

A COMPANION

ZACHARY WINNIESTAFFER

THE RAIN FELL IN A TORRENT, THE DARKENED SKY becoming even darker as the citizens of the town of Coldwood tried to find cover from the sudden storm. Morgan Woodruff held his head down, trying to keep the rain in his face as he navigated the cobblestone streets, but it was a futile attempt. On either side of the street, Morgan could hear people as they rushed towards buildings or stray trees; their curses as they stepped splashed into puddles that were scattered across the road like autumn leaves. However, Morgan pressed onward, heedless of the torrent.

Morgan knew the layout of the town like the back of his hand, having lived here the entirety of his life. Despite not going anywhere but a few particular places, he could not imagine living anywhere else, especially with the circumstances standing as they are. Without even looking at the buildings around him, he was able to navigate just off the road itself, taking a left and heading straight. He could feel the rain soaking his clothes through his coat, its dark brown exterior becoming even darker as the rain drenches it. He always liked the rain when he did not have to do anything, listening to the heavy drops splash against the roof of his small hut behind the church. It was only when it came to work that it became troublesome, as he could not easily dig a grave when the water would rather turn it into a lake of mud.

The Candlelight orphanage seemed to loom over Morgan, without him even having to raise his head to look at the structure. Moving his damp, mud colored hair out of his face, he raised his head – taking in the sight of his former home. The exterior was a mixture of moss and stray vines, the red brick exterior barely poking through. He thought that he would never come back to this building, no reason to, especially not after it closed just a few years ago – after Morgan and Jamie left. Once they reached 18, both Morgan and Jamie were thrown out of the orphanage. Morgan had to no idea what to do at the time, he felt like he was suddenly in an unfamiliar world, despite

being in the same town he had grown up his entire life. He had no idea how he was going to survive, and the years that followed had been hell for him trying to find a place in this world since Jamie left him too.

Morgan could remember the last day he saw Jamie, the cold winter sun breaking through an overhead of clouds as he tried to keep up with Jamie's pace.

"Where are we going, Jamie?" Morgan had asked, his voice lingering between the pants of cold breath. Despite being physically stronger than Jamie then, Morgan always walked at a slower pace, never understanding where he was going.

"We, Morgan?" Jamie's reply was sharp, the tone itself slowing Morgan's tracks behind Jamie. Jamie looked at Morgan, his gray eyes looking down at Morgan felt like he was standing at the bottom of a cliff instead of just an inch beneath him. His voice was caught within his throat, trying to figure out what he did wrong.

"I am leaving this town, Morgan," Jamie continued, his eyes being colder than that of the air around.

"Leaving? Where are you going?" Morgan asked, his voice tentative. He wanted to ask about what he meant with "I", but he felt like if he didn't ask, the shadow that started to loom over his mind would somehow cease to exist.

"Somewhere, anywhere," Jamie coldly stated, the wind blowing his black hair in Jamie's face, he ignored it

as he turned and began to walk again down the cobblestone street.

"What about me?" Morgan asked, picking up his own pace to meet back up with Jamie, but instead he saw Jamie spin on his heel and raise his arm, punching Morgan in the face. The fist itself did not hurt as much he thought it would, but the damage done felt like his face had been stabbed in the face with a knife. His legs collapsed from under him, their standing lost with his mind's confusion at the situation — the only sensation being pain and heartbreak as he stared up at Jamie.

"You are staying here," Jamie's voice felt like it was miles away, but the intensity of it caused Morgan's heart to seem like it was frozen in ice. What did he do wrong, he asked himself, how did he upset Jamie. Morgan felt tears begin to trickle down his face as he watched Jamie continue on his way, his silhouette disappearing amongst the winter wind.

Morgan, even now, could feel his heart breaking in two as he was reminded of the memory that played every night in his dreams. Even now, he didn't know what he did wrong to Jamie. Sometimes he wondered if Jamie figured out how he felt, the feeling that he buried deep within his heart — determined to never let out. As long as Jamie could be happy, he thought he would be, too. All of that changed that day, when Morgan lost the only person that given him a reason to live. He passed each day empty, living on

the streets, food being thrown to him in pity. The old priest of the church was the one to take him in and give him a job, digging graves and helping with the physical work. The straining of his muscles was a welcome distraction from Jamie, but in the end, he never managed to have Jamie fade from his mind. The lingering sensation of the punch remained for months after, never going away.

Shaking his head, not wanting to get distracted, Morgan strode up the steps of the orphanage. He grasped hold of the door handle on the door, but when he tried to move it, it refused to budge. Morgan felt the seed of doubt begin to bloom in his mind as he rifled his hands through his coat pockets till he found the letter that he had gotten just days before. The first sensation was disbelief when he got it, unable to understand, he had thought Jamie wanted nothing to do with him. However, Jamie mentioned that he wanted to see him here at the orphanage, where they had first met.

Morgan put the letter back, making sure it didn't fold, as he focused on the situation at hand. If Jamie was here, perhaps he took a different entrance. Morgan quickly went off of the front steps and took a quick glance around the street to make sure no one was around. He turned into the alleyway to the left of the orphanage, moving past the piles of trash that was scattered around, just dumped against the side and forgotten. He kept his attention on the orphanage wall, looking

at the windows to see if any of them were left open. After a few seconds of walking, he saw one window that was left cracked, leading into a darkened room that he guessed was a bedroom. After taking another glance to make sure that nobody was watching, Morgan jumped and grasped the edge of the window sill, pulling himself up to a point where he could kind of balance himself on. He opened the rest of the window with a rattle before stepping into the damp interior of the orphanage.

The interior of the Candlelight orphanage was dark, and without his prior knowledge of the building, Morgan would have trouble telling the silhouettes of the furniture from the shadows. He was in one of the series of bedrooms that the children were herded into, varying only in the occupants that had lived there. The room was long, filled with beds that were placed with only a foot or two apart. He could remember sleeping in one of these beds as a kid when he first arrived, struggling to find a good position to sleep in on the bare mattress. It took a long time, but eventually, he managed to ignore the uncomfortable bed and just go to sleep.

He pushed open the door, leading out of the room and into the hallway, even darker compared to that of the room – where at least there was the light coming in from the window, even if it was not much.

“Jamie?” Morgan called out into the shadows, the hope in his voice

apparent to even him, but there was no answer. After a few seconds, he called out again, louder, "Are you there? It's me, Morgan!" Still no response. Morgan felt that doubt begin to creep into his mind again, but he knew he was in the right place. Jamie had said to meet him at the orphanage, but where was he at? Was he hiding from someone, and if so, from who? Morgan tried to think of anything that Jamie would want to hide from, but his mind came up empty. He was always full of confidence, but he was friendly and caring too. He even became friends with Morgan, when no one at the orphanage would talk to him.

Morgan clenched his hand into a fist, digging his fingernails into his own skin. Despite the years since they've last seen each other, despite Jamie seeming to reject him, he felt anger begin to form like a piece of burning coal in his heart. He knew that he would do anything to help Jamie out, to make him feel like he was important enough to keep around, even if for a moment. Morgan marched briskly through the darkened hallway of the orphanage. Opening a door, he came across a classroom, the desks remaining left in various states of disarray.

Morgan was left in the care of this orphanage when his parents died in a carriage accident, him being the only survivor. He knew that he should feel some grief or anything, really, but it was so far ago that he can't even remember their faces – if they really cared about him that much,

they wouldn't have died. That line of thinking was the only thing that allowed Morgan to truly start living again. He was just an empty husk at the orphanage, just doing the tasks handed out to him at the orphanage by the headmistress and the teachers, not really understanding anything at all. He never tried to talk to anyone, and so, the other kids never tried to talk to him. Jamie was the first person to try to talk to him, to ask him how he was doing, anything at all. Morgan couldn't help but feel some sort of admiration to Jamie then, and before he knew it, he became the face that Morgan looked forward to seeing every day. Even Jamie, despite being one of the most popular kids at the orphanage, constantly kept Morgan close. When Morgan confided into Jamie what had happened at the accident, Jamie told him that they would have survived if they cared about him.

Morgan turned away from the classroom and tried the door at the other end, leading into one of the offices of the teachers. He couldn't remember which one now, but he remembered being dragged in here before. The other students accused him of stealing food from the cafeteria, but even if he knew he was innocent, he couldn't seem to speak. The teacher thought he was guilty, so what did it matter? Jamie had spoken up for him, though, acting as a witness and convincing the teacher that he did nothing wrong. Morgan remembered sitting in the chair, looking at awe in

Jamie, tears blurring his vision as he was defended. That was when Morgan knew about the feeling that he buried within himself, knowing that he wasn't allowed to hold these kinds of feelings. He knew he would do anything for Jamie then and there.

Morgan heard a sudden metallic crash within the building, breaking him from his memories. It sounded not too far away, coming from the cafeteria. Quickening his pace even more, Morgan pushed onwards, towards the double doors of the cafeteria. However, his pace slowed instinctively, as a smell began to waft its way to him. It was an unfamiliar smell, but his body seemed to instinctively revolt it, his mouth going dry as the heavy scent of iron filled his lungs. What was going on in there? His body seemed to instinctively take hold of him while he was too busy trying to grasp the situation. He felt himself instinctively taking a few steps backwards, away from the doors of the cafeteria. There was a strange sense of dread that resonated in his body, trying to get him to leave. Jamie was here, though, so he couldn't just leave? His mind seemed to be at conflict with his body – one fighting on some strange instinct to run, while his mind wanted to push forward. Trying to reassure himself that nothing was wrong, Morgan took a deep breath of the iron-tinted air before taking careful steps towards the cafeteria doors.

He closed the doors behind him, the scent became stronger that it was before, seeming to have a more of

a presence than the air itself, still damp with the rain that seemed to be slipping into the building through cracks. Morgan looked around the darkened room, before seeing the first semblance of light in the building, a small lantern and a figure sitting beside it that seemed to rise when he entered. He could barely make the familiar features out from the light that the lantern provided; black hair that seemed messy but perfectly kept, the familiar edges of Jamie's face, with his familiar winter gray eyes looking right at him.

"Morgan!" Jamie's voice rang across the empty cafeteria, filling Morgan with excitement and helping shake off the previous unease that he had upon entering the room, "Glad you managed to find your way in. Didn't want just anyone to walk in here, so I had to lock the front door, but you seemed to manage just fine." Jamie smiled and waved Morgan over.

Morgan was walking over before he even knew what he was doing, his eyes remaining focused on Jamie. He couldn't break away from him, he had forgotten how handsome Jamie looked, especially now after a few years had passed. How his voice was enough to put Morgan into a stupor. No matter how much he tried to remember, no matter how much he imagined, nothing could compare to having Jamie in front of him now.

"Come on, take a seat Morgan," Jamie said, pointing to the seat across from him at the table, where Morgan obediently sat and looked towards Jamie.

Despite being only an inch shorter than him, Jamie always seemed to be taller than him with just the presence that he carried.

“Glad to see you again, friend,” Jamie said, smiling at Morgan. Despite the cold interior of the cafeteria, he could feel his temperature rise as he tried to remain focused.

“Come on, speak up! We haven’t seen each other in forever!” Jamie said with a laugh as he leaned forward and shook Morgan’s shoulder, the sensation lingering after he pulled away.

“Good to see you again, Jamie,” Morgan breathed out, the name escaping his lips solidifying that this was reality, not just a dream. He actually got to meet Jamie again, he hadn’t thrown Morgan away and forgotten about him.

“I know we didn’t leave on the best of circumstances,” Jamie said, looking away for a moment, staring into the darkness of the room. Morgan could see an emotion unfamiliar on Jamie, regret. His body relaxed into his seat, tension being released from his muscles, like steam escaping a pot with a lid. Jamie regretted leaving him behind.

“I was hoping you could help me out, though,” Jamie turned back to Morgan, the regret gone and replaced by anxiety. Morgan could feel his blood begin to ignite, his body temperature rising as anger ignited a spark within him.

“With who?” Morgan’s voice escaped him, too loud and too

strong. His throat was dry from just the unusual sensation of speaking so loudly, grown accustomed to only quiet mumbles and silence.

Jamie let out a laugh, his laughter increasing Morgan’s pulse, but for a different reason entirely. Morgan tried to look away from Jamie while he laughed, but he couldn’t help but keep looking back. Morgan knew what this feeling was, but he wasn’t sure how to act on it, instead just trying to keep it in himself and enjoy moments like these when the two of them were together.

“Well, it is a couple people, actually, and I figured that you and I would be perfect in figuring this out,” Jamie said, rising out of his seat and taking the lantern within his hands before starting to slowly walk away from the table. “Come on, let me show you something.”

“Truth be told, I’ve been having a bit of trouble with something,” Jamie said, leading Morgan between the tables and towards the back of the room. “I wasn’t sure how to deal with it, but I didn’t want to trouble you, so I tried to deal with it myself.”

‘You won’t trouble me at all!’ Morgan replied in his mind, but he caught himself. Saying that would put him on a path that he knew there was no escape from — the emotion he had buried in his heart that he can’t let escape. He doesn’t want to lose everything, especially after the first time it happened.

“I’ll help you,” Morgan said

after a few seconds, the rest of what he wanted to say sitting like an angry wasp on his tongue.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Jamie laughed, before reaching the door to the kitchen and opening it. “Truth be told, I knew that I could only count on you for this.”

Jamie held the lantern out in front of him, and the light revealed the interior of the kitchen to Morgan. He could see pots and pans in varying states of filth, resting in various states of seeming use, despite not being touched in years. The counters had some spots of dust-like powder on them that he could see, but despite that, they seemed clean. He expected this room to be filthy, but for some reason, it looked like it had been cleaned. Morgan noticed that the strong scent of iron was stronger now, seeming to coat the entire kitchen with an invisible, thick fog.

Morgan heard a click behind him before Jamie walked forward, leading Morgan deeper into the kitchen.

“You’ll see it in here,” Jamie said, beckoning to a door in the back of the kitchen. Even though he knew most of the interior of the orphanage, Morgan had never been allowed in the kitchen – nor were most of the kids allowed, although he remembered some particular kids being able to enter at one point, Jamie included.

“Just,” Jamie spoke with something that Morgan had never heard in his voice, a hint of nervousness leaking

from his words, his usual confidence breaking. “Promise me that you’ll still like me, after you see this?”

“I’ll always like, like you, Jamie.” Morgan stammered, feeling his heart pound, seeming to beat against the holds of his body. Even if there was the devil himself in that room, Morgan felt like he could face him down in that moment. Jamie had never relied on him before, nor had Jamie ever shown weakness. Morgan felt special, his body was warm with the feeling that he kept within him, for fear of letting it out – a feeling of love within his body.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Jamie smiled at Morgan, a bright smile that seemed to match that of a group of fireflies on a moonless night, before pushing open the door and revealing the interior to him. The first thing that Morgan saw was an arm, grasping at the empty air as it protruded out of a burlap sack. There were dark, red stains on other bags, too, and crates that seemed to be still dripping, he now realized, with blood. He could feel vomit rising in his throat, his eyes looking everywhere and nowhere. His body that was still damp from the rain become cold with sweat that began to coat him beneath his clothes.

“I need help dealing with these,” Jamie paused, contemplating for words as Morgan slowly turned to him, his face still vibrant, but with a darker shade that seemed to grow across it now, “*leftovers*, I suppose I should say.”

Morgan’s voice seemed to be

lost within his throat, tight and closed, as it were bound by stitches. The emotions in his body were lost, he could feel everything and nothing at the same time. He opened his mouth, but all that came out was a low sound of air weaved with his voice. His body collapsed, his knees being the only thing keeping him from landing on the floor. The only thing he seemed to be able to do was to just let out a few, silent tears.

“Are you alright,” a familiar voice asked. The concerning tone should have been a comfort to him, but the only emotion that seemed to rise to the question was fear. The only person that Morgan thought he would never fear, the only person that Morgan felt he could rely on, the only person that Morgan loved.

Morgan shook the hand off him as fear began to take hold of his body, his body already turning before he could stand up, his legs pushing him towards the exit of the kitchen before even his mind could keep up. It felt like he was an ant trying to get out of spilled molasses. The air seeming to pull him away from the blood-stained room. He fought against the air, his muscles straining for him to move faster than he was, but it felt like it took an hour to reach the kitchen door. He desperately tried to open it, but the door refused to budge, the lock holding it in place. Left with nothing to do, Morgan took a step back and shoved his body against the door, the old wood breaking open and collapsing beneath him.

Morgan collapsed onto the

floor in the remains of the kitchen door, one shard of wood finding its way into his stomach and piercing his skin, the pain seeming to encompass his body and distort his vision. He heard footsteps behind him, patient, barely audible over his heated breaths tumbling out of his lungs. He tried to crawl forward, to get away, but was soon met with a familiar hand on his shoulder.

“Really, you shouldn’t go so far as to injure yourself, Morgan.” Jamie’s voice was unnaturally calm and cool, it felt like Jack Frost himself was speaking to him, his body growing colder within Jamie’s presence.

“Let me,” Morgan panted out, trying to pull himself forward against the stone of the cafeteria floor, “Let me out, please.”

“I thought you said you would always like me,” the familiar voice cooed within his ear as he felt himself be turned over. The once familiar features of Jamie’s face seeming to be darkened and twisted.

“Your stomach will need some time to heal, that much is for certain,” Jamie observed, squatting on the ground and setting the lantern beside him. He took one of his shirt sleeves and tore the fabric, taking it and reaching toward Morgan’s wound, removing Morgan’s coat and shirt, tearing when necessary, to look at the wound. The look of concern on Jamie’s face seemed to stop Morgan’s movement, making it impossible for him to do nothing but watch as Jamie reached for the shard of wood and pull it roughly out of

Morgan's body. He howled at the pain, feeling the blood that was held in by the shard begin to stain his clothes and spread across the rest of his stomach.

The fabric of Jamie's shirt wrapped around his stomach, covering the wound in an attempt to slow the bleeding. Morgan felt his body's breath slow down, his mind seeming to be floating in the sky while his body was solid on the ground. Perhaps the room was just his imagination? Jamie couldn't have really done anything like that. Why would he be taking care of Morgan if he had?

"That will have to do for now. We'll have to get you out of here, though," Jamie huffed as he picked up Morgan's body and leaned him on his shoulder. Morgan felt comfort as he learned against Jamie's body, the man's frame being a comfort to him. He could feel his vision begin to darken a little, his mind calming down. This was his best friend, his only friend. He was just imagining things in that room, it didn't happen – maybe this was all just a dream, and he would wake up with nothing wrong in the morning.

"We can think about what to do with the leftovers tomorrow, once you calm down a little," Jamie said with a laugh as he began to walk with Morgan, practically holding him upright all by himself. Morgan's thoughts were stopped. The denial was replaced with a cold stone in his stomach that even outmatched the warmth of the blood that stained him as he shoved away from Jamie, collapsing onto a

table. He couldn't deny what he saw, he knew what it was, he knew that Jamie had murdered those people.

"Morgan, Morgan, Morgan" Jamie sighed, his voice sounding exasperated, stepping towards Morgan and holding him down onto the table, his body leaning over him. "I thought I would trust you with this. I thought you liked me."

"You killed those people," Morgan managed to breath out, his face looking up at Jamie's as he managed to continue, "You killed them and stuffed them in a bag like they were garbage, scraps of food."

"How unexpected of you, guessed it right it one," Jamie laughed as his arms snaking around Morgan's frame. He started pressing them even closer together against the table. Morgan could see his reflection in Jamie's eyes, the light cast by the lantern being just bright enough to make out enough details to see himself in the reflection – his mud colored hair disheveled, his somewhat tanned skin being paler than chalk, his brown eyes looking right back at him. Morgan thought that this may be the last time he saw himself, with the man he thought at one point he wouldn't mind facing the devil for.

Then everything seemed to stop when Jamie's lips pressed against his own. The situation that seemed to be as tense as a spider web that was being pulled apart seemed to collapse, his emotions that had managed to grasp themselves once again dispersed into nothingness as they fought for

control. The only thing that Morgan knew he could feel would be Jamie's lips pressed against his own, securing a state of dominance against him as it pushed even further than that as he felt an intrusion in his mouth. Morgan was breathless, a situation that he had dreamed of before in fantasy appearing in what could only be described as a nightmare. Jamie's eyes were staring right at his, their emotions unreadable, but Morgan could not look away – he felt like he was a mouse being held by a snake.

Morgan didn't know how much time had passed, but eventually he began to writhe from underneath of Jamie's body as his lack of air began to send his body into a frenzy. After a few seconds of this, Jamie finally broke the kiss, his face leaning away from Morgan's, the bewilderment of Morgan's mind still not fading away when Jamie began to speak.

"I love you so much, Morgan," Jamie coughed, as tears began to drip down his face like rain against a window.

Morgan's mind began to align itself, following his words like a writer was pulling his mind along, writing the emotions to fill his mind. This was still Jamie, he was the only one that Morgan had. No matter what Jamie did now, he was still the one the kid that talked to him that day, when no one else would. Morgan felt his emotions begin to dim as he calmed down, his breathing returning somewhat to normal as he kept his eyes looking

right into Jamie's.

"Yes," Morgan sighed, the tension in his body relaxing into Jamie's hold, "You're right." Without Jamie, Morgan would still be the husk that he was, not able to feel anything, not able to talk at all, only able to do the commands that were given to him.

"Of course I am," Jamie laughed, pulling Morgan up and holding himself against himself. Morgan could feel Jamie's heartbeat against his own, as he leaned into the embrace. *