

Maria woke suddenly, thick sweat covering her body and making her shirt stick awkwardly to her skin. The cold air around her seemed to be closing in on all sides, constricting her chest, her breaths coming in painful gasps. Something was wrong, and she knew it without any doubt.

She threw the covers aside and raced from the bedroom and into the hallway towards her son Andy's room. Too fast. She tried to catch herself as she fell, but it was like trying to walk on ice with flat-bottomed shoes; her socks slipping on the smooth hardwood flooring. Instead she ended up pitching forward, her head bashing off the handrail leading to the ground floor, resulting in a resounding CRACK that pierced the otherwise deadly silence that filled the house.

Maria cried out in anguish as pain radiated from the point of impact; an explosion of light and color burst into life in front of her eyes as she collapsed onto the floor. Through the pain, a warmth spread from the side of her head and down her face. It took a moment for Maria to realize that it was blood running into her eyes and not tears as she had initially thought.

Her stomach clenched tightly and Maria remembered suddenly why she was running down the hallway in the first place.

Rubbing the blood out of her eyes, Maria got to her feet, legs shaking, and made her way to the door at the end of the hall. Immediately she knew that she was right, that something was terribly wrong, because Andy's door stood half open. Andy never slept with his door open; he was too scared otherwise.

Maria threw herself against the door sending it crashing backwards. The momentum of her charge sent her staggering as she did, before coming to a stop at the foot of Andy's bed. Her heart felt too big for her chest as she grabbed the edge of the blanket and ripped it clean off with one fluid move-

ment, throwing it onto the floor.

A scream caught in Maria's throat. In place of Andy was the family dog, or rather what was left of it. All four of the poor beast's legs were ripped off and the hilt of a knife was sticking out from between its bloodshot eyes.

Maria backed quickly away from the bed, her heart beating somewhere in the area of her throat, and crashed into one of Andy's dressers, shattering the mirror that stood atop it, the glittering splinters showering down around her feet. She doubled over and heaved.

It wasn't more than a minute before she rushed from the room. Andy had to be there somewhere. Maybe he was hiding. Maybe he had gotten away. Maria knew this wasn't true before she even finished the thought.

Down the stairs and into the living room. Not there.

Around and into the guest bedroom. Not there.

Into the garage. Not there.

Then Maria raced into the kitchen and saw a few things all at once. On the counter she was confused to find an empty bottle of cooking oil, a pot and a funnel. On the wall leading to the dining room, a message had been written in black marker:

You took them from me, now I take them  
from you.

We're even. Maria – I, Jon – I.

Your move.

Dazed, she ran her hand absently over the lettering as she walked into the dining room. She could almost see the words typed out on a piece of paper, some random text from a novel that was not her life.

"He really does it," she said aloud to no one.

Maria fleetingly noticed the small puddle

# RED HANDS

- Kyle Kerr

of blood on the table, but there seemed to be nothing else of significance in the room, and surely no Andy. Then a drop of crimson liquid fell from above and splashed into the little pool, the sound almost deafening in her ears.

Maria's eyes slowly rose, and in that instant her soul died. There was her baby boy, his naked body wrapped around the chandelier that hung over the table, his broken back arched unnaturally backwards making the top of his head touch the tips of his feet coming around the other side. The skin around his mouth had been burned raw and his throat was red and swollen many times larger than was normal. Maria realized with a start that this was why she hadn't heard Andy scream, because surely having your whole back broken backwards was a painful ordeal; Johnny had poured boiling-hot cooking oil down Andy's throat and scorched his voice box, effectively sullyng her son's ability to scream. His arms drooped down; small red slits near his wrists the source of the ever growing pool of blood on the table. Then her eyes locked with his, open wide and bulging from their sockets, staring at her, pleading. He was still alive.

All of the oxygen seemed to have been sucked from the room and Maria could not take even the smallest of breaths. Her legs would no longer support her weight and she tried in vain to support herself against the wall. At that moment, Maria's vision went black and she crumpled to the floor.

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Christopher yawned and stretched, rubbing the impending sleep from his eyes. He looked down at the notebook lying open on the desk in front of him and smiled favorably at what he had written.

He was particularly pleased with the imagery formed about the dying boy; his body bruised and broken, the wide surprise in his eyes, the way he had been so trusting of his

loving father. Christopher could smell the burnt flesh from around the boy's mouth and even taste the tinge of copper wafting through the air from all the blood. It was brilliant – perfect – just as he remembered it.

*A good start, I should say,* he thought to himself. He felt it rejuvenating to write about someone who really deserved all the pain and suffering he brought upon her. All of those other hapless broads had been a warm-up for what he had just accomplished, and surely the sales of those previous novels were in reflection of that. This novel was special, though, and he was sure it would climb to be a top bestseller. So much work had gone into this that it could not possibly be anything but. He would have to remember to thank Julia for that one day.

He took a sip of coffee, cold from neglect, before picking up his pen and continuing to write.

Chris had barely made it two lines down the page when he was disturbed by a persistent rapping at the front door of his apartment. He put down his pen and headed towards the door.

He twisted the deadbolt until it clicked into place, and then turned the lock on the handle. Before Chris could open it, however, there was a loud noise from out in the hallway. He was thrown several feet back and saw as a section of the wooden door exploded in a burst of thick splinters. He barely had time to register the dull pressure building up in his stomach before the door was thrown roughly open before him.

Standing in the doorway was Julia, the gun in her outstretched hands pointing slightly downward, her now soulless eyes boring holes deeper into him than the bullet that was now lodged in his gut.

"Maria?" Chris said, his mind swimming.

"Maria? Fucking Maria?" she shrieked as she cocked the gun. "You know my fucking name. My move, right?"

Pain radiated from Chris's knee as the second bullet shattered his kneecap, the force of the blast knocking his feet out from under him.

"Your own son, how the fuck could you do it? Your *own* son."

Chris pulled himself around on his

stomach and started to crawl towards the couch, under which his gun was hidden.

“He loved you so much.” Julia could hardly be understood through the gale of her sobs. “Stop and look at me you coward!”

Another shot, this one immobilizing his right arm at the shoulder. He screamed so loud he feared his lungs would tear.

The scream, however, died down and slowly transitioned into a roaring laugh. Chris rolled onto his back as the almost alien sound filled the room and looked at the woman standing over him.

Julia’s face deeply reddened. “You’re about to die and yet you laugh.”

Chris spit out a mouthful of blood before saying, “Damn, I wish I would have seen this coming.”

A Cheshire grin spread across his face at Julia’s obvious confusion.

“The perfect twist,” he clarified.

The last thing Chris ever saw was the barrel of the gun pointing directly at his forehead, its dark entrance seeming to suck everything into it as if it were a black hole. It consumed the whole of his vision before the world went black.

