

BEFORE YOU READ:

First off, thank you for taking the time to check out this story. Second, this is based on a real life event that happened to my family. I wrote this in the hopes of achieving some catharsis. Obviously names have been changed and events have been either made up completely or embellished upon.

While reading, please make note of things that work, or don't work, either in the story itself or with the pacing of certain parts. I'm at a point where I can't gauge it myself. I'm not super concerned with grammar or spelling at this point, I'm more concerned with structure and readability, so expect missing comma and poor spelling. There will likely be parts that seem out of place as I haven't been able to stitch all the ideas together yet.

Time and the reliability of memory are key elements of this story, and it's important to me that this is evident.

Consider these questions as you read:

Is the story good? Interesting? Presented in a way that makes you want to keep reading?

Do you care about the characters or do they need more personality, etc? Are the characters believable?

Are there elements that are cliché and boring?

Does the plot make sense?

What sorts of things do you think could make this story better?

What questions weren't answered for you? Were there parts you didn't understand?

Are there continuity errors? Do some parts not align with earlier parts?

Are parts disorienting? If so, does it make sense in the story to do so?

Is the voice of the story consistent? Does it feel like it's written by the same person? (I wrote this over the last two years, so I'm not sure if I changed how I wrote things, even over the last two drafts)

If there are any other ideas or ways I can make this better, please feel free to let me know. Thank you!

VULTURE

By Brandon Stewart

3rd Draft-redux

Chapter One

1

A bright light forces her eyes open. She quickly covers them, shrinking away to keep out what feels like white fire. The muscles in her eyes contract, overworking in her head to adjust to the sudden dark to light. Sticky and blurry, they scan the room. She can't focus. Like someone wiped vaseline on her eyeballs.

Fresh from sleep
(was it sleep?)

her eyes are struggling to adjust. Everything is a wet blur, looking like it has been painted over with a thin, white glaze.

She sees enough to know that she doesn't recognize this place. This place, so well-lit that for a brief moment she thinks she is on stage. Like a theater. Or play. This place—a small room measuring approximately 12x12 foot square—with four walls and no separate rooms, is mostly windows. Eight of them; two on each wall, taking up about two thirds of the space from floor to ceiling. She sees herself in the reflection and doesn't recognize who she sees. She tries to think, to understand, to dig in her mind for any clues about this place, about anything that resembles who she is. She can't remember her name. Her name, the most basic of information. Like her existence had been wiped out the moment she appeared in this room.

The room is empty
(like your mind)

with no furniture or tables or anything.

Except it isn't. There are some things she still remembers. Like the thing in the center of the room.

Her eyes are clearing.

A gun lays on the floor, like a show piece, the center of attention. She has one of those, a gun, at her home
(an apartment)

to keep herself safe. A woman could never know who was out there to cause them harm.

The gun on the floor is not just any gun; it is her gun. A .38 revolver. On the butt of the gun a 't' shape is engraved. This has something to do with her, but she doesn't remember what.

How do I know this, but nothing else? I remember the names of basic things but nothing directly about myself.

She searches her mind for an explanation. Any how or why. But her mind is quiet on these questions. She feels the stirrings of panic as it begins to rise and manifest. She remember panic, the weight that it brings to her chest. The fear, the shakiness. The sinking, sick feeling in the stomach that reminds her that things are anything but fine. The overwhelming feeling of wanting to run away, to be anywhere but here.

No, now is not the time. Keep your head on straight. Figure this out. Get your bearings.

The room is strangely nice, like it had been built yesterday. Everything smells new, the sweet scent of wood and cleanliness, and of fresh paint. A professional contractor would appreciate the workmanship. Perfect trim, perfect neutral, warm gray color that was easy on the eyes, not a single paint drip or inconsistent brushstroke. Real wood flooring. And six perfectly-spaced recessed lighting. And the view: people seeking an escape from the relentless pace of daily life would love this place.

I know a contractor, or a construction worker. But who?

She hears a noise. Someone or something is tapping on a window. It is outside. Or inside. She can't really tell. The sound seems to come from multiple directions, like an echo, but in reverse.

She looks out the window behind her, hoping to see what is making the noise.

Outside is a dense forest. Mostly
(fir trees)

but also trees with leaves that are beginning to change from green to orange.

(Fall)

This place is remote.

Of course it would be; you don't take people against their will to highly populated places.

From outside, this place

(a house, a room, a cabin?)

looks like a perfect vacation getaway.

But not for her. She realizes that the building is missing one key feature: a way out. Or in. This place doesn't have a door.

This is a prison.

She finds it strange that she is not bound by anything. No rope. No tape. No zip-ties. She is free to move about. This means that whoever put her here isn't concerned about her leaving.

She isn't sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

No, don't overthink. Keep it simple. What are the small details?

She is stiff and sore, but not like she had been beat up. More like from sleeping poorly. She looks herself over and finds no evidence that she was dragged around or hit with anything. She has no tender spots on her head and no scrapes, bruises or cuts anywhere. If this was a kidnapping, then it was a non-violent one. There is no evidence of rape either. She doesn't remember anything about how she got here. It's as if her mind is erased.

Maybe she had been drugged, doped to the gills, then taken here.

But why?

She is thinking too much. The real question is how can she get out of here? There is no door, but there are windows. There is also a gun, making this situation that much more interesting. Her guess is that the gun is empty.

Still stiff and sore, she gets up slowly. Her eyes are finally back to normal, so she walks around the room, seeing if there are any signs of how or why she might be here. There are none. At least not that she can see in the immediate. But there has to be. Everything has a weakness.

Outside, trees sway slowly in the breeze. A bright sun shines through fir trees. It's a beautiful day. It looks warm beyond the windows, though no heat radiates through them. The glass, much like everything else in this small place is perfect. No fingerprints or smudges of any kind. And impossibly clean, almost as if there is no glass at all. She goes to all the windows and sees that there is not way to open them- no latch, no lock, no way to slide them open. She puts her hands on the glass, pushing slightly to see if there's any give. None. No flex at all. It was obvious that the only way out would be by breaking a window.

The gun. She could use the gun.

Of course the gun isn't loaded. Why would you think it would be?

Even still, she knows the gun can be used to break the glass. Holding it by the barrel, like you might a hammer, she bashes it into the window with the handle. Pain shoots up her arm and she drops the gun. The window doesn't have any marks. No cracks. The window isn't broken, but she fears her hand might be.

Ignoring the pain, she picks up the gun, steps back, and hurls it into the window. The gun bounces off. Again, there's no crack or mark on the glass. She picks the gun up and holding it by the barrel smashes the handle into the window. All this does is hurt her hand more. Is it bulletproof glass? Shatterproof? Because of course it would be like that. If you build something this well, you use fancy glass to keep in your unwilling guest.

"Goddammit!" She yells, throwing the gun across the room.

Fear and anxiety are turning into anger. Or maybe they are all mixing and turning into a confusing soup.

The people who did this: would they be back? What would they do? Why are they doing this?

It suddenly dawns on her that if this whole situation was for a reason, there would have to be a way in to this building in order to carry out the plans. Whatever they were. Perhaps there is a hidden door, or hatch. It could be in the wall, the floor, or even the ceiling.

She gets on her knees and looks closely at the baseboard trim. Perfectly painted. Perfect seams. She runs her fingers along the lines hoping to find some imperfection that might indicate an opening. Something, anything. But nothing. This trim is water tight. This place seems to have been built by the most skilled of builders, which means a weakness won't be found.

I have to keep looking. There has to be something.

She moves to the floor, feeling the grain of the wood. There are spaces between slats, but unless it is the most well-hidden escape door ever made, there is nothing to be found. No draft, no cold air comes up from the floor, which might indicate an open space below.

The walls are the same with no weak areas or obviously larger spaces than what is warranted. Even around the windows, there is no evidence that anything isn't in a fixed place. She knocks on the wall softly in different places, listening closely to see if the wall makes different noises. If there is a weak spot, she'll find it. Like a normal wall, there are studs, drywall, mud, paint. She hits harder with her fist. Harder and harder with growing frustration until there is throbbing knuckles and a blood smear. The wall is untouched, however; no dents, no holes. No closer to escape.

Frustration is building in her. She needs to take a break.

Be reasonable. Have a plan. Do not make this worse.

She sits to think, looking further at her surroundings. Was it worth it to yell? Could she climb up on the window sills to get a closer look at the roof? Or should she expect the same?

She thinks about the lighting and wonders if there are cameras up there watching everything she does. Despite the fear and anxiety there is some room for anger. She flips a middle finger to the lights, just in case anyone is watching. In a situation where she knows she has no power, this feels a little like control.

She takes a deep breath.

Approach this rationally. Have a plan. Or something like a plan.

Easy to think; less easy to do. So far this place didn't have any obvious means of escape. No obvious explanation for how she is here. And worse, no reason for why she is here.

She can look for clues. Finger prints on windows. Footprints or shoe marks on the floor. Dirt. Any evidence that someone else had been here. Maybe there is blood. Hers even, despite not finding any wounds or damage to her own body. It is possible she had been charged up on fear and adrenaline that she overlooked it? The body does weird things when it feels like it's in danger, and this circumstance is certainly befitting of that.

It is likely going to be for nothing, doing all of these things. Being a detective. But she needs to keep busy. She can't let her mind dwell on the situation too much because she feels the panic rise in her. And panic is the worst thing to have when locked in a mystery building way out in the woods, with zero explanation for how and why she is here.

From all four huge windows (nearly an entire wall), the trees seemingly expand in all directions forever into darkness. Wherever she is, she is far away from civilization. She can see no visible roads or trails in or out of this place. How could anyone get here? The forest floor is blanket of leaves which puts her at the beginning of fall. But none of these things offer any answers, only more questions. More feelings of being alone. More hopelessness. But at least she isn't cold. Inside this containment the temperature is perfect. And yet, there is no sign of any means for heating. No vents. No tubes. No pipes.

Interesting. Unnerving.

She isn't sure those are the right words.

Maybe unsettling or terrifying is more appropriate.

2

She needs to pee.

Not like a regular pee when the urge hits, but the type that comes back like a punch when you've spent all day ignoring it. She needs to go. Now.

She drops her pants and picks a corner, as far away from the spot in this place that is most comfortable. She thinks of the potential for cameras overhead and has a strong disdain for the people potentially watching her do something so private. Even with how bad she needs to go, the thought of being spied on makes her bladder halt. Stage fright, that's what her dad had called it.

A memory. My father. But why now?

Suddenly her mind is filled with a time camping with her dad. She was little and had to pee. Convinced she needed a real toilet, she refused to squat in the woods. Her father, frustrated, had finally convinced her that it was ok. He had been right, she had felt much better afterwards. And her mom, who usually yelled at her for doing un-ladylike things, wasn't mad that time.

She relaxes slightly at the small glimpse of her past life. It isn't helpful in the big picture, but she is relieved to remember something about herself directly. Something other than the names of inanimate objects. Anything. Maybe her name, which seems of utmost importance to her in this place, will come next.

She finally pees, interlopers be damned.

This small relief goes a long way.

Nothing to wipe with of course. She removes her underwear, thinking that it would be best to use it as a means to dab herself after peeing rather than wearing them with pee in them. This place has her using baser instincts, thinking about possible means of survival with the nothing she has available. None of this solved this issue in the event she has to go the other thing, but she'd worry about that when the time comes.

The moment of relief is short-lived as she quickly comes to the realization that whoever was keeping her here may never show up. This would mean no food or water. Maybe the game is simply to watch her wither away slowly. But why? Had she done something she can't remember? Is this punishment? Or is this amusement? Her being a female would increase her chances of rape, wouldn't it? Why keep her captive just to watch her whither away?

The thought drives an ice pick into her stomach. A wave of panic washes over her.

She needs out of here. Obvious, yes, but this is the narrative she needs to keep so she doesn't succumb to the inevitable anxiety and panic. The inevitable hungry and thirsty. The inevitable hopelessness.

What is my name?

The question is eating at her. She cannot understand how she could lose something so ordinary. Could people lose the most basic of information about themselves in extreme situations? Could certain drugs do that? It seems the most important thing to know. Perhaps her name is the key that'll unlock all of the closed doors in her mind.

She gets glimpses here and there, like moving things in her peripheral, but she can't make out what they are. Is it memories trying to push in?

(Try to pick yourself up, carry that weight that you can't see)

This isn't her thought, this is something else. Is she remembering something?
(Tonight, tonight, tonight we're gonna make it right)
She is humming a song. Out of nowhere. Those lines are lyrics, but to what? She searches her mind. She can hear the song, she recognizes the lyrics
(You keep telling me that you're gonna help me, but you don't)
but she can't place it.
How would she have a song stuck in her head? How can she hear the lyrics so clearly as if they are her own thoughts?
(But now I'm in too deep)
This is like a memory taking her hostage, with no explanation, with no connection to anything she can remember. Does this mean something? Could this be connected to a memory that is trying to push its way back in?
(Please get me out of here)
Appropriate.
(Just help me I'll do anything)
The music fades away and she has nothing left to hum, nothing else to remember. But this song—she knows it, but it is buried deeper than she can dig up.

Chapter Two

Yesterday

<You there? I'm worried>

She had texted her husband several times since yesterday. No response. Same as the day before. She hadn't seen him at all today or yesterday. She had called and left voicemails but they had all yielded the same results: no answer. No call back. She had called and paced through the house, hoping to hear the vibration of his phone in the event it had been accidentally left at home. But no, nothing. That wasn't like him. He was always the type to immediately text back, especially with her. He never left his phone around.

<Hey, give me a call or text back when you get this>

She continued to pace around the house, to piddle here and there to occupy her mind. Her frustration had turned into concern long ago. Had something happened to him? Had he been injured at work? Wouldn't she have been called and told? It was common for him to work late; it was the nature of his job in construction. Sometimes jobs took longer than expected. That had to be it. But over night? What kind of job wouldn't provide a small break between yesterday and today? All of these questions and speculations don't assuage the sick feeling that she had in the pit of her stomach. Something wasn't right. She had the worst feeling. Not just because she had been the reason he had stormed off in anger, but because she knew he wasn't ok.

She needed to sit down, relax, and space out on some TV. It wasn't that late. She might have no reason to worry this much. There was probably a reasonable explanation. Still, the uncomfortable feeling of something being off persisted. But she was like that; prone to overthinking, over-analyzing, and allowing her feelings to swell far more than what was reasonable. Plus, this had been a stressful week.

She sat on the couch, TV light danced aimlessly upon the room. She didn't care what was on because it was all background noise anyway. She was hungry, but not hungry. Stress always knotted her stomach up.

She couldn't shake the feeling of something being wrong. It wasn't uncommon that her husband was late from work, but it was definitely not a thing that he just wouldn't come home at all. Maybe him and the guys went out for some drinks. Maybe he didn't want to drive home. But no, he would always call or text to say so. She was doing it again: letting her mind spiral. Letting her emotions overpower her rational sensibilities.

Just watch TV. Don't try to solve this mystery without information.

Her phone vibrated on the table next to her, pulling her from that space between real life and sleep. She must've been more tired than she thought. She quickly answered.

It was her husband.

"Hello? Are you ok? Where have you been?!" She demanded, trying not to show her worry or frustration.

No response.

"You there? I can't hear you," she said. Of course he would call from an area where there was no cell service.

Again no response.

"Try to move somewhere else. You don't have service. I can't hear you."

There was a scratching noise on the other end of the line, like something was brushing the phone. It sounded like her husband was pocket dialing her. The scratching continued, but then she could hear a muffled voice. Not like bad or cutting out service, but as if the phone was in a large area and the person talking was far away.

She turned the volume up all the way and listened closely. She couldn't make out any words, but there was definitely a conversation happening.

More scratching.

More muffled sounds, like labored breathing.

Could her husband be...? There was a cute little payroll girl that did work with him...

No. He wouldn't do that. Would he?

Since starting on the steroids for his mid-life crisis, her and her husband's sex life had taken a nose dive. But was he the type to step out on her like that? Would he even be able to with the side-effects?

It had to be something else, something more simple. Service was bad. She was hearing the radio as he drove home. That had to be it. But why wouldn't he have called or text back? Why...?

No. Don't do this. You know how you get anxious over dumb things.

The phone had suddenly gone silent. No more muffled sounds, scratching, or distant voices. She had been hung up on. She had heard the click.

That phone call had done nothing to settle her nerves.

She didn't want to be 'that wife,' but she dialed one of her husband's friends and co-workers. "So you haven't seen him? He wasn't even at work today? Ok, thank you. Sorry to bother you."

She sat staring at the TV. She wasn't seeing what was on. She wasn't hearing the sounds. Any bit of anger or frustration was gone; it was only worry now. She was running out of simple explanations. She couldn't hop in the car and go looking- well, she could- but where would she go? His work? He worked all over the place. He did construction. Sometimes the locations would change a few times in a day. Should she go to the bar he and his buddies frequented? She could, but to what end? Embarrass herself? What if he was actually there? Would she scream in his face in front of the whole bar? Maybe in her younger days, but at 52 she was beyond that now. Or so she would like to think. What if he was dead on the side of the road? Car accident? Hit and run? Not paying attention and drove off a cliff?

Reel yourself in.

She was gripping her cell phone so hard that its case made a small cracking sound.

He'll call back.

It was dark outside and shadows had begun to cross the room, like a movie that was sped up. Certain mindsets, certain stresses and worries have a tendency to play tug-of-war with time. Was it 7:30pm or 1:00am?

This was one of those times when she would think of all things and nothing all at the same time. If she had been asked what was on her mind she wouldn't have been able to tell you. It was a trickle, no, a flood of things. Of worries. Of possibilities. Of what-ifs. Anxiety had her mind thinking of every possible worst-case scenarios. She had trouble breathing; anxiousness was choking her.

And then she had the feeling of being watched.

Is he home...?

It wasn't him. She was still alone in a mostly dark apartment. The TV was still droning on, this time about something that had happened in the Middle East. But she couldn't hear it.

She scanned the room and saw nothing but shadows. There were no eyes to see her with. Not in the room anyway, and not that she could see. There is a lone streetlamp outside her apartment window. It was casting a sickly-colored shade of yellow in the room. The shadows were playing tricks on her. The few trees that did stand outside weren't moving in any sort of breeze, and yet the shadows were moving. Like skinny people pacing back and forth on the wall. Odd.

I am not in danger. My husband will be home soon. Nothing is in the apartment. You are just letting your mind get the best of you.

She couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. Of being observed.

In the top drawer of her bedroom dresser was a gun. A six-round .38 Special. Her husband had thought it was a good idea for her to have her own gun when she was home alone. She pushed aside some socks and panties and grabbed the gun. She pushed out the cylinder to make sure it was loaded. She knew that it was, but it made her feel better to double check. Nothing more useless than an unloaded gun, her father had told her years ago.

She went to every room in her apartment — a three bedroom — and turned on the light in each room to check.

Nothing.

She imagined herself as a little girl when she checked under her bed at bedtime. She was embarrassed by her reaction to all of this. She knew that nothing was in her apartment, knew that her mind was doing what minds do. She sat back on the couch, gun in her lap, cell phone still in hand.

From the corner of her eye she can see that the trees outside were unmoving. But inside her apartment the shadows danced upon the walls, criss-crossed the room, and slid impossibly up to the ceiling. They led her eye to a corner where a shadowy mass gathered. One that didn't make sense. Out of place. A huddled figure almost, distorted and stretched outward, joining the other undulating darkness.

The figure was there, yet not quite there. A haze. Less of a shadow and more like smoke about to dissipate in a breeze. The shadow, the figure, seemed to cast a shadow itself. It spread all around her like blood soaking into carpet.

"Stop!" She yelled. "I have a gun and I'll shoot you. Get out of here!"

The shadow seemed to shrink away into the corner, receding to the cracks. For a moment she feels relieved, but as the shadows stretch and expand in another corner, the tightness in her chest returned. She raises the gun and points.

"I'm not kidding!" She yelled again. "I really will kill you!"

On some level she knew that whatever this thing was could not be killed with a silly little gun. A creature that could expand and contract like the room was breathing, that appeared and disappeared at will, was not going to be concerned with bullets. Or her. In fact, deep down, she knew the creature was toying with her.

The creature, or whatever it was.

The darkness soaked into the ceiling then expanded above her like a predator threatening its prey.

She fired.

In the spot where she shot, the darkness expanded, and dodged the bullet. Then the shadow filled the hole like water going down a drain.

The creature, the darkness, swirled above in a frenzy of what looked like black tentacles. A warning maybe. A threat. She didn't know. But she didn't want to find out. The first shot had been futile, but maybe the next five wouldn't be. For a brief moment she considered the neighbors sleeping above, this included their two young children.

No, this is survival.

She quickly fired four more shots into the shadow.

The eyes she felt in the room were all around, not fixed in one position, but occupied the entire expanse of darkness above. They were violating her, searching her. She could feel it on her skin, all around her, inside of her. She couldn't fire the last bullet, like her arm was pinned down. A sudden smell of rot and decay filled the room. Or her mind, she couldn't tell which. She suddenly felt sick, about to throw up. Her mouth watered and her stomach convulsed.

She tightened her grip on the gun and readied her finger over the trigger.

One bullet left.

Her eyes shot back up to the corner of the room where the figure existed and pointed the gun. She had control of her body again. But the creature was gone, vanished with its shadow out the window. And with it she went, grabbed by the last lashing tentacle the figure had cast in shadow, pulled out into the pool of darkness and sickly yellow light outside.

The last thing she heard was a tapping sound far off in the distance.

Chapter Three

1

She remembers the sensation of her mind and body being stretched and pulled like putty. This hadn't been painful; only disorienting. There was no sound other than the distant tapping. She had the feeling of being on a violent amusement park ride in the pitch black... then, the brightness. That was when she got here, she supposes.

A little at a time her world becomes more clear and parts are coming into focus. But that doesn't mean they make sense.

The shadows, the darkness that had dragged her here, the tentacle-like shadows that undulate in her peripheral; she can't make sense of all this.

Whatever it was. IF it was at all.

With no damage to her body, especially to her head, she isn't sure how a person could simply forget who they are or were. Are there drugs that could do that? She wonders what happened to her life. Did she have kids? Her mind says she has, or had, a husband. But she doesn't know what came of that. She doesn't remember his name, but she knows she misses him. Or at least that's what echoes inside of her. What is her job? Did she have one? Were these memories at all? Was her own mind lying to her? How reliable is the human mind under such stress?

Being drugged seems the most plausible explanation for the gaps in her memory, especially without any severe head trauma. Truth is though, what does it matter? Right now her main focus is, or should be, getting the hell out of here. Away from this prison and back to where she can start to make sense of her life. But where would she go? If she can't remember where she came from, then how would she know where she wants to be?

Shadows cross the room like prison bars set at an awkward angle, splashing darkness all around her. For a brief moment she has the sensation of being watched, like the trees outside are peeking in.

She looks out her nearest window and drifts in the forest and pretends she is out there, free, breathing in the open air. There is no sensation of being watched. There are no impossible shadows. She is unsure where she will go, but she won't stop until she hits some form of civilization. Perhaps being around people, closer to home, might remind her of who she is.

She isn't sure how long she had stared out the window. She supposes it doesn't matter, really. But she notices something unsettling: she hasn't see one animal. Not a bird, a squirrel, a deer. Nothing. This fits with the fact that there are no trails or roads either.

This place, whatever and wherever it is, seems to repel life. Even the trees are kept at a distance, a near-perfect square perimeter around the building. She sees that no grass or bush of any kind is within the boundary as well. Even every fallen leaf seems to stay clear of this building. A ten foot perimeter of barren dirt and scattered rocks stands between her prison and the freedom of the forest.

She looks out every window, and this boundary is truth all around the building. No trails or paths. No roads. No moving, living animal anywhere in the vicinity. Not that a squirrel or deer was much in the way of friendship, but to know that no animal was nearby makes her feel more alone. More with herself. More away from everything else.

The urgency and panic stabs her in the chest again. Sometimes the worst feelings can trigger something. Something else inside. She is having moments where she can tell she's trying to remember. Small pieces of herself are starting to fall in place. This experience is a reminder that sometimes she could, at least in the parts her old life that she can remember, bend reality to her will. She can act as if everything is ok and in her control. It'll remind her that she can handle anything.

Anxiety and panic is a waste of emotion right now. Her focus should be on getting out of here. Perhaps she can find the people who did this and send them a message. What kind, she isn't sure. But in that moment she feels strong, inspired, ready to look these people in the face. The knot in her chest loosens at this new found inspiration to survive.

Get out. Find a way.

A lip on the window sills are small but she thinks she can use one to get a closer look at the ceiling and windows. Somewhere up there could be a crack, a weak spot in the wall or top of the windows, or maybe see that the lights do in fact have cameras. She has scoured most everywhere else, so this is the logical next step.

Just as she gets her second foot up on the ledge, she knows she is making a mistake. With all her weight forward toward the window, she feels her foot begin to slip. She can't correct fast enough, and as she reaches for something to stable her, all she grabs is air. Her forehead smashes into the lip of the window sill on her way down.

This doesn't knock her out but her head is static. A high-pitched whine is ripping through the center of her brain. Her thoughts are like a radio that is between stations. She feels the tickle of blood running down the side of her face. She quickly wipes it away, looking at the blood on her hand to see how bad it is. She takes a quick look in the reflection in the window and sees a dark red smear across her face.

Regardless, she knows she's fine. It's not the worst she's ever done to her head. She suddenly gets a short vision of a car accident in her past. Another memory. It's not much, but it's something.

She probably wouldn't need stitches, that is, if she was still in the real world. It was enough to make her feel stupid and angry. As if this mystery room isn't enough, now she's going to do this with a terrible headache and a wound that hopefully stops bleeding soon. She takes the sleeve of her shirt, a white tee with an image of a single wolf on a ridge wolf howling at the moon, and wipes her head.

Lone wolf. That was a way she had to see herself. Somehow this memory, a piece of her gets put in place. She can handle herself, and that is the point. But that is silly, isn't it? To think of oneself as a wild animal. And in this place it seems ridiculous to over inflate, to ignore the awful reality of her situation.

She looks down at the blood on her shirt. Maybe a wild animal is what she'll have to become if she doesn't get out of here soon.

2

Sitting around only makes her head worse. Then again, so would moving around too much. The pounding resumes, the feeling of being stupid enough to fall and hurt herself in this situation persists. Then again, at least she had tried something. She didn't just roll over. This is survival.

She has moments where she can forget the dire nature of this situation, then other times reality hits her square in the face. She is starving and thirsty. The last time she had eaten or drank anything was a few days ago. Between the worry of her husband disappearing (Why can't you remember your husband?)

and ending up in this place, eating really wasn't at the top of her list of things to do. Now she is regretting that decision. The lack of food or water is making her weak, making her mind clouded. Thoughts don't come easily.

She is still unsure of her memory, reluctant to accept it as truth, wondering if maybe she is lying to herself. Did she have a husband? Was the past pertinent? The reality is that she is in a room, alone, with no clear way of escaping. And she has to piss in a corner. And she is starving. That is the reality. Is anything else pertinent?

She blots her head with her shirt. Only a little bit of blood. Just the headache, mostly.

I'm overthinking again.

A gun that she keeps near for safety. The unloaded gun. *Her* unloaded gun. The illusion of safety. She wonders why her gun would be in the room. Was it sitting there unloaded and useless to make a point? She picks it up to examine it. At first glance it is her gun; she knows this. She also knows to look at the butt of the gun, because there will be something there she'll recognize. A 'T' or a cross shape engraved into the handle. She isn't sure what it means, but she knows that was on her gun. Maybe the first initial of her first or last name. Maybe a symbol of importance.

She is too tired and hungry and thirsty to keep digging in her mind. All she wants is a glass of water. A granola bar

(you hate granola bars—they taste like bark)
an apple, or carrot, or cereal, or... anything sounds good at this point. She wants something so much that she can practically taste it. Except what she tastes is actually a few days
(was it days?)
of not eating anything. She is to the point of hunger where she almost feels sick. But that can also be from dehydration, or her spill against the window sill.

She recognizes her flurry of thoughts, recognizes that they are counterproductive. But she can't think of anything else to do. Think. That's all there is. About food and water. About how she got here. Why she is here. So far, none of the answers—if there was any—made any sense. Just like her memories were knocked from her mind, her world slips away, out the windows and into the forest. Somewhere out there are all of her answers.

Or maybe there aren't answers. Maybe this is how things are.

She looks back to the gun, then to the woods again.

There is something standing in the forest. She is sure of it.

Her heart lurches. Whatever it is is standing upright like a person. so this isn't a deer or bear or dog. There is something strange, something off about it. Everything surrounding—the trees, the bushes—are in focus, but the figure isn't. Whoever it is seems blurry, like they are vibrating rapidly. But it is a person. They are wearing jeans, and a white shirt with something on it that she can't make out. The figure has chin-length dark hair.

It looks to be a woman.

Fear turns to hope. Maybe this is her chance to be out of here. This small hope gives her strength.

She bangs on the window hard enough to hurt her fists more than they already had. She knows from experience that the window won't break, but maybe whoever is out there can hear her.

The figure seems aware of her, but doesn't move.

"Goddammit!" She yells. "Help me! Don't just stand there!"

But she has a thought: maybe whoever is out there has to do with her being in here. Maybe she caught them trying to sneak in food... or something else. Maybe they are here to rape her, or to finally finish off the job. Or torture. Or...

What little hope she has fades. The figure continues to stare at her, then turns to leave, disappearing as quick as it had appeared into the trees.

Her banging on the window fades with her hope of leaving this place.

"Please," she whispers to an empty room softly. "Please."

She turns away, presses her back against the wall and slides down. The chance to get away from this. This hadn't been a chance at all.

She cries, sobbing uncontrollably.

This place is peeling away all her layers, or at least the ones she can remember. She is exhausted, starving, thirsty and confused in this perfectly constructed prison cell. It is that perfection that unsettles her the most; this isn't some dank and dark cellar. She can't make sense of the room with its perfect temperature with a world outside that never has a night.

She can't logic her way out of this. No matter the rationalizing, she can't make the pieces fit the puzzle.

So she cries. And for this moment, that's ok. But just this once. That's all she's allowing herself.

She wipes her eyes on her dirty sleeve.

Lone wolf.

Outside the standing figure is gone, replaced by the long and distorted shadows of trees. As she looks out into the forest, she swears she hears music faintly playing beyond the trees.

Chapter Four

Two Days Ago

1

She stormed out of the bank, livid.

She couldn't do anything. The bank had locked her out of all the accounts. No one would tell her why, no matter how loudly she had yelled at the bank teller and manager. No withdrawals, no debit usage, no credit card. She'd been careful not to overuse the accounts when she first had access, but now she regretted that she hadn't taken more. She needed that money because funerals were expensive.

She wanted all of this to be over.

His death had been a bigger challenge than she had expected and she needed a break. She was the only one handling all of this. Not her husband. Not any of their friends, even though they said they would. Friends always seem to let you down when you need them most.

Like the bank, the funeral home denied her. They wouldn't allow her to make any decisions on the body and they wouldn't tell her why. No matter how much she raised her voice. Couldn't they see how emotionally distraught she was? Instead they used a patronizing voice to try and calm her. This upset her more. "I know you're frustrated ma'am, but there's nothing we can do about it," they had told her. "We can't give you that information, ma'am."

She was sure that if that funeral home lady called her 'ma'am' again that she might reach over the table and pummel her.

All of that was the last thing she needed. Everything about her friend's death had been a nightmare. Before she stormed out of the funeral home she wanted to let them know that she was serious. "What you're doing is illegal. You have to allow the executor—that's me—to make decisions for what happens to the body! I was his friend! He put me in his will! I showed you! Expect a call from my lawyer."

She let the door slam behind her on the way out.

She didn't have a lawyer; she didn't actually think she would have needed one. She was the executor. She had all the paperwork. She still had all of this under control so she need not worry. Everything would fall into place, with or without help. It always did. And it always fell on her to make things right.

Like her husband. He worked hard, but only if it benefitted him.

It wasn't only her husband though; it was friends as well. People who always claim to be there for you but then seem to disappear when things get tough. She was trying to bury a friend of all of them and everyone ups and scatters when you needed them the most.

Things needed to get done, and she would most likely be the one to have to do it.

2

After the failure at the bank and the funeral home she drove back out into the woods where the mess awaited her. The house, the property was a complete chaos of garbage and broken down vehicles.

Her friend had been a shut-in at the end and it was her job to clean up after years of negligence. And now with the family poking around, there was a sense of urgency to it. She wanted it all done and over with, if only to have a break from all the work.

The dead guy, her friend, the guy she had looked after right before he died, had family and they were beginning to cause problems. She was sure that's why she ran into the roadblocks at the bank and funeral home. After all those years they expected to pick through the bones of this guy's life. After never being around, after never offering help like she had, they decided they wanted their piece. Even when she had all the proper paperwork, the Will, proving that the guy had left her everything, the family was gumming up the works.

Just as well. Things needed to get done. Just faster now.

As she rolled into the overgrown driveway at the end of a long dirt road, branches reached out to scratch the side of her car. It was muddy from the recent rain. They had done a lot down there and turned the driveway into a soup of mud and cut trees and branches. Old appliances sat outside in the rain, forgotten in exchange for something newer. Her friend loved to start things but never finish them.

No one else was there yet. By this time her husband and one of their friends was supposed to be there. The inside of the house had been professionally cleared, something that had to be paid for on account of how much garbage was in there. Old microwave food wrappers and beer cans had been like an avalanche inside. The guy, her friend, had not been good at taking care of himself, not since he had become sick.

The place was in the home stretch. That's what she told herself. And rightly so after all the work they had done to get ready for selling the house. Most of the garbage was picked up and out of the way. Cars had been pulled from the overgrowth and ready to be sold or towed. Anything of potential value had been taken out and put into a storage unit so it would be easier to sort through. But there was still a lot to do.

<Hey, I'm at the house. Where are you??? There's a lot to do and I need your help. I can't do this alone>

Her husband frustrated her. His urgency for getting this house clean and on the market, didn't appear to be the same priority as hers. After all, the family would blame her, not him. She wanted this done because she didn't want to think about it, didn't want to have to sort through this shit anymore. Her husband wanted to half-ass it, and that meant that he hardly ever showed up on time to help, because God-forbid he not spend every waking hour at work or at the gym.

Plus, this whole thing had costed her more than she had expected. Sure, things were paid from her friend's bank account, but still, that wasn't the point. She wanted to maximize the value of everything so she could rest, take a break, and maybe even buy herself something nice for the effort.

<Hurry up. Bring food. And some water> She texted. The least her husband could do if he was going to be late was bring something for her to eat.

She stood in the overgrown driveway and figured that the best thing to do at this point is to start burning leftover cardboard, papers, and wrappers that still littered the house and garage. This was something she could do easily without her husband's help. It was

something; she couldn't stand sitting idle when there was still so much to do.

It was hard to believe that even after all they had done, there was still so many things to go through. The garage was not one of the areas that the cleaning people handled, so it was still piles upon piles of stuff. Life adds up when you aren't paying attention. It's only in the end that we realize that life has weight. An immense one. Upon death, that weight is shifted to those that loved and cared for them.

She dragged heavy boxes from the garage to a burning pit that they had already started. Inside is old school work. Homework. Tests. Some grades. This must've been the guy's son. She had never met him but knew of him through stories.

She used these things to start the fire.

If the family had been cordial with her, if they had accepted how things were, she might have considered offering all these things back to them. But not anymore. Not with how they had treated her and her friend. Family can turn into a flock of vultures when one of their members passed away. This was one such case. It was sad, really. Because that was what life came to: stuff. Walls of stuff to make us all not feel so alone. Sure, she was guilty of it too, but not like this guy and his family was. And now they wanted to pick through the bones.

To hell with them.

Family photos, including those of wedding or trips. Old spelling tests, math homework, and A's and B grades went up in flames, tearing through the past. Old boxes went up in flames like the contents had never happened. Soon a large bonfire of old limbs and smalls stumps were raging. Slowly the driveway was more clear. The piles of boxes in the garage were disappearing, leaving an empty floor. More space. More cleansed.

Time had drifted away like the smoke and ash that spiraled from the fire and into the sky.

5:30 pm. The sun was going down behind the trees. It wasn't quite dark, but soon it would be. She'd have to start thinking about closing it down for the night.

After a few more boxes. More done today would be less to do tomorrow.

The most tedious part about the cleanup was not the piles of garbage; it was looking through everything to make sure there wasn't anything of importance hidden in the piles. He had boxes stacked nearly in every corner, stuffed with things that he had deemed 'valuable.' Old car magazines. Car part catalogues from thirty years ago. Workbooks from his job working for the government. Most of this stuff were things that normal people would throw away.

She tossed them in the fire.

Some boxes contained other things. Old photos. Pictures from the past, when times were happier. Times before a landslide of garbage overtook his life. She was looking back at a younger man, one with a wife and son. In the photos the guy was smiling, or glaring annoyingly because a camera was in his face at an inopportune moment. He looked like a completely different person. Clean cut and unburied by a beard of neglect. He had worked on cars, ridden motorcycles, had traveled to places all over the US for work, and had gone on trips with his wife and son. Now these people had left and this man, her friend was nothing more than a forgotten memory for them.

Some family.

Her father had always taught her that family was everything. That they would always look out for you, and that you should always look out for them. In a world of shitbags, as he had put it, family was all you could rely on. So she couldn't understand how a family could so easily toss one of their own aside.

In the past this house, now a refuse pit, had been a nice place. Well-maintained. Homey. Simple. Back then, there were no dead cars in the driveway. Now, there were several that had been swallowed by overgrown bushes and trees, like nature was trying to reclaim a bad memory. Where there had been flowers, was now a pile of tires, tread worn down and unusable. Where there had been grass, was now a stand of new alder trees that pushed through a lawn where pets had once laid in the sun, where his son and him would play catch.

None of that was relevant anymore though. The family had abandoned him, so why should they get these things?

She watched the flames as they ate through the guys past. More family photos. More old homework and catalogues. More car magazines. More trash.

She was sure the guy had kept this stuff because he was afraid that he'd lose the good memories if he hadn't. Sadness can shape our thoughts into something worse: shame. This place had been a fortress, with garbage walls to keep the outside world from collapsing in. We build places that look like the inside of our minds.

She knew that better than anybody. In order to survive the past she had created a world around her that she could control.

Another handful of photos on the fire.

She reached for more to toss, but found something different. Not just family photos or smiling faces of ancestors long dead, but drawings. They looked to be drawings done by a young kid. She had known his son was a bit of an artist, but upon a closer look into the box, she could see that it was more than just kid scribbles. She looked through them, seeing crayon and marker and pencil drawings of cars, motorcycles, comic heroes and villains, and spaceships. Some had the ever-popular smiling sun in the corner that was all the rage among young artists.

Some had writing on them. Ages 4. Age 7. Age 10. Age 11. Truth was, the art was pretty good for a kid of that age. She set the drawings aside, unsure if those were worthy of burning.

In the box beneath the typical child drawings were ones that weren't so child-like. Ones that unsettled her. She grabbed a small

pile and shuffled through them, seeing that each drawing got progressively more awful. Not in ability, but in content. One drawing was of a woman standing alone in a blood-soaked shirt, drawn in pencil and markers. She was vomiting blood. The next drawing was of a bloated dead man drawn and colored with crayons. His eyes had been ripped out, leaving dark pits where they'd once been. Then a ballpoint pen and marker drawing of a pile of bodies- or was it people melted together- she couldn't really tell. She could see a mass of flesh, faces hidden in the pile, deformed and terrified. Another was of a man screaming as his flesh was being peeled off of him by unseen hands.

What kind of kid would draw stuff like this?

The final drawing was of a lone woman sitting in a box. Blood pooled all around her. Strange, vaguely human-shaped figures stood all around her, misshapen and distorted people that looked like shadows.

Despite her horror, she would keep these pictures, if for nothing else but to show people. She folded up the drawings and put them in her pocket.

3

Her husband hadn't returned her text from a few hours ago. This seemed like the growing fad these last few days, as all of her help stopped responding to her texts or calls to help her at the house. Every single of those assholes had bailed on her.

<Thanks for leaving me to do everything today. Hopefully whatever you had to do was more important>

She was starving and needed a drink. A stiff one. She couldn't remember when she had eaten earlier that day. After the days frustration, she was even more annoyed that her husband couldn't even do the most basic thing: bring her food and something to drink.

She closed up the house and garage, and made sure everything was locked up. She uncoiled a hose and made sure that the large fire was completely put out. She was happy with how much she had accomplished at the house, bank and funeral home be damned. Tomorrow would be a new day and she'd have to figure out another option to make sure everything got done that needed to be done. She'd make sure to bring all of the paperwork she had.

It was no easy feat being the executor of an estate. Especially when the family did nothing but make it more difficult to do things the right way.

As she was getting into her car, she slipped in the mud and almost fell.

One of those days.

On her drive home she thought about all the things she would say to her husband to let him know how upset she was about being left to do all the work. Because even with how much they had already done, there was still so much to do.

Chapter Five

1

She looks out the window and into the sky. The perfectly blue sky. She feels the gentle breeze on her face, smells the fir trees, hears the soft whooshing of the limbs as they toss lazily. She knows she can't, but who says she can't wish she was? Who says she can't pretend she wasn't out there? Who says this is even happening at all? As jumbled as her thoughts are, as nonexistent as her memories are, who knows if any of this is real or not? All of this feels like being caught in a nightmare.

The window she is looking out of has the same sill that made every effort to knock her out. Her head is still swelled from the fall and hurt like hell to the touch, but the bleeding had stopped at least. It is too bad that hitting her head hadn't thumped more memories into her.

This experience leaves her feeling like she's in a perpetual state of asleep and not asleep. It is easy to drift in and out when there isn't anything else to do but think. And wonder. And worry. She hasn't had a full sleep since she has been here, but napping keeps her from losing her mind, from getting into her head too much. This could be her saving grace but also be her downfall. She knows this about herself. She knows that anxiety is always waiting to pounce on her. But she also knows that she needs to keep her wits, to stay reasonable, to not allow fear to disable her ability to think and plan. She doesn't want to be a crying mess again; she only allowed herself one of those.

But this tapping, tapping, tapping. She tries to see what does it, what

(or who)

makes the noise but every time she opens her eyes, there's nothing outside. Only trees. Only an open skies that unfolds above the leaves. Only a world that taunts her inability to escape, to feel normal, to pee in a toilet and not on a floor, to sleep in a bed, to eat.

Oh God, to eat and drink the biggest glass of water, ever.

She thinks she remembers that around three days is the most a person can go without water. In most cases. Today is

(somewhere around)

day two in this prison. She wonders why she has't seen night. Only day. Only perfectly blue, cloudless skies. A sun that doesn't

seem to move. She can't really have an idea how long she has been in here. She can't make sense of this upside-down place. Had she hit her head that hard? What had they done to her? Had she really only been in this room for less than a day? Why does it feel so long? Why is her body reacting like it's been days, rather than hours?

Ok, you're doing it again. Slow down. Breathe.

Without knowing for sure when the last time she had something to drink, she is forced to guess. But this is an informed guess; it stings more and more when she pees. And the color has become progressively more yellow. This usually not a good sign. The dehydration is becoming more apparent. Her peeing is becoming less and less. Which, in all honesty it is perfectly fine with her not to have to pee. Instead of exposing herself to the potential cameras in the light fixtures, she could subsist on what little dignity this small comfort offers her.

Still, she needs water. This is inescapable truth. And she needs it soon. Because the shock and adrenaline are starting to wear off she is becoming more aware of her body.

Her mouth is dry. Her lips cracked. She is nauseous, dizzy. Her eyeballs feel as if they've been bathed in sand. She feels hot, even though she knows the room isn't. She remembers, knows that things only get worse from here unless her thirst is remedied.

She turns slowly, thanks to the vertigo. All movement is a test, given the state of her muscles, sore and stiff from stress, the lack of water, and her futile attempts at escape. As she slowly stands to go sit in her spot again...

Next to the gun is a plate of food and a large glass of water.

She quickly scans the room. Ignoring her dizziness, she stands and hurries to look out all of the windows, in the hopes to see who could have dropped the food and water off. Perhaps to get a glimpse of her captor(s).

If there is a way in, there's a way out.

There's nothing. No one. No car or signs that one had driven nearby. No visible footprints. Only endless trees. And a bigger mystery to ruin her already terrible sleeping habits.

She looks back to the food and water. Spaghetti. It looks amazing and her hunger is urging her to dig in without abandon.

No. You can't.

No matter how good it smelled, no matter how much she wants to rifle into the plate of food that is steaming, she knows it would be a bad idea.

God, it smells great.

(In the outside world, spaghetti isn't one of your favorites.)

She suddenly knows this, suddenly finds a piece of the puzzle that reminds her that she had to eat spaghetti a lot as a kid. These are different circumstances though. Her mouth is no longer dry.

No. It won't be smart to just dig in. What if it is poisoned? What if the people keeping you here want to watch you slowly die a painful death?

This would be exactly what they want: to watch her wither away slowly because of her lack of self-control and over-indulgence. She can push past an empty stomach, but the glass of water... she needs it. Now. To clear her mind. To assuage her dizziness and fatigue. She decides that she will take a small drink, the tiniest of tastes, just to see if it is poisoned. Enough to test, but not enough to kill. She grabs the glass with both hands, shakily. She looks it over.

No oil slick appearance on the surface.

She puts a finger in the water.

No greasy or slimy film.

She holds the glass up to the window.

No floaters or discoloration.

She smells it.

No smell.

She isn't sure how she knows to look for these things, but they make sense. Memories seem to slowly be slipping back into her mind. A little at a time, and at the perfect time.

She takes a tiny sip. No bitter taste. Of course, none of those things meant anything. Poison could be a very difficult thing to trace. She waits a second to see if anything happens.

Nothing.

So she takes another tiny sip. This does not quench her thirst, but she needs to play this smart. She knows that downing the glass could lead to a few issues: one, too much water after not having anything in her stomach could end up with puking, and two, if it was tainted, her options were distilled to zero.

Even two small sips makes her feel better. Not great, but renewed in a way. With this comes the inevitable question: how the hell did whoever is doing this get the stuff in here without her seeing?

She can feel the time passing, but it is always daytime in this place. Her chaotic sleep schedule, if you could call it that, is giving her a false sense of reality. Her body says a few days, and this is certainly possible, but drifting in and out disables her from making sense of anything.

Outside the light has changed. The colors have changed. It reminds her of the sickening light of her apartment the night she had been taken. She can tell by how the shadows cross the forest floor that something is different. Something outside has changed. Shadows can be ominous and look more like figures standing in assessment when you're tired, hungry, and scared.

Maybe it's just that. Only shadows.

She has a sudden shiver at the thought of shadows, of standing figures... of the things that had dragged her out of her apartment and into the night. Because they, or it, brought her to this place.

The gun, the glass of water, and the plate of spaghetti are still in the center of the room, framed by the strange shadows from the sickly light outside. The food still seems to be steaming. Perhaps it is a trick of light. Perhaps her vision is blurry. She looks closer. The plate of food is not just steaming, it is still hot, as if cooked recently and just off a stovetop. But how? New plate? Reheated? How is someone getting in here without her knowing? Are there secret gas lines that are piped in here, knocking her out while they play this sick game?

Her head is cloudy from not eating and not drinking but she doesn't feel drugged or gassed. Not that she knew

(You've tried huffing gas and spray paint when you were young.)

exactly what that was like.

Or do I?

Who could know with this place?

The smell of food hits her nose and her stomach lurches forward, as if it is going to come out of her body and make the decision to eat for her. But no, she won't submit that easily.

I can't.

She can't give in to her basic senses just because she is hungry, just because she is scared or feeling weak. She has to be smart about this, and for now she knows food can wait.

The water seems fine. The time that passed gives an indication that it isn't poisoned. But maybe that's what 'they' want her to believe. Should she test it again? Maybe a little more this time? Shouldn't that same thought be applied to the food as well? In her mind, food seems more invasive. Not as necessary in the immediate. But eventually she is going to have to make the choice. She is hoping she will be out of here before that time comes.

She is still shaky. She grabs the glass with both hands and carefully raises it to her lips, making sure she doesn't spill any. Before she can get a drink, something slams into the window behind her. The shock from the noise startles her and makes her fumble the cup and it crashes to the floor, showering her with the water that she desperately needs.

"Shit!" She yells. This is not only because of the shock of the loud noise, but also because she knows she'll have to drink the water from the floor like a caged animal. Which, for all intents and purposes, is what she is.

Demeaning. Embarrassing. But she needs water.

She leans down like a dog, slurping the water up as best as she can. Aside from the embarrassment of drinking water this way, she is partially satisfied. A good amount of the water is wasted, soaking into her clothes and seeping into the small cracks in the flooring. But still, she had water. Enough to be somewhat less thirsty. Truth is, she could probably drink three of those full glasses.

She looks up to the ceiling, at the lights, into the possible camera and glares.

I bet you're enjoying this.

Somehow the glass didn't break when she dropped it. In her frustration and embarrassment she grabs it and throws it against a window. In keeping with the upside down rules of this place, neither window nor cup breaks, cracks, or leaves a mark. She watches the cup as it rolls to a stop on the perfect wood floors. It drips the smallest amount of drinkable water on the floor and she realizes that she had never been in a position

(that you can remember)

where she would consider that amount of water as a loss. But how long might it break until she gets more? Would she at all? This thought makes her consider the fact that she may have to resort to drinking her own piss. She hoped it wouldn't come to that.

This reminds her that she has to go.

Of course. Even my body is screwing with me now.

She gets up to pee, walking around the plate of food. Still hot. Still taunting her severe hunger by smelling amazing.

In the corner she had decided early on was her bathroom, she squats to pee, looking mindlessly around the room while a dehydrated and stinging version of normalcy splashes against the floor. She stops caring that some hits her pants and runs under her shoes.

It is what it is.

Her head still hurts. She knows she is bruised. She reaches up to touch it and feels the hard little lump and dried blood. At least it isn't still bleeding. She sits on the floor. Even this action makes her tired. But not sleep tired; it's more of a 'I've had a panic attack for 18 hours straight' brand of tired. It is possible it has been that long. Maybe more. Time, memory, and her thoughts are all a mystery at this

point. As she sits down, back against the wall, legs drawn to her chest to rest her head on her knees, something in her pocket pokes her. Not painful, just uncomfortable. There is something in her pocket that she has forgotten, something she had strangely not noticed since appearing in this place.

Paper. She unfolds the small handful of paper.

Drawings. The ones she had found at her dead friend's house. Ones drawn by his young son. The crayon and marker drawings that had left her unsettled in her previous life, or so her trickling memory is reminding her. Does she want to be reminded?

Just look. You kept them for a reason.

She lays the drawings out on the floor.

They are exactly as she remembers. Dark. Bloody. Unsettling. If they had been painted or drawn by a professional they would be all of those things, but because they were created by such a young kid (signed ages four, seven, ten, and eleven), it made them so much more unnerving. What sort of parents would encourage things of this nature? How would this child even know to think up these things?

She doesn't want to look at them anymore. Something really unsettles her about these drawings. Like she knows the images in these drawings. But how?

A movie? Other art? A book? Does it matter? They're just drawings by a twisted kid.

She rips the drawings into as many pieces as she can. If a fire was available, the images would be lost to the flames. Not like last time. She can't make sense of why she had felt the need to keep them. No one should have to look at things like that. She walks to the far side of the room and tosses them in the corner that is farthest away from where she sleeps; the place where she pisses and...

On her way to sit back down, she quickly peeks out the window expecting to see the crumpled body of an animal, but there isn't anything. Whatever had slammed into the window had been something large. And no damage to the window. The way this room shook, she thinks there should be some damage.

In a place that makes no sense, all of this makes perfect sense.

Chapter Six

Four Days Ago

1

<There's a truck at the house>

It was Sunday, the last day of her self-appointed weekend off. Of course something would have to come up. The text was from the guy's neighbor, who had taken it upon herself to keep an eye on the house when she couldn't be there. Probably with binoculars. She was a nosy person, but she had made friends with her because of her many visits to her friend while he had been ill.

Neighbor: <Looks like a truck and trailer. Just pulled in. I see two guys>

Who would be down there? She hadn't reached out to anyone other than the people she had helping her clean the place out, but could any of them gone down there? And for what? Thing is, the neighbor would've known either of their cars, so it probably wasn't them. Was this just some Lookie-Lou? A friend? Family? And why would they have a trailer?

She messaged back: <What kind of truck? Is it anyone we know?>

Neighbor: <Large silver truck. Chevy I think. I don't recognize the people. Older guy with gray hair. And another guy with a darker beard. Younger>

She thought quickly.

It wouldn't make sense for her to go down there. Not now.

She hated the cops, but they were her best bet. With all the paperwork in order, she could get these people removed from the property. Going through the police would give these mystery folks reason enough to stay the hell away with a threat of being arrested for trespassing or stealing. Both of which she would claim, of course. With a trailer it seemed that these people had intentions of taking stuff. Her stuff.

<I'm gonna call the cops. Let me know when they show up>

Neighbor: <Will do>

She called the police.

Before she got off the phone she made sure officers were on their way to go take a look. She had been in a little trouble when she was younger, so it was good to finally be on the right side of the law.

She texted the neighbor: <Cops on their way>

<K>

She paced around the room until her husband poked his head out of his man-cave to see what was going on. She explained and his response was for her to 'relax,' as if that ever worked with a stressed out woman. She glared at him and he scurried away back into his

room.

She couldn't relax, and being told to do so annoyed her.

"How about you make yourself useful and go get us some dinner?" She snapped at him through the wall. "You know, instead of sitting there doing nothing but pissing me off?"

He came out a few moments later with his shoes on. "And what would Your Highness like for dinner?" He said, sarcastically.

"I don't care. Something greasy."

He started to speak again, but her phone vibrated. She dismissed him with a wave of her hand.

The neighbor: <The cops just showed up. They're talking to the two guys>

<K. Good>

Neighbor: <The cops even pulled their guns on them. They were attempting to take one of the cars. Had it half up on the trailer>

<Cops aren't letting them are they?>

Neighbor: <No. They're taking the car off the trailer right now>

<Good. The balls on those pricks thinking they could take my stuff. It's gotta be family right?>

Neighbor: <haha. Not sure about that>

<Let me know when they leave>

Neighbor: <Will do>

Her cell phone rang. A number she didn't recognize.

"Hello...?"

It was the police. They had questions.

"No, I'm the executor of the estate. I have the paperwork."

More questions.

"I use to look after him. My friend hated his family. That's why he left everything to me."

A few more questions.

"I'd be happy to show proof, bring copies, whatever. I can get them to you."

The cop seemed satisfied.

"So who is down there? To the best of my knowledge he had written his family off years ago."

An explanation.

"Huh. Yeah, they're lying. As executor, I want them off the property. My friend didn't want them to have any part of this, so I am respecting his wishes, as stated in the Will. I want those guys gone. If anything is missing, I want to press charges. If even one thing is missing, I want them arrested."

That should shut them out.

"Thank you, officer," she said. "I appreciate that."

She wished she could see the looks on the guys' faces, confused and wondering how the hell all this had happened and angry that they couldn't do anything about it. She loved it.

What she didn't love was waiting for the neighbor to text her that the two guys and the cops were gone. What was taking so long? They should be gone by now. Were the cops listening to the family? Were they doubting her story? She was overthinking. Not an uncommon thing for her when she felt out of control of a situation. She knew she had this in the bag though; she had nothing to worry about.

Her phone vibrated again. The police. More questions.

"No, I don't know either of those names. I've never heard of them."

This was a lie. She knew who both of those people were from the photos she had burned, but felt it easier to not get into the unnecessary details. She knew that it was the dead guy's son and brother and that the family had been called about the death. That's why they were down there, supposedly to clean up the place.

"I don't care who they say they are. They don't have the right to any of that stuff. Only I do."

More questions.

"As I said before: I want them gone, trespassed off the property. If anything was taken, I want them arrested for burglary. I'm the executor, and I have that right."

The police again seemed satisfied with her answers. That should settle it.

"Ok, thank you, officer."

A few moments later, she got a text from the neighbor: <They're gone>

<Good. They didn't take anything did they?>

Neighbor: <No. The cops followed them out>

<Ok. ty>

She was finally able to sit down. The family trying to be involved would make things a bit more difficult, and force her to do things quicker, but that was ok. The cops knew she had all of the legal documentation; the family members were the ones butting in. She

had the paperwork. She had the proof. Chances were good that the family would fight this, however, but by the time they could move on anything, it would be too late. They should've cared when they had the chance. But they abandoned their family, and for that she would make them pay.

As she was just getting comfortable and relaxed, her phone vibrated in her hand. She hadn't even noticed that she hadn't put it down yet. A habit while dealing with all the stuff she had since her friend had passed away.

It was a text from an unknown number: <How is my father?>

She stared blankly at her phone for a moment.

Shit.

If she was to respond she'd have to be smart about it. Tone could give her away if she came off too pissed. Or urgent. Or nervous. She'd have to come off nonchalant, and yet annoyed that the family had the nerve to reach out. She was in control of the estate. This was her game, not theirs. So she responded:

<He was dead I'm the one who found him. But thank you for your concern>

A few hours later and there was still no response. She messaged again:

<Just to be clear- anything missing from the property and the lawyer handling probate will press charges. It's been years since any of you have seen or spoke with him. No one was interested until he was dead>

No response, even after a few hours. She needed to make herself known. She had to scare him. Threaten him. Subtly.

<Where's the keys to the cars? A report has already been made. You all hadn't talked to him in years. You guys knew there was no way in hell he would leave you anything. In fact your family had talked to him so seldom that he was in that house for weeks, maybe months dead. God knows how long he would have been there if I hadn't been out there and called in a welfare check. I was there when they took him out of the house. Where were you guys? He didn't even have your numbers in his phone. You got the coupe running- it was moved. Next of kin doesn't mean that you get everything. I have the notarized will. You guys have until tomorrow morning to give me the keys and everything else you took from the house or for trespassing and burglary charges will be filed>

Then as an afterthought to further drive her point home, she messaged:

<Don't fuck with me- I'm not the one. Your family didn't give a fuck about him and he hated all of you. He never even opened their mail that was sent to him. Graduation cards, gifts, whatever, they all went unopened or unread. I've been out there 3 times over the summer checking on him. I took him to doctor appointments. I clean his place for him. Where was your uncle? Where were you? You guys were no where around. If your uncle has an issue he can contact me, not send you to do his bitch work. I am not the one to fuck with>

That should give him something to think about, she thought.

He hadn't responded because she had cornered him. She was sure he was scared.

Good.

Now she could sleep. She had handled that perfectly.

Tomorrow was going to be a grueling day, and an early one at that. She had to get ahead of this thing.

2

She laid in bed staring at the ceiling. Time ticked by slowly. She felt tired, ready to sleep, inspired to be up early to start what would be a long day, but too many thoughts crowded her mind. And even though she could feel the weight of them, she couldn't pinpoint what any of those thoughts were.

Her husband had been gone for four hours. She guessed she had pissed him off pretty good this time. Men were so fragile. They said the dumbest shit then couldn't handle when a woman spoke up for herself. Her father hadn't raised no softie. She always remembered how he'd tell her not to be like her mom, to lay back and take shit from people. Her husband, for all his faults, wasn't terrible. He had always treated her well, despite being mostly emotionally unavailable. But that was due to his struggling with midlife crisis. He couldn't get past how much of his life he'd wasted in jail, or nodding out on junk. Problem was, he had traded one habit for another: heroin for steroids. Midlife had triggered this need to be bigger, better, faster, though all it had really done is made him worthless in bed.

In bed, where she was and he wasn't. He needed to cool off and she needed to get her thoughts straight. This time away was beneficial to both of them, otherwise they'd likely be up arguing all night.

She looked out the bedroom window. Outside a breeze was tossing the little trees about, making the limbs hit her window slightly. The tap tap tap noise was incessant, encouraging even more thoughts of frustration and annoyance. She rolled over, covering her head with blankets in the hopes of drowning out the noise.

But it wasn't just the noise; there was a smell coming in through the closed window. Something dead. Something rotten.

She swore she had smelled that several times over the last few days, like a bad song on repeat in her mind.

Am I a snake? An opportunist?

She is convinced

(as much as you can be)

of why she is here: Her friend, the dead guy

(you can't remember his name)

had family who was jealous that he had left everything to her. But maybe she hadn't gone about doing it all on the up and up.

Maybe she had fidget somethings here and there to streamline the process, not considering any of the family's wishes. All of this was a big game of revenge. They don't want to kill her; they want to scare her into giving everything up that he had left behind.

That is it. Has to be.

There is no point trying to make sense of how people can do the things they do. Death brings out the worst in people and this has always been true. Trying to reason out the unreasonable is a futile use of her dwindling energy. She will probably never know why they would do this to her. Or maybe she will. Maybe this game will go so far and they'll open the room to let her out, to explain their reasoning. Maybe she'll give them a few things and it'll all be over.

Here's to hoping.

In the immediate, she is starving. Still thirsty. Shaky and unwell. She can imagine her face in a mirror, haggard and pale, color leached from her by circumstance. No food. No real sleep. What water she did have was slurped from the floor like a stray dog.

She understands that is how the family views her. So is it beyond reason to wonder if they could treat her like one? Would she be put down?

Unlikely given the water and food that had appeared yesterday. Clearly this is a message. They simply wanted to watch her live without dignity.

She is starting to feel safe in assuming that the food isn't poisoned. The water wasn't, so why would the food be? She is convinced that this is a game, some sick theater to see if they can break her while they watch from afar like cowards. Her life is a plaything to them. All because the man who died, her friend, had left everything to her instead of them. The best thing she can do, she assumes, is act as if she is fine. But she isn't. She has the urge to scream, to yell into the world that she is innocent, that she hadn't done anything worthy of this punishment. But she knows, knows but can't remember, that people aren't so malleable, even in the face of evidence. Most people held on tighter to their stupid ideas the more they're proven wrong. She is sure that the people responsible for her captivity won't listen to reason, even if she has the chance to explain her side. In fact, the act of her even trying might encourage them to become worse. She shudders at the thought.

Don't give them a reason to keep toying. Be boring. Carry on in the best way you can.

Nearby, the unloaded gun, a new glass of water, and a new plate of spaghetti awaits her. She knows what she needs to do. While convincing herself there is no reason for it to be poisoned, she still worries that it might be. But she needs to do it. Not just for her body, but to win this small game of chess with her watchers. She needs them to know that she isn't some trapped animal, reduced to basic instinct. She doesn't need to remember her name to know that she's better than all that.

The plate of food is amazing looking, somehow still steaming like it is just off the stove. Glistening and smelling incredible, with the most perfect meatballs, probably a mix of ground beef and Italian sweet sausage. The dark red sauce is flecked with spices. Her stomach is convincing her brain that this is the best looking food she's ever seen. Her mouth is encouraging the bite.

The plate does not include a utensil of any kind, so she picks up a noodle with her shaky hand. She studies it, looking for anything odd.

She tastes it.

It's good. Like, really good. Maybe the best spaghetti she'd ever had.

Maybe it is that good, or maybe she is starving.

Using both hands she scarfs down the spaghetti, hardly chewing. She is ravenous, but she knows that if she doesn't slow down, her stomach will decline all that she'd eaten. She doesn't want to waste this. She needs it. But it is too late. Her stomach churns, threatens to upend itself onto the floor. But she knows she can't lose this. She chokes it back, swallowing the food again. Too much, too fast. Happily, it wasn't in her stomach long enough to sour the taste.

She wipes her face on her shirt in whatever dignified manner she can perform.

Slow down. Enjoy this.

She leans against the wall, cradling the plate of food, nonchalant like she is outside for a picnic. The glass of water is next to her, as if everything is normal. A meal and a drink, like back home. This is the way to move beyond her circumstance. This is the way to show the people who did this that she won't reduce herself to nothing more than a shriveled and scared little girl.

If she ignores the fact that she can't escape, can't explain why it never gets dark, can't remember, can't figure out how food and water somehow appears in this room, she can rise above the fear and anxiety.

No, you can't, but you are going to pretend you can.

She knows that allowing this weight to bring her down will only open more doors to her being victimized. For now she'll allow herself the luxury of disappearing into the endless day. This is how she shows her captors that she isn't and won't be easily defeated.

She looks outside and gets lost in the forest. This could be a picnic, at least in her mind. For now that is all she has; her imagination and the reassurance that she is stronger and more capable of maintaining control no matter the circumstance. She can feel a breeze, she can smell the clean air. The walls of her prison fall away, and the smell of piss is buried beneath tumbling leaves and whispering trees. The blue above is calming. Inviting. Not a drifting cloud in the sky, except maybe her because she likes to think she's up there, above all of this. If only she can remember a memory to make all of this fantasy more real, but she has to build it from scratch.

She drifts back into her room, into her cage. The tap tap tap is starting again and ruins her daydream. Perhaps on some level she is getting used to it, no longer concerned with what it is, but more inclined to accept that it is part of the way things are here.

She looks at the food in her lap.

Delicious.

She finishes the plate and sets it next to her.

God, I needed this.

For a moment she feels normal, like she had been allowed the freedom to eat in her own home, on her own couch. It isn't long before she falls asleep. As she does this she smells something faint, something dead.

2

She is dreaming that she is out of the room.

She is outside the strange boundary around the room where nothing grows. She is on a trail that she had not seen when she was in there. She is surrounded by trees and bushes. She is free of walls.

She turns to look back.

Inside the room that was once her prison she can see a figure standing in the window. She can't make out who. Man, woman, she can't be sure.

She knows they have traded places—her out here and them in there. Everything in life is a negotiation. She had earned this freedom, hasn't she? The person inside the room begins slamming the window with their fists. She knows that they are yelling despite the blurry nature of their appearance. She can't hear them at all. Not the screaming voice or the pounding.

Down the trail behind her, deep into the trees, she can hear music. It's the song Tonight, Tonight, Tonight by the band Genesis. She knows that if she follows the trail towards the song that she'll be safe.

In her dream it is warm and bright, the perfect day. The trail is well-tended; no branches or roots reach out to claw at or trip her. There is no need to run. There is no longer anything to fear. All of that is behind her up the trail and in the room where the figure is now crying. She doesn't know how or why she knows this. But there is no helping them; there is only helping herself.

She continues along the trail toward the music. She takes her time, appreciating the fresh air, the gentle breeze on her face. She hadn't seen a bird the whole time she was imprisoned, but now they fly and dive overhead. Their chirps become part of the music, like they had been recorded with it originally.

God, it is good to be free.

Freedom means seeing things in a way that you never had before. Like the intricate details in the bark of trees. The subtle and gentle brushing of the needles of fir trees as the breeze tosses them. She thinks she can hear the world of bugs in the soil, carrying on with their little lives, ignorant to the existence of the larger creatures above ground. This forest is a network of living things, existing at this place, at this time, and she is welcomed to be part of it.

Thank God, in all His forgiveness and Grace that allows me to be part of this moment.

She is so thankful for every little thing.

Just ahead the forest opens to a clearing where a small cabin stands. In her dream, this cabin is nothing like the room where she was kept like an animal. The door of the cabin is open. She can hear voices in conversation, and she can see, yes, see, the music spilling from the open door, like colorful water escaping an enclosure. She knows absolute safety can be found in this place.

She has the sudden urge to look back, to make sure the room is still lost in the trees, to make sure it is far enough away for her to be safe. But she knows she won't be able to see it. She knows she's safe. She knows she doesn't need to look back.

Memories can be like that. They can be gone the moment you have the courage to not dwell in the past, or the moment you become transfixed on something more immediate. Because memories are malleable; the more they become out of focus, the more distant and remote that they become, the more that we can rebuild and sculpt them in the way that we want or need.

As she steps closer to the house in her dream she can see people moving inside, still conversing. It seems like a gathering, a party, a celebration. She can't make out what anyone is saying over the music. It doesn't matter because to hear voices other than her own thoughts is music on its own.

As she steps on the first stair leading to the front door, a large black bird swoops down and lands on the roof overhead. She can't

tell if it's a crow, a raven, or a...?

"Hello," says a man's voice. "Welcome. I'm guessing you're looking for a safe place?"

A man, just taller than her with a long gray beard is standing just inside the doorway. He is holding a small bottle of prescription medication. She can't make out what kind, but it doesn't matter, does it? She is safe.

"Yes," she says. "I've been..."

The man with the beard cuts her off. "Well, come on in. There's no need for tedious introductions. We both know why you're here." He looks past her and into the woods where the room is. The man shakes the bottle of pills like a baby rattle, smiles and walks back into the house. As he leaves he says something that she can't make out.

Inside she can see six people. They are talking and laughing.

She steps through the doorway. As she does, she smells the aggressively sweet and horrid decay of a dead body.

3

She wakes up gasping for air and gagging on vomit. What she had eaten before she had fallen asleep was now all over her and the floor.

The smell still lingers from her dream, lingers in the room, her prison.

The perfect room, with the perfect walls and flooring and perfect temperature, where outside a perfect sunny day is shining upon her through the perfect windows.

Chapter Eight

Five Days Ago

1

The garage was a mechanic's wet dream. *Her* wet dream.

Thanks to her father, she was aware of what some of this stuff would go for when she sold it. Motorcycles. Classic cars. Snap-On tools. Roll away tool boxes of many sizes. Metal and wood lathes. Huge air compressor. Sandblaster. Car and motorcycle parts beyond counting. Boxes upon boxes loaded with who knew what. And a very large gun safe. She was sure there was more in there than just firearms in there. Maybe cash. Silver. Gold. Sky was the limit.

This place was a treasure trove. More than just potentially.

Most of this stuff would move fast. She knew lots of people who would want it. Especially the tools and car parts. Whole cars and larger machine shop stuff would be a bit more difficult, but she could sell the stuff at a lower price just to move it. That way she didn't have to.

The garage itself was in really bad shape. The roof had leaked in on some of the stuff and mold was a festering disease that infected every corner of the building. That would make digging through the shit a bit more difficult, but overall, this place would still have value once they put the property on the market. A little work, some new paint and a buyer wouldn't know the difference. Luckily her husband worked construction, so that would be a simple task.

As with the house, there would be a lot of cleaning to do. Both places were filled to the ceilings with garbage- boxes, old food wrappers, beer bottles. That friend of hers definitely didn't leave the house much. Sick as he was, this had been no surprise when he died. Alone in bed, surrounded by garbage and other discarded things from his life.

Life could do that to anyone, really. At any time.

That's why a person should live for now.

A huge opportunity had appeared in front of her and she would have been an idiot to not take advantage of it. She knew she needed to get the show on the road. But first, she needed to take care of this avalanche of shit, because buried below it was the gold. She knew it.

2

The smell in the house was awful thanks to the body in the back bedroom.

He had to have been laying in bed when it happened, because when she had found him, his skin was tight against his bones. What liquid had been inside of him had run out, soaking into the bed and floor. He had been dead for at least a few weeks. Maybe more.

Before they called the death in to authorities, she wanted to go through as much as she could. The Will he had left behind entitled her to his estate. This made it clear that he had entrusted her with all of his belongings. This also meant that she was in charge of cleaning

this place up. She and all of her help had mostly stayed out of the house, at least for long period of time because of the smell. No amount of odor killer could knock death out of the air.

She was fine around the dead, having seen it a few times before in her life. What bothered her was that the body was in the way of getting things done. He had been her friend, sure, but now he was gone, if only literally.

It was a Friday, so if they had called today, she would have all weekend to air the place out. She and her husband had been careful not to move too many things, as the coroner or police would wonder why the house looked sorted through when they came to pick up the body. Sure, they probably shouldn't be doing what they were doing, but their dead friend didn't need it. She thought back to the time she was with her father at the grocery store. She was maybe nine years old and she had spotted a \$5 bill that someone had dropped on the floor. Her father had seen it too. Go ahead, he had said. If you don't grab it, someone else will.

This was an important lesson in circumstance. She had never forgotten that day. Her father had been right, someone else might have picked up that \$5 and used it for ice cream and candy like she had. Her father had looked after her in so many ways, and yet, not in others. His inconsistency had enforced a philosophy in her that she was alone, that she couldn't rely on anyone but herself. Most lessons were painful. Sometimes she wondered if that was his point all along.

Because now, even with the help she had, she'd still have to do most things by herself to get this place in order.

After the uncomfortable phone call she'd have to handle the funeral arrangements for her friend. She'd have him cremated. No service. No questions. No prying from the family who had all but abandoned him in his final days. Truthfully she wasn't sure how he'd have wanted to be put away, but cremation was cheaper, so that was the route she was going to go. She had found another \$5 and she wasn't about to spend it all on something that didn't matter.

She had been early today, antsy to start clearing space to work. So early that she had beaten her husband here. Things would go a lot quicker with him lifting the heavy things. Men weren't good for much most of the time, but at least they weren't as useless as most women.

She looked around the mess of a house and thought about how proud her father would be that she was going to be taking more than just a \$5 bill from this situation. More is lost by indecision than wrong decision, he had said. And this, the dead guy's house, was the opportunity of all opportunities. Only a stinking body and piles upon piles of shit stood in her way.

The smell was starting to get to her. That would make that a perfect time to take a break. Her husband would be here soon, and really, she wouldn't be able to do much without him anyway. She stepped outside to get some fresh air. Out on the rotting front deck she took a seat. Being this far down a dirt road had its perks; it was actually quite beautiful down here. The forest was dense, and the sun was streaming through the trees on this fine Friday afternoon. And it smelled good— although this could be due to the other smell she had been breathing in. But it was the trees that made the air smell so clear. Like breathing in a new life almost. The opposite of what was rotting in the back bedroom of a falling apart double-wide mobile home.

Life happened in cycles; you live, you die, then something else grows on your bones. It was like the driveway down here. At some point it was well taken care of with fresh gravel. There was a line between driveway and forest. But no more. Now little new trees grew where cars once regularly drove. A boy played basketball on this driveway. A wife tended the lawn and flowers. A husband took pride in it all. Now small alder and fir trees were starting their lives on the bones.

She could hear a tapping sound coming from behind her. She had left the front door open, along with all of the windows in the hopes of getting rid of that smell at least a little. The sound was coming from inside.

Tell me it's not rats. Because that is all we need; little bastards eating through our profits.

She got up to go look, to scare them off, but she could hear the pop of gravel and a splash of puddles from the recent rain. A car was coming down the driveway.

Her husband's truck emerged from the thick brush and into the clearing where they could park. It stopped in the ever-growing mud puddle. Her husband gets out holding two bags and steps right into the puddle, covering his work boot.

"I really hate this damn driveway," he said, and shook the water and mud off. "It gets worse every time we're down here."

"You took longer than I expected," she said.

"Nice to see you too," her husband said in return. "There was a long line at McDonald's."

"Look, we've got a lot of shit to do," she ignored his sarcasm and took the bag of food. "This needs to get done faster than it is. I'm pretty sure there are rats in here now. And I don't want them eating through anything of value."

She could still hear the tapping noises inside the house. Truthfully it didn't sound like rats chewing through shit, it sounded more like something knocking softly on glass. But what would do that? A bird? Why?

"What's that noise?" Asks her husband. "Do you hear that? I don't think that's rats."

"No idea, but it's inside the house. I heard it earlier too, when I was in there."

Together they go inside, traversed the garbage pathways, tripped over random boxes or bottles, and made it to the back room. The place where he died.

"Yeah, you never get used to the smell, do you," says her husband, more as a statement than a question.

"No, you don't. That's why I was outside when you got here. I needed air."

They stood in the room and looked around. Neither of them saw anything.

“What the fuck? It’s loud as shit, but no matter where I look, the sound seems to move. It’s here, it’s there, it’s everywhere.” Her husband motions to the whole room.

The sound seemed to be getting louder. And he was right; it did seem to be everywhere, like it was leaking from the cracks and seams of the room. She looked out the one bedroom window and saw nothing. But the moment she looked away, a black shadow seemed to be perched just outside. It tapped, tapped, tapped.

But when she looked again, it was gone.

She looked down at the bag of food and realized she wasn’t as hungry as she thought.

Chapter Nine

1

The tapping is following her. From the dead man’s house, to this prison. The noise from the back room where the body was is now here.

She is convinced that this is part of the plan. to make her lose her mind more than she already has. With tapping. With shadows. With the unrelenting fear of what happens next.

As the memories continue to trickle in she realizes she isn’t perfect, just like all other people. She has fragilities, weak points, and a lifetime of reacting to things out of her control, just like everyone else. It is true, people rarely lived their lives; they reacted to it.

She is no different.

She had taken advantage of a situation as it presented itself to her, just like her father had taught. Was that so wrong? She had looked after the dead man, her friend. Taken care of him. Or, at least, that is and was how she remembered it. Though she can’t help but think of how filthy his house had been. What exactly had she done to help out? Just doctor visits? Fact is, none of it matters. She is here, now. And that was there, then.

Each time she had drifted off, more and more of her past unfolded, answering small questions about why she is in this predicament. More than a predicament, really. This feels like life or death. This is her being completely out of control of her situation, at the mercy of whoever is keeping her caged like a wild animal. And she knew beyond a shadow of doubt, that being out of control was and is not something she tolerated. But the question remains: what is to be done with her? What else did the watchers have planned?

She can’t shake the anxiety of not knowing what comes next.

These memories aren’t doing her any favors. She’s starting to see that maybe that family might have a point in wanted some solace in the matters of their dead loved one. But all this, just because she took advantage of a situation? Seems a bit extreme, no?

The gun is in the center of the room like it always is. Next to it is another plate of food and glass of water. At least she has those things. Sure, pissing in the corner isn’t great. So far she hasn’t needed to do the other thing, but if she keeps eating, it’s inevitable. She will cross that bridge when she gets there. She is getting used to this place, its rhythm, its oddness. Food appearing in the room out of seemingly nowhere is no longer a big deal; it is what it is. A meal she will take for granted. To subsist. To persist. Her mind is becoming stronger, only fighting the battles as they arise, rather than juggling the what-ifs her mind would notoriously throw at her. In the back of her mind she knows she needs to keep her mind on escape. Everything else is a distraction.

Except, the anxiety persists in her chest with a slight tightening. But that’s ok.

You’re gonna beat this. They aren’t trying to kill you. They are teaching you a lesson. They’re having fun. You are their entertainment.

She has to believe this.

2

She hears a noise behind her. Not a tapping sound this time, but a... whimper. Her mind immediately says wounded animal outside. As she turns, her eyes say something completely different.

Crumpled in a pile in the corner where she sleeps are two women. One blond and one brunette. They are bound. They are gagged. They are whimpering. They are covered in fresh and dried blood.

She feels like she knows them. She isn’t sure how. More of her old life seeping in without explanation.

“Jesus Christ!” She says loudly, surprising herself. Her eyes are locked not on their faces but on their butchered and stitched wrists. Both women have had their hands cut off. Not with a sharp surgical tool, but obviously with a crude and dull something. Loose skin hangs from them like small drapes. But the scorched skin indicates they were cauterized to keep from bleeding to death. Plus the stitching that kept the meat together.

Blood still leaked slowly from the stitching, leaving small, dry smears wherever their stumps had rested. Whoever had done this intends to keep them alive.

These women are friends. And it is possible that she is friends with both of them. Or acquaintances. That detail doesn’t really

matter.

(Jessica and Carla? No, Jennifer and Carly? Yes, those are their names.)

Jennifer is blond and Carly is Brunette.

She knows this, but nothing else. She cannot place these women in her memory or how and why they are connected to her in this place. She looks at them, bound and crying, pitiful, wishing they would stop whimpering. She looks at their grotesque stumps, wondering why this would happen to them.

This is about me.

Somehow she knows this is all a play to get her to feel, what, remorse? This had to be revenge, and she has the sick feeling that all of this is just beginning. Her being inside the room was only part of the play. The room is merely the stage.

"Ok, hold on," she says to the women. Maybe she can help them. Maybe they will have some information. Even in their state it is possible that they remember how it had happened to them. Maybe they saw faces. Having answers feels will almost like having control.

As she gets closer to the women, they shrink back. Frayed nerves. Automatic reflex from what they had been through, clearly.

"It's ok," she says to them, showing her hands in an innocent, non-threatening manner. "I'm going to take your gags out. I'll let you free."

The women seem to relax some.

She takes the gag out of each of their mouths, then goes to see about unbinding the rest. But she can't. Both of the women have their hands bound not by rope or ties, but by the fact that each of their hands are bound together with stitches. Stitched together. She can't undo that without causing more pain and damage.

Who would do this? And for what?

"Your hands... I can't," she tells the women.

"Please... help," moans Carly through tears. "Everything hurts. Jesus, look at us."

"I know, I see," she says. "But I don't know what to do. I'm stuck in this place just like you. I have been for days. I don't know where this is. I don't know how I got here. It just happened. Things still happen. Like you two."

Jennifer remains quiet and begs with her eyes. She looks defeated.

"How did you get here?" She asks them.

"We don't know," the women say together, their words stumbling over each other. Any movement they make seems to cause extreme pain. They both wince as the stitches stretch their skin uncomfortably. Grotesquely.

"Please," cries Carly. "Look at us. Stitched together like a science project. The shadows. The voices. The tapping. They're permanently in my head now. I can't un-hear it. I can't... I don't remember.." Carly trails off, defeated. Perhaps he realizes her circumstances are hopeless.

The two women are searching the room, confused and terrified. The pain and stress is cracking them, is making them hear and see things that weren't there. She had experienced, some of what they explained but she knew they were figments of her imagination- their imagination- caused by unusual circumstance. It is a lack of sleep and food. Of normalcy. She knows she is trying to talk herself down from pain. Fact is, there's no explaining away how people can just appear in a doorless room like this using just a lack of sleep and food as an answer.

Jennifer speaks. "You've heard and seen them too. The noises and shadows. Haven't you?"

"No, I haven't heard or seen..." she lies. "And neither have you. It's all in your mind. This is all a game. Someone is messing with us to scare us. That's all."

"That's all?!" Yells Carly. "Look at us! We have no fucking hands! This is more than just a game!"

Of course she knows this. But she can't fill in the gaps in her memory. She can't put the pieces together. There had to be more than her taking advantage of a situation. Of the death. That is the key element, the piece that brings everything together. But how?

She is losing hope that these women can be helpful. You can't reason with the unreasonable. She feels for them. Really. And she is relieved that she still has her hands. Truth is she would rather be alone than be forced to listen to these two women cry and carry on.

This place is hardening her. Shockingly so. Thing is, what can she do? She isn't a doctor. She isn't magician that can suddenly transport all of them through the wall and into freedom from this nightmare.

She turns to Carly and Jennifer and leans down to their levels. "What is my name?" She asks.

The two stitched women look at each other in confusion. "What?" Carly asks.

"My name," she repeats. "What is it?"

"Terri," says Carly, looking at Jennifer again with the same incredulous look.

Terri. One of the more important pieces to this whole puzzle. A name wouldn't get her out of here, but maybe this simple fact can unlock more doors in her mind. Perhaps it can reveal something useful. Something more chilling than her present thought about why she is here crosses her mind. What if she was hiding here on her own accord? What if she had all the answers, knew the way to freedom, and had simply forgotten. Far-fetched as that might sound, she has to be open for any possibility. She wants to pretend that things can't simply appear in and disappear from a room like they have. What if she had been the one doing all of this. All the gaps in her memory, is it possible? But what reason would she have for bringing mutilated friends here? Terri wants to run, to escape this place and all these dead-

end questions.

(Terri, you can't just look the other way and pretend it's not happening)

This is her father's voice. From the past. A new memory. Her father is helping her bury a pet

(your favorite pet)

in the backyard.

She has tears in her eyes. Not her current eyes, but her eyes as a child. She doesn't want to watch her father put her dog's body in the ground. That would mean he

(Charlie)

was truly gone.

Charlie had meant the world to her. Especially when her mom had been so mean. Mean about what she wore. Mean about how she ate, making sure to call her 'little fatty' if she had a bigger snack than what mommy approved of. Mean about her school grades. But Charlie never judged. And he knew when she was having a bad day. He knew when the other girls were mean to her at school. Somehow he knew when she was sad. She hadn't wanted to look at him when they found him on the side of the road, so shamelessly run down and abandoned by a car that couldn't be bothered to stop. Charlie had been four. She remembered wanting to run away.

Terri isn't sure the importance of this memory given her situation. Maybe her father, from the grave, was telling her to stay vigilant. To face the situation head on instead of running. To not be distracted by things that didn't matter in this circumstance.

She can't remember who these women are, or how they're connected. "How do I know you?"

Carly and Jennifer look at teacher with the same confused expression.

"We're all friends, Terri," Carly says. "Do you not remember anything?"

"Parts," Terri explains, not looking at the two women. "Pieces fall into place sometimes. The best I can tell is that I had a friend die. And given the circumstances, I took advantage of the situation because his family had abandoned him. So I took control." She turns to look out the window. "Then I ended up here. In this fucking place. With no way out. With no memories of how or why, with just a slow drip of information that I can't even know if it's true or a figment of my imagination. I get food and water, but it simply appears here, out of thin fucking air. And now you two; a cut up and crying mess. No explanation. Only an extension of this nightmare."

Terri turns to face the women, but she finds that she has been talking to a room corner, to small smears of blood on the perfectly built wood floor.

Carly and Jennifer are gone.

3

Terri isn't sure when exactly this whole situation had become less shocking. Appearing food? Appearing women with butchered hands? The slow peeks of her life back into her mind, revealing some uncomfortable truths?

(Or were they? Were they even your truths at all? What parts are reality and what parts are memory? Is any of this your past, or is it pieces randomly thrown together?)

Not being sure if what she is experiencing is real or not adds to her feelings of unreality.

She sits next to the gun, the glass of water, and a new hot plate of food, that had somehow appeared as the women disappeared. Even after what she's experienced with the two women, Terri is still hungry. And thirsty, of course.

Again, she marvels at how incredible the food is.

Chapter Ten

Seven Days Ago

1

Terri slid a small baggie across the table slyly to Carly. She did the same to Jennifer.

"As promised," said Terri. "This is for helping out here today."

Both of the women quickly scooped up the baggies and stuffed them into their pockets, looking around them as if paranoid. They were definitely paranoid; this was a public place after all, with prying eyes in every corner.

"I didn't want to get into too many details on the phone," Terri explained. "This is more of an in-person type situation." She had a folder and put it up on the table at the small cafe where they all sat. Inside was some paperwork. A last will and testament. A power of attorney. Titles to a few cars. The only other person who was going to sign them was already a dead man.

"What I need is witnesses," Terri explained. "I have these forms here and they need verification, proof of legality."

"But..." Carly began.

“Yes, I know, you aren’t notaries. But I’ve already taken care of that.”

Terri looked down at the stack of paperwork, documents that would seal a more prosperous future. This stuff was a work of art. Having dabbled in forged documents in the past, unsuccessfully, these new ones were a work of art. She had honed her craft since the last time, learned from her mistakes.

“Look,” Said Terri. “All I need is a couple of signatures, and there’ll be more where that came from.” She indicated toward the small baggies she had slid to Carly and Jennifer.

The two women across the table look at Terri, then at the strange older man next to her.

“This is Allen. He’s the one doing the Will. He needs witnesses to make this official,” said Terri. Actually his name was Robert, but the two women didn’t need to know this. At least not yet. Eventually Terri would tell them the truth, but for now the truth would gum up the works. Terri didn’t need that. She needed to work fast, to get this paperwork in order before anything fell through.

‘Allen’ sat quietly, and didn’t say anything to the women he had just been introduced to. He had been told to keep quiet, to help sell the story. Truth was, the women getting the small baggies were far more interested in the contents of the ‘payment’ than they were the strange man.

Robert, or Allen, whoever, was an old friend of Terri’s. Another hang around guy that did what she asked if she provided certain illicit substances. He hadn’t always been that way, but the moment his wife had left him, he didn’t have much else to do. At least pills had given him a direction. It wasn’t always the right way, but at least it was something.

Terri liked to think she was doing all of these people favors; saving them; helping them. They all had something in common: they were broken people looking for a purpose. And she could give it to them, all while getting what she needed.

Terri had picked a day and time that she knew would be less busy. A Tuesday at 11am. The cafe had a few stragglers, finishing up a late breakfast, probably drunks trying to replace alcohol with grease. They were all focused on their eggs and bacon. They had zero interest in what a small group of people were doing in the corner of the cafe.

Still, she wanted this to be over. All that kept her from a potential goldmine was a few signatures.

Carly and Jennifer had scurried off to the bathroom, just like Terri thought they would. That had been the plan. If the two women were tuned up on the pills that Terri had just given them, they would be more malleable.

The longer she sat, the more anxious Terri would become. It had taken the ladies too long to get back from the bathroom. And once they did, it had been obvious that they had snorted too much.

Terri ushered them both to sit down. Carly and Jennifer dripped into their seats with Terri’s help.

“Ok,” said Terri. “Now all I need you to do is sign here. And here. And then here. Then one more over here.” She pointed to the respective blank signature lines. “And date here. And there.”

The women could hardly hold their head up, let alone a pen.

But they managed.

2

Later that morning she had a signed and notarized Will and Last Testament of a one Mr. Dead Guy, that looked as good as the real deal. The key had been to take some extra time with the details, especially the notary stamp, and that had made all the difference. It was official enough that no one would second-guess its appearance. That was the important part: the first sight. If it looked real enough at first glance, no one would feel the need to take a closer look, because if they did, they would see that the notary wasn’t even a real person. But this was something special. She was proud of that one. It was a work of art.

She gave the people who acted as ‘witnesses’ a promise of ‘getting their piece’ from the dead guy’s estate without giving them any details. That was all bullshit, of course. She’d give them promises and a few pain pills to even up. Junkies were an easy lot to appease. Being one in the past had taught her that. Hell, if she wasn’t careful, she could always slip back into it. Not with a job like this though. Keeping occupied meant making sure she had a clear head.

She had so much shit to do today. So many errands. So much to do, so little time. The Will, the big thing was done, but all the little things were tedious annoying. Hopefully soon, or at least by the time she was done running around, her husband would have good news about finding keys and titles to all the vehicles. She knew he had reached out to some people and they were waiting for the call to sweep and clear once everything was in place.

For now she would keep it simple. Paperwork needed to be in place. Not a whole hell of a lot could be done until that stinking mess in the back room was taken care of. In the next few days they’d have the dead guy gone and the house airing out.

<Found keys to the garage. You should see this shit>

A text from her husband. This was great news.

They were good about texting very limited information about the dead guy’s house.

She replied: <Great. Be there soon. I’ve gotta make a quick stop first. And hey, invite everyone over. It’s a good night for a get together>

<Will do. Something up?>

<Let's just say that we're all good here>

<Nice. Loud and clear. See you in a bit. I love you>

She was excited and forgot to return the 'I love you' to her husband. She'd see him soon enough.

She now had access to the dead guy's accounts. She wouldn't go crazy, at least not yet, but she felt she deserved a small celebration. All the work she had done to make this all happen, she deserved something.

Her first stop would be a store so she could grab some snacks. While she did that she found a perfect little pink dress for her seven year old granddaughter. Alyssa would love it.

All of that cost \$33.79. That certainly wouldn't raise any red flags.

After that she stopped at the dead guy's bank and withdrew \$300. As executor of the estate she could do that.

That amount of money would be enough for the cocaine she wanted for this celebration. Clean three years or not, she had earned the simple pleasure of getting high. But only a little bit. Just enough to perk her up after a long and busy day

She made a quick phone call and arranged for the cocaine to be at the dead guy's place later.

An hour later, when she got to the house at the end of the road, all of the people involved were there. The six of them stood around a bonfire that burned the dead guys things. They talked. They laughed and drank. They snorted lines and partied like they had as teenagers. Sometimes it was good to remember back when things had been good.

The coke and alcohol had made her clingy, but her husband was too preoccupied with talking about the new guitar he was going to get and with lifting weights. So much so that he didn't notice that his best friend and her had snuck off to fuck in the woods behind the house.

Chapter Eleven

1

She is a thief. She had stolen from a dead man. A friend, but a dead man. One that didn't need any of his stuff anymore. His name had been Allen, but he didn't need that anymore either. She had used his death as a way to chisel his entire estate. She had used drugs to lure some addicts to help her.

Better to take advantage of a situation, then let someone else do it, her father had said.

(Had he said that to you?)

Whether he had said it or not, whether it had even happened, he had been right. All those years ago, with the \$5 bill, he had been right. When an opportunity arose, you take it. Otherwise you'll regret it. That had been what he was saying. He liked to say that so many things had slipped by because he had always tried to do 'the right thing.' But meanwhile other people would benefit.

What her father hadn't talked about was probability of reprisal.

Here she is, locked in a mystery room, with no explanation. She has pieced together that this is revenge and that she is the target for taking advantage of a situation, for doing like her father had said. For doing something she didn't feel completely bad about. She remembers a message she had sent to one of Allen's family members, that they had abandoned him. That they had left her to deal with him as he was sick and dying. For doing so, her actions after he passed had been her payment. That was why she didn't feel bad.

Her change in this place is starting to shock her. Has she always been this way and revealing itself through small glimpses of the past, or is she a product of circumstance? Maybe it isn't shock; maybe it's realization. Puzzles are satisfying when all the pieces fall in place. This situation she finds herself in, this is survival, not just a puzzle to solve. The more she learns about what and who she is bodes well. Becoming a hardened opportunist will give her the advantage.

Who will win this: the scared woman, or the prepared one?

Terri looks outside, and realizes that it has still never been dark outside. She knows that it has to have been longer than a day, two days, even three or more days. Is it possible that she has been in this place longer and is simply sleeping through all parts of the evening and night? How can that be? She isn't sure which is more unsettling: always being on display in the light or been shrouded in more shadows than she already was. As it was, this place didn't make much sense. The lighting, the way things move, the shadows that dance on the walls- none of these things line up with the reality she remembers. Like all the windows are TV screens showing the same outside, with no relation to what actually was. What the fuck is this place? What is happening to her mind?

She screams until her throat is sore. Then she screams more. At the windows. Into the outside. At the whole room, and the world.

This is the one breakdown she will allow. No more after this. She needs to keep her head on straight. She can't allow herself to get overly emotional.

"Women always get emotional about things. For everything. And it makes them do stupid stuff. Just ask your mom." Her father had proclaimed many times during her formative years. Terri liked to think that he was teaching her something, trying to keep her from becoming awful like her mother. When her parents argued, both of them liked to point out what the other was doing: "See what your mother made me do!" And "Did you hear what your father said to me?!"

It was only during arguments that the family did something together.

2

She has a feeling of being watched.

Someone or something is in the room with her. She has sensation of it touching her skin, exploring her.

She hears the tapping noises, far in the distance. This isn't something that bothers her near as much as it once did.

But the not alone feeling is not something she is comfortable with.

She is looking out the window, sipping on a glass of water that had appeared moments ago.

But there's nothing in the room.

She goes to every window and looks out. No sign of anything. No people. No vehicles. Not even a lone grazing deer. She takes another drink.

Behind her, something makes a noise. Maybe someone. Kind of a voice, but definitely not words. A gurgling sound, like someone trying to cough something terrible up. She turns.

A person huddles in the corner of her room. A woman, shaking as if she is cold. She is wearing a red shirt; no, not a red shirt, a white shirt covered in blood. The woman looks up at Terri and tries to say something, but only a thick, wet gargle comes out. A long string of dark blood falls from her mouth, adding to the already expanding red against white.

Terri recognizes this woman but cannot come up with a name. She searches her mind to very limited avail.

(Is it Shauna? No.)

But she is a talker. She likes to gossip. Terri knows this much.

(She had been useful. But how?)

Terri can't make the connection here. Yes, she knows the woman, but there are blank spots in her mind.

Blood dribbles from the woman's chin. She is trying to speak. There are no words, just the continuous flow of blood clots. A bubbling sound from the depth of her throat is as good as the communication gets. Her sunk in eyes and dark circles indicates that she is another victim of no sleep. She lurches forward, and retches the contents of her throat onto the floor. The chunks that hit the floor sound like a wet towel. The growing pool of liquid looks like a pile of squirming leeches. Terri recoils. This is awful.

"I can't understand you," Terri says. "Say something."

The woman opens her mouth, points to it, then shakes her head. *I can't.*

Terri can see inside her mouth. Inside she can see teeth swimming in a chunky red soup. Her tongue had been removed, leaving a stumpy piece of meat that thinks it still has a purpose. It twitches and moves, attempting to form words. Her gargling and choking is less about communication and more about trying to not drown on her own blood.

"Christ," says Terri. "Who...?"

But she knows. This is another chapter in this sick story, an attempt to break her, to scare her, to teach her a lesson.

(Sandra. That's the woman's name.)

The tongueless woman, Sandra, sits leaning forward on her knees, letting the gore slide out of her mouth and into a pool in front of her. She is struggling to breathe through the clots. Her wound is new. Fresh. And leaking all over the place.

This conversation, or attempt of, is not going to go well.

"Look I'm sorry I don't know how to help you. Have you tried your shirt to stop the bleeding? As you can see," Terri indicates to the room. "...that I have limited resources here. But we need to get out. You and I both. So if you have any information, please figure out a way to relay it."

Terri grabs a piece of the woman's shirt. Sandra recoils. "No, it's ok. I only want to help," reassures Terri. "I'm going to rip a piece of your shirt off so you can put it in your mouth, to maybe get the bleeding to slow down."

Terri folds the torn shirt and folds it, then hands her the piece of fabric, already dirty with blood and dirt. The woman is shaking. Cold or terrified. Or both. But it isn't cold in here. Sandra is in shock.

Terri feels for this woman. Sandra's mouth has got to be incredibly painful. Terri wishes she can help more. But more than that, Terri is happy she was able to keep all of her parts.

For now.

Terri shudders, but shakes off the thought before it drills into her mind.

"Do you know how you got here?" Asks Terri, the most obvious of questions.

Sandra shakes her head. *No.*

The woman puts up a finger. *One moment. Hang on.*

She dips her finger in the pool of blood in front of her and turns toward the wall. She smears the red against the bright white paint and words begin to emerge.

SHADOWS.

Shadows. That word. She thinks back to the night that she was brought here, pulled here, seemingly by shadows, through the

window and into the night. Then darkness. Those same shadows cross the room here too. Distorted, human-like shadows often populate this space. She tries to ignore them, to leave her unsettled, but now having heard the visitors say

(or write in blood)

the same thing makes it harder to ignore. She shivers at the thought.

The woman doesn't stop there.

VOICES.

Another common thread. Voices. Whispers. Cliche horror movie stuff; not shit that happens in real life. Terri writes it off.

"The voices in your head?" Terri asks.

The woman without a tongue, shakes her head. *No*.

Sandra indicates all around her. *Everywhere*.

Despite the nonsensical mystery of what brought her and these visitors to this place, Terri has to believe that there is a perfectly good, reasonable explanation. The people doing this have to be professionals. As if kidnapping and planning an insane horror scenario was something a person could excel at.

There are obviously speakers in the ceiling. Along with the cameras, Terri is sure. Whoever is doing this is watching the whole thing. Probably enjoying it, maybe even getting off on it.

Sick.

This poor woman will never talk again. Sandra, a woman who could not keep quiet about anything, that spoke ill of anyone if it benefitted the conversation. The irony is not lost on Terri. This is all part of the play. All for her.

Terri is exhausted. This place. This circumstance. Everything is taking its toll, no matter how much she might want to deny it. And she would. Because indulging in the fear, the anxiety would get her no closer to her goal: to get the hell out of this place. And yes, to exact revenge on those responsible. Because the punishment is above and beyond the crime. Had she been a thief? Yes. But she had done what she needed to do to survive.

The dead guy had been her friend, so why should his family who had written him off years ago, get everything?

(The neighbor.)

That's who she is. The neighbor of the dead guy. She would know his name write it on the wall in blood. But for what? Did his name matter? He was gone. Irrelevant.

"You were his neighbor," Terri says to the woman.

She nods. *Yes*.

Sandra looks bewildered because she doesn't know that Terri has forgotten everything.

(She gave information.)

Sandra had told her about the house. That the owner, the dead guy, never left. Gave his schedule, gave Terri the information that led to robbing the house. That she had robbed a person, her friend, while he lay dead.

(He was sick.)

So he had been sick, had died, and his neighbor had called her to tell her that the house was wide open. That there were things there that were of value. But if she was his friend, wouldn't Terri know all of those things first? There are still so many gaps in her memory. And what gaps are filled she is reluctant to accept as truth. How can she know if what she is remembering is in fact what happened? It is difficult talking to mutilated people in a reasonable manner that would get her more information. And that is assuming she would know what questions to ask. She has to admit that these extraneous circumstances is clouding her own judgement. And the anger and anxiety is eating her alive.

"Is there anything else you can tell me?"

Sandra looks up, small strings of blood dripping from her bottom lip. She shakes her head. *No*.

"If I knew more, I could try to get us out of here." Terri isn't really talking to Sandra. "But I've got nothing."

Terri sits opposite to the tongueless woman in the room, in her corner. She looks out the window, while the woman behind her continues to gag and cough, making an effort to converse, but Terri is already elsewhere.

As Terri looks out the window, the horror inside the room is fading away, like a radio being turned down. From her vantage point on the floor, she can see blue skies between the gently swaying trees. The occasional cloud drifts by. It is a beautiful day and she longs to be out there in the clean air, beyond the walls of this place. Away from the thickness of the iron smell of blood. Away from the ever-growing pool of blood that now stains the once clean floors.

If only she could bring herself, to close her eyes, to make this all go away, she would. And sleep. Sleep until the walls dissolved away.

What kind of monster could do all of this?

The same kind that can make things appear and disappear at will. Like the stitched women. And... Sandra.

She is gone as well. There's nothing left but a pool of thickening blood and a soaked piece of shirt on the floor. And two words that are smeared on the wall:

SHADOWS. VOICES.

Unanswered questions and exhaustion are keeping Terri awake. She is so tired that she isn't tired anymore. If only sleep could solve this problem. If only she could wake up and know what the fuck is happening. All of this could be easier if only she could appear and disappear like food, water, and maimed people.

Her eyes swing up and out of the window to another time and another life.

Chapter Twelve

Nine Days Ago

He lay there like a rotting, stinking inconvenience.

"Jesus Christ, open some fucking windows!"

The house was a network of trails through empty beer cans, bottles, boxes, frozen food wrappers, and meals-for-one containers. That was the saddest aisle at Walmart. Some of the stuff was half-eaten, left to rot. The dead guy had lived alone and had clearly done so for a long time. The smell was beyond awful. The stench of a life wasted.

She would make sure none of this went to waste. All of this stuff would need to be picked through. People like her friend, the dead guy, were the type to squirrel away money and valuables. Hidden under this landslide of trash was some treasure, she was sure of it. But that was just inside the house; outside in the driveway, vintage cars were buried in overgrown trees and sticker bushes. Rusted or not, these cars would fetch some serious money. First things first, though; Terri needed to dig through this smelly pile of shit to get the dead guys information. Paperwork. That was the key to this whole thing.

This would be no easy task; there was at least ten years—probably more—worth of shit piled all over the floor. Plus, there was dealing with the rotten stink drifting from the back room. But that was why she had put her husband back there.

"Hey, make sure you aren't messing stuff up back there too much," She yelled from the living room to the back room. "We don't want the cops thinking we had anything to do with his death. Nor do we want them thinking we're stealing before we get all the shit in place."

"I know! I'm not a fucking retard!" He yells from the back room. "Holy shit this place stinks. It's hard as hell to be back here."

"Breathe through your mouth then!"

"Why?" He yells. "So I can taste it?"

Terri chuckles to herself. Better him than her.

Even out here in the living room, the smell was aggressive. Plus, add in the mold from old food. Gloves and masks were a must, for obvious reasons; nobody should be touching or breathing this shit. It also wouldn't be a good idea to leave fingerprints. Not that police even do that anymore. Usually a cop is only good to call if you want to file an insurance claim. Terri would use that incompetence to her benefit, but she also had to be smart. Pulling off this job wasn't going to be a walk in the park.

More like a stroll through a garbage pit. One with a dead body in it.

She continued stuffing garbage into a black plastic bag, one of the huge 45 gallon ones. She knew they were going to be using a lot of them over the next week or so. Every so often the smell would seep out of the back bedroom and remind her aggressively that there was a rotting corpse back there. Her stomach would lurch, but she managed not to puke in her mask.

She had seen the body, had to look, and could tell he had been dead for at least a few weeks. Enough time to where most of his skin had slid off his bones. The skin of his face was leathery, gray and void of all living human color. Everything under the skin had liquified and soaked into the mattress and into the carpet below. The floor looked like a pot of rancid goulash had spilled there. In a way, the dead guy, Allen, seemed to enjoy torturing them with his smell and rot— his skin had tightened around his mouth, pulling back from his teeth, leaving his face a grim and amused smile.

Her husband stumbled out of the room, almost tripping on a box of empty beer bottles. "Jesus, fucking Christ," He said regaining his balance using the wall. "This place is awful. Almost puked in my mask like seven times. Why aren't you back here helping with this?"

"Because you're the man, and you're a gentleman." Terri says flipping him off playfully.

"Yeah, that's great, the chivalry and all that, but I need a break," he said, covering his masked face. "Even this mask isn't helping. And I swear my eyes are burning."

"Sure, but that's not from the smell," she said smiling. "That's from you being a pussy."

"Nice. But either way, I'm going out to the garage where there isn't a rotting corpse."

She could tell something more was bothering him than the smell of the body. Not everyone was cut out for working around death. Even her, who had a pretty strong sensibility about such things started to feel watched after awhile. Like, yes they were dead, but were they completely gone? It was silly to think that way, she knew this. It was childish.

She was sure her husband would explain himself later. He was one of those dudes who felt a thing, but weren't sure until much later how to talk about it. And she was patient. No, not patient, it's that she didn't care enough right now; not with all the shit that needed to be done. Do now, feel later. Time was of the essence, as her father used to say about missing out on things.

“Fine,” she said. “Get some fresh air.”

She went back to the bedroom, the room with the body, and picked up where her husband seemed to have left off. She sorted papers, tossed trash, rifled through endless boxes of trash in the hopes of finding that one key bit of information that would crack this whole thing open. She needed access to Allen’s identity so she could create the proper paperwork. Then she would be executor and sole beneficiary. That had been the plan since this whole situation had been revealed to her by Sandra, his neighbor.

<I think I may have something you’ll be interested in> Sandra had texted a few days ago.

She wouldn’t go into the details over the phone, so Terri drove over there shortly after the message. It had gone something like this: Her neighbor Allen, a guy she had rarely seen, hadn’t left his house in months. That had been unusual since he had kept to a fairly strict schedule after he had retired a few years earlier. Confused, Terri wondered what the ‘something’ Sandra had mentioned was. Sandra, the big mouth, suggested that maybe the man who lived in the house at the end of the road had died and that maybe it could be open season down there. ‘Open season’ had been a euphemism for stealing, of course. Sandra knew full well that it was something Terri enjoyed. Allen, the neighbor was either sick or dead. Either way this was an untapped well to exploit. Terri agreed.

So there blossomed the plan, that Terri was a concerned friend who had checked on Allen only to find him dead. She could call in a welfare check. But before she would be a ‘concerned friend’ she would be a thief who would create bogus paperwork that would justify her taking all of Allen’s things. This included old cars. Motorcycles. Parts for both. And Sandra explained what a shut-in Allen was, and from that Terri could wager a bet that there was all kinds of collectibles, coins, gold or silver bullions, or cash hidden all over that place.

What Terri hadn’t bet on was how fucking disgusting the place would be.

She stuffed loads and loads of crap in huge plastic bags. This property was in a serious need of a bonfire. If she hadn’t been so sure there had been valuables under all these piles she might have suggested burning the whole place down.

But all the work was worth it, because she finally found a checkbook. Some old paystubs. Bank statements. All of the things she needed to make proper paperwork, to make this whole idea convincing.

This is it!

She was stoked. This was the key to the whole fucking farm.

She heard a soft rustling sound behind her. Then a gravelly voice that sounded like it said *leeeaaaavvvvee nooooow*. She turned quickly to face an empty room. Her husband hadn’t been messing with her; he had still been out in the garage. But the sound and voice seemed clear. Or had her mind been messing with her?

Allen was there. Still dead. Still stinking. Still judging with his wet and empty eye sockets. And that dead smile.

Just something shifting. That’s all it is.

So many things piled on other things. Of course it would be that; just shit settling after the hours of sorting through it.

As she started to leave the room she stopped to look at the dead guy. She wasn’t sure why. But his head, that had been glued to the same spot on the bed since her first visit, suddenly broke free and fell over. Instead of looking straight up like it had been, now it looked directly at her. The neck was twisted unnaturally, settled in a position that seemed molded to stare at her. Which it did. In judgement of what she was doing. At least that’s what it felt like. Looked like.

She felt held in the corpse’s eyeless gaze. She couldn’t look away.

She could feel the anxiety, the fear rise in her chest. A tightening in the throat like the body was choking her until she became what he was now. The body’s jaw gave out and fell against the stained bedding, leaving Allen with an even more grotesque smile.

He seemed entertained by all of this. By her fear. By her need to get out of this room.

She needed some fresh air.

Chapter Thirteen

1

Terri dreams about the night that she caught her father cheating on her mother.

She had been eight, maybe nine. The front door had slammed and woke her up.

She had to pee so she got up to do so, but had been distracted by a bunch of sounds in the kitchen. She snuck out to take a look. Sometimes her father stayed up late. He liked to finish his drink and watch movies that he said were for adults.

Her father wasn’t in the kitchen.

“What’re you doing up?” He says. He is angry. He has the smell on him, the drink, the one that encouraged him to spank really hard.

“I... heard noises,” she says. Terri was scared of her father. “I was sleeping and they woke me up, so I... came to look.”

“Go back to bed. It’s late.”

He talked funny like he did at night when he finished his drinks.

“I will. I’m sorry,” she says. But before she could get back to her room, the front door had opened and a strange lady had walked

in.

"I need to use your pisser," the strange woman says, then noticed Terri standing there in pajamas. "Oh, hi, sweetie. You must be Terri. I've heard a lot about you."

"Hi," Terri said shyly.

"You're so cute. What a sweet little girl. I can't wait to become your new mommy," said the same lady with a smile.

"Goddammit, Terri, get your ass in bed. NOW!!!" Terri's father yells.

Terri had turned and ran to her room as fast as she could, down the hall, and past the bathroom, that in that moment she had forgotten she needed to use. Behind her she could hear more yelling, then finally the front door slammed.

Terri hadn't slept that night. She stayed up all night wondering if her own mommy, who had worked late that evening, had told this other woman to be a mommy for Terri because she had been working.

This same occurrence had happened a few other times after that, but Terri had stayed in bed, unwilling to engage with a strange woman who said she was 'going to be her new mommy.' Even if her own real mommy was mean sometimes, Terri knew that what her father was doing was wrong.

2

Terri wakes, thinking about her own experiences in the matter. She is no stranger to stepping out on partners. Boyfriends. Husbands.

(You have been married twice)

Seems cheating had been a family affair. She isn't sure why these memories are popping up now, and to what relevance they have to her situation. Memories can be inconvenient. So many parts of the past are painful. Embarrassing. Not always worthy of remembering. Terri knows this more than anyone right now.

Truthfully, she knows very little. She still isn't sure exactly how much of these memories can be trusted. They leave her with a hollow feeling of unreality, one where she isn't sure what to accept as fact or as a figment of imagination. And worse still, is wondering if that imagination is hers or a revenge fantasy of someone else.

She can't ignore that most of these events line up as they unfold. She doesn't completely rebel at the thoughts as they freight train through her mind.

She knows she had a tough childhood. She knows she had used that as a crutch to justify doing shitty things to people that hadn't deserved it.

This whole thing is theater, a play to get her to see how awful she is. To teach her a lesson.

3

A sound startles her. A slapping sound, like a mass of raw meat being thrown against a window or a cement floor. A sloppy, wet noise, of something once alive, but now a tossed aside bag of bits and pieces. Even before she turns, she knows that it is a dead body.

Is it him? Is it the guy they robbed, the one who was dead in his bed with the darkened skin pulled back around his teeth?

This would be the ultimate lesson.

(Look what you've done)

She does not want to see that smile again. By now she has learned her lesson. She doesn't want to see anymore mutilated people, alive or dead.

She is nervous to turn. There is a trend to who appears in the room with her, a trend to her emerging memories. She doesn't want to see her husband. Not in here. But...

She spins quickly, pressing her back against the wall.

On the floor is what she imagines a slaughterhouse to look like: parts and pieces of flesh everywhere, piled on itself. A human body, a fat and bloated, naked, purple mass, marbled with yellow and green bruising. And blood. So much blood. The body isn't cut up, it is impossibly twisted, distorted like a ragdoll after being dropped onto a busy freeway. Limbs are bent and stretched grotesquely, obviously broken. It looks chewed up and spit out.

She does not want to go near it, but the human need to look at horror pulls her towards it. She knows who it is, but she needs to look to be sure to confirm it. As she inches forward, she can see that some of the bruises are faded tattoos, hidden beneath swollen and discolored skin. The body is facing up, but the head is twisted impossibly to the floor face down. The skin appears to be the only thing holding the head to the body. The bones inside of the neck are obviously broken and pulverized inside the distended skin. The body is that of a man with his genitals removed, leaving a festering hole.

Maggots are squirming from every hole and crack where the skin had been split open by the impact of hitting the floor. Rotting entrails spill from the side of the stomach area, and she can hear the Rice Krispy sound of maggots feasting on the body.

On

(Dozer's)

body.

It must be him.

She recognizes the tattoo on his thigh. She isn't proud of why she intimately knows a part of a man that isn't her husband, but life was what it was. Before all of this certain insecurities and need to control encouraged poor actions. Or necessary actions, depending on how you looked at them.

But she needs to be sure. More than she is already. God, she doesn't want to do this.

She cradles the head in her hands and lifts. There is resistance because the face is leaking from all of its holes and it sticking to the floor. Like a glue. It is all over her hands, a semi-clear orange ichor and squirming maggots. But she keeps twisting to get the head to face her. The head finally releases and she falls back on her ass.

The face, Dozer's face, bloated and discolored, is staring up at her without eyes. They had been eaten out of his head. His mouth is slightly ajar, jaw broken into a shape that almost seems to be asking her for help.

She wipes her slime-covered hands on her pants, adding to the disgust that they had already absorbed, then leans back into her corner. She is exhausted. She isn't sure how much longer she can go on like this. A big game, that is all this is to them. To whoever. She would apologize and give everything back if only to be out of this room, away from this horror.

Or she would stab them in the fucking eyes.

She needs real sleep. Real food. Real air. Her real memories back.

She had cared for Dozer, she knows that much. Some specifics had littered her mind, but with every memory that pops up, but there is always something missing. Like a four star meal without spices.

She knows that Dozer and her husband are friends. Not best friends, but still close all the same. She knows that Dozer was a nickname he had given himself because he was a Mexican with a white-guy name. She knows that Dozer and her had a... thing. Not relationship, but something more than associates. A physical thing. That's how she knows his tattoos so well. Dozer had become a sort of fill-in man since her husband's use of steroids rendered parts of him useless. A woman has needs, after all.

She looks at Dozer's crumpled body. She isn't sure how many people she had been close to in her life, as still so much of it is clouded. But there is something about staring at this body, this person she used to know in her past life. Terri isn't sure if she had loved Dozer, but she knew she'd cared.

Cares now.

Perhaps it is the situation making her emotional, but she has a sad feeling in the pit of her stomach. Maybe the loss of Dozer's life; maybe the loss of her own. This doesn't mean she is giving up hope of escape, but she knows it's important to allow herself to finally break down a bit. But she has to be careful. She doesn't want the people watching her to see her cracking even a little. She has to find a delicate balance of internal conflict resolution and maintaining a facade of toughness. For her own sake.

She could really use someone to talk to. In the regular world she'd pour her stresses on her husband... or Dozer if her husband was too occupied with the gym.

The bloated, dead mass of flesh lay silently. Ironic given how he'd get talking endlessly if it was about things he cared about. Like his kids. He'd had

(three)

of them.

This was probably what had drawn her to Dozer to begin with; the fact that even as a, addict and a thief, he still made time for his kids, long after his marriage had fallen apart. Terri felt that they had been on the same path — her correcting her past mistakes with

(her daughter)

and Dozer keeping his kids close despite a tough situation.

Her husband was too caught up in his mid-life crisis to bother with making Terri feel seen, heard, or felt.

She stares at the body, at Dozer and wonders how all this came to be. How had the people murdered him? Had they? Something is strange about his skin color. Terri isn't sure he was murdered; it reminded her of an old friend that she had found dead of an

(overdose)

of heroin. Her friend had had the same color, the same marble look to their skin. The same froth gathered around their lips.

Thinking about it now that the shock of the initial sight of the body, she hadn't seen, still doesn't see any stab marks or indications of a shooting. Sure his body was mangled, but it all seemed internal, like his body had fallen from a great height, which, she supposed it had. But Dozer's body had been gone for awhile before it appeared in this room. He wasn't a fresh death.

He had overdosed. She knew it.

He had always been an idiot, she thinks. He should've been more careful.

Whatever money she had given him for the help had gone to his old and unshakable habit. And Dozer had paid for it. His daughters would pay for it too with him being gone. He might've been a junkie, but he'd been a good father.

As Terri looks into the face of a man she'd once cared for, she swears the head turns slightly to look in her direction. With no eyes, the body seems to be assessing her. Maybe it is the maggots squirming inside the head that is making it move. Maybe it is all in her mind.

The body moves again. A quick twitch at the shoulder, like someone pulling a string that is attached. This makes the head tilt further to look at her.

She pushes herself back against the wall more, as far as she can.

The body convulses again, more violently. Then it begins to slide, as if it is being dragged by unseen hands.

The empty eye sockets remain fixed upon her.

She wishes she could be away from here. Away from this.

The body slides more, stops, then slides again. It is giving her a chance to see every motion, every twitch.

And the sound. A wet and slow slop like a wet mop. Starting and stopping.

The dark sockets keep watching her.

The body slides into the wall with a wet thump. But it doesn't stop. The body folds slowly with unnatural articulations, the skin building up and folding against the wall like clay being mashed.

Whatever, whoever is doing this is tremendously strong. Dozer was not a small man. Yet, 'they' are pulling him into the wall, literally *inside* the wall. Blood and other clear or discolored liquids are erupting from the flesh like wringing out an old towel.

The body is convulsing, seemingly struggling against the force dragging it through the wall. Impossibly, the body slowly slides in the crack between the floor and wall. Into the tiniest of seams.

But there is no space; she knows this. She had examined this whole place. There are no weaknesses, no cracks, no spaces to exploit.

Three again, she is presupposing this place is meant to make sense. Which it doesn't.

The body, skin, bones all disappear through the wall, leaving a red smear to nowhere.

She quickly stands to look out the window, to see if the body is being dragged off into the forest.

It isn't. Like food, like people appear here, so too does it seem that things disappear here as well: stitched women, tongueless women, dead bodies, and her memory.

In the distance, she hears the incessant tapping sound. Somewhere far away. Outside. In the forest. And it's getting closer.

She doesn't give it much thought, because all she can hear in her head is the dragging, wet sound of Dozer's body as it had somehow animated itself and slid through the wall.

Chapter Fourteen

Thirteen Days Ago

1

She was alone in a room with a dead body.

This is something she had done before. She had listened to her father take his last breath. She had felt his hand go still and had seen his face go slack and take on the color of carved marble.

She hadn't cried then and she wouldn't cry now.

Memory, evasive and unreliable as it is, had failed her for a lot of years, until a new experience handed her parts of the past that her brain had kept locked away. For her safety. Sometimes the brain hides memories for self-preservation, in cases of emotional or physical trauma.

She stood looking at Allen, the dead man, a father. She thought about how she viewed her own father, who for many years, was the pillar of strength and virtue. Who had taught her about everything, but most importantly, how she should carry herself in the world. How to not become a victim. How to be strong. How not to get taken advantage of. How to not be like her mother. That had always been the most important part to him.

She wasn't sure exactly what brought her back to this house, back to a place that could get her arrested if anyone saw. But she needed a sense of closure, maybe. Could that be it? Sometimes a person needed to see things again to make sure it had happened to them.

In that moment she hated her father. Hated his lessons. Hated that everything he said was predicated on a lie, on a story he had written for himself to justify the shit he had done to his family. Stories can be ways to make things easier to accept.

It hadn't been just the drinking. It hadn't been that he had beat her mother regularly, but had been smart enough to do it without leaving marks. It hadn't been that he allowed a best friend, a person she was encouraged to call uncle, to live with them who, on occasion, liked to touch her in places where she wasn't comfortable. It was that the family was torn apart, and that he had blamed it on everyone but himself.

But, he had molded her into a tough bitch, ready for whatever life would throw at her. So in many ways she could forgive him for

all of that.

Her mother had been the opposite: weak, spineless. Ready to let who or whatever to take advantage of her. According to Terri's father, her mother had been a she-devil, always getting in her father's way of being everything he had wanted to be. And yet, he never showed any interest in anything other than complaining about everyone else. He never made any effort to go after these supposed dreams. And if her mother had done anything it was enabling him by not leaving to protect Terri and her sister. But her father was convincing. He had manipulated his two daughters into thinking it was all their mother's fault, no matter what it was. The worst part was that Terri and Sara had believed him. Fathers loom larger than life for young girls looking to be accepted by their protector. Mom was an easy target because she never spoke up. Not for herself and not for them. Terri especially made it her whole life's work to not become her mother. Instead she became her father.

Terri looks around the room where Allen had died. She knew that somewhere under all these piles, within all these boxes were pictures. Photos from the past, that captured times that were good. That were healthy. That were complete. Somewhere long ago, before life was reduced to a rotting corpse in a decaying house.

None of this made sense. All of this soul-searching for one dead asshole. That was not who she was. She didn't soul-search; she knew who she was. And all of these emerging memories about her father, who wasn't who she had remembered after all of those years. One dead man gets buried and another is dug up in exchange.

Maybe this was one of those 'life-changing moments' that old people are always going on about.

2

Dozer and her husband would be at the house in an hour or so. This gave her time to look through the house alone. If she found any cash, or easily pocketed items, she would do so and not tell anyone else. After all, she had brokered this whole thing.

There was so much shit in here though. This place was a goddamn garbage pit. She started in the kitchen, digging through all the old miss-matched dishes. How sad that a man is reduced to eating meals-for-one off of a few dishes that an ex-wife had left behind in a divorce. But life was a cruel place; no one has time to sit around and feel sorry for themselves. Otherwise everyone would all end up like that sad prick in the back room rotting alone.

Before she got done rooting through the kitchen she could hear a car coming down the driveway. Fallen limbs and gravel popped as her husband and Dozer finally arrived. Terri peek out the blinds of the front window to make sure it's them and not some mystery, unannounced visitor. This happened on dead end streets.

It was Dozer's car. He was alone.

As he got out she said, "Hey, where's that asshole you call best friend?"

"He said he'd be late," said Dozer. "He text me and said he wanted to get more time in at the gym."

"Of course he did."

"Hey, you can't blame a guy for trying to better himself." Dozer shrugged and reached to grab Terri by the waist. "Besides, that gives us some time alone."

'Some time alone.' That was code for her to put out.

She wasn't in the mood. Not after staring at a dead body and being confronted by uncomfortable past realities. But she couldn't say no to Dozer. With him helping, she felt obligated. And really, what was a few minutes?

3

She wiped her mouth quickly and said, "Zip up your pants. He's here."

Dozer's best friend, her husband had arrived.

She quickly ran outside of the house to greet him. As he stepped out of the car she said, "Hey! How was the gym?"

He seemed a little confused as normally Terri didn't care too much about hearing about the gym. "Fine," he said, looking at her. "And you? How's the digging going? Find anything yet?"

"No, not yet. But now that we're all here, I think we can get stuff done."

She kissed him on the lips and he kissed back.

Kissing had become a rare thing for them. The distance had been growing for quite some time. Terri secretly hoped that these circumstances would bring them closer together.

Chapter Fifteen

Terri swallows the last bite of beef stew when she thinks she hears her name.

She looks around, still chewing. Nothing. No one. Just echoes from the nightmare she's lived for the past... who knew how many days. Did it matter anymore?

Nothing outside either. As always. The same swaying trees. The same cloudless blue sky. All taunting her to escape when the beautiful world outside knows she can't.

She picks up the empty bowl of stew and begins licking it. Every little bit counts.

She hears her name again, only this time it's more clear.

Terri Terri Terri.

The rhythm reminds her of the tapping sound that had kept her from sleeping and an anger rises in her, only to be extinguished by the reality of the situation. But again and again she can hear her name in different parts of the room, slowly growing louder. Louder. The sound overlaps, like echoes in a small cave, growing louder and louder. The trees are casting shadows in the room. The sway and dance to the rhythm of her name.

Terri Terri Terri.

She is becoming disoriented by the growing cacophony and the strobe effect of the shadows dancing in all directions. She closes her eyes.

Until all at once... it stops.

All she is hearing is her own labored breathing.

And someone else breathing as well. When you've slept next to someone for several years, you know their breathing like you do their voice.

"My God, Shaun, is that you?" She sounds so small in her own head. Like a child walking down a long dark hallway where she hears a noise.

No answer.

"Shaun?"

"Yes, it's me. Jesus. What is this? This place. Where are we? Are you ok?"

Shaun sounds equally as small as she does. Frightened. Exhausted.

He is huddled in the far corner, looking up at her with wide eyes.

No one is ok.

"I'm fine," she says and goes to him. She rests her hand on his should and Shaun shrinks back. He breathes out forcefully.

He's hurt.

He looks up at Terri and says nothing. Doesn't explain. He looks way older than he is, a man nearing fifty who looks seventy-five. He has deeper wrinkles than she remembers. His eyes are sunk in, as if receding from they've seen. He looks tired, like he hasn't slept in years. He's terrified. He's an old and withered child crumpled in the corner after being beaten mercilessly.

She leans down to hug him.

"No, don't," he says weakly. "Please."

"Why? What did they do to you? Those sick fucks..."

He turns slowly to face away from her. At first she thinks he is shunning her, but then she realizes he is showing her his back. His shirt is soaked. She touches it gently. Shaun flinches, making a sad little sound. She looks at her fingers.

Blood. A lot of it.

he turns to face her. "They," he begins. "...they skinned my back. Most of it. Part of it. I don't know. I couldn't tell, exactly. But it looked like a lot when they held it up to my face. They made me look at it."

"My God." The thought suddenly crosses her mind: The signers of the bogus paperwork Jennifer and Carly had lost their hands. The blabbermouth Sandra had lost their tongue. Dozer had been castrated and killed. Why had they skinned the back of her husband? What had been his part in the play? Why not killed? Or something else? She shakes the thought. It isn't helpful. "Wait, so you had seen them? You've seen the people who are doing this?"

"No, just shadows. Silhouettes. No faces. Hardly even bodies. Just blurry, and distorted shadows. Darkness." He sighs, breath ragged. "Every time I move.. or breathe... it feels like they're doing it again."

Terri begins to pace. "There has to be a way out of here. We need to get away from this shit." Mostly she is talking to herself. Trying to plan. She has a person she can work with. Not well given his state, but it is better than no hands, no way to talk, and dead. Then to Shaun: "Come on, get up. We need to figure this out. I know your back hurts, but getting out of here is more important."

"No," he says after a short pause. "We can't. There is no way out."

She has never seen him so small, so terrified and defeated. She believes him. But that doesn't mean she has to accept it; this is survival. "No," she says coldly. "There has to be a way out. Anything that gets in has to come out. It's basic—"

"No," he cuts her off. "You don't understand. Those rules don't apply here."

"How would you know?" She asks accusingly.

"Because they told me." Shaun looks more pale. "They told me everything."

“Who’s they? I thought you said you couldn’t see them.” Terri can feel herself becoming urgent, more anxious than ever to get away from this place.

“No, I didn’t see them. Just moving shadows. Darkness. That’s all I saw. All they allowed me to see. I couldn’t tell if it was one person, or a few people. It was as if the world blurred around me. I would get dizzy anytime they, whoever, whatever they are, were around. I could feel them. And I could hear voices.” He is shaking. These memories are eating at him. “But like, layered voices, one over top of the other. It was always disorienting, like I was just waking from a deep sleep. When they spoke...” he shivers. It isn’t cold. “... it was like they. Weren’t actually in the room. It was more like they were in my head.”

“How—?”

“Like having headphones on. That’s the best way I can explain it. They weren’t just next to me...” He cuts off as if the thought is painful. “...it was like they were inside my mind.”

“Do you remember how you got there? Got to anywhere you had been, like when you appeared here. Do you remember any of that?” Terri is thinking of her own experience. She didn’t want to feel alone in this nightmare.

No, I don’t,” Shaun explains. “I was at work—that’s the last normal thing I remember—then I wasn’t. Everyone was at work. We were all standing around chatting about the usual shit, so no one could’ve grabbed me without being seen. I hadn’t been knocked out. I had no head injury. No sign of being drugged, but that’s all I can think it could’ve been. I had definitely lost consciousness. When I came to it was pitch black. Quiet. I was alone somewhere, at least at first. But then I smelled something. Something awful.”

“A smell?” She wanted to keep him talking. She wanted to encourage more information. She hopes this will increase their chances.

“...yes. A rotting smell like a dead body. Like *his* dead body.”

Allen. The dead body. The awful smell that seeped from the back bedroom at the house.

2

“So, wait, you’re saying that the dead guy is getting revenge from beyond the grave? Like a fucking movie, like some Stephen King book? Tell me you’re not saying that... because it sounds ridiculous.”

She knows it does. Terri can’t just completely ignore her situation, all that had happened in this place. But then again, how could she be sure it happened as it seemed?

‘I know it does,’ says Shaun. ‘I’m only telling you what I experienced. The smell. The voices. The shadows. Then the relentless tapping right before they carved my back.’

“Tapping...?” She asks, thinking about that incessant noise that has kept her from sleep. Surely all of this shit is related.

“Yes, like someone tapping on a window. All the time. It never really seemed to stop, but it only grew louder, especially before they would show up. The shadows. The voices.” Shaun shudders. “Wait. You’ve heard it too.”

This isn’t a question.

“Doesn’t matter,” says Terri. “What matters is us getting the fuck out of here.”

Shaun sits up and becomes more forceful. “You don’t understand, Terri. This is it; there is no way out of here. With everything that has happened to you, to us, you really think that whoever is doing this is simply going to let anyone walk away? If people we know appeared in this room, as you said, they have us where they want us. Women with cut off hands. Tongue cut out. Dead and bloated. Carly and Jennifer. Dozer. Sandra. All friends of ours who were part—” He cuts off, looking Terri in the eye. “We have no power. They do. They have the upper hand. We have shit. We are at their will. Even if we were to get out of this room, we wouldn’t make it far. I’ve seen it all play out and I know what happens next. Accept that.”

“No,” Terri says simply. “No. Fuck you. I won’t accept that there isn’t a way.” Her eyebrows bunch up in question. “But wait, how do you know all the specifics? I didn’t tell you about what had happened to everyone.”

“I’ve told you already. They told me. The voices. They showed me everything that was happening to you. The meals with...” Shaun pauses for a moment. “You peeing and shitting in the corner. The people who appeared here. I could hear and see it all.”

“So there are cameras in here!” Terri says looking to the lights in the ceiling. “I fucking knew it!”

“There aren’t any cameras. They just know. And they showed me. Like they forced it into my head as a movie. I watched it play out. I don’t know how.” Shaun looks away, out the window. “I can tell by your face that I’m right. You know it. So why would I lie?”

“So we’re supposed to give up?”

“Yes. We have lost.” Shaun looks ashamed. And defeated. He begins to rise to his feet, slowly, painfully. His face is serious.

Terri wonders if this maneuver is meant to intimidate her. Or if it is to show how serious he is. Either way, she doesn’t buy it.

Shaun digs in his pocket, his face winces in pain at the effort. “But we have this. And I think it’ll explain everything better than I can,” he says as he pulls out a closed hand. It is tight around whatever he fished out of there.

Shaun opens his hand. A bullet. Another part of the game.

“One bullet,” she says. “Because of course it would be. Like a movie where the two lovers have to decide which one goes. Fucking poetic.”

Shaun's face shows no emotion.

"So why wouldn't we just shoot out the windows? Wouldn't that make more sense?" Terri says sarcastically. Shaun is shutting down, just like in all of their arguments. He couldn't handle a strong woman, one that can hold her own. "Oh, let me guess... the 'voices' told you that it wouldn't work. And I'm betting you're dumb enough to believe them."

She picks up the gun. "Give me the bullet," she says.

Shaun opens his hand and she snatches the bullet. She loads the clip, slammed it back in the gun, and pulls the slide back. Without hesitation, she pulls the trigger.

Click. Eerily similar to the tapping noise.

The gun doesn't fire.

She tries again on every window. But again, nothing.

"FUCK!!!" Terri looks at the gun disdainfully, fighting the urge to throw it.

Shaun looks on, ignoring her outburst. "They told me how all of this would go. So far they've been right about everything, even down to the smallest details. We're playing their game, Terri. I've seen it. And that's why I believe them."

She turns to him with fire in her eyes. Shaun knows the look. She's ready to go to war. With him. With anyone.

"I know you're scared. So am I. But please, let me show you. Give me the gun," Shaun says with his hand out.

"Scared? Fuck you. I'm not scared of shit. What, do you think I'm going to give you the gun so you can shoot me and escape yourself?" She says. She is taken aback by his ability to be calm and step up to her like that. She didn't think he would ever be capable. She had spent their years married shaping him, turning him into a perfect good boy. Loyal. Hers to do with as she pleased. But here, now, finally, he is showing resolve.

He looks at her, unblinking, face unchanged. "Give me the gun," he says.

His face softens slightly. This is the man she is married to. The man she had hoped would come here to save her. The man she loves. She hands him the gun, reluctantly.

Shaun points the gun at each window and pulls the trigger. And just like with her, nothing happens each time.

"Maybe it's jammed," she hopes.

Shaun looks into her eyes and slowly raises the gun and presses it against his temple.

"What're... what are you? ...don't. Please." She pleads, not truly believing he'll do it. But who knew; every person has a breaking point. Maybe this is it for him. Maybe this is what cracks him. This place. This situation. Maybe this was part of the play, the theater to teach her a lesson.

"It's the only way you'll see," he says calmly. More calm than she'd ever seen him, in all their years together.

But he does do it; he pulls the trigger.

She tries to shield herself from the inevitable, but she isn't fast enough. She can see it all, as if in slow motion.

No click, no loud bang. No blood and brains splatter her.

Like before, the gun doesn't fire.

Shaun looks at her with an expressionless face, and lowers the gun.

"Now," he says. "You'll have to trust me."

He raises the gun again and points it at her head.

"What the fuck are you...?" She begins to back pedal.

"They have been right about everything so far," Shaun says

Her husband pulls the trigger.

Chapter Sixteen

Three Weeks Ago

1

When Sandra, an acquaintance, called to tell Terri that she had a solid lead for a big score, Terri couldn't wait to give herself something to do. She had sat idle for too long, had been miserable for too long. In her marriage. In her life. She was ready for a change. She was just hitting her fifties and definitely not getting any younger. How much of her life had passed her by. How much of her father's advice had she ignored? How many things had she not taken advantage of when the situation had arisen?

Sandra had told her that she had a neighbor that was sitting on a gold mine. His name was Allen and Sandra was sure that he was sick or dead. He hadn't been leaving for his usual two week excursions into town. His mail was piling up in his mailbox. Sandra said she had known he wasn't in the greatest of health, and that this might be a good time to go down there and nose around.

Hearing this, Terri had made a quick decision: she was going to rob the place if everything lined up. She might have been looking

for an adventure, but not one that would land her immediately in jail.

She drove over to Sandra's house early in the afternoon, just after the phone call to get more details. To look around this Allen's house. To scope out the potential.

As she started up the driveway, she stopped at the mailbox that was overfilled. She stuffed them in a plastic bag that she had brought. She thought they might come in handy later. Lots of information could be found in mailboxes.

When she arrived at Sandra's, Terri was given more information about Allen's place. That the driveway would be hard to drive down as overgrown as it was. That he lived alone. That he had no dogs to worry about (one had died a few years ago).

That was enough for Terri to go on.

She made her way on foot because it wasn't far. Through the new alder trees and sticker bushes, she made it to what was one a driveway, now reduced to an uncontrolled overgrowth. A house and garage peeked out from all the vegetation. Along with a few vehicles.

How the fuck could anyone have lived down here?

On the front of the house was a deck, mostly rotten and overtaken by sticker bushes. She carefully stepped on the stairs, hoping the whole thing wouldn't fall apart under her. Luckily they didn't. She reached for the door knob on the front door.

No, wait. I can't just open the door and walk in. What if he isn't as sick as she had said? What if he was simply a shut in that wanted to be left alone? What if he was a nut job that greeted her at the door with a shotgun?

She thought for a moment: what if she was an out of uniform officer doing a welfare check on account of a concerned neighbor? Surely he wouldn't draw down on a cop?

She reached for the door knob again. She turned it slowly. The door was unlocked.

Ok, let's go from here. Knock and state your business. Don't just kick the door in since you don't have to.

She knocked loudly, like a cop.

"Hello?" She yelled. "This is officer Tally. This is a welfare check."

She listened closely.

Nothing. No sounds inside the dark house. She could see no lights were on inside.

She knocked one more time.

Still nothing.

She opened the door slowly.

"Hello? I'm here to make sure you're ok. Please speak up if you're here." She wasn't sure if that was what cops would say, but it seemed professional enough.

Again, no answer.

The first thing that hit her was the smell. A putrid mix of old food, piss and shit. The next thing that hit her was a box of empty beer bottles that was stacked next to the door. Literally, right in the head. Luckily it didn't hurt, but it did smash to the floor with a loud noise. If the man inside hadn't heard her before, he had certainly heard that.

"Hello?" She asked again.

The house was an avalanche of trash. Garbage littered every inch of the floors. All she could think of was the show Hoarders. That was this place. She didn't know how anyone could live like this. And the smell. God, the smell. She covered her mouth and nose with her sweatshirt sleeve.

Maybe he had died in here.

The front door had gone directly into the living room, which was connected to the kitchen. All that was in this whole area was trash. Boxes and boxes of beer cans and bottles. All of the blinds were pulled tight in every room making it seem like late evening even though it was still early afternoon.

There was a small trail that led to all the rooms in the back. She followed it past the small office, past a small bathroom, and finally to the back bedroom where most of the smell radiated.

"Are you there?" She asked into the darkness.

After a moment she found a light switch.

The man, Allen, was still alive.

His eyes were open. She could see him laboring to get lungs full of air. He gargled while struggling to breathe. His eyes rolled in his sunken skull, obviously afraid and trying to make sense of her presence. Half of his face drooped grotesquely under a long gray beard.

His appearance made her recoil.

"Jesus," she said under her breath.

She looked away, considering this whole environment. It would be a lot of work to clear this place, but she was convinced it would be worth it. People like this always squirreled away shit thinking the world was about to collapse. She knew just by a few of the vehicles poking out of overgrowth that there was money to be found here. A little work and she would be sitting comfortably for quite awhile.

She needed this to break the monotony of her life.

She looked down at this pitiful man and said, "Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back."

She could tell by how Allen moved that he was no threat to her. Breathing was a struggle and Terri was convinced that he had had a stroke sometime ago and his ability to move was becoming less and less.

He was on his way out.

2

Terri hadn't even said goodbye to Sandra on her way out. She got in her car and left. On the way home she sent two text messages: One to her husband Shaun, and one to Dozer.

<Meet at the house around 8pm>

3

At 8pm, Terri, Shaun, and Dozer, sat around a kitchen table and planned how to kill a man.

"He wouldn't be hard to take care of," she said. "He's a fucking scarecrow—sick and frail. Dude looks like an emaciated Grizzly Adams. Hair, long as shit, and a beard down to his stomach. Guaranteed this guy hasn't left his house in months. I saw him with my own eyes."

"And by 'take care of,' you mean...?" Her husband looked at her, curious, in the way a dog looks at you when you make an unusual noise.

This annoyed her. "Yes, 'take care of.' And not like I'm a nurse. The fuck you think I mean?"

"I just..." Shaun said, cut off.

She dismissed him with a wave of her hand and continued: "I really don't think we'll have any trouble with this guy. When I first got in the place, I had to wade through a literal avalanche of shit. Garbage everywhere. Bottles. Frozen burrito wrappers. TV dinner boxes, shit like that. The place is a fucking wreck. The lights were all out so I had assumed the place was empty. But when I got back to the bedroom, I turned the light on and the guy moved. Made some noises. It actually kind of startled me since I was expecting either an empty house or to find a dead person... which he practically is. Just in case he had a gun or tried calling the cops, I told him I was checking up on him. You know, like a welfare check. He didn't seem to be all there, if you know what I mean."

"So you think he was sick? Dying? I mean, what the fuck?" Asked Dozer.

"Honestly," she explained. "I think he had a stroke or a heart attack or something. Maybe diabetes. Who knows. I saw his feet sticking out of the blankets and they looked terrible, like they had gone through a meat-grinder or something. I know my aunt Beverly had diabetes and her feet were always fucked up. I think people with that shit don't heal properly or something."

"Fuck," said Dozer. "So what makes you think he has shit worth anything? I mean, if we're gonna clip a guy, we had better make it worth it."

"I wouldn't have you all over if I didn't think it was," she said, matter of fact. "The house is a garbage pit, but shut-ins like this guy always have things squirreled away. I looked around outside and this guy has six or seven classic cars sitting in the driveway. Place is overgrown like he hardly ever left the house, and definitely no one visits him. It's perfect, secluded down a long dirt road."

"Well shit," said Dozer. "The cars alone have got to be worth it. Know what any of them are?"

"Nah, not really," she said. "I just know they're old. Some trucks. Some cars. One of them for sure is really old. Looks like one of them cars from one of those old gangster movies. 20's. 30's, maybe."

"Fuck! Yeah, let's get this done!" Said her husband.

She knew full well that her husband would go along with all this. That's how he was; game for something, but only if everyone else in the room was too. She knew calling Dozer was a good plan for getting her husband on board. Men couldn't help being competitive when there was another guy around. They were dumb fucks, but useful ones.

"So how are you thinking we do this?" Asked Dozer. "A quick pop, then dispose of him? Snuff him out with a pillow. Hell, from what you've said he's basically on his way out anyway. I can't see him putting up much of a fight."

She thought for a moment. What would make the most sense? How could they use his circumstances against him? How could they make it seem like it was natural?

"There were pain pills and other medication bottles in his bathroom. The dude is obviously a walking pharmacy. And it seems up until whatever the fuck is wrong with him, he was a big time alcoholic. Beer bottles and shit stacked to the ceiling in that place. What if we made a concoction of alcohol and mashed up pain pills and injected him? That'd be enough to wipe him out, right?" She said finally.

"Yeah, actually. If we dice up some Oxy's and mix it with alcohol, that should do the trick. Not immediately though. He'll hang around for a bit until his organs fail," said Dozer. He would know; the dude loved his pain pills. Hell, drugs in general, which was ironic because he knew several people who had overdosed, one of them being his oldest son, leaving him with three daughters.

Her husband nodded in confirmation.

"But we can't call his death in right away," she said. "We've gotta let the body sit for awhile. That'll help hide any foul play. Fuck, if the cops see his place, their first thought would be that he just up and died. Ain't no healthy person gonna live like this guy does."

"You said this guy is conscious? Moving and shit?" Asked Dozer.

"Yeah, which is why I want to get this done," she said. "He can't move well, or talk, or anything, but still. I have his cell phone. I disconnected his landline phone. Yeah, fucker still has a landline, and that cell phone of his was about as old as cell phones are. I took his keys, so there's very little chance of him trying to call for help or leave. But still. We gotta do this. Tonight. I mean, I suppose we could just let him go on his own, but I'd rather him be out of the way so we can take his stuff."

"You don't think he was faking it or anything, this being sick thing?" Her husband asked.

"Nah, unless you can fake a drooping face and inability to move or talk. He grunted, that's it, and tried to move but couldn't. Dude is fucked up. Stroke most likely, even though I didn't see meds for that. The whole place reeked of a guy that couldn't take care of himself," she explained.

"Let's do it. From what you said, chances would be slim anyone would say anything. Neighbors, shit like that. From the sounds of it, there really isn't anything to worry about." Said her husband, getting up from his chair.

"Ok, let's take your car and Doze can drive separately. I figure we can grab a few things of value while we're there. We're just concerned friends going to check on someone they care about, right?" She looked at Dozer and gave him a quick grin and a wink, subtle enough to where her husband missed it. "Let's make that dead guy cocktail before we get there."

4

It was just after 10:30pm when they pulled up to the house. Hardly any porch lights were on in the neighborhood. That was good.

They put rubber gloves on and walked up to the house. The front door was still unlocked as she had left it.

Before she opened the front door, she said: "Be careful where you step."

"Holy fucking shit," said her husband, marveling at the avalanche of trash in the living room and kitchen.

"What a piece of shit," said Dozer, also taken aback by how much garbage had filled this house. Like one of the worst episodes of that TV show people would watch to make themselves feel better.

"He's in the back bedroom," she said.

They made their way through the house through the small network of trails that punctuated the mountains of garbage, occasionally tripping or losing their balance on a stray beer bottle or box. Back in the bedroom, the guy hadn't moved much after she had left. There was a slight rustle as he attempted moving under the tangle of blankets and sheets. He knew they were there and was quietly grunting. Or maybe he was just struggling to breathe.

She had to assume he was confused or scared as to why three strangers were in his house. He must've known he was powerless to do anything about it. She smiled to herself.

"Jesus Christ, it stinks in here," said Shaun.

"No shit," she said, annoyed by the obviousness of his statement. "Dude's been laying here for who knows how long eating nothing but what, the shit in these wrappers and bottles?" Terri looked round the mess of the bedroom. The smell was awful. "He was pissing and shitting himself because he can't get around."

She flipped the light on in the room. The guy in bed squinted his eyes the best he could. It was likely that he'd been in the dark for months; lights off and blinds closed. The man's face looked like melted wax, sagging and out of his control. She could tell he was making every effort to have facial expressions, to talk, to react to the three of them, but he was a prisoner of his own body. His grunts were quiet and strained.

They'd be doing this fucker a favor.

"Grab the blankets from both sides of the bed and use them to hold him down, just in case he gets the stupid idea to move. Plus we don't want to bruise him or make it look like there was a struggle," she explained to Shaun and Dozer. "I'll inject him."

The man looked up at her the best he could and his eyes widened disproportionately. Terri knew that he had heard them and knew what they were going to do and he had no way to escape. What struggle he could manage was nothing to the larger men holding him down with a blanket. The man's breathing was labored from the pressure they imposed.

"Where should I stick him?" She asked.

"Probably between the toes. By the time this is called in, the puncture wound will be impossible to see, even if they did an autopsy. Which it's doubtful they will. Not after seeing this place. You've got to assume they'll just think this poor bastard succumbed to being a sad, worthless fuck and maybe took a bit too much of his own stash. In the event they do a tox-screen, they'll see what he took. To them it'll look like a sick man accidentally overdosing," said Dozer, with a small laugh. "I mean, for real." He moved his arm like a gameshow model presenting a shitty prize to be won.

Shaun nodded in confirmation.

She couldn't tell if she was nervous or excited. She'd never done this before. She'd shot herself and a few others up to get high, but had never shot anyone else up to kill them.

The man was struggling the best he could, eyes wide and wet, rolling around in his skull like lost marbles. His grunts were stifled chokes. Air seemed to be escaping him slowly like a puncture in a tire, but it was obvious he wasn't getting the air back that he was

losing.

She pulled the blankets off his half-covered, discolored foot and slowly pushed the needle in between his big toe. She pressed the plunger. The mix was thick and had to burn like a motherfucker as it entered his foot. His eyes rolled in his head slightly, like he was trying to make sense of what was happening. It wouldn't take long for the injection to take hold, but she wasn't sure how long exactly it would take to kill him.

The man stopped the minimal struggle that he was able to muster and became still. His eyes continued to roll around, doll-like in his hollow sockets.

Dozer and her husband released the pressure on the blankets. The guys breathing was slowing, almost like he was calmer, accepting of the situation. Which of course he was because he was flying high.

The three of them stood over him, watching patiently.

Suddenly his body lurched violently, startling not just Terri, but Shaun and Dozer too. He lay there twitching, eyes rolled back into his head leaving just bloodshot whites.

"Jesus," she said outloud, but to herself.

His head violently thrashed back and forth a few times then finally settled with a quick and muddy gasp. His eyes slowly rolled back down out of his head. There was no longer life in them, like a light had been turned off inside of him. He gurgled quietly and a stream of pink foam spilled out of both sides of his mouth into his unkempt gray beard.

He stared up at her blankly.

"Well shit, that was faster than I thought," she said sounding disappointed. She reached down with her gloved hand and checked his pulse. "That's it. It's all over for him."

Fuck, this was a rush. She had never felt something like that before. No drugs she'd ever taken had given her the feeling she felt as she watched the man slip away. The guy was dead. His life ended here, by her hand. By her control of the situation. She wished it had lasted longer.

"Hey, what time is it?" Her husband asked, breaking her reveling in this perfect moment.

Dozer pulled out his phone. "It's a little after 11. 11:13," he said. "Why? You got a fucking date?"

"Nah," her husband said. "I just have to be at work by 6:00am tomorrow. Plus, I'm starving and want to grab something before bed."

"Well, you go ahead and take my car," she said. "I'll catch a ride back with Doze. We'll stay here and start looking through some of this shit. See what kind of info we can get. Titles and shit have got to be around here somewhere."

"Good deal," her husband said. He went over to her and kissed her on the cheek. "See you guys tomorrow."

5

She had done some fucked up shit to people, sometimes for fun, sometimes out of desperation and survival, but she had never killed anyone. Not until now. She had never experienced a rush like that. The control, the absolute dominance over another human. Better than any drug she had snorted or shot up her arm. She would never forget watching the guys face change and slowly fade to the color of wet clay.

This had been easier than she had expected. It wasn't like the movies; they always made it a huge ordeal, something that took tons of planning. This wasn't some long-drawn out endeavor. She made a plan, and executed it... and him. No guilt. No stress.

She was good at this.

That feeling of domination and power reached all the way down between her legs, lighting a fire there. All of this had turned her on.

She could hear Shaun's tires on the gravel slowly disappear as he left the driveway.

She went to Dozer who was looking in a bedside table. From behind she ran her hand down his chest to his pants zipper. She spun him to face her and she dropped to her knees in a confetti of old food wrappers next to the bed.

The dead guy looked lifelessly at the ceiling as if trying to ignore what was happening.

Chapter Seventeen

There isn't a sound.

Terri looks down at herself, expecting blood to be soaking her shirt. She waits for pain, but none comes. Is this what death is like? Could it really be this painless, this quiet? She's heard stories about how badly a gunshot hurt, and she is feeling none of that. Which means... that she is already dead.

Or that she hasn't been shot at all.

She looks up from herself and sees her husband standing there lowering the gun he had just fired at her.

"See?" Shaun says. "The rules don't work in this place like you think they should."

He smiles nervously, knowing he had been right, but also sees the anger in Terri's face.

She steps toward him.

Shaun backs up slowly. She grabs the gun out of his hand.

"Did you just point this gun at me?"

"Yes... but I knew it wouldn't go off," he stammers, continuing to backpedal. "I knew the gun wouldn't fire. You have to believe me."

"You fucking piece of shit!" She screams in his face, ignoring his explanation. "You were gonna kill me so you could escape! I fucking knew it!"

"No...!"

All these years and she always had a feeling he would somehow screw her over. What can she expect of a spineless, ex-heroin junkie? She pushes him back forcefully against the wall. She isn't very big, but she is full of fury, full of irrational strength that comes with anger. Her husband won't fight back, despite being much larger and stronger. He cries out in agony as his skinned back slams against the wall.

"Oh, your back? You poor baby," she says, mocking his pain.

She takes the gun and jams it under her husband's chin, pushing him against the wall. She has him pinned against the window sill, the lip digging into his flayed back. She enjoys the pained look in his eyes, the powerlessness he has.

"How does it feel, you fuck? Still think you're gonna get over on me? I'm not one to fuck with. Did you forget that? If you'd paid attention to me in this marriage you might know that. But no, you were too focused on your band shit and your weight lifting like a stupid fucking insecure teenager." She shakes her head like a disappointed parent.

"But I thought..." he says, but trails off.

"What, that I liked your shitty band? That I liked the fact that you spent more time lifting weights than being with me?" She laughs, pushing him harder against the wall. "You might be the dumbest fucker I ever met."

There is pain in his eyes, and not just from the window sill that digs into his back.

"What? Got nothing to say? You gonna cry about it?" She asks, making fun of his misery. "Do it. Show me how much of a bitch you are. Prove me right." She leans in closer and whispers in his ear, as if someone in the room might hear it. "I was fucking Dozer because you couldn't fuck me." She leans back away and looks her husband dead in the eyes. He isn't crying like she thought he would be. He is almost smiling, looking past her, drifting off and out a window.

"I know you were," he says weakly.

She had become so used to the sound, that she hardly notices the tapping sound, the one that had kept her from sleeping for however long she had been in this room. It is secondary to making sure her husband, the man that had tried to kill her, is in agony. It makes her more angry to see him not responding to her.

"What? Are you not taking me seriously? Am I a fucking joke to you?!" She demands, more enraged, and pushes the gun harder into his chin to where he is almost looking straight up. But her husband's eyes are still fixed upon something behind her. The pain, the shock is making him delirious. He keeps that half-smile on his face.

"I wanted to be in here together. To wait out the end. I love y—" he begins to say.

"Fuck you," she says and pulls the trigger.

Her husband drops like a sack of meat, leaving behind a red mist. Blood and brains splatter everything behind him. Red runs down the wall like a poor paint job.

"This the 'getting out' you were talking about?" She drops the gun near her unmoving husband. "Fucking idiot."

She stands over his body and looks at how pitiful it is. Motionless. Worthless. She can't believe she thought that this was the guy she was hoping would save her from this place. From this nightmare. He had only added to it.

She turns to sit down, and there is a young child, scared and curled up in Terri's corner of the room. A little girl with long, blond, curly hair. A pink dress, one she recognizes immediately.

She knows that hair anywhere.

It is her granddaughter, in the little dress she had bought her just a few weeks ago.

With this her mind is flooded with the past.

Chapter Eighteen

She couldn't be sure, but she still hoped so.

How could God let what happened to her keep happening? And how could her daddy not believe her? How could he stick up for a family friend over her? Did her daddy not love her like she thought?

When she had told her daddy that 'Uncle Bill' was making her uncomfortable, her daddy told her that Uncle Bill loved her. He wasn't actually her uncle, just a good friend of daddy's. Something about the way he always looked at her had made her feel icky.

Uncle Bill was around a lot, especially when daddy picked up the bottle.

After Daddy fell asleep on the couch, Uncle Bill would crawl in bed with her and cuddle, but not in the way her parents did with her. Uncle touched her tummy, her legs, and the space between them. The private spot.

She would try to roll away or pretend to be sleeping because she was scared that running or yelling would make uncle really mad. Maybe he would hit her.

She told her daddy, but he always said that Uncle Bill loved her and was only tucking her in to bed. That's not what it felt like, she told her daddy. He dismissed her. She was just a kid, he'd say.

She couldn't know what she was thinking, not really.

And if she couldn't know what she was thinking, how could she make any sound decisions?

She sat thinking about herself as a child and wondered how her life would have been if she had had parents that didn't treat her like burden. Her mother and father liked to remind her that she had been an accident, than an abortion would have been easier at the time. But Catholicism had been in the way. That's what her father had said. God was all things, he told her, and He would make things as they were meant to be. She received the same line when she had mentioned Uncle Bill.

She knew now that her father had allowed it, that her father and Uncle Bill had an arrangement of sorts, though she never found out what it had been until much later. As it turned out, Uncle Bill had a daughter about Terri's age, whom she had only met a few times. Her father and Uncle Bill liked to trade daughter for daughter. That was why when Uncle Bill was over when her father wouldn't be home.

When Terri was fourteen her father's friend had gotten her pregnant. This was after seven years of him sliding into bed next to her drunk with wandering hands that had graduated to more and more and finally... Uncle Bill had left her with child, so she carried the guilt like she carried his baby. She couldn't kill it, even though she wanted to clean herself out to be absolved, but she didn't want to trade one sin for another.

She hid the pregnancy for as long as she could, but as her belly began to swell, the other kids at school would poke fun. Even if their jokes were true, she needed to come clean and finally tell someone.

"I always knew that you'd grow up to be a whore," her father had said in response to finding out. "He loved you like a daughter, and this is what you do to him? How do you think he feels? And what about me and your mother? Now we all have to live with this shame, this embarrassment."

Her father stormed out. Her mother stood in the doorway looking small and tired.

"Mom, I..." But Terri trailed off, unsure what to say, not confident that her explanation would be heard. Was she really at fault, or was she the victim?

"You did this to yourself, Terri," her mother had told her before leaving her alone. She cried. Cried, and prayed to God who could guide her through this. She asked for strength to make the right decision. In the end God told her to have the child.

Her mother had driven her to the hospital when Terri had started labor, but she had refused to go in to watch Terri give birth. It was a sin, and she wouldn't support it, her mother had maintained.

After a few months, Terri discovered drugs as a way to cope with being an adult far sooner than she had been ready. Her addiction had become more powerful than her supposed natural instinct to mother her child. She didn't want to sit at home bored, waiting for her daughter to need to eat or have a diaper change. The baby's crying was incessant, and all she could think about was getting high, partying, and getting laid. She resented the small baby because of it, and for that reason, her daughter had spent most of her time with grandparents, other family, or people she hardly knew that also did drugs.

As her daughter aged, she saw her even less, and her parents took care of the child pretty much full time. She had gone to jail a few times for petty drug charges during this time as well, despite being smart enough to stay away from selling the shit. Anytime she took a break from her partying or was out of jail she would go see her daughter, but her parents would tell her stories about how the child had developed learning problems, and heavily implied that she was the cause due to her continued drug use while pregnant.

Bullshit. And even if it was true, what could she do about it now? She would yell at her parents and storm out. She wouldn't return to her daughter for months, finding it easier to deal with sleeping on several different couches at friends, or strangers, homes. It was better than dealing with her parents' disappointment, name-calling, and lectures. And she certainly didn't have patience for dealing with a daughter that had learning disabilities. It couldn't have been her doing- it had to of been that old asshole she fucked because she was too scared to say no. He was the one with retarded genes.

Over the years she had cleaned up a few times. As her daughter reached the age she had been when she had become pregnant with her, she thought maybe this was the last time. The real time to get cleaned up. Maybe she could finally be a mother to her child. Her daughter knew her, but still approached her like a stranger when she came around. This rejection hurt more than she expected and she

backslid, making her go back to the needle once again.

On the night of her daughter's 15th birthday she watched one of her closest friends die on a couch of an overdose of heroin. She watched him convulse, froth at the mouth, then finally in one last breath, his wide open eyes settled upon her. This experience rocked her, made her more aware of just how quickly life passes. She needed, and for once, wanted to get her shit together before she turned 30. She had a few months to do it.

Once she got clean, she made every effort to be part of her daughter's life. Dinners. Movies. Her parents allowed them day trips to go shopping, to do things mothers and daughters do, even during the awkward teenage phase. This didn't last long though, because her daughter was starting to want her own life. She wanted to hang with her own friends to go shopping, to see movies, to go out to dinner. Her daughter was making the choice to spend more time with friends than with the woman who had birthed and abandoned her. As sad as this made her, she could understand. This resentment had almost pushed her back into drug use, but she stayed strong. Instead she turned to something else: stealing. It started small, as most things do, and she got a rush out of taking things, especially clothes from large department stores. The more she stole, the more she wanted to steal. The possibility of getting caught was a rush and the fact that she never was just proved how good she was at it. Eventually her thieving led her to masquerading as other people. Most people would be shocked at how easy it is to be someone else simply by having a few pieces of their mail. Identity theft was her next big rush. It was nothing like sailing with heroin, but it was pretty fucking close. Every swipe of Mr. Smith's or Mrs. Gallagher's credit cards just emboldened her. She had learned how easy it was to buy online for thousands of dollars and have it shipped right to her. Her brazenness had eventually caught up though and this landed her an 18-month sentence in county jail.

Just as she felt like it was possible for her daughter to open back up to her, she had disappeared again. In a shocking turn, her daughter came to visit her in jail, to catch her up on what had been going on in her life. Her daughter must've noticed how she had been trying, making every effort to make up for her past motherly mistakes. Her daughter had come to tell her about the new guy she was seeing, a guy her daughter referred to as 'the one.' He was a submariner in the Navy from the midwest and had that middle-American charm, her daughter had told her. He was good to her, as evidenced by the stories that her daughter told. Terri loved that.

Her daughter also told her that they were expecting.

Terri was going to be a grandma.

She welled with pride and promised her daughter that she would spend more time with all of them. Once she was out of this place.

The promise had lasted a few months. It was broken the moment Terri had to bail her daughter out of jail on a drug charge. The father of her granddaughter got custody and moved back to Ohio. When she walked out of jail with her daughter she had told Terri that she needed the money to survive, that she had seen an opportunity and had taken it.

2

Many years later, Terri would buy her granddaughter, Alyssa, a pink dress that she hoped to ship in time for her ninth birthday. The dress would be paid for with money Terri had stolen from an innocent man that she had killed.

3

Right now the past and present have no separation. They are both happening in this moment.

Chapter Nineteen

"The voices told me," says her granddaughter, finally, after some coaxing.

It had taken a good long while to convince the little blond girl that it was ok, that she could be trusted. She had lied to her granddaughter about why she had done what she did to her grandpa. The nine-year-old was reluctant, but finally she had uncurled from her little ball in the corner of the room.

"Voices? You mean the voices of people? What people?" She asks gently, continuing to make sure the child isn't afraid of her. "Did you see the people?"

Was her granddaughter talking about the same voices that her husband had heard? That they all had heard?

"The shadow people," says her granddaughter, seemingly unafraid of these supposed 'shadow people' like everyone else had been. The child continues, "They told me what you did. And they told me what you were going to do. They said you were bad."

"You shouldn't listen to those people," she explains. "You know I'm not a bad person. I'm your grandma. I've bought you toys and candy. I always did what I thought was best for you and your mommy."

"That's not what the shadow people said. They told me everything that you did. That you were mean to other people. That you

would take their things, and you would do it when they were dead,” says her granddaughter, with the hint of not seeming 100% sure as to what dead really meant. Kids have a far way connection with mortality, and view it in an almost cartoon way. But this, the way the child said it, is almost like her granddaughter is beginning to understand the concept. She had always seemed much older, looking at things in a way that gave everyone around her a feeling that she could see through some of life’s bullshit, even at her age. An old soul, if you will.

She is starting to get frustrated with the situation, that her granddaughter is stuck on her idea of what the truth was. These people had gotten to her and warped her mind. “Those people are liars!” She raises her voice. “You can’t trust them!”

“But I saw... I saw what you did to grandpa,” her granddaughter stammers, shriveling away again at the thought of what she had seen. “I saw everything. You shot grandpa with a gun.”

“I know sweetie, but I explained the whole thing. Your grandpa was mean, and he was trying to hurt me. That’s why I did this... besides, he wasn’t your real grandpa. He was only a step-grandpa” She turns to look at the body of her husband, but it is no longer there. None of it is. The pools of blood, the brain and bones, the rotting bits of entrails, and the writing on the wall... all gone, vanished like it had never happened.

She can use that to her benefit.

“See, sweetie? Grandpa isn’t here. It was all make believe. None of it happened.” She says to the child soothingly.

“No,” the little girl says, unconvinced by her grandmother’s sudden change in tone. “I know it happened. I saw it. I heard it. The voices told me it would happen.”

“Well, there’s no proof, honey. Things don’t just vanish like that,” she lies. She had seen many times while being in this place how things can blink in and out of existence. This whole experience is a testament to unreality. Even this, speaking with her granddaughter, was making her wonder if all of this was a product of a lack of sleep. A lack of normalcy.

The child looks her in the eye and says, “No, the shadow people removed them. They said they were sorry I had to see that, but that they wouldn’t keep making me look at it. They said it was for the best.”

“For the best? The best what?!” She raises her voice again. All this talk of voices and shadow people is pissing her off. Or scaring her, but she’ll never admit that. She’s seen and heard enough to think maybe that it was all real.

“They said that it was something I needed to see.” The little girl pause, then says: “...because seeing that would teach me what kind of person not to be. They said...”

“What? What did those liars say?!” Again she loses her temper, and raises her voice to indicate that.

“They said you were really mean,” the girl shrinks away. “And I believe them because you’re being mean now.”

She must keep calm in order to reason with this child. She has to convince her. “Sweetie,” she says quietly. “Please, believe me. I would never do anything like that if I didn’t have to. I’m not a bad person.” She steps toward her granddaughter.

“No,” says the little girl, backing away. “I don’t want you to be by me. You’re scaring me.”

“Oh, honey, don’t be scared. I just want to give you a hug. I want to show you, to prove I’m not bad,” Terri steps closer.

The child says nothing, but also doesn’t make an effort to move away. This is progress. She notices that her granddaughter is holding something behind her back, like she is hiding something. The shock of seeing the little blonde girl kept her from noticing.

“What do you have there, baby girl?” She asks. “What are you hiding behind your back?”

The child looks up to her shyly and says: “Something I have for you. I was going to give you them.”

“Oh? And what might that be?” She is honestly very curious. Given the twists and turns of the current circumstances it is hard to believe that her granddaughter would appear here to give gifts.

“They’re pictures,” says the child. “The shadow people thought you might like them.”

Maybe she doesn’t want them. Were they pictures from her committing crimes? What the fuck could those shadow people assholes possibly have on her? Her curiosity goes the best of her. “Ok, sweetie. I’ll take them.”

Her granddaughter takes them from behind her back and holds them out for her. They were beat up and stained pieces of notebook paper with what appeared to be scribbles on them. Not surveillance pictures, obviously.

She grabs the pieces of paper from her granddaughter and can immediately tell they are kids drawings, stained and crumpled by years of neglect. She shuffles through them quickly and realizes that they are the ones from her pocket.

“How did you get these?” Terri asks her granddaughter.

“The shadow people.”

Of course. The shadow people.

The drawings are the fucked up scribbles that She had at first kept, but then because of this situation, had torn into bits just days ago.

(Days or weeks?)

It is impossible that they are in her hands, intact, again leaving her unsettled because of what they depicted. Even more so than they had when she saw them before. Previously she hadn’t been exactly sure what these drawings were, but now it was obvious.

The first depicts two women with missing hands. The second shows a scared woman with blood pouring from her mouth. The third is a fat, rotting corpse with his eyes eaten out by bugs. The fourth is a man leaned against the wall with a gun next to him—which originally she had thought meant to be a suicide, but she knew the reality of this image now.

There is one more image, one she hadn't seen previously: a woman inside of a clear box, sitting alone, save for a gun and four empty plates.

Her. It has to be her.

These scribbles are showing her the experience in this place. A grim reminder drawn in crayons and markers. But from how long ago? Was a child's drawings used for effects to drive home the point these 'shadow people' are trying to make? Or had these actually been preemptive, and somehow a kid in the late 80's and early 90's knew what would happen in the 2020's? That makes about as much sense as the rest of this place.

Terri throws the drawings to the ground.

"WHAT IS THIS?!" She yells at her granddaughter, who backs further into the corner. The child is terrified by her explosion, caught off guard by her yelling.

"...I'm sorry..." the scared child says in barely a whisper. "You're scaring me, grandma."

Terri continues to glare at the cowering little girl, but softens. This is not the way to win her favor. She is only nine.

"Can I have a hug now?" She asks, a complete turnaround in tone from a few seconds ago. Terri feels like two people; one making amends, and one fighting for survival.

Her granddaughter looks at her skeptically, still cowering into the wall.

"It's ok, honey. Those pictures just scared me," she explains. "That's all. I'm not mad at you."

"I'm scared to hug you," says the little girl.

"Please, sweetie?"

"No, I don't want a hug," she says looking out between her blonde curls. "Not from you."

She loves this kid, but she is being a frustrating little shit. "Come over here and give me a hug."

"No!"

She is losing her patience. "Goddammit, I said get over here!" She moves quickly to grab her granddaughter by the arm. To shake her. To punish her for not listening... but she can't. An invisible binding is keeping her locked in place, keeping her from reaching out. She is pulled to the floor violently by something unseen. She bashes her tailbone hard against the wood floor and she grunts loudly as the wind is knocked out of her. She is forced back, sliding on the floor and smashed into the back wall. She thinks of Dozer's body.

She is pinned there. She can't move. Can't breathe. Can't speak.

Her granddaughter looks as shocked as Terri is. But then, the child's face changes. From fear and shock to something near amusement. The child stops cowering and stands straight, like she had found some courage. She walks toward her grandmother.

Two stretched and distorted human-like shadows cross the room, dimming it unnaturally.

Still pinned against the wall with her granddaughter moving closer, Terri suddenly wants the child to leave, to disappear just like the rest of them. The thought that this child is working with whoever is doing this shit made her despise this cute nine year old... but only for the briefest of moments. The little girl is a victim of these psychopaths, too, isn't she?

"The shadow people don't like it when you're mean," the little girl says with her confidence back.

Her granddaughter sat in front of her, with criss-crossed legs like children her age often do. The child looks at her. "The shadow people said you would be mean, and you were. I don't like that. I got scared. The shadow people promised nothing bad would happen to me, and they didn't break their promise."

"Who are these shadow people?" She asks. The back of her head is in pain from smashing against the wall.

"I don't know. They didn't say if they had names. But they're in the room with us right now," says the little girl. "Can't you see them?" Her granddaughter looks around as if they are everywhere, like there is a group of people here.

She is still pinned against the wall, but she can move her head slightly. "No, all I see is shadows from the trees outside."

The child scrunches her face up like she had tasted something bad, then says: "Ew. Yuck. Really?"

"Who are you talking to, baby girl?"

"The shadow people. Can't you hear them?" Says the young girl, taken aback.

"No. I can't. Did they tell you something?"

"It's a secret. They said that it's my decision to tell you or not." Says the girl indignant.

The shadows in the room sway back and forth rhythmically, making the room darker and lighter, like the weakest of strobe lights. This is making her head feel worse, and with that, adding to her frustration of the circumstances. She wants to be free, not pinned against the wall with a little shit that is taunting her with some 'secret.'

"Just tell me...!"

"Shhhh...!" Says her granddaughter, and tilts her head slightly as if listening. "The shadow people are talking."

"I don't give a shit who is talking! You need to tell me...!" But she is again cut off, but this time by a squeezing in her throat. Like she is being choked. She tries yelling again, but nothing comes out but a small choking sound. Slowly, her ability to breathe comes back. She takes a deep breath and says, "Please, just tell me."

"I kinda don't want to say. It's yucky. It's about you..." The girl says, almost shyly. "Do you remember those plates of food you had in here?"

“Yes, of course I do. But what...?”

“The shadow people said that you ate that food, then people came to visit you? People you knew, including grandpa?” She asks.

“Yes, that right. What is this? A riddle? A game? Just tell me.”

Tell me or get the fuck out of here.

Anger has pushed aside her worry about being held by the throat with invisible hands. This place had calloused her, made her unfeeling. Shaped her with every experience, even though she would never admit it.

Her granddaughter scrunches up her face in disgust. “The shadow people told me that there were pieces of all those people in the food you ate.” The child looks at her unbelieving. “Is that true? You did that? Gross, who would eat people? You must’ve been really hungry.”

Jesus Christ.

Her blood freezes in her veins. Had she really eaten parts of those people? What had they been missing? Hands? Tongue? Back skin? Eyes and a penis? She feels her stomach lurch, it threatens to empty itself on the floor in front of her granddaughter. Luckily there isn’t much in there at that moment. She chokes back the acid that rises in her throat.

The young girl tilts her head again listening to the mostly empty room.

“The shadow people also reminded me of something mommy told me about you.” Her face becomes serious. “That some people have nothing good to give, so all they can do is take.”

The shadows bend impossibly and stretch, dimming the room, painting the entire area with a color like that of murky water. The shapes blur then swirl around her granddaughter, like a murmur of darkness. She remembers the dark tentacles that had pulled her from her apartment and shuddered.

The shadows recoil into all of the edges of the room like smoke going backwards to a flame. They disappear into the corners of the wall, leaving it lit normally again.

With a sharp breath she slumps down against the floor, free of the invisible bonds that had held her.

Her granddaughter is gone. The shadows are gone.

She is alone.

Alone, again.

Is this really how people view her? The people she cares about the most think of her this way? Despite what she had done for them? How could her doing what she needed to survive be considered the wrong thing? Could she have done shit differently? Sure, but past is past.

Fuck the past.

The present claws at her, still urges her to find a way out of this, to find those responsible and end them, to make them pay. She feels tired, but also feels like she can dig her way through the wall with just her fingernails. She knows she can’t though. And she knows that she cannot correct the mistakes she has made. There’s no going back.

She curls up on the floor and hopes for a miracle. She prays, reaches out to a God that she feels had abandoned her, and hopes He can hear her.

Chapter Twenty

She woke expecting another grotesque reminder to be in her room, but God had answered some of her prayers. No new body. No mystery visitor that would plunge the knife of regret into her chest. Remnants from her last four visitors, people she once cared for, once found useful, aren’t there. The rotting smears and drips upon the walls and floor, everything, all of the blood and gore, all of her shit and piss has been removed. Like a clean slate, like a way to start over.

These ‘shadow people’ hadn’t wanted her granddaughter to see all the horror of this place, and for that she can be thankful. If there is something to be thankful for, it is that. Alyssa had seen what they wanted her to see.

Terri sits up slowly. Her back, her neck, and every other joint reminds her that the days of sleeping on floors are long behind her. Her mind might rebel at the thought of being old, but there is no fighting progress and decay.

Look at yourself.

That is the cruel irony of aging: the body begins giving up long before the mind does.

She reaches up with both arms stiffly and shakily, trying to stretch in the hopes of loosening up some. She stands slowly on stiff knees. She turns at the hips and stretches again painfully. The damage she had done to her head the first day seems to have been reminded by the strange force that slammed her against the wall earlier. Her head is killing her. Much like this place.

She knows she isn’t getting out of here. Her escape is death. And it would probably be soon.

For now she is an example to be made, a toy to be played with. She is left with only the thought of how all of this will play out. Or when.

Some of her husband’s brains are still stuck to her already soiled shirt. There is no explaining why the gun wouldn’t go off when

he aimed it at her and pulled the trigger. One bullet. One. And it would only go off when she fired it. Of course. Women with cut off hands. Woman with a cut out tongue. A dead and mangled former lover. Just like everything else in this place, the things make perfect sense because they make zero sense.

She doesn't make the rules for the game. They do. Whoever *they* are.

She keeps acting like she doesn't know who is doing this. But she does. It's the family. Somehow. She is their puppet, a martyr for their brand of morality, an example to be made. If it had just been her, then the lesson would have died with her. But this was played well. All her faults, all her mistakes—even those don't die with her—they are passed to her granddaughter as an example of how not to be.

Her whole life Terri had been so concerned that she would be how her father had defined her mother, but in fact, she had become him.

She walks across the room to squat in the opposing corner to where she sleeps, a place already littered with her waste because she is forced to live like a dog. It is uncomfortable to piss because of the measly amount of water she is provided. It stings. But, it is enough to keep the worst effects of dehydration at bay. All part of the plan, she is sure.

She watches her urine drip down the wall and collect in a puddle, spreading further to join with the still wet dark spot where the woman had coughed out part of her tongue. They mix to create this sickly, bright, cloudy orange shade. She is glad she isn't pissing that color.

Not that it matters.

As she pulls her pants back up, she makes sure to glare up at the cameras in the ceiling, even if they aren't there. This has become somewhat of a tradition, especially as she allowed herself to be more accepting of her circumstances. Accepting, but not ok with it.

She sits in the corner, back against the wall. From this spot, she can see the entire room and she can see out all four windows into the world that she was once free to roam. She had made mistakes, but at least she had been free to make them... without ramification for a really long time. Until this place. Until she had poked the wrong bees nest.

There is no new food or glass of water, which is fine by her. Even if the tortured or dead people had left the room, or rather, disappeared, she isn't hungry knowing she had eaten a piece of them all. Her guts are knotted at the idea of another plate containing pieces of the people she once knew and loved. Her stomach lurches. She can't keep thinking about it. What's done is done.

She stares dreamily outside and into the bright blue sky. For the first time since being in this room she thinks she sees an animal outside. Just above the trees a large black bird circles. The trees began to sway.

The wind. How I miss it.

For a brief moment she almost feels the breeze inside her room. Impossible of course, but with a bit of longing, perhaps her brain makes it possible. An escape, just for a moment. Even if it is all in her mind, it still feels... normal.

The tapping is starting again, far off in the distance. Maybe outside. Maybe in the walls. Maybe in her head. She almost doesn't care anymore. She thinks she getting used to it. In a way.

The bright sun casts dark shadows onto the walls of her room, making the trees almost appear as dancing and circling around a bonfire. They seem to speed up, swaying and moving in unison, distorting and stretching onto the ceiling as if in some crescendo to some long-standing tradition. The shadows on the wall spin so fast she can no longer focus on individual movements. She is becoming dizzy, disoriented like she is in a spin cycle set on high. Her vision goes sideways as if the gravity in her little room has suddenly switched directions.

She closes her eyes, hoping to steady herself.

Slowly, she opens them again.

But before her eyes can focus, her head is pressed against the wall behind her. Something is in the room with her. She struggles to no avail. She is held there. By someone, by something. Her eyes scan to room urgently and sees nothing but blurry shadows, gently continuing their dance. They recede and advance making the room look almost as if it is breathing.

Just the wind, she thinks.

But the wind can't hold a person like that, someone else thinks inside of her head.

The tapping becomes louder. Closer.

Just tree limbs on the windows, she thinks.

Not tree limbs, the someone thinks in her mind.

The pressure tightens on her head. It feels as if her skull is going to sink into the wall. Then the pressure moves down to her throat, like an invisible hand, choking her, but also lifting her. Slowly it pulls her to her feet while still keeping her pinned against the wall. Black is beginning to creep into the edges of her vision as the oxygen is cut from her brain. The shadows are in her eyes.

This is all in your mind, Terri thinks.

No it isn't, says the words forced into her mind.

This is a dream, she counters.

No, thinks her passenger.

The pressure around her throat suddenly releases, and she draws in air like she had never breathed before. The room dances back into her vision. Shadows continue to cross the room, enveloping the area where she is suspended against the wall like a doll frozen mid-

toss. Her body is not her own to control; every part of it is now victim to whatever is holding her, whatever is in her mind and body. Her eyes dart frantically around the room. The shadows have faded but are still swaying rhythmically. She can't get her eyes to focus on them. Not on the floor. Not on what is outside. Finally, her eyes settle on the far wall, on the two words written, no, smeared, in blood. They have returned, previously written by a tongueless woman.

Shadows.

The shadows continue to swirl around the room, creating a strobing effect. She can't close her eyes as they are being pried open. She can feel her heart pounding inside like it is trying to escape her body.

The tapping outside is becoming louder still, in perfect syncopation with both her heart and the maelstrom of shadows.

She feels hands all over her, grabbing and squeezing and pulling. She begins to slide up the wall until her feet are no longer touching the floor. Slowly she slides upwards toward the ceiling.

This isn't happening, she tries to assure herself.

Yes it is, her passenger reminds her.

She can feel her heart bouncing around in her ribcage. Her breath, inconsistent and labored, feels like life is being squeezed from her.

No, she fights back.

Yes.

She is pulled onto the ceiling, pulled across slowly, until finally she stops. She feels the grip of unseen hands release slightly, and yet, she still clings to the ceiling as if it had been the floor all along. She is still unable to move. Unable to blink. Prostrate. Even most of her thoughts are not her own.

This is it.

Is that thought hers or theirs?

The shadows begin to slow, to grow static again, like the trees they had always masqueraded as. They grow lighter, then vanish completely, spiraling like injured tentacles into the cracks of the room.

The tapping is unrelenting, growing louder. Tapping adds to other tapping to other tapping until it is a symphonic cacophony banging on the windows of her small space. She can feel her ear drums making every effort to not burst.

Inside of her she can still hear the low bass thumping of her struggling heart.

A sudden sharp pain stabs into the soft skin just above her pelvic bone sending pain through her. She naturally reacts, and tries to escape it, but she still can't move. She is a prison in her own body. Her eyes widen and fill with tears that fall to the floor.

Whatever icy blade is inside of her begins to slowly slide up, stopping at her belly. She can see blood spilling from her to the floor. Then it continues, slowly, like a zipper being undone. Higher and higher. Then with one last quick slash, she is split from the center of her chest to the base of her neck.

She watches in horror as the contents of her body fall with a grotesque slap, as if her room had become a slaughterhouse floor.

The tapping stops. Her ears ring, but she can still hear a sound that reminds her of leaking pipes, of water hitting a floor. Or, like blood hitting a floor, as if it was raining inside the room.

Her eyes dance around the four walls, trying to make sense of this. She sees the crack on the damaged window, slowly arcing across the glass like lightning. Shards begin to fall. The outside world spills in and she can smell the freshness of the fir trees outside. Of the clean air. Of the wind. Of potential freedom. She swears she can even smell the blue of the sky above.

The window crumbles completely, like something that had fought the test of time and had suddenly lost.

A shadow crosses the room and falls upon the area where the window once was. Not a shadow. A bird. A large black bird.

A crow.

No.

A raven.

No.

A vulture.

The vulture hops down into the room. It looks up at her and tilts its head as if trying to make sense of her. It ruffles its wings, then goes about its business as if bored by her presence.

Then the vulture eats.

From her Christ-like position on the ceiling of a room she still isn't sure is real or a nightmare, she watches the vulture tear into her entrails, making a meal of her.

Her eyes, unblinking, blurring with impending unconsciousness fall to the next word smeared on the wall.

Voices.

Inside her head, she has the feeling of being inspected. Poked. Prodded. Whatever it is claws through the folds of her mind like the vulture is tearing through her insides. The thoughts she has are not her own, forced upon her by the uninvited passenger.

Some people do not have anything good to give, so all they can do is take.

