

Something Inside

20 Short Stories by C. Flemish

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Dedicated to all the people in my life who support this madness called writing. My wife, our many pets, family and friends. And to you the reader for continuing the slowly fading art of reading.

“There is no exquisite beauty... without some strangeness in the proportion.”

Edgar Allan Poe

Foreword:

When I was growing up, one of my favorite things in the world was discovering short stories.

Some of my earliest memories of reading come from collections and anthologies. Back then, before the internet, discovering new music or new writers was different.

If you were lucky, you lived in a town that had a record store. Most of the time, though, you had no clue what bands existed. So, record labels would release sampler CDs. One song from this band. One song from another. A sampler plate of noise.

That's how I discovered bands like Social Distortion, Bad Religion, and so many others. Punk rock, hardcore, metal... that was what I liked.

And that's how I've always viewed short stories.

They are samplers.

A quick hit into a strange world. A glimpse into a story. As a kid, I wasn't a huge reader. Comic books, absolutely. But sitting down with a giant novel felt like homework.

Then I discovered anthologies and suddenly, reading became exciting.

Five pages. Twenty pages. Thirty pages. Anything over fifty pages did not get much love. I didn't want to wait three hundred pages to get to the good stuff. I wanted the monster now.

That's the magic of short fiction. It gets straight to the point.

A good short story doesn't waste your time; it drags you straight into the dark.

As a writer, I love that freedom. I can explore dozens of different ideas, voices, creatures, fears, and worlds without spending years building a single story. Some tales in this collection came together in days. Others stayed buried in notebooks for years before finally clawing their way out.

Over time, I learned to love novels too. Massive books. Thousand-page epics. But short stories have always held a special place in my heart.

They remind me of those old sampler CDs. A little bit of everything. A chance to discover something unexpected. Something Inside is exactly that. A variety of different journeys into the strange and unknown.

Some are brutal. Some are sad. Some are strange. And a few may hit a little too close to home. But every one of them carries a piece of me within it.

Thank you for picking up this anthology and giving these stories a home in your imagination.

Something is waiting for you inside.

C. Flemish

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SOMETHING INSIDE

The waiting room smelled of disinfectant. A TV in the corner that was playing a show no one cared about. The fluorescent lights buzzed softly. She checked her phone again.

11:42.

Her lunch break had technically ended twelve minutes ago.

Great.

Her manager would love that. A small pulse started behind her right eye. It was tiny at first, then turned sharp, like a needle pressing into the back of her skull.

“Ellie Harper?” The nurse gave her a tired smile. “Doc is ready for you.” Ellie stood up and followed the nurse down the hallway. The exam room was freezing. She climbed onto the paper-covered table and folded her hands in her lap while the nurse tightened the blood pressure cuff slowly around her arm. The machine beeped. The nurse frowned slightly.

“Are you nervous?”

“A little,” Ellie said automatically.

The nurse nodded like she’d heard that answer a thousand times, took the pressure cuff off and scribbled something on her notepad.

“The doctor will be in shortly.”

Ellie stared at the anatomy poster on the wall. It showed the digestive system, with smiling see-through people and colorful organs inside them. The door opened and the doctor stepped in, looking at the clipboard in his hands.

“Ellie Harper,” he said absently. “Twenty-four.” He sat on the little rolling stool.

“That is me.” Ellie replied politely.

“Well, good news first. Bloodwork looks fine. Cholesterol’s good. Thyroid’s normal. No signs of anemia.” He flipped a page. “But your blood pressure is very high.”

Ellie gave a small shrug. “Okay.”

The doctor looked over the clipboard. “You’re young. Healthy weight. No smoking?”

“No.”

“Diet?”

“I mean... pretty normal, I think.”

“Exercise?”

“Every day.”

He nodded but didn’t really react.

“Any medications?”

“No.”

The silence lingered a second too long. Then he finally looked up at her.

“So. Stress?”

Ellie laughed softly through her nose.

“A little.”

“How little?”

She stared at the floor for a moment.

“Well... I moved here after college. My parents are back in Oregon.” She tucked a strand of black hair behind her ear. “I don’t really know anybody here yet. Work’s been...” She hesitated. “A lot.”

“What do you do?”

“Marketing assistant.”

“And stressful?”

“I just...” She searched for the words. “I really want to do well.”

The doctor nodded politely, but Ellie could tell he was already distracted. His eyes drifted, his attention somewhere else, already thinking about his next appointment.

“It’s my first real job,” she continued. “Everybody there seems like they already know what they’re doing, and I’m constantly afraid I’m screwing something up.”

“Mhm.”

"And I keep trying harder, but it just makes me more anxious, and then I mess up more things, and then..."

The doctor scribbled something on the clipboard. He wasn't even looking at her now. Ellie felt a sting in her chest. It lasted only a second.

A flash of irritation.

Is he even listening to me?

A sharp pain suddenly stabbed behind her right eye.

"Ah," Her hand moved instinctively to her temple.

The doctor finally looked up.

"You okay?"

"Yeah." Ellie forced a quick smile. "Sorry. Headache. Recently, I mean."

She swallowed. "I guess."

The doctor nodded again. "Stress can absolutely do that." He set the clipboard down. "How is your sleep?"

Ellie hesitated.

"I sleep," she said quietly. "I just don't stay asleep."

"Trouble shutting your brain off?"

She gave a small laugh. "Yeah."

"Any nightmares?"

"No." Another pause. "I don't think so."

That wasn't completely true. Lately, she'd been waking up exhausted with strange impressions lingering in her head. Wet sounds. Dark hallways. The feeling of something moving under her blankets. But dreams were dreams. The doctor leaned back slightly on the stool. "Honestly, Ellie, your body's throwing up warning signs. At your age, these numbers shouldn't look like this."

A cold feeling settled in her stomach.

"What kind of warning signs?"

"Stress. Burnout. Anxiety." He gave her a practiced, reassuring smile. "The good news is you're young. This is manageable if you address it now."

Deal with it. Like it was an email that needed to be redone.

"You need rest. Better sleep habits. Less pressure on yourself." He started ticking things off with his pen. "Exercise helps. Magnesium sometimes helps. Melatonin is short-term, though I wouldn't rely on it too heavily."

Ellie nodded without saying anything.

"Maybe talk to someone too," he added. "Therapy can make a huge difference."

The pressure behind her eye pulsed again. Stronger this time. And for one bizarre second, she felt something move low inside her abdomen. A faint flutter. Barely there. It felt like fingers moving under her skin.

Ellie froze.

Her breath caught. The sensation disappeared instantly.

“You alright?” the doctor asked again.

She realized she’d gone pale.

“Yeah,” she whispered but her hand had unconsciously drifted to her stomach.

And deep inside her, something shifted again.

“Ok well, check with the nurse for a follow up. Take good care of yourself and call us if things don’t get better. Off he went to his next patient.

Ellie’s apartment smelled faintly of lavender detergent and burnt dust from the old wall heater by the window. As soon as she stepped inside, she locked the door, checked it twice, then took off her shoes and lined them up neatly with the others by the wall.

Everything in the apartment had a place. Not because she was obsessive. She thought that if she kept things organized, maybe her life would become that way, too.

She dropped her purse onto the tiny kitchen table and stood there for a moment in silence, listening to the hum of the refrigerator and the muffled footsteps from the apartment above hers. Somewhere down the hall, somebody laughed too loud.

Her headache had faded to a dull pulse behind her right eye. The doctor's words still echoed unpleasantly in her head. *Warning signs. Stress. At your age, these numbers shouldn't look like this.*

Ellie let out a slow breath and moved through the apartment. She changed into soft gray sweatpants, started a load of laundry, wiped down the kitchen counter even though it was already clean, and checked the lock again. Her mother used to call it nesting.

"You clean when you're anxious," she'd say gently.

Ellie hadn't realized until college that not everybody lived with their stomach clenched all the time.

She poured herself a glass of water. The city outside started to turn blue-gray, headlights silently moved across wet streets six floors below.

For dinner, she heated soup from a can and ate it cross-legged on the couch while some reality competition show played softly in the background. She wasn't really watching it. She scrolled absently through her phone instead, looking at photos from home. Her parents stood smiling at a lake.

Christmas two years ago.

A picture of her and two college friends, whom she barely talked to anymore. Everyone seemed to be drifting apart quietly, like continents moving away from each other. The loneliness hit hardest at night.

During the day, she could hide it behind schedules, deadlines pretending to be productive. But at night, everything was stripped down to silence. That was when the apartment felt empty.

By ten-thirty, she had showered, moisturized, folded laundry, prepared breakfast for tomorrow, packed her lunch, and laid out her running clothes for the morning. Her whole life had slowly turned into getting ready for the next day. Ellie climbed into bed wearing an oversized T-shirt and reached for her phone one last time before turning off the lamp.

Three unread emails.

Spam.

Spam.

And Veronica Holloway.

Ellie's stomach tightened with anxiety.

She opened it.

The email was only three sentences long.

Ellie,

I reviewed the Walker account revisions. Still not where they need to be. I'll expect

updated drafts on my desk first thing tomorrow morning.

Please try to pay closer attention to detail moving forward.

Veronica

Ellie stared at the screen.

Still not where they need to be. No explanation. No actual feedback.

Just enough to make her feel stupid. Heat slowly crept up her neck. *Cunt*

Ellie thought and she felt guilty right away. *I shouldn't say that.*

She had stayed late three nights in a row working on those revisions. Missed lunch twice. Rewrote the presentation from scratch because Derek had dumped half the project on her at the last second before Veronica's meeting. And Veronica knew that.

The pulse behind Ellie's eye sharpened suddenly. A tiny stab. Then another. She shut her eyes hard.

"It's fine," she whispered to herself. "It's okay."

Something ached low inside her stomach.

Ellie froze. The sensation lasted barely a second. A strange rolling movement under her ribs, subtle and damp, like a hand moving in deep water. Her breath caught. She slowly lowered the phone.

Nothing moved after that.

Ellie swallowed hard and laughed nervously to herself.

Stress.

That was all. Too much caffeine. Too little sleep. Anxiety.

That was what normal people experienced, right?

She turned off her bedside lamp and darkness swallowed the apartment.

Outside, rain tapped softly against the windows. Ellie curled up on her side

and closed her eyes, but she couldn't fall asleep. Veronica's email kept replaying in her mind in that controlled, polished voice.

Please try to pay closer attention to detail moving forward.

At midnight, she was still awake. At one-thirteen, she finally drifted into a thin, restless sleep filled with strange, unfinished dreams. Wet hallways. Bare feet against tile. A woman whispering softly somewhere nearby and deep inside her body, something was listening.

The alarm exploded at six sharp. No lingering. No snooze button. No lying in bed half-awake, the way normal people seemed to do in commercials and movies. The moment she woke up, her brain was already moving.

Time.

Bus.

Presentation revision. She sat up slowly, wincing at the stiffness in her neck. Her dreams left her with an unpleasant, greasy feeling she couldn't shake, though she couldn't remember any real details.

Ellie rubbed her eyes and headed for the shower. Everything after that unfolded with practiced efficiency.

By six-thirty, she was pedaling steadily on the small exercise bike in the corner of her living room while the morning news droned quietly from the television. Some anchor with perfect white teeth talked about rising rent

prices and a downtown stabbing while Ellie scrolled through work emails on her phone.

Three more messages from Veronica. Two from Derek. Her stomach tightened instantly.

Derek's messages were short and casual.

Hey Ellie, can you add those analytics charts to the Walker presentation?

Veronica wants the revisions cleaned up before the client call.

Appreciate it!!

Of course, he appreciated it. Because it was supposed to be his job.

Ellie started pedaling harder. Sweat gathered at the back of her neck. The little pulse behind her eye returned. Sharp. Like a needle pressing inward.

"It's fine," she muttered under her breath.

The pain eased slightly. By seven-fifteen, she was dressed in black slacks and a cream blouse, standing in front of the bathroom mirror with a brush in her hand. Her dark hair hung neatly past her shoulders. She wore minimal makeup, simple earrings, and looked clean, professional, and put together. No one looking at Ellie Harper would think anything was wrong with her. That almost made it feel worse. She grabbed her purse, checked the stove twice, even though she hadn't used it, then opened the apartment door.

The sound froze her instantly. A lock clicked open somewhere down the hallway.

Ellie stepped back inside on instinct and quietly shut the door again.

For a second, she just stood there listening.

Then came the familiar squeal of hinges.

Apartment 6B.

Great.

Ellie moved silently toward the peephole and looked out.

Frank Delaney shuffled into the hallway wearing construction boots, a faded work hoodie stretched tight across his stomach, and enough cologne to fumigate a building. Even from inside the apartment, Ellie could practically hear his voice.

Morning, sweetheart. You headed to work already?

Smile a little. Life ain't that bad.

The first few times, she'd tried being polite. That had been a mistake. Now he acted like they shared some private little friendship she'd never agreed to.

Frank scratched his stomach, yawned loudly, then lumbered toward the stairwell. Ellie kept watching.

Please leave.

Please just go.

The stairwell door slammed shut. Still, she waited.

Thirty seconds. Forty.

Her phone buzzed with another incoming work email.

“Shit.”

A sharp pain stabbed behind her eye. Harder this time. Ellie pressed her fingers against her temple and shut her eyes.

At the bottom of her stomach, something gave a strange, slow twist.

Not pain exactly, some sort of movement, like muscles rolling over each other deep beneath her ribs.

Her breathing caught. Then it stopped.

Ellie swallowed hard and looked back through the peephole one last time before finally stepping into the hallway.

Empty. Good.

She hurried toward the stairs. By the time she reached the bus stop, cold drizzle had started falling again. The bus was crowded. Ellie squeezed inside with everybody else, instantly surrounded by damp jackets, stale sweat, cheap perfume, wet wool, and the lingering smell of cigarettes.

Somebody near the back coughed violently without covering their mouth.

A man beside her blasted tinny music through headphones loud enough for everybody to hear. Two teenagers shoved each other while laughing over something on a phone screen.

The bus lurched forward. Ellie grabbed the overhead rail and closed her eyes briefly. Another spike behind her eye. Her stomach tightened hard enough to make her flinch.

Why are people like this?

The thought slipped through her head before she could stop it.

Why does nobody care anymore?

The smell of body odor and wet clothes suddenly felt suffocating.

Heat crawled slowly through her abdomen. Not nausea. Something else.

Ellie shifted uncomfortably and stared out the rain-streaked bus window while the city crawled awake around her. Somewhere deep inside her body, something twisted in response to her anger.

By the time Ellie reached the office building, the rain had soaked dark streaks into the shoulders of her coat. She hurried through the revolving doors with her head lowered, weaving past people carrying coffees and laptops. Her phone read 8:57. The meeting started at nine. Of course, the elevator chose today to stop at every fucking floor. Ellie stood in the corner, clutching her bag while two men in suits casually discussed golf scores beside her like they had all the time in the world. Her pulse ticked steadily in her throat.

Eight fifty-eight.

Ninth floor.

Come on.

The doors finally opened.

Ellie practically speed-walked through the office, heels clicking against polished concrete floors while rows of desks slowly filled with people pretending to be awake. Computer monitors glowed pale blue in the dim morning light. Nobody looked panicked except her.

Nobody ever looked panicked except her.

She reached her cubicle, dropped into the chair, woke her monitors, plugged in her headset, opened Slack, opened the Walker presentation, opened Zoom,

8:59.

“Jesus Christ,” she whispered.

Her fingers flew across the keyboard. Connect audio. Join the meeting.

Camera off. Microphone muted.

The Zoom room opened just as Veronica Holloway’s face appeared onscreen from the conference room upstairs. Perfect makeup. Perfect hair. Perfect white smile. Ellie exhaled shakily and immediately started taking notes while people discussed campaign projections and client retention numbers in the dead-eyed corporate language everybody pretended mattered.

Synergy.

Outreach.

Brand alignment.

Engagement growth.

Her inbox continued to fill up beside the meeting window. Three new emails already. Derek spoke confidently about analytics that he hadn't even compiled himself. Ellie typed rapidly while trying to moderate incoming client questions in the chat. Then came the soft ping of a private message.

Veronica Holloway.

Ellie's stomach tightened instantly.

She clicked it open.

You're cutting it very close lately.

Ellie stared at the screen. Another message appeared immediately underneath.

Everyone else on this team seems capable of arriving early and prepared.

The pressure behind Ellie's right eye sharpened. Her fingers stopped moving over the keyboard. Another message.

If this position is becoming too difficult for you, I'd rather know now than continue wasting time.

Ellie swallowed hard. Heat crawled slowly into her face. Onscreen, Derek laughed at something Veronica said. Another message popped up.

I don't have room on my team for people who don't take this seriously.

Something twisted violently low in Ellie's stomach. Hard enough to steal her breath. She slightly bent forward in her chair. A sharp cramp rolled beneath her ribs. For one horrifying second, she could swear she felt something turning inside her. Stretching. Her hand instinctively pressed against her abdomen beneath the desk.

"Ellie?"

She looked up sharply. Someone in the Zoom meeting had said her name. Twenty faces stared from little glowing squares across her monitor. Ellie forced herself upright immediately.

"Sorry," she said quickly. "Yes, I'm here."

Veronica's expression remained perfectly composed on the screen.

Professional. Polite. Cold.

"We'll need those revised metrics before lunch," Veronica said smoothly.

"Try to stay focused."

A couple of coworkers nodded absently. Nobody noticed the way Ellie's hand trembled beneath the desk. Nobody noticed the sweat gathering along her hairline. And nobody noticed that something beneath Ellie's skin had just moved for the first time with enough force to be impossible to explain away.

Once the meeting ended, the office slipped back into its usual rhythm of keyboards, ringing phones, and low conversations drifting over cubicle

walls. Ellie barely noticed any of it. She lost herself in the work, the way drowning people grabbed onto floating debris. Meeting minutes first. Then, the revised agenda for Thursday's client review. Then follow-up emails. Then, update the shared project calendar. Then, she called supply vendors because the printers on the fourth floor were somehow already out of toner again, even though she had literally ordered cartridges three days earlier. Every task led to another task. Every email created three more.

And somehow, everybody else in the office still found time to stand around talking about brunch plans and Netflix shows, while Ellie felt like she was constantly sprinting underwater.

Around noon, she finally glanced up from her monitor and realized she hadn't eaten anything except half a protein bar she barely remembered opening. Rain crawled slowly down the office windows overlooking Manhattan. Even after two months, the city still didn't feel real to her. New York felt like a machine pretending to be a place. Everything moved too fast. Everybody walked too fast. Talked too fast. Worked too fast. Even the silence felt aggressive. Back home in Oregon, strangers smiled at each other. Cashiers asked how your day was going and actually waited for the answer. People held doors open. Here, people looked through each other like ghosts.

Ellie understood it. You probably had to harden yourself to survive here. Millions of people stacked on top of each other, everybody chasing something, everybody exhausted. Still. Sometimes she missed softness so badly it physically hurt.

At first, her parents had called every night after she moved. Her mother was checking if she was eating enough. Her father reminded her to carry pepper spray. Little harmless things.

But eventually they only talked on Sundays. Scheduled. Controlled. Safer that way.

A Slack notification snapped her back to the present.

Scott Ramsey.

Ellie sighed quietly. Scott leaned against the neighboring cubicle wall a second later, coffee in hand, expensive watch peeking from beneath rolled-up sleeves. Early thirties. Easy smile. The kind of man who somehow always looked relaxed, no matter how much work everybody else was drowning in.

“Hey,” he said casually. “Need a favor.”

Of course you do.

Ellie forced a polite smile anyway.

“What’s up?”

“Veronica wants the Lawson analytics package cleaned up before tomorrow morning.” He took a sip of coffee. “Can you handle it?”

Ellie blinked.

“Didn’t she assign that to you?”

Scott grinned like they were sharing a joke.

“Yeah, technically.” He shrugged. “But you’re way better with formatting stuff than I am.”

Before Ellie could answer, he continued. “You’d seriously save my life.”

Ellie looked at the pile of unfinished work already covering both monitors.

The Walker revisions. Meeting summaries. Vendor follow-ups. Three pending client requests.

The pressure behind her eye returned immediately.

Tiny.

Sharp.

“I already have a lot on my plate today,” she said carefully.

Scott nodded sympathetically without actually listening.

“You’re the best.” Then he walked away. Just like that. Not giving a shit.

Ellie stared at her screen for several seconds. A hot and ugly twist hit her chest.

No.

Not her chest.

Lower.

Her stomach cramped hard enough to make her hunch forward. Pain rolled beneath her ribs. Something slowly uncurled deep from inside her abdomen.

Ellie sucked in a sharp breath. Across the office, Scott laughed loudly at something Derek said.

The headache behind her eye intensified.

Why do people do that? Why does everybody just dump things on whoever works the hardest?

Worse, why could she never say no? She knew the answer already. She was terrified people would stop liking her. The realization made her feel weak.

Pathetic.

Ellie swallowed her anger down the way she always did and opened the Lawson files.

By six-thirty, the office had mostly emptied. The city outside the windows had darkened into rivers of neon and headlights. Ellie's eyes burned from staring at spreadsheets all day. That was when Veronica finally emerged from her glass office carrying a folder.

"Scott," she called. Scott turned in his chair.

"I reviewed the Lawson package. Excellent work."

Ellie froze. Scott smiled modestly.

“Thanks.”

Veronica nodded approvingly.

“This is exactly the level of initiative I expect from leadership staff.”

Leadership staff.

Ellie stared at her monitor.

Scott didn’t say a word. Not one.

The pressure inside Ellie’s stomach turned violent. Her vision blurred slightly. Heat spread upward through her abdomen in sick rolling waves. She shoved her chair back and nearly stumbled heading toward the restroom. Nobody noticed. Ellie barely made it into the stall before dropping to her knees. Another violent cramp twisted through her body. Something moved inside her hard enough to visibly shift her stomach beneath her blouse.

“Oh God,”

Black liquid exploded from her mouth onto the tile. Thick. Dark. Not blood. Not vomit.

It hit the floor in long oily strands that looked almost alive beneath the fluorescent lights.

Ellie stared down at it in horror, trembling violently. The substance moved slightly.

Just for a second she noticed a tiny twitch. Deep inside her body, something new was awake.

That night, Ellie moved through her apartment in silence, trying very hard not to think.

She changed into comfortable clothes, tied her hair back, and immediately started preparing for tomorrow, as if her body didn't know how to do anything else. Put chicken and rice into small plastic containers. Coffee grounds were measured out for the morning. Work clothes hung neatly over the closet door. Laptop charging.

Her entire life had slowly become maintenance.

Keep moving. Keep functioning. Keep everything from falling apart.

The black substance in the bathroom at work kept creeping back into her thoughts anyway. The way it had looked on the tile. The way it had moved. Ellie scrubbed harder at the food container in her hands.

Stress.

That was all this was. People had panic attacks every day in New York. People burned out. People hallucinated. People vomited from anxiety.

Normal.

Everything was normal.

By ten o'clock, she was soaking in a hot bath with her knees pulled to her chest while steam fogged the bathroom mirror. She closed her eyes and tried focusing on the sound of dripping water instead of the constant pressure inside her skull. Her phone rested on the counter nearby. Three unread work emails already. Ellie ignored them.

Instead, she reached into the small pharmacy bag she'd picked up downstairs earlier and pulled out a bottle of melatonin gummies. The doctor's voice echoed again.

Better sleep habits.

She stared at the bottle for a moment before taking one. Only one.

Recommended dosage. Careful.

Always careful. By eleven, she was finally in bed.

Rain tapped softly against the windows again.

New York never really became quiet. Even at night, there was always the distant growl of traffic somewhere below, the occasional siren, voices drifting faintly through walls. Ellie rolled onto her side and closed her eyes. For once, sleep came quickly. And deep in the darkness beneath her ribs, something stirred happily.

The alarm screamed at six.

Ellie jolted awake, feeling groggy and strangely heavy, as if her body had spent the entire night running somewhere without her. Her stomach ached faintly. Pressure. She ignored it.

Shower.

Coffee.

Exercise bike.

The morning news blurred across the television while Ellie pedaled mechanically, scrolling through overnight emails on her phone. Veronica had already sent two messages before six-thirty that morning.

Of course, she had.

Ellie checked the clock repeatedly while getting dressed. Today she would be early. Not just on time. Early. No excuses for Veronica to glare at her. No reason to criticize her. She left the apartment 20 minutes early. The bus was already crowded. Ellie slipped into an empty seat near the middle and immediately regretted it when a middle-aged man in a navy overcoat sat beside her, even though plenty of other seats remained open.

Professional looking. Wedding ring. Briefcase. The kind of man people automatically trusted. Ellie angled herself toward the window slightly and focused on her phone. The man shifted beside her. Too close. She could feel the heat coming off him through layers of clothing. Her shoulders

tightened. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed him glancing repeatedly toward her screen. Reading over her shoulder.

Why?

The bus lurched through traffic while rain streaked the windows. Ellie kept her eyes fixed downward. *Please stop looking at me.* The pressure in her stomach tightened. The man shifted again. Then casually rested his hand beside his leg. Too close to hers. Ellie moved slightly toward the window. Nowhere to go. The city slid past outside in blurred gray smears. Then she felt it. Fingertips brushing lightly against her thigh. Ellie froze. Maybe accidental. Then it happened again. Slow. Deliberate. Something hot exploded inside her chest.

“Don’t touch me.”

The words came out louder than she intended. Several heads turned immediately. The man jerked back, startled.

“What? I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did.” Ellie stood abruptly, her voice shaking now. “You were touching me.”

People stared openly.

The man lifted his hands defensively.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to,”

“Move.”

The bus had gone completely quiet. Ellie's face burned. Now everybody was looking at her. Not him. Her. Like she was the problem.

The pressure inside her stomach twisted violently. Something punched hard beneath her ribs. For one terrifying second, she thought she might vomit right there in the aisle.

The bus stopped. Ellie shoved past people and stepped out into the cold rain two stops early. Her breathing came fast and shallow. Humiliation crawled beneath her skin like insects.

Why did they all look at me like that? Why is everything always my fault?

She walked the remaining blocks to work in the rain without opening her umbrella. At least this way people wouldn't notice her crying. But would they notice anyway?

By the time she reached the office building, her blouse clung damply against her skin.

8:58.

Still technically early. Good. Ellie stepped out of the elevator and immediately saw Veronica Holloway standing near the glass offices with three male supervisors gathered around her. Scott among them. All smiling. Laughing. Relaxed. Having a blast.

Veronica held a coffee cup in one hand while one of the men talked animatedly beside her. She looked elegant even this early in the morning. Sharp black blazer. Gold jewelry. Perfect posture. Then her eyes landed on Ellie. The smile vanished almost imperceptibly. Not even disappointment. Just judgment. Veronica glanced toward the office clock.

8:58.

Then back to Ellie. A tiny nod. The kind adults gave children who had already failed something. Ellie felt heat flood instantly into her chest. Around Veronica, the men kept laughing comfortably.

Ellie had worked there for two months, and not a single woman held a leadership role beneath Veronica.

Not one.

Maybe it meant nothing.

Maybe it did.

Ellie lowered her eyes quickly and hurried toward her cubicle. By the time she sat down, her breathing felt wrong. Too shallow. Too fast. Her chest tightened painfully. The office noise blurred together around her.

Keyboard clicks.

Phones ringing.

People talking.

Her inbox overflowing. Thirty-seven unread emails.

The walls suddenly felt too close.

Ellie pressed trembling fingers against her stomach beneath the desk.

Something moved again. Longer this time. Slivering, she could feel it rub against her skin from within.

Almost affectionate. Then Scott appeared beside her cubicle, carrying coffee.

“Hey,” he said casually. “Just wanted to thank you again for yesterday. Seriously saved my ass.”

Ellie stared at him silently. Scott either didn’t notice or pretended not to.

“Actually,” he continued, “I’ve got another thing Veronica needs done before the end of the day.”

Something inside Ellie twisted violently. Her vision flickered. And for the briefest moment, she imagined sinking her teeth directly into his smiling face. By the time Ellie finally left work, the city had already dissolved into darkness and neon reflections. Her shoulders ached. Her eyes burned. And somewhere beneath her ribs, the pressure had settled into a constant living heaviness she could no longer completely ignore. The subway had been delayed. The sidewalks were packed. Somebody shoved past her and nearly knocked her coffee from her hand without even glancing back.

New York never apologized.

By the time she climbed the stairs to her apartment floor, all Ellie wanted was silence. She rounded the corner of the hallway and immediately saw Frank Delaney fumbling with his keys outside 6B.

Fuck.

Frank looked up instantly when he noticed her.

“Well, hey there, Ellie.” His face brightened in a way that immediately exhausted her. “You work too hard,” he said with a grin. “Every time I see you, you look like you’re comin’ back from a funeral.”

Ellie forced a small, polite smile while fishing for her own keys. “Long day.”

“You should relax more.” Frank leaned casually against his doorway.

“Actually, I was thinkin’ about grabbin’ dinner somewhere this weekend.

Maybe a couple drinks too. You interested?”

Ellie felt her stomach tighten immediately.

Fatigue had settled deep into her bones after spending all day smiling through things she didn’t want.

“That’s really nice,” she said carefully, still focused on unlocking her door.

“But I can’t. I’ve just got a lot going on right now.”

Frank chuckled softly.

“A nice broad like you shouldn’t spend every weekend alone.”

The words hit her wrong instantly. Maybe on another day, she would have brushed it off. Maybe before the man on the bus. Before Veronica. Before

Scott smiled while feeding her more work. But now it just felt greasy. Like his voice itself was touching her.

Ellie felt something hot rise suddenly into the back of her throat. A bitter taste.

“No, thank you,” she said more firmly.

Frank lifted both hands defensively.

“Hey, no pressure.”

But he kept smiling. That same smile. Like he already knew, she would eventually give in if he just kept pushing long enough.

Something twisted violently beneath Ellie’s ribs. A sharp rolling movement.

For one horrifying second, she imagined opening her mouth and black liquid pouring across the hallway floor. She shoved the thought away.

“Goodnight, Frank.”

Before he could answer, Ellie stepped inside her apartment and locked the door hard behind her.

Silence wrapped around her immediately.

Safe. At least for now.

Ellie leaned against the door, eyes closed, as her breathing slowly steadied.

The apartment smelled faintly of detergent and lavender again. She moved automatically through the rest of the evening.

Dinner.

Laundry.

Shower.

Preparing clothes for tomorrow.

Every motion carefully measured. At one point, she caught herself staring blankly at the kitchen counter for nearly a full minute without realizing it.

The pressure inside her stomach shifted lazily.

“What’s wrong with me?” she whispered.

Later, lying in bed, Ellie stared at the ceiling while sleep refused to come.

Tomorrow was Friday.

Just get through one more day. Then the weekend. Two days to breathe.

Two days to sleep. Two days without Veronica Holloway staring at her like she was perpetually failing some invisible test. The thought calmed her slightly. Ellie slowly rolled onto her side and closed her eyes. Deep inside her body, something slithered awake at the sound of Frank Delaney’s name lingering in her thoughts.

The next morning unfolded almost exactly like the one before. That was the part Ellie hated most. Life kept moving, no matter how exhausted you were.

The alarm rang.

She showered.

Made coffee.

Checked emails.

Prepared lunch.

Only today she skipped the exercise bike. Her body felt too heavy somehow, her muscles sore in strange places she couldn't explain. Instead, she did a few quick sit-ups on the living room rug while the news muttered quietly in the background about subway delays and stock market fluctuations. By six-thirty, she stood in front of the bathroom mirror, fastening small silver earrings while trying not to look too closely at herself. Something about her reflection felt... off lately. Just enough to unsettle her. The skin beneath her eyes looked darker than usual. Her cheekbones were sharper. Her face was thinner somehow despite the fact that she'd barely lost any weight. And her eyes. They looked tired all the time now. Not sleepy. Haunted.

Ellie grabbed her purse and opened the apartment door. Frank Delaney was already standing outside his own apartment holding a travel mug.

Waiting.

The moment he saw her, his entire face brightened.

"Well, there's my girlfriend."

Ellie stopped immediately. The hallway suddenly felt smaller.

"I'm not your girlfriend."

Frank laughed loudly.

“Jesus, don’t be so uptight. It’s a term of endearment.”

Ellie locked her apartment carefully without answering. Frank fell into step beside her as they headed toward the stairs.

“So,” he said casually, “plans change for this weekend yet?”

“No.”

“Still work stuff?”

“Yeah.”

Frank shook his head dramatically.

“You work too much.”

Ellie kept descending the stairs without looking at him.

“I can give you a ride sometime, you know.”

“I’m okay.”

“Seriously. The bus takes forever. You ride with me; you’d save at least twenty minutes every morning.”

Ellie glanced over finally.

“How do you know where I work?”

Frank’s smile faltered just slightly.

“Well, I mean...” He shrugged awkwardly. “You mentioned it before.”

No, I didn’t. Ellie was certain she hadn’t. A cold, unpleasant feeling crawled slowly across her skin.

“I really don’t have time for this,” she muttered.

Then she quickened her pace down the remaining stairs and pushed through the building's front doors into the cold morning drizzle. Behind her, Frank called after her.

"Hey, I'm just being friendly!"

Ellie didn't answer. The bus ride was miserable. One seat near the back sat open, but something sticky and dark stained half the cushion, forcing everybody to avoid it. Ellie chose to stand instead, gripping the overhead rail while the bus lurched through traffic. Her stomach felt unsettled all morning. Not pain exactly. Restlessness. Like something inside her body disliked being confined.

At work, surprisingly, things almost felt normal. Veronica was out of the office for most of the day, attending meetings downtown, and without her, the entire floor seemed to breathe easier. Conversations became louder. People laughed more. Even Scott looked less polished and confident without Veronica orbiting nearby. Ellie actually finished most of her work before lunch. For the first time in weeks, nobody yelled at her. Nobody criticized her. Nobody dumped extra assignments onto her desk. Around noon, her mother texted her.

Just checking in, sweetheart. Are you doing okay?

Ellie stared at the message for several seconds before replying.

Busy but okay. Love you.

The response came almost instantly.

Love you too, kiddo.

The knot in Ellie's chest tightened painfully.

A few minutes later, another notification appeared across her phone screen.

A dating app match. Ellie hesitated before opening it. The guy looked normal enough. Dark hair. Soft smile. Hiking pictures. A dog in one of the photos. His profile talked about books, coffee shops, and terrible horror movies. No shirtless mirror selfies. No weird comments. No obvious red flags. For once Ellie found herself smiling faintly.

Hi, nice to meet you.

She hit send before she could overthink it. Then she returned to work.

By the end of the day, she almost felt lighter. Maybe the melatonin was helping. Maybe she really had just been overwhelmed. Maybe things would settle down eventually.

Ellie returned to her apartment building, hopeful.

And there was Frank Delaney.

Waiting beside the front entrance, smoking a cigarette beneath the awning.

"Well, look at that," he grinned when he saw her. "My favorite neighbor."

Ellie forced a tired smile.

"Hey, Frank."

"How was work?"

“Fine.”

Frank tossed the cigarette aside and fell into step beside her as they entered the building together.

“Closed a nice deal today,” he said proudly. “Big client. Real money.”

Ellie nodded politely while climbing the stairs. Behind her, she could hear Frank breathing. Feel him watching her.

“Mmm,” he murmured softly.

Ellie’s shoulders tightened immediately. She slowed her pace slightly until they walked side by side instead. Anything to stop him staring at her back.

The hallway lights buzzed faintly overhead as they reached the sixth floor.

Frank smiled at her again.

“So this is me,” Ellie said quickly, stopping at her apartment door.

“Yeah,” Frank said softly. “That’s you.”

Before Ellie could react, his hand suddenly closed gently around her wrist.

“Why don’t you come inside for a drink?”

“No, Frank.”

“Come on.”

“I have work to do.”

“You work too much.”

Frank stepped closer.

The smell of cologne and cigarette smoke hit her immediately.

“I said no.”

“You’re a beautiful woman, Ellie.” His voice lowered slightly. “I’m not a bad-looking guy. We could have a good time together.”

He tugged lightly at her wrist. Not violent. Worse. Confident. Like he already believed she would eventually give in.

“Frank, let go of me.”

“Don’t play hard to get.”

Then he leaned toward her. Trying to kiss her. Something inside Ellie snapped.

She ripped her hand free and slapped him hard across the face. The sound cracked sharply through the hallway. Frank stumbled backward in shock.

“I said NO!”

For one stunned second, neither of them moved. Then Frank’s face changed instantly.

“Oh shit,” he said quickly. “Ellie, I’m sorry.”

Ellie’s chest heaved violently.

“You don’t get to touch me!”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry, I was just,”

“You don’t get to touch me!”

Her voice broke.

Frank lifted both hands.

“I’m an asshole, okay? I’m sorry.”

But Ellie was already fumbling with her keys, shaking so hard she nearly dropped them. The hallway tilted strangely around her. Her heartbeat thundered painfully inside her chest. By the time she stumbled inside the apartment, tears were already streaming down her face. She slammed the door shut and locked it. Then slid slowly to the floor with her back against the wall.

The panic came instantly. Her breathing turned ragged. Her vision blurred. “Oh God...”

Her skull throbbed violently. Pressure built beneath her ribs hard enough to make her curl forward. At first, Ellie thought it was a panic attack. It felt like one. Her heart racing. Dizziness. Terror.

But panic attacks didn’t make your body move. Something contracted violently beneath the skin of her stomach. Ellie gasped. For one horrifying second, she saw the outline of something press outward beneath her ribs. A shape. Like fingers slowly dragging themselves underneath flesh.

“No no no no,”

Another movement. Lower this time. Stretching her skin from the inside. Ellie scrambled to her feet in terror and stumbled toward the bathroom, kicking off her heels along the way, she flung her purse on the couch and its contents spilled across the floor.

The shower handle twisted beneath trembling fingers. Cold water exploded down her body. Ellie stood beneath it fully clothed at first, sobbing uncontrollably while water soaked through her blouse and her makeup streamed down her face. Her entire body hurt.

Inside her skin, something moved again.

Slow. Awake.

Ellie tore off her clothes frantically and pressed herself against the shower wall while the water hammered down around her. Beneath the pale surface of her skin, dark veins pulsed slowly black for just a second before fading again. Something had opened its eyes inside her.

That night, following her traumatic confrontation, Ellie entered a deep, almost unbroken sleep that contrasted sharply with her recent pattern of restless nights. She was physical and emotionally exhausted, her body and mind sought recovery after the agony she had experienced. Her body had finally collapsed under the weight of itself.

The sheets beneath her were damp with sweat. Her dark hair clung to her forehead and neck. Every few minutes, she turned violently, one hand clawing at the mattress, the other pressed against her stomach as if some part of her sleeping body knew what was happening before her mind could understand it.

In her dream, something chased her through a hallway that had no end. She ran barefoot over wet tile. Doors lined both sides of the corridor, apartment doors, office doors, exam room doors, all of them locked when she grabbed the handles. Behind her came a dragging sound, not footsteps but something heavier and slicker, something pulling itself forward with patient hunger. The hallway breathed around her. The walls flexed. The lights flickered. Somewhere close behind, a woman whispered her name with terrible affection.

Ellie.

Ellie.

Ellie.

Ellie's entire body snapped rigid against the mattress. Her arms shot straight. Her legs locked. Her spine arched so sharply that for a moment only the back of her head and her heels touched the bed. A strangled clicking sound rattled in her throat. The sweat on her skin caught the city light and made her look waxen, unreal, already halfway emptied.

Then her abdomen moved.

It began low, below the navel, with a slow internal pressure that lifted the skin in a rounded bulge. It rolled upward beneath the surface of her body, not like gas, not like muscle, but like a small animal turning over inside a sack. Her stomach tightened around it. The skin stretched smooth and

glossy. Dark veins surfaced briefly beneath the flesh, thin black branches spread outward before fading again.

Ellie whimpered in her sleep.

In her dream, she slammed both fists against a locked door until her knuckles split. The thing behind her dragged closer.

The pressure in her body climbed. Her ribs began to separate. Not break at first. Not fully.

They flexed outward one by one with soft, moist pops, making room for whatever was crawling upward from the dark machinery of her gut. Her breasts shifted unnaturally to either side as the center of her chest pushed forward. Tendons stood out beneath her skin. Her collarbones lifted as the shape beneath her sternum widened and flattened, then narrowed again, as if it were learning how to become a body while still trapped inside hers. A faint black glow pulsed beneath her skin.

Ellie's mouth opened.

Too wide. Her jaw gave with a wet snap that should have woken her, should have filled the apartment with screams, but the only sound that came from her was a dry choking gasp. Her throat swelled. The skin of her neck stretched until it looked thin enough to shine light through. Something forced its way up through her chest, under the ribs, behind the throat,

pressing against muscle and cartilage with hideous patience. Then a fingertip appeared between her lips.

Long. Pale. Slick with black fluid.

It hooked over her lower lip and pulled.

A second finger followed. Then a third. Then a fourth, each one sliding free with a soft sucking sound, each one finding purchase along Ellie's chin. The hand emerged slowly, bending her mouth wider, dragging ropes of oily saliva across her cheeks. A thumb slipped loose last, and the hand clamped around her jaw.

In the dream, Ellie screamed as the thing had grabbed her ankle.

In the room, a second hand pushed out of her mouth, wrist first, folded wrong, boneless until it touched air and remembered its shape. The hands were not attacking her. They were using her. Fingers crawled across her face, her throat, her collarbones. Nails dug into the spaces between her ribs. The creature inside her pulled itself upward inch by inch.

Wet tearing noise filled the bedroom.

One shoulder came next, narrow and black, mucus-covered. Then the curve of a skull pressed against Ellie's stretched jaw. Her face distorted around it. The skin at the corner of her mouth split into a red thread. Her throat ballooned, and with one final convulsion, the creature's head slid free.

A shaved scalp. Fine features. A mouth too red against all that black. Bright green eyes opening in the dark. Beautiful eyes. Hungry eyes.

The creature paused halfway out of Ellie's mouth and looked around the room like a child seeing the world for the first time. Then it smiled. The rest of her came in one violent, liquid pull. Both hands braced against Ellie's forehead and jaw, and the creature dragged herself out in a slick ribbon of limbs, spine, hips, and black fluid.

Ellie's body collapsed flat against the mattress with a rattling exhale. Her limbs remained stiff and wrong, arms angled too sharply, fingers curled backward, jaw hanging open as if she were a discarded doll someone had broken and forgotten to throw away. The thing dropped beside her in a boneless heap.

For several seconds, it was barely human. A dark mass twitching on the sheets. A slick, furious residue of everything Ellie had swallowed and smiled through. Then, the mass tightened. Limbs lengthened. Skin drew itself pale over muscle. The spine found its curve. The face settled into something delicate, young, and impossible.

Nadia lifted herself onto all fours beside the sleeping shell of Ellie Harper. Her green eyes stayed on Ellie for a long moment, almost tenderly. Then she crawled off the bed. By the time she reached the bedroom door, she was walking.

Almost.

Across the hallway, Frank Delaney slept beneath the flickering glow of a television left on overnight. The room smelled of old beer, stale smoke, and the cheap cologne he wore too heavily. An empty bottle lay on its side beside the bed. His work boots sat in the corner with dried mud packed into the soles. On television, a late-night host laughed soundlessly at his own joke, the blue light trembled across Frank's face.

In his dream, Frank was at a bar surrounded by women who laughed too loudly at everything he said. They leaned close. They touched his arm. They made him feel younger than he was, better than he was, entitled to every wanting thing that crossed his mind.

Nadia stood beside the bed and watched him smile in his sleep. Observing the erection under the sheets.

One of the pillows lifted slowly.

The pillowcase slowly slid free, whispering against cotton.

Frank frowned, caught somewhere between dream and waking.

Then pain ripped him awake. A blood stain seeped through the bedsheet where his penis used to be.

His eyes flew open. His mouth opened with them, but the pillowcase whipped across his face before the scream could fully form. It twisted around his head and throat, tightening with a savage snap.

Frank bucked beneath the sheets.

A weight slammed onto his chest. The breath burst out of him. His hands clawed blindly at the cloth, at the air, at the shape crouched over him.

Then he saw her.

A pale naked woman with a shaved head and luminous green eyes sat astride him, her skin streaked with black as if she had crawled out of an oil spill. She looked almost calm. Turning her head as if she was studying him.

That was the worst part. No fury. No panic. No pleasure that he could understand.

Frank tried to scream again.

Nadia drove the twisted pillowcase into his mouth. He gagged violently, heels hammering the mattress. The bedside lamp crashed to the floor.

Empty bottles rolled and clinked under the bed. Frank's hands found Nadia's wrists, but her flesh shifted under his grip, softening, sliding, becoming too slick to hold.

She pushed harder.

The fabric disappeared between his teeth, down over his tongue, deeper, bunching against the back of his throat. His eyes bulged. His face darkened. The wet sounds he made were small and helpless. Nadia leaned closer until her lips brushed his ear.

"You should have listened," she whispered.

Then she shoved the cloth down with both hands. Frank convulsed once. Twice. His fingers scratched at her forearms, leaving red lines that closed instantly. His body fought a little longer than his mind did, jerking beneath her. Then he went still. Nadia remained on top of him for several seconds, head tilted, listening to the silence she had created.

When she slid from the bed, her body loosened again. Bones softened. Skin darkened. She crossed the room as a shadow with hands and eyes, slipped beneath the apartment door like spilled ink, and vanished into the hallway.

At six a.m., Ellie's alarm went off.

She woke with a gasp.

For a moment, she lay motionless, staring at the ceiling while her heart thudded thickly in her chest. Her throat burned. Her jaw ached. Every muscle in her body felt bruised from the inside. The sheets were soaked, and there was a faint black smear on the pillow that she stared at for a long time before convincing herself it was makeup. Ellie forced herself out of bed and began her routine.

Shower. Coffee. Clothes. Hair. Keys.

Normal. Everything is normal. She opened her apartment door and froze. The hallway swarmed with police. Voices echoed sharply across the sixth floor. Two people in white Tyvek suits moved in and out of Frank Delaney's apartment carrying equipment cases. A uniformed officer

blocked the doorway while another questioned nervous tenants near the elevator.

Ellie stood half in, half out of her apartment, one hand still on the knob.

From inside Frank's apartment came the sound of someone vomiting.

"Oh my God," she whispered. Deep inside her stomach, something turned over lazily, satisfied and warm. The next two weeks passed in a blur of exhaustion, fluorescent lights, and routine. Frank Delaney's apartment remained sealed behind yellow police tape for almost six days. Detectives came and went at strange hours. Police had talked to them all. Tenants whispered in hallways and elevators, inventing theories to make sense of what had happened. Suicide. Drug overdose. Some kind of sex thing gone wrong. Nobody really knew.

Ellie tried very hard not to think about it. Work continued exactly as it always had. Veronica remained cold and impossible to please. The buses remained crowded and miserable. The city remained loud and exhausting. Ellie's doctor prescribed blood pressure medication after her second appointment.

"You're getting worse, not better," he'd told her while reviewing the chart.

"At your age, this is extremely concerning."

Ellie nodded numbly while staring at the floor. Meanwhile, her mother kept calling because Ellie's father had developed some kind of stomach illness

back home. Nothing serious, according to the doctors, but enough to scare her mother into constant anxious phone calls.

“You sound tired,” her mother kept saying.

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine.”

“I’m just busy.”

And she was.

Busy surviving.

The dates didn’t help either.

Three in two weeks.

One ghosted her immediately afterward. One spent the entire dinner talking about himself. One disappeared before the check came, and left Ellie sitting alone in the restaurant staring at a bill she couldn’t really afford. Every disappointment layered itself carefully inside her.

Monday morning arrived gray and wet again.

Scott appeared beside her cubicle around eleven, carrying coffee and wearing the same easy, confident smile he always wore.

“Hey,” he said quietly. “You got a minute?”

Ellie looked up cautiously. Scott leaned casually against the divider wall.

“I just wanted to say thanks again for all the help lately.”

Ellie nodded politely.

“Sure.”

“And listen...” He lowered his voice slightly. “Maybe I could take you to lunch sometime. It’s the least I can do.”

Ellie blinked. The offer caught her off guard enough that warmth spread briefly through her chest. Scott was attractive. Funny sometimes.

Successful. And more importantly, he was finally acknowledging her.

Actually, seeing her.

“You mean like...” Ellie hesitated awkwardly. “A date?”

Scott grinned.

“Could be.”

Something hopeful flickered carefully inside her. Small. Fragile. They ended up going that Wednesday. A little Thai restaurant three blocks from the office. At first, it almost felt normal. Scott asked about Oregon. About business school. About how she was adjusting to New York. Ellie found herself relaxing slightly for the first time in weeks. Then, somewhere between appetizers and the main course, Scott leaned back in his chair and smiled in a different way. A calculating way.

“You know,” he said casually, “Veronica really listens to me these days.”

Ellie frowned slightly.

“Okay.”

“I’m just saying...” He shrugged. “If you want to move up around here, it helps to have people advocating for you.”

A cold feeling settled instantly into Ellie’s stomach. Scott continued smiling. “You’re smart. Cute. Hardworking.” He leaned slightly closer. “You just need someone in your corner.”

Ellie stared at him. Understanding arrived slowly. Then all at once.

“You’re kidding.”

Scott laughed softly.

“Come on, don’t act shocked.”

Heat surged instantly into Ellie’s face.

“So, this wasn’t actually a date.”

“It can still be fun,” Scott said smoothly. “I’m just being honest about how things work.”

Ellie stood up so fast her chair nearly tipped backward. People nearby glanced over. Scott raised both hands slightly.

“Ellie,”

“No.”

She grabbed her purse.

“You seriously thought I’d sleep with you for a promotion?”

Scott’s expression tightened.

“Lower your voice.”

Ellie laughed once. Not because anything was funny. Because if she didn't laugh, she thought she might scream. She walked out of the restaurant without touching her food. After that, everything between them became strained and awkward.

Scott stopped lingering near her desk. Stopped smiling at her. But he also couldn't fully avoid her because he still needed her work. By Thursday evening, he finally cornered her near the printers.

"Hey," he said quietly. "Listen. I'm sorry."

Ellie kept organizing papers without looking at him.

"I thought maybe you were into me, too."

"I wasn't."

Scott winced slightly.

"Okay. Fair enough. I just don't want things to be weird."

Ellie's entire body felt tight with buried anger, her voice remained perfectly calm.

"We're fine, Scott."

That night, Nadia came out again. Not violently this time. Almost gracefully.

Ellie slept, twisted deep in sweat-soaked blankets, as her body slowly unfolded into impossible angles beneath the sheets. Her jaw hung

dislocated. Fingers bent backward. Ribs spread outward beneath translucent skin while black veins pulsed softly beneath the surface.

Nadia peeled herself from Ellie's open mouth like oil sliding free of water.

By the time she reached the apartment floor, Ellie's body remained behind, looking almost hollow.

Across the city, Scott stumbled drunkenly from a sports bar, laughing at something his friends had said.

He leaned against a traffic sign while fumbling for his phone. That was when Nadia stepped silently from the alley. Scott barely even saw her.

A shaved head glistening wet beneath streetlights.

"What the fuck,"

Nadia shoved him. Scott stumbled backward directly into the path of the oncoming city bus. The impact sounded like a car accident. Metal screamed. Glass shattered. People started screaming. Scott disappeared beneath the wheels.

By noon the next day, the entire office knew. Veronica's cry echoed sharply from her office after somebody delivered the news. A real cry. Not polished. Not controlled.

Managers hurried into an emergency meeting while rumors spread instantly through cubicles and Slack channels.

Scott Ramsey had killed himself. Jumped in front of a bus. Nobody could believe it.

Ellie sat frozen at her desk while cold sweat gathered along her spine. Deep inside her stomach, something was happy.

After Scott's death, Veronica became worse. She started dumping more and more responsibilities onto Ellie without asking. One evening, she even admitted it openly while pacing near Ellie's desk.

"I know Scott pushed a lot of work onto you," Veronica said distractedly while flipping through papers. "Honestly, I was aware of it. But I liked Scott. He produced results."

Ellie stared at her silently.

Produced results.

The pressure inside her stomach twisted violently. Something rolled hard beneath her ribs. Veronica continued speaking without noticing.

"I'll need you handling his Philadelphia presentation now."

Ellie suddenly shoved back from her desk and hurried toward the restroom afraid she would lose control. The moment the stall door locked behind her, she dropped to her knees, vomiting violently. Black sludge exploded from her mouth and nose simultaneously.

Thick.

Stringy.

Alive.

It splattered across the toilet and tile in oily waves while Ellie gagged so hard tears streamed down her face. The smell was unbearable.

“Oh God...”

The sludge moved slowly inside the toilet bowl.

Tiny ripples. Tiny contractions. Ellie flushed repeatedly, trembling, before collapsing weakly against the stall wall. An hour later, she texted Veronica.

I got really sick suddenly. I'm so sorry. I had to go home. I'll make up the work tonight.

Veronica responded three minutes later.

Fine. Feel better. We still need Philadelphia ready by Monday.

Nothing else.

Saturday evening, Ellie went on another date.

This one was different. His name was Daniel. He listened when she spoke.

Held doors open. Didn't stare at her chest. Didn't touch her unnecessarily.

They ate Italian food at a small restaurant lit by candles, with old jazz playing in the background. They talked for almost three hours. For the first time since moving to New York, Ellie laughed without forcing it. When he walked her home later, he stopped outside the apartment building and simply smiled.

“I had a really good time tonight.”

“Me too.”

“No pressure,” he said gently. “But I’d like to see you again.”

No grabbing.

No expectations.

No games.

A few minutes later, her phone buzzed.

You’re kind of amazing, Ellie. I’m really glad we met tonight.

Something warm flickered carefully alive inside her chest.

Hope.

Then she entered the apartment. Immediately she saw the flood of unread emails from Veronica.

WHERE ARE THE PHILADELPHIA SLIDES?

I NEED THE CLIENT NOTES ORGANIZED TONIGHT.

CALL ME WHEN YOU GET THIS.

The warmth inside Ellie vanished instantly. Her entire body tightened. It was Saturday night. And Veronica still expected her to work. Ellie spent the next four hours hunched over her laptop while cramps twisted through her stomach hard enough to make her double over repeatedly. Sweat soaked her shirt. She barely made it to the bathroom twice before violent diarrhea hit her again. Every email notification felt like another knife. By two-thirty in the morning, Ellie sat shaking at the kitchen table, staring at the glowing screen while her body slowly came apart around her.

And that was when Nadia decided she was done sharing.

Ellie woke suddenly to unbearable pain. Her jaw hung dislocated sideways.

Her fingers bent backward. Her ribs spread visibly beneath stretched skin.

Across the bedroom, Nadia crouched naked in the darkness, watching her.

Bright green eyes. Her bright white teeth smiling.

“No,” Ellie whispered weakly “You’re the monster from my dreams.”

Nadia lunged.

The creature slammed onto the bed, fingers wrapping around Ellie’s throat,

Ellie’s bones cracked violently back into place beneath her skin.

Pain exploded through her body. Ellie screamed. But this time, something inside her fought back.

Not fear. Rage. Years of swallowed humiliation suddenly ignited all at once.

Frank.

Scott.

The bus.

The loneliness.

Veronica.

Everything.

Ellie grabbed Nadia by the throat and shoved hard. The creature shrieked violently as black fluid sprayed across the bed.

“You’re killing me!” Ellie screamed.

Nadia's face twisted with hatred. Because it was true. Ellie finally understood. Nadia wasn't protecting her anymore. Nadia wanted her gone. Wanted Ellie's body permanently. Wanted freedom. The realization hit Ellie like a bucket of ice water. If she kept living this way, this thing would eventually consume her completely. Ellie slammed Nadia backward hard enough to crack the bedside lamp.

Then, suddenly, Nadia dissolved into black liquid and vanished back into Ellie's mouth in one long violent inhalation. Ellie collapsed onto the mattress, choking and sobbing.

But something had changed. For the first time since this began... She was angry enough to fight back. Ellie did not sleep after that. She sat on the edge of the bed until the room slowly stopped spinning, one hand pressed against her throat, the other against her stomach. The sheets behind her were drenched in sweat and streaked with black, she refused to examine them. Her jaw ached. Her ribs hurt every time she breathed. Somewhere inside her, Nadia moved restlessly, smaller now but not gone.

Waiting.

Ellie then understood. The thing inside her had not been born from nowhere. It had been fed. Every apology she did not mean. Every smile she forced. Every insult she swallowed because being difficult seemed worse

than being hurt. Every time someone used her, she called it 'helpful.' Every time she said it was fine. It was not fine. None of it was fine.

Her phone buzzed on the kitchen table.

Another email from Veronica. Ellie looked at it without touching the screen.

WHERE ARE THE FINAL SLIDES?

The pressure under her ribs stirred. A second email appeared.

Ellie. I need confirmation that you are awake and working.

Something hot moved through her. Not sick this time. Not panic.

Anger. Real anger. Her own.

Ellie stood. She dressed in gray sweatpants, an old college T-shirt, and the first coat she found by the door. Her hair was still tangled. Her face pale and bare. She looked nothing like the careful young woman who lined up her shoes, measured coffee grounds, and tried to make herself small enough to survive.

She grabbed the folder Veronica had demanded earlier that week, the remaining Philadelphia notes, and the stack of marked-up pages she had been expected to fix before morning. Then she left the apartment.

The city at two in the morning looked hollowed out. Cabs hissed past with their tires cutting through shallow water. Ellie walked three blocks before

finding a cab, then sat silent in the back while Manhattan slid by in streaks of yellow light and glass.

She knew where Veronica lived because two weeks earlier, Veronica had sent her across town with printed client binders after deciding, at seven o'clock on a Friday night, that messenger services were unreliable. Ellie had delivered them like a good employee. Like a good girl. Veronica had opened the door wearing silk and irritation, taken the binders without a thank-you, and told Ellie to be at the office early Monday.

Now, Ellie stood outside the same building, the folder clutched under one arm.

The doorman gave her a wary look.

"I'm here to see Veronica Holloway," Ellie said.

"At this hour?"

"She's expecting these."

She held up the folder. That was enough. People trusted paperwork.

Veronica's apartment was on the twenty-second floor. Ellie rode the elevator up alone, watching the numbers climb while Nadia shifted inside her like a blade turning slowly in a wound.

No, Ellie thought. Not you. Me.

Music thumped faintly behind Veronica's door when Ellie reached it.

Laughter too. A man's voice, low and amused. Veronica did not answer the first knock, so Ellie knocked again, harder. The door swung open.

Veronica Holloway stood there barefoot in a short black robe, hair loose, makeup still perfect except for a faint shine of alcohol in her eyes. Behind her, the apartment glowed with warm, expensive light. Wine glasses stood on a marble counter. A man in an open-collared shirt looked over from the living room, annoyed by the interruption.

Veronica stared at Ellie.

"Ellie?"

Ellie said nothing.

For once, she let the silence be uncomfortable for someone else. Veronica glanced at the folder in her arms, then back at her face.

"What are you doing here?"

"You asked for the Philadelphia materials."

Veronica blinked, then gave a short, humorless laugh.

"I asked you to work on them, not show up at my apartment like a lunatic."

Something moved beneath Ellie's ribs. She held it there.

"You kept emailing me."

"Because I needed confirmation you were doing your job." Veronica's mouth tightened. "You should be home working, Ellie."

There it was. Not concerned. No surprise. Not shame. Control.

Veronica started to close the door. Ellie put her foot against it.

The door stopped against her sneaker with a soft thud.

Veronica looked down, then slowly back up. For the first time Ellie had ever seen, uncertainty passed across her face.

“Move your foot.” Veronica’s expression hardened at once. “I do not have time for this.”

Ellie laughed.

It came out broken, wet, and almost ugly.

“No. You never do.”

Veronica stared at her.

“You don’t have time for anything except making everybody else miserable.

You use people until there’s nothing left, then you act annoyed when they bleed on your floor.”

“Ellie, you are clearly unwell.”

“I am.” Ellie’s voice shook, but she did not stop. “I am unwell because I’ve spent months trying to make people like you happy. You knew Scott dumped his work on me. You knew he took credit for it. You knew, and you let him because he made you feel important. Maybe you fucked him too.”

The man in the living room stood halfway.

“Veronica?”

“Stay there,” Veronica snapped, but her eyes never left Ellie.

Ellie stepped forward, forcing Veronica back into her own apartment.

“You humiliate people and call it standards. You bully people and call it leadership. You treat every other woman in that office like competition because you’re terrified someone younger will come along and prove you are not as good as you pretend to be.”

Veronica’s face flushed. “You need to leave.”

“I’m not done.”

The pressure inside Ellie surged, furious and hungry. For one second, the hallway seemed to ripple. Ellie felt Nadia pressing upward, eager for the old way, the dark way. Ellie swallowed hard.

“No.” She kept her eyes on Veronica. “I came here because I thought if I didn’t, something inside me was going to kill me. But I know one thing. I am done apologizing. I am done saying yes to everything.”

Veronica recovered some of her coldness. She pulled herself upright, smoothing the front of her robe.

“It is obvious you can’t handle pressure,” she said.

Without hesitation Ellie punched Veronica in the face. It was not graceful.

Her knuckles struck Veronica’s nose and mouth. Veronica stumbled backward with a sharp cry, one hand flying to her face. Blood appeared

between her fingers, shockingly bright against her polished skin. For a second, nobody moved.

The music kept playing in the background. Ellie could hear the man in the living room, “Holy shit.”

Ellie stood in the doorway, breathing hard, tears running down her face, her fist throbbing.

Inside her body, something screamed. Nadia convulsed. Ellie felt her violently twisting beneath her ribs, a last desperate clawing at the places where Ellie’s fear and anger used to hide. Black heat rushed up her throat, but this time Ellie did not swallow it down. She opened her mouth and breathed it out.

All at once.

The folder slipped from Ellie’s arm. Papers scattered across Veronica’s entryway. Ellie pulled the badge from her pocket and threw it onto the floor at Veronica’s feet.

“I quit.”

The End.



DEATH RADIO

The lighthouse stood at the far edge of Graywatch Harbor where the cliffs dropped into the black water like broken teeth. Storms had been chewing at the old structure for nearly seventy years, bleaching the paint, rusting the railings, and warping the wood beneath the salt air, but the tower still held. It still watched the harbor. That mattered to the people of Graywatch. Especially at night.

Fog rolled in thick from the gulf, swallowing the docks and fishing boats until only scattered lights floated in the darkness like drifting stars.

Somewhere below, a buoy bell clanged softly against the waves. The sound carried through the mist in long hollow groans.

Inside the tower, warmth hummed through old wires and dusty equipment.

The radio station occupied what had once been the lighthouse keeper's quarters just beneath the lantern room. Over the years, people had added onto it piece by piece until it became a strange little nest of maritime history and outdated technology. Old Coast Guard radios sat mounted beside modern soundboards. Tangled cables snaked across the floor. Framed photographs of fishing crews covered the walls; some so faded the faces had become pale ghosts behind the glass.

A crooked neon sign reading ON AIR buzzed softly above the studio door.

Jayden Cross leaned back in his chair and adjusted the microphone hanging in front of him.

At forty-five, time had weathered him the same way it weathered the harbor. His beard had gone more gray than black over the years, and deep lines framed the corners of his eyes from too many cold nights staring out over open water. The prosthetic beneath his jeans clicked faintly whenever he shifted in the chair.

The harbor had long ago stopped noticing it.

To them, Jayden was just part of the lighthouse now.

Part of the voice.

He took a sip from a chipped coffee mug that read WORLD'S OKAYEST DJ and glanced through the wide salt-streaked windows overlooking the docks below. Rain drifted sideways through the harbor lights. Men moved along the piers in heavy jackets, loading crates while diesel engines rumbled against the water.

Jayden smiled faintly and leaned toward the microphone.

“Good evening, Graywatch. You’re listening to KFTA 71, K-North Harbor Radio.” His deep gravelly voice filled the small studio with practiced warmth. “The voice of Graywatch Harbor.”

He reached over and adjusted one of the old analog sliders.

“Fog’s thick tonight, folks, so if you’re heading out toward open water, keep your lights visible and try not to hit anything more expensive than your own boat.”

A quiet chuckle escaped him. The kind people recognized.

Comforting.

Familiar.

He glanced at the small notepad beside the soundboard where callers and text messages had been scribbled throughout the night.

“Looks like Russ Pike and the boys aboard the *Harbinger* had themselves one hell of a catch tonight.” Jayden tapped the paper with one finger. “Russ says the nets are full, the coffee’s terrible, and somebody named Tommy lost fifty bucks playing cards before midnight.”

He shook his head. “Some things never change.”

Outside, the lighthouse beacon swept slowly across the black ocean.

“Alright, boys,” Jayden said. “This next one’s for everybody freezing their asses off out there tonight. Keep your lines tight and your coffee hot.”

He pressed a button on the console.

Soft static crackled.

Then the opening guitar of *Brandy (You’re a Fine Girl)* drifted into the room.

Jayden leaned back in his chair as the song played through the harbor.

Somewhere out beyond the fog, fishermen listened from wheelhouses and cramped bunks while cold waves hammered against steel hulls.

For a few minutes, the lighthouse felt less lonely.

Then something chirped behind him.

A sharp electronic burst cracked through the room.

BEEP.

Jayden frowned slightly.

Another burst followed.

BEEP BEEP.

...BEEP.

The sound hadn't come from the broadcast equipment.

It came from the old emergency receiver mounted beneath the weather monitor near the back wall. Jayden slowly turned in his chair.

The receiver hadn't made a sound in years.

Jayden frowned and pushed himself up from the chair, the prosthetic giving its familiar soft click against the wooden floorboards.

The old emergency receiver sat mounted beneath a dusty weather monitor near the back wall. Most of the equipment around it hadn't been touched in years. The harbor upgraded to digital communication a long time ago, but Graywatch never threw anything away. Old radios, old charts, old warnings.

They just kept stacking history on top of history until the lighthouse became more museum than station.

Another burst crackled through the speaker.

BEEP.

BEEP BEEP.

...BEEP.

Jayden's expression tightened slightly.

Morse code.

This wasn't random interference. Actual Morse.

He reached for the battered handset hanging beside the receiver and thumbed the transmit switch.

"KFTA emergency channel," he said calmly. "Unknown signal, you're broadcasting on a restricted frequency."

Only static answered him.

Behind him, *Brandy* continued drifting softly through the station speakers.

Jayden glanced toward the receiver again.

"If this is an emergency, you're not transmitting clearly," he continued.

"Your message is breaking apart. Repeat transmission."

Nothing.

Just the low hiss of open airwaves.

Then suddenly...

BEEP BEEP.

...BEEP.

BEEP.

Incomplete again.

Like pieces of a sentence missing from the middle.

Jayden frowned harder now.

“Hello? You’re not coming through loud and clear.” He adjusted one of the old tuning knobs beside the receiver. “If this is distress traffic, contact the Coast Guard immediately and retransmit your coordinates.”

The signal dissolved into a burst of static so violent it made him pull the handset away from his ear.

Then silence and the receiver went dead. Jayden stared at it another few seconds before finally setting the handset back into its cradle.

Outside, fog pressed against the lighthouse windows like pale smoke.

He glanced toward the clock mounted above the soundboard.

2:53 A.M.

Weird.

But strange things drifted through harbor frequencies all the time. Storm interference. Military chatter. Crossing signals from old marine bands. Half the wiring in Graywatch probably still dated back to the seventies.

Jayden shook it off and returned to the microphone.

“Looks like the ghosts are trying to call in tonight,” he muttered with a dry chuckle. “Sorry folks, no requests from the afterlife unless they’re buying me coffee.”

He faded the music lower.

“Up next we got some Creedence Clearwater Revival for everybody still working through the storm tonight...”

The harbor rolled on.

But the next night, at exactly 2:53 A.M., the signal returned.

BEEP.

BEEP BEEP.

...BEEP.

Jayden nearly spilled his coffee.

By the third night, he was waiting for it.

The old emergency receiver remained silent for hours while he worked the overnight broadcast, talking weather reports, reading messages from fishing crews, playing old classics into the darkness beyond the harbor.

Then, always just before three am.

BEEP.

He started keeping notes beside the soundboard.

Incomplete letters.

Repeated patterns.

Broken fragments.

Sometimes the signal sounded weak and distant, swallowed beneath static.

Other nights it came through sharp enough to make the hairs on his arms rise.

Each time Jayden answered. “KFTA emergency frequency. Identify yourself.”

Static.

“Your transmission is incomplete. Repeat message.”

Static.

“Hello? Is anybody there?”

Nothing.

One night, beneath the broken Morse bursts, Jayden heard something else.

It wasn’t code.

It sounded like a voice. Faint and far away. He couldn’t hear what it was, it was buried too deep beneath the interference.

“...coming...”

Jayden froze. The receiver hissed softly.

“...it’s...coming...”

Over the next few nights, the signal became part of the show.

Not intentionally at first.

Jayden kept trying to laugh it off. “Anybody out there screwing with old military frequencies better at least have the decency to request a good song,” he joked one night after another burst of broken Morse interrupted a Roy Orbison track.

But the truth was, the thing had started getting under his skin.

Every night at 2:53 A.M., the old emergency receiver woke up.

Always the same sharp electronic chirp.

Always the same incomplete transmission.

BEEP.

BEEP BEEP.

...BEEP.

Then static.

Then fragments.

“...coming...”

“...below...”

“...leave...”

Sometimes the voice sounded distant and underwater. Other nights it crackled through the speaker so clearly Jayden could almost imagine someone standing in the room whispering directly into his ear.

The fishermen listening offshore started asking questions.

At first, they thought it was funny.

“You finally losing your mind up there in that lighthouse, Cross?” one deckhand laughed over the air one night. Another called in saying maybe the station was haunted. That got a good round of drunken laughter from half the harbor.

But nobody really laughed after Jayden finally patched the receiver directly into the broadcast feed.

That night, the entire town heard it.

The signal burst through the music just before three in the morning.

Static flooded the station speakers.

Then:

BEEP.

BEEP BEEP.

...BEEP.

Silence.

And beneath it,

“...coming...”

The voice was clearer now.

Old.

Tired.

Like somebody speaking through waterlogged lungs.

Jayden sat frozen at the soundboard.

“You heard that too, right?” he asked quietly into the microphone. The station lines exploded almost immediately. Callers talking over one another. Fishermen shouting from boats offshore. People demanding to know who was transmitting on the emergency frequency. Jayden answered call after call, trying to keep things calm.

“Nobody’s in trouble as far as I know,” he said. “Could be interference bouncing off the storm systems.” But even he didn’t sound convinced anymore.

The next night, nearly the entire harbor tuned in waiting for the signal. Bars kept the station playing. Fishing crews gathered around radios. People sat awake in dark kitchens listening to static hiss through old speakers.

At 2:53 A.M., the transmission returned. This time the voice stayed longer.

“...it’s...coming...”

Then a burst of distorted static screamed across the airwaves.

Jayden winced.

“Hello?” he said quickly into the receiver. “Can you identify yourself?”

Only static answered him. Then his phone buzzed beside the soundboard.

A text message.

MICK DUGAN — FV HARBINGER

Jayden frowned and opened it. The blood slowly drained from his face.

I know that voice.

Jayden stared at the message. Another text came immediately after.

That's Walter Grieves. Harbormaster. Died five years ago.

Jayden's mouth went dry.

Walter Grieves had been one of the most respected men in Graywatch Harbor. Thirty years overseeing the docks before a winter storm swept him off Pier Nine during a surge. Half the town attended his funeral.

Slowly, Jayden looked back toward the emergency receiver mounted on the wall. Static hissed softly through the speaker. Another text arrived from Mick.

I worked with him twenty years. I'd know that voice anywhere.

Jayden swallowed hard. The room suddenly felt much colder.

Outside, fog pressed thick against the lighthouse windows while the beacon swept slowly across the black water below. The station lines kept ringing. People talking. Arguing. Praying.

Some demanded Jayden shut the whole thing down. Others begged him to keep listening.

Jayden reached for the microphone with a trembling hand. "KFTA 71," he said quietly. "K-North Harbor Radio."

The words sounded smaller now.

Less certain.

He looked toward the receiver again.

“Walter?” he asked softly into the static. “If this is really you... what’s coming?”

For a long moment, nothing answered. Then the speaker crackled violently and the voice returned clearer than ever before.

“...GET...OUT...”

By the end of the week, Graywatch Harbor stopped talking about anything else. The signal had become the center of the town.

Fishermen returning from overnight runs climbed the lighthouse stairs still wearing rain gear and rubber boots, demanding answers from Jayden before they even unloaded their catches.

“You screwing with us, Cross?” Russ Pike asked one morning, standing in the doorway of the station with seawater dripping from his sleeves. “This shit ain’t funny anymore.”

Jayden looked exhausted. He hadn’t been sleeping much. Dark circles hung beneath his eyes, and empty coffee cups littered the soundboard beside pages of scribbled Morse code and broken phrases.

“You think I’d do this?” Jayden asked quietly.

Russ didn’t answer immediately.

That silence hurt worse. The harbor had always trusted Jayden.

Now people didn’t know what to believe.

Throughout town, conversations stopped whenever he walked into a room. Cannery workers whispered over lunch counters. Deckhands replayed recordings from the broadcast on their phones. Church groups started praying publicly for the harbor. Even the tourists vanished. Nobody wanted to be near Graywatch anymore.

The police chief came to the lighthouse two days later. Chief Elias Rourke was a broad-shouldered man in his sixties with a face carved deep from cold weather and disappointment. He listened to one of the recordings in silence while Jayden sat nearby rubbing tired hands together.

Static crackled through the speaker. Then the voice emerged again.

“...GET...OUT...”

Rourke’s expression darkened.

“You got somebody helping you with this?” he asked finally.

Jayden looked genuinely wounded.

“You know me better than that.”

Rourke studied him a moment longer before nodding slowly.

“Yeah,” he admitted quietly. “I do.”

Things got worse after they visited Walter Grieves’ widow.

Margaret Grieves lived alone in a weather-beaten blue house overlooking the harbor cliffs. Family photographs covered every inch of the walls.

Walter appeared in most of them smiling beside fishing crews and dockworkers, always wearing the same old harbor jacket.

Margaret listened to the recording with trembling hands wrapped around a coffee mug.

The room fell silent.

Then tears welled slowly in her eyes.

“Oh my God...” she whispered.

Jayden felt his stomach tighten. Margaret looked up at them pale as paper.

“That’s Walt.”

Nobody spoke.

“That’s my husband.”

Chief Rourke shifted uneasily beside the kitchen table. Margaret pressed trembling fingers against her mouth as the recording played again.

“...coming...”

Her shoulders shook.

“That’s him,” she whispered again. “I know his voice.”

Word spread through Graywatch before sunset. By nightfall, nearly the entire harbor believed the voices belonged to the dead.

The town meeting the following evening nearly turned into a riot.

More than a hundred people packed into the old community hall near the docks while rain hammered against the windows outside. Fishermen

shouted over one another. Families argued openly in the aisles. Some people demanded Jayden shut the station down permanently. Others wanted to hear more.

Mayor Dennis Hale stood near the stage trying unsuccessfully to calm the room.

“This is mass hysteria,” he snapped. “Radio interference and ghost stories.”

“Bullshit!” somebody shouted from the crowd.

“You heard the recordings!”

“You heard Walter!”

The room erupted again.

Jayden sat near the front looking like he wanted to disappear.

Finally Mayor Hale pointed directly at him.

“This is the time to come clean, Jayden.”

The room quieted.

Hale stepped forward.

“You’ve run that station alone for years. You know every piece of equipment up there. If this is some kind of stunt, now’s the time to stop before this town tears itself apart.”

Jayden stared at him in disbelief. Then slowly, painfully, he stood.

Rain rattled against the windows behind him.

“I swear on my soul,” Jayden said quietly.

The room remained dead silent.

“I didn’t fake any of this.”

Hale rolled his eyes slightly.

Jayden’s voice rose.

“Bring every Bible in Graywatch into this damn room and stack them to the ceiling. I’ll swear on every single one of them.”

Nobody moved.

Nobody laughed.

Because they believed him. And that terrified them more than the voices.

The transmissions continued that night. And the next.

More voices joined the broadcasts.

Different men.

Different patterns.

Different dead harbor masters recognized by old fishermen listening offshore.

Earl Bennett. Tom Grady. Leon Vickers. Men buried years ago.

All saying the same thing.

“...GET...OUT...”

“...LEAVE PORT...”

“...NO TIME...”

Panic spread through Graywatch Harbor like fire.

Some families packed immediately and fled inland. Others refused to leave at all.

Mayor Hale publicly demanded calm, insisting there was no evidence of any disaster approaching. He threatened fines for anyone causing “unnecessary panic” by abandoning harbor operations. But Chief Rourke stopped backing him.

One cold morning near the docks, Hale confronted him directly while fishing crews hurried to prep their boats.

“You’re supposed to stop this nonsense,” Hale snapped. “Not encourage it.”

Rourke watched workers loading supplies in silence. Finally, he looked at the mayor.

“These people have survived storms here longer than you’ve held office.”

Hale’s jaw tightened. “If they want to move their boats offshore,” Rourke said, “I’m not stopping them.”

By the following night, the harbor had split in two.

Some stayed.

Most left.

Fishing boats pulled away from Graywatch one after another, vanishing into thick fog beyond the bay while caravans of trucks carried families inland toward the mainland roads.

And every night from the lighthouse tower, Jayden kept broadcasting into the darkness while the dead begged the harbor to run.

Two nights before the wave, the signal stopped limiting itself to the lighthouse.

People started hearing it everywhere.

At first, it was faint.

A distant electronic pulse buried beneath static.

Three short bursts.

Three long.

Three short.

... — — — ...

SOS.

Drivers heard it through their car speakers while cruising the coastal roads.

Dockworkers heard it through handheld radios clipped to their jackets.

Families swore their televisions hissed with the signal even while powered off. Some claimed they heard it through hearing aids. Others through baby monitors.

Always faint.

Always distant.

Always growing louder.

Graywatch Harbor stopped sleeping entirely.

By then, most of the fishing fleet had already abandoned the docks. Boats drifted miles offshore beyond the bay while families packed trucks and ferried inland carrying whatever pieces of their lives they could fit into duffel bags and coolers. But Mayor Dennis Hale refused to back down. “There is no tsunami warning,” he barked during one of the final emergency meetings. “The National Weather Service confirms there is no seismic activity. The Coast Guard confirms there is no emergency broadcast.” He pointed angrily toward Jayden standing near the back wall. “This town is destroying itself because of ghost stories and a damn radio station.”

But even as he spoke, the signal crackled softly through the meeting hall speakers.

· · · — — — · · ·

Several people stood up and walked out immediately.

Nobody tried stopping them anymore.

Chief Rourke finally issued the evacuation order himself the following morning. Not officially. Not legally. Just as a man who’d spent sixty years watching the ocean.

“We got one last ferry leaving tonight,” he told the remaining residents gathered near the docks. “If you stay after that... you stay by choice.”

The final broadcast began just before midnight.

Jayden sat alone in the lighthouse station while rain battered the tower windows hard enough to rattle the glass. The harbor below looked almost abandoned now.

Empty docks. Dark storefronts. Loose ropes whipping in the wind. Only a handful of lights remained.

The emergency receiver hissed softly beside him. Then at exactly 2:53 A.M., every speaker in the station exploded with sound.

Not static. Voices. Dozens of them.

Men talking over one another through roaring interference.

Dead harbor masters. Lost fishermen.

Voices swallowed by storms decades earlier.

And for the first time...

they came through perfectly clear.

“GET OUT.”

“LEAVE NOW.”

“RUN.”

“IT’S COMING.”

Jayden felt tears welling in his eyes.

Outside, the lighthouse beacon swept across violent black water.

Then one final voice cut through the others.

It was Walter Grieves. Clear as day.

“The water’s pulling back.”

Jayden froze. Every coastal kid in Alaska knew what that meant.

Tsunami.

He lunged for the microphone. “This is Jayden Cross broadcasting from KFTA 71, K-North Harbor Radio.”

His voice shook.

“If anybody’s still in Graywatch...”

The lighthouse trembled softly beneath him.

“...run.”

That was the last broadcast the town ever heard.

The final ferry reached the mainland less than twenty minutes later.

Families stumbled onto the docks exhausted and soaked from rain while fishing boats rocked violently offshore beyond the harbor mouth.

Then somebody pointed toward the ocean. The water near Graywatch Harbor had vanished. The seafloor stretched exposed beneath the storm like the harbor itself had been drained.

People stood frozen in silence.

Then the earth began to tremble.

Far out in the darkness, something rose from the ocean.

Not a wave.

A wall.

Black water towering against the horizon beneath flashes of lightning.

Someone started screaming.

The tsunami struck Graywatch Harbor seconds later.

The wave swallowed the docks first, then the cannery, then the streets beyond it. Buildings disappeared beneath black water and shattered debris.

Fishing boats still tied to the harbor snapped loose like toys.

The lighthouse held for almost five seconds.

Then the foundation gave way and the ocean took everything.

By sunrise, Graywatch Harbor was gone.

Those who listened survived. Those who stayed behind did not.

Weeks later, rescue crews searching the wreckage recovered portions of the lighthouse radio equipment nearly two miles inland.

The emergency receiver was still operational. And according to the recovery report, static continued broadcasting through the speaker long after the power died.

Three short bursts.

Three long.

Three short.

... — — — ...

Recovery crews reached what remained of Graywatch Harbor three days later.

There wasn't much left.

The cannery had been flattened into splintered timber and twisted sheet metal. Fishing boats rested half a mile inland among uprooted trees and crushed vehicles. Entire sections of the harbor simply no longer existed, swept clean from the coastline like they had never been there at all.

The lighthouse had collapsed onto its side near the cliffs.

Most of the upper structure was destroyed. But part of the old radio room remained strangely intact beneath the wreckage.

Chief Elias Rourke stood nearby with two recovery workers as they carefully pulled debris away from the shattered equipment. Saltwater dripped steadily from broken wires.

One of the workers froze suddenly.

"You hear that?"

At first, it sounded like static beneath the wind.

Then it came again.

BEEP.

BEEP BEEP.

BEEP BEEP BEEP.

Three short bursts.

Three long. Three short.

SOS.

The sound came from the old emergency receiver lying half-buried beneath a collapsed beam.

Chief Rourke stared at it silently. The small speaker crackled again.

... — — — ...

One of the workers frowned.

“How the hell is that thing still running?”

The other man crouched beside the receiver and slowly turned it over in his hands. The power cable had been severed completely. Corroded wires hung loose from the back of the unit. The receiver wasn’t connected to anything.

For a long moment, nobody spoke.

Then softly, beneath the static, a voice whispered through the speaker one final time. Barely audible. Relieved.

“...they listened...”

The receiver went silent forever after that.

The End.



THE GRINNER

In the old country, when a man died, the women of his family gathered quietly around his body before sunrise. They lit candles, covered the mirrors, and sprinkled salt on the windowsills and under the doorframes. They tied his jaw shut with black ribbon so his mouth would not hang open and let wandering things inside.

Then came the oldest ritual.

The teeth.

One by one, every tooth was pulled from the corpse.

The old woman used silver pliers wrapped in cloth, working carefully while prayers were whispered with shaking voices. The teeth went into small wooden boxes lined with lamb's wool, then were buried far from the body. Some families hid them under hearthstones. Others dropped them into rivers or sealed them inside church walls so no wandering creature could ever find them.

Children were told this protected the dead on their journey to Heaven.

But that was not the truth.

The truth was far older.

The truth was for The Grinner.

The Grinners did not come from the forests, the mountains, or the sea.

They crawled up from deeper places where the earth sweats black oil and

the roots twist through endless darkness. Old priests called it Hell. Old grandmothers called it the Buried Kingdom. Whatever name it carried, the stories about the Grinnners were older still.

Some said the first Grinner was once a man who smiled at a demon beneath the earth and never stopped smiling again.

Others whisper about a child born with a mouth full of teeth, thrown into darkness and returned with a stranger's face.

The Grinnners feared returning there.

So, they climbed upward into the world of men wearing stolen skins and borrowed smiles.

Without teeth, they could not keep a human shape for long.

If a Grinner found fresh teeth, it could wear the dead like a coat. It could steal their voice, their face, even their memories. A husband might come home from the grave and know his wife's favorite song. A dead child could name hidden toys under the floorboards. The creature remembered everything the teeth remembered.

That was how they fooled people.

That was how they stayed.

Old stories said Grinnners wandered battlefields and graveyards with long leather sacks at their sides, looking for fresh corpses before families could prepare the bodies. Sometimes they dug through graves with clawed hands

until their pale scales were covered in cemetery mud. Sometimes wicked men called them on purpose, offering teeth for secrets, revenge, or forbidden knowledge.

But bargains with Grinnners never lasted long.

Eventually, the teeth inside them began to rot.

And when the rotting started, the rattling followed.

People heard Grinnners long before they ever saw them.

A wet clicking sound.

Teeth knocking softly together inside an unseen mouth.

Clack.

Click-click.

Grind.

The sound drifted through dark hallways and empty roads at night, like dice rolling across stone.

Then came the second sound.

The warning.

When angered or trapped, Grinnners rubbed their long arms against their bodies in frantic, violent strokes. Their scales were white and layered like overlapping human teeth from throat to heel, dry as old bone. When scraped together, they made a terrible rattling hiss, like a thousand snakes screaming at once.

The sound drove dogs mad.

It made pregnant women bleed.

The old stories claimed that weak-minded men sometimes clawed their own faces apart in an attempt to escape the noise.

That was why mothers pulled their children indoors whenever strange rattling drifted through the streets after sunset.

Because where the rattling came...

The Grinner followed.

No living soul truly knew what a Grinner looked like beneath its stolen faces.

The oldest drawings showed tall creatures wrapped in burial cloth, with skin pale as candle wax and bodies covered in shifting scales the color of old ivory. They had no eyes, only rows of tiny breathing holes along their skulls, like vipers hidden under thin white flesh. They could smell the warmth of living bodies and taste fear in the air, like wolves scenting blood.

But the mouth...

God protect anyone who saw the mouth.

A Grinner's jaw split almost to its throat. Inside, several long black tongues rolled stolen teeth against each other in endless wet motion. Human teeth. Animal teeth. Children's teeth. Gold teeth. Rotting teeth. Thousands of them turned and ground endlessly inside the creature's mouth.

Always moving.

Always clicking.

Always hungry.

And the smile never matched the face wearing it.

There was once a village high in the mountains where a beloved hunter named Josef died during winter. The snow came early that year, and the ground froze hard as iron. Josef's wife refused to let the old woman touch his body.

"No one will mutilate my husband," she said.

So Josef was buried whole beneath the frozen earth.

Three nights later, he returned home.

At first, the village rejoiced.

Josef smiled.

Josef spoke gently.

Josef remembered every face and every story.

He kissed his children goodnight and held his wife while she wept against his chest.

But strange things followed him home from the grave.

The dogs whimpered whenever he entered a room.

Milk curdled beside him.

Children woke crying in the night after hearing clicking sounds outside their bedroom doors.

Clack.

Click-click.

Grind.

Josef's wife began waking after midnight to find him standing naked in the corner of their cottage, facing the darkness beyond the windows.

Smiling.

One night, she followed the sound of wet clicking into the cellar beneath the house.

There, in the candlelight, she saw her husband remove his jaw with trembling fingers.

Inside his open throat writhed black tongues rolling human teeth like little white stones.

Hundreds of them.

The creature slowly turned toward her.

And Josef's smile moved before the rest of his face did.

By morning, nothing remained inside the cottage except blood, splintered furniture, and teeth scattered across the floorboards like spilled pearls.

The old women pulled every tooth from the dead after that.

Even now, in forgotten places where roads disappear into forests and fog, people still lock their doors when strange rattling sounds drift through the dark. But lately, stories have spread beyond these old places. A schoolboy goes missing in a northern village, police find doors locked from the inside, and cracked teeth appear on windowsills. Night guards in the city whisper about chills and clicking sounds in empty subway tunnels. Some say they see faces in rear-view mirrors, smiling with too many teeth. Maybe the Grinner is not as far away as people once hoped.

Because the old stories warn of one terrible truth above all others.

Grinners are always searching for another smile to wear.

The End.



THE LAST CONFESSION

Father Gabriel started hearing confessions after midnight on Fridays. He did not ask the diocese for permission. By morning, the doors were locked again, and no one spoke about it. Officially, confession was held Monday through Friday from ten to eleven-thirty. Just before midnight, Gabriel would walk silently through the empty building, unlock the side door of the church, and leave it open. Then, as the quiet settled in around him, he waited.

He didn't wait in the pews, nor in his office. Instead, he waited in the confessional.

The church sounded different after midnight. The old beams creaked long, slow complaints that echoed through the rafters. Pipes ticked softly inside the walls. Even the smallest noise stretched across the stone floor and lingered longer than it should, as if the building were holding onto it.

Gabriel sat in the dark of the booth and listened.

At first, he had found it unsettling. Now, he relied on it. The silence wasn't empty. It was alive in small, shifting ways. It had become a language he had started to understand.

In that deep quiet, sometimes he could tell someone had entered before he heard the door open. The change in pressure. A faint disturbance in the air. The energy that signaled someone was present. At first, it was just a subtle

awareness that he was no longer alone, then, a second or two later, the sound would follow. The latch. The hinge. Footsteps crossing the nave. On those nights, he would straighten slightly in his seat, his hands folded over the rosary, listening for the voice before it spoke.

Waiting had become part of the work. He wasn't just waiting for people but for something to reveal itself, something more than footsteps or voices.

There was a reason for Gabriel's nightly services, and the reason had a name.

Marisol Vega.

She stayed after Mass, lingering near the back pew, as if unsure whether she was allowed to be there once the others had gone. Gabriel noticed her before she spoke. People who needed confession often moved a certain way, hesitant, suspended between leaving and stepping forward.

"Father," she said.

Gabriel waited. Sometimes it took people a moment to find the words.

"I think I need to talk," she said finally. "I just... I don't know how to say it."

"That's alright," Gabriel said gently. "You just did."

She nodded, but her hands gripped the sleeves of her hoodie, knuckles white, as if she was desperately holding herself together, afraid that letting go for even a second would make her fall apart.

“My office is open,” he said.

She shook her head quickly. Her eyes shifted past him to the confessional.

Gabriel understood what she needed.

“We can go now,” he said. “If you’d like.”

She didn’t move.

“I can’t,” she said.

“Why not?”

She hesitated, and for a moment, Gabriel thought she might say something else. Something important.

“I start my shift in twenty minutes.”

Gabriel glanced at the clock without meaning to.

“Come back tomorrow,” he offered.

She shook her head again, slower this time.

“I work nights,” she said. “All week.” Her eyes stayed fixed on the confessional, as if she would look away, it would disappear.

Gabriel stepped a little closer. “We’ll find another time,” he said softly.

She nodded. But there was something in her expression, something closed, something had already slipped out of reach. As if whatever had brought her there had already started to fade.

Two nights later, she was dead.

After her funeral, Gabriel sat in the confessional long after the parishioners had left. He tried to leave, made it halfway to the door, then turned back. The candles were burning low by the time he sat down again; one of them guttered and went out with a soft hiss.

“Alright,” he murmured, almost under his breath. As if he were agreeing with someone. The warmth of the day slowly drained from the church.

Stone held onto the day and then let it go all at once.

The building settled, wood shifted, pipes ticked, the familiar rhythm he’d heard a thousand times. But tonight it sounded different.

He rubbed his thumb along the beads of his rosary. Stopped. Then started again.

“I should’ve just taken five minutes,” he said quietly.

No one answered. Time passed. But he stayed all night, heart heavy, guilt anchoring him in the dimness. Leaving would be to betray both the living and the lost. That was when he made the decision.

No one would have to wait again.

For months, it worked. Better than he expected, honestly. People came quietly. The word spread. It was clear that people needed a listening ear at all times of the day.

A nurse who hadn’t slept in two days kept apologizing for crying. A man who tried to joke about the things he had said to his kids couldn’t finish the

sentence. A teenage girl who asked three different times if she was a bad person. They just needed someone to be there and listen. Gabriel could do that. It was the least he could do. Until Ted.

That night, Gabriel felt it before he heard it.

A small shift. Subtle enough that, a few months ago, he might've ignored it.

Now, he didn't. He straightened slightly in the booth. The church door opened. The metal latch's hollow click carried through the church.

Footsteps followed. Slow. Even.

Gabriel tilted his head slightly, listening. Counting the steps as they got near.

One. Two. Three.

The steps stopped, and the confessional door creaked open.

Someone knelt.

For just a second, Gabriel had the strange thought that the man had been there longer than he should have been. Like he hadn't walked in. Like he had been waiting to enter.

"Bless me, Father."

The voice was calm. A man, forties, maybe. Not nervous. Not ashamed.

Unusual.

"For I have something to confess."

Gabriel folded his hands over the rosary.

“Go ahead,” he said.

A pause.

“I haven’t done it yet.”

Gabriel blinked once, confused.

“That’s... okay,” he said, adjusting slightly in his seat. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“I keep seeing something,” the man said. “The same thing. Over and over.”

“What kind of thing?”

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Around two fifteen. I’m in my brother’s office.” A small exhale. “He’s not there.”

Gabriel leaned back.

“I open the safe.”

“So, you’re thinking about stealing from him.”

“No. It feels like I already did.”

Gabriel frowned slightly.

"Okay," Gabriel said. "Let's slow down. You haven't done it."

“No.”

“Then you’re not confessing a sin,” Gabriel said. “You’re asking for help.”

“I know,” the man said. “I think I know. But it doesn’t feel like that.”

“What does it feel like?”

A pause.

“Like I already made the choice.”

Gabriel sighed, his breath barely escaping through his teeth.

“Alright,” he said, softer this time. He wasn’t sure why he said it. Maybe to steady himself.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Ted.”

“Okay, Ted.”

Knowing his name helped. Made it slightly less... strange.

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” Gabriel said. Not as a priest, but as a person trying to help another person. “You don’t go there tomorrow. Don’t even go even near your brother. Call your him if you have to. You change something. Anything.”

Ted listened.

When Gabriel finished talking, he asked quietly: “Can I still be forgiven... even if it feels like I already did it?”

Gabriel hesitated. Something in Ted’s question felt wrong. Not morally. Not theologically.

Just... wrong. Slightly off. Like it didn’t belong where it had been placed.

He almost said something else. Almost.

“Yes,” he said, and he gave Ted absolution.

The next afternoon, Gabriel sat in a small parish study group. Paper cups filled with coffee sat nearby. The smoke from a cigarette lingered in the air. Several folding chairs were placed across the floor. A half-finished discussion about forgiveness had drifted into a more personal conversation. Gabriel kept catching himself thinking about what Ted had said.

Like I already chose.

Across the circle, one of the men was talking. Mid-fifties. Worn hands. The kind of person who didn't usually complain.

"...I don't know what to tell him," the man said. "He's convinced it was me."

Gabriel blinked, pulling himself back into the conversation.

"Who?" he asked.

"My brother," the man said. "Money's gone from his office. Cash. No sign of forced entry."

A few people murmured. Someone shook their head.

"That's rough."

"Family stuff like that..." someone else added.

The man gave a tired shrug.

"Yeah. It is what it is."

Gabriel leaned forward slightly.

"When did it happen?" he asked.

The man thought about it.

“Yesterday, I think. Sometime after two. Two Fifteen, I guess.”

Gabriel’s chest tightened, the mention of that time clanging in his mind.

Like a thread being pulled.

“Strange,” he said. His voice sounded normal.

He hated it when he sounded normal. He was afraid that people would think he didn’t care.

The conversation moved on. Someone made a joke. A few people laughed.

Gabriel smiled when he was supposed to. Nodded when it made sense. But the time frame clung to him, an accusation echoing over and over.

Two fifteen.

He could feel it thrumming under his skin.

Two fifteen.

He found himself watching the man when he spoke again. Looking for something. Guilt. Confusion. Anything. He saw neither. Gabriel left the meeting early.

Ted didn’t return the next week. Or the week after. Gabriel found himself listening for him. Every Friday. Every shift in the air. Every sound that didn’t belong.

He started noticing things he hadn’t before. The way silence sometimes felt... expectant.

Six weeks later, the door opened. Gabriel knew it before the sound came. It was the same shift, subtle and familiar. The latch. The slow swing of the door. Footsteps. Same pace. Same weight.

Not hesitant. Not rushed.

Gabriel released a quiet, shaky breath he hadn't realized he'd been clutching, heart, stuttering at the familiar return.

The confessional door creaked open. Someone knelt.

"Bless me, Father."

Gabriel leaned forward slightly.

"You came back."

"I said I would."

"You did."

A pause.

"I did it," Ted said.

Gabriel felt his throat constrict, a cold dread sliding under his collar at Ted's confession.

"You said it felt like you already had."

"I did."

"And how do you feel now?"

A faint breath.

"Now it feels like I did something twice."

Gabriel shifted in his seat.

“Alright,” he said quietly. “Tell me what you’re seeing now.”

Ted moved slightly.

“There’s a car,” he said. “A white sedan. Parked outside a house with a blue door. There’s a statue of a dog in the yard. Small. Stone. Third house past the corner.”

Gabriel pictured it without meaning to.

“When?” he asked.

“Friday night. After midnight.”

“What happens?”

“I take it,” Ted said. “I leave it somewhere else. Engine running.”

“And then?”

“Something bad happens.”

Gabriel leaned closer.

“What kind of bad?”

“I don’t see all of it,” Ted said. “Just pieces. Lights. Someone yelling.

Then... nothing.”

“You think you’re responsible.”

“I think I’m connected.”

Gabriel didn’t correct him.

“Ted,” Gabriel was trying to think what advice he could give. “This has not happened yet. Your dreams might seem very real. But you don’t have to do what you see.”

“I have no choice.” Ted walked out of the confessional.

Gabriel stepped out and watched as Ted walked out of the church, hoping he would be ok.

That Friday night, Gabriel drove around. He told himself it was caution, a way to put his mind at ease. Something about Ted’s description sounded familiar, and after driving for a while, Gabriel saw it.

The house was exactly where Ted had described it.

Blue door. Stone statue.

A white sedan was parked along the curb.

Gabriel slowed as he passed. Then, circled back. He parked across the street. The engine ticked as it cooled down. The street was quiet.

Gabriel checked the time. Waited. Told himself he would leave in five minutes.

Five minutes passed.

But he stayed.

The porch light flicked on. Gabriel straightened in his seat. A man stepped outside. Keys in hand. Everything seemed normal. Completely normal.

Gabriel felt something twist in his chest. *Nothing's going to happen*, he told himself. *This is nothing. I worry too much.*

The man reached the car. Unlocked it and opened the door. From the darkness, Gabriel saw movement.

Fast.

Violent.

A figure lunged forward, and the door was yanked open.

The man's scream was cut short.

Gabriel saw a struggle. He was already moving. He had jumped out of the car. Running across the street. But even as he ran, He knew.

It wasn't Ted.

By the time he reached the poor man, the car was gone. The street never noticed what had just happened. It still looked the same, porch light glowing, a dog barking somewhere, a television flickering blue through a window.

The man was on the ground. Half on the curb, half in the street. He tried to sit up. But fell.

Gabriel reached him.

"Hey, hey, stay still," he said, dropping to his knees beside him.

The man's hands were shaking so badly he couldn't seem to decide what to hold: his chest, his arm, the air itself.

“I. He,” the man stammered, pointing in the direction the car had taken off.

“It’s okay,” Gabriel said, though it wasn’t. “You’re alright. You’re alright.”

He wasn’t.

There was blood. Not a lot. But enough.

A thin, dark line was soaking the collar of his shirt where something had caught him. Maybe a knife. Cutting close enough. Too close.

Gabriel pressed his hand over it instinctively, trying to stop the bleeding.

Warm. Sticky.

“Don’t move,” he said again, softer now.

The man nodded like he understood, even though he clearly didn’t. The sound of sirens came fast. They were closer than Gabriel expected. Red and blue washed over the street in pulsing waves. Shadows dancing across the homes.

Neighbors opened their doors. Curious about the spectacle. Lights flicked on. Voices, too many, started asking questions with no answers. By the time the police arrived, Gabriel’s hands were streaked with someone else’s blood. They pulled him back. Asked questions. Simple ones, at first. What did you see? Which direction did he run? Can you describe him?

Gabriel answered. He tried to. But even as he spoke, something else was settling in. He had been there. Waiting. Watching.

And it still happened. The police wrote everything down. Gabriel stood at his car a while longer after they told him he could go. Long enough for the street to start returning to itself.

He drove home with the smell of iron still on his hands. He washed them twice. Then again. It didn't help. The smell of blood had lodged itself in his mind, and it would take a while before he would forget.

Ted's third confession came about a month later. He sounded different. Not just tired, but worn down. Like something had passed through him.

"There's a woman," he said.

Gabriel didn't speak.

"There's always a woman," Ted added quietly, like he was correcting himself.

Gabriel's fingers tightened around his rosary.

"Tell me."

"Dark hair," Ted said. "Always tied back. She carries a canvas bag. Worn. Like she's had it for years. She walks past the church most nights. Late."

Gabriel felt his chest tighten.

"Where?" he asked.

Ted described the street in full detail, as if he were watching it as he spoke.

Gabriel didn't need him to finish.

Third pew. Left side. Candles every Sunday. Always the same ones. Always the same quiet nod when she passed him.

“Do you know her?” Ted asked.

Gabriel hesitated.

“Not well,” he said. Which was true. And not true at all.

“She doesn’t know me,” Ted said. “But she will.”

Something cold slid through Gabriel’s chest.

“Stop,” Gabriel said. The word came out sharper than he meant to.

Ted fell silent.

“You don’t go near her,” he said. “You hear me? You stay away from that street.”

“I don’t want to be there.”

For the first time, there was something that sounded like fear in his voice.

“I don’t think it matters,” Ted said.

That stayed with Gabriel long after Ted left. Gabriel struggled with his decision, but this time, he called the police. He didn’t wait. Didn’t second-guess it. He told them everything. Not all of it. Not the confessional. But enough.

A man. Mid-forties. Predictive. Specific. Dates. Patterns. Locations.

The officer on the other end was quiet for a moment.

“Have we spoken before?” He asked.

Gabriel closed his eyes briefly. “Yes.”

A longer pause this time. “You’re the one from last month,” the officer said.

It was not a question.

“Yes, I am.”

Another pause.

Different this time.

“And how are you getting this information?” the officer asked.

Gabriel hesitated. That was all it took.

“Alright,” the officer said, tone shifting just enough. “We’ll note it.”

Gabriel sensed the officer would just file it away as “The crazy priest.” So, he decided to go to the station in person. He would make sure they took him seriously. When he got to the station, the same officer was at the front and recognized him immediately.

“You again,” he said.

Gabriel nodded. “I need you to take this seriously.”

The officer studied him. “We’ll take a statement,” he said finally. They went to one of the offices, and this time Gabriel told them everything. They wrote it down. Same as before.

“You do know we can’t take action on a crime that has not been committed yet.” The officer said, looking straight at Gabriel. “I want to believe you, Father, but ... you know.”

“I know how it sounds,” Gabriel said defensively. “Trust me. I know how it sounds.”

He folded his hands, and now he looked the officer straight in the face.

“You weren’t there. You don’t know. And I know you can’t imagine. But what am I supposed to do?”

At the end, the officer handed him a card. Same one as before.

“If you see this guy,” he said, “call us.”

Gabriel looked at the card. Nothing had changed.

“I already have,” he said, defeated.

The officer didn’t respond, walked away, and left the room’s door open.

Two days later, it happened. The news came through in fragments. A 911 call. A disturbance. Then, details became available. Gabriel didn’t see it on the TV, but he heard enough from his congregation talking.

The woman miraculously had survived. But not all of her. Gabriel sat alone in the church when he found out. Hands folded. Head bowed. Not in prayer. Just sitting there in deep thought. And for the first time, he was not listening for someone to come in. He felt like he had let something in.

It had been months, so long that Gabriel thought Ted might be gone.

Moved on, maybe dead. He prayed for him. Wherever he was. For him to find peace. To find help.

But then one night, he felt it. The presence before the door opened, and Ted was sitting in his confessional again. His voice raspy, cracked like brittle sticks. He didn't ask for forgiveness this time. He just sat there. Waiting for Gabriel to speak.

"It's been a while." Gabriel opened.

"Yes."

"Are you ok?"

"I don't think I'll ever be ok. I don't think there is any coming back from what is about to happen." Ted sounded less confident. Afraid maybe.

"What did you see, Ted?" Gabriel asked. Maybe I can help.

"I don't think anyone can help my father, or stop me. It is set in motion."

"Try," Gabriel asked.

"The voices." Gabriel was crying. "I hear them. All of them. The screams, the crying, their suffering. I see them bleeding. Dying. Hundreds of them. Men, women, children." Ted's body was rocking back and forth. His nails sank into his flesh, leaving fresh marks upon older ones.

"They are making me kill them all, Father. I don't want to. They are making me kill them."

Gabriel stepped from the confessional and opened the door on Ted's side; he sat on his knees before him and took his hands in his. He laid the rosary across their wrists. Ted flinched.

"I am here for you, son. Let me help you." Gabriel pleaded. Knowing now that Ted's visions were true and not just fabrications of a madman.

Ted rose up quickly, almost lunging at Gabriel.

"There is no help for me. There is no salvation." His voice deep now.

Almost unreal. Gabriel grabbed his hands.

"Yes, there is. There is always hope. I can help you. I will help you."

Ted pulled his hands free. His bloodshot eyes looked at Gabriel, begging for mercy. Gabriel took his rosary and placed it over Ted's head.

"Wear this. Pray Ted. Pray for strength and forgiveness." He walked to a pew, and they sat down, and he took Ted's hands back in his. "Don't stop praying till you are back here with me tomorrow. I will prepare a ceremony that will take away your pain and suffering."

"That is impossible." Ted spat back.

"It is not. Give me this Ted. Give me this one chance to set you free. Let me help you stop these nightmares. No one needs to get hurt." Gabriel pleaded.

"Are you going to call the cops? I know you've talked to them. I saw that too in my dreams." His eyes stared deep inside Gabriel.

“I won’t. I promise you. Come tomorrow, 8 pm. I will make sure everything is ready. Fast, and pray. Pray as much as you can.”

Gabriel blessed Ted, and they walked out together.

The night swallowed Ted as Gabriel crashed on the steps, looking up at the sky and mumbling.

“Help me.”

Gabriel had fasted all day. He had prepared his office for the ceremony.

Various vials of holy water were placed on his table, and candles and incense burned all day.

Ted arrived at 8 sharp; he looked as if he had not slept at all.

“Thank you for coming, Ted. I know this is not easy.” Gabriel guided Ted to his office. Ted didn’t speak. He slowly followed.

“Have a seat.” Gabriel offered. “Do you want some water?”

“I am fine, thank you.”

His voice sounded calm. Slightly different from all the other times.

Gabriel put on his robe and ceremonial dress. He took a Saint Benedict Medal and placed it in Ted’s hand. They were cold. Too cold.

“Hold on to this medal. It will protect you. If you are ready, we can start.”

Ted looked Gabriel in the eyes. Tears slowly well up.

“I am ready.” He spoke.

Gabriel anointed Ted's hands carefully as he prayed out loud.

Ted exhaled. Long. A sigh of relief.

"God," he whispered, almost laughing, "that feels... better."

Gabriel swallowed and continued.

The prayers came easily. Words he had said a hundred times. A thousand times. But never like this.

Ted's shoulders loosened. The tension left him piece by piece, like something inside was uncoiling.

"I'm sorry," Ted murmured.

"I know," Gabriel said.

"I didn't want any of this."

"I know."

Gabriel made the sign of the cross with holy water on Ted's forehead and stepped behind him.

Ted didn't react. Didn't question.

He trusted Gabriel.

For a second, Gabriel hesitated. Not because he didn't understand. But because now he did.

Then, without hesitation, he moved.

The blade went in clean.

Quick and precise. Ted gasped. His eyes stared at the ceiling. Not in pain but in surprise.

Then... relief.

His body sagged backward into Gabriel's arms. For a moment, Gabriel held him. Supported him.

Like the ritual hadn't ended. Like it was still part of the same act.

Ted's body went slack. And a silence fell over the church. Heavy. Absolute.

Gabriel didn't move. He sat on his knees in the puddle of Ted's blood, holding his dead body. Crying.

"I..." he whispered. The word didn't go anywhere. He looked down at his hands. At the blood.

"I didn't,"

But he had.

The reality of it hit all at once. He had just killed a man.

Gabriel staggered back. The knife clattered as it fell to the ground. Ted's body slipped from his arms and hit the floor with a dull, final weight.

Gabriel shook his head.

"No," he said under his breath. "No, no."

But there was something else. A second feeling.

Quieter.

Relief.

It crept in before he could stop it.

It's over.

The thought came uninvited.

You stopped it.

Gabriel froze. Horrified.

“No,” he said again. Louder this time. His hands began to shake.

Then, the pain started. It was sudden. It was sharp.

Like heat pressing into his palms from the inside out. Gabriel gasped. His fingers curled instinctively. But it didn't stop. It spread. Up his hands. Into his wrists. Crawling along his arms like something alive.

“Ah,” he choked, dropping to his knees.

The pain intensified. Burning. Deep.

Not on the surface, but inside him.

He pressed his hands to the cold stone floor.

It didn't help.

“Please,” he whispered, though he didn't know to whom.

He rolled onto his side, curling in on himself. The pain surged. Then it peaked and finally broke.

Gabriel lay there, breathing hard on the floor. Afraid to move.

Slowly, he lifted his hands.

Blood.

Not Ted's.

His.

Small. Precise puncture wounds. Centered in his palms. Blood dripping down his wrists.

Gabriel stared.

"No..." he whispered.

Bright red droplets exploded as they hit the floor.

Mixing with Ted's.

For a second, just a second, he thought he saw something move.

A shadow. Leaving. Crossing the floor faster than light should. And then, it was gone.

Gabriel blinked. It was over. He dragged himself backward until his shoulders hit the wall. The cold stones pressing against his back. His hands still trembled.

He looked at Ted. His body still. Empty. A cold smile on his face.

"I'm sorry," Gabriel whispered as he reached for his phone.

His fingers fumbled. Slippery from his blood, smearing blood across the screen as he dialed.

9.

1.

1.

When the voice answered, he didn't hesitate.

"This is Father Gabriel," he said. His voice was steadier than he felt.

"I need the police."

A pause.

"I've killed someone." He closed his eyes. "I think I need help."

The arrest was immediate. Undeniable. They found everything in Ted's home. Weapons. Materials. Maps. Photographs. Enough to make it real. Enough to make it worse.

It became a spectacle. The public branded Gabriel a hero. The law branded him a stone-cold killer.

Gabriel took the plea deal.

Manslaughter. Years of sentence reduced. No death penalty.

Time passed differently after that.

The prison chapel was smaller. Quieter. But it still had a confessional.

"Bless me, Father," Gabriel said. His voice sounded distant to him. "For I have sinned. I killed a man."

Silence.

Then, "Why?"

Gabriel swallowed. "Because I believed I was saving people."

The priest on the other side was quiet for a long moment.

“Do you repent?”

Gabriel closed his eyes.

Marisol.

Ted.

The silence after midnight.

“I don’t know,” Gabriel said.

The priest exhaled slowly. “You’re not the first to say that.”

Gabriel’s eyes opened. “What?”

A pause.

“I had someone come to me,” the priest said. “A few weeks ago.”

Gabriel didn’t move.

“He said it felt like he already did it.”

Silence filled the booth and Gabriel lowered his head.

He understood it had not ended.

It had only moved on.

The End.



OPEN WIDE

The pain started like a mosquito bite: a dull ache in the corner of Dan's mouth. Now, fifty days into his new job's ninety-day probation period, it had become biblical, a throbbing, pulsing agony. His jaw pounded like a war drum, making him consider DIY dentistry with a butter knife.

Dan was the kind of guy everyone liked. Short, with an easy grin. He had a voice that could charm free coffee from any barista, even on their worst day. But today, even his self-deprecating humor couldn't hide the grapefruit-sized swelling on his cheek.

He sat hunched in the break room, drooling on his half-eaten microwaved burrito, the fluorescent lights overhead flickering like a bad omen.

That's when Dennis slithered in, the last guy Dan wanted to see. Dennis wasn't officially a coworker; he just had a habit of showing up, leaning against the counter with his burnt-toast stench, mismatched shoes, and the kind of smile that made your skin crawl.

"Rough day, champ?" Dennis's voice oozed faux sympathy, punctuated by a loud slurp from his oversized iced coffee.

Dan groaned, clutching his jaw. "I'm dying. I need a dentist. But my insurance hasn't kicked in yet. Forty days to go..."

Dennis's grin stretched too wide, revealing teeth that looked a little too sharp for comfort. "Insurance? Please. I know a place. Real old-school. They don't ask questions. In and out. Just... read the fine print."

He fished a crumpled card from his pocket, sticky with something Dan didn't want to think about. The card was old, its edges browned and frayed like a relic from a lost century. Dennis slid it across the table with a flick of his nicotine-stained fingers.

Dan hesitated, his swollen cheek pulsing with each beat of his racing heart. He picked up the card.

Evergreen Dental – We'll Take Care of You.

The words shimmered slightly, as if printed in some ink that resisted light.

Dennis gave him a wink, then whispered low, "They'll fix you up, friend.

Cheap, quick, and easy."

Dan stared at the card, torn between the warning gnawing in the back of his skull and the firestorm blazing behind his molars. His hand trembled. His cheek pounded. In the corner, a fly battered the windowpane.

Desperation and two sleepless, pain-riddled nights later, Dan found himself standing in front of the clinic, a flickering neon sign buzzing overhead like a dying insect. The building was wedged between a closed-down taxidermy shop and a karate dojo with a "Grand Opening: 1993" banner still hanging.

Fucking great.

Dan stepped inside the waiting room. He felt like he was stepping into Beetlejuice's fever dream. Patients were frozen mid-action. One man sat cross-legged on the floor. A woman with half a face flipped through a magazine filled with pictures of teeth while a child with a balloon-like head counted silently to himself. The air reeked of antiseptic and stale regret. The receptionist, a woman with porcelain-doll features, painted-on lashes, and a disturbing habit of tapping her nails on a stack of moldy medical forms, looked up with a grin. "Ohhh, you're the walk-in! Have a seat. Dr. Carver will be with you... eventually."

He sat. The seat squelched.

By the time the assistant appeared, a spindly figure with skin stretched thin over arms that seemed too long, her latex gloves accentuating fingers that bent in impossible, insect-like joints, Dan's mind spun with pain-fueled delirium. The hallway twisted as if alive, stretching far into a darkness while the walls pulsed gently, lined with dental X-rays whose toothy grins seemed to widen at his approach.

Dr. Carver was waiting. He was at least seven feet tall, wearing a blood-speckled lab coat two sizes too small and safety goggles that reflected the dim, flickering light. His smile was too wide, revealing teeth like piano keys. "Let's get those chompers sorted out, my friend!" Dr. Carver said, snapping his gloves on with a cartoonish pop.

They strapped Dan into the chair, clamping his wrists with rusted buckles. The gas mask lowered over his face, filling his lungs with a sweet, sickly vapor that made his limbs heavy and his thoughts swim like fish in a blender.

His consciousness ebbed, but before he could slip under completely, a long, yellowed contract was thrust before him. Dr. Carver grinned. “Just a little paperwork, formalities, you know how it is.”

The letters on the contract writhed and rearranged themselves. Phrases like *identity*, *consent*, and *soul* flickered in and out of legibility as if fighting not to be understood. Dan struggled to track the words, but his hand was guided through signature after signature, his mind flickering on the edge of sense like a light bulb in a nightmare.

His eyes squinted hard, and for a second, he thought he saw the word SOUL. He blinked, struggling to understand. But the assistant gently guided his hand, and his signature bled onto the parchment as the mask descended for full sedation.

Through the haze, he heard them pulling his teeth.

“One, two, three.” The sound of his teeth being pulled echoed like corks popping from wine bottles. Dr. Carver’s voice was muffled, gleeful:

“Vintage enamel! Mint condition! This’ll fetch a pretty penny!”

When Dan awoke, he wasn't in his body. He flickered into existence in the waiting room, a grotesque parody of himself, frozen in a permanent, distorted scream. His mouth stretched wide, limbs twisted. He felt every endless moment of waiting, conscious yet trapped, part of the surreal tableau that would forever be.

Outside, the clinic's neon sign buzzed and flickered, unnoticed.

Back at the office, Dennis reclined in his chair, scrolling through his phone.

His screen pinged with a message:

\$500 has been added to your account.

Thank you for your referral. We look forward to doing business with you again.

Dennis smirked, slurping his iced coffee, and typed out a reply:

Got plenty more where that came from.

The End.



GLOW

The glow appeared every night, just before 3:00 a.m.

At first, I thought it was a dream. A soft pulse of amber light floats above the dresser, hovering like a firefly. If fireflies ever moved like they were watching you. I didn't question it. I was tired. Every morning, I woke up a little weaker. Lips dry. Fingers tingling. My mouth carried a persistent metallic taste, as if I had been chewing on a coin. One morning, a single drop of blood stained the pillow.

The man in 4B has not left his apartment in days.

The hallway smells like soup and metal. My mail key sticks in my hand. 4B's doormat is wet from the inside. I don't know my neighbors, not really, just the door numbers. But lately, I dream of them. Mr. Imani from 6A digging at his skin. The pale woman in 3E crying while shaving her daughter's head in the tub. I don't know why I dream about those things.

My own reflection no longer matches. My eyes are too large. A wet sheen glistens on my cheeks. I shine when I sweat. And I sweat constantly.

Last night, the glow landed. Right between my eyes. I couldn't move. I couldn't scream. My mouth opened on its own.

I think I saw legs. Insect legs. Gentle, familiar. And then, it was gone. I went to the hospital to get checked out.

"Probably stress," the ER said. "Everything looks fine."

I'm not stressed. I'm in love.

He comes to me in dreams. A tall man, skin like earth after rain. Hands strong and slow. He touches me like he's memorizing me. His mouth was warm against my neck. He doesn't speak, but I feel his words in my bones, pulling me in closer.

When I wake, my heart pounds like I've run somewhere. My chest aches. My body is flushed. But I don't feel empty. It is something else.

I call him mine. And he is. Even now, I smell him in the room. Sweetness, like sugar burning on the back of the stove. I keep a journal. I write down everything, the things he tells me, the way he touches me, the nights we spend together. I think I love him. I know I love him.

The neighbors began to change in ways I barely noticed at first.

Mr. Imani from 6A started talking to the plants in the lobby as if they could answer. One morning, he collapsed into a plastic chair, skin pale and drawn, whispering numbers that made no sense. The woman in 3E walked slower, her daughter's hair was uneven and patchy, and she told everyone it was lice. Small things, easily dismissed, but I felt the pull of it, an invisible tether from my chest to theirs.

At the coffee shop, I carried two bags up the stairs without thinking about the weight. The barista's eyes lingered on my hands, puzzled. At lunch, I climbed three flights of stairs instead of two.

I told myself it was nothing. But every time I glanced at someone in the hallway, there was a flicker. A dulling. A shadow of their former selves. My secret grew, tucked behind the warmth in my ribs, humming like a small instrument tuned to one note.

The dreams came nightly.

He smelled of soil, smoke, and sweet, sugary oil. Not a man exactly, nor a bug, but both at once. He folded the world around me, made my chest a cathedral. His touch taught me things I had forgotten: how to open my mouth for him, how to cradle the memory of a person so it would not hurt when I took from them.

One night, I had a dream about a child wearing a yellow sweater. He placed his palms on the child's forehead and hummed until the little thing slept and slumped forward like a lump of dough. I woke with a bloom of heat beneath my shoulder, a small red print on the sheet. I could not remember the child's face clearly in daylight, only the exact way it had looked in the dark.

Days blurred.

Friends drifted. People looked dimmer, weaker. Smiles thinned. Lips cracked. Chalky teeth. The little boy in 2B clutched his rabbit to his chest, staring too often at the floor. The woman in 3E moved out quietly, taking two suitcases and a small bag of things. On the building app, someone

posted about a bug going around the city. Another called it a scam.

Comments multiplied, explanations stacking like firewood.

Through it all, I felt the warmth. The humming. The love. I wrote it down, every word. The handwriting grew tighter, a map of obsession and devotion.

I changed, too.

Cheeks narrowed, jawbones sharp. My Collarbones pressed under skin like sculpted lines. Bra straps slipped. Skirts stretched longer. My hair went unwashed, longer than ever before. I laughed when neighbors remarked on my thinness. But inside, the bloom of warmth pulsed, the hum never leaving.

It wasn't violence, I told myself. It was a necessity. A rhythm. They were gifts. Each weakness is a note in the song we shared.

Then the glow left me.

I expected the fullness to stay. But my chest hummed only once, and then silence. I felt hollow, like a vessel drained of honey. Outside, the apartment bustled with activity, couriers lingered, baristas stopped offering extras, and Mr. Imani moved like a ghost.

The glow had found a new feeder two buildings down. I saw him briefly, a man with a bag of warm bread, eyes like a weather vane. He hummed. I

watched from my curtained window as a tiny amber flicker moved behind his pane, slipping through a crack.

Three days later, the apartment manager entered my place.

He gagged at the smell. Wet, coppery, heavy with rot. Lights buzzed, one flickering orange.

Anna lay in bed. Sheets blackened beneath her. Eyes open. Lips parted.

“Oh God,” he whispered.

Something glowed behind her teeth. It was an unsettling shimmer, moving within the shadows of her mouth. An insect’s foot slowly moved from her throat. Bright amber light. The manager turned and vomited across the floor. He struggled to the window, gasping.

A sharp sting kissed his wrist.

Nothing.

The buzzing in his head had already started.

The End.



FIVE STARS

Rana cursed under her breath as she slid the last pin into her hair and grabbed her folder from the counter. The front page of her résumé was already bent at the corner. Her boots thudded against the tile as she crossed the small apartment, glancing once in the mirror.

Good. Presentable. Sharp.

This job interview mattered.

It was more than work. It was her way out. Out of sleeping on her cousin's couch, out of endless VA paperwork, out of remembering every goddamn thing the uniform didn't protect her from.

Her phone buzzed.

OneWayRide: **Your driver, Jamal, has arrived.**

She blinked. Shit. Already?

She slung her jacket over her shoulder and burst out the front door, jogged down the cracked steps two at a time. Sunlight punched through the morning haze. Across the street, a dull gray sedan idled by the curb, hazard lights blinking slow and steady like a heartbeat.

Jamal. 5 stars. 742 rides. "Polite. Clean car. Good music."

She slid into the back seat, breath quick.

"Sorry, I'm running a little late," she said, smoothing the creased corner of her résumé. "Appreciate the fast arrival."

The driver didn't say anything at first.

Just nodded.

She caught a glimpse of him in the rearview mirror. Young. Clean cut. Calm eyes. Something about his stillness felt... deliberate.

"You mind if we take I-45? I know it says surface streets, but I really can't be late."

He nodded again, eyes still locked forward.

The door locks clicked.

She barely noticed.

The car pulled away from the curb, smoothly, like it had been waiting not just outside, but for her.

Rana settled into the back seat, balancing the folder on her lap as she unlocked her phone.

The screen was already smudged with fingerprints. She wiped it absently on her sleeve.

Interview questions. Behavioral examples. Why do you want to work here?

Her thumb scrolled through her notes while the city passed outside the window. The buildings blurred together, graffiti-tagged brick, half-boarded windows, kids in uniforms waiting at the bus stop.

She cleared her throat, quietly rehearsing her answers.

“I’m looking for a challenge that lets me apply my discipline and leadership skills in a meaningful way...”

She winced. Too stiff. Try again.

“I’m ready to bring everything I’ve learned, structure, adaptability, control, into a team that values integrity.”

Better.

The car hit a small bump. Her résumé shifted in her lap.

She looked up, instinctively checking their route. The street signs passed too fast for her to make out, but the car was moving smoothly. No music.

No conversation. Just the sound of tires rolling over wet pavement.

Her eyes flicked to the rearview.

The driver, Jamal, according to the app, was watching the road, both hands on the wheel. Nothing strange. But his posture was... off. Too straight.

Rigid, like he was bracing for impact or posing for a picture.

She cleared her throat again. "Hey, sorry, what's the ETA looking like?"

No answer. Just the faint tap of his index finger against the steering wheel.

The same rhythm. Over and over.

She narrowed her eyes but didn’t push. Some people just weren’t talkers.

She shifted her weight and immediately noticed the seat felt a little damp.

Not soaked, not gross, just... not dry.

She frowned and adjusted her jacket beneath her.

Back to the phone.

“Talk about a time you faced a difficult situation...”

Her breathing slowed as she focused. The words came easily, a product of old muscle memory from training.

“Kandahar. Convoy stalled. Heatstroke hitting three of our guys. One more hour out there and they’d have started dropping...”

The air inside the car felt heavy now.

She reached toward the center console.

“Hey, is the A/C on?”

Before she could finish, the vents gusted softly, blowing cool air directly at her.

Rana blinked. She hadn’t seen him touch the controls. Still..., maybe they were auto-adjusting.

Her phone buzzed with a calendar reminder.

15 minutes to interview.

She sat straighter, brushing off the gnawing feeling and forcing her focus back onto her folder. Her stomach grumbled, but she ignored it. Stay sharp.

One more mile. Then shake hands. Eye contact. Win the room.

A drop of something hit her shoulder.

She looked up at the ceiling. Dry.

Maybe it came from her hair? She brushed at her temple.

Another drop. This time on her thigh.

She looked down.

A dark, viscous bead of moisture had formed on the inside of the door. It was thick. Almost sap-like. It slid slowly, unnaturally slow, toward the floor mat.

She leaned in slightly. What the hell?

Her eyes flicked up to the rearview mirror again. And froze.

The mirror... moved. Not physically, but what it reflected shifted ever so slightly. It no longer showed just her face. It was angled wrong, but somehow, she was still in the center of it. Perfectly centered. Perfectly framed.

She didn't remember making eye contact with it before, but now, it felt like the mirror was watching her. Tracking her. Waiting.

Her mouth went dry. She blinked, and the image returned to normal. Just her own reflection. Except... her eyes in the mirror didn't blink.

Then the driver spoke.

His voice was low. Flat. Almost monotone.

"Almost there."

Rana blinked. It was the first thing he'd said.

She met his eyes in the mirror.

They weren't looking at the road anymore. They were looking at her.

The heat was unbearable now.

Rana wiped her palm against her jacket, but her skin stuck to the fabric. Her breathing was shallow. Controlled. But her heart was racing. The smell had grown thicker. Wet metal, rot, and a chemical substance, such as melted plastic and burnt sugar.

Her voice dropped into a command.

"Let me out."

Nothing.

"Pull over. Now."

The driver kept his hands on the wheel, eyes on the road that no longer looked like any road she'd ever seen, just a gray stretch of asphalt stretching into a horizon that refused to move.

She clenched her jaw.

"Last time. Let. Me. Out."

Still nothing.

She reached down, pulled the blade from beneath her jacket.

A seven-inch combat knife, black grip, still sharp from the last time she'd honed it.

She leaned forward and pressed it against Jamal's neck, just under the jawline. Close enough to feel the texture of his skin.

Not stubble. Not warmth.

Smooth. Cold. Waxy. Almost... rubbery.

“Stop the car. Or I open your fucking throat.”

Her hand didn't shake.

She was breathing hard now. Sweat was dripping down her back. Her thighs were sinking into the seat as if it were absorbing her weight. The sound of her heartbeat was too loud in her ears.

Then Jamal began to tremble.

Not flinch, tremble, like a puppet with loose strings.

His spine slackened. His arms bent in the wrong direction. His neck collapsed downward in a slow, silent spasm.

Rana recoiled just as his entire frame began to deflate, collapsing inward like a deflated balloon.

The knife clattered to the floor.

His clothes remained. Skin folded in on itself. Beneath the surface, beneath what used to be a face, there was nothing. No skull. No bones. No blood.

Just empty space.

Then...

From deep inside the dashboard, a sound emerged.

Low at first. A hiss. Then a slow, wet rumble.

Like something enormous chuckling just under the skin of the world.

It vibrated through the steering wheel. Through the vents. Through the seats.

"You've arrived."

Rana wanted to scream, but she didn't.

She launched forward, grabbed her knife from the floor, and kicked the back of the driver's seat with both boots, hard enough to bend it forward.

The crumpled skin-suit slumped deeper, folding in on itself, already dissolving into a dark sludge that hissed where it touched the fabric.

The car groaned.

Not the engine, the body.

The doors didn't just stay locked. They twitched. Seams wriggled closed like freshly sutured wounds. The window next to her pulsed, as if covered in a thin film of skin.

"No," she muttered, voice low. "No, no ..."

She slashed at the seatbelt, tearing through it in two quick strokes, then threw herself at the door. The handle was soft. It bent in her grip. Not plastic. Tissue.

She screamed in fury, raised her blade, and drove it into the panel next to her.

The door bled.

Not red but black, syrup-thick, steaming. It sprayed across her face and arm, sizzling against her skin like acid. She bit down on the pain, shoved her shoulder into the door with everything she had, but it didn't move. The floor flexed beneath her boots. She dropped to a crouch, knife raised, and for a moment the silence returned, dead, suffocating. Then the seat buckled beneath her.

The cushion peeled open like a rotten fruit, revealing layers of pulsing, fibrous muscle beneath. A dozen tendril-like cords lashed upward from the tear, wrapping around her legs, her waist, slowly trying to pull her in.

Rana screamed, more rage than fear, and hacked downward. The knife cut deep. Black fluid sprayed.

She was halfway out of the seat when the ceiling cracked open above her. From within, a gaping circular maw split into view, lined with rows of wet, translucent teeth like leeches, each one twitching hungrily. It wasn't part of the car. It was the car. The vehicle was its shell. It's lure. It's a trap.

And she was inside it.

The cords pulled tighter. Her boot slipped into the floor, which gave way like a mouth, wrapping around her ankle.

She screamed and stabbed upward, driving the blade into the roof, into the thing's open flesh. A burst of heat exploded across her arm, the roof shrieked, high and vibrating, like metal tearing inside her skull.

Rana used the moment and tore her leg free, braced herself against the center console, and began kicking at the windshield.

Cracks spiderwebbed. The glass warped, resisted, not like glass, more like bone.

Her blade was slick in her hand, her skin smoking where the acid had touched it. She kept going. Fighting. Breathing through the pain.

The center console pulsed, ripped open, and a coil of muscle wrapped around her torso, jerking her sideways into the seat again.

This time, she didn't scream.

She roared, planting her feet and driving the knife into the console, over and over until it twitched and writhed like an exposed nerve.

But it was too late.

Slime rained from above. The acidic mucus she'd felt earlier now cascaded down her back, burning through her clothes, eating into her spine. Her arms trembled. The strength drained from her hands. The knife fell.

She was sinking into the seat, into the creature. The leather peeled back into raw flesh, forming a cradle of muscle and sinew that accepted her body, inch by inch.

She thrashed. Bit her tongue. Screamed through blood.

"I'm not yours," she growled.

A final tendril wrapped around her throat, soft, slow, like a silk ribbon, pulling her head back against the seat.

As the slime enveloped her face, the last thing she saw was the rearview mirror.

It showed her face. Still. Staring forward. Blinking.

Not her. The next lure.

Across town, a young man received a text.

OneWayRide: Your driver, Rana, has arrived.

Rana. 5 stars. 743 rides. "Polite. Clean car. Good music."

The End.



PER TE

The mail always came in the afternoon.

Derrick had anxiously been waiting for news from his brother.

Paper shuffled softly across the table. Bills, advertisements, and envelopes with plastic windows were mixed in, as if they belonged there. Among them was a postcard.

One corner was slightly bent. The edges were soft, as if the card had been handled too many times before it arrived. Derrick's hand paused for a moment. Then he turned it over.

The front had a gorgeous picture of Rome.

A sunlit piazza, washed in gold. A marble fountain caught mid-splash, water hanging in midair, suspended like glass. Old buildings leaned inwards. Open Shutters. Laundry drifted in the warm air. People walked over centuries of layered stone and memory. Even the sky looked old.

Derrick took a quiet breath.

"Sure, looks nice." He flipped the card and read it out loud.

"Got here safe. It really is amazing. So much history. You were right. The gelato really is to die for."

A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Of course you'd lead with food." A soft chuckle. "Figures." He lowered the card, but not all the way.

The image lingered in his mind. "I wish Mom could've seen this." He

placed the card on the dresser. Carefully. Not tossed like a thing to be forgotten. Purposeful.

A few days later, another card arrived, this one seemingly less worn.

Derrick recognized the picture on the front right away.

The Sistine Chapel ceiling in the Vatican Museum stretched out in incredible detail. The famous hands reached for each other. Bodies twisted in motion. Colors built up over centuries. Light spilled across painted figures that seemed almost alive. Even on paper, its beauty was overwhelming.

A quiet laugh. “Man...” He gently shook his head. “I’m so jealous, David.”

He turned the card in his hand and studied it longer this time. “I always wanted to see this in person.” He paused. “But hey...” He shrugged.

“Someone has to stay behind and keep an eye on things, right?”

The card flipped in his fingers.

“Met so many new people from all over the world. Can’t wait to learn from them. We have so much in common. I can’t believe all the history here.”

He let out a soft breath. “Yeah... sounds like you.” He lowered the card.

“Making friends everywhere you go.” A faint smile appeared. “You’re having the time of your life.”

The postcard joined the first. Aligned. Deliberate.

About a week later, David's next card arrived. Derrick spotted it among the mail.

The Colosseum stood as a broken ring of ancient stone under a pale sky. Its arches looked like hollow eyes. The ground was worn smooth by time and by millions of footsteps, first to witness brutal games, and later by those trying to imagine the old fears. It looked patient, as if it were waiting.

Derrick tapped the card in the air. "Definitely you." He paused. "Kind of creepy, if you think about it. Everything that happened here..." He shrugged softly. "But yeah... this is absolutely your kind of thing." He flipped the card as he slowly moved towards the dresser.

"You would love this place. It's strange to think about everything that's happened here... but I'm sure it's right up your alley. Classes started. I'm learning Latin."

"Latin, huh..." A faint chuckle. "Guess that makes sense."

He laid the card down, lining it up with the others like dominoes. The stack of cards was slowly growing.

Another week passed before the next card arrived. The rhythm felt a little off. Not by much, but it was noticeable. This time, the front showed a more macabre image: the Capuchin Crypt. Thousands of bones were arranged in perfect symmetry. Skulls were stacked in arches. Ribs were woven into

patterns that almost looked delicate. Every surface was made from what people had left behind.

Some people might find it unsettling. But for Derrick and David, it didn't feel wrong. They saw its beauty, the respect, and the history.

He let out a low whistle. "Well... you'd love this place." He shook his head.

"Yeah. This one's definitely for you."

The card flipped over.

"Found a place right up your alley. The Capuchin Crypt. Entire rooms built from the bones of priests, walls, ceilings... everything. It's not what you think, though. It doesn't feel dark. There's a kind of peace to it. Strength. We're all a little excited this week. The Fathers are taking us to witness a real exorcism firsthand."

"Huh..." He paused. "Looks like the field trip is getting interesting."

Derrick placed the card on the dresser, but his hand stayed there for a moment. He was lost in thought.

The next card arrived late. Two weeks had passed.

"I guess David is staying busy."

As he pulled the card from between an advertisement for car insurance and a reminder to pay the water bill, he saw the Capitoline Wolf.

The bronze wolf stood rigid and watchful. Beneath her, the twins Romulus and Remus, were small and vulnerable, feeding from her. Her expression

was stern, maybe protective, or perhaps something else. He exhaled quietly, giving a nod of recognition.

“This one’s yours.” He flipped the card and read it out loud.

“I thought you would like this one. I’m sure you know the story, the wolf who raised the sons of Rome after their mother was taken from them. She made them strong. Strong enough to build something that would last. It is so appropriate. You’ll see what happens now. I have a gift for you. But I need to give it to you in person. Remember our mother.”

Silence.

Derrick turned the card slowly in his hand. His jaw tightened. His thumb pressed hard along the edge, bending it slightly. He wanted to do a lot of things. But he couldn’t. Not when they were so close.

He took a breath. Then flung the card at the dresser. A faint tap of glass answered.

“Exorciꝑo te.”

The dresser shuddered. It wasn’t violent, but it was enough to make the wood creak.

Something unseen shifted, just beneath the surface of sound. A faint, contained movement. Then stillness.

“I figured.” Derrick organized the cards in the stack. Making sure it was perfectly aligned.

Weeks passed.

Derrick felt his brother's absence weighing on him.

He didn't mind staying behind or being alone.

He just didn't want to be here. With it.

Every afternoon, he looked forward to seeing the postal carrier and finding another card from his brother. It broke up the monotony and gave him a much-needed boost, just enough to get through the next week.

The next card felt heavier. Or maybe it was just him.

A beautiful picture of the Scala Santa was on the front. Worn marble steps had been smoothed by centuries of pilgrims climbing slowly and deliberately on their hands and knees. Each movement was measured. The stone reflected a quiet devotion that lingered in a place like Rome.

Derrick flipped the card without much thought.

"Sorry, it's been a while. We've been busy. The studies are... demanding. Some of the others have already left. They couldn't handle it. Every night we assist. Learning the words. The symbols. How to fight. How to cast them out. It takes more than I expected. We fast before each session. Three days sometimes. I've started losing weight. You'd think, with all this food..."

Scala Santa. You know what these are? The steps Christ walked before judgment by Pontius Pilate. They say He knew what was coming. There's something... clarifying about that. I don't think I'm afraid anymore."

He read the card a second time in silence and looked at the image, wishing he could be in Rome. But this journey belonged to his brother.

He glanced at the dresser.

Not at the postcards.

The final card arrived by itself. No other mail. Just a single card.

On the front was the Archbasilica. White stone rose into stillness. Columns stretched upward with quiet authority. This was a place built not just for faith, but for judgment.

Derrick walked to the desk and held the card so he could read it.

"I was successful last night. I did it. My first exorcism. After all this time... we're finally close. You won't recognize the boy who left. Not after what I've learned. I've included something for you. A gift. Let a few drops of holy water soak into the card's paper. I hope you can feel it. I hope it keeps you squealing in agony till I make it home. Wish you were here. See you soon."

Derrick lowered the card and reached toward the dresser. Behind the line of postcards sat a jar.

Inside, something dark swirled.

Wet.

Moving.

Angry.

It pressed against the glass, recoiled, then tested its prison again. Derrick lifted the jar and slid David's final card underneath.

He could hear a faint sizzle, like something trying to scream.

The thing inside jerked violently. Thrashing itself against the glass. Folding in on itself.

Desperate to find an escape.

But there was none.

The End.



THE HOLLOW ONES

They say the forest used to have a name. But no one remembers it anymore. Even on the maps, it's just a patch of unmarked green, wedged between dying farmlands and the ruins of a mining town.

Locals call it the Hollow, but they don't say it out loud, not after sundown.

Sam only went in because her dog had gone in. A rusted fence barely held the woods back, and somewhere just beyond it, Milo's bark echoed once, then stopped. Dead quiet. Not even the wind blew.

The trees were wrong. Older than they should've been, too dense for anything to thrive beneath them. Their bark split in odd patterns, like mouths that had been sewn shut. A faint rustling reached Sam's ears, the sound of dry leaves touched by an unseen breeze, but none were moving. The call of a distant bird floated through the heavy air, and then, without warning, silence fell again. Underfoot, the ground felt... soft. Not mud. Not quite.

Sam stepped across the threshold without meaning to, and in that instant, the air changed, thick and cold, like walking into a long-closed room. The sky dimmed, though it was only late afternoon.

And then Sam heard it.

It was not Milo. It was not the wind.

A whisper, not from behind or ahead, but from inside the trees themselves.

“She’s here.”

She called Milo again. No answer.

Sam froze. Her breath clouded in the air.

Beneath Sam's boots, the soft ground pulsed once, as if something beneath the surface had inhaled.

The silence pressed in, heavy and absolute. Then a subtle sound. Something dragging over

stone drew her toward a pile of ancient boulders nestled between twisted trunks. The rocks

seemed to lean together unnaturally, as if they were hiding something in the hollow beneath them. Sam crouched, squinting into the cracks.

At first, she saw only darkness.

Then something shifted.

A lump of black fur, not moss, not shadow, retracted deeper into the gap.

The thing moved oddly, folding itself inward like a wet cloth. A glint of something, an eye, perhaps, or just an illusion, caught the dim light, momentarily grounding its strangeness in something recognizable. No face, just dark fur matted with twigs. Its limbs were stunted, almost comical, short arms tipped with curved claws, and massive, arched hind legs like a hare's. Muscular. Ready to spring.

It didn't growl. It didn't hiss. It just watched.

The fur swallowed any sign of a face, leaving only the faint quiver of breath and a heavy sense that it was waiting.

Sam took a step back.

The whisper came again, and this time it wasn't the forest.

It came from the thing itself.

“Leave.”

Sam's heart slammed against her ribs. Sam turned to run and tripped.

The ground gave beneath her, not like soil but something breathing. When she scrambled to her

feet, muddy and shaking, Sam realized what felt so strange beneath her feet.

Not dirt.

Fur.

The forest floor moved.

There were more of them.

Dozens, maybe hundreds, flattened against the earth, tucked under roots and rocks, curled like dark, breathing tennis balls. Sam backed away slowly, careful not to step on one.

The original creature, larger than the rest, emerged fully from the stones. It stood upright on its thick legs, no taller than her thigh, but solid, radiating a stillness that made her stomach knot.

"We remember," it whispered. "You took the name. You burned the roots.

You scarred the land with your mines, and now you dig again."

Sam shook her head.

"I-I don't know what you mean."

The creature cocked its head.

"You will."

It scraped one clawed hand slowly across the stone, a sound like chalk dragged over bone.

Then it leapt, not at her, but onto a nearby tree, vanishing into a hollow like smoke through a crack.

All at once, the others scattered and slipped into the earth, the rocks, the trees. Gone, as if they had never been there.

Sam stood alone again.

But now she felt it, beneath the ground, in the trees, in the cracks between the world.

The Hollow was awake. And it remembered.

Sam made it out somehow.

One moment, the creature vanished, and the next she was stumbling back across the fence line, skin cold and damp like she'd been pulled from a river. Milo was waiting by the truck, tail tucked, eyes wide with terror.

She never told anyone.

Until the hikers went missing.

Three of them. College kids, posting videos about “finding the real Hollow.” Laughing into the camera, daring each other to go deeper. They never posted again.

Search parties found their campsite abandoned. No blood. No struggle.

Just flattened grass near the rocks. And fur. Short, coarse, black fur.

Sam watched the footage and felt her stomach twist. The same boulder formation. But this time, deep claw marks scored the stone. Fresh ones.

Like something had broken free.

Officials promised to keep looking, but no one went too far into the woods. Not anymore.

Sam knew what no one else did: the creatures hadn't killed them. Not yet.

They had taken them.

Like seeds. Like offerings.

Because something had changed.

Something had woken up.

Sam tried to forget. Pretended it wasn't her fault.

But the Hollow didn't forget.

The news stopped covering the missing hikers after a week. The search parties thinned. Life

went on, until the ground began to crack.

It began in the old mining town, where sinkholes swallowed streets.

Then the farms. Then the edges of town itself.

Places where the woods had long since died now sprouted black, stunted trees overnight. The air was thick with the acrid scent of sulfur, a clawing hint of decay that permeated everything. Trees whose bark split like mouths stitched closed, pulsing with a sickly green light that flickered across their twisted forms. This eerie glow and the suffocating odor made the spreading blight unmistakable and unforgettable.

Sam knew it was spreading.

She woke one night to Milo whining at the door; his nose pressed against the glass. Beyond the

porch light, the fields that once stretched empty to the horizon were moving, slow and pulsing, breathing earth.

Dark shapes shifted between the wheat.

Waiting.

Sam pressed her palm to the window. The sky above the Hollow pulsed a deep, unnatural red, like an open wound in the cosmos. Her breath caught, short and sharp, matching the thrum of her heart. Shadows moved with purpose between the stretching fields, becoming a dark tide. They hadn't stayed buried. They were listening. Waiting. Now they were coming. To take what was theirs.

Sam turned the lock on the door, knowing it wouldn't matter.

"We remember."

And this time,

Sam understood.

The End.



PIGGY PIGGY

The piglet was no bigger than a fist, slick and shivering, abandoned in the straw. Its mother had shoved it aside, snout rooting only for the stronger siblings.

Only a few hours old, and already abandoned, Tommy thought as he bent down and scooped the newborn into his jacket. The tiny creature squealed, trembling against his chest.

“Don’t worry,” Tommy whispered. “I’ll take care of you.”

He did. He warmed it by the woodstove, fed it from a bottle, even slept with it on nights when the house felt cold. He called it Piggy because that felt honest, a name that did not pretend it would be anything else. Over time, Piggy grew plump. Its little tail curled like a question mark whenever Tommy came near, nodding its head, oinking with excitement.

Tommy’s house sat at the edge of a stand of leafless birch trees, their bark peeling away as if they were attempting to escape life. The house’s porch sagged in the middle. The entire house needed constant repairs. The wind carried the smell of manure and wet hay.

First thing in the morning, Tommy would check on Piggy. He crossed the yard, his jacket zipped to his throat, steam lifting from his breath. Piggy would crawl up in his lap, his one blue eye full of love and endearment. He knew what he was getting. Some warm milk mixed in with stale oatmeal.

Piggy did not care. He stuck his snout in the plastic bowl and ate it all.

When the bowl was empty, Piggy licked at Tommy's wrist with his small, rough tongue. Tommy laughed; he liked the tickle.

Mom worked split shifts at the diner, then did inventory in the evenings.

Sometimes she fell asleep in her uniform, her shoes still on. She was too tired to say much at breakfast. She never said his dad's name, not once in three years.

He talked to Piggy a lot. About algebra quizzes, the slush in the parking lot, the boys on the back of the bus who spit sunflower seeds and called him Scarecrow. He told Piggy how teachers looked through him, how his answers came out twisted. Piggy listened; its warm body pressed against Tommy. Piggy made him feel less invisible.

At school, he practiced walking with more confidence. It never worked. The hallways swallowed him. In the cafeteria, he waited until the rush passed to reach the tray rail, his change already cupped. He had learned where to stand, how to breathe, how to survive the quiet assaults of his classmates.

Once, after gym, Billy Harper and two friends cornered him in the locker room. They flicked Tommy's ears, hid his shoes, and wiped his shirt under their sneakers. When Tommy cried, the sound came out thin and high. He reached for his shirt, and Billy dropped it in the wet corner by the drain.

“Careful, Scarecrow,” Billy said. “You might blow away.”

Tommy went home in his soaked shirt; his jacket zipped over it. He did not tell the school. He did not tell his mother. He went to the shed, where Piggy lay curled in fresh straw. He pressed his forehead against Piggy’s side, feeling the steady push of breath, and whispered, “Piggy, I hate them, Piggy. You are the only one who gets me.”

At first, Piggy ate scraps: potato peelings, wilted lettuce, and toast ends with jelly stuck to them. The pig gulped and licked the air for more. Then scraps weren’t enough. Piggy’s hunger grew, and Tommy felt a thrill he could not name.

A mouse snapped a trap in the barn. Tommy hesitated, then carried it to the shed. Piggy smelled it and squealed, teeth clicking, stamping as if the straw were hot. Tommy opened the trap. Piggy pounced. There was a happy squeak, a crunch, and a wet slap of teeth breaking the thin mouse bones. Tommy gagged for a second, then laughed cause Piggy looked so happy.

Tommy put out more traps, all around the house and even in the field near the birch trees, but soon, mice were not enough. One day, one of the neighbor’s chickens wandered through a break in the fence. That night Tommy returned with a bird tucked against his chest. Piggy’s eyes followed his hands. Tommy pulled the bird from underneath his shirt and threw it in

Piggy's pen. The chicken flapped once, and Piggy rushed, a low rumble in its throat. A loud death scream and feathers flung through the air. Piggy ate the bird whole. As time passed, it became easier. Piggy wasn't picky. Grain, leftovers, roadkill. He did not discriminate. Tommy would catch or find dead rabbits, then he started catching everything else that moved. Bristles appeared along Piggy's back; his tusks pressed white at the gums, then slid out like small knives.

Tommy trained Piggy without thinking. "Stay," Piggy stayed. "Up," Piggy reared. "Come," Piggy came. Words meant more than noise.

"Good Piggy," he said. "My Piggy. You are the best pig." He would sit on his knees, hugging the only friend he had ever had, and most likely would ever have.

Neighbors noticed Piggy getting big. Mr. Albee at the feed store said, "That pig is getting hog-sized. Plan to butcher or sell?"

"Never," Tommy replied firmly. Mrs. Larkin across the road complained about the smell, so Tommy moved Piggy farther back into the shed. He nailed a sheet across a new partition, made a door from two boards and a hinge he found in the barn. He pressed his hand to Piggy's neck and felt a thrum of life.

The boys at school grew bolder. Not a day went by that Tommy didn't have to endure some form of bullying. Billy Harper and his friends asked what

he fed Piggy, laughing as they tripped him, kicked his papers, and mocked him day after day.

That night, Tommy sat in the shed, cheek pressed to Piggy's side, whispering, "One day they will leave me alone, Piggy." A tear rolled down his cheek. Piggy noticed.

Spring brought Pet Day. Dogs, cats, lizards, hamsters. Everyone had a chance to show off. Tommy never had a pet. Until there was Piggy. The school reluctantly agreed when he asked if he could bring Piggy, on one condition: "Must be on a rope."

Tommy was so proud. He brushed Piggy's sides until the bristles shone, cleaned between his toes, whispered, "Good Piggy. I love you so much." At dawn, Tommy and Piggy walked down the gravel road to school. Hooves clicked. Step, breathe. Step, breathe.

Billy Harper saw them walking towards the gate.

"Figures Scarecrow brings a hog," he said. He pushed Tommy to the ground. Tommy's hand tightened on the rope. Piggy looked at Tommy. On the ground. Embarrassed, people laughing, mocking. Piggy squealed, showed his mouth, and lunged.

If it hadn't been for Tommy having Piggy on a rope, Billy Harper would have never made it to class that day.

There was a tearing sound when one of Piggy's tusks ripped Billy's pants. Billy's cry was cut short when the morning bell rang, summoning everyone to get to class. Tommy's palm pressed Piggy's cheek. "Good Piggy. My Piggy. He is such a jerk." The pet day went well, and some other kids even petted Piggy, who enjoyed the scratches and oinked happily. His blue eye looked around the room, taking it all in.

After that day, the bullying never stopped and only got worse. Billy Harper led the charge, flanked by his shadows. In the cafeteria, he swatted trays out of Tommy's hands. In the gym, he slapped the back of Tommy's head. In the locker room, he shoved him into the tile, spitting and kicking him till Tommy begged for mercy, which he hardly ever received.

One day, after a particularly cruel shoving match that left Tommy's books scattered across the hall, Billy crouched to his level and sneered. "You ever wonder why your old man left? Cause even he knew you're nothing. Your Mom is nothing, and you will never be nothing." A thick lugie hurled towards Tommy's face. Kids can be so cruel.

For a second, Tommy imagined punching Billy. He would love to punch him right in the nose. His fists clenched his nails so tightly that they bit into his palms, slightly making him bleed. He could fight back. He knew he could. He was wiry but stronger than he looked. He would beat the shit out

of Billy. But a fight would mean the principal, cops, maybe worse. His mom couldn't afford more trouble.

So, he swallowed it. He always swallowed it. Hoping, longing for the day he could leave school and move out of this damn town. But that was a long time ago. And today, right here, right now, Billy and his jerk friends had no intention to ever stop making Tommy their pet project.

That night, in the shed, Tommy fed Piggy scraps. "I could've hit him, Piggy," Tommy whispered. "I could've made him bleed. But then Mom..." He trailed off. "I can't. Not yet."

Piggy stomped angrily, bristles rising. He understood. He felt the pain and anger of his pink friend.

"You're hungry, huh? Always hungry." Tommy scratched him behind the ear. Piggy leaned into the fingers scratching.

Things got worse. Bills piled high. Tommy could hear Mom cry when she thought he was asleep.

"I could sell him," she murmured one night at the table, head in her hands.

"Get us through another month."

"No." Tommy pushed from the table, his voice sharp. "Piggy's not for sale."

"Tommy, you don't understand."

"I do!" His fist hit the table. "You can sell me before you sell Piggy. He is the only friend I have."

"You think I want to sell him?" his mom's voice broke. "You think I don't see how much you love that pig? Love doesn't pay the rent, Tommy."

"NO!" Tommy ran away and into Piggy's pen.

Her eyes filled with tears, but she said nothing.

One Saturday afternoon, Tommy was stacking wood when he heard voices near the shed. He froze, then crept closer.

Billy Harper. What is that asshole doing here? Tommy felt his anger explode.

How dare he come here?

"...bet he's got it locked up like treasure," Billy whispered to a friend.

"Ugly hog," the friend snorted. "Why does he even keep it?"

"Cause it's the only thing that'll put up with him," Billy said. He rattled the shed door. "C'mon, help me let it out. Let's see how Scarecrow likes chasing his pet through the woods."

"Don't!" Tommy's voice cracked like a whip.

The boys turned. Billy smirked. "Well, well. Look who finally grew a spine."

"Get away from the shed."

"Or what?" Billy stepped closer, all teeth. "You gonna send your pig on me?"

The boys laughed.

Something in Tommy snapped.

In one fluid motion, he grabbed a big rock from the dirt as he rose. He lunged. Without any hesitation, he flung the rock at Billy's friend. It connected just right.

The freckled loser's temple turned red, and the boy crashed like a freshly cut tree to the ground. His feet twitched in the dirt. A wet gasp rattled from his throat. His freckles stood out bright against the sudden wash of blood.

For a second, no one moved. Then Billy screamed and charged.

The fight was ugly, fists, knees, teeth. Billy swung wildly and caught Tommy on the cheek, splitting his skin. Tommy didn't feel it. He drove his shoulder into Billy's chest, slamming him to the dirt. His thumbs sank deep in Billy's eye sockets. The bully screamed in agony. He wanted Billy to finally see nothing; he wanted him to feel how Tommy had felt all his life, unseen.

Every insult, every punch Tommy ever received and took without escalating the situation, ran through his head. The time they pushed his face in the toilet, the smell never left his nose.

They rolled, grunting, clawed. Tommy had his heels locked behind Billy's knees. In one brief moment, years of abuse were released, and there was nothing Billy could have ever done to get out alive.

All the nights he felt alone, crying himself to sleep, with no one to hold him, telling him it was going to be ok. It all flooded Tommy's brain.

In a split second, he went from innocent boy to bloodthirsty monster. A blue-collar teenage Jekyll and Hyde. Tommy sat on top of Billy's back, holding his tormentor's head between his hands, smashing his eyeless, blood-soaked face into the ground, over and over again, until something gave. A dull crack, like green wood snapping. Then another. The smell of iron crept into Tommy's nose. The dirt turned dark beneath them.

Billy jerked.

Once.

Twice.

His skull split against the stones. What spilled out wasn't blood at first but something thicker, gray and pale, oozing slowly, sticking in the mud like rotten porridge. Tommy's hands slipped in it as he slammed again, and again, until there was no face left to punish, only pulp. His chest heaved, spit hung from his lip, his hands still pressing Billy's ruined head into the ground, grinding it down as if he could bury the years with him.

Tommy stared down at the lifeless body. Slowly, he was returning to his body. The rage drained out of him, leaving the cold realization of what he had done.

Two bodies. Dead.

"Oh God, no, please. No," his hands clawed in his hair. *What do I do?*

He could not have his mom dragged into it. Piggy taken away. Rotting in prison for an asshole like Billy Harper.

Tommy opened the shed and dragged both bodies inside. He undressed both boys and discarded their clothes in the corner as they had done to him so many times before. He looked at Billy's naked, faceless body. For a split second, he chuckled. *No wonder you were such a jerk.* Piggy squealed inside, the boards trembling.

Piggy was hungry. Piggy knew what to do.

Tommy closed the shed, and when he was sure Mom was passed out, he pulled the rusted pin from Piggy's pen.

Piggy ran to his buffet of young flesh. Squeals of excitement bounced around the shed as the boar tore chunks of flesh from bone and gulped them down. Its snout drenched in blood as it tore through intestines and organs, now piled across the floor. Its teeth crushed bones, its tongue gobbling it all down without ever slowing down. Tommy could hear the crushing of bone as Piggy devoured its meal. It was like watching joy, pure and unfiltered. Horror, but the good kind. Horror, he had wished upon all the bad people in his life a thousand times.

Tommy came back to the shed; his face cold and without expression. He had read enough stories about evidence and dead bodies. He would have to make sure Piggy could eat every last bit, or else he could get caught. He let

the sledgehammer rest beside him for a second. Doubting if he could do it.

But then the sledgehammer came down and turned Billy Harper's slender friend into an experimental piece of art.

They chose to come here. They chose to come and fuck with me. They just couldn't leave me alone. They did this to themselves.

With every swing, cracks could be heard, and the ragdoll bodies slightly took on a new position till Piggy yanked the pieces towards his mouth.

For a moment, Tommy felt on top of the world. He saw Piggy feast, his tormentors dead; he would never have to deal with them again. He felt at peace. Finally. Finally, he could maybe be normal. But what was normal was going to be. Live without fear. Maybe just live.

The bliss was short-lived. Tommy was no idiot. He was poor. Yes. He had barely anything, but that had made him more dangerous than most boys of his age.

He did not have a flashy phone to distract him. He would spend hours in the library. He did not have a TV, so he spent hours in the diner where his mom worked. He did not have friends, so he would observe people, learn from them, and learn their behavior and vices. He would watch TV and the news at the diner where Mom worked until she would take him home between shifts. They could not afford to pay anyone to fix the house, so

Tommy learned to fix everything himself. At his age, he might have been one of the smartest boys in town.

When his mind settled and rational thinking set in, he came up with a way to stay out of trouble.

As expected, there was a massive search for the boys. Every kid at school was questioned many times, and the town was pretty much turned upside down. But they did not find anything. No matter how hard they looked.

One day, the police received a tip.

Tommy had overheard two men who occasionally came to dinner. They were shady. They were scum. Tommy could tell. They never treated anyone nicely. They once grabbed his mom's arm, and he saw her bruises that night. Over time, he discovered where they lived. It was not in the nice part of town. They were cooking drugs. Tommy knew exactly what to do. There was a \$100,000 reward for any information that could solve the case.

Tommy had hidden the boys' clothes and kept some bones and teeth. And he knew what to do with it.

Tommy had watched the men for days, learning their routines, the creak of their back door, the quiet footsteps to the basement. He waited until night, when the house was dark and silent. The reward money, the safety of his mother, and the promise of a final, clean break from fear drove him.

He slipped through the yard, careful to stay in the shadows. In the basement, he found what he was looking for. He scattered some of the small bone fragments, a few teeth, and tattered clothing he had among the men's drug paraphernalia. Tommy arranged it to look as if the men had been careless, as if the boys had been there.

He stepped back, locked the basement door, and called the police. He told them he had overheard the men bragging about hurting the boys at the dinner. He provided a detailed statement, including information only the killers could have known.

By dawn, police cars swarmed the house. Officers banged on doors, shouting commands. The men appeared, surprised, guns in hand. Shots rang out. Chaos filled the small street. By the time it was over, the men were dead, killed by police in a hail of gunfire. The evidence from the basement was secured, the police found the hidden remains and the clothing, enough to close the case.

The town exhaled in relief. The local newspapers ran the story: *Local Hero Saves Brutal Murder Case*. Tommy, Piggy, and his mother stood together at city hall, holding the check for the reward. Photographers snapped the moment: Tommy's pale, solemn face, his mother smiling softly, Piggy proudly at their side.

Piggy nudged Tommy's hand, its one blue eye fixed on a man in the back. A man who did not clap did not smile.

Dad?

The End.



GOODBYE

Max dropped the Ouija board on the clubhouse table, his hands unable to settle. His fingers drummed against the wood before he forced them still in his lap.

"This thing is so old and it smells like sadness," he said, forcing a grin that didn't quite hide the worry in his eyes.

Benny leaned in, biting his lip. "Where'd you get it?" His voice softened with a mix of curiosity and unease, as if he were anticipating what the board might reveal.

Max grinned, trying to appear casual. "Found it in Brett's closet. Way in the back, under all his incense and that weird scarf he thinks makes him look mysterious."

Eli raised his eyebrows and shivered, fiddling with the chain around his neck. "You went through Brett's stuff? Isn't he, like, halfway to starting a cult?"

Max shrugged. "He's not scary. He likes to pretend he is, and that he knows everything."

Ash picked up the board. It was basic. Nothing spooky. Just the classic Parker Brothers style: alphabet, numbers, "YES," "NO," and the word GOODBYE printed clean across the bottom. The Planchette was made of light plastic, still in good shape.

"I thought these things were supposed to be scary. This just looks... normal."

"That's how it gets you," Eli whispered, half-joking.

They were huddled in Cody's shed, known to them as *The Clubhouse*, their unofficial headquarters. The inside was decked with Christmas lights and posters of TV shows and bands they liked. A sagging couch slumped against the wall, posters of *Evil Dead* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* peeling at the corners. A whiteboard with "YOUTUBE TAKEOVER PLAN" scrawled in red marker was left abandoned halfway through a brainstorming session.

But today the air felt different, a strange chill pressing in through the walls, the shadows pulsing and shifting as if something moved between them, even though the candles burned steady.

"We should stream this," Cody said, pulling out the tripod. "Ouija at midnight. No edits. Just pure, unfiltered creepiness."

"I want proof," Cody replied. "If something happens, we've got it on tape. If nothing happens, we make Max scream and still get likes."

"Hey! I'm right here," Max said.

They set up everything: candles spaced around the table, the camera angled just right, Max's phone propped up as a backup.

Midnight crept closer.

“Okay,” Cody said. “Rules of the game: don’t take your fingers off the planchette. Don’t be a troll. And when we’re done, we have to say goodbye.”

Ash looked around the table. “Seriously? We have to say goodbye?”

Cody shrugged. “Yeah. That’s how you close the session.”

Everyone nodded.

One by one, they placed their fingers on the planchette.

Cody started. “We welcome any spirits who wish to speak. Please answer truthfully. We mean no harm.”

The board sat quiet.

Then the planchette twitched.

Ash flinched. “Who moved it?”

“I didn’t.”

“Not me.”

“Dude, I’m not even pushing.”

It slid, smooth and slow, the plastic edge dragging softly across the board.

H. I.

“Holy shit,” Ash whispered.

Eli swallowed. “Are you... friendly?”

A long pause.

N. O.

No one laughed.

They looked at each other, hands still pressed to the planchette, fingers damp now, the air in the room tightening around them. Someone's breathing picked up, quick and shallow.

"Don't take your hands off," Cody said quietly.

He leaned forward. "What do you want?"

The planchette jerked, then slid faster this time.

Y. O. U.

"Okay," Benny pulled his hands back. "Nope. I'm out. That's enough."

"Dude, no, put them back," Cody snapped. "Put them back."

The planchette slammed against the board, sharp and sudden.

S. T. A. Y.

The candles blew out all at once.

Ash's voice dropped to a whisper. "We need to end the session. Say it. Say goodbye."

No one moved.

Then the candles went out.

A sharp, collective gasp broke from the table. The chairs scraped the floor, someone started swearing as the dark closed in around them.

"Oh my God."

"Say it, say it!"

“Good,”

The shed door slammed open with a bang.

They all jerked toward it, some half-rising, others stumbling back, hearts kicking hard in their chests.

For a second, no one spoke.

Then they looked back.

Max was gone.

His seat sat empty, his phone still recording, its screen casting a weak, flickering glow across the table.

A dry, restless rustling slipped through the room, like leaves dragged across concrete, though nothing moved. It came from the shadows where Max had been.

Something flickered at the edge of their vision. There, then gone.

“Max?”

No answer.

“Dude, where is he?”

“Max, stop messing around.”

They all started talking at once, voices overlapping, sharper now, fear slipping in. Someone leaned over the table, looking beneath it. Another stepped back, scanning the corners of the room like he might just be hiding there.

“Max?”

Nothing.

For a second, they looked at each other.

Then it hit all of them at once.

No scream. No sound.

No Max anywhere.

They didn’t think about the board.

They didn’t say goodbye.

They just ran.

Ash screamed the whole way. Benny tripped over a hose and scraped his chin. Cody dropped the flashlight but didn't go back for it. Eli tried to say "goodbye", but he actually started to, but no one heard him over the chaos.

They didn't stop until they hit Cody's porch.

"What the hell just happened?" Benny gasped.

"Max..." Ash doubled over, clutching her stomach. "Where did he go?"

"He just vanished," Cody said, pale. "Like, one second there, next second just... gone."

Eli was the only one not pacing. He stood frozen, arms crossed tight over his chest. "We didn't close the session."

Everyone stopped.

"What?"

"We didn't say goodbye," Eli whispered. "We left the board open."

Meanwhile, back in the clubhouse, the livestream continued to roll.

Camera angle unchanged, focused perfectly on the Ouija board sitting untouched on the table.

At first, there were only a few dozen viewers. Curious. Then a few hundred.

Then 1,200.

Then 4,000. Then 20,000.

A tweet from a popular influencer suddenly appeared on every timeline, exclaiming, "You have to watch this! #OuijaLive".

Soon after, a news anchor paused during a morning broadcast to mention the "chilling live event that is consuming the internet right now," fueling the livestream's rapid ascent.

The chat exploded.

"This is fake, right?"

"WHERE IS MAX?"

"BACK IT UP. SOMETHING SLITHERED BEHIND THE BOARD."

"WHY IS THE PLANCHETTE MOVING ON ITS OWN??"

"LEAVE. LEAVE. LEAVE."

"NOOOO GET OUT OF THERE"

New viewers flooded in, reposting and sharing. The hashtags lit up like fire.

But the kids weren't watching the chat. They weren't watching the screen.

They didn't see the moment when something slipped free from beneath the board.

It wasn't a shadow. Not exactly.

It dragged itself across the table in short, uneven pulls, like it didn't understand how to move yet, thick, black, and wet, catching the dim light in a dull sheen as it gathered itself, growing, taking on the suggestion of shape without ever settling into one.

For a second, it held there.

Then it spilled over the edge.

The viewers saw it stretch downward, thinning as it fell, like smoke dripping in reverse, pulling itself longer instead of breaking apart. It didn't drop. It *reached*.

On the floor, it spread, then rose again, swelling upward, folding in on itself, building height without form, like something trying to remember how to stand.

It leaned toward the camera, trying to peer through it. It could feel something watching. It wanted to know who was watching.

The image warped, static crawling across the screen as the shape stretched, rubber-thin, its surface shifting, folding, dripping without ever losing itself.

For a single frame, it seemed to look straight into the lens.

And then, it snapped back.

Recoiling, folding in on itself, sucked violently across the floor and up the table.

Back toward the board.

Gone.

The Next Day

"I left my phone," Cody muttered. "It is still on the tripod. Still recording."

Ash glanced toward the clubhouse. "You're going back?"

"I have to. It's linked to my mom's email. If she sees," He didn't finish the sentence.

"I'll go with you." Benny offered.

Cody shook his head. "You guys stay by the fence. If I'm not back in two minutes, come drag me out."

He hesitated. It was his fault. He'd left the phone.

"I'll be quick," he added, already looking toward the clubhouse.

Cody moved toward the clubhouse slowly, glancing back over his shoulder, one hand lifting in a quick signal to the others. "Stay."

He paused at the edge of the yard, listening.

Nothing.

Still, he circled once, keeping his distance, his eyes scanning the windows, the door and the shadows around it.

Then he stepped inside.

Everything looked the same.

The camera was still on, its small red-light blinking. The phone stood upright on the tripod. A few of the candles had burned back to life, their stubs flickering weak shadows along the walls.

Only the planchette moved.

It pulsed at the center of the board, slow and steady, as if it had been waiting.

A chill prickled up his spine. The air felt tight, charged, a faint static creeping through the stillness.

Something was wrong.

He knew it.

Cody lunged for the phone.

Heat bit into his palm, sharp, sudden. It was so hot he almost dropped it.

The viewer count had climbed to 116,000.

The chat was a blur:

“OMG HE’S BACK”

“DON’T PICK IT UP”

“IT’S UNDER THE TABLE”

“TOO LATE”

“RUNRUNRUNRUN”

Cody blinked at the screen.

"What the,"

A shape shot from beneath the board. Black tendrils, lashing upward, wrapping around his wrists, neck and face. He tried to scream, but something slid into his mouth, thick and alive, swallowing the sound before it could escape. His body folded in on itself like cloth, collapsing inward.

The board gave a low thump, like it had swallowed something heavy.

Just like that, Cody was gone.

The phone clattered to the floor, still streaming, still fixed on the Ouija board.

Waiting outside, Ash shifted. "He's taking too long."

Eli didn't look up. "Don't go in."

Ignoring him, Benny hurried across the yard and reached for the clubhouse door, determination written on his face.

Inside, the angle had tilted on the floor, just enough to show the board ...Cody's last footprint fading slowly in the dust.

The chat boiled over:

“DID HE JUST GET PULLED IN?!”

“WHAT IS THIS THING?!”

“WHY IS THIS STILL LIVE???”

“THE BOARD JUST MOVED.”

“I HEARD A VOICE. WHOSE VOICE WAS THAT?”

The planchette shifted.

Slow.

T...W...O.

Viewers surged past 240,000.

Ash and Eli watched the feed from Eli's bedroom, curtains drawn, the volume turned low on the phone between them.

Neither of them spoke.

They just stared.

They had seen it, Cody reaching, the shadows snapping up, his body folding in on itself like it had been pulled through something too small to hold him.

The board after.

The way it pulsed.

The way the shadows still clung to it, faint, like something hadn't fully let go.

Max. Then Cody.

Only two left.

On the screen, the planchette moved again.

T... H... R... E... E.

Eli whispered, "We're next."

They didn't argue. They just headed for the clubhouse.

The clubhouse felt colder than before, the kind of cold that didn't belong to the air but seemed to press in from the walls themselves. The board sat where they had left it, untouched, waiting.

They lowered themselves onto the floor together, close without meaning to be, their hands trembling as their fingers settled against the planchette. For a second, nothing happened.

Then it moved.

W... E... L... C... O... M... E.

Ash shook her head; her voice tighter than she wanted it to be. "We're not here to welcome you. We're here to end this."

The planchette dragged against their fingers, resisting her, pulling with a slow, stubborn force.

N... O.

The shadows along the walls deepened, thickening into something heavier, and when the voice came, it didn't echo, it pressed into the room.

"Ash... don't you miss us?"

Max's voice.

Then Cody's.

"We're still here."

Ash's breath caught. Her eyes unfocused as she stared into the dark, seeing them, standing just beyond the edge of the light, pale, smiling, their faces still and empty.

"Just one more minute," Max said softly.

Her fingers slipped from the planchette. Her nails scraped across the table as she was dragged forward, her body jerking, folding where it shouldn't.

"Eli!"

He grabbed her, bracing, pulling her back with everything he had, his feet slipping as the table lurched beneath them.

The black shape surged from beneath the board, thick and fast, spilling over the edges, tendrils snapping toward him.

One caught his wrist.

Another wrapped his shoulder.

"Let go!"

It didn't.

Ash clung to him,

her fingers digging in, but her body was already giving, folding inward as if something inside her had come loose.

The board rattled as the air warped, bending inward as something beneath the board swelled and pressed upward, a pulsing mass forcing its way into

the room. The camera stuttered as the shape surged outward, stretching, distorting, and then it took them.

It snapped shut, collapsing inward with a heavy crack that rattled the table before slamming it flat again.

Silence rushed in, and the Ouija board was gone.

All that remained was a dark, scorched outline burned into the wood where it had been, the edges still faintly smoking.

The phone lay on the floor, the image shaking, struggling to focus.

The chat flooded the screen:

“WHAT JUST HAPPENED”

“WHERE DID THEY GO”

“IS THIS REAL???”

“HELLO???”

The feed crackled, and the image warped, but it didn’t cut.

Something moved.

The planchette. Slowly dragging itself across the scorched outline, tracing a path over empty space where the board had been.

The chat spiked again:

“WHAT IS MOVING THAT”

“NO ONE IS THERE”

“TURN IT OFF”

“WHO’S IN THE ROOM???”

G... O... O... D... B... Y... E.

It stopped.

For a second, nothing happened.

Then,

it vanished.

Gone.

The image jerked, static bursting across the screen and the feed cut to black.

Epilogue

Later that night, a new stream appeared.

The channel and title —Midnight Ouija Challenge, LIVE— remained the same, but the surroundings had changed.

A new room, a different house, somewhere else entirely. This time, it was a clean garage with a fold-out table, bikes in the background, and a dartboard hanging on the wall. The same board sat centered on the table, neat, ready, as if nothing had ever happened.

Zero viewers. Then one, two, and before long, fifteen thousand.

The chat lit up: "Where is this?"

"Not the same house??"

"Same board though..."

"Wait, did it just move?"

The planchette twitched.

Once.

It moved again.

A long pause followed, amplifying the sense of impending doom.

Then, a whisper beneath the static.

"Hello."

The End.



THE DOOR

A dim light fell through the crack underneath the weathered door, faintly illuminating the cold concrete steps. In the distance, a muffled sound broke the long-persisting silence.

Footsteps.

Fast, pacing back and forth.

Who was it this time? Would they come for him? Should he scream, or should he walk up the stairs to be close to the door when it opened? Maybe he could surprise them. Maybe he could pull one of them down the stairs and break their neck.

How long has it been?

He couldn't remember. It must have been weeks now. It couldn't be just days. Weeks. Yes, weeks. It must be. He couldn't remember.

The only reference to day or night was the occasional light that would shine underneath the crack of the door.

That damned door.

A simple piece of wood. A dead tree, sliced into pieces and glued together.

A mighty thick door, but still, just wood.

The first day, he had tried everything that came to mind: banging it, kicking it, slamming his shoulder into it.

Screams of despair.

At the end of the day, it was simple.

Door: 3 - Idiot: 0.

His hands hurt from the pounding, his bones felt bruised, and the skin that held them together was inflamed. His toes were numb, throbbing within his shoes.

He was slowly going insane. He tried to count the days, but somewhere he lost track of them.

The damp basement had been stripped to the bones.

At the end of the first night, he had found a mattress. But relief turned to horror. As he lay down on it, he noticed it was wet. He sat up and, in the darkness, felt over the damp surface. His fingers moved slowly, searching for the edges of the wetness. It wasn't water. It wasn't piss. Its consistency was thicker. He brought his fingers to his nose and sniffed. He instantly recognized the scent.

Blood.

He lurched away from the mattress, falling backwards, crawling into the opposite corner. He could feel his heart frantically beating in his chest.

Padaboom. Padaboom. Padaboom.

What games are they playing? What is going on?

Shivering. Shaking. Pulling his hair.

The silence was killing him. Once in a while, he would hear footsteps or a door slamming shut. But what slowly drove him insane was the sound of the individual drops of water falling from the ceiling, splashing on the concrete floor.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

The sound seemed to mock him. Amplified as time passed by.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Stop. Stop. STOP!

His screams bounced off the walls. Thoughts flying in and out of his mind.

Who is keeping me here? What could they possibly want? Whose blood was on that mattress?

He tried to recall all the people he owed money. One, two, five. It's not even more than fifty bucks. No one would kidnap him for fifty bucks.

He racked his brain, trying to remember who he had pissed off in his short life. The list went on and on.

So focused was he on recalling names that he didn't notice the short moment the door opened and then slammed shut.

An aluminum can bounced off the concrete steps.

Klang, tonk, bang, tink, tonk.

Metallic punches echoed through the darkness.

Silence.

He crawled forward on his hands and knees, fingers fumbling over the rough floor as he blindly searched for the can. He found it, but it rolled away.

"No, come here." He lunged forward like a cat on prey, grabbing the can with both hands.

He felt his way around it, traced the lip on top, peeled it open. His fingers penetrated the thick goop. Using them as a spoon, he shoved the raviolis into his dry mouth.

Chef Boyardee.

It became a staple during his imprisonment. Spaghetti O's, dinosaurs, and meatballs, he had them all.

The first time he ate, his stomach rebelled.

"No, ooooh please no, no, no, please, oow." He ran to the farthest corner, unbuttoning his pants just in time for a flood of diarrhea to erupt. His pants flopped around his ankles, his arms desperately pushing against the wall to maintain his balance, and his pants from getting shit on.

Slowly but surely, his body adjusted to only eating canned goods, but not until he had to return to the far corner a few more times.

Twice a day, a can came tumbling down the stairs. On lucky days, it survived the descent unscathed, a small victory. But more often than not, the angle of impact wasn't in his favor, and the can burst open, spraying

Chef Boyardee across the concrete steps. He would grope along the ground, scraping up whatever he could. Glucose-enriched tomato sauce, now with a seasoning of dust and grit. Finger-licking delicious.

The drops from the ceiling became his only source of water. He found the impact zone and placed his empty cans beneath it. Once full, he drank the murky, spaghetti-sauce-infused water. In return for his survival, a few more trips to the far corner were added to his repertoire. He didn't even smell his own shit anymore.

His senses had numbed.

His mind had shut down. Trying to retain the little sanity he had left.

After a few nights of sleeping on the concrete floor, using the bottom step as a pillow, he gave up and returned to the corner with the mattress. He used his shirt to cover the spot where he thought the blood had been, then curled into a ball.

The pain was maddening, constant, gnawing. The lack of nutrients had infected his gums, the throbbing never ceasing.

The dirt in his meals didn't help.

The air was thick, damp, oppressive, like being trapped inside the belly of some great beast. His skin itched, but he couldn't afford to waste what little water he managed to collect on washing himself. Every day, he saved one

extra can of water, just enough to clean himself after taking care of business.

But what he wanted, more than anything, was a hit. One sweet, long hit. Just thinking about it made his fingers tremble. At this point, he didn't care about the quality or the price; he just needed a few minutes of escape. Just one brief moment of relief.

It had been so long.

One sweet, long hit. Just thinking about it made his fingers tremble.

More footsteps. More than one pair.

Two.

Two pairs.

More than one person.

How many? How many are they?

Mumbled noises. Words. But what were they saying?

Focus.

Focus.

Listen. Stop breathing. Listen.

Nothing.

Just mumbling.

He went back to the mattress. Sleeping was the only thing he cared about.

Escaping was not an option.

Trapped.

Fucking trapped.

He recalled leaving his apartment and turning around to close the door. A blanket was thrown over him. And then he felt a sting at the back of his head.

Then darkness.

The next thing he knew, he woke with a pounding headache and a thin sliver of light in front of him.

The door.

That damned door.

The shaking had given way to paranoia. He spent every moment awake running through scenarios in his head. Why was he here? Why were they keeping him alive? Were they going to sell him? Kill him? Harvest his organs?

His screams rang out again, fists slamming against the wood.

"Let me out! Please! I won't tell anyone!"

He knelt and pressed his eye to the crack beneath the door.

Nothing. No way to see what lay beyond.

But then, air. Faint, almost imperceptible, but moving. A breeze. The first he had felt in longer than he could remember.

He lay there for a while, letting the sensation wash over him. Eventually, the whisper of outside air lulled him to sleep.

More footsteps. More whispers.

"How's he doing?"

"Good, I think. He still screams, but that should stop soon. He's eating.

He's drinking. He'll be a good one."

A female voice. A woman.

Fucking bitch. She's the one keeping me locked in here.

Who is it? What did I ever do?

Names and faces flickered through his mind, but none fit. No woman he could think of had reason to hate him this much. Well, maybe one or two.

But that was years ago.

"He'll be a good one."

What the hell did they mean?

See. See! They have plans for me.

Fuckers! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

No. No. I won't be a good one.

He slammed his fists against the door, kicking and screaming.

"You think I'll let you get away with this?! You pieces of shit! NEVER, you hear me? NEVER! Open this door, you motherfuckers! I'll kill you all!

Come on, you pussies!"

Footsteps.

Slow. Leaving.

No. No, no, no.

“Come back! Come back, you assholes! Cooooommme back!”

He slid down the steps, gasping for air. His chest heaved, his face wet with tears.

“No. Please, God, no. Don’t let them do this.”

Sobs racked his body. He gasped between cries, struggling to speak. Slowly, exhaustion took hold. Sleep came like a wave, swallowing his whimpers.

How long had he been trapped? He tried to remember. He couldn’t.

Even the simplest things slipped away.

My name is...? My name is...?

Nothing.

I am, I am...

He was 25, but even that felt distant, unreal.

I’ve been kidnapped. They want to sell me. Or kill me.

They think they’re winning. Ha. Bullshit.

No one wins except me. No one will get me.

“NO ONEEEE!”

He swung his fist wildly, striking at shadows, fighting some invisible giant. His breath ragged, his body weak, he crawled toward the corner where the empty cans lay.

“I’ll show you. Oh, I’ll show you alright.”

His fingers searched the cold floor, finding the cans. One by one, he peeled back the lids. Another. And another. And another.

Then, slithering toward the stairs, he took one lid and gently began twisting it and bending the aluminum. Pounding it softly against the ground. A second lid. A third. A fourth.

His hands shook, his fingertips slick with blood, but he didn’t stop.

When he was done, he inspected his work.

Yes. This will work just fine.

He ran a finger over the edge of his homemade blade. Sharp enough to puncture his skin. A small bead of blood welled up. A slow grin spread across his face. Sliding the weapon into his pants, he whispered to himself.

“Just try it. Come get me. I’ve got a surprise waiting for you.”

Noise.

A lot of noise.

Footsteps. Heavy. Fast. Stomping against a wooden floor.

He jolted awake, scrambling back against the wall. His sweat-soaked skin pressed against the cold concrete.

This is it.

They were coming. The moment of truth.

His fingers fumbled for his makeshift dagger. Tearing a strip of fabric from his shirt, he wrapped it around his fist. The blade quivered in his grip, his teeth chattering, his breath sharp and uneven.

His gaze locked onto the door.

That damned door.

The door swung open, and a flood of bright light pierced the darkness of his cell.

Here they come. Here they come. This is it. Damn you. Damn you all.

His muscles locked so tightly that his entire body trembled. His mind spun at a hundred miles an hour, primed for battle, though he had no idea how it would unfold.

One thing was sure, they would not take him alive.

Minutes passed.

Nothing.

The door.

That damned door.

It stood wide open, but no one came.

Fresh air poured in, rolling down the steps like an invisible tide. He inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with the outside world. Car fumes. Grass. Cigarette smoke. The scent of freedom. How wonderful plain old air could be.

But still. No one. No one was coming.

What are they waiting for?

He remembered something: the best defense is a good offense.

His breathing slowed. The shivering subsided. He pushed himself to his feet and crept forward, each step careful, deliberate. At the threshold, he squinted into the blinding light. It burned his eyes like fire. He threw a hand up, shielding his face, dodging his head in and out of the doorway like a caged animal testing its limits.

Nothing.

No one.

Then a sound.

Soft. Barely there.

Someone was waiting. Watching and toying with him.

They want to break me.

Hahaha. Crazy.

Hahaha. Crraaazy.

Hibi.

Fuck 'em. I'll do what I want.

His fists clenched, knuckles white. I'll show them.

With a bone-shaking scream, he lunged forward, charging up the steps.

Bursting from the basement, he plunged the jagged aluminum deep into his own chest.

“Who’s a good one now, assholes?! Who’s a good one now?!”

Blood gushed from the wound, warm and sticky, soaking through his shirt.

He fell to his knees, coughing, sputtering red onto the cold floor.

“Come get me now.”

The blade twisted in his grip, shredding muscle, tearing through his lungs.

Each movement sent another wave of fire through his body, but he welcomed it. His breath came in ragged gasps, drowning in his own blood.

Screams echoed around him.

Footsteps.

Rushing.

Closer. Closer. Too late.

His heartbeat pounded in his ears, drowning out the voices.

He swayed forward, barely able to hold himself up, still swinging the dagger in weak, clumsy arcs.

“Who’s a good one now?”

His lips trembled, blood spilling from his mouth with every word.

Footsteps.

Many.

Hands. Warm hands. Pressing against his chest. Cradling his head.

"Michael! Michael, don't go! Please stay with us! Fight, Michael, please!"

A voice. Familiar.

Mom?

What is she doing here?

"Michael, please... we were just trying to help you... please..."

The world faded.

"It's okay, Mom. It's okay."

Soft kisses against her cheek.

Jessica's arms wrapped around her, holding her together as she shattered.

"He's at peace now," Jessica whispered.

His mother sobbed into her shoulder, tears soaking the soft pink fabric of Jessica's sweater.

"My boy... my poor boy! NO! He's my boy! MY BOY!"

Her cries filled the room, a mother's grief carving through the air like a blade.

"We should have never locked him up. I should have never let them talk me into this. I should have taken him to a real rehab, not some goddamned experiment.

Damned insurance companies.

It's all my fault. It's all my fault..."

She cradled Michael's lifeless face in her hands, rocking him gently as if she could will him back. Jessica tried to soothe her, whispering empty comforts into the silence.

Outside, sirens wailed in the distance.

Sunlight streamed through the windows, stretching long shadows across the walls. A silhouette moved. A man started taking down the decorations.

The balloons.

The congratulations sign.

Michael Thompson

Beloved Son

August 21, 2002 – December 28, 2025

The End.



TORN

The basement was colder than it should have been. Concrete sweated in slow, weeping drips. Mold traced the corners like veins under skin.

Father Gabriel sat in the basement, and as cold as the room was, he was sweating through his collar.

It was the kind of room the Church would never bless. Damp walls, a leaky pipe overhead, the concrete floor cracked like an old rib cage left out in the sun. One bare bulb hung from the ceiling casting shadows on the wall that twitched like flies. This was just part of their tactics. Let your victims wait in the dark.

His hands trembled as he reached for his lighter. Scar tissue laced across his knuckles. Reminders of old rites gone sideways. Burned crosses. Salt lines broken too soon.

He lit his cigarette.

The cellar stank of mildew and something rotten.

Footsteps echoed from above, measured, deliberate.

Father Gabriel stood and flicked the ash off his lapel.

The steel door creaked open and Vincent D'Onofrio walked in, a black leather jacket, white shirt, a gold chain resting like a noose of its own. He closed the door behind him, calm as a butcher.

"You look like shit, padre," Vincent said, smiling like he meant it.

“I’ve been praying,” Father Gabriel rasped.

Vincent nodded to the far end of the basement, where a maintenance hallway led into deeper darkness.

Father Gabriel crushed the cigarette underfoot.

“You know why you’re here?” Vincent asked, voice silken with menace.

“Not really,” Father Gabriel muttered, wiping his palms down his thighs.

Vincent raised an eyebrow. “Remember that crack whore you rescued last year?”

Father Gabriel looked up. “Her name was Mari.”

“Whatever. It’s time to pay your debt,” Vincent replied.

One of the tugs stepped past Father Gabriel, toward the dark and he could feel it, the presence. Heavy. Watching. The air pressed against his chest like wet cloth.

Behind him, Vincent called out: “I told you there’d be a price to pay for the income you took from me.”

“You did.”

“Well, padre...” Vincent stepped closer, shoes echoing off stone “...it’s time to pay up.”

Father Gabriel exhaled through his nose. He didn’t flinch, but his jaw clenched tight enough to pop.

“You’re not sending me after another girl. Are you?”

“No,” Vincent said, almost laughing. “This one’s already taken. Not by me. Something... else. Something I need gone.”

Father Gabriel stared at him, then looked away. “This is not my work anymore.”

“It is now. Your life depends on it. Her life depends on it.”

Silence.

Vincent let the words hang in the mold-thick air, then turned toward the stairs.

He snapped his fingers once.

A moment later, one of his men emerged, bald, expressionless, sleeves rolled up over arms mapped in prison ink. He wheeled in something large, something heavy. It rolled on rusted casters, groaning with every turn. The crate was about six feet tall, thick oak, and bound in blackened iron. A chain ran through the latches, taut and trembling like it was holding back a pulse. As it got closer, he heard the first thump. Then a whimper. Then something like a voice scraping the inside.

“What is this?” Father Gabriel asked, throat dry.

Vincent lit a cigarette. “The package. Handle with care.”

The goon stopped a few feet away. Father Gabriel stepped back. Something inside the box shifted, dragging nails or bone or teeth against the interior.

Then the screaming started.

It wasn't rage. It was fury wrapped in sorrow. A sound too broken to be fully human, like a child's nightmare amplified through a throat that hadn't slept in days.

Vincent nodded once.

The goon unhooked the chain. The tension in the room snapped like a rubber band.

Vincent yanked the lid off.

The girl inside arched upward like a broken marionette, her back split with old bruises, her limbs crusted with filth and iron bruises. Her hair clung to her face like seaweed. Her eyes... weren't hers. Solid Black.

Father Gabriel stumbled back.

She was naked, except for a rag that clung to her hips. Her skin a map of forgotten tortures, track marks, burns, symbols he didn't recognize. Her wrists were chained to the box. Her ankles too.

But it was her face that stopped him.

Tears cut lines through the grime. Her mouth trembled, not with fear, but with something like recognition.

"Father," she whispered.

And then in a second low, cracked, ancient voice: "You're late."

Father Gabriel didn't dare to blink. The girl, Kristina, lay trembling in the box behind him, her breath a rattle, her skin a map of trauma. He could feel the presence, watching from beneath her eyes.

"She needs help," he said quietly, not facing Luca.

"She needs an exorcism," Vincent replied. "She needs it now."

Father Gabriel turned, shaking his head. "It doesn't work like that. The Church has procedures. Approvals. There has to be ..."

Click.

The sound froze the air.

Vincent pulled a Glock from his waistband and calmly slid a bullet into the chamber. He stepped forward, raised the gun, and without ceremony, jammed the muzzle between Father Gabriel's lips.

Steel clinked against teeth.

The priest gagged.

"Then what good are you to me?" Vincent screamed, staring the priest deep in the eyes.

The world narrowed to a pinpoint: cold metal, the taste of oil, and the hum of something in the dark that was not done waiting.

Father Gabriel's knees buckled. He made a choking sound, half a protest, half a sob.

"Okay," he croaked as the gun withdrew. "Okay. I'll do it."

Vincent smiled like a man who'd just won a coin toss.

"Get to it."

Father Gabriel wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his coat, then reached for the vial of holy water in his pocket. His hands were shaking too much to uncork it. Behind him, the girl laughed, only it wasn't Kristina's laugh. Something older. Wetter.

"You bring a knife to cut fire, priest?" the demon rasped. "You should've let him pull the trigger."

The basement was silent except for the wet rustle of the girl's breath and the soft clink of chains as she shifted inside the box.

Vincent sat on an overturned crate in the corner, cleaning his fingernails with the same knife he used to gut someone last week. He watched Father Gabriel prepare, half-bored, half-curious, like a gambler watching the dice before they roll.

Father Gabriel drew a shaky salt circle around the crate, whispering Latin like a man remembering a song he used to love. The holy water shook in his grip. He recited the Rite not from faith, but from memory, from guilt.

"In Nomine Patris, et Filii..." He flung holy water across the demon.

The demon inside Kristina writhed with every drop that splashed on its skin. But it didn't scream. It just smiled.

"...et Spiritus Sancti..."

Kristina hung still in her shackles, barely breathing. But the voice inside her slithered out between her teeth.

“You don’t even remember my name,” it hissed. “After all this. After the pain we have endured together.”

Father Gabriel inched towards her, careful not to break the circle of salt he had made on the ground. He stepped into the demon’s dominion. “Tell me. What is your name. What gives you authority to possess this woman?”

The demon grinned. Its lips split.

“We have met before priest. But you have forgotten. My name is Adalon.

They called me that before your God learned to crawl. I’ve hidden in a thousand skins to forget the light. But I still feel it, in dreams, golden, unblinking, merciful and terrifying. I crave it like fire, but I know if it touches me now... I will be no more.” The demon launched forward and spat in his face. Without losing his concentration he wiped his face; he could not let the demon get to him.

Father Gabriel held up a relic he had used numerous times before, an old medallion with a shattered edge, the Jerusalem cross embossed on it. He pressed it against her brow. “WHAT GIVES YOU AUTHORITY OVER THIS WOMAN?”

The medallion burned into Kristina’s skin and the demon’s scream shook the room. Vincent flinched, almost cutting himself.

“STOP!” the demon roared. “It burns. IT BURNS!”

“Then speak.” Father Gabriel growled. “Why her? Why did you take her?”

Low words rumbled from the shell of Kristina’s body. “She is a sinner; all sinners are for us to inhabit.” The voice trembled now, breaking apart.

“Hell is a wound that never closes. We claw out of it to hide in your bodies.

Your suffering..., what you even dare to call suffering, is less than ours.

When we can hide in flesh, we forget the fire. When we take on the flesh we get reprieve from the scorching fires of hell. But it is only temporary, as your bodies are weak.”

Father Gabriel’s hand dropped. He stared at the girl, blood seeping from her cracked lips, the ruin of her arms.

“You are hiding,” he said softly.

“Yes.” Adalon’s voice slithered.

“She was never the one you wanted.”

“No.”

Silence.

Father Gabriel sat back, shaking.

He looked across the room at Luca, still watching, still waiting for it to be done.

And then it came to him.

“Your possession consumes the host. Over time, it kills them.”

“Slowly,” the demon whispered. “We take, we rot, we empty. And when it’s hollow, we are forced to return to the pit.”

Father Gabriel stood. He stepped out of the circle of salt and looked at Luca. Something didn’t make sense.

“You want her saved?”

Vincent scoffed. “Obviously.”

“Why is she so important to you? I have never seen you care for anyone this much.”

“Well, you don’t know me priest. Do you. You only know what you think is the truth.”

“Tell me.” Father Gabriel stared Vincent down.

The demon twisted, cracking Kristina’s neckbones. A low rattle falling from her mouth.

“Can you save her?” Vincent said as he came closer.

“I might. I will try with all I got.”

The demon spat in the direction of the men and released a long low bellowing series of laughs.

Vincent grabbed Anthoney’s arm.

“She is my sister. Kristina. She is my only family left. Save her.”

Father Gabriel was shocked. For a second he did not know what to say.

“I forgive all your debts. I will never contact you again. Just save her.”

Tears welled up in Luca’s eyes.

Father Gabriel closed his eyes for a second and stared deep into Luca’s eyes.

“Whatever it takes?” He asked.

“Whatever it takes. You have my word.” Vincent held out his hand.

Father Gabriel shook it. “Whatever it takes.”

He wrapped his rosary firmly around his hand, praying loud and with conviction. Every time he got to one of the larger beads, he flung holy water onto Adalonl making the shape of the cross. Each drop of water scorched Kristina’s skin, burning it where it landed.

“In the name of Jesus Christ, In the name of the Holy Spirit, in the name of God, I command you to leave this body.” He punched Adalonl, the rosary’s cross slashed across Kristina’s cheek. “Begone Satan...” Father Gabriel punched Adalonl again and splashed more holy water. “Inventor and master of all deceit...”. With each punch Kristina’s body was growing weaker and the demon inside became more desperate. He would have to be careful not to sacrifice her to expel the monster that was possessing her. But he had to push, push them both to the brink of death. “Begone now. Begone in our lord Jesus Christ’s name.”

Adalonl shrieked in despair. “Stoppppp. Stoppppp. I beg you. Kyrie, eleison. Kyrie, eleison.” Tears of blood dripped from Kristina’s eyes. “I beg you priest, have mercy. I once was an angel. I to am a creation of your God. I beg you. Kyrie eleison.”

In all his years, and all the exorcisms, he conducted or attended, he had never heard a demon beg for mercy. It made Father Gabriel think for a second, that they to, had been deceived by Satan, that they were forced to suffer eternally for their sins. He could not let this foul creature devour Kristina. He could not let it trick him. But then he knew.

“Are you willing to leave this woman. In God’s name leave her. Set her free.” Father Gabriel pressed the crucifix to Kristina’s forehead.

Adalonl shrieked in pain as the cross burned Kristina’s flesh. The demon’s dark eyes faded out and Father Gabriel could see Kristina’s blue eyes slowly fade back in.

“Switch. Priest. Switch.” Adalon whispered, pleaded. “I will let the girl go. Switch.”

Father Gabriel stepped back. He knew.

His foot broke the salt circle of salt that contained the demon.

Father Gabriel reached out his hand. “Luca.”

Vincent looked up, not knowing what he was witnessing.

“Give me your hand Luca. Now. This is the time. Now!” Father Gabriel let the rosary slide from his other hand. His other hand seized Luca’s wrist muttered a final invocation and pressed the relic to his palm. The reaction was immediate. Kristina gasped, her body arching, then collapsing into sobs.

Vincent staggered, blinking, clutching at his chest

Father Gabriel felt an electric shock pulse through his body as Adalon transferred its filthy spirit from Kristina into Luca. For a split second, he could see hell, taste the sulfur, smell the decay, and before he could truly register, he hit the ground.

“What did you? What the fuck did you...”

His voice changed mid-sentence.

It dropped.

Fell.

Something wet slithered through it.

“Oh,” Adalon breathed. “Oh... this one’s warm. So full of sin.”

Father Gabriel looked down at Kristina crying on the floor, human again.

“You said you needed a body,” he told the demon. “I found you one.”

“This won’t last,” it growled. “He’ll decay. You’ll see.”

“I know. But that’s not my problem.” Father Gabriel turned away. “It gets you out of Hell, and it gets you out of her.”

“I paid my price in flesh.” he whispered to Luca, who laid shaking on the ground, face twitching with something inside, his eyes fading away, turning a solid black. Beneath his skin Father Gabriel could see the darkness spreading. He bent down and took Luca’s jacket, carefully, putting it on Kristina. He freed her from her wooden cage.

As they walked out together the lightbulb overhead exploded, and the screaming started all over again.

A week later, Father Gabriel lit a candle in a nameless chapel on the edge of the city. His collar was gone. The pews were empty. But he still prayed.

For Kristina. For Himself.

And, God help him, for Luca.

The End.



UNDER MY SKIN

The old woman had the timing down to a minute. Last bus gone, first drunks thinning, the hour when even good men feel alone in their chests and want to be useful for something.

She stood at the foot of the red-brick walkup with two paper grocery bags and a cane, letting everything about her be slightly off. The bags pulled at her wrists. The cane was too polished for the stoop. The pleated skirt was too formal for the heat. She knew if she made the picture nearly right, people would step closer to fix it.

“Excuse me,” she said as the first candidate passed, broad-shouldered, earbuds in, open eyes darting for a split second to assess, then skitter away.

“Mijo? If it’s not too much... these steps...”

He hesitated, gathering the ghost of a boundary. Stale lilies and a wet-copper radiator smell filled the air.

“I’m just up to the third,” she said. “I shouldn’t have bought so many jars. Thumb’s not what it was.” She raised a hand and showed him the thumb wrapped in a beige brace, a good pharmacy purchase. A little too spotless.

“Sure,” he said, and hooked an earbud out. “Yeah. I got you.”

“Bless you,” she said. People will swallow anything if you put the right salt on it.

He took the heavier bag. Shouldered his own backpack to his other side and reached for the second bag, but she clucked her tongue and lifted it herself with a convincing wobble.

The bag unnaturally warmed his palm through the paper. He felt glass clink. Something viscous thudded. A sack of rice slid against a carton. The unnatural warmth was the first wrong thing. Groceries should be cool. But the paper was dry under his fingers. He chalked the heat up to the lazy night, the bricks, the way the building hoarded heat from the day and sweated it out after midnight.

He was one floor up before it occurred to him to give a name. "I'm Jesse," he said, trying to be polite.

The old woman smiled up at him, her teeth a hint too perfect in their modesty. "Jesús," she repeated, warm and deliberate.

"Jesse," he corrected, then heard himself and laughed. "Either way."

"Either way," she echoed, pinning the syllables with care like tags on butterflies.

The stairwell light droned. Someone had switched the bulb lately; the layer of dust on the glass was too fragile for old neglect. On the second landing, a hand-scrawled notice on the corkboard curled up at the edges: Super: NO GARBAGE IN HALL. NO EXCEPTIONS. Below, a flyer for a cat with a torn ear, ink blurred by damp fingers.

The old woman's cane tapped, tik, tik. Pause, tik, an off-rhythm that made Jesse adjust his step unconsciously. He tried to retake the second bag, and she shook her head with a stiffness that felt rehearsed instead of frail.

"I've got my little one," she said, patting the bag like a child. "You are strong. No?" She touched his wrist with two fingers, a brief claim. Her skin was tissue-flesh-soft and cooler than the air, a surprise that made him swallow.

"Third floor?" he asked, because the second flight always felt farther than the first. And conversation helps you climb.

"Three B," she said, tasting the B like a flavor she liked. "Just at the end."

"Big building?" He nodded up. "Feels bigger at night."

"Buildings are like people," she said. And it landed like a proverb. "They keep secrets better in the shadows."

They passed a window cut into the stairwell like a wound, the screen bowed inward. A moth tested the mesh on the inside as if it had been born there and knew the shape of escape but not its direction. Outside the glass: the street, the sodium hush. An empty bench, the night kept going on with or without them.

On the third-floor landing, the stench deepened, the floral note grew cloying. Oppressive with sickly sweetness, like someone had microwaved potpourri. Jesse grimaced and shifted the bag higher against his chest.

“The stench,”

“My neighbor,” she said, lowering her voice in a confiding whisper older women have perfected in every language. “She sprays, for the bugs.” A slight, precise pause. “It does not help.”

The hall was narrow enough that his shoulder skimmed the wall, leaving a stain on the paint that wanted to be eggshell but had lived a more complex life. Apartment 3A wore three sets of lock scars around its knob. 3B at the end had nothing but a peephole and paint that didn’t match the others, a shade too beige, a tone more like skin. 3C had a dreamcatcher with more dust than dreams in its web.

The old woman’s pace hitched. She seemed suddenly too tired, but then corrected herself. The bag in her arms inflated slightly and then deflated with a faint paper wheeze. Jesse stopped dead. The grocery bag shouldn’t have done that. He stared at it. He told himself it was the paper shifting. Air trapped and released. The physics of corners.

“Almost there,” she said, bright again. The brightness felt like someone pulling a blanket over a sore place. “You have been so kind.” She did a slight twist with her mouth, fishing for something to say next. “Would you like a glass of water? For the stairs?”

“I’m good,” he said automatically. “I mean, I could. Yeah, maybe.” The word maybe hung. Politeness is a leash he’d worn all his life.

At 3B, the old woman let her own bag tilt forward until the paper edge touched the door. Not quite a knock; more intimate, like a forehead resting on wood. The hallway draft paused. The peephole fogged a little from inside.

“Here,” Jesse said, shifting his weight so he could reach without dropping everything. “Let me set this just inside the door. Save you the lift.”

“Oh,” she said, as if the thought had not occurred to her, as if she did not live for this moment. “That would be...” Her tongue gathered the proper adjective. “Lovely.”

She patted along the top of her bag and found the keys, or what appeared to be keys. A fob with floral print, a brass key with its teeth chewed smooth by doors that didn’t cooperate. The second key was entirely smooth, no cuts at all. She selected the second key without looking and put it in the lock. The door accepted it like a mouth accepts a trusted spoon.

The door opened halfway. The stench poured out, not stronger, exactly, but nearer, the way a whisper is not louder than a shout and still lives closer to your spine.

“Just to the table,” she said, tipping her head toward the shadowed inside. Jesse stepped over the threshold, careful not to snag the grocery bag on the doorjamb, polite not to bump the owner in her own doorway. The floor

beneath his feet felt insubstantial, faintly yielding, as though cushioned under the boards.

“Where do you want?” he asked as he set the bag on the not-table. The surface was slick, almost living, and unnaturally warm. Not sunlight-unnaturally warm. Body-unnaturally warm.

“It keeps the chill out,” she said, apologetic as if she knew that was a little fancy for a place like this. The apology made his hand lower the last inch. The bag settled. Something inside sighed, the same tiny paper wheeze, like a sleeping thing shifting.

“Second one?” he asked, looking back.

“If you could,” she said.

He turned back with the second bag and took two steps in. A floorboard whispered, no, not a board; something under the floor that had been trying very hard not to make a sound for a very long time and had forgotten how the human version of the sound should go.

“Do you live here alone?” he asked. The room felt watched.

“Yes,” she said. She meant for now, and he heard yes because he wanted to.

“Sit,” she said, flesh-softly, like an aunt offering comfort. “Just a moment. Rest your legs.”

He almost said no. Almost. But the word snagged on his upbringing. He smiled. It felt rehearsed. He lowered himself onto the sofa.

The cushions yielded beneath him, sighing around him, then stiffened as if adjusting to his shape. Too much give, too much attention.

“Comfy?” she asked, her head tilted in a way that felt rehearsed. She stepped back, fussing with the bags.

The fabric at his sides shivered, like upholstery catching a draft. Then the seat cupped him, subtly first. Then insistently.

“Yeah,” he said, voice trembling. “It’s... fine.”

The sofa answered by closing in. The cushions rose at his hips, pressing inward. The back arched behind him with the slow inevitability of a closing jaw. His instinct screamed, and he shoved to rise, but the seat seemed to grab. Not with hands but with pressure. With intelligence that understood the shape of his body.

“What the,” he started.

The old woman stood perfectly still, her eyes bright with something too sharp for gratitude.

The sofa’s arms flexed. What had been padding became muscle. The seam along the seat split wider, threads snapping like torn flesh, flesh-soft fabric peeling like gums. Jesse’s protest broke into a strangled yell as the cushions clapped up around him with the finality of a mouth shutting.

It was not loud. More like a resounding wet thud, as if a fruit had been dropped and broken open. His voice vanished under it, cut clean.

The old woman smoothed her skirt, the cane leaning untouched beside her.

She glanced at the bulge inside the sofa as it shifted once, twice. Then settled. The upholstery resettled itself neatly, no stain, no seam, only a faint unnatural warmth lingering where he had been.

From the thickening silence, a thought pressed against her skull.

Not enough.

She tilted her head, listening. *"You swallowed him whole, Corven."*

"Thin," came the reply, damp and cold. *"Hollow. I am still hungry."*

"You are always hungry."

"And you, Eira... you are always hunting. That is why we endure."

She touched the cracked bowl on the not-table, the way a wife touches a clock to mark time. *"Then we will hunt again."*

"Bring me marrow. Bring me flesh. Bring me more."

"Yes," she whispered, her form already flesh-softening at the edges, ready to take on another skin. *"I'll find us something better."*

She lifted the cane again, though her gait did not falter as she crossed the threshold. The hall waited, dim, indifferent, ordinary, as if nothing had happened.

Down the stairs. Tik, tik, pause, tik. Her rhythm returned. Rehearsed. At the door, she straightened her back, tested her lips in the glass until they

smiled in a way that people trusted. The old woman's form had been good.

Too good.

But Corven was right. One was never enough.

The street yawned outside, empty but not for long. She stepped into the sodium hush of the night, her eyes flicking, already searching for the next kindness that might kill.

The next night came humid and heavy, the air sticking to the walls of the stairwell.

This time she wore a different mask. The cane was gone, the skirt traded for slacks and a buttoned shirt, the face broader, lined with the years of an honest man. His hair was thin at the temples, his shoulders slightly stooped, the sort of neighbor you never really noticed until you had to.

On the second-floor landing, he stopped and waited. Not long.

Opportunity always walked by eventually.

The door to 2C opened. And a woman stepped out, balancing two trash bags and a laptop case. She reeked faintly of soap and late work hours. He smiled, tired but friendly.

"Evening," he said, with the casual warmth of someone you've passed on the stairs a dozen times.

She nodded, polite but brisk.

He shifted the small box in his arms, taped cardboard, edges dented just enough to look real. “Hey. Sorry. Could I ask a tiny favor? Could you help me up just one flight of stairs? My hands are so full. And I’ve dropped this box twice already.”

She hesitated, instinct drawing the line. But politeness tugged harder. She’d seen him before. He lived here. Harmless.

“Sure,” she said, adjusting the bags. “Which floor?”

“Third,” he said. “Not far. You’re an angel. Thank you.”

They climbed together, her breath a little quick from carrying the trash bags earlier. His steps matched hers exactly, too exactly. But she didn’t notice.

At the landing, he nudged the door with his shoe. “Just in here. On the table.”

She frowned. But only slightly.

Inside, the air pressed close, floral and metallic. She wrinkled her nose.

“Bug spray?”

“Neighbor,” he said, smiling like it was a shared secret. He stepped aside to let her in. She crossed the threshold, and the cardboard box warmed against her palm. The door eased behind them with a whisper.

“Just on the sofa, please,” he said.

The sofa exhaled a damp, hungry breath.

Her head turned. “What,”

The box in her arms shifted, something inside thudding wetly. She almost dropped it.

“Careful,” he said gently. “It breaks so easily.”

She set it down fast. The cushions behind her flexed, their seams splitting wide. From the shadowed crease, strings of slick silk shot outward with shocking speed. One tentacle clamped across her mouth, wet and strong, sealing the scream before it formed. Another coiled her wrist, another her ankle. They came alive with purpose, winding, wrapping, binding. She staggered, kicking, eyes wild. The box toppled and split on the floor, cloudy jars rolling across the floor, their lids rattling like teeth.

More tendrils lashed out, looping around her waist, her shoulders, her throat. She gagged against the pressure; her body lifted as though by an unseen puppeteer. Her head snapped back, face half-swallowed by one muscular, slimed cord.

“*Corven*,” Eira chided lightly, arms folded as she leaned against the wall.

“*You’re such a messy eater.*”

The tendrils pulled her down relentlessly, dragging her into the yawning crack of the sofa. Her nails scraped the fabric but left no mark. A muffled cry quivered and stopped as the upholstery closed around her, Corven’s tentacles slick with mucus and hunger, retreating one by one until nothing

moved. Silence settled again. Only the faint, obscene sound of swallowing from deep inside the creature.

The sofa's fabric rippled, then smoothed itself, flattening the last bulge. A shadow radiated from its surface.

Eira cocked her head. *"Better?"*

The answer slid into her skull like cold oil.

"Richer. Stronger. Still not enough."

She sighed, feigning long-suffering. *"I swear, you'd eat the whole building if I'd let you."*

"And you'd starve without me." Corven burped back.

Her smile, which felt rehearsed, was faint and secretive. "Perhaps. But you'd never be able to lure them through the door without me."

The cracked bowl on the table trembled faintly, its fissure flexing as it tasted the humid night air.

"Tomorrow," she said, smoothing her borrowed shirt, the man's voice already fading from her throat. *"We'll find you another. But I'll have to feed myself, too."*

"Find us another," Corven corrected, hunger still pressing against her thoughts.

She glanced at the door, the hallway beyond. The trash bags her victim had carried lay forgotten in the corner. Eira stepped over them, heels clicking flesh-softly on the floor. Already rehearsing a new smile that felt rehearsed.

By the third night, Eira wore a different skin.

She chose beauty this time. The kind of beauty that turned heads before the mind could remind itself to be cautious. Her body was all lines and curves arranged for hunger. Her long legs poured into a short black dress that clung like a secret, hips swaying with a rhythm that suggested promise. Her hair spilled in loose waves, shadowed and glossy, catching the streetlight like wet silk. Her mouth painted deep red, curved into a smile that hinted at private knowledge. Her eyes were dark, still, half-lidded, lashes heavy, the kind of eyes that made a man lean closer without realizing he'd moved.

She walked like she owned the sidewalk, her heels clicking a seductive invitation. Each step carried the lazy grace of someone who knew she was being watched.

On the corner, laughter spilled from a group of young men staggering home from bars. She didn't need to call them. She paused, angled her body just right. Letting the night drape over her like a lover's arm. One of the men broke away, the tallest, his gaze caught and tethered. His friends were teased. Barking their encouragement. They wandered off. He stayed.

She tilted her head, lips curling. "You look restless," she said. Her voice is low, velvet, the kind that brushes the skin before the ear.

He laughed, half-embarrassed, half-thrilled. "Maybe I am."

“Good,” she murmured, drawing a cigarette from her clutch. She lit it without inhaling, holding it like a prop, like a promise of intimacy. Her nails gleamed crimson against the glow. “Walk me home, then. Unless you’re afraid of the shadows.”

He followed. Of course he did.

Inside her apartment, the air pressed heavy and floral, cloying in its sickly sweetness. He hardly noticed. His attention was on her. He watched the sway of her hips as she slipped off her heels and the curve of her back as she let the dress slide to the floor. She playfully lay herself naked on the sofa, one hand trailing over the cushions as though introducing flesh to flesh. Her voice filled the room, low and resonant, vibrating through the air. Her invitation to join her at a frequency that set his bones glowing faintly, stark as X-rays, before dissolving into slurry humming. His thoughts dulled, slowed, flesh softened.

“Come here,” she whispered.

He obeyed.

They kissed, his body pressing against hers, the heat of her skin intoxicating. Her voice purred in his ear, a sound too sweet to resist, half-hypnotic, half-command. He sank deeper into her spell with every syllable. From beneath them, Corven stirred, restless.

"Don't be enjoying this too much," the voice hissed, not aloud but inside both their skulls, a slippery intrusion.

Eira's lips curved against his. She rolled him smoothly onto his back, straddling him, her eyes shadowed pools that drank his reflection.

"Do you want me to ride you?" she asked, velvet and venom.

"Yes," he breathed, dazed. Eager. Horny. Hard.

She pushed him down firmly, his back sinking into the cushions that shifted with a hungry sigh. The fabric clung to him, pulling, shaping itself around his body. He gasped, but her voice drowned any doubt; her touch gently pressed him deeper.

The sofa opened beneath him like a mouth, its seams parting, and the warmth beneath him turned wet. He thrashed once. Too late.

The sofa convulsed violently, membranes straining as it swallowed and Corven fed. The man was dragged under, pressed through layers of slick, membranous flesh. His body buckled and shrank as it was being squeezed through an unseen throat.

For a moment, shapes bulged beneath the upholstery: the outline of a chest rising, ribs straining, a jaw gaping in a silent scream. Then the skin peeled from his face, muscle dissolved into a shadowed slurry that spread like ink in water.

Through the fabric, bones showed pale, flickering like trapped insects. His arm jerked outward, his fingers clawing at the surface in a last, desperate reflex. The dissolving hand pressed against its prison, tendons straining against skin that no longer belonged to him. For a second, it pleaded for release, then the flesh sagged, softened into pulp. The outline bled away into a milk-colored shadow, then vanished entirely. The sofa sighed as it digested its prey. The fabric quivered, something beneath shifted its weight, then smoothed flat.

Eira stood still, watching the faint bulges ripple and vanish, as if Corven's skin had swallowed the man whole and was already forgetting him.

"Better," Corven's voice pulsed inside her skull. *"Richer. But still not enough."* The cracked bowl on the table trembled, its fissures widening like a mouth forming a smile.

Eira slipped her dress back over her shoulders, eyes lingering on the sofa's surface, which shivered once. Then lie still. *"You'll never be satisfied."*

"No," Corven said, hunger thick and unblinking. *"And neither will you."*

She opened the door, the hallway dim, indifferent, ordinary again. A laugh drifted from somewhere outside, careless, human, close enough to taste.

Eira's lips curved into a new smile. She walked out.

"I'll be back." She said, closing the door. "Now I need to go feed myself."

The End.



THE THIRD DOOR

One

The house still smelled like mothballs and cigarette ash, but something underneath the house smelled too. Something sweet and sour, like flowers left to rot in a sealed room.

Erin stood in the entryway with her keys still dangling from the lock, unsure whether she'd stepped into a memory or a mausoleum. The floor groaned beneath her like it resented her return. The same brown shag carpet from 1989 spread out like dead moss. The air was humid and almost viscous. It clung to her skin.

On the far wall, the old analog thermostat blinked blankly, set to 74. The temperature hadn't changed, but the air felt wrong, like it had lungs.

She hadn't been back since she was eight. The year her mother sent her away without explanation. She was given a duffel bag, a cab, and a choked "be good." Erin remembered the silence more than anything. Not cold, just... sealed. Like the house itself had been told to forget her.

Now her mother was dead. A stroke, alone. No neighbors, no friends, no will. Just the house. And now, her.

That night, Erin lay on the thin mattress in her childhood bedroom, staring at the ceiling. The corners of the wallpaper had curled back like peeling skin. Her old lamp flickered when she tried to turn it on, then went out

entirely. Her phone wouldn't charge. The charger heated up in her hand,
too fast.

Something scratched faintly in the walls, more deliberate than mice.

Slow.

Repeating.

Like fingernails tracing a familiar path.

Sleep came in pieces. Shallow. Restless. And then,

Knock. Knock. Knock.

She sat up. Her heart hit her ribs like a trapped animal.

The clock on the nightstand read: 3:33 a.m.

Three slow, deliberate knocks again. From downstairs.

Not loud. Not threatening. But measured. Intimate. Like someone knew
she was listening.

Erin moved deliberately. Down the hallway. Down the stairs. The
floorboards wailed under her bare feet. The porch light flickered once, then
steadied, as if something had paused beneath it.

She opened the door.

No one.

Just heat. Stillness. The sound of crickets. The house dead silent.

But something sat on the doormat.

A Polaroid.

Curled at the edges, colors drained like old bruises. It showed a girl. Not older than seven. Standing on the walkway in front of the house. One arm hung limp. The other held a stuffed rabbit, threadbare, head lolling to one side. Her face was caught mid-turn, eyes half-closed.

Erin knew the dress, a blue one with white trim.

It was hers.

She didn't remember the photo being taken.

She turned it over.

Three words, scrawled in smeared ink:

"See you soon."

Two

Erin didn't sleep the next night. Or the one after.

She hadn't told anyone. Who would believe her? Who could? Facing the silence of her doubts, she picked up the phone and dialed the only number she could think of. It rang, unanswered. She listened to the automated voice prompting her to leave a message. "Mom? It's me..." Erin's voice faltered, the question hanging in the air. She left no message, just the echo of isolation.

By the end of the first week, she was jumpy, brittle, and constantly watching the corners of rooms. The air felt off, as if it were pressing inward. The lights flickered longer now. The silence between creaks seemed to breathe.

She kept glancing at the clock, as if it might catch her staring back.

Two weeks passed. The house no longer felt like a home. It felt like it was waiting.

Then came the knocking.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

3:33 a.m. Of course.

This time, Erin was ready, but only the way a deer is ready for headlights.

She grabbed a flashlight even though the porch light was on. She did not remember turning it on.

She unlocked the door.

Silence.

But colder than before.

Waiting on the doormat, a box.

Small. Carved wood. Old enough to drink in humidity like skin yearning for moisture. It looked exactly like the one her mother used to keep rings in, before she stopped wearing them.

Her hands shook as she brought it inside. The lock was long broken. It opened with a click that felt too loud.

Inside, cushioned in velvet and dust, was a broken key on a rusted chain.

Erin stared at it until her vision began to blur.

She knew this key.

It had once belonged to the basement storage room. The one her mother always kept locked, the one she wasn't allowed to go near, even as a child. She hadn't thought of it in years.

Taped to the inside of the lid was a brittle scrap of paper. A scent of lavender clung to it. I smelled like her mother's perfume after it went bad. Her mother's handwriting, slanted and tense:

"The door was never locked for your protection. It was locked for him."

Erin staggered back. The box hit the floor. The key made a sound that didn't match its size. Heavy, like it remembered where it had been.

Her father.

She remembered the shouting. On the nights, the lights would stay off. Her mother's eyes are always tired. Her father's hands were constantly shaking. And then, nothing. He was just gone.

She'd always assumed he had left.

But now... she wasn't sure.

That morning, just after dawn, she stood at the basement door with the key in her fist. The padlock had rusted into flakes. She slid it off and pushed the door.

It resisted. Not like it was stuck, like it knew.

The hinges shrieked.

The air inside was different, colder than the rest of the house, but not clean.

It smelled like mildew, sweat, and old breath.

The room was small. Concrete. No windows.

The lightbulb overhead buzzed, then steadied.

Scratched into the back of the door were tally marks.

Hundreds. Maybe thousands.

Some deep and old. Some seemed fresh.

Beneath them, barely legible, carved with something jagged and hopeless.

“JACOB.”

Someone had been locked in here for a very long time.

Three

Erin no longer dared to leave the house, not after what she found in the basement.

She tried to rationalize it. Perhaps her father had a breakdown, maybe the tally marks were his own doing, perhaps the door was just a terrible mistake. But the smell, the stillness, the scratches...

And the name. JACOB, carved like a confession.

She stopped using the lights. They hummed too loud, flickered too often, trying to send messages she couldn't read.

The air felt thinner. The rooms seemed smaller. She began hearing footsteps upstairs when she was downstairs, and downstairs when she was upstairs.

Sometimes, when she looked into the mirror in the hall, her reflection didn't blink.

She kept the key and the photo in a shoebox under the bed. Locked. Taped shut. She checked it every night. Until she stopped checking, it didn't matter. The house remembered even if she didn't. She considered leaving. She even packed once. But something in the walls pulsed when she reached the front door.

She stayed.

And then it came.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

3:33 a.m.

Her breath caught mid-dream. Or maybe she hadn't been asleep at all.

She moved without thinking. Down the hallway. Past the mirror. The basement door was open again.

She hadn't opened it.

On the porch sat the final item. It was wrapped in black cloth and tied with twine.

Heavy.

Dense.

Erin hesitated, hand hovering over it. Her fingers tingled before she touched it, like the air around it carried a charge.

She brought it inside.

Unwrapped it.

Inside was an audio cassette tape. No label, just “PLAY ME” scratched into the plastic with something jagged. Something angry.

Next to it sat a small handheld tape recorder, stained at the edges. It looked like rust, or old blood.

She didn't sit down. She didn't breathe. She just pressed play.

A hiss of static filled the room.

Her mother's voice. Faint. Unsteady. Like it had been recorded in secret.

“If you're hearing this, then I'm already gone. I'm sorry, Erin. I did what I had to do. Your father wasn't just sick. Something found him. Something from the woods. From the mine.” Her mother hesitated. “He brought it back. It... clung to him. I saw it in his eyes. Heard it in the way he talked. He made a deal. Said it was for us. To keep the lights on. To make sure we didn't lose the house.” Her voice trembled in sorrow, “He thought he could control it. But he was wrong. It didn't want his soul, Erin. It wanted yours.” Erin dropped the cassette player. It continued playing.

“He tried to pass it down. It told him it needed blood. Family blood. Your blood. To keep growing. To stay fed. I couldn’t let it take you. So, I did what I had to do. I locked him in that room. I thought it would die with him. But I don’t think it ever left. I think... I think part of it’s still inside this house. And maybe... inside you.”

The tape clicked off.

Erin looked at the mirror across the room. Her reflection did not move.

Not at first.

Then, it blinked. It was not her blink. It was its own. That was when she knew, the thing inside her had already begun to turn.

The basement door creaked wider. From below, something was breathing.

Slow. Heavy. Familiar.

She stood in the hallway, the player humming faintly in her hand. Her mother’s voice clung to the walls like smoke. The smell of burnt tape lingered. The air buzzed with a low-frequency hum. Subtle, but constant, like power lines buried in concrete.

Three knocks. Three nights. Three doors.

The mine was two miles from the house, but the drive felt longer. The gravel hissed under her tires like something whispering too close to her ear.

No music. No phone. No calls.

She drove like she had nothing left.

She found the trailhead past the hollow, just beyond the line where the birds stopped singing. The signs were rusted, tilted, and long forgotten. No one came here. No one was meant to.

The boards at the mine entrance had split in half. Rotted and peeled away like old flesh.

Something had come through. Or, gone back in.

She stepped inside.

Her flashlight shuddered in her grip. The beam shook like it was afraid, too.

The air was wrong. Heavier, yes, but also thick with presence. As if it were exhaling. And she had stepped into its breath.

The shaft sloped downward, then opened into a natural cavern. Stalactites hung like teeth. The walls shimmered with black mineral veins that pulsed faintly when her light crossed them.

At the center, a stone altar.

Low.

Cracked.

Slick with age. Covered in symbols older than names. They moved when she tried to focus on them.

She didn't remember walking toward it.

But she was there.

She reached into her coat and pulled out the small metal tin. Her mother's last gift.

Inside, hair. Bone. Nail clippings. A ward made of blood.

Her mother's final act of love.

She placed it on the altar.

Struck a match.

The flame caught instantly. No hesitation. Smoke curled upward, not white, not black, but red.

The stone surface beneath it groaned.

A scream built, not in the air, but in her chest. A pressure pushed against her teeth and the back of her skull. She almost collapsed.

"You are the door. You are the key. Let us live again."

The voice wasn't spoken. It bloomed in her spine.

She took out the Polaroid. The little girl. The stuffed rabbit. The life that should've been hers.

Into the fire.

Then the broken key.

Then the cassette.

The smoke turned black. The altar cracked down the center. From below, something thrashed. A shape made of absence. A shadow that refused to form.

“You would rather burn than admit who you are. What you are meant to be.” The shadow growled

Erin leaned over the fire.

“You had your chance.” She struck the stone with her fist. Over and over again until her knuckles split. “No one owns me.”

One final strike.

“My father had no right to give away what wasn’t his.”

The altar gave way.

The roar from beneath, the thing that had been sleeping, howled once.

And began to fade. The red smoke thinned. The symbols stilled. The heat receded.

And for the first time in weeks, Erin felt as if she could breathe.

Later, much later.

Months passed.

The house stood empty. The basement door stayed shut. Erin had left

Texas. No forwarding address. No number to call. The shoebox under her bed, gone. The mirror in the hallway was covered.

But sometimes, in places where the light couldn’t reach...

Just after 3:33 a.m....

In the reflection of a darkened window, in the silence before sleep sets in,
in the faint creak of a stair that shouldn't groan, a whisper curls in the air.
The third door never closed.

The End.



CHAIN OF CUSTODY

Antoine's cubicle was always pristine.

Attention invited questions. And questions, once asked, never stayed contained.

The only items on his desk were a mouse and keyboard, his government-issued laptop, a monitor, a pen, a #2 pencil, a small pair of scissors, and a thin manila folder stamped **EVIDENCE – BIOLOGICAL** in faded red ink. The folder lay open, its plastic seal sliced cleanly and folded back.

Stapled to the inside cover was a checklist.

CHAIN OF CUSTODY

☐ Collected

☐ Logged

☐ Processed

☐ Transferred

☐ Disposed

With his pencil, Antoine marked the third box.

PROCESSED.

He stared at the list. His eyes burned from exhaustion. Sleep had fractured into shallow segments filled with pressure dreams; faces floated in and out, voices speaking without mouths.

He began typing up his report.

Male victim, approximately thirty-five. Caucasian. Exhibited a heightened fear response prior to death. Defensive wounds consistent with prolonged awareness. Cause of death appears to be asphyxiation, manual. Postmortem trauma is inconsistent with self-harm.

He paused and let his fingers hover over the keyboard. That line did not feel right.

He deleted *heightened*. Replaced it with *elevated*. That felt better.

Around him, the bullpen hummed, phones rang relentlessly, keyboards clacked, and the smell of burnt coffee drifted through stale air.

No one sat within arm's reach of Antoine's cubicle. That was unofficial policy. No memo had ever gone out, but everyone understood. People gave him space. People thought he was a freak. And for some, Antoine scared the shit out of them.

Antoine glanced at the empty evidence bag again. He hadn't meant to finish the report so early. He never did. But once the impressions came, they came, whole names, fragments, moments like bullets fired from a gun.

He flexed his jaw, swallowed, and returned to typing.

The phone rang.

"Antoine."

A pause.

"We need you on site. Dockside apartments. Riverfront."

He saved the document he was working on, closed the folder, slid it into his drawer, and locked it with practiced precision.

"I'm on my way," he said.

Rain had already started falling as he left the station; the city dissolved around him in reflections and blurred light.

By the time Antoine reached the Dockside apartments, his head throbbed with the dull, familiar ache that came from carrying other people's endings too long. It wasn't pain exactly. It was pressure. Like a room that had been sealed too tightly and in need of oxygen.

Rain slicked the pavement, turning the crime scene lights into smeared halos. Antoine moved through the perimeter with practiced efficiency, nodding where required, answering questions that hadn't really been asked. Someone handed him a pair of gloves.

"Long night?" a patrol officer offered, trying for small talk. There was something in the patrol officer's eyes, a glimmer of curiosity veiled behind the casual question. The question they all wanted to ask, but few ever dared to ask.

Antoine managed a thin smile. "They're all long," he replied, deflecting the unspoken hanging in the air. The officer hesitated, as if considering whether to press further, but seemed to think better of it; the tales of Antoine's methods lingered, unspoken yet palpable.

The body lay face-up, rainwater pooled in the hollows of its collarbones.

For a brief moment, Antoine thought he saw a flicker of movement, a shallow breath. It was a cruel trick of the mind.

Early thirties. Male. No ID. The kind of face that disappeared easily, average features, forgettable hair, eyes already dulled by the gray sheen of death.

The other detectives stood back, giving Antoine the room he hadn't asked for.

He knelt.

Up close, the smell hit him, not rot, not yet, but the sharp metallic tang of blood mixed with wet concrete and old oil. Antoine breathed through his mouth, slow and deliberate. Rushing only made it worse. His gloved hand brushed the victim's arm. The skin was cold, but not yet stiff.

His stomach clenched.

He hated this part.

His mouth flooded with saliva; sharp, sour. Swallowing hard, his gag reflex flared. For a moment, he considered stepping back, pretending he needed more light, stalling for more time. Anything just to delay what came next.

Delay never helped.

Leaning closer, he turned his shoulder to block the view.

The act itself was quick, almost surgical. Still, his body rebelled.

When his teeth pressed in, the texture gave, rubbery and wrong. The flesh was colder than expected: dense, waxy. Immediately, taste bloomed: coppery, like meat that had been left too long in the sun.

Antoine gagged. He forced himself not to retch, not to make a sound. His eyes watered. His throat burned as he swallowed.

He hated being good at this.

The world tilted.

A name surfaced.

“Mark Ellis,” he said. Nearby, an officer took note.

The memory did not unfold gently. It swallowed him whole.

Despair came first, dense and suffocating, followed by a surge of panic.

Antoine felt the hands at the man’s throat as if they were closing around his own. The crushing pressure. The frantic pull for air that would not come.

His vision tunneled. The victim’s terror flooded him, loud and blinding, until the edges between them thinned. Antoine could no longer tell which heartbeat he was hearing. Which lungs were straining.

Diesel and river rot filled his nose. A voice, close to the ear, *don’t fight*.

The body fought anyway.

Antoine stood inside the narrowing space where breath becomes memory, and the world recedes to a single need. The final rebellion of muscle and will. The last, useless demand for air.

He forced himself back before the dark finished closing.

“Victim is Mark Ellis,” he said again. “Strangled. Killer knew him.”

No one asked how he knew. They never did, but they would gossip about it later.

The nausea lingered longer than usual. Antoine stood and walked to the detective who had called him. Bowen was his name.

“Is there anything else you need?” he asked.

Bowen considered him for a moment, respect edging out fatigue. “You think there's more you can see right now?”

Antoine shook his head, drawing in a slow breath. “It's still foggy. I'll let you know if anything surfaces.”

“Appreciate it. Get some rest.”

“I doubt it.”

Antoine walked to his car, his footsteps splashing gently through the rain puddles. He liked the feeling of stepping into them. Reminding him of a time that was just easier.

Later, alone in his car with the engine off, Antoine pressed his forehead to the steering wheel and counted his breaths until the pressure eased. It always did, eventually. What never passed were the fragments of the victims clinging to Antoine. The sound of Mark Ellis begging for his life to be

spared, the weight of speaking a name out loud that had not belonged to him minutes earlier.

His phone buzzed with a voicemail notification from Internal Affairs; he ignored it, knowing what they wanted. He was not ready to hear praise that felt hollow or accusations whispered behind closed doors.

Antoine drove home. The city's rhythm continued.

A body was loaded into the back of an ambulance while, somewhere else, another was already being guided toward its end.

A mother poured milk over cornflakes and called for her children to hurry.

A florist unlocked her door and flipped the sign to **OPEN**.

In a narrow apartment kitchen, a barista folded a blood-darkened shirt and pushed it into the bottom of a trash bag. He tied it shut carefully and set it by the door. From the back of a chair, he lifted a clean uniform. Stepping outside into the early morning chill and joined the quiet line at the bus stop. A few blocks later, he clipped on his name tag, straightened the counter, and smiled at the first customer of the morning. "What name should I write on your cup?"

The next call came on Monday.

"This one's... odd," dispatch said. "Warehouse off Saint-Jude. Near the old cemetery."

He felt something tighten, not fear. Recognition.

“I’m on my way.”

The warehouse crouched low and long, its windows blown out like empty eye sockets. The cemetery had been neglected for years, with tilted headstones and iron fences half-swallowed by weeds. The air smelled wrong. Old.

Antoine stepped inside, and immediately he felt the temperature drop. The body lay near the center of the floor, limbs folded at angles that suggested intention rather than violence. No blood. No visible wounds. The face was slack; the mouth parted in something like relief.

“Jesus,” someone murmured behind him.

Antoine knelt.

This time, the hesitation stretched.

He told himself it was procedure. He told himself so many things.

The bite landed, and the world split; his senses dragged somewhere else.

This was not just a memory but a borderless place. Something brushed against his mind, something ancient, attentive. Not afraid.

Heat shimmered without fire. Disembodied voices slid beneath hearing, disturbing and wrong. A thing unfolded in his mind, alien but aware. It was not afraid.

It was curious.

Antoine reeled back as nausea surged. His stomach convulsed. What came up wasn't bile.

Black, viscous, glossy, it spilled onto the concrete with a wet, heavy sound, steaming faintly despite the cold. The smell wasn't rotten. It had the smell of old incense. Burnt fat.

A flash shot through his mind of a ceremony gone wrong.

The black slime twitched, although no living thing was left to move it. It seemed to respond to something unseen, as if aware. Just enough.

"Bag it," Antoine said hoarsely. "Now."

No one argued. Reluctantly, a younger officer stepped forward and bagged whatever Antoine just had delivered.

The thing was awake now. Antoine sensed something ancient. Fragments of forgotten places flashed before his eyes, intentions worn smooth by time.

The impressions were blurry and wrong, remnants of an age when ritual shaped reality.

The entity moved through Antoine's fractured memories, testing them for recognition, its awareness brushing his thoughts like a memory stripped of origin.

It did not enter Antoine's mind. It hovered above it, aligned with it, looking for the flaw that allowed presences to slip through.

You see too much, the voice said, not aloud. *And you record it.*

Antoine froze.

You will stop.

He thought of the files, the reports, the permanence of ink.

“I can’t stop,” he said.

The thing paused.

You will.

Antoine did not remember losing consciousness.

When he came to, he was in the back of an ambulance. One of the paramedics asked him if he was ok. Antoine waved him off, saying he had not eaten well and was just tired. The young girl did not really believe his lies but accepted them and helped him up.

The voice wasn’t there anymore, but he could sense it was not gone.

Just... farther away.

In the days after the warehouse incident, Antoine continued to work his cases with the same careful precision, but something new pressed at the edges of his thoughts.

The dreams slowly returned. They were different now. Less chaotic. More focused. He no longer relived the victims’ endings at random. Instead, he drifted through rooms without doors, stairwells that led nowhere. There

was always a sense of being observed. He started sleeping in short blocks.

Ninety minutes at a time. Enough to function but never enough to rest.

At work, his desk refused to stay as he left it.

His pencil would be flipped around. A folder nudged half an inch to the left. The demon was messing with him.

Antoine corrected it each time. Refusing to let chaos take over. He never reacted in front of anyone. The demon waited. That patience unsettled Antoine more than the threat it made.

He began pulling files.

Not all at once. That would have drawn attention. Instead, he treated the archive like a crime scene. He focused on suicides that didn't feel right. No history. No note. Elevated fear markers. Neurological trauma that never made it into summaries.

He started seeing the patterns.

Isolation. Threshold. Completion.

The demon slowly pushed people to die. It guided them to places where their death would go unnoticed.

Bathrooms. Stairwells. Abandoned cars at night. Apartments in forgotten neighborhoods with locked doors and drawn blinds.

It needed privacy. It did not want its prey to be found.

Antoine was about to write down his findings, stopped himself, and closed the notebook. Some things were better left unrecorded.

He turned to older sources. Religious texts. Medical journals. Fringe case studies he would never cite. The Bible was blunt where it needed to be.

They were not killed. They were bound. Their deaths were restrained. Their suffering was delayed.

Antoine closed the book and rubbed his eyes.

“Shit,” he said to the empty room. “I can’t kill it.”

As he said it, the demon laughed inside his head.

“What are you going to do? Antoiinnne.” It asked, with something like fondness. *“Tell them about us?”*

The air felt thicker near his desk. He didn’t dare to look up.

“They already think you’re unstable,” the voice continued. *“You know they do.”*

Antoine thought of Internal Affairs. The way praise always sounded like suspicion.

He didn’t answer.

The demon receded, satisfied.

The next case came three nights later.

A man in his forties. No record. No note. Found in a locked bathroom by a neighbor who complained about the smell. Official cause: self-inflicted.

Antoine arrived early and took his time.

He didn't bite.

Not yet. Instead, he watched the body.

The man's hands were clenched in a way Antoine had seen before, fingers curled as if gripping something invisible. The jaw was tight. The eyes, half-open, carried that same expression of terrible focus. Antoine felt it then.

The pressure. The sense of something leaning forward, waiting for completion.

He made a decision.

He called for more light. Asked for a delay. Ordered the room cleared under the pretense of contamination. Then, for the first time ever, he broke protocol.

He spoke the man's name, loudly, and forced his eyes open.

The pressure snapped as he felt the demon's presence enter him.

Antoine staggered as something tore away from the space between them, recoiling like a hand yanked from a closing door. Antoine convulsed once, then went still.

Antoine stepped back from the body, his heart racing.

The demon was silent.

That silence told him everything.

He didn't sleep that night. Instead, memories came uninvited, fragments from victims who had almost crossed. The same sensation repeated itself across different minds: a tightening in the chest, a pressure behind the eyes, a phrase forming without sound. Not belief. Not prayer. Muscle memory. His teeth snapped together hard and fast. Tack. Tack. Tack. He woke in a puddle of sweat.

Antoine understood then.

The demon brought rituals with it. It used the victims to finish what it started.

So, Antoine had to learn how to interrupt it.

The next day, there was another case. This time, he bit on purpose, no hesitation. He was eager. He had been waiting for the next opportunity to find another piece of the puzzle.

The victim was young. He saw her standing on the bridge at dawn, eyes unfocused, lips moving silently. Antoine chewed on her flesh. As he tasted the copper, he started to taste fear and something older.

He didn't resist the pull. He stepped into it.

The threshold was narrower than he expected. Not a place, exactly, more like a moment stretched thin. The demon was there, distributed across nerves, breath, and intention.

Antoine spoke. "What's your name?"

The demon screamed, the sound driving like a spike behind Antoine's eyes, prying its way into his mind. It fractured, awareness tearing sideways as Antoine forced it to remain where it hated being most aware, embodied, incomplete. He forced it to stay in the decaying flesh of its victim.

"I've told you to stop." Its voice was thick and resonant, vibrating in Antoine's ribs. "I've been giving you signs to back off."

"You should know that is not who I am. I won't let you just prey on these innocent people."

"Innocent." The demon gave a quiet, almost indulgent laugh, as if humoring a child.

The demon did not mock him again. It was gone.

That should have frightened Antoine more than the laughter.

That night, Antoine had vivid nightmares, and when he woke, all he could smell was car fumes.

The next morning, the office was quieter than usual. Too quiet. Phones went ringing unanswered. People stood in small, stiff knots.

“Did you hear?” someone whispered as he passed.

A coworker. Marko. Thirty-six. No warning signs. No note. Found in his car in the underground garage before sunrise. Officially ruled suicide.

Antoine stood in the stairwell afterward, breathing through his sleeve, fighting the familiar nausea. The smell of his nightmares clung to him.

“You didn’t make him?” Antoine murmured.

The stairwell answered.

“No,” the demon said gently. “*I don’t push. That’s crude.*”

Antoine’s fingers dug into the concrete railing. “Then what?”

A pause. Not silence. Anticipation.

“*I guided him somewhere quiet.*” Its voice is soft and poisonous.

“What do you want from me?” Antoine pleaded.

It was gone.

That night, a body fell from a window three floors above Antoine’s apartment. He didn’t see it happen. But he heard it, the thick, sickening crack of bone meeting pavement, the dull, meaty thud that followed. A sound too final to be mistaken for anything else.

Sirens came. Neighbors gathered. People cried.

Antoine stayed inside. He turned his lights off.

“You are trying to prove a point,” he said into the dark.

"I'm explaining myself," the demon replied. *"You study patterns. I thought you'd appreciate that."*

"People aren't variables."

A smile crept into the demon's voice. *"Everyone is."*

Antoine slid down the wall until he was sitting on the floor. His hands were shaking.

"You can reach anyone," he said.

"Eventually."

"But you didn't stop me," Antoine continued. "You didn't silence me."

The demon hesitated. Just a fraction of a second.

"I have existed for eternity. No one has ever looked at me and understood what they were seeing. Not until you."

The words slowed. Measured.

"You are... unusual."

"I won't let you do this. I will stop you."

Laughter boomed through the apartment.

The walls trembled. Books ripped from the shelves as if swatted by invisible hands. Frames tore free and shattered against the floor. The television flickered to life, volume spiking into static before bursting into a sharp, electrical pop.

"You humans are so funny."

“You are afraid of me.”

“Afraid.” The word twisted into something jagged. Laughter followed.

Antoine clamped his hands over his ears as the sound drove into him.

“Afraid of what?” the demon sneered. *“Fragile sack of meat. You are nothing.”*

Inside his mind, the demon felt it, a shift. A spark of defiance. Irritating.

Bright.

“You know I can see you,” Antoine said. “You know I am uncovering your methods. You are afraid of being discovered. Afraid I will expose you. That I will unravel whatever you are and send you back to Hell. Maybe I will find a priest. Maybe we will exorcise you.”

For a long moment, there was no laughter.

When it came, it was low. Measured.

“Exorcise me?”

The word rolled slowly through his skull.

“I am older than your languages. Older than your priests. Older than the idea of Hell.”

The air grew heavy.

“You speak of eternity as if you understand it. You count years. I do not. I have watched civilizations rise, kneel, and rot into dust. I have watched bones like yours turn to powder and blow away.”

A pause.

“You are not my enemy, Antoine. You are like the weather. You pass, and I remain.”

The words settled, cold and precise.

“If I wished, I would simply wait. Your body will fail. Your hands will tremble. Your mind will thin. And when you are alone, when your breath shortens, and your heart struggles... I will be there.”

The demon’s presence pressed closer.

“Your lifetime is a flicker. A blink. I do not need to defeat you. I only need to endure.”

Silence.

“You misunderstand what I am,” it continued, almost gently. *“Exorcism is for parasites. For things trapped inside flesh.”*

A faint shift in the demon’s tone.

“I do not inhabit. I do not cling. I do not require a host.”

The weight of its words settled deeper.

“I observe. I whisper. I find the weak. Humans build their own ruin. I merely feed.”

A pause.

“You imagine me bound inside a body, waiting to be expelled by ritual words. I am not contained. I am not anchored. I move where I am welcomed. And you are constantly welcoming me.”

The voice lowered, steady and absolute.

“You cannot banish what was never confined.”

“Maybe,” Antoine said, though the certainty in his voice had thinned. “And maybe I’m crazy enough to try for mutual assured destruction.”

A quiet laugh moved through the room.

“Careful,” the demon said. *“You’re beginning to think like me.”*

For the first time in weeks, Antoine smiled.

The smile did not last.

Pain lanced through his skull, sharp, surgical. The air shifted. Though every light in the apartment was off, the room flared white in his vision, outlines burning against darkness. The walls seemed to breathe. The smell of charred circuitry from the ruined television thickened, metallic and bitter.

“Everything in life is a choice,” the demon said, its voice no longer echoing but pressing. *“You have been given the gift of free will. So, I will give you a gift in return.”*

Antoine tried to speak. The muscles in his jaw refused him. His lungs worked, but the air felt owned by something else. Not inhabited.

Overridden.

“You may continue this futile exercise of resistance,” the demon went on, calm as stone. *“You may chase patterns. Interrupt rituals. Pretend you threaten me.”*

The pressure increased. His knees buckled.

“Or,” it continued, “you may live for a purpose.”

The word purpose settled like a weight.

“As I have said, I am eternal. There is nothing you can do to end me. But there is much I can do. And nothing I will not do.”

The air seemed to constrict around his throat. Not strangling but just reminding him how fragile breath was.

“I will leave you with my final gift.”

The voice thinned, then sharpened, sliding across his nerves.

“Make your choice.” It drew out his name, savoring it. *“Antoiüünne...”*

A pause.

“Vera Cruz; She still misses your father.”

The pressure vanished.

Antoine collapsed forward, hands striking the floor. The apartment was dark again. Still. Only the faint, acrid smell of the burned television remained, and the distant wail of sirens somewhere in the city.

His body shook. The demon was gone.

The next morning, Antoine resigned. No explanation. No forwarding address. His office was emptied in less than an hour.

By nightfall, his apartment was bare.

The pact was simple.

He would stop hunting.

He would disappear.

The demon would leave those he loved untouched.

He chose an island.

Small. Quiet. Beautiful water.

On Sundays, he would sit in one of the back pews.

After mass, he called his mother and listened to her talk about small things.

He never told her where he was.

Every day, he fished at dusk and released what he caught.

One evening, a boat docked.

Three people disembarked, laughing. Tourists would come and go.

They walked by him, waving hello. As the last man walked by, he smelled it.

Not the same. Close enough but different enough.

Antoine froze.

The stranger turned its head slightly.

The look it gave him was not anger.

It was dismissive. Ancient. An apex predator looking at an insect that had briefly irritated it.

The look held him.

We see you. You were never a threat.

The thought was not his.

It turned away and continued down the dock, already forgetting him.

Antoine watched the ripples in the water. The line in his hand twitched. He reeled it in, worked the hook free, and let the fish slip back into the water.

He wiped his hands on his jeans and stood.

The tide moved in and out behind him as he walked down the pier.

The End.



THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR

A Dominion Hotel short story

The Dominion Hotel was a cathedral of old-world grandeur. Marble pillars rose. Stained-glass chandeliers watched a century of adventurers and scandals. Its walls trapped the perfume of another era, holding the scent of cigar smoke and secrets buried in velvet.

But every October, the Dominion became something else entirely.

For one day each year, it opened its doors for the annual Halloween Festival: a full day of food, music, and masquerade. Children paraded through the gilded lobby in pirate hats and princess gowns. Laughter echoed up the stairwells like flocks of birds. The scent of roasted corn, pumpkin spice, and burnt sugar clung to the velvet drapes.

Musicians in skeleton masks played jazz on the mezzanine. Parents lounged with drinks, letting the hotel be the babysitter. Amidst the festivities, a lone trumpet played off-key, its notes lingering too long, a whisper of discord beneath the merriment. Shadows flickered on the ballroom walls, lanterns swaying in a breeze that did not exist.

For most, it was tradition. For Scout and Jane, it was the day they had waited for all year. The siblings knew every corner of the Dominion: the cracked cherub in the lobby fountain, the dusty piano that played by itself

when the night grew long, the mirrors on the top floor that reflected not one face, but two. To them, the hotel was a playground, a labyrinth of marble and myth. Each year, they tried to uncover a new secret.

Rumor said the Dominion was built on a crooked foundation, that it shifted with the seasons.

As the festival lanterns flickered to life and the brass elevators shuddered awake for another night of revelry, somewhere deep within the Dominion's bones, beneath the hum of laughter and the sound of jazz, a single gear began to turn that hadn't turned all year.

At eleven, Scout was restless, a bundle of energy in a torn zombie costume he'd already ruined from running too hard. Jane, eight, followed in her crooked witch's hat, clutching her treat bag with both hands. They were inseparable, partners in every prank, every adventure. But Scout had discovered something better than candy or contests: the elevators.

The Dominion's elevators were unlike those in malls or offices. Brass cages shone like mirrors; jeweled buttons glimmered like treasures. Each clang and rattle spoke of another century. Operators scolded, "Don't press all the buttons!" Their command only sharpened the allure.

"Think you can hit every floor before the bellhop catches us?" Scout challenged, a sly grin spreading across his face.

Jane shook her head. "We're definitely getting in trouble, Scout."

Scout winked. “That’s exactly why it’s fun.”

They shot up to the twelfth floor, then bolted into stairwells. Laughter filled the hallways as they outran the staff. Their footsteps thundered with mischief. More kids joined, turning corridors into a playground. Linen closets became hide-and-seek havens; ballrooms erupted in tag games. Still, Scout wasn't done. His eyes danced with plans.

“Basement,” he teased, pointing to the 'B' button. “Bet you won't go.”

Jane hesitated. “It smells down there.”

“That’s where they hide the ghosts,” Scout whispered. “And the candy shipments. First to find them wins.”

Scout pressed the 'B' button. The elevator groaned as it started descending and shuddered around them, making the lights flicker.

Jane gasped. Above the glowing '12', a new button sparked to life. Its face was ornate, etched with intricate filigree, gleaming gold. '13', it read.

“Scout...” Jane whispered, eyes wide. “That wasn't there before.”

Scout’s grin widened. “Only one way to find out.” He jabbed the new button.

The elevator lurched, heavy, as if carrying more than just the two children.

Jane heard a sound rise from the walls. It almost sounded like laughter, maybe a child's soft, eerie giggle. The gears vibrated, the metal groaned, and then, with a sudden jolt, everything stopped.

A heartbeat held. Then, softly, the doors parted.

The air that drifted in smelled like cotton candy and warm caramel, like the first breath inside a carnival tent. Jane blinked against the light. It was soft and golden, as though the whole place were made of afternoon sunshine.

They stepped out.

The floor beneath them wasn't carpet or tile. It was marble, white as milk and veined with swirls that shimmered as they moved. Pink, green, and gold flecks glinted like crushed jellybeans beneath glass. Scout stomped one sneaker down and laughed, watching the colors ripple like liquid rainbows.

The hallway stretched ahead, endless and bright. Shelves of toys and jars of candy lined the walls. Lollipops bigger than their heads, licorice ropes curled like sleeping serpents. Overhead, paper lanterns drifted like balloons, glowing tangerine and violet. Deeper inside, a calliope played a lullaby melody.

Jane twirled slowly, eyes wide. "It's like a candy store, and a toy store had a baby."

Scout grinned. "Best elevator ride ever."

They walked down the hall in awe. Their footsteps echoed faintly. It was as if the walls themselves held their breath. Shelves stretched forever, stacked with plush bears, porcelain dolls, and tin soldiers frozen in salute. The toys

didn't move, but their eyes followed the children, clicking softly, like camera shutters clicking in turn.

At the far end of the corridor stood tall, ornate doors. They were carved from dark cherry wood and inlaid with gold threads that shimmered beneath the surface. At first, the patterns appeared to be vines and leaves. Closer inspection showed strings. Thousands of them, woven in loops, shaping tiny marionettes. Their carved bodies dangled in eternal dance, each one held aloft by invisible hands.

Jane stepped closer. Beneath the wood and gold filigree, she could see movement.

Inside the carvings, behind the grain, tiny wheels spun in slow, perfect rhythm. Cogs turned behind the marionette strings. Tiny pistons hissed, as though breathing. The door wasn't just carved, it was *alive*, part of a greater machine, humming deep in the Dominion's bones.

Somewhere beyond the walls, a clock chimed faintly. As it struck the hour, the golden door strings vibrated softly, resonating with the sound, like the whole floor kept time with the Dominion's heartbeat.

Jane reached out. "Scout, look."

Before she finished, the strings shifted. Not by wind or touch, but with a force all their own. They tightened. The marionettes danced, movements jerky and precise. A pause stretched, brimming with anticipation. Then the

door unlocked with a deep, mechanical sigh. Gears clicked. Springs recoiled. The doors parted with a watch's elegance.

The marionette door sighed open, revealing a world that stole their breath. Light spilled out in soft, swirling colors. They walked into a dream painted in melted candy. The air smelled of cotton candy and cinnamon, tinged with a sharp, sweet note.

The room stretched endlessly, alive with motion and sound. Gumball machines, tall as trees, turned slowly and spilled rainbow orbs into glass chutes. Music boxes lined the walls, each playing its own tune. Hundreds of melodies, somehow harmonious, blended like laughter.

Laughter echoed there, not mocking or cruel, but the wild, joyous kind that lives only in childhood.

Jane spun in a slow circle, her witch's hat slipping sideways. "It's like a birthday party that never ends."

Scout grinned. "Or a toy store that never closes."

A slide shimmered at the far end of the hall, golden, twisting, alive with ribbons of light that pulsed like carnival bulbs. It rose from nowhere, arched gracefully through the air, and ended in a mountain of plush animals so soft they looked like clouds.

Scout bolted before Jane could say a word. He ran up the steps two at a time and threw himself down the slide. His laughter filled the air, wild and

fearless, echoing off the marble and crystal walls. The slide sang beneath him, its hum blending with the distant music boxes.

“Jane! You *have* to try this!”

She hesitated only a heartbeat before climbing after him. The world blurred into color and sound as she slid down, the air tasting like sugar, the lights flashing past her like shooting stars. When she landed beside Scout, they both dissolved into giggles.

It was perfect.

Jane noticed a faint crack in the eye of a porcelain doll, a small but unsettling detail. Nearby, a paper lantern's glow flickered, as though it were trying to hold a secret. The perfection felt thin, like a surface waiting to fracture.

Every toy in the room smiled at them. Stuffed bears with stitched grins, rocking horses with polished manes, porcelain dolls seated like guests at a tea party. All, perfectly, still. Yet somewhere, something clicked. A rhythm, soft and steady. The faintest sound of gears turning in unison.

A voice breezed through the sugary-scented air, exuding warmth and a disarming cheer. It had a hint of an outdated eloquence, as a character plucked from a bygone age. Its amiable tone, however, betrayed an odd momentary stiffness, a politeness that felt rehearsed, slightly too formal, hinting at something lying beneath its inviting facade.

“Well now,” it said, like a grandfather catching children sneaking cookies.

“Aren’t you two the curious ones?”

They turned.

At the top of the slide, half-silhouetted by the carousel light, stood a tall man with silver hair and a velvet coat the color of ripe cherries. His spectacles gleamed gold, and when he smiled, it was with the easy warmth of someone who had been waiting a very long time.

“Welcome,” said the man at the top of the slide, clapping his gloved hands together. “That was a marvelous landing! A perfect ten for style!”

Scout grinned, breathless. “Did you see that?!”

The man chuckled, the sound smooth as wind through music boxes.

“Indeed, I did. You flew like a comet, young man. Though,” he added with mock seriousness, “we usually land on our feet up here. Floors tend to be... delicate.”

He winked, and the tiles beneath their feet shimmered faintly, colors rippling under the marble like sunlight on a pond.

Jane blinked. “How did you do that?”

“Do what?” he said, feigning confusion. Then he smiled. Something in the corners of that smile didn’t move the way it should have. “Magic has a funny way of happening around me.”

He descended the slide steps in two hops, coat tails fluttering. His silver-grey hair gleamed, catching every color from the lanterns above. His spectacles were round and gold, the glass filled with tiny shifting reflections, like falling stars. His skin had a strange texture: pale and smooth, yet with faint grain lines, like fine wood polished by many hands.

“I’m the Toymaker,” he said, offering a small bow that somehow felt like part of a performance. “Caretaker of curiosities, engineer of entertainment, and,” He tapped his temple with one gloved finger. “moderately good at rhymes.”

Scout laughed out loud. Jane couldn’t help but smile.

“Do you... make all of this?” she asked.

“Oh heavens, no.” He spun dramatically, gesturing at the impossible world around them. “This place makes me. I only keep it tidy.”

He lowered his voice as if sharing a secret. “You’d be surprised what chaos children leave behind when they’re happy. Half a chocolate waterfall in the parlor, a gummy bear rebellion in the pantry, it’s all terribly exhausting.”

Scout laughed so hard he snorted. “You sound like my mom.”

The Toymaker feigned offense, hand to chest. “I assure you, young man, I’m far more fun than your mother.”

With a clap of his hands, the air changed. Lights brightened. The carousel began to turn, its mirrored panels casting ribbons of color across the walls.

A marching band of tin soldiers clattered out of the shadows, trumpets and drums springing to life in perfect rhythm. The spectacle of endless wonder unfolded before them, a world where innocence met indulgence, and the boundaries of reality surrendered to fantasy.

"Welcome," the Toymaker announced, his voice ringing like theater applause, "to the *Thirteenth Floor*! Where imagination has no bedtime! Here, the dreams of childhood are both playground and product, crafted and consumed in a cycle of boundless delight that hints at the weight innocence bears in a world of unchecked desires."

The floor trembled slightly beneath their feet, not with danger, but with delight. Laughter echoed from every corner, a chorus of unseen children giggling somewhere just out of view.

Jane's eyes darted toward the noise. "Are there... other kids here?"

"Oh, yes," he chirped. "They're very good at hide-and-seek."

Scout grabbed Jane's hand, already forgetting her question. "Can we play?"

The Toymaker grinned wide enough to show the faint seam running from his jaw to his ear. "Of course. Games are how we *make friends*."

He extended both arms like a conductor who was about to lead an orchestra. "Let's begin with something simple. How about..." He tilted his head as if listening to invisible voices. "A treasure hunt?"

Scout cheered. Jane hesitated. "What kind of treasure?" "Oh, the best kind," he said. "One that remembers you." His eyes twinkled with a hint of mystery. "But be careful. Some treasures don't like to let go."

He spun on his heel and strode toward a corridor glowing with golden light, whistling a tune that sounded cheerful, until you realized it was a lullaby.

Downstairs, the Dominion hummed with the sound of ordinary life. Adults talking too loud, the band switching to a tired jazz standard, the clink of glass and silver.

No one noticed right away.

Not at first.

Two hours had passed since the costume parade. Parents lounged near the bar, laughing and showing off photos of their kids in costume. The elevators chimed occasionally, carrying guests to and from their rooms, each ding swallowed by the murmur of the festival.

Then came the first question.

"Have you seen Scout?"

The words were light at first, casual, tossed out between sips of cider.

Then again, sharper.

"Jane? She was right here a minute ago."

Music swelled from the ballroom, laughter spilling from the bar, but beneath it, something cracked.

A silence.

A stillness that didn't belong.

Sarah rose from her chair, scanning the crowded lobby, dozens of costumes, painted faces, little monsters running in every direction, but not *hers*.

"Scout!" she called, waving to a nearby couple. "Have you seen the kids?" They shook their heads, smiling politely. She tried to smile back, but her throat had already closed.

"Jane!" she called louder. "Sweetheart!"

No answer. Only the echo of her voice bounced off the marble.

Robert joined her, setting his drink down too hard. "They're probably playing. The elevators, maybe."

He was trying to sound calm. It came out hollow.

They split directions, one heading toward the restrooms and the other toward the stairwell. Each step louder than the last.

The smell of pumpkin and sugar turned thick in their throats.

At first, they told themselves the kids were hiding. This was just one of the games they enjoyed playing. They always ran all over the hotel. It was their favorite thing to do.

But with every hallway they searched, the laughter of other children grew fainter, and their own fear grew heavier, like a weight pressing down on their chests.

Suddenly, Sarah halted in her tracks. Her eyes widened as she saw something small and singular, a green ribbon lying lonely on the floor. It was unmistakably Jane's, the one that danced on her witch's hat earlier. The sight gripped her heart, sending a chill through her body. This forgotten ribbon, so personal and so out of place, turned her mounting panic into a crushing dread.

They found a dropped treat bag near the fountain, its handle torn.

Jane's.

Sarah froze. "No," she whispered. "No, no, no..."

She started running. Past the candy table, past the photo booth, shouting names that vanished into music and chatter.

By the time she reached the elevators, her voice was raw.

"Security!" the father shouted. "Somebody. Help us!"

Two hotel staff members rushed over, confused smiles fading fast as they took in the mother's trembling hands and wild eyes.

"Our kids," she gasped. "They were here." She held up her cellphone showing their picture. "Scout and Jane. We turned around, and they're gone."

A pause. The kind of pause that shouldn't exist in a place filled with people.

"We'll check the cameras," one staffer said.

Another staffer pressed his radio, calling for the manager. Somewhere behind them, the band stopped mid-song.

The hotel's lobby suddenly felt too small, too bright, too cold. The chandeliers hummed overhead, their crystal teardrops swaying with invisible motion. Every sound was amplified: the soft scuff of shoes, the clack of the elevator doors, and the relentless static of security radios that wouldn't quite tune in.

Minutes blurred.

Then hours.

They searched the stairwells, storage closets, and conference halls.

Each door opened on nothing. Each hallway was longer than it needed to be.

Sarah's heels echoed down the corridor as she ran, voice breaking. "Jane! Please! Answer me!"

Her words bounced back, smaller, weaker.

When she reached the elevator, the doors slid open on their own.

Empty.

The air inside smelled faintly sweet, like cotton candy and candle wax.

She staggered backward. "They were in here. I know it."

The father pulled her close, his voice trembling. "We'll find them. We'll find them, I promise."

As he said it, the hotel lights flickered.

Once.

Sarah looked up at the nearest mirror. Behind her reflection, for a split second, she thought she saw the elevator panel glowing. Floors 1 through 22, faint and flickering, for a second, and then, a 13.

On the 13th floor, the Toymaker led Scout and Jane down a hallway that pulsed with soft light. Music hummed from inside the walls, something playful and strange, halfway between a lullaby and a carnival march. Even the very walls seemed to whisper stories of the elusive 13th story, a place where only imagination treads.

"Now," he said, his voice bright, "we mustn't waste a perfect imagination. This floor runs on it. This is the *Toymaker's Workshop*."

Every surface was alive. Mechanical arms spun ribbons through the air, sewing them into kites that floated off under their own power. Screens hovered in midair, showing shapes being designed and tested in bursts of color. Animals crawled across the floor with too many legs, balloons that changed faces, and jack-in-the-boxes that played symphonies instead of songs.

Jane gasped. "This place is magic."

"Not magic, my dear," the Toymaker said, tapping his temple.

"Imagination."

Scout ran to a table where clay molded itself into shapes. He laughed as a lump of red clay folded into a racing car, then sprouted wings and a mouth full of teeth. "Can I make one?"

The Toymaker clapped his hands. "But of course! Here, I'll show you how to bring it to life."

He waved his hand, and a circle of small brass tools floated toward Scout.

"Every creation begins with a *wish*. What shall this one do?"

Scout thought for a second, face scrunched in concentration. "It should never crash!"

"Ah," said the Toymaker. "Then it needs balance." He twisted one of the tools, and a tiny gyroscope appeared inside the clay. It hummed. "Now speak to it. Tell it your name."

"My name?"

The Toymaker nodded. "How else will it remember you?"

Scout leaned close and whispered, "Scout."

The toy blinked. Two glass eyes opened on its hood, and it squealed softly like a happy pet.

Jane laughed, clapping her hands. "That's amazing!"

Behind them, something moved.

A boy carrying two large, empty, see-through boxes shuffled silently past.

His skin was pale, almost waxy, his motions a little stiff, too even, like a puppet following a silent drumbeat.

“Hey,” Scout called. “Cool costume!”

The boy didn’t answer. He walked straight through a narrow door and disappeared.

“Who was that?” Jane asked.

“Ah,” the Toymaker said lightly, adjusting a clock on the wall. “Just one of my helpers. I need so much help to keep this place running.”

Jane frowned. “Are there a lot of kids here?”

“Oh yes,” said the Toymaker. “Dozens, hundreds. Some stay longer than others. We all do our part. Even... Krampus, on the other side of the hall.”

He chuckled when he saw their puzzled faces. “A bitter old fellow, that one. Doesn’t believe in joy. Tries to frighten children into being good. I prefer to reward curiosity. Isn’t that much more fun?”

Scout nodded eagerly. “Yeah! Krampus sounds like a jerk.”

The Toymaker’s grin widened, too wide. “Indeed. He’s all sticks. I’m all candy.”

They moved deeper into the workshop. More children appeared in glimpses, silhouettes moving behind frosted glass, shapes that looked

almost right, almost human, except their joints bent in slightly wrong directions.

“Come now,” said the Toymaker brightly, steering them toward another room. “Play makes one thirsty.”

The next chamber bloomed open like a stage. Plush chairs unfolded from the floor, shaped like enormous blossoms, so soft they seemed to sigh as the children sank into them. The air smelled of toasted sugar and polished wood, like a toy chest just opened after years in the attic.

“You must be thirsty!” the Toymaker said, clapping his hands. “Watch closely.”

From the ceiling, a fountain descended, a column of shimmering liquid suspended in midair, flowing upward instead of down. It looked like water, but it pulsed with inner light.

“Go on, take a cup.”

Two crystal goblets floated toward them, catching every color of the room.

“Now dip them,” said the Toymaker, “and say the name of your favorite drink.”

Scout dipped his first. “Coke!”

The clear liquid inside turned dark brown, fizzing instantly.

Jane squealed and tried hers. “Big Red!”

The Toymaker laughed, delighted. “Marvelous! I prefer something more... *orange* myself.”

He dipped his cup and whispered, “Fanta.”

The drink flared bright as flame, glowing gold before he took a long, satisfied sip.

They laughed together, the sound bright and genuine. For a moment, it was perfect.

Then the lights dimmed a shade. The music slowed, just a beat.

“You like games?” the Toymaker asked.

“Yes!” they chorused.

He smiled. “Good. Let’s play one more.”

He snapped his fingers. From the floor, two elegant visors rose, curved glass, glowing faintly blue.

“Put these on.”

Scout slipped his on first, laughing as the visor adjusted around his head.

“Whoa, cool! What’s this?”

The Toymaker leaned close, voice dropping to a whisper. “It shows you everything you’ve ever dreamed of.”

Jane hesitated, but he placed a hand gently on her shoulder, almost human.

“You’ll love it, my dear. Trust me.”

She slid it on.

The visors flared to life, flooding the room with color. The children's faces relaxed. Their mouths opened in wonder, their eyes reflecting light that pulsed with a purpose.

The Toymaker stood between them, smiling faintly. His reflection in the crystal cups was different now: his face cracked, his eyes hollow, his mouth stretched wider than it should be able to stretch.

"Every child deserves to be remembered," he whispered. With a flick of his wrist, the lights in the workshop dimmed.

The Dominion's lobby looked like a crime scene.

Police lights bled through the glass doors, casting a red-and-blue glow over the chandeliers. Officers murmured into their radios. Guests huddled in corners, whispering, clutching their children closer.

Sarah sat on a green velvet couch; her hands wrapped around a paper cup of coffee gone cold. Her fingers wouldn't stop trembling. Across from her, Robert was trying to sound calm, answering the detective's questions.

"What were they wearing?"

"Scout had a torn zombie costume, Jane was dressed as a witch, with a black hat and green ribbon. They were playing. Everyone saw them."

The detective nodded, jotting notes that already sounded hopeless. "You said you turned away for only a minute?"

Sarah's voice broke. "Less than that. We have come here for years. They know the hotel and its staff. All the children are playing hide-and-seek. We had nothing to worry about."

A uniformed officer whispered something to the detective. He turned to the parents with practiced empathy. "We've reviewed the footage. They entered an elevator around four-thirty. The doors closed, but... the car didn't go anywhere."

"What does that mean?" Robert asked.

"The logs say it stopped on the twelfth floor," the officer said. "But no one saw them get out. The cameras froze. And there are no cameras on the individual floors."

Sarah covered her mouth. "They're somewhere in this building. You have to keep looking."

"We are," the detective said gently. "But ma'am, we've searched every floor. Every room."

The sentence hung in the air, unfinished.

The band in the ballroom had gone silent hours ago. The only sound left was the humming of air vents and the hiss of static from half-working radios. Somewhere down a hallway, a maid was crying quietly, repeating that she'd seen the children just before the lights flickered.

Sarah's voice was barely a whisper. "It's this place. It's the hotel. It took them."

Robert squeezed her hand, but his own voice cracked. "Please," he said to the detective. "Don't give up looking."

The detective exhaled, tired. "We'll find them, Mr. Hayes. We'll do everything we can."

But as he spoke, the Dominion's lights dimmed again; it was only a second, but everyone in the lobby froze.

Somewhere far from the lobby, somewhere above and outside of time, the Toymaker stood before the mirror.

It towered over the room, framed in carved gold, its surface pulsing with faint light. Inside, reflections moved on delay, smiling a second too late, blinking out of rhythm.

Scout and Jane stood before it, visors gone, eyes glassy, their breathing shallow.

The Toymaker's voice was gentle. "Do you see, my little ones? The mirror shows what the world wants most, joy that never fades."

The glass shimmered. The children's reflections looked back at them, perfect, polished, still. Then the reflections smiled and stepped forward, hands outstretched.

Jane gasped as her reflection's fingers brushed her own. The surface rippled like water. She felt a pull, soft and irresistible, and then she was gone.

Scout tried to move, but his body would not obey. His reflection caught his wrist and yanked. Two splashes of light. Silence.

The Toymaker sighed, content. He brushed his hands together like a craftsman finishing a long day's work. Behind the glass, the children now floated peacefully, adrift in silver light. Their bodies on the floor were still, faint breaths rising and falling.

The boy with the translucent boxes entered robotically, joined by three other helpers. In pairs, they laid the boxes on the ground, clear acrylic coffins, and loaded Scout and Jane into their new resting places. When they carried the containers away, the mirror pulsed again.

From its surface stepped two new figures: a boy and a girl, small and shining, still damp and warm from the mold.

The Toymaker circled them slowly, inspecting every detail. He pried open Scout's mouth, smiled at the tiny silver filling. He took Jane's hand in his grotesque, varnished fingers and traced the half-moon marks from her habit of nail-biting.

"Perfect," he murmured.

No matter how often he performed this act, the craftsmanship always amazed him. "Come, children."

They moved, first unsteady, then with growing grace.

“Yes, Master,” they said in unison.

“I am not your master,” he corrected softly. “I am your maker. Open your mouths.”

They obeyed, and he placed a copper penny on each tongue, then pressed a finger inside.

His eyes glowed bright yellow. The room filled with a sharp hum and flashes of white light. When the sound faded, the clones blinked, alive with borrowed memories, familiar gestures, and learned affection.

Satisfied, the Toymaker led them to the door. It swung open on cue.

Beyond it waited the brass cage of the Dominion elevator, patient and gleaming. “Deliver yourselves,” he said. “Parents worry so beautifully.”

Dawn had barely started painting the horizon when an officer burst into the lobby, breathless. “We found them. We found the children!”

Sarah and Robert were on their feet before he finished.

“Where? Are they all right? Are they ...”

“They’re alive,” the man said. “Come quickly.”

Outside, the sky was a pale, cold blue. At the edge of the trees, two small figures sat inside an ambulance, wrapped in blankets. Officers crept around them, marking footprints that led nowhere.

Sarah ran first. She crushed both children into her arms, kissing their hair, their cheeks, every bit of them.

“Oh my God, my babies, where have you been? We were so worried. We looked everywhere.”

Her tears soaked through their blankets.

Scout and Jane blinked slowly. Their smiles were soft, hesitant.

Robert knelt beside them. “Hey, buddy. You okay?”

Scout nodded once. Jane leaned against her mother, eyes half-closed. They seemed tired, but unharmed.

A medic looked over them, puzzled. “They’re fine. No injuries, just a little disoriented.”

Sarah brushed Scout’s hair from his forehead, her hand trembling with relief. “It’s okay now. You’re home.”

The officer cleared his throat. “One thing, ma’am. We found these.”

He held out two small evidence bags, each containing a single copper penny.

“They were in the children’s pockets,” he said. “Do they belong to you?”

Sarah frowned. “No... we never carry cash. How did it end up in their costumes?”

Robert reached for the bags, but stopped when he saw faint red fingerprints pressed into the metal.

Far above, on the now-sealed Thirteenth Floor, the mirror cooled to a black glass. The halls were silent except for the whisper of gears winding down. In the distance, beyond the mirror room, the clone hall pulsed with slow, even light. Hundreds of cylinders stood in perfect rows; mechanical children shuffled between them, boxing and tagging the orders they had to fill, tending to the next generation of Toymaker helpers.

The Toymaker walked the aisles with his hands clasped behind his back, humming a lullaby that echoed through the machinery. He paused before a fresh cylinder, two new figures floating inside, faces serene, eyes closed. His ancient fingers traced across the glass. "Sweet dreams," he said softly. He straightened his crimson coat and looked toward the ceiling where the pipes of the Dominion's elevators disappeared into darkness.

The Dominion shuddered once, gears locking, breath released, a sigh through its bones.

Then, it fell quiet for another year.

The End.



RAIN EATER

The Texas Panhandle was not known for its lush greenery. Tumbleweeds, cacti, and more cattle than people were a more accurate description.

Dryden had not seen rain in maybe a year; its people were starting to forget what rain smelled like.

Sometimes the old-timers still talked about it. As they sat outside Harper's Feed & Supply in stained caps and sweat-darkened shirts, drinking coffee from paper cups. The morning heat already climbed into the nineties before eight o'clock. They talked about how the storms used to roll across the fields so thick you could watch them swallow the horizon. Reminiscing about creek water that was cold enough to numb your feet. And how at night they would leave the windows open so they could listen to the thunder moving across the hills.

You could hear the ache in their voices when they talked about those years. The drought had lasted so long that children in Dryden barely remembered anything different. Some of them had never seen Miller's Creek flowing at all. Jedd's own son, Travis, once asked him why people called it a creek when all he'd ever seen was broken earth and trash. The creek bed cut through town like a giant scar, nothing left except cracked mud, sunken shopping carts, broken beer bottles, and pale rocks baked white beneath the sun. Jedd remembered fishing there as a boy, icy water running over his

ankles, but now even the memory tasted dried out. Cottonwoods along the banks stood leafless and brittle. When the wind blew hard enough, branches snapped and, like old bones, tumbled to the ground. Sometimes, Travis would pick up fallen branches and pretend they were swords, but even his games had to end when the dry wood crumbled in his hands.

Everything in Dryden was coated in dust.

It didn't matter if it were window sills, store counters, or the church pews. People tracked it into their homes, and every room looked dirty, no matter how much they cleaned. The dust crept into bedsheets and the folds of people's clothes.

By noon, the heat became something physical. If you've been to Texas, you might have sampled it. It sits on your shoulders and can push the air out of your lungs.

The sunlight was merciless, bleaching Dryden's color.

The worst were the days without wind.

In those days, the town felt trapped beneath glass.

People moved more slowly then. Faces flushed red. Tempers shortened.

The cashier at the grocery store started crying one afternoon when the credit card machine stopped working for 10 minutes, and 6 customers began shouting at her as if it were somehow her fault.

Nobody apologized afterward.

Dryden had reached the point where people no longer apologized.

From the highway, the farms surrounding Dryden looked abandoned. Fields that once carried cotton and sorghum stretched brown and empty toward the horizon. Irrigation rigs stood frozen where they had broken years ago, rust spreading along their metal frames. Barn roofs sagged inward. Most ranchers had already sold their cattle.

The lucky ones sold early. The stubborn ones waited too long and witnessed their herds die, one by one. The heat claimed them. Carcasses like polka dots across the landscape. Cows collapsed beside dry stock tanks. Horses standing too weak to move, their ribs pressing against hide stretched thin as paper.

People tried not to look at them anymore.

It hurt too much.

Every Thursday morning, water trucks arrived under county escort. Folks lined up before sunrise carrying buckets, coolers, and old plastic drums in the beds of their pickups. The line sometimes stretched for three blocks. Nobody talked much while they waited. Parents sat sweating inside idling trucks, trying to keep their children cool with the little air conditioning they could afford. Elderly couples leaned against folding chairs with towels draped around their necks. There weren't many left these days. Arguments happened almost every time.

Someone always accused somebody of taking too much.

Someone always tried to cut in line.

Someone always loses their ration card.

Last month, a deputy got punched after telling a man there wasn't enough left for an extra container. Life in Dryden sucked.

No matter how bad it got, the church stayed full. People who had not set foot in a church for 20 years suddenly found religion when the wells began drying up. On Sundays, hymns drifted out through open windows while the grass outside crackled beneath people's boots. Jedd noticed it every week, the way the voices rose together, raw with hope and desperation.

Sometimes, he would park his truck nearby just to listen, feeling both comforted and ashamed by the longing gathered in those songs, even as he stayed outside, unable to make himself walk through the doors.

Pastor Wynn stopped preaching about salvation.

These days, he preached endurance. About suffering and how the Lord tested people before delivering them.

Most nodded when he spoke.

Others stared at the floor with hollow eyes because, deep down, they had begun to wonder whether God had left Dryden behind.

At the edge of town sat what was once the Dryden reservoir. It looked hellish. Miles of exposed earth curved around the shrinking waterline. Old

boats sat stranded in the dried-up mud, far from where they once floated in the water. Dead fish littered the shoreline, baking under the sun. Sometimes the smell carried all the way into town, forcing people to close their windows. Not to mention the flies. The hordes of flies.

Children were forbidden to go there after the sinkholes began to open. The ground near the center had become unstable, and last summer, three boys had disappeared there. Only one body was retrieved.

After that, people stopped speaking about the reservoir unless they had to. Because everyone understood.

Dryden was dying slowly.

And nobody knew how much longer it had left.

Jedd Mercer should have left when Gloria asked him to.

He knew that now.

Some nights, he sat alone on the porch, staring across the dead fields and replaying their conversation; her words burned into his skull.

“Just come with me, Jedd. We don’t need to stay here.” She said, standing in the kitchen, sweat darkening the collar of her shirt, pressing herself against the counter; the heat inside the house made her dizzy. The air-conditioning unit rattled in the window, pushing out little more than warm air and noise. “We can start over somewhere else.”

Jedd remembered staring through the kitchen window instead of looking at her. Staring out toward the fields his grandfather had worked. His father had too. Acres of cracked dirt stretching beneath a white sky that never seemed to end.

“My sister said we can stay with her in San Antonio until we get back on our feet.”

Jedd said nothing.

Outside, one of the cows had collapsed near the fence line. He had not dragged it off yet. The smell already started creeping through the heat. *Why bother. In a few days, nothing but bones will be left. Why waste gas? Why go out in this heat?*

Gloria’s voice cracked. “Before we lose everything.”

For Jedd, leaving meant losing everything. This land was not just property. It was blood. His blood. Generations of Mencers are buried beneath dry earth.

Walking away would feel worse than dying. So, he stayed.

Two weeks later, Gloria packed the truck and left without him. She was tired of begging. Tired of waiting for death to come and take more. The night before she left, Jedd found her sitting at the edge of their bed, folding Travis’s clothes in careful, silent piles. Shadows lined her face where exhaustion had settled, but her eyes still burned with frustration and

something softer underneath. "Jedd, you remember when we first came here?" she said, her voice raw and quiet. "You promised me we'd build a life, not just survive until the land finally gave up." She shook her head. "I can't just watch everything I love rot and dry up any longer." Jedd stood in the doorway, unable to answer, the words catching in his throat. Gloria didn't look at him again. The next morning, without goodbye, she loaded the last box into the truck, glanced once at the house where laughter had once filled every room, and drove away.

At first, she called every few days.

Then, only once a week.

The conversations became shorter every time they spoke, and long silences lingered. There were too many things neither of them wanted to say out loud.

Jedd kept promising that rain would come soon. That things would turn around. He just needed a little more time, and everything would be ok again.

Eventually, even Gloria stopped believing him. Maybe even Jedd stopped believing.

The last call ended with quiet crying before she finally whispered:

"You are just waiting to die out there." A click, and that was the last time she ever called.

Now Travis would have to leave, too. At least that was what the judge had decided. Jedd still had the divorce paperwork folded on the kitchen table beneath unpaid bills and foreclosure notices. Temporary guardianship pending review. Unsafe living conditions for a minor. Recommendations for relocation to the next of kin. *Load of bullshit.*

Jedd's world was slowly turning to dust.

The farm had belonged to the Mercer family for over a hundred years. And Jedd refused to become the man who lost it.

Some nights, he drove aimlessly through Dryden. He drove past the empty fields and dried creek beds. Some evenings, he parked outside the church to listen to hymns that drifted out through the cracked doors. Exhausted voices begged God for mercy.

Mery.

That word stayed with him.

Because deep down, Jedd no longer believed he deserved it. Still, desperation had a way of making unreasonable things sound reasonable. He started spending afternoons at the library, which was one of the few buildings in town cool enough to think inside. He read anything connected to droughts. Crop failures. Dust Bowl accounts. Ancient rituals. Old religions. Stories of starving civilizations offering blood to silent skies. One book, brittle with age, told the story of a village in the old country where

prayers for rain were answered for seven days and nights. The land drank, but when the water receded, nothing living remained aside from green shoots and a single, hollow-eyed survivor. The librarian stopped asking what he was researching after a while.

Jedd's fingers explored the pages.

Aztecs. Mayans. Incas.

Over and over again, he found the same pattern. When the land died, people started offering sacrifices. Not because they were evil, but because they were afraid. People will convince themselves of almost anything when the world is collapsing around them. Jedd wondered how many of those old stories started with a good man, a desperate man, simply trying to save what little he loved. There was even an old rumor he remembered from childhood, a legend whispered by the ranchers and told with a shiver at the schoolyard fence: when the land grew thirsty enough, something would come if you asked. Out by the reservoir, some folks swore they'd seen strange shapes during the fires of the last bad drought. Something was watching from the edge of the firestorms. Kids called it Old Oth, a shadow that could bring water. Most folks laughed it off, chalking it up to prairie superstition, but the story lingered. Jedd remembered staring up at the ceiling late at night, trying to reason with the hard current of dread in his chest. He told himself the stories were nothing but myths, cautionary tales

for people too frightened by a world that would not listen. But every morning, the sky remained blank and pitiless. Each afternoon, his eyes lingered longer on the lines in his palms, as if he could read the answers there and spare his family, his father's land, another day of suffering. Guilt and hope took turns hollowing him out. He kept searching for excuses, reassurances, anything to justify the shape his thoughts had begun to take. Jedd never truly believed the stories, but the drought wormed its way past belief, turning doubt and longing into something darker, and somewhere during all those sleepless nights, a terrible idea began to take root. A sacrifice.

A sacrifice that had to matter. That was the one part every story agreed on. So, he drove out to the fields, Travis Mercer asleep in the backseat of his truck.

Jedd had crushed valerian root into his food earlier that evening and poured a little extra into the boy's soda. Halfway through supper, Travis complained about being tired and asked if he could go to bed. By the time they left town, his breathing had started to become slow and heavy. The truck rolled through darkness under a sky filled with empty clouds. The truck's headlights swept across dead pastureland and rusted fencing before Jedd finally stopped near the old north field. Four generations of Mercers used to plant crops here. The fifth generation would not get that chance.

The engine ticked softly after he shut it off. The land looked skeletal beneath the moonlight that filtered through the clouds. It lay in waiting, dry, patient, and hungry. Jedd gripped the steering wheel so tight his knuckles ached. Behind him, he could hear Travis breathing.

For a moment, he almost started the truck again. Almost drove back. But then he thought about Gloria leaving. About the foreclosure notices. About Travis being taken from him. About their cattle collapsing in the heat. About Dryden dying one house at a time.

And somewhere inside his ruined, exhausted mind, he convinced himself that any god worth praying to would accept his sacrifice.

Tears his body could barely spare crept slowly down his face, leaving thin trails through the dirt coating his skin.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered to the darkness and kissed Travis on the forehead.

He opened the truck door and stepped out into the dead field, carrying Travis in his arms.

The heat still lingered even at night; the wind moved across the pasture carrying dust and the smell of dead grass. He kneeled down and lay next to his son.

His only son.

For one terrible moment, Jedd saw him at six years old again, running through sprinklers behind the farmhouse, laughing hard enough to fall into the mud.

He kissed him one last time, and as a salty tear dropped from his eyes, moonlight flashed across the blade as it cut Travis' throat.

For a moment, Travis' eyes flashed open, but it was too late, and what was done could no longer be undone. Travis' blood flowed down his neck, soaking the land that started to quench its thirst.

Jedd threw the knife as far as he could, screaming at the moon, rocking the lifeless body of his son until, at some point, he passed out.

At the first crack of light, thunder stirred Jedd awake.

For a moment, he did not understand what he was hearing.

Thunder.

Real thunder.

Heavy enough to shake the ground beneath him. Then something cold touched his face. A single drop of rain. Then another, and another.

Jedd's eyes opened slowly. The sky above him had turned black. Not night black. Storm black. Vast clouds rolled across the horizon in enormous churning walls while lightning flickered deep inside them like something alive moving through the sky. Rain began falling harder. Fat drops struck the dead earth beneath him.

The smell hit him next. The slight metallic smell of dirt rising from the soil, mixing with cold drops of water. The quenched soil slowly turned into mud.

Rain.

A smell most of Dryden had forgotten.

Jedd stared at his trembling hands, covered in dried blood. He watched in awe as they turned pink beneath the downpour. Beside him lay Travis Mercer. His only son. The sacrifice given in Dryden's name.

Pale.

Still.

Gone.

Rainwater puddled in the hollow of the boy's ragged throat before slowly spilling into the dirt below him.

Jedd made a sound he did not recognize. It was not quite a sob, nor a scream. Something broken somewhere between the two.

The storm intensified rapidly, and the rain hammered the fields hard enough to flatten the dust into mud within minutes. Thunder rolled endlessly overhead while water poured from the heavens in thick sheets that blurred the world.

And despite the horror lying at his feet...

A terrible thought bloomed inside Jedd's exhausted mind.

It worked.

Dear God... it worked.

Shaking violently, he lifted Travis from the ground, his cold flesh sending shivers and repulsion through Jedd's body. He carried him toward the grave he had dug the day before, beneath the old mesquite tree that overlooked the north field. The rain had soaked through his clothes, and mud clung to his boots, trying to pull him under the ground, like hands from the undead. He lowered his son carefully into the grave while rainwater closed over him in slow muddy ripples. Jedd's hand lingered for a moment against Travis' wet hair before finally letting go.

Generations of Mercers had worked this land. Generations buried beneath it. Now, Travis had become part of it, too.

Jedd pushed the soil back into the grave, his hands numb, the rain battered his shoulders and streamed down his face. The thought that Travis could not see him crying shattered something inside him. He collapsed beside the grave as the storm raged overhead, weeping into the mud while rainwater poured across the dying farmland of Dryden for the first time in years. For one small terrible moment...

Jedd believed the sacrifice had been worth it.

Jedd Mercer stumbled back toward the truck through ankle-deep sucking mud while the rain continued to hammer the fields around him. The storm

was slowly turning violent. Water crashed against the earth so hard it bounced back upward in silver sprays. Thunder shook the sky without pause. The windshield wipers groaned uselessly once he pulled onto the road, struggling to clear the torrent pouring across the glass. Water rushed through the ditches on both sides of town. Jedd drove slowly, white-knuckling the steering wheel while lightning flashed across the sky in violent bursts of blue-white light. His clothes were soaked, and some of the blood still stained his hands. Every time lightning flashed, he thought he could still see Travis sitting beside him.

As he entered town, he saw people gathering in the streets, despite the storm; some stood barefoot in the rain, their arms raised toward the sky. Others sat on their knees in the puddles of water, crying openly. Children splashed through growing puddles while the church rang its bells beneath the thunder.

“Hallelujah!”

“Thank you, Jesus!”

“Our prayers have been answered!”

Jedd could hear their voices echo through the rain from every direction. He slowed near the courthouse intersection and stared through the windshield at the people dancing beneath the storm. For the first time in years, life was falling from the sky. And all he could think was:

At what cost?

His stomach twisted violently. He wanted to scream at them. Tell them what he had done. Tell them, what was buried beneath the north field, that this precious gift of life was soaking a fresh grave. But the words never came. Because if the rain truly had come because of Travis... If the sacrifice had worked... Then what did that make him?

Jedd drove on through the storm while Dryden celebrated around him. For now, there was only one thing left to do. Go home and pretend his son was still alive.

That night, Jedd Mercer sat in the doorway watching the rain fall across the fields while cold wind drifted in and drenched his bare feet. Water blew into the house, soaking the floorboards near the entrance, but he no longer cared enough to wipe it up.

Nobody in Dryden cared about rain ruining things anymore. Not after years of drought. The entire town seemed drunk on relief. People laughed again. Children ran through puddles barefoot. The church was filled with singing while thunder rolled overhead almost constantly now. Trucks parked along Main Street with their windows down just so people could sit and listen to rainfall hitting rooftops.

For the first time in years, Dryden could breathe again. At least, that was what people believed.

By the second day, the rain still had not stopped. Not once.

Mary Holloway noticed the flies first.

She stood in the kitchen, rubbing sleep from her eyes while the rain tapped steadily against the windows. At first, she thought dirt had somehow blown onto the sill overnight.

Then the dirt started moving.

Dozens of flies spun in frantic circles across the wood, buzzing loudly as they rotated faster and faster until some of them simply collapsed onto their backs, twitching. Their little needle-thin legs curled inwards. Others smashed themselves against the glass hard enough to leave wet, yellow-green streaks behind.

“Daddy?”

Her father looked up from the coffee pot.

“What is it, honey?”

Mary pointed toward the window.

The flies continued spinning wildly. Not flying. Not crawling. Turning endlessly in tight little circles like broken toys wound too tight.

Mr. Holloway frowned and crushed several beneath his work boot.

“Probably confused from the rain,” he muttered. “Hell, everything’s confused lately.”

But all over Dryden, flies gathered. Along windowsills. Near sinks. Beneath light fixtures. Buzzing frantically until they dropped dead.

By the third day, water covered parts of Main Street.

Storm drains overflowed continuously while muddy runoff rushed through neighborhoods in brown swirling currents. The dry earth could not absorb the water fast enough. Puddles became ponds. Ditches became streams.

Still, the rain came. Steady. Heavy.

Unending.

That afternoon, twelve-year-old Jacob Reese crouched beneath his parents' porch, poking at a spiderweb with a long stick. Normally, the web stretched perfectly between the wooden beams. Now it looked ruined. The large brown spider at its center jerked violently in random directions, spinning left and right so fast its legs blurred. It would stop for half a second, twitch violently, then resume spinning.

Jacob frowned.

"What's wrong with you?"

Around the base of the porch lay dozens of dead crickets. Several centipedes curled inward like burned fingers. The spider suddenly dropped from the web onto the wet dirt below and began twisting in frantic circles before finally going still.

That night, the birds came down. People across Dryden woke to the sound of impacts striking rooftops, windows cracked from their impact.

Thousands of birds fell from the sky before sunrise.

Blackbirds. Crows. Sparrows.

Entire flocks dropped dead mid-flight.

People across Dryden woke before sunrise to the sound of bodies striking rooftops, porches, windshields.

By morning, the streets seemed alive with twitching wings and wet feathers.

Wounded birds flapped helplessly through growing puddles while others lay motionless in gutters, their broken bodies slowly turning with the rainwater rushing past them.

Children cried in horror.

Dogs barked hysterically from inside houses, refusing to go outdoors.

The smell arrived by afternoon.

Wet feathers.

Rot.

Rainwater.

And still the storm continued.

By the fourth day, people noticed the silence.

No birdsong. No insects. No sound except rainfall.

Even the dogs had stopped barking.

By the fifth day, people stopped celebrating the rain.

The storm had become relentless.

Water rushed through the streets of Dryden in muddy currents strong enough to drag garbage cans and tree limbs downstream. The dry ground could no longer absorb anything. Entire sections of roadway collapsed overnight where floodwater carved through brittle earth beneath the asphalt.

The town smelled different now.

Wet soil. Rotting animals. Sewage started backing up through old pipes.

The rain fell so hard that at times people could barely see across the street.

The few livestock animals left were now getting trapped against fencing, drowned by the water they desired just a few days ago. Dead dogs and bloated cats floated through drainage ditches beside torn branches and clumps of trash. Somewhere near the edge of town, floodwater tore open part of the cemetery hillside, exposing old coffins that now leaned drunkenly from the mud like broken teeth.

And still the rain came down, day and night, without mercy.

By evening, the people who had remained in Dryden gathered inside First Baptist. Some came to pray; others came because the church sat on slightly higher ground and their homes had started to flood. All were terrified and did not want to die alone.

Rain hammered the stained-glass windows, rattling the glass in their frames while muddy rivers flowed down Main Street.

Pastor Wynn stood near the altar, trying to calm everyone.

“This is only a storm,” he kept saying. “After so many years of drought, the land needs to readjust.”

But few people actually believed him. A child suddenly pointed toward the church doors.

The room fell silent.

Someone was standing outside.

A motionless shape. A tall man, wearing dark clothes, was soaked black by rain and mud. Water poured from his hair and ran down his chest in streams.

Then slowly...

He pushed the doors open.

Wind burst through the church, carrying cold rain and the smell of wet earth.

The stranger stepped inside.

And behind him... the storm began to weaken.

The rain itself retreated from his presence. The deafening roars outside softened. Thunder rolled farther away. Slivers of light began pushing weakly through breaks in the clouds overhead.

People stared in disbelief.

One woman dropped to her knees, whispering, "Thank you, Lord..."

The stranger raised his hands slowly.

His skin was pale. Bloodless pale. Like flesh that had spent centuries beneath the earth.

And behind his eyes, a faint glow pulsed softly, as if lightning had been harvested and buried deep inside his head.

Pastor Wynn stepped forward cautiously. "Who are you?"

The man slowly looked around the church, studying each frightened face as if humanity were vaguely interesting. Then he smiled.

"Oth," he said, his voice soft and ancient. His words sounded like water moving beneath ice. "You called for rain."

The name lingered strangely in the air, as if it did not belong to any language known in Dryden. Those nearest the stranger noticed a faint symbol etched in mud on his palm, resembling a circle twisted with a broken arrow, half-erased by rivulets of water. For a flicker of a moment, his eyes glinted silver as thunder rumbled outside, and some in the pews felt an old, rooted chill stir deep in their bones, as if the land itself recognized him before they did.

Silence filled the church.

Nobody moved.

They simply stared at one another, frozen in place while rain rattled against the stained-glass windows.

Finally, Pastor Wynn swallowed hard.

“Did... did God send you?”

Oth’s faint smile widened slightly.

“No,” he said.

Another low rumble of thunder rolled across Dryden.

Then lightning struck outside the church.

The flash turned the windows white.

A deafening crack shook the building hard enough to rattle the pews beneath them.

People screamed.

Across the street, the old oak tree standing beside the church exploded apart in a shower of splintered wood and steam. For generations, the children of Dryden had played beneath those branches after Sunday service.

Couples carved initials into its trunk. Families gathered beneath it during church picnics every summer before the drought came.

The tree lay split open down the center, blackened and burning beneath the rain, while smoke curled upward from the shattered wood.

Inside the church, panic spread through the congregation. Oth looked toward the rain-streaked windows.

“You asked for cleansing.”

Outside, floodwater rolled another dead animal slowly down the street.

Then Oth turned, stepped back into the storm...

and disappeared into the rain.

Jedd Mercer understood what had answered his sacrifice.

It was not mercy.

It was vengeance.

On the seventh day, floodwater rushed through Main Street, carrying garbage cans, cars, broken fencing, and dead animals. Mud-coated storefronts halfway up the windows and entire sections of road had collapsed into sinkholes filled with swirling brown water. Somewhere in the darkness, transformers burst one after another, throwing flashes of blue light across the storm before entire neighborhoods vanished into blackness.

The people trapped inside the church watched in despair as the long-awaited rain destroyed what little of Dryden remained. And there, beyond the flooded intersection, stood Oth.

Motionless. Looking at the church.

The rain that fell from the sky moved around him strangely, bending through the air as if dragged by invisible currents. Water streamed in spirals

beneath his feet. Lightning flickered deep inside the clouds above him, illuminating his shape in brief unnatural flashes.

Oth had grown. He hovered in the storm. Nothing about him appeared human anymore.

A low rumble rolled across the sky, and Oth slowly raised his head. His eyes reflected silver-white beneath the storm. Lightning struck all around him.

“I am the Rain Eater,” Oth said, his voice carrying unnaturally through the storm.

Though he stood nowhere near the church, every person inside heard the words clearly.

“You begged the sky to open.”

As Oth raised his arms, the storm answered.

Lightning cracked across the heavens, and the rain intensified instantly.

Wind hurled water sideways through the streets while thunder shook the buildings hard enough to rattle windows from their frames.

Oth floated forward, hovering above the flooded road.

“Your sacrifice,” he said softly, “was accepted.”

Nobody moved.

Then lightning struck him.

Not around him.

Into him.

The bolt tore down from the clouds in blinding white light and disappeared directly into Oth's skull. For one horrifying instant, his skeleton glowed inside him, burning white beneath translucent flesh.

His mouth opened impossibly wide as rainwater surged upward toward him from every direction. Water lifted from gutters, flooded streets, and rooftops, twisting through the air into his body while light burned behind his eyes bright enough to turn them white.

People screamed.

Another bolt struck.

Electricity exploded from Oth's outstretched hands toward the church. The steeple erupted apart in a shower of sparks and burning wood that rained into the floodwater below. Slowly, through the drowning streets of Dryden, the Rain Eater moved forward to complete the task for which he had been summoned.

The people trapped inside the church watched in despair as the long-awaited rain destroyed what little of Dryden remained.

The roof groaned overhead. For one terrible second, the entire church fell silent beneath the thunder. Then lightning struck somewhere above the sanctuary.

The crack was deafening.

A massive timber ripped free from the ceiling and crashed downward through the darkness, driving straight through Jedd Mercer's shoulder, bursting out through his side before burying itself deep into the flooded floor beneath him.

Jedd jerked violently upward. His body was pinned upright like an insect mounted for display. Blood erupted from his mouth as his body convulsed against the timber. Each spasm drove splinters deeper into his flesh. One arm twitched uselessly while his boots scraped desperately against the rising water below him.

Jedd's scream tore through the church, filling the sanctuary with agony, terror, and the horrible realization that none of them had ever been safe. It shattered whatever humanity remained inside the church, and panic erupted instantly.

Men who had prayed side by side moments earlier clawed at each other to escape the rising water. Women climbed onto pews and confessional booths while others grabbed at their legs, screaming for help, only to be kicked back into the flood below.

All kindness vanished. All civility dissipated. All pretense of goodness was gone, and only a deep-rooted animalistic survival instinct remained.

Pinned helplessly above the rising water, Jedd watched the horror unfold around him while blood bubbled slowly from his mouth and dripped into the flood beneath his feet.

Outside, beyond the shattered church windows, Oth continued walking slowly through the drowning streets of Dryden as the storm answered his will.

The stained-glass windows shattered inward beneath the force of the storm as muddy water surged through the church hard enough to knock people from their feet.

Oth's path of destruction continued slowly through the flooded streets.

Lightning answered his movements.

Power lines exploded and the few homes still remaining ignited in flames.

Entire sections of road vanished beneath the floodwaters while trees ripped free from the soaked earth and crashed through rooftops.

Dryden was being erased.

Pinned helplessly beneath the shattered beam, Jedd watched the horror unfold around him while icy water slowly climbed higher across his body.

To his waist.

His chest.

His throat.

The church around him burned and flooded simultaneously.

Bodies drifted past him in the dark.

Some facedown.

Others stared upward with glassy, dead eyes.

The water finally reached Jedd's mouth.

He held his breath as long as he could while rain hammered the collapsing church around him.

Then at last...

He slipped beneath the floodwater.

By morning, there was nobody left alive in Dryden.

The storm continued through the night.

Rain hammered the town until buildings collapsed into the floodwaters and entire sections of road vanished beneath mud and debris. Fires burned where lightning had struck homes and power lines, orange flames hissing beneath the downpour before finally dying beneath rising water.

And through it all, Oth moved slowly across the ruined town like something ancient walking through a dream.

Where he passed, death followed.

Not rage.

Not cruelty.

Purpose.

The rain itself had become his weapon.

People drowned in homes.

Others vanished beneath floodwaters.

Some simply collapsed where they stood as lightning flashed white through the storm around him.

By dawn, the screaming had stopped.

The church stood half collapsed.

Vehicles rested upside down in flooded intersections.

Dead cattle drifted through muddy streets beside shattered trees and pieces of rooftops.

And at the center of town, beneath the dying storm, Oth stood alone.

The rain around him finally began to weaken.

Slower now.

Softer.

The clouds above Dryden churned one last time before slowly unraveling.

Oth raised his face toward the sky, his massive shape seemed less solid than before. Rain passed through parts of him like mist moving through smoke while wind carried fragments of his dark form upward into the retreating storm clouds.

Then the Rain Eater began to disappear.

Only his eyes remained for a moment longer.

Then they too vanished into the storm.

Silence settled over Dryden for the first time in days.

Only dripping water and the distant creaking of broken buildings shifting in the mud.

Then finally...

The clouds parted.

Sunlight touched Dryden again.

Weak at first.

Thin golden rays breaking through the retreating storm.

Steam rose from the flooded streets.

And there, pushing through the soaked earth and ruined fields...

tiny blades of green began appearing.

Fresh grass. New life is pushing slowly upward through the mud.

For every blade of grass that struggles into the broken sunlight, something else had been lost beneath the wet earth. Somewhere, if Jedd Mercer were still here to see it, he might understand at last that all things green come with a cost, and that nothing in Dryden ever grows without a sacrifice beneath its roots.

Through shattered roads and drowned fields.

Through the bodies buried beneath the soil.

The land had finally been given what it needed.

And somewhere beneath the wet earth of the north field, among generations of Mercers before him, Travis Mercer rested as rainwater soaked the flesh from his bones and carried him deep into the roots of a dying town reborn at last.

The End.



THROUGH THICK AND THIN

The rain had stopped sometime around four in the morning. Tiny puddles had formed along the curb. Sprinklers clicked lazily somewhere down the street while a garbage truck groaned in the distance. John Harris stood barefoot in his driveway holding a ceramic coffee mug with faded blue lettering that read WORLD'S BEST DAD.

He and Cindy had found it at a thrift store for a dollar twelve years ago. They had no children. John just thought it was funny. He wore plaid pajama pants and an old Texas Rangers T-shirt with a bleach stain near the collar. The shirt should have been thrown away years ago, but the fabric had softened perfectly with age, and John believed throwing away comfortable clothes was wasteful.

The newspaper lay at the edge of the curb. Directly in a puddle. John sighed softly. "Aw, for goodness' sake." He wasn't angry, just disappointed on behalf of the newspaper.

He walked carefully down the driveway, avoiding the deeper puddles before rescuing the paper and tucking it beneath his arm like something fragile.

Halfway back to the porch, he noticed the cricket. It struggled upside down in a ribbon of rainwater beside the curb, tiny legs twitching helplessly.

John stopped immediately. "Well now," he murmured. Balancing the mug against his knee, he crouched and gently scooped the cricket from the

puddle. “You picked yourself a real foolish swimming spot there, buddy.”

He carried it toward the flower bed near the porch, where Cindy’s hydrangeas drooped heavily with rainwater. Butterflies drifted lazily between the wet blossoms while the morning air carried the smell of soaked dirt and mulch.

John set the cricket down beneath one of the leaves. It sat there, motionless for a moment, and then it disappeared into the dark soil. He smiled faintly to himself. Behind him, the front door creaked open.

Cindy Harris stood in the doorway, wrapped in a faded blue robe with tiny embroidered flowers near the sleeves. Her short blonde hair flattened awkwardly on one side from sleep, while reading glasses rested crookedly on her nose.

“You saving wildlife again?” Cindy asked.

“Crickets bring good luck,” John said.

“You know most people just let nature happen,” she said.

“Most people are monsters.”

Cindy laughed quietly. It was a practiced kind of laugh. Twenty years’ worth of practice.

John stepped back inside while Cindy moved toward the coffee maker. The house smelled faintly like coffee grounds and vanilla candles. The kitchen still wore traces of last night: two wine glasses were drying beside the sink, a

half-folded dish towel hung from the oven handle, and a yellow sticky note Cindy had left near the refrigerator reminding John to call the hotel in Las Vegas about late check-in.

One week. Twenty years married. Vegas first. Then the Grand Canyon. John still couldn't quite believe they were actually doing it. Not because they couldn't afford it. Technically, they could afford far more than this. Both of them had steady jobs, no debt, decent retirement accounts, and enough money tucked away to survive most ordinary disasters life could throw at people. But for twenty years, John and Cindy Harris had treated money the same way medieval villagers treated winter. Carefully.

Suspiciously. You never knew when something could happen.

The roof could start leaking. The plumbing could back up. The air conditioner could die in August. A car engine could suddenly start making one of those sounds that mechanics described as catastrophic. So, they saved.

Constantly.

Religiously.

Almost professionally.

At some point, frugality had quietly evolved into a sport between John and Cindy Harris.

Who could squeeze the most toothpaste from a tube? Who could make a

roll of paper towels last the longest? Who could find the cheapest gas within a five-mile radius? Sometimes they even shared techniques with each other like tiny suburban survivalists.

“You gotta roll the toothpaste from the bottom,” Cindy would say.

John disagreed with this completely. He believed in pressing the tube flat against the counter first with the palm of his hand “to redistribute the remaining product.” Neither of them knew what that actually meant. They bought used cars with cash and drove them until they practically fell apart. They reused freezer bags. Folded wrapping paper after Christmas. Argued over thermostat settings like it was a sport. The house around them reflected that same carefulness. They weren’t cheap exactly. When John and Cindy Harris made a purchase, it was measured. Intentional.

Every product was researched beforehand: customer reviews, recalls, comparison websites, YouTube videos of strangers stress-testing blenders like federal investigators. And when all that was done, John and Cindy would still sit at the kitchen table making handwritten pros-and-cons lists while comparing long-term value, return on investment, durability, warranty coverage, and possible future liability.

Nothing in the Harris household was ever left to chance. Or at least, they tried very hard to eliminate it.

The kitchen cabinets held exactly four plates, four bowls, four glasses, and

two coffee mugs.

One mug read WORLD'S BEST DAD, the other said DON'T TALK TO ME UNTIL THIS IS EMPTY. They had owned those same two mugs for nearly ten years. Not because they had sentimental value. But because they simply still worked. No reason to replace something that continues serving its purpose. And purpose was important in the Harris household.

The living room had two small reclining chairs instead of a couch because couches took up too much space and cost too much. Since they had no children and rarely entertained guests, the arrangement simply made more sense.

John's recliner sat angled slightly toward the television while Cindy's rested near the lamp she used for reading. Between them stood a narrow wooden end table holding a neatly stacked set of coasters Cindy's parents had given them as a wedding gift twenty years earlier.

They used the coasters constantly.

The guest room wasn't really a guest room. It functioned more like an overflow space for practical things that the rest of the house didn't quite have room for.

A treadmill sat against one wall because John refused to pay monthly gym membership fees, as walking indoors technically accomplished the same thing for free after the initial purchase.

Near the window stood Cindy's sewing desk, where she repaired loose buttons, patched tiny tears, hemmed pants, and occasionally made simple clothes herself whenever fabric sales became "financially irresponsible to ignore." An ironing board remained permanently open in the corner because repeatedly folding and unfolding it every week felt inefficient.

Everything in the room had a purpose. Which was good.

Nobody ever stayed over. They liked it that way. Not because they disliked people. They just preferred leaving restaurants and going home afterward.

Cindy poured coffee into her mug and leaned against the counter.

"You call the hotel today?"

"Lunch break."

"You confirm the canyon tour?"

"Already did."

"Did you print the reservation?"

John lowered the newspaper slowly.

"I forgot."

"You forgot."

"I was gonna do it yesterday."

"You said that yesterday."

"I'll do it today."

"You're very lucky I find you adorable."

John smiled faintly without looking up from the paper.

“That’s fair.”

Outside, another sprinkler started ticking rhythmically. Cindy sipped her coffee while staring through the kitchen window at the neighboring houses.

Mrs. Peterson across the street had recently planted new roses.

Bright pink ones. Too bright. The kind of flowers people bought when they wanted the whole neighborhood to notice how expensive their landscaping was.

Ugly roses. Probably cost a fortune too. Such a waste of money.

Cindy took another sip of coffee.

Ridiculous.

John adjusted the newspaper in his lap.

“Do you think we should pack early?” he asked.

“For six days?”

“Well, I just don’t wanna forget anything.”

“You’re bringing three pairs of khakis and seventeen emergency phone chargers. I think we’ll survive.”

John nodded thoughtfully.

“That’s fair.”

“Did you buy sunscreen?”

“Yes.”

“The good sunscreen?”

“There’s bad sunscreen?”

“The cheap one separates the oils.”

John frowned slightly.

A low, faint mechanical hum drifted in from outside.

Not a car. Something heavier.

Both of them looked toward the front window. The sound stopped near the door. Then came the doorbell.

Ding-dong.

John lowered the newspaper slowly. Cindy looked toward the hallway over the rim of her coffee mug.

“You wanna get it?” she asked.

“You’re closer.”

“I’m emotionally closer. Physically, you’re closer.”

John sighed softly and pushed himself out of the recliner with the small involuntary grunt Cindy had accused him of making earlier.

“There it is,” she said.

“That’s still breathing.”

“Sure it is.”

Ding-dong.

John shuffled toward the front door, automatically smoothing down the

front of his shirt.

The frosted glass beside the doorway revealed only vague shapes: something large, dark, motionless.

For one brief, uncomfortable moment, John wished they had spent the money on a door camera. Then immediately dismissed the thought. The subscription fees alone were ridiculous. Paying monthly to watch recordings from a camera you already owned felt borderline criminal to both John and Cindy Harris.

Maybe somebody was selling solar panels.

He unlocked the deadbolt and pulled open the door.

The man sitting in the motorized wheelchair looked enormous. Not just overweight. Massive. Three-chins kind of massive. His cheeks were flushed deep red beneath damp curls of thinning hair, while sweat darkened the collar of a faded polo shirt stretched tightly across his stomach. A half-empty gas station soda rested in the cupholder while the wheelchair hummed softly beneath him like heavy machinery left idling.

John's brain instantly began estimating grocery costs against his will.

Dear goodness. What would that electric bill alone look like?

Immediately, he felt guilty for thinking it.

The man smiled broadly. "Hey there, buddy."

John blinked politely. "Hello, sir. Can I help you?"

The man's smile faltered slightly.

"John."

John stared blankly. "Do I know you?"

"It's Alex."

A long pause.

John searched the stranger's face desperately, finding nothing familiar there.

"I'm sorry," he said carefully. "Do we... have an appointment or something?"

The man laughed loudly.

"Alex Nolan," he said. "Middleville Elementary? Mrs. Berns' class? You broke your wrist falling off the monkey bars in fourth grade and blamed me for daring you?"

John froze.

"And you helped me pass algebra sophomore year," Alex continued. "You let me copy half your history homework because Coach kept threatening to bench me."

Another pause.

Then suddenly: "Oh my goodness." John's face changed all at once. "Oh my goodness," he whispered again. "Alex? Alex Nolan?"

Alex grinned wider. "The one and only."

John stared at him in complete disbelief. "Oh my gosh, Alex, I didn't

even... I mean I just..."

"Yeah, changed a little," Alex said, patting his stomach. "Life comes at you fast, buddy."

Then, before John could respond, Alex pushed the joystick on the wheelchair. The machine rolled forward immediately with a loud electric hum.

John stepped aside out of pure instinct as the wheelchair squeezed through the doorway with barely an inch to spare on either side. The electric humming bounced harshly off the narrow hallway walls.

"Oh my God, this is so cozy, John. I love it."

Alex's self-directed tour continued as he slowly wheeled farther into the house.

The humming noise startled Cindy so hard she nearly dropped her coffee mug. "What on earth is that?"

The wheelchair hummed down the hallway toward the living room.

John followed a step behind, suddenly aware of how narrow the house actually was.

"Well, would ya look at this place," Alex said warmly as the wheelchair turned. John blinked twice and slowly closed the front door behind him.

Alex spun the wheelchair in a wide, slow circle while taking in the connected living room and kitchen.

“Oh, this is NICE, very nice,” he said. “Look at this open floor concept. Buddy, I could move right in here.” The electric motors whined loudly beneath him. “I love this floor. Is this laminate? That’s smart. Carpet’s a son of a bitch to clean.”

Cindy stepped carefully from the kitchen area, still holding her coffee mug with both hands.

Her eyes widened slightly. Pure suburban panic.

Who the hell is this?

Alex noticed her immediately and beamed. “And this must be Cindy.”

He extended one large, sweaty hand toward her.

“Alex Nolan. Johnny’s old partner in crime.”

Cindy carefully transferred her mug into her other hand before shaking his.

Five thick sausages attached to a meatball. Good Lord.

“Oh. Well. Hello,” she said pleasantly.

The moment Alex turned back toward the living room, Cindy immediately looked at John. Her eyes widened further.

Who.

The fuck.

Is this?

Behind Alex’s back, John gave the smallest helpless shrug imaginable while raising both hands slightly as if to silently say: *I don’t know. He just appeared.*

Alex continued admiring the room, completely oblivious. “This place is fantastic,” Alex said. “Seriously. Cozy as hell. You two did well.” The wheelchair hummed farther into the living room.

John suddenly became hyperaware of everything: the narrow hallway, the tight spacing between furniture, the sharp corners of the coffee table, the fact that they only owned two mugs, and the complete lack of anything resembling actual guest seating.

Alex turned slowly in the wheelchair, taking everything in with genuine admiration.

“This is smart,” he said. “No wasted space. Everything’s got a purpose.”

John blinked once. Nobody had ever complimented the house like that before. Most people just called it small. But then again, they hadn’t had many visitors at all since they started living here.

The wheelchair rolled forward again and stopped directly in front of John’s recliner. Alex smiled.

“Oh, buddy,” he said softly. “This thing looks comfortable as hell.”

John felt something twist quietly in his stomach.

Alex kept talking. Words just poured out of him in a nonstop cheerful stream while the wheelchair hummed softly beneath him. “You remember that gas station over by Miller Road? The place still exists. Can you believe that? Smells exactly the same, too. Cigarettes and mop water. Some things

never change.”

John nodded automatically.

Cindy stood near the kitchen entrance, still holding her coffee mug with both hands, while trying to process what exactly had just happened to their morning. The house suddenly felt different. Smaller somehow. Their entire day had quietly shattered without either of them agreeing to it.

John was supposed to print the hotel reservations. Cindy needed groceries.

The bathroom towels were still in the dryer. They had planned on organizing luggage tonight. Now there was suddenly: a giant wheelchair in the living room, a sweating man from another lifetime, and the smell of gas-station soda, slowly warming the air.

Alex pointed toward a framed photo on the wall “Oh my God, look at you two,” he laughed. “Twenty years? That’s incredible.”

John smiled politely. “Next week, actually.”

“No shit? That’s beautiful, buddy.” Alex kept rolling slowly around the room while talking.

The electric motors emitted a soft mechanical whine every few seconds, a sound John was already beginning to suspect would haunt him later tonight.

“So where are you guys headed?”

“Vegas first,” John said. “Then the Grand Canyon.”

Alex slapped one hand against the armrest excitedly.

“Oh HELL yes.”

The word echoed through the living room. John felt himself tense automatically. Cindy smiled thinly. “Well,” she said politely. “That should be fun.”

“Oh, it’s gonna be incredible,” Alex said. “I always wanted to see the Canyon.”

Before the silence could settle awkwardly, John immediately defaulted into politeness.

“Can we get you something to drink?”

Cindy’s eyes shifted toward him instantly.

John.

What are you doing?

Alex lifted the enormous, half-melted convenience store cup from the wheelchair cup holder and shook it slightly. “Oh buddy, I would LOVE something.” Then he tilted the cup back and finished the remaining soda in one long slurping gulp. Ice rattled loudly against the empty plastic cup.

“Ahhhhhh.”

Gross. Cindy thought.

Alex automatically handed the empty cup to Cindy. “Here ya go.” For one horrifying second, Cindy stared at it. The straw glistened. Condensation mixed with fingerprints along the side. Inside her mind, every survival

instinct screamed. *Absolutely not.* Outwardly, she smiled.

“Oh. Sure.”

She carefully took the cup, using only the very top edge with two fingers.

“Would you like me to just refill this one?” she asked. “We try not to waste cups if we can help it.”

“Nah,” Alex said cheerfully. “That thing’s from yesterday anyway.”

Cindy nearly dropped it.

Yesterday?

“Oh,” she said faintly. “Alright then.”

As she disappeared into the kitchen, she immediately opened the trash can and dropped the cup in, as if it were radioactive. She scrubbed her hands with soap, two happy birthdays.

Then she froze.

Glasses.

They only had four. And two of them were currently in the dishwasher. Her eyes slowly shifted toward the cabinet.

Absolutely not my glass. John’s glass. Obviously. It is his friend.

She pulled John’s favorite glass from the shelf and immediately felt better.

In the living room, Alex leaned back comfortably in the wheelchair while John remained standing awkwardly nearby. For a moment, the nonstop talking finally slowed.

John rubbed the back of his neck. "So, what uh... what brings you here, Alex?"

Alex looked down briefly at his hands. For the first time since entering the house, some of the energy faded from his face. "Well," he said quietly. "Honestly?"

John nodded.

Alex shrugged one shoulder. "Life kinda happened." The wheelchair hummed softly as he adjusted his position. "I got married." He smiled faintly. "She was beautiful, too, buddy. Way outta my league."

John smiled politely. "What happened?"

Alex let out a small breath through his nose. "Everything, I guess." He looked around the room while speaking. "Divorce about eight years ago. Started drinking too much after that. Stopped moving around so much. Got heavier." He patted his stomach once. "Then I found out I got one hell of a metabolism disorder mixed with some other garbage."

John listened quietly.

Alex shrugged again. "One thing turns into another after a while."

The room suddenly felt much quieter now. Even Cindy stopped moving around in the kitchen.

"I've been in the chair about three years."

John swallowed slightly. "That's awful, Alex."

“Eh.” Alex waved it off casually. “Could always be worse.” Then he smiled again. Like someone changing the subject inside themselves before anybody else noticed. Then he said it.

“I’m dying, Johnny.”

The sentence landed softly.

John stared at him. Something strange happened inside him then. Not just shock. Recognition. Like grief had reached across twenty-five years and grabbed him by the throat anyway.

Because suddenly, he wasn’t looking at the massive, sweating stranger in the wheelchair anymore. He was seeing the sleepovers, baseball fields, cheap beer, high school parking lots, bad haircuts, broken hearts, being fifteen years old and convinced life would last forever. And somehow, impossibly, this man he had forgotten still mattered.

Cindy returned, carefully balancing John’s glass in one hand. Ice cubes clinked softly inside it.

Alex accepted the drink with genuine enthusiasm. “Oh man, thank you.” Then he took an enormous sip like somebody who had just crossed a desert.

John watched in mild horror as condensation immediately formed beneath the glass.

No coaster.

Cindy noticed it too. Her eye twitched slightly.

Alex leaned back comfortably in the wheelchair. “So anyway,” he continued, “after all the medical stuff started piling up, I kinda figured... hell, why not go see some people, you know?”

John nodded slowly. “Yeah.”

“I mean, what’s the point sitting around waiting to die in an apartment?”

The sentence landed with such casual bluntness that neither John nor Cindy knew how to respond. Alex kept smiling anyway.

“I’ve been making a little bucket list.”

“A bucket list?” Cindy repeated politely.

“Oh yeah. Dumb stuff mostly. Vegas. Grand Canyon. Old friends. Restaurants I always wanted to try.”

John and Cindy exchanged the smallest glance imaginable.

Vegas.

Grand Canyon.

Alex continued talking before either could react. “Anyway, funny story,” he said, laughing softly. “The hotel I booked apparently declined my card or screwed something up. One of those two.” He waved a dismissive hand. “I tried calling customer service, but apparently, nobody on earth works Fridays anymore. The earliest they can straighten it out is Monday.”

John felt something cold begin forming quietly in his stomach.

No.

Alex sighed dramatically. “So right now I’m kinda just floating around till then.”

Silence.

Alex looked between them. Then suddenly smiled apologetically. “And listen, I hate even asking this because I know it’s awkward as hell...”

John’s heartbeat immediately sped up.

“...but would it maybe be alright if I stayed here till Monday?”

Silence.

“You honestly won’t even notice I’m here,” Alex joked.

John stared at the wheelchair. The humming alone could probably be heard from orbit.

“Oh,” Cindy said carefully.

Absolutely not.

John smiled automatically.

“Well, ”

“Actually,” Cindy interrupted quickly, “John, could I talk to you in the kitchen for one second?”

“Yep,” John said immediately. “Absolutely.”

The moment they stepped into the kitchen, both polite smiles vanished.

“What is happening?” Cindy whispered harshly.

“I don’t know.”

“He can’t stay here.”

“He’s dying.”

“He’s enormous, John.”

“Cindy.”

“I’m sorry, but where exactly is he supposed to go? We don’t even HAVE a guest room.”

“We technically do.”

“That room has an ironing board and your treadmill from 2009.”

“I still use that treadmill.”

“You walked on it once since then.”

John frowned. “That’s exaggerated.”

“John, we have things to do.” Cindy started counting quietly on her fingers.

“I need to start the laundry for the trip. We still have to do our packing.

You said you were fertilizing the lawn today. The reservations aren’t printed. I still need travel shampoo bottles.”

John rubbed his forehead. “I know.”

“And what if he stays longer than Monday?”

“He said Monday.”

“People say all kinds of things.”

John glanced toward the living room, where Alex’s voice continued

rambling happily to nobody in particular.

“He used to be my best friend.”

Cindy’s face softened slightly.

“Used to be. You haven’t spoken to him in twenty-five years.”

“I know.”

“He’s basically a stranger.”

“I know.”

Silence.

Then Cindy sighed heavily through her nose. And there it was.

The trap.

Because they both already knew what kind of people they wanted to believe they were. Cindy folded her arms tightly.

“You’re always talking about how nobody helps each other anymore,” she muttered.

John looked away.

“And if we say no to a dying man...”

She didn’t finish the sentence. She didn’t have to. John nodded once.

Defeated already.

“Till Monday,” Cindy whispered firmly.

“That’s it.” John immediately clung to the phrase as if it were legal wording.

“Till Monday.”

When they returned to the living room, Alex looked up hopefully. John smiled politely.

“Well... we can make something work till Monday.”

The relief that flooded Alex’s face was immediate and devastating.

“Oh buddy,” he breathed. “Thank you.” “Oh Jesus, thank you.”

John physically flinched at the word Jesus echoing through the room.

Cindy smiled tightly. “Well,” she said. “Let us show you the guest room.”

Alex followed them down the hallway while the wheelchair motors whined softly through the narrow house. The guest room door opened. Alex looked around warmly. “This is perfect.”

The room contained the treadmill, Cindy’s sewing desk, the permanently open ironing board, and several carefully stacked plastic storage drawers labeled batteries, cords, manuals, and receipts.

John immediately folded the ironing board shut. For perhaps the first time since purchasing it.

“I can move the treadmill, too,” he offered awkwardly.

Alex laughed. “Oh, trust me, buddy. I won’t be needing that.”

John laughed politely.

Yeah. No kidding.

“We uh...” John hesitated. “We actually don’t really have a bed in here.”

“Oh, that’s no problem.” Alex tapped a button on the wheelchair controls.

The chair slowly reclined backward with a soft electric hum until it resembled something halfway between medical equipment and a lawn chair. “See?” Alex grinned. “I sleep in this thing most nights anyway. Honestly, more comfortable than half the hotels I’ve stayed in.”

John stared at him. And suddenly something inside him hurt.

Not disgust. Not awkwardness.

Grief.

For one brief moment, he could still see the eighteen-year-old version of Alex Nolan underneath all of this. Throwing footballs in parking lots, laughing too loudly at parties, eating entire pizzas after midnight, convinced his life would become something enormous and invincible.

And now this was what remained.

A reclined wheelchair is in a storage room.

Alex smiled up at him. “I promise I won’t be any trouble.”

John smiled automatically.

Of course not.

Internally, every system in his brain had already begun calculating catastrophe.

Three days. Maybe four. What would they feed him? Where would he shower? How much water did motorized wheelchairs use to charge? How much would this cost? Would Cindy be okay with this? Would the

neighbors see? What if the bathroom doorway wasn't wide enough? What if the chair damaged the floors? What if he stayed longer than Monday? John suddenly realized he had absolutely no idea how to have another human being in his house anymore. Especially one this large. Especially one this loud. Especially one dying.

The realization sat heavily on his chest.

Alex smiled warmly up at him, completely unaware of any of it. "You guys are lifesavers."

John nodded politely. His life no longer felt recognizable.

That evening, the television stayed on mostly to prevent silence. Nobody really watched it.

Some home renovation show played softly while Alex talked over all of it anyway.

Cindy folded laundry at the dining room table with sharp, controlled movements while John sat nearby pretending to follow the television.

Alex kept talking. Stories. Names. Memories. Half-forgotten people from another lifetime.

Eventually, the conversation drifted outside. The evening air had cooled slightly after sunset, and John sat in a patio chair while Alex parked the wheelchair beside him near the backyard fence.

Crickets chirped softly somewhere in the dark.

“You remember Mary Barlow?” Alex suddenly asked.

John frowned. “Mary Barlow...”

Alex laughed loudly. “Oh come on, man. MARY Barlow.” Then Alex grinned. “The girl who taught you how to kiss.”

John nearly choked on his drink. “Oh my gosh.”

Memory hit him instantly. Mary Barlow, brown hair, green eyes, oversized denim jacket, the smell of strawberry lip gloss. Summer after sophomore year.

Alex had somehow talked her into it after finding out John had never kissed anybody before.

“She didn’t even wanna do it at first,” Alex laughed.

“I remember.”

“She said she’d only do it if she got to kiss me after.”

John groaned into his hands. “Oh, dear God.”

Alex nearly wheezed laughing. “And then afterward you kept asking if you were supposed to use tongue immediately or if that came later.”

“Alex.”

“You were panicking!”

The sliding glass door opened behind them. Cindy stepped outside carrying folded towels. “Mary, what?” she asked casually. John immediately pointed toward Alex.

“He dated her.”

Alex looked at John.

John looked at Alex.

A long pause.

Then Alex burst out laughing again. “Oh buddy,” he said. “You still lie exactly the same way.”

Cindy narrowed her eyes slightly.

“Oh my.”

John rubbed his forehead.

“It was one time.”

“That’s all it takes,” Alex said proudly.

Cindy disappeared back inside, shaking her head while smiling despite herself.

For a moment, the awkwardness eased. Not completely. But enough.

Alex leaned back slightly in the wheelchair. “So what about you guys?” he asked. “How’d this happen?”

John glanced toward the house. Cindy could be seen through the kitchen window organizing towels with terrifying precision.

He smiled faintly. “We met in college.”

Alex nodded. “What class?”

“Accounting.”

Alex stared at him. "Of course it was accounting."

John laughed softly.

"We got paired together for a project."

"And then?" Alex asked.

John shrugged. "I don't know. It just... worked."

From inside the house, Cindy yelled "He brought color-coded folders to a study group."

Alex barked, laughing. "Oh no."

"And she alphabetized the snack table," John called back.

"I was being organized."

"You labeled the dip."

"It was ranch and onion dip in identical bowls, John. Civilization requires structure."

Alex laughed so hard the wheelchair shook slightly beneath him. "That's beautiful."

John smiled despite himself. "Yeah," he admitted quietly.

"It kinda made sense."

"And twenty years next week," Alex said. "That's incredible."

John nodded. "We usually just go to Antoine's."

"The pizza place?" Alex asked.

"Every anniversary," John said.

“We get an extra topping.” “And breadsticks,” Cindy yelled from inside.

Alex stared at them in disbelief. “That is the most married thing I have ever heard in my life.”

John laughed softly. “Well, this year we decided to do something bigger.”

“Vegas,” Alex said.

John nodded.

Then came the pause.

Small. Almost invisible. But there.

Alex looked down briefly before smiling again.

“Oh man,” he said softly. “Vegas.”

John immediately heard it in his voice. Not jealousy.

Longing.

“That’s always been one for me,” Alex admitted. “Bucket list thing.” He rubbed one hand slowly against the armrest. “I actually got married there once.”

John blinked. “You did?”

“Yep. Little Elvis chapel.” Alex smiled faintly. “Marriage lasted about as long as Elvis, too.”

John laughed awkwardly.

Then, quieter, Alex added: “I always thought I’d go back someday.”

Silence settled briefly between them. Then Alex brightened again instantly.

“But hey, don’t worry about me. I can totally book my own stuff.”

John felt Cindy reappear silently behind him near the doorway.

“I get disability discounts on flights,” Alex continued. “And honestly, I wouldn’t wanna impose anyway. Maybe we’d just grab dinner or hit a buffet one night.”

John and Cindy exchanged another tiny glance. Dangerous glance. The kind of glance married people develop after years together.

Alex kept talking. “I mean, hell, you probably wouldn’t even notice me.”

There it was again. That phrase.

John felt something quietly dreadful move through his stomach. Alex smiled out toward the dark backyard. “The doctor says maybe five years,” he said casually. “But that doesn’t really mean five years, you know?”

Nobody answered.

“So I figured every day’s gotta count.”

John woke just before six the next morning to a sound he did not immediately recognize.

Water. Not running normally. Spraying. Gushing like it was free.

He sat upright in bed. Beside him, Cindy was still asleep beneath the comforter with one arm tucked beneath her pillow. The spraying sound continued faintly down the hallway. John quietly slipped from bed and shuffled toward the bathroom. Then stopped in fear.

The bathroom floor was soaked. Not damp.

Soaked.

Water glistened across the tile while muddy wheelchair tracks curved outward into the hallway like something large had crawled from a swamp.

John blinked slowly.

“Oh, dear.”

The shower hose had been detached from its holder and stretched halfway across the room. All four towels were gone from their rack. John stared blankly for several seconds before finally locating them. One towel lay crumpled beside the toilet, completely soaked. Another had apparently been used to wipe down the wheelchair itself. The remaining two towels rested on the hallway floor near the guest room entrance like makeshift tire mats. John stood there in silence, trying to process the scene.

Technically... Nothing had been damaged. Alex clearly believed he had solved a problem. John slowly rubbed both hands over his face. Cindy was going to have an aneurysm.

He quietly gathered the towels into his arms and immediately started the washing machine downstairs.

The entire morning rhythm was wrong now. Laundry was not supposed to happen until Tuesday.

Towels were washed separately from clothes. And absolutely nothing was

supposed to happen before coffee. John stared at the washing machine, which slowly turned.

His chest already felt tired. A few minutes later, he carried Cindy's mug upstairs, filled carefully to the exact level she preferred.

DON'T TALK TO ME UNTIL THIS IS EMPTY.

Cindy opened one eye suspiciously as he entered the bedroom. "You brought me coffee?"

John handed her the mug carefully.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong."

"John."

He sat gently on the edge of the bed.

"So Alex took a shower."

Cindy blinked once.

Then twice.

"Well."

A pause.

"At least he showered."

Immediately, her face tightened with guilt.

"Oh, that was ugly."

She sighed.

“I’m sorry. That wasn’t nice.”

“It’s okay,” John said quietly. “I understand.”

Cindy took a slow sip of coffee. “What happened?”

John stared toward the hallway. “He uh... improvised.”

“That sounds bad.”

“He used all four towels.”

Silence.

“All four?”

John nodded weakly. “And I think one of them was used on the wheelchair.”

Cindy closed her eyes slowly. Her entire soul appeared to briefly leave her body.

“The blue towels?”

“Yes.”

“The GOOD towels?”

“They’re in the wash.”

Another silence.

Then finally, “This is not who we are,” Cindy whispered.

John nodded. “I know.”

“This isn’t our life.”

“I know.”

“But it’s only a couple more days,” John said softly. “And he’s dying.”

Cindy stared into her coffee mug for a long moment. Then nodded once.

“Right.”

The first crack sat quietly between them afterward. Small. But real.

John smelled eggs before he even reached the kitchen. Not healthy eggs.

Bad eggs. Butter. Grease. Burnt toast.

The television was already on. Some loud morning game show filled the living room while Alex sat happily at the kitchen table wearing one of

John’s old T-shirts stretched alarmingly tight across his chest. Cabinet doors hung open. Crumbs covered the counter. The toaster sat out beside an open loaf of bread. A dirty fork rested directly on the countertop beside a plate smeared with egg yolk. Alex looked up immediately and grinned.

“Morning, buddy!”

Tiny yellow egg fragments launched briefly from his mouth.

John froze politely in the hallway. Alex wheeled himself closer.

“C’mere.”

Before John could react, Alex grabbed him into a greasy one-armed hug that smelled faintly like soap, sweat, and overcooked eggs. John felt something wet touch the side of his neck. He smiled anyway.

“How uh... how’d you sleep?”

“Like a baby,” Alex said happily. Then he pointed proudly toward the kitchen. “Made breakfast.”

John looked around slowly. “I see that.”

Every cabinet door was open.

Every. Single. One.

“How thoughtful,” he whispered faintly.

Alex leaned back in the wheelchair, satisfied. “This toaster is fantastic, by the way.” At that exact moment, Cindy entered the room.

She stopped immediately. Her eyes moved across the crumbs, the grease, the open cabinets, the dirty plate, the egg yolk on Alex’s shirt, and finally, the damp towel currently hanging from the back of one of the dining room chairs. For one horrifying second, John thought she might actually drop dead.

Instead, she smiled.

“Well,” she said carefully. “Somebody certainly had a productive morning.”

By noon, the house no longer felt like theirs. Alex remained in constant motion.

Not physically fast. The wheelchair limited that. But emotionally.

Endlessly.

The television stayed on all day. Every hour John calculated the additional electricity cost in his head. Alex talked over nearly every program. Crumbs

surfaced everywhere. Cabinet doors remained mysteriously open behind him like the house itself had started giving up. And everywhere Alex went, John quietly followed afterward.

Closing things. Straightening things. Wiping things clean.

Adjusting anything Alex touched. Not consciously at first. Instinctively.

Alex rolled into the pantry looking for chips. John closed the pantry door afterward.

Alex microwaved frozen burritos. John wiped the grease splatter from inside the microwave three minutes later. Alex opened drawers while talking and forgot to close them.

John silently moved through the kitchen behind him like a nervous museum curator restoring exhibits after a school field trip. The worst part was that Alex genuinely believed he was being respectful.

“Hope I’m not making too much of a mess,” he said at one point while crushing crackers into the carpet.

“Not at all,” John replied automatically.

This house may never recover.

The thermostat war began around two in the afternoon. Alex rolled past the hallway thermostat, paused, then lowered the temperature four degrees without even mentioning it. The air conditioner roared to life immediately. Within twenty minutes, Cindy had changed into socks and a cardigan. By

four o'clock, she was wrapped in a blanket despite it being July.

"Are you cold?" Alex asked.

"A touch," Cindy smiled politely.

"I run hot now," Alex explained casually. "Part of the disease."

"Of course," Cindy said. Her left eye twitched visibly for almost three full seconds afterward. At some point, John realized Alex had been sitting in his recliner nearly all day. John spent most of the afternoon sitting upright at the dining room table instead. His lower back had already started hurting. By evening, subtle changes had begun to appear in Cindy. Tiny things. Small enough nobody else would notice. But John noticed.

Her hair remained slightly uneven on one side, where she normally fixed it automatically every hour or so. She forgot to use a coaster beneath her wine glass.

At dinner, she accidentally used the wrong-sized fork for salad and didn't correct herself afterward. That, more than anything, frightened John. Cindy always corrected things.

Meanwhile, Alex remained wonderfully happy. That made everything worse.

"This is nice," Alex said during dinner while chewing loudly. "I forgot what it feels like eating with people." The sentence hung in the air afterward.

Cindy's expression softened immediately.

Of course it did. Because underneath all the exhaustion, all the disruption, all the irritation...

They still felt sorry for him. That was the trap.

Alex looked around the dining room warmly. "You guys got a real good life here."

John looked at the open cabinet behind him. The dirty napkin beside Alex's plate. The crumbs caught in the folds of Alex's shirt. The faint smell of sweat was slowly overtaking the vanilla candles. Then he looked toward Cindy. She smiled back at Alex politely while one eye twitched again. And for the very first time since Alex arrived, John thought *I don't know how much longer we can do this.*

By Sunday afternoon, the house had developed a new smell. Not filthy. Just...

human. Too human.

Warm deodorant. Fabric softener. Sweat trapped too long in heavy fabric. The faint sourness of a body struggling against itself. The vanilla candles had no chance.

John noticed it first in the hallway. Then in the recliner. Then, lingering faintly after Alex rolled from room to room. Nobody mentioned it. Of course, nobody mentioned it. That would have been horrifying.

So instead, John opened the windows. Adjusted ceiling fans. Lit another candle. Then another.

These cost over ten dollars. Each.

By evening, the house smelled like sour vanilla.

John thought the worst was behind them, but the grocery store trip somehow made everything worse.

Alex insisted on coming. “Oh, buddy, I need supplies,” he laughed. “You don’t wanna see me without snacks.”

The electric wheelchair barely fit through half the aisles. Meanwhile, Cindy moved through the store with terrifying tactical precision: comparing unit prices, checking coupons, calculating sales mentally.

Alex operated entirely on appetite. “Oh, these are GOOD.” And whatever he had in his hands went into the cart. He joked at John “Buddy, get the name-brand ranch. Life’s too short.”

Into the cart.

“Have you ever had these jalapeño cheddar things? They’ll change your religion.”

Into the cart.

Cindy silently removed three items from the cart while Alex checked out the frozen pizzas. Alex returned and immediately put two of them back.

The cart slowly transformed into something unrecognizable to John and

Cindy.

Snack cakes. Frozen appetizers. Premium soda. Double-stuffed cookies.

At one point, Alex grabbed a tiny bag of beef jerky. Cindy saw the price.

Fifteen dollars.

Fifteen dollars for meat strings. Her soul briefly detached from her body.

Meanwhile, Alex chatted loudly with strangers. Complimented cashiers.

Made jokes. Talked too much. At one point, a woman passed wearing yoga pants, and Alex muttered: “Lord, have mercy.”

John accidentally laughed. Not loudly. Instantly, he saw Cindy looking at him.

The disappointment in her eyes hit harder than if she’d yelled. John cleared his throat awkwardly.

Alex noticed none of it.

That night, Alex drank three Coronas while sitting in John’s recliner. The empty bottles rested on coasters. At least there was that. The television played an old rock concert while Alex talked about high school parties, old teachers, and people John had not thought about in decades. And slowly... against his better judgment... John started laughing more. Really laughing. Not polite laughter. Real laughter. At one point, he laughed so hard that beer came out of his nose.

Alex nearly fell out of the recliner laughing with him.

From the kitchen doorway, Cindy watched silently. Her expression was unreadable. Because she realized something deeply uncomfortable, Alex was waking up a version of John she had never known. Messier. Looser. Less controlled. A younger man. And part of John seemed happy. That frightened her more than the mess.

Later that night came the worst moment yet. The wheelchair battery malfunctioned. Just enough that one of the motor functions locked awkwardly while Alex was halfway to the bathroom.

“Oh hell,” Alex muttered quietly.

John immediately stood. “What’s wrong?”

Alex stared at the controls for a moment. Then, for the first time since arriving, genuine embarrassment crossed his face. “Buddy,” he said softly. “I hate asking this.”

John’s stomach dropped immediately.

Ten minutes later, he stood in the bathroom wearing yellow cleaning gloves. His entire life had somehow led here.

Not children. Not fatherhood. Not changing diapers for family.

No.

Helping his dying childhood friend empty part of a medical waste container attached discreetly beneath a malfunctioning wheelchair. Steam from the earlier shower still clung faintly to the mirror while Alex stared at the floor

in silence.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

John swallowed hard. “It’s okay.”

It was not okay. But what else could he say? And somehow the worst part wasn’t the smell.

It was the intimacy. The sudden, humiliating closeness of another human being needing him this much.

Later that night, after Alex finally fell asleep in the guest room, Cindy whispered from their bed “We specifically decided not to have children because we didn’t wanna deal with diapers.”

John stared at the ceiling. “I know.”

Silence.

Then quietly “He smells different now.”

John closed his eyes. “I know.”

A long pause followed. Then Cindy whispered the sentence neither of them had wanted to say aloud “I can’t relax in my own house anymore.”

And for the first time since Alex arrived... John realized he couldn’t either.

Monday morning felt different immediately. Cabinet doors were closed again. The towels had returned to their proper rack. Cindy vacuumed the living room before eight in the morning with the concentration of someone reclaiming occupied territory. Meanwhile, Alex sat at the kitchen table, on

hold with his bank for nearly 40 minutes.

“Yup,” he said eventually into the phone. “That fixed it.”

John felt relief hit his nervous system so suddenly that he nearly became emotional.

“Oh, good,” Cindy said warmly. Too warmly. The performance warmth.

“That’s wonderful news.”

Alex hung up and smiled. “Card’s working again.”

“Excellent,” John replied immediately. Then came the most beautiful sentence John Harris had heard all weekend.

“So I’ll probably head out today.”

Relief moved silently through the house like a religious experience. Even

Cindy’s posture changed.

Just enough.

Shoulders lowering slightly. Jaw unclenching. Life returning.

Then Alex smiled again. “But hey,” he said. “Timing actually worked out kinda perfect.”

John’s stomach tightened instantly.

Alex pointed toward them. “You guys leave for Vegas tomorrow, right?”

A pause.

“Tuesday morning,” John answered carefully.

Alex slapped the kitchen table excitedly. “I KNEW it.” He pointed

accusingly at them.

“Lemme guess. Midweek rates.”

Neither John nor Cindy spoke.

Alex grinned wider. “You cheap, beautiful bastards.”

Cindy laughed despite herself.

“It’s significantly cheaper. Tuesday through Thursday”

“Oh, I know it is,” Alex said proudly. “Tuesday through Thursday. Smart.”

Then he leaned forward slightly. “Okay, wait, let me guess the hotel too.”

John already hated where this conversation was going.

“Circus Circus.”

Cindy looked mildly offended. “We did consider Circus Circus.”

Alex exploded laughing. “I KNEW IT.”

“We read several positive reviews,” Cindy defended herself immediately.

“Oh, my God.” Alex said cracking up.

“But ultimately we decided on the Excalibur,” John said quietly.

Alex stared at them for one long second. Then pointed dramatically. “See now THAT’S luxury thinking right there.”

John smiled awkwardly. “The rates were reasonable.”

“And free parking,” Cindy added.

“Of course there was.” Alex was almost choking from laughter. He laughed so hard he had to wipe tears from his eyes. Then slowly the laughter faded.

And casually,

far too casually,

He said, “You know... honestly...”

John immediately sensed danger.

“I was originally gonna stay around here another couple of weeks.” Alex shrugged. “But if you guys are already going to Vegas...”

Another pause.

“...I could honestly save money cutting the trip short and flying home from there instead.”

John and Cindy remained completely silent. Their hearts stopped beating for a second.

Alex continued, completely oblivious. “Seriously, it’d probably be cheaper than sitting in some hotel around here for two more weeks.” There it was.

The trap.

Not emotional guilt this time. Financial logic. Their strongest weakness.

Alex smiled warmly. “And hey, don’t worry. I’d book my own room and everything. We could maybe just grab dinner one night or hit a buffet together.”

John looked toward Cindy.

Cindy looked toward John.

And both of them realized simultaneously there was no polite way out

anymore.

Tuesday morning arrived with the exhausted emotional atmosphere of people evacuating a flood zone. Nobody slept particularly well. Cindy spent the entire morning aggressively reorganizing luggage that had already been organized twice. John checked flight confirmations four separate times.

Alex remained wonderfully excited. “This is gonna be incredible,” he kept saying. “Buddy, I haven’t traveled in YEARS.”

The transportation issue appeared almost immediately. John’s sedan could barely hold two suitcases comfortably.

Adding Alex, the wheelchair, medical supplies, and luggage turned the situation mathematically impossible.

“I can just book an accessible transport van,” Alex offered casually.

“They’re actually cheaper than most airport shuttles because the city subsidizes part of it.”

John and Cindy exchanged the briefest glance imaginable.

Cheaper.

That was all it took. Twenty minutes later, they sat squeezed together inside a crowded handicap-access van while Alex happily chatted with the driver about Vegas buffets.

Cindy sat pressed tightly against John near the window. Too tightly.

Alex's body heat filled the van. The sour smell had already returned beneath layers of soap and deodorant. Not filthy. Just warm. Persistent. Human. Cindy stared silently out the window while trying not to breathe too deeply. Immediately, she hated herself for that thought. Then hated herself again for hating herself. Her eye twitched twice in rapid succession. John noticed. Of course, he noticed.

Alex, meanwhile, remained blissfully happy. "You guys are gonna LOVE Vegas," he said. "The people-watching alone is worth the trip." At one point, the van hit a pothole hard enough to jolt everyone to the side. "Oh hell," Alex laughed. "That woke up organs I forgot I had." John chuckled automatically. Cindy slowly turned toward him. John immediately stopped laughing.

Just before leaving the house that morning, Alex accidentally clipped the back door with the wheelchair. Not hard. Just enough. The door never fully latched afterward.

Nobody noticed. Until halfway to the airport. Cindy suddenly froze. "Walter."

John looked over immediately. "What?"

"The back door."

John's stomach dropped. "Oh no."

Cindy was already grabbing her phone.

Three minutes later, a text arrived from Mrs. Peterson across the street.

YOUR CAT IS OUT. TRYING TO GET HIM NOW.

Cindy closed her eyes slowly, like someone having a stroke.

“Oh, my God.”

“I’m sorry,” Alex said immediately.

“I didn’t realize,”

“It’s okay,” Cindy replied instantly.

Too instantly. Too pleasantly.

John could actually hear the emotional damage happening beneath her voice.

Walter was eventually recovered safely. But something about the incident lingered afterward. Their cat wasn’t just a pet. Walter was their one irrational indulgence. Custom food. Little climbing shelves. A heated bed shaped like a shark. The only creature in the house allowed to exist without purpose. And Alex had endangered him.

At the airport, Alex moved through everything effortlessly. Special assistance. Priority access. Helpful employees.

Meanwhile, John and Cindy stood in regular security lines removing belts and shoes while clutching Groupon boarding passes printed at home to

avoid airport kiosk fees.

“We saved eighty-six dollars booking this way,” John whispered proudly at one point.

Cindy nodded. “Almost ninety-three after baggage calculations.”

Alex stared at them lovingly. “You two are honestly fascinating.”

At the gate, the boarding announcement finally began.

“Now boarding passengers requiring additional assistance, active military personnel, and Platinum Sky members...”

Alex immediately rolled forward. “Well,” he said brightly. “Guess that’s me.”

Then he disappeared down the jet bridge ahead of everyone else.

The moment he vanished from sight, Cindy grabbed John’s arm. Hard.

“I cannot do this anymore.” Her voice cracked quietly.

John stared at her. For the first time since knowing her, Cindy Harris genuinely looked ruffled.

Tiny red veins streaked through her eyes. Her lipstick sat slightly uneven.

One side of her hair had flattened awkwardly near her temple. Even her hands trembled slightly. “This was supposed to be ours,” she whispered.

“Our anniversary. I haven’t relaxed in four days.”

John looked exhausted, too. His shirt was wrinkled. Dark circles sagged beneath his eyes. His shoulders remained permanently tense now. “We’ll

have space again in Vegas,” he whispered back quickly. “He’s got his own hotel. It’ll be okay.”

“You promise?”

John hesitated. Then lied. “Yeah.”

Cindy leaned into him briefly while he held her. And for one small moment, they looked like a couple trying desperately to survive something together.

Then boarding resumed.

By the time they boarded the plane, nearly all the overhead storage space had been taken. A flight attendant took their carry-on bags without apology.

“Wonderful,” Cindy whispered hollowly. Then they reached first class.

And there was Alex.

Already seated comfortably with a champagne flute in one hand and a shrimp cocktail in the other. Cocktail sauce dotted his chin.

“HEY BUDDY!”

Several passengers turned immediately. Alex waved enthusiastically with shrimp still between his fingers. “You guys gotta try this stuff,” he said loudly. “This shrimp is UNBELIEVABLE.”

Cindy stopped walking.

Very slowly, she turned toward John.

First class.

Alex had booked himself in first class.

John stared blankly.

Meanwhile, Alex happily dipped another shrimp into cocktail sauce. “Oh man,” he moaned. “This is living.” A flight attendant passed carrying warm towels. Alex accepted two.

John and Cindy continued silently toward the back of the plane. Seat thirty-seven. Middle seats. Beside the bathroom.

Once they landed, it was only a 20-minute ride to the hotel. Alex offered to pay, and the Harrisons did not even protest. The lobby of Excalibur felt exactly like the kind of luxury John and Cindy Harris trusted. Fake luxury. Affordable luxury.

Castle-themed carpeting stretched beneath artificial stone arches while slot machines rang endlessly somewhere deeper in the casino. Children ran past carrying oversized souvenir cups nearly the size of fire extinguishers. Cindy leaned closer to John. “It’s tacky.”

John nodded. “But reasonably priced tacky.”

That made her smile.

Alex, meanwhile, looked genuinely enchanted.

“Oh buddy,” he whispered. “This place rules.” The wheelchair hummed excitedly across the marble-pattern floor while he stared upward at the fake castle ceilings like a child entering Disneyland. At the front desk, the concierge smiled professionally while typing.

“Alright, Mr. and Mrs. Harris,” she said. “You’ll be in the Resort Tower, room 3340.”

She pointed toward the casino floor. “You’ll head past the sportsbook, take the elevators near Dick’s Last Resort, up to the thirty-third floor, then turn left after exiting the elevators.”

John nodded seriously, as if he were receiving military instructions.

“And Mr. Nolan,” she continued. “You’re in the Resort Tower as well. Room 3328. Wheelchair-accessible suite.”

“Oh, that’s fantastic,” Alex said happily.

Cindy’s soul quietly left her body.

Same tower.

Same floor.

Alex grinned at them. “Hey, convenient.”

John forced a smile so strained it physically hurt. “Very convenient.”

Alex adjusted the beads hanging around his neck.

Somewhere between the airport and the hotel, he had already acquired a massive plastic yard-long alcoholic drink, purple Mardi Gras beads, and a T-shirt that read: WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS IS PROBABLY ON VIDEO.

“We should totally hit a buffet tonight,” Alex said. “We paid for the trip, might as well enjoy it.”

There it was again.

That phrase.

John felt Cindy stiffen beside him.

But before either of them could answer, Alex lifted the enormous rum-filled tube happily.

“Alright, buddy, I’m gonna go take the first proper shower of my damn life.” Then he pointed between them knowingly. “You two kids go celebrate.”

For one brief shining moment after Alex rolled away...

Hope returned.

The hotel room was perfect. Not luxurious. But clean. Cold air conditioning. Dim lighting. A massive bed. A window overlooking the Strip, glowing gold and neon beneath the desert dusk.

Cindy stood quietly near the glass, staring down at the endless lights below.

“It’s beautiful,” John said softly behind her.

“It’s horrifying.”

John smiled faintly. “So much money.”

“So much wasted money,” Cindy corrected.

Below them, the Bellagio fountains erupted in a choreographed display of water and light.

Cindy watched silently for a moment longer. Then softer “Still kinda

beautiful though.”

John stepped behind her and wrapped his arms gently around her waist.

For the first time in days, her body relaxed. Really relaxed.

“We made it,” he whispered. “Our twentieth anniversary.”

Cindy leaned back against him slightly. “You know,” she murmured, “We haven’t been alone once since Friday.”

“I’m aware.” His lips brushed lightly against her neck.

“What are you up to, Mr. Harris?”

“Well,” he said quietly, “We are in Vegas.”

Cindy laughed softly. “Oh, are we now?”

John kissed her neck again. More confidently this time. Something about Vegas itself seemed to loosen him slightly.

Cindy turned toward him, smiling. “You naughty boy.”

John kissed her properly then.

The kiss deepened quickly.

Years of routine and schedules and carefully controlled affection suddenly giving way all at once. Cindy pulled him toward the bed, laughing softly, while John fumbled awkwardly with his shirt. Then...

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.

Both of them froze.

Another knock.

“Buddy?”

Alex.

Cindy closed her eyes immediately.

“No.”

John stared at the ceiling like a man witnessing God’s cruelty firsthand.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.

“Hey buddy, you decent?”

John opened the door halfway.

Alex stood there grinning broadly with the giant drink tube hanging from one hand. His cheeks were flushed bright red now. “Oh shit,” he said immediately upon seeing John shirtless. “I’m interrupting sex.”

John said nothing.

“I am SO sorry.” Alex absolutely did not leave. Instead, he continued talking enthusiastically from the doorway. “I just wanted to let you guys know there’s a happy hour downstairs till seven and the margaritas are basically free.”

Behind John, Cindy slowly pulled the sheets up over herself with the exhausted fury of someone covering a corpse.

Alex pointed down the hallway. “I’m in 3328 by the way. Come knock if you guys wanna do dinner later.” Then he proudly lifted the giant drink.

“This thing was only five bucks.”

John stared at the bucket-sized alcohol tube.

“How?”

“I genuinely don’t think there’s much actual rum in it,” Alex admitted. “But still.”

Then he winked badly. “Alright. I’ll let you kids get back to anniversary activities.” He rolled away down the hallway, humming happily to himself.

John slowly closed the door.

Silence.

Then Cindy looked at him. Not angry.

Worse.

Defeated.

“Don’t even think about it,” she said flatly.

John stared toward the ceiling again.

Somewhere beyond the hotel walls, slot machines screamed endlessly into the Vegas night. The Excalibur buffet smelled like melted butter, prime rib, sugar, and exhaustion. Families wandered between stations carrying overloaded plates while slot machines screamed endlessly beyond the dining area. Alex was on his fourth plate.

“This shrimp is unbelievable,” he announced loudly through half-chewed food. “You know Vegas buffets lose money on seafood? That’s how they get ya.”

Cocktail sauce dotted his chin again. Cindy stared fixedly at her salad.

Across the table, John watched Alex return to the buffet for more crab legs with the focused determination of a man storming a beach during wartime.

“He’s still going,” Cindy whispered.

“He’s enjoying himself.”

“He’s sweating through his shirt.”

Alex returned triumphantly, carrying crab legs, prime rib, mac and cheese, bread pudding, and something covered entirely in melted cheese.

“You paid for the buffet,” he declared proudly while sitting back down.

“Might as well enjoy it.”

There it was again.

That phrase.

John took another sip of beer. For one brief moment, watching Alex attack the buffet with complete unapologetic joy almost felt admirable. Almost.

Alex cracked a crab leg open, and warm juice sprayed across the tablecloth.

Cindy physically recoiled.

“So,” Alex said happily between bites, “What’s the big anniversary plan tomorrow?”

Cindy answered before thinking. “We’re going to the Grand Canyon.”

The table went silent. John slowly turned toward her. Cindy froze.

Oh no. She realized she fucked up.

Alex stared at them wide-eyed.

“The GRAND CANYON?”

He slapped both hands against the table hard enough to rattle silverware.

“No way.”

Several nearby diners turned toward them.

“You guys are going to the ACTUAL Grand Canyon?”

John smiled weakly.

“Well,”

“Oh, my GOD.” Alex pointed dramatically at them. “Do you know how many movies have been filmed there?”

Nobody answered.

“National Lampoon’s Vacation.” He pointed at John. “Superman.” Now Cindy. “Transformers.” Back to John. “The Lone Ranger.” Back to Cindy. “Dude, even the Brady Bunch went there.”

He leaned back laughing. “That place is basically America’s giant hole.”

John chuckled despite himself. Cindy kicked him beneath the table.

Alex continued getting louder. “And the history! Teddy Roosevelt called it the one sight every American should see! Evel Knievel wanted to jump it! Red Bull did those crazy wingsuit videos out there! He suddenly grabbed John’s forearm excitedly. “Oh, buddy.”

John already knew.

“You know what my number one bucket list item is?”

John closed his eyes briefly.

“The Grand Canyon.”

“THE Grand Canyon!”

People at nearby tables were openly staring now. Alex lowered his voice slightly.

“I always wanted to see it before...” He shrugged lightly. “You know.”

The mood shifted instantly. That happened a lot with Alex. One second exhausting. The next heartbreaking. John looked down at his beer. Cindy looked away completely.

Then Alex brightened again. “So how are you guys getting there?”

John hesitated. “We uh... booked a helicopter tour.”

Alex nearly choked on bread pudding.

“A HELICOPTER?” He looked genuinely emotional now. “My dad used to fly helicopters in the Army.”

John blinked. “I didn’t know that.”

“Oh yeah,” Alex laughed. “One time he flew low over our middle school football field and got suspended for like three weeks.”

John burst out laughing.

Cindy stared at both of them in disbelief.

“A helicopter over the Grand Canyon,” Alex whispered. “That’s

incredible.” Then his eyes widened suddenly. “Who are you flying with?”

John immediately regretted existing.

“Papillon,” Cindy answered automatically.

Alex pulled out his phone so fast it nearly slipped from his fingers. “No way. Kevin works for Papillon.”

John felt actual terror. “Alex,”

“I haven’t talked to him in forever, but he owes me a favor.”

Before either of them could stop him, Alex snapped a photo of John’s reservation screen.

“Alex,”

“I’ll text him RIGHT now.” Then he wheeled away from the table at alarming speed.

John stared after him. Cindy looked like she might actually murder someone.

“This cannot happen,” she whispered.

“I know.”

“This was supposed to be OUR anniversary.”

“I know.”

“He ruins everything.”

John rubbed both hands over his face. “There’s no way they’ll fit him on a helicopter.”

The next morning proved John catastrophically wrong.

Alex had actually gotten a reservation.

The helicopter terminal sat just outside Vegas, beneath glaring desert sunlight. Tourists moved excitedly through check-in while giant red helicopters thundered overhead. Alex looked happier than John had ever seen him.

“This is unbelievable,” he kept saying. “Oh, my God.”

Then came the weigh-in. The employee remained polite. Professional. But eventually she glanced at the wheelchair. Then at Alex. Then, with the paperwork.

“I’m very sorry, sir.”

Everything after that happened quietly.

There were weight restrictions. Balance limitations. FAA regulations. The wheelchair alone weighed nearly three hundred pounds. Alex sat motionless for several seconds.

“Oh,” he said softly. Then again “Oh.”

The excitement disappeared from his face so completely that it frightened John.

“I understand,” Alex whispered quickly. “It’s okay.”

But his voice cracked. And suddenly he was crying. Exhausted tears from a

tired man, embarrassed by his own body.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I know I make everything difficult.”

John felt something inside himself collapse. Cindy looked away immediately. The employee awkwardly stepped aside to give them privacy.

Alex wiped his face.

“You guys should still go,” he whispered. “Seriously. You paid for it.”

Nobody moved.

Then Cindy suddenly said “What if we drove?”

John looked at her.

“It’s only a few hours,” she continued quickly. “We could still see it.”

Alex stared at her in disbelief. “You guys would do that?”

Silence.

Then John nodded slowly. “We’re in this together, buddy.”

Alex looked like he might cry again.

“Through thick and thin,” he whispered.

John smiled weakly. “Through thick and thin.”

The drive to Arizona should have been beautiful. And somehow it was.

Massive skies. Endless desert. Red cliffs glowing beneath the sunlight. For long stretches, nobody even talked. At one point, Alex farted violently inside the SUV.

“Oh sweet Jesus,” Cindy muttered automatically.

Then immediately “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Alex laughed so hard he started coughing. Even John laughed. For a few minutes, everything almost felt normal again.

Then Cindy’s phone buzzed. Mrs. Peterson.

WALTER IS STILL MISSING

Cindy read the message silently.

John saw her face change immediately.

Something cold entered the vehicle. Neither of them said much the rest of the drive.

The Grand Canyon was impossibly large. No photograph had ever prepared them for it. Wind moved softly across the cliffs while sunlight poured endlessly into the massive red stone abyss. Alex sat silently near the railing for nearly a full minute.

“Oh my God,” he whispered finally. Tears filled his eyes again. “It’s real.”

John and Cindy stood quietly behind him.

Then Alex smiled. The happiest smile either of them had seen all week.

“You guys did this for me.”

The guilt became unbearable. Cindy grabbed John’s arm and pulled him aside.

“We can’t keep doing this,” she whispered harshly.

“He’s happy.”

“I don’t care anymore.”

“He’s dying.”

“He ruined our house.” Her voice cracked. “Our trip. Our anniversary.”

“Walter is gone.”

John stared toward Alex, sitting peacefully beside the canyon.

“He might come back.”

“What if he doesn’t?”

Silence.

Then Cindy whispered the sentence that changed everything “He’s going to die anyway.”

John looked at her slowly. “This is the happiest moment of his life.”

“Exactly.” Cindy said and turned to the rental. Wind moved softly through the canyon below them. Cindy’s voice became very small. “Maybe this is mercy.”

John looked down at his shaking hands. Then back toward Alex.

Alex turned toward them, smiling. “What a view, huh, buddy?”

John nodded slowly. “Yeah.”

The three of them moved closer to the railing together. Alex looked out across the canyon like a child finally seeing heaven. “Can you imagine flying over this?” he whispered. “Like a bird.”

John stepped behind the wheelchair handles. Cindy moved beside him.

Alex smiled without turning around. “You guys are the best friends I’ve ever had.”

Then John pushed. Hard. The wheelchair tipped forward instantly. For one impossible second, Alex looked confused.

Then he was gone.

John and Cindy stepped back from the edge immediately.

Neither looked down.

The screaming was almost instant. Then the metal struck the rock.

Again. Again. Again. The terrible, endless crashing of a wheelchair and a body tumbling through stone. Gradually it grew softer. Farther away. Until finally, there was only canyon wind again.

Neither of them spoke.

They walked silently back toward the parking lot beneath the enormous Arizona sky. Then John’s phone buzzed.

YOUR CHAMPAGNE LUNCH EXPERIENCE WILL BEGIN IN 15 MINUTES.

Both of them stopped walking. Cindy looked toward the distant canyon.

“Well,” she whispered.

John stared at the message. Then slowly slid the phone back into his pocket.

“We already paid for it.”

Cindy nodded once.

After a long silence, John quietly added “Might as well enjoy it.”

They reached the rental. John automatically opened the passenger door for her. Cindy leaned over and kissed him softly. “Happy anniversary, honey.”

John smiled faintly. “Happy anniversary.”

The End.



OPEN WINDOWS

Kelly Voss had never imagined herself living in the city.

Growing up, she used to think cities only looked beautiful from far away.

Skylines on postcards. The lights you see in movies. Tiny glowing windows scattered across the darkness.

Up close, cities felt loud, crowded, and sometimes ugly. Just rows of gray concrete buildings with no warmth. Not every city was like that, but the nicer ones were out of reach for most people. Especially for Kelly and her mother.

After her father died last year, everything changed faster than Kelly or her mother could handle. The house cost too much. Taxes kept rising. Hospital visits happened more often, and suddenly every choice they made was about distance.

How far to the doctor. How far to the treatment center. How far to the pharmacy. How far to the emergency room. In the end, being practical won out.

The apartment wasn't fancy, but it was clean, affordable, and just fifteen minutes from Saint Agnes Medical Center, where Evelyn had appointments twice a week. That made it feel worth it. They could finally get some of their lives back.

The move took three exhausting days.

Kelly carried boxes while Evelyn insisted on helping, even with her oxygen tank and the wheelchair she acted like she didn't need. Some days, Evelyn could walk a little without trouble. Other days, standing too long made her pale and shaky.

"I can still carry a damn lamp," Evelyn muttered while dragging a small box toward the living room. Kelly laughed.

"You almost died carrying a toaster yesterday."

"I survived carrying a toaster yesterday, thank you very much."

"Barely."

By the third night, the apartment started to feel less temporary. Evelyn's blankets were draped over the recliner by the window. Prescription bottles sat in neat rows in the kitchen cabinet. Family photos were grouped together, waiting for Kelly to find them a spot on a shelf or table.

Outside, a beautiful sunset spread across the city. Kelly stood at the living room window with a glass of wine while Evelyn sat nearby, listening to the quiet hiss of her oxygen machine.

"Well," Evelyn sighed quietly. "I suppose this is home now."

The city stretched out beyond the window. Old brick apartment buildings stood close together under glowing streetlights, and far-off towers reached into the clouds. In the distance, Kelly could just make out a church tower

above the rooftops. Beyond that, a dark strip of parkland ran through the city like a river.

And everywhere, there were windows. Hundreds of them. Tiny glowing squares shining in the dark.

At first, Kelly only glanced at them while she unpacked boxes or made dinner. But over the next few weeks, she found herself standing at her own window for longer and longer. There was something comforting about it. Each window seemed to hold its own little world.

In one apartment, a woman cooked while she danced barefoot across the kitchen.

In another, two children chased each other across a living room while their exhausted father tried to fold laundry. An elderly man sat alone every evening drinking beer in front of his television. Kelly felt bad for him and wondered. Did he have someone who cared? She wondered a lot, looking at all the different worlds behind glass.

A young couple fell asleep together on the couch almost every night around eleven.

From this distance, no one could hear each other or reach out. They were all separated by glass, brick, and darkness.

Yet somehow, watching these little worlds made Kelly feel less alone.

Sometimes Evelyn caught her staring.

“People watching again?” she asked one night from the recliner. Kelly beamed faintly.

“It’s relaxing.”

“No,” Evelyn replied. “It’s comforting.”

Kelly looked over.

“What’s the difference?”

Evelyn adjusted the oxygen tube beneath her nose.

“Relaxing means it calms you down.” She nodded toward the windows outside. “Comforting means it reminds you that other people are alive too.”

Kelly never forgot that.

After that, watching the windows simply became part of her routine.

She made dinner, did the dishes, and helped Evelyn organize her medicine for the next morning.

And when all her chores were done, she would sit by the window with a glass of wine or a good book, while the city glowed quietly around them.

Some nights, she watched snow drift between the buildings. That was fun.

Other nights, rain left silver streaks on the windows. And sometimes, when she couldn’t sleep, Kelly would open the sliding window, sit on the deck, and let the air move around her while she listened to the sounds of the city.

Thousands of people lived here, all lonely in their own ways.

A month passed quietly.

The apartment slowly became home, just like any place does. The strange noises grew familiar: the elevator groaning, the plumbing rattling through the walls at night, and the old radiator hissing whenever it got cold.

Kelly worked from home, doing scheduling and administrative tasks for a medical supply company. Most days, she stayed in the apartment with Evelyn nearby.

And at night...

She would sit and look at the windows. She never meant to become invested in the people across the courtyard. It just happened naturally, the way strangers slowly become familiar faces in neighborhoods without ever learning anyone's name.

There was the young artist in the building directly across from hers, on the third floor from the top. Kelly watched him spend entire evenings painting massive canvases beneath warm orange lights while jazz records played loudly enough that she could sometimes faintly hear the trumpet through the open summer air. Two floors below him lived a middle-aged woman with three cats who seemed to survive entirely on cigarettes and microwave dinners. Every night around nine, she opened her kitchen window and argued on the phone with somebody Kelly never saw.

Then there was the older couple in the neighboring building who danced together every Thursday evening in their living room. Just the two of them

swaying slowly together while soft yellow lamp light filled the apartment around them.

Kelly loved those moments. Tiny glimpses of ordinary lives. Not exciting enough to matter to anyone else. But somehow comforting anyway.

One evening, Kelly noticed movement on a small balcony several floors below.

A little girl stood outside holding a folded piece of paper. Kelly leaned closer to the glass. The girl carefully unfolded the paper airplane, adjusted one crooked wing with deep concentration, then launched it dramatically into the night air.

The airplane spiraled downward between the buildings before disappearing somewhere near the little patch of park below. A minute later, Kelly watched the apartment door downstairs burst open. The little girl came sprinting out into the street wearing oversized rain boots and pajama pants while her exhausted mother yelled something after her from the doorway. Kelly quietly laughed to herself. The child ran through the tiny park below, found the paper airplane beneath a bench, then proudly carried it back inside like buried treasure. Ten minutes later, she did it again. And again. Each throw looked just as important as the first. Kelly sat there smiling long after the lights inside the apartment finally went dark.

Childhood had been like that once. Tiny things felt enormous then. A paper airplane. A blanket fort. Rain against windows. Staying awake five extra minutes past bedtime.

Back then, happiness came easily.

You didn't have to chase it through jobs, bills, grief and endless exhaustion. You simply found it. In simple things. Things that, once we become adult, we take for granted.

The thought stayed with her the rest of the evening while the city slowly darkened outside.

Across hundreds of glowing windows, people moved through their private lives completely unaware of one another.

Cooking. Laughing. Fighting. Making love. Crying.

Simply existing.

The city no longer felt cold to Kelly. It felt human. Messy, lonely, and in its own way, beautiful. And that was when she noticed the new apartment.

Two buildings over.

Corner unit.

Fifth floor.

Before tonight, it had been dark for weeks. Now the lights were finally on.

Another little world had woken up.

For the next few days, Kelly found herself occasionally glancing toward the new apartment without even realizing she was doing it.

At first, there wasn't much to see.

Some evenings, the curtains were closed completely. Other nights, only a lamp glowed faintly somewhere deeper inside the apartment. Once or twice, Kelly caught movement crossing the rooms, but never long enough to make out much more than a silhouette.

The person living there seemed much more private than everyone else.

Most people nearby left their curtains open all the time, letting their lives play out behind the glass every night. But this person was different.

Sometimes the curtains were open, sometimes closed. Lights on, lights off.

It made the place stand out even more.

Then finally, nearly a week later, Kelly caught her first real glimpse of him.

She had just finished helping Evelyn organize her medications for the next morning when movement in the corner apartment drew her attention.

A man stood inside the kitchen beneath soft yellow light. Maybe mid-thirties. Dark hair. Lean but broad-shouldered. Wearing faded jeans and a dark gray t-shirt. Nothing remarkable about him at first glance.

He stood quietly wiping down the kitchen counter with a towel while music played faintly somewhere deeper in the apartment.

Kelly watched for only a few seconds before looking away. It felt strange, suddenly, to see someone new occupy a space that had sat dark and empty for so long.

The next evening, she saw him again. This time, he was carrying grocery bags into the apartment. He moved slowly between the kitchen and the refrigerator, unpacking food, while the television flickered blue light across the walls. Kelly saw no sign of visitors or anyone else living there. Every night he eventually closed the curtains before turning off the lights. That became part of his pattern.

“Your mystery man’s back,” Evelyn teased one evening without looking up from her crossword puzzle. Kelly rolled her eyes.

“He’s not my mystery man.”

“Mhm.”

“He’s just... new.”

Evelyn laughed faintly.

“That’s how all trouble starts.”

Kelly laughed and gently tossed a pillow toward her mother. But over the next several days, she found herself noticing the apartment more often. Not the man specifically. The apartment.

She noticed the small routines inside. A lamp turned on near midnight. The faint shape of someone moving from room to room. Ordinary details, like she saw in other apartments, but his felt different.

Finally, on a quiet Saturday evening, Kelly carried a book and a glass of wine onto the small balcony outside the living room. The city air felt cool against her skin. Somewhere below, distant traffic hummed softly while clouds drifted low between the buildings. She had just opened her book when movement across the courtyard caught her eye. Mystery man stood outside his apartment window smoking a cigarette. For the first time, both of them happened to look up at exactly the same moment.

Kelly froze slightly. So did he. After a brief awkward second, mystery man gave a small wave.

Friendly.

Casual.

Almost shy.

Kelly carefully waved back. Nothing more passed between them after that. Still... when she went back inside later that night, she realized she was smiling.

Over the next several days, observing the new apartment became part of Kelly's routine.

Or, more accurately, the man inside did.

At first their interactions remained small and almost accidental.

A wave through the glass. A polite nod. The occasional awkward half-smile whenever they happened to notice each other at the same time. Nothing more.

Still, Kelly found herself looking toward the apartment more often now.

Curious. Wanting.

The mystery man, as she privately started calling him, seemed strangely difficult to read. Unlike most people in the surrounding buildings, he revealed very little about himself. There were no loud phone calls. No visitors. No music echoing through open windows late at night. Just simple, quiet routines. Cooking dinner. Cleaning counters. Reading sometimes near the window. Standing outside smoking while staring down at the city below. Ordinary things. Yet somehow, that only made him more interesting.

“You’re smiling again,” Evelyn said one evening from the recliner.

Kelly looked up from her wine.

“What?”

“That window.”

Kelly followed her mother’s gaze across the courtyard. The mystery man stood in his kitchen unpacking groceries beneath warm yellow light.

“I’m not smiling.”

“Mhm.”

Kelly rolled her eyes.

“You’ve officially become weirdly interested in this stranger.”

“Says the woman who knows what time the cat lady microwaves dinner every night.”

“That’s different.”

“How is that different?”

“She burns popcorn constantly. It’s concerning.”

Evelyn laughed softly into her crossword puzzle.

A few nights later, Kelly stepped onto the balcony, wrapped in a sweater against the cold evening air. Across the courtyard, the mystery man noticed her almost immediately. He lifted his coffee mug slightly toward her. Kelly politely raised her wine glass in return. Tiny things after that slowly became habits between them. A thumbs-up through the glass if one of them looked exhausted. A shrug whenever rain ruined someone’s evening on the balcony. Silent little gestures that somehow felt strangely personal despite the distance between them. Sometimes Kelly caught herself wondering ridiculous things about him.

What music did he listen to? What did he do for work? Why did he always seem awake so late?

And slowly, without meaning to, she stopped watching the other windows. The city faded into background noise, and her eyes searched for only one apartment.

One evening, Kelly held up a handwritten sign against the glass while laughing at herself for how stupid it felt.

YOU ALWAYS AWAKE THIS LATE?

Across the courtyard, the mystery man blinked in surprise. Then he disappeared briefly from view. A moment later, he returned holding his own piece of paper.

INSOMNIA.

Kelly laughed quietly. A few minutes later, she held up another sign.

DO YOU HAVE A NAME, OR SHOULD I CALL YOU MYSTERY MAN?

The man stared at the sign for several seconds. Long enough that Kelly almost regretted sending it. Then, finally, he disappeared again before returning with another piece of paper.

BOB.

Kelly laughed softly. Bob gave a small shrug afterward like even he didn't particularly believe the name himself. But after that, he was Bob in her head.

Over the following week, their strange, little, silent friendship continued to grow across the courtyard. Simple things. Good morning signs held against windows. Tiny conversations scribbled across notepads. Silent jokes that neither of them could actually hear. To Kelly, it felt harmless. Comforting. But Bob's behavior was weird sometimes. More than once, Kelly noticed him suddenly closing curtains halfway whenever someone entered his apartment. Sometimes she caught him staring down toward the street below as if checking for something or someone. She once saw him freeze in place when a car idled too long outside; his jaw set, hands gripped tight around a mug until his knuckles turned white. At night, there were moments his silhouette seemed restless, pacing the length of his kitchen before stopping to press his forehead lightly against the glass, eyes fixed on something distant and unseen. In the mirror-like reflection of his own window, Kelly sometimes thought she saw a strange sadness flicker across his face, quickly hidden whenever he noticed her watching.

Still...

Sometimes late at night, after Evelyn had gone to sleep and the city grew quiet beyond the glass, Kelly caught Bob watching her.

One night, after finishing nearly half a bottle of wine by herself, Kelly finally grabbed a marker and wrote across a large piece of paper:

MAYBE WE SHOULD ACTUALLY GO ON A DATE SOMETIME.

The moment she held it up, embarrassment flooded her instantly.

Oh my God...

She almost lowered the sign immediately. Across the courtyard, Bob stared at it in visible surprise. Then slowly... he smirked. A moment later, he returned holding his own sign.

MAYBE WE SHOULD.

Kelly felt herself blush like a teenager. She laughed nervously and wrote another.

WHAT'S YOUR NUMBER?

Bob held up another sign almost immediately.

YOU FIRST.

Kelly shook her head, smiling despite herself.

"Asshole," she muttered affectionately.

Still laughing, Kelly finally scribbled her number onto the paper and held it against the glass.

A few seconds later, her phone buzzed beside her wine glass.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

Kelly laughed quietly and typed back instinctively before stopping herself.

"Oh, that's cheating," she muttered.

Across the courtyard, Bob watched her curiously through the window.

Kelly quickly grabbed another sheet of paper and held it up against the glass.

THAT'S NOT FAIR.

NOW YOU HAVE MY NUMBER, BUT I DON'T HAVE YOURS.

Bob stared at the sign for a second before laughing silently to himself. Then another message appeared on her phone.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: Fair point.

A second later, another text arrived.

BOB: There. Happy now?

This time, an actual number appeared beneath the message.

Kelly smiled so hard her cheeks hurt. From there, texting became easier than signs. More personal too. Sometimes they texted while simultaneously watching each other from across the courtyard. The whole thing felt ridiculous. And weirdly intimate. One evening Kelly sat outside on the balcony beneath a warm orange sunset while distant traffic hummed below the city. The summer air drifted softly between the buildings. Lights slowly flickered on one apartment at a time across the courtyard as dusk settled over the neighborhood.

Kelly texted: I think I'm too nervous to actually meet you in person.

Across the courtyard, Bob read the message while leaning against the kitchen counter.

A moment later, her phone buzzed again.

BOB: Why?

KELLY: Because we don't actually know each other.

Bob looked toward her apartment before replying.

BOB: You've been watching me for weeks. You're kind of a voyeur, Kelly.

She laughed quietly.

KELLY: I am not.

BOB: You're much naughtier than you pretend to be.

Kelly felt heat rise into her face. Across the courtyard, Bob lifted his beer toward her with a teasing smile. Kelly rolled her eyes dramatically before raising her wine glass in return.

KELLY: THAT'S FOR ME TO KNOW.

Bob laughed silently as he drank from his glass.

Slowly, night settled across the city. One apartment at a time, windows flickered alive. Office workers returned home carrying grocery bags and exhaustion through brightly lit kitchens. Televisions popped on across the buildings, glowing against walls. Somewhere below, a siren wailed briefly before disappearing deeper into the city. The older couple in the

neighboring building had already started dancing in their living room beneath their warm yellow lamp.

Across dozens of tiny glowing windows, ordinary lives quietly continued their circle of events.

Kelly started typing again.

KELLY: SO WHERE ARE YOU TAKING ME ON THIS AMAZING FIRST DATE?

Across the courtyard, Bob picked up his phone. Kelly watched him read the message. For a second, everything felt strangely intimate despite the distance between them. Two people alone together in separate little worlds suspended above the city.

All of a sudden, Bob froze. Not casually. Not distracted. But suddenly alert. Kelly frowned. *What is happening?*

Across the courtyard, Bob's head snapped toward the apartment door somewhere out of sight.

Then came the sound. Metal keys lightly clinking together. Bob's expression changed immediately. The relaxed teasing smile disappeared from his face as he listened. Keys scraped softly against metal outside the apartment door. Searching for the keyhole.

Kelly sat up straighter. *What's going on?*

The lock clicked. Bob moved instantly. He rushed toward the large window and yanked the curtains shut hard enough to shake them before pressing himself behind them.

KELLY: BOB?

Across the courtyard, she saw the glow of his phone light briefly inside his pocket as the message arrived. He ignored it.

Another text.

KELLY: WHY ARE YOU HIDING?

No response.

Then the apartment lights suddenly flicked on. She could only see shadows now.

Movement. Distorted shapes crossing behind fabric. A larger silhouette entered. Male. Broad shoulders. The shadow moved casually at first while Bob remained perfectly still, pressed against the window.

Kelly's stomach tightened. Something felt wrong. Very wrong. Then, suddenly, the larger silhouette stopped. The shadow turned slowly toward the window. Toward Bob. Even through the curtains, Kelly could feel the moment the man realized someone else was inside the apartment. The curtain burst open. A man stepped into view. Mid-forties maybe. Bigger than Bob. Suit jacket loosened around the collar with a messenger bag hanging from one shoulder like somebody returning home from work. For

half a second, both men simply stared at each other. Then Bob lunged. The impact slammed both of them violently into the kitchen counter. The messenger bag flew across the apartment.

“Oh, my God!” Kelly shot to her feet.

The fight became instantly savage. The larger man pushed Bob backward into the cabinets, hard enough to rattle the dishes inside. Bob swung wildly, smashing the other man across the face before getting thrown sideways into the dining table. Furniture crashed. Both men disappeared briefly below the window before slamming back upward into view.

Kelly grabbed her phone with shaking hands.

KELLY: WHAT IS HAPPENING?!

The apartment owner grabbed Bob by the throat and drove him hard against the wall beside the kitchen. Bob twisted free and slammed an elbow into the man’s jaw. The bigger man staggered backward. Then charged again. This time, Bob hit the counter hard enough to split his lip. Kelly saw the blood running down the stranger’s face.

“Oh my God...”

The apartment owner grabbed a chair and swung it violently. The chair shattered against the wall beside Bob in an explosion of splintered wood. For one brief second, Kelly thought Bob might actually lose. Then

something changed. Bob stopped panicking. His entire body suddenly became cold. He grabbed something heavy from the kitchen counter. Kelly couldn't tell what it was.

Then, he swung it hard across the side of the man's skull. A sickening crack echoed faintly inside the apartment, and the larger man collapsed instantly against the cabinets before crashing sideways onto the floor out of sight. Everything stopped.

Kelly stared through the window in horror. Bob stood frozen in the middle of the apartment, breathing heavily. Blood ran from his mouth onto his shirt. Then slowly... he turned toward Kelly. And for the first time since she had met him, she saw real fear in his face. Not fear for himself. Fear because she had seen everything.

For several long seconds, Bob simply stood there in the middle of the apartment, breathing heavily.

Kelly couldn't move.

Across the courtyard, the kitchen looked destroyed. Broken chair pieces littered the floor. One cabinet door hung crooked from its hinge. Blood dripped slowly from Bob's mouth onto the front of his shirt. She sent him a text.

KELLY: BOB...?

No response.

Bob looked down toward the body lying somewhere out of sight beneath the window. Then slowly, he pulled his phone from his pocket.

Kelly held her breath. *Finally.*

But instead of answering, Bob stared at the glowing screen for only a second before tossing the phone carelessly onto the kitchen counter. Like it no longer mattered.

“Bob, what are you doing...” Kelly whispered.

Across the courtyard, he walked back toward the window. For one horrible second Kelly thought he was coming to explain. Instead, Bob grabbed the curtains and pulled them shut completely.

The apartment vanished behind fabric and shadow.

Kelly shot to her feet. “What the fuck?” Her hands trembled as she typed again.

KELLY: ARE YOU OKAY?

KELLY: WHO WAS THAT?!

KELLY: BOB, PLEASE ANSWER ME

Nothing.

Kelly paced away from the window before immediately returning to it again.

Her thoughts crashed chaotically into each other.

Maybe the man broke in. Maybe Bob was defending himself. Maybe...

No. No, that didn't make sense.

The keys. The way Bob hid. The panic in his face.

Kelly looked toward Evelyn's bedroom instinctively. The apartment remained quiet behind her. Her mother had either slept through everything or simply hadn't heard the muffled violence across the courtyard. Kelly grabbed her phone tighter. Should she call the police? What would she even say? I watched an assault through somebody else's apartment window. And worse, she didn't even know the address. Not exactly. Just the building. Just the floor.

Across the courtyard, the curtains suddenly moved. Kelly froze. Slowly... the curtains opened again. The apartment lights still burning bright inside. The larger man sat upright, tied to a kitchen chair, facing the window. Facing Kelly.

Her stomach dropped. "Oh my God..." The man's hands were tied tightly behind the chair. Blood ran down the side of his face from the wound near his temple. One eye had already started swelling shut. He looked dazed. Barely conscious. Kelly stared in horror.

KELLY: BOB, WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS

The man in the chair tried to move. Behind him, Bob stepped slowly into view. Calm now.

Too calm.

Kelly felt something cold slide through her chest. This wasn't self-defense anymore. Bob rested one hand gently on top of the injured man's head, almost tenderly. Then he looked directly across the courtyard toward Kelly. Toward her window. Toward her, watching him. Kelly shook her head instinctively. "No... no, no..."

KELLY: STOP

Bob's eyes never left her. Slowly, deliberately, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a knife.

The apartment owner suddenly began struggling harder against the chair. Kelly could see him trying to yell something. Trying to scream. All she saw was movement. Silent terror.

"Oh my God..."

Bob grabbed the man by the hair and pulled his head backward. The man's mouth opened in a scream Kelly could not hear. Then Bob dragged the knife hard across his throat.

Kelly screamed.

Blood exploded across the front of the man's shirt and sprayed against the kitchen floor as the chair rocked violently beneath him. The apartment owner convulsed against the restraints for several horrible seconds before slowly going limp.

Kelly stumbled backward from the window in shock. Her phone slipped from her hand onto the floor. Across the courtyard, Bob released the dead man's hair carefully.

Then once again... he looked directly at Kelly.

Kelly couldn't stop shaking.

Then, her phone rang.

Kelly nearly screamed.

BOB, the screen read. For one horrible second, she simply stared at his name glowing across the screen. Finally, she answered with trembling fingers.

"Hello...?"

For the first time, she heard his real voice.

Low. Calm. Almost gentle.

"Kelly."

Her throat tightened instantly.

"Bob... what the fuck is happening?"

A soft chuckle crackled through the speaker.

"Well," he said quietly, "this wasn't exactly what I had planned for our first date."

Kelly slowly backed away from the window.

"Bob, listen to me,"

“I’ll be right over.”

The line went dead. Across the courtyard, Bob calmly placed the glowing phone onto the dead man’s chest, walked toward the window, and turned the apartment lights off. Darkness swallowed the room completely; only the faint glow of the phone remained visible, resting against the corpse.

Kelly stood frozen. “Oh my God...”

Without warning three hard knocks rattled the apartment door.

Kelly gasped. Another knock. Louder this time.

“Mom,” Kelly whispered sharply as she backed away from the living room.

“Mom, lock your door. Don’t come out.”

Evelyn appeared halfway down the hallway, looking confused and frightened.

“Kelly, what’s wrong?”

“It’s him.”

“Who?”

“The man across the courtyard.”

Another violent knock shook the door, rattling the frame.

Evelyn jumped.

“Kelly...”

“He killed somebody.” The words barely sounded real even as she said them. “He killed somebody, and now he’s here.” Kelly grabbed her mother’s shoulders. “Lock your door. Please.”

Evelyn stared at her for one terrified second before disappearing back toward the bedroom.

Kelly rushed toward the front door, legs shaking. Another knock thundered through the apartment. Slowly, she looked through the peephole.

Bob stood directly outside the door, smiling. Blood covered half his face. His hair hung damp against his forehead. Dark stains covered the front of his shirt. One eye is slightly swollen from the fight. But his smile... his smile looked wrong now.

Bob lightly tapped the knife's tip against the door.

“Kelly...” His voice sounded playful through the door “Come on.”

Kelly stumbled backward from the peephole.

“Go away.”

Bob laughed softly outside. “You wanted a first date.” Another tap of the knife against the door. “Come on, sweetheart. I know you’ve got wine in there.”

Kelly grabbed her phone with shaking hands.

“I’m calling the police.”

“Go ahead.” Another laugh. “That’s no way to treat me after all our flirting.”

Then...

BOOM.

The entire door shook violently beneath a kick. Dust drifted from the frame.

Kelly screamed. “Bob, stop!”

Another kick. Harder.

“Kelly...” His voice changed now. Deeper. Colder. The fake warmth was gone completely. “Don’t make this difficult.” Another impact cracked loudly through the apartment. “I know your mom’s in there.”

Kelly froze.

Outside, Bob lowered his voice almost tenderly. “I know exactly which room she sleeps in.”

Kelly’s breathing became shallow and fast. “Please...”

Another kick. The deadbolt groaned. “Come on now,” Bob said softly through the door. “Open up.” Then the final kick came.

The door burst inward hard enough to slam against the wall. Bob stepped calmly inside, carrying the knife loosely at his side, its tip scratching along the wall.

Kelly backed away immediately.

Bob smirked at her affectionately, his lips covered in dried blood.

“There she is.” He spread his arms as he was welcoming his mom on a Sunday afternoon.

Kelly could barely breathe. Up close he looked completely different now.

Bob slowly looked around the apartment. “Nice place. So much nicer than mine.”

“Please leave.”

He ignored her. Instead, he pointed the knife casually toward Evelyn’s bedroom.

“She means everything to you, doesn’t she?”

Kelly felt tears forming instantly. “Please don’t hurt her.”

Bob’s smile widened. “Let’s not ruin our evening.” Slowly, he sat down at the kitchen table as if he was an invited guest. “Come on, Kelly.” He nodded toward the wine bottle on the counter. “Pour me a glass.”

Kelly stood frozen.

Bob tilted his head slightly. Then, with a snapping voice, “Don’t make me ask twice.”

Hands trembling violently, Kelly reached for the bottle.

“What do you want from me?” she whispered.

Bob watched her carefully. “We’ll figure that out.”

Kelly poured the wine while trying not to cry.

“You killed somebody...”

Bob shrugged casually. “That complicates things a little.”

Kelly handed him the glass, shaking. As she did, Bob slowly pressed the tip of the knife against the center of her chest. Not enough to cut. Just enough to make her feel it. Just enough to make him hard.

Bob licked his lips as he held the knife against her chest. Gently pressing the steel against her flesh, hard enough to leave a mark, too soft to cut. Bob was not nervous anymore. Not pretending anymore.

Everything soft and awkward about him had vanished the moment he stepped through the broken doorway. Kelly saw the monster that had really been living behind the other window. The excitement in his eyes terrified her most. Like this was the moment he had been imagining the entire time. “You know,” Bob said softly, “I always wondered what your voice sounded like.”

Kelly’s breathing trembled. Bob stepped closer behind her. “You were always so careful,” he whispered near her ear. “Sitting there with your little wine glass... watching everybody.” The knife slid lightly along her shirt. “Watching me.”

“Please...” Kelly whispered.

Bob grinned. “Oh, don’t do that.” His voice remained strangely gentle.

“You make me sound like the bad guy.” He laughed softly to himself. “I

liked you, Kelly.” The way he said it made her skin crawl. He reached past her and picked up the wine glass from the counter, taking a slow sip. “You know what the funny thing is?” he asked quietly. “I think you liked me too.”

Kelly said nothing.

Bob stepped behind her again and wrapped one arm loosely around her waist while keeping the knife pressed against her stomach. “Come here,” he whispered. He guided her slowly toward the balcony door. Kelly’s legs barely felt stable beneath her anymore. The cool night air drifted across her skin as Bob walked her outside onto the balcony. The city stretched endlessly around them. Hundreds of glowing windows. Hundreds of little worlds. Bob rested his chin lightly against her shoulder.

“Look at them,” he whispered. The knife pointed outward toward the surrounding buildings. “Go on. Look.”

Kelly stared across the courtyard. She could see people moving behind the windows.

Cooking. Watching television. Drinking wine. Living their tiny little lives.

And suddenly she understood.

Some of them had seen. Maybe not all of it.

But enough.

Enough to know something terrible was happening. Yet nobody had come to her rescue.

Nobody screamed. Nobody intervened. Nobody called for help.

They were watching.

Just like she had watched.

The realization hollowed something inside her. Bob rubbed against her neck.

“See?” he whispered. “Everybody likes watching. And nobody gives a fuck.” His hand slid slowly along her side possessively. “I knew from the beginning what you were,” he said quietly. “Lonely people always look through windows.”

Kelly felt him press closer against her from behind, his breathing uneven; she could feel his excitement.

“You smell so good,” he murmured near her ear. “I used to wonder about that.”

Kelly closed her eyes.

The knife remained pressed against her stomach. Behind them, Evelyn’s bedroom door stayed shut. That was all that mattered.

Keep him calm. Keep him distracted. Keep Mom safe.

Bob slowly kissed the side of her neck.

“We were supposed to have fun together,” he whispered. “You and me.”

His hand moved shakily against the front of her shirt, fumbling with one of the buttons.

“And now everything got messy.”

Kelly took a breath and shoved hard sideways against his knife arm.

Bob cursed violently as the blade scraped harmlessly across the balcony railing instead of her stomach. The wine glass shattered across the floor.

The small patio table overturned loudly.

Bob grabbed her instantly. Both of them slammed hard against the railing.

Kelly screamed. The knife flashed wildly between them. Then...

CRACK.

Something heavy slammed into the back of Bob’s skull. Bob staggered forward in shock.

Behind him stood Evelyn, gripping her oxygen tank with both trembling hands.

“You fucking son of a bitch!” Evelyn screamed.

Bob turned instinctively toward her.

Kelly shoved him, and he stumbled backward against the railing.

For one impossible second, he tried to regain balance. Then the railing gave way.

They heard him scream all the way down. A fading, terrified sound swallowed by the city below.

THUD.

And silence.

Kelly collapsed against the balcony, shaking violently. Evelyn rushed toward her, wrapping both arms around her daughter while the oxygen tank rolled across the floor beside them.

“I’ve always wanted to do that,” Evelyn said. For several long seconds, neither of them spoke. Finally, Kelly forced herself toward the railing and looked down. Far below, a broken shape lay twisted beside the sidewalk, illuminated by a streetlamp. Motionless.

Dead.

Kelly started crying. Evelyn held her tighter.

Then slowly... both of them looked back out across the surrounding apartment buildings. Across the courtyard, windows still glowed in the darkness. Tiny little worlds watching from behind glass. And one by one... the lights began turning off. A window here. Another there. Then another.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Until eventually the buildings stood dark and silent around them. Like nobody had been watching at all.

The End.

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