

NO ONE WILL BE SPARED.



WHEN THE WOLF COMES HOME

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of this generation."

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NAT CASSIDY

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NIGHTFIRE

TOR PUBLISHING GROUP
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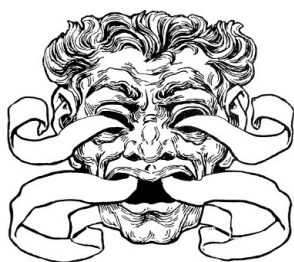
For Barry

CONTENT WARNING

I'll never understand why some people get so upset about content warnings. If you're a sicko like me, all these do is give you a little preview of what flavors of nasty fun you're in for; and if you're a reader who prefers to avoid certain subjects or prefers to go in with some bolstering, well, forewarned is forearmed, right?

This is specifically a story about the slippery nature of fear and how important it is to find healthy ways to live with it, so I'm more than happy to provide a heads-up: this book contains graphic depictions and/or discussions of murder, gore, dismemberment, needle trauma, blood-borne diseases, spiders, insects, suicidal ideations, abuse, grief, alcoholism, parent death, child death, child trauma, child endangerment, and a whole lot more. It borrows a few tropes from fairy tales; happy endings isn't one of them.

And, hey, if you *are* the sort of person who's offended by the existence of content warnings, I'm truly sorry. Maybe next time, I'll give you a little heads-up that they're coming, so you'll be able to prepare yourself.



PART ONE

ALL DADS ARE MOTHERFUCKERS

I am afraid, oh I am so afraid!
The cold black fear is clutching me to-night
As long ago when they would take the light
And leave the little child who would have prayed,
Frozen and sleepless at the thought of death.

—Sara Teasdale

I must not fear.

—Frank Herbert



1

Daddy is roaring.

Howling.

Destroying everything in the house—furniture, pictures on the wall, all of it—while he searches for the boy.

The boy is crouched inside the pantry. Hidden. For now.

Hardnoise, he thinks in his terror, flinching at the sounds of destruction. He's seen Daddy angry plenty of times before ... but not like this. This is so much worse than all the other times.

"How?!" Daddy demands in a deep, raspy voice. "Where?!" It sounds as if the words rip out of him, pulling bits of throat along the way. "*Where ... ind ... I-i-t?*"

The boy—who is only five years old and small for his age—shrinks farther inside the pantry. He thinks about disappearing completely, but knows he can't. The thing he's clutching to his chest keeps him moored to the world. The thing Daddy is raging about.

The book.

Lately, the boy had been sneaking out a window while Daddy took his afternoon naps. He knew it wasn't allowed, that it's Bad and Dangerous, but he hadn't been able to stop himself. The call of the outside world was too great, and for all his rules and precautions, Daddy hadn't yet realized the boy figured out how to open that window.

Daddy's naps are always the same time and the same length every day, so the boy never went far on these walks. Usually, he just stood and looked around for a bit before scrabbling back inside. He looked at the other houses. At the cars driving by. The little rocks with bits of sparkle in them. The trees. A lizard. A stray cat. Things he'd seen or heard from the other side of the

window, usually accompanied by Daddy's dry, detailed explanations of what they were looking at. "So you never have to wonder," Daddy always said.

But it was so much nicer to *experience* them. So much more exciting to wonder.

A few days ago, the boy let himself walk down the block a little, and that's when he'd discovered the tiny house. It was in a neighbor's front yard: a tiny house on a short pole. The tiny house had a little glass door, and inside ... was all books. If the boy could read, he still might not have known what the phrase *Little Library* meant, but he thought the teal calligraphic squiggles were pretty.

The boy didn't own any books, but he'd seen plenty. Daddy liked to read. Except, his books were all dull, uninteresting things. Flat colors, no pictures, blocks of tiny words inside. The boy had never seen books like *these*.

Some were soft and floppy, with glossy pictures on their covers. Some were sturdier, and their covers even slipped off, revealing the blank, hard covers the boy was more familiar with.

One book in particular stole his attention.

Old. Worn. Hardbound, but its peach-colored cover wasn't blank; it had shiny gold lettering and pictures stamped into it. This book had been *loved*, the boy knew somehow.

The inside was also full of pictures. Beautiful, full-color, richly detailed *pictures*, some taking up one or even two whole pages. A boy and a girl finding a house made out of candy. A girl asleep in a bed full of flowers. Another girl with fish fins instead of legs. The boy didn't understand any of these images—he'd never heard a fairy tale, had never seen a picture book—but he was captivated.

He didn't know a book could ever be like *this*.

He'd been out too late—had sensed the time slipping away like a physical thing—so he hurried home with the book in tow, making it back into his room just in time before Daddy woke up. He hid the book, *his* book, under his mattress, peeking at it very rarely and very briefly, whenever he was certain Daddy wouldn't catch him. He only looked at one picture at a time. Savoring it. Cherishing it. Trying to imagine the words that might go with such fantastical pictures. He didn't even feel the need to sneak out the window anymore. The book was his window now.

Until one day he flipped to the wrong picture. A large, hulking wolf

stalking through an endless forest. The wolf had oily dark fur, a long, pointy snout, pulling back to reveal rotting gums and massive teeth dripping with foamy drool. Its claws were massive, perfectly sharp and curly, and made for tearing into soft, little-boy flesh.

The picture scared the boy. Scared him in a way he'd never been scared before. He couldn't shake it. He had to keep looking at it. It seemed to give a shape, a face, to every fear he'd ever had, as if this wolf had been waiting for him all along in the shadows.

Every time he looked at his book, he went straight to that picture. Compelled. Hypnotized. Like prey.

He was staring at it this morning, when Daddy caught him.

Daddy got so angry, seeing what the boy was doing. He began to yell and stomp and demand answers. He threw the book. He shook the boy. Which only scared the boy further.

And now ...

Another howl tears through the silence.

“WHERE—?! *STOP THIS!*”

The boy hears heavy footsteps stomp farther into the house, searching for him.

Go now, he thinks. Run.

Don't, he also thinks. Stay hidden.

But Daddy will check the kitchen eventually. And when he does ...

Remember the other boy!

That gets him moving. The other boy. His only friend.

The boy has to leave. At least for a little while. So Daddy can calm down.

He carefully opens the pantry door. Daddy is gone, destroying other rooms in his search for the boy, but the devastation in his wake ... The kitchen table, smashed into bits. The walls, ravaged and slashed. Holes punched in the plaster. Shreds of fabric everywhere.

For a moment, the boy is frozen, taking it all in.

The air is hot. Heavy. Smelling like food left burning on the stovetop. Like that time Daddy ruined dinner and got so mad and the boy got scared and—

More hardnoise from the other room—*Smash! Crash! Howl!* No time.

Still clutching his book, the boy tiptoes his way to the front door. Too many things on the floor to trip over and make noise. It takes all his balance and concentration to not—

Snap!

The boy inhales with a hiss. A framed picture. Daddy and Mommy smiling. The boy has stepped on the thin wood of the frame and cracked it.

The hardnoise in the other room stops.

Daddy. Listening.

The front door is suddenly yards away. Miles. Impossible to reach from here. Too late. The boy ducks behind the overturned coffee table. Makes himself small, as small as he can, and squeezes his eyes shut. Maybe if he can't see Daddy, Daddy can't see—

A hand closes over his ankle.

“FOUND YOU.”

The boy is pulled out and up. As if he's insubstantial as air.

He opens his eyes to find himself dangling upside down, staring at eyes burning with senseless anger. Lips pulled back in a sneer. Breath as hot as an oven's. Frothy drool seething between clenched teeth.

He barely recognizes the face.

No, no, no!

The boy squeezes his eyes shut again. He remembers another picture in his book. A hero, brandishing something long and sharp in the face of some fire-breathing, scaly thing. In that desperate instant, the boy imagines he holds a similar weapon and brings his book down, hard as he can, onto the hairy arm holding him. He feels the solid resistance of bone.

Daddy yelps.

The boy hits the carpet in a tooth-rattling thud. He wastes no time, scrambles toward the front door, not caring how much noise he makes now.

He doesn't let himself worry that the door might be locked, or the knob too high, or his palms too slippery. Still holding the book under one arm, he wrenches the door open and sprints into the night. His bare feet slap against pavement and asphalt.

From inside the house, Daddy's cries change from pain to anger again.

“GET BACK HERE!”

The boy ignores his father's commands. He runs and runs. Daddy will be behind him any second, so he heads for back ways, through bushes and culverts, ignoring sharp gravel, hoping his small size helps him disappear.

“GET BACK HERE!”

Daddy's voice, fainter now. The huge world, swallowing up sound the

farther the boy runs.

But the memories of hardnoise still crash in his ears.

And the taste of fear never leaves his mouth.



2

“Oh my god, Jess, what are you so afraid of?”

Jess cocks a hip, makes a show of considering the question.

“Hmm. Chlamydia? Gonorrhea? Weeping pustules? The kind that smell like cheese from a few feet away?”

Margie grimaces. “Okay—”

“Hepatitis A? Hepatitis B? Hepatitis *C and D*?! And AIDS is still a thing, right? Can’t forget AIDS—”

“Shut *up*!” Margie smacks her with a menu. “Good *lord*.”

It’s a quarter past 1:00 a.m. Jess doesn’t bother keeping her voice down—the only people eating at Poppy’s Diner right now are past caring about the animated conversation of the establishment’s two-person waitstaff. Even if that conversation invokes cheese-smelling crotch rot.

From where they’re leaning against the main counter, Jess and Margie can see every one of Poppy’s nine tables and fifteen booths, save for a couple of booths at the extreme ends. It’s the usual sparse, graveyard crowd as ever this time of night. Whether or not a single customer has *actually* set foot in Poppy’s before, it’s the same cast of characters. Itinerants. A truck driver or two. Goth kids. People using the \$3.50 bottomless cup of coffee (“North Hollywood’s Finest!”) as their evening’s rent.

It’s not as if Los Angeles is exactly drowning in options as far as twenty-four-hour eateries are concerned, so Jess often thinks it says a lot that Poppy’s still doesn’t pull in huge numbers during the graveyard shift. Location might have something to do with it. Poppy’s is tucked away under the 107 like some vestigial organ the body forgot to reabsorb. That and a pretty decent Denny’s opened up just a couple of miles away.

Margie straightens the pile of menus and blows a curly strand of hair out

of her eyes. “He *is* cute.”

They give one more appraising look at the photo Jess conjured forth from social media of the boy she’s crushing on.

“Yeah,” Jess grumbles. Then she kills the display and puts her phone back under the counter, where it continues to charge. “Too bad he does improv.”

“*You* do improv.”

“Girls that do improv are cool. Guys that do improv are ... the opposite of that.”

“Okay.” Margie sighs and gives the menus a firm tap, then pours herself a white ceramic mug of Poppy’s not-actually-all-that-fine coffee.

“No, seriously,” Jess continues. “Wanna know why?”

“I bet you’re going to tell me.”

“Because everyone in the comedy scene has daddy issues. It might as well be a rule. And girls with daddy issues know how to party. But guys with daddy issues? They’re just mean.” She gives a disappointed shake of her head. “Fuckin’ dads, Margie. They ruin everything...”

In fact, Jess’s first UCB team after she moved to LA was even *named* Daddy Shoes (short for Daddy Is Shoes, which was a compromise from the originally proposed All Dads Are Motherfuckers), because it was the one thing every member agreed they had in common. Before she can share that detail, though, one of the goth kids over at Booth 8 periscopes over the vinyl seat back and looks around for assistance. Jess hurries to attend to them. More coffee, shocker. As black as the kid’s cargo pants and, presumably, soul.

When Jess comes back, Margie is wiping down the counter with a rag. At one point in its history, Poppy’s could’ve been considered a ’50s-style diner, all spaceship sparkle. Its chrome will never shine that way again, but Margie always wipes it down as if it will.

“Anyways,” Margie picks up their conversation without missing a beat. “Just ask the guy out. You don’t have to—ugh—exchange fluids with him. Not yet, at least.”

“I dunno, man.” Jess’s turn to pour herself a cup. “It’s been so long I might not actually have a choice. It might just *happen*.”

“So long,” Margie scoffs. “You’re young. Long for you is, what, a month?”

Jess quickly does the math. “Three and three-quarters.”

“Hmph. Come crying to me when it’s been six years.”

“Six y—?! Margie!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“We’ve gotta get you some action, like, *tonight*.” Jess begins looking around for an eligible candidate.

“The only action I want is for someone to pick up my bills for the month. I’m a fifty-eight-year-old single mother, sweetie. You wanna talk VDs? Having a kid is the only VD you’re expected to send to college.”

“Hey, I sent my HPV to college. Well, I guess technically, it came *with* me, but still...”

Margie smacks her with a menu again, and Jess grins. Jess likes getting a rise out of her. In fact, she likes everything about Margie. Of all the staff at Poppy’s, Margie’s the only one ever willing to riff with Jess. Sometimes Jess even entertains the idea of showing up at Margie’s house with some wine and/or weed so they can hang out, gasp, *outside of work*. She knows where Margie lives—a few weeks ago, Margie’s car had been in the shop, and Jess had driven her home a couple of nights in a row. Jess has never followed through on these plans, though. Something she can say about a lot of things in life.

Still. Margie’s good people.

More than that, this conversation is doing Jess a world of good. This companionship. This distraction. It’s allowing her to forget about the static that’s been buzzing inside her skull for the past several days.

Margie wouldn’t know this, but there’s a reason Jess has dads on the brain right now. Hers was just found dead a little over a week ago, and she still has no goddamn idea how to feel about it.

Fuckin’ dads ruin everything.

★ ★ ★

She doesn’t have all the details—which is fine by her—but it appears to have been a fittingly pathetic end to a pathetic existence.

He’d been dead for a few days before someone found him, out in Pennsylvania where he’d been living his spartan, isolated excuse for a life. No foul play; his body had simply given out after years of alcohol and neglect. He died alone, which was all he deserved.

There'd been a records check, a contacting of the next of kin, which had led to Jess and her mom being notified. Neither had any interest in claiming the body, so they left him in the custody of the Commonwealth. By now, he's probably the finely packed contents of an urn in some potter's field somewhere.

Simple. Fitting. No muss, no fuss. Adieu and good riddance, Tommy Bailey; we hardly knew ye (which was *your* fucking choice).

And yet, since hearing the news, something fundamental has changed for Jess. It's like she's been split into two separate entities.

There's Outer Jess, living her life, cracking her jokes, unaffected by the death of the man who, for all intents and purposes after she reached the age of six, might as well have been an anonymous sperm donor.

And there's Inner Jess, who's busy seeing him *everywhere*. Who's working overtime to force everything into the context of *him*.

I wonder if Dad liked this kind of cereal, too.

What kind of music was he listening to lately?

Did he put his socks on before or after his pants?

Did he ever think about me?

Inner Jess is fucking obsessed.

Every now and then, there's an additional presence, too. Not quite a voice; it never speaks. A *feeling*. A bone-deep agony Jess remembers from when she was first told Dad was leaving. From those few, brief slurring phone calls he'd made before eventually giving up. She thinks of this presence as Little Jess. And Little Jess just *hurts*.

It's all so infuriating. Honestly, after two and a half decades of absence, how dare he become so present in her life now? It's gotten so bad she hasn't even wanted to talk to her mother lately, something she's done almost every day for as long as she can remember. She and her mom used to have no problem *not* talking about Tommy—not even thinking about him. Now Jess feels like he'd be there on the call with them.

She just wants things to feel normal again. To go back to having a dad who was a concept, a few tainted memories, something she could safely joke about. Not this nagging puzzle. Not this thing caught between her teeth.

Someone's got her Daddy Shoes laced a little too tight, Inner Jess observes.

Outer Jess hides her grimace inside a cup of North Hollywood's finest

coffee and scans the diner for some new distraction.

Moments later, she finds it.

★ ★ ★

“Ooh, hello,” Jess nudges Margie. “I think I found someone who can end your dry streak. Maynard over there—he your type?”

They both crane over the bar to get a better look at the ragged beanpole who’s just sat back down in Booth 15. No, *sat* is the wrong word. He’s come back from the bathroom, coughing, sweating, and has *crumbled* into his seat.

Jess has no idea if Maynard is the guy’s actual name. Speaking of Poppy’s regular cast of characters, every patron who looks one day shy of living the bindle life is named Maynard by the staff. “That’s just how it’s always been,” Margie explained back when Jess first started working here. They get a lot of Maynards on the midnight shift.

This particular Maynard looks terrible. He could be anywhere between thirty-five and ninety years old, draped in ill-fitting clothes the ashy color of neglect and hard luck. He’s shivering and damp, scratching at dark spots creeping up his neck. His skin is somehow both red and green: a Christmas ornament of nausea. A faint line of drying crud rings his lips.

The unasked question hovers over them: Drugs ... or disease?

Jess drops her voice. “What do you think he just did to our bathroom?”

“Nothing good,” Margie mutters back. “Guess someone should check and see?”

Jess makes a whining noise. “Or—what if we don’t and this can be a Rhonda-and-Freddy problem?”

But no. Margie doesn’t even need to say that if Maynard left the bathroom a mess, they need to know ASAP. The next shift doesn’t start for well over an hour. Plus, Rhonda would never miss an opportunity to tell their boss that Jess and Margie failed to maintain even Poppy’s loose standards of hygiene and presentability. Fucking Rhonda.

“Tell you what,” Margie says. “I can clean up the bathroom—”

“Bless you—”

“—if *you* ask Maynard to leave.”

A steely glare. “Margie, you know I hate doing stuff like that.”

“Take your pick.” Margie shrugs. “How about this? If *you* take care of the

bathroom, *I'll* help Maynard leave, *and* I'll cover the rest of the shift so you can go home early."

"Seriously?"

Margie nods. "It's totally dead tonight. And my back and knees would appreciate not having to clean a toilet right now."

Jess considers. She *does* have an audition later this afternoon. A commercial she desperately needs to book if she wants to live her fantasies of qualifying for health insurance and paying rent. Getting even thirty minutes more of sleep would be a blessing.

Plus, wasn't she just looking for a distraction? If she stays here much longer, listening to the steady backbeat of *dad, dad, dad* in her head, she might get bored enough to tell Margie what's going on. That might lead to her receiving sympathy for her loss—and *that* might make her actually snap.

"Ugh. You asshole. It's a deal."



3

Jess looks at the soupy-gray vomit sprayed in a fine patina across the toilet and thinks, *Could be worse.*

One time, a guy had finger-written on the wall in feces: A WIZZERD SHIT HERRE. The misspellings were almost as upsetting as their medium of expression. Almost.

That wound up being a two-person cleanup job, which could only be done in sixty-second bursts because of the smell.

Another time, someone wrote a few inches over the toilet paper holder in what she'd prayed was red Sharpie: **NO ONE WILL BE SPARED WHEN**

The unfinished thought sent literal chills through her body. She thought about it for weeks after cleaning it up. When *what*? Why hadn't the tagger completed their sentence? Had they been sucked up by a UFO or something?

Considering how run-down Poppy's often feels, though, cleaning the bathroom usually just means brushing the inside of the bowl after all that fine coffee gives some trucker a touch of the ol' Jackson Pollock backdraft. Or wiping up piss from the seat, tank, and floor, since men apparently feel they have permission to set it on spray whenever they step into this room.

This sort of chunky, emetic display is a blessed rarity.

Blessed. Right. Like this job is a treat otherwise.

Breathing through her mouth so as to not smell the room and trigger a sympathetic response, she sets down her bucket and sponge and reaches for her phone to put on a podcast or some music while she cleans. Then she remembers her phone is still charging under the counter.

Curses.

She considers turning back and retrieving it, but the thought of going out, then coming back to face this reeking tableau afresh seems entirely too much.

Plus, it's probably wise to spare her phone from the whole biohazard-y vibe in here. If she had it with her, she'd feel compelled to soak it in Lysol for hours afterward.

"Let's just do this fast," she says with a groan, then starts singing tunelessly: "Make our own kinda music..."

Continuing her song, she maneuvers her hands into thin yellow plastic gloves that go halfway up her forearm, then flushes down what the guy managed to get inside the bowl. (She closes the lid first—something she does for every flush since reading an online article about bacterial spray.)

While she waits for Poppy's languid water pressure to work its magic, she takes the bucket over to the sink and starts filling it.

Inner Jess pipes up.

I wonder if Tommy puked a lot before he died. Was he scared? Did he even know it was happening? Did he think about his daughter?

Little Jess stirs in her hiding spot.

Outer Jess hums louder.

Once the bucket is full, she turns back to the mess sprayed all over the toilet and gets to work.



Halfway through cleaning the bowl, Inner Jess says something that stops Outer Jess cold.

But why didn't he want me?

It hits her like a fist to the throat. A simple question. Almost rhetorical, really. Certainly not a new idea or concept to her. Yet, for a moment, she can't even breathe it's so overwhelming. Tears sting the backs of her eyes, and she has to mentally shove them back into her skull.

"Whoa," she says, voice choked with emotion. Legitimately surprised at the full-body response. "Okayyy. Let's ... let's not go *there* right now."

But Inner Jess knows a victory when she gets one. She ushers in a parade of related questions, letting them loose like a bunch of children sneaking under a circus tent. *Why didn't he want me? Why didn't he stick around? Why didn't he ever even call? Why was he so okay with cutting me out completely? What is it about me that not even my own father could love? It has to be my fault somehow, doesn't it?*

“Welp,” Jess replies with brittle cheer, “can’t really ask him, so, better just drop it!”

The tears surge back, harder. A sorrow she’s never tasted floods her mouth. She blots her eyes with the cleanest part of her forearms.

Why was it so easy to leave me?

“Because he fucking sucked,” she insists through clenched teeth, “that’s why. *Why am I getting upset right now?* Seriously!”

Anyone listening at the door might think she sounds nuts, snarling at herself in an otherwise silent room. She doesn’t care. Not too deep down, she understands this one stupid question is the most insidious articulation of everything she’s been wrestling with throughout this week of messy grieving.

But why didn’t he want me?

She traces the thought back to where it sprang from, hoping to maybe retroactively yank it out by the roots.

She’d been cleaning the toilet, thinking about Arnie, the improv boy. How he might laugh at seeing her this way. How, if she had her phone with her, she could send him a selfie saying, “Thinking of You,” while hugging the be-Maynarded bowl. Which made her think about Maynards. How her dad had no doubt been a Maynard, too. Which made her wonder if maybe she’d gotten this job because, subconsciously, she’d craved being around people like him. Serving people like him. Cleaning up after people like him. Which made her wonder—

“But this is how I know this is bullshit,” she says. “I *know* why I got this job.”

Once upon a time—namely, half a year ago—Jess used to work at much higher-end restaurants, until a certain general manager of a certain \$\$\$\$-restaurant in Venice cupped her tit one night after closing. She’d been in a particularly rotten mood when it happened, so she’d rejected his advances, rather bluntly, and quit. Next thing she knew, though, she was blackballed across every \$\$\$\$-, \$\$\$-, and even \$\$-restaurant she applied to, and cursing herself for reacting with such uncharacteristic fury.

She has no office or retail skills whatsoever, so she wound up applying to Poppy’s out of a mix of desperation and irony, thinking it’d be kinda funny to work at a place she’d never patronize, and as so often happens in one’s late twenties and early thirties, the irony quickly calcified into habit. Importantly, though, no one she knows would ever patronize this place, so she never has

to worry about anyone seeing her here. Plus, the graveyard-shift hours allow her to still take auditions, rare though they are nowadays. All perfectly legitimate reasons for her to be working at this shitty diner, none of which had anything to do with her stupid, absent dad.

“See?” she snaps at the voices in her head. “Case closed. Just *stop*.” She gets back to the bowl, singing that damned “Make Your Own Kind of Music” song again at a low, determined volume. The angriest anyone has sounded, channeling Mama Cass.

But her heart is pounding. Little Jess is wide awake, too. Awake and aching.

Why didn't my dad love me? What is it about me? Why couldn't I make him care?

A question she could ask regarding her acting career, too.

For a while, it'd seemed like it was about to take off. A couple years ago, she'd filmed a principal supporting role in a comedy pilot for a major streamer that was perfect for her and earned all those deliciously jealous coos from her peers. But the pilot never got picked up, and the auditions just ... slowed to a halt. Pandemics and strikes didn't help either. Her Big Break remained stubbornly in one piece.

Except other people seem to be getting work again. Why wasn't she? Had she done something wrong? Why had it all just suddenly stopped? She'd begged her agent for more insight, and all he had to offer was, *These things happen, Jess. We just gotta keep at it*. Then he added, *I hate to say it, but ... it doesn't help that you're not a Jennifer Lawrence, and you're not a Melissa McCarthy. Maybe try losing twenty or gaining fifty, you know?*

She'd swallowed that with a smile. Understood. Totally. Always eager to please, eager to avoid conflict. Eager to be seen as game—especially by a man in power (incident with Handsy von Manager being the exception that proved the rule). Because, otherwise, why would they want her? Why would anyone?

“Shut up!” She sits back on her haunches. Smacks her head with the insides of her forearms. “Shut up, shut up, shut up!” If the bullshit self-analysis doesn't stop, she's going to drown herself in the toilet just for a little peace and quiet. Fucking grief. Fucking stupid, unpredictable, illogical, unhelpful grief.

“I'm never doing anything without a podcast to listen to, ever again, that's

for goddamn sure.”

Inner Jess changes tactics.

I think we all know the reason why no one wants you.

“Wonderful.” If she could, if her hands weren’t clad in puke-drenched gloves, she’d rub her temples in frustration.

It’s because you’re just like him.

“Okay. Sure.”

He was a coward. He was afraid of everything.

“And that’s me, too, right? That’s where we’re going with this?”

He had his booze and his isolation. You have your jokes and all your excuses. What a cliché. Put on your Daddy Shoes and dance the night away.

And isn’t that true? Isn’t she an absolute coward? Isn’t that why she’s *really* in this bathroom? Hadn’t Jess intended to take action against that handsy restaurant manager? Find some other women he groped and demand accountability? Become a crusader? Demand justice? And for all her jokes about VD, isn’t she also desperate for some romantic companionship, too?

Inner Jess conjures Margie’s voice from earlier:

“Oh my god, Jess, what are you so afraid of?”

With that, Outer Jess snaps.

“FUCK. THIS.” Furious, manic, she gets back to scrubbing the toilet. Ready to be done with this fucking task *and* conversation. “I’m *nothing* like him. This is just oversimplified pop therapy bullshit. Too much Instagram, bitch. I am a good person. And I’m just going through a rough patch. And I’m sad my shitty dad died, and that’s it. We don’t need to turn this into some big fucking thing, okay? Okay?!”

No response. But now Outer Jess is on a roll. She adjusts herself so she can start scrubbing the rest of the toilet, barely even paying attention to what she’s doing.

“I don’t need this shit. Things are hard enough right now. I didn’t ask for him to die. I didn’t ask for him to leave. I wasn’t the one who cut him out. I deserved a dad. And I deserve success. And I shouldn’t be working this shitty job! Cleaning drifter puke for shit money? Life is too short. I’m thirty-one goddamn years old. Working at a place like this was never supposed to be part of the plan!”

In that moment, clarity overtakes her.

“So I quit!” she tells the bathroom. “Okay? I fucking *quit*. Tomorrow’s my

last day here. I deserve something better. I fucking *quit*.”

Do you really mean it? Inner Jess asks. Hopeful. Doubtful.

“Oh, I mean it,” Outer Jess says. “And I’m gonna fire my shitty agents. Find new reps who actually believe in me. I’m fucking talented and wonderful, and this dry spell is going to end because I’m going to make it end.”

The resolutions continue, faster than she can even speak them.

She’s going to swallow her embarrassment at still needing a survival job and ask her friends for advice, for connections.

She’s going to fucking ruin that gropey, blackballing restaurant manager.

And later today, she’s going to ace that audition. Then maybe she’ll call Arnie up and ask him if he wants to collaborate with her on something. A web series. A TikTok channel. Something productive. Then they can move on to something more *reproductive*. Ha. Gross. She hates kids. But, hey, who knows? Arnie has kissable lips and a scruffy beard and really nice shoulders she deserves to hang off. Life can change in an instant. Especially with a little force. Especially if you’re not afraid.

A grim but genuine smile crosses her face as she reaches around to finish behind the base of the toilet. A more thorough cleaning job than she needs to be doing, but fuck it, she’ll go the extra mile this one last time. This little meltdown in the bathroom has been a good thing. A galvanizing thing. That moment near the end of the story where our plucky heroine *finally* realizes what she needs and can start living her goddamn l—

Something bites her finger, hard. Her smile disappears into a gasp.

She yanks her hand from behind the toilet and scoots away on her butt. What the fuck?!

Her first thought is she cut herself on something structural. But whatever got her felt too thin, too bendy, to be part of the toilet.

A snake? She stares at the dark spot between the wall and the porcelain, waiting to see if something fanged and venomous uncoils from the shadows.

When nothing does, for a moment, she wonders if she imagined it. Then she sees a bead of red blood emerge from a tiny hole in her yellow-clad index finger. She strips the glove off. There’s a tiny puncture wound in her skin. Another jewel of blood seeps out.

Slowly, she reaches behind the toilet with her other, still-gloved hand and feels for the thing that bit her.

She knows what she's going to find even before her fingers wrap around it. Because she's thinking of how Maynard looked. How sick.

She pulls it out into the light.

Not a snake.

A syringe.

A dirty, obviously used syringe.

"Huh," Outer Jess says. "Shit."

Welp, Inner Jess replies. *You wanted something new to think about.*



4

The world gets loud. Every molecule in the air, grinding and roaring inside her skull. She can't think from all the clamor.

Emergency walls slam into place. That helps muffle the noise.

Jess watches herself move quickly and decisively—no longer Inner or Outer Jess but some strange, robotic hybrid. Action Jess. Imperative Jess. Definitely Not Going to Panic Jess.

She rips off a chunk of sponge, sticks it on the needle-tip, then wraps the syringe in a thick wad of toilet paper and throws it in the trash. Hopefully that'll keep anyone else from getting stuck.

Yes. Good. Keep moving.

She strips off her remaining glove. Trashes both, too. Washes her hands. Washes her hands again. Forces the wound to bleed. Washes her hands again. And again. Once it seems like she's out of blood, she dries her hands and wraps her finger in toilet paper. Avoiding any eye contact with the mirror the whole time.

Ignoring the scratching at the walls.

(theFUH)

Next: leave the bathroom. Grab coat and bag. Say goodbye to Margie. Margie asks a question in some language Jess no longer speaks. Doesn't matter.

Maynard's gone, too. Doesn't matter.

(uhtheFUH)

Now Jess is in her car. Traffic is light, and that's good because the scratching at the walls is getting louder.

Hospital.

Need to get to a hospital.

When she got on the road, she automatically pointed herself toward home—that’s okay, there’s a hospital not too far from her apartment in Van Nuys. Don’t know the exact address, but that’s also okay. It’s all okay. Just look it up and—

“I left my phone at the diner,” she says in a monotone. “Fuck.” She can see it, still charging under the counter.

All okay. Turn around, get the phone from Poppy’s, then go to the hospital. Or don’t, there are signs to follow, don’t even need the addr—

“What am I doing?”

She pulls off the highway. Not heading to the hospital and not heading to Poppy’s. Taking the exit for her apartment.

Fingers digging into the mortar, pulling out entire bricks.

(*uhtheFUCK*)

(*uhTHEFUCK*)

“I just gotta...”

Pulling into her apartment complex’s parking lot.

(*uhTHEFUCK*)

“I just gotta...”

Fumbling with the keys to open her front door.

(*whuhTHEFUCK*)

Bricks crumbling all around her now.

Finally, she gets herself inside and sags against her front door. She has to scream, let it all out—

(*WHATTHEFUCK?!*)

—but she can’t. Not out loud, at least. It would feel incredible to do so—necessary, even, like vomiting up poison—but her roommate, Kelsey, works during the day and is currently asleep, so Jess has to settle for a silent exhale of words.

*WHAT THE FUCK WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCKING FUCK
DO I DO NOW?!*

★ ★ ★

She does this a few times, wheezing silent curses, and starts to feel better. Well, not better. Present.

That rushing, grinding cacophony is gone. The world sounds normal again. No more need for protective barriers.

She staggers away from the door. The apartment is dark, so she turns on a rickety floor lamp, her injured finger sticking out like the inverse of a teatime pinkie.

She's still a little disoriented. Confused, almost, to be home.

The events of the past half hour or so come back to her like memories of an in-flight movie watched during a red-eye.

This isn't the first time she's had this sort of response.

When she got groped by that restaurant manager, she hocked a righteous wad of spit in the guy's face and stormed out ... but didn't *really* realize what she'd done until about forty minutes later, after she'd gotten home.

Another time, when she was nine, she found a stray cat while riding her bike around her neighborhood in Tempe. She picked it up to give it some cuddles, and the cat latched its teeth into the side of Jess's neck. After it sped away, Jess calmly checked her neck for blood, then calmly got back on her bike, and calmly pedaled home. It wasn't until she got inside and saw her mom at the kitchen sink that she switched into Breakdown Mode.

An acting teacher in college once pointed out that "fight or flight" is a myth; there are way more trauma responses than that. "I'm a Flight with Freeze and Fawn rising," Jess had cracked. Everyone had laughed at her quick wit.

She starts to shiver.

"Shock," she says. "Just a little shock. That's all. I'm okay. Shock-a-doodle-doo. Boom-shock-alocka."

She grabs Kelsey's Mexican blanket off the couch and wraps it over her shoulders. It helps.

So stupid, coming home like this ... but it also feels safe. Calm. Quiet.

"I've gotta get to a hospital, though. ASAP."

Then she remembers her phone. "Right. Drive back to the diner, get my phone, then get to the hospital."

Right.

And then what?

She doesn't know. She doesn't have insurance at the moment; is this visit going to deplete her meager bank account? Does it depend on what kind of horrible, lifelong disease she might've just given herself?

"I should look up what I'm in for. What I should be doing."

Don't wanna know, Inner Jess starts moaning. *Don't wanna know, don't*

wanna know.

“Oh, *now* she wants to leave things alone.”

Her laptop sits on the table that takes up the bulk of the two-bedroom’s dining area. She flips it open, only to discover a black screen. The charging cable lies in luxurious repose on the floor. Kelsey must have unplugged Jess’s laptop to charge her own computer, then forgotten to plug Jess’s back in. Thanks, Kelsey. A-plus roommate-ing.

“Charge the computer, then look up what I’m in for, then go get my phone, *then* get to the hospital.”

Jess connects the charger. It’ll take a minute or two for enough juice to boot it up, so she grabs a beer from the fridge. Drinks the whole thing down without taking a breath. It helps so much she opens another.

The apartment’s best feature is a sliding glass door that leads out to a patio area. They’re on the ground floor, and there’s a large, communal backyard to which they and the other six or seven ground-floor apartments have access.

The door slides open with a pleasant *shhhh*, and Jess steps out into the night.

A beautiful October Los Angeles night. Dawn still a few hours away. Chilly enough for a jacket, but not unpleasant without one. No Halloween decorations out yet, but the promise of fall crispness in the air. All is silent.

“Everything’s gonna be okay,” she tells herself. “This happens all the time, I bet.”

In fact, the likeliest scenario is that Maynard was in withdrawal and he shot something up to level out. That’s all. Still awful, but not *deadly*. Jess probably just gave herself a light dose of methadone or something. Maybe that’s why she feels so weird. The odds that he had some communicable, blood-borne disease have gotta be slim. And, hell, even if he did, there are cures for pretty much all the worst stuff these days ... right?

What are you so afraid of, Jess?

Sickness. Infection. Hepatitis. AIDS is still a thing, can’t forget AIDS—

Her computer should be ready now. Then the phone. Then the hospital.

One last, deep sip of beer, enjoying this final moment of ignorance. As she turns to head back inside, she hears a strange rustling noise.

The backyard is long and narrow. Made for socializing, with its communal grill, picnic table, and ample standing room. It’s not entirely walled off; a long concrete wall running parallel to the side of the building serves as its

main perimeter. The two shorter sides are open, one leading to the complex's parking lot and the other out into the wilds of Los Angeles.

The rustling is coming from *that* side.

Not just rustling. Whimpering, too.

She stands there, listening. She needs to go inside, to begin the dreadful business of taking care of herself. Not to get distracted by the easy pull of taking care of something else first. But the noises are too strange to ignore. What if it's someone's pet?

Another whimper. This one sounds almost ... human?

"Okay. *Fine*," she groans. Investigate the noise, *then* check the computer, *then* get the phone, *then* ...

She walks over to the bushes. Not too close. Just in case.

"Hello?" she calls to the foliage. "Is—"

A bird explodes out of the leaves, cawing in outrage. Jess flinches into a crouch. "The hell—?!"

She's never seen a bird like it before. Its head is huge and knobby. Its feathers are bright yellow and ... blue? Is she seeing that right, in the white glare of the backyard floodlights?

It flies around her head and then careens back into the bushes, apparently on the attack. The bushes rustle with movement.

Another whimper comes from the foliage. Words. Pleading. "*Stop! Leemee 'lone!*"

Definitely human.

"Hello?" Jess asks again. "Do you need help?"

Another whimper. This time, in the affirmative.

The bush rustles, and a small shape hurriedly crawls out from under it.

"Oh my god," Jess gasps.

It's a little kid.

Two huge, yellow, bigheaded birds follow the kid, pecking and cawing. The kid bats at them in a distinctly little-kid way, begging them to stop.

Jess rushes forward, whipping at the birds with the blanket from her shoulders. They squawk at her, and for a second, Jess thinks she sees what looks like human teeth in their clown-orange beaks. Then, thankfully, they disappear back into the bushes.

She turns her attention to the kid, standing there, not sure what to do. A boy, looks like. Small. Probably only five or six years old. Hair buzzed in a

short, almost military crop. Dressed in pajamas and holding what looks like an old book. He looks like shit. Filthy. Bruised. Scraped by bushes and thorns. His legs wobble, but he also looks ready to bolt. And his eyes—which are an arresting, almost electric-ice blue—are wary.

“Are you okay—?”

The kid recoils a little at her outstretched arms.

“Hey, shhh, it’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you. You’re okay. Everything’s okay.”

Tonight’s magic word.

An uneasy standoff. She breaks it the best way she knows how.

“You want some pizza?”



Not good, she knows. The need to get to the hospital is making her heart hammer and her stomach float. But the kid is so small, so clearly in need of help; she can’t just ignore him.

She wishes they had a landline or something. If only it were the 1900s.

She sets him up at the table (next to her now-ready-and-waiting computer), and while he wolfs down day-old leftover slices from LaRocca’s, she wipes him off with a wet dish towel. He’s too distracted by the food to mind.

“So, um. I’m Jess,” she says. “What’s your name?”

He doesn’t answer. He looks shell-shocked.

But from what?

“Is that your book?” she asks. “Can I see?”

He squeezes the old, thin book he’s carrying closer to his chest.

“Okay. Never mind.”

Midway through his third slice, he lets out a tremendous yawn. His head suddenly sags toward the table, ready to collide with the plate, before snapping back up.

“Whoa,” she says, rushing to his aid. “Okay. Let’s get you somewhere a little more comfortable. It’s okay, the pizza will still be here.”

He’s so tired it’s like he’s been drugged. She can only guess how long he’s been without food, how much energy he’s spent escaping whatever he’s escaping. He smells only a little ripe—maybe he’s been on the run for a day

or two at most? Within minutes, he's asleep on her couch, tucked under Kelsey's blanket.

Only then does he relinquish his book. *A Children's Garden of Fairy Stories*. The art and coloring look like they date back to the '60s or '70s, all muted earth tones and bulbous faces with beady eyes. Illustrators were straight up unhinged back then.

Jess quickly flips through familiar images of stories she's seen depicted a million times in other books. A princess on a stack of mattresses. Another princess in a tower. A thoroughly creepy Big Bad Wolf. Jarringly racist stereotypes for a few of the more "exotic" stories.

Other than the thin line of brown crud along one edge she really hopes isn't dried blood, there's nothing interesting about the book. At least the kid'll have something to read when she has to take him to the hospital with her. It's either that or Jess can try to steal her sleeping roommate's phone to call the authorities.

She decides to let the kid keep resting for now. She has other business to attend to first. Her plan. This new costar doesn't change the overall plot.

She finishes her beer, then drops the kid's book onto the kitchen counter before grabbing one more bottle from the fridge. She knows her limits. She's just gonna take a few baby sips from this one to keep any pesky thought spirals at bay.

Next, she heads over to the table, opens her computer, and tries to prepare for the worst.

That way, at least, there's no way tonight can surprise her any further.



5

A few minutes later and panic is scratching at her defenses again. Jess pauses, beer halfway to her lips, realizing her few baby sips have turned into half the bottle.

She gets up and pours the rest down the sink.

Two tabs are open on her laptop's browser. The first displays results for the search "**What to do if find missing kid.**" The information is scattershot. Advice on how to talk to a lost kid, what numbers to call—many of which are region-specific and not always in Los Angeles. Nothing hugely helpful yet.

The second tab displays results for "**What to do if stuck with dirty needle.**" She can barely even skim these results, they make her so skittish. Even so, they're mostly what she expected: force the wound to bleed, don't suck at it, get to a hospital or clinic ASAP, certain viruses like HIV are best treated within seventy-two hours of exposure.

While she's at the sink, she scrubs her finger again. Tries to squeeze more out of the little puncture hole. Nothing comes out. Which means the only thing left to do now is ...

Jess tucks the hand towel back into place across the refrigerator handle and stands there, listening to the open-mouth sounds of the boy sleeping on her couch.

She's just starting to think of the best way to wake him up, when she hears something else. Voices outside. Excited voices.

"Now what?" she whisper-groans.

After she'd gotten the boy to follow her into her apartment, he wouldn't stop throwing nervous glances toward the glass door, so she'd pulled the curtains to give him a sense of security. She peeks through the curtains now, cupping her eyes and getting close to the glass.

Two of her neighbors are out in the back area—Carl, from three doors down, and his girlfriend / common-law wife, Amber. Plus, a third figure. All engaged in some sort of argument. And it looks heated.

What makes Jess decide to slip outside and investigate is this third person's haircut. Close-cropped, like the boy's. A tenuous connection, but maybe something?

It's not until she gets a little closer and sees that the guy is totally naked that she realizes maybe this is something she might not want to insert herself into.

Carl has always been a bit of a mystery to the other residents in this complex. He stands six foot five, not counting the additional inches from his massive mop of dark, curly hair. He's built like a linebacker—muscular but undefined—but he's never seen exercising and he smokes like a chimney. He says he's an amateur surfer, but no one's ever seen him in a wetsuit or with a board strapped to his Ford Maverick pickup. That same truck has two decal stickers on the cab's back window: a Grateful Dead bear on one side and on the other, one of those Punisher skulls with a Blue Lives Matter flag. He's like a pothead and a frat bro melded together, Cronenberg-*Fly*-style. He's got a faint, unplaceable accent, too. Something vaguely German or Eastern European, which makes Jess wonder if he's really Karl, not Carl.

He's one of the most inscrutable guys she's ever met—in other words, so quintessentially LA.

Because of this, Jess doesn't think it's beyond belief that the argument she's walking up on might be the result of some sort of sex thing gone wrong. However, before she can retreat, Carl sees her coming and says:

"Wendy! Didn't mean to wake you!" He always calls her *Wendy*; she's given up on correcting him. Took her ages to realize where the name came from. Her apartment is 1D. Wen. Dee.

Amber is still yelling at the naked dude. She even pushes him backward. Amber weighs about as much as a bag of Fritos, so the guy doesn't move far. He holds his hands up in a pacifying gesture, and he's speaking at her in low, measured tones. Jess can't hear what he's saying, but he appears to be trying to calm her down. As if he weren't standing there with his (thankfully flaccid) dick out a few inches away.

Carl looks at Jess and explains, "I keep hearing weird noises, like bird noises, right? So I finally come out to look and also have a smoke, and that's

when this cowboy strolls up.”

“Total buck-ass pervert, creeping around the bushes!” Amber adds, keeping her focus on the naked stranger. “Get *lost*!”

“Please,” the guy begins, raising his voice a little in frustration. “I told you, I’m looking for—”

“OH, WE KNOW WHAT YOU’RE LOOKING FOR!” Amber shouts.

“We’re taking care of it, Wendy—he’s going to be history,” Carl continues. “You got the cops ready, babe?”

Amber holds up her cell phone. “Just gotta press Send!”

“For the last time,” the stranger says, “I’m warning you. *Don’t*.” He sounds harried but firm, the way one might sound trying to discipline a particularly annoying child. Despite his nakedness, he bears himself with a rigidity that’s surprisingly intimidating.

Military? Jess thinks. *Or maybe a cyborg from the future?*

She doesn’t remember Terminators having tattoos, though. This guy has several, as well as a pretty hefty bandage wrapped around his right forearm.

Amber takes the guy’s “Don’t” as an invitation to start yapping like an angry terrier. She bounces back and forth in front of him, invoking all the places he can stick his “Don’t.”

Deciding Carl and Amber are useless, the man turns his attentions to Jess. “Ma’am, I’m sorry. Have *you*—” He takes a step forward, but Carl quickly wraps his arms around the guy’s upper chest.

“I gotcha, Wendy!” Carl grunts in the scuffle. “Amber, call the cavalry!”

Amber is straight up screaming now. “Get him, baby! It’s ringing, baby!”

Other neighbors are looking out their windows or coming onto their porches and balconies. What a sight they must be seeing: one of their more eccentric neighbors having a midnight wrestling match with a buff naked dude in the harsh light of the backyard.

Jess, for her part, is backing away. She wants nothing to do with this. Tonight has been too much. Way too much. *Jesus Christ*, this night.

Nude Dude isn’t inconvenienced by Carl’s amateur grappling for long. In a blur of movement, he spins Carl around and bends one of Carl’s arms backward. Carl yelps in pain.

Definitely military. Jess picks up her backward pace to the safety of her apartment.

Now holding Carl in a full nelson, Nude Dude is facing Jess. His eyes

suddenly go wide.

Jess feels her stomach sink ... but he's not looking at her. He's looking over her shoulder. She turns to follow the guy's gaze.

The little boy is awake and standing at the glass door, looking out at the commotion.

She has no idea what's really going on here—this is happening so fast—but she knows it's all related, this naked interloper and the scared and desperate boy, and so Jess turns and jogs the remaining distance to her apartment. The look of terror on the boy's face is all she needs for confirmation.

When she reaches the door, she can't help but turn back once more to see what's happening.

Amber has leaped onto Nude Dude's back, beating on him with all her stringy might, shrieking, "The cops are coming! They can hear all of this, you fuck! Help! Come quick!"

"Hell yeah, babe!" Carl shouts in triumph.

"What the shit is going on down there?!" another neighbor yells from the second floor.

Nude Dude tosses Amber off his shoulders, and her tailbone meets the concrete with a painful-sounding thud.

Jess watches her fall, wants to make sure Amber's not too badly hurt, then realizes Nude Dude is now staring right at *her*.

"Wait!" Nude Dude bellows. Roars. "STOP—"

He's cut short as Carl tackles him again, taking him to the ground this time.

Jess pulls the sliding door open and scuttles inside. The lock engages with a firm click, and she yanks the curtains shut, blocking any view of the backyard.

I don't like this, she thinks. I really don't like this.

The little boy doesn't either. He's whimpering again, the way he did when the birds were attacking him. The whimper of something very small and vulnerable.

"Let's go over here, huh?" She guides the little boy away from the door, into the living room. Sits him down on the couch.

The boy looks at her with huge, frightened eyes.

"It's okay," Jess says. "It's okay, don't worry."

“H-he’s h-here,” the boy stammers in terrified disbelief. The two words run a cold finger down Jess’s spine.

“Who’s here?”

The boy gulps. She’s never seen someone actually gulp in fear before.

“Daddy.”

Now she understands the gulp.

The boy squeezes his eyes shut. She feels a shudder rack through him.

Before she can say anything, noises outside take her attention. Carl and Amber, still yelling, interrupting themselves with confused yelps. Those yelps turn into screams. Not just them—Nude Dude, too? Screams of pain and shock? What the hell is going on out there?

The screams are lopped off by another noise.

A howl.

A monstrous, bone-rattling howl.

It begins in a low register and then twists upward, until it sounds almost like videos she’s seen of those god-awful shrieks mountain lions make.

Everything inside of Jess turns to ice. She spins around, seeing nothing but the closed curtains.

Is there an animal out there now? A huge one, by the sound of it?

Excruciating silence.

Then, another twisting howl. Far too close. So loud it could almost be in the room with her.

The human screams resume. Recognizably primal sounds of trying to escape. Of terror and agony. And underneath, something wet. Something ... *ripping*.

More neighbors are calling out now. Freaking out. Demanding answers. One shouts that they’re also calling the cops.

The shouts are met with what sounds like manic crunching up the side of the building wall—Jess can imagine claws scrabbling up stucco and brick. Then, screaming from one of the second-floor balconies. Glass shattering. More scrabbling. More screams, these cut short with nauseating finality as someone collides with the backyard pavement. Oh god. She grips the little boy and feels him grip her back.

“Jess? What is going on out there?”

Jess nearly jumps out of her skin.

Standing in the hallway to the bedrooms, wearing a tank top and loose

plaid pants, is Kelsey. Her hair is mussed from sleep, her eyes puffy and confused behind thick-framed glasses. Her bedroom faces the front of the building, so she hasn't been able to look out a window and see what's happening.

Jess tries to rise to meet her, but the kid clutches her down. "I-I don't know. There's a fight, some guy was attacking Carl and Amber a-and—"

Kelsey looks past Jess to see the kid on the couch. She blinks in confusion. "Is that a kid?" Another agonized scream rises outside. Followed by another blood-chilling howl. Kelsey's face goes ashen. "Is that an *animal*?"

"I really don't know, Kelsey." Jess can only whisper this. It's not until she watches Kelsey run back to her room and then come back with something in her hand that Jess finds her voice again. "Whoa, Kelsey, is that a gun?!"

Kelsey holds up the pistol she's apparently been keeping in her room. "My dad got it for me when I moved here."

"You've had a *gun* in our apartment this whole time?" Jess asks stupidly, as if this is the most unbelievable turn of events so far.

"I know how to use it, Jess." She spits the name with annoyance. They've never gotten along great even in the best of times—more polite ambivalence than anything else.

Just then, they all realize how quiet it's gotten outside.

"Is it gone?" Kelsey asks.

Holding the gun up with one cocked arm, she makes her way to the back door curtain.

"Don't," Jess warns. Suddenly, that closed curtain is the only thing keeping the monster at bay. It's the blanket over the head. If they can't see whatever's out there, then whatever's out there can't see them.

Kelsey heeds Jess's warning for about five seconds before reaching out and yanking the curtain open. Then she shrieks and leaps backward.

"What is *that*?" Kelsey asks in a choked whisper.

The howls prepared Jess to see something wolflike, or maybe a distressed mountain lion. And, at first, what's on the other side of the glass makes her think of a quadruped balancing on its hind legs, maybe even leaning onto the door. But whatever it is, it's too erect for that. Too obviously standing on its own.

A massive, hulking animal, more like a bear or an ape, but thinner limbed. Seven feet tall, at least. Perched on painfully bent hind legs. Shoulders

heaving with exertion. In the chiaroscuro of the backyard floodlight, its fur looks black and gray, except for the many places where it's sopping and matted with blood as slick as tar.

Relative to the rest of its body, its head is huge and angular, with large, shaggy triangles for ears pointed high, probably catching their rapid, fluttering heartbeats through the glass. Its muzzle is long, lips rippling across gigantic yellow fangs bathed in froth—a rooting snout, the better to dig into your insides and tear into your organs, my dear.

And its eyes ...

Its eyes scan the inside of their apartment and then land on her. *Specifically* her, Jess is suddenly sure. Only then does she notice one other detail.

The animal has something in one of its massive, all-too-dexterous paws.

The ankle of Carl's left foot. Still connected to Carl's leg. Still connected to Carl's body. The animal dragged him across the pavement of the backyard to their window.

"What's it doing?" Kelsey manages.

Jess doesn't answer, but she has an idea.

It doesn't want to hurt itself jumping through the glass.

The animal-thing wraps its other hand around Carl's ankle, and, like a golfer, like a baseball player, swings Carl's body backward, then heaves it forward into the glass door.

The glass explodes, spraying the dining area with jagged shards.

The boy is wailing now. Jess scoops him up and looks for somewhere to hide. As she does so, she also sees Kelsey take a wide stance and aim her gun at the oncoming creature.

Jess feels a sudden surge of admiration and respect for her roommate's bravery. She's not flinching. She's ready to kill. *Holy shit, Kelsey.*

The monster advances. *Not a monster*, her rational brain tries to insist, *just an animal! A big, fucked-up animal!* But she's never seen an animal like this. The way its joints bend. The way its muscles bulge. The uncanny way it balances itself, more like a rising cobra than a quadruped on its haunches, or even a man in a suit.

Kelsey fires several bullets into the thing's torso. The reports are deafening. An acrid smell, combined with burned hair, floods the room. The wolf-bear-thing staggers backward ... but doesn't fall.

The momentary delay gives Jess enough time to realize there's no good place to hide here. Without wasting an instant, she carries the boy to the front door and yanks it open.

"Kelsey, come on!" she yells.

Kelsey looks in her direction, but at the same time, the wolf recovers from the gunshots. It seems to swell in size behind her. Kelsey turns back just as it wraps its massive jaws over and around her face. Jess can hear Kelsey's screams echo into the creature's mouth and down its throat.

Kelsey's arms fly up in protest, and it grabs her at both of her wrists and twists. Kelsey's arms tear out of their sockets with a sickening ease and the stomach-lurching, rotisserie chicken sound of snapping tendons.

Jess doesn't stay to watch. She runs outside, slamming the door shut behind her, hearing Kelsey's body being tossed around the room like a chew toy.

She and the boy are both sobbing now.

But there's another sound, too. Sirens. Not just approaching but *arriving*. The world is slathered in reds and blues as two cruisers pull up and officers pour out. Thank god, they must have heard the sounds of struggle over the phone—maybe even the screams.

Jess opens her mouth to tell the officers where the danger is, but the danger bursts out of her apartment without introduction, knocking the top hinges off the front door.

The officers shout in their officer language for the inhuman monstrosity to stop, to lie down and put its horribly inhuman hands on its head.

Jess doesn't wait to see how this plays out either. She hightails it to the parking area, heading straight for her car. It's around the corner from the front, so she can't see what's happening. She only hears gunfire ... and howling ... and screaming.

Her Honda Civic is right where she left it. She sets the boy down, telling him it's okay, they're going to be okay, they're gonna get out of here, and—

"FUCK!" she interrupts herself. The boy flinches, and she caresses his cheeks as soothingly as she can, keeping her voice low. "Sorry. I just—I don't have the keys. We need keys, right?"

The kid nods, eyes brimming.

Jess steals a look over her shoulder. It's still red-and-blue chaos around the corner, full of screams and shouts and snarls and the pop of guns.

Not far away, she can hear more sirens approaching, even the distant, coked-up heartbeat of a helicopter. The cavalry, Carl said.

“They’re gonna kill that thing, okay? Nothing to worry about. I just need you to—can you hide? For just a few minutes, while I run back and get the keys?”

The boy nods again—more resolute this time. Walks over to the front of the car and crouches like a little soldier preparing for an ambush.

“Perfect. Don’t move. I’ll be right back, okay? Right. Back.”

Gonna die, I’m gonna die, I’m gonna die. The phrase scores through her brain like a news ticker. She crouch-runs to her apartment, this time via the backyard route. But what the fuck else can she do? Try to steal a car? She doesn’t know how to do that, and she doesn’t really have time to sit and watch a fucking YouTube tutorial.

Besides, it sounds like the cops have that monstrous thing well distracted at the moment. They’ll wear it down and kill it in no time.

It’s just an animal.

Just an animal.

Of course, she’s also thinking of the howls. Of monster movies. Of the number of shots Kelsey pumped into the thing without it even noticing. Idiotic thoughts. Impossible thoughts. But what kind of animal walks upright like that? What kind of animal knows how to use—

She reaches the backyard area and skids to a halt. For a moment, all thoughts cease.

During the earlier chaos, she hadn’t been able to see what was being done to her neighbors. Now, she can hardly believe what’s in front of her.

A slaughterhouse.

The concrete is bathed in gore. Blood streaks up the walls to the second-floor apartments, too, where the occasional limb droops over a balcony. The creature must’ve climbed up and mutilated even the people who’d just happened to step out to see what the matter was. It had moved so *fast*.

But the ground is worse. Neighbors who’d been thrown, crumpled in impossible shapes where they landed. Amber, torn to shreds, guts leaking out of a crater where her toned stomach used to be. Other bodies rendered unidentifiable by their dismantling.

One of the backyard lights was damaged in the melee. It blinks in and out in a disbelieving strobe, as if even the world itself is saying, “Maybe if I close

my eyes, this'll all go back to normal," over and over and over again.

No way this is real. This *cannot* be real. How could one animal do all this?

She flashes on those birds again. Mother Nature's all fucked up tonight. Maybe the world is ending? Or some sort of lab escape? Maybe she needs to be on the lookout for other—

She snaps herself out of the reverie. *No time!*

She makes her way to the glass door leading into her apartment. Broken glass crunches underfoot. Thank god she didn't kick her shoes off when she got home.

More carnage inside her apartment. Blood, splashed across the walls, the ceiling. One of Kelsey's arms leans against the living room bookcase like a bra thrown off after a long day.

Nearby, Jess finds Kelsey staring dull-eyed into nowhere, glasses gone, face framed by ragged parentheses left by huge teeth. It takes Jess a moment to realize Kelsey's torso is facing the wrong way—her neck, twisted around while she was shaken like a chew toy.

The contents of Jess's stomach press against her throat—only burning bile now, but it wants to come up in a rush. She chokes it back, along with the sobs that want to come with it. She has the powerful urge to close Kelsey's eyes for her, to kneel down in apology for this atrocity. They were just Craigslist roomies, never really friends, but Kelsey didn't deserve *this*.

Then she notices Kelsey's gun, a few feet away on the floor. She retrieves it, and just as she's looking it over to see how it works, she hears crunching glass behind her.

Steadily approaching steps.

Heavy breaths.

Maybe even a low growling?

Something else is here.

The wolf-thing? Another animal monstrosity? Whatever it is, it's approaching—and fast.

Gonna die, gonna die, I'm gonna die ...

Remembering Kelsey's bravery, Jess squeezes her eyes shut in prayer, spins, and fires.

She surprises herself by remaining un-mauled. Her eyes open to a gray cataract of gun smoke. It takes a heartbeat to dissipate, and when it does ... there's no animal there.

Just a man. Standing right where her bullets were meant to go.

A police officer.

With only an exhausted exhale, the cop crumples.

She drops the gun and runs over to him, stupidly repeating *no no no*, begging him not to be shot, as if that'll Control+Z the situation.

The cop gurgles blood, wheezes in pain. He's been hit in the upper chest, just above his tactical vest. An expert shot for a first-time marksperson. What beautifully horrible luck.

He weakly reaches for his radio.

"Officer ... down," he sputters. "P-possible a-accomplice..."

"No," she begs, "not an accomplice! An accident!"

He begins to give her description through thick, agonized coughs, a cop 'til the end—and she can think of no other option than to run away. So much running tonight. That makes her skid to a halt, double back, grab her car keys and bag from the kitchen counter, where she'd thrown them a million years ago, and then bolt back out the shattered glass door, trying not to think how she might've just killed a man.

She's sobbing again, this time blubbering words, too. "I'm sorry," she says to no one, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

She reaches the car, and the boy is hiding just as she instructed. She unlocks the car, throws the boy and herself in. Manages to get the key in the ignition, fire it up. Still sobbing, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

This has all happened too fast. It's too much. There has to be a way to undo at least some of what has happened.

But the sounds of struggle between the creature and the police continue. More cops being slaughtered; hopefully, the wolf-bear-thing, too. The helicopter has arrived, casting its mad spotlight onto the front of her building. They'll be looking for that accomplice any minute now. She even left a gun with her fingerprints all over it.

Turn yourself in, Inner Jess says. *Don't make this worse.*

Outer Jess looks at the terrified boy. Throws her car in reverse. Peels out and speeds away, desperately hoping she's leaving the madness behind them.

★ ★ ★

A few minutes later, not even sure where she is or where she's going, the

sobs finally run out. The boy is also still crying, but he sounds too exhausted to go on much longer.

She hears herself tell him to put his seat belt on, then realizes he's not even on the seat, he's crouching in the footwell. Fine. That's fine.

She needs to think. What are her options?

Head to a precinct somewhere? That idea terrifies her almost as much as driving back to her apartment. She just—*maybe*—killed a cop. Other cops don't take kindly to that sort of thing. The details are already a blur; did he give her a warning before she turned and fired? Did she make things even worse by running? She's never felt more sober in her life, but she's also got two and a half beers in her system—would they smell it? Run a Breathalyzer on her?

And, of course, there's the wolf-bear-thing. What if they couldn't kill it after all? What if it's still out there, too?

Every instinct tells her to hide. Wait for things to calm down a little, including inside her head. For all she knows, though, they already have her name, her relevant info—so she shouldn't go anywhere they might think to look for her.

I want my mom, she thinks, amazed at how strong that desire hits during times of great stress. Hardwires.

Except she can't even call her mom, because she doesn't have her phone.

Then she thinks of someone. The closest thing to her mom right now.

A quick glance at the dashboard clock. Yeah, she should be home by now. She would've just finished her shift—the same shift Jess would've also been working, if she hadn't cleaned that fucking bathroom in order to leave early.

"Hold tight," Jess tells her passenger. "I know where we'll be safe."

A million miles away, Jess's index finger throbs, as if to say, *You're not gonna know "safe" for a long, long time.*



6

A monstrous-looking clown with a bloodred grin and eyes sparkling with hunger.

A man with knives for fingers and a face like ground beef.

A hulking giant with a face made of holes.

A massive spider looming over two tiny figures who hold up a glowing blue vial in doomed defense.

And skulls. So many skulls. So many teeth.

The boy stares at it all, barely able to make sense of what he's seeing.

"Yeah," Margie says, "my son's tastes are a bit..." She grimaces at the figurines and posters that fill the small bedroom. "I'd throw all this out, but Scotty usually comes home in between semesters, and he would lose his friggin' mind. I promise, though: the bed is good. Memory foam. You ever heard of memory foam?"

The boy hasn't, but he's too busy gaping at the contents of the room to respond. Not just the imagery but the sheer amount of it all. Daddy doesn't allow decoration of any sort. Not even drawings.

He squeezes Margie's leg.

"Maybe I shoulda just set you up on the couch?" she mutters. "Ugh. Too late now. Hey." She squats down to his level (not without some effort). "Some of this is pretty scary, huh?"

The boy doesn't need to nod. He just meets her eyes with his big, blue, exhausted ones.

"I hate it, too. But, y'know something? My son wasn't always a fan of this kind of stuff either. He used to get really spooked, just like you. Wanna know what we did to help him not be so scared?"

"Yeah," the boy says eagerly.

With another groan, Margie straightens up and quick-jogs out of the room. The boy hears a door open nearby, and then she's back. "Ta-da." She presents him with a ratty old blanket. Threadbare and dulled from untold washes ... but still surprisingly soft to the touch.

"What is it?" he asks.

"That right there, my friend, is an invisibility blanket. Do you know what *invisible* means? It means, whenever you're scared, if you hide under this blanket? The things you're scared of *can't see you*."

To demonstrate, she drops the blanket over the kid's head. The kid gives a tired, broken giggle that squeezes Margie's heart, and pulls the blanket off his head. Static turns his hair into weary exclamation marks.

He looks at the blanket, gives Margie a momentary look of skepticism—or what passes for skepticism on his babyish face. "Really?" he asks.

He hands the blanket back to her, as if to say *show me*.

"Really." She puts the blanket over her own head.

"I can still see you!" he exclaims, confused and a little delighted to potentially catch an adult in a fib.

"You're a smart kid," Margie says and pokes at the boy's belly. "I knew I liked you." The boy can't help but giggle some more. Margie takes the blanket off, smooths her own hair. "I told you, it only works when you're around the things you're afraid of." She hands it over to him and invites the kid to hop onto the twin bed in the corner of the room. "Why would I be afraid of you?"



As Margie gets the boy settled, Jess eases her Civic into the single-car garage attached to the small ranch house. She had to back Margie's car out to fit her own—and felt like a real asshole requesting to do so—but this was the only way she'd feel secure. The cops might not be looking for her or her car yet—especially out here in Echo Park—but better safe than sorry.

She sits in the dark garage for a moment, listening to the cooling engine tick itself to sleep. Sending out a little prayer that things will be okay, that they've found protection, even if only for tonight. Hoping visions of Kelsey, of that dying cop, cease their looping autoplay in her mind.

Margie's waiting for her, sitting at her dining room table behind two beers,

when Jess finally hurries inside.

“He’s almost asleep,” Margie says, drinking from the bottle nearest her. “Cute kid. I miss that age. Everything’s so much ... simpler.” Then she grimaces. “The hell am I talking about? It’s never simple. Gonna share his name yet?”

Jess shrugs. “He hasn’t told me.”

Margie groans softly. Rubs her temples, like that was the answer she was afraid of. Takes a swig of beer. Indicates the other bottle. “Figured you could use one. I know I can.”

Inner Jess heartily agrees. Outer Jess stays put.

Silence spools between them. Jess can’t help but notice Margie’s avoiding any prolonged eye contact.

“So, what’s next?” Margie asks. “You wanna take a shower? Get into some clean clothes?”

“That would be amazing.”

“Uh-huh.”

Margie pushes her chair back and rises. Rather than provide Jess with the things she’d need for a shower, though, Margie walks to the window over the sink. She cracks it open and lights up a cigarette.

More tense silence. More furtive glares.

Jess wants to sit down, but is suddenly too self-conscious. “Margie, again, I ... I can’t thank you enough for this. I know it’s—”

Margie makes a noise and holds a hand up. It’s shaking a little.

“You gotta walk me through all this again, Jess. Cuz I gotta be honest, I’m having a real hard time wrapping my mind around everything here. I mean, I’m two edibles deep when you show up, I’m just trying to decompress after a long day, and—and you’re covered in blood and you’ve got a strange kid with you—*whose name you don’t even know*—and you say you were just attacked? By some wild animal?”

“I know it sounds crazy—”

“Ya think? But that’s not even the craziest part! Because you’re *also* saying you can’t go to the cops? And you’ve gotta hide your car in my garage in case anyone’s looking for you? I mean, what the fuck, Jessica?! I just saw you like three hours ago!”

Jess stammers. “I ... I don’t know where to begin. I’ll tell you everyth—”

“Don’t you dare.” Margie takes a drag, shakes a finger on her other hand.

“I don’t want to know. If I’m asked about this later, I wanna be able to say I don’t know jack. I don’t wanna be an accomplice or anything. Just tell me: Am I safe? Did you put me in danger, coming here?”

Accomplice ... Jess winces at the word.

“No. You’re totally safe. And I won’t stay here long, I promise.”

Margie nods, stares at the burning tip of her cigarette. “I’m flattered you thought of me as a safe place to run to, Jess, but...” She gives a humorless laugh. “I mean, I hardly know you! Okay? And this is a lot.”

Jess does her best not to show how much that stings. “You’re right. I just ... couldn’t think of where else to go.”

“This kid—is he one of your neighbors or something?”

Jess shakes her head. Leaning against one of the chairs, she quickly tells Margie about the boy. A runaway, found in the bushes. Jess was trying to get his story when his dad showed up, demanding the kid back. But before she could learn anything further ...

“Yeah?” Margie asks.

Jess is thinking of the guy’s eyes when he bellowed at her to wait, stop. Those eyes had burned with such intensity and—

Were those *his* eyes she’s remembering or the animal’s? The way it scanned her apartment, stared at her through the glass door. So clearly intelligent. Almost like—

STOP. Quit making this more insane than it already is. She shakes her head of the thought.

“And then everything went to hell,” she finishes. “That thing, that huge fucking bear-wolf-*thing* showed up and ... Margie, I can’t tell you—the place looked like a war zone. I’ve never...” Her voice cracks. She’s pretty sure she’s about to start sobbing, so she finally grabs that extra bottle of beer and takes a deep gulp.

“Goddamn,” Margie exhales. “This is just so ... *goddamn*. And none of this has to do with why you left the diner all freaked out? You looked like you’d seen a ghost or something.”

Jess surprises both of them by bursting out in a laugh. *Nope, different catastrophe!* she almost says. Instead, she settles for, “No. That was—no.”

More silence. But at least Margie seems a little calmer, having vented a bit. After another drag, she asks, “So, what’s the plan? After you get cleaned up, I mean. Any idea where you can go?”

“My mom lives in Scottsdale. I guess I could head in that direction. In fact, can I maybe use your phone for a sec and call her?”

“Over there.” Margie lifts her chin toward where her cell phone sits on the kitchen counter. “Just point it at my face.”

“Thanks.” Jess does so, which unlocks the phone, then dials the number. The only number she knows by heart.

While it rings, she says, “It’s Jessa, by the way.”

Margie blinks. “Huh?”

“My name. It’s Jessa. Not Jessica.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Huh. You think you know a person.”

Voicemail picks up on the other end of the line. “Hey, Mom, it’s me. Um. I’m calling on a friend’s phone, but, um ... something’s happened? And I ... I really need your help? Can you call me back as soon as possible? Please?”

Here come the tears again—an automatic response to asking her mom for help, Jess imagines. She swallows them back, but Margie must have noticed the effort, because before Jess finishes putting the phone down, she’s come over to rub a hand along Jess’s back.

“Asleep?” Margie asks.

Jess gives a wet chuckle. “God, no. She’s probably out partying.”

“Seriously? It’s like 3:00 a.m.”

“Yeah, my mom’s...” Jess sighs, puts her head in her hands. “I’m so sorry about this, Margie. I just didn’t know where else—”

“I know. It’s ... I’d hug you, but.” She gestures at Jess’s general filthiness. Her face is softening. Empathy creeping in. “Whatever happened, hon ... I’m sorry your night went sideways.”

“I’m sorry yours did, too.”

They look at each other for a beat. Then Margie growls.

“I’d just better live long enough to hold the meanest fucking grudge.”

She goes back to her cigarette.

Meanwhile, her phone, still in Jess’s hand, gives a harsh buzz. Jess jumps a little, then shows Margie what’s on the screen:

A news alert, recommending residents of Los Angeles County keep themselves and their pets inside due to what’s being described as “violent animal activity” that has claimed the lives of several people in Van Nuys.

“Well, shit,” Margie mutters again. Then, almost with the tenor of an apology: “Okay. You weren’t kidding. *Shit.*”

They look at the alert together, a strange mirror to how they’d looked at that photo of Arnie a lifetime ago. Margie reaches out for her phone, and Jess hands it to her.

“Where’s *your* phone?” Margie asks. “Battery dead again?”

“Actually, no,” Jess answers. “I’ve gotta ask you one more favor...”

Margie’s softened face turns back into stone.

On the other side of the small ranch house, the boy sleeps restlessly in a room full of monsters.



7

One thing Jess likes—or at least doesn't hate—about the graveyard shift at Poppy's is there's nothing quite like Los Angeles in the dead of night. Or is it technically the dead of morning?

Whatever it's called, it's that predawn window of time after everyone has siphoned themselves off to their various bedrooms (some more ad hoc than others), the drunk drivers have mostly torn their destructive path through whatever lives they're endangering, and now all is calm and peaceful until the morning rush begins.

Maybe this kind of peace is a rule for every city, but there's something especially delightful that even a city like Los Angeles—which seems to ignore so many rules—obeys this one.

It's not like the streets are deserted. There are still plenty of cars on the roads right now. But there's no gridlock. No honking. Everyone gets out of everyone else's way, understanding that if you're out at this time, you have a *reason*.

That's what it is: there's empathy in the air. A quality Los Angeles isn't known for when the sun is out.

It's maybe Jess's favorite time.

Not tonight, though.

Tonight, the calm feels ... itchy. She wishes she were spotlit by the sun, hemmed in by other people. She wishes horns were bleating all around her.

More than that, she wishes Margie were running this errand instead of herself.

Jess tried her best to convince her: *I'll take kid duty. You've already done so much.* But once they'd seen that alert on her phone, there was no way Margie was going outside again. Plus, Margie added, she'd already had those

two edibles earlier and she had a firm policy of never driving while stoned. Jess would have to take Margie's car to Poppy's to retrieve her phone, and that was that.

"One thing, though," Margie said, holding Jess by the forearm. "If you steal my car and leave me with that kid, so help me god, I will hunt you down. Don't believe me? Ask my ex-husband, when he tried to skip out on child support."

"I believe you, Margie, Jesus. I'll be right back."

What a strange thing to worry about. *What're you so afraid of, Margie? I'd never do something like that.*

All the same, as Jess drives now, it occurs to her she *could* just keep going. Drive until she can't drive any farther. Leave them both behind. Start a new life. It's not like Margie is her friend, right? At least, according to Margie. They barely know each other.

That's not fair. She's just shaken up. This is a lot to put on someone.

"Yeah," Jess says out loud. "No fucking kidding."

There's a sharp pain in her chest. Not quite betrayal. More—horribly—like sad resignation. Another relationship, flimsier than she'd thought.

Fucking L.A. Fucking stupid, lonely, superficial, friendless town. She turns the radio on to drown out her thoughts.

Margie's default station is blaring R&B, which is delightful, but Jess switches over to the AM band for news. The first station she tunes to is, unsurprisingly, discussing the horrifying scene in Van Nuys, where what appears to have been a backyard party was attacked, leaving numerous people dead, including several police. Reports indicate it was some sort of large animal, possibly rabid, and that, whatever it was, it escaped into the night. Authorities are scrambling to contain the animal, kill the animal—which *will* happen, nobody needs to worry, this was just a freak occurrence, but—

Jess switches to another station. Gets the same story. And another. And another.

It's almost impressive how all the stations are on the same page. Who puts these talking points out in the first place, anyway? That sort of question makes her think of all the conspiratorial dudes she's dated over the years—another common character in the comedy scene. Conspiracy theories are basically just fairy tales for adults, aren't they?

Doesn't matter. It was just an animal, that's what's important. "Just an animal," she tells the car. Just one really pissed-off bipedal wolf-bear-thing with terrifyingly lucid eyes.

She doesn't love hearing that it's still out there, of course, but at least there's no mention of any *other* freakish creatures. Those weird birds were just birds, not a sign of Mother Nature in revolt. Maybe the world isn't ending after all.

She sits back in her seat a little. She's been driving like that coked-out Mafia guy in *Goodfellas*, not just looking everywhere for the fuzz but for monster-animals, as well.

All the same, she jabs the radio off and drives in silence—all the better to hear, my dear—throttling the wheel with anxiety.

Finally, she pulls up to Poppy's.

She checks herself in the rearview mirror. Her eyes are a bit crazed, but otherwise, she doesn't think she looks like someone who's been through nine lifetimes' worth of hell in a single evening.

She took a quick shower at Margie's, rinsing all the blood out of her hair. Now that still-wet hair is tucked under a baseball cap, and she's wearing some of Margie's nondescript clothes. As incognito as she can get. Maybe unnecessary since, if the police have already figured out who she is and where she works, she's well and truly screwed ... but no police appear to be waiting here.

Rhonda almost doesn't recognize her at first and gives a warning squawk as Jess heads behind the counter. Once Rhonda realizes who she's looking at, she exclaims too loudly, "Oh! Jess! Thanks for cleaning up the bathroom during y'all's shift. That was a nice surprise."

The bathroom. Jess's gorge rises at the memory.

"No problem," Outer Jess says around a smile, broadcasting as clearly as she can that she's in a hurry. She retrieves her phone from where she'd left it under the counter.

"Hey, be safe out there," Rhonda says, following her to the door. "Did you hear? Some sort of wild bear just killed a bunch of people? Crazy, right? Like there's not enough to be scared about these days?"

"Crazy. Right." Jess stops, can't keep herself from adding, "Not sure it was a bear, though."

Rhonda perks up. "What do you mean? You hearing something different?"

“I dunno,” Jess replies. She thinks again of fairy tales. Of the boy’s book. Of feeling small and lost in the deep dark. “Maybe it was the Big Bad Wolf.”

★ ★ ★

Back in the car, Jess sits for a few moments, staring at her phone. Not anything on it, just the object itself.

Having it back in hand definitely helps her feel more secure. Pathetic how a device can do that, but it’s the stone-cold truth.

She breathes in ... out ... in ... out ... The same kind of calming breaths she uses to combat stage jitters before a show. In ... out ...

Hey, be safe out there.

“I’m trying, Rhonda,” she mutters.

As soon as those words are in the air, a strong premonition comes to her. A dark shape, swelling up from the back seat. The wolf-bear-thing is *here*. It’s been hiding in Margie’s car this whole time, waiting for the most dramaturgically perfect moment to rise and lop Jess’s head off with a single, effortless swipe.

She spins around. The back seat is empty.

“Of course it is,” she exhales. In ... out ... in ... “Anything else we wanna worry about?”

She gets an answer with unnerving immediacy.

What about the boy’s dad?

Again, she flashes on his eyes. Him yelling at her—*ordering* her to stop. The shell-shocked look on the boy’s face, so obviously on the run from someone who terrified him. Even in just those few seconds, his dad had given her some bad vibes. That’s not even factoring in the guy’s public nudity.

But had she seen his corpse among the ruins of her backyard? It would’ve been hard to miss, given it’d be the only one without clothes on, right?

Did he somehow manage to escape? Is he out there now, also looking for them?

Or is there a third possibility? Something having to do with those eyes...?

She groans. Slaps at her forehead a few times. She’s letting her imagination run wild. There’s no way the guy survived. Not even people on the second floor survived, let alone some asshole without so much as a pair of boxers to protect himself. He was definitely torn to shreds. And definitely not

some sort of movie monster. Those things don't exist. The world is horrifying enough as it is.

"Fucking dads." She turns the engine over.

She realizes, in her quick retelling of events to Margie, she'd neglected to add that the kid's dad was totally naked. Jess makes a mental note to share that with Margie; she'll get a kick out of that. Maybe they can laugh about it. Lighten the mood.

And there was no monster in the back seat. No cops at the diner. She got her phone back with no issues. Hell, her battery's even at 100 percent.

Things will start to make sense again soon.

Things are gonna be okay.

Looking at the diner, though, one more unbidden thought pops into her head. That old nonsense graffiti that had bothered her for weeks.

NO ONE WILL BE SPARED WHEN

This time, some random synapse or other completes the fragment for her. Still nonsense, but somehow fitting. A dubious gift from her overheated brain.

No one will be spared when the wolf comes home.



8

It knows how to hunt.

Even before, the knowledge of hunting was in its bones. But now, with this nose, this sense of smell ...

It can practically *see* the boy's scent, an ever-brightening neon line, no matter how far away he was taken.

It crouches low, moving with liquid grace. Despite its size, it's almost as imperceptible as a passing shadow. All the skills learned in a previous life, put to new use.

Several times as it's been nearing its destination, a strange cramp has hit its midsection. Unlike the bullets that bounced off its impenetrable hide, it actually *feels* these. Its body, beginning to twitch and flicker, its previous form spasming into reality. That stupid, weak body that failed at its one and only mission.

Falling asleep, it realizes. *Mind drifting*.

It needs to move faster. Before it loses its advantages.

Inside its head, three rivers converge into a single stream.

One, the wildest. Roiling, demanding: *Kill. Rip. Eat*. Unsatisfied, even with the gallons of blood currently sloshing in its guts.

Another, tossed and impotent in the greater waves. Useless. Barely audible.

And the third. Cold. Dispassionate. An icy undercurrent, pushing the river forward in a single direction.

Find him.

Find him.

FIND HIM.



9

After much tossing and turning, caught between worries and the self-soothing nighttime techniques Daddy taught him, the boy finally drops into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

It's broken by a loud voice from the living room:

"Son of a *bitch!*"

The boy's eyes snap open. Fully awake. Heart pounding. He instinctively reaches for his book and realizes with horror that, in all the hardnoise earlier, all the running and the screaming and the guns and loud flying things, he lost track of it. *No, no, no.*

The voice belongs to the nice lady who owns this house. Margie. She sounds scared and surprised—the loudness of her exclamation different from anything he's heard from her so far.

Now there's a metallic crinkle: window blinds snapping back into place.

"Son of a bitch," Margie says again, lower this time. Meaner.

The boy doesn't know what she's looking at ... but also, he does. Oh, he surely does.

No, please, no.

Margie walks past the boy's doorway, muttering through clenched teeth.

"Naked asshole on the front lawn ... Jesus *Christ*, this day..."

The boy hears her open another door, rifle through some things. She comes back in the other direction now, stops at the door to the room the boy's in. Pushes the door open farther. The boy can see her silhouette against the hallway light. She's holding a long, wooden stick, thicker at one end than the other. He doesn't know the phrase *baseball bat*, but he can tell it's a weapon.

"You awake?" Margie whispers into the room. "Hope not. But if you are, everything's fine. You just stay put, okay? There's ... someone I gotta deal

with.”

She closes the door.

The room is dark, but he squeezes his eyes shut anyway. Tears pool behind his eyelids.

He can feel the scary figurines, the faces on the posters, grinning down at him. Loving this. *Yes*, they’re saying. *Yes*.

No, no, no, he thinks back at them.

His mouth is dry and his palms are wet. His chest heaves. He wishes he could stop what’s going to happen next, but there’s no stopping something like this, is there?

No. The answer is no. The same word he’s repeating in his head.

No, no, no, no, no.

A shiver runs through him as he hears Margie opening the front door.

“Hey!” she shouts angrily.

A howl rises up to greet her from the front yard. A howl that suddenly squeezes in pain ... and then begins to *twist*.

Yes, the figurines and posters agree, *yes yes YES*.

Margie screams, too, at what she’s seeing. She slams the front door shut, still inside. Breathing fast. “What the fuck was *that*?! What the fuck?!”

The strange, twisting howlscreams continue outside.

No, no, no, no!

Glass shatters in the living room. The front window. Something heavy thuds onto the living room carpet.

Margie is still screaming. She’s joined by strange, harmonic groans, several mouths in confused, disoriented pain—noises the boy has never heard before.

Then wet, gurgling, choking, ripping—noises he *has* heard before.

The nice lady, Margie, is suddenly silent. Her sounds, cut short.

All is silent. Except for that low, harmonic growling.

Glass crunches.

Footsteps approaching. More than two feet.

The low growling gets louder. Closer.

Nononononono—

He does the only thing he can think of. He throws Margie’s invisibility blanket over his head just as the door pushes open, revealing a new silhouette in the doorway. A horrible shape.

It sidles into the room.

The boy trembles under the blanket. He can hear its breathing as the shape slinks around, searching everywhere. More of that multitone, harmonic growling. Not hardnoise, but somehow just as awful.

One arm lifts up the bed skirt and looks under the bed.

Another lifts up the comforter that, just a few seconds ago, the boy was curled under.

The boy has wedged himself into a corner, hiding under the special blanket, seeing the outline of this new horror through a thin layer of well-washed cotton. Its arms. Its legs. Its heads.

Not a wolf anymore. So much worse.

It can't see me.

Can't see me.

Can't see me.

The kid's heart thunders. The figurines, the posters, leer with glee. But even they—

Can't see me.

The shape finally gives up on this room and scuttles out to keep searching.



10

The changing isn't painless.

Quite the opposite. For a while there, it felt as though every bone in its body was shattering, melting, burning, re-forming, all at once.

But its new form feels stationary again. Settled. For now, at least.

It misses the simplicity of its previous shape. This body is *confounding*. Its limbs are ungainly, its balance awkward. Certain senses have heightened, others have dulled. Certain hungers have become keener, others less imperative.

The undercurrent hasn't changed, though. Cold. Steady.

Find him find him find him

The boy must be here somewhere. Where could he be?

It looms over the body of the woman who must have lived in this house. Most of her body, at least. The bottom half of her face is somewhere to the side. Her lower jaw came off so easily with the bladelike appendages sprouting from one of its several hands. Now the woman's tongue lolls out like a short, fat kite string on the floor.

Its many eyes stare into her dull ones, still imprinted with that final burst of fear. It wishes it could demand answers from her. Fury roils. Where is the boy?!

A song begins to play somewhere else in the room.

Somewhere in the soup of its consciousness, it knows the song is called "More Than a Feeling." The wolf might not have been able to remember this—its primal instincts were far more overpowering, leaving less room for thought. But this new shape, with all its many inputs, offers a sharpness ... even though something internal keeps begging to stay looking at the dead woman's fear-stamped eyes.

It turns to pinpoint the source of the music. A cell phone sitting on the kitchen counter. It moves forward awkwardly, loathing its clumsiness (this many legs, this center of gravity!).

One of its more hand-shaped hands picks up the phone.

Someone named “JESS (POPPY’S)” is calling.

Could it be?

The younger woman who stole the boy?

It swipes one of its fingers across the screen to accept the call.

It doesn’t quite know how to activate its vocal cords in any sort of coherent way, but thankfully, the caller—JESS (POPPY’S)—starts talking without needing much of a prompt.

“Margie?” she asks. “Hey, sorry, I think our connection’s weird. Um. Listen, I got my phone and I’m on my way back. Told you I wasn’t gonna run away. But I just wanted to say ... I’m sorry again about everything. This wasn’t cool of me, putting you in this position. So I’m gonna take the kid, and we’re gonna head to my mom’s place in Scottsdale right away. Like, tonight. I just feel awful, making you worry about being in danger and stuff. But I think I’m getting a second wind, so ... Anyway, if you want to pull my car out of your garage, feel free. Or I can when I get back, either way. Also, this is embarrassing, but heads up, my mom *might* call you. She’s the 480 number I called a little bit ago on your cell, so you should be able to recognize it. I just left her another message saying I have my phone back, but since she knows I’m in trouble, she might try to talk to you behind my back and, y’know, get *your* version of events. She’s nuts. Just wanted to prepare you. Her name’s Cookie and, I mean, the two of you might wind up becoming best friends, or ... Margie, are you there? I think I can hear you breathing, but...”

A giggling steals its attention. It looks down, startled. Its torso—or is it technically a thorax now?—is covered by a thin, red-and-green-striped pelt, and pressing out from the surface, like breathing tumors, are the shapes of faces. Each face is riddled with holes, empty eye sockets, almost like a hockey mask. But one such face is a glaring white, save for its red nose, and its mouth has turned up into a severe, drool-leaking grin. It giggles again—high-pitched and insane. A clown’s giggle.

“Margie?” the voice on the phone asks again, after a pause. Her fear coming through the phone is delectable.

All its faces are smiling now.

Either this JESS has the boy already or she will again shortly. Either way, now it knows where they're going next. It has a phone number and a name and currently feels sharp enough to use certain skills to make a plan. To hunt. To

(find him find him get him back)

There are very loud voices in the soup that want to continue all this fun. But too much carnage is a liability. It knows this. All the better to head JESS off at the pass.

It looks down at the body of the old woman.

Funny. She's almost bent into a question mark.

No questions here, though. With another audible giggle, it disconnects the call. Then it picks up the old woman's head (most of it anyway), adjusts her eyes to face forward, and holds it in front of the phone to unlock it.

While it's busy using one of its more appropriate hands to pull up and memorize a phone number in the phone's call history, it doesn't notice tiny indentations form in the pools of blood as an invisible body sneaks through the living room and out the front door.



11

Jess pulls up in front of Margie's house, the knot in her stomach as hard as concrete.

Something is wrong. She can't stop thinking about that strange noise she heard on the other end of the phone. Was it really laughter? Did Margie's edible kick in *that* hard?

It must've just been a weird cell signal or something equally stupid and obvious, but every alarm bell in Jess's head is ringing. Something is very wrong.

No one will be spared ...

Before she can turn off the engine and get out of Margie's car, she notices the front door is ajar. The curtains billow out through the front window, where the glass should be.

The knot tightens.

Jess steps out onto the curb, the car parked but running in case she needs to beat a hasty retreat.

She takes a few tentative steps onto the small patch of grass that is Margie's front lawn. She moves slowly, in part to keep her footsteps quiet and in part because she really, *really* doesn't want to go into that house.

Before she can take another step, something grabs onto her leg.

She almost topples over, her hands flying up to her mouth to trap the scream that wants to fly out.

It's the boy. Suddenly standing in front of her, arms wrapped around her thigh. How the hell did he just appear like that?

He's holding a ratty old blanket. His hair stands up, and his eyes are wild with shock. He's shivering, like he was just doused in ice water, and saying something, too. She can't quite make out the words.

She scoops him up and puts him in the back seat of the idling car. Tries to comfort him, calm him down ... also get any clue as to what's going on.

He's rocking back and forth. His feet are stained a deep, wet red.

She gets closer to his mouth so she can understand what he's saying. "I-I had to walk by her ... I had to walk in her ... and he's there ... he's..."

"He?" Jess asks.

"D-Daddy." He looks into her eyes. "He's so *mad*."

It's like she's punched in the gut. All the air suddenly leaves her lungs.

Oh god. Margie. "I had to walk in her..."

"Wait right here. Don't move," Jess manages, also shivering now.

The boy stops her, holding out the blanket. "Here," he urges, face grave.

She takes it, no idea why, and makes her way toward Margie's house, courage draining fast.

The world is midnight silent, save for the whisper of leaves ... but does she hear a rustling inside the house? Something large, rooting around?

She gets as close as she can to the shattered front window and tries to peer in, holding her breath.

The curtains keep billowing like overexerted lungs, obstructing her view, so she's only able to get the briefest of glimpses into the living room.

She maybe sees some all-too-familiar splashes of red across the wall. And a shape. A silhouette farther in the house. Something hunched over itself, busying itself with something. But it doesn't look quite like a person. The angles are wrong, it almost looks like—

The curtain blocks her view again.

All the same, her shivering intensifies.

She tries to get a better look into the living room while staying flat against the wall. In her maneuvering, she doesn't realize she's accidentally dropped the blanket until the boy hisses from the car in an unsuccessful stage whisper. She can't tell what he's saying—"You sit," or "Use it," or something—all she really cares about is she can tell the silhouette inside has moved.

It straightens up. Listening. It must have heard the boy, too.

Jess wants to be brave, wants to make sure Margie isn't past saving, but the way that shape moves, the impossible outline of it, sends her running back to the car. And the kid is shrieking now. Not in terror but in outrage. "The blanket!" he's screaming. "The BLANKET!" Rocking back and forth in his seat like he's on fire.

She slams the rear car door on his pleas, then hurries to the driver's side.

Behind the wheel, she steals one more glance at Margie's house. Whatever's in the living room has *definitely* heard them now. Jess watches as the shadow inside swells in size as it rushes toward the window.

Too many limbs. Too many legs.

A trick of the light! Just some shadows!

All the same, she doesn't stay to make sure.

The tires scream as loudly as the boy in the back seat. Jess peels the car away and barrels down the residential streets toward the first highway they can find.

All she can do is pray no other car slams into her and that, if it does, it kills her instantly, rather than leaving her to find out just what was waiting inside Margie's home.

No such car comes. They make it onto the highway, and Jess hopes they never have to stop again.



12

The kid won't stop screaming and hammer-kicking her seat. He's in full-on tantrum mode, and Jess realizes she never put his seat belt on. She's going to have to stop at some point to strap him in ... or maybe strangle him with it.

"Blanket! You left the blanket! And my book! Where's my book?! I need them! I NEED THEM!!"

More kicking. Thrashing.

Jess hears herself offering apologies, useless solutions, none of which land amid this shrill tornado.

"I NEED THEMMMMM!" His voice is high and piercing, like knitting needles in her ears. "I NEED THEM!!"

Finally, she yanks the wheel and steers them to an off-ramp before throwing the car into park on what she hopes is a safe side street.

"Hey. *HEY!*" She turns around in her seat to face him. The kid stops screaming, but his breaths come in big, hitching gulps that let her know more screams are waiting for deployment. She keeps her voice calm and low. "I know you're upset right now, but I'm about five seconds away from throwing you out of this car and driving away. I'll let whatever was in that house come get you. Do you want that?"

The hitching breaths become more controlled. "No," he says with determination. Good, he's taking her threat seriously. Because she really kinda meant it.

"Thank you," she says, already feeling terrible. "Now, do you know how to put on a seat belt?"

He shakes his head.

"Of course not." She gets out and opens the back-passenger door to buckle him in.

“Hurry,” he pleads in a soft, frightened voice that melts whatever disciplinarian steel she’d galvanized to yell at him.

Less than a minute later—an interminable minute full of visions of a malformed silhouette appearing over the horizon and rushing toward them with lunatic speed—she’s got them back on the highway.

It’s quiet enough now to think, but she’s forgotten how to do it. Her mind is a chaotic leapfrogging of questions. Where are we going? What are we doing? Are we being followed? What was that thing in Margie’s living room? What if she’s still alive?

She doesn’t realize she’s asking them out loud until the boy responds.

“That was Daddy,” he says, miserable. “He found us again.”

She looks at him through the rearview mirror. His frightened, blue eyes hold hers.

“Kid, I ... I’m not sure what’s going on tonight, but whatever that was ... that wasn’t your daddy. I don’t even think it was human.”

“It was *Daddy*,” he repeats with an edge of frustration. “He’s still mad. And when he gets mad, he...”

“He what?” No answer. “Okay, look.” She has no idea what to say or how to say it. “Your dad was a bad guy; I get it. And I *definitely* know what it’s like to build up your dad in your head. But ... daddies are just people. Your daddy’s just a person. In fact, sorry to tell you this, but ... he’s probably dead. That thing at my apartment, the wolf-thing? I don’t think anyone besides us ... y’know, got away. Including your daddy. Do you know what *dead* means?”

He considers, then looks out the window at the anonymous wash of midnight highway. “I don’t think he *can* be dead. He said people tried to make him dead before all the time and they never could. And he’s so mad right now. At you, too. We have to get far away. We have to hide. Even though we don’t have the *blanket* and my *book*.” Naming each item, he kicks out in whiny frustration, then appears to remember her threat and stops.

I think I liked it better when he barely spoke.

“Okay.” Trying to play along, to sound reasonable. Her head is starting to ache. “Well. If that was your daddy, how did he find us? How could he have known where we were?”

“I don’t know,” he says. He stares out the window, brow knit. It’s too old an expression for such a small kid. He looks like he’s fuming about work or

an ex-wife or something. “The doggy nose, maybe. Daddy told me doggies can smell things people can’t.”

“Wait, so he’s the wolf-thing now, too? That’s what you’re saying?”

“When he gets mad, he...” The boy searches for the right words. “Gets more scarier. He gets different.”

“Like, he changes?”

The boy nods.

“But you know that’s impossible, right? *Right?* People don’t change. Not like that.”

But there’s no use trying to rationalize with a scared kid. Hell, she’s scared herself. And also ...

*Those eyes. The wolf’s eyes were too—
STOP.*

The car is silent again. Jess sighs.

“Well, great. This is all just great.”

“It’s *not* great,” she hears the boy mutter. It occurs to her he’s actually showing a surprising amount of discipline for a kid so young; his tantruming gave way to passive-aggressive sulking with impressive speed. Then she realizes why. The kid’s dad probably beat that discipline into him. Even if he’s not a *monster*, that guy was probably a monster.

“Fucking dads.” A familiar ache blooms within her chest. Little Jess, joining the fun.

She wrings her sweaty hands against the steering wheel. One thing at a time. Where are they going? What’s the immediate plan?

She looks at the clock.

It’s only 3:37 a.m. If this were a normal night, she would’ve just finished jerking off and/or watching some trash TV before laying out her outfit for the day and getting ready to try to sleep.

Pretty sure I’m not making that audition later, she thinks, and for an intense microsecond, she feels bubbling, hysterical laughter at the back of her throat.

Then she remembers that giggling on the other end of the phone, and the impulse dries up as quickly as it came. Guilt overtakes her instead. A massive wave of it.

Oh, Margie. I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry. Tears sting her eyes. *Fuck.*

She never checked to see if Margie was still alive. She stole her car and

left her, just like Margie'd been afraid she would.

But that silhouette ... all that blood on the walls ...

"I think we have to go to the cops," she says at last, hoping that hearing herself say it will give her the resolve to follow through. "There's nowhere else we can go."

The kid offers no opinion on the matter. He might not even be listening.

What stops her from looking up the nearest precinct, though, isn't just her fear of getting punished for her shoot-and-run. The kid's obviously overimagining what's happened to them tonight ... but suppose he's at least right that *something* is after them.

Suppose—on the slimmest of chances—that everything hasn't just been a series of nightmarish coincidences.

It's not like the dozens of officers at her apartment offered much protection. And what if she turns herself in and gets thrown in a cell while the cops deliberate over her story? She'd be trapped. The boy, too, probably. No way to run. Nowhere to hide.

It's too silent again. She forces herself to unclench the wheel. Looks through the rearview at the boy. Huge, silent tears slip down his cheek, catching the scattered streetlights. He knows how to suffer in silence.

"Hey." She clears her throat. "Everything's gonna be okay. Okay?" She's starting to hate that word. Silence. "I'm really sorry about your blanket." Silence. "Tell me more about your daddy. Do you ... do you really think he —"

Before she can finish her question, the car is filled with a buzzing sound. Jess gasps in surprise, and the car swerves dangerously out of its lane. Her brain catches up with her nerves quickly enough and she's able to steady the vehicle before catastrophe. It's just her phone, vibrating inside her bag on the passenger seat.

Keeping one hand on the wheel, eyes darting back and forth to the road, she digs it out.

The display reads: COOKIE MOMSTER

She puts the call on speaker.

"Mom?!" she practically shouts.

"Well, heya, stranger. Long time, no speak."



13

If Mona Dahl weren't being such a petty twat waffle, Cookie wouldn't have needed to leave the party early to decompress.

Goddamn Mona Dahl and her nonstop monologuing about her stupid neurosurgeon son. Directing each sentence straight to Cookie as if to say, "See? See how *some* children can be?"

Cookie had wanted to invite Mona to sit and spin on the ol' middle-finger whirligig, but of course, she held her peace. For now. After all, Cookie is hosting this week's Bridge Night, and it wouldn't be wise to stir the pot. It'd make people feel like they had to "choose sides" in order to attend, blah blah blah.

Besides, Cookie knows that Mona is really just jealous that Cookie and Bob Bradford have been hooking up for the past few weeks while Mona sits in her room with a cooch so dusty it would take one of those *Mary Poppins* chimney sweepers to clear all the bats out.

God, it's all so exhausting. Like being in high school again.

No, worse. Living at the Sky Blue Senior "Freedom" Residences is like goddamn elementary school again. Only, instead of "My dad can beat up your dad," it's "My kid is more successful than your kid."

Good for you, Mona. I'm soooooooo glad your little Bradley just made attending neurosurgeon at the hospital he spends 23.75 hours of every day at. Big fuckin' whoop. A rich white kid raised by two rich white parents got a promotion. Quelle surprise.

Cookie never feels the pathological need to brag about her own kid like that. She *does* brag, of course, but she doesn't *need* to. She can read the fucking room and talk about other things. *It's called being a human goddamn being, Mona.*

Besides, there's more to extol about your kid than artificial career metrics. Cookie doesn't mind that Jessa's career is struggling. Jess is still finding herself. And Jess is cool and funny, and most importantly, she's *kind*.

The other residents never want to hear about that stuff, though. They just want to know about her auditions, her bookings, her celebrity sightings, blah freaking blah.

How about this, Mona? My daughter was raised by a single mom on a legal secretary's income, and now she's out in California living her dream and she's not a total fuckup. A little bit of a fuckup, sure, but who isn't? At least Jess is still able to think about other people's well-being from time to time.

Plus, unlike a certain someone's neurosurgeon son, my kid doesn't look like Charles Laughton after being stung by a buncha bees.

Cookie isn't above being petty. She didn't earn her nickname in high school because she was sweet. She was called Cookie for the ways she crushed her enemies into little bits, after which her friends would remark, "That's the way Cookie crumbles *you*."

Of course, there's an even deeper reason why Cookie is feeling so sensitive about the subject of children right now. It's been almost a week since she last spoke with Jess. Longer than any other time in recent memory. She's positive Jess is avoiding her. Ignoring her calls, even.

She has a pretty good idea why, too.

Tommy.

Goddamned Tommy.

For practically her entire life, Jess's dad has been the great, shared punching bag for both Cookie and her daughter. Now that he's dead, Cookie knows Jess must be feeling ... a lot. Sad. Unsettled. Angry. Cookie can relate. She feels the same damn way about that worthless idiot—but he wasn't her father. And the fact that Jess wants to isolate herself with those feelings, doesn't want to share them with her mom (and best friend) is breaking Cookie's heart and making her feel new levels of resentment for her least favorite ex-husband than she ever thought possible.

She doesn't want to lose her daughter or their special relationship. That's something she never even entertained before. Now, she's tasting its possibility.

Especially if Jess learns what Cookie has been hiding.

If Jess learns Cookie's secret ...

It wasn't even supposed to be a secret! That asshole screwed everything up by dying. Now I can't ever tell her or she'll hate me for the rest of my life. Maybe even hers.

"Oh, it's all just so *stupid*," she groaned, alone in her Sky Blue "Freedom" condo. "Stupid, stupid, stupid."

Then she did what she often does whenever the thoughts get too heavy. Something, yes, Tommy used to do, too—but Cookie always had far better self-control than that guy.

She poured herself a healthy glass of Franzia from the box in the fridge.

It wasn't until she finished her glass and reapplied her lipstick that she noticed her voicemail message light blinking.

★ ★ ★

She tries to hide the relief from her voice when Jess picks up—not because she wants to hide her feelings from her daughter but because she knows Jess might be annoyed or embarrassed to hear her mom fawn all over her.

She doesn't hear annoyance, though. She hears panic. Distress. And even though the wine has been flowing since around 4:00 p.m. that day, Cookie sobers up like she's been slapped in the face.

"Okay, slow down, slow down," she urges. "You don't have to tell me anything yet except that you're safe. Are you safe?"

Jess says that she is, but Cookie isn't sure she believes her.

Once Jess is calmer, she's able to give Cookie a little more coherent info. There was an attack on her apartment complex—"It might even be on the news where you are"—but she got out okay. The only thing is, she needs to get as far away as possible, and she can't go to the cops.

"You can't go to the cops? Why not?"

"I ... There was ... Mom, I'm so fucking tired, can I just tell you about it tomorrow?"

"Yeah, great, this totally sounds like a thing I'm going to be chill about."

"Mom."

"Don't 'Mom' me! When your daughter calls and says she can't *go to the cops*—"

"Mom!"

“Jess!”

They fall into a brief tangle of sounds, some of which are words, before ultimately rising to a climax and then falling silent. A common enough duet for the two of them.

“Oh my god, you can be so obnoxious.” After a beat, Cookie asks, “What do you need? How can I help?”

“I don’t ... I don’t know. I just—I need a place to sleep and think and...”

“Hide? Jess, are the cops *after* you?” Cookie pitches her voice low, as if Mona Dahl or one of the other Sky Blue crotch sniffers were in the other room.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so, but ... maybe.”

“Oh, chicklet.” Cookie heaves a great sigh, then pours herself another glass of Franzia, fresh lipstick be damned. “Okay, lemme think. Where are you?”

Jess gives her approximate location. No longer on the 101; now it’s the 10.

“Okay,” Cookie says. “Okay, here’s what I’m gonna do. There’s a Radisson maybe thirty, forty minutes away if you keep heading toward Palm Springs. It’s nice. I went to a few conferences there back in the day, and Harry and I used to meet up there from time to time to, y’know—”

“Ugh, Mom—”

“*Have a drink at the bar. Get your mind out of the gutter.*” Harry was Cookie’s third husband, a bland also-ran of a man neither thought much of (nor thought of much). “I’m going to reserve a room—under my name, so if anyone’s looking for you, hopefully it won’t set off any alarm bells—”

“Thank you.”

“It’s just you, right? You’re alone?”

A small, but noticeable pause. “Yeah.”

Cookie decides to shelve that pause for later.

“Okay. Well, check in there. Get some rest. Charge everything to the room. Food. Get a massage. There’s a nice pool. Decompress. Sounds like you could use it.”

“Thank you, Momma.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I’m bribing you so you’ll tell me what the hell is going on.”

“I will. I promise. You know I will.”

“I know. You’re a good egg.” She can’t help herself: “It’s really good to

hear your voice.”

It sounds like Jess is crying, so Cookie tells her it’s time to hang up so reservations can be made.

Jess responds by saying, “Thank you,” over and over again, each time shattering Cookie’s heart into smaller and smaller pieces.

“I love you, kiddo.”

“Love you, too,” Jess manages to say before hanging up.

A few minutes later, Cookie’s made the reservation and informed the hotel desk clerk that her daughter will be checking into the room while Cookie “runs some errands first.” The clerk says that’s no problem.

Cookie decides then and there that, after she and Jess talk, she’ll drive to the hotel and stay with Jess. It’ll be nice to get away and spend some time getting pampered with her daughter ... especially if her daughter’s about to go to prison or something.

She pushes that thought aside. It’s too awful to even joke about.

Her palms are sweaty. Her fingers knit together in anxiety.

She could attempt to go to bed now.

Instead, she straightens her spine and resolves to go back to the party for a little longer. Otherwise, she’ll keep trying to call Jess every five minutes for an update, and that’ll just cause an argument. Jess needs to sleep, and she’ll be safe enough at the Radisson.

Plus, Cookie needs a drink. Something stronger than white wine.

And who knows: maybe some more tales of Bradley the Special Widdle Neurosurgeon will bore her enough so she can get some shut-eye later.

Might be the first useful thing he’s done in his life. Besides all the brain surgery, of course.



14

By the time Jess sees the bright lights of the Radisson emerging from the highway darkness, the kid has fallen asleep again in his seat. Scared as he is, he just can't fight his exhaustion.

Jess can relate. Once she'd finally spoken with her mom, along with the deep relief from finally hearing her voice, an almost overwhelming fatigue hit her. She didn't like lying to Cookie—she usually tells her mom everything—but she just couldn't go into everything now. The adrenaline had drained away, taking with it all her stamina.

However, as she maneuvers into the hotel's massive parking lot, she's momentarily elated, like someone lost in the desert, stumbling onto a working soda fountain.

Safe here, she thinks—practically begs. *We'll be safe here*.

Of course, she doesn't *know* that. Stopping here could be a horrible idea. But along with the promise of a clean, quiet bed comes that anonymity she was craving. A crowd to blend into. Too many smells, even for hypothetical monster-doggy noses.

The kid is light enough to carry, and he more or less stays asleep as Jess handles checking them in. There's no problem with the reservation. It all goes as smoothly as she could hope.

Her mom mentioned amenities. Room service. Spa service. Those all sound not just tempting but *necessary*. Yes, please.

But first: sleep.

She puts the kid down in the king-size bed, then kicks off her own shoes.

No nightclothes for either of them. They'll just sleep in what they came in. That's fine. They'll worry about clothes tomorrow. She does wet a washcloth with warm water and clean the kid's feet. He barely notices.

The front desk had spare toothbrushes and toothpaste (and by “spare,” they meant “available for an exorbitant surcharge”). She gives her teeth a once-over. No need to shower or wash her face since she just did so at Margie’s not even an hour ago.

Margie ...

She can’t let herself think further of Margie. She can’t breathe if she does.

For now, they’re safe. That’s all that matters. Or at least as safe as they can be.

No one will be spared ...

She shakes that thought away. Looks down at the kid. Brushes some hair out of his face. He gives a soft, barely conscious whine, and her heart clenches a little.

He looks so small. So helpless. It’s almost impossible to imagine she was once that tiny, but she was. She needed caring for then, too.

When she gets into bed, the boy curls toward her for warmth. For company. For protection. She hears a strange voice in her head, not quite verbal but impossible to misinterpret. *Protect me*, it says. *Keep me safe*.

I’ll try, she thinks back at it.

You will, it responds. Somewhere between a plea ... and a command.

It disturbs her. She doesn’t understand where it came from, or how, or why it makes her feel powerless and afraid.

There’s no energy or will left to investigate it, though.

More important to let this horrible, horrible day finally come to an end.

★ ★ ★

But the day doesn’t let go.

Jess sleeps maybe an hour or two before the nightmares hit.

Running through a dark wood, chased by some huge, unseen pursuer. The trees are vast—impossibly tall and dense, and she is so very small. Barely six years old. About the age when she was informed that her daddy was leaving.

Little Jess manages to elude whatever’s searching for her—too terrifying for even her imagination to conjure—but she’s worried her panting and whimpering will give her away.

All she wants is someone to come protect her. Someone big and strong to keep this nightmare at bay. And the night sky glows against a great, fat moon.

No face on this moon, though; its head has been turned around on its neck and now it's facing the wrong way.

She looks down and, by the light of the faceless moon, she discovers her dress is soaked in blood. Glaringly red blood. Should be black in this light, but it's unmistakably vibrant.

As is the place where the blood comes from: the tip of her finger, where she's been pricked like Sleeping Beauty.

It wasn't a spindle, though. It was a dirty hypodermic needle, which she still holds in her other hand. She tries to drop it, but it's stuck to her palm by tiny, grasping legs all along its sides. Like some hideous insect.

She shakes at it desperately. It refuses to fall. Instead, it scrabbles up her arm, her shoulder, her back, piercing her all the way with its contaminated stinger.

She shrieks, all thoughts of her pursuer gone, batting at the needle. Spraying blood from the still-oozing wound at the tip of her finger.

Not just blood. Clotted, noxious pus. Fatty, yellowing flesh.

She's rotting from the inside out.

It starts from that still-bleeding puncture wound. The skin around her finger swells, slick and purulent, before belching itself inside out into cream-colored rivers. The stench is ghastly: hot and sweet, like a shit-smeared diner bathroom. As the rot travels down her finger, blood congealing, skin withering into necrotic black, the sound is like someone squeezing handfuls of Poppy's famous spaghetti with both fists. Her palm begins to curdle into yellow froth. Her other fingers quickly follow. Her veins become a highway of poison, the I-10 of decay, spreading death through her body, her bloating, sweating, rapidly disassembling body.

Run all you want, Little Jess. You can't escape what's already inside.

She watches in horror as skin sloughs away from her forearm, revealing a radius and ulna streaked and drooling with flesh, but just before she wakes with a barely suppressed scream, she notices that it's not just liquifying muscle oozing off her moon-white bones. Mixed into the rancid meat are strands of dark, oily hair. Not human hair. It's hair from the thick, shaggy pelt of some great and ravenous—

After jolting awake, she stares at the ceiling. Waiting for her heart to slow its terrified gallop. Listening to the steady, open-mouthed breaths coming from the little boy beside her.

It takes a long time before she stops inhaling that sweet smell of rancid decay.

Stops hearing the wet squelch of her disintegrating flesh.

Stops feeling her finger pulse with its baleful, poisonous secrets.

Stops holding out hope that *everything* that's happened to her has all been a dream.



15

At some point during her communion with the ceiling, she must have fallen back asleep because now the boy is shaking her and sunlight is making the room's blackout curtains glow around the edges.

"I'm hungry," he says, his breath sour and stale.

"Yeah." She sits up, blinking and groaning. "Me, too."

Room service brings them an expensive array of pancakes, eggs, muffins, fruit. She expects the kid to be excited—what kid doesn't love getting room service? Instead, he seems guarded and morose. Back to staring at her cagily. It all must be sinking in for him, how his life has changed, how he's stuck with this stranger.

Come to think of it, she's feeling pretty fucking morose, too. Sore and achy, not just physically but mentally. Too many things to think about. Too many traumas to process.

She's come to a decision, though. A plan for this morning. Risky, but necessary. She knows they need to hunker down, stay out of sight ... but if she doesn't cross at least one item off her list of anxieties, her chest's gonna cave in. A thought keeps buzzing inside her head like a trapped fly: *What's the point of running for your life if you're just gonna let something else kill you?*

The boy takes a small plate of food and sits as far from her as he can get.

"Did you sleep okay?" she asks.

He shrugs.

"Bad dreams?"

He thinks ... then shakes his head.

"That's good." She tries to sound bright and upbeat. Tries not to think about her own nightmare. Distracts herself with a cheese danish.

They eat in silence.

“You’re still mad about the blanket?” she asks the boy.

“And the book,” he grumbles around a mouthful of toast.

“Right.”

He needs to take a bath. Or a shower? Do kids his age take showers? She has no idea. But he’s filthy from his time hiding in bushes, and there’s undoubtedly dried blood-spray all over him, too. Can he do it himself? Does she need to help? So much she doesn’t know about a kid this age—hell, about a kid at *any* age. She’s almost relieved he can handle solid food.

She’s also got to tell him about the plan.

She decides to start there.

“Hey, um ... you know we’re safe here, right?”

He looks up at her. Listening, weighing what she’s saying.

“This is a big, safe place, full of people. No one can find us here. Not even doggy noses.”

After a pause, he says, “Okay.” It sounds like he believes her.

“So, all we gotta do is hang out for a little bit, wait for ... for what’s chasing us to be caught, and then...”

She trails off. “And then” is still a mystery to her, too. She *does* know it’ll involve them staying at this hotel for as long as it takes. Considering what happened to Margie, there’s no way Jess is going to risk going to her mom’s place.

“Unfortunately, that means you and I are going to get to know each other real well. So, I hope you’ll stop being mad at me soon. But that’s okay. I’m not going to rush you. I respect your, y’know ... your boundaries.”

Another pause. Then he nods. “Okay.”

“Okay. Can I finally get your name, maybe? I should probably know your name if we’re going to try to be friends, right?”

He gets up and makes himself another plate of food from the array laid out on the hotel room’s table.

“I don’t know,” he says at last, sitting back down.

“You don’t know if friends know each other’s names?!” She feels like she’s on a children’s show, playacting incredulousness. Trying too hard. “They totally do! I know all my friends’ names! And I already told you mine, remember? I’m—”

“I don’t *know*,” he says, irritated.

It takes her a second to process what he means. “You don’t know ... your name?”

He shrugs, pays more attention to his plate.

“How is that possible? You’ve gotta know your name.”

“Daddy never uses it,” he says, “so I just ... don’t remember.”

“That’s the saddest fucking thing I’ve ever heard.” It’s out of her mouth before she can stop it. The kid doesn’t seem offended, though. He just gives another shrug and tries a grape. Jess puts her Kids’ Show Happy Face back on. “Well, okay! I could *give* you a name in the meantime, if you want. Maybe it’ll jog your memory. Is there a name you’ve always liked? Tyler? Matt? Batman? Super Duper Mega Pooper?”

He shakes his head.

Ouch. Not even a smile.

A familiar low tremor in her stomach—that hardwired desperation to make her audience like her, even if it’s just an audience of one. Old habits, she supposes. But also, if they’re going to be stuck together for the time being, the idea that it’ll be in tension makes her all itchy.

Come on, kid, work with me here. I’m fucking fun.

“Okay. Well, how about for now I just call you *kiddo*. That okay?”

He nods. A slightly more engaged nod, so that’s something.

She eats a few forkfuls of rubbery eggs. Funny, they tasted good a few seconds ago.

She clears her throat. Takes a sip of coffee. Not looking forward to this next part. “Anyway, listen, kiddo. There’s a lot we’ve got to talk about and a lot we’ve got to figure out. But first ... How comfortable would you be hanging out here if I went to run a quick errand?”

“An Aaron?”

“Errand. It’s like a task. A ... a *thing*. Just a quick thing I have to do. I guess I could also pick up some new clothes for us, too. Or we could order some online to be delivered, I dunno, I’m thinking out loud here.” She shakes her head, starting over. “Something happened to me last night, before I met you, and I just need to make sure I’m okay. *We’re* safe. I just gotta make sure *I’m* safe, too. From this *other* thing. Unrelated.”

He stares at her blankly. She has no idea if she’s making any sense. She presses on.

“I’ll only be gone for a little bit. I did a little googling—”

“What’s googling?”

“Uh.” She thinks about how to best explain it. “Jesus.”

“What’s Jesus?”

“Never mind. I did some *research*. I found a place I can go that’s only like ten minutes away. It’s early enough that there shouldn’t be a line either, so I bet I can be in and out in, like, thirty or forty minutes tops. I’ll just need you to wait here and behave and not, y’know ... do anything. Is that okay? Can I ask you to do that?”

Already, this plan, the prospect of going back out into the world, fills her with low, simmering terror. As much as she needs medical attention—and soon, according to all the websites—she almost hopes the kid says no. Instead, he hops down from his seat and goes back to look at the food.

“Kay,” he says. “Not doing anything is pretty much all I ever do.”

That makes her chest cramp with a feeling she can’t quite define. Disappointment? Pity? Sadness? Relief?

“Great. Thanks, kiddo.” She has the urge to reach out and tousle his hair. Then she stops herself. “We also gotta get you clean. How do you normally get clean? Do you take baths or—”

“No, no, no!” He whips his eyes to her, shaking his head forcefully, the most emotional reaction she’s gotten out of him yet this morning. “No baths!”

“Okay, so what—”

“Daddy uses the shower on me. I don’t like baths. The hole...”

She laughs. She can’t help it—he looks so horrified. “I get it. Worried you’ll get sucked down, right?”

The kid doesn’t respond to that, but she senses—or perhaps imagines—he’s holding back a memory he doesn’t want to talk about.

“That’s okay,” she assures him. “Totally normal fear. I had it, too. Okay, we’ll use the shower. If you’re okay with that.”

“Okay.”

“Cause you’re filthy, kid. Ya gross.”

“I am?”

He looks down at himself.

Something about the way he’s standing in the light, she feels like he looks even filthier than he did a moment ago.

“Yeah, buddy. But that’s okay, we’ll take care of that as soon as I get

back. First, I just need to go do ... a thing.”

“An Aaron.”

She bites back the urge to say that she has an ex-boyfriend named Aaron and he definitely revealed himself to be a *thing* she wouldn’t ever be doing ever again.

Stop trying so goddamn hard, Jess. Ease up. Inner Jess, resuming her usual role before her dad died, as comedy critic.

She really should just get this over with. Rip it off, Band-Aid style. They’re a good distance from both her apartment and Margie’s place—the crime scenes, she realizes—so if anyone or anything is looking for them, they should be far enough away for now. Just a quick blood test and the results can hit her email inbox while she and this weird-ass kid hunker down and wait for the shitstorm to pass.

One more thing occurs to her.

“Shoot. Before I go, I should see...”

She grabs the remote and turns on the room’s medium-size flat-screen TV. She flips to the first local news channel she can reach.

The “bear attack” is still the top story. Understandably, since, in the sane world, it only occurred like five or six hours ago. The anchors seem equal parts baffled and bloodthirsty about the event. An animal expert is scheduled to appear next, to assuage the public’s fears ... but not so much that they feel it’s safe to change the channel.

Down by the news crawl, there’s an on-screen graphic of a grizzly, rearing in attack mode. Looking at it, Jess is struck by how little it actually resembles what she saw last night.

No mention by the anchors of any “accomplice,” though. No mention of Margie either. Jess realizes with a sinking sensation that Margie might not even have been discovered yet.

Oh god, her son. Someone’s going to have to tell—

She forces those thoughts away for now, as well as the nauseating guilt that comes with them. Tries to find a little solace in the fact that her own name isn’t being mentioned on the news. Neither is the cop she shot. For the first time, she starts to consider that maybe the scene was so chaotic, they might not even really *know* what she did.

She’s about to turn the TV off when she hears the boy ask in a hushed, awestruck voice:

“What is *that*?”

She follows his gaze. He’s staring at the screen the way someone might stare at a UFO blotting out the sky.

“What, the TV? You don’t know what TV is?”

“TV...” He gets even closer, puts his hand on the screen. “What is it?”

“It’s a ... box, obviously. A screen. And it ... shows stories.”

“How does it work?”

“Uh ... Do you know what a camera is? Photos? Pictures?”

He thinks, then nods. “Daddy has pictures of Mommy.” The word comes out *pitchers*.

“Well, there are also cameras that take *moving* pictures of people. Moving and talking. And the TV plays those kinds of pictures so you can watch them. Like stories.”

She flips through the channels.

“See? These are all stories you can watch. Some are boring, some are trying to sell you stuff, some are true stories, some are not-true stories. It’s like books, right? I know you know what books are.”

“But with pictures?” He takes the remote from her and copies what she did.

“Yeah, like picture books that can move.”

That makes him stop. “Are there other *books* with pictures, too?”

“Of course—wait, did your daddy not let you have any picture books?”

“No.”

Her jaw somehow drops even farther. “What?!”

“Daddy has his own books, but they don’t have pictures. And he has newspapers, which I guess has pictures, but I’m not allowed to look at them, and he burns them up as soon as he’s done.”

She makes a few baffled, staccato noises. Holy shit, maybe his daddy is an *actual* monster after all. Who doesn’t let a little kid have a book or two?

“Kiddo! Is *that* why you were so upset when we lost the last one? I’ll take you to a Barnes & Noble and blow your mind! Don’t ask what that is; I wanna show you.”

A huge smile stretches across his face, erasing the unnatural decades he’d been wearing. The greediest parts of Jess drink it up.

He looks back at the screen. Keeps flipping channels. Starts bouncing on his feet a little. “It’s amazing.”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

Something about the look on his face, the feeling in the room—she could almost cry. His joy is so unalloyed. She’s smiling, too.

He lands on a relatively recent episode of *Law & Order*, and before he can flip away, she stops him. They watch for a couple of seconds, then she grumbles in disgust. “Ugh, they gave it to *her*?” The boy looks at her. “Sorry. I auditioned for that role, the bartender there. Never watched the final scene.”

“Auditioned?”

“Hoo boy. Yeah. I’m an actor, I . . . How do I explain it? I’m one of the people on the TV sometimes. I help make TV shows.”

He looks astonished. “*Really?*”

“Yeah, *really*. I’m super famous, didn’t you know?”

She says it dryly, almost defeatedly. But the way he looks at her, she can tell her sarcasm hasn’t quite landed.

“What’s famous?”

She should stop there.

She doesn’t.

“Oh, y’know, just that *everybody* knows me and loves my work and—”

“You mean like a slebrity!” He bounces up and down again, excited to use a word he’s obviously never had occasion to use before.

“Yes, exactly!”

His brow knits a little. “Daddy says celebrities are...” He searches for a second, trying to remember the exact wording. “Stupid bottom-feeders.”

“Damn. Well, your daddy can”—she stops herself from saying *eat my entire asshole*—“be a real jerkbag. As we’ve established. Do I look like a stupid bottom-feeder to you?”

He considers, shakes his head, smirking a little at the heresy of someone calling his daddy a *jerkbag*.

“Thank you! No, I make people happy!” She dials up her exaggerated oh-so-fancy voice even further. “I tell them *stories* and *entertain* them, and that’s why they all want *photos* of me, and my *autograph*. They bring me *cool gifts*.” She gestures to their food, to the hotel room, as if her mom wasn’t paying for all this. “I’m a pretty big deal, kiddo! So, see? You should be *happy* you and me are together! You pretty much hit the jackpot!”

“Okay!” he says. And for the first time this morning, he seems like he’s actually glad to be in her company. “What’s a jackbot?”

She lets that question go unanswered. Embarrassment has won a tug-of-war inside her. She can feel herself turning red.

“Awright, enough surfing. Let’s find you a good babysitter.”

He gives up the remote, and she flips through the channels, looking for something fun he can watch while she’s gone.

Nick Jr. and Disney are both showcasing loud and obnoxious preteens screeching at each other in Dutch angles. The kid recoils when she lands on them, which she supposes makes sense considering how little stimulation he’s used to receiving.

More hyperactive crap on another channel—this one animated, which causes the boy to make a confused grunting noise. Based on his expression, he doesn’t like what he’s seeing, so she keeps searching. She lands on a show that features a freakish CGI baby of some kind, all giant eyes and one huge tooth. Another one where adult faces poke out of huge, foam Mother Goose costumes.

“Yeesh, are these terrifying,” Jess says, shuddering.

She resigns herself to going back to find the least unsettling programming, but then passes a cable channel currently playing a familiar movie from the late ’80s—the one about the cartoon rabbit and the hard-boiled human detective. Jess squeals.

“Oh, man! You ever seen *this*? No, what am I saying, of course you haven’t. This movie is so cool. See? It’s people *and* cartoon characters. I’ll tell you all about cartoon characters later. But isn’t that awesome?”

His eyes are wide as saucers. Mind officially blown.

“Oh yeah,” she says proudly. “I used to love this movie when I was a kid. Haven’t seen it in decades, but I was *obsessed*.”

The movie is already underway, humans and cartoon characters arguing and banging each other with mallets—but despite all that, it’s still roughly a bajillion times less frenetic than whatever shows were on the purportedly kid-friendly channels. Jess knows she should probably go back and to the more “age-appropriate” stations, but, hey, she watched this movie a hundred times over when she was young and turned out okay. Not like it could scar him any worse than the things they saw yesterday. Plus, she always imagined in the astronomically unlikely event that she ever had a kid, she’d want to raise it to be cool, to have good taste. Here’s her chance to contribute to future generations.

It actually takes a good amount of effort for her to tear her own attentions from the screen. Maybe, if her errand is as quick as she hopes, she'll be able to watch the last chunk of the movie with him.

"I'll be right back, okay? Don't worry, don't let anyone inside, and just ... don't do anything."

He nods distantly, rapt with the images on the screen.

This is perfect, she thinks. He's going to love this. He won't even notice I'm gone.

She's right; he doesn't even glance her way as she leaves.



16

A familiar refrain settles into her head as soon as she steps out into the hallway. The one she heard while sneaking back to her apartment to grab her car keys, or driving to Poppy's to retrieve her phone.

Gonna die, gonna die, gonna die.

As before, she does her best to ignore it.

The events of last night feel just far enough away—physically and emotionally—for her to function. She knows it won't stay this way for long, emotionally speaking at least, but for now, she's actually kind of proud of herself for taking care of what needs to be done.

For some reason, that causes her chest to ache again. That powerful, irrational feeling of wanting, *needing*, to protect the strange little boy in her custody. Even though he baffles her. Even though she has no idea what to do with him.

Her sense of purpose is helped by the fact that it's a gloriously sunny morning. The kind made for keeping thoughts of death at bay. Despite it being early October, it's almost beach weather, and any odd autumnal decorations seem almost laughably anachronistic.

Traffic is a little gnarly. People living their California lives, unaware that there are actual monsters out there. *That could be the state's motto*, she thinks.

She figured a health clinic is better than an ER since they can't admit her. Google said the nearest clinic is ten minutes away; she pulls into the parking lot in fifteen.

Only two people already sit in the clinic's lobby, waiting to be seen by a doctor, each staring off into their own personal middle distance.

A young woman sits behind the desk. She smiles as Jess walks in.

Her smile twitches a little after Jess pulls off her hat and sunglasses. The woman's eyes go wide. Almost as wide as the boy's, seeing that movie.

"Oh!" the woman says, then reorients herself. Sits up straighter. "Sorry! Hi! Um, how can I, we, help you?"

First day? Jess thinks bemusedly. Then, out loud:

"I need to get, like, a full blood test. Last night, I was—"

The receptionist stops her with a quiet, almost embarrassed laugh. "You can explain all that to the doctor in private. Is this your ... um, first time coming to one of our locations? Here's a new patient form."

She clumsily hands Jess a clipboard with some paperwork on it, knocking over a little skeleton doctor figurine holding a card that reads, *Have a Happy HEALTHween*. As she rights it, she adds:

"Also, I know I shouldn't say this, I wouldn't normally, but ... I'm really sorry, I can't help it. I am *such* a huge fan."

Now it's Jess's turn to blink. "Huh?"

The receptionist cringes and covers her face. "Sorry! Forget I said anything! I just couldn't help myself. I love your work and—"

"My work?"

The receptionist is crying a little now. Actually *crying*. "I'm sorry! Sorry. I can't believe I just embarrassed myself like that in front of you, I mean, people must do this all the time and—"

"No, no," Jess says, brow knit in total confusion. "Don't ... don't worry about it. Go ... drink some water or something."

She takes her form and sits down in the mostly empty seating area.

What. The. Fuck. Was *that*?

Jess tries to concentrate on her form. A sudden realization: maybe she should use a fake name, fake address. The cops might have some sort of APB out on her (not that she really knows what that is). Shit. She pulls out her phone, starts the process of setting up a new Gmail ... then stops.

The receptionist is staring.

When Jess looks up, the receptionist's eyes dart away.

Whispering pulls Jess's attention over to the two strangers in the waiting area. Jess had no impression they were there together, but now they're leaning toward each other, over the chairs between them, talking quietly. She can't tell what they're saying, but Jess thinks she hears the words, "That IS her."

Is ... is she being pranked? Is her luck really *that* bad? After all that happened yesterday, has she wandered into a taping of a *Punk'd* reboot or something?

Dread settles at the pit of her stomach. Something isn't right. She shouldn't have left the safety of the hotel room.

Gonna die, gonna die—

No. Just being paranoid. Focus.

She decides on a fake name—the name of the character she played in that pilot she'd filmed; no one will recognize *that*—then sets up a dummy email account and starts filling out her forms.

A few minutes later, she hands it to the still beet-red receptionist.

"We'll make sure you get seen right away," the receptionist says in a choked voice.

"Awesome," Jess grunts and sits back down.

There's a TV mounted on one of the walls, playing some talk show or whatever. Jess tries to give it her attention, but the smiles and banter seem demented, a pantomime put on by aliens making fun of the human race.

The show cuts to commercial. More products for an insane world Jess no longer feels a part of. No mention of what to do about those pesky shape-shifting monsters or slaughtered friends or strange little boys with ice-chip eyes and no name.

A shape-shifter? Is that what we think that was last night?

Maybe, she answers herself. Seems impossible in the light of day, but ... *Maybe ...*

She's so wrapped up in her thoughts that it barely registers when, rather than go back to the talk show, the commercials segue to a news desk.

A handsome reporter with breaking news. Inside sources report that the location of last night's bear attack wasn't just some random apartment complex.

"It was the North Valley home of beloved icon Jessa Rae Bailey," he says to camera, and on the screen is *her* picture.

Jess bolts to her feet. "The fuck?!"

All the eyes inside the clinic are on her. She can even feel stares coming from the back rooms, the doctors and nurses.

Ignoring everyone, she slowly approaches the TV, hoping what she's looking at is just a hallucination. But no, that's her picture—one of the

“dramatic” options from her most recent round of expensive headshots.

The reporter continues, saying now that Ms. Bailey’s been identified, police are actively trying to get in touch with her for questioning.

Peripherally, Jess notices one of the patients in the waiting area—a middle-aged man—has stood, too. He nervously approaches.

“Jess?” he asks. “Jess, I’m sorry, but could I ask you for a photo? It would mean so much to my daughter.”

The other patient is on the phone, texting away. Their camera comes up in a not-so-subtle gesture, pointing at Jess.

Jess looks over and sees the receptionist is also on the phone, covering the mouthpiece with one hand. “You’ll never guess who’s in here right now,” she’s saying.

“*What the fuck?!*” Jess says again, louder but somehow with less oxygen.

Screeching outside. Through the front windows, Jess sees a van speed into the parking lot, way too fast for someone visiting a health clinic. It ignores all the lines painted over the asphalt and instead pulls to a halt at an angle near the entrance to the building.

“Please, Jess! My daughter, she worships you! It’ll just take a sec.”

Jess looks past the imploring stranger and sees that doctors and nurses have emerged from the back rooms, eyeing her hungrily.

She turns back to the window. Men wearing cargo shorts and hoisting cameras pour out of the van.

Jess lunges for the door, yanks it open. The health clinic patient follows her.

“Okay, I lied, it’s *me!* I worship you! Please, just one photo! I promise I’m not sick or anything! I just have a foot fungus!”

The men with cameras are also shouting her name as she runs past them to her car.

“Jess!”

“JESS!”

“Do you have a minute to talk to us?”

“*JESS! PLEASE!*”

She fumbles with the keys to Margie’s car, thanks god for the keyless unlocking button on the attached fob. Once she’s inside the car, hands slap against the windows, trying to get her attention. The bright lights of cameras cover her like a lecher’s breath.

“Jess!” They’re clamoring as one. “Jess! Over here! Can we—? Jess!”

She turns over the engine, peels her car into a fishhook turn, nearly taking out whatever idiots approached her from behind. Hopefully, they managed to get out of the way. Otherwise, *Film at 11:00: Impossible Celebrity Runs Over Paparazzi with Murdered Woman’s Station Wagon*.

She tears out of the parking lot and speeds back to the hotel, no longer finding comfort in the workaday traffic, now desperately wanting to be alone, to hide and never come back out again.

The “Gonna dies” have been replaced by another refrain. Now it’s the one she heard after leaving Poppy’s bathroom in a daze.

What the fuck, what the fuck, what the FUCK?

She’s still got Margie’s baseball cap and sunglasses, so when she finally gets back to the hotel, she hopes she looks generic enough as she runs into the lobby. She tries not to call attention to herself, tries to slow her gait and not appear like she’s a woman beset by a cloud of bees.

The hotel clerk is gaping at her all the same.

“What?” Jess snaps, waiting for the elevator, stabbing the button with a vengeance.

“Nothing,” the clerk, a twentysomething blonde, responds. Then, after a beat: “I just ... I’m a big fan.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Jess snarls, pressing the elevator button harder. Maybe she needs to run to the stairs?

“I want you to know,” the hotel clerk adds sheepishly, “I didn’t tip them off, Jess. It was one of the other clerks, I swear!”

Them? Oh, fuck, did someone here let the police know where she was? Jess wants to round on the young woman and scream her into pieces, but the elevator doors finally open, and instead, Jess practically throws a family of four out of the car, one by one, like heavy luggage from a struggling plane.

They squawk in outrage ... until they see who just manhandled them. All four family members fumble for their phones, cooing with love and apology to the idol who just deigned to abuse them.

As the elevator doors close around her, Jess sees a tide of strangers hurrying into the hotel lobby, looking for someone.

Looking for her.

She gets to her floor, explodes out of the elevator, hurries down the winding, carpeted hallway to her room.

Behind her, she hears other elevators and the stairwell doors open, a clamoring crowd shouting her name, the shutters of camera apps clicking. *How is this happening?!*

She reaches her hotel room door, hoping to slip in before they see which room is hers. Where's her keycard? She pats her pockets, forgetting where she put it. Fuck, fuck!

Finally, she digs it out, only for her shaking hands to drop it to the carpet. As she picks it up, she hears the crowd rounding the corner. They see her. "Jess! JESS! JESS!!" They pick up speed, volume, hunger.

She hurls herself into her hotel room just as they reach the door, knocking and pounding against the wood while she activates every lock available.

Her pulse hammers against her throat. But she can finally catch her breath now that she's alone.

Wait.

Why is she alone?

The door does little to muffle her pursuers' voices, but she's suddenly aware of how quiet it is in here.

The TV is off ... and where is the boy?

"Hey," she whispers. "Hey! Where are you?"

He's not where she left him, sitting on the bed. He's not in the chair. He's not at the window.

She steps farther into the room, away from the door that vibrates with pleas for her to please come outside and please talk, please, just for a minute, just a few questions.

"Hey!" She tries to keep her voice down, as if the paparazzi will forget she's in here.

Where the fuck is the kid?

The bathroom door is shut—is he in there? Maybe. But the bathroom door is too close to the room's front door, so she checks the rest of the room first.

She crouches down and checks under the bed.

There he is. Curled in a ball and sucking his thumb.

She pulls him out. "What's going on? What were you doing under there?"

From outside: "*Jess! Please, just a few questions!*"

"The TV people," the little boy says. "I got scared."

"The what?"

He points to the TV. "They were *scary*." His eyes shine with tears. "I had

to make them go away.”

A dim realization: that movie *does* get a little scary, doesn’t it? Fuck. She traumatized him. Oh, well, no time to talk about that now. The hands on the other side of the door become more insistent.

“Jess! Jess, come on out and talk to us! Jess!”

She tries to keep the panic from her voice. “Something is going on, and I don’t know what or how—they won’t leave me alone, I can’t—I *don’t know what’s happening.*”

“Jess, can’t we just get a picture? Just a few photos, Jess!”

He looks at her, not understanding why she’s so upset.

“But you’re a slebrity,” he says. As if it’s the most obvious answer in the world. As if he can’t fathom her confusion. “They want your picture.”

She blinks at him. “What? I’m not...”

The two of them stare at each other.

“But you *said*,” the boy insists.

A vague clicking in her mind. Impossible, inchoate connections being made.

“Jess! Come on, please! Jess, is it true your apartment was the scene of the bear attack last night?”

Something about his blank-faced confusion at her confusion. Something about his ice-chip eyes. She asks the boy: “Are you...? Did you make this happen somehow?”

“Jess, why are you living in an apartment anyway? Are you having money problems?”

Still not fully understanding, feeling like her mind is about to tear out of her skull and float into the sun, she grabs the boy by his shoulders.

“If you’re doing this, I was just kidding! Understand? I’m not famous, I’m not a celebrity, I was just joking! If you’re doing this, you gotta make them go away. MAKE THEM GO AWAY!”

She’s shaking him—not trying to hurt him, just emphasizing her words—and now he’s telling her to stop, too. “You’re—hurting—me!”

“Jess! Jess! Please!”

“I’M NOT A FUCKING CELEBRITY! MAKE THIS STOP, PLEASE!”

She lets him go. His face curdles with confusion and disgust. His lower lip trembles, and huge tears gather inside his eyes.

But the tumult outside has stopped.

Jess hurries to the peephole. The reporters and photographers and whoever else they might be are standing outside, looking at each other like, *What the hell did we come here for?* As one, they begin to slowly disperse back down the hallway, grumbling in low, irritated tones, as if they were just told the club they were trying to enter was at capacity.

“Thank you,” she exhales to no one in particular, leaning her head against the door. Her entire body is shaking. “Jesus. Thank you.” She sinks to the floor, exhausted. Then she looks at the kid. The expression on his face ...

“Daddy says liars are the worst people. You’re a *liar*.” He spits the word at her like it’s a slur he’s just worked up the nerve to say out loud.

“What?” she manages, genuinely confused for a moment. “I’m not a liar, I just ... lied.” Too disoriented to muster anything more substantial as a defense. “I was just playing. Trying to make you happy. Adults do that sometimes. I’m ... sorry?”

They stare at each other. It takes a few more seconds for the reality of what might’ve just happened to thud into her.

“Wait. What just happened? How did you make—?”

“I don’t want to talk to you,” he says and angrily climbs into a chair.

Annoyance bordering on fury surges inside her. *We’ve got more urgent matters here than your butt-hurt feelings, kid.* Now that she thinks of it, shaking him felt good. She wants to do it again. Harder this time. She fights the impulse.

“Can we just ... start over? Please? We need to talk about this. How did that—? What did you—?” She makes a half dozen attempts at beginning a word, any word, but can’t quite figure out what to say. He won’t look at her anyway.

She glances at the TV, tries a different tactic. “I’m really sorry that movie was scary. I didn’t mean to leave you with a scary movie—I remember it being fun.”

“It *wasn’t!*” He sulks.

“Okay, but I said I was sorry,” she says through gritted teeth. “You should accept people’s apologies.”

“Not liars’,” he replies.

She forces her fists to unclench, then sighs. “I feel like I’m gonna fucking pass out. I need some water or something.”

She heads over to the bathroom door, puts her hand on the knob to open it.

Suddenly, the boy screams, “DON’T!”

Just as she turns the knob, it’s ripped out of her hands with a force that makes her fall forward onto her hands and knees.

She lands in the bathroom, and a shadow falls over her.

The wolf’s come home, she thinks wildly.

But when she looks up, it’s not the wolf.

Standing in the bathroom is a man in a long black suit, with a small sprig of white hair on his egg-shaped head.

Holy shit, that’s what’s-his-name from Back to the Future. Christopher Lloyd.

But his eyes ... oh god, his eyes ...

“No!” she hears the kid shrieking. “Don’t let them out!”

Flanking the actual movie star are two anthropomorphic weasels in garish yellow zoot suits. They’re holding gigantic knives and hooting with ghoulish delight, and they fall on Jess before she can draw breath to scream.



17

I'm not seeing this, Jess thinks. *This is impossible. I'm not seeing this.*

She shoves herself onto her butt, then rabbit-kicks at her assailants. Impossible or not, her feet connect with solid mass, and the two weasels fly backward.

As quickly as she can, Jess scuttles out of the bathroom. The weasels are undaunted; they hoot and holler and bounce up and down, slapping each other with towels, getting caught in the shower curtain.

Christopher Lloyd continues to loom over her. Only, no, it's not Christopher Lloyd, it's his character from that fucking movie, his name escapes her, but it's really *him*.

And his eyes are bright and wild and malevolent ... and animated.

Actually animated.

Same with the weasels. They're cartoons. *Actual fucking cartoons*—two-dimensional drawings, colored with bright, garish yellows and reds and browns, outlined in black—but here in the hotel room, in the real world, with them.

Her brain cramps in agony, trying to process it.

They don't look *exactly* like the characters from the movie, more like they've passed through a round or two of Telephone and are somebody's memory of the characters. Little details are off, the angles are wrong. But not as wrong as their existence.

The kid continues to shout, "I saw them on the TV and they scared me and then they came out of the TV and I trapped them in the bathroom and *you let them out!*"

Jess manages to get to her feet, but her legs shake. She really might pass out or piss herself or, most likely, both.

Not-Christopher-Lloyd takes a step forward, and she realizes he's flat as a pancake, walking in that horribly uncanny way that only now she's remembering *did* terrify her when she was little. Why did she—did anyone—think this movie was safe for kids?

The weasels hiss and growl and circle around his legs.

"Oh, we're gonna get you good," one says in a high, nasal sneer.

"We're gonna *fuck. You. Up,*" says the other—with a certain relish that can only be found in finally being able to curse without the constraints of the MPAA.

The tall man in black just smiles. Lips straining toward his earlobes.

Jess steals a desperate look to the kid. He's standing between the bed and the wall.

"Where ya gonna go?" one of the weasels taunts.

"Nowhere to run," its partner adds.

Jess tries to keep her distance, nearly trips over the bed, then crawls over the mattress to the other side. She's with the kid now, with the bed between them and the three characters.

"Can you crawl under the bed and get to the door?" she asks the boy. He nods. "Do it when I say, okay?"

One of the weasels jumps on the bed, waving its massive knife in her face. As it lunges toward her, Jess grabs its wrist and throws it as hard as she can into the nearest wall. Its mass is solid and real, but still strangely cold and flat, and she feels another part of her sanity flake away.

"Oooh, you drippy little slit-for-brains." The other weasel begins to approach.

"Go!" she whispers to the kid. She grabs the comforter off the bed and whips it over the cartoon abomination. Having it out of her sight does her mind a host of good.

Then she hears a high-pitched whirring that makes her eyes water.

The man in black is still here, grinning as if this is all going according to plan.

And his hands have turned into buzz saws.

He waves them leisurely back and forth, turning chunks of the wall, the bedposts, into particle sprays. Jess can taste the excruciating sound of the blades in her fillings.

Meanwhile, there's only one way out of this room.

She waits until the blades are busy tearing into the walls again before she jumps onto the bed. At the same time, the kid emerges from underneath and runs toward the door.

The man's awful cartoon eyes fall on her as she launches herself forward.

He's close. Too close. But she's got too much momentum to stop or redirect herself, so when her feet touch down on the carpet, all she can do is try to duck as she runs past him.

The next thing she knows, she's sprawled on the ground, her back on fire.

He got me! Oh god, he got me. She can feel where the serrated edge of his saw ate into the muscles between her shoulder blades.

"No!" the kid screams.

"Go!" Jess manages. "Hurry!"

No time to wonder how badly she's hurt. She forces herself up, feeling hot, *real* blood gushing out of her, hearing the whine of the saws.

Please open the door, kid, please open the door.

But there are too many locks. She scrambles up next to the kid and disengages everything, the buzz saw buzzing what sounds like inches away from their backs, and then she yanks the door open, and together Jess and the kid flail out into the hallway. She runs out so quickly that she slams into the opposite wall and hisses in pain. She glances back into her room just as the one weasel cuts himself free from the blanket and the other pulls out a massive tommy gun from his coat pocket.

The man in black's bendy legs give him almost a floating, ethereal vibe as he steps leisurely after them, blades carving gashes into the hallway walls.

"That way," she gasps to the kid, indicating the elevator bank. The kid runs, and she lurches after him.

A few of the paparazzi types are still milling around in the hall, probably comparing notes, trying to understand their earlier furor. They turn to look at the noise.

"Oh," one of them says derisively. "There she is."

Another one pulls out a recording device and points it at her. "Jess, right?" he asks as if in the process of forgetting her name. "Care to comment on why you defrauded the public? Anything you want to—"

"Run!" she yells at him as she shoves past him.

"What the hell?" one of his companions grunts.

The cartoon weasels burst out of her room, bouncing off the walls with

manic glee.

The weasel with the tommy gun fires at the reporters. Large, cartoon bullets fly out of the barrel, each with huge eyes and hungry mouths. The bullets scream, “Bang! Bang!” in a gruff, raspy voice, and when they reach their target—in this case, the reporter who was holding his device out to Jess—they use their mouths to chew the guy to shreds. The reporter shrieks in agony while the large, blue-black bullets swarm him, tearing him apart one gory bite at a time. Blood arcs across the walls.

One of the other reporters turns just as the second weasel, the one with the giant knife, falls on her, swinging the blade back and forth like an Amazon explorer hacking through heavy vines. The reporter barely gets an “Oof!” out before the knife opens up her belly, spilling an uncoiling mass of organs onto the floor.

A third reporter backs against a wall, eyes wide, gibbering madly, tearing ragged troughs into his cheeks with his fingernails, unable to process what he’s seeing.

The flat, loping man in black puts a merciful end to the reporter’s mental torment with a swipe of a shrieking buzz saw. The reporter’s face slides to the floor, leaving a neatly bisected skull to gawp in surprise.

The door to another room is ripped open by a hotel guest—an old man who sticks his shiny, bald head out into the hallway. “Excuse me! What in god’s name is going on out here?”

The weasel flicks a huge switch on his tommy gun, and a green, putrid-looking fluid sprays out of the barrel, all over the old man.

Jess and the boy have just made it to the elevators. She looks back down the hallway, not wanting to see but unable to stop herself. The old man’s skin makes a Pop-Rocks-on-the-tongue sort of sizzling, and before his screams can reach their highest pitch of agony, his body dissolves into a puddle of restless, red liquid that spreads across the carpet.

The animated weasels cackle and hoot in delight, bouncing around the corpses. But the man in black only has eyes for Jess and the boy.

“*Fun movie, isn’t it?*” he calls out, his voice a helium-distorted shriek. He starts down the hallway toward them. “*Great for kids!*”

The boy jabs the elevator buttons, but Jess knows all too well how slow they can be.

“Stairs!” She points to a door nearby. “There!”

The boy runs for the door. Jess goes to follow, but the pain in her back is so great that, for a moment, she has to hold on to the wall.

Unfortunately, the boy has just enough of a head start that by the time she also makes it into the stairwell, she sees with horror that he's doing the one thing he shouldn't.

He's running up the stairs instead of down them.

"No! Not that way!" she calls after him. His footsteps and his panicked breaths—and his naive instincts to find safety with height—are too loud. He keeps running.

She stands there, frozen, unsure what to do. Run down without him? Try to draw their pursuers away from him?

And then keep running, a voice urges. Get as far away as you can.

She really *could* do that. Run down to the parking lot, leave all this madness behind.

This might be your last chance to get away, Jess.

But she finds herself running up the stairs for the boy all the same. She's not going to abandon him. She can't. Something in her won't allow it.

Besides, there's no way to know she'd get far, even on her own. Might as well hope to find some sort of safety together. And to that end, an incomprehensible, impossible idea is starting to brew in her head. A notion of what might be happening. What might be *possible*.

Then she hears the boy opening the door to the roof above her and thinks, *Oh, you've fucked us, kiddo. You've fucked us big-time.*

A few moments later, she staggers out into the sunlight. The kid is standing a few feet away, looking around, realizing there's nowhere to go.

She hurries over to him, her back throbbing in agony.

"We're too high," he says, face pale. He's right. They're at least seven stories up. "How do we get down?"

Her idea occurs to her again. Her insane hypothesis forming under the terror. *No way. That'll never work. It can't.*

"Maybe they won't follow us this way," she says, winded from pain and effort. "Maybe they'll think we went downstairs."

The door to the roof bangs open. The flat, loping man in black steps out into the light. His cartoon details are even more unbearable to look at in the sun.

All the refrains singing together now: *gonna die what the fuck gonna die*

what the fuck

She backs the boy up toward the edge of the roof.

“What do we do?” the boy asks, terrified but also ready for anything.

“*What do we do?*”

Die up here, kid; that’s what we do.

But her idea ... Oh, god, what if it’s their only choice?

They’re at the edge now. Not-Christopher-Lloyd continues toward them, his buzz saw hands emitting high and frantic squeals of hunger. They can’t break around him—his arms stretch out across the entire expanse of the roof. Literally nowhere to go now.

Their only choice. Could be suicide, but there’s no other option.

“Hey,” she says to the kid, trying to sound as casual as possible, “it’s okay. All we’ve gotta do is jump.”

The boy gasps. “We’re too high!”

“No, we’re not.” She takes the boy’s head in her hands. Stares him in the eyes. “We’re *totally* not. Understand?” She speaks as firmly, as calmly, as *believably*, as possible. “All we have to do is fill our lungs up with so much air that we float down, right? Like a balloon? You’ve seen balloons?”

She watches the boy try to process this, try to decide if he should believe her.

Gonna die, she thinks. But the buzz saws are getting closer—that’s gonna be true either way if they don’t do something.

“It’ll work. I promise. People do it all the time. We’ll. Be. Okay. Okay?”

The boy nods.

The buzz saws fill the world.

Jess takes the boy’s hand, they take a huge breath together, and then step off the roof.



18

As they run to the car, all Jess can think is, *It worked. It worked. It worked.*

In one instant, they were leaping off the roof; the next, they were touching down painlessly onto the pavement, exhaling, and running for the parking lot.

It worked. It fucking worked.

And yet, despite this litany, despite the evidence literally under her feet ... she can't believe it.

Even as she shuts herself and the boy in the car, turns the engine over, throws the car in panicked reverse once again, she can't believe it. It's impossible. And yet.

It worked.

It worked!

But how?

Why?

Because. The kid *thought it would*.

Just like how the kid thought she was famous.

Just like ...

She turns in her seat to look behind them.

The half-animated, half-human movie character is still on the roof, waving his buzz saws at them, jabbering in outrage. His impossible two-dimensionality is no less jarring at this distance.

The kid made *that* thing happen, too.

Somehow.

The kid.

He's laughing in his seat. Legitimately relieved and delighted that they escaped.

She can feel laughter of her own bubbling up in her throat. Laughter she

dares not let out, in case it's as reedy and insane as she suspects it might be.

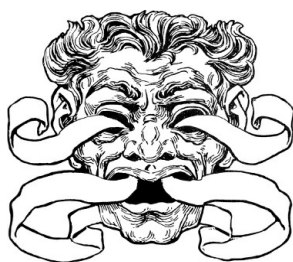
The danger recedes in the rearview mirror as they drive away. They're back on the open road again.

Her mind is white and slippery with terror. She's amazed she can drive so competently. She tries to steady herself, remind herself that they're alive, they escaped, they leaped off a goddamn roof and *survived*!

Her back is coated with blood—she can feel it pooling in her seat—but even her injury is miraculously not as bad as it could have been.

The danger is behind them.

And yet, for all they've managed to survive so far—she steals another glance at the kid, who's now attempting to buckle himself into his seat, mimicking what he saw her do earlier—Jess has a feeling she's never been this physically close to true danger in her entire life.



PART TWO

YES AND

Men fear death as children fear to go in the dark; and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other.

—Francis Bacon

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

—Franklin D. Roosevelt



19

A peculiar sensation insinuates itself across the back of Special Agent Michael Santos's neck. Almost like a faint tugging. Phantom fingers plucking at his skin. He reaches up with one hand to feel for the culprit.

Nothing's there, and, for the briefest of moments, he forgets everything.

Who he is. What he's doing. *Everything*.

Only that strange, itchy, sourceless sensation exists.

"Michael?"

Director Allen stares at him from across the desk.

Not good. Don't screw this up, Mickey.

Hearing his childhood nickname from his long-dead father brings it all back to Santos in an instant. Who he is. What he's doing. He gives his head a brisk shake.

"Sorry. Yes, I'm listening."

He's sitting on a small leather chair in a windowless office, deep in the bowels of the Hoover Building, being debriefed by Arthur Allen, director of Department 925. A department and a director he'd had no idea existed until about an hour ago ... but had always secretly hoped might find him.

"Good. Because here's where it gets weird."

"A rabid bear attack on an apartment complex isn't weird, sir?"

Director Allen smiles. He's an older man, trim, with a snowy push-broom mustache. There's something innately, essentially paternal about him, which makes Santos both like him and crave his approval. He suspects Allen knows he has this effect on people and uses his smiles strategically.

"A couple hours later, this happened." Allen pulls up a sound file on the tablet he's holding, then sets it on his desk.

A whispered voice, obviously too terrified to speak loudly, calling 911,

babbling, crying, saying they just saw what looked like a massive spider crawl out of a neighbor's house and chase after a car.

The 911 operator is, as always, impressively unimpressed, but Santos has never been so convinced he's hearing the sounds of someone having a nervous breakdown before. He can't even tell if the caller is a man or a woman, their voice is so corkscrewed with shock and fright.

Allen picks the tablet back up.

"Then, this morning in a hotel near Palm Springs, there was *this*."

When he puts the tablet back down, it's showing a video.

Santos feels himself sitting up straighter in his chair. Suddenly, the histrionics of that 911 caller make sense. Santos himself wants to start laughing and crying.

In a low-definition security feed, he's treated to a bird's-eye view of what appear to be two figures—two *animated* figures?—cavorting around a hallway, attacking several flesh-and-blood human beings. Santos can tell they're flesh and blood because flesh and blood is what they're reduced to, all over the hotel walls and floor.

He intends to ask if this is a joke, but as he opens his mouth, one of the hotel guests is sliced into chunks with a large, cartoonish blade. The blade almost looks like something out of a 16-bit video game, thanks to the low-quality feed, but what sprays across the hallway walls is unquestionably real.

No. This isn't a joke. If anything, he's glad the footage isn't high-def now. He watches in silence, then finally manages to speak.

"What ... what am I ... What is this...?"

Allen smiles again.

"Told you it gets weird."

★ ★ ★

Eighty-one minutes ago, Santos received a phone call from an unlisted number. He'd been working for the bureau long enough to know that unlisted calls weren't ones you wanted to ignore.

As luck would have it, he wasn't home, he was at the office, banging his head against the Wilkes Cartel case. Collating entity names and pass-throughs, combing through reams upon reams upon reams of bank statements.

No, scratch that. Luck had nothing to do with it. There's nothing lucky about his commitment to his work. A three-year greenhorn at the bureau, he's been clawing his way up the ladder, slowly and steadily, happy to take whatever menial grunt work he can find to act as another rung.

Some might say he's pathological. Santos prefers *ambitious*.

Given how Director Allen greeted him over the phone, Santos has also apparently made no effort to hide the kind of cases he'd really like to be investigating.

"I hear you've got a taste for the unusual, Santos," Allen said. "We've been looking for the right opportunity to give you a try."

The first time Santos had made himself known to his superiors was when he'd asked his current director, Lana Vaynburg, CID, for permission to investigate further into the death of one of their own: Special Agent Peter Arliss, the agent-turned-author-turned-minor-celebrity who'd singlehandedly stopped the perpetrator of the Easter Massacre in Arroyo, Arizona, several years back.

Arliss had been riding high on his never-ending book tour (now in paperback! now with a new afterword by the author! now a limited series from Hulu!) when one day, poof, he'd disappeared. Nothing in his house except for a mist of blood spray on the walls. Eerily similar to how he'd described the scene of the killer's final spree.

Santos had been convinced there was something unnatural about Arliss's disappearance. It was just too much of a coincidence. There'd also been a spate of incidents in New York City that somehow seemed related, too—random acts of bloodletting and disappearance without any traceable perpetrator.

He'd asked Director Vaynburg for permission to follow up. Vaynburg responded brusquely. "Sorry, Santos; that's beyond your pay grade."

Just a joke, right? Santos didn't think so. Vaynburg was notoriously not the joking type—she'd say no if no was all to be said. Santos took that as confirmation: those kinds of investigations were *somebody's* pay grade. There were other sides of the bureau to which he wasn't privy. Not yet, at least. Then and there, he decided to start poking around. Not obtrusively. Not in a way that might compromise his actual workload. Just a background interest in tracking wherever the weirder stuff landed, to see if the truth, so to speak, was out there.

Had he watched too much *X-Files* and *Twin Peaks* as a kid? Maybe. Had his poking around yielded any actual answers? Not really. But it also made sense to him that secretive departments would be made *even more* secretive in the wake of certain pop culture depictions.

Then came today's call from Director Arthur Allen of Department 925. Every other department and division in the bureau has a name. Acronyms. CTD, CD, OTD, LD, CIRG, CyD. But a department that's just a number? He'd never even thought to look for such a thing.

Even the name *Arthur Allen* seems designed to be overlooked, forgotten.

Santos had to fight sounding like he was smiling triumphantly as they finished up that phone call.



Now, in Director Allen's tiny, isolated office, Allen pulls out a crystal jar filled with what look like pink and white pills.

"Good and Plenty?" he offers Santos. Santos shakes his head, and, undeterred, Allen pops a few into his own mouth. "It's okay. Licorice isn't for everyone. Personally, I'm an addict." He holds one up. "You know one of the ingredients for the dye in this coating is made out of crushed-up beetle shells? Don't know why, but whenever I think of that, it always makes me crave them harder." A crunch comes from inside his cheeks. "Guess I'm into weird stuff, too. Anyway."

Allen continues his debrief, telling Santos how the hotel incident has been explained away. Carbon monoxide. A leak that resulted in a few deaths and many more hallucinations. The security footage has been commandeered; witnesses have been contained. Just another mundane tragedy in the waning days of the good ol' US of A.

Santos no longer feels like screaming. His feet have reappeared beneath him. Something about the crunching noise of candy has grounded him. He's excited again. Being here is what he's always wanted.

Finally, Santos says, "So, the bear attack, the 911 call, the hotel. I take it these three incidents are related?"

Allen leans back in his chair. His smile is gone. "How trustworthy are you, Santos?"

Santos wants to say something cool, smooth. All he can come up with in

the moment is, “Completely, sir. One hundred percent.”

After an interminable beat, Allen pops a few more Good & Plenty into his mouth and then pulls out a paper map. Southern California. Three dots where each incident took place. First, second, third.

“What do you see?”

Santos doesn’t hesitate. “Eastward movement. Whoever or whatever’s responsible for these events is moving east.”

Allen grants another proud papa smile. “That’s what we think, too.”

“But who’s doing it? Or ... what?”

“What I’m about to tell you is not just confidential. If you breathe a word of this sort of intel to someone unauthorized, you’re not getting a slap on the wrist. You’re losing the whole hand. And you’re gonna find your medical records changed to say you never had that hand to begin with. Like it never existed. Understand?”

“Am I authorized, sir?”

Allen gives an almost imperceptible nod. “Don’t get too excited, though. I’m about to tell you all I know, and it doesn’t fill a goddamn thimble.”

Santos’s imagination lights up like a slot machine hitting all sevens ... then, as Allen speaks, Santos feels that strange, faint tugging at the back of his neck again. It takes all his concentration to ignore it.

“Here’s what I know. I know the military has certain ... extracurricular projects. They were especially popular during the height of the war on terror. One in particular was called Project Albatross. I *don’t* know if that was always its name or if that’s what they started calling it after they decided they had no damn idea what to do with it. But it was up and running around the tail end of Afghanistan—before anybody knew it was the tail end of Afghanistan. I know it was voluntary. I know certain substances were administered to said volunteers. I know certain *enhancements* were attempted. ‘Make your brights brighter and your grunts grunter,’ that sorta stuff. And I know the project was eventually scuttled, so it was probably a bust. That’s where what I know ends. Until this man comes in.”

On the tablet, Allen flips to a photograph of a young man, probably late twenties. A soldier. Exhausted eyes already made inexpressive by the traumas of war.

“Peter Calvert. Sergeant first class. He was ending his third tour when he volunteered for the project. Maybe he needed the extra money. Maybe he

thought it would help him advance. Either way ... somebody screwed up. See, whatever was done to these soldiers, there was one side effect they were all supposed to exhibit—not that they were told this, of course. Anyone who signed up for Project Albatross was meant to be rendered sterile. Calvert's reproductive system apparently didn't get the memo. A few months later, he's sent home to his wife, and about a year after that, they have a kid. A son. Same name. So, 'Junior,' obviously."

"And this kid—?"

"Almost immediately, it was clear something was ... different about the baby. For a while, Calvert was a good soldier; he let military intelligence hold on to and monitor the kid."

More security footage, high and tight from the upper corner of a small institutional nursery, focusing on the room's single bassinet. The room isn't well lit—it must be nighttime. Or at least sleep time. The video feed isn't the highest resolution either, because there appears to be distortion happening in the solid blacks of the shadows around the perimeter of the room. The pixelated darkness shifts ever so subtly, like oil on the verge of boiling.

A nurse walks in to check on the baby.

Before she can make it to the bassinet, though, a black tentacle separates itself from the walls and wraps around her. There's no sound, but Santos imagines her screaming as she's pulled into the shadows. It wasn't low-resolution distortion after all—the darkness around the room was *alive*.

"She was okay," Allen says, chewing on some more candy. "Someone pulled her out of there pretty quick, and she was just shaken up. Another nurse wasn't so lucky."

More footage—a different day. The nursery has now been fitted with soft night-lights dotted across the floorboards, keeping the shadows at bay.

A nurse—apparently a different nurse; her back is to the camera, so it's not obvious—walks over to the bassinet. She moves without urgency, leading Santos to believe the baby must be asleep. The entire scene seems as peaceful and serene as security footage can seem.

Until the nurse leans over the bassinet.

After a few seconds, her shoulders suddenly jerk and her hands spasm against the rim of the bassinet, like she's been jolted with electricity.

With horrifying grace, the nurse arches backward, away from the crib, a swan dive in reverse. She's moving blindly—because, as Santos sees when

she turns in the direction of the camera, her entire face is gone. The front of her skull is smooth as an egg. No eyes. No nose.

Santos realizes, even if the video had sound, this surreal display would be silent because the nurse has no mouth with which to scream. He thinks of the title of an old Harlan Ellison story and his stomach twists.

"I Have No Mouth..."

The nurse has no way to breathe. Her hands appear to be clawing at her face, trying to rip open some sort of ad hoc airway. It's not long before she collapses to the ground and begins to spasm the way dying things do.

"My god..." Santos whispers.

"The child," Allen says, pausing the video on the nurse's body, "has an ability. It took a little while to really suss out the specifics, but by this point, they couldn't deny it."

Santos finds his voice. "What's the ability, sir?"

Allen gives a humorless chuckle. "I've rehearsed this in my head dozens of ways, but it's no good. It always sounds..." He waves his hands to erase the thought, then looks Santos dead in the eye. "Fear. His ability is fear. Whatever he's afraid of becomes real."



Santos's voice has left him again. He sits in silence, processing this.

Allen leans back in his chair, strokes his mustache. "Now, it may be that's something of an oversimplification. There are other instances where fear doesn't appear to be the primary instigator. I could show you one video where he makes a male attendant sprout tits and begin lactating. Another one where he tries to make the entire room rock in an attempt to, you know, self-soothe. But, by far, the most common incidents appear to be some sort of adverse reaction to threatening stimuli. He's afraid of something, and it ... manifests. There's some sort of mental trigger that gets pulled. We don't think it's automatic, but during extreme emotional moments, it might as well be. My opinion? He's still young. He's figuring out how to use, well, everything. In time, he might be able to control it. Focus it. But until then ... Kids get scared. Their minds run wild."

Santos has a million questions. He surprises himself with the first one he's able to ask.

“Where’s the mom in all this?”

“Didn’t make it through the birth.”

“Was that because—?”

Allen nods. “Birth must be terrifying for an infant, don’t you think? And I can only imagine whatever happened in the delivery room was horrifying enough for Calvert to bring the baby in for further testing, so...” He helps himself to another piece of candy. “Anyway. You’re almost caught up, Santos. Unfortunately for us—for everyone—Calvert may have been an unexceptional soldier, but he still has plenty of skills. Around a year into sharing custody with the United States government, he decided he didn’t like what was being done to his boy. He was able to enter the facility and remove the child. Then he and his son disappeared. They’ve been living off the grid ever since. We hadn’t found any trace of the kid. Until this morning.”

Allen taps the map of the three incidents.

“You think the kid is responsible for—?”

“A small child, about the age Calvert’s kid would be now, was seen fleeing the apartment complex by a police officer and also fleeing the hotel by the staff. Also”—Allen pulls the hotel security video back up—“these characters, don’t they look familiar to you?”

Santos nods. “They’re not quite right, but ... yeah, I remember being freaked out by that movie when I was little. Wait—are *they* still running around now, too?”

Allen gives a patient chuckle. “No. Best we can tell, there’s a sort of half-life to these projections. Guess that’s the one saving grace of this kid being so young. As soon as his mind fully moves on to other things—poof, back to normal. Except for the damage, of course. That’s very real. Very permanent.”

“Oh, thank god.” Then, embarrassed at his sudden display of honest fear, Santos rifles through the rest of the materials on the desk, begins putting it all together. He speaks slowly, each word falling into place with the deliberation of someone finally laying down puzzle pieces in order. “So ... Calvert must have kept his kid isolated. Emotionally quarantined. Trying not to exacerbate his condition. If there were incidents, they were ... private. But the kid gets out. Runs away ... Now the kid is being exposed to things that scare and confuse him, and it’s ... doing real damage.”

“Thinking like a detective. I knew you were the right person for this assignment, Santos.”

Santos holds his breath. “Assignment, sir?”

Allen begins gathering all the materials on his desk into a neater pile.

“Retrieval.”

“Retrieval,” Santos repeats. For confirmation.

“*Retrieval*. At all costs. No witnesses.”

“Understood.”

“Is it? Because you’re missing one crucial bit of information here, don’t you think?”

Santos stares at him, blank-faced. His stomach flops. This meeting has been going so well, and now suddenly he’s a disappointment? “I don’t...”

“You think a five-year-old kid is able to run this far on his own?”

So stupid. So obvious. Good job, Mickster.

“No, of course not. Someone has him. Kidnapper? Rescuer?” Gulp. “Foreign national?”

“We don’t know the nature of the relationship. But we know the culprit. You do, too, Santos.”

“I do?”

Onto the neat pile of evidence, Allen places a printed photograph. Not just some candid security grab, this one; it’s an actor’s professional headshot. Santos laughs in surprise.

“Holy crap, *her*?”

He picks the picture up. He can’t believe it. What are the odds a celebrity is wrapped up in all this? Just as instantly as that reaction, though, he has another one: *I have no idea who this person is*. Her name, her backstory—gone like the details of a dream upon waking.

“Where do you know her from?” Allen asks with a leading tone.

“I ... I’m not sure. I thought I did for a split second, but now I’m blanking on why. She’s famous, right? Or does she just look like someone famous? I...” His head aches with the confusion. “No. I don’t know her at all.”

“Jessa Bailey,” Allen says. The name gives Santos the faintest echo of recognition, but it’s less substantial than *déjà vu*.

“The ‘bear attack’ happened at her apartment. She was also seen at the hotel. But more than anything, it’s that feeling in your head right now, the one that’s making you feel like you can’t quite place where you know her from—*that’s* how we know she’s involved with this. She’s *why* there were reporters and photographers at that hotel.”

Santos stares at her picture. Allen continues.

“By all accounts we can gather, she was—*is*—a nobody. A failed actress. Then she gets ahold of this kid, and suddenly, for a few minutes at least, she’s the most famous person in the country.”

“You think maybe she found out about the kid’s abilities somehow and tried to ... use them? For her own benefit?”

Allen shrugs as if to say, *Go on*.

“But then it went away, right? She’s not famous anymore. So ... why—how—?”

Allen leans back in his chair. “Maybe she did something to piss the kid off? Maybe he stopped believing her? I don’t know, Santos. But this is as much of a lead as we’re likely gonna get. Find her and you should find the kid.”

“What about the dad? Sergeant Calvert.”

Allen is silent for a moment. “Let’s hope he’s dead. And let’s hope he stays that way.” Allen’s chair creaks as he sits forward quickly, face conveying nothing but utmost seriousness. “We can’t send a big team on this, Santos. We *cannot* risk scaring this kid. We can’t let him know we’re coming. We need someone with curiosity and adaptability and hunger. Someone like you.” Allen picks up the tablet and gestures with it. “Last looks.”

Santos shakes his head, declining the offer. Allen flips to a settings option, reveals that he’s about to completely wipe the tablet’s contents and reset it to factory settings. That done, he throws the tablet and all the papers on his desk into a box at the foot of his desk: HAZARDOUS MATERIALS, BIOCHEMICAL WASTE.

Santos must have raised an eyebrow because Allen notes his expression.

“Can’t exactly put ‘Burn Box for Secret Documents’ on the side, can we? Anything related to Department 925 gets mixed in with stuff nobody would ever dig through and then usually incinerated. We keep our secrets close here, Santos. But who knows: pull this assignment off and you might get to take a peek.”

Santos grabs a piece of Good & Plenty from the dish. Grimaces as he chews it. Thinks of beetles and the harsh, unapologetic taste of black licorice.

Allen looks on approvingly.

Santos floats back to his desk, head spinning.

He's able to find a good amount of background on Jessa Bailey, the pseudo-quasi-celebrity. Ephemeraally famous or not, even a quick Google search reveals an ample amount of info to go off. God bless social media; it never asks for a warrant.

Hearing about her in Allen's office, Santos felt an immediate dislike for her. *Actors*. Nothing but trained liars, cultivating superficial relationships just to mimic human behavior. Borderline sociopathy right there.

Except ... he begins to notice Jess doesn't have many relationships, superficial or otherwise. Not a lot of repeat faces in her photos. Captions saying, "So excited to join this team for a show! One night only!" Large gaps between posts. Either she's one of those people who lives a good portion of their lives off social media, or ... she doesn't have much to post about. No romantic partner. Few friends—close friends, the kind you regularly do things with. Santos can actually relate to that.

There's only one really regular repeat face, and it takes Santos a while to realize the woman is Jess's mother. She goes by the name "Cookie." Cookie looks surprisingly youthful—they could almost be sisters. They party together. They go to bars together. "Cookie's in town—you know what that means. Lock up your sons and horses." They're best friends.

He opens up another search tab. A few keystrokes give him Cookie's address—a condominium complex in Scottsdale, Arizona, which appears to be some sort of "active adult" community, complete with "medical resources on campus." An upscale assisted-living situation? Cookie might *look* young, but looks aren't everything.

Back to Jess. Staring at her pictures.

Santos grew up loving to read. He'd even tried his hand at writing his own stories for a few years, mostly fantasy and sci-fi. Ultimately, he decided to pursue a more practical life after his father died when Santos was sixteen, but he thought he always had a knack for narrative. It's one of the many reasons he knows he'd be a great field detective, if only he can get the shot.

This is the shot.

What are you doing, Jess? How are you feeling? You've seen horrible things. Experienced horrible things. Are you angry? Scared? Desperate? Confused?

What happens when your mental triggers get pulled? Where do you go

during your extreme emotional states?

Just like that, he has it.

If his mental map is correct—and he has no doubt it is—Jess’s progress east would put Scottsdale straight in her sights. She’s heading toward her mother. Either to be with her or just be near her.

Which means the best way to intercept Jess and her dangerous cargo is through Cookie.

He quickly puts in a requisition for a plane ticket and car rental, heart pounding. *Please be right*, he begs his instincts. *Oh god, please be—*

He pauses. That strange feeling again. The back of his neck—

He slaps it away, grimacing. No time.

The final words exchanged in Allen’s office come back to him.

Santos had stood and walked to the door, then stopped and turned back. Allen was finishing packing the contents on his desk into the burn box. He looked up, his expression still paternal but now impatient.

“Tock’s clicking, Santos,” Allen grumbled, a nonsense phrase that Santos immediately knew would stick in his head forever.

Santos’s eyes flicked to the box, which was destined for destruction.

“Of course, sir, I guess I just wanted to ask ... This is a suicide mission, isn’t it?” Not a question, really. “You think whoever goes after this kid might not survive. That’s why you’re sending someone like me. Someone who’s not valuable. Someone potentially disposable.” Allen stared back at him. “Am I right? I just want to know what I’m in for.”

One more smile. Perhaps how Abraham might’ve smiled at Isaac before heading up that mountain to make a sacrifice.

“There you go again,” Allen said. “Thinking like a detective.”

But now, Santos is the one smiling.

He *is* a detective.

And he’d been right about the existence of Department 925.

Now he’s going to prove them wrong about underestimating him.



20

First thing she does is dump the kid on the side of the road and speed away. She watches his shocked eyes recede in the rearview mirror while she thunders back onto the highway and out of his life ... until a few minutes later, when he's suddenly floating over the road in front of her, those same eyes ablaze with rage. She doesn't even register she's on fire until she smells her flesh crisping, and he crushes her car into a cube as she burns.

So, no, scratch that. She doesn't dump the kid.

First, she goes to a hospital. Gets her back stitched up. Gets her blood test, hallelujah. The kid stays by her side—she's able to lie and say he's her nephew. But then, the kid goes exploring while she rests and he sees something he doesn't understand and suddenly they're running through labyrinthine hospital hallways, trying to find a place to hide, while some abomination made of scalpels and burn victims clatters its way after them. Once they're safe, they realize they're trapped, just as they begin to hear the echoing footsteps of something huge and merciless on its way. The wolf has found them at last.

Fuck no; that's out, too.

Jess shakes her head clear. She doesn't know if any of these scenarios would actually come to pass, but that doesn't stop her from seeing them play out while she drives in stony, stunned silence.

It's been at least an hour. No real idea where they're heading, just driving, trying to put distance between themselves and the most recent horror, trying to make the time before the next one last as long as possible.

The kid's mood has deflated. He'd been bouncing in his seat, still laughing in amazement as they sped away from the hotel, but all his giddiness petered out when he saw how upset Jess was. *Is*. Now he's glumly leaning his head

against the window, whispering something to himself.

Please don't let him be casting a spell or something. Please, I can't take anything more.

Despite the October sun, she's shivering. Outer Jess turns the heat up a little while Inner Jess continues spiraling. Arguing with herself.

What do we do? What are our options?

Okay. Lay it all out. This kid has—fuck it, just say it—magical powers. He can make things real. No denying what you've seen already. He made you famous. He made those fucking cartoon characters come out of the TV. He—

Wait.

"Your daddy." She almost startles herself by speaking.

The kid is surprised, too. He looks over at her. "What?"

"That wasn't him back there, right? At the hotel?"

"No?" The brittle edge of fear creeps into his voice. "That was the TV people—?"

"But you said your daddy..." All of it, coming into horrible focus. "You said he's that wolf-thing. Right? And also whatever that was at Margie's house?"

"Yeah?"

"Because he ... he can turn into things? He changes?"

"When he's mad."

Like father, like son. They've both got horrible fucking powers. The kid's an evil genie, and his father's some kind of werewolf. Jesus fucking Christ.

The kid's eyes are huge again. "W-why are you asking about Daddy? Do you think he's going to find us again?" Close to tears. Shit.

"No! No, no. Just." Palms slick on the steering wheel. Pulse pounding in her throat. "Just thinking out loud. He can't find us. We're too far away. Don't worry. Go back to what you were doing."

Ditch him. You have to ditch him. He's too dangerous to be around. Ditch the little monster and maybe the big monster will stop coming after you, too.

But what if that only makes the kid mad? If he can ... do things just by thinking of them—even well-meaning things like making you famous—what if he decides to hold a grudge? What if he feels betrayed? Abandoned? Hell, he might not even let you leave him. He could keep you with him forever if he wants. And that might be the best-case scenario.

So, keep him happy, calm, until you can come up with something better.

But not too happy and calm that his mind starts to wander.

Every thought, a contradiction. All the options are bad. It doesn't help that she's stunned and starving and the wound on her back is aching and itching and sticky with blood.

Margie's car needs gas, too. Christ, how insane, after everything they've been through, they've still gotta worry about things like that.

She's in no state to plan anything coherent now. She decides to do what she usually does when her own tank is empty and she can't come up with anything inspired. Just keep the game going. See what her scene partner does. React. Trust her gut.

Right now, her gut is saying, *Fill me.*

"We have to stop," she says at last. "Do you think you'll be okay at a gas station?"

★ ★ ★

She groans as she gets out of the car, feeling two hundred years old. The *peeling away* from the seat isn't pleasant either. Thankfully, doesn't look like too much blood has stained the seat; her shirt is just tacky and unpleasant.

The kid remains in his seat, staring out the window while she refills the tank. Still mouthing something to himself. Fine. As long as there are no incidents, leave him alone.

Next, she drives the car closer to the station's convenience store. From what she can see, it's not crowded. Thank god; fewer potential casualties.

Can't believe I'm making those kinds of calculations ...

The kid might be, too, because when she tells him they need to go inside, he gives her a wary glare. "I *know*," she says, "but we're going to have to stop at Target or Walmart and get actual supplies next, and I need to do a few things before we can be seen in public. Come on. We'll be super quick."

She'd left her incognito hat and glasses back in the hotel room. She needs another, just in case she's still a little "famous." She also needs a new shirt. And the kid needs shoes.

There's a rack of thick, plastic sunglasses, and another of clothes in one corner of the convenience store. Shirts, ranging from black to Southwestern pastels, featuring images of wolves (no thank you) and cacti and Navajo pottery—even a few dusty LET'S GO BRANDON shirts she rolls her eyes at. Only

tops, though, no pants, which is a bummer since her pants are also fucked with blood, but one of the shirt options is long-sleeve, so she grabs one to tie around her waist. She's also able to grab a small pair of flip-flops for the boy.

Most importantly, the convenience store has rubbing alcohol and large bandages among its paltry collection of painkillers and Pepto. Thank heavens for clumsy truckers.

She also gets them some road snacks—jerky, chips, shelf-stable pastries. When she reaches for a bag of Cheetos, Inner Jess pipes up.

What if he imagines those are worms?

Her hand withdraws. Same goes for the Pirate's Booty. And definitely no gummy frogs; don't need those hopping around the car. God, is this really her life now?

The clerk, a young man with a surprisingly anachronistic mullet and the try-hard ghost of a mustache, stares at her a beat too long. "Is everything okay?"

She responds, very aware of being a bloodied woman with a child whose eyes are darting around like he's looking for snipers, "I stopped earlier ... to ... uh ... pee and, um, fell down an embankment. It's been a rough morning."

"Oh," the clerk says. "Yikes."

He doesn't sound like he believes her, but he also sounds like he wants her out of his life as quickly as possible. Maybe he thinks she's on the run and he doesn't want to meet whoever's after her. *Buddy, if you only knew.*

She can't stop herself from idle chatter, though. "I should get one of those pee funnels for women, right? I don't suppose you sell any of those here?"

The guy looks just as disturbed at the prospect of a conversation about peeing as he is about the blood on Jess's clothes. He shakes his head, trying to ring up her items faster.

Before Jess can say anything further, the boy's voice pops up from below. "That's not what happened."

Jess quickly puts a hand on his head. "Hey, it's okay, kiddo, no need to—" She feels the clerk's eyes on her, shoots him a hopefully not-too-desperate smile. "Like I said, crazy morning."

The clerk swallows. "Do you need me to call someone?" he asks in a quiet voice.

"No!" Jess blurts. "No, seriously. We're all good." Begging with her eyes.

Pleading. “Seriously. Please don’t. My ex ... is a cop.”

The clerk nods slowly. “Okay. Sure. Got it.”

He hands her the bags and, with a grateful expression, she hurries the boy into the bathroom.

“But that’s not what happened,” the boy says again as Jess locks the bathroom door. His brow is knit. He looks confused. “That was a lie, too.”

She tries not to sigh in frustration. “I know, kiddo, I ... Look, sometimes adults have to lie a little, okay? Do you know the word *complicated*? Life is complicated. And sometimes you’ve gotta lie a little just to keep things from getting *more* complicated, that’s all. I’m really sorry I lied to you. I promise, I’ll always try to tell *you* the truth, okay?”

The kid’s face tells her he accepts what she’s saying, but he doesn’t like it. He lets the subject go, turns away to explore the rest of the bathroom. However, she senses something fundamental shifting between them. His definition of her is getting, well, *complicated*, and it troubles her. She tries to remind herself that kids have goldfish memories, and hopefully he’ll get distracted by some other feeling soon—but of course, if she’s right about what’s going on, his getting distracted is no real comfort either.

“Fuck,” she mumbles. “Okay, let’s do this quick, before that clerk changes his mind.”

With another groan and another peel, she painfully removes her shirt. The scent of antiseptic spray is overwhelming, but she’s cautious to not let her open wounds touch anything in here all the same. Once her shirt’s off, she holds it up to look at the slash on its back. The bloody slice in the fabric makes her nauseous. *A cartoon did this ...*

With an awkward, uncomfortable twist, she looks at her own back in the mirror.

She’s expecting to see a wound that’s huge and ragged, maybe even a little exposed spinal column winking through red pillows of muscle, but it’s actually not so bad. The tips of the cartoon buzz saw ripped open her shirt but only dug a relatively shallow groove in her skin. Her stomach relaxes a little.

The cut sits a few inches below the clasps of her bra, so she doesn’t have to take that off, and thank god, because reaching back there to unhook might be too painful, and that’s not a skill she wants to walk this child through.

She was lucky. Half an inch closer and she’d have no choice but to go get stitches. A full inch and she probably wouldn’t be standing here.

After a quick prayer to any deity in the vicinity, she uncaps the bottle and pours the alcohol down her back.

It hurts so bad she doesn't even scream. Her eyes and mouth burst open in a voiceless agony that scatters into disbelieving laughter by the end.

The boy is watching her now, fascinated.

"I'm okay," she wheezes, feet stamping some strange pattern in place. "Totally okay. Don't worry."

Hands shaking a little, she opens up the first bandage. But now she's at a bit of an impasse.

"Um," she begins, "do you think you might be up for helping me out a little? I can't really reach. I just need you to take this bandage and—"

"Soft part goes over the hurt," the boy says, taking it from her. "Sticky part goes on the sides." She looks at him. "Sometimes after Daddy gets mad, he needs me to help him with bandages." The maturity of this statement is offset a bit by the fact that he pronounces it *banningez*, but her heart aches a little all the same.

She watches him in the mirror as he puts the first bandage on. He does it perfectly, little hands moving carefully, face scrunched up in concentration. She bites back the urge to say, *Be careful. You don't know what kind of contagions are in my blood right now.*

When it's done, she puts on her new shirt, then kneels down to the boy's height.

She takes his face in her hands. "Thank you," she says.

They stare at each other in the unforgiving fluorescent light, each sizing the other up. She hopes her expression doesn't read as conflicted, as unsure, as straight up terrified as it feels.

What are you? she thinks. Then, the most important question of all: *What am I going to do with you?*

"The TV people are gone," she says at last. "And your daddy—he can't find us."

The boy nods, but he doesn't look entirely convinced. Feeling safe isn't a simple problem like getting off a rooftop. Daddies are hard to shake.

"It's really important you don't let any of that happen again," she tells him. Then adds, "As long as you're with me, you're safe. That's no lie."

She hopes he believes that. She can almost see the word *complicated* flash in his eyes. He trusts her, but he also doesn't. Again, those warring, almost

wordless impulses:

(leave him)

(you can't do that)

"Let's wash up and hit the road," she tells him.

He nods again, and once that's done, they quickly scurry out of the convenience store—Jess hiding behind her new glasses and hat, the boy's flip-flops slapping like applause.

She looks up the nearest Target—only thirteen minutes away—and they're just pulling into its parking lot when the top of her phone map disappears under an incoming call alert.

Cookie Momster is on the line.



21

The old lady isn't happy.

The boy can tell she's old because of her voice—older than Jess, at least—and he can tell she isn't happy because of the yelling.

As soon as Jess answered the phone, the old lady sounded scared. "Jess! I just got some alert that there's been a carbon monoxide leak at the hotel?! Are you okay?! What the hell is going on?!"

The boy didn't really know what any of that meant, but the sound of fear was familiar enough.

Jess said she was okay, and the old lady said Jess should "come straight here." Jess said, "No, I can't," and that's when the old lady got mad.

Now the boy and Jess are sitting in their parked car, surrounded by so many other cars, while Jess and the old lady trade yelling.

The old lady is Jess's mother, the boy understands—although he's still not entirely sure what a mother *does*. Sometimes, during the yelling, Jess yells back, "Mom—Mom—*Mother!*" Other times, it's "Cookie! Shut up, Cookie!"

The boy hates yelling. It's hardnoise. But there's also a strange softness in the way Jess and her mom-mom-*mother* do it. Like neither thinks it's scary to the other. Like neither is trying to hurt the other. It's yelling but not yelling.

It makes him feel confused and jealous and alone. He adds it to the pile of feelings inside him. *Complicated* feelings.

So many things he's never felt before. Some he recognizes as simply new flavors of Angry or Scared or Sad; others he can't name any more than he could name all the different kinds of wind. They have their own temperatures, their own weights. They push him round and round in different directions before he even knows what's happening.

One such wind has been blowing ever since they sped away from that

place with the TV people.

It begins in his stomach, then swirls around, up and down, through his chest, up his throat. It's hot and dense and roiling with sharp spikes. Bad things have happened, and he's sadmadscared about them. He also knows it's all his fault, but, at the same time, knows there's nothing he can do to make things better, which makes him a kind of scaredmadsad.

These feelings are their own kind of hardnoise. They clatter in his head and his heart, and they hurt. Leave bruises. He wishes he could think them away, but thinking makes them stronger somehow. Makes him think of the times Daddy used to yell at him to "be normal"—*Be normal! Make yourself normal, goddammit!*—which only ever made him understand *normal* was a thing he wasn't. Would never be.

The conversation between Jess and her mom goes on and on and on. He's barely listening to them. The yelling has become boring.

He stares out the window. Scared. Sad. Angry at Jess. Grateful for her care. Hungry. Tired. Bored. He even misses Daddy a little. Not-mad Daddy. But that hurts too much to think about, so he looks around for something else to think.

They're parked in front of a huge boxy building with a red circle on it on the side. That circle has a thick red dot in the center. It reminds him of an eye, and he looks away because he knows otherwise the eye will start blinking and looking back at him.

So many cars surround them. He didn't know there *were* so many cars, and yet they've seen even more than this on the road.

Same with that building last night and this morning. So many rooms. So many people. The world is so big—he never would have imagined how big it was. Daddy had told him what things were and how they worked—cars, planes, whatever they would see out of the windows of their house—but he'd never even *hinted* at how big the world really was.

Did that mean Daddy was a liar, too? Did that mean that liars were really the Worst, like Daddy always said?

Was Daddy lying about how bad *he* was?

Hardthoughts and hardnoise.

He leans his head against the window, wishing Jess would get off the phone.

Then he notices something. Another car a few spots away. The car is a

soft, dusty red. Its tires are black. In the back seat is a big, shaggy, golden-brown dog.

That car's window is down, and the dog is sticking his head out, tongue flopping down, a big, goofy grin on his doggy face, while the dog's people-family are loading bags into the trunk. Despite the boy's understandable fear of wolves, he can't help but smile—this dog is so happy. So excited to be around his family.

That family also includes a boy, older, probably around ten, who digs his hands deep into the dog's fur through the window after finishing loading up the trunk. The dog covers his arms and face with sloppy kisses.

As Jess continues her shouting at her mom, the boy watches this other boy and his dog and feels pangs of yearning, of want, as sharp as needles. Then the dog looks at him and all his sad feelings blow away under the force of that doggy smile.

"Hi," the boy says softly, giving a little wave.

His own window is up, the phone argument is loud, and the other car is parked far enough away, but based on the movement of the dog's mouth and the astonished expression that explodes across the other kid's face, it's clear the dog said "Hi" back.

This makes the boy giggle. He watches as the older kid freaks out in pantomime, trying to convince the rest of his family of what he just heard. Soon, they're all in their car and pulling away, out of the parking lot. The dog keeps his head stuck out of the window, though, relishing the air on his doggy face.

What's it like to be happy like that? To stick your head out the window and feel your big floppy tongue in the breeze ... No *complications*.

The boy slumps back into his seat. Jess and her mother continue arguing.

"I have to go to the bathroom," he announces at last.

"What?" Jess looks at him, almost like she forgot he was here for a moment. She tries to cover up the phone, even though it's been so loud this whole time.

"I have to go to the bathroom."

"Why didn't you go when we were just in a bathroom?" she asks in a whisper.

He shrugs. "I didn't need to go then." It's true. But he does now.

"Jess?" the old woman's voice demands from behind Jess's hand. "Who

are you talking to?”

Jess squeezes her eyes shut and sighs. “No one, I’m—”

“Who’s with you? Who’s that voice?”

“I ... I’m—”

“Have you been with someone this whole time?”

“Sort of.”

““Sort of?””

“I’m ... kinda taking care of someone right now. A kid.”

“A—?!” Cookie gives a long, creaky laugh. “Jessa Rae, is this some sort of prank? Are you pranking me right now? I feel like someone just slipped some acid into my Sanka, here—please tell me this is all some sort of hidden-camera joke thing and that you’re *working*.”

“I didn’t want to tell you,” Jess begins to argue. “I’m sorry. It’s just a lot to explain—”

“I have to *pee*!” the boy whines.

“We have to go, Mom! We’re at a Target, and he’s gotta go to the bathroom.”

“Well, it’s a good thing cell phones are friggin’ portable, isn’t it?”



Jess sticks a little white thing in her ear and, unfortunately, the argument keeps going, even as she and the boy make their way through the sea of cars and people—so many people!—and through doors that whoosh open.

The giant box-place is so overwhelming inside that the boy almost forgets he needs to pee. So many colors. So many *things*! Like a million billion of those tiny gas station stores. There are even counters with hot, fresh food that smells amazing!

The boy does his best to focus. He uses all the tools Daddy taught him. He breathes. He counts. He tries not to think.

They make it to the bathroom—which is a relief on a number of levels—and afterward he’s actually eager to get back to the main part of the store. He almost can’t believe this is a real place, but no one is acting the way they do when things aren’t normal. He knows those kinds of reactions very well, but here people are almost acting like they feel ... safe.

He walks quickly alongside Jess as she collects all the things they need,

moving with a speed and a confidence the boy can hardly comprehend. How could anyone know what they're looking for, or what they're looking at, in a place like this? Could he, one day?

Another feeling starts bubbling up inside him. Not just his chest but his arms and legs.

The fear is still there, telling him to be careful, to be slow—but it starts to get quieter. The colors around him are so much *louder*. The images on all the big pictures: people smiling, laughing, posing. And the clean, hot, saltysweet smell in the air. And the shelves, holding so many things that demand inspection. And even the racks full of soft clothing seem purposefully constructed for a boy his size to climb on, hide in, swing from.

He's five years old, and this is the closest thing to a playground he's ever seen.

Something else catches his eye. It startles him a little at first, but he remembers he needs to not be afraid.

So, instead, he stops to get a better look.



22

In a way, Jess is grateful to have Cookie in her ear as they enter the Target. The gas station was one thing, but walking into this relatively crowded place fills Jess with the closest thing to agoraphobia she's ever experienced.

She's terrified of being recognized, of that instant, ambushing fame suddenly coming back, reporters jumping out of every corner, shouting her name and hounding her with questions.

She's terrified of what could happen with the kid, what he might see, what he might do.

She's terrified of their pursuers coming after them. The police. The kid's werewolf-on-steroids dad.

She's terrified *for* all the other people in the store and also *of* all the other people in the store. It makes her dizzy and sweaty and almost stuck to the asphalt of the parking lot.

But having Cookie on the line—especially when Cookie is being annoying as hell—is distracting enough to get Outer Jess moving again.

Cookie has always been a calming, grounding source in her life. When Jess first moved to LA, Cookie would visit almost every weekend, giving her someone to hang out with, make mistakes with, find her feet with. Anytime Jess went through a breakup or tried to work up the nerve to ask someone out, Cookie was there to give advice, even act as a wingwoman.

Usually, Jess thinks of Cookie as a sort of coconspirator. This naggy, worried, *mom-like* Cookie is something new.

It's almost like Cookie knows this is what Jess needs right now.

First, she helps Jess with the bathroom situation.

"So, I've got a five-year-old boy with me," Jess mutters into her earpiece. "Do I take him into the ladies', or—?"

“Yes, Jessa.” Cookie almost audibly rolls her eyes.

“Well, *I* don’t know.”

“Take him into a stall with you. Be prepared for people to tell you he’s cute.”

Thank god for moms, Jess thinks as she ushers the clearly overwhelmed boy into the bathroom.

On the heels of that gratitude: *Fuckin’ moms*. Cookie won’t let Jess get off the phone; she keeps asking for more details about what has happened so far. Jess has to talk at a low volume while grabbing all the things they need for another god-knows-how-many days on the lam.

She doesn’t tell Cookie *everything*—what an insane conversation that would/will be. She sticks to the least insane version of events she can. About the kid showing up at her apartment, the attack, the escape. She leaves out her own cop homicide, as well as the little detail of the kid’s apparent magical powers. Oh, and that his father seems to be a shape-shifting psychopath.

“Wait,” Cookie says, and Jess can picture her rubbing her temples, “so, the boy’s dad shows up and threatens you ... and then a few minutes later, that rabid bear attacks the building?”

“It was a rough night, Mom.”

Jess fills in plot holes on autopilot, keeping the kid close while they grab supplies, trying to also make sure he’s not too overwhelmed. He mostly seems in hesitant awe for now. As long as he stays that way, they’ll be golden.

Groceries first. Food with a little more nutritional value than their gas station snacks. Even some of her favorite seltzers. Just because they’re on the run doesn’t mean they have to live like animals.

Occasionally, Jess feels eyes land on her, but not for long. The question she senses from all those eyes: *How do I know you?* That’s fine as long as they don’t make any connection.

Eventually, Jess can’t put off telling Cookie about her *other* problem. Not because Cookie needs to hear it; Jess needs to hear herself say it.

“There’s something else, too, Mom. I ... Something *also* happened to me at work last night. Right before everything else.”

“I’m opening a bottle of wine,” Cookie sighs. “I love you, but, *goddamn*, you really don’t half-ass trouble, do you, kiddo?”

Jess tells her about the syringe. They’re in the clothes department now,

grabbing stuff for the boy first. He dumps some shirts into the cart, favoring plain, block-colored tees, not really knowing what to do with all the imagery on the branded shirts. Comic book heroes, anime characters—ugh, cartoons. Jess quickly moves them to the socks, underwear, and then the shoes, eager to get them away from all the stuff that has faces plastered all over it.

“You gotta get yourself to a doctor, Jess,” Cookie is pleading in her ear.

“I *know*, I’m trying.” To the boy: “Do you know how big your feet are?”

“Jess, baby, you’re a good person, and what you’re doing with this little boy is commendable...”

“But?”

Cookie lowers her own voice, as if she weren’t already inside Jess’s ear. “Drop him off somewhere. You’ve done enough. Let the authorities handle it now.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

How can she tell Cookie that no one is safe? That wherever she drops the kid off will probably become a bloodbath and that for all she knows, the kid even won’t *let* her drop him off?

She needs more time to think, to figure out what to do.

“I just can’t, Mom. You’ve gotta trust me.”

“I trust you more than anybody, Jessa. To do what’s right for other people. But you’ve got a shit track record for doing what’s right for yourself.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“Oh, come on, kid, you know you can be a bit of a masochist.”

“What?!”

“That doesn’t only mean sex stuff, Jessa, relax—”

“Well, I’m not one either way, for fuck’s sake!”

“Yeah? Remember Kyle? You stayed with him for like *three years* because you didn’t want to make him sad.”

“His sister was going through chemo—that’s totally different!”

“You would rather drink hot lead before putting your needs over someone else’s. I *know* you, kiddo.”

They’ve moved on to the women’s department. Jess loads up on socks and underwear, a couple of sports bras, barely looking at them beyond their size. Having this conversation with the boy so close is making her feel uncomfortable. Cookie’s doing her best to sound reasonable—her position is

reasonable—but what if he can hear her? What if he understands what Cookie’s saying and gets scared? Or mad?

Jess doesn’t hang up on Cookie until Cookie brings up you-know-who.

“You’re not your father, you know.”

Jess stops what she’s doing.

“I know grief’s a bitch,” Cookie continues. “I know you’re trying to process everything, process *him*. But just because he abandoned you and was a selfish piece of shit doesn’t mean you have to, like, adopt some kid who—”

“Okay! Bye!” Jess ends the call, whips her AirPods into their case, stuffs her phone in her pocket, closes her eyes, and breathes. For reasons she doesn’t understand, nor care to investigate, her sinuses flood with the memory of cold, chlorinated water. Her hand wraps around the shopping cart handle for support.

Cookie isn’t wrong. She *should* drop the kid off somewhere. Let professionals handle protecting him. Even if something does come after her then, she’d be faster, more flexible, on her own.

But, goddammit, she has her reasons—bringing her dad into this is just plain stupid.

Enough. Stop. Save the debate for when you’re somewhere safe and secure.

She sighs. Opens her eyes.

Takes her a sec to notice ... the kid is gone.

She spins in a circle, hoping he’s just wandered over to something nearby.

Nope.

Oh *god*.

Her first impulse is to call out his name, but of course she can’t do that. And a crazy woman yelling, “Hey, *kid!*” is probably gonna attract some unwanted questions. She grabs her cart and hauls it onto the tile thoroughfare, nearly taking out some other shoppers in the process. No time to apologize—she moves as quickly as she can without causing any accidents, frantically looking around for the kid.

She stops when she hears giggling—and clattering metal and plastic.

The boy is running in and out of the clothing racks. At first, Jess isn’t sure what she’s seeing, but then she realizes: he’s either chasing or being chased by a small, white, boy-shaped mannequin. Meanwhile, two adult-size mannequins look on, swaying together approvingly.

The boy slaps the small mannequin on the back, then turns around and runs away. The mannequin-boy pursues.

Feeling like she's about to lose her mind, Jess intercepts him. "Hey, hey, hey!" She kneels down to his level. The kid has a huge grin on his face. She's never had occasion to notice how many teeth he's missing.

"We're playing!" he crows.

"I can see that." Trying to stay calm. Over the boy's shoulder, the small mannequin waits among the clothes, bouncing up and down excitedly. The two larger mannequins wave hello at Jess and her jaw muscles seize up. "This isn't the best time for this, though—"

The boy chatters over her, breathless. "I saw the tall ones and I got scared, but then I decided I didn't want to be scared, and I saw the little one and decided to play with him because I had a friend just like him once and—"

"Oh my god!"

"How are they *doing* that?"

Two customers stand on the tile, gawping at the mannequins. Mouths open, eyes bulging.

Jess covers her frustration with a wheezy, brittle laugh. "You haven't seen the commercials? This is some weird promo thing they're doing. Crazy, right?"

Before they can respond, she turns back to the kid, speaks in a low, serious tone.

"Hey. You're having a good time, that's great, I'm super happy to see that, but we gotta keep it chill, okay? We can't—"

"But we're playing!"

"I know. Maybe you can play more later, once other people aren't staring, okay?"

"But—"

"Please, kiddo. I'm begging you. It's not *safe*."

That word seems to land with him. He gives a little whine, but she's able to pull him away, back to their cart. The mannequins, thankfully, don't follow.

"I had a friend who looked a lot like him," he explains as they reach their cart and resume their shopping. "Well, he was *different*. But Daddy didn't let him stay alive..."

Hearing that makes her heart drop. She opens her mouth to ask him to

elaborate, but then the kid's face lights up. "Whoa!" Just like that, he's sprinting away from her.

"Wait!" She hurries to catch up with him, tossing one more glance back at the mannequins. The two customers are currently waving their hands in front of them, trying to make them activate again.

The boy comes to a halt in front of the big stationery and office supplies section, looking at a wall of markers and crayons and colored pencils.

"So many colors," he says.

"You like drawing? Coloring?" she asks, willing her heart to stop galloping.

"I don't know," he says, entirely genuine. His expression is unambiguous, though: pure awe. An archeologist finding an ancient city he'd only dreamed about.

"Lemme guess: you weren't allowed. Well, how about this?" She starts adding crayons and markers and construction paper to the cart. This is good. Great, even. They've found something the kid can do to pass the time. Something *harmless*.

She's about to ask him if he wants to try watercolors, too, when—
Fucking hell!

He's gone again. Booking down the aisles to the next discovery. His little footsteps, slapping away. "Whoa!"

"Hey!" she stage-whispers after him. "Wait!"

He's headed for the books department. But then, when he sees the neighboring TV department, he veers sharply away, probably not wanting to be anywhere near those walls of screens.

If the cart weren't loaded with so many damn seltzers, she'd be faster. Feels like trudging through sand to get to him. *Goddammit*.

She's slowed down further by him losing his gas station flip-flops as he runs. She stoops to retrieve them.

Just as she rounds the corner, she hears dozens of voices in unison say, "Hi!"

The toy section.

He's staring at racks upon racks of figurines, dolls, display boxes—and they're all staring back at him. He doesn't look as awestruck as he did by the art supplies. In fact, he looks a little repulsed, not even knowing where to start. Makes her think of how he shrank away from the ostensible kids'

programming on the hotel TV—it's not easy being dropped into the boiling water of hyperactive, contemporary kidshit, is it?

She casts a nervous glance around, hoping no one else is watching. For the moment, it looks like they haven't been noticed.

"Hey!" she says again, sharper this time, not enjoying being the disciplinarian. It works, though; he turns to her. "*Safe*," she urges, like it's some sort of incantation. "We gotta be *safe*. Understand? *Safe*."

The boy nods.

She hands him his flip-flops and he slips his feet back into them. She can feel all the plastic eyes watching them.

Once he's done, she asks, "You want a toy or something, kiddo? Anything calling out to you?" A stupid question, considering everything literally called out to him a minute ago.

Toys continue to murmur hellos at him—thankfully at a much lower volume.

He cautiously examines his options. While he does that, she grabs a bunch of nearby board games at random and tosses them into the cart, trying not to take her eyes off him.

She looks down for only a second, just to see the recommended age of one of the games she's grabbed—when she looks up, he's run off. Again. The slaps of his flip-flops recede down another aisle.

She seethes. Any novelty has definitely worn off; this is fucking exhausting. How does anyone deal with a kid this age? She heaves the cart forward to find out which altar of consumerism he's supplicating himself in front of next.

It takes her a few moments to see which direction he's gone. Customers and awkward angles are in the way. When she spots him, a slow, dismayed "Fuuuck" escapes her lips.

Of course, he'd have found his way to *that* section. Of fucking *course*.

Fuck fuck *fuck*.

She watches, as in a nightmare, as he disappears down one of the aisles.

She doesn't know if he's being pulled along by curiosity. Or bravery. Or straight up ignorance.

All she knows is it's just barely October and he's found the Halloween section.



It's early enough in the month that the section is still siloed away to one remote corner of the store. Soon it will take over more real estate, before surrendering to the inevitable metastasis of Christmas. For now, it's just four or five shelving bays and endcaps, as well as some freestanding bins displaying overstuffed bags of candy.

That's what must've tempted him over. Like a fucking fairy-tale witch.

Speaking of, Jess notices as she rushes over to intercept the boy, there are a couple of Halloween yard statues for sale, including an animatronic witch hunched over a cauldron. Next to the witch is a huge, orange-red skeleton with glowing eyes. Motion-activated, most likely. That's gotta be why it feels like their eyes are following her.

Fuckfuckfuckiddyfuck.

Some of the aisles are lined with harmless decorations. Adorable scarecrows, bags of fluffy cobwebs, cute plastic bats. Did he land here, to take in the not-so-scary side of the season? No such luck.

Jess finds the boy standing in the middle of the aisle surrounded by costumes and masks.

The masks look down on him, just like the toys. Only there's no friendly welcome here. An atmosphere as thick as smoke hangs over them. This part of the store even seems darker than any other, like maybe some of the overhead fluorescents are dying.

The boy looks appalled. Jess—who would've barely noticed this section were she here by herself under normal circumstances—sees them through his eyes and immediately understands why. Most of them are fucking terrifying. Cloudy-eyed ghouls. Evil scarecrows. Wrinkled, hollow-socketed old men with long beards. Demons with rapturous, black-tooth grins. A mask made entirely of eyeballs. Worse, there are numerous gory, mauled faces. Skin shredded, skulls peeking out from ragged flesh. All too reminiscent of the horrors they've seen so far. Apartment neighbors. Hotel guests.

And, hanging from one rod, a phalanx of wolf masks.

Fanged, furious mouths dripping actual foam onto the floor.

She has to find her voice. "Just plastic," she says, for him as well as for herself. Then, louder: "They're all just plastic. They're not real."

Off in the distance, the animatronic witch lets out a shrill cackle.

The boy jumps. Some of the masks growl excitedly in response. Hiss. Gnash their teeth. They strain off their rods, actually lifting into the air in an attempt to get at him.

“Hey. Look.” She gets down to his level. Turns him to face her. “*Look.*”

On one rod are some goofy-looking cartoon Frankenstein masks for younger kids. She grabs one and, after a quick glance around for an employee, drops it on the ground and stomps on it before it can come to life. It cracks easily underfoot. “Just plastic. Not real. Just plastic.”

She grabs another. Stomps it.

“Just plastic,” Jess repeats. “This is a holiday, and these are just decorations. Not real. See?”

“Just plastic,” he says, staring down at the broken Frankensteins.

“You’re safe. They’re just silly toys, okay? Just—”

“Plastic.”

The display of masks settles down—no more growling and snarling and hissing. Just a rustling of plastic, like leaves in a light autumn wind.

“You wanna get out of here?”

He nods and the rustling continues to grow fainter ... but never silent.

“I just need to make one more quick stop,” Jess says. “Okay?”



The man at the pharmacy counter tells Jess that no, they don’t offer blood tests here—and his expression tells Jess that she’s silly for even entertaining that idea. Jess figured it was a long shot, but she had to check.

She does a speed run of the pharmacy section, grabbing toothpaste, toothbrushes, a toiletry bag, soap. Their cart is pretty full, but Cookie threw extra money into Jess’s account, so she doesn’t have to think about budget.

Once she’s gotten everything she can think of, she looks at the boy. His fingers are tying themselves into knots. He’s clearly preoccupied, throwing looks over his shoulder to where they came from—where the masks are—but making an admirable attempt at not tipping into full-on anxiety. *Stop thinking about that stuff, kid. Fight it.*

Then something else occurs to Jess. Another item from the pharmacy that might prove useful. Necessary, even.

She doesn’t know exactly what she’s looking for, but there are a few

options on the shelf, and she grabs them all, just to be safe.



Everything is going fine until the first scream.

They're standing at a self-checkout kiosk, ringing up all their stuff. The scream comes from one of the other carts behind them. It's quickly followed by a childish laugh and a reprimand from an exhausted mother. Jess looks over and sees a boy of about thirteen tormenting his younger sister.

He's holding a damn Halloween mask in his hand, waving it in his sister's face. It's one of the scarier ones—a grinning, pumpkin-shaped skull with marble-white eyes and an engorged, triangular mouth—and given that the kid's thirteen, he doesn't heed his mother's reprimands. The mask keeps attacking; the girl keeps squealing.

Jess notices the boy—*her* boy—watching, too, from where he stands next to her. His face has gone ashen.

"Hey," she whispers to him hastily. "They're okay. Everything's okay. We're almost outta here." She speeds up her item-scanning.

Then the mask bites a chunk of flesh from the little girl's shoulder and all hell breaks loose.

Not only does the girl *really* scream—along with her mom and brother—but so do other people in line. Especially those catching the blood spray.

"No," Jess pleads to the boy through clenched teeth. "*Don't.*"

It's too late. He looks like a kid desperately trying to not go to the bathroom, unable to hold it any longer. His eyes are squeezed shut and, somewhere inside, a dam is breaking.

More screams.

Jess cranes a look back into the store.

Shelves are being knocked over. Racks of clothing. The huge, red skeleton with the flaming, light-up eyes is swiping at everything with its large, bony hands. Behind it, the animatronic witch perches on a man's back, raking his face with her nails.

"Stop!" Jess shouts at the boy. His eyes spring open. As he glimpses the chaos, things get even worse.

Behind the skeleton, what at first almost appears to be a cloud of fabric rises into the air.

The masks have taken flight.

Shrieks from the scattering customers echo through the store, sounding like animals being slaughtered. The kid shrinks against her leg. She can feel him trembling.

They haven't finished checking out, but Jess throws their stuff back into the cart.

"Come on!" She throws the kid in the cart, too. Tries to steer around fleeing bodies.

As she emerges from the checkout area, she gets a less obstructed look at the main floor.

People are slamming into one another, trampling those too confused to move. A father with two kids rams his cart into an old man coming out of the Starbucks. The old man skids, headfirst, across the floor.

The air is full of flying wolfmen. Flaming skulls. Ghostfaces, trailing black hoods like ghastly tadpoles. Greenish, glow-in-the-dark wraithgirls.

The boy watches it all from the cart, his fear feeding on itself, making the scene more chaotic, more *real*, the more frightened he becomes.

Then he shrieks, too. Jess follows his gaze. The little mannequin-boy stands in the middle of the clothing area, helpless and vulnerable as the giant skeleton approaches.

A woman runs in front of them, blocking their view. Several masks are chewing into her neck and arms, blood spraying red fireworks off her body. Jess sees with gut-curdling clarity one of the woman's ears disappear into a mouth. The ear plops onto the tile, nowhere to go after being swallowed. The earring on its lobe makes a curt little *tak!* sound.

"Look at me!" Jess barks at the boy. He does. "Just keep your eyes on me!" She shoves their cart forward and toward the exit.

Near the main door, one of those goofy Frankenstein masks makes its way across the tile, using its strap to inch itself across like a slug.

Jess runs the cart over it, joining the crowd streaming out to the parking lot while the store continues to fill with screams.



23

It's Jess's turn to scream as soon as they're back on the highway. She's not hurt, not physically, but if she doesn't let out some of the pressure building inside her, she might actually explode. She throttles the steering wheel, letting out howls of disbelief and stress and terror the way someone might vomit after learning they've just ingested poison.

Finally, she looks at the kid, who's curled into himself on the passenger seat, clearly sensing how close to madness the adult in the car has become.

"You can't—!" she starts to say. She's so shaken that the words keep getting stuck. "Why did you—?"

"It was scary," he offers.

"WELL STOP BEING SO FUCKING SCARED OF THINGS!" she roars. "FUCK!" Quickly realizing she might sound scary herself, she lowers her volume, speaks in a rapid but controlled rush. "I don't know what's going on inside of you, or what you're doing to make that stuff happen, but you *have to learn how to control it*. People are getting hurt! And..." She breathes, hands restless against the wheel. "And also ... if other people are looking for us ... every time you do that, it makes it easier for them to find us." She swallows. "But mostly it's the people getting hurt part. This. Has. To. Stop."

She feels a little better after having screamed it out. Purged. When the kid finally speaks, it jolts her a little. Like she forgot he was an actual person.

"Sometimes," he says, no longer looking at her but staring down in deep shame, "Daddy says I'm too bad to be alive."

That stuns her.

"Jesus," she exhales. "I'm not saying—you're not—sweetie—"

"I had a friend, and he was a little boy like me. He lived in the walls. I made him come out and play with me when I was lonely, but Daddy ...

Daddy said I was bad and was going to get people hurt if I didn't stop being bad. And I said I didn't know *why* I was bad, and he said the little boy was why. He said my mind made the little boy up and now it was too dangerous for the little boy to be alive, so he had to hurt the little boy until the little boy wasn't alive anymore, and he made me watch so I wouldn't do anything like that anymore, but ... but I don't mean to be bad. And I don't want to not be alive. So I get scared."

It's the level of resignation in his words that shatters her. She never would've imagined a five-year-old could sound so defeated.

She never would've imagined a lot of things.

One spring break when she was in college, she—along with Cookie and Cookie's last husband, George—had gone to Colorado to do some hiking. It was the first time Jess had ever experienced elevations like that. Her first taste of oxygen starvation. She feels that sensation again now. There's air in the car, but she can barely breathe it.

The boy's thumb has crept into his mouth, and he sucks on it, staring blankly into nowhere.

"Jesus," she manages again.

Drop him off, Inner Jess whispers. Somewhere. Anywhere. Drop him off, drop him off.

"I'm—" Her mouth has gone dry. "I'm sorry. I'm ... so sorry that happened with your friend. And I'm not your daddy. I'm not mad at you. I'm just..."

"Scared," the boy finishes. He looks at her from above his little fist.

"Yeah."

"Me, too." If he were an adult, would he have pointed out her own hypocrisy? *Stop being so fucking scared ...*

They drive in silence for a while.

Then a realization comes to her out of the blue. "We just stole a whole buncha stuff from Target." She starts to laugh. "Whoops."

The boy isn't so sure it's a joke. He straightens up. "Are we going to get in trouble?"

She thinks about it, imagines herself finally in court for her cop-killing crime spree. A judge pounding his gavel with fury. "AND ALSO, you owe the Target Corporation for socks and seltzers!" That makes her laugh again: a weak, wet laugh, half-exhausted tears.

“Nah, I think we’re gonna be okay on that front.”

The laughter dies just before the tears can take over.

“We need to find a place to hole up,” she says. “And we need to eat. I don’t suppose you could imagine us up a free steak dinner and a survivalist compound?”

He looks at her, blank-faced. “Just kidding,” she says.

Twenty minutes later, they pull into an Applebee’s parking lot. She orders them food on her phone and has it brought out to them, so they avoid as much interaction as possible. While they wait, the kid just sits there, looking at his hands. She notices his lips are moving again. He’s slowly repeating something to himself. She wants to ask what it is, but she’s too nervous to break the silence.

At one point, he looks up with interest out the window, then sags back down. “I thought I saw a doggy,” he says.

“You like dogs?”

“Yeah.” Back to looking at his hands. “They’re like woofs but nice.”

Woofs instead of *wolves*. Her heart aches.

When their food comes, they eat silently in the car, watching the afternoon shadows grow long.

She wants to at least put on music or something, but an old memory comes to her as she reaches for the console. Being young and hearing, of all things, the theme song to *Ghostbusters*. That movie had its scarier moments, but no one ever mentions its dumb song among them. Yet there had been a lyric that had burrowed under her skin. A reference to an invisible man sleeping in your bed. *That* had made Little Jess deeply afraid for some time, no matter how harmless the rest of the song was.

Kids feel time so differently than adults. For those handful of seconds while she processed that lyric—imagining how she’d never be able to feel truly safe in her room, how she might roll over one night and feel arms wrap around her, trapping her, smothering her, muting her screams, without being able to see a thing—Little Jess had experienced a world of true terror and dread anytime that song came on.

God, she hasn’t thought about that in decades.

No wonder this kid’s dad didn’t let him see anything or read anything or ...

She doesn’t like that thought, that one bit of empathy for his monstrous

father. All the same, she doesn't turn any music on either.

Instead, she scrolls through Yelp to find the least disgusting motel in the vicinity. There are hotels and inns and other options, too, places that might be a little less questionable. But she doesn't want to deal with crowds—or, worse, stairs.

Before long, they're pulling into the parking lot of the El Rancho Motel.

It's a squat, stucco building the color of cloudy urine, with a reddish roof that looks simultaneously sun-bleached and waterlogged. The Yelp reviews prepared her—not a single rating above three stars—but even so, she's *not* impressed.

"Ugh." She puts the car in park. "Last time I stayed at a place like this, there were bugs the size of horses. Put a quarter in 'em and they vibrated."

"Really?" The boy's eyes go wide with anxiety.

Goddammit. Her impulse to make dumb jokes in times of stress is so hardwired, it's practically reflex. *I've gotta be as disciplined as he does.*

"No." She offers a difficult smile. "Not really."

Inside the El Rancho lobby, an old man the consistency of beef jerky sits behind the counter, his white hair circling his skull like clouds around a mountaintop.

He puts down his magazine with a huff as Jess approaches. She notes the full-color spread he was ogling features at least a half dozen different kinds of automatic rifles.

Even though the mostly empty parking lot makes this question feel like a formality, she asks him if he has any vacancies for tonight and maybe even for tomorrow night.

Mr. Beef Jerky Mountaintop stares at her for a good, long while. "I know you?" he asks, genuinely curious. Then, before she can answer, "Nah. But I don't like you. I want cash. Up front."

She's stunned by the frank appraisal. "Is that even legal?"

He doesn't say anything. Just points his beef jerky chin toward an ATM in the corner of the room.

It's not like there aren't other motels ... but this one did have the best ratings. And she's so tired, and so anxious to get somewhere relatively private that she swallows the indignity (and the four-dollar bank fee).

He counts the bills. "Yeah, something about you I just don't trust," he explains. "You got the look of a liar on you. Bet you're one of them Los

Angeles types. All a buncha liars. *Professional* liars.”

“That’s very nice of you, sir, thank you.”

He grunts, reaches for a key.

She stops him. “Can I at least ask for a room that’s on the end?”

★ ★ ★

She lets the kid in through the door first. He’s carrying a small bag of their supplies while she juggles the rest. They should’ve grabbed a suitcase or something from Target, too—or at least a backpack. Oh well, next shoplifting spree.

The lights to the room flicker on with effort, eventually casting a bluish, yellowish pall over the twin beds, the dresser, the small TV.

The boy walks in, tentatively, shoulders hunched like he’s expecting enemy fire. Jess kicks herself again for saying anything about bugs—shit, she should’ve at least tried to convince him this was the fucking Four Seasons. She could’ve joked about Jacuzzi tubs.

We got lucky on that rooftop. I don’t think his powers work well on demand.

She shuts the door behind them, and as she puts the shopping bags down on the room’s table, she has to stop herself from literally jumping across the room. Clinging to the corner behind the door, almost as dark as a natural shadow, is a cockroach at least three feet long. Its antennae twitch at her presence. Its head rotates ever so slightly. Christ, it’s so big she can see every crinkle and fold of its wings, every bit of veiny piping along its carapace. No way the boy knows these elaborate details.

It’s like ... it’s like the boy’s imagination gets the ball rolling, and then reality takes over. Fleshes things out. His own horrible improv partner. Yes and.

“Heeeeeeey,” she hears herself saying, voice quavering just a little. She forces herself to stop staring at the massive roach, to look *through* it. “This place is *nice*! I’m impressed.”

The boy isn’t looking her way; he’s testing the springiness of the bed with his hands. “You are?” he asks.

“Yeah!” She positions herself in front of the bug and, when the boy turns to look at her, she gives him the biggest smile she’s capable of conjuring.

“We lucked out! Whoo, I’m relieved!”

The voice of every improv teacher she’s ever had rings in her ears: *Take what your partner gives you and build off it! Never say no!*

The boy gives a relieved shrug. “Cool!” He hops onto the bed.

When Jess looks back at the wall, the roach is gone.



24

“Anything else?” the 7-Eleven clerk asks after Agent Santos places three large bottles of water onto the counter with a reverberant, weirdly gelatinous thud.

“Is it always so hot in October here?”

The clerk shrugs. “I guess?”

“Man!”

Santos has been in Scottsdale for less than an hour and he feels like he’s had two days’ worth of sun. The day is getting late, and the sun has found a way to hang just beyond the visor in his rental car the entire time he’s been driving from the airport. Even here in this 7-Eleven, it blasts through the windows wherever he stands.

He’s about to say all he needs is the water, but then the idea of another item calls to him. No one else is in the store, so he doesn’t feel bad about telling the clerk he’ll need just one more minute.

He turns around to begin his search, and as he does so, he glimpses the rack of newspapers by the front door. Only a couple of locals, a tabloid, a *USA Today*—but they all have the story emblazoned on their front pages. Last night’s bear attack. APARTMENT TERROR. CLAWS AND TEETH. NATURE AMOK.

Apparently, in an effort to tamp down any panic, the official word is that the bear has been located but not killed yet—presumably because whoever will be staging the photographs is searching for a sufficiently gigantic bear to dispatch and use as a stand-in for the creature that slaughtered so many people at that apartment complex. From what Santos read while on the plane to Sky Harbor, the movie rights have already been sold.

Meanwhile, as he drove his rental car from the airport to this gas station, he’d had another call with Director Allen. A Target in Yuma had—reportedly

—experienced more inexplicable phenomena. No one killed, but numerous people are in the hospital and a whole lot more were left confused and terrified. Department 925 is working on a story; Santos needn't concern himself. All that mattered was the Target's location: due east from the site of the hotel carnage. The woman and the boy are still heading this way.

Still proving his hypothesis.

He smiles a little. Then he heads for the candy aisle to find what he's looking for.

"You okay?" the clerk asks from behind the counter. "Hey—sir?"

Santos snaps back to attention.

He realizes he's been zoned out, standing at the candy section and rubbing the back of his neck again. That strange, tugging itch has come back.

How long was he out for?

He hears his father's voice. *Get your head in the game. You gotta focus, M*

But then ... a blank space where his nickname should be.

Only for a second. But it's a second longer than he's ever felt before. Like a physical lacuna. Like the surface of his mind has been greased.

Mickey.

It's always been Mickey. Why couldn't he remember that? And what is that weird tugging/plucking feeling? This time it almost felt like ... fingers rooting around inside his skin.

"Yeah, I'm okay, sorry. Must be the heat."

"It's only, like, ninety," he hears the clerk mutter.

Santos grabs what he came into this aisle for, makes his purchase, and gets back in the car.

"Whoo, it's hot!" he exclaims to himself—and it *is* hot; the car feels like an oven, smells like burning metal and baked leather. He takes a big sip of water, then pulls up Cookie Cormier Philbrick Bailey Williams Montgomery's address in his GPS.

Before he puts the car in drive, he opens up the box of candy he purchased and pops a pink-and-white handful into his mouth.

There are definitely Plenty in the box; he's got a ways to go before he thinks they're Good.

He works on appreciating the harsh taste of candy-coated licorice as he drives into the sun.

Thirty-seven minutes later, he's pulling into the front parking lot of the Sky Blue Senior Freedom Residences. Colorful adobe apartment buildings arranged in concentric half circles, each two stories tall, with bright white staircases and/or ramps across their fronts. Rich islands of grass and sharply maintained bushes and trees. Palm trees, palo verdes, magnolias. Off in the distance, he sees a black metal fence that must encircle the building's pool and hot tub, which he saw advertised on its website. That means the red-and-brown building next to the fence must be the gym. It's a beautiful, serene little paradise. A place where people—people with money, of course—can retire and *bask*. Bask in the luxury of having succeeded in life (by the only metric that truly matters in this society: financially), keeping the indignities of age at bay in the same way the green grass and clean pool and perfectly tended flora keep the indignities of the desert at bay. The landscaping basks, too.

Another handful of G&Ps—they're making him grimace less, at least—another swig of water, a check of the breath, a glance in the mirror, and Santos is ready. He gets out of the car, winces at the hot air waiting for him, and heads for Cookie's apartment. (Each of the residents technically live in an apartment, as opposed to a "room," and so, all praise Google, Cookie's apartment number came up in his record-searching.)

Because of the glare of the setting sun, Santos doesn't notice the man with close-cropped hair sitting low in one of the other cars in the parking lot. The man notices Santos, though. He stops what he's doing as Santos passes by. Once he's clear, the man resumes checking his Beretta M9 with the gaffer-taped grip. He does this with professional ease, and he finishes in time to watch Santos approach, and be accepted into, a certain apartment.

He regards Santos with interest but not worry—in fact, he sizes Santos up immediately as almost certainly not a threat. Santos looks too awkward, too green. A salesman, maybe. Or a missionary.

Either way, the man watches with interest. He's eager to see how long Santos remains inside.

His watcher's eyes are avid.

A wolf's eyes.



25

For the first time in her sixty-eight years, Cookie forgot about a party.

And not just any party: tonight is Bridge Night. Bigger than any other regular event at Sky Blue, because people aren't just gathering to drink and shoot the shit; they're gathering to *watch the game* and drink and shoot the shit. People look forward to Bridge Night every week. None of the other social gatherings here scratch that same itch.

To make matters truly apocalyptic, Cookie is scheduled to host.

She's been so wrapped up with worry over Jess today that it wasn't until Fran called about an hour ago asking what she should bring that Cookie remembered her Bridge Night was *tonight*.

Hot on the heels of that call, Bob Bradford rang to see if Cookie had any interest in him spending the night afterward and whether he should pack his morning pills.

Cookie found herself thinking a litany similar to her daughter's lately: *Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuckfuckfuck*.

Were it any other event, Cookie would do the usually unthinkable and cancel. Claim sickness or something—maybe stomach distress from the dining room's salmon, which everyone complains about. Folks might whisper a little snarky disapproval behind her back for a couple of days, but they'd also find someone else to host and get on with their lives.

That sort of shit doesn't fly for Bridge Night.

Bridge Night rotates hosting duties, in part because it's a way for residents to check out other people's apartments. Canceling Bridge Night, especially day of, is like taking a crap in the communal pool. People will dedicate weeks to discussing how maybe you did it because your apartment wasn't clean enough—maybe you're beginning a humiliating (and unseemly)

descent into dementia—or maybe, just maybe, worst of all possible things: you’re running out of money and couldn’t afford refreshments.

Sky Blue’s a complicated place, and Cookie knows she’s bringing some extra baggage to her analysis. She’s always felt like an outsider here. It’s not a cheap place to live, and she only came into money later in life, with the death of her fourth (and, as far as she’s concerned, final) husband, George. George had been the best man she’d ever known, so of course he had to die way too soon thanks to a sudden and aggressive conspiracy of skin *and* prostate cancer. She’d trade his bank accounts away in a heartbeat for a little more time with him.

This condo had been his, as well. When she met him, she’d ribbed him for living in a place like Sky Blue, and he ribbed her back: “Not everyone’s afraid of the elderly, Cook.” Typical George. Incisive, smart, and somehow delivered without an ounce of meanness. He’d been spot-on. It had always been Cookie’s deepest fear, getting old and winding up in a place like this.

Hell, it’s why she’d found Tommy so appealing all those years ago. He was the sort of guy who made it feel like staying young, fun, and reckless was all a matter of willpower. Back then, she was one marriage down and well into her thirties and, good lord, had that energy seemed appealing. But then she’d gotten pregnant with Jess and—an unexpected plot twist for someone who never wanted a kid—she’d immediately fallen in love. And Tommy immediately revealed himself to be worthless, even dangerous, to have around. Perpetual youth wasn’t everything, so she kicked him to the curb, where he was happy to remain.

Getting older didn’t have to be bad. Once she met and moved in with George in her late fifties, she discovered a place like Sky Blue wasn’t so bad either—strange rules and itchy pubic lice like Mona Dahl notwithstanding. After George died, Cookie found herself grateful for the easy social life. Doubly so when Jess moved to LA, and Cookie started feeling more and more self-conscious hanging out with her. At Sky Blue, Cookie can still be one of the “young ones.”

The only thing she *truly* hates about this place is its full name. Senior Freedom Condominiums. Just embarrassing. She’d take *Retirement Community* or even *Nursing Home* over *Senior Freedom Condominiums*. It sounded like it was a free-range hatchery for ethically sourced elder-meat. It sounded desperate.

Not that this was a nursing home. The only real differences between Sky Blue and a regular condo complex were the minimum-age requirements and the 24–7 nurse on call—and Cookie had a feeling that nurse mainly handled questions about venereal diseases more than anything else.

Today, though? Today, she wishes it *were* a nursing home. Hell, let it be a state-run Medicaid facility. At least then she'd feel less pressure to host Bridge Night tonight. She's going to have to run on autopilot and stick close to her phone. She hates that they ended their last conversation in a fight. They fight all the time—she's not worried about that—but she's so scared for her daughter's well-being that she wants to make up the instant Jess is ready.

Cookie goes through the motions of cleaning the place up, putting out the food she'd already purchased, when there's a knock on her front door.

Goddammit, Fran, of all the days to show up early ...

She opens the door to an unfamiliar young man. Maybe a couple of years older than Jess. He's wearing a decent, but poorly tailored, suit, and even though it's gotta be in the upper eighties, he's got a tan trench coat thrown over one crooked arm. His hair is slicked back, and he's got an eager look. Almost too eager. She recognizes that vibe from countless audition waiting rooms, waiting with Jess.

"Cookie Montgomery, right?" he asks. "Hi. I'm—" He pulls out a wallet, flips to a badge, and Cookie can almost see him practicing this move in the mirror. "Special Agent Michael Santos. FBI."

"What?" she asks, feeling stupid. "FBI?" *Please let this be a joke. Maybe a really early trick-or-treater.*

"Hoover's own, ma'am. I'm here to talk to you about Jessa Bailey. Your daughter, correct?"

"Uh—"

Her immediate instinct is to lie, but his eyes float over her shoulder. She knows exactly what he's looking at. Jess's headshots over the years, all of which prominently feature her name, and all framed and displayed in something of a mosaic on the wall behind her.

"Mind if I step inside?" he asks. "It's awful hot today."

"Okay, just"—she steps aside, not sure what else she can do—"I have company coming, so—"

"This'll be quick."

She casts a nervous look outside, hoping no one's watching or, worse, on

their way, and shuts the door as soon as he's in.

He's got an interesting smell, she notes as he passes her. Something like licorice and flop sweat.

Once he's inside, he gives a quick once-over of her living room. "Very sweet," he says, pointing at all of Jess's headshots. "Nice to see a mother so supportive." Then he indicates the chair by Cookie's couch. "May I?"

"Free country," Cookie says, willing her dander up. "At least, I *hope*."

He settles in with a luxurious sigh, in no apparent hurry. She wants to pace, wants to yell, wants to collapse into her couch next to him and beg for information. She doesn't do any of these things. She knows she's got to stand firm, share little, in case Jess needs her help ... or her silence.

"These condos are lovely," he begins. "How long have you—what are you doing?"

She's pointing her hand at him, pressing her thumb down repeatedly onto her curled index finger.

"This is me fast-forwarding you to get to the point," she says. "It's Bridge Night. Lots to do."

He gives a strained but appreciative laugh. "Oh. Ha. I got you. Tock's clicking."

"Huh?"

"Doesn't matter." He crosses his legs. Throws another glance toward the wall of headshots. "I imagine you're aware of Jess's current ... situation?"

"Meh." Cookie shrugs. "We're not that close."

"That right?"

Cookie keeps her lips tight. Crosses her arms over her chest, gives him an impatient eyebrow raise.

"My mistake," Santos says. "Guess you can't believe everything you see on social media." He lets her stew in the implication that he knows more than he's letting on for an uncomfortable beat. Then: "Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Ms. Montgomery, but your daughter is in some pretty serious trouble."

He starts laying out the events of the past two days. At first, Cookie expects it to be more or less a recap of everything Jess already told her, but then he keeps adding details Jess left out. Like how Jess could be charged federally for kidnapping, since she took someone else's kid and carried him over state lines.

Or like how she also shot a police officer—a sentence that makes Cookie’s entire body go numb. The officer is actually expected to live, although it was touch-and-go until very, very recently.

Cookie tries to maintain her stony disposition. Give the man in her living room nothing. The more he tells her, though, the more her reserve starts to crumble.

Still. She manages to keep quiet. Not even the heartbroken exhale that desperately wants to escape her lips.

“I can only imagine how upsetting this must be to hear,” Santos says. Cookie shrugs. *Yeah, sure*, her body language says, *I guess it could technically be considered upsetting*. “How it must feel, as a mother, to think about your—”

“Okay, stop.” She holds up a hand. It doesn’t shake. She’s surprised at how clear her voice comes out, especially considering her heart is beating against her larynx. “Why are you *here*? What do you want with *me*? I don’t know where Jess is, and the last time I spoke with her, she said she was far away, so.” Was that too much info to give? Better shut up.

“Cookie. May I call you Cookie? All due respect, but I still think she’s heading this way. It’s clear from her movement pattern.”

She gives him a skeptical glare. “Well, all due respect, but if you’re following her movement pattern, why don’t you just nab her en route? Are you trying to set some kind of trap? Use me as bait?”

“No. Not a trap. Not ... Would it be all right if I asked for a glass of water? This heat really makes me—”

“I think I’d rather you spit out whatever the fuck you want to say and then leave my house, actually. I have *invited* guests coming.”

A low, thrumming dread settles into Cookie’s chest. There’s more to this story than what this strange little dress-up man is telling her, too. Something is *very* wrong.

“Totally understand,” he says. He slaps his hands on his legs and stands, then doesn’t move from in front of the chair. He considers his words. “Your daughter ... has seen and done some very unfortunate things over the past couple days. And her running has made her a lot of enemies. Enemies who don’t want to slap her on the wrist, you understand. Enemies who’d just as soon take her whole hand off and maybe let it bleed. But, here’s the good news.” He takes a single step forward. “I’m not one of those enemies. I know

your daughter didn't want any of this to happen. I know this has all been a whirlwind for her, and as scared as you are, Cookie? I know she's ten times more terrified. If she gets *nabbed en route*, chances are it'll be by people who are very, very pissed off, and there won't be a whole lot she can do to calm them down. *Unless* she's with me first. If I—and *you*—can convince her to come *here* as quickly and quietly as possible, to cooperate with me, then I'm pretty sure I can make all her problems with my higher-ups go away."

Cookie's vision blurs. She tries to blink her tears away. "But ... why? I still don't understand. What has she seen? Why is this happening? Who *are* you?"

"Special Agent Michael Santos with the FBI, ma'am. I'm the one who wants to keep your daughter out of prison for the rest of her life." He pulls out a business card and hands it to her. "That's my personal cell number. If you speak with Jess again anytime soon, I would highly recommend you encourage her to get here as soon as possible and to let me help her. If she keeps running, she's in a lot of danger—and I don't just mean legally."

Cookie stares at the card. All the walls she's tried to build have crumbled. "How do I know you're being straight with me?" she asks at last. Her voice has gotten very small.

"You don't. But I'm giving you my word, ma'am. And I don't give it lightly."

Good line, she thinks, wondering if he rehearsed it.

Then, suddenly, Cookie does sit down. She has to. The relief is almost too much to bear.

She wants to ask more questions, but they all get caught in the doorway of her brain. "I—How—Do—"

Knocking interrupts her. A voice from outside.

"Cookie! I brought wine! Red and white! And that pink kind you like!"

Fran.

Agent Santos looks at Cookie and smiles warmly. "The invited guests. Just, please, think about what I've said, Ms. Montgomery. Help me make things better for Jess, okay? While we still can."

Cookie gives a faint, almost imperceptible nod. Almost, but not totally. Then Fran knocks again. Cookie inhales and, as if by magic, all the worry and exhaustion on her face disappears. She offers Santos a huge, dazzling smile. If she was previously acting like a bad hostess, here suddenly is the

apotheosis of hospitality. The social butterfly, emerging from her cocoon.

Except for the glint of fear in her eyes.

“Let me see you out,” she says and heads to the door. “Thanks again for stopping by. I’ll think about what you’ve said.”

Santos and Fran do-si-do in the doorway, Fran wearing an expression of surprise that morphs into titillation as she watches Santos head for his car. Hungry for gossip.

Outside, the Arizona sky has gone purple and russet with the setting sun.

Bridge Night has begun.



In their definitely-clean-nope-no-bugs-at-all motel room, Jess and the boy also try to get a card game going. Nothing as complicated as bridge; at first, it's gin rummy. Jess has the vaguest of memories playing it with her dad when she was a kid, but it must've been during that one time they'd managed to convince him to visit when Jess was a little older, because the boy gets easily confused about the rules. He *does* get a kick out of constantly shouting, "Gin rummy!" and slapping his cards down prematurely, though.

It's very cute, and it's quite nice to hear his delighted giggles ... but it's not enough to pass the time for long.

They move on to war, at which the kid is shockingly proficient. He knows his numbers well, and when Jess expresses her surprise, he tells her it's because one of Daddy's most reliably safe methods for the boy to pass the time is counting.

"Counting?" she asks. "Like, you just sit and ... count?"

He nods proudly. "I can count up to a thousand!" It comes out *fousan*.

Something clicks for her. "Is that what you were saying to yourself while we waited in the car?"

"I know my tens and I know my hundreds, and sometimes I even give them different colors when I count and that's okay. Colors don't hurt anybody."

They play several time-consuming rounds, but eventually they both get bored and start slamming their cards down, shouting, "Gin rummy!"

Jess then moves on to investigating the board games they bought—well, *intended* to buy—from Target. Some have rules that are just complicated enough to not be worth it. Monopoly is a bore. Guess Who? seems dangerous. Draftosaurus has some dinosaur pictures that capture his attention,

but she starts to get nervous about the potential consequences and quickly stuffs it away, wondering why she picked it up.

It's not even dark yet. The kid might be able to pass the time by counting, but that's not going to work for her.

Eventually, she resorts to what she's been dreading most and turns on the TV. She can't think of anything else to do.

She flips through the channels on the old set, which has a thickness to it that's endearingly retro. There's no cable package, just whatever the janky digital antenna picks up, so there aren't a ton of choices—which helps her assure the kid that they won't run into *those* people again. Every few minutes, though, no matter what channel she lands on, it seems like there's an ad for some show or movie full of murder and blood and anger and fear. The boy rests against the crook of her arm, and she can feel him tense whenever it happens—she quickly moves to the next channel, and the process begins again. She never would have noticed how so many things could be considered scary in her day-to-day had she not suddenly started looking through the eyes of a sensitive kid.

At last, she leaves the channel on the public access station, which appears to be doing a program on antique coins.

"Feeling sleepy yet?" she asks and then feels his bony shoulders shrug. "Yeah, me neither."

They sit and watch the show for a few minutes. Then she hits Mute.

"So ... have you ... always been like this?" she asks. "Your, um, ability, I mean?"

He shrugs again. Begins picking at his shirt. "I guess so."

"Do you feel it when it starts to happen? Can you control it?"

A long pause. "I try."

"You know, if you can make things happen ... have you ever tried to, you know ... believe that you're different? Make it so you ... can't?"

Something in him stiffens. "But I *can*. I *know I can*! I've *said*!" He slaps the comforter, frustrated and angry.

"Okay," she assures him. "Okay, I'm sorry." This tactic has been tried before, she realizes. His daddy. She strokes his arms, his hair, until he settles.

"I don't know how to *not know*," he says miserably.

"I get it. Really. Just ... I want to help however I can, okay? Maybe we can work on it together? So when it *does* happen, we can try to make it not so

bad? How does that sound?”

“I don’t want it to be bad. I hate being bad.” He looks down at his hands, and she tilts his chin up.

“Hey. *You’re* not bad. Okay? You’ve just got ... something inside you.”

“A bad thing.”

“No. I mean it’s—no, it’s not *bad*. It’s just...”

His large, ice-blue eyes search hers. “*Complicated*,” he says at last.

She’s almost positive he’s sassing her a little and can’t help but laugh. “Exactly.”

He nods and looks back at the TV. She gets the sense he doesn’t have more to say on the matter, so she unmutes the TV, and they learn about the price differentials between smooth-edged dimes versus the ones with ridges.

Night finally begins to blot through the window curtains like a pool of ink seeping through paper.

“I hope nothing happens tonight,” he says quietly, almost to himself. “I hope he stays far away.”

“Me, too,” Jess replies. Then: “He *will*.”

Outside, a car door slams as loud as a gunshot. A couple starts arguing. Their voices fade away, but their anger leaves a residue. A few minutes later, somebody’s tires give a furious shriek. Elsewhere, sirens wail. A car speeds by far too fast, sounding like a hive of insane wasps blasting heavy metal.

She tries turning up the volume a little, but with every noise from outside, she feels the boy flinching some more.

This isn’t going to work. He’s too anxious. Hell, *she’s* too anxious.

She looks down to see he’s started to count again. But his face is pale, and the purplish bags under his eyes attest to how worn out he must be.

She decides to try her little experiment.

“Hey. Want some chocolate milk?”

“Yeah!” he says, momentarily enthusiastic.

“Okay, then!”

She gets up and goes to the mini fridge, pulls out one of the small, individual serving bottles of chocolate milk they got from Target. Then, she gives the boy a quick glance, hoping he’s refocused on the TV.

He’s watching her with those icy eyes. No use lying or trying to hide what she’s doing.

“We both need to get some good sleep, so I’m gonna add something to

your milk to help,” she says. “Is that okay?”

He nods. Goes back to the TV.

She retrieves the array of small boxes she’d grabbed from the pharmacy. Nytol. Unisom. Sominex. ZzzQuil.

Maybe it’s not the best idea to give a kid his age a sleeping pill, but these are extenuating circumstances if ever there were some. She wants him out and she wants him not afraid ... and she also needs to know this is an option they can use if/whenever things get bad again.

Benadryl, she thinks suddenly. *I should’ve grabbed Children’s Benadryl. That’s what you use to knock a kid out safely.*

Oh well, they have to work with what they’ve got. Necessity and mothers and all that.

She selects the gentlest-looking box. The pills are surprisingly small, but he’s young and tiny, so she splits the pill in half, grinds it up, adds it to the small bottle of chocolate milk. Then caps the bottle and shakes it up like a martini mixer. One knockout chockie cocktail, coming up.

“Okay,” she brings the bottle over to him. “Hopefully, this doesn’t taste too much like chalk. *Bleh*, right?”

“I don’t know what chalk tastes like,” he says. “Ew, you eat chalk?”

“Hey,” she laughs, handing him the bottle. “Watch it, smart guy.”

Somehow looking even more exhausted when he giggles, he takes the bottle from her with both hands. Stares down into it.

“I’ve never even seen chalk before,” he muses. “Daddy said they use it in school a lot, but ... I’ve never been to school.”

“One day,” she tells him, and the lie makes her burn a little. Jesus, what would this kid be like in a school setting?

He drinks the milk down, no complaints about the taste. She wipes what got on his face, and then they settle in on top of the blankets again to keep watching public access. The program changes to something about a man and his hunting dogs. The boy gives an excited, if sleepy, squeal and pats the covers.

“Puppies!”

“You really like dogs, huh?”

“I love them. They’re just so...” Then his chin hits his sternum and his eyes close.

A surge of disquiet sizzles through her. *Fuck, that was fast. I hope I didn’t*

just kill him.

He's breathing slowly and steadily.

She tucks him farther into the bed, roiling with guilt and relief and anxiety, then nestles in next to him, phone in hand. She starts googling children and sleeping pills.

Probably shoulda done this part first, Jess.

Okay. Not the most advisable thing to do, but he'll probably be okay. There's also no mention of children who have the ability to bring homicidal cartoon characters into the real world or conjure flying Halloween masks with razor-sharp teeth, so they're all in uncharted territory. Going forward, though, this will be an emergency-only procedure.

The boy gives a deep, open-mouth snore that makes her heart melt a little. He's cute when he's not terrifying.

Without even realizing it, she's googling another subject.

Blood-borne diseases.

A list of all the deadly pathogens she could've given herself.

"You've just got something inside you..."

How long has it even been? Has she missed her window to effectively get treatment? Some tests had to be administered within seventy-two hours, right?

She does the math and realizes, no, it hasn't even been twenty-four hours since the incident in Poppy's bathroom. This time last night, she and Margie might not even have started their shift yet.

It's enough to make her want to start braying with mad donkey laughter at the absurdity of everything that's happened. Then, just as intensely, she wants to howl in outrage, throw her phone across the room, smash something. She decides against that, opting instead to put her phone face down on the comforter and breathe.

Outside, the traffic breathes with her. Steady inhales ... steady exhales.

I need to stay calm.

I need to get to a doctor.

I need a plan.

Maybe she should take a sleeping pill, too? No. Cookie might call. Plus, she shouldn't do anything that makes her unable to run, in case anything else happens tonight.

Run.

Run where? Run to whom? Even if she had options, she can't risk endangering anyone else she cares about. Look what happened to Margie.

Oh, Margie. I haven't even had time to think about you. What I did to you. Margie, I'm so sorry. I'm so, so, so sorry.

She gets off the bed and starts to pace, trying to quiet her thoughts.

Panic, dread, terror—none of these are unfamiliar to her. Pre-audition, pre-show, pre-breakup, post-breakup, even just the free-floating nightmare of anxiety that is being alive in the twenty-first century. But this? Even moving to LA alone, with no money, no connections, doesn't compare to the sheer level of helplessness—of existential free fall—she feels at this moment. She's never felt anything *this* overwhelming before. Although, that's not entirely true, is it?

A memory she rarely accesses comes to her with remarkable clarity.

Cookie sitting little six-year-old Jess down and explaining that Daddy's moving out of town, that she isn't going to see him as much anymore. Despite all his fuckups, despite the accidents and arguments, Little Jess had worshipped her dad, had thought he was the absolute funnest human being alive. She tailed him wherever he went, his chubby little shadow. Even then, at that age, she'd known "You won't see him as much anymore" really meant "You won't see him *ever again*." Because he didn't want to see her. Because she wasn't important to him. Because if he wanted her in his life, he'd find a way to make that happen. He was Daddy. He could do anything.

Clearer still are the memories of that conversation's aftermath. Little Jess had gotten dizzy and started throwing up. In fact, she couldn't keep food down for almost a week. A few years later, when Cookie had nagged Tommy to finally come back to visit his daughter, after a few awkward, painful days, he left again, and the vomiting started all over. As if her little body wanted to punish itself with physical misery, to keep the pain in her heart from being lonely. She puked after every increasingly rare phone call—until she stopped wanting to hear from him as much as he apparently stopped wanting to make an effort.

All these memories. Perhaps that's why in her pacing, she finds herself in the motel room's bathroom. She closes the bathroom door as quietly as she can, then sits on the toilet lid.

All these memories. All that pain.

Rage, so bright it's almost visible, flares within her. She welcomes it.

Fuck him. Why does he get to be dead already? Why did he get to die before all this happened? On his own fucking terms? That fucking piece of shit. That worthless goddamn monster. Why isn't he here to help protect me, too?

A rogue wave surges behind her eyes, but she holds it back. She can't cry, not now, not ever. Not for him.

She just needs to breathe. Stop thinking about her dad. Stop thinking about death. Stop feeling its oppressive unfairness, its finality, its unpredictability. Stop replaying what happened to Margie. To Kelsey. To Carl and Amber. To that cop. Stop imagining what's coming for her. Stop wondering what her nerves will say about claws and teeth and cartoonish acid. Stop obsessing over how, even if she escapes those dangers, her death could already be inside her, in her blood, *blood-borne*, an awful phrase, like she's a mother to the pathogens hurtling through her bloodstream, waiting to mature and blossom and make her proud.

Stop understanding that death is death is death is death, waiting around every turn, like trees in a densely packed forest, and that no one is coming to protect her.

That no one will be spared.

That the wolf always comes home. In fact, sometimes it's already here.

Moaning comes from the other room, and for a moment, she's not sure the noise isn't coming from her own throat.

She quickly wipes away the few tears that managed to escape and steps out of the bathroom to see what's the matter.

The kid is making noises in his sleep.

She stands there for a moment, watching him. He quiets and seems to settle back into a curled peace.

The urge to shake him awake comes upon her, followed by an even more disturbing idea.

If he were dead, I'd be safer.

That shocks her. Appalls her. Before she can chase the thought down and kill it, a low vibration comes from somewhere on the comforter. Her phone is ringing.

When she sees who's calling, she can't answer fast enough.

"Hey, Momma."

"Hey, kiddo. I wanted to give you time to cool off, but I'm losing my

mind with worry. Is this an okay time? Are you safe?”

No one will be safe, she almost replies. Instead, she listens for a beat and then laughs. “Is that music?”

“I forgot I was hosting a thing tonight.”

“Damn, girl. Party animal.”

“I’ve never felt less like being around other people in my life.”

“Wow. That’s like hearing Chef Boyardee say he’s not in the mood for pasta.”

“I know. Listen, kiddo. We have to talk—outta my way, Fran. It’s Jess. I’m trying to have a conversation.”

A swell of outraged voices in the background, then the sound of a door being shut.

“Okay, I’m in the bedroom now. Listen. I had a visitor.”

★ ★ ★

In fact, Cookie has had several so far. Three people have shown up for the party already—annoyingly early—and are setting up the bridge table. But, of course, that’s not who Cookie is referring to.

She takes a breath, gets a better grip on the phone, and tells Jess what just went down a few minutes ago.

She tells her daughter she knows what’s really going on, that she loves her, that everything is going to be okay. Then she tells her about her visit from the FBI. About that agent, Something Santos, she can’t remember his full name, but he gave her his card and told her to call him as soon as she spoke with Jess. Cookie tells Jess how Agent Santos was very emphatic: Jess should continue her way to Scottsdale, come to Cookie’s, where he will be waiting to rendezvous with them, take control of the situation, *protect them*. Cookie assures Jess she won’t be in trouble for the kidnapping, the accidental shooting, just as long as she cooperates and sticks to this plan.

She tells her all this ... then braces herself for a fight, for a litany of reasons why Jess won’t come here and do what the man is asking.

Jess is silent for a moment. Then asks:

“The FBI?”

“Yeah.”

“And you trusted him?”

Cookie thinks it over one more time. “Yeah. I think I did, baby.”

“Then ... okay.”

Cookie can’t believe it. “What?”

“Okay. We’ll drive to you in the morning. I don’t want to keep running. I don’t have a plan.”

“This is the plan, baby. You’re going to be okay.”

“Are you sure?” Jess asks in a voice that’s very high and very fragile.

“I’m sure, baby. I’m sure.”

“How?”

And even though she’s old enough to know better, even though she’s said or heard these exact words a thousand times before a thousand disappointments, Cookie replies, “He promised.”

Jess exhales a wavering sigh, and Cookie’s heart shatters with the pain she hears.

“Once everything is sorted out with the authorities,” Cookie says, “you can stay with me for as long as you need. We can get you rested and get you to a doctor and find you a new place to live, and—and everything’s gonna be okay, baby. It’s gonna be okay.”

“I thought...” Jess begins, then sniffs a hearty helping of snot. “I thought no one was allowed to live there who’s under a hundred, though.”

“On second thought, you little shit, you’re on your own.”

They share a laugh, and all the questions she desperately wants to ask her daughter stab her heart with fine-tipped needles. There will be plenty of time for that once she’s safe. For now, Cookie only tells her how much she loves her and wishes her a night of restful sleep. Then, with great effort, Cookie ends the call.

She fishes out the business card from her pocket—*Michael*, that was his name—calls the number, and gives him the good news.

Santos also sounds relieved. Elated, even.

Cookie tells him that if he’s still in the neighborhood, he’s welcome to come by and join the party. He politely declines, saying he’s on his way to his hotel room and is ready to turn in for the night. Early to bed, early to rise, et cetera, et cetera.

That’s never been Cookie’s way, and she feels plenty healthy, wealthy, and wise, all things considered. She thanks Santos again, and before they disconnect, she reiterates, “I’m trusting you. Please don’t let anything bad

happen to my girl.”

“I promise,” he says. “Starting tomorrow, everything’s going to be okay.”

“Well,” Cookie says. “Guess we’ve just gotta make it ’til then.” She hangs up.

It’s louder in the living room now. More people have arrived. More voices chattering in delight, aliens from a distant fucking galaxy.

Her body is humming with relief and anxiety, a contradictory stew.

How is she ever going to make it through this night? She just wants Jess to get here—now, before she can change her mind, before that stubborn, self-reliant little girl inside her wakes up and remembers she’s her mother *and* her father’s daughter.

Starting tomorrow, everything’s going to be okay.

Cookie decides to go watch the game. Bridge is boring as shit, and maybe that’ll help inspire her to get some rest. A little wine will help add weight to her eyelids.

Starting tomorrow.

There’s a knock on her door.

Everything’s going to be okay.

Cookie puts her hostess face back on and answers.



27

Sitting in his car in the parking lot, Santos is still smiling. He feels so damn proud he might literally be patting himself on the back if the headrest weren't in the way. And why shouldn't he be proud? He nailed that encounter with Cookie. He didn't give away too much; he said just enough to let her know the stakes; he'd entered into an adversarial environment and emerged—pretty quickly—with an agreement. Best of all: he'd gotten some damn good lines in!

“Who are you?” “Special Agent Michael Santos with the FBI, ma’am. I’m the one who wants to keep your daughter out of prison for the rest of her life.”

I mean, hell yes.

By this time tomorrow, he's going to have Jess *and* the kid in hand, no muss, no fuss. Director Allen will be thrilled. Impressed. Surprised. Grateful. Maybe even proud.

Who are you? Special Agent Michael Santos with the FBI.

He knows he's being silly. He can't help himself. For all the chaos and madness and death and destruction ... this really is shaping up to be a dream come true. He's a part of things. A vital part. A principal character.

He meant what he told Cookie, too—not about heading back to his hotel room but about protecting Jess. He fully intends to make sure nothing bad happens to her. He'll enjoy learning about, then flexing, whatever power he has.

His lie about the hotel room was just a little white one—something his mother sometimes called a *hummingbird fib*. He wanted to stick around the condo for a bit, in case Cookie suddenly made a break for it to go hide her daughter or something. After he left Cookie's apartment, he got into his car,

drove around the parking lot, and reparked in a different spot, to keep watch.

Cookie's not going to do anything rash; he's sure of that now. She's smart. She's cool. She knows how to handle herself.

He pops another handful of Good & Plentys into his mouth and sits there, watching more people filter into Cookie's apartment, absently rubbing the back of his neck. That damned plucking sensation is back. More accurately, it never left.

Then, a curious thing takes his attention. A much younger man than any other invitee, probably in his thirties, gets out of a parked car. That car must've been parked here for a while—Santos would've noticed if it had pulled in recently.

The man has short-cropped hair and carries himself with a stiff preciseness out of place in the linen suit he's wearing.

Is he familiar? Santos can't tell yet ... but he thinks so.

Synapses firing erratic warning shots—but still not entirely sure why—Santos sits up and watches the man knock on Cookie's door.



28

His longest stakeout had been just outside of Kandahar. He'd hidden under a tarp heavy with week-old garbage, baking in the desert sun for something like fourteen hours. A miserable, punishing ordeal, but worth it when he got to see the surprised eyes of his target, an informant whose double-crossing had led to the deaths of three infantrymen and the amputation of a sergeant's leg. Waiting under that tarp, no food, no water, no bathroom breaks, barely any air, he kept himself focused by thinking of the Mission, and the Mission sounded an awful lot like that sergeant's screams of agony while he tried to keep his leg connected by a few bloody ligaments.

Now, sitting in his air-conditioned car in this Arizona parking lot, he knows *this* stakeout won't take nearly as long or be nearly as uncomfortable. He's almost tempted to turn off the air-conditioning just to make things a little less cushy, feel the heat and the burn that his body remembers so clearly, sometimes even craves ... He can't risk sweating through his suit, though. He's gotta look good for his plan to work.

As relatively comfortable as he might be, he's starting to get nervous. More people keep entering his target's apartment.

She's already had that one salesman-looking solicitor who just left—at least he exited the scene pretty quickly. But the woman is clearly hosting some sort of gathering that hasn't reached its capacity yet.

More people mean more complication. He's had enough complications lately.

Enough messes.

He's planning on this all going quickly. All he needs is to make an introduction and extract a promise.

He's done his due diligence. Using the name and phone number he'd

gotten from the dead woman a couple of days ago, he'd been able to get a good sense of Cookie Montgomery and Jess Bailey from their social media profiles and photos. He knows they're closer than most mothers and daughters. He has a good idea of the kind of people they are.

Most importantly, he knows Jess is an actress. He has the faintest feeling that maybe he's even seen her in something, but he can't imagine what that could be—she must have that kind of face. He also has a sense that Cookie is the kind of ravenous stage mom who'd do anything to help her kid succeed, if only to bask in the secondhand sunshine of stardom. Some parents, the man knows, look at their offspring as fully separate people—others, like this Cookie, he bets, look at their children as ambassadors to their own grandeur.

He stuffs those judgmental thoughts down. They're not part of the Mission at this moment. He needs to get into character. He needs to be charming. He needs to be someone else. Someone who can deal with other people.

He used to have those skills at the ready. Back when he was first courting Shelly, for instance, he was charming as hell. Now, after so many years in the service, followed by that strange and stressful isolation with his son, other people confuse and frighten him. He made so many mistakes at Jess's apartment the other night. Granted, he'd been naked and discombobulated after so suddenly finding himself in his normal body again. Still. That night had made things so much worse. He needs to try a softer touch this time around, much as it scares him.

Strangely, though, it's not that night he keeps thinking about in his car.

Over and over again, he finds his mind going back to that horrible incident with his son's imaginary friend. The little boy made out of shadow. The one who "lived in the wall." Of all the horrific things the man has experienced lately, that moment was one of the worst. The way that shadow-boy had fought to live. The way his son had sobbed. There'd been no other way, the man was sure of that—there were lessons that had to be learned—but something in him had broken that day. Shrapnel, still tearing him up inside.

Why does he keep thinking about that now? A part of him wonders if maybe his son has been thinking of it, too. Maybe, there's some sort of conduit between the two of them—father and son. He hopes that isn't true. God help them all if his kid has access to some of the things he's seen ... and thought.

Enough. He can't put this off any longer.

Nervous as he is, if he doesn't act now, he'll almost surely miss his chance for the rest of the night, and who knows how long after that, too? He could lose a whole day, and he's pretty sure he doesn't have that much time.

Hope for the best, prepare for the worst.

That's what his years in the service taught him.

That same sergeant who'd lost his leg outside Kandahar, a flinty bulldog named Robert MacNeil, had a less rosy outlook on life. He'd always been fond of saying, "Wish in one hand, shit in the other, and see which one fills up first." But a little hope costs you nothing. As long as you're prepared.

That's why, before getting out of his car and knocking on Cookie's front door, the man triple-checks that his Beretta is fully loaded and ready to go.

Hope for the best.

Prepare for the worst.



As soon as the door opens, his eyes see everything. Every ingress and egress to the living room. Every corner for hiding or being hidden. The half dozen old people setting up a table with cards and drinks. One woman in a red-and-blue tracksuit, dancing with the tentative sweeps of someone with hip problems while she sets up more bottles in the kitchen. The wall of photographs of Jess, the young woman he's looking for.

He tucks his training behind his eyes and offers the woman at the door, Cookie, his most charming smile.

"I'm so sorry to bother you!" he says, his voice sounding clear and bright and strangely young in his ears. "You're Cookie, right? Jess's mom? Don't worry, we've never met. I'm ... well, I see you've got some of Jess's headshots up there. I recognize a couple of them, actually, because, ha, I should introduce myself, huh? My name's Neil McRoberts. I'm a casting director with Paramount Pictures."



He knows his ruse is going to be a success the instant Cookie's eyes widen into perfectly round, hungry spheres. As soon as he tells her who he "is," she lights up like he's delivering one of those novelty-size sweepstakes checks he remembers from his childhood.

“May I come in?” he asks, trying to find the right balance between respectful and normal.

“Oh, um—just, I hope you don’t mind ... I’ve got company. And”—she lowers her voice—“they can be kind of nosy.”

“Gotcha,” he says, whispering and touching his own nose. “I’ll be fast. I don’t want to take up any of your evening.”

She steps backward, and he steps inside, closing the door behind him. They don’t move farther into the room, though. Some of the guests look up in interest; others are too busy having a good time.

“So—did you say Paramount?” she asks.

“Yes, ma’am.” Big grin. Stupid grin. Harmless grin. “See ... we’re working on a new project, a sitcom, I can’t really go into details, but Jess auditioned for us a few weeks ago. It took a while before we were able to make our decisions, then someone else got hired, then fired, blah blah blah. You know show business. The important thing is: we want Jess. It’s a great role, a killer opportunity, but we start filming soon. Really soon. A matter of days. And ... well, she hasn’t been answering her phone. I barely managed to get ahold of her a couple of days ago—the connection wasn’t great, and she sounded like she was in a rush, but I *think* I heard her say she was on her way to see her mom, before we got cut off? Does that sound right to you?”

“Wow,” Cookie says, agog.

“I know!” He nods. “I seriously *never* do this, but I’m in town for my sister’s wedding, and it probably won’t surprise you to hear that Jess talks about you *all the time*, so I knew you lived around here. I’m actually on my way to the rehearsal dinner right now, if you can believe it, but I figured I’d look you up and swing by to see if, I dunno, if she was here or if you knew a better way to get in touch with her? I’m rambling. This is why we leave talking to the professionals! I guess, long story short: I’d hate for us to have to offer the role to someone else. She’s perfect for this part.”

He doesn’t know much about the show business world, so he tries to strike a delicate balance between vague and specific enough. He also listened to a few television-related podcasts on the drive here to try to get a cadence for the way people speak (which is, honestly, exhausting). If he’s gotten any terms or details egregiously wrong, though, Jess’s mother doesn’t seem to notice. She swallows his story with shocking ease. The way she leans against the wall, he almost thinks she’d be ready to jump his bones if they were

alone.

“Oh my *god!*” she exclaims flirtatiously. “Jess is such a flake sometimes! I could kill her. I can’t believe she’s so close to missing out on an opportunity like this!”

“Hey, as far as we’re concerned, she’s worth the extra effort,” he says. “Is she still traveling? I know when I’m traveling I like to keep my notifications off. Otherwise, it’s like—”

“Like you’re not even traveling, right? I get it. I hate these damn phones!”

She’s so giggly and solicitous. A softness he recognizes as distinctly civilian.

“Trouble is,” she continues, “I’m not sure *where* she—”

“I’m almost positive I heard her say something about coming out to Scottsdale.” He holds eye contact with her, hopes his grin doesn’t bare too much teeth.

“Yeah?” she says. Is she getting the tiniest bit uncomfortable? He thinks so.

“Tell you what,” he says. “Why don’t I give you my phone number, and if you happen to talk to her, can you have her give me a call and—oh, shoot. I might be out of pocket with wedding stuff. New plan, if it’s not a huge ask: Could *you* also let me know when—if—she gets in town, so I know she’s alive and okay and I can be sure to have my phone on me for when she calls?”

“Wow, okay, um—”

“Sorry to recruit you like this!”

“I mean, hey, you’re doing my very flaky daughter a huge favor. Although, ha, I don’t want you thinking she’s ever flaky on the job—”

“Oh, no, I know! We’re all big fans of hers. I loved her work in...” For a moment, he feels like he’s able to reference a specific show or movie he knows her from—that’d be a great detail to bolster his identity—but it slips out of his mind before he can grab ahold of it. He lets it go. This is good. He feels satisfied. He’s convinced her—a quick blitz is often best for this sort of work. Now all he needs to do is wait.

He gives Cookie his phone number. She accepts it like a starving woman accepting steak, and she promises she’ll let him know the *nanosecond* Jess is in town.

As he’s thanking her, the door behind him almost hits him in the butt as

more guests to Cookie's party arrive. He quickly steps aside with a congenial laugh, feeling the solidity of his gun against his stomach, glad he's pretending to be someone who wouldn't have killed whoever was behind him on reflex.



29

Cookie, still giggling, holds the door open for the casting director.

“You’ll let me know as soon as she’s in town?” he confirms as he steps over the threshold door and back out into the night.

“You kidding? You’ll have to stop me from giving you updates every five minutes! Oh, I’m just so excited. *We’re* so excited. Thank you again for the house call! Congrats to your sister!”

With a huge smile and a girlish wave, she shuts the door.

“Who was that?” Greta Walcomb asks, but Cookie is already shoving past her, face set in deep concern.

All pretense of the giggling naif is gone.

She hurtles for her phone.



“Hey,” Jess answers, confused. “What’s up? Did you forget som—”

“Plan’s off,” Cookie says. She’s shut herself up inside her bedroom again. “Do not come here. You’ve gotta get somewhere safe and far away, ASAP.” It all comes out in a breathless tumble.

“What? Slow down. What are you talking about?”

Cookie forces herself to breathe. They’re okay. For now.

“Someone *else* just came here. Looking for you. I—I don’t know, Jess. Something was very, very off about him. Said he was a casting director, that he had a big offer for you and wanted to talk to you about it in person—”

“What? That’s insane! Who—?”

“I forget the name. He said he was with Paramount—Paramount *Pictures*, which sounded wrong. Said you’d gone in for him a few weeks ago? I played

along because I figured if he'd already found out where I lived, he knows more than he's letting on, but I didn't like it one bit, Jess. Something about him. Something about his eyes ... I got to know a fair amount of casting directors when you were a kid—never seen one look like this guy. Like he was trying to look at everything at once.”

“Mom, you're scaring me, I don't—”

“GOOD. I'm saying you should be scared. I'm saying we should both be scared. I've just got a bad feeling, kiddo. I saw through this guy's act, but it wasn't a *bad* act. You get what I'm saying? If he'd come here first, I don't know, I might've even fallen for it. And it's got me thinking maybe I was wrong about before, about the other guy who came around looking for you, too.”

“The FBI agent.”

“He also gave me weird vibes. Like he was playing a role or something. I don't know what you got yourself wrapped up in, kiddo, but I think you were right the first time. Don't come here. They know you're coming, and they'll be waiting for you.”

“I ... I don't ... What do I do, then? Where do I go? I can't keep skipping from one motel to the next without any idea if it's safe for me to—”

“There might be one place that's safe.” Cookie tries to keep the dismay out of her voice.

“Really?”

“It's isolated. It's probably not on a lot of records. No one should know it even—SHIT.” She clamps a hand over her mouth.

“What, Mom? What?”

“I don't know if I should give you the address over the phone. I don't know if we're being monitored or what. Um. Hold on.”

Still holding her phone, Cookie hurries out of the bedroom and heads straight for the desk she keeps in a corner of the living room. Guests try to talk to her, and she waves them away.

Out of the desk's flat, middle drawer, she pulls out an old, battered address book—almost as old as Jess, although she rarely has cause to consult with it anymore. Its binding is loose, and various Post-its and folded-up pages stick out of it like paper mushrooms growing out of a tree stump.

She flips through the pages. Despite the urgency of the moment, when she finds what she's looking for, she stops and stares, mouth dry.

You sure you wanna do this? Once she realizes what you've been keeping from her, she might hate you for it ...

But there are no other options. Let Jess hate her. As long as she's still alive to do so.

Written on the page in large block letters, circled for good measure, are the words *TOMMY'S CABIN*. On either side of the address are some doodles of a tiny house pumping smoke among trees. Below the address is a phone number. She tears the page out of the book so no one else can peek at it—suddenly, she doesn't trust any of her guests, even the Free-Range ones.

"Okay," Cookie says into the phone, "tell you what. I'm going to call someone. I'm going to tell him to expect a call from you, and *he's* going to give you all the info you need. I'm also gonna tell him if he breathes a word of this to anybody but you, I'm gonna gut him like a rainbow trout; he'll appreciate that. I don't know if this is enough, but I gotta hope so, baby girl, I can't think of anything else."

"Jesus, Mom, this is all happening so fast—"

"I know. Let me just call Uncle Pepsi and let him know what's up."

"Wait—who? Uncle *what*?"

There's a hint of laughter in Jess's voice, as if she truly can't believe what she just thought she heard, but Cookie doesn't waste any time. She hangs up, heads back into her bedroom, and dials her ex-husband's cousin's number.



While she waits for her mom to call her back, Jess continues pacing around the room, full of nervous dread. She looks for a pen and paper in case she needs to write anything down. She finds a pen in the bottom of her purse and half of an old notepad in the motel room's desk drawer. A small roach is also hiding in the drawer, and it scuttles away into the secrets of the upper shelf.

She doesn't stop to grimace, just thanks god for the notepad and for the fact that the bug was only bug-sized.

She starts doodling. Shapes, swirls. Closer than she'll ever know to the doodles in Cookie's address book.

Soon she gives up and starts straightening things out on the room's table. This includes organizing the supplies she haphazardly brought in, putting all the board games and card decks into the same pile and tidying up the mess from where she'd opened the pill bottle and crushed half of the sleeping pill. There's powder to wipe away, bits of plastic and cotton to throw out, an empty box, and the info sheet that came with it.

She's just picked up that info sheet, thinking maybe she'll read some of its fine print, when Cookie finally calls back. Jess hastily discards the sheet into the trash and answers.

"Okay," Cookie says. "You're all set. Now I'm texting you Pepsi's number so you can call him when you're good and on the road. He'll give you a place to meet up with him, and then he can show you where to go from there. Just try to make sure you're not being followed."

"You really think all this is necessary? All this spy shit?"

"You *don't*?"

"No, I ... I guess I do." She's been so concerned about so many other threats, she hasn't thought enough about the kind with search warrants and

listening devices. “Can you at least tell me where I’m heading? What direction I go in?”

Cookie sighs—a deeper sigh than Jess would’ve expected, given how important this info is. “God. Um. Okay. Who do we never talk about?”

“Who do we never—? Mom, what does that—?” But, of course, there’s only one actual answer to that question. Their shared persona non grata. “Oh. But—”

“Exactly,” Cookie says. “Remember where *that person* grew up?”

“Yeah, of course I do. Wasn’t he still living out around th—”

“*Hush*. It’s a big state, Jessa. Anyway, don’t worry about all that now. Just head in that direction, and ... we’ll talk more about it when you get there. I know you’ll have questions. But it’s not a quick trip, and you’ve gotta get there as fast as you can. Promise me.”

“Okay.” Jess lets it go for now. “I promise.”

“And ... and you take that kid and protect him. I don’t know what the hell is going on, but I’ve got a feeling this all has something to do with him. Am I right?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“Then it sounds like I’m gonna have a lot of questions for you, too. For now, you just get where you’re going, and I’ll do all I can to keep these bastards off your ass. That FBI guy—if he even is an FBI guy—said he’ll be back tomorrow. When he gets here, I’m gonna try to get some answers outta *him*. Look the fuck out, Jessica fucking Fletcher.”

Jess’s phone lights up with Cookie’s incoming text message, showing the contact.

“Got it. Can I ask one more question?”

She can hear Cookie swallow a lump of dismay. “Shoot.”

“Is this guy’s name *really* Uncle Pepsi?”

Cookie lets out a wavery, exhausted laugh. “Yeah, it’s ... a long, stupid story. I’m sure he’ll tell you all about it; I don’t want to go into it now.”

“But really? Uncle *Pepsi*?”

The two of them begin to giggle. An identical, somewhat manic sound.

“Yes, Jessa.”

“That’s a really, really dumb name.”

Cookie clears her throat. Giggles sneak through.

“Oh my god, let it go, Jessa. This is serious.”

“Oh, I know. That’s why we need *Uncle Pepsi* to help us.”

“Shut *up*—”

The giggles catch on like a brush fire. The harder they try to stop them, the harder they come. Best they can do is keep them as quiet and contained as possible—and if anyone happened to stumble upon either woman, they might think she was trying not to weep.

Meanwhile, on the bed, the boy moans softly and rolls over. His eyes begin whirling frantically under his eyelids. “No, Daddy,” he mumbles. “Don’t.”

Jess doesn’t notice; she’s too busy laughing with her mother.

And from her motel room garbage can, the info sheet that came with her sleeping pills lies facing up, presenting text that Jess will never get around to reading.

A warning.

Contains diphenhydramine. Side effects may include dizziness, headache, confusion, anxiety, and occasional intense, abnormally vivid dreams or nightmares.



31

“Up against the wall!”

Santos pushes the guy against the broad side of the apartment complex, out of sight from any more arriving guests.

The instant the guy stepped into Cookie’s apartment and Cookie’s door closed, Santos realized who he might be. Panic almost made him burst in, his bureau-issued Glock 17 drawn, to try to drag the guy out—but he decided to wait a little while longer so as to not risk a scene that could harm any of the guests. Santos crept up close to the front door and told himself the moment he heard a commotion he’d jump in, gun blazing ... but thankfully, the visit had remained quiet and quick.

Once the man stepped back outside—was Cookie giggling? Happy to see him?—Santos got a good enough look at him to confirm he was indeed the man from the photos Allen had shown him.

Peter Calvert. The boy’s father. Very much alive. Very much still in the picture.

Somehow, he’d found Cookie. Somehow, he’d made the same calculations Santos had. Not good.

Not good for him—because I’ve got him.

Calvert is distressingly solid. All muscle. Santos feels like he’s trying to shove a marble statue around. Not to mention, there’s a voice in the back of Santos’s head screaming at him to stop, to remember this guy is trained, might even be preternaturally strong, danger on top of danger. Santos pushes all that away. Now is the time for bravery—and for speed. If he keeps moving quickly, he might keep Calvert disoriented, and that might keep himself alive.

He finds the Beretta in the man’s waistband right away.

“What’s this?” he asks, not waiting for an answer, putting the gun in his own pocket, barely taking a moment to appreciate how heavy it sits. “Sergeant Calvert, right? We’ve been looking for you. Hands behind your back.”

Santos snaps handcuffs around one of Calvert’s wrists and tries to bend the arm toward the midline to grab the other wrist.

Calvert is starting to regain his faculties, though. “Wait, wait,” he’s saying.

“Hands! Behind your back!” Santos repeats, pulling hard on Calvert’s arm, hoping his voice isn’t shaking, trying not to lose grip on his own weapon in the juggle.

Then, unexpectedly, Calvert stops resisting. Instead, he lurches and bends forward as if he just got socked in the guts.

“*Whuff—!*” Calvert exclaims. The look on his face is almost comical, but the sweat slicking his skin isn’t funny in the slightest. His eyes bulge, and he goes impossibly ashen. “Oh god,” he moans. “Oh *no*.”

Santos is still holding on to Calvert’s wrist, the one with the handcuff dangling.

“Stop being dramatic,” Santos barks, “straighten up—”

“No, no, no. Not now.”

“Yes, now. Stand up, soldier!”

Calvert reflexively straightens up a little, but he squeezes his eyes shut.

“Don’t do this,” he’s hissing, and Santos gets the distinct impression that Calvert isn’t talking to him anymore. Who could he be talking to? “No! Please—*why is he doing this now?*”

It’s like a cold wind blows over Santos. His skin ripples with gooseflesh.

Calvert manages to get a few more words out: “*No, I don’t want t—*”

Then Peter Calvert begins to change.

★ ★ ★

I’m not seeing this, Santos thinks. But his eyes tell him otherwise.

Calvert’s head snaps back, and what at first looks like a fist explodes out of his mouth, scattering teeth outward in a spray that rattles onto the pavement.

The fist isn’t solid flesh, though. It’s strangely fetal, slick with esophageal

fluid, skin rippling and warping until it forms a more definable shape. A hairless wolf snout. Hair and fangs begin to bristle up through the pale flesh. Meanwhile, the human skin around Calvert's lips strains and splits.

Calvert's eyes are wide and wild in agony. They roll back to reveal their whites as, simultaneously, two pairs of eyelids rip open across his cheekbones, revealing glowing, red sclera, literally steaming with heat. Calvert's nose—his human nose—opens down the middle, then starts to peel away toward the back of his head, a bloody flower in bloom. The snout continues to force its way out of the man's mouth, merging with the ruins of his upper palate and those furious, red eyes. The top of the man's agonized face never fully disappears as the wolf's head comes together.

The sound of Calvert's bones breaking and reshaping echo in the air like fireworks set off nearby. His clothes tear away as his body expands. His exposed, sweat-slicked skin bubbles and stretches, semiliquid, wet clay handled by clumsy hands. Bunching up, creating mountains of flesh and valleys of red, outraged muscle. From the bloody sores sprout thick patches of fur.

All this happens in a few seconds; quickly enough that Santos doesn't even let go of the arms he's holding. He's frozen with terror and fascination. *Tharn*, he thinks distantly, remembering that fantasy-adventure book about rabbits he loved as a kid.

As the fur spreads, Calvert's wet, claylike quality never quite goes away. It's like looking at a monster through oily water. The pelt never settles; it moves restlessly across the creature's tormented body, occasionally forming into, or pooling away to reveal, impressions of eyeballs or spider legs or a human face screaming.

Santos has a split second to wonder why. Distantly, he hears more guests entering Cookie's apartment yards—light-years—away. He wants to open his mouth to warn them to run as far as they can, but suddenly, one of Calvert's semi-human, shifting hands wraps around Santos's wrist.

Calvert swings Santos forward. The adobe wall rushes to meet him, and then, Santos knows no more.



32

A scuffle. Shouting. Gasps. A heavy thud.

Not that the beginnings of the bridge game aren't captivating, but several of Cookie's guests notice the faint sounds of commotion outside and two decide to investigate.

Leading the way is good ol' Bob Bradford. Cookie has been ignoring him all evening, so he thinks being a take-charge kinda guy will make her finally pay him some mind. Also, before retirement, he always felt like a cowardly schlub, working his desk as an insurance adjuster, pouring money into his healthy savings account while the rest of his life withered from dehydration. He loves his social life at Sky Blue—it's nice being one of the few remaining men his age, and the attention he gets from the women here makes him feel alive.

When he turns the corner around the side of the apartment complex, he runs straight into a slaving monstrosity that's at least nine feet tall. It unseams him from groin to gullet, and he dies feeling the guts he always wished he had slide out onto the ground.

Cheney Jenson is right behind Bob. He hates bridge and was looking for any excuse to leave. He was also planning on asking Bob how serious it was between him and Cookie because maybe she might be looking to switch suitors and Cheney would be happy to volunteer.

Cheney is momentarily confused why Bob suddenly gags and collapses. As the massive creature reveals itself, some half-formed wolf thing, Cheney screams and turns on his heels, bladder and bowels letting go simultaneously into the linen pants he'd purchased for tonight's occasion.

Cheney doesn't notice how the wolf thing continues to morph and mutate. Thick black lines form around the edges of itself, its eyes bug out waggishly

—cartoonishly—at the sight of its prey. Spidery legs jut from its torso, and it lopes forward. One of those legs spears Cheney through the heart, and he dies instantly, the doorway to Cookie’s apartment almost within reach.

The creature notices the doorway, as well. It’s a warm night, and Bob and Cheney made kind of a show of leaving the apartment, so they thought nothing of leaving the door open.

Mona Dahl notices what is happening outside first. She’s been sitting on Cookie’s couch, telling Adelle Swanson all about what her son has been up to lately.

Mona rises as Cheney falls. At first, she thinks Cheney’s tripped. A common enough peril at their age, and no laughing matter, especially since it looks like he planted face-first.

What emerges from the night behind Cheney is nothing close to common.

Mona screams, and a stroke rockets through her brain. She falls back on the couch, dead, before her screams finish passing through her vocal cords.

Adelle looks out at what Mona saw, and her screams join her friend’s.

Others begin noticing and screaming, too. Cookie, still on the phone with her daughter, comes back out of the bedroom to see what the matter is.

She can’t see what everyone is reacting to, but Jess hears the commotion through the phone and doesn’t hesitate. She tells her mom to run—*run!* Cookie, still not sure what’s happening, immediately responds to the panic in her daughter’s voice and complies. The front door is blocked, so she hurries back to her bedroom and tries to find a place to hide.

She doesn’t see the creature as it steps into the living room.

They’ve all heard about the bear attack in Southern California. Many of the night’s side conversations have been about how, isn’t it strange those things only seem to happen in cities run by Democrats, and what even is the point of the government if it can’t protect people from local wildlife, and you think that’s bad, my precious Snickerdoodle was eaten by a coyote nine years ago, it’s like nowhere is safe ...

What they see cross the threshold is huge and furry, ambling on two legs in that slightly awkward way usually quadrupedal animals have. Not a single person thinks *bear*.

The thing’s form twists and shifts with a restlessness both repulsive and hypnotic.

The guests scatter. Looking for somewhere to run, not having the space,

instincts, or physical prowess to succeed. They bump into one another, into the monster, into claws and teeth.

Reginald LaHue, who was playing north in the bridge game, gets his feet tangled up in his chair as he tries to flee. His head hits the floor with a melon-splitting crack that would be audible to anyone not preoccupied with screaming or running—which, in this situation, is no one.

In his immobile-but-still-conscious state, life oozing out of him, Reg is the only one who gets a good, long look at the entity tearing through the rest of the partygoers.

He has a similar thought as Santos's—that it's like watching a nightmare through water. The entity ripples. Undulates. It's a wolf. No, it has no snout, only a round head full of white, triangular teeth. No, it's an amalgam of spiders crawling over themselves in the shape of a human. At one point, it's a woman who almost looks like she could be a diner waitress or something, except her head lolls off and a huge yellow bird pokes its way out through the neck stump. At another point, it's a giant, naked infant, and it pisses something that looks like cartoon rainbows, only the colorful arcs burn whatever they touch like acid, including the body of Tamara Meister and the chair she was sitting in.

It's all of these things and none of these things—now it's a liquid mass of fur, feathers, and weeping eyeballs—and the only constant Reg tracks in his increasingly hazy state is that whatever this entity is, it's in anguish. Every face is sobbing, wailing. When it's in its infant form, it even manages the word *no* over and over again—“*No, no, no, no.*”

Finally, as a heavy, empty silence falls over the living room, the entity seems to settle on one form, which is appropriately formless.

A storm cloud, dark and malignant. A fibrous tumor hanging in the air.

The cloud is made of mouths. Mouths opening to reveal mouths. Mouths within mouths. Mouths puckering every shadowy surface like sores on necrotic flesh. Mouths moaning in anguished harmony.

Reginald watches as the mouth cloud floats toward the bedroom hallway, hungrily searching for more prey. Everyone here is dead, Reg understands. That includes him, too.

With that thought, more blood pools into his field of vision, and the redness takes him away relatively peacefully a few minutes thereafter.



Cookie has had no luck finding a place to hide. She can't fit under her bed. It's not up high enough—Sky Blue rules; we can't have our patrons struggling to get in and out of bed—and her apartment uses all the storage space it can for her outfits and shoes and what-have-you, so what space there is under the bed is crammed with boxes.

All Cookie can do is crouch behind the bed, putting it between her and the door ... which, of course, has no locks, because Sky Blue rules: what if there's a medical emergency?

Meanwhile, Jess is in her ear, practically sobbing, begging for updates. Cookie can only relay the screams she's been hearing in the other room. Those screams have gotten sparser and sparser. Now it's appallingly quiet.

"Jess, what's happening?" Cookie asks in a whisper. "Do you know?"

"It's the kid's dad," Jess stammers. "Has to be. He—he can change shapes, Mom. He can turn into things. I don't know how he found you. We have to get you out of there."

"Baby, that's impossible."

Whether she means her escape or the father's abilities, neither knows.

"I know it's crazy. The boy, he can do things, too. It's ... We just have to get you out of there, okay? Then I'll tell you everything."

"I can't hide anywhere. I don't know where to go—"

"What about the window?"

"I don't..."

Cookie rises to inspect the bedroom window. It's locked, but it should swing outward. She's never tried it; she usually keeps the apartment pretty cold, and if she ever wants fresh air, she can sit in a chair outside her front door. The window looks pretty stubborn, but maybe, if she can muster enough strength, she can push it open far enough and pull herself out. The ground slopes away to a gravelly culvert under the window, so the drop might hurt like a sonofabitch, but she's willing to take that risk.

As she undoes the window lock, she notices she still has the torn page from her address book in her hand. Before she can stuff it into a pocket, she hears a strange noise behind her and freezes.

A low, miserable keening ... followed by the sound of the bedroom door being pushed open.



Jess presses her ear against the phone.

This can't be happening. This *can't be happening*.

"Mom?" she whispers, but oh how she doesn't want to ask, this can't be happening.

Cookie doesn't respond. Instead, she inhales a sharp, involuntary gasp.

"Oh my god ... *Oh my god, what is that?*" Cookie's voice goes high, almost hysterical. It's the youngest she's ever heard her mother, and it's so dreadfully wrong.

"What, Mom, what's happening?!" Not whispering now.

At first, Jess thinks she hears singing in the background. A musical, harmonic moaning—many voices, many tones united in chordal lamentation.

"I-it's okay, baby," Cookie manages in that miserable falsetto, her voice strained and shaking with terror. How she's finding the strength to comfort her child while facing whatever she's facing is impossible to know. "It's okay. It's gonna be okay."

"Mom! Get out of there!"

The noises get louder.

"You go get safe, okay?" Cookie manages to say into the phone. "Please."

"MOM!"

Louder. Buzzing through the earpiece.

"Go get safe, and please don't hate me. I love you so much, Jessa. You were all I needed in this world, and it was all worth it just to get to know y —"

But the strange moanings have gotten too loud as whatever Cookie is seeing approaches, and Cookie's words are cut off with a gurgling cry.

"Mom!" Jess screams. "MOMMY! NO! MOMMY!"

She screams. And screams.

She screams so loudly she wakes the dreaming boy, who sits up, blinking groggily, the words *No, Daddy* thick on his lips, confused and disoriented from his nightmares.

Jess doesn't see or hear him. Nor does she notice how, on the other end of the phone, all the horrible noises cease, evaporate, the way bad dreams do upon waking.

There is no waking from this bad dream. Not anymore.

All she can do is scream and sob for her mother.



33

With a jaw-rattling thud, Peter Calvert drops three feet to the ground, going from nine feet to just under six in the blink of an eye.

He's naked, confused. Reverting like this is never not disorienting, but this time, the changes were so erratic, so wild, and the cessation so abrupt that the only thing he can think is: *Dreaming. He was dreaming about me. Nonsense dreams—but all about me.*

On the heels of that thought: *Even his dreams are dangerous now. My god, what are we going to do?*

He pushes himself onto his hands and knees, then stands, takes notice of his surroundings. Blood everywhere. Limbs. Viscera. A heavy, appalling silence, broken only by blood *plinking* from the walls and ceiling into pooling puddles on the floor. He slips and slides on the floor as he makes his way to the living room. His stomach sloshes, overfull, but he refuses to let himself vomit.

My god, his mind repeats, my god, my god, my god.

He wants to curl up and weep. He's never felt so helpless, so horrified. He has witnessed, participated in so many horrors, but this—this shifting, formless, *ruleless* chaos, with all its implications of how the boy's abilities are developing—this was ... well, beyond nightmarish.

He puts a stop to those thoughts by remembering the Mission. The Mission always takes care of thinking, and he's never not grateful for it.

Is there anything here that he can use? He catches sight of a desk. On top of the desk is an open address book. A few small shreds stick to the binding. Was a page torn out?

The woman had been on the phone. Speaking with Jess. Giving her a new place to hide, maybe?

He doubles back to the blood-soaked bedroom, scans the mess, and there among shredded flesh that might have once been a hand, he finds a crumpled page that looks of the same make as the address book.

The page reads, "CABIN."

He smooths the page out, folds it neatly, and brings it with him.

Makes his way through the carnage and outside.

Heads toward his car and stops, doubles back to the body of the man who tried to arrest him.

Authorities are on his heels now. This is all going as disastrously as he ever could've feared. This mess, this chaos.

To Calvert's surprise, the man appears to still be breathing. When he'd been slammed into the wall, it was while Calvert was mid-transformation, nowhere near as strong as he'd become a few seconds later. A fluke of timing had saved the guy's life. Calvert considers killing him now, covering his airways and removing the variable ... but he can't bring himself to do it. Not with this horrible sloshing in his guts. This has all been too much. And it's not like whoever sent this man wouldn't just send someone new.

Calvert looks around in the dirt and finds the remnants of his clothes. His keys.

Then, equally as important, his gun.

He picks it up and holds it tightly in silent prayer.

My god my god my god.

The Mission is everything. But for the first time, he thinks, if he starts to change like that again, he should put a bullet in his head. Before he becomes another fucking abomination.

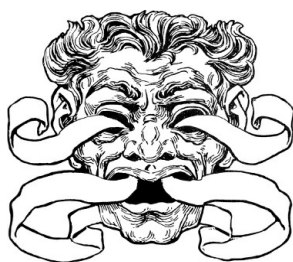
Would that even work? He understands why these transformations don't kill him, why he always returns to normal afterward. Consciously or unconsciously, to the boy, his father is eternal. For all Calvert knows, then, his corpse could become just as dangerous as his living body. But at least maybe he wouldn't have to be aware of what was happening anymore, right?

He doesn't know.

All he can do is focus on the Mission.

Hope for the best. Prepare for the worst.

One way or another, he's going to find his boy and end this.



PART THREE

WOLF AT THE DOOR

Afraid! Of whom am I afraid?
Not Death—for who is He?
The Porter of my Father's Lodge
—Emily Dickinson

Fear no more ...
—William Shakespeare



34

Santos is six years old. His parents have taken him horseback riding near Washoe Lake. He sits on a tiny—though not to him—Shetland pony named Biscuit, and he wears the sort of cowboy costume only a six-year-old could wear without embarrassment. During the course of their trotting, his cowboy hat blows off his head and he begins to sob. His father is forced to dismount his own horse and run back along their trail to find it, and Santos sits on the pony, alone and sniffing. For a brief-but-jarring instant, he can't remember where he is, and his neck itches.

Now he's thirteen. He's standing in front of the Grok Committee, the after-school sci-fi/fantasy book club of which he is a passionate member, giving a presentation on a Piers Anthony novel he'd just finished. He loves this club, and the closest things he has to friends are all members, only he's too shy to approach any of them to hang out beyond club meetings. He'll get better at this, but it's a challenge and it takes effort. Except ... as he talks about his book and whether or not he'll recommend it, he suddenly realizes none of the students have faces. The fronts of their heads have all collapsed inward, as if sucked by a straw, and Santos's neck begins to itch.

He's eight years old. Looking out across the ocean. He's out in New Jersey to visit relatives. His parents are arguing farther up on the beach, and he's walked down to the water to get away from the noise of it. His neck itches, and suddenly, the ocean goes silent. He can't remember what waves sound like.

He's seventeen. His social skills have improved; he's even found himself a girlfriend. Gennifer Baskin, who likes to be called "Ginny," despite that usually being a nickname for Virginia. She's invited him over on a night when her parents are out of town, because she's planned on this night being

the Night. Candles are lit. Music plays softly, a mix of mostly early '90s R&B, and they lie on her bed, kissing. She's laid a towel underneath her in preparation because she says her best friend, Bethany, warned her the first time can get kind of bloody. Santos finds this all terrifically exciting, but also borderline panic-inducing. The low light, the *preparations*. Perhaps that's why, when he tries to move his hands up to caress Ginny's face while they kiss, he forgets how arms and hands work. For a split second, he has total body amnesia. His limbs don't obey him—or no, his limbs *would* obey him if only he could remember what moving limbs felt like. For this instant, his nerves only know that itch.

He's a dozen more ages, all blurring together. There are only two commonalities to each snapshot: that maddening itch ... and a strange understanding that something is searching for him. *Through* him. Like a bird of prey, circling the skies. Only, it's not a bird, it's something more abstract. Impossible to describe. It only makes sense to him in his unconsciousness.

Someone—some *thing*—is rooting through his existence, looking for ... what? Something specific. An exact moment. Brushing past all these other memories and disturbing the waters as it searches.

A nonsense phrase runs recursively in his mind:

(it hasn't happened yet, but once it happens, it will always be happening and will never not have happened)

(it hasn't happened yet, but once it happens, it will always be happening and will never not have happened)

(it hasn't happened yet, but once it happens, it will always be happening and will never not have happened)

He tries to hold on to this phrase as he floats up to consciousness. Actual consciousness.

He's thirty-nine years old. He's a special agent with the FBI sprawled out on the dirty ground against an adobe wall after being rendered unconscious by a vicious assault. His arm throbs. His nose feels smashed against his face. He was just attacked by ... by a monster.

He struggles to a sitting position. All is silent except for the approaching wail of sirens and his whistling, blood-clogged breathing.

He's here now—in the real and actual now.

He gives himself another moment to gather his strength and to try to make sense of the epiphany that has followed him into waking life: that this

strange, itching, plucking sensation has been with him for as long as he's been alive, but also it *hasn't*, because it hasn't happened yet, but once it happens ...

Dream logic. Nonsense. He lets the thought go.

The smells of death and evisceration drift into his nostrils, and he lets that realness clear his mind.

It's time to get back to work.

★ ★ ★

No survivors, besides himself.

Santos slowly wanders through the crime scene.

He's been pressured to go to a hospital. He insists he will in a little bit, but it's not urgent. A concussion at most, maybe a broken nose and some busted ribs. A sprained glenohumeral joint where his arm was used as a cantilever. He's lucky, all told.

Another bit of luck: since there are no other survivors, no complicated story needs to be devised.

Director Allen tells him in a low voice over the phone that they'll likely just blame the carnage on a lone shooter with an AR-15—"Maybe a disgruntled grandson who got cut out of the will." It's almost funny, Santos muses; actual mass shootings tend to conjure forth conspiracy nuts who scream that it's all a staged event, another false flag meant to gain attention for gun control. The truth is, nowadays, mass shootings are so common they're more useful to bury attention than gain it. You could basically call *any* massacre a mass shooting, and within a day or two, most Americans will have digested it and shit it out without so much as a faint aftertaste. It's like money laundering but for slaughter.

Director Allen seems understanding about what happened, but Santos hears a pinched quality in his voice. Obvious frustration. Disappointment.

It hurts worse than any physical damage Santos's nerves can report.

★ ★ ★

Santos wanders into the bloody apartment, through the bloody living room, past the gore-streaked wall of Jess's headshots, into Cookie's bedroom. What's left of the poor woman isn't enough to fill two buckets.

His heart hurts for her. She didn't deserve this. None of the victims deserved this.

Worst of all, with her has gone Santos's only lead, his best chance at ending this nightmare and preventing more scenes like this from bloodying the landscape.

Where is Jess going next? Where is she taking the boy? What will she do?

He has no earthly idea. He doesn't even know where to begin. And he can't stop replaying the horrifying way Calvert began to twist and contort. The sounds of his bones. The agonized look on his face. His pleas to stop what was about to happen. It had sounded so genuine. *"Don't do this. No! Please, I don't want t—"*

He needs to focus. Future victims are counting on him.

(it hasn't happened yet—)

(but once it happens—)

He shakes that nonsense away.

His neck is raw from where he's been absently rubbing it lately—the skin is starting to actually glisten with abrasion—but he's so sore from head to toe that he barely feels it as he absently sets to it again.

"You're a detective, Mickey," he growls under his breath, not caring that a couple officers on the scene stop what they're doing to look at him. "Detect."

Another nonsense phrase pops up, but this one he accepts. It came from Director Allen, after all, so it has to mean something.

Tock's clicking.



35

Jess sits on the bed until the sun comes up, staring blankly into nowhere. At some point, the boy, sensing her distress, nestles into her lap, hugging her. She wants to flinch away from him at first, throw him across the room. But his warmth and solidity bring her some comfort, so she holds him until dawn.

Then, as if a switch is thrown by the rising light, she inhales. Straightens up. The tears she wasn't even aware she'd been crying tighten her cheeks as she offers the boy the saddest, fakest smile she's ever formed.

"Better hit the road," she says, her voice weak and broken, an eerie simulacrum to how her mother sounded in her final moments. "Got a long drive ahead of us."



Thirty-seven hours, to be exact. Mostly a straight shot across the country via Interstate 40.

Jess cries softly and steadily for the first hour. Then her tears stop for a little while. A couple of hours later and they come back so overpowering she almost has to pull over. It's like driving through a monsoon, except none of the other drivers are caught in the same squall.

The boy is silent. He never asks for music or entertainment. He either watches her, concerned, or he stares out the window.

In fact, everything is silent. Even her thoughts. Inner Jess has vanished. Only the respiration of traffic exists in her ears.

It's unnatural. Surreal. Like a dream. Only, she realizes, *this* is reality; it's her past that was the fantasy. Her life-that-was, full of sounds and feelings and sensations. Full of people she cared about, people who cared about her.

Full of promise, of joy. *That* was the dream. She's awake now, in the cold, quiet, numb present. This is all existence will mean from here on out, until the day it's finally, mercifully over.

Around hour five or six, they stop for food. She's not aware of what they get. It has no flavor, no texture. She forgets where they are and what she's ordered as they sit in the parking lot and eat.

Eventually, after fourteen hours on the road, she decides it's time to sleep. No hotels or motels this time. She pulls them to the side of the road near a weigh station, nestling the car among all the sedentary big rigs.

Whenever she'd passed these kinds of stops in her life before, the trucks always made her think of dinosaurs sleeping in herds. Maybe the kid will have the same idea and all the vehicles will come alive, stomp them to death, rampage across the countryside, ravage the world.

As it turns out, the boy also appears too exhausted to use his powers. Or maybe he senses he needs to control them now more than ever.

She doesn't know.

She doesn't ask.

She has her first clear thought in hours.

I don't know if I even want to survive this anymore.

★ ★ ★

Dawn breaks on day two of their journey, and as soon as it's too bright for them to get any more sleep, they wordlessly visit the nearest rest area's bathroom and also scarf down some rubbery breakfast foods. Before she puts them back on the highway, she picks up her phone and starts dialing a number.

"Just gotta—" she begins, then stops. *Call Cookie*, was what she was going to say. *Give her an update.*

She already forgot.

She cradles her face in her hands and sobs.

Tiny hands stroke her back. The boy, trying to comfort her.

"I'm okay," she tells him. "I'm okay."

As she gets them back on the road, her mother's voice echoes in her mind.

Go get safe.

And please don't hate me.

After about an hour of replaying and investigating that inscrutable directive again and again—*don't hate me, don't hate me, why would she say that*—Jess decides she can't handle the quiet anymore. She asks the boy, "How's it going over there?" She has to clear her throat to get her voice working. "You okay?"

The boy shrugs.

"Yeah. Me, too."

Horrible, dangerous silence again. Jess shakes her head.

"We gotta do something or I'm going to lose my mind. You ever played I Spy?"

The boy lights up at the idea of play. She explains the rules. They give it a go for half an hour or so, and the mood in the car lifts a little. Eventually, though, all they can spy are cars and billboards, cars and billboards, cars and billboards. Behold, the great American Experiment. All that precious destiny, manifested.

Just as they're both beginning to lose interest, it's Jess's turn.

"I spy something ... round and stinky."

The boy can't guess. He really gives it some serious thinking but comes up short.

Jess pronounces severely, "Your. Butt."

He looks at her with huge, shocked eyes.

"You heard me," she repeats. "Your butt stinks."

"No, it doesn't."

"Yes, it does."

"No, it doesn't!"

"Then why can I smell it?"

He thinks about it. "That's *your* butt. Your butt stinks."

"Nope, it's yours. I know you've been tooting over there for hours, and it's *violent*."

"Your butt!" He's grinning widely, delighted at this rapier match of wits. "Your butt is the violent! Your butt!"

"Nope. Yours!"

"Yours!"

The argument peters out into satisfied giggles.

Then it's silent again. A different kind of silence this time—a silence that knows what it's lost.

She sighs, tears threatening to spill out of her eyes once more. “Oh, kiddo.” She bounces her fist off the steering wheel a couple of times. “What a mess we’ve gotten ourselves into, huh? What a big, stinky, messy butt.”

“Are you mad at me?” he asks. The giggling child is gone in an instant. He looks ready for the punishment he clearly thinks he deserves.

“No,” she says, then realizes she means it. “I’m not mad at you.” Another long pause. “To be totally honest, you scare the crap out of me, but ... I’m not mad at you.”

He nods as if he expected as much.

The mood begins to darken again. The buildup of tears makes the air heavier. She opens her window a crack, lets the wind disperse the tension.

“I’m sad about your mommy.”

“Thank you. Me, too.”

A slithering, ice-cold thought. Like a leech sliding into her ear. *He could bring her back. All it would take is a thought. A little prompting and ...*

That makes her break out in a nauseous sweat. She’s seen enough horror movies to know those sorts of ideas never end well.

But in the moment, it seems so simple. So tantalizing. He could do it. She could make him do it. All she would have to do is convince him that—

“Jesus, fuck. Let’s play another game!” She wipes distractedly at her eyes. “Let’s play ... One Word at a Time.”

Of course, he has no idea what that is. “We tell a story, together. One word at a time. I’ll say something, then you say something, then I say something, and we put a sentence together, and then another, and soon, we have a story. Get it?”

He says he does. But, ultimately, the boy knows fuck-all about story structure. They wind up with: Once. You. Ate. Butt. (Pause for laughter.) And. It. Was. Butt. So. You. Said. Gin rummy! (Pause for less laughter.)

“Okayyy.” Jess stops the game. “When you tell a story ... try this. The phrase *Once upon a time*.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means, ‘This happened once.’ Like, once upon a time, this happened. Then you tell a story about a person or a character and something that happened to it. Okay?”

“Upon a time?”

“Yeah, I dunno. I guess I never thought about what a weird phrase that is.

But it's older than I am, kiddo, so I let it slide."

"Once upon a time," he muses. Then, even though it's a flagrant breaking of the One Word rules, he continues, "There was a puppy."

"Great!" she exclaims. "And?"

They wind up getting pretty far. The puppy is happy. The puppy gets food. The puppy sees a red balloon. The puppy goes to sleep on a bed of pink and blue and orange pillows.

Not much of a character arc, she supposes, but it's a cute little vignette—and most importantly, the boy seems proud of their accomplishment.

"I like that game," he says after they get to *The End*—another phrase he was unfamiliar with, and which Jess had to provide.

"Always been a favorite of mine. Almost every improv troupe I've been in, we've used it as a pre-show warmup. Our stories weren't usually so wholesome, but..."

"What's an introv troupe?"

"Improv. *Improvisational comedy*," she says. In an appalled, offended voice: "Ugh! Not knowing TV is understandable, but not knowing improv comedy?! America's favorite pastime?! Were you raised in a barn? Are you a goat?"

He giggles. "I don't want to be a goat!" Then, with genuine consideration: "I want to be a puppy. What does *introvimashional comedy* mean?"

"It's ... oh god, how to explain? It's where a group of very strange people get together, and we all make stuff up together on the spot."

"The spot?"

"*In the moment*. No planning. And there's usually an audience, and they give us some suggestions, and then we do a bunch of scenes and stories that we're making up as we go. It's a lot of fun. Sometimes it's awful. Actually, a lot of times it's awful, but that's also part of why it's fun. I've been doing it for years. Years and years. Too long."

"And you do it with TV people?"

She can't read his tone. Somewhere between dismayed and skeptical. He still might not entirely trust her when it comes to describing what she does professionally.

"No," she says. "I mean, I've done it with people who've gone on to *become* TV people. But they weren't TV people at the time. And they definitely don't talk to me now that they are. I told you, I'm not famous,

kiddo. Really. The industry has been very clear it doesn't want me. Just like every troupe I've been involved in—they always fall apart or move on without me."

"Why?"

"Wish I knew. Bad luck? Or I'm too thirsty?"

"Thirsty?"

"Like, I want it too much. Makes people uncomfortable. I need to just start my own team, but I don't even know who to ask anymore. Everyone's either too famous or already set. It's all just ... The business sucks, and I hate it."

"So why do you do it?"

She laughs at the simplicity of the question.

"Because I love it? I don't know. Is love enough of a reason to keep doing stupid things?"

He doesn't answer. How could he? She answers for him.

"Maybe instead of 'love,' I mean it gives me what I need. Maybe those are the same thing. I do it because it's fun and I need it and ... I'm not ready to give up on it. Because it kinda saved my life?"

"It did?"

She nods. "Oh yeah. See, I have a very hard time making my thoughts shut up. But the nice thing about improv is you can't be like that when you're onstage. You have to focus, be in the moment, listen to your partner, think about *them*. And they have to do the same for you. There's a rule they drill into your head during classes, it's like the most important thing: 'Never Abandon Your Partner.'" She gives a small, embarrassed laugh. "I actually cried the first time I heard that rule. Full on wept. Isn't that pathetic? It was everything I'd ever wanted to hear or feel. Whenever I'm onstage, even for just a few minutes, I'm not going to be abandoned. Oof, what a basket case. See, *that's* why I can't quit show biz. Daddy Shoes."

He perks up at that. "Daddy Shoes?"

"I'm being stupid; never mind. The point is, it gives me something I can't get anywhere else. It helps me feel..." She looks over at him. Sees he's listening intently.

Tell him. He'll understand.

"You wanna know the real reason I need it?"

He nods.

"Because improv is scary. Really, really scary. When I first started doing

it, I was terrified. I would get this awful feeling. *What if I can't think of anything? What if my words don't come out right? What if I'm not funny like everyone else?* I'd feel it in my stomach, and I'd think, *There's no way I can go onstage and do anything.* But then? I'd go onstage and do something. And the more I did it, the less scary it became. It helps remind me I can be brave."

"I hate being scared," he says. He doesn't seem skeptical anymore. He seems grateful that an adult is talking to him like this—maybe for the first time in his life.

"I know it, kiddo. I don't like it either. And you know what? I'm still scared most of the time. I'm just like you."

"You are?"

"Oh yeah. I'm always scared of stuff. You get to be a certain age and they stop calling it *scared* and start calling it *anxiety*. But it's all the same. Sometimes I even get so scared I accidentally make the thing I'm scared of come true too."

So many examples she could share. All the ways fear has shaped her life. Fear of rejection. Fear of failure. Fear of not being lovable. Fear of not being enough. The shitty situations she's accepted because that's less scary than doing something about it. Call it what you want; it's all just the skeletal shadow of tree branches on the wall. Fear is fear is fear when it's slithering in the dark.

I'm just like you ...

Poor kid can't know what she really means—and she feels a little embarrassed, psychologically unburdening herself to a child. But in saying all this out loud, a new understanding of their situation begins to form. Possibly even a plan.

It's clear she can't just *convince* the boy he doesn't have his powers—he's too resistant to that approach, too confused by it. Trying to shake it or starve it out of him clearly hasn't worked either. So maybe the key, then, is to just lean into it. Make him feel less alone. Less special. Literally less afraid of the fear itself.

Maybe she can get him to think his abilities are just a normal quirk he'll grow out of. No, not think—*believe*.

Is that possible?

It'll take time and care ... but, if she's right, it'll also only take one simple moment of belief for him to fix himself.

And it wouldn't come a moment too soon because, underneath all these thoughts is just more fear. Including

(make him bring Cookie back)

fears too awful to contemplate.

She's been silent too long. She clears her throat. "So, yeah. I know exactly what it's like, kiddo. But the thing about getting a little older is you start to find tricks to shrink your fears. That's what improv did for me. Now I get scared, but I'm still in control. And we're gonna figure out your ways to do that, too. Like, your counting, but even better. Because I'm just like you and you're just like me, and we're brave, right? We're stubborn. We're bigger than fear. Right?"

She turns to look at him, and he's staring right back at her. His expression, one of relief, of amazement, of ... something else.

"I didn't know," he says in a tiny, heart-wringing voice. "I thought I was just ... bad."

"Nah," she replies. "There's only one thing bad about you, kid. Your butt."

She figures this will get an easy giggle out of him, but he just keeps his eyes on her and stares. Not unkindly. Appraisingly. Like a scientist enthralled by a heretofore unimaginably simple solution to a complicated problem.

For a moment, it fills her heart with a beautiful, almost physical warmth.

Then it begins to unnerve her, and she doesn't entirely know why. The warmth turns to dread.

"How about we listen to a little music?" she says, shaking the strange chill that just ran through her. "Let's see what"—a quick glance at the map on her phone—"Oklahoma radio has to offer."

★ ★ ★

The unease doesn't go away, but at least when they stop to get food again, she can actually taste it this time. Her appetite is stronger. She feels more present. Enough so that, when she puts an order in for a kid's meal, she makes sure to request that it's "just the food, please, don't include whatever comes with it." Giving him a toy to play with in this enclosed space seems unwise.

He doesn't seem to notice or mind. When she hands him his food, he

smiles, bright as can be.

Jess smiles back at him. “Eat up, buckaroo. I gotta remember to call Uncle Pepsi next time we stop. Give him an update and figure out a place for us to meet.” She takes a hearty bite into her own burger.

“He has a funny name, right? Uncle Pepsi?”

She starts to chuckle. Nah, she intends to say; she’s got loads of family members with brand names. Aunt Jemima, Grampa Google, Second Cousin Mucinex.

But she surprises herself by starting to sob all over again. All she can think about is how she laughed with Cookie about this very same name. How setting this refuge up was Cookie’s final act of protection. How, for all her fears of abandonment, Jess was never as alone as she’d feared.

For a moment there, she’d thought grief was done with her, at least for today. No such luck; the tears were just waiting, right behind her eyes, to begin their assault anew.

Nobody hides like tears, she realizes. *We could learn a thing or two from them.*



36

One more night in the car—this way, they can arrive at the cabin in daylight. During their brief phone call, Uncle Pepsi warned them it's hard to navigate through the woods when it's dark, so this seems like the smartest course of action.

Jess has to be honest with herself, too: there's a part of her that's loath to end this road trip any earlier than necessary.

Especially in light of the chaos they've been through, this leg of their journey has gone surprisingly smoothly. It's hard to think of a desperate car ride across a continent as *relaxing* or *pleasant*, but ... it's been kind of close to that, hasn't it? Even Margie's car, which has 203,000 miles on it and probably dates back to three recessions ago, has performed without complaints.

Jess and the boy play more improv games, they sit in comfortable silence, they sing and dance along to the radio. They stop at gas stations, cringe at disgusting bathrooms, marvel at the way the landscape changes on the margins of the highway. At one point, they even find a tiny playground attached to one of their rest stops. The playground is empty, so she lets the kid run around for a little while, squealing in delight while he burns off energy.

When he sleeps, curled in a compact coil against the car door, nestled under a blanket Margie'd kept in the trunk, Jess considers how the past two days on the road have been free of incidents. *His* incidents.

He doesn't even appear to have bad dreams in the car. He's not throwing anxiety monsters and visions and terrors at them left and right.

Maybe her response to Cookie's death chastened him? Maybe he scared himself straight?

Or maybe—Jess suspects this is the real reason—he’s enjoying this road trip, too. He’s comfortable on the run. He finds solace in movement.

“I’m just like you.”

Oof. Poor kid, that means you’re just like me, too.

Then a dark thought. Whispered. Almost inarticulate.

What am I going to do with him?

No answers there. Meanwhile, the address on the GPS for their meetup with Uncle Pepsi gets closer and closer.



The late-morning sun winks off the chrome façade of Rose & Sal’s Diner and, pulling into the parking lot, Jess thinks, *Another diner. Full circle.* Is that why it feels like things are ending?

Except circles don’t have endings, she thinks. That’s kinda their thing.

She lets the thought go and tells the kid she’s going to look for Uncle Pepsi, then gets out and stands by the car.

The groan she gives as she stretches in the parking lot is like the door to some ancient crypt swinging open after millennia. Her lower back is furious.

When she spoke with Pepsi, it had been very brief, only long enough to set up their meeting location. “Cookie told me we’ve gotta be quick on the phone,” he said. “Guess things are kinda serious right now, huh? But how is the ol’ gal doing?”

Jess thought she did a good job hiding the sobs that wanted to reply.

Here he comes now, out of the front door of the diner, waving in greeting. An older man on the husky side, with a light dusting of downy, white hair. His face is ineffably kind—Jess likes him right away. He walks with something of a pained waddle, and she feels bad for making him come out to find her. Nothing in his expression indicates he resents it, even for a second.

“Wow,” he says, a little out of breath. “Little Jessa Rae. Look at you. Do you do hugs or a handshake or—”

“Hugs are fine,” she says, “but I’ve been in a car for three days, so hold your breath.”

“I grew up with four brothers. There’s no stench I can’t handle.”

They hug. Even though this man might as well be a stranger, the human contact makes her eyes well up. She has to force herself to let him go.

After they separate, he gives a little wave to the boy, who's watching him from the car. The boy waves back, tentatively.

"So," Uncle Pepsi starts.

"Thank you again for taking us up to the cabin and getting us set up. I know this has all been ... sudden."

"Not a problem," he says. "You guys wanna come inside? Grab a bite before we hit the road?"

She looks at the diner looming over his shoulder.

"No," she says. "Last time I was at a diner, I got really sick."

"Aw, Rose and Sal's isn't one of those joints! I eat here all the time—best food in town!"

It does look clean and welcoming. Her mouth waters at the thought of fresh coffee, of eggs, of pancakes and butter and syrup.

"We're pretty tired; I think we wanna get set up and relax, if you don't mind. Maybe a rain check?"

"You're the boss, hoss. Let me just pay for the coffee I was sipping on and we'll hit the road."



She follows his vaguely blue truck to the cabin. The way is, indeed, winding. Full of unmarked turns and repetitive scenery. Maples and birches, pressing in around them. Other cabins, spread out and well distanced from one another. A few cabins display Halloween decorations, but thankfully none of those decorations misbehave—though she thinks she spots some plastic eyes turning to mark them as they pass.

Uncle Pepsi mentioned before they hit the road that he'd written all this down for her, too, but she does her best to memorize the route for when she has to make it on her own. After all, who knows how long they'll be staying here? Could be weeks. Months. They'll need supplies.

What if we get snowed in up here? Cue the Kubrick soundtrack ...

Finally, a tangled ribbon of asphalt leads up a short hill to a circular, almost bulbous driveway.

"This must be it," she tells the boy, who's been plastered against his window, looking at all the trees.

It looks more like a house than a cabin. A decent-size one-story house

with a screened-in patio and, across the wide, round driveway, a large external garage.

Something about this place is faintly tugging on her brain. A memory, perhaps.

As she, Pepsi, and the boy stand in the driveway, she asks, “Earlier, you said, ‘Look at you,’ like we’ve met before. Have I—?”

“Been here before?” He gives her another kindhearted grin. “Oh yeah. You came up here a few times when you were a tyke. Me and the other cousins loved having you around.”

Cousins. Right—he’s actually her dad’s cousin, not an *uncle*. So many details she’s either forgotten or been too distracted to chase down in her mind. She blushes.

“I totally don’t remember. I’m so sorry.”

“Hey, no apologies. Last time you were here, you couldn’ta been much older than this young gentleman, here. I never caught your name, little man.”

The boy, who automatically clutched Jess’s hand after they stepped out of their car, looks up at him and says, plainly, “You can call me *kiddo*.”

Uncle Pepsi gives a full belly laugh. “Well, okay, then! Cool name, kiddo.”

“Jess says your name’s funny.”

He looks playfully shocked. “Don’t blame me! She’s the one who gave it to me.”

Jess feels herself blush even harder. “I did?”

“She did?” the boy echoes.

“Oh yeah.” Uncle Pepsi looks at her, chuckling. “You were three or four, maybe? Me and the boys had been watching tapes of old *Saturday Night Live* episodes on the VCR with you. And for whatever reason, out of the blue, you pointed right at me and shouted, ‘No Coke! Pepsi!’ And, boy, did that crack us up. Cracked you up, too, so you did it every chance you got. ‘No Coke! Pepsi!’ Everybody started calling me Uncle Pepsi after that, and, well, the name stuck.”

Jess is laughing now, too. “Oh my god.”

He shrugs. “There are worse things a kid can name ya. And, gosh, was it funny at the time. You were such a funny kid. Always trying to make everybody laugh. Pulling weird faces, trying out silly voices. Born entertainer, we all said. You do that nowadays, too, right? I feel like I’ve seen

you in a bunch of things, but ... shoot, you've gotta forgive me, I can't remember what they are. Never had a good memory for that kinda stuff."

"Meh," she says. Her laughter has dried up; she tries not to show the strange melancholy that has crept into her heart. "None of it's worth remembering."

"Welp." Uncle Pepsi claps his hands. "Shall I show you 'round the palace, madame and monsieur?"



The screen door welcomes them with a loud screech and a louder slam as they pass through the patio into the cabin.

Once inside, the boy's usual misgivings are immediately forgotten as he sees the massive array of fishing posters and memorabilia all over the walls. He runs around, laughing at them, never minding the fact that he can't read a single word.

Jess walks a tight circle in the kitchen / dining room area.

"I'm impressed. Surprisingly not disgusting for a man cave."

"We do have *some* standards, thank you very much."

Pepsi tells her that he and "the cousins" have mainly used this place as a home base for fishing trips, ever since they inherited it from a granduncle some fifty years ago. That granduncle had been a fishing fanatic; much of the wall décor was originally his. There's even a tradition he'd started that whoever catches the fewest fish in a season has to bring a baseball cap to hang on the "Ceiling of Shame." The ceiling in this room, Jess notes, is featureless.

"Do you guys still do much fishing?"

"Not as much as we used to," he says sadly. "We're all just getting older. Plus, once Tommy started living here full-time, we didn't like to intrude."

That stops her cold. "Wait, what? He was living *here*?"

Pepsi blinks. "Well, sure. You didn't know?" The look on her face answers him. "Gosh, Jess, I'm sorry, I figured you ... Yeah, he'd been doing his thing, drifting around, living wherever, and then about four, five years ago, he moved in here full-time."

Suddenly, his presence is everywhere. She wants to bolt, feels rooted to the spot. The entire atmosphere has changed, the way it can after a sudden

drop in barometric pressure or an effective ghost story.

"I ... I just knew he'd been living in Pennsylvania; I didn't know it was ... here. Wait, he didn't die *in*—"

"In the cabin? No. He was out in his truck. Out by the lake, actually. A neighbor found him. Came over to yell at him for being parked there so long. Found him in his seat with a bottle between his legs."

"Oh. Good. That's—" Her heart is pounding. She puts a hand on her chest. "That's something."

Pepsi rubs his temples. "Jeez, Jess, I'm really sorry for the surprise. I..." He drops his voice a little. "Hey, I just want to say..."

He's about to say, "I'm sorry for your loss," and I might scream.

"I just want to say, none of us blame you for not having a funeral or anything. I can't defend what he did. And I won't. We all thought your dad was, well, not an easy person to know. He kept it that way. But the way he ran out on you and your mom?" He shakes his head. "His dad was no piece of cake either, of course. And his dad's dad. The war. There's a whole long line of screwups and sad stories there. Doesn't matter. I'm just sorry he wasn't worthy of knowing you."

Jess nods as if this isn't all an enormous amount of information to take in. "That's very kind of you. Thank you." After a beat: "So, what else do I need to know about this place?"

★ ★ ★

He shows her how to turn on the water heater. What to do in case there's a freeze warning. How to clear spiders from the shower. The boy's eyes go wide at the mention of spiders, but Jess is relieved that Pepsi is quick to allay his fears. "We mostly just get daddy longlegs, and they're harmless. In fact, they help us keep the skeeters down." The boy doesn't know what that means, but he seems struck by the concept that some spiders can actually be Good Guys.

Cell coverage is spotty at best. No Wi-Fi. "Never saw the need for it. This is a place that's meant to be a little unplugged from the world, you know?" There's a collection of VHS tapes and DVDs, mostly westerns and the Three Stooges, and an old TV that begrudgingly had to be set up with a digital antenna and gets something like twelve channels when the weather's good.

There's also a boom box that must date to the mid-to-late 1700s and a stack of Jimmy Buffett and Neil Diamond CDs in scuffed jewel cases.

"Don't blame me if you don't like the selection; they're mostly all Tomcat's."

"Tomcat." She does her best to hide a grimace.

Pepsi's cheeks go red again. "His old nickname. From his ... prowling days."

"Gross."

The screened front porch has two comfy-looking lounge chairs on one side and a white plastic table with white plastic chairs on the other—so you can have supper in the fresh air, without being eaten alive by the skeeters.

Every room, every chair. Inner Jess is back and reeling. She can't help but think, *He was here. He sat here. Not even two weeks ago. He was right here.*

"And, last up, lemme show you the garage."

The screen door creaks and slaps loudly behind them as they cross the circular driveway. Jess and Uncle Pepsi lead the way; the boy follows behind, far more interested in inspecting the rocks and sideboards and staring out into the tightly packed trees that surround the property.

The external garage is large enough to fit a truck and a boat, Pepsi explains. Currently there's neither because, "Cousin Wally took the boat in for repairs half a decade ago. And your dad's truck is, well, with the police now."

The light switch is on the opposite side of the garage—a poorly planned layout, Pepsi admits—but from the light of the open side door, she's able to see pretty well. There are tools and sharp things in the murky, muted light; she tells the boy to hang back.

Pepsi walks farther into the garage. "Over here is the grill, and down there are the extra propane tanks. Here's the light switch." The garage is bathed with warm, yellow light. "I'd say you've got at least a month or two of grilling weather. Winter seems to be coming later and later these days."

He continues talking, but Jess stops listening.

The ceiling is covered with bats.

Not just covered—*carpeted*. An impenetrable layer of sleeping bats, shoulder to shoulder.

Before Jess can fully flinch in terror, though, the right synapses connect and she understands she's not looking at bats; she's looking at *hats*. An

enormous collection of baseball caps, a hundred at least, all decorating the ceiling of the garage in neat rows. The Ceiling of Shame, must be. She's never seen so many hats outside of a sporting goods store, and the strange sight coupled with the dim lighting made her imagination go wild for a second there.

Hot on the heels of that realization, though, she understands she can't let the boy see this. She can only imagine what would happen if those hats suddenly came alive and started flapping around the room. In fact, she notices with horror, several of the hats begin to stir ... sleeping creatures ready to wake.

"Hey, kiddo," she says hurriedly, "let's scoot out of here, huh? You must be ready for a snack."

Pepsi stops what he was saying, confused. Then shrugs and turns off the lights and follows them out of the garage.



"Welp, I'll letcha both get settled, then," Pepsi says as they gather in the driveway once more. "Just one more thing. Your mom."

Don't hate me. Jess's heart cramps.

Pepsi continues, "She told me we should swap cars. I'm happy to oblige—that okay with you?" He points to his truck. "This one's a reliable ol' gal, and I don't mind letting you hold on to her until whatever you're going through blows over."

Jess is flabbergasted, even as she sees the wisdom in Cookie's plan. Pepsi assures her he'll keep her (that is, Margie's) car in a garage, out of sight, and that he has plenty of other vehicles, so losing this truck for a while is no real inconvenience.

She takes out everything she might need from Margie's car, and as they trade keys, Pepsi says, "Whatever's going on, it's ... bad, huh?"

Again, those fucking tears, threatening to jump out from their hiding place. "Yeah." She clears her throat. "Yeah, it's—"

He holds up a hand. "Hey, it's okay. You don't have to tell me. I'm just happy to be of use. You're a good kid." He winks at the boy. "You're both good kids."

"Jess is a *grown-up*," the boy corrects.

“Everyone’s a kid to somebody,” Pepsi replies, and the boy mulls that over. Pepsi turns back to Jess. “I’m sorry again about the surprise with your dad.”

Jess smiles, and it feels genuine. “You have nothing to apologize for. As far as I’m concerned, you’re the best thing to come out of that man’s train wreck of a life.”

“I, uh, I wish there’d been more time for me to get the place ready for you. I cleaned it, changed all the sheets, stocked the fridge, but I’m just thinking about where you might be coming from, emotionally and all. If there’d been more time, I woulda, y’know. Gotten rid of more traces of him. Not that there were that many. He traveled light.”

“Do you know ... I didn’t see any, but ... did you ever see any pictures of me in there? Did he ever...?”

Pepsi looks down at his feet. “I don’t think he liked to be reminded of the past. The people he let down. He was...”

“A chickenshit.”

“As good a word as any. And, like I said, I didn’t get to do a real thorough look-see. So maybe be careful, poking around. If you’re feeling sensitive. Losing a parent is ... complicated.”

“Thank you. A million times over, thank you.”

She surprises him with a hug. He hugs her back.

“And hey. You should give Rose and Sal’s a try sometime,” he says. “Don’t let one bad diner experience rob you of life’s pleasures, okay?”

“Okay.” The thought of diners, though, makes her think of one last thing—something she can’t believe she almost forgot about in the wake of what happened to Cookie. She stops him before he can get into his new car. “Can I ask you a weird question?”

“Course.”

“Do you know if there are any emergency health clinics or anything nearby? You know, something a little less complicated than a hospital?”

He stares at her for a beat. She can see all the questions he wants to ask, swimming beneath his eyes like fish in a pond.

“Matter of fact,” he says at last, “there’s a doc-in-the-box not too far from the diner. Good place. No questions asked.”

He gives her the details and, with that, bids them another goodbye. Jess and the boy see him off with waves, Jess sending out silent prayers that he’s

not next in the line of people who have helped them out and then paid for it with their blood.

★ ★ ★

Of course, they're not alone.

They haven't been since they arrived.

Hidden among the trees, one pair of eyes watches everything. The approaching cars. The tour of the property. The goodbye. The old man leaving in the car Jess came in.

Those same eyes watch as Jess and the boy go into the cabin.

Behind those eyes, a mind whirs.

Jess and the boy are all alone now.

That's good. That's exactly how he needs them.

And yet he finds himself unable to act just yet. Is it fear? Guilt? Second thoughts?

He tells himself no. No, it's strategy. He won't risk anything going wrong again. He has to wait until the timing is exactly right and their guard is down.

They're all alone and will be for the foreseeable future.

There's plenty of time.



37

All this talk of diners, so Jess decides to make them eggs, bacon, instant pancakes.

Pepsi stocked the place well—as per Cookie’s orders, he’d said. She and the boy should be able to stay up here for at least two weeks before they need to make any sort of grocery run. Maybe by that time, she’ll have some sort of concrete plan for what to do next.

All the food looks new. Nothing half-used. Maybe Pepsi threw all the used stuff out. Or maybe Tomcat lived one day at a time.

The cabin kitchen has a decent gas range, and the pots and pans are all relatively well kept. *How often did he use them?* Inner Jess wonders. *What did he eat? Did he like to cook?*

She can’t believe she’s here. She can’t believe any of this.

She’s opening cabinets at random, getting a lay of their supplies. Some older-looking dry goods. A box of Splenda. Random seasonings. Instant coffee. Coffee filters. Dishes. Dish soap.

Did he buy and maintain all this stuff when he started living here? Did the cousins buy them and he just used them the way he used everyone else in his life?

Fucking miserable piece of shit. I hope he was lonely and sad. I hope he died brokenhearted and hungry and—

She opens a lower cabinet and gives a low, disgusted laugh.

“Okay,” she says. “There he is.”

Every liquor imaginable. Dozens upon dozens of bottles. Some almost empty, some almost full. Tequila. Whiskey. Port. Vodka. Gin. Rum. Even red wine.

For whatever reason, she picks through the bottles, trying to get a sense of

his tastes. It's impossible to know which bottles were prioritized or favored. Truly, a man with a welcoming palate. The only thing each bottle has in common: none of them are dusty.

Priorities. So fucking pathetic. Make sure you never have to experience a feeling, Tomcat.

Then something catches her eye. A crumpled mass of papers behind all the bottles, stuffed haphazardly into the corner of the cabinet. Not just papers but a book, too?

She pulls them out, bottles rattling, pulse already beginning to thunder, and when she realizes what she's looking at, she gives a startled yelp.

"Is it a leggy spider?"

The boy runs in from the other room. He sounds worried, but he's also clearly curious to see what such a spider might look like.

"No, no," she says, quick to allay his concerns—and to prevent a parade of imagined spiders suddenly rushing up her arm. "No spiders. No, I just ... got surprised, that's all."

He tries to see what she's holding. "What is it?"

"Nothing exciting." She shows a bunch of loose papers and a red, leatherbound journal with most of its own pages ripped out and no writing inside. "Except."

She hands over the one thing he might find interesting. A small photo, dented and creased.

His eyebrows go up. "Is that—?"

"Sure is." Little Jess. Probably three or four years old. Wearing red overalls and a yellow sweater. Perched on the shoulders of a grown man with an undeniably similar face. Both of them, grinning the same joyous grin, surrounded by trees. Of course, she's seen old photos of the two of them together before, but this particular one is unfamiliar to her.

"Wow!" the boy says. He happily studies the picture, then gives it back.

He has no way of knowing how significant the loose pages she's holding are, as well. They're clearly a different kind of paper from the journal's, and they're full of writing. Jess doesn't recognize the sloppy script, but her name is at the top of several sheets.

Drafts of a letter.

A letter addressed to her.

She didn't see a date, didn't get any sense of when the drafts were written,

or why, or what stopped them from being completed. Doesn't matter. She tears out one of the remaining blank pages of the journal then stuffs everything else back where it came from with the alacrity of someone putting out a fire. The bottles all clank and clatter at her rudeness.

The boy watches, concerned.

Jess stands, smoothing her hair and her clothes. The breakfast ingredients wait for her, unattended and arrayed, on the counter.

"Let's eat something, huh? And hey!" She brandishes the blank page. "While I cook, why don't you draw me something to put on the fridge?"

★ ★ ★

While she cooks, the boy uses a box of crayons from Target to draw. She gave him an assignment: "I want to see something that makes you happy." If she's able to decipher his circles and swirls, he's drawing a puppy, and he's smiling.

Jess is not smiling. Despite the fact that she often finds cooking relaxing, her face is pulled down in a scowl. It's taking all her efforts not to stop what she's doing and go back to that cabinet, read those damned pages. Their very existence is making her angrier and angrier.

That piece of shit. That fucking asshole.

When the food is ready, she starts gathering plates to bring to the table. Something under the table catches her eye. Something easy to miss—barely visible even now.

A pair of well-worn shoes, obviously belonging to a grown man.

"Let's eat on the porch instead," she tells the boy.

★ ★ ★

They sit at the white plastic table and scarf down their breakfast.

Dappled light falls through the screen, caresses their faces. Birds and breeze trade harmonies. A gorgeous autumn day. The air is brisk—they'll need better cold-weather clothes soon. There are probably hats and scarves and oversize jackets they could take from inside the cabin. She'd rather go cold until they get their own. And it's warm enough for now while the sun is out.

She asks the boy, "Do you like this place so far?"

He nods, mouth full of pancake. “It’s neat!”

“Yeah. Very neat.”

She can feel her dad’s letter drafts inside their cabinet, scratching at the wood like some god-awful Poe story.

She can also feel her back and her butt, which aged a few decades faster than the rest of her after all that time behind the wheel.

“How’s about we get a little walk in when we’re done eating?”

“Okay!” He starts eating even faster.



The screen door creak-slaps like a starter’s pistol as they step out into the driveway, its echoes still audible as they head for the main road.

They walk. The only sounds in the world are the birds, the wind, their shoes on gravel, their shoes on dried, fallen leaves.

Getting away from the cabin helps improve her mood a little. The beauty of their surroundings. The peace. The feelings of safety and isolation. The boy’s expression of wonder. This place is exactly what they needed. A blessing, however complicated.

Other cabins are nestled sparsely among the trees. Each building uniquely different. Some are huge. Some have SUVs parked in their drives. Some are abandoned and gutted.

They don’t see any other humans. As far as living creatures go, it’s mostly chipmunks and squirrels.

At one point, they see a deer—but then, seemingly at the same time, they both realize it’s not actually a deer; it’s just somebody’s yard statue of a deer, and it hardens in mid-motion as if it also just remembered what it was. Jess chuckles at the thought of its owner seeing his decoration in a new position next time he looks at it.

She’s not eager to get back to the cabin, so she’s content to make the walk last as long as she can.

On that thought, after twenty minutes or so, she says, “Hey.” The boy looks up at her. “So, you remember me telling you how, way back before we first met, I got a little ouchie at work and need to go to a doctor real quick to make sure I’m okay?” *Should probably make sure my back isn’t infected, too.* She adds that to her mental Rolodex of anxieties.

The boy nods.

They haven't seen or heard a single car since their walk began, but she gently pulls him over to the side of the road and then kneels down to be at his level.

"You can absolutely say no to this—I want you to feel as safe as possible here. But I also really need to see a doctor as soon as possible. How would you feel if I went to the doctor's tomorrow morning and left you here for just a little while? There's a phone in the cabin and I could show you how to use it so you could call me the minute you think you need me. It'll basically be like I'm just in another room. But if you think that'd be scary, being here by yourself, we can figure something else out, no problem."

He thinks about it. Listens to the peaceful silence around them. Then reaches up to gently touch her cheek. "I want *you* to be safe and feel safe and get your ouchie helped," he says.

It moves her beyond measure. She takes his hand and holds it in her own. "But are you sure you'd be okay? I'll be as quick as I can and then come right back."

He nods again. "I know you will." Then his eyes go wide with a memory. "But no cartoons, though."

"Definitely no cartoons." She laughs and brings his tiny hand to her lips and kisses it, grateful for his bravery, his kindness. It's a gesture so tender, so unexpectedly sincere that it takes both of them by surprise a little. Not in a bad way, but she needs a moment to recover herself. "I think the sooner I do it, the less likely any people will be out there looking for us, too. We've got a head start. Do you know what a head start is?"

He shakes his head.

"Well, it's like when you're running a race with someone but then they get a little extra time because they start running *before you—like this!*"

She starts running away from him, and he squeals in delight. "No fair!" He pumps his little legs to catch up with her, and she slows down to let him.



They find the lake a few minutes later, each still huffing and out of breath from their impromptu race.

The exercise has made them both a little giddy. They giggle as they take in

the view.

A gorgeous, placid arena of crystalline water, bordered by distant trees. This place must be a paradise in the summer.

"I guess this is where the boys do all their fishing," she says, then mentally corrects herself: *did their fishing*. Then another thought.

This is where he died. In his truck. Looking at this lake. Maybe even from this very spot.

So beautiful. More than he fucking deserved.

Her giddiness doesn't falter, but it does take on a harder, meaner edge. She's a little surprised at how much anger has been kicked up since they arrived. Like her father's waste of a life and selfish death have finally been made real, seeing this place.

She doesn't fight it. In fact, a part of her is grateful to have something to think about other than Cookie. The pain and horror of her death, the finality of—

Don't hate me.

Her mother's voice, like a whisper off the water. This time, though ... Jess begins to understand why her mother might've said that.

Tears spring to her eyes, and she shoves the thought away. She doesn't want to consider *that*. Anything but *that*.

The boy asks her a question she doesn't catch.

"What?" she asks, a little louder and more frantic than she intends.

"Does anyone live in there?" he repeats.

For a moment, she thinks he means one of the neighboring houses, the nearest of which is at least two football fields away along the lakeshore. A nice-looking house, and there's a car in the driveway—maybe belonging to whoever found her dad's body—but no other signs of life.

"Probably," she starts to say. Then she realizes the boy is looking at the lake. That's what he's asking about. "Oh. Sure, lots of stuff lives in there. Fish. Frogs. Maybe Nessie."

"Who's Nessie?"

What are you doing, Jess?

"She's a lake dinosaur."

"A lake dinosaur?"

"Sure. Everybody knows Nessie. She's big and she's nice and she's got this long neck and a tiny head and—"

As she speaks, the surface of the lake ripples outward and a long, graceful neck emerges, holding aloft a smiling, oval-shaped head. The creature blinks big, lengthy eyelashes, and looks at them, smiling.

Jess doesn't know where or how the boy learned about this iconic dinosaur design, but score one for the collective unconscious, she supposes. It's like looking at that old black-and-white cartoon of that dinosaur—Gertie, not Nessie, she thinks—only this isn't like when the boy brought malevolent cartoon characters into their reality. This dinosaur, despite its expressive and friendly face, looks very, very real. Water glistens off its scaly skin.

What's most remarkable of all, though, is the distinct lack of any threatening energy whatsoever. The dinosaur has a kind face—looks, in fact, suspiciously like Uncle Pepsi, were he an anthropomorphically female sauropod.

"I was kidding! I was kidding!" Jess tells the boy, but she's laughing, and he's laughing, too, delighted giggles from behind his hand covering his mouth.

The sea monster gives an almost offended hoot—"Fine, be that way," it seems to say—before it sinks back into the water.

The water ripples ... then regains its glassy serenity.

Jess and the boy exchange an eerily identical look—frightened but also tinged with manic glee. Two kids who just did something really stupid, waiting to see if they'll get in trouble for it. It's the most control she's ever seen him exhibit over his abilities.

"Don't—no more—you can't—*no*."

But they're both laughing too much for her to finish the reprimand.



38

She can't stop herself.

After they get back to the cabin, the boy goes down for a nap on one of the several beds. (During some fishing trips, Pepsi had explained, there could be as many as seven grown men sleeping here; hence all the options.) Jess finds herself back in the kitchen, pulling out her father's letters from his ad hoc liquor cabinet.

She clicks on a lamp in the living room. Settles into one of the ratty old Barcaloungers. Stares at the photo of the two of them for a good few minutes, then places it delicately on the end table next to her.

First thing she notices as she flips through the pages this time: on the back of one sheet is her address. Somehow, he'd found out where she lived and jotted it down. Probably the inspiration for these attempted, aborted letters.

Each draft begins the same:

Hey, Jess,

I bet you're surprised to hear from me.

No shit. Real incisive, Tomcat. Can't wait to read what wisdom you have to impart.

From there, it's multiple attempts to have a one-sided conversation with his abandoned daughter. Sometimes he starts out self-deprecatingly. Sometimes it's more awkwardly formal. In one version, he teases a discussion about his own father—that draft doesn't make it beyond a few measly sentences, which he scrawls over with desperate pen strokes.

She gets the idea that he probably made all these attempts at once, probably one drunken night, and then stuffed the pages away to look at them

fresh later, only to get even drunker and forget about them. Or maybe he didn't forget but was too scared to go back. That strikes her as more likely.

In one margin, crossed out but still obviously considered:

~~Not everyone meant to be parent?~~

At the bottom of the pile is the longest draft. In it, her dad appears to have given up the pretenses of writing a letter and just started writing free form. Sometimes the text addresses her, sometimes it's to himself *about* her. His sentence fragments flow with a strange sort of poetry, and the dialogue he has with himself almost reminds her of ... well, her own internal debates. Inner Dad.

What do I say? How do I say it?

What the hell am I doing? She's probably wondering why I left her, right?

Hands high let 'em fly, Tommy.

Well what was I supposed to do? I'm a piece of shit. I know that. Cook definitely knows that. She wasn't even surprised

When I got in that fender bender

The way she looked at me. Pure hate. Can't say I blame her. When you get in a wreck with your 3 y.o. in the back seat because you'd had 1 or 2 too many? Well, it's pretty clarifying, I bet. No one was hurt, no one was killed. But being killed was right there on the table. And it was all my fault, she made that crystal

It was the pool that was the straw-breaker. As it should've been. Worst mistake of my entire rotten life! I hope you don't remember that, Jess. I remember it. Never stop thinking about it. You were 5, you were getting pretty good in the pool. I can still see you there with your floaters on. So I let myself have

a few extra beers while we were hanging out. It was hot. Bright sun. Didn't ~~know~~ I'd mean to fall asleep. Didn't know you'd decide to take your floaters off. Thank Christ your mom found you in time and knew CPR, huh? For a while ~~they're~~ there you were as blue as the sky. We were both screaming. And if I thought she looked at me hard after that car crash

She never looked at me the same after the pool. Told me I couldn't be trusted w/ you alone and I said your 100% right, Cook. So I ~~had to leave bec took off~~ left because

Jess
Jessa

Jess looks up, almost as if he were audibly calling her.

Two near-death experiences. She remembers the car accident—without any real baggage, just as a Thing That Happened. The pool incident, however, is news to her. Cookie was never shy about sharing Jess's dad's drunken fuckups. The two of them had shared many a bitch-fest cataloging his transgressions ... but Jess can't recall anything like that ever coming up. Was it so awful Cookie couldn't stand to talk about it, even so many years later? And had Jess herself just folded it up and tucked it away in her subconscious? She *does* hate deep water. All these years in LA, she never goes into the ocean. Could this be why?

How amazing that we can compartmentalize trauma from that age. In a strange way, it almost gives her hope for the boy and all he's been through.

Her eyes flick to the photograph, then she goes back to reading.

Being a dad is a sucker's gig, Jess,

I don't like thinking of it like that, but I mean

What the hell are you supposed to do?

You donate some genetic material to make this living thing that you love, there's no question about the love.

But I mean

Your body can't carry the kid. Your body can't feed the kid.

All your body can do is stand in front of the kid when danger comes. You're given this stupid instinct to protect. But how do you protect

How do you not fail?

In this fucked-up world where there are car crashes and swimming pools and hell those were my bad but what about cancer what about leukemia or some asshole with a gun or what about heartbreak and disappointment and unfairness and and and and

Suckers gig

Doomed to fail

Guess you do what you can? But here's the real question then

What do you do if it's you?

when the danger is YOU?

Jess, if you were in the middle of the road and a car was coming at you, I'd push you out of the way.

Except I'm also driving that car. I am that car. Me being in your life.

I don't know how to explain it, kid. Not smart enough. Whenever ~~things get bad~~ bad things happen it's like walls in my head suddenly BAM see ya!

It's like I'm suddenly two people. At least two. You ever felt that way? There's the me who's running, and then the me who's inside, watching it all and wondering what the fuck are you doing, man?

Guess I'm too sensitive haha. I feel things hard, believe it or not. If you're still like you were as a kid, you do, too. And

I hope you've figured out how to deal with that better than your old man because—

Jess rips and crumples the pages into the tightest ball she can. The photo too. She can't bear seeing this version of herself smiling in his presence.

Keeping her breath steady. Not letting herself feel anything. Definitely not letting tears come.

In the kitchen, there's a little wood-burning stove in one corner. She and the boy started a fire after they got back—the boy had wanted to see how it worked, and the air was getting chilly enough to give it a try. It doesn't warm the whole house, but it gives the kitchen a comforting glow.

Without so much as a conscious thought, Jess throws the ball of paper into the belly of the stove. The flames, which had been dying down, reawaken and embrace the kindling.

For one sudden moment, she has an urge to pull everything out, rescue this tiny bit of evidence that her father had been thinking of her. The urge is so strong she almost reaches into the flames with her bare hands.

Then she remembers his journal. All those torn-out pages. He'd made himself unknowable to her. His choice. Let his excuses and justifications burn. Let Little Jess exist only in pictures and memories of those who cared enough to stick around. There are other photos of the two of them out there; she'll find them and burn them too.

How do you protect. A fragment he never got around to completing. Or maybe just a concept he never wrapped his mind around.

How do you protect.

"I just wanted a dad, asshole," she tells the burning sheets. She spits into the stove, and the flames crackle. The closest thing to a conversation she ever got to have with him.

★ ★ ★

Don't hate me.

No doubt now why Cookie said that. Not after Jess saw her own address on his letter drafts.

She doesn't feel hate, though. Not yet, at least. For now, a strange sort of peace settles around her heart. The least peaceful peace she's ever known.

This must be what air feels like in the middle of a hurricane: acceptance of what's to come. Both of her parents are gone now. Even the one who was never around, the one she supposes a dim, yearning part of herself always hoped was still out there, just on the verge of reemerging into her life. She's truly on her own now. No one to stand between her and death anymore.

She looks in on the boy, napping. He's curled into a fetal position, one thumb in his mouth. Her heart fills with a protective love, but it's a strange picture. After a beat, she realizes what's missing: he needs a stuffed animal or something. Like any other five-year-old.

There'd been options at Target, but no time to grab one. She makes the mental note to get him something the next time she's able ... then stops. Kids imbue their stuffed animals with life, with personality. They take them everywhere. They get into mischief with them. Can she risk something like that? She remembers his "boy in the wall," that imaginary friend his father had to kill, and her protector's love disperses into troubled winds.

She works on quietly prepping a few things for dinner while the boy naps. Even though the letter drafts are gone, she still feels the presence of that liquor cabinet. A drink has never sounded better. Some blissful oblivion. Wouldn't that be fucking nice?

At one point, movement catches her eye. All the fish on the walls start moving ever so slightly. He must be dreaming again. She watches until they stop, mouth as dry as graveyard dirt.



They go for another walk after dinner, after the sun has set. The stars are too vibrant to not chase after.

They walk in silence for a little while, until they reach a clearing in the trees. She looks up, and her breath catches.

The stars are impossibly vivid out here. Even the wispy spray of galaxies.

"Look at that," she says, though the boy has already followed her gaze.

"Are those all stars?"

"Yup. I've never seen them so clearly like this. Wow." The awe almost makes her physically dizzy. "They look so close. Like fireflies."

"Fireflies," the boy repeats, tasting the world. He's still got a bit of a ways to go before he can fully pronounce his *r*'s, so it comes out *fih-fwies*. "Yeah!

Fireflies! Fireflies!”

He runs a few steps forward, as if that’ll give him a better view of eternity. They each stand in their own spot for another moment, and then the stars suddenly detach and begin to swirl about in their firmament. Darting around. Dancing.

Like fireflies.

Fih-fwies.

It’s one of the most beautiful things Jess has ever seen. Distant, glowing bodies, flitting with grace and wonder, even a sort of glee. As if the universe chose that moment to come alive for them and tell them there was nothing to worry about. As if it knew their names.

But it isn’t the universe doing this.

Jess feels ice slide into her guts.

The display is over almost immediately, lasting for a five count at most, and then the boy says, “I’m sleepy.” Perhaps the effort cost him in ways he can’t articulate.

Perhaps, she wonders as they walk back, it also cost untold planets and civilizations. Perhaps trillions of alien life-forms just experienced an instant, merciless apocalypse. Who knows what kind of drastic, horrifying consequences that little display might have caused—it could have massacred galaxies. Or it could have done nothing. She doesn’t know. She can’t know.

By the time they get back to the cabin, her legs are shaking. She watches herself put the kid to bed, sing him to sleep, never once revealing how, like those stars, her guts are swirling.

The boy falls asleep, and she kisses his forehead, takes comfort in the tiny smile on his face. His hands curl against his chest, where a stuffed animal should be.

Jess tiptoes out of the room.

Fear has come upon her again, waiting for the dark and the quiet, as it so often did when she was young. Not just fear—the Fear. So overwhelming it deserves its proper status. What is she doing? What is this stupid plan of hers? She can’t even give him a teddy bear—how will they survive a winter together? How would *she* survive? As cute as that lake monster had been, consider the stars.

She’s not equipped for this. She can barely take care of herself. She’s letting him get away with too much. Another realization: she should’ve tried

to get to the clinic *today*. It might be too late now. Too many spinning plates, all starting to drop and shatter.

Not everyone is meant to be a parent, she thinks. Tries—fails—to draw a mental line through the words.

There's only one person who's been able to talk her down when things get overwhelming. But, of course, she's—

don't hate me

—not an option anymore.

All the same, Jess finds herself sitting on her own bed, phone in hand. And when the familiar (but not too familiar, because it was pretty rare to not get a pickup) voicemail answers, it takes her a couple of seconds to be able to find her words.

"So," Jess says. "You knew, huh? For how long?"

She pauses, as if any answer might come.

"Must've been years, right? You knew where he was living for fucking *years* and never told me? You *lied*, over and over. I could've reached out to him, I could've written him or called him or told him to fuck off and die or ... or had a conversation. You knew and you didn't tell me. Why? Fucking *why*?"

Saying it all out loud, she realizes just how awful it is. Anger burns, bright and fast. Tears pool in her eyes.

"Did you think you were protecting me? I mean, what the fuck, Mom?! And how often were *you* in contact with him? You're the one who gave him my address, right? Were you ever going to fucking warn me he might reach out? Let me guess: you knew he'd never follow through with it? You were counting on him to keep your secret, too? Or was it a fucking test? Giving him a chance or something? Jesus. Thanks for the fucking mystery."

She sits there, rubbing her temples, phone to her ear.

Her mother's voice, faint in her mind: *If I'd told you ... would you have reached out to him?*

All her frustration explodes out of her in a furious whisper. "*I don't fucking know!*" She breathes for a beat. "Probably not. But. God, how will I ever know now? You *dick*. You fucking *coward*. You're as bad as he was."

But she knows that's not true. After all, Cookie never left. Not even for a second.

As quickly as it surged, all her anger burns away. Only ashes remain.

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever said. I’m sorry. And I could never hate you, you absolute asshole. I miss you so goddamn much, Momma. You were all I needed, too, and now you’re gone, and I don’t know what to do. About anything. The boy ... he could kill us all. The whole world, if he wanted to. Even if he *didn’t* want to, I don’t know. What if my plan won’t work? What am I going to do when it gets colder? And what if I’m sick with something awful? It’s all just too much, I don’t know how to handle this.”

She doesn’t hear her mother’s voice, but she imagines Cookie says back, *It’s okay, kiddo. Baby steps, right? You can only eat the pizza one slice at a time.*

“Yeah,” Jess sighs. “Right.” She swallows back her tears. “I wish I could just hear your voice for real. I wish you could just tell me everything’s going to be okay.”

That voice ... Jess can feel it scratching against some thin membrane in her mind, like Cookie’s ghost is trapped behind plastic and just needs the right tension to rip its way through.

For a moment, it feels so trembly possible.

But then Jess thinks of monkeys’ paws and pet cemeteries and thanks god that her imagination can’t bring her mother back. Because she would do it. In a heartbeat, she would.

Rather than try, she hangs up the phone and cries herself to sleep.



39

Santos feels like he's losing his mind—and staring at himself in the precinct bathroom mirror, he looks like it, too.

Face squashed. Nose splinted. Eyes bruised and blackened. Hair uncooperative. Arm in a sling.

His insides aren't much better. His guts feel like they're in free fall. He came into this bathroom because he wasn't sure if he was going to puke and/or shit himself after that phone call with Director Allen. Nothing's happened yet, but the contents of his body and mind all feel precariously close to spilling out in one way or another.

"Unexplained cosmic activity." That's what the news bulletin Allen shared with him had called it.

It was almost midnight in Arizona, which means it had been like three in the morning where Allen is, but Santos called Allen right away anyway. He had a feeling neither of them were able to sleep.

He was correct.

The conversation was made entirely of subtext.

"Pretty fascinating, huh, Santos?" Allen didn't even sound tired.

"Fascinating." Santos was pacing in tight circles in the small office the Phoenix PD had given him. "Yeah."

"But I guess it's nothing to worry about. There's an official explanation."

"Is that right?"

Allen said NASA had released a statement that the sudden celestial display visible in the Northern Hemisphere for a few seconds was simply an atmospheric anomaly; no stars *actually* moved—it was just an optical illusion caused by light doing some weird refraction. Probably happens all the time and we just never notice it.

Allen gave no verbal indications that this phenomenon had anything to do with an active case; he and Santos were just two coworkers talking about a bit of trivia in the news.

“A whole lot of fascinating things happening lately, huh, Santos?”

Santos understood this to mean: *You’re fucking this up, Santos. You’re responsible.*

“Yes, sir.”

“What’s the world coming to these days?”

Read: *Do your job.*

“It’s a lot, sir.”

“Some days, I wish we just had all the answers, you know?”

Bring that fucking kid back now.

“Me, too, sir.”

Allen gave a yawn. “I’m going to bed, Santos. Hope you’re not working too hard. You need your rest.”

Work. Fucking. Harder.

Tock’s. Fucking. Clicking.

Santos hung up and ran to the bathroom.

Now he leans forward against the bathroom counter. Forehead to forehead with his reflection.

“Please don’t give up on me,” he mutters. To himself? To Allen? “Please. I’ve got this. I can do this. I was chosen for a reason.”

Of course, there’s no way he’s the only person on this assignment. He *knows* that—this is all too important. If anything, he’s just the tip of the spear. The bait. Being watched. Tailed. Judged. He can be replaced by someone else, some other ambitious lamb ready for the altar. Being replaced is basically what he’s *here* for ... unless he can rise to the occasion.

He’s *going* to rise to the occasion.

He splashes a little water on his face and then walks back to his private office.

The Scottsdale police have been pretty accommodating and set him up with this empty room, where he can spread out evidence from the crime scene.

He doesn’t really have any, though. Just a box of personal effects from some of the victims, which currently sits, closed, on the otherwise featureless desk.

He tries to put himself into a Zen state, staring at the wall. His body is a symphony of aches: all his injuries, sustained when his face met some of Sky Blue's adobe. One other source of pain, too. The red, irritated spot at the base of his neck, where he's distractedly rubbed the flesh into a shallow crater. Almost looks like a canker sore at this point. He's rubbing it again now.

He ignores his outraged nerves. Focuses on the questions he must answer.

How can he find Jess and the boy?

Where could they have gone?

Where might they hide?

If this boy was responsible for the "unexplained cosmic activity," there really are no boundaries to his abilities, are there? How threatened is the entire world?

He wishes he still had all the items from that first debrief with Director Allen. Maybe there'd been another clue in there. Maybe a better detective would have noticed something.

He suddenly realizes what it is about the phrase *tock's clicking* that has so stuck in his imagination. It's because everything feels *wrong*. The ingredients are jumbled. Moving in the wrong direction. But still counting down to some ... dreadful ... thing.

A *doom tock*. He exhales through his nostrils in a short, humorless laugh. Rubs at his neck.

Focus.

A buzzing takes his attention.

"Huh?" He looks around, places it. It's coming from the evidence box.

He takes the lid off the box, pulls a bagged cell phone out. An iPhone with a bejeweled case. On the back is a large, rhinestone C.

Bloody prints show a ghostly grip on the phone.

He knows not to take it out of its clear evidence baggie, but when he sees who's calling, adrenaline floods through him. His guts, no longer in free fall, now floating in a carbonated sea.

PRINCESS JESS.

She's calling *right now*. What should he do? Answer? Try to get her location? Can he get the call traced in time? How can he keep her from hanging up on him?

All these thoughts, whirling like
unexplained cosmic activity.

His eyes are drawn back to the blood, dried but still tacky on the plastic in finger-shaped clumps, and then he understands what Jess must be doing. Why she's calling her dead mom's phone.

Santos also lost a parent—his father, to a swift and brutal lymphoma twenty-two years ago. Nearly half his life now, but he'll never forget those days in the immediate aftermath. That grief so keen it made it hard to breathe, as if *he himself* were the one who'd actually died and was only slowly coming to realize it. That sense of unreality, that shrieking alarm in your head, telling you there'd been a mistake, this wasn't right, you're in the wrong reality.

That desperation for one more minute together. One more second. Even just the sound of their voice.

"I get it, Jess," he mutters to the ringing phone. "Goddammit, I get it."

He puts the phone back in the box and replaces the lid, letting her go to whatever voicemail she needs to hear. He doesn't try to intercept the call.

It takes about three seconds before he regrets the decision.

He yanks the box lid right off again, fishes the phone out, cursing himself

—
"Stupid moron! What were you thinking?"—but it's too late; the call has passed.

He seethes. "No!"

What a rookie move. He has no business being so sentimental; sentimental doesn't get results. He presses *hard* on the sore spot on his neck, making his eyes water.

The pain is clarifying. A potential plan begins to form: he'll set up a trace, he'll call Jess back on Cookie's phone. He doesn't have to say anything, just let her answer and be stupefied. It might fuck her up to see who's calling her back, but could she really stop herself from answering? He thinks not.

That's really cruel, though, Mickey.

But it's what needs to be done, he tells himself, already feeling a nauseous kind of guilt take root in his stomach.

Unless ...

He continues rubbing, continues pressing. Hard.

Unless ...

Think.

Jess is lonely. She's vulnerable. She's brokenhearted at the death of the

woman who was both her mother and her best friend. She needs comfort. Security. She's reeling in the unreality of loss, looking for something solid and familiar. Even a simulacrum.

Back when he'd first begun trying to understand Jess, he'd established Cookie was her only real friend. Social media supported that impression ... but had he been entirely correct?

Patterns tell you everything about a person. Patterns and impulse. He'd learned that in training. Find her patterns.

"Where'd you go run the first time?" Santos asks out loud, fingers smearing against raw, abraded flesh. "After that first attack?"

Santos knows: to the home of a diner coworker, Margorie Hurd. Found torn to pieces, much like Jess's mother. Margorie had also been older than Jess. Another mother figure of sorts? Just how good a friend was she? Willing and able to go a little further than someone Jess's age?

The ping of instinct. He whips up a request for a warrant and subpoena. Sends it to the proper channels for submission. Might take four or five hours for the records he's looking for.

In the meantime, his mind merges into other lanes of thought.

Patterns. Impulses. Margorie. Cookie. Mother figures. Where's Jess's dad in all of this? Dead, Santos knows. But if Jess is currently flailing in the wake of her mother's death, looking for anything related to that feeling of parental protection ...

He looks up Jess's birth records. Finds her father's name. Looks up *his* records. Born and raised in a tiny township in Pennsylvania called Bangor, located in the northeast of the Lehigh Valley.

Total shot in the dark, but those are the only shots Santos can take now that his best lead was quite literally shredded apart. He puts in another request for a searchable compendium of recent 911 transcripts from across eastern Pennsylvania.

An hour and a half later, he has the compendium.

Twenty-five minutes after *that* and he has a new lead.

He'd combed through the transcripts using the following terms: *unexplainable, inexplicable, strange, impossible*. Too many results, so he decided to try *monster*—

That's how he stumbled across a call from Burt Fallon, seventy-six, a resident of Monroe County. Burt swears he saw the Loch Ness Monster

emerge from Munsee Lake. The 911 dispatcher asks him to repeat himself three times, and Burt swears, “It’s the damnedest thing.” He’d been in the kitchen of his lakeside cabin, looking out the window over the sink, and saw “the goddamn Loch Ness Monster come out, plain as day. Nessie herself! And, no, I’m not drunk!”

The dispatcher on the transcript doesn’t know what to do with the old man, but Santos does.

He immediately begins searching for flights. Doesn’t matter if they’re red-eyes. Doesn’t matter that even the skies don’t feel safe right now, that the stars themselves are in danger of falling.

All that matters is the taste of licorice flooding his mouth and his bone-deep determination to not be written out of this story so easily. He’s going to make Director Allen proud.



40

The next morning, a woman named Mindy Bixby steps through the front door of the Pocono Now Urgent Care Clinic. She wears a baseball hat pulled down over her head and dark sunglasses, looking very much like someone trying to be incognito, but that's okay; she's not the first person to walk into the clinic like that.

Mindy's a young woman, but even younger than she looks: only a couple of days old. She shares her name with a character from a television pilot that never aired, and her only real possession at the moment is an email address that's as old as she is, born in a health clinic very similar to this one, on the other side of the country.

The clinic isn't crowded at all this morning, so Mindy's able to walk in and get an appointment without any issue.

There are two people ahead of her. A strangely inevitable mirroring of the day Mindy was conjured up from a very stressed woman's memory.

After around ten minutes of waiting, her name is called, and she's able to head back with the nurse.



Around the same time Mindy steps into the second health clinic of her short life, a harried FBI agent gets into his rental car at the Lehigh Valley International Airport. His name is and has always been Michael Santos—although, for a dizzying second and a half, he forgot that fact while filling out the rental car paperwork. The woman behind the counter asked him for his name and he just ... couldn't remember it. The landscape inside his head became flat and featureless, and again, he felt that rooting-around feeling,

like a hand blindly sifting through a dark box. He slapped at the back of his neck and the feeling—

hasn't happened yet

—receded a little.

It's stress, he decides. He's currently under a lot of stress. Although, his primary emotion as he settles into this car is excitement.

He's on the phone with one of the bureau's administrative assistants in Virginia—or is she a junior agent? She sounds young and eager, but she also offers no further information beyond answering any question she's asked.

Either way, he's being told great news. His hunch paid off: the warrant and subpoena for Margorie Hurd's E-ZPass records have been approved and transmitted, and the toll plazas confirm: yes, indeedly, Ms. Hurd's car has been barreling east toward Pennsylvania, despite the fact that its owner was reduced to the congealing contents of a Rubbermaid coffin inside the cold storage of a Los Angeles morgue a few days ago.

Tock's clicking, Jess.

If only he'd thought of tracing that car sooner. What else has he failed to think of?

Patterns. Impulses.

While he has the admin/agent on the line, Santos asks for another favor. Something he thought of on the plane.

These recent lapses of his memory—however brief they might be—have been disturbing. Enough so that he thinks he should see a doctor once all this is settled; find out if there's a reason for these phantom fingers he's been feeling on his neck. He could also probably stand to get the divot he's worn into his neck checked out, too. It's started to bleed a little.

Thinking of doctors, though, made him remember the last time Jess ventured out of hiding, after the attack at her apartment and the attack at Margorie Hurd's house. A risky move after all she'd seen. There had to have been a *reason*. Well, friends and neighbors, where had she gone? To what type of establishment?

Santos gives the admin/agent the name of the town where he's headed, where the lake dinosaur was sighted (not sharing that particular bit of information, of course).

"I need you to send me the names and addresses of all the nearest hospital and medical clinics around there. Can you do that ASAP?"

The admin/agent assents with reflexive efficiency. She'll get him a list ASAP. Good. That's good. He's on a roll. Don't stop it now. *Don't screw this up, Mickey.*

A few days ago, Jessa Bailey had been trying to see a doctor. Her attempt was cut short, so it stands to reason that maybe she still needs to see one. Maybe she'll risk stepping out of hiding again.

Maybe Santos can make up for the time lost, failing to think of Margorie Hurd's car sooner.

Or maybe he's way off, farting in the wind and then following the scent.

Only one way to find out.

His phone pings with the list he requested. He puts the first address into his GPS.



41

“You okay?”

The doctor watches her patient switch between laughing and crying with unnerving ease. The patient nods, two huge tears rolling down her face, wearing an inscrutable smile.

“Sorry,” the patient laugh-sobs. “Yeah, I’m ... I just can’t believe I’m finally here.”

Meanwhile, the phlebotomist finishes with the just-drawn vials of blood, placing them in the tray with the casual ease of someone who’s done this a million times.

The patient’s first outburst of laughter happened the moment the needle was pulled out of her arm. Her first bout of crying occurred half a second later. Both reactions seemed to take her by surprise.

The phlebotomist gives the doctor a look—*Good luck with this one*—and hurries out of the room, tray in hand.

The doctor, whose name is Tanya Bennett, puts her hand on the patient’s shoulder. She’s seen all sorts of reactions in this room. Laugh-crying isn’t anything new, but the intensity of this reaction certainly seems ... unique.

“So, we should have results around twenty-four to forty-eight hours.”

“So quick!” The patient guffaws. “Ugh, I’m sorry.” She wipes at her face. “Sorry.”

Tanya wishes she had better news. She lets her patient have another moment to calm herself, then says, “Well, the unfortunate thing is that, based off what you’ve told me, I think too much time has gone by for us to administer PEP. That medication is really only effective for the first—”

“Seventy-two hours. Yeah. I did the math in the waiting room and realized it’s been like, seventy-nine? Eighty? Pretty special.” No longer manic; now

calm and centered.

“It’s not ideal. But I think you should be optimistic. The odds are very, very good you’ve got nothing to worry about. And honestly, the PEP pills *really* work best when taken right away. Within an hour or two. You would’ve had to have seen a doctor immediately.”

“I was going to. I just ... got distracted.”

Distracted from this? Tanya wants to ask. She doesn’t share that accidentally stabbing herself with an infected sharp is one of her deepest fears. She can’t imagine what made this damn fool of a woman wait so long to seek medical attention.

Instead, she says, “These are strange times. I feel you. Once you get your initial results, I’d recommend scheduling another series and then continuing to check for the next couple of months. Some pathogens can take time to show up, and you want to be sure. But again: be optimistic.”

She expects more hysterics from the patient, but a change seems to have come over the woman. The calm sticks.

“I just can’t worry about it anymore,” her patient sighs, nodding. “There are too many things to be afraid of, you know? So I’ve just gotta roll with ... whatever. You can only eat the pizza one slice at a time.”

“That’s a good attitude. The important thing is you’re here now.”

“And hell.” The woman gives a strange, private, almost bitter chuckle. “Worst case, I’ll just tell him I’m healthy. As long as *he* believes it...”

Tanya has no idea what to make of that and doesn’t want to ask. Something religious maybe? She decides her patient might appreciate this, though.

“I’ll tell you something I don’t tell a lot of people, since it doesn’t always strike them as ‘doctor-like.’ The mind-body connection is very real. I believe in the power of manifesting. Try to stay positive, okay? You’d be amazed what positive thoughts can do.” She realizes what she just said. “I mean, not ‘*positive*’ in this case, but—”

The patient is already laughing over her, though. Tanya feels her cheeks burn, shakes her head.

“Okay, let’s take a look at that cut on your back.”

★ ★ ★

“You okay?”

The receptionist eyes the man at her desk warily.

For starters, he’s all banged up. Scars and scrapes all over his face. Either a broken or bent nose. One arm cradled in a sling. He looks as if he’d been put in a tin can and then vigorously shaken.

That’s jarring enough, but there’s also something off about him. The way he walked into the clinic, headed straight for the front desk, and then, for just a split second, suddenly became glassy-eyed and distant. Frozen, except for the hand that slapped at, then started rubbing, the back of his neck. Like he’d been bitten by a fly that made him forget where he was or what he was doing.

Her question seems to snap him out of whatever trance he was in.

“Yeah. Yes! Sorry. Hi.” He gives her a smile she thinks is meant to be professional and then reaches with his free arm into his jacket pocket. The receptionist stiffens ever so slightly. She doesn’t think he’s going to pull out a gun—shooters usually use automatic rifles, like that monster who just shot up that nursing home out in Arizona that was on the news the other day—but something about the guy worries her. He seems ... unnaturally distracted. Stressed. He wouldn’t be the first to come to this clinic with a lot on their mind, but still. Times are crazy. Even animals are starting to snap, it seems.

Before she can see what he’s about to pull out, though, Dr. Bennett comes out from the examination rooms hallway with her most recent patient.

That patient gets behind Weird Guy to wait for her turn at the front desk.

“Ma’am,” the receptionist says over Weird Guy’s shoulder, happy to have someone new to talk to. “You’re good to go. We’ll email you with—”

Weird Guy turns to look at the patient, too, and then gives a great, barking laugh.

“You have *got* to be kidding me,” he says brightly, as if all his stresses have suddenly been blasted away. “This really is my lucky day!”



42

Lying on the matted, cream-colored carpet of the cabin's living room, the boy is surrounded by paper and falling in love.

He's drawing. He's never been allowed to draw like this before, and it's the greatest thing.

At first, the carpet was too soft and squishy, and he kept breaking through the paper, but Jess showed him the ingenious trick of putting a big, flat book underneath, and this makes him feel like he's been let in on some ancient trade secret.

Plus, this act of creation! This conjuring forth of ideas from his head, but at last, in a controlled, satisfying way! It's bliss. It brings him back to that feeling he got, staring at those first images in his picture book, the ones that captured his imagination: the idea of there being a world of possibility at his fingertips—not to fear but to *explore*.

Right now, he's drawing dogs. Puppies.

He thinks they're quite good, too. He doesn't know the concept of "jobs" or "careers," but he feels the first inchoate rumblings of *If I could do this all the time when I grow up, I would be happy*.

He looks at his most recent picture, which was an attempt to accurately capture the dog he saw in the parking lot a couple of days ago. Golden brown, with huge, dense fur, floppy ears, and a big doggy grin.

What is it about puppies? he wonders. He's too young for much analytic insight just yet, but even he understands there's something about Daddy here. And himself. Some *alternative*. Some changing of the story they've been weaving together.

Feeling a slight twinge of guilt despite the fact that he's alone and no one can see what he's doing, the boy fumbles in his mind for what he's beginning

to think of as the Trigger, and *pulls*.

The dog on the page—a flurry of crayon circles and pencil scribbles—tilts its head at him, and a big pink tongue flops out of its mouth. A tongue he didn't draw.

Another *pull*.

The dog starts cavorting around on the page. Bounding from one side of the sheet to the other.

The boy giggles. Not just at the dog but with delight at what he's done. What he *can* do. It used to be this ability of his—his Trigger—only happened at the worst times. But lately, being with Jess, who talks to him, who listens, has made the Trigger feel smaller. Realer. More controllable. Daddy always made him feel so bad and scared, which made the Trigger happen without him even wanting, like flinching, which made the even worse things happen, and on and on and on. But now? With the scary feelings shrinking a little?

Pull.

The dog barks. Actual sound comes from the paper—the thin sheet rattles faintly with the vibrations.

I made this, he thinks. Feeling proud. Feeling whole.

Then the dog starts to chew on the white space around it. Its little puppy teeth tear into the paper, tossing scraps up into the air—the *real* air.

“Stop. No.”

The stupid dog doesn't listen. It grabs hold of its paper and starts shaking its head back and forth. The page lifts up a little from the floor. Soon there's going to be a mess. There might even be a Problem. “No, no, *no*.”

Unsure what to do, the boy scribbles over the puppy and then guiltily crumples the page into a ball. He breathes for a few beats. Counts. One. Two. Three. All the way up to twenty.

More guilt—a harsher kind of guilt—floods into him. He's sorry for what he did. He hopes the puppy didn't feel anything. Maybe he needs to stop for the day, much as he loves drawing.

Only trouble is, drawing served more than one purpose. Not only was it fun, it also took up a lot of his concentration. This whole time, he's barely felt Jess's absence ... but he feels it now.

He likes this place Jess took them to. It's quiet and pretty. It smells good. And all the fishes on the wall are funny. But he doesn't like being here alone. Being without Jess gives a unique kind of fear.

There are all kinds of different fears, he's been learning. Sharp fear—the kind that usually follows hardnoise. That's the kind of fear that makes you run, that tells you *Something* is coming and you need to hide. But there's also soft fear. Soft fear wraps around you like a blanket. It doesn't make you run, and that makes sense because where would you run to? Soft fear creeps in from everywhere. You don't even know you're feeling it sometimes. Until it's all you can feel.

He reminds himself that Jess is coming back, and very soon. He *knows* that's true. He *knows* it—which means she *will*. He just has to wear this soft fear a little while longer.

He sits very still, holding his breath for a moment. Listening. Not just with his ears but his whole body.

No, he realizes. His mouth goes dry, and he feels a tiny tremor in his tummy. No, something's not quite right.

He gets up and tries to putter around the house a little, see if looking at things—the fish pictures, the furniture—makes this feeling go away.

Outside in the trees, a bird gives a high, urgent chirp. Then another bird gives a low, menacing caw. A conversation is being had.

The boy thinks he knows what they're saying. *Something is here with us.*

He doesn't know how he knows it. But he feels it. It's not hardnoise ... it's hardquiet.

Something is here. Not in the house but outside. Hiding. Watching.

Someone.

He's suddenly gripped by the desire to hide under one of the many beds—even if there are longleg spiders waiting under there with him. The soft fear is turning sharp, and his stomach is starting to feel very, very heavy with the instinct to get small, get hidden.

Something stops him from doing that, though. A nascent sort of understanding: the more he fears being found, the more likely he'll be found. He can't let that happen.

Instead, he stiffens his spine and very, very slowly sneaks out onto the patio, heart hammering in his tiny chest. This feels very stupid, but also very brave. Very grown-up.

Very Jess.

Jess is brave. Jess has stared down all sorts of monsters and meanies. Jess only runs when she has to.

The boy looks out through the porch screen (he's not so brave that he would step out onto the driveway). Thick trees form a wall all around them.

More bird chatter. News being spread.

Yes. Someone is definitely out there. Eyes that don't belong, peering back at him.

The boy thinks he knows whose eyes they must be.

Thud THUD, his heart goes. *Thud THUD*.

He swallows. Squeezes his fists. Then speaks.

"I know you're there. I know you're watching. But..." An idea occurs to him. "You can't find me anymore. You'll never find us. I won't let you."

A word he remembers that nice woman, Margie, had used before giving him a special blanket. He tries that word out now, speaking it as clearly as he can. *Believing* in it. "We're im-vis-bull to you now. Just you!"

Pull.

The birds all let loose a flurry of caws and chirps. He can imagine whoever's in the trees right now suddenly jolting in panic, in anger, that the house he was looking at has disappeared.

Has gone invisible.

After another beat, the boy feels satisfied and goes inside to continue waiting for Jess.

He can be patient.

Patience is in his blood.



43

“I still can’t believe it,” the FBI agent says giddily as they slip into their opposite sides of the diner booth. “I mean, the first clinic on my list and there you are. It’s like that scene at the end of *Silence of the Lambs*. Only you’re not a serial killer. Ha! Anyway, I really appreciate your not running away.”

Jess wants to say something like, *What was I supposed to do, give you a chase? Start blasting the Beastie Boys’ “Sabotage” and slide over the hood of a car?* Dude all but ambushed her in the lobby of the health clinic, while she was still processing everything the doctor said. Plus, not only did he identify himself as an FBI agent—which meant they’ve found her once again—but then he said the one thing that could get her to stop and listen. A sentence she hadn’t realized she desperately needed to hear.

“I know what you’re dealing with, and I’m here to help.”

This had been sotto voce in front of the clinic’s reception desk. Afterward, he’d walked out into the parking lot with her, where he’d asked if she knew of anywhere they could talk, even for just ten minutes.

She only knew of one other place around the parts, so here they are.

Rose & Sal’s.

She wonders if Pepsi is here somewhere, eating a stack of pancakes, drinking coffee. He was right; it’s a nice establishment. Definitely nicer than Poppy’s. The view’s better, too, looking out onto idyllic small-town Pennsylvania rather than the concrete underbelly of an LA freeway.

She doesn’t think she’ll be sampling much of Rose & Sal’s cooking, though. In the complicated aftermath of finally getting her blood test, she’d been looking forward to eating something rich and greasy. Now she’s not hungry at all.

She clears her throat, tries to play it cool.

"I'm not confirming or denying I have any idea what you're talking about," she tells the beat-up-looking man who identified himself as Special Agent Michael Santos with an enthusiasm that made her think of a kid showing off his hall monitor badge. "But ... what do you want?"

"I want the same thing you want, Jess."

"Yeah? A recurring role on a multicam sitcom and Flo from Progressive's bank account?"

He snorts. "That's funny. You're funny."

A waitress comes by with waters, asks if they know what they'd like. Santos orders two eggs, over hard, with bacon, and some black coffee. He asks if they have any pie, and when the waitress offers cherry, he jumps at it. Jess says she's good with water for now.

After the waitress leaves, Santos takes a sip from his glass and fixes his eyes on Jess.

"You might like to know, that cop you shot? He's going to live. You're still in big trouble for what you did, but ... thought you might like to know that."

She doesn't show her relief. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Right. I forgot. Just like how you have no idea you've committed felony kidnapping a half dozen times over. Look. Let's—" He leans forward on the table, keeping his voice low. "Can we just *talk*? Stop pretending I don't know what's going on, what you've been through? Who you're hiding? What he's capable of?"

She shrugs. "You wanna role-play? We can role-play. But it'll cost you extra." Though she's suddenly desperately thirsty, Jess picks up her glass and takes the gingerest of sips.

"By the way," Santos says. "I'm really sorry about your mom."

She almost spits the water out.

"I know what it's like to lose a parent," he continues. "It's ... She seemed like one heck of a woman. And she sure loved you."

He's trying to throw me, she thinks. He wants me off-balance. He might seem junior league, but he's thought about how to manipulate me.

She swallows. Clears her throat. Puts the glass down.

"You met her?" she asks.

"I did. Only briefly, but—"

"Were you there the night she died?"

“I was. And I’m so—”

“Well then,” Jess says over him, “you might wanna know the last thing she said to me was to not trust you. Specifically *you*. To get as far away from you as possible.”

Now he’s the one who’s thrown. Good.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“That’s ... I’m ... That’s sad to hear. I thought we left things ... I made it as clear as I could that I was there to help. I’m just trying to help you, Jess. Sincerely. What can I do to make you trust me?”

“Gosh, who doesn’t love it when a man asks her that?”

He looks actually hurt. Flummoxed. She takes another victorious sip of water. Looks him up and down. His injuries. “What happened that night? Can you tell me?”

He sighs, shifts in his seat, the plastic of the booth squeaking a little. “I’d come to speak with your mom, to tell her the same thing I’m telling you. That you’re in trouble but that I can help you. That I’m the only one on this case—specifically *me*—who wants to make sure you’re not blamed for ... for everything.” He holds her eye contact. “She believed me. She said she’d encourage you to come so we could all meet up and talk together ... But then *he* showed up.”

“The wolf.” Said in a whisper, as if afraid of summoning. “How did he find her?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. He’s ex-military. He’s got ... skills. All I know is he was there. Waiting, I guess. As soon as I saw him and realized who he was, I tried to arrest him. I *had* him. But before I could get the cuffs on his other hand, he started to change. And he took me out.” He gestures generally to his injuries.

He seems chastened. A welcome alternative to his cocky, playing-at-*X-Files* vibe. He looks at her with sincere eyes, made all the more effective by the dark smudges of bruising across his cheekbones.

“Don’t hate me when I say I know I’m lucky. Your mom wasn’t. Your friend Margorie wasn’t. The people at your apartment complex weren’t. I’m not a religious guy, so I think it’s just dumb luck I’m still alive, but either way, Jess? I’m not going to waste it. I want to help end this. For you. For your mom. For everyone who’s been hurt or worse so far.”

Fuck. He's winning her over. "What are you proposing, then? Why do you even want to talk to me?" She wraps her hands around her glass of water to try to stop them from shaking.

"The boy," Santos says. "Take me to him. Let me take him back with me. Do that, and all of this ends. No more running. No more death and destruction. No criminal charges."

"Back? Back *where*?"

"Back to the people who made him this way. Back to the people who can cure him."

★ ★ ★

He promises her in whispered tones to tell her everything he knows. "Don't get too excited, though," he says. "Most of what I know doesn't fill a thimble."

He tells her about the boy's father's service. The medical experimentation. How "something" was passed on to the boy, but then the father decided he wouldn't let the boy be studied.

Santos is right; it takes barely any time at all to tell. But throughout his brief overview, Jess finds herself growing increasingly uncomfortable. This feels too easy. Too good to be true.

She keeps hearing Cookie's voice in her head: *Protect the boy, get him as far away as you can.*

Still. There's the indisputable fact that Santos found her. Here, in a tiny town on the other side of the country. Where *can* she hide?

"This all sounds crazy, you know," she says, to herself as much as to Santos.

"I know. Believe me, I know."

"You really think they can cure him?"

"I'm assuming you were with him when that thing happened with the stars last night, right?" She doesn't nod; he doesn't need her to. "No one has an interest in powers like his being out there."

"And what about the dad? Is there a cure for him, too?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean?" She almost has to laugh. "I mean, there's a shape-shifting super-soldier running around, murdering everybody to get his kid

back. Remember? I saw what he did to the friggin' LAPD—what's *your* plan for him?"

"Huh," he says. Muses.

"What?"

He shakes his head. "I just would've thought you understood..."

"Understood? The fuck is that supposed to mean? Do you have any idea what I've been dealing with the past few days? I understand *plenty*."

He puts his hands up. "You're right, you're right, I'm sorry. You've been on the ground; this must have all been ... To be honest, I didn't fully understand it until I saw him in the parking lot myself. That's when I started to put it all together."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Santos's eyes dart across her face as if scanning for an answer. "You really think his father is a ... a monster?"

She has to stop herself from slamming the table, from shouting.

"Asshole. I *know* he's a monster. I've seen what he can do."

"But haven't you also seen..."

"What?!"

"Jess." Pity, now. Genuine goddamn pity. "His father's a normal human being. Just like you or me."

She fully intends on a snappy retort, but her voice suddenly fails her.

"The boy is the monster, Jess," Santos repeats. "It's *always* been the boy."

★ ★ ★

Her mouth opens, closes, like a fish tasting air. She kinda wants to throw up.

"But—no, you said—medical experiments—his dad—"

"There's zero evidence those experiments did anything to *him*. Made him a carrier, I guess. But that's it. If he'd gained any sort of abilities, we'd know, right? They're pretty hard to miss. Things only started happening after the boy ran away and his dad started chasing him."

It's so obvious, she doesn't know how to process it. Of *course* it wasn't a magical boy *and* his shape-shifting father. Of *course* it's only been the boy all along. She's seen his powers at work.

Still, she fights it. "But he told me. He said his daddy ... turns into things." *It happens when he's angry.*

“Jess. He’s five years old.” As if that explains everything. “It’s not like he’s doing this on purpose. When his daddy scares him, it probably *does* seem like this is all Daddy’s choice. But I saw him at your mom’s apartment complex. The look on his face. He was *begging* not to change. I mean, for all we know, his dad is a decent guy who wants to stop this as much as we—”

“Don’t you fucking dare start that. I’m not going to start sympathizing with him now. Not after everything he’s—”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. You’re right—he’s definitely not innocent here either.”

“And the boy isn’t a *monster*. He’s ... he’s just a little kid.” She has to swallow the bitter taste of insincerity. She means what she’s saying, but she also knows she doesn’t. Not entirely.

“I couldn’t agree more. And listen to me: you’ve done a hell of a job, trying to keep him safe and contained so far. Truly. That’s why we need you. Monster or not, we need to keep that boy calm. Unafraid. Only you can do that for us. After all you’ve been through, he trusts you. So, please. Work with me here. For his sake. For your sake. For the world’s.”

Again, she thinks of those swirling stars. Those agonized galaxies.

Suddenly, the waitress is there with Santos’s food. Jess has to hold in a gasp; she almost forgot where they were.

Santos thanks the waitress, then picks up his silverware. “You don’t mind, right? I’m starving. Can’t think of the last time I ate.”

Jess realizes she’s starving, too. Her blood sugar has plummeted. She’s shaking with full-body chills that something warm might allay. But she doesn’t say anything.

It’s always been the boy.

The boy made his father a monster. The Big Bad Wolf. Even if his father was your garden-variety abusive asshole, there was nothing inhuman about him. That was all kiddo.

Which means what happened to her mom was all him, too. To Margie. To everyone.

Santos’s silverware clinks and clatters.

“I meant what I said about you doing an amazing job so far,” he tells her. “I think about how hard it was for my mom after my dad died. What it must have been like for your mom. Taking care of a kid on your own is ... But a kid like *this*?”

Jess nods, staring at his plate. He spears a bit of egg.

“You ever read *The Lathe of Heaven*?” he asks. “Ursula K. Le Guin?”

It rings a faint bell, in the way famous book titles do. She shakes her head.

“Great book. Classic sci-fi. I’ve been thinking about it a lot. It’s about this guy whose dreams begin shaping reality. Whatever he dreams of starts to come true. So he goes to this doctor, basically like a therapist, and the therapist realizes, ‘Wait a minute. With your power and my smarts, we can work together; maybe make this world a better place.’ But the guy, the dreamer, can’t control all the ramifications of his dreams. At one point, he tries to solve world hunger and winds up wiping out *billions* of people. He tries to dream up peace on earth, and that causes aliens to enslave the planet. His therapist knows it *can* work with the right kind of prompts, he just needs to find the right one, but ... Well, never mind that; now I’m rambling. The point is, that sort of power, in the wrong hands, in the wrong scenarios, it’s too awesome, it’s too powerful, too...” He swallows. Puts his silverware down. “Right now, he’s five, Jess; he’s afraid of five-year-old things. What happens when he gets older? I first learned about nuclear weapons when I was nine, and I couldn’t sleep for a week, I was so scared. It would only take a *second* for him to accidentally nuke the world. And what happens when he begins having sexual fantasies about other people? Jess, what happens when he discovers cruelty?”

How do you protect?

“I don’t know,” she says.

“You and me both.” He stares at her for a moment. Scratches the back of his neck. “You sure you don’t want any food? It’s really good.”

She stares at his plate. So much like the plates she served in a previous life.

“I think ... I think I need to use the restroom.”

He shoots a glance beyond her—she can see he’s making a mental calculation, where the bathroom is, where the entrance to the diner is, whether he can keep an eye on her ...

And even though another diner restroom is the last place on earth she wants to be, a few moments later, she finds herself inside the ladies’ at Rose & Sal’s.

Back in a bathroom, once again.

This one’s so clean. She can’t not be struck by how it’s nothing like the

hell pit that is Poppy's unisex.

She stares at herself in the mirror.

She looks ungodly. None of the physical injuries Santos has, but just as chewed up. Aged a decade at least. Sallow skin imprinted with worry lines. Unwashed hair. Chapped lips.

What can she do?

I think even if I run, he'll find me. Even if I leave him right now, he'll figure out how to track me back to the cabin. There might even be agents waiting there.

—Yes, and...?

For all her initial dislike of him, he's made some irrefutable points, points she's been trying to articulate herself over the past few days. And yet, what she really keeps coming back to are two things, intertwined like snakes in a knot.

One: *I have to protect the boy. He's just a little kid, and he trusts me. He needs me. I couldn't live with myself if something happened to him.*

Two: *This has all been his fault. He killed my friend. He killed my mom. He prevented me from getting to a doctor. It's been him this whole time.*

—Yes, and...?

Do I really have any allegiance to him? After all he's done? After all we've gone through—because of him?

Maybe she's fighting this solution because it feels too easy? Maybe she's too used to catastrophizing—and who could blame her? You spend enough time in the shit and every smell is suspect. But ... look at this bathroom. She's not in Poppy's anymore. These scenarios *are* different. Sometimes solutions come and they're anticlimactic. They're easy.

—Yes, and...?

He made his father the monster. It's not fair. It's not his fault. He's just a scared little kid. But what might he do to her? What happens when she inevitably loses her temper or snaps at him? She's barely holding it together as it is.

How do you protect?

Her half-baked plan of slow, gradual defusing is madness. She can see that now. For all she knows, his dad had the same plan, too. As for her idea that the boy could undo whatever pathogens might be in her own bloodstream, isn't that also crazy? Like that FBI agent's sci-fi story, it could have

disastrous side effects. She'd have to phrase her prompt exactly right; otherwise, who knows what the kid might do to her? Make her immortal, even—which, sure, sounds tempting at first, until you're wandering around a dying planet with no friends or loved ones—or maybe your body is still aging but you just won't die and holy fucking shit, imagine being two hundred years old and longing for death ...

Complications versus simplicity. Risks versus obvious solutions. Doing this alone versus finally having some help ...

She steps out of the bathroom. From the hallway leading back to the dining area, she can see their booth, and she watches Santos.

He's sitting there, a piece of bacon halfway to his lips, staring blankly into nowhere, frozen except for one hand, which rubs furiously at the back of his neck.

She's struck by a wave of surreality. How is this her life?

Run now. You can run now, and he might not be able to follow you in time.

It's this thought that finally clinches her decision.

Because running was what got her into this mess in the first place. And because her dad was a runner.

The running stops now.

When she slides into her side of the booth, Santos snaps back to attention. The bacon finishes its journey into his mouth.

"So," he says, after he's done an acceptable amount of chewing. "What're you thinking?"



44

He hears a car crunching up, and he rushes out the front door to greet her.

He's been so brave. He can't wait to show her how brave he's been. But bravery has also felt like a weight—he's eager to set it down at her feet. She holds it so much easier than he.

He pulls up short on the patio as he notices it's not one car pulling into the drive but two: Jess's and someone else.

He doesn't like this.

No. This is strange and unexpected. He hates unexpected.

But he doesn't run. He's determined to be brave a little while longer. Whoever has just arrived is here *with* her. He trusts her.

Despite all he's been through, he's still at the age where love and trust are inseparable, as unquestionable as gravity.

Jess gets out of her car, and a man gets out of the other—a man with a face full of hurts.

Jess makes a hand wave that tells the man to stop and wait, then Jess comes forward, opening the porch screen door with a squawk and inviting the boy to step down onto the gravel of the driveway.

He does so. She makes sure the screen door doesn't slam behind him. In the sunlight, he sees the tears streaking down her cheeks. She's been crying again. But he doesn't think she's been crying for the same reasons she's been crying a lot lately.

She kneels down to his level and puts her hands on his shoulders.

He waits for her to tell him what's going on.

"So, kiddo," she says at last, sounding very, very, *very* sad, "I've got some good news."

★ ★ ★

Silly Jess; she'd thought that by never getting married and never having children, she could avoid a conversation like this. Like the one Cookie had with Little Jess when it was time to explain that Daddy didn't want to be around her anymore.

The boy doesn't throw up like she did, but he wears an expression of disbelief and hurt and confusion Jess is sure is identical to her younger self's. It rips her heart into pieces.

She explains that this man is a new friend and that he's here to help. That the boy needs to go with him to a new place. A safe place.

"But," the boy says when she's finished, "I don't want to go with him. I want to stay with you."

The FBI agent steps forward.

"Hey, Pete," Santos says. That's his name? No look of recognition crosses the boy's face—he doesn't respond like the name means anything to him. Santos squats down, too. "Hey, my name's Special Agent Michael Santos. You can call me Mickey." The boy glares at him. "I know this is confusing, but I'm just here to help. I promise."

"I don't want to go," the boy repeats, frustrated and angry. "I don't know you."

"No, you don't"—Santos tries to laugh it off—"but I'm not such a bad guy. Right, Jess?"

Jess tries not to wear any sort of commentary on her face. "He's ... he's here to help, kiddo. That's all. He's—"

"You're a real special kid, Pete," Santos interjects. "Real special. You know that, right?"

The kid looks at both adults, not sure how to respond. Jess opens her mouth to take over, but Santos continues.

"You can do things no one else can, and that's really cool. But it's also really dangerous, right? It's been causing all sorts of—"

"Complications," the boy says.

"Exactly! Complications. So I'm gonna take you to where you won't have to worry about those complications anymore. Where really smart people can help you. Where they can make it so there are no more complications and you can just be, well, normal."

The boy cringes at that. So does Jess. “He is normal.”

“Right! I didn’t mean—I’m just saying, you won’t have to worry anymore. Doesn’t that sound nice?”

“Can Jess come with us?” the boy asks, suddenly hopeful.

That’s such a good question it rips her heart into even smaller pieces. She hadn’t thought to ask that yet. *Your father’s daughter*, Inner Jess seethes.

“Can I?” she asks Santos.

He immediately begins to flounder. “I mean, I ... I don’t know, I’ll have to check with my—maybe not right away, but—”

The boy saves him from further hemming by scurrying around Jess to hide behind her legs. Santos makes to retrieve him, and Jess holds up a hand.

“Wait,” she tells Santos. “Just wait.” He’s about to try anyway, and she stops him with a stern look and a low, serious tone. “*Don’t make him more upset.*”

Santos understands and takes a few steps back. “Yeah, Petey,” he says, too loud. “I bet we can make that happen. Of course we can make that happen.”

He’s lying.

Jess stares at him. He stares back. Offers her a “work with me” smile. Like they’re building a scene together.

It’s funny how quickly things develop, she thinks. Another thing you learn as an improviser: a good scene only takes a couple of lines to establish. Ideally, the first person to speak establishes the setting and relationship, the second person establishes the conflict, and you’re off to the races. Now, she realizes *this* scene has changed in just a few short sentences. Santos is trying to establish their relationship as coconspirators. But the conflict is she very much doesn’t want that role.

One rule about scene building, though: you’re not supposed to do it with questions. That makes your partner do all the hard work and can grind the scene to a halt.

Jess is bursting with questions.

“But is that true?” she asks. “I mean, what’s going to happen to me with all the stuff I know? All the stuff you told me? Am I going to have to be quarantined? Or killed? And where is the facility you’re taking him to? Where’s he going to be held? Are there people who care about his well-being, or are they just scientists? Will there be other people for him to play with?”

Santos stammers. “I—I don’t know that stuff yet, but I’ll find—”

“And *wait*. You keep saying how special he is—are there other kids like him? Have there *ever* been other kids like him? If he’s so special, how do they even know what to do with him? How do we even know that a cure is possible if—oh *fuck*. Oh my god, I fucked up.”

Understanding turns her guts into lead. So obvious.

She’s made a terrible mistake. In her fatigue, in her grief and fear and desperation to find a solution to this nightmare.

Santos seems to have noticed her tipping point, too.

“Jess,” he says, oozing desperation. “There are some little logistical things I don’t know, but you just have to trust me. Okay? Please. I want what’s best for both of you. I’m not going to let anything bad happen. That’s the whole reason I’m here.”

“I’m so confused. I’m so stupid. Oh god.”

“Trust me. *Trust me.*”

“Who’s the hero in your story?”

“What?” He blinks at the non sequitur.

“That story you were telling me about. The one where the guy can dream stuff up. Who’s your hero when you think about it? Who do you side with? Who’s right? Is it the guy with the powers, who’s scared of what he’s doing? Or is it the doctor who’s trying to manipulate him?”

“Jess,” he exhales. “I—I mean, the doctor is trying to make the world a better place, he’s not—there are no heroes. That’s not how classic sci-fi works, Jess.” He gives her a wheezy laugh, like she’s being so unreasonable.

Oh fuck, what have I done? I’m so stupid.

“They’re not really going to cure him, are they?”

“Jess, you’re overthinking—”

“There’s no interest in curing him. You’re taking him to the same people who did whatever they did to his father, because ... they want to study him. They want to train him.”

Cookie’s voice: *Get him far away. This is about the boy.*

“Jess.”

“They want to *use* him.”

Discovering all of this as she speaks. Hearing it out loud. Yes, *and*—ing herself.

“No, I—” But he seems unsure, like he’s putting this together, too. “No!”

He stamps his foot, cutting the thoughts off. He will not question his orders. “Jess, you’re making all this worse. Look, you’re scaring him. We’re just going to take him to a new place, with experts, who are going to make sure nobody else gets hurt and that he’s healthy and happy and—”

“They’re going to turn him into a weapon, aren’t they? They’re going to try to change the world.”

She says it quietly, not even to Santos, more to the air around them, but it has the effect of a slap in the face.

She looks up at him, sees that he has the same suspicions.

“Jess—” Trying to work up the energy to lie.

She doesn’t give Santos the time. She looks down at the boy.

“Run,” she says.



45

He doesn't plan on pulling his gun, but it's out, in his hands, and pointed at the woman, this god-awful woman who's so close to ruining everything.

"Jess," he warns her, "*stop*."

The boy has taken a few hesitant steps away, but now he's standing there, transfixed, watching the adults argue.

"Run!" she keeps telling the kid. "Get away! Hurry—he's going to hurt you!"

"No!" Santos roars. "She's lying, kid!"

Is she lying, though? His mind reels. He hasn't thought this through either—he's been so consumed with his tasks at hand, with proving himself.

But what happens to the boy next isn't up to him; that's not his job. Keeping Jess safe is a bit of altruism on his part, but that's all. The rest of these questions are, well, beyond his pay grade.

Who's the hero of your story?

The boy flicks back and forth between them, legs bent and ready, but not moving, not yet. "I don't want to run!" he whines. Then to Jess: "If I run, he'll come find me. And he'll hurt you."

"I *will* find you, kid," Santos growls. "And I don't want to hurt her, so just don't listen to her, listen to me, get in the car, everything is going to be okay."

"He's lying," Jess says. "You're not safe with him. Either he's lying to us, or they're lying to him, but remember how you feel about liars—"

"Nobody is lying!" Santos shouts. "Nobody is going to get hurt!"

"YOU'RE POINTING A FUCKING GUN AT ME, ASSHOLE!" Jess yells.

His arms twitch reflexively, wanting to bring the gun down, take that

argument away from her. He doesn't allow it to happen—he keeps the gun steady. He will not relent. Allen wouldn't relent. Allen is counting on him to not relent. He will not be proven weak. He speaks deliberately.

"You're the one with the weapon, Jess. Don't make me act in self-defense."

He regrets saying that immediately. He sees the subtle way Jess's eyes bulge: she hadn't considered this, her upper hand.

"No. Jess, don't—"

"He's gotta disappear," she says to the boy.

Santos's and Jess's voices begin to tumble over each other.

"Jess, don't you dare. Jess! I'm warning you, I will fire, you have three seconds, two—"

"Get him out of here, make it like he was never here, like he never found us, it's the only way—"

The crescendo of their overlap is interrupted by the boy's screaming. He throws his hands over his ears, squeezes his eyes shut.

"You're not here!" he shouts. "You were never here! You're not real *and you never were!*"

And then it happens.

★ ★ ★

All of this, in an instant:

The feeling of a hand punching through his brain.

No. Not through his brain.

Through his life.

Through time itself.

Not a punch. Not a fist, at any rate. A hand. Reaching, penetrating, grasping for purchase, for the best place to grab ahold of something.

It speeds through his existence, from this moment and beyond. Every moment he's ever lived. Leafing through each page in his book of life.

Not here. Earlier. Earlier. Keep searching. Keep looking for that perfect spot. That hand, that horrible hand, forcing its way down time's throat, making him choke and gag as it goes deeper. Deeper.

Looking for a seam. A hook.

Earlier.

Earlier.

Every moment.

It has always been there, because it's there now, and *there* already happened.

It hadn't happened until this instant, but because of this instant, it has always existed. Once it happens, it will always be happening. It will never not have happened.

Memory and future, colliding. Changing.

At last, it finds what it's looking for.

Deep in the earliest moments of what will eventually become Special Agent Michael Santos's life. Before consciousness. Before shape. Before form.

A tangle of unrecognizable shapes and threads congealing in their red, uterine laboratory.

The hand grabs ahold of one of these threads. Like a worm, a vine. This thread will eventually grow into a nerve, into a spine, into a spot on the back of the neck of a fetus, an infant, a toddler, a child, an adolescent, a young man, an adult.

The hand doesn't know this. It just knows it's found something it can really sink its nails into. A thread it can yank and unravel.

It's thinking in its muscle-memory way of an old sock it pulled apart and unraveled when it was three years old.

It grabs ahold. Loops its finger around the thread.

It *pulls*.

All this, in an instant.

★ ★ ★

Agent Michael Santos slaps at the back of his neck where that maddening, ghostly feeling has finally become all too tangible. Flesh explodes—unravels—from the spot, too fast, too powerful. It's like he's standing in a pressurized chamber and someone put a bullet hole through the wall right behind him. Or perhaps a better analogy is that it's like he's a whale and that spot on his neck is a blowhole, only instead of spray he's exhaling, it's the entirety of his body.

But these are just rhetorical devices, imperfect attempts to put into words

the excruciating unknitting that spreads from the spot Santos has been rubbing for (*his entire*) the past few (*existence*) days.

He feels it all. Every moment of this endless instant. An agony louder and more profound than any neuron could dream to concoct.

Each and every part of him experiences this chiral, expanding nothingness. A pitiless, ravenous vacuum only the bodies of dying astronauts lost and spinning in the soundless dark might understand.

The hand covering the spot on his neck doesn't block anything. In fact, the hand itself joins the spray, corkscrewing with a drumroll of snapping bones, and wafts into burning leaves.

The liquid in his veins bubbles and froths.

His eyes: the sclera spiral up and outward, streaked with disassembled iris, the aqueous and vitreous humors dancing in liquid grace.

He's screaming, howling, shredding, *shrieking*. But his voice twists up into a mad helium-helix and soon becomes inaudible.

Layer by layer. His skin, tearing off his muscles, dissolving in the air like flash paper. His muscles, tearing off his bones. His bones splintering into marrow-streaked shards. The shards fragmenting into smaller and smaller flakes.

The front of his chest cavity cracks into a vertical mouth as his back and spine contract inward. Ribs like teeth in instant decay. Perfectly solid viscera unzipping into cloudlike vapor.

The blood vessels.

The blood.

The nerves, stubbornly reporting their outrages until the very end, until even his atoms have bubbled and twisted their way into nonexistence.

His skin is gone.

His blood is gone.

His screams are gone.

For a few beats, there's the stench of burning metal, like scorched ozone, an acrid, painful odor, but then that's gone, too.

The last to go is something intangible.

An energy. A sense that something living *existed*. Sweaty handprints smeared on the glass of reality. But even those fade and vanish as the world tells itself that he was never here.

Never here

never here
never he



46

In a small house in Carson City, Nevada, Emmaline Santos putters around, cleaning, dusting her photos.

Duster in hand, she stops.

A noise has surprised her. A squeak.

She doesn't realize it came from her own mouth.

She looks up from what she's doing.

What just happened? Something just happened ...

A molasses-thick feeling of dread oozes through her heart. Makes her chest heavy and baleful.

But she can't put a finger on what the matter is.

I was dusting this end table and ...

She looks back down. There's a framed photograph there. She bends to inspect it, heart fluttering madly. Like a hummingbird.

What...?

What...?!

She screams at what she sees. Or perhaps what she doesn't?

She screams until the neighbors, Joanie and Andy, break the door down to find out what's the matter.

I needed that door fixed, she thinks as she screams. Sometimes it sticks when it's humid. I was going to ask Mickey to fix it. I was going to ask—who?—who??

She doesn't stop screaming, even as dear old Joanie and Andy try to physically restrain her.

She doesn't stop screaming as they call for an ambulance.

She doesn't stop screaming as she's taken to the hospital.

She doesn't even stop screaming even after her voice finally gives up the

ghost and the only sound that escapes her throat is a ragged whistle.

She screams her silent scream as her ruined throat drips blood down her trachea and her larynx is rendered paralyzed.

For the rest of her life—her miserably long life—that scream continues. For the few hours she sleeps, she whimpers and groans miserably, and when she wakes up, her screams resume through vocal cords completely shredded and still, through a face twisted in uncomprehending misery.

And no one—least of all she—knows why.



47

The two of them are silent for a long time.

The world is silent, too. No birds chirp. Even the wind seems to be holding its breath. Shocked by what it just witnessed.

First to speak is the boy, whole minutes later, maybe even hours.

“What did I do?” He doesn’t ask as if he’s forgotten. He asks with uncomprehending horror. Jess has a strange insight that, even if Santos is now gone forever, even if the specifics of who it was begin to dissolve, the two of them will never really forget what they did to *someone*. Those screams. That smell.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” the boy says. He brings his eyes up to meet hers. “Why did you make me do that?”

“I...” Jess begins. “I didn’t...”

Those screams.

That smell.

He just unmade a person.

She’s dimly aware that her face is twisting, contorting in obvious disgust and loathing as she looks at (*the monster*) the boy. She tries to fight it, but she’s so horrified at what he’s done that her expression must be showing.

He just unmade a person. With his mind. He just—!

“Why did you make me do that?” The boy’s tears begin to spill down his cheeks. His voice becomes thick. “*Why did you make me do that??*”

She needs to comfort him. He’s only a kid, she tries to remind herself. He’s just a scared—

he just UNMADE a PERSON—

kid.

Her head throbs. Knowledge of what they did. Memories starting to

conflict. She brought someone here—who? Why? The details are achingly, maddeningly close, but her synapses won't connect them. The boy has punched messy holes in her memory, in reality itself. He's too powerful. How can you train *that*? How can you make *that* safe? Oh god, how can you look *that* in the eye?

What did I do? Why isn't anyone here to help me?! I thought someone else was here to—

Her thoughts are cut off as the kid begins to wail. A long, loud fire truck siren of a sob. Huge tears burst from his eyes.

"I DIDN'T WANT TO DO THAT."

He stamps his feet, waves his hands in front of him. Snot balloons out of his nostrils. It's a tantrum, a garden-variety tantrum because he's just (*a monster*) a child.

She forces her terror, her revulsion, down and goes to him. She hears placating words coming out of her mouth, barely audible against his maelstrom. She tries to rub his arms, his hair—he shoves her away. She tries to reengage. He shoves her again.

"I didn't want to do that!" The boy, who is only five years old, howls and sobs. "That was bad! I did bad! *You're* bad, too! I hate you!"

"No," Jess tries to say. "No, shhh, it's okay. You're okay. You're not—"

A sudden cramp seizes Jess's body. Not an organ cramp, a stomach, a uterus; her entire body is seized with agony. She can't breathe.

She looks down. Sees her hands.

Her fingers twist and break. Her nails darken and squeeze farther out of their beds.

Thick, coarse hair stabs its way out of her skin.

Comprehension like a runaway bus slams into her.

Oh ... oh god, no ...

"You're bad, too!" the boy manages through his tears. "You're bad!"

She feels like she's being set on fire, the whole-body cramps are so intense.

He's turning me into the monster now.

He's turning me into—

Something begins shifting inside her skull. Scratching. Clawing on the inside. A second shape preparing to burst forth and be born. Her vision fades behind a veil of red.

“Please,” she gasps. She won’t have a human throat for much longer. “Don’t. I’m sorry. Don’t do this. I’m not like him! Please—”

But her mind is shrieking: *The man was right (which man who) the boy is the monster, not the father, and now you’re the monster, too, like your father.*

“Please, baby,” she begs, falling to her knees. “Please don’t, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. You’re not bad, I’m so sorry, I’M SORRY, YOU’RE NOT BAD, YOU’RE NOT—”

The cramps suddenly let go.

She falls forward onto the heels of her hands. Her *human* hands. Her bones shift back into place. The thick hair covering her arms falls away. The straining, itching shape inside her skull recedes ... dissolves ...

When she’s able to see clearly, she sees the boy standing there, face in hands, shoulders shaking with sobs.

“I’m sorry,” she wheezes. “I’m so sorry. It’s okay. Come here, it’s okay. We’re gonna be okay.” She holds her arms out for him.

He shakes his head.

“I’m bad,” he whispers. Finally looking up at her. So small. So hurt. “I did bad. I always do. Daddy was right.”

With that, he turns and runs into the trees.

“Wait!” she calls after him.

Her body is so disoriented by what it just experienced that it takes her precious seconds to find her footing. She staggers up and after him. “Wait! Come back!”

A faint, furious voice responds from somewhere too deep among the trees: “*You can’t see me now either!*”



The trees are faceless giants a hundred feet tall. Densely packed. Impenetrable—but the boy is small enough to find himself lost within them.

He stumbles his way through their unyielding trunks, leaves crunching underfoot, his tears blurring the greens and browns.

He didn't want to be bad. He just wants to be good. That's all he's ever wanted. Why can't he just make that happen?

For the first time, he thinks the words, *I wish I was never born*. He feels a faint tingle at the base of his neck—but then, in his memory, he hears high-pitched screams, the worst pain he's ever heard, from that awful bad thing he just did, and he can't commit to the wish.

Finally, he slumps against one of the trees, slides down into the dirt onto his butt. He folds his arms over his knees and weeps for as long as the tears will come.

When they run out, he wipes his face and looks around. Trees stretch out in every direction—if he had the word, he would think of *infinity*. He can't have been sitting here for too long, and it was bright daylight when he ran away, but the trees are packed so tightly together that a twilight gloom falls over everything.

He feels emptied. It reminds him of the time he got very sick when he was younger. A fever. Vomiting, all of it.

Perhaps that's why with this emptiness come memories of being cared for. Of being held. Rocked. Caressed. Fed. Soothed.

Of the strong, sure hands that have been there for as long as he's had thought. Of the deep and straining pain, need, *want* for those hands whenever they were taken away. Whenever he didn't deserve them.

He's not meant to be alone like this.

He needs an adult. A caretaker. He's just a child.

I want my daddy, he thinks. I miss Daddy.

He's surprised at how brightly he feels this desire. How not *complicated*.

That comes a few moments later, when he remembers what Daddy can be like.

But this time, even though the boy's body fills with terror, a strange part of him welcomes it. *That's fine, this part of him thinks. Daddy will punish me ... but I deserve to be punished. Because I'm bad. I've done such bad things.*

Daddy was *right*. And Daddy is the only one who can make him better.

It will hurt. It will be scary. But it's the right thing to do. And maybe ...

... maybe after the hurting, Daddy will love me again.

He snuffles. Looks around at the dizzyingly vast forest.

"Daddy," he says. It falls out of him like the sigh of the condemned on the scaffold.

His heart thunders with fear.

He closes his eyes.

Come find me, Daddy. You can find me again.

Come punish me.

Come take me home.

★ ★ ★

To Jess, the trees remind her of fun house mirrors. Each trunk, a reflexive clone of the next, repeating and repeating and repeating into distorted eternity. On the heels of this image, an even more unexpected one: that movie *The Matrix*, with its never-ending rows of CGI weaponry whooshing past its heroes.

Having these references helps her wrap mental hands around the situation, but it also reminds her again of the instinctual nature of imagination. How immediately it works, how necessary it can be for processing what's going on around you.

How impossible it is to turn off.

I've got to get out of here.

If she's being totally honest with herself, she's finally reached her breaking point. She wants to run away as far as she can, get as much distance

from this boy, this situation, as possible. She can still feel how her bones began to shift, how her skin began to burn. She can still remember that horrifying other-shape scuttling inside her skull ...

The problem is, Outer Jess went into action before her brain could catch up. She ran after the boy when he disappeared beyond the tree line ... and now she can't find her way out again. The trees are everywhere, even behind her. She didn't go that far into the woods, but the woods swallowed her up all the same.

He's doing this. He's the monster.

What happens when he discovers cruelty?

She stops, spins around, trying to ignore the panic scratching at the base of her spine, trying not to drown in the impossible distortion of the never-ending stretch of trees. He could be anywhere, doing anything. He could be preparing to do to her what he did to ... *Who? Who am I trying to remember?* He could leave her lost in these woods forever. God, she just wants to get back to the cabin—maybe raid that liquor cabinet and drink this nightmare away.

She closes her eyes. *Stop. Don't panic.*

He's just a kid. Not a monster. A scared, hurt, confused, ashamed little kid.

Another thing she can't forget: he's the only one who can stop this, who can get her out of here. She has to find him, reason with him—without losing her calm. She never wants to feel that breaking, that burning ever again.

One thing at a time, then. Find him. Get out of these trees.

But how? He said she couldn't see him anymore.

So play by his rules. Don't look. Listen.

She holds her breath. Focuses.

Faintly ... she hears sobbing.

She runs toward it. The noise gets closer. So close that she starts to believe he's nearby, that maybe she'll actually be able to find him, and then—

There he is. Sitting against a tree, head in his arms, weeping.

Was he upset enough that his invisibility wore off? Or did he decide to take it back on purpose? Her heart gives an anxious lurch, knowing that when he looks up at her, his expression will tell her everything. *If he looks at me with hate, I'm dead. If he looks at me with relief ...*

It's neither. It's the purest fatigue she's ever seen. The boy wipes at his

eyes, his nose.

“Go ’way,” he says.

She keeps her distance. “I can’t, kiddo. I’m stuck in these woods. You’ve got us stuck in here. You gotta let us out.”

“I’m not doing *anything*.” Petulant. Frustrated. “I’m just ... waiting.”

“Yeah? What’re you waiting for?”

He kicks at the ground with his heels. “I’m tired. I’m hungry. I’m scared. I hate this. I HATE THIS.”

“I know.”

“I don’t know what to do. I feel like ... like everything’s broke. Like I’m all broke.”

“Yeah.” She squats down. “I know that feeling. Sometimes I think that’s just what being alive feels like.”

“I hate it!” He looks at her, his face a tear-streaked portrait of misery.

“Hey, don’t say that. As long as you’re alive, you’ve still got...”

“What?”

She shrugs. “Hope. Time. A chance to turn things around.”

“I’m a bad kid,” he says, shaking his head. “I don’t want to be bad. I don’t want to hurt so many people, but that’s all I do.”

Now’s your chance, she realizes with sudden and urgent clarity. *You can end this. Maybe he’ll finally be receptive to making this all go away.* “Not true, kiddo. You do so much more than that. Hey. Will you walk back to the cabin with me? I’ll tell you everything I know about you, all the good stuff, and we can work on this together?”

Hope brightens his face for a moment, then he clouds over again.

“It’s too hard. And I’m too bad.”

“It is hard,” she agrees. “But you know what? I think you can do hard things. I think you can do *anything*. Will you trust me? Just one more time?”

He looks at her again. This time, really stares at her, trying to read something in her face. “You really think we can make things better?”

She puts every ounce of effort into not showing how she really feels. “I do, kiddo. One hundred percent. And hey, if we need a little break? We can always play gin rummy.”

That makes him smile a little. She holds her arms out, and he gets up, goes to her, lets himself be hugged. In that embrace, feeling his tiny body close to hers, she actually *does* believe that there’s a way out of this.

Until the first low rumble slithers through the fallen leaves.

★ ★ ★

She's not even really sure she felt it ... until the second one.

The boy pulls away from her. His face has gone white.

"Oh no," he says as if just remembering something awful. "Oh *no*."

"What? What is that?"

"I did bad."

"It's *okay*. We're going to figure all that out. We're—"

"No, I did more bad than that." He looks off into the trees. Whining with fear.

Her stomach drops a little.

"What do you mean, kiddo? What did you do?" Keeping her voice soft, making sure it sounds curious and not totally fucking terrified.

"Um." He tries to figure out how to tell her, wipes at his eyes with the backs of his hands. "Daddy always said when I did bad things, I need to be punished. He said I needed dis ... dis—"

"Discipline?"

He flinches at the word. "And I did bad, so I needed Daddy. And I also missed Daddy. And that's bad, too. And so I..."

This time, she hears it as well as feels it in the ground.

thud ...

thud ...

Getting louder.

"I'm sorry," the boy says, grabbing her arm. "I'm sorry, Jess."

Thud ...

Thud ...

Like heavy machinery.

Or bass turned up high.

Or—

Thud ...

Another stupid fucking movie reference fires off in her imagination. Not *The Matrix* but a different blockbuster she saw when she was very little. At the theater with her mom—maybe even her dad, too? The place had been packed, buzzing with excitement, and the dread had started from the very first

scene. By the time they got to *this* scene, she'd had to run out to the lobby because she was hyperventilating so hard. Because ...

Thud ...

THUD ...

The *T. rex* was coming. Nobody had warned them *Jurassic Park* would be so goddamn scary. Even when she'd finally seen it, years later and from the safety of her own tiny TV screen, when that monster finally burst through its wire fence, that ancient horror rendered unmistakably alive, it had lost none of its power.

THUD ...

THUD ...

Closer. Almost on top of them.

But this isn't a *T. rex*. This is something far, far worse.

The boy is full on hyperventilating with terror now. Jess might be, too.

Just you wait until your father gets home, she thinks. No one will be spared.

Barely a few yards away, a wolf at least twenty feet tall bursts through the trees, looking straight at them.



49

The creature is so massive Jess's mind can only process it in tiny snapshots.

Fangs as big as her forearm, slick with gallons of dripping saliva.

A snout like a pickup truck.

Eyes the size of exercise balls, the color of rotten yolks.

Hair as thick and rangy as moss—no, like the dangling scalps of stacked piles of dead women.

She scoops the boy up in her arms and runs.

A roar like a bomb blast follows them into the trees.



The boy has begun to cry again.

"I'm sorry," he keeps repeating, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

In her feverish mind, she wonders: *Is he saying that to me or to his father?*

"Make him go away," she manages in between labored breaths, trying her best not to trip over branches or slide in leaves while they run. "Make it so he can't find us anymore."

"I'm scared," he responds in a whine. "I'm too scared."

"Me, too," she says. How can you keep your thoughts clear with something like this after you?

Behind them, too close, another tree explodes as the thundering giant follows.



She zigs and zags, running in circles, trying to lose the pursuing giant. The tree cover is thick enough that the effort of pushing through seems to slow

the wolf down a bit. But those planet-shaped eyes, those radar dish ears, find them more often than not.

Her lungs burn and her legs cramp. The kid gains another five, ten, fifteen pounds in her arms. She can't outrun it. Its legs are too large, the ground it can cover too vast.

She knows she's going to soon run out of options. She darts in an unexpected—*please, god!*—direction, and finds a thick copse of trees. Remembering their time on the hotel roof, she acts quickly, setting the boy down and wiping his tears.

"Okay, sweetie," she says in as steady a voice as her pounding adrenaline will allow. She points in a random direction away from the sound of heavy footfalls. "If you run that way, you'll find the cabin. Okay? Just head that way and you'll get there. Understand me?"

The boy nods.

"Calm yourself down. You can make all this go away. Tell your fear to *go away*. You can do this. Everything is *okay*. You are strong, and you are *good*."

Another roar. Another explosion of wood and leaves. The ground shakes as the wolf forces its way toward them.

"Go! Now! I'll be right behind you in just a few minutes. Believe that! Make sure you *believe* that."

With another more decisive nod, the tiny boy takes off running in the direction she pointed him in. She tries to find a landmark, something to help her orient herself and remember where he ran.

Will this work? Inner Jess asks.

"Who fucking knows?" Outer Jess responds.

Through the veil of trees, she can just barely make out a horizontal line, highlighted by traces of white. The lake. The kid ran toward the lake. Shit! Their cabin definitely isn't in that direction, and the lake won't provide them any cover!

No time to worry about that now; she just has to hope the kid's powers come through one more time and he finds himself at the cabin. Not that any place is safe from—

Another snarling, deafening roar.

Not going to work, not going to—

"Shut up."

Hoping the real kid is far enough away to not hear her now, she curls her arms around an imaginary child against her chest and starts reprimanding in a loud voice.

“Stop crying!” she yells. “He’s going to find us! Stop!”

Still yelling, she takes off running in the opposite direction, deeper, deeper into the trees.



50

The wolf hears her and gives chase.



51

It's a decent-enough plan, considering the lack of time to think about it. Get the monster deeper into the woods, lose it with her newfound agility and speed, then book it for home, where she'll have a little more time to help the boy make this nightmare stop.

There's only one problem. She's just too tired already. She has to skid to a halt a few minutes later, legs watery, blood thundering in her ears.

She only means to stop for as long as it takes to catch her breath again. While she gasps for air, she notices she's stopped a few yards away from a building.

An abandoned, ramshackle cabin. Like a half dozen of the other ones they'd passed on their walk around the area yesterday. Run-down. Broken windows. No front door. Probably home to vagrants during the warmer months, or maybe some wildlife. Smaller than the semi-suburban-feeling home she and the boy are staying in; this building feels far more deserving of the term *cabin*. Still, shelter is shelter. Maybe she can hide in—

The wall of the abandoned cabin suddenly speeds toward her. She only registers *she's* the one flying toward it an instant before impact.

The world cuts to black. Stutters again into focus. Her back aches where she was swatted by something massive. The searing pain in her front is even worse. Broken ribs, no doubt—air comes in thin, whistling gasps as she tries to breathe. Almost a blessing, really, that the abandoned cabin was here to stop her flight; otherwise, she might've wound up skewered on a branch or decapitated by a tree limb.

She staggers to her feet, the world still fading in and out behind black stars, as the gigantic wolf rumbles toward her. The carrion stench of decay fills the world. The wolf blots out the afternoon sun, swallows Jess in its

shadow. Still yards away from her and yet so, so close.

The doorless entryway to the cabin is just to her right. Ignoring the asphyxiating pain in her chest, she rolls in that direction, falling inside the dilapidated building just as claws the size of pickaxes slam down into the earth where she'd been standing.

For a moment, she thinks she might find some safety inside the cabin, but then she notices the entire back wall of the building rotted away. No, not rotted. Burst. Something exploded through the back of this cabin, and sunlight streams into the cabin as if to say, *No hiding in here, kiddo.*

It's in that sunlight that she notices certain items strewn on the floor.

A bedroll.

Bags of dry food. A lantern.

Ragged shreds of clothing.

The leather scraps of boots.

All of it looking, despite the tattered remains, very new, very clean. Very fresh.

Someone had been staying here very recently.

It comes to her in a flash.

The boy's father.

He'd found them, had been waiting for them here in an abandoned cabin by the lake, somehow. And when the change overtook him, when the boy summoned him, his clothes were rendered into rags as the giant wolf exploded through the abandoned building.

This place is no shelter. There is no shelter. Not from the Wolf.

Another roar, just outside. Her head rattles like the beverage cart in a turbulent plane.

Should've had the kid make me immortal after all, she thinks wildly.

Before she decides which direction to run once more, she notices something else on the floor.

Beside the tattered clothes: a gun.

Its handle is wrapped with tape—something about it looks ugly and mercenary. She knows all too well, from Kelsey to the seeming entirety of the LAPD, that guns aren't going to stop this thing, but there's at least a semblance of protection in her hands now.

Having seen a thousand movies with a thousand psychopaths taunting their recently armed victims, she knows to check for the safety. Doesn't mean

she knows *how* to do it, so it takes her a few moments to identify the damn thing. She has to move carefully so as to not accidentally shoot herself in the face while she disengages the small toggle by the hammer.

Once finished with this, though, her heart lurches—not at any noise but at the absence of it.

It's too quiet.

Suddenly, horribly quiet.

She hurries out of the building. The monster is gone, the sounds of snapping trees telling her it's moving off to find the boy. It took her play and ran with it.

No!

Her chest is agony, her breath whistles like a factory insisting it's quitting time.

But it's not. She's got her own play to attempt.

She frantically looks around, searching for any hint of the lake. Spots it distantly through the trees. Closes her eyes and hobbles as quickly as she can in that direction, hoping whatever shortcut the boy's impossible geography provided still holds true for her. Believing in the boy's belief that she'll get to him first before the monster, no matter what form it takes or tricks it uses.

Please, god! Please, god! Please, god—

When she opens her eyes, she's limping through a clearing toward the circular driveway of their cabin.

"Thank you!" she manages in a wheeze.

The boy is standing outside. Hands clenched. Face tight with concentration. Mouth moving in recognizable shapes: he's counting. Trying to calm himself. His eyes open at her approach.

"Hey!" she gasps. It hurts so badly to speak, but she's too relieved. "Told you I'd be right behind you!"

A frustrated tear spills down his cheek.

"I'm trying, Jess," he says, distraught. "I'm trying, but I can't make him go away. It's too—"

More trees explode in the not-too-distance, and the boy flinches.

"I know," she says, pulling up close to him. Thinking once again of the trick that worked on the hotel roof, she painfully kneels down to his level. "It's too scary. But also ... the trees are too thick for him to get here. Can't you tell?"

He considers. Nods hesitatingly. When she turns around, the tree cover is even thicker than it was before. A good first step.

She remembers something else—what he did when he stormed off. “Can you make it so he can’t see us? Make us invisible?”

Another hesitating nod. He closes his eyes and focuses.

More roars and sounds of frustrated rage from inside the trees.

The boy gives up, shaking his head. “I can’t. I’m too scared.” He’s literally trembling with fright and effort.

“It’s okay,” she assures him. “I know he’s loud. But the trees are too thick and he’s too big. He can’t get to us. It’s okay.”

Unless he finds a different way to move through the trees, Inner Jess pipes up. *Plus, he can still smell us. He’ll know where we are, even if we’re invis—*

NOT HELPFUL, she reprimands herself, grateful the kid can’t hear her thoughts.

He’ll find a way, though. He always finds a way. A horrifying way.

Jess does her best to ignore the doom-thoughts. “It’s okay. Let’s get inside where it’s quieter. You’re doing so good. You’re so brave, kiddo. I’m so proud of—”

A strange noise makes her stop and listen. From inside the woods. No longer the fierce stomping and snapping of trees. Something creakier, like a boat on the waves.

She notices the kid’s expression. His eyes have gone huge in uncomprehending surprise.

She turns to follow his gaze.

Has to blink to process what she’s looking at.

The trees are densely packed together, but not so much that she can’t see the shadowy shape barreling through them. No longer pushing and shoving its way with difficulty. Moving instead like ... *What? How?*

As the shape nears, it catches more light and Jess is able to see more detail.

“Oh my god,” she manages.

She’s witnessed too much by now to doubt her eyes, but even so, this is a hard visual to believe.

The giant wolf has sprouted hands and arms all over the surface of its body. Its snout points forward like the nose of a torpedo, and in a ghoulish corona are scores of grasping, pulling limbs. Some huge, some small, some

human, some animal, some insectile. The trees bend and bevel as it launches itself over, through, between them.

Jess's body breaks out in chills at the unnatural, uncanny, undeniably organic sight. She wants to run, but she's hypnotized. The boy, too. The front of his pants has gone dark with urine. Either he had similar fears as her own or his daddy really has figured out ways to change on his own now.

The horror reaches them in no time, hanging above them at the edge of the tree line. Looming like a storm cloud. A ponderous planet. Its massive head floats over them, dwarfing them.

Jess manages to push the kid behind her. The movement sends white-hot shards through her abdomen that almost take her already-scant breath away. She can feel the boy trembling behind her and wonders, *What happens now? Does it eat us both? Tear us both apart? Or only me? Does it scoop the kid up and run away?*

"Go away," she manages. Sounding so laughably small. She gathers more strength. It's so hard to breathe, let alone yell. Her voice shakes with the effort. With the terror buzzing through her veins. "Go away! He doesn't want you here!"

She doesn't actually expect that to work, but the wolf's head cocks a little, as if in consideration.

The myriad hands holding it in the trees lower its body, and two large legs emerge to support itself on the ground.

Another massive arm emerges. Before Jess can move, fingers wrap around her torso and she's being scooped up into the air.

The pain is immense. The wolf isn't even holding her that tightly, but her body is so battered that being held like this is agonizing. As is the knowledge that it could crush the life out of her if it pleases.

The boy screams below, powerless.

The wolf brings Jess toward its face. The rumble of its throat, like a thousand idling engines. Sick, fevered warmth radiating from all around it.

Any moment now, it's going to pop her into its jaws, chew her to shreds.

A deep, primordial, almost numbing fear pounds through her skull. She's about to see what her mother saw. What Margie saw. Hell, even her father. *Everyone* who has ever died. Come for her at last, with no escape.

The giant wolf's lips begin to curl backward, the fur around its maw sliding and parting like kelp around an emerging leviathan. A wall of

clenched teeth the size of cellos, nicked and grooved. And something happening behind those teeth. Everything she's ever feared, waiting for its big reveal.

Death itself.

In that impossibly slow second before the wolf opens its mouth, though, she realizes something. Her arms are free, like goddamn Fay Wray, and in one of her hands ...

The sight of the wolf-creature burrowing past the trees had been so surreal, she'd almost forgotten she was still holding on to a goddamn gun. She knows she can't kill it—but can she at least hurt it? Maybe give the boy a chance to run away? That's what Cookie did for her.

Screw it. Jess raises the gun with both hands and points it at the yellow yolk of one of the wolf's giant eyes. *Welcome home, motherfucker.*

In that instant, the wolf opens its mouth. Jess is so startled by what she sees inside, she squeezes the trigger by accident.

Thankfully, her aim was true. The wolf's head snaps backward with the impact of the bullet. Almost simultaneously, the thing inside the wolf's mouth whips out and smacks into Jess, sending her flailing backward, out of its grip.

She hits the dirt, landing on her back. Her broken ribs howl. All her air is gone.

The gun scatters from her hand somewhere across the driveway.

As she gasps for breath, her ears ring with the gun's report. One other sound, too:

The monster is reeling in pain. She succeeded in hurting it—badly, sounds like. If she hadn't hit it precisely when she did, she would have been skewered by what she saw—what she *thinks* she saw—hiding behind its teeth.

The wolf is leaning away now, paws clamped over its wounded eye, mouth open to the sky, so Jess can't see to confirm. But the image is burned in her brain. Inside the wolf's jaws, behind its serrated and gargantuan teeth. Wet and coiled like a snake. Not quite a tongue, but—something sharper. Something almost ... needlelike.

The boy runs to her. "Hurry," he's urging. "Hurry!"

The monster is still yowling in outrage, two paws covering its wounded eye.

Jess wheezes to her feet, lets the boy lead her. She's in so much pain the world has gone gray.

"There," he says, pointing to the external garage. He tugs on her arm to lead her there, then stops. "Wait." He lets go of her for just a moment. Runs to the cabin porch—so perilously close to the stumbling legs of the giant, wounded wolf. She wants to stop him, but she's in too much agony. And he's clearly got a plan.

Quick as he can, the boy springs up the three wooden steps leading to the screen door of the patio. He opens it up as wide as possible—it gives its telltale rusty shriek—and then he lets the door slam shut. *Whack!*

Kid, you're a fucking genius, she thinks as he hurries back to her. Even under its howling protestations, the monster no doubt heard the noise of the screen door. It'll think they've run into the cabin instead of hustling into the dark garage.

The automatic roll-up door to the garage faces the driveway, but there's a small side door around the right flank of the building. That's where they go. Once inside, she cracks that side door open the tiniest amount to peer out and see what the monster does next.

It has begun to regain itself. Shaking its massive head, trying to rid itself of the pain in its eye. That was one hell of a good shot. She's two for two as a markswoman.

She also doesn't know if it's her change of perspective or just plain old wishful thinking, but the wolf seems smaller somehow. No longer twenty feet tall. Now maybe fifteen.

Still bigger than the cabin, though, which is where the beast focuses its rage. It swipes a huge paw at the screening along the patio, flaying the thin wire with its claws. Then it works on lifting the entirety of the patio up from its foundations, tearing it to pieces, trying to get to the main body of the cabin.

It's going to destroy the place looking for them. The cabin won't put up a fight for long. They've only got a little time before the wolf moves on to the garage next. Little pigs, little pigs.

What can they do? What can they do?

She quietly shuts the side door, leads the boy farther into the dark, cool garage. They have tools here. Some power tools. Shovels. Fishing rods. Propane tanks. All laughably small against a nightmare this size.

“Are you okay?” a small voice asks her. She looks down and sees the boy is staring at a blood blossom on her chest, soaking through her shirt.

I was stabbed with something.

The wound isn’t deep; thankfully, whatever got her didn’t get a chance to go in too far. But—

I was stabbed with something real. I didn’t just imagine it.

“I’m fine,” she wheezes. “Just banged up. You?”

The boy nods. He seems more present now that he has someone to take care of and to take care of him.

Outside, the sounds of the wolf tearing apart the patio and cabin continue. Loud and furious. Huffing and puffing and no one will be spared.

“We hurt him,” Jess says. “Did you see that?”

The boy nods again.

“You know what that means?”

The boy considers. She answers for him.

“That means he *can* be hurt. No matter how scary he is. You understand?”

Even in the darkness of the garage, though, she can see he’s not fully convinced. The noises outside get louder: *roar, smash, bang*.

“We have to do something or he’s going to check this place next. So, I need you to breathe, okay? Just breathe. Get calm. Don’t let the scariness win. Can you do that?”

He nods, trying, but the noises of destruction outside are too loud, too frantic. If the monster can do that to a building, imagine what it can do to a body.

“Breathe. Make him go away. Make all this stop”—*No! Not like that, he might accidentally erase the world!*—“I mean, *him*. Make him ... nice. Do you remember him being nice?”

She strokes the boy’s hair as calmly as she can. His breaths come out in shudders. He’s shivering, sweating. Trying so hard to not focus on his fears.

She’s sweating, too. The blood loss, the adrenaline, the absolute fucking insanity of it all.

“Puppies,” she says. “Think of puppies and—”

Another outraged roar. What sounds like the roof of the cabin giving way. The boy gives a quiet scream, squeezes his eyes shut harder.

This isn’t going to work—she’s not going to convince him to not be afraid, not of his daddy, not of this totem of primal terror.

Her eyes cast around the garage.

What helps me? she asks herself. *How do I make my mind go blank?* Only one answer comes to her. The same thing that apparently affected her dad the same way. Fear. Fear itself.

Not helpful at all. Fear is what got them into this situation in the first place. There's got to be another—

Then she sees something in the garage with them. It sparks an idea.

An absolutely insane idea.

You gotta be fucking kidding me, Inner Jess pipes up.

But what other option is there, besides crouching and waiting for death? More of the cabin collapses outside. She can hear a sniffing—the wolf inspecting the wreckage. He'll move on to the garage soon. A house of stone this time, sure, but no bulwark against the Wolf.

We can't just make the fear go away, she tells herself. *We've gotta play with it.*

A feeling comes over her similar to that feeling during a particularly focused performance. Use it. Run with it. React.

Make him afraid.

"Oh no," she gasps, low but purposefully loud enough for the boy to hear. "No, no, no, no!"

His eyes pop open. "What?" he asks, not expecting something new to fear.

"Shhh!" she reprimands sharply, letting her eyes go wide. "This isn't good, kiddo. Oh, I don't think we can stay *here* either. Oh, no."

"Why, Jess? You're scaring me."

"Because," she replies. "The *bats*."

"The bats?" Fright squeezing his throat.

"Shhhhh. We have to be very, very quiet. Don't look up. Just look at me. You know what bats do, right? They sleep on the ceiling and they have really sharp claws and teeth. And they hate noise and light. It makes them very, very mad."

He shakes his head. She can see tears coursing down his cheeks in the dim light. He begs, "Jess, no, I don't want them, too, please—"

"*Shh!* Don't wake them up yet! I think I can hear them." And she can—ever so faintly. "Here's what we've gotta do. Close your eyes and be very quiet. Okay? Don't look until I tell you. Promise?"

He nods miserably, puts his hands over his eyes.

Jess hurries to the light switch and turns it on, flooding the garage in fluorescent white. He flinches.

“Jess!” Whispered in panic. Peeking from behind his trembling hands. “You said no light!”

“Do you trust me?”

He nods again.

“Then trust me.”

He covers his eyes back up.

She runs to the garage door, searching frantically, finds a chunky red button hidden among some cobwebs.

Hands high, let 'em fly, she thinks, and presses it.

The garage door makes a terrific groaning noise. It begins to roll upward on its tracks, as loud as the cabin’s destruction.

“Jess!” the boy whines in terror.

She runs to the boy, covers his hands with her own, guides him away from the door. She can feel him shaking in terror. But she can also sense a restless stirring above her.

Meanwhile, under the clamor of the garage door, she can hear the ruination outside stop. A massive thud as the wolf drops onto all fours again. The gallop of its paws as it speeds toward them. Sniffing. Snarling. No going back now.

The wolf jams its head close to the rising door, blotting out the light like an eclipse. Its lips mirror the garage door’s ascent, trundling upward, revealing teeth almost the size of the boy himself. Its face fills the entire garage opening. Fills the world. Its growls are indistinguishable from the garage door’s ancient motor.

At last, the entirety of its face is revealed. Its snout, its nose, its teeth, two eyes—one yellow and furious, flashing with hunger and rage, the other bloodied and mangled by Jess’s million-dollar shot.

Now! a voice like Cookie’s urges Jess.

“Look up!” she yells to the boy, moving his head to face the ceiling, taking her hands away. “Look at all those bats!”

He does.

Jess does, too.

The dozens—hundreds!—of baseball caps are quivering and rustling. Their brims separate like mouths, revealing razor-sharp teeth. Their

squealing, undeniable now.

“Look at them!” she calls again, but her voice is drowned out by the noise she was at once dreading and anticipating. “They’re awake! And angry!”

The wolf lets out a tremendous, world-splitting roar. The stench is appalling: rot and decay and the promise of ruined flesh. Her bones rattle inside their muscles from the force of the sound. She squeezes her eyes shut. If this is the end, at least she tried.

Then, a shrieking, fluttering squall above her. A storm cloud of high-pitched outrage.

She can’t help it; she steals a glance at the ceiling, just as a multicolored gale swirls and sweeps past her. The Ceiling of Shame, she thinks wildly, remembering Pepsi’s description of the cousins’ tradition. They really do look like bats. And there they go, doing what any colony of bats would do in this situation:

Attack the thing that’s making all that noise.



The instant the bats take flight, something incredible happens. The boy becomes too fascinated to be afraid.

Just moments earlier, he'd felt like something might be breaking inside him. Whatever invisible connections kept him tethered to reality, to the present moment, were ready to snap and leave him either catatonic or beyond control. Not that he understood any of that conceptually—but he absolutely felt the fraying. The overheating. It had all been too much in too short a time: that strange person whose very existence sparks and fades in the boy's memory like a dying lightbulb; the smell of burning and the sounds of screaming; seeing Jess begin to change into something horrible; running away into the endless woods; being chased out by the giant monster Daddy, who slithered through the trees to get them. Then for Jess to scare him even more with the news of bats in their hiding place? And *then* for her to open the big rolling door, letting Daddy find them?

At some point during all this, he wet his pants. Normally, he hates that sensation more than almost anything. This time, he barely noticed when it happened. That's how frightening this has all been.

But then, the shrieking, squeaking, colorful bats.

So many of them. Beautiful and wild and loud and *mad*. And their bright colors are even more striking against the dark fur covering the wolf's face.

They fly at the wolf—at Daddy—and then Daddy also starts making high-pitched, squealy noises. Noises the boy recognizes unquestionably as pain. He never would have imagined noises like that coming out of something so huge and powerful.

Wolf-Daddy yelps and howls, wiping at his giant face with giant claws, unable to deter the swarm of angry, biting, and shredding attackers.

One bat with a red-and-white *P* on its front takes a chunk out of the wolf's nose. Another bat with a blue-and-orange *M* chews on the wolf's gumline, above a massive tooth that just can't seem to find any of the flying, flaying assailants, no matter how much the big mouth bites at the air.

The wolf, yipping and wailing, backs away from the garage, rising to its full height. The bats follow, undeterred. Furious.

It's amazing to watch. The more the big wolf fights back, the angrier the bats become. And because they're so small, the wolf can't stop them. Every claw swipe. Every chomp. They dance away and reattack. Being big isn't such an asset after all.

The boy steps forward, toward the garage opening, too fascinated by what he's seeing to even remember to hide.

The wolf's back slams into the remains of the cabin, and it stumbles and slides to the ground in a heavy *whoomf!* The wolf's face is all but gone, covered in squealing, chittering colors.

The yips and moans of agony are almost enough to hurt the boy's heart. They don't sound like a big, giant monster anymore—they sound like a puppy being kicked. They sound ... like he does when he's scared.

Somewhere behind him, he's aware Jess is shouting words at him.

She's bent over double—he can tell she's in so much pain. But she's telling him to *look*, really *look*—look at your daddy. Look at how small he really is. Look how they don't have to be afraid of him. He can't hurt them. He's just a stupid, mean, regular old *person*.

And, yes, the boy understands what she means. For the first time ever, he really can believe that Daddy can be hurt. Can feel pain. Those pathetic, heartbreaking yips and yowls.

Daddy begins to shrink ... and shrink ...

Fifteen feet ... twelve ... ten ... eight ... six ...

The fur falls away. The tail. The claws. Blown into the air like wisps of spiderweb.

As the big wolf gets smaller, the hat-bats lose interest and fly off in various directions. Some head back to the familiar safety of the garage. Others into the trees. Anywhere that promises darkness and quiet.

All that remains on the driveway, curled and helpless and shivering and bloody, is a naked, human man. Moaning in misery. Pulverized and ragged. He lies there, wheezing and groaning. When he's able to, he gathers enough

strength to sit up. Flaps of skin hang off his face and chest and shoulders. One eye is an outraged, red lump. But it's not a scary image. Not yet, at least. For now, it's just heart-hurting.

The boy stares at him. Waits to see what he does next.

Daddy stares back.

The two of them haven't actually looked at each other since that brief moment through the sliding glass door at Jess's apartment. For a long, long time, they just stare.

Then a new noise comes from deep in Daddy's throat. Long. Strained. Like he might start throwing up, but instead of the contents of his stomach, what comes out is a cry. His face crumples. He puts his bloody hands over his bloody face, trying to hide, but it doesn't work, and maybe that's why he starts shaking his head back and forth.

His sobs begin to form words.

"Don't," he's saying. "Don't look at me. I'm so sorry. This was all my fault. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

He tries to back away on his elbows, back toward the trees. Wanting to hide. The boy won't let that happen.

"Daddy!" he shouts, short and sharp, like a bark. "*Stop it!*"

Daddy freezes, more apologies on his lips.

He regards his son, blood and tears glistening below his own remaining ice-blue eye.

His son regards his father. "I don't wanna be scared of you anymore," he says through a clenched jaw.

Then something inside takes over.

The boy doesn't question it. He lets it happen.

He breaks out into a run.



53

From where she's bent over in pain, Jess watches as the boy sprints toward his father.

She's not sure what's happening—at first, she thinks the kid is going to try to tackle him, set upon him with his tiny fists while the man is at his weakest.

Then she fully processes how the boy is saying, “Daddy!” over and over again, and how the man is sobbing—full on blubbering—apologies, begging for forgiveness, just as the two collide in a desperate hug.

In a way, this is almost more horrifying than any of the hellish nightmares they've witnessed so far. How could the boy be so hungry for his father's affection? After everything?

She knows the answer.

Love.

As talented as children can be when it comes to being afraid, there's really no comparison to how they love, is there?

She was once like that, too. She used to love so much the pain was unbearable whenever it wasn't given back.

Love is a shape-shifting monster, she thinks, dizzy and horrified and exhausted and devastated. *A werewolf with a bottomless stomach.*

She wants to separate them. Pull the boy away and get him far from the man who scared him so badly he literally became inhuman ... but not only is she too weak to move, a part of her also knows this moment isn't for her to understand. Hell, they probably don't much either.

It's still *for* them. For father and son.

The boy has just begun to see his father as a human being. There will be plenty of time for the man to show his true colors again, fuck everything up, get mad, get impatient, get self-pitying. If he truly is a monster, monsters

don't change.

But sometimes fathers do. Right? Sometimes?

She lets them have their tearful hug, hoping maybe something good can come of this. Maybe a seed of healing can be planted.

They look so much alike, she realizes. Especially when they cry.

The man's large hands grab at the boy encircled in his arms; the boy's small hands do the same. They're both so desperate to hold on to the other.

"I'm so sorry," the man keeps saying, trying to sit more upright. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry."

Jess turns away, giving them some privacy, heart hurting in more ways than she can comprehend.

Fatherhood's a bum deal.

Our parents define so many things, she thinks. Love. Hate. Fear. Provider. Abuser. Abandoner. Monster. Mirror. They metamorphose. They mutate. They change. They are fairy tales with inscrutable illustrations.

I miss my mom, she thinks. With every atom of her being.

The boy and the man sob over each other, voices helixing like their shared DNA, each offering apologies and pleas for forgiveness. Each saying, "I was bad, I didn't mean to be bad, I'm sorry I scared you." Bare minutes ago, they were the bitterest of enemies. No, not even enemies. Predator and prey. More definitions unmade. Mutated.

Frowning, Jess steps farther out into the light, limping, wheezing. Hoping the temperate October sunshine brings her the smallest bit of clarity.

She looks up into the trees, which witnessed all this impossible change. No answers there.

Her head is full of questions. Always questions. What now? Where do they go from here? Will anyone tell her what to do? Will anyone protect her?

It takes her a moment to process the dread in the pit of her stomach. A moment longer to put a finger on why.

Something about the way the father's voice has overtaken the boy's—in her own ears, at least. The way she's really hearing what he's saying. I'm sorry for all the times I scared you. I'm sorry I couldn't figure out a way to stop all of this. I'm sorry we got here. I'm sorry this is the way it has to be.

The way it has to be.

I'm sorry I couldn't protect you.

How do you protect?

Protect from what?

What did he come here to do?

“Wait,” Jess starts to say—

BANG!

When the gunshot roars out behind her, she jumps and whips around, but can't make sense of what she's seeing. The boy and the man are still in an embrace, faces warped by their sobs.

But the rolling echo of the shot spreads out into the indifferent trees around them.

A hard noise. The hardest she's ever heard.

As natural and unmistakable as a wolf's howl.



54

Was it fate that he had landed so close to where his gun also lay on the asphalt? Luck? And, if the latter, what kind of luck? Good or bad?

He doesn't know. All he knows is that familiar feeling of hot metal in his hand. That acrid stench in his nostrils. And an agony, unfathomable, in his heart.

Mission accomplished.

He knew where to aim to make sure it was quick. Painless. But the boy is still blinking, gasping, refusing to let go so easily.

His boy. Never one to do the easy thing. Never one to give up without a fight. Was it fate to have a boy like this? Luck? Good or bad?

For the first time in his life, the man has to discard a weapon he's holding, throw it away, he's so horrified by what he's done with it.

What he needed to do.

His boy looks up at him. Does his baby understand why this happened? Does he hate him?

A wail escapes the man. He wishes it would pull his guts out with it. Leave his rotten insides steaming on the ground. No less than he deserves.

He tries to wail again, but there's no breath. Nothing inside him anymore to propel the grief that's boiling in his heart.

His cheeks are soaked with blood and tears already—but this feeling is beyond tears now. A grief too white hot for water.

And yet his vision is blurred—he looks at the woman standing there in the driveway through a red, diaphanous curtain. She's frozen in shock, a hand trying to cover her mouth but stalled halfway in its journey.

So much he wants to say. "I'm sorry," he says again for the hundredth time, but his voice cracks with the pain, making everything else he wants to

say unintelligible.

I was just trying to protect him, he wants to add. *And me. And everybody.*

He wants to make it clear that this is all his fault. All the ways he failed. How he should have remembered the boy was just a boy, no matter how powerful. Just a kid. Just a child.

He wants to atone for every moment he lost his temper. All the times he yelled, thinking scaring the boy would shock him into mastering his abilities. The times he shook him or punched walls in frustration. He thought he could be the one to teach him, discipline him, change him. The boy was his blood, after all. Was it fate or luck that he was so wrong? Was it fate or luck that he was still willing to do what needed to be done to end this?

“I couldn’t think of any other way,” he manages at last. “I didn’t want to do that, but I couldn’t think of any other way.”



55

Jess can't find her legs. She doesn't know if she's standing or sitting. Kneeling. Floating. No idea.

She must be standing, because she's approaching the man and the boy, and she can hear unsteady, limping steps on the asphalt. The closer she gets, the more details she sees. The blood blossoming across the boy's back. The thin stream of gray smoke floating up from where the two bodies meet.

The man, who at first seemed unable to speak, has now found his voice. He's babbling—to her, to the kid, to the universe, who fucking knows.

"It wasn't his fault. He didn't want to be that way. I just got mad sometimes and it scared him. And the more scared he got, the worse I got. He couldn't control it. I couldn't control it. I shouldn't have been his dad, but I was his dad. I didn't know what I was doing. Neither of us knew what we were doing."

"I know." Jess finishes limping over to them.

The man's clothes were, of course, torn away during his change into the monster. Now that she's this close, she can see his tattoos clearly. Most don't interest her. But on his left upper arm, she notices a flower, decked with leaves and thorns.

Two names, in filigreed text, next to the bloom. One *Shelly*. The other *PJ*. Two more words underneath: *Family Forever*.

Jess slowly lowers herself onto her knees. The ground is unkind, and her body is in agony, but she wants to see the boy one more time.

The man shot him in the chest. A neat hole where his little heart used to beat, used to flutter in terror.

The boy's eyes roll toward her and then, as if needing that one final look, they glaze and become unfixed. She brushes his hair away from his forehead.

The man continues keening, moaning, rocking his dead son.

"I couldn't think of what else to do. It was all my fault."

"I know," Jess repeats. What else can she say?

There were so many questions that demanded answers, after all. Questions posed by faded, screaming memories. Questions posed by everything she'd witnessed.

"He was too dangerous," the weeping father continues, as if reading her mind. "He didn't mean to be. He wanted to be good, it wasn't fair, but ... It was all too dangerous. Wasn't it?"

How do you protect?

"I don't know," she says. "Maybe. Yeah."

The gun is just a few feet away. She barely even needs to stand to reach it.

The man has reverted back to apologizing to his son. He buries his head against the boy's broken, motionless chest, mixing their blood together.

"He was just so scared," Jess says. Muses. As if she's putting the final pieces of a puzzle in place. "All the time."

"I know," the man replies.

"He was so scared ... because of you."

"I know." His tears have begun to abate. He wipes at his face.

"He was so scared that you were going to hurt him."

He nods, staring at his boy.

"And look what you did," Jess says. "He was right. He was right to be scared of you."

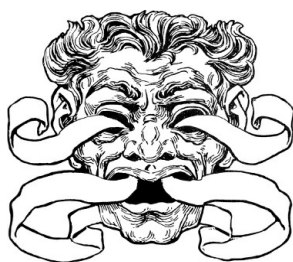
How do you protect?

How do you forgive?

She raises the gun.

The man looks up—and is his expression grateful? She doesn't care.

Funny how this gunshot doesn't sound anywhere as loud as the first.



PART FOUR

FAIRY- TALE ENDINGS

And what of the world?
What will it become when you leave it?
Nothing, nothing at all like its present appearance.
—Arthur Rimbaud

imaginary gardens with real toads in them
—Marianne Moore



Jess stands there for a long, long time, staring down at the bodies in the driveway.

Someone somewhere must've called the police—after the gunshots? The roaring? The massive lupine centipede burrowing through the trees? She can hear distant sirens. Arriving far too late, but nice to hear all the same. If anything, at least she knows she'll soon be forced to stop standing here, staring.

Before they reach her, though, something catches her eye and she does look up. Something barely visible among the trees.

Two dogs, just behind the tree line at the edge of the woods. One dog, small and young. The other, older. Wary. Protective. Its father, maybe. The puppy gives a yip, all but bouncing back and forth on its paws. Looking right at her. Then the sirens grow too loud, and the dogs dart back into the trees. After a blink, it's like they were never there.

Were they?

She prays they were. She prays he was able to imagine one final scenario. Before the hole in his chest robbed his brain of oxygen. She prays he managed to give himself the life he deserved.

The gravel nearby crunches under approaching tires.

★ ★ ★

The story she gives is simple enough. The boy was abused. She found him one night. His father showed up, tried to kill them both. They wound up on the run. His father followed them here. Shot the boy. She managed to fight back and kill the father with his own gun. Almost impressive how mundane it sounds. Tale as old as time. Over to Nancy with the weather.

There is the question of the cabin, though. How did one man manage to

completely destroy most of the building? And what about all the felled trees? The reports of roaring? Did this guy bring Godzilla as a wingman or something?

Jess is too tired to think of anything, so she just shrugs at the inquiring officer. The worst kind of scene partner. Before the officer can press the issue, a man and a woman in dark suits so similar they might be purposefully matching appear and take that officer aside.

Jess watches the Two Suits talk to the officer for a few moments, then turns her attention back to the bodies in the driveway. They're being photographed, then eased into separate white bags.

As the bags are zipped, Jess feels walls inside her mind go up.

★ ★ ★

She doesn't move; more like the world dissolves around her and she's suddenly in a new location.

Just like that, she's in a hospital, being examined and patched up. Being told she should be thankful that nasty puncture in the center of her chest didn't go too deep. Being told there's nothing that can really be done about the broken ribs other than taking it easy and getting some rest.

Two Suits are with her in the examination room, which doesn't feel like it should be allowed, but they're very gentle and unobtrusive about it.

The world dissolves. Just like that, she and Two Suits are in an antiseptic, isolated office with a metal table in the center. She's being interrogated—but again, gently. Unobtrusively. Although, would she know if it wasn't gentle? When you're this numb, being sucked under the tires of a Mack truck might feel gentle.

Two Suits want to know the *real* story. *It's okay*, they assure her. *You're safe now, and this location is fully secure.*

Jess says she doesn't know what they mean. Two Suits tell her, again, it's okay, she can talk to them. They know about the boy and his father. They know about her road trip from hell. They know what she must have gone through.

"The only thing we don't know is why we didn't have an agent as point person on this," one Suit says to the other. "We normally would've had someone on the case."

The other Suit nods and shrugs ... then looks troubled, as if there's a memory dancing on the tip of her brain.

Jess says she still doesn't remember. She's too tired. She's too numb.

One Suit says he understands she needs some rest—he's clearly not happy about it, but he understands.

The other Suit says they're going to put Jess on a plane in an hour, back to Los Angeles. "But don't be too grateful. We're not done here."

"Not by a long shot," Suit One adds.

"This is the beginning of a real close friendship between the three of us."

Jess shrugs. Says okay, looking at scuff marks on the metal table, finding patterns in the polish.

And just like that, she's on a plane, staring at a monitor on the back of a seat. The monitor shows the plane's flight path. It's all she wants to watch. She sips at a whiskey ginger, but it might as well be water. There's no numbing the already numb.

And just like that, she's in a cab, staring at the concrete intestines of Los Angeles through the window.

And just like that, she's in her living room, staring at the shattered glass door. It's X'ed by crime scene tape, which flaps in the autumn breeze. Dark, ugly stains splash across the floor and walls, yet it's the dining room table she most refuses to look at. That's where he ate pizza.

And there on the kitchen counter: his book. Still sitting where she'd tossed it absent-mindedly. She opens it up, somehow knowing exactly which page to turn to. The Big Bad Wolf. An impossibly dark forest. Freakish yellow birds perched in the trees. All of it, *right there*. She just hadn't noticed.

She can't stay here.

And so, just like that, she's checking into a hotel.

It was another long, expensive cab ride to get here. A couple of hours. But she wants to stay at this hotel. Specifically, this hotel. The same one her mom set her up with a million years ago.

No one recognizes her this time. That's fine with her. Maybe she'll finally treat herself to that massage tomorrow. The thought makes her laugh like a dead leaf scraping against sidewalk.

Is she staying in the same room? She doubts it—that floor is probably still a crime scene. It's really only been a few days, after all. But the room rate is quite discounted. They must be hurting for guests.

So much travel in a day has worked its magic. Her body is exhausted.
Just like that, she's in the king-size bed.
Just like that, she's asleep.
The walls hold steady.

★ ★ ★

The walls hold steady.

She's determined to keep it that way for as long as possible.

A faint, pathetically small voice from the other side of the bricks: How do you live with what you've seen? With what you've done?

How do you protect?

The answer: More bricks. More mortar.

Just keep running. Keep building. These walls feel good. They feel *right*. She understands their simple brilliance now.

That following morning, she orders a bottle of champagne. By lunch, she's ordered a bottle of vodka and a bottle of tequila.

They're not cheap, but who said good masonry was?

★ ★ ★

For want of a nail, the kingdom is lost, the old saying goes. In this case, what brings the walls down is a soft buzz.

An email.

She's gotten a deluge of emails already. And texts. And calls.

Two Suits. Her agent. Her landlord. Her manager at Poppy's. Even one from Arnie, that boy she liked once upon a time. She ignores them all, without a second thought.

But this particular email she can't ignore.

From the Pocono Now Urgent Care Clinic: **Your Results Are Ready.**

Her walls shake a little. Dust and grit spew from the seams. But they remain upright, so she feels cocky. She opens the email, thinking that if she speeds through it, barely stopping the scroll, grazing the text with quick disinterest, it'll be over and done with. Just a glance over the ramparts.

Until, in her scrolling, she sees one word. Written in red, like inexplicable bathroom graffiti.

POSITIVE.

Her walls evaporate in an instant. She drops her phone and starts to tremble.

Did I see—? Did it really say—?

Nope. She scurries away. Uses the room's landline to order room service. More alcohol. Soon enough, her walls are back up, leaning against reinforcements.

She doesn't know how long she goes on like this, drinking, staring at the TV, flipping through channels, dimly hoping to find a certain public access show about coin collecting.

She keeps shooting glances at her phone, face down on the bed.

She knows she needs to *actually* read those results. She could've simply imagined that word. Or it could've been in relation to something harmless. Or it could just mean the presence of antibodies for something. Or it could just it could just it could just it could just

She picks up her phone, then closes her eyes and throws it.

In order to ensure she forgets where it landed, she orders another bottle of champagne.

★ ★ ★

For want of a nail.

Around three in the morning, she wakes up from a terrible dream. She was trapped in a pool. Her floaties had come off and she was all alone, water in her mouth, water in her lungs. No one there to save her, except a low, steady snoring coming from just over the pool ledge. No, not snoring. Growling.

When she sputters awake, she's sopping wet. How did she get so—?

Sweat. An inordinate amount of sweat, that's all.

Then the hangover hits.

She stumbles blindly through the pitch-black hotel room—nauseous, freezing, bladder full—until she finds the bathroom. Relieves herself. Drinks some sink water. Waits to see if her stomach will settle. Peels off her wet clothes and gets into the room's complimentary bathrobe. Wrings out her hair.

Her head is throbbing. The air feels mountainously thin. She can hardly breathe. All these physical miseries, so it takes some time before she realizes that growling is still audible. Somewhere in the darkness of the room. Low.

Dreadful.

Must be the hotel. A motor somewhere. A car in the parking lot. The boiler.

She just wants to get back in bed. Burrow into the warm covers and catch up with oblivion again.

First, she stands there, waiting for her eyes to adjust a little. While she does so, she hears a voice in her head—her own voice. Plain and direct, no distancing abstractions, no character work.

Why am I doing it this way?

Why am I being so irresponsible?

Why am I so afraid?

Why am I so alone?

She squeezes her eyes shut. Feels a shiver run through her. When she opens them again, she can see a little better and makes her way to the bed. Crawls over it, ignoring the damp covers, trying to find some warmth under the blankets.

She meets solid resistance. A different kind of warmth. A body.

A man's voice in her ear.

"Because it's in your blood, Jess."

The clearness of that voice. The caress of its breath. The tickle of someone else's hair against her skin. She flails backward, too terrified to scream, landing on the floor, injuries howling.

She scuttles, gasping, to a corner.

Someone in her bed. An invisible man.

No. Not quite invisible. Her eyes have adjusted enough that she can see the shape of the man lying on top of the covers. Not invisible—made entirely of shadows.

The shadow-man crawls to the edge. Stares down at her. Despite not having any eyes.

"That wasn't what they meant by 'think positive,' remember?" he asks. Despite not having a mouth.

She knows exactly who he is.

Dear ol' Tomcat.

Dear ol' Dad.

And somewhere, off in the shadows, the growling continues.

"But seriously," he continues. "Why are you doing it this way, kiddo?"

Why are you being such a coward?"

I'm not a coward, she responds, so quiet she's not even sure it's out loud.

"I think it takes one to know one, kiddo."

She wants to run, but feels pinned to the wall. Something about his voice. She can't quite place it.

Doesn't matter. This isn't happening. This is all—

"Just a dream, right? Yeah, you'd think. But." Her dad laughs. "Sorry, kiddo, it's not."

Stop calling me *kiddo*.

"But I was the one who called you that first. That came from me."

I don't care. This is my dream, I set the rules.

"Already told you, kiddo. This isn't a dream. And you're a fucking coward."

A soft tapping noise, a fingernail on glass. She looks over across the room. It's coming from the flat-screen TV on the bureau.

The TV isn't on—the screen is black—but a cartoon weasel is there anyway. Floating in the blackness, tapping on the inside of the display. He waves. Hi. Remember me? His garish colors practically glow inside the dead eye of the screen.

A dream, she urges herself, trying to deepen her shallow breaths. Even though a part of her knew somehow she wouldn't be done with these horrors. *I'm still drunk. Or this is part of the hangover. I'm fucked up either way.*

The weasel gives a shove against the glass, and the television topples over onto the floor in a loud, very real, very un-dreamlike clatter.

"They're gonna make you pay for that," her dad says. "Sorry."

Before she can respond, she hears fingernails on glass again. Less of a tapping; more of a scraping. She turns her head and this time actually has to fight not to scream.

One of the few preconditions the hotel gave her for her severely discounted room was that she was encouraged to keep her windows cracked open. Not that there was *actually* an issue with their carbon monoxide levels anymore, they'd assured her; but better safe than sorry.

The windows are narrow and open up by swinging out along the middle of each casement. She'd only cracked the windows a little, and she'd definitely kept the curtains closed. Now the window is open all the way, as are the curtains, which billow in the breeze.

just a dream just a dream just a dream please oh god

Floating outside in the dark waters of midnight, curling coy fingertips against the open windowpane, is the mauled corpse of her mother. Half her face is bone, wrapped sloppily in mangled, blood-wet skin. Gaping furrows in her chest reveal mangled and deflated organs that have been clawed or chewed. And in her arms ...

The urge to scream becomes the urge to sob.

Cradled in Cookie's arms is the boy. Sickly pale with a hint of green. Eyes filmy, yet still avidly, icily blue. A hole where his heart used to be. Jess clutches at the walls like that's the only thing keeping her from flying off the face of the world in abject terror.

"Sorry, kiddo," Cookie says with a sad smile. "You know I hate to be the bearer of bad news, at least without a martini, but your father's right. Never thought you'd hear me say *those* words, huh?"

Jess squeezes her eyes shut, tries to count to ten, tries to believe when she opens her eyes these visions will be gone.

Her father asks, "Haven't you noticed by now? Just because something's impossible doesn't mean it's not real."

In the darkness behind her eyelids, she's able to place what's so strange about his voice. That intonation. That rhythm. That "yes, but" attitude. A different pitch and timbre, but she knows the voice of Inner Jess when she hears it.

Meanwhile, that ambient growling intensifies.

Jess opens her eyes.

The gang's still here. The cartoon weasel pops up from the fallen TV at the foot of the bed like a jack-in-the-box. Giggling with delighted menace, he starts crawling toward her. He's going to *prove* he's real. Once he gets close enough, she does what she did the very first time and piston-kicks him as hard as her injuries will allow. The weasel hoots and flies backward into the darkness of the room—

—then his hoots cut off with a sharp, surprised gurgle as something unseen tears him apart.

The growling resumes. Louder. Unsatisfied.

No denying what that means. Not even the throb of her headache can dull the razor-sharp realization.

The Wolf is here.

“Has been for a while, Jess,” the corpse of Cookie says. “Don’t you understand what’s going on? What you’ve done?”

“What you’re *doing*?” her faceless father adds.

Jess is too busy frantically scanning the darkness. Where is it? How can she hide? How did it find her?

“It’s really bad news, kiddo,” her mother says. “Maybe the worst news possible.”

“You can’t run away from *this*,” her dad says. “You never could.”

“And you did it to yourself.”

Jess is about to try to deflect them with a breathless, pathetic joke—*Hey, nice to see you two getting along so well*, or something—when the boy finally speaks.

“You’re just like me.”

Jess glitches. Shakes her head.

“What?” she manages. Definitely out loud this time.

“You’re just like me,” the boy repeats, his voice lower and meaner in death. “Remember?”

“I don’t—What are you talking about?”

She feels his filmy, icy eyes on her. They’re *all* staring—even the wolf in the darkness—waiting for her to get it. Get *what*?

Then, a memory.

In the car. After Cookie died. Her conversation with the boy.

“*You’re just like me.*”

Her mouth goes dry. Her guts fill with lava. A new sheen of sweat envelopes her.

“That?” She gives a weak, disbelieving laugh. “That was just a stupid, offhand...”

You’re just like me.

“That didn’t mean anything. I was just trying to help you feel...”

You’re just like me.

“NO. That didn’t *mean* anything!”

But she can see the boy’s face in that memory. He had taken that information so seriously, so ... literally. In that one moment, in one tiny, insignificant fucking moment—

You’re just like me.

—he had believed it to be true.

And so, it *became* true.

“No. No, no, no, no.”

White-hot panic fizzles through her. She wants to move, wants to run, wants to tear her fucking skin off.

No no no no no!

Her dad is laughing. Her mom is laughing. Delighted at Jess’s realization.

The boy is not laughing. He’s staring at her with that too-old, too-serious expression he sometimes wore.

“What’s wrong, Jess?” he asks at last. “You don’t want to be like me? You think I did?”

This is impossible, it can’t be true, it can’t be.

“Okay, then, tell me.” The boy’s uncannily mature tone is almost more disturbing than his pallid skin and mortal wound. “If it’s not true, what did you see in the wolf’s mouth?”

“Nothing,” she stammers. “I just ... imagined...”

That word. Pain flares in her chest. Her very real puncture wound.

“I didn’t know about needles,” the boy continues. “But the wolf did. And what about the bats? How would I know what bats even are, what they look like? I wouldn’t have known any of that. *You* did.”

“I—kids know all sorts of things.”

“How would I know what *fireflies* are, Jess?”

That shuts her up. Was that celestial display, that cosmic horror, the potential death of galaxies ... Was that *her* doing? Was *she* the danger that night?

“You were so close to bringing me back to life that night, too,” Cookie says. “Remember? You could just *feel* me scratching on the other side of the phone. Well, anyone else looking out their hotel window right now is in for a shock. Scratch, scratch, baby.” She gives a gravelly giggle. “I don’t even have my face on.”

“I think you look great,” her dad replies.

“You flirt.”

The world is spinning. Jess grabs at the hotel room carpet.

The boy continues, “Know what I think? I think maybe *everything* that happened after a certain point was all you. *You* wanted me dead, Jess. You knew, just like Daddy knew, that it would all be so much easier if I were dead. Right?”

“No,” Jess says, her voice small and weak. This is unfair. It’s not true.

“Aw, kiddo,” Cookie says, the very portrait of sympathy. “Of course it’s unfair. But you know it’s true.” Her voice suddenly distorts. “*Because you’re afraid.*”

“Hey, so here’s an idea: just stop being scared, Jess!” The boy’s dead eyes flash with rage, like silver dollars in the moonlight. His face contorts in anger. “It’s so *easy*! ‘Just stop being so afraid!’ That’s what you told *me*! I was just a little kid—you’re all grown up. Should be easy for you!”

But grown-ups can’t have these powers, she wants to argue. Our fears are too big. Too shapeless. They’re not as simple as a monster in the dark. Insecurity. Anxiety. Trauma. Career. Social pressures. Money. Love. Politics. Identity. Health. Hypochondria. How do you fight those fears? How do you —

Her thoughts cut short as her finger begins to tingle.

“Uh-oh,” Cookie warns, gleeful. “Don’t start worrying about *that*.”

The finger that had been pricked by the needle back in Poppy’s bathroom. Her own dark fairy tale beginning.

The boy is shrieking now. “TAKE YOUR OWN FUCKING ADVICE, JESSA. JUST STOP BEING AFRAID.”

Jess brings her hand up to her eyes. A puckering mouth has opened up on the tip of her index finger. A nightmare she had once. Not a nightmare anymore. The mouth is smiling. Dribbling infected fluid onto the floor.

With every pulse beat, the word **POSITIVE** flashes in her mind. The mouth smiles wider. Turns inside out. Becomes a rotting canker that spreads. And spreads.

“No,” she says again for the thousandth time, and for the thousandth time, her protest goes unheeded. “No. I’m okay. I’m fucking okay.” Dizzy. Nauseous. “I’m *okay*!”

But the jeering, taunting corpses remind her she’s not. She saw the bloodred writing on the wall. And she was too scared to read more, so she gave it permission to be *anything*.

The rot spreads down her finger, into her palm. The stench, like maggoty meat, like milk left in the sun.

But nothing in those test results would have been an imminent death sentence! Her rational, adult brain knows this.

“But you have to *believe* it, baby.” Her mother oozes false sympathy.

“And you can’t really do that, can you? You don’t have the muscle memory.”

Doesn’t matter—she can prove it! She throws herself onto the floor. Casts around for her phone. Doing her best to picture it in her hand—the one not rapidly curdling. To picture the email she received. Positive for, for, what? For herpes, for chlamydia, hell, even for HIV, just for something treatable, something *nameable*.

Where could the phone have landed? The room isn’t that big. Shadows have added square footage by the dozens.

“It’d take a miracle for you to be okay,” Cookie continues, “and let’s face it, you’ve never been someone who attracts miracles. The good kinds, at least.”

Her dad agrees. “You couldn’t even keep a father around. You *know* this.”

“That’s why the Wolf is going to feast tonight, kiddo.”

Jess has to prop herself on her elbow now. Sweat plasters her hair to her skull.

The growling is so loud. Warning her she’s in the Wolf’s house. She’s going to wind up like that cartoon weasel, torn to shreds. Hotel security will get a phone call in a few minutes that some woman is screaming and what sounds like an animal is attacking her, and they’ll break in and find her mauled corpse splattered all over the room like somebody set off a confetti bomb of flesh.

Might be preferable to dying from the nameless terror boiling through her bloodstream, though.

At last, her good hand pats something rectangular and plastic. She pulls her phone from the shadows, desperate ... but when it comes time to look at the screen, to read her test results, she hesitates once more. What if they *are* really bad?

“JUST STOP BEING AFRAID!” the boy screams in furious mockery, crawling over Cookie like an insect. “SO EASY STOP BEING AFRAID SO EASY STOP BEING AFRAID!”

It’s too much. Too loud. Too cruel. She can’t think. She needs to think. She needs—

She knows what she needs.

Jess closes her eyes. Squeezes them. Feels something inside *pull*, and just like that



She's not in her hotel room anymore.

She blinks. Looks around.

She's on her knees, head still ringing, chest still aching, stomach still clenched in nausea.

But it's quieter here. Safer.

The safest place she's ever been, in fact. The only place she's ever been able to believe she'll be okay.

She's backstage.

Not any specific backstage—she can make out details from several different performance spaces—but they're more or less the same. The same disgusting couch. The same tiny fridge. The same grime-spotted mirror and walls covered in promotional stickers and graffiti.

Am I really here? Did I just physically transport myself somewhere?

That'd be impossible, of course. But she can smell watery beer. Humid wood under layers of paint. Good smells. Even the sulfury haze of nervous pre-show shits wafting through the backstage bathroom's pressboard door. The smell of a performance about to begin. Of troubles about to be momentarily forgotten.

The smell of potential.

Along one side of the room is a heavy, musty curtain. Currently closed. Its vertical folds aligned like trees in a dense forest.

The growling, the taunts and jeers of the dead—Jess can still hear them, but they're fainter now. Coming from the other side of that curtain. A rambunctious audience, but no longer so overwhelming. She's been here before.

Another sound: *plip plip*. Her inflamed, ulcerous hand and forearm, leaking flesh onto the floor. The rot has slowed, but not stopped. She can't stay here forever, whether she's actually here or not. But she's bought herself a tiny bit of time to think, to ...

To what?

Her phone is still in her good hand. She has to check her results before the show can go on. She *knows* this. But the fear of what happens next is still so strong.

"It gets stronger in the dark," a voice says to her side. Jess turns to look.

It's coming from the grimy backstage mirror. A child, standing inside the glass. Wearing red overalls and a yellow sweater.

Little Jess. Only, her eyes are a startling, icy blue.

"You'd think monsters eat people," Little Jess continues, "but I think they really feed off of darkness. That's what makes them bigger."

Kid logic. But she's not wrong, is she?

Just look. Believe that things can be okay ... and look.

"I can't," Jess begs her reflection. "I'd be the worst fucking person in the world to have this power. I can't stop thinking about all the things that'll go wrong. *Please.*"

"It only takes a second," Little Jess says. Unlike the dead boy, she makes it sound so sincere. So easy.

Just a second of belief. Untainted by experience.

Is that possible? To live in this world and not scare yourself to death? To feel turbulence and not imagine the plane going down? To experience hope as a grown-up with the same clarity a child feels terror?

How do you not call forth the things that will devour you and give them teeth?

How do you protect? Especially when the danger is you?

Then Jess remembers where she is. She remembers the cardinal rule of improv. One venue even had it written in ironically homey cross-stitch above the stage door. She sees it now on the wall above the mirror.

NEVER SAY NO.

"Okay," she exhales, somehow both defeated and resolute. "Fine. *Yes.*"

And ... what if she looks and her test results aren't so bad? What if life goes on? Can she believe *that's* possible?

"Yes."

And ... then what if that actually proves all this is real? That her thoughts can reshape reality? That she *does* have the boy's powers? What if ... what if she simply imagines herself as someone who isn't afraid? What if she believes herself to be fearless?

She could do anything then.

"Yes."

And ... so what if this is only the beginning? What if she becomes a New

Jess? Unstoppable. Able to undo everything that's happened. Able to unbelieve all this pain. Not just for herself but for everyone.

She could do it. It would only take a moment.

She could change the world. This painful, frightful, complicated world.

A bone-deep tremor of dread at that. A tiny, terrified voice deep inside:

(no! stop! remember the lathe!)

She doesn't know what that means, though—if she did once, that memory has faded away. She shoves the voice aside. Just another heckler.

She only needs to believe this is possible. For a single moment. No need to fear the consequences. What's the point of fear, anyway?

"Yes!" Desperate now.

(stop!)

And what if she believes this world *can* be changed? No more absent fathers. No more dead children and murdered mothers. No more dreams that don't come true. No more casting directors who forget you and restaurant managers who don't.

A world without pain.

A world without fear.

Is it possible?

I could make it possible if

(don't! stop!)

I just stop believing in fear.

She hears the howling, demented sound of her audience—whether she's still in her dark hotel room, or some imaginary venue. So loud. So eager for her to succumb to their noise.

She squeezes her eyes shut.

Feels something *pull*. A curtain, opening.

Her diseased skin sloughs away. All of it.

And the audience is silent now.

The house has been cleared.

Or is that the entire world? Emptied. Erased.

Simplified.

Nothing to lose and nothing to be lost.

Only took a moment.

She steps onto the empty stage.

Something new.

Something fearless.
YES.
And home at last.

AFTERWORD

ON FATHERS AND SHAPE-SHIFTERS

A couple of months after I turned twenty-three, I started having massive panic attacks.

I'm talking wild, intrusive thought spirals, insomnia, heart palpitations. I couldn't keep food down—which led to even *more* thought spirals. All of it, coming pretty much out of the blue.

I'd just moved to New York City from my home state of Arizona, the culmination of a lifelong plan. And I wasn't intimidated by New York. I'd been raised by a New Yorker. Indoctrinated by a New Yorker. I'd studied the maps. I'd pored over the guides. I'd made a *notebook*.

But there was one thing I couldn't have prepared for.

I'd never experienced winter.

The cold. Worse: the *darkness*. My physical body had spent the past quarter century soaking up sunlight and heat for 360 days outta the year and had no idea what was happening when my first New York winter descended. Add to that no money, no financial support system, a job in a bookstore basement, McDonald's for basically every meal, relationship issues, and your other bog-standard quarter-life crises, and, for a horrendously long stretch of months, I sincerely thought I was losing my mind.

Then I booked a theater gig that took me back to Arizona, and within literal hours of getting the amount of sunlight I was used to, my symptoms began to abate. Seasonal Affective Disorder: don't let the cute acronym fool you.

This started a yearslong process of getting these cyclical predispositions under control. Now, thankfully, I've reached a point where, beyond my general and abiding hatred of the season, I barely feel winter anymore. Once I'd named the monster, its power shrank.

Except ... then I had a conversation with my mom that complicated

things.

This was years later. I was telling her about just how bad those Bad Times had gotten, and she replied, almost offhandedly, oh yeah, your dad went through the same thing at that age.

I was stunned. He *did*?

Oh yeah. *Massive* panic attacks. He couldn't even leave the house some days.

Huh, I remember saying. Well, that would've been useful information to have while I thought I was going actually insane.

Genetics, man. You can run, but you can't hide.

★ ★ ★

What was your dad like?

Was he tough? Stern? Kind? A big softie?

Was he scary? Intimidating? Conservative? Liberal? Religious? Secular?

Did he flirt with waitresses and flight attendants? Was he a sports fanatic? A silent monolith? A teller of horrible jokes?

Was he a ghost? An idea? A memory? An empty space?

I don't know what's normal—the older I get, the less fathomable a concept like *normal* becomes—but for me, my dad was all of these things. Sometimes a multiplicity at once.

Before I go on, though, let me make something clear:

My dad isn't a character in this book.

He wasn't a terror. He wasn't abusive. He wasn't an alcoholic. He didn't abandon me—though, if you'd asked either of us about that at different periods in our lives, we would've said differently.

Despite some superficial details—like our shared love of gin rummy and black licorice—there are very few *specific* references to my dad in this story.

But my dad is *everywhere* in this book.

Because my dad was a shape-shifter.

★ ★ ★

He's raised in a tiny town in the suburbs of Chicago, by a father who's an alcoholic sheriff's deputy and a mother who's likely an undiagnosed manic-depressive. He's a troublemaker and is eventually given the choice: enlist in

the military or you can't graduate high school. He enlists and, when told he can either be a cook or a medic, he chooses the latter. By sheer luck, despite it being the height of the Vietnam War, he's sent to Turkey. There, he discovers he enjoys medicine and, after he's honorably discharged, he enrolls in an experimental program at Duke University, creating a brand-new medical position: the physician assistant. My dad's in the third-ever class of PAs; they don't even offer a degree for it yet. He spends the next several years traveling the country like a frontier missionary, trying to get a *deeply* antagonistic medical culture to admit this new role into their entrenched hierarchies. There's so much resistance at first, he's physically threatened and chased out of buildings.

Skip past the personal stuff: he gets married, has a kid, gets divorced, gets married again, has two more kids (one of which is me), gets divorced, gets married a third time. He lives in Illinois, in DC, in North Carolina, in Arizona (where the rest of this story plays out).

It's a decade or so later now. PAs are finally an accepted thing—in no small part thanks to his efforts—and he's the PA for the thoracic and cardiovascular surgery team at the Arizona Mayo Clinic. He's the guy who massages your heart to keep it beating during surgery.

By the mid-to-late '90s, academia and politics come calling. He gets a university deanship, helps establish more medical programs. He's appointed executive director of the Arizona Medical Board (their first-ever PA in charge; how the tables have turned). He *officially* gets his BS and then his Ph.D. in medical ethics.

By the mid-2000s, my dad is sixty years old. He's lived a full life. Had a capital-C Career in medicine. He's also overweight. He's diabetic. He's comfortable behind a computer screen. So he does what any normal person that age and disposition would do.

He enlists in boot camp and joins the Phoenix Police Department.

He's—fucking *obviously*—the oldest new recruit by, like, three entire decades. The physical demands are punishing. He drops over a hundred pounds, most of them sweat out in the mountains during early-morning drills, when it's only like eighty-five in the shade. To my knowledge, the man had never exercised a day in his adult life before all this.

He graduates the academy. Becomes a beat cop—patrolling, at times, the sketchy neighborhood where my mom had to raise me and my brother on her

own; how's that for poetic? A few years after that, he takes his detective's exam and serves *another* four years as a detective in the Crimes Against Children Unit.

Four years. In a department with an incredibly high turnover rate due to its profoundly upsetting nature.

Then—finally!—he retires. Sort of.

The last name *Cassidy* might've clued you that he wasn't born Jewish. However, my mom, who was born *very* Jewish, wouldn't marry him unless he converted. He did—no easy task—but after their divorce, he drifted away from observance. Once he retires from the force, though, he finds himself more and more compelled to reconnect with his Judaism.

He becomes actively involved with a small, local synagogue: leading services, writing *divrei* Torah. He even articulates a desire to go to school *again*. Maybe become a rabbi. Hey, what's one more identity change, right?

He doesn't get the chance. Lymphoma finds him first, and barely a year later, he's gone.

In between radiation and chemo treatments, he tells me, "I feel like an old man for the first time in my life." So, I suppose he did get to try out one more new identity after all.

Still.

A doctor. A teacher. A scholar. A politician. A cop. An amateur religious leader.

Enough life for several lifetimes.

My dad was brilliant and funny and fascinating. He was restless, inquisitive, passionate.

He was also, for much of my life, mostly a complete stranger.

★ ★ ★

My parents split up when I was around five. Until I graduated high school, I saw my dad for one overnight visit every two weeks. Probably around twenty hours total, twice a month. And for most of those visits, the prevailing atmosphere was a polite, curious distance. Not uncomfortable but definitely not very familial. Cautious. Even awkward.

We connected most when he would let me practice guitar in his office while he worked. He was fascinated by my growth as a musician. I think he

loved witnessing other people learn.

But he was also—and I think he'd be the first to admit this—terrible with kids. They made him deeply uncomfortable. They're loud, messy, irrational, all things he had little patience for. All things I was, in spades, growing up.

My earliest memories of him are of his rage.

My mom used to tell me how, when I was really young, anytime my dad came into the room, I would just start screaming in terror at the sight of him.

Obviously, once I got a little older, I stopped feeling/responding that way. But I'm sure, deep down, there's a part that never forgets. And it wasn't until writing these very words that I thought about his side of that equation, too. God, I bet *he* never forgot that either.

Toward the end of his life, however, we *did* start to get closer. Not that we knew it was the end of his life.

We'd talk on the phone a few times a year. Sharing interests. Avoiding certain topics (I'm a New York liberal loudmouth; guess my opinions on policing). During his religious reawakening, my wife and I even had him officiate our tiny wedding, held in the backyard of my mom's nursing home since she wasn't really mobile by that point.

Most of all, there were three specific visits where we started to dig deep. Where I started to meet the human being underneath all the Dad Baggage.

He opened up about the lives he'd lived. The shapes he'd taken. He told me about regrets, about sins—some I knew, some I didn't. Some painful, some astonishing, some hilarious, some infuriating. I won't go into them here, but I *will* say, I made sure to ask him: hey, so, why the hell does someone become a cop at sixty damn years of age anyway?

What he told me resonated deeply.

Because, he said: he'd realized it was his last chance to maybe get to understand *his* father, the sheriff's deputy. His father had been a shape-shifter, too—a drunk, a terror, a mystery that needed solving—and my dad wanted a chance to meet, or at least see better, the human underneath.

I felt that. I also use work to process my feelings. To get as close as I can to things I want to understand. I mean, hello.

Then I had to ask:

“Okay, but, Dad ... a Child Crimes detective? *You*? How did *that* happen? And why?”

He looked me straight in the eyes and said:

“Because I know I wasn’t a good father either.”

★ ★ ★

Knowledge of behavior you can’t alter is the heaviest kind of knowledge, isn’t it? Knowing you’re a shape-shifter? It gets hard to remember what shape is really *you* in the end.

Maybe the true horror of the werewolf is that the change is never permanent.

Maybe the true beauty of the butterfly is that it is.

There’s one final detail I want to share from the Story of My Dad.

It’s the real reason I started writing this afterword.

It’s what I think about most often now that he’s gone.

★ ★ ★

The thing about Barry is he was one hell of a raconteur. He loved holding court and was damn good at it—*especially* when the subject matter was of questionable taste. Once he became a cop, his Batshit Anecdote Portfolio exploded with material.

However, there was one event he never talked about—and, given what he was okay with sharing, this spoke volumes.

It’s whatever made him retire from Child Crimes. Whatever he witnessed. Whatever he stopped ... or perhaps failed to stop. I imagine every person in that unit has one.

He never shared those details with me. But he did tell me what happened the day after.

So, it’s the day after the Incident, and Barry still can’t shake it. Not too far in the back of his mind, he can sense another change coming on. A new shape is forming. But there’s still a job to do in the meantime, right? Other crimes to solve. His task this next day is to go interview a rabbi as a fact witness for some other case.

They have a fruitful conversation about whatever needs to be discussed. Barry is, as always, his charming self. Good humored. Quick-witted. But also eminently professional.

However, toward the end of the interview, the rabbi says, “Do you mind if I ask ... You look like something’s bothering you. Would you like to put on

some tefillin and say a quick prayer?”

Barry immediately says yes. The rabbi wraps his head and arm—his mind and his body—and they say a prayer together ... and Barry, who again, *is there as a police detective on the job*, surprises himself by breaking down sobbing.

He even weeps years later as he tells this story to his son.

That night, Barry has a dream.

In his dream, he’s holding an infant.

This infant is as close to death as a living being can be.

He *knows* this look. He’s witnessed it countless times over his various lives. From operating tables to bedsides to street corners.

He stares at this dying thing, so new to being alive, so close to slipping away.

And he says out loud, in the dream—and in the retelling to his son—“This is my soul.”

The next morning, Barry wakes up and puts in his notice for retirement from the force.



When you’re raised by a single parent, you take their influences as a given. I see my mom everywhere—in my tastes, in my daily habits. Hell, I even see her in the mirror. Under all this scruff, I’m her spitting image.

I look nothing like my dad. He was hefty and bald and had these owl-like eyebrows with occasional internal cowlicks sticking up in the middle of them. For the longest time, I could only see him in the tendencies I’d made it my life’s project to control. My restlessness. My insistence in pursuing a half dozen careers at once. Even, yes, sometimes my anger.

It took a long time before I started seeing him in the best of me, too.

It took a long time.

But he’s there. In every flutter of anxiety when the weather gets cold and I remember I can’t take sunlight for granted.

And he’s there in my pathological need to learn things. To know more. That includes self-knowledge, and the impulse to write afterwords like these.

I’m intensely proud of him. Of the lives he lived. Of the mysteries he left.

Also ... since I turned forty, there’s this single damn hair in the middle of

my left eyebrow that keeps *insisting* on sticking up.

Genetics, man. You can run, but.



In a way, this book forms a sort of trilogy with *Mary* and *Nestlings*. All three books document my attempt at processing a series of losses in my life. As such, I don't know that I'll feel as compelled to write another afterword like this for a while. (I mean, famous last words—the next book I'm writing is also really personal, albeit in a different way.)

Regardless, you've been beyond kind to read this far. Hearing from readers who've appreciated these afterwords has been a profound experience. Thank you for sharing with me your own thoughts and losses. I'm never not grateful, even if I'm slow to respond to mail or social media posts. (Something my next book ALSO addresses.)

The last thing I want to say here is, every time I write one of these, I try to figure out some sort of grand unifying thesis to build toward.

If I had one for this afterword, it would be a plea.

My dad lived an incredible, fascinating life. My mom did, too. I've barely done justice to either of their experiences, and I straight up *begged* each of them to write it all down.

Neither did, and it kills me to think of the details and dramas and lessons and triumphs I'll never be able to recover.

So I'm asking you—yes, you, most likely a total stranger to me.

Please.

Tell your stories.

Share your transformations.

Don't leave it up to some weirdo who's gonna try to capture your essence with a horror novel about Big Bad Wolves and Roger Rabbit.

I wanted to share so much of my dad with you in the hopes that you could feel about his dream the same way I do. I look at that dream as my birthright—one to distribute, not to hoard. I come back to it again and again. As a reminder. An exhortation. A blessing.

My father held his imperfect, fragile soul in his hands.

He did his best to keep it alive.

He shared it with those who needed it.

That's the best any of us can do.

★ ★ ★

Until the next one, thanks, as ever, for being here with me.

NAT CASSIDY

New York City

April 2024

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To the makers of the TV show *American Gothic*—and specifically whoever cut that initial teaser back in 1995. Fun fact for *Mary* fans: this book was another one I first attempted writing as a teenager. In fact, I started working on it right after finishing that nascent version of *Mary*, and it was entirely because the 1995 TV teaser for CBS's *American Gothic* fired something off in my brain ("Someone's at the door"). Unlike *Mary*, though, I never finished that early attempt ... which had the gallingly pretentious title of *Under the Masque of Autumn Twilight* for some godforsaken reason. Ugh. I shoulda let that detail stay private.

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God help us with whatever that means for the next one.

ALSO BY [NAT CASSIDY](#)

[*Mary: An Awakening of Terror*](#)

[*Nestlings*](#)

Rest Stop: A Novella

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kent Meister

NAT CASSIDY writes horror for the page, stage, and screen. His novels, including *Mary: An Awakening of Terror* and *Nestlings*, have been featured on best-of lists from *Esquire*, *Harper's Bazaar*, NPR, the New York Public Library, the *Chicago Review of Books*, *Paste* magazine, and more, and he was named one of the “writers shaping horror’s next golden age” by *Esquire*. His award-winning horror plays have been produced across the country, including Off-Broadway and the Kennedy Center. You’ve also maybe seen Nat guest-starring on shows like *Law & Order: SVU*, *Blue Bloods*, *Bull*, *Quantico*, *FBI*, and many others ... but that’s a topic for a different bio. He lives in New York City with his wife.

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