DARK PARTS



GATHER THE NIGHT

J.R. ERICKSON

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DARK PARTS: BOOK 1

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For Avery.

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1

Starla fumbled her cell phone, her hand slick with blood.

Too much blood. It was impossible to swipe or press. She lurched toward the dishtowel hanging from the oven, smudged it across the phone screen.

Dizzy, with fireworks popping behind her eyes, she sank to the wood floor and tried again. Her home screen appeared, a grainy photo of her mother sitting cross-legged on a bench in a subway car, a pile of dark flowers cradled in her lap.

Her sticky index finger struggled to find traction as she pressed the little green phone icon once, twice, three times. On the fourth, it opened, black buttons blurring.

Starla leaned closer, the warmth and wetness of her blood pooling around her bare legs.

9—what? What was the next number? Her mind had gone blank, empty.

She needed to sleep, rest. The phone was too heavy. Her fingers couldn't curl around it. It slipped from her grasp and smacked the floor, landing face up in her spreading blood.

Starla stared at the blood. Too much this time. Or was it enough?

1-1. That was it.

She leaned over, the phone screen little more than a pinprick in her darkening vision, and pressed the numbers.

A voice answered, a woman, but Starla couldn't make sense of her words. They jumbled together, word soup.

“I might … die,” she managed, the thought of it strange in her mind.

The pull of the void grew stronger, a riptide of darkness sweeping her away.

“… three … two … lift.”

Starla came to. A man leaned over her, his face damp with sweat.

Now a woman. “Stay with me. What’s your name?”

She knew it, but couldn’t find it.

The man spoke to someone else. “Female, approximately thirty. Bilateral wrist lacerations. Significant blood loss.”

Another voice. “We’ve got a note.”

A note? Yes, she remembered now … what had she written?

I’m sorry, Finn. Don’t be mad at me.

Something bumped beneath her.

The view slid past in broken pieces—white plaster, porch light, black sky, the woman’s serious face bobbing as they moved.

Stars flickered through the branches overhead.

Her mother had once stretched out beside her in the grass, hands folded beneath her head. Above them, an impossible number of stars had punctuated the black sky.

“People think darkness hides things,” she’d said. “It doesn’t. The night sees everything. Lovers finding each other.” Her mother’s face had been serene, a rare moment when the worry lines on her forehead had smoothed away. “Babies sleeping against their mothers’ hearts. Old men taking their last breath. Secrets whispered on back porches. Somewhere, someone is burying a body.”

“They are?” Starla had asked, struggling to imagine it, a ripple of fear passing through her.

Her mother had squeezed her hand. “Don’t be afraid, my love. Everything dies eventually.”

“She’s waking up.”

Bright lights stabbed through her eyelids. Everything was painfully white.

“Starla, can you hear me?”

Faces hovered over her, blurred around the edges, so many pairs of eyes gazing down at her. Blue scrubs. Masks. Plastic face shields.

Someone pressed hard against her arm. Someone else peeled away blood-soaked gauze. Her stomach lurched.

She wanted to tell them she was sorry. She couldn’t remember why.

Darkness folded over her once more.

Through the haze of sedation, Starla woke briefly to the pumps and gurgles of the hospital machinery.

Someone walked by in the hall carrying flowers, their red petals wilting to black, pungent and drooping. Shadows hovered nearby, slipping around corners, undulating.

A man sat in the single chair in the corner, watching her with luminous hazel eyes. Strange eyes. He was perfectly still. The stillness of a photograph.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

A nurse hurried into the room, carrying medication. “Good. You’re awake.”

Starla blinked. Only for an instant.

When she looked back toward the chair, it was empty.

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Starla shivered beneath the too-thin cotton blanket.

She stared at the ceiling, the previous night's fever dream on a loop in her thoughts: the faces of the EMTs, the emergency room nurses, the strips of fluorescent lights, the cacophony of voices. She remembered the man in the chair watching her, his piercing hazel eyes, his tousled light brown hair, a sort of static buzz emanating from his corner of the room.

Had he been another patient? Surely not part of the medical staff. What had he been wearing? He'd likely been a watcher, someone the hospital staff posted in the rooms of attempted suicides. She couldn't conjure any memory below his neck.

Seven times Starla had attempted suicide.

Seven times and another failure, though had she expected it to work this time?

She thought back to the day before, stirring the crushed sleeping pills into her red wine, irritated at the hard bits that stuck to her gums and scratched down her throat. She'd climbed into the bath and opened her wrists. Pressure that had been building for weeks beneath her skin was instantly loosed by the razor's edge.

Now voices rose in the hall. Starla closed her eyes and wondered if the slight fluttering of her dark lashes would be visible to whoever stood in the hallway.

When the doctor entered, clearing his throat loudly, she opened her eyes and looked at him.

“Starla, I’m Dr. Kaine.”

“We’ve met,” she said.

He shot a glance at her. A rapid blink, once, twice, gaze lingering on the right side of her face, the ruined side. His lips pursed, and he returned his eyes to her chart. “Yes. You were admitted yesterday for attempted suicide. Correct?”

“Yes.”

Starla’s long, wavy red-brown hair lay knotted at the base of her skull. She wanted to pull it down, conceal the right side of her face as she usually did in public, but it was too tangled to separate.

“And how are you feeling today, uh, physically?”

Starla stared at him, the hard set of his jaw, the narrow focus of his eyes on the sheet. He did not want to look at her. Many of the doctors she’d encountered were unfazed by her face. They were doctors, after all. They sawed open chest cavities and craniums. They lived in a world of blood and viscera and disease.

This doctor, Joseph Kaine, was different—squeamish even. Starla found his bedside manner lacking and suspected he had been pressured into becoming a doctor, perhaps by an overbearing parent, rather than being drawn to the profession by a genuine desire to heal.

“Fine.”

“Your blood pressure is coming up. Hemoglobin dropped overnight, but not enough that I think you’ll need a transfusion. The lacerations required quite a few stitches, but they’re clean.” He paused. “You were fortunate.”

Was she? Fortunate never seemed like the right word to fit her life.

“A psychiatrist will come speak with you sometime today. They’ll determine what the safest next step is.”

“Which psychiatrist?” *Please don’t say Dr. Copeland.* She’d met with him before and sensed his desire to commit her.

“Dr. Argall, I believe.”

Starla blew out a relieved breath. She knew Argall well and liked him.

Dr. Kaine wrote something on his clipboard. “Do you have any other questions?”

She had made a business of studying people. She’d become fluent in discomfort. His eyes cast everywhere except at her face, flitting over the clipboard, the monitors, even the window, which revealed a sunny, blue-skied day. His shoulders were tense, his mouth set.

“No questions,” she murmured. She’d done this before, knew the protocol.

“Well, then …” He was already moving toward the door and then out, not bothering to complete his sentence.

“Hey, girlie.” Carrie, a nurse who’d taken care of Starla on many previous occasions, breezed into the room. “I’ve got your favorite.” She held up a plastic tray with a container of chocolate pudding.

“Thanks.” Starla pressed the button to sit up higher. “Does that mean you’re not mad at me?”

Carrie pursed her lips. “I’m not happy with you, but I’m not mad. Last time you said you were going to get back into therapy.”

“I did.”

“And it didn’t help?”

Starla picked up her chocolate pudding and peeled off the tinfoil seal. She’d never been able to explain her desire for death. Some people could understand it, but rarely hospital staff. They’d devoted their lives to keeping people alive. Starla’s desire to self-annihilate went against the very core of their belief system. “It helped for a little while, but honestly the therapist wasn’t great.”

The truth was Starla had done only two sessions after her last attempt, both online, and after the first, the therapist, a young woman who looked like she’d just graduated from high school, suggested they do away with video calls and stick with voice calls only. Starla knew why. She was uncomfortable with Starla’s disfigured face.

“I need to take a shower,” she told Carrie. “I’m sticky, and my hair is a bird’s nest.”

Carrie peeled back her bandages and inspected her sutured wrists. “I know you want one, but you lost a lot of blood. Right now, if I stood you under hot water, there’s a good chance your blood pressure would tank and you’d end up on the floor. Tomorrow.”

“I could sit on that little plastic chair in the shower,” Starla argued.

“Those bandages are fresh, and we’re not getting them wet yet. Let’s compromise. I’ll grab you some warm washcloths, a clean gown, and a

shower cap if you want one. I know it isn't the same, but it'll help."

"No shower cap," Starla said. Even tangled, her hair at least covered her mutilated right ear.

"Agreed. No shampoo cap. Now eat your pudding."

"Is that Starla I see?"

Starla turned to the door as a middle-aged woman, clad in a hospital gown, her graying dark hair loose and snarled, lumbered in pushing her IV pole.

"Leslie, the last time I saw you, you said you'd be back in this place over your dead body." Starla clasped the woman's hands.

"Don't remind me, girl. If this damn ulcer would stop acting up, I'd keep my word."

Starla had met Leslie decades before when the woman volunteered on the Freak Floor. She'd often brought in brownies for Starla and Finn.

"The question is what in the world are you doin' in that bed?" Leslie frowned when her eyes landed on Starla's bandaged wrists.

"Oh, just … had a rough week. All better now, though."

"Good. I'm retiring in December, and I'm throwin' a big ole party. I expect you to be there."

"Oh, I will be."

"And where is your sidekick?"

"Finn? Working, I'm sure."

"Still cancer-free?"

"Twenty years and counting."

"Amen to that." Leslie turned toward the hall. "Uh-oh, Ferris just walked by and he'll throw a hissy fit if he sees me outta bed. See you later, girl."

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Noelle smiled at Gina, the woman at the front desk, but angled away to avoid a conversation. Gina was great—kind, funny, eternally optimistic—but she loved to ask probing questions. Not out of malice, but simply curiosity.

How's that gorgeous husband of yours? Talkin' about having kids yet? How is your mother?

Not inappropriate questions by any means, but Noelle liked to imagine that when she stepped across the threshold at Bellerose Hospital she slipped through a veil, and that veil erased the Noelle who existed outside of the hospital.

In this place, she was not twenty-eight-year-old Noelle Radmor-Mitchell, wife of news anchor Aiden Mitchell, daughter of Grace Radmor. She was just a nurse—a healer in blue scrubs, a person without a past.

Noelle took the elevator to Med-Surg and swiped her badge on the time clock. She clipped her hospital phone to her waistband, poured half a cup of coffee that tasted like it had been brewing since noon, and headed toward the nurses' station for her night shift.

She'd been on the unit for less than six months. Long enough to memorize room numbers and staff names. Not long enough to stop feeling like everyone knew what they were doing except her.

"Evening," she said.

The day nurses looked as tired as she felt. Kate slid a report sheet across the counter. "You've got four patients tonight." She traced a finger down

the page. “Including Starla Burton in 216.”

Noelle frowned. “Burton …”

“The woman transferred to us from the ER last night.”

“The one with the facial scarring?”

“That’s her. She’s a frequent flyer around here, as a visitor and a patient. She started coming to Bellerose”—Kate gestured at her face—“ages ago. Ferris likes to call her our unofficial mascot.”

“What happened to her face?”

“An acid attack as a kid.” Kate dropped her voice. “Her father did it.”

Noelle’s mouth fell open. “That’s terrible.”

“Yeah. She’s had it rough. Pat can tell you all about her, or Carrie. They’ve both known her for years.”

“How is she? As a patient?”

“Good. Never a problem. Not a typical suicide attempt, that’s for sure.”

Noelle walked into 216 to find Starla watching the news. Her eyes landed on the right side of Starla’s face: the network of scars, the puckered eye, and the mostly missing right ear.

She quickly looked away, focusing instead on the whiteboard. “Hi, Ms. Burton, I’m Noelle Mitchell, and I’ll be taking care of you today. How are you feeling?”

“Never better.”

It took Noelle a moment to recognize the sarcasm, but when she did, her shoulders loosened. Noelle had dealt with two other suicide attempts during her time on Med-Surg, and both had been difficult. One patient had been so depressed she refused to speak to anyone—Noelle, her doctor, other nurses. Even family couldn’t get through. The second had ripped out his IV and had to be strapped to the bed for two days.

“And call me Starla.”

“Starla’s a unique name.”

Starla nodded. “It’s a song by the Smashing Pumpkins.”

“One of your parents was a fan?” Noelle uncapped the dry-erase marker and added her name to the whiteboard. She skimmed the rest of the board—

regular diet, activity as tolerated, psych evaluation complete, discharge planning underway.

“My dad had a love-hate thing for them,” Starla explained. “He was a musician and believed every other musician was put on this earth to spite him, especially if they had talent and were famous. My mother chose the name, and I’m pretty sure my dad hated it.”

Noelle thought of Kate’s story that Starla’s own father had been behind her disfigurement. “Well … it’s a very pretty name. How are you feeling today? I’m just going to do a quick assessment while you fill me in.” She slipped on a pair of latex gloves and listened to Starla’s heart and lungs.

“Physically? Worse than I did when I slit my wrists. Mentally? A lot better.”

“That’s good, then. Obviously not that you’re feeling worse physically, but …” Noelle checked her blood pressure and jotted down the results.

“It is,” Starla agreed. “Physically I’m never good, haven’t been good in a long time.”

Noelle inspected the fresh dressings around both of Starla’s wrists. “Wiggle your fingers for me, please.”

Starla did.

Satisfied that the circulation and sensation were intact, Noelle checked the IV in Starla’s forearm. “Vitals look good,” she said, slipping off her gloves. “When you say physically you don’t feel well, can you tell me about that?”

“Look at me. I’m a walking, talking voodoo doll. How would you feel?”

Noelle searched for what she should say. She was the nurse, after all. Blood warmed her face, and she shifted her attention to Starla’s saline bag to avoid looking at her. “Is there anything I can do to ease your discomfort?”

Starla didn’t respond, and when she turned back, Starla’s eyes were fixed on the television.

Peter Calhoun, a man from Novi, Michigan, whose wife had vanished the week before, was giving an interview, clutching a photo of his missing wife.

“He killed her,” Starla said.

Noelle turned, mouth fallen open. “What? No. Look at his face. He’s devastated.”

“Crocodile tears. Not a wet eyelash on that man. And see how he’s looking everywhere but at the reporter? He’s eye-blocking.”

“Eye-blocking? I can see his eyes. I don’t get it.”

“No eye contact, and he keeps covering his face.”

“My husband is a news anchor here in Blackwater. He said the woman’s family believes she was abducted, maybe trafficked.”

Starla shook her head. “First off, that’s not how human trafficking works. The bad guys do not target suburban housewives. They kidnap people who are poor, who are addicts or have parents who are addicts, or who are marginalized. The last thing a human trafficker wants is this.” Starla pointed at the screen. “National news coverage. Families want to believe their loved one is alive and being trafficked rather than murdered. Sad, but true.”

“He just seems so … genuinely upset.”

“Watch him.” Starla gestured. “You know what happens when people cry? Snot. The tears drain into the nasal cavity, mix with mucus, and come pouring out of your nose. He’s not even sniffling.”

The interviewer leaned forward and softened her voice. “Peter, you’re telling us that you have absolutely no idea where your wife is at?”

The man pulled in his lips and once again covered his face with his hands.

“Lip compression,” Starla said. “See how he pressed his lips together? He’s holding something back.”

“Maybe he’s holding back his grief.”

“Nope. I’m telling you, Noelle, this guy has guilt written all over him.”

“How do you know all this stuff?”

“I’m a forensic consultant.”

“What’s that exactly?”

“I study cases, do behavioral analysis, assess risk, and build offender profiles. A lot of report writing.”

“Are you like an expert witness?”

“Adjacent to it. I don’t testify. I stay behind the scenes.”

“That all sounds very interesting,” Noelle said.

“It can be, though getting into the minds of murderers isn’t always a picnic.”

Noelle’s eyes widened.

“What?” Starla asked.

“Nothing … You’re just not what I expected.”

Starla studied her. “Not meek enough for someone who tried to kill herself?”

Noelle flushed. “No. That’s not what I meant. I just—I don’t have much experience with people who’ve tried to … who’ve attempted …”

“Suicide,” Starla finished for her.

“I’m not trying to offend you. I’m sorry if …”

“Stop.”

“Okay, you’re right. I’m sorry.”

“No. I’m not saying stop talking about suicide. I’m saying stop apologizing.”

“Oh.” Warmth crept into Noelle’s face.

“I know it’s unusual to talk about. People associate killing oneself with insecurity, weakness, but this”—Starla gestured at her face—“taught me to be strong, mean, loud even.

“People are going to gawk at me, and that’s fine, but I’m going to say what they’re thinking. I’m going to stare back and bring all this stuff we’re afraid to talk about into the open. People die every day. They kill themselves every day. They kill each other.

“All of us have the capacity to be cruel, but we hide it with passive aggression, gossip, and trolling people on the internet. Well, I want to get it all out there. I’m disfigured. I’m ugly. I was terribly traumatized as a child and a lot of children would have learned to be exactly what you expect of me—weak, afraid—but when your parents are both gone and you end up in foster care, you lose the luxury of hiding. Even beautiful little girls get broken in that world.”

“I’m truly sorry that happened to you.”

Starla stared at her, and Noelle felt an almost physical urge to turn away, to shield the parts of herself that seemed suddenly, impossibly visible.

“So, umm …” Noelle forced her gaze to Starla’s chart. “It looks like you met with the psychiatrist today. How’d that go?”

“Fine. I love Hank Argall—Dr. Argall, I mean. He was a huge help when I got my PhD. We go way back.”

“You have a PhD?”

“Don’t look so surprised.”

“No. I’m not,” Noelle stammered. “I didn’t mean …”

Starla laughed. “I’m only kidding. I guess the other nurses didn’t prepare you for my sense of humor.”

“I appreciate the humor, really. I’m just …” Noelle almost confessed she was tired, but remembered what her preceptor had drilled into every new nurse: *Leave your baggage at the door. They’ve already got enough of their own.*

“You’re just what?” Starla asked.

“Nothing. Never mind. I hope it was helpful, your time with Dr. Argall.”

“Unfortunately, he just gave me the usual spiel along with a pamphlet on suicide hotlines.”

“Starla, you seem pretty flippant about all of this, but … you did try to take your life.”

Starla glanced down at her bandaged wrists. “Yeah. It’s hard to explain, but … after this”—she held up her wrists—“after I open them up, it’s like releasing a pressure valve that’s been building for weeks. Instant relief, which, yeah, I get it’s not ideal, but … I feel better now.”

“For how long?”

“Never can tell.”

“If you take advantage of some of those resources when you’re feeling better, maybe the pressure won’t start building again.”

Starla smiled. “Sure. I’ll take that into consideration.”

“Okay, then. It’s been good to meet you, Starla. If you need anything, hit the call button.”

Starla nodded, but her eyes had returned to Peter Calhoun on the screen.

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4

Starla studied Noelle when the nurse returned later that night to replace her saline bag. Noelle, unaware that Starla had woken, chewed her lower lip as she worked.

Noelle had a girl-next-door look. Heart-shaped face, milky, pale skin of the kind that sunburned easily, a dash of freckles across the bridge of her perfect little nose.

Starla had seen her at the hospital in previous years. Only a handful of times and only from afar, but she'd taken notice. The woman was beautiful.

Virginal, Starla's father would have called her. He'd loved to divide women into virgins and whores, had done it constantly when Starla was a girl, even when he picked her up from school, pointing out her classmates: *Whore, whore, whore, virgin. You can hang out with her.*

The nurse also had a handsome husband who sometimes dropped her off in a sleek white Porsche. In sun or wind, her face grew flushed, cheeks pink. Even if her coffee-colored hair blew around it settled perfectly back into place.

She was the type of woman Starla had been watching her entire life. Beautiful, loved, unscarred.

Noelle had probably been raised in the suburbs or, better yet, one of the brick mansions that sat along Blackwater Bay. Her parents had never fought. They sat around an enormous dining table and ate things like pot roast and chicken cordon bleu.

Noelle's husband had probably been her high school sweetheart—he a basketball star, she a cheerleader.

Starla had seen Noelle's husband announcing the daily news dozens of times, smiling with his perfect white teeth, blue eyes widening when he shared especially salacious or tragic stories.

"You're awake." Noelle pulled Starla from her thoughts.

Starla licked her chapped lips. "Yeah. Sorry, I was staring. A little out of it, I guess."

"Any pain?" Noelle examined Starla's bandages.

"No, but I desperately need a shower."

"Okay. I think we can do that. Give me a few minutes."

After Noelle left, Starla swung her legs over the side of her bed, took a deep breath, and stood. A wave of light-headedness enveloped her, but she bit hard on her lip to ground herself back in the room. When the dizziness subsided, she grabbed the IV pole and wheeled it to the door.

Starla visited Med-Surg at least once a month. She brought baked goods for the nurses and sat with the patients. She looked up and down the hall now for a familiar face. The night nurses were less familiar, but Starla had spent enough time at Bellerose to know a few of them.

A man appeared at the end of the hall, swaggering toward the nurses' station as if he owned the place. He carried a large bouquet of crimson roses.

It was Noelle's husband, Aiden, the news anchor. Aiden Mitchell was even more handsome up close. His face had the polished perfection of a department store mannequin somehow brought to life. There wasn't a crooked tooth or stray wrinkle anywhere on his flawless face.

"I'd imagine those are for Noelle?" the nurse at the station, Kate, asked.

"Happy wife, happy life," he trilled, his smile practically glowing beneath the bright lights.

Another nurse emerged from a nearby patient room and slowed at the sight of Aiden holding the flowers. Starla recognized her as Lacey, though she knew little about her. Something tightened in the woman's expression before she looked away. Jealousy, Starla guessed.

"They're beautiful," Kate said. "Noelle is a lucky woman."

"Make sure to tell her that," he said with a wink.

"Do you want me to get her for you?" Kate asked.

“That’s okay. I’m on my way to meet a friend for drinks.” He reached out and brushed his fingers along the red petals before turning and walking back the way he came.

A minute later, Noelle appeared further down the hall. Kate called out to her. “Special delivery for you, Mrs. Mitchell.”

Noelle’s eyes fell on the flowers. Something in her smile appeared forced. “Oh, wow. They’re beautiful. Was he just here?”

Kate nodded. “I asked if he wanted me to grab you, but—”

“No, it’s fine.” Noelle cut her off. “I’m getting Starla into the shower. Thanks for accepting them, Kate.”

Starla hustled back to her bed and sat on the edge, winded.

Noelle frowned when she appeared in the doorway. “I would have helped you sit up.”

“I’ve got to do it eventually.”

“True.”

It took several minutes for Noelle to cover Starla’s bandages and help her into the bathroom. “The door has to stay open, and I’ll sit right there.” Noelle pointed to a chair that offered her a view of the bathroom.

“I know the drill,” Starla said. She didn’t love being observed in the shower, but after a suicide attempt, it was hospital protocol.

Noelle turned on the faucet and helped Starla strip off her hospital gown.

Once in the shower, Starla closed her eyes and turned her face to the warm spray. Her arms were weak as she lifted them to massage shampoo into her hair. Blood the medical team had not wiped off ran pink into the drain beneath her.

When she emerged nearly fifteen minutes later, Noelle stood and helped her out. “Let me lower the bed,” Noelle said, slipping from the bathroom.

Steam softened the reflection in the hospital bathroom mirror. Starla was bone-tired, but somehow still less exhausted than she’d felt before opening her wrists. Mentally she felt lighter, physically heavier.

She drew a comb through her damp hair, then arranged it over the right side of her face until the familiar curtain concealed most of the scar. As she glanced up to ensure she’d properly hidden her disfigurement, she froze.

A man stood behind her, his image distorted in the fogged glass. She sensed it was the man who’d been watching her from the chair the night she’d been admitted.

More curious than frightened, she studied his blurred image, searched for his eyes, but his face was little more than a smear.

A puff of frigid breath tickled the back of her neck and broke the momentary spell.

Starla whipped around, the movement causing an immediate wave of dizziness.

The cramped bathroom stood empty.

She dropped the comb and reached for the walker wedged in the bathroom door, holding tight to the handles.

Above her, the fan hummed. From her room, the television droned.

When the wooziness passed, Starla turned back to the mirror, bracing her hands on the vanity edge. The reflection held only her face. She blinked hard.

Hospitals are haunted, you know …

The words had been whispered by the girl who'd shared Starla's hospital room more than two decades earlier, in the months following the acid attack. The worst of Starla's physical recovery was behind her, and she'd been transferred to a quieter section of the pediatric floor, where she no longer required constant monitoring. The Freak Floor, the kids called it.

People die here every day. Every hour, I bet. You'll probably die here, too.

The girl's name had been Margaret Hansen. She had cancer. The terminal kind.

At twelve, Starla knew the word "terminal," but associated it with airports, not life expectancy. Another boy on the floor, Finn, a frequent visitor thanks to his own cancer, had explained that it meant you were probably going to die.

"Is your cancer terminal?" Starla had asked him.

Finn, bald from chemotherapy and nearly as thin as she was, had shaken his head. "My uncle's a statistician. He says my chances of pulling through are sixty, maybe even seventy percent. Those aren't bad odds."

Finn had been right.

He survived.

Margaret Hansen did not.

During her years in and out of hospitals, Starla had come to recognize the terminal patients. They had a sheen around their eyes and shadows beneath them. She'd tried once to explain it to a nurse, but the woman had

merely pursed her lips and insisted Starla stop being morbid. It was true, though. Starla had made a point of following up on the patients with that strange sheen to find out if they'd lived.

None of them ever had.

She stared for another moment into the mirror, trying to understand what drug might cause her to hallucinate the man.

You didn't. He's a ghost.

It was Margaret's voice she heard, but the thought was her own.

That night Starla dreamed of the man in the mirror.

He stood beside her bed, his expression urgent, gripping her shoulders as he tried to shake her awake. But Starla was trapped within her own body, unable to move or make a sound. She slipped in and out of dreams and nightmares.

Voices drifted in from the hallway. Shouting, tennis shoes slapping the linoleum, figures darting past her open door, blurry. "Code blue, code blue!"

Starla understood the code blue. She'd lived her entire life in and out of hospitals.

Someone was dying.

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Starla woke to a nurse she'd never met, adding her name to the whiteboard: Reba. The nurse had sharp, serious features and wrote quickly.

She turned to Starla. "You're awake. And how do you feel?"

Starla rubbed her eyes, a faint pulse in her wrists beneath the bandages. "Pretty good."

"Dr. Kaine has approved your discharge today. You were asleep, so I ordered you eggs for breakfast."

A man pushed a cart into the room.

"And here they are now."

The man set a silver-domed food plate and a glass of orange juice on Starla's tray table.

"Coffee?" Starla asked.

"I'll get you a cup from the break room," Reba told her. "Before you tuck into those eggs, let's take out your IV."

Starla had no intention of *tucking* into the eggs. During her years at Bellerose as a kid, she and Finn had renamed them Breakfast Brains, and her stomach clenched at the mere thought of forking one into her mouth.

Reba peeled the tape from the back of Starla's hand and slid out the IV, pressing a square of gauze over the puncture. "Hold that for me."

Starla pressed her thumb against the gauze. "Was there a code blue last night?" Starla asked, struggling to separate the previous night's dreams from reality.

Reba pursed her lips. “I wasn’t on shift last night. I’ll be back with your coffee shortly.”

The morning dragged while Starla waited for her discharge paperwork to get signed.

Her blood-soaked clothes had been thrown away. After Reba promised to find her some clothes to wear home, Starla got up and made her way to the vending machine in the visitor’s lounge.

She bought a bag of M&M’s and started out of the waiting room. Her eyes caught on an open brochure on a coffee-stained side table. She slowed and stared, eyes glued to a picture of a man standing in the center of a group of nurses, all clad in blue scrubs, beneath the Oncology sign.

It was the man who’d been in her room.

“He’s a nurse,” she said.

Maybe he had been there after all, a real, living person who’d slipped in to assist, and her muddled brain had planted him in the corner watching her.

But what about the mirror?

Starla grabbed the brochure and headed back to Med-Surg.

Pat sat at the nurses’ station. She was a lifer at Bellerose, had even cared for Starla a few times during her teenage years.

Next to her stood another nurse Starla knew only in passing, though she couldn’t remember her name.

“Totally unexpected code,” the nurse was saying.

Starla paused before them. “Are you guys talking about the code blue from last night? I thought I heard that. Did the patient die?”

The nurse exchanged a significant look with Pat before hurrying away.

Starla watched her go. The nurse had looked upset, scared even.

Pat gazed up at Starla with her usual motherly disapproval. “Yes. They died. But we don’t need to discuss that. What I would like to know, Starla, is what you’re going to do differently this time so that we don’t see you back here under these same circumstances in six months or a year.”

“I’m still figuring that out.”

“I’m sure Dr. Argall offered you mental health resources.”

“He did. I’ll read through them when I get home.”

Pat looked unconvinced.

Starla set the Oncology pamphlet on the counter. “Do you know this guy?” She pointed at the man.

Pat sighed and leaned forward. “He appears to be an oncology nurse.”

“He doesn’t work on this floor? I saw him in my room the night I was admitted.”

Pat’s lips thinned. “I find that hard to believe. I read your admission notes. You lost nearly two liters of blood. You were unconscious.”

“I woke up and saw him sitting in the chair. The one by the window.”

Ferris, a male nurse who looked perpetually annoyed, emerged from a patient room. “Pat, can you come here for a minute? Mrs. Mendoza is requesting you.”

Pat stood, looked pointedly at Starla. “I assure you this young man was not sitting in your room.” She rifled around the desk and then handed Starla a card. “I hope you’ll take advantage of our mental health services this time, Starla.”

Pat hurried down the hall and disappeared into Mrs. Mendoza’s room.

Starla left the brochure propped open on her tray table. She changed into the navy-blue sweatpants and plain black T-shirt Reba had scrounged up for her to wear home.

Knuckles rapped on the doorframe, and she looked up to see Finn, his face grim. His long, dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and he wore jeans and a *Lord of the Rings* T-shirt.

“Again?” he asked.

“I told them to just call an Uber to take me home.”

“Why, so you wouldn’t have to take any accountability for trying to kill yourself?”

Starla sighed. “No, so that you wouldn’t have to leave work and come to this place you hate so much to get me.”

“I don’t hate this place, but I sure as hell don’t love it as much as you do.” He strode toward her. “Come on, let me see.”

She held up her bandaged wrists.

He frowned. “How bad was it this time?”

“I’m pretty sure I met God. Except he just looked like a normal dude.”

“That’s not even remotely funny.”

“I’m not kidding.”

“All right, come on then. Let’s get out of here before they try to commit you to the psych ward again.”

As they walked out, Starla paused in the doorway and gazed back at her hospital room, missing it already.

Within minutes, someone would strip the bed, wheel away the IV pole, wipe down the surfaces. Every trace of her would disappear.

A new patient would arrive. A whole person with a life beyond the hospital walls. A family. Favorite foods. They’d be in crisis—an illness, an injury, something. No one who stayed in that bed would visit it during the best day of their life.

Starla found a strange sort of comfort in their shared pain. Not one of them who lived in these rooms was unaffected by fate, the wheel of fortune always spinning and picking out some soul for the lesson of suffering.

You did it to yourself.

She frowned, dismissed the thought, and hurried back into the room, grabbing the Oncology brochure.

On the drive home, Finn pulled into a convenience store and emerged with two bottles of bleach cleaner and a five-pack of paper towels.

“What’s all that for?”

“To clean up the blood. Obviously.”

“I’m not stupid. I did it in the bathtub.”

“And did you call an ambulance from the bathtub?”

Starla wrinkled her brow, tried to remember back to those hazy moments of too many pills and too much lost blood. She vaguely recalled lurching from the tub and stumbling through her house. She’d intentionally left her cell on her kitchen counter so she couldn’t call for help. “Probably not.”

“Exactly,” he said.

Finn parked in the driveway of Starla's little house.

At less than seven hundred square feet, the two-bedroom wasn't much, but Starla loved it. She had purchased the house in part because dark wood floors stretched wall to wall. No carpet. She'd added a few rugs, but otherwise kept the floors easy to clean. It wasn't only the suicide attempts, which often resulted in vomit and spilled blood. It was the surgeries that left her spending days with her face oozing beneath bandages, the medications that made her sweat or sent her running for the bathroom.

Every piece of furniture came from estate sales or thrift stores. Starla loved to settle into the cracked brown leather chair in her living room, supported by the grooves and contours made by the bodies who'd occupied it before. An old man, she thought, who'd spent years reading newspapers in the chair, bouncing grandchildren on his knee while he puffed on a cigar.

Finn used his own key to open her door. She'd given him a copy years before, at his insistence after her second suicide attempt.

She followed him inside. It was pitch dark thanks to blackout curtains on every window. A vague memory of an EMT groping along the walls near the backlit doorway surged. Another medic had walked into the house and sworn when he slammed his leg into something, probably her coffee table.

When she flipped on the light, a scene straight out of a horror movie greeted them.

The color drained from Finn's face. Blood clung to the white walls in uneven smears. The hardwood was spotted with dried pools connected by blurred footprints that charted her desperate path through the house.

"Well, shit, there goes the butterfly rug," Starla joked. The cream-colored rug, which she'd bought at an estate sale after Finn insisted it wasn't too whimsical, lay crumpled and streaked with rust-colored stains.

Finn didn't laugh. He moved down the hall toward the bathroom, peering into Starla's spare room. His frown deepened, though he said nothing.

He emerged with the mop and bucket she kept in the bathroom closet.

"You don't have to do that. I'll clean it up," she told him.

Finn gazed at her. "Do we have to do this every time?"

"Do what?"

"Argue about my cleaning the blood? Just sit down. You're getting paler by the second."

Starla frowned and sat on the couch, pulling her legs beneath her and watching as Finn scrubbed away the blood.

"I'm sorry," she said after a few minutes.

He was on hands and knees, the white rag now pink in his fist. He looked up at her, eyes troubled. "I don't want you to be sorry, Starla. I want you to get help."

She leaned her head back on the couch, clenched her eyes shut. "You of all people know that help is bullshit. The system is a revolving door. What are they going to do? Medicate me? Ask me to talk about my childhood? I've done all of that."

Finn sighed, and sat up on his heels. "No. You haven't. You've paid it lip service. You can't just go through the motions, Starla, you have to do the work, the inner stuff."

She pulled a blanket around her and slumped to the side. "Fine. I will, but not today. I'm exhausted."

He stood, dropped the rag in the sink, and started filling the bucket.

For a while Starla listened as he moved around her house. Guilt gnawed at her, made her want to shrink deeper into the couch. She hadn't asked him to pick her up, hadn't asked him to clean, but the shame-filled voice was loud, insidious.

She heard him go into the spare bedroom, where she'd left a mess of scattered photos and remnants of the life she'd had before the attack. As she often did during her descents into darkness, she'd taken a walk down memory lane—more like a crawl, as she pored over her past and tried to make sense of how it had all gone so terribly wrong. Finn would tuck everything back into the box—out of sight, out of mind.

Sometime later, he emerged, bent and kissed the top of her head. "I'll call you tonight."

The silence stretched.

From her hovel of blankets, Starla stared at the pressed tin ceiling and thought about the man in her hospital room.

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6

Noelle peeled off her scrubs, left them pooled on the floor, and stepped into the shower. Her feet ached. Her legs ached. Everything ached.

She wanted to sit down, maybe lie there and let the hot spray wash away the long, dark night. The smells of vomit and urine and feces. The sticky dribbles of orange juice Mr. Foster had flung from his tray in a rage. *I ordered apple juice!* All the ordinary indignities of a hard shift.

Except all of that paled in comparison to the code that had happened two nights before. The woman who'd been stable, smiling, chatting away when Noelle last checked in was a gray corpse an hour later, eyes sightlessly fixed on the ceiling.

People died. It was part of the job. But this one had been different.

Noelle didn't sit, didn't dare, because then she'd never stand back up.

The bathroom door opened, and icy air from the bedroom slithered around the glass shower door and chilled her despite the scalding water.

Aiden walked in. The shadow of annoyance fluttered across his face as he bent, scooped up her discarded clothes and dropped them in the hamper. He tapped the glass hard, as if she hadn't seen him. "We have to be in the car in seventeen minutes, or we're going to be late."

She stifled the yawn that ballooned from her chest into her throat and offered him a thumbs-up, biting back what she wanted to say—that she'd just completed another twelve-hour shift, hadn't wanted to go to brunch to begin with, was exhausted.

A patient died.

My patient.

He slipped back out, leaving the bathroom door cracked. It would be freezing when she emerged from the shower.

He'd done it on purpose. Aiden had perfected the art of subtly signaling his displeasure.

Noelle toweled off, her body coated in goose bumps, her teeth chattering. She slipped into black slacks and a silvery-blue sleeveless blouse.

The dining room overlooked Blackwater Bay, sunlight dancing across the water beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows. White linen draped the tables and crystal glasses caught the morning light.

Noelle had been to dozens of brunches like this, but her mother had always been the center of attention, the person everyone wanted to impress, hoping to secure a donation of some sort. Now her husband seemed intent on taking up the mantle.

Noelle wrapped both hands around her mug, grateful for the warmth despite the July heat.

The memory of the patient's death lay coiled in the base of her brain, a serpent ready to strike. The sudden alarms blaring, Josh yelling "Code blue," the woman's lifeless body as Kate did chest compressions. Noelle's stepfather, Dr. Yates, rushing in.

No pulse.

Across the table, Aiden oozed his typical charm.

To his left sat Blackwater mayor Aurora Harper, beside her a man named Gary, a real estate developer.

Malcolm Jasper, chairman of the Bellerose Foundation Board, focused on Noelle, who wished she could turn to water and melt off her chair into the floor.

"The Radmor family has always believed in investing locally," Malcolm said. "We're grateful your family chose Bellerose."

Noelle forced a polite smile. "My mother always felt healthcare belonged to the community."

“And she’d be pleased to know we’re trying to build on that,” Malcolm added. “We’re currently upgrading the security cameras. A necessary expense, though the installation has been a nightmare. Half the system seems to be offline at any given time. Once that’s all squared away, the next step is deciding what to do with the original Bellerose building.”

“The administration offices?” the mayor asked.

“Exactly.” Malcolm took a sip of coffee before continuing. “The architecture is remarkable. Limestone facade. Original oak staircases. Terrazzo floors under decades of carpet. We’d like to restore some of that character instead of treating it like a forgotten annex.”

Aiden nodded and leaned in. “Absolutely. So many cities are reclaiming their old buildings, and the original Bellerose Hospital is fantastic. It could be so much more than a labyrinth of cubicles.”

“Not to mention the basement,” Malcolm added, “which needs a major overhaul, or it’s liable to get condemned.”

Noelle’s fingers tightened around her cup. “You want to renovate the original hospital?”

Malcolm nodded. “Oh, yes. We’d keep portions for administrative purposes, or perhaps, if we had the money”—he winked at her—“build an entirely new administrative office.”

Noelle’s mouth filled with saliva. She pressed her lips together, afraid she might throw up, and pushed back from the table.

Aiden stared at her, part concern, part annoyance on his handsome face.

“I need to use the restroom,” Noelle announced. She hurried to the lobby but bypassed the bathroom and pushed through the front double doors, gulping in fresh air.

On rubbery legs, she walked the sidewalk and braced her hands on the back of a park bench.

She was just tired, exhausted. That was all.

A horn honked, and Noelle jumped, turning to see a little black Kia parked at the curb. The driver’s side window rolled down, and she recognized Starla from the hospital, the right side of her face concealed behind a sheaf of hair.

“Hi. Sorry to startle you,” Starla called.

Noelle walked over, heart thumping in her ears. “It’s okay.” She took another slow breath, the nausea that had struck her at the table ebbing away.

“Eating at the Blackwater Club?” Starla asked.

Noelle nodded. “Brunch.”

“Nice. I ordered takeout. They’ve got the best white chocolate raspberry muffins.”

“Do they?” Noelle had ordered a fruit cup and two scrambled eggs. She rarely allowed herself sweets, especially at breakfast.

“So how come you’re out here?”

“Oh …” Noelle lifted a hand to her hair and smoothed it down. “I just … needed some air.”

“Yeah. I hear ya. I’ve never actually eaten in the restaurant. Too fancy for my tastes.”

“Too fancy?”

“They fold napkins into birds. Need I say more?”

Noelle laughed, grateful for a little levity amid the heaviness of the past few days.

The doors to the club opened, and several women walked out.

“I have to go back inside.” Noelle sighed.

“Or hop in, and you can tell them you were kidnapped.”

Noelle smiled, imagining Aiden’s reaction if she simply didn’t return to brunch. “That’s tempting.”

Starla rustled around her glove box and handed Noelle a card. “Here,” Starla said. “If you ever need a rescue, call me.”

Noelle couldn’t help appreciating the irony. Only days ago, she’d been caring for Starla after the woman had tried to end her own life. Now Starla was offering to rescue her.

She studied the business card: *Starla Burton, Forensic Consultant.*

“Thank you.” Noelle tucked it into her pocket, surprised by how much she hoped she’d have a reason to use it.

Noelle had never been particularly good at making friends. Too often, people knew who she was before she had the chance to decide whether she liked them. They knew about the money, the house, the Radmor name. It left her forever wondering whether someone genuinely wanted her friendship or simply wanted something from her.

“Are you on Facebook?” Noelle asked.

Starla shook her head. “No social media for me.”

“Wow, really? Why is that?”

Before she’d even spoken the words, Noelle realized why Starla did not use social media. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram were little more

than showcases for everyone’s best angles. Their prettiest pictures, their happiest moments.

Noelle’s Facebook displayed a story of happily ever after. Her profile showed her in a princess-style wedding dress in the manicured gardens of her mother’s mansion, her handsome groom beaming beside her.

“Sure, of course,” Noelle said, embarrassed.

A server emerged from the Blackwater Club, a to-go bag in his hands. “Starla Burton?” he asked.

“That’s me.” Starla handed him cash.

Noelle backed away. “It was good to see you, Starla.”

“You too. Good luck in there.”

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7

As Starla started toward Leslie's room on Med-Surg, Carrie stepped from behind the nurses' station and intercepted her.

"Hi," Starla said, holding up the muffins from the Blackwater Club and a bouquet of daisies. "Wanted to brighten Leslie's day."

She'd also brought her canvas bag of random stuff she gave to patients when she visited the hospital—word searches, fuzzy socks, lip balm, decks of cards, snacks, and anything else she thought patients might find comforting.

Carrie's face fell. She took Starla by the elbow and steered her away from a patient walking down the hall, clutching his IV pole. "You're doing good, Sam," she told him.

When they stopped near an empty room, Carrie dropped her voice. "Leslie died."

Starla stared at the nurse, mouth open, the cellophane-wrapped daisies tight in her suddenly stiff hands. "No. What? Of course she didn't. Her ulcer was acting up. It wasn't even a big deal." Starla stretched back in time, hours pressing together until she could see Leslie in her mind's eye. The woman's face, eyes tired, but bright. No sheen to those brown eyes, no pallor of death in her skin.

"She was the code blue when I was here," Starla murmured.

Carrie gave Starla a half hug. "I'm so sorry. I know you've been friends for a long time." A call bell dinged at the nurses' station. Carrie released

Starla. “I need to go see about that.” She started away, but then turned back, forehead creased with worry. “But don’t let this get you down, understand?”

Starla walked into the waiting room and sank into a chair. The aroma of burned coffee permeated the space. A rerun of *Friends* played on the television.

Leslie was dead. Leslie, who’d been so excited for retirement, who had planned a big party.

How had Starla missed it? The telltale clues Leslie had entered the last hours of her life. She struggled to remember Leslie’s face clearly in those final moments. Had Starla been so preoccupied with herself that she’d simply not noticed?

No. There’d been no shadow. No haze in Leslie’s eyes. Nothing.

Starla’s tote full of distractions suddenly felt absurd. Who was she trying to cheer up? People died in the hospital. A lot of them. Sometimes for reasons no one could explain.

“So what?” she muttered. “So what if people die? So what if it’s all for nothing?”

It’s not, the voice she liked to pretend was her mother’s, but she understood was actually her own, insisted.

Starla forced herself up, slung her canvas bag over her shoulder, and trudged back to Med-Surg.

She didn’t do it only for the patients. She did it for the nurses, too. Over the years, Starla had consumed more than her share of their time and energy, arriving at Bellerose broken and leaving after they’d put her back together.

She couldn’t undo any of that. But she’d made a deal with herself long ago: whenever she was well enough to give instead of take, she would.

The first patient waved her inside before Starla knocked. She sat beside the woman for a while, discussing the woman’s frustration that she was missing her niece’s wedding thanks to chest pains.

The second patient, an older man admitted for congestive heart failure, accepted a puzzle book and fell asleep halfway through thanking her. For the few minutes he’d spoken to her, Starla noticed the familiar sheen around his eyes, faint as frost on glass.

She stopped Carrie in the hall. “You should keep an eye on 220.”

Carrie gazed past her. “Mr. Franco? He seemed fine earlier.”

“Yeah, but he’s not.”

Carrie pressed her lips together and nodded. Carrie was one of the few nurses Starla could speak candidly with. Many of the others viewed her suggestions with a skepticism not unusual for healthcare professionals. Carrie, on the other hand, kept a lucky rabbit's foot dangling from her rearview mirror and insisted on wearing her Caribbean blue scrubs on full moons or the night would be chaos. She approached life and death with a slightly more open mind. "Okay. Thank you."

In Room 219, a teenage boy sat propped against his pillows, wearing a black baseball cap. Six balloons bobbed above his bed—three black, three bright red.

"Black and red? Those are pretty cool," Starla said.

He flicked his eyes up from his tablet. They widened for a second as he took in her face and then shifted to the balloons. "Blackwater Cardinals. My soccer team brought them in last night," he said.

"They must be good teammates."

"I'm not sure my nurse thought so."

She held up her bag. "I've got snacks, puzzle books, fuzzy socks …"

He smirked. "I'm seventeen."

"So … crossword puzzle?"

He tilted his tablet toward her to reveal a guy with a machine gun aimed at an enormous black monster with wings. "*Monster Hunter*," he said. "I'm good without the crossword."

"What are you in for?"

"I was in a car accident last week. Broke some ribs and my right leg."

"How'd the other guy look?"

"It was a tree. He didn't make it."

"Well, I'm glad you did."

He smiled, then shifted his gaze back to his tablet. "Me too."

Starla rifled through the bag. "Granola bar?" she asked.

He didn't look up from his tablet. "Got any Doritos?"

She took out two bags of potato chips. "Best I can do is Lays."

"Sure."

She tossed them onto his bed. "Good luck with the monster."

Starla continued down the hall, moving in and out of rooms. She chatted for a while with Marcus Combs, a patient she'd met previously who suffered from chronic pain. He was missing his cats, June Bug and Mr. Magoo.

After she'd covered nearly the entire floor, the residual exhaustion from her latest suicide attempt crept in. Her wrists throbbed beneath her bandages, and a mild headache pulsed at her temples.

"Why do you come here so often?"

She turned to see the nurse, Ferris, watching her. A veteran of the Med-Surg floor, Ferris had never made any effort to hide his dislike of Starla.

"To visit my sick friends."

He scowled. "The patients on this floor change constantly. You probably don't even know ninety percent of them."

"Spoken like someone who hasn't lived in one of these beds for months on end. I don't need to know them to *know* them. Once you enter this place, we're all the same."

"I might not sleep in these beds, but I've spent a lot more time on Med-Surg than you have."

She rolled her eyes. "It's not a competition, Ferris." She groped in her bag and found a small plush kitten. "Here. Maybe you need a friend." She tossed it at him, but he didn't reach for it. The kitten dropped to the floor at his feet. He turned and strode away.

"Asshole," Starla muttered. She walked back and stooped to grab the kitten. The room tilted when she stood back up. She braced a hand against the wall, the thump beneath her bandages intensifying.

As she started back down the hall toward the elevators, movement caught her eye. A single black balloon from the teenager's room had drifted into the hallway.

She stopped and watched it. The ribbon trailed beneath it, twisting lazily as the balloon floated several feet above the floor down the empty hallway. It paused, bobbed for a moment, and then continued forward.

Starla pulled her cell phone from her pocket, aimed it at the balloon, and hit record.

She followed. The black balloon passed Room 221. Then 223 without wavering. The ribbon brushed against the wall before it slowed outside Room 227. It hovered in the doorway and then slipped inside.

Starla peered into the patient's room.

A man slept peacefully beneath a thin hospital blanket, no shadows beneath his eyes. The balloon settled against the ceiling above the foot of his bed and stilled.

A whiteboard listed his name: Dan Mercer.

Starla looked from the sleeping man to the motionless balloon. Something shifted at the edge of her vision.

For a heartbeat, the oncology nurse stood in the corner—the same man who'd appeared in her room. Solid. Real.

Starla turned her head.

Nothing.

The corner was empty.

Hospitals are haunted, you know.

Despite the encroaching exhaustion, Starla took the elevator to the Oncology floor.

Starla had never been to Bellerose's Oncology floor. Back in Finn's cancer days, it hadn't existed. The hospital had added the unit eight years ago, long after Finn had finished treatment.

She stepped off the elevator and dug the Oncology pamphlet from her bag.

Sunlight spilled through the windows at the end of the cancer wing, brightening the polished floors. The unit felt different from Med-Surg. Quieter, but not in a gloomy way.

Down the hall, a teenage boy shuffled along with an IV pole. A nurse walked beside him, encouraging him to complete another lap around the unit.

"Almost there," the nurse said.

The boy rolled his eyes. "You've said that three times."

The nurse laughed.

Starla thought instantly of Finn, likely around this boy's age when she'd met him at Bellerose. Hair fallen out, face sunken, but none of his sarcasm and wit dulled by the endless pump of poison designed to destroy the cancer. This boy seemed similarly tenacious. He lifted his gaze, eyes pausing on Starla's face, but no judgment there. A curiosity, unlike most teenage boys who gawked and snickered. The hospital did that to people. It leveled the playing field.

"I rang the bell today," Finn had told her nearly two years after they met on the Freak Floor. He wasn't on the floor anymore, had beaten the pneumonia that had put him there, and now he'd beaten the cancer as well. Starla had experienced mixed feelings about his announcement, jealousy coupled with joy. Joy that he'd survived—the cancer, for now anyway, had

gone into remission. Jealousy that no such bell existed for her. Her disfigurement was a life sentence.

At the nurses' station, Starla unfolded the pamphlet and displayed it for the nurses at the desk. "Is this guy working today?"

The nurse, nametag Eileen, shook her head. "Bryan quit last year, or, well … quit might not be the right word. He stopped showing up. His mother came around for a while and insisted he had disappeared. Admin said he left of his own accord. So"—Eileen held out her empty palms—"I can only tell you he hasn't worked here in nearly a year."

"His mother said he disappeared?"

Eileen shifted her attention back to the monitor before her. "Yes, but I was only on shift with him a few weeks, so I'm not the person to ask about this stuff. You could try Tia." Eileen gestured at the nurse who'd been walking with the teen boy and now stood in the hall writing on a clipboard. "I'm pretty sure they were friends."

Starla approached the nurse, who looked up and smiled. She held open the brochure, pointing at Bryan. "Can you tell me anything about this guy?"

Tia's eyes widened, and her smile slipped away. "Bryan Carlson? I'm sorry, are you with … law enforcement?"

"No." Starla had tried to pinpoint the lie she'd offer when asking about the man, but all of them had fallen flat in her own mind. "I … knew him a long time ago. And someone said he worked here."

Tia's mouth turned down. She lowered her voice. "Well, I feel weird telling you this, but … he vanished a year ago."

"Vanished?"

Tia fidgeted with her ID badge. "I don't know. He stopped coming to work. There was a rumor that he ran off with a secret lover. He practically lived with his mother, you know, and for some men, they can't muster up a clean break. They can't seem to just say, 'Hey, Mom, it's time for this birdie to leave the nest.' So instead, they pack a bag one night and never look back."

"Is that what you believe? He ran off with someone?"

Tia's forehead creased. "Honestly? No. That man was the most gentle, kind-hearted person. Everyone in this place loved him, even the grouches."

"What do you think happened then?"

"Oh, gosh. I mean, I've thought about it, wondered, talked with the girls. We all thought maybe some random drunk guy had killed him. He

loved to dance. Isn’t that funny? He was in his thirties—I’m not sure how old—but sometimes he’d show up for his shift still wearing bracelets from a dance club he’d been at the night before. I thought he might have crossed the path of some inebriated jerk, and that person took him out.”

“But no one ever found his body?”

“Yeah, that’s strange, but there’s enough water around here. He could’ve been dumped. It’s also possible he was stumbling drunk away from one of those bars and fell into Blackwater Bay. That’s happened before, you know? Like ten years ago, a college kid drowned in that bay after a night out with friends.”

Starla considered the man in the corner of her room, eyes bright. Too bright.

He’d vanished a year before.

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8

Noelle stepped into Room 227. The sixty-two-year-old man had arrived with a kidney infection the day before.

"Hi, Dan. I'm Noelle. I'm taking over for Mona. How are you feeling?"

Dan, who'd been flipping through a magazine, readers perched on his nose, turned. "Just dandy, Noelle. Though disappointed to hear Mona left. She's been smuggling me extra Jell-O cups."

Noelle noticed four empty Jell-O cups on his tray table. "I guess that means your appetite is alive and well."

He folded the magazine and rested it on the bed. "I can't say I'm ready for a steak, but that Jell-O is really hitting the mark."

"I'll make sure to keep it coming." Noelle checked his temperature, heart rate and blood pressure. She hung a new IV line. "Any pain today?"

"Nope. Feeling good as new. I'll be ready to head out of here tomorrow. Not to say it hasn't been nice having you lovely ladies care for me the last couple of days."

"It's our pleasure."

"Knock, knock."

Noelle turned to see a young woman, a small boy perched on her hip, standing in the doorway. The boy clutched a little pink bear with Get Well Soon sewn onto its belly.

"Noelle." Dan beamed. "This is my daughter, Parker, and my grandson, Logan."

“Sorry to show up so late,” Parker said. “I had to work until seven and then got Logan from the sitter and came straight here.” She walked in, leaned over, and kissed him on the head.

Noelle felt the little flutter of longing she’d experienced a thousand times before when watching fathers and daughters.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Dan told her. “I’m perfectly fine.”

“Look what I got you, Papa!” Logan thrust the pink bear into Dan’s hands.

“Well, good gracious. He’s pretty cute.”

Parker smiled. “The gift shop only had pink.”

“Enjoy your visit,” Noelle said, starting from the room.

Parker followed Noelle into the hall. “Is he actually fine? He didn’t even tell me he was coming in, just called this morning to say he’d been here overnight with a kidney infection.”

“He’s doing great,” Noelle assured her. “The antibiotics took care of the infection. One more night and he’ll be good as new.”

Parker rested a hand on her chest, eyes welling. “Thank God. He’s just … so stubborn when it comes to his health, and I worry about him. You know? I can’t imagine losing my dad. It would absolutely destroy me.”

“No risk of that. I promise,” Noelle told her.

“Thank you so much,” Parker said, “for taking care of him.”

The call light for Mr. Romero, in for COPD, lit up.

Noelle walked to his room and stepped inside. “Hi, Mr. Romero.”

The man sat up in bed, wide awake, eyes bulging. “There’s a man in that hamper.” He pointed a shaky finger toward the large, rolling hamper piled with linens in the room’s corner.

The fine hairs on Noelle’s neck prickled. “Mr. Romero, it’s only bedsheets and blankets. See?” Noelle walked to the hamper, stared at the misshapen bedding in search of any sign someone sat crouched within it, and lifted a sheet up.

Mr. Romero squinted toward the cart, shaking his head slowly. “I saw him. He’s in there.”

“Well … here, let me …” Noelle reached into the tangle of bedding and began to pull the blankets and sheets out, careful not to sink her hand into a soiled section of bedding.

Cold, damp fingers clutched her own.

Noelle screamed and stumbled back, hip bumping Mr. Romero’s tray table and sending a cup of water to the floor.

“See!” Mr. Romero shouted. “He’s in there.” The man furiously jabbed his call button.

Ferris appeared, eyes roving from Noelle to Mr. Romero. “Everything okay?” he asked.

Noelle pointed at the hamper, but Mr. Romero spoke first.

“There’s a man hunkered down in that hamper. He’s in there. She just saw him.”

Ferris looked at Noelle, but she said nothing.

He stepped to the cart and peered in, then, as Noelle had done moments before, began pulling out blankets and dropping them on the floor. Soon he was bent in half, his upper body completely submerged in the hamper.

Noelle waited for him to recoil, jump back, something. He didn’t.

Ferris straightened, brow furrowed. “It’s empty,” he announced.

On shaky legs, Noelle walked over, half thinking Ferris was playing a trick on her, and she’d discover another of the nurses inside, curled in the fetal position, waiting to grab her once more.

The empty gray bottom of the rolling laundry hamper met her eyes.

Noelle slipped into the break room, opened her locker, and grabbed a protein bar. She eyed the chairs arranged around the little round table, but didn’t sit. Sitting allowed the nerves in her feet and lower back time to signal her brain that they ached. As long as she stayed on her feet, kept moving, they couldn’t deliver their message.

The door opened, and Kate walked in, yawning. She clapped a hand over her mouth. “You didn’t see that.”

Noelle nodded. “It’s our secret.”

“I hate to make another pot of coffee at three a.m., but this is one of those nights, eh?”

“Agreed. Obviously, the slowness is a good thing as far as our patients are concerned, but it sure makes the nights drag.”

“It does.” Kate walked to the coffeepot, grabbed the carafe, and held it under the faucet.

Ferris came in next. He looked annoyed, not an unusual expression. “No coffee?” he muttered.

Kate hit the button on the coffeemaker. “There will be in about five minutes.”

He sighed and leaned back against the counter. “Lacey owes me big time. I’m at twenty hours and counting right now.”

“At least you’ll get overtime,” Kate said.

“Starting to think it’s not worth it. Happy I was here to deal with the hamper man, though.” He shot Noelle a derisive look.

“The hamper man?” Kate gazed back and forth between them.

“It was nothing,” Noelle murmured, knowing her cheeks flared red and unable to stop the warmth in her face. She finished her protein bar, dropped the wrapper in the trash, and headed out to the floor.

She moved between patient rooms. Most of her patients slept, save Mrs. Reggler, who insisted the alarms kept waking her.

“I wish I could make it quiet in here,” Noelle said, “but I can’t. Those alarms let us know when someone needs help.”

Mrs. Reggler frowned and clapped her hands over her ears, clenching her eyes shut.

As she stepped from the room, Noelle caught sight of Ferris once more, but his usual smirk had vanished. “Code blue, Room 227,” he shouted. “Code blue.”

Room 227. Dan Mercer’s room.

Noelle broke into a run, skidded as she hit the doorway, and clipped her shoulder on the frame.

Ferris leaned over Dan, pumping his chest.

Noelle stared at her patient, who minutes before had been stable, sleeping soundly. The monitor showed a flatline.

She flipped the switch by the door. Bright light flooded the room, exposing the gray, sweat-sheened pallor of Dan’s skin.

Dan’s body jumped beneath Ferris’s hands, and Noelle expected him to draw in a breath.

He didn’t.

Noelle reached for the oxygen, sealed the mask over his mouth and nose, and began squeezing air into him in steady bursts.

Footsteps flooded the hallway.

Kate and Anita arrived, followed by Dr. Kaine.

“What happened?” Kaine barked. “When was he last seen?”

“He was stable,” Noelle insisted. “Kidney infection, on IV antibiotics—”

“No pulse,” Ferris said.

“More compressions—keep going,” Kaine commanded.

Ferris counted under his breath. Kate pulled open drawers, snapped syringes into place.

“Hold compressions,” Kaine said.

Noelle stared at the monitor. A flat, indifferent line. Noelle’s stomach plunged.

“No pulse. Resume.”

Ferris’s hands came down again. Hard.

Noelle moved to the IV. She flushed the line.

“Airway,” someone said.

The respiratory therapist moved in, equipment open. Kate tilted Dan’s head, and the therapist inserted the breathing tube.

The bed creaked beneath Dan as compressions continued. Dan, whose daughter was Parker, whose grandson was Logan. On the tray table, the pink Get Well Soon bear jostled with the movement of the staff.

“Hold,” Kaine said.

Anita, who’d taken over for Ferris, stopped compressions. Again, everyone looked at the screen. Noelle willed the green line to jump.

It didn’t.

“Check his pulse,” Kaine said.

Anita’s fingers moved to Dan’s neck.

“No pulse.”

“Resume.”

Minutes passed. The room felt claustrophobic. Sweat poured between Noelle’s shoulder blades, lodged in the waistband of her scrubs.

They continued at a feverish pace, everyone moving, but Noelle noticed the decline in effort. The energy was changing.

“Time?” the doctor asked.

“Two forty-three.”

“Another round.”

Noelle nodded.

Another cycle. Another pause.

“Hold compressions.” Kaine looked at the screen, then at the patient, then at the clock.

Noelle wanted to scream, *Keep going*, push Anita aside and start compressions herself. She didn’t.

“Time of death,” Kaine said. “Two forty-seven.”

Anita stepped back from Dan. Ferris turned off the monitor. The flat tone ended, and the silence that followed sent shockwaves through Noelle. She took two steps back and leaned against the wall.

One by one Kaine and the nurses exited the room.

Noelle didn’t move. Couldn’t move. She stared at Dan, at his waxy gray face and his lifeless body, as if he’d become a mannequin in a matter of minutes.

He was gone.

Legs trembling, Noelle walked to his bedside. She adjusted his sheet, pulling it higher, smoothing it across his chest. She picked up the little pink bear and set it on the pillow.

He’d been fine, stable.

Noelle had promised his daughter he’d be fine.

Now he was dead.

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9

Starla woke early. She'd soon begin researching her next case. A teenage girl who'd been murdered in Marshall, Michigan. Her killer had never been found.

An oversized drafting table occupied an entire wall in her living room and served as Starla's desk. Its scarred oak surface had once belonged to an architect. Now it held stacks of books on criminal profiling, psychology, and victimology. Soon, all the books would go back on her shelf, and the surface would be clear so she could see the next case all laid out.

Starla opened her laptop searched for Bryan Carlson in Blackwater, Michigan. He appeared in several articles connected to Bellerose, mostly pieces about the new Oncology unit. He had no social media pages.

Starla opened the investigative database she used for consulting work. The blue login screen for Cross-reference appeared, followed by a search bar.

She typed: *Bryan Carlson, Michigan.*

The system returned twenty-three results.

She grimaced. "Come on."

Adding his approximate age narrowed the list to three. She opened the first profile. A photograph appeared in the upper corner.

It was him. The man from her hospital room. Bryan Elliot Carlson.

The same light-hearted smile she'd seen in the Oncology pamphlet.

For a moment she simply stared at the photo and tried to superimpose this Bryan onto the man in the corner of her room, sitting, watching her. He

looked different and yet unmistakably the same.

She turned back to the results. The report listed his previous addresses, vehicle registrations, former phone numbers, and employment history.

Her eyes skimmed downward to known relatives.

Jana Carlson

Relationship: Mother

Starla clicked Jana's profile.

Age sixty-two. Widowed. Her current address.

Starla opened another map tab and typed the address. Jana lived less than a mile from Bellerose. Starla clicked the street view and studied the small ranch-style home on Knight Road.

Starla copied the address onto a yellow notepad beside her computer.

Her cell rang. An unfamiliar number showed on the screen.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Starla?"

"You've got her."

"Hey, umm … This is Noelle. I just wanted to check in and see how you're feeling."

"Oh, hi, Noelle. I'm pretty good. How are you?"

"Well … I guess not super great. We had another patient code early this morning, and …" Her voice cracked.

Starla frowned, thought of Leslie, who'd coded just a couple nights before. She bit back her first question—*Who?*—aware that Noelle would be unlikely to share that information. HIPAA laws and all that. "Want to come over?" Starla asked.

"Come over? To your house? I probably should let you rest. You were just discharged and—"

"Noelle, I'm fine. I've been working since three this morning. I need a break. Come over. I'll make coffee. Okay, I'm hanging up to text you my address."

Starla ended the call before Noelle could argue.

Noelle arrived with a white paper bag from the bakery. "Donuts," she said.

Starla blocked the open door. "Any glazed in that bag?"

Noelle's smile faltered. "Yes, umm … I think. I just grabbed four or five randomly …"

Starla laughed. "I'm only kidding. Come on in."

Noelle followed her into the kitchen. Starla opened the cupboard and gestured at stacks of colorful coffee mugs. "Giant mug? Medium size or small?"

"Oh, well, medium, I guess."

Starla pointed to the middle shelf. "I've got Winnie the Pooh, *Twilight Zone*, a blue one covered in white lizards."

Noelle pressed her lips together as if struggling to choose.

"Decision fatigue? Here, let's go with Winnie the Pooh. He can cheer anyone up." Starla took the mug down, filled it with coffee, and handed it to Noelle. She topped off her own coffee in an enormous black and yellow Batman mug. "Let's sit." Starla grabbed a glazed donut from the paper bag and sank into her cracked leather chair, propped her coffee on one armrest and flung a leg over the other.

Noelle perched nervously on the edge of the couch, spine straight, her powdered donut untouched on her plate. "Do you mind if I …?" Noelle leaned forward and pushed Starla's mug back slightly. "I thought it might fall."

Starla grinned. "These floors have seen far worse. Do you want to talk about what happened at the hospital?"

Noelle's mouth turned down. Her eyes welled. She took a sip of coffee, cringed as if she'd scalded her tongue. "Not yet. Is that okay?"

"Of course." Starla took a bite from her donut and immediately followed it with a sip of coffee. "Mmm. Why is that so good?"

"Is that like an architect's table?" Noelle gestured to Starla's drafting table.

"Yeah, a drafting table. I bought it at an estate sale a few years ago. I like a big space when I work, so I can see everything in front of me."

"You're working on a case now?"

"Not officially. I'm waiting for case files. But unofficially, yes. I started this morning."

"Can I ask what it's about, or is that confidential?"

"It involves an unsolved murder in Marshall, Michigan."

"Are most of your cases about … murders?"

"Some of them. I wouldn't say most."

“Is that depressing?”

Starla shrugged. “No. It’s fascinating. Some cases are hard, but I’ve gotten better at turning down the ones I know will throw me for a loop.”

“What kind are those?”

“Family annihilators and wife-killers. I do them occasionally, but I’m very selective. I have no interest in writing reports that will help get some psycho off the hook for murdering his wife.”

“Is that the goal of your reports? To help a person get away with … a crime?”

Starla shook her head. “No. Not even remotely. I don’t have a goal. My job is to present what I find. Sometimes I’m looking for competency to stand trial, sometimes I assess risk, and I do quite a bit of profiling.”

“Profiling? What they do with serial killers?”

“Sort of,” Starla said. “Though most of my time is spent reading reports, timelines, interviews, and medical records. I’m looking for patterns everyone else missed and trying to understand why an offender made the choices they made.”

“That sounds interesting.”

“It has its moments, but honestly it’s a lot of reading and writing.”

Noelle, fidgety, stood and walked to the wall of pictures. There were photos, artwork, and an album cover Starla had framed. Noelle stared for a long moment at a black-and-white picture.

“That’s my mom,” Starla told her.

The image captured Starla’s mom, Nadia, sitting on a black wrought-iron bench, a pond sparkling behind her. She smiled, but Starla remembered the moment she’d snapped the photo. Her mother had had less than twelve days to live. Their reality was one of constant vigilance, of enormous joy and crippling fear.

“She’s beautiful.”

“Yes. She was. That was the last picture I ever took of her.”

“Oh … I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have …”

“Shouldn’t have what? It’s a photo hanging on my wall. If I didn’t want to talk about her, I wouldn’t have put it on display.”

“Can I ask how she died?”

“The same way this happened to my face. My dad threw acid on us. She didn’t make it.”

“Oh, God. That’s just … so terrible. Did the attack happen here in Blackwater?”

“Yes, but I was born in New York. The only place to live if you’re a serious musician, according to my dad.”

“He was a musician?”

“A rock star, if you asked him. My mom was a poet. New York is gritty and hard, but artists can exist there in all their strange glory. Then, when I was nine, they suddenly packed me into Rebel—that was my dad’s touring van—and announced we were moving west. California, I thought.”

A slight smile touched Noelle’s lips.

“Let’s just say shock does not adequately describe my feelings when Rebel finally rolled into Blackwater, Michigan.”

“Why Blackwater?”

“My dad had a friend who’d opened a nightclub. He offered my dad a management position and wanted him to gig there.” Starla stood and walked to the wall. She pointed to an album cover. “This was the only album my dad ever produced.”

It was a photograph of a stairway leading into a New York subway. No people in sight. Hundreds of dahlias trickled down the stairs into the darkness below.

“My mother told me they waited all night for an empty moment on the staircase before tossing the flowers onto the steps. The band had to shoo people away while my mom snapped pictures.”

“I’ve only been to New York twice, but I’m shocked they found an empty stairwell.”

“Yeah. It wasn’t easy.”

“The album was called *Drowning Dahlias*?” Noelle asked.

“His band name,” Starla said. “He actually named it after my mother. She loved dahlias—she was completely obsessed with them. She wrote about them constantly, painted and sketched them. One of her poems was called ‘Drowning Dahlia.’ It was really a metaphor for her own life, growing up in a house full of alcoholics.

“My dad loved the poem, so when he started his band, he borrowed the title. It’s weird though. My brain looks for hidden meaning in everything,” Starla said. “Sometimes I think about him choosing that name, a poem about my mother being destroyed by the people who were supposed to love her. He took the name for himself, and in the end …”

“He killed her,” Noelle said softly.

“Yeah.”

Noelle stared at the cover for a long time. Starla had stared at it too, studying that dark hole yawning at the bottom of the stairs.

Follow me, the image seemed to say. *Follow me into the darkness.*

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"What went wrong between your parents?" Noelle asked. "And if you don't want to tell me, that's totally fine."

"Originally, I convinced myself it was the move. Michigan was an alien planet compared to New York. They struggled here. All three of us did. We were here for two and a half years when she left him. She moved us out in the middle of the night when he was at a gig."

"That must have been a shock."

"Yes. And I knew he'd freak out. He was … emotional. That's how my mom described him—passionate. The truth is that my dad was a psychopath. I've had to go back in time to understand that. The kid version of me thought they were both just struggling to adjust. Now I understand that my mother was blackly depressed before she left. He controlled her and manipulated her."

"Do you really think your dad was a psychopath?"

"Yeah. I've studied enough of them by now to see the signs. He murdered my mother. I can't say for certain if he intended to kill me, but probably. Then he died in a shootout with police after the attack. Luckily, he didn't kill any of the cops, but that wasn't for lack of trying."

A tear had slipped from Noelle's eye, and she wiped it away. "I'm so sorry, Starla. I cannot even … I don't even know what to say."

"It's okay. There's nothing to say. It's what happened."

"In the hospital you said you ended up in foster care. Wasn't there any other family to take you in?"

“Both my parents came from dysfunctional homes. In New York, the band was our family, but when we moved to Michigan, we lost touch. A couple of them came up for the funerals, and one of them even had the audacity to tell me my dad didn’t really mean it, he actually loved us.” Starla shook her head.

“None of them offered to help care for you?”

“A bunch of self-absorbed rock stars? Hell, no. They couldn’t get out of Michigan fast enough. Plus, they barely took care of their own kids. So off to foster care I went.”

“That must have been really hard.”

“Yeah, it was. When I finally turned eighteen, I thought about moving back to New York, a place where disfigurement is less likely to draw attention. The range of human faces is vast, and those looking on stare out from a sea of indifference.”

“Why didn’t you move back?” Noelle asked.

Starla returned to her chair, slumped down. “Because I’m comfortable here. That’s the simple answer, the truest answer. Comfort is strange. We seek it and simultaneously feel a prisoner of it.”

“The enemy you know,” Noelle murmured.

“Exactly.” Starla took a sip of coffee. “All right, come on. Your turn. I’ve shared my entire life story, and I’ve yet to hear your last name.”

“I told you my last name in the hospital.”

“I know. I’m making a point. Come on, spill. Has it always been rainbows and white picket fences?”

Noelle’s eyes shifted down, and her lips thinned. She folded her arms across her chest. A series of little micro-shifts. “There’s not a lot to share. I grew up here in Blackwater. I’ve been a nurse at Bellerose for four years. Umm … my stepdad is a doctor here.”

“Really? Which doctor?”

“Dr. Ezra Yates.”

“Ahh. Okay.” As a longtime patient of Bellerose, Starla knew of Dr. Yates, though he’d never been assigned to her. He struck her as arrogant and rather standoffish. “Do you have a relationship with your biological father?”

Noelle shook her head. “I never knew him. My mother was secretive about him.”

“Sometimes you’re better off not knowing him,” Starla said.

“Yeah.”

“How about your mom, then? Are you close?”

Noelle shifted, put her hand to her throat. “Sort of. Well … we were. A year ago, she had a terrible accident. She’s paralyzed now and … umm … permanently brain-damaged. She’s nonverbal.”

“Oh, man. That sucks. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. It’s kind of like what you said before. There’s not much to say. It happened and … this is our new reality.”

“But she and Yates are still married? Despite being a doctor, he doesn’t strike me as the caretaker type.”

“She has full-time nurses. Three of them.”

Starla whistled. “That can’t be cheap.” She immediately regretted the comment. “I’m sorry. That was rude.”

Noelle smiled, but her face remained drawn. “It’s okay. It’s not cheap, but she has a lot of money.”

“And how about your husband? I’ve seen him around the hospital, not to mention on the news. Quite the Prince Charming. Did he sweep you off your feet? All of that fairytale stuff?”

Noelle blinked several times and seemed to hesitate before answering. “Aiden is … great.”

“How did you meet him?”

A small crease appeared between her eyebrows. “At a fundraising gala for the Bellerose Children’s Museum. I was in college at U of M, and my mother insisted I come home for the event. I tripped, started to fall down the stairs, and he caught me.”

“Wow. He really is Prince Charming. And you fell head over heels, or what?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

Starla sensed Noelle’s discomfort at her questions. She seemed reluctant to share information about Aiden, which struck Starla as strange. Most women in love gushed endlessly about their partners. “Do you want to talk about what happened at the hospital?”

Noelle, who’d not touched her donut, picked it up and took a tiny bite. “A patient died, a … umm … a man.” Her eyes welled.

“Did you know him?”

“Not before he was a patient, but I met his daughter and his grandson, and he … was very sweet. It came out of nowhere, and it hit me harder than

I expected.”

“I bet. That’s not an easy job you have.”

“No.”

“I heard yesterday that Leslie Hamilton died.”

Noelle paled. “Did you know Leslie?”

“Yes. I met her when I was a kid at Bellerose after the acid attack. Back then, she volunteered on the Freak Floor.”

“The Freak Floor?”

“That’s what we called the kids’ floor. We all felt like freaks compared to normal kids. I guess it was our way to band together, shield ourselves from the big, wicked world and all the normal kids.”

“That’s a little heartbreaking.”

“Yeah.”

“I was Leslie’s nurse.”

“You were? Wow, okay. I know you can’t share her medical history, but honestly, I was shocked, just sick over it, frankly. Did something happen or …?”

“No. Nothing … I don’t know.” Noelle pressed her fingers to her mouth and shook her head slowly. “She just … crashed.”

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11

"What now?" Starla asked.

Their coffees had grown cold. Starla had polished off two more donuts, and Noelle had managed to eat half of hers. They'd been talking for nearly three hours, and though Noelle still seemed worn out, her previously strained features looked softer.

Noelle leaned back on the couch and closed her eyes. "I have to go visit my mom."

"You *have* to?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said it like that. I mean, considering your mom …"

"Is dead? Just because my mom is dead doesn't mean I expect every other person on earth to cherish every moment with their own moms. Why are you dreading it?"

"I'm not. Of course not." Noelle blinked several times and rubbed the back of her neck.

Starla noted the behaviors, little cues signaling Noelle's discomfort with the topic of her mother.

"It's just … Dr. Yates is often there, and we've never been especially close." Noelle fluttered her hands. "Never mind. It's nothing. I don't know why I'm even talking about it."

"Want me to go with you?" Starla asked.

Noelle's eyes widened. "Really? I mean, you'd want to? I told you my mother had an accident, and she's basically, well, she's permanently

disabled now.”

“Those are my people,” Starla said. And it was true. Ever since her accident, Starla had felt the most safe, the most seen with the sick, the disfigured, and the dying.

Starla sat in the passenger seat of Noelle’s SUV.

They’d driven to the west side of Bellerose. The suburbs gave way to sprawling wooded estates, houses concealed behind trees and long private drives. The road narrowed before curving around a stand of ancient oaks.

Starla had driven through the area before but never visited. The wealthiest of Blackwater lived in this part of town.

Noelle turned into a gated driveway. The gates stood at least twelve feet tall, black iron adorned with elaborate scrollwork and bronze crests. Stone pillars flanked either side, each topped with a weathered lion.

Noelle pressed a button clipped to the visor, and the gates swung open.

A winding drive stretched ahead through what looked less like a yard and more like a private park. Massive beeches and maples dotted the sprawling lawn. Starla caught glimpses of formal gardens exploding with color.

The farther they drove, the more unbelievable it became.

The house finally appeared atop a gentle rise. Starla gaped at the Tudor mansion with its countless windows, soaring chimneys, and ivy-clad walls. It looked more like a university, a boarding school. For an instant her thoughts flashed back to the Meadowsweet Academy, a structure not dissimilar to the one before her though far less preserved. “Holy shit. Your mother lives here?”

Noelle nodded, but her mouth had thinned to a line.

“You don’t like it?” Starla asked.

“I still don’t think of this as our house,” Noelle murmured as she parked in the enormous circular drive. “It was always my grandparents’ house. Ed and Betty. I never even called them Grandma and Grandpa.”

Starla looked up at the enormous house.

“It wasn’t a warm place. No Christmas cookies or Easter egg hunts. This was a dinner-party house. Formal dances. Fundraisers.”

“That’s too bad. You could’ve had some serious games of hide-and-seek in there.”

“I can confirm I have never played hide-and-seek in this house,” Noelle said. “We only came here a few times a year when I was growing up. In a weird way, we existed outside my grandparents’ money. My mother was a paralegal. We had a nice house, a normal life.”

“What changed?”

“My grandparents died in a car accident when I was sixteen. Suddenly my mother inherited all of this.” Noelle gestured toward the house. “And not just the money. My grandmother was a big philanthropist. There were boards and charities and fundraisers, all these expectations that my mother would step in and take her place.”

“Did she do it?”

“She tried.” Noelle sighed. “I was too young to understand how much pressure she was under. Looking back, I think that was part of what drove her into Dr. Yates’s arms.”

“Not love, then?”

“If it was, she never said so. I don’t even know why I’m talking about this. It always feels wrong to criticize her now.”

Noelle unlocked and opened the door.

Starla followed her into a soaring foyer where gleaming marble stretched beneath an iron chandelier the size of a small car. A grand staircase curved toward the second floor, its polished banister gleaming. Oil paintings in heavy gilt frames lined the walls. Fresh lilies sat on a large, round table, their scent overlying something antiseptic.

Eyes wide, Starla followed Noelle up the stairs and down the hall.

“That’s my mom’s office.” Noelle gestured at a closed door. “And Dr. Yates’s office.” She pointed to another across the hall. “And this is the parlor where my mother spends most of her time.”

Starla paused in the doorway. The room was stunning, with rich wood paneling, stained-glass cabinet doors, and rows of leather-bound books lining built-in shelves. Soft classical music played from a speaker positioned on an intricately carved side table.

Through the window, the grounds sprawled beneath the midday sun, all perfectly groomed hedges and rows of flower bushes. It looked like something from a novel—*The Secret Garden* or *Pride and Prejudice*.

"Mother, this is Starla." Noelle kneeled before a woman who sat in a wheelchair angled toward the enormous window.

Noelle's mother's eyes did not flicker to her daughter. Her mouth didn't curve up. No physical reaction signaled that the woman existed inside her body at all.

"Starla, this is my mother, Grace."

Starla crossed the room and squatted beside Noelle. "Hi, Grace," Starla told her, taking hold of one of Grace's limp, cool hands. "You have a beautiful home and a beautiful daughter, too."

Noelle unzipped a small, quilted bag printed with crimson dahlias. An ornate gold R had been stitched onto the front. She took out a tube of ChapStick and applied it to Grace's lips.

Starla leaned closer. "That bag is pretty."

"My grandmother made them for her garden parties," Noelle said. "There are at least a hundred of them sitting in a storage room here. I could find you one."

"I'd love that. The R stands for Radmor?"

"Yes."

Footsteps sounded behind them. Noelle and Starla both stood.

A woman clad in navy slacks and a dark polo shirt, a stethoscope looped around her neck, entered the parlor.

"Hi, Virginia," Noelle told her. "This is my friend, Starla."

Virginia smiled. "I know Starla, but it's been a while. Hopefully, that means you've been staying out of trouble."

"Doing my best," Starla told her. "I love the dark hair."

Virginia touched her hair, pulled tight into a low ponytail. She laughed. "That's right. I was blonde when we met. It never suited me."

"I beg to differ," Starla said, eyes flicking again to Noelle's mother, who stared blankly out the window.

"How do you know each other?" Noelle asked.

"Bellerose," Starla offered. "Virginia's husband, Jim, was my best friend, Finn's oncologist."

"Oh, yes," Virginia agreed. "I met Starla, what, twenty years ago?"

"Yep. You yelled at me and Finn for running on the Freak Floor."

Virginia frowned and shook her head. “I always hated that you guys called it that.”

Starla grinned. “All the adults did.”

Virginia walked to Grace and smoothed the blanket across her lap. “Your mother’s friend Anita sent a photo of her grandbaby,” Virginia told Noelle. “I brought a frame from home. Thought it might be nice to sit here on her table.”

Noelle took the framed picture. Starla leaned over her shoulder and gazed at the baby photo, a professional job, with the sleeping newborn nestled inside a shallow wooden bowl lined with layers of moss-colored knit blankets.

“He’s so beautiful,” Noelle murmured.

“He is,” Virginia agreed.

“Do you have children, Virginia?” Starla asked.

Virginia crossed her arms. She shook her head and smiled, but the expression appeared hollow. “No. I was unable to conceive.”

“But you wanted to?”

Noelle shot her a look, but Starla didn’t retract the question.

“Yes, I did.”

“Why not adopt?”

Virginia’s eyes flared, and her jaw tightened, but she masked her anger. Starla watched, curious about the emotion. Sadness she understood, but anger was fascinating.

“Jim was not interested in adoption.”

Noelle and Starla left the house and walked the grounds.

“Dahlias,” Starla said, turning down a manicured path and heading for rows of enormous dark purple flowers. She leaned toward a dark dahlia bloom, closed her eyes for a moment, cheek against the springy petals.

“Black satin,” Noelle said. “That’s the color.”

“They’re amazing.” Starla brushed her fingers over the tops. A piece of her always believed dahlias were a sign from her mother, a whisper from the other side.

“What happened to your mother?” Starla asked.

“She nearly drowned.” Noelle pointed through an opening in a hedge. “In that pool, actually.”

Starla walked toward a large in-ground pool, the water sparkling.

“Dr. Yates, Ezra, talked about filling it in after the accident, but I pushed back,” Noelle explained. “That pool is a hundred years old. It has the original mosaic tile installed by my great-grandparents.”

Starla gazed through the still water at the intricate tile in navy, ivory, and jade. “Did she hit her head and fall in?” Starla studied the pool. A set of wide stairs descended into one end of the pool. A metal rail ran their length for support.

“We don’t know what happened. She was here alone. Ezra got home around midnight, and he couldn’t find her, so he came out to the pool. She was unconscious on the pool steps. He pulled her out, did CPR. Ultimately, he saved her life, but …” Noelle frowned and looked toward the large second-floor parlor window. “I’m not sure she would have wanted it this way. I think she’d have rather died.”

“Did she have a DNR order?”

Noelle shook her head.

“I understand why you didn’t want him to fill the pool in. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Yes. Sometimes I feel guilty about it. He has to live here and see it all the time and be reminded, and part of my reasoning was selfish. I love this pool. Once we moved here, I swam in it every day. I still come out here to swim.”

“I have a love-hate relationship with swimming,” Starla said.

“Why is that?”

Starla crouched beside the pool and dipped her fingers into the water. Cold enveloped them. “I didn’t learn to swim until I was sixteen. Growing up in New York with city parents, it was never a priority. Then we moved to Michigan, my mother left my dad, and swim lessons definitely weren’t high on the list.”

She looked down at the water. “In sixth grade, I got invited to a birthday party. A pool party. The girl had an actual in-ground pool, which seemed like the coolest thing in the world to me. I was so excited to be invited. I told my mom, and she immediately worried because I couldn’t swim. So she bought me a life jacket. Pink. We had no money then. She was waiting tables, and we’d become experts at surviving on nothing.” Starla felt a

familiar flicker of sadness at the memory. “She had this ring she loved. She sold it to a pawnshop so she could buy me that stupid life jacket.”

“Oh, Starla.”

“The worst part is how excited she was to give it to me. Like she’d solved everything.” Starla stared into the pool. “And I was mortified. I was twelve years old. There was no way I was showing up to a pool party in a pink life jacket. I would rather have died.” She paused. “So I didn’t go.”

Noelle said nothing.

“Then the attack happened. I spent months in the hospital with nothing to do but lie there and think, and somehow, I became fixated on that life jacket.” Starla shifted her attention to the dahlias. The memory physically hurt. “I convinced myself I’d caused what happened to us. That God was punishing me. I’d been ashamed of a life jacket, so he was going to teach me what real shame felt like. He was going to humble me.”

“Starla …”

“I know how insane that sounds now. I knew it then, on some level. But I couldn’t stop believing it.” She looked back at the water. “Even now, when I think about that life jacket, I feel sick.”

Starla leaned farther over the pool. Her reflection wavered, the right side of her face stretching grotesquely, as if something beneath the surface were pulling it into a bottomless void. She blinked, willing the image away.

Another reflection appeared beside her own. The man from the hospital stared up at her, his features perfectly still despite the movement of the water.

Noelle, also gazing into the pool, said nothing. She couldn’t see him.

Because he doesn’t exist.

A gust of wind sent a dahlia tumbling into the water. It struck the surface, and his face shattered into ripples.

Noelle shook her head. “I’m so sorry.”

Starla stood, wiping her hand on her jeans. She forced her gaze away from the pool and back to Noelle. “The warped mind of a pre-teen girl.”

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Noelle drove into the parking garage and headed for her usual spot on the fourth floor. It was at the far end of the deck, away from the elevators and stairwell, and few others ever parked there.

She'd had a couple of days away from Bellerose, but when she stepped onto Med-Surg, the memory of Dan's code returned instantly. She stared down the hall toward the nurses' station. The image of the pink bear lingered in her mind, its two little glass eyes sightlessly staring at the ceiling.

"Dreading it? Me too. Full moon tonight," April grumbled when Noelle stopped at the computer to clock in.

Noelle forced her attention to April, tried to bury the tears creeping up her throat. "Yeah," she breathed.

"Nothing to do about it now except hope one of these patients is a secret zillionaire about to fall in love with me and whisk me away to his castle in Scotland."

"You never know," Noelle said, her voice catching slightly.

April peered closer at her. "You okay, hon? You're looking a little pale. A nasty strain of influenza A went through the emergency room last week." April put a hand to Noelle's forehead. "No fever."

Noelle shook her head. "No. I'm fine. Thank you. I'm just going to run to the restroom quick." Noelle slipped past April and made her way to the bathroom.

Noelle sat down behind the nurses' station, relieved her co-workers were all busy elsewhere on the floor. She had loads of charting to do, had spent far too much time chatting with Mrs. Miller, who was recovering from knee surgery. The woman had insisted on telling Noelle a fully dramatized story of twisting her knee during the playoff game in her fifty-plus women's soccer league.

Noelle gazed at the glowing monitor, scrolling as she added lab values and medication times. Despite the full moon, Med-Surg had settled into an almost unnatural calm.

As she leaned back in the rolling chair, a call light illuminated on the tracking board.

Room 214.

Noelle pushed back from the desk. "I got it," she called, though nobody stood nearby to hear her.

The hallway stretched long and empty, overhead lights dimmed for the night, leaving pools of yellow light between darker patches of shadow.

The call light above Room 214's door glowed red.

Noelle knocked softly. No answer.

She opened the door. The room was empty.

Noelle stopped. The bed was stripped. The television was off. The call button beside the empty bed swayed gently as though someone had just released it.

Gooseflesh prickled over her arms. She rubbed the sensation away, blinked a last time at the empty bed and turned, her thoughts on April's comment at the start of the shift. *Full moon tonight.*

As she strode into the hall, a figure stepped in her path. She yelped and threw up her hands, nearly colliding with Dr. Kaine.

He narrowed his gaze at her. "Is something the matter, Noelle?"

She blinked at him, heart racing. "No. Sorry. You startled me."

He didn't respond, but stepped around her and continued down the hall.

Lacey stopped at the nurses' station. "Can you keep an eye on Marcus in 221?" she asked Noelle. "I need to run downstairs with a patient for a CT."

"Sure." Noelle nodded, not lifting her eyes from the monitor.

After she'd input her charts, she stood, stretched and padded down the hall to Marcus's room.

It was dark except for the glow of the television. Marcus sat propped against his pillows, oxygen tubing looped beneath his nose. A baseball game flickered across the screen.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

He nodded. "Can never sleep in this place."

"You're not alone."

He laughed softly.

His water pitcher was nearly empty. Noelle refilled it, adjusted his blanket, and left.

Noelle stepped into the bathroom and bent over the basin, splashing cold water on her face. The early morning hours dragged, and she inevitably hit a window of tiredness.

When she emerged, a yell immediately cut the silence on the floor.

"Code blue! Code blue in Room 221."

221 was Marcus.

As she approached 221, she caught sight of Jamie, another nurse, bent over the bed.

Noelle stared at Marcus's face, bloodless, eyes closed, lips thinned to two gray lines. Twenty minutes before he'd been sitting in bed, watching the ball game, which still played from the TV, and now he looked dead.

Two more nurses rushed in, Josh and April. The floor transformed instantly from sleepy to barely organized chaos.

Then compressions began. The television continued playing as Marcus's body jolted beneath each push.

Another death.

Noelle sat in the breakroom and stared numbly at the wall of lockers. Her shirt was damp from the exertion, her heart still hammering.

She'd not felt close to Marcus, but that hardly eased her misery. He was not her patient, but she'd been charged with monitoring him. He was her responsibility, and again she'd failed, and this kind of failure was unforgivable.

Dan and Marcus were both dead.

And there were others, too.

When Lacey walked in several minutes later, she looked as terrible as Noelle felt. "I just … don't get it. You checked on him, right?"

"Yes. He was fine, sitting in bed watching TV. Nothing unusual, no complaints of pain. Absolutely nothing."

Lacey pushed both hands through her short hair, spiked with sweat. "I feel sick."

Aiden, dressed with a thermos of coffee in hand, was on his way out as Noelle walked into the house.

"Leaving already?" she asked. It was only seven-thirty in the morning, and he didn't have to be at the station until eleven.

He set the thermos on a side table and grabbed his briefcase from the closet. "Yes. I'm meeting Jeremy to talk about the broadcasters' conference coming up. How was work?"

Noelle imagined falling into him, telling him about the deaths of Leslie, Dan, and Marcus, revealing the nightmare her job had suddenly become. Other nurses from the shift would go home and confide in their spouses.

Noelle gave him a light peck on the cheek. "It was fine, but I'm exhausted. I'm going to bed."

He nodded. "See you tonight."

She might have been carrying sandbags around her neck as she ascended the stairs, one hand clutching the railing, her head fuzzy and aching. Tears hung suspended behind her ribcage, a water balloon ready to burst.

She always showered after a shift. Not only did she need to cleanse the sweat and fluids of the previous night from her skin, the mere act of

standing beneath the water marked the transition from nurse to Noelle once more.

Her body begged her to bypass it, lie down instead, disappear into sleep. But Aiden would know if she hadn’t showered, and she’d hear about it later.

Exhausted to her very core, she turned on the shower and climbed in.

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13

Starla thanked the courier for dropping off the banker's boxes sent over by the cold case detective for her next job. The detective had left on a family vacation and told Starla she could wait to dive in until he returned in ten days.

Ten days felt like a lifetime between projects. Starla needed something to sink her teeth into. Her eyes landed on the Oncology pamphlet, folded open to Bryan Carlson's photo on her drafting table. She stared at him and considered what Tia, his co-worker, had said: *He vanished a year ago.*

Starla poured a coffee to go, punched Bryan's mother's address into her GPS and headed for her car.

Starla parked at the curb in front of Jana Carlson's house. Two vehicles sat in the driveway, a red pickup and a green two-door coupe.

Starla knocked on the front door and waited.

A middle-aged woman, dark hair streaked with gray, pulled open the door. She wore a blue Detroit Lions T-shirt and a pair of knee-length cutoff jean shorts.

The woman's eyes traveled Starla's face, paused on the right side long enough to register the deformities, and then quickly flicked back to her left eye. Her words faltered. "Umm, can I help you?"

“Mrs. Carlson? My name is Starla Burton. I’m something of a regular at Bellerose Hospital. I recently heard about your son, and I’m … trying to find him.”

At the mention of her son, pain streaked across her face. “You heard about him? What did you hear?” Her voice rose.

Starla had rehearsed what she’d say, but the despair in the woman’s face stole the script. “I heard that he … umm … that he went missing.”

“From who?”

“A nurse in Oncology. Tia.”

Mrs. Carlson swallowed. Her eyes welled with tears. After several moments, she whispered, “It’s been almost a year.”

“Since you last saw him?”

The woman nodded.

“I work on … cases,” Starla continued. “Crimes and disappearances.” In truth, she’d rarely worked disappearances. Defense attorneys called her, district attorneys, detectives, but they nearly always had a body and often a suspect or defendant.

“You do?” A glimmer of hope filled the woman’s eyes.

“Yes. I’d like to look into what happened to Bryan.” Starla had dreamed of him since leaving the hospital, distorted dreams where she woke to him standing over her bed, stethoscope resting on his chest, something in his eyes. Pleading, she’d decided after the most recent dream. He seemed to be pleading with her.

“I would be so grateful if you did,” Mrs. Carlson told her.

“Absolutely. I wonder if we could … start at the beginning, I guess. Can you tell me about the last time you saw Bryan, Mrs. Carlson?”

The woman extended her hand. “Jana. Please call me Jana.”

Starla shook it.

“Come in, please. I can make coffee or tea or … I have …”

Starla followed her into the house, down a short hall into a sunlit kitchen. Jana stopped at the fridge and opened it. “I have some Pepsi, but it might be flat.”

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

Jana motioned for Starla to sit at the kitchen table. A wooden Lazy Susan occupied the center, holding cat-shaped salt and pepper shakers, a vase of artificial pink carnations, and a pile of mail.

“I’m sorry. This is terribly rude of me, but can I ask what happened to you?” Jana lifted a hand to her own cheek.

Starla nodded. “My father threw acid on me when I was twelve.”

Jana’s eyes widened. “Oh, my God. That’s terrible. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. He was an asshole.”

“I shouldn’t have asked.”

“Why not? I’m thankful you did. Most people don’t ask and then struggle to look at me.”

Jana nodded. “Bryan used to get after me for being nosy. He said I was one of those people who’d ask a bank robber what happened in his childhood.”

Starla smiled. “You’re my kind of people then. I’m nosy too. It’s why I’m good at my job.”

“And your job is finding missing people?”

“Partially. Yes,” Starla lied. “Let’s start at the end, and then we’ll work our way back. Do you mind if I video-record this?” Starla held up her phone.

“Oh.” Jana touched her hair. “I’m sure I look like a disaster, but sure. That’s fine.”

“Great.” Starla didn’t offer not to record. Video was always her preference for interviews because she could study the nonverbal cues, which offered as much information as the conversation itself, if not more. Starla propped her phone against the vase and hit record.

“I’m sorry.” Jana’s eyes darted to the phone and then quickly away. “I’ve forgotten where to start.”

“Let’s talk about the last few days before Bryan disappeared.”

“The last few days …” Jana repeated, her eyes drifting up and to the left. A good sign. Many behavioral analysts believed eye movement to the left signaled recall, and eye movement to the right indicated creation or lying. Starla put little stock in a single eye movement, but if she talked with Jana long enough, she’d recognize a baseline and from that be able to more easily distinguish truth from lies.

“Oh, gosh,” Jana continued. “I’ve gone over them in my head a thousand times, but now … umm … Okay. He had a lot going on. He was working four twelves each week as an oncology nurse. He loves his job. My dad was a medic in the army. He and Bryan were very similar. I’m sure that healer gene came from him.”

“Not your husband?”

“No.” Jana chuckled. “Daryl was a wonderful man. A plumber, actually. Not in the medical profession.”

“Was?”

“He passed when Bryan was fifteen. It was terrible. Colon cancer, and we thought we had it beat, and then …” Jana’s eyes filled. “And then it came back with a vengeance. I’m sure his death drew Bryan specifically to working with cancer patients. It had a major impact on his life.”

“I can imagine.” Starla thought of her own experiences, orphaned at twelve in the most brutal way. “Does Bryan live here with you?”

“Yes—well, yes and no. He lives in a little cottage out back. He built it as a mother-in-law cottage for my mom, Granny Faye. She was in her eighties then and had her license revoked after she ran into a dumpster at the supermarket. She still lived in the big old farmhouse I’d grown up in on the north side of town. Without a car, she couldn’t live there anymore, so he spent a summer working night shifts at the hospital and day shifts here at the house. Bryan’s a workhorse, a ball of energy.”

Starla noted Jana spoke of Bryan in the present tense.

“When he was a little boy, we called him Road Runner.” Jana smiled, but her eyes grew misty. “Sadly, my mom only spent a year here. She had a stroke and passed away. Bryan had started to rehab her farmhouse by then. He loved that place, had visions of raising a family out there, chickens and horses and the whole thing. But in the meantime, he sold his condo and moved into the cottage here to save a bit of money. I loved having him here. He has this … light around him, this joyous ‘whistle while you work’ personality. Just being in his presence makes me feel calmer, happier.”

“Is Bryan your only child?”

Jana shook her head. “I have another son, Rhett, and don’t get me wrong, I love him dearly, but he and Bryan are night and day. It defies belief that they came from the same family, let alone grew up together. Rhett has, umm … well, I guess they call it bipolar disorder. It used to be called manic depression, that was his original diagnosis.

“The only person who could get through to Rhett during those dark times was Bryan. He’d sit outside his bedroom door for hours talking about memories they had as boys, climbing trees at Granny Faye’s, or the time they got her pickup truck stuck in the mud hole at the Bensons’ farm.”

“Where is Rhett now?”

“He lives in Detroit. He’s doing okay as far as I know, but he’s not a communicator, not like Bryan. If I can get Rhett on the phone once a month, I’m doing good. Bryan, on the other hand, always answered my calls, and if he missed one, he called me back that day. That’s how I know something happened. He’d never just … stop answering my calls.”

“What do you think happened?”

Jana put her hands to her lips, closed her eyes. “I think … Sometimes I think he’s gone.” A tear slipped from one closed eye. “But other times when I’m feeling more optimistic I like to believe he ran off with the girl he was dating. He was secretive about her and maybe … he felt like the only way they could be together was if they went away.”

“He was dating someone? What was her name?”

Jana shook her head. “I have no idea. I met her once by accident, walked into his cottage and they were both at the table. She was only wearing a T-shirt and underwear.” Jana’s face flushed. “I felt terrible. Normally I was better about not just barging in, but I didn’t see another vehicle in the driveway, so I just assumed he was alone.”

“He didn’t introduce you?”

“No. I said sorry and walked right back out, and later I asked him about her, and he said she’s a friend and he wasn’t ready to give details, but he would when he could.”

“He would when he could?”

“Yes. Those were his words.”

“And after he went missing, she never came here? Never stopped in looking for him?”

“No.”

“Huh. That’s interesting. Did you try to find her?”

“Yes. I asked at Bellerose, and none of the nurses knew he had a girlfriend. His friend Tony had heard something about her, but no details, and he never met her.”

“All right. Let’s talk about the very last day you saw him.”

“It was August tenth of last year. Let’s see … I only saw him briefly. He had a night shift at Bellerose. I’d made him a batch of sugar cookies—those are his favorite—and he popped in to thank me. He had his scrubs on, said he’d probably go straight from his night shift to the farmhouse and work for a few hours. That wasn’t unusual. I don’t know when he came home because I drove to Detroit that afternoon to spend a week with Rhett.

“I called Bryan on his cell phone a couple days into my trip. No answer. Then again, the day after that. Still no answer and no call back, which was odd. I started to worry, but Rhett acted like I was overreacting, and a part of me thought I was.

“I got home on the fifteenth, and the first thing I did was look in his cottage. He wasn’t there. I honestly couldn’t tell when he’d last been home. I went to Bellerose, and they told me he left in the middle of his night shift on the thirteenth and never returned.

“When I heard that … I knew.” Jana rested a hand on her chest. “Something had happened. I walked up and down my street and asked my neighbors if anyone had seen him around. Nobody had. His best friend Antonio received two text messages about him needing space or something, but they didn’t sound like him and he didn’t text me. If he were going away, he’d text me.”

“Meaning what? You believe someone else sent those messages?”

Jana released a shaky breath. “I don’t know. I’ve wondered if he did decide to leave for a bit and then something happened. But I’ve also thought.” Her forehead tightened. “That someone might have done something to him and sent those texts to trick us.”

“Did you file a missing person report?”

“Yes. But the police were very dismissive. He’s an adult man; he’s allowed to leave. They looked at me like the overbearing mother, the nag.” She shook her head. “But if they knew him even a little, they’d realize what a terrible mistake they’ve made in not investigating his disappearance.”

“Can I look around his cottage?”

“Yes. Of course. I’ll take you out there.”

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Starla turned off her phone and followed Jana out the back door to a quaint yellow cottage. Jana took a key from beneath the welcome mat.

"Has that key always been there?" Starla asked.

"Yes." Jana unlocked the door and pushed it open to reveal a little kitchen, a table and two chairs against one wall, a kitchenette on another.

"Did you notice anything unusual in his cottage? Any signs of"—the words 'a struggle' rose in Starla's mind, but she opted for something softer —"disarray?"

"No. Nothing at all."

Starla walked to a framed photo above the kitchen table of a much younger Bryan shaking a man's hand in a crowded hall.

"Bryan and Bryan," Jana said. "I was so surprised when he hung that picture in here. I had to drag him to that concert."

"Who's the other Bryan?"

"Bryan Adams."

Starla frowned. "Is he famous?"

"You don't know who Bryan Adams is? Oh, gosh. I guess I really am getting old. He was the soundtrack to every love story of my life. I actually named my Bryan after him." Jana smiled, though pain filled her eyes. She took out her phone, and a moment later, a song played. "'Summer of '69,'" Jana explained. "I can't play the slow ones, or I'll be standing here crying my eyes out."

Starla bobbed along. “Okay. Yeah. I’ve heard this song. So that’s this guy?” She tapped the second man in the photo. “You guys saw him in concert?”

Jana nodded. “I was supposed to go with Daryl. He’d bought the tickets for my birthday, but he didn’t feel well that night. The cancer hadn’t been diagnosed yet, but it was there. Bryan agreed to go with me, and then we had this amazing moment at the end where Bryan Adams walked right by us, and I yelled out that I’d named my son after him.” Jana laughed. “My Bryan could have died on the spot, but Bryan Adams walked over and offered to get his picture with him.”

“And here it is,” Starla said.

“Yes.” Jana touched her son’s face in the photo. “God, I miss him.”

“I’m sorry you’re going through this, Jana.”

“Me too. I just want him to come home. For the first couple of months, every time a car drove by on the street, I’d be plastered against the front window thinking it was him.”

Starla followed Jana as she led her through the cottage, pointing out his bedroom and the bathroom. She picked up a dark bottle of cologne from his dresser and smelled it.

“*Oud wood*,” Jana said, spraying a bit into the air and walking through it. “Sometimes I like to wear it. It reminds me of him.”

“It smells good.”

“I think so too.”

“Do you mind if I look around? Open drawers, that kind of thing?”

“Please do. If you find anything, anything at all that might help find him, I would just be so indebted to you, so very grateful. I’ll head back to the main house. Take your time.”

After Jana left, Starla returned to his photo in the kitchen. Same eyes, except in her hospital room, they’d seemed to glow.

Was it possible she’d encountered Bryan before at Bellerose without remembering it? And then later, drugged and suffering from blood loss after her suicide attempt, her subconscious had borrowed his face and built a hallucination around it?

Plausible.

Except then she’d seen him in the bathroom mirror and later in Dan’s room. And that night Dan had died.

Hospitals are haunted, you know …

Starla set aside the vision of Bryan and ran through the basics from an investigative techniques course she'd taken years ago. *Start wide. Don't search for what you expect to find. Notice what doesn't belong before you notice what does.*

Bryan's house was sparsely furnished—typical for a single man. The little kitchenette included a half-size refrigerator, stove, and dishwasher.

In the compact living room, a black futon faced a small flat-screen television. On a coffee table, next to a reclining chair, sat a single framed photograph. Bryan with his mother and another older woman, likely the grandma Jana had described.

The bedroom was crammed with a king-sized bed. No comforter, just an oversized, pilled Detroit Lions blanket. She walked to the head of the bed and gazed down at the pillow with its noticeable crease. She reached out and swept her fingers across the indent.

Starla opened the drawer on the bedside table. Inside lay a jumble of colored plastic bracelets, many stamped with the names of bars or nightclubs; a box of Trojans; earphones; a pocketknife; and candy—mini-Snickers, Reese's Peanut Butter cups and boxes of Milk Duds. She took a photo of the contents.

A hamper in his bathroom held unwashed clothes. On impulse, Starla lifted a T-shirt from the top of the pile and slipped it into her bag.

She made another pass through the house, photographing rooms, opening drawers, and looking beneath furniture. Nothing seemed out of place.

She returned to the main house, where Jana waited in the kitchen. "Anything?" Jana asked.

"Nothing jumped out. Jana, did Bryan's vehicle disappear with him?"

Jana shook her head. "It's the red truck in my driveway. We're less than a mile from Bellerose. He always walked to work."

Starla glanced toward the road. It was a quiet residential street, but a couple of blocks away, the streets of downtown Blackwater held the potential for more sinister encounters, especially at night.

"Huh. Okay. So the police think he ran off without a vehicle?"

"Yes. And I told them it made no sense. How could he leave without his truck? Buses, airplanes, trains—they listed every kind of transportation under the sun and acted like I was crazy for not realizing all the options."

Starla chewed her lip. “Yeah. I agree with you. It’s weird he’d abandon his vehicle. Before I go, I wonder if you have anything that could help me know him?”

“Know him?” Jana echoed back.

“Yes. I need to understand his movements, what was potentially happening in his mind in the days before he disappeared. Obviously, in our modern world, the best options are cell phone, tablet, and laptop. But I’d also love to look at journals, day planners, wall calendars, umm … photo albums.”

“His phone isn’t here. I’m sure he had it. I have his tablet, but I could never get into it. It’s password-protected. His friend Tony has tried multiple times to help me, but we couldn’t figure it out.”

“Do you mind if I try?”

Jana shook her head. “Let me get it.”

She left the room, and Starla moved to the wall of photos, all arranged in blue and white frames. Bryan appeared in nearly every picture. In a cap and gown, standing between Jana and a man Starla suspected was his brother, Rhett. Dressed in a tux next to a girl in a glittery purple dress—prom, most likely. In his scrubs. Sitting on a beach with a little girl building a sandcastle. One in dark jeans and a black T-shirt, neon glow necklaces encircling his neck, a nightclub in the background, his arm draped loosely around a pretty young woman with long blonde hair.

Jana reappeared, tablet in hand. “I’m sorry. I must have never plugged it in the last time I tried to get into it. It’s dead.”

“That’s fine.” Starla looked at the charging port. “I have chargers at home that will fit.”

“I’ll get it back?”

“I promise.” Starla pointed at the young woman outside the club with Bryan. “Who’s this?” The picture showed an older Bryan, perhaps from recent years.

“Oh, that’s Mary-Ann. Bryan’s cousin. She lives in Kentucky, but came to visit a couple of years ago, and Bryan insisted on taking her to all his favorite clubs.” Jana laughed. “Bryan loves to dance. Mary-Ann had just split from her husband and was feeling a little lost.”

“When he disappeared, was he still doing that? Going out to clubs to dance?” Starla’s mind shifted to a case she’d worked on two years before of

a young man beaten to death outside a dance club in Tennessee. He'd made the mistake of flirting with a man's girlfriend.

"Oh, gosh, yes. At least one night a week, and sometimes more. He absolutely loved to dance and let loose."

"All right. Well, I'm going to access this"—Starla held up the tablet—"and I'll do some digging, see if I can get any sense of where he went."

"Wait. You know what I have? A home movie montage that Bryan made for my sixtieth birthday. He spent months on it and stitched together videos and pictures from his childhood with recent stuff. It was absolutely lovely. It's on a compact disc, though. Do you know what that is?"

Starla laughed. "You flatter me, Jana. CDs were my life as a teenager."

"Oh." Jana smiled. "I can never tell ages anymore. I'm sixty-two and still feel twenty-five most days. In my mind, anyway. This body begs to differ. I guess technically it's a DVD, not a CD. Do you have a DVD player?"

"No, but I can get one."

"You can borrow mine."

"Are you sure? You don't use it for movies?"

"Not anymore. Bryan got me all set up with Netflix and Hulu and those a while back. I still have a huge DVD collection, though. I figure if one of those hackers ever takes down the internet, I'll be set with movies."

"True enough."

Starla left with the DVD player, Bryan's tablet, and a promise to Jana that she'd keep her updated on anything she discovered.

As she drove from the house, she pulled Bryan's T-shirt from her bag and lifted it to her face, inhaling the phantom scent of his cologne.

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Starla parked at Bellerose and grabbed the jumbo bag of Doritos she'd bought for the teenager recovering in Med-Surg from his car accident. She'd also made oatmeal butterscotch cookies for the nurses. With the platter balanced in one hand and the bag of Doritos tucked under her arm, she headed inside and rode the elevator to the second floor.

As she started toward the nurses' station, she encountered Carrie in the hall. "Hey," Starla said, holding up the platter of cookies. "Oatmeal butterscotch."

Carrie groaned. "You're killing me, Starla. I'm pretty sure you're the reason my jeans don't fit."

"Jeans suck," Starla said. "That's why God made scrubs and sweatpants."

"Spoken like someone who lives on junk food and never gains a pound."

Starla laughed. "I guess the universe saw fit to punish me in other ways."

"You're too much."

"That seems to be the consensus. How are things going?"

Carrie frowned. "Marcus died."

Déjà vu. An echo.

For half a second, Starla was the Starla of days earlier, still weak with blood loss, weirdly euphoric from nearly dying, all of it crushed by the

announcement of Leslie's death—sweet Leslie planning her retirement party.

Starla had just spoken with Marcus. He suffered from chronic pain, which he managed with a range of treatments, from prescription painkillers to marijuana and reiki. Starla had chatted with him at length about his belief that his pain, which never seemed to have a verifiable source, was related to intergenerational trauma—specifically the history of child abuse that both his parents suffered. He was a nice man, and it made Starla sad to imagine his beloved cats, June Bug and Mr. Magoo, waiting for the owner who would never return.

"How did he die?"

Carrie shook her head, but something in her expression bothered Starla. She'd compressed her lips, and her eyes darted down the hall as if checking to see who might be listening.

"Was it something strange?"

"Well …" Carrie dropped her voice. "You didn't hear it from me, but people are talking about … an angel of death."

Starla stared at her. "Wait a minute. You're telling me people think a healthcare worker is intentionally murdering patients?"

"Shhh." Carrie clamped a hand on her arm. "Jesus. Are you trying to get me fired? It's only a rumor."

"Is it true?"

"How would I know?"

"Has anyone called the police?"

Carrie rolled her eyes. "And make the hospital look bad? Not a chance, but a staff-wide email went out asking all the nurses and doctors to submit their hours for the previous month, including specific shifts they worked. I think they're trying to cross-check who was on shift when the patients died."

"Who was his nurse?"

Carrie peered past her for a moment. "Lacey. But, Starla, don't mention this if you're going up to Med-Surg."

"I won't," Starla promised.

Starla headed for the nurses' station, Carrie's words ringing in her ears.

A nurse or doctor killing patients? No way. It made no sense. It ran completely counterintuitive to that person's life choice to help, to heal, to better the world.

Starla trusted nurses and doctors above all others. They'd saved her life, been the few, perhaps only, people who treated her like a human being in the days after her acid attack when every other person regarded her as if she were a contagious fungus.

She wasn't naïve. She'd encountered some asshole doctors and less-than-compassionate nurses, but murderers? No.

Starla sensed the change as she moved through the ward. A heavy quiet with a current of tension humming beneath it.

Only Pat occupied the nurses' station. No group of nurses standing around chatting, sharing plans for the upcoming weekend.

"Hi, Pat."

The charge nurse jumped as if she'd been deep in thought and not heard Starla approach.

"I brought cookies."

Pat blinked at them. "Thank you." She took the cookies, but said nothing else. No admonishment that Starla needed to take better care of herself, no battery of questions about whether Starla was getting help since her discharge.

Starla was halfway to the soccer player in Room 219 when a man stepped into the doorway. He paused and then turned his head.

For one brief second, Starla saw his profile.

Bryan Carlson.

He disappeared into the room.

Starla hurried after him, heart thumping. She reached the doorway seconds later.

No Bryan.

No one at all.

The bed was stripped bare. The soccer player was gone.

Carrie appeared further down the hall.

"Hey, what happened to the kid in 219?" Starla asked Carrie.

"Discharged this morning."

"Well, that's good. But I swear I just saw someone walk into the room." Starla did not say Bryan's name, though it had been him she'd seen.

"You thought you saw someone walk into Room 219?"

"Yes. I swear, but there's no one in there."

Carrie gave her a significant look.

"What?" Starla asked.

“You’re not the first person to see someone who wasn’t there walk into a room on Med-Surg.”

“Come again?”

“Well, let me see.” Carrie put a hand on her hip and stared at the floor. “I guess the first person to mention it was Pat maybe eight months ago. And you know how Pat is, no-nonsense. She was working an overnight. An older woman was in 221, and Pat had just left her a few minutes before, sound asleep, vitals good, and the next thing you know, Pat looks down the hall and sees the silhouette of a man walking into the room. Her first thought is it’s another nurse checking on her, Ferris or Josh, but Pat said she had a funny feeling, so she got up and checked. Nobody in there but the patient.”

“And other nurses have said this?”

“Yep. Lacey and Kate both. Lacey said the call light kept going off one night for 217, but the room was empty. Kate swore up and down she saw a man walk into 223, but when she followed him in, no man. And don’t even get me started on the patients, three at least I’ve heard of claiming to see a man in their room.”

“What does he look like?”

“I haven’t seen him.”

“What do you think’s happening then?”

Carrie dropped her voice. “A ghost.”

Starla frowned, unsure if the nurse was joking. Her expression said she was not. “You’re serious.”

“Serious as a heart attack, and around here, we know how serious those can be. I’ve been a nurse for almost twenty years. Nobody is going to tell me that people who die don’t hang around. They do.”

“You think the man was a patient then? Someone who died on Med-Surg?”

Carrie shrugged. “Now that I don’t know. But whoever he is, he’s dead.”

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Noelle had considered calling in sick to work. She had time off, could have faked a flu and stayed home, but as the hours wound toward her shift, she didn't pick up the phone.

She went through the motions of her usual day. Laced up her sneakers and went for a three-mile run. Scrubbed the master bathroom until it shone. Cooked and ate an early dinner with Aiden and tried to pay attention as he boasted about ratings at the station.

When Noelle stepped onto Med-Surg, her palms grew sweaty, and the chicken she'd eaten for dinner gurgled in her stomach.

She stood with the rest of the night-shift nurses gathered around the station, clipboard pressed tight against her chest as the day nurses gave their report. The usual hum of conversation felt strained. She caught a few glances that lingered.

The patient in Room 219 had elevated blood sugar. A post-op gallbladder patient in 221 needed encouragement to walk. Noelle struggled to focus.

Some of her tension eased when the shift officially started and she'd completed her first set of rounds. No high-risk patients.

She stopped at the computer and put in her notes.

"Hey, Noelle, when you have a minute, Allison wants to see you in Conference Room B," Kate told her.

Noelle's stomach flipped. She blinked at the computer, her train of thought skittering away from the patient file.

Noelle found the conference room empty except for two people seated at the far end of the table. Karen Ramirez from Human Resources sat with her hands folded neatly atop a yellow legal pad. Beside her, Allison White, the director of nursing. Neither woman smiled.

A knot formed in Noelle's stomach.

"Thanks for coming in, Noelle," Karen said. "Please have a seat."

Noelle lowered herself into the chair opposite them. Through the narrow window beside the door, she could see nurses moving through the hallway. A call light chimed somewhere in the distance.

Allison glanced down at a folder before looking up. "We're conducting a review of several recent patient events."

Noelle nodded. "The deaths?" she asked.

Karen exchanged a look with Allison. "Yes. There have been a number of unexpected patient declines."

Noelle folded her shaking hands in her lap. Her mind flashed to Dan Mercer, the pink bear lying on the floor next to his bed. "Okay."

Allison opened the folder. "Can you walk us through the night Mr. Mercer coded?"

Noelle thought back to that night, the sourness in her stomach suddenly more palpable. "His vitals were stable when I checked him around midnight. I was checking on another patient, Mrs. Reggler, who'd been complaining she couldn't sleep. When I left her room, Ferris shouted the code blue."

"You were out of Mr. Mercer's room?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Maybe fifteen minutes."

Karen jotted something down. Noelle watched the pen move across the page.

"Did you notice anything unusual before the event?" Allison asked.

"No."

"What about visitors?"

"No. It was after hours."

"Anyone on the floor who seemed out of place?"

"No."

The questions continued. Different patients. Different nights. Leslie Hamilton, Marcus Combs. Noelle answered each question as best she could.

The longer the meeting lasted, the drier her mouth became.

Finally, Allison closed the folder. “Thank you,” she said.

“Am I in some kind of trouble?” The question slipped out before Noelle could stop it.

For a moment no one spoke, and then Karen offered a stiff smile. “No. At this time, we’re simply gathering information.”

At this time.

Noelle returned to the floor. Her head felt weirdly light, her body ungrounded. Voices, call bells, footsteps echoed around her, but it was just noise. None of it registered. She checked on each of her patients, grateful to find most of them asleep.

The shift dragged. Exhaustion caused Noelle’s shoulders to droop, her hands to fumble simple tasks. She’d almost given a woman recovering from surgery the wrong dosage of medication, noticed only seconds before injecting it into her IV port. She needed a break, a few minutes of sitting, and a strong cup of coffee.

As she started into the break room, a voice stopped her.

“Angel of death,” the nurse said. It was Lacey, a nurse Noelle had worked with for a couple years. She stood at the counter, Ferris and April her audience.

Whatever Lacey had intended to say next died on her lips. Her eyes widened at the sight of Noelle.

Noelle forced a smile, demanded her feet walk forward. Robotically she moved to the coffeepot, poured a cup. The three nurses smiled in return, but their lips were tight, their expressions guarded. As Noelle moved away from them, a bead of sweat rolled down her spine beneath her scrubs.

Angel of death.

She’d heard the term before. It was one of those disturbing monikers given to nurses who killed babies.

Why had they been discussing it, and worse, why had they stopped talking at Noelle’s arrival?

Noelle slipped into the supply closet and pulled the door shut behind her. She leaned against it, closed her eyes, and took a shaky breath.

The nurses' conversation replayed in her mind. They believed she had something to do with the patient deaths.

It was impossible, unfathomable. But true.

They suspected her. So did Karen and Allison. They hadn't said as much in the meeting, but their questions had felt heavy with unspoken accusation.

Noelle pressed her palms against her eyes, fighting back tears.

Something scraped against the door behind her.

Noelle stepped back, quickly wiped her eyes, and grabbed a stack of patient gowns, expecting the door to swing open.

It didn't.

She took a deep breath, did her best to appear fine and reached for the door handle.

It wouldn't turn.

Noelle frowned and tried again, rattling it harder.

Nothing.

She gripped it with both hands, yanked up and down. The gesture ignited an inferno of panic in her brain.

Another memory of a locked door slammed through her thoughts, threatened to paralyze her. The smell of damp and blood. She clenched her eyes shut and forced the memory away.

"Help!" She released the handle and banged her fists against the door. "Help. Please help me."

Noelle spun and searched for something she might use to break out. A metal step stool sat wedged in the back corner. Noelle grabbed it and smashed it against the door, screaming now. "Help! Help me!"

As she arced back to strike the door again, it suddenly opened.

Her stepfather, Dr. Yates, stood in the corridor.

Noelle stumbled back, still clutching the stool.

"Noelle? What on earth is going on?"

"Someone locked me in!" Her voice cracked. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "I've been screaming for help!"

Yates glanced at the door. "Locked you in?"

"Yes! The handle wouldn't turn. Someone was holding it shut."

He studied her for a moment, his expression one of thinly veiled concern. "I simply turned the handle, Noelle, and the door opened."

Somehow Noelle finished her shift. When she walked into the break room after Dr. Yates released her from the supply closet, the other nurses stared at her as if a madwoman had burst into the room.

No, not a madwoman. A murderer.

The daylight burned Noelle's eyes as she drove from the parking garage. It had been the longest shift of her life.

As she came to the intersection that would lead her home, Noelle turned instead toward Starla's house.

"They think it's me," Noelle blurted the instant Starla opened her door.

She hadn't intended to say the words. Upon overhearing the whispers at the hospital, she'd wanted only to scrub them from her memory, sponge away even the looks on the other nurses' faces.

"Who thinks what's you?" Starla asked. She wore black sweatpants and a rumpled gray T-shirt. She held a mug of coffee in one hand, the *Twilight Zone* mug.

"The administrators and other nurses at Bellerose think I'm the one killing patients. Leslie and Dan and Marcus. They think I did it."

"What? No."

Starla's response slightly loosened the vice around her lungs. Noelle closed her eyes and willed back tears. She wanted to reveal that someone had locked her in the utility closet, but what if they hadn't? The door handle had simply gotten jammed. No, she couldn't risk Starla looking at her with the same skepticism she'd received from Dr. Yates.

"Get in here." Starla opened the door wider. "Coffee?"

Noelle shook her head. She'd had too much already. Her blood hummed through her veins.

"I overheard them in the break room this morning," Noelle said, pacing Starla's living room. "Three nurses. They think it's me."

"You must have misunderstood. There's no way they think it's you."

Noelle wanted to believe Starla's version of events. The nurses could have been talking about anyone.

But they hadn't been.

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"You were on shift for all three deaths?" Starla asked, trying to follow Noelle's ramblings as she walked back and forth in front of the window.

"Yes."

Starla refilled her coffee mug. "Well … Jesus, you're a nurse. It's a hospital. People die."

"They called me into a meeting last night. HR and our head of nursing."

"And said what?"

"They asked questions. What shifts I'd worked, what happened during the nights that patients died."

Starla frowned. "And they've never done that before?"

"No. Never."

"Did they call anyone else in?"

"I don't think so."

Starla's thoughts churned. Carrie had used the same words, angel of death, but about Noelle? She couldn't imagine a more unlikely killer. "Are you just coming off the night shift?"

Noelle nodded.

"Shouldn't you go home and sleep? You've got to be exhausted." Starla didn't say *you look exhausted*, but the other woman did. Noelle's face appeared washed out, her eyes bloodshot.

"I am, but I can't. There's no way I can sleep."

"Want an Ambien?" Starla gestured at her bottles of pills.

“Those are not meant for sharing.”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures.”

Noelle rubbed her face. “No.”

“Well, do you want to take kittens to hospice with me?”

Noelle blinked at her. “Kittens?”

“Yeah, you know, little furry things with whiskers and tails.” Starla had promised the hospice workers she’d bring kittens by that week when she visited the patients.

“Umm … okay. Yes. I’ll go.”

Starla pulled into the Pets for Life Animal Rescue and parked. During the drive, they hadn’t spoken about the deaths at Bellerose, the accusations. Noelle insisted she needed distraction, to lock it in a room for a bit, deal with it later.

Starla understood the need for compartmentalization. She’d had a similar coping method after the death of her mother.

The shelter smelled of disinfectant and wet fur. A chorus of meows followed the women as they moved past rows of cages. Tiny paws reached toward them. Starla stopped in front of a litter of orange and gray kittens tumbling over one another in a heap.

She extended her finger through the door, where an orange kitten grabbed hold with both paws. Starla pushed her face closer to the cage, and for a moment, her long hair, carefully parted to shield the right side of her face, fell back, revealing the full extent of her scarring. Noelle had already seen it, Starla knew, but still she pulled it back into place, warmth rising into her neck.

“Why don’t you have any pets?” Noelle asked.

Starla smiled as the kitten chewed her fingertip. “I prefer to borrow other people’s.” In truth, Starla loved animals and had always wanted a cat, but she didn’t trust herself to have one. Too many times she’d decided to exit the world, and someday when she followed through, her pet would be abandoned.

A volunteer appeared with a carrier destined for hospice. As Starla carefully lifted the orange kitten inside, she caught a tiny smile on Noelle’s

lips.

“How long have you been helping at hospice?” Noelle asked as they drove.

“Oh, geez. Nine years, ten. I can’t even remember anymore.”

“I feel like it would be draining.”

“Really? You’re a nurse. You do the hard stuff. I just come in with kittens or cookies and leave when it’s time to change bedpans.”

Noelle’s cheeks grew pink. “I’m embarrassed to admit this, but I’m not really great at dealing with death.”

Starla raised an eyebrow. “Most people aren’t, though in that case, I’m surprised at your choice in occupation.”

“I started in Labor and Delivery. I only ever wanted to work with babies. I was there for several years, but then Dr. Yates started pushing me to move on. Labor and Delivery is for the softies. Didn’t I want to challenge myself? Move up in the ranks? So when a space opened on a more serious floor which happened to be Oncology, I applied. I only spent about six months in Oncology and then my mother had the accident. I transitioned again and, well, now I’m on Med-Surg.”

“What kind of asshole says Labor and Delivery is for softies?”

Noelle laughed. “He had my best interests at heart and wanted me to advance.”

“That’s bullshit, Noelle. You should have told him to fuck off.”

Noelle’s voice fell. “Yeah,” she murmured. “I probably should have.”

When they arrived at Hospice House, Starla popped her trunk. “I made a platter of cookies if you’d grab them,” she told Noelle. “And I’ll carry the kittens.”

“How do you do all of this?”

“All of what?” Starla grabbed the cat carrier.

“Bake cookies and visit people at Bellerose, take cats to hospice, work your job.”

“Sometimes I can’t sleep. That helps.”

“But isn’t it hard? Patients I’ve worked with who are terminally ill are sometimes …”

“Mean?”

“Yes.”

“Sometimes the patients are mean,” Starla admitted. “Like children, no filter. But there’s something really freeing in that transparency. In the ordinary world, people are still mean, they just try to hide it. The people here have gone through their own disfigurement—the withering of their youthful faces, the yellowing of their eyes, the graying of their hair. Beauty is fleeting.

“Once you’re old, looks are the most trivial thing. A woman here at Hospice House told me that once. She cried over all the years she wasted taking weight-loss pills and obsessing over cellulite. She lamented a trip she took to Paris where she visited this decadent bakery and desperately wanted a chocolate croissant, but only allowed herself lemon water for fear she’d put on weight.”

“That’s sad,” Noelle murmured.

“I took her a croissant,” Starla said. “One for each of us. We ate chocolate croissants and watched *30 Rock* and she cried during the entire show, even though it was one of the funniest episodes I’d ever seen. She’d be sobbing, then laughing so hard her teeth fell out.”

“She died?” Noelle asked.

“They all die.”

Starla walked into a cacophony of greetings at Hospice House. Four women and one man crowded around her, eager to see the kittens. Noelle hung back, but Starla waved her forward. “Come on. Here. You take this little beast in to see Mrs. Pearson.” Starla pulled a wriggling kitten from the carrier and thrust it into Noelle’s hands. The nurse looked momentarily terrified, as if the kitten might explode.

Brenda, a hospice worker who’d been with the organization for nearly forty years, guided Noelle toward Mrs. Pearson’s room.

Starla took the second kitten into Boris Kent’s room. In his mid-seventies, Boris was a grouchy man, slowly dying of liver disease. “What?” he demanded.

Starla had worn him down with multiple visits the previous month. He’d started off by telling her to get out, and, when she ignored the

command, throwing a paper cup of water at her. However, in the days that followed, she'd visited him anyway, read to him, and brought him cookies. Eventually, he begrudgingly allowed her to stay in the room for longer periods.

Now his gaze softened when it landed on the kitten.

"Look who I brought to visit you, Boris. This is Camelot."

"What kind of stupid name is Camelot?" he snapped, though he took the kitten gently and let it nudge its nose into his chin.

"I agree. Let's name him something else. What do you think? Fang?"

"Fang …" He frowned.

Starla studied his face. It had changed; a familiar silvery sheen covered his eyes. He would die soon. Maybe even that night.

"Mr. Jinks," Boris said. "The orange cat from *Huckleberry Hound*. That should be his name."

"Mr. Jinks, huh? I like it."

Boris flicked his hand at her arm where her sleeve had fallen back when she handed him the kitten. "What's that? Why are you bandaged up?"

Starla shook the sleeve back down and sat in the chair by his bed. "Just a little cut. Here." She pulled a packet of cat treats from her bag. "I think Mr. Jinks would like a snack."

Starla made her way amongst the rooms, visiting patients on one side of the hallway while Noelle took kittens to patients on the opposite side. As Starla emerged from the room of a woman whose young grandchildren had been visiting and whose parents intended to adopt Mr. Jinks, she heard raised voices in the hall.

"You did it. You did it!"

Starla hurried to the room. Noelle stood pressed against the wall near the window, an orange-and-white kitten clutched to her chest.

Across from her, an elderly woman stood hunched in her hospital gown, one hand gripping the bedrail, the other pointed at Noelle.

"You did it!" Spit flew from the woman's mouth. The woman jabbed her finger harder. "It was you."

A nurse rushed past Starla into the room.

“Dorothy, hey. Come on now.” She slipped an arm around the woman’s waist. “Let’s get you back into bed.”

“No.” Dorothy fought her, eyes never leaving Noelle. “I know what you did.”

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"I'm sorry that happened," Starla said when they got back to the car.

Noelle had regained some of her color, but not much. "It's okay. It wasn't your fault."

"So much for cheering you up." Starla was tempted to ask if anything had triggered the woman's outburst, but Noelle already looked on the verge of tears, and Starla didn't want to make her feel worse.

Starla started the engine. A thumping electronic beat filled the car, followed by synthesizers and the opening of some eighties song. "'You're my obsession …'"

Noelle reached for the radio and twisted the volume knob so violently it came off in her hand.

For a second, she only stared at it. "Oh, God. I'm sorry." She tried to push it back on, but her fingers were trembling.

Starla took it and snapped it into place. "No big deal. Not an eighties fan?"

Noelle shuddered and rubbed her arms. "I hate that song."

"It is pretty creepy. I don't think I've really paid attention to the lyrics."

"They're disturbing."

When they returned to Starla's house, some of the strain had dissolved from Noelle's face.

"Before you go, write the names of every staff member on shift when a patient died." Starla handed Noelle a notebook and pen.

"Oh, gosh. I don't know. Am I allowed to do that?"

“Sure. I already know the names of the patients who have died, and if there are others, maybe you could jot down initials. No HIPAA violations there, I’d say.”

Noelle held the notebook as if it might bite her.

Starla took the notebook back. “All right. You say the names. I’ll write them down.”

“I don’t want to get into any trouble.”

“Noelle, I literally do this for a living. I’ll do a bit of analysis all on my own. I won’t tell anyone at the hospital where my information has come from.”

“Okay, all right. Umm …” She paced away. “Two nights ago, when … Marcus passed, I was working with Lacey. Technically, she was his attending nurse. Also on shift were”—Noelle bit her lip—“April, Josh, Jamie, and Gwen. Dr. Kaine was the attending physician. Umm … I remember the CNAs were Harper, Kennedy and … a new guy. I honestly can’t remember his name. That’s the first shift we worked together.”

The list went on, six deaths in total in a period of six months, three of which had happened in the previous week—a clear escalation. Starla didn’t know what the usual death toll was on Med-Surg, but the number seemed high. In the hours before they died, the patients had been stable.

After Noelle left, Starla uncapped a red marker and wrote out the names of every staff member on shift during an unusual death. Thirteen nurses rotated through the night shifts, and multiple doctors, though only two had been present during the unusual deaths: Dr. Kaine and Dr. Yates.

She added the dates of deaths along the top and put check marks next to any staff member present when a patient died.

At first glance, everyone seemed to overlap with everyone else. Night shift was a small world. The same handful of people rotated through the schedule week after week.

Noelle, Lacey, Ferris, Josh, Kate, Dr. Kaine, and Dr. Yates had been on shift for three or more deaths. Only Noelle had been present at all six.

Starla set the grid aside and logged into the American Psychological Association’s website and began a search on medical homicide and angel of death killers. On a separate sheet of paper, she listed motives typically associated with such homicides.

There were mercy killers, those who claimed to want to end the patients’ suffering; hero killers, who induced a crisis to ‘save’ the patient;

killers looking for power or control, who killed for the mere sake of having the power of God in their hands; profit-driven killers who visited patients in their homes and hoped to financially gain by their death; and finally compulsion killers, who killed for the mere excitement.

Beyond the motives, she'd found several scientific journals that compiled common traits in such killers. They included narcissism, a need for control, emotional detachment, a history of instability, compartmentalization, and resentment. The list didn't exactly help Starla narrow down the killer.

Still, she made another grid of all the staff on site during the deaths and added checks to anyone who seemed to display a particular trait. Again, as she studied the grid, she didn't feel it pointed to a likely suspect.

Noelle was on every shift, but nothing in her personality displayed the traits associated with such a murderer, and Starla's gut told her it couldn't be Noelle. But could the murderer be trying to make it look like Noelle?

Starla stared at the name Dr. Yates.

He was Noelle's stepfather, a respected doctor. Why would he murder patients?

Beneath his name she wrote: *Motive—to get Noelle's money?*

Was Noelle standing in the way of Yates inheriting the Radmor money after Grace died? They'd had a later-in-life marriage, two adults with considerable assets. It seemed unlikely there hadn't been some sort of prenup. Then again, Noelle had described Grace coming into the money abruptly after the death of her parents. Perhaps she'd not been skilled in navigating the complicated legalities of marriage with that kind of money.

Starla typed his name into the search bar. Multiple articles had been published about the doctor's work at Bellerose. Halfway down the page, she saw a news piece from the previous summer.

Prominent Blackwater Philanthropist Hospitalized Following Pool Accident

Grace Radmor, a longtime Blackwater resident and prominent supporter of Bellerose Hospital, remains in critical condition after being pulled unconscious from a swimming pool at her family's estate in the early hours of Tuesday, August 9th.

Emergency personnel responded to the residence shortly after 2 a.m. Authorities said Grace's husband, Dr. Ezra Yates, discovered Radmor in the pool and called 911.

Police have not indicated that foul play is suspected. The circumstances surrounding the incident remain under investigation.

Starla browsed a few additional articles, but found nothing suspicious beyond Grace's accident.

If Yates had tried to drown Grace, why had he called 911?

Starla moved next to a property search for Radmor and Yates. The Radmor estate belonged to Grace—or, more precisely, to a trust bearing her name. Yates's name appeared nowhere on it.

She dug deeper. A civil suit tied Yates to a failed medical investment three years earlier. It had eventually been dismissed, but he might have settled out of court.

None of it meant Yates was broke. It didn't mean he'd killed anyone either. But it suggested the polished doctor sitting in Grace Radmor's mansion might not be nearly as comfortable financially as he appeared.

And if Grace died, how much of the Radmor money would become his?

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Starla's night had been restless. She'd dreamed of Bellerose, waking in a dark room to a shadowy figure all in white plunging a needle into her arm. At four, she got out of bed, took her meds and returned to work on the Bellerose murders.

Several hours later, she lifted her head to a single knock at her door. A key turned in the lock, and Finn poked his head in. "Not lounging in your underwear, are you?"

She flipped him the middle finger.

"Is that any way to greet a friend with coffee?"

"Depends on whether he got the coffee at a gas station or Starbucks."

He held up the cardboard carrier, Brew-La-La stamped on the side. "Even better. And I got you a dirty chai. You're welcome."

Starla yawned and stood from the drafting table, pulled the bandanna from her head and let her hair fall over the right side of her face. "Thank you." She took the cup, removed the lid, and inhaled the spicy sweetness. "Oh, here. I got something for you." Starla leaned under her table and grabbed a blue and red gift bag.

"What's this?" he asked.

"My 'thank you for cleaning up my blood' gift."

Finn reached into the bag and pulled out a T-shirt and an envelope. He unfolded the T-shirt, revealing a rainbow pyramid beneath the band name, Imagine Dragons. "Sweet," he said. "Thank you."

"Well, look in the envelope."

Finn peered into the envelope. “Concert tickets? No way.”

“Way. Maybe you could take a date.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Unlikely. You could go with me …”

“Too many people. Take Andre.”

“He *does* like Imagine Dragons.”

“Perfect.”

“What are you working on?” Finn gestured at her messy drafting table. “The new cold case?”

“Nope. Deaths at Bellerose.”

“Huh?”

“Leslie Hamilton died.”

“Oh, damn. Really? I always liked Leslie. What happened?”

“That’s the million-dollar question. She went in because her ulcer was acting up. I saw her. She seemed mostly fine. And she’s not the only person to die on Med-Surg mysteriously. There’s been a string of deaths at Bellerose. The nurses on Med-Surg are talking about an angel of death murderer, a healthcare worker who is intentionally killing patients.”

“No way. Is it true?”

“I don’t know, but they’re talking about Noelle.”

“The nurse you’ve gotten all chummy with?”

“Exactly.”

“They think she’s killing patients?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s insane.”

“Remember how I told you I can tell who’s going to die?”

Finn shuddered. “Yeah.”

“With these people who have died at the hospital, there were no signs. That sheen in their eyes, that hollow look—not there at all, perfectly normal.” She held up a hand. “Leslie, Marcus, even this guy, Dan, who I saw the day he died. They looked perfectly normal.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning they weren’t meant to die. Their bodies were not preparing to die. Someone is killing them.”

“I’d hardly call that proof.”

“Obviously. That’s what I’m looking for.”

“How many patients have died?”

“Noelle came up with six.”

“Six? That’s insane. Hardly anyone dies on Med-Surg. The ICU, the emergency room, sure, but people on Med-Surg are usually in the clear.”

“That’s the idea, anyway.”

“What have you found, then? Was it the butler with the candlestick?”

“I’m actually thinking a doctor with a syringe.”

“Well, that’s not very clever.”

“Look. Here’s my list of staff on shift for each death. Dr. Yates is on quite a few, and get this, he’s Noelle’s stepfather.”

“Dr. Yates? I remember him. Bushy eyebrows, looks at you like he’d rather be somewhere else. Why would he be killing patients?”

“Someone started the rumor that Noelle is behind it, which makes me think the person is trying to frame her.”

“Why would he try to frame her?”

“Because her mother, who happened to be severely injured last year and is now essentially in a vegetative state, has beaucoup money. Crazy money.”

“You know what you always tell me? The simplest answer is usually the correct one.”

“Meaning?”

“Noelle is the only nurse on every shift.” He pointed at Starla’s grid.

“It’s not Noelle. No way.”

Finn shrugged, walked into her kitchen, and opened a cupboard. “Where are the saltine crackers?”

“For breakfast?”

“I’ve been craving them.”

“You told me once they tasted like cardboard.”

“They do.”

“Behind the Oreos.”

He pulled out a sleeve of saltine crackers and opened it with his teeth. As he walked back toward the living room, he paused, brow furrowed. “What’s up with this?”

Starla looked up to see Finn holding the Oncology pamphlet, Bryan’s face circled in red marker. “Bryan Carlson,” she said.

“Who is he?”

“A nurse, or he was. I don’t know. Something strange has been happening ever since the last time I tried to off myself.”

Finn frowned, but didn’t make his usual comments about her casual use of *off myself*.

“I’ve been seeing him at the hospital, but then”—she shook her head—“he’s gone. It’s like he’s a ghost.”

Finn stopped mid-bite. “I have a core memory of you saying ghosts are as real as mermaids and Bigfoot.”

“I’m aware of my previous stance on the issue.”

“And have you considered that the suicide attempts and variety of prescription drugs might be conjuring said ghost?”

“Of course I have. I’m not an idiot. He’s real.”

“Obviously he’s real. He’s literally in a Bellerose brochure.”

Starla rolled her eyes. “I’m dead serious here.”

“Pun intended?”

“Actually, no. See? That’s how serious I am. I think he’s trying to tell me something.”

“Maybe that you need to see that therapist.”

“Listen, don’t act like it’s bullshit. You heard that story from Mindy Skink on the Freak Floor about her near-death experience.”

“She was eight when that happened. When I was eight I dreamed of flying around on a Dalmatian with wings every night.”

“Except she was very clear it wasn’t a dream. She coded and saw her grandmother. Finn, nearly every single patient I’ve sat with at hospice who passed described visitors before they died, and not the flesh-and-blood kind. None of them die alone.”

“That’s fine. I don’t doubt it, but you’re not dead, Starla, or dying, for that matter, despite your best efforts.”

“I’d hardly call them my best efforts.”

He scowled at her, but dropped the argument.

“I genuinely believe Bryan is trying to help me. Look at this video.” Starla grabbed her phone and opened her photos, clicking on the video of the black balloon. “Watch it.”

Finn stared at the screen, frowning. “It’s probably following air-conditioning currents or something.”

The balloon slowed, stopped, and shifted into Room 227.

“That was Dan Mercer’s room. I saw Bryan in there, just for a second, and then he was gone. The balloon floated above Dan’s bed. He died that night despite being stable.”

Finn pinched the bridge of his nose. “It’s a balloon, Starla.”

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20

Noelle woke to a pit in her stomach. Her last shift reverberated through her mind—the meeting with Karen and Allison, the murmurs on the ward, the locked utility closet door. She turned and looked at her alarm clock. It was just after eight.

She wanted to stay in bed, but her brain had flipped the switch, and sleep would elude her.

Aiden sat at the kitchen table, the newspaper open. Noelle studied the front cover.

"He *did* do it," she said, gazing at the photo of Peter Calhoun beneath the headline *Husband Arrested for Wife's Murder.*

Aiden set the newspaper down. "Excuse me?"

Noelle gestured at the paper. "The guy from Novi whose wife went missing. They arrested him for her murder. Starla said he did it, but I was so convinced it couldn't be him."

Aiden turned the paper over and stared at the article. "His lawyer says it's a rush to judgment. Police have tunnel vision."

"Do you think so?"

Aiden cocked his head. "I don't know. Who's Starla?"

"Oh, a new friend."

"Where'd you meet her?"

"Bellerose actually. She was a patient of mine."

He raised an eyebrow. "Is that a good idea? Becoming friends with a patient?"

“I think so. She’s actually really interesting. She’s a forensic consultant. And her life has been … hard, though that doesn’t even begin to cover it. Her father attacked her and her mother when she was a child, and she’s permanently scarred on the right side of her face. It’s terrible. He threw acid at them. Can you even imagine?” Noelle did not know why she was suddenly pouring out Starla’s personal details as if by sharing her story, Aiden might not question the friendship.

“Is that why she was in the hospital?”

Noelle shook her head, then nodded. She didn’t want to tell him that Starla had attempted suicide.

She moved to the coffeepot. “More coffee?”

“No. I’ve had enough.” Aiden stood and dumped the remainder of his coffee in the sink. “What are you up to today?”

Noelle had the next two days off and usually met her free time with vigor. Errands, workouts, cleaning, the list of things to do never ended. But now all of it sounded daunting. “I’m exhausted. I think I’ll catch up on sleep.”

He pursed his lips. “Better add laundry to the list. Those towels have been sitting in the dryer for two days.”

Noelle forced a nod. “Sure.”

“And don’t forget I’m heading out of town today for that broadcasters’ conference in Chicago, so you’ll be on your own.”

“I remember.” She’d been looking forward to his trip. Two nights when she could leave a glass on the counter, eat cereal for dinner, fall asleep on the couch—whatever she wanted—without wondering if Aiden was annoyed.

Noelle turned into the gated driveway at her mother’s house.

Despite her best efforts to sleep away the day before, she had tackled the laundry and then scrubbed the kitchen floors and counters, followed by a deep clean of the refrigerator. When she’d finally crawled into bed, her body had ached and her head swam with bleach fumes.

Exhaustion should have bought her a solid ten hours of sleep, but she’d gotten only six, waking repeatedly with memories of the Bellerose deaths

marching through her head.

Noelle had always been good at compartmentalizing. She locked away her secrets, her guilt, and the things she wished she could forget. But now, everything she'd worked so hard to bury was clawing its way back to the surface.

She let herself into her mother’s house and made her way upstairs. Noelle found her mother sitting alone in the parlor, her wheelchair angled toward the window. The familiar notes of Beethoven's *Für Elise* drifted from the small speaker on the side table. It had always been one of her mother's favorites.

“Hi, Mother.” Noelle pulled flowers from the vase on her table and replaced them with fresh dahlias she’d picked from the garden on her way in.

“I made a new friend,” Noelle said, leaning forward to dab the bit of drool from the corner of Grace’s mouth. “Starla. You met her, but … I’m sure you don’t remember. It’s funny because you were always encouraging me to make girlfriends. You wanted me in Girl Scouts and on the tennis team and practically lost your mind trying to get me into that sorority in college, and honestly, I never understood the appeal, but with Starla, I kind of get it. You always said you wanted me to have someone like you had Virginia, and honestly, I think Starla is that person. She’s so fascinating. You’d like her. I know you would.”

Noelle and her mother had rarely had deep talks before the accident. When they did, it often felt perilous, as if they were both navigating emotional landmines.

What Noelle really wanted to talk about were the deaths at the hospital, the sudden glare of attention focused on her. The meeting with HR, the whispers on the ward.

“I’m scared.” Noelle scooted closer and leaned her head on her mother’s shoulder. “Something bad is happening at Bellerose, and it’s … I mean, it’s a mistake, but people are blaming me.”

The final notes of Beethoven's melody faded, replaced by the unmistakable opening of Animotion's song, *Obsession*. Noelle's blood ran cold. She lunged from her chair, crossed the room and switched off the speaker.

The door clicked shut, and Noelle jumped, heart hammering

Virginia gazed at her, smile faltering. “Is everything okay, Noelle?”

Noelle’s hand trembled as she set the speaker back on the table.

“The music,” she said. “It changed from classical to … “ The song reverberated through her thoughts. *You are an obsession*. “Something else.”

Virginia frowned. “Did it? That’s strange. I’m sure Ezra keeps it on a classical playlist.” Virginia held a small basin of water with a rag. “I thought I’d clean your mother up a bit.”

Noelle swallowed and pressed a hand to her chest, willing her racing heart to slow. It was just a fluke, some strange algorithmic mix-up that had played the one song she couldn't stand to hear.

Virginia kneeled in front of Grace and began to gently clean her face.

Grace and Virginia had been friends for decades. In childhood, Noelle had called Virginia Aunt Virginia, though the title had faded as she’d gotten older. She often wondered how it felt for Virginia to be a caretaker for Grace. How strange to go from gossiping about their lives to sponge baths and administering medicine.

“How’s everything in Med-Surg?” Virginia asked. “Liking the transition?”

Angel of death.

Noelle nodded and forced a smile.

Starla insisted they must have been talking about someone else, that Noelle had misinterpreted the comments. She wanted to believe that.

But she didn’t.

“Well, that’s good,” Virginia said. “I can’t say I miss Med-Surg. Life is a lot easier in the rehab unit, and it doesn’t hurt that I’m only part-time now.”

“You’re here three days a week and at the hospital for at least two days,” Noelle said. “I feel like I see you at Bellerose on practically every shift. That’s not exactly part-time.”

Virginia smiled and ran a comb through Grace’s dark hair. Before her accident, it had been coal black, dyed monthly to hide any grays. Now it had gone silver at the roots. “Yes, but taking care of your mother is a breeze. You’re such a good patient, aren’t you, Grace? And I’m usually at Bellerose delivering Jim whatever lunch or dinner he left at home. You'd think he'd learn after all these years, but Jim's never been one to learn from his mistakes. Not even the little ones.”

The door opened, and Dr. Yates stepped inside. “Virginia, the Radmor trustee is coming by shortly, so I’ll be in a meeting.” He paused, gaze

shifting to Noelle. “Noelle. I didn’t know you were visiting.”

Noelle forced a smile, the appearance of her mother’s husband instantly causing her to tense up. “It was a last-minute decision. I’m heading home in a few minutes.”

“I see. And are you feeling better?” His dark eyes were fixed on her.

She recognized the look on his face. She’d seen him wear it with unstable patients, that measured concern reserved for people who couldn’t be trusted with their own emotions.

“Yes,” she told him.

Virginia stood. “I’m leaving as well, Ezra. Charlotte’s with Grace tonight.”

The doorbell chimed from downstairs.

“That’ll be the trustee.” Yates turned and strode from the room.

At home, Noelle trotted upstairs, stripped off her clothes and put on shorts, a sports bra and a tank top. She slipped on her running shoes and hurried back out of the house, hoping a run might exhaust her enough for sleep.

She ran for nearly an hour, covering almost six miles. By the time Noelle turned back onto her street, sweat had soaked through the back of her shirt. Her mind, a cyclone of worry when she’d embarked on her run, had finally gone quiet. She slowed to a walk in the driveway, tugging one earbud free.

Something white fluttered against the windshield of her car.

Noelle frowned. She assumed it was a flyer, some landscaping company or a teenager offering to mow the yard. She crossed the lawn, still catching her breath, and pulled the folded scrap from beneath the wiper.

It wasn’t a flyer, but an obituary cut from a newspaper.

Leslie Marie Hamilton, 67, of Blackwater died unexpectedly …

Her stomach plunged, and involuntarily her fingers opened. A breeze caught the thin bit of newsprint and sent it flying.

Noelle chased after it, suddenly terrified it would land in a neighbor’s driveway and they’d somehow make the connection that the woman had died at Bellerose and that people suspected Noelle of having intentionally caused the death.

She caught it at the edge of her lawn, crumpled it into a ball, and stuffed it into her sweaty gym shorts.

Her tennis shoes echoed in the large foyer. She closed and locked the door behind her.

Who had put the obituary on her SUV? The idea of someone walking up her driveway, lifting the windshield wiper, placing the newspaper clipping beneath it made her want to scream.

She moved to the glass on either side of the front door and peered out.

Were they still out there?

Watching her?

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21

Starla's cell rang, Noelle's name on the screen. She'd spent the day poring over the deaths at Bellerose, doing background searches on every staff member and patient who'd died.

"Hello," she answered.

"Hi. It's Noelle."

"Everything all right?"

"Do you want to come over and watch a movie?" Noelle asked.

"A movie?"

"Yeah, we have a home theater in our basement, and Aiden's out of town, so I thought …" Noelle's voice was high, nervous.

Starla did not feel compelled to watch a movie. The situation at Bellerose disturbed her. The hospital was not merely a hospital. It had been her sanctuary for many years. But Noelle sounded frightened.

"Did you say you have a home theater in your basement? Heck, yeah, I want to come over. But Noelle, is everything all right? You sound a little—"

Noelle released a strained laugh before Starla could finish. "Fine. Yes. I just thought … well, I've shown up at your house multiple times now, so it's only appropriate that I should host."

Starla cast a fleeting glance at her grid of names. Breakthroughs in cases happened most often when an investigator unplugged from the facts for a bit and let the mind make connections on the subconscious level.

"All right. A movie it is. Text me your address."

Starla whistled as she pulled into the drive of Noelle's large brick house on a street of similar large brick houses.

Noelle opened her front door, her eyes drifting down to Starla's neon pink and yellow stilettos.

Starla pointed a toe and circled her foot. "Like them? I bought them at Sally's, that vintage store downtown. They have the best shoes."

"They're great. I live in orthopedic shoes."

"Those are far more practical," Starla said, pulling her turtleneck up higher on the right side. "Mine are decoys."

"Decoys?"

"To distract people from this." Starla gestured to her face.

Noelle frowned and looked back toward Starla's feet. "Well, I like them. I hardly ever wear heels, which Aiden hates, but I have wide feet and can hardly walk the next day if I wear them."

"I have ninety-nine problems, but that ain't one."

"They're gorgeous," Noelle said.

"This is your house? It's impressive. Just you and your husband live here?"

"Yes. Eventually we were planning, are planning, to, umm … to—"

"Have kids?"

"Yes." Noelle stepped back and held the door open for Starla to pass through.

White.

White walls, white tile floor, a white side table with a white lamp beneath its white shade. When Noelle flipped on the sparkling chandelier above them, the floors gleamed.

Starla struggled to find a single spot of color in the blinding foyer. It reminded her of the surgical rooms of her childhood.

"Wow. This is … clean."

Noelle laughed. "Yeah. It's … a little sterile, huh?"

Starla slipped off her heels. They looked alien against the colorless surroundings.

"I have a bottle of white wine in the chiller, or if you prefer red …?" Noelle offered.

Starla wrinkled her nose and hefted her canvas bag from the floor. “I have a better idea. Midnight margaritas.”

Noelle’s forehead creased.

“What? Don’t tell me you’ve never seen *Practical Magic*?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, obviously they’re not actually midnight margaritas since it’s only seven o’clock, but we’re making an exception. Come on. Take me to the kitchen.”

Starla followed Noelle into the kitchen, somehow even more pristine than the rest of the house. Gleaming stainless-steel appliances, white marble countertops. Not a crumb on any surface.

“Have a blender?” Starla asked, unloading the tequila, orange liqueur, lime juice, and agave.

“Yes.” Noelle opened a cupboard and took down a large, industrial-looking Vitamix blender.

Starla grinned. “Nice. That thing is a beast.”

“Aiden drinks a lot of protein smoothies.”

“Gotcha. Well, this baby needs to have some fun for a change.” Starla patted the top of the blender.

After Starla mixed their margaritas, she poured them each a tall glass and rimmed it with black lava salt before handing the drink to Noelle.

Noelle lifted it to her lips, took a sip, and smiled. “Mmm, that’s delicious. I don’t think I’ve ever had a margarita.”

“What? Have you been living under a rock?”

Noelle laughed. “This is probably weird to say, but I’ve always felt this pressure to order wine or some other more sophisticated drink. Not to say these aren’t sophisticated,” she added quickly.

Starla shook her head. “They’re not sophisticated. That’s part of the appeal.”

“Popcorn?” Noelle asked. “I have some of the microwave kind. It’s plain, salt-free, no butter, but I can add those things.”

“Definitely,” Starla said.

She sipped her margarita and watched Noelle move around the kitchen, noting the tension in her shoulders, the drawn look on her face. “Did something happen?” Starla asked. “Something at the hospital?”

Noelle seemed laser-focused on the microwave as she pressed buttons. When she turned to Starla, her mouth had shrunken into a tiny, wrinkled

bud. “No. Nothing. I’ve been off for two days, so …”

Starla didn’t believe her. “Before we go brainless in a movie for an hour, can we talk through some theories about what’s happening at Bellerose?”

Noelle, clearly reluctant, hesitated.

“Just a few things, okay? First, is there any medicine every patient who coded received?”

Noelle was quiet for a moment. “Honestly, no. I mean, saline bags. Everyone gets those.”

“All right. I wonder if the hospital has looked into that—contaminated saline bags. Maybe the deaths are actually caused by something happening outside of Bellerose.”

“Contaminated saline bags … It’s possible.”

“But not likely?”

“If the saline bags had some kind of bacteria, I’d expect to see a patient develop a fever, the chills, even sepsis. It’s hard to imagine anything that would cause them to die so quickly.”

“Have administrators told you anything about the causes of death? I’m assuming all these people were autopsied.”

“They haven’t told me.”

“All right. This might be a long shot, but could someone be framing you, Noelle?”

“Framing me? As in killing my patients so it looks like I did it?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, God. I don’t know. That’s such a horrible thing to think about … I just … are there people who would do such a thing?”

“Yes, there are. But the real question is whether there’s someone who would do such a thing *to you*. Have any beef with co-workers, other hospital staff? Have you told on someone? Had an issue with anyone at Bellerose?”

A flash of something crossed Noelle’s face, alarm or fear. “I’m not super close with anyone, but … we’re all friendly.”

“How about Dr. Yates?”

“My stepdad?”

“Yes. I’m wondering about your mother’s money. Are you standing in the way of him getting that?”

Noelle took a long drink of her margarita, the theory clearly upsetting her. “He has his own money.”

“Doctor money does not compare to your mother’s money.”

“If it were my mother’s money he wanted, wouldn’t he just kill me? How does framing me make sense?”

“That’s true, but it’s not inconceivable that it’s a multi-step plan, the first of which is to destroy your credibility, make you the villain and then when you die either by your own hand or in some terrible accident, the police can close the case of the hospital deaths without a lengthy and expensive trial.”

Noelle sat at her counter and put her head in her hands. “You’re saying if someone is framing me, they’re doing it to kill me and make it look like a suicide?”

“I’m saying it’s a theory. Does Yates have anything funky in his past? Gambling problem, lawsuits, that kind of thing?”

Noelle shook her head. “Not that I’m aware of.” She took another drink. “Well, he was married before my mother.”

“And it ended badly?”

“She died.”

A flare went off in Starla’s brain. “How?”

Noelle scrunched her face. “I don’t remember. Umm … I want to say she fell down the stairs.”

“What was her name?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay.” Starla made a mental note to investigate Yates’s former wife. “How’s your marriage, Noelle?”

The question hung in the air as if Noelle couldn’t quite grasp it. “My marriage?”

“Yeah. Would … I mean, I know it’s insane to even ask, but would Aiden ever do anything like this?”

“Aiden? No. God, his reputation alone … he would never.”

“So it’s more about his reputation than the fact that he wouldn’t murder innocent people?”

“Well,” Noelle sputtered, “that, too. No. Never.” She finished her margarita and poured another from the blender. “Can we just … go watch the movie now?”

Starla bit back the endless questions lining up in her mouth. Noelle had reached her limit, likely surpassed it.

Popcorn and margaritas in hand, Starla followed Noelle down the white carpeted stairs, a marvel she'd never have considered thanks to her propensity to ruin every fiber-based floor in her own house.

A long hall stretched before them. Starla counted four doors, all closed. White walls, white doors. No photos or art in sight.

Noelle stopped before the last door. "This is it."

Starla stepped inside.

The theater room spread out, dark and cavernous. Plush black recliners sat in three elevated rows facing a massive screen that occupied nearly an entire wall. Small lights glowed along the floor and steps, creating pools of amber in the darkness.

"Wow." Starla slowly turned in a circle. "This is nicer than the movie theater in Blackwater."

Noelle laughed. "Aiden spends more time down here than the rest of the house combined."

Starla sank into one of the plush recliners. "He's a movie lover?"

Noelle sat beside her. "He likes movies, but he watches all of his broadcasts down here, watches other people's broadcasts to see what they're doing and saying, how to improve his own persona. It's practically a part-time job."

"He watches himself on this screen?" Starla stared at the massive screen and imagined her own face magnified, every groove and trench in her scarred skin on display. Even someone with a beautiful face would likely see imperfections. "That sounds horrible."

Noelle picked up a remote and clicked the screen on. "I couldn't do it. But … I've never had his attraction to the limelight. I even froze at dance recitals as a kid if I saw someone holding a video camera."

"Yeah." Starla took another drink. "I don't remember much about how I felt being recorded before the attack, but after …" She shook her head. "I hated it."

Noelle navigated to a menu of movies. "Personally, I love movies from the eighties and nineties. My mom watched those when I was a child and … I guess they're my comfort movies."

Starla scanned the list of titles. Her own parents had not been movie watchers. In New York, they hadn't even owned a television. *It's literal*

programming, her dad would say. *Brainwashing disguised as entertainment.*

As Noelle scrolled, a movie suddenly clicked on. “Huh, that’s weird. It’s *Robin Hood*, the original one with Kevin Costner and Morgan Freeman. Should we just watch it?”

“Let’s do it,” Starla said.

Starla wasn’t sure when she’d begun to cry, but once she started, she couldn’t stop. She sobbed silently. Massive tears flooded down her cheeks and fell to her lap.

“Are you okay?” Noelle murmured.

Starla said nothing for a moment, eyes glued to the film, hands clasped so tight the knuckles had whitened. Starla mopped her face with her shirtsleeves and turned to Noelle. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

Starla forced a hollow smile.

“Did you … ummm … not like the movie?”

“It was beautiful,” Starla said, still drying her face. “But my relationship with these kinds of movies is complicated. I’ll never have that.” She pointed at the screen where Robin Hood and Maid Marian stood in a grove of trees getting married. “Never. No one will ever love me like that. My parents, for all their toxicity, all their issues, loved each other so much.” She frowned and shook her head. “No. That’s not quite true. My mother loved *him* so much. She wrote poetry about him, and he wrote songs about her, but I think he used her, used her as a muse, as an inspiration. She was little more than a beautiful illusion, a pet.”

“No. I’m sure you’ll find love. If that’s what you want, of course you’ll find someone who adores you. You’re brilliant, Starla. One of the most interesting women I’ve ever met.”

Starla pulled a tissue from her purse and mopped her face. “This isn’t a Disney movie, Noelle. I appreciate your optimism, but human beings are unbearably critical. Men are the worst of all. But don’t feel bad for me.” She shrugged. “I’ve had a lot of years to come to terms with this.”

The credits rolled, and a song came on—a song Starla had heard before. Bryan Adams, “Everything I Do.” She stared at the screen.

Noelle tensed and switched off the movie, silencing the song. “I shouldn’t have suggested we watch that movie. I’m really sorry—”

A low thrum began somewhere above them.

Noelle jumped up, her bowl of popcorn clattering to the floor. “Shoot … oh … that’s the garage door. Aiden must have come home early.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Starla bent down to sweep Noelle’s popcorn back into the bowl.

“No. It’s just … it’s okay. Let me run up and let him know you’re here.”

Starla watched Noelle disappear from the room, curious about her reaction to her husband’s unexpected arrival.

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Noelle reappeared several minutes later, her eyes too bright, her smile waxy. “He’d love to meet you,” she announced.

“Unless you have a secret tunnel out of here, I don’t think he has a choice.”

Noelle laughed, a brittle, high-pitched sound. “Listen, Starla, I haven’t told Aiden what’s happening at the hospital.”

“Why not?”

“He’s … sometimes he overreacts. I’m going to tell him, but … when I’m ready.”

“Got it. No chitchat about weird patient deaths.”

“Thank you.”

Starla followed her up the muted white stairs and into the gleaming kitchen where Prince Charming stood with a glass of water in one hand, his cell in the other.

“Starla, this is my husband, Aiden. Aiden, Starla.”

He set his water down and extended his hand. His eyes lingered on the right side of Starla’s face for an uncomfortably long time as she shook it. Starla gazed back, sensing Noelle jittery beside them.

“Nice to meet you, Aiden,” Starla said. “I just had the pleasure of watching a movie in your home theater. I think if I had that in my house, I’d never leave.”

Aiden shifted his attention to Starla’s good eye. She wanted to reach for her hair, arrange it more fully over the right side of her face, but forced her

hands to stay at her sides.

"Noelle said your father attacked you and your mother with acid?"

Noelle gaped at him, but Starla only smiled. "Yes. When I was twelve."

"We could do a feature on you. You've got quite a story, Starla. The kind people remember. The attack, your mother's death, everything you've accomplished since. It's got tragedy, suspense, redemption." He smiled. "That's television gold."

It wasn't a question. Aiden seemed to assume that anyone in their right mind would say yes to having the worst moments of their life displayed on television for the entire world to see.

"No, thanks." Starla stepped to the sink and put her margarita glass in it.

"Why not? Surely you want to spread awareness."

"Spread awareness about what?"

"Well, survival against the odds or … here's an angle." He leaned in, eyes glimmering as if he'd just had a genius idea. "Domestic violence awareness. That's pretty hot right now, especially with this Peter Calhoun situation in Novi. Man allegedly kills wife. We could feature both stories."

"It's getting late," Noelle cut in. "And Starla, you probably …"

"Need to get home," Starla finished for her. "Yeah. Good to meet you, Aiden."

Starla followed Noelle to the front door, slipped on her shoes, and they walked outside.

"Well … thanks for coming," Noelle said, "And I'm sorry about Aiden pushing you on the whole story thing. Sometimes he operates as a journalist first, human being second."

"Don't be sorry. It's not a big deal."

"Okay."

"Work tomorrow?" Starla asked.

"Yeah. I have to be there at nine. Fingers crossed that …"

"Nobody dies?"

Noelle nodded.

The next day, Starla searched online for Dr. Yates's first wife.

She discovered an obituary for Melanie Ann Yates, age forty-two, who died after falling down the stairs in the home she shared with her husband. They'd lived in Grand Rapids at the time.

There were no articles about Melanie's death, which implied no suspicion surrounding Ezra Yates and no investigation. But two wives having fatal or near-fatal accidents was quite a coincidence.

Starla found the number for the Kent County medical examiner's office and dialed.

A woman answered.

"Hi, I'm looking for information about a death your office investigated several years ago. A woman named Melanie Ann Yates. She reportedly died after falling down a staircase."

"Just a moment."

Starla listened to the tapping of keys.

"Yes, I see we have a file on her."

"Was an autopsy performed?"

"I'm afraid I can't release that information over the phone. You'll need to submit a formal records request."

"How do I do that?"

"There's a Freedom of Information Act request form on the county website. You can fill it out and submit it electronically."

"And how long does that usually take?"

"We have five business days to respond, though we can request an extension. Depending on the records, it may take longer to get everything to you."

Starla frowned. "There's no way to expedite it?"

"Not generally, no."

"All right. Thank you." She ended the call and pulled up the county website and submitted the form.

Just after five p.m., Finn walked into Starla's house with a paper bag of groceries in one arm. "You were out of milk the last time I was here," he said.

"I don't even drink milk."

“Yeah, but I do.” He peered into the bag. “And I got you more coffee, the Death Wish stuff. I hate the name, by the way. And a few more boxes of cinnamon buns since I know you practically live off those. And soup.”

“Thank you. I was planning on ordering some stuff, but haven’t gotten around to it.”

“I figured. What are you listening to?” Finn plopped the bag on the counter, stuck the milk in the fridge, grabbed a cookie off the table and took a bite. He made a face.

“Those are peanut butter,” she told him.

“I realize that.” Finn had hated peanut butter since his cancer days when his mother, in an attempt to help him put on weight, had added it to virtually every meal.

“I’m listening to that true crime book, *The Good Nurse*. It’s about Charlie Cullen, a nurse who killed a bunch of patients on the East Coast.”

“Huh. Never heard of him. Why’d he do it?”

“The thrill, it seems.”

“And you’re hoping this will help you understand what’s happening on Med-Surg?”

“Yep.”

“Do you think you’re being a little obsessive about this?”

“No. I’m being thorough. There’s a difference.”

“You’re also not getting paid.”

“That’s beside the point. Noelle and I are friends. I want to help her.”

“I appreciate that. It’s admirable, Starla, but … you said you were going to call that therapist.”

“I am. As soon as this is over, I’ll call him.”

“As soon as this is over? It could take years. If they actually believe she’s done this, there are going to be investigations and trials.”

Starla scratched at the corner of her right eye, the dead spot that had no sensation, the nerves all burned away, and yet every now and then it itched madly. The itch could wake her from a dead sleep, and no matter how she scratched at her face, she felt nothing, no relief, no sensation at all. “I went to Noelle’s house last night. She lives in that Copper Ridge neighborhood where all the street names start with Copper. Copper Meadow, Copper Hill.”

“Yuppie city?”

“That’s the one.”

“Nice house?”

“To say the least. She has an entire theater in her basement. It was nuts. And everything was white and spotless. It was pretty impressive.”

“Sounds bland. Who wants to live in a house where everything is white?”

“Rich people. And I met her husband.”

“The news anchor? How’d that go?” Finn asked.

Starla wrinkled her nose. “I’m not a fan.”

“Really? Huh. He always looks so nice on TV.”

“Yeah, well, he’s perfected his mask. I can tell you that much.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning if he wants something, he’s as charismatic as a psychopath, and if he doesn’t, he looks right through you.”

“He can’t be all bad, right? Noelle married him.”

“Her mother pushed her into it. She regrets it.”

“She told you that?”

“Not in those words, but yes. Their marriage is … uncomfortable. No warmth. She looked like a rubber band wound so tight she might snap at any moment. He pitched doing a story on me, was practically salivating over it.”

“And you said no?”

“Obviously.”

“Makes sense. What’s his opinion about the deaths at Bellerose?”

“Noelle hasn’t told him.”

His eyes narrowed on hers. “That’s weird. Isn’t it?”

“Not once you meet him. He’s an image guy. She’s got enough on her plate without having to convince him his beloved reputation won’t be ruined by this whole thing.”

“By his wife killing people in the hospital? Nah. Why would that bother him?”

Starla rolled her eyes.

“What are you finding then?” Finn asked. “Any proof that someone is intentionally killing patients?”

“That I don’t know. Without confirmation of how they died, it’s still possible the deaths are natural. But get this, Dr. Yates had a wife who died ten years ago. She fell down the stairs.”

“Huh. That is unusual. But I’d hardly call it evidence.”

“Not yet, anyway.”

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Starla spent another two hours researching the patients who had died. Victimology was an integral part of any death investigation. The problem was that angel of death killers didn't necessarily have a 'type.' Instead, they were often opportunists who killed whichever patient they were alone with when other staff were not nearby.

She stood and pushed her notes into a folder. "I'm going to head up to Bellerose."

Finn, legs stretched in front of him, feet propped on a pillow on her coffee table, paused *The Hobbit*. "It's almost eight."

"I know. Noelle has a night shift tonight. I want to see if I can get a sense of what's going on. Visiting hours end at nine, so I've gotta head in there now."

Finn frowned. "Is that really a good idea?"

"Yep. I'll call you tomorrow." Starla grabbed her bag and slipped out the door.

Starla stepped off the elevator onto Med-Surg into a group of three women talking over each other.

"If he'd quit smoking, he wouldn't be here again," a loud woman in a khaki business coat said.

“It’s not his fault,” a smaller woman insisted. “He gets nervous, and that helps him calm down.”

The women brushed past Starla, the loud one staring at Starla’s face, a crease forming between her eyebrows. The elevator closed, and their voices faded.

At the nurses’ station, two women stood shoulder to shoulder before a computer, speaking in low voices. Starla recognized both of them, Lacey and Gwen. A call light chimed somewhere down the hall.

“You’re here late,” Gwen said when she saw Starla.

“I was passing by and thought I’d pop in, visit with a few patients.”

Gwen tapped her watch. “Visiting hours end in a half hour.”

Starla gave her a thumbs-up and continued down the hall. She spotted Noelle bent over a cart. Starla turned into a patient’s room. If Noelle saw her, she’d be required to offer an explanation.

Bryan stood beside the patient’s bed. She stilled and stared, dumbstruck. His eyes met hers, a blaze of hazel, molten gold and filled with some unspoken message.

For an instant Starla knew he was real, opened her mouth to blurt his name, but it died on her lips as a nurse strode into the room and passed right through him.

He was gone.

Starla rubbed her eyes, stared at the place Bryan had stood seconds before.

The nurse, Anita, checked the patient’s saline bag and then started back out. “Is something wrong, Starla?” Anita appeared slightly annoyed.

Starla blinked at her, shaking her head. The nurse continued down the hall.

Head swimming, Starla forced her attention to the whiteboard. The patient’s name was Shannon Lucas.

“Hi, Shannon,” Starla fumbled with her canvas bag. “Was there anyone else in here just now before Anita came in?”

No. Of course not. Because people don’t simply vanish.

The woman, not much older than Starla’s own thirty-four years, gazed back at her. “No. I mean, you, obviously.”

Starla studied her—no sheen around her eyes, nothing to signal death, but the room felt oddly heavy, the air dense. “What were you admitted for?” Starla asked.

The woman’s eyes had returned to the television suspended in the corner of the room. “A perforated appendix.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. It sucked.”

“And you’re how old?”

“Thirty-eight.” Shannon’s eyes flicked back to Starla. She wanted Starla to leave, but didn’t say so.

Starla didn’t want to leave. Bryan had been in Shannon’s room. He’d summoned her there.

The thought sounded ridiculous even in her own mind. Summoned her there?

She considered the meds she’d taken that morning. Was some pharmaceutical interaction creating delusions? Had her latest suicide attempt caused a misfiring in her brain that now had her seeing apparitions?

“What do you do for work, Shannon?”

Shannon sighed as if resigned to having to chat with Starla. “I’m a bartender.”

“Huh. That’s interesting. You must meet a lot of people.”

“Yep.”

“I don’t spend much time at bars myself.” Starla gestured at her right cheek. “On account of my face.”

Shannon’s eyes flicked toward her, settling uncomfortably on Starla’s scarred face. “What happened?”

Starla considered a lie. She’d tried on a few over the years, mostly in her late teens. *I was attacked by a tiger while on safari in Africa. I escaped from a burning building. A firework exploded in my face.* “My dad did it.”

Shannon’s eyes widened. Her mouth turned down. “Men are truly the lowest life form.”

“Does that mean you’re not married?”

Shannon scoffed. “Divorced twice, and I told my mother if I try again, just shoot me at the altar.”

Starla laughed. “Those would be some disturbing wedding photos.”

Starla and Shannon talked for half an hour. It had taken Shannon a bit to warm up, but once she had, she'd shared funny stories of intoxicated customers and even pulled out her cell to show Starla pictures of her chihuahua, Bono.

Eventually, Shannon fell asleep.

"Visiting hours are over, Starla," Anita said.

Starla glanced at Shannon. "I wondered if I could just"—Starla gestured at the chair in the corner of the room—"stay and watch over her a bit."

Anita cocked an eyebrow and then shook her head. "You know the rules."

"I do, but … well …" Starla needed some explanation that would bypass the hospital policies, that would convince Nurse Anita, one of the crankiest nurses on the ward, to bend—no, to break—the rules.

Anita put her hands on hips. "Starla, you need to leave. End of discussion."

Starla stood, cast a last glance at Shannon, and made a show of walking toward the elevator at the end of the hall.

Anita watched her for a moment and then turned and continued in the opposite direction. Starla slipped into the bathroom. She counted to fifty, figuring that'd be enough time for Anita to move on, and hurried back out, staying close to the wall and peering up and down the hall.

Noelle emerged from a room, and Starla jerked back, not wanting even her friend to see her. When she looked next, the hall stood empty. Starla bolted out, ran down the hall, and skittered into Shannon's room.

Shannon still slept.

Tiptoeing, Starla angled the reclining chair in the corner so it offered a tiny alcove she could squeeze into.

She sat on the floor, legs pulled into her chest, and settled in for a long, uncomfortable night.

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Noelle sat on the edge of her bed, towel cinched at her chest, the full-length mirror across the room reflecting her pale face and wet, lank hair. She looked as if she'd not eaten in days, not slept.

The night before, after Starla had left, she'd lain for hours watching the slow whir of the ceiling fan, shivering in the icy room.

In the night, Aiden woke up and climbed on top of her. Sex with her husband had become something she dreaded, but Noelle didn't resist, only rolled over afterward and cried silently into her pillow.

When had she fallen out of love with him?

It was the wrong question. She'd never been *in* love with him. Their courtship had so pleased her mother that Noelle had gone along with it, convincing herself that with time, the intimacy would deepen.

Now she felt as if she lived with a stranger, and her mother, whom it had all been for, no longer existed at all. Not really.

Nursing too had been for her mother, and she had moved onto Med-Surg because Dr. Yates considered it more serious, and now that too had crumbled to ash around her.

"I can't go," she told the gaunt face in the mirror.

The obituary from her SUV windshield was folded into a tiny square and hidden in the jewelry box on her dresser. Why had she kept it? She wanted to burn it, shove it into the garbage disposal and listen to the metal teeth gnash it to nothing, tear it into tiny shreds over the wastebasket.

The door swung open, and Noelle flinched.

Aiden, dressed in a suit and tie, paused, impassive expression shifting to one of disapproval. He looked at his watch. “Don’t you need to be at the hospital soon? You’re not even dressed.”

Because they think I’m killing patients.

“I don’t feel great. I might call in.”

“An hour before your shift starts? That’s rather inconsiderate.”

“People get sick, Aiden,” she murmured.

“Well, Mike Sinclair is stopping by to talk about an upcoming story, so I’m going to need you to stay up here if you’re not working. The last thing we need is for both of us to get sick.” Aiden strode back out of the room.

Noelle imagined the evening, listening to Aiden and Mike downstairs, both loud and full of themselves.

She forced herself up and pulled her scrubs from the closet.

Noelle tried to act normal. She stood in the circle of nurses at shift change and pretended to ignore their darting glances. When she walked into the breakroom and the conversations instantly stopped, she tried not to notice.

Noelle had the fewest patients of everyone on shift, and they were all stable. She visited them one by one, introduced herself, checked their charts and vitals, and settled into the rhythm of the night. Noelle’s nerves continued to jump like frayed wire. Every alarm, loud voice, and unusual clatter made her tense.

Lacey stopped Noelle on her way to grab coffee from the break room. “Anita’s son is sick, and she has to leave early,” Lacey told her. “We’re dividing up her patients. You have Shannon Lucas, Room 221.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Noelle stepped into Room 221. Shannon was recovering from an appendectomy.

The patient lay in bed, eyes trained on the television. The nightly news played a story about Peter Calhoun, the man now suspected of murdering his wife.

“Hi, Shannon. How are you feeling?”

The woman sighed. “Tired. I keep falling asleep for twenty or thirty minutes, and then I wake up again. I’m ready to go home.”

“I bet. It looks like tomorrow you’ll be discharged.”

“I hope so. My neighbor is watching my chihuahua Bono, and they’re not exactly friends. Not to mention my neighbor has a cat. I can only imagine the hellscape of his apartment right now.”

Noelle smiled, noting the stats on Shannon’s monitors. Everything looked fine. “Bono will be happy to have his mom back, I’m sure.”

At three a.m., the shift more than halfway over, Noelle’s unease ebbed away. In the stretch of quiet, she decided to restock blankets, as inevitably patients would wake up and complain of feeling cold.

The service hall branched off near the end of Med-Surg, a narrow stretch of corridor that housed the utility room, the linen storage, the housekeeping closet, and the service elevator. She moved down it warily, the memory of being trapped in the utility room lurking at the edges of her thoughts. Dr. Yates said he’d simply turned the handle, but Noelle had practically ripped it off trying to open the door. Could it simply have gotten jammed?

Movement at the far end of the corridor caught her eye. A figure clad in blue scrubs, including a scrub cap, as if they’d just come from or were on their way to surgery, disappeared into the service elevator.

The doors slid shut behind them.

Noelle slowed, watching the numbers above the elevator descend. “Huh.”

It was unusual to see anyone on the service elevator. It was notoriously unreliable and regularly got stuck between floors.

Propping the door open with the stepstool, Noelle grabbed an armful of blankets from the linen closet and walked back to the main hall.

Her patient in Room 219 called out as she passed. “My back is sore. I need to move.”

Noelle stepped into Alma Bennit’s room, plopping the blankets on a chair. “Sure. Here, let’s get you up for a few minutes.”

It was a painstaking process getting Alma out of bed. She’d been admitted with complications from diabetes several days before. She was a large woman, and her breath puffed in strained bursts as Noelle helped her

swing her legs over the side of the bed. Carefully moving her IV pole, Noelle braced the woman as she stood and clutched the walker next to her bed.

“Let’s … walk down the hall,” Alma wheezed.

The pulse oximeter flashed ninety-one percent. Her heart rate climbed to a hundred and fourteen.

“I think that’s too much, Alma. How about we work on standing here for a few minutes to start with, and if that’s okay, we’ll try for the opposite side of the room?”

Alma blinked through beads of sweat sliding from her brow. She nodded. “I swear these beds are designed by sadists,” Alma muttered.

Noelle smiled. “They’re definitely not Tempur-Pedic. Is it helping to stand for a minute?”

“A little.”

On the television, a white-haired man stood in a crime scene surveying fire damage.

“Dick Van Dyke,” Alma said. “Ever seen this? *Diagnosis: Murder*?” Her words petered out, and she took a couple of quick breaths.

“No. It looks interesting.”

A shrill alarm sounded somewhere down the hall.

A streak of fear shot down Noelle’s spine. Her hands instantly went clammy. Her eyes, previously trained on Alma’s stats, shifted to the open door.

“Code blue!”

The words were a bucket of ice water thrown in Noelle’s face. She felt her entire body begin to tremble.

“What’s going on?” Alma asked, squinting toward the hall.

The same nurse—Lacey, Noelle thought—yelled again, “Code blue. Room 221.”

The room number flooded Noelle’s head, crowding out every other thought. For a few seconds Alma no longer existed. The drone of the television vanished, the room itself receded into nothingness.

Shannon Lucas’s room.

“Code blue!”

The shout came again, and the world rushed back in, Alma’s sweat-damp face, worried eyes fixed on Noelle’s. The sound of running feet echoed in the hall, followed by an indistinct shout.

“Stay with your walker.” Noelle forced her voice to steady, her legs to move.

Alma frowned. “Is everything okay?”

Noelle didn’t answer. She rushed into the hallway.

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Starla's butt and legs hurt. Tiredness tugged her eyelids down. She'd been watching Shannon sleep forever, two hours at least, maybe three.

Anita had left, and Noelle had taken over. Starla had nearly spoken when Noelle entered. Instead, she'd remained tucked into the corner, watching her friend move around the room. The silence felt dishonest, as though she'd crossed some invisible line between keeping vigil and spying.

Her chin dipped. She jerked awake.

The time displayed on her cell phone now read three a.m.

She peered around the chair and watched Shannon, who slept soundly beneath a white blanket, her chest rising and falling with slow, even breaths. The heart monitor continued its steady rhythm.

Starla rubbed her burning eyes, then pinched her cheeks.

Stay awake.

She leaned her head back against the wall and let her eyes slip closed.

Bryan sat on the edge of Shannon's bed. He wore blue scrubs, his hands folded loosely between his knees. "You missed it," he said.

Starla frowned. "Missed what?"

His gaze shifted toward the door.

An alarm shrieked.

Starla jolted awake and nearly smacked her head on the back of the chair. A tiny oof escaped her lips, and she clamped her mouth shut, trying to get her bearings.

She was in Shannon's room at Bellerose, hunched in the corner behind a chair.

"Code blue!" a nurse shouted.

Starla peered around the chair to find a nurse standing over Shannon. Lacey, her face white, was pumping Shannon's chest.

Starla stared at the monitor. Shannon's heart rate was dropping: 75, 68, 55.

"Code blue! Room 221!" the nurse repeated, louder.

The room flooded with hospital staff. Someone turned on the lights. Josh shocked Shannon's body. Shannon convulsed on the bed, but her heart rate line remained flat.

"She's pulseless!"

"Starting compressions!"

"One. Two. Three …"

Noelle appeared near the back of the group, her eyes enormous, fear-filled. She was not jumping into the fray, seemed unable to move.

Dr. Kaine strode in and started shouting orders. Starla tried to follow as the medical staff surrounded Shannon, but her eyes refused to focus.

Her windpipe narrowed. She could not draw in her breath. Pinpricks of black speckled her vision. The room receded, and before she could stop it …

She was twelve again and everything burned.

Her skin. Her eyes. Her lungs. She couldn't open her right eye at all.

Someone held her down. "No, sweetheart, don't touch your face."

Where was her mom? Starla tried to turn.

Another stretcher rolled beside hers.

For one impossible second, they moved together beneath the ambulance bay lights.

She recognized her mother's mane of dark glossy hair, but her face …

Excruciating pain and bright lights and the shouts of nurses and doctors.

"Twelve-year-old female!"

"Chemical burns!"

"Protect the airway!"

Starla glimpsed her mother lying across the hall. One arm dangled over the edge of her stretcher, her hand limp, the midnight-blue polish on her fingernails dotted with tiny yellow stars. Starla had painted them herself only days earlier.

People surrounded her mother, blocking Starla's view. Then they were moving, taking her away.

Starla never saw her mother alive again.

"Clear!"

The command ripped her back to the present. Shannon's body jumped as electricity surged through her.

The nurses and Kaine stared at the monitor. A single wavering line stared back.

"No pulse," Gwen whispered.

"Resume compressions," Kaine commanded.

The compressions began again.

Harder.

Faster.

Starla had to get out of the room, but she couldn't, didn't dare flee through the crowd of nurses and staff as they tried unsuccessfully to revive Shannon.

Minutes passed, loud, chaotic, adrenaline-filled, and then, as if the unseen hand of God had reached down with a pin and popped a bubble, the room went still.

Dr. Kaine called the time of death. Josh switched off the alarms. Kaine shook his head, muttered and strode from the room.

Josh followed then Gwen and Lacey. Noelle pulled the sheet to Shannon's shoulders, her hands trembling, her face ghostly pale. Tears streamed down her face.

Starla needed to say something but could find no words.

Noelle walked from the room.

Starla waited another thirty seconds, hardly daring to breathe. Grimacing, she unfolded herself from behind the chair, her knees and lower back aching.

She crossed the room without looking at Shannon.

The hallway outside was clear. Most of the staff were gathered at the nurses' station, speaking in subdued voices she couldn't quite make out.

She stared for a second, tried to discern Noelle in the throng, but couldn’t see her.

Starla bolted in the opposite direction and turned into the hallway that held linens. She pressed the button for the service elevator, bouncing on the balls of her feet, willing the blood flow to return to her tingling legs as she glanced repeatedly back toward the opposite hall. If one of the nurses or doctors from Med-Surg spotted her, she’d be in a hell of a mess.

Shannon Lucas, a stable patient, had died, and Starla had been hiding in the room the entire time.

Finally, after what felt like ages, the elevator doors groaned open.

She’d never ridden in the service elevator. Wood veneer lined the walls beneath scratched stainless-steel rails, and the floor bore decades of scuffs from hospital beds and supply carts. It smelled of disinfectant and faint perfume.

Hand trembling, she pressed the button marked 1. The doors closed, and the elevator descended with a low mechanical rumble.

Her pulse had not slowed. Her entire body thrummed. The right side of her face and neck sounded the loudest. It itched and burned as it had in those early days, as if witnessing Shannon’s death had triggered memories in not only her mind but her body as well.

As the elevator descended, Starla pressed her forehead against the wall and tried to turn off the adrenaline screaming through her cells.

The elevator stopped, and the doors slid open to reveal a dark hallway. She’d expected the brightness of the lobby.

She looked at the floor panel and realized B was lit rather than 1. She’d arrived in the basement, but still. Where were the lights?

Starla pressed 1 and then the door-close option, but the elevator did nothing. The doors remained open.

Not complete darkness, but something close stretched before her. Only every third fluorescent fixture seemed to work, leaving long swaths of corridor swallowed in shadow. The air felt cool and damp.

Starla knew Bellerose, had spent years of her life in the hospital. She’d even been to the basement via the regular elevator. This section was something else—something older and apparently no longer in use.

She stepped out, and the elevator doors whispered shut behind her, taking even more of the light.

A long concrete tunnel stretched before her. She started down it, her thoughts momentarily drifting away from Shannon as she tried to make sense of this tunnel and where it might lead.

Her shoes echoed on the concrete.

In front of her, she saw double metal doors painted with two words: Administration Annex.

Starla stepped through the doors and back in time.

The basement walls were covered in pale green ceramic tile that hadn't been fashionable in decades. Nothing about this basement aligned with the modern hospital above her. A scattering of footprints marked the dust on the floor.

More halls branched off from the main one, with faded hand-painted arrows pointing toward Central Supply and Dietary.

Above a metal door she saw the word Morgue.

Some morbid curiosity drew her closer, and she pushed through the heavy door, vaguely surprised to find it unlocked.

The room beyond was almost completely black. The smell hit her first—cold concrete, rust, mildew, and beneath it all a faint medicinal odor, a smell that took her back to dissecting fetal pigs in high school anatomy class.

The darkness was absolute, swallowing everything beyond the doorway. There was no movement, no sound.

A prickling sensation crept up the back of her neck.

She could see nothing inside, yet Starla sensed someone stood in the dark room.

Staring at her.

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Starla took a quick step back and let the door swing closed.

Her brain urged her to run back down the long corridor, rush into the elevator, and start slamming buttons until she'd made it back to the brightly lit, occupied floors of the modern Bellerose Hospital. But Starla had stopped running from monsters a long time ago.

Steadying her hand, she took her phone from her pocket and switched on the flashlight.

She stepped back to the door and pushed it open, illuminating the darkness.

A stainless-steel autopsy table stood in the center, its surface dulled with age. A floor drain rested beneath it, surrounded by cracked tile stained brown with rust.

Her light caught a glint of blue on the floor, a tiny gemstone flower with blue and white stones lay on the ground. A remnant from a body or perhaps a living person who'd once entered the morgue.

A medical cart stood nearby. Metal cupboards lined one wall, several doors hanging crooked. In one cupboard she could see a little colored pouch on a shelf and half considered going to look inside, but no, she did not want to step fully into the morgue.

A row of old body lockers stood on an opposite wall, one slightly open. Starla stared at the narrow gap, almost waiting for someone or something to crawl out.

Nothing emerged, and after a few more seconds, she felt sure no one occupied the space. Starla started to step away and close the door when something creaked inside. Her eyes locked on the body lockers once more, that one open locker.

Gooseflesh prickled along her spine.

The fear was trying to get hold, filling her head with every horror movie she'd ever seen. A decomposing corpse would lie in that locker, its sightless eyes gazing in her direction, its fleshless nose tilted to the air, smelling her.

Starla stood her ground, gritted her teeth against the rising panic.

Nothing happened.

She let the door swing shut, then walked backward down the hall for the first few feet, not ready to turn her back on the old morgue just yet.

At the end of the hallway opposite from the service elevator, she discovered another elevator. A modern keypad had been mounted beside the call button. A sign above it read Authorized Personnel Only.

She pressed the button anyway.

Nothing.

A red light blinked above the keypad. The stairwell beside it was locked as well.

If she returned to the service elevator and again found she couldn't press the button for the first floor, she'd be trapped in the basement.

How often did people enter it?

She took out her cell phone. She'd call Finn if she couldn't get out, and he'd send someone to retrieve her. But when she looked at the cell signal, she saw three tiny letters: SOS. No service.

For a few seconds, she imagined days, weeks even, stuck there, screaming and shouting in the hopes someone on a floor above would hear her.

She shook the thought away and walked briskly back toward the service elevator. She stepped in and pressed the button for floor one with more force than necessary. For several agonizing moments, the doors remained open; the elevator didn't move.

From the dark hall before her, something groaned. A door opening.

Starla's pulse jumped. She jammed her finger on the button again. "Go," she told it. "Fucking go."

The doors shut, and the light for the first floor blinked on above her.

By the time Starla reached the lobby, forcing herself to walk instead of run, the fear she'd carried up from the basement had begun to fade. She was almost to the exit when she rounded a corner and slammed into someone.

Starla yelped and caught the woman by the arm before she could fall. A cooler bag slipped from her hand and skidded across the tile.

"Virginia," Starla breathed.

"Jesus, Starla." Virginia pressed a hand to her chest. "You scared the hell out of me."

"I scared the hell out of both of us."

"What on earth are you doing here?" Virginia asked, squinting at her watch. "It's four o'clock in the morning."

"I couldn't sleep," Starla lied, attempting to sound calm. "And there are always people hanging around in waiting rooms here, so …" She trailed off, aware that the lie was not a good one. "Are you working?" Starla noted Virginia wore jeans and a T-shirt rather than scrubs.

"No. Delivering breakfast to Jim." Virginia walked to the bag on the floor, bent and picked it up. "He forgot it last night, and if I know him, he'll end up eating some big slab of bacon in the cafeteria and suffering heartburn all day."

"So what's he having instead?"

"Hard-boiled eggs and fruit."

"Sounds…" Gross. Hard-boiled eggs reminded her of rubbery eyeballs. "Healthy."

"What floor were you visiting?" Virginia asked.

Starla's mind raced. "Oh, a few different ones. Umm … Are you caring for Grace today?" Starla changed the subject..

Virginia shook her head. "Tomorrow."

"Shouldn't you have scaled back by now? You've got a husband who's a doctor."

"And do what? Watch daytime television?" Virginia shook her head. "I'd be eating the wallpaper if I did that."

Starla frowned. "That seems extreme."

Virginia smirked. "Idle hands and all that. I'll see you later, Starla." Virginia headed for the elevators.

In the parking garage, Starla hurried to her car, unlocking it the moment it came into view. As she opened the door, she paused, staring across the lot at another familiar-looking vehicle. It was a white Porsche, the car Aiden Mitchell drove, and it was parked in a far back corner, almost hidden.

Another patient had coded that night, and Noelle's husband happened to be at Bellerose.

Starla imagined her grid of suspects. Originally Aiden had seemed an unlikely perpetrator, but that had shifted when she met him. He was not the friendly man viewers saw on the morning news each day. Aiden had a cool, detached quality. Would she go so far as to say sociopath? No, not yet anyway.

She walked toward the Porsche, intent on taking down the license plate, but the exit door in the hospital swung open.

Starla quickly ducked back to her own car and climbed inside, slid down in the seat, just enough to still peer through her driver's side window.

Lacey from Med-Surg emerged from the hospital and lit a cigarette. Starla watched her cross the lot toward the Porsche. Something shifted behind its windshield.

She leaned closer to the glass. Was someone sitting inside it?

Aiden?

Lacey passed the Porsche and got into a small dark car beside it. She didn't leave, but sat with the door cracked, cigarette glowing between her fingers, staring straight ahead.

Starla understood. After Shannon, every nurse on Med-Surg was probably carrying some version of that same thousand-yard stare.

Still, her attention kept returning to the Porsche. She couldn't make out the driver's seat.

But her gut told her someone was sitting behind the wheel.

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"Absolutely no reason she coded."

Noelle turned the corner to raised voices and found Lacey talking animatedly to the charge nurse, Gwen.

"Are you guys talking about Shannon?" Noelle asked.

Lacey paled and took a step back.

Gwen nodded. "Yes. It seems unusual that she died."

"I totally agree," Noelle said. "I checked on her around three, and she was fine, sound asleep, all her vitals looked good."

"Was that the last time you saw her?" Gwen asked.

Noelle nodded, but Lacey shook her head. "I saw you coming out like fifteen minutes before she coded." Lacey's eyes narrowed on Noelle's.

Noelle frowned, remembered her quick stop back into Shannon's room. "You're right. I grabbed my clipboard from her room."

Gwen glanced at Lacey and then back to Noelle. "Okay. Noted."

Noelle moved away from them, off down the hall, her legs unsteady beneath her.

They thought she had caused Shannon's death.

A little after five in the morning, Noelle stepped off the elevator into the largely empty parking garage. The previous hours played on a loop. A

headache had begun behind her eyes and worked its way deep into the center of her brain.

She'd left her shift early. None of her co-workers pushed back. Maybe they were happy to see her go. It was, after all, yet another of her patients who'd died unexpectedly. She'd felt the weight of their unspoken accusations.

She normally exited Bellerose with other nurses as night shift ended and day shift began. Now the garage was eerily quiet, her footfalls loud as they echoed across the cement.

As she made her way toward her SUV, another sound emerged from somewhere behind her. Noelle turned, half expected to see someone else exiting Bellerose, but no one appeared.

She exhaled, shaking her head, and kept walking.

A few seconds later, it came again. A sharp tap behind her.

Noelle spun around.

Empty parking spaces. A pickup truck. Nothing else.

Her pulse quickened. "Get it together," she whispered, though the words did little to settle her nerves.

She walked faster.

A set of footsteps began to follow.

Noelle broke into a run.

Her shoe caught on a crack in the concrete, sending her sprawling. Her palms scraped across the rough floor, and pain shot through one knee. She scrambled up without looking at the blood beading on her hand.

The Tahoe sat only twenty yards away. She fumbled for her key fob, nearly dropping it before the headlights flashed. She threw herself inside, slammed the door, and hit the lock button.

Her rapid breaths filled the SUV as she scanned every corner of the garage through the windows. Even as fear pounded through her body, her mind tried to rationalize her out of the overreaction, the paranoia. She'd allowed such thoughts to get the best of her before and paid dearly for her overreaction.

No one lurked in the shadows.

The parking deck was empty.

Hands shaking, she started the SUV and reversed from her spot, eyes darting to the rearview and side mirrors.

She drove slowly from the parking garage, hands tight on the wheel, her palm throbbing where she'd scraped it.

When Noelle pulled into her driveway. The house was dark. She turned off her engine and watched the driveway behind her, some piece of her convinced the person from the parking garage had followed her home.

There was nobody in the parking garage, Noelle.

Minutes passed, and not a single car drove by.

The death of Shannon had pushed her brain into hypervigilance. She needed to calm down.

Noelle unlocked the door and stepped inside. The hush of the house did little to soothe her nerves. She flipped on the entryway light and noticed Aiden's keys were missing from the white hooks beside the door.

Had he left early for the gym? It was just after five in the morning, more than an hour before he typically woke.

Her thoughts drifted to Starla.

How's your marriage?

The question had come up while they were discussing the possibility that someone was framing Noelle for the deaths at Bellerose. Starla had been probing, wondering whether Aiden might somehow be involved.

But no. Of course not. Besides, the missing keys meant nothing. He might have simply forgotten to hang them up.

Still, she crossed into the kitchen and opened the door to the garage.

The spot where Aiden's white Porsche usually sat was empty.

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When Starla got home, she made a pot of coffee and ate two packaged cinnamon rolls, standing at her drafting table, gazing at the suspect list she'd compiled for the deaths at Bellerose.

Guilt had been chewing at her since Shannon's death. Starla had been right there, hiding in the room, waiting for the killer. And she'd fucking fallen asleep.

She hadn't warned Shannon. Hadn't stopped anything. Hadn't even seen who came through the door.

In her mind's eye, she retraced the previous hours and added a new checkmark to every staff member who'd been on Med-Surg that night: Dr. Kaine, Lacey, Ferris, Gwen.

Noelle.

It was only five a.m. Finn would still be asleep. She sent him a text, desperate to tell him what had happened, to unburden herself of the terrible mistake she'd made.

Starla: *Come over when you wake up.*

She turned her attention back to the list of names, but ran into a dead end. The long night had diminished any possibility of genuine breakthroughs.

She made her way to the kitchen and poured another cup of coffee. As she sipped it, her eyes landed on the DVD player from Jana Carlson, Bryan's mother.

Bryan, who'd been standing next to Shannon's bed, who'd infiltrated Starla's dreams seconds before Shannon died.

Starla plugged the DVD player into her TV and wall outlet. She loaded the disc and hit play.

The image opened with letters panning across the screen.

Carlson Home Movies

Happy 60th Birthday, Mom!

Bryan walked onto the screen and sat down on the futon in his cottage and grinned at the camera.

A current of electricity buzzed through her to see him up close, not drifting through a doorway or tucked into a shadowy chair. A real, solid man.

Thick, light brown hair curled slightly at the ends, tousled, but not in an intentional way. Hazel eyes crinkled when he smiled. He wore faded jeans and a lightweight gray hoodie. His sneakers were a blinding shade of fluorescent yellow, with charcoal-gray soles and black mesh detailing.

"We're getting ready to take a journey into the center of the earth," he announced.

She leaned closer as he spoke. To hear him was another revelation. A softer voice than she expected, playful.

"Only kidding. We're actually taking a walk down memory lane, bringing back home movies, if you will. So come on, what are you waiting for? Let's get started."

Words panned in from the left.

It all began on a sunny Saturday afternoon in 1991.

Or was it rainy …?

You and Dad told different versions of this, so who knows, right?

A grainy, sepia-toned wedding video filled the screen. A love ballad played in the background.

A much younger Jana walked onto the screen in a beaded wedding gown, her hair, all brown then with no gray, piled on her head. A man in a tuxedo followed. They stood at a table with a tall wedding cake, a little plastic bride and groom adorning the top.

Starla watched as they giggled through the cutting of the cake and playfully fed each other a piece, each smearing frosting across the other's cheek. The groom leaned in and kissed her. The video faded out.

Words again on the screen.

Their tranquility was soon shattered when this nuisance joined the fray …

A video of a baby in a tiny little blue swing, tears streaming down his face.

“Bryan, it’s just a swing,” Bryan’s dad, Daryl, said from behind the camera. “It’s okay.”

Jana appeared behind baby Bryan and lifted him out, cuddling him against her chest.

The videos continued.

Home movies of a toddler Bryan leaning in to blow out his birthday candles, another of him riding a tricycle in a little cul-de-sac, his father walking behind him, a shaggy two-toned dog trotting along beside them.

Another video at a hospital. Jana lay in bed, a newly swaddled baby wrapped in her arms, Bryan jumping up and down at the bedside demanding to see his brother. His dad lifted him up. The smile disappeared from Bryan’s face.

“Ew!” he shouted. “He looks gross.”

The person holding the camera laughed. Jana scolded him. “No, he’s not. He’s beautiful. All new babies look like this.”

The movies went on revealing young Bryan and his brother, Rhett, on camping trips, in elementary school Christmas pageants, and at track and field days, Christmas mornings, beach outings, proms.

More than an hour in, an adult Bryan arrived in the videos.

“Dude, Tony and I are, as we speak, outside the Palace with tickets”—he held up two concert tickets—“to see Kings of Leon. We drove here tonight and stood outside before the concert started hoping to score tickets, and guess what? We did!”

The video snapped to Bryan and his friend in the stands, his friend singing and pumping his fist before it shifted to a technicolor stage, lights strobing behind the lead singer.

Few of the adult Bryan videos included his brother, and when they did, Rhett appeared distant, hardly engaged with the videographer, who was often Bryan.

Another video clip opened to Bryan. “Mom, as you can see, I’m here at Grandma’s, and boy, do I have a surprise for you!”

Starla studied the old farmhouse in the background: two-story, white paint peeling from the wood siding. Sawhorses stacked with two-by-fours, a

ladder propped against the side of the house, and an array of power tools strewn across a folding table. A golden retriever trotted happily through the frame.

Bryan pointed the camera forward as he walked up the porch steps and through the front door, the screen banging behind him.

The kitchen was a mess. The linoleum floor had largely peeled away. An ancient-looking, pea-green refrigerator stood against one wall at the end of a row of yellowed cupboards.

Bryan moved to a section of linoleum still stuck to the floor and pointed the camera at the edge, partially pulled back from the wall. He plucked something from the crack with two fingers and dangled it in front of the camera.

Starla leaned closer to the screen. The tarnished bracelet appeared to be made from pearls and diamonds, or knockoffs of the two.

“It’s Grandma’s tennis bracelet! Great Aunt Shirley didn’t steal it,” he announced, shaking the bracelet. “Crazy, right?”

The camera lifted as Bryan stood, and a moment later he appeared on screen.

“That brings our walk down memory lane to a close. I thought it appropriate to top it off with the bracelet, seeing as how it’s been family lore for fifty years or so.” He laughed. “I’ll bring it along with a mushroom and olive pizza from Amalfi’s for your official birthday since that’s your favorite. Anyway, happy sixtieth birthday. You don’t look a day over fifty-nine. Love you, Mom.”

He walked back toward the camera, and a moment later the screen cut to black.

For a while Starla stared at the dark screen, Bryan’s face and voice lingering. Her heart ached for Jana, who’d been searching for her son for a year.

Starla backed the DVD up and paused on Bryan’s face. She had no doubts whatsoever this was the man she kept seeing at Bellerose.

The ghost.

“Where are you?”

She found his tablet on her drafting table and attempted to unlock it. She’d tried the day she’d brought it home with no luck.

Now she attempted combinations of Bryan’s name, his address, his birth date, his parents’ names, but still hit a wall.

Her cell phone pinged. Starla looked at the screen.

Finn: *I'm on my way.*

Starla opened the door for Finn, whose smile faded when he saw her. "What? Did something happen?"

She led him into the house, talking fast, explaining the harrowing night before—seeing Bryan slip in a patient's room, meeting Shannon, hiding in the corner. The code blue. The pronouncement of death.

"I messed up," she said. "I could have saved her."

"Holy shit," he breathed. "Did anyone see you?"

Starla, mid-drink of coffee even though she'd already had three cups and was buzzing like a vending machine, paused. "No. But who cares? Did you hear me? I … I let her die."

"No. You did not. Don't go there, Starla. I'm serious. You cannot take responsibility for what happened at Bellerose. The thing to think about now is that you were hiding in her room. And the hospital is already suspicious that someone is murdering patients."

"Oh, yeah." Starla set her coffee down, ran through the moments of slipping from the room, Shannon's lifeless body still on the bed, and moving in a haze to the service elevator. She'd not seen anyone, but had someone seen her? "I don't think anyone saw me. No. Shit. I ran into Virginia Parry."

"Jim's wife?"

Starla nodded.

Finn chewed his lip. "She's known you a long time. Maybe she won't say anything."

"She wasn't on shift, just taking food to her husband."

"You said you saw Bryan walk into the room first. As in …?" He pointed at the photo of the nurse from Oncology.

"Exactly."

"But you're going to tell me he wasn't in there?"

"No, because he's … I don't know. He's not alive. I mean, how else do I explain it?"

“Hallucinations? I can tell you’re not sleeping enough. What kind of medicine did you take yesterday?”

“I’m not hallucinating him. And hello, Shannon’s death is proof that he’s real and he’s trying to tell me who’s going to die next.”

“I know you believe this, okay? I can see how serious you are, but … I’m struggling with it. You’ve never been a person who buys into the woo-woo stuff, and honestly, it’s worrying me.”

“Fuck!” Starla said. “I didn’t even pay attention to the body language of the staff when they were trying to revive Shannon.”

Finn brushed both hands through his hair. “Have you talked to Noelle?”

“No.”

“She has no idea you were up there hiding in a room with one of her patients?”

Starla shook her head.

“How do you think she’ll feel about that?”

“I may not tell her.”

He frowned. “Why? Do you believe she’s involved?”

Starla ignored the question. “Did you know there’s an underground tunnel that connects Bellerose to the original hospital? That administrative building.”

“I think I remember hearing about that as a kid.”

“Excuse me? You knew there was a creepy underground tunnel that fed into the old hospital and you never told me?”

Finn shrugged. “It hardly seemed relevant. What were we gonna do, run up and down the tunnel? I could barely walk in those days.”

Starla thought of the long minutes trapped down there, the sense of something lurking in the morgue. “I went down there last night, or I guess it was this morning.”

Finn wrinkled his brow. “Why?”

“Not on purpose. The service elevator spit me out in the basement, totally bypassed the first floor, and when I tried to go back, it wouldn’t let me.”

“The elevator wouldn’t let you?”

“The button for the first floor wouldn’t work.”

“Huh. So how’d you get out?”

“Eventually the elevator worked, but I walked around down there first. It’s creepy as hell.” She rubbed away the goose bumps prickling her arms.

“The original morgue is down there.”

Finn shuddered. “Tell me you didn’t go in it.”

“I mostly stood in the doorway, but”—she shook her head—“it spooked me.”

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Starla called Noelle around noon and left a message.

Someone had killed Shannon in the early morning hours, and Starla had been in the room. Had she stayed awake, she would know who had done it. Not only that, she could have saved Shannon, stopped the killer.

But she hadn't.

Across the room, a sound suddenly emanated from her television.

Bryan's voice: "Mom, as you can see, I'm here at Grandma's and boy, do I have a surprise for you."

Starla crossed to the TV. The home video had turned on. In the background, Starla saw the old farmhouse once more.

"Are you here?" She turned in a slow circle, willed him to appear.

He didn't, but on the TV, he moved toward the house.

She paused the DVD, returned to her drafting table, grabbed her cell and dialed Bryan's mother, Jana. The woman answered on the first ring.

"Hi, Jana. This is Starla Burton."

"Starla. Hello. I was wondering … hoping, I guess, to hear from you."

"I'm sorry I haven't called. I've been caught up in some other work."

"It's okay. I know life goes on."

"I'd like to come over again, if that's okay? Ask you a few more questions."

"Yes, please do. Today or …?"

"I can be there in half an hour."

“I’m curious about the farmhouse,” Starla told Jana across her kitchen table. “You said he was rehabbing your mother’s old house and planned to eventually move there?”

Jana nodded. She lifted her wrist, and Starla saw the bracelet Bryan had presented in the video.

“I saw that in his home movie. It belonged to your mother?”

Jana looked at the bracelet and smiled. “Yes. It was literally the only expensive piece of jewelry my mother ever owned. My dad gave this to her for their twentieth wedding anniversary. She had it for maybe a year, and then one weekend, her sister, Shirley, came for a visit, and it disappeared.

“My mom was convinced Shirley stole it. Shirley was sort of the black sheep of the family, married and divorced several times, which back then was a travesty. Anyway, my mother and Shirley had a bit of a falling out over the whole thing. Years later they reconciled, but my mother always secretly believed Shirley took the bracelet.”

“Wow. And all that time it was in the kitchen?”

“Yeah. My mother would have been so upset if she’d realized she accused her sister wrongly, but I guess none of that matters now. They’re both gone, my mom and Shirley.”

“What happened to the farmhouse?”

“Bryan owns it. He bought it from my mother after she’d moved here to the mother-in-law apartment.”

“So, it’s sitting vacant?”

“Yes. I used to drive out there two or three times a week, often at night. I thought … if he had left on his own, maybe he’d still be going there, working. You know? Maybe I’d catch him out there.”

“But you never did.”

“No, but … sometimes I wondered if … I don’t know. Things looked different. Tools moved, doors opened I was sure had been closed. I heard things a few times and almost convinced myself it was him. But, of course, it never was.”

Starla thought of the home movie suddenly turning on, Bryan next to Shannon’s bed, the black balloon bobbing down the hall. “Can I go to the house and look around?”

Jana nodded. “Please do. I don’t expect you’ll find anything. It’s a mess, but … maybe you’ll see something I missed.”

A knock sounded at the front door.

“Just give me a sec.” Jana stood and trailed from the room.

Down the hall, she opened the front door.

“Antonio!” Jana opened her arms, and a man stepped into them.

Starla craned forward to get a better look at him, then shifted back when his head tilted toward her.

“It’s so good to see you,” Jana told him.

“Is it? How come my mom never says that?”

“Oh, stop it. She adores you. Come in, please. I’d like you to meet someone.”

Starla took a deep breath and braced herself. She met new people all the time, forced herself to do it as a sort of exposure therapy, but meeting men her age added another layer of discomfort.

Jana returned to the kitchen, the man, Antonio, following. He stood tall, well over six feet, and had dark, wavy hair and angular features. He wore a black polo shirt, black slacks, and shiny loafers.

“This is Starla. Starla, Antonio. Bryan’s best friend since childhood. And Starla is going to help us find our Bryan.”

Starla extended her hand. His eyes flickered to the right side of her face, faltered. He shook her hand. “Good to meet you.”

“And you, Antonio.”

“Tony,” he said.

“I’m just going to pop out quickly and grab the mail,” Jana said. “If that’s okay?” She looked between Starla and Tony.

“Sure.” Tony took a seat at the table.

“You were Bryan’s best friend?”

“I *am* his best friend.”

“I’m sorry. Yeah. I shouldn’t have said it like that.”

He shrugged. “It’s fine. My girlfriend says Jana and I are in the bubble of denial.”

“Meaning your girlfriend thinks Bryan is no longer with us?”

Tony frowned, ran his hand through his dark hair. “Who cares what she thinks? She barely knew him.”

“Have you had any contact with him since he went missing?”

“Two text messages.”

“Really? Okay. That’s interesting. What did they say?”

Antonio frowned. “They were both … odd. Bryan was a terrible texter, man hands, all thumbs. I don’t think he ever sent me a text without misspelled words. We had an ongoing joke about getting tater tits from Loony’s Diner thanks to a text he sent me a few years back when I was grabbing takeout. I asked him if he wanted tater tots or fries, and he sent back ‘tater tits.’ From then on, they were tater tits.”

“That’s funny. So, you’re saying his texts didn’t sound like him? Did you suspect someone else sent them?”

“Not at the time. The first was ‘I’m going out of town for a while.’ Super basic, and I tried to get him on the phone, but he never picked up. The second one came after I’d sent him about fifty texts and called as many times. I was laying a pretty heavy guilt trip on him because Jana was getting ready to file a police report.

“He texted back something like, ‘I need time and space to think. I’ve been struggling for a while. I’m an adult and can make my own choices. Please respect my wishes.’ It was so weird. Again, perfectly spelled. There was even, like, good grammar or whatever. I must have read that text a hundred times. I showed it to Jana, and she also felt weird about it. Not to mention he didn’t text her. Only me. It made no sense.”

“Is there any chance it was him? Or he asked someone to send the messages for him? Bryan’s mother said he was seeing someone. Did you ever meet her?”

Tony shook his head. “He talked about her, but when I said we should all go out, he gave me some line about taking it slow. I pressed him about her, but he wouldn’t give me details.”

“Huh. Interesting. Had he ever hidden a girlfriend before?”

“Never.”

“So what’d you think?”

“That she was married.”

“But he didn’t say that?”

“No, but I’d bet money on it.”

“Anything that makes you think he’d run away with her? Start over? A clean break from his mom and whatever pressure he had here in Blackwater?”

Tony scoffed. “What pressure? The guy was a bachelor living rent-free in the house out back, dancing at bars three nights a week. He loved his job,

loved working on the farmhouse. No way. What would he be running away from?"

"A lot of people have secrets."

"Not Bryan."

"What do you think happened to him?"

Tony picked up the cat-shaped salt shaker and turned it over in his hand. "An accident, maybe."

"If he had an accident, how could he have sent those texts?"

"He might have hit his head and … fuck. I don't know." He stood abruptly, and Starla realized his eyes had welled with tears. "I have an appointment, so … Good to meet you."

Tony strode down the hall, encountering Jana briefly as she walked through the front door. He gave her a curt goodbye and disappeared.

"I'm sorry," Starla told her when she returned to the kitchen. "I think I upset him."

Jana set the small pile of mail on the table. "No. It's not your fault. This has been really hard for Tony. For all of us."

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The call came shortly after three p.m., asking Noelle to come into Bellerose despite having the night off.

By the time she stepped into the conference room, the knot in her stomach had grown into a gnawing pit. Karen Ramirez from Human Resources sat beside Allison White, Bellerose's director of nursing—the same two women who'd questioned her before.

But this time they weren't alone.

Dr. Kaine sat at the far end of the table.

Noelle managed a smile and lowered herself into the empty chair. She'd slept maybe three hours that morning.

"We asked you back because there have been developments regarding the recent deaths on Med-Surg," Karen said.

Karen began to list the names of the patients who'd died, the dates and times of their deaths. Dr. Kaine interjected, correcting the time of death for Shannon Lucas.

Noelle listened to the voices in the room in numb shock. She'd slipped into a wind tunnel, a vortex of white noise, the rush of blood in her ears.

Sudden deaths.

You were on every shift.

Insulin injection.

She perked at the final two words. "Insulin injection?" She echoed the words back to them, and the voices stopped. "You're saying Dan died from an injection of insulin?"

Karen closed her mouth. She wore pale pink lipstick that struck Noelle as clown-like. Her suit appeared creased, sweat stains spreading beneath her armpits. She was nervous. That small realization allowed Noelle's shoulders to drop a centimeter.

"Yes," Allison cut in. "The medical examiner found a lethal amount of insulin in Dan Mercer's system."

"Was he diabetic?" Noelle searched her memory for his stats, his file. She already knew the answer.

"No," Dr. Kaine said, eyes narrowing on Noelle. "There is no reason he should have had artificial insulin administered, period."

"Of course," Noelle agreed.

"Can you think of any circumstances where he might have received insulin?" Allison asked.

Noelle frowned. "No. I never gave him insulin."

"You had a diabetic patient that night. Debra Grayson." Allison stared down at her notes.

Noelle's stomach tightened. "I …" She swallowed. "I did administer insulin to Mrs. Grayson."

"Could you have accidentally administered it to Mr. Mercer?"

The question hung between them.

"I don't …" She stopped, forcing herself to think instead of react. "I scanned every medication before I gave it."

"But is it possible?" Karen asked.

Noelle closed her eyes for just a second. She pictured the hallway. The interruptions. The call lights. The endless rhythm of the night shift. She'd been tired lately. Sometimes whole chunks of her shift would pass in a sort of autopilot haze.

Could she have?

"Well … I'm still adjusting to Med-Surg. As you all know, I took a leave of absence last year after my mother's accident, and I've only been back for six months." She looked up, her eyes glistening. "I've replayed that night a hundred times already."

They waited, silent.

"But no." She forced her voice to steady. "No, I don't believe I gave him insulin."

"You don't believe it?"

“I know what that sounds like.” She shook her head. “I’m saying I questioned myself the second you asked. I had to. If someone died because of me …” Her voice caught. “I couldn’t live with that.” She balled her hands tight in her lap. “Everything I administered was documented. Mr. Mercer wasn’t diabetic. I had no reason to give him insulin, and I have no memory of doing it.”

Karen studied her for a long moment. “We’re not accusing you of anything today, Noelle.”

Today.

“Every medication I administered is documented. You can compare my charting to the medication administration record.”

Noelle stepped off the elevator and crossed the hospital lobby, her purse clutched tightly beneath her arm. Her hands were still trembling from the meeting. She kept her head down, desperate to get outside, into her SUV, away from Bellerose.

“Noelle!” The woman’s shout stopped her in her tracks.

Noelle turned and her stomach plummeted.

A woman stood near the reception desk, clutching a little boy’s hand. Her face was flushed, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Noelle recognized her immediately. Dan Mercer’s daughter, Parker, with her son, Logan.

Parker started toward her, dragging the boy along.

“I’m so sorry about your father,” Noelle told her, trying to offer a smile to Logan, who looked confused and scared.

“You’re sorry?” Parker’s voice rose. “You told me he was fine!”

Other people in the lobby stared.

“He was.” The memory of Dan’s death pushed in—his gray face, the rounds of compressions, the pink bear. “I don’t know what happened.”

“You promised!” Parker was crying harder now. Logan too began to cry and tug as if trying to pull away from her. “You said he’d be coming home!”

Noelle’s mouth had gone dry, her mind blank. She was frozen, caught.

“What happened to my dad?” Parker demanded. She took an aggressive step forward, and Noelle stumbled back, bumping against a large potted plant.

A security guard approached from the reception desk. “Ma’am, I’m going to have to ask you to lower your voice.”

Parker ignored him, her gaze fixed on Noelle. “Did you do something to him?”

Noelle felt the blood drain from her face. “What?”

“Did you give him something? Some medication you weren’t supposed to?”

Logan broke free of his mother and ran toward the automatic doors that led to the parking lot.

Parker spun away, Noelle momentarily forgotten. “Logan. No!” She raced after her son.

Noelle watched in slow-motion horror as the boy darted through the doors and into the path of a van approaching the entrance. Brakes squealed, and the vehicle lurched to a stop, narrowly missing him.

The security guard sprinted after them.

Noelle turned and ran. By the time she reached the parking garage, tears blurred her vision and she could barely breathe.

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Starla plugged the address of Bryan's farmhouse into her GPS and drove to the north side of Blackwater.

The house was old—a tall white farmhouse with flaking paint, weathered shutters, and a porch that stretched across most of the front—but it sat on a beautiful piece of property. Wildflowers had overtaken the field beside the drive. Huge trees shaded the yard, and an old red barn stood beyond the house against a backdrop of rolling hills.

She'd glimpsed the house in Bryan's home movie, but seeing it in person had an entirely different effect on her.

"Wow." She climbed out of her car, lifted a hand to shield her eyes from the afternoon sun, and studied the two-story house.

Using Jana's key, she unlocked the door and stepped inside.

The first floor was little more than a shell. Plaster had been stripped from the walls, exposing old studs and electrical wiring. The kitchen cabinets were gone, leaving pale rectangles where they'd once hung, and stacks of salvaged trim rested against the dining-room wall. A circular saw sat beneath a film of dust beside boxes of unused flooring. Everything suggested someone who'd walked away in the middle of a day's work and simply never come back.

At some point, he'd tossed a hooded Central Michigan University sweatshirt over the back of a chair. She picked it up and smelled it, inhaling a layer of dust that caused an immediate sneeze. Beneath that, she caught a hint of his cologne.

Starla pawed through his toolboxes and scanned his workbench. A couple of empty cans of Dr. Pepper, candy wrappers, and a few of the same bracelets she'd seen in his bedside drawer, bracelets from clubs or bars where he'd gone dancing.

She walked upstairs and discovered it remained largely untouched. Bryan apparently hadn't made it this far. Faded wallpaper covered the hallway, and the floorboards creaked beneath Starla's feet. One bedroom held a queen bed on a heavy-looking wood frame. The bed, though not made, had bedding on it.

Starla studied the pale pink duvet covering the bed, its softness at odds with the scuffed plank floors. At his cottage, Bryan had used a worn Detroit Lions blanket as a bedspread, a stark contrast to the feminine bedding here. Two matching pillows rested at the head of the bed, both bearing the faint impressions of someone's head. On the wooden nightstand, an amber-and-musk candle had burned nearly to the bottom of its jar.

He'd brought her here. The mystery woman.

Another room contained nothing but a rocking chair angled toward the window. Dust coated everything.

Starla gazed through the window at the property—the barn, the fields, the trees shifting in the breeze. For a moment, she tried to imagine Bryan sitting in the chair, work boots balanced on the wide window ledge, looking out over all of it and contemplating the future.

She walked back to the room with the bed and lifted the mattress. Nothing hidden there. The nightstand held another pack of Trojans, similar to those Starla had seen at his cottage, and a worn paperback book titled *Home Repair Manual.*

Nothing in the house offered guidance on where Bryan had gone. Likewise, she saw no evidence he'd been there recently.

She took his tablet from her bag and settled into the rocking chair. She opened a music app on her phone and selected the Bryan Adams song 'Everything I Do, I Do It For You.'

Her chest tightened as the song began, the words causing a visceral pain in her heart. *Take me as I am, take my life.*

The lyrics reminded her suddenly of a song her father had written about her mother. *Even death will not keep us apart,* the lyrics had read.

Starla remembered her father singing the song at a show in New York, her and her mother in the front row, her father's eyes locked on Nadia's. It

had seemed romantic to an eight-year-old Starla, proof her parents were soulmates as her father so often claimed. Now it was only evidence of his obsession with her.

“Okay, next.” She clicked away from ‘Everything I Do’ and opted for one of Adams’s lighter options, ‘Summer of ’69.’

Starla tapped her foot to the music and focused on the tablet. “Bryan, if you’re here, help me get into this thing,” she said.

She typed nothing, had already been locked out of the device numerous times and wanted to wait until a password that seemed likely popped into her mind.

Outside, a tall oak tree cast an enormous shadow over the grass. A tattered rope hung from a thick branch. A tire swing, she thought, and imagined Bryan on it as a boy, yelling “Higher!” as his grandmother pushed him.

Starla typed in his grandmother’s name and the address for the farmhouse.

Incorrect password.

She tried his name backwards along with the year he’d been born.

Incorrect password.

Across the room, the door creaked. Starla stared at it, waited for some other movement, but it had gone still.

She shifted her attention back to the window. Close to the oak, a bit of red caught her eye. Starla stood and pressed closer to the glass, making out a dog bowl. She thought of the dog in the video.

Starla texted Jana.

Starla: *Did Bryan have a dog?*

The response came almost immediately.

Jana: *Yes. Doris. A golden retriever. She died three months ago.*

A moment later, a ping on her cell revealed a picture of Bryan posing with Doris. He sat in a reclining chair, and the large dog lay curled in his lap as if she were a puppy, her head lolling on his arm.

Starla swiped the tablet back to life and typed *Doris* followed by Bryan’s birth year.

The home window opened.

Starla stared at it. “I’m in.”

Starla migrated to the porch, pulled on Bryan's CMU hoodie, and settled into a cushionless wicker chair with the tablet.

A Yahoo email occupied the bookmarks bar at the top of his browser window. Starla opened it. Thousands of emails. Most were advertisements for nursing scrubs, house remodel newsletters, upcoming concerts, sales at local stores. Recent emails would be of little use as he'd vanished a year before, but one thing was clear: he'd not opened any of the emails in a very long time.

She clicked into his sent folder. His last sent emails were dated from the previous summer. If he had disappeared by choice and decided to live life elsewhere, he'd abandoned his email as well.

The last email he'd sent had been the day before Jana last saw him. It was addressed to ILikePotatoes6161@gmail.com.

Subject: *Barn wood*

Hey, man,

I saw your ad online for salvaged barn wood. Is it still available? I can come by this weekend.

Call or text.

Bryan

If Bryan intended to skip town, why would he be trying to purchase barn wood?

The next message had been sent to someone at Bellerose. Bryan had asked about getting a shift covered the following Friday.

She saw a series of emails sent to tink9012@yahoo.com.

Subject: *Halloween in July at Legends*

Don't forget! Halloween in July Party this Friday at Legends. Be there or be square.

Don't worry if you don't have a costume. Throw one of those sheets over your head with the eyeholes cut out. You'll still look gorgeous.

Several weeks later another email had been sent to the same address.

Dearest Tink,

See what I did there? Who says the old romantic letters are dead? Sadly, my romantic musing might be limited to that introduction. And this is an email, not a wax-sealed scroll, so …

What do you think about dinner at my place on Saturday night?

I cook a mean fettuccine Alfredo. Mean? I've never quite understood that term. My fettuccine is in fact very nice. And I intend to prove it to you.

I promise the estate—lol (I figured you'd chuckle at that assessment)—will be completely empty this time. No morning coffee delivered by my mother while you're hanging around in your underwear. God, that woman has no shame. You have to love her, though.

Starla smiled as she read, imagining Bryan's mother startling his paramour with coffee while she sat in the little cottage half-naked.

Excited to see you then.

—Sunshine

Sunshine. Why had he signed off using that name?

Starla texted Jana.

Starla: *Did Bryan have any nicknames?*

Jana: *I called him Thunder Thighs because he had such big thighs when he was little (laugh emoji). Mostly everyone called him Bry.*

Starla: *How about Sunshine?*

Jana: *Oh, yes. That was a nickname at the hospital. A patient of his called him that, an old woman, and it caught on, so then his co-workers used it. Why?*

Starla considered whether she should tell Jana she'd gotten into Bryan's tablet. She ignored the question and returned to the tablet, searching his received messages from the month he disappeared.

There was one email from the Tink address, eight days before Bryan left his shift at Bellerose and was never seen again.

Sunshine—

Sadly, I don't have your gift for romantic letters, but I'm writing anyway in the hopes that you'll look past my poor grammar (and spelling, but thank God for spell check) and see I'm just a girl who has fallen for a boy. I'm blushing with embarrassment right now. I've never been good at this, being honest about how I feel, but you make me want to do better.

I've been thinking about you constantly and about what we discussed, making a real go of this.

If you're in, I am.

—Tink

The email had an air of someone preparing to take a leap. What if Bryan and his secret lover *had* run away together, leaving their old lives behind and starting over somewhere else? Like Jana, Starla wanted to believe it.

The last of daylight drained from the sky, the sun slipping behind the trees at the edge of Bryan's property, leaving a trail of red gold in its wake.

For a moment, she thought she saw a figure in the tall grass. A man and his dog walked along the edge of the tree line.

She blinked and stood, trying to bring them into focus.

But the figures were gone.

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Bryan

June 3—The Year Before

Bryan made it halfway down the block before he remembered the thermos of coffee and last night's cashew chicken sitting on the kitchen table. "Shit."

He pulled out his phone. Twenty minutes until his shift started. The walk to Bellerose took fifteen.

For half a second, he considered abandoning the food. But the cafeteria coffee tasted like something wrung from a dirty sock, and he'd been thinking about that cashew chicken since breakfast.

He turned and jogged back toward his mom's house, cutting across the lawn to his cottage.

Doris had apparently been waiting with her nose pressed to the door. When Bryan burst inside, she sprang back, then launched into an excited barking fit.

"Sorry, girl." He gave her a quick scratch. "False alarm. We'll hang out in the morning."

Doris stared up at him, unconvinced.

Bryan grabbed his thermos and leftovers and hurried back outside. He clocked in thirty seconds before his shift officially started.

"Way to make it in under the wire," Tia said.

Bryan was still catching his breath. "Gotta keep things interesting."

“What’d you bring me for dinner?” She popped open his takeout container.

“*I* am having cashew chicken from Jade Dragon. I suspect *you’re* having your usual can of cold soup.”

“Nope.” Tia smacked her lips. “PB and J.”

Bryan nodded appreciatively. “I do love a good peanut butter and jelly.”

“Wanna trade?”

“Not a chance.”

Bryan almost walked past her.

Noelle was tucked into the narrow space beside the supply room, sitting on the floor with her knees against her chest. If Bryan hadn’t caught the slight movement of her shoulders, he might not have noticed her at all.

He stopped. “Noelle?”

She looked up. Her face was blotchy, eyes wet.

“Hey.” He crossed the hall and crouched beside her. “What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing.”

“I’m fine.”

“Less believable.”

She dropped her forehead onto her knees. “Please, just go back to work.”

Bryan sat down. For a few seconds, neither of them spoke. Then Noelle whispered, “I don’t think I’m very good at this.”

“At what?”

“This.” She gestured vaguely toward the hallway. “Being a nurse.”

“Come on. You’re being way too hard on yourself. Have you seen Karen lately? I swear to God, every time I walk into the break room, she’s asleep.”

Noelle sniffled, but the corner of her mouth lifted.

“Wow. Your lips go up too? I had no idea.”

She drew in a shaky breath.

“And let’s not forget Mike, who once gave a patient six enemas because he misread the order.”

She laughed, but the sound died on her lips. “My patient in 502, Frank, called me incompetent.”

“That’s because Frank is an asshole. Making new nurses miserable is basically his hobby.”

Noelle wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

“I had him last year. Guy made me hold the urinal for him, then dumped half of it down the front of my scrubs.”

“Oh, my God.”

“On purpose, I might add. Looked me dead in the eye while he did it.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“And he was grinning,” Bryan continued. “Swear to God. Like the Cheshire Cat.”

Noelle laughed, then covered her mouth.

Bryan smiled. He liked her laugh. “Anyway,” he said, “I got him back.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “How?”

“Decaf.”

“What?”

“Every cup of coffee he asked for. Decaf. Two days straight.”

Noelle snorted, her pale face instantly red.

Bryan nudged her with his elbow. “Do you feel better?”

She hesitated. “A little.”

Noelle looked down at her left hand and slowly turned the gold band on her ring finger. Bryan knew she was married to Aiden Mitchell, the Blackwater news anchor. Half the women on the floor lost their minds whenever he stopped by.

“Is there something else, Noelle? Something besides Frank?”

Noelle stared at her ring. Her frown had returned. “Do you ever want to run away?” she asked. “Leave everything and just … go?”

Bryan studied her.

Noelle lifted her eyes to his. Her eyes were a deep brown. Beautiful really.

“Bryan?” The voice snapped him from the moment.

He looked up to find Lacey standing over them. “Hey. What’s up?”

“Room 509 is asking for you,” Lacey said.

Bryan got to his feet and offered Noelle his hand. Her fingers closed, warm, around his, and he helped her to her feet. “509? That’s Wendy,” he said. “I better go check on her.”

He followed Lacey down the hall.

At the corner, Bryan glanced back. Noelle was still standing where he'd left her.

She smiled.

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Noelle poured a cup of coffee.

In the light of a new day, the nightmare of her meeting at Bellerose and her confrontation with Parker had dulled, though only slightly. She sat at the counter, opened her phone, and checked her email.

A message from Bellerose jumped out at her. She opened it.

Noelle,

Effective immediately, you are placed on administrative leave pending review. Do not report for scheduled shifts or access hospital systems until further notice.

You may be contacted for additional information as needed. Direct any questions to Human Resources.

—Karen Ramirez

Human Resources

Aiden walked in, freshly showered. He grabbed a coffee and sat down to read the newspaper.

Noelle read the email a second time, the words blurring.

“Don’t forget we have dinner with the Ackersons tonight,” Aiden told her.

Noelle heard his voice, but the message did not register.

“Noelle?” His tone was sharp, irritated. She blinked at him. “Did you hear me?”

“Yes, ummm … dinner tonight with … with …”

“The Ackersons.” He closed the paper with a sigh and stood. “I have a golf fundraiser today. I’ll see you tonight.”

Noelle had not moved from the kitchen table. Aiden had left more than an hour before. She sat on the hard wooden chair and stared in numb shock at the clock on the oven, ticking the minutes and then hours away.

That night they would have dinner with the Ackersons, a couple Noelle struggled to hold a conversation with on her best days.

Bellerose had put her on administrative leave. Two meetings and now admin leave. This was not whispers on the ward. Hospital administrators suspected her of killing patients.

Noelle opened the email and printed it. She held the paper in her hands, read the words again, feeling sick. She took a picture of the email and texted it to Starla.

Noelle pulled into the circular driveway of the brick colonial where the Parrys had lived for decades. Noelle had memories of visiting the house as a child, playing in the backyard with the Parrys’ Saint Bernard, Clifford. At some point, the visits had dwindled and died away. Noelle’s mother remained friends with the Parrys, but distance had grown between them.

Noelle suspected it had something to do with the money. Once Grace’s parents died and she stepped into the role of Radmor philanthropist, the Parrys no longer quite fit in Grace’s social circle.

Noelle parked, grabbed the printed email from the hospital, and walked to the door. She rang the bell, but after several minutes of no answer, circled the house and found Jim Parry in the backyard perched on a stool in his garden. He wore a wide-brimmed straw hat and flowery garden gloves.

Jim looked up, and his entire expression changed when he saw her. “Noelle!” He stood so quickly he nearly knocked over his stool. “Well,

you've just made my morning."

"I'm sorry to show up without calling," she started.

"Nonsense." He pulled off his gloves, smiling at her. "I don't get to see nearly enough of you as it is." Something in his voice caught, and he looked away briefly. When he turned back, his smile had returned, though it seemed a little forced.

"Now, what can I do for you?"

For a moment, Noelle wished she'd come for any reason other than the one that had brought her here.

She pulled the email from her back pocket, unfolded it, and extended it toward him. "I need help. I've been put on administrative leave by Bellerose because of the unexplained deaths on Med-Surg."

Jim frowned, took the letter, silently mouthing the words as he read. A deep crease appeared between his eyebrows. "I don't understand," he said.

"There have been … deaths. Multiple patient deaths on Med-Surg, and they've happened to otherwise stable patients. The hospital thinks I did it."

"On purpose?"

"Yes."

His mouth fell open. "Totally inappropriate. Utterly inappropriate. What proof do they have?"

"They've called me in for meetings, two in fact, but they didn't mention administrative leave in either. In the second, yesterday morning, they … well, they said one of the patients died from an insulin overdose."

"Insulin? Was the patient diabetic?"

"No."

Noelle knew that Jim Parry understood diabetes. He'd been diagnosed as a type one diabetic in childhood. He had told her years before that his own struggles with managing his diabetes had, in part, led to his desire to become a doctor.

"That is unusual."

"Yes. And I was his nurse, and I didn't give him insulin. I swear. I would never mess something like that up."

"Of course you wouldn't. He folded the letter in half. "I'll sort this out, Noelle. Don't worry, okay? I'm sure there's been some mistake and … well, you know how administrators in hospitals can be." He adjusted the brim of his hat and lifted his eyes to the sky. He seemed to come to some

conclusion and nodded to himself. “Can I keep this, Noelle? I’ll speak to the administrators on your behalf.”

A sudden surge of tears fluttered behind her eyes. She looked quickly away, pretending to admire his garden. “Yes. That would be great, and, umm … your cucumbers look good.”

“Don’t they? Pushy though. They’re crowding my peppers out completely. Would you like some? They’re great with a pinch of salt, or you can toss ’em on a salad. Aiden loves a salad, doesn’t he? I saw him on the morning news the other day singing the praises of that new restaurant on Main Street. Apparently their Cobb salad is fabulous.”

“Yeah. He does love salad,” she agreed. “No cucumbers today, though. We have dinner later, so …”

“Right. Well, don’t worry about this.” He held up her email. “I’ll get to the bottom of it.”

“I truly appreciate it.”

As Noelle started away, Jim called out. “Noelle, have you talked to Ezra about this?”

She turned back, struggled to meet his eyes. “No.”

“I think you should. Just as a precaution. I’m sure your mother’s estate has attorneys, legal counsel. It wouldn’t hurt to make contact with some of those people.”

“Attorneys?” The word wrapped tight around her lungs.

“Merely as a safeguard. I’m sure it won’t prove necessary, but do it anyway.”

Noelle parked at her mother’s house. She did not want to see Ezra in person, had tried in vain to call him instead, but he’d not answered.

As she took the carpeted stairs to the second floor, her stomach twisted into an ever tighter knot of anxiety. How had this happened? How would she possibly explain it to him? Or did he already know?

From behind his closed office door, she heard his voice as if he were speaking on the phone.

She knocked and waited. After a moment, the door opened. He wore dark slacks and a maroon collared shirt.

“Noelle. I thought I might see you today. Come in.”

Noelle followed him into his office. He sat behind his gleaming mahogany desk, and she took the chair opposite, squeezing her knees together to stop their trembling. “That means you’ve heard about the deaths on Med-Surg?”

“I have.”

“And that they’ve put me on administrative leave?”

“I found out this morning.”

“I went to see Jim, Dr. Parry, and he thought I should talk to you about Mother’s legal counsel.”

“You spoke with Jim?”

“Yes … I … had already planned to stop by, so it made sense to ask him what he thought.”

Dr. Yates steepled his fingers. “I see. Personally, I’d not worry about this, Noelle. But if you’d like, I’ll reach out to the attorneys who represent the Radmor estate and request their input.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Grand. That’s it, then?”

“Well … umm … no. Obviously you know about my getting locked in the utility room at work.”

He pursed his lips and nodded.

“I also think someone might have been following me in the parking garage at Bellerose the other night. And then—and there have been other things, weird things.” The words tumbled out in a rush, and she regretted them almost as quickly. Of all the people she could have confided in, why him?

His expression only deepened her regret, skepticism written plainly across his face. “I’m glad you told me, Noelle. But I’m sure your mind is running a tad wild with all this turmoil at Bellerose. I’ll get in touch with the attorneys, and we’ll go from there.”

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34

Starla hadn’t left Bryan’s farmhouse until nearly midnight. She’d spent hours combing through his tablet and had come away with nothing that might explain where he’d gone—or what had happened to him.

She managed five solid hours of sleep before the slow creak of her bedroom door pulled her awake. Footsteps crossed the room.

Starla lay still, caught somewhere between sleep and waking.

The mattress dipped beside her and fingers brushed her cheek.

Starla’s eyes flew open. She scrambled up and flipped on the bedside lamp.

Her bedroom stood empty. No one occupied the bed beside her, but a scent lingered in the air, faint, ghostlike. Bryan’s cologne—Oud Wood, Jana had called it, which had registered in Starla’s ears as Old Wood. But it didn’t smell like old wood, more like vanilla-scented tobacco.

“Bryan?” She didn’t expect an answer. He wasn’t there.

And yet he was.

Starla got up, made a pot of coffee, and opened Bryan’s tablet.

She didn’t search for evidence. Instead, she flipped through his photos. There weren’t many. He’d likely mostly taken pictures on his cellphone, which had vanished with him. On the tablet she found a couple hundred images, mostly of various states of the farmhouse during its remodel. She’d catch glimpses of him in the reflection on windows, in his pickup’s side-view mirror as he snapped his dog, Doris, sitting behind the wheel of his truck.

She had never met Bryan, but Starla felt as if she'd known him. Starla believed this man would have seen her and not recoiled, not cast his eyes anywhere but at her face.

She wanted him to be alive. For Jana, but also for herself.

Her instincts told her he wasn't.

After she'd stared at his photos for over an hour, she forced herself away from the tablet and returned to her investigation into the deaths at Bellerose.

Just after seven in the morning, Finn knocked and then let himself in.

"Hey." Starla sat at her drafting table.

"What are you working on?" Finn walked to her kitchen and poured a cup of coffee.

"The deaths at Bellerose."

"Any breakthroughs?"

"No. I'm still trying to decide who at Bellerose fits the profile of the type of person to kill like this. Patients are already incapacitated, likely asleep when the attack happens. If I were looking at this in a non-hospital setting, I'd be thinking in terms of perps who attack sleeping victims. That can be part of the appeal. A lot of serial killers attack sleeping victims not only because they're more vulnerable and easier to control, but because a victim who already appears dead literally turns them on."

"That's sick."

"But true. The challenge with medical murderers is that they often have a unique set of motives, primarily attention. Also, there's a God complex at play. We see that in most serial killers. They enjoy having power over victims, which of course belies their deep sense of powerlessness in normal life."

Finn sighed and peered over her shoulder at the grid of hospital staff. "These are the suspects?"

"So far."

"Noelle's husband? That seems like a stretch."

"It's not. I told you, he's a phony. That easy-going guy on the TV is nothing more than a disguise."

Finn picked up a photo Starla had printed of Aiden Mitchell from the *Blackwater News* website. He wrinkled his forehead. "I cannot imagine this guy creeping around Med-Surg killing patients to frame his wife. First of all, how is he getting on the floor without anyone noticing?"

“He doesn’t have to. He visits Noelle.”

“But you said yourself the patients crashed in the middle of the night. It makes no sense.”

“Only because I haven’t isolated how he’s doing it. And one way is to poison saline bags. If he injects something into those bags, they’re not going to kill anybody until the bag gets hooked to a patient. It could also be as simple as slipping something into their water cup. Plus, I saw his car there the other night when Shannon died.”

“You did?”

“Well, I think I did. It was a white Porsche, and he drives a white Porsche.”

“Not exactly a smoking gun.”

“There’s never a smoking gun. Not unless the killer is a complete moron.”

“All right, who else?”

“Dr. Yates, obviously.”

“Is it obvious, though? He’s kind of a big deal at Bellerose. Why would he risk all that?”

“The bottom line is Grace Radmor is worth a fortune. I mean it—we’re not just talking millions, we’re talking tens of millions. But guess who stands between Yates and all that money?”

“Noelle.”

“Bingo. And let’s not forget his first wife died in a fall down the stairs. What do you want to bet there was an insurance payout of some sort?”

“Have you found one?”

“No. I want to see the medical examiner’s report first.”

“Where’s the sheet on her?” Finn asked.

“Who?”

“Noelle, obviously. Surely you’re investigating her too?”

Starla grabbed her notes and stuffed them into a folder.

He rolled his eyes. “You know you do this, right? Adopt some wayward soul, devote your entire existence to them for six months as a way not to work on yourself.”

“That’s not what I’m doing.”

“Noelle’s married to a person who’s a charismatic fake,” he continued, “comes from a rich family where she probably felt disempowered. You’ve said her house is spotless, which implies a need for control. Wouldn’t that

make her a more likely suspect? Killing patients as a way to get power in an otherwise powerless life?”

Starla shook her head. “No. I’ve been studying these people, angels of death. Most of them have antisocial personality disorder; some of them are quite grandiose, narcissistic. I’m telling you, she doesn’t fit the profile.”

He stared at her before shaking his head. “The profile? Isn’t such a profile generally created by someone unbiased, someone without a personal connection?”

“Well, I won’t be taking the stand if that’s what you mean, but I’m more than qualified, in my opinion, to develop a profile of the likely murderer, and I can tell you it’s not Noelle.”

“What if you’re wrong? Have you stopped to consider that for a moment in your latest crusade for justice? What if it is actually her, and your attachment to her is impeding an unbiased look at what’s happening on Med-Surg?”

“I’m not a cop. My job isn’t to look at this through unbiased eyes, as if such a thing exists, which, reality check, it doesn’t. I’m doing this to help her because she’s my friend.”

Finn shrugged. “So was Leslie.”

Starla flicked her eyes to him; the comment cut instantly. “That was a shitty thing to say.”

“Why?” he demanded. “It’s the truth. Do you know how many lectures you’ve given me about speaking the truth, no matter who gets uncomfortable? Well, bravo, your lessons have finally paid off.”

“Noelle didn’t do this. I know it in my gut.”

“I’m not arguing she did. I’m simply saying you should rule her out. That’s what makes the most sense.”

“But here’s the issue with pointing to Noelle. She’s not rushing in to save the day,” Starla insisted. “I saw her the night Shannon died. Noelle was a deer in headlights, practically catatonic. That’s not someone who’s seeking the glory of attempting to save a patient’s life.”

“Except whoever is doing it isn’t actually trying to save their lives. They’re all dying.”

“As far as we know, but there might be other similar almost-deaths we’re not aware of.”

“I wish you could put an ounce of the effort you heap onto saving other people into yourself.”

Starla's cell beeped. She picked it up and saw a screenshot from Noelle. She clicked it and zoomed in, mouthing the words as she read.

"Holy shit," Starla murmured.

"What?"

"Bellerose put Noelle on administrative leave." She handed Finn the phone.

He read the message silently. "I wonder if they've contacted the police."

Starla took the phone and clicked to call Noelle. It rang twice and went to voicemail. "Noelle, it's Starla. Call me."

"She's not answering?"

Starla shook her head, opening her text messages.

Starla: *Are you okay? Call me.*

Starla stood and grabbed her bag. "I'm going to the hospital."

"What? Why? Starla, I don't think that's a good idea."

"When has that ever stopped me?"

"Noelle's on leave. She will not be there."

"I know, but I need to find out what's going on. Are you off today? You could come. You know how people are with this." She gestured to her face.

He sighed. "Fine. I'll join you, but … you need to calm down. I can tell you're in 'make a scene' mode."

Starla grabbed her keys from the counter. "I don't even know what that means."

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"Well, if it isn't double trouble," Pat said, opening her arms to embrace Finn. She hugged Starla next, though not before giving her a slightly disapproving look.

"Hi, Pat," Finn said. "How are you?"

"Still putting in my time, but just between you and me, I've started a little Etsy store to sell my handmade birdhouses and once that takes off, I'm outta here." She laughed. "What have you been up to, Finn? No need to ask Starla because I see her more than my own children."

"I'm still working as a juvenile probation officer for the county. Other than that, hanging with Starla."

"Have you heard anything about the strange deaths on Med-Surg?" Starla blurted, ignoring her own better sense.

Pat's face darkened. "Starla, don't go getting involved in that. Hear me? That's a matter for the hospital administrators."

Starla shot Finn a knowing look, but he stared back at her, exasperated.

Carrie emerged from a patient's room down the hall.

"I'll be right back," Starla said, hurrying after Carrie, who'd turned the corner. She caught up to her right before she walked into another patient's room.

Starla touched the nurse's elbow. Carrie yelped and put a hand to her chest. "My God, Starla. Today is not the day for sneaking up on people."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I wanted to find out what's happening with the patient deaths."

Carrie glanced down the hall before leaning closer. She looked tired. Serious. “It’s awful around here. It feels like a witch hunt. Everybody’s watching everybody.”

“That bad?”

“Worse.” Carrie folded her arms. “We’ve all been questioned. The administration is crawling all over the place. Even the patients are mentioning the tension.”

“Is there talk about who might be behind it?” Starla did not mention Noelle’s leave, wasn’t sure if word had spread on the ward yet.

“Oh, there’s talk all right, but …” Carrie shook her head. “I’m not trying to fuel the fire at the rumor mill.” A call light went on above a patient’s door. “I have to go. And, Starla, I wouldn’t hang around Bellerose for a while. You don’t want to get caught up in this.”

As Starla started back for the nurses’ station, she spotted Dr. Kaine. “Dr. Kaine,” she called.

He’d heard her, Starla was sure of it, but he kept walking. “Hey, Dr. Kaine,” she nearly shouted.

He slowed and turned, his mouth thin.

Starla hurried up to him. “I wanted to talk to you about the unusual deaths on the floor.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Listen, Noelle Mitchell is not your killer. I really think you guys are way off.”

“Miss Burton, this conversation is highly inappropriate. You’re a patient here attempting to discuss a staff member.”

“You’re wrong about her. I spent my life with a psychopath until I was twelve years old. I have a PhD in forensic psychology. I’ve been studying psychopaths for most of my life, save a couple of years when I was chronically in the hospital getting facial reconstruction.”

Kaine, who’d continued not to look at her face, hazarded a glance at it now, then looked away.

“Noelle is not a psychopath. If there’s a murderer on the ward, it’s someone else.”

“I appreciate your input, Miss Burton, but let’s be honest here,” he said coolly. “You’ve been admitted for attempting to take your own life, what? Five times? Ten?”

“That has nothing to do with this.”

“Maybe not, but it does speak to your mental state.”

“My father threw acid on me and my mother when I was twelve years old. My mom died, and I was permanently disfigured. That’s why I tried to kill myself. Not because of some undiagnosed mental disorder, and let me tell you, I’ve seen a lot of psychologists and psychiatrists. If there was a disorder, they’d have found it.”

His eyes drifted past her, lips pursed. “I’m afraid our time is up.” He pulled the pen from his clipboard and walked away.

Starla knew she was breaking all her own rules. Running around the hospital, confronting people, asking overt questions. She knew better and yet couldn’t seem to help herself.

Her cell phone had not pinged. No call or response text from Noelle.

“Hey.” Finn appeared in the hall. “Where’d you go?”

“I talked to Carrie and Dr. Kaine, but Carrie knows nothing, and Dr. Kaine, per usual, looked at me like I’m a cockroach.”

“I doubt that’s true.”

“I promise you it is.”

As they walked toward the elevator, Starla heard raised voices. She grabbed Finn’s arm and dragged him down a side hall where the break room and conference room for Med-Surg were located. The door to the conference room stood slightly ajar.

She saw Dr. Parry in casual clothes: jeans and a plain blue T-shirt. He looked upset. Starla could not see who sat on the opposite side of the conference room table.

Finn shook his head and mouthed, *No.*

“Yes,” she hissed, pulling him closer. Starla strained to hear.

“Where’s the proof of this?” Dr. Parry demanded. He waved a piece of paper in the air.

Several voices answered him at once, and Starla struggled to piece together their words.

“She was on every shift when a patient coded,” a woman answered him. “Lacey saw her walking out of Shannon Lucas’s room minutes before she crashed.”

“That’s not proof,” he barked. “What are the causes of death? These people aren’t here for Sunday brunch. They’re sick; some of them are actively dying. How many of you have been present at the deaths of patients? Imagine if someone pointed a finger at you.”

“This is not a final determination, Dr. Parry,” another voice said calmly. “We simply thought it appropriate to remove her from the floor temporarily while we investigate—”

“The police are involved?”

“At present, this remains an internal matter. Involving law enforcement prematurely could unfairly damage Noelle’s reputation, not to mention expose Bellerose to unnecessary scrutiny.”

“Noelle Mitchell is not harming patients in this hospital. I would stake my medical license on it. Frankly, I find what you all are doing here reckless and disturbing. You realize who she is, don’t you? Who her family is? The money that is behind her? The lawsuit she could bring—”

“Which is why we’ve consulted a lawyer about her administrative leave and carefully worded the email. This is merely an evaluation of whether she’s a good fit for Med-Surg or—”

“Don’t feed me your bullshit explanation. Even an idiot can read between the lines here.”

“Starla,” Finn hissed, grabbed her arm and jerked her back from the door as Dr. Kaine strode down the hall.

Kaine shot her a dark look before slipping into the conference room and closing the door firmly behind him.

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After Bellerose, Starla dropped Finn off at his car so he could run errands.

Starla tried to call Noelle again. No answer.

She imagined the series of events likely underway at the Mitchell home. Calling lawyers, doing damage control, navigating the uncertain days ahead.

Noelle's husband, Aiden, was a public figure. He'd be terrified of word leaking out that his wife was under investigation for intentionally killing patients in her care.

Or Aiden was involved.

When Noelle still hadn't called back, Starla drove to her house. No cars in the driveway, and when she knocked, no one answered.

Two years before, Starla had worked on a murder-suicide. The husband, jealous of his wife's success as an executive at a *Fortune* 500 company, had strangled her and then shot himself in their large suburban house. A house that reminded Starla eerily of the one before her.

She knocked again, and, when no one answered, walked around the back, imagining security cameras likely tracking her progress along the landscaped cement path to the backyard.

She stepped onto the large back deck. At the glass patio doors, Starla cupped her hands around her face and peered into the kitchen. No one moved inside. No blood splashed across the pristine white surfaces or trailed along the floor.

A clean kitchen did not mean a crime scene didn’t exist elsewhere in the house, but Starla suspected no one was home.

Starla drove next to the Radmor estate, floored again by the sheer size. Houses like this barely existed in real life. They’d long ago become museums, historical societies—

“Or boarding schools,” she muttered, remembering Meadowsweet Academy. Her mouth instantly tasted bitter, a lasting remnant from the meds they’d pumped into the girls night after night.

At the front door, she rang the doorbell and waited.

A woman appeared, mop in hand. Her eyes darted to the right side of Starla’s face, and she drew back slightly. “Can I help you?”

“Hopefully. Is Noelle here?”

The woman shook her head. “No.”

“What about Virginia? Is she caring for Grace Radmor today?”

The woman appeared unnerved by Starla’s knowledge of the people in the house. “Yes.”

“Can I see her?”

“Is she expecting you?”

“Yep,” Starla lied.

“Your name?”

“Starla Burton.”

Virginia appeared several minutes later, her expression curious.

“I’m actually looking for Noelle. I hope you or Dr. Yates, if he’s here, might have heard from her.”

Virginia shook her head. “I just got here about twenty minutes ago, but Dr. Yates might know where she is. Did you call her cell phone?”

“Yeah. Several times.” Starla didn’t know if Virginia was aware of the deaths on Med-Surg. Surely her husband had heard about them by now, though he worked in Oncology and might not have been looped in.

“Dr. Yates is upstairs with Grace. You’re welcome to go talk with him.”

Starla took the stairs two at a time. She paused outside the open door to the room where Grace once more sat angled toward the enormous window. She knocked on the wooden frame.

Yates turned, studied her for a moment, and then waved her forward. “Step into our parlor.”

Starla hesitated, his words taking her instantly back to a book of poems her dad read to her as a child, *The Spider and the Fly*. Though her dad didn’t merely read the poem, he acted it out, taking the part of the spider in his top hat, luring the unsuspecting fly into his web of death.

Dr. Yates smiled, two rows of perfect white teeth. “What can we do for you, Starla?” He stepped behind Grace and put both hands on her shoulders. Grace appeared asleep, her head lolling to one side, a line of spittle creeping from the corner of her mouth.

A ripple of unease moved through Starla. His use of *we* unnerved her. Yates was on her list of suspects. Near the top, really. He had access to the hospital, and Grace had the kind of money that might inspire a lot of people to do terrible things. And he had a wife who’d died in a tragic accident. At least it was labeled an accident.

“I’m looking for Noelle. I haven’t been able to get ahold of her.”

He pressed his lips together and nodded. “Noelle came by a couple of hours ago. You’ve heard then about this business at Bellerose?”

“Yes.”

“It’s unfortunate, truly. I’m sure she is fine, likely keeping a lid on things. Noelle isn’t prone to cries for help disguised as something more dramatic.”

Starla blinked at him, understood the insult embedded in his comment. “What do *you* think is happening at the hospital?”

He stepped away from Grace, tilted his chin up slightly, and compressed his lips. “I suspect it’s random. I’ve been a doctor long enough to see outliers. Clusters of unexplained deaths happen. Human beings love a villain, a scapegoat, but the real killer is the human condition. We’re all meant to die in the end.”

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The Ackersons were already seated when Aiden and Noelle arrived.

"There they are," Mark Ackerson called. "We thought we'd been stood up."

Aiden pulled out Noelle's chair, his smile brittle. "Sorry we're late." His eyes flicked toward her. "Someone couldn't decide what to wear."

Noelle murmured an apology and sat down. Her outfit had not been a factor. She'd tried to get out of the dinner, telling Aiden she had a headache, but he'd spent half an hour guilting her. Aiden collected influential friends the way other people collected business cards and the image of a happy marriage was an integral part of his persona.

Linda Ackerson waved a hand toward a server hurrying past. "We've been waiting ten minutes for sparkling water," she snapped at him.

The young server stopped beside the table. "I'm so sorry. I'll get that right away."

"I certainly hope so." Linda smoothed her dress, appearing annoyed. "The service industry is a dying breed. And don't get me started on my dry cleaner. The dress I wanted to wear tonight came back completely ruined. Four hundred dollars wasted."

Mark chuckled. "I told her they ought to buy her a new one."

Noelle forced her lips into something that felt vaguely like a smile. Her own dress felt too tight. Aiden had insisted she wear the wine-colored cocktail dress because it looked expensive. She'd told him it no longer fit properly, but he'd cited the price tag and the fact it had been an anniversary

gift, and she'd finally given in. Now she realized she could either sit up straight or breathe, not both.

The conversation drifted from the dry cleaner to Mark's newest investment property, then to Aiden's golf game. "I shot an eighty today," Aiden said. "Best round I've had all year."

Noelle ordered a second glass of wine before dinner arrived. Then a third.

With each glass she polished off, Aiden's frown deepened, but the Ackersons, at least, did not seem to notice.

"… and the station manager said my ratings have never been stronger," Aiden continued.

Linda fixed him with an intense gaze, her long, likely fake, eyelashes fluttering. "You deserve it. We watch you every day, don't we, Mark?"

"Absolutely. Aiden Mitchell, our favorite broadcaster."

Noelle released a quiet laugh into her wine.

Aiden turned to look at her sharply. Noelle needed to behave normally, to hush the irrational laughter suddenly gurgling in her diaphragm.

"What?" Aiden demanded.

"Nothing."

He reached for the glass to pull it away. Noelle's hand shot forward. She tried to grab the slender stem, but succeeded only in knocking the glass over, sending red wine splattering across Linda's cream-colored dress.

Linda shrieked and jumped from her chair. Mark, who'd also gotten a bit of wine splatter, scooted away, eyes going to Aiden in surprise. Aiden's face burned crimson.

"I'm sorry," Noelle mumbled, her words slurring. Unsteadily, she stood. "I don't feel well. I'll meet you in the car." She turned and walked smack into a waiter carrying a tray of desserts. The desserts tipped and crashed to the floor.

Noelle didn't stop. She angled around the man, mumbled an apology while stepping over smeared molten chocolate cake.

Outside, Noelle gulped in the balmy summer air. The humidity was thick and pressed in, amplifying the warmth from the wine and her dizziness.

She stumbled across the parking lot toward the dock filled with yachts. The zipper on the back of her dress caught as she struggled to yank it down.

Finally, it gave way and released her. She sucked in a deeper breath, slipped off her shoes and sank to her knees. Her dress snagged on a splinter.

As she gazed into the dark water, she thought of Starla and her easy relationship with her own mortality. What would it be like to sit on the edge of the dock and push off, slip into the cool water, disappear?

Just do it.

Slide in and drift away.

She didn't. Instead, she lay on her side, cheek pressed to the wood. When she closed her eyes, the world flipped upside down, and Noelle's stomach rolled.

Nauseous, she pushed herself back up and struggled to her feet, teetered back along the dock and into the parking lot. She stared at Aiden's Porsche. Aiden had not appeared. Maybe he would stay inside, finish his dinner, and act as if nothing at all had happened.

As she studied the shapes of the dark cars, movement caught her attention. A few rows away from Aiden's car, an inky silhouette shifted, a head bobbing above a car for a moment and then dipping low as if trying to remain unseen.

Noelle braced her hand on the back of a pickup truck, eyes slightly out of focus, and tried to see if a person in fact moved there or if she'd merely imagined them.

Too much wine.

Her throat grew thick, and spit filled her mouth. She was going to throw up.

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38

Starla sat on the edge of her bed and propped the photograph of Bryan on her side table.

Noelle had never called her back. Maybe she didn't want to talk to her, regretted confiding in Starla to begin with.

Friendships were complicated for Starla. *Fast and furious,* Finn had once called them, quick to burn out.

She opened a music app on her phone and found a Bryan Adams playlist. "Everything I do, I do it for you …" filled the room.

Starla leaned back on her pillows and imagined Bryan from the home video. She let her eyelids get heavy. The room softened, shifted out of focus. She could almost see him—feel him.

Starla slipped from her bedroom, her fantasy, into a dream.

The elevator doors slid open, and Starla stared into the dank tunnel that led to the basement of the original Bellerose. As she had in life, she attempted to push the button for the first floor, but the elevator did not move.

She stepped out and walked forward. The walls sweated moisture. A dank mildew scent filled the air.

Up ahead, a figure was walking. Starla recognized the shape of his shoulders, his wavy brown hair.

Bryan.

He rounded a corner, and for a moment she lost sight of him.

When she reached the bend, the tunnel had changed. The paint peeled from the walls in long, curling strips. Rusted gurneys sat abandoned against the concrete, their wheels frozen in place.

A heavy metal door stood open.

The old morgue.

Bryan slipped inside and the door whispered shut behind him.

Starla hesitated at the cold metal door, afraid. Some instinct told her not to go inside, but Bryan was in there.

She pushed the door open. It screeched on rusted hinges.

The room appeared empty. No sign of Bryan.

Her gaze swept over the body drawers and settled on the stainless-steel table in the center of the room. A pile of wilted black dahlias buzzing with flies lay in the center of the table. A fluorescent light flickered, its persistent buzz like a swarm of mosquitoes trapped inside her skull.

Someone stood in the corner of the room.

A woman.

She wore a white lab coat, glossy dark hair in a bun at the base of her neck. She stood perfectly still, facing the wall.

“Noelle?”

The woman didn’t respond, didn’t move at all.

Starla’s brain urged her to turn around—run, not walk out of the morgue. Instead, she shuffled forward, legs heavy, the old familiar burn tingling on the right side of her face.

From the wall of metal doors holding bodies came a sudden pounding, as if someone were trapped inside. Noelle cocked her head as if listening.

Starla wanted to wrench open the body door, but her legs advanced toward Noelle until she stood close enough to reach out and touch her. “Noelle?”

The banging continued.

And suddenly the figure did not appear to be Noelle at all.

Starla backed away just as the person turned and thrust out its arm. Starla saw the bottle, the liquid flinging from its dark mouth.

Fire.

Blinding, impossible fire streaked across her face.

She screamed, clutching her skin as it melted beneath her fingers.

Starla woke with a violent gasp. Her hand flew to her face before she fully came to. Firm skin on the left, grooved on the right.

Not soft, not melting.

Her lamp glowed beside the bed, illuminating Bryan's photograph. The dream replayed in sluggish, broken fragments, but her body hadn't caught up to reality.

Starla had been in the basement of the old hospital.

"I followed Bryan," she said aloud, resting a steadying hand on her chest, willing her heart to slow.

A sudden pounding split her thoughts, and for a moment she thought the sound had followed her from the dream.

Slowly, she understood.

Someone was at her front door.

Groggy, the dream almost more real than the surrounding room, Starla stood, using the walls for balance, and made her way to the living room. She peered through the peephole.

Noelle stood outside.

For a moment, Starla hesitated, the nightmare playing out in her brain, Noelle spinning around, throwing acid in Starla's face.

But it had only been a dream. Starla's own father had been the person to throw acid on her.

Starla unlocked the door and opened it.

Noelle stared at her, almost seemed surprised she'd answered.

"I'm sorry," Noelle whispered, tears cutting gray mascara lines down her cheeks. "I couldn't … go home."

"It's okay." Starla stepped back and gestured her inside.

"Did I wake you?"

Starla nodded, rubbing her gritty eyes. "Yeah. But that's a good thing. I was having a terrible nightmare."

"I'm sorry—really, terribly sorry to show up like this in the middle of the night—but … well I went to dinner tonight with Aiden and these people, the Ackersons and I got drunk and Aiden never came out, so I called an Uber and I should have gone home, but I couldn't face him so …"

Noelle's words came out in a rush. Starla's fuzzy brain struggled to follow. "Let me make some coffee."

“Coffee?” Noelle paused. “It’s two in the morning.”

“Are you going to sleep tonight?”

Noelle’s face fell. She shook her head.

“I called you like a hundred times yesterday,” Starla said. “I even went to your mother’s house trying to find you.”

“I’m sorry. I just … I needed to be on my own.”

“I saw your stepfather, Dr. Yates. He seems to think the deaths are natural, just an anomaly, which I’ve done some research on and, honestly, that makes the most sense.” Even as Starla spoke the words, she didn't believe them. She’d been in the room with Shannon. Perfectly fine to dead within minutes. There was nothing natural about it.

Noelle rubbed two fingers against her temple. “Do you have any aspirin? I have a terrible headache.”

Starla moved to the section of her counter covered in pill bottles. “Ibuprofen, Tylenol, aspirin. I’m all out of the heavy-duty stuff.”

“Ibuprofen would be great.”

Starla opened the bottle. “How many? Four?”

Noelle gazed at her. “Isn’t the dosage two?”

“Probably. I never take less than four.”

“Two is fine.”

Starla shook two pills into her hand and filled a glass of water, handing them to Noelle.

Noelle didn’t immediately take them. Starla realized her gaze had shifted to the Oncology pamphlet with Bryan’s picture open on her counter.

“Did you know him?” Starla pointed to Bryan.

Noelle said nothing for a moment. When she spoke, her voice was small. “I worked with him before my mother’s accident.”

“Really? Okay. Did you know he disappeared?”

“Noelle blinked, her eyes shifting from the photograph to Starla. A sheen of perspiration had broken out across her forehead, and she pressed a hand to her mouth.

“Are you okay?” Starla asked.

Noelle shook her head, then abruptly covered her mouth. “I’m going to be sick.”

She stood and darted down the hall into Starla’s bathroom.

After several minutes, Noelle returned, her face blotchy.

“How can I help?” Starla asked.

Nolle eased back onto the couch and took a drink of her water. “I’ll be okay.” Noelle’s cell phone vibrated in her purse. “I’m sure that’s Aiden, but I can’t talk to him right now.”

Starla wanted to ask more about Bryan, but Noelle’s thoughts were clearly elsewhere. “How is Aiden handling everything?”

“Well, he insisted we have dinner with a couple I abhor last night, so that was fun. Though I never made it to the actual dinner. Instead, I drank three glasses of wine, spilled the last one on Linda Ackerson and went outside to throw up.”

“Ouch.”

“Aiden spent most of the dinner bragging about how well he played in his golf game earlier in the day. Honestly, it was excruciating.”

“Sounds pretty insensitive.”

“He can be an asshole.”

“Aiden the asshole,” Starla said. “It has a certain ring to it.”

Noelle stared at her, horrified. “He would kill me if he ever heard me say that.”

“Literally kill you?”

“No. God, no. Of course not. It’s a figure of speech.”

“I’m well aware of that, and it’s also one of those things women married to psychopaths say a few times before their husbands actually kill them.”

“Where are you going with this? Aiden is not involved in what’s happening at the hospital. Okay? He’s not a nurse or a doctor. He’d have no way—”

“He brought you flowers that time. How often does he visit?”

Noelle scoffed. “I don’t know. Once a week, sometimes a couple of times, he’ll bring me dinner or flowers. I can’t exactly fault the man for that.”

“You literally just said he’s an asshole.”

“I said he can be an asshole.”

“Is there a difference?”

“A huge one. Who among us hasn’t been an asshole at one point or another?”

“Well, I have for one, but what you’re describing sounds like more of a chronic issue.”

Noelle buried her head in her hands. “I humiliated myself last night. Aiden is going to be furious.”

“If ever there’s a time to get drunk and make a scene, it’s when you’re being unjustly accused of murder.”

“Oh, God.” Noelle lay down, curling her legs into her body. Her dress, which Starla had noticed hung open in the back, scrunched up around her thighs.

“Do you want some comfy clothes? That dress looks miserable.”

“I’ve ruined it. I threw up on it. Aiden spent five hundred dollars on this dress.”

“Take it off. I’ll toss it in the washing machine.”

Noelle clenched her eyes shut. “That would ruin it completely. I just … I need to close my eyes for a little while.”

“Sure. Have a nap.” Starla stood and grabbed a blanket. She spread it over Noelle.

From Noelle’s purse, her cell continued to vibrate.

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39

When Noelle returned home the following morning, she found Aiden at the kitchen table. Showered, dressed in his button-down shirt and slacks, he regarded her with something bordering on disgust as she walked in barefoot, her dress a wrinkled, stained mess, her heels clutched in one hand.

“I don’t even know what to say to you right now,” he told her, his jaw set.

She struggled to meet his gaze. Stomach queasy, head pulsing, she wondered why she hadn’t taken Starla up on her offer of a shower and a change of clothes. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” His eyebrows shot to his hairline. “That’s it? You completely humiliated me in front of the Ackersons and fifty other people who probably know me from the news. Then you ran out like a lunatic and disappeared, didn’t answer your phone, didn’t bother coming home.”

“I stayed the night at Starla’s.”

“Oh, wow. That makes me feel a lot better. You stayed the night with a suicidal mental patient.”

Noelle opened her mouth to argue then paused. “I never told you she attempted suicide.”

He stared at her. “Then some other nurse must have mentioned it when I stopped in to see you. And who cares how I found out? It’s true, isn’t it?”

“There’s more to her than that.”

Noelle needed to tell Aiden about what was happening at the hospital. The only way he could understand her downward spiral was to put it in the context of the deaths at Bellerose, being under suspicion and now on leave.

He walked his mug to the sink and dumped his coffee. “I have to be at the station. You need to shower.” He breezed past her and out the front door without another word.

Noelle wavered on her feet.

She had no job, her marriage was in shambles, and the suspicion she was an angel of death killer cast her entire life in shadow.

Her stomach roiled, her head dense and throbbing.

She needed a plan. She needed to call her mother’s attorneys, get ahead of whatever was coming, do anything besides surrender to it.

Instead, she climbed the stairs and crawled beneath the covers. Aiden would have been horrified—her dirty clothes, her sour skin, all of it contaminating their pristine bed. The thought surfaced and sank. Noelle pulled the covers to her chin and slept.

When Noelle woke, the afternoon sun crept beneath the curtains. She stilled, listening for any sound of Aiden in the house, but heard nothing.

Dread continued to wrap tight around her, but her headache at least had subsided. She showered, dressed in shorts and a blouse, and drove to her mother’s house.

It had rained while Noelle slept. The roads and grass glistened in the shafts of sun through the cloud cover.

She drove through the gate at her mother’s house and pulled her Tahoe onto a path the landscaper used. She parked and walked to the pool.

Fog rose from the surface, pale, ethereal. For a moment, Noelle saw her mother there, waist-deep in the pool, moonlit water glistening against her naked back.

The vision held for a second and then dissolved.

Night swims. Grace and Noelle had done them frequently after Grace inherited the house. Grace would lead Noelle from the enormous house, both in their swimsuits, across the lush lawn to dive into the cool water. They'd float on their backs beneath the moon, the stars.

They hadn't talked during the swims. The night talked instead. Frogs and crickets and owls. The wind through the dahlias, the rustle of tree limbs. Some noises had scared Noelle, but the fear, as much as the novelty of the night swims themselves, exhilarated her.

The night swims ended abruptly when Noelle was a senior in high school. During their last swim, as they walked back to the house, Noelle had asked Grace about her father. He'd been on her mind in the weeks prior, likely due to Rachel Edwards's dad returning from deployment and showing up during gym class to surprise Rachel. Her classmate had jumped into his arms and cried, and Noelle had watched the scene with curious envy.

As she and her mother made their way back toward the mansion, Noelle had asked, "Can you tell me about my father?"

Grace had not slowed, nor glanced back. "There's nothing to tell you, Noelle. We had a brief … encounter, and I fell pregnant."

"He never asked about me?"

"I never saw him again."

"But why? Why didn't you try to find him?"

"Because *I* chose to have you. Me. And he was merely a stranger."

"What if I wanted to find him?"

Grace glanced back, something hard in her expression. "That would be impossible. I didn't even know his name."

The moment they stepped through the front door into the vacuous foyer, the mystique of the night swim vanished, replaced by the stiff formality of their new home.

Grace said nothing more about Noelle's father. She hurried up the stairs and disappeared down the hall.

They never took another night swim.

Now, Noelle forced her thoughts back to the present. She sat on the edge of the pool, the dampness of the stone seeping through her shorts. She dipped her feet into the water and watched a dark dahlia drift on the surface.

For a moment, another memory surfaced. Swimming naked in the water, powerful arms wrapping around her, hands sinking into her hair.

Memories. So many of them submerged in the waters of this pool she'd once loved. Once, it had been her refuge, perhaps the only place on the Radmor estate where she'd felt happy. But now it had become a place of endings. Of death.

Noelle stood and made her way to the house, using her key to open the front door. "Hi, Lee. How are you today?" Noelle asked the woman who stood on tiptoe in the foyer of her mother's house dusting an oil painting.

Lee had cleaned for Grace and Grace's parents before her. She was well into her sixties, but liked to say she'd work until her body gave up the ghost. "I'm lovely, dear. How are you?"

"Oh, pretty good. I'm just going to run up and see Mother."

"She'll like that."

Noelle walked up the grand staircase. She paused at the door to her mother's office and twisted the knob quietly, not wanting to alert whatever caretaker sat with her mother to her presence.

Her mother's office appeared unchanged. Prior to the accident, any time Noelle walked into the room, lights had glowed from the array of Tiffany lamps propped on tables. The curtains were never closed, as Grace preferred to always gaze out at the garden. Now the heavy maroon drapes blocked the light, and the dark interior appeared gloomy, forgotten.

Noelle went to the desk and flipped on the lamp.

Her mother's planner rested on the desk, still open to the week of her accident. Noelle's stomach tightened as she recognized the dates. She could almost hear their final argument, the angry words exchanged before everything had gone so terribly wrong. She refused to follow the memory any further and turned her attention to the desk.

What she wanted would not be in the open.

Like most fatherless children, Noelle had often daydreamed of the man who'd given her life. Despite her mother's claims that he'd been a stranger, she'd never truly accepted the story. Grace was not the type of woman to have a one-night stand. She suspected instead that either her father was unacceptable to the Radmor family or he'd been unable or unwilling to take responsibility for his child.

Or, perhaps most disturbing of all, he'd never known Noelle existed.

The desk drawers contained tax forms and other paperwork. The bottom-left drawer was locked.

Noelle stood and walked around the office, scanning for a spot her mother might have hidden the key. What if it wasn't in the office at all, but tucked into one of the hundred other little nooks in the house? It could be folded in any of a thousand books on the shelves in the parlor.

As Noelle started toward the parlor, she heard Dr. Yates's voice. "Yes, I found out this morning. Hospital administrators have called the police to investigate."

Noelle slowed and crept closer to the cracked door, listening.

"Do I think it's possible? Of course it's possible, but likely? I doubt it. Though she mentioned being followed or some nonsense, which implies histrionics and attention-seeking behavior. I'm going to nudge her to speak with Dr. Argall. Yes, the psychiatrist. If this goes to trial, she'll need a psych eval anyway, and frankly, she might have to lean on an insanity defense if irrefutable evidence comes out."

Another stretch of silence. Noelle balled her hands into fists. Her fingernails dug into her palms.

"Oh, sure, there's plenty of money, but how sad to see it poured into the pockets of a bloodsucking defense attorney."

Noelle backed down the hall, grateful for the thick carpets to muffle her footfalls. She hurried down the stairs, ignoring the imploring look of Lee as she rushed from the house.

She nearly ran straight into Virginia walking up the stairs. "Oh, gosh, I'm sorry," Noelle said.

Virginia smiled. "In a hurry, are we?"

"Umm, yes. Kind of." Noelle descended the steps and then paused and turned back. Virginia was watching, her expression troubled, and Noelle realized she knew about what was unfolding at Bellerose. Not a surprise really. Jim would have told her. Still, Noelle's face grew warm. "Actually, Virginia, while you're here, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"Do you know who my father is?"

Virginia's eyebrows lifted. "Your father?"

"Yes." Noelle fidgeted on the steps. "I've been wondering lately and … I'm not sure where to begin. I just thought since you and my mom have been friends for so long, you might … know."

Virginia glanced up at the house, eyes seeming to land on the window that gazed out from the parlor. "I wish I did, Noelle, but I have to admit,

your mother was very secretive about him. I don't know if there was ever even a relationship; it may have been—"

"A one-night stand?" The idea of her mother having casual sex with a complete stranger seemed impossible, and yet it was the same story Grace Radmor had told.

"Brief."

"You never asked her while she was pregnant?"

"I might have, but … honestly, I can't remember now. Those were busy years, and we drifted in and out of closeness as all friends do. I wish I could help, but I can't."

"Was she close with anyone else during that time? Anyone you can think of she might have confided in?"

Virginia shook her head. "Your mother has always been a very private person. It's possible, but if she did, I don't know who she told."

"Okay. Thank you."

"Noelle, before you go, I heard you've been put on administrative leave. You can talk to me. I'm happy to help in any way I can."

Noelle swallowed hard and nodded. "Maybe another day. Thanks, Virginia."

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Starla had been sitting outside the local television station where Aiden Mitchell worked since five o'clock that evening.

The station sat on the edge of downtown, a squat brick building with mirrored windows and a satellite dish perched on the roof. Aiden's white Porsche sat in a parking spot designated with his name on a metal sign.

Aiden went on air for the second time at five, and he'd leave sometime after. Starla wanted to follow him.

As Finn had mentioned, Aiden was an unlikely suspect. His face smiled from bus benches. He moderated charity auctions, emceed holiday parades, and appeared in enough local commercials that most of Blackwater, Michigan, probably recognized him on sight.

But his Porsche had been at Bellerose the night Shannon died. And like Yates, Aiden could have a financial motive to get Noelle out of his way.

Just after six, the side door opened, and Aiden emerged carrying a briefcase. Even from a distance, she recognized him instantly. He walked with a swagger, a confidence she found mesmerizing … and annoying.

Some people moved through life as if the world had collectively agreed to like them. He had one of those faces people trusted.

"So did Ted Bundy," she muttered.

A woman walking a small, fluffy dog approached him. They exchanged a few words, the woman smiling as if she were star-struck. The moment she turned away, another expression flitted across Aiden's face. Disdain.

Aiden climbed into his white Porsche and pulled onto the road. She counted to ten before following.

He drove north, the same roads Starla had traveled just days before when visiting Bryan's farmhouse. She half expected him to turn onto the same road, but he didn't, kept going. They left the Blackwater city limits and drove another ten miles. Starla did her best to always keep a car between them.

The Porsche slowed and turned into a strip mall parking lot. She eyed the shops: a dry cleaner, Chinese takeout and a liquor store.

Starla veered into a fast-food parking lot and twisted around in her seat.

Aiden parked next to a small dark car. As Starla watched, the driver's door of the other car opened. A woman got out and climbed into Aiden's passenger seat.

Lacey.

As Starla drove towards home, she contemplated calling Noelle and revealing what she'd witnessed. But she didn't understand what it meant yet.

Were Lacey and Aiden both involved in the deaths at Bellerose? Were they having an affair? Or was it a completely innocent encounter?

No. She didn't think so.

Her cell phone rang.

Jana Carlson.

"Hi, Jana," Starla answered.

"Hi, Starla. I'm sorry to bother you. I just hadn't from you and wondered if …"

"Yes," Starla said before Jana finished. "I have some news."

"You do?" Jana's voice lifted.

"I got into Bryan's tablet. I haven't found anything groundbreaking, but it's a start."

"Oh, my God. Okay. I would like to see it, if you don't mind."

"Not at all. I can run home and bring it over. Are you busy?"

"No. I'm … well, today is Bryan's birthday. I'm just trying to get through it."

Bryan’s birthday. Starla’s heart ached for Jana. “How old is he?”

“Thirty-one.”

Jana did not look well. She’d pulled her snarled hair into a low ponytail and wore a wrinkled T-shirt and sweatpants. Her nose was red-rimmed, her eyes puffy.

Starla held up a pizza. “I stopped on the way. In Bryan’s video, he mentioned getting you a mushroom and olive pizza from Amalfi’s. They were closed, so I had to settle for Little Caesar’s.”

Jana’s lower lip quivered.

“No waterworks,” Starla said. “Come on. Let’s have a slice of pizza and read Bryan’s emails.”

Jana cried as she ate, sitting shoulder to shoulder with Starla.

“He called her Tink,” Jana said. “Do you think that’s an abbreviation for her name? But what could it be? Tina? Tracy?”

“I’m guessing it’s a nickname, like his signoff—Sunshine. Maybe she’s a tinkerer, or it could be short for Tinker Bell.”

“Tinker Bell,” Jana repeated.

“That’s my guess, though I could be wrong.”

“Why hasn’t she come here?” Jana wondered aloud, setting her pizza on her plate. “Bryan vanished a year ago, and she’s not worried. She didn’t come to ask me if I’d heard from him.”

“Which makes you think what? She knows what happened to him?”

“Or maybe”—Jana’s voice lifted slightly—“maybe they ran off together. I’ve been reading about people who do that. You know, a few weeks ago they found a woman in California who went missing in 1964. Her entire family thought she’d probably died, but nope, took a bus west, changed her name. She started a whole new life.”

“It’s possible,” Starla said, not wanting to dash Jana’s hopes. Technology had largely destroyed a person’s ability to truly disappear.

“For his last birthday, I made coconut cupcakes,” Jana said. “Those are his favorite. We even gave one to Doris. She swallowed it in one bite.” Jana’s eyes misted again. “We didn’t have dinner together. He said he was going out, and I figured he was meeting the girl, but I didn’t ask him that

night. I'd bugged him enough about her by then, and it was clear he wasn't ready to formally introduce us, but I should have asked. I should have insisted on meeting her."

"Beating yourself up doesn't help," Starla told her, grabbing another slice of pizza. "Believe me. I did it for years after my dad killed my mom. We were at the mall because of me. Typical twelve-year-old girl who thinks the worst thing that can happen is showing up on the first day of school without new shoes."

"That's where your dad attacked you?"

"Yep. He followed us there, waited in the parking lot. When we came out, he threw acid on us. My mom died in the hospital."

"Did your dad go to prison?"

"No. He ran. Died in a shootout with the police."

Jana touched her throat. "My God."

"Yeah. I've had a lot of years to replay that day and imagine all the ways I could have changed the course of it. But those scenarios only exist in my head, don't they? In another dimension, maybe those alternate realities are playing out. I tell myself that sometimes on the really dark nights."

"Does it help?"

"Rarely."

"I'd like to tell you something else," Jana said.

Starla waited.

"I had a dream about Bryan. Just a few days after he went missing. In the dream I was asleep, and something touched my foot. I opened my eyes to see Bryan standing at the end of my bed. He said, 'You're going to be okay, Mom.' And then I woke up. That was the whole dream."

Starla rubbed her arms. "What do you think it meant?"

Fresh tears spilled from Jana's eyes. "That he was dead. That's what I thought when I woke up. I just had this sensation"—Jana put her hand between her breasts—"like someone grabbed both sides of my ribcage and split it open, like I'd been cracked in two. I lay there in the bed registering that it wasn't real, and then in a sort of terror I realized that he'd come to say goodbye."

On her way home, Starla had bought a coconut cupcake from a bakery.

Now, she lifted it from its little white box and set it on the nightstand in front of Bryan's picture. She opened a box of candles and placed a single silver and blue striped birthday candle in the center of the white frosting.

"Happy birthday to you …" she sang.

From his photo, Bryan smiled at her.

She closed her eyes, envisioned him in the room, kneeling before her, laughing.

"Make a wish," she said, her last birthday with her mother flashing through her thoughts.

Her mom had baked her a boxed Betty Crocker chocolate cake with white frosting. Little pink flowers, cut fresh in the yard, poked from the top.

"What did you wish for?" Nadia asked after Starla had blown out her candles.

"I can't tell you, or it won't come true."

Her mother only smiled, but then Starla blurted her wish. She wanted Reebok Pumps, the same ones Amber Hastings had.

When her mother handed Starla her birthday present, shoebox-shaped, Starla had torn through the wrapping carelessly, gift wrap made from inside-out paper grocery bags that her mother had hand-painted flowers on.

Inside, Starla had not discovered Reeboks. Her mother had made her a diorama. It was nestled inside a shoebox, tiny cutouts of Starla in various stages of life with snippets of her mother's poems about her only child seeming to float in the background.

Nadia must have seen the look on her face, the disappointment. Starla had tried to hide it. Even in her often selfish pre-teen brain, she understood on some level the hardships her mother faced.

"And your other present," her mother said, "is the Reebok shoes. We'll go to the mall this weekend and get them. Okay?"

Starla had screamed and wrapped her mother in a hug.

Now her phone buzzed, and she opened her eyes, letting the memory slide away.

Halloween in July at Legends Bar starts at 6 p.m. Prizes for Best Costume!

Starla had followed several of the bars Bryan frequented on social media after finding the wristbands in his drawer.

She returned her eyes to the tiny flame.

And blew the candle out.

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Starla stood in front of her bathroom mirror and regarded the woman staring back at her.

Starla had worn the *Phantom of the Opera* costume many times. She'd had the white mask custom-made to cover the right side of her face. She'd affixed it with spirit gum, covering the scars beneath so completely they might never have existed.

It was a fitting costume. She and the Phantom had shared a similar tragic fate.

Black fishnets. Tight black skirt. Ruffled white blouse buttoned to the throat. Her red-brown hair hung loose, deliberately swept over her right ear.

Halloween had always been Starla's favorite holiday. The one night a year when she blended seamlessly into the crowd.

This year she'd get two nights.

Starla walked out to the Uber. "Legends," she told the driver. She'd never been to the bar, but had driven past it in downtown Blackwater's industrial zone a few times.

The Uber driver glanced at her repeatedly in the rearview mirror, a behavior not uncommon around her, but on this night, she sensed curiosity, maybe even attraction lay behind his inquiring looks. The attention, so alien, became uncomfortable, and she stared out the window to avoid catching his eye.

Legends occupied an old brick warehouse, dark and deafening, the dance floor packed with costumed bodies.

Starla pushed her way to the bar. The bartender, a middle-aged man dressed as Beetlejuice, leaned toward her. “What can I get ya?”

Starla took Bryan’s photo from her bag. “Do you know this guy?”

The bartender blinked, expression thoughtful. “Is that Disco Bry?”

“Bryan Carlson?”

“I couldn’t tell you his last name, but he looks like a guy who used to come here dancing quite a bit. I called him Disco Bry.”

“Has he been in lately?”

The guy scrunched his face. “God. Uh, not for six months, a year. I don’t know.”

“All right, thanks.” Starla had brought the photo of Bryan, but hadn’t really gone to Legends intending to work. “I’ll take two shots of tequila.”

Starla drank them back to back, hissing as flames shot down her throat, into her stomach. She ordered a third.

The music throbbed, costumed bodies writhing and pulsing beneath the flickering orange and red lights.

She slipped into the crowd.

“Fuck, you’re so hot,” John or James, whatever his name was, murmured into her left ear. She kept her head angled so that he only ever got close to the left side of her face. “Let’s take this off.” He reached for her mask.

“No.” She shoved his hands down, used them to take the front of her shirt and ripped hard, buttons exploding free.

Starla tied his hands to the frame of her bed, so there was no risk of him pulling her mask free, no risk of his fingers wandering to the right side of her face. She slipped off her fishnet nylons and underwear and climbed on top of him.

“Oh, God,” he whispered as he slipped inside of her. “Oh, fuck.”

She planted her hands against his chest and watched his face drift in and out of focus.

Dark hair became lighter. Strange eyes turned hazel.

Bryan smiled up at her.

A sound came from the living room. The DVD player had turned itself on.

Bryan’s voice. “Mom, as you can see, I’m here at Grandma’s …”

Starla turned toward the open bedroom door, and the room tilted. She forced her eyes back and down.

“Bryan,” she breathed.

“Sure, honey.” He grinned. “Whatever you want.”

Starla woke to her cell phone vibrating somewhere near her left calf. She didn’t bother searching for it, but focused her eyes on the ceiling.

An overripe melon had replaced her head. A headache the likes of which she’d never experienced kept pace with the thud of her heart.

When she finally rolled to the side of her bed, frantically searching for her wastebasket, she caught sight of a pile of blankets on the floor and froze, the man from the previous night flashing through her mind. She stared at the pile, waited for it to move. It didn’t, and after a moment she realized no man lay curled inside it.

They’d flung off most of her bedding the previous night. It was only a pile of blankets and pillows. The man must have gone home.

She found the trash, pulled it to the edge of the bed, and vomited.

Someone pounded on her door. A minute later she heard a key slide into the lock and footsteps cross the wooden floor. She blinked as light spilled through her open bedroom door. A silhouette, a man.

Finn.

“Jesus, Starla. I’ve been calling you for three hours. I thought you’d …” He trailed off, eyes taking in her fishnet nylons, ripped white blouse. Starla caught sight of a condom wrapper next to the pile of discarded blankets.

She didn’t have the energy to feel embarrassed.

Finn blew out a breath. “A costumed rendezvous, huh? Looks like you had fun.”

Starla closed her eyes and put a hand to her throbbing head. “Not worth it. Can you, umm … get me some water, please, and a hundred ibuprofen?”

Finn disappeared and returned a few minutes later. He handed her the glass of water and two pills.

“Two?” she grumbled.

“Yes. The recommended dose.”

The mask still stuck to the right side of her face, which felt hot and itchy. She’d need a shower to work it free, but the thought of moving caused her stomach to churn.

“Do you want me to help you take the mask off?” he asked.

Normally she’d say no. As close as she was with Finn, it felt like crossing a line, but the itch had transformed to a swarm of hornets attacking the puckered skin around her right eye.

“Yes, please,” she mumbled.

Finn left. When he returned, he sat on the edge of her bed and gently wiped a warm, damp washcloth beneath the edges of the mask, easing it up as he went.

Shame bubbled deep in her sternum, but the overriding desperation to have the mask pulled free eclipsed her discomfort. When he finally pulled the mask off, she let out a sigh of relief.

“Thank you.” She scratched the right side of her face, pulling off remaining bits of glue.

“You’re welcome. I’m going to dump this water.” Finn stood and started from the room. “What the heck is this?”

Starla turned her head, though even that slight movement caused a slice of pain through the center of her skull.

Finn stared at her side table with the framed photo of Bryan, the hospital pamphlet, his crumpled T-shirt, two plastic club bracelets and the birthday cupcake, the icing looking hard and crusty, the little candle perched on top.

“It’s nothing,” she mumbled.

Finn looked at her ceiling as if holding back the words the sight inspired in him. From his expression, Starla already knew what he wanted to say. *This is nuts! You’re taking this too far; it’s time to call the therapist.*

Finn brought her a cup of coffee. “Think you can hold this down?”

She stared at it, stomach a cauldron of acid. “By sheer will.”

He set it on her side table, glowering at the cupcake. “I’m on my way to work, but call or text me if you need anything. Okay?”

“Sure.” She pulled the blanket over her face to block out the light.

He yanked it down. “Promise?”

“Yes. I promise,” she grumbled, rolling over.

Finn slid the blanket back over her head and left.

After sleeping until nearly five in the afternoon, Starla dragged herself from the bed and into the shower. Her headache had mostly subsided, but the queasy stomach remained.

She pieced together the events of the previous night, remembering the man sidling up to her on the dance floor. He’d been dressed as Zorro, clad head to toe in black, with a black mask covering the top half of his face.

When he’d begun to dance with her, his lips had reminded her of Bryan’s, and she’d allowed herself to slip into the fantasy.

She sat on the floor of the shower and leaned her head back against the wall, letting the water wash away the sweat and other bodily fluids Zorro had left behind.

It had been months since she’d had a similar tryst. They were usually isolated to once a year, October thirty-first, when she could go out in costume and for one night be someone other than Starla Burton.

After the shower, she stood before the mirror, her already puckered face red and swollen from the previous night’s glue and mask.

Starla’s cell phone beeped, and she saw a text message from Noelle.

Noelle: *I’m having a rough night. Do you want to meet me for a drink?*

Starla grimaced.

No. She did not want to meet for a drink. She wanted to put on her sweatpants, turn on some mind-numbing reality show and spend her night on the couch.

Lacey climbing into Aiden’s Porsche rose in her mind.

“Fine,” she muttered.

Starla: *Where and when?*

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Noelle slid into a booth and ordered a margarita.

Several minutes later, Starla walked through the door. She wore red boots, laced up the sides. The rest of her outfit seemed designed to help her disappear: dark jeans and a high-collared shirt with sleeves that left almost no skin exposed.

She walked to Noelle's booth and paused. "Can we switch sides?" she asked.

Noelle blinked at her. "Umm … sure. Yeah."

It took a moment for Noelle to understand. Starla wanted her left side to face the sports bar, rather than her right, though Starla had her sheaf of long hair arranged over her scars.

"I've never been here." Starla cast a glance at the crowded tables.

Televisions hung on multiple walls, tuned to a range of sports games. The tables were full, largely with groups of men drinking beer.

"I rarely come here," Noelle admitted. "Aiden thinks sports bars are trashy. I wanted somewhere …"

"Where you don't know anyone?"

"Exactly."

"How did it go with Aiden when you went home?"

Noelle frowned and picked at her napkin, thought of the silence filling their house like noxious gas. "He's not really talking to me."

"That's pretty passive-aggressive."

The server delivered Noelle's margarita. Starla ordered a ginger ale.

“It’s fine,” Noelle said. “Maybe it’s better. I don’t even know what to say to him.”

“Noelle, is your marriage okay? I’ve never been married, or in a serious relationship for that matter, but I feel like what you’re describing is not exactly happily ever after.”

Noelle drank her margarita and thought of the night before she’d married Aiden.

Butterflies, cold feet, her mother had called it when Noelle had shown up at the Radmor house crying, scared she was making a terrible mistake marrying this man for whom she had no genuine passion, no spark.

“Aiden and I make sense, or we *made* sense as a couple.”

“That’s why you married him?”

Noelle frowned. “No. I don’t know. It’s part of the reason.”

Handsome and charismatic, Aiden had charmed her. Everyone wanted to meet him; women wanted to date him. In the beginning, Noelle had been swept up in the allure of Aiden Mitchell, but by the time they’d moved in together, she’d realized Aiden’s public face did not match his private face. At home he was critical, controlling, and often detached. He brought her flowers at work, but never complimented her at home. Fancy dinners, grand gestures, he excelled at any affection that included an audience, but in private, he was like a stranger.

“Have you ever considered leaving him?”

Noelle let the question sit and roll around in her mind. Had she? Yes, there’d been a time. “Aiden has a lot of good qualities, and our lives are so intertwined.”

The server returned with Starla’s drink, and she peeled a straw and plopped it in the cup.

“I went in search of information about my dad yesterday,” Noelle said, ready to shift the conversation to anything except Aiden.

Starla looked up from her ginger ale. “And?”

“I couldn’t find anything.”

“Where’d you look?”

“My mom’s office. She has a desk with a locked drawer, and for years I’ve had this belief that proof of his identity would be in there. It’s probably not. I mean, why would she have anything about him in there? We didn’t even move to that house until I was in high school.”

“She might,” Starla said. “You couldn’t get into the drawer?”

“No. It was locked.”

“On a desk? That thing has to be easy to pick.”

“I’m sure it’s an antique. Everything in the house is. Not to mention I don’t want Dr. Yates, Ezra, to know I broke into the desk.”

“Why not? It’s your mother’s desk. He shouldn’t have any say in it.”

“In theory, sure, but … with everything happening at the hospital, I need him on my side.”

Was he on her side? His words from that day ran through her mind. *Of course it’s possible.* It was possible Noelle had killed patients—that was what he was saying.

“I don’t know why I’m looking for my father now, as if I don’t have a thousand more important things to focus on, like staying out of prison. Instead, I’m hunting down some stranger my mother probably had a one-night stand with almost thirty years ago. It’s insane.”

“Survival via diversion,” Starla said.

“I’m sorry?”

“We’re hard-wired to distract, to numb ourselves when things get hard. Some of us, anyway. There are those among us who charge into the fray, but I’d say the majority do what you’re doing now, finding something, anything to focus on other than the investigation at the hospital. Believe me, I get it. My entire life revolves around distractions. I chose my job because of it. I needed work that would take me out of my own tragic life. You’ve seen the kind of choices I make when I have too much time to think.”

“You mean trying to kill yourself.”

“Yes.”

Noelle looked at her margarita, painfully aware that since the deaths had started at the hospital, her drinking had increased tenfold.

“I’m a professional digger,” Starla said. “Do you want me to help you find your biological father?”

Noelle pressed her hands into the dark hollows beneath her eyes. She shook her head slowly. “I’m not sure I even want to find him.”

“Are you looking to be saved? Like maybe this unknown dad will appear in your life and right everything that’s gone wrong?”

Noelle closed her eyes. “Yes. I think so.”

“Probably best to lower your expectations. But if you want me to look for him, say the word. Though I should tell you in advance, some of my methods are unorthodox.”

“Meaning what?”

“Well, I don’t always follow the rules. I might look in databases I’m technically not allowed to. I’ve been known to trespass a time or two. I could get into that locked drawer and not make it obvious.”

“Really?”

“Easily.”

Noelle considered whether she wanted to risk it. “Okay. Yes” she said.

The door opened, and a man in a dark hooded sweatshirt walked in. Noelle blinked at him, flashed back to the person in the parking garage, at the docks. The man grinned, walked to a table of guys and sat down.

“I think someone has been following me,” Noelle said. She wasn’t sure why she’d refrained from telling Starla, but even now feared the reaction. *Histrionics*, Yates had said.

Starla sat up higher. “Where? When?”

“A few things have happened, weird things. It started with … well, someone left Leslie Hamilton’s obituary on my SUV, and then I heard someone in the parking garage at Bellerose, and the night Aiden and I had dinner at the club I saw a person in the parking lot who seemed to be ducking behind cars.”

Starla frowned. “Someone put Leslie’s obituary on your Tahoe?”

Noelle nodded.

“Where was the vehicle when that happened? Bellerose?”

“No. At my house.”

“At your house!”

“Yes.”

“Have you seen this person?”

“No. I heard footsteps in the parking garage, and at the club, they were a silhouette. It was dark out.”

“Do you have surveillance cameras at your house?”

Noelle shook her head. “We’ve talked about getting those Ring doorbell cameras, but no. We don’t have anything.”

“It’s time to get some, and probably a weapon. At a minimum, pepper spray. My personal preference? A stun gun. Technically, they’re illegal in Michigan, but you can buy one in Ohio without a permit and, frankly, it’s a hell of a lot better to deal with the legal repercussions of owning a stun gun than have no defense if you get attacked.”

Noelle noticed the men before Starla did. Clearly drunk, they hung from their chairs, mouths stretched in leering grins, eyes glued to Starla's face where her hair had fallen back, revealing the Jackson Pollock striation of scars.

"What the fuck is that?" one man guffawed, swiveling his head to gaze at his two friends. "Is that a woman?"

Starla quickly pulled her hair down, color rising into her neck and cheeks.

Another guy, a Detroit Tigers ball cap turned backward on his head, eyes unfocused, nodded. "From the tits down, anyway."

Starla threw two twenties on the table. "Let's just go." She slid from the booth.

Noelle's mouth hung open. She was stunned by the cruelty of the men.

As Starla headed for the door, the toe of her bright red boot caught a wrinkle in the carpet, and she went down on one knee. The men laughed, heads lolling.

Rage like Noelle had never experienced poured white-hot through her body. "Shut up, you fucking bastards!" Noelle threw her drink in Ball Cap's face. He jumped up, fist cocked.

The bartender, a tall, wiry man with a shaved head, slapped one large hand on the bar. "Stop! Or I'm calling the cops."

Starla hurried back, grabbed Noelle's hand, and dragged her toward the door. Others in the bar had turned to stare.

Outside, the earlier drizzle had given way to pounding rain. They climbed into Starla's car, and Noelle began to cry so hard, she struggled to breathe.

Starla rested a hand on her back. "It's okay."

Noelle's sobs gradually withered away. She leaned her forehead against the rain-slick window and stared into the parking lot.

"I'm sorry," Noelle said finally. "What right do I have to be crying? Jesus. I'm making it all about me."

Starla glanced at her. "I think we can agree it's worse to be branded a murderer than to be made fun of for being ugly."

"You're not ugly."

Starla smiled. "Not to my friends, anyway."

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At home, Starla stood in front of the bathroom mirror.

Her right eye peered from a cavern of puckered flesh. Beneath that was a desert of angry-looking ridges and valleys.

As a teenager, she'd stare for hours at the right side of her face in a magnifying mirror, her own form of self-flagellation. Little remained of her right ear save a slightly raised hole largely hidden beneath her hair. In the early years after the attack, she'd had no hair on that side of her head. It had been repeatedly shaved as she marched through months and then years of plastic surgery.

She imagined herself through the eyes of the men at the bar. Men who'd grown up in suburban houses and small Michigan towns where the girls were pretty, where the women on TV and in magazines had high cheekbones, glossy hair and full lips.

Starla had once seen a movie of a woman flying in a small plane over an African desert. The woman had gazed out at the alien landscape below with fear, even disgust. It was an uninhabitable place. Nothing survived there. Starla's own face looked like that hostile ground.

She was a monster, an alien, a creature. A boy in high school had called her Freddy Krueger's girlfriend. A girl had whispered just loud enough for Starla to hear: *She looks like Frankenstein's monster.*

It didn't matter. Those people and their opinions, their small minds. She'd had a therapist once who spent months instilling in Starla the belief that her injuries, her tragedy, were a superpower. *The attack*, the therapist

told her, *gave you a singular view of the world. Gratitude for things other people took for granted. Depth.* And a part of her believed it.

But not all of her. The voice of derision remained. It was as if one of those schoolboys had embedded a miniature version of himself deep in her psyche, and that cruel, mocking child lived there still.

You're ugly, hideous, disgusting. No one will ever love you.

The mirror confirmed that voice most of all. It silenced every other belief she'd fought so hard to internalize. It rendered lies the affirmations hung by magnets on her refrigerator: *You're Powerful, All Your Limits Exist in Your Mind, Whatever You Want Is Already Yours.*

The affirmations changed. During her dark days, she'd rip them to shreds or burn them. Inevitably light would dawn once more, and she'd print new affirmations and attach them to the refrigerator.

Finn had hung new ones after her last suicide attempt. They read: *I Am Enough, and I Don't Need To Change. I Am Beautiful. I Trust Everything is Going To Work Out for Me.*

Starla considered tearing them down. She thought of the birthday candles she'd bought for Bryan. She could light one and hold each bullshit affirmation to the little flame and watch it turn to ash.

In the second bedroom, where no one ever slept, Starla opened the closet and took out the box. It was long and flat, had once been a glossy black, but time and touch had faded and scuffed it. There'd been a satin ribbon attached to the bottom that tied across the top. It had ripped away years before. For a while, Starla had kept the ribbon on her nightstand. Sometimes she slept with it curled in her hand or draped over her eyes as she drifted to sleep, but then one day she'd thrown it in the trash. Decades before the box had contained a black velvet dress her father had given to her mother in New York. Nadia had cherished it.

Starla opened the box and pulled out the photo albums, three in total, all created by her mother before she'd died. The albums offered a timeline, a glimpse into their once-intact lives.

The albums lied. They'd been curated, each photo carefully chosen to display maximum joy. Starla sitting on a New York subway, sprinkle ice cream dripping down the front of her shirt. Her parents passionately kissing in Central Park. Nadia lying on her side in the grass, a bird eating seeds from her cupped palm.

What existed between the photos were days of the silent treatment, Starla's father stomping a porcelain doll her mother had given Starla into bits on the tile floor, her mother hunched at the side of her bed crying, hands balled around a pair of yellow thong underwear she'd found in her sheets that morning.

The albums covered five-year intervals. They began before Starla was born, in the early days of her parents' budding romance, when their dreams still had wings, when the world hadn't started pushing back, when her father's personality disorders had not yet consumed him.

In childhood, Starla had not merely flipped through the photos, her mother had narrated them. "That's when I knew he was the one," her mother would say, touching a finger to an old Polaroid encased in the plastic page.

Their friend Blaze had captured the couple on a New York street corner, surrounded by honking cabs, dirty pavement, and a river of strangers. The whole scene looked dingy.

But not Starla's mother. Nadia wore a long, flowing white silk slip dress. How it wasn't covered in smudges and smoke stains and grease always mystified Starla. Nadia's long, obsidian-black hair hung over one shoulder, her enormous green eyes fixed on her future husband, Dean, whom everyone called by his middle name, Felix, because it sounded *more rock and roll*. Felix wore ripped, stone-washed jeans and a red leather jacket. His hair was long, nearly as long as Starla's mother's, red-brown and curly. He looked every bit the 90s rock star. He gazed back at Nadia, serious, intent, his eyes a brown that sometimes appeared almost black.

The city seemed not to touch them. Nadia's face tilted toward Felix, his toward hers, their expressions frozen in reverence.

Starla had always wondered what it felt like to look at another person and forget the rest of the world was there.

The poet and the rock star, Blaze had written in black Sharpie on the bottom of the Polaroid.

Starla had loved the photograph as a girl. Back then, she'd believed in *the one*, in destiny, in the possibility that two people might lock eyes across a crowded room and recognize the great love of their lives without exchanging a word.

Except it had not been real.

Even after the moment her father threw acid on Nadia and Starla, even after he died, Starla's belief in those truths remained. They eroded gradually at first and then rapidly, dissolved beneath the weight of her actual memories rather than her mother's stories.

Starla left the albums on the floor and took out one of her mother's poetry chapbooks, the last published less than a year before her death. She flipped to the first poem in the last book, her favorite. She'd read them so many times the pages were stained from her fingertips, warped and soft.

Gather the Night

Pull down the blanket
of black sky,
silver stars,
Venus in her exaltation.

Wrap it around you.

Close.
Closer still.

Until the light is gone
and with it
the day,
the noise,
the memories,
the mess.

Here,
beneath this shroud of darkness,
nothing asks anything of me.

Here,
even the dark parts

can be still.

Here
I am safe.

From the world.

From you.

From me.

Starla had read it a hundred times, always searching her mother's words for evidence of something, maybe proof that the love was real, proof that her mother was real. She'd been dead now for over twenty years. Starla could no longer remember her voice, retrieve the smell of her eucalyptus lotion, or conjure the sensation of her hands as she brushed Starla's hair.

Starla had sat in this same room, reading the same poem the night before her latest suicide attempt. She'd found herself once more in the grip of a sadness that never truly left, but simply went dormant for a while.

She'd completed her latest case, an assignment that involved reviewing psychiatric records and a competency assessment for a college student accused of killing his roommate. And she'd been in that limbo state. The next job hadn't arrived. The last was packed and sent away, and the long hours had surrounded her once.

Sometimes she could face them.

And other times she couldn't.

A sound emerged from elsewhere in her little house.

Starla left the mess she'd made, stood and walked into the hall. She gazed at the front door, could see she'd locked it when she returned that night. As she passed her bedroom, she stopped.

Bryan's birthday cupcake sat on her nightstand, the tiny candle lit.

When she stepped into the room, the scent of his cologne lingered.

"Are you here?" she asked.

Rational Starla should have thrown open closet doors and peered under beds with a kitchen knife in hand, ready to seek whoever lit the candle. But

her house was empty.

Of other people, anyway.

She walked to the bed and sank down, grabbing Bryan's T-shirt in her hand. She lay on her side and stared at his photograph.

He gazed back at her, steady.

The candle flickered.

The room fell away.

There were only his eyes.

The black center, deep as a well. Alice's rabbit hole. Rings of color radiated outward, sandstone bleeding into indigo. A galaxy. An entire universe contained there.

No one had ever looked at Starla the way Bryan did now.

Eyes are windows to the soul. The cliché made her cringe, and yet in that moment, she understood.

Because Bryan saw *her*.

Not the ruined skin. Not the face that made strangers glance away and children stare.

For once, Starla didn't feel ugly.

Tears spilled over her cheeks.

She imagined Bryan's hand reaching toward her, long fingers brushing her skin.

Her thoughts returned to the stranger she'd brought home from Legends.

But when she remembered him beneath her, she saw only Bryan.

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Bryan

June 13—The Year Before

“Hey.” Lacey caught Bryan’s hand. “Tia said there’s trivia Saturday night. Are you going?”

Bryan gazed past her, where a call light had just gone on in Archie’s room. “Tomorrow? Uh, maybe.”

She frowned. “Why maybe?”

“I need to prep the bathroom at the farmhouse for tiling next weekend.”

“You still haven’t invited me out to see this alleged farmhouse, you know.”

He chuckled. “You’re welcome anytime so long as you bring your tool belt.”

“Ooh. Is that an invitation?”

He laughed and slipped around her.

When Bryan stepped into Archie’s room, he knew immediately something was wrong. The man’s face was flushed, his hospital gown dark with sweat around the collar.

“You feeling okay, Archie?”

The man blinked at him, his gaze slow to focus. “Cold.”

Bryan touched the back of his hand to the man’s forehead. He was burning up. “Let me grab your vitals.”

The thermometer came back at 103.2. He was running a fever. And his blood pressure had dropped.

Bryan stared at the numbers. Dr. Parry had been explicit in his instructions to the day nurses to call if Archie experienced any significant changes overnight.

Bryan stepped into the hall and caught Noelle as she passed. “Can you sit with Archie for a minute? He’s running a fever and feeling confused.”

Noelle nodded. “Yeah. Go.”

Bryan hurried back to the nurses’ station and picked up the phone.

The hospitalist had checked Archie and worried about an infection. When Dr. Parry arrived, Bryan met him at the nurses’ station.

“What happened?”

“Archie spiked a fever about forty minutes ago. One-oh-three point two. Pressure dropped to ninety-two over fifty-six.” Bryan stood and handed him the chart. “Hospitalist ordered fluids and blood cultures. We drew labs.”

Parry scanned the latest vitals as they walked. “Any change in mental status?”

“More confused than he was at shift change.”

They entered the room together.

Archie lay beneath a thin blanket, face flushed and damp with sweat. Bryan checked the IV while Parry leaned over the bed and spoke to him, asking a few simple questions. Archie managed his name but stumbled over where he was.

Parry listened to his lungs, checked his abdomen, then glanced at the monitor. “Let’s keep the fluids going. Start the antibiotics as soon as the pharmacy gets them up. Repeat his pressure in fifteen.”

Bryan nodded.

For the next half hour, Parry stayed close while Bryan moved between the patient and the nurses’ station. Archie’s pressure crept upward. His temperature remained high, but at least nothing was getting worse.

By eleven, Bryan found Parry standing at the counter outside the room, staring at the latest set of vitals.

“You heading out?” Bryan asked.

Parry shook his head. “I’ll hang around a while. I want to see where his pressure goes.”

The elevator chimed. Virginia Parry stepped onto the floor carrying a small leather purse and what looked like a lunch bag.

Bryan smiled at her and glanced at the clock. “You know it’s almost eleven, right?”

“So I’ve been told.” She held up the bag, eyes narrowed on Dr. Parry. “You managed to leave the house without half the things required to keep you alive.”

Parry sighed. “I left in a hurry.”

“You always leave in a hurry.” Virginia opened the bag and pulled out a small, zippered case. “Your insulin.” She handed it to him.

“Thank you.”

“Everything okay?”

“Patient took a turn. I’m staying for a while.”

“Of course you are.”

Bryan enjoyed their banter. They’d been married since college, both worked at Bellerose, and seemed devoted to one another. Bryan hoped for a similar partnership someday.

Parry tucked the case into his coat pocket.

“You didn’t have to drive all the way over here.”

“I know.” Virginia leaned in and kissed his cheek. “But I’d prefer not to become a widow because you can’t remember your medication.”

Noelle leaned against the counter in the break room and ate her strawberry Greek yogurt. Two hours until the shift ended, and she was ready.

Bryan walked in, grinned and bumped her with his hip.

She yawned and smiled. “Is this shift ever going to end?”

He held up the can of Red Bull. “There’s more where this came from. Want one?”

“And miss my three hours of broken sleep once this shift is over? Not a chance.” She scraped out the final spoonful of her yogurt and dropped her empty container in the trash can. “How’s Archie?”

“Fever’s down, blood pressure is up, and he’s sleeping like a baby.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Noelle started toward the door.

“Want to go for breakfast?” Bryan asked.

She turned, pulse quickening. *Yes*. “When?”

“This morning when we get off.”

Noelle’s mind raced. “Are you sure?”

“Why not? Ever been to Bermuda Joe’s? They make a killer western omelet.”

“Bryan … what if someone sees us?” She knew the comment only made sense if Bryan felt the way she did. His expression told her he did.

“They’ll see a couple of nurses eating breakfast together. What’s wrong with that?”

“All right.” Her face felt flushed. “Yes.”

She slipped into the hall, fighting a smile. Minutes earlier, she’d been counting the seconds until she could crawl into bed. Now she felt like she could work another twelve hours.

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Noelle had never loved mornings, but she'd met them with sheer determination. Wake up, cup of coffee, run, shower. The routine soothed her, made it easier to swing her legs out of bed each day, but lately when her eyes opened, dread flooded her body.

The shower was on in the bathroom. That was Aiden's routine. He didn't even walk downstairs for a glass of water first. Straight to the shower.

They'd spoken little in the previous days, their encounters marked by the wary politeness of two people who didn't trust each other. When she'd arrived home after her drink with Starla, Aiden had not been there. It was after midnight when he climbed into bed, and she thought he smelled of another woman's perfume. She'd said nothing, wondering if it might be easier that way.

Noelle slipped from the bedroom and down the stairs. She started the coffeepot, drank a glass of water, then tugged on her tennis shoes and headed outside for the newspaper.

The delivery person always tucked it neatly into the mailbox. This wasn't the kind of neighborhood where newspapers were tossed onto driveways or front porches.

She pulled the *Blackwater Chronicle* from the box, glanced absently at the front page and froze.

She felt as if the wind had been knocked out of her. "No." Her eyes moved over the headline. "No, no, no."

Her hands began to shake. The paper slid through her fingers and landed in a puddle with a wet slap, muddy water splattering her white tennis shoes.

Noelle barely noticed.

Her own face stared up at her from the front page, the staff photograph taken directly from Bellerose Hospital's website.

Above it, in enormous black letters:

Is There an Angel of Death at Bellerose?

"Good morning, Noelle." The voice struck her like a cattle prod to the spine.

Noelle gasped and whirled around.

Mrs. Hershey, who'd offered the greeting, stared at her in surprise, and her usually calm cocker spaniel barked.

"Sorry, hi," Noelle called, lifting her hand, which shook madly as she attempted a polite wave.

Noelle waited for Mrs. Hershey to turn up her own driveway before she bent down and snatched the soggy newspaper from the ground. She rushed up the driveway, opened the door of her SUV and shoved the paper beneath her passenger seat.

In the house, she walked on wobbly legs to the coffeepot and poured a cup, her hand shaking too much to lift it to her lips.

Her mind seemed incapable of making sense of the horror she'd just encountered. Someone had written an article about the deaths at Bellerose and they had named her.

Aiden walked into the room, hair wet, dressed in khakis and a red button-down shirt.

"Where's the newspaper?" he asked, eyes sliding over the smooth white marble of the countertop where she usually put the newspaper every morning.

"It didn't come this morning."

Aiden frowned, took down a white mug from the cabinet, and filled it with coffee.

She forced her eyes down to her own cup of coffee, which she'd barely touched. Her stomach churned, bitter and acidic.

"Are you working today?" he asked.

Noelle shook her head. "No. Umm … I'm going to see my mother."

He nodded. "It would be nice if we could talk tonight. I think we need to make time for that."

“Okay.”

As Noelle watched Aiden back from the driveway, her pulse thrummed a relentless beat at her temples. She should have warned him.

He had a meeting that morning. They’d go over the latest news.

Noelle Radmor-Mitchell has been named as a person of interest in unexplained deaths at the Bellerose Hospital.

A knock sounded at her front door, and Noelle jumped. She stared at the hall, imagined opening the door to a mob of reporters, cameras shoved in her face.

Have you been murdering patients at Bellerose?

“Noelle,” a voice called through the door. “It’s Jim Parry.”

On shaky legs, Noelle walked to the door. She opened it and immediately burst into tears.

Jim stepped forward, wrapped his arms around her. “There, there. It’s okay.” He patted her hair, and, after her tears slowed, guided her back into the house. “I know it’s not going to help, but I brought muffins.” He held up a white paper bag.

Noelle slumped into a chair, knowing she’d likely not be eating at all that day.

“I saw the newspaper this morning.” Jim took down a coffee mug and filled it. He sat opposite her at the table. “It’s devastating, I realize that, but now is the time to dig deep and find your strength.”

“Yeah.” She didn’t know how to tell him she doubted there was any to find.

Jim’s cell phone rang. “It’s Virginia.” He looked slightly exasperated. “One moment.” He pressed the phone to his ear. “Hi Dear.”

Noelle couldn’t make out the words coming through the receiver, but the sharp, angry tone was unmistakable.

“All right, sweetheart. I understand.” Jim pulled at the collar of his shirt. “No, of course not. We’ll talk when I get home.”

He ended the call and slipped the phone into his pocket.

“Everything okay?” Noelle asked.

“Oh, yes.” He offered a reassuring smile, though it seemed a little strained. “Nothing to worry about.” He took out a muffin and slid it across the table in front of her.

Noelle didn’t touch it.

“I’ve met with hospital administrators,” Jim explained. “They don’t have a cause of death for every patient who died abruptly, but there are three confirmed cases of insulin overdose. There’s no reason that any of those patients would have been given insulin. These deaths are not natural, and they’re not an accident.”

Noelle squeezed her eyes shut, the gravity of his words dragging her lower in the chair.

Insulin.

The same drug that had killed Dan Mercer. Noelle had almost convinced herself it was a laboratory error. That she’d get an email or call and learn it was all a terrible mistake. “Are they sure?”

“Yes,” Jim said. “The police have been reviewing the files and … it’s not good. The deaths were intentional.”

“I didn’t do it. I’d never do that.”

“I know, Noelle. And I’m going to do whatever I can to prove that.”

But someone *had* done it. And now the hospital had proof. Noelle wanted to scream.

Her cell phone rang. Dr. Yates.

Jim saw the name on the screen. “Best to answer it,” he told her.

Noelle pressed the green button and held the phone to her ear. “Hello.”

“Noelle, it’s Ezra. You need to come to the house. I’ve requested a meeting with your mother’s attorneys this morning.”

Her mouth went dry.

Jim looked at her, imploring.

“All right,” Noelle told him.

“Can you be here in twenty minutes?”

“Yes.”

When Noelle arrived at her mother’s, she found Ezra sitting stiffly in a chair in the parlor. He turned his attention to Virginia.

“Virginia, could you take Grace out to the garden?”

Virginia stood, cast a quick glance at Noelle, and then moved behind Grace, wheeling her from the room.

Noelle watched them go. She wanted to touch her mother, hug her, and sob. Grace could extend no consoling words, no reassurance, but her mere presence might have offered a balm to the terror sheathing Noelle in a cold sweat.

“The attorneys should be here anytime,” Ezra told her.

Noelle sat, said nothing. She felt as if she’d just walked into the principal’s office, having been caught writing cuss words in the bathroom stall.

“Obviously, they’ll get the article removed, and a public apology will be made, which unfortunately will do little to soften the blow.”

“I would never intentionally hurt a patient.”

Ezra said nothing for a moment. The pause was excruciating. Noelle squirmed in her chair.

“Dr. Yates?” Lee poked her head into the parlor. “Charles Klein and Rebecca Shaw are here for you.”

“Send them up,” Yates told her.

A moment later, two people walked in. The man, early sixties, wore a navy suit and carried a briefcase. The woman was younger, forties perhaps, with blonde hair pulled away from her face. She also wore a suit, red, with matching red heels.

“Noelle.” Yates stood. “This is Charles Klein. He’s handled your mother’s affairs for years. And this is Rebecca Shaw.”

The woman extended her hand. “Criminal defense.”

Noelle shook her hand, aware that her own was cold and clammy.

Noelle listened as Yates and the attorneys talked. Klein had already called the *Blackwater Chronicle* and demanded they retract the article. Shaw was in contact with hospital administrators and Blackwater police.

“Mr. Klein, Dr. Yates, would you give us the room?” Rebecca asked, shifting her attention to Noelle.

Yates looked surprised. “I’m her stepfather.”

“Which is why I’m sure she’ll tell you whatever she wants you to know afterward.”

Noelle spent nearly two hours talking to Rebecca Shaw. No, that wasn't quite right. She'd spent nearly two hours being talked at by Rebecca Shaw.

The woman intimidated her. She was loud and animated, waving her hands as she paced the parlor, outlining their strategy. They would go on the offensive. They would fight back. They would not under any circumstances sit down for an interview with the police.

Noelle left the parlor and stood in the hall, her breath locked behind her ribs. She wanted to cry or scream. The endless floral wallpaper lining the hallway dizzied her.

Unable to stop herself, Noelle practically ran for the stairs, nearly tripping halfway down, catching herself only barely on the thick wooden banister.

For a second she imagined what would have happened if she'd just let go, allowed herself to tumble to the tile floor below. She'd likely not have died, perhaps been paralyzed, imprisoned in a chair next to her mother in the parlor. The thought sobered her instantly. Noelle walked slower, placing each footfall deliberately.

She burst from the house and rushed to her SUV.

She caught sight of Dr. Yates talking with the other attorney, Charles Kelin. Both men watched, wide-eyed, as she reversed too quickly, nearly struck a hedge, then shifted into drive and floored it away from the house.

Noelle knew exactly how she looked. Like a crazy person. Like someone coming apart at the seams. Like the kind of woman who might be murdering patients at Bellerose.

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Bellerose buzzed with hushed voices. Before Starla even reached Med-Surg, she clocked three police officers and one more who looked like a plainclothes detective.

Finn had called that morning. His friend Andre, an officer with the Blackwater Police Department, had mentioned a major investigation unfolding at Bellerose. That was all Starla needed to hear. She'd hung up before Finn could finish and headed straight for the hospital.

She found Carrie in the hall, her face drawn, her lips pressed tight. When Carrie's eyes landed on Starla, she looked right through her.

Starla held up a tray of monster cookies. "Brought your favorite."

Carrie frowned and shook her head. "I don't think you should be here, Starla."

"Why?" Starla played dumb. "What's going on?"

Expression troubled, Carrie stared at the nurses' station where the detective stood next to Pat. "The police are here. The rumors—remember I told you about those angel of death rumors? They think …" Her voice caught. "They think the rumors are true. That Noelle is—I mean, that someone on the floor is intentionally killing patients."

"What kind of evidence are they gathering?" Starla pushed a cookie into Carrie's hand.

Carrie took a bite, swiped at her eyes with her free hand. "Staff records, patient records. Surveillance. They're looking at every medication that was ordered, administered, or removed on those shifts. They've been doing

interviews. Apparently, they came in the middle of the night. They were here when we got on shift this morning. Lacey, from the night shift, said they questioned every single person on the ward."

Dr. Kaine appeared and went directly to the detective. He leaned in, whispered something, and the detective followed him down the hall.

Starla stared after them. It wasn't simply that they'd spoken. It was the comfort of the exchange. When had Kaine gotten so friendly with the detective investigating Noelle?

"Here," Starla thrust the tray of cookies into Carrie's hands. "Take this to the nurses' station. Maybe it will help cheer everyone up."

Carrie, face slack, nodded.

Starla slipped down the hall in the direction Kaine and the detective had gone. She stopped just short of the conference room they'd stepped into, keeping herself out of sight.

"… I spoke with her stepfather, Dr. Yates, this morning. He mentioned something I thought should be passed on. Last year, Noelle's mother was severely injured in an accident. Noelle returned to work in Oncology, and one night she attacked a man in the parking garage."

The detective said something Starla couldn't make out.

Kaine lowered his voice, forcing Starla closer to the door. "He approached Noelle at her SUV because she'd dropped her keys in the elevator. Apparently, she grabbed a baseball bat from her backseat and struck him in the face. He was hospitalized."

"Did the man press charges?"

"No. It's possible the Radmor estate paid him off. But Noelle suffered some kind of mental breakdown after the incident and was hospitalized, not at Bellerose, for several weeks. I can't give you any more details, but you need to interview Dr. Ezra Yates."

Starla backed away from the door. Noelle had attacked someone, and Dr. Yates had gone out of his way to inform Dr. Kaine while Bellerose was crawling with detectives.

When Starla arrived home, Noelle's SUV sat in her driveway. She stepped out and found Noelle in the driver's seat, pale face streaked with mascara

tears.

Noelle jumped when she saw her and burst into fresh tears, crying so hard she couldn’t speak. She thrust something through the open window toward Starla: a newspaper.

Starla turned it over and stared at the front page, stomach sinking when she saw Noelle’s photo and above that the headline: *Is There an Angel of Death at Bellerose?*

“Holy shit,” Starla said. “Why would someone print this?”

“I haven’t told Aiden,” Noelle said.

“About the newspaper? I’m sure he’ll be pissed. He probably knows the guy who wrote it.” Starla leaned in to read the byline. “Adam Francis.”

“No. I haven’t told him anything. Not about the deaths or the meetings or the hospital putting me on administrative leave.”

Starla lowered the paper and stared at Noelle. “What? I thought you told him days ago. Remember, you said he insisted you guys go out to dinner with that couple and you drank too much.”

Noelle shook her head. “I never told him. We’d already had those dinner plans … and I just … couldn’t.”

Starla’s right eye seeped, and she wiped away the tear running behind the hair loosely covering the scarred part of her face. The admission gave her an immediate flutter in her stomach. Noelle hadn’t lied exactly. Perhaps it was only a sin of omission, but such behavior revealed another layer to a person, a layer Starla had been unaware of. “Where is Aiden now?”

“At the station. He had to work today.”

“You know this is probably on the news, right? Maybe you need to call him.”

“I feel sick.”

“Not telling him is going to make it worse. Why haven’t you told him? Are you afraid of how he’ll react?”

“Of course I am,” Noelle practically shouted, another surge of tears pouring down her face. “Wouldn’t you be?”

Starla nearly said no. Wasn't marriage supposed to mean loving someone despite their darkest secrets? Then again, what did she know?

“Someone obviously tipped this reporter off,” Starla murmured aloud.

“The lawyers have already called the paper. They’re trying to make them retract the story, but it’s too late. It’s already out there.”

“You have a lawyer?”

Noelle wiped her cheeks. “Two. My mom’s attorney and this woman Rebecca Shaw.”

“Rebecca Shaw?”

“Do you know her?”

“I know of her. She’s a shark. Definitely the one to have on your side.”

“She scared me to death.”

“I bet.”

A car pulled to the curb in front of Starla’s house. A short, skinny man in Hawaiian shorts and a tie-dye T-shirt stepped out.

“Hey, Marty,” Starla called.

Marty waved.

“Noelle, I want you to meet this guy. Can you come in for a few minutes?”

Noelle stared at the man. “Who is he?”

“A friend. He’s dropping off an information packet that might help you. He has a unique perspective. He was accused of murder six years ago. It ended in a hung jury, and later DNA proved it was someone else, but he started the Haven Justice Project to help people wrongly accused of crimes.”

Marty slurped his coffee, fixing his gaze on Noelle. “So let me tell you what happens when you become suspected of murder by the police. Someone takes a scalpel to the front of your body and cuts clean down the center. They peel you open and reveal everything inside. Nothing is hidden, nothing left to the imagination.

“In the days after the accusation, everything in my life became public. Every social media post, every job listing on Indeed, every review I wrote on Yelp. That wasn’t the worst of it. The trial is where you really get exposed. Every single text message, every time I opened or closed my phone, passed a security camera, had a conversation with a friend.

“And they don’t just read the texts, they pass judgment on them. *This is what Marty meant. This GIF is cruel. This picture is attention-seeking. This comment is narcissistic.* That’s what’s coming for you, Noelle. If this story catches fire, you and everyone you love will get burned alive.”

“Jesus, Marty, I told you to soften it a bit,” Starla grumbled.

Noelle stared at them both, her already pale face completely drained, her eyes wide and unblinking.

“Especially if they think you’re one of those angel of death killers,” he continued. “The press will be salivating the instant they hear about it. Pretty, rich, white girl murders innocents. My God, there’ll be a made-for-TV movie within a couple of months.”

“They’ve heard about it,” Starla said, leaning toward Noelle to take the newspaper she clutched in both hands.

Marty looked at the headline and whistled. “Don’t waste any time, do they? At least I’m a man, which softened the blow. People expect men to kill. Women, not so much.”

“Okay.” Starla held up a hand. “Enough. Let’s talk about the Haven Justice Project.”

Marty pulled a thick binder of paperwork from his camo backpack. He thumped two fingers on the top. “This is basically a beginner’s guide to being accused of murder—what rights you have, how to document everything you remember, and what to do if the cops want to chat. Spoiler alert: don’t chat.”

“That’s what my lawyer said,” Noelle said.

“Who ya got?”

“Rebecca Shaw.”

He whistled. “She’s a viper. Good choice.”

For another hour, Marty laid out the next steps for Noelle. Starla watched her shrink further into herself, her hands curled against her stomach.

Marty left, and Starla moved to the couch next to Noelle. She squeezed her shoulder. “It’s going to be okay. It is. This is scary, but you’ll get through it.”

She wanted to mention what she’d overheard at Bellerose, Kaine describing an assault and hospitalization that Noelle’s own stepfather had revealed. Had Yates also informed the *Blackwater Chronicle*?

Noelle’s phone rang. She picked it up, eyes widening when she saw the screen. “It’s Aiden.”

“Are you going to answer it?”

Noelle stood and nodded. “I’m gonna go. I’ll call him from the car.”

“Are you sure? Maybe you shouldn’t drive right now.”

“I have to.”
Starla watched Noelle hurry out to her SUV and drive away.

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The newspaper lay face up on Starla's coffee table. She looked at the article's byline and did a quick search for the journalist's number on her phone.

"Adam Francis," a man answered.

"Adam, my name is Starla Burton. I'm working with Noelle Mitchell's defense team. I'd like to know where you got the information you used in your article for the *Blackwater Chronicle*."

"I've been advised by the newspaper not to make any statements. If you have questions, you can contact our attorney. Would you like their information?"

"No. Hold on. Back up. I'm not actually with her defense team. I'm a friend. I just want to find out who called in the tip."

"Confidential source."

"Come on. Give me something? Was it another hospital employee? There's a possibility Noelle is being framed by a co-worker. That person might also try to ruin her in public, which means they could very well have called in that tip."

"It was anonymous, came through my email."

"What's the email address?"

"I won't give you that, but it was a Yahoo account, likely a burner email."

"Did you email them back?"

"Yes."

“And they responded?”

“Once. They gave me a couple of names to verify the incidents and a picture of the notice to Noelle that she’d been put on administrative leave.”

“They had a photo of a confidential email sent to Noelle Mitchell?”

“Yep.”

“That’s an invasion of privacy.”

“According to them, they found the email printed and sitting in a community space.”

“And that’s enough to print a smear piece and splash her face on the cover of the newspaper?”

“I’d hardly call it a smear piece. I stated the facts. There have been unusual deaths at Bellerose; a nurse has been put on administrative leave pending an investigation.”

“The headline was a tad salacious, wouldn’t you say?”

“Gotta sell papers,” he said.

“At the expense of a nurse who is innocent until proven guilty?”

“Have you read the newspaper lately? I’m not trying to win a Pulitzer. I just need people to fork over their three dollars so I can stay in a job.”

“Someone handed you information specifically designed to make Noelle look like a murderer. It didn’t occur to you that her accuser might have ulterior motives?”

“Sure. It also occurred to me that somebody may have gotten tired of watching Bellerose bury unexplained deaths.”

“They aren’t burying anything.”

“Really? Because several patients died unexpectedly, the same nurse was present, and somehow the police weren’t called. That nurse also happens to have a physician for a stepfather and belongs to a family that’s donated more than a million dollars to Bellerose. You don’t see why someone might question that?”

“What I see is a witch hunt. If you’d bothered to meet Noelle before plastering her face across the front page—”

“I wonder if she’s disclosed the Elijah Shepherd incident to you?”

Starla, still talking over him, paused, “the what?”

“The Elijah Shepherd incident. The man who was hospitalized last year after Noelle Mitchell assaulted him with a baseball bat.”

Starla blinked at the newspaper, Noelle’s face staring back at her.

It was the same story Kaine had told the detective at Bellerose. A story delivered by Dr. Ezra Yates.

Starla ended the call and leaned back in her chair.

For several seconds, she didn't move.

Yates wasn't defending his stepdaughter. He was implying that the deaths on Med-Surg might be linked to a pattern of violence with Noelle.

"Explain to me what we're doing again," Finn said from the passenger seat as Starla turned onto the road that led to the Radmor estate. Her headlights illuminated the tall, dark trees bordering the properties.

"We're checking out Noelle's mother's house."

"Checking it out means what? Driving by?"

"No. I want to go inside."

"And you plan to do that by knocking on the door and asking for a tour at ten at night?"

"Not exactly." Starla pulled onto the grass not far from the gated driveway. She grabbed her dark hoodie from the backseat and slipped it over her head.

"Wait," Finn said as she jumped from the car and started jogging toward the brick wall that surrounded the property. He followed her, struggling into the second black sweatshirt she'd brought for him. It was hers, and the cuffs ended well above his wrists. "This is too tight," he muttered.

"Here, come on. Boost me up."

His eyes widened. "No. No way. This is stupid even for you."

"Fine. I'll do it myself." She walked along the wall to a thick bush and put one foot on a sturdy branch, bracing her hands against the bricks. She scrambled over the top and dropped to the ground on the other side.

A minute later Finn landed beside her, his face paler than normal, eyes huge. "This is insane," Finn whispered. "What are we doing here? How did I let you talk me into this?"

"Shhh." Starla crept toward the wall of hedges that flanked the edge of the property.

The house came into view. Lights glowed in several windows. Starla tried to identify each room. "That's the parlor where Grace usually sits,"

Starla said, pointing. “Though I’d imagine she’s in bed now.”

“Look at this place. You know they have security cameras, right? At this moment, some two-hundred-pound gorilla is probably loading his gun and getting ready to unleash a stable of Dobermans on us.”

Starla laughed under her breath. “You watch too many movies. Plus, I was here. Not a camera in sight.”

“That’s because they have enough money for those tiny cameras the size of a bug.”

In front of them, a branch snapped, and then another.

Finn grabbed Starla’s arm hard.

A squirrel darted from the bush and crossed the path in front of them.

“Jesus,” Finn breathed. He released her. “I’m going back to the car. I love you, but I’m not going to jail. One of us has to be free to bail the other one out.”

“Good idea. Listen, go park up the road on that hill. There are binoculars in my glove box. Keep an eye on the doors. If you see someone coming out of the house, text me.”

“No. Let’s both just get out of here. Okay? What happens to your consulting job if you have a record?”

“I’ll be even more valuable because I’ll understand life on the inside. Just go. I’ll be fine. I promise.”

Finn didn’t move.

“Finn, go. Honestly, you’ll be more help to me up the road.”

“What are you hoping to gain here?”

“Proof that Yates has a motive.”

“And haven’t you already found that in his financial records? Do you think you’re going to break in and find him twisting his mustache as he plots how to inherit all the Radmor money? This isn’t fucking Scooby-Doo, Starla.”

Starla walked backward toward the bushes. She blew Finn a kiss. “Text me if you see anyone.” She turned and slipped between two hedges, walking low, careful to keep her head beneath the bushes and flowers.

If she could get into the house, she might find documents to prove Yates would stand to inherit Grace’s money if Noelle was out of the way. Power of attorney forms, a will. Noelle had said Grace had a locked drawer in her office desk. Yates also had an office in the house; all were on the second floor in the same hall as the parlor.

Starla came upon the pool and slowed.

Days earlier, when she'd visited the house with Noelle, she'd glimpsed Bryan in the reflective surface. She stared at it now, the water lit by the lights embedded in the tile walls.

Grace had nearly drowned in the pool the year before. Ezra Yates had discovered her. If he'd attempted to drown Grace in the pool, why had he called an ambulance? He was a doctor. Why hadn't he just let her die?

Maybe because the money would have gone to Noelle. Or maybe he'd attacked Grace in a moment of rage and only as she neared death realized what would happen to her fortune if she died in the pool.

Starla's phone vibrated in her pocket, but before she could fish it out, she heard a door slam and the sound of walking.

Starla dropped to her belly and edged under the bush. The footsteps grew closer and then stopped right in front of her feet. Shiny black loafers, slacks. She tilted her head up and through leafy branches caught a glimpse of Ezra Yates, his expression serious as he gazed at the misty pool. He walked closer, paused at the edge, and stared into the water.

Starla didn't move.

She could no longer see his face, so she tried to discern his mood from the set of his shoulders, the tilt of his head. His chin was tucked, perhaps because he was looking into the water, or perhaps out of shame or suppressed anger. His shoulders were drawn back, almost as though he were squaring off against the pool.

As if it were the enemy.

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The doctor moved away. His footfalls faded.

A moment later, a car door slammed, and an engine started. Starla scrambled from beneath the bush, stood and caught sight of a black BMW accelerating fast down the long driveway.

When he'd turned onto the road, Starla pulled out her cell and saw the text from Finn.

Finn: *It's hard to tell from here, but I think someone walked out the front door.*

Starla: *Yates just left. I'm going into the house.*

Finn: *Like hell you are. Get back here. We're leaving.*

Starla didn't respond and ignored the incessant vibrations as she crept toward the dark house.

It wasn't empty. A person in Grace Radmor's condition could never be left alone. Virginia might be with her or some other night nurse, but Starla thought she could slip in and out undetected. If she ran into someone, she'd claim to be picking up something for Noelle.

She avoided the front door and went around the side of the house, where a set of French doors led into a large sitting room. She bypassed those and continued until she found a small door at the bottom of three steps, almost hidden in an alcove at the side of the house. Once upon a time, this would likely have been a servants' entrance.

New houses had locks that were difficult to pick. Old houses, on the other hand, did not. Her nearly two years at Meadowsweet had taught her

that.

She pulled a small zippered pouch from her pocket. Inside were a flashlight, a pair of thin metal pins, a bent paper clip, and a few other odds and ends she'd grabbed from home. The old skeleton lock was stubborn, but after a minute of fiddling, something inside shifted with a soft click.

She eased the heavy door open just wide enough to slip through before pulling it shut behind her.

Starla waited, silent, and listened.

No sudden footsteps.

She moved through the narrow space into a larger corridor that disappeared toward what Starla guessed was the kitchen. To her right, a steep staircase climbed into darkness.

She turned and headed for the front of the house. The grand staircase led directly to the floor that contained Ezra's and Grace's offices.

The house smelled of lemon polish and the faint medicinal scent of antiseptic.

At the foot of the grand staircase, she listened. Nothing but the distant hum of the air conditioner. The runner muffled her footsteps as she climbed.

At the landing, she turned toward the offices Noelle had pointed out as Grace's and Dr. Yates's. She moved to Yates's first.

The door stood closed. Starla steadied her hand as she twisted the brass knob.

The dark room smelled vaguely medicinal. Starla slipped inside and eased the door shut behind her.

The room was large and impersonal. The only light came from a green glass lamp on Yates's desk. Dark shelves held medical texts arranged by size. A leather chair sat angled toward an immaculate desk. There were no photographs, and the walls were mostly bare except for framed degrees and medical certifications.

Starla moved to the desk. A legal pad lay open, several lines scrawled across the page.

Noelle—psych eval?
Prior depression, instability, violence
If charges request independent evaluation
Grace—successor trustee
Noelle's rights?
Distribution upon death

Starla stopped.

She read the last line again.

Distribution upon death

Below it, separated from the rest:

Noelle alone with Grace? Absolutely not.

The words had been underlined twice.

Starla pulled out her phone and took a picture.

The notes did not prove Yates was involved in the murders at Bellerose, but they clearly pointed to his current focus: the Radmor estate. Whose death was he referring to? Grace or Noelle's?

And why didn't he want Noelle alone with Grace? Because he suspected her of being a killer.

Starla's phone vibrated.

Finn: *Where are you?!*

Starla sent him the photo of the note she'd found, then slipped her phone in her pocket and went through the drawers. She found nothing else connected to Grace or Noelle.

In the hall, Starla listened once more for any sounds in the house, but heard no one.

She moved to Grace's office and opened the door to complete darkness. She couldn't risk turning on a light, especially if Yates returned. He'd see it from outside.

Starla turned on her phone's flashlight. The narrow beam caught floral wallpaper, the curved back of a pale upholstered chair, bookshelves crowded with novels and small decorative boxes. The room felt softer than Yates's office, feminine.

Starla swung the light toward the far corner and froze.

Someone stood beside the window.

Her heart slammed once, hard, before her brain caught up. Not someone. A coat rack. A long red coat hung from one of its hooks, the shoulders giving it the shape of a body in the darkness.

"Jesus," Starla whispered.

She moved to the desk. A day planner sat next to a silver cup filled with pens.

Starla flipped through the leather-bound book dated the year before. Grace Radmor's last entry had been on August eighth of the previous summer. That night she'd nearly drowned, and the woman pulled from the

pool likely bore little resemblance to the one who'd written those final notes.

Grace had lovely cursive handwriting. Starla's own writing looked like something from the hand of a six-year-old.

On her last day, Grace had jotted down three appointments in her planner.

8 AM: Tennis with Lucille

12:30 PM: Lunch with J.

3 PM: Beneficiary call with Bellerose Historical Society.

Nothing else had been written.

Starla photographed the page.

She pulled open the top drawer and searched it. Nothing. The next was much the same. She crouched and found the locked drawer that Noelle suspected hid the clues to the identity of her biological father.

Starla took the paperclip from her pocket and went to work. A few seconds later, something shifted inside the mechanism.

She pulled the drawer open and aimed her phone inside. The beam moved across envelopes, several folders, an old address book, and a small black voice recorder.

Starla picked up the recorder. She considered turning it on, but not here. Not when she had no idea how loud it might be.

She slipped it into her pocket before thumbing through the files—property records and a folder that held appraisals for jewelry and artwork, complete with glossy photographs and numbers that defied belief.

Nothing at all connected to Noelle's biological father.

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Noelle walked into her house to the sound of Aiden on the phone talking fast, voice urgent.

"I know how it looks. You think I don't know that? Jesus fucking christ. It's a-"

She stepped into the kitchen and he froze, mouth still forming the next word.

"Jeremy, I have to go." Aiden pulled the cell from his ear and sat it slowly on the counter. A vein near his temple throbbed. His jaw tightened, and he stared at her for a long moment, his expression caught somewhere between anger and revulsion.

"I'm sorry. I should have told you," she said. Each word floated out and hung in the air. Useless, empty.

"Is it true?"

Her mouth fell open. "Is what true? That I'm murdering my patients?"

He braced his hands on the counter and glared at her. "Ten hours ago, I would have defended you to the ends of the earth, but now I realize you've been lying to me. You're not the woman I thought you were."

Tears welled behind her eyes.

Defend yourself.

But she couldn't. She had no energy left to tell the man she'd married she wasn't a killer.

Without another word, Noelle turned and fled from the house.

She drove recklessly, aimlessly. Tears blurred the streets.

Another barrage of phone calls from Aiden, followed by text messages.

Eventually, she found herself on the tree-lined road that led to her mother's estate. She pulled into the driveway and sat in her SUV, staring at the dark windows.

Noelle did not return Aiden's calls, but she read his texts. At first they were angry. *How could you lie to me? My career is ruined*. But they gave way to something softer. *I'm sorry, Noelle. I shouldn't be making this about me. Please come home.*

Noelle stepped from her vehicle and walked to the garage, peering through the window. Ezra's BMW did not occupy its usual spot. She breathed a sigh of relief, walked to the house and let herself in.

As she moved through the foyer, a floorboard creaked overhead in the hall that led to the parlor.

She would not have expected anyone in that part of the house. The master bedroom was in the west wing, as was Ezra's room, formerly a guest bedroom. He'd moved into it after the accident. Maybe the nurse had forgotten something in the parlor and had to retrieve it.

Noelle gazed up the grand staircase and, after a moment's hesitation, started up the steps. Another creak. This one sounded like a door, but no footsteps followed it.

Noelle frowned.

As she turned down the hall, a shadowy figure appeared before her. Noelle screamed and put her hands up.

The other person stumbled back, hit the wall and yelped. Noelle recognized the voice.

"Starla?" Noelle's heartbeat thumped in her ears as she fumbled her cell from her pocket and flipped on the flashlight.

Starla gazed at her, red-faced, wide-eyed. "Wow. This is awkward. I should probably have told you I was going to do this."

"You broke into my mother's house?"

"And into that locked desk drawer."

Noelle gaped at her. "But … why? You could have just asked me to bring you here. What if Ezra had been home? What if the nurse saw you and called the cops?"

"I was quiet, and I saw Ezra leave. I'm sorry. You're right. I should have called you."

Noelle leaned against the wall, catching her breath. She felt equal parts stunned and impressed by Starla's audacity. "I feel like I just ran a mile."

Starla continued watching her, shame-faced. "I'm truly sorry, Noelle."

Noelle blew out a breath. "It's fine. Did you find anything in the drawer?" It was hardly the most pressing question, but it was the one she most wanted to know.

"Nothing that points to your biological father."

"Maybe she was telling the truth. He was a one-night stand."

"Noelle, I went to Bellerose today, and I overheard Dr. Kaine talking to a detective."

"And?"

"He said your stepfather called him and mentioned that you attacked a man last year after your mother's accident."

Noelle's heart skipped. "He what?"

"He said the detective should check into it. The truth is that's why I came here tonight. Not to search for your dad, but to get a sense of whether Yates is behind what's happening at the hospital."

"Hello?" The voice drifted from the end of the hall that branched off into the west wing. Noelle recognized the voice of Charlotte, one of her mother's regular overnight nurses.

Noelle flipped on the hall light, washing out the shadows. Charlotte stepped into view, face pinched.

"Hi, Charlotte. Sorry to startle you. It's just me and my friend."

Charlotte lifted a hand. "I knew Dr. Yates had left and I heard voices, so I wasn't sure. Are you spending the night, Noelle?"

Noelle imagined a night in the house, tucked into her old bedroom. It wasn't appealing. Her thoughts returned to Aiden's final messages. "No. I'll be heading home in a little while."

"Okay. Well, good night."

Noelle led Starla down the opposite hall toward the east wing of the house.

She pushed open the door to her bedroom. It had been Grace's room as a girl, and Noelle had moved into it when her mother inherited the house. It remained largely unchanged, with a carved four-poster bed, silk curtains, and a delicate vanity that had belonged to Grace since childhood. When Noelle moved in, she'd simply added her own belongings around her mother's.

Noelle sat heavily on her bed and put her head in her hands. “Why would he tell the detective about that?”

Starla sat on the stool in front of her vanity. “The reporter who published that article about you mentioned it too.”

Noelle jerked her head up. She felt sick to her stomach. “He wrote about it?”

“No. I called him and tried to find the source of his information. He wouldn’t tell me, but he mentioned the tipster also told him to look into an assault in the parking garage at Bellerose.”

Noelle stood and paced away. She wanted to scream, to shrivel up and die.

The man’s face rose in her mind. Elijah.

“Elijah Shepherd,” she whispered.

“What happened?” Starla asked.

Noelle shook her head. She walked to the window and stared into the dark night. “Two weeks after my mother’s accident I went back to work. I shouldn’t have, I realize that now. But … I did, and one night I left my shift early. I didn’t feel well. I was in the parking garage and heard footsteps behind me.” The sensations of that night slipped back in. Someone moving through the darkness, stalking her. “I panicked. I thought he intended to attack me. I grabbed a baseball bat from my backseat and hit him in the face.”

Noelle massaged her breastbone, the memory of that night causing a sharp pain in her chest. When she’d spun around, she’d expected a certain face, not Elijah’s, but she’d already swung the bat, prepared to defend herself. “Elijah was at Bellerose with his wife. She’d just given birth to a little girl. He was running home to shower and saw me drop my keys in the elevator. He was just trying to give them back to me.”

“Elijah didn’t press charges?”

“No. I’m sure he intended to, but then someone must have told him what happened to my mother … he took pity on me, I guess. I wasn’t okay though. I couldn’t get out of bed. I spent a few weeks at Still Waters; it’s an inpatient mental hospital.”

“I’m familiar with it,” Starla said.

“So that’s it. That’s the story.”

“The police would have found out anyway,” Starla said. “And they can’t exactly blame you for the reaction. You were a woman alone in a dark

parking garage, and a strange man approached you. Most of us would have done the same thing."

Noelle wanted to believe her. "Yeah. Probably."

Starla leaned over and picked up one of Noelle's sandals. They were silver with thin, crisscrossing straps. Each was decorated with tiny flowers made of blue sapphires, their petals arranged around diamond centers. "These are gorgeous," Starla said.

"A birthday gift from my mother."

Starla returned the sandal to the floor and stood. "The fact that Yates called Kaine with this information about the assault, and the tipster gave that same story to the reporter, makes me think he's the one who tipped off the *Chronicle*."

"My stepfather?"

"Yes."

Noelle stared at the doorway, numb, confused. "But why would he do that?"

Starla didn't respond. She'd paused at Noelle's dresser and picked up the plush doll sitting next to her jewelry box. "Tinker Bell?" Starla asked, holding up the toy.

Warmth rose into Noelle's neck. "Yes. I loved her as a girl. When my mom and I moved here, I kept her, but my mother forced me to *grow up my room*. That's what she called it. At our other house, I had a Tinker Bell bedspread, lamp, curtains. It was over the top."

Starla stared at the doll and then set it back down.

"I cannot imagine why Dr. Yates would tell Dr. Kaine about Elijah," Noelle said.

"Maybe because he's the person murdering patients at Bellerose."

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“Jesus, I’ve been freaking out here.” Finn stared at Starla, binoculars still clutched in his hand. “I saw a car pull in and someone go into the house. I was waiting for the lights and sirens. I almost called Andre.”

“You were going to call your friend who’s a cop and tell him I broke into someone’s house?”

“Well, I’d have left that part out.”

“It was Noelle.”

“Noelle just found you in her mother’s house? Was she pissed?”

“Of course not. We’re friends, and she has bigger issues than me breaking into her mother’s house.”

Finn leaned back against his seat with a sigh. “I cannot believe you just did that.”

“Really? It doesn’t feel all that out of character to me.”

“Did you find something at least?”

Starla thought of the Tinker Bell doll, the implication, but she didn’t tell Finn. He already had suspicions about Noelle. She didn’t want to fuel them.

“I found that shady note from Yates. I don’t know if he was just thinking aloud or chatting on the phone and writing stuff down, but he’s clearly thinking about what happens to Grace’s money if Noelle gets arrested.”

“Which isn’t unusual.”

“I’m not so sure.”

Starla had spent much of the night lying in bed, the previous evening on replay in her head. The Tinker Bell stuffed doll was not proof that Noelle was Tink from Bryan's messages, and yet …

At six, she made coffee and sat at her drafting table. Yates had written a list concerning Noelle. He'd implicated her. He'd shared a story about an assault, and he might also have informed the reporter at the *Blackwater Chronicle*.

Her phone rang. Jana's name on the screen.

"Hi, Jana."

"She's on the cover of the newspaper!"

"I'm sorry?"

"The woman Bryan was dating. It's her. Noelle Radmor-Mitchell. She's on the front page of yesterday's paper."

Starla sat back. There it was. Proof positive. "She's the one you saw in Bryan's cottage?"

"Yes. Without a doubt. And did you see it? The article? They think she's killed patients at Bellerose." Jana's voice rose another octave.

"I have seen it. I'm going to speak with Noelle today and call you later. All right?"

"Do you think it means she … that she did something to my Bryan?"

Starla had no answer.

She texted Noelle.

Starla: *If you have time, come over this morning and we'll talk. I have something I should tell you.*

Noelle appeared haggard, the bluish circles beneath her eyes deeper, her skin practically translucent.

"Did you sleep?" Starla asked.

"Barely. Aiden and I were up until three talking.

"How did that go?"

Noelle yawned and rubbed her eyes. "He was angry and then … shifted into damage control. He started emailing people, making lists."

“Grab a cup of coffee,” Starla told her.

Noelle did, opting for the Winnie the Pooh mug. She sat on Starla’s couch.

“All right,” Starla said. “I hate to show you this in the middle of everything that’s happening. Especially now that Aiden is trying to help, but it would be wrong for me not to.” Starla opened her phone and clicked on the picture of Lacey climbing into Aiden’s Porsche.

She handed her phone to Noelle, who stared at the image as if she didn’t understand it. “Is that …?”

“Lacey, yes. She’s getting into Aiden’s car.”

Noelle closed her eyes, swallowed.

“I’m sorry.”

“When did you take this?” Noelle asked.

“The day we met at the sports bar for drinks. I would have shown you that night, but … I didn’t want to make things worse.”

“Why are you showing me now?”

“Because you deserve to know.”

Noelle handed the phone back to Starla and slumped back in the leather chair. “It doesn’t even matter anymore.”

“Why not?”

Noelle covered her face with her hands.

Eye blocking …

But when she pulled them away, tears streaked down her cheeks, real tears.

“There’s something else I’d like to talk about,” Starla told her. “Just give me one minute.” Starla walked to her room and retrieved the photo of Bryan. She handed it to Noelle.

Noelle’s eyes widened, and then she looked away, lifted a hand to her throat and licked her lips. The cluster of movements unsettled Starla.

“You said you worked with Bryan Carlson in Oncology. Were you friends?”

Noelle’s lips trembled before she pressed them together. It took her a moment to speak, and when she did, her voice was barely a whisper. “Not really.”

“His mother is worried about him. He went missing last year, and he’s not contacted her since.”

“You spoke to his mother?” Alarm laced her words.

Starla nodded, continued clocking Noelle's subtle behavioral shifts, several rapid eye blinks.

Noelle cleared her throat. "She said he's missing?"

"Yes. No note, no call, and he wasn't the type of person to do that. The opposite, in fact—a very reliable, predictable sort of person. No one ever talked about him on the ward? He just vanished?"

"Vanished …" Noelle echoed. "I, well … my mother had her accident, and I took a leave of absence. When I returned, I'd moved to Med-Surg. I didn't realize …" She trailed off.

Fading facts, a behavior analyst might say. One of many behaviors implying Noelle might be lying.

"Noelle, I'm your friend. If you want me to help you, I need you to be totally honest with me here."

Noelle's eyes darted toward the door, and Starla sensed she'd shifted into fight or flight.

"I'm on your side, okay?"

Starla could see Noelle was reaching her maximum cognitive load. She'd already been under the pressure of the deaths at the hospital, suspicion surrounding her, and now right after showing Noelle a photo of her husband with one of her co-workers, she'd heaped on another problem.

"Were you and Bryan dating?"

Noelle seemed frozen, eyes glued to his photograph.

Starla tried to understand the reaction. It was extreme. Perhaps merely evidence of the overwhelm currently crippling Noelle's prefrontal cortex.

"Noelle." Starla softened her voice. "Look at me."

Noelle did eventually.

"You can leave. You can stay. You can tell me to fuck off. Whatever you choose, you're in control of what happens next. Okay?"

Noelle hunched forward, put her elbows on her knees, her head in her hands, and cried.

Starla stood and grabbed a box of tissues and a plate of tinfoil-covered chocolate chip cookies. She unwrapped the cookies and set one on a napkin on the arm of Noelle's chair.

Starla had come to associate cookies with comfort during her time at Bellerose, mostly because of Leslie Hamilton. The woman had baked for the Freak Floor nearly every week, a simple act of kindness that had meant

more than Leslie probably realized. And now she was dead, and the nurse suspected of killing her looked like a cornered animal.

After a while, Noelle lifted her head up. She dabbed her eyes with a tissue, but didn't touch the cookie.

"Yes," Noelle said finally. "I knew him. More than knew him. We had an affair."

Starla nodded. She didn't speak. The questions piled up in her head, but she sensed if she left the space open, Noelle would fill in the gaps.

"It started at Bellerose. We were both working in Oncology, and I was … struggling. I missed Labor and Delivery, but I wanted my mother and Dr. Yates to … approve, I guess. It seems so stupid now. It was Dr. Parry who helped me get into Oncology, but"—Noelle rotated her wedding ring—"I wasn't very good. I made a few mistakes, and one particular nurse, Trent, seemed to hate me. Bryan started going out of his way to make me feel welcome, help me with stuff I hadn't learned, and … one thing led to another. We went out as a group a few times. Bryan had several friends on the floor, and they'd go to karaoke and trivia, and dancing. He loved to dance."

Starla smiled.

"In the beginning, it was a like a fairytale"—Noelle swallowed—"and then … it became a horror story. He started stalking me. Emailing and texting me these horrible things, threatening to out me to Aiden."

Starla sank back, stunned. "Hold on. Back up. He started stalking you?"

"The last good night was the night before my mom's accident, and weirdly, we went to her pool. She and Dr. Yates had gone out of town for the night. Bryan and I swam and"—Noelle blushed—"had a really beautiful, romantic evening. Afterwards, we went to his house, the one he was renovating, and we … talked for hours. I genuinely thought I had fallen in love.

"I left his house after midnight. Aiden thought I was out with a few nurses from Bellerose celebrating a birthday. I had the next day off, so I didn't see him at the hospital. And then that night was the night my mother nearly drowned. I woke up to an urgent call from Dr. Yates. He'd found my mother in the pool.

"Everything changed in an instant. I saw Bryan in passing at Bellerose the night after my mother's accident. My mother was in the ICU and Aiden and I had gone down to the cafeteria for coffee. Bryan had just picked up a

sandwich, and our eyes met and …" Noelle's forehead wrinkled. "There was something strange in his face. At the time, I just assumed he'd heard about my mom and I was there with Aiden, which made the whole situation so bizarre and terrible, so of course he didn't know how to act, but then … that night, I got the first crazy text.

"I was completely … just …" Noelle picked at her fingernails, then shoved her hands beneath her legs. "Shocked. It was like we were in this amazing place and then"—Noelle snapped her fingers—"he flipped a switch."

"Did you tell anyone? Call the police?"

Noelle squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. "It would have all come out, the affair. My marriage would be over. I couldn't do it."

"Do you still have the messages?"

Noelle frowned and shook her head. "No. God no. I'd already been deleting our messages because, well … Aiden. Not that he ever looked at my phone, but just in case. Bryan kept threatening to tell Aiden about the affair. He said he'd destroy me. That song that came on in the car the day we went to hospice, that 80s song about obsession, he sent that to me like a hundred times."

Starla chewed her lip, tried to reconcile Noelle's story with the man she'd come to believe she knew. "Did anything happen? Something that set Bryan off?"

"No." Noelle shook her head. She lifted the cookie and nibbled the edge. "I swear it. My mother had the accident, and the next thing I know, Bryan was a completely different person. I felt"—Noelle rested a hand on her chest—"destroyed. I was ready to leave Aiden. Bryan and I talked about it. I was getting divorced, and we were going … to be together."

"What exactly did his messages say?"

"Oh, God. Umm … that I was a whore, an adulterer, a terrible nurse, a terrible human being. That he was going to expose me. He even called my mother a whore. I had told him about not knowing my father and her story of the one-night stand." Noelle shook her head.

"Maybe he had a mental breakdown," Noelle continued. "Or maybe he'd been that way all along, this secretly horrible person. I lived in fear of him showing up at our house or at the network to confront Aiden. I stopped eating, sleeping. Aiden thought it was stress about my mother." A tear

slipped down Noelle's cheek. "That's why I attacked Elijah. That night in the parking garage, I thought he was Bryan."

Noelle's story upended everything Starla believed about Bryan Carlson. In her mind, she saw his mother, her overwhelming love for her son, her desperation to find him. "And you didn't tell anyone?"

"No. I felt as though I couldn't trust my own instincts. I had fallen in love with a predator, been ready to uproot my whole life for him. It was … I cannot even describe it. I wanted to die. I thought about it. About killing myself."

"You never confronted Bryan?"

"I never saw him again. He quit at the hospital and, well, you know, he disappeared."

"He didn't quit, though," Starla said. "He vanished in the middle of a shift."

Noelle's eyes shifted to the floor. "Yeah."

"Noelle, do you think he could be behind what's happening at Bellerose?"

Noelle crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head. "Yes. I've suspected that."

Starla tried to discern what Noelle was thinking. She had a guarded quality to her face. And had been shaking her head as she confirmed the possibility of Bryan's involvement in the Bellerose deaths. If she believed he was involved, the appropriate head movement was a nod.

Noelle looked at his photograph again. "Starla, how do you know about Bryan? Why did you talk to his mother?"

An image of Bryan rose in her mind, sitting in the chair in the corner of her hospital room, watching her. It had all begun there, in that strange, inexplicable moment. But why? What had it meant? "I think I saw him at Bellerose."

Noelle stiffened. "You did?"

"I honestly don't know. This is going to sound nuts, but yes, I thought I saw him, but … I believed he was a ghost."

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Bryan

July 2—The Year Before

“It’s Halloween in July on Friday at Legends. You have to come,” Bryan told Noelle in the break room at Bellerose.

She took a sip from a Styrofoam cup of coffee. “This Friday?”

“Yep. Sexy costumes. A fog machine. Witch’s brew sangria.” He raised an eyebrow. “It’s going to be wicked. Will you go?”

“That depends. What sexy costume are you wearing?”

“Oh, boy, you aren’t going to be able to keep your hands off of me.” He opened his phone and turned it to face her.

She laughed. “An inflatable T-Rex?”

“I call him Sexy Rexy.”

“I don’t have a costume.”

“Wear your scrubs. Voilà, you’re a nurse.” He tried not to sound too eager, but suspected Noelle recognized how much he wanted her there.

She sighed. “I’ll try.”

“That’s all I ask.”

“Hello, lovely Mother, what are you baking, or should I say burning this evening?” Bryan bumped his hip against his mother’s in the kitchen of her house.

Jana laughed and swatted him. “Cookies. And they’re not burned. I took them out, and they were practically mush. Ten minutes is not enough time.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Whatever you say. Can I leave Doris with you tonight? It’s Halloween at Legends.”

“Of course. Doris is always welcome.” Jana frowned. “As long as you tell her to stop humping my footstool.”

Bryan laughed. “I can’t help it if she’s fallen in love with your footstool.”

Jana nodded. “I guess even Doris needs to have a little fun now and then.”

“Are you waiting for someone?” Lacey, dressed in a skimpy angel costume, asked Bryan. She danced in front of him, swiveling her hips, brushing her feathered wings against his tiny dinosaur arms.

He’d looked at the door more times than he cared to admit.

“Uh, yeah. My friend Tony said he might stop by.” Tony had in fact said, *I’d rather get hit by a truck than go to Legends in a costume.*

“I’m gonna grab another sangria,” Bryan told Lacey, backing into the crowd. “Want one?”

She pouted then shook her head no, holding up her mostly full glass.

Bryan walked to the bar. He squeezed between a group of girls dressed as Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders and ordered his drink.

As he sipped it, eyes once more searching for the door, someone pulled his inflated tail. He turned to see Noelle dressed in a short, glittery green dress with pale blue wings clipped to her back. A blonde wig, done in a bun, covered her usually dark hair.

“Wow! Tinker Bell, you look amazing.”

She grinned. “I ordered it online.”

“It’s perfect, and we’re both green. We match! Want my sangria? I can order another one.”

“Let’s share this one.” She took it and sipped from the edge. He watched her lips on the glass.

They returned to the dance floor, both trying to maintain an outward appearance of something platonic, but every time their eyes met, Bryan felt a rush of something he’d never experienced before.

Noelle was married—not just married, she was married to Aiden Mitchell, a well-known news anchor in Blackwater. Bryan had never been interested in a married woman. He knew better, and yet …

Noelle twirled in front of him, playfully taking his little arms and pulling him close, closer than perhaps she intended. They bumped against each other.

Noelle flushed, and for an extended moment their eyes locked.

Lacey, who’d been dancing nearby, stared at them. Bryan backed up a bit and danced with Tia. He saw the confusion in Noelle’s face, but he slipped over to her a moment later and whispered in her ear. “Just making sure no one gets the wrong idea.”

Bryan and Noelle lingered in the parking lot after their coworkers had climbed into their cars and driven away. Bryan had peeled off the top half of his costume, leaving it hanging loosely around his waist, the T-Rex's deflated head resting on the pavement.

Lacey hung around after the others left, but finally trudged to her own car and disappeared down the street.

“She’s into you,” Noelle said.

Bryan wrinkled his forehead. “Who?”

“Lacey. She wanted to go home with you tonight.”

“I didn’t want to go home with her.”

Noelle looked at him, and for a moment neither of them spoke. The air between them was electric.

Noelle broke eye contact, gazing at the ground. “Thank you for inviting me.” She pulled off her Tinker Bell wig and shook her brown hair loose. A lock fell across her left eye.

Bryan stepped closer, tucking it behind her ear. “Thank you for coming.”

Her neck and cheeks flushed. She swallowed and lifted her eyes back to his. “I really enjoyed it.”

He wanted to kiss her. Every fiber of his being urged him forward. Urged him to close the gap, lean in.

He didn’t.

Noelle was married, and if anything unfolded between them, he wanted her to be sure.

“I’ll see you at work,” Noelle said. She walked backward toward her SUV.

Bryan watched until she reached her driver’s side door, then walked to his pickup. He climbed out of the bulky T-Rex costume, bundled it into his arms, and tossed it onto the backseat. He was reaching for the driver’s door when he heard his name.

“Bryan?”

He turned. Noelle stood in front of him, close enough that he could see the uncertainty in her eyes.

He reached for her, slipped his arms around her waist, and drew her against him. He searched her face, saw a longing that matched his own.

Bryan leaned down and kissed her.

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“A ghost?” Noelle’s voice had taken on a new, strained quality.

Starla wondered if she should have left out her belief that Bryan had appeared not as a man, but something else.

Noelle’s cell phone shrilled, and she took it from her purse. “It’s Aiden.” She stood abruptly. “I’m going to take it. I should go.”

She was gone before Starla could object.

Starla stared at the closed door. Noelle was a runner. When things got difficult, she fled rather than face them head-on. But would she actually answer Aiden's call, or had it simply provided a convenient excuse to escape Starla's questions?

Starla picked up the framed photo of Bryan. A tightness gripped her chest.

A stalker? A psychopath?

No.

Not only did she not want to believe it, none of those terms fit the man she’d come to know.

But Noelle had dated him, the flesh-and-blood Bryan. Starla’s version was merely a fantasy.

Had it been Bryan all along? The real, alive and well, Bryan Carlson somehow sneaking into the hospital and killing patients as some kind of sideways revenge against Noelle?

Starla did not shy away from far-fetched theories. The simplest answer was often the right one, but now and then something really twisted crossed

her desk, and she'd be remiss not to consider the possibility that Bryan was behind all the horrible things happening at Bellerose.

And if those things were true, Bryan was not haunting Starla—offering her little clues, helping her investigate the deaths.

He was behind them.

Starla closed her eyes and tried to get back to her first night in the hospital after her suicide attempt. The hours had been fragmented, but the memory of him held strong. The man sitting in the chair in the corner, hazel eyes luminous, as he watched her.

Finn had challenged what Starla had seen, pointing out her variety of meds, her potentially delirious state in the hospital.

Had she imagined it all?

Starla's phone dinged with a new email. She opened it and found the autopsy report for Melanie Yates attached.

According to the report, Melanie had suffered a brain aneurysm and fallen down the stairs. The aneurysm had killed her, not the fall.

Did that exonerate Yates? Hardly. But it undermined her theory that he'd murdered his first wife, and with it, the notion that he'd attempted to kill Grace.

Her front door creaked open. Finn stuck his head in. "Are you decent?"

"Yates didn't murder his first wife," Starla announced. "And Noelle and Bryan Carlson were having an affair."

Finn walked in, his expression thoughtful. "Your ghost?"

"Yes. Noelle was the mystery woman."

"Huh. That's a twist. Did her husband know?"

"I doubt it."

"Bryan didn't run off with the secret lover then."

"No. And Noelle told me he turned on her after her mother's accident and started stalking her."

Finn's eyebrows shot up. "Do you think he's the one killing patients at Bellerose?"

Starla stood and paced away from her table. "I just don't get it. They're falling in love and then, out of nowhere, he goes full-blown stalker before vanishing without a trace, only to pop up a year later and start murdering patients on her floor as some kind of revenge? But revenge for what? She didn't break up with him, didn't tell him she intended to stay with her husband."

“Midlife crisis, psychotic break, went off his meds. There’s a hundred reasons.”

“But the way his mom described him … I just can’t make the connection.”

“Come on.” Finn stared at her. “Ted Bundy’s mom stood by him until he confessed. You can never trust the judgment of the mother; they don’t want to be responsible for a monster. It’s easier to blame literally everyone else—cops, victims, lawyers, but not their beloved son.”

Starla frowned. “You’re not wrong, but I’ve talked at length with Jana Carlson. She’s no Mrs. Voorhees. She’s totally transparent, has opened up his cottage and house completely to me. She’s just desperate to know what happened to him. I’ve scoured this guy’s tablet. It’s PG. We’re talking construction YouTube videos and Adam Sandler movies.”

“Probably deletes his history so people don’t know he’s a whack job.”

“But I saw him. I saw him in places he couldn’t be. In the mirror, in Shannon’s room.”

“Here’s a theory,” Finn offered. “Let’s say he’s alive, and he did actually come into your room the night of the suicide attempt. You weren’t exactly in your right mind. The drugs, blood loss, and … everything else. So you see him, and it plants this idea of him, and he becomes a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. You’re convinced you saw a ghost, and now you’re tuned into any little thing that might support the new belief. The balloon in the hall, his face in the mirror—you keep thinking you see him, but maybe you’re literally transposing his face onto other people, and each encounter reinforces your theory.”

“So I’ve imagined every night except the first one?”

“Not necessarily. Not if he’s the one killing patients on Med-Surg. You may actually be catching glimpses of him.”

“But no one else is?”

Finn shrugged. “You’re not like everyone else. You’re perceptive in a way most people aren’t, and ever since the first night you saw him, you’ve been looking for him.”

“Noelle is terrified of him. He’s coming onto Med-Surg and killing her patients, and she’s not noticing him?”

“He might be more careful to hide from Noelle.”

“But not from me?”

“As far as he’s aware, you’re another patient. Remember Dr. Moss from the Freak Floor? He used to say his doctor’s coat was an invisibility cloak. Patients are in a bubble of their own circumstances. Bryan is likely assuming you fit into that category.”

Starla sat in the leather chair and blew out a breath. “Where is he then? And why hide for a year?”

“Maybe he skipped town, started over somewhere else, but the thing with Noelle kept eating at him. He wanted to punish her, or whatever, so he came back. If it’s him, Noelle is probably in danger, and if he’s aware of what you’ve been up to, you are as well.”

Starla called and texted Noelle throughout the afternoon with no response. Finally, she climbed into her car and drove to Noelle’s house, thoughts of a deranged Bryan running on repeat in her head. Even as she considered the possibility, her heart resisted it.

Noelle’s SUV sat in her driveway. Starla knocked on the front door. After several minutes, Noelle opened it.

“Listen, I know you have a lot going on, and I’m sorry to just show up, but you could be in danger, Noelle. If”—Starla dropped her voice—“Bryan is killing patients, you need to tell the police what happened with him.”

Noelle stood in the doorway of her giant, pristine house. She’d clearly been crying again, and her narrow shoulders seemed to fold forward as she stared at the floor rather than into Starla’s face. Noelle said nothing.

“Hello?” Starla said. “Did you hear me?”

Footsteps echoed down the hall, and seconds later Aiden appeared. As usual, he looked as if he’d come from the set of a men’s face cream commercial. He stepped between Noelle and Starla.

“Starla, Noelle appreciates your concern,” he said. “We both do. But it’s in her best interest right now to focus on limiting her circle. Understand?”

Starla, tempted to take a step back, held her ground. “Umm, no. I don’t understand. I’ve been helping her. I *am* helping her.”

He smiled coolly. “Your help”—the word dripped with disdain—“has frankly only hurt her. Her association with you is not a benefit to her at this time.”

“Excuse me? Noelle?” Starla tried to peer past him, but he blocked her. “Tell him, Noelle. I’ve been looking into the deaths at Bellerose for weeks.” Starla glared at Aiden. “She didn’t even tell you, her husband, what was happening, and I have a pretty good sense of why.”

His smile remained unchanged, a waxy, static expression that made Starla’s skin crawl. “You need to leave, or I’m going to call the police.”

Starla’s mouth fell open. “Noelle, you’re an adult woman. Do not let him do this.”

But Noelle had shrunk further away.

Crying, she turned and disappeared back into the house.

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Starla struggled to focus as she drove away from Noelle's house. Her body buzzed with fury.

She passed Bellerose and slowed, her thoughts once again on Bryan. Starla made a u-turn, parked and took the elevator to the Oncology floor.

Tia, the nurse she'd originally spoken to about Bryan, stood at the nurses' station.

"Hi. Do you remember me?"

Tia's eyes drifted to the right side of Starla's face. "Of course."

"I had a couple of follow-up questions about Bryan Carlson. Do you have a minute to chat?"

"Sure."

"I'm trying to narrow down Bryan's last actual day of work. Any chance you could find that out for me?"

Tia scrunched her forehead, then nodded slowly. "You know what might help? My planner. One sec." The nurse disappeared down the hall, emerged several minutes later with a thick planner, notes poking from the pages. "It's a two-year planner, which seemed great in the beginning, but now is frankly unwieldy." Tia flipped back to the previous August. "All right, let's see here."

Starla scanned the days. Tia was a meticulous keeper of events. Not only did she mark appointments and her work schedule, but during her

scheduled shifts she made notes about patients, co-workers, and other goings-on at Bellerose.

Lacey's birthday—Harriet brought cupcakes.

Ms. Northom rang the bell!!!

Trivia after work with Bryan, Lacey, and Noelle.

"Lacey used to work on this floor? Lacey from Med-Surg?" Starla asked.

"Yep. She changed floors about eight months ago. 'Too depressing here,' she said, though everything that's happening on Med-Surg sounds a lot more depressing to me."

"You've heard about the patient deaths then?"

"Who hasn't? The entire city of Blackwater knows. Although I can't believe they think it's Noelle. That blows my mind."

"You worked with Noelle?"

"Yes. Though she didn't last long in Oncology. Her mother had an accident and most of us thought she'd left Bellerose for good, but then she returned as a nurse on Med-Surg. And now they suspect her of killing patients. Honestly, I don't know what to think."

In Tia's planner, Starla caught Noelle's name scrawled in a note.

"Wait." Starla bent over the woman's planner. "On August eighth, Noelle was two hours late for her night shift?"

Tia pushed her glasses up, read the entry, and nodded. "I guess so. If I wrote it down, it happened. This is the only way I keep track of my life. Notes on everything."

Starla knew the significance of August eighth. Grace Radmor, Noelle's mother, had nearly drowned in the pool that night. Dr. Yates had found her in the water, unconscious, and essentially brain-dead in the early morning hours of August ninth. "Do you have any idea where she was? Was it planned, or …?"

Tia shook her head. "Unfortunately, I don't have that level of detail. I'm not sure why I even jotted that down. Usually, I'm not concerned about what the other nurses are doing." She continued staring at the entry, frowning. "Hold on, wait. You know what? I actually remember this.

"Wow. God, I'm impressed. It was Karen's birthday, and Noelle had offered to bring cupcakes, so we were kind of scrambling to get her something. I called Noelle half a dozen times but didn't get her. Then

around nine she came walking in, apologized for being late, and that was that."

Starla's mouth had gone dry. She thought of Finn's comments about Noelle being exactly the type of person who might become an angel of death, disempowered, needing control—perhaps searching for attention, recognition, or excitement. Had it been Noelle all along? And had her downward spiral begun with the attempted murder of her own mother?

Bryan's face appeared in her mind then. What about him? Had Noelle eliminated him as well? It felt both plausible and impossible. What if the entire stalker story was made up? A lie to justify Bryan's disappearance?

"What did Noelle say? Any mention of where she was?"

Tia stared at the planner. "I honestly can't remember."

"How about Bryan Carlson? Was he on shift that night?"

"No. I'm sure he wasn't because the nurses who were here huddled up in the break room to see who could run out for cupcakes." Tia flipped another page. "Okay, here we go." Tia tapped the page. "'August thirteenth: Bryan MIA in the middle of shift.'"

Starla added the date to her phone. "Were you working the night Bryan left?"

"Yes. And it was hectic on the floor. Not only had Bryan taken off, but we were short-staffed because of what happened to Noelle's mom. It was a stressful couple of weeks."

"Did anything set him off? Did he say he was leaving?"

"I wish I could remember. His mother asked me that, too. I honestly don't know. I definitely called and texted him a few times in the days after he took off, but he never responded. And then one day, our charge nurse said he'd emailed her he was quitting."

"And that was it? No contact again?"

"Nope."

"Have you ever thought you've seen him around the hospital? Like in passing?"

Tia shook her head. "No. And I'll tell you right now, if I had run into him here at Bellerose or anywhere else in Blackwater, I would've given him a piece of my mind. He ghosted me. I considered him a good friend. Frankly, it still hurts to think about."

Starla left the hospital and headed for her car, head buzzing with the news that Noelle had been two hours late to work the night of her mother's

accident.

Halfway across the parking lot, a man whistled. “Wowza!” the man called out.

Starla kept on, head bowed, hair obscuring the scarred side of her face and neck.

“Whoa, gorgeous, what’s the hurry? Can’t you—”

Starla whipped around, hair sweeping back, revealing her face.

The man’s word stopped in midair. He didn’t even close his mouth. Just stared as if she’d thrown off her cloak to reveal Medusa herself, had frozen him with a look.

“Go fuck yourself,” she spat, turning back and walking on, harder, ready to shove anyone who stepped in her way.

Starla had fallen for a killer’s lies before. Maybe she was destined to. Murder was threaded through her DNA, written into the very blueprint of who she was. Perhaps it had blurred some internal line, made monsters harder for her to recognize.

She sat at her drafting table and attempted to fit the pieces together. She wrote Noelle’s name on a sticky note and pinned it to the top of her list of suspects.

Noelle had been MIA from Bellerose the night her mom nearly died.

Starla chewed the tip of her pencil, willing some stroke of insight to appear.

When she’d broken into the Radmor house, Grace’s planner had been open on her desk, but there’d been no mention of a scheduled visit from Noelle.

But there had been a voice recorder.

It was still tucked into the pocket of the jeans she’d worn that night. Starla dug them from the hamper and retrieved the little device.

She connected it to her laptop and opened the collection of audio files. Each was labeled with a date, nothing more.

She selected one at random, recorded several months before Grace’s accident.

Grace’s voice emerged.

“Dinner reservations at the club for Ezra’s birthday. Call Miranda to arrange. Respond to the charity director’s email requesting a meeting about the art museum project on Monroe Street. Ask Noelle about Aiden playing in the Smith Memorial golf tournament.”

Starla listened to several more recordings. Most were little more than to-do lists, occasionally interrupted by Grace’s personal observations.

She scrolled to the last file recorded on August eighth of the previous summer, the night Grace had nearly drowned.

Starla clicked play.

“The Women of Influence luncheon is Friday at noon. Tennis Saturday morning with Virginia.”

A faint sound interrupted the recording. A door opening, perhaps.

“Oh, Noelle. Hello. I didn’t know you were stopping by.”

Starla sat up straighter.

Noelle responded, but her voice was distant, the words indistinct.

Starla increased the volume to its maximum and leaned closer to the laptop.

“What is that?” Grace demanded.

“It’s a family DNA kit. All ready to send in.”

“For what purpose?”

“Because I deserve to know who my father is and if you’re not going to tell me, I’ll find out for myself.”

“Noelle, you’re a grown woman. Stop acting like an insolent child.”

“Who was my father?”

A rustle of papers followed, then the scrape of something against the floor. A chair, perhaps. Grace pushing back from her desk.

“Noelle, what is this? You barge into my office to interrogate me?”

“I need to know. I’ve always needed to—” Noelle’s voice faded. Starla thought she heard it break, as though she’d begun to cry.

“Darling, I’ve told you. It was a brief affair. He isn’t part of our world.”

“No more fucking lies.” Noelle’s voice was suddenly louder. Closer to the recorder.

“Noelle!” Grace snapped, her tone sharp and reprimanding. *“You are completely out of line.”*

A scuffling sound.

Something struck the floor, and the sound of breaking glass filled the room.

The recording stopped.

Starla stared at the file. She rewound it and played it a second time.

Had Grace reached over and pressed the stop button? Or had the recorder been knocked against something during a struggle?

A struggle between Noelle and her mother on the very night Grace had later been found unresponsive in the swimming pool.

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Bryan
July 8—The Year Before

“Where are we going?” Noelle asked Bryan, sliding down in his passenger seat. “We can’t be seen together.”

“Don’t worry. This place is a hole in the wall. Nobody you know will see you. Now relax. Bon Jovi’s on.” Bryan turned up the radio. Bon Jovi belted out ‘Livin’ on a Prayer.’ From the corner of his eye, he caught Noelle leaning back, mouth silently moving along to the words.

He tapped the wheel and sang loud, bouncing in his seat. He loved Bon Jovi.

When they arrived, Bryan parked under a shade tree and turned off the truck.

Noelle stared at the sign posted near the door. “This place is literally called Hole in the Wall?”

Bryan laughed. “What did I tell you? Wednesday night is 80s Hair Bands Night. This is *the* dance party.”

Noelle wrinkled her nose. “*The* dance party? This place looks like somewhere people come to drown their sorrows.”

“Sure, by dancing their asses off. What do you think we’re here for? Come on.” Bryan killed the engine and jumped out. He and Noelle walked into the nearly empty bar. She stared at the large, empty dance floor covered in peanut shells.

They slid into a booth. Bryan handed Noelle the drink menu. Their fingers brushed, and he felt that familiar jolt at even the most fleeting of contact. For a while, Noelle's eyes shot to the door every time it opened, daylight spilling into the shadowy bar. Slowly, she relaxed.

Within an hour, the dance floor was full.

The band started their next song, 'I Want to Know What Love Is' by Foreigner.

"Shall we?" Bryan grabbed her hand.

Noelle laughed and let him pull her to the floor.

"What did you do last night?" Tia asked Bryan. "I called you like three times. The Coach had trivia night, and do you want to know what the topic was? *Grey's Anatomy*. We'd have killed it."

Bryan almost told her. Almost blurted out that he and Noelle had gone dancing at the Hole in the Wall. Instead, he lied. "Worked on the house. I'm trying to get that bathroom tile done. Left my cell in the truck so I wouldn't be yapping all night instead of working."

"Well, you lost us two free appetizers and a twenty-dollar gift card."

Bryan laughed. "That is tough to hear."

Noelle wasn't on shift that night, but Bryan thought of nothing except her.

Just after ten she texted him as he sat at the nurses' station updating charts.

Noelle: I'd like to see you tomorrow.

Bryan: *Yes, please!*

Lacey walked over and sat in the chair beside him. "Bryan, I can't believe you missed trivia." Lacey pouted.

His phone lit up.

Noelle: *I miss you.*

Bryan grinned.

Lacey frowned and leaned over as if trying to catch a glimpse of his messages. He cupped his hand around his phone to block it. "Yeah. Next time," he told her.

"Promise?" Lacey fiddled with the collar of her scrubs.

He glanced up from his cell and nodded. “Yeah. Sure.”

“I can’t believe you’re doing all this work yourself,” Noelle breathed.

Bryan and Noelle had met in a strip mall parking lot where most of the stores had closed in previous years. From there, they’d driven Bryan’s pickup to the farmhouse he’d been renovating for the previous year. It still had a long way to go, but he’d mostly gutted the first floor and begun the slow rebuild.

He took Noelle’s hand, and she followed him into the house. “It’s a little dusty, but it’s going to be gorgeous. I’ve stripped off the carpet and linoleum to refinish the original hardwood. Tongue and groove for the walls.”

“It’s amazing.”

He turned to look back at her. “Really? I mean, I know it’s rough, but …”

“I love it. The property. The house clearly has good bones. Isn’t that what you say when it’s built well?”

“It is.”

“What’s upstairs?”

“I haven’t tackled that yet, but that’s by design. Sometimes I’ll spend a weekend here with Doris. I have a bed up there …” He paused at the startled look on Noelle’s face.

“Who’s Doris?” she asked.

“Oh.” He laughed. “She’s my golden retriever. Best dog on the planet. You’ll meet her soon.”

“I’d like to see upstairs.” Noelle’s hand tightened in his own.

He walked up first and pushed open the door to the bedroom. When he turned back, Noelle had unbuttoned the top buttons of her dress.

She stepped close and pulled his shirt over his head.

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Starla imagined confronting Noelle.

If she'd tried to kill her own mother, did that mean she was responsible for the deaths at Bellerose too?

If so, Noelle wasn't simply a murderer.

She was a serial killer.

"This also means she killed Bryan," Starla murmured.

Except it didn't. Not necessarily.

She had no proof Noelle had hurt Grace, much less Bryan. But Noelle had lied about the affair. She'd lied about what had happened the night of her mother's accident.

And Starla had learned long ago that liars rarely confined their lies to a single subject.

So what else had Noelle lied about?

The obituary?

The person following her in the parking garage?

The figure outside the restaurant?

Had any of it actually happened?

Or had Noelle been constructing a story all along, scattering breadcrumbs that led anywhere but back to herself?

Finn showed up with takeout just after six.

“Tandoori chicken and vegetable curry.” He slid the Styrofoam containers onto her coffee table. He walked to the bathroom, and Starla saw him pause outside her extra bedroom.

When he returned, he sat on the couch, releasing a big breath. “Man, was it a day.”

Starla grabbed plates and silverware and sat in her leather chair. “What happened?”

“A fourteen-year-old I’ve been working with got picked up today for flashing a gun at school.”

“Shit. Fourteen?”

“Yeah. It’s not looking good for him.”

“That sucks. What did he get in trouble for originally?”

“Assaulting his stepdad. He claims there’s abuse in the home, but it’s not substantiated.”

“Do you think he’s telling the truth?”

Finn nodded. “Yeah. I do. But now he’s facing another jail placement for the gun.” Finn scooped chicken onto a plate. “Let’s talk about something else. What’s happening with Noelle?”

“Fuck Noelle.”

“Huh. Okay. That’s new.”

Starla thought of Aiden with his bullshit perfect face and his placating smile. “I went to her house yesterday, and her husband threatened to call the police on me.”

“That’s an interesting turn of events. Was Noelle there?”

“Yep. And she didn’t say shit.”

“Does that mean Noelle now has a place on the suspect list?”

“You were right, okay? I’d be stupid not to consider her, especially now that I know she lied about Bryan.”

“And it’s not hurt feelings pointing you at Noelle?”

“I don’t want it to be her. I hope it’s not her, but I’m in too deep to back out now.”

“I don’t think you are.”

“I just want to know the truth. And there’s other stuff … Noelle went to her mother’s house the night of her accident. They had a fight. I heard it on Grace’s voice recorder.”

“How do you have Grace’s voice recorder?”

“I took it the night I broke into the house.”

“You stole it?”

“It’s not like I’m going to hawk it at the pawnshop. It’s evidence I collected. I’ve downloaded the files, and I’ll happily return the recorder.”

“What are you saying? You think Noelle hurt her mother?”

“She was late for her shift at Bellerose that night. We talked about her mother’s accident, and she did not disclose she went there. I doubt anyone knows.”

“That doesn’t mean she hurt her mother.”

“Now you’re on her side?”

Finn sighed. “I’m not on anyone’s side. Your emotion is clouding your judgment. That’s been the problem from the start. First, it was affection for her, and now it’s anger. And what about Bryan? How does he fit into all this?”

“It stands to reason if Noelle tried to kill her mother, she may have actually killed Bryan.”

“But why?”

“Because she’s a psychopath. That’s what they do. There is no reason, at least not one that makes sense. It’s a compulsion, a sickness.”

“I find it hard to believe you genuinely think Noelle is a psychopath.”

“I don’t know what she is.”

“You don’t look like you’ve slept.”

“I did. From about three to five a.m.”

“Starla—”

She held up her hand. “Finn, just … give me a break, okay? I’m right there.” She held thumb and index finger close together. “I’m so close.”

“So close to what?”

“This. Figuring out what happened.”

He sighed and stared at her. “You were going through photo albums.”

“What’s your point?”

“That you’re not in a good place. Remember, we talked about this before. There are things you do, patterns.”

“Patterns aren’t always meaningful, you know.”

“As you sit here literally searching for patterns.”

“This is different.”

Starla woke and knew it would not be a good day.

The tentacles of a dream held her in their alien grasp. Her mother squeezed her hand tight, a single word, a name—*Dean*—slipping from her mouth. His given name, his birth name. Starla's mother never used it, but she'd uttered it then. It was the last word she'd ever spoken.

The dream had not ended there, but inched forward into those suspended slow-motion seconds of looking up, seeing her dad grizzled, his eyes bloodshot, something clasped in his hand as he swung his arm forward and loosed the monster. It hit her mother full in the face, splashed toward Starla, a liquid devil eating her alive.

Starla curled on her side, pulling a pillow against her belly.

What role had fate played in that day? It was a question she'd contemplated frequently, obsessed over even, at various times in her life.

If she and her mother had not gone to the mall that day, but opted instead to spend the day at home, cooking and watching movies—if the acid purchased by her father had not arrived on the very morning he received divorce papers—might Nadia still be alive? Would Starla be living an entirely different existence?

She'd seen a thousand examples of how the tiniest decisions changed the course of a life. What if Leslie had skipped the hospital and opted for antacids and rest to deal with her ulcer? What if Shannon had driven to a different hospital for her stomach pains?

Sliding doors, twists of fate. A billion paths, each formed by a singular, insignificant choice—slowing instead of speeding up at the yellow light, turning left instead of right when parking the car, hitting the snooze button one more time.

The problem Starla had with fate was that she'd spent enough time studying killers to know that fate didn't always arrive by accident. Sometimes it had a face. A name. A person who had already decided what would happen to you and was willing to do whatever it took to see it through.

Felix would never have let Nadia go. Starla had been little more than collateral damage. If they hadn't gone to the mall, Starla suspected he'd have been waiting in the parking lot of their apartment when they returned.

And likewise, if it hadn't been Leslie who died at Bellerose, or Shannon, it would simply have been someone else. There was a killer on Med-Surg and someone was going to die.

Was it fate that Bryan had appeared in Starla's room? And if so, what version of reality was playing out? A deranged ex-lover achieving the ultimate revenge by framing Noelle for a series of murders? Or was there no deranged ex-lover at all? Only the remnant of a man somehow trapped between this world and the next, trying to steer Starla toward some answer that continued to be frustratingly elusive?

Or maybe *Noelle* was the deranged ex-lover.

Starla pulled Bryan's photo from the nightstand, laid it on her pillow and closed her eyes.

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Noelle moved toward the kitchen, slowing at the sound of Aiden's voice.

"I can't tonight. It's crazy around here right now."

She stepped into the kitchen. Aiden pulled his cell from his ear and ended the call.

"Who were you talking to?" Noelle asked.

He broke eye contact with her and frowned at his watch. "Jeremy from the station. He was asking about drinks later. Obviously, I told him that's out of the question."

"Why?"

"Why?" He gazed at her as if he'd never heard a more stupid question. "Because you're suspected of murder. How would it look if I was seen at the club having drinks?"

How would it look?

It always came back to that with Aiden.

Aiden continued. "I called Dr. Argall this morning and scheduled a psychological exam for you. Your stepfather recommended it when I spoke with him yesterday."

"You spoke with my stepfather about a psych eval, and you didn't include me?"

"It's a little hard to include you when you haven't been answering my calls, haven't been coming home, and have been belligerent when you are

home. You didn’t even tell me any of this was happening. I found out from my producer.”

“I already apologized for that.”

He shook his head. “So that makes it all better?”

Noelle crossed her arms over her chest. For years, she’d gone along with what Aiden wanted. Life was easier if she complied.

The only true happiness Noelle had felt in a long time had been with Bryan, and then that too had become something ugly. But she’d learned an important truth during her time with him. She did not fit into the life of luncheons and fundraisers and networking dinners.

Perhaps it had never been Bryan at all that she’d fallen for, but the freedom he embodied. Dancing at dive bars, driving in his pickup with the windows down, his dog on the passenger seat, wind in their faces, the farmhouse, old and beautiful and completely without pretense.

And now she’d given up Starla too. Tossed away her only true friend because Aiden had insisted their relationship would only damage her in the months ahead when the press coverage grew more relentless.

“I let you send Starla away. Why did I do that?”

“Your life is on the line here, and you’re worried about that freak?”

Noelle gaped at him.

He braced both hands on the counter. “I’m sorry. That was crude. I’m simply saying now is not the time to be concerned with other people.”

She could no longer suppress her voice for the sake of their marriage. “This isn’t working,” she said.

“What’s not working?”

“This. Us.”

He leaned back and crossed his arms, more irritated than upset. “You’re not thinking clearly, Noelle. Ezra mentioned the paranoia. Which is exactly why a psychological evaluation is the right next step—”

“You’re having an affair.” She took her cell from her pocket, scrolled to the picture of him and Lacey and set it on the counter.

Aiden paled. “That’s not …” He leaned in and stared at the photo of Lacey climbing into his car. “Where did you get this?”

“From my friend, the freak.”

He steepled his hands at his mouth. “Okay. All right. I’m not going to deny it. Lacey … pursued me, and it was wrong. It was, and I’m sorry. After your mother’s accident, you changed. You know it, Noelle. You

became distant, physically and emotionally. I've felt alone in this marriage for a year."

Noelle stared at him. She considered fighting back, spewing her laundry list of Aiden's faults. His passive-aggressiveness, his obsession with his image, his unyielding ego.

She said none of it.

"It doesn't matter, Aiden. I cheated too. I'm not … attacking you. I understand. Okay? We're not compatible. We probably never were."

His mouth fell open. "You cheated on *me*?"

The laugh came out before she could stop it. He was furious. He was furious that Noelle had done the very thing he was doing now.

"All right, fine. You want to run off to that freak show, Starla? Why don't you ask her why she was at Bellerose the night your patient, Shannon, died?"

"Excuse me?"

He nodded, gaining momentum. "We're putting it all out there, right? Well, I went to see Lacey that night and I saw Starla come running out of Bellerose in the middle of the night. Not ten minutes later, Lacey told me about Shannon."

Noelle tried to make sense of his words. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying Starla is probably a goddamn killer. This woman you've decided to throw your life away for is framing you for murder."

"You knew about the deaths on Med-Surg?"

He blew out a frustrated breath. "That's what you're focused on? Didn't you hear me?"

"You said you found out from your producer."

"To be honest, I thought Lacey was lying. She said several of your patients had died and there were rumors you could somehow be at fault. She wants me to leave you and marry her. I figured it was all a big ruse to lure me away."

Noelle picked up her cell phone and started out of the kitchen, pausing in the doorway to look back.

"Goodbye, Aiden."

Noelle called Starla again. No answer.

She texted her.

Noelle: *Please call me. I am so sorry. I really am. I was an idiot.*

Starla's Kia sat in her driveway, but when Noelle knocked, no one answered. She suspected Starla was inside ignoring her.

Somehow, the horrors unfolding at Bellerose, the accusations, the end of her marriage, all paled compared to the loss of this new friend. It was irrational, likely a sign she was losing it, but she felt it just the same.

Noelle knocked again, then backed off the stoop and tried to peer through the curtain, but the heavy, dark drapes were drawn tight. Her heart pulsed louder behind her ribcage. She imagined Starla inside, a bath filled to the brim, her wrists open and draining the last of her life into the red water.

No. Surely Aiden sending her away would not have such a devastating impact.

But Noelle didn't know that. Not really.

She returned to the door, pounding harder. "Starla!" she shouted and then louder. "Starla, open up, or I'm calling an ambulance."

"She won't open for them either."

The voice startled her. Noelle turned to see a man walking up the driveway. His long hair hung loose on his shoulders.

He extended his hand. "I'm Finn. I'm guessing you're Noelle?"

"Yes." She shook his hand

"Starla's okay. Physically, I mean. I demanded proof an hour ago. She has the deadbolt locked, so I couldn't barge in." He held out his phone to reveal a blurred picture of Starla buried in a heap of blankets. "She's having a bad day. Hopefully, it's not going to be a bad week or worse. It's hard to tell when this happens."

"What should we do?"

Finn kneeled and propped something against the door. "Nothing. There's nothing we can do. She'll emerge in her own time."

"What's that?" Noelle stared at the white paper bag.

"A raspberry Danish from the Village Bakery. She loves them, and it'll get all weepy if she leaves it out here, so that should at least force her off the couch for five minutes."

"She hates me," Noelle said.

“Nah. Starla doesn’t hold a grudge. This isn’t about you. I know the timing makes you think it is, but it’s not. I could tell she was starting to … slip again.”

“How?”

Finn pushed a hand through his hair. “It’s hard to explain. But honestly, her getting so obsessed with your situation was a red flag. It’s a signal that internally things are not okay. A sign she’s trying to fill the void, I guess.”

“I feel terrible. She came over, and Aiden, my husband, basically ran her off the property.”

Finn nodded. “She told me. Aiden sounds like a jerk.”

Noelle recalled the shock on Aiden’s face when she’d walked out an hour before. “I think it’s over between us.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I can’t imagine a worse time to get a divorce, but here we are.”

“Hard times are when people show their true colors.”

“Yeah.”

“Look,” Finn said, “if you really want to help Starla, tell her to stop working on your case and to get back into treatment.”

“Treatment?” Noelle asked. “Therapy?”

“Yes.”

“She and I spoke at the hospital, and she seemed rather dismissive of the psychiatrist she’s met with.”

“She had one two years ago who was amazing. Starla went more than an entire year without an episode. I’m not just talking about suicidal ideation or attempts. I’m talking about depression, self-isolating,”—he gestured at the door—“like what we’re experiencing right now.”

“Why did she stop seeing them?”

Finn shook his head. “She never told me, but I assume she felt better. It’s the usual conundrum. Someone gets treatment. They no longer feel depressed, so they go off the meds or stop seeing the therapist. You’re a nurse; I’m sure you know the drill. I had a close friend who died from cancer that way. I’ve tried to tell Starla that. But it’s like we’ve been friends for too long now. I’m a broken record, white noise. She barely registers my suggestions.”

“And you think she would take mine?”

“Probably. You’re the flavor of the week, after all.”

Noelle stared at him, disturbed by his remark. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that Starla does this. She gets fixated on other people’s problems to avoid her own. When she’s at her worst, that’s when she makes a new best friend, always someone who needs help, and becomes obsessed with helping them. Case in point, you.”

Noelle bristled at the suggestion that her friendship with Starla was not real, that the woman was merely using her situation as a distraction from her own. “I find what you’re saying pretty offensive. And frankly, I think Starla would be surprised that such a close friend would speak about her this way.”

“Actually, she wouldn’t. I’ve told her this myself. She knows the pattern, whether she wants to acknowledge it or not. I’m not saying she doesn’t genuinely care about you or what you’re going through. She does. But she’s using your problems to avoid dealing with her own. She lets herself become consumed by someone else’s crisis because it’s easier than facing what’s happening in her own life. It’s a toxic pattern, and it isn’t new. If she keeps this up, she’s going to end up in the same place that brought her to you in the first place.”

“A suicide attempt?”

“Most likely, yes.”

Noelle gazed at the closed door. “Finn, did Starla ever tell you anything about being at Bellerose during one of the patient deaths?” A part of her suspected it was a complete lie, an attempt by Aiden to turn Noelle against Starla.

Finn nodded. “Yes. She was there. She hid in the room behind a chair hoping to catch the killer, but she fell asleep.”

Noelle’s shoulders slumped. Starla had been in the room, hiding. And she’d never said a word.

Noelle’s phone rang. It was Dr. Yates. She ignored the call, but moments later it rang again. She frowned.

“Go ahead,” Finn told her.

“Hello?” Noelle pressed the phone to her ear.

“Noelle, you need to come to the house. Your mother … died in her sleep last night.”

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Bryan

July 27—The Year Before

Bryan studied the wine selection, trying to remember the bottle Noelle had brought to the farmhouse. Her favorite, she'd told him.

He scanned the labels until he spotted a familiar blue butterfly. "That's the one," he murmured, grabbing the bottle. His eyes widened at the ninety-eight-dollar price tag.

A man stepped beside him and reached for a bottle of the same wine.

Bryan was turning to leave when the man spoke. "You work at Bellerose."

Bryan glanced back and felt his stomach drop.

Noelle's husband, Aiden Mitchell, stood before him.

"Oh, uh, yeah. Hi."

"In Oncology with Noelle," Aiden added.

"Yep."

Aiden's gaze dropped to the bottle in Bryan's hand, and Bryan felt his throat tighten. "Good choice," Aiden said.

Bryan glanced at the wine, then back at Aiden. "Thanks. Noelle recommended it, actually. I was looking for a birthday gift for my mom." Bryan's stomach felt suddenly queasy at the lie.

Aiden said nothing for a moment. Something flickered behind his usually sunny expression. Suspicion, perhaps, though maybe Bryan was

being paranoid. “I’m sure she’ll enjoy it.”

He turned and strode toward the register.

Bryan remained where he was, watching Aiden pay for his wine. The cashier smiled at him, batting her eyelashes as she handed him his receipt. Aiden returned the smile, every bit the charming television personality.

But as he passed through the automatic doors, he glanced over his shoulder.

His eyes met Bryan’s.

The look lasted only an instant before Aiden disappeared into the parking lot.

Bryan stared after him, the bottle suddenly slick in his hand.

“Bryan,” Noelle whispered, “I think Aiden knows.”

Bryan, who’d begun to drift to sleep, sat up, startled. He leaned over and turned on the light, balancing on one elbow as he studied Noelle’s expression.

She looked slightly apprehensive, but he thought, hoped perhaps, that he saw a relief in her face.

“Why?” he asked.

Bryan hadn’t told Noelle about his encounter with Aiden at the store, but it had been weighing heavily on his mind for days.

“Something in the way he’s been looking at me, talking to me. He showed up twice on the ward this week. He used to do that a lot, but then it tapered off and suddenly he’s back at it.”

“How do you feel about it?” Bryan asked.

Noelle chewed her bottom lip, eyes focused on the ceiling. “I don’t feel sad. I guess that’s what I’m noticing the most. My husband might know I’ve been having an affair, which likely means the end of our marriage, and yet I don’t feel sad.”

Bryan fought to keep his expression neutral, to not betray the surge of joy he felt at her words. He nodded. “It’s a complicated situation. But I think it tells you a lot. The way you’re feeling and the way you’re not feeling.”

“I bought one of those family ancestry tests,” Noelle said. “I got it in the mail yesterday.”

“You did? How come?”

“Because I want to know who my father is and if my mother won’t tell me, I’ll find out for myself.”

“Is it that simple? Send one of those in, and you’ve got his name?”

“No. But I think if I confront her with it, she’ll feel compelled to tell me.”

“Wow. That sounds intense.”

“It will be, but I’m ready for the fight. I’ve spent years, my whole life maybe, backing down, being good.” She stared at him, eyes determined. “You’re part of this. Taking this leap with you has made me feel … liberated. I don’t have to live the life my mother wants for me. I can do things my way.”

Bryan leaned forward and kissed her. She pushed aside the comforter and climbed on top of him. He gazed up at her, her naked body bathed in the moonlight filtering through the window. She was everything he'd ever wanted.

When their lovemaking ended, she snuggled into him and closed her eyes. After a while her breath grew steady.

Doris snored on the floor next to the bed. The farmhouse settled and creaked around them.

They’d been seeing each other for more than two months, building a relationship out of stolen hours. Nights at his farmhouse. Kisses in the supply closet at Bellerose. Long conversations in the bed of his truck, where they talked about the future.

Bryan held her against him, though not too tight.

Maybe because he was scared.

Scared by the depth of what he felt for her.

Noelle belonged to another world, one of money and appearances and expectations. She was married to a man who fit neatly into that world.

What would she be giving up if she chose Bryan?

He traced his fingers slowly down her back and let himself imagine that someday they would look back on all of this—the secrecy, the fear, the uncertainty—as nothing more than the difficult beginning of something amazing.

“This is your mother’s house?” Bryan whistled. “Thank God she didn’t see how I showed up to our last date, mud-stained and carrying dandelions.”

Noelle laughed. “Seeing as how I’m married, I think that would have been the least of her concerns.”

“We’re not going in?” Bryan asked as Noelle started away from the house walking into the elaborately landscaped yard.

“Nope. I have something better.”

“Better than that?” He turned and glanced back at the house, overwhelmed by the sheer size. It looked like a hotel.

Noelle disappeared between two towering hedges. Bryan followed her into the garden, beneath branches and glossy leaves that glowed silver in the moonlight. He pushed through another dense hedge and slowed.

Noelle stood at the edge of a sprawling pool. Light glowed beneath the water, illuminating colorful mosaic tiles in shifting shades of blue and gold. Dark flowers crowded the stone perimeter, their petals reflected on the glassy surface.

“A pool?” Bryan had to fight his inner ten-year-old boy, who wanted to strip down and do a cannonball into the water.

Noelle put a finger to her lips and began unbuttoning her shorts. She slid them down and kicked them into the grass.

She descended the steps naked, slipping beneath the shimmering surface.

The wind picked up, shaking the flowers. Heavy purple dahlias broke free and blew into the pool.

Bryan watched her swim, her slender body gliding through the illuminated depths, blossoms floating around her. It was surreal, like something out of a fairy tale.

He stripped off his shirt and shorts, then carefully unbuckled his watch. The gold watch had been his father’s. During one of his final trips to the emergency room, he’d taken it off and pressed it into Bryan’s hand. The cancer had taken him several months later. In all the years since, Bryan had removed the watch only to shower. Nothing he owned meant more to him.

He waded into the pool, drawing in a sharp breath as the water reached his waist.

Noelle rose to meet him. Goose bumps covered her arms, and when she wrapped them around his waist, he felt her shiver.

“I love you,” he whispered into her wet hair.

She pulled back, her eyes searching his.

“Is it too soon to say that?”

For a while she said nothing, her face a mix he didn’t understand—sadness, maybe joy, or perhaps that was wishful thinking.

She pushed back and floated on her back, face toward the dark sky.

“I love you too.”

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Another knock at the door, followed by a text from Finn.

Starla, deep in her nest of blankets, lifted her cell.

Finn: *Noelle just left, but you should let me in. I have a raspberry Danish and some news.*

Starla: *What's the news?*

Finn: *I'm not going to share it unless you open the door. Plus, when's the last time you got your mail? It's reminding me of all the true crime shows you watch. One more oil change coupon and it's going to explode.*

Starla: *Then bring it in.*

Finn: *A better friend would say no and insist you change out of your pajamas and walk outside.*

Starla: *Good thing you're not a better friend.*

Starla shoved off her blankets, trudged to the door and released the deadbolt. She returned to the couch and flopped back down.

Finn opened the door, mail stuffed under one arm, a white deli bag clutched in his teeth. He bent over and let the deli bag fall to the coffee table in front of Starla.

"You are a pain in the ass," he said.

"I didn't ask you to come."

He rolled his eyes and flipped through her mail. "Uh-oh." He held up an envelope. "Jury duty."

She grabbed the deli bag and took out the raspberry Danish. "Thank you," she grumbled.

He sat in the leather chair. “Noelle was out there.”

“I heard her.”

“Her stepfather just called. Her mother died last night.”

Starla froze with the Danish halfway to her mouth. “No.”

“Yes.”

“Fuck, and I ignored her. I’m a terrible person.”

“She thinks you hate her.”

“It’s me I hate.”

“Starla.” Finn balanced his elbows on his knees. “I scheduled an appointment with that therapist.” He took a card from his wallet. “I’m asking you as a friend, your oldest friend, to promise me you’ll go.”

Starla frowned at the white business card. *Dr. Zion Swanson* was printed in dark blue lettering, with a phone number and address beneath it. She wanted to refuse. It wasn't that she didn't want to get better. She was simply tired of telling her story, of reliving her childhood trauma for yet another therapist, only to be disappointed.

“Fine.” She snatched the card from his hand and tossed it onto the table.

“Promise me.”

She took a bite of the Danish and through a mouthful said, “I promise.”

“Are you going to call Noelle?”

Starla swallowed. Her mind raced from one possibility to the next. Grace Radmor was dead. An accident, or something more sinister? She recalled the anger in Noelle's voice on the recording. Had Noelle been the killer all along? Or was Bryan exacting revenge? Yates eliminating Grace? Aiden punishing Noelle for her betrayal?

The theories kept multiplying, but the evidence remained maddeningly elusive.

“You think Grace’s death is connected to what’s happening at Bellerose?” Finn asked.

“It’s hard not to.”

The sudden exhaustion of the previous twenty-four hours vanished, and a surge of interest in Noelle’s case coursed through her.

Starla shoved off her blankets. “I guess I better take a shower. I’m a total wreck.”

“You’re beautiful. Even with raspberry Danish smeared down the front of your T-shirt.”

Starla eyed him suspiciously then glanced down at the glob of red on her wrinkled white shirt. “Are you trying to get a free consult for one of those unhinged kids you work with?”

Finn brushed both hands through his hair and shook his head. “Way to take a compliment.”

Starla smirked. “Who is it? The kid who nearly ran his grandmother over trying to steal her car?”

He stood. “All right, I’ve gotta go.”

As he headed out the door, Starla called after him. “Let me know on that kid.”

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Noelle arrived at her mother's house.

A Valley Rest Funeral Home van sat in the circular driveway.

Her gaze went instantly to the parlor window where her mother would never sit again. She walked on stilted legs toward the door.

Hushed voices greeted her in the entryway. Dr. Yates stood next to a man she didn't recognize. Lee and Virginia were huddled to one side. Virginia caught her eye for a moment and then pressed her lips together and offered Noelle a sympathetic smile.

Dr. Yates moved toward Noelle, gave her a stiff hug.

"Is she still up there?" Noelle asked, eyes drifting to the staircase.

"She is."

Noelle took the stairs, hand trembling on the banister. When she stepped into her mother's room, Grace looked as though she were sleeping.

Noelle sat on the edge of the bed and threaded her fingers with her mother's. "Oh, Mom."

Her grief had been trapped, but now it broke loose. Tears poured down her face and her ribcage caught as she struggled through her heaving breaths.

Noelle bent in half and buried her face in her mother's hair.

It was all over now.

Grace and Noelle. Just the two of them for so many years, imperfect years, painful years, but joyful too. And now it was over.

“Noelle?” Dr. Yates spoke from the doorway, his expression unreadable. “They’re coming to take her.”

Noelle nodded through her tears. She lifted her mother’s hand, limp, cold, to her lips, and kissed it. She leaned close. “I love you.”

Dr. Yates had left with the funeral home director and his technicians. He intended to meet with the attorneys after. He did not ask Noelle if she wanted to go, and if he had, she wasn’t sure she could have managed to say yes.

She lay down in her old bedroom, curled around her Tinker Bell doll and wept until she fell asleep.

When Noelle came to, hours had passed. The light filtering through her bedroom window had turned golden, the unmistakable glow of the late-afternoon sun.

“Noelle?”

Jim Parry stood across the bedroom. His face was drawn, hands clasped in front of him. “I would have come sooner, but I was at the hospital.”

She sat up, held Tinker Bell against her chest. She felt like a little girl again.

Her mother was dead.

“I’m so sorry,” he said.

A fresh wave of tears poured down her cheeks.

“Are you okay?” Jim sat on her vanity chair.

How did she answer that? “I’m not sure.”

“No. And you wouldn’t be. I understand that.” He wrung his hands. As Noelle gazed at him, she could see he was nervous. “I need to tell you something, Noelle.” He picked up a hair clip off her vanity, rotating it in his thick fingers. A butterfly wing snapped off. “Oh, good grief. I’m sorry.” He returned the clip to the glass surface.

“Are *you* okay, Jim?”

“No.” He shook his head. “But I will be once I … get this out.” He cleared his throat and cast his gaze toward the ceiling. When he looked back at her, his eyes were tear-filled. “A very long time ago, I made your mother a promise, and I have kept it. There were many times I wanted to break that promise, but … I didn’t. Out of love and respect for her and her wishes. But she also told me that someday, if she was ever gone, I could tell you.”

Noelle wiped her damp cheeks with the back of her hand.

“Noelle.” His eyes searched hers. “I’m your father.”

The seconds stretched, expanded. The room filled with a kind of haze. Noelle could not speak. His words had triggered something, a separation from her body.

He moved toward her, kneeling at the side of the bed. “Please forgive me. I have wanted to tell you all these years.”

He clasped her hand, and the sensation jolted her back. She braced her free hand on the bed, Tinker Bell falling to the floor.

“You?” she whispered.

Large tears rolled over Jim’s ruddy cheeks. “I loved your mother. She may never have told you, but we dated in high school and … I would have married her, but we were so young. It ended in part because your grandparents did not approve of me.” He shook his head. “Those were different times, and I came from a lower-class family. I was the first in the Parry family to go to college. But back then I was a high school kid living in a trailer with five siblings and parents barely making ends meet. We broke up our senior year.

“In college, I met Virginia and … we made sense. Similar backgrounds, both drawn to healthcare. She helped take care of my alcoholic mother when she developed cirrhosis of the liver.”

“You and my mother had an affair?”

“No.” He rubbed his face. “It was one night. One reckless night, and I’m telling you right now, I never regretted it, never, not once because the result was you.” He squeezed her hand. “When your mother discovered she was pregnant, I told her I’d stand by her. I’d leave Virginia, which, well, I felt terrible about, but … I would have done it.”

“She asked you not to?”

“Yes. She and Virginia had grown close. They were best friends. She swore me to secrecy, and in some ways, we all did okay. Virginia wasn’t destroyed. I was still in your life even if it had to be from afar, which …

was hard. I need you to know that. A thousand times I considered saying to hell with it and breaking that promise.”

“What about me? Do you think I was okay living without a father?”

He wiped his leaking eyes. “No. I don’t.”

"Why didn't you tell me after my mother's accident?" Noelle asked. "She couldn't have stopped you."

Jim lowered his gaze. "I thought about it. More times than you know."

"Then why didn't you?"

"Virginia and I tried for years to have children. She lost three pregnancies. The last one was particularly difficult. She had a mental breakdown and was hospitalized. Then last year, after your mother’s accident, she … well she seemed on the verge of that again. She went to a very dark place. I knew she was grieving the loss of her best friend. I kept telling myself it wasn't the right time. And then another month passed, and another. I suppose I was waiting for a reason to stop being afraid."

"And now you're not?"

"I'm terrified." He gave a humorless laugh. "But I don't want to die with you never knowing the truth."

"What about Virginia?"

"I'm going to tell her. I’ll wait until after your mother’s funeral. She deserves to hear it from me, not from someone else. I don't expect her to forgive me, but I owe her the truth. Just as I owe you the truth. I’m sorry, Noelle."

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Bryan
Aug 8—The Year Before

Bryan pulled his pickup into a grove of trees down the road from Noelle’s mother’s house.

He should have just called Noelle and asked her to retrieve his watch, but their conversation earlier that day had been rushed. She'd fought with Aiden, who'd stormed out of the house, and she'd been going on about the DNA test and confronting her mother, all while scrambling to get ready for work. The last thing Bryan wanted was to add another task to her already overwhelming day. Besides, he didn't want to spend another night without his watch.

It was nearly eleven at night. Everyone in the house would likely be asleep. He’d run in, grab the watch he’d left near the dahlias and run back out. Quick and easy.

He jumped up, grabbed the top of the brick wall that surrounded the Radmor property and hoisted himself over.

He studied the hedges and trees and did his best not to get lost. The faint smell of chlorine drifted on the night air. He made his way toward it and finally came upon the pool.

He marveled at it once more, tempted to jump in. But no. He wasn’t stupid.

Get the watch and get out.

He and Noelle already had an uphill battle without Bryan getting caught lurking around her mother's property in the middle of the night.

He crouched and spotted his watch near the dahlias. As he secured it to his wrist, raised voices met his ears.

Bryan froze and listened. He crept back from the pool and slipped between two hedges.

Noelle's mother, Grace, appeared. She was walking and talking, hands moving as she spoke. She stopped near the pool.

Another woman followed her.

Virginia Parry.

"Virginia, I'm sorry. I truly am, and I know you may never forgive me, but Noelle deserves to know that Jim is her father."

Virginia laughed, a furious hollow sound that made the hairs on Bryan's neck stand on end. "*She* deserves to know? You slept with my husband. You lied to me for years, and you're worried about what Noelle deserves?"

Bryan blinked, struggling to process what he'd heard.

Jim Parry was Noelle's father?

Noelle had spoken about her father. Her mother had claimed Noelle resulted from a one-night stand, but Noelle had never believed her.

Bryan chewed his lip, aware that he should not be listening to the conversation, but tempted to stay.

"I knew you were never my friend," Virginia spat.

Her fury unnerved him. This was not a conversation he had any business listening to.

Flinching at each footfall, Bryan tiptoed away from the pool and back toward the road.

As he scrambled up over the wall, he heard a sound, almost like a scream. He froze and listened, but the night had grown quiet.

He dropped to the grass and ran to his truck.

Bryan paced the Oncology floor.

The previous twenty-four hours had been some of the longest of his life.

Bryan had learned of Grace's accident the previous day. Noelle had texted and told him she was in the ICU at Bellerose and her mother had

been pulled, nearly drowned, from the pool. Doctors didn't know if she'd make it.

Noelle had asked him not to respond. Yates and Aiden were with her constantly, and she didn't want to risk them seeing a message from Bryan.

The issue was that Bryan knew something no one else did. Virginia had been with Grace the night of her accident.

And they'd been arguing.

Bryan had seen Virginia earlier in the evening. She was working an overnight shift in rehab.

He caught Tia coming out of a patient's room. "I need to run upstairs for a few minutes. Can you keep an eye on my patients?"

"You got it."

Bryan took the elevator to the third-floor rehab unit. He found Virginia at the nurses' station. She looked older somehow, the lines around her mouth more pronounced, her shoulders slightly stooped.

"Virginia, do you have a minute?"

She looked up and smiled though the expression appeared forced. "I always have time for you, Bryan."

He gestured to an empty patient room. "Privately?"

A small crease formed between her eyebrows, but she nodded, stood and followed him into the room.

"I wanted to talk to you about Grace Radmor."

Virginia's face fell. "An unbelievable tragedy."

"Yes." He ran his damp hands over his thighs and spoke his next words carefully. "I was there the night of her accident, at Grace's house. I forgot my watch and went back to get it, and I saw you. You and Grace were arguing."

Virginia stared at him, a strange expression in her eyes, gone as quickly as it appeared. "Bryan, please don't say anything. I understand you have to eventually, for now, but … I promise you, I did not hurt Grace. Honestly, I feel terribly guilty. I suspect she was so upset after our conversation she wasn't paying attention and fell and hit her head. I'm going to tell Ezra, of course. I just … I didn't want to add more to their burden right now. Can you give me a few days?"

"Sure, yes. I can do that." Bryan felt both terrible guilt and relief at confronting Virginia. She already intended to go to Ezra, and of course she

hadn’t hurt Grace. She was a nurse. Her husband was a doctor. They were lifelong friends with Grace Radmor.

For a moment, his thoughts flashed to the confession Grace had made. Jim Parry was Noelle’s father. Virginia had clearly been upset, angry even, but that didn’t mean she’d hurt Grace.

Bryan left the rehab unit and made his way to the cafeteria, his stomach grumbling. He’d not eaten all day, too disturbed by what he’d witnessed at Grace’s house followed by news of her accident. Now his appetite returned in full force. He grabbed a tuna fish sandwich and stood in line to pay.

As he waited, Noelle and Aiden walked in.

Bryan’s hunger disappeared once more.

She looked wrecked. Her eyes were swollen and bloodshot, her face pale with exhaustion. Aiden kept a hand on her elbow as he guided her toward the coffee station.

Every instinct in Bryan told him to go to her. To wrap his arms around her, smooth a hand over her hair, and ask what she needed. He swallowed and tried not to stare, but his eyes kept moving back to them.

Aiden handed Noelle a cup of coffee. As she reached for it, her gaze lifted. Their eyes met.

Noelle blinked, and then her face crumpled. Tears spilled down her cheeks, and Bryan had to fight the nearly overwhelming impulse to cross the cafeteria.

“Six ninety-nine,” the cashier told him.

Bryan forced his attention away from Noelle. He fished cash from his pocket and paid for his sandwich.

When he reached the cafeteria doors, he made the mistake of looking back.

Noelle stood beside Aiden, her head bowed, tears still falling.

Bryan wanted to grab Noelle's hand and flee Bellerose. They'd climb into his pickup and drive away, never looking back. It was a ridiculous thought, one he had no right to entertain, but a peculiar dread had settled over him. He couldn't explain it. He only knew that something was wrong, and he feared nothing between them would ever be the same.

Back in Oncology, Bryan walked to the break room. He suddenly wanted his cell phone on the slim chance Noelle had texted or emailed him.

Tia sat at the table eating straight from a can of chicken noodle soup.

He grimaced. “I don’t know how you can eat it right out of the can.”

“I’m weird like that.”

Bryan opened his locker, felt around the shelf for his cell. It wasn’t there. “Huh.”

“What?” Tia asked.

“I could have sworn I left my cell in here, but I can’t find it.”

Tia stood and looked along the coffee counter, moving filters and mugs. “It’s not over here.”

Lacey walked in.

“Lacey, any chance you saw my cell phone?”

“Nope.” Lacey’s tone was clipped.

Bryan and Tia exchanged a look.

Lacey ran hot and cold, sometimes friendly, other times moody and abrupt. Bryan knew she’d wanted more than a friendship, and she’d clearly taken it personally when he’d made no advances.

Bryan sat at the farmhouse, trying to concentrate on filling several cracks in the foundation with mortar. His thoughts skewed constantly to Noelle.

Was she okay? Still no contact from her since her mother’s accident, and the silence was eating him alive. Though she might have texted or called, and he was simply clueless because he’d lost his cell phone. He needed to get another one, but had been putting it off, convinced it would turn up.

Bryan had not spoken to Virginia since he’d confronted her. She’d asked for a few days, and though it felt like a betrayal of Noelle to give her that time, Dr. Parry was not only his superior, Bryan considered him a friend. He had such respect for the man and didn’t want to put a spotlight on his wife.

One more day. He’d give her one more day, and then he’d come clean.

Doris nudged him from behind, a tennis ball lodged in her mouth, tail whipping back and forth.

“All right, girl.” He wrestled the ball from her jaws and hurled it across the yard, wiping her slobber on his jeans.

Doris tore after it, disappearing into the high grass. Grasshoppers and butterflies scattered before her.

Something moved through him, a brief and inexplicable sadness. She’d miss him if he were gone.

Doris raced back, tennis ball in her mouth. He frowned at the strange thought and returned to the foundation.

“Bryan.” Virginia stopped in front of him at the nurses’ station in Oncology, a slight smile on her face.

“I was hoping we could talk tonight,” he said.

It had been four days since they’d spoken, and it was time to tell the truth.

She dropped her voice. “We will. Absolutely. Jim and I spoke about everything last night. I should have told Ezra and Noelle right from the beginning. But I’m not coming to you now because of that.”

“You’re not?”

“No. I spoke with Noelle this afternoon, and she asked me to give you a message.”

“She did?” Warmth rose into his neck.

“Don’t worry.” She winked. “Your secret’s safe with me. Noelle wants you to meet her in the basement at midnight. The old Bellerose section.”

Bryan frowned. “Can we even get down there?”

“Oh, yes. You have to take the service elevator.”

“She’s coming here at midnight?” Bryan was unnerved by the request, but equally excited.

“With everything that’s been going on, she hasn’t been able to get away during the day, so …”

“Huh. Okay. Midnight in old Bellerose. Thanks for letting me know.”

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Starla showered and put on shorts and a long-sleeved T-shirt. She examined the five racks of shoes in her closet, grabbing a pair of sandals with turquoise beads. As she buckled the straps, another pair of shoes popped into her mind.

The silver sandals at Noelle's house, specifically the gemstone that had adorned the tops. Starla had seen one of those flowers before.

Where?

The memory of it hovered in the corner of her mind, and then slowly it materialized.

"In the morgue at Bellerose," she whispered. The little blue gemstone flower had been lying on the tile floor.

Starla stood, grabbed her keys, packed a few things in her bag, and headed for her car.

Starla did her best to avoid people as she made her way to the service elevator in Bellerose. She stepped in and pressed B for the basement.

The doors closed, but the elevator didn't move.

She pressed the button again and waited. Seconds passed, a minute. "Come on."

Above her the old cable groaned, and the elevator car finally moved.

On the short ride down, she took latex gloves from her bag and slid them on. Starla had brought a flashlight as well. When the doors slid open to that long concrete hall, she flipped it on and made her way back to the morgue.

The door to the old morgue groaned when she pushed it open, her awful nightmare flaring briefly as the dank air enveloped her.

Keeping one foot angled in front of the heavy door, Starla stretched for the instrument cart, flinching as its wheels shrieked across the tile. She wedged the cart in the door.

No way would she risk getting trapped inside.

Angling her light at the floor, she spotted the tiny blue flower. Starla had not been positive it matched the missing flower from Noelle's shoe.

Now she was.

Leaving the flower where it sat, she took out her cell and snapped a picture of it.

She stood and shone her light around the morgue.

The last time she'd been there, Starla had seen something in a cupboard, a colored pouch. Now that cupboard was closed, and when she opened it, she found the shelf empty.

Could she have imagined it?

She didn't dismiss the possibility. Her adrenaline had been running high. She'd just witnessed Shannon's death and had ended up in the basement of the old Bellerose Hospital by accident.

Although now she didn't think so.

"Bryan brought me here," she whispered.

If the pouch had been on the shelf and it was now gone, someone else was visiting the old morgue as well. She cast a glance toward the open door, the hall beyond dark and quiet.

She moved along the wall of cabinets, opening and closing them. Mostly empty save for a box of disposable masks, their cardboard softened by moisture, and several dusty toe tags.

She turned back to the metal instrument cart. It held a pair of scissors, a couple of pens and a yellowing notebook.

An old filing cabinet was tucked into one corner. She walked over, rested the flashlight on top and opened the first drawer.

Empty.

The next drawer held several mildewed files. Starla lifted them out.

A quilted pouch sat beneath them. The same pouch, she suspected, that she'd glimpsed in the cabinet days before. Crimson dahlias and a gold-embroidered R.

"For Radmor," she whispered.

Starla picked it up, queasy now, already aware of what she'd find inside of it. She slid open the zipper and stared at the contents.

Five syringes and a small clear bottle. Starla turned the bottle just enough to read the label.

Insulin.

This was it. The murder weapon.

She returned the pouch to the cabinet, took out her phone and photographed it.

Starla opened the next cabinet drawer, empty. The bottom one held an old black rubber apron. She hefted it out.

At the bottom of the drawer sat a single fluorescent-yellow sneaker. Starla's stomach plunged. She'd seen this shoe before, on Bryan's feet in the birthday video he'd made for his mother. Across the toe, several dark, rust-colored spots dotted the fabric.

Blood.

Her eyes drifted to the wall of cold lockers that once stored bodies.

The door stood ajar on one locker.

As she moved towards it, her nightmare again flashed through her thoughts—finding Noelle in the room's corner, someone trapped in the body drawer, pounding to be set free.

Hand trembling, she grabbed the handle of the slightly open door and pulled. A rectangle of darkness greeted her.

She shone her light inside.

An empty metal tray table occupied the space.

Starla moved to the next and the next. Some were nearly impossible to open, and when they did, they released a god-awful screech that gave her flashbacks to Freddy Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, his blade fingernails running across metal pipes.

The sixth drawer stuck, and she wrapped both hands around the handle and pulled. It refused to budge. She put her weight into it, yanked harder, and suddenly the drawer broke open. Starla stumbled and fell backward, colliding with the metal cart. It shot across the room, the tools on top scattering to the floor.

The morgue’s door swung closed.

A smell emanated from the dark hole—not powerful, but there. Decomposition.

Starla did not walk closer. Her feet had become cement bricks. “No …”

Even though some part of her had known all along that Bryan was dead, confirmation made her knees feel weak, her heart struggle to pull blood.

She picked up the flashlight and pointed it at the open drawer. The dark, shiny contours of a body bag lay inside. The bulk beneath it was unclear, but undeniably human.

Without looking in the bag, she couldn’t know that it was him. Even if she did look, she suspected the body could no longer be identified by sight alone.

But it *was* him.

For a suspended moment, a living Bryan filled her thoughts. Hazel eyes and messy brown hair. He was running through the field at his farmhouse, Doris at his heels.

The cart, still a moment before, rolled an inch toward her.

The vision of Bryan faded.

Starla was alone in the morgue once more.

Starla lifted her phone and took a picture of the body bag.

Her heart ached for Jana as she pulled open the morgue door. She'd barely turned toward the elevator when a faint noise stopped her.

It had come from the opposite end of the hall, where two corridors branched off near the secured elevator to Bellerose's administrative offices.

A footstep?

Starla swung her flashlight toward the sound, its beam sliding over the closed doors and empty corridor. She waited, straining to hear something more.

Nothing.

After another moment, she turned and headed for the service elevator.

It was dark out when Starla arrived home.

Her mind raced as she considered what to do next.

Noelle was behind the murders at Bellerose. The Radmor makeup bag with insulin, the flower gem from her shoe, Bryan's body in the morgue—it was the only thing that made sense.

Did Starla simply call the police? Let them handle it? Or confront Noelle herself?

That's a stupid thing to do. Finn's voice filled her head.

She unlocked and opened her door, hurried to the bathroom to pee.

Starla dropped her bag on the floor and set her cell phone on the rack of towels. As she unbuttoned her shorts, something moved in the open door behind her.

Starla started to turn.

An arm locked around her chest. A sharp sting bit into the side of her thigh.

"What the—" She drove her elbow backward, connected with something soft, but it was too late. The room tilted.

Starla's body fell, but her consciousness rushed back as if pulled by the tide out to some dark sea.

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Noelle
Aug 13—The Year Before

Every instinct screamed at Noelle to refuse the meeting with Bryan in the basement of the old Bellerose Hospital

For days he'd been sending her the most horrific messages, threatening to out her to Aiden, promising he would ruin her.

She needed to come clean. Tell Aiden, Bellerose administrators, the police.

Except she couldn't.

Her mother was fighting for her life in the ICU. Family and friends had rallied around her.

Your mother was so proud of you.

You and Aiden are so strong.

You've accomplished so much.

Their words silenced her. She could not bring herself to be the disappointment, to soil her mother's name, to turn a devastating tragedy into a spectacle of her poor choices.

Whatever Bryan wanted, she'd agree to it. That's why she had to meet him. If she didn't, he'd expose the affair, and Noelle was already at her breaking point.

As she walked into Bellerose, still wearing the dress and gemstone sandals she'd worn to dinner at her mother's house that night where she'd

spent hours listening to ‘friends’ of the Radmor family gush about Grace’s accomplishments, she wished she’d gone home to change. But Aiden was home, and he would have demanded to know where she was going in the middle of the night and why.

Noelle hurried through the lobby and down the corridor to the service elevator. She pressed the button for the basement.

Few people at Bellerose used the service elevator, as it was notoriously unreliable. Twice while Noelle worked at Bellerose, the fire department had been called to free staff trapped inside.

What if that happened now? How would she possibly explain why she’d gone to the hospital at midnight and taken the service elevator to the decommissioned section of Bellerose?

Sweat broke out on Noelle’s forehead as she waited for the elevator to move. It did, finally, dropping her into the basement.

The doors opened to a dark hall.

Noelle moved slowly down the tunnel, the slap of her shoes echoing around her. Every tendon in her body coiled like a spring.

She paused at the double doors leading into the administrative annex.

Noelle had been in the basement of the original Bellerose only once, years ago when she was first hired. Back then, new employees were given a tour of the old hospital, likely as a way of showing them just how far Bellerose had come. At some point, the tours had stopped.

There had been talk over the years of demolishing the old building and replacing it with something new, but the plans had never seemed to make it past the discussion stage. The original Bellerose, converted into offices, remained standing, its basement largely forgotten beneath it.

Noelle pushed through the doors.

The fluorescent lights ended at the annex doors. Beyond them, the basement halls lay mostly in darkness, illuminated only by the faint red glow of an EXIT sign at the far end.

“Bryan?” It hurt to say his name. A part of Noelle wanted him to appear and insist it had all been a terrible mistake. Another part of her wished she’d never agreed to that first breakfast.

A sound came from a door to her right. Noelle moved toward it, heart thumping. She glanced up, read Morgue in faded black letters.

“Bryan?” Her voice was little more than a whisper.

A candle burned on an old instrument trolley, its flame casting a weak glow across the morgue. Beside it sat a cell phone.

Bryan's.

Music spilled from its speaker, the same relentless song he'd sent her again and again over the past several days.

You are an obsession.

Noelle grabbed the phone, her fingers trembling as she tried to silence it. She swiped at the screen, pressed the wrong buttons, then tried again. The music kept playing, growing louder in her ears.

“Shut up,” she cried.

She threw the phone down and stamped on it, once, twice, her vision blurring with tears.

Behind her, something scraped. Noelle spun as the morgue door slammed shut. She lunged for the handle and pushed, but the door held fast.

Her stomach dropped. She was trapped.

Why had she come? How could she be so stupid?

Noelle fumbled her own phone from her pocket. The screen showed no service.

“Let me out!” She tried to infuse her voice with confidence, but it came out as little more than a croak. She slammed both hands against the door. “Bryan! Don’t do this. Please!”

No answer.

She pressed her ear against the metal, listening for movement. Had Bryan locked her in and left, or did he stand out there now, listening, waiting?

She tried the door again, then put her shoulder against it and shoved. The frame rattled, but something heavy held it shut from the other side.

Noelle stepped back, fighting the urge to scream. She couldn’t do this, couldn’t handle this.

Regret pressed heavily around her. Regret at having started the affair, at having fought with her mother on the last good day of her life, at a thousand things she couldn’t name but felt pressing in, smothering her.

Her mother might die at any moment, and Noelle, locked in the morgue, might never see her again.

Her tears gave way to huge racking sobs. She doubled over and then sank to the floor, burying her head in her hands. The floor was cold, damp. It stank of mildew and rust.

How could she have been so wrong?

Bryan had told her he loved her. She'd believed him. But it had all been a lie, and now everyone would know.

For several minutes, she surrendered to the panic, sobbing until her head throbbed and her face felt swollen.

Eventually, a single thought broke through her despair.

She had to get out.

She couldn't simply lie there and wait for Bryan to do whatever terrible thing he had planned.

Noelle pushed herself upright, wiped her face with trembling hands, and forced herself to her feet.

She walked to the trolley and picked up the candle. Hot wax spilled down and burned her fingers, but she barely noticed it. She moved along the perimeter of the room, searching.

The flame illuminated a stainless-steel examination table and a deep porcelain sink. Along the opposite wall stood two rows of refrigerated body compartments, their rectangular doors fitted with heavy metal handles. Six in all. The old morgue had been abandoned for years, but no one had bothered to remove the equipment.

She needed a weapon. Whether Bryan opened the door or she rammed her way out, he'd easily overpower her in the hall.

On the lower shelf of the trolley, she spotted an old pair of surgical scissors. They were heavy and cold in her hand.

Clutching the scissors, Noelle backed up and ran at the door, slamming her shoulder into the metal. Pain streaked down her arm.

The door didn't open.

"Come on," she whispered.

She backed up further and drove her shoulder into it again.

Sweat trickled between her breasts. Her dress clung to her back, and the muscles along her right shoulder burned.

She turned and struck the door with her left shoulder. Pain flared through her collarbone.

"Open!" she screamed.

She drove her shoulder forward once more, but suddenly the door wasn't there. It swung free, and she lurched into the dark hall.

A figure stood directly in front of her.

Bryan.

She glimpsed his face, the movement of his hands.

Noelle drove the scissors into his chest.

Bryan's eyes went wide. He stumbled back and grasped her wrists.

For one impossibly long moment their eyes locked.

What did she see there? Confusion? Shock?

She tore herself free, left the scissors behind, and ran. She pushed through the annex doors and sprinted to the elevator.

Noelle thought she heard him coming for her.

She jammed her finger against the call button. Tears and sweat and snot streamed down her face. "Come on. Come on."

Somewhere above her the elevator began to move.

Noelle turned and looked back down the dark tunnel, but Bryan had not appeared.

Bryan

Bryan stared at the scissors in Noelle's hand. For a moment, he couldn't make sense of what had happened.

She looked at him, her face white with terror. Then she turned and ran.

"Noelle?" His voice came out as a rasp.

He took a step after her, but something pulled sharply inside his chest.

He smelled blood the same moment the spreading warmth dawned on him. He pressed his palm against the wound.

Jesus Christ.

The scissors had gone in deep.

He tried to draw a breath and felt a tearing pain behind his ribs. His next breath was shallower.

She'd nicked his lung. The thought arrived with the detached clarity of someone assessing another person's injury.

He looked down at his hand, blood flowing between his fingers. He needed pressure on the wound. No, he needed a goddamn trauma team.

Bryan pushed away from the doorframe. The corridor tilted.

He reached for the wall, missed, and went down hard on one knee.

His pulse was racing. He could feel it in his throat, fast and insistent.

You’re bleeding too much.

No shit.

Bryan tried to call out, but no sound emerged. He coughed, and fresh pain ripped through his chest. His vision briefly darkened.

Back against the wall, he slid onto his butt.

Noelle had stabbed him. The thought was so incomprehensible that he almost laughed.

Noelle.

He looked toward the end of the corridor where she’d disappeared. What the hell had happened? How had she gotten trapped in the morgue?

No, not trapped.

Locked in.

Someone had wedged a chair beneath the door handle.

Footsteps split the quiet. He lifted his head, expecting to see Noelle coming back.

The footsteps came closer. A figure appeared.

He blinked toward it. “Noelle?” he whispered.

Blood in his mouth. He spat it out.

Not Noelle.

It was Virginia Parry … and she was smiling.

His brain could not make sense of the moment.

Virginia did not look well. Face shiny with sweat, eyes bright, she advanced closer. She clutched something in her hand.

A syringe.

Virginia, no. He thought the words, but was not sure if he spoke them.

Virginia sank the needle into his neck.

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Starla woke in the bathtub. Warm water spewed from the faucet. She blinked at her naked body and tried to remember how she'd arrived at this moment.

On the sink sat a single razor. It shifted in and out of focus.

The door creaked open. Virginia Parry walked into the bathroom.

Starla squinted at her.

"You're awake?" Virginia said. "I was afraid that might happen. But don't worry, you won't be for much longer."

Starla's sluggish brain struggled to make sense of what she was seeing.

Virginia wore blue latex gloves. She arranged items on the edge of the sink. Starla's pill bottles.

"Who would have thought that you'd be the one to put the pieces together?" Virginia shook her head. "People underestimate you, Starla. I know I did. It's unfortunate that I have to do this. It wasn't my intention."

The realization came slowly, then all at once.

Virginia Parry was Bellerose's angel of death.

"Why?" Starla's words were thick, slurred. Virginia Parry had been Grace Radmor's lifelong friend. How could she possibly be behind everything that had happened to Noelle?

"Because Noelle is a whore. Just like her mother." She wound a towel around her fist and punched the mirror above the sink. Glass crashed into the basin. Virginia held up a long, jagged shard. "They'll believe this. A woman who couldn't bear to look at herself anymore. It's almost poetic."

Starla's limbs still refused to move. She twitched the fingers on her left hand, but could not lift her arm.

"You injected me with something." She struggled to form each word. Her lips were sticky, her mouth dry. "They'll find it in the autopsy."

"Why would they do an autopsy, Starla? You already taught everyone how this story ends."

"No."

Virginia carried a glass of water to the tub. She gripped Starla's hair in one hand and jerked her head back. "Open your mouth."

Starla pressed her lips together.

"Fine." Virginia tilted Starla's head further and poured the water into her nose. Starla couldn't breathe. Water burned her nose, down her trachea and esophagus, scalding everything. She sputtered, tried to wriggle away, but had no strength. She coughed and water spewed from her mouth and nose.

Virginia waited until the hacking had slowed. "Ready to cooperate, or do we have to do that again?"

Tears streamed from Starla's eyes. Her throat was on fire.

When Virginia pulled her head back a second time, Starla gulped the water, aware she was consuming her death.

Virginia set the empty glass on the floor next to the tub.

She gripped Starla's right arm and lifted it from the water. Starla couldn't fight back. She could barely flex her fingers.

Virginia dragged the glass over Starla's wrist, cutting deep. Starla gasped, willed her arm to pull away. It lay slack in Virginia's hand.

Blood seeped from her wrist. She stared down at it. The water turned pink and then slowly darkened.

Virginia dropped the shard of glass into the bath. She piled the pill bottles on the lip of the tub and walked from the bathroom.

Starla had wanted to die. Had tried to, many times.

But she didn't want to die tonight.

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Noelle sat on the edge of the pool, her feet dangling in the water. She'd been there for hours, ever since Jim left, trying to understand how her mother had managed to keep such a secret for so many years.

Clouds blanketed the sky, making the night especially dark, but the pool lights cast a soft blue glow across the water.

She heard footsteps on the lawn and braced herself for Dr. Yates, but Virginia appeared between two hedges.

“I saw your Tahoe, but you weren’t inside,” Virginia said. “I thought you might be out here.”

Noelle struggled to look Virginia in the eye. A dozen conflicting emotions rippled through her. Jim Parry was her father, and Virginia, her mother’s closest friend, had no idea. And now her mother was dead.

The police and Bellerose believed Noelle was a murderer. Her marriage was over.

It was almost too much. She wanted to confess everything, to release it, but not to Virginia. She wanted to tell Starla.

But she’d hurt Starla, destroyed the one good thing in her life.

Virginia pulled a bottle of wine and two glasses from a black canvas bag. She walked over and sat next to Noelle on the edge of the pool.

“Your mother loved this.” Virginia tilted the bottle to show Noelle the label. “Grace and I used to laugh about how she’d go with your grandparents to these five-hundred-dollar-a-plate dinners, and the wine never measured up to this ten-dollar bottle we’d buy at the grocery store.”

Virginia filled them each a glass and handed one to Noelle. “I know it won’t help much, but I thought we could toast her memory.”

Noelle took the glass and drank. The wine was bitter. “You and my mother were really close.”

Virginia nodded. “Like sisters.”

“And you met in college?”

“Yes. Through Jim. He and your mother had been friends since they were children. She and I hit it off right away.”

Noelle took another drink, a seed of guilt growing in her belly at the secret she now knew, the secret her mother had carried for decades.

“Grace and I both had complicated relationships with our own mothers. We bonded over that.” Virginia smiled, but there was little warmth in it. “My mother was a restless woman. She drifted in and out of my life whenever it suited her. Men. Travel. New jobs. New cities. There was always something more interesting waiting for her somewhere else.”

“I didn’t know that. I’m sorry.” Noelle finished her wine. Virginia leaned over and refilled her glass.

“I really shouldn’t,” Noelle said.

“I think you’ve earned a little liquid pain relief after the week you’ve had.”

Noelle took another sip.

“Your mother might have been the first woman I ever really trusted.”

Noelle’s chest tightened.

“I was with her last night. Your mother.”

“You were? Dr. Yates didn’t tell me. I didn’t ask. I was so shocked, but … I’m not sure why.”

“It was only a matter of time.”

“Yes.” Noelle had known that. The doctors had told her after Grace’s accident that life expectancy for a person in her condition would be years, not decades, and even years were not guaranteed.

Noelle’s mouth had gone dry. She coughed and tried to clear her throat. She lifted her glass and took another sip.

“I want you to know something, Noelle.” Virginia stood and walked over to her black shoulder bag. “I know about your mother and Jim.”

Noelle stared at her, an odd taste in the back of her throat. Something strange had begun to happen. Her fingers tingled. A numbness spread from the tips up to her knuckles. “You do?”

“Yes. I know that you’re his daughter. Your mother told me last year. Right here in this very spot. I was so angry. Blind rage. That’s what my mother used to call it when I was a girl. I couldn’t contain my anger. Impulse control issues.” She chuckled.

Noelle coughed again and tried to raise her wineglass, but her fingers refused to close around the stem. The glass tipped sideways, spilling red wine across the stone ledge and into the pool. “I think…” She swallowed, struggling to gather her thoughts. “I don’t feel well.”

“I thought I could live with it,” Virginia continued, seemingly oblivious to Noelle’s distress. “What they’d done to me. Your mother and Jim.” She paused, her expression darkening. “After all, your mother wasn't a threat to me anymore. She couldn't even speak, for Christ's sake. But…”

Virginia rummaged through her bag.

“I realized it wasn't only your mother I hated.” She glanced up, her eyes settling on Noelle. “It was you. I think I hated you most of all. The evidence of their betrayal, always right there in front of me. And Jim, adoring you from afar. His precious little love child.”

Noelle stared at her, struggling to make sense of the words.

“What you needed, Noelle, was a fall from Grace.” Virginia laughed, the sound high and shrill. “Get it? A fall from Grace.”

Noelle stared at her. The words floated through her mind without meaning, taking several seconds to arrange themselves into something she understood.

Virginia was reaching into her bag.

She brought out two objects, though Noelle couldn't immediately make sense of them. She blinked hard, trying to clear her vision.

A small vial.

A syringe.

“What's that?” Noelle asked, her voice little more than a croak. She braced her hands against the stone ledge. The pool seemed dangerously close now. She needed to scoot back before she lost her balance and toppled into the water.

But her arms felt weak, her legs impossibly heavy.

Virginia moved toward her.

Noelle tried to retreat. Her mind screamed at her to move, but her body remained stubbornly still.

Virginia lifted the syringe.

Only then did Noelle understand.

The needle was meant for her.

Noelle pitched forward. Her face hit the water with a cold shock. She struggled to get her legs beneath her, to find the bottom of the pool, but she'd gone into the deep end. Her legs scissored, and she slipped beneath the surface.

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Starla's cell phone lay on the rack of towels, out of reach. The water had gone from pink to a deep red.

The phone's screen illuminated, but made no sound.

Was someone calling her? Finn? Noelle?

It didn't matter. She couldn't answer.

Soon the water would reach her neck, then her chin, her mouth and nose. She would drown, or she would bleed to death first.

Starla had wanted this. She'd attempted it so many times a part of her had begun to believe she could not die. She was destined to stay alive, to spend decades trapped behind her disfigured face, stuck in purgatory.

Be careful what you wish for.

"Starla? Are you there?"

She heard Finn's voice, but it sounded far away.

Finn …

She tried to say his name, to call out, but her lips didn't move. Her eyelids drooped closed.

She opened them for a moment.

From the living room, a sound.

The DVD of Bryan's home movie … Bryan's voice.

"We're getting ready to take a journey into the center of the earth …"

Virginia had circled the pool, was walking down the steps, syringe in hand.

Noelle flailed in the water, found the hard tile floor, but struggled to stand. Dizziness, nausea, disorientation, it all came in waves.

She sensed Virginia getting closer, but her eyes blurred. Noelle slapped at the water. “Get away,” she cried.

Virginia gripped Noelle’s shirt and pulled her. Noelle lost her tenuous footing. She fell, went under, and swallowed a mouthful of water.

Noelle resurfaced. She thrashed and clawed at the woman’s arms, but her long sleeves prevented Noelle from scratching her.

“Stop moving!” Virginia shrieked, releasing Noelle’s shirt and grabbing her hair instead.

In Virginia’s opposite hand, Noelle saw the syringe arcing toward her.

“No!”

The word came out loud and harsh and ripped Starla back into her body. Her eyelids fluttered.

Finn rushed into the bathroom and reached beneath Starla’s arms. He hauled her out, cradling her like a baby as he laid her on the floor and wrapped towels around her leaking wrists.

“Not me …” she slurred.

He pressed his cell to his ear. She caught fragments.

“Send an ambulance … Right now. She’s bleeding out …”

Starla watched Finn as if through smudged glass. Then, just over his shoulder, she saw someone else. He didn’t come into the bathroom, merely stood in the hall, half in shadow, luminous hazel eyes fixed on hers.

Bryan …

Noelle twisted violently, fighting to break Virginia’s hold. Her brain screamed at her to move faster, harder, but her limbs felt weighted, disconnected from the commands she gave them.

She plunged beneath the surface and kicked out blindly. Her foot connected with something solid—Virginia’s hip, maybe her stomach.

Virginia released her.

Noelle broke the surface and sucked in a desperate breath, thrashing away from Virginia. The edge of the pool would be impossible to scramble over in her drugged state. She had to get to the stairs.

The pool lights bled together. Noelle struggled to focus, to find the metal rail that marked the steps.

Virginia lunged toward her, grabbed her once more.

Noelle tried again to break away, but this time, Virginia held her fast. She sank the needle into Noelle’s shoulder.

“Virginia! Stop!”

The man’s voice cut through the sounds of splashing water.

Noelle gasped and searched for him. It was her stepfather.

Ezra strode toward the pool, his shirt rumpled, confusion in his face.

Virginia froze.

The needle was embedded in Noelle's shoulder, but Virginia hadn't depressed the plunger.

“Ezra! Thank God you're here! Noelle's the angel of death killer at Bellerose. She attacked me!”

Virginia released the syringe and waded toward the steps.

Noelle managed to raise one unsteady hand. Her fingers closed around the needle, and she tugged it free.

The syringe fell into the pool.

For a moment, it floated beside a dark dahlia.

Then it began to sink.

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66

Starla woke up in the hospital. Finn dozed on the chair beside her.

She stared at her bandaged wrists, and then her eyes slipped to the corner of the room. She half expected to see him there.

Bryan.

But the chair was empty.

Finn opened his eyes, sat up. “You’re awake. How do you feel?”

“It was Virginia,” she blurted, the urgency hitting her anew. “Virginia tried to kill me. You have to call the police. Warn Noelle.”

“They know.” Finn scooted his chair closer to the bed. “She attacked Noelle tonight too. Dr. Yates caught her in the act.”

“Is Noelle—?”

“She’s all right. Down the hall, in fact. Carrie is taking care of you both.”

Starla eased back against her pillows, the tension draining from her shoulders. “I didn’t call you,” she said.

“What?”

“Last night. You got a call from my phone, but it wasn’t me who called you.”

He nodded, his face troubled. “I know.”

“You do?”

“I answered, and there was no sound but this weird static. I said your name, and then I heard … a man. He said, ‘Help her.’”

“‘Help her?’”

“Yes. That’s it. Two words, but somehow I knew. I drove about ninety miles an hour to get to your house. I had a terrible feeling. You were in the bath.” He closed his eyes, expression pained.

“I’m sorry you had to see me naked.”

He opened his eyes, grinned. “Can you ever be serious?”

“I am serious. You’re clearly traumatized.”

He stood, stretched, and yawned. “I need a cup of coffee. Want one? Or something else? Chocolate cake for breakfast?”

“Is it time for breakfast?”

He looked at his cell phone. “It’s four in the morning. I’d say that counts.”

“Chocolate cake then, and ice cream if they have some.”

“I’m sorry, Noelle.”

Ezra stood in the doorway of her hospital room. He’d brought her clean clothes and signed her discharge paperwork.

She sat on the edge of the bed, clad in jeans and a T-shirt. “For what?”

“For … suspecting you. I hate to admit it, but I did. Virginia was the first to mention the rumors on Med-Surg. Obviously I realize now that’s because she started them. She said you’d been with every patient and you were acting strangely. I trusted her.”

Noelle frowned. “I trusted her too.” Noelle had not fully processed the previous twenty-four hours. Jim Parry was her father. Noelle’s mother had revealed the truth to Virginia, Jim’s wife, her best friend, and she’d paid with her life. “Virginia killed my mother. Not just the attack a year ago. She murdered her in her sleep.”

He put his hands into the pockets of his white coat. “You said that last night when police arrested her, but”—he shook his head—“she hasn’t confessed.”

Had she expected Virginia to confess? She honestly didn’t know.

“What’s happened with my mother’s body? Have you ordered an autopsy?”

“I called the medical examiner this morning and requested they perform one.”

“Okay.” Noelle touched her fingers to the bandage on her shoulder where Virginia had jabbed her with a syringe full of insulin. Had Ezra arrived thirty seconds later, Noelle would be dead.

“Thank you,” she told him. “For saving my life.”

Ezra shook his head. “I’m not sure I deserve that praise.”

“I am.”

He nodded, shoulders stiff, expression grim. “Carrie mentioned you didn’t want Aiden to come pick you up. Would you like me to drive you home?”

Home.

Where was that? The house she’d shared with Aiden? No. She’d go back to get her things at some point, but she and Aiden would never live there together again.

“Finn is going to give me a ride.”

“Finn?”

She nodded. “Starla Burton’s friend.”

“I see. Well, I’m meeting with detectives here shortly, but call or text me if you need anything.”

“I will.”

After Ezra left, Noelle made her way to Starla’s room.

For a moment, Noelle felt as though she'd stepped backward in time. Starla lay before her much as she had when they'd first met, her eyes hollow, her hair tangled, her bandaged wrists resting on the white sheets.

“Hi,” Noelle told her.

A piece of half-eaten chocolate cake sat on her tray table. “Hey,” Starla said. “What a night, eh?”

Noelle tried to smile but failed. She sank into a chair near Starla’s bed. “You can say that again.”

“Discharged already?”

“Yes. I made out a little better than you.”

“Physically anyway.”

Noelle sighed, flashed on Virginia’s contorted face in the glowing lights from the pool the previous night and shook the image away. “Jim Parry is my father.”

Starla stared at her. “Virginia’s husband?”

“Yes. He told me yesterday afternoon after my mother … had passed. He’d promised my mother to keep it a secret.”

Starla sagged against the pillows. “So that’s why Virginia did all this?”

“Yes. It’s … unfathomable, but yes. She tried to kill my mother last year.”

“And she killed Bryan.”

Noelle stared at Starla, a terrible image rising in her mind. Bryan in the basement. The scissors. The blood. “What?”

“I thought you were the killer,” Starla said. “I found one of those jewels from your sandals in the old morgue, and then the quilted insulin bag with the embroidered R. I thought it was proof. But Virginia must have been following me. She must have known I was getting close.” Starla drew a breath. “Noelle, I found Bryan. He's in one of the body lockers in Bellerose's old morgue.”

Noelle covered her mouth, unable to speak.

All this time, she'd imagined him alive somewhere. Watching her. Hating her. Perhaps even killing people at the hospital to make her suffer.

But she'd also feared the opposite. That she'd watched him die that night and somehow convinced herself otherwise because the alternative was unbearable.

Now, after a year of uncertainty, she finally had an answer.

Bryan was dead.

And he'd been there, in the basement of Bellerose, the entire time.

“You went into the morgue and saw him in a locker?”

Starla shook her head. “Only the body bag. But it’s him. I can’t explain how I know, but I do. His shoe was in a filing cabinet. There was blood on it.”

Noelle’s mind raced. Had it somehow been Virginia who had lured her to the basement at Bellerose? Who’d trapped her in the morgue? Had she orchestrated the whole thing?

“No confession from Virginia?” Starla asked.

Noelle shook her head. “She’s claiming I was behind it all.”

“I have to admit I feel kind of stupid for not picking up on Virginia’s dark side. I’ve known her since I was a child. I should have recognized it.”

Noelle frowned. She too had known Virginia her entire life and never once believed she could be dangerous. “She fooled the whole world.”

“Forensics doesn’t lie. I’m sure the Blackwater P.D. is swarming that old morgue as we speak. Even if they can’t prove the patient deaths, they’ll link her to the murder of Bryan.”

Noelle drew in a shaky breath, Bryan’s face filling her thoughts in those final seconds. His eyes going wide as she stabbed him. This was the moment to admit what she’d done, but the words stayed buried.

Finn walked into the room, a cardboard carrier of coffee in his hands. He set one on Starla’s tray table and turned to Noelle. “Ready to go home?”

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EPILOGUE

Noelle sat with Jim in the parlor of her mother's house. Her house now, though she couldn't begin to fathom what that meant.

Exhaustion had settled into every line of Jim's face. He seemed as if he'd aged a decade.

Noelle could relate. Since the attack at the pool, her nights had been plagued by a rollercoaster of insomnia and nightmares. No relief.

Dental records had confirmed the body in the decommissioned morgue at Bellerose was that of Bryan Carlson. The investigation into how he ended up there was only just beginning.

"This is my fault," Jim said. He braced his hands on his knees.

Noelle didn't know what to say. It wasn't his fault, not really. How could he have known that one act of infidelity would lead to so much violence? Still, a part of her did blame him. Why hadn't he pushed back against Grace? Insist they tell Noelle the truth? How differently all three of their lives might have been.

"I should have left Virginia and married your mother and … done everything differently. If I could go back …"

"You can't. There's no going back. Only forward now." Noelle crossed her arms over her chest. "Have you spoken with Virginia?"

He nodded, eyes troubled. "She's still proclaiming her innocence.

"And saying I did it?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, Noelle. I truly made a mess of things."

"Ezra told me she could get out on bail."

Jim pressed his lips together. “The judge set her bond at one hundred thousand dollars.”

“Are you going to bail her out?”

“I’m trying not to. The police are searching the house, and if they come up with proof, I won’t post bond for her.”

“And if they don’t?”

Jim rubbed his palms against his thighs. “I don’t know.”

Noelle imagined what came next. An autopsy on Bryan. A forensic search of the morgue. What if they found the scissors she'd used to stab him? What if her fingerprints were still on them?

She hadn't told anyone what she'd done. She'd spent years compartmentalizing, hiding pieces of herself from the people closest to her. Now, when she needed to come clean, to reveal everything she'd kept hidden, she couldn't seem to make herself do it.

And the stakes had never been higher. If she told police about stabbing Bryan in the basement of Bellerose it might bolster Virginia’s claims that it had been Noelle all along.

“What happens for you now?” Jim asked. “Ezra said he’s moving out. Will you stay here, in this house?”

Noelle’s eyes drifted to the window, the pool glittering in the distant garden. “For a little while, anyway.”

“I’m so sorry, Jana,” Starla said.

Jana sat across from her at the table, exhaustion etched into her features. “At least now I know. I’m not sure if that’s better. You hear people say that, don’t you? On the news, when someone’s been missing and they finally find the body, they say it’s not the outcome they wanted, but at least they have answers.” Her gaze drifted to the wall of photographs, lingering on a picture of Bryan. “But I think a part of me might’ve been happier if I could’ve gone on believing he’d run away with that girl. That he was out there somewhere, living his life.”

Starla took Jana’s hand. “I think that's understandable. As long as you didn't know, there was still hope.”

“I would like to speak with her. Noelle Mitchell.”

“I’ll talk to her. She’s still in shock from everything, but I’ll set something up.”

In truth, Starla had questions for Noelle as well, including what had happened when she’d visited her mother the night of the accident. But they’d spoken little since leaving Bellerose. Noelle was dealing with Grace’s estate, the revelation about her biological father, and a host of other issues. Starla figured the questions could wait.

Jana wiped at her eyes. “Rhett’s coming tomorrow. We’re going to start planning the funeral.” She paused. “I’d like you to be there, if you want to come.”

Starla squeezed Jana’s hand. “It would be an honor.” She thought of Bryan in her hospital room that very first night, those penetrating hazel eyes. He had brought her to this moment. “There’s something I want you to know. Jana. Bryan saved my life.”

A flicker of confusion crossed Jana’s tired face. “I don’t understand?”

“The woman who killed him, Virginia, attacked me.” Starla held up her bandaged wrists. “She left me for dead, and I probably would have died if someone hadn’t called my friend Finn.” Starla hesitated. “I know how this is going to sound, but it was Bryan.”

Jana stared at her. “Bryan?”

Starla nodded. “I was admitted to Bellerose weeks ago for … trying to take my own life.”

Jana gasped.

“I’m okay now. I am. But my first night in the hospital, I saw Bryan. Except … well, I believe I saw his spirit. I didn't understand it at first, but he's been with me through all of this. Helping me.”

Jana looked away, her eyes settling on Bryan's photograph. “I've felt him,” she whispered. “There have been moments when I could've sworn he was right there beside me.”

“He was.”

Starla arrived home to an unfamiliar car in her driveway. She stepped out of her Kia.

A man she didn’t recognize stood at her front door. He wore jeans and a Black Sabbath T-shirt.

He smiled as she approached. “Hi.”

Starla searched her memory, but came up empty. “I’m sorry. Do I know you?”

He smirked. “Glad I left such a strong impression.”

She scanned his face, lingering on his blue-gray eyes, something vaguely familiar there.

“Jake.” He extended his hand.

Starla shook it, still trying to place him.

“We met at the Legends Halloween in July party,” he told her.

Heat crept into Starla’s face, the right side burning, tingling. A flash of tying his hands to the bed, climbing on top of him.

“Now you remember me.” He arched an eyebrow, clearly enjoying himself.

Starla touched her cheek, quickly drew her hand back down. He could see her face in full view. Her sheaf of hair was tucked over her right shoulder.

“Starla, right?”

She nodded.

“You used to visit my grandpa at Hospice House. Boris Kent. We never officially met, but I saw you there a few times. And then you were at Legends, and …” He shrugged. “I’m sorry. Is it weird that I just showed up like this?”

“Boris was your grandfather?”

“Yeah. A grumpy old beast, but he and I were pretty close. He used to take me fishing on Blackwater Bay. He died last week.”

“I’m sorry.” Starla said, though in truth she knew Boris had been ready to be released from his body.

Jake nodded, then slipped his hands into his pockets. “So, what do you say? Want to go out on an actual date?”

Starla parked and walked toward the former church, now converted into a community center with offices in the basement and activities like bingo and

book club upstairs. In ten minutes, she had an appointment with the psychologist Dr. Zion Swanson.

As she neared the building, a familiar vehicle caught her eye. Finn's blue Honda Civic. He stepped from the driver's seat and waved.

"Making sure I showed up?" she asked.

"Of course not. I was just in the neighborhood."

"Bullshit."

He laughed and shrugged. "What can I say? There's a new Thai restaurant a block that way." He pointed. "Meet there after for lunch?"

Starla shifted her eyes from him back to the church. For a moment she glimpsed a familiar figure in the window upstairs. Bright hazel eyes fixed on hers. He'd say something encouraging like 'you've got this.' She blinked, and he was gone.

Starla turned back to Finn. She hadn't seen him since agreeing to her date with Jake, and she was both excited and nervous to tell him about it. "You're buying," she said. Halfway up the steps, she paused again and turned back. "Here goes nothing."

Finn smiled. "I'd say it's a pretty big something."

She looked at him for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah. Maybe it is."

Starla pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Ready for more Starla? Don't miss Book Two in the Dark Parts series,
Where the Dark Leads…

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AUTHOR’S NOTE

Hey there, Reader!

Thank you so much for reading *Gather the Night* and taking the time to get to know Starla!

When I first started writing this book, I intended for it to be a stand-alone novel. But somewhere along the way, as I got to know Starla, it became apparent that she and I would be spending quite a bit more time together.

Starla's character originated, in part, after I revisited two books I'd read many years ago. The first was *Autobiography of a Face* by Lucy Grealy, a memoir about the author's experience with childhood jaw cancer and the decades of surgeries that followed. Grealy, who became a poet, offers a remarkably honest account of living with a disfigured face in a world that places so much value on physical appearance.

The second was *Truth & Beauty* by Ann Patchett, one of Grealy's closest friends. Patchett offers another perspective on Lucy, describing a woman who could be charismatic, witty, and seemingly unfazed by her appearance, yet who also struggled with a desperate longing for love and acceptance.

Both books stayed with me, and when I began imagining Starla, I found myself returning to the complicated relationship between our physical appearance, our sense of identity, and the ways we believe others perceive us.

Of course, any reader who's been with me for a while knows that true crime frequently finds its way into my fiction.

Gather the Night is no exception.

The mystery at Bellerose Hospital draws inspiration from a number of so-called "Angel of Death" killers I've read about over the years. One case in particular had taken up residence in my mind: that of Lucy Letby, a British neonatal nurse convicted in 2023 of murdering seven infants and attempting to murder others.

The case has remained controversial, and I found myself returning to a particularly unsettling question: What would it be like to find yourself accused of murdering the very patients you'd devoted your life to caring for?

That question became one of the many threads woven into *Gather the Night*.

I could go on and on about the inspirations behind my stories. They're numerous, sometimes strange, and often difficult to trace back to their origins.

These are just a few of the influences that helped bring *Gather the Night* to life.

I'm excited to see where this series takes us. I've grown incredibly fond of Starla, and I have no doubt that the road ahead will be both rewarding and perilous.

I hope you'll join us for the next book in the *Dark Parts* series, **Where the Dark Leads.**

And if you'd like to hear more about the strange and sometimes true stories that inspire my novels, get a peek behind the scenes of my writing life, and stay up to date on new releases, book deals, and giveaways, I'd love to have you join my newsletter.

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Until next time, stay spooky…

Jacki, aka J.R. Erickson

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Dark Parts series:

Gather the Night

Where the Dark leads

Dear Celeste series:

Come Home, Katie

The Worst Kind

Dread the Night

She Writes in Red

Veil of Pines

Troubled Spirits series:

Where paranormal fiction and true crime meet.

The Northern Michigan Asylum Series:

Ghost stories inspired by a real former asylum.

You can find all my novels and join my reader team to find out about new releases, book giveaways, and more at www.jrericksonauthor.com

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J.R. Erickson, also known as Jacki Riegle, is an indie author who writes ghost stories. She is the author of the Troubled Spirits Series, which blends true crime with paranormal murder mysteries. Her Northern Michigan Asylum Series are stand-alone paranormal novels inspired by a real former asylum in Traverse City.

These days, Jacki passes the time in the Traverse City area with her excavator husband, her wild little boy, and her three kitties.

To find out more about J.R. Erickson, visit her website at www.jrericksonauthor.com.

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