

LIMINAL PARADOX
LOVE ME
DAMON ROBI

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Love Me – Liminal Paradox

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LOVE ME



Chapter 1

The Broken Heel

The once-fresh and clean wallpaper in the Corbin house was peeling again, no matter how many times they tried to clean the nicotine-dripping walls, it still stuck and clung to the house like a virus. The little yellowed curls of floral print drooping down the walls like skin flaking from a burn. The smell of beer, sweat, and stale cigarettes clung to everything, seeping into the curtains, the sheets, the carpet, their clothes. It was the smell of something dying, but not dead enough to stop screaming. Ten-year-old James Corbin stood in front of the cracked mirror, trying to smile through his pre-puberty smile. He was wearing one of his mother's old black dresses that hung off his shoulders like a secret. It smelt like cheap, powdered-scented perfume and cigarettes, but, staring at himself, he imagined it smelt like expensive Vera Wang Princess perfume that he had smelt in his mother's Vogue magazine. His lips were painted a shaky red, his lashes wet with clumps of mascara, and the black high heels—his favorite—made him feel taller, like he could reach something that always stayed just out of grasp. Every time he dressed up, he never thought of it as a game or a play; he thought of it as: This is who he was, how he was beautiful, how he was not actually a he but a she. Images of all his mother's magazine covers flashed in his head. How beautiful the woman looked, how powerful

they were, and how sexy they were. He would read the words on the covers but never actually knew what they meant. He spun once, in front of the mirror, the hem brushing his knees, and for a moment, the world outside the bedroom didn't exist, and he felt beautiful.

Then his father's voice tore through the house. "James! What the hell are you doing up there? I've been fucking calling you!"

James froze. His breath hitched. Footsteps thundered down the hallway—each one closer, heavier, like an approaching storm. The door burst open, the lightbulb overhead flickered, casting a weak orange glow across the man's furious face. His father, Aaron Corbin, filled the doorway like a shadow wearing skin. The burly man towered over him in his grease-stained work shirt, belt already half undone, veins bulging in his neck. James startled and shook like an earthquake, stumbling back as his father stormed into the room.

"What the fuck is this?" His father's eyes locked on the black heels, the lipstick, the dress. His face twisted into something monstrous. "You're wearing your mother's clothes? Makeup?!"

"Dad, I—"

His father didn't let him finish. He grabbed James by the arm and yanked him hard enough to tear the strap of the dress. The fabric ripped down the middle, exposing his shoulder.

"You think this is cute?!" He shoved him against the mirror. "You think you can parade around like some little girl?"

“Stop!” James cried, covering his face as his father’s belt flew free from its loops with a hiss.

The first strike came fast and loud. Leather met skin with a crack that echoed through the house. James screamed, stumbling to the floor. His exposed skin instantly screams red.

“You don’t get to act like this in my house!” His father snarled, kicking over a box of Barbie dolls. He grabbed one of them—Miranda, the one James loved most—and ripped its head off, throwing it across the room. “You like these? You wanna be like these little sluts?”

“Please, Dad, don’t—”

His father swiped at his legs, missing, and instead tore off one of James’s heels and hurled it at the wall. The heel snapped off and slid under the bed. Then he grabbed a fistful of the boy’s hair, tossing him into the pile of broken dolls on the floor.

“You’re sick. You hear me? Sick!”

The second hit came even harder. James’s lip split, blood trickling down his chin. His blank stare focused on the Barbies with fresh makeup and unbothered smiles beneath his ragged, tired body.

“Aaron!”

His mother’s voice cut through the chaos like glass shattering. She stood in the doorway—robe loose, eyes wide with panic. “Stop it! He’s a child!”

He spun toward her, sweat and rage dripping from his brow. “You did this, Linda! You made him like this!” He slapped her before she could answer. The crack echoed off the walls, sending her sprawling to the floor beside James.

The boy crawled to her, trembling. “Mom...”

His mother reached for him, blood in her mouth, tears cutting streaks through her makeup. “It’s okay, baby... stay down.”

He grabbed James by the hair again, lifting him halfway off the floor. “You want to wear her clothes? You want to act like her?” he hissed. “Then you can take her beatings, too.” He raised his belt again, but this time—James caught it with his forearm. It stung badly, but it was better than the alternative of where it was headed.

Something inside him snapped, silent and final, like a bone giving way. His eyes darted to the broken heel lying beneath the bed, and in one non-hesitant motion, he tore free from his father’s grasp and lunged for the bed, crawling to get underneath it as quickly as he could. His predator quickly followed his prey, grasping at his sprawling legs under the bed, snatching his ankle, squeezing it so hard that James could feel his foot go numb. He turned, tears streaming down his blood-smeared face, clawing his way to the jagged high heel, and just as his father gave one final hard yank of his ankle—before he could even curse—before he could cause any more harm—James grabbed the black heel. As he was exposed from under the bed and his suppressor

then reached for his neck, James drove the jagged heel into his father's neck.

The sound was wet and sharp, and the chaos went from a deafening, murderous race for survival to a sigh of quiet relief.

His father stumbled back, choking, one hand clutching the wound as blood sprayed across the mirror and dresser. His knees buckled, his body crashing to the floor in a heap. His mother screamed, but her voice was distant, muffled by the rush of James's heartbeat pounding in his ears. He rose to his feet, still shaking, the adrenaline still rushing through his veins, and he stared down at the man twitching on the floor, watching his last heartbeat pulse its last pump of fresh blood from his neck. His reflection in the cracked mirror stared back at him—lipstick smeared, eyes wide, dress torn open, the black high heel dripping red still clenched tightly in his hand.

The boy fell to his knees, the weapon clattering beside him. "Mom... I didn't mean to—"

His mother crawled to him, pulling him into her arms. She was shaking, sobbing, pressing his head into her chest. "Shh... shh, baby... It's okay. He can't hurt us anymore."

The mirror on the wall shimmered. The reflection twisted—James's young, tear-streaked face blurring until it wasn't a boy anymore, but a girl staring back. Her lipstick-painted mouth curved into a small, knowing smile.

And for the first time, James didn't flinch. He smiled back.

Chapter 2

The Crooked Cabin

Six years later.

The world hadn't ended the night James Corbin killed his father. It just changed its shape.

His mother moved them away from that house—quietly, without ceremony—into a smaller apartment across the river in Athens. New school, new locks on the doors, new name on the mailbox.

Jamie. Not James. That name, that little innocent little boy just wanting to play with dolls and wear an innocent dress, died that night with her father.

A metamorphosis happened, and the caterpillar finally became a butterfly. The name settled into her bones as it had always been there. It felt more real than anything she'd ever been called. Linda, her mother, supported it just as she had always. She bought her new clothes and makeup, and helped her practice walking in wedges across the faded carpet. But support only stretched so far when your eyes always looked tired, and the whispers followed you into every store.

It took her until her senior year, but Jamie had learned to walk with her chin up, even when her stomach twisted in knots every time someone stared or whispered. Athens High wasn't a war zone, but it wasn't a sanctuary either. Most of the time, she

blended in—quiet, thin, pretty in a ghostly sort of way, and hence the beauty still felt like the beast. Teenagers are cruel, the occasional autistic outburst of name-calling, the physical abuse of paper balls thrown at her, the boys not holding the door for her and slamming it shut behind them, and the other girls are afraid to be her friend purely for reasons of what others may think of them. With all the love her mother gave her, it still wasn't what she craved, and she just wanted to be like the others and be envied, of course, by the popular girls. But teenagers can smell fear.

And tonight, her fear reeked like perfume.

She stood at the edge of the parking lot, just beyond the glow of the school's orange floodlights, nervously checking her reflection in her small, round compact mirror. Her black dress was too tight, but she didn't own anything else that looked even remotely "hot," as the girls had requested. Her eyeliner was uneven. Her heels—cheap knock-offs from a thrift store—pinched her toes. It was all her mother could afford, but she still tried to make it look good.

But when the car pulled up, honking twice, she smiled like it didn't matter. She was finally accepted. One of the most popular girls in school had invited her out with her friends. She had helped pick up her books when a group of immature nerds knocked her books out of her hands, while the jocks gave the nerds a high-five, joining their alliance of high school hatred.

Three girls were inside. Laughing. The kind of laughter that made your spine itch.

“Get in, Jamie!” called Cora, the ringleader. Perfect teeth, perfect tan, perfect mean. “You’re gonna love this.”

Jamie climbed in. The car smelled like vanilla spray and weed. Someone handed her a can of soda, already cracked. It tasted sweet and bitter—off. They didn’t say where they were going.

“Where are we going?” Jamie asked, trying to relax, but hearing her own confidence melt with each syllable. “*What am I doing? This isn’t me?*” Her thoughts spiraled into a foggy darkness.

“We! We’re going to a bonfire in the woods!” Cora looked through the rearview mirror at Jamie, her eyes smiling at her as all the girls laughed at each other.

“You are also going to do an initiation!” Amy, the brunette sitting next to her, blurted out as she moved her hand to Jamie’s thigh and looked her in the eyes with mixed intentions.

“All of us did it. You do it, you’re in the clique.” Cora looked, smiling, into the mirror again.

Jamie nodded. She was tired of not belonging. “Yeah, sure! Of course!” She wrinkled her nose, smiled, and combed a loose strand of her hair behind her ear.

The town disappeared behind them. Streetlights grew rarer. The radio played static and old pop hits. Somewhere around the

thirty-minute mark, Jamie realized they weren't on the highway anymore. The road narrowed. Trees leaned in like they wanted to listen.

"Where... are we?" she finally asked.

"The border," said Lisa, one of the other girls, grinning.

"Ever heard of the Crooked Cabin?"

Jamie had. Everyone had.

The stories were different depending on who told them. A witch who bathed in virgin blood. A black altar that moaned if you stepped on it. Kids who went in and never came out. But it was all campfire crap. Ghost-hunter nonsense. Still, her fingers curled tight around her small clutch handbag. They reached a rusted gate. Beyond it: a thin dirt path overgrown with weeds and broken bottles. The car stopped.

"We walk from here," Cora said, already climbing out, with a flashlight in hand.

Jamie followed behind the girls, leading the path with their flashlights, her heart pounding harder with every step. The path wound like a snake through the trees. The air felt colder than it should have. The forest didn't make noise—not even wind.

"Where is the bonfire?" Jamie wraps her arms around her shoulders, warming herself with the uncomfortable feeling of the cold and unknown intuition of dread.

Then she saw it.

The Crooked Cabin.

It looked like a painting someone had tried to erase. Its wooden slats leaned at unnatural angles, and the roof slumped like a broken neck. One window was boarded. The door hung off its hinges. The whole house leaned so far to the left that it looked ready to collapse.

“This is it,” Cora said with a theatrical bow. “One hour inside. Flashlight only. Don’t cry, don’t scream, don’t leave early, or you’re out. We go to the bonfire when you are done.” Her left eyebrow couldn’t raise any higher with her mischievous smirk.

Jamie stared at the door. “That’s it? ... go in alone?”

“Yup. We all did it.” Lisa, the dirty blonde, smirked while she lit a cigarette, her face warm with the yellow glow of the lighter.

Lies. She could feel the lie in their smirks. But what if they weren’t? What if this wasn’t like all the stupid, scary movies that she has seen in the past?

“One hour.” Cora hands her a black flashlight, takes out her phone, and sets the timer to one hour.

“See you in an hour, babe. We’ll be right here when you come out,” Lisa smirks and takes a puff from her cigarette.

“Promise?” Jamie said nervously and coldly.

“We aren’t that cruel, trust us, okay?” Amy looks up and down. “Oh, and your ass looks amazing in the dress, by the way!”

“Thanks!” The compliment boosted her confidence.

“Okay, go! I want to hurry and get to the bonfire. I need a beer!” Cora turns her to face the decrepit cabin.

Jamie stood feeling alone in the shadow of what felt like a nightmare. The girls standing in line behind her were egging her on.

She switched on her flashlight. And stepped forward slowly and then inside.

The smell hit her first—damp wood, rot, something else beneath it like mold and mud. Her beam of light flicked across the entryway. A dusty fog and illuminated bugs flying around the beam of light, taking refuge in the warmth, helped light the room. Floorboards warped, splinters jagged, graffiti scrawled across the walls in red and black.

Inverted pentagrams. 666's. Warnings.

DON'T LISTEN TO IT.

SHE'S STILL HERE.

VIRELDAGRIN

RUN.

The living room was crooked—literally. The floor dipped at an angle that made her stomach lurch. Dust hung in the air like ash. Jamie stepped forward carefully, the light shaking in her hand; she was mesmerized by the name VIRELDAGRIN written on the peeling wallpaper, which reminded her of her old life. She

stared at the red dripped spray paint, trying to understand who or what that name belonged to.

A scream erupted upstairs. Knocking her out of trance, but she froze even more in her place.

It didn't sound human.

Her legs didn't want to move, but her hand did—lifting the flashlight toward the stairs. Each step creaked as if it would collapse. Halfway up, something scratched beneath the boards.

“Why the fuck am I going up here?”

She reached the top.

To her left: a hallway with three doors. Two closed. One cracked open. The house was silent, her breath the only sound now that deafened her ears. Then she heard a sniffle and a soft whimper.

Something inside the room with the open door was sobbing. Soft. Childlike.

Jamie stepped toward it, heart hammering. “Hello?” she whispered.

The door creaked as she pushed it open.

The room inside was cold. The air felt... wet. The room was eerily empty, no graffiti, no windows, no furniture. Her flashlight, a beacon of the only good thing in this house, reaches the far corner, where a figure sits curled in shadow, shoulders shaking with each sob. A little girl in a torn and dirty dress was

huddled in the corner. Her dirty, dark hair sprawled across her back.

“Are you okay?” Jamie asked, taking a step closer. “It’s okay, I can help you?” The flashlight shining on the little girl’s back, her head tucked inside her crossed arms.

“I want my mom,” the girl’s weak voice responded, echoing uncontrollably. “I want my mom.”

“Okay, come with me, I can help you find her.” Jamie reached a hand out to comfort her.

The sobbing stopped.

The figure stood bending backward on all fours.

It wasn’t a child.

It wasn’t human.

“I want my mom!” It says softly again while it transforms.

It turned toward her with a face made of stretched flesh, empty-skinned eyes, and a mouth that opened the wrong way—too wide, too low, filled with teeth like shards of bone from ear to ear, which wasn’t there.

Jamie screamed, backing up, staring at the demon. She couldn’t help it. “Fuck this!”

It lunged, but she dodged, falling to her side. The demon, Vireldagrin, slid on the wood floor, its claws scraping to gain traction as it lunged again for her. Jamie dodged again, but this time a little late, the demon catching her side, clawing her side with three gashes in her flesh. Her dress was soaking up the

blood as she didn't hesitate and turned and ran down the hallway, the stairs, slamming into walls. Something clawed at her back, barely missing. She hit the front door hard enough to knock it off its hinges, tumbling outside into the dirt. The demon screamed its inhuman screech when she made it outside.

She didn't stop.

She didn't look back.

The girls were nowhere to be found, but right now she didn't care.

She ran through the trees until her lungs burned. The air changed—thicker, electric. She hit something invisible, staggered, dropped to her knees, and vomited. She felt it before, like a familiar place, the past, like she knew where she was.

Behind her, the demon screeched again, sending a vibrating alert to something else that growled to her left in the distance.

Her side ached, her dress sticky with blood, vomit still dripping from her chin, and she got up and ran.

She can feel as if something is close to her, a breath that isn't hers, choking her, wanting her to give up. She runs and hits the asphalt; the solid ground feels safe and stable.

Ahead, distant headlights.

She stumbled forward, waving her arms.

A pickup truck swerved, brakes screeching.

Then everything went black.

Chapter 3

The Sheriff's Bargain

The first thing Jamie noticed was the smell—stale coffee, cigarette ash, and the faint trace of lemon cleaner that never fully masked the decay beneath. She blinked awake on a hard bench, fluorescent light buzzing overhead, the hum like a swarm in her skull. Her throat burned. Her skin ached. The cell was old. Not retro—just wrong. Metal bars flaked with rust, a single rotary phone bolted to the wall, a radio in the corner playing something that sounded like “Dope Show” by Marilyn Manson through the static. It took her a moment to realize the song wasn’t just old. It was new, here, but it was a creepy 80’s remix until it was interrupted by a very excited and deep-toned DJ.

“Can’t get enough of Manson, here on Moonville Radio, and if he ever did make his way here, he would be nothing more than a god! But remember, my Nightlings, Moonville only calls those who are naughty, and man, do I feel naughty when I listen to Manson, it makes me thirsty! Enough with the talk, let’s play some more tunes. For your survival, I’m rooting for you, Nightlings. See you in a few. Victor Vale out!”

“Rise and shine.” The voice was gravel-soaked in bourbon, as a scruffy sheriff clicked off the radio on his desk. Sheriff Frank Garlow stood on the other side of the bars. Tan uniform, scuffed

boots, thinning hair, a badge dulled by time. He looked like he'd been awake since the 1970s.

“You with me now?”

Jamie sat up slowly, clutching the edge of the bench.

“Where... am I?” Her side ached, but now it was bandaged.

He studied her face for a long time before answering.

“Moonville.” The name felt heavy, like it didn't want to leave his mouth. “You can thank Dr. Tube for that later.” He points to her side through the bars.

He moves to his desk and grabs her black clutch with her school ID on top. “James Corbin?”

“It's...It's who I used to be. But the fucking school didn't care!” She sits hugging her knees to her chest.

“Hmm...I see.” He grunts and holds her purse and ID through the bars. “Take it.”

She reluctantly gets up, her side aching, and gently grabs her things.

“You were found just outside town. Ran into the road screamin' about something in the woods. You're lucky I didn't hit you.” He reaches to his side to unclasp his keys from his belt.

Jamie blinked. The last thing she remembered was the cabin—the crooked walls, the screaming, the thing that wasn't human—and then headlights.

“My mom—she's probably—”

Garlow raised a hand, shaking his head. “No. That’s not how this works.”

“What do you mean?”

He sighed, rubbed the bridge of his nose, then leaned against the bars. “I need you to listen real close, Jamie. Because this... ain’t the kind of place you wake up in and go home from.”

Jamie frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“You crossed the line,” he said. “The barrier.”

“The what?”

Garlow gestured vaguely toward the window—a square of glass fogged over with years of grime. “You probably felt it. The nausea, the burn in your chest. That wasn’t fear. That was the town taking you in. And once it does, that’s it. You’re here.”

Her voice cracked. “You’re saying I can’t leave?” She stands up quickly and goes over to the bars of the jail cell, gripping them, her knuckles white.

He stared at her a long moment, then said softly, “No one does.”

The silence stretched, thick as the air outside after a storm. He sticks the cell key into its lock and turns; the clank echoes through the entire station as the door creaks open.

“You’re stuck in a loop now,” he said. “Moonville runs on its own clock. Been stuck sometime in the late eighties for as long as anyone remembers. People come through—tourists, drifters, kids on dares. But the barrier only goes one way. You can’t go

back. Doesn't matter how far you walk or how hard you try, you'll just end up right where you started, and that's if you don't end up dead first."

Jamie shook her head. "No. That's impossible."

"Yeah," he said, "that's what everyone says. Try to remember—how did you get here?"

"My friends—well, I thought I was going to have friends—those bitches tricked me, I'm so fucking stupid, no one will ever love me." A lump forms in her throat as she stands frozen, resting her head on the cold cell bars.

"Hey! Never mind all that, think! How did you get here?" His voice is low and raspy.

"They dared me to go into the crooked cabin, but then something tried to fucking eat me, so I, I ran—they weren't there, they left!" She angrily sobs.

He pulled a chair closer and sat down. The old leather squeaked. "The cabin you went into—the Crooked Cabin—it's one of the gateways. It's been so long, I forgot about that place on the other side. These gateways move around sometimes. Sometimes it's the cabin, sometimes it's the lake, sometimes it's the tunnel off Elder Vein Road. Whatever form it takes, it opens the way for the town to welcome someone new, to welcome its next victim. It's how Moonville feeds. The witch that lived in that cabin did some fucked up shit, and those demons love to fuck with you and lure you here."

Jamie's stomach turned. "Feeds?"

"On people. On stories. On what we bring with us. I haven't quite been able to figure it out yet."

She thought of her father's blood, her mother's tears, the mirror that smiled back at her. "I don't belong here," she whispered.

"None of us did," he said. "But you're here now, and that means you follow the rules."

He reached into his coat and pulled out a folded piece of paper—creased, yellowed, smudged with fingerprints. "Here."

Jamie unfolded it. The handwriting was shaky but clear.

Rules:

- 1. Never go out after midnight. The streets shift.*
- 2. Don't answer the phones.*
- 3. Don't turn on Channel 11.*
- 4. If someone knocks and says your name, don't open the door.*
- 5. Don't cross into the fog. It doesn't end.*
- 6. Never step in still water*
- 7. If you hear music, don't follow it*
- 8. If you find a cassette tape, don't press play.*

She looked up at him. "Seriously?"

"Dead serious," he said. "Trial and error, I'm afraid."

Jamie stared at the paper. Some rules looked like they'd been erased and rewritten—layered over one another.

“They change?” she asked.

He nodded grimly. “Some show up outta nowhere—some twist. None of them ever goes away. The mayor usually announces new ones at the monthly town meetings, and when he calls attendance ain’t optional if you want to survive.”

Jamie stood, clutching the bars. “I have to find my mom. She’s waiting for me.”

Garlow’s expression didn’t change. “No, she’s not. That world’s gone, sweetheart. You crossed over. It’s been that way since the town was cursed.”

“Cursed by what?”

He looked away, giving a grungy sigh. “Depends on who you ask—the witch. The mine collapsed. The preacher who tried to burn the fog away. Doesn’t matter anymore. All I know is, once you’re in, the town gives you a part to play.”

“A part?”

He nodded slowly. “Everyone here is... something. The mechanic who never ages. The kids at the diner who dance the same song every night. Me? I keep the peace. Make sure newcomers don’t lose their minds too fast.”

Jamie sat down again, dizzy. “So that’s it? I’m just—trapped here? Forever?”

Garlow stood. “If forever’s how long the town wants you, yeah. But I ain’t gonna let you rot in a cell.”

He grabbed his coat from the hook. “You need a place to stay. Somewhere to learn the ropes. There’s a woman named Agatha, who has been here since the start, like me—runs a boarding house on Hollow Crest Drive. She’ll take you in.”

“Take me in? What is this, fucking foster care?”

He gave her a look that wasn’t cruel, but wasn’t kind either. “It’s survival! Here, put this on?” He handed her an oversized gray hoodie. “It’s cold.”

He stood in the open cell door, and the hallway light flickered again. Jamie swore she saw the color drain from the world for just a second as she pulled her head through the sweatshirt—the gray of the walls shifting to sepia, like an old photograph.

“Sheriff?”

He didn’t turn. “You’ll get used to that. Come on”

Outside, an old brown Chevy truck with police lights mounted on top was parked by the curb of the station. Officer Garlow, open the door for Jamie; its rusty hinges creaked as she got in. The leather seats were cracked and cold. Garlow went around the front and got in the truck, slamming the door behind him. He immediately started the engine, and the smell of the old car blew through the vents as the radio clicked on.

“The moon will be high tonight, Moonvillers, which means I’d stay inside if I were you. You never know what might take a

bite.” A deep raspy voice chuckles, then plays “Black Celebration” by Depeche Mode.

“Ya, you’ll get used to him, too. The only radio station we have in this place.”

The streets were empty, lit by dim neon signs and the faint hum of the crooked power lines that stretched overhead. They drove through town in silence. Faded storefronts. A movie theater playing *The Lost Boys*. A hair salon advertising perms for \$4.99. Time hadn’t stopped—it had looped, endlessly repeating its own decay. Finally, they stopped in front of a house not far from downtown that looked like a church that had forgotten what it prayed for. The porch light flickered. A cross hung over the door.

“This is her place,” he said. “Agatha Mills. She’ll give you food, rules, and a roof. You’ll keep your head down, and maybe you’ll make it through the first week.”

The door opened before Jamie could move. Agatha stood in the doorway like she’d been waiting all night—tall, bony, dressed in black from throat to ankle, crucifix glinting in the yellow light. Her eyes were sharp and still.

“Sheriff,” she said. “You’ve brought another one.”

“Yeah,” Garlow said, tipping his hat. “Try not to scare this one off.”

Agatha smiled without warmth. “If she listens, she’ll be just fine.”

A girl stepped into view behind her. Blonde. Soft-spoken. Eyes too old for sixteen.

“This is my daughter, Mary.”

Mary looked at Jamie and smiled faintly. “You’re new.”

Jamie didn’t know what else to say. “I... guess.”

“Come inside, child,” Agatha said. “The night doesn’t like wanderers.”

Jamie looked back toward the road, but the cruiser was already gone. The engine’s echo vanished into the fog. The three enter the house, Agatha locking the door behind her with three deadbolts, an overkill in Jamie’s mind, but she didn’t know what was going on, and from the sound of everything so far, it just may be needed.

“Well, it’s late—follow me.” Agatha hobbles up the creaky wooden stairs, leaning heavily on the rail. “You see, my late husband built this house with his bare hands—I love this house.” She stops mid-step and looks around.

“Well, thank you very much for taking me in; it’s very nice that you do that.” Jamie softly speaks.

“Oh, don’t thank me, thank God, he put me here to help—told me you would be coming.” She starts moving up the stairs again, slowly.

The house smelled musty, old, of baby powder; each step loomed uncomfortable until they reached an open door. Inside a small single bed with white sheets tightly wrapped around its

mattress, which rested on a thin metal bed frame and headboard. Several crosses hung just above the headboard, casting a large, looming shadow from the old lamp, and an accordion lampshade rested on a nightstand next to the bed. On the other side of the room sat a small wooden desk, a basic wooden chair, and a black bible with gold lettering.

“This is our guestroom, you’ll stay here for the night. Mary will make you your own room in the morning—I think we should turn in for the night and discuss more when time has caught up.”

“Okay, and thank you so much again, you’re both so very nice.”

“Just doing my Godly duties, dear—oh, if you need the restroom, it’s just down the hall, there.” She smiles and points down the dark hallway. “Goodnight, dear—God bless.” She grips the cold door handle and closes Jamie inside the room.

That night, in her borrowed bed beneath a wall of crosses and framed psalms, Jamie couldn’t sleep. The window beside her was cracked, the air outside too still. Somewhere in the distance, a TV played faintly through the static.

She turned her head toward the mirror across the room by the door—an old oval thing with an ornate frame. For a moment, she swore she saw the reflection of the Crooked Cabin behind her. The doorway. The dark figure.

Then it was gone.

Jamie pulled her sheets tight around her neck, turning to face the window, where the cool breeze wafted her thoughts as she closed her eyes. And somewhere, far off in the endless fog, as she slept, a woman's voice whispered through the static from her open window.

“Welcome home, Jamie.”

Chapter 4

Hollow Crest Drive

Jamie slept, but the kind of sleep that wasn't well enough to remember or feel.

The whisper still hung in the air, floating like dust caught in the sunrise. "*Welcome home, Jamie.*" She knew she had heard it; she thought it was a dream or maybe stress, but she was sure that, while her eyes were closed and her body at rest, she had heard something. She lay stiff in the guest bed, clutching the thin blanket, surrounded by walls of framed psalms and wooden crosses that seemed to breathe in the darkness of this strange room. The cracked window let in just enough chill to keep her awake from not sleeping well, and the glow from the rising sun started to creep in, melting the shadows away. When the sky finally changed its color from darkness to dawn, she rolled out of bed, muscles sore, side still aching beneath the bandages that some apparent doctor had crudely stitched together. She touched her ribs—three long scratches, now in their beginning stages of scabbing over. Her fingertips trembled. The cabin hadn't been a dream. The demon wasn't a hallucination. The barrier, the fog, the rules—they were all real. And now she was trapped in a haunted town, stuck in the 1980s with a religious boarding mom and a daughter who looked like she'd been carved out of an old hymnbook. The floor creaked beneath her feet as she padded

barefoot to the hallway. Everything in the house smelled like lemon polish and burning wax. Candles flickered in sconces even in daylight, which danced in the overly clean halls. Jamie cautiously crept down the stairs. The floorboards groaned with her weight down to the bottom. Agatha was already in the kitchen when Jamie arrived—back straight, hair pulled tight in a bun, sleeves rolled to her elbows as she worked the frying pan with the grim purpose of a surgeon.

“Good morning, Jamie,” she said without turning. “The Lord made this day for us, didn’t He?”

Jamie hovered in the doorway. “Uh... sure.”

Agatha slid a plate across the table. A triangle of toast, two eggs, and a cup of milk. Everything is white or beige. No butter. No jam. No coffee.

“I hope you slept well.”

Jamie sat cautiously. “Yeah. I guess.”

“Nightmares are common your first week,” Agatha said, folding her hands. “Moonville’s fog gets into the soul. But prayer helps. Prayer always helps.”

Jamie nodded, pushing the eggs around her plate.

Mary entered next, already dressed in a knee-length skirt and a pale blue blouse, her blonde hair pinned neatly behind her ears. She smiled softly at Jamie but didn’t speak. Her eyes darted to her mother, then back down to her folded hands.

They prayed before eating.

Agatha's voice was smooth but cold. "Dear Lord, bless this food and bless this house. Protect us from false prophets and wandering spirits. Cleanse the heart of confusion and plant only the seeds of righteousness. Amen."

Jamie mouthed the *amen* and picked up her fork. The eggs were rubbery. The toast crunched like sawdust.

"You'll have your own room," Agatha said between bites. "I thought it best. Until we know each other better."

"Thanks," Jamie said, surprised but grateful. "I... I appreciate that."

Agatha smiled gently. "We believe in boundaries here. Good fences make good families."

Jamie bit back the obvious prison metaphor.

After the awkward breakfast, Agatha gave her a tour of the house. The living room was full of Christian paraphernalia—crucifixes, framed Bible quotes, a cracked photo of a man in a military uniform with hollow eyes.

"That's my late husband," Agatha said when she caught Jamie staring. "He died righteous. Not many do."

Jamie said nothing.

"You'll do your own laundry, keep your space clean, and chores are expected to be done before sundown. No phone calls after seven. No television without supervision. And if you need anything, ask Mary first. Not me."

"Okay." Jamie, questioning some of the off-rules in her head.

“Modesty is a virtue,” she added. “We dress for the Lord in this house.”

Jamie glanced down at her hoodie and bare legs, visible beneath her tight black dress. “Right. Got it. But...”

“We already have some new clothes for you, so don’t worry.”

“Thank you...”

“You’ll also attend church every Sunday and every Wednesday evening. There are no exceptions.”

Jamie forced a smile. “Of course.”

“This is my room; no one is allowed to enter without my permission. Do you understand?” She glares at Jamie.

“Yes, yes ma’am.”

“Good, now back upstairs, Mary will show you to your official room.”

“Come follow me.” Mary grabs Jamie’s hand, pulling it.

“Ahem!” Agatha cleared her throat and stomped her foot on the floor, looking at Mary, then at their clasped hands.

Mary looks down, clenching both lips together in shame, and drops her hand from Jamie. “Follow me.”

They made their way up to the second story, the creaks of the steps still lingering behind them. “My bedroom is here, and yours is just across the hall from mine.”

The hallway to their bedrooms felt colder than the rest of the house. Her door stuck a little when it opened—just enough to make her think it was locking her in rather than keeping her safe.

The room was barren: a small twin bed, an old vanity with a mirror, and a single wooden cross nailed above the headboard, and the same nightstand and lamp as the guest room. On her neatly made bed was her small black clutch, some folded clothes, and a black bible with gold lettering.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to knock, and I’ll see you for bible study this afternoon.” She pushed an awkward smile from her lips, looking Jamie up and down, her eyes taking her in, before looking back down to the ground in shame as she closed the door behind Jamie.

The closed door felt like both refuge and a prison, but her little black bag felt like home. She unpacked the few items she had from her clutch—mascara, a worn compact mirror, her eyeliner pencil, and a hot pink folded paper. Her hands trembled as she unfolded the paper. She already knew what it was, but she wanted to take a final look. Homecoming, October 3rd, 2009, it was the flyer they were handing out at school, and the reason why she was trying so hard to be friends with almost anyone, so she didn’t have to go through the embarrassment of going to the dance by herself or not at all.

“I’m so fucking stupid.” She shakes her head, crumples the paper into a hot pink ball, and throws it to the ground.

She digs her clutch again and removes her compact mirror to see how bad she looks. The girl in the mirror didn’t look like the one who entered the Crooked Cabin. She looked older. Harder.

Something in her eyes had snapped and never quite reset. She pokes at the puffs under her eyes and inspects her dry lips when her mirror cracks for no reason. She stares at herself for just a second, more confused, and closes the mirror, disgusted. She takes off her hoodie and then her dress, standing naked in a lacey thong, bare-chested, her figure still that of a boy, and grabs the clothes on her bed, unfolding them, instantly crying as she sees what was given to her.

“Fuck them!” She whispered and wrapped her arms around herself. She licks the tears that have fallen onto her lips and puts on a short-sleeved, light-blue button-down shirt made for a boy. Sniffling, she pulls down her panties and replaces them with a stiff white pair of briefs, and then pulls on the straight-legged khaki pants. “I fucking hate this!” She collapses on the bed, her tears soaking into her clean pillow. Mary knocked gently at her door, the sun already casting a low shadow through her window on the door.

“I made some tea,” she said, opening the door and holding out a mug. Her voice was soft, like everything she said came with an apology. “You don’t have to drink it. Just... wanted to say welcome.”

Jamie sat up in bed and took the mug. “Thanks.”

Mary hesitated. “She can be intense, my mom. But she’s... she’s trying.”

Jamie nodded slowly. “Yeah. So am I.”

They stood awkwardly in silence for a moment. “Well, I’ll see you downstairs in a bit for Bible study.” Mary retreated, leaving the door open as a reminder to come down.

Jamie smiled and nodded, watching Mary leave, her hot cup of tea held in both hands. She looks around her new room once more and at her new home until she notices her door. The door had two locks: one for her to lock from the inside and another on top, which she couldn’t control. She looked at the outside of the door and saw two separate keyholes, as if she could be locked inside and controlled, or maybe it was to keep her safe. Jamie closed her door, confused, controlled, heartbroken. She sits on her bed, and the springs sink with her weight. She stares at the pink crumpled ball of paper on the floor. She’s changed her mind, she goes and grabs the loosely made ball of paper, plops back onto the bed, and quickly unfolds it and straightens it back out as best as she can on the side of her nightstand. This is all she had left of home, and the date on the paper meant more to her than anything. She folded it into a neat square, creasing its edges, and placed it back into her clutch purse.

Chapter 5

The Milk of the Word

Sunday came clothed in fog. Jamie woke to the chiming of bells—not from a church tower, but a vinyl record Agatha played on an ancient stereo in the hallway. Bells and distant organ music and a male voice reciting Leviticus like it was gospel and poetry all at once.

She sat up slowly. Her side still throbbed where Vireldagrin's claws had scraped through flesh. Her dreams had been nothing but teeth and mirrors and whispered sermons. She hadn't slept nearly as much as she wanted and felt like it was a blink between hallucinations. She still hasn't gotten used to her male clothes, but put them on without too much of a fuss in her own head, and tied her hair up short, which was a nicely put-forward demand passed along to her by Agatha. She's only been here for four days, and it's already been hell, but at least it was a safe place for now and better than out there. Jamie climbed the stairs down to the kitchen, the gospels getting louder with every step. Breakfast was already on the table: boiled eggs and lukewarm milk. Agatha, already sitting at the table, wore a black dress with puffed sleeves and a wide lace collar. Mary had on something similar—a blouse buttoned to the throat, hair in braids.

"You'll wear this today." Agatha got up from the table and handed Jamie a folded outfit—long black pants, and a white

long-sleeved button-down shirt. “The Lord doesn’t require glamour.”

Jamie blinked. “Do I have a choice?”

Agatha’s smile was patient. “Everyone has a choice. But every choice has a weight.”

Jamie took the clothes, not saying anything. What she has been wearing wasn’t glamorous to begin with.

“Now go change, come back to eat breakfast, and then we must hurry and go.” She waves a hand to push her away and sits back down at the table.

They walked to the church, rows of people shuffling through the mist, dressed in outdated Sunday best—jackets with wide lapels, pastel suits, thick nylons. Some carried Bibles, some just stared straight ahead like their wires were wound too tight. The church loomed near the center of town, where the fog began to pulse outward into the streets and toward the distant, invisible barrier. It was a squat, square building built from gray stone, its steeple crooked like a broken finger pointing nowhere. Inside, the pews were warped. The hymnals were from the 70’s. A red velvet curtain covered the altar like something backstage, waiting to emerge. Jamie sat beside Mary, clutching the pockets of her borrowed trousers. The room smelled like dust and old perfume.

The organ groaned a few notes, then stopped, and a man stepped out from behind the curtain.

“That’s Reverend Tully.” Mary squealed in excitement in her seat.

He was tall, gaunt, his black suit two sizes too big, collar pressed flat against his papery skin. His eyes were sunken pits beneath thin gold spectacles. When he smiled, the room felt colder.

“Welcome,” he said, arms open. “The flock is whole again.”

No one clapped. No one moved.

Jamie swallowed hard.

“Today’s sermon,” he said, “is about purity. About deception. About the masks we wear and the bodies we defile. Let us begin.” His voice was velvet over knives. He didn’t yell, didn’t stomp, or wave a Bible. He spoke—and the room listened. He spoke about “the milk of the Word”—how it cleanses and softens the bones hardened by sin. He spoke of “false faces” and “genderless wolves dressed as lambs,” and Jamie felt the blood drain from her face.

Agatha didn’t flinch.

Mary didn’t look at her.

Jamie realized, then, that this wasn’t just any church. This was *Moonville’s* church, and everything the Sheriff had told her that was odd about this place started to feel more real. When the sermon ended, everyone stood in unison. Reverend Tully bowed

his head and whispered a final benediction in Latin. Then he raised his hand.

A murmur passed through the pews like static.

“Before we go, my lambs, we must welcome our new guest,” he said, his eyes falling directly on Jamie. “Come, brother. Let us bless your beginning.”

Jamie froze.

Every head turned toward her.

Agatha nudged her forward. “Go on. It’s tradition.”

Mary didn’t look up.

Jamie stood, legs shaking, and walked down the aisle. The Reverend extended his hand, pale and cold. He wore a large gold ring that Jamie couldn’t help notice, a crucifix with a pointed bottom like a dagger, and a thorny crown wrapped around its top. When she took it in her hand, she felt a spark—like static, but more intense, the cold metal ring an ice cube on her skin.

“What’s your name, child?”

“...Jamie.”

He smiled wider. “Jamie. A name of rebirth. A name of change. The Lord knows all names, especially those we try to bury.”

Her stomach turned.

He placed his ringed hand on her forehead. The metal’s cold again burned her warm, flushed skin.

The room spun. Images flooded her brain—her father bleeding, the cracked mirror, the demon in the cabin, Agatha’s crucifixes, the smell of burnt hair and perfume.

“May he walk the narrow path,” the Reverend said softly, “may the fog never take him, and may his path be unwound from confusion to clarity.” He looks up at the sky and speaks in Latin, “Quod in nobis sepultum est...” His voice echoes deep in the entire church. Then he let go.

Jamie stumbled back. The crowd bowed their heads, and in unison they all spoke, “...nobiscum resurget.”

She returned to her seat, hands shaking. She didn’t understand what happened and the only thing that she understood was that her body was telling her that this isn’t right, that something is wrong, that she should run, but something made her sit back down next to Agatha. The rest of the service was a blur.

Later, back at the house, Agatha served church soup for lunch. The smell of vegetables, chicken, and seasoning filled the kitchen, but it couldn’t mask the odor of rot that Agatha and the church were trying to shove down Jamie’s throat.

“That was such a beautiful service today,” she said. “You did very well, James.”

Mary excused herself quietly. Her face was pale.

Jamie poked at her soup. “Do I have to go to that every week?”

Agatha smiled. “Yes, of course, we are trying to save you.”

“But the Sheriff, where was he?”

“Well, I’m sure the Sheriff was doing God’s work and was needed elsewhere.”

Jamie didn’t respond to that clever answer. Agatha always has an answer, and it always points to God.

“Why do I need to be saved?” She looks Agatha in the eyes.

“Because you are a non-believer, my dear.” Agatha stares back, but not at her—at her soul.

“And how do you know if I’m a believer or not? You’ve never asked?” Jamie says, annoyed and frustrated.

“Because you are a young man...” She says with power and narcissism. “According to the Bible, you are an abomination, and you need to be saved, so you are not a believer, and your soul needs to be cleansed.” Agatha starts to change; her tears pour from her hateful eyes. “That’s my purpose, I have to save you, He told me. He told me. I knew you were coming. He told me you were coming. He told me to purify you, to make you whole again.” Her sobs were frantic, trying to justify her words.

“I do believe!” Jamie stands up, slamming her hands on the table. The dishes clatter on the table, spilling soup on the table cloth.

“But you won’t be accepted for who you are.” Agatha’s voice turns to disgust as her tears stop.

“Then fuck your God for being cruel!”

“You leave this table now! You, you demon—in God’s name, you leave this table now!” Agatha stands up furious, drawing a cross in the air in front of Jamie.

Jamie throws her hands in the air, storms up the stairs, and slams her door. Agatha is still downstairs in the kitchen, collapsed in her chair, swaying back and forth, repeating a prayer over and over again, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Chapter 6

The Purity Lesson

A week passed before Jamie realized Moonville had its own kind of gravity. It pulled you down, slow and soft, until you forgot what the sky used to look like. The air never smelled clean, the lights never truly turned off, and every face—smiling or polite—hid something hungry behind the teeth. And school. School was supposed to be her reprieve, but it wasn't.

Moonville High looked like a freeze-frame from 1986 that refused to move on: lockers painted a fading teal and purple, motivational posters yellowed, and curling announcements typed on paper and pinned up instead of digital screens. The students dressed like mannequins from another life—acid-washed jeans, puffed sleeves, mullets—and yet no one seemed to notice anything strange about it.

Except her.

On Jamie's first day, the stares were knives.

By the third, the whispers followed her down every hall.

By the fifth, someone had scrawled a picture of a penis and the words "*GOD MADE ADAM AND EVE*" on her locker in what looked like lipstick but smelled like blood. She told herself she didn't care. She told herself she'd survived worse. But that night, she stood in front of her mirror and touched the bruise-colored words like they were scripture written on her skin, until

the room flooded with cold, like death's blanket. Jamie stared at herself, frozen and unsure, as her reflection split into a mask that looked like a female manakin, vibrating like a pulse in the mirror until it frosted over and cracked perfectly down the center.

Agatha's voice carried up the stairs. "Prayer circle, Jamie! Don't keep the Lord waiting."

Snapping out of her trance, Jamie came down in the plain black slacks and long sleeves that Agatha insisted upon. Her makeup had been scrubbed clean under the threat of "no supper." Her hair was pulled back, severe, unrecognizable. Mary waited at the table. Her eyes were softer that first week, but something in them had changed—gone glassy, fervent. She smiled when Jamie entered, but it wasn't kind; it wasn't forced, either, like she was a puppet and the puppeteer was pulling the corners of her mouth with strings into a frightening, unnatural smirk.

"You look better," she said, tilting her head. "Cleaner."

"Thanks," Jamie said flatly, sitting down.

Agatha clasped her hands. "The Lord loves obedience, my children. And obedience loves beauty."

They prayed. Agatha led. Mary echoed every word. Jamie whispered nothing, her lips still, her pulse loud, and the only thing she could look forward to was the tea at the end, until Agatha made them sit and discuss the Bible. But just like every prayer circle, church gathering, and unsolicited Bible lesson that Agatha decided to do at a moment's notice, Jamie just

participated. She put her head down, bit her tongue, and obeyed. What else was she supposed to do? She was trapped, and these first few weeks in Moonville seemed more like hell rather than Agatha's purity for heaven. Nights in that house stretched too long. Jamie started to hear the floorboards whisper—little sighs, faint voices, the sound of a woman crying under her bed, while she was forced to lie on top of her bed and play the part of someone she wasn't anymore. Every mirror in the house reflected her a second too slow, and the cross above her bed had begun to tilt, just slightly, toward her face. Taunting her, preaching to her, reminding her. And while sipping tea, she couldn't help but think. *"How could the Sheriff have done this to her? Why this house? Did he know? He said something about don't let this one run away?"* She couldn't remember fully through Agatha's constant rambling of scriptures and how she twisted them to fit her daily agendas.

"Today is Purity Day!" Agatha announced as if it were a birthday.

"The Reverend has called for cleansing," she said cheerfully.

"There are sins that need tending."

Mary smiled into her oatmeal. "It's beautiful when he chooses someone special."

Jamie's spoon froze in midair. "Someone?"

Agatha's eyes met hers. "Don't worry, dear. The Lord always knows best. Just eat up! I want you two to spend the rest of your

day in your rooms, noses to the scriptures, after breakfast! It's such a special day!"

"But it's Friday, what about school?" Jamie, questioning her own question, couldn't decide which was worse, being in this house or being at school, where she was being made fun of for being trans and looking like an obsessed Bible freak with the clothes she was forced to wear.

"The only school today is Jesus!" Agatha excitedly clapped her hands and smiled.

The night came heavy and humid. The fog outside pressed against the windows like a living thing, clawing to come inside. Jamie lay in bed, awake, thinking she had gotten out of whatever this "Purity Day" was. She's been in her room all day, and not a creak or a whisper came from the house, when then a knock came. Three slow taps. Jamie's heart sank, and her chest became heavy.

"Jamie," Mary's voice said through the door. "It's time."

Jamie opened the door. Mary stood there in white—barefoot, hair unbound, holding a large silver cross in her hands firmly, her knuckles white. Her pupils were blown wide. Her lips trembled, but her smile didn't. From downstairs, Agatha's voice

rose in a hymn, long and low, while a record player screeched gospel songs.

“The lamb returns to fire, the fire to the Lord, and the Lord to dust.” Agatha’s voice echoes up the stairs.

“Mom says the Lord can fix what’s broken in you,” she whispered. “You just have to want it.”

Jamie stepped back. “Mary—what are you talking about?”

Mary raised the cross, gripping it at the top, now revealing a long, sharp dagger where Mary’s hands were. Blood ran down the cross from her sliced hands, pooling down by her wrists.

“It’s not me. It’s Him.” She smiles, her voice hopeful.

Jamie’s heart stuttered. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I do,” Mary said, and her voice broke into a laugh that wasn’t hers. “You brought something here. The mirrors won’t rest. The walls hum when you walk past. You changed the air. It’s not holy! God told me. You need to be pure.”

Jamie shook her head. “Mary, stop. You don’t—”

But Mary lunged.

The cross caught her on the shoulder, its blade digging deep into her flesh, pooling blood in the deep wound. Jamie stumbled, grabbed her arm, tried to pull her away, but Mary was able to get several frantic slices on her face and forearms while Jamie was trying to block her before gripping her arms and pushing Mary to the side. The cross was stuck in the floor like a dart next to the dresser.

Mary screamed. Not in pain—in revelation. “See?!” she shouted. “Even He knows!” She pointed to the upright cross and grabbed it again with her blood-soaked fingertips. The music from Agatha downstairs seemed to get louder.

Jamie stood terrified and glued to her bedroom wall. The cracked mirror next to her glowed faintly in the dark. For a heartbeat, Jamie saw herself reflected there again—not as she was, but as Mary saw her: monstrous, painted, wrong, a demon wearing a mask.

Mary ran towards her again, knife in hand, when something inside her snapped. She shoved Mary back, hard enough to send her sprawling across the room. Mary’s back hit the dresser with a crack, and she went still. The sound of the impact broke the evil in the room into something darker. Something that changed Jamie. Something that she was all too familiar with. The house went quiet, except for the echoes of the screeching record downstairs, still playing gospel music.

Jamie stared at her shaking hands. “Mary...?”

But Mary wasn’t answering. Her eyes were open, staring through her. Blood from a gash above her temple dripped onto the carpet and pooled beneath the fallen cross. Jamie backed away until she hit the mirror. Her reflection smiled at her—slow, knowing, forgiving. Outside, the fog thickened until it swallowed the streetlights whole. Jamie sank to her knees, tears and sweat mixing down her face. The cross gleamed beside

Mary's still hand. For the first time in her life, Jamie didn't know if she'd defended herself or become exactly what the town wanted her to be. But the more she thought about it, the more she dug deep within herself, the more comfortable she felt becoming what the town wanted her to be because now, this very second, she could finally be herself.

Chapter 7

The One Who Answers

Jamie stayed kneeling on the floor a moment longer, breath trembling, eyes locked on Mary's still body. The silver cross lay between them, tipped onto its side like it was bowing to the dead. The cracked mirror behind her buzzed faintly, a low electric hum that seeped into her bones. Downstairs, Agatha's hymn wavered, stuttered, then cut off abruptly.

Silence. The house went dead quiet. Not the kind of quiet that brought peace—the kind that listened. Then—Footsteps. Slow. Measured. Footsteps. Climbing the stairs. Jamie's pulse roared in her ears. She pressed a hand to the wound on her shoulder, the fabric sticky and warm. Her fingers shook. She quickly got up and shot to the door to lock herself away from Agatha.

"Mary?" Agatha called, voice thin but not frightened, but expectant. "Is it done, darling? Has the Lord finished His work?"

Jamie choked on air. The doorknob rattled.

"Mary?" Agatha said again, voice too calm. "The purity ritual should be complete by now. Open the door."

Jamie scrambled backward, slipping on the blood on the carpet, her hand smearing red across the dresser as she clawed for balance. The mirror caught her movement and reflected something wrong — a shadow behind her that wasn't there in the room.

The knob twisted harder. “Mary.” Agatha’s voice cracked. “Let Mother see.”

Jamie didn’t wait. She bolted to the window with whatever energy she had left. She threw open the only gateway to her survival, the cold night air slapping her across the face. The fog pushed inward like it wanted to inhale her. Her little black clutch bag caught the corner of her eye, the pink paper inside it screaming for her to take it with her. To save it from this false prophet. But, she left it there. That part of her was dead. Her ribs screamed in protest as she climbed onto the ledge. She can hear Agatha scrambling for her keys and sticking metal inside metal to unlock the door. The door behind her clicked open. Agatha’s breath hitched—a wet gasp. A sound like a mother seeing her child’s corpse for the first time. Not grief. Recognition. Jamie didn’t look back. Didn’t dare, didn’t want to waste any time. She dropped from the window, hitting the ground hard enough to knock the wind out of her. She stumbled to her feet, ignoring the stabbing pain across her forearms and cheek where Mary’s blade had marked her. She ran as fast as her body would allow, her entire body throbbing in pain, and yet she never looked back as the fog swallowed her whole.

Moonville at night was a carcass of a town—its streets too empty, its windows too dark, like the buildings were holding

their breath. The air hummed with static, the same pitch her mirror made when it fractured. Jamie pushed forward, clutching her side. Her wounds throbbed, each heartbeat a warning. She didn't know where she was going. She just knew she had to get away from that house, from Agatha's voice, from the ritual she was never meant to survive. Lights flickered in the windows she passed, blinking in and out with no pattern. The sidewalks were lined with payphones that rang softly, one by one, as she ran past them. She didn't answer. Rule #2. Don't answer the phones. She remembered. Her breath hitched as she turned onto a narrow alley between two shuttered storefronts. Trash cans rattled. A cat yowled and bolted into the dark, tail puffed. A figure flickered at the far end, a silhouette against static-white fog. Jamie stopped.

"Hey!" she called hoarsely. "Please—I need help!"

The figure didn't move. It tilted. Not the head. The whole body. As if reality itself bent around it for a moment. Jamie staggered backward.

A voice behind her spoke calmly, "You don't want to talk to that one."

Jamie spun around. A man stood in the mouth of the alley, illuminated only by the buzzing neon sign behind him. His coat was long and stained, his gloves mismatched, his hair sticking out in erratic tufts. A surgical mask hung loose around his neck. His eyes gleamed with something between fascination and delight.

“Hey there,” he said softly, as if greeting a stray animal.

“You’re hurt.”

Jamie backed away. “Who—who are you?”

He pressed a hand to his chest and bowed gently. “Dr. Tube,” he said. “At your service.”

Jamie’s knees nearly buckled. The Sheriff had mentioned him. The one who patched her up before she woke in the station. The man watched her for a long moment, head tilting, studying her with the kind of curiosity reserved for rare insects.

“You’ve been through something nasty,” he murmured, stepping forward. “Nasty leaves marks, and marks need healing.”

Jamie stumbled. The world tilted.

Agatha’s voice echoed from somewhere far behind, faint but rising, “JAAAAAAAAAMIEEE!”

Her throat closed in terror.

Dr. Tube’s eyes sharpened. “Oh,” he said softly. “You’re being hunted.”

Jamie didn’t know if she nodded or collapsed—both seemed to happen at once. The alley spun, her vision tunneling. Dr. Tube caught her before she hit the pavement. His hands are disturbingly gentle. Too gentle for a man whose coat was stained and who smelled faintly of formaldehyde.

“Easy now,” he whispered. “You’re safe.”

Her voice cracked. “Please... don’t take me back.”

“Back?” he repeated, smile twisting. “Oh no, no. We’re not going back.” He leaned closer, breath freezing against her cheek. “You bumped into the right man.”

Jamie’s head lolled to the side. She saw the silhouette she’d spotted earlier closer—now frozen mid-step, its limbs at wrong angles, its face blurred like a corrupted VHS tape.

“JAAAAAAAAAMIEEE!” The twisted shadow in the distance whispered a screech.

“Oh, I think we’d better get you inside.” Tube, held Jamie upright the best he could with his small frame, dragging her backward to the mouth of the alley. Rats and cockroaches scatter about from the vibrations.

The silhouette twitched violently... and began to creep forward with an unnatural sound of movement.

“Oh, this one’s really hungry for you for some reason.” He looks down at his feet, where an unbothered rat has stopped to smell some unexpected rotting food from the trash. He stomps his heel into its flesh, giving it its last squeal and breath, taking a splatter of blood on his brown leather-heeled shoes. He bends his knees slowly, still holding on to Jamie, and picks up the dead rat, blood running down his fingers to his wrist. He takes the rat and tosses it underhand to the shattered, twisted figure, who twisted unnaturally and caught the corpse in midair, tilted and, like a VHS tape on fast forward, started to twitch and devour the rat.

He grinned. “See?” he whispered. “You’re safer with me than anywhere else in this godforsaken town. But I am afraid we must hurry before he finishes.”

Jamie’s vision darkened. His face was the last thing she saw, but his eyes were bright, excited, ravenous, and they carved their way into her mind.

“And lucky for you,” he murmured to himself, lifting her easily into his arms, “I’ve been waiting for someone like you.”

The fog closed in as Jamie slipped under. Moonville had taken her once. Now something inside Moonville had claimed her.

Chapter 8

The Surgeon in the Fog

The alley closed behind them like a trap snapping shut. Rain hissed against the cracked pavement, a dull, static whisper in the fog that swallowed half the city. Jamie couldn't tell if she was still alive or already a ghost—blood dripped from her shoulder, sweat stung her eyes, breath came ragged and scared. The man who called himself Dr. Tube carried her easily, arms firm but cold as grave soil, lifting her over his shoulder like a sack of dirty laundry. His long coat was damp, its tails dripping into the mist. Now and then, his fingers brushed the patchwork of red on her side, studying it, memorizing it.

“You're safe now,” he whispered.

But safe had a flavor she didn't recognize, the taste of antiseptic and old rust. He moved through Moonville's streets as he knew it better than its ghosts. Shops throughout these streets were sealed shut for the night, the streetlights buzzed louder with every passing pole of their fluorescent yellow bulbs, and the half-dead neon signs seemed to give a misheard message with their broken, flickering messages. The fog seemed to swirl around him, parting just for his silhouette, following his boots. Jamie tried to speak, to ask where they were going, but her throat refused. Her head lolled to the side; memory shredded halfway between the scream and the pavement. They reached a building

with no sign, just a heavy door covered in rust. Dr. Tube pulled out a rather large set of keys on a metal loop, sticking an ordinary key marked with blue paint inside its keyhole. He twists three times to the right as a large clunk of metal unlatches from the inside. He softly, like he didn't want to wake the night, slides the door to the left. The door opened without a sound; the well-greased wheel made it move effortlessly. The door opened just enough for him to step inside and bring Jamie in with him, as he slides and locks the door behind him with a clank.

The stench hit her first: a sharp mix of alcohol, bleach, and something like flesh decaying within linen. The walls were lined with cracked white tile; fluorescent lights buzzed overhead in a rhythm way too slow. A stainless-steel table stood in the middle, worn leather straps dangling at its sides. Cabinets lined the walls, glass jars with dark shapes inside, rusted scalpels, and vials of clear liquid. The air hummed with antiseptic and static.

Dr. Tube laid her on the table, gently. She tried to fight—limbs loose and her mind foggy. He pushed her down lightly and caught her wrists before they could struggle.

“Relax,” he said. “Just breathe.”

He placed a cold, wet washcloth on her forehead, both soothing and shocking her. Her head snapped back as pain bloomed behind her eyes. She gasped, mouth dry.

“Hold still,” he commanded. His voice was not angry—but smooth, curious. Detached.

He quickly ran to the metal workbench with wooden cabinets behind him. He shuffles through several of its drawers and opens a cabinet with several glass vials, pulls one, and races back to Jamie. The label read: *Midnight Serum*. The liquid inside was milky and thick. He uncorked it, inhaled, then dripped a few droplets near the cut on her side. The burn was instant and hot—not like fire, like acid crawling beneath the skin. She screamed, but it was muffled—her lungs refused air. After a second, the pain dulled. The serum worked fast; the red on her skin browned, then faded like ink bleeding underwater. Her side stung, but no longer flamed. He quickly grabbed a pair of gloves, stretching them over his hands, the latex stretching, the smell of powder and rubber filling the air around the table. He dabbed the wound with a rag, then began wrapping it with gauze. Jamie was still in pain, but not nearly as bad. It was tolerable. More doable than her thoughts have ever been.

“Better,” he nodded. “Pain doesn’t suit you.”

Jamie tried to push up, but the straps clicked closed. She was pinned, her soft, cool skin dripped in sweat and blood against cold steel. Her breathing was erratic, and the bandages pressed tight against her ribs. Dr. Tube moved around the table, inspecting her. Pale light glinted off the jars behind him, ones she’d seen in photographs in the attic of her old home; old needles, glass eyes, false skin patches stained yellow. The air smelled like a morgue.

“You’re in this world now,” he said quietly. “And Moonville doesn’t tolerate weakness. It doesn’t tolerate broken things. But broken things can be fixed. Crafted. Remade.”

He pulled a large surgical mirror that hung above her, its sides cracked and worn with age. He held it at her eye level. Jamie blinked at her reflection—bruised lips, pale cheeks, eyes wide with horror. Light flickered, and the mirror wavered. For a moment—barely—she saw something else, a face—hers—but smoother, sharper, hollow where the fear used to burn—a mask of porcelain, that same mannequin, but it was comforting this time. He picked up a syringe—long and thin. The needle caught the overhead light, as a sliver of silver liquid pooled into its glass housing. He didn’t ask permission. He didn’t think. He just pressed the needle into her arm. Cool fluid slid in, ice spreading through her veins like spilled water on marble. The world tilted again. The straps loosened. Her limbs grew heavy—lead anchors sinking through mist.

“Sleep now,” he said. “When you wake... you’ll feel beautiful and whole again.”

She tried to jerk away. Air in her lungs burned like dry cotton. Her fingers twitched—weak, futile. Darkness came. Cold and quick. And pain receded, lifeless as dead leaves. Jamie drifted in and out of consciousness like someone caught between dreams and drowning. The fog, the church hymns, Mary’s voice, Agatha’s chant, the crack in the mirror—they floated in

fragments behind her eyes, shattering and reforming in flashes.
But one sound stayed constant.

Breathing.

Not hers.

His.

When she finally blinked awake, she saw clean white curtains hanging from rusted steel hooks around her instead of jars. Soft music hummed low and echoed through crackling speakers somewhere behind curtains. The smell was cleaner, sterile. Warm. Dr. Tube sat beside her on a metal stool, elbows resting on his knees, hands clasped like a man in prayer. His eyes gleamed through messy strands of hair. A mask hung loosely around his neck, stained at the edges with sweat.

“There you are,” he murmured. “You took longer than I expected. But... delicate things often do.”

Jamie swallowed. Her throat burned. “Wh... where am I?”

“My lab,” he said. “My home. My studio. Call it what you like.” He reached out gently, brushing a fingertip along the bandage on her cheek. She flinched. His smile sharpened. “Don’t worry,” he whispered. “You’ll get used to being touched.”

Jamie tried to sit up. Leather straps tightened across her ribs, hips, and wrists. She froze. “Why... why am I tied down?”

He stood slowly, hands sliding into his pockets like he was containing electricity. “Because you’re alive,” he said simply.

“And alive things move.” He stood. Moving with grace, but it was measured and dangerous.

She looked at her shoulder, which wasn’t in excruciating pain anymore but just a dull ache wrapped in clean bandages. Her body still ached, her muscles tense from everything that had happened, everything that had gone wrong since coming into Moonville.

He paced beside her, thoughtful, almost tender. “I’ve worked on many people before you, Jamie,” he continued. “Men, women, drifters, hunters, sinners, saints. But none of them lasted. None of them understood the gift I was offering.” He stopped at her side. “But you... You’re raw. You’re broken. Perfectly so.” He touched her jaw. She shivered for reasons that weren’t entirely fear. “You’re someone I can shape.”

Jamie’s pulse kicked, wild and confused. She turned her head away. “Let me go.”

“Into the fog?” he asked. “Back to the witch who tried to carve righteousness into your bones? Back to the high school that eats anything it doesn’t understand? Back to a world that abandoned you long before you slashed your father’s throat for your freedom?”

Jamie went still.

Tube's smile softened. "Yes... I know what you did. I could smell it on you. Trauma is a perfume. I have my ways thanks to this godforsaken place."

She clenched her jaw. "Let me go."

"As you wish," He moved around her with the calm efficiency of someone performing a ritual older than Moonville itself. He unbuckled one strap.

Only one.

Then he held her hand in his gloved palm. "You want to be beautiful," he murmured. "Don't you?"

"I..." Her voice cracked as she paused, thinking about her answer. "Yes." She whispered with a lump in her throat.

"You want to be loved?"

Her eyes filled. "Yes."

"You want to be seen exactly as you feel inside?"

Jamie nodded. It hurt to admit how badly, and tears flooded her eyes.

He leaned closer until his lips hovered just above her cheek. "Then let me build you."

She shut her eyes. Tears rolled from their corners.

"Let me carve out the parts that hurt. Let me stitch you into the woman you already are."

Jamie opened her eyes. "What will you do first?"

If a wolf could smile, this was it. "Only what you're ready for."

“I, I want to be beautiful.” Her voice cracks, and her muscles relax as she adjusts herself on the table to be strapped back down.

He picked up a long, silver tool—something between a dental scaler and a sculptor’s chisel. Jamie’s stomach flipped.

“What... what is that?”

“A beginning.” His eyes are gentle.

He dragged a tray beside her bed—filled with vials, syringes, cotton, and thin blades that glistened under the fluorescent light. None of it looked sterile, and all looked used.

“Your cheekbones,” he said, brushing her face lightly over every part of her that he spoke of. “Your lips. Your brow line. Your jaw. Your Adam’s Apple.” He lifted her chin. “And eventually... everything below.”

Jamie swallowed, chest tight. “I’m not ready for that,” she whispered.

Tube tilted his head, and held her face, looking into her eyes like a lost lover, and kissed her forehead.

“You will be.”

He dipped a needle into a vial of translucent liquid. “Hold still.”

The needle pierced her skin. Fire exploded through her cheeks. Jamie gasped, back arching—the strap catching her before she could thrash.

“Shh,” he whispered. “Pain is just the body remembering it’s alive.” He massaged her cheek gently as the serum settled beneath her skin. It tingled, then numbed, then tightened—like her face was being molded from the inside. “Beautiful,” he said. “Already better.”

Tears slipped down her temples.

“Does it hurt?” he asked.

“Yes.” Her voice trembles.

He smiled. “Good.”

The room spun around her in a vortex of eventual darkness. Her dreams tilted from nightmares to a bliss of what she would become, and the doctor’s kiss turned into much more.

Hours passed as he finally loosened the straps around her wrists, her weak body wiggling her fingers as she woke up from her transformation.

He took one of her hands in his. “Jamie,” he said quietly, “look at me.”

She did. Her eyes met his. And in that moment, she saw the truth. He didn’t just want to fix her. He wanted to claim her. To craft her. To make her the first creation he could finally keep.

“You’re mine to remake,” he whispered.

Her breath caught. Her dream. *“How did he know?”* she said to herself, and then, she whispered back, “And I’m yours to admire.” Something inside her—wounded, starving, desperate for connection—reached toward him in a way she couldn’t stop.

He kissed her forehead. It was soft. Wrong. Electric. Then Jamie’s body went rigid. Her heart pounded for reasons that weren’t only fear.

“I knew you were dreaming about me. You grew so much while you were asleep that I couldn’t resist. I hope you don’t mind.” He smirked and looked down between her legs again as she started to grow again with his words.

Jamie smiled, her eyes filled with lust, but with heavy eyelids.

“Sleep,” he whispered. “The body heals better after surrender.”

Her eyes fluttered.

“You’re going to be magnificent,” he murmured. “A masterpiece. My masterpiece.”

Something cold and tender curled around her soul.

“And one day,” he whispered, lips brushing her ear, “You’ll thank me for killing the parts of you that hurt.”

Darkness swallowed the light until the world dissolved. The last thing Jamie saw before she fell asleep was his silhouette bending over her like a sculptor leaning into his marble.

And she wondered—*when she woke again...How much of her
would still be her?*

Chapter 9

The Girl in the Mirror

Jamie woke not like someone recovering, but like something rebooting. No pain. No scream. Just a cold breath—sharp and hollow—slicing through her as her eyes opened to a soft golden light and unfamiliar warmth. The ceiling above her was tiled, cracked, and ringed in dust. Not the sterile white from before. A soft filter had fallen over the world, and everything now hummed as a lullaby played through broken speakers—soft enough to soothe but warped enough to warn.

She moved her hand. It obeyed. Her wrists weren't bound anymore. Her fingers trembled, but not from fear. More like static. Anticipation. Disbelief. The kind that makes your body hesitate before it trusts the air.

A curtain rustled. He was there. Dr. Tube stood in the corner, silhouetted by a light somewhere in the distant corner, and as the air conditioner filled the silence, the curtain gave her a glimpse of him again with its wavering gusts. His sleeves rolled to the elbows, mask hanging loose from one ear. His coat was stained, but his hands were clean. He held a teacup as if it were polite company rather than a prop in a nightmare.

He senses her awake and turns to her. “Welcome back,” he says from a distance, taking a sip of his tea, then walks toward her. “You survived your first cut.”

Jamie pushed herself upright. Her body obeyed her, but differently—like waking up in someone else’s skin. Her shoulder was wrapped tight. Her side had a clean bandage where the claws had once torn her open. The ache was there, but far away, like it belonged to a memory instead of flesh.

“Wh—” she tried. Her voice cracked. It didn’t fill the room. It barely left her mouth. It came out hushed, as if her throat had learned fear in the dark and decided it liked the quiet.

Tube’s eyes sharpened, attentive. “Easy,” he murmured. “Don’t force it.”

Jamie swallowed. The swallow scraped. She tasted metal. “What did you... do... to me?”

Tube stepped closer, slow enough to feel like a choice. “I showed you a future you already wanted,” he said.

Jamie’s eyes narrowed. “I wanted... to live.”

“You did,” he replied, unbothered. “And you did. But survival is only the first line of the script.”

He gestured toward the far wall. A mirror hung crookedly above a rusted basin. The basin looked like it had been scrubbed too many times, as if someone were trying to erase sins from porcelain.

Jamie slid off the table. Her knees nearly gave out. The floor was cold through the soles of her feet. Tube didn’t help—he watched. Waiting to see if she would stand on her own.

Jamie hated that part of her liked being watched. She shuffled forward, arms tight across her chest, steps clumsy but determined.

And then she looked.

Her face stared back—her face, but... not exactly.

The jaw looked softened, the cheeks fuller. Her lips carried a delicate swelling. Her brow seemed smoother, as if someone had pressed the sharpest edges down with warm, kind hands. Her skin was pale as porcelain with a faint blush beneath the surface, like candlelight under ice. Her cheeks have small puncture wounds and bruises from injections. Her throat was wrapped, but not as heavily as her shoulder—more like a reminder than a wound. The reflection didn't cry this time. It blinked slowly. Quietly.

Jamie reached up, touched her face, and whispered, "Is this... me?"

Tube approached behind her, slowly, like a ghost in a chapel. "It's the beginning," he said. "A glimpse. A promise."

Jamie's eyes flicked to him in the mirror. "You changed me."

"I refined you," he corrected, voice gentle. "There's a difference."

Jamie's mouth parted, wanting to bite back, wanting to scream, wanting to fill the room with the sound of refusal. But her throat only offered air—thin, scratchy, uncertain. Her eyes widened in panic.

Tube's hand lifted. Not to grab. Not to restrain. He hovered near her shoulder like a man there to protect her, to guide her, to be there for her.

"You're still healing," he said softly. "Your voice is... tender."

Jamie glared at him, a glare that asked a hundred questions without saying one.

Tube took her rage like a compliment. "You're worried I took it from you," he said. "That I stole your sound."

Jamie pressed her fingertips to her throat and tried to speak again. A whisper came out, broken and breathy.

Tube's eyes brightened. "There," he murmured. "That's still you."

Jamie shook her head, furious. "It's not—"

The sentence collapsed into a cough. Her throat flamed.

Tube tilted his head. "Don't punish yourself. You've done enough of that."

He reached into a pocket and produced a small bottle with a hand-written label: MERCY.

He held it up. "This is why you don't feel the shoulder the way you should."

Jamie stared at the bottle. "What... is that?"

"An agreement," he said. "Between your nerves and my work."

Jamie's eyes darted to the cabinets along the wall—glass-fronted, crowded with jars. Some jars were full of cloudy liquid. Some held things that looked like roots. Some held something that might have been a hand once... but the shape was wrong, like it had learned a different language after it died.

Tube followed her gaze and smiled, proud. "Moonville gives you ingredients," he said. "It's generous, if you know how to ask."

Jamie's breath hitched. "Ask... what?"

"Ask the fog," Tube said, and the way he said it made the fog sound like a god.

He set the bottle down and opened a drawer. Inside were more vials, each one labeled in the same hand:

LULLABY.

MERCY.

BLOOM.

VEIL.

STATIC.

GLASS.

SILK.

Jamie's eyes flicked over them like reading tarot.

Tube noticed. "You're curious," he said.

"I'm... alive," Jamie whispered, and hated how small it sounded.

Tube nodded, satisfied. “Lullaby is what I used on you first. The one that put you down in the alley.”

Jamie’s stomach tightened. Her memory flashed— the fog, the strange creature, Agatha’s scream, the alley spinning, his hands catching her.

“You drugged me,” she rasped.

“I spared you,” he corrected. “You were running on panic and blood. Lullaby helps the body choose sleep when it would rather die.”

Jamie swallowed hard. “What’s it made of?”

Tube’s smile widened. “Moonville’s fog, distilled. Not the fog you see... the fog underneath. The part that remembers.”

Jamie was groggy, but she knew that didn’t make any sense, but in Moonville, nothing had to.

Tube lifted the MERCY bottle again. “This is pain,” he said. “Or rather—this is the absence of it.”

Jamie watched his fingers on the glass. His nails were clean. His hands looked almost gentle. That was the worst part.

“Mercy comes from a thing that lives under the town,” he continued, casually. “It doesn’t scream when you cut it. It doesn’t beg. It doesn’t even flinch. Moonville rewards indifference.”

Jamie’s skin prickled. “You... cut it?”

Tube shrugged. “I learned. I adapt. So can you.”

Jamie stared at him. “And Bloom?”

Tube's eyes glimmered—this one wasn't found by me; it was hungry. "Bloom is for the cracked mirror, and its ingredients were given to me by a dear friend of mine," he said. "This is for the face you carry in your head and helps heal wounds remarkably quickly. Very difficult to get and create."

Jamie's pulse thudded. "That's what you used on my—"

He nodded. "Cheeks. Mouth. Skin. Just enough to let you see her. Just enough to keep you breathing. Just enough to heal you, but enough to remind you that you need to heal on your own still."

Jamie's hands trembled. "And Veil?"

Tube's smile softened as if she'd asked about something romantic. "Veil is for fear," he said. "For the part of you that believes you deserve pain. Veil makes the mind... receptive. It helps you accept what you want without drowning in shame."

Jamie's eyes flashed. "So it makes people easy to control."

Tube didn't deny it. He only said, "It makes people honest."

Jamie looked away, nauseous. "Static?"

Tube's grin returned. "Static is fun," he said. "Static scrambles the senses. Makes a room feel wrong. Makes a hallway longer. Makes a person doubt what they saw." He leaned in, voice warm. "Static is how Moonville talks back."

Jamie swallowed. "Glass?"

Tube's eyes went distant, reverent. "Glass heightens the mirror," he whispered. "Not the reflection. The truth underneath it. The shadow behind the face."

Jamie felt a cold bloom along her spine. "Why would I want that?"

Tube touched her shoulder—light as a breath. "Because you've spent your whole life being told you're a lie," he said. "Glass helps you see that the lie belongs to them."

Jamie's throat tightened. Her eyes stung. Her lips parted to speak, and only a thin breath escaped.

Tube watched her struggle. Something in his expression shifted—less predator, more believer. Like he truly thought he was doing holy work.

"You're scared," he said.

Jamie shook her head, angry at how true it was.

Tube set the bottles down and picked up the teacup again. "Come," he said gently. "You need to sit. Your body's still learning itself."

He guided her—not by grabbing, but by moving the chair into place and stepping back, letting her choose to sit.

She sat.

He poured tea from a small silver kettle. The steam smelled like mint and something earthy beneath it.

Jamie stared at the cup. "What's in it?"

Tube laughed softly. “Just tea,” he said. “I’m not sedating you every time you blink.”

Jamie’s eyes narrowed. “Not every time.”

Tube’s smile turned fond. “Good. Keep that suspicion. It will keep you alive.”

Jamie crapped the cup with shaking hands and sipped anyway. The warmth slid down her throat like an apology. It eased the rawness, just slightly.

Tube sat across from her, elbows on his knees, eyes fixed on her like she was a project and a prayer at the same time.

“You’re wondering why I do this,” he said.

Jamie’s whisper was barely there. “Yes.”

Tube nodded, satisfied. “In the real world,” he began, “people will watch anything if you package it right. You tell them it’s educational. You tell them it’s science. You wear a white coat. You use big words. You make them feel clever for being curious.”

Jamie listened, still.

“I wasn’t a doctor,” he admitted. “Not officially. But an official is just a stamp. A costume. A way to make strangers trust you.”

His gaze sharpened. “I became a costume. And the internet... worships costumes.”

Jamie whispered, “You had... followers.”

Tube smiled, the memory lighting him from inside. “Fans,” he corrected. “They called me brilliant. They called me brave. They called me sick, too... but they never stopped watching.”

Jamie’s stomach rolled. She tasted mint and bile.

“At first, it was just performance,” he said. “Special effects. Editing. Fake blood. Medical jargon stolen from textbooks I never paid for.”

He shrugged. “Then the applause got louder. The hunger got louder. And I realized something.”

Jamie lifted her eyes. “What?”

Tube’s expression went almost tender. “People don’t want truth,” he said. “They want permission.”

Jamie didn’t understand.

“Permission to be curious. Permission to be cruel. Permission to stare,” he clarified. “And I gave it to them.”

Jamie’s hands tightened around the cup. “Then you... got caught.”

Tube’s eyes flashed. “Fame is bright,” he said. “It burns. It leaves fingerprints. Eventually, someone wanted to punish me more than they wanted to watch me.”

His smile returned—thin, amused. “So I ran.”

“And Moonville—” Jamie began.

“Caught me,” Tube finished, pleased. “Like a trap that looks like fog.”

He leaned in again, voice lowering. “I thought it was hell,” he said. “At first.”

Jamie held his gaze.

Then his eyes softened, and the softness frightened her more than any knife ever could.

“Then I found you,” he said.

Jamie’s breath caught.

“You’re not like the others who stumble in here, you’re making me want to talk, but enough about me, this is your day! Your revival!” he changed his tone from serious to excited. “You’re already halfway transformed. You’re already a story with teeth.”

Jamie’s throat tightened. “I’m not—”

Tube reached into a drawer and pulled out a lipstick—blood-red, the color found on an old movie poster. He set it on the table between them like a charm.

“You’ve spent your whole life trying to be seen,” he said.

“Not as a joke. Not as a mistake. Not as a debate.”

Jamie’s eyes stung. She hated that he sounded like he understood.

“Moonville doesn’t care about morality,” he continued. “It cares about roles. Archetypes. Legends.” He smiled. “And you, Jamie... you could become one.”

Jamie swallowed hard. “You think you’re... saving me.”

Tube's expression turned sincere. "I am," he said. "And we're building something beautiful."

The words made Jamie's skin tighten.

Beautiful.

That word had always belonged to other people. Other bodies. Other mouths.

Jamie whispered, "I hate my throat."

Tube's face softened. "I know," he said.

Jamie pressed her fingers to the bandage. "I hate that they can tell."

Her words broke into a cough. Her throat burned again, a reminder that her sound was already slipping away.

Tube moved to his cabinet and returned with a vial labeled: SILK.

"Silk is new," he said. "It calms the tissues in the neck and throat. It will help you speak without tearing yourself open, but will make bass sound like treble and treble sound like bass, until it wears off, of course."

He slid it toward her. "Sip."

Jamie hesitated.

Tube held her gaze. "It's for your throat," he said. "Not your mind."

Jamie delicately grabbed the vial and took a tiny swallow.

Warmth spread down her neck, easing the scrape. Not healing it—just making it bearable.

She exhaled, a sound halfway between relief and something else.

Tube's gaze lingered on her lips.

Jamie noticed.

Tube didn't hide it. He didn't apologize. "You're beautiful when you're not fighting yourself." He stared at her and said.

Anger and shame and hunger collided in Jamie's chest. "I want... to look right," she whispered, but this time the deep whisper was soft, more feminine, sensual breath. Jamie's eyes widened as she grabbed her throat.

Tube nodded solemnly. "Then we take steps," he said, smirking at his miracle remedies working in front of his eyes. "Small ones. Safe ones. Your body needs to trust you."

He steps away for a brief moment and walks to a wardrobe behind him, pulls down a bright red dress from the rack, and holds it out like an offering.

Jamie stared at it as if it might bite, its bright red glow reflecting in her eyes—then took it anyway.

"Put it on." Tube softly raises his eyebrows and smirks.

"Do you have a bathroom?" Jamie looks around, clutching the dress to her chest, protecting herself.

"Put it on right here." He turns and sits in his chair, watching her and waiting for the show to begin. "Go on, you have nothing I haven't already seen. Remember, I prepped you to save you, so proceed."

Jamie was scared but liked the attention, so she obeyed. She slipped the hospital gown from her narrow shoulders, her bare chest revealing a flat canvas of other desires, and as the gown slid down her hips to her ankles, it revealed what she hated the most about herself. Her eyes met the doctors analyzing her, and even though she felt scared and disgusted, she also felt desired, so she slipped the dress over her head as it clung in all the places she wished it would. Not perfect. Not finished. But closer.

Tube's eyes widened, genuine appreciation lighting his face.

"There," he murmured. "There she is."

Jamie swallowed. "Don't... make it sound like I wasn't before."

"You were," Tube said quietly. "You were trapped behind bruises." He gets up from his chair, comes closer to her, and grabs her hand, guiding her to the cabinet of jars. "Moonville gives," he said. "But it never gives for free. So, I make bargains."

Jamie's whisper came out thin. "You make... serums from monsters."

Tube nodded. "Everything here wants something," he said. "And everything here leaves something behind."

Jamie stared at a jar where a cloudy eyeball floated, turning slowly as if searching.

Tube's voice softened. "I'm not going to let Moonville take you," he said. "Not the way it takes the others."

Jamie's whisper shook. "You don't own me."

Tube smiled with something almost sad. "I'm not trying to own you," he said. "I'm trying to build you."

He led her back to the worktable. Tools were laid out neatly—the way a craftsman lays out brushes. BLOOM sat beside them like a candle waiting to be lit.

Jamie stared at it. "Will it hurt?"

"A little," Tube admitted. "But pain isn't punishment. It's the body admitting it's changing, remember?"

Jamie swallowed. "And if I say no?"

"Then we stop, but I won't be able to finish what I started," he said, patient as a saint.

Jamie stared at him. "You're lying."

Tube chuckled. "I'm persuasive," he corrected. "There's a difference."

He waited.

Jamie turned to the mirror. Bandages. Red dress. Bright lips still imagined on her mouth. A girl half-made and still breathing.

Her whisper fell out, raw and honest: "I want to look like her."

Tube's eyes softened. "Then let's introduce her to the world," he whispered.

He set the mirror directly in front of her. The cracked edges framed her like a halo made of broken glass.

Tube's fingers brushed her hair back, gentle as a lover. "This is art," he murmured. "Not because it's pretty. Because it's true."

Jamie's breath shook, and she made a sound—soft, involuntary—not a word, not a scream—something between relief and hunger.

Tube paused, watching her reaction, and his eyes darkened with a hunger of his own—then he steadied himself, like a man refusing to rush the sacred.

"Easy," he whispered. "Not yet."

Jamie's eyelids fluttered. "Not... yet?"

"You'll know when it's time," Tube said. He moved with practiced calm—no boasting, no spectacle—only intention. "MERCY first, to keep her shoulder quiet. SILK again, to keep her throat from tearing. BLOOM last, like a blessing."

Jamie stared into her reflection as the room hummed. The mirror seemed to breathe.

Tube leaned close, lips near her ear, and murmured like a vow, "We're building something beautiful."

Jamie's eyes closed. Darkness gathered—not violent, not sudden—gentle as a curtain falling at the end of a scene. Tube eased her down into the bed beyond the worktable and covered her with a thin blanket.

"What... happens after?" she whispered.

"After, you'll wake up closer," he said. "Not finished. Not perfect. But closer than we were before."

Jamie's whisper came out fragile. "And then?"

"Then we plan," Tube murmured. "Then we gather what we need. Then we make sure the world never laughs at you again."

He lifted the Lullaby vial. The liquid inside looked like fog trapped in glass.

"You're exhausted," he whispered. "Let your body heal. Let your mind rest."

Jamie's lips parted. "Promise?"

Tube's eyes softened with sincerity that felt real enough to be dangerous. "I promise," he said. "When you wake, you'll see her more clearly."

He kissed her forehead—soft, wrong, electric. "Sleep," he whispered. "The body heals better after surrender."

Jamie's eyes fluttered.

The last thing she saw before darkness took her was her reflection in the crooked mirror.

The girl in the red dress.

Bandaged throat.

And for a heartbeat—just one—her reflection smiled before she did.

Chapter 10

The First Cut

Jamie woke to the sound of her own breathing. It was the first thing she noticed—that it no longer hurt to exist. The ache in her shoulder had dulled to a distant throb, like a bruise remembered instead of felt. Her body felt... aligned, not finished. But quieter. As if the noise she'd carried inside herself had been turned down one careful notch. She lifted her hands and stared at them. The fingers looked the same. The scars were still there. But when she sat up, the movement felt smoother. Less combative. A mirror waited for her. Dr. Tube had placed it directly across from the bed this time—no crooked angle. No shadow. Just glass. Jamie swung her legs over the edge and stood effortlessly this time. She approached the mirror slowly, like it might decide something about her if she startled it. The girl looking back wore the same bones—but softened. Her cheeks curved gently now. Her lips were fuller, the shape more deliberate. Her jaw no longer looked like it had been carved by apology. She touched her face. The reflection copied her without hesitation. Jamie swallowed.

“H—hello?” she whispered. The word came out thin, fragile, but real. Her eyes widened. She tried again. “I’m... here.” It scraped her throat, but it came out.

Behind her, Dr. Tube exhaled like a man hearing a prayer answered. “You see?” he said softly. “You’re still with us.”

Jamie turned. He stood a few feet away, arms folded loosely, watching her like a painter waiting to hear what the subject thinks of the portrait. “My voice—” she began, then winced as the sound frayed. She pressed her fingers lightly to her throat.

“Temporary,” Tube said gently. “Inflamed. Overworked. You’ve been through hell.”

Jamie frowned. “You said—”

“I said it was tender,” he corrected calmly. “Not gone.”

She studied his face, searching for cracks. “How long have I been asleep?” Her scratchy throat crackles to a whisper.

“Oh, about a week ...do you... feel different,” he added.

“A week!” Jamie’s voice was hoarse with an angry surprise.

“That’s the combination of Bloom and Lullaby serum. It helps your body accept what your mind already knows and puts you into a healing sleep.” He moves around her. Inspecting her. He grabs her arms, brushes her soft skin with his fingers, and touches over her scars. “Yes! Good. It looks like you’ve been fully healed, but underneath, it takes a little more time, which is why you were out for so long. So be careful. Even though you feel good, be cautious.”

Jamie looked back at the mirror. “I look... right,” she whispered.

Tube smiled, genuine pride warming his eyes. “That’s because you are.”

Something twisted in her chest. Relief. Fear. Hunger.

Tube stepped closer. “Now,” he said, lowering his voice, “there’s only one thing left to prove.”

Jamie’s reflection stilled. “Prove what?” she asked.

“That you can live inside this body,” he replied. “That you won’t fold the moment someone tests you.”

Jamie’s jaw tightened. “You want me to hurt someone, don’t you?”

Tube didn’t deny it. He only said, “I want you to stop being hurt by everyone.”

He moved to the rack and pulled down a dress—short, playful, teal, like a prom night stolen from a better timeline.

“And I want you to choose,” he added.

Jamie stared at the dress. Then the knife rested on the nearby tray. Then at the single black high heel beside it. Her pulse quickened.

Tube watched her carefully. “You don’t have to,” he said. “But if you want the next step... the one you’ve been asking for without saying it...”

Jamie touched between her legs, feeling an endowed part of her that shouldn’t be there, and lifted her chin. “I’ll do it.”

Tube nodded. “Bring me proof,” he said. “Then we finish what we started.”

Moonville welcomed her as if it had been waiting. The fog parted as Jamie stepped onto the street, teal dress catching the neon lights from the rundown record store downtown, her lipstick bright, defiant, pulsating on her new full lips. Her heel clicked softly, a metronome counting down to something inevitable. She felt taller. Not physically—internally. The knife, a large, wooden-handle butcher knife, rested warm against her thigh. A chained hot pink clutch purse hangs on her shoulder. She walked until the town gave her someone. It always did and will. He was leaning against a convenience store window with a friend, laughing too loudly, voice sharp with confidence that had never been tested. His eyes flicked over her—dress, legs, lips—and lingered at her throat, still the most tender scar of her smoothed Adam's apple. The smile she was expecting from him was the same one she'd seen a thousand times in the halls of high school or on the streets. The ones that weren't kind. But this time it was different. This time, the smile that this boy wore was one of hunger. Desire. Lust.

“Well, fuck me, gorgeous, aren't you nervous walking around at night by yourself?” he said, looking her up and down. His long bangs hang over his eyes.

Jamie felt something bloom behind her ribs. She stepped closer. “I—” she started. The word caught. Scraped.

He laughed. “What, cat got your tongue?”

Something inside her snapped.

He reached out, fingers brushing her arm. “Relax. I’m just messing with you.”

Her breath hitched. The world narrowed. The alley behind him yawned open like a mouth, and her hunger wanted to feed it. Jamie smirked, looking at the arm that he just brushed, and then gazed into his eyes in seduction. She reaches out with her slender hands and bright red nails and softly brushes his long, dark bangs back, then scrapes the tip of her manicured nail over his plump lips. Her big eyes glance over to his, then signal toward the alleyway just next to them. He pulls his eyes away from her to look in the direction she had captivated him with.

“Hey, uh...um, Rich, why don’t you head to your house and I’ll be there in a bit.” His eyes fixated on Jamie’s.

“Dude, you serious, she’s a fucking...” before he could finish, Jamie gave him a glare that shut him up instantly.

“Just shut the fuck up and go, bro.”

“Dude, it’s only 10, we...”

“I said go the fuck home!” He slowly says, glaring at his friend.

“Whatever the fuck, bro!” He storms off down the street, his hands in his denim jacket pockets.

Jamie flirtatiously looks over her shoulder to make sure his friend has left, then flings her gaze back to her prey. She slides

her hand down his arm, grabs his hand, smiles, and, excited, pulls him to the hungry alleyway.

He stumbled, surprised. “Hey—what the hell—okay.” His voice faked being surprised as his perverted thoughts clouded his judgment.

The fog thickened around them as the two made their way deeper in the alley. When Jamie then pulled his arm hard, slamming him into a rusted dumpster.

“Jesus,” he muttered. “You’re kinda crazy.” His eyes wide, he smirks and unbuttons his pants, frantically pulling them down, his cock stiff and throbbing inside his jeans as it sprang free, ready for Jamie to take him on her knees.

The word struck like a match to her. “Crazy.” She thought. She moves over to him and looks down at his swollen, twitching cock, smirks, lifts an eyebrow, and grabs it firmly as she gets on both her knees. She pulls him up and down slowly; she can feel the blood throb in his veins. His head tilting back in bliss.

“Fuck! That feels good. I want you to choke on my cock.” He puts his hands behind his head and stares up into the night sky before he closes his eyes.

Jamie’s chest heaved. The pressure inside her throat surged—everything she’d swallowed, every sound she’d buried. She reached for the knife that had been pressing between her thighs, she stretched him long and smirks as she brought the sharp, clean, warm knife across his dick. It breaks away from his body,

a clean cut, warm blood spurting from his center over her face and dress as she looks at his cock in her hand. He screams, his eyes wide, looking down at what isn't there, his hand trying to stop the blood.

“What the fuck, fuck, fuck, what did you fucking do!” His eyes are horrified, but Jamie's are amused.

She takes the sticky, blood-soaked knife and plunges it into his chest, again and again. She screamed. It tore out of her—raw, violent, ecstatic. A scream of rage, a scream of release. A scream that carried every insult she'd ever worn like a bruise. But pain exploded in her throat. Hot. Sharp. The scream collapsed into a wet gasp. Blood flooded her mouth; the sound died. Her eyes widened—but she didn't stop. The feeling of it pushing through and coming out, pushing through and coming out, excites her. The feeling of the vibrations of the metal ripping through his flesh, the warmth of his blood. She remembers. She breathes. She's alive. He falls to his knees, blood seeping from his wounds, mouth, and in between what she doesn't want anymore with herself. His lifeless body under hers, that was just reborn. The purple-hazed fog creeps in around her like a welcome hug from Moonville, as it starts to devour her victim.

Dr. Tube knew the moment she came back. He heard the door. He smelled the fog. He saw her face. “Jamie?” he said softly.

She opened her mouth. No sound came out. His smile vanished. She staggered toward him, eyes wild, pointing at her throat, blood still drying at the corner of her lips.

Tube caught her shoulders. “Hey—hey. Breathe.”

She tried to speak. Air escaped. That was all.

Tube’s hands tightened. “What did you do?”

Jamie slammed her fist against the table, furious tears spilling.

Tube grabbed a scope, peered into her throat, muttering to himself. “Inflammation. Rupture,” he whispered. “God—Jamie—”

She glared at him.

Tube looked up, guilt flickering across his face. “I didn’t expect that much force,” he said. “Your body wasn’t ready.”

She shoved him. Hard. Tube stumbled back, shocked. Jamie grabbed the knife between her legs. In a second, she had him on the floor, knee in his chest, blade pressed to his throat. Tube froze. Their faces were inches apart. Her breath was hot, silent, and furious on his face. His pulse hammered under the blade and moment, neither of them moved. Then Tube did something unexpected. He smiled. Not amused. Not mocking. Reverent.

“You did it,” he whispered. “You crossed the line.”

Jamie’s eyes burned. Tube lifted one hand slowly, not to push her away, but to touch her cheek, to hold her. He stopped just short, waiting. She didn’t move the knife. The air between them

thickened—fear tangling with desire, control blurring into something else.

“You gave everything in that scream,” he murmured. “That’s why it’s gone.”

Jamie shook with rage.

Tube swallowed against the blade. “Let me try to fix it,” he said quietly. “Please.”

Her eyes searched his, her chest rising and falling quickly, her heart feeling like it would explode from her chest, knife still pressed to his neck, as she reached into her hot pink purse, pulling out her victim’s dismembered penis, throwing it in his face, leaving smears of blood like war paint.

The doctor stared at her with a look of fire in his eyes as his hands broke from her face to the back of her head, his fingers intertwining in her hair as he pulled her down to his lips hard. Jamie doesn’t resist, the knife still at his throat as their tongues interlock, her blood from her mouth seeping into his. Jamie bites his lips, then licks her victim’s blood off Tube’s cheek. She hikes up her dress, pulling it up and over her head, leaving her bare and vulnerable, except for a bright pink pair of panties, with the tip of her stiff cock peeking out from above them. She undoes Tube’s belt, then, before he could remove his shirt, his pants were gone. Tube grabs a fist of her hair, pulling her off of him as he stands, his throbbing cock in Jamie’s face. Jamie’s blood-filled mouth takes him, without thinking, staining him in

red and then cleaning it with her tongue. She gasps for air with every pulse of her newly plump lips, his grip tighter around her hair, slamming her down on his cocking making her choke. He holds her there, as she looks up at him in pain from her throat and needing air. Tears form in her eyes, her mascara runs down her face as he pulls her head back off of him and forces her to stand. He bends her over the operating table, where he has seen her already vulnerable, where he had thoughts of taking advantage of her, but he couldn't at the time. Still, now, now that she was ready, now that she has become a part of Moonville as he has become a part of it, he was ready to take her. The doctor pulls her panties down, revealing a full, tight sack and a very sizable, stiff cock. He gives her cock several strokes, feeling her girth in his hands, feeling the weight of her juices flowing inside of her. He pushes her head hard on the stainless-steel table, kicking her legs wider as he spits between her ass. Jamie reaches behind her, spreading herself, inviting him inside her warm, tight, and now wet star of excitement. Tube spits again, taking his finger and massaging, and then inserts one, then two fingers inside her. Jamie's eyes explode with pleasure.

"Do it!" Her voice, torn apart and barely heard, and hurting, but she needs him to hear her.

The doctor spits in his hand and strokes his throbbing head, spreading his pre-cum, and slides into Jamie. They moan together, her tight ass hugs his cock inside her as he thrusts

slowly, pulling himself out just enough so he can see it, then goes back in deep. He then gets faster and faster, deeper and deeper, the stainless steel table scratching and skipping across the floor. Jamie moans in pleasure. She's never felt this good ever before, not ever, no one has ever accepted her. Because of that, it felt really good, better than the other times where she was forced, where she felt ugly, how they made her feel ugly, how she felt used because she was different, so they wanted only to try her instead of love her. She reaches around to herself, stroking herself. She's never felt herself this hard before, but she still wants it gone. This isn't her, but the feeling is so good. She imagines herself rubbing her clit, as the doctor thrusts inside her. As she strokes her cock faster and faster. She can feel him, getting harder, getting longer, and then a burst of warmth enters her, a burst that she has never felt before, a warmth fills her body. The last stroke of herself was over before she could stop herself from keeping it lasting longer. She came as the doctor came. She drips from him. He turns her around, meeting her eyes. Holds her face with both hands, rubbing her flushed cheeks with his thumbs.

"I'm going to heal you. I'm going to help you become who you have been needing, who you have been craving to be." He smirks, his eyes kind and soft, but sinister all at once, and Jamie is craving him more because of it. She smiles back at him, tears

roll down her cheeks as she puts all her weight into the doctor's hands.

Chapter 11

VHS Dreams and Dead Things

The make-shift television studio smelled like formaldehyde, burnt dust, and stale cigarette smoke. Rows of bulky CRT televisions lined the walls, their curved glass screens flickering with static and distorted images. Some showed old sitcom reruns. Others displayed security footage from around Moonville. A few hissed, emitting white noise that cast ghostly light across the room. Stacks of VHS tapes towered against every wall. Moonville Monster Files. Moonville Missing Persons. Moonville TV Halloween Special 1988. Dr. Tube's Greatest Autopsies Volume 3.

Jamie sat behind Camera Two, adjusting the focus ring. The machine whirred softly beneath her fingers.

Thirty years old.

Thirteen years trapped in Moonville.

Thirteen years since the Crooked Cabin.

Thirteen years since she had been seventeen.

The studio lights blazed overhead. On the stainless-steel table beneath them lay a dead creature. Gray skin. Six eyes. A mouth that split vertically down its face and two slits that ran horizontally from either side of its mouth. Its claws were still stained with dried blood. Dr. Tube stood beside it wearing a blood-speckled lab coat and thick protective goggles.

The red recording light blinked.

“Welcome back, Moonville. To another fascinating episode of The Moonville Morgue,” His cheerful voice echoed through the studio. “Today, we have another fascinating specimen recovered near the railroad tracks.” He lifted one of the creature’s claws. “Notice the curvature. Excellent for climbing. Terrible for handshakes.” Dr. Tube laughed at his own joke. “Scalpel.” He commanded.

Jamie silently entered the picture, dressed in a tight white nurse’s dress, carrying a tray of tools, and handed him the requested instrument.

“Thank you, my beautiful assistant.” He smiles with his eyes at her.

“You’re... welcome...” she whispered, smiling back. The words barely escaped her throat.

Years ago, the accident had stolen most of her voice. Now every word felt like dragging broken glass across her neck.

Dr. Tube understood her anyway. He always had. The blade sliced through the gray flesh of the creature’s torso. Black blood pooled onto the table. Several monitors displayed close-up footage for viewers at home.

“Remarkable anatomy,” Dr. Tube continued. “A secondary stomach. Three lungs. Two hearts.” He reached inside the creature.

Jamie went back to the main camera and zoomed in as the doctor removed the organs, placing them on the table.

Outside the studio window, Moonville moved beneath a gray afternoon sky. Neon signs buzzed. The giant Rewind Video sign flashed blue and pink. A synth-pop song drifted from a nearby arcade as it always has, adding to this never-changing town. Moonville never stopped pretending it was 1988. Then the movement caught Jamie's eye. Three figures crossed Main Street. A girl wearing a mint-colored beanie, hoodie, and jeans. A taller boy with dark hair, dressed in a patched denim jacket and jeans to match, and a younger boy wearing a mixed-match red and blue polo and bright blue corduroy pants, who leads them down the street. Jamie stopped adjusting the camera as she watched them through the thick silvered double-tinted glass. The trio disappeared behind a passing station wagon. Then emerged again.

Laughing.

Talking.

Alive.

"Jamie?"

She didn't answer.

"Jamie?"

She blinked. "Hm?"

"The camera?"

Her attention snapped back. The creature's corpse had drifted out of frame.

"Oh." She grits her teeth together in silence to show she's sorry.

Dr. Tube followed her gaze toward the window. "Something more interesting than dead things?"

Jamie said nothing.

Outside, the teenagers stopped in front of Moonville Diner. The younger boy pointed toward something down the street as the others listened.

Dr. Tube smiled. "Ah."

Jamie glanced toward him. "What?" The whisper barely existed.

"The new kids." The doctor squinted out the window. "That little one you already know." He returned to his autopsy.

Jamie looked back toward the window. She couldn't stop. For some reason, she couldn't look away.

Outside, Knox pointed toward a side street. "Okay, so that's Dusk mire Avenue."

Cove looked down the road. "The flower competition place you were telling us?"

"Yep. All the way down there, and it's where I live."

Sara laughed. "The place with the creepy gardener?"

"Mr. Daniels isn't creepy," Knox said.

Cove raised an eyebrow. "I heard he kills people and uses them as fertilizer, and that's how he wins."

"Wouldn't surprise me at all in this freaking place." Sara raises an eyebrow, looking down at Knox, who got visibly annoyed and angry.

"No! That's because everyone else is such a sore loser, and they can never beat him!"

"Okay, I'm sorry, chill out, dude, that's just what we heard ok." Cove is trying to calm him down.

"Well, it's not true, he's a good man, and he doesn't want good people getting hurt, and he's someone who has helped me since my grandma died."

"I'm sorry, Knox, okay, we believe you, we just are trying to learn everything in this creepy town that tries to kill you every way you turn, okay." Sara scruffs his hair. "Now what else can you show us! You're being very helpful."

They continued walking. Knox seemed proud to be showing them around. "This town has rules." He explained.

"Everybody keeps saying that," Cove replied.

"What kind of rules?" Sara looks down at him.

Knox immediately held up a finger. "Rule number one. Never follow music if you hear any."

Cove nodded. "Fair, learned that one the hard way when I first came here."

“Rule number two.” Knox continued. “Never answer a phone that’s ringing where there isn’t supposed to be a phone.”

Sara stopped walking. “What?”

“I’m serious.” His stare was more serious than his words.

“That doesn’t even make sense.” Sara shook her head, confused.

“It doesn’t have to.”

Cove laughed. “I love this town.”

“Trust me,” Knox said. “You won’t when it tries to love you back.”

“That was a joke there, bud.” Cove furrowed his eyebrows.

The smile faded from Sara’s face. For a moment, nobody spoke. Moonville had a way of doing that. Making jokes until suddenly they weren’t funny anymore. They passed Video King, with movie posters filling the windows.

A Nightmare on Elm Street 9.

The Lost Boys II.

Friday the 13th Part 14.

Movies that should not exist.

But did.

Cove stopped to stare at a poster. “Dude!”

“What?” Sara drained.

“Look at this.” He points to a poster in the window.

Knox rolled his eyes.

“Yeah?” Sara was annoyed at all the interruptions.

“They made another Back to the Future!” Cove excited.

“They make one every year.” Knox chuckled.

“What happens? I freaking love these movies!”

Knox shrugged. “No idea.”

“You haven’t watched it? Wait, you said you make one every year?”

“Yup, every year they make a bunch of this stuff, and nope, haven’t seen any of them.” Knox’s concerned face tells more than it should.

“Why? It’s Back to the freakin’ Future!” He looks closer at the movie poster. “Number 12! Dude!”

“Because every time somebody watches a movie that’s a crazy sequel, they disappear for like three days and don’t remember a thing, including the movie.”

Sara smacked Cove’s shoulder. “Stop looking interested!”

“Oh, I’m definitely interested.” Cove gawks at the poster. “I just need to see numbers 4 through 11 first.” He laughs.

“You are exactly why people die in horror movies.” Sara rolls her eyes at him.

“That’s fair.” Cove smirks and agrees.

The three continued down the sidewalk. The afternoon sunlight bounced off arcade windows. Synth music drifted through the air. A rusty DeLorean rolled past.

“See, look, that’s a sign!” Cove points to the DeLorean.

“Shut the fuck up!” Sara punches him in the arm again.

“Damn okay sorry!” He laughs but rubs his arm to relieve the stinging. “Is this an arcade?” He quickly forgets about his arm as he holds both hands to the glass, peeking inside.

A dusty, portable black radio sits atop a stack of VHS tapes, crackling with a familiar voice. “Good afternoon, Nightlings. This is Victor Vale reminding you that if a stranger offers you candy today, make sure they’re human first. Trust me on that one.” The radio hissed, then played a synthesized, distorted 80’s version of “Love Fool” by The Cardigans.

Dr. Tube chuckled. “Still the funniest guy in town, and I’ll never get used to these twisted 80’s songs.”

Jamie barely heard him. She watched every second through the studio window. Every smile. Every laugh. Every conversation. Something twisted inside her chest. Not attraction. Not yet. Something worse. Something older. Regret. The life she never had. The years she never got back. The chance to be seventeen. Gone. All of it is gone.

“Forceps.” Dr. Tube held out his hand.

Jamie handed them over automatically. Her eyes never left the window. Dr. Tube accepted the instrument and glanced at

what she was looking at. Then back at her. Then toward the window again. A thoughtful expression crossed his face.

“Jamie.”

“Hm?” she hummed. The sound scraped painfully from her throat.

“You haven’t stared at a living person that long in years. Not even me.”

Jamie immediately looked away. “I...I wasn’t.” The lie barely escaped her plump lips.

“Of course not.” Dr. Tube carefully removed a yellow sac filled with liquid from the horizontal slits that were on either side of the creature’s vertical mouth. Its veins twitched weakly on the sac, its yellow liquid slightly glowing. “Interesting.” He inspects his findings and drops the specimen into a jar, where it makes a wet slap. He lifts the jar to the camera. “Ladies and gentlemen, this is peculiar. I have never seen something like this in these monsters.” He moves back to the corpse, poking it with his forceps. “I think these slits on either side of the mouth are its nostrils, and maybe it tracks the scent with its nostrils and all of these eyes to find its prey like a snake that maps out the scent of what it tracks.” He sticks his forceps into the other nostril and pulls out another glowing yellow sack, showing it to the camera before dropping it into the same jar as its twin. “Very interesting, I will do more research, of course, I will follow up with you all on another episode.” He turns on his charm and smiles at the

camera. "I'll see you all next time, and remember to stay safe out there." He pauses, takes off his gloves dripping with black blood, throws them into the trash beside him, and then walks over to the main camera and turns it off. He walks to Jamie slowly.

Cautiously. Inspecting her like she's one of his curiosities. He comes up behind her and grips both of her arms, his touch sparking electricity throughout her.

"I, I'm sorry." She shakes, looks into his eyes, and smiles at him. Twenty minutes seemed like seconds when you're trapped in your mind.

"Corpses." He whispers close to her lips.

She looks at him, confused, and then at his lips, forgetting what he had already said, his breath taking her away. His lips made her insides quiver, and her mouth salivate.

"Usually it's corpses." A faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "So someone new. Someone young. Someone alive. Excites you." He moves over to her ear, whispering, her hair standing on end down her neck, her eye dilated in excitement.

"But, I love you." She turns and holds his face, her pain ignored in her throat.

"I know. But I also understand. The craving." He kisses the tip of her nose and turns her back to the window, where she focuses on her reflection rather than what's on the outside.

Jamie catches a glimpse of Cove once more beyond her reflection. She moves effortlessly to the other side of the glass,

as if to take a glimpse of a rare, endangered species before it goes extinct. Before he. Before Cove. Goes out of her sight. Outside, Knox was still talking excitedly. Cove laughed at something he said. Sara shoved Cove's shoulder. The three looked happy. Comfortable. Normal.

Everything Jamie wasn't.

The doctor moved around the room, turning off the rest of his cameras. "You know who they are, don't you?"

Jamie hesitated. Of course, she knew. Everybody in Moonville knew the new boy in town. The one the town is watching very closely, and the curse is hunting to see if it will turn him into prey or a prowler.

Dr. Tube followed her gaze through the studio window. "That's Cove and Sara."

The names settled into the room. Into the static. Into the humming glow of the televisions. Jamie swallowed. Her throat burned. Outside, Sara laughed at something Cove said. The sound didn't reach the studio. But somehow Jamie could still hear it, and it nauseated her. Her laugh. How did he make her happy? She was sick to her stomach.

"Cove..." she whispered. The word scratched through her throat like broken glass, the shards trickling down to her heart.

Tube looked at her. Something moved behind his eyes. Concern. Curiosity. Maybe both. Jamie continued staring. Unable to stop. Unable to look away.

Sara slipped her hand into Cove's. The gesture was simple. Natural. Effortless. Jamie's stomach tightened. Not anger. Not hatred. Not jealousy. Not exactly any thought at all in her mind. Just a sudden awareness that Sara possessed something she never would. An organic body. A body that he was attracted to. She wasn't born trapped like her in a body that wasn't hers. She didn't have to work hard to have Cove. Thirteen years ago, Jamie had entered Moonville. Seventeen years old. Terrified. Broken. And somewhere along the way, she'd become this. A woman filming autopsies while watching strangers live the life she'd never have. The Doctor loved her and fulfilled her, but not like this, not the need that she's been craving ever since she knew who she was when she was little. Her father didn't understand that. The world didn't understand that. And these outsiders sure as hell didn't understand it yet. But this town understood. This town will give her exactly what she wants, and she's ready to receive it, and by the time she looked up again, the trio had disappeared around the corner. But Jamie continued staring through the glass long after they were gone, long after the street had emptied, as if she expected them to come back, as if something inside her had already started following them.

The radio crackled. Victor Vale laughed somewhere beneath the static as he announced the next song on the radio, breaking her focus.

The televisions hummed. The dead creature lay open on the steel table. And deep inside Jamie's chest, a small, ugly seed finally took root.

Chapter 12

Where The Scratches End

Knox pushed open the arcade doors. The familiar chorus of electronic music and digital explosions greeted them immediately. Neon lights flashed overhead. The air smelled like warm circuits, carpet cleaner, and stale popcorn. Behind the counter sat a heavyset man with a thick gray mustache, reading an old and worn book titled “Misheard Words.”

“Finch!” Knox called.

The man looked up from his book. “Well, look who wandered in.” He pointed at Knox with his book. “You still owe me twenty bucks!”

“It was a loan.” His eyebrows raise, and a mischievous smile stretches across his face.

“More like theft,” Finch grunted through his mustache.

Knox grinned, rolling his eyes. “Same thing.”

Finch rolled his eyes back at him. Then noticed Cove and Sara. “New kids?”

“Sort of,” Knox said.

“This is Cove and Sara.” Knox points to the two that tower on either side of him.

Finch stepped around the counter. His eyes settled on Cove. “Oh yeah, the one that got rid of the Lavendar Lady.” He stands

and looks him up and down. "Say, you any good with machines?" He taps his book on Cove's chest.

Cove shrugged. "Depends?"

"Now, that's not confidence." The husky man's mustache dances with each syllable.

"Just being honest, I don't know unless I see it first, I guess."

Finch laughed and slapped him on the shoulder, knocking Cove off balance. "I like him!" He pointed toward a flickering arcade cabinet behind them. The screen flashed on and off. The speakers emitted a horrible crackling noise.

"Fix that!"

"What?" Cove looked at him with furrowed eyebrows.

"You said you know machines. So, fix that one over there."

"I said it depends."

"Welp, go see if that depends can be a can-do."

Sara laughed. "You've been challenged there, buddy."

"Yeah, Cove, you've been challenged by a seventy-year-old arcade wizard." Knox elbows Cove, egging him on.

"Sixty-two! You little shit!" Finch pushes him almost into another machine.

"That's exactly what a seventy-year-old arcade wizard would say." Knox makes a face at him.

Finch crossed his arms. "You'd better pipe down, pipsqueak, before I push you through the machine next time. And you... um... you..."

“Cove! You old fart!” Knox jokes back, but gets shoved hard by the older man, knocking him into a pinball machine that rings and dings, and then he falls onto the floor. “Ouch! You old fart...oh, hey, a quarter!” Knox gets up, forgetting everything, and pops the quarter into the pinball machine to play.

Cove chuckles, “Okay, I’ll take a look at it.” He approaches the machine and starts to look inside its old cabinet. The machine is old, the kind of arcade machine that should have died years ago, but years ago for Cove is today for everyone else. The back panel hung partially open with a handful of wires that had come loose. “Looks simple enough.”

“Hey, whatcha reading?” Sara points to the book still in his hand.

“Oh, this I have no idea, I found it cleaning up in the backroom, figured it could give me something to do when it’s slow.” Finch lifts it to show Sara the cover, his fingers still between the pages, holding his place.

Sara tilts her head to read the cover, which is all black, with just red letters spelling out the title. “Misheard Words.”

“Hmm...Never heard of it. I don’t even see an author.”

“I thought the same thing, but figured I’d try nevertheless.” He looks back at the book, inspecting it.

“God, dammit!” A spark shoots out of the old arcade game, shocking Cove.

“Excuse me, um...I’m going to see if uh...um..” He looks concerned and tries to remember.

“Cove!” Knox yelled, shaking his head, still playing the pinball machine.

“Thank you. I’m going to see if Cove needs anything over there.”

Sara, captivated by all the lights, watches the old man move over next to Cove. The whistles of the machines make the room sound like a carnival until she notices something strange from the corner of her eye. “Uh...”

Knox looked over. “What?”

She pointed toward the carpet. Long gouges scarred the floor. Deep and violent. Like something heavy had been dragged. The scratches disappeared beyond what she can see up a flight of stairs.

“What the hell happened there?” Sara points to the floor.

Knox’s smile vanished as the two followed the trail of scratches halfway up the narrow flight of stairs, where the marks continued the rest of the way up and down a small, narrow hallway leading to a door. On their way back down, she saw the scratches go across the arcade floor and straight toward the old machine that Cove was attempting to fix.

Sara frowned. “That’s really fucking weird and creepy. Oh, shit, sorry, Knox, I forgot you were here.”

Knox shifted uncomfortably. “It’s ok. What did that?”

Finch stared at the machine and then saw what the other two were inspecting. A long silence followed. Finally, he sighed.

“Last maintenance guy.”

“Last maintenance guy, what?” Cove asked.

Finch rubbed the back of his neck. “Don’t know. The Sheriff couldn’t find him and all we...”

“The scratches?” Sara says freaked out.

Finch nodded. “They appeared the same night he disappeared.”

Sara looked toward the machine. The cabinet sat dark and silent with cove elbow-deep inside its carcass. Its screen a cold obsidian. Its controls are untouched and waiting. “You think something dragged him?” she asked.

Finch’s expression darkened. “I think he was trying really hard not to go.”

Nobody laughed. Not even Knox. For a brief moment, the arcade felt colder.

“Um...Cove? I’d stop...” Sara tried to stop Cove.

The machine crackled. The screen flickered. Then exploded to life. Bright colors danced across the monitor, lighting Cove’s smirking face, as the music chimed on to match.

Finch let out a whistle. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

Cove climbed down from the stool. “That was just a loose ground wire. But I cleaned up the wired mess and just reattached it. Told you depends.”

Finch stared at the machine. Then at Cove. Then back at the machine. "You know how many people looked at this thing?"

Cove shrugged. "I don't know."

"Seven."

Sara laughed. "Seriously? Seven?"

Finch pointed at Cove with his book. "And the new kid fixes it in five minutes."

"I got lucky. Like I said, it depends."

"No," Finch said. "Lucky would've been hitting it with a wrench and somehow making it work."

Knox grinned. "Told you he knew what he was doing."

Finch rolled his eyes at Knox, then rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Then looked toward the staircase. "Actually..." The older man seemed to think about something. "You two got somewhere to stay?"

The question caught both Cove and Sara off guard. They exchanged a look.

"Not really," Sara admitted.

"We've been figuring it out as we go," Cove added.

Finch nodded. "That's what I figured." He pointed upstairs. "Apartment's empty."

Cove blinked. "That's an apartment above the arcade?"

"Yep."

"Um..the one where the maintenance guy disappeared?"

Sara's tone changed.

Finch shrugged. "Technically."

"Technically?" Sara's eyebrows did most of the talking.

"Technically, he disappeared from the apartment."

Sara stared at him. "That's not helping."

Finch chuckled in his gut, like a warped 80's arcade version of Santa Claus.

Knox immediately stepped forward. "Wait!"

Everyone looked at him.

"You can't just take them."

Finch raised an eyebrow. "Take them?"

"They were supposed to stay with me tonight."

Sara smiled. "Knox..."

"I'm serious." His cheeks reddened. "I already cleaned the couch and everything." Knox getting visibly upset.

Cove burst out laughing. "You cleaned a couch for us?"

"Yeah, it was gross, there were like chips, a melted half-eaten candy bar, lots more crumbs, found some fingernails, and..."

Sara's smile softened. "Wow! Bud, um...that sounds gross and a lot of work."

The twelve-year-old suddenly looked much younger. For a moment, he wasn't the kid who survived Moonville. He was just a lonely kid who had finally found friends.

"We appreciate it," Sara said. "We really do."

Knox kicked at the carpet. "I know."

Finch smiled. "They can still visit."

“Every day?” Knox perked up, excited.

“If you don’t annoy the shit out of them.” Finch chuckles.

Knox thought about it. “Okay. I promise!”

Then he pointed a finger at Cove. “You better not die.”

“What the fuck?” Cove’s laugh got caught.

“I’m serious!” Cove locked eyes with both of them, giving them a very stern look.

Sara laughed. “That is a completely normal thing to say.”

“In Moonville it is.” Knox frowned. “So, I mean it! Don’t die, okay!”

Nobody argued. Because, unfortunately, Knox was right.

“I promise, okay!” Cove looks him in the eyes and then scrunches his hair.

“Now let me show you your new apartment.” Finch led them upstairs.

The stairs creaked beneath every step. Sara’s eyes were glued to the scratches, the long, deep, and violent gouges carved into the carpet. Finch opened the door as they followed close behind him. Immediately, they notice the scratches that started near the bedroom door, then continued down the hallway, down the stairs, across the arcade floor, and all the way to the machine Cove had just repaired.

Finch sighed. “I know.”

Sara can feel her nerves tightening, her intrusive thoughts overriding the logic of a free place to stay in a freaky town they still didn't know anything about.

"I don't know what to tell you, kids. But the place is free as long as you help me out around here."

"Honestly? Was it another one of these psycho monsters from this town?" Cove looked concerned.

Nobody answered.

"I can't answer that, son, but all I know is that Moonville isn't easy; in fact, it's hell." Finch's voice is low and serious.

Silence followed. Nobody liked that answer. Least of all Sara, whose brain wouldn't turn off with the what-ifs. But she was lost. They were lost, she and Cove, and she couldn't help but fight her thoughts with how the apartment itself was surprisingly nice. Not fancy. Not modern. But safer than being on the streets or couch-hopping with strangers. She looked around the small living room, which housed a classic 80's brown tweed sofa with wood inlays, a walnut wood coffee table, and a TV stand to match, which held an 80's Hitachi 19-inch television, the kind that were heavy, had two twist knobs, and had wood trim. The kitchen was basic, with cheap taupe linoleum tiles, and the tiny bathroom had a pedestal sink, tub, pink shag bathroom carpets, and toilet seat covers. The bedroom was decent, with one queen bed, a closet, and a dresser lacquered so thick that even whatever clawed the carpet probably couldn't scratch it. Cove side-eyed it

and smirked at Sara, wiggling his eyebrows, to which she responded with a middle finger.

Most importantly, they liked the locks. Lots of locks. Three on the front door. Two on the bedroom door and extra locks on every window.

“Wow! I normally would be freaked out with all the locks, but in this case, I like them.” Sara plays with one of them on the bedroom door.

Finch chuckled. “Yeah, well, seeing what happened, I scavenged around seeing what I could find and went a little overboard, but I wanted to make the new tenants feel safe, um, ya know.”

“Welcome to Moonville,” Knox added.

Again. Nobody argued.

Cove tested the deadbolt on the front door. It clicked solidly into place. For the first time since arriving in town, he felt something strange. Relief. “It’s safe.”

Sara smiled. “As safe as we’re probably gonna get.”

Knox wandered through the apartment, opening doors, looking into closets, and inspecting everything. Finally, he stopped and plopped onto the couch. “Okay.”

“What?” Sara smirks at him, all comfy.

“I admit it.” Knox kicks his feet up on the coffee table, his hands behind his head.

Sara folded her arms. “Admit what?”

“This is better than my couch,” Knox said with a straight face, and Cove cracked up laughing.

“Thank you, I’m glad you approve.” Finch chuckled

“But only a little.” Knox looks and measures the air with his thumb and pointer finger.

“Only a little, huh? I guess the melted candy bar on your couch can’t compete, huh?” Sara plops next to him.

“Okay, maybe medium.” Knox rolls his eyes.

Finch shook his head. “You kids are ridiculous.” Then he handed Cove a small ring of keys. The metal jingled softly. “You help me keep the arcade running.”

Cove looked down at the keys. “You’re serious?”

“Dead serious. Well, poor choice of words, I suppose, but yeah, I’m serious.”

Sara stared. “You’d really let us stay here?”

Finch shrugged. “This place has been empty long enough, and this place gives people a place to forget about all the shit that’s outside despite the gouges in the floor.”

For a moment, nobody spoke again. The weight of it settled over them.

A job.

A roof.

A locked door.

In Moonville, that was practically winning the lottery.

“Thank you,” Sara said quietly.

“Yeah,” Cove added. “Really!”

Finch smiled. “Don’t thank me yet.” His eyes drifted toward the staircase. Toward the scratches. Toward the arcade below. “You still live in Moonville.”

The room fell silent again. Understanding what goes on in this town is both supportive and sickening. They all know they are trapped; they know their survival is limited, and they know that every silent moment is a moment that they can listen to their own heartbeat and their steady breaths, as it may not be the case to hear themselves being alive for very much longer.

Outside, neon lights flickered to life as evening settled over town. Below them, the arcade machines hummed. The repaired cabinet flashed brightly.

Waiting.

Watching.

And somewhere across the street, hidden behind the glowing reflection of a video store window, Jamie stood in the gathering darkness.

Watching too.

Bright colors exploded across the screens of the arcade. Their montage of classic 80’s synth and 8-bit gaming music broke the silence.

Finch clapped once, breaking everyone from their understood trance. “Good, well, I’ll let you two get settled in.”

They all look at each other as Finch heads down the stairs and back into the arcade, but stops as he hears a raspy, muffled, deep growling, high-pitched scream all at once coming from the direction of where Cove had fixed that arcade machine. He stops, as his hair stands on the back of his neck, and swallows the lump of fear in the back of his throat. He knows something is wrong with that machine. He understood it was hungry. But he also knew that Cove and Sara had a better chance of survival here with him until it was their time when Moonville was hungry yet again.

Chapter 13

Behind a Locked Door

The last machine died at eleven fifty-three. Not gracefully, but in an abrupt wave, as Finch flipped the breakers behind the front counter. The electronic music slowed into distorted groans.

Screens collapsed into narrow white lines before disappearing. Neon borders blinked twice and went dark, leaving behind the stale smell of heated wires, old carpet, and decades of spilled soda. The sudden quiet felt unnatural. Cove was standing next to him, learning how to close up for the night. Finch said he didn't have to start right now since it was his first night living in the apartment, but he and Sara felt they needed to start right away to say thank you. Sara stood beside the machine that Cove had repaired earlier, watching its colorful screen shrink into darkness. Even without power, she could still hear something humming inside it.

A low electrical vibration.

Almost too faint to notice.

Almost enough to pull her attention away, but just enough to keep her focused on the black screen.

Cove walked around with Knox and Finch, just making sure the trash was emptied, the bathrooms weren't a disgusting mess, the limited snack sections of whatever Moonville could get their

hands on were stocked for the next day, the neon closed sign was clicked on, and its opposite was clicked off.

“Good job, kid, appreciate you wanting to take the initiative to learn so soon. We’re not as busy as we used to be, but the help is appreciated.” Finch fiddles with his keys as they make their way to the front doors. “I’ll lock up tonight, you two go ahead and get some good rest, okay!”

“Finch, thank you so much!” Cove sticks out his hand for a shake, and Finch purses his lips, fiddles with his keys some more, nods, and walks off to the front doors. Cove retracts his hand, still grateful and heads up the stairs, but realizes Sara is still staring at the game he had fixed earlier.

“You coming?” Cove called from the stairs. But Sara doesn’t answer or move. “Sara?” he walks back down the couple of steps he traveled and makes his way to her. “Sara?” He says short and quick this time.

Sara pulled his attention away from the cabinet, startled.

“Y...yeah, I...”

Finch had come back and stood behind the counter with the black book tucked beneath one arm. The title “Misheard Words” glimmered in red lettering beneath the weak security light, and walks over to the two.

“I forgot my book. Is she alright?”

“Yeah, um, I’m fine, think I’m just really tired.” Sara shakes herself out of her trance.

“Well, alright, you can call me if you need to, but the front door stays locked after midnight. Back door stays locked all the damn time. Don’t answer either one unless you know who’s standing there. And even if you do, still be fucking cautious!” His heavy, raspy voice burns in their mind.

“That seems reassuring,” Sara said.

“It’s Moonville. Reassurance keeps people alive. Remember what the little shit said.” He nods his way to Knox, who stood beside her, looking up the staircase toward the apartment with poorly concealed disappointment.

“You sure you don’t want to stay at my place tonight?” He looks at the two of them.

Sara smiled. “We’re sure.”

“My couch is comfortable.” Knox smiles awkwardly.

“You said you found fingernails in it,” Cove reminded him.

Knox shrugged. “I got rid of most of them.”

“Most?” Sara asked.

“I think.”

Finch shoved the boy gently toward the front doors. “Come on, pipsqueak. Some of us want to go home before the streets decide to move again.”

Knox planted his feet. “I’m not done saying goodbye.”

“You’ve said goodbye four times.”

“This one’s the real one.”

Cove walked over and held out his fist. Knox bumped it reluctantly. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Promise?” Knox looks up at him.

“Promise.” Cove smiles back at him.

Knox narrowed his eyes. “And you’re not going to die?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“That isn’t the same thing.” Knox glared at him.

Cove grabs Knox by both shoulders and looks him in the eyes. “Then I promise we’re not going to die tonight.”

Sara folded her arms. “You probably shouldn’t make promises like that in Moonville.”

Knox pointed at her. “You too. No dying.”

“Yes, sir.” Sara salutes him.

He nodded, apparently satisfied. Then he turned back toward Cove. “And if you hear someone knocking after midnight, pretend you’re asleep, that’s what I do.”

Sara’s smile faded. “Why?”

Knox shrugged. “That’s what everybody does.”

“That doesn’t answer her question,” Cove said.

“It’s better if you don’t know.” Finch opened the front door, grabbed Knox by his collar, and dragged him through the door, closing it behind him.

“Goodnight.” Knox waved and sounded muffled on the other side of the glass doors. Knox pressed both hands against the glass. “I’ll be back tomorrow!” He yells.

Finch locked the deadbolt. “Will you stop! You’re getting smudges all over my glass with your grubby little boy hands!”

“We know!” Sara shouts back, cupping her hand over her mouth to amplify the sound through the glass.

Knox remained outside for another moment, his face distorted through the dirty glass. Then he finally turned and disappeared into the fog with Finch. A few seconds later, they heard Finch’s car cough to life behind the building before fading into the distance.

They were alone.

The arcade stretched around them like a graveyard of machines. Rows of black screens reflected the faint emergency lights. Plastic characters grinned from the cabinet artwork. Spaceships, knights, monsters, and cartoon animals waited patiently for electricity to bring them back to life.

Sara climbed the first few stairs. “Come on.”

Cove remained near the repaired machine.

“What?” Sara looked back at him.

“What were you staring at? You were like completely gone the entire time I was closing with Finch.”

“I, I honestly don’t know. I think I was just tired and was staring off.” Sara’s gaze went from Cove to the machine as she

listened. The building creaked. A pipe knocked somewhere inside the wall. Nothing else.

Cove stepped closer to the cabinet. "There is humming."

She descended one step. "The power is off."

"I know."

The screen remained completely black. Cove placed his palm against the side of the machine. A faint vibration traveled through the wood and into his fingertips, and the three small light taps. He pulled his hand away. "Okay, that's weird."

Sara stared at the scratches on the carpet. They began at the foot of the stairs and traveled directly toward the cabinet.

"Cove." She says she is worried.

"Yeah?"

"I would really like to go upstairs now."

He looked at her face and decided not to argue. "Right behind you."

They climbed the stairs together. The apartment, the arcade, the air, they all felt different at night. They quickly went inside and closed the door behind them, locking it as if someone or something was chasing them. Once inside and all the deadbolts locked, they felt like they could breathe again. Even though they had each other, they still felt very alone in this apartment, in this town. They walked together, checking every room, in the closet, in the cabinets, everywhere a person or a thing could be hiding

Cove walked to the front door one last time and checked each lock.

One deadbolt.

The lock on the door handle.

Two chain locks.

A sliding bolt near the bottom.

“Finch wasn’t kidding about the locks,” he said.

Sara opened one of the kitchen cabinets. Inside were two chipped plates, three glasses, and a ceramic mug that read “WORLD’S OKAYEST BOSS”.

“At least the last guy left dishes.”

“Maybe he didn’t leave willingly.” Cove, not thinking, said.

She looked back at him, “Why would you say that?”

“Sorry.”

“No, you aren’t.” Her glare could kill.

“No, not really.”

Sara closed the cabinet. They found an unopened package of crackers, two cans of soup, a new jar of peanut butter, and a can of sardines that had an expiration date of 12/12/1984.

Cove held it up. “Ha, this expired on my dad’s literal birthday.”

“Have you thought if anyone in our families has tried to look for us?”

“It’s been kind of hard since we ended up in this shit hole. Just when we get a moment to breathe, there’s something else that tries to kill us.”

“We’ve made it this far, and this might be our break.” Sara gets up, takes the old can of expired sardines, and places them back in the cabinet. She grabs the saltine crackers and the jar of peanut butter. “Cmon, let’s eat dinner.”

They ate the crackers on the couch, dipping each one in the peanut butter and splitting a bottle of warm soda Finch had given them. It wasn’t much of a dinner, but neither complained. Outside, the fog pressed against the windows. The neon sign above the arcade flashed intermittently, painting the ceiling in alternating shades of red and blue.

FINCH’S ARCADE.

Darkness.

FINCH’S ARCADE.

Darkness.

Sara pulled her knees against her chest. “You think Knox made it home?”

“He knows the town better than either of us.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

Cove took another cracker. “I think he’s fine.”

“You promised him we wouldn’t die. He seemed worried.”

“He is worried, I wonder if this place is all he knew?” Cove crunches on another cracker and peanut butter.

“Yeah, I know poor kid probably doesn’t know what normal is.” Sara curled one side of her mouth in sadness. “He really likes you.”

Cove looked at her. “He likes you, too.”

“Not the same way.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Sara smiled faintly. “He looks at you like you’re his older brother.”

The words landed harder than she intended. Cove looked toward the dark television.

“I never had a little brother.”

“He probably never had someone like you.”

“You mean someone irresponsible enough to promise immortality?” He smirks and pops another cracker with peanut butter.

“No, someone who listens to him. Like really listens.”

Cove leaned back. The couch groaned beneath his weight. For several minutes, they sat without speaking. Moonville had rarely allowed silence without filling it with something terrible. A distant scream. A ringing telephone. Static from a television that wasn’t plugged in. Tonight, however, there was only the refrigerator and the flickering neon outside.

Sara rested her head against the couch. “This almost feels normal.”

“Eating ancient crackers inside a haunted apartment?” He looks at her, painting her with his eyes, the curves over her face, then the swoop of her nose.

“You know what I mean.” She laughs through her nose.

Cove did.

A roof.

A locked door.

A place where they could leave their things without wondering whether they would still be there when they returned.

A place where, for one night, they didn’t have to keep moving.

“It’s nice,” he admitted.

Sara looked down the hallway toward the bedroom. “You can take the bed.”

“No, no one could ever allow a lady to be on a couch for sleeping.” He says in a chivalrous manner.

“You fixed the video game thing. You earned it.” She sat up and looked at him.

“You’re taking the bed.”

“I don’t need special treatment.”

“I’m not giving you special treatment, okay.”

“You are literally giving me the only bed.”

Cove stretched across the couch and placed his hands behind his head. “I like couches.”

“You’re too tall for it.” Sara stood up, watching him stretch across the old sofa.

“I’ll bend.”

“You’re going to wake up shaped like a question mark.”

“I already have terrible posture.”

Sara rolled her eyes. “Fine. But if you complain tomorrow, I’m not listening.”

“You never listen anyway, and besides, I kinda like this old musty smell that it’s giving off.”

She threw a cracker at him, which he very quickly caught, placed very swiftly into his mouth, and began to crunch.

“Goodnight, Sara.”

She stood and walked toward the bedroom. Then, at the doorway, she stopped.

“Cove?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you’re here with me.”

He looked up at her. The neon flashed red across her face.

“Me too.” He smiled gently at her.

Sara disappeared into the bedroom and closed the door halfway. Cove listened as the mattress springs complained beneath her weight. A lamp clicked off, and the apartment settled.

Outside Finch's Arcade, Jamie stood beneath the dripping awning of Rewind Video. Rain slid from the plastic edge in steady streams, splashing against the sidewalk inches from her shoes. The arcade was dark except for the flickering neon sign and the faint glow from the apartment above it.

Jamie imagined her walking through the apartment as though it were hers.

Opening cabinets.

Touching Cove's things.

Sleeping only a few inches away from him.

Her throat tightened.

She had followed them after leaving Dr. Tube's studio and then waited. Not closely. She knew how to disappear inside Moonville. She knew which alleys stretched farther than they should and which storefront windows reflected people who weren't actually there. She had watched Finch leave. She had watched Knox walk away alone. She had waited until the streets emptied, and now the town was approaching 2 a.m. as she waited until they were asleep. She could sense they were asleep, a feeling in her soul that this was her time to get closer, so she crossed the street, careful to avoid any puddles. The front doors were locked. Of course, they were, but she still tried. Finch had always been careful. But Finch was also old. Older adults forget things, she thought. Jamie walked around the side of the building, pressing one hand against the damp brick as she

entered the narrow alley. The back door was warped, as if someone, or something, had tried to break in long ago, and its warped shadows waited beneath a rusted security light.

She tried the handle.

Locked.

Her fingers tightened into frustrated fists.

For one horrible moment, she imagined Sara inside Cove's arms while Jamie stood outside in the rain like a stray animal. The thought made something pulse behind her eyes. She searched along the doorframe. There was a small gap. She can get inside. She reached down under her soaked, black wet dress where her large butcher knife rested between her thighs.

Thunder started to roll overhead, lightning electrifying the sky. The neon signs painted the alley and streets even more brightly, their wet surfaces coated with rain. She slipped her knife between the small crack of the door and the door jam and shimmed the knife down to the locking mechanism by the door handle. The thunder rolled again, and with her timing, she put as much pressure as she could and yanked on the door as hard as she could.

It didn't budge.

She waited again, ready and in position.

The thunder roared again.

She applied pressure and, this time, lifted and yanked forward.

The door was open. She looked around her, biting her wet, chapped lips, and opened the creaking door slowly as she slipped inside, closing the door behind her.

The arcade smelled exactly as she remembered it.

Burnt dust.

Plastic.

Popcorn oil.

Old electricity.

She moved between the silent cabinets, her fingertips trailing across their surfaces. When she then passed the repaired machine. She can feel it pulsating. Vibrating. Calling her to let her know she was supposed to be here at this exact time.

Jamie stopped.

The black screen reflected her pale face.

Behind her reflection stood something tall and crooked.

She turned.

Nothing was there.

Jamie looked back at the screen.

Only she remained. A thin woman. A patchwork woman. A woman built from pain and the pieces of people nobody missed.

She touched her chest.

Flat.

Dr. Tube could change that. He could change anything. He had promised. She loved him.

Sara tossed in bed. Restless. Her eyelids closed, but her eyes were rapidly moving from left to right.

The machines were all on, the lights, the flashes, the music. Then, row by row, they all lost power in a wave to that one machine. That machine Cove had fixed. She stood there, frozen, staring at the machine, when the apartment door flung open, and a ghost of chilling cold air gushed from its hinges down the stairs, icing her veins. Then there was nothing, no sound, no air, like being drowned under water. Then a blood-curdling scream from the apartment ripped through the silence.

The old caretaker.

His scream.

His arms flaring to try to grip anything to keep him from being dragged to his death. His scream got louder, above the broken and thrown pieces of furniture that were desperately trying as life preservers to help him from drowning in his death. Nothing gripped him, but his leg was raised as if someone was pulling him hard. His nail dug into the carpet, each nail snapping, leaving a trail of blood in its place. His chin smacking every step on its way down, his arms flailing to grip onto anything until they got to where Sara was frozen, watching the horrific past, and they stopped. The man on the floor was battered and beaten, lying silent for just enough time to relax in

fear until he contorted his body, causing several cracks, twisting his arms and then his neck in a most unnatural way to look at Sara. His eyes were pure black, his face expressionless, his nose gone, and his mouth was a grin from ear to ear, wide and narrow. Sara stood frozen in fear as the figure screamed.

A sound came from upstairs.

A scream.

Sara's scream.

Jamie's nails dug into her palms; she screamed his name. She climbed the staircase slowly, avoiding the steps that creaked. The scratches guided her up the stairs. Jamie crouched and touched one of the floor scars. They were deeper the further up she went. The torn carpet was stiff with something dark. Old blood, perhaps. She imagined the caretaker lying on his stomach, fingernails ripping backward as something pulled him toward the arcade. She wondered whether he had screamed. She wondered whether anyone had listened. Jamie sat beside Cove and Sara's door. She pulled her knees to her chest and rested her head against the wood, her mascara dripping down her cheeks from her eyes.

At first, she heard nothing.

Then Cove spoke.

His voice was muffled slightly behind the door.

Warm.

Startled, but alive.

“What happened? Are you okay?” He jumped out of the sofa and into her room.

Her cheeks were soaked with tears. “I had a bad dream, a really bad dream, Cove,” Sara answered, panicked.

Jamie couldn’t understand every word, but their voices moved together easily. Naturally. As though they had known each other forever.

“Hey, hey, hey, it’s okay, you’re safe, I’m here.” He rushes over to her and holds her.

“Cove, I’m too scared I can’t sleep by myself, please.” She looked at him in desperation.

“Okay.” He moves the sheets from the other side of the bed and climbs in, and Sara immediately snuggles up beside him for safety. He turns to wrap his arms around her, “Is this okay?”

She nods, “Yes, thank you.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you.” He whispers in her ear, as her fears disappear and the hairs on her neck finally stand on end in a good way.

“This is a terrible idea,” she whispered.

“Probably.”

“We’re trapped in a nightmare town.”

“Definitely.” He gives another short answer.

“We just moved into an apartment where someone was possibly dragged into an arcade machine.”

“Allegedly.” He smiles.

She laughed quietly. It was a nervous sound. A frightened sound. But it was real. Sara turned in bed to face him, looked into his eyes, leaned forward, and kissed him.

Cove froze, only for a moment. Then his hand moved gently to the back of her neck, pulling her closer. The kiss deepened as they locked their lips. He can taste her tears as she sighs from him taking away her fear. The fear, the exhaustion, and everything they had avoided saying seemed to collapse between them. For once, neither of them was running. Neither was fighting a monster or searching for an escape that might not exist.

They were simply together.

Sara pulled away just far enough to breathe. “This doesn’t mean you get the bed.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” He smirked.

She kissed him again.

Jamie closed her eyes, trying to block everything she had heard. In her mind, she pictured Cove looking at her and holding her. The image burned in her mind, and her nails dug into the carpeted stairs. The nightmare of Cove with Sara vanished from her mind as she imagined opening the door and finding him alone. Just waiting. Waiting for her to come to him. He would

look at her body without disgust. He would touch her scars and call them beautiful. He would see the woman Dr. Tube had created, and he would understand that she had survived it all just to find him.

Then she heard it, “I need you closer,” Sara said, muffled through the door, and Cove agreed, scooting closer.

The fantasy shattered. Jamie pressed her ear harder against the door. “You don’t belong with him, you fucking whore,” she whispered, the angriest whisper.

Then, outside the door, Jamie heard the bed creak. Cove had moved closer. Her entire body stiffened. She pressed her ear against the wood until it hurt. Their voices were quieter now.

Whispers.

A laugh.

Then the silence was broken only by the shifting mattress. Jamie understood. She didn’t need to hear more. Her chest tightened until breathing became impossible. In her mind, she saw Sara’s body pressed against Cove. The body Jamie had studied from the studio window. The curves. The softness. Everything that had been naturally given to Sara had been denied her. Jamie pressed both hands over her ears, closed her eyes and rocked back and forth. It didn’t help. She could still hear them. She could hear every imagined breath. Every imagined touch. Every imagined word Cove would never say to her.

“No,” she whispered. Her voice trembled. “No. No. No.”

Inside the room, Cove pulled the blanket around them as Sara rested her forehead against his. For a brief, fragile moment, Moonville disappeared.

The arcade below.

The fog.

The monsters.

The rules.

None of it existed.

Only the warmth between them.

Then something scraped across the apartment door. Sara's eyes opened. Cove lifted his head. Another scrape came—longer this time. Wood splintered beneath fingernails.

Sara gripped his arm. "Did you hear that?"

Cove nodded. The sound stopped. They waited. A violent pound struck the door. The entire apartment shook.

Sara gasped. Another blow followed. Then another.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

Cove shot out of bed and put on his clothes.

"No." Sara reached for him. "Don't go out there."

"Someone's at the door."

"That is exactly why you shouldn't open it." She whispered loudly.

The pounding stopped.

Silence filled the apartment. Cove moved into the hallway. Sara followed, holding the blanket around herself.

“Cove, Knox told us not to answer the door, and that was not a normal knock. Please don’t.” Sara begs.

Cove looked through the peephole. The hallway appeared empty. “I don’t see anyone.”

“That doesn’t mean no one’s there.”

He reached for the first lock.

Sara grabbed his wrist. “Cove.”

“If it’s Knox—” He looked her in the eyes.

“It isn’t Knox.”

“If someone needs help—”

“This is Moonville. Anything outside that door knows you’ll think that.”

He hesitated. Then a soft sob came from the hallway. A woman crying. Cove looked at Sara. The sound came again.

Weak

Broken.

“Help me.”

Sara’s face drained of color. “That’s what the creature in the cabin did,” she whispered. “It cried like a child.”

The hallway fell silent. Cove slowly removed Sara’s hand from his wrist.

“I’m only looking.” He unlocked the bottom deadbolt. Then the first chain. Then the second. He looked back at her and twisted the lock on the door handle.

“Help me.” The voice said again behind the door, but this time it sounded farther away.

Sara stepped backward.

Cove slid the final bolt free and opened the door quickly.

The hallway was empty.

No creature.

No crying woman.

No Knox.

Only darkness stretches toward the staircase.

Cove stepped into the doorway. “Hello?”

Nothing answered.

Sara remained inside. “Close it.”

Cove examined the floor. Beside the wall was a wet patch where someone had been sitting. Wet, darkened carpet, and the shapes of two wet shoe marks remained near the apartment door. Someone had been there. Someone human. Cove followed the damp footprints toward the staircase. They stopped at the top step. Something moved near the bottom of the railing. A single strand of long black hair lifted in the cold draft beyond the shadows. It twisted through the air before floating down the bottom of the staircase. Cove watched it disappear into the

darkness below. Then from the arcade came the sound of a machine turning on. A single electronic melody played.

Bright.

Cheerful.

Wrong.

Then the repaired cabinet spoke through its crackling speakers. “Love me, love me, say that you love me.” The distorted, over-synthesized, out-of-tune ‘80s version of The Cardigans was playing, while a cassette tape pixelized on the game’s screen.

Cove didn’t see what was on the screen; he couldn’t. He was frozen at the top of the stairs, but when the song played, he knew, and he wasted no time slamming the apartment door and locking every bolt.

Below them, the machine began to laugh, and it was an all-too-familiar laugh.

Chapter 14

Seeds of Tomorrow

The streets of Moonville were nearly empty. Fog drifted between the old buildings while the distant voice of a late-night DJ echoed from a forgotten radio somewhere in town. "...and remember, Nightlings, if something smiles at you with too many teeth... smile back. It's only polite." The broadcast dissolved into static. Knox hurried through the iron gate surrounding Mr. Daniels' greenhouse. Warm light spilled through the old glass panes. Inside, thousands of flowers nodded gently beneath hanging lamps.

Mr. Daniels stood with his back to the door, trimming a blood-red rose. "You are home later than expected."

"Sorry."

"And your guests?"

Knox frowned. "They aren't coming."

Mr. Daniels stopped trimming. "They chose not to stay the night with us?"

Knox kicked lightly at the stone floor. "Finch offered Cove a job. And the apartment above the arcade. And they both took it."

For several seconds, neither of them spoke. Mr. Daniels carefully placed the pruning shears onto the workbench. "What a shame."

"I know."

“I had already prepared the soil.” Knox sighed.

“So had I.” Mr. Daniels turned. “You were looking forward to helping.”

Knox nodded. “I even cleaned the couch.”

A faint smile crossed Mr. Daniels’ face. “I noticed.”

“I thought if they stayed the night...” Knox paused, disappointed. “...it would’ve been easy.”

Mr. Daniels folded his hands behind his back. “They trusted you.”

“I know.”

“They never would’ve suspected.” Mr. Daniels raises a busy eyebrow.

“I know.” Knox walked toward one of the flower beds. His fingers brushed the petals of a deep crimson rose. “I really liked them.”

Mr. Daniels smiled. “I know you did.”

“Cove would’ve made a good topiary. The height was excellent.” He stares at the rose petals. “He could have been my friend forever.” “And Sara...” Knox looked over another bed filled with white lilies. “She would’ve looked pretty beside Grandma.”

Mr. Daniels nodded thoughtfully. “Beth always preferred company.”

The greenhouse fell silent. Only the soft hiss of the misting system could be heard, which Mr. Daniels had created with old garden hoses and pipes he had found lying around.

Knox sighed again. "I wanted to help shape them."

"You will just be patient."

"I've been practicing." Knox perked up a little. Excited.

"I've seen your work." Mr. Daniels moved towards the boy as he rested a hand on the boy's shoulder. "It improves every season."

Knox smiled proudly. "I think Cove would've looked nice holding a lantern. And Sara?" Knox thought for a moment. "A bench."

Mr. Daniels tilted his head. "A bench?"

"So people could sit beside her."

Mr. Daniels chuckled softly. "An interesting design."

"I would've planted climbing roses around them."

"Oh, I believe Beth would've liked that."

Knox looked toward the back corner of the greenhouse. The moonlight filters through the glass and illuminates a row of enormous flowering bushes. Most visitors would have admired their beauty. Knox saw something else—the curve of a shoulder beneath the vines. The outline of a hand disappearing into vines and trimmed topiaries. The faint shape of a smiling face forever frozen beneath blossoms. "Grandma." He says softly. She

bloomed differently now. “It’s disappointing,” Knox admitted. “I finally made friends.”

Mr. Daniels looked toward the sleeping forms hidden within his garden. “Sometimes the finest flowers must bloom another season.”

“You think they’ll stay in Moonville?” He looks up at Mr. Daniels.

“Oh yes.” Mr. Daniels smiled as he returned to clipping his roses. “Moonville has a way of keeping the people it wants.”

Knox’s disappointment slowly faded. “So, we’ll have another chance?”

Mr. Daniels clipped away another leaf that was bothering him. “I imagine we will.”

Knox smiled. Next time... He wouldn’t ask them to stay. He would insist. Outside, a cold breeze swept across the greenhouse. The crimson roses swayed gently. Deep beneath the rich black soil, something shifted. Almost as if the garden itself approved of the plan.

Chapter 15

Standing Room Only

Moonville had a strange way of rewarding survival. Three months ago, Finch's Arcade had been little more than a dying relic filled with dusty game cabinets, faded carpet, and enough silence to hear every loose wire hum. Now people lined up outside before the doors even opened. Word had spread across Moonville that the two teenagers who had survived the Lavender Lady worked there. Some came to meet them. Others came simply to shake their hands. Most came because surviving something in Moonville made you famous. Finch wasn't complaining.

He stood behind the counter, counting another overflowing cash drawer and a ration bin. "I haven't seen business like this since the summer of '88." He laughed to himself. "I was younger... had more hair... and had more fun."

Cove looked up from the back of an arcade cabinet, a screwdriver clenched between his teeth. "You've mentioned 1988 at least six times this morning."

"It was a good year."

"And being stuck in some weird twisted 80's town doesn't contribute to that?" Cove takes the screw from his mouth.

Sara rolled her eyes while handing a little boy a roll of quarters. "Don't encourage him."

“I’m just saying,” Finch continued, “before you two showed up, I was one monster, murder, or ghost away from turning this place into a morgue.”

The front door opened again. Another family stepped inside. The children immediately rushed toward the racing games. Their parents, however, walked directly toward Cove.

“Excuse us.” The woman in bright pink yoga pants and a tie-dye tank top asked.

Cove stood. “Yeah?”

“Were you really there?”

He smiled politely. “There?”

“With The Lavender Lady.” The grungy, messy-haired dad, wearing a stained white tank top, asked.

Sara looked over from the counter. She already knew where this conversation was going. “Weeee were.” She wanted to make sure she was included.

The father nodded slowly. “My daughter made me drive from the edge of town just to meet you. Even dodged a few forest gnomes to get here. Those little bastards... woooooo nasty little critters, that one was feisty, hey babe!” He elbows his wife, who is giving him a disgusted look. “But I mean for you I’d bet they’d be nothin’ I’m sure. Have you ever come across...

A little girl peeked around his leg. “You beat the ghost.”

Cove chuckled softly. “I wouldn’t say beat.”

“You survived.” She squeaked back.

“I guess we did.”

The little girl smiled. “You’re my hero.”

Cove rubbed the back of his neck, clearly uncomfortable. “I just got lucky.”

Finch leaned toward Sara. “They’re going to need an autograph book.”

Sara laughed. “I know, and not like I exist in this whole thing.”

Across the arcade, someone watched. Jamie sat at the same Pac-Man cabinet she had occupied nearly every Saturday for the past three months. She never played. She only inserted enough quarters to make it appear she belonged there. Sometimes she let the game play itself until the ghosts caught her. Sometimes she stared at the blinking screen while secretly watching Cove in its reflection. Every smile he gave another customer settled inside her like a splinter, especially when he smiled at another female. It didn’t matter their age, the pain that entered inside was an unbearable knife to the heart. Jamie’s fingers tightened around the joystick until her knuckles turned white because she knew Sara was the one every smile was calculated for and only her.

She told herself he smiled at her, too.

Sometimes.

When he caught her looking, he didn’t know her name. He didn’t know she watched him every week. He didn’t know she followed him to the convenience store every Tuesday. Or

Benny's Boombox every Thursday while he looked for something new to listen to. Or the diner every Friday evening, which he always went to with Sara. She wanted to puke when she saw her and him together—laughing and having fun. Her intrusive thoughts were too much even for her to keep her bile out of her mouth.

He thought she was simply another customer.

Shy.

Quiet.

Harmless.

Every time their eyes met...He smiled—every single time. And every single time Jamie whispered beneath her breath. "I love you too." No one heard her. No one ever did. But when she said those words, she felt loved, the warmth cascading over her body, until it hit her between her legs, and then her words became ugly to him, to her, to what she was trying to be. She needed to change, to complete the final metamorphosis so Cove would be hers. A loud crash echoed from the skee-ball lanes. Catching her breath away from her thoughts.

"Oh, come on!" a teenage boy shouted. "That machine cheated!"

"It doesn't cheat," Finch called from behind the counter. "You're just terrible."

"I hit the hundred!" The boy screeched.

"You hit the gutter," Finch grunted.

“There is no gutter!”

“There is now!” He yelled back. The arcade erupted into laughter. “Damn little shit.” Finch rolled his eyes, looking at Cove.

Cove couldn’t help but grin. “You really enjoy messing with people, don’t you?”

Finch looked offended. “I own the damn arcade.”

“So?”

“I practically have a doctorate in messing with people.”

Sara walked over carrying two paper cups filled with soda. She handed one to Cove. “Break time.”

He accepted it gratefully. “You are a lifesaver.”

“I know.” She leaned against the counter beside him.

“You’ve fixed what...” She looked around the arcade. “...six machines today?”

“Seven.” Finch raised a finger.

“Eight if you count the claw machine,” Cove said after a gulp of soda.

“The claw machine wasn’t broken,” Finch said, confused.

“It is when I’m using it,” Cove said through his cup.

Finch took a pen from his shirt pocket, clicked it, and stabbed the bottom of Cove’s cup, leaking soda all over himself.

Sara laughed.

“What the fuck!” Cove tries to recover from a soaked shirt and pants.

“Remember a Ph.D. in fucking with people, now clean this up and go get changed, I’m going to go read my book.” Finch scrunches his hair and walks off.

Across the room, Jamie watched the exchange through the blinking reflection of Pac-Man’s maze and couldn’t help but smirk at what just happened. She knew their routine now. Every afternoon around three, Sara brought Cove a soda. At four-thirty, they swapped places. Sara worked the register while Cove repaired machines. At six, they ate together.

Always together.

Always laughing.

Always smiling.

Jamie’s stomach twisted.

The little girl from earlier tugged on Cove’s sleeve. “Mister?”

Cove crouched to her height. “What’s up?”

She held out a stuffed Pac-Man she’d won from the prize counter. “My daddy says heroes should sign things.”

Cove blinked. “You want... me to sign your stuffed Pac-Man?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “Please?”

He looked helplessly toward Sara. Sara burst into laughter. “Oh, you are absolutely signing that.”

“I’ve never signed anything.” He looked at the little girl with his sticky shirt and disheveled hair.

“Better learn.” Sara smiles at the little girl.

“Here, kid! Finch walks by and tosses him a permanent marker. “Congratulations!” He continues to walk by and chuckles.

“You’re famous.” Sara smiles.

“I’m not famous.”

“Tell that to the line forming behind her.” Sara tilts her head for him to look.

Cove slowly turned. Six more kids were waiting. Each held something different. A game manual. A baseball cap. A cassette case. One little boy held a flashlight.

“I’m drenched in soda.”

“Okay, I’ll hold them off, go run upstairs and change, and come back.” Sara grabs the marker from him. “Okay, go! Be quick.”

“Okay, I’ll be right back.” Cove runs towards the apartment stairs, weaving in and out of the kids.

“Hey, where’s he going?” The little girl holding the Pac-Man, sadly asks.

“It’s okay, everyone, he’s just going to change his shirt real quick, alright. So... what’s everyone’s favorite video game here?” Sara tries to distract the line of antsy kids as two more join out of curiosity.

Cove bolts up the stairs, Jaimie watching him from across the arcade. Her eyes fixated on him, confused by his unfamiliar pattern, and her body moved toward the stairs without a thought

to follow him. She walks up the stairs quietly, and the sound of the water being turned on from the shower is heard from beyond the walls. She reaches the door and turns the doorknob, and it moves. Cove just rushed in and didn't bother to lock it behind him. Her pupils dilate, her heart beats faster as she opens the door to his apartment. His and her apartment. She pictures herself cooking for him in the kitchen and snuggling him on the sofa in the living room. Then she notices the bathroom door. The very open bathroom door which reveals Cove taking a hot shower. His silhouette is beyond the curtain, but then the water turns off, and Cove furiously slides the shower curtain to one side. Jamie jumps, runs to his bedroom, and slides under his bed. Cove comes in, wrapped in a towel, which drops to the floor in front of Jamie. He shovels through his clothes in the closet, the hangers clanking together as he furiously puts on his clothes. He sits on the bed to put on his socks, his body so close to hers. She can smell him. His skin. The soap. She wanted to reach out and touch him. Anything to feel him. He gets up from the bed quickly, the springs relaxing. He slides on his shoes in the living room and races downstairs, the sounds of the arcade and kids growing louder with the open door. Jamie reaches for his towel that fell to the floor and instantly holds it to her nose, taking a deep breath. She takes the damp towel and rubs it all over her face and down to her neck.

“I love you.” She whispers to herself. “You’ll see that tonight.” Tears start to form in her eyes as she hugs the towel close to her body. Smelling his scent and imagining he is here with her, and nothing else matters.

Chapter 16

Love Me

The apartment settled into silence. Downstairs, the last arcade cabinet clicked off. The familiar chorus of electronic explosions, racing engines, and cheerful jingles faded into nothing. Finch locked the front doors, wished Cove and Sara goodnight, and drove home beneath the glowing neon lights of Main Street. Moonville grew quiet, and upstairs, Jamie remained perfectly still beneath the bed. Dust clung to her sleeves. She listened, still hugging the bathroom towel. The apartment creaked as Cove locked each deadbolt.

“Long day,” Sara sighed.

“The busiest we’ve ever had,” Cove answered.

“You think it’ll always be like this?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged, looking in the fridge, not finding anything he liked, before closing it and yawning.

“I hope so. It makes the day go by so quickly, and I forget about things.”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m really tired. I think I just want to go to bed.” Cove yawns again.

Sara yawns after him, “Crap, it’s contagious, heck ya I’m ok with that, but I want to take a shower.”

“Fuck the shower. Let’s sleep.”

“But I feel like I stink.” She smells her armpit.

“Na, you never smell, come on.” He turns off the kitchen light and heads into the bedroom as Sara follows.

Jamie closed her eyes. Their voices were warm and comfortable—everything she had imagined for herself. But one voice needed to be removed. Eventually, the bedroom light clicked off. The mattress springs complained softly as their weight shifted, and silence returned.

Jamie counted slowly inside her head.

One.

Two.

Three...

By the time she reached three hundred, Cove’s breathing had become slow and steady.

Sara shifted once beneath the blankets. Then stopped moving.

Jamie smiled. She slowly slid from beneath the bed. The floorboards groaned beneath her bare feet. She froze. Neither of them stirred. Moonlight spilled through the bedroom window, painting pale rectangles across the floor. Sara slept closest to the edge of the bed. Jamie stepped toward her. Jamie’s long, dark brown hair spilled over her forehead and across her eyes as she tilted her head, staring at Sara, imagining what she was going to do to her, what she hated about her. What she envied about her.

She reached out with trembling fingers. “I’m sorry, but he’s mine.” The whisper barely existed.

Sara's eyes suddenly snapped open. For a heartbeat, neither moved. Then Sara screamed.

Jamie lunged. The two crashed into the nightstand. A lamp shattered against the floor. Glass exploded across the room.

Cove jolted awake. "Sara!"

Jamie grabbed Sara's wrist to hold her back. As Jamie swiped across Sara's face with her long nails, drawing four gashes across her face. Sara fought wildly, kicking, clawing, reaching for anything. Her hand closed around a jagged shard of broken glass. She swung. The glass sliced across Jamie's face. A crimson line opened from cheekbone to jaw. Jamie staggered backward. She touched the wound. Blood coated her fingertips. She stared at her sticky, wet hands. Then looked at Sara. Something inside her broke. With a guttural cry, Jamie tackled Sara to the floor. The bedroom erupted into chaos. Furniture overturned. Pictures crashed from the walls. Sara struck Jamie again and again, but Jamie refused to let go. Finally, Jamie slammed Sara against the dresser, and a gasp of air exploded from Sara's mouth. Jamie grabbed a fistful of Sara's hair, lifting her head violently, then slamming her head into the wooden dresser several times before Sara went limp. Sara collapsed, unconscious to the ground. What seemed like minutes was only a few seconds before Cove could even react, before he could even scream.

"No!" Cove charged through the darkness.

He could only make out a silhouette standing over Sara. “Get away from her!”

The figure turned. Moonlight caught the blood running down her face. Then her eyes. “Cove...” she whispered.

He stopped. “You... You...I...I... I’ve seen you at the arcade.”

Jamie stepped into the light. “I love you.”

Cove stared at her. “What?”

“I’ve always loved you. I love you, Cove!” Jamie smiles ear to ear, her face drips in blood.

“I don’t even know who the fuck you are!”

“You smiled at me.” She smiles with her eyes, but her mouth speaks the words seriously, with a troubled expression.

“I smile at fucking everyone! What did you do?”

“You weren’t supposed to.” She twitches her head to one side.

“You have the wrong person.” Cove goes to move over to Sara, but Jamie twitches with his movement like she’s a glitch. A virus. Ready to attack her host.

“No.” Her voice cracked. “You have the wrong girl.”

Before Cove could answer, every arcade cabinet downstairs roared to life. The apartment floor vibrated. Electronic chimes echoed through the building. Lights flashed beneath the bedroom door.

“What the fuck?” Cove looked at the open bedroom door, but Jamie never took her eyes off him.

Every machine below displayed the same looping image.

A spinning cassette tape.

Its label read only two words.

LOVE ME.

Distorted synth music blasted through every speaker in the arcade below.

The melody was familiar.

Wrong.

Warped by static until it sounded like a dying cassette tape fighting to keep playing.

The chorus echoed through the building.

“Love me...Love me...Say that you love me...”

Cove lunged toward Jamie. He never reached her. Something invisible seized him. His body jerked violently upward. He slammed against the ceiling hard enough to crack the plaster.

Jamie screamed, “No! No! No! Don’t kill him! What are you doing?”

There was no answer. Only the music was growing louder. Something hurled Cove across the room. He crashed through a chair and struck the far wall before collapsing motionless. The music stopped. Silence swallowed the apartment. Jamie stared at Cove. She looked around the room. No one else was there—

nothing she could see. Yet something had protected her. She can feel it there. Feel it breathing on her neck.

Slowly, she knelt beside him. She brushed a strand of hair from his forehead with trembling fingers. "I'll come back for you," she whispered, kissing him on the lips very gently as tears ran down her face. Her fingertips brush his sleeping face and twirl his hair.

Behind her, Sara lay unconscious. She grabs Sara by the ankle, lifts, and drags her out of the bedroom and down the stairs. Sara's limp body makes a thud on every stair until they make it to the bottom. Jamie's smile never left her face. All she could think about was how she kissed him, how she felt him, how she smelled him. The dark arcade waited below. Every machine was silent once more. Only the cassette image remained glowing on a single screen before fading into black, the one that Cove fixed. Jamie dragged Sara to the back door, through which she went, disappearing into the fog with Sara still being dragged behind her.

Across Moonville, the lights of Dr. Tube's television studio flickered awake. The sound of a dragging corpse echoed through the streets as Jamie walked strongly toward the studio with purpose. Jamie never looked back, never even flinched when far off in the hills... A lone wolf echoed its howl across the sleeping town, ending the night's horror.

Chapter 17

A New Face

The fluorescent lights inside Moonville TV buzzed softly. Dr. Tube stood over the stainless-steel autopsy table, staring at his watch, taking Sara's pulse from her unconscious body. Jamie paced nearby, unable to stand still.

"I want her cut open on camera," she whispered angrily.

Dr. Tube didn't answer. He adjusted his glasses. Then sighed. "No."

Jamie's head snapped toward him. "No?"

He shook his head. "This is a terrible idea."

"You promised."

"I did. But not like this. Actually your lucky you didn't kill her."

"You said we'd finally be together." Jamie slammed her hands on the table.

"I also said we needed to be intelligent."

Jamie frowned. "I don't understand."

Dr. Tube gestured toward Sara. "Everyone in Moonville knows who she is."

"So?"

"So if she disappears and suddenly shows up on Moonville TV as tomorrow night's autopsy..." He folded his arms. "...the entire town will know."

Jamie looked down. “They’ll know it was us.”

“And Cove,” Dr. Tube continued, “will never stop looking.”

The words settled heavily into the room. Jamie hated that he was right. Before either could speak again, heavy footsteps echoed through the hallway. A slow, deliberate knock sounded against the studio door.

Three knocks.

Pause.

Two knocks.

Pause.

Dr. Tube smiled faintly. “Right on time.”

The door opened. A tall and handsome man wearing all black hospital scrubs, pushing a gurney covered by a white sheet, strolls in casually. His weathered uniform was stained from another long night.

“Anyone order takeout?” Bram said playfully.

“Bram! The one monster that always comes through in Moonville.” Dr. Tube pulled back the sheet.

A beautiful young woman lay beneath it.

Peaceful.

Still.

Jamie barely noticed her face. Then the sheet shifted lower. Her eyes widened. Dr. Tube noticed immediately.

“Ahh...Silicone implants.” He looks at Jamie, smirking.

Jamie’s hand instinctively moved to her own chest.

The night nurse looked between them at Sara lying on the table behind them. "I seem to have interrupted something?"

"Actually, maybe you could help," Dr. Tube quietly explained.

Jamie.

Cove.

Sara.

The failed plan.

The night nurse listened without interrupting. When the explanation ended, he chuckled. "You're thinking far too small."

Dr. Tube raised an eyebrow. "Am I?"

"You don't need a television audience." He looked toward Sara.

You need a story." Jamie tilted her head.

"A story." The night nurse nodded.

"People disappear all the time. But survivors..." He smiled. "They're remembered."

He rested a hand lightly against the gurney. "Send Sara somewhere nobody questions broken minds.

"Halo Hills." Dr. Tube's eyes lit up.

The night nurse nodded. "A frightened young woman claimed that she attacked her boyfriend because she thought he was one of Moonville's many monsters before throwing herself down a flight of stairs." He laughed quietly. "Sounds like a psychotic

episode to me, and then she tried to kill herself shortly after. I'll have her diagnosed before she finishes her first sentence."

Jamie looked at Sara. "So Cove..."

"...will spend years trying to convince people she isn't crazy, that's if he even remembers anything," Bram finished. "And no one will believe him."

"How will we know if he remembers anything, or can we make him forget?" Tube asked.

"Oh, I'll take care of that after I leave. I think our good friend Mr. Daniels has something for that."

Silence filled the studio. Then Dr. Tube smiled. "I rather like that ending."

Bram walked over to Sara and touched her cold face. "She's rather pretty, too. I'll have fun with this one. Call it an even trade. No payment or rations necessary. And I think someone really, really wants those implants."

Jamie looked toward the woman on the gurney and then at Dr. Tube, begging him to agree.

Dr. Tube nodded. "It's a deal, and thank you again."

"Us monsters have to stick together after all." He smirks at Jamie and cups her face with his hand. "So pretty, but Doc, you need to fix these wounds." He lifts her chin to stare him in the eyes. "You're becoming exactly what you want, and I can't wait to see who you will become."

Jamie didn't answer. Just smiled

One Month Later

Moonville had already begun inventing new stories. Some claimed Sara had suffered a complete mental collapse after the Lavender Lady. Others insisted she was just another victim of Moonville, and she's now a monster. Everyone had a version. No one had the truth. Inside Dr. Tube's dressing room, Jamie stood before a cracked mirror. The scars running across her cheek had faded into pale lines beneath careful makeup, but were still there, and she hated them and hated the person who gave them to her even more. A smooth mannequin-like mask rested in her hands. Its painted features smiled with unsettling perfection. She lifted it into place. The woman staring back from the mirror looked almost ordinary.

Almost.

Only the eyes remained the same.

Hungry.

Hopeful.

Broken.

Jamie adjusted the mask. Then smiled. "Better," she whispered.

Across town, a bus rolled to a stop in front of Halo Hills Asylum. Cove stepped off, carrying a small bouquet of white flowers.

He looked thinner.

More tired.

But his determination hadn't faded. He climbed the stone steps and entered the front lobby.

The receptionist looked up. "Can I help you?" Cove nodded quietly. "I'm here to see Sara."

Outside, across the street, a lone figure in a yellow sundress with white daisy print stood partially hidden beneath a dead oak tree. Her skinny figure is now well endowed with the curves of her new breasts, and her pale mannequin mask caught the afternoon light. Jamie watched him disappear through the asylum doors. She placed one white-gloved hand against the trunk of the tree, and in her other hand was a matching purse that housed her knife. A slow smile spread beneath the mask as she looked at the tree, took her knife out, and started to carve a heart. Then her name, and then lastly Cove's.

"I'll wait," she whispered.

Some loves never die. They only learn to hide.

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Damon Robi

Haunted houses. Gingerbread houses. I write both.

Damon Robi is an indie author whose stories celebrate both ends of the calendar—from haunted towns filled with monsters, mysteries, and the supernatural to cozy Christmas inns glowing with romance and second chances.

A Florida native, Damon has been writing since age thirteen. Whether crafting psychological horror, paranormal adventures, or heartwarming holiday romances, he creates memorable characters and immersive worlds that linger after the final page.

When he isn't writing, Damon is a devoted single father of two, an avid reader, and a lifelong believer that Halloween and Christmas are the year's two greatest seasons.

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