

CHAPTER 1

“Please watch until the end. I’m not the only one here.”

Everything after was lost to a hiss of static that rose and fell with her vocal intonations. It came from the lowest of four shadows on a beige face, her form distorted by the compression artifacts that came from sending such a video through email. Kate struggled to connect the woman in the video with her cousin, though she knew it was her from the smear of dark hair and the maroon tapestry hanging on the wall behind her. It was a poor rendering of Rachel, made even more foreign by the corrupted audio that dirtied her soliloquy, turning her into a cornered snake.

Her mouth stopped moving and she stood there, swaying. She raised a steady hand. Something glinted just past her closed fist and Kate leaned in close to the monitor, trying to make it out. When Rachel dragged her fist across her throat, it was not smooth and effortless; Kate could see the muscles in her forearm straining as she pulled the knife through protesting flesh. A sound like fabric tearing under the static. She jumped back when the first spray of red hit the camera, but her eyes stayed glued to the screen.

Rachel collapsed. The crimson torrent arced with her fall until it shot straight up, then it, too, dropped off the screen. All that remained were the streaks smeared on the camera and the thick, red pixels dripping from Rachel’s ceiling. Kate wanted to stop the video, but her hands were unresponsive wooden blocks and her legs threatened to give

out if she shifted her weight. These physical betrayals were the only reason she saw Rachel stumble back to her feet.

She leaned in, one shiny, red hand clamped firmly over her throat, the other reaching out to the camera. This close, Rachel's eyes were clear. There was a haunting in them, but there was determination, too. The stubborn grit that ensured her cousin always got her way.

The video ended on a black screen. Kate stared at it blankly, waiting for her brain to click, for something to start making sense. Her head rang with a litany of *dead, not dead, dead, not dead, dead, not dead*. She remained that way for a while, even after she walked away from her laptop. At some point, while she sat on the couch and picked mindlessly at its loose threads, a spark of inspiration struck. *Call her*. It was so obvious she almost smacked herself on the forehead.

When she dialed the number, three rising tones played immediately. "The wireless number you are trying to reach is unavailable. Please try again later."

She hung up and scrolled through her contacts for Rachel's mother. Same tones, same message. Her finger hovered over her dad's number, then swiped away. It would be an unproductive conversation—her father was hopeless after losing his brother and her mom, and even neutral conversations could send him spiraling. He would be no help.

The laptop's screen still showed the dark little window where Rachel had been. Kate closed the browser, took a breath, and opened a new one. She searched for Rachel's town, her old home: New Anders.

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It was a small fishing town in East Maryland on the coast of the Chesapeake Bay. There was never much news about it, as tourists eschewed the town for sandier beaches with more hotels and restaurants. There was a smattering of gaudy vacation homes near the marina, but outside of that, the houses were mostly single-family and no more than two floors; tastefully sided, shingled, and shuttered in neutral colors and acceptable styles. Their “poor” neighborhood only took up two streets and consisted of ranch-style homes where the grass grew longer only because the men were on boats for days at a time pulling in their catches and the women worked long shifts in the neighboring city. You could walk anywhere at any hour of the night and feel safe because everyone knew everyone and the worst crime in town was teenagers shoplifting.

Kate knew this because she grew up there. Until she was sixteen, their family of three lived in a charming little Cape Cod-style home that mirrored her cousin’s (but for the shutters, which her parents painted olive and Rachel’s parents painted navy), who lived only a street away. Kate’s dad, Ted, was a plumber. Her mom, Jean, was an artist who moonlighted as a receptionist for an ENT in Easton.

Rachel’s dad, Bill, was Ted’s brother. He worked as a shipwright, and her mom taught at an elementary school nearby. Lottie was retired now but stayed active in the community running events and organizing fundraisers. Rachel went to college nearby, got a degree in psychology, and was offered a cushy job in human resources by one of her dad’s old friends. She made enough to buy a starter home just fifteen minutes away from her mom’s place and stuck around for the next eight years. She didn’t want to get married or have children. She said she didn’t need the extra work.

Kate's family left shortly after Uncle Bill died. Even before Jean's death, Kate's dad was a sensitive man prone to bouts of self-pity. He spiraled when they found his brother's body, eventually breaking down each time he saw the Chesapeake Bay. Unfortunately, there hardly existed a view in New Anders that didn't include the bay. Jean made the executive decision to move their family to Ohio, and her dad's mood improved. They kept in touch through phone calls, and Kate would often spend summers there if Jean was available to make the drive. Her dad never went back.

The most recent information Kate could find on New Anders was an announcement for a fish fry that occurred two years ago. That was both expected and comforting. It wasn't a town that made the news often.

Kate called Rachel again, then Lottie. "The wireless number you are trying to reach is unavailable. Please try again later."

* * *

Kate was old enough to have seen the internet when it was a lawless wasteland—before parents knew enough about it to monitor their kids' activity. It was easy to stumble on websites where you could chat with strangers long enough to see your first penis or others with a different kind of disturbing content (she cried for days about "bonsai kittens"). She and Rachel would browse for hours on her family computer after their parents were asleep, enjoying the jittery thrill of a danger that couldn't really hurt you.

Kate and Rachel were online when the first cartel videos started leaking. You could click on a link with a harmless, or even silly, name and be surprised by a clip of men speaking a different language, singing and laughing as they flayed someone alive.

She remembered their eyes—the way they rolled and stared. Sometimes those men didn't even scream, as if already resigned to their fate.

She hadn't thought about those videos in a long time. They were tucked far back in her head, somewhere she wouldn't trip over them. Those videos, those men, had been summoned to the forefront of her mind because now there was someone new. Rachel's hands slick with blood, droplets like freckles on her face, her grim, determined stare through the camera. She was one of them. How long did it take after the video ended for her to bleed out? Did she make it to the hospital in time? New Anders didn't have its own hospital—they had to drive to the one in Easton, so the response time in town left something to be desired.

She blamed the tortured men, the ones who died on or off screen, for her certainty that Rachel was dead. It wasn't true; not yet, because Rachel wasn't dead until she was *observed to be* dead. Until Kate knew for sure, she was Schrodinger's cousin. And if no one would answer their phones and the internet wouldn't help, there was only one way to collapse the superposition—she had to go back to New Anders. She had to see.

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Kate's life was set up for things like this—sudden relocations, bouts of wanderlust, depressive episodes where she couldn't be productive for days at a time, investigating potential family tragedies, etc. She worked from home in a choose-your-own-hours style gig: data entry for a college in Arizona. It was mindless, repetitive stuff, transferring information from one form to another form. The sort of purposeless job people usually stay at for a few months before they go crazy from

boredom or loneliness. That wasn't a problem for Kate. She liked the solitude and simplicity of it. The pay was low—just enough to keep her fed and sheltered in a tiny one-bedroom apartment in the cheapest town she could find—but she didn't need much.

There was no husband or boyfriend she needed to inform of her departure, no child she needed to make care arrangements for, and no pets that needed sitting. She cleared her work schedule with a form email and packed a heavy suitcase into her Civic. All the while, Rachel's and Lottie's numbers played the three maddening notes of a failed connection.

Google Maps told her the drive would take roughly ten hours, mostly along flat, boring highways. She unrolled her windows just enough to be too cold to doze off, then let her mind wander to the last conversation she and Rachel had before the email.

It was a month ago. *Too long*, she thought with a pang of guilt. Rachel didn't mention anything about problems she may have been having—certainly not suicidal thoughts. They talked about her job, Kate's love life (dry and bland), when they would see each other again, and what they would do together.

Nothing strange. Not until the very end, though it seemed innocuous at the time. Kate had just launched into the traditional "Well..." of Midwestern goodbyes when Rachel said, "I saw the weirdest thing today." Kate waited, giving space for her to continue.

"You know how my dad always talked about sea monsters in the Chesapeake?" she asked.

"Sure," Kate responded. Bill loved a big fish story. If he wasn't relaying

mythology, he was exaggerating a sighting from his boat.

“I saw one. *Thought* I saw one. I was walking around the lighthouse, and on the east side, there was something on the rocks. It looked like a bunch of black tentacles.”

“Did you check it out? It could have been garbage or a spill or something.”

“No, they were moving.” She cleared her throat. “They shot back into the water when I got close.”

“Maybe an octopus?”

“Big fucking octopus.”

“They can get pretty big.”

“I guess. It just reminded me of my dad. Maybe that’s why I got creeped out. I wish I could’ve gotten a better look.”

“I think it’s kinda nice,” Kate said. “Some spirits send a butterfly or the scent of rose petals, but your dad sends a giant octopus. On brand, at least.”

Rachel laughed and shifted topics to the war her mom had waged on the rabbits eating her vegetable garden. It didn’t come up again. Strange, but not too strange.

The car passed a green sign on the highway that announced she was only 143 miles from Pittsburgh. Then, it was just over four hours before she reached New Anders.

She would stay at the only motel in town when she got there. If Rachel was okay, she wanted to be there for her. If she wasn’t, she could be there for her aunt. She hadn’t allowed herself to think it could be a prank (Rachel would never), but if it was some kind of mistake, a different girl in the video, she could go to the bar and find a man who smells like salt and has no interest in conversation to spend a few hours with. There

were always things to do.

By the time she made it to Baltimore, her eyes had grown heavy. She was too close to stop, though; Baltimore meant she was only an hour away. Two hours if traffic didn't let up. She would take 50 across the water, drive through some wilderness and roads that wound around creeks and marshes, then New Anders was on a little peninsula sticking out into the Eastern Bay.

The Chesapeake Bay was a black mirror that showed nothing but a distorted reflection of the lights above when Kate drove over it. She wanted to see the deep blue water sparkling up at her, waves lapping at the bridge and shores, but at night it was an inky pit. She'd leave early on the way back for a better view. She always loved the water—even after what happened to Bill.

The weakness in her father was always present, but Bill's death started his unraveling. The other adults wouldn't talk about it except to offer platitudes ("He's in a better place, now"), so all Kate and Rachel knew was that he had washed up on the beach near the lighthouse. His boat was still docked at the marina.

Shortly after his death, Kate's father had entered her room, shut the door behind him, and sat on the bed. She closed the book she had been leafing through and waited. He made her nervous lately—acting unpredictable and emotional—and the smell of alcohol hung off him from morning to night at varying levels of intensity.

"You don't play in the bay anymore," he said. His voice wasn't slurred like it usually was when the smell was this strong. Kate stayed quiet. She wasn't sure what triggered his breakdowns anymore and had no desire to test it. "It's not safe out there."

"Okay, Dad," she said meekly, knowing she would be out there the very next day

if the weather held up. Her own mother had told her to go if she wanted but to keep quiet about it.

“You know, your uncle,” he said, pausing to sniffle, “didn’t have the same skin when they found him. Holes all over him. Little tunnels. They didn’t want to let me see him, but I’m his brother, his fucking *brother*.” He folded over, head in his hands, shaking a little.

Kate didn’t know what to say to that. She imagined her uncle like a sheet of honeycomb and shuddered. “Oh,” she said.

“I saw him out there in the water. It wasn’t him, but it was *him*.” He straightened his back and Kate could see the tears shimmering on his cheeks. “The bay isn’t safe. There’s something wrong in the water, or with the water. You promise me, Katherine.”

“I pr—”

Then Jean was in the room, a frown heavy on her face, shuffling her dad away.

“Sorry, Kate,” she said. “Go to sleep.”

It was a promise she would’ve broken, anyway.