

# SCARY SHORT STORIES

## THE ONE WHO WALKS

THE BUILDING LOOMED IN THE MIDNIGHT STILLNESS, ITS SILHOUETTE JAGGED AND BROKEN AGAINST THE NIGHT SKY. A RELIC FROM AN ERA WHEN ARCHITECTURE WAS HEAVY AND RELENTLESS, NOW IT WAS NOTHING BUT A RUIN—A SIX-STORY SKELETON OF ROTTING TIMBER AND SHATTERED WINDOWS. YET TONIGHT, SARAH STEPPED THROUGH ITS DOORS, CLUTCHING A SMALL SILVER LOCKET, A BLACK CANDLE, AND A STRIP OF DARK CLOTH. THE STAIRCASE WAITED FOR HER, ITS ANCIENT WOOD STEPS SWALLOWING ANY TRACE OF LIGHT, AS IF HUNGERING FOR A FOOTFALL. TONIGHT, SHE WAS HERE FOR “THE ONE WHO WALKS.”

THEY’D SAID THAT IF YOU WERE FOOLISH ENOUGH, OR BROKEN ENOUGH, YOU COULD CALL THEM OUT FROM THE UNSEEN. THEY’D ALSO SAID THAT NO ONE WHO’D SOUGHT THEM EVER RETURNED THE SAME.

SARAH’S GAZE LINGERED ON THE STAIRS, RISING INTO A SMOTHERING DARKNESS. SHE DREW A BREATH AND TOUCHED HER LOCKET, A KEEPSAKE FROM HER MOTHER WHO’D VANISHED YEARS AGO WITHOUT A TRACE. SHE PLACED IT CAREFULLY ON THE FIRST STEP, AN OFFERING, AND THE FAINT METALLIC CLINK SOUNDED TOO LOUD IN THE DESOLATE HALL. LIGHTING THE CANDLE, SHE HELD IT CLOSE, ITS FEEBLE GLOW BARELY ILLUMINATING HER OWN HANDS, AS IF RELUCTANT TO PIERCE THE DARK.

WITH TREMBLING FINGERS, SHE WRAPPED THE BLACK CLOTH AROUND HER EYES. HER WORLD TURNED INTO SOUND AND SCENT—THE STALE, OPPRESSIVE SMELL OF DAMP WOOD, THE FAINT WHISTLE OF WIND THROUGH SHATTERED WINDOWS. SHE FORCED HERSELF FORWARD, ONE HAND BRUSHING THE BANISTER. HER STEPS ECHOED, SWALLOWED BY THE HEAVY SILENCE AS SHE COUNTED EACH FLOOR IN HER MIND.

THE FIRST FLOOR ARRIVED QUICKLY, ALMOST DISAPPOINTINGLY. SHE PAUSED AND WHISPERED INTO THE DARK, "I SEEK THE FORGOTTEN."

NOTHING. ONLY HER OWN SHALLOW BREATHING.

BUT AS SHE STEPPED FORWARD, A FAINT BRUSH—LIKE FINGERTIPS—GRAZED HER SLEEVE. HER PULSE STUTTERED, AND THE CANDLE WOBBLLED DANGEROUSLY IN HER GRASP. WAS SOMETHING HERE, OR WAS IT HER MIND PLAYING TRICKS ALREADY?

SHE CLIMBED AGAIN, HER FINGERS NUMB AROUND THE CANDLE'S BASE, FEELING HER WAY UP, STEP BY STEP. AT THE SECOND FLOOR, SHE LIFTED THE CANDLE FORWARD, THE FLAME CASTING GROTESQUE SHADOWS THROUGH THE CLOTH COVERING HER EYES. "REVEAL WHAT IS HIDDEN," SHE MURMURED.

THE SILENCE WAS DEAFENING. SHE LISTENED, WILLING HERSELF TO HEAR SOMETHING BEYOND THE SCRATCHY ECHO OF HER OWN BREATH. AND THEN, FAINTLY, FOOTSTEPS. SLOW, DELIBERATE—DESCENDING FROM SOMEWHERE ABOVE HER. OR WERE THEY FOLLOWING HER?

SARAH SWALLOWED THE RISING PANIC, CLENCHING HER JAW AGAINST THE URGE TO FLEE. SHE WAS IN TOO DEEP NOW; SHE COULDN'T TURN BACK, NOT WITHOUT FACING WHATEVER MIGHT FOLLOW HER. SHE ASCENDED, BREATH CATCHING AS SHE CLIMBED TO THE THIRD FLOOR.

"I SEEK THE ONE WHO WALKS," SHE WHISPERED.

NOTHING RESPONDED, BUT A STRANGE PULL SETTLED AROUND HER, SOMETHING DARK AND EXPECTANT. SHE FELT IT IN THE HEAVINESS OF THE AIR, PRESSING DOWN ON HER SHOULDERS, ON HER LUNGS. THE CANDLE FLICKERED, AND FOR A HEARTBEAT, IT SEEMED LIKE AN INVISIBLE HAND TRACED ALONG HER SPINE.

SHE FORCED HERSELF TO CLIMB, STEP BY AGONIZING STEP, UNTIL SHE REACHED THE FOURTH FLOOR. HER VOICE WAS STRONGER NOW, DESPERATE. "ARE YOU NEAR?"

THE FLAME QUIVERED AS IF ANSWERING HER. SHE DIDN'T DARE LIFT THE CLOTH TO SEE; THE DARKNESS BEHIND HER BLINDFOLD WAS ALREADY THICK ENOUGH, POOLING WITH A SENSATION OF SOMETHING STARING BACK AT HER. SHE CLIMBED, EVERY STEP FEELING AS IF IT STRETCHED HER FURTHER FROM THE WORLD SHE KNEW, AS IF REALITY ITSELF WAS THINNING AROUND HER.

THE FIFTH FLOOR BROUGHT A CHILL SO INTENSE THAT HER SKIN PRICKLED, EVERY NERVE FLARING IN PROTEST. SHE PRESSED HER LEFT HAND TO THE WALL AND SPOKE SOFTLY, "I GIVE THIS OFFERING FOR PASSAGE." SHE FELT HERSELF BREATHE IN THE DAMP AIR, ITS COLD TOUCH STICKING TO HER THROAT, TO HER LUNGS, BUT SHE KEPT MOVING, THE STAIRS WINDING ON AND ON.

FINALLY, THE SIXTH FLOOR. HER FOOT LANDED ON THE STEP, AND SOMETHING SHIFTED—THE AIR DROPPED, CHILLING HER BLOOD. SHE PAUSED, EVERY INSTINCT SCREAMING TO TURN AND RUN, TO ABANDON THIS GAME SHE COULD BARELY BELIEVE SHE'D STARTED. BUT THEN SHE HEARD IT.

A SLOW, DRAGGING SHUFFLE, SO CLOSE SHE COULD ALMOST FEEL IT STIRRING THE AIR BY HER CHEEK. A PRESENCE PRESSED AGAINST HER LIKE A SHADOW WITH WEIGHT, SETTLING INTO THE EMPTY SPACES AROUND HER, FILLING THEM WITH DREAD.

IT WAS HERE.

THE ONE WHO WALKS.

A WHISPER, LOW AND CRACKED, SLIPPED INTO HER EAR LIKE A KNIFE CARVING HER NAME, SYLLABLE BY SYLLABLE. SHE FROZE, EVERY MUSCLE LOCKED, HER HEART A TERRIFIED DRUM IN HER CHEST.

ASK, IT SEEMED TO SAY.

HER MIND WENT BLANK. SHE HAD COME HERE FOR ANSWERS, FOR SOMETHING SHE COULDN'T EVEN ARTICULATE ANYMORE. SHE SWALLOWED AND FORCED HERSELF TO SPEAK. "WHERE DID SHE GO?" THE WORDS ESCAPED HER LIPS IN A TREMBLING WHISPER, HANGING IN THE AIR.

FOR A HEARTBEAT, THE PRESENCE STILLED. THEN, IT SPOKE, A VOICE THAT SOUNDED LIKE THE WEIGHT OF ANCIENT WOOD AND STONE AND ALL THINGS THAT HAD FORGOTTEN LIGHT.

"SHE WAITS WHERE YOU CANNOT GO."

A COLD THAT WAS NOT A CHILL, BUT A MEMORY, LIKE THE LAST BREATH OF A WINTER WIND, SETTLED OVER HER, AND HER CANDLE FLICKERED. SHE WAITED FOR MORE, HER MIND RACING, BUT THE PRESENCE DREW BACK, RECEDING LIKE A SHADOW UNDER A DIMMING LIGHT.

WITHOUT DARING TO LOOK, SHE TURNED, FEELING HER WAY DOWN, STEP BY STEP. THE AIR FELT DIFFERENT NOW, TAINTED, AS IF IT BORE THE RESIDUE OF SOMETHING THAT DIDN'T BELONG TO THIS WORLD. HER HEARTBEAT ECHOED WITH EACH STEP, GROWING LOUDER, FASTER, THE SENSE THAT SOMETHING WAS CLOSE BEHIND HER PRESSING DOWN WITH EVERY FLOOR.

SHE REACHED THE BOTTOM, PULLING THE CLOTH FROM HER EYES AS SHE EXTINGUISHED THE CANDLE. SHE LOOKED DOWN AT THE FIRST STEP, BUT HER LOCKET WAS GONE.

FOR A LONG, PARALYZED MOMENT, SHE SIMPLY STOOD THERE, THE COLDNESS SEEPING INTO HER VEINS. SHE GLANCED BACK AT THE STAIRCASE, ITS SHADOWS THICK AND WATCHFUL, ALMOST...WAITING. SHE KNEW SHE COULDN'T COME BACK HERE, BUT SHE ALSO KNEW THAT SHE WOULDN'T NEED TO.

IN THE FOLLOWING DAYS, THE PRESENCE WOULD FIND HER ANYWAY—IN HER HOME, IN HER DREAMS, IN EVERY QUIET CORNER SHE ONCE FOUND SOLACE IN. IT WOULD BE THERE, WATCHING, WAITING, AS IT ALWAYS HAD.

AND EVERY NOW AND THEN, IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT, SHE WOULD HEAR HER OWN NAME WHISPERED BACK TO HER, AS IF ECHOING ACROSS AN ENDLESS STAIRWELL, FROM A PLACE SHE COULD NEVER RETURN.

---

## THE MIRROR MASK

I FOUND THE MASK IN THE BASEMENT OF AN OLD THRIFT STORE ON THE CORNER OF MARROW AND ELM, HIDDEN IN A DUST-RIDDEN BOX BEHIND A CRACKED MIRROR. THE MASK'S SURFACE WAS SMOOTH, MADE OF SOME POLISHED METAL THAT SEEMED TO CAPTURE LIGHT AND SHADOWS AT THE SAME TIME. ITS SURFACE WAS SEAMLESS, GLEAMING SILVER THAT ALMOST SEEMED ALIVE, SHIFTING WITH STRANGE, DARK REFLECTIONS AS I HELD IT UP TO THE DIM LIGHT. IT WAS A MASK WITHOUT EYE HOLES, NOSE BRIDGE, OR MOUTH. A PERFECT, HAUNTING MIRROR THAT REFLECTED ONLY THE FAINTEST IMAGE BACK AT ME.

WHEN I ASKED THE SHOPKEEPER ABOUT IT, HE STIFFENED, GLANCING AT IT WITH BARELY VEILED FEAR. "THAT'S...WELL, THAT MASK," HE MUTTERED, AVERTING HIS GAZE. "THEY SAY IT SHOWS YOU THINGS. BUT YOU DON'T WANT TO SEE WHAT IT HAS TO SHOW."

THE WORDS DIDN'T MATTER. I TOOK IT ANYWAY. I DIDN'T KNOW WHY, BUT SOMETHING ABOUT THE MASK — ITS COLD, UNYIELDING BEAUTY, THE GLINT OF METAL WITH ITS SECRETS FOLDED INSIDE — SEEMED TO CALL TO ME.

\*\*\*

THAT NIGHT, I BROUGHT IT HOME, SETTING IT ON THE MANTLE IN MY DIMLY LIT ROOM. THE MASK SEEMED ALIVE IN THE DARK, GLINTING WHENEVER I MOVED, CASTING STRANGE SHADOWS. IT UNSETTLED ME. THAT POLISHED METAL REFLECTED ME, BUT IMPERFECTLY, DISTORTING MY FEATURES IN WAYS THAT FELT... WRONG. IT STRETCHED MY FACE, DARKENED MY EYES. AND THE SHADOWS BEHIND ME TWISTED INTO STRANGE SHAPES WHEN I GLANCED AWAY, FILLING THE EMPTY CORNERS OF MY ROOM.

AS MIDNIGHT STRUCK, SOMETHING ABOUT THE AIR CHANGED — A HEAVY, SUFFOCATING SILENCE THAT PRESSED DOWN, THICK AND UNFORGIVING. I COULDN'T EXPLAIN IT, BUT I FELT THE URGE TO WEAR IT. DRAWN TO IT BY SOME INEXPLICABLE COMPULSION, I REACHED FOR THE MASK WITH TREMBLING HANDS, AND BEFORE I COULD SECOND-GUESS MYSELF, I PLACED IT OVER MY FACE.

THE COLD METAL PRESSED AGAINST MY SKIN, MOLDING TO EVERY CURVE OF MY FACE. AND AS I STARED INTO THE MIRROR BEFORE ME, I SAW NOT MY REFLECTION BUT... *SOMETHING ELSE*.

THE WORLD SHIFTED.

IN THE MIRROR, I SAW A VERSION OF MY ROOM, BUT IT WAS DARKER, FILLED WITH SHADOWS THAT CRAWLED LIKE LIVING THINGS. MY REFLECTION STOOD THERE, STILL AND RIGID, STARING BACK AT ME WITH EYES THAT WEREN'T MINE. THEY WERE WIDE, HOLLOW, GLEAMING WITH A HUNGER THAT MADE MY BLOOD RUN COLD. THE MASK DIDN'T REFLECT MY FACE — IT SHOWED A WORLD WITHIN, A TWISTED REALITY WHERE THINGS WERE DARKER, QUIETER, TOO STILL.

I TRIED TO PULL THE MASK OFF, BUT IT WOULDN'T BUDGE. MY FINGERS SCRAPED AGAINST THE METAL, AND THE MORE I PULLED, THE TIGHTER IT SEEMED TO GRIP, AS THOUGH IT WERE ALIVE, *CLINGING* TO ME. AND AS I

STRUGGLED, I REALIZED THAT THE REFLECTION WASN'T COPYING ME ANYMORE. NO, IT WAS STARING — STARING WITH AN INTENSITY THAT MADE ME FEEL LIKE IT WAS TRYING TO CONSUME ME, TO PULL ME IN.

THEN IT MOVED.

A SUBTLE TILT OF THE HEAD, A SLOW, DELIBERATE SMILE STRETCHING ACROSS ITS FACE. IT LIFTED A HAND, MIRRORING MINE, BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING IN THE WAY IT MOVED — SOMETHING ALIEN, AS IF IT WERE LEARNING, MIMICKING. MY BREATH QUICKENED, AND I TRIED AGAIN TO PRY THE MASK AWAY. PANIC CLAWED AT ME AS THE REFLECTION'S SMILE WIDENED, EXPOSING TEETH FAR TOO SHARP, TOO WHITE, TOO MANY.

“PLEASE...” I WHISPERED, MY OWN VOICE SOUNDING DISTANT, MUFFLED WITHIN THE COLD EMBRACE OF THE MASK.

THE REFLECTION LAUGHED. IT WAS A LOW, QUIET SOUND, HOLLOW AND TWISTED, FILLING MY EARS WITH A WRONGNESS I COULD FEEL DEEP IN MY BONES. THE LAUGHTER ECHOED, REVERBERATING AS THE REFLECTION'S EYES BORE INTO MINE. IT RAISED A FINGER TO ITS LIPS — A WARNING, OR PERHAPS A TAUNT. AND THEN IT MOVED CLOSER, ONE STEP AT A TIME, SLOWLY, DELIBERATELY, EACH MOVEMENT SENDING A SHIVER THROUGH ME.

I FELT IT — A PRESENCE, DRAWING CLOSER, PRESSING AGAINST THE THIN VEIL OF GLASS BETWEEN US. ITS FINGERS CURLED, TAPPING AGAINST THE INSIDE OF THE MIRROR, NAILS SCRAPING WITH A SOUND THAT GRATED AGAINST MY MIND. I STUMBLED BACK, BUT THE MASK PULLED TIGHTER, AND I FELT A STRANGE, SICKENING PULL AS IF IT WERE TRYING TO DRAG ME CLOSER, TO MERGE ME WITH THE IMAGE ON THE OTHER SIDE.

I FOUGHT IT, CLAWING AT THE METAL, FEELING MY OWN NAILS BREAK AGAINST THE HARD, UNYIELDING SURFACE. MY HANDS BLED, SMEARING CRIMSON STREAKS ACROSS THE MASK, BUT STILL, IT HELD, BINDING ME IN PLACE. THE FIGURE'S EYES WERE ON ME, WATCHING, DEVOURING, ITS SMILE STRETCHING WIDER, THE MOUTH OPENING TO REVEAL A DARKNESS SO DEEP I FELT IT REACH INTO MY SOUL.

AND THEN, IN THE REFLECTION, I SAW MYSELF — OR WHAT HAD ONCE BEEN ME. PALE, TREMBLING, WITH HOLLOW, LIFELESS EYES. I LOOKED AS THOUGH I HAD BEEN DRAINED, EMPTY, A HUSK LEFT BEHIND. AND I UNDERSTOOD: THE MASK DIDN'T MERELY REFLECT. IT TOOK.

THE THING IN THE MIRROR RAISED ITS HAND, FINGERS SPLAYED AS THOUGH REACHING FOR MINE. I FELT ITS COLD, SLICK TOUCH SLIDE OVER MY OWN, A GRIP THAT FELT LIKE IRON. I SCREAMED, BUT NO SOUND CAME OUT. MY VISION BLURRED, DARKENED, AND THE LAST THING I SAW WAS THE FIGURE PULLING ME FORWARD, DRAGGING ME INTO THE DEPTHS OF THE MIRROR, MY OWN FACE TWISTED IN HORROR AS THE GLASS SWALLOWED ME WHOLE.

\*\*\*

WHEN I WOKE, I WAS STARING AT MY ROOM — BUT IT WASN'T MINE. EVERYTHING FELT DISTANT, MUTED, LIKE LOOKING THROUGH FOGGED GLASS. MY REFLECTION — NO, *IT* — WAS STANDING OUTSIDE THE MIRROR, LOOKING DOWN AT ME WITH THAT SAME TWISTED SMILE. I REACHED OUT, POUNDING AGAINST THE GLASS, BUT MY HANDS PASSED THROUGH IT AS THOUGH I NO LONGER EXISTED, AS IF I WERE NOTHING MORE THAN A SHADOW.

IT — THE THING THAT HAD STOLEN MY FACE, MY VOICE, MY BODY — LEANED CLOSE, WHISPERING SOFTLY AGAINST THE COLD GLASS. “THANK YOU,” IT MURMURED, AND I SAW MY OWN LIPS MOVE, FORMING WORDS I HADN’T SPOKEN. “I’LL TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOUR LIFE.”

IT TURNED, LEAVING ME TRAPPED WITHIN THE MIRROR, HELPLESS AS IT WALKED AWAY, EACH STEP STEALING ME FURTHER FROM THE WORLD I’D KNOWN. I WATCHED, POWERLESS, AS IT DISAPPEARED INTO MY LIFE, MY HOME, LEAVING ME IN THE DARKNESS, A PRISONER OF THE MASK.

NOW, I AM HERE, BOUND WITHIN THE MIRROR, MY VOICE LOST, MY BODY STOLEN. AND IN THE DARK SILENCE, I WAIT, WHISPERING, CALLING, PRAYING FOR THE DAY SOMEONE ELSE FINDS THE MASK, HOPING THEY’LL TAKE IT FROM ME AND SET ME FREE.

BUT I KNOW, DEEP DOWN, THAT I AM DOOMED TO WAIT FOREVER.

THIS MASK WAS NEVER MEANT TO BE DISCARDED.

IT WAS MEANT TO BE WORN.

---

## VOICES IN THE DARK

THE HOUSE STOOD ALONE ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF TOWN, AN OLD, FORGOTTEN STRUCTURE GNAWED BY DECADES OF ROT AND NEGLECT. THE TOWNSPEOPLE CALLED IT THE *DARK HOUSE*. BUILT FOR REASONS LONG LOST TO MEMORY, IT WAS NOW A RUIN, ITS WALLS SWOLLEN WITH MOLD, ITS WINDOWS BROKEN AND BLACK. FOR YEARS, NO ONE HAD DARED ENTER IT.

BUT THIS NIGHT WAS DIFFERENT.

CAROLINE HADN'T MEANT TO COME HERE. HER CAR HAD DIED ON THE ROAD, AND AFTER AN HOUR OF FRUITLESS CALLS AND A DEAD BATTERY, THE STORM DESCENDED WITH FIERCE SHEETS OF RAIN AND ROLLING THUNDER. SHE'D RUN, CLUTCHING HER COAT AROUND HER SHOULDERS, FEET SLAPPING AGAINST WET GRAVEL. THE HOUSE LOOMED IN THE DISTANCE, RISING LIKE A SILHOUETTE CUT FROM THE STORM. SO, SHE ENTERED THE DARK HOUSE — OR RATHER, SHE HAD NO OTHER CHOICE.

THE AIR INSIDE WAS THICK, HEAVY WITH THE SMELL OF DAMP WOOD AND STALE ROT. SHADOWS CLUNG TO THE CORNERS, STRETCHING OUT TO GREET HER AS SHE STEPPED INTO THE ENTRYWAY. EVERY FLOORBOARD CREAKED UNDERFOOT, EACH SOUND SWALLOWED BY THE OPPRESSIVE SILENCE THAT LINGERED AFTER THE RAIN.

A LONG, NARROW HALLWAY STRETCHED BEFORE HER, LINED WITH PEELING WALLPAPER AND DUST-COVERED FRAMES. SHE GLANCED AT THE PICTURES, TOO BLURRED AND FADED TO MAKE OUT. ONLY THEIR EMPTY, UNBLINKING EYES REMAINED VISIBLE. SHE FORCED HERSELF TO LOOK AWAY.

AS SHE VENTURED DEEPER, THE STORM SEEMED TO FADE, REPLACED BY A DEAFENING QUIET. THE ONLY SOUND WAS THE ECHO OF HER OWN FOOTSTEPS. SHE STOPPED. HELD HER BREATH.

NOTHING.

YET SOMETHING FELT WRONG. THE SILENCE WAS *TOO* QUIET, UNNATURAL, AS IF THE HOUSE ITSELF WERE HOLDING ITS BREATH.

THEN, SHE HEARD IT. A FAINT, A WHISPER, ALMOST INAUDIBLE, SLIPPING THROUGH THE WALLS. SHE TURNED QUICKLY, EYES SCANNING THE DARK. "HELLO?" SHE CALLED, HER VOICE A TINY, TREMBLING THING SWALLOWED BY THE DARKNESS.

NO ANSWER. SHE SHOOK HER HEAD, FEELING FOOLISH. BUT THERE IT WAS AGAIN — A VOICE, LOW AND WAVERING, LIKE SOMEONE TRYING TO SPEAK FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF A WALL. SHE TOOK A STEP FORWARD, EARS STRAINING, HER HEART POUNDING.

"CAROLINE..."

SHE FROZE. THE WHISPER HAD SPOKEN HER NAME.

A CHILL CRAWLED UP HER SPINE, LEAVING A TRAIL OF ICY SWEAT. SHE WAS CERTAIN THERE WAS NO ONE HERE. THE AIR HAD THAT STALE, UNDISTURBED WEIGHT OF A PLACE FORGOTTEN, UNTOUCHED BY ANYTHING LIVING. SHE TRIED TO CONVINCE HERSELF THAT IT WAS THE WIND, PERHAPS THE OLD HOUSE SETTLING. BUT AS SHE MOVED FURTHER, THE WHISPERS GREW LOUDER, EACH WORD DRAGGING AGAINST HER EARS LIKE RUSTED NAILS.

"CAROLINE..." THE VOICE CALLED AGAIN, GENTLE, SOFT, ALMOST COAXING. "COME CLOSER..."

HER HANDS SHOOK, BUT SOMETHING ABOUT THAT VOICE, SOMETHING SHE COULD NOT EXPLAIN, NOR UNDERSTAND, LURED HER FORWARD. IT FELT FAMILIAR, TUGGING AT A DISTANT MEMORY, LIKE A SONG SHE HAD HEARD LONG AGO BUT COULDN'T QUITE REMEMBER. SHE MOVED AS IF UNDER A SPELL, EACH STEP SLOWER, HEAVIER, AS SHE APPROACHED THE FAR END OF THE HALL.

THE VOICE LED HER TO A DOOR, HALF-ROTTED, HANGING ON RUSTY HINGES. SHE PUSHED IT OPEN. THE ROOM BEYOND WAS SMALL, LINED WITH DARK WOOD PANELS THAT GLEAMED IN THE DIM LIGHT. IN THE

CENTER WAS A CHAIR, FACING AWAY FROM HER, AND DRAPED ACROSS ITS BACK WAS A DELICATE, THIN VEIL OF COBWEBS THAT SEEMED TO SHIMMER. SHE HAD THE STRANGE FEELING THAT SHE WAS INTRUDING ON SOMETHING PRIVATE, SOMETHING THAT HAD BEEN WAITING IN STILLNESS, QUIET AND FORGOTTEN.

AND THEN, FROM BEHIND THE CHAIR, THE WHISPER CAME AGAIN, CLOSER THIS TIME, THREADING THROUGH THE AIR LIKE A SHIVER. "CAROLINE...PLEASE, SIT."

SHE DIDN'T WANT TO OBEY. EVERY INSTINCT SCREAMED FOR HER TO TURN, TO RUN, TO GET AWAY FROM THIS PLACE. BUT SHE WAS DRAWN, LIKE A MOTH TO FLAME, A BIRD TO GLASS, AND SHE STEPPED FORWARD.

AS SHE CIRCLED THE CHAIR, HER HEART HAMMERING, SHE SAW THE SOURCE OF THE VOICE. THERE, SLUMPED IN THE SEAT, WAS A FIGURE — SKELETAL, WITH SKIN STRETCHED THIN OVER BONE, HAIR FALLING IN BRITTLE STRANDS DOWN ITS SHOULDERS. ITS EYES WERE CLOSED, BUT ITS MOUTH WAS OPEN IN A SLACK, SILENT SCREAM.

CAROLINE STUMBLED BACK, HER BREATH CAUGHT IN HER THROAT. BUT THE FIGURE'S EYES SNAPPED OPEN, HOLLOW, DARK PITS THAT SEEMED TO SINK INTO INFINITY. AND THEN, A VOICE — ITS VOICE — REACHED INTO HER MIND, THOUGH ITS LIPS NEVER MOVED.

"SIT WITH ME, CAROLINE," IT WHISPERED, ITS VOICE SOFT YET PIERCING, AN INVITATION WRAPPED IN THE ROT OF THE GRAVE.

SHE FOUND HERSELF UNABLE TO LOOK AWAY. THE FIGURE'S EYES HELD HER, PULLING HER DEEPER, SHOWING HER VISIONS THAT SLIPPED THROUGH HER MIND LIKE SMOKE. SHE SAW A WOMAN, YOUNG AND BEAUTIFUL, SITTING IN THE SAME CHAIR, HER FACE TWISTED IN HORROR AS SHADOWS CURLED AROUND HER, WHISPERING SECRETS, DARK PROMISES.

THE SCENE CHANGED, AND CAROLINE WATCHED AS THE WOMAN BEGAN TO AGE, HER SKIN WITHERING, HER HAIR GRAYING, UNTIL SHE WAS NOTHING MORE THAN THE SAME SKELETAL FIGURE THAT NOW SAT BEFORE HER.

“WHY...WHY AM I HERE?” CAROLINE CHOKED OUT, HER VOICE A THIN, RAGGED WHISPER.

THE FIGURE’S EYES GLISTENED WITH SOMETHING LIKE AMUSEMENT, OR PITY. “YOU WERE CALLED,” IT REPLIED, ITS VOICE FILLING THE ROOM, RISING FROM THE SHADOWS. “I CALLED TO YOU... BECAUSE YOU HEARD ME.”

THE SHADOWS THICKENED, SWIRLING AROUND HER ANKLES, COLD AS ICE. SHE TRIED TO STEP BACK, BUT HER LEGS FELT HEAVY, AS IF ROOTED TO THE FLOOR. THE VOICE WOUND AROUND HER MIND, SLIPPING INTO THE CREVICES OF HER THOUGHTS, FILLING EVERY DARK CORNER. SHE REALIZED, WITH MOUNTING DREAD, THAT SHE HAD NOT JUST HEARD THE VOICE. IT HAD *HEARD HER*, TOO. KNOWN HER. KNOWN HER SECRETS, HER FEARS, THE MEMORIES SHE TRIED TO FORGET.

“SIT WITH ME, CAROLINE,” THE FIGURE URGED AGAIN, ITS WORDS SLIDING LIKE COLD FINGERS ACROSS HER SKIN.

SHE FOUGHT THE PULL, EVERY MUSCLE STRAINING AGAINST THE INVISIBLE CHAINS THAT BOUND HER. “NO,” SHE MANAGED, THE WORD SMALL, FEEBLE, IN THE FACE OF THE VAST, ENDLESS DARKNESS THAT SEEMED TO PRESS IN FROM EVERY DIRECTION.

BUT THE VOICE ONLY LAUGHED, LOW AND CRUEL. “YOU CANNOT LEAVE. YOU *BELONG* TO THE DARK NOW. YOU *HEAR* IT, DON’T YOU?”

AND SHE DID. WITH EACH PASSING SECOND, THE VOICES GREW LOUDER, LAYERING OVER ONE ANOTHER, WHISPERING THINGS SHE COULD NOT UNDERSTAND, A CACOPHONY OF SECRETS MEANT FOR THE DEAD. HER HEAD THROBBED, THE WORDS DRILLING INTO HER MIND, EACH ONE DRAGGING HER DEEPER INTO THE DARKNESS.

THE FIGURE ROSE SLOWLY, CREAKING LIKE AN ANCIENT, FORGOTTEN DOOR. IT TOOK HER HAND, ITS TOUCH COLD AND DRY AS DUST, AND LED HER TO THE CHAIR. SHE TRIED TO RESIST, BUT HER BODY BETRAYED HER, MOVING IN SLOW, SHUFFLING STEPS UNTIL SHE SANK INTO THE SEAT. THE SHADOWS CURLED AROUND HER, THEIR WHISPERS FILLING HER EARS, HER MIND, HER SOUL.

THE LAST THING SHE SAW WAS THE FIGURE, BENDING CLOSE, ITS HOLLOW EYES SHINING WITH A TWISTED SATISFACTION. IT PLACED A FINGER TO ITS LIPS, A SILENT PROMISE OF SECRETS NEVER TO BE SPOKEN.

THE ROOM FADED, SLIPPING INTO AN ETERNAL DARKNESS, AND HER OWN VOICE JOINED THE OTHERS, A FAINT, DESPERATE WHISPER LOST IN THE ENDLESS, SUFFOCATING DARK.

\*\*\*

DAYS PASSED BEFORE HER CAR WAS FOUND, ABANDONED ON THE ROAD. BUT THE DARK HOUSE REMAINED UNTOUCHED, ITS WALLS HOLDING SECRETS OLDER THAN MEMORY.

AND ON QUIET NIGHTS, IF ONE DARED APPROACH, THEY MIGHT HEAR THE FAINTEST WHISPER — A SINGLE VOICE, CALLING, WAITING, FOR SOMEONE TO HEAR.

AND CAROLINE'S VOICE, LOST IN THE SHADOWS, JOINED THE CHORUS OF THE FORGOTTEN.

---

# THE DOLL MAKER'S CALL

IT WAS A NIGHT CHOKED IN FOG, THICK AND DAMP, PRESSING AGAINST LYDIA'S WINDOWS LIKE IT WANTED IN. THE SMALL CLOCK BY HER BED TICKED SOFTLY, DRAGGING THE TIME TO MIDNIGHT, AND HER ROOM HELD THAT PECULIAR, STILL AIR THAT ONLY COMES WITH HOURS MEANT FOR SLEEP. BUT LYDIA HAD DECIDED THAT TONIGHT, SHE WOULD NOT SLEEP.

THE MIRROR SAT AT THE EDGE OF HER BED, COVERED IN A BLACK CLOTH THAT SHE'D STOLEN FROM HER GRANDMOTHER'S SEWING STASH. NEXT TO IT, A SMALL, TATTERED DOLL WITH MISMATCHED BUTTON EYES SLOUCHED IN THE GLOOM, WAITING PATIENTLY.

LYDIA REMEMBERED THE TALES HER BROTHER HAD TOLD HER ABOUT THE DOLL MAKER. HE SPOKE OF A DARK FIGURE, DRESSED IN BLACK RAGS AND A CROOKED SMILE, WHO COULD BE SUMMONED TO ANSWER SECRETS HIDDEN IN SHADOWS. "YOU CAN ONLY ASK HIM ONE QUESTION," HER BROTHER HAD WHISPERED TO HER IN THE COLD DIMNESS OF THEIR BASEMENT ONE NIGHT. "BUT IF YOU DON'T LIKE HIS ANSWER, YOU BETTER COVER THAT MIRROR FAST. REAL FAST."

LYDIA WAS CURIOUS ENOUGH TO IGNORE HIS WARNING. AFTER ALL, WHAT WAS THERE TO FEAR IN HER OWN ROOM?

SHE GLANCED AT THE DOLL AGAIN, A CRUDE LITTLE THING SHE'D STITCHED TOGETHER FROM HER MOTHER'S OLD SEWING SCRAPS. IT STARED BACK, SILENT AND VACANT. SHE STEADIED HER BREATH, LIT THE RED CANDLE, AND DREW A CHALK CIRCLE AROUND HERSELF AS THE INSTRUCTIONS SAID, FEELING THE ABSURDITY OF IT ALL SETTLE INTO HER BONES.

“DOLL MAKER, DOLL MAKER, I SEEK YOUR CREATIONS, HEED MY CALL TONIGHT,” SHE WHISPERED, AS HER HEART STAMMERED AGAINST HER CHEST. THE ROOM FELL INTO A HEAVY SILENCE, AS IF ALL THE WORLD WERE LISTENING, WAITING. HER BREATH PUFFED SOFTLY AGAINST THE COLD AIR AS SHE SLOWLY PEELED THE CLOTH FROM THE MIRROR.

NOTHING HAPPENED AT FIRST, AND LYDIA EXHALED, RELIEF RISING IN HER CHEST. THIS WAS JUST ANOTHER SILLY GAME, SOMETHING TO LAUGH AT TOMORROW. BUT THEN HER REFLECTION BEGAN TO CHANGE.

IN THE MIRROR, HER EYES GREW DARKER, BOTTOMLESS, ABSORBING THE FEEBLE LIGHT OF THE CANDLE UNTIL THEY LOOKED LIKE TWO SMUDGES OF INK ON HER FACE. THE CORNERS OF HER MOUTH TWISTED EVER SO SLIGHTLY UPWARD, A TOO-WIDE GRIN SPREADING ACROSS HER FACE. BUT THAT WASN'T HER SMILE. THAT WASN'T HER.

A FIGURE MOVED IN THE BACKGROUND OF THE REFLECTION. SHE STIFFENED. THERE WAS NO ONE ELSE IN THE ROOM.

THE FIGURE SHIFTED CLOSER. IN THE SHADOWED REFLECTION, SHE COULD MAKE OUT THE FAINT OUTLINE OF SOMEONE STANDING BEHIND HER — OR RATHER, SOMETHING. IT WORE A THIN SMILE, FAR TOO WIDE, STRETCHED AND CURVING UPWARD LIKE IT HAD BEEN DRAWN ON. SHROUDED IN TATTERED CLOTH, IT LOOMED, ITS HEAD TILTING WITH A SLOW, UNHURRIED CURIOSITY.

LYDIA DARED NOT MOVE. HER BREATH FELT TRAPPED INSIDE HER LUNGS AS HER REFLECTION TURNED TO FACE HER. *NOT HER*, BUT THE THING THAT WORE HER FACE, ITS SMILE MOCKING HER FEAR.

“DOLL MAKER,” SHE WHISPERED, HER VOICE TREMBLING. HER REFLECTION’S EYES GLINTED DARKLY. “WHAT... WHAT SECRETS DO YOU HAVE FOR ME?”

FOR A MOMENT, THERE WAS SILENCE. THEN, THE FIGURE'S VOICE, HOARSE AND THIN, CRACKLED THROUGH HER REFLECTION. IT WAS A SOUND THAT SCRATCHED AT HER MIND, FRAYING HER NERVES WITH EACH RAGGED WORD.

"I HAVE MANY CREATIONS," IT RASPED. "EACH MORE PERFECT THAN THE LAST. EACH ONE MADE FROM PIECES... SO MANY LOVELY PIECES."

THE REFLECTION'S HANDS LIFTED, FINGERS TWISTING AND WRITHING, THIN AS TWINE AND BLACKENED AT THE TIPS. THEY STRETCHED TOWARD HER AS IF REACHING OUT OF THE GLASS ITSELF. "WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE THEM?" IT ASKED, THE VOICE DRIPPING WITH SICKLY-SWEET ALLURE.

LYDIA'S INSTINCT TOLD HER TO COVER THE MIRROR, BUT SOMETHING HELD HER IN PLACE. AN UNNATURAL FASCINATION GLUED HER EYES TO THE FIGURE, TO THE THING INSIDE THE MIRROR THAT FELT SO MUCH MORE REAL THAN HER OWN FLESH AND BLOOD. SHE MANAGED A NOD, AND THE DOLL MAKER'S SMILE BROADENED UNTIL IT LOOKED AS IF HIS FACE WOULD SPLIT IN TWO.

THE REFLECTION'S HAND TWITCHED, AND SUDDENLY, THE DOLL AT HER SIDE BEGAN TO MOVE. SHE GASPED AS IT LIFTED ITS HEAD, ITS BLANK BUTTON EYES SHIFTING TOWARD HER, GLOSSY AND DARK. THE DOLL'S LIMBS TWITCHED AND JERKED, AND A LOW, SCRAPING NOISE FILLED THE ROOM AS IT DRAGGED ITSELF ACROSS THE FLOOR TOWARD HER.

"YOU SEE," THE DOLL MAKER'S VOICE CROONED, "EVERYTHING IN THIS WORLD HAS A PURPOSE. EVEN THOSE THINGS LEFT BEHIND... EVEN THOSE THINGS FORGOTTEN." HIS WORDS DRIPPED WITH AN ANCIENT, HORRIBLE WISDOM. "LOOK CLOSELY, MY DEAR, AND YOU SHALL SEE THE PURPOSE OF THOSE THAT CAME BEFORE YOU."

THE CANDLE'S LIGHT FLICKERED, CASTING STRANGE, MOVING SHADOWS ACROSS THE ROOM. SLOWLY, SHE NOTICED MORE DOLLS EMERGING FROM THE CORNERS, CRAWLING, THEIR LIMBS JERKING AND TWISTING AS IF GUIDED BY UNSEEN STRINGS. SHE RECOGNIZED THEM: ONE HELD A PIECE OF CLOTH FROM HER MOTHER'S FAVORITE DRESS, ANOTHER WORE HER BROTHER'S OLD SHIRT. EACH DOLL BORE FRAGMENTS OF HER LIFE, SMALL PIECES SHE HAD THOUGHT LOST OR ABANDONED OVER THE YEARS.

THE DOLL MAKER LAUGHED, A WET, RATTLING SOUND THAT ECHOED THROUGH THE ROOM. "I AM THE KEEPER OF ALL THINGS FORGOTTEN, THE MAKER OF MEMORIES DISCARDED AND DREAMS LOST." HIS WORDS CRAWLED UNDER HER SKIN, LEAVING A DEEP, ABIDING CHILL.

THE DOLLS CREPT CLOSER, THEIR BUTTON EYES TRAINED ON HER WITH AN EERIE INTENSITY. LYDIA'S HAND SHOOK AS SHE REACHED FOR THE CLOTH, DESPERATE TO COVER THE MIRROR, TO END THIS NIGHTMARE. BUT BEFORE SHE COULD MOVE, HER REFLECTION'S VOICE BROKE THROUGH AGAIN.

"LEAVING SO SOON?" IT ASKED, WITH THAT GHASTLY GRIN. "BUT YOU HAVEN'T EVEN MET *YOURSELF* YET."

WITH THOSE WORDS, HER OWN FACE BEGAN TO SHIFT, TWISTING AND CONTORTING. HER SKIN GREW MOTTLED, HER EYES SUNKEN AND HOLLOW, HER MOUTH STRETCHED INTO A SILENT SCREAM. IT WAS LIKE WATCHING HERSELF DECAY, PIECE BY PIECE, LAYER BY LAYER, UNTIL THERE WAS NOTHING LEFT BUT A LIFELESS, EMPTY SHELL.

AND THEN SHE FELT IT: A PULL, A SLOW TUGGING AT HER CHEST, AS IF INVISIBLE THREADS WERE WRAPPING AROUND HER HEART, BINDING HER, TETHERING HER TO THE REFLECTION. SHE TRIED TO SCREAM, BUT NO SOUND ESCAPED HER LIPS.

“YOU WILL MAKE A FINE ADDITION TO MY COLLECTION,” THE DOLL MAKER WHISPERED, HIS HAND REACHING THROUGH THE GLASS. IT FELT COLD AND HARD AS IT TOUCHED HER CHEEK, ITS GRIP TIGHTENING AS IT PULLED HER CLOSER, HER FACE INCHES FROM THE TWISTED, GRINNING FIGURE.

IN A FINAL ACT OF DESPERATION, LYDIA REACHED FOR THE CANDLE, TIPPING IT OVER. THE FLAME HISSED AS IT MET THE FLOOR, CASTING THE ROOM INTO DARKNESS. SHE SCRAMBLED TO COVER THE MIRROR, HER BREATH HEAVING, HER HEART POUNDING. THE ROOM WAS SILENT, DEATHLY SILENT.

WHEN SHE FINALLY DARED TO OPEN HER EYES, SHE WAS ALONE. THE MIRROR STOOD BEFORE HER, STILL COVERED, AND THE DOLLS LAY SCATTERED ON THE FLOOR, LIMP AND LIFELESS.

BUT AS SHE STOOD TO LEAVE, A FAINT WHISPER BRUSHED AGAINST HER EAR. SHE TURNED SLOWLY, STARING AT THE MIRROR.

FROM BENEATH THE CLOTH, HER OWN VOICE MURMURED BACK AT HER, SOFT AND DISTANT, AS THOUGH IT WERE TRAPPED INSIDE.

“DO YOU LIKE YOUR NEW HOME, LYDIA?”

THE VOICE LAUGHED, LOW AND MOCKING. SHE STEPPED BACK, HER HEART SINKING, AND FOR THE FIRST TIME, SHE FELT THE COLD, CREEPING REALIZATION SETTLE IN HER BONES.

SHE WAS TRAPPED. TRAPPED IN THE DOLL MAKER’S REFLECTION, WITH ONLY HER DOLLS TO KEEP HER COMPANY.