Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

Chapter 1

The house was perfect. Pristinely maintained, it was a turn-of-the-century beauty with a wraparound porch, huge windows on the sides and front, and a sweeping gabled roof. The realtor had said that the roof was brand new, the HVAC top of the line, and the foundation had been repaired about a year ago. Even the vibrant, emerald paint was fresh, along with the white window frames. It sat on an *entire acre of land*, and old growth forest sat mere yards away.

So when the price was a cool hundred grand below other houses in the area, Lizzie Stewart knew something had to be wrong.

"Has there ever been termite damage?" she asked the realtor, who swept her long, black hair away from her heart-shaped face. Her gray pin-striped suit hugged her generous curves a little too tightly to be professional.

"No." The realtor's—Victoria's—hair swished as she shook her head.

"Mold? An old house like this, there has to have been mold."

"Never. The air is considerably dry around here, and it has stayed in the same family. It's only changed owners twice."

Lizzie frowned, but her heart beat faster. She ran a hand along the mahogany stair handrail.

This could be perfect.

"There has to be something wrong with it," Lizzie accused the realtor as if she was personally responsible for the house's upkeep.

"What I think my wife is trying to say is that it is quite odd for a house this nice to be at such a low price point," Michael Stewart said, as he slipped a hand around Lizzie's shoulders.

But Lizzie shrugged him off.

You don't get to pretend that we're normal.

Victoria's eyes slid sideways, and Lizzie would forever regret that she didn't listen to the voice inside her telling her to take note of that. How liars could never look someone in the eye. Poor ones, at least.

"Well, it's actually a matter of the owners, not the house itself. They want to sell as soon as possible. There's some legal wrangling going on, and they're getting up in years. They would like to retire and would rather have the liquid assets. But let me show you the house, and you can see for yourself its excellent condition."

For the first time in a year, Lizzie felt…hope. Hope, however delicate, was a ferocious thing. She almost didn't even want to hope that the house was as perfect as it seemed to be. At 3,000 square feet, it would feel like a mansion compared to their cramped, two-bedroom duplex in the city, but reasonable enough that cleaning it wouldn't consume their lives.

They started at the oak doorway, where the sunlight filtered through the stained glass. It had a traditional layout, with a small hallway that led to a formal dining area on the right and what was once a formal dining area had been converted into an office on the left. Lizzie's high heels clicked against the tiger-striped hardwood floors as they entered the living room.

Lizzie tried to keep her expression as neutral as possible, but she nearly gasped. Floor-to-ceiling windows let the golden afternoon sunlight, illuminating the winding staircase,

crown molding, and lofted ceiling. She inhaled, and the house smelled like a mix of citrus furniture polish, beeswax, and that leathery scent that old houses had that she loved so much.

The kitchen was entirely upgraded with stainless steel appliances, cherrywood cabinets, and marble countertops, and it sat parallel to the living area, separated by a small bar. The master bedroom was enormous, with a small lofted ceiling as well, and two full closets. Upstairs, there were three bedrooms, as well as a small entertainment area, so both Lizzie and Michael could have their own home office, plus a room left over for visiting company.

Outside, the backyard sprawled, with mature trees and a retaining wall, so that Lizzie could have different levels of gardening if she wanted.

"There's enough room to build a pool if you want," said Victoria.

"We don't *want* a pool," replied Lizzie, throwing a dark look to Michael. "Ever again."

Poor Victoria. It wasn't *her* fault her husband was negligent; it wasn't *her* fault what happened on the day of Michael's book party.

Memories threatened to floor Lizzie, but she pushed them back.

I'm allowed to be happy. I'm allowed to want this house.

All Lizzie wanted at that very moment was to start over. It wasn't about the house. It was what the house represented. It was half an hour from the city, away from reminders of Noah at every turn, away from memories that made life excruciating, away from every single aspect of her life from *before*. Before "What Happened."

The house was even *green*; new life, new beginnings. And that was exactly what Lizzie wanted. A new life. A new start.

And if that new start just happened to be the house of her dreams, then so much the better.

Michael could see how much Lizzie wanted the house. She had no poker face, even though she tried. It was strange, seeing how much his wife desired the house. Michael felt a brief flash of jealousy at the house, that it could evoke such desire from his wife, desire that had been denied him for a very long time. Before Noah…

Michael swallowed the lump in his throat. He actually hated the house. He knew how difficult old houses could be, how they looked nice on the outside, but how they always brought problems. He preferred something modern, something brand spanking new, everything new. If they wanted a new start, then they should move to a house that was built with modern construction standards.

Still. Maybe it was the way Victoria talked about the house, or the way her lips moved, or how her dark brown eyes lit up when she mentioned its features, but the house didn't seem half bad when she showed it.

Damn, she's good at her job.

Michael had walked in already thinking it was a hard *no*, but by the time they had finished the tour, he was ready to drive to the bank to get a cashier's check and sign some papers. Or maybe…it was just the way Lizzie looked at him, pleading. He could do that for Lizzie. It wouldn't make up for what he did—*careless, stupid, shameful*—but if it brought the slightest bit of happiness to Lizzie, then he could put up with musty smell and creaky floorboards.

[finish this scene—need an unsettling image]

Chapter 2

Michael pushed his laptop screen down with a definitive *thunk*. He loved writing, but sometimes he loved being able to shut down for the day. After he banged out an entire chapter in three hours, fueled by coffee and exercise endorphins and sheer love of the topic, he enjoyed the carnal satisfaction of walking away.

And speaking of carnal…

The image of Lizzie in her summer dress made his loins tighten. Maybe that was an invitation, maybe that was her way of saying that she was finally ready. It had been about a year since their son had died, and about eight months of that was spent in chastity. Michael wasn't sure why Lizzie had suddenly shut down after four months. It was like she had been pretending to be normal, or try to get on with normal life, then suddenly realize how infuriated she was with him.

Not that Michael blamed her. He couldn't blame her. However mad Lizzie was with him, he heaped ten times as much scorn upon himself. He'd lost weight. Barely slept. Made sure to go to a gym where they had a punching bag, so he could imagine his own face being slammed with punches and kicks.

But goddamn, Michael was still *human*. He had needs. Hardwired needs. And yeah, giving himself a yank while watching some video on Pornhub was nice and all, but what about the real thing? Michael loved sex, and he was meant to love sex! It was how the human race survived.

If he were being completely honest with himself, which, let's face it, when was the last time he had been *that*—Michael didn't (just) want to get off. He longed to touch his wife, show her how much he loved her, how much he still loved her. He longed for the connection that only sex between two soul mates can bring.

But Michael wasn't thinking of any of that when he walked up the stairs. All he thought about was how nice it would finally feel to lay Lizzie down and slide into her.

So he walked up the wooden stairs, which creaked beneath his weight, despite the pounds he had lost. He hadn't been this skinny since right before he quit smoking. God, he missed smoking. He missed the sharp cut of nicotine into his lungs, missed the way it made his brain sizzle, helped him focus, helped him *write*. He had gained twenty pounds in the two months after he quit, which made Lizzie force him to get a gym membership.

He glanced at his face in the hallway mirror. Cheeks a bit too sallow, chest and shoulders needed some work. Sandy brown hair and cheeks covered with dark brown stubble.

If I start working out, Lizzie will at least look at me again.

That was the hope at least. Moving into the house had done them both good. Lizzie returned from the office and went straight to her garden for a couple of hours, where she at least ignored him, as opposed to them getting into another fight. Then they had a civil dinner, followed by more silence, then sleep. Lizzie even had started talking about her work again, how she was gaining new clients. Michael heard the way her voice picked up speed when she talked about her business, and he was grateful that Lizzie…well, was starting to sound normal again. That her emotional range was now wider than "hate to anger."

So tonight might be different. Tonight might be the night that she let him in.

He knocked quietly on the door of the room she was working on. Boxes lay opened with newspaper and bubble wrap strewn all over the floor. Knick knacks, office supplies, and framed photos formed a labyrinth that he carefully stepped around.

Lizzie was sitting on the floor, going through their filing cabinet. He sat down beside her and put his elbows on his knees.

"Finished a chapter today."

"That's great."

Silence.

When would they be able to speak to each other like normal people did? Without straining their voices, without sounding like robo-calls?

Awkwardness paralyzed Michael for a moment. But he was a man with a mission. He just wanted to touch his wife.

"You've been working really hard this week," he said in his best soothing voice. He slowly crossed behind her and began massaging her neck. Lizzie froze, but then her muscles unclenched as Michael continued kneading. "I could help you relax."

Lizzie closed her eyes, and Michael knew he was *so close* to getting her in bed. To joining with him. He could almost taste victory, and it would taste just like Lizzie. He bent his head and slowly kissed her neck, starting at the base and traveling up to her ear.

Then she jerked her head away.

"Not tonight."

She continued whatever menial task she had in the filing cabinet. She wouldn't even look at him.

"Lizzie, how long am I going to be punished?"

She just kept working. Kept her eyes fixing on those stupid manilla envelops.

"It's not punishment, Michael—"

"Like hell, it's not. You even said it was five months ago."

"I know what I said, and yes, I was angry, and I still am, but I'm not trying to punish you anymore. I just can't." She finally looked at him, but Michael still saw hate simmering in her gaze. Lizzie was also a terrible liar.

"Why won't you touch me?" No answer. Of course not. "What am I supposed to do, Lizzie? When my wife won't even comfort me? When…" He trailed off. What was the point? It was an argument they'd had a thousand times before, and Michael was so tired of fighting. Of going around in circles. And not getting off.

Lizzie shrugged her small shoulders. "We could pray together. You could ask God for the comfort that I can't give you."

God can't give me a mind-blowing orgasm from deep-throating me.

Something about the utter sincerity of Lizzie's face just threw gasoline on Michael's smoldering flame of anger. He hadn't even realized he was this angry, until Lizzie brought up God again. Michael shot to his feet.

"God can't give comfort, Lizzie." Despite himself, Michael's voice rose. "How can I get comfort from a Being who took our son? Where was God when our son died?"

Nowhere, that's where. Michael didn't believe in God. Never had. And he especially didn't when his father had died, when his mother died. If there was a God, He was evil for taking so much from him. Father, mother, son. It was too much. Too fucking much.

He turned away and walked out of the room. Slammed the door shut.

Lizzie flinched from the sound. Papers flew around the room from the draft, until they settled once again.

Let him go.

Like Michael, Lizzie was tired of fighting. She longed to give him what he wanted. What she wanted too. Lizzie had sexual needs; men weren't alone in that department, although they loved to act like they were.

Lizzie hated to admit it, but Michael was right, but she couldn't admit he was right to anything because it was his fault that Noah died. He wasn't allowed to be right about anything ever again. He was right that she was still punishing him, but it was more complicated than that. Something inside her shriveled when Noah died. She wasn't taking her birth control pills—what was the point if she wasn't having sex? She didn't want to risk getting pregnant again, not so soon after Noah…

But more than that, something about the thought about having sex with Michael frightened Lizzie. What if she became pregnant again? What if she couldn't protect her next child? What if her next child was like Noah?

Fresh tears started in Lizzie's eyes as she stood up. Walked out the door and down the hallway to the empty bedroom. She took out a box cutter and sliced open the tape and took out Noah's toys. She briefly considered what it would feel like to slide the knife against Michael's flesh. Not enough to kill him, of course not, but just enough for him to know the pain that she felt. For that matter, Lizzie wondered what if might feel like to slide the knife along her own wrists, to watch the blood pool around her, until darkness took her for the last time. Then, and only then, would she find relief from this pain. This excruciating, unbearable pain.

She shook her head, clearing her thoughts. Those dark thoughts were sinful. She could never commit suicide because God would never forgive her.

God, You always said that You would never give us more than we could bear, but I think You trusted me a bit too much.

God was the only way that Lizzie could even stand to touch Noah's toys again, to feel the soft fur of the teddy bear, to smell its scent, to smell traces of Noah on it. The smell was sunshine in the spring and freshly cut grass, like when they had a picnic. Noah had stared at the birds on the pond for so long that he seemed turned to stone. Lizzie loved how he studied everything, how it seemed nothing escaped his notice. Even when he was a baby, he always stared, and sometimes it felt like he could see straight to the bottom of Lizzie's soul.

She clutched the bear to her chest and moaned quietly. The only way she could bear any of this was the thought that Noah was in Heaven now, perfect whole. Perfectly normal.

They had fought over whether to take Noah's things with them, just like they fought over everything these days. Michael wanted to take everything to a donation center, but Lizzie couldn't let go. She would eventually, but…not now.

Lizzie unpacked Noah's blocks, stacking them just the way he always had. She lightly fingered the letter N.

A door slammed down the hallway, which made Lizzie jump.

Throwing a temper tantrum just because I wouldn't sleep with him. Well, fine. Michael can slam all the doors he wants.

But Michael was downstairs, watching TV in the living room.

Chapter 3

The next day, Lizzie opened the door of their new home, and immediately felt a surge of anger. Boxes were still everywhere, *unopened* boxes. Absolutely nothing had been done. She and Michael had talked about this. Since she spent more time at work and spending more time commuting, Michael could take some time out of his day to unpack a few boxes.

She took a deep breath.

It's not worth it, the boxes will get unpacked, just take a shower, just let the hot water run over you.

Marriage was all about letting the small stuff go. Putting up with each other. Putting up with each other's crazy.

Michael was a writer down to the bone—head in the clouds, unconcerned with practical matters, a little bit arrogant, and a little selfish. Lizzie was the one who paid the bills, made sure the mortgage payments were made on time, and was the main income of the house. Granted, Michael made good money as a writer, but it was wildly unstable. Some years were better than others, whereas Lizzie had the office job that gave them both health insurance.

Lizzie passed by the kitchen, where dirty dishes were stacked in the sink. Flies circled around them. Swallowing her frustration, Lizzie walked to the bathroom. As far as bathrooms went, it truly was amazing. Decorated in a vaguely Sicilian way, it felt like stepping into a Roman bath, with warm wallpaper, a huge garden tub with jets, marble countertops, and gorgeous mirrors. The shower had a rainfall spout, which Lizzie loved just standing under, letting the water massage her scalp.

She twisted on the water and undressed while it warmed up. Steam filled the room. Suddenly, Lizzie wrinkled her nose.

Oh my god, something must have died.

The smell was putrid, that exquisitely awful blend of sweet and decay. That rotten egg stench. It had to be sulfur because there was only one thing that could cause that sort of eye-watering smell. And as much as she might have wanted to repulse Michael, she couldn't walk into the office smelling like a dumpster.

"Michael?" she called.

Moments later, he appeared.

"What?"

"Can you do something about this smell?" Lizzie turned on the water so he could experience it firsthand.

"Yeah, I can call someone and get them to come out."

"When?" If Lizzie didn't something specific out of Michael, it might take him three weeks to even call, much less set up an appointment.

"I don't know, when I get to it."

"Oh, when you have a break in your *busy* schedule." Lizzie glared at him.

"Yes. Exactly," Michael shot back.

"Well, do it this week because I don't want to smell like a rotten egg."

"Whatever." Michael left.

At that point, Lizzie was so angry at Michael that she had to do something to relax. She could douse herself in perfume after. She turned the water on and stepped inside. She turned the knob to the exact center. At this point, the old water heater had enough power for about twenty minutes of hot water, then it abruptly went cold.

Michael loved to complain about how much work writing was, but all Lizzie saw him do on her days off was spending exactly two hours drinking three cups of coffee, dithering around on his laptop, finally writing for about an hour; then he took about two hours for lunch, then wrote for *maybe* another hour or two. While Lizzie had to deal with 8 hours of clients breathing down her neck, her boss demanding the next project, and her co-workers failing to give her the information she needed to complete a project. He needed to do more.

Lizzie was so absorbed in her thoughts that she almost didn't notice the water got hotter. She relished it, letting it flow over her skin, her scalp. She always felt cleansed after a good, hot shower. She could put up with a little Sulphur smell if it meant she had her dream house. These old houses always had little kinks to work out.

Suddenly, the water was too hot.

Way too hot.

Lizzie yelped and tried to turn off the shower. But it wouldn't budge. Her skin quickly turned red. She screamed and pushed back the shower curtain. Steam filled the room. She leapt out of the shower so fast that the shower curtain became tangled around her, and she slipped on the wet floor. She hit her knees hard and whipped her head around to the shower.

The water suddenly shut off.

Lizzie's heart pounded, and her skin hurt. Someone would need to come out to check the water heater. And the shower knob. If she had stayed any longer, she could have been burned.

Michael burst through the room. "I heard a scream. Are you OK?"

Lizzie suddenly realized that she was still naked. Yanking a towel from the rod, she covered herself.

"God, Lizzie, I know what you look like."

"Well, I'm fine. But someone will have to come out to check the water heater. It's busted. Or something."

If Lizzie had stopped for just a moment, she would have known that the water heater was new. That there was nothing wrong with the shower. That the old house was creaky and windy and drafty was the simplest reason, too simple. That the flashes she felt of someone staring at her couldn't be explained away. That the finger of dread down her spine making her stomach twist was fear, not anger.

But how often do we disguise one thing for another?

*

Michael stared at the pile of boxes in the living room that needed to be unpacked.

And left them there.

He heard the accusation in Lizzie's voice. He knew that she thought he was just another lazy writer, not putting in his fair share of the household, even though they had been able to put a down payment on this huge house she wanted with the advance from *his* book, had been able to get the engine fixed on her car with the royalties from *his* book. She seemed to forget that when it came to large purchases.

So he left them there. He would get to them, but he was busy. What Lizzie never saw was how much *brain work* writing took. Michael needed his rituals; he wasn't just drinking coffee, he was thinking about what he would write for that day, going over his notes, making new notes, adjusting the outline. It was only because he thought so much beforehand was he able to sit down and write so fast. Writing wasn't just about sitting down and typing, it was about the mindset he had to have. Reading his notes, drafting an outline, *thinking*, for chrissake. No one could write if they didn't think first; it was a vital part of the process, but no one saw that. People saw chopping firewood or stringing up electrical wire, but no one could see mentation.

Plus, he had emails to answer, appeasing his editor, reassuring his literary agent, and just generally handling the stress of writing a book that would exceed the sales of the previous. That was what it meant to be a writer—constantly worried that he would suddenly be unmarketable, that he would never match the success of the previous book, that his agent would drop him like yesterday's garbage.

Thump

Michael craned his head around toward the noise. He was still getting used to the old house. He also hated old houses because there was no telling how many people had died in its lifetime. People used to just die in their houses, not in the hospital. All those deaths, all that pain.

Thumpthump

Michael typed faster. He just needed to finish another chapter. Then maybe Lizzie would get off his back. This was the first time in a year that he had been able to write. In the months after Noah's death, he hadn't been able to write a single word. He had asked for an extension from the publishing house, then *another* extension when he couldn't muster the strength or brainpower to write. Every day had been excruciating. Just sitting in his chair, staring at the blinking cursor, writing a sentence, then immediately deleting it. But now, in the new house, he had new energy, new resolve. Michael had thought that he would never be able to write again, but now he could sit down and write without stopping for a few hours.

So if he "only" wrote for two or three hours, well, that was better than zero.

He had a new book about innovative therapeutic strategies for treating anxiety. His last book had been about depression, but that had been a huge failure. Not in sales; he actually had done very well for his second book, about 20,000 copies sold, and the publishers had given him a handsome advance for his next one. No, it was a failure because it hadn't helped the one person he loved the most, apart from Lizzie—his mother. She had still succumbed to depression, let it pull her under, and—

thumpthumpthump

Something was definitely making a noise upstairs. It didn't sound like a tree branch tapping against the window. It sounded like it was coming from *inside* the house.

Michael stood up. Sunlight streamed through the windows, making everything bright and warm.

Yet he shook. From the sound of it, whatever it was came from Noah's room. Except it wasn't "Noah's" room at all. Noah was gone. Noah had turned blue, blue like his baby blanket, blue like his tiny little pants, blue like his eyes were when he was born and Michael held him in his arms. Blue like the pool water.

The thumping continued. Michael walked up the stairs slowly, suddenly hating his career choice as a writer. He wasn't brave, wasn't a hunter or anything like that. He could have been a police officer or firefighter, something that made him braver. Trepidation snuck into his bloodstream. Why did his knees shake? Why was it so hard to plant one foot in front of the other? Why did it sound like Noah was playing in his room, like he always had, tossing his toys around, stomping his feet?

Michael pushed open Noah's room. Silence.

Maybe it's just a squirrel on the roof.

Except squirrels made tiny pitter-pattering noises, not large bumps. Michael wiped his damp hands on his pants. He turned to go.

Thumpthumpthump

Definitely coming from the closet. The closet which was closed. Michael grabbed the first thing he could, a broom. Should he snap it over his knee so it would break into two sharp, pointy ends? He tried but only succeeded in giving himself a bruise.

What if someone was living in the house? That happened. People lived in attics of abandoned houses, sneaking food from the refrigerator, food had been missing, lately, hadn't it? and then they killed the owners in their sleep and used their skin as a robe while they listened to Dark Side of the Moon backward. What if he opened the door and someone sprang out to stab him?

Quit being an idiot.

Michael reached for the knob but stopped when he saw his hand shake. Then, in one fluid motion, he yanked open the door.

A black and white face. Huge fangs. Humanlike hands.

A racoon scurried away from him and fled into the hole it had made from the attic.

Michael exhaled, and his lungs hurt from holding his breath. He laughed out loud just to hear another noise. He pulled out his phone and dialed Animal Control.

Cell reception was shit this far out in the country. He shut the door—and put a stack of boxes in front of the closet—then tried again. Still no answer.

Michael walked downstairs to get better reception. Then outside, just to walk around and rid himself of the jitters. For some reason, his fingers dialed Victoria. She would think it was funny.

"Hello?"

"You didn't tell me the house came with a free racoon."

"Oh no! Did you call the city's Animal Control?"

"I tried, but they didn't pick up."

"Well, I can give them a ring. It didn't scare you, did it?"

"Nah, I figured it was some animal trapped in the attic. Not surprising with these old houses."

"Well, you're braver than I am." Victoria laughed. Michael loved the sound of her voice, how musical it was, how she made everything he did seem wonderful.

"I don't know about that. You have to deal with people every day. I'm just a writer."

"Pssh. I could never do what you do. I downloaded your book and read the first chapter. You're a *very* good writer."

Michael smiled. The pounding in his blood transformed from hunted to hunter.

Chapter 4

Michael snapped his eyes open. Only a nightmare could make him feel the terror he did now. Only when the mind was completely vulnerable to its own machinations did true fear come. He had that sick sensation of immediate danger. He looked wildly around the room. Dark shadows, Lizzie's form, and nothing more.

He couldn't remember what he dreamed. Only the vague sense of a skull and maybe a woman. That almost made it worse, that he couldn't remember. What was his mind trying to hide from him?

He wanted to shake Lizzie awake. Suddenly, he was five years old again, and the twisted shapes lurking in the corners were monsters, ready to sink their claws and fangs into him. He needed her.

But he also didn't want her to worry. He was no stranger to nightmares. He had lived Noah's death over and over again in the months that followed. He had tried everything from melatonin to hypnosis to get rid of them, but the only thing that would cure them was time. He hadn't had one in so long that he forgot what it was like to feel his stomach clench, feel his heart knock against his ribs.

He carefully lifted the blankets off and climbed out of bed. Knowing he wouldn't be able to sleep, didn't want to sleep, he crept downstairs. Tomorrow would be a shitty, unproductive day, but that was a small price to pay to not feel the terror of sinking back into the nightmare.

He put on some coffee and glanced around the kitchen. The moonlight shone its bone white light, illuminating the forest just past the backyard. An owl hooted in the distance.

Suddenly, Michael could feel something watching him. Like it had snuck from his dreams to real life. He went around flipping on every light in the house. He didn't want to wake Lizzie, so he put a towel down on the floor, so the light couldn't seep through the crack. He checked every room. Nothing.

But he knew it was there. Something awful, something malevolent. Crouching in the corner, hiding just behind a door.

It's just the new house.

People always slept lighter when they were in a new location. Hotel, vacation spot, new house, didn't matter. It was primal, instinctive. Just as people knew when they were being watched.

You're scaring yourself.

Michael walked to his office while carrying his cup of steaming coffee. He carefully sipped and relished the warmth down his throat and into his stomach. He closed the door, then moved a stack of boxes in front of it.

If he could just work an hour, then tomorrow wouldn't be a complete waste. He could put insomnia to good use. Opening up his laptop and launching Word, he typed out a couple of paragraphs that he would probably need to heavily edit, but at least they were on paper. At least he was doing something.

Then the low, guttural growl erupted. It was so loud that it seemed like it came from inside the office. Demonic, a demon haunted him, that's the only thing it could be.

Thumpthumpthump

Just below the window. Something huge and heavy, something powerful. The growl grew louder, followed by a squeal. The thing snarled. Then squealed so loudly that Michael bolted to the other side of the room. It was inhuman. Monstrous.

Michael desperately wished for a gun. He had never learned to use one; he was Liberal for chrissake, but he longed for heavy weaponry sitting firmly in his grasp. Bullets and powder.

Then the thing growled again. Huge, heavy footsteps padded the soft grass beneath its feet. Heavy breathing. Could it get in the house? Finally, it squealed again, and took off running, away from the window into the forest. Michael looked out the window, but only saw a dark shape disappear into the trees.

Was that the thing that had been watching him? That awful shape in the dark, growling, warning him that he was on its property, its land, its territory?

Writing was impossible now. Michael glanced at the clock. 5am. Good enough. He would never get to sleep, adrenaline burned through his system, but he couldn't stay in the office anymore. Besides, Lizzie might wake up soon, and what would she think if she knew he was out of bed? Michael just wanted them to get back to normal, but nightmares and demonic squealing weren't normal. He didn't want her to worry about him; she had already worried enough.

As the adrenaline gradually wore off, his body felt like an abandoned car at the bottom of a lake. He climbed into bed and wrapped the covers around him. And stared at the ceiling until Lizzie woke up.

Chapter 5

Lizzie woke up at 7am that morning. It was Saturday, and the fresh feeling of the weekend washed over her. She didn't have to worry about work for two whole days, and she could finally make some headway unpacking the boxes. Maybe if she worked hard enough, she could forget about Noah for a few hours.

Except, that was impossible. She could never forget about him, not for a single second. She couldn't forget how happy she was the day he was born, how utterly joyous and exhausted and relieved he had made it into the world. She couldn't forget the feeling of finally having a family of her own. She couldn't forget how perfect he was, with his tiny little toes, his beautiful, bald head, his mouth that latched onto her instinctively. To forget was to be guilty. To forget was to forsake being a mother.

So she got up and made eggs and toast for both Michael and herself. She even scrambled them with butter and garlic and sliced tomatoes for Michael, his favorite. She put on a strong pot of coffee and clicked on the radio. Nothing but war, protests, disease, and corruption, so she turned that off. She pulled out her phone and dug a speaker system out of a box and put on some music. Something upbeat enough to work to but mellow so that it wouldn't disturb Michael as he slept.

Hopefully, the good breakfast would induce Michael to unpack some of his own boxes. The house just didn't feel like a home yet, and it wouldn't until the boxes were gone. Lizzie couldn't stand mess. That was partly why she made such a good graphic designer—she fixed lines, balanced images; she couldn't stand a messy look. She took what clients imagined and made it a reality in vibrant color.

After a few hours, Michael plodded into the kitchen.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning," she replied. She motioned to the microwave, where she had put the eggs underneath the plastic cover. "I made breakfast."

"Thanks." Michael took it out and ate it cold. Took a few sips of coffee. Then he zombie walked back to the bedroom and laid down again.

Lizzie frowned. He had clearly seen her up to her elbows in bubble wrap. It was Saturday; he had nothing to do.

So she worked for a couple more hours. It helped her to put things in order, when Noah so frequently made life chaos. It wasn't just that he was four, it was because he was…

Well, she wouldn't think about that right now.

When Michael woke back up around noon, Lizzie had to say something.

"I could really use your help," she said.

Michael looked like a baby owl, with his hair tousled on one side, blinking in the sunlight.

"What?"

"Unpacking. I've been up for hours, and you've been sleeping all day. I could really use your help getting some of these boxes out of the way. Since you haven't done anything this week."

The air changed so fast around them that Lizzie's body tensed before she registered it. Electricity before a gathering storm.

"Haven't done anything? Is that what you think? What do you think I do, just sit on my ass all day?"

Lizzie tossed aside one of Michael's comic book figurines. The fury was too close, it wasn't deep, it was right there, just waiting, ready to spring.

"You haven't helped at all! You haven't touched a single box, haven't done anything to unpack the house. You never help, you never helped with Noah, either." Hot tears sprang to Lizzie's eyes. She wasn't sad, oh no. These were bitter, Pandora's tears, tears of white-hot rage.

"Here we go again." Acrimony laced Michael's words. "You *know* I helped. You *know* how difficult Noah was. You just want to blame me for everything."

"Because it was your fault!" Here it was, the ugly. She had tried to forgive him, but she just could not. "It's your fault our son died. You were supposed to be watching him! And all you cared about was impressing your friends and showing off your new book and, and—"

Suddenly, Lizzie could not stand to be in the same room as Michael. Not one second longer. She hated him. She hated him and loved him and couldn't leave him because he was the only family she had ever known.

She stomped to the front door. Yanked on her shoes.

"Where are you going?" demanded Michael.

"Out."

"Out?"

"Yes, out."

If Lizzie hadn't been so damn angry, she would have seen the look of worry flash across Michael's face. "There's something out there. In the woods."

"Better that than being here with *you*."

This time, it was Lizzie's turn to slam the door.

It was true, Michael had not really helped with Noah, but not because he didn't want to. It was because he didn't know how.

And how could he? Michael had never had a child with special needs before. Neither, for that matter, had Lizzie.

As she crossed the boundary that marked their property and stepped into the woods, she remembered how it was Michael who first noticed something...off about Noah. He thought it was odd how Noah didn't seem to point at objects like other children did. Lizzie thought he was just being paranoid. Noah was only two months old; he was just a baby. So what if he didn't look at where Lizzie pointed or didn't wave like other babies? Every single child developed differently.

But it only continued. Noah didn't respond to his name. Most children, said Michael in a very holier-than-thou voice, recognized their name very young.

"There is *nothing* wrong with our son," Lizzie had said, then taken him to the park. The sun was warm that day, and every other parent was outside with their babies in strollers, talking to them, cooing over Noah. As she passed them, their babies stared at her. Noah never looked at her.

But there was something different. Michael had tried to tell her, but what mother wants to learn that her child might not be as perfect as she thought? And because Michael had been the one to spot the signs, with his background in psychology, his knowledge of child development…Lizzie started to resent *him*, as though Michael were the cause.

Still, even at twelve months, Noah was doing just fine. Who cared if he didn't smile as much as other babies did? Or express wonder at the world around him? Babies were just tiny sponges, and who knew how much was really going inside their heads at once? Emotions had to be learned after all. He was only a baby. Nothing *wrong* with him.

But still the months passed, and Noah still didn't talk. He didn't make baby noises at twelve months, that was OK, some babies didn't, but sixteen months came and went, then twenty, and then he turned two, and nothing. Not a word. Just yelling. Always yelling. When he turned two, it was like a switch was flipped. He couldn't stand to be hugged, ran away from Lizzie when she tried to kiss him.

Then Michael finally convinced Lizzie to take Noah in for testing.

No other horror in Lizzie's life had been greater than sitting in the chair in the pediatric office watching the doctor's lips move.

Autism.

The slow, mounting realization that Noah was forever going to be like this, forever going to be separate from others was the worst sort of terror. The horror of knowing that there was nothing, absolutely *nothing*, she could do to change, fix, or stop it. The dread of knowing that life would be so much harder, the sheer unfairness of it all. She was locked in a cellar, with the key thrown away. Nothing would be the same. Nothing could ever be the same.

A scream shattered her thoughts like a bullet through bone. High-pitched, frightened. Wailing.

Lizzie tore off in the direction of the sound. It was a child. It had to be a child.

Runrunrun

Brambles cut her arms and legs. Splashing. Where were they?

"Help!"

Lizzie ran faster. Lungs burning. Legs shaking. Nothing but sharp branches and dark leaves all around her, obscuring her vision.

Where is the lake?

The screaming continued.

"I'm coming!" Lizzie shouted. "Just hold on!"

Screaming was good. Screaming meant they were still alive, still capable of drawing breath. It was when everything went silent that true fear descended like a bird of prey. Silence meant despair.

"Where are you?" Lizzie shouted. Splashing to her left. She jerked around and stumbled into a clearing. The lake stretched before her.

A group of children were out by a dock a few hundred feet from the shoreline. One thrashed in the water.

"I'm stuck!" His little head bobbed up and down, the wind splashing waves over him.

Without thinking, Lizzie kicked off her shoes. She didn't notice how cold the water was when she ran in, or how the mud sucked at her feet, the pointed rocks that cut her skin. Her only focus was on the little boy who needed her, who would drown if she didn't come.

Not again. Please, not again.

She swam against the current, kicking her legs fiercely. Her jeans were cement, dragging her down. She moved slowly, too slowly. She wouldn't make it. She wouldn't save him.

She passed by a clump of wild cattails and long grass, moss gently flowing with the waves. Lake water splashed in her face. The taste was vile. None of that mattered. Not the way her arms were heavy, not how her clothes were iron chains around her, sticking to her, not—

Then a cold, clammy hand gripped Lizzie's ankle. Dragged her down. She didn't even have time to scream.

Suddenly, all she saw was black. Water pushed against her nose, her throat.

This is how I die.

She thrashed, wanted to scream, but couldn't because that would release air, precious air. Which was was up? Still, the hand held tight. She kicked. Blind panic. Which way was up? Her eyes were open, but all she saw was the filthy murkiness of the lake.

She curled into a little ball. Reached for her ankle. Her lungs burned, begged her to take that final breath. Just one breath, and everything would be all right. Brightly colored spots burst into her vision.

Just breathe.

Her fingers touched something. She ripped with all her strength.

Free.

Lizzie's head burst through the surface. For a moment, she couldn't inhale, only retch putrid lake water. Her chest hurt too much. But when she lifted her hand and saw the clump of slimy moss in her fist she gasped.

She whipped her head around.

A group of children splashed near the shore, laughing and yelling. They grabbed their towels and shoes and ran back into the forest.

"You're it!" shouted one.

"No, you're it!"

Panting, Lizzie wiped hair from her face.

Just moss. It wasn't a hand.

Lizzie didn't know whether to scream her anger at the children—never pretend to drown!—or cry from relief.

But they were alive. She was alive. That mattered. That mattered so much. Lizzie began to swim back to shore. The sun felt amazing on her arms, the water, though cold, was bracing. She lived; she breathed. She continued swimming the breaststoke.

As soon as her toes touched sand, she started crying. She flung herself onto the shore. All she wanted now was to be in Michael's arms. Who cared if he unpacked the boxes or not? They were just some stupid boxes. They'd get unpacked eventually. Lizzie cried in sheer relief. She didn't want to die. She knew that viscerally now. And she didn't want to hurt Michael. Those were just bad thoughts, thoughts that weren't true. The mind did that—create thoughts that just weren't real.

Lizzie spat onto the sand. Maybe forgiveness didn't happen all at once. Maybe it happened day by day. She could lay her sword down tonight. Maybe she would pick it back up again tomorrow, but tonight…well, she could love Michael.

For a moment, she gazed across the lake. The trees had already turned color, and the burst of yellow, orange, and red was possibly the most beautiful sight Lizzie had seen, apart from the moment she had looked into Noah's eyes after he was born. Jagged hills thrust themselves against the sky in the far distance, and a curl of black smoke drifted into the air. The aroma of cedar and pine was almost ethereal in its strength. About a hundred yards away, a small island held a copse of trees. Against the setting sun, Lizzie spied the form of an owl. Its girth was too wide to be a hawk, but it was too small to be a vulture or other carrion bird. It was hard to tell, but Lizzie had the feeling that the owl was staring at her just as much as she stared at it. Then it swiveled its head around.

Ugh. Owls were freaky. No animal should have the ability to turn its head 180 degrees. Lizzie thought of twisting heads and the scene from *The Exorcist* popped into her head. What was it about unnatural movement that was so terrifying?

She shuddered, then picked up her shoes and started to walk home. She would have to put antibacterial ointment on her feet, arms, and legs, where her skin was torn. It also wouldn't hurt if she swung by the pharmacy to pick up some Vitamin C; if she didn't come down with a nasty flu, she'd be lucky. Who knew what sort of bacteria lurked in the lake?

She turned around to gaze back at the glittering water.

Or, for that matter, what sort of creature did.

Stop it, she thought. *There is nothing in the lake. You were panicked.*

And yet, the feeling of fingers around her ankle had been unmistakable. She had even felt the sharp nails dig into her skin.

Just thorns.

As she walked back through the forest, she thought of Noah. He had never enjoyed water. Which is why no one thought he would go near the pool that day. Why would he?

Bath time had been hard. Lizzie often bathed him once a week because any more was just too exhausting. Noah hated everything about it. He hated the sound of the running water; it was too scary. He hated the feel of soap against his skin, shrieked when she touched him with the washcloth. Even with a thermometer, Lizzie could never get the bath water the right

temperature. Noah was always scared he'd get soap in his eyes. He splashed Lizzie, and once, she fell down hard on the tile floor and bit her lip so hard she broke skin.

She loved Noah. Still did. But it hadn't been easy. She knew she had been cruel with Michael, saying that he never helped. He did. Maybe not enough, but he did help. Raising a child was hard. So very, very hard. And one with special needs, well.

No words could describe it.

As she passed through the front yard, Lizzie frowned. Something had made deep furrows around the front lawn and torn up the grass. She wasn't an expert, but the two almond-shaped impressions close together were likely wild hog tracks. Unsurprising, given how far out in the country they were. She had never been a gun nut, but maybe having a rifle around would be a sensible precaution.

*

Michael was scrolling through Netflix, wondering how it was possible that nothing looked good enough to watch when Lizzie walked into the living room. For a moment, he wondered if Lizzie had finally cracked.

She was soaking wet.

He was in fact, truly worried about Lizzie. The worst sort of pain was of a mother losing her child; nothing could compare to that. And after losing his mother…well, he didn't want the same thing happening to Lizzie. He didn't think it was right, how she clung to the memory of Noah, setting up his toys and clothes, pretending that he still lived. And Lizzie had said some things that made him question her grip on reality. Like the door slam the other night—she swore that he slammed the door upstairs when he had been downstairs, but she was absolutely adamant that it had been him. Plus, he heard her talking to Noah sometimes. *That* couldn't be healthy. But she spoke to him as if he were right there in the room.

But of course, the minute that he expressed any sort of concern, Lizzie accused him of psychoanalyzing her, so he kept quiet. Therefore, he kept his tone light as he said, "Out for a light autumn swim?"

Lizzie looked down at herself as though realizing her clothes were muddy and torn. Then, she did something that Michael did not expect at all.

She walked around the couch. Pulled him to his feet. Then threw her arms around him and kissed him.

The touch of her lips on his was almost too surprising for Michael, at first. They just stood there for a moment, mouths closed. Lizzie's lips were cold, and the image of a corpse flashed through Michael's mind for just a moment, but then she kissed him harder. Pressed her body into his. He didn't mind that his clothes were getting wet. For the first time in months, Lizzie was giving him an honest-to-god kiss.

He wrapped his hands around her. Felt her thin hipbones through her jeans. She used to be thicker, all soft curves and delicious flesh, but after their son's death, she stopped eating as much. His hands traveled up the curve of her sides, and she responded by pressing harder. Her mouth opened, and her hot tongue touched his, and suddenly lightning sizzled up Michael's spine.

Lizzie, I've missed you so much, this is what I want, I want you, I want us, please don't leave me, come back to me.

Lizzie pulled away and nestled her cheek against Michael's. Just as soon as she had started kissing, she stopped.

Was this the inappropriate affection that heralded a psychotic break? Or was Michael just looking a gift horse in the mouth? God, he wanted to give Lizzie a gift in *her* mouth.

"Lizzie, what is going on?"

At first, she didn't reply. Only looked at him with those huge blue eyes that he loved so much. He remembered the first time that he saw those eyes; it was at an alumni luncheon. Usually, Michael didn't go to those kinds of things, but his best friend, Craig had begged him to. As soon as he saw Lizzie in her royal blue blouse, with those wide, owl-like eyes, he just had to say something to her. Make her laugh in some way.

"I…I heard some kids screaming. I thought they were drowning." She glanced down at herself and laughed.

"Kids?" There weren't any kids around. At least, Victoria had told them that all the families who lived around here were empty-nesters. Maybe they were grandchildren or something.

"Yeah, just some boys playing in the water, pretending they were drowning. I swam out save them—" Her voice cracked, and she stopped.

Then, just like that, Michael forgave Lizzie for being such a bitch the past few days. That tiny crack in her voice made him realize that she couldn't let go of Noah because he was still everywhere. He, of all people, should know that it would take more than a year for her to heal. Hell, she would never heal. They never would. Not fully. Losing Noah was a scar that would stay with them forever, as permanent as letters carved into rock.

She had tried to save Noah. Those lips on his, the lips that he kissed had tried to breathe life into their son. But she was too late. She would try to save the world if she could; that was Lizzie. She would never stop trying.

"Oh, baby…" He wrapped his arms around her as she buried her face into his chest.

She sniffled. "Just stupid, really. Should have known they were just playing. Nearly got myself killed," she half-laughed on the last word.

"What?" He pulled away. "What happened?"

"Nothing. Just got caught in some weeds or something. But it made me think…I might not ever see you again."

All of a sudden, Michael felt a rush of protection sweep through him. He covered Lizzie with his body. And in doing so, he felt the warmth of her, her softness. He would never forgive himself if another member of his family drowned.

But the weirdest moment was that in his fear of losing Lizzie, Michael felt himself grow hard. It was as if some caveman part of his brain wanted to ferociously attack anything that threatened his family and then make more family.

And that was it, wasn't it? It wasn't about sex. Michael wanted to try again, to stich back the family they once had. They could do it. They didn't have to let their past errors define them. That was what all the self-help books taught, Michael's included. He wanted to give Lizzie another child so badly, wanted to give them the family that they both wanted.

But before Michael could say anything, Lizzie pulled away from him gently. "I think I'm going to take a shower. Get all the lake water off me." She sniffed and walked toward the bathroom.

Michael took a step forward. “Do you want any company?” The longing in his voice was evident.

Lizzie laughed sadly. “No, not right now.” She started to turn around again, but then stopped and looked back at him. “Oh, by the way, thank you for unpacking the boxes in your office.”

“What?”

“The boxes. I saw when I came in. You even lined up your books.”

Michael swallowed. He didn’t want to ruin a good moment. But this was the most passive-aggressive thing Lizzie had ever said. Of course, he hadn’t unpacked his boxes. She knew that. They were the only ones in the house. But she sounded so sincere, and they just had a *moment*.

“Uh, you’re welcome?”

She turned around and plodded to the bathroom, her feet heavy on the hardwood floor. Michael strode to his writing office. Sure enough, every single box was unpacked; his bookcase was filled, all his photos were lined up on his desk, and even his printer had fresh paper and ink.

Maybe it was her way of saying sorry. Or maybe she was being passive-aggressive as hell. Either way, Michael wouldn’t say anything. He genuinely appreciated the work Lizzie had done. Yeah, it ticked him off how she tried to manipulate him into working more around the house, but they had reached a truce for tonight, and he wouldn’t break it.

Chapter 6

The nightmare came for Michael again. This time it was a woman, and she was absolutely beautiful. That kind of ethereal, couldn’t-possibly-be-human sort of beautiful. Playboy face with a Sports Illustrated, Swimsuit Edition body. Her long, dark hair swayed as though she floated in water. Pale skin like cream, vibrant green eyes.

“Hey there,” she cooed. “Wanna play?”

Michael looked around. This woman couldn’t possibly be talking to him. “Me?”

“Of course.” She trailed a fingernail down his chest, raising delightful goosebumps on his skin.

“Who are you?”

She grinned. Something off about her mouth. “Cinnamon. You can call me ‘Sin’ for short.”

What he didn’t want to do with Sin. A bed appeared, and Michael naturally accepted its strange manifestation, as one accepts all in a dream. She took his hand in hers, and her hand was so soft that it made him think of other parts of her body. She pressed herself into him, rubbing against him like a cat.

“Why don’t you want to play?” she purred.

“I’m so lonely,” he whispered. “I don’t know how to play anymore.”

Playing was for children, and he didn’t have children anymore.

“I’m here for you,” said Sin. “I want to comfort you.” She placed a hand between his legs. “I’m lonely, too.” She began to stroke him. “We can be lonely together.” Up and down, up and down, that felt so good, Michael was building, he didn’t want it to stop, he wanted more, always more.

But god, he wanted *connection*. His mouth against another mouth. He turned to Sin, and she lifted a hand with those razor-sharp nails to his face. Gently grazed his skin, and he shivered. She opened her mouth to kiss him, and Michael recoiled.

Her teeth were rotting. Brown, broken teeth, breath like rotten meat. She leaned closer to him, and said, “Play with me.”

Michael woke up, sweat slick on his skin. He couldn’t remember the dream, but someone had touched him. In the fog of his mind, he knew Lizzie had touched him, had touched him in his sleep. She had kissed him earlier, maybe she had changed her mind?

It was an odd feeling, to be sure—to be completely terrified and turned on at the same time. But the adrenaline was what made the horniness that much more powerful. It really wasn’t that weird, when you thought about it. The same chemical that made people want to fight or flee was also what gave them the urge to fuck. Same neurons firing. Same organic compounds swimming in the brain. And that’s all we were, wasn’t it? Lizzie liked to think that there was some sort of higher power. She clung to her notion of God, so that she didn’t have to face what Michael knew as absolute truth: that we were nothing mor than organic compounds that got lucky enough to achieve self-awareness.

So even though he still had that cold sweat still on him, Michael was as hard as steel, and he needed to release it somehow. Lizzie had touched him; he had felt her, so he reached over and stroked her thigh in return.

Lizzie lay on her side, pretending to have her back turned to him, as though she hadn’t grabbed his junk in the middle of the night. Michael’s pulse thumped in his throat. Her skin was so soft, and she had just shaved. That was always an invitation, wasn’t it? After years of marriage, Michael knew all of Lizzie’s subtle invitations—when she was on her period, she practically became a cavewoman, didn’t shave, wore baggy clothes with food stains, and wore her hair in a messy bun. But when she did want something, she shaved her legs, shaved everywhere, wore tank tops, and brushed her hair out. She wouldn’t have shaved tonight if she didn’t want to have sex, right?

Michael moved his hand up her creamy thigh. Wind howled outside their window. Their house was situated on a quarry that jutted out over a ridge. The wind was as loud as a freight train, and at times, it sounded almost human. These North Carolina hills were full of ghost stories, and Michael could sense how they started. Nothing more than wind shrieking all night would make anyone believe in spirits.

He touched his wife where he had longed to touch her for months, and her flesh was hot and ready. Lizzie opened her eyes. Then pushed his hand away.

“The hell are you doing, Michael?” Her speech was still slightly slurred with sleep.

Michael felt the sting of rejection. It hurt far more than it should. How long could one person put up with being rejection from the one person that they wanted connection from most of all? How long should he put up with it? He shouldn’t have to, and it wasn’t fair. And it wasn’t fair the way Lizzie played these games.

“You were touching me.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Yes, you were. I felt you. Don’t pretend that you weren’t.”

"Michael, I've been asleep. God, it's three o'clock in the morning. I want to sleep, not have sex right now. I have work in the morning." She flopped back over on her side. "Goodnight," she said definitively.

Michael remained in an upright position. He was frozen, unable to move. His pulse still thumped in his blood, but now it changed once again. Hot and heavy, yes, but with anger, buzzing, droning. Just more chemicals swimming in his brain. He knew that's all emotions were, just chemicals. He should just go back to bed, just say goodnight.

But the anger wouldn't let him go. He threw the covers off. Stomped to the door.

"Shit!" he cried when he stubbed his toe on the doorframe. That only made him angrier, preposterously angry. If Lizzie had just had sex, then he wouldn't be this upset, wouldn't have stubbed his toe, wouldn't need to flick on all the lights in the house. It was her fault that he was in his writing office opening up his laptop. Punching the keyboard to PornHub. Flicking past his normal videos of standard doggy-style sex. No, he wanted something better. Women tied up, bound. Having a cock shoved down their throat, a cock so big that it probably hurt.

Michael pumped his hand, squeezing himself nearly to the point of pian. And all the while, thought of a woman with long, dark hair, voluptuous hips, and a cupid's bow mouth.

Chapter 7

Michael stared at his computer screen while drinking his third cup of coffee. He was tempted to go down to the liquor store and buy a pack of cigarettes, but Lizzie would inevitably smell it on him. He was halfway through writing his next chapter when he smelled something rotten.

He twisted in his seat.

Why does it smell so familiar?

It was sickening. He threw open a window hoping that it would alleviate the smell somehow. It didn't. If anything, it seemed to make it worse. The stench set off something in the reptilian part of his brain, the amygdala, where emotion and smell were Gemini twins. A memory bloomed in his mind. He was seven years old again, with his father, when he went fishing with him, and they encountered the carcass of some animal near the pond. Bloody, juicy, with colors that a young boy didn't know existed, and they weren't good colors, no, these colors meant death. Pale yellow and dirty cream, the color of the maggots feasting on the dark green flesh. Michael would smell that same foul odor on his mother when he found her in her basement. After she—

Michael couldn't stand it anymore. He had to call someone. Surely, there had to be a dead animal or something in the walls of the house. Maybe that raccoon had finally died. That would be a relief. But why would he be able to smell it downstairs, if it was upstairs in Noah—*the spare*—bedroom?

Oh God. What if he were having a psychotic break? Smelling things that weren't really there?

He picked up his phone. Thought about calling Lizzie. But what could he say? "Hey honey, there's a weird smell, probably a dead animal. I know you wanted me to call animal control, but I haven't done that yet…"

No. Lizzie would just harangue him. She hadn't really spoken to him much that morning. Neither of them had mentioned the incident of the night before. Just pretending that things were back on track. Their truce still held, and Michael didn't want to do anything to break it.

So he dialed Victoria. Maybe there was something in the historical papers that the inspection hadn't caught.

"Hello?"

What an angelic voice. That voice seemed familiar; it was so sexy, so subtle.

"Hey there, I have a sort of silly question." He rubbed the back of his neck. What was she wearing? Did she have perfume on today?

"There are no silly questions. How can I help?"

"Well, I was wondering, if you weren't too busy today, if you could come over. There's some sort of smell in the house, or maybe I'm just going insane, haha."

"Ha, you wouldn't be the first person to call me about strange smells in houses. Sure, I don't have any more showings planned for today. The market in rural North Carolina is not the hottest."

The market has a pretty hot realtor, though.

"Thanks, I would appreciate it."

Michael took a shower and scrubbed himself. The water was fine; he didn't smell any sulfur, so maybe Lizzie had just wanted to complain that day. But he smelled something in the air in his office. Spritzing himself with cologne, Michael looked at himself in the mirror. Decided to throw on his tee-shirt that was slightly too small, but it showed off what little remained of his defined musculature. He also ironed his good pair of dark-washed jeans and slipped on his leather loafers.

About an hour later, Victoria pulled up in her pink, 1984 Mercedes. She drove carefully up the gravel drive, avoiding any dings to her immaculate car. When she opened her car door and stepped out, she wobbled a second in her red high heels. They, along with her pinstripe, mid-thigh skirt, showed off her tanned legs nicely.

"So what's this about a smell?" she asked. She walked up to him, and a cloud of sweet jasmine caressed Michael. She did wear perfume, and it was the perfect amount. Not so overwhelming as to be trashy, but not so little that it would escape notice. Inhaling the air around her was better than fresh air after the stench in the office.

"Just come in. See if you can tell where it is." He held out an arm to let her go first. He wasn't being chivalrous. He wanted a glimpse of her generous ass. *Looking* wasn't a sin.

Victoria stepped into the house. "Not so far." She walked into the office. "Maybe a little musty in here, but nothing." She kept walking deeper into the house. "Kitchen is fine." She crossed into the small adjacent hallway that led to the bedroom. "May I?" she asked, motioning to the bedroom door.

"Of course," said Michael. For some reason, his stomach leapt. Victoria was in his bedroom, looking around at his bed. It was intimate, private, and just the tiniest bit scandalous.

"Nothing a little Febreze won't fix," she said, then closed the door behind her.

Michael frowned. "Well, guess I am going crazy," he said. He laughed nervously.

Victoria shook her head and said, "No, lots of people are unsettled in a new house. It just takes time. You never know what's on the wind."

Unsettled, that's the word Michael had felt for the past few days. Like something were always watching him, staring. Like the house itself had a thousand eyes on its walls, its roof. Or there were secret cameras in the corners.

Michael glanced at the clock. Lizzie would be home in a few hours. He didn't really want her to know that Victoria was here. But he didn't want her to leave, either. He could stop writing for the day. He had done enough.

"Can I get you anything? Water? Or a beer? I'm a hipster when it comes to beer. Had to drive half an hour just to get a good IPA," said Michael. Of course, Lizzie didn't know that he had bought the beer, either.

Victoria glanced at the clock. "It's only 4." She bit her lip.

"It's 5 o'clock somewhere."

She laughed. "Yes, I guess that's true. Why not?"

Michael led the way back to the living room. He gestured to the couch. "Make yourself comfortable."

Very comfortable.

He scurried to bring back the bottles and popped the tops. Handed one to Victoria. When their fingers touched, Michael felt that warm, familiar electricity on the back of his neck. The kind that he had felt with Lizzie, except it hadn't gone anywhere. He sat down on the opposite side of the couch.

Victoria took a small sip. "How are you liking the house?"

"Honestly? It's kind of weird. I keep feeling like I'm being watched. Plus, I heard the weirdest fucking sound the other night. Sounded like a demon mating with a banshee."

Victoria swallowed again. The sight of the bottle against her mouth was very appealing to Michael. "Oh, that was probably a razorback. Hazard of living in the country, I'm afraid. Just get some blood meal. They hate the smell."

A hog. Michael could have slapped himself. He had been afraid over a stupid pig.

"Well, good to know." Michael drank, attempting to keep a neutral face. God, the beer tasted fantastic. He hadn't had a drink in 22 months and 6 days.

"What are you working on now? I noticed a stack of books in your room," said Victoria.

"Another book on psychology. This time about anxiety."

"How fascinating. I'm about halfway through your first. It's very good."

Michael shrugged. "I'm not so sure."

"What!" Victoria's perfectly plucked eyebrows shot heavenward. "What makes you say that?"

The beer loosened his tongue. "Well,

Scene 10	What Happens	And then?
	• Michael notices horrible smell	• Victoria leaves the house, but as she's leaving, Lizzie pulls up and notices her

	• He calls Victoria to come over • Sexual tension is now strong and obvious, but Michael doesn't have an affair yet • He tells her how Lizzie doesn't touch him. Also reveals backstory about finding his mom	driving away. She confronts Michael about it. He says they're not doing anything. They get into a fight. • Michael destroys Noah's room • Lizzie demands they see a therapist.
	Why It Matters	The Realization