

A gentle howl. A soft drip. A creak.

A puddle of water pooled on the kitchen floor.

Lynn hunkered on a stool beside the antique butcher's block. Dark hair askew, she leaned heavy on her slim elbows, sleep shirt only reaching the middle of her canyon-colored thigh. The dying under-cabinet fluorescent washed the brittle curves of her body with sickly white. And through the wide, clear windows that framed her bent form, where the broad halo of the porchlight faded out among the tall grass bordering the yard of Loomis House, shadows of rain slick aspen swayed under the thrall of the storm winds.

Slowly, Cilla slipped behind the hallway arch. She scraped her slippers on the hardwood—hhk, hhk—loud enough to herald her arrival. Arms crossed under breasts against her apron, and shrouding her concern with indifference, she drifted out onto the linoleum.

Lynn bristled. Two bloodshot blue eyes locked to Cilla's feet long before they grazed her face. A soft parting of the lips precipitated a shudder, and her gaze fell away without sound.

"Oh, treasure," Cilla whispered. "Did something happen?"

Hand to her forehead, Lynn rolled all her bangs from her face. Thumbnail against thumbnail. The beds of her fingernails were ripped open again.

Her palm skimmed Lynn's back, but didn't settle. "Was it your visitor, again?"

Low exhalation. Watery eyes. "Yeah."

"Same as last time?"

The flick of Lynn's gaze drew the scene on the countertop tile. "He was there. In the bedroom, he was there. Behind my night stand. He didn't blink, didn't move for so long. The Pilgrim."

Sympathy overwhelmed her. “He’s not real,” Cilla said. “There’s no spirits lingering in the halls of Loomis House, treasure, least of all pilgrims. I of anyone would know. He’s only a figment, a night terror. Didn’t the doctor give you pills for this? The things you say you see.”

Slow, she shook her head. “Shortage. Nationwide.”

“Lousy castor oil artists, all of them. Down with the iatrarchy’s what I say.”

A long strip of white skin peeled from Lynn’s first finger. It stretched and snapped past the cuticle, the new trench flooding with red. She hissed, rolling the dead skin between the pads of her fingers. “Yeah, well. Then I’d never get pills, and it’d be like before.”

Hand on her hip, Cilla leaned closer. “Pills aside, treasure, all I can offer is the pleasure of my company. You mind if I stay a while?”

Quicker, Lynn nodded. “I’d like that.”

Spurred toward the kitchen appliances with instincts honed by decades of playing hostess to ex-husbands, Cilla pried open the refrigerator door. Cold light spotlighted the butcher’s block from below, racing along the facets of the attic door along the ceiling. “You need a nightcap. I could fix a mimosa, crack the champagne for New Year’s early? You love mimosas.”

“Graham lost the bottle opener,” Lynn said.

Cilla clicked her tongue. “A vodka spritz, then. I made daiquiris for your birthday, I could again? As long as it’s boozy, it’ll help you sleep this off.”

High cheekbones shrouding Lynn’s eyes in the new shadow. “I don’t want to sleep.”

The door shut brusquely. Hot sauce jingled against the mayonnaise bottle. “Coffee?”

A considering tilt of the head. “Okay.”

Water filled the pot. The pilot light clicked three times. Flame. New rain braced against the side of Loomis House, and for an instant, the din outside was audible in the insulated interior, a roar like none other, how a mouse must feel in the throat of a hawk.

Cilla sidled around the little puddle and sat beside Lynn. Forearm scraping the old chops and gouges in the butcher's block, knee touching the rusted iron hinge, she offered a tentative hand. Didn't mind if it wasn't taken. Lynn surprised her with her touch, petite fingers quick to strangle her thumb.

A smile. Fleeting. "Cold hands."

"Sorry," Cilla said. "Just washed them."

"Of course you did."

The quiet that followed was both comfortable and sincere. Two squeezes were all Cilla needed for reassurance: Lynn's secret way of saying thank you, because she never did. Not out of pride, or vanity, but in the way the poor girl always shrank herself to ensure she took up no more space than what she deserved, which was never as much as she required.

Cilla let her hand fall away. "Do you work? In the morning."

Dark spikes of errant hair shook.

"Then I'll stay up," Cilla said. "And get you a washcloth for those eyes. Very puffy. Don't want your heart to see you like this."

"He's seen worse," Lynn said.

"Oh, and that may be true, treasure, but—you can say a lot of things about yourself but I never want to hear you call yourself *worse* ever again."

Her smile rose and fell in the span of a single nagging thought. "He'll be back."

Cold water turned warm quick. The wrung cloth changed hands. “Graham? Unfortunately.”

“The Pilgrim,” Lynn said, dabbing her face. “Those eyes, Priscilla, those eyes—hungry eyes, needful eyes. He wants me for something. Ghosts, I thought—they always just want me to leave. But he wants something else.”

It took effort to unwrinkle her nose. “Treasure, the g-word is unappreciated. You know how superstition curdles my willingness to converse.”

Dark eyes narrowed like a rebellious daughter’s might. “Mike believed in ghosts. And in spirits and karma, too. Do you remember Mike?”

Cilla clicked her tongue. “Occasionally, and against my will.”

“Maybe I should try calling him.”

“Please do not.”

“It’s just that—every time I’ve seen him, the Pilgrim’s come closer, but he’s been quiet. He was whispering this time—*take*, and *want*. *Delicious*. Said he’d suck me up and roll me in his mouth. And the entire time, I couldn’t move. I tried, but I couldn’t. Nailed to the bedsheets, choking down the smell of mold, the smell of death, and listening to him talk about how delicious I looked, how soft I must be....”

“I never liked Mike,” Cilla said. “The way he snapped at you. How he’d puff up when you spoke your mind. Reminded me of August, my second husband—and only in the worst way. When he left you alone? Now, that’s a kind of ‘ghost’ I more than approve of.”

Her next breath was loud like a threat display, inflating her spine to rigidity once more. “I’m scared, Cilla. Okay? I don’t need a distraction, or jokes. I need a solution.”

The water was boiling and Cilla went to find the grounds. “There’s no solution for something that isn’t real, treasure. You just need to live with it or let it go.”

“Last week it was the doorway. Friday, the lounge chair. Today, behind my nightstand. Every time it rains, he appears. He’s getting closer every time. I’m so scared. I don’t know what to do. All this week is rain.”

The clip on the bag popped off. “Remember he can’t hurt you, and go back to sleep.”

“He’s real,” Lynn said, voice loud now as the storm outside. “Why don’t you believe me? This old house, my heritage, us—it’s woken something up. Something evil.”

Grounds poured into the filter over the cup. “The only thing left of the Loomis House those colonists built is the gravel under the foundation, treasure. This old place’s been knocked down and thrown around and rebuilt and restructured so many times—it’s a regular ol’ Ship of Theseus. If something was haunting this place back in 1794, it’d be haunting old boards in the junkyard about now.”

The folded filter met trash; the disused water, the sink. The mug slid across the counter to Lynn’s waiting hand, steam rising from its dark surface, and the wind beat against the windows again and that spine of hers hollowed out fast until she’d slumped down, nose nearly dunked in the black. “Buckled shoes. Buckled hat. Has to be.”

“Does it, treasure? You think the pilgrims really dressed all the same, like the parades on TV? That the colonists hated the Indians so much, they’d come back from death to kill one more? Or is it more like you’re just remembering something dark—something from the bad times, back at the group home?”

Lynn turned her mug. “That’s somehow worse.”

Cilla touched her hand. “I’ll keep you safe.”

The front door cracked open, and the full force of the storm penetrated the refurbished exterior of Loomis House. Wind screamed against the narrowing gap, and the lock turned hard before thundering footsteps drove Graham into the kitchen. Raindrops turned his glasses into a kaleidoscope of big blue eyes and fear.

“Jesus, Lynn,” Graham said, loud but soft, scared but safe. “You can’t call me twenty times and then not pick up later. Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

By the time Cilla drifted back, Graham had Lynn all wrapped up in his big, greasy arms. Warm whispers and reassurances bounced between the two, back and forth, frightened tenderness and mansuetude apologies. No interrupting that now. Soon, their tender moment ran its course, and the two retired back to the bedroom tangled up in one another as lovers in pain always are.

Lynn squeezed the butcher’s block twice before she went. For reassurance.

A puddle in the foyer. Wet footprints ran the hallway to the kitchen where the grout was dark and damp. Raindrops littered the counter, shed by raincoat, shed off uncaring shoulders. Gentle shoulders. Shoulders that would rush home from a night shift at the factory without question to shelter their love. Shoulders so broad and strong but that would never harm Lynn, never, no matter how much the black ball in Cilla’s chest tightened at the thought of the lonely child with the bloody nail beds being tricked by yet another man.

Cilla waited. Still, now. Quiet as she could be, and still. Still and breathless until Loomis House and her were one. The storm seethed against the refurbished exterior, rain ballistic, wind demoniac, dying pandaemonium, and she felt nothing until the tip of a toe pressed into the old splinters and reprocessed fiberboard of the antique butcher’s block and woke her.

Suspended in the dim fluorescent by two gangly arms, a shape more shadow than man. His faded jacket striped with duct tape; his beard exploded out from beneath a ratty fishing hat, forehead marked with a tarnished square. Captive heat chased him from inside the attic along with a sprinkle of dust, churning the smell of human waste and mold among the bleach-kissed surfaces of the kitchen.

Grease-marked fingers left their hang. A drop into a crouch. Silent, the man stood listening. No sound. Just the wind beating against the house in the same tempo as the drip from the total darkness above the open attic door.

Hollow eyes reflected in the chrome refrigerator handle. Cold light illuminated dandruff and nits, shingles and stains. Dirty fingers around the hot sauce bottle, chapped lips to the rim. One long stroke of the thumb through the untouched mayonnaise, white streaks on mustache and sore.

“That’s very, very rude,” Cilla said. “Now we have to throw the whole thing out.”

All his little body stilled save for his tongue, white and red, its far bed a yellow sponge. It darted in a snakelike slither to lap up a squeeze of mustard.

“I’ve been patient with you until now, sir, but at the present juncture I’d prefer you leave. You’ve stayed your welcome and now it is time to go. I’ve only ever removed one other gentleman caller from the premises, but—”

A hand lashed out. Scrawny. In its grip, a stolen bottle opener. The corkscrew spike slipped across Cilla’s throat, gouging. A hole sagged open, and he was atop her. Greedy fingers pried her blouse. Lips descended to suck. But there was no blood—no blood at all. Her wound yawned open, and there was no blood.

She clicked her tongue.

The only apology he could offer was a backstep and a nasal inhalation. The dying fluorescent beneath the cabinets snuffed, and when it returned, the Pilgrim had gone. What shredded offal was left of him no longer graced the spotless kitchen, but instead the lonely, tenebrous place Mike had gone the day he'd choked Lynn blue while they made love.

Cilla closed her throat and the refrigerator door. Tabasco and mayonnaise jar joined each other in the trash can. Straightening her apron, she took her seat beside the butcher's block, gently fingering the old chops and marks in the fiberboard cast from the old sawdust of a pile of junkyard wood.

Her smile came unbidden. Nerves impelled a little laugh, filtered through her fingers, spurred by the disappointment laid about her heart. The Pilgrim was a man. Just a daring transient, not a ghost, despite how it would've wrinkled her nose while fulfilling her hopes.

She hadn't known she'd wished Lynn was right until she was so certainly wrong. Of course there were no ghosts at Loomis House: Cilla had been living there for two-hundred and twenty-nine years and had never seen a one.