

## BLOOD BOX

### Part 1

"Eve? Eve!?" I snapped from my apparent trance. I looked over to my mother-in-law blankly.

"Huh? Yes?" I replied.

"How are you holding up dear? I know this has been very difficult for you, especially with all of your... 'issues'." she said with a disingenuous tone of concern. She never really liked me. The feeling was always mutual

"Jane!" my father in-law interjected.

"No, it..it's okay Frank..I'm hanging in there, I guess..." I said.

I just wanted this reception to be over with. Every person who moves a step closer in my direction my world shrinks and with it my chest tightens more and more. I haven't been around this many people in a very long time and without him next to me *alive*, I just can't handle this.

"Come here baby!" my mother told me as she swept me away from the group of people forming around me. She must have seen me struggling. "Just breathe sweetie, it's okay."

"Mom!" I said as I broke down, sobbing uncontrollably. "I can't do this without him, I can't live life without Mark!"

"Evellyne, you are stronger than that sweetie. It's going to take some time but you will get through it okay?" She reassured me.

"Mrs. Preston?" a soft, apologetic man's voice was heard from behind me. "I'm very sorry, I see this is bad timing but I have to make my flight back to Germany and I needed to speak with you before I left." It was a young, handsome black man in his Air Force dress blue's quite a bit shorter than me, though a lot of people are as I am just over 6' myself. "Ma'am Technical Searge...errr uhmmm, Mark was my supervisor. I was deployed with him in Germany when the accident happened. I brought what belongings he had with him and I wanted to personally deliver them to you." He gestured over to another Airman that was gripping two luggage. One large green military one and a smaller black one resting on top, along with two large cardboard boxes. "Tech Sergeant Preston made me a great mechanic. He was an amazing mentor and one hell of an Airman, ma'am" his voice cracked and his eyes began to water.

I could barely squeak a "thank you" as I was so overcome with emotions when I caught a glimpse of the little enamel Pokémon pin of Eevee attached to the smaller bag. He used to always call me his 'little emo Eevee', but now I'll never hear him speak those words again.

"Where would you like us to place these ma'am?" he asked.

The house was in such disarray. I felt embarrassed holding a funeral reception in a house undergoing renovations and repairs but there was no way I was going to manage tearing myself from here to be around this many people due to my 'issues' as Jane so eloquently put it.

"Uhhmm please, follow me." I told him. We stepped away from the dining room and passed the kitchen through to the living room. Each room was either undergoing maintenance from the replumbing or littered with furniture draped in thick white canvas protecting it from what were future painting plans. Who knows if I could bring myself to do it now, It all feels so...pointless. "I'm sorry, the plumbers are completely redoing the plumbing downstairs, something about the old well system, would bringing this upstairs be a problem?" I asked.

"Not at all ma'am. Jeffries, give me a hand here," he beckoned to the other Airman. I showed them 'our' room and they placed the items in there. I thanked them and they left.

I returned downstairs to my mom wrapping up my current hell, that was the reception. She knew I was struggling and she was thanking everyone for coming, paying their respects and showing support. I reluctantly stayed at the door thanking each person as they left. After the last one left, only my mother and father remained. I immediately collapsed on the floor. This time no tears came. Nothing did, no feelings, like I was injected with a lethal force of lidocaine. My mother instinctively went to the couch and grabbed the throw and an accent pillow and buried me neatly inside on the floor. As my eyes grew heavy and I drifted off I heard my father mutter under his breath, "she's doing this bullshit again?" I started to hear my mother challenge him but I didn't care, I just wanted to sleep. That's all I wanted. Well, that and to not wake up, ever again.

## Part 2

*Thump-thump....Thump-thump* A soothing rhythm played. *Thump-thump...Thump-Thump...* Gently guiding me from my slumber. *Thump...Thump...* Like a reverse lullaby. *THUMP...THUMP...* My eyes opened. The sound ceased to exist. My heart was racing, I was soaked in sweat. I took in my surroundings.

"Mom?" I called out. No answer. I was alone. It was dark out. I checked my phone, 8:19 PM. I've been out for a little over five hours. I was late taking my meds. I hated being downstairs at night in the dark. I usually leave most of the lights on in the house at night. My mother didn't happen to leave any lights on when they left, whenever that was. The switch near the door still hasn't been repaired. My only option was my phone light.

I stared down at it, pausing my gaze at the screen saver. I was met with a duality of emotions. Warmth, from the adoring loving smile of my husband looking into the camera as he embraced me. A portion of my long, straight black hair transitioned into crimson just above his upper lip as he wore it as a mustache for the picture. My eyes were closed, my midnight eyeliner streaked

down my face like a dying river flowing from the corners of my eyes. I was crying tears of laughter from his tickles during that picture. It was finished off with a slight blur from the motion when I took it, 'hard to keep a steady hand in that situation' I thought to myself. Still, it was one of my favorite pictures of him.

Then sadness crept in and smothered that small fleeting moment of peace. I desperately wanted to hold onto that feeling like it was a lifeline but I stood no chance. I was trying to protect the most delicate ember from a torrential downpour with a tennis racket. Every time I thought about a moment in time I had with him, I thought about a hundred more I would have without him. That sentiment was cut short however when I jumped in place from a loud cracking sound elsewhere in the house. The air conditioning unit kicked on and with it loose doors boomed and rattled in their frame, reverberating off the wooden walls throughout the house. I nearly jumped out of my skin.

I really cannot wait for the rest of our household items to finish being delivered. I desperately needed it to drown the echoes. I refocused on my task at hand and turned the light on and shined it before me. Large foreboding shadows cast on the walls. What was here casting those towering shadows? Furniture left behind. Furniture that no doubt has seen much untold history. My guess, most of it has been here a century at least, when the house was originally built. The house and its contents were as charming as they were haunting. Especially with the canvases strewn over the majority of it. My imagination couldn't help but find unwanted shapes in them. As I stepped through the room towards the other side, on my right were two large walnut bookshelves. In front of one, sharing its ragged aged veil, what seems to be a hunched mass. Protruding from it a haunting limb extends out desperately reaching to grasp something, anything perhaps. I shuddered and goosebumps crawled down my extremities. I shook my head and some of the nerves with it. It's actually beautiful, I reminded myself.

I placed it there myself. One of the few treasures this house offered when we moved in that I actually embraced. I remembered the beautiful ornate harp. It was the first thing I saw when we first came to see the house. It felt like it was like a scene from a movie. When we were let in the house there were dusted beams of afternoon light dancing on it like it was offering it to us as a gift. The main body of it was an elegantly posed angel with her arms behind her around the bulk of it like she was gently holding onto it. Tattered strips of fabric flowed whimsically across and around her body. Her wings, a golden hue, gently dulled by a long kiss of patina worn by time. They were stretching over the top across the width of the instrument forming the neck of it. Where feathers ended under the wings, strings began. Pulled taught like it was finely tuned and ready for a performance. Wear had shown throughout it but it wore it proudly. It was clear it was cared for by its previous owners. Paint on the body and face of the angel borne cracks throughout its slate colored skin and the eyes bestowed a bit of surprise. They were two small jet obsidian stones. My husband thought it creepy, I thought it was a beautiful juxtaposition.

The fond memory which helped to steel myself was abruptly gutted as I was quickly jerked back to reality, *literally*. I thought I was imagining it, like it was one of the hallucinations I get, but I don't *feel* hallucinations. My hair was yanked as I was stepping forward, my shoulder fell back

against the wall as my whole body weight followed suit. My legs give out but my head doesn't lose altitude as I scream a blood curdling scream "AAHHHHHHHHH". My phone carried forward from my momentum leaving my grip, tumbling on the hard floor. The light beaming around the house with each flip like a nightmarish strobe light. I instinctively reach my hands to my head where there is an immovable death grip on my hair. My hands are met with an ice-cold metal. I desperately feel around trying to make sense of the situation as I feel intricate details in the metal's touch. I frantically try ripping away at my hair to free myself, my hands shaking uncontrollably not wanting to cooperate, my struggles in vain.

I realized I had made it across the living room to the hallway while lost in thought and the light switch was barely in reach. After what felt like a lifetime of reaching and ripping at my hair, my scalp felt as though it would tear away from my skull at any given moment. My fingertips felt the welcoming feel of the light switch plate.

"Almost there!" I tell myself. I pulled harder, wrenching forward. A slight give in my hair went as I screamed in pain. My fingertip just grazes the side of the switch. I lurched harder, a tearing sensation ripped through my cranium only I could hear. One last scream, one last give as I finally flick the switch as though it's my salvation. I twist my head desperately still anchored in place, searching my peripherals for the answer, eyes watering. I felt behind me but found nothing but hard wooden walls. Frantically I reach at the metallic vice grip on my hair still trying to deduce what it was. My eyes cleared up shortly after and I looked up across the hallway directly opposite of me.

I yelled out a "ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME!?" followed by what most people (myself included) would probably describe as a maniacal mixture of uncontrollable psychotic laughter and hysterical crying. I felt like my eyes were going to pop from their sockets across the room, tears spewing constantly. I knew I looked insane, hell I felt insane. When I finally calmed down, I again looked across the hall and let out a "fuck you!", throwing a middle finger up at the wrought iron sconce that sits mounted opposite its twin that had its twisted prongs still mangled in my hair.

For nearly 30 minutes I tried to free myself. My hair was put up in a tight braided bun my mother did for the event today. It felt like it was a permanent part of the fixture. I tried pulling the sconce from the wall, wrestling it desperately. I hung my entire weight on it lifting my legs off the ground and I just dangled there, not even a nudge. I don't weigh a lot but I am tall, I thought that might count for something. "I guess this is how I die" I half joked to myself. I noticed my phone on the ground and that was where my height did pay off. I stretched my entire body out, outreaching my leg and was able to manage getting my foot on my phone and dragging it over to myself.

After a phone call to my mother, about an hour's wait, and a less-than-ideal haircut later, we were both having a good laugh about my little adventure as we huddled up in front of the fireplace. In the back of my mind I couldn't stop thinking how terrified I was though. How uneasy I am in the house alone. Knowing the little respite from that feeling during my mother's company

would be extinguished the next few days. She stayed with me that night and the next couple nights, until her and dad had to fly back to Ohio. Each night I fell asleep to the same soothing beat that awoke me that day. *Thump-Thump, Thump-Thump, Thump-Thump. THUMP-THUMP.*

### Part 3

I'm alone. This is the first time I truly have been since Mark passed. My mother pretty much immediately flew down to be with me when I got the news. Such a stupid, avoidable accident that ripped him from me. I try not to think about it. I try not to harbor hate for the driver that sealed his fate. My mother raised me to always try to forgive because hate will make you bitter and consume you. I try not to let the anger and despair eat at my mind and soul. I know it will fester and rot away at me. I try not to let my depression pull me down like an anchor with no floor to find. Try not to let it paralyze me, constricting me into an inescapable cocoon of dark feelings and thoughts I know would plague my mind if I let it grab hold. I have been there too many times. Mark helped me with that.

I try so hard to distract myself. Force myself to do tasks like painting the living room, work on my sculpture commissions, do ANYTHING. It's hard when you are empty inside though. I can't find joy, excitement, or motivation. I tried to remember what they felt like but those memories were sealed behind a wall, each brick a negative feeling or emotion. When I eventually was able to force myself to commit to a task I decided to finish painting the living room walls that were left undone. After about two hours of grueling up and down roller strokes I decided to take a break to have lunch and feed the kitties outside.

They weren't mine per se. I found a stray calico at the wood line by my house. I fed her a single can of tuna and she has been glued to my house since. I named her Dahlia after my favorite band. She and her surprise litter of kittens always hang around outside and I feed them when I can remember.

As I was carrying the bowls with the freshly poured food I had one foot across the threshold of the door as I stopped dead in my tracks. *Thump-Thump* I heard clear as day. The hairs on my nape prickled up as a chill crept down my spine. I spun on my heels and stood there looking off into the house, nowhere in particular but listening intently for it to come again. Nothing at first but after about a minute another followed, more faint but no doubt present *Thump-thump*. I took steps in the direction I thought it came from. I shook my head as if to ask myself 'what the hell are you doing' but I couldn't help myself. I had to know what it was I had been hearing each night.

I originally chalked it up to the hallucinations I suffer from but never have I had one *THIS* consistent, *THIS* mesmerizing. *Thump-thump* I heard again, fainter.

"Up stairs!" I thought to myself. Without thinking I loosened my grip and the bowls crashed to the floor creating an explosion of cat food everywhere, it didn't phase me. I dashed to the bottom of the staircase and grabbed the banister whipping myself around then jump-skipping

stairs, nearly faceplanting as I tripped up desperately seeking the cardiac siren. I stopped myself in the middle of the hallway so I could deduce which direction it would come from next.

I waited there, a good three minutes at least. My heart was nearly beating out of my chest as I tried to keep my panting under control. I didn't want it to shroud the sound if it came again. Just as disappointment sank in at the thought it wouldn't come again, one last whispered echo came from behind me as if it were a football field away *thump*. I slowly turned. The direction it came from was a room just four feet away, our bedroom. The door creaked open as I stepped inside. Somehow I knew the sound wasn't coming again. I stood there for a while in a daze. I eventually snapped out of it.

I started looking around every inch of the room for any justification for the sound. I found nothing. 'I'm actually going crazy,' I told myself as I rubbed my temples. As I was about to leave, my eye fell upon the pile of my husband's belongings that were brought up here earlier that week. I began unpacking his things. I started with the two boxes. They were full of a variety of uniforms and other military paraphernalia. There were various documents such as flight itineraries, nothing I was too concerned with. His larger luggage was more of the same, with his civilian clothes mixed in. I found his favorite hoodie. I clenched it, holding it to my chest, burying my face in it. It smelled of his cologne he always used. The black band hoodie was a gift from me for his last birthday. I started getting choked up as I was having memories of the good times and the bad times, missing both now. I slipped the hoodie on as I continued digging through the luggage.

After removing all the items and neatly organizing and putting them up as if they were stocked, ready for him to wear again, I noticed one last thing in the backpack which I thought was emptied. In one of the smaller zippers on the back was a small bulge. I slipped my hand in and when I grabbed the item I was hit by some mixture of eagerness and desire. I pulled out a small box wrapped with brown wrapping paper with a little bow on. It had a little tag with a heart and "Eve" written on it. I was surprised and excited but my heart started pounding unreasonably fast. Something inside of me wanted to ravenously open the package and I wasn't sure where that feeling was coming from. I tried to calm down but I found myself already opening the package. I opened the box up and it was filled with small foam packing peanuts. I dug in and made contact with a small metal cube, my chest tightened and I felt something deep inside me feel like it was trying to emerge. It's hard to explain but it felt dark and wrong. It shook me and I desperately tried to suppress it.

I pulled the object out and was taken aback with its beauty. It was a small metal box. Each face was probably about four inches tall and wide. It was beautifully inscribed with a myriad of intricately engraved filigree. It consisted of a series of sliding and shifting parts. I adore small trinkets and artifacts. I LOVE 3D puzzles. This seemed to tick both boxes. Inside the package I retrieved a small scroll of paper written with "Eve, I saw this and immediately thought of you. I hope you like it and happy anniversary. Love, Mark". It had a small doodle of Eevee's face from Pokémon smiling with black lines flaring from its eyes just like I always wear my eyeliner. I had a big smile on my face. I found myself immediately fidgeting with the metal box. I couldn't put it down.

I laid back and started working away trying to solve the puzzle. Sliding certain pieces around would unlock mechanisms allowing others to move and articulate. It was very hypnotic, with each piece freeing another, I grew more and more entranced by it. I found myself laboring away at it for quite some time. Thirty minutes grew to an hour then to two then three. I would grow more enthralled the more time I spent with it. I felt an obsession, like I couldn't put it down until its completion. The more I went the more I felt like I couldn't breathe until I made progress. How could such a small box contain so many moving pieces and so many intricate mechanisms? It seemed impossible but it didn't seem to affect me.

I finally came to a point where I could no longer progress the puzzle. A small hole revealed itself on one side. I peered inside but could see nothing but pitch black. It was impossibly black, almost incomprehensibly so. I tried shining a light inside and nothing, it was completely unaffected. It seemed to absorb any light cast onto it. I still felt transfixed on the box. I felt like I still needed something from it, or maybe it needed something from me? Before I knew it my hand seemed to move on its own. I plunged my pointer finger inside the small abyss and was immediately impaled by some sort of needle or spike inside! I yelped from the pain as it jammed into the bone. I instantly tried to pull my finger out but it was too late.

Some unseen mechanism activated within the box and the hole had closed around my digit. A series of spikes from inside pierced through down to the bone. I thought my finger was cut off as I unleashed another howling scream but the hell box was still fixed to it, not letting go. Suddenly an intense burning like I have never felt before coursed through my hand and up into my veins spreading throughout my body. I tried to let another scream escape but no sound came, my vocal chords were stunned from the pain. It felt as though the sun injected me with its plasma and I was being burned alive from the inside. It spread to every limb. I could see every vein and artery swell up with a thick black hue under my skin where the pain was spreading. It reached my chest, my heart felt as though it would implode any second. It reached my throat, still a mute void with all my screams and agony trapped inside. It reached my face, surely it was going to melt off and my eyes would explode out of their sockets. My vision was fading fast. My world was spinning into darkness. Then it reached my head. My brain was boiling in a blistering inferno and everything went as black as the small void that I unleashed from that hellish box.

#### Part 4

I woke up in a pool of my own sweat. It felt like ice water on my skin. My vision was blurry. I sat up and rubbed my eyes and then I remembered what happened. My body began shaking uncontrollably as I remembered the unbelievable pain I went through. I checked my finger and hand frantically, in a panicked breath. There was nothing. There were no wounds from the impaling, not a single blemish. What the hell was going on? I remembered the pain so vividly but I saw no evidence of it at all. The box, where the hell was it? I searched furiously, ripping the bed apart trying to find it. It was nowhere. I opened up every drawer, checked under every piece

of furniture. After 45 minutes my room was a disaster. I had no idea what the hell was going on. Are my hallucinations getting so realistic I'm imagining pain now?

I started feeling a deep sense of dread. I was feeling terrified and small in my own house. I already hated being here alone but these strange experiences I have been having amplify the feeling. I noticed it was dark outside now. It was 3:28 a.m. according to my phone, almost 15 hours since I had lunch. I headed downstairs flipping each light on as I entered each room. When I reached the bottom of the stairs and rounded the corner toward the kitchen something felt wrong. It felt like someone or something was there, watching me. Goosebumps formed on every inch of my skin. I wasn't sure what it was so I lit every room within my eyesight. When I reached the kitchen I caught sight of the basement door. I instantly froze. I wasn't sure what it was but I couldn't look away. I was stunned in fear from just the sight of it. I was fixated on a gouge in the door, an accident from the plumbers. It revealed a jagged hole into absolute darkness. I began feeling hyperaware of my surroundings. I could just picture something vile, or evil hiding in the dark peering back at me through the hole but nothing ever showed. After a minute of being frozen I finally forced myself to break free and I lunged to the door and twisted the lock closed then ran out of sight of it.

I noticed I had warm urine streaming down my leg. And I was once again trembling. What was that? I get creeped out from the darkness of the house, especially the basement but never that intense. I wiped myself clean and made some food. I sprinted past the basement door when I ran back up into my room, that feeling still lingering until I was out of sight of it. Locked myself in my room, and turned on the TV. I needed something to distract me, to stop my mind from playing the horrifying tricks on me. They are tricks right? I eventually drifted back to sleep, no heartbeat rhythm to be heard. I slipped into a horrible nightmare.

I was in a black abyss. I could barely see my hand in front of my face. I turned around and found a wall standing alone, probably five feet wide and eight feet tall. It was covered by a hideous wallpaper. It had vertical stripes with a variety of flowers lined up between them. I got closer and noticed something unusual. The wallpaper would raise and rest by something pulsing under the surface in small sections all around the wall. I pushed on a section as it bubbled up from the pulse and it had a soft feeling like some fluid was under it. I dug into the wallpaper with my fingernails and was met by a high-pitched snarl. I ignored the sound and dug harder picking at it until I finally tore through the surface. The snarl came again more intense this time. I dug my finger under the fresh tear and felt a warm fluid dripping down it; blood. I was freaking out in my mind but I kept on tearing at it, freeing a big chunk of wallpaper, more blood seeping from under. I clenched the hideous flap and pulled with all my strength, ripping out a long bloody flap up the height of the wall. Blood sprayed and splattered, covering my face and peppering my whole body with thick blood specs. A loud primal screech came with it.

The wall beneath wasn't a wall at all but revealed a surface of exposed muscle and viscera throbbing uncontrollably, constricting and contorting. I grabbed under another piece of the wallpaper, yanking another large chunk of it, the screeches kept coming. I didn't stop, couldn't stop. I HAD to remove it. After some time the ground was littered with these thick folded and



curled shreds shining from glistening gore. The howls turned into a gurgling labored breath. They grew further and fainter from the next until the last one drowned under the gurgling. I stopped and took stock of my situation. I was completely covered now, every inch of me. I slipped and fell in the ocean of blood covering the ground now. I sat there a while, shocked at what I saw. Behind me I felt that dreadful feeling again. The sense of eyes piercing through me. I managed to turn around on my hands and knees, unable to stand from the slippery surface. Far off in the distance I could see a faint silhouette of a small square or rectangle. I squinted trying to make it out. It was getting bigger, no closer. Faster and faster it was coming. I struggled hopelessly flopping around trying to stand or move but the floor was impossibly slick. I looked up again and it was almost here. It moved like a bullet and just as it reached me it stopped three ft from me, blasting me with a massive rush of air. It was the basement door, resting in its frame. My heart sank, a lump in my throat formed as I stared into it against my will. The same dreaded feeling overtook me and I was trembling. I could hear my heart pounding. The door clicked and creaked open just an inch or two. My heart went into overdrive. I flopped over onto my stomach, flailing around on all fours trying desperately to gain some traction. The door creaked a little more. I was screaming at the top of my lungs. I looked back and the door boomed open with a loud crash, I squealed in terror. A pure black void stared back at me then suddenly I was ripped inside by some unseen force. The door slammed behind me and I gasped awake from the hellish nightmare screaming out loud waking myself.

## Part 5

The nightmare was so vivid, so surreal. I woke up on the floor of my bedroom. The door was cracked open. I KNOW I locked it last night, and did I fall off the bed? I was reeling. Who or what opened the door? What brought on that grotesque nightmare? I must be sleepwalking or something, I tried to tell myself to ease my mind. My body was sore all over, especially my hands, like I had been working out. I checked the time, 5:22 p.m. I had been out for almost fourteen hours, but I was still exhausted.

“Damnit” I thought out loud. I missed my video appointment with my psychiatrist. I absolutely needed to speak to them. I called their office and the receptionist informed me the doctor agreed to still have a video appointment with me before they left the office for the day. About 45 minutes later I spoke to my doctor.

I told them about everything. The dread I feel being alone in the house, and how bone chilling I found it. My imagination, going to dark unsettling places. The ‘gift’ I found from my husband's belongings and it disappearing after that diabolical experience that I... think I had? The terrifying nightmare that made me never want to sleep again. The emptiness and the deep depression I am constantly being smothered by.

I wasn't happy with our conversation. She basically chalked it up to my increased stress and trauma of losing my husband, me grieving his loss and trying to come to terms with it. I understand that could 100% be a factor but I stressed that I didn't feel safe and was horribly worried something bad was going to happen. I swear she rolled her eyes as she told me I just needed to give my brain time to process everything and that I was going to be fine. She did finally decide to bump up the dosage of my antipsychotic medication and that gave me a small glimmer of hope. Maybe this would help give me some peace of mind. It did not.

Over the next week I had more dark experiences. Every time I was in sight of the basement door I had those same malevolent episodes of paralysis like something was gripping my soul trying to rip it from my body. I even thought I heard faint whispers seeping from it. I started going out the front door around the house to get to the kitchen just to avoid the basement. I ended up having another morbid, disturbing nightmare.

It started like the first one with me standing in infinite darkness with a scene lit up from an unseen light source in front of me. It was a peculiar tree. It had an uncanny shape like a crude stick figure. From the ground rose two gnarled trunks that angled towards each other and fused together at the center. From there two shambling branches sprouted outwards like raised ghostly arms forming a 'V' shape. In the valley of the two wretched limbs rested a large haunting burl. It had two deep empty sockets where eyes could or should be and a large hole forming a dreaded gaping wide mouth. Much like the first dream my body moved against my will. Laying on the ground next to the tree a small splintered axe. I approached it and picked it up, grasping it as hundreds of splinters entered my skin with intense piercing pain. I screamed on the inside. Blood began seeping through my clenched fingers as I raised the axe, winding back as if to hit a homerun. I lurched forward driving the axe's head into that burl of the tree. The sound was grotesque and unexpected. Instead of a thunk you might hear from chopping wood I was greeted with a squishy meaty thud instead. Dark sap splattered from the fresh wound onto my face. I heard a guttural gasp of breath leave its would-be mouth. I rocked the axe up and down to free it and followed up with several more consecutive blows to the tree. Each one met with wet meaty splats or sickening cracks always followed with spattering of deep dark amber colored sap. I eventually chopped deep enough into the limbs that I gripped them with my bleeding splintered hands and began twisting the limbs savagely trying to separate them from the tree. Each twist brought visceral wet tearing and sickening pops until a final rip, freeing it from its body. I did this for each limb and finally the burl. It brought a troubling, unwanted satisfying pop! I held the mass in my grip as I watched the sap drain until the last staggered drops ceased to drip.

It was followed by another familiar terrible scene. The small silhouette in the distance caught my attention and just like before it came for me. Rushing at a thousand miles an hour the dreaded basement door stalked me once again. This time I was glued down by the drying sap. I couldn't look away. I was frozen, slack jawed. The door clicked and creaked open little by little, then boomed open, almost breaking from the hinges. Pure darkness greeted me. I tried with every fiber of my being to run, to move, to budge at all. I couldn't even wiggle a finger. Then I felt something cold and unseen grip around my whole body slowly ripping me away from my sappy

prison. My arms were cemented to the floor but my body didn't wait for them. My skin ripped at the shoulder, followed by my bones popping from their sockets. This time an ear piercing scream escaped me. I was pulled closer and closer to the door. My skin finally tore away successfully leaving my arms behind. My veins and arteries still clung hopelessly to them stretching further and further until they ripped, freely dangling like glistening ribbons. Pulses of blood spurted constantly from them. My screaming stopped, as my vision was going. Then suddenly, I was torn away into the darkness of that dreaded basement, door slamming behind me.

I gasped myself awake trying to catch my breath. My hands and arms were throbbing. My head was pounding and I felt sick to my stomach. I was on the cold hard floor, downstairs in front of the basement door. My heart sank and filled with dread. I wasted no time, I lunged forward and slammed it shut engaging the lock and deadbolt. I ran away from it as fast as I could. How the hell did I get down there? I grabbed my keys, jumped in the car and floored it the hell out of there.

## Part 6

I checked into a nearby motel. I was holed up there for nearly a week until I realized my husband's paycheck never came that payday. I vaguely remember a conversation with the financial office saying I would need to apply for survivor benefits for him but I was so overwhelmed with the memorial service, the reception and all this madness I have been going through that it completely slipped my mind. I also received a phone call that Mark's ashes were ready to be picked up. I didn't want to drain what little savings we had in the savings account, I would need it for bills and groceries. I also haven't been able to pay the contractors to continue the work on the house for a while either. So, after I picked up Mark's ashes I went to the financial office and filled out the required paperwork. I was told it could take anywhere from three to eight weeks before I may receive the first deposit. I had no choice, I had to go back to that damned house. I didn't know anyone from around this area so I had no support system to turn to outside of my mother several states away.

When I returned home I made it a point to keep myself busy. I decided to work on sculpture commissions on Etsy. Sculpting was my passion. I could lose myself while sculpting and it made me feel so at peace, usually. It was hard to get that same feeling now for obvious reasons distracting me. Nevertheless I was able to complete my first piece in three days. That was \$300 that I desperately needed.

I also decided to get new locks for the house. Several times that week I discovered unlocked or opened doors throughout the house, including the outside doors, that I know for a fact I closed and locked. The locks came in the next day. After a couple hours and a helpful youtube tutorial I got a lot done. I added deadbolts to every door in the house, some now adorned two deadbolts but that's just an extra layer of defense I told myself. I got two of the three locks for the outside replaced. One lock was defective so I had to send it back and await a new one to come in. I really wished the locks made me feel better but if I am being honest they didn't.

That week was Mark's and my anniversary. I felt terrible knowing I was going to be spending it alone. It probably sounds pathetic but I decided to celebrate it like he and I always did, with a late night picnic on the beach. It wasn't easy for me to get myself to do it. I knew I would look crazy out there by myself with a candlelit picnic, but after much thought and consideration, I thought it would be a nice way to celebrate him. It was also an excuse to get some reprieve from this hellhole.

In preparation I dug out our beautiful picnic basket. It was a black stained wicker basket. Inside were two sets of plates, bowls and teacups each fashioned to the inner sides of the basket and underside of the lid in their own dedicated places. They were white porcelain with silver trim on the rim of each piece and beautiful black roses danced around the perimeters. Two sets of bright silver cutlery were also strapped under the lid. Neatly packed inside was a black and white checkered picnic blanket as well as several candles with silver candleholders. This basket was one of our first purchases as a newly wed couple eight years ago. That was a wonderful day.

I also couldn't go out there alone so I found a small vial that I fashioned into a cute necklace to hold his ashes in, to wear around my neck. Next I found one of his service dress pictures from the Air Force and placed it into a picture frame to take with me. The last thing was the food. We had a silly tradition. We wrote a list of foods that we have heard of but never tried and would make an effort to be adventurous by picking up a dish that we decided on and try it out on the picnic. I retrieved the list from between the plates in the basket and unfolded it. There was our little list. Fifteen dishes written on it with seven crossed out. Some of the notable crossed out ones were: *Ceviche* with a vomiting face drawn next to it, *Pho* with 'meh' written next to it, and *Chicken Tikka Marsala* with 'HELL YES!' written next to it. I remembered each of those nights vividly. We had no idea what Ceviche was and laughed a lot that night after he threw up all over the blanket after one bite. After scanning the list I decided on *Kebab* for that night. After getting ready and gathering the things I clenched the vial hanging from my neck, took a deep breath and left for the beach.

## Part 7

After picking up the food I arrived at the beach. I was surprised and disappointed with how many people were there at night. I had to walk quite a way down to get a section of beach without anyone nearby. I unpacked the basket, laid out the blanket and set up Mark's picture. As I started pouring two glasses of our favorite wine I got a knot in my stomach when a small convoy of ATVs with a bunch of rowdy teenagers crested over the sand hill. They were all hooting and hollering and being obnoxiously loud. I contemplated packing up and leaving then and there but decided against it when I laid eyes on Mark's photo. Once again I clenched the vial in my hand and continued doing my thing trying to ignore the kids. I could hear faint mentions of me from them and saw them looking over at me several times as they started up a campfire. It was hard not to overhear them.

The kebab was amazing. I put it up to his picture as if to let him try it and asked "good huh?" as my heart started swelling up. Next thing I know a football came crashing in shattering a plate and spilling everything. I was shocked, trying to figure out what just happened.

One teen ran over and gave a sarcastic "oopsie" with a large devilish grin on his face. As I looked over his nose wrinkled and brow furrowed in disgust as he said "what are you doing freak?", his gaze settling on the picture frame. I grabbed it and pulled it to my chest.

"Nothing, leave me alone," I murmured.

"Wow, you look pathetic!" he said, cackling out a laugh.

"Lets go Sam", two of the girls yelled from the group. "Leave that weirdo alone," they added. He snatched the ball from the chaos it caused and ran away kicking up sand over everything. I started hyperventilating uncontrollably, a panic attack quickly ensued. I tried fixating on objects around me to calm me but it went on for a good six minutes. The whole time I could hear those little bastards laughing. I curled up and rolled over on my side still holding the picture close to me as I began sobbing. Before I knew it I drifted off. After some time I was woken up by a police officer shaking me awake.

"Ma'am...ma'am I need you to wake up." I felt my shoulder being quickly shaken. I opened my eyes and was greeted by an officer from the local police department kneeling down with his hand on my shoulder. He stood up and grabbed a small notebook and pencil from his shirt pocket. "I need you to stand up for me ma'am." I was really out of it but after a small struggle I brought myself to my feet, my whole body was aching.

"I'm sorry I didn't mean to fall asleep here." I said through a tired whisper.

"Well, that's not the problem, I mean it's dangerous to sleep out here but I need you to answer a few questions." When my vision cleared I noticed another officer about 20 feet away. He was speaking with the kid that grabbed the ball earlier, the kid was talking and pointing in my direction.

"Okay, what's the problem officer?" I asked.

"Ma'am did you attack these kids?" he asked. I scoffed, through a raised brow.

"Wha- what? Excuse me?" I stammered.

"That young man over there said you went over and cursed them out and then proceeded to choke him. I need you to be honest with me." I was stunned, what the hell are they trying to pull here?

"N-no, hello no! That little shit came and trashed my stuff with their ball and came over to me and talked shit. I just ignored them and I guess I fell asleep." My mind was racing. Why the hell would they lie like that? I didn't do anything to them, this has got to be some kind of sick ass prank.

"Do you think maybe you got mad and...wait...Mrs. Preston?" he asked as he came to some kind of realization.

"Uhm yes?" I said in surprise.

"I was part of the detail for your husband's funeral service, I'm...I'm very sorry about your husband ma'am."

"Oh uh, thank you." I replied, lowering my head.

He gently tapped his pen on his chin, looked over at the kids and back at me, then let out a low "hmmmm". "You know what?" he asked. This ain't the first time these kids have gotten into an altercation that the police had to intervene. They don't have any proof of what they're claiming. Why don't you just pack up and head home Mrs. Preston." He flipped his notebook closed and tucked it away. I let a big sigh of relief out.

"Oh, okay thank you sir." I replied. I quickly began gathering my things up.

"Have a good night ma'am and be safe driving home" he told me as he turned and walked towards the other officer.

"What the hell? You're letting that bitch leave?" The boy shouted as he noticed what I was doing. "Put her ass in jail man!" He said in a high-pitched voice. I finished packing and practically ran to my car. I never wanted to go out in public again.

## Part 8

I felt deflated. Everything seemed to be going horribly for me. I was still plagued with several more of those ungodly nightmares, all following the same terrible formula as the ones before. Still waking up in parts of the house I didn't fall asleep in. Waking up feeling like I had done full body workouts the night before. Sometimes waking up with minor injuries and occasionally what seemed to be black dried ink stains covering my hand or other parts of my body. One such time I woke up with every one of my fingers in excruciating pain, each of my fingernails bent backwards like I was clawing at something hard. I was still hearing and seeing things, unwanted. And, to top it all off I haven't seen Dahlia or her kittens in weeks. I am terribly worried because on the back porch there were specs of what I believe to be dried blood and clumps of their hair. I really hope something bad didn't happen to them but I had a feeling deep down that something did.

One day while watching the local news there was a story covering a string of disappearances for the county I lived in. Apparently this is the third person in the last month to be reported missing. They showed pictures of each of the missing persons. The first was a small girl. She was seven years old. The picture showed a sweet little girl sitting atop a small pony. The girl had brown hair with braided hair and an adorable smile with two of her front teeth missing. She never made it home walking home from school. The next was a lady, 25 years old. Her picture was jarring though. It was a mugshot of a lady who appeared to be damn near 40. She coincidentally also had missing teeth but for obviously different reasons. She had dirty blonde hair up in a frizzy ponytail. She also had sores all over face and arms, and her skin had a weathered leathery appearance. She had all the tell-tale signs of being an addict of some sort. She went missing from a local homeless shelter. The third person was a high school teacher from the next town over. He was a good looking man, aged 32. He reminded me a lot of Clark Kent from Superman. He had a strong jawline and wore black thick framed glasses and had jet-black hair neatly combed over to one side. He damn near looked like a Clark Kent cosplayer. He never showed up to school on a Monday to teach. This story made me very uneasy, as I shot a look at my doors thinking about how I keep finding them ajar.

The last lock did finally arrive but I came across a strange and unsettling realization when I went to install it. I was searching for the video I used before to install the locks. While going through my search history I found a search that I didn't perform. 'How to remove dead smell.' Chills ran down my spine, a feeling I have become all too familiar with. Who the hell used my computer? Did I accidentally search for that somehow? That's what I wanted to believe instead of some terrifying alternative. I quickly deleted that search as if to erase it from reality. I finally got the last lock replaced. If someone WAS entering the house they would have to make a bigger effort than using a key to the old locks.

Changing the locks changed nothing. I still found locked doors unlocked or left open. About a week after installing the last lock my husband's first survivors' benefits payment finally came in. I immediately went to amazon to order a surveillance system to install around my house. I wanted to make sure I could catch anything and everything freaky that's been happening here, so I splurged on high quality cameras. I got six 4k cameras with infrared nightvision capabilities.

## Part 9

The day finally arrived and I received the surveillance system. None of my husband's tools were here and I am one of the least tech savvy people on this god forsaken planet so I hired a handy man. I found Matthew through a Facebook group for my town after I made a help wanted post for a handyman. Matthew was nice enough albeit a bit too flirtatious. He took about three hours to install the cameras. He then showed me how to install and navigate the app which let me view the camera's live feed from my phone or view the recorded video on my laptop with up to 96 hours worth of saved footage before it recorded over itself. He tried to offer me a 'discount' if I would let him take me out to coffee or dinner. I quickly rejected his offer and paid him in full. He left with an embarrassed red smile on his face and left his number on the instruction manual in case I had questions or changed my mind about his offer.

The next two days were unordinarily ordinary. No nightmares, no waking up in a different room, no doors unlocked or opened. I felt a sense of relief I hadn't felt in some time. Maybe things were changing back to normal I thought. Then, on the third night things went back to horrifying and my life as I knew it changed forever. It started with the nightmare. I found myself in that all too familiar darkness.

I gripped a large pig by its hind leg, dragging behind me with relative ease. The entire time it was whining and squealing but I wasn't bothered by it. I dragged it over to a pile of various tools and instruments. The first items I picked up were some unusually long and rusted railroad spikes. I took one at a time viciously plunging it into the swine's legs. One spike per leg I stabbed it in, where the joint of the leg meets its body. Each one I plunged in, the pig squealed uncontrollably. After the last one I grabbed a nearby sledge hammer. I gripped it with both hands and raised it high above my head and drove it into the first spike. The pig went wild, squealing in agony as the spike pierced into the ground, pinning its leg down. The next swing missed the spike hitting it in the leg with a sickening crack as the leg was forced from its socket. The squealing intensified. It squirmed helplessly as its freshly liberated limb flopped around attached only by its skin. The second swing hit its mark and the pig exhaled a low wheezing gasp this time. Its squeals were replaced by gurgled breaths now. I drove in the last two spikes and pinned the beast down like a frog on dissection day in science class.

I dropped the sledge hammer and reached for a straight razor. I unfolded the blade and swiftly went to work. I dug the blade into the belly of the pig ever so slightly, just under its throat. I pulled the blade towards me, slicing a paper thin layer of skin. The pig tried to let out a squeal but could only manage a pathetic squirm as its whole body writhed. I continued this for quite some time. When I was done, the whole body was a skinless heap of glistening fat and muscle. The pig was still conscious but just barely. Once it was barely still breathing, I grabbed one final tool. I took the giant pair of hedge shears and drove it down into what was unmistakably its exposed jugular. A tear followed by a blast of crimson spray exploded from the impact. Blood dripped from my face.

I knew what came next. I was forcibly wrenched around as some unknown force gripped my throat and lifted me nearly three feet off the ground. Then, in the distance, I could see the door closing in fast. I started blacking out from the lack of oxygen, but before I did, the door arrived and immediately flung open. I was violently thrown into the darkness. The door slammed shut right behind me. Once again I woke from the nightmare gasping for air in a state of panic.

## Part 10

When I woke I was still unbelievably tired. I had no energy and just felt defeated. I also realized I wasn't in my bed where I fell asleep but laying facedown on the couch downstairs. I could barely move but I did manage to reach the TV remote and flick on the television. The weather was just finishing up, transitioning into a breaking news segment. I saw the date, Jesus, I've been out for days I realized! Then, another missing person report. I was met with a very



familiar face. 27 year old Matthew Cuttingham last seen earlier that week leaving his apartment and never returning. "Holy shit!" I blurted out loud shooting upright on the couch. What the hell is going on? He was just here! Was I fucking next!? I ran to each of my doors making sure they were locked. I also pushed a piece of furniture in front of each door to barricade myself in. I checked all the windows in the house and made sure they were all secured. 'Surveillance!' I thought to myself.

I darted upstairs to my bedroom to retrieve my laptop. I snatched it off the charger and leaped on my bed. I quickly opened it and navigated to the app to view the recordings. I chose the day Matthew came over. I viewed camera one, which shows the side of the house where I park my car. 20 minutes after the feed went live I saw Matthew getting into his truck and driving away. I fast forward to the next day I saw myself leaving to go get groceries and return 45 minutes later with a few bags. The next night I saw myself walk out of the house and get in my car and drive off. Wait, did the video glitch? Is it showing the same video of me leaving to get groceries? I haven't left the house since then. I checked the date and sure enough it's from the next night. I fast forwarded another hour and a half. I see myself pull back up and get out of the car, then a figure gets out of the passenger seat, Matthew Cuttingham.

"What the fuck!?" I yelled out. I picked up my phone to dial 911.

In the video I grab him by the hand and lead him into the house through the kitchen door. I fast forward to see when he leaves. After quite a while of fast forwarding the video catches up to the live feed of the house. Wait he...he never left here? I rewind to the point where we enter the house and cycle the cameras. Camera four shows a view from the corner of the dining room past the basement door and into the kitchen. We step inside and take our coats off, I pull him close to me and kiss him. My stomach churned. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Then I grab him by the hand again and lead him out of the kitchen.

"911 what's your emergency?" I hear on the other side of the call.

"Hello I..." I stopped speaking mid sentence as I saw myself unlock the basement door, open it and we both disappeared through the threshold. I dropped the phone and it crashed to the floor.

"Hello? You dialed 911, do you have an emergency?" I faintly heard through the speaker. I quickly scooped up the phone and lied.

"Sorry my kid must have dialed this number" and hung up.

I stared blankly at the screen letting the video play in real time. Over an hour later I emerged from the basement. I wore a large apron, long black rubber gloves and some sort of safety glasses. It was black and white due to the lights being off but I stiffly walked over to the kitchen sink and took each piece of gear off and rinsed them off in the sink. After 20 minutes of this I carried the items back down to the basement and emerged once again empty handed. I turned

and locked one lock on the basement and walked out of sight to the hallway towards the living room. Camera five shows me enter the living room and lie face down onto the couch. I fast forwarded, three days later and I hadn't moved. Then, I see myself gasping for air as I wake up.

I started shaking uncontrollably. I didn't want to but I had to go down into that basement. Reluctantly, I found my large flashlight, it was so bright it made it look like daytime in a dark room. I slowly crept down the stairs. I grabbed the bat I keep near the door in case I ever had to go little league on someone's ass. I walked through the living room down the hallway and turned the corner and am once again stun-locked in place when I see the basement door. My heart was going a thousand miles an hour. I began feeling hyper aware of everything around me. After a minute I broke free and finally managed to take a step towards the door. I slid my feet inch by inch. When I reached towards the door the air around it was ice cold. I slowly slid the door bolt and the door pulled free from its frame and creaked open ever so slightly. I pointed the light inside and the brightness somehow was being absorbed by the darkness. I could only see a few feet in front of me like there was some sort of veil limiting the reach of the light.

"Hello!?" I tried to yell into the dark but it came out more of a whimper. Urine streamed down my leg as I stepped down the first step. No sooner had I stepped through to the darkness than the door clicked and sealed itself behind me. I cried and quickly turned around but the door handle was immovable. I closed my eyes tightly and didn't want to open them again. Then I began hearing the whispers. Different volumes, different pitches, different voices, all unintelligible. It sounded like a lost unknown language. I found myself stepping down the staircase, my body was moving against my wishes. I held the flashlight as far in front of me as I could to maximize the distance I could see. My foot eventually found flat ground. I was in the belly of the beast. I turned the corner and my foot found some kind of puddle losing stability. My foot slipped forward forcing my legs into the splits painfully pulling my groin muscle. The flashlight and bat both left my grip as I swiftly fell to the ground.

I screamed in pain, doubled over as I struggled to pull my legs together once again. The light had settled on a short stone well. As soon as I laid eyes on it I heard that dreadful heartbeat. It thumped so loud I could barely think straight. I quickly covered my ears but it beat just as loud. Through the agony I noticed a mass hunched over the well. I scrambled over to the light and shined it closer to the mass. It was a body, pinned down to the well. All the skin had been flayed from its muscles. I tried to jump back but still couldn't gain any traction. I was stuck there next to it sloshing about in the wetness. I finally shined the light on the floor and saw I was practically swimming in the blood from the body. I grabbed on to the well and struggled to pull myself up. The light found its way to the face of Matthew hunched over, blood still dripping from his slit throat. I screamed again and fell back.

Only for an instance the light revealed the most evil, horrific sight I have ever witnessed. It was only for a second but the image is forever burned into my brain. Huge, pure-white, dagger-like teeth formed an impossibly large, sinister grin beneath two almond-shaped eyes with large pupils, all set in an enormous, pitch-black, glistening, demonic face. With every blink, that image haunts me, projected on the inside of my eyelids. I tried to scream but nothing ever

came. I grabbed onto something on the wall to try to pull myself up but it tore from the hook it hung on. The light revealed a small Hello Kitty backpack. I eventually found my footing and sprinted towards the stairs, once again my legs betrayed me. My foot found something small wrapped in a blanket or canvas of some kind, hurdling me forward. My head was greeted by the unwelcome touch of the hard brick wall. I felt warm blood running down my face, into my eye. I still gripped the light, I wasn't letting go again. But then the light started fading. No, my vision did. Darkness slowly smothered my vision and with it my consciousness. I woke up in bed, my memory slowly started returning to me. I reached for my head where it hit the brick wall. It was perfectly fine. I...I did hit my head right? I know I did, it was too damn real. I looked myself over and I was clean. No injuries, no blood, no piss, no split open head, just sore all over like always.

That was nearly a year ago now. The nightmares haven't stopped. I still wake up where I shouldn't, still see things that shouldn't exist, still see that unholy face every time I close my eyes. Those memories and experiences I've endured have left me calloused. Most days I just lie in bed, empty, soulless and completely devoid of emotion. I have even tried to end it all, multiple times, but every time, I always wake up unscathed.

I'm laying in bed now, dead inside, trapped. I flick on the TV. The glow from it dimly fills the room. Another breaking news segment. Another missing persons report. Person number fifteen missing in these mysterious vanishings.