

**A
Colder
Home**

Jillian Maria

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First Printing, 2026

Print ISBN: 978-1-7338635-3-7

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SLUGLINE

EXT. RURAL ROAD - AFTERNOON

There is a truck crumpled against a tree. Broken glass litters the ground. Smoke pours from the hood. Faint rock music still plays from the radio.

CLOSE-UP ON: A pale hand dangling out the shattered window. Blood drips from its fingertips into the snow.

WE'RE GOING TO die.

The truck drifts across the barely visible road and hits the shoulder with a jolt, wheels grinding as they wage a losing battle against gravel and ice. Noah leans forward, gripping the wheel in both hands.

“Shit,” he mutters, more annoyed than alarmed.

I’m alarmed enough for the both of us. I can picture our deaths perfectly, typed out in the same font as the movie scripts I write. Fitting, since it’s a script we’re currently risking life and limb to film. I should have known this was a terrible idea. I *did* know, but now it’s too late.

At the last moment, Noah coaxes the truck back onto the road. The cargo bed wavers, then straightens. “*Whew*,” he breathes. He’s relieved.

I’m not. “Noah, maybe we should call this off.”

“What?” Noah shoots me a quick glance before returning his gaze to the road. His eyes, the same shade of brown as mine, are wide and incredulous. “We’re almost there. Doesn’t make sense to turn around now, does it?”

“I guess not, but...” But what? Despite my earlier internal hyperbole, I *hadn’t* thought this was such a terrible idea at first. When we’d left Ellis this morning, there’d only been light flurries. They barely stung my cheeks as I helped Noah pack the filming equipment into the truck, and the forecast had called for less than an inch. Nothing life-long Michigan residents like us couldn’t handle.

Not to say I was thrilled at the idea of filming *The Widow Ghost*. Personally, I would have been content to file it away with all my other half-finished projects. But Noah insisted. It seemed harmless enough to humor him.

It does not seem harmless now.

I look out the window at what little I can see through the thick white fog and streaking snow. It’s the kind of storm that happens once in a

lifetime. The kind of storm that ends with a death toll read out by a solemn-faced newscaster to all of those lucky enough to be safe in their homes when it hits.

The kind of storm that feels like an omen to those unlucky enough to be caught in it.

I swallow around the panic-shaped lump in my throat. Beneath my black sweater dress and thick tights, my skin is slick with a cold sheen of sweat despite the blizzard raging outside. “I think we should—”

Noah hits a patch of ice. The truck skids.

My hands fly to my face, eyes squeezing shut in reflex against the inevitable end. As the truck begins to spin, I wonder if we’ll have separate funerals, or if Aunt Carla and my mom will deign to get it all over with at once. INT. FUNERAL HOME — MORNING. Or maybe mourning. Two caskets sit side-by-side, surrounded by flowers. Inside, my pale hands are laced over the chest of a brightly colored dress I’d never wear in life, and Noah’s habitual red zip-up is replaced with a suit.

Actually, I sort of hope that the damage is extensive enough for a closed casket. The practice of leaving them open is ghoulish, and I don’t understand how anyone finds comfort in it. I’d only felt vaguely nauseated at my father’s wake, staring at him through prayers I didn’t hear and

condolences I don't remember. I couldn't stop wondering what sort of state he must have been in for the undertaker to put him back together so *wrong*, his waxy face shaped into an uncanny approximation of what he'd looked like in life.

The tires screech. My entire body braces, waiting for the crunch of metal against bark, and...

The truck slows to a halt.

My body unfurls in increments: back slowly easing into the seat, breath returning to lungs, legs releasing from their defensive crouch. When I lower my arms from my face, I see Noah in the driver's seat, his hands still white-knuckled against the wheel, his brown hair tousled.

"We're... here." When he smiles at me, he at least has the sense to look sheepish. "You okay?"

"Okay? I saw our *funeral*, Noah."

Noah begins to laugh. I laugh too, because it really does sound melodramatic when I say it out loud. Also, the leftover adrenaline from our near brush with death has me fighting off hysterics.

"You would be thinking about death, fucking goth," Noah says, with all due affection. "Come on, help me get the equipment out of the trunk."

He flings open the car door. A chill runs down my spine, one that has

nothing to do with the cold wind that rushes into the cabin of the truck. “Are you sure you want to film this?”

Noah pauses, halfway out of his seat. His wide-eyed stare is the same one he used to give me when we were children and I suggested maybe *not* going along with one of his half-baked plans. It’s his patented ‘*you’re being crazy, Cleo*’ stare. “Are you kidding me? We’re already here.”

“But the cast isn’t,” I argue. “And if the storm keeps on like this... obviously, no project is worth risking their lives for. But especially not this one. We’re just making this on a whim, Noah. For fun.”

Honestly, I hadn’t taken Noah that seriously when he first suggested making *The Widow Ghost* a reality. I’m surprised he went through the trouble of finding a filming location for it, and I’m even more surprised that he found a cast and crew willing to work on it. They’re all mutual friends of ours, which helps. But I have to imagine that they have better things to do with their time than risk their lives in a freak snowstorm for a dead-end passion project with no pay.

Noah’s expression flatlines. As if he might, for once, be taking my words to heart. But the moment I think my cousin has finally found his common sense, it’s gone, replaced by a grin. “It’ll be fine, Cleosaurus.” He punctuates this latest nickname by reaching out and giving my ponytail—this month dyed a pale blue-gray—a familial yank. “You worry

too much.”

Before I can say anything else, he’s up and out of the truck.

I don’t know what I was expecting. Noah may be fantastic at directing horror movies, but he’d never survive one. If a masked killer cornered him in a dark cabin, he’d react with that same blasé optimism. *It’ll be fine.*

My stomach gives an uneasy lurch. The car may not be in motion anymore, but I still feel like we’re sliding across the ice. Like any moment we’ll meet our doom, our vision too choked by fog and snow to see it before it’s too late.

“Hurry up, Cleopoke!”

I sigh. The wind rips my car door from my hand, and snow immediately swirls into the cab, stinging my cheeks in icy pinpricks. I squint against it as I step out of the truck. My feet slide out from under me the moment they make contact with the icy driveway, and I have to grab onto the door handle to keep myself from christening this endeavor by eating absolute *shit* on the pavement.

Which would be terribly on brand, I suppose. The universe is not shy about humbling me.

“This movie is cursed,” I tell Noah as I round the back of the trunk in careful, mincing steps. I have to raise my voice to be heard over the wind.

Noah snorts. “Your face is cursed.”

I scowl, even though I’d *meant* the words with the same melodramatic humor as my quip about our funerals. I can recognize, on some level, that I’m jumping to extremes. But I hold that knowledge in the same part of my brain that knows, logically, that there are no monsters hiding beneath my bed at night.

It may be true, but that won’t stop me from making sure none of my limbs dangle from beneath the covers after the lights are out.

We’re parked at the end of a long driveway. The home where we’ll be filming *The Widow Ghost* is, at this point, only a vague dark shape. The snow is too thick to look at it straight on. Closer to us is a sedan, already coated with ice.

“Are the homeowners here?” I ask. I hadn’t been aware that we’d be filming for an audience, and the idea makes this whole proposition feel even more horrifying.

Noah shakes his head. He returns his clapboard to the box it fell out of during our expedition across the ice. “No, that’s Declan’s. He and Rhiannon must have beaten us here.”

The last time I saw him, Declan had been driving a passed-down minivan. I suppose it makes sense that he’s gotten a new car in his three

years since heading off to college, but it still seems a bit strange to me. Stranger still is the second half of Noah's statement. "Rhiannon rode with him?"

Rhiannon is sixteen—two years younger than me—and I'd only met her after Declan graduated. I've never seen them interact, but Noah's worked on films with the both of them. According to him, they're constantly at each other's throats.

When I voice this to him, he scoffs. "What? No, they're good friends, really." He hands off my camcorder, still secure in its case. "Five bucks says they're arguing when we walk in."

"You have a very strange definition of friendship," I tell him. But there's no real disdain in my voice. The camera rests at my hip when I sling the bag over my shoulder, and its familiar weight is a comfort.

Arms laden with boxes, we start our slow trudge up the icy driveway. The closer we get to the house, the more it comes into view, its dark siding stark against the snow. In spite of its rural location, there's something distinctly suburban about the shape of it: two stories with tall windows flanking the door. It's got the sort of liminal familiarity of a place I might have stayed briefly as a child.

There's only one thing I can say about it. "It's creepy." I force a shiver

for emphasis. “I’ll give you this much, it’s perfect for *The Widow Ghost*. Where on earth did you find this place?”

Noah grins. “Craigslist.”

“Jesus. We’re going to get murdered.”

“If I go first, get it on camera.”

When he wants to, Noah can be just as morbid as me. I try and fail to fend off a laugh. “Ah, of course. Nothing like that sweet, sweet posthumous publicity.”

The chill works its way into my bones, numbing my fingers and the tip of my nose. Despite its unsettling aura, it’s actually a relief when we finally get inside and out of the cold.

After the bright white of the snow, the house’s interior is impossibly dim. Dark spots dance in front of my eyes, and there’s a faint buzz in my ears. I’m almost dizzy as feeling rushes back into my wind-numbed appendages.

While I struggle to orient myself, familiar voices echo.

“You’re ridiculous.” That’s Rhiannon, frustrated.

“I’m just saying!” And that’s Declan, amused. They’re arguing after all.

I suppose it shouldn’t surprise me that they manage to push each

other's buttons. Rhiannon will argue until she's proven her point a thousand times over; Declan will argue just for the thrill of it.

Beside me, Noah snickers and holds out his hand. I slap my palm to his in a pantomime of handing over a five-dollar bill, and he tucks the imaginary cash into his pocket. It's a ritual we've performed hundreds of times since childhood.

"If you're going to kill each other, *please* wait until Cleo gets her camera out," he calls into the kitchen. "We were just talking about how a murder would really spice up the marketing."

By now, my eyes have begun to adjust. We stand in an entryway with surprisingly high ceilings and wainscoting along the walls, wooden floors overlaid with thick rugs. There's a kitchen to our immediate right, and a hallway to our left that seems to lead to a living room. Above us is a second-floor balcony lined by a wooden banister.

I'm struck by how lived-in this place feels. The wood floors are well-maintained, and the air doesn't strike me as stale or underused the way it sometimes does in hotel rooms or rentals. An umbrella hangs on a hook by the door, and the fridge in the kitchen is overflowing with magnets from tourist traps: Mt. Rushmore, Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon.

It's from this kitchen that Declan steps, heeled boots clicking against

the floor. He wears tight dark jeans and a gray off-the-shoulder sweater, silver eyeshadow sparkling against his brown skin. His dark hair is artfully coiffed. He's grown into himself in the years since I last saw him in person. He's always been confident, but there's something new in the way he holds his body. He came out as non-binary recently, and I wonder if *that* has something to do with this change, although his name and pronouns remained the same. Perhaps self-actualization is what lends him this new air of assurance.

He seems impossibly, distantly mature, even though he's only a few years older than me. Frankly, it's a bit intimidating. But then he smiles, and I see my friend. The same senior who, three years ago, took one look at the artsy, angsty, wannabe-goth freshman and decided to take her under his wing.

"Cleo, *darling*," he coos, swanning into the hallway. He speaks in a pseudo-transatlantic accent. I'm fairly certain it's only partially ironic at this point. "It's so wonderful to see you again. Where have you *been*?"

I smile, accepting his hug and the air-kisses he presses to both my cheeks. "Where have *I* been? You're the one who graduated."

Not that it's stopped him from seeing Noah. Or Rhiannon, for that matter. And I suppose I've had opportunities myself. Noah has tried to convince me to play cinematographer on countless projects over the years,

dangling the names of friends in front of me like lures. But the timing has never been right. We only tried working together once, when we were fourteen, on a stereotypical slasher film called *Slaughter!* It didn't get far. Frankly, I'm surprised this one hasn't blown up similarly in our faces. Yet.

Again, the image of the storm outside as an omen returns to me. I fight a shiver.

Declan doesn't seem to notice. He slings a companionable arm around my shoulder, giving me a gentle squeeze. "I suppose you *do* have a point. Well, come along then. Rhiannon and I have been using the kitchen as our base of operations."

Base of operations, apparently, is code for *dumping ground*. The kitchen is long and narrow, with pale yellow wallpaper and a wooden door at the far end, and we've taken over nearly every inch of the floor. Boxes overflow with wires and mic packs. Bags are full to bursting with clothing, groceries, and miscellaneous set dressing. There are light bulbs and reflectors, boom mics and other filming apparatus I don't even know the name of.

When I suggested that everyone in the cast and crew bring their own clothing to hang in the closet, hoping to imply that the haunted house had claimed more victims prior to the start of the story, I thought I was being overindulgent. But the boxes strewn across the kitchen are even more so. Why do we need light bulbs and set dressing when the house already comes

with all of that? It's overkill for a project like this one.

Noah whistles. "Damn, we've got our work cut out for us if we want to start filming tonight."

He sounds amused but not surprised. Had he known they'd be bringing all of this?

Rhiannon sits at the kitchen table, fussing with a portable recorder. Faint blue light from the screen shines against her dark-skinned face and yellow hoodie, reflecting in her round glasses and in the metal beads woven into her braids. She glances up when we walk in. "Hey. Do you need help unloading your equipment from the truck?"

She directs her question to me, not Noah, for some reason that I can't parse. "Huh? Uh, no. This is it." Noah and I only have a few boxes between us: prop blood, copies of the script with loose production notes, a surprisingly organized shot list and a schedule in a binder from Noah, along with a few other miscellaneous tools like the clapboard. And, of course, my camera in its rightful place at my hip.

"Hm." Rhiannon cranes her neck to look into the boxes. "Who's bringing the tripod then?"

"Tripod?"

"To stabilize while shooting."

“Oh.” I grip the strap of my camera bag in both hands. “I’ve never used one of those. I guess I just thought I’d hold the camera, like I always do...”

Although most of my completed filming experience boils down to candid shots taken at parties or events, or quick vignettes turned in for school assignments. A whole movie? That’s far more ambitious. Looking at all of the equipment Rhiannon and Declan bought, I can’t help but worry that I’m woefully unprepared to rise to the task.

Noah shrugs. “The camcorder has built-in image stabilization. You’ve seen Cleo’s work in class, right? You know it’ll look great.”

The vote of confidence doesn’t feel all that comforting: *it’ll look great* spoken in the exact same cadence as his earlier *it’ll be fine*. I’m not sure if this convinces Rhiannon, but she turns back to her recorder with no further argument.

Declan smiles. “You’re still working with that camcorder? Goodness, I haven’t seen that since... graduation, I suppose.” His silver eyeshadow sparkles as he raises his eyebrows. “It’s perfect, I’m sure. Analog horror is all the rage these days. The judges will love it.”

“Judges?” I laugh a little, thinking this is the set up to one of Declan’s jokes.

Beside me, Noah goes uncharacteristically stiff, his normally easy

smile becoming noticeably forced. It reminds me of the time Aunt Carla caught us trying to sneak out of Thanksgiving to go see *V/H/S/94*.

“Well, naturally,” Declan says. “For—”

“Heeeeeeeey,” Noah interjects, subtle as a lead balloon. “Cleo, did you see how cool the balcony looks from the first floor? The shadow the banister casts is creepy as hell, you’ve got to check it out.”

His hand clamps around my forearm. Beneath Declan and Rhiannon’s bemused gazes, he drags me out of the kitchen.

The hallway is dim. There’s an overhead chandelier, but it’s off at the moment, which means that the only light comes from the kitchen and what thready gray sunlight manages to get through the storm. It’s not enough for the banister to cast *any* shadow, much less one worth remarking on, but Noah makes no attempt to rectify the situation. He just stands there, flickering shadows of snow from the tall windows playing across his sheepish smile.

“Noah,” I say.

“Cleo,” he responds, mirroring my tone. No nickname, which is a terrible sign.

I fold my arms over my chest. “What did Declan mean about judges?”

Noah’s sheepish smile widens. “Surprise? I signed us up for *Horrorfest*.”

“You—what?” I must have misheard him. Because it *sounds* like he just admitted to submitting this mediocre mess of a film script to the horror film festival we’ve been fans of since we were preteens, and that’s an utterly ridiculous notion. “You said that this was casual! That we were doing this for fun!”

“I know, I know! But then I checked the submissions page, and what do you know, they were open! And the deadline just happened to line up with the filming schedule...”

“Oh my god.” I pinch the bridge of my nose. So much of his behavior over the past few weeks—his uncharacteristic determination, his unflappable excitement—is suddenly put into a new, horrific context. “*That’s* why you were so dead set on starting today. It was... I cannot fucking believe...”

There’s a long beat of silence as Noah lets me stew in my own frustrated anxiety. But, finally, he breaks it. “What’s the big deal? We’ll still be making the movie like we planned. This doesn’t change anything.”

“It changes plenty! I didn’t think anyone was going to see this! If I’d known, I would have...”

Well. I would have refused, most likely. *The Widow Ghost* is a simple script. I’d written it as an exercise in playing with my favorite tropes,

without giving much thought to plot or substance. As a result, it's painfully derivative and downright clunky in places. I was only willing to go along with this production because Noah pitched it to me as a practice piece.

But anything more than that?

"You should have told me."

Noah sighs, cheeks puffing out in a slow exhale. "I'm sorry, okay? But I knew... I *know* you're going to have a great time. Trust me, okay? It's all going to work out."

How can he say that so easily? He has to remember our first attempt at filming, back when we were younger. He watched that production fall to pieces. He got a textbook education about how things aren't always fine, how they don't always work out. So how can he look at me now and be so unflappably optimistic?

I'm not sure. But I also don't know how to argue with him when he's like this. I sigh long-sufferingly instead. "When we get murdered in the creepy Craigslist house, I'm going to use my dying breath to tell you that I told you so."

Noah laughs. He claps me on the back. "Oh, come on, already. We've got a lot to do if we're going to be ready for filming by the time the actors show up!"

He vanishes back into the kitchen. I make no move to follow him.

It's not the house I'm worried about, of course. Not really. How long will it be, I wonder, before the rest of the cast and crew realize how woefully inadequate I am? How long until they regret getting involved?

Above me, something skitters. Because of course this place would be infested with rats on top of everything else, I swear that I—

But the face that peers over the banister at me is too large to be a rat's. Two eyes, sunken into a pale face, glitter out at me from the shadowy slats of the balcony. Pale hands wrap around the beams, their limbs bent at impossible angles. There's a wet shine in the darkness, one that might come from a string of saliva.

Or teeth.

My heart stutters. I pull in a breath, stumbling back. But before I can even think to exhale that breath in a scream, the figure vanishes. Only darkness remains. Darkness and silence, save for the ever-present howl of the wind outside.

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MISE-EN-SCENE

CLOSE-UP ON:

An empty hallway, doused in shadow. A strange figure crouches behind the banister. The light shifts. The figure is gone. But low, foreboding music continues to play over the scene, and the shadows seem darker than ever.

I STARE AT the empty hallway. The figure does not return.

I must admit, there is a distinct possibility I imagined it. It wouldn't be the first time I dreamt up a creature lurking in the shadows, stalking my every step. It's a hazard of the trade, being a horror writer. I don't know if my stories will ever scare others, but I do an excellent job of scaring myself over nothing.

Unless it *isn't* nothing.

I'm agnostic to the existence of ghosts outside of fiction, but if any house could be haunted, this one is a prime candidate. It has the right shape for it, all hidden corners and strange shadows. It's basically begging for some unfortunate specter to stalk its hallways, wailing mournfully in tune with the wind.

"Cleorama! Are you coming, or what?"

"I'm assuming 'or what' is not an option," I shoot back. My voice is, I'm glad to note, relatively steady. And if I'm being honest, the idea of supernatural intervention isn't half as frightening to me as the idea of watching *The Widow Ghost* crash and burn.

Noah appears in the entrance to the kitchen. His silhouette in the low light could almost be dignified, if not for the grubbiness of his zip-up sweater and the untied laces of his shoes. "Well, it's not like there's anywhere else you can go."

He says it like a joke, but I can read between the lines. We're here, and Noah is my ride home. I have no choice but to move forward with this, no matter how much of a waste of time it may be.

I spare the balcony one more glance. Still empty. I almost certainly imagined what I saw, but I still have to hunch my shoulders against the chill

that creeps along the back of my neck.

Rhiannon is sorting through mic packs and takes little note of my arrival. Declan, leaning against the counter, seems a bit more interested. “Are you okay, darling? You look pale.”

Is he asking because he’s concerned, or just because he’s hungry for gossip? Knowing Declan, it’s probably a mix of both. “I’m fine.” I have no intention of explaining the *Horrorfest* situation, or inviting questions as to *why* I find the idea so unappealing. I grope for an alternate excuse. “I thought I saw something on the balcony. It startled me, is all.”

Declan’s eyebrows raise, brown eyes sparkling more than his dramatic eyeshadow. “Is that so? Could there be an uninvited guest haunting these halls? Perhaps our titular widow ghost is more than mere fiction.”

Rhiannon scoffs. “Oh, please.”

If anything, her dismissal seems to encourage Declan further. He hoists himself up to sit on the counter, his long legs dangling against the cupboards below. “Oh, *Rhiannon*. Are you really going to dismiss the possibility of paranormal activity so quickly?”

“Obviously. Ghosts aren’t real.” Rhiannon turns, arms crossed over her chest. “It was probably just a shadow or something. Right, Cleo?”

Even though I’m the one who *started* this conversation, it’s still a bit of

a shock when she addresses me directly. “Oh. I mean, yeah, maybe?” I’d be willing to let it go there, but Rhiannon’s gaze is so disapproving that I feel the need to add, “Probably?”

Declan hums, a disapproval so put-upon that it circles back around into irony. “No vision, either of you. Where’s your sense of drama? Just *think* of what a haunted filming location could add to our production.”

Noah chuckles, scratching the bridge of his nose. “I’ll stick with a living actress for our ghost. Easier to direct.”

Sensing that it might be best to move the conversation along before it starts a genuine argument, I ask, “Who did you get to play the ghost, anyway?” There are three roles in *The Widow Ghost*, and I know the other two: Andrea and Zander, old friends of ours. But the owner of the titular role somehow never came up during planning.

Noah grins. “Oh, she was a dancer in the spring musical I directed. You’ll love her, trust me.” Straightening, he claps his hands together. “Anyway! Let’s get started with—”

A muffled clatter cuts him off.

I’m still keyed up enough from what I saw on the balcony that I jump, hands reflexively curling into fists. Noah’s the only one close enough to actually notice, but because he’s Noah, he immediately draws attention to

my overreaction by chuckling. “That came from the basement, I think.” He nods toward the door at the far end of the kitchen. “Probably just a draft.”

“Or a ghost.” Declan wiggles his eyebrows. “Moving from the balcony to the basement is quite a feat, but it’s probably easier for those of us who are less... corporeal.”

Rhiannon sighs, long-suffering. “Are you going to be like this the *whole* time?”

The wind howls, and the entire house groans in response. Declan laughs. It’s a really rather convincing Vincent Price impression, so over-dramatic that even Rhiannon cracks a smile.

The wind dies down, but the house doesn’t quieten. In fact, the noises from the basement get louder.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

My stomach drops, panic setting in before my conscious mind even registers what I’m hearing. It’s the same anticipatory panic that clutched at me when Noah’s truck started to fishtail, and a moment later, I realize why.

Those are footsteps.

There’s someone—or something—in here with us.

Thump. Thump.

Noah catches on a second too late. “What—”

The door opens.

A woman steps out. Her clothes are splattered in *something*—dried blood?—and the hand not occupied in carrying a large canvas is holding something silver and sharp that glints like a weapon. Her eyes lock on me. For a moment, I consider the irony of a horror writer getting murdered by a knife-wielding killer.

Then the woman shrieks, and she drops her weapon. Which is, I must concede, a very uncharacteristic thing for a knife-wielding killer to do.

“Oh my god,” Noah says, his conciliatory tone only further dampening my suspicions. “Michelle? Are you okay?”

The name is unfamiliar to me, but Noah clearly knows her. I have to conclude that she must be the owner of the house. I hadn’t seen her car in the driveway, but that doesn’t mean much. Maybe she simply doesn’t have one, or maybe I’d been too focused on making it through the blizzard to see it.

“Who—wait. Noah, right?” She massages her chest with her newly free hand. The other still clutches the canvas, knuckles white. “You’re... the one making a movie. You were here last month. Location scouting, you called it.” She pushes her auburn hair back from her face, revealing the hints of gray

at her temples. “I thought you weren’t coming until the eighth?”

Noah laughs. It’s his awkward laugh, but hopefully it isn’t as noticeable to this woman as it is to me. “Uh, it *is* the eighth.” He shakes his head. “I’m sorry I didn’t let you know we were here! I just assumed you were out of town.”

“Oh.” For a moment, Michelle looks dazed, as if she’s not quite sure where she is. But then she chuckles. “You must think—You must think I’m crazy. But I completely lost track of time. I meant to leave this morning, but I got... caught up.”

There’s a strange glassiness to her eyes that doesn’t go away no matter how much she blinks. Upon closer inspection, the splatters on her clothes are darker than dried blood would be, more black than brown. It could be dirt, but the canvas in her hand makes paint more likely.

“Well, that’s okay!” Noah’s cheer sounds almost hysteric in the wake of her quiet, quavering voice. “I can introduce you to the crew, anyway. Everyone, this is Michelle Barlow, the house’s owner, who is nice enough to let us film while she goes on vacation. Michelle, this is Rhiannon, our sound mixer” —Rhiannon nods, looking almost as uncomfortable with the situation as I feel— “Declan, our costume and set designer” —Declan waves, removing himself from the counter with as much tact as he can manage— “and Cleo, our cinematographer and script writer.”

I clear my throat. Something about this woman's bloodshot gaze unnerves me. "Hi."

"It's... nice to meet all of you." Michelle smiles. In spite of the gray in her hair, the lines around her eyes and mouth are very fine. "I'm sorry, I'm such a mess, I just wasn't expecting... well, it's like I said."

"Oh, hey, don't worry about it. It's fine." Noah nods at the canvas in her hands. "What do you have there?"

"This? Oh, it's, um. It's a painting I was working on." Rather than turn it to face us, Michelle clutches the canvas closer to her chest, hiding what's on the other side even further from view.

Noah doesn't seem to notice her reluctance to share. "Whoa, you paint? That's so cool, can I see?"

In spite of the way she frightened several years of life off of me, I begin to feel a bit sorry for Michelle Barlow. Her face twists, and I can't tell if it's an attempt to fend off laughter or tears. "You—You *can*, of course. But I was actually going to throw this one out, it... it wasn't turning out how I wanted, so I... well, see for yourself."

Slowly, she turns the canvas around. The painting has the air of one of those staged family portraits, with three people standing against a dark red background. But only one of them is rendered in any sort of detail: a blonde

woman in a white dress. One hand is splayed against her collarbone; the other is curled around her stomach. There are purple bags under her eyes, but there's a sharpness in them. Her lips are pressed into a thin, tight line.

Beside her is a shorter woman, or maybe a young girl. Her blonde hair suggests that she's related to the first woman, but it's impossible to make out any further inherited similarities. Michelle didn't get that far in painting her. Her face is blank and featureless, a blob of pale skin.

The final figure seems taller than the other two, but that's all I can make out. Thick black paint obscures their face and a good portion of their body.

"I got a little frustrated toward the end, there," Michelle says sheepishly.

I surprise myself by speaking. "Once, I got so frustrated with a script that I set all my notes for it on fire, so, uh, don't worry about it."

"Oh, man, your mom was so mad." Noah snickers. "Anyway, Cleo's right. We've probably all got you beat in the drama department."

"Well, most of us," Rhiannon adds.

"Debatable," Declan goads.

The banter does seem to put Michelle a bit more at ease. Her grip on the canvas loosens slightly. "Well. There are more paintings in my studio

downstairs, but, um. I'd prefer you didn't go in there. It's... It's superstition, I guess, but it's my space, you know? It was originally built as a storm shelter, so sometimes I *had* to let the rest of the house in when it was an emergency, but I really prefer..." She trails off, blinking. "I'm sorry. You're not here to listen to me ramble."

"Well, no studio snooping, got it." Noah makes a dramatic cross over his chest. He once made the same gesture when promising to save a slice of Aunt Carla's cake for me. He promptly ate it, but seeing as how he was eight years old at the time, it seems unfair to bring up now as he smiles winningly at Michelle. "Hey, if you were just going to throw that painting out anyway, can we use it?"

Michelle's eyes widen, what little calm she had before vanishing. "What?"

"I'm serious! I know you didn't mean it, but this is kind of great set-dressing for a horror movie."

"It does have a certain air to it," Declan says, looking interested now. "It would look quite striking hanging in the hallway, right below the banister."

"Oh, well..." Michelle's eyes dart around the room, as if looking for a savior. But none comes for her any more than one came for me when Noah

snagged *The Widow Ghost* out of my pile of incomplete manuscripts and demanded we film it. “I... It’s fine, sure.”

She hands over the painting. Declan takes it, turning it over in his manicured hands. “Fantastic. Although I must say, that particular hallway doesn’t need much help feeling ominous. Tell me, Michelle, does your house have a sordid past of some kind?”

Rhiannon sighs, and Declan’s grin grows wider. But Michelle doesn’t seem to find any humor in the situation. Her face grows pale, and that glassiness returns to her eyes tenfold.

“Did you see something?” she whispers.

It’s as though the temperature in the room plummets, and the mood with it. Declan had obviously been fishing for a lighthearted, campfire-type ghost story. Not the sort of story that would bring the homeowner to near tears.

Noah clears his throat. “Cleo thought she saw something on the balcony,” he says. “But it was probably just a shadow.”

“A shadow... Right. Of course. It’s... It’s a very strange coincidence, that’s all.” Michelle swipes a hand over her face. It remains dry, but there’s a twitchiness to her expression. Her lips twist, but instead of a sob, she barks out a nervous laugh. “Sorry, it’s just, well... my mother, she hung herself

from that balcony.”

There’s a pregnant, awkward pause, broken only by the shuffle of fabric as Michelle fidgets. Finally, Noah coughs. “Shit, I’m so sorry. Was it... recent?”

People always say the strangest things when they find out that someone close to you has died. I’ve experienced weirder comments since my dad’s passing. But I suppose I can’t judge Noah. I certainly wasn’t rushing to fill the silence with anything better.

“Not recent, no, no,” Michelle hurries to clarify. “It was decades ago now. My sister and father had just died in a car crash, and she... well, it was a lot for her. My father, he...” She trails off, her eyes drifting off toward the basement door. I get the distinct sense that she’s trying to pull herself together.

It’s uncomfortable, watching this stranger struggle so openly with her emotions. I know that I’d feel mortified in her shoes. I wish that we could give her privacy in this moment, but simply walking out of the room would be rude. The others seem as frozen as I am, most of them avoiding eye contact.

Finally, Michelle breathes in, blinking rapidly. “Anyway! It really isn’t... I mean, it was so long ago, so it’s not... I’m keeping you from your movie,

aren't I! I should let you get to it, and I should really... really get going, huh?"

"Oh, right! Yeah, absolutely!" Noah nods, palpable relief in his tone as he turns to the rest of us. "Let's get going. Declan, let's get this painting hung up. Rhiannon, you can get the lights set up in the living room. Cleo, you grab those clothes and get them hung up in the closet. Alright?"

"Okay." Set dressing is not, strictly speaking, my job, but I'm not about to argue with an opportunity to clear out of the room. I fumble with various duffel bags and totes as the rest of the crew files out.

Michelle hovers. "I need to clean up downstairs," she says. "But then I'll be out of your hair. Is that okay?"

"Of course! Um, take your time." I pause, torn between wanting to flee and feeling obligated to stay. The air in the room feels expectant, somehow. Heavy with words not said. In a movie, this would be the point where the homeowner would give a warning that falls on deaf ears. When Michelle regards me, I'm almost sure that she's going to talk about the shadow I saw on the balcony.

Instead, she smiles. It's so shockingly genuine that I almost forget the awkwardness. "Are you really making a horror movie?" she asks.

"Oh! Yeah. Yeah, we are." If I had a hand free, I'd be fidgeting with something. "It's nothing special though. I mean, the script is not my best.

Really, it was nice of you to let us use your house for something as silly as this.”

“Well, it was hard to resist. Horror is my favorite genre.” Michelle tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. There’s a wistful tone to her voice, something sweet and gentle. “I suppose it’s a bit morbid, but I’ve... I’ve just always loved scary stories, ever since I was a little girl. I guess I never grew out of it.”

In spite of myself, I smile. I know other female horror fans exist, but I haven’t met many of them, and none of them older than me. I wonder what my mom, who frequently derides my interests as “unladylike,” would have to say about Michelle.

“Me, too. There’s something fun about being scared when you know it’s all fake, I think.” I could continue along that train of thought for quite a while, but my arms are starting to ache from the combined weight of the bags I’m holding. “Sorry, I really need to get these upstairs. And you need to get going too, right?”

“Right. Of course.” Michelle nods. “I’ll let you... get to it, then.”

The conversation feels distinctly unfinished. But I don’t stop Michelle as she returns to the basement, shutting the door behind her. I only readjust my grip on my bags and head in the opposite direction, up the stairs to the

balcony above the first floor.

And if I *do* happen to glance at the banister as I go, all I see are plain wooden railings. Nothing more.

- 3 -

CALL TIME

LOW ANGLE ON:

PATRICK, walking across the kitchen floor in silence and darkness. He opens the fridge, filling the room with its light. He doesn't take anything from inside or even examine its contents. He simply steps backward and stands there, unnervingly still. The camera captures him from the torso down: we can't see his face.

(Excerpt from THE WIDOW GHOST, written by Cleo Moss.)

UPSTAIRS, THERE ARE three bedrooms. Only the largest has a walk-in closet suitable for filming, but I suppose that's all we'll need.

There's no clothing inside, which strikes me as a bit odd. Surely Michelle wouldn't have had to pack all of her clothing for a vacation? This

must not be her room, despite being the nicest. Then again, if it used to belong to her parents, I can't blame her for not wanting to sleep here. Just the thought puts a chill down my spine.

In the back corner of the closet is a stack of canvases. None of them are as large as the one Michelle hauled upstairs, but they're the same material. Is this where she stores her extra supplies? Curious, I turn over the top-most one in the stack.

It's not extra supplies at all. It's a finished painting. In it, a woman stares out with bulging eyes and a mouth stretched in a silent, eternal scream. Blood drips down her face in lurid, obscene strokes. It's objectively well-painted, but what really thrills me is that it's familiar: this is a scene from *Carrie*. It isn't a direct recreation of the movie. Carrie's face in this painting is rounder, more plain. But the wide, staring eyes are what made Sissy Spacek's performance memorable, and those are rendered here in full glory.

Carrie was less conventionally attractive in the book, I believe. I remember reading an article once that argued the importance of that part of her character, urging casting directors of a remake to take it into account. Maybe this painting is Michelle's way of bridging that gap.

Flipping through the stack gives my theory more credence. The next paintings depict a scene from *Silence of the Lambs*, then *Frankenstein*, then *The*

Exorcist. They all blend classic images from the films with more canon-accurate elements from the source material.

I can't stop smiling. Michelle *said* she was a horror fan, but I hadn't expected to find such enthralling proof of that fact. It's too bad she's almost certainly gone by now, because I'd love to pick her brain about some of these pieces.

Even if she was still here, I probably wouldn't say anything. I wouldn't want to hold her up.

I pause at the final painting in the stack. It takes me a moment to place: it's *House of Usher*, blending the original short story by Edgar Allen Poe with the Vincent Price movie. Although outside of the character appearances, it doesn't look much like the scene from the movie at all. In the film, Rodrick Price dangles out the window while his revived sister strangles him to death, her hands bloodied from climbing out of her grave. That's not what's happening here. Here, Rodrick opens his arms to Madeline, pulling her closer even as her collapsing, blood-stained body crushes him. Behind them, paintings hang sideways as cracks run through the walls.

Is this how it went in the short story? I only read it once, years ago, but I seem to recall Rodrick near madness in his terror of Madeline. He doesn't look terrified here. Instead, there's a tired desperation in his expression,

almost a resignation. Madeline's back is to us, so her face offers no further insight.

The other paintings delighted me: the blood, the body horror, the haunts. But this one is unnerving in a distinctly less fun way. There's a weight to it, from the crushing fall of Madeline's corpse to the way the walls crumble behind her and Rodrick. I almost expect the canvas to be heavier when I lift it to turn it around.

I can't leave these here. They're wonderful, but they'll clutter up the shot. Leaving the bags of clothing to deal with later, I heft the stack of canvases into my arms, careful not to damage them.

When I return to the balcony, Declan and Noah are standing on the first floor, right below Michelle's newly hung painting. As bad as I feel about Michelle's reluctance, I do have to admit that it's going to look fantastic on film. In the darkness, the woman's eyes seem to move, and the unfinished faces of the figures next to her take on strange, inhuman shapes.

Noah looks up at me. "What do you have there?"

"Paintings," I say. "They were being stored in the closet. What should I do with them?"

"Would any of them make good set dressing?"

He *would* ask that, even without Michelle here to give permission. I

shake my head, coming up with an excuse on the spot. “These all have IP in them. I wouldn’t.” I consider showing them off but decide against it. It feels right, somehow, to keep these as a secret between Michelle and me.

Thankfully, Noah doesn’t press it. “Go ahead and put them in the basement, then. Not like we’re filming any scenes down there, and that’s where Michelle’s studio is anyway.”

It makes enough sense to me. I walk toward the kitchen.

Declan raises his eyebrows. “Do you want one of us to accompany you, darling? Venturing into a basement by yourself in such a home...”

I’m a little surprised by how quick he is to joke about it, considering what we just heard. Then again, Declan’s never been the type to take anything seriously for long. I honestly admire how quickly he’s able to brush things off.

Noah grins, getting in on the joke. “Hey, yeah, that’s not very final girl of you. Sydney Prescott would be ashamed.”

The *Scream* reference, more than anything, pulls a smile out of me. It’s one of the first horror movies Noah and I watched together, and it’s gained a bit of a soft spot in our banter. “I have never claimed to be the Sydney Prescott of this operation,” I say. “If anything, I’m the Casey Becker.”

Cannon fodder who exists only to die a gory death in the first scene?

Far more likely.

“Aw, don’t sell yourself short, Cleoface! You’re at least Randy Meeks, easy.”

I laugh, holding up the paintings in lieu of a proper response. “I’m going to get these downstairs.”

Some of my resolve falters when I open up the basement door. The stairs downward are narrow and wooden, a little uneven. A chill wafts up from the stone flooring, bringing with it the smell of must and old cigarettes. Between that and the dimness, it calls to mind one of those ancient, seedy types of bars. For all of my joking, it makes me uneasy.

I glance down. At my feet is a metal tool—what I’d mistaken for a weapon in Michelle’s hand. As I pick it up, I see that it’s a spackle, its edge coated in black paint. Holding tangible proof of my tendency to jump at shadows doesn’t quite make going into that dark basement a pleasant prospect, but at least it breaks my paralysis. I walk downstairs.

The basement is unfinished, and it is cold. Within seconds, the tip of my nose begins to ache, an involuntary shiver radiating from the base of my neck. Plenty of houses don’t heat their basements, but should it be *this* cold? I swear, the chill down here is sharper and more cutting than it is outside among the flurries and ice. It’s not quite so cold that I can see my breath, but

in all fairness, I can't see much of anything. There is one single high window, coated over with a thick crust of ice. Only a little light breaks through, pale and blue.

A dusty lightbulb hangs from the ceiling, a chain beside it. I pull it, and it flickers to dim life.

What it reveals is fairly average: mostly shelves and old storage, nothing of note. Perhaps the strangest thing is the door on the far wall, one that I can only assume leads to the art studio. "Michelle?" I try. But there's no answer. She must have left when I was upstairs.

I hesitate. Michelle wanted to keep her art studio private, but surely she wouldn't mind me leaving these there? I'll just open up the door and lean them against the wall. I won't even have to look inside.

Only when I try the doorknob, it's locked. I frown. Were there hard feelings about Noah strong-arming her into letting us hang the painting? It wouldn't surprise me if she didn't trust us not to poke around, after all that. Guilt sours my stomach, even though I'd been determined *not* to snoop.

I lean the paintings up against the wall by the door instead, setting the spackle down as well. As I bend over, I hear a noise from the other side, in the studio. A strange shuffling sound, like something scratching at the wood.

"Hello?" I pause. There's no response. "Michelle?"

Silence reigns. But the hairs on the back of my neck are all on end. I'm struck with an oppressive feeling: not just of being watched, but *monitored*. As though, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, I'm not alone down here. It's like I just got into bed after a horror movie marathon, and now I'm left alone to imagine terrors lurking in the dark.

Shivering, I hurry back upstairs.

The next few hours are such a whirlwind of preparation, there's no time to dwell on that feeling. Lightbulbs are swapped for ones that look better on camera, stingers are placed strategically, and boom mics are tested in every room we plan to film in. The set is already mostly dressed as is, but Declan's brought a few key pieces: a strange antique bust for the living room, a creepy doll for one of the beds. Plus there are plot relevant props to place, like the scrapbook Andrea's character finds in the final scene. Seeing that come to life, when before it only existed as words on a page, is surreal.

This is far more work than we ever did while filming *Slaughter!* It's overwhelming, and it's strange to see how expertly Noah takes charge, ticking off items on a checklist in his binder with remarkable professionalism. I know he's had plenty of experience since our ill-fated venture four years ago. But I'm just not used to seeing this level of organization from him. He certainly doesn't approach schoolwork with this kind of determination. Aunt Carla probably wouldn't recognize him either.

We've done just about everything but dress the kitchen when there's a knock at the front door. Noah, deep in conversation with Rhiannon, glances up. "Probably Zander and Andrea. Andrea said she'd bring dinner. Cleo, can you get it?"

"Sure." Setting down my camera, plugged in and charging, I move to the hallway.

It's freezing when I open the door. I wince as Andrea and Zander hurry in, Andrea balancing pizza boxes in one hand. She hoots. "Holy wah! That wind is a nightmare."

I peer over her shoulder. The sun has fallen, but I don't need it to see that the snow is still falling fast and hard. "The storm hasn't gotten any better, then?"

"What do you think, eh?" Andrea's always had a bit of an accent, having grown up in the upper peninsula before moving to Ellis, but two years at Michigan Tech have thickened it. "I thought we were goners. Didn't you, babe?"

"We had some close calls," Zander agrees quietly.

On the surface, the two couldn't be more different: Zander with his pale cheeks reddened by the cold, his wide blue eyes and his windswept blonde curls; Andrea with her clear olive skin, her narrow features and her

sleek black bob. Zander's dressed in preppy pastels with a thick scarf around his neck, while Andrea wears a snow-caked brown bomber jacket and steel-toed boots. But years of dating have left their mark: they move in tandem with ease, Zander catching the pizza as Andrea sheds her coat.

"Well, I'm glad you guys made it," Noah says, appearing in the kitchen entryway. "I'm saying that because of the pizza, by the way."

"Fuck you and the horse you rode in on," Andrea says, no real venom in her words.

Zander smiles at me sweetly as he lines up her boots alongside his by the door. "It's good to see you again, Cleo."

"You, too." I smile back, but there's no real warmth in it. I'm thinking of the snow outside, the storm. *We had some close calls.* Andrea and Zander made it here safe, but we're still waiting on a final actress.

Is that how this production is going to end, then? Not with my own death in a car wreck, but someone else's? It makes a horrid kind of sense. After all, that's what happened during *Slaughter!*, when...

I don't want to think about it. But I can't think about anything else.

I barely manage to pick at my slice of pizza, too nervous to enjoy it. Eventually, I can't sit still anymore, so I examine the remaining bags on the counter. They're full of food to use as set dressing.

It's a good thing we have it, because the pantry is empty. I'm a little surprised to see just how bare it is. It makes sense that Michelle would clear out her fridge before she leaves for vacation, but why would she get rid of shelf-stable items?

Declan shrugs when I bring it up. "Perhaps she's frugal," he suggests. "Open up some of those boxes, would you, darling? Make it look more lived in."

I obey. It's a poor distraction as time ticks by and no actress appears. I wonder how it's going to happen. Will the hours go by with no word, or will the police come by to deliver the bad news? CLOSE-UP ON: red and blue lights spilling across the snow.

Finally, when Noah heads out into the hallway, I follow him.

"Hey," I say. "Has the ghost actress texted you or anything?"

Noah frowns, stopping in his tracks. "I guess she did a while ago. But she's probably running late, it's fine."

I stare at him, wondering how he can be so monumentally dense. "Noah, the roads are terrible."

Noah's gaze skates over me, toward the window. "Zander and Andrea made it fine."

"Andrea said they almost went off the road. *We* almost went off the

road.”

“And we all made it fine!”

“What if *she* didn’t?”

Noah shakes his head. “She would have let me know if she got in an accident.”

“Not if...” I swallow. I feel like I should be on the other end of the camera for this conversation. Filming it at a distance, not having to be the one to say it. “Not if she can’t.”

“Oh, relax already.” Noah leans against the wall next to me, nudging my shoulder with his. “First you’re jumping at ghosts, now this? Save the blood and guts for your scripts, Cleodrama.”

But he’s worried. Too late, he’s worried. I can see it beginning to bloom behind his eyes, like a slow-seeping poison.

“We should have cancelled,” I whisper.

“Cleo—”

“I warned you, in the truck. I *said*.”

Noah’s expression pinches. Finally ready to take me seriously, for once. Only then light floods the dim hallway. Headlights. They shine in through the tall windows by the door like a beacon, or a searchlight.

Noah's expression relaxes, nascent fear melting into exasperated relief. "See? What did I tell you? You worry too much." He boops me on the nose before heading to the living room.

I stare at the windows as the headlights fill them, then cut out. Even with my fears proven false once again, I can't shake off the persistent anxiety. Not the way I could back in the truck, or the hallway, or the basement. It lingers on the back of my neck like a cold, clenching hand.

I head back into the kitchen. Declan is putting away pizza boxes as Zander and Andrea finish changing into their costumes. Rhiannon fusses with their lav mics, threading cords beneath Zander's university hoodie and Andrea's pale sweater. "Is there anything else I can do?" I ask.

"Could you give the fridge the same treatment you gave the pantry?" Declan asks. "I already filled it, but make it look less staged."

"Sure." I take the fridge door from him, letting banter wash over me as I examine its contents.

I open the milk and pour some of it down the drain, then open a box of butter sticks. I keep my back to the kitchen as the door opens, and Noah hollers a greeting to our final arrival. I glance over my shoulder as she steps into view.

My heart seizes in my chest.

The girl standing at the entrance of the kitchen is my age, wearing a soft pink scarf tucked into a light gray jacket. Her honey-blond curls look perfect in spite of their windswept appearance, and the cold has only done her pale skin favors, adding a rosy flush to her cheeks and full lips. Her green eyes are bright and curious as she takes us all in.

Declan whistles. “Well, well! Miss Isobel Vernier, as I live and breathe. How have you been, darling?”

Isobel beams, a bright smile that scrambles my brain like a bad signal. “Oh my god, hi! It’s been *way* too long.” She swans into the room on lithe dancer’s legs, hugging Declan like they’re old friends. Which they probably are—he and Noah have worked on enough of the same stage shows. Isn’t that where Noah met her?

Noah, who never told me the name of the actress who would be playing our titular ghost.

Noah, who is now looking at me with the *smuggest* fucking grin.

I’ve been doing my best to dismiss my fears of any paranormal entities so far. But if this house isn’t already haunted, it’s about to be, because I’m going to kill him.

Isobel, mercifully unaware of this silent exchange, continues to chatter brightly with Declan. “I’m so sorry I’m late, the roads were a total

nightmare! But oh, here, I got your text so I brought this.” She holds up a large tote bag. “It’s, like, a bunch of clothes, you said you wanted them for set dressing or something?”

Sensing the opportunity for escape, I get to my feet. “I can take your clothes off!” All heads turn to me, and I can *feel* the heat rushing to my face, body reacting to the embarrassment before my brain has the chance to catch up. Jesus. This is why I’m better behind the camera, where it’s expected I’ll keep my mouth shut. “I mean, I can take your clothes. Can take the clothes off your hands, it’s—um, Declan probably wants to get started on makeup, so I can handle these.” I’m rambling. I’m prattling on like an idiot, in fact, and I haven’t even introduced myself. “I’m, um, Cleo, by the way. I wrote the script and I’ll be behind the camera, so...” So her job will be to ignore me. Probably for the best. “So I can handle set dressing.”

Isobel smiles. Small and polite and for my benefit, which makes me want to die a little. “Oh, sure. Cleo. Didn’t we have, like, Algebra together freshman year?” Lamely, I nod. I’m a little awestruck that she remembered me at all. “Right, totally! Good to see you again. Here.” She hands over the bag and gives me a wink. “This isn’t how pretty girls *usually* ask to get into my pants, but, like, I’ll take it?”

“I. Right. Thank you.” My brain, helpfully, refuses to process that. I’m viewing this whole scene as if through the lens of my camera, objective and

clinical. AERIAL SHOT ON: a perfectly normal and platonic clothing hand-off. “I’m just going to take this, then.”

I clutch the bag and flee.

I make it about halfway up the stairs before I have to pause to catch my breath. I’m used to making bad first impressions, but even for me, this was a colossal failure. I’m seriously considering going outside and burying myself under a snow drift when Noah walks out of the kitchen, grinning.

“Nice.”

“You!” I hiss. “You did this on purpose.”

Noah laughs, which does absolutely nothing to quell my fury. “Okay, look, I didn’t tell you because I thought it would be funny, but I didn’t think you’d react like that! I thought that crush was freshman year stuff!”

“It was! It is! I haven’t even thought about Isobel in years!” Which is both true and a lie. We haven’t had any classes together since freshman year, and nothing came of the hours I spent staring at the back of her head in Algebra, captivated by her bright smile and cheerful confidence but unable to work up the nerve to talk to her. I’ve seen her in passing since—in the halls, and once when I went to see a show that Noah directed. But we never talked.

Still. Isobel is the first girl I ever had a conscious crush on: the one that

made me realize I was bisexual. That's not the sort of thing that stops meaning something. Even if those feelings faded before I did anything with them, they're still important to me. They're part of what makes me who I am today.

I can tell none of this to Noah. Instead I say, loftily, "You're too heterosexual for me to explain this."

Noah snorts, leaning a shoulder against the wall. "I didn't *just* do this to fuck with you. She's actually talented, and the best person for the job. Don't you trust me?"

"About as far as I can throw you," I grumble, leaning against the banister. Above us, the half-finished painting looms, eerie in the low light. "If it weren't for the storm, I'd consider stealing your keys and making a run for it."

Noah rolls his eyes, poking me in the cheek. He pulls away when I move to bite his finger, unfazed and amused. "Oh, quit being so fucking dramatic. Do your thing behind the camera, and Isobel will do her thing in front of it. It'll be great."

Sighing in defeat, I hold up the bag of clothes. "I'm going to put these upstairs."

Noah goes back into the kitchen, and I walk up the stairs. Just before I

reach the top, I hear the bright peal of Isobel's laughter.

I can only hope she's not laughing at me.