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The sun's rays bore into Vicki's eyelids. She moaned and rolled onto her side with her back toward the open window, scrunching the pillow underneath her and burying her face in the white cotton.

As the sun continued to warm her and the room became increasingly brighter, she reluctantly opened her eyes. She'd moved from the side of the bed where she customarily laid, to the pillow where Dylan had fallen asleep in the wee hours of the morning. She touched the imprint where his head had rested and continued to breathe in the fragrance that was uniquely his.

She wished he was still there, still sound asleep with her legs intertwined in his, her head buried in the crook of his arm, his large, strong hand absent-mindedly tracing her shoulder. She felt safe when he was there, secure enough to sleep the sleep of the dead, knowing she was protected for as long as he was near.

Placing her arm across her eyes in a vain attempt to shield her face from the sun, she hesitantly raised her wrist in front of her eyes and tried to focus on her watch. It was ten minutes past ten.

Groaning, she sat up in bed and raised her knees against her chest.

Her head ached as she tried to orient herself. She felt like a moviegoer who'd just spent two long hours in a darkened theatre, whisked out of her own time and context and into a parallel universe. The movie ended, the theatre lights now bright and blinding, she found herself forced to enter the daylight even though her mind was still solidly entrenched in the movie.

Shaista had not been a dream. She knew that. She knew with the certainty she'd gained over the years, of the nights spent in vivid dreams only to discover the visions had been real, the people had truly existed, the locations were factual and the events were tangible and physical. She knew as she'd drifted off to sleep in Dylan's capable arms, she had traveled to a strange land, to distant people, and encountered what they were experiencing at the exact moment the events were unfolding.

She shrugged off the sheet and cotton spread and dangled her legs over the edge of the bed. After a long moment, she sighed deeply and stepped onto the small rug, digging her toes into the soft fibers before making her way across the room to her cell phone.

She held the phone in her hand for a long time, absent-mindedly flipping it from one palm to the other. Then she texted Sam:

Need to talk.

She set the phone on the dresser and walked slowly to the bathroom, pausing briefly to peer out the bedroom window. Dylan's truck was parked in the driveway; just the sight of it causing her heart to skip a beat. She was glad he hadn't left; glad he was downstairs somewhere working. Perhaps, she thought with a sliver of guilt, he was working in the fish house, doing the job she'd been hired to do.

Vicki continued into the bathroom and groggily brushed her teeth. Grabbing a washcloth and splashing water over her face, she leaned into the sink to soak up the cool water as it poured from the tap.

She turned off the tap and tried to fully awaken as the water dripped off her face. Rising, she reached for the hand towel along the wall, catching a glimpse of her profile in the bathroom mirror.

Her eyes caught a shadow rippling in the mirror and she froze, her arm suspended in mid-air as she watched the shadowy figure undulating against the shower curtain just behind her. It was thin—far thinner than a human being; perhaps only four feet tall and just inches wide. Yet, two arms extended past the body, moving jerkily like a creature walking and yet it remained fixed in the center of the tub. The torso parted into two legs that were stick-like and lurching.

Then the shadow stopped and turned toward her, as though just realizing she was watching. The head emerged from the body like a person jutting his neck forward, growing as it neared the shower curtain. It swelled in a black intensity while two pits where eyes should have been grew more prominent.

She whipped around to face the shower curtain, her heart pounding, and her breath shallow.

There was nothing there.

She swung back toward the mirror. Her own face stared back at her, her eyes wide and chest heaving. The curtain hung behind her, motionless.

She raced from the bathroom, grabbing her clothes on her way past the bed. She opened the door and changed from her gown to her clothes while stumbling into the hallway. She reached back inside briefly to toss her gown onto the dresser and grab her shoes. Not stopping to put them on, she raced downstairs with her shoes in her hand.

The front door was open. Vicki dropped her shoes on the floor at the foot of the steps and ran her hands through her hair, realizing she hadn't taken the time to comb it.

As she slipped her feet into the sandals, the vacuum cleaner began whirring in the living room. It sounded so domestic and so normal that she hesitated at the foot of the steps, pondering whether to go back upstairs and at least make a minimal effort at cleaning up.

Before she could retreat back up the stairs, the vacuum cleaner stopped and Benita called out to her. Embarrassed, Vicki answered. "I overslept," she said, making her way into the living room.

“Breakfast on the table,” Benita said in her halting English. “You get some. Juice, too.”

Vicki nodded. “Thank you.” She peered around the room. When she turned back to Benita, the woman was watching her curiously. “Where’s Dylan?” Vicki asked as she felt her cheeks beginning to burn.

“He went back yard.”

“Thank you.” She backed into the hall. “I’ll go get breakfast.”

Benita returned to her work. As Vicki started down the hallway toward the kitchen, the whirl of the vacuum began again.

Her stomach was tied in knots so she passed through the kitchen without eating. She was halfway across the lawn to the fish house when the hairs began to rise along the back of her neck.

She stopped abruptly.

The door to the fish house was no more than fifteen feet away. It felt like a beacon welcoming her into another world, a world where worries and human frailties were left behind; a world where nothing mattered except the welfare of tiny fish sometimes no larger than the head of a pin.

And yet she remained there, unable to move toward it. The more time that passed, the heavier her feet became, as if they were sinking into wet concrete. Her back felt like it had a bull’s eye emblazoned on it; she could feel eyes boring into her.

Gradually, she turned her head to her right. The back yard was bordered by a serpentine garden of rhododendrons and azaleas, within which a small opening in the bushes provided an arched gateway to the driveway, where the grille of Dylan’s truck was barely visible.

As she stared at the driveway, a movement caught her eye and she turned a bit further.

A man stepped from behind the bushes nearest the house.

He stood there, wooden and still, staring at her. He wore a simple, snug polo shirt, the short sleeves stretched tightly around muscular biceps. Dockers grabbed his thighs in a silent but unmistakable announcement that his legs were as powerful as his arms. He was of medium height, his head appearing too small for his weight-lifters body. His hair was barely longer than

a crew cut and so blond it almost appeared white. His skin was light; too light, she thought, like someone who rarely saw the sunshine.

And she knew him.

As she stared back at him, neither one of them speaking, she thought of the remote session in which she found herself staring at Dan Beyer inside the tunnel. Now she wondered if this remote viewer—the young man she'd seen leave the building at Fort Bragg just days earlier—was spying on her, using his own psychic talents to report back to Sam on her movements.

Silently, she turned back to the fish house.

Her feet no longer feeling like they were sinking, she walked purposefully to the fish house, opened the door, and entered.

As she closed the door behind her and looked around, she was surprised that Dylan wasn't there. She'd fully expected him to be elbow deep in one of the tanks, but he was nowhere to be seen.

The room felt empty and her heart sank. The first set of charts noted that Dylan had recorded a water change, water parameters and feeding two hours earlier. He'd been there and gone.

She was at the end of the aisle checking a set of wigglers that had hatched during the night when the door opened behind her. She waited for Dylan's familiar voice, perhaps good-naturedly chiding her for sleeping late, but he didn't speak.

The faint sound of footsteps approached deliberately, each step measured and slow. When they were almost directly behind her, she turned around, expecting to see Dylan watching her.

Instead, she stared into the gray-green eyes of the young man.

"Why are you spying on me?" she asked. Her voice sounded strained and she wondered if she was staring at an apparition.

In a flash, he was upon her, his muscled arms grabbing her and slamming her backward. The fish tank teetered, the water sloshing over the side, as the angelfish parents scattered in fright. The slate with hundreds of baby wigglers crashed to the floor of the tank as she tried to draw the man away from it. A step

away, his arms reached out to either side of her like a set of bars imprisoning her, slamming her against the far wall.

His face was contorted, his lip curling downward.

"I'm not a dream," he breathed. "I'm your worst nightmare."

"Take your hands off me."

"What do you think you're going to do if I don't?" he snarled. "You're no match for me."

"I have no quarrel with you," she said.

"Oh, yes, you do."

"Then take your hands off me and we'll talk about it. I'm sure we can work something out—"

"Oh, we can work something out, alright. You say what I tell you to say. And if you don't, you'll be MIA." His lower lip was contorted. His breath smelled like stale onions and she turned her head.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Stay out of the tunnel."

"What tunnel?"

He pushed against her with his entire body, pinning her flat against the wall. "Stay out of the tunnel." He venomously enunciated each word, spraying spittle on her as he spoke. He pushed against her again, and she realized he was silently threatening her with rape—or worse—if she didn't comply.

She felt a chill creeping across her skin, leaving it tingling as though the circulation had been cut. His whole body felt like iron and he clearly intended on keeping her pinned to the wall until she complied with his demands. As he continued to exert pressure against her, her lungs began to feel weighted and she struggled to catch her breath. Even if she'd intended on agreeing to his demands, she was unable to speak.

He shoved against her once more, pushing the remaining air out of her lungs. She was suffocating, she thought with rising panic.

Then two tanned hands landed on both his shoulders, pulling him off her so abruptly that she nearly fell to her knees. As she gasped for air, she caught sight of him being pulled backward through the fish house, through the doorway and into the yard.

Her knees shaking, she rushed after Dylan as he slammed the man against the trunk of an ancient oak tree.

"This isn't your fight," the assailant said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Dylan slammed his fist into his abdomen, causing him to drop to his knees and double over with pain. "I'm makin' it my fight."

Before he could recover, Dylan kicked him in the head with the steel toe of his cowboy boot. Blood poured down the side of his face but Dylan kicked him again. "Get up!" he ordered. "Get up and fight like a man!" He kicked him a third time, knocking him backward against the tree. "Or do you only fight women?"

Vicki watched in horror as Dylan pummeled the man relentlessly. The other man never had a chance to raise his fist or come to his feet as Dylan struck him again and again. Soon, his head, shirt and pants were spattered with his blood.

"Stop!" Vicki called out, rushing forward to grab Dylan. He shrugged her off as though she was weightless. "Stop!" she screamed again, rushing in again to grab Dylan's arm. "Stop! You're killing him!"

He stopped abruptly and stared at her, wild-eyed.

She stared back at him. He looked like a stranger to her; his eyes were red and bulging, and a thick vein was throbbing in his temple. He looked possessed and she dropped her hand from his sleeve and took a step back.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the young man slowly trying to rise to his feet, his palms still on the ground. He was half crawling and half stumbling down the path toward the bushes.

Dylan started to move after him but Vicki jumped in and clutched him again. "Don't kill him," she begged. "He's not worth it."

"Get out!" Dylan bellowed after him. "And don't come back! You'll not have anyone steppin' in to save you next time!"

But his words were unnecessary. The man disappeared through the break in the bushes.

Vicki felt like every muscle in her body was trembling. In a daze, she headed back toward the fish house, her mind focused on the baby fish that might have been crushed when the slate fell.

She was just a few steps from the building when she was spun around and pushed roughly against the wall. But the young man had not returned. It was Dylan who pounced upon her, pushing her against the wall and nearly knocking the wind out of her. She barely registered his forearms glued to the building on either side of her head, his hands balled into great fists covered in the man's blood. He slammed one fist into the building. More blood welled from his knuckle, his blood this time, but he did not appear to register any pain.

His face was puffy and red, his eyes wild, his hair tousled and his clothing completely disheveled. He bore his eyes into hers with an intensity she'd never seen before. She was trapped beneath his arms, his face so close to hers that they were nearly touching. And when he spoke, it was with a rage that he didn't attempt to control. "Who *are* you?" he demanded.