THE MIRROR

A Horror Novel

Hash Black

THE MIRROR

Preview Edition

NOT FOR SALE!!!

Hash Black

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this achievement to all the pillars of support in my life. This includes my insanely crazy friends, who choose to remain anonymous, and my loving family. I never would have been able to put all this together without their love and never-ending support.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to you, my reader. You are the drive behind every keyboard stroke and all the gory inspiration that goes into all my writing. I strive to give you perfection.

So, I do hope you will enjoy this little treat and come back for more as I continue this amazing journey of writing.

I love you all!

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PROLOGUE

AGATHA HAD JUST stepped out of the shower when she caught a glimpse of tiny legs scutter past the crack of the bathroom door. She sighed and quickly wrapped a towel around her body before stepping out into the dark hallway.

"Ben?" her voice tore through the darkness.

A childish chuckle echoed against the walls in response.

Agatha grunted with exasperation.

Damn it, Ben. Tomorrow's your first day in school.

Agatha staggered her way through the hallways with the guidance of the dim light filtering in through the crack of the bathroom door.

More footsteps.

Agatha turned right and left.

I can't see shit.

"Ben?"

A door creaked open and slammed shut.

Jesus! Agatha shuddered.

She turned to see a light underneath her son's bedroom door.

The aggravated mother tore the door open, ready to give her son a piece of her mind, only to be greeted by darkness.

Dim moonlight filtered in through the fluttering curtains of the bedroom window, highlighting her sleeping angel on his bed.

What the…?

Agatha shook her head.

I'm hallucinating. I really need some shut eye.

Agatha walked in and closed the bedroom window before turning to her son. She ran her hand over his tiny chest and planted a kiss on his cheek.

Sweet dreams, sweetheart.

Agatha gently closed the door behind her as she walked out of Ben's room and made her way back to the bathroom.

She stood in front of the mirror and grabbed the sink, shaking her head at the dark eye bags beneath her eyes. She sighed and glazed her toothbrush with a fresh wad of toothpaste.

She froze when she raised her gaze back at her reflection. It was refracted against a crack that ran diagonally across the mirror.

That wasn't there before.

She ran a finger across the crack, but she couldn't feel the groove.

It's almost as if it's behind the mirror.

A prick in her finger forced her to jump back.

Fuck.

She rose her finger to her face. A drop of blood had formed at the tip. She sucked it in her mouth.

Crack!

A scream escaped Agatha's lungs, as the deafening sound of breaking glass reverberated through the house walls.

"Ben?"

Silence.

Agatha looked back the mirror. What she saw shook her to the core.

The crack. It's gone.

She looked back at her finger. The prick was gone as well.

Her heart palpitated in her chest as a chill coursed down the back of her neck.

"Who's there? Show yourself!"

Silence.

She swallowed a lump. A bead of sweat cascaded down her forehead.

Yowl!

The blood curdling cry came from bathroom door.

A cat?

The black feline stood by the door. Its eyes glared menacingly at the mother in the bathroom. Its sharp fangs were borne defiantly in the open.

Where the hell did you come from?

Agatha grabbed the toothpaste and threw it at the cat. It yowled again before disappearing into the hallway.

Agatha ran after it.

"Shoo!"

Her vision betrayed her in the dark. But even with the dim light from the bathroom, she could make out the desolate floor before her.

Where did it go?

She rubbed her eyes and shook her head, waiting for her vision to adjust to the darkness. The distraught lady flashed her eyes open again, scanning her surroundings for the black furball in the hallway.

Got you!

Bright red eyes gleamed at her in the dark.

Agatha advanced, dashing toward them, moving deeper into the heavy shroud of darkness.

"Shoo!"

A deafening growl shook her to the core, forcing her to a halt. She screamed as a beast pounced onto her chest, throwing her to the ground.

Agatha cried in agony as heavy paws crushed her chest and claws dug into her skin. A putrid breath huffed hungrily over her face. Giant fangs shone bright before her eyes in the cover of darkness.

"Mommy?" Ben called from behind Agatha.

The helpless mother looked over her head to see her son's sleepy eyes looking down at her.

A tear fell from her eyes as she yelled, "Run, baby! Run!"

Her heart almost stopped when the jaguar leaped over her chest and grabbed her son by shoulders. His scream felt like a dagger inside Agatha's heart.

"Ben!"

Agatha staggered to her feet and ran after the beast as it disappeared behind Ben's bedroom door.

She gasped as she stormed in. Her eyes opened wide open as she froze in place.

A smokey figure had her son's body in its arms. Its eyes glowed bright red in the darkness as its stare penetrated into Agatha's.

A shiver cascaded through her body. She stared in disbelief as the ghost disappeared into the mirror with her son.

The mother's scream shook the house. She thrashed wildly at the mirror, trying to get through.

"Give him back! Give my son back!"

Screech!

Agatha grabbed her ears, frantically struggling to block out the deafening squeal that stabbed through them. She fell to the ground, writhing in pain as she waited for her eardrums to pop.

Then it stopped.

She opened her eyes. Everything was a blur. The room seemed to revolve around her. A ringing sound chimed in her ear. And a throbbing ache pounded in her head.

She pressed her temples as she trailed her gaze back to the mirror.

It was intact.

But a message was scribed into it.

A LIFE FOR A LIFE
I WILL HAVE MY REVENGE
YOUR 24 HOURS START NOW

Part I

"Reality is an Illusion"

CHAPTER ONE

New Beginnings

The sweet scent of freshly bloomed flowers graced the cool autumn air, promising a fresh start from all the torments that once plagued Beth Carson. She stood wearily in the front lawn of her new house, looking hopefully at the property she had moved into a couple of days ago.

Beth turned to check on her six-year-old daughter, Lily. She had her back to the house. A stuffed bunny was snuggled tight over her chest. And her eyes were trained on the entry path behind them.

Beth watched in pain.

She's still waiting for Jared to come back.

The mother knelt to her daughter's eye level and brushed her hand over Lily's shoulders, pulling her attention from the empty street behind them. She looked deep into her big blue eyes and flashed her a smile before planting a kiss on her soft chubby cheeks.

"Why do we have to stay here?" Lily protested.

Faking a smile, Beth bit down on an ache that ravaged her heart.

"Baby, there's nothing left for us in Manhattan. Mistic is where we belong now."

Lily's face contorted into a frown. Tears welled in her bubbly eyes.

"But-but what about daddy?"

The question stabbed at Beth's chest. Visions of Jared walking out the door on a rainy night cascaded through her mind. She struggled to breathe as she

remembered Lily running to hug him after he'd given her a stuffed bunny from the store.

He'd just gotten home from work. Maybe if I hadn't sent him back out for groceries…

The ghastly sound of screeching tires still clawed at her ears. The same screeches that became the last sound Jared would hear.

Beth looked down at the bunny in Lily's arms.

It's been a year now, and that stuffed bunny has never left her side.

"He said he would be back, Mommy. He promised," Lily protested, yanking Beth from the demons that haunted her mind.

A dark heaviness settled in her chest as she struggled to look her daughter in the eye. Lily's face streamed with tears.

Beth took a deep breath, desperate to push the pain deeper down her core. She put on another fake smile and wrapped her arms tight around her daughter.

"Daddy will always be with us, baby. He will always be near."

"I don't understand, Mommy. Why isn't he coming back? Doesn't he love us anymore?"

Beth swallowed hard against a rogue sob as she laid her chin over her daughter's shoulder. The ache in her heart was unbearable.

I have to be strong for Lily's sake.

She gnashed her teeth as the dark heaviness resurfaced, suffocating her composure and sending tears of her own down her face.

Beth wiped her tears and unwrapped her arms from her daughter. She brushed the tears off Lily's face and looked her in the eye.

Those blue eyes. So much like your father's.

She smiled as the heaviness in her heart lifted.

Lily's gaze shifted to the floor. Her grip over the stuffed bunny grew tighter. Her breathing escalated. Beth's eyebrows furrowed.

"What is it, little bugger?"

"Mommy. There's monsters under my bed."

Beth's eyes widened. Lily continued,

"They talk to me at night."

"Baby-"

"Can you sleep with me at night like daddy used to?"

It was then that Beth made a declaration. The declaration that would spell a new beginning to her life with Lily.

"Baby, look at me."

Lily lifted her gaze back to her mother. A soft breeze blew against her golden hair, much like her mother's.

"I will always be here for you, honey. Okay?"

Confusion grew over Lily's face. Beth continued,

"I'll never let anything bad happen to you. You'll never be alone."

Lily's eyes widened.

"Pinky promise?"

Beth burst into tearful laughter as her daughter raised her little finger. Beth hooked it with her own and pulled her daughter in for another hug.

"Pinky promise, baby."

It's time for me to let go of the guilt. Lily is all that matters now.

Beth untangled herself from her daughter and looked back at her with a broad smile.

"Chocolate pancakes?"

Lily's face lit up. Licking her lips, she responded,

"My favorite. Yes, please!"

Beth got back up on her feet and flashed her a cheeky smile.

"Race you to the front door?"

Lily started running before her mother could even finish her sentence.

"Hey. That's not fair," Beth called out.

By then, Lily was already making her way up the porch steps. Her mother followed close behind, laughing as she approached.

"It's okay, mommy," Lily soothed. "You're just old and slow."

Beth feigned a pained gasp as she fit a key through the doorknob.

"I'm not old."

Lily laughed.

"Of course, you are."

Meow.

Beth turned from the front door to notice a cute black cat circling her daughter.

"Mommy, Mommy. A kitty!"

Before Beth could respond, Lily dropped Bunny and lunged forward, picking the cat from the ground. Beth watched in shock as the stuffed animal hit the ground.

She dropped Bunny. She's never dropped Bunny before.

Lily brushed her face against the cat's as it licked her in the cheek. Beth watched in amazement as her daughter's face lit up with joy.

"Can we keep it, Mommy? Can we? Can we? Please."

Beth did a quick search for a collar around the cat's neck.

"Well, it doesn't have a collar on it."

"So we can keep it? So we can keep it?"

Beth laughed.

"Only if no one comes to claim it, sweetheart. It could be a lost cat."

"Yes! It's so fluffy, Mommy."

Beth smiled as she watched her daughter run into the house with her new pet. She turned around and picked the stuffed bunny from the front porch before walking into the house, locking the door behind her.

Laying the bunny on a moving box placed next to the front door, a smile curled over her face.

Things are finally looking up.

• • •

The cat circled Beth's legs as she laid some leftover meat on the floor for the cat. She winced at the idea of having to give up her favorite bowl. With a fist on her hip, she shook her head as she watched the cat chow down on a piece of meat.

I'll need to go shopping. Soon.

Beth turned her gaze to her daughter. She was munching joyfully at the fresh batch of chocolate pancakes she'd just made her. She chuckled remembering Lily's earlier meltdown when she couldn't find the maple syrup.

Beth walked over the sink to finish washing the dishes. Pleasant memories flooded her mind as she brushed a foamy scouring pad over the frying pan. Flashes of her baby daughter cradled in her arms for the first time were a pleasant comfort, especially from the tension she'd had to endure through their recent move. The soothing memory of Lily peering inquisitively at her was still fresh in her mind. It was as though she was trying to say, "Hey, I know you."

A loud cry rang behind her. She turned to see Lily ransacking the moving boxes in the living room.

"Mommy!" she cried.

Beth ran over to check on her. She got down on her knees and grabbed her daughter from behind, frantically checking her from head to toe.

"What, baby? What is it? Are you okay?"

Tears flowed down Lily's cheeks.

"It's Bunny. I can't find Bunny."

Lily's cries bounced off the living room walls. She turned away from her mother to resume her search among the boxes. She tumbled and turned them as she scoured for her favorite stuffed animal. Her loud sobs were like daggers through Beth's heart.

"I can't find her," she protested. "She's gone, mommy. Just like daddy."

Lily's last statement hit Beth like a rogue train speeding off its tracks. She grabbed her daughter again, lifting her in her arms.

"No, sweetie," Beth soothed. "You left her outside after you met the cat, remember?"

Lily stopped crying, replacing the expression with a bright glow. Beth continued,

"Don't worry. Mommy carried Bunny back inside as you were playing with the cat."

Beth laid her daughter onto the nearest couch she could find.

"Wow. You've gotten heavy," Beth complained. "Now, you stay right here. I'll bring Bunny straight back to you."

"Promise?"

Beth leaned over and kissed Lily on the cheek before holding out her little finger. Lily grinned and wrapped her pinky over her mother's.

"Pinky promise," Beth encouraged.

Beth made her way to the box next to the front door where she had left the stuffed bunny earlier that day.

It wasn't there.

Beth gasped. She got down on all fours, searching the floor.

She couldn't find it.

Her breathing escalated. She pulled the heavy boxes from the wall to check behind them.

It wasn't there.

She swirled left and right, checking the walls and cabinets around her.

It wasn't there either.

Beth bit her finger.

Did I leave it outside? I'm pretty sure I didn't.

Beth grabbed the door handle, unlocked it, and flung it open. But what she saw sent an icy chill down her spine. Her eyes opened wide and her hands flung over her mouth. A whiff of air escaped her lungs.

She had found Bunny, but the stuffed animal was hung by its neck. Blood flowed from its eyes, dripping onto the ground below it.

Meow.

Beth almost jumped out of her skin. The black cat was seated underneath the bleeding bunny, licking its paws. It stopped and glared at Beth.

That's strange. Weren't you inside the house? I'm pretty sure I locked the door.

Beth started to untie the bunny when the cat hissed. A stab of pain jolted from her foot, shooting its way up her spine to the base of her skull.

"Mother f-"

She looked down to see blood seeping from where the cat nicked her.

CHAPTER TWO

Meet the Neighbors

Beth lied still in the lawn as her worries sank with the sun beneath the horizon. Lily was curled up beside her with Bunny clenched over her chest. The cat sat next to them licking its paw. The refreshing smell of freshly cut grass filled their senses as a moonlit night slowly manifested from a bright sunny day.

This is good. We're off to a good start. Something good is coming our way, I can feel it.

"Mommy, Look. Those stars look just like Fluffy," Lily exclaimed.

Beth laughed.

"Who's Fluffy?"

"That's my cat, silly."

"Okay, baby. You can call her whatever you like."

"How do you know she's not a he?"

Beth choked.

How the hell do I explain genitalia to a six-year-old?

"I don't know, baby. When you're as old as Mommy, you'll get to know a thing or two about these things."

"Is this one of those things grown-ups are too shy to talk about with kids, Mommy?"

Beth laughed.

"Okay, smarty pants. Let's get you back inside before you catch a cold."

Beth picked Lily up and walked to their front porch. Fluffy tagged along, tiptoeing over the grass.

A smile curved over Beth's face.

Lily's getting back to her old self.

"Hello, new neighbors!" A deep friendly voice called behind them.

Beth turned to see a skinny man wearing large glasses. He was in blue, flower-print shorts and a white shirt that was buttoned to his throat. In his left hand were three leashes attached to a Chihuahua, a French bulldog, and a furry Maltese. The dogs circled him, tangling their leashes around his legs as he waved at Beth and Lily.

"Mommy, who's that?" asked Lilly.

Beth whispered through her teeth, "I've seen him around, but I honestly have no idea."

Beth held down against the urge to giggle as the man lost control of his dogs. Lily burst with laughter as the neighbor's legs got tied stiff by the hyperactive dogs. She pulled at her daughter's shoulder.

"It's not polite to laugh at people, Lily."

But Lily kept laughing.

Beth raised her gaze to see the poor guy hop around as the Chihuahua jumped up and pulled at his shorts. He stopped waving and grabbed his waistband, pulling in vain against the dog dangling by his leg.

"Amy, stop it. Stop it!"

The Maltese paraded across the street, pulling its master off balance with its leash. The man called out to the dog, still pulling at his shorts.

"Keisha. Get back here, Keisha. Get back here!"

The third dog just stood there, huffing with its tongue out. It wagged its tail with excitement at the unveiling drama.

Beth struggled to contain her daughter, who was rolling on the floor by now.

"Lily," Beth giggled, "stop it. It's rude to laugh at people."

With her daughter settling down, Beth picked Fluffy up in her arms.

"Get up, baby," Beth chuckled. "I think we should go help the poor fellow."

Lily put a finger over her lip and made a thoughtful face.

"Well, I guess it's the prudent thing to do."

Beth laughed.

"Prudent? Where did you learn that?"

"Focus, Mommy. Focus."

Beth chuckled and shook her head.

They walked over to the entangled neighbor. He feigned a friendly smile while doing a poor job keeping his shorts on.

The dogs suddenly turned at her.

No.

They turned at the cat.

They barked, baring their sharp teeth at the feline on Beth's arms.

The cat's fur stood on end. It yowled in response and arched its back high in Beth's arm. Its sharp claws wedged deep into Beth's skin.

Beth whimpered in pain.

The cat hissed and jumped off Beth's arm. It dashed off, disappearing beneath a hedge fence.

"Fluffy," Lily called, "come back!"

The little girl ran after her pet, but she couldn't keep up. Beth followed, leaving the neighbor behind her.

"It's okay, honey. She'll be-"

A heavy thud interrupted before she could finish her sentence. Beth turned to see the neighbor tumbled onto her lawn, face first. His shorts had found their way down to his ankles.

"Oh my," Beth exclaimed, a hand over her mouth.

She shook the sight from her head when she caught herself staring and turned back to her daughter.

Lily was lying on the ground, peeping beneath the hedge. She called restlessly for her cat.

Beth huddled in close and held her.

"It's okay, sweetie," Beth soothed. "Fluffy will be back."

"Fluffy's gone, Mommy. Just like daddy."

A tear came down Lily's cheek.

"No, baby. Fluffy just got a little scared, that's all. She'll be back. I promise."

Beth pulled her daughter back to her feet and erased a tear from her eye.

"Are you sure?" Lily asked.

"You know mommies are never wrong, right?"

Lily's face shone with brightness again. She jumped at her mother and wrapped her tiny arms around her. Beth chuckled and reciprocated the gesture.

A groan pulled Beth's attention.

"The neighbor," she remembered.

Beth turned to see him struggling to pull his shorts back up as he wiggled on the ground. She shielded Lily's eyes.

With a sheepish smile on his face, the man raised his arm.

"Sorry. Sorry. I'm fine. No need to worry. I meant to do that."

Beth's eyes widened.

"Apart from the shorts, of course."

The man blushed, getting his shorts back to his waist. Beth let go of Lily's face.

"What?" Lily protested.

Soon, they were both handling the dogs, helping untangle the distraught neighbor.

"It's Kelvin, by the way. Mark Kelvin," announced the neighbor, feeling the ground for his lost glasses.

Beth was still recovering from what just happened as she untied Mark's legs. She didn't even notice that her face was inches from Mark's.

"Well, Kelvin," Beth started to speak, raising her gaze to Mark, "you should be more careful next… time."

Beth's gaze found Mark's. She felt the fresh minty scent of his breath on her face. His dark bewildering eyes sucked her into a dreamy vortex.

She lost herself amongst the chiseled features of his narrow face. A well-defined jawline. A brow ridge hung low and prominent over his eye sockets, giving way to a thin, refined nose. Her eyes searched higher to his short dark locks of thick moist hair. It was combed to the side, reflecting bright rays from the full-moon light. And the stub on his jaw.

Beth licked her lips.

Those glasses sure do hide a lot.

"Hello? Neighbor?" Mark called, still unable to find his glasses.

Beth snapped out of her trance. She shook her head, struggling to find something to say. Her throat went dry all of a sudden.

"Here you go, good sir."

Lily chipped in, handing Mark his glasses.

Beth watched as Mark put his glasses back on, instantly transforming him back into the nerdy clutz she'd just met.

"Oh, sorry. Got a little preoccupied there," Beth blurted, brushing an invisible strand of hair over her ear.

"That's, um, that's okay. It's not- you know, it isn't, um, it isn't every day that a random stranger falls onto your front lawn. You know?"

Beth shrugged, unsure what he was trying to say. She jumped back when he burst out laughing. She exchanged a glance with Lily.

"Anyway, um, thanks for helping me out. I'm sorry about the cat. You know. Your pet."

Mark pointed at Beth's forearm.

Beth furrowed her eyebrows and followed his gesture. A gasp came out of her lips.

She was bleeding.

Mark continued, "Please, I can- you- I can have a look at that for you. I'm the, um, I'm a physician from the village hospital."

Beth struggled not to laugh as the nervous man trembled in front of her.

Am I crazy? Or is his awkwardness a little bit charming?

"Oh, really? I'm the new surgeon transfer from New York City," exclaimed Beth. "Looks like we'll be work buddies. Oh, and don't worry about my arm. It's just a scratch. I can patch this up. It's no problem."

"Oh, that's great," announced Mark. "Sorry, I didn't, um, I didn't catch your names."

"Oh, I'm sorry, kind sir," chirped Lily from below. "My name is Lily Carson, and this fine lady here is my mommy, Beth Carson."

A grin was plastered onto her face.

Beth laughed and pulled Lily closer.

Mark bent over to shake her hand.

"Well, it's nice to meet you both. And I truly am sorry for all the trouble I've caused," Mark said, his confidence building. "Tell you what? I'm headed home to prepare some food- some dinner and, um, I would love to have the two of you over in about, um, two hours?"

"No, that's really not-" Beth began to speak, but Mark cut her off.

"Oh, no. I'm not taking no for an answer. I stay two houses down the block. It's the least I could do for the trouble. Besides, it's only right to welcome a new neighbor. Plus, um, it would be- it would be nice to get a head start with my new work buddy."

They agreed.

Beth went back inside with Lily's hand in hers, leaving Mark to trot his way back home. His overly enthusiastic dogs dragged him forward.

Beth put her hand over her chest. It was racing.

• • •

Beth was in Lily's room. She was helping her daughter try out different dresses for their dinner invitation. Lily held Bunny to her side as Beth knelt behind her, holding a cute white sleeveless dress in front of her. She looked at Lily's reflection in the huge mirror fixed to the wall. Her attention was on the dress on her daughter.

"What do you think, baby? I think the blue one is better."

"Why isn't Fluffy back, Mommy?" Lily complained, avoiding Beth's question.

"She'll be back, sweetie," Beth soothed.

She turned Lily to face her. With a cheerful smile, she said, "Tell you what? We'll put some milk outside and Fluffy will come back running. I promise."

Lily's eyes lit up.

"That's a good idea. Let's put glitters too. Cats love glitters."

Beth chuckled.

"Of course, baby. We'll put lots of glitters."

Beth turned Lily back to the mirror. But what she saw made her shriek.

A long crack ran diagonally across the mirror.

That wasn't there before.

Beth laid the dress in her hand onto Lily's bed. She moved in closer to inspect the mirror. She trailed her index finger across the crack, but she couldn't feel its groove over the surface.

It's almost as if the crack is behind the mirror.

A sudden prick in her finger jolted her back. Her finger was bleeding.

Ding Dong!

Beth jumped with a yelp at the ringing doorbell. Her heart palpitated in her ribcage as she checked the mirror one last time.

The crack was gone. And so was the prick on her finger.

She noticed Lily looking at her with an inquisitive expression on her face.

"What's wrong, Mommy?"

Beth tried to reply, but her throat felt dry and she noticed that she'd been holding her breath. After a deep inhale, she smiled and turned to her daughter.

"Sorry, sweetie. Mommy's just a little tired, that's all. Let me get the door. I'll be right back."

Beth rushed downstairs to the front door, leaving her daughter with Bunny in her arms.

Who could that be at this hour? Could it be Mark?

She checked the wall clock down the stairs.

Well, we're not all that late.

She opened the front door only to be greeted by a chubby old lady on her front porch. The tantalizing aroma of fresh apple pie scintillated the air from the tray in the lady's hands. She wore a big smile on her face over a green sunflower-print dress with a thick orange shoal draped over her shoulders. Her straight grey hair was cut short, pouring down just below her neck.

"Well, hello there, dear," the old lady rasped, handing the tray of pie to Beth. "My name is Eva Carmine and I live next door."

Beth's face lit up with delight.

"Oh, my. You shouldn't have, Ms. Carmine. Thank you so much," Beth said, accepting the tray. "My name is Beth Carson and I really appreciate the warm welcome."

"It's my pleasure, dear," replied Eva.

The big smile on Eva's face changed into a solemn gaze. Beth's eyebrows rose as the lady turned her head left and right. Beth tried to follow her gaze,

Is she running from someone?

Nobody else was there.

"Is everything okay, Ms. Carmine?"

"Beware the roof you live underneath, my dear. Tales of the lost souls that ravage this house by night are well known in this neighborhood."

Beth smiled.

"People say a lot of things, Ms. Carmine. I'm sure the local folklore is nothing to lose sleep-"

"No!" Eva yelled, pulling Beth closer to her. "I've heard them. The wails. The loud footsteps. The breaking glass. Oh, the loud breaking glass. It keeps me up every night."

Beth brushed her hand over Eva's, moving it from her dress. She nested it softly in between her palms.

"I'm so sorry to hear this, Ms. Carmine. You know, sightings of ghosts and the supernatural are usually signs of depression and paranoia. I start work at

the village hospital tomorrow, and-"

"Watch your tongue, young lady. I am not crazy."

Eva's hiss came unexpected for Beth.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Ms. Carmine. I just wanted to-"

Eva grimaced with rage and turned on her heal, wobbling her way to the porch stairs. Her neck turned back to Beth on the first step down. A menacing glow emanated from her eyes.

"I am not crazy," she repeated. "I know what I heard. Heed my warning, child. Leave now. Before it's too late."

CHAPTER THREE

Dinner at Mark's

BETH COULDN'T KEEP her hand from shaking as she walked Lily with to their front door. The thought of Mark made her knees weak.

Why do I feel this way?

She looked down at her short blue dress and bit her lip.

Maybe I should have gone for the green one. I feel underdressed.

She thought about the round neckline on the dress she left behind. She then looked down at the low V-neck on the dress she was wearing.

Oh, great. Now I feel overdressed.

She shook her head and checked on Lily. She looked like an ice princess in her white flowing dress. She had Bunny snuggled tight to her side.

Beth picked up the watermelons before heading out the door.

Damn it, Beth. Watermelons?

She sighed.

Well, it was either this or showing up empty handed.

A pleasant surprise awaited her daughter as they stepped out the front door.

"Lily. Look who's back."

Fluffy was crouched over a bowl of milk in the front porch lapping quietly at its contents. Lily put Bunny down and to greet her lost pet. She picked the cat up and gave it a tight hug.

Beth smiled watching from behind. But she noticed something off on the cat.

Its eyes. Are they glowing?

She bent over for a closer look.

Yap, I'm officially hallucinating.

She sighed.

I can't wait to get this dinner over with. I could really use some shut eye. Tomorrow's a big day. For me and Lily.

Beth let the cat inside and poured in some more milk for it.

Out at the front porch, she noticed the neighbors from three houses across the street staring at them. An old couple stood by their door while two other onlookers stood by their windows.

Beth waved hello, but they all shut themselves in immediately and turned their lights off.

"Well, that's rude!" Lily complained.

Her mother laughed.

They strode their way down the street under the guidance of bright streetlamps. Soon, they were walking up the front porch at Mark's place. She checked the address and turned to Lily.

"Yap. This is the one. You ready?"

Lily smiled.

"Mommy, I was born ready."

Beth laughed before replying.

"I won't even ask."

Beth rang the doorbell and waited for Mark to welcome them inside. She brushed dust speckles off her dress and fixed her hair as the door opened. Mark hadn't changed his outfit.

"Wow. Don't you two look dazzling?" Mark complimented with his hand glued to the doorknob.

Beth felt her cheeks warm up in the chilly air.

Damn it. My hands are sweating.

"Well, thank you, fine young man," Lily responded.

Beth stared at her daughter in bewilderment after her umpteenth witty phrase that day.

They all laughed before an awkward silence took over. Beth's eyes found the floor. Her core fluttered with anticipation. She swallowed hard against her racing heart as Mark's eyes scanned her from head to toe.

What the hell is happening? Why am I shaking like this? It's definitely not the weather. A few more minutes out here and the butterflies in my stomach will come bursting out my

mouth.

"Ahem," Lily interrupted, breaking the loud silence.

"Young man, it's chilly out here and I'm afraid Bunny might catch a cold. So, if don't mind, we would like to come inside right about now."

"Lily!" Beth exclaimed.

Her eyes darted to Mark.

I hope he didn't take offense.

Mark shook his head as if snapping out of a trance. Beth watched in awe as an enchanting smile spread over his face.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Please. Please, come in," he gestured.

Beth led her daughter inside as Mark took their coats and hung them behind the door. She handed the bag of watermelons to Mark as she admired the fascinating interior of her host's house.

"Wow. You have a very lovely house, Mark," Beth remarked.

Mark received the bag and responded, "Thanks. Please, feel at home."

Beth held her breath as Mark peeped into the bag.

Damn it. Why the hell did I bring watermelons? I should have gotten champagne.

"Nice melons. They're perfect."

The comment slipped past Beth's ears.

"Excuse me, what?"

"I mean your melons. I like them. They're lovely."

Before Beth could respond, she sensed an awkward hesitation in Mark's demeanor.

He stuttered, "Oh, no. No. I'm so sorry. I meant these melons," he gestured to the bag in his hand. "I didn't mean your, um, you know…"

Beth's eyebrows spiked as Mark's gesturing arm rose toward her. Luckily, he caught himself just in time to feign scratching the back of his head. His cheeks instantly turned pink.

Beth bit hard against a surge of laughter. Her hands reached over her mouth as a giggle broke loose.

But it was no use.

Her laughter rang loud against the walls around them. Her host soon joined her.

All the while, Lily watched in confusion.

"Hey. What's so funny about watermelons?"

• • •

Mark tensed with anticipation as he decorated the small round dining table with mouth-watering delicacies. An assortment of savory aromas graced the company.

A big bowl of pasta was laid in the middle of the table. Beside it was a bowl of glistening meatballs, dipped deliciously in a special sauce, with a light sprinkle of fresh coriander leaves.

Mark's eyes were glued to Beth's alluring smile as he laid a tray of clam pie beside the pasta.

Beth is so beautiful, he thought.

A stab of guilt bit at him when he noticed a bandage on her arm.

Oh great. I meet a lovely girl, and the first thing I manage to do is get her patched up.

The guilt dissipated into a smile as he watched Beth mouth a *"wow"* to herself.

Mark began to talk as he sat on his chair when Beth interrupted him.

"Oh, Mark. This is all looks so lovely, but it's too much. When you said dinner, I-"

Mark raised his hand.

"Not at all. This is how I always cook."

The mother and daughter looked at the food-packed table, and then back to their host Mark. A puzzled look riddled their faces.

"Oh, no," Mark chuckled. He swallowed hard, not sure how to explain his answer.

"I give some to the neighbors."

"Oh," Beth nodded.

Mark swallowed.

Okay, time for a subject change.

"Um, before we start eating, do you guys mind if we say a prayer?"

"Huh? A prayer? Why?" Beth inquired.

"Um. I don't know, um," Mark shrugged, unsure what Beth meant, "it's just something people do before they eat, I guess?"

"Oh, but of course."

A fake smile crept over Beth's face.

"Um, okay," Mark responded, unsure how to proceed.

"Psst!"

Mark's attention turned to Lily. She had a hand over her mouth, shielding it from her mother's view. The cheeky little girl whispered out load to Mark,

"She's not a fan of the big guy upstairs."

Mark laughed and whispered back while nodding in earnest,

"Oh."

"Lily!" Beth complained.

Mark and the little girl burst out laughing. Beth fidgeted in her seat. He admired her from the corner of his eye as her cheeks warmed into a dazzling shade of pink.

Mark and Lily continued to pick on Beth throughout the meal. He couldn't help but steal glances whenever he could. And every so often, their eyes would meet. They'd blush and look back down to their plates.

Slow your horses, Mark. You've only just met her, and you barely know anything about her. She could be married for all you know.

Mark raised his gaze for a peep at her ring finger.

No ring.

He shook his head.

No, Mark. Relationships have never worked out for you before, so how would this be any different. Plus, there's more at stake here. She's got a kid.

He stole another glance at Beth, admiring her grace as she fed another spoonful of pasta to her daughter.

Oh my God, she's so dreamy.

Mark turned back to his plate, shaking his head.

No, Mark. No.

By the end of the meal, Lily was so sleepy that Beth laid her down on the couch.

Mark suggested, "Hey, you know, um, I wouldn't mind if you guys slept over. I mean, Lily's totally out anyway."

Beth's eyebrows rose.

"I don't want to intrude. Plus, we should get going."

"Not at all. I have a few extra rooms, and I'd be happy to have you guys."

"That's really kind of you, Mark. But tomorrow's my first day at work, and Lily's first day at school. We'd be better off at our place tonight."

Mark noticed Beth's discomfort as she kept looking at the door.

"Okay, okay," Mark surrendered. "Let me get my coat. At least let me walk you guys back. I can help you carry Lily."

"Thanks. She can be quite the load."

Soon, they were strolling their way back to Beth's. Lily was asleep in Mark's arms.

"Whoa. You weren't kidding about the load. What do you feed her?" Mark joked.

Beth chuckled, but she didn't comment back.

Mark noticed as Beth's mind wandered off. She had her arms folded over her chest, lost in her own silence. The tension grew thicker around them.

Mark, say something, you idiot. Anything.

"So, um, was Lily for real? You know. About your anti-religion thing?"

Beth snapped out of her thoughts.

"Oh, I wouldn't call it anti-religion," Beth laughed sheepishly.

"That's okay, you know. I respect that," Mark said, a solemn look on his face.

Beth smiled.

"Thanks. That means a lot coming from the handsome doctor of Mistic."

Mark's heart sank.

Handsome? Did she just call me handsome?

Mark swallowed hard, struggling to maintain his composure. An awkward silence ensued.

Come on, Mark. Would you say something already?

"Um, thanks," he blushed, "but what's, um, what's Mistic got to do with it?"

"Oh, it's just that I get the impression that people here are pretty… superstitious."

Mark laughed.

"Really? And what gave you that impression?"

Beth told Mark about what happened earlier with Eva. She then told him how the neighbors reacted to her and Lily when she waved at them before coming over to his place.

"Oh," Mark exclaimed.

"Oh? What do you mean, *'Oh'*?"

"You haven't heard?"

"Heard? About what?"

"That house you stay in, there's a bit of history there."

"Really? Tell me about it."

"I'm guessing you got it cheap?"

"Well, yes actually. I was knocked off my socks when the realtor shot the price at me. The house was solid, so I jumped at the offer."

"That house had been vacant for years. Nobody ever wanted to buy it. Those who showed interest got scared off by the locals."

"That explains Eva."

"There was a fire there a long time ago. A mother and daughter died inside. So, rumor has it that their souls stills prowl the house, looking for revenge over their deaths."

Beth laughed.

"Wouldn't that make for a trendy horror movie?"

"You watch movies?"

"As long as there's cheese popcorn."

Mark chuckled.

"Which reminds me," Beth continued. "I have extra pie at my place."

"Is that an invitation?"

Beth blushed.

"Well, that depends on how well you take care of me tomorrow at the hospital."

Mark's eyebrows rose.

• • •

Beth sighed for the tenth time that night, struggling to rid herself of the unease that settled at the pit of her core. She snuggled into Lily's bed, striving to abolish Mark from her mind.

Meanwhile, Lily held on tight to Bunny. She had her thumb wedged into her mouth as a smile spread over her lips.

Beth brushed her hand over her daughter's soft golden hair and planted a kiss on her forehead. She raised her head to check on the purring cat under the mirror across the room. The tired expression on her face was vivid in her reflection.

Dinner was amazing.

She turned her gaze back to her daughter.

I'm glad Lily's back to being the jovial daughter I once knew. Things just haven't been the same since Jared left. But tonight… Tonight was different.

Her thoughts wandered to the soothing bas in Mark's voice. She chuckled as she remembered how he dropped a hot meatball on his pants when she caught him staring at the dinner table.

What's happening to me?

Lily smacked her lips, interrupting Beth's thoughts. The mother looked down at her peaceful daughter and smiled.

You got along with him too, didn't you?

Beth turned away and sighed once more.

I know I've been looking for a fresh start, but is it too soon?

Visions of his intense gaze as he said goodbye in the porch came tumbling back to her mind. She tensed as she remembered how he leaned in for a kiss. How her heart raced with anxiety, her body cried with wanton. But it was all too much. Too soon. So, she turned with Lily in her arms, opened the front door, and closed it behind her while saying goodbye, leaving Mark baffled outside.

She felt blood rushing to her cheeks again. Her arms rose to cover her face, the scene playing over in her mind like a broken record.

He'll never want to see me again after that.

Beth shook her head and held her daughter in her arms, shutting out the visions from her mind. Everything went blurry as heavy slumber enveloped her drained body.

As the mother and daughter slept, a handprint slowly condensed onto the bedroom mirror. A pale distorted face hovered behind it, watching from a distance.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Dream

Something didn't sit right with Beth as she basked in Jared's embrace. Yet the sunset glowed with colorful promise over the dazzling horizon.

Lily was playing with Fluffy right beside them, striving in vain to have the cat fetch a frisbee. Fluffy just sat there, licking its paw, oblivious of Lily's frantic outrage as she complained to her parents.

"Daddy. Fluffy won't fetch. Why won't Fluffy fetch?"

Beth and her husband laughed. The warmth in Jared's voice was soothing as he encouraged their daughter.

"Don't give up, baby. Keep trying."

The sun glinted at them as it sank into the lake. Its reflective rays scattered over the calm serene water. Evening birds chirped in the dense forest by their side as the smell of freshly bloomed flowers soothed their senses. Red evening clouds drifted high above them, forecasting calm weather as the night drew closer.

Beth snuggled tight into Jared's embrace. She quivered as his finger traced a path across her jaw. She turned to face him. The deep glow in his warm eyes drew her closer. Her gaze fell to the sharp edge of his nose and farther down to the thin slit of his red lips. Her heart raced as her lips met his, dissipating the void that sat heavy in her core. Beth closed her eyes. Her body suddenly felt lighter as Jared took her breath away.

"Ew! Gross!"

Lily's interruption pried Beth off Jared. She opened her eyes. Jared's hypnotizing gaze still glowed with passion. His deep voice was like a cool breeze beneath the warmth of the dwindling sun.

"I love you, honey."

Beth blushed.

She watched as Jared's charming smile shone over his face. He winked at her and took to his feet, chasing after their daughter.

He was a mountain of a man.

He grabbed Lily by her sides and tossed her into the air, catching her on her way down. They laughed hysterically as Jared laid Lily on the grass. Their laughter grew louder as he tickled her.

Beth enjoyed the view from a distance, giggling as the show unfolded.

Everything's perfect.

She narrowed her gaze to her surroundings.

But something feels off.

A sudden sharp pain jolted through Beth's arm. She whimpered in pain as she spun to check her rear. Her arm bandage was back. A blot of blood grew larger on the gauze.

A hiss whirled her around. The black cat was crouched behind her.

"Fluffy?"

Its back was arched upward. Its fur stood on end, and its sharp fangs were borne in the open. It hissed menacingly at Beth. An angry snarl was fixed on its face. And its eyes. Its eyes glowed bright red.

Beth's heart rate elevated. She could feel it pounding in her rib cage like a rabid raven struggling for freedom. She leaned back over her arms and kicked, propelling herself backward, away from the approaching feline. Her wrist slipped. Something wet and sleek slid her off balance.

Beth turned to check. It was blood. Her arm bandage was gushing with it. Fatigue rapidly overcame her body as she backed away. Soon, her legs were numb, and her arms could barely hold her up anymore. She tried calling for help. But her voice was stuck in her throat.

Beth swallowed hard, but the saliva was dry and thick in her mouth, laced with a metallic taste. She watched with dread as the cat drew closer, taking calculated steps. It hissed again, growing larger with every stride. The ground shook hard underneath its paws. Its hiss manifested into a bone-chilling growl.

And the small fangs morphed into large dagger-like projections from its mouth, threatening to tear her to shreds.

The sky above them grew darker. The red evening clouds turned grey. They seemed to descend toward her, thickening as they inched lower and lower. The static energy in the clouds grew strong, sending jagged streaks of lightning from one cloud to the next. A deafening thunderclap tore through the air, and a bright flash ensued.

The cat's chilling roar tore into Beth's ears. She shuddered as the terrifying beast crouched before her, preparing to pounce.

Frozen on the floor, Beth turned to call for her husband's help. But he wasn't there. Nobody was. Nobody except her daughter. She was balled up on the suddenly bare dry sandy ground. The lush green grass was gone. Lily held Bunny firm in her arms as her body shook with terror. Her cry was profuse as she witnessed her mother's last horrendous moments of life.

A tear rolled down Beth's cheek.

Will she be next? Is this the end.

The huge black cat pounced.

Beth closed her eyes.

A desperate scream forced Beth's eyes open. The cat was gone. She turned to check on Lily. Her heart sank.

"No!"

She watched helplessly as the giant cat grabbed her daughter by the shoulder, carrying her into the dry thorny forest in front of her.

Beth struggled to get up, but her left leg wouldn't budge. She dragged it, stumbling across the sandy field towards the forest edge.

A thunderbolt tore through the sky, decimating the trees in front of her with a loud explosion.

Beth gasped.

She found herself flailing in the air, wooden splints flying past her. Some embedding themselves deep into her face and arms. A sharp pain shot through her lower back as she hit the sandy ground below her.

She groaned as she propped herself onto her elbows. A loud ringing debilitated her hearing. She covered her ears, struggling to recover from the gruesome shock. Her surroundings whirled around her. Everything was a fuzzy blur.

She shook her head and struggled back to her feet. Biting hard against the pain, she staggered her way back to the forest edge.

Lily. I have to find her.

A figure manifested itself before her, forcing her to stop. She couldn't make out who or what it was. The unsettled haze was too thick. But she recognized the eyes. Those two distinct red eyes. They glowed with dreadful conviction.

The figure drew closer. Its stride was calm. Confident. Soon, it was close enough for Beth to see.

It wasn't the cat.

"Jared? Is that you?"

The haze around them began to swirl. A howling gust of wind grew stronger, whirling incessantly around them.

"Jared," Beth called out again, shielding her eyes from the wind, "why are you doing this?"

Jared raised his arms to his sides and as his body levitated off the ground. With lightning speed, he whizzed right in front of her. He was so close that Beth could smell his breath. It was putrid. His eyes weren't glowing anymore. But his once deep blue eyes were replaced by a dark lifeless hollow.

This is isn't my Jared. This is a demon.

The demon stayed still. Beth tried to move. She tried to turn and run. But she couldn't. She was frozen still as she was with the cat. She swallowed hard. Warm blood streamed down from her arm bandage, dripping off the tip of her fingers. The wind grew stronger around them, its deafening howl growing louder by the second. Beth gasped for air as it thinned out.

The demon tilted its head at Beth and grabbed her by the neck. She choked as it hovered high above the ground, lifting her with him. Soon, the demon had the desperate mother dangling by her neck, high up in the air. A howling twister raged around them. She held on tight to the beast's arm. Her legs thrashed, searching desperately for solid ground. She could feel the vertebrae in her spine crack as they pulled apart. Her vertebral nerve bundle strained against her weight, threatening to sever from her neck.

The demon stretched its other arm out. Lily morphed into existence. He held her by the throat as well. She looked lifeless in his hand. Bunny dropped from her grasp, plummeting to the dark abyss below them. Her golden hair was tumbled haphazardly over her face.

Tears streamed down Beth's cheeks as she gasped for breath. She grabbed the demon's arm with all her might, pulling herself up. Just enough for some reprieve.

"Please-"

She coughed.

"Please don't- don't do this."

The grip tightened around her neck.

"Take me- take me- instead."

The glow returned to the demon's eyes and it finally spoke. Its voice was a vibrating echo of multiple voices speaking in unison.

"I shall have my revenge."

The demon's lips never moved.

"Please, I'd-" Beth choked to speak again but was interrupted by the demon's disembodied bellow.

"A life for a life! I will have my revenge!"

• • •

Beth sucked vehemently at a whiff of air as she woke from her sleep. Her eyes were spread wide open. She frantically traced her hands over her throat, checking for any signs of damage from the horrific experience she had just endured.

I'm fine. I'm okay.

She sighed, checking her arm for blood. Her bandage was dry. She sat up and checked on Lily.

Good, I didn't wake her.

She turned and sat by the bedside. Checking the time

1.30 am.

Sweat trickled down her forehead, dripping off her chin. Despite the chill in the room, she felt hot and sticky, even with the cool draft coming in through the open window. She got up and closed it.

I need a cool shower.

A sharp pain riveted through Beth's leg. A familiar hiss followed, forcing her lungs to collapse. She looked down to see Fluffy.

"Oh, I'm so sorry about your tail."

The cat skittered out of the room.

Oh, great. I'm talking to cats now. Get a grip, Beth.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Rude Awakening

BETH WAS SURE she could feel a burning stare on her back as she walked to the bathroom. She shook her head.

No, there's nothing there.

She nudged the gruesome dream from her head. Heaving hard, she struggled to exhale the graphic visions from her mind.

Beth flicked the bathroom lights on. Her reflection in the mirror was the first thing she saw.

Crap. I look hideous. Dark eye bags, a bloated face, and a horrendous bad hair day.

She sighed and stretched her arm, relieving a tight ache in her lower back. She looked back in the mirror and took a deep breath.

I'm just going to take a shower and get back to bed. There is no such thing as demons and giant cats. It's all in my head. Tomorrow's a big day. I need to be on top of everything. Not to mention meeting Mark again.

Her thoughts wandered to the awkward goodbye at her front porch. Blood raced to her cheeks as she groaned in shame.

I can't help it. He just makes my stomach flutter.

She frowned.

Could I ever put Jared aside for him? But wait, I don't even know if he feels the same way. Why am I even thinking about these things?

She slid the robe off her slender shoulders and let it glaze her soft skin as it fell to the floor. She tiptoed into the shower and allowed the cool water to soothe her heated body. She let her head lie back as the water caressed her,

working its way down her chest, to her stomach, to her thighs, and down her feet. The water felt so good on her skin. So refreshing. She hiked her shoulder as she leaned onto the tiled wall, releasing another tense ache in her back. A satisfied moan escaped her lips as the water washed down the dip of her spine to the curve of her lower back.

Overtaken by deep relaxation, Beth drifted off under the shower. She let the cool water pamper her as it trickled down every inch of her body. She let all thoughts and worries drift into the darkness. She enjoyed the tranquil of the moment and let it linger. Her eyes slowly closed shut.

Crack!

The sound of breaking glass forced Beth back to reality. She opened her eyes to see blood flowing down her breasts, her stomach, her thighs, her hands.

She was covered in it.

Her chest heaved faster as the walls closed in around her. Her chest tightened. Dizziness set in. The bathroom got smaller. She could hear people talking, but no one else was there. Her body weakened over her buckling knees. She slowly laid herself onto the floor and curled over into a fetal position.

She closed her eyes tight and pressed her palms against her ears.

It's all in my head. It's all in my head. Everything's okay. Everything is fine. Nothing wrong is happening. I'm just tired. I just need some sleep, that's all. I'm okay.

She opened her eyes and the blood was gone. Everything was back the way it was. Beth heaved a sigh of relief and got up on her feet. She turned the shower off, stepped out of the stall, and picked her robe from the floor. Her reflection in the mirror was dull with exhaustion. She brushed her hand over her wet hair, letting it rest at the nape of her neck. Another loud sigh escaped her lips.

Great, so now I'm going crazy.

She chuckled and stretched her back again.

Time to hit the sack.

She turned to leave when,

Crack!

The sound echoed through the house this time. Beth held her breath and looked around, making sure she wasn't imagining things again.

Lily. I need to check-

Crack!

Louder. Closer.

She looked back in the mirror and saw something familiar. There was a long crack running diagonally across the mirror. Chills ran down Beth's spine. She bolted out of the bathroom to Lily's room.

The bedsheets were all bundled up on her daughter's bed. But she wasn't there, and neither was Bunny. She switched the lights on and checked again, tossing the sheets to the floor.

Nothing.

Beth turned on her heel to check her room, but something took her by surprise. It was Lily's wall mirror. The crack was there as well. A palm was imprinted onto the surface. It was about the size of Lily's. Beth swallowed hard and ran across the hall to her room.

No one was there.

She checked her bedroom mirror. The same crack and handprint were there as well. She frantically checked the guest rooms.

Nothing.

She dashed down the stairs to check the living room. The kitchen. The closets.

Nothing.

She checked the front door. It was locked. No sign of forced entry.

Beth started hyperventilating. Tears ran down her face and her legs grew weak again. She dropped to her knees and cried.

"What do you want from me?" she shouted, bitterness spewing from her words. "Why me? Who are you? Show yourself!"

Beth let her face collapse into her hands. She couldn't stop crying.

They have her. They have Lily. They have my baby!

"Give her back!" she shouted again, "Please…"

Beth pulled herself together and reached for her cell phone. She dialed 911 and waited for the beep in her ear. Someone picked up on the second beep.

"911 emergency. How may I be of assistance?"

"Please, please help me. It's my daughter, she's-"

Beth stopped talking.

Wait, I'm the only one here. What will I tell them? Cracking mirrors? Palmprints? They'll take me for a nutjob. Or worse, they'll take my daughter away from me.

She hung up.

I need help. But from whom?

Crack!

Beth screamed, nearly jumping out of her skin. Fear tightened its grasp on her as she turned all the house lights on.

She went back to her phone and got down on her knees.

Who do I call? Mark?

Beth shook her head.

Damn it. I never took his number. Mother? No. She's too far away.

A light bulb went off in her head.

Eva! She's right next-

A tap on Beth's shoulder made her pounce to her feet.

"Mommy, what are you doing?" Lily complained in a sleepy voice.

Beth turned around to see Lily standing in front of her, Bunny hanging off her left arm. She just stood there with her cute chubby cheeks rubbing her eyes, squinting under the florescent lights of the living room. Fluffy meowed behind her, licking its paw, oblivious of the shin-dick that just transpired.

"Baby," Beth shouted.

A sigh of relief escaped Beth's lungs. She fell on her knees and held her daughter in a tight embrace.

Breaking the hug, she started to talk, but something… someone was standing by the far wall behind Lily. Beth's skin crawled.

Jared?

He stared at them from across the room through hollow eyes. Beth closed her eyes and shook her head. She looked back.

He was gone.

Beth swallowed hard and turned back to her daughter.

"Baby, where were you?" Beth asked, struggling to stabilize her shaky voice.

"I was asleep Mommy. But I woke up and you weren't there. So, me and Bunny came out looking for you. Fluffy came too."

Beth held Lily's hand and walked with her up the stairs, back to her room. But she was shocked to find the bed nicely made.

It's like we weren't even sleeping here earlier.

She turned to the mirror. The crack was gone. And so was the palmprint.

"Mommy, can you sing me a lullaby?" Lily called from her bed.

Beth snapped from her thoughts.

"Yes. Yes. Sure, honey."

What the hell just happened?
A cold draft coursed through Beth. The window was open again.
She shuddered.

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Author's Note

Did you enjoy it? If you did, feel free to
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About the Author

Hash Black is an author with a flair for writing horror fiction. Ironically, his educational background is rooted in marine biology, and has an innate love for coral reefs. However, he has always enjoyed writing his heart out as he grew up. R. L. Stine was a major influence during those days, with Goosebumps and Fear Street series getting lots of traction among his peers. Finally, at the age of 30, Hash gave in to his passion for writing.

Enjoy the fruits of his efforts and support his journey along this winding adventure of writership.