

The Bad

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Part 1: She's gone

1

The scraping sound was the worst. It wasn't just the friction of her skull or her nightgown rubbing against the coarse basement floor. It was her wedding ring. It was the fourteen-karat diamond that Herald had hand-picked himself — forty years ago — scraping across the concrete as he dragged his wife's body into the darkness.

He left her near the workbench. He even had the decency to re-position her arms, lifting the two dead rubbery weights, one at a time, and placing them so that her hands were resting on her stomach. She looked peaceful this way, like she was only sleeping. Herald wanted to give her a soft kiss, stroke her hair, but he couldn't bring himself to do it because the rational part of him knew that it would not wake her up.

If Herald didn't already know better, he would never guess that the back of his wife's skull had been cracked open. He could barely see the blood through the darkness, the shadows made it blend in. This was a good thing, because he really didn't want to see it. It was a disgusting sight, like her hair was painting the basement floor with long, wispy streaks of the never-ending flow of red goo.

Her eyes still managed to find Herald through the shadows, wide and stark-white, they gazed at him accusingly. Her eyes followed him as he rose to his feet, seeming to shift with his every move. This was unsettling. It made him wonder if she could still see him somehow.

He stepped carefully over the wide, glistening streak of blood that stretched across the floor. He marched up the stairs and shut the basement door, and he went into the kitchen and poured himself a glass of bourbon (neat) before finally putting the bottle back into the cupboard.

This was his forth and probably last drink of the night, but something had to take the edge off. The bourbon sloshed around the edges of the glass as he slowly brought it to his lips. What started out as a sip quickly became a flood of potent alcohol that rushed down his throat. It didn't burn like the first couple of glasses, he'd gotten beyond that. Now it was smooth and warm. It was like his chest had become a radiator, and the bourbon was the fuel he needed in order to heat the sucker up. And heat it up, it did.

When he was finished, he slammed the empty glass down into the sink. He stared at the doorway, and his mind played the whole thing over again.

It had happened so fast that he barely even remembered how it started. Anna was getting loud with him, he remembered that much.

"Don't you think you've had enough," she'd said.

He was on his way back from the kitchen, and he'd bumped into the end table. He thought she didn't notice, but Anna never missed a beat. She saw, and she watched him shuffle across the room like he had a set of new legs and wasn't sure if they would get him to where he needed to go.

He plopped down onto the easy chair. Anna remained still and quiet, glaring at him with a look that made him uncomfortable. She never had to say anything, he could always see the disappointment on her face, the utter disgust. It was always evident, always there.

They argued a little, and when Herald got up to go back into the kitchen to top himself off, Anna followed.

He supposed it was in his blood, the drinking. It was a terrible habit that his father had passed down to him. Herald could recall plenty of nights as a kid where he'd watch his father sit on the couch next to a glass of amber liquid that would make his father's eyes red and runny and his mouth unable to produce sensible words. Herald's parents would argue, and once in a while things got physical. His father would sometimes shove his mother, sometimes he'd hit her. That's when Herald was told to go to his room. His mother would say, "Daddy's got the bad in him." For his father, the bad was bourbon.

Tonight, the bad was in Herald. Only, he didn't just shove Anna or smack her around a little. He had killed her. He had murdered her. But it wasn't his fault. He didn't realize that the basement door was open a touch, just enough that the slightest bit of pressure would cause it to swing inward and swallow his wife, shattering her bones as she tumbled down its long, jagged esophagus.

Anna had followed him down the hallway, cursing at him and telling him how she didn't like it when he had this much to drink. She said that she just wanted to leave. He pushed her away, and immediately afterward he heard a bang and then a series of thumps and screams. It sounded like a heavy rock tumbling in the dryer. He turned around, and the hall quickly spun in the opposite direction. Anna was no longer there. The basement door was wide open. The sounds Herald had heard were the sounds of his wife falling to her untimely and accidental death.

Herald squeezed his eyes shut, hopefully when he reopened them the room wouldn't be spinning so much. During the brief eclipse of his eyelids, he saw Anna's face. She was lying at the foot of the basement stairs, her head twisted upward at an impossible angle, her eyes staring at him through the shadows.

His eyes snapped open and the room whizzed around again. He stumbled into the kitchen table, quickly steadying himself on a chair. He needed to rest. Then he'd be able to think more clearly. He'd be able to figure out what to do with the body.

Herald stumbled into the living room where he fell onto the couch and slipped off into darkness.

2

Herald groaned awake. A jackhammer pounded incessantly at his skull. There was a knock at the front door. He remained still, his body melded to the soft, warm cushion beneath him. It was a quarter to midnight. Who in the hell would be knocking at the door at this hour?

Herald rocked himself off the couch and then cracked his back before heading into the kitchen to grab the keys.

He paused before unlocking the door. "Who is it?"

There was no response, just the howling of the wind as it ripped around the corners of the home.

The keys rattled as Herald's hand hovered above the lock. He couldn't bring himself to open the door, not without a knife or something to defend himself with, just in case there was some kind of maniac on the other side.

Herald stepped away. "I'll be right there."

He spun and walked toward the kitchen, stopping just before he reached the doorway. He stood there and stared into the gloom, where his bottle of bourbon sat on the table. But this was impossible. He'd put it away after pouring his last drink. Yet there it was, empty and staring at him through the faint amber glow that pushed through the doorway.

Herald noticed something else, too, a thin trickle of blood that led down the hall and into the kitchen. He followed the trail, easing cautiously through the entryway.

"Anna? Honey, are you all right?"

He flicked on the light. The bloody trail continued toward the sink, where it dribbled over the steel basin.

Herald's attention was now split between the blood and the empty bottle sitting on the table. He leaned forward and peered into the sink. There was blood inside the basin, dark and red and blended with shards of broken glass and residual puddles of bourbon. He glanced into the living room. There was blood on the carpet, on his chair.

A swell of panic arose within him, a sensation that seemed to hollow out his insides. What the hell had he done? He brought both hands up and slowly inspected them. He already knew what had happened, but actually seeing the gash in his right palm, the blood pumping out and oozing over the side of his hand, made his stomach queasy and his head feel as though it had been filled with helium.

Herald's legs nearly buckled, but he caught himself against the kitchen counter. He needed to bandage the wound. He needed to get to the bathroom.

There was another knock at the front door, a persistent wrapping. Herald heard it three times, and then he blacked out.

3

Herald awoke lying on the cold linoleum of the kitchen floor, his arm resting in a warm puddle of his own blood. He got to his feet and hurried to the bathroom. There were bandages inside the cabinet beneath the sink. He pulled out a roll and tightly wrapped his palm.

His hand wrapped in a blood-soaked bandage and his body exhausted and dizzy with lethargy, Herald stared into the mirror at a disheveled stranger who swayed ever so slightly as he wearily stared back into Herald's bloodshot eyes.

The dark stretch of hallway reflected behind him, shadows strangling its empty space. Beyond the hallway was the living room, where Herald caught a brief glimpse of someone ascending the staircase. Only the bottom half of the stairway was visible, the rest was hidden beyond the demarcation of the ceiling. Herald noticed the figure just before it had crossed the demarcation point, and now he heard the gentle thud of footsteps overhead.

Herald spun around and gazed through the darkness. Maybe Anna's fall down the basement stairs hadn't been so tragic after all. She was up and about, probably packing her things — something she had done hundreds of times before.

Herald slightly tilted his head, raising an ear to the sound of the floorboards groaning upstairs. He took the fireplace poker and positioned himself at the base of the staircase.

“Anna?”

The only response he received was the shrill whistle of wind that rattled the shutters. It was a wind fierce enough to rip off the siding and implode the windows, and Herald felt its arctic blast freeze his insides (even inside the comfort of his warm, cozy home).

Herald took the stairs one at a time, slowly. He had walked up and down this staircase thousands of times, but it had never taken so long to reach the top, and the darkness had never seemed so oppressive.

“Anna,” he called again.

There was still no answer.

Herald checked the spare bedroom first: bed, dresser, nightstand, but there was no one in the room. He crossed the hallway and flicked on the bathroom light. This room was empty as well.

The master bedroom was further down on the left side of the hallway. It was the only other place she could have gone. Herald eased in front of the open doorway. At first, he noticed only the darkness in the room. A cool, soft glow bled through the bedroom window, a grim reflection from the thin sheet of last night's snow. The room was not empty. There was someone sitting on the bed.

Herald couldn't make out much more than a head slightly pitched forward over a set of rounded shoulders. His heart did a back-flip, and for a second he lost his breath. He instinctively jumped away. Then he found his voice.

“Anna?”

There was no answer.

An achy fear arose within Herald. It slowly climbed up his spine and crawled over his scalp. Whoever was sitting on his bed was watching him, and he knew one thing to be sure, it was not his wife.

There was a sound downstairs that briefly stole Herald's attention, and as he turned toward the staircase he swore that from the corner of his eye he saw the thing rise from the bed and start toward him.

When he looked back to the bedroom, it was empty. There was only the lingering terror that hovered in the darkness, that and something at the foot of the bedroom door.

Herald cautiously inched closer to the object lying on the floor, and what he saw scared the hell out of him.

The object before him would not normally instill fear in a person, but it was different for Herald. The object was a high school yearbook. It was his fifth year as a math teacher, a year he remembered all too well and in all-too-great detail. The book wasn't the problem though. Anna knew he had it, knew he'd had one from each of his twenty five years of teaching. The thing about the yearbook that made Herald's heart take a sudden pause was the page that it was opened to. A picture of a beautiful blond girl hovered in the upper-right corner, Madison Baxley. It was her senior class photo, and seeing her smiling face staring back at him made Herald's heart ache.

Herald spun away from the cursed object and hurried back down the hallway. He started down the stairs, his heart hammering, each step he put between himself and his bedroom bringing just a little more relief.

In the living room was where he finally saw her. He reached the bottom step and pivoted to his left, and there she was, sitting on the couch, her white nightgown draped over her legs, her hands folded patiently in her lap. Her face was the color of sour milk, and a web of blood weaved across her forehead. It was like sap was oozing out of her, matting in her hair, smeared over her face. A thousand volts of terror ran through him then. The jolt to his body was so much that he nearly fell back against the front door.

"Anna? Honey, are you all right?"

She said nothing. She only watched him creep closer. There was a look of loathing in her eyes, like Herald was an insect that she wanted to crush, just as soon as he got close enough and stopped moving for a second.

"I didn't mean it," he said. "It was an accident. I was so worried. I thought..." Tears welled in his eyes and streamed down his face. "I thought I'd lost you."

Herald inched closer. Under normal circumstances he would have rushed over to the woman he loved and thrown his arms around her. But this was different. Something wasn't right. Everything about the strange figure sitting in his living room gave him an awful feeling that it was not Anna.

He surrendered with his free hand as he set the poker down beside the fireplace. "I'm just gonna put this down, okay."

Her dark eyes followed his every move, studying him keenly as he eased slowly toward the couch to get a better look at her.

"You know I get a temper in me sometimes, Anna. Why'd you have to go and start hitting me?" He grew frustrated when she didn't answer, the volume of his voice began to rise. "What did you expect me to do? I was being hit."

Anna said nothing. Her eyes locked onto him in a way that made the inside of his stomach feel like a fistful of worms. Her eyes were the only part of her that moved, everything else was dead and incapable of providing a physical response.

"Is your head all right?"

She didn't answer.

"I was gonna come back down soon to check on you."

Semi-lucid thoughts began to swim to the surface of his brain. "Wait a second," Herald said. "Wait a goddamn... How did you get down here? You were just up in the bedroom, weren't you? How did you get down here without me seeing you?"

She said nothing, only watched him with those coal-black eyes that were as cold and unforgiving as the winter air.

"Why won't you answer me, dammit? You can't fault a man for something he didn't mean to do." Herald shrugged and threw his hands into the air, and for lack of a better explanation he said, "I guess I must have had the bad in me."

Anna finally broke her silence, uttering only two words, which caused the temperature in the room to plummet. It wasn't just the words, it was the way she said them. In a monotone voice she spat out the unsavory words, letting their stench linger like filth.

"You will," she said.

There was a knock at the front door again. Herald's head snapped in the direction of the sound. "I need to answer that, someone's been..."

When he turned back, Anna was gone. Her absence struck him with an unexpected shock that sent a wave of goosebumps across his flesh.

Herald grabbed the poker and went to the front door.

"Who is it?"

There was no response.

He unlocked and opened the door, and he was greeted by only cold air and night shadows. The air swathed him as he gazed out at the snow-coated ground beyond the gravel driveway. He was certain that he had heard a knock, but his ears weren't quite what they used to be. Sometimes there were strange noises that could be rationalized, like the knocking of the front porch swing against the railing. Maybe that was what he'd heard. Maybe there really was no one at the front door after all.

The soft peck of piano keys made Herald's heart leap. The haunting lyrics of a familiar song floated through the house. Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, by Elton John, was somehow playing through the stereo. Herald spun around and gazed into the empty living room while Elton sang about how he couldn't be held forever.

"This is all in my mind," Herald said. "None of this is real. I didn't see you on the couch, and this song is only playing in my head. It's the goddamn alcohol."

Herald shut and locked the door, then he stormed over to the stereo and glared at the illuminated station numbers. He pressed the power button and the music went silent.

Sometimes a quick power spike would cause certain electrical devices to blip. That was probably what had happened, a power spike, and it triggered the stereo to turn on.

Satisfied with his rationale, Herald approached the basement door. He reached for the knob, and the instant his fingers met the cold metal, there was another power spike, and Elton began to serenade him once again.

Herald cautiously approached the stereo, and he shut it off once again. Hopefully this would be the last time.

He went back to the basement door, reluctant to open it, because maybe on the other side he'd find the unsettling version of Anna that his mind had tricked him with before. That was something he'd rather not see again, ever, but he needed to make sure that she was still down there, that she was in fact still dead. Because, if what he had seen in the living room earlier was real, he had to find where she'd gone and try to somehow smooth things over. But there was no telling how this would all go over, presuming her dead and dragging her to the far, dark corner of the basement until he could figure out how to properly dispose of her body. For that, there would be no forgiveness from Anna.

He reached for the knob, turned it. The door groaned slowly open. Herald stared down into the darkness. He hadn't replaced the light bulb. This was one of those things that was on his to-do list, he just hadn't found the time. The flashlight was upstairs in the bedroom. Even with the sudden

onset of rational thinking, he still wasn't ready to venture back up there. Not yet. So he decided to venture down with only the light that slipped through the open doorway to guide him.

He took the first step, then the second. The wood groaned beneath his weight, mimicking the ghostly moan of a tortured soul.

He was about halfway down the stairs when his eyes began to adjust to the darkness, halfway down when his heart froze and the temperature of his blood dropped to a bone-chilling freeze.

He stared through the shadows, dumbfounded, frightened. The dim shaft of light that spilled down the steps did not illuminate Anna. It couldn't have, because Anna was no longer there.

Part 2: A suspicious guest

4

She was taunting him now, and when she was finished, she'd call the police. Herald would be charged with attempted murder, as well as a host of other unconscionable crimes that would forever ruin his reputation and assure that he'd live out the rest of his golden years in a small cell, his only view of the world through a tiny, barred window.

Anna was hiding in the house, probably digging through the rest of Herald's old yearbooks, her ultimate goal to eliminate the glory from Herald's glory days. Had she suspected all along or was this newfound knowledge to her? Either way, how the hell did she find out, and who the hell else had she told?

Herald sat on the living room couch. Anna had survived the fall, which was amazing because the staircase was steep, and her body was too frail to have survived hitting the concrete below after tumbling and flailing down fourteen rickety, old steps. But she had miraculously done it, and now she wanted to make him pay. He needed to get to her first. He needed to kill Anna — for good this time. Then he would chop her up and hide the parts so that no one would ever find her. Anna would remain a dark secret. Herald had plenty of those.

They didn't own a gun. Anna had always insisted that there was no good reason why honest people needed one. Guns were for criminals. Herald asked how she expected them to defend themselves in the event that one of those very criminals had broken into their home. She never had a good answer, she only waved him off and said that she wasn't comfortable with a weapon like that in the house.

There was an ax in the tool shed out back. Herald always kept the blade sharp for cutting wood. One swing to the head was all it would take. Then he could use the tool to dismember her. What a perfect plan.

It was freezing outside, as cold as a witch's titty in a brass bra (his mother would say). He bundled up in his winter coat and slipped into his boots. He shook off the chill and started off the back porch, stomping his way through the snow. Shining stars speckled the night sky, and the blanket of snow mirrored the glowing surface of the moon that hung overhead. Plopped into the middle of that glowing surface was a small block-like structure, the shed, and unlike the basement, its light did work.

Herald opened the door and reached for the dangling chain. He tugged it twice, and a soft glow illuminated the inside, which was crammed with tools: the lawnmower, gasoline canisters, the weed-wacker, shovels, rakes, and the ax, which was suspended on a proprietary hanger made from a few large, steel nails.

Herald took the ax and then shut off the light and spun back toward the house.

There was a man standing behind him. The suddenness of his appearance made Herald jump. His heart squeezed like a tight fist, and he felt a cold surge of blood disperse throughout his veins as though an artery filled with ice-water had suddenly exploded.

The man stared at Herald, his face obscured by night shadows, made even darker by the wide brim of his hat, which gave him the appearance of a small-town sheriff. But Herald had a strong feeling that this man was not a local authority.

The man wore a long, brown coat and a pair of leather cowboy boots. He held a small briefcase close to his side and spoke with an accent that was not indicative of Pennsylvania. It was more of a southwestern drawl.

"Didn't mean to scare you," the man said.

Herald just stood there, not knowing what to say to the man.

"You've got blood on your hands," the man said.

Herald's heart went numb. "What?"

The man nodded down toward Herald's bandaged hand. "You're bleeding through your bandage there."

"Oh, yeah. I had an accident."

"You all right?"

"I'm fine, just my own stupidity. That's all."

The man glanced down again, this time at the ax. "What's that for?"

"Wood." Herald even surprised himself with how quickly he responded with such a sensible answer. A wave of relief rolled off his shoulders. He was doing nothing out of the ordinary. He was just a guy preparing for a snowstorm, that was all. "Fireplace is running low, and we've got a nasty storm coming in."

The man only nodded, and Herald wasn't sure he believed the explanation.

"A man carrying an ax out of his shed at almost one in the morning makes a person wonder," the stranger said.

Herald cut to the chase. "Can I help you with something?"

"Just came to talk, that's all." The stranger motioned over his shoulder. "I knocked at the front door, but no one answered. Figured I'd try the back, then I saw the light, and here you are."

"I opened the front door. I didn't see a car in the drive."

"I parked up near the road. Don't want to chance getting stuck on the account of the storm. My name's Walter." The stranger extended his free hand.

Herald introduced himself and then asked Walter what he was doing at Herald's home at almost one in the morning.

"I came to talk," Walter said. He motioned toward the back door, which Herald had left slightly ajar. A shaft of light from the kitchen spilled over the back steps and onto the snow. "Mind if we go inside?"

Herald did mind, because there was a good chance that Anna would come out of hiding and tell Walter how her husband had tried to kill her, and she'd tell him other things, too, things that Herald didn't want anyone to know about.

"Do I know you?" Herald was certain he didn't know this man, had never seen him a day in his life, but he felt it was a sensible thing to do, posing the question.

"Sure, you do."

"My apologizes, you'll have to forgive me. I'm getting older, and I'm not so great with faces anymore."

"Aren't you?"

What the hell was that supposed to mean? Herald found himself pulling away from Walter. There was something off about the man, something Herald couldn't quite put a finger on. This was not a man worthy of trust, Herald could tell that much.

"Have a look inside that shed. I'm sure there's a face in there that you'll remember quite well."

What the hell was he talking about. Herald had just been inside the shed, and there was no one else in there. Had Anna somehow slipped in without him knowing, while Walter had distracted him? Was that why Walter was here? He was an acquaintance of Anna's. Had she managed to call him and tell him what had happened?

"I'm not falling for any tricks," Herald said. "I don't know what you're doing here or what you want, but if Anna put you up to this..."

"Just take a look," Walter said.

And with that, Herald slowly began to turn around. He had no idea what awaited him inside the shed. The logical part of him knew that it was only filled with tools, but there was something

about Walter's insistence that made him think that maybe he had missed something before. He doubted it, but he had to at least take a look. He had to be certain.

Once Herald made the full rotation, he was no longer standing before his shed. He was no longer even in his own backyard. Herald's world had evaporated, and he found himself transported into the past. He stood before a classroom, staring out at the empty rows of cockeyed chairs and desks. It had to be a hallucination, but hallucinations were only visual illusions. Weren't they? Herald not only saw the classroom, he smelled the chalk, too. And he heard the squeaking and shuffling of feet in the hallway, students rushing to their classrooms. What the hell was this? He looked behind him, expecting to see the silhouette of Walter standing against the gray, chipped siding of his home, but instead he faced a wide chalkboard covered with linear equations and algebraic expressions.

This was impossible. Yet here he was, and all of his senses agreed that this was not a hallucination. This was very much real.

He turned back around to face the empty desks, and there she was. Madison Baxley. She was sitting up front, third desk back, second row over.

She looked up at him, and those large blue eyes caused a lustful stir in his chest. She smiled, and then she stood and sauntered to the front of the class.

She stood so close to him that he could feel the firmness of her breasts pressing gently against his chest.

This was real.

Madison looked exactly as she did when she was seventeen, but Herald had aged considerably. It was impossible. Back then he was forty-six years old, much her senior. It had been sixteen years, which should have put her at thirty-three. But somehow here she was, still seventeen years old, while Herald had climbed to a plump and unhealthy sixty-two.

An arousal of emotions suddenly overcame him. This was when it had happened. Even after all the years that had passed, he remembered that clearly. Madison had kissed him and he kissed her back. They both vowed not to mention it to anyone, and they vowed that it was a mistake. It would never happen again. Only, it did happen again. In fact, what happened next was much more than just a kiss.

Anna had never known about Madison. She had never known about the others, either. Because, there were others. Eight to be exact. Herald had slept with eight of his students, each twenty-nine years younger than he. Each under the age to be considered a legal adult. A sense of shame bubbled up within him. What he had done was wrong, he knew that now, but at the time he couldn't help himself. And so he continued to coerce the girls into his classroom after school, to take them into the back closet, and to do things with them that he knew he could be arrested for.

This went on all year long, and it continued throughout the next few years. Only, the number of students began to dwindle. But regardless of how many others there were, Herald always stayed in touch with Madison.

Herald would sit across from parents during conferences and tell them what a great student their child was, and he would always feel like they had known somehow, but maybe that was his own guilt. Maybe it was just his own fear that someday they would find out.

Now here Madison was, standing before him once again and gazing into his eyes. He could feel the warmth of her breath against his lips.

"I have something for you, Mr. Crowler," she said, and he remembered that voice. So sweet and innocent. "Something to help you remember."

She leaned back, and she opened her mouth. Her lower jaw unhinged and gave way to a threatening black abyss just beyond her soft, parted lips. There were small, sparkling objects back there, objects that seemed to be moving from the impossible depths of her throat, sailing toward the front of her mouth. The objects grew further into view, and Herald suddenly realized what they were.

Shards of glass spewed from Madison's mouth. They sliced across Herald's face and dug into his cheeks. He raised his hands to shield himself, but the glass only sliced those apart as well.

Herald screamed. Blood splashed onto his face. Then suddenly, the barrage of glass shrapnel came to an abrupt end.

5

Herald was still screaming when he realized that he was staring into the darkness of the shed, his eyes pouring over the ghostly shadows of the tools and the phone on the workbench. There was no blood. There were no visible wounds. It had all been a hallucination after all. Even Walter himself was a hallucination.

Herald hurried into the house and closed and locked the back door behind him. Then he put the keys back where they belonged.

When he walked into the living room he found Walter sitting in his chair.

“What are you doing here?”

Walter just smiled. “Did you see her?”

“Get out of my house,” Herald said.

“Why don’t you have a seat.”

Who in the hell did this man think he was? Instead of getting up and leaving like he was told, he was giving Herald orders, in his own home.

“I asked you to leave. Now, I think you ought to listen.”

The man motioned to the ax in Herald's right hand. “Tell me, Herald, what were you going to do with that?”

Chop you up with it if you don't get out of my goddamn house, Herald thought. But he didn't say it. Instead, Herald stuck to his original story. “I told you already, I was cutting firewood.”

Walter eased back in the chair. Then he blurted out the words Herald had been dreading, a simple question that was somehow more frightening than the hallucination in the shed.

“Where's Anna?”

The fire crackled, its warmth seemed to magnify, and now Herald felt a slimy film of sweat form on his forehead, under his armpits, and across the small of his back. Herald dropped onto the couch, dumbfounded. He had no rational explanation as to where the hell Anna was.

“It's time for you to come to terms with things, Herald. Why don't you have a seat.”

Herald sat down without asking any questions. He leaned the ax against the side of the couch and then placed his hands in his lap and twiddled his thumbs (something he did when he was nervous).

“What happened to Anna?”

“She...” Herald thought about it for a moment, realizing that each second of silence that passed would increase Walter's sense of suspicion. “She left me,” Herald finally said. He didn't know why, but when he said those words he felt the sting of tears fill his eyes. He took a deep breath and then hung his head. “She’s gone.”

“I see.” Walter leaned back. “So, who do you have in your basement?”

The absence of Herald's voice had probably given him away. “No one,” he finally said, but he said it so low he doubted that Walter had even heard him.

“When you were a kid and your Dad got the way he got, your Mom called it the bad. Didn't she? She'd tell you, Daddy's got the bad in him.”

Why the hell was Herald being interrogated? And how did Walter even know about that? It had to have been goddamn Anna, he knew it. Herald leaned forward, eagerly, the twiddling of his thumbs coming to a sudden stop. “How the hell do you know about that?”

“Ever hear of the Nesquitique Indian tribe?”

Herald shook his head.

“Small tribe back in the early fourteen-hundreds, long before Columbus staked his claim to America. Very spiritual tribe, the Nesquitique. They held their people accountable for any wrongdoing. Sometimes, when a member of the tribe had done something really wrong, they'd make them ingest a concoction. It was their form of punishment — nasty stuff. Do you believe in ghosts, Herald?”

This guy was all over the place. Herald shrugged. “I don't really know.”

“Well, there's a reason you don't hear of many people being killed or physically harmed in a haunting. There's a veil between this world and the spirit world, but it's only so thin. You can see the spirits, but that's about as far as it goes. They can't interact with you. That's where the punishment came in. You see, the stuff that the Nesquitique made the wrongdoers ingest completely removed the veil for that person. It opened them up to the other side. This was often done to those who committed murder.”

The skin on Herald's scalp grew tight and tingly.

“Their shamans created the stuff. It was a concoction that released a chemical inside the person who ingested it. Think of it as a complete loss of spiritual inhibitions. The wrongdoers experienced what the Nesquitique called, the bad. Ironic, ain't it? It's said that this concoction allowed the dead to make things right. It let them get even. It allowed them to take the soul of the wrongdoer to where it belonged. They had a saying, 'you don't come back from the bad'.”

What the hell was wrong with this man? Why was he telling Herald all of this mumbo-jumbo shit?

“Anyway, that's just a little lore I thought you might find interesting.”

“I just don't get what any of this has to do with me. I don't understand why you're here or what the hell you're after?”

Walter leaned forward. The firelight danced over his face, an amber gleam ignited his eyes from beneath the shadow of his hat. “I want you to dig real deep, Herald. Remember the crash. Let it all come back.”

It did start to come back. Old memories began to haunt Herald's brain, things he suppressed, things that he was not proud of. Things he did not want to remember.

Walter watched Herald with a knowing smile, and after a brief pause he asked, “How long has Anna been dead?”

Herald knew the answer to the question. Anna had died the same year he met Madison.

There was a car accident. Anna was hit by some idiot screwing around with his radio while he was driving, a guy in his mid-twenties named Keith Lunz — Herald would never forget that name. Keith didn't realize that he had swerved into the other lane. He struck Anna head-on. Anna died instantly. Keith died five days later in intensive care. Herald was glad the bastard had hung on for so long, glad he had suffered for a while before his body finally gave it up.

Herald could not recall much from Anna's funeral. The vague scene that he did remember arose in his mind as a blurry sea of people dressed in black and apologizing for his loss, as though they had something to do with it.

Anna was gone, and a part of Herald had gone with her.

Even now, the thought made him want to cry. Digging up the memory made it fresh again, like it had just happened. He couldn't understand how he had forgotten about it. How the hell had he not known that his own wife was dead? Was this something his mind did to protect him from the pain?

Herald breathed a sigh of relief. He *hadn't* killed his wife. She died years ago.

Walter must have been able to read Herald's thoughts, because just as the next terrifying thought arose in Herald's mind, Walter smiled as though he had been waiting for just this moment.

Anna had died, and Herald's mind had gone into protective mode and erased her death from his memory. But his mind had somehow woven Anna into the fabric of his everyday life, because they had just been arguing only hours ago, and Herald had knocked her down the basement stairs and broken her neck. Or so he thought.

Walter finally broke his silence. "Get it yet?"

Herald involuntarily shook his head, slowly. "I don't think so."

"Why don't you go down into the basement and identify your dead wife?"

Herald didn't want to go into the basement, not now. He didn't want to see what was down there, he was afraid to, because now he knew for sure that it was not Anna.

The basement door opened on its own, its rusty hinges eliciting a long and painful moan.

There was a flashlight on the table, right beside Walter's briefcase, but Herald had no recollection of how it had gotten there.

"Go have a look," Walter said.

Herald took the flashlight. He walked over to the basement door and directed the beam down the stairs. The light reached the floor and threw a dim glow over the far wall. He walked to the bottom of the stairs, surprised to see that the body was still down there. He had just missed it earlier, that was all. He hadn't gone far enough down to see it.

Herald walked over to the body. He knelt down and pulled the dark veil of hair aside, exposing the cold, creamy flesh of a younger face he knew all too well.

He stumbled away and fell to the ground. Fear shot through his heart, briefly stealing his breath.

There had been a barrier around his mind for a long time, and seeing the face of the dead woman lying on his basement floor punched a hole right through it, one that allowed the memories to come rushing through.

Madison. That's who was lying dead in the basement. It wasn't Anna. It never was.

"Do you remember now, Herald?" Walter's voice carried from the top of the staircase. His shadow loomed there, staring down at Herald through the darkness.

Herald scooted away from Madison's body until he bumped up against the bottom step. "What have I done?"

The memories came back in all-too-vivid detail. Herald recalled Madison stopping by the house, shortly after Anna's death. She stayed for the whole day, and when it came time for her to leave, Herald would not let her.

He wasn't forceful at first, just coaxing. But things changed when Madison became angry with him. That was when he hit her for the first time. He hit her in the face and he dragged her down into the basement where he chained her up to one of the support beams. He left her there, in the dark. She screamed for hours, but eventually she lost her voice, that or Herald had become numb to the sound of it.

She reminded him so much of Anna, and to him that's who she was, his lost, beloved wife. And after a while she didn't seem to mind staying with him. He'd spend hours in the basement just talking to her. Sometimes they'd do more than talk, and she never seemed to mind that he referred to her by his deceased wife's name.

Then Herald purchased the locks, one for the front door and one for the back. They contained strong, sturdy bolts that could only be unlocked from the inside of the home and only with the key. Herald kept the key.

He replaced the windows, too, with unbreakable glass. He also moved the phone line into the shed. It had cost him a small fortune to secure the home, but the investment was well worth it.

Madison grew complacent soon enough. Sure, she tried to escape a few times, but once she realized that she couldn't break the glass or pick the locks, she settled into life with Herald. He had his wife back, Anna had returned to him at last.

"Stockholm syndrome," Walter said.

This snapped Herald out of the barrage of memories.

"Ever hear of it?"

Herald shook his head. What the hell was Stockholm syndrome?

"It's where a victim becomes sympathetic to their captor."

The outline of Walter watched Herald from the top step, the soft glow of the fireplace scattering around him.

"You've done a bad thing," Walter said, and he said it in a scolding voice, a voice that made Herald feel shameful and rotten.

Herald looked over at Madison's body. The blood in her hair was beginning to dry. Her neck was twisted, and those dead eyes stared off into nowhere, just as they had since he had locked her inside his house. Her spirit had been broken long ago, and looking at her now made his heart ache for her. What the hell had he done?

"Some would call you a monster, Herald," Walter said. "In fact, most would."

Herald turned up to Walter. "You're the monster. Why are you doing this to me? Things were fine. I didn't need to know about this. Everything was fine the way it was."

"It takes a monster to know a monster, Herald."

Herald's eyes were drawn to the body, he couldn't stop looking at her, and when he finally looked back up Walter was no longer there.

Part 3: The Bad

6

Walter was nowhere to be found, but this was impossible because both the front and back doors were locked, and only Herald knew where the key was.

Herald closed the basement door and went back into the living room. Walter's briefcase was still resting on the table.

"Where'd you go?" Herald stormed through the room. He yelled up the stairs. "I want you out of my house, do you hear me? Out!"

There was no answer. This only made Herald more furious.

"If I have to come looking for you, you'll be sorry. You're an intruder here, goddammit. I never let you in. You let yourself in, you crazy bastard. Telling me about Indian rituals. Like I give a shit!"

The room still spun a little when Herald turned around, a residual effect from the amount of bourbon he had consumed earlier. He bumped against the table and cried out at the pain that jabbed below his kneecap. Then he kicked the table, and the corner of it jumped off the floor, causing the briefcase to slide off and thump onto the carpet.

Herald scanned the room once more before kneeling down to pick the briefcase up. "Whatever's in here is mine now. Do you hear me?" He said the next part more to himself while he tried to work the lock. "It's mine."

To Herald's surprise, the briefcase was not locked. The moment he pressed the buttons on the latches both latches sprung open. "Well, you can stick your key up your ass." Now he muttered to himself again. "I can fuckin' open it myself."

Herald wouldn't have been more surprised if Anna herself was peering up at him from the bottom of the briefcase. He slowly opened the lid and gazed inside, where there was a thick, sexy bottle of amber liquid that winked at him from beneath the firelight.

"What do we have here?" Herald lifted the bottle. The weight of it brought a smile to his face and sent a burst of saliva to the taste-buds at the back of his tongue. The bottle was full. How about that? "You were holding out on me you selfish, old bastard, weren't you?"

Herald uncorked the lid and tossed it aside. He looked greedily around the room before tilting the bottle to his lips and letting the sweet nectar warm his throat, chest, and stomach. He took more than a swallow, enough to make the room spin. He drank a quarter of the bottle in one big guzzle. It was that good.

"I don't know how you know the things you know, but you don't scare me. And I didn't do anything wrong. The girls liked Mr. Crowler. Yes they did." Herald rose to his feet. "Madison wanted to come here and fill the void. Why the hell else would she have showed up? She was helping me! And it worked." He mumbled the next part to himself. "I wasn't even her goddamn teacher anymore, anyway. I was retired."

Herald looked down at the bottle. There was a silver label on the back. "Walter's got good taste," he said. He lifted the bottle and turned it over to read the label. "What the fuck?"

The label kept going in and out of focus, but it still wasn't hard for Herald to decipher the two words etched into it, *The Bad*.

7

You got the bad in you, Herald.

Herald heard his mother's voice as clear as day. It was the same thing she had always said to his father. He wasn't quite sure where the voice had come from or if it had even truly manifested at all. Maybe it was only in his head, but it was enough to give him the creeps, enough to make the hair on his arms rise ever so slightly.

The lights in the room suddenly went out. Herald stood still, listening only to the howling of the wind and the crackling of the logs in the fireplace. He found himself creeping closer to the fire, wanting to remain within its glow, because the rest of the room had been swallowed in darkness.

The breaker box was down in the basement, but there was no way in hell he was going down there. After all, he had consumed the bad. What if Walter was right? What if the veil between worlds had been lifted? What if Madison could now exact revenge?

That was just crazy internal dialog. He knew it. Walter was full of shit. He'd left a bottle of bourbon in his unlocked briefcase just so that Herald would drink it. Hell, he even went as far as to make up a label to convince Herald that everything he had said was real. But fuck him. Herald knew better.

"It's just bourbon, you goddamn fool," Herald said, not sure if he intended for the words to reach Walter's ears or if they were just meant for himself.

A sound stole Herald's attention. It was a soft and steady thumping, and it was coming from the basement, slowly making its way up the stairs.

The door creaked open, and at first Herald only saw the dark gaping outline of the basement entrance, but a contorted, disheveled body emerged from the darkness. Madison breached the doorway.

She moved slowly and silently, a solemn spirit sneaking through a cemetery. Herald could not see her face, her head was tilted toward the ground, and her hair dangled, obscuring her features like a blood-soaked veil. Even in the warmth of the fire, the chill of death managed to cling relentlessly to Herald's bones.

Herald realized immediately that what had come up from the basement was not Madison. He did not know what it was. The peculiar thing that had risen from the darkness just stood there, gazing at the ground, exuding malevolence. Even the glow of the fire would not touch the creature.

Creature. That was the only word Herald could use to describe the thing that he was staring at. The thing that had pierced his heart with a terror he'd never felt before.

The head twisted toward him so that the thing's white, scarred irises could settle on Herald.

The creature issued forth, its body twitching with an odd, mechanical motion. When it stepped into the firelight, Herald's insides huddled so tightly that he thought he might vomit.

The version of Madison standing before him had aged a thousand years, the muscles that once controlled her face must have shriveled up and died, because there was no expression. Her hair was mangy and tangled, as absent of life as her flesh, which matched the color of new-fallen snow. She opened her mouth, and the sound that her throat exhaled was that of thousands of tortured souls, all screaming at once.

The front door. That was Herald's initial thought. He could escape the house and just keep running until he found help or until he passed out from exhaustion. Either way, at least he'd be somewhere safe. He'd be far away from this nightmare. But there was one severe flaw in Herald's plan. The doors and windows had been engineered in such a way that they could not possibly be opened, not without the key. They were engineered to keep Madison inside the house, and they would now keep Herald inside with her.

Madison lunged at Herald, her hand groping for his throat. He jumped away and fell onto the couch. He grabbed for the ax, but Madison moved faster than he anticipated. She reached forward, this time clutching onto his arm.

“Get away from me!” Herald shoved her off.

An evil grin worked its way across her mouth as she backed away. Then she turned and walked into the kitchen.

“You'll never find them,” Herald said. Only he knew where the keys were. He had hid them in the back corner of the cabinet, where she would never think to look.

Silverware clanged as she frantically searched the drawers. It was then that Herald realized why she had gone into the kitchen in the first place, and it was not for the keys.

Madison's silhouette emerged in the doorway, an angry cluster of shadows that gathered in the open space. The flames in the fireplace flickered more fiercely in response to her appearance, and their light caught a glimmer of something in her hand. Madison was holding a butcher knife at her side.

Terror zipped through Herald. “What the hell are you doing?”

She didn't answer. Instead, she broke from the doorway and came at him. She was halfway across the room before he could give the order to his legs that it was time to run.

Madison chased Herald up the stairs. He tripped on the top step and stumbled into the hallway. The blade of the knife sliced across his back, igniting him with a searing pain that burned the flesh between his shoulder blades. He caught a glimpse of her in the hallway mirror. She was right behind him, her upper lip drawn up into a snarl and a crazed look in her eyes. It was a look that Herald had never seen before. It was a look that nearly made his old heart quit beating right then and there.

Suddenly, the downstairs stereo turned on once again, but this time it was playing a different song. The maddening beat of the drum and haunting notes of the guitar crawled their way up the stairs. With the recognizable melody came a voice, one that seemed to speak directly to Herald, telling him not to fear the reaper.

Herald barely dodged Madison's next strike. He lost his footing and sailed through the bedroom doorway. The floor punched his sternum, expelling every ounce of breath from his lungs, but he still managed to roll over and kick the door shut just in time. Then he locked it.

The sound of the stereo grew louder, as if it knew Herald might not hear it from behind the bedroom door.

Seasons don't fear the reaper...

He shimmied backward and stopped in the center of the room. He had seen something in here earlier, had thought it was Anna. It sat on his bed, directly beside where he sat now, and it had stared out at him through the dark, open doorway. Was it in here with him now? It was too dark for Herald to tell.

“Mr. Crowler.” It was Madison's voice, the way she used to sound. It was coming from just outside the bedroom. “Don't you want me?”

What the fuck had Walter put in that bourbon? Herald had experienced slight hallucinations before, had seen things out of the corner of his eye that were never really there, but that was the extent of it. Now he was fully experiencing a hallucination, Walter had somehow given him the whole shebang.

“No, I don't want you,” he shouted. “You're dead. Now get the fuck out of my head!”

The music stopped playing.

There was a brief moment of silence. This was surprisingly more terrifying than all the commotion that had come before it.

Madison's voice came through the door again, but it sounded different this time. It was low and dry with a palpable sense of malice that made Herald's bones freeze like a set of old pipes.

“Are you afraid of the reaper, Herald?”

What the hell kind of question was that?

Madison began violently banging on the door. Splinters of wood separated from the frame, and then suddenly the door burst open.

She came across the room faster than Herald could get to his feet. He managed to kick her away and stagger through the darkness.

The soft glow that came in through the window provided just enough light for Herald to see Madison's face, to see that wicked grin that was carved in place of her mouth.

"What do you want, you crazy bitch?"

Madison shrank into the darkness. The sound of her breath was over near the dresser now. It was a ragged sound, like there had been holes punctured into her lungs.

Herald stood there, in the center of the room, knowing that the doorway was somewhere ahead of him, but he was unable to see it.

"I can see you," Madison said. Her voice was eerily playful and its origin uncomfortably close. "I've always seen you, Mr. Crowler. Even when you couldn't see me."

"You stay the hell away from me, you devil."

Herald tripped and fell to the floor. He scooted over near the bedroom door, where a pale block of light from the window splashed onto the wall. He sat there, feeling around for the opening of the doorway. Herald could not see Madison, but she was there. She had become part of the darkness that surrounded him, part of a living, breathing darkness that was inching ever closer.

Soon Herald was able to make out the bed and the zigzag design on the quilt that dangled just above the dark space beneath it. Then something jumped in the corner of his vision. Herald was overtaken by an uncontrollable thrash of fear that sent him spinning away from whatever it was he had seen.

A face emerged from the darkness, floating at an unnatural height. Madison was walking across the floor on her hands and feet, bent over like a grotesque animal. She eased closer to Herald, her presence frightening away the shadows that surrounded him. She slowly parted her lips, producing a wet, peeling sound as she did so. The corners of her mouth stretched back, revealing a set of teeth that were close enough to take a chunk out of his face. Her foul, hot breath uncomfortably warmed his cheek. He tried to lean away, but Madison continued to advance.

Screaming would do Herald no good, but he couldn't do that anyway, even if he wanted to. The sight of her had somehow taken away his voice. It had wrapped an invisible hand tightly around his vocal cords, sealing off any sound he had once been capable of producing.

Madison made a long and ominous hissing noise, and at the same time she did this her upper lip curled back, much like a snarling dog.

Herald threw himself away from her, and in doing so he somehow managed to hurl his body through the doorway and out into the hall.

The lights flickered back to life.

The bedroom was empty now, and the house was unnervingly still and quiet.

Herald hurried down the hallway. He took the steps two at a time, something that surprised him at his age, but he supposed that fear had a way of fooling the body into believing it was younger than it was. It had a way of putting the old muscles into survival mode.

He hurried toward the kitchen. As he rushed past the basement doorway, an unseen force knocked him off kilter. He tumbled down the stairs, his arms and legs flailing about like the loose limbs of a rag doll. On his way down he heard a snap. He must have split the wood on one of the steps.

As he lay in the darkness, only a thin trickle of light sneaking down the stairs and across the lower half of his body, he noticed a bloody shard of bone protruding from his torn pant leg.

Once he noticed the break, his mind registered the pain, it was so excruciating that Herald thought he might pass out.

A hollow knock caught Herald's attention. It came from miles away. Herald's head rolled from side to side, and as the room came back into focus he saw Walter coming down the stairs, taking an unusual amount of time. Walter was silhouetted by an orange flickering glow. Fire.

"Help me," Herald pleaded.

"That's what I'm here for," Walter said.

Something bizarre happened when Walter reached the bottom step. There was a sudden change in his appearance. Even with the brevity of the change, Herald had enough time to notice it. One minute an older gentleman was approaching Herald. The next, it was something else. Something far more ominous and demonic than what he had seen in his bedroom. Something with eyes that burned as violent as the flames upstairs. Something that was pure evil.

A fearful jolt of adrenaline shook Herald's body. He tried to scoot away, but there was nowhere to go.

Walter walked off the bottom step — Walter, with his wide-rimmed hat and that whimsical smile.

"What is this?"

"Gotta make sure you know why I'm here, Herald," Walter said.

"I don't understand."

"But you will."

"What do you want? Why are you doing this?" Herald looked past Walter. The entire first floor of the house was on fire now, and the flames were beginning to crawl down the basement stairs. "We'll never make it out of here."

"There's no need to."

Part of the kitchen collapsed. Burning wood rained onto the basement floor. The heat was so strong that Herald began to break out in sweat.

"I've come for you, Herald."

"What are you talking about? You're crazy."

"I come for them all, eventually."

"Who? You come for who?"

Walter leaned forward, and in his eyes Herald saw that orange, fiery glow. As the smile stretched across his face, the flames grew in response. Walter said, "I come for the bad."