

Emotional Defect

By

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CHAPTER 1

Everyone had wondered why John and Amanda Baker had moved into the Goddamned Christy house. Sure, it was pretty. And it was even modern. But it was deadly. No one wanted to say anything when the couple bought it on a steal from Kevin Riley, Stanwyck, Georgia's resident real-estate guru. After all, the Bakers and their two cute little children Amy and Michael were outsiders in the Stanwyck community. They were from Atlanta for Christ's sake. And well Atlanta may as well have been a foreign country to these yokels.

After the family moved in, no one really interacted with the Bakers much, and no one really wanted to. It was almost like the townspeople didn't expect this family to last very long. Whether in the house or above ground. After all, surely this family knew of the Christy home's dark history. Wouldn't Kevin or all the internet rumors have alerted them of the house's evil? John and Amanda both did online work at home, they had to have stumbled upon information regarding their supposed "dream home" at some point. An anonymous forum, an amateur ghost hunter site, anything. Everybody in town thought for sure this would be the case. But apparently, it wasn't. And the Bakers remained completely unaware. They had no idea what awaited them inside.

It was three months after the Bakers moved in (the community consensus over/under was around four) when the 911 call arrived a little after 11:14 P.M. On the phone, a hysterical Amanda Baker was heard begging and pleading for help. Her sobs were uncontrollable, almost painful to listen to. The operator was a newb and absolutely helpless. Amidst Amanda's agonizing rambles of "John's gone crazy," "there's blood everywhere," "hurry before it's too late," only one sentence was completely clear: "he took the children."

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One month after that frantic phone call, a curious new group arrived at the Christy home. The afternoon sun was blistering and smoldering. But amidst the sweltering summer landscape, the Christy house retained an All-American eloquence. One that wouldn't be out-of-place in your average 1950s sitcom.

The home itself was just two stories of pristine brick. That's it. Even the homes all around it practically looked the same. The big yards, the garden sheds/storage rooms, the brick design.

Unlike its neighbors though, the Christy house also bore something else: actual residents. See, the housing market collapse of 08 really wore down this upper-middle-class neighborhood. Enough so that every other house seemed to wave a buyer beware sticker in the form of a For Sale sign. These weren't selling anytime soon. Not at that price, and not in a non-metropolis city like Stanwyck. After all, this wasn't Atlanta.

But none of that ever stopped the unflappable Kevin Riley. He was Stanwyck's number one realtor. Not to mention Stanwyck's number one asshole or bullshitter depending on who you asked. With this neighborhood though, he certainly had his hands full this time. A challenge none of the city's other agents ever had any luck in: selling the Christy home and its three acres of archaic loveliness.

Kevin was always a bit of a gambler. Whether it was purchasing the foreclosures or stacking off the local politicians in Stanwyck's secret poker games, Kevin liked to gamble. He liked taking chances. The Christy home was as exciting to him as an over-bet bluff on the river. This would be one way to show the locals who's boss. A challenge that could be his crowning achievement as the big fish in this small pond.

Certainly, Kevin's awful yet brilliantly cheesy For Sale signs hinted at a charismatic personality. Big smile, wide eyes, handsome face. The good-looking jock by way of a cartoony car salesman. Such a manic image adorned the front yard of almost every house in this upscale neighborhood.

Like the rest of the Stanwyck community though, Kevin was well aware of the Christy house's morbid history. The murders, the tragedies. But that wasn't stopping him. He was gonna sell this Goddamn house at all cost.

Behind the house's wrought-iron fence, Kevin's potential customers were already arriving. Their fancy SUV pulled into the long driveway, parking right behind a nice truck.

Emerging from the house's front door, Kevin immediately went up to greet this unique crew: Linda Kane's team. His eyes lighting up once he saw their expensive SUV.

Linda, equal-parts adventurous and level-headed, had heard all the stories about the Christy house. Both the facts and the legends brought her here. Nearing her sixties, Linda still retained a youthful beauty, something not going unnoticed by Kevin's wandering eyes.

The rest of the crew was made up of Linda's typical accomplices. The brute and the wits: Tony Winston, Linda's bodyguard of choice, his big muscles overcompensating for his natural chickenshit instincts, and Bridget Buechler.

Tony had tried to be a football player. Then he tried to be a rapper. He failed at both which led to his natural progression of mall security guard, bouncer, then bodyguard. Somehow he ended up with

Linda. It paid better than high school coach, the only other life option for a hulking black man in America apparently.

On the other hand, Bridget was unlike anyone Linda had ever seen because she was unlike anything anyone had ever seen. Bridget the afterlife savant as Linda once referred to her. For Bridget had the innate ability to sense spirits and paranormal presences. She could even see or hear them. Even though she had possessed these abilities since childhood, Bridget had never exploited such a talent. She wasn't one for mugging on Oprah or on those late-night-ads she always saw sandwiched in between the other nocturnal commercials about addiction networks or the latest patented infomercial disaster. Instead, Bridget wanted to stay grounded unlike her ghostly subjects. Her talents were just like any other specialty, she felt. Albeit, within a talent field dominated by sheysters and shitheads forever seeking their fifteen seconds of fame.

Yeah, Bridget knew the stigma associated with her talents, and she didn't like that shit either. Her days as the lone black woman in every paranormal group had taught her to stick to her visions no matter what. Stick to your gut, baby girl, as her grandmama had often told her.

"Well, hello, there," Kevin greeted them, armed with a smile and an outstretched hand.

Linda obliged with the completed handshake, a little distrust in her face.

"It's lovely to meet you in person, Ms. Kane," Kevin stated.

"Yes," Linda replied. "It was a very long trip."

During the casual meet-and-greet, Bridget's eyes strayed all around the Baker property. It was even bigger once you got past the nearly-abandoned Pleasantville neighborhood. And past that tall and imposing gate.

The yard was undeniably pretty. Full of tall pines and trimmed hedges. An idealic idyll. A sight for sore eyes considering how far Linda and the crew had traveled to get here. All the way from Chicago, Illinois and the many plane rides and rental cars that trip encompassed.

Tony shook Kevin's hand. "Nice to meet you," Tony muttered without meaning it.

"Say, you got a strong grip there," Kevin bullshitted back.

"I work out when I can."

Linda patted Tony on the back. "That's why he's mine," she said with sarcasm.

Kevin gives her a flirtatious grin. "Oh really?" he said.

The suggestive look doesn't go unnoticed by the smiling Linda. Kevin was attractive after all. "I could always use more than one bodyguard, you know," she said back.

The comment made Tony give her a WTF look. Kevin liked where this was going.

As the small talk accelerated to excruciating awkwardness, Bridget tuned it out. Her eyes instead focused on a garden in a corner of the yard. A secluded portion of the Christy house landscape.

The garden was lovely. The many flowers in full bloom. The whole thing was well-organized. Even in such thick humidity, anyone could enjoy such a serene sight. Standing a few feet away from the cherished garden, its shed was just as nice. Freshly painted and clean.

Someone took this gardening shit pretty serious, Bridget thought. But Bridget couldn't help but wonder... wasn't this the site of a grisly crime scene just a little over a month ago? Why was this whole area so clean and neat? Had the homeowners just hit the reset button?

"Bridget, come introduce yourself," Linda beckoned. Her rough grasp on Bridget's arm immediately destroyed whatever (and all too infrequently-pleasant) daydreams Bridget was conjuring. "This is the real brains of the operation right here," Linda told Kevin.

"Ah, I see," Kevin commented. He sticks an eager hand out. "You're the gifted one?"

"For what it's worth," Bridget responded as she forced a grin and shook his hand.

"I'd be nowhere without Bridget," Linda explained. "God knows she's rescued me from so many crazies."

Bridget noticed how Kevin eyed her with some skepticism. Nonetheless, he played it off well.

"Nothing wrong with that," Kevin commented to Linda, . He motioned toward the house. "The house certainly is genuine for someone of her talents."

Taking a step back, Linda gazed out at the home. Definitely not your typical haunted appearance. This wasn't Hill House or a Gothic castle, that's for sure. "It really doesn't look it, does it, Bridget?"

Bridget gave Kevin a cold look. "Nope."

"Y'all are aware of the tragedies of this house, I assume," Kevin pleaded. He faced the house himself, getting lost in the visual. "Two families were tragically torn apart in there."

The others watched Kevin's "performance." He was putting on a show that demanded the stage. Shakespeare For Realtors.

"This house guards many dark secrets," Kevin continued as looked at his customers with the intensity of a hammy leading man. "Two little children just snatched up outta here by their own daddy damn near a month ago, and that ain't even the start!" He paused for dramatic effect. Only Tony was uneasy which isn't saying much. "Now, I can't sell this place to a soul in Stanwyck. Something evil lurks in there, you see. Something otherworldly!"

No one said anything even though it was obvious Linda and Bridget were unimpressed.

"It's been there for over twenty years, and it ain't left!" Kevin went on, desperate to engage his potential buyers. "I can tell you that! It ain't leaving anytime soon."

"Okay, man, I believe you," the nervous Tony chimed in.

Like an all-too-friendly preacher, Kevin stepped up closer toward Linda.

She liked his attention at least.

"Now please, ma'am," Kevin started. "I assure you we have the proof for what you're looking for."

"Who's we again?" Bridget inquired.

Before Kevin could answer, a voice rained down from the cozy front porch. "That would be me."

Everyone turned to see Amanda Baker herself standing right outside the front door. Right next to her favorite rocking chair. She looked defiant and rebellious. A Southern Belle of feisty strength rather than dutiful politeness.

"And you're Amanda Baker?" Bridget asked sternly.

Methodical, Amanda took a few steps toward her guests. "Indeed I am," she responded firmly. She stopped and looked right at them, holding them with her big green eyes. "And my friend Kevin here is right. The Christy house is indeed haunted. And we can prove it."

"So you can, huh?" Bridget challenged.

"I've got proof right inside," Amanda answered.

Amanda and Bridget maintained intense eye contact. A staredown between two heavyweights. Bridget couldn't help but wonder why Amanda felt the need to wear jeans and a hoodie in this heat. One of many peculiarities with her probably, Bridget thought.

Eager to break up the tension, Kevin led Linda and Bridget up to the front porch. "Let's go in, shall we."

"That's fine," Bridget said to him.

"You have a wonderful home," Linda exclaimed to Amanda as they stepped up on the porch.

"Thank you," Amanda replied.

Unable to help herself, Bridget glanced over at Amanda. "I'm getting a good vibe already," Bridget quipped with not-so-subtle sarcasm.

"Oh, nothing evil?" Linda asked, the barb flying right over her head.

Amanda just glared at Bridget. This was looking to be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

CHAPTER 2

The inside of Amanda's home was clean and well-furnished, but Bridget noted how it seemed to be lifeless. From what she understood, Amanda was supposed to have had a husband, a young daughter, and a young son less than a month ago. A nuclear family. So the question wasn't so much as where were they, but why was there no trace of them left?

There were no obnoxious family photos, no toys strewn about, no outward signs of a child making a mess in the house via scribbling and drawing on the walls. In fact, there were no photos anyway. Just clean chairs and couch, a perfect flatscreen, and an antique mirror in the corner. Again, this was so clean considering the recent atrocity.

The staircase nearby looked regal enough. Its wooden steps led up to a dark hallway. Who knew how many times Amy and Michael had stumbled up those steps? Or ran up it for that matter.

In addition to the stoic white walls, the inclusion of a discreet security camera gave the room and house a clinical feel. To Bridget, the house didn't feel inhabited, much less haunted. It felt a relatively new building. Not a home.

With everyone huddled around the flatscreen, Amanda made the group watch her so-called proof: different security videos. As the footage played, Amanda looked anxious and worried. She fit the part of the manic victim quite well. A personification of PTSD.

Bridget thought Amanda looked to be trying too hard, but maybe Bridget was being too harsh. After all, this woman did just lose her entire family.

The videos themselves were all impressive. Amanda showed them one after the other. Each one more chilling and convincing than the last.

There it was on screen. This very living room. In the nighttime footage, the living room's camera had caught Amanda's front door creaking wide open on its own, the loud creak slicing through the midnight silence like an efficient blade. Then came the footsteps. Heavy footsteps that lumbered through the room. They came to a sudden. All seemed calm for a moment. Until a shelf toppled to the ground and was pushed across the floor in a rough slide. A scathing sound accompanied the shelf sliding against the floor. But no one was in the room, no one was seen pushing it.

Another video was in Amanda's kitchen. This one in broad daylight and filmed by Amanda herself. Through a window, she pointed her camera at the beautiful garden. A perfect view save for a mysterious figure lurking near the garden. A tall figure that just stood there, their face guarded by shadows. As the

wind ripped through their torn clothes, the figure turned and looked right on at the camera, right toward Amanda.

In the clip, her terrified screams blared over the footage. Almost instantly, cracks appeared all throughout the window, running along the glass like cryptic spiderwebs.

Jumping back, the horrified Amanda lowered the camera. She breathed heavy and staggered further back away from the window's new eerie design.

Everyone watching the video was captivated. And silent. Even Bridget.

On screen, Amanda took a moment to recover and regain her composure. She pointed the camera back out the kitchen window and got a clear view through the cracked glass. But the figure wasn't there. It was gone. The garden and shed stood all alone.

Amanda started to relax. She coaxed herself back to a more calm state of mind. Maybe she was just seeing things.

Then a harsh voice shattered those soothing thoughts with two cold words. "Die, Amanda!"

Full of fear, the frantic Amanda screamed as she waved the camera all around the kitchen. She pointed it at the fridge, the counters, the wooden table, everything. She expected to see the creepy figure lurking right behind her. But she was alone.

Amanda stopped screaming, but before she could relax, she noticed a long butcher knife lodged straight into the wooden table. The handle stuck straight out... challenging Amanda to grab it.

Amanda let out another blood-curdling scream and shut off the camera in a panic. In a startling transition, another video played on screen.

The video was taped off a camera from the upstairs hallway. It featured Amanda dressed in only a towel as she walked through the hallway, going toward the bathroom.

Like she could sense someone watching her, Amanda stopped and turned around. Her worried eyes scanned the scene. Her face said it all. This wasn't the expression of someone mad at herself for imagining things. This was the face of a person *convinced* someone was inside their house. However, no one was there. Amanda was alone. But she didn't believe it.

Fueled by anxiety, Amanda hurried into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her. She was heard stumbling inside as she turned on the shower. The running water was heard through the quiet hallway.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Until a quick glimpse appeared: the figure from outside. They were transparent and nothing more than a blur. Their legs couldn't even be seen. But even their quick

movement couldn't hide its glowering male face and tattered shirt. Or its seemingly-singular focus on the bathroom. He resembled an Angel without wings or promises of solace. A stalking specter.

In the living room, Kevin jumped back and yelled, feigning his over-the-top fright. Tony wasn't feigning his.

Annoyed, Bridget ignored Kevin and stayed focused on the video.

"Just keep watching," Amanda stated.

In the video, the creepy man disappeared just a few feet away from the bathroom door. His apparition had made a quick appearance. Quick enough to be frightening yet quick enough to not seem staged. Honestly, the footage wouldn't look out of place on a ghost video feed... but it looked so much more authentic. The man was simultaneously abstract and haunting.

The area was now silent save for the shower's onslaught of running water. Its incessant rhythm was reminiscent of pouring rain. It was soothing and pretty. But it seemed too safe. As if the man was waiting for the right moment to reappear for a brilliant jump scare.

In the bathroom, Amanda was heard turning the shower off. The running water stopped. Cutting through those few moments of silence, an invisible force snatched the bathroom doorknob and shook it rapidly, desperate to get inside. The unnerving noise replaced the running water, but it definitely wasn't as soothing. It had the same harrowing intensity of heavy footsteps following you in the dark or heavy breathing from a mysterious caller.

The whole time, no one was seen turning the knob. Not the man or anything that could be physically seen. Just the invisible force, a force of potent strength that kept rattling the knob. Amanda screamed and screamed in the bathroom. Responding to her cries, the force banged against the door in rapid succession, making it rattle with each ferocious hit. Amanda's cries grew louder. So did the force's hits. Someone wanted in to that room. Someone wanted Amanda. Right before the latest slam against the door, the video paused.

In the living room, Amanda's bony hand placed the remote control on top of a shelf. "It still scares me," she said to herself. Her voice was loud enough to make sure the others heard though.

Everyone else looked at the flatscreen, impressed by this catalog of horror. Even Bridget didn't say anything, making sure to keep a stoic expression so as not to give Amanda too much confidence.

Needless to say, Tony didn't like this one bit. His face equivalent to a five-year-old experiencing their first haunted house ride.

The giddy Kevin smiled at the guests. "Well. What'd you think?" he asked in a told-you-so manner.

"It seems real," Linda replied. She glanced back at the paused video. "Very possible at least."

"You fooled me," Tony commented. He nodded toward the stairs. "I sure as Hell ain't going up there."

Full of passion, Amanda stood up, almost defensive of the Christy house mythos. "It's not just there, it's everywhere," she pleaded. "It's all over this house!"

Everyone kept their eyes on her. Unlike the others, Bridget wasn't so much mesmerized by Amanda's neurosis as she was studious of Amanda's quirks. Bridget considered her thorough inspections to rival those of the great analytical minds.

"All along, I knew it was here," Amanda went on, visibly shaken by her memories. "The minute I walked in this place, I told John, but he just shrugged it off like always. He was always the tough guy."

"Sounds like my ex-husband," Linda joked. Only Kevin laughed. His laugh way too enthusiastic.

Amanda struggled to continue. With everyone's attention on her, she didn't know how to explain this most extraordinary situation. "I knew it in my heart though," she said. "And it's only gotten stronger ever since. Whatever's here is evil, pure evil." Sensing Bridget's suspicions, she made direct eye contact with Bridget. "And it's after me."

As Amanda looked away to avoid eye contact, the excited Kevin leaned in closer toward Linda. "I'm telling you, Ms. Kane, this place is a goldmine!" he proclaimed. "Bona fide haunted!"

He laid his groomed hand on Linda's leg. She took note with a smile. "This is exactly what you were looking for," Kevin said. "The history, the spirits. It's all right here, and it's all real!"

"A little too real," mused Tony as he browsed through Facebook on his phone. Anything to get his mind off this fucking house.

"This is the real deal, Ms. Kane," Kevin pleaded.

"Yes, well," Linda started. She leaned in closer toward Kevin. Now he was really getting excited. Linda could tell by how much harder he squeezed onto her well-preserved leg. "The videos were pretty frightening."

"I've seen better," Bridget quipped.

Standing in the corner, Amanda glared at Bridget. Everyone except Kevin was intrigued by the comment, not offended like Amanda.

Tony gave Bridget a funny look. "Better?" he asked.

"That's outrageous!" Kevin interjected.

Facing the curious Linda, Bridget went on with confidence. "Come on, Linda, we've seen better from all the other crazy assholes. The Tomberlin farm in Iowa!" She looked at Tony. "You even thought those floating skeleton holograms were real, remember?"

"They were good," Tony stated, a little embarrassed to be called out.

Pleading her case, Bridget continued with Linda. "The Howards mansion in Burbank was great too. All the yells and screams from the speakers fooled everyone the first night."

"Hey, those were good too," Tony added.

Linda smiled with pride. This is why she loved Bridget.

"My point is the vast majority of these hauntings can be explained," Bridget finished. She gave the nervous Amanda a cold look. "And this one's no different."

Defending Amanda, Kevin swooped in. "Mrs. Baker's not the kind of person to-

"Bullshit!" Bridget interrupted. "Anyone desperate to sell a house or make a dollar will say anything for the attention. Bullshit paranormal fakers are a dime a dozen, *Mr. Riley*." She looked to Linda. "Ms. Kane should know that as well as anybody."

Grinning, Linda faced Kevin. "She's got a point."

Bridget confronted Amanda. "So go on and tell us," Bridget began, her eyes piercing straight into Amanda's vulnerability. "How did you pull these off? Some new filter or app maybe?"

Amanda took an angry step toward them. "I'm not lying!" she yelled.

Bridget cracked a confident smile. "Sure you are."

Taking up for Amanda, Kevin pointed at Bridget. "Now you listen to me! Mrs. Baker has been through enough these past few weeks without you-

Bridget waved him off. "Yeah, yeah, I know." She lost the lethargic smugness as she looked at Amanda with sympathy. "I get it. It's horrible what happened to you, Mrs. Baker, and I don't blame you for leaving this house."

"Thank you," Amanda replied, not sure how to react to Bridget's change of mood.

"But I'm not letting Ms. Linda buy a house that's about as haunted as the haunted mansion or haunted castle at Miracle Strip," Bridget continued. The harsh cynic was back, the Bridget Linda loved. Bridget motioned toward the T.V. "Hell, I've seen better videos than this on YouTube."

A loud and obnoxious HA! from Kevin served as his rebuttal.

"You sure?" Tony asked Bridget.

Ignoring Tony, Bridget confronted Amanda. "Either way, it's gonna take a Hell of a lot more than this to bring in one-hundred k."

"One-hundred-and-fifty," Kevin adamantly corrected.

"Jesus, really..." Bridget groaned.

Linda beamed with a smile.

Angry, Amanda pointed right at Bridget. "You don't know shit!"

"Oh, I don't?" Bridget responded.

"You don't know what I've been through!" Amanda yelled back.

"You're right," Bridget replied. "I don't." She leaned back in her seat, keeping her Zen coolness even in the face of Amanda's unstable rage. "But I can tell you now, that I don't see anything and I don't feel anything." She locked eyes with Amanda. "I feel nothing in here."

A little reassured, Tony looked up from his mindless app.

Rage boiled up in Amanda. She looked like a Southern Belle on the rampage as she approached Bridget.

"Mrs. Baker," Kevin said as he reached toward Amanda in a weak attempt to calm her.

Amanda shoved his hand away and stopped in front of Bridget. "You know nothing about this house! What happened here, or the evil that fucking lives here!"

Bridget just stared at Amanda, not backing down one bit.

"There's a long history of evil here, I promise!" Amanda yelled.

"I'm aware," Bridget said calmly.

"What?" Amanda asked.

"Yes," Linda chimed in. She nudged Tony. "We've done quite a bit of research on the Christy place."

Kevin gave Linda a nervous look. "You have?"

Clumsy, Tony dropped his phone as he grabbed a briefcase. An old leather suitcase with ancient brass latches. The thing was practically a relic itself.

"Yes," Linda replied to Kevin. She looked over at the smug Bridget. "One thing Bridget has taught me is that you can never be too careful," Linda continued.

"I see," said Kevin as foreign worry started to show through his overzealous arrogance.

Amidst the conversation, Tony struggled to open the briefcase.

"You got it, Tony?" Linda asked.

"Just gimme a sec," he replied. He could feel all the amused eyes on him. Straining, he used all his might to force the latches open. But he just couldn't do it. "Goddammit," he exclaimed.

"Here, don't worry," Linda said as she snagged the briefcase from him.

Desperate to prove himself, Tony reached toward her. "No, let me try."

Linda held him back. "I got this, Tony."

"But Ms. Kane-

Playing the role of gentle mother, Linda patted him on the shoulder. "I know you're tough, Tony. But you don't have to feel the need to prove it to us."

"She's right," Bridget reassured him.

Kevin nodded toward the briefcase. "Do you want me to try?" he asked Linda.

"Oh no," Linda stated as she placed the suitcase in her lap. Her fingers ran all along its smooth surface, savoring the leather encasing. "I know this baby all too well."

"Does it have any kind of special significance?" Kevin asked out of curiosity.

"It holds a special place in our hearts," Bridget responded.

Kevin gave Bridget a confused look. "Excuse me?"

With calm precision, Linda popped open the latches.

"The briefcase belonged to a businessman by the name of Donald Bostick out in Tallahassee," Bridget started.

Linda opened the briefcase. A wealth of files greeted her nonchalant eyes.

"One day Donald goes postal and shoots up his office," Bridget continued. She nodded toward the suitcase. "Of course, he kept the weapons in that bad boy right over there."

"Oh," Kevin said.

"After killing about ten of his co-workers, he put the rifle to his mouth then blew his brains out all over the third floor," Bridget said with detachment.

Threatened by Bridget's headstrong personality, Amanda just listened in disgust.

"As luck would have it, this here briefcase has exchanged hands for well over fifty years now," Bridget said.

Linda pulled out a large file.

"So what does that have to do with anything?" the impatient Kevin asked.

Savoring the moment, Bridget looked right at him. "Every person who's ever had it has claimed to suffer bad vibes from it. Just this general sense of unease."

Scared, Tony looked down at his hands, inspecting them for signs of possession or otherworldly marks. No wonder he probably couldn't open the damn thing.

Kevin scoffed as Linda skimmed through the file. "Is that it?" Kevin asked Bridget. "I thought y'all were into more intense items. You know, like this house."

"Oh, we understand," Bridget replied, her voice retaining that same calmness that veered from professional to patronizing. "But the suitcase has different effects on different people."

"So what makes it so damn special then?" Amanda inquired.

Bridget hesitated. "Well, two people who worked in office jobs like Mr. Bostick have owned it since. Both of them went on killing sprees just like him." She faced the uneasy Kevin. "One killed eleven, the other twelve."

A loud SNAP ended their conversation. Linda had shut the suitcase. She placed it back on the ground. "Thank God, I retired from the office before getting the Bostick bag," she joked.

Kevin fabricated a smirk.

Smiling, Linda held up the file. "Anyway, here's what I could find on the Christy home." She opened the file where nothing but papers and newspaper articles crammed inside it. "The research me and Bridget did was extensive, but it did turn up a lot of fascinating accounts."

"Well, I can assure you, that most of it is unexplainable," Kevin pleaded. "These are real mysteries we're talking."

Linda gazed through all the snippets. "Oh, no worries, Mr. Riley," Linda commented as she faced Kevin. "I assure you, none of our information has discouraged me from buying the house."

"That's good," a relieved Kevin said.

Linda held the file out to everyone else. "I must say this house has had quite the tragic history."

All of the bold-print headlines screamed at Amanda, disturbing her further. The headlines were the perfect combination of exploitation and horror: Local Family Missing. Police Search For Baker Children While Mother Grieves. John Baker Suspected Of Murder!

"Especially considering it's not all that old," Linda continued.

"See, she wasn't lying," Kevin interjected.

"Oh, I know," Linda responded. She kept her focus on Amanda. "I know Mrs. Baker was telling us the truth."

"So far at least," said Bridget.

Linda pulled out another article. "But I had a few more questions," Linda stated. She held the article out, letting the bold headlines face Amanda again: Police Declare Baker Case Murder-Suicide. Candlelight Vigil For Young Son And Daughter Planned Downtown.

"No...", Amanda muttered, horrified. She turned away, ravaged by her emotions, breaking down before everyone's eyes.

"Is this really necessary, Ms. Kane?" Kevin asked.

Intrigued, Linda held her hand up, silencing Kevin's concerns. "We just wanted to hear her side first," Linda said.

The skeptical Bridget watched Amanda wipe her tears away on her jacket sleeve. Amanda still refused to face anyone. Whether it was out of genuine fear or by overacting the role of grieving mother, Bridget wasn't sure.

"But she's a wreck, come on," Kevin pleaded with Linda.

"I have to hear the whole story," Linda replied sternly.

"I told you everything!" Amanda yelled out at everyone. Tears slid down her face, her voice a conglomeration of fear and frustration. "John went crazy, he wasn't the same! He hadn't been the fucking same ever since we got here!"

Tony looked at her, disturbed by the sight. Amanda resembled a shrill actress from a mental ward's acting troupe.

"He hit me," Amanda went on. "He never hit me before, but he did when we moved into this Goddamn house. He started blaming me for everything, but then he got worse." Avoiding eye contact, she looked down and muttered, "God..."

The uncomfortable confession made everyone silent. Finally, Linda asked another question, "What happened, Mrs. Baker?"

Amanda wiped away her tears and faced them. Her delivery more sharp and brutal than the words themselves: "He blamed the kids." She snatched the article out of Linda's hand. "He said they were demons!" She waved the article at everyone and said, "That the house's evil was inside them!"

Her melancholy eyes looked down at the article's photos. The pictures of John, Amy, and Michael. John's black hair and greasy features. Amy's mischievous grin. Michael's shy expression. This was the one time a family didn't want their family pictures printed in the newspaper. This wasn't a glorious celebration or a great achievement, but a terrible tragedy.

Through tears, Amanda looked at everyone else. "He just wasn't the same," she began. "And it wasn't gradual, it was fast. John was different." Her words came out fast and furious, at an uncontrollable speed. "The house had consumed him. Whatever's here, it made him that way. It made him crazy!"

Kevin stood up and tried to calm her. "Amanda--"

One shove from Amanda sent Kevin's ass back in his seat.

Bridget took note of Amanda's raw strength. Rather than being possessed by powerful spirits, Bridget thought Amanda seemed possessed by her own erratic emotions.

"He took them away!" Amanda yelled. "Our own Goddamn children! Amy and Michael... oh God!" Conquered by grief, she looked back at the newspaper article's photo. "I don't know what he did to them, I don't know where they are! And I don't wanna know!"

Bridget stood up and grabbed Amanda's arm in one firm grasp. Amanda nearly gasped.

Concerned, Kevin glared at Bridget. "What are you doing?"

Linda patted Kevin's leg, calming him down. "It's alright," she said, her pretty eyes and face reassuring Kevin.

Bridget stared right into Amanda's eyes. "Are you okay?" Bridget asked.

Amanda yanked her arm back. "I'm fine!" she yelled. She glared at Bridget, her overbearing sadness morphing to outright hate. "What are you trying to do, huh? You want any more proof of what I've been through!"

Bridget kept her cool. "I'm not saying anything."

Amanda pulled on her overlarge jacket sleeves. "I bet you're wondering why I'm wearing this, huh," she exclaimed.

"I kinda was," Tony mumbled.

"Ninety-degree weather in hot-as-fuck Georgia," Amanda went on. She stepped closer toward Bridget, getting in her face. "Well, I'll show you why!"

"You don't have to-," Bridget began.

With ferocity, Amanda lifted up her sleeves. "Is this what you wanted! Huh!" she yelled. Deep slices ran up and down her arms in grisly track marks. Dark bruises accompanied the vicious scarring.

Bridget and everyone else stared at the marks, unsure how to react to the morbid revelation. Even Bridget looked queasy by the sight.

"He did this to me!" Amanda said. She held her arms up to Bridget's face. "Is this good enough for you!" she yelled.

Disturbed, Bridget turned away. The others remained speechless. Observers to the most captivating yet unsettling one-woman show.

"What he did to me was bad enough," Amanda said, her voice changing from a shrill yell to a somber softness. "But I don't wanna think about what he did to them." Turning away, she burst into tears. Wild, uncontrollable sobs. "I'm sorry," she stated. "Amy and Michael. I'm sorry."

Bridget caressed Amanda's shoulder. There was nothing false or facetious about it either. Amanda looked at Bridget, surprised to see her show heart for the first time during this entire meeting. Even Linda and Tony were shocked. "It's alright," Bridget told Amanda, her tone full of warmth rather than snark.

Calmed by Bridget, Amanda turned away. "I just want someone to believe me," she muttered. "That's all. That's all I want."

Bridget squeezed her shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said to Amanda. And Bridget meant it. She flashed Amanda a gentle smile.

Unsure whether to trust Bridget's sincerity, Amanda looked into her eyes. She didn't say anything. Just gave a silent nod.

Kevin stood and walked toward them. "I got you," he said as he guided Amanda back to her seat. "It's alright, Mrs. Baker."

Wiping away her tears, Amanda stole a look back at Bridget. Their eye contact was brief yet intense.

Back to business, Linda sifted through the other papers in that bizarre briefcase. She settled on another couple of newspaper clippings. Clippings that were so faded and yellow with age.

Standing alone, Bridget watched Amanda take a seat. For the first time in ages, Amanda seemed more calm. She might even fool Bridget into thinking she was the stable mother of two she once was.

"I believe you mentioned the Christys," Linda began.

Holding the article on Amanda's family, Kevin sat down next to her. "Oh, uh. Yeah." He felt the suspicious gaze of Bridget. "They owned this house for a few years."

"In the nineties?" Bridget asked.

"Yes," Kevin answered nervously. "Steven and Mallory Christy. My father sold them the house back in ninety-four."

"The same thing happened to them," Bridget commented.

Kevin didn't like Bridget interrogating him. "Well, yes, it's just terrible-"

"I did some more research on my own," Linda interrupted. She handed the articles out to the others.

They scanned the articles, horrified by the accounts. The headlines were just as vivid as the ones covering the Baker family incident. Hell, they were practically the same, just a different family and a different era. The bold print screamed: Local Handyman Slaughters Family. Police Rule It Murder-Suicide.

The Stanwyck Review had been having a field day with this house, Bridget thought with morbid humor.

"It was the same M.O.," Linda exclaimed. "The father killed his children then killed himself."

Pictures were in all the articles. Christy family photos. An All-American family gone too soon. Steven and Mallory, the hard-working parents. Shelley and Alice, their two young identical-twin daughters. The photos showed a happy family.

As Bridget stared down at the images and joyous smiles, intruding thoughts plagued her mind: What drove this man to kill his entire family? And why did it happen again over twenty years later?

Glancing over at Amanda, Bridget could tell she too was affected by the pictures. The sight of another tormented family seemed to elicit more feelings of sadness from Amanda.

"But wouldn't that make it even more obvious, Ms. Kane," Kevin stated. He motioned around the living room, continuing his never-ending pitch. "It's the house. It's not just coincidence that both these things happened."

"Well, it's quite more than that," Linda responded. "All the families that moved in later reported having weird experiences themselves."

"Basically Amityville 2.0," the amused Bridget quipped.

"They'd hear voices, see apparitions," Linda said. "They felt like they were always being watched."

The words captivated Amanda as she watched Linda with intense interest.

"Some even believed that living here was draining them of their sanity," Linda continued. "A psychosis was forming from living in this house."

"It's true!" Amanda stated with excitement. She leaned in toward Linda. "I know exactly what they mean! I felt the same ever since we stepped foot in this house!"

"Jesus..." Tony muttered.

With everyone intrigued by Amanda's story, Bridget kept silent while she studied Amanda's manic mannerisms and tics.

"I knew nothing about them," Amanda said. "The Christys, the history, I swear we didn't."

Uneasy, Kevin sifted in his seat.

"What?" Linda asked incredulously.

Amanda glared at Kevin. "No one told us anything about it."

All eyes turned to Kevin. He faced everyone, nervous to be put on the spot.

"Really, man?" Tony asked in disbelief.

"Company policy," Kevin sputtered out.

"Company policy!" Tony scoffed.

Kevin looked around at all the disgruntled faces. Bridget in particular gave him a nasty sneer. "Look, I didn't make the rules, alright," Kevin said defensively. "The house had an emotional defect, but I don't have to mention it unless someone asks me. Don't ask, don't tell."

"Just a fucking emotional defect?" the bemused Tony asked. "They're people killing children and shit!"

"Hey, it's the law!" Kevin replied.

Amanda's harsh eyes stayed glued to this most sleazy realtor.

"And I ain't even gotta worry about it now," Kevin stated with forced nonchalance. "All of y'all know what's up." He pointed toward Linda and Tony. "Hell, it's what brought y'all here in the first place!"

Linda placed a smooth hand on Kevin's leg. That's one way to get him to shut up. "Hey, take it easy," Linda said. "We're not arguing here, Kevin." In a subtly flirtatious gesture, Linda ran her hand along his leg. "In fact, we're still very much interested."

Displeased, Bridget shook her head and turned away. Come on, Linda, Bridget thought.

Enjoying Linda saying his first name, Kevin leaned in closer toward her, channeling both his suave gigolo and charming realtor personalities. "So what do you say then," he said. "One-hundred-and-fifty thousand's quite the steal."

Linda chuckled softly. "Let me sleep on it."

Still frustrated, Amanda stood up and confronted Kevin. "You never told us about any of that!" she yelled. "None of these murders or hauntings and shit."

Rattled, Kevin offered up a meek response. "You never asked."

Amanda flung the article in his face.

Kevin shut his eyes as it pelted him across the face. Linda reached over and grabbed the paper.

"You're just as responsible as anyone!" Amanda yelled at Kevin. "All just to get a fucking sell! You're like any of the other assholes in this town, you never told us about anything!"

Scared of Amanda's outburst, Kevin looked to Tony for support. "Can you do something?" he whispered.

"Naw, man, you're on your own," replied Tony.

All the bickering was starting to weigh Bridget down. So much for a casual investigation. These people are fucking crazier than me, she thought.

Trying to ease the tensions, Linda looked at Amanda. "Mrs. Baker, I know it's-

Amanda pointed at Linda. "No!" Amanda screamed. "You stay outta this!"

"But what about the deal?" Kevin pleaded.

Bridget stepped between them, intervening. "Look, let's get back to the point, alright!" she said.

Amanda stopped and just glared at her.

"Sure," Kevin began. "That's all I've been saying this whole dang time."

"Shut up!" Bridget commanded him. With the spotlight now on her, Bridget faced the others. "Now look, it's gonna take more than some spooky videos and a little history to prove to me that this house is the real deal."

"Aw, come on," Kevin protested, drawing a glare from Bridget.

Linda looked toward Kevin. "Just let her finish."

"I need a little more proof before we agree to this," Bridget continued. "So far, I feel nothing and haven't seen anything out of the ordinary other than a lameass real-estate agent constantly trying to sell us on it."

To her surprise, Amanda wasn't combative. Instead, Amanda displayed a confident smile. "Well, that's why we're here isn't it," Amanda said with a cool tone. She looked to Linda and asked, "Isn't that right, Ms. Kane?"

"Well, yes," Linda responded, caught off-guard by Amanda's chill demeanor.

Such confidence caught Bridget off-guard as well. Combined with that hoodie, Amanda had the aura of a hipster Scarlett O'Hara.

Kevin clapped his hands together. "Okay, excellent!" he proclaimed. "I knew we could get on the same page at some point."

Hearing Kevin shoot that shit, Tony could only shake his head in dismay.

"So tell me," Amanda asked the intrigued Linda. "How has your 'collecting' gone so far?"

Linda hesitated. "Well, to be honest..." She looked to Bridget, unsure how to respond.

Bridget's grimace suggested that Linda not reveal much. She thought this might've been Amanda trying to challenge them.

Amanda noticed their exchange, but didn't say anything.

Linda faced Amanda. "Not too efficient, I'm afraid," Linda admitted.

"Oh, is that so?" Amanda responded with a condescending smirk.

Swooping in to the rescue, Bridget took a step toward Amanda. "We've had lots of items."

Amanda stared her up and down. The two were only inches away from each other.

Bridget turned her back to Amanda as she inspected the room. "But never a house," she finished.

Bridget could feel Amanda's intense eyes focus on her, watching her every move.

"Well, there's a first time for everything," Kevin interjected. He stood up and locked eyes with everyone in the room. "So what do you say? A trial run this weekend?"

"That was the plan all along, wasn't it," Amanda said, her focus still on Bridget.

"Of course," Linda replied.

An unenthused Tony glanced over toward the staircase. At the dark hallway upstairs. "Great..." he muttered.

Bridget faced Amanda. Both women resembled rival gunslingers engulfed in an epic staredown. Thick tension permeated solely between the two. This house wasn't big enough for the two of them.

"Me and Bridget have found this to be the best method," Linda announced to the others.

"Very true," Bridget stated bluntly.

"I can understand," Kevin responded as he held his hand out toward Linda.

Blushing, Linda grabbed it and let him help her off the couch. "I've got such a good feeling about this place," she said.

Pretending to disregard the hostility with Amanda, Bridget walked toward Linda and Kevin.

Linda looked around the room, especially giving the mirror a through look. "This house just has too much... history to be a disappointment."

"Now that's the 'spirit', Ms. Kane" Kevin joked.

No one laughed as Amanda snatched the remote control off a shelf.

"No pun intended," the chuckling Kevin joked. Still no one joined his laughter.

Sitting in a recliner, the bored Tony kept his eyes glued to his phone. The brainless app would provide solace from Kevin's cheesiness at least.

Ignoring Kevin, Linda confided with Bridget. "What do you think," she asked. "You think there's something here?"

Bridget watched Amanda fast-forward through the flatscreen's videos. "We'll see," Bridget said loudly enough to make sure Amanda could hear her skepticism.

"Shall we explore the rest of the house?" Kevin inquired.

An explosion of sound erupted from Tony's phone. "Fuck!" Tony yelled aloud. Back to level one on his game.

Linda tugged on Kevin's arm seductively. "Sure. Give us a tour."

Partly teasing and part genuine revulsion, Bridget gave Linda a grossed-out look.

"Do you mind getting the bags, Tony?" Linda politely asked.

Eager to escape the house, Tony rose out of his seat. "No problem."

"Hold on just a minute," Amanda hollered, commanding everyone's undivided attention.

She took a step back, revealing to them the flatscreen. A new video off a security camera was about to play. It was paused on a shot inside a bedroom.

A curious Bridget approached her. "What's that?"

Tony stared at the screen in dread. The bedroom was already creeping him out. "Uh-oh," he murmured.

Amanda confronted Bridget. "I wanted to save the best for last."

Both Linda and Kevin looked toward the screen, simultaneously excited and uneasy.

Teasing Bridget, Amanda pointed the remote right toward her. "Just for the skeptics."

Accepting the challenge, Bridget grinned. "Show me then."

With wicked confidence, Amanda aimed the remote at the T.V. and mashed play.

The video started playing. The footage was from a security camera in Amanda's bedroom. Like the rest of the house, the bedroom was barren and devoid of life. No picture frames or quirky decorations. It had no soul. No sign of life except for the sight of Amanda sleeping in bed.

The timer in the corner of the video revealed this was just after midnight. The room was silent save for the constant noise of the rotating fan resting on the nightstand. In the bed, Amanda kept tossing and turning, but nothing seemed too awry.

"It's just you sleeping," Bridget noted.

Tony looked up from his phone. Bridget's comment gave him hope that maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

"You'll see," Amanda told Bridget.

"Of course, we will," Bridget muttered.

"What was that?" Amanda asked.

"Nothing."

Using the remote, Amanda pointed at the T.V. "I caught this the first night I installed the cameras," she stated to everyone.

"And this was last week?" Linda asked as she took a step closer toward Amanda. Kevin trailed behind her like a lovesick lapdog.

"Uh-huh," Amanda replied, her eyes glued to the screen in anticipation. She pointed the remote closer toward the screen. "Look right there!"

The video still looked mundane. Candid footage of a restless sleeper.

"I don't see anything," Linda commented.

"There!" Amanda pointed the remote at the open bedroom door.

A ghostly figure stood in the doorway. The boy couldn't have been more than ten years old. He stood completely still, his gaunt face devoid of any discernible emotion.

His eyes looked on at the oblivious Amanda. His clothes old and ragged. He waited right in the doorway. Waiting to be invited in.

"My God!" Linda exclaimed.

Kevin's excited eyes stared at the boy. Dollar signs may as well had been in Kevin's irises.

"He was just standing there," Amanda commented.

In the video, the boy stood still as he just stared at Amanda. His haunting gaze never wavered. He never even blinked.

"Just looking at me," the nervous Amanda continued.

Even Bridget was silent. The boy sure was creepy.

Amanda fast-forwarded through the footage. "He was like that all night," she said. Her words couldn't be truer. The time stamp changed, but the boy's position never did. Neither did his focus. He was constantly just watching. His eerie expression frozen on his face.

"What do you think, Bridget?" Linda asked.

"Definitely weird," Bridget responded.

Amanda fast-forward to another video. It showed the same bedroom. The same time: just after midnight. Amanda was sound asleep in her bed. But someone else was inside the bedroom: the boy. Amanda hadn't invited him in, but that hadn't stopped him from advancing closer in the room. Maybe a few feet away from the doorway.

He had the same exact facial expression, wore the same exact clothes. An eerie statue someone had shifted elsewhere.

"It happened again," Amanda told the others.

Kevin and Linda looked on at the boy, frightened.

"Only this time he was closer," Amanda said.

Even though he was standing closer, the boy's features still weren't too distinguishable. The darkness shielded him. However, his gaze was still directed on his favorite target: Amanda.

"He kept watching me," Amanda said.

"You never saw him there?" Bridget asked.

Feeling disrespected, Amanda gave her a disapproving look.

"I mean you never once woke up," Bridget said, knowing she was likely to provoke Amanda into another hysterical reaction.

"What do you expect?" Kevin said as he came to Amanda's aid.

Keeping her anger in check, Amanda didn't respond right away.

"Just curious," Bridget retorted. She looked right at Amanda. "I know that when I sense something, I react pretty fast."

Ignoring Bridget, Amanda looked back at the T.V.

"Especially once I know a spirit was watching me the night before," Bridget stated calmly.

"That's enough!" Kevin barked.

Linda put a hand to Kevin's chest, holding him back. "It's okay," she whispered to him.

Kevin glanced down at her hand before looking into her sultry eyes. He gave up on the fight for her.

"I didn't know what to do," Amanda told Bridget. She fast-forwarded through the clip. The boy just kept standing there in what felt like a replay of the other video... only this time, the boy was standing in her room. "Honestly, I was just scared."

"Right," Bridget quipped.

Angry, Amanda got ready to play the next video.

"That seems to be a reoccurring theme with you, Amanda," Bridget teased.

Kevin kept his mouth shut for the amused Linda.

"What else could I have done?" Amanda pondered aloud. She raised her thumb over the play button. "I saw him every night." She mashed play. "And it just kept getting worse."

The latest video was the creepiest. It was still in Amanda's bedroom, still a little after midnight. Amanda was asleep. And the boy was closer than ever. He stood right next to Amanda, his face hovering up over her. Maybe she was asleep, maybe she was pretending to sleep out of pure fear. Whatever the case, the boy didn't pretend to care. Instead, he stared down upon her with glowering eyes. His clothes nor his facial features were easily seen, but pure evil could be seen in those eyes. That and the abundance of dark blood smeared over his young face. Even more blood was seen practically covering his entire body, drenching through his clothes.

"Oh my..." Linda muttered.

"I don't know who he is," Amanda said in a broken tone. Unsettled, she paused the video. "I just hope it's not him." She ran a nervous hand along her face. "I just hope it's not Michael."

Tony looked up from the app and saw the boy on screen. The boy's cold eyes locked in on the sleeping Amanda. The frightening shot scared the shit out of Tony. "Great," he said as he looked back at his app for an escape for his traumatized eyes.

"It could be anyone," Bridget said.

The restless Amanda watched Bridget step toward her.

Bridget gazed around the living room. "With a house with this history, who knows what kind of spirits it attracts?" She glanced over at the security camera. Very convenient to install all these and instantly get such great footage, Bridget thought.

"You saw the video!" Amanda protested. "He looks just like Michael."

Bridget confronted her. "If he's real, that is."

Keeping her emotions in check, Amanda glared at Bridget. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what it's supposed to mean," Bridget stated.

Kevin looked to Linda. Her knowing eyes kept him in place.

"The footage could easily be fake," Bridget continued.

"That's bullshit!" Amanda said.

"Well, it is frightening," Linda intervened.

"That it is," Bridget commented dryly, her harsh gaze still scolding Amanda.

Kevin stood up and confronted Bridget. "Look, leave her alone."

Stopping him, Linda yanked him back on the couch. "Just let her talk."

Amanda looked right at Bridget. Another staredown between the two tough women. "It's not fake, I swear."

Unfazed, Bridget just stared at her, taking note of Amanda's emotional outpour. Amanda's fear.

"He keeps getting closer," Amanda said. "This is the closest he's ever gotten."

Fueled by skepticism, Bridget nodded toward the paused video. "When was this taken?"

Amanda didn't avoid eye contact on this one. "Last night," she answered with confidence.

CHAPTER 3

The Friday afternoon dragged on. Tony brought in the bags and luggage, most of which belonged to Linda Kane. The crew packed heavy for a mere weekend excursion. And Tony wasn't too happy about it.

On the outside, the Christy house looked as fine as ever. The house you would least expect to see be the home of such tragedies. Two stories of upper-middle-class Heaven.

Certainly, the home was guarded well enough. The wrought-iron fence was sturdy enough to stave off any outside trouble. Security cameras surveyed the yard at an efficient rate. Together, such protection formed a strong team designed to keep the evils of this world at bay from the Christy house... or you could say it did an efficient job of keeping innocent outsiders from ever encountering what lurked within Stanwyck's most notorious house.

The sun poured in through the house's large kitchen windows. The house had a spacious kitchen. It was clean and full of modern appliances. Everything just perfect except for the one gaping knife wound marring an otherwise flawless wooden table.

Eager to start work, Bridget scattered her equipment all across the table, covering up the knife mark with her "tools." Her utensils were not unlike the typical gear necessary for any other ghost hunter: an infrared thermometer for sensing temperature drops (AKA "cold spots"), a hi-tech tape recorder for capturing "voices," and an infrared camcorder for the off-chance you actually come across an apparition. Unlike the ghost hunters and amateurs you would see on T.V., Bridget's gadgets were not gaudy or flamboyant. They were efficient. Like her.

Bridget tested the equipment and made sure each piece worked to perfection. In all her years as a paranormal expert, she'd yet to come across a real haunted house. The Christy place was her best chance yet, and she knew it. She wanted to be prepared.

Bridget put the infrared camcorder to her eye for a quick test. Like a student filmmaker, she scanned the kitchen. Determined to capture anything...

There the boy stood in the doorway that connected the kitchen to the living room! It was unmistakable. Just like in the first video from Amanda's bedroom. There he was, clothes and blood and all. Only this time, those eerie eyes weren't glowering at Amanda. They were latched onto Bridget. In the murky filtered lighting, he resembled a blazing demon.

Scared shitless, Bridget jumped back and lowered the camcorder. "Shit!" she said as she noticed the boy was gone. He was no longer lurking in the doorway.

Acting quick, she put the camera back to her eye. But the moment was over. Even through the camcorder, the thrill and the boy were gone. No one was in the doorway.

Bridget lowered the camera. Unsure what she saw, she cracked a weak smirk and placed the camcorder back on the table. That was a jump scare for the ages, she thought. Probably my only one for the weekend, so she better enjoy it. She figured Amanda already had her losing it...

Bridget turned and looked out a window.

The garden was off in the distance. Coated in sunlight, it looked glorious. A serene daydream. The flowers were tall and looked lush enough to lay in. A long-handled spade stuck straight out of the garden's soft soil, lending the sight an even more wholesome mystique.

Captivated, Bridget walked up to the window for a closer look at this breathtaking view. Such a garden was too beautiful for this era, Bridget thought. It and all those flowers belonged in a Norman Rockwell painting. I could get lost in this, Bridget mused. Then she wondered what such a garden was doing in this supposed house of horrors? Nevermind the fact that the rest of the house lacked any of the garden's passion or character.

"Not bad, huh," a female voice said.

Bridget turned and saw Amanda waiting in the doorway. The same spot she saw the weird little boy. "Oh, hey," Bridget said awkwardly.

Entering the kitchen, Amanda motioned toward the window. "I try to take care of the garden at least once day." She noticed all the gear lying on the table. "Oh wow!" she exclaimed as she walked up to the tools.

"Yeah," Bridget said with a smile. "I always come prepared."

Amanda stopped and looked down at all the unusual instruments. "What's all this?"

Amused, Bridget waved toward the tools. "They just help me with my investigations."

Amanda started to touch the camera, but out of courtesy, looked over at Bridget. "Do you mind?" she asked like a curious elementary school student.

Bridget chuckled. "Go ahead!"

Excited, Amanda scooped up the camera and inspected it with awestruck eyes. "Wow! This is so fancy."

Bridget walked up to her. "It's supposed to be the latest model."

Amanda looked through the camera lens and pointed it all around the room. The perspective warped into another dimension. The Christy house under filtered lights. Definitely a unique perspective. She giggled with awe. "Shit, this is amazing!"

All the while, Bridget studied her, curious if Amanda would see the boy too. Judging by Amanda's giddiness, apparently not.

"Really cool," Amanda said. Her smile faded quickly.

"Well, thank you."

Through the camera, Amanda saw him again. The boy in the doorway. He gave her the death glare of a prisoner on execution day. The filtered lighting gave him that same otherworldly look... like a snapshot from a surreal nightmare.

Bridget noticed Amanda's sudden mood change. The joy was replaced by unease. "Hey, you alright?" she asked Amanda.

"Uh, yeah," Amanda mustered as she lowered the camera. She glanced at the doorway through her own eyes.

But the boy was still there! In real-life. Not caught in the murky surveillance camera footage or infrared lighting, but merely a few feet in front of her. His image clearer than ever. He wore the ripped clothes. Just a silent specter. His glare was even more frightening up close. So was all that blood covering his face and clothes.

Gasping, Amanda took a frightened step back.

Bridget snatched her shoulder in a firm grip. "Hey, what's wrong?"

Speechless, Amanda faced Bridget real quick before looking back at the doorway. The boy was gone.

"What's wrong? What happened?" Bridget asked, concerned.

"Nothing," Amanda responded. Trying to keep her cool, she laid the camera back on the table. She wasn't fooling anyone, definitely not Bridget. "I was just kinda weirded out." She forced a smile. "You should understand. In a house like this... things can get a little crazy."

"I see."

"I think it was just the lighting." Amanda forced a laugh and pointed at the camera. "That thing's a little crazy."

"I know," Bridget said quietly. She spun the camera around on the table, trying to not seem too interrogative. "Sometimes, the mind can do funny things, you know."

Amanda didn't respond. The comment seemed to offend her.

"Particularly in houses with dark histories," Bridget said. Keeping her cool to appease Amanda's temper, Bridget stepped closer toward her. "But if you saw anything in that camera, I wouldn't flip. Ghost stories can even get to me sometimes. They make me see stuff too."

"So you have seen something?" Amanda asked, unable to contain her smug excitement.

Bridget smirked. "Let's not get carried away." She leaned in closer, teasing Amanda in a (for once) light-hearted manner. "Like I said, the mind can play tricks on you. Especially when you're scared."

Amanda flashed her a grin, amused by Bridget's constantly-dismissive skepticism. The animosity was dying down between the two.

Keeping her sardonic coolness, Bridget stepped toward a window. "Until I really have an experience, I'm gonna stay skeptical."

Amanda followed her up to the window. "But you don't have to."

"No," Bridget began. She turned and faced Amanda. "Actually, I need to."

"But why?" The curious Amanda stepped right in front of Bridget, bridging the gap between them. "I mean this is your life." She motioned toward the equipment, embellishing her point. "You obviously take this shit serious. So why be so..."

"Why be a pessimist? A bitch?"

Amanda cracked a smile. "Well. To be honest..."

Chuckling, Bridget looked out toward Amanda's garden.

"I mean you don't have to be so negative about everything," continued Amanda.

Not sure how to respond, Bridget looked over at her. For once, Amanda's words were affecting her... albeit, not Amanda's accounts of ghosts in the Christy house.

"I just don't understand how you can be so negative about something you love," Amanda finished.

The two looked at one another in reflective silence. Bridget was unable to resist Amanda's green saucer eyes. Amanda was so naif, Bridget thought. A mother with a psycho husband and missing children, yet a mother who was apparently still so idealistic.

"I'd just think you'd rather be doing something else," Amanda half-joked. "If all you're trying to do is cut everyone down, calling them liars."

Bridget sensed the real emotion in Amanda's last line. "Look, I'm sorry about how I was back there," Bridget stated.

Surprised by the "apology," Amanda didn't say anything.

Bridget looked away before confronting Amanda, struggling with spilling her guts out like this. Usually, Bridget wasn't the one to level with her subjects. Hell, she never did. She didn't like doing this with her grandmama, her family and friends, or the many therapists she'd employed over the years, much less someone who might be full of shit and trying to con her. "Ms. Kane and me. We come across a lot of

fakes. Tons of them. There are just... so many fucking disgusting people who prey on people like her and me. Especially Ms. Kane because she *really* wants to believe."

"Easy target," Amanda commented.

"Exactly!" Lost in her emotions, Bridget waved her hands around. Now she was probably acting like Amanda, she thought. And she was. "They're always just trying to take advantage of her! You know, an older, pretty widow who likes paranormal shit. Hell, you had her hooked with just one video!"

Amanda smiled. "I could tell."

"And look, I don't blame her." Bridget did her best to calm herself down, but she was still high-strung. She sounded more attached to Linda than to anything supernatural. "After Ray divorced her, she was all alone. She had all her money, but no one to share it with or leave it to, and she'd always been fascinated by the hauntings and the paranormal stuff. You know her type."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she's the one to watch that Haunted Family shit on Destination America instead of the soaps."

The comment made Amanda laugh. "You trying to say she's mainstream?"

"You get the idea." Bridget steadied herself, doing her best to mask her vulnerable feelings with her clinical tone. She also wanted to stay respectful to her good friend Linda. "I mean shit, some asshole conned her out of a hundred grand over this shack in Louisiana! I mean it was a fucking shithole. Wharf rats were making the noises, not some Goddamn ghosts!"

"Oh my God, really," Amanda said in disgust.

"After that bullshit, she got in touch with me. I'm not even sure how she found me since I never go on those shows or put myself out there much."

"I don't blame you."

"Yeah," Bridget said with a laugh. "I try to take things more seriously, you know. Be more rational. So yeah. She needed me." Her tone stayed soft. "She really did."

"How'd she find you anyway?" Amanda asked.

"I think she saw my site on a forum. Probably Reddit," Bridget said with a laugh.

"Oh."

"I kinda have my own cult following. I just don't like to exploit it and push it on everybody. I don't have the personality for that shit."

"No shit," Amanda said, not missing a beat.

They shared a friendly laugh together. "I don't know, we've gotten real close," Bridget said. Such warm reflection could be seen melting her purposefully-stoic demeanor. "I just try to look after her."

"I don't blame you." Amanda smiled. "You two make such a strange couple though."

Bridget chuckled. "Yeah..."

"Like how did y'all get so close?" Amanda asked with particular interest.

"Well." Bridget hesitated. Giving in with an awkward grin, she looked right at Amanda. "She's kooky. You've seen her."

"Right."

"But she's got a lot of heart," Bridget continued with confidence. "She believes in me." The memories made Bridget lose her voice. More memories than just her time with Linda. Their bond had roots in deeper relationships for Bridget. "In a thing like this, that's important. It's rare. And honestly, no one's ever been like that to me, no one's trusted me or my gift like that except for her and my grandma. And grandmama, she had heart too. They're actually quite similar."

Sympathetic, Amanda watched Bridget continue her emotional explanations.

"I think that's why I get so protective of Ms. Kane. I want to prove her right. Just like I always did for grandmama. They deserve that at least."

"No, I totally get that," Amanda said. She gave Bridget a warm smile. "It sounds like you need Ms. Kane."

"True," Bridget replied. "I guess we need each other." She looked away, her typical cynicism starting to reappear through her tender refuge. "It's just so many people will try to make fun of her, take advantage of her." Bitter, she faced Amanda. "They did the same thing to grandma. I just, I have to step up for them against all those assholes. It's what really drives me. Not the ghosts or the spirits I hear, but them. Proving it for them."

Amanda nodded, visibly relieved to see this side of Bridget. She was just as shocked as Bridget by their bonding. "I understand. You've gotta do what you gotta do with all those douchebags running around. I don't blame you."

Staving off her emotions once more, Bridget walked back to the table. "Yeah, sadly, that's most of the industry though," she said dryly. She started toying with the infrared camera. A distraction from the more personal aspects of her career.

Breaking the somber silence, Amanda nodded at the camera. "What's the craziest thing you've ever seen on that?"

Cracking a weak smirk, Bridget faced her. "Well, I mean it's nothing like what you see in the movies."

"I figured that."

"I catch a weird glimpse here and there. Nothing specific, just quick visions really."

Amanda stepped next to Bridget and pointed toward her eyes. "So it's nothing as clear as what you see in those, huh?"

"I guess you could say that." Bridget turned and looked back out the window. Compelled to look out at that magnificent garden. Maybe it's just all the beauty or the peace, Bridget pondered.

Amanda followed her gaze toward the spot. The forest of flowers. "I got a little carried away I guess," she said.

"No," Bridget said as she faced Amanda. Bridget's expression wasn't built off of skepticism or resentment but respect. "It's beautiful."

Amanda couldn't hide her proud smile. "Thanks."

"It's impressive, honestly."

"Yeah." Silent, Amanda stared at the garden. Even though it's pretty, its loneliness mirrored Amanda's. All those flowers with no one to show them off to. "Honestly, it's become my life at this point."

Noticing Amanda's carefree smile being replaced by a solemn melancholy, Bridget turned and looked out at the garden. Amidst the flowers and plants, the long-handled spade still stuck out of the ground like Amanda's own personal signature to this work of art.

"It means everything to me," Amanda said. She turned away from the window, plagued by her memories. "At this point, it's all I've got."

Bridget watched her tremble. Amanda's emotional outburst was much more erratic than Bridget's.

"It's all I've got left of them," Amanda struggled to say. She looked at Bridget with tormented eyes. "I had started it before, but I... I wasn't done when it happened."

"I'm sorry," Bridget said softly.

"After everything, it's all I could do," Amanda said as she looked out at the garden. "It took my mind off the pain. The memories. It was like therapy for me."

Bridget noticed how the garden captivated Amanda even more than it did herself. She was probably picturing her young kids frolicking through those flowers, Bridget thought.

"They wanted me to finish it," Amanda said. She choked up and sniffed. "Amy and Michael... God... I never finished it for them..."

Bridget rubbed Amanda's arm, trying to comfort her. "It's okay," Bridget whispered. Maybe she wasn't great at this whole consoling thing, but she was at least trying.

Lost in her memories, Amanda let out a tranquil laugh. "They wanted us to be like farmers. Grow our own food."

Bridget gave her a reassuring smile. "The green thumb, nothing wrong with that."

"Yeah," Amanda replied with a laugh. She looked directly at Bridget. Their mutual respect and matching smiles had replaced their initial tension by now. No sign of hostility was left.

"Look," Bridget began. Lowering her hand off Amanda's arm, she maintained eye contact with her. "I'm really sorry about how I was back there."

"No, don't-"

"No, I was being a total bitch."

Amanda grinned. "Maybe just a little."

"I know. Believe me even I know how I can get." Bridget glanced at the garden before facing Amanda with full sincerity in her eyes and heart. "I'm really sorry about what happened to your family. I really am."

Emotional, Amanda just nodded. "Thank you."

"I often look past the stories and the histories, all just so I can prove everybody wrong," Bridget confessed. "But that's not right. There are real victims in these places, and I shouldn't be like that. Especially considering what all's happened with you."

"You're not the first," Amanda commented, fighting back tears. "No one wants to believe me. All they do's just question me or think I'm hiding something. That I'm hiding something about my own children..."

Empathetic while still trying to keep her usual detachment, Bridget got a first-hand view of Amanda's rising intensity. Selling her Oscar moment, Amanda was full of pleading passion.

"But I'm not, I swear!" Amanda yelled. "I just want someone to listen to me! Someone to believe me."

"I want to believe you, Amanda," the calm Bridget said. She rubbed Amanda's arm. "I do."

Amanda nodded. In this cloud of suspicion and tragedy, she was now at least momentarily comforted.

"Believe me, I know how frustrating it is," Bridget continued. "To not have people take you serious or to just be flat-out treated like shit, I know."

"You do?"

"Number one, I'm a woman," Bridget responded with a smile.

Amanda chuckled.

"Number two, I'm a black woman," Bridget stated.

Like reunited old friends, the two shared another laugh. "And what's number three?" Amanda asked.

"Oh, number three?" Sarcastic, Bridget pretended to hesitate. "Oh yeah, I'm a black woman who sees fucking ghosts."

Amanda beamed with a smile, her brightest one in quite some time. "Okay, you got me there."

"You see my point?"

"No, that's fair."

"Yeah, so I can at least feel you there, girl," Bridget said. She gave Amanda a playful hit on the shoulder. "Just know one thing."

"What?"

Bridget leaned in closer, the chummy-chummy sorority sister routine giving way to her typical laser-sharp toughness. "If you're lying and this is another con, I'm gonna turn you into a motherfucking ghost myself. And I'll do it."

Not sure how to take Bridget's warning, Amanda deliberated on a response. She displayed a sly grin. "I guess you'll just have to find out yourself."

CHAPTER 4

Part of Bridget's ghost-hunting "routine" involved a thorough tour of the location. Such a process typically consisted of checking for cold spots or getting a feel for any sort of paranormal presence. Again, typical fare for any ghost hunter. However, Bridget was ambitious enough to kill two birds with one stone, She didn't just carry out any normal preliminary tour: she'd attempt to make contact right from the start.

Armed with her tape recorder, Bridget led Tony down the long downstairs hallway. The hallway was long and wide. Not much character aside from several potted plants. Tall flowers and even exotic-looking cacti stood out to Bridget. Amanda's favorites perhaps, Bridget thought.

Tony held the infrared thermometer as he lagged behind Bridget. Together, they made for a quirky pair as they journeyed toward the last door on the left. The basement door.

All the while, one of Amanda's security cameras stayed glued on them. A silent guard watching them.

"Do we have to go down there?" Tony pleaded.

"Yes..." Bridget replied in annoyance. Tony was always like this. Utter chickenshit behind those muscles.

"Don't get so mad."

"You ask this about every damn room," said Bridget as they stopped in front of the basement door.

"Not all of them..." He saw Bridget reach for the doorknob.

Still uncomfortable, Tony grabbed her wrist. "Whoa, can't we just wait till tomorrow?" he asked.

Aggravated, Bridget pulled away from him. "Look, we have to check every room, alright." Tony's groan annoyed her even further. "Hey, we always do this, man."

"But we haven't seen shit!"

"Exactly, so stop being a pussy and follow m!."

Tony just looked at her, offended. "Really, Bridget?"

Feeling guilty, Bridget exhaled in frustration. "I'm sorry, Tony, I didn't mean to call you a pussy.

"Apology accepted."

"But we have to go down there. Besides the bedrooms, most of the things we find are usually in the less visited rooms, Tony."

The anxious Tony glanced over at the basement door.

Bridget continued, "So think. That usually means--"

"Basements and attics, yeah, yeah, I know the drill," Tony interrupted, his eyes still on the door.

"Thank you, Tony."

"It's your fault if we get killed."

"So it is," Bridget replied as she turned the knob and swung open the creaking door. The harsh creaking silenced their bickering... things were getting serious.

They both looked out into the dark, damp room. Amidst the staunch darkness, only the first step in a long and winding staircase could be seen.

Even Bridget was a little creeped out. It looked like no one had explored the basement in years. It was darker than a cave. She almost wanted Tony to talk and complain just to end this lingering unease. She turned and looked at the visibly-frightened Tony.

"Don't look at me," he protested. "You go first."

Bridget couldn't really argue with that one. Her idea, right? Clinching her tape recorder, she made the first move and entered the ominous room.

*

The basement was large and wide. Aside from a few boxes, no furniture was seen anywhere. A few ancient lightbulbs hung from the ceiling, but it wasn't getting used right now. Not a part of Bridget's process.

Bridget and Tony staggered through the dark arena. The area was silent except for their restless footsteps.

"Shit," Tony muttered.

Shushing him instantly, Bridget stopped in the center of the room, trying to gather a "feel" for the eerie locale. She shut her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she gazed around the room, keeping her mind and senses open to any possibility.

The uneasy Tony stayed as close to her as possible. "Is there a reason we can't turn on the damn lights?" he complained.

Bridget shushed him once more.

"Bridget--"

"Shut it!" Bridget commanded him.

Even in the darkness, Tony could feel her commanding glare. He knew to back off when Bridget got this pissed and focused.

Regaining her focus, Bridget looked toward the back of the room. She realized she felt drawn to that spot. An invisible force beckoned her. Keeping her eyes focused on the back wall, she mashed the record button on the tape recorder.

Tony just watched her, too scared to look anywhere else.

Staring ahead, Bridget put the recorder to her mouth. "This is day one on one-fourteen Chaney Lane," she began. "We're here in the infamous Christy house." She took one cautious step closer to the long wall at the very back. "A house of horrors believed to be haunted by several tragic incidents in the last few decades."

Tony crept up closer to her, staying on Bridget like a scared child clinging to his mother.

"We're now here in the basement," Bridget continued.

Tony wiped sweat off his brow. The fucking basement was both hot and scary.

Caught up in the unsettling atmospherics, Bridget gave a quick glance around the room. "A nice creepy spot, I might add," she said into the recorder.

"No shit," Tony commented

Groaning, Bridget stopped her tape recorder with a harsh smash of the button. "Tony, will you shut the fuck up!" she said to him in a harsh whisper.

"Okay!"

Bridget stepped closer toward the back wall, eager to get further away from Tony. She knew he wouldn't follow her this far to a spot she was this drawn to.

Staring at the wall, Bridget hit the record button once more. Take two, she thought. "Okay, we're looking to establish contact now."

Unbeknownst to Bridget, the discreet Tony stopped right behind her. He ain't waiting by himself.

"I'm going to ask a series of questions," Bridget said aloud. She looked like she was talking to herself, but Bridget wasn't so sure. Neither was Tony. "If you are here with us, please try to communicate in any way you can," Bridget continued in a firm tone. "A sound, a voice, anything to let us know you are here with us."

Bridget hesitated, already listening for any signs of life thus far. But there was nothing... nothing yet. Just the still silence and Tony's neverending anxiety. Finally, Bridget put the recorder closer to her mouth. "Is there anyone here with us?" she asked out loud.

Bridget and Tony waited in tense silence. They waited for a reply, a voice, a breath, any sign of life. But nothing came. It was just them and their heavy breathing alone in the darkness.

"Is the Christy family in here?" Bridget asked, undeterred. "Are you here with us now?"

Again, the silence lingered. All that was there was just the still darkness.

Determined, Bridget took another step toward the back wall.

Almost instantly, Tony fumbled through the darkness and snatched her arm in a tight grasp. "What are you doing?" he yelled.

Bridget pulled away from him and staggered back. "Tony, let go of me!"

"Just stay here!"

Ignoring him, Bridget turned and faced the back wall. She felt drawn to it as always. Bridget held the recorder up toward the wall. "We're not here to hurt you," she stated calmly. "We just want to know if you're here with us."

She stopped and waited in anxious dread. Tony stayed quiet the whole time, not surprising Bridget. He wasn't eager to talk to ghosts.

"If you're here, please, let us know," Bridget said. She stayed calm, but her passion was still intense. She wanted to reach contact with some. "Please, we wanna-"

A confident chuckle echoed toward Bridget, interrupting her. A calculating laugh. It was coming from near that back wall. Just a few feet away from Bridget.

"Oh my God!" Bridget said with nervous excitement as the chuckle faded away. She turned and punched Tony's shoulder, a punch probably harder than necessary.

"Ow!" Tony exclaimed.

"Did you hear that?" Bridget yelled.

Confused, Tony looked right at her. "Hear what?"

"I heard someone laughing," Bridget replied as she looked back at the wall. "It was over here-"

The overhead lights cut on with a start, stunning Bridget and Tony. Every single one of the ancient bulbs hummed in unison, the unnerving sound more overpowering than a collection of crickets.

The thick lighting illuminated the basement's walls. All of them were blood red. Almost bleeding...

Bridget looked toward the back wall and screamed in fright.

A body hung directly in front of the back wall, right before Bridget's eyes. Swaying softly, the corpse wore a white lab coat, his dead eyes looking on at Bridget. Bridget knew it was a doctor of some sort. A dead doctor for sure.

The noose was wrapped tight around the corpse's pale neck like a primitive choke collar. The doctor looked fresh. No decomposition, no vile scent. Unlike the boy Bridget saw earlier, this doctor was

fresh off his deathbed and unafraid to interact. Not shy in the slightest. His wide eyes looked on at Bridget, daring her to approach him. *Come cut me down* they seemed to call to her. *Come to me, Bridget.*

Tony grabbed Bridget's arm, startling her.

"Oh God!" Bridget yelled as she faced him.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

Bridget grabbed his wrist and pointed him toward the back wall. "Look!" she yelled.

But nothing was there. No body, no noose, no doctor. Just the imposing red wall.

"No..." the uneasy Bridget muttered.

Tony grabbed her shoulder, trying to soothe her. "Hey, look, it's nothing," he said, doing his best to hide his own fears and worries. Nevermind, how crazy Bridget sounded. "There's nothing there, Bridget."

"No, I saw something!" Bridget replied. Her eyes stayed glued to that spot where she knew she saw the doctor. At this moment, she realized how flawless the red paint job was. None of it was peeling, none of it splotchy. It was a pristine red indeed.

"Hey, we're alright," Tony reassured her.

Bridget faced him, her confidence convincing and creepy. "But I saw him," she stated. "I saw a body!"

Creeped the fuck out, Tony looked up at the lights. Their continuous hums resembled a clinical chorus. "I don't know, Bridget."

"I know I saw someone there, Tony!" Bridget continued.

Tony began to pull Bridget toward the staircase. "Maybe you did," he said. His performance as the brave hero was starting to crack. "Let's just get the fuck outta here!"

CHAPTER 5

Regardless of the Christy house's ominous reputation, the house itself was a huge and lovely residence full of many bedrooms. So many rooms that Amanda thankfully didn't have to force an unlucky visitor to stay in Amy or Michael's old bedrooms.

Linda stayed in a small guest room upstairs. There wasn't much furniture as it had likely been unused over the past few decades. But it was quite cozy regardless. Cozy and lifeless. A staple of the Christy home.

Kevin helped Linda unpack inside. Not an easy task considering the overflow of suitcases and bags she brought. Her luggage practically swallowed the room.

Straining, Kevin struggled to place a crammed carry-on onto the bed. He gave up and threw it on the mattress. The bag hit the bed hard like a bag of rocks, nearly taking down the entire bed with it.

Meanwhile, Linda did the "easy" part. She hung her clothes in the closet, populating the once-barren space with a colorful array of outfits.

"You sure you don't mind?" Linda asked, too preoccupied to even face Kevin.

Sweating, Kevin breathed heavy as he opened the carry-on. "No, I'm fine," he responded in between breaths. He stopped and took off his suit jacket. He had a tight shirt on underneath, definitely to show off those guns.

"Well, I do appreciate it," Linda said. She turned and stole an admiring glance at Kevin placing his jacket on a small counter. He stayed in shape. Nice muscles and ass.

Oblivious of Linda's ogling, Kevin looked back through her carry-on. "No, it's no problem," he said. He pushed aside several bottles of wine. A few heavy books too. Linda was quite eclectic. Kevin couldn't help but notice that every book discussed her two favorite topics: true crime or the paranormal.

Linda hung her last shirt on a hanger. The closet was now nearly full. Linda stared at all the clothes, always proud of her quirky style.

Kevin picked up and inspected a Creepy Georgia book. True Hauntings Are On Our Mind was the book's subtitle. "No problem at all," Kevin commented as he placed the book on the bed. "My customers always come first."

Smirking, Linda faced him. "Oh, stop it!" she said in the tone of a flirty teenager.

"I'm always pleasing my customers, Ms. Kane," Kevin said as he got toward the end of the bag. "Especially in the bedroom," he muttered to himself.

Linda stepped up behind him. "You're too kind," she said sarcastically. Her infatuated eyes ran up and down Kevin's toned body. He had no idea she was behind him, checking him out with overzealous glee. "Far too kind, Mr. Riley..."

"Please," Kevin began. "Call me Kevin." Scouring the bag, Kevin spotted a strange item wrapped in newspaper, buried in the very back of the carry-on.

"Okay, *Kevin*." Linda watched him reach in and start to undo the newspaper. A large silver figurine lurked inside. The silver had rusted with age. The figure's twisted arms and legs made it resemble a contorted human.

"Whoa!" the fascinated Kevin exclaimed. He picked it up for closer examination.

Linda leaned in closer toward Kevin's ear. "You can call me Linda," she said softly.

Startled, Kevin whirled around to face the smiling Linda. "Oh, hey." With salesman instinct, he put on a beaming smile. "Ms. Kane, I mean Linda," he instantly corrected himself. "I didn't see you there."

Linda played off the awkward encounter, toying with Kevin even further. "It's okay." She motioned toward the figurine he still held in his hand. "We got that in New Orleans," she said matter-of-factly.

"Interesting," Kevin responded. He stared at the figure intently. It seemed to have an otherworldly grip on him, some kind of pull. Like he was holding an ancient relic in his bare hands. He couldn't let go even if he wanted to.

"Yeah," said Linda as she rubbed her hand along the rugged figurine. She too compelled by its simple yet uncanny design.

Forcing himself to take his eyes off the object, Kevin faced Linda. "I'm guessing this is one of those 'collectibles' y'all were talking about?"

"Oh yes," Linda replied. She lowered her hand and looked right at Kevin, her eyes drawing him in more than the figurine. "This is supposed to guard the owner from all evil spirits, bad fortune. That sort of thing."

"Aw, I see." Kevin looked back at the figurine. Somehow its metal arms and legs seemed even longer. It felt bigger. Heavier.

"Yep, Bridget even gave me the okay on it," Linda said with a smile. "So you know it's legit." She looked closer at the figurine, Linda the proud owner. "God knows, she calls out enough of them. It's practically a miracle when we strike gold."

"Better safe than sorry," Kevin noted.

"Exactly." Concentrating, Linda wiped a small stain off the figurine. Not that it mattered much amongst all the rust. However, Linda was quite protective over her collectibles. "I guess he's worked out pretty well so far."

Kevin gave her a baffled look. "What do you mean?" He pointed at the figure. "This?"

Linda flashed him a grin. "Well, I'm still here, aren't I?" she said, not missing a beat.

"No doubt." Kevin ran his hand down the figurine, but seemed uncomfortable doing so. Either scared he'd break it or was tarnishing the figure's odd power just by using his mortal touch. "How old is it anyway?"

"Almost a hundred years from what I understand."

"Wow..."

Linda held her hand out toward Kevin, wanting to hold the figure herself. "Let me see it." Reluctant, he relinquished the it to her. Nonetheless, he relished his final touches.

"Yeah, I was told a bluesman made it during the height of the Axeman hysteria," Linda said.

Kevin stared down at his fingertips, hoping the mystique of the figurine was somehow glued to his flesh. "Axeman?"

"Yes, it was a serial killer in New Orleans around 1920 or so." She lifted the figurine and stared right into it. "The police never caught him or her."

"Oh really?" Kevin asked.

"Yeah. They even sent newspapers letters and all that jazz. They were very violent and taunting. They even said that on a certain night when they were supposed to strike again, they'd spare anyone who played jazz music as loud as possible. Boy, they say New Orleans was never as loud as it was that night. The whole city must've been one big night club. Then again, it always is I guess." On the silver figurine, Linda's enthralled reflection looked right back at her. "Anyway, the fellow who made this and his family survived the attacks. And ever since then, his family's cherished it. They believed it was the reason why they weren't killed, that it protected them."

An intrigued Kevin watched her run a gentle hand along the figurine's arm.

"They say all the evil of that era, all of that hysteria," Linda continued.. "It still lives in our little friend here." She looked on at what could only be described as the figurine's face. Its face about as warped as the rest of it. "That its power's so strong that it wards off all the other bad souls." Linda's voice retained the creepy intensity of a storyteller around a campfire. "It protects its owners at all costs."

An eerie silence settled in the bedroom. Both Kevin and Linda stared on at the figurine, neither one of them saying a word. The figure was at the center of their full and undivided attention.

Linda rubbed the object fondly. Breaking the quiet tension, she smiled at Kevin. "I guess it's kinda like having the biggest bully on your side."

"I can see that."

With the slow reluctance of a kid being forced to put down the hottest toy at the department store, Linda began to lower the figurine. "It feels a little stronger than usual," she said, trying to pass off the line as a joke.

"What happened to the last owner?" Kevin asked out of curiosity.

Still clinging to the mysterious item, Linda looked right at him.

"I mean the people you bought it from," Kevin said. "What happened to them?"

"He was desperate for the money, I'm afraid," Linda responded. Compelled, she looked back at the figurine, her gaze held by it. "He practically gave it away."

"Oh, really?"

"It definitely wasn't enough. Not after what happened to him."

"Oh..." Kevin looked at the figure. Rather than allured, he'd become more intimidated by it. He cracked a nervous smile. "But nothing too bad happened, right?" he asked, some hope in his voice.

"A couple of gangsters decapitated him the very next day," Linda responded, her eyes still glued to the figure rather than on Kevin.

Queasy, Kevin went white as a sheet. Too horrified to even speak.

Linda looked at him. "I read it in the newspaper," she said dryly.

"Right," Kevin responded, still plagued by unease.

Linda held up the figurine as she walked toward the side of the bed. "Like I said about the man we bought it from," she began. With a careful touch, she placed the figure on her nightstand. It stood there all alone. A victorious God. "We didn't pay him enough."

CHAPTER 6

Tony and Bridget weren't quite done yet. Now holding the infrared camcorder, Bridget led the pair down the long downstairs hallway, past Amanda's cherished plants. Bridget brushed past a flower's dangling vine, its rough touch scaring her.

She looked over and realized it was just a plant. But somehow they looked bigger, Bridget thought. Like they'd grown more during her and Tony's trip down into the basement.

Nervous, Bridget glanced up at the security camera. As if on cue, it was pointed right at her. Bridget felt something else was behind the lens... someone else within the machine surveying and stalking them. She felt someone grab her arm with a gentle touch, not like a rugged plant.

"You okay?" the concerned Tony asked her.

Bridget nodded. "Yeah." She pointed toward the doorway that led into the living room. "Let's check out the living room then go outside."

"Great," Tony said unenthusiastically as he clinched the infrared thermometer in his grasp.

"You know the drill."

"And then we're done?" Tony asked, unable to hide his pleading tone.

Bridget was about to tell him the 'yes' he wanted to hear when a frenzied voice erupted from the back of the hall. "Wait!"

Bridget and Tony whirled around to see Amanda stop right behind them. She was wearing different clothes from earlier: just a t-shirt and jeans. Much less formal. Make-up now covered up all her vicious scars and bruises.

Amanda's beaming smile captured what Bridget would consider a kind of uncontainable excitement. The creepy kind.

"Y'all mind if I tag along?" Amanda asked with the enthusiasm of a younger sibling.

Hesitant, Bridget and Tony looked at one another. "Uh, sure, I guess," Bridget relented.

"Oh, thank you so much! I've always wanted to see how this stuff works."

"Right," Bridget replied.

Chuckling, Amanda pointed at Bridget. "I know what you're thinking. The paranormal shows!"

In awkward silence, Tony gave Bridget a weird look as Bridget didn't say anything. Amanda's emphatic chuckles echoed through the hallway.

"Oh boy," Amanda said. She clapped her hands together, replacing the burgeoning void left by her faded laughter. "But for real, I'm so excited about this."

Bridget couldn't tell if Amanda was on drugs, off her meds, or just extremely social awkward. Hell, maybe all three. "No, I understand," Bridget said, keeping her lethargic coolness in check. "Feel free to join."

Surprised by Bridget's response, Tony leaned in closer toward her. "You sure about that?" he whispered.

Bridget noticed how the intrigued Amanda kept staring at the infrared camera and thermometer with awe.

"It's fine," Bridget muttered to Tony. "Come on," she told Amanda. Bridget held up the camera and turned toward the front of the hallway.

Tony was left in dismal dismay as Amanda stepped past him.

"Boy, I can tell y'all take this serious!" Amanda said with a grin.

Through the infrared camcorder, Bridget looked around the hallway but saw nothing unusual. "And why wouldn't we," she replied with the dry wit of an (over)confident professor. She lowered the camera and faced the others. "After all, this is only the preliminary stuff."

Dissatisfied, Tony looked away. His genuine grumble wasn't very discreet.

"We're just getting started," Bridget continued.

"Oh, I believe you," Amanda commented. "Take all the time you need."

"Well, thank you—" Bridget started.

Amanda grabbed Bridget's wrist in a soft yet tight grip. "This is important for all of us, Bridget."

Bridget smiled awkwardly. Were we really on a first-name basis now, she wondered.

Tony looked up toward the security camera. "Yeah, well, I hope we can bust this stupid shit by tomorrow."

Annoyed by his disrespect, Bridget flashed him a glare.

Tony recognized her glower immediately. "What?"

"Oh, that ain't happening," Amanda said with a grin. "We might get an answer by tomorrow, but it'll be the truth."

"Which truth?" Bridget asked, her confrontational side sneaking out again. "Your version?"

"No," Amanda said, her never leaving her lips even as her toe shifted to sternness rather than friendliness. "The secrets of this house are the only truth."

The off-setting of Amanda's wide grin with her cryptic words unnerved both Bridget and Tony. "Well, we'll certainly work on finding the truth," Bridget stated. "Whatever that may be." She looked over at Tony. "Just expect to hear us staggering around all night," she said to Amanda.

"All night?" Tony asked incredulously.

Bridget wasn't even gonna respond to that one.

"Oh, that's fine," Amanda said with a chuckle. "Do whatever's necessary."

Eager to move on from their chat, Bridget pulled Tony toward the living room. "Come on, tough guy."

"The house is yours for the weekend, Bridget," Amanda said as she followed them.

Trying to stay focused, Bridget motioned toward Tony's thermometer. "You got anything yet?" she asked him.

Moving calm and slow, Amanda's methodical footsteps trailed behind the pair.

Tony checked his thermometer. Just room temperature. Nothing had changed so far. "Nope."

"Not even in the basement?" Bridget asked.

"Naw, I don't think so," responded Tony.

"Shit..." They got closer to the living room. Out of the corner of her eye, Bridget saw the all-too-friendly Amanda just mere inches behind her. Amanda had snuck up closer to them with such extreme stealth and ease.

Right before Amanda could grab Bridget's arm, Bridget stopped and confronted her. "Hey," Bridget said awkwardly.

"Oh, I'm sorry I wasn't trying to interrupt," Amanda said. She glanced over at Tony who stood a few feet away.

He was back in bodyguard mode, watching Bridget and Amanda like a hawk.

"It's fine," Bridget began. "Just stay with us, it's cool."

Amanda faced her. "No. It's just something kept bothering me."

Belying Amanda's friendly expression, Bridget thought Amanda's eyes were wired and restless. They looked to be the one failed aspect on an otherwise convincing portrait of normality. "Well, what is it?" Bridget asked, confused.

"I've just been meaning to ask," Amanda started. She hesitated on how to ask her question. "But why didn't the Christys leave?"

Curious for the answer as well, Tony looked over at Bridget. Bridget stayed quiet, not sure why Amanda was asking such a question at this particular time.

"It's something I keep wondering about," Amanda went on.

Bridget eyed Amanda suspiciously. Amanda had a morbid curiosity, but why wouldn't she, Bridget thought. This woman lost her entire family in this house for Christ's sakes. "What do you mean exactly?" Bridget asked.

Amanda struggled to explain. "Well, you mentioned that all the others left as soon as they started hearing the noises and all."

"Right..." Bridget said.

"Well, I was just wondering why they didn't do the same thing. It just doesn't make sense if you ask me."

"She's got a good point," Tony interjected.

Bridget just stared at Amanda. What role was Amanda playing now, Bridget wondered. The victim, the saleswoman, or now the detective? "From what I understand, Mr. Christy got a real good deal," Bridget finally gave in. "I don't think he could really afford to just up and leave the same house he'd emptied his life savings on."

Tony gave her a look of disbelief. "That's the reason? His ass shouldn't have bought a haunted house in the first place."

"Well, that was what they suspected," Bridget responded. Soft footsteps drew Bridget's attention. Quick and effortless footsteps coming from the living room. Bridget turned and looked toward the doorway that led into the living room.

"Well, that's one Hell of an excuse," Tony said.

"The house has one Hell of a history," Bridget replied. Raising her camcorder, she ventured toward the living room, tracking down where she heard the footsteps.

"Yeah, no shit," Tony scoffed.

Bridget stopped right outside the living room. Doing her best to stay quiet, she peered inside through the camcorder, searching for a sign of life in the unoccupied room.

"They were probably just scared," Amanda told Tony. "I can understand."

In the living room, Bridget didn't see anything. Nothing out of the ordinary through the camera's lens. Despite the infrared's trippier aesthetic, the living room was just as bland and uninhabited as always. Where'd the footsteps come from, she wondered.

Just realizing Bridget was gone and he was all alone with Amanda, Tony looked toward the living room. "Hey, Bridget!" he yelled toward her.

He got nothing back. Bridget was too busy searching the living room to reply.

Amanda grinned at Tony, her unsettling smile seeming to challenge him. "What's the matter?" she asked. "You scared?"

Defensive, Tony took a step back. "No!" he said emphatically. "I just got a weird feeling, it doesn't mean it's haunted."

Amanda groaned. "Come on," she said in disapproval. "Seriously?"

Trying to tune them out, Bridget put the camera back to her eye as she continued gazing around the living room, listening intently for anything. Something had to be in here, she thought. She was eccentric, but not crazy. She heard something!

And then there it was again. Bridget heard a scurry of footsteps, this time accompanied by a child-like voice. Startled, Bridget pressed the camera closer to her eye and scanned the room, hoping for a quick glimpse or sighting of anything. Any form of phenomena.

In the hallway, Tony and Amanda continued bickering. "You've seen the videos!" Amanda pleaded. "How could I be lying?"

Tony didn't respond. He didn't have a real solid answer, but there wasn't much point arguing with Amanda anyway.

Taking a few more restless steps through the living room, Bridget continued searching for the source of the footsteps. The noises had stopped, and Bridget had seen nothing. "Come on," she muttered to herself.

A little girl's innocent voice drifted toward Bridget's alert ears. "In here," the voice said.

Excited, Bridget stopped dead in her tracks and looked at every corner of the room. But she stood alone.

"Closer," the whisper said.

Haunted by the voice's pretty incantation, Bridget lowered the camera. Through her natural vision, she evaluated the room, but it looked the same. There was just the furniture, the mirror, and the flatscreen. Bridget stared on at her reflection in the mirror. She had the fear of a scientist who just made a shocking yet mysterious discovery. "Where are you?" Bridget said softly.

"Come closer," the little girl whispered, just a little louder this time.

Bridget tracked the voice to a certain corner of the room. Even though Bridget saw no one there, there was no mistake the voice was coming from here. Right near the corner wall.

"Please," the voice beckoned, sounding more intimate than ever. "Bridget..."

The voice sounded distressed. As if the little girl was trying to keep her voice quiet for a reason, Bridget thought.

"Bridget, I'm here..."

Panicking, Bridget put the camera back to her eye and looked right at the corner wall. She gasped in fright. "Oh God..."

Through the lens, Bridget saw her: a little girl. Much like the mysterious boy, the girl stood in front of the wall, her innocent beauty reduced to a morbid cadaver. Deep cuts ran along her face, forever marring the child's radiant face. Blood stains scattered throughout her school clothes.

The little girl stared right at Bridget, her wounded eyes captivating Bridget's soul. The girl's harsh glare offered no solace. All the while, her mouth never once moved. Rather, her mind seemed to communicate with Bridget. "Come here," the girl's haunting voice said to Bridget without her busted lips ever moving.

Frozen in fear, Bridget remained stuck in place. Her eye glued to the camera. Even though Bridget had experienced her share of paranormal encounters, nothing could compare to this unsettling sight. A blasphemous sight of a desecrated dead child.

With a hand full of chipped and grimy fingernails, the little girl waved Bridget over. Her voice ran through Bridget's head, repeating Bridget's name over and over again in a hushed chant.

Bridget lowered the camera. The girl's voice stopped. Bridget no longer even saw the little girl there. "No..."

Uneasy, Bridget looked back toward the downstairs hallway. Neither Tony or Amanda paid her or the little girl any attention.

Instead, Tony endured a melodramatic soliloquy from Amanda. Emotional, she wrapped her arms around Tony, desperate for reassurance.

"He said we were demons," Amanda stated. "He thought our own children were just monsters!"

Trying to reassure Amanda, Tony patted her on the back. He made for a better bodyguard than therapist. "Shit, that's crazy," he said.

"That's all he kept saying," Amanda went on. "He said they were demons." She looked right into Tony's uneasy eyes. "And they needed to be punished!"

Horror conquered Tony's face as Amanda lunged into his arms for an ambush of a hug.

"He said we all needed to," Amanda said, horrified by the memories.

In the living room, Bridget watched Tony struggle to comfort Amanda. Good luck with that trainwreck, Bridget thought.

"Bridget, come here," the little girl's voice pleaded.

The voice drew Bridget's attention back toward the corner wall. But no one was there. "Shit," Bridget said.

"It's here," the little girl's voice drifted toward Bridget.

Anxious, Bridget glanced down at her camera before looking back at the wall.

"I can show you," the girl's voice continued.

It took Bridget a moment to gather up her internal strength. She finally looked through the camera, fully expecting what was in store.

There the little girl was in all her undead glory. She stood in the same spot, looking on at Bridget with detached eyes.

"Come here," her voice beckoned Bridget. "Bridget, please..." The words were drawn out weakly like they were entering from another realm or dream. Or from a nightmare. Again, the little girl's mouth never moved.

Concerned, Bridget rushed toward the little girl. "I'm coming!" she screamed.

Just as Bridget got a few feet away from her, the little girl turned and pointed at the wall behind her. "Look," the girl's voice whispered.

Bridget came to a confused stop and looked toward the wall. "What?" she muttered.

"Look, Bridget," the girl stated.

Horror washed over Bridget's face. Through the infrared camera, she looked on at a horrifying sight.

The wall's blandness had been replaced by a grotesque smorgasbord of blood. Red paint consuming a bland canvas, gallons of blood oozed down the wall's surface. The blood was thick and voluminous. It was fresh.

While the crimson was overwhelming, parts of the wall's white paint job could still be seen. Splotches that hadn't been tainted by the blood.

Scared, Bridget lowered her camera and staggered back. "Oh God!" she shouted aloud.

Her voice alarmed Tony and Amanda. "Shit!" Tony exclaimed as he took off for the room. Amanda struggled to keep up with him.

"Wait," Amanda said.

"Bridget!" Tony yelled.

Unresponsive to them, Bridget just stared at the wall in a state of shock. The now-plain white wall confronted her with the blankness of an evaporated mirage. Nothing and no one was there. No little girl. No blood.

Where'd it all go, Bridget wondered. Was she losing her mind after all? Had her notions of Amanda being full of shit been this far off? Maybe the Christy house really could affect the mind.

"No," Bridget muttered as Tony and Amanda stopped next to her. "I saw her, I just saw her!"

Supportive, Tony grabbed her by the shoulders. "Bridget, who?" he asked.

Panicking, Bridget pointed her camera toward the wall. "She was right there!"

Amanda and Tony looked toward the plain white wall.

"It was a little girl!" the defensive Bridget pleaded. "I saw her. She was standing right there."

Bridget could feel their awkward, questioning looks. Now Amanda was the one skeptical of Bridget's claims, Bridget thought in disgust..

"I'm serious!" Bridget said, doing her best to stay calm as she realized how hysterical she must sound. She held up the camera. "I saw her through this! And the wall, it was covered in blood!"

"Hey, it's okay," Tony said. His tone reminded Bridget of a therapist comforting a gun-waving inmate.

"But I did..." Bridget said.

"I know," Amanda commented sternly.

Ready to go off, Bridget looked over at Amanda. But Amanda's expression wasn't one of "I-told-you-so" bemusement. Instead, she seemed sympathetic toward Bridget's current panic.

"I've seen her too," Amanda said.

Stepping away from Bridget, Tony held his hands out as he gave both women a weird look. "Yo, what the Hell are y'all talking about?" he asked.

Bridget saw the thermometer in his hand. Excitement surging through her, she pointed toward the thermostat. "Look!"

At her demand, Amanda and Tony looked at the thermometer. "Oh shit!" Tony exclaimed.

In a slow and steady fall, the temperature dropped a full ten degrees lower than where it was.

Amanda stared at the thermostat, stunned by the sight. Like her "welcome to reality" moment when it came to the outright scariness of those paranormal shows.

"It's a chill spot," Bridget said, undeterred. She turned and stepped toward the wall, hope and excitement replacing her defensive anger. "I think she's still with us."

Simultaneously fascinated but nervous, Amanda watched Bridget trace her hand along the wall.

"I saw her right here," Bridget went on. "Right in front of the wall."

"Look, you don't know-" Tony began.

Confronting Tony and Amanda, Bridget held up the camera. "I saw her and the blood on camera! That's why it's a chill spot!"

Not wanting any part of this, Tony handed her the thermometer. "Look, here," he started.

Bridget awkwardly took the thermostat. Now holding both the camera and thermometer, Bridget really did look the part of professional paranormal investigator.

"You take it," Tony finished.

Bridget turned her attention back to the wall. She got ready to put the thermostat right up to it. The thermometer remained stuck at a steady sixty-five degrees.

"Well, what happened there?" Amanda asked with trepidation. "Why that one spot?"

With the incessant drive of a mad scientist, Bridget activated the thermometer's laser and pointed it right at the wall. "Something must've happened here," Bridget said. She moved the thermostat in closer, mere inches away from the white surface.

The numbers on the thermometer rapidly changed right before Bridget's amazed eyes. It shot all the way down to fifty-five degrees. "Holy shit!" Bridget said.

"Why's it dropping like that?" Amanda asked. "It's so fast!"

Turning, Bridget faced them. "I thin it's coming from inside the wall," she said in excitement. "She's close!"

"The girl?" Amanda asked.

"Yes!" Bridget exclaimed, showing more emotion now than she had in the previous months combined. "Her presence is right here." She waved the thermostat in front of Tony and Amanda. "It has something to do with this wall. This room."

"This house," Amanda noted.

Before Bridget could answer, a harsh voice swept through the room, giving her chills.

"She did it," the voice whispered into Bridget's ear. "It's her..."

Terrified, Bridget looked around, expecting to see a ghostly adult standing nearby. But there was nothing. Just Amanda, Tony, and that fucking boring room in this bland fucking house. That wasn't the little girl's voice she heard. In fact, Bridget thought it couldn't have come from any child at all. This was the voice of a man. An unsettled man with a voice of anguish. Bridget didn't like it. Unease settled under her skin.

Tony reached toward Bridget. "Hey, you okay?"

"She did this," the man's cries continued, his voice now louder and more intense. Unlike the children, he wasn't keeping to a whisper.

Avoiding Tony's touch, Bridget took a step back. The voice haunted her and ravaged her mind. Why was she the only one to hear this, Bridget wondered.

"She did this!" the man's voice yelled.

Bridget confronted Tony and Amanda. "Don't you hear him!"

"No," Tony replied as Amanda gave Bridget an uncertain look.

"It's her!" the man's voice seemed to scream right into Bridget's skull. "Don't believe her!"

"Bridget-" Tony began.

Stepping away from Tony and Amanda, Bridget put the camera to her eye.

Before she could search the room, a concerned yet familiar voice pierced through the room: "What happened?"

Startled, Bridget and the others turned to see Linda and Kevin rushing down the stairs. "What's wrong?" Linda continued.

"We heard some screaming," Kevin chimed in as they stopped near the others.

The man's voice targeted Bridget once more: "It's inside her!"

Bridget turned and looked behind her. Right toward the wall. Still, no one was there.

Linda noticed Bridget's increasing unease. "Bridget," she said.

Her ears still ringing, Bridget stepped right up to the wall. Tuning everyone else out, Bridget strained to listen for more. When would the frightening voice strike again?

"I don't know what's going on," Tony said to Linda. "We got a cool spot or some shit."

"Oh my God, really!" Linda exclaimed with wide-eyed excitement.

Amanda walked over toward Bridget, approaching her with curiosity rather than concern.

"That's unbelievable!" Linda continued.

"See, I told you," the smug Kevin said to her.

"Yeah, shit dropped like twenty degrees," Tony told them.

Linda's eyes beamed in a way that belied her age. "My goodness! That's unbelievable."

Still trying to hear the man, Bridget felt someone grab her shoulder, scaring the shit out of her.

"Bridget," Amanda said.

Bridget whirled around to see Amanda standing right behind her. "Hey-" Bridget awkwardly began.

Then the man's voice shattered through Bridget's mind, stopping her mid-speak. "It's all evil!" he yelled with the shrill tenacity of a powerful buzzsaw.

Cringing, Bridget grabbed at her temple.

"What's wrong-" Amanda started to ask.

Matching the voice's intensity, the living room mirror shattered on its own, busting into a million pieces.

Horrified, everyone jumped back as shards and clouds of dust flew out everywhere. Decades old debris.

"Oh God!" Kevin yelled.

"It's in her!" the voice screamed onto Bridget.

Covering her ears, Bridget turned away.

With the fury of a missile, a long glass shard shot out from the mirror's jagged edges. Hurling straight toward the crowd.

Concerned, Amanda leaned in toward Bridget. "Bridget!" she said.

Bridget looked up real quick and saw the shard heading straight toward Amanda! It was a fragile yet sharp bullet.

"Look out!" Bridget yelled.

With fractions of a second to spare, Bridget tackled Amanda to the ground, saving both of them from a grisly death.

They both turned around to see the glass shatter against the corner wall. Pieces of it stuck right into the wall, piercing through the blandness. Like the blood Bridget saw earlier, grimy dust off the glass smeared against the wall.

Bridget breathed heavy, adrenaline still surging through her veins. Amanda was too stunned to say anything.

Aside from the intermittent fall of the mirror's straggler remnants in a pitter-patter manner, The room was now deathly quiet. No screaming, no eerie voices. This is a nice break, Bridget thought to herself. Must be halftime.

The worried Linda and Tony ran up to them.

"Are you alright?" Linda asked.

"Yeah, we're fine," Bridget sputtered out in a weak voice.

"Oh Jesus," Kevin said with over-the-top concern as he approached them. He stole a glance back at the broken mirror. "Please, Lord, no liabilities," he muttered.

Tony helped Bridget and Amanda up on their feet. Bridget dusted herself off.

Loud sobbing distracted Bridget. She turned and saw Amanda shedding more tears than a bullied schoolchild.

"Oh God!" Amanda said through the tears and snot. "It's my fault..." Tears formed parallel rivers down her nervous face. "I shouldn't have bought anyone here. I shouldn't have ever invited y'all..." Avoiding eye contact, she broke down in her tumultuous emotions.

"It's okay, dear," Linda told her as she rubbed Amanda's back.

Kevin wrapped his arm around Amanda, replacing his cheesy salesman act with the sympathetic salesman routine. "It's alright, Amanda" he said in an emotional voice that would make even the worst soap actors cringe.

Seeing through Kevin's melodramatic theatrics, Tony made eye contact with Linda. She smirked at Tony's disapproving facial expression.

Bridget stared at Amanda. The emotional roller coaster that was Amanda Baker greatly fascinated Bridget almost as much as the paranormal occurrences that kept happening in this house. One minute, Amanda was a charismatic Southern belle, the next a weeping weakling.

"We're here," Kevin said to Amanda in a soothing tone. "You're safe." He broke his white knight act to flash Linda a I-told-you-this-place-was-haunted look.

Unamused, Linda just shook her head.

Tony saw Bridget stepping up toward the corner wall. She was still holding her camera and thermometer.

Intrigued, Bridget inspected the wall, staring at all the glass embedded into it. It almost looked like the mirror shards were for decoration, an arrangement of crystals.

Leaning down, Bridget picked up a large shard off the ground. Though the piece felt old and light, the edges were just as sharp as any vicious blade.

While Amanda's loud sobs blared through the room, Bridget stared at her reflection in the shard's glass. She looked at it long and hard. She was waiting to see the children she saw in the camera or to hear one of the voices that had been haunting her during this whole trip. But nothing came. Instead, it was just her and her weary expression. Her hair a mess from the fall, her eyes wide and restless, her face stressed beyond belief.

She looked up and saw Tony looking right at her. Tony's fear-riddled face practically begged Bridget to call this investigation off now.

Not giving in, Bridget tossed the glass to the ground and walked back toward the hallway.

Tony groaned in dismay.

An hour later, the group convened in Amanda's home office. The cramped and messy room reflected Amanda's 9-to-5 work-from-home grind. Compared to the rest of the house, at least the office had some character with the countless stacks of folders and scribbled notes.

Amanda sat at her impressive desktop computer, everyone else crowded around her. It was claustrophobic with this many people and this much disarray in such a tight space.

On the computer, Amanda re-played the security footage from the living room.

Everyone in the group stared at the screen, disturbed by the mirror shattering on its own and the flying glass shard hunting for Amanda.

As they watched the clip, Bridget listened intently for the man's voice. But she heard neither the man nor the little girl on the video's audio.

Right before the mirror exploded, Amanda could make out a small figure's reflection in the glass. It was quick and blurry, but unmistakable to Amanda: the little girl her and Bridget kept seeing. Just as unmistakable was the little girl's glare zeroed right in on Amanda in the video. No one else seemed to catch the image, and Amanda didn't want to bring it up. She just let the video play on.

Amanda then watched herself being saved at the last minute by Bridget. A heroic tackle that resulted in no deaths and just mere broken glass. "God..." Amanda said to herself with the frightening realization of just how close she came to her demise.

"You said you heard a voice?" Linda asked Bridget.

"Yeah, I guess," Bridget answered.

"I've heard it to," Amanda confessed. Anxious nerves getting the better of her, she faced Bridget. "The voice you heard. Was it a man?"

"Yeah," Bridget replied.

"God... he's still here," Amanda said, terrified. "He won't leave me." She looked toward the computer screen, both her body and mind full of unhealed wounds. "He never will..."

"Who?" Bridget asked, already fearing the answer.

Amanda never took her eyes off the screen. "John," she said quietly.

"But it could be the Christys," Linda stated.

"No," Amanda said as she moved a trembling hand against her face. "It's John, I know it is. I know his voice. I know he's still here in this house."

"But he could still be alive," Tony commented, hoping to comfort Amanda.

Amanda glared at him. "No, it's his spirit! He's in this house!" she yelled.

Intimidated, Tony leaned back away from the group. "Okay, my bad..."

"Don't you think I know my own husband's voice!" Amanda continued. "The way he yelled at us before... God, before he killed them!" She looked away and buried her face in her hands, distraught. "God..."

Everyone went quiet. The office felt more funeral home than a work station. Unlike the others, Bridget kept her emotions in check. She watched Amanda run her hands through her hair, still not sure what to make of Amanda's constant instability.

Like a showman crashing the final few seconds of a bravura performance, Kevin interrupted the silence by flashing a sneer at Bridget. "You still think she's a phony, huh? Just look at her."

"I never said that," Bridget responded.

"Bullshit!"

Upset, Bridget looked over at the computer screen, avoiding Kevin's confrontational eyes.

"You think she's trying to get herself killed over a hundred and fifty thousand dollars!"

"It's possible," Tony interjected.

"Tony..." Linda said in disapproval.

"What?" Tony responded.

Quiet, Amanda faced the computer and clicked back to a main menu full of her many camera screens. Each box showed what each security camera was filming. A puzzle of square screens.

Bridget noticed all the screens. She saw how Amanda scoured through each of them.

Kevin faced Linda. "Look, Linda, this place's certified haunted at this point. It's guaranteed!" He pointed toward the computer. "I'll even throw in the footage for free!"

Tony looked over at the computer, surprised by all the screens. "Damn, how many cameras you got?" he asked aloud.

Amanda never took her eyes off the screen. "Enough," she stated bluntly.

"If I throw in the home security system," Kevin said to Linda, back in bullshitter mode. "Well, now that might drive up the price a little."

Bridget glared at him. "Ugh, will you shut the fuck up!"

The offended Kevin just looked at her, pretending to be upset by her vulgarity. "Excuse me, Ms. Buechler."

At her desk, Amanda paused the living room video on when the mirror was about to burst.

Looking at the video, Tony noticed Bridget facing the corner wall.

"Just stop fucking with us about the house, alright," the annoyed Bridget told Kevin. "We've got all weekend to find more proof."

"Like you need more..." Kevin said snidely.

Tony grabbed Bridget's shoulder, calming her down. "Hey, you said you saw something else, right? Like a little girl or something."

"Yeah," Bridget replied. "But it was more than that."

The intrigued Linda stepped toward them. "What was it?"

Both Kevin and Amanda watched Bridget confront everyone. "I thought I saw blood," she said. "Fresh blood all over the wall."

Not emulating Amanda's theatrics, Bridget was visibly scared and uneasy even as she tried to hide it. Her combination of restrained professionalism and subtle fear made her all the more credible in the eyes of everyone else.

"I swear it was there," Bridget continued. She pointed toward the video, right toward the corner wall. "It was just blood all over that wall. It was everywhere."

The account sent the others into a hushed silence.

"It's where he attacked me," Amanda confessed, breaking the silence.

"What?" Bridget asked.

Everyone else looked at Amanda, shocked by her statement.

"It's where John attacked me," Amanda said with bitter rage. She looked at the others. "He grabbed me there and stabbed me and beat me. The bastard, he... he wouldn't stop...."

Struggling to go on, she turned and looked back at the video. Her eyes particularly focused on the corner wall. "It was right up against that wall."

She traced her finger along the screen, right over the wall. "The sick bitch threw me against it." She fought back tears. "And then he found the kids. He left me there to die while I heard them screaming and running away... he was gonna kill them... he went to go kill them...." She looked at everyone else once more. "They were trapped with that monster."

Sympathetic, Bridget maintained eye contact with Amanda. Through their differences, Bridget did realize they were now sharing a bond because of this house and its strange occurrences.

"And I couldn't do anything," Amanda continued, her voice trembling. "I couldn't save them..." With the pent-up anger of regret, she slammed her fist against the desk. "They didn't have a chance! Michael and Amy didn't have a chance with him... I left them alone!" She looked down at the keyboard, her body quiet and still like a melancholy statue.

No one tried to intervene. No one until Kevin that is.

"Amanda," Kevin said as he cautiously reached toward her.

Amanda looked up at them all with abrupt sharpness. "The blood on that wall," she started. Her eyes locked in on the disturbed Bridget. "That was my blood you saw on there, Bridget."

CHAPTER 7

Over the next few hours, the excitement of the mirror and bloody wall had died down. The group had split up, not to do work, but to have their own privacy inside the Christy house.

Generally, this was when Bridget did her own investigating while Linda and Tony indulged in more leisurely activities. Not even they could keep with Bridget's never-ending drive into the paranormal.

In her guest room, Linda sat in bed like a teenager seeking escape from the stiff confines of school and parents. Unlike those teens though, at least Linda was allowed a bottle of wine. A very expensive brand to say the least. She held it in one hand, the top open and welcoming her next sip at her convenience.

Linda's cell phone laid out on the nightstand, right next to the bizarre figurine. Serene New Age music played on her phone, giving Linda's drinking session a meditative feel. The soothing music egging her on, Linda took another casual sip of the delicious booze.

Linda then looked down at all the articles and papers lying out in front of her. All of them from her personal Christy house file. Linda grabbed one of the articles.

In true exploitative fashion, this article covered the recent mystery surrounding the Baker family. "Father believed to be possessed by the house!" "It's Amityville all over again!" "Horror mother grieving over Christy house murders" "Manhunt for missing father and children still on" "John Baker suspected of murdering his own children"

But it wasn't the lurid sentences that caught Linda's eyes. Instead, her fascinated gaze concentrated on the article's photo of John with Michael and Amy. It was a lovely photo taken in the Christy house's very front yard. In Amanda's garden. Hell, the garden still looked good even back then. At least, the paper had done a good job of not choosing the most unflattering Baker family picture.

The juxtaposition of the picture of the attractive family with the disturbing details of what happened to them could only make Linda shake her head. She took another sip. The craving for booze a reflex against the grotesque article.

A light rap against the bedroom door distracted Linda. She leaned upright as she did a half-ass job of covering up the wine bottle with a blanket. "Uh, come in," she said.

"It's just me," Kevin said from the other side.

"Oh, okay."

Kevin opened the door and took a step inside, keeping his hands behind his back. "Hey there."

"Hi."

Noticing all the articles lying on the bed, Kevin cracked a smile. "I see you're still doing your research."

Linda smirked. "Just going over a few things."

Kevin shut the bedroom door, all the while keeping a hand behind his back. "I was thinking maybe with the downtime, maybe we could discuss the sale," he said with a not-so-subtle seductiveness. This guy was slick.

Smiling, Linda leaned in closer on the bed, crushing the articles beneath her hands and feet. "Hmm, why not?" she said with a not-so-subtle drunken seductiveness.

Kevin pointed toward the bottle of wine. "You wanna share?"

Chuckling, Linda looked toward the bottle. She had inadvertently knocked the blanket away, revealing the bottle. "With you," she said as she faced Kevin. "Why not?"

Pleased, Kevin revealed another bottle that he had hidden behind his back the whole time. "I brought some reserves just in case," he said with a flashy smile.

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Evening had now set in outside the Christy home. Still hot and humid, the sun beat down upon the scene, scorching everything in sight.

In the lavish garden, Amanda and Bridget worked on their separate passions. Amanda tended to the flowers. Her outfit consisted of gloves, a hat, and a large apron. All of it looked to be straight out of a catalog for a gardening magazine.

Meanwhile, Bridget stood nearby and looked around the yard, simultaneously getting a feel for the property while also being on the lookout for any more weird sightings or noises. An unlit cigarette dangled out of Bridget's mouth. Old bad habits died hard for her.

Using the long-handled spade, the sweating Amanda filled up a small hole.

"That's what he said?" Bridget asked as she glanced over at Amanda.

With gentle precision, Amanda smoothed out the dirt with the spade. "Yes." She looked up at Bridget. "He just kept saying we were possessed. That ever since we moved in, we'd all changed. We weren't his real family anymore. God... he just. He just really lost it."

Creeped out by the reply, Bridget looked off toward the house's open front gate as she pretended to take a drag off the cig. It helped relieve her anxiety just a little. That's what the therapist(s) told her at least.

"That's all he kept telling us," Amanda continued. Reflective, she looked down at the soil. "He said it all the damn time, always accusing us. Hell, I began to wonder if maybe his crazyass was right."

Distracted, Bridget didn't respond. She wasn't just distracted, but too scared. She couldn't guarantee it, but she was pretty certain a child stood right in front of the gate. The little boy again.

In broad daylight, he looked even more terrifying, his blood and vicious wounds even more clear. He looked on at Bridget with a helpless expression etched upon his face.

Amanda didn't see him. She was too busy caught up in her own traumatic memories. "He told me we were doomed to Hell," she stated.

Bridget stared at the boy, fear in her eyes.

Then a new voice drifted into Bridget's conscious. A child's voice.

"Help us," the boy's voice pleaded to Bridget in a most chilling whisper. His voice was timid and vulnerable.

With subtle panic, Bridget put a hand over her eyes, trying to see the little boy through the intense sunlight.

Still staring at the ground, Amanda continued thinking back on her troubled past. "He said it was where we all belonged," she continued. "Even the kids."

Bridget squinted to see the boy more clearly.

"That night, when he tried killing us," Amanda said.

The sunlight caused Bridget to blink several times. And that was all it took. Just like that, the boy was gone. Vanished without a trace. His blood, his voice, none of it was left. By this point, Bridget wasn't too surprised by the abrupt exit, so she wasn't worried. She knew they'd come back.

"He said that was the only way he could save us," Amanda recounted. Her voice trembled. "The only way was if he took us out of this life..."

Nervous, Bridget put the cig back to her lips.

"This world..." Amanda continued.

As Amanda's voice died off, Bridget faced her. "Do you really think he believed all that shit?" Bridget asked.

"I know he did." Fueled by anger, Amanda stuck the long-handled spade straight into the soft soil.

"But how?" Bridget asked, suspicious. "Maybe it was all just an excuse for him."

Not answering, Amanda stood and brushed the dirt off her clothes.

Wanting Amanda to hear her out, Bridget stepped toward Amanda. "Maybe it wasn't the house," Bridget continued.

Amanda faced Bridget. "No. It was. This wasn't the first time he'd said these things."

"What do you mean?"

"I'd heard him talking about us being demons and shit long before he went fucking crazy!" Amanda said. She hesitated, struggling to go on. Like a mental patient trying to explain their issues, her unease a combination of frustration and pain.

Bridget took the cig out of her mouth for another fake drag. It wasn't very effective at calming Bridget. She knew the potential dark depths this conversation was headed.

"It was just this mumbling at first," Amanda finally released. "But it wasn't like John, it didn't sound like him at all."

"When'd this start to happen?"

"As soon as we moved in!" Amanda yelled in panic. "I mean literally the first few nights we were here." She looked away, her body trembling. "I don't even know if he knew what was happening. What he was saying..." She faced Bridget. "Hell, he'd mostly would say it in his sleep too. Like... like it wasn't even him laying there."

Bridget did her best to hide how much the recollection creeped her out. She didn't do a good job. "What'd he say?" she asked in a nervous tone.

"Like I said, he was always talking about demons and stuff. That me and the kids were evil, that we were possessed." Amanda leaned in closer toward Bridget. "He'd say their names in his sleep! He'd whisper Amy and Michael's names constantly, and I know it sounds crazy, but I know how John sounds! I know his voice, and it wasn't him, Bridget! It was somebody else!"

"God... are you sure-" Bridget began.

"I bet it's the same voice you heard," Amanda interrupted. "That's what John became, that's what made him go crazy!" Breathing heavy, she looked to be hyperventilating. "That's the voice that took him! It took John over!" Losing her voice, she staggered backward.

"Amanda." Bridget snatched Amanda's shoulder, keeping her from falling. She'd saved Amanda yet again.

"It just kept getting worse," Amanda said weakly. "He wasn't the same..." Amanda looked down at her garden, focusing on the protruding spade rather than looking into Bridget's eyes. "He never was..."

"Did you ever try talking to him? Going to him about what you'd seen or how he was acting."

"No," Amanda began. "I couldn't." She faced Bridget. "I was too scared. I didn't know what to do." She paused in reflection. "After awhile, I started to think maybe some of it was true. I started to believe him."

"What!" the shocked Bridget exclaimed.

"He was so convincing," Amanda went on, undeterred. Channeling a rambling preacher. "What if he was right! I mean it was all in the house. The evil in here, it got into him. What if it went into me and the kids..."

"That's crazy-"

Exploding in wild emotions, Amanda pulled away from Bridget. "But it was the house!" she yelled. "We know it was!"

"Amanda-"

"That's where it all started!" Amanda interrupted. Her eyes stayed on Bridget. "I heard the footsteps at night! And the voice, that awful voice... I heard it in John, and now I hear it everywhere! And I know you hear it too, Bridget! I know you do!"

Not replying, Bridget just stared at Amanda with the understanding of a weary psychiatrist. At this point, Bridget didn't know what or who to believe.

"We've got the videos," Amanda continued.

"I know."

"We've seen what this house can do." Amanda stepped in closer toward Bridget. Immense and intimate intensity hovered between them. "That girl," she said. "I know who that little girl is."

"What?" Bridget asked, stunned.

"It's Amy."

Bridget struggled to respond, too shocked by Amanda's statement. "Look, you don't know-"

"It's her and Michael." Amanda looked away, the pain still overwhelming her. "I see them both. They're still here." She faced Bridget. "That's the little girl you keep seeing. it's her. I know it is."

Supportive, Bridget rubbed Amanda's arm, trying to soothe her. "We don't know who it is, Amanda. They might still be alive-"

Amanda broke away from her. "I know my own children! I know what was done to them!"

Amanda's raw hysteria quieted Bridget. Bridget didn't think she had no choice but to give Amanda her space.

"Now they're here in this Goddamn house!" Amanda continued. "They're trapped here forever!"

As they maintained their eye contact, Amanda gave Bridget the stern look of a detective. Bridget didn't like how confrontation Amanda was right now. As if Amanda was the one reading Bridget's body language and not the other way around.

"You've seen them too, haven't you?" Amanda asked. "Both of them."

"I think so," Bridget relented.

"I knew I wasn't just crazy. I know what I see." Amanda ran her hands all along her face with the manic worry of a mental patient. "What I see here everyday."

Bridget grabbed Amanda's shoulder in a firm grip. "Look, I believe you," she said, reassuring Amanda.

"I told you it's haunted," Amanda replied. She didn't say it in a smug way but with the defeated horror of a victim who had grown tired of begging to be believed. "Whatever's here got John. And then it made him take the kids, and now it's after me."

"No you don't-"

"It made him do what he did!" Amanda said. "It made him go crazy."

Determined, Bridget tightened her grip on Amanda's shoulder, hoping to tighten her grip on Amanda's stability as well. "Amanda, you don't know that! You don't know if it's all the house!"

Amanda pulled away from Bridget. "No! I should've done something!" she yelled. "We should've gotten out of here! We should've moved!" Fighting back tears, she looked back at the garden. Not even the decadent flowers could console the solemn gardener. "God, it's my fault. It's all my fault. I should've stopped him, I should've..."

"No," Bridget said as she approached Amanda. "You couldn't have."

Distraught, Amanda glared at her. "I should've moved us out! I knew it was this Goddamn house! It tore us apart!"

Bridget grabbed Amanda's arm. "Listen to me."

"No, let go of me!" Amanda yelled as she struggled to break free.

Refusing to let go, Bridget only tightened her grip. "Just listen to me, okay," Bridget said. "You don't really know if it's the house, that's all I'm trying to tell you!"

"What do you mean?" Amanda asked, confused.

Bridget stared with conviction at Amanda's apprehensive eyes. "What if it really was just John. What if it was all him."

"I don't know... it couldn't..."

"Look, the papers said he'd battled mental illness. It's not like he just snapped in the house."

"Yeah, but that was before we were married," the defensive Amanda stated. "He was fine then."

"I know, but all I'm saying's you don't know, Amanda." Bridget relaxed her grip on Amanda. "If it was just him and not the house. I mean there's nothing you could've done about that, now could you." She let go of Amanda. "You don't know what was in his head, so stop blaming yourself."

"But I don't understand," Amanda pleaded. "I thought you said you know it's haunted! It's the house that drove him crazy."

The calm antithesis to Amanda's histrionics, Bridget continued confronting Amanda. "Maybe the Christy house was never really haunted until John did what he did."

Still bursting at the seams with nerves, Amanda glanced over at the house.

"Just think about it, Amanda," Bridget said.

Amanda faced her, confused yet intrigued by the theory.

"None of you experienced anything in that house until that night. It was always John saying things and talking in his sleep and harassing you and the kids."

"I don't know," Amanda mustered through her continuous doubt.

Bridget stepped toward her. "But don't you see! The ghosts are your children, the voice is John. If that's the case then you couldn't have saved them, Amanda, you couldn't have known he'd do this! He was crazy!"

Amanda's eyes went wide. Bridget's persuasiveness was starting to pay off, Bridget thought.

"You're using this house and its history as an excuse when all the real hauntings, the real horrors here are from John's own problems!" Bridget stated. "You couldn't have known he'd get worse, that the schizophrenia would resurface." Bridget held up her cig, letting her case simmer in Amanda's fragile mind. "You need to stop blaming yourself," Bridget stated calmly.

Using the cig, Bridget pointed Amanda toward the Christy house. Even bathed in sunlight, the house retained a creepy aura. A haunted house by way of Norman Rockwell.

"Maybe it wasn't ever haunted by evil spirits, but just by him," Bridget told her. "In that instance, you'd never be able to stop him. You couldn't have ever suspected he'd go this far."

Amanda pondered it for a moment. "I never thought about it like that," Amanda said with some uncertainty.

Bridget rubbed Amanda's shoulder. "Some of these houses aren't really inherently evil," Bridget lectured. "They don't have spirits, they just capture the events and people who've lived and died there."

Going quiet, Bridget gave Amanda's shoulder one final reassuring squeeze. "Think about what it has now with John and the Christy family," Bridget said. "No monsters or demons. Just ordinary people."

"Do you think that's true though?" Amanda asked.

Taking a step back, Bridget put the unlit cig back in her mouth and gazed around the yard. "I think it's a distinct possibility," she noted.

"Really?"

Glad to hear the meek hope in Amanda's voice, Bridget took the cig out and smiled back at her. "I think it's more likely than a bunch of demons just randomly taking over a relatively modern house like this one."

Amanda smirked. "Fair enough."

The two of them shared a quiet chuckle. Bridget felt their amicable weariness only made their bond grow a little bit stronger.

Amanda motioned toward the unlit cig. "So what's that for exactly?"

Amused, Bridget held up the cigarette.

Amanda flashed her a teasing smile. "Does smoking scare away the spirits?"

"No, not really," Bridget said with a smile. She tossed the cigarette over toward the front gate. Almost at the exact same spot she saw the little boy earlier. "It just helps with the nerves."

"I see."

Bridget looked over at Amanda. "I just have one a day when I'm investigating."

"But you didn't wanna save it?" Amanda asked with some surprise.

"Not really." Bridget recognized no smile or hint of sarcasm on Amanda's face. "Why?"

"For tonight," Amanda responded. She started to walk past Bridget and go toward the house. "I think you might need it," Amanda commented with the tone of a subtle warning.

Before Bridget could say anything, Amanda was already well ahead of her. Amanda could walk fast, Bridget realized. She could practically glide.

More uneasy than amused by Amanda's final comment, Bridget watched Amanda make her way to the front door. Amanda's walk was so methodical but well-paced. Her footsteps especially heavy considering her petite frame.

CHAPTER 8

Nightfall had finally arrived at around 8:30. The Christy house's interior was the only spot that offered light amidst the blanket of darkness outside.

In the dark, the house's property resembled a foreboding landscape. Even the garden looked more like a graveyard littered with bouquets than Amanda's innocent labor of love.

Inside the house itself, everyone except for Kevin and Linda were doing their own thing and hiding out in their own rooms.

An indifferent Tony leaned back on a couch in the living room, his eyes staring on at a boring newscast. He refused to stay in any of the guest rooms. After all, none of them even had a damn T.V. In a monotonous routine, Tony ate from a bag of potato chips, one flavored chip at a time. His nervous crunching did nothing to quash his inner fear.

The living room's flatscreen was nothing more than a bland distraction from the house that plagued Tony's mind and imagination. But sadly, neither the talking heads on T.V. nor the tasty chips were easing his mind.

At this point, Tony had stopped noticing the security camera constantly filming him. Or maybe Tony didn't want to notice it. Instead, he wanted to drown out his concerns via the flatscreen.

His bored eyes looked on at the newscast. He raised the remote, ready to change the channel when the local news abruptly shifted from the cheesy weatherman Mike Begley to a round panel discussion. The change looked unplanned. The spontaneity of an otherworldly glitch hi-jacking the station.

The round panel was all about the latest reports coming from the Christy house. The panel's flashy headline read: Christy House Of Horrors. The panel members' questions rolled in with melodramatic intensity: Where was John Baker? Where were his kids? Furthermore, are they alive?

On screen, the panel discussed Amanda Baker's account. How the police had found her bloodied and bruised. With sensationalistic glee, the panel covered salacious details on the house, John Baker's history of mental illness, Amanda's claims that the house made him go crazy. Everything exploitative was exploited.

Still holding the remote, Tony stared at the newscast, frozen in morbid fascination.

The anchors' collective of pretty eyes seemed to hone in on Tony. Their pointed words reminiscent of a siren's call.

The murder-suicide of John Baker and his two young children. The tragic murders of the Christy family. The suspected evil entity that lived in the house. All of this was too much for Tony, but yet he couldn't stop watching.

Heavy footsteps erupted from the other side of the room, so loud that even Tony heard them over the volume of the heated talking heads. The sound of glass being crushed beneath someone's relentless feet alarmed Tony even further.

"Shit!" Tony exclaimed. Lucky to not get whiplash, Tony dropped the remote as he quickly turned toward the wall. The same corner wall Bridget saw all the blood on earlier.

But as soon as Tony turned his head, the footsteps stopped. Tony looked on at the wall, immense fear in his eyes. But not a fucking thing was there. Just the long shards stuck into the wall. Amongst all the mirror's remnants, Tony did see smashed pieces of glass lined up along the floor... all of forming a trail of squashed glass leading straight to that wall. A trail someone had just made.

"What the fuck..." Tony said to himself.

Nervous, he looked back at the television. The channel was different. No longer on the newscast. Instead, it was just Tony himself, live footage of him off the security camera. A live feed of the terrified Tony sitting there on the couch.

Tony's fear instantly and somehow accelerated to higher levels. "Oh fuck!" he yelled as he looked up the security camera.

The mechanical spy pointed right at him. The camera wasn't moving, and it didn't want to. Their subject was right there.

"Fuck this!" Tony said. Throwing the bag of chips down, he staggered off the couch and rushed up to the unflinching camera.

The flatscreen showed the nervous Tony getting closer and closer to the camera. Minus the blaring news anchors, the living room was now filled with unnerving silence.

Finally, Tony reached his destination. He shoved a chair underneath the camera and used it as a stool to get eye-to-eye with the lens. He looked right into the security camera, inspecting it behind his uneasy eyes. There was nothing out of the ordinary with the gadget. No outward buttons anyone could press. No wires that hooked it up to the T.V.

In disbelief, Tony glanced back-and-forth between the security camera and flatscreen. Sure enough, there he was still projected onto the T.V. Man vs. camera.

And the camera wasn't backing down one bit. Those lens stared at Tony like a master criminal refusing to talk.

"How the fuck are you doing this?" Tony asked aloud. He raised a hand toward the camera but hesitated. He didn't know what to do. And he wasn't sure if he wanted to touch the damn thing. "Fuck it." Fearful of something inside the camera reaching out and snatching his wrist, Tony moved his hand in at breakneck speed toward the camcorder.

Before Tony could grab the camera, the T.V. changed back to the local news. Mike Begley's excited voice cut through the tense silence.

Startled, Tony stopped and looked over at the flatscreen. The weatherman's beaming smile greeted him. Locked in on Tony. Momentarily forgetting he was on a chair, Tony took one false step backward.

"Shit!" he exclaimed as he fell over. His quick thinking led to him holding himself up on a sofa arm, keeping Tony from making a huge face plant onto the floor.

Tony breathed heavy, both annoyed and shaken. He glared at Mike the weatherman. "Yeah, fuck you, Mike!" Tony said with the toughness of a keyboard warrior.

Recovering from the odd scares, Tony got back on his feet. He snatched the remote off the floor.

With Mike's voice booming through the room, Tony pointed the remote right at Mike's fake smile and changed the channel. A 90s sitcom then filled the screen. Comfort food for Tony's restless fear.

"That's better," Tony commented. He grabbed his bag of potato chips and sat back on the sofa, back to his station.

*

The lights were off in Amanda's home office. It was completely silent other than the repetitive sound of an intermittent mouse click. The sound echoed through the darkness in a steady rhythm.

Cutting through the darkness was the glowing beam of the computer screen. The lone light in the room illuminated Amanda sitting right in front of the screen. She was playing the living room footage once more.

Amanda looked concentrated and focused, her eyes never straying from the screen. Indeed, they stared right at the same spot: the old mirror shattering into pieces.

Entranced, Amanda kept repeating those same crucial seconds of footage. With each time the mirror exploded, Amanda just rewinded it right back in a compulsive manner.

But it wasn't just to see the shattered glass or the group's reactions, instead, Amanda was looking at the little girl in the mirror. Amanda couldn't keep herself from staring at the girl's eerie glare. She was drawn to it out of heartache or fear. Or maybe Amy's glare drew both of those emotions from Amanda.

*

A few empty bottles of wine now scattered along the floor. Linda's guest room had apparently gone from a place to crash to a place to get smashed.

Kevin and Linda sat up in bed together, surrounded by the endless amounts of newspaper articles and files. Linda cradled another open bottle of wine. As the two became drunker, they enjoyed each other's company even more, each of them laughing and having a good time. They didn't even bother with glasses or whatever they thought was proper etiquette at this point. They were just gonna drink from the bottle. Amidst her most tipsy laughter, Linda would occasionally grab Kevin's shoulder and bicep. Always playing it off, of course.

"So have you always been interested in this?" Kevin asked. He held his hand out toward the bottle. Smiling, Linda handed it over. "Not until the last few years really."

Kevin took a nice, long swig.

"After me and Ray divorced, I took it kinda hard. I got lonely, more withdrawn. I guess you could call me depressed."

Sympathetic, Kevin handed her the bottle back. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's fine," Linda replied. "It's fine now." She twirled the bottle in her hand. A nervous tic. A coping mechanism for discussing the bittersweet past. "I've gotten into other things, so I'm okay. I'm content."

Getting drunker by the second, Kevin watched Linda twirl the bottle, giving the bottle a kaleidoscopic appearance. The bottle held his gaze more than it should have.

"It was tough for a while," Linda went on. "But you know, I really started to get into T.V. of all things." Smiling, she took a big swig.

"What? Like soap operas?" Kevin joked.

"No." Linda giggled as she gave him a light shove.

"I was just asking."

"The haunted house shows," Linda went on, her voice clearly showing reverence for her guilty pleasure. "*A Haunting, Ghost Explorers*. The good stuff. They have whole channels for that shit, you know."

"But ain't most of them fake," Kevin quipped.

"Not all of them." Linda's sly smile couldn't undermine her clear affection for these cheesy shows. "They were all just really interesting to me at the time. I'd always had a curiosity about the paranormal so it just resonated with me. I mean here I am, a divorced old woman-"

"Not old at all," Kevin said with the flirtatious subtlety of a high schooler.

It worked. Linda couldn't help but blush. "Well, thank you, but the older you get, the more you get more intrigued by these ideas. What happens when we die, where do we go. I just started to question these things more including my own beliefs. And as I kept watching those stupid shows, it only pushed my interest in it even more." Even with a drunken monologue more fitting for an alcoholic philosophy major, Linda's sincere passion for the paranormal was still well on display.

"Interesting..." Kevin took the bottle from her.

"All I'm saying's that it really opened my eyes," Linda said. "Well, both the divorce and *Ghost Explorers*," she added with a chuckle.

After taking another huge gulp, Kevin nodded at the silver figurine. "Is that how you got all this shit-"

Linda gave him a quick punch to the shoulder. A playful yet still painful hit. "Ow!" Kevin exclaimed.

"It's not shit, it's spiritual!" Linda retorted.

"Okay..." Kevin said.

"There's more to this than just the cheap thrills of finding ghosts or getting scared, you know," Linda continued. "There's this need to know more. I wanna know what does happen when we die. Where do we go, why are some of us still trapped on Earth wandering around like a bunch of restless, eternal spirits." Linda looked right at Kevin, confronting him with her eyes. "Isn't this what you wanna know too? Shouldn't we all be interested in this?"

Put on the spot, Kevin hesitated. "Yeah, sure..."

"Why's it so crazy that I'm interested in these questions and discovering more about the paranormal." More defensive than ever, Linda motioned toward the figurine. "I mean who or what is in that thing for instance? No one seems to know. And why does it have so much power?"

Smiling, Kevin caressed Linda's shoulder, trying to get her off the rant. "Hey, I'm sorry, Linda. I wasn't trying to offend." He looked over at the figurine. "I think this stuff's cool," he said, not meaning a word.

Linda grinned. "Oh, I know." She looked down at the bottle. Not much was left. "I just get sensitive about it."

"No, I completely understand."

Feeling more horny and intoxicated because of the booze, Linda looked at Kevin with hungry eyes.

"Honestly, I like this whole spiritual, hippie vibe you got going on," Kevin said.

Linda giggled. "Well, thanks, youngin'," she replied in a sexy tease.

Kevin stumbled over his next words. "You're a free spirit, I can appreciate that." He rubbed Linda's shoulder, much to her enjoyment. "Does that sort of thing carry over into all the other parts of your life?"

"What do you mean?" The excited glint in Linda's eyes weren't going unnoticed by Kevin.

"I mean do you ever do drugs or meditate," Kevin said delicately even though his confidence was high.

Linda smiled with anticipation, knowing where this was leading. The first time in years a younger man had been this forward with her.

Kevin traced his hand down her arm. "Or have any unique sexual interests..." he continued.

"Of course," Linda replied, not missing a beat.

"Oh?" Kevin asked, surprised to see Linda being this forward.

"I like men and women."

"I see..."

With confidence, Linda leaned in closer. Now Kevin was the one blushing... or maybe just intimidated. "I like them young too."

"How young?" Kevin asked, some unease cracking through his debonair act.

"Real young." She was practically nose-to-nose with Kevin. Simultaneously Mrs. Robinson and a ferocious animal on the prowl.

Thick sexual tension swirled all around them. Kevin hadn't anticipated things moving this *quick*. He couldn't muster another word.

"You know," she started as she held up the bottle. "You're not so bad after a few of these."

Kevin grinned. "Who isn't?"

Amused, Linda motioned toward his suit. "Well, the whole real-estate shtick-"

"Just doing my job," he defended.

"Oh, believe me, I can tell."

"Sorry," Kevin said with a salesman's smile. He leaned in closer toward Linda. "It's just my personal policy." Now he could practically hear her heart thumping louder and louder. "Whatever it takes to consummate a sale," he said in his sexiest voice.

Entertaining the challenge, Linda smiled. "Whatever it takes, huh?"

In reply, Kevin gave her a soft kiss on the lips. Challenge accepted.

Linda smiled back at Kevin, not too surprised but still thrilled by his move. "You're gonna have to do a little more than that, hon."

"Oh, believe me," Kevin started. Their eyes glued to one another, Kevin leaned in closer, running his smooth hands all down Linda back. He had Linda hooked, and he knew it. "I will."

CHAPTER 9

It was well past midnight, but the living room T.V. stayed on. The same 90s sitcom blasted away on the flatscreen. It must've been a monotonous marathon.

No one was watching it though. Tony sprawled out on the sofa, sound asleep, still holding the remote. The now-empty bag of potato chips lied on top of his chest. He wasn't waking up anytime soon.

*

The downstairs guest room was even smaller than Linda's. The ceiling fan didn't work, and the air vents weren't doing their job very well either. In fact, there wasn't much furniture aside from the bare essentials. Somehow, the room seemed even blander than the rest of the Christy house. It looked as if a walk-in closet that had been converted into a bedroom. It certainly had the same claustrophobia.

Most of Bridget's equipment overflowed on top of a small dresser. There wasn't enough room in here for a ghost hunter of Bridget's caliber.

Bridget sat up in bed, her back against the wall. She was half-asleep, but in this room with this heat, that wasn't enough to take her down. Business as usual, she held the tape recorder up to her ear and mashed play.

Her voice instantly greeted her. The recorder played Bridget's recording from the basement. The amusing sounds of her and Tony arguing caused Bridget to crack a weak smile. Letting the tape roll, Bridget looked off at the bedroom door, bored.

On the tape, Bridget began to ask questions. Her voice so serious and strong.

As the audio continued, Bridget's tired eyes kept looking on at the door.

"We just want to know if you're with us," Bridget's voice said on the recorder.

Then an unsettling voice snapped Bridget out of her languid state. The harsh, cold tone she'd dreaded to hear.

"Kill her..." the male voice stated with eerie precision.

"Oh God!" Bridget exclaimed. She held the recorder closer to her ear, scared but prepared to listen further.

As sudden as it began, the voice disappeared on the recording. A vanishing apparition. Bridget gave it a few seconds, but whoever it was never returned.

Terrified, Bridget rewound the tape and played it back.

"Kill her..." the male voice said again. There was no mistake. The chilling voice had communicated with Bridget in that basement. And all of it was on tape.

"Jesus Christ..." Bridget said to herself. She stopped the tape and took a deep breath. Coming to the realization of what she'd just heard. Paranormal evidence, and a convincing piece of paranormal evidence at that.

Bridget turned and looked toward the bedroom door.

The door was now wide open, two children standing in the doorway. Amy and Michael. They just stood there in silence, their scared eyes looking right at Bridget. With the dark downstairs hallway lurking right behind them, the bloodied children resembled gatekeepers to a nightmare realm.

"Oh God!" Bridget said in fright.

"Help us," Amy whispered to Bridget, her mouth never moving. The children's disembodied voices seemed to exist as separate entities. Their bodies too slaughtered and desecrated to speak for themselves.

"Please..." began Michael's voice.

"Help us..." Amy's whisper repeated.

The chorus of whispers overtook the small bedroom, blasting right through Bridget's head. Their voices could be a taunt if they weren't so full of anguish.

Overwhelmed by a flood of varying emotions, Bridget threw the recorder onto the mattress and stood up. "Who are you?" she asked the two kids.

Bridget started walking toward them. "I'm not trying to hurt you, I just don't understand," Bridget said. Michael and Amy continued just standing there. Neither of them said a word, but Bridget could hear them. She could hear their intense fear in their unrelenting voices.

"Help us, Bridget," Amy pleaded.

"What do you want?" Bridget asked, doing her best to keep her voice gentle and calm.

Bridget got a foot away from them when both kids turned and took off down the hallway. They were in a hurry. Like they were either playing tag... or they saw something behind Bridget.

"Wait!" Bridget cried out as she followed them out into the hallway. She didn't see the children anywhere in the dark hallway. She didn't even hear their footsteps either. But she sure heard Amy's voice.

"Hurry!" Amy said in a urgent but hushed tone.

On Linda's phone, the exotic music provided the score to the steamy and exciting hook-up between Kevin and Linda. Basically, Linda's dream soundtrack for her hypothetical porno.

Each one of them completely nude, Kevin climbed on top of Linda in bed. His stray foot knocked over a folder, but neither Linda nor Kevin cared.

"Oh baby," Linda moaned as Kevin serenaded her neck with gentle kisses. "That's perfect."

In between the kisses, Kevin still managed to squeeze some work in. "I can talk to Amanda tomorrow," he muttered through the shower of affection. "We'll come to an arrangement on the basement leak-

"Oh God, just stop!" Linda interrupted, her body too preoccupied to give a fuck about the damn basement.

"But Linda-

Linda slapped his beefy bubble butt with a firm spank.

"Ow!" Kevin yelled.

Taking the initiative, Linda pushed him over to the side.

Kevin's leg banged against the nightstand, causing the silver figurine to collapse to the ground. Again, Linda didn't notice...or maybe she didn't care at this point.

Eager, Linda hopped on top of the uneasy Kevin. "No business before pleasure, baby."

Kevin looked on, helpless. "Linda, what-

Shushing Kevin, Linda put a finger to his lips. "No, baby. Just let me take over." She leaned back as she began to grind against him. "It's one of my dreams you've helped me realize, Kevin." Her voice sounded almost too calm. Professional even.

"What do you mean?" he asked, confused.

"Making love in a haunted place." She smiled at the uneasy Kevin. "I've waited a long time for this, darling."

Squirming, Kevin tried to get out from under her. "But Ms. Kane, this-

Linda leaned down and interrupted him with a passionate kiss. Accompanied by heavier exotic music, the sex escalated in intensity. "It's just us," Linda said to Kevin. Smiling, she glanced around the room. "Us and the spirits."

Kevin was about to reply when Linda put her finger to his lips, quashing his protest.

"Tonight, we'll all be as one," Linda proclaimed with pride.

Enjoying every minute of the long-anticipated realization of her insatiable sexual desires, Linda thrust into Kevin, practically overpowering him. She felt rejuvenated. She felt young. She felt alive.

Lost amongst the kitschy music and squeaky bed was the figurine lying on the ground. Kevin nor Linda noticed it laying there in several broken pieces.

*

Bridget staggered down the hallway. The kids were still gone, but their voices still swirled around her. Even with the T.V. blaring from the living room, Bridget could still hear the children. Their whispers were constant and unrelenting.

Staring ahead toward the back of the hallway, Bridget felt along the walls. Dizziness made her stumble a few times. A constant migraine only swelled with each step. The children's voices, the house's tight atmosphere, all of it was just overwhelming Bridget.

"Where are you?" Bridget asked weakly. She stopped and leaned against the wall, tired. "Where'd you go?"

She heard nothing. Not a reply, not even their constant whispers. The children's voices were gone. Desperate, Bridget looked down the hall. "Please," she begged. "Where are you?"

A few feet in front of her, a small door on the left opened on its own in a slow, deliberate creak.

Bridget stared right at it, hesitant.

"Bridget," Amy's whisper reappeared.

"What do you want?" Bridget asked. She stepped away from the wall, regaining some energy. "What is it?"

"Go on..."

Taking cautious steps, Bridget approached the door. It was a closet door from what Bridget could tell.

"Keep going," Amy's voice continued.

Bridget stopped near the open doorway and looked on in frightened shock. "Jesus..."

The entire bottom half of the door was covered in desperate scratchmarks. The marks didn't run up very high, and the marks weren't very long. Marks made from the hands of small children.

"Oh God, no," Bridget muttered.

"Look..." Amy's voice whispered.

At Amy's command, Bridget peered inside the closet.

Boxes piled up in the cramped space. Nothing but cardboard boxes. No clothes on the wire hangers, no shoes. Just really heavy boxes.

Bridget stared at the sight, uneasy. "I don't understand... what is this..."

"Help us..." Michael's vulnerable voice whispered.

Bridget looked around the closet. "Where are you?" she asked in fright.

One of the boxes' lids flew off, startling Bridget. The lid fell right at her feet.

"Look inside," Michael pleaded.

Bridget recovered from the scare and looked right toward the box. It looked filled to the brim with something Bridget's couldn't see.

Bridget took a deep breath. Too late to get scared now, she thought. Remember your dreams, remember your passions. This isn't *A Haunting*. This is real.

Full of determination and grit, Bridget took that fateful step forward and looked straight down into the box. The discovery stunned her.

Hundreds of photos were crammed inside. Family photos. The Bakers in all their All-American glory. Amanda, John, Amy, and Michael. The beautiful nuclear family.

"Oh my God..." Bridget said to herself.

She picked up the first photo. It showed the Bakers smiling in the front yard. Well, almost all of them were smiling. John's face was scratched out. Not by marker or by pen. But literally torn out by fingernail.

Uneasy, Bridget traced her finger against what was supposed to be John's face. What the Hell, she thought to herself. It looked like a damn monster clawed it out.

Bridget looked down at the other photos in the box. More of the Baker family pictures. The next one was the family standing in the living room. Again, all smiles except for John. His face scratched out again. "What the fuck," Bridget muttered.

Faster than a detective on the prowl of a fresh lead, Bridget scoured through the rest of the pictures. Someone had torn John's face out of each and every one of them. But the family kept smiling in each picture. Minus John, of course.

Scared, Bridget tossed the photos back inside the box. They landed on the slush pile of pictures with a tremendous THUD. Many of the photos even slid down the mountain of photographs in a mini-avalanche.

Bridget stared down at the pile. It was all one big collage of the grinning family with a faceless John. The faceless father.

"Bridget," Amy's voice whispered.

Startled, Bridget whirled around and saw the girl and boy standing in the hallway. They were mere feet away from her. Amidst all the blood and grue, their haunting and morose expressions could still clearly be seen.

Bridget turned and looked back at the photos. Even with the smiles, it was clear these were the same children now standing before Bridget. Michael and Amy. Amanda was right all along.

Turning, Bridget confronted the two children. What she got was a much more chilling sight than she anticipated: Michael and Amy were now smiling at her. But the smiles didn't look authentic. They were the kind of fake smile you forced at the demand of your parents, Bridget thought. Unnaturally big smiles. Just like the ones in the photos.

Then the man's voice returned. That eerie, raspy voice. The one from Amanda's video, the one on Bridget's tape, the one that felt right at home in the Christy house. "It's the house!" the man's voice cried. The sound terrified Bridget. Not just what the man said, but because where the voice was coming from: right behind her.

Before Bridget could whirl around, a blood-stained hand reached out and grabbed her shoulder. The cold touch sent shivers down Bridget's spine.

"The house did it!" the intense voice yelled. The man's voice may have been deranged, but he was full of conviction.

Bridget turned and came face-to-face with the startling sight of John Baker himself. His narrow eyes glared right at her. Blood a savage warpaint splattered all across his pale face and dirty clothes. The terrifying voice really did belong to him.

"Oh God!" Bridget screamed.

John clung tighter to her shoulder. Bridget struggled to break free, but couldn't. She felt like his strong grip both restrained her and drained her of all her willpower. Feeling weak, Bridget saw red stains all along John's fingers and under his long nails.

"It's the house!" John barked at Bridget. "It wouldn't let go!"

"No, please..." Bridget said.

Seemingly sensing her fear, John leaned in closer. "It killed them," he said in an unnerving whisper. Bridget just stared into his unflinching eyes.

"It killed them all," John continued.

"Bridget!" Amanda yelled.

Lunging toward the closet, Amanda pulled Bridget away from John's tight grasp. "What's wrong!"

Bridget turned to see the worried Amanda. Without missing a beat, Bridget pointed toward the closet. "He's in there!" she cried out.

"Bridget, listen to me," Amanda pleaded.

Panicking, Bridget looked around the downstairs hallway. But it was just them. Michael and Amy were gone. So was John. Even the scratching on the door had vanished. "No!" Bridget said. She confronted Amanda. "They were here, your kids and John!"

"I know," Amanda stated in a trembling voice.

Sensing the genuine fear and paranoia in Amanda's voice, Bridget went quiet.

"He attacked me!" Amanda said with ferocity. She showed Bridget her arms. "Look what that bastard did to me!"

Bridget looked on in horror. "Oh God. Amanda..."

Amongst the vicious scars were a multitude of fresh bruises. Amanda's arms looked to be nothing more than a pin cushion for John's abuse. Both in life and from beyond the grave.

"It's John!" Amanda rambled on. "He did this to me! I told you he's back!"

Unable to argue with her, Bridget faced Amanda, struggling to say anything. "Amanda, I don't-"

"I was in the study!" Amanda stated. She held her arms out in front of Bridget, waving those smoking gun bruises for Bridget's eyes to see. "It's the same spots he hit me earlier, Bridget! The same shit he always did to me." Terrified, she avoided eye contact.

"Amanda-"

Amanda glared at her. "I know it's him... God, I fucking told you! I fucking told y'all the truth!"

Bridget grabbed Amanda's shoulders, trying to calm her. "Amanda, look, I know you're not lying!"

Looking off toward the closet, the unsettled Amanda saw the pictures in the box. The family photos.

"I saw him too," Bridget continued. "I saw Amy and Michael. I followed them right here! You were right about the boy in the video, it's him!"

Amanda broke away from Bridget and snatched the first picture off the photo pile.

Bridget looked at Amanda. "It's Michael," Bridget stated. "I've been seeing him and Amy here all along. I've been hearing them."

"What happened to this?" Amanda asked.

Confused, Bridget walked up to her. "What do you mean?"

Amanda showed her the photograph. The Bakers in the living room. John's missing face. "I didn't do this!" she said adamantly.

Bridget looked on at the picture, right at its torn out piece. The missing link to a perfect depiction of the nuclear family.

Nervous, Amanda pointed at John in the picture. "They marked him out," she sputtered. "They had to!"

"I thought you might've done it," Bridget said awkwardly.

"No!"

In a torturous motif, John's voice rang through Bridget's ears once more. "She's evil!" he yelled.

"I didn't do it!" Amanda continued, not hearing John's voice.

Bridget cringed and looked around the hallway. But no one was there. Just her and Amanda. And the Baker family pictures.

Amanda put the photo to Bridget's face. "The house did this!" she proclaimed. "It's evil!"

"It's her!" John yelled into Bridget's mind. His voice louder and more anguished than ever.

John's voice certainly disturbed Bridget. But she knew it was only her that heard him. His voice an invisible speaker placed directly into her ears. A speaker transmitting channels from the afterlife.

"He's back here," Amanda muttered in a panic. "They brought him back again."

Bridget ran her hands through his hair, praying that she wouldn't hear John and his terrifying voice any longer.

"John's back," Amanda continued, her mind breaking down amidst the burden of this horrifying realization. "He's home..."

"I know," Bridget said.

Conquered by horror, Amanda stumbled back into the hallway. "I can't escape him!" she yelled.

Concerned, Bridget watched her. "Amanda, stop!"

"None of us will, we can't fucking escape!" With helpless eyes, Amanda stopped and faced Bridget. "He's gonna kill-"

A powerful force shot Amanda straight back into the wall. Clouds of dust flew out with the tenacious speed of the mirror's glass from earlier. Amanda's hand dropped the picture upon impact.

"Amanda!" Bridget yelled as she rushed toward her.

Dazed, Amanda slid down to the floor. The picture fluttered right before her eyes, John's ripped image teasing her in mid-air.

Bridget leaned down right next to the groaning Amanda. "Are you okay?" Bridget asked. She rubbed Amanda's shoulder. "Amanda!"

Lunging forward, Amanda unleashed a fit of bad coughs.

"Oh God!" Bridget said in horror. "Amanda."

Amanda turned and coughed into her hand. Each hack louder and nastier than the last.

Bridget watched her go on, unsure what to do. She wasn't a nurse or a doctor. She just saw fucking ghosts. "Amanda, are you okay?" was all Bridget could say.

"Fuck..." Amanda mumbled as she faced Bridget.

Observant as always, Bridget caught a good look at Amanda's hand. Crimson was all over Amanda's palm. She'd been coughing up blood. A lot of it.

"He'll never leave me," Amanda said in her best woe-is-me voice. At least this tone was well-deserved. "He'll never leave me alone. John won't..."

"You don't know that," Bridget replied in her best reassuring tone. Bridget was talented at a lot of things, but definitely not acting. "Maybe he's-"

"You know that's not true," Amanda interrupted sharply. "I can't move. It doesn't matter what the fuck I do."

Bridget didn't respond. There was nothing she could say without lying.

"You know that, don't you?" Amanda commented. "The spirits never leave once they latch onto you." She coughed out another violent hack. "Especially in this Goddamn house!"

Concerned, Bridget watched her cough once more. Amanda was a pitiful sight. She wasn't the strong Southern Belle or the defensive victim. Just a tormented victim at the moment.

"It's all her," John's voice said in a rare quiet tone. His voice had strayed into Bridget's mind once more. "It's her," he stated. His voice was even creepier toned down. Like the subtle difference between a madcap asylum patient you know is fucking nuts and the sinister hushed tone of someone who wants to let you in on their dark little secret.

"There's nothing I can do," Amanda said. She looked around the hallway with defeated eyes. "I'm trapped. I'm fucking trapped right here in this house."

Bridget rubbed her shoulder. "I'm gonna do everything I can, okay."

"No-"

"I am," Bridget said with authority. The strong tone even quieted Amanda. "We're gonna get you outta here and away from him, okay."

In a quick rebuttal, the closet door slammed shut on its own.

Terrified, both women looked over at the closet. Its closed door stood tall as a barrier guarding the rest of Amanda's photographs and memories.

"Goddammit," Amanda muttered. "It won't stop." She tilted her head back against the wall in defeat. "It won't ever stop," She closed her eyes as her only means to escape.

The hallway light cut on by itself. While Bridget was startled, Amanda didn't even flinch.

Bridget looked up toward the ceiling. The lights shined upon them with the deliberate focus of a spotlight. Somehow, the lighting seemed even brighter. Even more powerful.

Wallowing in her anguish, Amanda opened her eyes and looked toward the ground. Shocked horror crossed her face as she pointed toward the spot. "Oh fuck! Look!"

Alarmed, Bridget followed her gaze.

On the floor, the Baker family photograph was laying just a few feet away from them. The strong lights illuminated it just enough for the two women to see one noticeable change: John. He was back in the picture. Back with his family. Not a rip, a scratch, not even a stain could be seen on his face. As if time had reverted back to the moment the photo was taken. All the way back to when John flashed that confident smile.

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Bridget was the one who had to put the picture back in the box. She was also the one who had to open that closet door. Even under the incessant lighting, it wasn't an easy task. But Amanda couldn't handle it. Not in her current state.

While Bridget may have moved quicker than normal to rid themselves of the photo, she did it nonetheless. Her quick cursory glance of all the other photos showed a restored John in each of them. Him and his smile. But Bridget didn't dwell on those. She just wanted to get the fuck back in her room safely and call it a night.

As Bridget led the cowering Amanda back to her guest bedroom, Bridget had even looked back down the hallway a few times. But she didn't see anything. The long hallway was void of any ghosts. For now at least. In a quick motion, Bridget turned off the hallway lights. They shut off in an instant. And nothing turned them back on. No trickery from the Christy house, much to Bridget's delight.

Bridget finally led Amanda inside Bridget's dark room. Through the darkness, Bridget could still see the tape recorder lying on her bed. Back to work, she thought.

"He'll be back," Amanda said. Her insufferable fear and paranoia wasn't going away anytime soon. "He always comes back."

"Look, just relax, alright," Bridget reassured her. "You can stay with me tonight." She helped Amanda stand up on her own. "You got it?"

"Yeah," Amanda replied.

Bridget walked over and flicked on the lights. They cut on with a start and were followed by Amanda's terrified scream.

Alarmed, Bridget looked toward a corner wall.

Carved by a blade, large letters ran across the wall. The madman's graffiti read: *Kill Em All*.

The carvings of the words were etched in deep within the mundane wall. No paint job was gonna be able to cover this monstrosity.

A butcher knife was lying on the ground in front of it. Bits of white paint rather than red blood graced the blade, but it was still eerie nonetheless. Particularly the layers of paint stuck to the blade. The blade was practically coated in the pain due to how deep it hacked into those walls. If someone could do that to the hard wood, imagine what such a force could do to vulnerable human flesh.

Too overcome in fear, Bridget couldn't even scream. John and the Christy house weren't just after Amanda. They were after everyone.

"It's John," Amanda said, panicking. She snatched Bridget's arm in a wild grip. "It's John! It's John!" Spit and saliva flew out with her screaming. "I told you it's him! The house brought him back!"

Bridget grabbed her by the shoulders, but nothing was slowing Amanda down. "Amanda, please-

"

"No!" Amanda shouted as she pushed Bridget back.

Aggravated, Bridget held Amanda in her arms, restraining her. "Amanda, just fucking chill! I don't know what's going on, but you gotta calm down!"

Fire-eyed, Amanda was ready to talk back. Bridget was bracing for it as well.

On the bed, an invisible force mashed in the tape recorder's play button, the recorder's ensuing sounds interrupting the two women's confrontation.

They both turned and looked toward it, uneasy.

An evil voice played on the recorder, resonating through the entire room. "Amanda..." the voice drawled out.

"No..." Amanda said meekly. "John."

Amanda sure seemed to recognize the voice, but not Bridget. It was the voice Bridget had been hearing, for sure. But while this voice sounded similar to John's growl, it also seemed a little different. It was deeper and more stilted. Like someone... or something was imitating John.

"It's the demons, Amanda," the male voice continued.

Teardrops slid down Amanda's face. Bridget couldn't tell if they were tears or pain or tears of helplessness. Probably a combination of both, Bridget figured.

"They're here, Amanda," the voice muttered. "They're inside me," the man said as his voice suffered through a strike of distortion on the recorder, lending his voice an even more uncanny aesthetic to Bridget.

Bridget continued staring at the recorder as the male voice breathed heavy through the tiny speakers. Somehow, his voice seemed to only grow louder... the tape recorder's volume hitting impossible levels.

"They're inside all of us!" the voice cried.

CHAPTER 10

The following morning left Linda's group with even more mysterious questions than they ever could've imagined when they first arrived at the fabled Christy home. Nobody had slept well the previous night, particularly Amanda and Bridget (and Kevin). But in that living room, as they crowded around Bridget's tape recorder, the group were wide awake with simultaneous fear and excitement.

Holding the recorder, Bridget let what they believed to be John's voice finish playing on the tape. "They're here, Amanda," the creepy voice said.

Everyone listened intently, no one saying a word. Tony's face resembled a child being scared shitless on Halloween night, Linda's a child upon entering Disney World.

"They're inside me," John's voice continued.

The heightened intensity of his voice sent the disturbed Amanda turning away, unable to even look at the recorder from which his voice boomed. Hearing the domineering voice was enough. Facing it almost as bad facing John himself.

"They're inside all of us!" the voice finished.

As John finished, Bridget stopped the tape. The raw terror of John's voice lingered over the scene for a few moments. The closing lines of a sermon from Hell.

Everyone was too scared to react. Scared they'd antagonize John's spirit by saying one word.

"Well," Bridget said, breaking the silence. She laid the recorder on the couch arm. "That's what we got so far at least..."

"You got this last night?" Linda asked. She kept her voice low out of respect to Amanda and to the situation in general. But Linda's palpable intrigue was still rather blatant.

"Yeah," Bridget said. "I found all the pictures in the closet."

"How'd you know they were in there?" Tony wondered aloud.

Facing Tony, Bridget pointed at Amanda. "Her children showed me."

"What!" Linda said, unable to contain her excitement this time.

Recovering from the trauma, Amanda watched Bridget confront the others.

"It was Amy and Michael," Bridget explained. "They came to me again. They led me to the closet, and that's where I found the pictures. Boxes of them."

Linda turned to Amanda. "You put them in there?"

Not enjoying being put on the spot, Amanda struggled to respond. "I had to. I just, I just couldn't look at them anymore. I couldn't look at John."

Bridget took a step toward Linda. "But here's the thing. His face was marked out of all of them."

"What? Why?" Linda said.

"Marked out?" Tony asked.

"It was missing in all the pictures," Bridget said. She looked to Amanda. "Tell them."

Amanda nodded. "I don't know why he did it."

"It was probably Michael and Amy!" Bridget exclaimed. "They probably ripped his face out of all of them."

"For good reason," Tony deadpanned.

"Exactly! I think that's why the pictures changed later. The kids have that type of power."

"Whoa, hold on," Tony said with unease. "They have more power? Aren't they already ghosts?"

Ignoring Tony, Bridget continued talking to the others. "But more importantly, they're all still here! John, Amy, Michael. Their spirits are still in this house."

Just the mention of their names and the confirmation of her own deepest fears unsettled Amanda. "I told you they were," Amanda said quietly, avoiding eye contact with everyone.

Bridget looked at Amanda with sympathy. "Her kids are trapped with him," Bridget said to the others. She faced everyone else, her grave seriousness rivaling a preacher in a cemetery. "And now he wants Amanda."

Wanting to ease the room's panic-meter, Kevin confronted Bridget. "Whoa, whoa, hold on a sec--"

"She wasn't lying, okay!" Bridget quipped. She pointed toward the still-restless Amanda. "I know she's telling the truth. I believe her."

Linda stole a glance at Amanda. Distressed as ever, Amanda looked the part of the haunted homeowner and grieving widow.

"It's not like that though-" Kevin began.

"John's after her!" Bridget interrupted. "He attacked her again last night!"

"Attacked her?" Tony asked behind worried eyes.

"We got it on tape," Amanda defended herself in a quiet tone.

"I know, I know," Kevin stated. Making his case, he motioned around the living room. "But this house has too much history, Amanda. I mean what if it isn't John, huh? There's other stories all in this damn place. For Christ's sakes, it's called the *Christy* house! There could be any number of evil spirits running around! You don't know if they're specifically after you or us."

"No!" Bridget commanded as she got in Kevin's face, actually intimidating Kevin with her surprising toughness. "I know what I saw! It was John!" She pointed toward the hallway. "He was right there in that closet!"

Nervous, Tony took a quick peek toward the hall. He appeared to be making a mental note to never open that closet door.

Overcoming her defeated meekness, Amanda confronted the group. "The evil's never left this house," she stated matter-of-factly. "And it never will."

Bridget grabbed Amanda's arm, supportive. "Look, John's here, Amanda. He's after you."

"He wants his family," Linda noted to herself with some excitement.

Linda's vague giddiness drew a glare from Bridget.

Amanda stared right at Bridget, Amanda's eyes subdued. "Of course, he is," Amanda said bluntly. She looked up at the ceiling. "They want us all here," she said in a tone that mixed the musings of both an innocent child and disturbed lunatic.

Getting everyone's attention, Kevin clapped his hands together. "Well, okay then, so what if it's him? This is good, right?"

Bridget just glared at him. She hated this guy.

Kevin turned to Linda, glad to see her salivating eyes glued to him. "I mean the house is haunted, so let's say we go ahead and draw up the paperwork?" Kevin proposed.

"Hmm, I suppose we could," Linda hesitated.

Bridget looked over at Amanda. Amanda was already facing her, but their immediate eye contact wasn't awkward. It was cool and mutual. Bridget had already expected it.

Begging for a sale, Kevin ran his hand up and down Linda's arm, knowing his mere touch might be the finishing touches for the deal. "You sign the checks, Amanda moves on with her life." He flashed Linda his smile of pearly whites. "We all live happily ever after."

Linda seemed to purr. "You know I strike a hard bargain," she said without a hint of subtlety.

"Well, we got a whole night to *come* to a deal, don't we," Kevin replied as he moved in closer toward her. The two resembled intimate dance partners rather than realtor and client.

"Indeed," Linda said.

Like a kid who'd stumbled upon the wrong fetish porn, Tony looked on at them, speechless.

Kevin squeezed Linda's hand.

Bridget was joining Tony on the what-the-fuck-are-they-doing bandwagon. Really Ms. Kane, Bridget thought.

Not really paying attention, Amanda looked toward the tape recorder... dreading to hear it turn on again. To hear that creepy voice once more.

Feeling Tony and Bridget's disapproval, Kevin confronted them. "You see this isn't just about us and our creepy little haunting," he bullshitted to them.

Tired of Kevin's act, Bridget turned and looked out a window.

"I'm just looking out for what's best for Amanda," Kevin continued.

"I bet," Tony quipped.

A compulsion ran through Bridget. An unusual urge to look further. One of her intuitive pushes. She focused on the window, her intense eyes looking out into the front yard where the morning sun showcased everything.

Ignoring Tony, Kevin went on. "If she's in danger, we need to get this done sooner."

Not too discreet, Linda gave him a hard slap on the ass.

"Or by tomorrow," Kevin corrected. "Tomorrow morning at the latest."

Bridget faced him. "That's not happening," she stated affirmatively.

Kevin stepped toward her, outraged. "What? What are you talking about?"

"I mean it won't help," Bridget responded, keeping her cool as always. She glanced back at the scared Amanda. "He's just gonna keep following her no matter what."

"No, he won't, it's the house!" Kevin proclaimed.

Behind trembling eyes, Amanda didn't say anything.

Kevin glowered at the silent Bridget. No one else was taking his side. Kevin faced Amanda, desperate to reassure her. "Look, the ghosts are only in this house, Amanda. They ain't following you."

"Bullshit!" Bridget yelled.

"Yeah, I don't think that's right," Linda chimed in.

"The house is evil," Bridget started, eviscerating Kevin in the process. "But it's in John now. It latched onto his personality almost instantly because of his past and his schizophrenia. And now he's only gonna follow her even after she leaves this house."

"Aw, come on!" Kevin protested.

"She can escape the house, but she can't escape him," Bridget said.

Amanda looked down, entangled in a web of convoluted emotions. "I know. You're right.."

"I'm afraid she is," Linda commented.

Realizing he's being shot down by experts, a defeated Kevin threw his hands in the air. "I mean we can try! It's better than just having her stick around here all day."

Bridget stole a glance out the window before looking straight at Kevin. "I don't think you and her could leave tonight anyway."

"Why?" Kevin demanded.

Bridget waved him toward the window. "See for yourself."

Fearful of what to expect, Tony led the others up to the glass. They all peered out into the front yard.

From here, their cars were all visible in the driveway. And it was a fucking mess. The windshields and windows were busted completely, similar to the living room mirror. The cars either exposed to intolerable decibel levels of sound or had spontaneously combusted on their own.

Dents ran all along the vehicles. Deep dents that rivaled those of the deep piercings the knife had caused in Bridget's guest room. And most importantly, each car tire was meticulously slashed. Not just one puncture in each tire, but many. A frenzy of stabbings. Hell, it may have even been done by the same butcher knife from last night, Bridget thought.

Rubber debris scattered across the yard. Sunlight shone off the broken glass littering the driveway, reflecting off the glass and shining right back toward the horrified faces of the car owners.

"Oh fuck..." Tony muttered. Somehow, he was reaching new levels of his terror with each passing event in this house.

"What the Hell!" Kevin yelled. His irate eyes stayed focused on his once-shiny, once-new truck standing in the driveway. "What the fuck happened!" He gave Tony a harsh push. "What is this!"

Tony held his hands up, shielding himself. "Hey, he got our car too!"

Trying to calm Kevin, Linda reached toward him. "It's okay-"

"Goddammit!" Kevin growled as he avoided her touch and ran for the front door.

"Geez..." Tony commented.

"Just let him go," Linda told Tony.

"I hope he's got insurance," Tony said.

Like a distraught spouse refusing to be restrained, Kevin tore the door open and rushed out. His loud barrage of profanities could even be heard from inside. The "family-friendly" real-estate champ had seemingly lost his mind.

While the others didn't quite react with such emphatic panic, they were just as uneasy. The driveway scene before them captured the visceral horror of a grisly car wreck. A car wreck of paranormal origin.

"It's crazy," Linda stated, almost in rapture. "Unbelievable..."

Breaking the tension, Bridget looked over at Amanda. "This is all him, isn't it?"

Amanda didn't say anything. But the overwhelming fear on her face gave Bridget enough of an answer.

"Fuck, man..." Tony muttered.

Standing near what was left of his truck, Kevin yelled and held up a large piece of glass. Straight off his truck's shiny windshield. Irate, he waved the glass toward the others as he screamed with the tenacity of a holy roller. No one in the house could really tell what he was saying, but he was definitely cussing.

"What's he doing?" Tony asked Linda.

Outside, Kevin hurled insults up into the sky. Presumably to God.

"Who knows..." Linda replied.

Still yelling profanities, Kevin gripped the shard tight. The piece slid deeper into Kevin's palm, drawing blood. Now in pain and pissed off, Kevin yelled even louder as he grabbed his bleeding hand and jumped around in bitter rage. His blood dripped all over the driveway, giving the wreckage the grotesque quality of a fatal car crash.

"Ouch..." Tony muttered.

Kevin hurled the glass toward the window, right toward his potential customers. Everyone jumped back.

"Whoa!" Tony yelled.

The shard banged off the window, leaving specks of Kevin's blood behind. It now resembled a red stained-glass window.

"Just look at him," the amused Linda said.

Clutching his bleeding wound, Kevin looked right at them, yelling at the top of his lungs. His cut hand more bloodied than an overused cast. Too bad no one could hear him.

Facing Kevin, Tony threw his arms up in confusion. "I can't hear you, man!" he yelled back.

Bridget grabbed Amanda's shoulder. "Has John always been like this? This violent?"

Behind her big green eyes, Amanda just looked at Bridget in confusion.

"Amanda, please," Bridget pleaded. "I know you said the violence was escalating in the videos. Tell me, is this normal? Is he getting worse?"

"It's never been this bad..." Amanda said meekly. "He's only gotten angrier. He's just..."

"More powerful," Bridget said. To her horror, she now realized the probable reason. The eerie epiphany.

Overhearing their conversation, the intrigued Linda looked over at the two women.

"Since we came here, the house has made him stronger," Bridget told Amanda.

"It's you," Linda said to Bridget.

Amanda and Bridget turned to see Linda approach them with uncontrollable excitement. Linda was back in mad scientist mode.

Bridget wanted to protest but couldn't. How could she? She knew Linda had made the ultimate connection between all these weird events.

"It's your gift, Bridget," Linda continued as she stopped in front of them. Her hands moved at a frenetic pace. "The house can feed off of it."

"So can John," Bridget commented.

"Yes," Linda said. "But my point is your abilities. The house senses it, it makes it stronger!"

Stunned, Amanda and Tony watched Linda step closer toward Bridget.

"With your gifts to see the other world, you helped accelerate the Christy house's power," Linda told the uneasy Bridget.

"Shit," Bridget said wearily. "I know. It's never happened..."

Linda rested her hand on Bridget's shoulder. "But that's not a bad thing-"

Breaking away from Linda, Bridget faced Amanda. "I'm sorry!" Bridget said. "I didn't mean to do this, but you really can't stay here! We have to find you a way to get out! To get away from John!"

Crippled by anxiety, Amanda couldn't say anything.

Bridget realized Amanda was back to her timid victim persona.

"But Bridget!" Linda interjected.

Bridget ensnared Amanda's arm in a tight grip, trying to convince her. "It isn't safe here, Amanda!" Bridget told her. Bridget faced the others. "It isn't safe for any of us! Not with me here."

"I can't," Amanda said quietly.

Bridget looked at her.

"We all know I can't leave," Amanda went on in defeat. "John won't give up. He'll find me. He'll find a way. You know that, Bridget."

"But we can't just stay here!" Bridget pleaded. She looked over at Tony and Linda. "None of us can! It's too dangerous!"

Neither of them responded, even though Linda struggled to hide her disappointment. They could tell Bridget was passionate, but most of all, they could tell she was being serious. Bridget wasn't ever this rattled. She was the tough cynic of the group.

Amanda snapped Bridget's wrist, startling Bridget. Bridget looked right into those endless green eyes.

"We don't have to go anywhere," Amanda said without so much as a stutter or stammer. She said it with resiliency and strength. A complete 360 from the meek Amanda that was there moments earlier, Bridget realized.

Linda flashed a grin. Her optimism that they were staying here restored.

Bridget wasn't sure what to make of Amanda's mood shift. "What?" Bridget asked Amanda, confused.

"I'm not leaving," Amanda responded. "Not now."

"But Amanda-"

A long-suffering prisoner finally fighting back, Amanda threw Bridget's hand back at her. "And I ain't leaving y'all here by yourselves either. I ain't running away anymore!"

Before Bridget could protest, Linda interrupted their confrontation. "Let her stay," Linda said.

Bridget glared at her. "Are you crazy! We can't do that!" She looked at the determined Amanda before looking to Tony for support.

Holding his hands up, Tony took a step back. "Hey, not my fight."

Outraged, Bridget faced Amanda. "Amanda, this is crazy!"

"I have no other choice," Amanda replied.

Linda grabbed Bridget's shoulder, making Bridget face her. "Bridget, please."

Bridget stepped away from Linda, glowering at her with uneasy eyes. "Linda, no! I'm not letting her-"

With the reckless abandonment of a rogue researcher, Linda lurched forward and grabbed Bridget by the shoulders. "Bridget, just listen to me! This is the closest we've ever come, don't you understand. This is our dream! What we've been wanting."

Like a lot of what Linda said, her reasoning made sense to Bridget. Even if Bridget didn't approve. After all, they had come a long way from the Tomberlin farm or the Howards mansion. They were in a real haunted house. With real activity. Their dream.

"With your gifts," Linda continued. "We can get whatever we want! We can get our greatest proof yet."

Bridget made direct eye contact with Tony. His unusually calm expression told her to give in. This is Ms. Kane's legacy, Bridget thought. And she knew Tony would go with whatever Linda said.

"Please, Bridget," Linda stated. "We can do this. Everything we've worked for is right here. In this house."

Trying to hide her uncertainty, Bridget faced Linda. "It's almost like you're using her as bait," Bridget noted.

"No-" Linda began.

Bridget pointed toward Amanda. "But you're putting her in danger."

"It's fine," Amanda proclaimed.

"Hell, you're putting us all in danger just for this!" Bridget told Linda. "You didn't see him like me or her have. You didn't feel his anger, his rage. He's dangerous, Linda!"

"I know," Linda replied, still calm about the situation.

"We might not even survive to get the damn proof," Bridget said.

"But it's worth the risk!" Linda's voice was much louder and stronger then. As if all the pain of her divorce and the frustrations of the failed ghost hunts culminated in her one adamant stance. Her statement single-handedly blanketed the room in tense silence.

Unable to suppress her disgust, Bridget avoided eye contact. Even Tony was surprised by Linda's dogged determination.

"It's okay, y'all," Amanda said. Her calm, stern tone commanded everyone's attention. "She's right. I'm fine just staying here and trying to help with everything."

Hating the idea, Bridget looked at her. "But you don't have to-"

"I want to," Amanda stated. She looked up at the security camera. "We'll give it the weekend like we planned." She gave Linda a bemused smile. "That should give you the show you're looking for."

"Thank you," Linda said dryly.

"It's not a good idea," Bridget told Amanda. "You told me you were scared. John's only gonna get more dangerous!"

Amanda confronted her. "So let him!" With fire in her eyes, she looked over at everyone, almost challenging them. "I'm settling this once and for all. We prove John's here then we'll figure out a way to get rid of his sorryass."

Bridget didn't like this. This was a death sentence, she thought. But what could she do? After all, it was Amanda's house and Linda's passion. Hell, Linda's funding was what brought them here in the first place.

"Fabulous," Linda beamed.

The front door burst open and slammed against the wall, scaring the shit out of everyone. But it wasn't John or any other ghost behind it. Just Kevin.

"Goddamn, man!" Tony yelled in anger.

Breathing heavy, Kevin leaned into the open doorway. "Y'all ain't gonna believe this!" he cried between exasperated gasps.

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Under the beaming sunlight, all the broken glass resembled gorgeous crystals. The cars themselves were hideous, turning the driveway into a junkyard.

The group all stood outside the wrought-iron gate opening, stunned. The gate was closed, but now it was locked. Thick chains wrapped around the gate while a huge padlock entrapped the chains together. Along with the roving cameras, such security made the Christy house into a Decatur County prison.

Frustrated, Kevin kicked the chains. "Fuck me..."

"I don't understand," Bridget said.

Trying to help, Tony pulled on the chains to no avail. They were big and locked tight. Not even this muscleman had a chance.

"Someone really wants us in," Linda said, some amusement in her voice.

Straining, Tony's hands, arms, and face turned a painful red. "God!" he yelled.

Amanda just stared at the padlock. No emotion in her eyes save for weary helplessness.

"Fuck!" Tony yelled in frustration as he stepped back and gave up on the task.

"Who could've done this?" Bridget asked everyone.

"I don't know," Kevin replied. He waved over at the damaged cars. "I came out here and saw all this shit."

"Obviously," Linda smirked.

Aggravated, Kevin pointed toward the fence. "And then I saw this! It's all fucking locked!"

"Does anyone have a key?" Bridget questioned.

"No, fuck no!" Kevin replied. He pointed at the padlock. "I've never even seen this shit. How the fuck are we supposed to get out now!"

"It's John," Amanda said, her stoic eyes still staring on at the chains.

The others looked over at Amanda, both interested and fearful of what she had to say. Amanda had the spotlight again.

"He's keeping us here." With weary defeat, she finally looked at the others. "He wants us trapped here just like me and the kids were."

Bridget started to walk up to her. "Amanda-

Amanda stepped back, avoiding her. "Don't touch me."

"Look, maybe we shouldn't stay after all," a dejected Kevin said. "This is a little much."

Adamant, Linda gave him a shove. "No! We've come too far to quit now."

Bridget confronted her. "But it's suicide, Ms. Kane! Amanda's already been attacked, John destroyed our cars. We can't stay here like this! He's just toying with us!"

"So he's toying with us," Linda said calmly. "So what'd you expect. He's a ghost." She motioned toward Amanda. "If Amanda's fine with it, I see no reason why we should leave."

Caught between a sell and a hard place, Kevin bit his lip. And his tongue.

"Linda, come on," Bridget pleaded. "We have enough evidence-

Linda scoffed. "No, we don't! We don't have shit!" Full of jaded anger, she motioned behind the gates, toward the neighborhood. "You've see how people are! They mock us, Bridget, and I've had enough of it!" She stepped closer toward Bridget, getting eye-to-eye with her favorite clairvoyant. "We're not leaving without proof. Definitive proof."

Upset, Bridget hesitated. "Linda, we can always come back."

"No. This is it. We have everything now."

"Look, we'll find more places," Bridget protested. "I know we can." Looking for support, Bridget looked over at Tony. "Won't we, Tony? Just tell her!"

Noticing Linda's staunch glare bearing down on him, Tony didn't respond. He was caught between his two partners.

"Tony, come on!" Bridget pleaded. "Nothing's been right since we came here! This shit's too dangerous! I can feel it! John's not gonna stop."

"I'll be fine," Amanda said with some annoyance.

"No!" Bridget snapped at Amanda. "You won't be, none of us will be. We need to call the police and find a way to get the Hell outta here."

"Just let her do it, Bridget," Tony chimed in. He kept his demeanor calm and collected, hoping to keep the tempers down between Linda and Bridget.

Bridget stared right at him. She knew he'd never wish to pick between them. He needed them, and they needed him. The team a ragtag support group.

"It's what we've always wanted," Tony reiterated. He looked over at the pleased Linda. "Especially her. Let's do it for Ms. Kane."

"Thank you, Tony," Linda said appreciatively. "This isn't all for me either. I'd have never gotten this far without you two. We did this together. As a team I might add."

Annoyed by their stubbornness, Bridge avoided eye contact. Don't ask the expert here, she thought to herself.

"And we can't let John tear us apart," Linda continued. "We can overcome this house as long as we stick together."

Feeling Linda's gaze hone in on her, Bridget forced a weak smile for her.

"This is history," Linda said as she caressed Bridget's shoulder. "With your power and Amanda's willingness, we'll see things no other paranormal researchers have ever documented. This is what we've been waiting for years, Bridget. To prove the paranormal to the people who've doubted us and questioned you! We're not letting this slip away. Not now!"

"I'm in," Amanda reassured Linda.

Tony and Bridget looked toward Amanda and her confident grin.

Kevin intervened, "I still don't think this is fair to-"

Not missing a beat, Linda faced him real quick. "I'll pay the full listing."

Shifting gears quickly, Kevin looked straight at Amanda. "What do you think, Amanda? You on for one more night?"

"That was our original agreement," Amanda said. She locked eyes with the uncertain Bridget. "One more night it is."

CHAPTER 11

The afternoon's arrival was a welcome sight for only two people in the group: Linda and Amanda. As the minutes ticked by, both of them grew more excited for what was in store once nightfall struck.

All the while, Bridget had no idea what to make of Amanda's balancing act between outright terror and vindictive confidence. Either way, this Saturday night looked to be the culmination of Linda's many explorations. Or possibly the culmination of the house's long-standing history of horror.

Too full of childish excitement to be scared away, Linda sat with Kevin at the kitchen table. A huge bandage covered Kevin's sliced palm. Maybe a little more than was necessary for such a small wound.

Together, the two of them hammered out the details on this forthcoming sale. Kevin talked faster than usual, his voice speed rivaled only by how quickly he was jotting down notes on a scrap sheet of paper. Even with the large bandage, Kevin could write at breakneck speed, the potential payout apparently alleviating the pain.

Rather than debonair salesman, Kevin looked to be playing the part of calculating professional. "Now you've seen the security tapes," he said.

Linda sat across from him, bored. She didn't like *this* Kevin.

"Something broke those windows out there," Kevin went on. "The cars, the gates. It's some kind of force. An evil spirit." He was too caught up in his epic "negotiating" to notice Linda's unhappiness. He had the same excitement for dollar signs that she had for haunted houses.

Slightly annoyed, Linda unleashed a not-so-quiet groan. "Yes, I'm aware."

"To have it on tape like that," Kevin continued. "This is proof just like I told you." Excited, he scribbled down more notes.

"Yes," Linda muttered.

Grinning like a schoolboy, Kevin looked up at the displeased Linda. "Now remember, Ms. Kane, it's three full acres now."

Fed-up with the "pitch" agony, Linda leaned toward him. "Oh, Jesus, stop with the Ms. Kane bullshit," she pleaded.

Kevin forced a smile. "I'm just trying to-"

Linda leaned in even closer, crashing his personal space with palpable seduction. "Linda, *Mister Riley*."

Charmed, Kevin released a chuckle. "Sorry."

The laugh was genuine, and Linda knew it. "There we go," she said as she cradled Kevin's hand. "Now we've got all day tomorrow to finish this sale."

"Right..." Kevin commented, not sure if he lied where this was going.

Linda squeezed his hand. "So let's just enjoy tonight, shall we," she proposed in a voice barely more audible than a gentle whisper.

In a corner, Tony leaned against the kitchen counter, awkward as ever. He looked up from his phone just in time to see Linda stick her tongue out toward Kevin in a frisky manner. "Uh, guys," Tony interrupted.

Linda looked up at him real quick, a carefree smile on her face. "Yes, Tony?"

Worried, Tony took a step toward them. "Shouldn't we like call a cop or something? At least to-"

"A cop?" Linda asked incredulously as she stood up.

Remaining seated, Kevin held up the papers in his non-wounded hand. "Um, Linda, we still have more paperwork."

"Ms. Kane, please," Tony started. "Just to be safe."

"No!" Linda yelled. She walked toward Tony, making him cower with each ferocious step. "More people, especially police, would only scare John away! You know this, Tony!" She looked right at the silent Tony. Her seriousness reached intimidating levels. "Calling the cops, it'd only threaten all that we've worked for so far. All that we've found."

Tony avoided eye contact, but didn't argue back. A begrudging acceptance of Linda's strategy.

"We have to do this on our own," Linda reassured him. "Like always."

"Yeah, just relax, buddy," a smug Kevin told Tony.

Tony glared at him. He only took shit from Linda and Bridget. "Hey, you're not the one sleeping on the Goddamn couch!" Tony snapped back at Kevin.

Nervous, Kevin looked to Linda for support.

Linda just shook her head at Kevin as she walked toward the table. "Put the damn papers down," Linda commanded Kevin.

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It was another hot day outside. The wind was practically non-existent. The driveway still a hot mess.

In the garden, Amanda proceeded with her daily routine. Sweating, Amanda yanked the long-handled spade out the soil, lifting up heavy dirt.

Bridget stood nearby, watching Amanda hard at work. Bridget would've offered to help, but Amanda seemed to be the solo type. Bridget's non-expertise "help" would've probably only pissed Amanda off, Bridget figured. She'd only make the garden of Eden look worse.

At least hanging around the garden gave Bridget the opportunity to have these candid moments with Amanda. It was a way to observe and interact with Amanda without an audience or the house to influence her. Amanda at home. In her element.

Amanda placed several seeds into the fresh hole. She wiped her brow as she gazed up at the blistering sun. "Another hot one, huh," she said aloud.

"Yeah," Bridget replied as she followed Amanda's gaze up toward the sun. Even minus the heavy strain of garden work, Bridget was still sweating under the intense light. "Sure is."

Amanda smiled at her. "It took me awhile to get used to the heat."

"Atlanta wasn't hot enough for you?"

"Not like this." Amanda evaluated her garden. It was impressive as always. Pristine even. "I think Stanwyck's something else."

"I can tell," the amused Bridget said.

Amanda faced Bridget. "Where are you from anyway? You never told me."

Not enjoying the barrage of questions, Bridget hesitated. "Los Angeles." Somehow, Amanda had ended up putting her back on the spot again, Bridget thought. She was good at turning tables.

"Oh wow..." Amanda said, impressed.

"I got family from the South though," Bridget added. She looked off at the Christy home. Even if she was scared of it, she couldn't resist stealing another look at the two-story glory. The morbid glory. "I lived in Louisiana until I was about five."

Taking a deserved break, Amanda sat on the ground. "New Orleans??"

Bridget smiled at her. "Yeah."

"No shit!"

"Yeah, the one and only," Bridget joked. She stole another look back at the Christy house. Like a siren, the home seemed to call her with its eerie power. "A little cliché I guess."

"So what?" Amanda commented. "That city's legendary, man."

Weird sensations ran through Bridget's head. Cringing, she rubbed her temple. The sensations were brief yet vivid. A migraine populated by screeches and a murky deep voice.

Not noticing Bridget's distress, Amanda stared on at her life's work of a garden. "I think coming from some place like that gave you that power." She scraped the spade along the dirt, lost in thought. "Yeah, that's what I think."

Bridget's migraine finally went away. Bridget ran a hand through her hair, relieved to be back at a hundred percent.

"Or at least it helped you learn how to handle it," Amanda went on. She smiled up at Bridget. "I imagine you saw some crazy shit growing up out there on the bayou. They got some pretty mean spirits I hear."

Bridget flashed a weak smile. "They're not all mean."

Amanda chuckled.

"But I started seeing them while I was out there. It was my grandmother who sort of taught me first. They told me grandmama had the power like me. She ended up passing away before I moved." Bridget hesitated, the nostalgia getting to her. "Then she came back to me. She really showed me how to put my talents to good use. She taught me everything." Bridget released an awkward laugh. "I thought I was crazy, and sometimes I still do. But grandmama told me not to be scared, girl. That's how she'd say it. And for the most part it isn't scary at all. She was right."

"Until now?" Amanda asked dryly.

Through her romanticized reflections, Bridget cracked a nervous smirk. "It's not usually like this," she said. "Most of the spirits I see are kind. They only want to be heard. To have someone listen to them."

"John likes to be heard," Amanda quipped.

"Indeed."

As the two women went silent, Amanda looked over toward the house. Instantly, Amanda lost her smile and sarcasm. "There's nothing but pure evil in there," she said harshly. "I know John wasn't always like this. There's no way." She paused, too stuck in her painful memories and in her own regret. "The house only made him worse. It brought out his evil side. His problems..." Amanda faced Bridget with a melancholy expression. "All the awful things he had in him."

Concerned, Bridge took a step into the garden. "I know." She caressed Amanda's shoulder. "But you can't keep blaming yourself for his problems, Amanda."

Amanda stared at her, Amanda's inner pain and torment shining through on her somber expression.

"You know what he's capable of," Bridget went on. "You and I've both seen it. So why are we staying here? Why-"

"It's fine," Amanda interrupted coldly. In a violent coda, she stuck her spade deep into the dirt.

"But Amanda, he's after you specifically," Bridget said.

Battling her inner fear, Amanda just stared at the spade. She was stuck between listening to Bridget's rational concern and wanting to confront the personal demon that was John Baker.

"You're his target!" Bridget reiterated.

In a quick burst, Amanda stood up and looked right at Bridget. "And he's been after me," Amanda said harshly.

Bridget went silent. She wasn't looking to anger Amanda or test her anymore. Not with how far their relationship had come. After all, Bridget had started to respect Amanda's toughness. Even when Amanda was constantly running the gauntlet of her Rolodex of emotions.

"None of that's gonna change if I just up and leave," Amanda said. "If I just run away like I keep doing. I need to stay and see this through. I need to."

Both women were silent. Amanda's voice was too stern for Bridget to protest. Bridget felt she needed space.

Lost in thought, Amanda glanced down at the spade. "This house," Amanda began, finally breaking the tense silence. She looked at Bridget. "It has all this history, right?"

"Yeah," Bridget answered, not avoiding eye contact. Bridget's way of showing Amanda respect was by giving Amanda her full and undivided attention. Bridget wanted to help. The first time Bridget had had sympathy for someone besides Linda or Tony in quite some time.

"Like a bunch of baggage," Amanda said.

"Correct," Bridget replied without hesitation. Bridget's demeanor showed off the quiet confidence this paranormal expert always had when discussing her field. Similar to Amanda and her garden.

"Didn't y'all do all that research?"

"We did. I actually did more than Linda. I spent weeks looking it up."

"So what really went down with the Christys?" Amanda asked, her curiosity tinged with a sense of dread. "What really happened here?"

Teasing Amanda to lighten the somber mood, Bridget gave her a sly grin. "I thought you already knew?"

Amanda revealed an awkward smirk. "Well, I've heard bits and pieces." She looked over at the house. An ominous home possessing the lonely and eerie aura of castles from horror lore. "But never the whole story."

Bridget took a casual step toward her. "You sure you wanna know?"

Emphatic, Amanda looked right at her. "Yes!"

Bridget paused, preparing herself for sharing the gruesome details.

"Tell me," Amanda said softly.

Bridget gave the house a quick glance. It was still there. Still creepy. "The murders happened on a Sunday back in ninety-five," Bridget stated. "It's... it's kinda strange honestly."

"What do you mean?"

Trying to be respectful to both Amanda and the dead, Bridget debated on how to word it. "How you described what John did. The rage he felt." Contemplative, she stepped toward the house, her eyes drawn to it. "Steven Christy was said to be like that. He was like a man possessed." The house and its larger windows seemed to glare right back at Bridget... The house not liking her sharing its deep, dark secrets. "The brutality of it all. He was just engulfed in rage."

Nervous, Amanda watched Bridget. The descriptions all felt too familiar.

Bridget confronted Amanda. "It was just like you said about John." She thought about her own visions of John. His manic terror. His wild eyes. His voice the unsettling roar. The visual would forever remain engraved in Bridget's deepest, darkest fears. "It was like I saw him. How he was in the hallway. A man possessed by rage."

Simultaneously disturbed and fascinated, Amanda stepped right up to Bridget. All while the house lurked behind them, watching the two women from a distance. "How'd he do it, exactly?" Amanda asked awkwardly.

Keeping her cool and professional demeanor, Bridget answered in typical matter-of-factly manner. "From what I gathered, it was nasty. Real nasty." She hesitated, giving Amanda time to prepare. "I mean the crime scene photos is just toys and magazines covered in blood. Blood all over the floor, all over the walls. This is what his wife Mallory walked into that evening. She was completely unaware of what had happened."

Amanda turned her attention back to the house. The house of so many tragedies. She let Bridget's calm voice drift into her mind. Bridget's narration deliberate for this all-too-real podcast.

"They say she even stepped on one of the murder weapons," Bridget went on in her clear, concise tone. "A hacksaw I believe." Now even Bridget's voice was starting to show the discomfiting fear she was always trying to hide. "That's when it dawned on her what had happened. The pure, sad horror. She saw her twins Shelley and Alice right there on the couch. They were just lying there, both of them slumped over. Dead. Steven had tied them up earlier and put duct tape over their mouths. Right before he finished them off with the hacksaw. It was one of the kinds you had to push too. It took effort to use that saw, and

God, those girls suffered with every slice and hack he gave them. Their deaths were drawn out, full of agony. They couldn't do anything as he sliced deeper into them so slowly."

The disturbed Amanda cringed.

"All those cuts were so deep. A lot of their skin was just peeled off like they were filleted." Even Bridget struggled to continue. Understandable horror in her voice. "The bastard had even used his own handyman tools. He'd used the saw, and he'd jammed this wrench. This sharp, compact wrench straight into Shelley's head. It was the hit that ended her misery. But Alice wasn't so lucky..."

"Jesus," Amanda commented, mortified by the story.

Bridget followed Amanda's gaze over toward the Christy home. The All-American haunting. Never had such quaint prettiness been so horrifying, thought Bridget. The bright colors had the misleading appeal of an alluring trap. "Alice finally passed when he sawed into her throat." Bridget now had to prepare herself for the rest of this. "At one point, they believed the saw got stuck in there before Steven ripped it out. It took the coroner days to remove all the flesh from the blade."

Struggling to keep her level-headed expression, Bridget faced Amanda. "With the twins, they were both still wearing their church dresses," Bridget began. "Mallory and them had gone earlier that day, but Steven didn't go. He stayed home, in the house. And when Mallory came home that evening from the grocery store, both her little girls had been tied together. They were tied up with the same ropes, bound together like conjoined twins. And they were killed together. They had to watch each other suffer at the hands of their own father." She grabbed Amanda's shoulder, making Amanda's timid face look straight at her. "They watched his madness take over."

"God..." Amanda said in horror.

"They watched the slaughter."

"I'm sorry. Fuck..." Amanda struggled to say. Bridget's chilling words painted horrifying visuals for Amanda's rattled mind.

"After seeing that scene, Mallory was alone and crying and helpless," Bridget continued. "She didn't have a chance."

Amanda struggled to fight back frightened tears. Bridget's descriptions signaled memories of Amanda's own helplessness at the hands of John.

"He made sure she didn't," Bridget stated. "Steven had changed all the locks while she was gone. He made sure he could trap his family in the house. That they would never leave." Bridget hesitated. Her attempt at restraining her emotions was falling apart. "They ended up finding blood on the doorknobs. Bloody handprints on the windows. Mallory wasn't getting out of there alive."

Amanda looked away in sadness. She dreaded hearing about Mallory's fate, but had to. She felt a kinship to Mallory. Two tormented wives and mothers. The only difference was Amanda was still alive. Even if just barely alive.

"Steven ambushed her with a power drill," Bridget said. "He chased her around the house with it, knowing good and well she couldn't have escaped. He was naked the entire time. It was savage and brutal. It was like he was doing a ritualistic slaying." Bridget's voice showed fear she couldn't suppress no longer. "They believed he was even naked when he killed the little girls." She had to stop... even though she'd heard this story and had even explained it in her droll play-play-by manner to Linda. But this was different. She felt uneasy and guilty for describing the brutal account in front of a survivor like Amanda. Not just a survivor, but Mallory's spiritual descendant. And through Amanda's horrified expression, Bridget could tell Amanda wanted to hear more. She had to hear what happened to Mallory Christy.

"Steven chased her into the hallway where he cornered her," Bridget went on. Combined with her guilt, the gut-wrenching story itself had completely gutted Bridget's usually-sarcastic attitude. She had the tormented weariness of a detective exposed to sights and acts that would consume the souls of anyone. "Then he killed her in brutal and sick fashion." Bridget struggled to keep eye contact, having difficulty looking Amanda right in her disturbing eyes. "He lowered the drill straight into the top of her head, and he did it without hesitation. None of the flying grey matter or blood seemed to bother him one bit."

Mesmerized by the sheer horror of the tale, Amanda didn't say a word.

"This was no longer Steven Christy, family man," Bridget said in quiet fear. "This was the house."

Still disturbed, Bridget and Amanda just kept staring at one another. The horrific murders. The gory details. All of it was stewing in their collective subconscious.

"They found the Christys the following morning," Bridget said. "Steven' naked body was covered in blood and stray flesh. The blood of his children smeared on him like Goddamn warpaint. And Mallory. God, her head was just a crater of splattered flesh. It was unrecognizable. One cop described it as looking like a swollen, bleeding dartboard."

Gasping, Amanda turned away.

"Most of the reports I read all seemed to simplify it as just a murder/suicide," Bridget said. "None of them didn't even mention that Steven was naked or how he believed his wife and kids were demons. They never mentioned the house's power over him."

Amanda looked right at Bridget, concerned. "But why!"

"The police all just believed Steven was pressured by financial problems," Bridget stated. "They said it made him revert back to his past mental problems."

Shocked, Amanda staggered up to her. "Like John?"

Bridget nodded. She could've sworn she saw Amanda's heart literally sink. "Steven'd even briefly stayed in a mental hospital in his twenties."

"Oh my God..."

"It's a lot of similarities between him and John. Maybe just coincidences, but I don't know, Amanda," Bridget stated. She did her best to stay rational and calm, even in the face of such convincing paranormal evidence. "I know John had his issues-"

"But you know it's more than that!" Amanda yelled. She snatched Bridget's arm, begging her. "It's the house! It always was!"

"I know," Bridget said. Once more, unsettled emotions were starting to crack through her subdued tone. "I know it's gotta be something more than him."

Glad to have her support, Amanda loosened her grip on Bridget's arm.

Playing the supportive therapist, Bridget kept her eye contact with Amanda. "I wasn't sure at first, but it's too clear now. Every moment in that house, it just gets weirder."

Amanda remained focused on Bridget, processing every word. Bridget wasn't even sure if she saw Amanda blink.

"What that house did to Steven, it did to John," Bridget stated.

The gravity of Bridget's statement resonated well with Amanda. "I know," Amanda said. She took a step back. "I know it made him change the minute we stepped foot in that house! He wasn't the same, none of us were!"

"It's true."

"It made him go crazy!" Amanda screamed.

Trying to soothe Amanda, Bridget held a calm hand out toward her. "I know, Amanda."

Trembling, Amanda stood still, her breakdown accelerating faster than a jet plane. "But I couldn't do anything! What the Hell was I supposed to do! I didn't know it'd change him like that... I didn't know he'd kill Michael and Amy! That it was gonna make him kill us!"

"I know, Amanda. You couldn't have known." Calmer than a suicide negotiator (or at least pretending to be), Bridget stopped right in front of Amanda. "No one's blaming you now." She gave Amanda a gentle hug and rubbed her back. "No one could after what happened. You couldn't do anything."

Amanda held back her tears. She looked over at her garden, desperate for the serene sight to offer her some sort of therapy.

"I'm sorry how I was at first," Bridget said. She stepped away from Amanda and looked at her. "I was too suspicious with these things. Doing this kind of work for so long, dealing with so many assholes... it just wears you down after awhile."

"No," Amanda said quietly. "I understand."

Bridget gave her a smile. "People dispute me as much as they do you."

"Yeah..."

"I think that's what makes us work," Bridget said. "You and me have to fight to be heard. For people to believe us."

"I shouldn't have to," Amanda said with bitterness. "Not after what happened."

"You're right. And I'm sorry, I really am." The apologetic Bridget walked up to Amanda. "I guess my case is a little different."

Seeing Bridget's obvious remorse, Amanda quashed her pissy attitude. "It's fine."

"No... I just... I deal with assholes who prejudge me for what I do," Bridget confessed. She knew she held Amanda's intrigued gaze. "And for what I look like. But it's not quite the same."

She grabbed a hold of Amanda's hand in a supportive grip. Amanda looked at her, surprised yet moved by the gesture.

"It's not the same as losing someone you love," Bridget continued. "And I don't know why, but I now realize that."

Caught up in her emotions, Amanda hesitated. She was apprehensive about Bridget, but who else could she believe? Who else had been this genuinely sympathetic to her plight? "Well, thank you. Thank you, Bridget."

Bridget let go of Amanda's hand. She gave Amanda a soft smile, a non-verbal way of saying she was there for Amanda.

Amanda didn't really know how to react to that. Bridget hadn't had much social success outside of her ventures with Linda and Tony, and it showed. So the idea of saying "I'm here for you" was a little more complicated for her than say interacting with ghosts. Needless to say, these problems could be traced back to her erratic childhood. All the way back to when Bridget first discovered her unique skill set.

The two women were silent out there by the garden, still recovering from the emotional confrontation. Neither one of them seemed sure where to go or what to do. Bridget awkward from her years of paranormal investigations, Amanda traumatized from her most recent horrors.

Struggling to say what was on her mind, Bridget followed Amanda's gaze over toward the Christy house. She could see the fear and intrigue in Amanda's eyes. Amanda had the same morbid fascination for

the home as a child had for the monstrous animals at the zoo. Simultaneously scared and excited. "I guess I should tell you there was someone else," Bridget finally said.

Curious, Amanda looked right at her. "What?"

Bridget motioned toward the house. "Someone else lived here. Decades before the Christys moved in."

Shock dominated Amanda's face. "No... how? I ain't heard anything. I thought Steven Christy was-

"Ms. Kane did some more research on it."

Speechless and stunned, Amanda just stared at Bridget.

"She found out the original homeowner was this doctor," Bridget went on. "Dr. Carpenter."

"Dr. Carpenter?" Amanda said in confused fear.

"They called him the Doctor Of Death."

"Doctor Of Death..." Amanda stated it with the frightening reverence such a name deserved. A moniker intended to evoke the queasy unease and shock-fueled fright that such an exploitative name promised.

Not missing a beat, Bridget went on like a dutiful news reporter. "This all happened in the early fifties. Dr. Artis Carpenter... he was a big name in Stanwyck. He'd been working at the hospital for ten years, but no one knew what he was doing. No one really caught on until much later, that is."

"What happened?"

Focusing on Amanda, Bridget looked right into her eyes. "It turns out he'd been killing his patients."

"Are you fucking kidding me..." Disgust flowed with the nervous trepidation in Amanda's voice.

"No one really knew at first, but the numbers just kept growing," Bridget said. "The wrong procedures, the wrong prescriptions. Patients dying mysteriously under his watch."

"Did anyone do anything about it?"

Bridget shook her head. "No, they decided to keep it quiet. It wasn't a cover-up really, but no one wanted to dig into it because of his reputation and family. His name."

"Fucking sick pieces of shit!" Amanda spouted.

"Dr. Carpenter was a major part of the community," Bridget explained. "He was a family man, a churchgoer. He was always handing out donations. He was the hometown kid of Stanwyck."

Amanda didn't say anything. She was pissed yet the story was compelling.

With a historian's passion, Bridget motioned toward the house. "He'd built this house a year before they finally caught him. They'd caught him red-handed giving an old woman a deadly dose of morphine."

"Wow..." Amanda exclaimed.

"Yeah, she was a big socialite in town."

Amanda stared off at the house, her eyes really honing in on it. "What'd they do to him?" she asked. She looked over at Bridget. "Did they just let him walk?"

Keeping her serious poise, Bridget took a step toward Amanda. "No," Bridget stated. She stole a glance at the Christy home. The house seemed to invite both her gaze and soul. "All the local bigwigs and police went and talked to him in private. They didn't wanna make a big scene out of it... through it all, they still seemed to respect him. After all, it was Dr. Artis. He'd treated their kids and given them lollipops. He'd sponsored a Little League team. He was one of the good guys."

Amanda scoffed.

"They talked to him, but somewhere during that interview, he apparently lost it. He claimed he was only killing off the wicked. The "demons" as he saw them." Bridget faced Amanda. "They didn't buy it, of course. And the sad thing is they probably would've bought any old excuse if he had just played dumb." With only cynicism and not a trace of sarcasm, Bridget looked toward the gate, looking off at the neighborhood. "This was Stanwyck. They didn't want to believe Dr. Artis was a cold-hearted killer."

Intrigued, Amanda grabbed Bridget's shoulder with the force of a fan wanting to hear their favorite storyteller's next word. "So what'd they do to him? Did his family know about this? Did they know all along?"

Bridget hesitated, too scared of what the answer to question number three could be. "I don't know, honestly. But as for Artis... well, the police had to do something. But they were respectful. They were gentle to this particular killer."

Amanda didn't react to this slice of sarcasm.

"To save his family and his own reputation, the police gave Artis an option," Bridget continued. "The only way he could save them from what his horrible acts would bring. The only way to stop the story from going public."

Anxious, Amanda looked over at the garden, wanting to avoid eye contact. But Bridget's eyes never left her.

"They found Dr. Artis hanging in his basement the following morning," Bridget said. "The press reported it as just a tragedy. A mindless suicide." She looked back at the house, some hint of melancholy descending into her distant eyes. "No one ever reported what he actually did."

Timid, Amanda looked at Bridget.

"Instead, his crimes were largely forgotten," Bridget continued. "The "Doctor Of Death" title he deserved only came to exist in urban legends and local rumors." She looked right at Amanda, further frightening Amanda with her intensity. "Even though it was all true."

Stuttering on her fear, Amanda struggled to talk. "So it's him? It was him all along."

"I think so," Bridget replied with confidence. "I saw him down there in the basement."

"Shit," Amanda said in fright.

"I know I did. I think I've heard him too."

Overcome in fear, Amanda looked toward the ground. She was a helpless and pitiful sight. An anxious gardener.

Trying to reassure Amanda, Bridget rubbed her shoulder. "That's not it though, I'm afraid." Bridget made sure to keep her voice at a soft, gentle clip. She knew the eerie truth was already too much for Amanda. But then again, this would all be too much for anybody, Bridget realized.

Dread in those green eyes, Amanda faced her.

"He left his family one dying request," Bridget said. "Dr. Carpenter's final wish."

"What was it?" Amanda asked.

"He had his wife dissect his corpse before the cops arrived. Her and the children. They smeared his blood over each and every wall in that house."

Speechless, Amanda's horrified expression said it all.

Bridget lowered her hand away from Amanda's shoulder and took an uneasy step backward. "It was a fucking red paint job," she stated. "It was everywhere. Dr. Carpenter's wife, their two children. They did all this willingly."

"No fucking way..."

"The police got there and found the body. But they didn't wanna say anything. I mean they couldn't. So it was just a suicide. That's it... hardly any crime scene photos were ever made public."

Haunted by the story, Amanda looked back at the house. It loomed in the distance. Always beckoning her curious eyes. "It's like he never left," she said in a weak voice.

"Exactly," Bridget said. "The walls must've soaked up his evil. All of his malevolence." She glowered at the house. "His fucking spirit."

Bitter tears slid down Amanda's face. "The Doctor Of Death," she said in quiet anger.

Bridget pointed toward the house. "He's still in there, Amanda! It's him that's in that fucking house!"

Amanda glared at Bridget.

"He's the one who possessed John and now he's after you!" Bridget yelled.

Outraged, Amanda snatched Bridget's arm. She looked right into her eyes with those stunning green irises. From wounded victim to pissed-off Southern Belle in a split second. "Why didn't you tell me from the start!" she screamed.

Out of shame, Bridget didn't say anything.

"Why!" Amanda yelled.

Bridget caved in. "We weren't sure if it was true at first," Bridget said defensively.

"This whole time we were living with the Doctor Of Death!"

"We didn't know!" Bridget replied. "Plus we didn't want to freak you out anymore or..." She paused, trying to think of how to say her next reason.

"Or what!"

"We didn't want you trying to act anything out. Like play along with the story, pretend you were seeing him. You get what I'm saying."

"I know."

Battling guilt, Bridget looked over at the Christy house. Even just standing there with innocent indifference, the house seemed to intimidate her. Teasing her with all the horror she'd seen within it. And all the horror that awaited them. Bridget reflected on her experiences for a moment. "Because I didn't tell you anything, I knew you were telling the truth when I saw him," Bridget said. "I saw his body. I knew he was there, I knew it was him." She faced Amanda. "I knew the legends were true."

Calmer, Amanda let go of Bridget's arm. Bridget's sincerity was obvious. Behind the cynicism and sarcasm, Bridget cared.

"You see, this house," Bridget went on. "The evil in it. All of it mixes together." She grabbed a hold of Amanda's hand, wanting her full attention. "Think of it like timelines. Or a time warp!"

"What do you mean?" Amanda asked, the house's lore both scaring and puzzling her.

"Every traumatic incident that happened here is trapped inside those walls forever."

"How..."

"Think about it," Bridget went on with a passionate fervor. "Artis hanging himself, the Christy family massacre."

The horror overwhelming her, Amanda looked away.

Persuasive, Bridget pulled on Amanda's hand, making Amanda look right at her. "John and the children."

"No!" Amanda tried to break away. The legends were making her panic in a freak out of madness.

Bridget grabbed her by the shoulders. "Amanda, it's why we keep seeing them. Why we keep hearing them! Their spirits are trapped inside that house. Where all the evil occurred. Artis's evil. It'll always live on in there."

Amanda looked right at her focused eyes. "He got into John, didn't he," Amanda said.

"It's Artis's spirit!" Bridget proclaimed. "It permeates through the living. People like John or Steven, they were easier for him to take over because of their pasts. He can influence them-"

"Oh God!" Amanda cried in anguish as she staggered away, breaking away from Bridget.

The concerned Bridget reached toward her. "Amanda."

Fighting off tears of regret, Amanda confronted her, stopping Bridget in her tracks with the stare of a broken woman. "I should've known! I could've saved them, I could've gotten us out of this house!"

"You couldn't have known, Amanda. No one would."

"No, I knew it! Deep down, I knew something was changing him!"

Bridget shook her, trying to snap Amanda out of this overemotional hysteria. "No, you couldn't, Amanda! I promise! There was no way!"

Amanda's frenzied eyes stared right at Bridget. She was trying to yell more, but Bridget's stern demeanor kept her in check.

"The story was hidden so deep," Bridget continued. "Hardly anyone knows about Dr. Carpenter living here, much less his killing spree. Hell, no one probably would've believed you anyway. You didn't even know about the Christys." She caressed Amanda's shoulder with a gentle touch. "The whole house's built off of secrets and lies. You couldn't have told anyone or moved John out of that house. It had him under control, and once it did, there was no going back."

"I should've tried though," Amanda stated with sadness. "I could've..."

"I'm sorry," Bridget said. Sincere, she squeezed Amanda's shoulder in a soothing grip. "But there was nothing you could do, Amanda. No one told you the truth about this place." With comforting calmness, Bridget let go of Amanda's shoulder. "None of you had a chance."

Her nerves relaxing, Amanda nodded.

"We're all here with you now," Bridget said. "Just one more night and you'll be out of here for good." She gave Amanda a warm smile that offset the suffocating fear of their current situation. "Then you can leave all this behind. The evil, the memories." She glanced over at the Christy place. "The house."

"But what if he follows me?" Amanda asked, visible unease still present in her veins.

Bridget turned and faced her, pondering the question.

"You said it earlier," Amanda went on in a trembling voice. "John wants me. He's not gonna stop even if I leave. He's gonna keep coming after me."

"I think there's a way to break that," Bridget replied.

"What?" Amanda asked, vague hope shining through her ever-present anxiety.

Bridget hesitated. She wanted to sound confident even if she wasn't a hundred percent certain. "Just think of it like closure."

"What do you mean-"

"Look, just hear me out," Bridget interjected. She did her best to showcase her demeanor as the leading authority on all things paranormal. Or at least she wanted to sound like it. Her constant, excited hand gestures were a nice selling point. "In order to move on and get away from John's spirit, I think you have to have this final night. You have to stand up for yourself! Like you were saying."

The words stuck with Amanda. Bridget could tell she was intrigued. And not just because it was hope that she could escape an evil spirit. Amanda resembled a woman being introduced to the concept of self-sufficiency. Like a 1940s housewife being exposed to radical feminism for the very first time.

"I told you everything about the house," Bridget stated. "You know the legends, the stories. I think that by understanding all that, you can at least face John one last time. You know what he is. What caused this to happen."

"I know," Amanda said quietly.

Bridget placed her hand back on Amanda's shoulder as she leaned in closer. "It wasn't your fault. Just remember that, Amanda. It wasn't your fault. You can let go of that guilt and stop blaming yourself. Then you can fight back. You won't be afraid of him, he can't hurt you."

Hesitant, Amanda looked over at the house with a little less dread than usual. "Do you think it'll work?"

"I think it's worth a shot," Bridget quickly replied, masking her uncertainty quite well. "You can stay and fight back. Stand up for yourself and face him."

"Easier said than done," Amanda stated. She confronted the Christy home once more. The sight of John's spirit. The sight of the torment. The sight of her worst memories. "But it's my only choice. I knew that all along."

"It's just one night." Bridget rubbed Amanda's shoulder, reassuring her with the encouragement of a life-long friend rather than professional psychiatrist. "I'll be right there with you."

The two were silent for a moment. "It's time I did it," Amanda said, her eyes never straying from the house. "I need to say goodbye."

*

The kitchen was quiet. No longer the scene of a developing Kevin Riley deal or of a Linda Kane rationale for why the paranormal investigation should go on. Instead, Tony Winston sat there all alone at the kitchen table, his back to the kitchen doorway. A half-eaten tray of cookies lied on the table in front of him. Stale cookies at that. In fact, all the dinners at the Christy home had been nothing more than canned goods and out-of-date snacks. Remnants from Amanda's family life. She wasn't ever in the mood to cook anymore. Not that it mattered much to Bridget, Kevin, or Linda since they all had more important things to occupy their minds via ghost hunts and business negotiations. Apparently, Tony was the only one clamoring for a real meal.

At this point in the evening, Tony wasn't so much bored as he was restless. Kevin and Linda had disappeared on him, and he wasn't really sure if he wanted to know where the two lovebirds went. But still... being left alone anywhere in the Goddamn Christy house wasn't exactly comforting either.

Doing his best to stay distracted from whatever lurked around him, Tony scrolled Reddit on his phone. Idiotic GIFS of idiotic people doing idiotic things, unreasonable rants from internet warriors, cozy videos of cute old people with their grandchildren. It was brainless time-killer, but none of it was ailing his anxiety. Sighing, Tony looked away from the stream of frivolous content. He knew he was killing more brain cells than time at this point. He eyed the tray of cookies. Only one row was left, and they all looked to be gathering dust. Not the most appetizing meal Tony had ever had.

"Fuck it," Tony said. He reached for the row of treats.

Murmured whispering played toward him. Terrifying music to his vulnerable ears. Tony stopped and looked all around the room. The whispers of children continued. Not just children, but playful children. They knew something Tony didn't. A game of hide and seek in the dark in which the hidings were conspiring against a shivering seeker.

Tony looked all around the room but didn't see a thing. Soon, the whispering faded away. The room was quiet once more. "What the fuck," Tony said to himself in heightened fear. "What the fuck was that..."

Above him, the lights flickered momentarily. Another taunt from the Christy home.

Scared, Tony looked right up at the blinking lights. They lit the scene in hypnotic flashes.

Holding hands, Michael and Amy crept past the kitchen doorway. Blood all over their clothes and young skin. They never once turned as they disappeared into the living room.

Feeling a presence, Tony turned around real quick. But nothing was in the doorway. The children were gone. Tony stared at the spot with simultaneous suspicion and unease. All the while, the lights continued beaming down in fragments upon him. Combined with the dread-induced silence, the flickering illuminated the room as an abandoned stage.

"Hello," Tony said aloud.

The lights went steady. Somehow, they were even brighter. Tony turned and looked up at them. The otherworldly spotlights bared down on him. Cringing, Tony shielded his eyes from their immense glare. "Shit, man."

Right behind him, John lumbered past the doorway, his steps so heavy and stern. He turned and glared at the oblivious Tony, blood still smeared all over John's dead face. Disappearing just as quick as his children, John followed them into the living room.

CHAPTER 12

Nightfall arrived. No one was really looking forward to it save for Kevin and Linda. In fact, Bridget had to continue her amateur therapist routine just to keep Tony and Amanda calm as darkness gradually took over.

The group had retreated inside the Christy home by nine o'clock. In Bridget's guest room, Tony sat on the bed, more nervous than ever. At least he had covered the vicious carving on the wall with a huge blanket.

"I got a bad feeling about this," Tony commented. His eyes drifted over toward the blanket. Even hidden, the words were still etched into Tony's memory. *Kill Em All*.

"I think we all do," Bridget replied. She was standing nearby, fiddling with her infrared camcorder, getting ready for the night's work.

Tony looked at her, trying to get his focus away from that carving and those words. "You know it's not too late, man."

On the camera, Bridget played back the basement footage. She could've sworn she saw Dr. Carpenter down there. The hanging corpse. But it certainly wasn't on tape. Not even in the infrared vision.

"We can just talk to Ms. Linda and get the Hell outta here," Tony continued. "Before anything else happens."

Disappointed with the footage, Bridget didn't respond. She kept playing the clip back, hoping for a quick shot of the Doctor Of Death. Just a glimpse or any sign of the disturbed killer.

Tony kept pleading with Bridget. "Come on, Bridget! This is crazy!" He stood up and advanced toward her. "We can talk Linda out of this shit! I know we can!"

The frustrated Bridget held the camera out toward him. "That's what I was trying to do."

"What?"

Groaning, Bridget waved the camcorder at him. "There's nothing on here! She won't go until we have more proof!"

Tony raised his hands out toward Bridget, calming her down. "Okay! Chill!"

Bridget lowered the camera in defeat.

"But what about all the other shit we got?" Tony pleaded. "We got voices, all the shit breaking."

Shaking her head, Bridget looked at him. "None of it's visual. There's nothing on tape!"

"Why would that matter?"

Bridget ignored him. "It's nothing like what I saw!"

Tony stepped closer to her. "But why the fuck does that matter, Bridget! Look at what we've seen. She knows this bitch is haunted! She bought the shit, so we can just come back or something."

"But what if no one else believes her?" Bridget asked in a deadly serious tone.

"Come on..."

Adamant, Bridget placed the camera on a counter. "You know how people are," she began. She faced the aggravated Tony. "Just look at us. We're believers and even we doubted Amanda's story."

"So?"

"So?" Bridget said as she stepped up to him. "We just gotta get something big. Something visual or powerful." She leaned in closer to Tony's uncertain face. "Something that no one can deny."

"Alright," Tony relinquished. His face didn't hide his disapproval. Or his fear. Bridget could certainly tell.

"Hey, we owe her that much," Bridget said. She rubbed Tony's arm. The gesture seemed to reassure him a little. "This is her dream. Hell, it's mine as well."

"Yeah."

"I'm not crazy about staying here either, but it's one more night," Bridget said. She sounded more confident than she actually was. But at least Tony didn't know that. "We can do it for her." She flashed a weary smile. "Try to give her the definitive proof she's always wanted. Let her win one."

Tony chuckled. "I hear you."

"You know she'd throw that shit in everyone's faces," Bridget said light-heartedly. "All those assholes we've put up with over the years. The Enquirer, Gawker, the Times."

Tony laughed harder. They've all been wanting to give Linda her moment of triumph.

"Fucking Marcia Darden's hating ass," Bridget added on. "Remember when she called us the Wannabe Warrens?"

"Yeah, true," Tony commented.

"This would be amazing to sit them the fuck down," Bridget said, her genuine excitement full on display.

"Naw, you're right," Tony said. As his laughter died off, he stared at Bridget, his uncertainty returning. "Do you think we'll be safe though?"

"Yeah," Bridget replied. She ran her hand down his arm, still faking the immense confidence. She squeezed Tony's bicep. "You're our protection, remember?"

Tony chuckled quietly. "But why stay here like this? She just bought the damn thing."

"Hey, just let her stay if she wants," Bridget replied. "It's one more night, and Amanda wanted to do this as well."

"But come on," Tony said. "We can come back with an army or some shit."

Scoffing, Bridget grabbed the camera. "And who would believe us?"

"I don't know, someone."

"It's less than twelve hours, Tony." Bridget gave him a reassuring pat on the back. "We can make it."

"Yeah, we'll see..." he muttered.

"Besides," Bridget started. Grinning, she pointed upstairs. "Let her have her fun."

"That's the real reason isn't it?" Tony asked dryly.

Bridget shrugged. "Can you blame her? It's been years."

"Uh, yeah," Tony said adamantly. He followed Bridget out the room. "I don't wanna get killed just cause she wants some realtor dick."

*

Upstairs, Linda's spiritual music played on her phone. A hypnotic soundtrack for the room's sensual aura. The New Age jams seemed to never end. Compared to the rest of the Christy house, this particular guest room offered an escape from the house's suffocating history and bad vibes. For Kevin and Linda, it was certainly an escape to something more pleasurable.

The naked "couple" sat together in bed, cuddled up close. They were fresh off a bout of hot sex. Judging by all the signed sales papers scattered across the dresser, they were also fresh off a hundred-and-fifty thousand dollar deal. Linda's signature was vivid and precise. Certainly signed with pride.

"You made me work hard for that one," Kevin said to Linda with a smile.

"Oh, come now," she swiftly replied as she raised a half-empty bottle of wine. "You can't tell me it wasn't fun, doll." She pinched Kevin's cheek with the tenacity of a starved M.I.L.F.

Smirking, Kevin watched her take a long swig of wine. "No, you were great," he said.

Linda lowered the bottle, flattered by the compliment from her younger suitor.

"I've certainly done worse," Kevin said slyly.

"What? For a sale?" Linda teased.

"Well, yeah."

Chuckling, Linda got ready to take another swig. "I'm not surprised."

"It's part of the game." Feeling a bit bruised by Linda's barb, Kevin looked toward his pants that lied by the bed.

Linda savored the booze. She let out a mock yelp like a drunk sorority girl. While this wine didn't make you younger, it certainly made you feel so. Linda noticed Kevin leaning off the bed. "Hey, what are you doing, dear?" she asked.

"Hold on," he said as he dug through his pants' pockets.

Curious, Linda moved toward him. "What is it?"

"Ah, here it is," Kevin said triumphantly. Grinning from ear to ear, he sat back next to her. He held a lighter and an impressive joint in his hands. Grade A.

Linda couldn't hide her excitement. The sight was almost as tempting as the hunky realtor who would do anything for a sale.

Kevin held the smoke up. This was his cherished antique. "A toast to our deal?" he proposed to Linda. He knew what the answer was gonna be.

"Mmm-hmm," Linda exclaimed.

Ready to get the party started, Kevin ignited a flame. "Shall we-"

Interrupting him, Linda grabbed his hand, causing Kevin to cut off the lighter's flame. "What, not in here!" she said with a laugh.

"Come on. Really?" Kevin asked in disbelief.

"Not in the house," Linda pleaded. She motioned around the room. "This is history. We can't desecrate this!"

Kevin cracked a mischievous grin. "Geez, don't be such a prude."

"I'm not gonna upset the other residents," Linda said with authority.

"Look, they can have some too," Kevin replied in the smartass tone of your average high school punk.

"Shut up..." Linda groaned.

"What, babe?"

Aggravated, Linda looked out a window. She noticed all the tall trees and rural scenery lurking amidst the quiet darkness. She got another idea.

"I bet ghosts like a good contact high," Kevin continued.

Linda faced him just as he was ready to strike another flame.

"Hey, I'll be careful, alright," Kevin went on.

Right before he could hit the light, Linda snatched his wrist. "How about you give me a tour of the property instead," Linda said as she leaned in closer toward Kevin's intrigued face. "All 'three full acres..." Linda said in a seductive taunt.

"You sure you wanna do that?" Kevin asked.

"Yeah, why?"

Smiling, Kevin nodded toward the dresser. The current resting place for the broken figurine. "Cause I broke our little good luck charm."

"I think we'll be fine." Linda stated. Playing along, she reached toward Kevin's crotch. "We've got another good little luck charm right here."

*

Another 90s sitcom played on the living room flatscreen. This time, Tony wasn't solely relying on it as his safety blanket from the Christy home's evil tricks. Instead, he wore earbuds and played brainless pop music on his phone as loud as he could. No more of those creepy kid voices. Not as long as Nicki Minaj and Taylor Swift had a say.

With the sweet overproduced music serving as his comfort food, Tony sprawling out on the couch, keeping his eyes glued to the cloying situational comedy gracing the T.V. screen. Now his vision and hearing were sealed away from the house of horrors. A temporary fix at least. The combination was even soothing regardless of the music's ultra-catchy beat and the T.V. show's ultra-lame comedy. Tony blinked a few times, his blank expression never changing. He looked tired even.

He was about to shut his eyes when a hand snatched out one of Tony's earbuds.

"Wake up, sonnyboy," Kevin shouted in a smartass manner.

Startled, Tony jumped and turned to see Kevin and Linda standing near the couch. "Shit!" Tony exclaimed. He yanked the other earbud out. "What the Hell are y'all doing!"

"Sorry," the chuckling Linda said. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"But I did," Kevin commented with drunken glee.

Linda gave him a facetious punch in the shoulder. "Oh, stop it," she said. Her playful demeanor would make even the most flirtatious high school girls cringe.

Tony saw Kevin holding a large flashlight. "Hey, where you going?" he asked.

"He's just showing me around outside," Linda said. She rubbed a hand along Kevin's chest. "Just a little late night stroll."

"Yeah, I was just gonna give Linda here a tour of the 'estate,'" Kevin said with a chuckle.

In disbelief, Tony stepped off the couch. "Shit, it's almost midnight!"

"Relax, Tony boy," Kevin teased. He clicked on the flashlight and shined its bright beam right into Tony's eyes.

"Ah, damn!" Tony said as he shielded his vision from the aggravating light. The flickering ceiling lights had nothing on this monstrous beam.

"Bright enough for you?" Kevin joked.

"Get that shit outta my face!" Tony yelled.

Chuckling, Linda pulled Kevin away toward the front door. "Come on, leave him alone."

"I was just having fun with him," Kevin replied.

Linda patted Kevin's chest with seductive glee. "Let's go, 'Mr. Riley'."

Concerned, Tony took a step toward them. "But Ms. Kane-"

"Just relax, Tony," Linda said with a smile. "We're not leaving you."

"Yeah, we'll be back, kiddo," Kevin chimed in, feigning a fatherly tone. "We love you."

"Man, whatever," Tony said.

In a playful taunt, Kevin flashed the light in Tony's face multiple times.

Pissed, Tony waved at the flashlight. "Hey, cut that shit out, man!"

Kevin laughed. "Alright, geez."

Tony walked toward Linda with the worry of an overprotective parent. "Just let me go with y'all-

"

Kevin held Tony back. "Hey, we're fine."

"Yes, Tony, just stop worrying," Linda said. "Watch your show."

Unamused, Tony just stood there. Somehow the "adult" in this trio even though he was by far the youngest.

Doing her best drunk impersonation of a paranormal show host, Linda pointed to her temple. "Just keep your eyes and ears open..." she said to Tony.

"Ooh..." Kevin said with mock delight.

"Yeah, whatever," Tony replied. His disapproving eyes watched Kevin swing the front door open.

"Have fun," Tony said facetiously.

With drunken clumsiness, Kevin stumbled backward. Linda and him burst out laughing.

Tony didn't even crack a smile. "Jesus," he muttered.

Kevin waved off Tony. "Just hold down the fort, bud!"

"Yes, Tony," Linda said as she led Kevin out. "Hold down the Christy house! We'll be back!"

Still not keen on their decision, Tony watched Linda. "Ms. Kane, be careful-"

Kevin slammed the door behind them, interrupting Tony.

Disgruntled, Tony stared at the door. He wanted to say something mean but decided not to. After all, it was only Kevin being a douche.

Canned laughter off the sitcom distracted Tony. He put his earbuds back in and got back to his working "station." The wasteland of pop music and corny comedy.

*

Linda and Kevin held hands as they journeyed through the cluster of tall trees. They were about fifty feet away from the garden, but within this rural landscape of darkness, it may as well have been a thousand.

With the aid of Kevin's flashlight beam, Linda was actually admiring the yard. Somehow, it looked more natural and intimate at the late hour. Even though they were being constantly broadcast by all the surveillance cameras... but then again, the two of them certainly didn't mind. Neither of them were even aware that the cameras could capture them out this far. They were too distracted by each other.

"It's nice, huh," Kevin commented.

"Mmm-hmm," Linda replied. She stopped them near one of the bigger trees. They now had a perfect view of the expansive sky. "It's perfect." She looked up at the stars, mesmerized. For a haunted house, the Christy home did have some underrated perks.

"No doubt," Kevin replied as he reached into his pocket.

"It's so lovely." Linda kept gazing at all the stars. The sheer conglomeration was stunning. She looked back at the house. With the sky and the handsome home, this buy was turning out to be quite the combo deal. "Lovely but haunting," she said with a chuckle.

"Yeah." Kevin pulled out the joint and lighter. He smiled at Linda. "But not quite as lovely as you."

Linda played it off but still couldn't hide her schoolgirl blush. She was glade the darkness was kinda hiding it at least. "Oh, please..."

"I'm serious," Kevin said. He put the j to his lips and lit it. "You're something else." He took a hit off the joint. "So fucking beautiful..."

"You're quite the smoother talker," Linda teased. She leaned in closer toward Kevin as he took another cool hit.

"It comes with the territory," he sputtered out. The pot was already getting to him.

"No shit," Linda said with a smile as she got closer to Kevin's lips. He flashed her an awkward look. "And you're damn good at it," Linda said.

Right before their lips could collide, Kevin turned away and unleashed a series of nasty coughs.

Linda smirked at the sight of Kevin doing his best impression of a high schooler trying marijuana for the first time. "You okay?" she joked.

"I'm fine," Kevin muttered. Still coughing, Kevin held the roach out to her. "Here. It's strong."

"Okay, rookie," Linda joked as she grabbed the joint.

"Hey, it's been awhile," Kevin struggled to say through his last few coughs.

"I can tell."

"It's strong," Kevin reiterated.

Linda took the hit with ease. It was strong, but she didn't cough. Sensations ran through her mind. She grinned with ease.

"Damn," Kevin stated. "You're good."

An adventurous smile etched upon her face, Linda took another hit. "Look at you," she said. "Still shooting that shit."

Kevin grinned and leaned in closer. "Yeah, well," he began as they became nose to nose. "Not all the time."

"If you say so." In one relaxed motion, Linda handed him the joint back.

"Nope, you're different," Kevin said confidently. He took another smoke and made sure not to cough this time. "Much different," he said in a strained voice. But he still didn't cough.

The two shared a carefree chuckle. "I'm glad," Linda said. She rubbed her hands all along Kevin's chiseled chest. "You've convinced me at least." She leaned in closer.

Kevin got ready to kiss her lips. But Linda pulled a fast one. She grabbed the joint instead.

"Oh, nice," Kevin joked.

Smirking, Linda took another hit.

"So you just wanted to come out here for a little pot and a look at the stars?" Kevin quipped.

Linda looked up at the sky, well-aware of how much she was toying with him. She liked the control. "Maybe..." She blew smoke in Kevin's face.

"Well, I'm a little disappointed." Kevin flashed her a sly smile. "We've got all this land." As persuasive for sex as he is for a sale, Kevin motioned across the yard, toward the tall fence. "All this privacy." He leaned in toward the amused Linda's face. "It'd be a shame to see it all go to waste tonight," he stated.

"Indeed," Linda replied, not missing a beat.

Kevin got ready to lean in for another attempt at their long-delayed kiss.

Moving quicker than Kevin anticipated, Linda surprised him by shoving him up against the tree. She threw the j down, ready for the next part of tonight's "entertainment." "You ready, Kevin Riley," Linda said.

"Okay," the excited Kevin commented.

Linda ripped open her shirt, exposing her large and well-aged breasts.

"Whoa!" Kevin exclaimed.

"Let's go," Linda said in a commanding tone. With that, she lurched toward him with the carnal drive of a wild animal. Perhaps, a cougar?

Simultaneously intimidated and enthralled, Kevin watched her descend upon him. "Ms. Kane-

"It's Linda," Linda proclaimed as she gave him a passionate kiss.

Kevin didn't have a chance at escape. Not that he wanted to anyway. Pinned up against the tree, he let Linda work all over him. Her frenetic hands tore off his shirt as the two of them continued the steamy make-out session. Kiss after kiss after kiss. Their hands felt on each other's attractive bodies.

Linda forced Kevin's pants down, stripping him completely. She wrapped her arms around his waist and held on, gripping on to his soft skin.

Interrupting the burgeoning momentum, Linda looked right at Kevin. "How often will you come back and visit?"

"I don't know," Kevin answered.

One hard smack on the ass made Kevin YELP out loud. At least, it was the good kind of pain.

"Tell me!" Linda demanded. Her voice took on the tones of both a sincere romantic and obsessed lover.

"For you?" Kevin said. He caressed Linda's smooth face. "Everyday, sexy."

"That's more like it." With that, Linda squeezed Kevin's ass and pulled him in closer toward her.

Holding her trusted camera, Bridget walked through the downstairs hallway, recreating her fateful trip from the night before. She was as focused as ever. Taking her time with each step, Bridget looked back-and-forth between the camera lens and her own vision. If someone saw her without realizing her real occupation, they'd suspect she was either a pretentious filmmaker or an escaped lunatic.

Bridget stopped and scanned the long hallway. "Hello," she said aloud. Nothing. None of the activity from the previous night greeted her. Bridget even looked through the camcorder's lens for good measure. But nothing was glimpsed through the infrared mess. She was all alone.

Frustrated, Bridget groaned and played back footage on her camcorder. Footage she had been shooting all night. All through the house including the basement and this damn hallway. But it was all for naught. She hadn't gotten anything. Somehow the spirits were taking a holiday on Amanda's last night home.

Bridget groaned and looked off at the closet doorway. The hallway was really quiet, Bridget thought. The whole house for that matter.

Canned laughter blared in from the living room, startling Bridget. She jumped and looked down the hall. The laughter ended so suddenly.

"Tony?" Bridget asked. She waited for an answer. Nothing but silence greeted her. Bridget checked behind her, expecting to see John awaiting her nervous gaze. But still, she was alone. Bridget was almost relieved to feel this isolated. She heard nothing but her own heavy breathing. Eager to get back to some semblance of civilization, Bridget turned and started walking toward the living room. "Tony?"

A loud, jagged creaking stopped her dead in her tracks. The creaking came from right behind her. And it sounded familiar.

"Look behind you," little Amy's voice whispered toward Bridget.

Bridget turned and saw the closet door open all the way out. The door hit the wall with a soft thud for finality. Bridget looked on in petrified fear. She could see the boxes even from here.

"Behind you, Bridget," Amy whispered once more. Her voice full of fear. Afraid someone was gonna hear her if she dared speak any louder.

Bridget looked through the camcorder. Except no one was there. No ghosts or apparitions. Just an open closet that beckoned her.

Too scared to move, Bridget lowered the camera and stared right at the closet.

"Bridget," Amy's voice swept through Bridget's mind.

Gathering up the courage, Bridget started to step toward the closet.

A large cardboard box slid all the way out of there on its own, screeching against the floor. As if it was being pushed out by a pair of invisible hands.

Bridget jumped back in fright. "Shit!"

There the box stood a few feet away from her. Bridget stared at it with the unease one has toward a coffin at a wake.

"Look at it, Bridget," Amy's disembodied voice pleaded.

The box's lids flew open on their own in a matter of seconds. These weren't just a pair of invisible hands doing the lifting, but multiple pairs of young hands.

"Look at it, please," a male voice whispered. Michael.

Bridget hesitated for a moment. The box was fully open and awaited her eyes.

"Help us," Michael's soft voice drifted toward Bridget.

Bridget took a deep breath and took cautious steps toward the box. Each footstep echoed through the hall. All the while, the voices continued. A chorus of Michael and Amy.

"Please, look inside," Amy said.

"We need your help," Michael stated.

"Help us," Amy begged quietly.

Bridget leaned down toward the box and peered inside. A collection of framed photos and old Christmas decorations lurked inside.

Confused, Bridget stared at all the items. She put her camera on the floor and brushed a few of the box's pictures aside.

"What the Hell..." Bridget said. More of the Baker family pictures stared back at her. Or better yet, smiled back at her. The photos did look recent. Most of them were taken in this very house. But why did they matter, Bridget wondered. Why were the children determined to show her this?

"Look closer," Amy's voice pleaded.

Apprehensive, Bridget kept digging deeper into the box. She took out several of the pictures and cheesy ornaments and placed them on the ground. Nonetheless, the box seemed to never end. Bridget scouring through a bottomless treasure chest of family memories. But it was all so random. The happy family and their wide smiles offered nothing to her investigation.

As she was getting near the bottom, Bridget stopped to rest. She looked on at a picture of John and Amanda cuddling up on the living room couch. The couple actually looked genuinely happy for once. Amanda didn't look half as stressed or haggard as she did now. The things that tragedy could do to you, Bridget figured.

"Closer," Amy said. "Look closer..."

Before Bridget could react, she felt a force brush past her left arm. "Shit..." Then she felt another force brush past her right arm.

The forces pushed aside all the other items inside the box to reach the very bottom.

Bridget watched the forces move quickly. They loudly rummaged through the box's darkest depths. And in the end, a series of rattles greeted Bridget's confused ears.

"What the fuck," Bridget stated. She looked closer and saw the items buried at the very bottom. Pill boxes. Two of them. They were all nearly full. Their labels still stuck to their orange plastic cases.

"Look closer," Amy said once more.

Still feeling the children's presence around her, Bridget leaned in and grabbed the cases. She read the labels. Bridget's expression, her eyes, everything changed from puzzled unease to outright horror.

The names on both labels were clear as day: Amanda Baker. The name of the medication was even clearer: Zyprexa and Clozaril. Antipsychotics, Bridget realized in terror.

"She's crazy," Bridget said to herself. She cradled the bottles in her hands, horrified by the sight and by their plastic touch.

"Save us from mommy," Amy's voice said in a desperate hush.

*

At night, the garden was a graveyard, its shed a neighboring mausoleum. The flowers and plants were as lovely as ever. The soil so smooth except for a slight indenture in the dirt where Amanda had stuck the spade in earlier. Only now the long-handled spade was missing.

Through the silence, a soft humming was heard coming from the shed. A meandering tune that wasn't too recognizable.

Just then, a shadowy figure glided past one of the shed's windows. Not so much a blur as a calm stroll. It was Amanda.

*

Like the rest of the Christy home, Amanda kept the small shed clean. However, she also furnished it with a human touch. After all, she built this shed from the ground up. It was her labor of love. And the fruits of her labor certainly showed. All the shelves were crammed with heavy bags and the most up-to-

date gardening tools possible. This was more than a hobby for Amanda. This was her life... or what was left of it.

As she approached a table in the back, Amanda walked past a colossal pegboard hanging on the wall. The designated spot for Amanda's favorite tools: a shovel, a rake, a pristine pair of garden shears. A missing space on the board was reserved for the long-handled spade.

Amanda's humming retained its steady and creepy rhythm. It wasn't very pretty, but it wasn't out-of-control either. It just sounded despondent. A compulsory routine rather than enjoyable distraction.

Amanda laid the spade down on the table. She stopped humming and looked down at the tool. Her contemplative eyes evaluated the spade as she ran her finger down the handle in a gentle, smooth stroke.

Suffering an internal debate, she turned and looked toward the pegboard. So many tools. So many... options.

Moving in a confident stride, Amanda walked up to the pegboard. She evaluated each tool before her excited gaze settled on those garden shears. Amanda traced a finger over its shiny blade. The touch practically gave her an orgasm in the mind. The shears' sharpness oozed such brutal potential.

"Finish them, Amanda," a voice drawled out with sadistic intensity. The deep, nasty voice. The voice that wasn't John. The voice that wasn't even Steven. Dr. Artis Carpenter was back in practice. "Finish off the demons..."

The voice was sweet music to Amanda's ears. She caressed the shears's handle with the excitement of a pre-game ritual.

"Kill 'em all," the doctor said.

A deranged smile crossed Amanda's face.

*

Clutching the camcorder and pill bottles, a panicking Bridget ran through the upstairs hallway. She knew exactly where she was headed, what she needed to see.

"Mommy needs help," Amy's whisper rang through Bridget's mind.

"Help us," Michael chimed in.

Bridget endured their eerie chorus. Their scared voices were a chant that fueled her desperation even further.

The door to the home office was wide open. Bridget rushed inside. She saw the glowing home computer, its beaming screen an invitation for Bridget's disturbing suspicions.

Determined, Bridget sat down right in front of it. Amy and Michael's voices stopped momentarily as Bridget placed the camera and bottles on the desk and got to work. The voices now pleased.

Bridget moved the mouse. On screen, the litany of surveillance footage appeared. Bridget took a moment to understand the program's controls. Then a force pushed against her wrist, the touch of a small hand helping Bridget move the mouse pointer to a specific button. The program's archives.

"Thanks," Bridget muttered as she played footage from the previous night. Bridget watched the videos play rather slowly. Nothing was happening, and she wasn't sure what to do. Then another force swept past her hand, making her click the mouse. A different small hand. A more masculine touch... Michael's touch, Bridget now realized.

The footage then fast-forwarded at a reasonable pace. Bridget clicked on the camera showing Amanda's bedroom. It was twelve-thirty A.M., but Amanda wasn't there. Her covers were all strewn about, the fan on full blast. All the room was missing was its normal occupant. On fast-forward, it was obvious Amanda was gone for a long time.

"What the Hell..." the uneasy Bridget said. Nervous, she reached into her pocket and pulled out an unlit cigarette. Time for another one, she realized.

As she stuck the cig in her mouth, Bridget looked over the night's footage from each security camera. The downstairs hallway's camera showed Bridget looking through the boxes in the closet. Her late-night exploration into all the photos. Someone else was in the frame though... someone Bridget hadn't noticed there then. Someone she wouldn't have ever noticed without checking these clips.

Standing at the end of the hallway and out-of-view of the oblivious Bridget was Amanda. Deadly silent, Amanda glowered at Bridget from the distance. Amanda held the long butcher knife. *Kill Em All*.

"Jesus..." Bridget exclaimed in shock.

As Bridget remained distracted in the hallway footage, Amanda then marched into Bridget's guest room. She raised the knife, ready to attack Bridget right then and there.

In the home office, Bridget stared at the footage, her nervous eyes watching Amanda disappear into the bedroom. Amanda's appearance, her glare of cold eyes, her tight grip on the knife handle, all of it was scarier than any "ghost video" Bridget had ever seen.

"It was her," Bridget said to herself. "It was her all along. Jesus fucking Christ..."

Stressed, she opened up the computer desk's drawers. She was craving something. A lighter. She found it and lit the cigarette. Soothed by the drag, Bridget tossed the lighter onto the desk. She needed this.

Bridget looked back at the computer screen. Her bizarre closet incident from last night played on.

"Help us," Amy's whisper returned to Bridget in the home office.

"You have to stop mama," Michael reiterated.

"She's crazy," Amy pleaded.

The army of tormented voices barged through Bridget's temporary shell-shocked state. They were incessant and desperate, both Michael and Amy's voice a call to arms for Bridget.

Still hearing them, Bridget ran a hand across her face. The voices were rapidly getting louder, burrowing into her skull with a desperation that matched the children's tones. Within Bridget, intense and striking sensations accompanied the voices.

And then another voice broke through the other side. "Help us, please," John begged. The voice was deep like Dr. Carpenter's but nowhere near as unnerving. It was actually sincere. And heartfelt. "Stop Amanda!" he stated louder.

John's pleas cut straight into Bridget's mind. Closing her eyes, Bridget cried out as the cigarette fell from her mouth and smashed against the wooden floor.

Visions shooting through her mind, Bridget leaned back in her seat. Quick yet vivid visions that immersed her with the sensory submersion and attention to detail no movie could ever provide.

The visual hit Bridget hard. Amanda's kitchen a month earlier. John slumped back in a seat at the table, dead as a doornail. A long hose was tied tightly around his neck. So tight it cut into John's fragile flesh.

Two earth staples that were once used for gardening were instead protruding out of each one of John's eyeballs. They were lodged in deep, sticking out like blood-soaked T.V. antennas. Trails of blood ran down from John's eyes to the rest of his cold body. The trails completely drowned John's clothing in wet crimson. Hell, the blood even got on the dinner plate lying before him. He now was literally having a bloody steak for dinner. Amanda had knocked him off right around suppertime.

Loud crying and sobbing echoed from the living room. The sound of scared children: Amy and Michael. Amidst their chaotic fear, a steady hum was heard. Not from lightbulbs, but the humming of Amanda.

In the home office, Bridget cringed in dread, her eyes still shut. This whole psychic process was equal parts meditation and psychological torment. "Oh God..." Bridget muttered. The children, she thought. How could Amanda do this?

Through the visual, Bridget saw footsteps walk out of the kitchen and head toward the living room. It was bare female feet. A huge metal rake dragged behind right behind them, scraping against the floor in agonizing fashion.

As the kitchen became empty, the children's cries became much more frantic and terrified. Their young feet could be heard scurrying away from that unsettling hum-and-rake combo. Yelling, Amy was heard tearing the front door open.

Overwhelmed by the nightmare of a flashback, Bridget opened her eyes and lurched forward, gasping for breath. "No!" she screamed. "Leave them alone!" But the sensations didn't stop there. It was a migraine from Hell. A migraine of violent imagery. Bridget cried out and closed her eyes, bracing herself for more of the agony.

The scene within her mind shifted to Amanda's front yard on that fateful and fatal night. It was darker than ever out there. No bright moon or stars. And the same noises persisted: Amy and Michael's helpless screaming, Amanda's undeterred mumbling, Amanda's heavy footsteps, the constant metallic scrape of the rake. Together, they blasted through the night, but only upon deaf ears in this seemingly-abandoned, albeit-lovely neighborhood.

Exhausted, Amy and Michael struggled to evade Amanda. They staggered past the towering trees, making their way through the rural landscape.

Michael turned to see Amanda hot on their trail. Amanda was completely naked, her nude body coated in blood. John's blood. Amanda gave him a cryptic smile, maybe the same smile a savage mother in the animal kingdom gives to the runt of her litter before smothering them to death.

"I see you!" Amanda yelled aloud. Somehow, she seemed faster than the children without even trying. Her body revealed powerful muscles underneath all the blood. Her body powered by her delusions and strong urge to kill. Urged by Dr. Carpenter as well.

Amy turned back and saw the possessed Amanda, terrified. "No, mommy!" she screamed. "Mommy, please!"

"Leave us alone!" Michael yelled at Amanda.

Their tortured screams devastated Bridget and scorched her emotions. She wanted to open her eyes in that home office but couldn't. The forces in that house wouldn't let her... Amanda's family were making her see these haunting memories. Forcing a projector onto Bridget's subconscious.

In the front yard, Amanda got closer and closer to her two young targets. Amanda raised the rake like an executioner's axe. The weapon's many blades begged for blood.

"You devils!" she yelled with the strong and calculating tone of Dr. Carpenter. The voice of a killer. "Y'all demons need to be punished!"

"No!" Amy cried.

"Come on," Michael said to Amy as he led them through the yard. Frightened tears streamed down both their young faces.

"You evil bastards!" Amanda screamed. "You Heathens!"

The crying children further elicited sympathetic emotions in Bridget. She couldn't bear to hear their desperate cries, much less see their helpless faces. They were all alone. And she couldn't do anything to help them.

Michael and Amy neared the garden. The garden wasn't quite as decadent as Bridget had ever seen it. But the potential was there. Amanda just needed the time to let it flourish.

"Hurry!" Michael told Amy.

"You're all evil!" Amanda yelled after them. Her veins popped, matching her sweltering rage.

The children slogged through the garden. Their feet sunk in deep into the wet soil. Into the garden's quicksand.

"No!" Michael screamed.

"Y'all ain't my children!" Amanda yelled, her voice booming to deeper levels that mirrored Artis's frightening tone to a tee. It frightened the Hell out of her children.

Both Michael and Amy continued struggling to escape the garden. Dirt and bits of plants sprayed across their legs and shoes.

"Y'all took my family!" Amanda screamed.

She sounded closer than ever. Panicking, Michael turned and saw Amanda step foot in the garden. "No!" he yelled.

"Come on, Michael," Amy pleaded to him. She followed his gaze toward the terrifying sight of Amanda hunting them down. Amanda a wild predator on the prowl.

"The wicked must be destroyed!" Amanda cried aloud. Just a few feet away from Michael, she swung the rake right toward him.

"Michael!" Amy cried. Being the protective younger sister, she leaped in and tackled him to the ground, just avoiding the many sharp points on Amanda's impressive rake.

The two children collapsed into the soil. They struggled to get back on their feet. "Michael!" the panicking Amy said.

Wielding the rake, Amanda stepped up over them. She stood tall over her children. Her harsh eyes filled with Hellfire and brimstone. Amanda looked more Devil than executioner at this point.

Her hands gripped the side of her head as if she were trying to rip the memories out from her skull, Bridget cried out. "No!" she yelled through the pain. As the vision played on, Bridget trembled, dreading the inevitable.

Terrified and helpless, the two children faced the ferocious maniac that was their mother.

Michael grabbed Amy's hand. "Come on!" he said. He stood up, ready to lead them out to the front gate.

"You little devils!" Amanda cried out. "You're not going anywhere!"

With the knowing precision of a calculating doctor, Amanda swung the rake. The weapon a garden scalpel.

The many blades sliced into Michael's Achilles tendon. He yelled in pain and staggered to the ground. Blood flowed from his vicious cuts and all over the dirt stains on his leg, soaking all the way through his sock.

"No!" Bridget yelled as she convulsed in her chair. The memories hit her in electric bursts. Shock therapy to her sensitive senses.

Michael balanced himself with his hand, keeping him from completely falling onto the dirt. The wound may as well have been fresh concrete beneath his feet. He wasn't going anywhere.

Concerned, Amy rushed to his side. "Michael!"

She tried to help him stand up. But all it did was strain the wound: the tendon stretched further apart in agonizing fashion. Michael cringed and fell to the ground. His blood sprayed over the garden's immaculate flowers and soil.

"Michael!" Amy cried out. She hugged him close. "I'm sorry, Michael! Michael!"

Yelling in pain, Michael snagged his wound. The blood streamed out... crimson oil oozing through his fingertips.

"You're not fooling me anymore," Amanda said as she stepped toward them. All the blood on her body resembled a translucent dress fit for a morbid prom.

Both the children looked right at her. Redness coated the rake's talon-like ends.

Michael tried to push Amy away. "Run, Amy!" he yelled.

Amy held onto him. "No, I'm not leaving you!"

"Amy, go!"

"You can't get away," Amanda said. Her voice was a cryptic whisper, but still retained the nastiness of Dr. Carpenter's madness. "God will see to it." She held the rake out toward the petrified kids. "He won't let your evil evade me."

"No, mama!" Amy pleaded.

Amanda just glowered at her.

"This isn't you!" Amy continued. Weeping, she begged in desperation like the pitiful and terrified child she was. "I know it ain't you, mama! I love you! This ain't you!"

Tears welled up in Michael's eyes. Unlike Amy, he had no remaining hope left.

"Mama, please!" Amy begged. "Please..." She broke down and looked over at Michael.

Michael held her close in a tight grip. He didn't say anything. All he could do was hold onto his younger sister.

Silent, Amanda leaned down and caressed Amy's face. Even with traces of blood smearing onto Amy's solemn face, Amanda offered a motherly touch. A gentle and smooth touch.

"There, there," Amanda said softly. The first time her voice bore any resemblance to the real Amanda Baker in a long time.

Both Michael and Amy looked at her, a glimmer of hope in their eyes. They were simultaneously stunned and relieved to catch a glimpse of their real mom.

An evil grin then broke through Amanda's gentle face, shattering the optimism. "But you're not fooling me," she said in that wicked Artis tone.

The horror reappeared in her children's faces. All hope snatched away from the innocent as Amanda drew her hand back. "Goddamn you all," Amanda stated.

"No, mama!" Amy said in terror.

Clinging to the rake handle, Amanda hoisted it up over the little children. "You demons won't fool me." Her expression was confident and cool. The face of someone who'd executed 'demons' many times before. "You're not Michael or Amy. You're liars!"

Leaning in closer toward Michael, Amy held her timid hand out, trying to shield them both through miracle. "No, mama!" she cried.

"Kill 'em all!" With three words, Amanda's reply sealed the fate of the rest of her family for good.

"No, mom-" Amy began.

Yelling out in a terrifying battle cry, Amanda hoisted her weapon back and slammed it straight down upon her own son and daughter. It was one ferocious, sudden blow.

The grisly impact of the brutal murders awoke Bridget from the horrifying visions. Struggling to breathe, she lurched forward, knocking the camera and pill bottles off the desk. A patient suddenly awakening from a nightmarish coma.

On the floor, the bottles burst open upon impact. Capsules slid everywhere. There looked to be hundreds of them...

Bridget looked down at all of them, horrified. How long had Amanda been off her crazy pills, she wondered.

"God," Bridget muttered. She wiped dense sweat off her brow. The visions may have been quick, but the unsettling sensations long lingered inside Bridget. The cries of the children. Amanda's malevolent voice. The quick and efficient splat of the rake's sharp points into Amy and Michael's vulnerable heads. These horrors wouldn't be going away anytime soon. And Bridget knew it.

Bridget took a deep breath and looked back at the computer screen. The footage from the previous night was still on. One of the many cameras showed Amanda carving into the guest room's wall. Her back was turned to the camera, giving her appearance an uncanny vibe. Just a faceless yet disciplined figure hacking away into a bedroom wall. The carvings so deep and hard. She never turned once, not afraid in the slightest to be caught. Instead, she was a woman on a mission. As meticulous as those crude carvings were, the act took less than a few minutes. Amanda was extremely efficient in gardening, carving, and murder.

Too disturbed, Bridget couldn't look away. Without any music for soundtrack, and with the slight increase in video speed, the clip became an eerie combination of paranormal footage and a home-improvement GIF.

"Please, help us!" John's voice shouted through Bridget's mind. His voice the epitome of helpless desperation. "She's crazy!"

Uneasy, Bridget turned and looked toward the open office door.

John refused to relent. "You can't let her get away!" he begged.

Bridget stared right at the hallway that awaited her. She knew she was only delaying the inevitable.

"Please, Bridget," Amy's pitiful voice begged.

Bridget took a deep breath.

"Help us..." Amy continued.

Summoning her inner strength, Bridget confronted the computer screen. The frightening footage of Amanda finishing her vicious carving.

In the video, Amanda hurled the knife to the ground and turned around real quick. She honed her distant eyes in on the camera, looking right at Bridget. Like she just knew Bridget would be checking the footage at some point.

But Bridget was no longer in the home office. The room was empty save for the sounds of Bridget's footsteps careening down the hall.

*

Amanda now stood naked and alone in the garden shed. Her muscles were even more noticeable, her body stronger than ever. All of the supposed scars from John were missing. She resembled a suburban mom on steroids.

Amanda stared down at the garden shears she held in her hands. Her reflection in the blades stared right back at her. She may have been quiet, but she wasn't bored or in some kind of trance. Her excited eyes and subtle smirk didn't hint at that at all. Her night looked to be just getting started. This was just the warm-up before the real show.

"They don't believe you, Amanda," said the familiar and frightening voice of Dr. Carpenter. "And they never will."

Focused, Amanda stared down at the shears. She gripped the handle tightly. Dr. Carpenter's voice didn't scare her, it soothed her, goading on her psychopathic plans.

"They didn't believe me either," Artis said. His voice was louder and colder now, unable to hide the decades of resentment. "They can't understand! They won't ever understand! They can't see the evil like you and me!"

Throughout his sermon, Amanda's green eyes blazed with ire. And they were getting filled up on wrath and hate. A harsh glower overtook the Southern Belle's natural beauty.

Dr. Carpenter refused to let up. "They don't see it like us because they're evil, Amanda! They're the demons and the Devil who walk the Earth! And you can't let them go on! You must destroy the evil!"

In an emphatic Amen, Amanda snapped the shears one forceful time. They clasped together with the sheathing sound of a knife being retrieved off the kitchen counter. The shears were sharp, strong, and ready to kill. Just like Amanda.

"You know what you have to do," Artis went on. "You can't let the evil escape, Amanda!" His words and rants rose to an Apocalyptic crescendo. "You have to destroy the demons!"

Wielding the shears, Amanda locked her hungry vision onto the shed door.

"Kill 'em all!" Artis finished in a rallying cry.

*

Reliving a promiscuous youth, Kevin and Linda continued their intimate rendezvous. They were literally at one with nature. Pinning Kevin against the tree, Linda moaned with pleasure as she practically made Kevin thrust against her. Harder and harder. He was a sex slave stripped naked, Linda still half-dressed. She liked the control, after all.

Sweating, Kevin couldn't handle much more. Linda's red handprints ran up and down his ass cheeks, her own personal form of cattle branding.

"Keep going!" Linda yelled aloud. Her eyes were shut, her body in too much ecstasy to realize she was draining Kevin of both his soul and livelihood. Not an easy task when it came to realtors.

Kevin breathed heavy. He was wore out.

"Harder!" Linda screamed even louder. Her domineering voice could rival that of Dr. Carpenter's.

"I'm trying," Kevin mumbled weakly. He leaned back against the tree while Linda clung to his back. It was hard to tell who was doing the thrusting at this point.

"Come on, baby," Linda begged. She flashed a smile across that promiscuous face. "Don't tell me you can't keep up," she teased.

"I thought I could."

Finally, Linda opened her eyes and gave Kevin a nice smack on the ass, making him yelp. "You're my little bitch, hun," Linda said.

"For tonight at least," Kevin replied dryly.

Leaning in closer, Linda caressed his face, teasing him. "Ooh, you're so cute."

"Yeah..."

Neither of them noticed Amanda lurking behind them. Hiding in the darkness like a sneaky savage. She was maybe less than ten feet away. The long branches of a nearby tree shielded her naked body and wild eyes. The branches also hid the intimidating blades of the garden shears.

Breathing heavy, the exhausted Kevin looked right at Linda. "Say," he began. He rubbed a sweaty hand against her smooth face. "Maybe we can take a break for a minute."

"What?" Linda asked in disbelief.

Leaning down, Kevin reached for his shirt lying on the ground. "I'm tired, baby." He grabbed a hold of the khakis wrapped around his ankles from being thrown down in a haste. "You wear me the fuck out-"

Linda pushed him back against the tree, keeping him from getting dressed. "No," she said adamantly.

Avoiding eye contact, Kevin looked on behind her. He didn't see anyone in the yard. Certainly not Amanda.

Linda felt on Kevin's chest. "We've got so much more to do, hun." She noticed Kevin looking off behind her. She smiled and turned. "What? Do you see something?"

Linda didn't see anyone either. Just the garden. And the Christy home.

"Naw," Kevin said. Relaxing, or at least acting more relaxed and suave, he made Linda face him. "I just had to get my second wind."

Excited, Linda flashed a grin. "You're already that tired?" She caressed his cheek, his facial cheek that is. "I thought you were more experienced," she said in a seductive tone.

Kevin chuckled. "Oh yeah. For sure." His confidence sounded about as fake as everything else about him. But Linda didn't care.

She leaned in toward his face. Kevin seemed scared of what more this woman was capable of.

Linda stopped right in front of his lips. "You ready to close the deal?" she asked.

"Yeah, why-"

In a quick and not-so-gentle touch, Linda fondled Kevin's dick. He lost his voice quickly. The immense mix of pleasure and pain was too much.

"Come to mama," Linda whispered. She gave him a passionate kiss more appropriate for a soap opera than a business transaction. While she savored every minute and taste, Kevin's eyes went wide with fear.

A pair of open garden shears careened straight from the darkness, gunning for the back of Linda's head.

"Kill 'em all!" Amanda hollered, her voice the female equivalent of Dr. Carpenter's. All raspy rage.

The blade protruded through Linda's skull before popping out her forehead and pinning Kevin's head right into the tree. The shears stuck in deep. Blood ran all down the tree, dousing the bark with blood.

Linda's corpse slumped forward onto Kevin, her dead lips forever stuck to Kevin's. An eternal kiss. Her arms were even still eloped over his shoulders. Linda's eyes were closed, she never knew what hit her. Death during pleasure.

On the other hand, Kevin's eyes were wide open in fear. Taking a permanent snapshot of his impending death.

Together, the two of them resembled a gruesome student art project. Love in nature, murder by gardening tool. Blood trickled in small streams down their heads, interloping over their shared kiss. Slowly but surely, the crimson would adorn their nude bodies.

The intense Amanda glared at her victims. Making damn sure the 'demons' wouldn't come back. But the satisfaction was short-lived.

"Finish them, Amanda," Dr. Carpenter's voice said in a rare hushed tone. His words resonated with Amanda far more than any sermon ever had. This wasn't a command but the gospel. "Kill 'em all!" his voice then exploded.

*

Inside the house, Tony hid at his living room station. Earbuds, couch, and bad sitcom. His eyes began to drift on him. Not even the bombastic pop music could keep him awake at this point. The sitcoms seemed to be getting blander as the night went on.

Bored, Tony shut his eyes. This final night at the Christy home could've ended in a peaceful slumber.

"Tony!" Bridget yelled.

A familiar yet insistent grip snagged Tony's shoulder and shook him awake.

Tony bolted upright, startled. "Shit!"

"It's just me."

Tony gave Bridget a confused look. "What the Hell are you doing!" He yanked out his earbuds.

"Something weird's going on," Bridget said, unable to hide the fear in her voice. "It's Amanda!"

Concerned, Tony stood and grabbed her shoulder. "Yo, what are you talking about?"

"It wasn't John who killed them, Tony, it was Amanda!" Bridget yelled.

"What!"

Panicking, Bridget stepped away from Tony. "Look, she's fucking crazy!" Bridget pointed toward the hallway. "I found all her pills in the closet under all the pictures!"

The scared Tony looks toward the hallway. "Fuck, man..."

Bridget snatched Tony's arm, demanding his eyes. "It wasn't John, but her! She was the one with Schizophrenia! She lied to us! She killed her own family!"

Tony could see the sincerity in her eyes. Her desperate panic. "You saw it, didn't you?" he asked in a tone that was too scared to get much higher than a glorified whisper.

Uneasy, Bridget didn't respond. She felt she didn't have to anyway. Tony could tell, she figured.

"You saw it in your head," Tony said to himself, hoping saying it out loud could somehow make the revelation less disturbing. "You saw her kill them..."

"I did, but she's on tape. She went to my room and carved all that shit on the wall, Tony. She did it!"

"Hey, I believe you." Tony caressed her shoulder, trying to soothe her. "I ain't ever doubting you, Bridget."

Bridget looked into his soulful eyes.

"You know more than anybody when it comes to this shit," Tony reiterated. "I know that."

"We have to get out of here," Bridget stated. She walked over toward the stairs. "Where's Ms. Kane?"

"She's-" Tony began.

In a quick and sudden fall, a wooden shelf in the corner collapsed to the floor. The loud thud echoed through the house, even overshadowing the canned laughter.

"Shit!" Tony yelled as he and Bridget looked toward the shelf. It was laying there on the floor. A decorative coffin. Bridget wasn't sure why, but the sight and seemingly-simple occurrence felt like more than just a bad omen.

Nervous, she looked over at Tony. "Where's Ms. Kane!"

"I don't know, she went outside with Kevin!"

Grabbing their attention, the shelf slid all over the floor, moving straight toward Bridget and Tony.

Tony jumped back in horror. "Fuck!"

But Bridget stood strong. Because she could tell who was moving the shelf. It was just like earlier in the closet. The shelf, much like the boxes, was being moved by several pairs of small hands.

The shelf came to an abrupt stop right in front of Bridget and Tony.

"What the Hell's going on!" Tony yelled.

Busted holes appeared all throughout the shelf. Loud and quick hits. Those youthful forces were bashing the shelf in. They ran down the shelf in mysterious bullet holes, causing it to skid along the floor with each powerful smash.

Throughout the beating, Bridget heard voices. The Baker family's pleas. She stared at the shelf as their voices played through her entranced mind.

"Help us," Michael said.

"Please, Bridget," said Amy.

"Stop her before it's too late!" John begged.

The triumvirate haunted Bridget. A Greek chorus suited for the tragedy that was the Christy home. The family's voices played on a loop for Bridget. It would've driven her mad if not for her sympathy and

"gift." Her fascinated eyes watched the shelf move closer and closer to her. She realized it was nothing more than a vessel for the Baker family victims. A way for them to push Bridget to achieve the retribution they sought from beyond the grave.

One more bash against the shelf sent it colliding against Bridget's feet.

Freaked out, Tony rushed up to Bridget. "Bridget, what's happening!"

Bridget turned and faced him. "They're warning us."

"Seriously?"

Before Tony could react further, the flatscreen toppled over and smashed on the floor. Sparks and smoke shot out everywhere. An explosion of electricity.

Tony jumped back. "What the fuck!" he yelled.

The voices all stopped harassing Bridget's mind. That was the family's final warning.

Bridget snatched Tony's arm and pulled him toward the front door. "Come on!"

"Where we going?" Tony asked, worried.

"I don't know, but we're getting the Hell outta here!" Bridget replied. She pointed at the flatscreen debris. "That's our fucking cue."

Stepping in front of Bridget, Tony snagged the door handle. "I hear ya," he responded.

"Don't open that door," John's voice commanded Bridget.

Tony gripped the handle, ready to pull the whole thing open.

Nervous, Bridget reached toward Tony. "Tony!" she yelled.

In a tight grip, Bridget grabbed Tony's arm. He faced her right before he could open the door.

"Don't let him," John's voice warned Bridget.

Tony looked at Bridget, confused. "What?"

"John said not to open it," Bridget said. Her conviction sold such a ridiculous line.

Frightened, Tony stepped toward her. "Fuck, really-"

The front door burst open. Crying out, the naked Amanda came charging in from outside.

Terrified, Tony and Bridget turned to see Amanda raise the long-handled spade toward Amanda.

"Die!" Amanda yelled. Everything about her, her muscles, her expression, even Amanda's gritted teeth were full of overflowing rage.

"Oh God!" Bridget screamed. She held her hands out, ready to stave off the impending hack.

"Look out!" Tony shouted to Bridget.

Right before Amanda could wildly stick the spade into Bridget, Tony leaped in front of the intended target. The blade sunk deep into his upper chest, Amanda shoving it in as far as it could go. Blood spurted over Bridget.

"Oh God!" Bridget yelled. "Tony!"

Turning, Tony faced Bridget with blank eyes. Blood flowed through his shirt in a slow virus. The gaping hole of the wound resembled a shotgun blast. Amanda had stuck the spade in real good.

"No!" Bridget yelled. She looked on in horror, unable to help him. "No, Tony!"

Groaning, Tony grasped at the bleeding wound.

With wicked coldness, Amanda snatched the weapon out of his chest, sending more blood flying out.

Tony staggered to the floor.

"Kill 'em all!" Amanda screamed as she raised the spade.

Tony fell straight down with a loud thud. A red pool built up beneath him. He wasn't saying anything and hardly reacting. Not a good sign for a personality like Tony's.

"Tony!" Bridget yelled, hoping to resurrect him by calling his name. "No! Come on, Tony, please!"

Bleeding out, Tony couldn't say a word. He shut his eyes slowly. The blood kept building up beneath him.

"Oh God..." Bridget said.

Amanda glared right at Bridget. "You're all evil!" she hollered, spit flying out of her manic lips.

Frightened, Bridget stumbled back. "Amanda," she said in a calm tone. Or at least, Bridget's best attempt at a calm tone considering the moment. "You can't do this, look at me! You know me!"

"You're a demon!" Amanda yelled. She wielded the spade like a sword, ready to strike at any moment. "You can't fool me, swine!"

"Goddammit, Amanda!" Bridget pleaded. She backed up against a wall. Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. "We're not demons! You know us!"

"Run!" John's desperate voice blared into her ears.

Holding up the spade, Amanda advanced toward her sole remaining target. Amanda's smirk simultaneously sadistic and playful. A bully that knew they couldn't be stopped.

The sharp spade glistened in the light. Amanda moved with the swiftness of a killer on the prowl. A shark detecting blood in the water.

"She's crazy, get out!" John yelled to Bridget once more.

Uneasy, Bridget leaned against the wall, watching Amanda pick up speed as she got closer and closer.

"Run!" Amy whispered to Bridget.

Amanda yelled as she charged forward.

Bridget just avoided the thrust of the spade. The sharp blade implanted straight through the wall. The same spot where Bridget's head was pressed against just seconds earlier.

Shell-shocked momentarily, Bridget looked over at the spade. The whole wall cracked upon impact of the potent blade.

"You demon!" Amanda yelled in anger. She reached toward Bridget's throat.

Bridget thought Amanda's hands moved quicker and with more power than before. They were weapons on their own.

"Get out, get away from her!" John pleaded.

Heeding his warning, Bridget ducked, just dodging Amanda's forceful grip.

"She's crazy!" John's voice yelled.

Amanda's hand hit the wall with startling power. The hit didn't faze her even as it left a huge imprint in the wall. Almost as much impact as the sharp spade had had. "Die, Goddammit!" the frustrated Amanda screamed.

Bridget staggered away to the front doorway, her quick footsteps splashing over Tony's overflowing red river of blood.

"Go!" John pleaded.

"Outside," Amy's soft voice said to Bridget. A gentle command. "Go outside..."

"Get her outside!" John chimed in.

Bridget disappeared out into the front yard. She never looked back. She didn't want to. She just wanted out.

Groaning, Amanda snatched the spade from the wall. This hole was much more ferocious than any of the ones in the shelf. It'd have been much messier if Bridget hadn't have moved. Amanda's harsh eyes looked straight toward the door. "Kill 'em all," she muttered.

*

Through the wide yard, Bridget ran. She wasn't sure where she was going and she wasn't sure where to hide. But she felt drawn to a certain location: Amanda's famous garden.

Tired, Bridget breathed heavy as she kept going. But she wasn't going to stop. Not until she reached her final destination.

"Bring her to us," John's voice begged her.

"Bring mommy," Amy said.

"Bring her home, John stated.

Their voices were low, but full of adamant emotion. A chorus that kept motivating Bridget to get to that certain spot. Right to the garden.

"You're not getting away!" Amanda yelled.

Staggering away, Bridget turned.

Amanda was getting closer and closer. She held up her sharp spade, itching to kill. "I got you, you demon!" Amanda screamed. "You're all gonna die!"

Bridget looked ahead. John, Amy, and Michael all stood in the garden. None of them wounded. None of them covered in blood. They were Angels ready to greet Bridget and anyone else stuck in this damn house.

"You're not escaping me!" Amanda yelled.

"Bring her here," John's voice whispered to Bridget. "Bring her to us."

Bridget ran toward John and the rest of Amanda's family. An escape into the garden.

"Bring her to the garden," John stated. "Bring her home."

Fueled by instinct and John's soothing voice, Bridget headed straight toward the garden. His voice a calming antithesis to Artis and Amanda's manic rants.

All the while, Amanda ran after her, running Bridget down. With the carnal energy of a starved animal. Her body and swift movements graceful as if she were a dancer of death. "You're not getting out alive!"

"Bring her to us," John's low voice ran through Bridget's mind.

Bridget looked on at the Baker family as she staggered into the garden, exhausted. All three of them flashed her confident smiles. Bridget didn't know what to make of it. The family wasn't the same scared, bloodied wrecks she'd seen throughout her stay at the Christy house.

"I'm killing all y'all demons!" Amanda screamed at the top of her lungs. Her vocal cords seemed to tear on this one. She'd reached levels that even Dr. Carpenter couldn't handle. But it wasn't shrill, it was loud and even boisterous.

Bridget turned back real quick. She could tell Amanda couldn't see the family just like she could never hear them. She didn't have Bridget's gift. No one did.

Wielding the blood-stained spade, Amanda stopped in the garden, just a few feet away from Bridget. The two women stared right at each other, recovering with deep breaths as they engaged in this intense showdown. "You're not getting away," Amanda stated coldly. "None of you will. It's why I'm here! It's why God put me here!"

Amanda's voice dominated the scene. Bridget no longer heard John or the children.

"I'm here to exterminate evil!" Amanda boasted.

Not sure what to do, Bridget looked behind her. The family was gone. No, she thought. Was this all some sort of sick trap, she wondered.

"I never have mercy," Amanda said.

The nervous Bridget saw Amanda take a menacing step toward her.

"Not on the evil," Amanda continued. She raised the spade up toward Bridget's face. Bridget could see all the thick blood splattered upon it. The weapon a gravedigger's shovel rather than suburban wife's garden tool.

"Shit..." Bridget said as she backed away.

Enjoying herself, Amanda matched every one of Bridget's steps. "Not on you," Amanda went on.

Bridget's ankle bumped into a stiff object. Startled, she toppled backward and landed on the soft dirt. "Oh God!"

Using the spade, Amanda pointed at the ground. Right at the stiff objects lying by Bridget. "And not on your friends either," Amanda finished. Her tone was off... a stilted deadpan. Hell, she was too deranged to even pull off subtle sarcasm.

Bridget's uneasy eyes looked right toward the objects. She let out a horrified screamed.

Like human plants, Kevin and Linda's bloodied corpses lied sprawled out in the garden, each of them halfway-covered in dirt. Either Amanda attempted a halfass burial or she really was attempting to fertilize them.

"I had to destroy the evil!" Amanda proclaimed. "I have to!"

"Oh God... no, fuck no..." Bridget said.

"This is what I was chosen for!" Amanda yelled.

Fighting back tears, Bridget leaned over and grabbed Linda's dead hand. "No, Ms. Kane..." she said in sadness. She caressed the hand, never once caring about the moist blood and grimy dirt sticking to her skin.

Wielding the spade wildly during a soliloquy, Amanda went on. "I have to stop the evil! The demons! This is what I must do!" With the melodramatic flourish of a madcap preacher, she leaned in toward Bridget's face. "You're not fooling me! None of you ever were!"

The disturbed Bridget watched Amanda point the spade right at her.

"You're all demons just waiting to kill!" Amanda said. "And I ain't getting fooled by you. Oh no!"

"She's here," John's voice cried out to Bridget.

"Yes," Michael said.

Confused, Bridget looked around the garden, but didn't see anyone. Only one Baker family member was here, and it was the fucking crazy one.

"None of you were fooling me!" Amanda continued. "You're not taking me!"

"Bring her to us, Bridget," John asked.

Bridget looked right at Amanda. Amanda's "sermon" was only getting crazier, her rant accompanied by wild eyes and a performance that could be called hammy if it weren't so terrifying. Amanda waved her hands and that spade all around, looking to be at war with the entire world. A world full of demons in her mind.

"I lost my family to you sick fucks!" Amanda shouted in disdain. "You took my baby boy and girl! You made them evil!"

"Please, Bridget," Amy pleaded. The innocent voice elicited teardrops to slide down Bridget's face.

Amanda laid the spade against Bridget's face. "You can cry those tears, but you ain't fooling me, bitch."

"Just think," John begged. His voice was now louder. Not with fear or concern. But excitement. "Think about us!"

"I'm burying the evil now!" Amanda yelled.

Balancing the barrage of Baker banter, Bridget stared at Amanda, doing her best to keep calm. In the back of her mind, she could picture John and the children begging her. Their fatal wounds. The blood. Michael and Amy's brutal anguish.

Amanda drew the spade back. "I'm burying the evil forever!"

Flashes of Michael and Amy staring on with wounded eyes and fearful faces projected through Bridget's mind. The sensations hit Bridget hard, a burst of torment and adrenaline. And she didn't try to suppress them either.

"Think about her," John's voice said.

As Bridget's tears faded away, more Baker family memories hit her. John and the kids playing in the yard. All those photos from the closet. An All-American family eating dinner together. The family's joy of celebrating Christmas in the Christy home.

"You're not stopping me, you evil bitch!" Amanda yelled. Too busy spilling her feelings, she didn't care that Bridget let go of Linda to grab her own head. The killer migraines were all coming back for Bridget.

"None of you can stop the retribution!" Amanda went on. "The Lord's work!"

Overwhelmed by the visions, Bridget shut her eyes and kept clutching her head.

"Keep thinking," John commanded her.

"You can't stop me from ending your evil!" Amanda continued. "I see through your Goddamn disguise!"

"Keep thinking, Bridget," John said.

More of the memories flooded through Bridget's mind. The bad ones. Amanda's descent into madness. She hid the pills. She spent more time in the garden and inside the shed. More time talking to herself in a different voice... in Artis's voice. Only the kids noticed it at first. But then so did John. But none of them wanted to acknowledge that maybe mommy was going crazy.

In a rallying cry, Amanda waved the spade toward the house. "I'm taking you all out tonight!" Amanda screamed.

The latest flashes Bridget endured were from that fateful night. The Baker family massacre. Amanda nude and in stalker mode. She strangled John in grotesque fashion.

"No more evil!" Amanda yelled with fire-eyed passion.

Woozy, Bridget looked on at Amanda. "Amanda, please," she said weakly. "You can't do this."

"This ain't Amanda Baker," Amanda Baker proclaimed. She threw her hands in the air. "This is the Doctor Of Death!"

"Go on, Bridget," John begged. "Keep going!"

Feeling heavier sensations than ever before, Bridget's head leaned against her hand as she looked straight down at the ground.

"Tonight, I'm punishing the wicked!" Amanda yelled.

Bridget cried out, the visions practically pulsating through her skull. In the flashbacks, Amanda stripped down to her skin. Covered in blood, she stuck the garden staples in John's eyes, each one being stuck in with a long and tedious shove.

Bridget yelled once more, feeling the immense pain in her own eyes. She could feel John's pain... see the true horror of the Christy house. Amanda's vile actions.

"You demons won't stop me!" Amanda screamed.

Tears and snot overflowed on Bridget's face. It all mixed with the dirt stains.

"Think deep," John's voice said. He was calmer and more collected now. Beyond the grave, he knew Bridget was on the cusp of greatness.

Staggering up to Bridget, Amanda spun the spade in her hand. One sharp baton. "I'm doing God's deeds!" Amanda said.

Bridget could hear Amanda's harsh footsteps crush the soil as they got closer and closer.

"I'm taking out the evil!" Amanda proclaimed.

Terrified, Bridget looked right on at her. The twirling baton had the blur of an otherworldly crystal ball, one in which Bridget could get an excellent glimpse of her possible and most brutal death.

"Think harder, Bridget," John told her. He had the soothing tone of a comforting guide. Of a supportive father. "You're almost there."

Dreading what was to be a final part of this intense process, Bridget looked down and closed her eyes. The final visions reverberated through her conscience. The worst acid trip imaginable.

In vivid technicolor and a fairy tale's production design, Bridget witnessed Amanda chasing the children into this very garden. They were helpless and trapped. And forced to watch their own mother take them out with a monstrous rake. The slicing was continuous. She'd turned her own children into pulverized flesh.

"I'm cleaning you out of my house!" Amanda said to Bridget. Cackling with unsettling glee, she swung the spade right toward Bridget's exposed neck.

A pair of rotten hands emerged straight out of the soil and latched onto Amanda's ankles in a tight grip.

Lowering the spade, Amanda stopped and looked down in horror. She recognized those hands. The long, skinny fingers. Even through the deteriorating flesh, she could make out a small glimmer amidst the decrepit mangled skin. A wedding ring. "No!" she screamed.

Bridget looked up in petrified fear. She wasn't positive, but she had a good hunch who had crashed the scene.

Through the ground, John pulled himself up out of the soft soil. Out of this garden cemetery. The rest of his body wasn't in any better shape. His flesh was moldy and rotten, somewhere between deceased and wormfood. Glimpses of bones could be seen amongst the tattered clothing and desecrated skin. Hell,

he couldn't even stand. His splintered legs wouldn't allow it. Bugs and dirt slid off his flesh. The earth staples still hung loosely from those caved-in eye sockets. But he didn't have to have perfect vision to see his true target.

"You bastard!" Amanda yelled.

She swung the spade straight into his face, forcing it into an eye. The spade crashed through the earth spade, sending both weapons protruding out the back of John's head. Black blood oozed out the "wound" in a steady stream.

But John didn't let go. Somehow, through the grisly canvas that was his face he seemed even angrier.

"Die, you evil bastard!" Amanda screamed, unable to hide the desperation in her voice.

John groaned as he pulled Amanda to the ground. Right down to his level.

"No!" Amanda yelled.

John dragged her closer toward the mass of pulpy flesh and moist blood that was his face.

"Let go of me, you bastard! You filth!" Amanda continued.

Scared, she tried to pull his hands away from her. One of the fingers snapped off in an explosion of red dust, sending more of the ooze flying across Amanda's face and chest. She cried out in disgust.

John leaned in closer. Ooze spilled from his disjointed mouth as he attempted to speak. What came out wasn't the soothing voice Bridget had heard or the soothing tone of a warm father. Instead, it was slow and torturous.

"Amanda..." John sputtered out. All that dirt and blood had apparently strained John's vocal cords pretty badly.

"No!" Amanda screamed. She squirmed and fought all she could, using all her might. But her nimble, nude body wasn't getting out. John's hands held on tight.

"Let go of me, you evil son-of-a-bitch!" Amanda yelled.

"It's just me, Amanda," John stated. The bottom half of his mouth dropped a little lower. It hung on by mere threads of flesh.

Amanda shrieked. She was helpless like John. Like her children.

"Come home, baby..." John said. He would've formed a wide grin if his mouth would allow it. John pulled Amanda by her ankles with slow and long drags. Amanda's body slid along the slick dirt. She wasn't getting away.

Closer and closer she got to John. Like she was on an assembly line straight to Hell. She stretched out and tried to crawl away, pulling up all her dirt and flowers, leaving the garden in total disarray. "Aw, God!" she screamed.

Determined, she glared at John. "Go to Hell, you evil bastard!" she yelled. She reared her leg back, yanking it out of his grasp.

"No!" John yelled, the ooze drowning out his cries.

With a wicked smile, Amanda got ready to kick him right between the earth spades. "Burn in Hell, John," she said coldly.

Before she could finish the job, two pairs of small hands lurched out of the ground and yanked Amanda's leg straight into the dirt. Their hands were small, but the fingernails were long and jagged. Immediately, they tore into Amanda's leg, causing long red lines to appear.

Amanda screamed in pain.

Amy and Michael joined John on the attack. Deep slices and gashes were all over the children's young skin. They and their father were decomposing, their flesh hanging off in strands. But they had been waiting. And they were strong.

Ooze flowed simultaneously down each child's chin, giving them competing rivers of black blood. "Mommy," both Michael and Amy said in eerie unison.

"No! Leave me alone!" Amanda yelled.

John dragged her further toward the family's gaping grave. Michael and Amy's hands dug even deeper into Amanda. They weren't wanting to let go of mommy every again. Amanda tried pulling away from them, only to see her filleted flesh curl up along her leg. She hollered out in intense agony.

"You're not my children, you're evil!" Amanda screamed. "You devils, you're demons! Y'all are all evil!"

Pulled away by her family, Amanda looked on Michael and Amy. They grinned right at her. Unlike John, they still had teeth. Young pearly whites. The one spotless aspect on otherwise ghastly bodies.

"No!" Amanda cried out.

John pulled her toward him in one final rough tug. They were now nose-to-nose on this morbid wedding night. Till death they won't part. Michael and Amy leaned in right next to them.

Trembling, Amanda looked on at them all with horrified eyes. "No, let go of me!" she screamed.

"You're with us, Amanda," John proclaimed. His grotesque hands grabbed her by the shoulders. "Forever..." he managed to say before his jaw dislocated and dangled to the side.

The sudden fall spurted more of the slimy blood over Amanda's face, quieting her before she could even manage another scream.

The children lunged in toward Amanda's stomach and put their pearly whites to good use.

Grimacing, Amanda looked up, the pain unbearable. "No..." she groaned. "You're evil," she said in between spitting out the nasty ooze.

Her blood and intestines dangled out of her chest and fell to the soil. Michael and Amy's teeth became coated in crimson and with juicy chunks of Amanda's feast of flesh.

"You're not my family!" Amanda said in a weak yell. She turned and saw Bridget looking on in silence.

"Bridget..." Amanda said.

Still lying on the ground, Bridget just stared on at the pitiful sight.

John's dead hands were holding on to his one true love while the two zombified children ate their naked mother alive. Amanda wasn't the imposing predator anymore. She was overwhelmed prey.

Unlike in her visions, no sensations shot through Bridget right now. No sensational sympathy, not even disgust. Bridget just didn't want to intervene.

Amanda reached a weak and wobbly hand out toward Bridget. "Bridget, please," Amanda cried.

The voice sounded different to Bridget. She hadn't heard Amanda speak in her normal tone the entire night. Amanda now didn't have the eerie bravura and confidence of Artis. Here was Amanda Baker. The tormented wife and mother of two.

Amanda's grue flowed through the garden, watering the plants with blood. Her eviscerated organs and intestines only began to pile up higher. The ones that weren't being consumed by Amanda's own children that is.

"Bridget, help me," Amanda stated weakly. She held her hand out just a little bit further. "Please..."

Hesitant, Bridget didn't say anything. She was scared, but not sympathetic.

She could see John looking right at her. Not in an intimidating way... just with satisfaction over their mutual agreement. John satisfied Bridget kept her end of a bargain Bridget didn't even know she was capable of. He respected her too much to pose a threat. Bridget thought he seemed grateful.

"Help me!" Amanda yelled to Bridget.

The voice felt a little different again. It was a little louder and a little more demanding, Bridget thought.

"Bridget, save me! Save me from the evil!"

Suspicious, Bridget didn't budge. She just watched with uncertainty.

"Goddammit, Bridget!" Amanda went on. "Don't just stand there! Help me! Save me!"

It was then that they both knew Bridget wasn't going anywhere.

Amy pulled out a long strand of Amanda's organs and consumed it with rapid glee. Blood and gore covered her chin like smeared spaghetti.

Amanda screamed in pain. "You bitch!" she yelled at Bridget.

Recognizing that tone, Bridget crawled back just a little. Just to be safe.

"You're evil like them!" Amanda continued. "You're a fucking demon! Evil cunt!"

Artis's voice by way of Amanda had re-emerged. And Bridget could tell instantly. Maybe that was Amanda all along or maybe she was really possessed. Bridget wasn't sure...

"Goddamn cunt!" Amanda shrieked. "You evil bitch!"

Ignoring Amanda, Bridget looked right at John. Even though his corpse was nothing more than barely-conjoined fragments masquerading as limbs, Bridget could sense his feelings. He liked Bridget. He wasn't a threat. After all, her powers had given him and his family their one shot at vengeance.

"You evil bitch!" Amanda hurled at Bridget. "You're fucking evil, you-"

John forced Amanda to face him and gave her a rough kiss, silencing her profanities.

Amanda's weak hands slammed against him. Aside from further knocking bits of his flesh away, it did nothing.

Even with only John's upper mouth being functional for a kiss, it was a tight embrace, one made even more uncomfortable by the children constantly eating Amanda's insides.

With a dramatic flourish, John pulled back, biting off a chunk of Amanda's lips through his grimy teeth.

Crying out, Amanda grabbed her blood-spurting lips. The tattered remnants dropped down her chin, leaving her teeth permanently exposed. A literal kiss of death. "No! Aw, God!" Amanda struggled to say through the pain.

John and the children grasped onto her body and made their way back to the deep hole John emerged from. Their garden grave where Amanda had buried them all along.

Helpless, Amanda looked on at the spot as her family pulled her in closer under the suffocating earth.

"No, let me go!" she pleaded through the blood and mangled lips, her voice barely above a pathetic whimper. All her ferocity had been stripped away by her own family. "Y'all evil bastards! Let me out! Let me go, Goddammit!"

The kids entered into the grave first. John held Amanda close to him, restraining her weak attempts at escape.

"You demons!" Amanda screamed out.

Pulling her in closer, John dragged Amanda underground. The dirt muffled Amanda's final cries forever.

The soil smoothed out on its own, covering up the hole. The Baker family unit was all together again. Reunited in the grave.

And then it was quiet. Bridget didn't say a word. She was simultaneously stunned and scared. However, she had prevailed. Her gifts finally hadn't been exploited for profit or evil. They had been used by kinder spirits. The spirits of a family desperate for closure. At the very least, the voices and visions were gone from Bridget's head at this very moment. There was peace.

All the blood and Amanda's stray guts littered the garden. As did Linda and Kevin's corpses. Sure it was a mess, but somehow the colorful grue worked in perfect correlation with the remaining flowers. Call it a gory Gothic garden.

A long crimson trail strewn with bits of Amanda's flesh and intestines stopped right at one particular spot. One of the few areas of the garden where no plants grew. The grave.

Nearby, Amanda's long-handled spade stuck straight out of the soil. Just as she would've left it.

Alone in this gruesome environment, Bridget stood up. Sweat, blood, and dirt covered her skin and clothes. The surrounding landscape didn't faze her none. Not the vivid blood or splattered organs. Instead, Bridget felt relieved.

A beaming voice broke through the staunch silence. "It's in the shed," Amy's voice said. No longer a whisper, her voice radiated. A burst of sunlight in this darkness.

Bridget looked right toward the garden shed. She listened for anything else, but the voice was gone. That's how all children should talk, Bridget thought. They should all sound this happy.

Bridget couldn't help but crack a weak smile.

A strong hand snatched Bridget's shoulder, startling her away from the good vibes as fast as they had hit her. Ready to swing a punch, she turned and looked on at Tony.

Tony held his hands up and took a step back. "Whoa, whoa, it's just me!" Large blood stains still dominated his shirt.

Bridget groaned. But she was glad it wasn't anyone else. "Jesus, Tony..."

Reassuring Bridget, Tony grabbed her shoulder. "Hey, I'm sorry, alright. Are you okay?"

Bridget gazed at his wound. At least the bleeding had stopped. "I was gonna ask you the same thing."

Tony smirked. "Naw, I don't think she got me too good."

"Yeah, if you say so" Bridget replied. She flashed him a smile until she turned and saw Linda lying on the ground. Surrounded by flowers, the arrangement of the corpses had a poetic eloquence to them.

Noticing Bridget's morose mood, Tony followed her gaze to the sight. "Aw, shit," he said in dismay. For once, he wasn't exaggerating from fear or for melodrama. He was speechless. His hurt was real.

Bridget looked over at him. His wounded eyes said it all. Bridget pulled him away toward the shed, wanting both of them to get outta there together.

"Come on," Bridget said to Tony in a supportive tone. They were only about ten feet away, but it was the longest walk either one of them had ever made.

CHAPTER 13

Moments later, a silence surrounded the Christy house to the point where not even the distant sounds of nocturnal animals and wildlife could be heard. Just a lingering silence provided the soundtrack for the home's latest massacre.

In the garden, the long-handled spade still stuck straight out of the ground. An appropriate tombstone.

The garden shed door was wide open. Inside, Tony paced about while Bridget looked through the shelves. She kept thinking back to Amy's guidance. There had to be a reason for why she wanted them in there, Bridget thought.

Clutching his wound, the uneasy Tony gazed all around the room. Various tools scattered across the floor. The window was busted. Several tables were turned over. Amanda's descent to madness really did start right here.

He looked over at the pegboard. Most of the tools were missing. The most vicious ones at least. "What the Hell happened?" he asked aloud.

Focused, Bridget leaned down toward the bottom row on a shelf. "It's a long story," she replied dryly.

Tony touched the spot where the long-handled spade once hung. Judging by its location as a pegboard centerpiece, the unusual yet brutal weapon must've been Amanda's favorite. "I bet..." Tony said.

Bridget pushed aside several large bags of seeds. Amy's voice, her words motivated Bridget. Something was here. She wouldn't lie to me, Bridget thought.

Creeped out, Tony backed away from the pegboard. "Fucking crazy," he muttered.

Too busy searching to pay Tony any attention, Bridget scoured the shelf, knocking all the bags over in one final desperate swoop.

The bags hit the ground and burst open upon impact. Seeds spilled out all over the floor like scattered marbles.

Bridget felt all along the empty bottom row. Nothing was on the damn shelf. "Fuck," she said to herself. This was a wild goose chase courtesy of a ghost.

"Looking for something," Tony said in his typical humorous tone.

Turning, Bridget saw him holding a key. He had picked it up from one of the busted bags. A needle in a seed stack. Of course Amanda would put it there, Bridget realized. That or bury the damn thing in the garden.

Tony flashed her a confident smile. "Is this it?"

Relieved, Bridget grinned and snatched it out of his hand. "Let's hope so," she commented.

*

Together, Tony and Bridget approached the front gate. All the while, Bridget clung to the key for dear life. It was their one-way ticket out of the Christy house.

"Let's hope it works," she said to Tony.

"Shit, it better," he responded. He kept a hand over his bloodied shirt, right over the stab wound.

"We'll get outta this," Bridget reassured him.

As they got closer to the gate, Bridget looked over and saw Tony wince in pain. Fresh blood was seeping through his clenched hand. She reached toward him, concerned. "Do you want me to help?" Bridget asked.

Tony held his other hand out toward her. "No, I'm fine," he said.

Bridget let it go. She recognized Tony's tough-guy facade coming through and decided to respect it.

The two stopped at the gate. Eager, Bridget grabbed the padlock and stuck the key in.

Tony stole a look back at the house. Lights were still on inside. The house still hoping to lure more helpless souls. "What are we gonna tell them?" he asked Bridget.

Moving quickly, Bridget unlocked the padlock. The key was a perfect fit. Relieved to see the key work, she faced Tony. "What do you mean?"

He looked right at her. "Our little ghost story." Tony staggered over toward her, his nervousness making Bridget's concern return with acceleration. "Think about it, Bridget, the bodies are everywhere. They're probably gonna blame us for this shit!"

Bridget faked a scoff. She thought it'd make Tony get over his fear, but it didn't work. She wasn't fooling anyone, not even herself. "No, they won't!" Bridget said. "The house is haunted-"

In a firm grip, Tony snatched her shoulder. This wasn't Tony when he was scared of the dark, this was Tony being plagued by a realistic fear. "I'm being serious! You think they believe people like us in situations like this?"

Bridget pushed him back. They had too much going on to worry about real-world issues. That could wait to figure this shit out later, Bridget thought. Once they were away from this Goddamn house. "Tony, stop it!" she demanded.

"Bridget-"

Intense, Bridget pointed at his chest. "Look, you're injured, you got stabbed!" She motioned toward the house. "And there are cameras everywhere! The cars are fucked-up!"

Tony gazed over at all the defunct vehicles. Bridget had a point.

"They'll have to look through all that before they can blame us," Bridget continued. "We'll be fine. We'll worry about this shit later, but for now, let's just go."

She turned and pulled the chain out from around the gate. It rattled rapidly as it whirled all the way back, unraveling faster than a yo-yo rolling along the floor.

"You really think they'll believe us?" Tony asked in a voice more befitting a child on Halloween night than a muscular bodyguard. "I can't stop worry about it."

"Well, even if they don't" Bridget began. She flashed him a smile as she pulled out the entire chain. "We'll be getting some free publicity at least." She hurled the chain to the ground, letting it hit the concrete driveway with a triumphant smash.

"I guess we'll have some believers," Tony deadpanned. Still uncertain, he noticed a Kevin Riley sign standing only a few feet away, right on the edge of the pristine lawn. Kevin's flashy grin on it was now almost mocking Tony considering all that the group had witnessed earlier.

Bridget pushed the gate open. She was surprised at the long creak it howled as it swung open. The gate a leftover from a Gothic castle. Bridget always thought the fence was new if not refurbished...

Standing there, the excited Bridget looked out onto the welcoming paved road that was just up ahead. "Alright, let's go," she said, eager to escape the creaky fence and the murderous house.

"We're not going anywhere," Tony said. His voice was familiar yet unfamiliar at the same time. It sounded harsher. Raspier. Arrogant in a demented way. The voice was back, and Bridget knew it.

Horrified, Bridget whirled around. "Oh God..." she said in fear.

A police line-up of the dead, the Christy house's many other residents all stood before Bridget. Steven and Mallory Christy. Their twins Shelly and Alice. Kevin and Linda. And the house's latest victim: Tony. Blood drenched his entire shirt and scattered across his pants. His stab wound looked bigger and nastier.

"Oh God..." Bridget said, horrified. "Tony... No..." Soft tears slid down her face. She now realized he was never getting better all along... Tony was dying.

"We can't ever leave, Bridget," Tony said in his eerie voice.

Bridget looked toward the group. All of them had smiles plastered on their faces. Each manic smile appearing painted on. Too big and wide to be genuine.

"No..." Bridget said.

She saw where these spirits were all grisly corpses, but they weren't decomposing or rotting. They kept most of their skin and clothes intact. Just their fatal wounds were there. The corpses so fresh.

Alice and Shelley even still wore their church dresses, their resemblance still quite uncanny after all these years. They were just like the Baker family spirits Bridget saw earlier. But unlike those apparitions, this motley crew was here to stay. They were here for Bridget.

"Stay with us, Bridget," Linda said. Her voice too had undergone this unsettling transfiguration. Equal parts calm Linda and persuasive Artis. Linda hoisted up Amanda's bloodied garden shears. Brain bits stuck to their ultra-sharp tips. "We want you to stay."

Terrified, Bridget saw that they all held weapons. Not just the garden tools, but Steven's handyman utensils as well. Alice with the wrench, Shelley with the hacksaw. Tony even clutched the long-handled spade.

"I can't," Bridget pleaded. She backed away toward the gate. "I can't stay here. I have to leave."

All the while, the ghosts of the Christy house just stood there. Their collective, eerie confidence unnerved Bridget.

"I can't stay here! I'm not like you!" Bridget said through the panic and tears.

"We'll handle that," Linda commented with a chuckle. She opened the shears in a vicious taunt, making sure the blades captivated Bridget's terrified eyes.

"No! I didn't do anything to you!" Bridget yelled. Full of rage, she wiped away her tears. "I didn't do shit to you, Goddammit!"

Displaying their pack mentality, the group descended upon Bridget with slow menace, their smiles and weapons unwavering. Some of them even laughed. But their voices were all the same... their vocal cords twisted with an infusion of the one and only Dr. Artis Carpenter.

"I'm not trying to hurt you!" Bridget screamed at the approaching corpses. "I didn't do anything!"

"But you came here," a cold yet familiar voice announced behind Bridget.

Startled, Bridget turned around.

Standing right behind her was Artis himself. The rope burns were still encircling around his neck. His chest dissected. His white coat painted with blood. He pointed a long knife toward Bridget. "It's time to cleanse the demons from this house."

Using all her might, Bridget ran straight toward the gate opening. Toward the street. Toward her escape.

Artis stood still. His confidence never threatened.

Right before Bridget could reach the safety of the street, the gates swung shut.

"No!" Bridget screamed as she grabbed the iron poles.

Moving on its own, the chain shot up and wrapped around the gate tight, swirling around the padlock as well.

All the horrified Bridget could do was watch the padlock snap shut. She could hear Artis's wicked laughter echo behind her. The slow footsteps of the group were closing in on her.

"No," Bridget said to herself. She reached for the padlock key.

It shot off into the air, faster than the closing gate.

Bridget watched the key hit Artis's open palm in stride. She looked over at the smiling ghosts. They were now just a few feet away. The Christy house's eternal residents wanted another one.

"You shouldn't have come," Artis stated.

Bridget confronted him in anger. "I didn't do any of this, asshole!" she yelled. "I was only trying to help!"

"And help you did," Dr. Carpenter replied. He ran his bloody fingers against her nervous face. "You helped me." He put a finger to her temple in a patronizing manner. "All because of that gift."

"No..."

Artis leaned in closer, his smile wider and more cryptic than any of the ones on the other ghosts. "Your power brought me back."

"No," Bridget said in terror. "That's not what I did. That's not what I was trying to do."

But there was no response from the Doctor Of Death. No sympathy from him. Just his unwavering and cryptic smile. A smile that crushed Bridget's hopes, a smile no different than the one Amanda gave her children before mutilating them. There was no arguing with madness.

Defeated, Bridget turned and looked on at the group. Their process to bring her to the other side was about to begin.

Bridget took a step back and crushed something beneath her feet. Uneasy, she looked down and saw what she had stepped on. Her unlit cigarette from the previous day. I guess it's never too late, Bridget thought. She scooped up the cig and stuck it in her lips. Her one solace in this dire situation. At least the Christy house had left her cigarette unscathed, Bridget told herself.

The terrifying group swarmed upon Bridget, drowning her in a sea of reanimated cadavers.

Bridget screamed as the group overpowered her to the ground. The weapons stuck into her flesh over and over, each hit making her one step closer to them: a fellow slaughtered corpse.

Standing by the gate, an amused Artis watched the attack. He gazed over at the house. The lights inside cut off seemingly at the command of his piercing green eyes. It was getting near closing time.

Bridget's screams faded away into the silence of death. Her blood piled up on the pavement. A multitude of bloodied footprints scattered throughout the red puddles, the footprints varying in size from child to adult.

One more horrific stab sent blood splattering all over the Kevin Riley sign. All over Kevin's shit-eating grin.

The blood crawled down the sign, splotching out Kevin's hone number and web site with thick redness. The Christy home was officially off the market.

THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I'll thank the usual great people: mom, dad, Holly, Alan, and of course, Ashley. Thank you for Skyler for helping me put this together! Wouldn't be anywhere without y'all's support!

So there's an interesting backstory for the novel. Back in 2016, I had a screenplay produced by an eccentric filmmaker. I can't say the results were great, but it got made... Not necessarily a terrible movie, just not well filmed. Anyway, the director came back to me and wanted another non-WGA feature... One that could be contained and shot exclusively in a modern L.A. house. To top it all off, he wanted a haunted house script or something paranormal. The first of his ever-evolving demands.

Well, I did what I could. Did research and came across the term "emotional defect." A realtor's spin on a house of horrors or a house notorious for past tragedies. I knew I had the title right then and there.

So I had several influences here. Stephen King's *The Shining* (crazed homeowners) and Richard Matheson's *The Legend Of Hell House* (paranormal team investigating a haunted house) chief amongst them. I wrote what would've been an EXTREMELY low-budget script... and one I was proud of. However, the director changed his mind in typical fashion and opted for an even cheaper psychological thriller. The script for *Emotional Defect* took me about two weeks to write from concept to final draft. This next psychological script, the one that ended up getting produced, took me less than a week. Yeah, I was unemployed at the time. Not to mention single.

Anyway, while *Emotional Defect* got nice feedback, it just collected cobwebs... Much to my frustration. I enjoyed the script a great deal and knew the story had potential. Hell, it's even my mom's favorite! But obviously, I didn't have the money to shoot it myself... and with no wealthy filmmaking connections, I decided to make *Defect* my first novel.

In 2018, I started writing more prose. Sure, I'd do the odd script here and there for the odd pay. But I needed to build a fanbase. A brand. Encouraged by Ashley, I decided to try my hand at writing a novel and given *Defect*'s struggles at getting optioned, I chose it for my inaugural yarn. I finished it in three months... and honestly, I believe it turned out quite well! Not to mention introduced me to my first prose fan (shout-out to Sharlene!). Anyway, I hope everyone enjoyed it... What you just read was written quite a few months before I even started doing NoSleeps. So there's some rhonnie14 history for you.