

PROLOGUE

“A land of deepest night, of utter darkness and disorder, where even the light is like darkness.”

—**Job 10:22**

It was a lovely property.

A house all alone, set back from the road and hidden within the tall white oaks and dark pines. Only an old rusted mailbox marked the entrance, leaning slightly, as if trying to prepare you.

A long dirt driveway led to its face. It looked tired, somehow. It felt still. Heavy.

If you walked through the door, you'd be forgiven for missing the claw marks in the hallway. Or the scent that clung to the air like iron and something else. Something that had soaked into the walls and floorboards.

Every home smells like the people who live there. Like a marker. A kind of proof of ownership. A scent that says, *this place is mine*.

But this house didn't smell like the people who'd lived there. It smelled like something that rooted its way in. Something that lingered, thick and sour at the back of your throat.

A festering.

If you walked further, you might notice the cold, but not the source. And you would be alone. But you would not be alone.

You would find a room and a door in the back of the house. You would feel it drawing you in as if a tether was pulling you. Inviting you. The door would look so small against the large empty wall. It would feel quiet and still. But you would feel the air contracting around you like breath.

In and out.

In and out.

You may not even see the blood on the walls or the crucifixes, too distracted by the sudden desolation creeping its way in. You would feel an itch, like something with legs crawling up your spine and threading itself into your hair. Something that felt like it was crawling into your ear but you couldn't get it out.

And even though the door had seven locks lining its edge and a thick wooden barricade bolted across its face, you were aware enough to know that these things did not make you safe.

You wouldn't notice the banister above the door, or the stairway with a bloody trail across its wall like a map leading to what stood above.

But then you would hear it.

Soft at first. Like an animal scratching at the door. A metallic dragging of something like nails raking a chalkboard. Heavy. Slow.

Then silence. And without warning—

A violent drop.

Legs slammed against the top panel of the door. Bruised. Bare. Toes brushing the wood, flexing and searching for something solid.

A body hung, suspended by wire looped over a beam. The twitching finally giving way as his arms hung limp.

His face...

Mouth open wide as if frozen in a soundless scream. Terrified. Neck torn nearly through, wire biting deep into the skin, through muscle and tissue. Blood tracking down along the scars on his chest like paint finding a crack. Strange symbols carved into his own skin, having begun to scar over.

Eyes were gone. Nails driven into their sockets. As though gouging them out hadn't been enough to keep him from *seeing*.

If you were there, you would understand.

But you are not there.

The others are.

And they are enjoying the song created as the wire saws into the beam above. As his feet tap against the door. Swaying softly like a pendulum.

Keeping time.

NEW LISTING — PROPERTY SOLD "AS IS"

Rare opportunity: three-bedroom home situated on several wooded acres just outside the city limits. Modern construction featuring updated appliances, open-concept floor plan, and central heating and air. Master suite includes private bath and walk-in closets. Spacious attic and full basement offer additional storage potential. Property requires interior repairs and cleaning. Electricity recently restored. Home has been inspected and cleared with no structural concerns. Located fifteen minutes from shopping centers and within a highly rated school district. Price reflects current condition.

Serious inquiries only.

THIRTEEN

The house looked better in person.

Sort of.

From a distance, it could've been a postcard. A beautiful wraparound porch with thick wood beams. Towering oak trees stretched along the perimeter like quiet sentries. Set back into the woods, the long dirt driveway led to a proper stone one that was shaped like a semi-circle in front of the house.

The setting felt private, serene. Almost like a storybook.

Up close, it needed work. The trim was peeling. The gutters sagged. Paint flaked in long, curling strips. Dead overgrowth clung to the porch rails. Moss spread along the path like rot. The entire place could use a power wash and some new paint. They would definitely need some landscaping, if only to restore the dead shrubbery surrounding the house.

Ian stood back from the porch, eyes scanning the roofline with an expression Mickey couldn't quite read.

"There's no way we can afford this," Ian said suspiciously. "It's too nice for our budget. What's the catch?"

"Can't be worse than the last place," Mickey muttered, hands shoved in his jean jacket pockets. His eyes flicked across the filthy black shutters. "Black mold. Old roof. Water damage. A city of racoons in the attic. And only sixty grand above our budget."

Before Ian could answer a bubbly redhead woman greeted them with a bright, practiced smile and a file folder. She reached out to shake Ian's hand.

"Hi! I'm Casey with Gold Coast Realty. We spoke on the phone. You're Ian and Mikey?"

"*Mickey*," he corrected, shaking her hand.

"*Mickey*—of course. Welcome, welcome!"

Ian looked up at the house.

"It's a lot bigger in person than in the picture."

“2,800 square feet. You’ll get a lot of bang for your buck, that’s for sure. Let’s start out here so you can get a lay of the land.”

They’d found the listing online, and it seemed too good to be true. The size, the location, the price... It was the first place in nearly a year of searching that had actually felt like a possibility.

If all it had were working plumbing and floors it would still be a steal.

But it was practically brand new. All up to code.

Mickey thought it had to be a scam. He wanted to bring a gun just in case someone tried to shove them in a van. That’s how rare it was to find a diamond like this in the whole lot of rough they’d seen.

Casey took them around the outside of the property, pointing out the picturesque creek down a ways and the natural beauty of the woods around them. The immediate yard area was a mess with branches scattered around as if there had been a hurricane. Overgrown shrubs clung to life.

But tucked into the trees like it was, the imperfection felt right. It didn’t need to be manicured to be beautiful.

“It’s been on the market for a little over a year with no takers. It’s definitely a bit of a fixer-upper, hence the price,” she said, as they walked back around to the front of the house after having looked at the yard. She wobbled a bit in heels that didn’t belong anywhere near soft dirt. “But the lot’s private. No neighbors in either direction for a good half mile. You’ve got shopping and a Super Walmart fifteen minutes away, good school district. It’s the best of both worlds.”

Ian and Mickey exchanged a look.

“There’s gotta be a catch. There were no pictures from inside the house on the website.”

Casey gave a diplomatic smile. “Well, the interior needs... *significant* work. There’s some damage to the flooring, and the walls are going to need to be redone. The owners passed away last year, no heirs. The property fell into probate. And when that happens, the state doesn’t clean or renovate. What you see is what you get.”

“I doubt anyone would be opposed to a little elbow grease for a house like this. There’s gotta be another reason,” Ian said.

She hesitated. “It’s a little more than that. Structurally, the place is sound. Solid, really!” she said, giving a thumbs up and trying a little too hard to sound positive. “Tankless water heater, modern

electrical, HVAC, the whole bit. The original owner was an architect—he designed it for himself and his wife. Took about a year to build. So it's only about two years old.”

Ian glanced up at the flaking eaves. “Looks older.”

“Yeah, I don’t know exactly what happened there,” she admitted. “Maybe the paint was never sealed properly. Maybe neglect. Things... declined. Rapidly.”

“What does that mean?” Mickey asked as they climbed the steps of the porch.

Before unlocking the door, she paused and turned toward them. “Well... I’m legally required to disclose that the owners passed away in the home just after they moved in,” she said delicately. “And since a crime was committed on the property, I also have to disclose that it was a murder-suicide.”

Mickey raised an eyebrow looking like he’d misheard her. She tried to explain.

“If a house is owned by a bank, they’ll come in and clean up in order to make the property appealing to buyers. But since they owned it outright, and there was no family to speak of, it hasn’t been touched since...it happened.”

“So this is gonna look like a crime scene?” Ian asked, still a little shocked.

“Mostly just a lot of trash and mess. Some police tape on the floor. The crime scene techs cleaned up most of the blood but it was difficult considering the state of the interior,” she said as Mickey shook his head at what he was hearing.

She expected this. She’d gotten that reaction— or worse— from the last twenty couples who had visited. The ones who didn’t immediately turn around and get back into their cars didn’t usually make it too far into the house before they, too, said *hasta la vista*. She’d changed tactics, trying to get her full-throated defense of the property out before they went in

“Mr. Dunn... he had some very serious mental issues. It looked like they were in the process of painting and wallpapering. There was very little furniture. But there’s a ton of trash. They managed to create quite a mess in just a few weeks. It’ll take some serious cleaning but just try to remember it’s all aesthetic. You’ll be amazed at what some Magic Erasers and freshly painted walls will do for a place. Try to keep an open mind,” she said, offering a tight smile as she unlocked the door and pushed it open.

Mickey gave Ian a look. “Yeah, a Magic Eraser and a Haz-Mat team,” he whispered sarcastically.

Ian grinned. “We’ve lived in worse. I’m sure Deb knows some hippie lesbian who can come and sage it for us or something. Get rid of the bad ju-ju.”

Mickey snorted as they followed Casey inside.

“I won’t lie. When I first came in here I was a little unsettled by some of it. But if you can see past that then it could be a really beautiful place. It has a lot of potential...”

The air inside was thick. Still and cold.

They stepped into the foyer, their boots landing with a dull echo against the hardwood. Ian glanced around. Mickey's eyes went wide.

The place was a wreck.

Wallpaper half-stripped from the walls. Plastic sheeting nailed over a window in the dining room. A circle of crucifixes around a small, dirty mattress on the floor. A bunch of crucifixes littered against the wall around the windows.

Claw marks along the baseboards.

“Jesus,” Mickey muttered.

“*Literally*,” Ian said, voice low.

“I mean... what the hell?” he muttered, kicking at one of the crucifixes on the floor only to realize it was nailed down directly into the wood. “Was he afraid of vampires or something?”

“He may have been struggling with paranoia or religious delusions. No one is entirely sure. Some people just deteriorate. He didn't leave any kind of note, unless you count the scribbles in the wood around the house.”

Ian moved slowly, eyes taking in every inch. He reached out and gently rubbed Mickey’s back to settle them both before moving around the space.

“It’s what we call a *half-and-half*—a mostly open floor plan, but the kitchen and laundry room are more contained. Lots of closets, and lots of good light,” Casey said, going into realtor mode.

“Yeah, really helps the crucifixes shine,” Mickey huffed, running a hand along the fireplace mantle, wiping dust on his jeans.

“The ceilings are fifteen feet, with wood beams all throughout. It makes the space feel very large and airy. Once it’s clean you’ll be able to appreciate the wood floors. Mr. Dunn didn’t like waste. Most of the house was built with lumber right from this lot. The beams and the floors are all white oak. Those ceiling fans are all on their own switches on the wall and the lights and speed can be controlled from there.”

They moved quietly. Ian opened a closet and peeked inside—empty save for a rusted umbrella stand and a scattering of moth wings.

Mickey flicked a light switch on and off testing it, playing with the dimmer before turning it back off.

Ian nudged him playfully as he passed. “It has potential.”

Mickey smirked and opened a cabinet near the hallway, revealing nothing but brittle shelving paper and a pile of dead spiders.

“That’s one word for it.”

They moved into what must have once been the dining room—only now it looked like someone had tried and failed to repaint it. A gallon can of dark green paint sat half-open, hardened at the top. Brushes crusted solid lay on a tarp that smelled faintly of mildew.

“Built in bookshelves and french doors to the patio. It’s actually quite nice. I can see a nice barbecue out there.

She took them out onto the large patio space, surrounded by stone and covered with wood beams. The stones of the patio all had different tones to them. They walked around to the kitchen entrance.

“So I’ll warn you, the kitchen is the worst area in terms of damage. But try to see past that. It’ll need some vision,” Casey said, leading them.

The smell hit them before they even entered—not sharp, just *wrong*. The first thing they saw were more claw marks on the walls. Like a bear had gotten loose. The floors were stone so at least they’d have one room they didn’t need to re-sand.

They both walked in different directions taking in the space. There was a breezeway at the front of the kitchen, leading to the foyer and living area. Another hallway at the back of the kitchen leading to a hallway and the laundry room, with a set of stairs going up. The hallways continued to the back of the dining area. It was a lot of space.

Mickey walked to the closest window and unlocked it, cracking it open a little to let in some fresh air.

The kitchen island and counters were cluttered with remnants of old meals and empty containers, maggots and flies making themselves comfortable. Old cans sat with faded labels. A cutting board warped from moisture. A drawer half-open with rusted silverware inside. A cracked ceramic mug on the floor near the fridge.

Ian went to the sink, full of dirty, moldy dishes and twisted the handle to the faucet. It groaned, then sputtered to life. Brown water coughed out from the sprayer head at first, then cleared after a few seconds.

“Water works,” he said.

Mickey opened one of the upper cabinets. Empty. Another one—this time lined with mason jars filled with dark, dried substances. He closed it again without comment.

He moved past Ian, brushing his hand along Ian’s lower back as he passed, fingers dragging lightly along his shirt. Ian turned and caught his wrist gently, moving to tweak Mickey’s nipple in retaliation, giving a little laugh before Mickey smacked his hand away.

They weren’t prepared as they walked around the corner of the fridge to a little hallway.

“That’s the laundry room. The washer and dryer are practically new and top of the line. Built in shelves. Tankless water heater, like I said, so you can have nice long showers. And there’s a nice size pantry. Lots of storage,” Casey said, trying to ignore the elephant in the room.

They weren’t really listening to her as they stared at the far wall. In the center was a door—covered in the same symbols as on the floor in the living room, but much larger, over and over.

And crucifixes. Probably over a hundred of them. All different sizes. Covering every inch of drywall. Overlapping. Cracked. Some bent out of shape. Nailed straight into studs. All over the door.

The door itself looked thick and heavy with vertical planks and a coat of faded blue paint that made it look a lot older than it probably was. Seven locks along the edge. A heavy wooden barricade across it with more of those strange symbols carved deep into the grain.

Everything about it screamed, *Go Away*.

They both stared for a long moment.

“Okay,” Mickey said. “Well, if I wasn’t creeped-the-fuck-out before...”

Casey came up behind them and walked to the door. “That leads to the basement,” she said, beginning to work through the line of deadbolts. Each lock clicked open with a tired groan.

She paused, bracing herself as she pulled the wooden barricade free from its brackets with a sharp creak. “He was definitely... eccentric,” she added carefully. “Just watch your step on the stairs.”

She flipped the switch on the wall. The bulb at the top of the stairwell flickered once, then held.

“I ain’t goin’ down there.”

Ian looked at him. “*Chicken...*”

“This is the part of the movie when everyone goes into the creepy dungeon instead of running out the front door.”

Ian made chicken noises as he and Casey began climbing down.

Mickey hesitated, rolling his eyes, then followed.

It was empty. A large stone structure off to the side indicated it was the foundation of the fireplace. There were some shelving units against the wall with a bit of junk littered on them.

“I feel like you could turn this into a great man-cave. Or game room. The ceiling is large enough. You could put a nice pool table down here and a big tv. Maybe a bar. You’d have to fix the floor, of course,” she said.

In the center of the concrete floor sat a sledgehammer, obviously used to smash at the basement floor. There appeared to be blood on the handle.

There was a crack about six feet long on the floor, with remnants of cement dusts and rocks scattered around. A big bag of cement mix sat against the wall. It looked like he had been trying to dig something up. Or cover something.

Mickey wasn’t sure which one was worse.

“No worries—the foundation is solid, it’s just damage to the top side of the cement. Nothing that can’t be fixed.”

“3 -to-1 odds he tried to bury his wife down there,” Mickey said. “At least some of her.”

Ian stepped closer, peering at the large crack. “We’ll definitely need to seal it before the baby comes. Don’t want any accidents.”

“Oh, do you have children?” Casey asked excitedly.

“One on the way,” Ian answered with a grin of pride.

“Well there are plenty of locks to keep little curious legs from coming down here.”

“Yeah, I doubt he was thinking about anybody's *safety* when he put those up,” Mickey said.

Ian noticed something on the floor and kicked around some of the broken cement. The same symbols from upstairs had been carved into the rock. Sharp angles, crude lines. They didn't look decorative.

Ian crouched, tracing one with his finger. “Do you know what this is?”

She shook her head. “No idea. But taking the crucifixes into account and the way his wife was found, he seemed to have some kind of religious fixation. Some people believe in demons. When your brain betrays you, anything can feel real.”

Ian didn't respond to that. But he understood it. All too well.

“So what happened? Do you know any details?” Mickey asked.

Casey hesitated.

“No one knows for sure. All I know was from the police report we got for the home disclosures. Mrs. Dunn's neck was broken. She was found there, against the wall,” she said pointing to the corner of the basement. “She had a lot of scratches and marks on her. Probably from trying to defend herself. She, um...”

Casey hesitated. This was the part where most people ran out.

“She'd been disemboweled. Her neck had been broken, almost completely turned around.”

Ian just looked at her like she must be kidding. Then he realized.

She wasn't.

Mickey gave Ian a quick look that said, *do you believe this shit?* before shaking his head and walking over to the shelving near the stairs, picking up a watch that had been left there. It wasn't working.

“Mr. Dunn hung himself upstairs. When he hadn't shown up for work for weeks, a business associate came to do a welfare check and found him.”

“That's lovely,” Ian said sarcastically. “There was no warning or reasons given?”

“None that I'm aware of. Co-workers said they seemed like a nice couple. He didn't seem unstable. But you never know these days.”

“I wanna see the bedrooms,” Mickey said, wanting to get out of that basement as soon as possible.

“Well, with that we have some good news. The upstairs area has almost no damage at all. It's like they'd barely used it. There's some nice furniture up there, too. Just needs a good dusting,” Casey said as they made their way back up.

Sure enough, the upstairs area looked pristine compared to downstairs. Dusty and musty but nothing unusual. One guest room was empty but another had a nice bed and furniture. As did the main bedroom.

Mickey looked it over, figuring they could move it or sell it. He certainly didn't want their bed anywhere near them.

Casey gave them space to look around as she stepped outside to take a call.

The master bedroom was large, with tall windows and dust in the air like snow. Ian appreciated the view of the back of the yard. He could see the creek off in the distance.

But Mickey had gone back to the smaller room down the hall. Ian found him there, leaning against the doorframe. He approached behind him, wrapping his arms under Mickey's, holding him for a moment as they stared at the empty space.

“This one's a good size for a nursery,” Mickey said softly.

Ian nodded against his ear. “It'll be beautiful when we're done.”

Mickey gave him a sideways look. “You're already moved in. I can hear your wheels turning.”

Ian smirked, smacking his ass gently before moving to look out the window. “We're not going to be able to afford anything else. And this is twice the house for half the price.”

“Yeah,” Mickey muttered. “Because a religious nutjob probably sacrificed virgins in the basement and had 666 on his head. Everyone else who saw the place ran screaming like we're too stupid to do. Did you see that shit carved into the floors? And the crucifixes?”

Ian shrugged. “Hey, after the shit we've been through, I'm not afraid of ghosts. I'm afraid of *creditors*.”

Mickey huffed. He took a beat, looking at Ian's profile in the light of the window.

He really was beautiful.

“I suppose we could claim any ghosts as dependents,” he said, resigned. He came up and leaned against the window.

“If we find a haunted doll, we can put it on babysitting duty. Free child care!”

“They’ll probably move on once they know they’re getting put to work. They’ll be like, *‘fuck this shit.’*”

They stood there for a while looking at each other with affection.

“I guess this is our house,” Mickey said finally. “But you’re doing the shoveling. That driveway’s a mile long.”

“Deal.”

“And tonight we’re driving around to find the nearest pizza place. There needs to be good takeout within delivery range before we sign any paperwork.”

Ian nodded. “Obviously.”

Mickey was still hesitant. Nervous about such a big decision.

“And you have to promise to not let us turn into boring, suburban fags who drive a minivan and wear cardigans and shit.”

“Hey, you told me years ago we’re never gonna be normal. We’re moving into the site of a murder-suicide. That sound boring to you?” He asked, moving closer to cup the side of his face.

“We’ll never be boring. And this will be our not-boring house.”

“A crazy, murder-y, suicide-y, *‘the power of Christ compels you’* house.”

“Hey...you said for better or worse, remember?” Ian chuckled, pulling his husband into the Mickey-shaped spot against his chest. Mickey settled in, putting his hands into Ian's back pockets loosely.

He grinned against Mickey's hair as he thought about how this could be their child's nursery in just two months. He could see their daughter in his mind running around with her little feet padding through the hallways. Playing hide and seek. Calling out for her daddies. He could see Mickey giving her piggy back rides in the yard. Throwing snowballs at her. Her laughter echoing throughout this place.

He could see the thread of their lives.

Mickey hummed, silently understanding exactly what he was thinking.

It had taken them five years. Five years to save. Five years to actually *want* to buy their first house. As the business grew they eventually brought on another team—Sandy and Iggy—to help handle the workload. New vans. A website. Some sharp upgrades to their gear. And after enough prodding, Mickey finally agreed to start paying taxes. Real payroll. Legit paperwork. Everything aboveboard.

Ian felt like he had to drag Mickey into every new step. That's how it always went. He had to force him there and after a while he stopped being afraid of it.

He didn't want to force him into having kids.

Kids were hard in the very best of circumstances. You have to *want* it. It's the only way you can deal with the responsibility and work that it takes to do it.

Ian had wanted children for as long as he could remember. But Mickey was a tough sell and with plenty of good reason.

It took building a life with Ian, watching how he lit up around Lip's kids, or how he melted when Franny climbed into his lap, for something in Mickey to shift. And slowly... it did.

They needed to clean out the storage space at the apartment complex. And afterward he realized that Ian had thrown away the crib they'd taken from Kev and V years before. He'd held onto it for so long.

It was like he'd given up on keeping it.

That's when Mickey realized he didn't want Ian to give up on that. He didn't want to take that from him.

And then it just clicked. He realized he *did* want it. He wasn't his father. He never would be. And even though they had real, serious issues to think about with having a kid, he knew they'd figure it out. But he wasn't going to be scared of facing it. *All* of it.

He was ready.

When he brought it up to Ian, he literally cried. Sandy volunteered to help and they started looking for a house.

A home. Where they grew up, there were a bunch of children who had to raise themselves around addictions and fight and loss. You never learned to do more than just survive. Hustle for rent money. Dodge the calls from utility companies until you could give them a minimum payment and let your rent be late. You had no good influence who could guide you.

So you had big dreams but no architecture to make *goals*.

Ian felt the pull to build a home for themselves, especially with the baby coming. He wanted a place that was theirs. Solid ground. But Mickey—even after fifteen years together—still lived like he was one step from the street. Physically, he'd moved. In his mind, he never left. He still had a hard time paying for something if there was a way to steal it. Still flinched at the idea of *owning* something big, like it might strip them of the identity they'd earned.

Maybe he was smarter. He'd never be disappointed.

So everything was always a process, with him.

But little by little, Mickey had started to believe he could want more than just survival. That he could want something better for himself. For *them*.

It had potential.

Ian enveloped him, arms around his shoulders as they both dreamed of what could be in that place. He kissed the side of Mickey's neck, enjoying the smell of him.

Outside, the wind picked up. The trees moved like they were whispering.

Waiting.

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The house didn't feel like theirs yet.

The mortgage was signed. The keys were in hand. They'd even shown up at the crack of dawn to scrub out the worst of it before the family arrived to help. But it wouldn't *really* be theirs—not until they could sit on their couch, eat takeout, and fall asleep to the TV playing something dumb and familiar.

Still, they were here. Officially. The U-Haul was empty. The rented dumpster hulking in the yard like a second house. Everyone made the trek to their new place to help out. Liam was in school, Carl was at work. But everyone else came through, excited to finally see the place they'd been taking about for a month.

Ian was already sweating through his second T-shirt of the day.

“Jesus,” Tami muttered, dragging a box up the porch steps. “This place smells like mold and B.O.”

“Reminds me of the old house,” Ian said, wiping his forehead. “We never knew if one of the kids had pissed on the couch.”

“Or Frank,” Lip called down the stairs, where he'd just dropped a box in one of the bedrooms.

Ian let out a tired laugh, setting down his end of the couch just as Mickey lowered his side with a grunt.

“Still an upgrade from our old bedroom,” Ian said.

“That's probably true,” Lip muttered, cracking his back.

They'd hit the ground running that morning—trash bags, gloves, enough cleaning products to strip a crime scene. It wasn't about making the place livable yet. It was about clearing a path. Making sure no one got hurt. Just enough space to drop boxes without worrying what might crawl out from under them.

The dining room had been their first win. Of all the rooms, it was the least offensive. No questionable stains. No carvings. Just trash, half-finished paint and a dusty floor. Once they cleared it out, they found that the bay window had a built-in seat with cabinets underneath. The wood was solid. Beautiful, even.

They'd swept, mopped, cracked a window, and called it good. Boxes and borrowed furniture were now stacked there like a placeholder for something better. The barest suggestion of a home.

The living room was still mid-exorcism. They'd hauled out the stained mattress. Mickey pried up the crucifixes nailed to the floor first thing. He wanted them gone. The ones on the wall and the ones in the laundry room would have to wait. They tried to wipe down the wallpaper but it wasn't salvageable. They were going to have to strip it.

The floors were... what they were. Until they could bring in the sander, they'd have to live with creepy symbols etched into the floor.

The kitchen was its own monster. They'd managed to clear the trash—barely—and Debbie had braved the maggots, scrubbing the sink so they could at least wash their hands. But the cabinets were caked with gunk, and the fridge was beyond saving.

“I can't perform miracles,” was all she said.

They were willing to battle the cabinets. The fridge, they'd burn if they could. An *Andy's Budget Appliance* run was already on the schedule for tomorrow.

Tami walked by with a box labeled BATHROOM and paused in the doorway, looking at Lip.

“I better get a backrub out of this later.”

“I'll rub whatever you want.”

“Who you two kiddin'? You're both gonna be asleep on your couch by 7pm,” Mickey smirked, tossing a garbage bag full of clothes near the stairs.

“Hey, that's what happens when you're parents. Which you two will find out soon enough,” Tammy said, flicking Mickey behind the ear.

“A good nap is sexy, trust me,” Lip said. “When Zoey had colic, I had fantasies about my pillow.”

“You never appreciate vegging out and doing nothing as much as you do after you have a loud, pissing, crying, puke machine waking you up every half hour,” Debbie chimed in, wiping her hands with a wet wipe. “Hopefully having her babysit Zoey will teach her the lesson I didn't learn early enough.”

“Hey, I need to pee again. Someone else take over on squirt patrol for a minute,” Sandy said, hopping up the stairs as fast as any seven months pregnant woman could.

“I got it. I need a break anyway,” Tammy said, going outside to keep an eye on Freddie playing in the front yard.

“Make sure he's staying away from that dumpster,” Lip called out.

Outside, Tammy sat on the front steps, taking a sip of her water as she watched her son throw a tennis ball with all the force his tiny arms could manage. She chuckled every time Porkchop galloped after it in his stubby-legged waddle. The Basset Hound looked like someone had assembled him from leftover parts—a sausage with ears almost as long as his body—but he was determined.

Ian and Mickey came out to pull down the back door of the UHaul, jumping down and leaning into each other. Ian leaning over to wipe Mickey's face from dirt. They teased each other, leading to a quick kiss as Sandy made her way back out.

“Look at you two. Suburban gays now. All you need is a lawn flamingo and a white picket fence.”

Mickey flipped her off without looking up from the padlock he was securing to the UHaul door. “It’s bad enough he wants to start a garden. If I see a single lawn decoration I’ll stab him with it.”

Ian grinned. “Romantic.”

Freddie’s shout drew their attention. The ball had bounced against the side of the house, near one of the basement windows, and was up against the glass.

“Go on, Porkchop,” he said, trying to prod him to go get it.

But the dog stopped cold. He let out a low whine and backed up. Then he barked. Loud. Fast. Sharp.

“Porkchop!” Tami called. She jogged down the steps to get a closer look. “Freddie, what’s going on, buddy?”

“Nothin’. He just won’t get the ball.”

“Well I’ll get it then.”

Tami smirked as she made her way over to the window. She picked up the dirty tennis ball covered in dog slobber.

“Gross,” she said, wiping her hand on her jeans. She glanced into the basement for a moment, feeling a strange sensation. As if someone was looking at her.

“Momma?!” Freddie called, impatiently. She shook her head, coming back to herself. She suddenly felt a little nauseous.

She made her way over to her son and handed him the ball.

“Fat little hot dog’s probably wiped out. We found him in a Dollar Store parking lot eating a ketchup packet, so you know—can’t expect too much from him. Maybe he needs a break. How ‘bout we bring him inside to get some water?”

“Can I have a juice?”

“We’ll see what’s left in the cooler,” she said, reaching for his hand and they made their way back to the house. She turned back to the yard as they started back up the stairs. “C’mon Porkchop!” she called.

But the dog didn’t move. He stayed there stiffly, eyes fixed on the house.

“Alright, weirdo,” Sandy muttered. “Stay outside then. Come on, Freddie.”

The boy waved back at the dog as they made their way up the stairs.

The rest of the day passed in a blur—cleaning, hauling, arguing over whether to keep the weird set of stuffed ducks they found in a hall closet (spoiler: no). A thank you dinner of pizza, beer and embarrassing stories followed. By the time the clock edged past midnight, their helpers were packing up. Debbie had left earlier, a scheduled job she couldn't cancel. They didn't mind; she'd been so busy lately they were just grateful she could come out at all. Tammy worked on getting a sleepy Freddie into the backseat. Lip loaded Porkchop into the car with a grunt, the dog doing absolutely nothing to help.

Ian had his hand over Sandy's belly, murmuring a goodbye to their daughter, when Mickey came over to join them. Sandy pulled him into a hug.

“Don't die in Amityville,” she said.

“No promises,” Mickey replied, rubbing her stomach gently. “Bye, pickle.”

“And settle on a name, already.”

Tami and Lip waved from their SUV as Freddie made a funny face at them from the back seat. Sandy's little red Nissan followed behind them.

And then it was quiet.

Ian and Mickey stood on the porch a moment longer, the night pressing in around them. The sky was clearer than it had any right to be, stars sharp through the canopy of trees. Their breath fogged faintly in the cool air.

Inside, the bed was the one thing fully set up.

Priorities.

The room was half-empty, just a few open boxes scattered around, clothes peeking out like they'd tried to escape. But the sheets were clean, and the mattress had never looked more inviting.

They moved around each other with the quiet rhythm of people who'd done this before. A hand brushing a back. A kiss to a shoulder. A kind of wordless ritual, anchoring them.

After a long day of cleaning, sanding, unpacking, and dodging conversations they weren't ready to finish, the only sound now was the slow hum of the bathroom fan and the soft creak of old floorboards settling under their feet.

Ian flicked the light on and squinted against it. “Jesus,” he muttered, shielding his eyes. “Why is it *always* brighter at night?”

Mickey padded in behind him, dragging his feet, shirtless and low-energy in threadbare sweats. “Because this house was built by demons and coded by electricians from hell.”

Ian snorted. He reached for his toothbrush without looking, already on autopilot. Mickey reached around him to grab his.

They stood shoulder to shoulder at the sink, brushing in silence, both of them leaning just slightly to the side so their arms didn’t bump.

Mickey spit. “I’m too tired to flirt with you,” he said, rinsing the sink. “But know that I’m thinking it.”

Ian checked.

“Appreciate it,” was all he murmured around his toothbrush, but he bumped Mickey’s hip with his own.

Mickey turned off the light and crawled into bed, groaning as his muscles complained.

Ian hopped in on his side, reaching over to rub slow circles into his shoulder. “I know we’re dead on our feet,” he said, voice low, “but we can’t let our first night in our new house go by without christening the bedroom. It’s bad luck. We don’t need any more bad vibes in this house.”

Mickey let out a wounded noise against his pillow. “Alright,” he mumbled. “But you’re doin’ all the work.”

He turned over onto his stomach and hugged his pillow, as if he were preparing for a back rub.

Ian laughed under his breath and leaned in, pressing soft, grateful kisses down the slope of Mickey’s back—from neck to spine to the curve of his waist. Slow. Worshipful.

Mickey gave a little satisfied hum, just enjoying the attention.

“Before we bring the UHaul back we should go to the appliance place. Get the fridge. Save the delivery fee,” he suggested, giving a long comfortable sigh.

Ian hummed against his skin. “Smart.”

“And we can’t forget to change our address on the post office site. Remember how fucked up the mail got when we moved to the West Side?”

“Mmm hmm.”

More kisses. A slow drag of teeth over a hip.

“And we gotta find the tv mount. I can’t remember what box it’s in but the Bears game is on tomorrow.”

“Mmm hmm,” Ian hummed, barely paying attention as he nipped at a buttcheek.

“And groceries. We’ll just do delivery, right? I’m not gonna have the patience to fight over parking...”

Ian flipped him over without warning.

“Shut up,” he said fondly, grinning as he kissed him full on the mouth.

Mickey laughed against it, lips wet, eyes crinkling at the corners.

The kiss deepened. He pressed Mickey back into the mattress as his weight settled between his thighs. He rolled his hips, slow and lazy, rubbing against Mickey’s cock until it started to stir.

Under the blankets, their bodies found each other again. Not rushed. Just *themselves*. The world could fall apart—and probably would—but this, right here, was still always theirs.

Always *this*.

Afterward, they sank into the pillows, still tangled up in each other. Mickey exhaled, voice low and certain.

“We’re home.”

Ian curled around tighter, kissed his shoulder, then the warm space at his throat. He breathed him in.

“Yeah.”

.....

Outside, the trees shifted gently in the night air as their tall spines swayed. Leaves rustled softly, almost soothing.

Then, without warning, the wind stopped.

The trees froze.

Branches held in unnatural stillness. No rustling. No chirping insects. Just silence—*total silence*—as if the world itself had taken a breath and refused to let it out.

Inside the house, a strip of torn wallpaper near the living room ceiling fluttered, moving slightly, as if someone had blown on it.

Below it, the air stirred. Cold. Directionless. Swirling around the house as if with a purpose.

The kitchen. The laundry. A whisper of motion—the basement door, its knob twitching like someone testing it from the other side. Slow. Steady. The metal clicked faintly in its socket, once, then stopped.

Upstairs, the bedroom was still.

Ian and Mickey slept tangled in the blankets, limbs loose, breath deep from exhaustion. The room was dark, the only light from a half-shuttered window casting long shadows over their bodies.

At the edge of the bed, the blanket shifted. A small movement, like someone tugging on it softly.

Then a soft sound—scraping.

A scratch.

Then another.

It got louder. Closer.

The kind of sound you feel in your teeth.

Then—

BANG.

A loud, percussive *knock*—directly beneath them.

Both of them jolted up, feeling disoriented by being pulled from such deep sleep.

Breathing hard. Hearts pounding in the sudden stillness.

Mickey wiped a hand over his eyes, wondering if he'd imagined it. Ian was already sitting up straighter, eyes fixed on the hallway.

“What the fuck was that?” Mickey asked, voice rough with sleep.

“I don't know.” Ian's voice was low, too steady. Like saying it quietly might keep the dark from answering back.

They both looked toward the hallway.

It was pitch black. The darkness didn't feel like the absence of light—it felt *intentional*. Like something had painted over the doorway.

They sat frozen, staring at that void.

There was a part of them—childish, buried, but still alive—that feared the edge of the bed. That avoided looking into the mirror too long after midnight. That hated leaving a closet door cracked open. That part of them looked down that hallway and waited.

Waited to see if the noise would come again.

Waited to confirm that they'd both heard it.

Waited to see if something might move inside that dark.

Mickey whispered, “If you say ‘probably the wind,’ I’ll punch you.”

Ian swallowed. “I was gonna say maybe a box fell.”

For a second, they both hoped that was it. That it wouldn't happen again. That they could shrug it off, pretend it hadn't sounded like knocking. Hide under the blankets like it was nothing.

Then—

BANG.

Louder this time. Heavier. The sound of impact. Something hitting wood, directly below them.

They were both out of bed in a heartbeat.

Mickey grabbed the bat from where it leaned in the corner. Ian opened the drawer and pulled out the gun. Neither of them said anything else. Just moved with practiced coordination, every step thick with that quiet, awful knowing.

This wasn't a maybe anymore.

They eased into the hallway, Mickey feeling around, still not sure where the light switches were, eventually hitting it and illuminating the entire upstairs area. They waited for a moment to see if the sudden light startled anyone down below. But there was nothing..

There were two stairways at each end of the hallway, not unlike the old Gallagher house. One led directly to the laundry and kitchen area. The other led directly to the front door and foyer. The chose the foyer stairs, wanting to check the door first.

The stairs creaked under their feet as they descended, every groan of wood echoing louder than it should have.

The house didn't feel like it was settling.

It felt like it was *listening*.

Ian moved toward the front door, turning on the foyer light, finally giving them a breath when they looked around and didn't immediately see anything. Or anyone.

Mickey could deal with anyONE. He'd had enough thieves trying to break into his dad's place. Enough drug addicts looking for Terry to get a hit. He understood that.

This felt like someTHING. And they were isolated there. No occasional traffic. No shots firing in the distance or ambulances whirring by. No humanity. And even though logically being alone in the woods was probably safer than on the streets of the city, this felt more dangerous, somehow.

As soon as they hit the landing Mickey flipped the light switch illuminating the foyer.

Ian grabbed the flashlight off the floor, unlocking the front door. Cold air swept in as he stepped out, scanning the yard with the flashlight. The beam cut through the dark like a blade—but it didn't feel like it *cleared* anything. The shadows were still thick, like they clung to the edges of the trees, reluctant to be chased off.

Everything looked undisturbed. Still. The trees were rigid again, like the wind had forgotten them.

Inside, Mickey walked through the living room and dining area, taking a quick look out the patio doors. He saw Ian walking around the house in his boxers and nothing else. He was going to be freezing when he came in.

He made his way through the dark hallway to the laundry area. Every instinct told him not to.

And yet—he did.

The floor felt colder here. Stone instead of wood. The shadows deeper.

He moved through the hallway, the bat hanging loosely in his hand, dragging on the floor. He turned the light on, but it still felt too silent to feel illuminated.

His eyes gravitated toward the laundry room. To the basement door.

Seven locks. Thick wooden plank. All in place.

Mickey stood in the doorway and stared. The rest of the house seemed to fall away.

He felt it—a pressure in his skull. Like the low hum of something watching from the other side. Something that had pressed itself flat against the wood, trying to reach out. Waiting. *Breathing*.

In and out.

In and out.

He felt his hand moving toward the door wanting to touch it. To feel the thing that breathed there. He felt like he was underwater, hearing something behind him, trying to pull him out but he couldn't make it out. The bat felt too heavy. His feet didn't want to move. His throat was dry.

The longer he looked, the more certain he became that *whatever had made that sound... it came from behind that door.*

It was coming from behind it still. His hand almost touched it—

A hand landed on his shoulder.

Mickey flinched so hard he nearly swung the bat.

“Shit—Jesus! It's me!” Ian held up his hands. “It's just me,” he hissed, heart slamming against his ribs

Mickey took a breath, then another, grounding himself. Ian stepped up beside him, following his gaze to the basement door.

They both stood there for a moment, scanning the room. Everything still. The soft hum of the overhead light.

They walked back out to check the kitchen together. The cabinets lined up like teeth. There were two kitchen cabinets sitting wide open.

“Come on,” Ian said quietly. “Let's go back up.”

Mickey followed a few steps out but stopped. Looking back at the room.

“I didn't open those,” he said.

Ian glanced over. “What?”

“Those cabinets,” Mickey said. “They weren't open before we went to bed.”

Ian frowned, walking over to the cabinets. Some dishes they got at Walmart that day. Nothing of note. He closed them, walking back over. “Are you sure?”

Mickey stared at it, searching his own memory like it had betrayed him. “I'm pretty sure.”

“Pretty sure, or *sure* sure?”

“I don't know,” Mickey said, jaw tight. “I thought I was sure.”

“C’mon, let’s go back to bed,” he said as they stepped back into the laundry room. He saw Mickey hesitating, looking at the basement door.

Feeling like he wanted him to feel safe, he crossed to the door, and checked each lock one by one. “Still locked.”

He gave the wooden plank a testing knock. Solid.

Mickey didn’t say anything.

They scanned the room once more. Nothing out of place. No signs of forced entry.

“There was probably an animal in the dumpster. I don’t know. There’s nothing here now. We’re just spooking ourselves,” Ian said as he reached in and turned off the light. The bulb went out with a sharp snap.

They made their way up the backstairs. It was the first time Mickey noticed the cut marks in the banister there.

But neither of them saw the crucifixes on the living room wall as they passed through.

Slanted.

Just a little.

Upstairs, the bedroom light felt too bright. Too normal. Like it was trying to convince them nothing had happened.

They got back into bed without speaking. Ian set the gun back on the dresser with a sigh. Mickey leaned the bat against the wall.

They didn’t fall asleep for a while. And when they finally did, the blanket at the foot of the bed stirred again.

Just a little.

TWELVE

Ian woke up first.

For once, he hadn’t jolted out of sleep with a half-remembered dream or Mickey elbowing him in the ribs. Just... slowly. Naturally. Like his body had finally remembered how to rest.

The room was bright. They still hadn't put up curtains, and the sunlight sliced across the bed like an unwelcome guest. Ian blinked at the ceiling, adjusting, listening to the low hum of the house.

Quiet.

He turned his head carefully, not wanting to shift the mattress.

Mickey was still asleep, mouth slightly open, one arm flung overhead like he'd given up mid-argument. His hair was a mess. One bare shoulder was just visible where the blanket had slipped.

Ian smiled, quiet and warm.

He liked seeing him like this—no tension in his jaw, no weight behind his eyes. The lines Mickey carried with him—etched from years of holding too much, too young—faded when he slept. His mouth was soft. The barely-there freckles he pretended not to have stood out against his skin in the light.

Ian reached out and gently brushed a thumb over his cheek, not wanting to wake him.

This man. This house. This *life*.

For the first time in a long time, Ian felt it—that thing he used to think wasn't meant for him.

Peace.

Not forever. Not unshakable. But here. Now.

He smiled to himself, then carefully peeled back the covers and slipped out of bed.

.....

Downstairs, the house still held the cool weight of early morning.

Ian padded barefoot across the living room, scratching at the stubble along his jaw. The sander sat where he'd left it in the corner, surrounded by dust and half-unpacked boxes. A hammer rested on the couch arm like it had fallen asleep mid-shift.

He sighed. Still so much to do.

Crossing into the hallway, he rubbed a hand down his face, already picturing the first sip of coffee.

As he passed the laundry room, he didn't notice the crucifixes.

All of them had turned upside down.

Dozens of them. Quiet. Balanced.

Each one perfectly inverted on the walls and the door, the nails still holding them tight. Like they'd been... rotated. Intentionally.

But Ian didn't notice it.

He ran a hand through his hair, yawned, and kept walking.

.....

Mickey was always the second to wake up.

Usually because he realized Ian wasn't in bed anymore. He knew, even in sleep, when he wasn't there. He could never sleep long without him.

A trip to the bathroom and a quick brush of his teeth and he made his way downstairs, pulling his shirt down over his stomach. His hair stuck up on one side and he felt like he wasn't physically recovered from the day before.

He walked by the laundry room.

The crucifixes appeared normally. Like they hadn't just been upside down a few minutes before.

He yawned, entering the kitchen and seeing Ian leaning on the island, sipping his coffee.

"There should be a law against being awake before eight," he said, stealing Ian's coffee from his hand.

This was not an unusual behavior. Ian smirked, turning around to pour himself another cup.

"Good morning, sunshine."

"Speak for yourself," Mickey muttered. "My hands are killing me."

“I told you to wear the work gloves. You’re so stubborn.”

Mickey scratched his chest, grumbling.

“You got mad at a crucifix that was stuck and ripped five off the wall in a row.”

“Oh yeah,” Mickey said, stretching. “That felt good. Satisfying.”

They stepped out onto the back patio, coffees in hand.

The air was still, the kind of morning stillness that felt too perfect to last. The trees whispered in the distance. Everything else was holding its breath.

Mickey leaned against the stone column, mug pressed to his chest.

“It’s too quiet here,” he said.

Ian nodded beside him. “You said that about the apartment, too.”

“This is even worse. It’s weird.”

“It’s peaceful.”

“It’s *isolated*,” Mickey corrected. “I feel like we could scream out here and nobody’d come.”

Ian raised an eyebrow, sipping his coffee. “Better watch your mouth. I could start smacking you around, kicking your ass like I’ve always dreamed of. No one’d hear you scream for help.”

Mickey barked out a laugh, head tilting back against Ian’s shoulder.

Ian grinned. “I’m a little offended that you think it’s that ridiculous.”

“After fifteen years, you should know I’d rearrange your face if you even tried.”

“Oh, I know.”

Mickey nudged him. “But hey, I’m up for a good spankin’ anytime you want, buddy.”

Ian smirked. “Maybe later—if you’re good.”

Mickey gave him a lazy grin and took another sip of coffee.

Ian sighed, settling in beside him. “In a few months, we’re gonna wish for quiet.”

Mickey looked at him.

Ian nodded toward the yard. “Imagine it. Toys. A swingset. That dumb plastic slide that always tips over.”

Mickey chuckled under his breath.

“Kid screaming her head off ‘cause she wants mac and cheese for the third time that day. You yelling at me because I lost the baby monitor again.”

Mickey smiled into his mug.

“There’ll be noise,” Ian said softly. “Real, living noise. And this place’ll finally feel like home.”

Mickey closed his eyes, letting himself picture it as they stood in silence a little longer.

They didn’t hear the soft creak of the kitchen window.

They didn’t see the faint grey handprint forming on the inside of the glass.

And neither of them looked back through the hallway—

—where every crucifix had turned upside down again.

.....

Ian had been working for a few hours by the time he found himself in the hallway.

It was a strange little stretch between the dining room and kitchen—narrow, windowless, with a slightly uneven slope in the floor. The kind of hallway that didn’t feel built so much as squeezed in.

The picture frames lining the walls were empty. They’d always been empty. He remembered at the showing, at the inspection, even during move-in. Just wood and glass, like someone had once meant to make a gallery wall and forgot to finish.

He took a long sip of lukewarm coffee and stepped closer, putty knife still in hand. That’s when he noticed it.

They were all tilted.

Not random. Not skewed from time or bumps. Each one was tilted the *same* way. Just a few hairs off level—counter-clockwise. Precise. Intentional.

Ian frowned and reached out, touching one of the frames to straighten it.

It swung gently under his fingers... and then tilted back.

He blinked, stepped back, and let out a dry breath through his nose.

Maybe the wall isn't level?

One by one, he started taking them down, stacking them against the wall. He was halfway through the third when he noticed something near the floor.

A stain.

Down low, just above the baseboard. It looked like water damage, but as far as he knew there were pipes behind this wall. Maybe a leak from the roof?

Great.

The shape was uneven, with feathered edges that stretched like veins into the wallpaper.

Ian crouched, touched it lightly with the back of his fingers.

Dry. Cool.

It hadn't been there yesterday. He was almost sure of it.

He stood slowly, rubbed his jaw, and moved on.

.....

Upstairs, Mickey had finally hit his stride.

The bedroom was beginning to look like something real—something livable. He'd put up the blackout curtains first, using a cheap power drill and too many curses to get the brackets into the studs. The fabric was thick, heavy, *perfect*. When they were closed, the room felt sealed off. Safe.

He'd unrolled the new area rug—deep charcoal with a Turkish pattern in greys and blues. It was thin and easy to clean. Got it on Amazon for half price. But it was soft under bare feet and covered just enough to let some of the beautiful floors show.

It took a few years for Ian to convince Mickey to buy a new bed and a new mattress, keeping the old one from the Gallagher house as long as they could. No one would call Mickey a sentimental person, but Ian knew better. He didn't want to get rid of it because it was the bed where they slept on the first night after they got married. Well, after Terry shot up their honeymoon suite.

It was the bed they slept on when they first moved into the west side apartment. It smelled like them. It felt like them. And Mickey felt a connection to it.

But eventually too many springs stuck into a back or poked at an asscheek and he finally relented. They bought an actual, grown up adult bed, with a box spring, a nice dark wooden headboard and all.

Mickey looked at their comforter, a dark grey linen and way too expensive for what they could afford at the time—with their cheap Walmart sheets beneath it. He smiled, thinking of all the memories they'd clocked on that mattress.

They'd made it their own in no time.

He pulled the sheets and comforter up—his half-assed version of making the bed—and moved the little nightstand over a bit so he could plug in his phone charger behind it.

He walked over to the open moving box, grabbing the table lamp and bringing it over to its place on the nightstand.

He broke down the empty box, adding it to the pile in the hallway, feeling accomplished.

The next box was clothes, and he began sorting through what was his and what was Ian's, putting each into their assigned drawers in their bureau, muttering about how Ian owned more underwear than any person should legally be allowed to.

That's when he noticed the scratches.

Thin. Sharp. Clawing down the baseboard near the closet.

He squinted.

They weren't dramatic. Just strange. Diagonal gouges, like someone had dragged something heavy across the floor and scraped it.

He crouched down, brushing his thumb across one of them.

Paint was chipped clean through. Wood exposed.

He stood slowly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Fixer-upper," he muttered, annoyed. This was the one room where he'd thought they wouldn't have to fix something. When they did their walkthrough, he thought they'd seen everything but everywhere he turned he found something they'd missed.

He shook it off, walked over to the TV setup, and ran the cords through the media stand. Plugged in the Roku. Turned on the soundbar. A small win.

Music played quietly through the speakers. Some old playlist Ian had queued up—classic punk and garbage early-2000s pop, the kind Mickey wouldn't admit he knew the lyrics to.

He stepped back, arms crossed, surveying the space, feeling relieved that one room was almost completely done.

And then he heard it.

A sound.

Faint, just beneath the hum of the music. Metal on metal. Grinding. Long, slow, *dragging*.

He froze.

It was coming from downstairs.

He turned off the music.

It kept going.

A slow pull. Then a pause. Then again. *Scrrrreee—scrrrreee*.

“Ian?” he called, already moving toward the hall.

No answer.

He made it to the top of the stairs leading to the hallway, heart picking up. Something in his body went tight. That animal instinct—primal and immediate. Not fear exactly. But that feeling of *don't go down there*.

He went anyway.

Barefoot, moving soft and quiet, he stopped at the top of the landing, looking down into the laundry room. Nothing unusual.

The sound stopped. He waited a moment, just looking at the pantry and seeing the light coming from the kitchen window stretching through the hall.

He descended the stairs slowly.

As he turned the corner, passing the laundry room—

His whole body locked.

Above the banister, right above the basement door—

A body hung.

Wesley Dunn.

Wire dug deep into his throat, torso jerking in slow motion, legs twitching just enough to knock against the basement door with each swing.

Toes flexed, bare. His chest was scarred. His eyes were gone.

It wasn't static. It *moved*.

Mickey stared, breath caught in his throat, heart hammering in his ears.

He couldn't scream. Couldn't even speak.

Instinctively, his head turned—toward the living room. Toward where he knew Ian was.

He opened his mouth to call for him—

And when he looked back—

The body was gone.

Just empty air.

The banister. He'd been standing there just a few seconds before.

The closed door.

Mickey didn't move.

Didn't breathe for a few full seconds.

He swallowed hard. Ran a hand through his hair and tried to catch his breath.

“What's the matter?” Ian asked, having come around the corner.

Mickey jumped. He hadn't even heard him walk in.

“Jesus, you...I don't know. I thought I saw something.”

Ian smirked. “You scaring yourself?” He asked, as he walked around him, making his way to the kitchen. Mickey looked back at the door for a moment, still freaked out by what he saw.

What he *thought* he saw.

He followed Ian into the kitchen as he watched him grab a bottle of water.

“I don't know. This place is just... messing with me. Fucking creepin' me out.”

Ian rubbed the back of his neck. “All this religious shit on the walls. The smell. You think it gets in your head?”

“Yeah,” Mickey said, too quickly. “Yeah, probably.”

Ian stepped closer, hand brushing Mickey’s back. “You wanna get out for a bit? I could use a break.”

“Yeah,” he said, still unnerved. “Yeah, definitely.”

.....

The living room was nearly bare.

They’d cleared out everything earlier—pushed boxes to the edges, stacked tools against the wall, rolled the rug and leaned it in the corner—so Ian could start sanding tomorrow. All that remained was the wide, empty floor and the strange, still feeling of a room not yet claimed.

Ian dropped a thick moving blanket in the center, covering the weird symbols carved into the floor as if he didn’t want any reminders of anything eerie tonight. He smoothed the blanket out with his foot before tossing down two pillows they’d stolen from the couch propped up in the dining room. Mickey came back carrying a greasy paper bag and two beers against his chest like trophies.

He handed it all to a sitting Ian and he threw his jacket in the corner as he flopped down. “If this place is haunted, I hope the ghosts like Shake Shack.”

They sat cross-legged on the blanket, Mickey’s phone propped up on a paint can playing some grainy ‘80s action flick. Stallone, probably. It didn’t matter.

They ate like they hadn’t seen food in days. Elbows touching, fries passed without asking. Mickey stole one of Ian’s pickles. Ian let him. Ian licked ketchup off his thumb. Mickey stared a little too long.

It felt normal.

Comfortable.

Safe.

The house creaked sometimes when the wind shifted. A weird echo in the corner. But none of it mattered—not right now. Not while Mickey was laughing at some bad explosion on-screen and Ian was watching *him* more than the movie.

Mickey took a bite of his burger and groaned. “God. This is better than sex.”

Ian glanced over at him, chewing. “That better be a lie.”

Mickey wiped his fingers on his jeans. “This reminds me of that time we broke into that empty house on Homan. Couldn’t go anywhere because it was raining and Terry was home. But we wanted to fuck so bad.”

Ian grinned. “Yeah. You tried to stab me with a screwdriver when I came back in after a smoke.”

“I *thought* you were a squatter!”

“I *was* a squatter.”

“I’m surprised we didn’t need to get tetanus shots after that.”

Ian raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t seem to mind when you were jerking me off on a pile of insulation.”

“Oh God,” he snickered, laughing at the painful memory now. Wasn’t so funny then. “I ended up taking a thirty minute long shower when I got home. Used all the hot water. I felt that shit in my skin for days.”

“You weren’t the one sitting on it,” Ian said.

Mickey squeezed his eyes closed, practically feeling his pain.

“Hey, I was seventeen and horny. I would’ve jerked you off in a dumpster.”

Ian leaned in, grinning. “You practically did a few times.”

Mickey laughed, full-bodied. “Yeah, well. Still better than Terry’s house.”

“You trying to seduce me with trash memory lane?”

“Is it working?”

Ian smirked, his eyebrow raised as if it were a challenge. He threw his french fry over his shoulder, pulling Mickey by his legs over playfully.

“No, no...I’m still eating!” Mickey said with his mouth full, dropping his own fries as he licked his finger and giggled at Ian, pulling at his jeans.

Ian crawled up over him and kissed him. Greasy lips and all. No hesitation. Just that immediate, warm-jawed hunger that lived somewhere between comfort and want.

It was a flurry of clothes being stripped off and thrown into oblivion. Shirts pushed up. Belt undone. Jeans tugged down. Mickey crawled into Ian's lap, knees pressed into the rough blanket, mouth at his ear.

"You smell so good," Ian said, low, already breathless.

Mickey snickered, wrapping his arms around Ian's shoulders. "That's because I smell like french fries."

Ian spit into his hand, prepping them both lazily and slid inside him with a slow, aching press. Mickey inhaled sharply, dropping his forehead to Ian's shoulder. Grounding himself. Holding still.

Then he started to move.

Slow at first, then harder. Finding the rhythm that made Ian grit his teeth and grip Mickey's hips with shaking fingers.

They were a mess—sweaty, laughing, breathless. Mickey's head dropped back as he rode him. Ian's name falling out of his mouth like he couldn't hold it in.

He pushed Ian back to the floor, rotating his hips as Ian held on for the ride.

From the phone speaker, Stallone shouted:

"Harder, man! Get it in there!"

Mickey nearly choked. "He's *doin' his best*, Stallone!"

Ian groaned. "You're gonna make me laugh while I'm—"

"Yeah, you are," Mickey teased, biting his lip as he moved faster. "You gonna come? Right here on this nasty ass floor?"

"Shut up and keep going."

"Oh, I *am*. Gonna get every drop outta that cock a' yours."

Ian came with a strangled noise, hips bucking up hard, hands tight around Mickey's hips like he didn't want to let go. Mickey kept moving, chasing his own high, with a hand between them, fingers quick and practiced. He came with a quiet, bitten-off moan, collapsing against Ian.

They lay back on the blanket, tangled and wrecked. The movie kept playing. Someone was being chased with a rocket launcher. Nobody cared.

Mickey sucked in a breath. "Okay. *That* was definitely better than the burger."

Ian chuckled, arm around his waist. "I warned you."

"I'm not sayin' I regret it, but my knees are gonna fuckin' hate me tomorrow."

"I'll carry you to bed."

"Hot."

Ian pulled him in closer, lips brushing his temple.

And for a while, there was nothing but warmth. The movie. The feel of a body that knew how to hold you.

The illusion of safety.

.....

The house held its breath.

Upstairs, Ian and Mickey were asleep, wrapped around each other beneath the blanket Mickey had pulled up in the middle of the night. The moonlight fell across the bed in a wide white slash, stopping just short of the corner near Mickey's side.

Their breathing was slow. Deep. Unaware.

Beneath them, the house was not still.

It watched.

It listened.

And it began to remember.

In the living room, a flicker.

For less than a minute, the space was full.

Figures. Dozens of them. Naked, twisted, warped in their proportions. Some dragged their limbs behind them like they'd forgotten how to carry them. Some bent too far forward, like they were listening for something they could no longer hear. Their skin bore slashes, missing pieces, open mouths stretched too wide.

Their eyes—where they still had them—were black and sunken, too deep in their sockets, like something had hollowed them out with spoons.

They stared upward. Every one of them.

Toward the ceiling.

Toward the bedroom.

Then—gone.

Another flicker.

In the hallway now. Silent. Watching the closed bedroom door. Some stood. Some crawled. Some pressed their faces close to the wall, like they wanted to taste the wood.

They gathered with mouths parted—not to scream, but to *breathe in* the life on the other side.

The living.

They could feel it through the walls.

And they *ached* for it.

Gone.

Inside the bedroom now.

The air shifted.

Figures stood around the bed in a wide circle. They had no clothes, no modesty, no identity left. Only wounds. Only want.

One woman was missing the lower half of her face. Just a dark pit of a jaw, skin torn like paper. A man stood beside her with fingernails that had curled into blackened claws, arms locked stiff at his sides.

All of them leaned in.

Hovering over the bed.

Their mouths open—not in screams, but in silent hunger. They made no sound. Their bodies barely moved.

Except their fingers. Twitching. Trembling. Wanting.

In the far corner of the room, in a place where the sliver of light through the curtains didn't reach. A deep shadow lay across it like a veil. Still and heavy. If you looked at it, you wouldn't see anything.

But you'd know something was there.

Waiting.

Nothing moves. There's nothing to see. But you could feel it. You'd expect something to come rushing out any moment. And then—

On the bed. Right beside Mickey's face. A hand appears.

Thin and jagged, fingers like broken branches, *crawling* up. Long, inhuman claws curling around the blanket, pulling it back—*fast*.

The fabric flies off with a whisper.

Mickey bolts upright.

A ragged gasp tore out of his throat before he could stop it. His chest heaved, damp with sweat. His heart slammed against his ribs like it was trying to claw its way out.

He looked around wildly—eyes adjusting to the dark—moonlight falling in a crooked slice across the bed, but everything else thick with shadow.

No movement.

No sound.

Ian lay beside him, arm slung lazily over his stomach, still deep in sleep. Unbothered. Breathing slow and even.

But Mickey wasn't.

He sat up fully now, throat tight, skin prickling, every hair on his body standing at attention like something *had been there*—was maybe *still there*.

His gaze dropped.

The blanket had been pulled clean off.

It lay bunched at the end of the bed like someone had yanked it with force.

He leaned forward, grabbing the edge. His hand was trembling. He didn't realize until he tried to pull it back over them.

First he covered Ian.

Then himself.

He sank back into the mattress, rigid, eyes locked on the corner of the room. In that dark place.

There was nothing there. Nothing moved.

But that feeling—the kind that sticks to your ribs and pulses like a second heartbeat—was still there. Still *watching*.

He stared at the ceiling, willing himself to calm down. He told himself it was a dream. A twitch. He was still adjusting to the new house. Still adjusting to being in this unknown place.

He told himself a lot of things.

But he never took his eyes off the dark.

ELEVEN

“Jennifer?”

“I hate too many girls named Jennifer.”

Mickey stood on the ladder in the living room, tugging a nail loose with the back of a hammer. It took effort—each one was buried deep—but every time he popped one free, another crucifix came off the wall. He dropped this one into the rapidly filling moving box with the rest they'd pulled down.

“Sarah?” Ian offered from across the room. He was on the other side of the window, wrestling with the crucifixes on his side.

“Too... I don't know. She's not a *Sarah*,” Mickey said.

“The problem is,” Ian began. “I like specific names, but I hate the versions people might call her. Like—I love Kate, but hate Katie. Abby, but not Abigail. Alex but not Lexi. Maggie, but not

Margaret. There's no guarantee someone won't call her something I hate and then I'm stuck with it, too."

"Which is why we should just stick with Charlotte and call it a day."

"You only want Charlotte so you can call her *Charlie*. You like boy names for girls."

"Yes, I do. Girls with boy names are scrappy. She's gonna..." He gave the next crucifix a good yank, tossing it into the box. "...need to be. Besides, Charlotte *and* Charlie are nice. And they sound good with both our last names."

Ian pulled off another one, a little too forcefully—it rocked him off balance for half a second.

He smirked. "Who are we kidding? We're gonna call her *Pickle* until she's thirty."

Mickey snorted, popping the last one off his side of the wall. He climbed down the ladder and grabbed his water bottle, taking a long sip before eyeing the box full of religious hardware.

"How many do you think there are? I mean all together. We should make a bet. Whoever guesses closest gets to pick her name."

"Not sure if knowing how many there are is going to make me feel any better about having to throw them in the dumpster later. I'm already getting the church sweats."

"Maybe it's like chicks with purses? Mandy's got like— fifty, and I swear twenty of them are identical. So maybe he started with one and couldn't stop himself from getting three hundred more." Mickey said crouching down, fingertips brushing over one of the carved symbols beneath where a crucifix had been nailed. He took another sip of water, eyes still fixed on it.

"What do you think it means?"

Ian didn't even glance over. "I think it means it's gonna take hours with a belt sander to forget it exists."

Mickey smirked, standing as Ian yanked the last crucifix off his side of the wall. He shook his head. "Between this and last night, I feel like I wanna start saying my prayers before bed."

"Well, if you need a crucifix, I have good news..." Ian joked, coming over to take the water bottle out of Mickey's hand to take a sip himself.

Mickey snorted. "Yeah, I'm good." He leaned up to give him a quick kiss. "Alright back to work. I'm gonna go tackle the ones in the laundry room. Go play with your big machine. Try not to hurt yourself."

.....

The whine of the sander in the living room was relentless.

Ian had his big headphones on, hunched over the same stubborn section of floor for the eleventh time. It was taking longer than he'd hoped—going on three and a half hours—but the raw wood was finally starting to show through.

He'd started with the dining room and when he finished he was impressed with himself. It looked great. He'd never done this before. Thank god for YouTube tutorials.

He enjoyed telling himself he was a homeowner now. He'd have to learn how to take care of stuff without hiring someone.

Dust spun around him in thick halos, catching the light through the living room windows. He was locked in—clothes a mess, goggles smeared, focus narrowed to the scrape and grind. He was taking a lot of passes but it was finally—finally—starting to fade.

Mickey was in the laundry area, one foot on the ladder, tediously prying crucifixes off the wall. It was slow work. Painstaking. Tedious.

He thought he'd be done by now, already moving on to tearing down the old wallpaper. But no such luck. His arms were killing him from the constant pulling and jerking.

But he'd gotten into a rhythm over the last hour. *Clink. Clink. Click.* Two at a time, sometimes three. He had to have pulled down over a hundred. And there were still more.

It was insane. Like, *actually* insane.

He was almost done—just twenty or so left, all clustered on the basement door. And for some reason, these were the worst. The nails fought him. The wood resisted. He needed a break. A drink. Maybe see how Ian was doing. He'd taken a peek at the dining room floor earlier and it was fantastic. A coat of stain and sealer and they'd be good to go.

His man had done good.

He stepped off the ladder, rubbing the back of his neck. Between the soreness of his body and the headache he was getting from the non-stop sander noise, he was going to need some Advil. Or something stronger.

The overhead bulb buzzed faintly. Too bright.

As he turned toward the kitchen, something tugged at the edge of his vision.

One of the upper cabinet doors was open. Left side. Above the counter.

He paused.

It hadn't been open earlier. He was sure of it.

He set his hammer on one of the moving boxes near the wall as he walked over, and pushed the door closed with the side of his hand. It clicked shut without resistance.

He stood there a beat, then shook his head. "This fuckin' house," he muttered.

In the living room, Ian leaned in hard with the sander. The symbols on the floor were finally fading beneath each pass. Deep gouges burned away into clean, exposed grain.

One more pass over the first sigil.

In the laundry room, a crucifix slipped from the wall on its own.

No sound. No pressure.

Another symbol—gone. Another crucifix—dropped.

Mickey stood in front of the open fridge, debating between water and a beer. He went with beer. Something cold and sharp. He cracked it one-handed—and took a long sip.

He shut the fridge. Turned.

The cabinet door was open again.

Same one.

He froze.

"You gotta be fuckin' kidding..."

A chill crawled up his spine. His scalp tightened.

He stared, walked back over slowly, and pressed it shut again—firmly this time. He opened it, closed it, pressed down. No spring. No pop. Nothing.

He waited. Five seconds. Ten.

Nothing.

Another deep pass of the sander.

More dust. More old marks erased. Another crucifix gave in, clattering into Mickey's box.

Mickey whispered, "Okay. There's an explanation. You're just tired."

He turned toward the laundry room, flipping off the cabinet behind him as he went.

Another sip of beer. One foot past the fridge. Then he stopped short.

"Shit. Hammer."

He turned back. When he walked back into the room, his whole body froze.

Every single cabinet.

Open.

The final symbol disappeared beneath Ian's sander.

The last crucifix—the one dead center of the basement door—fell.

Mickey couldn't move. His breath caught in his chest. His feet felt stuck to the floor.

Then—

SLAM.

Every door slammed shut at once.

The room echoed with the violence of it.

Mickey jerked backward, slipping on the tile. The beer bottle hit the floor and rolled away. His hip cracked hard against the wall as he crashed backward into a moving box, knocking it over.

“*IAN!*”

He hit the floor hard, scrambling to stand but collapsing back instead. His hand shot out blindly, fingers finally closing around the hammer that had fallen.

He scuttled back until his spine hit the wall, dragging the hammer with him like it could anchor him there. His chest heaved. His heart was a drum in his throat.

He gripped the hammer like a weapon. Like a prayer.

The kitchen lights flickered overhead.

“*IAN!*”

He finally unfroze himself, forcing himself to stand, legs trembling beneath him. But the floor felt *wrong*—like it was *tilting*. Like a ship in open water, slowly going under. He ran, heart thundering, down the hallway and through the dining room.

Ian caught him out of the corner of his eye and shut the sander off, yanking off his headphones just in time for Mickey to slam into him, breath ragged.

“What the fuck—what’s wrong?!”

“The fuckin’ cabinets!” Mickey panted. “They were closed—then open—and then all of them were open. The lights were flashing—”

“Okay, slow down—”

“*NO!* No fucking way! You didn’t just see what I saw!”

Ian gripped his shoulders. “Alright calm down, calm down. Let’s go check...”

“No—*don’t!* Don’t go in there—”

“Mickey...”

“I’m serious!” he said, voice rising. “We’ve been joking about it but something is seriously *wrong* with this house.”

Ian’s face softened—just slightly. “Okay. But I need to see.”

He started down the hall. Mickey reluctantly followed, hammer still clutched tight.

The kitchen looked normal.

Untouched.

The beer bottle lay on its side. The tile was damp.

Cabinets closed. Lights steady.

Ian walked slowly through the space, opening a door here, tapping a hinge there. Nothing strange. Nothing moved.

He turned to Mickey.

Mickey opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked around like something might still be hiding. He felt stupid.

But mostly, he felt *watched*.

“I’m not crazy,” he said finally, voice low. “One of them was open. I shut it. Turned around—it was open again. Then I came back and they were *all* open. All of them. And then they slammed shut. Like—at the same time.”

Ian blinked. “Were the windows open? Maybe the wind...”

Mickey shot him a look. “There’s no wind in here, Ian!”

Ian held up his hands. “Okay. Okay.”

He checked another cabinet, looked under the sink. “No weird hinges. No pressure system. I don’t know. Maybe there’s mold. Or carbon monoxide. Something messing with our heads.”

“I *know* what I saw.” Mickey shook his head. “And I know what I felt.”

“I believe you but...” Ian started. “What do you wanna do?”

Mickey wanted to run out the fucking door. THAT’s what he wanted to do. But to what? Where? They put everything they had in the house. They could sleep in the van but...

Maybe Ian was right and something was messing with their heads. All the trash and mold and grime they’d cleaned up over the last two days. Maybe something really was affecting them. It didn’t help that the backstory was a constant reminder.

But he knew what just happened. Whatever it was... it was real.

“Let’s take a break,” Ian said when Mickey didn’t say anything. “Air. Food. *Something*. We’ve been pushing hard all day.”

Mickey nodded, but didn’t move. He reached out and tapped the nearest cabinet door.

It didn’t move. He let out a shaky breath.

Ian crossed the room and pulled him into a hug—solid and warm. Mickey let himself lean into it, just for a second.

Then they turned and walked back toward the living room.

Neither of them noticed the dark shape blooming around the basement door.

A stain. Uneven. Pale around the edges. Crawling up.

Coming through.

.....

The burger joint was quiet—fluorescent lights buzzing faintly overhead, the occasional hiss from the kitchen breaking the stillness. The kind of place with cracked vinyl booths and laminated menus that hadn't been updated since the '90s.

Ian and Mickey sat across from each other in a corner booth. Neither had touched their food.

Mickey's burger was already going cold, the cheese hardened into a strange plastic sheen. Ian's fries sat untouched. He kept peeling the paper from his straw, rolling it into tight little wads and lining them up like a row of tiny soldiers.

"Okay," Mickey said finally. "So what? You think it's a ghost?"

Ian looked up, eyes hollow with exhaustion. "I mean... that shit's not real. Right?"

"I don't know anymore," Mickey muttered, scrubbing a hand down his face. "Cabinets don't open themselves. And they sure as hell don't slam shut like some goddamn ballet."

Ian gave a weak laugh—more breath than sound—then fell silent again.

"Maybe we should find somebody," he said after a beat. "Someone who knows about this kind of shit."

"Like what? A ghost hunter? A fucking exorcist?"

"I don't know," Ian admitted. "We could take pictures of those symbols on the basement door. The ones down in the basement. Post them online—Reddit, TikTok, whatever. See if anyone recognizes them. Look into the history of the house. I mean, we know his name was Wesley Dunn. He was an architect. He went crazy and killed his wife. But maybe there's more to it."

"You think anyone's gonna believe us?"

"I don't care. I just want answers. We could set up a camera or something. Get proof. Try to figure out if there's anything we can actually *do*."

"And then what?" Mickey asked, his voice tight. "Some voodoo priest comes in, blesses the place, and we just pretend none of it happened? I don't know if I can live there, Ian. I—" He stopped, staring down at his hands. They weren't shaking anymore, but the fear sat heavy in his gut. His whole body felt wrung out.

"You know I don't scare easy," he said quietly. "But I'm really scared."

Ian exhaled and looked at him—really looked at him. In sixteen years of knowing Mickey, he had never heard him say those words.

That scared him more than anything the house could do.

He slid out from his side of the booth and into Mickey's, wrapping an arm around him.

"We can sleep in the van tonight," he said. "Park somewhere safe. Tomorrow, we go back during the day, grab what we need. If we have to crash at Sandy's and sleep on her floor, then we will."

Mickey rubbed his brow, eyes shadowed. Ian pressed on gently.

"Hey, one upside of growing up on the southside is that being broke isn't new. We'll make more money. We've got the next week off—we use it to do whatever we can. Try to fix it up just enough to sell."

"I don't want you going back alone."

"I'll be fine. Don't forget—I've got some experience with ghosts and demons," Ian said, trying for a smirk. "It's part of the bipolar package."

The smile didn't quite land, but he kept going.

"If I can get the floors done tomorrow and wallpaper up on Tuesday... maybe just go back in twenty-minute chunks for painting. The landscaping's rough, but it didn't stop us from buying it, right? Someone else'll bite."

"Yeah, *hey, sorry about the jungle in the yard*," Mickey muttered. "*But once Casper and friends show up, I promise you won't care about the grass!*"

Ian huffed out a laugh. "We're doing what we have to."

"I'll go with you," Mickey said, serious now. "We stick together. No splitting up. No hero shit."

"You sure?"

Mickey hesitated, then nodded. "No. I don't know. But what else are we gonna do? It's all we've got. This is so fucked up."

"I know."

"The baby's due in seven and a half weeks, man."

"I know," Ian said again, slower this time. "We'll work fast. Sunrise to sunset. Short shifts. The second it starts to feel wrong—we leave."

"It happened during the day," Mickey pointed out. "Light doesn't protect us."

"No, but I'm definitely not going back at night," Ian said. "Daylight gives us time to run."

"I'm already sore. Sleeping in the van's gonna suck."

“We’ll freebase some Advil,” Ian said, kissing the side of his head. “We can do this, okay?”

Mickey looked up at him, eyes glassy. “We just can’t catch a break.”

Ian swallowed hard. He knew how much it had taken Mickey to risk wanting something real—something more. And now the world was telling him it was safer not to want at all.

“I love you,” Ian said softly. “Wherever you are, I’m there. If we end up in a shitty apartment again, that’s fine. But I want to try. If we can even get some of the money back...”

A silence settled between them—heavy, but grounding.

“I wanted this,” Mickey said.

Ian’s heart cracked wide. “We’ll have it. Just not there. It’ll take time, Mick. But we’ll get it.”

Mickey nodded, slowly. “Yeah. Well. We better hope we can flip it.”

Ian leaned in, eyes still tired but a little brighter. “Have faith. Haunted houses are hot right now.”

TEN

The van rumbled to a stop at the front of the house, the engine ticking as it cooled. Mickey pushed the door open and stepped out with a quiet groan, stretching his back until it cracked. Ian followed, shielding his eyes against the early morning sun as he looked up at the house.

It looked the same. Of course it did.

Their night in the van parked in the gym parking lot was productive. Ian had looked up some people who specialized in theology, symbolic texts and even a few paranormal researchers that he assumed were scam artists. When he tried to think about who to contact, he couldn’t even think of what to put into the Google search. It took them time, but he found a few professors and writers who seemed to be legit.

"You ready?" Ian asked.

"No," Mickey said. "But let's go anyway."

They stood there a moment longer, neither one moving. Then, with a shared breath, they walked up the path and opened the front door.

Inside, everything was still. Too still. Sunlight filtered through the dusty windows, casting long, angled shadows across the floor. It looked normal. Lived-in. Exactly as they'd left it.

They didn't speak as they made their way to the basement door. Mickey hesitated going toward the kitchen, expecting...he wasn't sure. Everything *seemed* okay. Cabinets were closed.

Ian approached the basement door, taking out his camera to snap images of the barrier and the symbols carved into it.

The box of crucifixes remained on the floor, although Mickey noted the few that had been left of the door were gone.

Ian unlocked the deadbolts and pulled off the barrier carefully as Mickey opened the door slowly, the creak of the hinges echoing louder than it should have. They descended carefully, each step groaning under their weight.

"We need to do this quick. I don't want to be down here any longer than we have to," Mickey said.

He didn't have to say it twice; Ian was fully onboard.

As they approached the crack they noticed immediately it was larger than it had been before. The gap was wider, like an earthquake had hit them.

"What the fuck," Mickey said, walking around it.

What had once been a thin fracture now split the concrete like a wound. It stretched wider, jagged edges crumbling into a black void that extended into the earth.

Ian crouched, trying to see into it. He held his phone over the gap, turning on the flashlight. The light hit nothing.

"Jesus. I can't even see the bottom."

"This wasn't supposed to be structural," Mickey muttered. "They said it was surface-level. Non-structural."

Ian looked up at him. "There was a clause in the contract. If we find structural damage within a certain time, we can walk. This might be a good thing."

"Good so we can get outta here then?" Mickey asked, hopeful.

"I'll call Casey. They're gonna try and fight it. They probably took pictures of everything before we signed to cover their asses. We should keep working just in case. It'll probably take forever to make a claim or whatever."

“Call her right away.”

Ian nodded as he snapped the last picture, following Mickey who had already begun heading for the stairs.

Ian began uploading the pictures and tagging the people he'd found last night as Mickey changed into some fresh clothes. They both took quick showers, keeping watch for each other. Grabbing fresh clothes and brushing their teeth.

He hit send on the last email. Hopefully someone will have some kind of information for them.

They made quick work of their planned tasks. Mickey, steaming the old wallpaper in the living room. Ian, finishing the floors. The smell of varnish filled the air. It almost felt normal.

Neither of them went near the kitchen.

Ian finished the dining room first. They had to let it dry before they could move everything back in so they could do the living room. So Ian began to fill in the nail holes where crucifixes had once hung. Mickey peeled at the edge of a stubborn strip of wallpaper, revealing yellowed glue and old plaster.

Then he saw something.

Behind the wallpaper, embedded in a hollow of the wall. Small off-white nuggets of something.

He pulled back the wallpaper more, revealing the small hole in the wall and grabbed one of the nuggets. He pulled it out.

A tooth.

Not fake. Not porcelain. Real.

He threw it aside immediately, as if it had burned him.

“What?” Ian asked, noticing his movement.

“Fucking fuck!” Mickey said, standing up and taking a step back. “There’s fucking teeth in the wall, man! People’s teeth. Root and all.”

Ian walked over, reaching into the hole to grab more, pulling them out and looking at them with a look of disgust on his face. He pulled out his phone and put on the flashlight, trying to see deeper.

“What the hell is that?” He asked, reaching in farther to grab the shiny object he saw. It was attached to something. He reached in, his arm flush to the wall. He was barely able to reach it, catching it with the tips of his fingers. He pulled it out.

An old hair clip, blue with a little flower. Rusted over. Looked like it would break if you handled it too hard. But more importantly—

The hair was still attached.

A tuft of blonde hair, clearly a child's, barely braided, worn out over time was held in the clip. It looked like it had been cut off at the root.

“Oh, this is fucked up,” Mickey said. “Just put it back. We'll fill it in.”

“I'm not putting it back. Just throw it away.”

“No way, removing it will invoke the wrath of the whatever from the wherever. Let's not take any chances. Put it back.”

Ian, still with a grossed out look on his face, hesitated but threw it back in the small hole, wiping his hands on his jeans afterward. As if it stained his hands.

“No wonder the house is fucking haunted. Little girl parts buried in the walls.”

“Not sure if I wanna know what else we'd find if we look too hard.”

“Grab the DAP and cover it over,” Mickey said, quickly going back to pulling down the wallpaper.

Ian grabbed the hole filler and began to cover the area smoothly, hoping they didn't find any other surprises.

They weren't that lucky.

The more Mickey tore away the wallpaper, the more they found. Tufts of hair. Old, dried blood. And handprints—bloody, smeared across the plaster like someone had tried to crawl up the wall and failed. Stains...strange white stains, slightly raised like a fungus all around the walls.

“Maybe this shit is like magic mushrooms and we're hallucinating,” Mickey wondered aloud, scraping at the substance with his box cutter.

“The great space coaster...” Ian began to sing. “Soarin' on a magic ride. Roarin' toward the other side...”

“Seriously, imagine if this is all some big delusion we're having because we're stoned out of our minds.”

“I think there's a word for that. Folie a-something. Two people sharing the same madness. I mean, I'd prefer that scenario to the idea that Dunn was some kind of serial killer and the ghosts of his victims are real and we're being haunted.”

“You say that now, but wait until we get the estimate for cleaning out black mold—then you’ll be begging for the creepy little ghost girl who just plays with the cabinets.”

“What the hell is that?” Ian said, looking at the new piece of wall that had been uncovered.

In large dark smears—

YOU WILL NOT BE SAVED

“What is...” Mickey began, looking up to the wall. The ‘D’ in *SAVED* was shaky and drawn out, smearing all the way down to the floor.

He touched it gently, but the material was dried to the wall. It was brown, a bit thick—

“Ugh! It’s shit!” Mickey yelled, wiping his hand on his pants. The smears had long hardened over and nothing came off on him. It was more of a visceral reaction.

Ian made a grossed out face as he kept his distance.

“We’re gonna need to sand this off. It’s hard as a rock.”

“Not my immediate concern,” Mickey answered, shaking his upper body like a dog trying to shake off fleas.

They stepped back. The room smelled different now. Like rot that had been sealed up and suddenly given air.

They took a break, sitting out in the back of the van with the back door open. Just enjoying the warmth of the sun in the late September air, with some cold drinks and a few quick snacks.

And enjoying being out of that space.

They only took a few minutes, both wanting to get as much as they could done and dreading having to go back in.

Ian buffed down the DAP fillers quickly before he began tackling the excrement warning on the wall. He pulled on his goggles and mask as he used the electric sander on the wall. Surprisingly enough, it chipped off fairly easily.

Hours passed. They’d begun to prime the walls.

“I wish we had scaffolding. Up and down these fucking ladders is killing me,” Ian said, trying to stretch his legs out before climbing back up with the pole. He had paint in his hair. Plenty on his shirt.

Mickey didn’t look any better. His t-shirt had a big splotch on the shoulder. The cost of rushing.

“If we could take our time we could spread it out a little. Wouldn’t be so bad. This is gonna be the fastest house flip in the history of time.”

“I wanna try and get the whole room primed today at least,” Ian said, rubbing his hair. “It’s getting late though. Sun’ll be going down in less than an hour.”

“It’s been okay so far. Let’s push through. Maybe it’ll skip a day. Worst case is we run out the front door, right?”

“Knock on wood, ” Ian said, beginning to walk to the kitchen. “I gotta wash my hands.”

“Woah, woah... wait up. We stay together, remember?” Mickey said, coming down from his ladder, sore and exhausted. He stuck the roller end of the pole into the paint tray, leaning the pole against the wall as he took off his mask.

“I need a beer,” he said as they headed toward the kitchen.

Neither of them had been in the kitchen since it had happened. They approached slowly.

Nothing seemed out of place. It was quiet.

Ian went over to the sink as Mickey made his way to the fridge.

“Brand new fucking fridge. We’re taking this with us when we leave.”

“If we have space for it.”

Ian threw some cold water on his face and over his head as Mickey cracked open his beer and took a satisfying gulp.

Then came the sound.

A deep, dragging scrape. Like something heavy crawling across the floor just out of sight.

They froze. The sound came from the laundry room.

Ian looked at Mickey. Mickey looked back. Both were breathing hard, their bodies tense.

They gravitated toward each other, walking slowly around the fridge together to the hallway. They stood in front of the basement door.

It was wide open.

A stain was actively spreading out onto all of the walls.

Then they saw it.

Something was coming up the stairs.

A figure coming up from the basement. Hands first, pulling itself out of the dark. A half rotted skeleton with flesh peeling off, remains of long white hair coming from its skull, leaving a trail of blood and rotting skin behind it as it crawled up to the top stair, inch by inch. And even though it had no eyes, it appeared to look up at them, its mouth opening wide with an excruciating sound coming out, loud enough to shake the walls around them.

They screamed. Ran. Tried the patio doors.

Then, all at once, chaos.

Ian was thrown backward, back through the hallways and into the far kitchen wall. His body landed with a thud, the drywall behind him cracking with the force of it.

“IAN!!!” Mickey screamed, running after him. Ian laid on the floor, rolling over in pain, trying to get his bearings. Mickey reached him, trying to help him up when he felt a strange pull.

Suddenly he was lifted off the ground, his body hurled into the ceiling before being dropped like a rag doll.

“MICK!!” Ian screamed, coughing from the pain in his chest.

They scrambled toward each other, bruised and in pain from the force of it all.

Then the banging.

Every door in the house began to open and slam shut in a deafening rhythm.

They were petrified, looking around, and trying to reach over to each other on the floor.

The dragging noise became louder. A sound like a violin string being played with a razor.

“Are... are you okay?!” Ian asked, crawling over to Mickey. He had blood in his mouth and his nose was bleeding.

“Yeah... I don't know. Fuck!... Yeah I...”

Suddenly the doors stopped slamming all at once. The whole house went quiet.

It felt like the calm before the storm. They just sat there clinging to one another, sharing the same traumatized and frightening looks on their faces.

“Can you get up? We gotta get out of here,” Ian finally said, trying to pull himself up as he bent to try and pick Mickey up, his arm aching like it might be sprained.

Mickey made a pained grunt, guarding his ribs as Ian tried to lift him.

Finally, they managed to stand together as they limped their way to the other kitchen entrance leading to the living room, not daring to go near the laundry area.

Near that *thing*...

They hit the foyer and Ian pulled at the handle to the front door until his fingers went white. Nothing. It wouldn't budge.

Mickey hobbled back to the living area and grabbed the ladder from the living room, aiming for the window, but it was ripped from his hands and flung across the room.

Suddenly they were both flung backwards, crashing onto the stained floor of the dining room. Things began levitating. Tools and brushes flew through the air like shrapnel. Items from their moving boxes flew out, hitting the walls and windows around them.

The *thing* crept forward, entering the dining room.

They both screamed trying to drag themselves away from it. Toward each other. It clawed toward them, terrifying them both. It was human shaped, but not human at all. Something else.

It opened its jaw, impossibly wide. The inside was a void—a darkness that screamed.

They scrambled. Mickey was lifted again, hurled into the wall, and dragged across the floor.

"IAN!"

Ian lunged for him, grabbing his arm, but something pulled Mickey back harder.

"NO!" Ian shouted, but Mickey was yanked quickly, through the dining room—through the hurricane of things being thrown around the room.

Mickey felt like something was grabbing his ankles pulling him back. He clawed at the floor, his fingernails breaking with the force of it. He tried to grab onto anything he could, but the force was too strong.

He was being led back, directly to the thing. But as soon as he approached it, it disappeared like mist, with Mickey being dragged around the corner into the hallway and out of Ian's line of sight. To that door.

To the dark.

He gripped as hard as he could, his t-shirt ripping across his back as if claws were gnashing at him. He screamed in pain. Screamed in fear.

Ian tried to get to him, screaming his name. But he'd get a little closer and suddenly he'd be yanked back. He managed to get up and run to the hallway, being pushed back into the wall in

front of the laundry room. Just in time to watch Mickey being dragged down the stairs, vanishing into the dark as he screamed.

The door slammed shut.

Silence.

Ian stood shaking, bleeding, in pain everywhere. Cuts all over him from trying to get through the flying debris. He was breathing heavily and he was terrified. The house had gone still again. Like nothing had happened.

Even though he hurt everywhere, his adrenaline took over as he bolted to the door, threw it open, and rushed down the steps.

The crack in the floor was massive now. Gaping. Almost like a well. He dropped to his knees, screaming down into it.

"MICKEY?! MICK?!"

No response. No echo.

He ran back upstairs, tore through their tool case in the living room, and found the flashlight.

Down again. Skidding back to the hole and dropping. He shone the beam into the crack.

The light disappeared. Absorbed like a black hole.

"NO, NO, NO! PLEASE....MICK!! PLEASE ANSWER ME! MI—?!"

Nothing.

Ian sat back on the concrete floor, the light trembling in his grip as the tears began to fall.

Alone.

Helpless.

NINE

He didn't remember unlocking his phone.

One second he was kneeling on the basement floor, staring into the gap where Mickey had disappeared—and the next, his hands were shaking and Lip’s name was ringing out from the cracked screen.

It wasn’t a conscious decision. It was *instinct*. When things broke, he called Lip.

Always had.

The phone rang once. Twice. Three times.

“Yo.”

Ian’s throat closed up before he could speak. His tongue felt dry. His whole face was wet and he didn’t know if it was sweat or tears or both.

“...Ian?”

“I need you.”

There was a pause. Not a confused one. A worried one.

“Ian? What’s going on?”

“I—I don’t know. I don’t—” His voice broke. “It’s Mickey. He’s gone.”

Another pause.

“Gone how?”

Ian swallowed hard. He tried to put it into words. He really did. But it came out in pieces.

“The basement. There’s something wrong with the house. I don’t know what it is, but it’s not—it’s not normal. There’s a door, a space, he went down there and now he’s gone.”

Lip was silent on the other end.

“Ian, what’s going on? That doesn’t make any sense. Are you okay?”

“No,” Ian cried. “No please...”

“Ian, listen to me,” Lip began, putting down the motorcycle part he had in his hand, moving out of earshot of the other mechanics. “You been taking your meds?”

Ian flinched. He pressed his fingers hard into his forehead. “Yes.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure!” He said aggressively. “I’m not—this isn’t that. This isn’t *me*. It’s real.”

“Ian, listen—breathe for a second. Okay? You’re not making sense.”

“I know,” Ian admitted. “I know I’m not. I don’t know how to explain it. I just—there was blood, and then he screamed, and I ran down and the floor was *open*, and—”

“Ian...seriously. I want you to hang up and call the police, okay? Do you understand?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“They won’t believe me. No one would believe this. I can’t...they’d take me away. I can’t leave him.”

“Okay, okay. Look I’m coming down there, okay?” Lip said, scared for his brother. When Ian didn’t respond right away he repeated himself louder. “OKAY?”

“Please don’t call the pol... please, Lip. Please don’t call them. I just want you here. Just come.”

Lip nodded, even though Ian couldn’t see it. “I’m on my way. It’ll be,” he looked down at his watch. “Like two hours. Hold on, okay. Don’t do anything. Go outside, get some water. Take a breath. Can you do that for me?”

Ian couldn’t sit still. He was pacing the hallway now, eyes wild, phone clenched like it was bolted to his ear.

“I don’t know what else to do,” he whispered, mostly to himself. “I don’t know what else to do. I don’t know how to get him back.”

Lip’s voice softened. “Hey. Listen to me. It’s gonna be okay. I’ll be there as soon as I can and we’ll figure it out.”

Ian didn’t say anything.

“Ian. I’m coming.”

“Okay.”

“You just hold on, alright?”

And then the line clicked off.

Ian stood there, phone loose in his hand. The house creaked softly around him, like it had been listening.

.....

Ian knew what Lip had said.

Go outside. Get some air. Drink some water. Breathe.

But he couldn't.

Not because he didn't want to. Not because he didn't hear the worry in Lip's voice.

But because the idea of stepping outside—even for a second—felt like a betrayal. Like turning his back on Mickey. Like walking away.

He didn't want air. He didn't want space.

He wanted *Mickey*.

So he stayed.

He paced the living room in slow, looping circles. Around the spot where the blanket still lay rumpled from the night before.

And every loop pulled him closer to the hallway.

To the basement door.

He didn't remember choosing to walk toward it. But he found himself there, anyway—leaning against the wall in front of it, staring at the wood like he could see through it. Like he could *feel* something coming off it.

He felt a hum in his body. Around the fear, through his nerves.

It was something more known.

It was *Mickey*.

He slid down the wall in exhaustion, his phone clacking to the floor. His knees came up of their own accord as if he wasn't entirely cognizant of his body. His face was pale and rigid. He stared at the door so long his eyes burned. But he didn't blink.

Talk to me, he thought.

Please. Talk to me.

He closed his eyes.

And reached for him.

Not physically. Not in any way the world would understand. But in that space they'd always held—since they were kids. Since the first night they'd fought in Mickey's room, all teeth and fists and need, and it turned into something else. Something urgent and impossible and alive.

There had always been a thread between them.

Not something either of them asked for. Just... *there*. From the start. Woven through their blood. Tethered together through bone and breath and skin. Deep in the sinews of his muscles and running through his veins, always reaching out. Always reaching for each other.

They'd spent years trying to ignore it, outrun it, cut it.

It never loosened.

Even when they weren't together, the connection remained—quiet, but taut. Like a chord that never stopped vibrating.

Now, Ian reached for it.

Like it might answer.

“Mick,” he whispered.

His voice cracked.

“I'm here.”

He pressed his head against his knees, exhaling sharp through his nose, trying to breathe even though he couldn't feel air in his lungs.

“I know you're not dead,” he whispered. “I'd feel it if you were.”

He looked back up at the door. The tears fell on their own. But his eyes were steady.

“I'm not leaving this house. I'm not going anywhere without you.”

His voice shook. But it didn't stop.

“I'm right here I promise. Please come back. Please just....”

He sat there.

Still.

Watching.

Waiting.

And somewhere deep below the house, something shifted—just enough to disturb the dust. Something ancient.

Listening.

.....

Ian heard the car before he saw it—tires on gravel, engine idling too long before shutting off.

He opened the door before Lip had even made it up the front steps.

Lip stopped cold on the porch. He's sped the entire way from Milwaukee, calling Tami to let her know what was going on. Now he dreaded what he was about to walk into.

Ian looked like hell.

His clothes were stained with blood and dirt, cuts all over his arms. His hair flattened on one side like he'd spent the last two hours curled on the floor. His eyes were hollowed out with something worse than exhaustion. His voice, when he spoke, was too calm to be safe.

"He's still down there."

Lip stepped forward to hug him. "Jesus, Ian."

They stayed there for a moment, each of them trying to hold on to something. Ian, to the feeling of relief that Lip was there.

Lip, to Ian.

"I know how this looks. But it's not what you think."

Lip eased into the living room, eyes darting around. The place looked trashed. Debris everywhere. A hammer in the middle of the floor. A smashed lamp in the corner. Moving boxes scattered through the house, some empty, some that looked like they'd been thrown across the floor with remnants of their lives tumbling out.

"I didn't hurt him."

“I didn’t say you did,” Lip said gently, looking back at Ian.

“You’re *thinking* it.”

Lip didn’t argue.

“I don’t know what this is,” Ian said. “I don’t know if it’s ghosts or what. But I swear to you—I saw it happen. It was real.”

He walked to the hallway. Lip cautiously followed.

He pointed at the basement door, open.

“It was the cabinets,” Ian said, voice raw. “Mickey was taking down the crucifixes on the basement door. He went into the kitchen and one of the cabinet doors was open. Just one.”

He ran a hand through his hair, fingers shaking.

“He didn’t think anything of it. Just shut it. Walked away. But when he came back, they were all open. *Every single one.*”

He looked up at Lip, eyes wide.

“That’s how it started.”

Lip stayed silent. Listening.

Ian swallowed hard. “Then they slammed shut. All at once. He came out screaming. I’ve never seen him that scared. *Never.* He was—” His voice cracked. “He was so fucking scared.”

He took a breath but couldn’t catch it.

“He told me what happened and I didn’t believe it at first. Ghosts aren’t real. The boogeyman isn’t real. I should have believed him right away.”

A beat.

“Then the house started.... There were pieces. *People.* Hair. Teeth. In the walls. Stains that got were spreading. And then—” He paused, one hand clutching at his shirt like something was still inside him. “Then there was this sound. Like grinding. From the basement.”

Lip’s expression was unreadable. Ian pressed on.

“We checked the door. It was wide open. But it had been locked. We didn’t open it.”

He blinked, fast, like he was trying to stay in control of the memory.

“And then...it came up the stairs.”

He hesitated.

“What came up the stairs?” Lip asked, softly.

Ian looked at him—and for a moment, he looked like a child. Like someone who hadn’t slept in a hundred years.

“I don’t know. It wasn’t human. But it had a face. Like something trying to be human. The skin was—peeling off. It had claws. It crawled toward us and we were screaming. I tried to pull Mickey back and then I felt—”

He clutched his stomach again, eyes wide.

“—this *pull*. Like it was inside me. Like it *knew* where to grab. It threw me across the room. Then Mickey. We tried to run. We tried *everything*. But the doors wouldn’t open. It wouldn’t let us leave.”

His voice was rising now, ragged.

“Everything started flying around. Chairs. Tools. Boxes. And then—”

He stopped.

Lip waited.

Ian's voice dropped into something small and broken.

“Then it took him.”

Silence.

“It dragged him down there. And I ran after him. I swear I did. But he was gone. He was just...”

He stood there, breathing hard, like he’d just vomited up every word. His whole body shook. He wasn’t looking at Lip anymore. Just the door. Or past it.

Lip looked toward the open door.

Then back at Ian.

“You’re scaring the shit out of me right now. You’re talking about monsters and things flying around on their own—”

“They’re real.”

“I’m worried your meds aren’t working.”

Ian flinched. His voice dropped. “They are.”

“You’ve had delusions before—”

“I’ve *never* had a delusion about Mickey dying. No matter what I ever saw or did, I wouldn’t hurt Mickey. You *know* that.”

Silence.

And for the first time, Lip didn’t ask if he’d taken his meds.

He didn’t say a word.

Because some things you *feel* in your bones. And Ian wasn’t lying.

Lip ran a hand through his hair, looking toward the kitchen. “I’m gonna get a glass of water. Just stay right here, okay? I’ll be right back.”

Ian didn’t move, just stared at the open door willing Mickey to come out.

Lip threw his keys down on the island and went to the sink, turning on the tap. The pipes groaned like they didn’t want to work. He found a half-clean glass in the sink and filled it, frowning at the faint reddish streak in the water.

Rust, he thought.

He turned to say something—and froze.

They all stood there, looking at him the same way they stood in the hallway the night before. And in the bedroom. Dozens of beings, all shapes and sizes. Men, women, children. Mouths opened. Leaning toward him.

He dropped the glass with a petrified gasp, hearing something above his head. He looked up.

A figure hung above him, upside down. Arms out like an inverted cross. It opened its mouth and screamed a sound—like a dying animal.

“IAN!”

Ian ran in just in time to see Lip stagger backward, crashing into the island, trying to escape the room.

The figures were all gone.

Ian ran over. “What?! What?!”

Lip was panting, wide-eyed, scrambling to his feet like he'd just touched an open flame. "There was—they were...."

Ian didn't ask what it looked like.

He already knew.

The house groaned above them.

A clock fell from the wall and hit the floor like a gunshot.

The overhead light flickered. They ran to the hallway.

Something *shifted* behind the basement door—something heavy. Something waiting.

"Okay," Lip whispered, breathing hard. "Okay. I believe you!"

Ian closed his eyes for half a second. "We need to go down there."

"No fuckin' way!" Lip looked toward the door like it might bite him as he made through the dining room and to the living room, making his way out the front door.

Ian followed him out into the yard.

Lip spun around, just trying to catch his breath. He felt like he was going to have a heart attack.

"You can't... I can't... what the fuck was that?!!"

"That's... whatever it is," Ian tried to explain. "I need rope. Long ropes. And some climbing gear. Stuff that I can use to go down there."

"Ian, you can't stay here. You're not going down into some demon hole!"

"I'm going with or without you. You don't have to come in but can you go get me the stuff?"

Lip kept looking back at the house, a hand on his head. Still shocked by the whole thing. He couldn't wrap his mind around it. Every instinct he had told him to run. Run away. Run *now*.

When Lip didn't answer, Ian yelled.

"Lip! Please! I can't go. I can't leave Mickey!"

"Okay! Okay, Jesus..." He said, bending over at the waist trying to calm his nerves.

"Ropes. Lights. Whatever else you can think of."

Lip stood back up straight.

“I can’t...I can’t fucking leave you here.”

“You can. You have to. Go! Home Depot is about four miles toward the highway back the way you came. Get the stuff and come back. I’ll be right here.”

Lip looked both hesitant and desperate to leave.

“Fuck,” he said, touching his pocket. “I left the keys in the house.”

“I’ll get them.”

“No! No, you aren’t going in there alone.”

They walked slowly—taking their time. Through the foyer. Through the breezeway into the kitchen. Stuck next to each other, trying to prepare themselves for whatever was going to come out next. As if going slower would somehow not disturb anything. They walked through the kitchen, quickly finding the keys.

“This is fucking crazy man,” Lip whispered. “I can’t believe this is really happening.”

Ian didn’t answer, just kept looking around as if keeping a lookout as Lip got the keys and headed back for the front door.

Lip exhaled, still shaken. He grabbed the handle of the door and pulled it open—

A man stood on the porch, hand raised mid-knock.

Lip jumped back, jolted by the unexpected sight.

His jacket was dusted with road salt, a weathered backpack slung over one shoulder. He looked like someone who hadn’t slept well in years, with lines around his eyes that weren’t from smiling—but the kind of lines you get from *knowing* too much.

His face was kind.

But burdened. Familiar, in that way strangers sometimes are. Loose brown hair, graying throughout. He looked younger than the lines on his face suggested. In his late 40s, maybe.

Lip instinctively stepped between him and Ian. “Who the fuck are you?”

The man didn’t flinch. His eyes went straight to Ian. Blood on his hands. The shudder still in his shoulders. The kind of hollowed-out exhaustion that didn’t need explaining. Not to him.

The man nodded once, gently. “Ian Gallagher?”

Ian’s voice was rough. “Yeah.”

“I’m Marcus Clark. You emailed me. About the symbols in the house.” He paused.

“Well—technically, you emailed a colleague. She passed it on to me.”

Ian stared at him, too tired to process.

Lip’s eyes narrowed, voice sharp. “And how’d you know where to find him?”

Marcus looked past them, into the dark of the house. Into whatever still lingered there.

His expression didn’t change, but something in him seemed to brace.

“Oh... I knew exactly where to find you,” he said quietly.

Then, with a soft sigh:

“I’ve been here before.”