

IN THE
DARK
DARK
NIGHT

a short story



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i n t h e d a r k , d a r k n i g h t

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*for the monster under your bed
and that thing you can't see,
but that your cat stares at in the dark*

SOPHIE

There was a sound coming from the garage.

Definitely louder than a rat, mused Sophie, who sat in the kitchen over a bowl of half-eaten soup. Spaghetti letters spelt out her name at the top of the bowl, while the rest of it got too cold to enjoy. She stirred it with her special spoon—a plastic case covered the handle showing a picture of herself and Rosie from a school trip to Disneyland years before—and watched as the clock ticked slowly towards eleven.

The sound, quieter than a horse, padded around the garage. *Maybe it's lost*, thought Sophie. The sound continued, like footsteps gradually making their way up the staircase before stopping for a moment, turning, and walking back down. Again and again, over and over. It had been happening for at least twenty minutes. Maybe longer before Sophie had even realised that it was happening. But that couldn't be it—other than the two steps by the front door which Sophie had broken her nose on when she was eight, there were no stairs in the single-floor house.

So, Sophie ignored it as she slurped another spoonful of disappointing soup. It was just the wind, or the old walls of the house creaking. They done that sometimes.

The sound, which she judged to be about as loud as loud as a small child playing, didn't care that Sophie was ignoring it. It continued, scraping along the cold, concrete floor of the garage.

A vibrating on the kitchen counter gave her a momentary start. Her heart slammed against her chest. As it calmed, she picked up the phone and swiped it open.

Rosie: are you okay?

She didn't know how to answer; whether she even should answer. What Rosie had done was bad—abhorrent, even—but it had been so long since Sophie had been able to rely on her gentle advice and soft-spoken words of encouragement. It was in this exact kind of situation that she could use Rosie to talk sense into her.

Sophie took another slurp of the cold soup as the irony slapped her in the face.

Rosie had burned a bridge that Sophie wasn't sure could be rebuilt. Not so soon, anyway. She locked the phone and placed it back down on the counter, sighing into her soup.

The sound, which by now was so ingrained in Sophie's head that she barely even registered it, faltered for a second. As Sophie stood up, wincing as her bare feet touched the freezing cold chessboard tiles, the sound snapped to a stop. Sophie carried the bowl of soup to the sink, where she left it to go even colder.

She turned away from the kitchen, making her way around the small counter that separated it from the living room, and glanced outside. The streetlight that stood beside Mrs Glazebrook's garage facing Sophie's house was flickering. Sophie turned the living room light off and closed the blinds over to avoid having to watch the light outside dancing as it clung for life.

She took a seat on the larger of the two sofa's, the one facing the window, spreading her body across it, her legs barely reaching the other end.

The remote for the television rested, as it always did, on the floor beside the head of the couch. Sophie, without having to look, reached her hand down and picked it up, feeling a tiny breath of cold stroke her wrist as wrapped her fingers around it.

As she pointed it at the television, she caught the sight of herself in the dark, empty screen. Her black hair a mess, her brown eyes puffy, her clothes two sizes too big and probably dirty from having been worn for three days straight. Behind her, the light from the kitchen flickered. Sophie let out a sigh and clicked the **ON** button.

The sound still bounced around the garage. In the time it took to wait for the TV to turn on, she heard it rise and fall. It had been going on for too long for her to shake it off. She took a breath, the air shakily filling her lungs.

Maybe it was coming from outside, she tried to rationalise. There were children who lived next door; perhaps they were outside playing with a ball.

As the screen burst to life, the sound stopped abruptly, replaced by an audible gasp.

Sophie sat upright and glanced around behind her. Someone had definitely made a noise in the garage.

Sophie shut it out, knowing she was being irrational, and flicked through the guide to find something to watch. Something easy, something she didn't have to get too into to follow and understand.

And then.

Nothing.

The sound stopped. All was silence. Until, so faintly that Sophie might have imagined it, the sound of wood creaking. Just quiet enough for Sophie to convince herself that it was nothing more than the wind sweeping the house. But, of course, loud enough to send a shiver through her body.

She angled her neck around to look across to the kitchen, scanning the granite counters and the shelves. Everything was it everything was. Not a fridge magnet where it shouldn't be, nor a spice out of place.

Her soup still sat sadly by the sink, too.

Her phone sat—

Crash.

Sophie leapt to her feet. She faltered for a moment, unsure of what to do. Tiptoeing into the kitchen she saw her phone laying on the tiles, the screen

cracked. She crouched beside it, taking a quick glance around the room before she picked it up. A shard of glass on the floor pricked the top of her middle finger, and a tiny bulb of blood began to pool just above her fingernail. She wiped it on the inside of her palm as she tried to turn the phone on.

The screen flickered. White, then hazy, then white again, before fading to black.

“*Dammit,*” she whispered to herself. On her finger, blood began to pool again, relentless and now dripping into her palm.

In the sitting room, the silent television flashed with a news bulletin. If Sophie had been paying attention, she might have seen it. And if she’d happened to see it, she might have known better than to walk to the bathroom without first checking that the windows were locked.

PETE

Sophie wasn't answering her phone.

That was Pete's first cause for concern. She always answered her phone.

As he steered the car around the corner towards her house, he turned the volume of the radio up a fraction, listening to the broadcaster read the headlines again.

"Stay indoors and make sure that all windows and doors remain locked," she added, her voice too breezy and un-caring. Pete tapped the **OFF** button to get rid of her infuriating voice.

Sophie's house sat at the very end of a street of quaint little single-floor houses with perfectly trimmed grass and rose bushes in their gardens. Surrounding her house on two sides was a forest of oak trees, a dense thicket which turned into a sheet of black in the night. As Pete approached it his headlights lit up enough of it to be able to see the brambles invite unwitting children and the branches sway in the breeze. The leaves, now turning a brownish-yellow, clung on for life.

Pete brought the car to a halt facing the forest. He killed the engine, glancing to Sophie's house. It's welcoming exterior didn't look amiss. The garage light was on, as was the kitchen light. Something in the air still didn't feel right, not least because Sophie's phone had gone to the answering machine four times in the last twenty minutes.

Just once more, for good measure, he pulled out his phone and dialled her number. Holding it to his ear, he heard it ring... and ring... and ring. Until it cut off, replaced by an electronic female voice talking in an electronic tone, telling him that the number he was calling was unavailable.

He unlatched his seat belt, carefully letting it fall into its resting position—he had, once when he was a little younger, let it swing back too quickly, and cracked the window.

The night was silent outside of his car. He glanced between his three mirrors, seeing nothing move on either side. No one looked out of their windows. Cars didn't drive by the junction end of the road behind him.

He was, for just that moment in time, alone in the dark. Not that he minded, of course. He had, after all, been born in the dark. He'd grown up in the dark, worked in the dark, lived in the dark. But this dark was different; this dark made him afraid. But, he thought with a shiver, he didn't know what it was that he was afraid of.

His phone, sitting in the passenger seat, began to vibrate. The screen lit up as it danced to the side, an unknown number calling.

It took until the third ring before Pete gathered the courage within himself to lift the phone, slide his finger along the screen, and put the speaker to his ear.

“Hello?” he whispered.

Static.

And then, a voice. Mumbled, but female. He strained to hear.

“Hello?” he asked again.

The voice cleared. “Hello?” it asked.

Left with few other choices, he asked again; “Hello?”

The distorted woman’s voice spoke again. “There’s something wrong with the children.” Something in her tone made Pete think she was crying.

“I’m sorry?” Pete asked. “Children? What children?”

“There’s something wrong with the children,” the woman repeated. Pleading.

“I think you have the wrong number,” Pete said, ready to hang up. But, before he could, the static in the receiver rose and rose and rose until, all at once, it stopped. And he was left with piercing silence on the other end.

When he took the phone away from his ear, he realised that it had gotten warmer and warmer to the point where he couldn’t keep his grip on it. It fell from his hand, sliding down into the abyss between the seat and the door.

Pete reached his arm down the side of the seat, rummaging through the unknown until his fingers grazed something cold, sharp, and metallic. It sent a

shiver up his wrist, tangling around his elbow, and settling near his shoulder. He shook his hand, but the sensation stayed.

He found the phone, nuzzled behind the latch to move the seat backwards and forwards. It was still warm. He slid it into his pocket and opened the car door, sliding out feet first.

The night air was cold, so he wrapped his scarf tighter around his neck, and pulled the hood of his jacket around his ears. When he breathed out, the air caught his breath and turned it into a cloud that clung to his lips.

Pete shivered as he locked the car door. Best not to stay outside too long, that was what the news woman had advised.

He made his way down the path outside of Sophie's house, his feet skimming along the bed of winter aconites which lined the way on either side. As Pete stepped onto the porch, the swing by the front door swung politely as if an old woman was sitting in it, knitting away as she watched the world pass by.

The front door was made of solid oak—oak which Sophie's father had chopped himself from the forest beside the house if his stories were to be believed. Pete knocked on it with a clenched fist, glancing behind him into the cold, dark as he done so. Nothing stirred in the street, not even a stray cat or a lost bird.

He waited a minute before banging on the door again. "Sophie?" he yelled.

To no answer.

But, he heard a sound to his right. It was coming from the garage.

A shuffling of feet.

Pete stepped away from the porch and tried to stand on his tip-toes to see into the garage. “Sophie? Is that you?” he asked to the silence. “It’s me—Pete. I just wanted to check up on you.”

The sound stopped.

All he could hear was the tiny electronic hum from the garage lights. For a few seconds, he stood like that, suddenly not daring to turn around to look behind him. Because in the silence of the night, the sound of a car without its light on rolling down the road towards him rooted him to the spot.

SOPHIE

Sophie heard the banging on the door as she reached up to switch the bathroom light on.

By that point the blood was following the path of the lines on her palm.

“Sophie?” she could hear Pete calling. The blood was spreading to her wrist and threatening to fall onto her mother’s gleaming white tiled bathroom floor. Pete would be alright for another few minutes.

She entered the bathroom, making her way towards the cabinet above the sink. The sink, made of white marble, was cold to touch—as was just about everything else in the house. She twisted the cold tap, watching for a moment as water started to spurt out. Holding her finger under the water, she watched as the sink stained red. Her blood swirled with the water, dancing in the sink bowl before being pulled away into nothing. After a few seconds, her finger was clean, no traces of crimson left. She looked to the tip of her finger. If she hadn’t known what to look for, she mightn’t have seen the tiniest little cut. But the longer she looked, the more the blood came back as a thin red line stretching across her entire fingertip. She hadn’t realised how big the little cut was, or how

much blood it seemed to be drawing. It was almost black as it seeped out of her finger. She held her hand under the tap once more, feeling the sting of the water shooting onto the cut.

Sophie had to stand on the tips of her toes as she reached up to the left-hand cabinet. She peered inside, searching for the gauze she'd bought just last week. All the while, water continued to waltz with her blood in the marble sink bowl.

She shoved aside a blue toothbrush, a half-empty tube of toothpaste, a razor—careful not to damage herself even more on its blades so fresh they might have just been taken away from a whetstone—and a bottle of contact lens solution, until finally, at the very back of the second shelf, she found a roll of gauze wrapped around a tub of plasters.

She carefully pulled it out of the cabinet and turned the tap off.

Despite multiple minor injuries, Sophie had never had to apply gauze to herself. As she dabbed her finger clean with a red hand towel, she examined the cut. Though she knew it couldn't have, it looked like it had gotten bigger—deeper. And it had begun to throb.

That couldn't have been possible, could it?

Sophie held her finger closer to her face, seeing a tiny glint reflecting off of it. As she rubbed her thumb across it, she felt a sharpness.

On the other side of the wall, she heard a sudden tapping. It only lasted a few seconds, but it tapped so quickly, and too many times for Sophie to be able to count.

She glanced up around the wall at the single pipe that ran up behind the cabinet and through the wall into the garage. *Of course, it's just the piping*, she thought, brushing off her hyper-active imagination.

She went back to wiping freshest pool of blood away from her finger with her thumb again, feeling the glass that must still be lodged in her finger scrape against her thumb.

The gauze was easy to tear. She took a little patch of it, and the smallest plaster she could find, and quickly wrapped the tip of her middle finger.

When she was done, she held her hand out under the light to examine her job. A red dot in the middle of the gauze told her that the blood was already beginning to seep through, but it was covered well enough for her satisfaction. If she needed, Pete could help her cover it more—or, if need be, he could take her to the emergency room. He'd likely put up an argument to that, tell her that she was over-reacting or being silly. But she knew she wasn't. She knew exactly what a lodged bit of glass could do if it stayed inside a finger longer than it was welcome. If she focussed hard enough, she could almost feel it inside of her, scraping against her bone.

She twisted the tap onto full power before she left the room, cleaning the last smudge of her blood that stuck to the rim of the sink. Then, having also dabbed a little on her face to cool her down, she turned it off and made to leave the room.

But the door, which she was certain she'd left open, was closed.

And, not just closed, she realised as she tried to twist the handle.

Locked.

She shook her head and assumed that the blood loss was distorting her thoughts. She had read all about the kinds of things that blood loss could do to someone's mind.

Still, she could feel her heart beating a little too hard inside her chest.

Slowly, Sophie took a deep breath and unlatched the lock on the door, stepping into the dark little hall. It was only now when she stood with her back to the bathroom that she realised how silent the night was. Her mind had been racing all day long, her thoughts yelling at her, screaming at her, tearing her apart.

Everything was as she left it. The white tiles still stung her bare feet. A little light still shone through from the kitchen.

Bang bang bang.

“Sophie?” Pete yelled again.

She shook her head and started to walk towards the front door.

Through the kitchen area and then the living room, she saw the hazy outline of someone standing on the other side of the door. As she fumbled for the key inside of a cabinet beside the door, she felt stupid for having forgotten that he was there.

The key slid easily into the lock, but it took more of an effort to twist it unlocked than usual. When she got there, she found her most convincing smile and plastered it on her face, hoping that the bags under her puffy red eyes wouldn't be obvious.

She opened the door, the beginning of a “Hello,” on the tip of her tongue. But there wasn’t anyone there on the other side.

A gust of wind from what the news was calling the ‘Coldest Night of the Year’ brushed past her, and she stepped out onto the porch. It wouldn’t be like Pete to try to spook her like that, but he knew that she and Rosie had been having troubles and she knew that he would go out of his way to cheer her up.

The street looked empty.

She turned to head back into the house, before spotting someone lingering at the other end of the street, standing just under a streetlight. She couldn’t make out any of the person’s features, but she saw them circle the light with something held in their hand. Probably a lost party-goer.

Sophie turned back to the house, falling back into the warmth, and locked the door behind her, wondering what the banging could possibly have been.

PETE

Pete stood by the door of the garage as Mrs Glazebrook, Sophie's neighbour from across the street, switched off the engine of her car and stepped out of it.

He felt silly for jumping at the everyday things around him, but the startle of sound in the dark, dark night—especially one like tonight—didn't seem like anything particularly unreasonable. Mrs Glazebrook didn't even grace him with a second glance as she unlocked her house and made her way into the darkness beyond the porch. Why should she?

Pete walked back up the two steps to the porch. The swing still swung happily. The light just beyond the door was still on.

Why wasn't Sophie answering? He tried to peer through the frosted glass door for movement, but everything was such a blur that he couldn't make out anything.

Something chilled on the back of his neck. A sway of cold air, sending his veins rigid. He shuddered, brushing it off as little more than a gust of cold wind.

He reached a hand to the door handle and gently twisted it.

And, to his surprise, it opened. The handle was warm to his touch, and the door swung open without its signature creak. Had it been open when he'd tried it before?

Irritated that Sophie had left the door unlocked after what was flooding the news, he walked inside and closed the door quickly, making sure to lock it securely with both locks that it had. He pulled on the door, trying to twist the handle. It didn't budge. *Good.*

"Soph?" he called. The open space beyond the door was empty. In front and to his left, the kitchen light was on and he could see a smudge of something on the counter. He glanced around, but she wasn't anywhere. He couldn't hear her, either, so she couldn't be on the phone to Rosie.

Slinking his shoulders, he walked to the kitchen, picking up a fresh red apple from the fruit bowl. Sophie's phone sat on the counter in the middle of the kitchen. Pete stepped towards it, raising the apple to his mouth and taking a bite.

Instantly he spat it back out. The inside of the apple was warm and slimy, and he could feel something sharp prodding his gums and the roof of his mouth. He gagged, coughing up something black into the sink. He dropped the apple and watched as a hundred spiders scurried out of it.

He clenched his eyes closed and gagged again, spitting out anything he could feel in his mouth.

When he opened his eyes again, he looked at the apple. There weren't any spiders around it—but the apple itself was rotten.

Pete panted, his head still spinning. He was sure that he'd seen something unnatural coming out of that apple. He picked it up with the tips of his fingers and dropped it into the bin without looking back at it, avoiding looking a bowl of half-eaten soup which was crusting around the edges. After washing his hands quickly, he turned back to the phone and realised that the smudge he'd seen around it was blood.

It ran down the island counter in the middle of the room towards where her phone lay, the screen smashed into a hundred pieces. Surrounding it, too, was blood smeared on the white tile floor.

Panicked, he bent down to pick it up, careful to avoid the glass. The screen flickered and wouldn't stay on, but he didn't particularly care. He left it on the counter and let his eyes follow the trail of blood which wrapped around the counter and out into the hallway at the other end of the kitchen. His heart was now thumping twice as fast as it should and sweat was burrowing on his brow.

“SOPHIE?” he shouted louder.

The blood was in patches around the hallway, but it was definitely fresh. Pete didn't want to touch it—he didn't even want to follow it. But his sick curiosity made him.

He walked around it carefully as it led into the bathroom. The door was laying open, and as he passed he glanced inside. The sink was covered; as was the cabinet door above it. A roll of gauze lay in the middle of the floor, a pair of scissors next to it.

What had happened? What had Sophie done? *How long ago* had she done it?

Pete didn't stop for too long to think about it. He couldn't—not when he glanced at the floor beneath the sink. Blood had pooled and was beginning to dry. Beside it, a spider investigated. It scurried quickly in a circle around it, then stopped. Then scurried again, then stopped in a different place. It wasn't a very large spider—probably only an inch in width at most. Pete stood and watched it, its scrawny little legs carefully judging where to walk. They moved slowly at first, then in a flash the whole thing flew halfway across the room.

Pete blinked, and it was gone.

The blood, however, wasn't.

He didn't know what to do, especially not as his arms began to shake and his throat began to tighten.

Should he call someone? The police? An ambulance?

Sophie would know.

Rosie would know.

Rosie would know.

For a second he thought that maybe she was with Rosie. It would explain the quietness of the house, but not the fact that the door was unlocked. Or the smashed phone. Or the blood he was desperately trying to ignore.

In a single swift movement, Pete grabbed his phone from his back pocket and unlocked it. The screen was slow to change to the Phone app, but he got there in the end. He flicked through his contacts looking for her, not sure if he'd ever even added her number. They hadn't particularly gotten along in the past.

Paddy, Pete (ME), Pub, Quernan, Rock, Ruby, Steph...

No Rosie.

He was standing in the doorway, but now facing the other way so that he didn't have to look at the streaks of red through the room.

He needed to call someone.

He needed to find Sophie.

He needed to *do something*.

So, he started to walk. He did his best thinking when he walked, but that was usually outside. Right now, he was inside with nowhere to go but to keep following the blood trail. It led him in a circle back to the kitchen.

Sophie's phone still lay on the counter where he had left it. He picked it up again, leaving his phone in its place, and examined the smashed screen. She must have dropped it, maybe by accident, or maybe in fear. Pete glanced at the window in panic, worried that he'd just seen movement outside the window. He stood very still, and very silent, for a moment, but couldn't see anything.

He had assumed that Sophie had cut herself trying to pick it up, but surely that was too much blood?

He didn't know.

He didn't know anything.

Tapping the screen, trying to force the phone to turn on so that he could find Rosie's number, he felt the sting of his finger hitting the jagged glass.

It didn't do much damage, but he could feel the shock vibrating up his arm.

Then, he heard something.

Bang bang bang.

Coming from the garage?

“Sophie?” he yelled, and inched his way towards the garage door at the other side of the kitchen. He reached the first door, the one which led to the small, dark laundry room. He ran a hand along the wall looking for a light switch but came across none. He’d never been in here before, he realised as he passed a wicker basket laden with neatly folded shirts and a bundle of freshly tucked socks.

And it was at that moment, just as he was lifting his hand to the garage door handle that he heard something slam against it on the other side, hitting it with such force that the entire door shook on its hinges. The sound only lasted a second, but it was more than enough to make Pete jump backwards, almost tripping over the corner of the washing machine.

Then he heard footsteps, but they weren’t coming from the garage. They were from behind him. He tried the garage door now, more eager to face whatever was in there than whatever was in the house. It was a fifty-fifty choice either way, he thought. But when he twisted the handle, the door was locked.

He spun back towards the house as quickly as he could, his heart racing again, his palms beginning to sweat. These footsteps weren’t mistakable. There was someone in the house, someone meandering through the living room and the kitchen and who-knows-where-else with intent. The laundry room door had swung over behind Pete as he came in, but it hadn’t latched. Light peeked

through from the kitchen, but the laundry room was otherwise in complete darkness.

Pete held his breath. If he tried to peek through the gap at the side of the door, he might be seen.

Something in the kitchen fell.

He let out a gasp.

But caught it quietly enough before whoever it was could hear him.

He had to phone the police.

He grabbed in his pocket, but—

Empty.

Damn it, he cursed himself. Damn it, damn it, damn it!

He'd left his phone on the counter where Sophie's smashed phone had been.

So, with little options left, Pete slunk backwards as the footsteps grew louder, and then quieter, and then more furious, and then calm, and he sat down on the ground. Because he knew that those footsteps didn't belong to Sophie. He crouched down, his hand grazing over something soft and warm as he put his hands on the ground to keep himself steady.

She should have paid attention to the news, he thought. She should have known better.

But, then again... so should he.

SOPHIE

“Pete?” Sophie asked.

She waited for a few seconds for an answer, walking slowly back to the kitchen.

But there was no answer.

Confused and scared, she rounded the corner to the kitchen—and found it empty. Maybe she’d been hearing things. It had been a long and difficult day, and seeing the blood on her finger had spooked her. Her mind was full of stuff. She needed to sleep, that was all.

As she thought that, she felt her mind go weak, her bones go soft, and a yawn force its way up her throat. She leant against the wall and let it out. When she opened her eyes again, she looked at her finger. Almost the entire tip of her makeshift bandage was spotted with red. She could change it in the morning when the cut had dried up and scabbed over. For tonight, she just had to leave it.

As she looked at how tiny the gauze seemed in relation to the rest of the world, she chuckled at how silly she felt for over-reacting.

She glanced around the kitchen to where the bowl of soup she'd been trying to eat all night sat in the sink. The spoon was at the side, leaving a dirty trail of dried reddish-orange.

She could clean it up in the morning. The clock on the wall ticked away.

Then, her phone began to ring.

Probably Rosie again, Sophie thought. She strolled over to it, unable to make anything out beyond the cracked and fuzzy screen. What she could see was marred by wavering black lines running vertically down it. It kept ringing, though, the screen desperately trying to light up. She knew generally where the answer button was, but was she ready to talk to Rosie?

Probably not, she thought. But it could be someone else. Maybe it was Pete, who she realised was likely still trapped outside waiting to scare her.

She clicked on the screen where she knew the answer button was, and carefully held the phone with a fingertip on either side.

“Hello?” she asked.

Her voice croaked and cracked having not been used in nearly two full days.

On the other side was crackling, as if whoever was calling was driving through a tunnel.

“I can't hear you,” Sophie said.

“There's... thin... ong... ren...” the voice tried to speak. It was so crackly, so distorted, that Sophie couldn't even tell if it was a man or a woman. She sighed, taking the phone away from her ear and trying to find the End Call button. The screen was gone, though.

All in an instant, the sides of the phone began to burn. Her fingers felt like they were on fire. She dropped the phone back on the counter, not caring about damaging it anymore. The whole thing was just about destroyed, anyway. She shook her hand and took it to the cold tap.

Taking the spoon out of the sink, she turned the tap on and ran her hand underneath it.

The freezing touch of the cold tap was soothing on her suddenly burning hands. Her whole body had even started to feel warm, despite the coldness of the night.

Sophie took a deep breath, listening to the peaceful sound of the water hitting the sink, the only sound filling the night. As she let the breath out she twisted the tap off again and shook her hand to dry it like a dog just out of a pond.

The kitchen light, hanging just behind her, flickered, sending her shadow dancing on the wall behind the sink.

She turned to face it, beginning to feel the cold seep back in, as if passing by her and patting her on the back.

Then, louder than ever before, the sound in the garage got louder and louder and louder. It sounded like someone thrashing around, throwing things at the walls. It rose and rose, and Sophie began to slink to the ground in fear. Bang after bang, she heard things fall and break, and then, when the sound grew to its loudest, she heard someone sobbing.

But just as quickly as the noise had come to a crescendo, it ended.

She glanced to the laundry room door. It was open. But it shouldn't be; she knew for a fact that she had shut it when she parked the car and came into the house that afternoon. She *knew* she wouldn't leave it open.

A chill spread from the tail of her spine to the nape of her neck. She took a step towards the room, through which the door to the garage was, and stopped just before it. She tried to lift her hand to the door to push it open and look inside, but she couldn't. The thought—the *fear*—of what she might find on the other side rooted her to the spot.

It was then that she knew that there was someone in her house.

Someone who shouldn't be.

Sophie dashed out of the laundry room and ran towards the front door to make sure that it was locked. It was.

But the window beside it.

She felt her heart drop to her stomach. The pane of glass in the middle on the left-hand side was smashed, and it was laying open.

Sweat began to drip down her neck, her arms, her legs. Her entire body was shaking. And, worst of all, she hadn't a clue what to do.

Her phone, perhaps the only thing she could use right now to find comfort or help, was smashed into pieces on the kitchen counter. Years ago her parents had decided against keeping the landline, because—Sophie thought with anger—*“When will we ever need a landline these days?”*

She pushed the window over, clicking it into its latch, and locked it. There was no use keeping it open for anyone else to come in.

Then, without thinking about it or having many other options, she fell to the ground. Her knees shattered against the tiles, and though she wanted to scream out in pain, she couldn't. Either her throat had tightened, or her mind had overtaken her body and forced her to stay silent.

Sophie started to move, crawling slowly back towards the kitchen. She didn't know when the idea appeared, but her mind was screaming at her to get a knife.

Not that she would know how to use a knife.

There was something in the garage. There was someone in the garage. Or maybe even inside the house by now.

Her bones shook as she thought of her phone falling. Had she really just left it too close to the edge? Or was it a distract—

Smash.

Then nothing.

She couldn't tell where it had come from, but the sound of glass breaking into a thousand pieces startled her. Tears were streaming down her face, but she didn't remember them starting. They left a warm trail down her cheek, and started to freeze around her lips.

Sophie stayed there, on her hands and knees, in the middle of the living room.

As if something had taken over her completely, she couldn't move anything. Her arms were shaking, and starting to hurt from holding her entire weight up, but as much as she might try, she couldn't slide them forward. Her knees she was certain were already bruising.

She looked around the room. Nothing seemed out of place. Everything was quiet again. Maybe she was imagining things?

There was a spider on the wall, crawling close to the roof facing her. It seemed to stop and look at her, wondering what was wrong with her. Sophie blinked three times quickly, trying to wake up or hope that this was all somehow not really happening.

When she opened her eyes, though, nothing changed.

And then the footsteps started again, coming from the opposite side of the kitchen. From where she was crouched, she could hear the feet distinctly, moving slowly, stopping every few seconds. *Tap... tap... tap...*

When she heard nothing but silence for a few seconds and had calculated that whoever it was must be somewhere near her bedroom, Sophie managed to push through her mental paralysis, get to her feet, and stumble to the kitchen.

Her arms still shaking, she managed to find the cutlery drawer and pull it open, careful not to make too much noise. The clink of knives and forks filled a little slice of the silence, making Sophie's arms tense up. She stopped moving, every atom of her being freezing for a moment.

Nothing.

She let out a small, quiet breath, and looked for the chef's knife which had been a gift to her parents for their wedding.

It wasn't where it normally sat.

She was lifting the cutlery dividing tray, searching for it underneath, when she heard the footsteps again. But this time they were louder...

And faster...

And getting closer...

And...

PETE

Whoever was inside the house was weeping.

Long, drawn out sobs that made Pete, for just a moment, almost feel pity. He felt like rather than cower in the back corner of the laundry room, he should go inside and comfort whoever it was.

It sounded female.

Could it have been Sophie?

He wasn't sure. Plus, he knew that if he burst out of the laundry room now and confronted whoever it was—be it Sophie or her mother—he wouldn't be welcomed easily. The fright he would give them, for entering the house without being invited more than anything, would be dreadful.

And if it wasn't Sophie or her mother, then he wouldn't know what to do.

He sucked in as much air as he could, filling his lungs until they felt like they might burst. Then slowly he let it out, feeling his body relax even if his mind wouldn't.

Still the woman wept.

He considered opening the garage door and running outside, but he knew that the keys were on a hook in the kitchen. He couldn't possibly get there without being seen.

With his heart thumping against his ribcage, Pete pushed himself quietly to his feet. He had to make a choice. The small, dark laundry room was beginning to cave in on him, his face going warm and his hands starting to shake. Trying the garage door one last time, he found it still locked.

In the house he could hear the woman continuing to sob, sounding like she was talking to someone. The fear that she wasn't alone in there made him even more afraid than before, the thought of having two people to contend with instead of just one.

And all the while, his mind raced with thoughts of Sophie. Where was she? What had happened to her? Was that...

Was that her blood smeared across the house?

The memory of the news lady's broadcasts swam around in Pete's mind. Nausea started to rise in his throat again.

Standing alone in the dark laundry room of Sophie's house, feeling completely alone and afraid of what was happening or what might happen, Pete started to cry. Not just little tears that bubbled in his eyelids; he started to bawl.

He tried to contain the sound, tried to be silent, but he couldn't control it. He joined the weeping lady in the living room in crying, unable to hold anything back.

Pete knew that he was going to have to go out there. He was going to have to face whatever it was that this cold, dark night had for him. He couldn't stay in the laundry room forever, waiting for the fear to pass. It had become a part of him. Nothing else mattered but the shaking of his legs, the pain in his tears, and the fear that had him by the neck.

He took a step forward.

And felt a cold hand grab his shoulder from behind.

SOPHIE

“Sophie?” she heard a whisper from behind. Her hand, still in the cutlery drawer, went numb. She couldn’t find the knife. She’d been too slow anyway.

The voice behind her started to chuckle, and she knew instantly that it didn’t belong to anyone she knew. She glanced around the room as quickly as she could to try to find a reflection, but there was nothing. The windows were too far away, and the curtains were drawn anyway.

She couldn’t even tell how long she’d been standing there like that for. Seconds? It might have been a minute. Or maybe she was an ancient statue and had stood there for eternities.

The voice spoke again. “You left the window unlocked,” it said. It was a man, definitely. Low, gruff, menacing. To her surprise, Sophie didn’t cry. Her arms and legs had stopped trembling. She’d become nothing all in an instant. He chuckled again, then spat a cough. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

When he started to move—she could tell by the sound of his feet dragging along the tiles—she darted towards the front door.

Her feet stumbled and threatened to trip her over herself, but she somehow made it and managed to grab the handle.

It was still locked. The keys, she knew were in the drawer of the table beside the door. She opened it quicker than she thought she could, and began to toss out envelopes and old phone chargers. But she couldn't find any keys.

Behind her, joining the footsteps of the intruder, she heard jingling.

Of course, she thought. He had the keys. He had known, whenever and however he'd managed to get in without her noticing, to take the keys because she'd try to get out.

It would take too long to get out of the window.

To get to the back door she'd have to go past him.

She felt like all of the air was beaten out of her lungs.

But she didn't have time to stop. His footsteps got closer. She knew she had to face him.

Slowly she turned, walking backwards to try and get space between them. He wasn't running, but he knew that she didn't have many options left. He was toying with her, playing like she was a cat.

And she finally saw his face. Or lack of a face.

A white mask covered his features, but it was moulded to the shape of his cheeks. She looked for a second longer than she should have. Holes were carved for his eyes and his nostrils, but not for his mouth. The white mask was painted with red and black circles around his eyes and a Cheshire cat smile where his mouth should have been. His movements as he walked towards her were like

water careening down a riverbend. His knees bent too low, his shoulders slinked like a fox through a bracken.

But none of those things were what frightened Sophie the most.

It was the bloodied axe that he held in his gloved right hand.

That painted smile. The blood. The movements.

Sophie kept moving, and the man—the *thing*—kept moving too. And though she had found her voice, at last, she didn't know how to use it. She didn't know what to say, because what could be of any use in this situation? She didn't want to know who it was underneath that mask, and she already knew how he got into the house.

But she spoke anyway.

“Rosie?” she whispered.

Sophie didn't know if she was asking the person slinking towards if *he* was Rosie, dressed up and distorting her voice as a prank, or if she just wanted to feel her name on her tongue one last time. The way that the single-syllable filled her mouth, and the way it sounded when it hit the air.

“Pete?” she asked next. Maybe he would hear her from wherever he was.

The intruder lunged forward, jumping in one quick, sudden arc. He didn't land anywhere near her, but the suddenness of it startled her. She stumbled to the side, falling to her knee. Already painful from falling to the ground the last time, she yelped in pain. Standing a few feet away from her, the man laughed and began to drag the axe along the tiles.

The scraping sounded like nails on a chalkboard, and as Sophie pushed herself back to her feet and walked faster, her shoulders cringed.

The man lifted the axe and swiped it through the air. And as he did, his laughter sent icy blood around her veins.

“Please,” she whispered. The man cocked his head to the side like a confused puppy. “Why?”

The intruder didn’t answer. He simply stood still, saying nothing but staring at Sophie from behind the mask.

The house regained its silence. Silence, save for the sound of Sophie’s heart beating viciously inside her chest and her wavering, struggled breathing.

And then the man began to move backwards, almost as if he was gliding. Sophie didn’t move an inch, or even let the expression on her face change to indicate her confusion. She watched as the man reached the kitchen and turned to the fridge. He laughed as he ran a finger between the magnets, then picked up an old picture held up by two brightly coloured magnetic letter—an S and an L. It was a picture that she and Rosie had taken when they were just kids.

Sophie wished she’d answered the phone whenever Rosie called—*it couldn’t have been only half an hour since, could it?* She wished she hadn’t ignored every text. She wished, she wished, she wished.

Then another sound tore through the house, coming from the garage.

Not quite a scream. A wail. Someone crying, weeping into the night.

“There’s something wrong with the children!” a woman’s voice bawled.

The intruder, still standing by the fridge, dropped his axe and looked at Sophie.

For a few seconds, there was nothing. Almost as if the two of them shared a moment of mutual confusion and fear. But then the man started walking back to her. Quickly. Every footstep louder and more intent than the last. And Sophie didn't have the time to consider it, or the time to move, or the time to remember that her father kept a gun hidden underneath the sofa that she was standing behind.

Because the man grabbed her head and threw her into the darkness.

PETE

Pete jumped at the cold touch.

But when he turned there was nothing there. Nothing but an open door to the garage, light spilling through into the laundry room. But it had been locked when he tried, hadn't it?

He followed the light to the bottom of the door and covered his mouth with the palm of his hand when he saw that the floor of the laundry room he'd been standing in was covered in more blood, blood that trailed through into the garage. He couldn't look in, couldn't bear to see what was in there. And then he saw, laying on the floor just beside the door, a bloodied, dismembered finger. He scrambled away from it, but his eyes wouldn't move away from it. He knew it was hers—the nail was painted with a glittery green polish.

Then he heard giggling, and footsteps. Footsteps that sounded like a group, running and jumping. Like a group of children playing in the garage. He inched backwards, watching his feet as they stepped through the crimson smears on the ground.

As he realised that he'd been standing in them for so long, he also began to notice the smell. How had it passed him by this whole time?

Feeling like he was going to vomit, Pete made the choice to leave the laundry room back through the house. He opened the door and bundled out, stumbling his way down the short stretch of hallway back towards the open kitchen and living room area. The lights were now off, though they were on when he'd entered the house. He felt his heart jump into his throat.

All the while the sound of the weeping woman continued to flood the air, filling his thoughts. It seemed to surround him completely, rather than come from anywhere in particular.

He slowed as he fell into the kitchen.

It looked empty enough. There was no one there, no crying woman. He found his phone sitting on the counter, grabbed it, and ran for the door.

But before he could reach it, he fell. His leg hit something on the ground and sent him tumbling down, his outstretched arms barely breaking his fall, his head cracking against the white tiles. His breathing was heavy and painful for a moment, and there was a metallic taste of blood on his tongue, as he adjusted to what had happened, and when it started to go back to normal he tried to look up.

His right leg, which had hit whatever tripped him first, was in agony, a searing pain shooting up and down from his shin to his thigh.

There was a throbbing in his head, across his temple. His eyes were blurry, like an out-of-focus camera, and as hard as he tried to look at what was

happening around him, he couldn't. The world was spinning in circles around his head, Sophie's house nothing but indistinguishable blurs in front of his eyes.

The woman had stopped crying.

Pete stretched out his arm to find what had tripped him, but other than the side of the sofa—which was at least two feet away from him—there was nothing. He knew he hadn't tripped over his own feet, too; his right shin had definitely hit something cold and sharp, before he had a chance to register it.

He tried to hold his head steady, but it wasn't working. He could see vague, hazy outlines of the living room, but nothing came into focus.

The pain made him almost bite his tongue to save himself from screaming out.

Pete forced himself to sit up, still feeling the excruciating pain in his right leg. He rubbed his hand against the top of his head, feeling it come away damp. It was either sweat or blood, but there wasn't much of him that cared which right there and then. As long as he could get up and out of the house, he didn't care. He'd fix anything later. If his head was bleeding, he'd go straight to a hospital.

But something wasn't right.

He tried to push himself to his feet, but it was like he couldn't find the ground with his injured leg. His left leg was fine, firmly planted on the tiles. But his right leg was numb.

He reached down with his hand to pull up his jeans to examine the damage, but his hand met air.

And then he realised.

His mind fell into a dark haze, and he vomited over himself.

He opened his eyes, squinting as best he could to confirm that his panic and fear was true. The lower half of his right leg lay a foot away.

He wept again and then heard the woman joining in with him.

Pete opened his eyes, and she was there.

She was standing above him, but she didn't quite seem all there. He could see her, but she didn't look real. She looked like a hallucination—maybe she was, he thought as he felt blood spurt from the half of his leg that was still attached to his body.

But she saw him. The woman, dressed in an old black gown, stood over him, a tissue clutched in her hand and dabbing tears from her eyes.

Pete tried to scramble back, but it wasn't worth it. He couldn't move, and any movement he did make felt like a fire blazing through his bones.

The woman stared at him, then sobbed into her tissue. She didn't look menacing at all, Pete realised. And then she started to talk, her words reverberating through Pete's mind. "There's something wrong with the children," she said.

The words sent a shiver down Pete's spine; he'd heard those exact words not half an hour ago, from the unknown phone number.

"Who are you?" he said. Or, tried to say. His throat had gone dry, and every word was painful to let out.

The woman stopped crying in an instant, her body going rigid. She stared at Pete as if just realising that he was there. Her hand glided down towards him, and he saw her face. Her horrible, disfigured face. It was dark in patches, charred and broken in others, her nose was squashed, her eyes looked like they were just hollow sockets. A gash of crusted, dried blood swept diagonally across her lips.

And she screamed. She screamed again for her children.

Pete wept and waited for everything to end. He clenched his eyes shut, waiting for it to all be a dream.

The woman grabbed Pete by the collar of his shirt and pulled him up, staring into his eyes. He couldn't look away even though he wanted to. His body had gone cold and numb. Her eyes bore into his, her cold breath caressing his cheeks. She considered him for a few seconds before dropping him to the ground with a *thump*.

She picked up his leg and started dragging him through the house, her steps slow, but steady. He clawed at the ground, trying to grab onto anything to stop himself from being taken by the woman. His hand hit against the part of his leg that used to be attached to him, and he almost felt it as if it was still attached to him. The unimaginable sting of pain still radiating through his leg almost made him pass out, but each time he came close the woman screamed again, and he felt more awake than ever before.

This was all a nightmare, he thought. It couldn't be true, it couldn't be real, it couldn't...

The woman slowed and pushed open the laundry room door.

Pete managed to grab at it and stop the woman from dragging him further. He felt the woman yank his left leg. And then everything went silent.

The woman looked at him, staring into his eyes. And started to wail again.

Pete looked back to living room. In the shadows where he had fallen, there was now a man standing with an axe in his hand. Pete's entire body went cold, and unintentionally, his grip on the door loosened. The woman kept pulling him, through the laundry room, over the blood—which Pete's blood was now mingling with—and into the garage.

The light almost blinded him.

He started to hear the giggling again, and a pair of footsteps dancing around.

The woman picked him up, and he noticed in the light that her skin was pale—almost grey.

She turned him around in the garage, and he saw two children running in circles. They looked like skeletons—like puppets. Their faces were painted white, and they were wearing ruffled outfits with black and white stripes and checkers lining them, like something out of a carnival. As much as Pete wanted to, he couldn't take his eyes off of them.

They stopped running and stared back at him for a minute before they started to walk towards him. And then Pete realised what they were running in circles around, what they were playing with. The sight of it made his mind fall to the dark, dark night.

EPILOGUE

There was a spider on the wall.

And it sat in the corner watching quietly as the lady returned to the house. Her hair, black as night, shrouded her face. Her gown, equally as dark, hung over her shoulders, ruffled and creased.

She walked slowly, as if each step was too heavy for her nimble body. The spider watched her with great interest, her arms reached out in front of her as she stumbled towards something the spider couldn't see.

The spider turned away when she started to weep, crawling back into the corner of the room where the roof touched the walls. The spider had decided that, tonight, he had seen—and heard—quite enough.

But the woman wept into the open as if the spider wasn't even there.

She started to speak then, her voice shrill and annoying. The spider listened even though it didn't want to, its sick curiosity getting the better of it.

“My children,” she wept. “What’s wrong, my children?”

The spider glanced around to see her kneeling in the middle of the room. The flickering screen in the corner of the room still shone, but there wasn't

anything on it. The spider had watched the girl and the boy as they passed by it over and over and over again

The lady of the house let out a wail which ripped through the walls. And then, in the dark, she stood up, tightened her hair into a knot, fixed the ruffles in her dress, and left the room in a silence so loud it could have torn the world apart.