

The Disappearance of Desmond Willows

by

Samuel Amazing

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

in the

NEOMFA

Program

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

May, 2016

The Disappearance of Desmond Willows

Samuel Amazing

I hereby release this thesis to the public. I understand that this thesis will be made available from the OhioLINK ETD Center and the Maag Library Circulation Desk for public access. I also authorize the University or other individuals to make copies of this thesis as needed for scholarly research.

Signature:

Samuel Joseph Amazing, Student

Date

Approvals:

Christopher Barzak, Thesis Advisor

Date

Mike J. Geither, Committee Member

Date

Eric Wasserman, Committee Member

Date

Dr. Salvatore A. Sanders, Dean of Graduate Studies

Date

Abstract

When Desmond Willows wakes up in an abandoned part of town, he thinks he's been the victim of a high school prank precipitated after a night drinking at a party. However, when he tries to go home, back to his life, he finds that two years have passed. To make matters worse, while Desmond looks the same to himself everyone else sees him as an old man. With nowhere to go and no one to turn to, Desmond grits his teeth and decides to find out what's happened to him.

While looking into his own disappearance he uncovers the town's long history of mysterious disappearances. Eventually coming across the file of someone he's met since being back. He's not the only one to which this has happened. This comrade in such a bizarre situation refuses to help him out of fear that the shadows will come back for her.

His encounter with the other disappeared person explains Desmond's newfound fear of the dark, but proves to be a dead end. With dealing with his fear of the dark, nightmares that make sleeping a gut wrenching prospect, and a creeping depression brought on by isolation, can Desmond hold himself together to figure out what's happened to him? And can he stop it from happening to anyone else?

Contents

Chapter I	1
Chapter II	6
Chapter III	17
Chapter IV	23
Chapter V	33
Chapter VI	60
Chapter VII	88
Chapter VIII	99
Chapter IX	115
Chapter X	143

Chapter I

Desmond Willows wakes in darkness. Mouth dry. Skin cold. Body sore. Memories a fugue.

He remembers showing up for the Senior Bash. It's the town's worst kept secret; every year the high school seniors throw a huge party the last week of school. Only juniors and seniors are allowed; the juniors because they "need to see how it's done." Desmond has been waiting since freshman year, like most kids, for his invite. He was so happy that even the awkward conversation with his parents that ended in with them handing him a box of condoms hadn't dulled his spirits.

Desmond tries to swallow, but nothing happens. He swirls his tongue around the inside of his mouth to wake it up. If the color gray tastes like anything it would taste like the inside of his mouth.

He tries to remember how much beer he had at the party. He's not a big drinker. He hates the taste of beer. It's hard to say no when someone shoves a cup in your hand and disappears into a dancing throng. Everywhere he looked was filled with half full cups or paper plates, or bodies, so he just held onto it. That first beer he drank wandering around the party, more out of something to do. A lot of people were dancing, some swimming, a few making out. He just wanted to talk to somebody.

Desmond reaches back to rub his neck, a particular spot of soreness, and feels metal. Gravel shifts under him, stones biting into his back; his ears fill with crunching earth as he sits up. Staring into the gloom, Desmond sees a long metal bar across the

ground, traveling into the shadows. He tries to shift, to see how long it is, but when he moves his ankle hits another metal bar in front of him.

Squinting through the darkness he looks at the other metal bar confused. Adrenaline spikes his brain; instinctively he jumps to his feet and backs up until he hits a wall. Breathing heavy, Desmond stares at the train tracks.

Where am I? Who would put me here?

The fear induced adrenaline won't let him grope for answers. Instead, his head darts about, looking for a way out. To his left is more darkness, ahead the tracks and another wall, right...His feet take him towards the light before it's fully registered in his mind.

It's a giant curved opening. The light beyond is what he strides towards. The opening is so far away almost none of the light reaches him.

He focuses as hard as he can on the opening. He pushes himself to get there, but it doesn't get closer. The fear that's driving him agrees. Desmond urges his legs to go faster. For an instant speed surges through him. For an instant his elation drives out his fear. Then his foot catches on something, all his forward momentum turns downward.

He slams into the ground. Stones bite into him again at his hands and legs. Dirt and soot fill the air. He coughs, wracking his body and juttering his mind. Face down in the dirt he struggles to catch his breath. When finally he takes a heaving breath without hacking he sits up and brushes the stones off his palms.

"Calm down, Des." His voice comes out a whisper, but even that echoes slightly in the space around him. He leans back against the wall and closes his eyes. "You haven't been afraid of the dark since you were nine. No sense starting again."

Opening his eyes, he stares at the wall across the tunnel from him for a few minutes. Until he's sure he's caught all his breath, until he's got at least some of his nerves under control. Then he gets to his feet and, calmly, walks towards the light at the end of the tunnel.

By the time he gets to the end he's decided this must be a prank. Someone at the party, probably his friend Kevin, found him after he fell asleep, or passed out, though he can only remember having two beers, and drove him up here. "Up here" being the town's old train tracks, from back when it was a mining town. They hadn't been used for at least a century; the tunnel itself was partially bricked off.

When they learned about it in eighth grade, Kevin had been obsessed by the tunnel. He especially got obsessed over the local legends that said the tunnel was haunted. He'd even convinced Desmond, on more than one occasion, to explore the tunnel with him. They never found anything, but that hadn't stopped Kevin from looking. Kevin had even tried camping in the tunnel overnight, with Desmond as backup, but they never made it an entire night. They always packed up and left just after sundown, at Desmond's insistence.

This is Kevin's way of getting me back, he thinks. Hilarious.

As Desmond nears the entrance he hesitates. His instincts tell him to turn around, tell him it's safer inside than out there. Shaking himself, he pushes the feelings away, feeling stupid, childish. He steps out of the tunnel into the light.

The sun is bright, piercing, blinding. It feels to Desmond like it takes his eyes too long to adjust. By the time his eyes clear their ache is palpable.

His surroundings confirm his whereabouts. The familiar stone of the tunnel's archway, the serial number painted on it, R612, still clearly visible after so many years. He reaches out and touches the numbers. The stone is cool to the touch despite the sun shining directly on it. Desmond suddenly feels too hot. He takes a labored breath as sweat breaks out on his head.

This is too much.

He takes a step back into the tunnel before he can stop himself.

What the hell am I doing?

He takes several steps away from the tunnel into the overgrowth springing up around the tracks. The brush of thick weeds against his legs draws his attention away from the maw of the tunnel. There's much more growth out here than what he remembers. He briefly wonders if he'll be able to find the marker by the track that indicates where the service road is. If it's even still there.

Turning away from the tunnel, he follows the tracks into the forest. The trees provide enough shade that the sweat on his forehead cools quickly, concentrating too much on where he's going to bother wiping it away. The marker is a small sign on a stick maybe a foot tall. Some of the weeds grown up around the tracks are twice that height, some are taller, and Desmond can't remember exactly how far from the tunnel the marker is. He doubles back twice thinking he missed it. Eventually he sees a flash of white behind a curtain of green. Shoving the weeds aside, he sees the marker, J146.

He turns right, plunging into the forest. The incline is fairly steep, and despite the shade, new sweat coats his head. The thought of finding something linked to the town, linked to safety, drives him forward. The farther he gets from the tunnel, the more he

wants to be away from it. Desmond guesses the feeling is just old fears resurfacing. He does his best to ignore the feeling. Pushing through the last of the foliage, he hopes Kevin had the presence of mind to have someone follow him up here so he could leave Desmond's car.

Unfortunately, as the leaves part Desmond finds himself staring at an empty patch of dirt road. Sighing in frustration, he heaves himself off the incline and into one of the ruts, which still resists Nature's tries to reclaim it. Automatically, his hand reaches for his phone. After checking several pockets and finding nothing, he sighs in exasperation.

Funny, Kevin. Real funny.

He's got a long walk back to town.

Chapter II

The walk back to town is longer than he thought. If Desmond is optimistic about it, he thinks it takes an hour. His feet tell a different story.

The walk gives him time to think, to remember the party. Flashes come to him. People laughing. A girl bumping into him, spilling her drink in the process. Kevin's face swirls out of a crowd, he's ranting about something. Snippets of conversation about colleges, about taking a year off, about summer jobs. He tries to pinpoint when he became drunk, but details are few and far between. Finally he gives up and lets his mind wander.

When he gets back to town he's relieved. If he's honest he thought he'd be more relieved than he is. The relief feels resigned. His throbbing feet might have something to do with that. Trying to stay upbeat, Desmond decides that once he's home, and can sit down, the relief will wash over him.

With his attention brought back to the present, his walk through town brings with it a strange unease. There's nothing he can put his finger on, but the colors seem slightly duller, the roads less busy.

He shakes his head and laughs at himself. *Kevin, you've outdone yourself.* Desmond marks his wooginess down to the childhood fear the tunnel brought back to the surface of his thoughts. *The colors seem off because of the morning light, which does seem brighter than usual, and the lack of traffic is because it's Sunday,* he reasons with himself.

Desmond sweeps the unease from him and heads for home.

When he comes face to face with his house, relief still isn't what he feels. Looking at the house Desmond feels an emptiness. The emptiness solidifies when, upon realizing without his car keys he doesn't have his house key either, he finds the door locked and no one comes to answer when he knocks.

Again he laughs at himself. He can't help but think this is what he gets for getting drunk at a party. This could easily be a PSA about the dangers of teenage drinking.

"See what happens, kids. You lose your friends, your car, and your home."

Trudging into the back yard he mentally prepares himself for the lecture his parents are definitely going to give him when they get home. Which he doesn't mind all that much, it's the disapproving looks that get under his skin. He finds the fake rock under the kitchen window in the garden and lets himself in the back door.

He tosses the key onto the kitchen counter next to the door, and heads for the fridge. The cool air feels cool on his skin when he reaches for the carton of milk. His parents hate it when he drinks straight from the carton; they keep bugging him about his manners.

What they don't know, won't get me in trouble. Bringing the carton to his lips, he tosses his head back.

Coughing, spurting milk onto his chin, he wrenches the carton from his mouth. "What the hell?" He gags, reads the label.

Since when does Mom buy soy milk? Shoving the carton back in the fridge, Desmond wipes his chin with the back of his hand. *I guess I really need to change now.* Seeing the milk drying on shirt already, he rubs the back of his hand on his chest and heads for the stairs.

He's halfway down the hall when he's jarred from the safety of his home. He stares at the wall confused. He stares at the white walls confused.

Green. They were green yesterday. Friday. I left for the party Friday night. What day is it? Could Mom and Dad painted the hall in that time? It's all the walls, Des. Look.

His eyes slide down the hallway. It's length totally white. Reaching the front door, his gaze ricochets to the right, following the stairs up. The wall there is white too.

Without thinking, he reaches out and touches the wall. He expects it to feel tacky, wants it to feel tacky. If his parents had painted the hall, even though he doesn't remember them saying anything about doing it, it's only been a day or two. The paint wouldn't be completely dry yet.

The wall is dry and unyielding under his fingers.

The pictures are different too.

Desmond's eyes dart up to the wall following the stairs. Instead of framed memories of his soccer team, family outings, and holidays, there are black and white photos of flowers and empty swings. He turns to the table behind him.

At least it's still here. Yeah, but it's wrong too. It should be wood not glass.

Ignoring his thought, he snatches one of the frames from the table. It shows a half wilted orchid. It's an electronic frame—*something else that's different*—and as he watches the picture changes to the same orchid only this time more dead. Staring at the photo, Desmond's head begins to pound.

"This is my house." Desmond's voice is raspy. Even to his ears he can't tell if what he said is a question.

Are you sure?

Before he can answer the question, the picture changes again. This time it shows a smiling, laughing, red haired woman with an orchid in her hair. Desmond doesn't recognize her. A numbness spreads through his body. The only thing he feels is the pounding in his head.

He hears the clattering of keys. In slow motion, he turns to see the front door opening. The red haired woman from the photo carries groceries into the house.

Desmond loses his grip on the frame. It falls from his hand, hits the side of the table with a hard plastic crack, and falls to the floor.

"AH!" The woman jumps, dropping the bags she's carrying as she spins around to see him. "Oh my god. What do you want? Please don't hurt me?"

"Who are you?" Desmond's voice croaks down the hallway still not fully recovered.

"Steve! You can have whatever you want. Just take it and go. Steve!"

"What?" The croak in Desmond's voice becomes more pronounced with his confusion. It takes him a couple beats to realize the woman isn't "Steve," she's calling for her husband. "I don't want anything." *Don't I?* "This is my house." *Is it?* "Who are you?"

The woman's look of fear falters for a moment as confusion spreads across her features too. "What are you talking about? How did you get in here?"

A man, arms full of groceries, comes in the door behind the woman. "Honey, what is it? I've got my hands full- Who're you?"

The woman clutches at his arm. "He was here when I came in. Do something."
Her voice takes a hysterical tone again.

Desmond can't stand the sound of her voice. It beats against the pounding in his head, making it hard to think. "Who are you people?"

"Let's just everybody calm down." The man slowly sets the bags on the floor and steps in front of the woman. "Sir, you must be confused. Can you tell me your name? Who are you looking for?"

The patronizing tone of the man's voice might be even more annoying to Desmond than the woman's hysterical one. "Who *are* you people? The Willows live here."

Are you sure? Where's your proof? Doubt rings under the pounding in his head. He looks around the hallway again. *Everything's different.* Nothing's in focus. *Has the hallway gotten smaller?*

"I'm calling the cops." The woman ducks behind the man, pulling a phone from her pocket as she does.

She's calling the cops? Get out of here. Regroup. Desmond shoves the panicked thoughts away. "Hey! Stop that!"

"It's okay." The man's voice is calm, only a tinge of his own panic coming through. "Are you looking for the Willows?" The man takes a tentative step forward, hands raised in a nonthreatening manner.

Desmond's jaw clenches in annoyance and concentration. *Is that what I'm doing?* If only the pounding in his head would stop. "Yeah, fine. I'm looking for the Willows."

The man takes another step forward, an awkward smile appearing on his face.
"You see, he's just confused, honey."

The woman scrunches into herself, turning her back to them. "Yes, we have an intruder in our home." She glances over her shoulder at Desmond. "An older man, grayish white hair. My husband thinks he's confused."

What did she say? Desmond tries to focus on what else the woman says, but his attention is brought back to the man as he takes another step towards him.

"That's where the confusion is, the Willows moved a year ago. We've lived here nearly that long."

"What?" The pounding in his head throbs behind his eyes, the world tilts for a second. Desmond takes a step back.

The man hesitates in his advance. "It's all going to be okay. Once the police arrive we'll work this out."

"What?" Desmond takes another step back. The man bends his knees in a half crouch posture, as if he thinks Desmond will pounce on him at any moment.

The woman turns back around, thrusting the phone out like a shield in front of her. "The police are on their way."

Desmond's mind reels. Images of his parents flash in his head. Images of the party. The images jumble together. His parents walk through a crowd of half-drunk teens. His memory of people dancing happens in his living room. He gulps down air, but can't manage to catch his breath. His mouth is completely dry again.

The man nods over his shoulder at the woman. "You see. Everything will be fin-
"

"Get out!" The words explode from Desmond. He wants these people out of his house. He wants to see his parents.

The man straightens, his hands making a calm down motion. "Take it easy. If we all stay calm we can get through this without anyone getting hurt."

Desmond's head pounds. He's tired of seeing these people. His eyes dart around the hall. The white walls, the black and white photos, assault him. They make it hard for him to think straight.

This is my house...but...Everything...everything is different.

The man and woman stare at him with a mix of fear and suspicion, expectant. Desmond tries to focus on the situation.

"Why did they move?" The question is out of his mouth before he knows he's thinking it.

"What?" The man looks confused.

"Why did the Willows move?" He raises his voice, taking a step forward. The man leans back, cringing slightly, completely blowing his protective vibe.

"They left town after their son went missing." The woman shouts at him from the door.

Desmond's eyes lock on her and she freezes halfway out the door. He sees her through a dream, the hall lengthening and blurring around him. The air feels thick. Every breath feels like he's drowning.

She's lying. I'm right here. I didn't go anywhere.

His pulse throbs in his eyes. The pounding threatens to split his head.

Why is everything different?

"Please, just stay calm." The man pleads with no one in particular.

Sirens waft through the open door. The woman runs out of the house, waving her hands in the air. The man stops cringing to look out the door himself.

Desmond panics. He doesn't know what's happening. *If this were a dream, this is the part where I wake up.*

The sirens are thundering. He hears a car pull into the driveway. The sirens abruptly stop.

The woman's voice comes through the door even more hysterical than before.

"He's in there with my husband."

Desmond's senses snap. He's running through the house, pictures and furniture a blur. He bursts through the back door, into the yard. Once again the light assaults his eyes. He's halfway through the yard before he sees the people in the house haven't had time to change it. It's still connected to the neighbors' backyard by some bushes and mediocre strip of garden.

"Police, stop!"

The words hit his back limply and propel him forward. The pounding has moved from his head to his chest, to his legs.

He treads recklessly through the garden and vaults the bushes. Landing in the next yard he hears the clinging of city issued equipment and the puffing of age issued breath to reach him. He darts forward without looking back. Sprinting through a swing set, he grabs the chains of the swings to set them colliding into one another. He doesn't wait to know if his trap catches anything. He forces his legs to pound faster. Clearing the house's front lawn he sets off at a diagonal across the street, down another driveway,

and into another back yard. He does this several more times before the pounding becomes too much and he slows to a brisk walk.

The last few minutes play and replay in his head on fast forward as he tries to make sense of it all. *Had that woman told the police I was an old man?*

He heads to the first car he sees parked on the street. Without caring if the police are still looking for him, he steps up to the car and peers at his reflection in the door's window. Immediately he sees his face contort in confusion. He looks the same. His hair still the mousy brown, his green eyes still sparkle with defiant youth, his face still smooth and barely weathered. Reaching up to see if it's real, Desmond pushes into his cheek, smooching the skin back and forth just to make sure it's not a mask.

What was that woman talking about? Did the man say I was missing?

Squashing his eyes shut he tries to remember...His head swims as darkness shrouds him. The world tilts; he takes a step forward, bracing himself on the car, eyes shooting open. He ignores the blaring of the car alarm.

"I'm Desmond Willows." He gulps down air. "I'm Desmond Willows." Sweat has broken out all over his body. "I'm Des-Desmon-d W-Wil-ows." He can't catch his breath. He falls to his hand and knees, his whole body heaves, bile, stomach acid, and soy milk splatter onto the curb in front of him. Desmond sits up, forcing himself to swallow air.

Fumbling into his jeans pocket, he pulls out his wallet and opens it. He stares at his driver's license. His mousy brown hair and green eyes stare back at him. The plastic declares in stereotypical type: Willows, Desmond. He stares at his name, and slowly he's able to breathe again.

"Sir, are you alright? Do you need me to call someone?" A hand touches his shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" Desmond jumps to his feet. Once more he's pounding down the sidewalk, wallet clutched to his chest like a talisman. He has no strength. After only a dozen strides, he begins to stumble and trip, only barely staying on his feet.

He doesn't notice, or doesn't care if he does. The world doesn't make sense anymore, it's seems perfectly reasonable to him to try to escape.

I'm still me. I know I am. Peeling the wallet away from his chest, he peers down at his photo again. It's a mistake.

He loses his footing, goes down fast and hard on the sidewalk. His wallet slides away from him across the concrete. Desmond gets to his hands and knees and skitters after it, snatching it from the ground.

Now that he's stopped he becomes painfully aware of himself. Tiny cuts burn his hands where he fell. His legs ache almost to the bones. His shirt clings to him damply.

Crawling to the nearest building, he sits with his back against the cool brick. Head throbbing, Desmond concentrates on his breathing. He tries to focus on the here and now. The buildings around him slowly come into focus. He's downtown-ish.

"When did I get here?" His voice still sounds creaky, like an antique. He has to swallow several times to get the words to come out. The car battery taste of his stomach stays.

When you tore off through town like a mad man.

"That might have been a bad idea." Desmond wipes his face with his hand. He has to take several passes over his eyes before they're dry.

What's the next idea?

Desmond pushes himself to his feet. Realizing he's still holding his wallet, he takes one last look at his driver's license before shoving it into his pocket. Then he looks up and down the street. There's a fast food place a block away from him, and he heads for that. The first thing he does when he gets there is go straight to the bathroom to throw cold water on his face. He looks at his reflection for a long time, before someone else comes in and he feels like he's been caught doing something he shouldn't. Even though he's not hungry, he decides after throwing up he should eat.

The girl working the register is extra nice to him up until he orders; then she goes on and on about how her dad had to change his diet when he had a heart attack last year. The pounding starts in his head again as she talks. By the time the food is ready he hates the sound of her voice. Desmond snatches the tray of food from her. He sits near the window watching his reflection chew, barely tasting the food, trying to think of what to do next.

Finished with the burger, he crumples the wrapper and drops it to the tray. *Well, there goes my last twelve bucks.* He regards his reflection in the window again, before refocusing on the town outside.

"What's next, Des?"

Chapter III

Desmond waits patiently behind the man at the ATM. At least he was patient eight minutes ago when he got behind the man. It would seem the man intends to do all his banking at the machine rather than going into the bank itself. By Desmond's count the man is up to his fifth separate transaction. Every time Desmond gets antsy and starts shuffling around the man turns to look at him until he backs up a step.

The man calmly, and disapprovingly, looks over his shoulder at Desmond again. Desmond glares at the man before shoving his hands in his pockets and taking a step back.

Relax, dude, I've got my own problems.

Desmond pulls his wallet from his pocket and takes out his bank card. He stares at it, flipping it around in his hand a few times. The plastic feels real enough, and the number and name are the same, but he has no idea if the card will work. If he's really been missing for two years...

Desmond focuses inward again. The first thing coming to his mind is entering the Senior Bash. Someone shoves a beer in his hand and disappears. He wanders through the house. Then...then...He closes his eyes, pushing his thoughts forward. He's sitting on a couch talking to...talking to...The throbbing returns to his head, worse than before. He ignores it. He was talking to...He's in a back yard? He remembers trees.

"Ugh!" Pain drives the thought away. The world is loose under his feet. He sways.

"Excuse me!"

Desmond opens his eyes as the man, finally done with his banking, bumps into him with his shoulder and pushes past him.

"Yeah. Sorry." The man doesn't wait for Desmond's reply, he's already out the vestibule door.

Desmond takes a shaky step forward. He takes a minute to rest his forehead against the cold metal of the automated teller. After a few moments his legs solidify and the throbbing lessens. A cough from a woman behind him brings his attention back to the world. He smiles weakly at her.

Turning to the ATM, he takes a deep breath. He's not looking forward to this next part. The machine accepts his card readily enough, when he puts in his PIN he expects sirens to sound. He's prepared to run again if need be, no matter how much like rubber his legs feel. However the menu screen comes up as silently as the first screen.

So far, so good. He lets himself exhale, and hits the savings account option.

To his surprise his account appears on the screen. Twelve hundred dollars. All the money he has to his name. Some of that was birthday money, some from a couple odd jobs he had. He struggles with taking out all of it, or just enough.

What if I only take out some and when I come back the rest is gone?

The woman behind him coughs again to show her impatience. Desmond doesn't turn away from the screen.

He decides to only take out five hundred dollars. *It was here for two years, why would it disappear after a week or two?*

He grabs the money and the receipt automatically and strides quickly out the door, still not convinced a silent alarm has gone off somewhere and the police are on their way.

Shoving the money into his wallet he freezes. It's not until the woman from inside brushes past him that he's brought back to reality and realizes he stopped right in front of the bank doors. He finishes shoving the money into his wallet, but he leaves the receipt out.

Walking away from the bank, he stares at the receipt in his hand. Other than the name of the bank at the top the small sheet of paper is blank.

Desmond fiddles with the bank receipt walking through the store. Every few minutes he glances down to see his thumb rubbing up and down its blank surface, unsure how long he's been there.

"Get it together, Des." He shoves the receipt into his pocket. "The next thing you know, you'll be talking to yourself."

Swinging back to the front of the store he picks up a hand basket and heads back through the aisles with purpose. He grabs a toothbrush, deodorant, and toothpaste, barely looking at the shelves, just enough to find the cheapest brands.

Leaving the aisle, he realizes he's absently rubbing his leg. He pulls his hand out of his pocket.

Next he picks up a couple extra shirts, a package of socks, a package of underwear, and a couple pants. He tries to think of anything else he might need, keeping in mind how much money he's got on him. Deciding that should be good enough for now, he heads over to the office supplies. He snatches the first pack of pens he sees, then rummages through the notebooks until he finds a college ruled one. He hates wide ruled paper.

At least that hasn't changed. He flips through the blank notebook, inhaling the smell of fresh paper. Closing his eyes, he presses the cool cover to his face, reveling in the solidity of the cardboard. He shoves the notebook in his basket, darting his eyes up and down the aisle. The last thing he needs is more weird and accusing looks from people. He tosses a roll of tape into the basket, rushing from the aisle.

There are only two checkout lanes open at the front of the store. Desmond doesn't feel like waiting, as the day has gone on he's gotten more antsy. He wants to be outside, around people, less and less, even though there are few people in the store.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised. He's rubbing the bank receipt through his jeans again before he can stop himself.

"Fucking stop." He pulls his hand away from his leg and switches the basket to it.

Focusing on the checkouts, he picks the lane with a girl close to his age working the register. He puts his things on the conveyor belt behind the person she's just finished ringing up. Though, now that he gets a good look at her, staring, she is dressed like all the mid-thirties-I-can't-believe-this-is-my-life cashiers. Desmond reconsiders this girl being close to his age. She seems to be younger than that despite the way she's dressed.

Maybe she just turned sixteen? Or maybe you should stop staring and focus on your problems.

Despite this thought, he smiles at her when he steps up to the register. It's wasted, as she's completely engrossed in her job.

"A bit young, aren't you?" He says by way of greeting.

The girl freezes ringing up one of the shirts. She looks up at him confused. "Excuse me?" Her eyes dart at the end of the register, then behind her before coming to rest on Desmond.

"I'm not trying to get you in trouble." Desmond immediately feels bad about bringing it up. "I'm just saying." He tries his smile again, this time awkwardly. "You're a bit young."

The girl's brow furrows. "Old enough." She restarts scanning his items, faster than before.

Desmond can tell when he's not wanted. He stands quietly while the girl rings up his stuff.

Exiting the store, Desmond eyes the receipt the girl handed him. Everything is itemized and accounted for on the paper. It's not blank.

Why isn't it blank? He feels his hand moving towards his pocket and stops it. Maybe the ATM ran out of ink?

A darker thought passes through his mind. *The bank receipt would have had my name on it, but I'm not me anymore. Am I?*

"Who am I then?"

"Sir?"

Desmond turns to see the checkout girl standing a few feet away from him. "Yeah?"

She holds out his notebook to him. "You forgot this."

Desmond stares at the notebook for a second. *Is she shaking? Is she afraid of me?* He takes the notebook from her. "Thanks." *Of course you were just standing here talking to yourself.*

"Thank you for shopping with us." The girl turns on her heels and rushes back inside the store.

He watches her go, slipping the notebook into his bag. Desmond shakes himself. Taking a deep breath, he turns his face to the sky to clear his mind. A sudden chill runs down his spine.

The afternoon sun hangs low in the sky. It's still prominent, but its promise of the night to come chills Desmond. He takes a deep, shuddering breath.

I should find a place to stay before it gets too late.

Chapter IV

The plastic keycard bites into his hand as Desmond's eyes slide once again to the setting sun. Finding a motel that didn't ask for his ID took longer than he expected. As the sun nears the horizon, Desmond realizes that he has to keep rubbing the cold sweat from his head, and he finds it harder and harder to breathe. It takes him four tries to get his door open, his hands are shaking so much.

Slamming the door behind him, he collapses against it to catch his breath. The rest is short lived as he surveys the room before him. The curtained windows and lateness of the day flood the room with long shadows. Reaching shadows.

Their weight presses against Desmond. His breathing ratchets into overdrive again. He gulps down air groping for the light switch. The dull click of plastic on plastic is deafening music to his ears. A ceiling fixture springs to life with harsh, fluorescent light, dissolving the shadows of the room.

This time when he collapses against the door his legs give out and he slides to the floor. Desmond stares up at the light until his breathing slows. Eyes sore. He stares at the light until the pressure in his chest lessens. Eyes watering. He stares at the light until his heartbeat isn't a roar in his ears but a distant thudding. Eyes burning.

"Get up, Des." His voice croaks into the room. It's harsh to his ears, but even that still doesn't get him moving for a few more moments.

He tosses the bag of clothes and the fast food he picked up on his quest for a room on the small Formica table, and heads for the bathroom. He splashes one handful of water...two handfuls of water...three handfuls of water on his face in rapid succession. Rubs the coolness into his eyes.

He stares at his dripping face in the mirror. His face. The face he's always seen when he looks in the mirror. A face that doesn't even look like it's aged the two years he's supposedly been missing. He doesn't feel nineteen.

Is this what people who wake up from a coma feel like? Disjointed.

He rubs the water from his face with his hand, standing up straight. His eyes never leave his reflection.

Was I in a coma?

He reaches for a towel. Out of habit his hand goes to the right of the sink, where the hand towels would have hung over the toilet at his home. When his fingers brush imitation wood he pulls his arm back as if bitten. Finally taking his eyes off the mirror, he swivels around looking for a towel. The only thing he finds are a couple washcloths. Taking what he can get, he dabs his face dry with the tiny piece of fabric.

"They didn't ask for your ID. What were you expecting, Des?"

He shuffles from the bathroom without turning off the light, and heads to the bags on the table. Weariness settles on him. He's sore from his jaw to his toes. He grabs the fast food bag and the bag with the notebook, then heads for the bed. He falls onto its mushiness; too mushy. The edge of the mattress sinks down so he's resting on the frame.

Necessity requires him to focus on the food no matter how much he doesn't want it. If he's going to be walking around all day tomorrow as well, he reasons, he needs the calories. The first bite of burger is cold and tasteless.

Initial food requirements met he sets the burger down, and turns to the other bag. The notebook comes out first. It settles on his lap and he looks at its solid black cover. Absently he grabs a cold fry and shoves it into his mouth.

Maybe I should have taken the time to find another color.

Next he grabs the box of pens. Slipping one out, he leans across the bed to put the box on the nightstand, turning on the light that's there as he does. With nervous energy in his hands he picks up the notebook and flips through it like he did at the store.

Something catches his eye and he opens the cover flipping ahead a few pages.

Written on one of the pages is:

Learn to let things go.

Desmond doesn't remember seeing that there in the store. Underneath it he writes:

Good advice?

Then he flips back to the first page. He rubs his hand down the clean page, before putting the pen to it.

This journal belongs to Desmond Willows.

Then a few lines down:

I am Desmond Willows.

He sits there for a long time staring at what he just wrote. It looks like an affirmation.

Not that Desmond considers himself a bully or mean, but he's always thought of affirmations and the people who say them to be a bit funny. Sitting in a motel room by himself he doesn't find it funny. Seeing his name, writing his name, felt good.

"I am Desmond Willows." The sound of his name makes him jump, as if he didn't know he was going to say it. His eyes shoot around the room, looking for what, he doesn't know. They linger on the corners and under the table where the light doesn't quite reach, where the shadows still cling.

He takes a few deep breaths. Then he turns the page in the notebook. He pulls the blank bank receipt from his pocket and the tape from the bag. Once the receipt is secure he circles it several times.

← Why is it blank?

He stares at the receipt and his writing.

← Why is it blank?

Thoughts and images about the day play through his mind. He tries to decide what to make of the receipt.

← Why is it blank?

important?(!)

paranoid??(!!)

He looks between the words. Memories of the man in front of him come flooding back. Specifically, the memories of how many transactions the man did.

He could have run the machine out of ink. Right?

He moves the pen over: important, ready to cross it out. It won't come down on the paper though. He pulls back, taps the end of the pen on the paper.

"Shit, I hope I'm not paranoid."

He flips to the next page.

Missing two years

Parents moved a year ago(?)

People see an old man.

He rapid fires the pen against the notebook. Shoves more fries in his mouth. Eyes do another sweep of the room, stopping at the corners again.

People see an old man. ← What/How/Why?!?

Desmond sits on the bed jittering the pen back and forth with his fingers, flipping from the first page of the notebook to the third and back again.

I need more information. Back to the beginning. I need a computer.

"I guess I'm going to the library tomorrow." He gets to the second page, the blank bank receipt staring passively up at him. "Actually, my first stop might have to be to the bank."

He's got a little less than fifty dollars left in his wallet. He rented the motel room for a week, having nowhere else to go, and that took most of his money. A heavy sigh escapes him.

At this rate I'll need to get a job. He flips through the notebook until he finds the page with the advice on it. The longer he stares at it the more it gets inside his head.

Learn to let things go.

Good advice?

Yeah, but I'm me, and no one knows it.

Desmond stares at the paper. He stares so long at it the words begin to lose their meaning, becoming just symbols on the page. "Learn to let things go" travels back and forth in his head. Then the man's voice comes to his head; the man who now lives in his home. *"They left town after their son went missing."*

Desmond shakes himself out of his thoughts. He grips the pen so hard his fingers hurt as at the bottom of the page he writes:

FUCK YOU! It's my life.

Music fills his body. The bass shakes his bones, and his heart struggles to keep time with the rhythm. Desmond tries to sink deeper into the couch for comfort. Out of habit he brings the cup he's holding up to his lips before remembering that it's full of beer.

It's dim in the house. There's a harsh glow from the kitchen lights, but most of the lights are out here in the living room. In fact much of the light is being provided by a strobe light.

Who the hell has their own strobe light? Again the cup comes up to his lips, his mouth half full before the scent and taste of the alcohol hits him. He spits out the beer, leans forward, and sets the cup heavily on the coffee table.

The music stops; all is quiet for a few brief seconds before another song blasts through the house. It may be Desmond's imagination, a trick of the silence, but the music is even louder now. It's so loud he's having trouble placing the song. He tries to listen for the words, but the bass is too high. The words are there though. He can just barely hear them under everything.

A group of kids runs past him on their way to the dance floor, the spot where the couch and coffee table used to sit. One of the girls grabs his wrist as she passes and pulls him off the couch with surprising strength. The next thing he knows, he's staring at the back of her head as they plunge into the throng of dancing youth.

She pulls him roughly to the center of the group before she lets go, putting her hands in the air and swaying back and forth. Desmond half-heartedly moves to the music. His eyes haven't moved from the girl, whose face he still hasn't seen. She's clearly into the music.

He tries to lean in to get a look at her over her shoulder, but it's hard to see. Over here on the dance floor the light pouring from the kitchen is gone. The strobe light does nothing to illuminate the situation. Desmond tries to jive and shimmy around the girl, feeling more awkward by the moment, to get a look at her. She turns with his every move, keeping her back to him.

Frustrated, Desmond stops dancing and tries to just walk around the girl. As soon as he moves one of the other dancers bumps into him hard, shoving him back into the crowd. The dancer, a boy in a black t-shirt, doesn't even notice what's happened. Desmond admits to himself that the dance floor is a bit too crowded. He's farther from the girl now. He takes a step toward her. Another dancer bumps into him, this time much harder, sending him staggering to the left. It takes Desmond a moment to orientate himself with the flashing light. Finally he gets his feet under him. A shoulder hits him in the chest, pushing him back several steps. This time he whirls until the crowd catches him and flings him back in the opposite direction.

He's done looking for the girl, who has blended in with all the bodies surrounding him. Desmond just wants off the dance floor, but he can't seem to find the edge.

Someone stomps on his foot. Half bent over, he's hit from behind and almost sprawls face first onto the floor. At the last second he grabs someone's arm, keeping himself upright. Halfway to standing, an apology already forming on his lips—

When the someone bounces, their shoulder coming up, catching Desmond under the chin. His mouth slams shut, teeth rattling, body tilting backward. Someone careens into his hip. He spins, still holding his jaw. Putting his foot firmly to the floor, he sets himself, determined not to be moved again. The press of bodies creates a palpable heat

around him. Something slams into his knee. He winces in pain, but holds his ground. Something else crashes into his knee, then again, then again. The knee buckles. He's hit from the side, spiraling into one person—shove—another person—push—a third—fling. Desmond barely gets his balance, he sees the next person coming for him. He puts his hands up, cushioning the impact, and shoving the person away from him.

The person flies through the air, knocking four other people down with them as they fall to the floor. Everyone stops dancing. Slowly the person he flung and the ones they knocked down get their feet. As one the dancers turn to face Desmond.

His throat constricts, it won't let his scream go.

In the flashing, intermittent light, Desmond can see each face too well. There are no eyes, no noses, no mouths. There is just a mob of smooth flesh. They move forward, pressing themselves into him.

Desmond forces his voice from his throat. He shouts at them to stay back, but even he can't hear his voice over the music that still blares around them.

They don't grab or reach for him. They don't need to. The sheer pressure of them traps him. They're as close as they can get to him. The scent of them buries his nose. Their sweat slicks him from all sides. Their combined, palpable heat suffocates him.

Still they push forward. Still they try to be closer. Still they press into him.

Desmond can't move. His arms are pinned. His feet shuffle in place, but of no mind of their own, only caught up in the mind of the mob.

They press.

Desmond can't breathe.

Desmond stumbles, gasping for breath.

The throng is gone.

He's alone on the dance floor. Sucking in air in giant gasps, his head swivels around looking for anyone.

They are gone.

Desmond rushes forward, he desperately wants to get out of there. After only a few feet he stops. He feels the presence behind him before he turns. He tries to stop himself. He tries to tell himself not to care, to just keep running. His body doesn't listen. Slowly he turns around.

The figure is huge. It towers over him. With the strobe light behind it, it is just a silhouette. A dark, blank space in the flashes of brilliance.

Desmond opens his mouth to scream, takes a step to back pedal.

The figure's arms dart forward. Its cold fingers wrap around his neck. The pressure cuts off his scream, its arms hold him in place.

Desmond grabs at the figure's wrists, pulling at them. Ink black skin rips from them, causing him to lose his grip. Panic keeps him fighting. He lets the skin fall from his hands, then balls them into fists.

He punches the figure's stomach. His fist sinks into it; for a moment Desmond is elated. Then the wet stickiness registers on his knuckles. Instinctively he pulls his hand back. A long, ropey piece of the figure comes with his fist. It bows into a low 'u' shape between them before breaking off and hitting the floor. Desmond can't open his hand, his fingers held together by the tarry substance.

Some animal part of Desmond's brain notices the light from the strobe is dimmer, and realizes this means he's passing out. He pushes at the floor, struggling to jump away from the figure who seems unfazed by all his efforts.

Desmond feels his legs weakening under him. The darkness seeps into his vision from all sides.

"Get off me!" Desmond shoots into a sitting position. The notebook that was on his lap flies across the room, hit by his flailing arms, cold fries and burger bounce to the floor.

He jumps to his feet. He spins in place looking for the figure, trying to get his bearings. Cold sweat dries on him as the previous day swamps his mind. Slowly he gets his breathing under control.

Eventually, he retrieves the notebook and picks up the fries and burger. The notebook goes on the table, the fries and burger in the small trashcan in the bathroom.

I really wish I could take a shower. He eyes the stubby wash cloths hanging above the toilet. He settles for washing his face, pits, and crotch, the bare minimum of hygiene. He puts on an extra layer of deodorant hoping that will help. By the time he's done cleaning up and putting on some new clothes the clock by the bed says it's a little before eight in the morning.

Notebook in hand, Desmond opens the door to his room. He doesn't realize he's holding his breath until he sees the sun and lets out a long sigh.

Chapter V

Desmond decides his first stop for the day should be the front office of the motel. Stepping through the glass doors it hits him again how out of date the place looks. The paintings on the wall, obviously prints, look to be at least forty years old, and the fake wood they're hanging on is faded.

What catches Desmond's eye though is the dog lying in front of the counter. It sits up when he comes in, but other than that doesn't move. It looks like it's part German Shepard, but it's clear that's not the only thing in it, even if it's not clear what that something else is.

"Hey, buddy. Are you in charge today?" Desmond tentatively reaches out to the dog. It sniffs his fingers, then nudges him with its nose. Desmond takes this as a sign the dog isn't going to eat him, and he scratches behind its ears.

As he does that he moves up to the vacant counter and dings the bell sitting on it. While he waits for someone to appear, he absently pets the dog's head. It's fuzzy and soft on his fingers. His dream floats back to him. The tar that coated his hand, the papery feel of the figure's skin as it tore off its wrist.

"Sumabitch! Cecil, you worthless guard dog! Git yur ass back here!"

The woman's voice brings Desmond back to reality. The dog, Cecil, whines and walks to the gap between the counter and the wall and disappears behind it.

"Go on!" The woman spits another command at Cecil, as Desmond watches him trot through a door behind the counter, before turning her squinty gaze on him. "Can I help you?" The unmistakable scent of coffee and cigarettes wafts towards Desmond when she speaks, just as its unmistakable there's nothing she wants less than to help him.

"You've got a nice dog." He says as a way to be cordial and break the ice. There was a man working the counter when he checked in.

"He's worthless is what he is. Is that all?" The woman taps the fingers of both her hands on top of the counter.

"Uh, no. I don't have any towels in my room." Desmond decides to just come right to the point.

"Yeah."

Desmond takes a moment to figure out if that was a statement or a question. "I just want to know if you could have someone put a couple towels in my room?"

"How do I know you aren't stealing them?" She stops tapping her fingers so she can cross her arms, lean back, and level an accusatory stare at him.

"What?"

"How do I know you haven't taken the towels and are looking for more?" The woman says with same stern look on her face.

Desmond can barely tell she's not joking. "Do I look like I need to steal towels?"

"Mister, I don't judge. It's one of the things I learned not to do with this job a long time ago."

Desmond is taken aback by this. He can't believe he's having this conversation.

"Look, I checked in last night and there weren't any towels in the room when I got-"

"Alright, alright." The woman waves her hand in the air to dismiss the rest of his sentence. She flops a pad of paper onto the counter she pulled from somewhere underneath it. "What's your room number?" Out comes a pencil from underneath the counter as well.

"Room 23."

"I'll have someone-"

Cecil starts barking from somewhere in the back.

"Goddammit!" The woman whips around, scooping the pad up. "CECIL! You shut the hell up!" She disappears through the same door the dog went through.

Desmond can hear her berating the dog, then a male voice yells something about trying to get some rest. He leaves, sure she's not going to come back out front for a while, and not really wanting to deal with her when she does.

I hope I get my towels.

Desmond stands in the empty vestibule looking at the ATM with resignation. He taps his bank card on his palm. There's no way he can get around taking out more money. Automatically the amount left in his savings blinks into his mind. Seven hundred dollars. It's all the money he has left. The forty or so dollars he has in his wallet comes to his mind as well.

I could probably get through today with that. But I'd have to come back here tomorrow. His feet already hurt thinking about backtracking to the bank again.

"Shit." He shoves his card into the machine and waits for the menu to pop up. He stabs his PIN into the keypad when the prompt appears. Then stops, confused again, by what the screen says.

Under account balance it says: \$1200.

He hits 'CANCEL' and takes his card out of the machine. Just to make sure, he examines the card. It's his. He reinserts the card, going through the motions until he's back at his account screen.

Account Balance: \$1200.

Desmond hits 'CANCEL' again and snatches his card from the machine, unsure what to do.

A man comes through the doors tapping his wallet against his leg and stands behind Desmond. Desmond smiles at the man, unsure what to do next.

He steps to the side, nodding at the man. "Go ahead. I'm still trying to figure out what I need to do."

"Thanks." The man nods to him and steps forward, quickly tapping on the machine.

Several options rocket through Desmond's mind.

Just take the money, Des. You need it. It's the easiest option. He's tempted to do it. His chest rises and falls with a heavy sigh, eyes sliding to the interior of the bank. It's half empty. Only a couple customers wait for the tellers to call on them.

"I'm so stupid." Before he can change his mind, he pulls the interior door open and rushes to take a place in line. He forces himself to take several deep breaths, to slow down.

What am I doing? He's ready with an answer.

You already said: being stupid. He closes his eyes, blocking out the world, trying to order his thoughts.

What if it's a trap? They could have noticed activity on the account after two years and they're waiting to see who takes out more money. The thought percolates and ferments in his brain.

If that were the case why would they refill the money? They'd have to know that would be suspicious. No criminal is that dumb. Are they?

The blank bank receipt pops into his mind. The woman-from-his-house's words come back to him: *"An older man, gray-ish white hair."* The fact he's lost two years of his life looms over both these things.

I want some goddamn answers. The resolution blankets his thoughts, quieting any rebuttal he might throw at himself.

"Can I help you, sir?" The teller's voice brings Desmond out of himself. He opens his eyes and cajoles his mouth into a smile.

Walking over to the teller's window, he leans on the counter and tries to look exasperated. His face falls into the expression easily enough. "Yeah, I have a question about my savings account. I took some money out of it the other day, and coming back here today the total didn't look right. I just wanted to double check the numbers with you. Usually bank errors in my favor only happen when I play Monopoly™."

The teller smiles politely at his joke, then turns her full attention on the computer. "I can check that for you, no problem, sir. What's the account number?"

Desmond relaxes a little when she doesn't ask for the name on the account, but his frustration level rises when she asks for the number. *Fuck, how am I suppose-*The number comes readily to the forefront of his brain. Yet another heavy sigh escapes him. *All the things I can't remember...*

He tells his mouth to keep smiling, and starts rattling off the account number. He's halfway through when he notices the teller's face.

"Are you alright, Miss?" Desmond leans in to get a closer look at her. Her features, soft and doughy when he first stepped up to the window, now seem stiff and tense. Her eyes are wide and unblinking staring at the computer screen. Her smile, politely small but genuine, now spreads across her entire face. "Miss?"

Slowly her head turns to look at him. "I'm fine." The smile doesn't shrink, her lips barely move as she answers him. "What's the account number?"

Though she's facing him again, Desmond gets the distinct impression she's not seeing him. He moves his hand up and down in front of her face. She doesn't move. Desmond ignores the teller, examining the rest of the people in the bank. Everyone else is acting normally, beside the fact that none of them are looking in his and teller's direction.

The other teller focuses on helping the person at her window. A banker in a grey suit walks behind Desmond's teller, but doesn't even glance in their direction, despite the fact his eyes dart around everywhere else. Desmond turns around, sees another customer waiting in line. The woman clearly wishes to be somewhere else, but her eyes are only fixed on the other teller and her customer.

Desmond raises his hand and waves at the woman. No response.

He feels woozy. Memories of his dream threaten to smother him. Quickly his head darts around. Searching for any dark, menacing figures. His stomach clenches even though he doesn't see any.

"Sir?" The teller's voice comes over his shoulder. He takes a step forward, ready to sprint for the exit. "The account number?"

Stop! The thought, his thought, jolts his mind firmly into the moment. He sucks in a deep breath and turns around to face the teller. She, and more importantly her face, hasn't moved. He finishes reciting the account number.

The teller looks at her computer for a long time. Desmond has to keep reminding himself to stay still. Finally, the teller tilts her head; her head sinking to the side until it's at a ninety degree angle, the side of her head touching her shoulder. Then she turns her whole body to look at Desmond.

"The account balance is: twelve hundred dollars."

"That's it?" Desmond has to admit that the answer seems a bit anti-climactic.

"Was there a deposit made recently?"

The teller doesn't move. "The account balance is: twelve hundred dollars."

"So, no deposits?"

"The account balance is: twelve hundred dollars."

His fingers tap the counter in frustration. *So much for those answers I wanted.*

"Do you have a record of any withdraws?"

"The account balance is: twelve hundred dollars."

A long breath vibrates Desmond's lips. Under the teller's doll-like stare he tries to figure out what else he could ask her. He stares into her eyes for a moment, before deciding it would be useless to try.

Instead he puts his notebook on the counter and flips to the page with the blank receipt. Underneath the receipt he writes his account number, and then:

Account refills(?) Daily? \$1,200.

He closes the notebook, and turns to leave.

"Thanks for the help." He says over his shoulder, not waiting for an answer.

Back in the vestibule he can't help but turn to look at the teller again. Her face has returned to normal, once again its doughy self. She politely listens to the request of another customer.

It's like I was never there. The thought causes a shiver to run down his spine.

Pushing the thought away, Desmond goes back to the ATM. This time when his account appears he doesn't hesitate. He takes out eleven hundred dollars. Stuffing half the money into his wallet and the other half into his pants' pocket, he makes a mental note to come back tomorrow to test his theory about the account refilling.

Desmond's next stop is the library. Luckily for him it isn't that far away from the bank, located a few streets away from the downtown area. The building is just as squat as he remembers it being when he came here as a kid.

The smell of paper and the underlying body smell all public places get is a welcome assault on his senses when he enters the doors. More memories of the building flood into him. He remembers coming to a story time when he was five where the librarian used puppets. He got to play with one after the story was done, though he can't remember what the story was or even which puppet.

Maybe a parrot?

He also remembers making his mom laugh with the puppet. The energy abruptly drains from him when he remembers his mom's smiling face. He stops mid-stride, halfway down an aisle of books.

They think I'm gone. He tries not to imagine how grief stricken his parents would have been when he didn't come home from the party, and fails. His eyes burn, vision blurs, as tears well up in them. He slumps against a book shelf for support, knocking books over with his shoulder. *Would they recognize me?*

A low moan escapes him at the thought of vacant, unknowing looks on his parents' faces at meeting him now. An older man, standing a few feet away down the aisle reading a book, shoots a stern glance at him before shoving the book back on the shelf and rushing past him. Desmond remembers where he is, taking a shuddering breath in, he rubs the tears from his eyes. He's here for some answers, and he's determined to get them.

Standing, he takes a minute to make sure his legs are under him. He pushes thoughts of his parents from his mind, and smears more tears across his face. Now that they've started they don't want to stop.

You can do this, Des. He inhales wetly through his nose, the noise fills the aisle. *You have to do this.*

"I can do this." Even to his own ears he doesn't sound confident.

What else do you have planned for today? A hoarse laugh escapes his throat. He takes one last swipe at his face, and pushes himself forward.

There are twenty public computers in a brightly lit corner of the library. When Desmond finally ends up in said corner all of the computers are occupied. He stands

there for a minute, looking over the people, trying to discern if any of them are nearly finished. It isn't until he sees people waiting in some chairs next to the wall that he also sees all the notices pinned around the computers. Signs declaring: 'no food or drink near computers;' 'thirty minute limit on computer usage;' 'please sign in at tech desk.'

He slaps his notebook on his leg a couple times, then a couple more. The thought of sitting around here just waiting makes him antsy. Tap, tap. He wants to be doing something. Tap, tap. He wants answers now. Tap, tap.

Maybe I could go to the newspaper's office. They're bound to have archives there, right? Tap, tap.

A couple people, on computers nearest to him, glance in his direction. "Man, do you mind?"

Desmond can't figure out if the person means his tapping or him standing there. In the end he decides that either is probably pretty annoying. "Sorry."

Looks like I'm waiting then.

He trudges up to the tech desk. There's a pudgy man in a polo shirt with a mustache in dire need of a trim sitting behind it. The man doesn't glance up when Desmond comes up to the desk.

"Is this where I sign in?" Desmond grabs the clipboard and pen from the desk. The form is relatively simple. They require you to put down your library card number, initials, and the time you get on the computer. There's an empty spot at the bottom of the list; Desmond quickly writes in a library card number from the top of the list and scribbles in something that looks like initials. "What time is it?"

"There aren't any computers open." The man absently reaches for the clipboard while scanning the people on the computers.

"It says I have to put the time down." Desmond moves the clipboard away from the man's hand.

"Only the time you get on the computer. You'll have to wait." When the man's fingers fail to touch anything for the third time he finally looks in Desmond's direction. Desmond stares down at the man making sure he actually sees him. Desmond's not in a hurry to repeat what happened at the bank. After a moment the man's other hand comes up and rubs his mustache nervously. "It's for our records. Just in case."

"Of course." Desmond finally hands the clipboard to the man, relieved. The man just has that general malaise of working with the public. He's just happy it's not him.

"You can have a seat over there." He indicates the wall with the chairs.

"Thanks." Desmond walks over and slumps into a seat.

There are a couple people ahead of him so he's in for a wait. Now that he's sitting down that doesn't seem so bad. His feet still ache from walking all over town yesterday, and his body is heavy from his poor sleep. He hadn't really noticed until he sat down.

Starting to feel your age? A short, bark of laughter escapes him. Several people look at him, startled.

"Sorry." He shakes his head at himself. It won't do if he gets thrown out of the library for being disruptive. The stern look from the man in the aisle comes back to him.

Ah, the joys of crying in public.

He flips open his notebook to review his notes. All five pages of them. On the third pass he stops on the advice page and stares at the words.

Learn to let things go.

He stares at the words so long he begins to feel they are less advice and more a message directed at him.

Who would tell me this?

He stares at the words until they lose meaning. He stares at the words until they seem to float around the page. Desmond shakes himself. He flips to the receipt page. Underneath his notes about his account refilling, he writes:

Need a car.

He closes the notebook and leans his head against the wall to continue waiting.

More people have signed up for the computers and have joined the chair brigade while he was going over his notes. Desmond tries not to stare at any one person on the computers for too long, feeling its rude or some type of intrusion. After a while the man from behind the desk ventures out into the rows of clicking and clattering and tells someone their time is up. When the person gets up, the man calls out a name. Someone jumps up from the chairs and rushes to take their place.

Desmond can't remember who was in front of him. He could be next. Again he finds himself studying the faces of the people to see if anyone looks like they're about done. Somewhere in his second pass he stops.

Des, relax. You've got plenty of time. Trying to calm down, he leans his head against the wall and closes his eyes.

The noise of the corner, by far the noisiest corner of the library, washes over him. The steady clicking of mice and the clattering of keyboards, is maddening. He tries to find a rhythm to it, but every time he thinks he has it he catches someone new clicking or

clattering. Then there's the murmuring underneath it all of people listening to music or news just loud enough to contribute to the din.

Now that Desmond is focused on the murmuring he can't seem to stop. The clattering moves to the background. Feet marching.

The murmuring directs the marching? Desmond's eyes squeeze tighter shut trying to decode what he's hearing. *No, the murmuring isn't-*

"Desmond."

The feet, marching, gets louder.

"Desmond."

The feet aren't marching in the background anymore.

"Desmond."

The feet march towards him.

"Des-

Desmond jumps to his feet.

I'm in the corner. Where can I go? He swivels from left to right and back again, fear deadening the feeling in his legs, planting him to the spot. His eyes dart among the bookshelves, trying to see where the marching is.

Silence.

There is no marching.

There are no murmurs.

There is no one in the chairs.

There is no one on the computers.

There is no pudgy, mustached man behind the desk.

"Hello?!" His voice falls flat, not seeming to carry past him. "HELLO?" He waits for a minute, but there's no answer.

Is the library closed? His feet instinctively move towards the exit, but he stops them. *Wait. If the library is closed why did they leave me?*

The vacant look of the teller invades his vision. Mentally, he shoves the image away from him. He doesn't want to think about that vacancy spreading through everyone that comes across him.

"HELLO?"

Still no answer.

Once again his feet move in the direction of the door. He's intent on trying the door, just to make sure it's locked. He stops again as he passes an empty computer.

What are the chances they leave the computers on when the library is closed?

Not bothering to sit down, he hunches over and wiggles the mouse for the computer in front of him. He waits for a minute to see if the computer is in sleep mode, but the monitor stays black. He stabs his finger at the monitor's power button. He tries the next computer and the next. Each time the monitors stay passively and apathetically blank.

Well, so much for that.

In the dark reflection of the monitor, Desmond sees a tall, faceless figure behind him.

"What the fuck?!" He jumps to the side, swinging his notebook out wide behind him to fend off the figure. He lands hard on his ass on the floor, and immediately scrambles a few feet away.

Breath coming in fast, ragged gasps, heart pounding a quick, heavy beat in his chest, instincts on overdrive, Desmond is ready to fight. At least enough so he can get away. His hands are fists. He ignores the partial rug burn on them from the fall and scramble.

There's no one there.

He spins in place to look behind him.

No one.

He hops into a crouch, bobbing his head back and forth to see through the rows of computers. The monitors are wide though, not enough of a gap for him to see much, too many places to hide.

The person could be anywhere.

The thought propels him into standing. The strategy is a double edged sword; he can see anyone among the computers, but they can see him too.

There's no one there.

"Christ, Des. Calm the fuck down." He tries to get his breathing under control.

"No need to be paranoi-"

He finally notices how dark it is outside. He assumed it was night if the library is closed, but what he sees outside is nothing. Even closed the library is close to downtown. He should be able to see streetlights, the light coming from houses, moonlight, starlight, something. Outside the window there nothing: an inky, amorphous blackness.

It's like someone killed all the stars.

"Or it's cloudy." His voice shakes.

Maybe the shadows ate the town.

"Maybe it's a blackout." His voice is a hoarse whisper. Slowly he looks up at the lights obliviously humming above him, casting him in harsh, uncaring florescent light.

The thud against the glass in front of him causes him to jump. Bringing his attention back to the window, whatever hit it is gone. A black smear glistens halfway down the window.

Now that Desmond is aware, now that Desmond knows, there are things out in the black he can see them out there. He can see them out there moving. Figures. Things. They are darker than the black they inhabit. Some of them lope through the blackness. Some of them are hunched. Some of them are impossibly tall. Some so squat he misses them until they take a single lunging step forward before settling into place again.

He doesn't want to see this.

He can't look away.

He doesn't want to watch this.

He takes a step forward.

If I can see them, can they see me? The thought freezes his movement, halts his breath in his throat, chills his bones.

As one the dark figures stop moving. As one the dark figures turn to look at Desmond. The lights above him flicker. When they stabilize Desmond swears they're dimmer.

One of the hunched figures takes a halting step forward, towards Desmond. It's the first to move, but not the last. A squat figure takes a huge lunge forward and then another, then another, not taking time to regain its strength like before. An impossibly tall figure takes two steps and is nearly at the window.

Desmond tries to move, to back away from the window. He coerces himself to take a step backwards.

The lights flicker again.

Desmond trips over his own feet, and falls over. Pain sears his head as it collides with the back of a chair. For a moment he thinks he's passed out, then the lights come back on. He wishes they hadn't.

Pressing against the windows are the dark figures. Impatient to get to him, they push against the window, smooshing themselves and each other against the glass. Desmond's mind tries to find familiarity in the mass. Pain and fear cause his eyes to jitter and slip across the mass without finding a beginning or end.

He hears the glass crack before he sees it. By the time he finds it, the crack is halfway up the window.

He jumps to his feet.

The glass shatters.

The world goes dark. It's a heavy, wet dark. It pulls, pushes, and pries at him. The weight of it is suffocating. He can feel its urgency.

It wraps itself around him. He inhales it, the scent of dirt and mineral filling his nose. A trickle slides down his throat. He can't keep himself from coughing. Something forces its way into his mouth, stretching his jaw, keeping his mouth open, wriggling for his throat. He tries to scream, but there's no breath, no room.

I should have screamed when I had the chance.

Desmond feels himself tear.

"Hey, buddy?"

Desmond's body shakes.

Air explodes into his lungs.

Desmond jumps up from the chair. "Get off me!"

Light stabs at his eyes, causing him to wince. Out of the corner of his eye he sees a window frame. He jumps away from it.

His chest hurts from heaving air into his lungs.

"Sir, are you alright?" Desmond spins, the pudgy man and his mustache comes into view.

Desmond turns away from him, searching for the dark forms. They're gone. Sunlight streams in from intact windows, illuminating the buildings and streets beyond. The only things staring back at him are dozens of confused, concerned people.

"Sir?"

"I fine." Desmond swings around to face the pudgy man, dodging out of the way of his outstretched hand. "I think," he scans the room one more time. "I just think I was dreaming."

"Okay." Pudgy keeps his distance, glancing around, the pleading look on his face asking anyone in the crowd for help.

No one moves.

They don't want to deal with the crazy man. So I've got that going for me.

"Is it my turn on the computer?" He huffs, breathing not yet under control.

"Y-yeah. Number sixteen." The man vaguely motions towards the computers.

"Thanks." Desmond brushes past him, navigating the rows of computers until he finds a monitor with a '16' written on the side.

The people on either side conspicuously ignore him when he sits down. He ignores them right back, settling himself, putting his notebook down and opening it to a blank page. All that done in a hurry; Desmond takes a minute to catch his breath.

Breath caught, his fingers come down heavily on the keyboard. His mind comes to a screeching halt, a widening blank filled with the off blue color of the computer background.

"Come on, Des," the harsh whisper does nothing to motivate his fingers.

Do I really want to do this?

"Of course I do."

The person next to him shoots him a glance and moves their chair over slightly. Desmond throws a smile in their direction trying to be reassuring.

Pull yourself together. You can do this.

"I kno-"

I know.

He takes a slow breath. If he wants answers he has to do this. He wants to do this. Now that he's here though the amount of denial he's in occurs to him. He doesn't feel missing; for him he's only been gone a day. Looking for answers he'll have to face his disappearance, the consequences.

His fingers fly across the keyboard, filling his name into the search engine.

Last chance.

Without thinking he smashes the 'enter' key.

The screen jumps as search results come back. The first link is a news clip, and he clicks it.

His mother's face, frozen in grief, fills the screen. Once again, his mind blanks. Almost on its own his hand clicks the play button. According to the bottom of the screen, the video stars Police Chief Rozen, Desmond guesses it's the man behind the podium, Desmond's parents clinging to each other behind him.

"I want to assure everyone that we are doing everything we can to find Desmond." Chief Rozen says as the video starts. Four voices rise from the background, their rushed questions crashing into each other becoming indiscernible. Rozen holds up his hand to quiet them down. "I'm not taking questions at this time. What I want to do is reassure everyone that I believe it's only a matter of time before we find him."

Desmond's eyes focus on his parents. His father's arms are wrapped tightly around his mother. *He looks older.* Desmond's eyes flick to the date on the video. *Only a couple weeks after I went missing.*

"I want to discuss the possibility that Desmond may be missing because he's injured." At Rozen's words he sees his mother wince. "We believe it's possible that Desmond may have gotten up to something with some other kids and hurt himself." Desmond stares Rozen's face as he says this. The video is good quality. He can clearly see Rozen looking through the camera with cold eyes.

He doesn't believe that.

"It's understandable that someone may want to help a young boy in trouble, and that you'd want to keep watch to make sure he's okay. But if he is hurt he'll need proper medical attention. So I'm here to say, if anyone were to drop Desmond off at a local hospital or police station no questions will be asked regarding his care." Rozen pauses to let the statement sink in. "Thank you. That is all."

A din of questions and camera flashes erupts from the crowd. Rozen turns from the podium, face falling as he does. Desmond guesses he didn't like saying any of that, even if it wasn't true.

Desmond's mother springs forward, gripping the podium so hard Desmond can see her white knuckles. "Desmond, if you're out there, honey, it's okay. We won't stop looking for you. If you have my son, listen to me. Please bring him back. We just want our son back."

Desmond stops the video, sucking in leaden air through his nose. He rubs his eyes to stop the tears before they can run down his face. He rubs hard at his eyes, but tears roll down his cheeks despite his efforts. Desmond's face burns, rage welling up to take the place of tears. This time when he wipes the tears away they mostly stay gone.

Whoever did this is going to pay.

Desmond swipes a hand across his face, denying the wetness he feels there. He flips through his notebook, writing Chief Rozen on a page he entitles "Investigation," he also includes the date of the press conference. After a moment he writes down the date of the senior party.

MISSING

He looks at the word. Anger blurs his vision.

MISSING

TAKEN!

Who would take me? Why would they take me?

Why me?

Who would take me?

He opens another tab on the webpage. When he gets back to the search page he types in: kidnapping into the bar. He scrolls through the links of news stories until he gets to a psychology wiki-page. He smashes his finger down on the mouse. His eyes fly over the page, not really reading what they're seeing.

Calm down, Des. It won't help if you don't actually read it. He closes his eyes and counts to ten. When he opens his eyes, what he reads on the screen chills him.

90% of kidnappings are done by people known to the victim

His hand shakes as he writes the statistic in his notebook. Immediately faces of his parents' friends rocket through his mind. Soon his teachers' faces join the shuffle; then the faces of parents of his classmates. They flutter through his brain, mixing and converging. What's left is a faceless person running through his mind towards him.

Desmond slams his notebook shut. He darts his gaze up and down the row of computers. No one is coming to get him. An urge he can't deny causes him to look behind him. Only the backs of the computers are there.

He's not comforted. He can't shake the feeling someone is coming for him.

One of the people next to him gets up and leaves hurriedly. Desmond looks to the person on his left, but they're concentrating on a video.

Concentrate, Des.

He clicks back to the links about his own kidnapping. He scrolls down the page until he finds an article that interviews Rozen. The article briefly mentions him, before talking about kidnapping in general, and then has Rozen assuring the town that the police are doing all they can.

No Ransom

Good? Bad?

Desmond navigates back to the search results. Now that he's concentrating there aren't many pages about his kidnapping.

Just another sad statistic. Wait.

Kevin's name is on the screen after a link. Desmond clicks on it. **Find Desmond Willows** fills the top of the screen, the title of the page. It's a page Kevin made to find him. It logs progress in the investigation, as well as progress Kevin made looking for him. Desmond finds the first entry.

A large, color photo of him begins the post. Then it gives his vital stats. Then Kevin talks about what a good friend he is. He closes by asking anyone who might have information about Desmond's disappearance to leave a comment.

Desmond clicks on the comments. There are a lot on the first post. Most of them are condolences, wishes for strength and such. Some of them mention seeing him at the senior party. None of them know when he showed up or when he left.

He jumps to the second post. It's about the investigation, a couple days before the video he watched. More condolences in the comments. There are a couple suggestions about where to look, some of them not very nice. There's mention of some people going back to Stacy Fredricks's house the night of the senior bash for a more mellow get together, and maybe Desmond might have gone there.

Desmond remembers Stacy Fredricks. She was popular by money alone. Her house had a pool, probably the reason people left the senior party to go back to her house with her.

Would I have gone with them? Desmond can't remember one time Stacy talked to him.

Later comments are from people who were at Stacy's. None of them remember seeing him. Finally, there's a comment from Stacy stating that she didn't invite him back to her house.

He jumps to the next post. This one is about the press conference. The comments here are all about how sad his parents look. He jumps to the next post, a week later. According to Kevin the police aren't doing much. The comments here are basically a conversation about kidnapping and speculation on if he, Desmond, actually ran away from home.

Frustrated, Desmond scrolls past several posts. The one he stops on isn't an update on the police investigation. It's more of a rant from Kevin about how they aren't doing anything, and how he's going to search for Desmond himself. From that point on the comments are few and far between.

People getting on with their lives. Trying to forget the horrible thing that happened. Happy it wasn't them.

From what Desmond reads Kevin is desperate to find him. He looks everywhere he can think to look. When someone does comment with a tip, a sighting or a suggestion on where to look, Kevin jumps at it. It's clear to Desmond that some of these tips must be people trolling him, but Kevin doesn't seem to notice. Or maybe he doesn't care.

The tone of the posts gets more desperate too. The first ones were paragraphs long, even the ones that were just Kevin doing his own thing started with paragraphs. Desmond stops on a later post.

Ivorson's Steel Mill. Abandoned. Plenty of places to hide a body. More if it's dead. Don't want to think about it. Will see what we'll see.

Desmond sucks in a deep breath. Thinking how his best friend must feel thinking he's dead. He scans the comments. He doesn't see anyone posting a tip about Ivorson's.

Kevin, must have been there looking for himself.

He scrolls to the last post. It's dated six months ago. Since then no updates, no comments. There's not even a comment on Kevin's last post.

For a moment Desmond's hands hover over the keyboard, his fingers twitch. At the last moment, before he can change his mind, he clicks off the page. Back at the search page, he types in his address and clicks on the first real estate site on the page. It's a wiki-page for home owners/buyers. It lists how much the house sold for and the date the sale was closed. Desmond writes the date in his notebook. Next he goes to the city hall webpage and goes to the city records. He looks for the records of his parents buying a new house. All he can find with their name on it is the certificate of sale on their old house.

They moved away? His stomach bottoms out, eyes sting. His body feels hollow and heavy at the same time.

He rapidly stabs at the keyboard. Facebook. Tumbler. Flickr. His parents' names don't come up on any of them.

They deleted all of them? Why? It only takes him a moment for his mind to reach the conclusion that they were tired of being reminded by people of their loss. They wanted to move on too. *After a year it must have been too much for them.*

He sits there, letting the information sink into him. His parents are gone. A part of him is relieved. If they were here he would have gone to see them.

What would I have done if they didn't recognize me?

Desmond shakes himself. He tries to ignore the hollowness in his chest. He makes his way back to the search page.

A hand grabs his shoulder.

Desmond jumps from the chair. The pudgy computer monitor stands next to him just as surprised as him.

"Sir, your time is up."

Desmond looks from the man to the computer and back again. "Of course." He grabs his notebook. "Is there any way I can get back on?"

"You'll have to sign up and wait again." The man calls someone's name to come take the computer.

Desmond doesn't wait for the man, heading back to the desk so he can sign up for more time. He picks up the pen, scanning for the next empty spot on the sheet when he stops cold. He reads familiar handwriting at the bottom of the page.

Seriously, leave this alone.

He turns, quickly scanning the people waiting for the computers. He doesn't recognize anyone. He turns back to the counter, flipping through his notebook until he gets to the page with the advice on it.

Learn to let things go.

It's the same handwriting. He half turns to try to see the people at the computers, but the monitors get in the way of faces.

The pudgy man finally makes his way back and takes his seat. "You didn't see who wrote this, did you?" Desmond shows him the clipboard.

The man looks at the words, eyes squinting. "No. Sorry."

Desmond scans the rest of the sheet, looking for handwriting that matches. None of the names signed up to use the computers match. Without thinking, he tears the bottom of the sheet off.

"Hey, you can't do that." The monitor gets to his feet.

Desmond shoves the piece of paper into his pocket, turning, and leaving. On his way out of the library his gaze never rests. He keeps his eyes moving, trying to find a familiar face he might link to the handwriting. He doesn't see anyone, but he doesn't waste much time lagging about. He keeps a brisk pace for the doors, leaving before they can throw him out.

Out on the sidewalk he searches left and right, up and down the road. He still hopes he might see someone that looks like they have the handwriting that seems to be haunting him. There's no one here he recognizes either.

Chapter VI

Numerous crime shows and movies bombard Desmond's mind.

I need a lead. That's what all the detectives go on about, right?

His hand goes to his pocket, and he pulls out the strip of paper with the new writing on it. He stares at it. *Not very subtle.* He shoves it back into his pocket.

And not so much a lead as a clue. Where can I get more information?

Kevin's website comes to his mind. Kevin, his best friend. Kevin, who looked for him longer than the authorities did. Kevin who...

Who deserves to move on. Doesn't he deserve to grieve? Desmond stumbles. Catching himself, he moves to the side of the building, reaching out to feel its rough solidity. *Does he think I'm dead?*

Desmond feels his mind closing up. After finding out what he did about himself. After finding out his parents left; seeing Kevin's website had been a buzz like a sugar high. Someone hadn't given up on him. Kevin hadn't given up on him. The thought that since Kevin's last post six months ago he might have come to terms with Desmond being gone for good comes to him.

"But I'm not dead. I'm right fucking here."

Desmond pushes off the building, shoes slamming the sidewalk as he starts walking. He goes into the first store he gets too, a small chain store with 'dollar' in the title. He grabs the first disposable phone and power cord he sees. The clerk mentions the store carries a better brand, but quiets down when Desmond glares at him.

He opens the phone as soon as the man hands him the receipt, leaving the packaging on the counter. Despite his doubts, the phone turns on, and seems to have half

a charge. Activating the phone quickly, Desmond's fingers hover over the buttons, Kevin's phone number burning in his brain.

Last chance, Des. You sure you want to do this? What will this prove?

He almost turns off the phone, but at the last minute he smashes the buttons and shoves the phone at his ear.

"Hello?" Someone answers after the third ring. Desmond is caught off guard. He thought he'd have to leave a message. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Fisher?" He's surprised his voice doesn't shake.

"Yes? Who is this?"

Desmond ignores her question. "Is Kevin th-"

I probably don't sound like myself either. Whoever she thinks you are you don't know Kevin.

"I wanted to ask you about your son Kevin."

"Oh god." Her total exasperation comes through the cheap speakers clearly.

"What has he done now? He didn't skip class again did he? I told him if he doesn't shape up and graduate high school I'd throw him out of the house. So what's he done?"

"He...he's still in high school? Isn't he nineteen?" Desmond can't figure out why Kevin would still be in high school.

"Yeah, he flunked a couple years on account of him missing so many days looking for his missing friend. I love that kid, and I love how much he loved his friend, but I told him: his friend is gone but he- Why don't you know this? Aren't you with the school? What was your name aga-"

Desmond ends the call, shoving the phone in his pocket. He turns around and stalks down the street.

If Kevin's still in school, I can find him there if I hurry.

Desmond leans on the fence on the south side of the school feeling more like a creeper than he would like. He tries to look nonchalant, but he can't help but keep looking around to make sure he isn't attracting attention. The irony that this is calling attention to him isn't lost on him.

Stopping himself from looking around again, he takes a deep breath to try to relax. It's been twenty minutes since he got here. He made better time than he thought he would. The waiting, standing around doing nothing, gets on his nerves.

Where else do you have to be? What else you got to do? These reminders don't help. Neither do the thoughts that Kevin might not walk home anymore. He might have a car to go to a job. Or, if his mom is really on his case about school, his mom might pick him up.

Not realizing what he's doing until it's too late, he darts a look around the school grounds for the umpteenth time. Mrs. Fisher's car is nowhere in sight among the other parents' cars.

No one seems to be paying attention to me. They probably think I'm just another parent.

Desmond narrows his eyes at the waiting parents. *They think they're being good parents. Vigilant. By being here to pick up their kids.* Anger fills his throat, beating against his vocal chords a rhythm that needs release. *I'm right here and they don't even see me. I'm*

just part of the background. How long would it take me to wonder away with one of their kids? Would they notice?

His lungs fill with a mighty breath. His mouth opens wide, ready to roar his disapproval.

The final bell rings, breaking the general stillness of the area. The sound jars Desmond back to his senses. He shuts his mouth and lets out his breath in a long, shuddering, silent, wind. He contents himself with waiting for Kevin.

A few minutes later a tidal wave of teenaged bodies erupts from the building. Desmond remembers being part of the throng. It's overwhelming standing in the middle of it, but he never really realized the size of the mob.

It would be so easy to grab one of them from the fringes. He pulls out his notebook.

Why wasn't I taken from school?

He looks around the area again. This time he thinks like a predator. Now that the kids have been released people that had little to no interest in their surroundings are attentive. They search the crowd for their children. Even if it's a selective search, only having eyes for their own children, they're still semi-aware of the whole crowd.

He turns his attention back to the kids. *What would be my in? What would be my out?* It dawns on him that the size of the throng is a negative to a plan. Someone could lose themselves in the crowd, but it would take time to get back out again. Adding another person to that would make that much harder.

Desmond watches how the kids break up. Even as the bigger crowd dissolves smaller clumps remain. The kids going to the buses all together. The kids going to the

parking lot to their own cars or to their parents'. Even the kids that walk home have their own groups, and those that don't are never that far from a gaggle of walkers.

All it would take is one person noticing something for a plan to fall apart.

Another thought occurs to him, and he turns his attention back to the waiting parents.

Their gazes intent on the crowd.

Why wasn't I taken from school?

Accessibility poor. Too many problems could arise.

Parents intent on kids-problem and solution. So intent on kids not looking at who else might be here.

School=Scouting area. Used to find me.

Senior party where taken(?)

Party accessibility=high(?)

No parents, alcohol, loud music, dancing, sex(?) -
distractions to cover entrance and exit.

Desmond studies his notes. *This isn't creepy at all, Des. You always were a quick learner.*

Adult still noticeable in throng of kids.

Easiest to grab someone from fringes of party-loud music
covers screams from outside.

When did I go outside?

Last memory on couch-When did I leave?

Something in drink or just drunk (How many drinks did I
have?)

Could I have been lured away from party?—By who??—One of
the other kids?!

Faces of classmates shotgun into him. Which one of them would he have trusted enough to leave the party with? Kevin's face leers at him from the cracks of his brain. *No.* He shoves the image away. *You wouldn't have had to trust them.* Female classmates fill his senses, their hair, their breasts, the way they laugh. Which one would have approached him? Which one would he have gone with? Other than the obvious choice?

This isn't helping. You don't even know if you were taken from the party.

Desmond has to admit it's true, it's just an assumption based on his memory. *How reliable is that?*

"It's all I got."

He closes his notebook and, trying not to think about how easily he's slipped into the mindset of a kidnapper, watches for Kevin. After several more minutes of waiting he's ready to concede that Kevin must not walk home anymore. Then he sees his friend.

Desmond almost doesn't recognize him at first. The Kevin he knew is gone. The Kevin he knew liked to joke around too much, a smile never far from his mouth, eyes glinting with laughter even if no one else laughed at his bad jokes. The Kevin he sees skulking away from the school isn't smiling. Desmond can't see Kevin's eyes because he's hunched forward looking at the ground, but Desmond is willing to bet they aren't glinting anymore. Kevin should have matured into his looks by now, but instead he looks haggard.

Christ Kevin. Even if no one else is looking for me you shouldn't be killing yourself doing it.

Desmond is so stunned at his friend's condition it doesn't register on him that Kevin doesn't notice him until he's turned away from Desmond and is walking away.

"Kevin! Kevin, wait up!" Desmond is ready to holler again, but Kevin stops and turns to look at him.

His eyes narrow when he sees Desmond. "Yeah?"

"Kevin." Desmond moves to stand next to him.

"Who the hell are you?" Kevin takes several steps away from him.

Ice shoots through Desmond, stabbing him in the stomach. For a moment he thinks he might throw up. A part of him thought this whole thing might still be some elaborate joke or a bad dream. A part of him wanted Kevin to see him and recognize him, to wake him up from this. The fact that Kevin doesn't know him makes what's happening to him dreadfully real.

A burning, acid taste fills his mouth. He swallows it down with a force of will. *If I throw up in front of him, I'm pretty sure he won't talk to me.*

"You are Kevin Fisher, then?" Desmond tries to sound official.

"You've got the wrong guy. Fuck off." He turns and starts walking away.

"This is about my-Desmond Willows and his disappearance." For the first time since coming back Desmond wonders about what he must sound like. *Obviously not myself, or he would have recognized me by now, right?*

Kevin swings around before catching a hold of himself again and restoring his nonplussed and angry demeanor. "What's an old perv like you know about Desmond? You a reporter? It's old news. You don't look like FBI. No glory in solving a cold case."

Pointedly Kevin puts his hand in his jacket pocket, like he's reaching for something and wants Desmond to notice.

Desmond puts his hands up in a surrender gesture. "I'm not here to cause trouble. You're right. I'm not a reporter or with the FBI. I'm..." *A friend of the family. A long lost uncle. A retired cop.* "I'm a private investigator. I've recently been hired by the Willows to find out definitively what's happened to their son."

Kevin studies him for a moment before finally taking his hand out of his pocket. It's empty. "And why do they all of a sudden care about what's happened to Desmond?"

Anger twists in Desmond's chest. "It's my experience that parents always care what happens to their children if they're willing to pay my rates. It's come to their attention that the police aren't going find their son. So if it's alright with you, kid, I've got some question." There's more edge in Desmond's voice than he wanted. He knows Kevin has been through a lot too with his disappearance, but his tone must work.

"Yeah. Okay. But you'll have to do it while we walk. My mom freaks if I'm not home right after school." With that he turns and walks away.

Desmond jogs to catch up, then falls into step with him. They walk past the school grounds and turn down a street, quickly leaving the view of anyone else. Now that he's here, Desmond's not sure what to ask.

"So why are you talking with me? I told everything I could remember to the cops two years ago. It didn't help, but I'm sure it's in a report somewhere. And I've got a blog with places and people I've talked to since then. You've seen my blog, right? Why do you need me?" Kevin doesn't look at him when he talks. Desmond glances at his friend, and, if it's possible, his face is set even harder than before. "Well?"

"Yeah, well..." *I need to talk to you because you're my best fucking friend, and I'm seriously losing my shit over here.* "You see..." He tries to recall all the cop shows and movies he's ever seen. "Reports can't convey feelings. Plus, paperwork is only as good as the person doing it. What if the cops missed a detail you told them because they thought it wasn't important. They had a lot on their minds at the time. What with a missing kid on their hands. Not to mention that fact he went missing from the town's worst kept secret of an illegal party. That couldn't have gone over well for them."

Kevin stops walking. "How do you know he went missing at the party? I never said he went missing at the party." His hand drifts back to his pocket.

What does he have in there? A knife?

"Take it easy. His parents say the last time they saw him he was heading to the party. When was the last time you saw him?"

"At...at the party." Kevin's hand falls to his side as his eyes drop to the ground again.

"Lots of loud music, drunk kids, no parents. That's a lot of reasons to be able to get away with kidnapping someone." Desmond does his best to sound like he knows what he's talking about.

Kevin looks up at him, his eyes burning with intensity. "So he was kidnapped. You think he was kidnapped. Who did it? Where are they?"

Desmond holds his hands up again. His legs wobble as fear shoots through him. He has no way of proving who he is, so getting Kevin's hopes up is the last thing he wants to do.

"Relax kid. I didn't say he was kidnapped, but there seems to be a lot of anecdotal evidence that suggests he might have been. Alright?" He lowers his hands, hoping he's gotten through to Kevin without crushing his hope entirely.

"Yeah. Whatever." Kevin goes back to looking at the ground.

Don't put this on too thick, Des. You don't want to throw Kevin to the despair wolves. Man, we're almost to his house. If I want some answers I'll need to take control of the situation.

"Don't you mean circumstantial?"

"What?" The question takes Desmond off guard.

"You said there's lots of anecdotal evidence that he's been kidnapped. Don't you mean circumstantial?" Kevin sounds confused himself. It's the first time his anger has slipped. For a moment Desmond sees Kevin's face soften and something of his friend come through. Then Kevin notices him noticing him and his face hardens again. "Are you perv-ing on me? Are you a real private eye?"

Shit! Don't lose this, Des.

"Look, kid, I don't mean circumstantial. Circumstantial is legal speak for coincidence. When I say anecdotal evidence, I mean everyone, including the police, think this boy has been kidnapped. When that many people say the same thing it's best to listen, but as far as I know there's no real evidence, not even circumstance, that suggests Desmond Willows was taken by anybody." Desmond is surprised how calm his voice is.

Fuck, Des. Don't lay it on too thick. He's still your friend even if he doesn't know it.

"You know what? Fuck you!" Kevin's shout stops Desmond in his tracks. "You didn't know Desmond. You weren't his friend! Why would he leave, huh?! Why would he run away from home?! You fucking tell me! Go ahead!" Kevin gets into Desmond's face, tears running down his face, features contorted in a mix of rage and despair.

Desmond darts a cautionary look around the neighborhood. Nobody's taken notice of them, yet. "Listen, kid, calm dow-"

"He wasn't abused! He wasn't dating some toxic chick from out of town! He had good grades! His parents had enough money to help him with college! He wasn't into drugs! He barely drank!"

Desmond takes a step back, trying to disengage from the argument, but Kevin follows him. He reaches up to pat him on the shoulder. "Alright, ki-"

"Fuck off!" Kevin bats his hand away. "You want something more substantial than everyone who's close to him saying he didn't run away? How about a history of disappearances in this town? How about that?!"

Kevin keeps talking, but Desmond doesn't hear him. He feels lightheaded; the world is too bright all of a sudden. Squinting, he loses his balance and takes another step back to steady himself. Kevin follows, still ranting at him, but Desmond can't focus. His friend is just an angry blur.

There could be others. It never occurred to him that this had happened to anyone else. *I'm not the only one.*

"How many?"

"What?!"

Desmond's question is so quiet it stops Kevin's rant cold. "How many people have disappeared?"

"Too many. More than usual for a population this size. Even if some disappearances went unrepor-"

"Can you show me?" Desmond steps forward with urgency. The movement catches Kevin off guard and he flinches.

"I...I have the files at my house."

"Show me." Desmond stares hard at his former friend. There must be something in his eyes, because Kevin doesn't say anything. He just nods, turns, and starts down the street again.

They make their way to Kevin's house in silence. Desmond tries to wrap his mind around the idea that what's happening to him may have happened to someone else. When he does come out of his thoughts enough to look at Kevin, it's clear the young man is brooding.

Jesus, I hope I didn't lay the whole "hard bitten detective thing" on too thick. I should say something.

Before anything poignant can come to him, they reach Kevin's house. Desmond expects Kevin to trudge him through the front door. Instead, Kevin heads down the driveway for the back yard.

Desmond eyes the house as they slink past it. The paint is duller than he remembers, the garden and yard overgrown. It's clear upkeep is not utmost on the Fishers' minds. Desmond remembers pulling weeds out the garden one Summer for Kevin's mom.

She wanted to plant...petunias. God, knows why.

She hadn't paid him, unless an endless supply of lemonade and cookies counts. It had for Desmond.

By the looks of it, Mrs. Fisher never got around to planting the petunias. Seeing the flowerbeds choked with weeds sends a hollow pang to the core of him. He looks from the flowerbed to Kevin's back, hunched over again.

What the hell am I doing? He's been through enough and here I am bringing it all up again.

Kevin stops at the back door, looking over his shoulder at Desmond. "You'll have to be quiet. My mom's been working the night shift lately, so she's probably asleep."

"How many people disappeared?"

Kevin stops halfway through the door, shooting a glare back at Desmond. "A lot. They're all in the files." He hisses.

Desmond doesn't say anything else as he enters the kitchen. Kevin shuts the door slowly and quietly. He wonders how they're going to avoid waking Mrs. Fisher when they go upstairs to Kevin's room. Then Kevin heads to the basement door, opening it, and motioning for Desmond to go down first.

Hesitantly, Desmond walks to the basement door and peers down. Off to the left side of the stairs he can see a couch, a dresser, coffee table, and corner of a bed. Half confused and half amused he goes down the stairs. Kevin shuts the basement door just as slowly and quietly as the back door and joins him.

Desmond surveys the sparse living conditions of Kevin's room. "When did you move down here?"

"Why the fuck do you care?" Kevin glares at him confused.

Desmond has to remind himself they're not friends now. "It just seems a bit cliché."

"I'm not discussing clichéd life choices with a private eye. I thought you wanted to see my files?"

Desmond nods. "Fine. Where are they?"

Kevin turns and walks to a corner of the basement. "Here you go."

"This is all of them?" Desmond's breath catches in his throat. He expected a folder stuffed with missing people, over stuffed even. Staring at the five boxes stacked in the corner makes his mouth instantly dry.

"Are these all the missing people the town has ever had? That's not investigating, kid. That's scattershot." There's a part of Desmond hoping Kevin's exuberance got the better of him. *There's no way all of these files are people who disappeared without a trace.*

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Kevin scoffs from behind him. "I looked over all the files. I only made copies of the ones that had no evidence in them. And yeah, I went back as far as the town records do."

In a daze Desmond steps forward and puts his hand on top of a box. It might be his imagination, but he thinks he hears the files shift restlessly under his touch. Slowly he lifts up the lid. More of that part of him that can hope dies when he sees the box filled from end to end with files. He reaches in to grab a file at random.

"Hss!" He pulls his hand away, pain searing his fingers. When he looks to see the paper cut there is none. No cut. No blood. It's just his nerves on fire.

"Occupational hazard, huh? My fingers were nothing but band aides for months while I dug through all the town's records." Kevin actually sounds half amused.

"Yeah. Hazard." Desmond rubs his fingers together then grabs a file. He opens it to see a young black girl's face. "Delores Mayfield, disappeared nineteen-seventy on her birthday. She and her friends went to a local bar to celebrate. They danced with several men that night. At some point Delores's friends lost sight of her. They say at the time they thought she had gone home with one of the men. Three days later they went to the police." Desmond stares at the faded picture in the file.

Desmond rubs his finger across the picture. *She looks happy. But it's easy to look happy in a picture. It only takes an instant. Delores, were you taken too?*

"Yeah, Delores. She's one I'm on the fence about." Kevin's voice is more confident. He's lived and breathed these files for a year or more; Desmond knows how obsessive he can be, experienced it firsthand. He's home. "There's no evidence to speak of, but, you know. She's an African-American gone missing in the seventies, and some might have considered her loose. The police might not have put in the time, you know?"

Underneath Desmond's finger, Delores moves. She jerks forward, bites his finger.

"Hss! Dammit!" He pulls his finger back, a thin line of blood running across his skin. He puts it in his mouth to stop it. His eyes fixate on Delores's picture. It's fine. There's nothing wrong with it. Nothing is moving. Desmond takes his finger from his mouth to see how bad the wound is, there's nothing there either, his finger is fine.

"Seriously, dude, paper cuts." Kevin takes a few steps away. "You need a band aide?"

Desmond shakes his hand. "I'm fine." He slams Delores's file shut, and shoves it back in the box. "This is some work, kid. It's very thorough." Desmond eyes Kevin, trying to judge if he can get away with what he's about to ask. Finally, he decides to just go for it. "Can I have these? It would cut down on the amount of work I would need to put into search."

"You want to take my files?" There's a tinge of panic in his voice.

"I can pay you for them." Desmond reaches for his wallet.

They hear the creaking of the floor above them scant seconds before the basement door flings open. "Kevin?! Kevin, you down there?" Mrs. Fisher's voice overfills the basement.

"God. Yes, Mom. I'm home. Where else would I be?" Kevin crosses his arms across his chest and slumps onto a support beam.

"Don't you take that tone with me! Were you in school today? I got a call-" She stops halfway down the stairs, pulling her bathrobe tight around her. "Who the hell is this? What are you doing in my house?"

"Mrs. Fish-"

"Christ, Mom! He's a detective. A private one. He's looking into Desmond's disappearance. I'm showing him my files."

Desmond waits for more yelling. Kevin eyes his mother. Mrs. Fisher eyes him. When the silence begins to stretch, he steps forward, hand out in greeting towards Mrs. Fisher.

"Mrs. Fisher, nice to meet you. I was hired by the Willows to find out the truth about their son."

She narrows her eyes at his hand. "The Willows hired you, you say?"

Desmond lowers his hand. "Yes."

"The divorced Willows came to you together and hired you?"

"They're-"

Divorced? Why? When?

Mrs. Fisher's face hardens even more. Clearly she's sizing Desmond up.

Pull it together, Des. You need those files.

"Yes. Well. You'd be surprised how wanting to know the truth can bring people together." Desmond tries out a halfhearted smile. It doesn't appear to be working.

"You sound familiar. Have we met before?" Her eyes are so narrow, Desmond wonders how she can see out of them at all.

"No. We haven't." Desmond hopes skirting the truth works.

The moment he sees Mrs. Fisher's nostrils flare he knows he's had it. "I want you outta my house."

"Mrs. Fish-"

"Mom, don't!"

"Don't you, 'Mom, don't,' me! You invite a strange man into the house-"

"He's a detective."

"-with, God knows, what intention!"

"He's looking for Desmond. He's the only one still looking!"

"I swear, Kevin, you're going to get yourself kil-"

"He thinks my files are good work. He wants to take them."

Abruptly Mrs. Fisher's mouth snaps shut. She turns her disapproving gaze back to Desmond. There's a tense silence. "You want his files?"

"Yes, ma'am. If there's a history of disappearances, maybe I can find a patter-"

"I don't care what you find, as long as you get those filthy things out of my house."

Desmond looks from Mrs. Fisher to Kevin. Kevin's face is a maelstrom shock and disbelief. Desmond looks back to Mrs. Fisher. "As I was saying to Kevin, I could pay-"

"Take them and leave. And be glad I don't call the cops on you." Mrs. Fisher stands firm on the steps, arms crossed like Kevin's were just a minute or two ago, face hard.

Desmond's not sure what else to say. He looks over at Kevin again. Kevin's features still scrunch and tumble together. After a few more moments they smooth out and he nods. With that Desmond moves back to the boxes of files.

He replaces the lid on the one he looked at and hefts it off the pile. "I don't have my car with me, so I can only take one. But I can come by tomorrow and pick up the rest."

"Oh, for fucks sake!" Mrs. Fisher curses.

"Mom!" Kevin glares at her, then faces Desmond. "That's fine. I'll have them ready for you."

"Oh no you won't!" Mrs. Fisher finally comes the rest of the way down the stairs.

"What? Why?"

"Because you'll be at school, young man!" She takes a few authoritative steps to stand in front of her son. "And you!" She swings to jab a finger at Desmond. "You will come over in the middle of the day, and you'll leave my son alone after today!"

"Ma'am, he's an adult-"

"Oh, please. He's an adult that still lives at home with his mother, and still needs protecting from himself." Roughly, she puts a protective arm around Kevin's shoulders. Kevin focuses on the floor. "That's the deal if you want the rest of those files."

Fuck you, Mrs. Fisher! Kevin's my best friend! He's the only one that kept looking for me after the cops stopped, after my parents moved away, and apparently got a divorce. So no! Fuck you!

Desmond takes a deep breath, ready for what comes next. Then the files shift in the box. The weight of so many lives is in his hands. He looks over his shoulder at the other boxes.

Which box is my file in? How many more boxes will be filled before this- whatever this is-stops?

He turns back to Mrs. Fisher and nods.

"Good. You can go now." She pulls Kevin into her, no doubt believing she's protecting him from a stranger.

As he passes by the two, the urge to reach out and hug his former best friend is overwhelming. He wants to thank Kevin for not giving up hope. He wants to tell him that he's back. He's back and he wants to solve his own disappearance. Desmond can imagine explaining who he is to Kevin, having to prove it's himself. He can see Kevin's enthusiasm about finding out the truth.

The thought causes him to slow in front of Mrs. Fisher and Kevin. Mrs. Fisher takes a half step back, taking her son with her. Desmond tightens his grip on the box and forces himself to take the stairs without saying anything else. Mrs. Fisher sees him out, keeping a few steps away from him at all times. As soon as Desmond is on the front porch, she slams the door and locks it.

I'm glad that makes her feel safe. He sneers at the door. When Mrs. Fisher's shouts at her son reach him through the door, he turns and trudges away from the house.

It's later in the day than Desmond would like it to be, the sun slung low in the sky. The urge to get back to his motel room tugs him in that direction, and he doesn't fight it. He lets his mind wander over what he needs to do with the files.

Kevin, so to speak, has already done all the heavy lifting, or most of it. Desmond decides the first thing he'll need to do is read over the files himself. He's not sure what he'll find, or even what he's looking for, but he hopes when he sees something he'll get a feeling.

For a moment his mind goes back to Delores's picture biting him. *That didn't really happen, though. Did it? Is that the "feeling" I'm looking for? Was Delores like me? Was she taken without a trace, only to be deposited back in town?*

You're getting ahead of yourself, Des. First get the files. First first, get a car so you can get the files. Shit. Desmond makes a mental note to get a car. *It shouldn't be too hard to get a car with the money that keeps reappearing in my bank account.*

A blast of police sirens brings him out of his thoughts. He almost drops the box of files.

"Well, now. You must have been quite deep in thought. I been tryin' to get your attention since the beginning of the block."

Desmond turns towards the voice, towards the police car, towards the more than slightly overweight man getting out of the car. A man he readily recognizes. "Chief Rozen."

Rozen pauses halfway on the curb, the mask of his confidence slipping for the briefest of moments before he gathers himself again. "You have me at a disadvantage, sir." He heaves himself fully onto the sidewalk and in front of Desmond.

Rozen despite, or maybe because of, his extra weight is an imposing figure. He's intimidating. Desmond has to admit, he's intimidated.

"You know my name, but I don't know yours." Rozen stares at Desmond with an intensity that makes him want to take a few steps back.

He manages to keep his ground. "It's Desssss-" Desmond forces himself into a coughing fit, hoping it covers what he was about to say enough.

"Take it easy. We old timers have to take care of ourselves. Do you need a ride somewhere? Out of town perhaps?" Rozen's questions are pointed, leaving no room to doubt what he means.

"Have I done something wrong?" That familiar anger stirs in Desmond. *This man failed me, and now that I'm here to do his job he's throwing me out of town!?*

"You see, that's what I'd like to know." Rozen takes a deep breath, then looks around the neighborhood before resting his eyes back on Desmond. "This is a nice town. For the most part it's quiet. I like quiet. So imagine my surprise when a report lands on my desk about a break-in in one of my quiet neighborhoods. Imagine, if you will, the

shock I experienced when the address of said break-in is at an address I recognize. The very house I consoled the Willows in as they worried themselves sick about the disappearance of their boy."

"Is that the part where the "mostly" comes into your description of how quiet this town is?" Desmond can't help but interrupt. The weight of the box is forgotten in his surge of anger at this man. Cardboard bites into his skin as he clenches handles.

A rye, half smile pulls at Rozen's face. Desmond can see the man sizing him up; sees the gears of his mind trying to figure him out.

"Now imagine my utter, *utter*, dismay," Rozen continues his spiel as if he wasn't interrupted. "When I get a call from Mrs. Fisher about a strange man claiming to be a private detective in her son's room; who just so happens to match the description of the man that broke into the Willows's former residence." Rozen's eyes narrow, studying Desmond for some type of reaction. "Do you believe in coincidences?"

"Again, have I don-"

"Yeah, me neither. Makes things seem too easy." Rozen takes a step forward so the only thing separating him from Desmond is the box in Desmond's hands. "Now before we jump to the subject of culpability; why don't you introduce yourself like a man?"

This close Desmond can see the rage seething behind Rozen's eyes. Desmond's own anger falters under the dark glint. Just like that Desmond has the measure of the man. Rozen's done his best to keep his town safe, and then someone he was supposed to protect, a child, disappears. Rozen falls back on his training, works the case. Except there's nothing to work. No witnesses step forward. He wastes time and money on

forensics that turn up too much information, none of it good, none of it conclusive. He waits with Desmond's parents for a ransom note/call/text that never comes. Desmond's lived with his disappearance for two days; Rozen's lived with it for two years. Things have gotten back to that quiet, at least on the surface, and now Desmond is making noise, waking up all those old memories.

It's no wonder this guy hates me. Great, Des, now what? He's looking for an excuse to arrest you, to rough you up, to run you out of town.

"You're right, Chief." Desmond takes a step back, puts the box on the sidewalk to the side, then extends his hand towards Rozen. "I'm..."

Shit! What's my name? Haven't thought this through have you, Des? Better think quick. You've paused. This is a long pause. This has gone on forever. He knows something's up. SHUT UP!

"I'm Sebastian Pryor."

"A pleasure." Rozen's face cracks into a smile, it's too manic. Desmond is about to pull his hand away when Rozen's meaty digits clamp down on his. Rozen pulls Desmond to him; they're nose to nose. Rozen's smile is gone. "I'm gonna need to see some ID to prove that."

"Alright." Desmond's hand instinctively reaches for his wallet.

What are you doing?! His hand freezes near his pocket. Are you insane? You can't show him your ID. It's YOUR ID. What's he going to say when you hand him over Desmond Willows's driver's license? He's going to arrest you on the spot. You'll be lucky to make it to the police station. You'll just disappear. Again!

"Is there a problem?" Rozen's warm breath bathes his face. Desmond feels sweat seep from his pores, covering his forehead.

"Yes-No!" Desmond tries to pull his aching hand out of Rozen's grip, but it doesn't budge. "Yes. This is police harassment."

"This," Rozen spins Desmond, twisting his arm up behind his back. Pain shoots up his arm into his chest; his shoulder stays in its socket, but Desmond guesses barely. "Is probable cause." Rozen pulls Desmond's wallet from his pocket and flips it open.

Goddammit! Desmond struggles to pull his arm away from Rozen, with little result beyond feeling his shoulder grind against his collar bone.

"Says here you're from New Jersey." Rozen shoves Desmond forward, letting go of his arm. Desmond stumbles forward, pulling his arm the right way around, rubbing his wrist and working his shoulder. "I hear it's a shit hole." Desmond turns around in time for his wallet to hit him in the chest. He scrambles to catch it, confused.

Opening it, he examines his driver's license. Only now it's not his face that peers back at him, not his name on the laminate. The face that stares up at him is old. The man's hair is white, the face isn't wrinkly, it's taut with age, giving the man a severe look, his features hard. The birthdate on the card puts him in his early fifties. Desmond can't stop focusing on the eyes. He knows they're his eyes. He can see himself in the eyes, but they're the wrong color. His eyes are brown, this man's eyes a stark, piercing blue.

"There a problem, Mr. Pryor? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Desmond doesn't look up from the license. He's having trouble breathing, the air is too thick. *What did he call me? Why did he call me Mr. Pryor?* His eyes slide back

and forth over the driver's license, finally coming to rest on the information. Eyes: Blue.
Hair: White. Height: 6'1". Name: Pryor, Sebastian.

That's not me! I know I said it was me, but it's not me! Why doesn't this say I'm me?!

"What's going on?" The question comes out in a rush of air, emptying Desmond. He can't remember how to fill himself back up.

"That's what I want to know, Mr. Pryor. Why don't you tell me? Who are you?"

Dizziness tickles the edge of Desmond's brain. Slowly, like trying to drink through a half blocked straw, he fills his lungs. Sweat rolls into the corners of his eyes, a few drops fall onto Sebastian Pryor's face.

"If you'd rather do this at the station, that can be arranged."

Desmond lifts his head to look at Rozen. The man is blurred around the edges. Desmond blinks away the sweat in his eyes. "What?"

"Are you playin' games with me, Pryor? 'Cause if you are, I don't like it." Rozen closes the gap between them again. Desmond can't stop himself from flinching. "This town is barely healed from the disappearance of the Willows boy, and we don't need somebody coming in here and opening wounds that ain't healed properly yet."

"Desmond." A spike of frustration drives some of his fugue away.

"What?!" Rozen's face is bright with rage.

It doesn't scare Desmond at this moment. At this moment it makes Rozen look cartoonish. "The Willows boy, his name is Desmond." He practically spits the name in Rozen's face.

"I know the boy's name. You think I don't know the boy's name? I worked that case for over a yea-"

"Say it."

"What?" Rozen looks off guard for the first time since stepping out onto the sidewalk.

"Say the boy's name." Desmond locks eyes with Rozen. He doesn't know why, but there's nothing he wants more than to hear this man say his name. Rozen doesn't look away. Desmond can see several emotions swirl behind the man's eyes. One of them, he's sure, is the urge to slam him in the face.

Rozen sets his jaw. "Desmond Willows." The two men continue to stare each other down. "Was there a point to that?"

"I just wanted to hear the name. I want to be clear why it is we're both here." Desmond finally looks away, panning his gaze around the neighborhood in imitation of Rozen. "It is a quiet town. And I don't want to disturb that," his eyes come back to rest on Rozen, "but that's already happened, Chief. I'm just here to get some answers to lay the incident to rest."

There's another flash of barely contained violence in Rozen's eyes.

The man doesn't like to be reminded of his failures. Watch yourself, Des.

"I don't suppose you got a detective's license to corroborate your claim?" Rozen's voice is more even, less veiled threat in it.

Don't let your guard down yet. It's not like you're actually a private detective.

"Sure. No problem." Desmond pulls out a card at random from his wallet. Handing it over to Rozen, he makes sure it isn't his bank card. The red plastic of his library card catches a few of the sun's rays.

Are you insane!? A surge of fresh panic drenches his brain. Desmond pushes it down and stands his ground. He's testing whatever it is that's doing this. He wants to see how far it will go to keep this, whatever 'this' might be, going. After all, the library card has his name on it too.

He watches Rozen closely as he looks over the card. Rozen takes his time. Eventually the man looks up at Desmond with a sour expression on his face.

"You know I could run you in." Desmond swallows hard at Rozen's words. "This license is three months expired." Rozen hands the card back over.

Barely keeping his fingers from shaking, Desmond takes the card and peers down at it. It's no longer the shiny red of the town's library, but a stark white. The state seal of New Jersey embossed in the corner feels mocking somehow. A moan bubbles up from Desmond's chest. Somehow he manages to stop it in his throat, shutting his eyes to blot out all the false information on the license.

He's aware of Rozen still standing there, watching him. Before he's completely ready, he opens his eyes. "Well look at that," his voice cracks, and he clears his throat. "You're right. I guess I've been busy." He brings his eyes up to meet Rozen's again. "I guess this is the part where you ask me to leave town."

Rozen's jaw clenches and unclenches, veins stand out on his neck, his eyes shift over Desmond several times. "Not today." He turns and strides to his car. Surprise keeps Desmond from saying anything. Before Rozen gets in his car, he turns back to

look at him. "The Willows deserve answers. I'm pissed I wasn't able to get any for them. If you can, then God speed to you. But I ain't letting you off the hook again. I get another call about you, and I'll throw the book at you. You hear me?"

"Fair enough." Rozen doesn't wait for Desmond's answer. He's already in the police cruiser. Desmond resists the urge to wave as the man drives off.

His hands begin to shake again as soon as the cruiser turns out of view. Without looking at it, he closes his wallet and puts it in his pocket. *Pull yourself together, Des. It's just a license.*

"It's not just a license." The words bounce off the top of the box as he bends down and picks it up. The weight of the box helps steady his hands. His statement quiets his inner thoughts.

When he turns in the direction of his motel, he sees the sun hanging low in the sky. His insides freeze. He runs for the end of the block.

Chapters VII

The door to the motel room bursts open, Desmond stumbling in out of breath and covered in sweat. He drops the box of files onto the table next to the door. The table shudders, the box slides to the other side, the take out bag containing his burger and fries falls off the top of the file box and lands on the table with a dull thud. Desmond misses all of this.

After dropping the box on the table he turns back to the motel door, still wide open. Every instinct in him screams to close it and lock it behind him. When he turns though, those instincts abruptly silence as fear roots him to the spot. The door opens out onto the night.

The cool breeze that wafts through the door burns against his skin it's so cold. The low hum of the street light sounds angry to his ears. The shadows gauntly reach out across the ground, the walls, invading.

A noise that sounds like scratching comes from far too close to his room. Desmond finds the courage to bolt forward. He slams the door, simultaneously turning on the room's overhead light. He finds the lock and turns it, then slides the chain into place. He turns, putting his back to the door, then sliding down to the floor to catch his breath.

"Christ, Desmond. Since when are you afraid of the dark?" He asks himself between gulps of air.

Since you were kidnapped. Who knows where they were holding you? Maybe it was dark.

Images of being buried alive clump into Desmond mind. Every image from movies, or television, or from books he's read.

"Stop! Stop it!" He shakes his head to clear it.

Ask a stupid question.

Desmond rests his head back on the door and tries to think of anything other than nightmare kidnapping scenarios. For some reason, the circus comes to mind, but that's not much better. He looks around the motel room trying to concentrate on his breathing and nothing else. Just him, the room, and his lungs filling and deflating.

It takes a long time for him to get his breathing under control. The relief is short lived, as fatigue and weariness rush in to replace the adrenaline and panic. His body aches. He uses the door as support to stand up. A few of his joints creak as he gets up.

Careful, you're starting to feel the age everyone thinks you are.

Desmond scowls at the thought. He takes out his wallet and opens it, staring at the foreign face on the license. "Who are you?" Desmond tries to think if he's ever seen this face before today. Nothing comes to him.

He's you, Des. Haven't you been paying attention?

Desmond runs his thumb across the name, Sebastian Pryor, that he gave to this face. "The fuck you are." He tosses the wallet away from him and it lands on the table, hitting the bag with his burger in it.

The paper crinkle reminds him he hasn't eaten all day. Reluctantly he stands next to the table, shoves the wallet away from the bag, and takes out the burger. When the smell hits him his stomach clenches, but not in hunger, in nausea. Shaking his head, he unwraps the burger anyway and takes a bite. The meat is lukewarm and the bun has

absorbed much of the grease, making it a soggy mess. With effort he swallows that first bite, then forces himself to take another.

Chewing, his eyes are drawn back to his wallet. Before he can think better of it, he grabs it again and flips it open. Sebastian Pryor stares back at him once more.

This time he calls up images of his family. Pictures of his grandfathers, both as young men and as the old men he knew. None of the features line up. "He looks nothing like me."

That's probably the point.

"They're erasing me." The thought reverberates through him. Shakes his core. Burger flavored bile creeps up his throat into his mouth. He drops the burger and rushes to the bathroom. Turning on the light, he doesn't make it to the toilet. He throws up into the sink. Chunks of burger and bun, and stomach fluid spatter against the sides. He heaves once, twice. He heaves until his stomach is empty and then heaves a few more times.

He turns the water on, letting it push the burger and bun down the drain. When the sink is mostly clean, he sticks his hand in the stream. He's still holding his wallet, so he puts it on the side of the sink. Then he splashes cold water on his face.

"You need to calm do-" His reflection stares back at him. It's him. His young face. His brown eyes. He stares back at him.

He snatches his wallet off the sink and opens it. It still reads Sebastian Pryor. It's still the old man. He holds it up so he can see the picture and his reflection. The world tilts, his mind feels fuzzy.

"I'm Desmond Willows." His reflection agrees with him. "I'm Desmond Willows!" Again his reflection agrees. "I'M DESMOND WILLOWS!"

He rushes back to the table, rips the box lid off, and finds his notebook and pen inside. Falling into the chair, he opens the notebook to the front page.

This journal belongs to Desmond Willows.

I am Desmond Willows.

He reads the sentences over and over again. Each time he repeats them he gets calmer and calmer. When he's calm enough, he adds:

Height: 5'10"

Weight: 172lbs.

Hair: Light Brown

Eyes: Brown

He reads the details over and over again. Eventually the words dance on the page, mash together into garbling.

There's got to be more to it than that. There's got to be more to me than that.

Favorite Color: Green

Favorite Sport: Hockey

School Crush: Victoria Barnes

Favorite Class: History

Best Friend: Kevin Fisher

He reads and re-reads the new list several times. Each time he lingers on Victoria's name. Her face solidifies in his mind. Her laugh, heard only second hand in the halls on the way to class while she talked to her friends, echoes softly in his head.

I was going to talk to her that night. At the senior party. I went there looking for her. Did I...Did I get a chance to talk to her?

He thinks back to that night.

Approaching the house, driveway and street filled with cars; he could hear the music thumping from a block away.

Immediately he feels dizzy.

He joins the flow of classmates entering the house. A couple people wave. He waves back. His focus on studying made acquaintances of most of his classmates.

His head starts pounding. He grips the edge of the table for support.

The house is crammed with kids. There's room to maneuver, but there's at least five kids in every room. Kevin is bopping to the music, a huge grin on his face. Already he's moving away from Desmond. Desmond doesn't mind, he knew it would happen. They'll find each other later.

The pounding intensifies. The motel room blurs.

He makes his way slowly through a couple rooms. He's not conscious he's looking for Victoria until he sees her. She's in the corner, making out with Becca Johnson.

The edges of his vision gray. There's a weight on his chest.

He's in the kitchen, his mouth suddenly dry. Someone passes him a plastic cup filled with beer. He takes it without saying anything, takes it into the living room and falls on to the couch.

His chest feels like it's going to pop.

He's on the couch...

Black spots fill most of his vision.

He's on the couch...

His throat closes.

He lets go of the memory. His throat opens, and he sucks in as much air as he can. The weight disappears, and after a minute his vision clears.

"God dammit!" He slams his fists down on the table. "God dammit." His notebook stares passively up at him. The list of things he is looks like so much gibberish.

"What do you want from me?" He asks no one in particular. "What the fuck do you want?!" He shoves the notebook; it goes sailing across the table and onto the floor. His nostrils flare as he fumes with anger. His eyes burn, tears seeping from the corners.

His wallet lies on the table where he dropped. He picks it up and stares at the license. "What do you want?" He stares at the old man for a few minutes.

You weren't really expecting an answer, were you, Des?

"It was worth a shot." He tosses the wallet back on the table, then rubs the tears off his face.

Now what?

"I need a shower." Standing, he peels his shirt off his body. Body odor wafts over him, and he fake gags. "I stink."

Just thinking about hot water pelting his body relaxes him. *I just need a few minutes where I don't think about my situation.*

Stepping into the bathroom, he stops cold. All his tension slams back into him. "God! Dammit!"

The towel rack is still empty.

Desmond spins, grabs his shirt from where he threw it on the floor and pulls it on, then shoves his feet into his shoes. He snatches the door open.

The night air hits him full on in the face, sobering him. The night fills his vision. It takes him a moment to realize he's stopped moving.

Maybe you don't need to shower? Who do you have to impress?

"Th...that's not the point." His eyes fall on the over big shadow of truck parked two doors down. For some reason it looks darker than it should. Desmond stops himself mid-step backwards, bringing his foot back in front of the door.

I don't want to go out there.

Desmond leans forward, looking out the door, and swivels his head to the left. He's in room twenty-three. There are twenty-two rooms until the building 'L's' to the right, which is where the office is. There are fluorescent lights all along the roof of the overhang all the way to the office.

Glancing over his shoulder at the safety of his room, he spots the phone on the table next to the bed. "Or I could just call them, and have them bring me a towel." Closing the door, he falls onto the bed expecting to bounce but instead only sinking into the mattress. He doesn't care at the moment. "Sometimes the simplest solution is the best."

Sometimes the simplest solution doesn't make sense.

He pushes the thought away as he picks up the phone and hits zero. He waits for a minute, then two. There's no ring. He holds down the button on the phone, then releases it. There's no signal sound. He presses the button several times, each time with more force born from desperation. No signal.

And you thought this would be simple.

He slams the phone down on the base. "I can do this." He stands straight up from the bed and takes a deep breath.

Are you sure? You could always wait until morning to shower. The thought sends waves of relief through him. His shoulders slump; he didn't even know he was tensing them.

He's halfway down to the bed when his anger boils over. "Fuck this!" He stalks to the door, rips it open, and hops over the threshold before he can think better of it.

Standing outside the night seems much closer. Goosebumps pepper his arms. He rubs them down.

Now you've done it.

He ignores the sarcasm of his own thought. "Yeah, I have." Despite the unease he's feeling a small smile crosses his face. "Let's conquer that fear."

He strides forward with purpose, but with speed as well. Desmond doesn't want his fear to rule him, but he can't stop it from quickening his step. He tells himself he's just eager to clean himself off.

His eyes never stop moving, they're almost as fast as his feet. Every shadow is seen as a threat. Every door is a marker, a countdown.

Door 10.

Almost there.

Door 9.

He can see the person behind the desk in the office. They're focused on the small TV glaring in there.

Door 8.

There's an added bounce in his step.

Door 7.

He lets out a small laugh at how panicked he was about doing this.

Door 6.

The light above him flickers and goes out. His head snaps up to look at the dead bulb. Panic laced with betrayal slices through him.

The light flickers and comes back to life, throwing light at him again. The breath he's holding speeds from him, on the tail end of it another, slightly nervous, laugh.

I really need that shower.

He starts walkin-

"Ah!" Desmond's heart leaps into his throat. Cast on the side of the office building's wall is the shadow of a dog. "Holy shit." Desmond leans against the rough cinder block of the wall next to him to settle himself. He stares at the shadow waiting for Cecil, the motel's dog, to come around the corner of the building. There's a gap between the rooms and the office, it leads to the maid closet and the stairs to the second level. That's where Cecil has to be to cast his shadow on the wall in front of him.

Desmond pushes off the wall. "You scared me, boy."

The hairs on the back of Desmond's neck stand on end. *There's something wrong.*

He pushes the thought away, marking it down to the overdeveloped fear he's acquired. "Hey, Cecil. You being a good boy and protecting the motel?" He takes a couple steps forward. Fear shivers down his spine and stops his legs from moving any farther.

The shadow! Look at the ground! The shadow isn't connected to anything!

As soon as the thought occurs to him, the shadow turns its head to look at him. Two bright, yellow orbs burn in the mass of black that is its head, they fix on Desmond. The accumulated dark that makes up the shadow's muzzle parts. Desmond watches as the shadows tear and rip to make the opening. His blood runs cold when the tears turn into white, jagged teeth.

The thing snarls.

Desmond turns, sprinting back towards his room.

The overhead lights flicker and sputter, providing only sporadic light.

Desmond stumbles and trips through the strobing light, bouncing off the cinderblock wall of the building.

He knows the shadow is chasing him, but it's not making a sound. Against his better judgment he looks back over his shoulder.

It's right behind him. It passes through a patch of darkness, becoming invisible except for the burning yellow orbs and gleaming white teeth.

The light snaps back on for a second, and the shadow snags his pants with its teeth. Desmond goes down as the lights go off. Unable to tell where the ground is, all his weight collapses onto his forearms. Pain jars up his arms.

Desmond flips onto his back, the lights coming on in time for him to see the shadow lunge for his face.

The lights go off as his fist connects with the shadow's head. It's too squishy, like hitting a plastic bag filled with liquid. Desmond's fist sinks into the shadow, covering his fingers, before it finds purchase and pushes the shadow back.

The lights come on, showing the shadow still too close to him. Desmond lashes out with his foot, connecting with the shadow's chest, and shoves it away from him.

Desmond scrambles up in the dark and sprints for his room. He knows the shadow is still behind him, but this time he doesn't look back.

He skids to a stop as the lights come back on to show him his door. He almost ran past it. He wrenches the doorknob, and jumps inside, slamming the door behind him. Frantically he re-locks the door, then braces himself against it.

The door shudders when the shadow hits it, but it doesn't give. The thing is persistent, scratching at the bottom of the door.

Desmond stands there holding the door closed, every muscle taut with the effort. The shadow doesn't give up easily, scratching at the door so long Desmond thinks he might go insane with the sound of it.

Eventually Desmond realizes the scratching has stopped. He doesn't know when the shadow left. He eases off the door, then puts his back to it, and slides down to the floor. His breath comes in shuddering gasps.

It's really quiet in here without the scratching.

He sobs to fill the silence.

Chapter VIII

Desmond sits at the motel table. His burger, half-eaten, cold, long forgotten, rests on the far edge threatening to fall. The rest of the table is covered with missing person files, at least a dozen, though some lie on top of others.

Desmond hurriedly scribbles something in his notebook, double checks the file to make sure he's got it right, then sets the file down and grabs another. He's halfway through writing something down when he realizes he's already read the file. He drops his pen and sits back in his chair.

He rubs a hand over his face. "I need to take a break. Maybe get some rest." He grabs the file off the table. "Sorry," he scans the file looking for the person's name, glances at the person's picture. "What the fuck?"

The person's face is blank. The rest of the picture looks fine, not much aging, every other detail is clear. The face is just gone.

He rubs his eyes. "I'm more tired than I thought." He goes to put the file down, but notices one of the other files on the table. He picks that one up.

The picture of this person has a blank face too. He grabs another file, another blank face. Another file, another blank face. Another, and another, and another file, all with blank faced pictures.

"What's going on?" Desmond looks at the file in his hand. The blank faced girl in the picture turns to look directly at him. "Wha'?" Without knowing what he's doing, he reaches out and touches the picture. It bulges under his finger.

"Oh hell!" He drops the file to the table, jumping to his feet.

All the files have bulging pictures. Miniature heads, hands, elbows, feet, and shoulders push against the confines of their reality to bust free. The box of files jitters, then falls to the floor, spewing more files with more faceless people trying to break free.

Desmond doesn't know he's retreating until his back hits the wall. With nowhere else to go he starts to panic.

There's a loud ripping sound as a girl's faceless head comes through a picture. Now that whatever seal was keeping her in is broken she pulls herself the rest of the way through the photo easily, emerging full sized. Others quickly follow. A faceless man kicks his way through. A faceless boy finally succeeds in shouldering his way out.

Desmond's brain floods his body with adrenaline. He reaches for the door, but it's too late. The faceless people swarm towards him. He jumps back so not to be touched by them. And just like that they've cut off his only exit. He backs up into the room.

More and more faceless people pour from the files. They fill the front half of the room, and still more appear. They begin to push forward, towards Desmond.

"What do you want?!" He doubts he'll get an answer, but a sound rises from them.

"Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..." They press forward, filling more of the room.

Desmond backs up more.

"Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..."

He makes a grab for the bathroom door. The throng surges forward, pushing him back, cutting off another escape route.

"Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..."

Desmond wedges himself into the corner of the room. Still the Faceless move closer. He grabs the lamp off the dresser and swings it in front of him. "Stay back!"

They stop just out of reach of the lamp. "Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..."

"What do you want from me?!"

"Uhhhhhhssssssssss..."

Desmond stops swinging the lamp. "What?"

"Uhhhhhhssssssssss..."

The lamp sags in his hands, no longer a weapon. "Us? Are you saying, us?"

"Us."

Desmond looks from faceless person to faceless person. "What do you want?"

"Join. Us."

The Faceless surge forward.

Desmond tries to bring the lamp back up, but it's too late.

The lamp gets torn from his hand. The Faceless savagely crash over him, a wave of human flesh. Their weight is immense, he's sure given time he'll be crushed under it. Their hands, dozens of them, hundreds of fingers, won't wait that long. They reach and grab for him. They rip his clothes. When those are gone, fingers sink into his flesh.

He tries to scream. Fingers shove their way into his mouth, pushing the scream back down. Instead of a scream they pull his teeth from his mouth in four, big, handfuls. Next comes his tongue, longer than he thought it'd be, three hands have to tug on it for it to finally tear free.

Blood gushes down his throat.

Desmond starts to drown on himself.

Desmond's head shoots up from the table. "NO!"

Breathing heavy, it takes him a minute to remember where he is. Once he's done taking in his surroundings his eyes come to rest on the dozens of files in front of him on the table.

"Fuck off!" He shoves them away, knocking his burger and file box to the floor, and jumps to his feet.

He stares at the files for a while, expects the pictures to come to life at any minute. During this time his eyes travel over every contour of their faces. The details he finds there are comforting.

He leans against the wall. "Christ. Can't I get a good night's sleep?"

It's okay, Des. Nothing to worry about. It was just a dream.

"Yeah, right. Was the shadow dog a dream too?" He looks at the back of his pants, and, sure enough, his left pant leg is shredded around the ankle. "So not a dream. Lots to worry about then."

I guess we'll add it to the list.

Desmond shoves off the wall, peels off his clothes, and, not giving a damn about the lack of towels anymore, gets in the shower. Two days of grime and sweat flow off of him. It feels good to be clean, and he stays in the shower until the water runs cold. He thought he'd feel better, but he doesn't.

Same shit, different day.

"Yeah."

He lets himself air dry for as long as he can stand it, then pats himself down with his dirty clothes. It isn't the best solution, but it's what he's got.

He emerges from his room not feeling much better than he did the day before. For a moment, right before he opens the door he half expects the sun not to have come up. That he would be stuck in an endless night, constantly chased by shadow dogs.

At least then you'd know where you stood.

"I know where I stand."

Do you?

He stands outside the door to his room half contemplating going back inside. "I want a day off."

You've already had two years.

Desmond punches his door, the thud reminding him of the shadow dog. He stares at the bottom of the door. He can see where the thing scratched at it. Of course, if you didn't know a shadow monster had spent the night trying to break through it you might just think it was normal wear and tear.

Before he knows what he's doing, he heads down the walkway to the office. Like the last time he was here, when he enters the office there's no one behind the desk. He rings the bell before he realizes that Cecil isn't there either. He waits for the dog to poke its head around the counter at the sound of the bell. After a few second, and no sign of Cecil, he rings the bell again. Still no Cecil.

He's in the middle of ringing the bell a third time, when the inner office door opens and the same woman from yesterday comes to the counter. "Alright already. I hear ya." She takes the bell and puts it under the counter. "What can I do for you?"

"I was in here yesterday..." He glances to the side of the counter, expecting Cecil to come out with his owner.

"Yesterday. Got it. What else?" The woman stares at him intently, even though Desmond can tell she's annoyed he interrupted whatever it is she's doing.

"Where's your dog?"

"We don't allow pets at this establishment."

The response is so canned and quick it takes Desmond a minute to regain himself. "I mean, where's Cecil?"

"There ain't no Cecil that works here." The woman's face pinches in annoyance. "Anything else I can help you with?"

Desmond forces a smile onto his face. "I'm sorry. What I mean to ask is, where's your dog Cecil?"

"What? I don't own a dog. I hate dogs, can't stand them. Have you seen a dog around here?" The woman's voice raises, and she leans forward, scrutinizing Desmond. "We don't allow pets." She practically spits the words at him.

That familiar acid taste crawls up Desmond's throat into his mouth. He swallows several times to keep it down. On autopilot he takes a couple steps away from the desk.

Cecil's gone. They took him, and they used him, and then they erased him.

"Hey, buddy, where you goin'? I thought you needed somethin'. Tell me the truth, you haven't seen a dog around here have ya?"

"No. No, I haven't." He turns and exits the office, not looking back.

Desmond's first stop of the day is the bank. On his walk through town, he tries to fit this new piece of information into the puzzle. He goes over the facts he's got in his notebook so far. Up until now he's been looking at the information linearly, but really it's a jumble. So he busies himself with trying to piece it all together.

Except, none of the information makes any sense. The world doesn't work this way. The new piece of information isn't any different.

"It's all coming together. I can feel it." The assertion is low, under his breath, but it makes him feel better to say it out loud.

You could be going insane. None of this is coming together. You said it yourself: the world doesn't work this way. You could just be someone who thinks they're Desmond Willows?

The thought hollows him out. If it's right then all of this is for nothing. His steps falter. His notebook almost drops from numb fingers.

Am I really Sebastian Pryor, private detective from New Jersey? Am I so obsessed with this case that I'm delusional?

His heart thumps in his chest shaking his legs. He leans against a storefront to catch his breath.

"Come on, Des. You can't think like that." With some effort, he pushes himself off the building and continues to the bank. "Let's assume the world does work this way, at least here. And if that's true that means someone is doing this to me."

Yeah? Who?

It's the question he's been asking himself since he woke up in the train tunnel. He's no closer to an answer now than he was then.

"I don't know. Yet."

Once he's got the money from his bank account again, he focuses on what he needs to do for the day. The next thing he does is find a newspaper and look for a car for sale in the classifieds. Half way through trying to decipher the abbreviations in the ads he's wishing he had a computer.

I don't think Chief Rozen would appreciate a call from the Library about you. Do you?

Desmond shakes his head over the scene, multiple scenes, he created at the library the other day. With those on his mind, he starts at the top of the classified ads. The first two numbers he calls don't pick up, instead going to voice mail. He doesn't leave a number, deciding to call back if he strikes out on the other ads. The third number is answered by an older man who invites him to stop by "whenever" to check out the car.

It takes Desmond longer than he thought it would to walk to the address the man gives him. He keeps checking the time on his phone, aware that he needs to meet Mrs. Fisher around noon. The man is surprised to see Desmond, not expecting him so soon after talking to him, but shows him the car readily enough.

The car is fifteen years old. Getting behind the wheel, Desmond can feel that it's spent too many years on the road. It has too many miles on the engine. There are too many memories crowding the seats. The old man lets him get a feel for the car, even letting him take it for a drive around the block. He seems a bit guilty when he mentions that the past few years he's lapsed on the upkeep. He's only asking three thousand for it. Desmond, feeling terrible, haggles the man down to twenty-five hundred.

His first stop after getting the car is the store. Walking through the door, he looks for the cashier girl from the day before. She's there, lazily checking someone out. She glances up, and Desmond waves. She nods to him, then turns to give the customer their total.

As Desmond walks through the store, a smile plays across his face. The cashier is really the only person he's met as Sebastian that hasn't immediately been hostile. His meeting with Kevin flashes through his mind; it was less fulfilling than he'd thought it'd be, even though he got a mountain of clues from it.

Shaking the dark thoughts from his head, he tries to focus on why he's here. He grabs a few more pairs of jeans and some shirts, a towel, and then heads to the electronics department and picks up a laptop. It's nothing fancy, but it's Internet ready which is all Desmond cares about.

Back at the registers, the girl is gone. There's an older man in her place, Desmond steps into the lane slightly disappointed. "Where's the nice young lady?" He hopes he sounds casual.

The man looks at him strangely; maybe he didn't sound as casual as he thought. "You mean Mary?"

Desmond tries to remember the girl's nametag, but can't place it. "Yeah. I saw her working when I came in."

"Sorry, fella. She went on her lunch break. You just missed her." The man gives him a wink and a sidelong grin while he finishes ringing him up. "Maybe next time." The man chuckles as he hands the bags to Desmond.

Desmond tries to get the weird encounter out of his head, walking out to his car. Clearly the man thought Desmond wanted to hit on Mary, but he's pretty sure he didn't want that. It just would have been nice to talk to someone with no ulterior motive. All the people he knows are gone. He assumes.

And they won't know you even if they aren't. He feels his face scrunch at the thought.

"Come on, Des, don't-"

The thought cuts off, his chest clenching, when he sees a sheet of paper stuck under his windshield wiper. The feeling dissipates when he sees it's just a flyer for the store. Pulling it from the wiper, he's ready to toss it to the ground when he sees the handwriting on the back, chest immediately constricting again.

If you don't stop, they'll come after you.

Desmond's head shoots up and he scans the parking lot. There are a few cars spread out across the lot. The closest ones he can see are empty. He's halfway to another row of spaces, when he stops and checks his phone.

"Dammit." It's past time he should be at the Fishers' house. Gritting his teeth, he pushes down the urge to tear through the parking lot looking for anyone that might have left the note. Instead he tosses it onto the passenger seat as he gets into the car.

When he pulls into the driveway of the Fishers', Mrs. Fisher is standing on the porch angrily puffing away at a cigarette. Desmond jumps from the car, "I'm sorry I'm late. I had to pick some stuff up."

Mrs. Fisher glares at him through a cloud of smoke. "Just take these damn boxes out of my life." She kicks the closest box to her, all the boxes from the day before are piled on the porch.

Unsure what else to say, Desmond stands there for a moment. Mrs. Fisher fills the silence by blowing smoke into his face. Without any more prompting, Desmond takes the first box and puts it in the car. The next five minutes are spent in strained silence as Desmond fills the car with boxes of lost lives.

With the last box in the car, Desmond turns back to Mrs. Fisher. "I want to thank you again for letting me take these."

"Pfft, please," she flicks the stub of her cigarette into the yard. "You're doing me a favor by taking them. And you can do me another favor by never talking to Kevin again." She turns to go back inside.

Anger thrums inside Desmond with the ease she dismisses him, dismisses all the lost people in his trunk. "I might need to contact Kevin to discuss some of the files." It's weird to feel a wave of satisfaction hit him when Mrs. Fisher stops, the door to the house half open.

She whips around. "What ain't you hearing? I don't want you talking to my boy! He's been through enough. He needs to move on." With that she turns back to the house.

"And what if it was Kevin missing?" Desmond's question stops Mrs. Fisher before she even has the door open this time. "Would you want me to leave Desmond alone if I thought he had information that could lead to Kevin?"

Somewhere in the neighborhood a dog barks. One of Mrs. Fisher's neighbors is watching TV too loud. Desmond swears he hears Mrs. Fisher sob.

"Get the fuck outta my driveway. I don't want to see you back here." With that she goes into the house, slamming the door behind her.

Desmond glares at the front door before climbing back into the car, slamming the door as he does so. It doesn't make him feel better. He revs the car and pulls away from the house.

"Who the hell does she think she is?" Desmond brakes hard at a stop sign, the boxes in the trunk thumping together. He roars through the intersection.

Why does she get to move on? Why do any of them? Why do they get to forget?

At the next stop sign he doesn't even bother to pause. He rips through the cross section of roads without looking to see if anyone else is there.

Why should I look out for anyone else when no one is looking for me?

He takes a turn too fast, and the boxes thud against the side of the trunk.

So many people not found. And I'm one of them. It's not fair!

Desmond passes another car, pulling into the opposite lane right in front of a car. The oncoming car's driver pales as Desmond speeds towards them. Sinking the gas pedal to the floor, he guns the car, surging forward around the other car. He swerves back into the correct lane, barely missing the oncoming car.

It's not fucking fair! Why does Kevin get to move on?

His meeting with Kevin yesterday comes to his mind. The haggard features of his friend that make him look so much older than nineteen. The hunched shoulders that make him so much smaller, that cocoon him slightly from the world. The eyes that have seen loss.

Desmond's foot slips from the accelerator, and the car begins to slow. "He doesn't look like he's moved on."

Why should he? What about all those other lost people?

"Kevin found them too."

Not really.

"At least he's not letting them be forgotten." The car's coasting now, losing its inertia as Desmond's anger fades. "He lived with my loss for two years. He almost destroyed his own life looking for me."

He's the only one.

"Chief Rozen doesn't look like he lets anything go either. He still carries my case around with him." The car has almost stopped, Desmond angles it towards the curb. He throws it into 'park' when the tires rub the cement.

Your parents ran away.

That familiar sting returns to his eyes, tears falling into his lap. "They're trying to outrun their memories."

Stop it.

Desmond sobs, great, body-wracking sobs. He swears he can feel the car rocking with him, his grief is so buoyant. He sobs in anger. He sobs in frustration, not able to lay blame at people's feet for not looking for him.

Two years they've lived with this. Every day waiting to hear something and never getting to. How long can someone live like that?

"They're still living like that." Sucking in wet air, he tries to get himself under control. The note from the store catches his eye, and he pulls it off the seat, placing it in front of him. It's something to focus on; somewhere to place his anger.

If you don't stop, they'll come after you.

He stares at the words, tracing the loops and slants of the letters with his eyes. *Who wrote you? Who?* He takes his pen from his pocket.

If you don't stop, they'll come after you.

WHO?

Last night's attack comes back to him in startling detail. The flashing lights, the glowering, yellow orb-eyes, the teeth pulling him to the ground. Desmond's breath quickens, his heart pounds on the inside of his chest. With a shaking hand he presses the pen back to the paper.

If you don't stop, they'll come after you.

WHO?

The Shadows!

His fear of the dark suddenly and starkly makes all the sense in the world. If who... If what took him was shadows...

He tosses the paper back into the passenger seat, and pulls the car away from the curb. He stops at the first hardware store he finds, asks for help from the first person he sees. Not caring about his budget, he buys two of the most powerful flashlights the store sells, even buying a belt attachment so he can carry one of them with him. He opens them in the car, putting them on top of the note in the passenger seat within easy reach.

Do you really think those will help?

Studying the hefty flashlights he doesn't have the answer. "We'll see."

Do you at least feel better having them?

Concentrating on his breathing, filling his lungs with stale memories from the car and a new found terror for his town, he notices his breathing is steady and even. "We'll see."

Ordering his thoughts, he makes his way to his motel room. Grabbing what little possessions he has, he doesn't tell them he's leaving, just puts the key on the room's table and drives off. He doubts they'll remember him after a few days, or that they'll care he's gone. He did pay for the week, and he's not asking for a refund. After the attack, and Cecil's disappearance, he can't stay there anymore.

Is any place really safe?

The thought starts his heart racing again. He takes deep breathes, concentrates on driving, and finding a new place to stay to calm himself. Thoughts like those are what's going to keep him from doing anything. Eyes flicking to the passenger seat, the words from the note sear into his mind's eye.

If you don't stop, they'll come after you.

They already came for me. They took two years of my life like it was nothing. His fingers ache, knuckles turning white, as his grip tightens on the steering wheel. I'm not nothing!

Lost in his thoughts, he almost drives past a Best Western proudly proclaiming, Free Wi-Fi, on its sign. Luckily, he sees it as the last second; he misses the entrance to the parking lot, but turns around and comes back to it. The check-in counter is much

cleaner than the last one, the woman behind it much nicer too. The rates are much higher though. With the money he has in his pocket, he can afford two days.

Something occurs to Desmond as he's filling out the information card for the room. "You don't have pets here do you?"

The woman behind the counter puts on a practiced smile. "We do have pet friendly rooms. There's a fifty dollar deposit associated with it. Do you need one?" She reaches out to take the unfinished card off the counter. No doubt the pet room is another card.

Desmond snatches up the card before she can take it. "No. I don't need a pet friendly room. I'm...I'm allergic to pet dander. Can I have a room as far away from the pet rooms as possible? If it's not too much trouble?"

"Not at all." The woman clacks away at the computer to find him just such a room, as he finishes filling out the info card.

Do you really think that will help?

Shut up!

After getting everything squared away at the desk, Desmond brings in the boxes of files. They take up most of the space in the room, but then they're the most substantial thing he owns now. The most important too. Looking over the pile of boxes weariness hits him. Muscles ache, fingers stiffen, eyes burn, the day crashing in on top of him.

He decides to take a shower before he does anything else. Grabbing the bag with his toiletries, he heads to the bathroom. A genuine smile comes over his face for the first time in two days when he flicks on the lights. There are towels on the rack.

Chapter IX

Setting the current file down, Desmond lets out the longest sigh of his life. It's not a sigh of frustration, or fear, or even calming, but of pure boredom. He looks at the thirty or so files he's placed in three piles: 'yes,' 'maybe,' and 'no;' then looks at the box open next to him on the floor. He can't believe how little of a dent he's put in the box, let alone the other files, in eight hours. Now he knows why in all those cop and investigation shows they do montages of information gathering, or have some other character, usually someone "tech-y," do the all the research off screen.

The first thing he did after his shower was find his file, take out his picture, a black and white of his yearbook photo that year, and tape on the inside cover of his notebook. He stared at that picture for a long time. His face. The face he sees in the mirror, the face no one sees when they look at him, staring back at him. That face looks so happy, no cares in the world.

I'm not the same kid I was...what...three days ago?

Three days and two years.

A small, humorless chuckle escapes him. "Yeah. I keep forgetting that." He'd flipped to his page of notes.

Missing two years

The words still didn't make sense to him. He couldn't place them in context.

Missing two years
730 days

This didn't help.

Missing two years WHERE?
730 days

Absently, Desmond reached out and touched the flashlight he'd put on the table within easy reach. He stared at it for a moment, before he picked it up and turned it on. He swung the beam around the room a couple times, losing it in the glare of the lamps that were already lit. He'd put it down and turned back to the notebook.

Missing two years WHERE?
730 days In the dark

Missing two years WHERE?
730 days In the ~~dark~~
SHADOWS

Desmond's breath came in shallow gasps as he read the words over and over again. They struck a chord of truth deep inside him. He swallowed several times, his mouth dry, his throat scratchy.

Getting a glass of water, he'd ignored his notebook when he came back to the table. Instead he grabbed his file and read it. Then he read it again in disbelief. It would seem that the police knew less than he did about what happened. They didn't even know if he was taken at the party or not. No one there remembers seeing anything. There were no signs of an obvious struggle, and no forensic evidence that led anywhere.

The last thing I remember is the party. Something happened there. He wrote in his notebook.

Check out Senior Party house

With no new information about his case, he'd decided to look at the other files. Each one he read he put into the, 'yes,' 'no,' or 'maybe' piles. For the cases he felt were linked to his case or weren't.

This leads to eight hours later and only being a fraction of a way through one box.

Desmond picks the file back up. Glancing at the details he puts it in the 'no' pile. By far the biggest pile on the table so far. It's hard to say what he sees in those files that makes him think they aren't connected to him.

The thought gives him pause. *I should be looking for a pattern beyond my gut reaction to what I'm reading.*

He reaches for the 'no' pile, but instead of taking a file from it he picks up the top file of the 'maybe' pile. Opening the file, Delores Mayfield's face stares up at him.

How did she get on top? Desmond hadn't looked at her file. Kevin said he was on the fence about it, and after she bit him, he didn't think too much about her. *Am I treating you the same way the cops did back then? Am I not giving you enough attention?*

"What do you have for me, Delores?" Starting to read the report, his eyes slowly drift up the paper to Delores's picture. Shaking himself, he starts reading the file over from the beginning. Still his eyes crawl back up to Delores.

Stop it! Concentrate on the file.

Desmond clears his throat, taking a drink of water. He looks for the detective's name who filed the report. Eyes scanning the page, instead of coming to rest on a name, they zoom in on Delores's smile.

"Why'd you bite me, Delores?" She doesn't answer him.

She didn't bite you. You're stressed. You're tired. You can't be sure that she bit you.

Desmond reaches out to unclip the photo from the file. Before he touches it though, his hand stops, fingers hovering over Delores's face. At first it's out of

apprehension, bite me once fool on you and all that, but then he holds his hand there more as a dare. He wants to prove to himself that he's not afraid of a picture, or that she really had bit him. He waits, and waits.

"This is stupid." He grabs the picture.

As soon as his fingers touch it, cold air blasts his face, the smell of pine trees fills his nose, hears tires crunching on gravel.

He pulls his hand away from the picture, throwing the file away from him, and jumping back from the table. The chair topples, tangling his feet. He loses his balance and ends up on the floor.

"Hs! Dammit!" He sits up, pushing the chair away from him and rubbing his leg where it ended up jabbing him. "What the fuck was that?"

Sitting on the floor, rubbing his leg, Desmond doesn't take his eyes off the table. He half expects to be dreaming again. Any minute a faceless Delores is going to fall to the floor and smother him, or strangle him, or something equally as terrible. He waits in expectation of the attack, or waking up, for several minutes before standing up. It's a cautious move, born from his recent nightmares.

Standing, he makes a slow turn, examining every corner of the room. He keeps expecting the shadows to lengthen, the walls to melt, more phantoms from the files to grab him. The table comes back into his field of vision as he finishes his turn; the flashlight rests near the computer, rests near where the file landed. He'd feel better if he had a hold of it. It's bright, and if that didn't do anything, at least it's heavy.

"This is stupid." Desmond tries to convince himself to move, but he doesn't. "I can't investigate the case if I can't touch the files." His voice falls flat, hitting the dull

walls of the room and evaporating. His eyes continue to flick around the room, resting on the pools of shadow. Despite the fact he has the curtains open and sunlight douses the room, he doesn't feel secure.

Remember the note. They'll come for you if you don't stop. You haven't stopped. Maybe you should take what life you have left and live it.

The panic is real. It fills Desmond head, makes it hard to concentrate. It forces his thoughts to places he doesn't want to go. Worse, it makes sense.

"They already came for me." His rage is real too. He uses it to burn away the panic. "They put me here. And *they* are going to regret it."

Picking up the chair, he slams it down in front of the table again, and throws himself into it. He takes a deep breath, picks up the file, and smacks his palm down on the picture of Delores Mayfield.

Cool wind whips through the car window, bathing Delores's face, and bringing with it the scent of the trees and the crunch of the road. She glances over at Ally-Mae on the on the other side of the backseat. Ally-Mae, as if sensing Delores's gaze on her, turns to look at her. The two girls can't help themselves, and they break out into more giggles. Caroline turns around from the front passenger seat, looks at them, and starts her own fit of giggles. This sets Delores off even more.

"Will, you girls, quit it? Keep acting like that, and I'm just gonna turn around. Won't be no point in goin' if you acting like children." Donna, Caroline's sister and the one driving, admonishes them again.

"Don't do us like that, Donna. You know this is Delores's first time to Bernie's. She's just giddy." Caroline shoots another glance into the back seat, setting off another round of giggling.

Delores can't deny that she's excited. Not only is it her birthday, but after months of hearing about Bernie's from her friends, whose birthdays were all before hers, she finally gets to go too. And while her Mama hadn't actually forbid her from going to the bar, she didn't exactly give her permission either. So the idea that Delores is breaking the rules is a heady feeling all by itself.

"How much farther is it?" She bounces in her seat, leaning forward to peer out the windshield.

"I told you it's a ways out. We'll be there in a few minutes." Donna glares at Delores from the corner of her eye. The next thing Delores knows, the car hits a bigger bump than normal, and she bounces off the seat, hitting her head on the ceiling. "Watch yourself. That's what you get for not sitting back." Donna smirks.

Delores reluctantly sits back in the seat. She wishes Donna weren't with them. Caroline's sister is two years older than them, and has been going out to Bernie's on a regular basis since she's been able. Now that Caroline is old enough she's been tagging along. Delores can tell Donna ain't happy about it. She's always telling Caroline how to act when they get to the bar. Delores thought it was bad enough listening to all the instructions Donna gave Caroline while she watched them get ready for their nights out, but now that she's out with them the reminders are almost constant.

"You know, we ain't children. We all adults here." Delores can't help saying something. She's almost to the point of not caring if Donna turns the car around. What's the point of going out if she ain't allowed to have fun?

"I know we adults. I'm just not sure you know it, the way you been acting."
Donna's eyes pierce Delores from the rearview mirror.

"How come Bernie's is so far out?" Ally-Mae pipes up, possibly to take the focus off Delores, for which she's glad.

Delores sees Donna roll her eye in the mirror. "'Cause we don't want the po-po in our business, now do we?"

"So there's no police out here?" Caroline chirps next to her sister.

"How many times I gotta tell you there ain't?" Donna sounds genuinely annoyed now.

"Then why you drivin' like Gramms? Put your foot down." Caroline laughs, setting off Ally-Mae, which finally gets Delores to join in once more.

The next few minutes are spent driving in silence when this bout of laughter dies down. None of them really take Donna seriously about turning the car around, not because they're not scared of her, but because that would mean she'd miss out on a night at Bernie's too, and they all know how much she likes the place. The chance was still there though that she'd turn around just to spite them in spite of the consequences. So they quiet down and wait for the ride to be over.

Dolores sits anxiously in the back seat, trying to catch a glimpse of Bernie's through the trees. Based on the stories she's heard the picture in her mind has the building at least three stories tall and covered in lights. She knows it's probably less

impressive than that, but it doesn't stop her from scanning the trees hoping for a flash of that light.

She doesn't have to wait long for her first sight of Bernie's. Only a few minutes after the car falls silent, Donna turns onto a drive that doesn't even have gravel, it's just a dirt tract. Dolores sits forward again, head popping up over the front seats. Not caring when she sees Donna glare at her again. Soon enough the trees widen and reveal Bernie's.

Even though the squat building looks unassuming it somehow also sticks out like a sore thumb. Its white paint so dirty it had turned a gray color that made it blend in more with the surrounding forest. The neon sign above the door proclaiming, Bernie's, is smaller than Dolores had imagined, but did the job of grabbing a person's attention, and was the main reason the building stuck out like a sore thumb. Getting out of the car the scent of the forest is pushed back, held at bay by the smell of alcohol and smoke.

"They serve food here too?" Dolores asks no one in particular.

"Of a sort." Donna brushes past her, striding to the door.

"It ain't real good, but it keeps you goin'." Ally-Mae grins at her as she follows quickly behind Donna.

"You alright?" Caroline has stopped with Dolores. She looks apologetic. "I know it ain't exactly like it is in the stories we told you-"

"No," Dolores stops her. "It's better." The two share a grin. Before they can break out in laughter again, Donna and Ally-Mae get open the front door, and music blares from the bar.

Dolores and Caroline's smiles turn into grins that split their faces. They race each other to the door, getting there just as Ally-Mae is about to let it shut. They scoot through the door, almost jumping over the threshold in their excitement.

Immediately Dolores feels cramped. The bar takes up most of one side of the room, there are tables and chairs that are supposed to be spaced out around the rest of the floor. Except most of tables have been moved off to the side to make room for dancing, making the room feel much smaller than it should. Of course the dozen or so people that are there also has something to do with that. Taking a quick glance around Dolores can tell there are more men here than woman, but she's glad they're the only ladies here.

While she's stuck at the door, taking the room in, Donna has made her way through people and tables to the bar. She's got her jacket off, a sleeveless shirt shows off her toned arms. She's at the bar talking with the bartender like they're old friends. Ally-Mae on the other hand has made her way to the dance floor. People there give her space and she starts dancing with abandon, like she's the only one in the world ever done it. Dolores is in awe to see this side of her friend, before Caroline grabs her hand and pulls her to the bar.

Caroline makes sure she's safely on a stool before turning down the bar. "Bernie! Hey, Bernie!" Her voice cuts clearly over the music.

Bernie, Dolores can clearly see, isn't paying her any attention. Bernie leans across the bar, letting Donna whisper something in his ear. Whatever it is she says to him, it has him smiling. Caroline is persistent.

"Bernie, git your ass down here and pour me a drink! You can disappoint my sister after that!" Several of the men in the bar laugh at her comment. Both Bernie and Donna glare at her. Bernie whispers something back to Donna, then makes his way down the bar.

"That mouth a yours is gonna get you trouble one day." Bernie gives her a stern look.

"That's what Gramms keeps saying."

"She a wise woman." Bernie looks like a man you wouldn't want to make mad. Caroline laughs his comment off. "My friend and I are going to need drinks."

"You starting early again tonight." He doesn't make a move to get her a drink.

"Yeah so? You my bartender or my mother?" Caroline puts both hands on the bar and leans in towards him.

Bernie doesn't back down. "I ain't never seen your friend before." Finally he turns to look at Dolores.

"Hi, I'm new here." Dolores's voice seems too quiet under the music.

"Obviously. You got ID?" Bernie holds out his hand.

"Oh, right. Sorry." Dolores reaches into her purse and pulls out her ID. She hands it over with a smile. "It's my birthday."

Bernie takes the card from her and examines it. "So it is. Happy Eighteenth." He hands the card back. "I gotta check. To cover my ass."

"Of course, it ain't no thing." Dolores puts the card back in her purse.

"What can I get you?"

"Vodka on the rocks for me." Caroline butts in. "And a beer."

"You're starting off pretty heavy." Bernie moves around the bar getting Caroline's drinks.

"Shit, the way you water the drinks down in this place I'll be lucky to get a buzz at all." Caroline grabs the vodka from him before he can sit it on the bar. He peels back the cap of a bottle of beer and sets it on the bar without a glass.

He looks at Dolores with a slightly softer look. "And for the birthday girl?"

"Uh?" The question throws Dolores off guard. She knew she'd want to drink tonight, but hadn't given much thought to what. Now she wishes she had. "I'm not sure. A beer?"

"Na-uh, Doe." Caroline puts her hand out to stop Bernie. "I'm not letting you get a beer for your first drink." She looks behind the bar, taking in all the bottles. "She'll have a rum and Coke. You'll like that, Doe. It's sweet. You just got to remember to sip it." With that Caroline throws back the rest of her vodka and grabs the beer.

Bernie looks at Dolores questioningly, waiting for her to agree or disagree with Caroline's order.

She nods. "A rum and Coke sounds nice. I'll take that."

Bernie nods and starts making the drink for her.

"That's my girl." Caroline tilts the beer bottle in her direction, then walks down the bar to sit next to her sister and watch the people dance.

Bernie puts her drink in front of her. "The first ones on the house." He smiles, his whole face softening with the gesture. His job done for the moment, he rejoins Donna a few stools away, picking up their conversation.

Dolores watches the people dance for a minute or two. Every once and a while glancing at Caroline. She was talking to her sister about something. Maybe about how the rest of them were going to get home at the end of the night considering how Donna's looking at Bernie. The whole time she holds the drink in her hand, trying to get used to the idea of drinking it. Finally she raises it to her lips, making sure to sip it like Caroline said.

The sweetness of the soda hits her first, and she instinctively gulps more down. The undercurrent of alcohol hits her next, numbing her tongue and sending a burning tickle down her throat. She winces despite herself. She didn't want to look like some know-nothing girl the first time she drank and she's already failed at that.

"Your first drink?" The male voice comes from off to her side, scaring her. She jumps spilling some of the drink. "Oh, sorry about that. I didn't mean to startle you."

Dolores sets the drink down before she spills anymore of it. "No, it's okay. You didn't...I mean, you did, but I shouldn't be so touchy." Dolores turns to look at the man that made her spill her drink.

He's close to her, given the mass of tables, he has to be. His eyes are deep, focused on her, his smile looks practiced, like he's tired, but not enough to keep him from chatting up the new girl. He looks a few years older than her.

"Yeah, this is my first drink. It's my birthday." A warm feeling fills her stomach and spreads quickly through her body.

The man's smile deepens. "Well then, happy birthday. I'd be honored if you'd let me have a birthday dance." He leans in, reaching past her to put his drink on the bar.

He's so close, his body heat adds to the warmth that's already spread through her. Then he's standing straight again, holding out his hand to her.

"I'd love to, but..." She pulls her eyes off of him to look around the bar. "Where's the jukebox? I'm not a fan of this song." She can't seem to find the machine.

The man chuckles. "Jukebox, hell, you got this place confused for one of those high end joints." He points to the end of the bar. Dolores follows his finger, seeing a record player set up there. "Bernie's ain't usually the type of place you come to for music. Most people are just here to get drunk after work. But on Fridays Bernie sets up the record player, and people bring in their favorite albums to play."

"That's nice of him." Absently, Dolores takes another sip of her drink. She notices the glass is half empty. She doesn't think she's had that much. Has she?

"About that dance." The man holds out his hand again.

Dolores smiles. "I make it a policy not to dance with strangers."

The man's eyes glint, alleviating some of the tiredness. "I'm Theo."

"Nice to meet you, Theo." She takes the Theo's hand, and he pulls her out into the open space on the floor.

From that point on the evening is a blur. Dolores dances for hours. First with Theo, sometimes by herself, sometimes Ally-Mae bops over for a song or two, sometimes Caroline, mostly the other men come up, introduce themselves and dance with her for a few songs. They try to pull her close during the slow songs, but Dolores declines, taking a few minutes to catch her breath and have another drink at the bar.

She's not sure when she notices the man, almost a boy really, with the guitar in the corner. All she knows is that once she does, she can't take her eyes off of him. A

couple guys try to dance with her, to talk to her, but when they notice where her eyes keep drifting they begrudgingly slide, jitter, or jive away.

"Who's that?" Dolores asks Caroline when Dolores takes a song off to go to the bar for a rest.

"Who?" Caroline sways a bit when she turns to look at the crowd. Her eyes look glassy to Dolores, but she doesn't say anything. Her friend has been coming here longer than her, she assumes Caroline knows her limit.

"The man in the corner."

"Oh him?" Caroline brings her hands up, mimicking playing the guitar.

"Stop that!" Dolores pulls her friend's hands down, then hunches over her drink, back to the room, hoping no one saw them.

"Tha's Clovis. He comes in an' plays sometimes." Caroline lifts her empty cup to her mouth and takes a drink, not noticing there's no liquor in it until the ice cubes hit her teeth. She puts the glass down and motions to Bernie, who seems to be ignoring her.

"Why you want to know?"

"What? No reason. I just wonderin'." Dolores takes a gulp of her own drink, by now she's gotten used to the alcohol, so it doesn't sting going down anymore.

"Wha' you mean, you jus' wonder-Oooo, got a birthday itch, do she?" Caroline leans over to look Dolores right in the face.

"No I don't. What you talkin' about?" Dolores tries to take another drink, but the glass shakes a bit when she picks it up so she sets it down quickly. Instead, she tries to look anywhere but at Caroline.

"Ooo, you do got the itch, don'tcha?" Caroline bumps her shoulder into Dolores and giggles. "Well, you sure can pick 'em." She looks down the bar motioning for Bernie again.

"What do you mean?" Dolores's insides fall bit at the tone in Caroline's voice.

"Eve'ybody got a thing for a man who can play guitar. And Clovis is definitely a man who can play guitar. Bernie! My glass is empty!" Caroline holds up her glass, tapping it with her finger to illustrate her point. A couple ice cubes fall out onto the bar top.

Bernie glares at her and holds up a finger, indicating she should wait a minute. He's at the end of the bar, near the record player. When the current song ends, he lifts the needle and turns to the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have a treat tonight. I'd like to bring your attention to, Clovis Brown." Bernie points to the corner, and Clovis nods his head at the bar.

Clovis gets to his feet slowly with his guitar, picks up his chair and moves it out to the front of the room where people have been dancing, and sits down. He strums down the strings of the guitar, letting each note sail through the room. He hasn't looked up at anybody since he nodded.

Still without looking up, he starts playing a song. It's slow at first, but picks up a bit as he plays. "This is a song I used to hear on the radio. And I think we can all relate to the sentiment." He strums a few more chords before he begins to sing. "Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz? My friends all drive porches, I must make amends..."

Dolores's heart skips a beat when Clovis sings. His voice is deep and smooth, and warms her in places the alcohol hasn't touched. She, like everyone else in the bar, listens captivated and not moving during that first song. When the crowd bursts into applause at the end, Dolores jumps a little. To cover her embarrassment, she downs the rest of her drink.

Clovis, on the other hand, nodding along to the music, never looks up. He continues to strum for a minute before changing chords and heading right into the next song. Now people begin to dance and move to what he's playing. A few more men come up and ask Dolores to dance, but she politely refuses, barely taking her eyes off Clovis while doing so.

It's on her third drink since Clovis started playing, that she decides she's going to go talk to him. She makes up her mind to do it after the next song. Of course, Clovis doesn't stop playing between songs, seamlessly going from one to another. Dolores orders another drink and waits for an opportunity.

Dolores loses track of time, of how many drinks she has waiting to talk to Clovis, on how many, and what, songs Clovis plays. All she knows is that she feels like she's floating. At one point she wonders if this is what being drunk is.

Then Clovis is standing up from his chair, guitar, silent, in hand. "I think that's all for me tonight, folks. Thanks for having me." He takes the chair back to the corner he took it from, and puts his guitar back in its case.

This is her shot, Dolores thinks.

"Yoo betta git goin' 'fore summen else grabs 'im." Caroline grins at her.

"Why am I friends with such a lush?" Dolores shoots back at her.

"Oh, yer luc-key I'm drunk, or elses I migh' take offense at tha'." Caroline pushes her off the stool and onto her feet. "Go, git!"

Dolores smiles despite herself. Caroline may be drunk, but she's still a friend. She pushes thoughts of Caroline and her boozing from her head. Standing, she locks eyes on Clovis, blocking everything else out. She makes a b-line for him through the crowd.

Now that she's standing and moving, she can't ignore the pressure in her bladder. All the rum and Cokes she drank waiting for this moment, are now making demands of her. Unreasonable demands in her mind. She tries not to think about it, but right then Bernie turns the record player back on and the people around her jostle her. Clenching her muscles, she pulls her eyes from Clovis to the bathrooms on the other side of the bar.

She's about to make her decision, when someone else bumps into her, and it feels like a little bit of pee comes out. Summoning her will, she clenches harder and makes her way to the ladies' room. She'll be quick. Clovis won't have gone by the time she gets back. He sang for an awful long time, he'll need to drink something before he goes.

Then she's in a stall and thoughts of Clovis dissolve as she unclenches her muscle and gives her body the release it demands. She does her business as quickly as she can, barely relishing the feeling of being empty after being so full, rushing from the bathroom. She scans the room, but even as late as it is the bar still has a mass of bodies.

Dolores pushes her way to the bar, looking for Clovis as she does. She doesn't see him, but ends up near Donna. Regretting doing it before she even does, she reaches out and taps the girl on the shoulder to get her attention.

Donna turns to her, the smile on her face seeming out of place. "Yeah, Doe?"

"Have you seen Clovis?" There's an urgency in her voice she wishes wasn't there.

"So Caroline is right? You got the hots for the guitar player?" Despite knowing Donna, Dolores can't detect any maliciousness in her question.

"Where is he?"

"Sorry. You just missed him." She hitches her thumb over her shoulder towards the door. "But he just left. Sometimes he has a smoke out there before he leaves. You might still catch him."

"Thanks." Dolores scoots around Donna and heads for the door.

Outside, the cold air envelopes her, for the first time she realizes how hot it is inside the bar. A shiver runs through her, sending goosebumps up and down her arms. She imagines what Clovis might have in mind for warming her up again, and a smile creeps across her face. She looks around the front of the building, smelling cigarette smoke, but not seeing anyone.

Going to take a step off the stairs, to look among the cars, her better judgment gives her pause. Should she really be chasing after a man she doesn't know into a dark parking lot in the middle of nowhere? She has to admit, her good sense has a point, but then she realizes her good sense sounds like her mother and she practically leaps off the steps.

Glancing among the cars, she can't see anyone. There's a brief cut of fear that Clovis might already be gone. Dolores's breath catches in her chest at the thought. Before she accepts it as truth, she heads for the corner of the building, thinking Clovis might have ducked around the side to avoid company. Instead of this new thought being a hint for Dolores to stop and go back inside, it spurs her on, intriguing her.

Why would someone like that want to be alone?

At the corner of the building her giddiness rises, she has to stop herself from giggling, as she peeks around the corner. There's no one there. Dolores brings the rest of herself around the corner and slumps against the side of the building. She's missed her chance.

Making up her mind to go back inside, order another drink, and dance her ass off; she pushes off the wall. In the distance, just out of the light shed by Bernie's, she sees a shadowy figure carrying a guitar case walk into the woods. Her heart jumps into her throat. She hasn't missed her chance yet.

Without waiting another second she takes off for the woods. She starts off at a run, but after tripping several times she slows down to a jog, and on entering the forest slows down to a quick walk. By the dim light of Bernie's and the stars, she looks for Clovis, but can't see him. Glancing over her shoulder at Bernie's, she decides she can go a little farther into the woods, as long as she can see Bernie's she's sure she won't get lost.

So she goes farther into the woods. "Cloooo-viiis. Cloooo-viiis Broooown. Are you out here?" This time Dolores doesn't stop herself from giggling at the way Clovis's name sounds when she sing-songs it. "You should wait up for me. I'm about to make your night." Dolores takes several more dancing steps through the trees. "Clovis, you stop playin' and come out here."

Dolores waits a minute, listening for Clovis's voice, looking for any movement among the trees that might be him. All she can see though is more trees, all she can hear is muffled music from Bernie's and the wind through the leaves. Disappointment and

anger mix inside her, it must be the alcohol because the next thing she knows hot tears are running down her face.

"Fine then! You leave a young woman alone in the woods, and she's gonna find her own way!" Dolores turns to head back to Bernie's, but stops before she's even taken a step.

Carried on the wind, soft at first but gaining strength as she listens, is the sound of a guitar. At first she can't place the melody, but it sounds beautiful. Dolores wipes the tears from her face, making sure to get herself under control, before she speaks.

"Oh, you think you funny, Clovis Brown? You think you can play with a woman's emotions? It ain't gonna work on me." Despite her tough words, after crossing her arms in defiance she doesn't move from her spot. She's too intrigued to see what he'll do next.

The guitar melody changes, it somehow goes up and down at the same time. Involuntarily Dolores feels herself smile. She's heard this song before. She can't remember where, but she knows it's a love song. The forest moves around her, it takes her a minute to realize she's started walking again.

She follows the music, a lightness in her step. The forest spins, and she realizes she's dancing through the trees. Dolores laughs with how airy she feels. The music mixes with her laugh, making it sound like a duet, like her laugh is supposed to be with the song.

"Clovis, that's beautiful."

The song rises, making its way to the end. Dolores prances along, waiting, reaching, for the ending, for finding Clovis among the trees. Just when she thinks he's

behind the next tree, she twirls around it, and the music slows. He's not there. The music, Clovis, is just out of reach farther into the woods.

Giggling, Dolores runs again, not caring about tripping. Once again the music rises. This time Dolores is sure she has him, only to come around another tree and see empty ground.

She looks out into the trees, smile only shrinking slightly. "Clovis? Clovis, stop runnin' from me. If you stop runnin', I promise to make it worth your while."

As suddenly as it started the music stops. The wind blowing through the trees doesn't bring the soft melody of a guitar, but a cold emptiness. Dolores is surprised to find she's shivering, her fingers so cold they ache.

"Clovis?" She rubs her hands together, then up and down her arms, trying to get warm. "Clovis, I'm cold." She waits there shivering for longer than she should waiting for an answer. "Fine, I'm going back to Bernie's, where it's warm, with my friends!"

Turning around, she immediately stops again. All she can see are trees. The dull glow of Bernie's has been swallowed by bark and distance.

"Goddammit!" She stamps her foot as much out of anger as to try to get warm. "Alright, Clovis. You've had your fun. Now git your ass out here and take me back to Bernie's." She turns back around to glare at the forest, so Clovis can get the full force of her anger...

A whimper escapes Dolores's lips. The forest is gone. She no longer sees the trees, hear the rustle of the leaves. Looking up, there are no branches through which she can see the sky. There is no sky, no stars. She takes a step back.

She can find her own way back to Bernie's. Eventually she'll see the light, hear the muffled music. She stops.

The cut of fear she felt earlier is nothing compared to what she feels when she sees the forest is gone behind her as well. This time the fear stabs her in the chest taking her breath away. Her shivering turns into shaking as adrenaline dumps into her system.

"Cl-Clovis?" She doesn't expect him to answer, too late realizing he's not here.

Dolores takes a few stumbling steps forward. Stepping quickly and cautiously she expects to trip over rocks, or run into trees, but there's nothing around her. After almost falling over herself for the fifth time, she stops to get her bearings. But there's nothing in the black expanse around her. Waving her hand in front of her, she starts walking again.

Minutes later she stops again, not sure where she is, not sure if she's moving, or even going in a straight line. Her breathing is too fast.

"Caroline! Caroline, help!"

There's no weight to her voice. It tumbles from her mouth and is swallowed whole by the darkness.

"Somebody, help me!"

Her chest hurts. Her heart beating to get out. She gulps down air.

The wind is back. The hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. The wind sounds like old, ragged breath. It sounds like it's getting closer.

Dolores freezes in her spot, even holding her breath. If that is someone coming towards her, are they here to help? What if they're not? What can she do? Where could she go?

The ragged breathing is close enough to pelt her back. It brings with it the scent of decaying meat.

Dolores screams, breaking into a run.

A few seconds ago she didn't think she had the energy to run, the breath to scream. Now she careens through the darkness. She can't orientate herself. She can't tell if she's running towards or away from anything.

Her head swims.

She veers to the left. She catches herself before she topples over, overcorrects, and veers to the right.

Her scream cuts off as she stumbles. Her foot sinks into the ground. She looks down, but can't see her foot, can't see what's got her.

The ragged breath is still there.

She pulls as hard as she can on her foot. The dark holds tight to her. When she stops pulling she's stuck up to her mid-calf.

She panics, lunges backward. Her leg doesn't come free, instead the darkness pulls even harder. Wheeling her arms, she tries to get her balance again. It's too late. She tips forward. Instinctively, she throws out her arms to stop her from hitting her face on the ground. When she hits the ground, her arms sink in up to the elbows.

Her panic doubles as she thrashes uselessly trying to get her hands and legs free. Each time she pulls a limb it gets sucked deeper into the darkness. Feeling the dark push against her chest, then give as her body begins to sink, she tries to think what to do. She tilts her head as far back as she can, forcing herself to calm down, to give her more time to think.

Not struggling lets her hear the ragged breathing again. It's close, standing over her. Hearing it so close almost sends her into another fit of panic, but she grinds her teeth to keep calm.

Feeling herself slowly sink into the dark, trying to figure out what she can do to stop, all she can really do is listen to the breathing. It circles her. First it's on her left, then her right, then in front of her, then on her left again. It's watching her. It's watching her sink, doing nothing to help her.

"Why are you doing this?" Her voice comes out a whine. Any other day she would hate herself for that, for sounding weak, but not now. Her face is also wet, covered in tears. These are real tears, not the love-sick girl tears from earlier when she thought Clovis had left her, but honest to God human in despair tears. She doesn't care about the tears either. She knows she's going to die. She knows there's nothing she can do to stop it. "What do you want? I'll do anything."

She listens harder, hoping to get a response from the breathing to her offer. The breathing gets louder, comes faster. Dolores thinks whoever is in the dark is excited about her offer.

That's not the reason whoever is in the darkness is excited.

The bottom of her chin comes to rest on the ground. She takes a deep breath and holds it in anticipation. A moment later she lets it out. She isn't moving. She has a second to believe she's reached the bottom of whatever it is she's caught in, that she won't sink anymore.

Then the ground gives a little and starts sliding up around her jaw.

The ragged breathing comes so fast it sounds like laughing.

*Dolores opens her mouth to scream. The dark rushes in, choking her.
But it's my birthday.*

Desmond sucks in a heaving breath as his motel room materializes around him again. He pulls his hand away from Dolores's picture, tossing the file across the table. He's drenched in sweat. His head pounds, the light stabs at his eyes.

"What the fuck?" He still hasn't caught his breath. He coughs and sputters. "What the goddamned fuck?!" He jumps up from the chair, pacing as much as the cramped space will let him. "Am I going insane?"

The question has no straight answer as far as he can see. Desmond wipes the sweat away from his head. His whole body is slick with moisture, it does no good. He stalks to the bathroom, turning on the shower and peeling off his shirt.

He sees himself in the mirror. His eyes are sunken, deep circles around them, they're bloodshot. "Are you insane?" He asks his reflection, or his reflection asks him. It's hard to tell. "Would you know if you were insane?" His reflection half smiles half shrugs at him. "There're two scenarios here." Desmond turns and leans on the sink, looking his reflection directly in the eyes.

"The first scenario is, you're bat shit, fucking crazy. You're some guy, Sebastian Pryor, who's come unhinged and thinks he's some missing kid no one knows what happened to and no one can find. And all that just happened is part of your delusion, you're crazy coming up with some crazy explanation for what happened to all those missing people."

Desmond's body slumps against the sink. The weight of the scenario settles about him. It would mean being stuck in an institution for the rest of his life, Sebastian's life, his life. He's pretty sure they don't let people with this level of crazy stay out in the public where they might hurt someone.

He studies his reflection. His reflection. Desmond Willows staring back at him.

I am Desmond Willows.

His reflection stands a little straighter. "What's scenario two, Des? Go on. Say it."

He takes a deep breath. "Scenario two is, you're not crazy. All this is very, very terrifyingly real. You're caught up in some bad, more than likely supernatural, shit, and it's been using your hometown as a hunting ground for decades."

Desmond runs from the bathroom. He finds his pen and his notebook on the table and starts writing. He writes down every detail he can remember from Dolores's last hours before she was taken, and then he writes about how she was taken. His hand shakes while he writes. He has to write several things twice, crossing out the illegible script. When he's done, two pages of the notebook are full.

Look up Bernie's Bar's address ← location important(?)

Who is Clovis Brown?

Is he part of this, or just image used as bait?

Would Dolores's family/friends still be in town?

Desmond stares at the information, reading it, and re-reading it. He wants to make sure he hasn't forgotten anything. The fourth time through the words lose their meaning. He forces himself to look away, rubs his eyes to clear them.

At least I have information about someone's disappearance.

The thought smacks his brain like a sledge hammer. He nearly tears the cover off the notebook flipping to it. He stares at his face from the picture from his police file.

Taking a labored breath, he reaches out and smashes his hand down on his face. He winces in anticipation for the light headedness to return, for the world to jump back two years as he inhabits his own memories.

After a minute or two of nothing happening he opens his eyes. "Dammit!" Without thinking, he flings the notebook across the room.

You didn't actually think it was going to be that easy, did you?

"I can fucking hope, can't I?" Desmond rubs his head, trying to push the pain out of it.

Maybe it was a one time thing?

Desmond throws his hand away from his face, peering at Dolores's file across the table. He reaches for it, covering the picture with his hand. Nothing happens.

So it was a one time thing.

Desmond grabs the first file in the 'yes' pile. Opening it, Chester Hollins's freckled face stares up at him. Desmond pushes down on the picture so hard the file bends and crinkles. The room's walls tremble, the furniture shimmers. The scent of blacktop fills his nose, he can feel the summer sun on his face, hear birds chirping.

He rips his hand away before he falls further into the memory. A spike of pain shoots through his head, the throbbing intensifies.

So not a one time thing.

He puts Chester on top of Dolores, making a new 'yes' pile. He grabs the next file from the original pile and opens it. Over the next ten minutes he goes back through the

files he's already read. He touches the pictures, and if nothing happens he puts that file in the corner of the room, just until he's emptied out a box, then he'll start re-filing the 'no's'.

When he goes through the files on the table, he starts reaching into the open box.

He's through a quarter of it, when he pulls out a file with a familiar face in it.

Chapter X

In a type of mild shock, Desmond sets the file down on the table, leaving it open. Then he goes back into the bathroom and finally gets into the shower. By now all the hot water is gone, but that's okay with him. The cold water does a little to bring him out of his state of mind and to alleviate the throbbing in his head.

When he's done with the shower, he dresses, grabs his notebook and the file, and heads down to his car. He concentrates very hard on his driving, squashing the urge to speed through town again. He got away with it once, somehow, but he's not betting on his luck to hold again.

His first stop is the bank. It's a new day, and he could use some more money. Then he heads through the drive-thru of the first place he comes to. It's also been a day since he ate anything. Thinking about what to order, he finds that he's not hungry, but gets food none-the-less. He figures eating will give him something to do.

Finally, he drives to the store where he's been doing all his shopping. He very deliberately parks in the middle of cluster of cars. He wants to make sure he's not sticking out, but also make sure he can see the entrance to the store. Then he turns off the car and waits.

He absently munches on the tacos throughout the day. The file he brought gets read several times, but he's careful to avoid touching the picture. Every hour or so he drives around the parking lot, as much for something to do as to look like he isn't just sitting around in the same spot all day.

Desmond waits and watches for four and a half hours before Mary comes out of the store. The first thing she does is look at the sky. It's a habit Desmond knows well,

one he's picked up since walking out of the train tunnel. She's seeing where the sun is, gauging how much daylight is left.

Seeing her do it gives Desmond the urge to look too. He tries to stop himself, to prove some sort of point, but in the end he looks to the sky. It's late afternoon, there's maybe a couple hours of daylight left. His insides clench.

There isn't enough time for this.

Mary's on the way to her car, walking quickly through the parking lot.

You can do this tomorrow, in the morning.

"What if she works in the morning? What if I miss her at her house?"

Mary gets in her car.

She's bound to have a day off. You can talk to her then. You think confronting her will be short? It'll be dark by the time you get the answers you want. Don't do this. This isn't some video game where you get extra lives.

Mary pulls out of the parking space.

"No, it isn't." Desmond turns on the car and follows Mary out of the parking lot.

He keeps his distance as best he can. This is the first time he's "tailed" someone. It's more nerve wracking than they make it look on TV. Every time he thinks she might have spotted him, he slows down. Then she makes a turn or goes through an intersection, and he's afraid he may lose her, so he speeds up again.

At one point he almost hits a guy that pulls out onto the road, when he hits the gas to speed up again. They don't actually make contact, but the man hollers out the window at Desmond anyway. Desmond doesn't listen. He's too busy watching Mary's car take a right turn.

When the man's done venting his rage and finally drives away, Desmond speeds to the road Mary turned down. His heart drops into his stomach when he sees it empty.

It's okay. See the houses? She probably lives on this street.

Cautiously, on the lookout for Mary's car, Desmond creeps up the road. In the middle of the street he sees Mary halfway up the walk of a house. He slams on the brakes, which only serves to get her attention. Caught, Desmond quickly angles the car and parks in front of the house.

When Mary sees it's him, she turns and hurries towards the door. Desmond jumps from the car, file and notebook in hand, and rushes after her. "Miss, can I have a word?"

"No." She drops her keys on the steps, she snatches them up, as she searches for her house key Desmond can see her hands shaking.

"Mary, I have some questions for you." Desmond feels for her, he really does, but she may hold answers to the questions he has.

"Go away, or I'll call the cops." She's finally found her house key. She shoves it into the lock like she's stabbing someone.

"I've already talked to Chief Rozen. He's a very dedicated man. We have an understanding."

His statement freezes her for a moment. Then she flings open her door and sprints inside. "I have nothing to say to you."

Desperation sizzles through Desmond's body. "Suzanne, please."

The door stops half way closed. Suzanne's face peers out at him. "Where did you find that name?" Desmond holds up the police file. "Of course. I guess you can come

in." The door swings open. Suzanne leaves the door open, walking farther into the house.

Desmond stands on her front walk stunned. He thought getting her to talk to him would be harder than that. Slower than he really wants to, he makes his way up to the house. Before stepping through the door, he leans in, peering at both sides of the entrance.

"What are you doing?" Suzanne asks from the kitchen doorway.

Desmond feels his face flush. "Looking for traps?"

Suzanne laughs, then disappears into the kitchen. Desmond hears her getting something down from the cupboards. He feels stupid now.

Good job, Des. Make yourself look stupid in front of her.

Shaking his head, he walks into the house and shuts the door. Inside, he refocuses on his surroundings.

It's bright in here.

There's a set of lights next to the door, they hurt Desmond's eyes a bit to look at them. Desmond takes a few more steps into the house, now he's by the stairs. He follows them up to the second floor, sees several open doors with light coming out of them.

Not sunlight, it's on the other side of the house now.

Desmond turns to his left, looking into the living room. There's a fan/light combo in the center of the ceiling, the light is on there too, and there are several lamps in the room, mainly at the corners, which are all on too. He has to admit, while the light stings his eyes a bit he does feel safer in the middle of all of it.

Desmond makes his way to the kitchen, where Suzanne is sitting at the table, two glasses and a bottle of Jack Daniels Blue label are on the table. "That seems a bit hard for a sixteen year old."

"Fuck off." Suzanne downs the alcohol in her glass and pours another one. "If you have my file you know how old I am."

Desmond makes his way around the table to sit across from her. "You don't look a day over sixteen. Do you want to see it?" He holds the file out towards her.

"I've seen it." She takes another drink of Jack.

"Really?" Desmond is surprised for some reason. "I guess that makes sense. You've been around for a while."

"Yeah." Suzanne stares at her drink, but Desmond can tell she's not seeing it. She's somewhere else. "Lucky me." She stares for another moment before picking up the bottle of whiskey and shoving it into Desmond's face. "You want a drink?" Without waiting for an answer, she pours some into the cup in front of him.

"Thanks." Desmond pushes the cup towards the middle of the table.

"Not a big drinker, are you, Desmond? You'll learn." To prove her point, she downs her drink again and refills the glass.

"You know me?" Immediately Desmond's hackles are up, ready for an attack.

"Of course I know you. When you reacted to me that first time you saw me I knew you were like me. It didn't take long to find your face. This Internet is an amazing thing." One side of her mouth jerks into a quick smile.

"Yeah. Of course." Desmond feels foolish. If he can see her, then she can see him. "You always keep this many lights on?" He tries to cover his embarrassment.

"This many lights on, all the time. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week."
The words sound like they're supposed to be funny, but her voice is monotone.

"How do you do that? Doesn't that get expensive?" *Why are you asking her these inane questions? You're on a mission.*

Suzanne points to a door off to the side in the kitchen. "Take a look." Desmond gets up and opens the door. He guesses the closet space is supposed to be a pantry, but Suzanne has it filled with light bulbs, from floor to ceiling. "There are advantages to working at a supermarket." Desmond comes back to the table and sits down. "The light keeps...it keeps things away. Mainly dark thoughts."

Desmond looks at Suzanne's face, so young yet so old at the same time. "Why do you still look sixteen?"

Suzanne laughs again, it's short and where there should be joy in it there's sarcasm. "I don't. I look like a grandmother."

Good, Des. Keep asking the wrong questions, making yourself look stupid. She'll never help you.

"What I mean to say is, why are you still sixteen?"

"Because that's when they took me." Suzanne finishes her drink, stares at the cup, reaches for the bottle, stops, hand falling to the table. She stands up, looking everywhere but at Desmond. "You hungry? I'm hungry. I'm going to make some Macaroni and cheese." She goes to a cupboard, when she opens it Desmond can see the whole thing is filled with mac and cheese boxes.

"I've got some tacos in the car. Who's *they*?"

"You should really keep your habits up. Calories are good for thinking and energy. Especially if you're investigating things." She turns and looks at him pointedly. "And sleep, you should try to get a good night's sleep no matter what." She turns back to the counter pouring the macaroni into a pot. Desmond watches her walk over to the stove, her movements mechanical.

"Suzanne? Who's *they*?"

"*They* are the ones who took me. *They* are the ones that took you." She lights the stove, and puts the pot on top, then she grabs a wooden spoon from a drawer and starts stirring. Desmond gets the distinct feeling she's doing all of this so she doesn't have to look at him.

"You're not being very helpful." His embarrassment is gone. Now there's an edge of anger in his voice.

"I offered you a drink. I offered you food." She continues to stir the pot.

"That's not what I mean. Who are *they*? What do *they* want? Why are *they* doing this? Suzanne, answer my questions!"

"I can't!" She slams the wooden spoon down on the stovetop, snapping the end off. She whirls from the stove to glare at him. "I don't have any answers! What makes you think there are any?" She notices she's brandishing the broken spoon handle and tosses into the sink.

Desmond gets to his feet, spurred by her outburst. "Because there has to be! There's got to be a reason for all this! If we work together, if you help me, then we can-"

"Oh my God! Do you fucking hear yourself?" She takes a step forward, and Desmond is glad the table is between them because she looks like she wants to hit him.

"You sound like a naïve hero from a bad story. *As long as we work together,*" she makes her voice high and mocking. "You know we're not the only people taken. Do you think we're the only ones that have been sent back?"

The question knocks the air from Desmond. "I...I hadn't...hadn't thought-"

"Of course you didn't! You boys are all so arrogant and self-centered. Has your investigation turned up Peter Wells yet?"

"N-no." Desmond's mind is reeling. *Others have come back.*

"Let me tell you about him." Suzanne is on a roll. "Smart kid, good at geometry, loved puzzles. Taken four months before his seventeenth birthday, returned three years later." As she talks, she stalks around the table towards Desmond. Desmond automatically moves backwards away from her. They circle the table. "He wouldn't let things go either. He wasn't the first one to investigate the disappearances in this town. I've been haunting this place for thirty-five years; dozens of you have tried to solve this. Peter was the most persistent. I tried to stop him, but he pulled me along. He had the softest eyes, barely any malice in them at all even after everything. Do you know what happened to him?"

Desmond can't find words. Seeing Suzanne raging has sapped his confidence. He just shakes his head.

"The shadows came for him." With that statement Suzanne's rough facade breaks, tears flow down her face. "Disembodied shadows of dogs, cats, people... little kids." Her voice cracks, and she looks away. Takes a minute and rubs at her face. It doesn't do any good. "Can you imagine?"

Desmond can, the shadow dog attack hurtles through his mind. He doesn't say anything, too shocked to interrupt.

"They came for Peter one night. They threw themselves at his body. They...they broke against him like water balloons. It sounds stupid, but that's what it looked like. And...and where..." She swallows hard, her voice getting stuck in her throat. The tears stream fast and hard from her eyes. Desmond reaches out to touch her shoulder, to comfort her, but she ducks away from his hand and takes a few steps back. "Where they broke against his skin...his skin dissolved. It bubbled and popped. It fell to the floor in chunks. You...you'd think that would be enough to kill him, but when his skin was gone he was still standing. Still screaming. He looked like one of those medical dummies with its muscles exposed." She reaches for the bottle of Jack with a shaking hand, knocks it over. "Oh fuck!" She snatches at the bottle to keep it from draining completely on the table and floor. When she has it in hand, she takes a swig of what's left. "And the bastards kept coming. Splashing against his bare muscles. His screams got worse. I didn't think that was possible, but they did. And his muscles dissolved. And then he was just a skeleton standing in my living room."

Desmond gasps. "This happened here?" Desmond darts a look down the hall at the living room.

"I've got the stains on the hard wood to prove it." She drains the bottle and drops it back to the table. "He screamed the whole time. He didn't have a tongue or lips, but he kept on screaming. Towards the end he was begging for them to kill him."

Suzanne looks past Desmond, down the hallway at the living. He doesn't know what to say, so he just stands there in silence. They stand there for a long time.

"You know what I did while Peter was screaming and begging me for help, begging to die?" Desmond doesn't say anything, not sure if he's supposed to. "Well! Do you?" Suzanne's gaze, hot and cold at the same time, is back on him

"N-no. No, I don't."

"I-" Suzanne swallows again. Her eyes close, and she turns her head away from him. "I cowered in the corner."

"Suzanne, there was nothing-"

"Don't!" Before Desmond knows what's happening, Suzanne shoves him. She shoves him again. "Don't you comfort me!" Another shove, and his ass slams into the counter. "I spent the whole time wishing and praying that the shadows didn't come after me next. And when they left...when they left me alone I was happy! I was happy to still be alive!"

They stand in the kitchen staring at each other. Suzanne has run out of words, and Desmond can't find any for the situation. They stare at each other. The only sound is their heavy breathing and the pot of macaroni boiling over.

Desmond eventually focuses on Suzanne's eyes. They're red and puffy, drowned in tears, but they tell the story of her age. Her face, to him anyway, is that of a sixteen year old girl, but her eyes are those of a survivor. She said she's been here for thirty-five years. Desmond does the easy math in his head: four years. She was gone four years, and she's survived eight times that long on her own. Desmond hopes he can stay as strong as her.

"You've ruined my dinner." Suzanne steps away from him. Pulling the pot from the stove and turning it off.

"I'm sorry."

"I wasn't really hungry anyway." She drops the pot in the sink to join the broken spoon.

"That's not what I meant."

"I know what you meant." She stands at the sink. Desmond hasn't moved from the counter. The silence descends on them again.

"You said others have come back."

"Are you stupid or suicidal?" Suzanne's rebuke has no force behind it. If she's half as spent as Desmond after that whole thing he can't blame her.

"No, I just...If there are others, maybe...maybe they know something...or could hel-"

"They're all gone!" Suzanne slams her hands against the dull metal of the sink. Desmond doesn't know if it's to emphasize her point or to feel something other than scared.

"L-like Peter?" Desmond doesn't know why he asks this. He doesn't want to know the answer. He can't take another story like Peter's.

Suzanne looks out the window above the sink at the darkening sky. "No. Yes? I'm not sure." She lets out a sigh, and it's like her body shrinks two sizes. "Some...some of the ones that tried to investigate this before Peter, they...they gave up before they got as far as he did. Some of them...They waited until night and walked into the woods around the town. It's like they wanted the shadows to take them again. I guess they got what they wanted, because I never saw them again." She moves down the counter, grabs a handful of paper towels, and starts sopping up the Jack Daniels from the

floor. "Others sat in their apartments or motel rooms, refusing to go outside. Eventually they disappeared again too." Paper towels soaked in booze, she brings the wad to the sink and throws it into the waste can in the cupboard underneath it. Then she turns to Desmond for the first time since shoving him. "The same thing eventually happens to the ones that try to live what life they have left. One day they're at their homes, doing whatever it is normal people do. The next..." She brings her fingers up and snaps them in front of Desmond's face. He jumps a little. "They're gone."

"So what you're saying is, I'm screwed either way." Desmond pushes himself off the counter, turning to face Suzanne head on.

Suzanne takes a step back, looking like she's been slapped. "I'm...I'm not saying that."

"You just said the people who investigate what happens to us get taken, and the ones who try to live their lives get taken too. Either way I'm screwed." Desmond crosses his arms, his point proven.

"The people who investigate this disappear after *months*. The ones that try to just live don't disappear for *years*. Look at me, I've been back for thirty years." There's what sounds like genuine panic and concern in Suzanne's voice, but something inside Desmond makes him feel off.

"How long?" Desmond takes a step towards her.

"What?" She tries to move towards the table. Desmond slides over quickly to block her, pressing her back into the sink.

"How long can I expect to live if I leave this alone? Other than you, how long has anyone else lived once they've come back?" Desmond closes the gap between them, pressing his body up against Suzanne's so she's sandwiched between him and the sink.

"I'm not sure...I don't know exactly." Desmond can see Suzanne panicking now. She leans back, trying to get away from him. Desmond leans forward, keeping the pressure on.

"Why not? Don't you watch them? Don't you follow them? Leave them little notes, like you did me?"

"Yes! I mean...no. I don't...I haven't...You make it sound like I'm a part of this." Her eyes search his face. Fear sheathes her features. It makes it hard to tell if she's lying.

"Aren't you? Thirty years sounds like a long time to live with these secrets. You've even seen an attack, but they left you alone. Why is that? What makes you so special?" Desmond leans in as close as he can. The two of them are sharing breath at this point.

"I don't know! I just try to live. I try to sleep, despite the nightmares. I try to eat even though I'm not hungry. Maybe clinging to our humanity is the way to keep them away."

Out of the corner of his eye Desmond sees Suzanne groping for something. She's got the broken spoon handle in her hand. She swings it at Desmond. It's too wide an attack. He's too close to her for it to be effective. He grabs her wrist hard with one hand, with the other grabs her shoulder, keeping her pinned to the sink.

"What do they want from us?!" Desmond spits the question in her face.

She cringes away from him as much as she can. "I don't know!"

"What! Do they want?!" Desmond squeezes her wrist. She yelps and drops the broken spoon handle.

"I don't know! I'm too afraid to ask questions like that! I don't want to know! I couldn't save Peter!" She's crying again. Her words come out as hiccups.

"Whatdotheywant?!"

"Our despair!" Suzanne looks him in the eyes. She's trying to glare, but her eyes are too watery for it to work.

Her answer drains some of Desmond's anger away. He takes a half step back, loosens his grip on her wrist. "What?"

"As far as I can tell, after thirty years of this bullshit, they want our despair. Shadows are things. They don't want money, or fame, property. So what's left? What do they gain from taking us?" Now Suzanne closes the gap, pressing her body against Desmond's. "They get the raw grief of a missing life. How many people does grief touch? Your parents? Your friends? What about your friends' parents, who worry about their own kids? What about the friends of your parents who worry about them and worry about losing their own kids? Or the people who read about, and see, the story in the news? They worry too. A missing person is a buffet of despair."

She's right. I've been so caught up in why I would be taken I didn't think about why take someone at all. Shadows are things, they could have taken anyone.

"Why let us go?" It's the next logical question. If logic can be applied to the situation.

"Maybe we lose flavoring, like a piece of gum. So they spit us out. Maybe they need another fix, so they let us go to stir the whole incident up again. Does it matter? You have your life back, Desmond. Isn't that enough?"

Isn't it? Whatever they are, they've given him endless money. He could live a good life. He could buy a house like Suzanne. Get a job to keep from being bored.

"But it's not my life. It's whoever they've made people see me as." Desmond's whispering, but Suzanne is close enough to hear.

"So what? You're still you on the inside. Make this life yours." Suzanne's pleading hurts something deep inside Desmond with its sincerity.

"How long would that give me? I'd be living in fear."

"So it's just like living normally." Suzanne's argument is good. Desmond can feel himself wavering under the thirty years of rationalization. It's just not enough to convince him.

"And how long before the shadows take someone else?" Suzanne's eyes widen in shock and surprise. Desmond steps forward, pushing her back up against the sink.

"We're the only ones who know about this. About what's happening. We need to do something."

Suzanne looks away from him. Her argument punctured, she's deflated with it.

"I'm not a hero, Desmond. I'm a coward. I just want to live."

Desmond tries to find the words, the argument that will sway her. *I don't know if I can do this alone. But can I ask her to do this with me? After all she's seen?*

"You're hurting my wrist."

"What?" Desmond's so caught up in his thoughts, Suzanne's voice is a surprise.

"My wrist." She tilts her head to the side.

Desmond follows her direction to where his hand clamps around her arm. "Oh! Sorry." He lets go of her wrist and steps back until he feels the kitchen table behind him.

Suzanne holds her wrist close, rubbing it. "I don't blame you." Her eyes narrow at him. "I could, I'm just not going to."

"Yeah. Thanks." Desmond tries to smile, but it feels weird on his face so he stops. "Are you sure you don't want to help me?"

"What I want is you out of my house." Even though she's kicking him out her words aren't angry, there's no malice behind them. It's just a statement. "No offense, but if you plan on continuing your investigation I can't..." Her eyes water again, but this time she holds them back. "I've already seen one person die in my house, I'm not too keen on seeing another."

"Yeah, of course." Desmond makes his way around the table and down the hall to the front door slowly. Suzanne follows him. She opens the door and holds it open for him. "Well, bye."

"I meant what I said earlier."

Desmond stops in the doorway, turning back to look at Suzanne. "About what?"

"About clinging to our humanity. I don't know if you've noticed, but we don't get hungry, and sleeping... Well, you've had the nightmares. We all have the nightmares. But if you don't sleep, you don't really suffer from it."

"Well that's good to know." Desmond knows his attempt at a joke is lame before he finishes the sentence.

Suzanne glares at him. "Hey! I'm being serious here. Even though we don't need to do that anymore doesn't mean we shouldn't. The ones that don't keep up the habits...they disappear faster than the rest." Her face is the hardest he's seen it. "You want to investigate? You want to play the hero? You get on a regular sleeping and eating schedule."

"Yes, ma'am." Desmond salutes her. She ignores it, starts closing the door. The movement forces Desmond to step onto the porch if he doesn't want to get caught in the door. "Suzanne?"

The door stops right before it's fully closed. It opens enough for Suzanne to look out at him. "Yeah."

"About the nightmare." She stares at him, waiting for him to continue. "Do they get better?"

She looks at him for a long time, her face blank and expressionless. "No."

She closes the door and locks it, leaving Desmond under the porch light, alone.