

Grendel doesn't bark when my key hits the lock.

That's when I know something is wrong.

Grendel, an eleven-year-old beagle mix, still barks at the mailman, the neighbors, squirrels, cats—any strangers at all, despite his age and flagging energy. And I can count on him barking with joy when I come in the back door every day. If not for him, I'd always be greeted by stone cold silence.

And that's what greets me tonight.

I toss my keys onto the kitchen counter and slip my coat off.

“Grendel?”

Everything looks normal. Grendel's food bowl is nearly empty, which means he's eaten while I was out at the library. I usually manage to keep the kitchen clean, mainly because I don't cook. The appliances are here, and everything appears to be in order.

But something *feels* wrong.

Because Grendel didn't bark, the house feels unsettled.

Off.

A chill flash-freezes up my spine. I feel like an intruder in my own home, like I've walked in on something.

I move toward the front of the house, walking carefully. The ancient floors squeak, each one sounding like a gunshot.

Grendel typically spends his time on the couch when I'm gone. When he hears something outside, he likes to stick his head up and look out the picture window. He lets out a series of barks that make him sound much more vicious than he really is, and once

that's out of his system, he flops back onto the couch as though he's just run twenty miles.

By now I should hear his collar jingle, his nails on the hardwood.

He's an old dog, I tell myself. *Old dogs don't live forever.*

"Grendel?"

When I reach the entrance to the living room, I freeze in place.

Everything is where it's supposed to be. The lamp I always leave on is on. The furniture is arranged the way it's been arranged for years. Nothing is disturbed. Nothing is broken.

And Grendel sits on the floor by the recliner, his tail flopping back and forth when he sees me.

Everything is where it's supposed to be except for one thing. Someone is sitting in the recliner, legs crossed, hand gently scratching Grendel between the ears.

"Hello," she says.

My mind is slower than my body. My body reacts instantly. My muscles tense. My hands clench. My knees bend into a defensive crouch, and adrenaline shoots through me like rocket fuel.

But my mind is still trying to make sense of this scene. A young woman with long hair dyed an unnatural shade of red sits in my recliner, petting my dog. And she greets me like she's supposed to be there, like I'd asked her to wait here for me to come home this evening. She wears black jeans and heavy boots, and her face is mostly obscured by large, owl-like glasses.

"Who the hell are you? You need to get out of here—"

The woman lifts her hand from Grendel's head and holds it up, cutting off my words. Grendel bounds over, sniffs my shoes. He would have barked when she first came in, because he always barks the first time he meets someone. Then he gets used to them. He looks happy to see me.

"You know who I am, Connor," she says, "and once you remember who I am, I think you're going to know why I'm here."

"I don't know who you are," I say. "But I am going to call the police if you don't get out. If you didn't take anything and didn't hurt my dog, you can just leave, and I won't press charges."

She ignores my threat. With a slow theatricality, she lifts the glasses off her face and folds them, placing them carefully in her lap. She blinks a couple of times but remains quiet.

"If you want food, you can take it. Or money. I'll give it to you. But you have to go."

"Connor."

And then I finally see it. The face is familiar. The eyes are bright blue. The shape of her face. Thinner. Much thinner. But recognizable.

She must realize that I'm starting to really see her because she smiles knowingly, like a chess master who has just outfoxed a lesser opponent.

"No," I say. "No. You're not supposed to...I mean, you're supposed to be..."

She lifts her eyebrows. "You mean, I'm supposed to be dead? Is that it? I'm supposed to be dead."

"Not dead," I say, my voice lower. "Not exactly dead."

But she's nodding. "Oh, yes. I'm supposed to be dead. I'm supposed to be written off. Forgotten. Erased. Tossed in a ditch or a river or a forest, my bones scattered to the winds and slowly returning to the earth. Dust to dust and all of that. Isn't that where I'm supposed to be?"

"Yes," I say. "That's what we all thought. I'm glad that's not true, but I'm...this is all very disconcerting. You're here..."

She leans forward and reaches behind her. She brings out a familiar-looking object and holds it up between us. She looks like she's on television, presenting something to the viewing audience.

"Isn't this what we need to talk about, Connor?"

It's my book. The book I published today. The one I was at the library reading from and signing. The one that represents a dream come true for me.

Instead, I don't answer.

I come all the way into the room and sit on the couch across from Madeline O'Brien. I sit across from my former student, the young woman who disappeared almost two years ago, just months before she was supposed to graduate.