

Claire settled into the hard, uncomfortable chair in the nondescript therapy room, organizing her files, taking out her notebook and pen. Then she sat back and focused on her breathing. *You are surrounded by light energy*, she told herself. *Nothing dark can reach you.*

There was always a tension in her body as she waited for him to be brought in. An ache in her shoulders, a tightness to her breath. Claire made sure that these sessions were the last of the day, the final hour of her workweek. Because she knew that when they were done, she would be drained. That was Winston Grann's special gift, to take everything from the people in his energy sphere.

The truth was that there was nothing she-or anyone-could do for him. His treatment was part of a state-mandated psychiatric protocol that existed for all patients who had been deemed criminally insane. Part of a philosophy that offered "comprehensive treatment that acknowledged the patient's offense, but also his humanity."

No one thought that Winston Grann was going to get any better. A serial killer who had murdered at least fifteen young women, he was certainly never going to be released.

Claire heard voices outside the door, footfalls in the hallway. She looked out through the barred window at the great oak that sat in the yard, its roots spreading wide like feet, its thick branches reaching into the dimming blue sky of early evening. High clouds drifted, and Claire watched, focused on her breath, centering herself.

She'd chosen this assignment as part of her research. She was a psychiatrist with a private practice, treating mainly people who struggled with severe depression, crippling anxiety disorders, phobias.

But she wrote extensively about men-yes, mostly men, all men in Claire's experience-like Winston Grann. So she'd chosen to spend Friday afternoons at four with Winston, even though her mentor, Dr. Sarah Bold, and Claire's ex-husband, Will, who was still her best friend, had urged her to give up the state assignment.

If she did move on from the Grann sessions, no one would challenge or even question that decision.

After all, the people who cared for Winston Grann did not fare well. He'd been incarcerated for over ten years. During that time, his first doctor, a nurse who attended to him some years later, and then, just recently, a patient he'd befriended in the last few months during supervised group meals had all killed themselves. What did it have to do with Winston? How had he wormed his way into the minds of these people? Was it a coincidence that might be attributed to the high-pressure work for the health professionals and the acknowledged instability of his fellow patient? Very hard to say.

But she knew this: Winston Grann was a sucking vortex, a black hole draining all the light and energy from the area, from people. After an hour with Winston, Claire felt so exhausted she often worried about driving. She felt a deep well of sadness and despair, a persistent, gnawing sense of failure. It often took her the weekend to recover.

"I think you need to ask yourself why you continue," Dr. Bold had offered. "Is your research more important than your mental health?"

She wasn't sure. Maybe. Because she couldn't shake the conviction that he, or the study of him, would provide answers to questions that had haunted her since childhood.

She jumped at the sudden knock on the door, snapping back hard to the present.

"Come in."

Her favorite orderly, Billy Jenkins, escorted Winston into the room. They were a contrast-Billy young and beefy, always with a smile in spite of the gritty nature of his work. Tattooed on his thick brown biceps was the word Mom, surrounded by a wreath of flowers. He wore a wedding ring, though she didn't know anything about his wife.

Winston, on the other hand, was a small man, slim, and nearly bald, skin pallid from years of incarceration. He had dark eyes that were alive with intelligence, seeing. His hands and feet were bound with cuffs, connected by a chain. It seemed like overkill; in prison, Winston had been as quiet and well behaved as a lamb. She was often tempted to request that he be freed during their sessions. Maybe she'd make more progress if she offered him this small concession.

But she always stopped short of making the request.

Because Winston Grann believed himself to be the host for a spiritual parasite named Archie. And it was Archie who had driven Winston to do bad things, all his life. Archie, in fact, used Winston's body to satisfy his dark appetites. Winston didn't deserve to be punished; he needed to be rescued. He didn't need a psychiatrist to treat him. He needed a priest to exorcise him.

Or so he said.

Claire wasn't afraid of Winston, who was mild mannered and soft spoken. She was, however, afraid of Archie.

"Mr. Grann is not having a good day," said Billy, taking his place in the corner of the large room. He spread his legs and folded his arms across his middle. He'd stand like that, so silent for the hour that she often forgot that he was there. "We're having trouble getting along with others."

Winston's gaze was lidded and dull, his posture that of a sullen teen. She tried to avoid making prolonged eye contact with him.

"This place," he said, rolling his eyes. "These *people*."

"What happened?" asked Claire, opening her file and looking over her notes from last week. *Archie is restless. He doesn't like it here*, Winston had complained.

"There was an incident in the lunchroom," said Billy when Winston remained silent.

"How was that *my* fault?" said Winston, sitting up, animated. "If one psycho sticks a fork into the eye of another psycho, and neither one of the psychos is me, how do *I* get blamed?"

"You were there," said Billy. "What did you say to Jimmy?"

A smile. Winston tried to move his arms, shifted uncomfortably, and then leaned back with a jangle of chains. "Nothing. I didn't say a word."

"Mm-hmm," said Billy. He had the tone and bearing of a man used to dealing with the mentally ill, and beneath the obvious strength of will, there was a kindness, even respect. That was why Claire liked him; too many guards, doctors, orderlies, and nurses she'd met in her career had lost their humanity. Winston was human. Deeply deranged, ill, but human. He needed help as much as he needed punishment.

And learning about him might make the world safer for someone else, though it was far too late for all the people he'd hurt. It was that idea that drove her work, and kept her coming back to talk to Winston.

We often come to this work to understand ourselves, are motivated by our own compulsions, said Dr. Bold. *What is it that motivates you, Claire?*

"You're looking well, Claire," said Winston, flashing perfectly straight, yellowed teeth. "Fresh."

He drew out the last syllable, a sibilant hiss, and Claire cringed internally, though she was quite adept at controlling her facial expressions, her body language. She often felt that he could see past her professional facade.

"Dr. Allen," admonished Billy.

"Dr. *Allen*," said Winston.

"Thank you, Winston," she said. "Let's get started."

Later, when she tried to remember the conversation that followed, it was foggy. She could hear her own voice, his, as they talked about the quality of his sleep (poor), whether he was taking his medication (he was), the state of his appetite (ravenous).

A painting, or rather the print of a painting, hung on the wall behind Winston. Within most institutional settings, one didn't usually find art. But the head of this facility, a man named Raife Warren, believed in art as therapy. So painting classes were a part of the patients' schedule, and the walls were adorned with the works of inmates, as well as works from Warren's private collection. Warren was an art scholar and a doctor of psychiatry with a degree in law enforcement, an unusual combination. It showed in the practices of the facility—which were creative, humane, and innovative.

She'd stared at this particular work many times. It was a haunting watercolor in shades of gray, red, and black of a sleeping woman, her body composed of swirls and cloudy spaces, her face obscured by a stack of windows, revealing another world, a stark landscape of dead trees.

Winston was talking, his voice a drone in her awareness. Claire rose, suddenly, powerfully drawn to the image. She walked past Winston, who gave her a knowing smile, and she put her finger to the glass.

"Doctor?" Billy's voice was drained, distant, as if he were standing at the end of a long tunnel.

Claire moved through the painting—impossible.

But there she was in a red-and-gray-washed world, with a man sitting easily on an Eames chair, waiting for her. Long and svelte, dressed in black, with thick, cascading dark hair pulled back loosely. His face, paper pale, was drawn, cheekbones severe. She moved nearer to him, her footfalls echoing on the hard floor. The air had substance, subtly resisting her movement.

"Dr. Allen."

His eyes, a milky blue, blazed. She felt naked, exposed before him. Distantly, there was a desire to run, but her limbs were filled with sand.

"I've been wanting to see you for so long," he said.

She didn't have a voice either.

"Sit," he urged. "Please."

And there was a chair across from him; she moved there slowly, primly, seated herself.

This simply couldn't be happening. Was she dreaming? Distantly, her thinking mind struggled. Had she entered a fugue state? Maybe brought on by the persistent stress of her work, the shambles of her personal life, the chronic feeling of unhappiness she'd carried with her since childhood? It was possible. People, seemingly whole people, snapped all the time.

There was a sound, a distant hum. Muffled voices. Did someone scream?

"Why do you waste your time with Winston?" he asked. "He's such a disgusting little man."

"Archie," she said, finding her voice.

He smiled, pleased, leaned forward. "You know me."

"Yes." She knew him by another name.

There was a vibration in the air, something that made her skin tingle.

"You have always known me. You and I, we met long ago, didn't we?"

Her body shivered, remembering. The big old house, its creaking floors, its dark corridors and hidden passages. The rambling woods. The path that led to the old, abandoned building, dilapidated and forgotten. She carried those memories with her always.

"And all these years you've been looking for me."

Was that true? Maybe it was. Dr. Bold had urged Claire to ask herself why she continued with Winston, with her research, when it was so clearly taking a toll on her life, her wellness. There was always an answer. One just beneath the surface of whatever she'd said to convince Dr. Bold and herself that her interest was purely clinical.

"Well here I am. Is it everything you imagined?"

He moved like smoke, wrapping himself around her, suffocating her. Only when his teeth found her neck did she manage to scream.

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