

# SAVANNAH

**SOMETHING IS POKING** me in the back and I'm cold as fuck. This information on its own is not concerning enough to get me to peel open my probably hungover little eyeballs. I roll off the pokey thing and reach for my comforter, but I come away with a handful of dirt instead. That *is* enough information to cause me to pry open my definitely hungover little eyeballs. It does not help that I find myself squinting into the cold, cruel light of dawn.

“What the fuck?” I say to myself, sitting up with a groan. No way I'm actually lying in the woods in my nightgown. This is it. This is the day I have to check myself into rehab.

I stand up and turn to make my walk of shame home, glad that I at least recognize this spot as a place I used to play when I was little, and then I stop so hard I wobble—because I'm looking at a corpse. I'm looking at an actual true-crime-documentary-in-the-woods human woman's most likely murdered body.

For all the times when I was a kid binge-watching *Investigation Discovery* with my mom, all the times when I knew for *sure* what I would do if I murdered someone or found a body or any of those shows' scenarios, for all of my intricate and foolproof plans and backup plans that I knew I'd definitely carry out with the cool-headedness of a trained assassin, I do not react as planned or backup planned. Instead I stare at her like Donald Trump stared

at that solar eclipse: I blink twice, dry heave, turn ninety degrees to the left, and absolutely haul ass out of there.

**I'M DODGING TREES**, because my contact lenses are dried out from sleeping in them, so I can't see. I'm trying to wipe that weird goop—the stuff that oozes out and glues your eyes together while you sleep—off my eyelashes when I think I see someone brush against my right side, like a cat trying to get my attention, but when I look, there's no one. I skid to a stop, squinting into the trees, trying to figure out where I am. I have to blink several times to verify that I'm still alone. Sometimes I swear I can see the version of Michelle that lives inside my head and exists to taunt me. She's so good at being almost real.

*Damn, Savage, Michelle says. You finally did it.*

“What?” I'm not supposed to talk to her. It's a compulsion. And it only makes her worse. I don't look at her, though—that's gotta count for something.

*Finally found a body!* Michelle says with a smile.

Fuck, I looked. It's okay. I just won't say anything else to her. She isn't real. She isn't real. I look around. I can't see the edge of the trees from here. That means I'm going the wrong way. Okay. Backward. I turn and start to walk back toward the body, trying not to think of it as “toward the body.”

*Don't you remember? That summer of sixth grade when your mom was really big on the true crime documentaries and you got all obsessed with death. You wanted to find a body so you could see what it was like to be dead. So we looked. We climbed that big, brushy hill in front of your old house and started looking behind trees and under bushes, hoping at the very least we'd find someone's severed arm or something.*

Michelle continues on, pulling the memory up from deep in my mind like she's pulling a loose thread from a sweater. She projects it up on the inner wall of my brain for me to see. It's true. We did look. I don't know why; I just found being dead fascinating

and I didn't love its certainty. I thought seeing it would help me prepare for the thing that was coming for me, too.

I stare hard at the ground to stop myself from unraveling. I need to focus on getting back. I know where the clearing with the body is relative to my house. I used to take a lot of walks out here when I was younger, and that clearing is the only real break in the trees I've ever found. The rest of the forest is super dense, so I used to stop at that clearing and chill. I found the spot to be peaceful, probably why I went there last night in the first place. My stomach tightens as I get close. I'm nervous. I remind myself that I'm not going back to gawk at the body; I'm only trying to get home.

*So? How was it? The more I try to ignore her, the louder Michelle speaks. Are you fascinated? Is that why your heart's beating faster right now – because you're excited to go back and poke her with a stick? I can hear it from here.*

I stop walking and close my eyes, hoping that when I open them, she'll be gone. I try to breathe slower and regulate my heart rate. I count my heartbeats. Too many of them, too fast. I push on my sternum with my palm to try to make it stop. I worry my heart will burst and then there will be two corpses out here. Behind my eyelids is an image of myself poking the body in the stomach with a stick. I push too hard and it pops and something green and sludgy oozes out. I shake my head back and forth, hoping to clear the image like an Etch A Sketch. The me in my head pushes the stick even deeper and twists. I open my eyes, panting, and there's Michelle again, laughing at me.

*Jesus, you're sick. Always have been, though, clearly.*

I drop my hand to my side and start walking again, faster, fists balled, denting my palms with my nails. It starts to look brighter up ahead, where the trees open up. I slow down until I've stopped. The tree just in front of me is the tree that she's behind. When I inch to the right and look down, I can see her half her hand, peeking out from the end of a raggedy sleeve, fingers

curled into a stiff cup. It still looks so much like a living hand, but there's something uncanny about it that gives me the ick. But I can't look away; I don't breathe. This is what I will become. A statue of flesh. An almost person.

*How do you think she died?* Michelle asks, snapping me out of it so abruptly that I jump with a squeak—I'm almost glad the woman on the ground isn't alive to hear it.

I force my cement feet forward, straight past the body, refusing to turn around and look back at her, trying to stay ahead of Michelle, but Michelle moves alongside me with ease. The body doesn't bother her. Meanwhile, I can't shake the feeling that it's staring at me.

*I mean, Michelle continues, it's not like people just drop dead around here. How'd she even get here, anyway? You don't have neighbors. The nearest house is, what? A mile away? Two?*

"She could be homeless," I mutter, and then scold myself for answering. I count my breaths in sets of two. I take two steps for every breath. I just need to get home.

Michelle huffs. *Homeless? Around here? Babe, that's like being homeless in the Hamptons. It's not really done.*

One, two. One, two. She's not real. She's not real.

*She was probably murdered. That's the only way a corpse ever really ends up in the woods. And if she was murdered, you know what that means?*

I do not want to know what that means, but Michelle tells me anyway.

*That means either some crazed killer decided to dump the body here in the middle of the night even though he would have had to drive right up your driveway and past your house to get here, and then drag her through the woods and dump her against that tree even though he for sure knows you live here and will likely find his kill OR—she pauses for dramatic effect—you killed her.*

I skid to a stop. "Me?"

Her smile spreads wide, lips sealed shut. Her blue eyes are sharp, like glass when it cracks. I squeeze my eyes shut as tight as they'll go, trying to crush her with the darkness so she'll go away, but it doesn't work. *Who else?* she asks. *As far as we know, you're the only one who knows where that clearing is by memory. Another killer would have had to root around for that spot, all while dodging trees in the dark and carrying a dead-weight corpse. Not likely. But you used to go there all the time when you were sad, didn't you? Look at you, navigating us back to the house with ease as we speak.*

"I didn't..." I didn't. Did I? No. I wouldn't have.

*Are you sure about that? I always knew you were ruthless. That's why I call you Savage.*

"I didn't." I'm not supposed to be talking to Michelle.

*Again, are you sure? What's the other explanation? Someone else murdered her and knows about that spot and was able to find it in the dark and also didn't care about the fact that your house is on this property? Who dumps a body on someone else's property? Who else knows about that spot? You didn't even tell me about it when we were friends. No, it's just you. You're a murderer.*

"I'm not."

*Then give me another explanation.*

"Maybe she just died."

*Where did she come from?*

"I don't know."

*Why'd you kill her?*

"I didn't."

*How do you know?*

We reach the end of the trees. The sun's so bright that it hurts as it reaches toward me through the last gasp of woods. The guilt in my stomach gurgles. Every time I blink, I see myself luring a reanimated version of the body into my kitchen in the middle of the night, sliding the biggest of my mom's Rachael Ray-brand knives into the space between her ribs.

*I guess you really wanted to see a dead body, didn't you? Maybe the urge has just been growing inside you all these years and you couldn't take it anymore.*

It's getting hard to count in twos. My heartbeats are so close together that they're slamming into each other. Almost there. Almost free of the trees.

*What did you do, Savannah?* She laughs and then she's gone and I'm alone in my brain again.

I squint into the sun, leaving Michelle and her big laugh behind me in the trees. I reach into the crevices of my mind the whole walk across the lawn, trying to remember anything about last night, but the last thing I see is myself popping that pill. I swallow the acid taste rising in my throat. Michelle's right. I can't remember. I don't know what I did.

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