

And the Car Burned off Exit 43

The next morning, there would be no evidence that anyone had been there at all when the car crashed on the back road off exit 43. Police would later report that damage to the fuel system was what caused the fire, which made it sound sensational, but it was a calm night when it happened. There was no rush of traffic, no people talking, not even a dog barking in the distance. It was quiet enough that if someone had been there, they would have only heard the chirp of crickets, or the faint rustle of wheat in the field.

Leo stood by the wreck of the car, a backpack slung over his shoulder. Inside were three water bottles which were not filled with water. He tried not to think about them. He also tried not to think about the thing he had just fished out of the glove compartment and which was now hidden in his pocket. He peered down the road. Someone had forgotten to turn off the 'open' sign in the malt shop. It glowed thick red in the dark.

On this type of road at this time of night, he reckoned it would be about twenty minutes before any other car came along. Leo looked at the asphalt. He looked at the blood on the cracked windshield, the night sky, the wheat field swaying in the slight breeze. He looked anywhere but the bushes just off the road.

'It's been a while,' Leo said. He still didn't look at the bushes. 'Was this your doing? Excellent work, anyone would think it was an accident.'

A shadow shifted among the leaves. The other voice came at once, crisp and quiet. 'You knew her?'

'No,' Leo said. 'Of course not. If I knew her I'd be crying, wouldn't I?'

'Would you?'

'No. I don't know, maybe. Depends on who she was.'

'Who is she?'

'For real?' Leo glanced at the body slumped in the driver's seat. 'Some girl I don't know.' He flipped open the brown leather wallet in his hand. Inside was an ID. A solemn, dour-haired girl stared out. 'Nora Davids, apparently. Worked at the seven-eleven.'

'I thought you were friends. I saw you talking at Snuffy's.'

'You thought wrong,' Leo replied. He was twenty-three now, and he feigned indifference well. He spared a quick glance towards the bushes. The shadow standing there looked human, but Leo knew it was not.

He had first noticed the dark figure when he saw it lurking in the back corner of the malt shop. It was right in the shadowed no-man's-land between the jukebox and dingy hall to the bathroom. No one else seemed to notice it. No one else seemed to care. There was idle chatter and the squeak of sparkly red stools against the checkered floor and Sam-the-register-boy counting coins and among it all, the thing in the corner. Watching.

Back on the quiet street, Leo fingered the change in his pocket. 'I barely knew her,' he continued. 'But here's a quarter for the jukebox. Play something good for me. Preferably ABBA.' He tossed a quarter. It clattered onto the pavement, rattled, and went still.

The figure shifted. 'I want to talk. That's why you came here, right? To talk?'

'Yes.'

'Then let's talk.' The shadow stepped onto the road.

It was always the eyes that took him by surprise. They were the same every time. Bright and intelligent, a coppery shade of off-amber. They weren't the eyes of a beast or monster, or even a stranger. They were the eyes of a friend. They were Sid's eyes—and that was what scared him the most. More than the dark or deep water or any of those other childhood fears, what

rattled him all the way down to his deepest bones was looking into the face of a monster and finding the eyes of a friend.

The rest of the body was made up of the last one the creature had taken. This time it was Noah from chess club. Leo had always been shit at chess and so was Noah, so naturally they became friends. He still remembered walking into the pub and seeing Noah slouched at the table in front of a chess board, black curls perfectly coiffed as usual.

Leo slid into the booth across from him, about to crack a joke about Noah being early for once, when Noah looked up, smiled. And Leo fell silent. It was the eyes. You could always tell. Ah, but he should have known, Noah was never early.

Back on the road, the two of them stood face to face and looked at one another. It was clear the creature had been in Noah's body for too long. The cheeks were hollow and the limbs atrophied. Noah's warm skin had grayed and its clothes—Noah's clothes—hung loose, as if they were no more than laundry on a clothesline.

'You've really let yourself go,' Leo said.

The creature's dry lips cracked in a smile. 'I left it to the last minute this time. I thought you'd be pleased. Five years is a long time, you know. This last year I haven't been able to go out in public.'

'Must have been hard.'

The creature shrugged. 'Wasn't too bad. I wanted to prove myself to you.'

'Prove what?'

'That I wasn't all bad.'

'I already know you aren't all bad,' Leo replied.

The creature rubbed its cheek. Leo knew it meant he was embarrassed, or touched. It was Sid's gesture. Sid, his childhood best friend. The only one he had trusted in all the world.

'I thought I was for a while,' Sid said. 'All bad, that is. For years I thought that.' His face quivered ever so slightly. Then he rubbed his hand once more against his cheek and the expression was wiped clean in an instant, brushed away like dust on a chalkboard. Leo had always envied that trick.

'But I thought if I could make you understand,' Sid continued, 'or if I could change, that maybe...things would be okay. Would that even be possible?' His tone was hopeful, expectant. He still sounded like the child Leo had met years ago.

Perhaps he still was that child, Sid had told him that his kind didn't age in the same way as humans. Of course, at the time Leo had thought it was pretend—just a game to pass the hours. It had been fun to have a friend that wasn't normal. It made him feel special, like he had been chosen, and every kid wants to feel special. Even if it's only pretend.

Leo was quiet for a moment. His palms, still stuck in his pockets, were sweating. 'I don't know. I suppose we can try.' He nodded at the body in the car. 'But first, hurry up and take care of this. Before someone comes along.'

'Really?' Sid smiled wide. 'You'll help me?'

'That's what I said.'

'You don't know how much that means to me. Really, you don't.' Sid shuffled forward eagerly, bending down to open one of the car doors. It screeched and got stuck partway. Leo went over and yanked it open.

'Thank you.' The voice was right in his ear. Leo turned. Sid was only a few feet away, amber eyes shining bright in the darkness.

'You're welcome,' he replied.

Sid let out a breath. 'It's so good to talk to you again,' he said, smiling. 'I missed you. Remember when we snuck into the neighbor's tree house and found those magazines? The dirty ones that had the—'

'Yes I remember.'

'What about when we built that boat and went down the river? You almost drowned and I saved you. You're lucky I was there.'

'Yeah that was a close one,' Leo said.

'Did you keep the drawings I made you? The constellations, I mean.'

'Of course I kept them.' He hadn't kept them. He'd thrown them out after the first of his friends had died. Leo glanced down the road. No sign of a car yet, just crickets and silence. 'You should hurry up, someone's bound to drive by eventually.'

'Right. I might need some help getting out once it's done.' Sid ducked and clambered inside. Metal creaked and glass crunched as he moved. Leo turned around and walked a little ways away, just far enough to settle his shoes in the grass. Then he waited, staring into the bushes. The coins clinked in his pocket as he turned them over and over, feeling the cool metal grow warm at his touch. They were slick with sweat now and slipped against each other. He might have been disgusted with himself if he had noticed.

'I'm done,' a voice called. 'The seatbelt's stuck, I think the lock broke in the crash.' It was still Sid's voice, yet through the girl's vocal chords it came out higher and sweeter. Half Sid's voice and half Nora's. 'Leo? Did you hear me?'

'Yes, sorry. Coming.' Leo turned back to face the car. The girl was sitting up inside. A chill ran down his back but he walked over anyway.

'Hi,' he said, peering through the door. The girl turned to face him. Brown hair, solemn face, bloody gash on the forehead, and bright amber eyes. Her limbs were tangled in the seatbelt.

Sid spoke again. 'I think if you get the lock I can do the rest.'

'Alright.' Leo didn't move. He looked up and down the road. No cars. 'Look, I'm sorry.'

'Sorry for what?'

Leo's hand tightened on the windowsill. 'What do you want, Sid?'

Sid tilted his head, confused. 'I said I needed help with the seatbelt.'

'No, what do you *want*?' The question came out louder than he had expected. His heart was racing now and the backpack was heavy on his shoulders.

Sid looked at Leo and his eyes gleamed too-bright. He nodded once, understanding. Then he reached over and placed his hand on Leo's. It was wet with blood and cold with death. When he spoke, his voice was small. 'I just want to be friends again.'

'Then I'm sorry,' Leo said. 'I can't help you with that.' He pulled away. The car door slammed.

Sid leaned forward but the seatbelt held him back. 'What are you doing?' He fumbled with the belt, new fingers clumsy and slow. Leo backed away and pulled out the thing he had hidden in his pocket. The keys jangled when he held them up. He clicked the button and the doors locked.

Sid's eyes widened. 'Wait, no. You promised. You said you would help me.'

'I also said I didn't know her. That was a lie too. She was my friend. So was the one before that, and the one before that.'

'Unlock the door. Please. Let me explain.'

'No need.'

Two of the water bottles went over the mangled body of the car. The last one he saved for the windshield. Sid was silent, hands knitted neatly in his lap. When he finally spoke, it was with the same quiet composure as always.

'Is there anything I could say to change your mind?'

'I don't think so.'

'Can I try?'

'Sure.'

'I'm in love with you.'

Leo laughed. 'You never loved anyone or anything.'

'Didn't I?'

Leo pointed at the thing that sat in the car with Nora's body and Sid's eyes. 'That isn't love.' There was a long moment of silence.

'It isn't?'

The last bottle went on the windshield. Sid didn't make a sound, even as it soaked through the cracked glass and onto his face, trickled down into his eyes. He didn't even blink. Leo lit a match.

It was a calm night. There was no rush of traffic, no people talking, not even a dog barking in the distance. It was quiet enough that if someone had been there, they would have only heard the chirp of crickets, or the faint rustle of wheat in the field. As they walked away there would have been a mild breeze, with just a faint hint of smoke—like the memory of yesterday's barbecue.

But of course, there was no evidence that anyone had been there at all when it happened. Not even a penny on the pavement. And so, with no one to bear witness, the crickets chirped and the wheat swayed and the car burned off exit 43.