

**Content Warning: Blood, Body Horror, Death, Depictions of Torture, Dysphoria, Genocide, Gore, Murder, Violence.**

## Prologue

Icy sweat drenched Ken's face as he ran headfirst into total darkness. He felt branches slash at his skin, he slammed into trees and struggled to keep his footing, but he didn't dare slow down. If he slowed down they would catch him, and then-

He could see their dim torches behind him, hear their shouts; a low, angry sound. Voices without words, hatred without reason. His ankle twisted in a rabbit hole, he fell forward, and felt the bone snap. He screamed.

The light came closer. He could see their faces. At one time, these were his friends, his family members, the people he loved. Now they wanted blood.

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It was a slow endeavor, his execution. First, they tied him upside down by his feet, taking care to keep the rope tight on his broken ankle. Then they ripped out his eyes, one by one, until he could only see out of the one on his chest. With each hoarse scream, the crowd cheered. Next they took off each of his fingers with rusted bolt cutters. Ken begged for it to stop, tears and blood pouring from his thirteen empty eye sockets, and finally, as they had begun their beatings, death came for him. The crowd's cheers came to a sickening peak, then faded, and eventually they dispersed. The work had been done for now, but this was only the beginning.

## Chapter 1

A hush fell over the church as she walked in. Parents gasped and gawked at her baby bump with each step. Some whispered to each other, and others just stared as the girl, barely a day over sixteen, found her seat.

"I couldn't imagine being her mother," Tiffany said.

"Come on mom, show a little compassion," Zoe said. "Think about what she must be going through right now."

"If she didn't want this to happen she should have been more careful," Tiffany said.

"That doesn't mean she deserves to be treated like a circus freak," Zoe said.

"Oh so I guess you'd rather kids just be running around getting knocked up left and right," Tiffany said.

"No, of course not," Zoe said. "I just think-"

"Shush! He's starting," Tiffany said.

"Friends," Pastor Gregory Strauss's voice echoed through the now-silent crowd. "I want to thank you all for once again coming to our little service. I know we're not the biggest congregation by any means, but the love I feel coming from all of you is as strong as anywhere I've seen." He was a newer resident, freshly moved in and only thirty-one, but Pastor Greg, as most of the church called him, had a charisma about him that entranced people. Zoe sometimes thought that he could preach about the holiness of a fiber-rich diet and within a day the county would be out of bran muffins. "I think that sometimes we all forget," he looked towards the pregnant girl. "Just how valuable God's gift of free will is to us, the blessings that it brings, and just how important it is that we don't lose sight of that responsibility. We need to think about all our decisions."

All eyes fell on the girl, and after a pause that felt like eternity, she ran from the church, tears streaming from her face. Zoe watched as the entire crowd's focus snapped back to Pastor Greg, who continued. Nobody, not even the girl's parents, went after her.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Zoe said.

"I told you not to have so much syrup with your pancakes," Tiffany said.

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Zoe found her huddled in the park across the street from the church, under a slide.

"Hey," Zoe said.

The girl scooted back, her eyes locked on Zoe. "What do you want?"

"I just wanted to check on you, I'm Zoe."

The girl relaxed, partially. "Kelsy," she said. "Kelsy Hastings."

"I'm sorry about all of them," Zoe said. "I don't get how anyone can be so cruel."

"You know I was a cheerleader two months ago?" Kelsy asked. "Everybody loved me, now whenever I go out in public I'm the local freak."

"Have you thought about, I don't know, getting rid of it?" Zoe asked. She shuddered at the bluntness of her own words.

The girl sighed. She wasn't crying anymore, but her cheeks were coated in tears. "My parents won't let me. Besides, what then? It's bad enough being the girl who got knocked up at sixteen, I don't think I could handle how they'd treat me if I became the one who killed one of 'God's precious creatures.' They'd probably run me out of town."

Zoe hugged her, and within seconds Kelsy had started bawling into her shoulder.

"Zoe! Get away from her!" Tiffany was standing a few feet away, scowling at them.

"She's upset," Zoe said.

"I don't care, you don't want to be associated with-" she trailed off. "The service is over, and a lot of people are coming this way. It's time to go."

Zoe felt anxiety bubble up. "I'm not going to leave her." She was shaking, Zoe didn't disobey her mom often, in fact she could only count maybe four times before that it had happened.

"Zoe, get out of there, and get in the car," Tiffany said. "Now!" Zoe felt a disconnect. She was thirteen now, a full-fledged teenager, ready to party and go to concerts and make trouble with her no-good friends, like all the ones on tv. But childhood clung to her, and the second her mom raised her voice, Zoe felt very very small. She was shaking now.

"It's okay," Kelsy said. "I kind of want to be alone right now anyways."

Zoe felt the pull of her mom's words, and although a pit had formed in her stomach, she let it pull her all the way back to the car.

Zoe thought about that day often, usually when she wanted to do something new and different. As time went on she had thought about getting piercings, dyeing her hair, and even getting a tattoo, but every time she thought about stepping out of line, her mind went back to the stares that poor girl had gotten. It made her want to vomit. Zoe often prayed that Kelsy was doing okay, wherever she was.

## Chapter 2

### Seven years later.

"You wanna go, bitch?" Riley asked. "Let's do this." They struck the air hockey puck forward, straight towards Zoe's goal.

Zoe threw her paddle forward, knocking the puck to the side, where it bounced back and forth between the left and right side of the table, inching closer and closer to Riley. Zoe leaned across the table and knocked it forward, right into Riley's goal. She smirked.

"Fuck!" Riley threw their paddle at the table.

"Looks like someone owes me a million bucks," Zoe said.

"Yeah yeah," Riley said. "Lucky shot. You wanna go again? Double or nothing?"

"Nah," Zoe said. "My hand feels kinda sore."

"Yeah you wouldn't want to exacerbate your air hockey injury," Riley looked at their watch. "Shit, it's like ten, I've gotta run."

"You're kidding," Zoe said.

"I'll get you back another time," they said, running out the door.

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Zoe's ship exploded in a hail of pixels, she and her crew had fought valiantly against the evil forces of Galactazon, but now, all was lost. She put her name into the machine and watched as it soared up to the fourth place spot, just below her place in third. She turned around and realized that the entire arcade was deserted. On a Friday night this place was crawling with people, but now it gave off an eerie emptiness. She imagined unknown horrors just out of sight, watching, waiting to strike, creatures from another world or maybe a masked killer, stalking their prey. It gave her a bit of a chill, and she smiled. Zoe loved horror movies, she'd probably seen them all. A part of her liked being scared, the thought of being a character in a horror movie sounded exciting. She grabbed her bag and started for the door.

As she passed the claw machine, white hot pain surged through her left hand.

She watched, powerless, as the skin on the back of her hand started to bubble and melt, to twist and shift. She felt skin rip and split open, and she screamed at the top of her lungs. She fell to the ground, and the lights in the room grew bright. She shut her eyes and clenched her left hand. The pain rose, higher and higher, until, without warning, it stopped. She opened her eyes, hot tears coating her face. There was no blood, no gore, her hand was still attached.

She hesitated, but removed her palm from the place the pain had come from. The room felt bright again. There, on the back of her left hand, she saw a brand new, fully formed eye, it looked at her, and all at once she could see the eye in her hand and her own face, staring back at it.

She screamed.

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"Zoe, is that you?" Tiffany called from the living room.

"Yeah," Zoe said, her left hand shoved into her jacket pocket. She shut the door and started up the stairs.

"How's Riley doing?"

"Oh you know, same old, same old," Zoe said.

"Do you want to watch some TV?" Tiffany asked.

"I'm actually just going to go to bed," Zoe said. "I'm pretty wiped."

"Alright, whatever," Tiffany said.

Zoe shut her bedroom door and let out a sigh. She looked at the fresh eye in her left hand, turning it around and studying its shape. It was like something out of science fiction, or a horror movie. Her mind went back to the arcade, how much fun she thought something like that would be. Now it was here, and she wanted to vomit.

She grabbed her phone and dialed Riley's number. The phone rang for a few seconds, and there was a 'click,' followed by a yawn.

"What time is it?"

"Are you busy tomorrow?" Zoe asked.

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Doctor Michaels held his finger in front of Zoe's new eye. "Alright, now follow my finger." He moved it back and forth, watching the movement.

"So?" Riley asked, holding their friend's clenched hand.

"I wouldn't be worried," Michaels said.

"Wouldn't be worried?" Zoe asked. "There's an eye growing out of my fucking hand!"

"It seems healthy," Michaels said. He scribbled something on his clip board, then looked back up.

"There's been a new medical phenomenon over the last few years. We don't really know why, but about one percent of the population has been growing eyes out of their bodies. Medically speaking there's nothing wrong, and I have no reason to believe the other eyes will have problems when they come in either."

"Other eyes?" Zoe asked.

"Typically, more eyes develop over time, but it usually stabilizes within six to eight months after the first eye comes in. During this time you might notice some extra exhaustion, some headaches, and some slightly accelerated healing."

"Accelerated healing?" Riley asked.

"Think of it like a second puberty," Michaels said. "Your body is going through a lot of changes in a short period, it'll react a little differently to injuries. But that's pretty variable, so don't go jumping out of windows or anything."

"How many eyes?" Zoe asked.

"Well I've never heard of more than twenty coming in," Michaels said.

Zoe's heart sank. Twenty? Did he really say twenty? Shit. Shit. Shit. She could barely manage to hide one. What if one ended up on her neck? Or her cheek? Somewhere she couldn't hide. Everyone would find out. She'd be just like Kelsy.

"Why is this the first I've heard of this?" Riley asked.

"Probably because it's so rare," Michaels said. "Plus a lot of people aren't very public about it. A lot of folks with this condition try to hide their eyes."

"Especially if their family is super religious and xenophobic," Zoe stared off into space. "Right?"

"I suppose that's probably a factor, yes," Michaels said. He looked at the scared girl, sitting in front of him. She looked like she wanted to throw up. "I wish there was more I could do."

### Chapter 3

Light filled Zoe's new eye. She was getting a text. She raised her hand slightly to see what it said.

Riley was calling. Zoe brought the phone to her ear.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Finally, she answers," Riley said. "How long exactly do you plan to keep locked away in your room?"

"It hasn't been that long," Zoe said.

"Two weeks," Riley said.

"I've been telling my mom I'm feeling sick."

Zoe eyed the cold chicken noodle soup on her nightstand. She had thought about saying something a few times, but the thought of them freaking out made her want to vomit. Beyond that, she had realized that the longer she waited, the harder it was. Every day became another piece of the ongoing lie that she just had a cold, another day she'd have to explain, another piece of evidence that she really didn't trust her mom the way she thought.

She loved her, of course, but her mom once told her that people who were born with birth defects didn't pray enough. Zoe could only imagine how she'd react to this.

"And you intend to keep that up forever?" Riley asked.

"If that's what it takes," Zoe said. "I'm not going to let the whole world see me as some freak."

Riley sighed. "I know this is scary, but sitting alone in your room for the rest of your life isn't going to make the eye on your hand go away. I'm outside, come on, you need to get out of the house and out of your head."

Zoe looked out her window at her friend, looking up at her from the sidewalk.

"They're playing Night of the Living Dead down on Main Street, and I've got tickets," they said.

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Riley flung popcorn into their mouth, just as the freshly-dead little zombie girl stepped towards her mother on the big screen. Zoe sipped at her soda and wondered what filming on that set must have been like. She wondered if any of the cast had even the slightest inclination that they were making a film that would influence cinema for decades to come, maybe longer.

"You see," Riley whispered. "I don't get why more movies don't make the zombies a result of cosmic radiation. It's always a virus or a medicine gone bad, we need more cosmic radiation zombies!"

Someone shushed them from a few rows in back.

"Maybe it's because it's more grounded," Zoe said. "I mean, what's more likely, that cosmic radiation will, for the first time in scientific history, reanimate corpses with a hunger for flesh, or that a virus will make people go out of their minds and be really aggressive?"

Riley crossed their arms. "I still think cosmic radiation is a more fun reason to have zombies."

"I guess I can't argue with that," Zoe said.

Riley had been right, not about the zombies (although they did have a point there, too), Zoe needed to get out of the house and out of her head. Two weeks of worry had gotten her nowhere, but a couple hours with her friend and Zoe already felt like she had her head on straight. She looked at her gloved left hand, and wondered what the movie would look like through it. She glanced around, there was no one else in their row, and only a few others in the theater, none of which had a line of sight on her. She inched the glove off her left hand, and moved it so that she could see the zombies surrounding the house with her new eye. Somehow, it looked fresher, better. The picture seemed

more vibrant, clearer (despite of course being the same black-and-white B-movie that it had been since 1968). She heard rustling behind her and yanked the glove back over the eye. The fabric made her wince as it dragged over the new eye.

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Riley sat, cross-legged at the edge of the concrete fountain in the center of the park. Zoe looked up at the starscape above.

"You know, if you want to, there's no one around who would see the eye," Riley said. "I saw you messing with it in the theater, you can give it some air."

Zoe smiled. She pulled the glove off of her third eye. "It's the glove," she said. "The damned thing keeps rubbing against it in a really irritating way." The eye was red, bloodshot. It teared up a little as the cool air hit it.

"Did you find anything out of those resources the doctor gave you?" Riley asked.

"Not much," Zoe said. "Just some tabloid stuff, 'the devil possesses children, causes them to grow new eyes,' that kind of thing.

"That's insane," Riley said. "People are ridiculous."

"Yeah," Zoe said. "Honestly it's pretty scary.

"Well, for what it's worth, I think I've found something that might help," Riley said. They pulled out a pink flier and handed it to Zoe.

**SUPPORT GROUP FOR THE  
MANY-EYED**

**SNACKS, DRINKS, FRIENDS**

**TALK TO PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN THERE**

**MEET IN THE HARPER'S RIDGE COMMUNITY CENTER**

**ROOM 433**

**FRIDAY**

**7PM**

## Chapter 4

Zoe watched the streetlights fly by through the dark car window. She could feel a pit forming in her stomach.

"You okay?" Riley asked.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Zoe asked.

"I don't think it'll make things worse," Riley said. "Why?"

"I don't know," Zoe said. "Just nerves, I guess."

That was a lie. Zoe knew exactly what was causing her to hesitate. This made it real. More than the doctor's visit, more than the weeks she'd spent hiding herself away, even more than watching the eye sprout from the back of her hand that night. If she walked into that community center, spoke with others like her, if she started to accept it, then it was no longer an ongoing nightmare. It was her life, and there was no longer any chance of waking up.

"We're here," Riley said.

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Zoe looked at the tan plaque for room 433, her hand hovered over the door. She looked back to Riley. They put a hand on her shoulder and offered a nervous smile. Zoe took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and pushed open the door, stepping into the room in the same motion. Inside, a small group of people sat in a poorly-defined circle. Each had a paper plate, either in their lap or on an extra chair, with a slice of pizza.

"Hey there," a girl with pink hair said. She stood, and Zoe could see that eyes dotted her neck and shoulders. She had piercings all up her ear, and a floral pattern of tattoos tracing the lines of each of her eyes. She was beautiful. "I'm Gwen. What's your name?"

Zoe felt the blood rush out of her cheeks. "I'm, um," she turned back to Riley, and immediately felt like a toddler looking to their parent for reassurance on the first day of kindergarten. She turned back to Gwen. "I'm Zoe." She extended her gloved left hand. Gwen took it, her thumb brushing the eye through the fabric. Zoe winced, and Gwen pulled back.

"Sorry," Gwen said. "May I?"

Zoe nodded. Gwen pulled the glove from Zoe's hand, slowly, softly. As the light hit her eye, Zoe felt a simultaneous combination of relief and fresh anxiety flow into her. It was all out in the open now, nothing to hide, but that also meant there was no going back from this. She could no longer pretend she'd gone into the wrong room, or that she was lost. Everyone in the room knew about the eye now, and they always would.

"Oh that is beautiful!" Gwen said. "Why would you ever hide this away?"

Zoe blushed. "I, well, I guess-"

"Leave her alone, Gwen," a voice from the circle said. "We all started scared."

Zoe turned to see a young man, he had an eye on his forehead and another on his right calf.

"But Kurt, look at it!" Gwen shouted. "It's gorgeous."

Kurt stood and approached. He looked at Zoe's eye for a second. "It's pretty," he said. Zoe studied the eye again. She had never really seen it as anything but grotesque, a monstrous growth on her once soft skin. But now two different people admired it. She smiled.

"Thank you," she said.

"How long ago did it sprout?" Gwen asked.

"A little over two weeks ago," Zoe said.

"Shit, so you really are new to all this, huh?" Gwen asked.

Zoe nodded.

Gwen put a hand on Zoe's shoulder. "I know this is scary, I can only imagine what the last couple weeks have been like," she said. "But it does get easier, and you don't have to go through it alone. Grab some pizza and take a seat, we're starting soon. If you'd like, you can tell us what it's been like, or if you'd rather just listen in that's okay too."

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"That's when he told me to get out," Kurt said. "I haven't seen him since. I've heard from my mom a couple of times, but the conversation always end up the same, she wants me to apologize, and she won't let up on the whole 'hide your eyes away' thing. It's just frustrating, you know?"

Most of the meeting had been like that. Someone would get up, tell their story, and no matter how it began it always seemed to end the same way. The people around them would freak out, some of them would act really rashly, and a lot of them would try to get them to hide their eyes away.

Sometimes with scarves, or makeup, sometimes bandages or even surgery. The whole thing made Zoe feel restless, itchy, and sore. She wanted to lay down. She wondered if her mom would react the same way if she showed her the eye.

"Does anyone else want to share?" Gwen asked. She turned to Zoe.

"Yeah," Zoe said. "Sure, I guess I've been feeling restless, and anxious. My eye came in weeks ago and my mom still has no idea it's there. It's getting harder to hide, and the longer I hide it the harder it is to tell her, I feel like-

She felt a spasm in her right shoulder. It felt hot suddenly, really hot.

"No," she said. "Please not again." She felt faint, and she could see the skin on her shoulder twitch, then bubble. She screamed, and the skin started to split. As the fresh eye pushed its way out of her shoulder, her vision once more blurred. The pain escalated, but before it could reach the unbearable levels it had when the last eye appeared, it subsided. She felt a cold rag on her forehead, and as she opened her eyes, she could see Gwen and Riley. Riley was staring at the fresh eye, transfixed on the new organ, while Gwen knelt by Zoe's face, holding the cool rag, and smiling.

"How are you feeling?" Gwen asked.

Zoe cried. "They're never going away, are they?" she asked.

"I'm sorry," Gwen said. "But no, they'll always be there."

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Zoe sat by her bedroom window, turning over a piece of paper. There were a few teenagers wandering around outside, laughing and shouting. She backed out of sight, wondering if they'd see her hand, or her shoulder. She thought of the support group at the community center. How did they do it? Living so publicly like that? Was there some sort of secret to it, or were they just stronger than her? Maybe she just needed to be braver. She could do that, right? It would only take a second, just one brief second to pull the glove off her hand in front of her mom. Then it would all be out in the open.

"But what if she thinks I'm a freak?" she mumbled to herself. It was a fair question; until tonight, she'd never even met another person with more than two eyes on their body. She couldn't imagine her mom was much different. There would be no real way to know one way or another until there was no turning back. She felt like throwing up.

There was a knock at the door.

"Zoe, you in there?" her mom asked.

"Yeah, I'm here," Zoe said. She pulled her sleeve further down over her shoulder, and tucked her hand behind her.

The door opened and her mom stepped in. She was holding a glass of water. "How're you feeling?" she asked.

"Better, I think" Zoe said.

"Good," Tiffany said. She set the water down on Zoe's nightstand and sat down on the bed. "I've been worried about you, honey. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," Zoe said. "I've just not been feeling well." Her mind was racing. Did she know? Was she trying to get Zoe to admit to the eyes? No, that couldn't be it. She didn't know anything, right? Right. Right?

"Is that really it?" Tiffany asked. "You've been acting differently for the past few weeks. It's worrying me. You haven't been to church in God knows how long-"

"Two weeks," Zoe said.

"Don't talk back," her mom said. "However long it's been, it's got me worried. I don't want to see you drifting away from the church. You know we're all here for you, right?"

"I know," Zoe said. She felt like she was running on autopilot; responding to stimuli without taking any time to process. Lying was becoming second nature. She wondered if it made her a bad person.

"Good," Tiffany said, smiling. Zoe felt a pit in her stomach. It almost felt worse to see her mom believe the lie than it did to think about her finding out. Zoe could feel every bone in her body screaming, begging her to raise her hand. That's all it would take, and the anxiety would be gone. It would all be out in the open.

Her mom left the room.

## Chapter 5

The ball flew down the lane, it crashed through the pins like a meteor through a sheet of cardboard. "Yes!" Gwen shouted. She dropped down on the bench and grabbed her soda from the little table. "Your turn."

The bowling alley was almost deserted. A janitor mopping farther down, a teenager behind the concession booth, a few kids in the arcade on the other side of the building. Beyond that it was just two girls, Zoe and Gwen, on their third game in almost as many hours.

Zoe was only arguably good enough to not need the rails, but Gwen was a master. She had practically grown up in a bowling alley, and it showed. Zoe held the ball in both hands, she took a step forward and threw the ball forward. Her ball flew and immediately fell into the gutter.

"Rough," Gwen said. She patted Zoe on the back as she stood. Zoe was glad she'd asked Gwen to hang out. It felt comforting being around someone who was like her, but was comfortable with that. "Can I ask you something?" Zoe asked.

"Shoot," Gwen said. The ball dashed forward into an effortless strike. "How do you do it?"

"I told you," Gwen said. "My dad ran one of these places, so I'd hang out with him at work and bowl." "That's not what I mean," Zoe said. "You're so comfortable in your own skin. You don't hide your eyes, you display them openly. I can't even imagine doing that. I always worry about what people would say if they saw me."

"Oh, that," Gwen said. She sat down next to Zoe. "Honestly, I still struggle with it sometimes. All of us do. But something I realized a long time ago is that if you spend your whole life worried about how other people will respond to you, then you'll never really get to live. There are always going to be people who don't like you, some who even hate you, that's just a fact of life. Letting yourself be bound by their opinions just leads to heartbreak. It's better to live in a way that makes you happy, and to not get worried about how other people will react."

"But what if the people in your life see you as a freak?" Zoe asked.

"Then they weren't really people who were worth your time to begin with," Gwen said. "You still haven't told your mom yet, have you?"

"No," Zoe said. "Every time I think about it, I just get this pit in my stomach, or I freeze up, then the moment passes. I guess I'm not ready yet."

"Can I give you a bit of blunt advice?" Gwen asked.

"Sure," Zoe said.

"You're never going to be ready. Never. I stopped hiding my eyes four years ago," Gwen said. "I'm still not ready. There's going to come a point where the stress of hiding it gets worse than the stress of telling her."

"What if it never does?" Zoe asked.

"Then you'll be hiding it forever," Gwen said.

Zoe felt her hands shaking. Forever? The thought of it made her want to scream. A lifetime of hiding away, wearing more and more scarves and gloves and jackets, turtlenecks and hats, always on the razor's edge of being caught, always terrified to go out.

"Hey," Gwen said. She grasped Zoe's hands. "It's okay. You'll get there when you get there. I promise."

Zoe could see two paths in front of her, clear as day. On one path, she hid, and did so for the rest of her life; growing old and bitter, always afraid of what others will think of her. On the other, she saw the path Gwen had taken; going it alone and throwing caution to the wind. Never apologizing for who she was, and being better for it. Despite that clarity, she felt nervous. Obviously there was a better option in front of her, but she wondered if she had it in her to take that path. She certainly hadn't been so far, even when she wanted to just scream it out to the world. It sometimes felt like she was physically incapable of telling Tiffany, like if she did, she'd burst into flames before her mom had a chance to react.

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Zoe ran, and the torches followed. Eyes covered her body, and she could hear screaming behind her. She ducked into an alleyway and watched as the mob of people passed. They were all from her church, and they were all out for blood. She sat down behind a trash can and cried. She didn't even do anything, and yet these people, who had been there for her all her life, wanted her dead. She heard footsteps.

"Zoe," a familiar voice said.

"Mom?" Zoe asked. She peeked her head out. She could see her mom standing there, tears streaming down her face. "Mom I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"Don't worry," her mom said. "I know how to fix this. She's down here!"

The mob rushed into the alley towards them, and Zoe could see the smile under her mother's crocodile tears. Zoe ran down the alley. The mob was getting closer, and she could see the light from their torches in front of her. For a brief, beautiful moment, she thought that maybe she could get out of there, outrun them somehow. Then the chain link fence came into view. Zoe jumped onto the fence and struggled to climb it. Her feet slid on the metal, and she slid, so that only her fingers could keep her up.

Then the mob reached her.

They grabbed her and yanked her to the ground. Some of them kicked her, others burned her with torches, and just as she thought it would all be over something happened.

She woke up in her bed, screaming.

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Zoe lifted a spoonful of cereal out of the bowl, then dumped it back in. Her eye twitched under her gloved hand.

"What's the matter, honey?" her mom asked.

"Nothing," Zoe said. "I just had a bad dream."

"What happened in it?"

"I'm not really sure," she lied. "I think I was being chased by some kind of monster."

"Hey Zo," her mom said. "Why have you been wearing gloves so much lately?"

Zoe looked down at her cereal. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. "I've been cold," she said.

"It's May," her mom said.

Tiffany sat down and reached for Zoe's hands. Zoe pulled back.

"Let me see," she said.

Zoe could feel her guts sink into what felt like an unending abyss. She extended her gloved hands forward. Tiffany pulled the gloves off, revealing the one, tear-filled eye on her daughter's left hand.

Silence suffocated the room for what felt like eternity, Tiffany stared at the eye, unable to form words. Her mouth wide open. Zoe could feel every part of her body tense up. Her body was screaming. If she hadn't been sitting down, her hand held by her mother, Zoe's legs probably would have taken her far away, maybe to another country.

"I-" Tiffany said, collapsing the silence. "I don't understand."

Zoe fought through a baseball-sized lump in her throat. "It grew in two weeks ago. I would have said something sooner, but I was honestly scared of how you'd react."

"How I'd react?" her mom said. "What am I such a terrible mother that you think I'd do something?"  
"No, I-"

"I'm a good mom," Tiffany said.

"I know," Zoe said. Her heart was racing.

"We need to get you to a doctor."

"Riley took me already," Zoe said. "The doctor said it was some sort of new medical phenomenon, and they didn't really know much about it, but from what they did know, there wasn't anything physically wrong with me."

"Nothing physically wrong?" her mom asked. "Zoe there's a fucking eye in your hand!"

Zoe stared, unable to say anything. Her mind raced but couldn't form a single sentence.

"So it just grew in, out of the blue?" her mom said.

"Yeah, it-"

"You didn't take something at a party?" Tiffany asked.

"What?" Zoe asked. "No, I-"

"Zoe if you took something you need to tell me," Tiffany said. "Some drug or substance or fucking peyote-infused-"

"It just happened!" Zoe said, tears welling up in her eyes. "I was at the arcade and I felt pain, then it grew in."

"We'll need to get Pastor Greg to look at it," Tiffany said. "Maybe he'll be able to stop whatever it is."

"What can he do?" Zoe asked. Aside from her heart, which beat like a drum, her entire chest felt hollow.

"Zoe, he's a priest and you're growing eyes out of your body," Tiffany said. "What if it's some kind of demon or something?"

"It's not a demon," Zoe said.

"How could you possibly know that?" Tiffany asked. "I know you think you know everything but some things are beyond you. I'm not stupid you know."

"I never said-"

"Put the glove back on it," Tiffany said.

Zoe pulled the itchy fabric back over her eye.

"You need to keep that thing hidden so people don't talk," Tiffany said. "I mean imagine what people would do if they saw it?"

Zoe felt sick. She'd been thinking that same thing for two weeks, but hearing it come out of someone else's mouth, her own mother no less, made it feel so much worse. At least she could tell *herself* to shut up.

"Get in the car," Tiffany said. "We need to go."

## Chapter 6

"Friends," Pastor Greg said. "I worry about our flock. As we navigate these tumultuous times, it can be easy to lose sight of the good light of the lord. This is not a time to relax, as the devil's influence can be seen everywhere." As he spoke on autopilot, Greg thought about his place in the world. They were eating out of his hands, but they were one little church in one little small town. He was missing something. Respect? No. He had that, the people adored him. Brains? No, he was smart, damned smart. A genius by local standards at least, maybe even more. Maybe it was something else, something less standard. Whatever the answer was, it haunted him. A nameless, invisible being, just out of reach but always on the tip of his tongue. He could feel its presence, its closeness, and it was driving him crazy.

Fifteen feet away, Zoe was sitting, adjusting her gloves. The fabric scratched her eye badly, but the anxiety she felt next to her mom in that moment dwarfed any discomfort she could ever imagine getting from a piece of fabric. The car ride had been hell. Neither of them could even look at each other. She felt like a criminal, guilty for her heinous crime of existing in the light. She wondered if there would ever be a point in her life where she'd feel normal again. Did Gwen feel normal? She definitely seemed comfortable in her own skin.

"Zoe!" her mom shouted. Zoe looked up. The service had ended, and most of the church was already empty.

"Sorry," Zoe said.

"Just come on," her mom said. "I don't want to keep him waiting."

---

Pastor Greg Strauss stared at the eye on Zoe's hand, lost in thought. He'd seen something online about these things, but a few badly-cropped pictures were nothing compared to the moving, living eye in front of him. He could use this.

"Well?" Tiffany said.

"Well," Greg said. "The lord works in mysterious ways. Maybe we should take this as a sign."

"A sign of what?" Tiffany asked.

"A sign to appreciate what we have," Greg said. "To think about our misdeeds, it's not really for me to say, but I'm sure the path ahead of you will reveal itself in time."

"Isn't there anything you can do?" Tiffany asked. "Anything you can suggest?"

"Prayer, if you feel a need." He turned to Zoe. "What I really want you to think about though, Zoe, is what this all could mean. I'm sure there's a reason for this tragedy, and I encourage you to ponder it. Maybe the lord is doing this to challenge you in some way, or maybe it's some form of atonement for something you've done."

Zoe felt a chill go down her spine. She wanted to run from the room, out the door, out the window, wherever she could, but her legs felt frozen. Despite Strauss's smile, and her mom's clear concern, she could feel a subtle hostility, and as she sat, staring at Greg's white, perfect teeth, she started to put the feeling into words. It was that assumption that filled the room, that this thing was bad, and that there was no version of this that would be okay, ever.

---

"At least they didn't scream and call you a freak," Riley said. They shoved a handful of popcorn into their mouth.

"I guess," Zoe said. "But it was just so different, you know?"

"Different from how they usually treat you?" Riley asked.

"No," Zoe said. "Do you remember the support meeting? How two different people looked at my eye and admired it? Gwen even called it gorgeous."

"I think I remember that," Riley said.

"Well, when I was at the church, it was like a completely different thing. Like it was some evil growth that needed to be dealt with rather than lived with. Does that make sense?"

"Kind of," Riley said. "But what did you expect? I know I play it for laughs sometimes, but that church really does creep me out."

"I guess some of the people are kind of judgy there," Zoe said.

"Yeah!" Riley shouted. "Like that pastor dude, Gary?"

"Greg," Zoe said. "Greg Strauss."

"Yeah! Greg!" Riley said. "That guy bugs me."

"How?" Zoe asked. "He's so nice."

"I don't know," Riley said. "Something about him just makes me uncomfortable."

Zoe slumped down on the bed. "All of this makes me uncomfortable," she said. "I mean, why me? What did I do?"

"You didn't do anything," Riley said.

"But what if I did?" Zoe asked. "What if I didn't pray enough or I didn't take things seriously enough?"

"Hey," Riley sat up. "You didn't do anything wrong. If not going to church was enough to make you sprout eyes out of your body, wouldn't I be covered in them? I don't believe a word of that shit, and you're miss churchy-church. This is just something that happened. It's no one's fault, and trying to pin blame is just going to stress you out."

"You sound like Gwen," Zoe said.

"Oh?" Riley asked. "When did you see Gwen?"

"Yesterday," Zoe said. "We went bowling."

Riley smiled.

"What?" Zoe asked.

"It's just," Riley said. "I saw how you looked at her on Friday. I'm glad you met someone."

"I haven't met anyone," Zoe said. "Not like that anyway. It's just nice to talk to someone who's been through this before."

"Right," Riley said. "Whatever you say."

"I mean it," Zoe said. "We're just friends." She could feel herself blushing. Did she like Gwen? They'd only just met, but at the same time Zoe couldn't deny the comfort she felt when they were together, like they were the only two people in the world. She was beautiful, and smart, and kind, and- Zoe stopped herself. She couldn't think like that. Thinking like that could lead her to other thoughts, and those thoughts would only make things worse.

She took a handful of popcorn.

---

Tiffany Dreyfus knelt by her bed, hands together.

"Lord," she said. "I don't know what it is I did to deserve this, but please find it in your heart to forgive me, and to forgive my daughter. She's a good girl, and whatever she did to deserve this

punishment, I know it's only because she's lost her way. I don't know what to do, but I have faith in your love and your light. Please show me the way. Amen."

## Chapter 7

"Okay," Gwen said. "Aliens land on your lawn, and they say they'll blow up the planet, unless you can do something, anything, better than anyone else on the planet. What do you do?"

"That's ridiculous!" Zoe laughed. "How could I possibly know for sure that there's anything I can do that someone else can't beat me at?"

Gwen leaned across the table, smiling. "That's the trick. You don't. But, in this scenario, you've got to do something right? So what do you think gives you the best odds?"

Zoe's eyes wandered to the pepperoni pizza between them, Gwen's treat. "Okay, so if I've got to be better at it than anyone, it should probably be pretty specific, right?"

"I would expect so," Gwen said. "I mean unless I'm sitting across from the secret world tennis champion or something."

"Okay, I think I've got it," Zoe said. "Name a horror movie, and I can tell you the director. I bet you I can name anything you can think of as long as it was made between 1958 and 1997."

Gwen squinted. "You're on. Night of the Living Dead."

"That's a warm up, right?" Zoe asked. "George Romero, give me a real one this time."

"Fine," Gwen said. "Teenagers from Outer Space."

"Not a horror movie, but Tom Graeff," Zoe said. "He actually later lost it and declared himself to be 'Jesus Christ II,' and tried to legally change his name. Now give me a hard one."

Gwen pulled out her phone and searched for a few minutes. "Okay, Messiah of Evil."

"Trick question," Zoe said. "Willard Huyck is the director listed but it was also co-directed by Gloria Katz."

"Damn," Gwen said. "Not bad."

"What about you?" Zoe said. "Aliens, lasers, all that jazz, what can you do that no one else can do better?"

"I'm really good at posing hypothetical scenarios," Gwen said.

Zoe laughed. "You're ridiculous."

"Maybe," Gwen said. "But at least I'm cute." She looked at Zoe's gloved hands. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Sure," Zoe said.

"Do you ever think you'll get to a point where you won't feel a need to cover those eyes up?"

"I-" Zoe trailed off. "I guess maybe. How long did it take you?"

"Months," Gwen said. "At first it was just a discomfort thing, you know how it gets irritating when fabric rubs against them?"

Zoe nodded.

"That's why I stopped covering them at first," Gwen said. "The irritation bugged me too much, but after a while it started to just feel like it was me. Even if it didn't hurt, I don't think I'd want to cover them up."

"Is that why you got the tattoos around them?" Zoe asked.

Gwen nodded. "I wanted to accentuate them. I mean, I think they're beautiful, and they're a part of me, so getting to really show them off to the world seemed like a no-brainer."

"Wow," Zoe said.

"What?" Gwen asked. "Do you think that's a dumb reason?"

"No!" Zoe said. "I guess it's just hard for me to really imagine being that comfortable with these things, especially when people can be the way they are."

Gwen frowned. "What happened?"

"What? Nothing," Zoe said. She stared down at her pizza.

"Zoe, come on," Gwen said. She extended a hand and tilted Zoe's head up to meet hers. "You can tell me."

"It's just," Zoe said. "My mom found out about the eyes."

"Shit," Gwen said. "What did she do?"

"They took me to see our pastor," Zoe said.

"Fuck," Gwen said.

"No, no, it wasn't too bad," Zoe said. "He didn't call me a freak or anything."

"That's like below the bare minimum you know," Gwen said. "What did he say?"

"Just that I needed to think about why this might have happened," Zoe said. "That maybe it was God's way of challenging me."

"I've heard that one before," Gwen said. "Did he make you feel guilty and like this was some kind of punishment for misdeeds?"

"I mean, he didn't outright-" Zoe sighed. "Yeah, he did."

"If I had a dollar for everyone who treated me like I was burdened by some awful disease when my eyes first started coming in I could buy a bowling alley," Gwen said. "People like that love to show off how sympathetic they are while making you feel like shit."

"But at least they mean well, right?" Zoe said.

"Even if that were true," Gwen said. "They're doing way more harm than good."

"How so?" Zoe asked.

"They're perpetuating this idea that this is some great tragedy," Gwen said. "That we're victims of something awful instead of people like anyone else."

"Aren't we though?" Zoe asked.

Gwen put a hand on Zoe's. "I know it can feel like that, especially when the people you care about are making life harder, but no, we're not. I mean, it's not like we're dying of too much sight or something."

"This isn't fatal, and it's not harmful, just different, and despite what some people might like to say, different isn't bad."

---

The bright red 'Open' sign of Pizza Shack fizzled out just as Gwen and Zoe stepped out into the street.

"Thank you for this," Zoe said. "I needed it a lot more than I realized."

"Who's to say 'this' is over?" Gwen asked. "The way I see it, we've still got a whole lot of night left."

"What did you have in mind?" Zoe asked.

Gwen smiled. "Come on," she said. She grabbed Zoe's hand and led her down the street to a bright neon sign for a movie theater.

---

The theater was pitch black as they sat down, and nearly empty. Zoe could only see the backs of maybe ten heads from their place in the rear of the theater.

"So you're just not going to tell me what we're seeing, are you?" Zoe whispered.

"Nope," Gwen said. "That's the fun part."

The screen flashed to life, and Zoe was immediately thrown into this new world. She was no longer Zoe Dreyfus, the girl with freakish eyes growing out of her, she was Gladys, the young woman on the screen, coping with the loss of her innocence in wake of the death of her father, a father who had left her a mysterious mansion in the Italian countryside. She leaned back in her seat, and felt a body next to her.

"Sorry," Zoe started to adjust.

"You're fine," Gwen said. She leaned a little into Zoe. "You know if you want, you can take off that glove and roll up your sleeve. I can tell you from experience that movies always look better through new eyes."

Zoe pulled the glove off her left hand, then raised it a few inches up, so it could see the screen for the most part.

"What're you doing?" Gwen asked. "May I?" she moved her hand towards Zoe's. Zoe nodded, and Gwen grasped her hand. She brought Zoe's hand over her own shoulders, letting it rest on her left arm. Zoe blushed. "Now shut the eyes on your face."

"What?" Zoe asked.

"Trust me. It's a whole new level of clarity," Gwen said. "If you're feeling adventurous, shift over a little and roll up your sleeve."

Zoe faced Gwen's seat, then rolled her sleeve up. She took a deep breath and shut her two original eyes. The whole film felt more vibrant, deeper somehow, even more than when she'd pulled her eye out at Night of the Living Dead. "Wow," she whispered. The whole thing felt surreal, like when you put your face in a pool but keep your ears above water. She felt her heart race as Gwen shifted, as she took deep, slow breaths.

"Hey," Gwen whispered. "Open your eyes."

Zoe opened her eyes to see Gwen, staring straight at her, the light from the screen giving her the slightest glow. She was leaning in, just a hair, but enough for that thought to come back, that dangerous, frightening thought, that would only make things more complicated. That simple, beautiful, scary thought; Gwen was beautiful.

"I-" Zoe could feel her cheeks getting hotter, and the pounding in her chest drowned out every other thought. Before she fully realized what was happening, she had leaned in, bridged the gap, she was kissing Gwen. Every thought vanished, and the small darkness of the theater faded into a stronger darkness, one that was beyond light, beyond reason. In that moment, for that brief, beautiful second, they were the only two people in the universe.

"Excuse me!" a voice from the right shouted. "What the hell are you two doing?"

Zoe pulled away from the kiss to see an older woman standing right next to them.

"Oh, I-" Zoe felt like she wanted to run, to hide. Her eyes darted around for an exit.

"What's the problem?" Gwen asked. She rose, all eyes glaring at the woman in front of her.

"That's disgusting," the woman said. "You two should be ashamed of your-" she saw the eyes on Gwen's neck and arms and went white. "What *are* you?"

"I'm a scary monster that eats little children and old hags," Gwen raised her hands into make-believe claws. The woman screamed.

"What's the problem?" a large man walked over. He was wearing a polo shirt that said 'Security' on it.

"That freak threatened me!" the woman shouted.

"She started harassing us!" Gwen took a step forward. "We weren't bothering anyone and she started freaking out at us."

The guard turned to Gwen, his gaze locked onto her eyes. He backed away. "Ma'am I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Me?" Gwen asked. "Why the fuck should I have to leave?"

"Because you're a freak!" the woman shouted.

"You're causing a disturbance," the guard said.

A few people in the theater stood and turned towards the two girls. Some began to leave their seats and step forward.

"I don't like this," Zoe whispered. "I think we should go."

Gwen snapped out of her stand off and saw the crowd starting to gather. "Yeah," she said.

On the other side of the theater, Pastor Greg sat, watching, not daring to say a word or draw even the smallest bit of attention to himself.

---

The two girls sat in the car as Gwen drove them down the empty road. Zoe looked out the window, watching the signs as they passed from sight.

"I'm sorry the night ended on such a sour note," Gwen said.

"It's okay," Zoe said. "It's not your fault people are shitty."

"It wasn't all bad though," Gwen said.

"No," Zoe smiled. "It wasn't all bad." A sudden pit developed in her stomach as she realized how much more complicated falling for a *girl* had made things, especially one covered in eyes like hers.

"I wasn't too much, was I?" Gwen asked. "I hope I didn't make you uncomfortable."

"No, no," Zoe said. "Nothing like that, it's just-" she trailed off.

"Just what?"

"It's just that so much is happening right now," Zoe said. "I feel like the flood gates are opening on my life, and everything is getting swept away. I don't even have a handle on the eye thing, and then you come along and you make me feel like I'm on top of the world. But now I've got a whole new thing to figure out, and a whole new thing my mom won't understand. A month ago I had a really strong idea of who I was, and I felt secure, now I feel like every day something new happens that completely recontextualizes who I am and what my place in the world is."

"You know when I first started growing eyes I ran away from home?" Gwen asked.

"You did?"

"Yeah, I was so scared of how my family would react, I just left," Gwen said. "I thought it would be easier to start fresh."

"Was it?" Zoe asked.

"I'm really not sure," Gwen said. "It was easier in some ways, I got to become the person I wanted, without worrying about people remembering how I used to be, it was freeing in a way. But at the same time, I never really was completely free of who I used to be. I still think about them sometimes, late at night."

"Did you ever think of going back?" Zoe asked.

"I still do, at least once a week," Gwen said.

Zoe put a hand on Gwen's. "If you need someone to go with you, let me know." It was at that moment when Zoe realized something. She could see the roof of the car out of the eye in her hand. "Fuck! I left my glove at the theater!"

"Oh shit," Gwen said. "Do you want to go back for it?"

Zoe thought about the crowd forming around them in the theater, a sharp chill surged through her body. "No, I really don't."

## Chapter 8

Tiffany Dreyfus thought of her daughter. She had never been the most devout girl in the church, and she did love those trashy horror movies, but she wasn't evil. Tiffany wondered what she'd done to deserve this.

She left the room, and wandered towards Zoe's room. This whole thing was just so much. In less than two minutes her daughter had gone from perfect to-  
She stopped herself from finishing the thought.

---

Gwen fumbled with the key to her apartment door. "It sticks sometimes," she said.

The door opened, and a tall man with an eye on his forehead stood in front of them. Zoe recognized him from the support group.

"Hey Kurt," Gwen said. She pushed past him.

"You didn't get the new key yet, did you?" Kurt asked. He turned back to Zoe. "Hey, Zoe, right?"

Zoe nodded. "How have you been?"

"Come on!" Gwen shouted from another room. Kurt gestured inside, and Zoe walked in the direction of the noise. Their apartment wasn't attractive in the conventional sense. The walls were covered in cheap white paint, only decorated with a few posters. The carpet was rough and a little dirty in places, and the whole place smelled dusty. It wasn't attractive at all, but it felt welcoming in a way that Zoe's perfect suburban house just didn't.

She followed the dim hallway into Gwen's room. String lights bathed the room in kind orange tones, her walls were covered in small paintings, and a layer of clothes covered most of the floor. Gwen was kneeling down by the entrance to her closet door, searching through plastic storage bins.

"Gotcha!" she shouted. Gwen held up a pair of fingerless cotton gloves.

---

Zoe crept through the dark house, it was past one in the morning, and the entire house was silent.

"Where were you?" a voice from behind asked. Zoe jumped, then saw her mom, holding a cup of tea, sitting in the dark living room, staring back at her. Zoe turned on the lamp.

"I was with my friend Gwen," Zoe said.

"Who?" her mom asked. "I don't know a Gwen."

"She lives in Harper's Ridge," Zoe said. "We got dinner and went to a movie."

"Oh," her mom said. "Where did you meet her?"

"Riley took me to a support group for people with, extra eyes," Zoe could feel the weight of those last two words, almost like she had accidentally told a secret.

"I see," her mom said. "You need to be more careful with strangers. They could just be creeps, especially if they-" she trailed off.

"If they what?" Zoe asked. "If they have too many eyes?"

Her mom folded her arms. "Watch your tone."

"I get that this is hard for you," Zoe said. "But try to think about what this is like for me. I feel like a freak constantly, then I make a friend who's like me, who gets what I've been going through, and because she's like me, you immediately don't trust her."

"Do you get what this is like for me?" her mom asked. "I do everything I can to make your life perfect, I clothe you, feed you, give you a place to sleep, and how do you repay me? By going crazy,

staying out all night and making me look like a bad mom. What did I do to you exactly? Where did I go wrong? You got everything you ever wanted as a kid and now you're this wild child. It's no wonder that God cursed you with that fucking eye!"

A heavy silence blanketed the room.

Tiffany's face went white. "Zoe, I-"

"I'm going to bed," Zoe said. She walked up the stairs and slammed her door.

## Chapter 9

"That's so fucked up," Riley said. "I can't believe she said that to you."

"I can," Gwen said. She tossed a bowling ball down the lane. "Kurt's dad has said worse."

"Yeah but I know her mom," Riley said. "I never would have imagined she'd be so hateful."

"New eyes can do that to people," Gwen said. "Maybe since it challenges their view of what's normal."

"I mean, I kind of get it," Riley said. "This is all so new to people, I can't imagine it's easy to just accept."

"Who said this was new?" Gwen asked. "People have been scapegoating many-eyed people for centuries, maybe longer."

"You're kidding," Zoe said. She traced the top of her hot dog with a line of ketchup. "When we went to the doctor, he said this had only been happening for the last few years."

"I can't blame him for thinking that, but it's a load of shit," Gwen said. She took a sip of her soda.

"People like us have existed for as far as we have recorded history. There are tablets from ancient societies that revere us as beings with mystical powers. A lot of those cultures actually made us their spiritual leaders because they believed we could see beyond what others could."

"What happened?" Zoe asked.

"Christianity," Gwen said. "As the church gained power, they started seeing people like us as a challenge to their authority. A lot of us were executed under suspicion of witchcraft, or heresy, and a lot of records of us got destroyed by different people over the years. Hitler actually had a special group dedicated to finding information about us and burning it."

"How do you know all of this exactly?" Riley asked.

"I've been working for almost five years on my doctorate," Gwen said. "Anthropology. I took a special interest in many-eyed people once mine started to come in. Most people still don't even know we exist, and even those that do don't know all that much about why we are the way we are."

"Huh," Riley said. They stared off into space.

"So you're telling me that if people were better, I might have actual answers about what's happening to me?" Zoe asked. "Maybe even a cure?"

"I'm telling you that people like us have been through a lot," Gwen said. "But Zoe, there's no cure, there's never going to be a cure." She put a hand on Zoe's shoulder. "Because this isn't a disease any more than having curly hair."

Zoe slumped down into Gwen's arms. "Still, maybe if we knew more, people would be less shitty about it."

"I need to go to the bathroom," Riley said. They left the lane, not noticing Pastor Greg Strauss sitting on one of the benches, pretending he wasn't watching Zoe and Gwen, not noticing the wild look in his eye.

"I hope I wasn't too intense for your friend," Gwen said.

"It's an intense topic," Zoe said. "You can't really talk about systematic censorship in an easygoing way."

"I guess," Gwen said. "How're you doing?"

"I'm okay," Zoe said. She looked up at Gwen. "Thank you for doing this, I know you guys met at the meeting, but you're both a big part of my life, and I felt weird with you two not really knowing each other."

"You know I'm always ready to bowl," Gwen said. "Besides, I like your friend, they seem nice."

"They are," Zoe said.

Gwen kissed her. "Your turn," she said.

Zoe jumped up. "Alright," she said. "But you promised you'd help me with my form."

"Your form is fantastic," Gwen said. "It's your bowling that needs work."

"Shut up!" Zoe giggled. "Really though, how do I do this?"

Gwen stood up. "Move your right foot a little closer," she said. "Now tighten your wrist. You see the seven red arrows on the lane?"

"Yeah," Zoe said.

"Aim for the one to the right of the middle," Gwen said. "Hey, do you want to try something?"

"What?" Zoe asked.

"Take off your gloves, roll up your sleeve, and look through your new eyes," Gwen said.

"Are you sure?" Zoe asked. "There are kind of a lot of people here."

"What does it matter?" Gwen asked. "Two people or two-hundred, you're still the same you."

"What if they freak out?" Zoe asked.

"If they were going to freak out, they probably would have already," Gwen said. "I'm a regular here, they're all used to seeing a few extra eyes. Give it a try."

Zoe took a deep breath in. "Okay," she said. She pulled off her glove and raised her right sleeve. The bowling alley felt clearer, and she felt an immediate awareness of the space that she didn't have before. She took a deep breath and stepped forward. The ball flew from her hand with singular purpose, hellbent on destroying the pins in front of it. It glided across the wooden lane, and crashed into the pins, knocking them all down in one fluid motion.

"God damn," Riley said, their hands still dripping with water. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

"I've got a hot girlfriend who's a master bowler," Zoe smiled.

"I do my best," Gwen said. She tried to hide a blush. "So I'm your girlfriend now, am I?"

Zoe felt her cheeks get hot. "I mean, is that okay? I'm sorry, was that-"

Gwen hugged Zoe "Of course it's okay." she kissed Zoe's head. "Jefferson! You're up!"

"Right," Riley said. They jogged to the ball rack.

## Chapter 10

"So what did you think?" Zoe asked.

"I think you guys are adorable," Riley said.

"Shut up, we're not that bad," Zoe gave them a light shove as they walked down the concrete sidewalk. The sun was already long gone, but traces of light still brushed the horizon, bathing the neighborhood in a gentle, almost imperceptible glow.

"I'm glad you met someone," Riley said. "I think it's good for you to spend time around people who aren't in your family or your church. You seem comfortable, happier."

"I am," Zoe said.

"You ever think of leaving?" Riley asked.

"I guess, sometimes," Zoe said. "But this is my home. I've never even moved."

"I think about it," Riley said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Why?" Zoe asked.

"Honestly," Riley said. "It's this feeling I get sometimes. Like I'm standing on top of a powder keg."

"What do you mean?"

"It's the looks I get from people," Riley said. "They smile at me sometimes, sure, but it's not sincere. Sometimes I can even see it change to a scowl when they think I'm not looking. It's like there's this really kind, inviting town we live in, and another one just below the surface. The other one scares me sometimes, especially when I think about what might happen if people stopped feeling like they had to be nice to everyone."

A chill went up Zoe's spine. She thought about her church, the way they treated people who were different. But that was just petty suburban shittiness, right? It had to be. They wouldn't go farther than that. Would they?

"I mean, *you* get what I'm talking about, right?" Riley asked.

"What do you mean?" Zoe asked.

"You get how shitty people can be," Riley said. "That's why you keep your eyes covered still."

A scowl formed on Zoe's face. "That's not why I keep them covered," she said. "I keep them covered because I still feel anxious about them, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't act like you understood everything I'm going through better than I do, especially when your understanding is that I'm some kind of coward too scared of other people to function."

"Woah woah woah," Riley said. "I never said you were a coward. I just meant that-"

"It doesn't matter," Zoe said. "I'm sorry for snapping, I just, I think I need some space."

---

Gwen sat, sinking into the couch like it was the world's slowest, firmest quicksand. She stared at the phone on the table. She'd only need a few seconds of being brave, then she'd be in it, moving forward, she'd be okay. She picked up the phone. Her finger hovered over the buttons, she took a deep breath. Just a few seconds. The phone rang in her hand and she almost threw it at the wall. It was Zoe. Gwen sighed. "Hey."

"Do you think I keep my eyes hidden because I'm a coward?" Zoe asked.

"Woah, where did that come from?" Gwen could feel her composure coming back, slow and steady. She was cool as ice. Right?

"I had a fight with Riley," Zoe said.

"Shit," Gwen said. "Wait did they call you a coward?"

As Zoe explained, Gwen found herself lost in her girlfriend's voice. Zoe's voice wasn't anything special, not objectively at least, but to Gwen it felt like a hug. A smile developed on Gwen's mouth, not a sudden smile, this was slow, organic, and unrelenting, like a photo fading onto a polaroid a minute after it's been taken. She could hear her girlfriend's anxiety through the phone. Gwen wanted to crawl through the speaker and wrap Zoe in her arms. She fought the urge to blurt out 'I love you.' It was too soon, right?

"It's just so much work to show my eyes," Zoe said. "You know?"

"I remember the first year after mine came in," Gwen said. "I was so scared of showing them in public. I wore thick turtlenecks that entire summer." For a brief second she was back in that summer, alone and scared, no one to help her, and no one to miss her if she failed, sweat drenched her skin and her clothes squished every time she moved.

"What did you do?" Zoe's voice cut through.

"I put on a tanktop," Gwen said. Perfect, cool as ice. "I was terrified at first, but most people barely even noticed, and most of the people that did were really nice about it. After that day I burned all my turtlenecks."

"It still sounds like a lot," Zoe said.

"It was," Gwen said. "But once it was out in the open, it got easier."

Zoe was silent, aside from a light breath Gwen could hear through the speaker.

"Hey can I talk to you about something?" Gwen asked.

"Of course," Zoe said. "What's up?"

"I've been thinking about reaching out to my Dad," Gwen said. "Maybe do a lunch. If I did, would you go with me? It would mean a lot."

"Of course!" Zoe said. "Just tell me when and where, I'll make time."

Gwen once again fought the urge to blurt out a clumsy 'I love you,' through the phone. That was the kind of thing to say in person, and probably a little later.

## Chapter 11

Zoe stared at herself in the mirror. Her eyes stared back at her. She held her gloves and instinctively winced as she moved to put them on. As she put on her jacket, she felt another type of discomfort. The cloth rubbed on her eyes, sure, and it was physically irritating, but it wasn't that. No, this wasn't physical at all. Somewhere down the line she had gotten used to the extra vision from the new eyes, and covering them made her feel like she was losing awareness, like walking around wearing noise-canceling headphones. It bothered her.

Her phone rang.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," Riley said. "I'm sorry about the other day. I didn't mean to make you feel shitty, and I shouldn't have assumed I knew everything you were going through."

"No," Zoe said. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped like that. I think you hit a nerve and I lashed out. Honestly I am scared. If it weren't for other people I think I'd actually be pretty okay with my eyes. I mean sure, they're new and weird, but they feel like a part of me."

"Friends?" Riley asked.

"Always," Zoe said. She looked at the gloves. "Hey, what're you doing later?"

---

Harper's Ridge Mall was an abandoned building with a pulse. A few small stores clung to life inside its walls, along with some restaurants that had entrances outside, and the food court, which could support upwards of three hundred people. Nobody had ever seen more than fifty there at a time. Every year the papers would insist that it would be gone within the year, they'd cite major decline, stores that didn't draw people in, and their favorite killer of small-town America; online shopping. In any other scenario they'd be right, but somehow, against all odds, the mall clung to life, unable to die, unable to live. It was perfect.

Zoe sat in the food court, a thin hoodie and a pair of fingerless gloves covering her eyes. She sipped at a large soda and watched people go by. Not many, of course, but enough.

"Hey!" Riley waved from across the empty sea of chairs and tables, working their way over.

"Thanks for coming," Zoe said. "I don't think I could have done this alone."

"You couldn't have gone shopping alone?" Riley asked.

"I couldn't have gone shopping like this," Zoe took a deep breath, shut her eyes, and pulled off her hoodie and gloves, revealing a tank top, and both of her extra eyes. She imagined crowds forming, ready to pounce, to yell, to attack. She braced for the worst, and opened her eyes.

Riley was the only one looking at her, they had a big smile on their face.

---

"Does it fit?" Riley asked through the changing room door.

Zoe watched herself in the mirror, the dress looked great, its polka dot motif made her eyes pop in a really nice way, it was comfortable and fit well. She felt a tinge up her right arm. Dull at first, but it started to grow, it felt hot. "Fuck," she said.

"We can find you another size," Riley said. "Is it too big or too small?"

Zoe fumbled with the dressing room door. She managed to open the lock just as her skin began to bubble. She clung to the clothing hooks as the pain rose. She took a deep breath and prepared for

the worst. The pain grew, but not even close to as much as it had on the first or second times. She started to hyperventilate, holding back a scream.

"Hey, hey, look at me," Riley held Zoe's right hand. "You're gonna be okay."

Zoe's skin began to split in multiple places along her right arm. The fluorescent lights grew brighter and brighter, the pain dulled, but her arm felt strange.

Something in her vision on the right was different, but she couldn't quite place why. "How many?" she asked.

"Take a look," Riley said. They turned her towards the mirror. Eight new eyes dotted her right arm, mostly clustered near her shoulder.

"Oh," Zoe said. Depth perception, that's what was different.

"Are you okay?" Riley asked.

Zoe smiled. "They really compliment the dress, don't they?" she asked.

---

Zoe placed a pile of clothes, the dress included, on the checkout counter.

"Wow," the woman in front of her said. Her nametag said Becky. "Those are gorgeous, how did you do that? Some kind of makeup thing?"

Zoe smiled. "I actually started growing them a little less than a month ago. It's some kind of medical thing."

"No way!" Becky scanned the dresses as she talked. "That's so cool! Wait, I think I heard about some writer in Kansas with that." She pulled out her phone. After thirty or so seconds, she looked back up. "Yeah, Ken Larson."

"I haven't heard of him," Zoe said. "I'll have to check him out."

"Zoe?" a voice from behind asked. Zoe turned to see a woman, a little older than her. She looked familiar. "It's Kelsy, we used to go to church together."

An image crashed into Zoe's awareness, a sixteen-year-old from years ago, huddled under a slide.

"Kelsy, holy shit, how have you been?"

"I've been okay," Kelsy said. "Suzie keeps me busy a lot of the time, but I'm managing alright."

"Suzie?"

"Oh, that's right," Kelsy said. She pulled out her phone and showed it to Zoe. There, on the lock screen, was a picture of a little girl, covered head-to-toe in eyes.

"Wow," Zoe said.

"She's my pride and joy," Kelsy said.

"When did she start-" Zoe gestured to the eyes on her own arm, unable to form the words.

"When she was around two months old," Kelsy said. "But they stopped growing in before she was one. What about yours?"

"Last month," Zoe said. "I'm still kind of grappling with it."

"I can only imagine," Kelsy said. "When Suzie first started growing them I was so scared, I didn't want her to grow up worried about how people would treat her."

"What did you do?"

"What my parents didn't do for me," Kelsy said. "I was there for her."

Zoe felt a tinge of envy for the little girl, her whole life ahead of her, with a mom that let her be exactly who she was.

Kelsy's phone started to ring. "Oh shit," she said. "I've got to take this. It was nice seeing you though, Zoe." She stopped in her tracks. Kelsy pulled a business card out of her purse and handed it to Zoe. "Oh, if you ever need to talk or need help, text me. I'll be in town until Tuesday." She walked out of the store to take the call. Twenty feet away, Pastor Greg sat at the food court, watching. Zoe walked back to the counter.

"Who was that?" Riley asked.

"An old friend."

## Chapter 12

Zoe laid on her bed, nose buried in a paperback. In it, a young man tracked down the mysterious person who killed his sister years before. Her phone buzzed.

"Hey Gwen," Zoe held the phone up to her ear, resting the open book over her eyes. "What's up?"

"What're you doing Sunday?" Gwen asked.

"I have church in the morning, but after that I'm free, what's up?"

"I want to go see my Dad," Gwen said.

"Oh shit," Zoe pulled the book from her eyes and sat up. "How far away is he?"

"A couple hours drive," Gwen said. "I can pick you up from your place, we can grab some lunch on the way. I'll be honest I could really use the support. What do you say?"

"Of course I'll come," Zoe said. "Pick me up around ten-thirty, alright?"

"Thank you," Gwen said. "What're you up to?"

Zoe slumped back against the bed. "I've been reading this many-eyed author, Ken Larson. Have you heard of him?"

"The mystery writer?" Gwen asked.

"Yeah!" Zoe said. "I'm like three books into his main series. I can't wait for his next release."

"Shit."

"What?" Zoe asked.

"Zoe I don't know how to tell you this, but Ken Larson died last week."

"Shit," Zoe said. "How did it happen?"

"He was killed," Gwen said. "The news is pretty sketchy about it, but it sounded bloody."

"That's awful," Zoe said. "Who would do something like that?"

"A mob," Gwen said. "At least from what I was hearing."

"You don't think it was because he had-" Zoe trailed off.

"I don't know," Gwen said. "But considering where he lived I wouldn't be surprised. Hey Zoe?"

"Yeah?"

"Stay safe, okay?"

---

Suzie hung upside down from the monkey bars. Everything looked funny upside down, like it was stuck on the ceiling. She watched the dog behind her running for a frisbee, and saw a few kids playing tag next to her.

"You have a lot of eyes," a girl to her left said.

"They started growing in when I was a baby," Suzie said. "I like your hair."

"My mom braided it last night," the girl said. "I'm Gracie."

"I'm Suzie. Wanna play hide and seek?"

"Okay," Gracie said. "Do you wanna hide first or seek first?"

"Can I seek first?" Suzie loved to seek, she was really really good at it because a lot of kids didn't remember she could see them when her back was turned.

"Yeah but no cheating, you have to close your eyes and count to twenty," Gracie said.

Suzie closed her eyes and began to count. She heard Gracie run off somewhere, but didn't dare open her eyes. In California she took a peak once with an eye on her leg, and the other kids figured it out, from then on she had to go behind a tree when she counted. Now she had a chance to reinvent

herself, she was going to win fair and square. She opened her eyes at 'twenty,' and scanned the playground. Gracie wasn't anywhere obvious. Suzie smiled, she hated when kids hid somewhere obvious, it was boring.

She started at the playground, looking through all the nooks and crannies in the equipment. Then onto the baseball diamond, then maybe-

"Hello," a man said. "What's your name?" He was wearing a black shirt with a little white thingy on his neck.

"Suzie," she said.

"That's a pretty name," the man said. "Where's your mommy?"

Suzie looked around, she was way out in the playground now, far away from the benches her mom was sitting at. Realistically it wasn't far, maybe two-hundred feet, but to Suzie it just as easily could have been two-hundred miles. As far as she was concerned, they were alone.

---

"Suzie!" Kelsy shouted. running through the playground. Suzie had just gone around the jungle gym, and now she was gone. Kelsy felt so stupid. How could she bring her out here? She knew what kind of town this was. How could she-

"Over here!" a voice from behind shouted. Kelsy whipped around to see a familiar, if not friendly face, standing next to Suzie.

"Hey, Pastor Greg," Kelsy said.

"Kelsy, it's good to see you," Greg said. "I thought you'd moved out to California?"

"We did," Kelsy said. "I'm just here for my Dad's funeral. We're leaving on Tuesday."

"He died," Suzie said.

"I see," Greg said. "I heard about his passing, I'm sorry."

"Thank you," Kelsy said. "Suzie, come on, we've got to get going."

"Oh, do you have to run so soon?" Greg asked. "We'd only just said hello."

"We do," Kelsy reached out her hand to Suzie, who grabbed it without hesitation.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Greg said. "I some questions about Suzie's 'unique' condition."

"I don't think there'll be time," Kelsy said. She started to walk away.

Greg grabbed Suzie's free hand. "How about you come to the service tomorrow?" he asked. "I think you'll really enjoy it."

"We have to pack," Kelsy said. She pulled at Suzie's hand, throwing her a little off balance, and out of Greg's grasp.

"Well have a good weekend," Greg said.

"Who was that?" Suzie asked.

"Someone I knew a long time ago," Kelsy said.

"Was he your friend?"

"No," Kelsy said. "He wasn't."

## Chapter 13

Zoe fidgeted in her jacket and gloves. Her neck felt sore. It occurred to her that the more comfortable she got with her eyes, the more uncomfortable it was to cover them up. She thought about just taking the jacket off, throwing the gloves in a trash can, and not caring about anyone who would judge. It gave her a smile, even if she knew she couldn't really do it here.

Pastor Greg fiddled with the ancient laptop at the front of the church. Zoe could practically hear the blocky piece of stone age technology wheeze and groan. It had probably been three or four years since the last time anyone had connected to the projector, and the mess of wires reminded Zoe of a bird's nest.

Blue light flooded the dusty screen, it flashed on and off, landing on the first slide of a powerpoint presentation titled 'Our Mission.' Probably another food drive or something.

"Friends," Greg began. "I'd like to start out today by asking a question. Of all the blessings our lord brings us each and every day, what do you treasure the most? Of all the beautiful gifts in your lives, what is the sweetest? Your families? Your friends? Our incredible way of life in this gorgeous country? I want you to think about those things for a moment. Close your eyes, visualize it.

"What if I told you that there were forces that wanted nothing more than the destruction of that way of life? What if I told you the devil was in Harper County, waiting in disguise? It pains me more than anything to say this, but that is not a hypothetical. The devil is here, and he has declared war." Greg Strauss pressed the space bar on the laptop. The screen switched to a picture of a young girl, no older than seven, covered in eyes from head to toe, staring at the camera in the middle of a park. The crowd gasped, and Strauss glared at Zoe.

"This poor girl was touched by the devil," he said. "His influence came in the form of these grotesque formations in the shape of eyes, a mockery of the form our lord blessed us with. It saddens me that such evil affected someone so young, that our enemy is so shameless it would attack and corrupt children. It makes me sick. 'Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.'"

Strauss flipped through slides of many-eyed people, all of which were framed in unflattering, often grimy ways. He stopped on a photo of Gwen at the bowling alley. "This is not an isolated incident. The devil's influence has begun to cover our world; infecting good, god-fearing people, destroying their humanity and turning them into inhuman monsters that further spread this demonic disease. They can look like anyone, your friends, your family, whoever they think they can use to get to *you*. 'Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.'"

Zoe felt a tinge of pain up her neck. It was starting to get hot. She stood, and vertigo hit her like a bus. She tried to run out, but snagged her foot on one of the pews, and fell. She had to get out of here, as fast as possible. Pain surged through her neck, this was stronger than the mall, by miles. She let out a scream as the skin on her neck bubbled and split open. She screamed, and the lights in the room got brighter. Her vision came back, only to find the entire church staring at her in horror. The eyes had grown all over her neck, at least ten of them.

"Do you see!" Greg shouted. "Satan's influence has even entered our church. This thing has taken over one of our own."

Zoe tripped over her own feet running forward. She got her footing and bolted out the door. There was yelling coming from behind her.

---

Gwen parked the car in front of Zoe's house. The car wasn't in the driveway yet, they must still be at church. She shut off the engine and sighed. It had been so long since she'd seen her dad. Would he even recognize her? So much had changed since she'd left. Maybe she should have called. He might not even be there. But how do you make that call? 'Hiya dad, sorry I dipped out like that, by the way, I'm covered in eyes now. Wanna get coffee?'

No, that wouldn't work. Spontaneous was better. It got everything out in the open all at once. Once Zoe was here it would all be okay. Zoe made everything okay. In private, Gwen felt fragile, a porcelain doll one nudge away from crumbling, but with Zoe she was made out of steel; she was cool and confident, she had all the answers. Zoe made her feel good about herself.

There was a crowd coming down the street.

---

Zoe stumbled over a garbage can, knocking it, and her, over. Her vision was blurry and she felt ready to puke. Her legs felt like they were going to fall off, and every breath was fire in her lungs.

She didn't even know where she was. She couldn't see anyone behind her, she must have lost them.

Her legs were drenched in sweat. She couldn't keep this up much longer.

There was a motel across the street. Zoe took painful steps forward. A moment ago she'd been able to sprint at full speed, stopping felt almost impossible, now every step was torture.

She stumbled into the office, drenched in sweat and shaking. "I need a room."

"Woah, you okay?" the teenager at the desk asked.

"I just need a room," Zoe said.

"You look like you need a hospital."

"No hospital," Zoe said. "I'm tired, that's all. Now how much?"

"Eighty for the night," the teenager said. "And I need to see some ID."

---

Zoe bolted the door and sat down on the dingy bed. She'd had this nightmare before, soon they'd find her and kill her, then she'd wake up screaming in her bed, right? She laid down and looked up at the ceiling.

She shut her eyes. "Please wake up, just wake up. Wake up!"

Her phone buzzed. It was Gwen.

**Where r u?**

"Shit," Zoe said. In all the chaos, she'd forgotten about her plans with Gwen. She started typing.

**Things are really bad, I'm at the Gray Mountain Motel, room 137. Get over here without drawing attention to yourself.**

---

An hour passed, then another, and another. It was starting to get dark. Her phone buzzed, flooding the room in light. It was Gwen.

**I'm here.**

Zoe ran to the door. She could hear shouting outside. She peeked out the curtain. The parking lot was filled with people, some were carrying baseball bats, others had fire pokers. A few in the center had some kind of animal tied by ropes, each carried by a different person on a different side, it was too dark to tell what it was.

The street lights came on, and Zoe's heart sank. It wasn't an animal.

It was Gwen, bruised and beaten, ropes tied around her neck and held by her captors. Most of her eyes were dripping blood. She was taking slow, labored breaths, and trembling.

Zoe opened the door and stepped out. "Let her go!"

Pastor Greg Strauss stood in the center, holding a phone. "You really should have called instead of just texting the address," he said.

"She didn't do anything to you, please just let her go," Zoe said.

"Didn't do anything?" Strauss said. "This thing's existence is an affront to everything that's good and sacred! We're going to cleanse the world of its sins."

"She's a person! Not some *thing*," Zoe said. "Please, let her go. You can take me instead." She held out her hands.

A few men approached, they grabbed her arms and forced her to her knees.

"Now let her go," Zoe said.

Strauss looked back to Gwen. "Kill it," he said.

"No!" Zoe struggled and tried to break free. One of the men hit her on the back of the head, and she fell forward. She felt a knee on her back, holding her down. A hand grabbed her by the hair and yanked her head up, so she could see Gwen.

The ropes around Gwen's neck tightened, each in a different direction. She stumbled up and grabbed at the ropes. Her neck was bruising, and her face was getting red. She tried to cough, but only a bead of saliva came out. She struggled and spasmed, trying to pull at the ropes. Her attempts got frantic; faster, but directionless. Her face was purple now. The eyes on her neck bulged out, they were bloody. She scratched at her neck and at the rope. Her gaze went to Zoe, and then her eyes unfocused. The scratching stopped.

She went limp. The men holding her ropes dropped them, and Gwen's corpse fell, lifeless and broken.

Strauss turned back to Zoe and smiled. "The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance," he said. "He will wash his feet in the blood of the wicked."

## Chapter 14

Human beings are built on contradictions. Some will wage wars in the name of peace, others will become monsters because they are afraid, others still will blindly follow the orders of a madman because they fear being influenced by an outside, malicious force. In Harper County, many human beings did all three of those things at once. To be as clear, it was not monsters that killed the woman Zoe loved, it was people, scared and stupid; walking contradictions willing to destroy lives because they did not understand their own hypocrisy.

It was humans, the same humans, who were now binding Zoe's wrists.

"Pastor please!" Tiffany shouted. "Isn't there anything we can do? She's my daughter!"

"She's not your daughter," Strauss said. "Not anymore. This thing may look like her, but it's a trick."

"Mom-" Zoe choked. She couldn't believe it. This woman, the one who had clothed her, bathed her, fed her, since birth, was now seriously considering just letting her own daughter be executed by a mob.

"We'll make it quick," Strauss said. "You don't need to be here to watch it, go home, get some rest."

"Wait," she said. "The other day she went to a support group."

"A support group?" Strauss asked.

Tiffany nodded. "More people with extra eyes."

"Not people," Strauss said. "Don't forget that."

She sighed. "If there's a group like that, she'd probably know how to find them. If you kill her now it'll be harder to track them down."

Strauss turned back to Zoe. "Fine, we'll get the information out of it, but to be clear, it's going in the ground once we're done."

---

Riley sipped at their Coke, watching the cars go by from their spot in the grocery store parking lot. They watched as an ice cream truck sped through an intersection, followed by a mob of kids on bikes. A semi-truck came through with a massive advertisement for hummus, and a fleet of midsize sedans, varying wildly from beige to silver.

They grabbed a handful of fries, it was a little after noon, and the lunch traffic was finally starting to die down.

A knock on their window made them drop a handful of fries into their lap.

"Beware!" the woman on the other side of the window shouted. "Beware the disciples of Satan!"

Cursed beings with a thousand eyes!"

"Go away!" Riley shouted through the glass.

The woman wedged a flier under Riley's windshield wiper. There was a caricature on it of a many-eyed person, they had horns and boils, and an evil smile, holding the shoulders of a terrified child, with big, handwritten letters.

**LEARN HOW TO PROTECT YOUR CHILDREN**

**EVERY NIGHT**

**8:30 P.M.**

**HARPER COUNTY CHURCH OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

"Shit," they said.

---

Zoe sat, her arms bound to a support beam in the church basement. Dim fluorescent lights flickered above, making the beige walls and dirty tile floor appear to pulse.

She felt no fear, no pain, nothing but an unyielding sense of loss. She could still hear Gwen's corpse hit the ground, could still feel the light fade from her eyes. She had come into Zoe's life so suddenly, so recently, but now Zoe couldn't imagine time moving forward without her in it.

She could hear footsteps coming down the stairs.

"I'll skip the small talk and tell you what's about to happen," Strauss said. "I'm going to hurt you, badly, you're going to tell me where the other freaks are; then you're going to die, and if you cooperate, I'm going to make that death quick."

"If you wanted information you should have kept Gwen alive," Zoe said. "She ran the fucking support group."

"I'll be honest with you," Strauss knelt down to Zoe's level. "I don't actually need information. Whether or not we find the other freaks now or later, I'm exactly where I want to be. The only reason you're down here at all is because I need it to look good for the morons upstairs. This needs to be a nearly unwinnable war, one that will destroy everything they love if they don't do exactly what I say exactly when I say it. They need to think that the information you give me today is vital, they need to be scared. Otherwise what am I even doing here?"

"Then why are you even bothering to interrogate me?" Zoe asked.

"It's one thing if things like you are lurking in every shadow," Strauss said. "But if I can find a group of you to destroy, I'll be even more of a hero than I already am."

"Why are you telling me all of this?" Zoe asked.

Strauss brushed the eyes on her neck with his finger. "Because I'm brilliant," he said. "And brilliance needs to be appreciated. The only problem with my plan is that if it all goes well, no one but me will ever get to appreciate it."

He dug a finger into one of the eyes and pulled it out. Zoe screamed.

"Tell me where they are," Strauss said.

"Fuck you," Zoe spat in his face.

Strauss stood. He took a few steps backwards, then ran at her. As he got close, he kicked her in the chest. Zoe coughed, tried to scream, but the wind had been knocked out of her.

"I'm going to ask you again," Strauss said. "And every time you don't tell me, I'm going to take another eye. Now, where are they?"

Zoe tried to speak, but no words came out.

Strauss smiled. "What did I say?" He put a hand on Zoe's face, then dug a finger into one of the two original eyes on her face, her left. He grabbed the eye and yanked it out.

Breath came back into Zoe's lungs. She looked up at Strauss. "You're a sick bastard, you know that?"

"That's rich coming from a thing like you," he said.

---

Tiffany sat at the far end of the church, listening to the screams of her daughter. It put a pit in her stomach. The sun was starting to set.

"You okay?" a voice to her left asked.

"Yeah Lenny," she said.

Lenny had been the one to pin Zoe down and make her watch as that poor girl was killed.

"You know that thing in there isn't your daughter, right?" Lenny asked. "It's just a thing that looks like her."

"I know," Tiffany said. "It doesn't make it easier."

"Are you sure you want to be here for this?" Lenny asked.

Tiffany nodded. "Do you think you could talk to Pastor Greg about the execution? I know this thing isn't Zoe, but it's still her face. I don't want to see her suffer."

Lenny patted her on the back and stood. "Of course." He walked towards the basement.

Tiffany lowered herself in her seat. She watched as Lenny knocked on the door, waited a moment, then led Strauss out. They walked out of the building into the yard.

She waited a second, then walked towards the basement. She could hear their voices outside, getting farther and farther away. She checked around again, no witnesses, then walked through the basement door.

"Zoe?" she whispered. "Are you in here?"

"What do you want?" her daughter's voice was weak, apathetic.

She made it to the bottom of the steps and gasped. The floor was covered in crushed eyeballs, gooey and bloody, and in the center of the room, Zoe. She was bruised and covered in blood, and every eye had been dug out of her body, including the two in her head that she'd had since she was born.

Despite the crusted blood staining her skin, she wasn't bleeding, courtesy of the accelerated healing many-eyed people get to enjoy for their first few months.

"I'm so sorry," Tiffany said.

"You should be," Zoe said. "You did this."

"Pastor Greg did this," Tiffany said.

"And you let him," Zoe said.

"I gave him a reason to keep you alive," Tiffany said. "I saved you."

"What about before then?" Zoe asked. "When he was saying that people like your daughter were dangerous, what did you do? It's people like you who let him get where he is. As far as I'm concerned you're just as guilty as he is."

"That's not fair," Tiffany said. "I didn't do anything."

"Exactly," Zoe said. "You didn't do anything. You've had so many chances to speak up, to say something, to leave. But you just sat there watching."

"I never thought he'd do something like this," Tiffany said. "I never thought he'd manipulate so many good people."

"Good people?" Zoe asked. "They were never good people. They're hateful, violent creatures. Pastor Greg just gave them a chance to be hateful and violent without feeling bad about it."

"That's not true," Tiffany said. "Nobody in this church has ever been anything but kind."

"Do you remember seven years ago?" Zoe asked. "When that girl came into church pregnant? She was sixteen."

"I think so," Tiffany said.

"You and everyone else terrorized her," Zoe said. "You made her feel like a monster. She was a child."

"It wasn't that bad."

"It was," Zoe said. "You even stopped me from comforting her because you didn't want me associated with her."

"I was protecting you," Tiffany said.

"From the good people of the church?" Zoe asked.

"Tiffany?" Strauss asked. "Get away from her."

"I was just leaving," Tiffany said. She pushed past Strauss and ran up the stairs.

---

Zoe faded in and out of sleep. She was exhausted. Everything was dim, but she could still see.

Strauss had missed an eye on her collarbone, under the neckline of her shirt. She could see light, but the shirt covered too much to make much out. She heard the door to the basement open.

"Bring her to the stage," Strauss said.

A moment later she felt someone grab her arms and lead her up the steps.

"You're making a mistake," Zoe said. "He's just manipulating you for power."

"Shut up," A man's voice said.

They led her out of the basement and onto what Zoe could only assume was the podium at the front of the church. She could hear yelling.

## Chapter 15

Riley took short, slow steps towards the church. A crowd had already started to form outside, and many were making their way in. They could see a few cop cars parked around the entrance, and officers were ushering people inside.

They joined the flow of people. Flickering candles illuminated the massive crowd, a crowd that was jammed together in tiny pews, facing the central podium, where Strauss stood, surrounded by candles. There was a tarp on the floor to the right of him.

"Friends," his voice echoed through the room. "These are dark times. The devil lurks in every corner of our little county, watching us, plotting to destroy everything. His forces are ruthless and conniving. They disguise themselves to look like us, grotesque copies covered in eyes, watching us and waiting for us to turn their backs, so they can infect our children with their unholy influence. "This is a difficult time to be an envoy of righteousness, but we have made a great victory today. We captured one of these creatures alive, and after thorough interrogation, we have learned about our enemy.

Two large men brought Zoe to the podium, and knelt her down on the tarp. Her mouth was gagged. The crowd gasped. Murmurs filled the air.

"This creature disguised itself as one of our own," Strauss said. "It killed our sweet Zoe Dreyfus, and took her place. Sadly we weren't able to learn the whereabouts of others like it, but it did reveal how many others there are. Over five hundred of these monsters have taken up residence in Harper County, many of which are hiding in our humble town.

"This is troubling news of course, but it is still a win. We now know what we are up against, and must take decisive action. I will lead this good church to fight these demons. This is not a position I relish, but it must be done. The road ahead will be difficult, and we will need more hands to help than we have now. I encourage all of you to spread the word, guide others to our church.

"In the meantime, I must ask for a moment of silence, for our fallen daughter, Zoe Dreyfus. While her death was senseless, I refuse to make it meaningless. We fight in her name, and in the name of all others like her, who were taken before their time. Tonight we will enact justice on her killer." He turned to Zoe.

"Shit," Riley muttered. They scanned the room.

Strauss walked over to Zoe. He pulled a knife from his belt, and knelt beside her. He pressed the blade against her neck.

"Fire!" a voice shouted in the back.

Strauss looked up to see bright flames creeping up the back walls. He dropped the knife and went back to the podium.

"Everyone stay calm, proceed out of the building in an orderly fashion," he said. "We'll take care of it."

The crowd pushed and shoved out the back door, trampling anyone who had the bad luck to fall or trip. Screaming filled the room as flames spread across the building's wooden walls.

Zoe felt a hand on her arm pulling her up.

"It's okay," Riley said. "I'm here."

"I have a working eye on my right collar bone," Zoe said. "If you can untie me I can run out with you."

Riley grabbed Strauss's knife, still on the ground, and cut the ropes. Zoe adjusted her shirt so that she could see. It was chaos; the building was covered in flames, and people were fighting to get out the back door. Strauss grabbed her arm, and she punched him in the face. He took a step back, clutching his right eye.

"You little bitch!" he shouted.

"Go, go!" Riley shouted.

Zoe ran off the podium and towards one of the windows, Riley right behind her. She grabbed a candlestick and slammed it into the window in front of her. The glass shattered, leaving a few pieces stuck to the rims. She knocked the remaining glass out with the candlestick, and hoisted herself out. Riley pushed her up over the edge. She only fell a few feet onto the ground, but hit the concrete hard. She struggled to her feet. Broken glass covered her. She turned back to find Riley, struggling out of the window. She grabbed their hand and pulled.

"There!" a voice from behind shouted. It was Lenny, covered in ash and dirt.

Riley fell out the window with a crunch. Zoe grabbed their arm and helped them up.

"Come on, run, run!" Zoe shouted.

Riley grabbed Zoe's hand and ran in the opposite direction of the mob. They could hear shouts behind them and sirens in the distance. Zoe was struggling to keep up, but she was alive. The car was just across the street. They tripped over a curb and fell hard onto the street, Zoe came tumbling down after them.

The mob was getting closer. Riley struggled to their feet and helped Zoe up. They kept going. They were at the car now. Zoe jumped into the back seat and Riley started the engine. They locked the doors just as the mob caught up. A few of them tried to pry open the doors. Riley hit the gas and sped away. They could see the burning church in the rearview mirror.

"What the fuck was all that?" Riley asked.

"Pastor Greg," Zoe said. "He got everyone whipped into a frenzy about many-eyed people."

"That's ridiculous," Riley said. "It's not like you're hurting anyone."

"Exactly," Zoe said. "We're a safe, easy scapegoat."

"Fuck," Riley said. "You know he had cops there? Waiting outside."

"Then it's even worse than I thought," Zoe said.

"We've got to get you to a hospital," Riley said.

"No," Zoe said. "If he has cops then there's no telling who else he has. A hospital is a death sentence."

"Then where are we going?"

## Chapter 16

"You're sure you haven't heard anything?" Kurt paced around the kitchen, his phone glued to his ear. "Well if you hear anything or see her, give me a call, alright? Thanks." He dropped the phone on the counter. Gwen had to be okay, right? She just had to be. Had her dad freaked out and done something? Zoe wasn't answering her phone either.

There was a knock on the door.

Kurt jogged over and looked through the peephole. He threw the door open to Zoe, bruised, bloody, and missing eyes, and the person who took her to the support meeting. They were both struggling to stand.

"Shit," he said. "What happened?"

"She needs medical attention," Riley said. "But the hospital might be too dangerous."

"Where's Gwen?" Kurt asked.

"I'm sorry," Zoe said. "They got her."

"Who?"

---

Kurt wrapped the last of Zoe's wounds. She looked like a mummy in an old movie, wrapped in bandages all over her neck, head, hands, and arm, save for a small spot on her collarbone, where a single functional eye remained.

"That's when they killed her," Zoe said. "Right in front of me."

"I'm so sorry," Kurt said. He put a hand on her shoulder. "She really cared about you, you know? She'd be grateful you made it out."

"I can't believe this is happening," Riley said. "What the hell are we going to do?"

"What can we do?" Zoe asked. "They could be anywhere."

"But not everywhere," Kurt said. "We can get the support group and get out, as far as possible. Then hopefully we can get the national guard or something."

"Do you know where they all are?" Riley asked.

"I have their contact info," Kurt said. "Gwen shared it with me in case she lost her phone."

"They have her phone," Zoe said. "They could start going down the list."

"That's all the more reason for us to move fast," Kurt said.

---

The Harper's Ridge Community Center would close in a little less than an hour. Zoe hoped that would be long enough. She struggled to look around.

"Do you see Kelsy anywhere? Or a little girl?" Zoe asked. She'd probably left Kelsy a hundred messages from Riley's phone. Zoe prayed her phone was just off.

"No, but it's clear," Riley said. They pulled the door open, then stepped out, gripping Zoe's hand as they did. Kurt shut off the car. As he left the car, he saw a shape just out of sight.

"Wait!" he ran in front of them, getting between them and the shape. "Who's there?"

"Kurt?" a bodiless voice asked. "What's going on?" The shape moved forward, it was a man, somewhere around twenty-five, covered in eyes. Zoe recognized him from the meeting.

"Jake," Kurt said. "Fuck I'm glad to see you. Shit's bad. This local pastor started whipping people into a frenzy against many-eyed people. They did this." He gestured to Zoe's bandaged body.

"Shit," Jake said. "That's awful."

"We need to get everyone as far away as we can now," Kurt said. "Do you know if anyone else is coming? I haven't gotten any replies."

"They're probably all at the bowling alley," Jake said. "They sent me a text like an hour ago."

"I didn't get one," Kurt said.

"Yeah Cindy didn't have your number," Jake said. "She texted Gwen and asked her to invite you. Where is she anyways?"

Kurt sighed. "She's not coming," he said.

"Not coming?" Jake asked. "What, are you just leaving her here to-" he trailed off. "Oh, you mean?"

"Yeah," Kurt said.

"They killed her right in front of me," Zoe said. "The sick fucks even took her phone so they could-" a chill surged up her spine. "Kurt we need to get to the bowling alley, now!" She ran towards the car.

"What's going on?" Kurt asked.

"They have Gwen's phone," Zoe said.

## Chapter 17

Riley's car came to a screeching halt outside the Harper's Ridge Bowling Alley. Light pushed through the tinted glass door. Kurt could see a few familiar cars in the parking lot. Zoe walked towards the door, she could see a few of the fluorescent lights flickering inside. There was a piece of paper taped to the door.

# SEE YOU INSIDE

"Shit," Zoe said. "He's here. Be careful."

"Should we even go in?" Riley asked. "It's clearly a trap."

"They might still be alive in there," Kurt said.

Zoe took a deep breath and pushed through the door. She could hear pins crashing inside, but it was different, quieter. As she got farther in, she saw that most of the alley was deserted. The lights were on, but only one lane, right in the center, was occupied. Zoe could see a few people with their backs turned sitting on the bench, and standing, bowling, was Strauss.

"I'm glad you could make it," Strauss said. He winced and gripped his arm. "That fire really was something. I guess that's what we get for leaving so many lit candles out."

"What did you do?" Zoe asked.

"See for yourself," Strauss gestured to the figures on the bench.

Riley was the first one to gasp, but Zoe was a close second, and Jake came in for a strong third place. Kurt was last to realize what he was looking at. He felt bile bubbling in his stomach, trying to force its way up. It was the rest of the support group. Their eyes had been sewn shut with a needle and thread. They were covered in dried blood and most had cuts and bruises all over them. Only one was alive, a seventeen-year-old boy named Thomas. He was tied to the corpses of his friends, and was shaking.

"You're a sick bastard," Zoe said.

"What did you do to them?" Jake asked. He was pale and looked like a corpse himself.

"We did what we could to save them," Strauss smiled. "But sadly we failed. I guess once you start growing Satan's eyes, you're just too far gone."

"We're taking him out of here with us," Zoe said. She moved to untie Thomas.

"I wouldn't bother," Strauss said. "He's just going to get tied to you next."

The entrances on either side of the bowling alley opened, and a mass of people entered. A few had ropes, others had baseball bats and fire pokers. One, near the front, was carrying a shotgun.

"Shit," Jake said.

Zoe finished untying Thomas and helped him up. The mob was starting to surround them.

"Wait, wait," Jake held up both of his hands. "Please, we can talk through this."

"They're not going to listen," Kurt said.

Riley grabbed Strauss and brought their knife up to his throat. "If anyone takes another step he dies!"

The mob hesitated.

"Stop!" Strauss shouted.

The crowd stopped.

"Now clear a path," Riley said. "We're walking out of here. Zoe, do you have the kid?"

"Yeah I've got him," Zoe said.

The mob looked to Strauss, who nodded. The mass parted and stepped back.

Riley walked Strauss forward, knife pressed against him. The group followed behind them, their eyes locked on the surrounding mob.

Jake watched the mass of angry eyes on all sides, waiting for one of them to make a move. Just a little farther, then they'd be safe, then they'd-

A foot flew in front of his, and he fell with a thud.

Riley turned, and Strauss grabbed their knife and threw them to the ground. He backed away from them, and the crowd grabbed Jake's legs.

"Run!" Riley scrambled to their feet just as a baseball bat came down on the place their head had been.

Zoe ran forward, guiding Thomas out. The crowd was running at them now. They could hear Jake screaming at the top of his lungs as he was beaten again and again. By the time the group had reached the door, the screaming stopped.

Glass shattered as a shotgun blast ripped forward, a few pellets caught Kurt in the leg. Riley helped him up, and they limped to the car. Riley ran into the driver's seat and started the engine.

Zoe led Thomas into the back seat. She slammed the door shut behind them, and hit the latch. A fire poker crashed through the window, held by a large man with a handlebar mustache. She grabbed it and held tight as the man tried to pull it back.

Riley hit the gas, pulling the man with them. He stumbled, pulling the poker out of Zoe's hand. The poker hooked on to the broken window, and the car shuddered as a tire went over the man's leg. He tumbled down and soon faded into the distance.

"Are they following us?" Riley asked.

Kurt looked back. "No," he said. "At least not yet. Fuck!" He gripped his leg, keeping pressure on the wound.

"We need to just keep driving," Riley said. "We can't stop until we're out of the state, at least."

Zoe screamed. It felt like someone was punching her from the inside. She felt her skin getting hot, and the empty places where her eyes used to be started to ache, badly. She let out another cry and suddenly felt a familiar sensation. Her bandages rubbed against something under them. She grabbed at them and started to unravel them. She could see! A few eyes had grown in from some of the wounded holes in her arm and neck, as did the one on her hand. She grasped at her face, but felt nothing new in them empty sockets on her face.

"Holy shit," Kurt said.

"What's going on?" Riley asked.

"I can see," Zoe said. "New eyes, where a few of the old ones were."

"How?" Riley asked.

"You're only a little over a month into this, right?" Kurt asked.

"Yeah," Zoe said.

"That's how," he said. "You're still growing new eyes, and wounds heal a little faster. The eyes healed back."

"God damn," Riley said.

"Do you think my original eyes will heal, too?" Zoe asked.

"I wouldn't count on it," Kurt said. "The new eyes were still relatively fresh, they heal faster since they're new."

Riley's phone rang in Zoe's pocket. She pulled it out and gasped.

"Kelsy? Are you okay?"

"Zoe, what the hell is happening outside?" Kelsy asked.

"It's bad, really bad," Zoe said. "Are you safe?"

"For now at least," Kelsy said.

"What about Suzie?"

"She's okay too, just a little rattled," Kelsy said. "What about you?"

"We've been better," Zoe said. "Where are you?"

"We're still at the hotel," Kelsy said.

"Text me the address," Zoe said. "I'll come get you." She hung up the phone. "Pull over."

## Chapter 18

Riley cinched the bandage on Kurt's leg. "This is crazy, you know that, right?" they asked.

"I still have to try," Zoe said. "She's got a little girl."

"Then take me with you," Riley said.

"No," Zoe said. "I need you to get Kurt and Thomas somewhere safe."

"I can get Thomas out on my own," Kurt said.

"Look at your leg," Zoe said. "You're in no condition to drive. Riley, you need to get them safe. I'll be fine. I've got fucking healing factor."

"No, you don't," Kurt said. "This isn't a comic book. Zoe, you've been running on fumes since all of this started. You've been beaten, you've been running, and now you've grown what, six eyes? Do you have any idea how much energy it takes to grow a new eye from scratch? Through some incredible combination of adrenaline and willpower you're still standing. You're not going to heal much more without some serious rest and medical attention."

Zoe walked over to the broken car window. She pulled the fire poker out from the window. "Then I guess I'll just have to fight my way out if things get hairy. I've got to try."

Riley sighed. "Fine," they said. "But get my hiking jacket out of the trunk first. It has a big hood so maybe you can get in without being noticed."

---

The car's headlights disappeared over a hill, and Zoe was alone. She was on a dark, silent dirt road, endless cornfields on either side of her. She turned back in the direction on town and started walking.

She started going through the plan. She'd make her way through town, slowly, and then have Kelsy meet her on the ground once she knew it was safe. Kurt had given her Gwen's spare car key, so maybe they could take Gwen's car out of town. It was probably still in front of Zoe's house.

There were headlights in the distance, getting closer. Zoe ducked into the cornfield to her left, and waited for it to pass. A caravan of cars came into view, slowing down and stopping just a little past her. A few people came out of the cars.

"Do you see anything?" one asked.

"I could have sworn there was someone on the road up here," another said.

"This is a waste of time," a third voice said. "Every second we wait is a second longer of a head start they have."

"But-"

"Let's go!"

---

"Thomas, how're you doing back there?" Riley asked.

"Are we going to die?" Thomas asked.

"What?" Riley asked. "No, no one is going to die."

"What about Jake?" Thomas asked.

Riley sighed. "Look, I won't lie to you, things are pretty bad right now. A lot of people have gotten hurt and a lot have died, but as long as I'm around, I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

"Thomas," Kurt was leaning back, his eyes shut. "What happened today was awful, it was inexcusable, and I want you to remember that. This didn't happen randomly; it wasn't an accident or

a fluke. Someone wanted power, so they decided that we were a threat, and got a whole bunch of people scared and angry, even though you and I both know we're no more dangerous than anyone else.

"One day this will all feel like a bad dream, but I want you to remember tonight, because someone will try this again; maybe they'll target many-eyed people, maybe they won't, but I need you to remember just how dangerous people like that pastor are, and how much damage they can cause." Riley looked in the rearview mirror, a set of headlights had come up out of nowhere. Before they could react, a car slammed into them from behind, and Riley's car fishtailed. They struggled to keep the car moving straight, and slammed down on the gas. The car jerked forward, just as another came up in the next lane.

---

Zoe sat at the outskirts of town, looking for any signs of activity. So far nothing, but how long could that really last?

She ducked into the alley behind the movie theater. Every sound, every creak or scuttle was enough to send shivers down her spine. She kept her hood up over her head, and the fire poker nestled in the crook of her arm, keeping it within her silhouette. It was hard to walk this way, she could only see out of a slight opening in her jacket, which she had to constantly adjust.

"Hey, spare some change?" a voice to her right asked.

She pivoted to see a man, sitting against a wall, newspapers covering his body.

"Sorry," Zoe said. "I don't have anything on me."

"What's the fire poker for?" the man asked.

"Self defense."

"Defense from creepy old men who sit in alleys?" he asked.

"Not exactly," Zoe said. Her hand slipped and the fire poker clattered on the ground. "Shit." She knelt down to get it, and light hit the eyes on her neck.

"You should really get out of town," the man said. "There's a lot of folks looking for people like us right now." He rolled up his sleeve, revealing a few eyes running along his forearm.

"I plan to," Zoe said.

"The fastest way out is the way you came," he said.

"I need to do something first," Zoe said.

"Good luck," he said.

Zoe started walking away, but stopped after a few feet. "Why don't you leave?" she asked.

"Where would I go?" he asked. "It's not like I can drive out of here, and I'm too old to walk my way far enough to make a difference."

"You could come with me," Zoe said. "I'm going to get a little girl and her mother, then we're taking a car and driving as far as we can."

"You sure I wouldn't slow you down?" he asked.

"I could use an extra set of hands," Zoe said.

The man struggled to his feet and hobbled over. "I'm Mike."

## Chapter 19

Strauss stared at himself in the bathroom mirror. He felt pain shooting up his arm, white hot pain. There was a thin cut along his throat from when that little shit put a knife against it. He felt rage, powerful, unyielding rage. He hated them, all of them. They were dumb, violent animals, and they clung to him like children. A part of him missed Zoe. At least *she* had enough awareness to hate him right back. He clutched the sink with trembling hands, staring at himself. This couldn't be happening. He'd done so much, gotten so much done in such a short window. If they found out- He slammed his fist into the mirror.

"Pastor Greg?" a voice asked. through the door.

"What is it?"

"I was wondering if I could talk to you about something."

Strauss opened the door to find Tiffany Dreyfus. As he opened the door she gasped.

"What happened?" she asked.

"It's nothing," Strauss said. "What is it?"

"Oh, well," Tiffany said. "I've been having some doubts."

"Is this about Zoe?" he asked, starting to compose himself, walking over to his mini fridge.

Tiffany nodded. "I know you're a good man, Pastor," she said. "But are you completely sure that this isn't just some kind of medical thing? What if we're hurting real, innocent people? What if we hurt Zoe?"

"I'm one-hundred-percent sure," Strauss pulled an ice pick from the fridge and started to break up chunks of ice. "That thing you spoke to earlier wasn't your daughter, it was a demon wearing her face, trying to manipulate you into doubting yourself."

"I don't know," Tiffany said. "The things she said made sense, even if I was too hard-headed to admit it at the time."

"If their actions were transparent," Strauss said. "They wouldn't be very good manipulators, would they?" He could feel her pulling away. He grabbed a handful of ice and put it into a nearby glass. He pulled a can of soda from the fridge and poured it into the glass. "Would you like one?"

"No thank you," Tiffany said. "But what if you're wrong? Everyone has been so brutal to them. If we're wrong, then we've been torturing people, killing them, and loving it."

"We're not wrong," Strauss said. "This is the danger, these things get under your skin, they make you question your faith, question the almighty. Before you know it you're helping Satan in his twisted schemes."

"What can I do?" Tiffany asked. "The doubts are there, and they're driving me crazy. I feel guilty and horrible and I don't even know if I should. I have faith in the church, but I can't shake these doubts."

"There is one thing we could try," Strauss said. "But I need you to trust me."

"I do," Tiffany said. "I trust you, Pastor."

He eyed the ice pick, still in his hand.

---

Riley's car flew down the pitch black road, dented and beaten, but still moving. Two other cars kept the pace, swerving into Riley when they had an opening, but never slowing. As far as they could tell, there were at least three behind them, maybe more.

Thomas clutched his seat with trembling hands, and Kurt was turned around in the passenger seat, looking through the rear window.

"They're going in for another hit!" Kurt shouted.

Riley tried to speed up, but only managed a slight boost before a car rammed them from behind. Their car shuddered forward.

There was a fork in the road coming up.

"Everyone, hold on!" Riley shouted. They drifted to the left as far as they could, the fork was coming up fast. The other cars came up behind them.

"Another hit!" Kurt shouted.

The car sped up towards Riley, and they swerved to the right, just as the divider came up. Riley's car grated against the left side of the divider, but kept moving, and the other cars sped into the left side of the fork.

"Fuck!" Kurt shouted.

"Was that all of them?" Riley asked.

Another car slammed into them from behind, sending the car shuddering forward.

"I think you missed one," Kurt said.

---

Zoe crouched behind a dumpster, waiting for Mike to catch up. She watched as a patrol car inched by.

"Are we clear?" Mike asked.

Zoe nodded. "We need to be careful though," she said.

"How deep into town are your friends?" Mike asked. "I need to rest."

"Not far," Zoe said. She pointed to the hotel across the street. "Once we find somewhere they can get to easily, I'll call them and they'll come down."

"How about there?" Mike pointed to an alley to the right of the building. "There's a big garage around there for deliveries, big semi trucks and stuff. We can hide back there and have them meet us by the back entrance."

Zoe nodded, looked around again, then started towards the alley. Mike hobbled behind, lagging just a little. She pulled out her phone.

"Are you here?" Kelsy asked.

"Yeah," Zoe said. "Meet me in the alley to the right of the entrance."

"About that," Kelsy said. "It might be a little while. Suzie's being difficult."

"Difficult?"

Kelsy sighed. "I think she can tell something's up. Can you wait for a bit?"

"There's really not much time," Zoe said. "If they haven't found you yet it's only a matter of time."

Kelsy paused. "Do you think you could try to talk to her?"

"Me? Why?"

"I don't know, you're many-eyed," Kelsy said. "She might listen to you, and I'm running out of ideas."

"You could carry her," Zoe said.

"She's seven," Kelsy said. "I'm not sure I can carry a seven-year-old for more than a couple blocks."

"Fuck, fine," Zoe said. "I'm on my way up." She shut off the phone and turned to Mike. "Hey, I've got a bit of a situation. Can you wait down here for a few minutes?"

"Whatever," Mike said. He slumped down against the wall. "Just don't ditch me."

## Chapter 20

Riley's back left tire exploded, and the car skidded forward. It flipped and crashed hard into the cornfield to the right of the road. Everything went black.

When they came to, they were upside down, and there was broken glass everywhere.

"Kurt," they mumbled. "Thomas? Are you okay?"

There was no answer. They heard footsteps coming forward. Riley pressed the seat belt button and landed hard on the ground. Broken glass dug into their hands. They could see a couple of flashlight beams getting closer. They pulled out the pocket knife and extended the blade.

"Did we get them?" a voice asked.

"I'm not sure," another said. The beam was pointed into the back seat, directly at Thomas. Riley struggled out of the broken driver's-side window and ran straight into the person holding the light. They dug the knife into their stomach, twisted, and yanked it back out.

"Fuck! Fuck!" the other person shouted as their partner hit the ground. They raised a baseball bat, just as Riley's knife slammed into their throat. They toppled to the ground, their flashlight still clutched in their right hand. Riley's hands were shaking. The light was pointed up at them, and it was then that they noticed they were covered in blood. They dropped the knife.

"Riley," a voice said.

"Thomas?" Riley asked. "Is that you?"

"What happened?"

"We were in a crash, but it's okay now. We're going to be okay."

---

Zoe knocked three times. The entire floor seemed deserted, no people, no life, just a seemingly endless hallway that jutted off in both directions, both of which ended in a turn. The halls would of course eventually end; but if you had told Zoe in that moment that those two hallways went on for miles and miles, she would have almost believed you.

The door opened, Kelsy was standing there, wearing a big coat over her pajamas. She had dark circles around her eyes and her hair had a few knots in it.

"She's on the couch," Kelsy said.

Zoe went in to find Suzie, huddled in a fetal position on the couch, all her eyes had locked on Zoe within seconds of her entrance.

"Hey Suzie," Zoe knelt down. "My name's Zoe."

Suzie stared back, wordless.

"I don't know how much you know about what's happening right now," Zoe said. "But I'm here to help you and your mom get back home."

"I don't want to," Suzie said. "Gracie and me are gonna play tomorrow before we go."

"Who's Gracie?" Zoe asked.

"My friend," Suzie said. "We met on the playground."

"Gracie will understand," Zoe said. "But for right now we need to get going. It's not safe."

"Why?" Suzie asked.

"There are bad people coming to hurt us," Zoe said.

"Why?"

Zoe sighed. "I don't really have a good answer for you," she said. "Sometimes people do bad things, but-"

There was a knock on the door.

Zoe stood. She walked towards the door, hesitating with each step. She struggled to put her neck up to the peephole. It was Strauss, and right next to him was Mike. There were a few others behind them.

---

Riley helped Thomas into the passenger seat of the car that had been following them. It was a black SUV, still running.

"Where's Kurt?" Thomas asked. He was covered in cuts, and shards of glass had gotten into his empty eye sockets. "Is he with us?"

"No," Riley said. They tried not to think about how they'd found him, his head caved in by bent metal, and dripping blood. When they saw him, they couldn't tell if his skin had been ripped or if there was just *so much blood*. "He didn't make it."

A few tears fell from Thomas's empty eye sockets, each one bloody and still covered in stitches. Riley hugged him. They needed to get going, the others would be there soon.

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"You're sure they're in there?" Strauss asked.

"Completely," Mike said. "She told me the room number and everything."

Strauss gestured to a man behind him, holding a fire ax. The man stepped forward. He adjusted his stance and started to chop into the door. Wood splintered, more and more with each strike. He struck again, and again, and again, each time wondering if it would feel the same way if he hit one of those freaks with the ax. The door splintered enough for him to reach a hand in and pull at the doorknob.

Strauss pushed Mike in first, followed by the man with the ax.

"Where are they?" Strauss asked.

"This is the room she told me," Mike said. "Maybe they're all hiding in a closet or something."

"Search the room," Strauss said. The others in the hall flooded in, they checked closets, under furniture, one even tore up the mattress with a knife.

"I don't understand," Mike said. "They should be here. Our deal hasn't changed though, has it? I told you what I know, you'll still let me live in peace, right?"

"I assure you, nothing has changed," Strauss said. He turned to the man with the ax. "Kill him."

The ax dug hard into Mike's shoulder. Hot blood sprayed from his body, coating the room. He screamed, the ax still wedge into his flesh. The man yanked the ax out, and Mike fell to the ground.

"Their end will correspond to their deeds," Strauss said. He turned to his flock. "Freaks get put down. No exceptions."

Zoe was shaking. She could hear Mike's pleas through the window.

"Wait! Wait! Please, I just-" the ax dug into Mike's skull, shattering it and leaving a gash through the middle of his face.

Zoe led Kelsy and Suzie down the fire escape, one step at a time. She pushed the ladder down into the alley. As she helped Suzie down the final steps, an overwhelming feeling of being watched sent shivers up her spine. She turned around to see a figure in front of her.

"Mom," she said. "Please, we just want to get out of here, get this little girl to safety."

Her mother stared back at her, blank and emotionless.

"Mom?" Zoe asked.

Tiffany stood like a department store mannequin, she had two black eyes, haphazardly covered in sloppy makeup.

"Mom? What's wrong?" Zoe asked.

"Zoe? Is that you?" Tiffany asked.

"Yeah, it's me," Zoe said. "What happened, are you okay?"

"Pastor Greg helped me out," Tiffany said, staring past Zoe, her unfocused eyes glazed over. "He fixed me."

"Fixed you?" Zoe asked. "How? What did he do to you?"

Tiffany stared forward, unblinking, not able to comprehend just what had happened when Strauss and a few others secured her into a chair, when they put her under with anesthetic, when he, in her unconscious state, dug an ice pick into her eye socket, or when he started to sever connections in her brain. Tiffany had heard of lobotomies, of course she had, but it was just something that happened in movies, right? All she was sure of was that when she woke up, she felt different. She felt like she was wandering through a dream, not quite awake, but not quite asleep. If she was able to feel anything, she would probably be terrified, but she was just blank. Zoe was in front of her now, tears streaming down her face.

"What did he do to you?" Zoe asked, shaking her mother's shoulders, desperate for any kind of response.

"Zoe?" Tiffany mumbled. "How was your day sweetie?"

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Kelsy led Suzie by the hand, right behind Zoe and her catatonic mother. They were slowing down at a dirty sedan. Zoe unlocked the car and helped her mother into the front passenger seat. She looked at the lifeless person sitting in front of her, and thought about everything she'd never gotten to say, never gotten to resolve. She thought about asking Gwen for-

Gwen was gone too, along with almost everyone from the support group and most of Zoe's eyes.

Even her future seemed to have vanished in those forty-eight hours. Gone in an instant, like the lives of so many others would be soon if Strauss was allowed to-

"Kelsy, are you able to drive?" Zoe asked.

"Yeah," Kelsy said. "Of course. You can sleep in the back if you need to."

"That's not why I need you to drive," Zoe said. She clutched her fire poker in a shaky hand. "I'm going after Strauss."

"The hell you are," Kelsy said. "Zoe look at you, you're covered in bandages, you're bruised, and frankly you can barely stand. Get in the back and rest up."

Zoe handed her the keys. "I'm not going to let him hurt anyone else," she said. "Get Suzie and my mom out of here. Once it's over I'll call you."

"What if you don't?" Kelsy asked.

"Then this'll be goodbye," Zoe said. She hugged Kelsy. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Kelsy asked.

"I should have stayed all those years ago," Zoe said. "When my mom told me to get away from you. I've always regretted that."

"You saved me," Kelsy said. "You saved my daughter. You don't have anything to be sorry for."

Zoe knelt down to Suzie's level. "Be good for your mom, okay?"

Suzie stared back. Her eyes were red-rimmed from tears.

"It'll be okay," Zoe said. "I'm going to make sure it's okay."

Zoe walked over to the passenger side door. She opened it up. "Mom, I don't know how much you understand right now, but Kelsy is going to get you to a hospital." She hugged Tiffany, who just sat and stared off into the distance.

## Chapter 21

Strauss watched his flock pile into the charred church, lost in thought. He considered how far he'd gotten in just two days. There was blood on his shoes. They'd need to be more subtle in the future. Less public killing and more private executions. That girl at the motel was probably a little too much of a spectacle. He needed to be smart, grow his numbers, leverage some political power, otherwise a bigger fish might notice him before he was ready.

Then there were the escapees.

They'd probably tell the police wherever they ended up, but he owned the police, or at least enough of them that they could lie for him. Hell, if they could grow a little bigger, he could probably extend halfway across the state without-

"Pastor, everyone's here," a voice whispered.

Strauss snapped back into awareness. He stood tall and stepped forward. "Friends, I want to thank you all for the work you've done tonight. In one night we've been able to accomplish so much. In such a short time we've been able to cull their numbers significantly, but I don't want anyone to think we've won. These devils still lurk in the darkness, they've done awful things to us; I mean, look at where we're standing." He gestured to the charred walls around him. "One of these creatures tried to burn our very church to the ground. If there's any doubt as to the evil of these creatures, just look around and remember that they came to *our* place of worship and attacked us! We've gained a foothold against them tonight, but we took losses as well. This is just the beginning, I-

Someone stepped up onto the stage, a hood covered their face, and they had something behind their back.

"What is it?" Strauss asked.

Zoe unzipped her jacket and dropped it to the floor. She held out her fire poker. "This ends tonight," she said. "Just you and me."

"Why would I do that?" Strauss asked.

"I would think someone as *brilliant* as you are wouldn't need to hide behind a mob," Zoe said.

"Someone as strong and capable as you shouldn't have any trouble going against one girl. Unless of course you want to prove to me and everyone else here that you're nothing more than a little man with a big mouth."

A tinge of anger shot up Strauss's spine. "I see what you're doing," he said. "You're trying to antagonize me so I do something sloppy."

"Well if you can see through that, you have nothing to worry about," Zoe said. "Unless of course you're as small and weak and pathetic as I think you are. If that's the case then you really should get the crowd involved."

Strauss extended a hand to the man in the front, holding the fire ax. The man tossed him the ax. He looked up at Zoe and ran forward. He swung the ax at her, Zoe jumped back. She took a swing with the poker, it hit the ax handle and sent a shockwave into her hand. Strauss kicked her in the stomach, and she hit the ground. He swung down, and Zoe rolled, just as the ax came down. It nearly hit her square in the face. She struck his leg with the poker, and he stumbled. She got back up and tried to take another swing at him. Strauss lunged back, but the point of the poker still hit him on the cheek. Dark blood oozed from the wound. Strauss smiled as his wound closed and the bleeding stopped.

"How did you-" Zoe trailed off.

"The light of the lord smiles upon me," Strauss said. "He knows what I am doing is good and he has decided to show his favor." He took another swing with the ax. This one clipped her left arm, she screamed. Strauss came down hard again with the ax, and Zoe jumped to the side. The ax dug into the floor, and Strauss struggled to get it out. Zoe took another swing, this one hit him clean in the back of the head. He fell to the ground hard, dazed. Zoe took a step forward and thrust the poker down, pouring all of her rage into that final strike. She thought about her mom, about the support group, about how he had tortured her, she thought about *Gwen*. The poker came down hard in the center of his chest, piercing his heart. Strauss looked up at her, dumbfounded. Zoe let go of the poker, still stuck inside her former pastor's chest, and took a step back. Strauss tried to speak, but no words came out. He coughed and blood splattered out of his mouth.

Zoe turned back to the awestruck crowd in front of her. They were just staring, unable to move, unable to act.

"You've all been lied to," Zoe said. "Pastor Greg didn't do any of this because he wanted to save humanity. He did this for power, he did this because he knew he could use fear and lies to whip you all into a frenzy. He made you hurt people, *kill* people. Is that really what you want to be? Brainless, violent monsters, hurting others because a man in a nice suit asked you to?"

"Devil!" a voice in the crowd shouted. "Freak!" another yelled. Within seconds the crowd had started to scream at her. A few stood up and took steps forward. Then, as quickly as their rage had come, a hush fell over the entire building. The people stepping forward stopped in their tracks. They weren't even looking at Zoe, they were looking behind her.

Zoe turned to see Strauss, struggling to his feet, the fire poker still lodged in his chest.

"You won't get rid of me that easy," Strauss said. He gripped the poker and yanked it out of his chest, spraying blood forward. "The lord has blessed me with a resurrection! If this isn't a sign that what we are doing is good, I don't know what is!"

Zoe stared at the wound in his chest through the hole the poker had made in his shirt. The stab was already closing up, fast, but there was something else. She noticed something shining just to the side of the wound, as if there was something wet there that had caught the light.

Strauss ran forward with the poker and went in for a strike. As he moved, Zoe noticed a streak of white under his shirt, where the light had reflected. She ducked out of the way of his swing and tackled him. She grabbed the poker in his hands and tried to wrestle it away from him.

"I know your secret," she said. "I saw the eye."

The color drained from Strauss's face. He'd been so careful to cover the fucking things since the first one grew in after the fire. How could he have been so stupid? Shit. Shit. Shit shit shit. Zoe moved her knee onto his chest, right where the eye seemed to be. She shifted her weight onto it. Strauss cringed and his grip loosened, just long enough for Zoe to rip the poker out of his hands. She brought the handle down hard on his face. Strauss grabbed his nose, and Zoe grabbed his shirt, right at the tear. She ripped it open, revealing a string of eyes, tracing from his chest to his shoulder. Zoe threw the poker to the side and stood.

"He's got eyes too!" she shouted to the crowd.

Strauss stood, and the entire church caught a glimpse of his eyes. "Wait, no!" he ran towards the front of the audience and waved his hands in the air. "It's not what you think, I'm not one of them, that thing put fake eyes on me to trick you! It's not-"

Strauss screamed and fell to his knees. The skin on his face began to bubble and contort. Four new eyes sprouted out on his cheeks and forehead. The crowd gasped. A few of them approached. Zoe kicked Strauss forward, off the stage and into the crowd.

As the mob surrounded him, his pleas turned into frantic screams, louder and more desperate the more and more they beat him. As Zoe made it outside, his screaming stopped, and the only sound she could hear were the meaty smacks of baseball bats hitting a corpse.

## Epilogue

Susan Hastings looked out at the invisible crowd, blinded by heavy spotlights on her, and total darkness on them. If you had told her there were twelve-hundred people watching, she would have believed it just as easily as if you'd told her there were twelve.

"When I was a little girl," she said. "A pastor in my mother's home town mobilized his entire church. Their goal was to capture and kill every single many-eyed person they could find. We were visiting at the time, and were almost killed alongside so many others.

"His name was Gregory Strauss, and he used photos of me to convince over two-hundred-fifty churchgoers that many-eyed people were corrupting children. He was killed by his own flock the next day, when they found out he had started to grow extra eyes himself. Despite his death, the killings didn't stop in Harper County. There were countless more as the days turned to months. This wasn't an isolated incident."

She pressed the space bar on her laptop, and a map of the United States came up, it was covered in red dots.

"Every dot you see there is another town where something like this happened in that five-year period," she said. "Hundreds if not thousands of many-eyed people were killed in that time. We don't actually know the real number because so many records of them were completely erased. Why was this happening? Well, in the years leading up to this tragedy, many-eyed people had entered public awareness in greater numbers and with greater consistency. Writers like Ken Larson had started to gain traction in the publishing world, as had many-eyed actors and directors in Hollywood. To be clear, many-eyed people have existed across our history, there are historical records about people like us that date back before the concept of a monotheistic god. But over those years, many-eyed people across the country had finally started to have a visible impact on modern culture. This inspired many-eyed people who had lived their lives in fear to finally go out and live their lives, without worrying about how they would be seen, or by who.

"A setting like this was perfect for people like Gregory Strauss, who were able to paint an image of evil monsters with a thousand eyes, that would pop up out of nowhere to prey on children, and if you let them, they would destroy your entire way of life. The anxiety was there, the fear was building up, Strauss and opportunists like him just lit the powder keg."

Susan stared out at the hushed crowd.

"It's easy to look back at this and say 'well maybe back then it could have happened, but something this awful could never happen now,' and sure, society has changed pretty drastically over the past thirty years. But I want to remind you that people thought the exact thing back then. Hatred can come from anywhere, so long as it's allowed to.

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Susan stepped off the stage to a roar of applause. She sighed.

"You were great!" Kelsy wrapped her daughter in a massive hug. As she put her down, Kelsy's eyes lit up. "Oh! There's someone here to see you too!"

That was when Kelsy noticed her. She had eyes growing all over her neck, left hand, and right arm, wrinkled floral tattoos traced each eye, and she had a big scar on her left arm, where the skin seemed to divet down.

"Zoe!" Susan ran over and hugged her.

"Hey kiddo," Zoe said.

"What did you think?" Susan asked.

"I loved it," Zoe said. "You remind me a lot of someone I knew a long time ago. She would have loved it."

"It wasn't too graphic, was it?" Susan asked.

"Not at all," Zoe said. "Genocide shouldn't be palatable."

Susan smiled. "How was the trip?"

"Not bad at all," Zoe said. "Riley drove most of the way. They're here by the way they just needed to use the bathroom."

Susan's phone rang. "Shit, I've got to take this," she said. She wandered a few feet away. "This is Hastings."

"You did a good job with her," Zoe said.

"I did my best," Kelsy said. "How's your mom doing?"

"The same," Zoe said. "It kills me that she's just stuck like that."

Kelsy hugged her friend.

"Sorry about that," Susan said. "There was a printing problem with the books, but it's getting handled."

"Why do you even have a publisher if they call you every time someone sneezes?" Kelsy asked.

"Printers are expensive," Susan said. "What're we thinking? Pizza?"

"When was the last time you went bowling?" Zoe asked.