

THIRTEEN

It is 3:30 in the cold, starlit Sunday morning, November 13, and the quiet on King Road is all enveloping. A whisper, it seems, would echo like a scream.

A white car appears, and it is in no hurry. It creeps along in front of 1122 as though on tiptoes. Continuing past the adjacent Queen Apartments, it climbs up the incline and is abruptly trapped in a dead end. But there's no sense of any frustration. The driver carefully executes a three-point turn, and the car exits toward Greek Row.

Is that it?

The driver cannot seem to find the will to park. He needs to stop wavering and hold the idea, the possibility, firmly in his mind. Only the driver of the white car is unreconciled. He is not there yet. But he *so* wants to because, as if summoned, he returns. The white car retraces its earlier route. But apparently he still cannot vault to the place he wants, he feels he must, reach. He can still see other possibilities. Once again, the white car exits the neighborhood.

Yet minutes later, the car returns as if pulled by an invisible force.

He needs to find the boldness to act. Except he cannot. Once again the car approaches, only finally to pull away.

And this time he is determined to stay away. It's as if he does not

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want to be that other person. He continues onto Taylor Avenue until King Road is a faint, distant blur in his rearview mirror. He is escaping. But he cannot help himself. It is 4:00 in the morning, and the driver turns around and returns a third time.

The white car has stopped, engine idling, on the asphalt parking bluff above the King Road house. Turning off the ignition will require the strength of Hercules. It seems an impossible task. It's still not too late to flee.

But he must know his hesitation is a hoax. He must understand that only the deed will silence the voices screaming like a chorus of banshees inside his head.

With that realization, self-restraint crumbles. And in an incredible moment, he finds the will. The idea has become as natural as breathing. He is committed. He turns the ignition off. The door of the white car opens. No one notices. All remains still.

A dark figure walks down the dirt incline, the ground hard with a thin coating of frost. He is heading toward the back of the house. In his gloved hand he is gripping a leather sheath that holds a Ka-Bar knife with a sharp, seven-inch steel blade. It is a killer's weapon.

THE SLIDING GLASS DOOR TO the kitchen is rarely locked, and tonight is no exception. The door glides open easily, making only a muffled sound, as slight as a sudden intake of breath, and he steps inside.

Does he listen for a telltale noise? Does he need a moment to get accustomed to this new manner of darkness? Or is the faint glow of the neon GOOD VIBES sufficient to light the way?

Once in the kitchen, he proceeds up the narrow staircase to the third floor. And this is, arguably, telling. If he were aimless, driven only by furious emotions, he would burst forward into either of the second-floor bedrooms. But he has a plan. He knows where he is going. He is a hunter stalking his prey.

Another speculation: since Kaylee no longer lives full-time in the

house, his target has always been, since the madness first crept into his thoughts, petite Maddie.

The stairs up to the third floor creak with the tread of his feet. He advances toward the bedroom door. Does his heartbeat slow? Does he feel invulnerable? Does he restrain himself, knowing that attack blows are better for this moment of delay?

When he opens the door, he finds two girls in the bed asleep. He slashes away swiftly, savagely. The wounds are long and very deep. It is quick, vicious work. In the single bed, the two lie dying, their bodies splayed yet touching. Their blood seeps into the mattress in a spreading red stain. Yet despite her wounds, Kaylee manages to lift herself up and, as if trying to escape, wedges herself into the far corner of the small room. The determined killer closes in, and she fights back. But all is quickly over, and her bloody body crumples to the floor.

The commotion and smell of blood rouses the dog, Murphy. From the room across the hall, the dog is frantic, his sense of danger keen. He bellows with large, cathartic howls.

Downstairs, Dylan wakes. Is Kaylee playing with Murphy at this time of night? She calls out with disapproval into the darkness from her bed.

No one answers, but Murphy has calmed in some measure. The sounds the dog makes are steady and low.

The killer walks down the stairwell.

Xana is awake. "There's someone here!" she cries out, the alarm loud enough so that from her bedroom across the hall Dylan hears every word. She opens her bedroom door and peers out. There is only darkness, and, closing the door behind her, she returns to her bed. This is not the time, she decides, to make sense of things.

But Ethan has emerged from Xana's room to investigate. And suddenly he is standing face-to-face with an intruder dressed entirely in black, a black mask pulled up high on the ridge of his nose. Ethan is six four, powerful, an athlete. Yet the killer does not hesitate. He lashes out

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without compunction, and an arcing blow slices through Ethan's neck, catching the jugular. His body starts to topple, and then falls in the doorway with a flat thud. Does the killer crouch over his victim and continue his attack? If so, the assault is unnecessary. Ethan is already dead.

Xana is sobbing.

The plaintive sound rouses Dylan again. She opens her bedroom door a crack and once again peers. The darkness reveals nothing.

The killer is now close enough to Xana to see that she is trembling. Despite everything that is raging in him, he selects his words with a deliberate care. "It's okay, I'm going to help you," he says.

It is a lie. He has only come to help himself.

He raises his knife and attacks.

From behind her partially opened door, Dylan hears the killer speak. Nothing is making sense. She closes the door and retreats back to her bed.

Xana, 5'3" and 113 pounds, is fighting for her life. But she is no match for the killer. He plunges his knife in deep, again and again. She crumples to the floor. Then he steps over Ethan's body and walks out of the room.

His gait is unhurried. There were four of them, and he never hesitated. He did what he had to, and he must feel exhilarated. He continues back toward the slider door in the kitchen. His self-absorption is total. He never notices that Dylan is standing in the doorway, the bedroom door flung open. And she is staring directly at him as if in a trance.

She sees a man dressed all in black, a black mask reaching up high on his face. As she processes the moment, she decides he is about five ten, maybe taller. Not muscular, but well put together like an athlete. For some reason, her eyes fix on his bushy eyebrows.

She stares at him. A visitor? An intruder? She doesn't understand what has happened. And she is extremely tired. She closes the door of her room and goes to bed, the blanket pulled up high.

Did the killer see Dylan? Does he spare her in a sudden act of

kindness? Or at that wild moment is he incapable of seeing anything? It remains a mystery.

He retraces his steps, making his way back up the hill. He is transformed. He has become what he had to become. In little more than eight minutes, ten at most, he killed four people. He gets back in the white car and drives off as the faint light of the new day begins to filter through the lead-gray sky, and the blood spreads in thin red rivulets through the house on King Road.