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## CLAIRE

I died, and I relive my death hourly. Although my absence from the world remains constant, the method changes each time. Could it be that I was strangled, staring past the mask into emotionless eyes as he crushed my larynx with his thumbs? Or was it this rope knotted around my neck? I try to grab onto memories, but they slip away like waves and the receding tide.

Nothing is clear, but I feel blood trickling from my head, and I think, yes, he threw me across the garage in a sudden fit of rage, cracking my skull against the Range Rover's right rear bumper, shocked and sorry for what he did.

I wonder, Did he try to revive me? Or had he come to kill me, plotting it out in his meticulous way? Had he come armed with his knife, maybe Ford's baseball bat, timed my arrival, and patiently waited for me to walk into the garage with my beachcombing treasures? Friday, the start of Memorial Day weekend, and I was feeling so happy.

Am I dead? Am I dreaming this? What time is it? Are people showing up for my opening? My best friend manages the gallery. Does she realize yet that I'm not coming? Will she send help? A thought shimmers through my mind: I was warned, and I didn't listen. My mind is

dull, and my mouth is dry; my face and hands are crusted with blood. The sound of my head being smashed rings in my ears. I hear myself crying.

There is a line tied around my neck, chafing the skin raw. I can barely breathe; I try to claw it away. The knot is too tight, and my fingers barely work – my hands are covered with shallow cuts. I see the knife waving, jabbing my hands as I hold them up to block the thrusts. But he didn't stab me. My wrist is raw, not from knife wounds, but from where he yanked my gold watch, a wedding present, over my hand.

I'm still in the drafty old carriage house we use as our garage. The concrete is solid beneath me, and I taste my own blood: signs that I'm still alive. Beside me on the floor are two lengths of splintered wood. My throat is on fire from the rope's pressure. My fingernails break as I struggle to loosen the knot. I pass out on the hard floor. When I come to, I feel cold. Was I out for a minute or an hour or all day and night, and did I die? I try again to tug the line from my neck – that must mean I'm not dead. The knot refuses to give.

Still on the ground, lying on my back, I stretch my legs and flex my feet. My limbs work. Slowly I pull myself up by the car's bumper; I lean on the rear door, leaving bloody handprints. My palms and fingers and the insides of my wrists are covered with small, almost superficial cuts.

An image fills my mind: a knife slashing the air but barely touching me, me punching and slapping and ducking, him laughing. Yes, it's coming back now. He wore a black mask. He dangled my watch in front of me, a taunt that seemed to mean something to him but not to me.

"Let me see your face!" I screamed as I fought him.

My attacker wore black leather gloves and blue coveralls, the kind mechanics wear, and the mask. So he planned it. It wasn't a bout of sudden rage. He came ready for this. He hid his face and hands, so he couldn't be recognized. But it was his body, tall and lean, and nothing could hide that from me.

## The Shadow Box

My husband is Griffin Chase, the state's attorney for Easterly County, Connecticut, and a candidate in November's gubernatorial election. Smart money says he will be the next governor, and there is a lot of money, a fortune, in his war chest: he has big donors, and he has made promises to all of them.

He studies the cases he prosecutes. He tells me what the husbands did wrong and that he would never make those mistakes. Griffin convicts violent offenders. He sends the abusers, the batterers, the stalkers, and the murderers to prison, and then comes home for dinner and tells me they are his teachers. He admires women killers too, including a local mother of two he successfully prosecuted for murdering her best friend.

John Marcus, a murderer he put away for life last October, had stabbed his wife forty-seven times. He was caught because he had accidentally cut himself when his hand slipped down the bloody blade and his DNA had mixed with hers.

"I can't think of anything more horrible than being stabbed," I'd said to Griffin. "Even just *seeing* the knife, it would be pure terror, knowing what he was about to do with it."

Now the memories flood in — clear, no longer a dream. Of course, he wouldn't stab me, because prosecuting John Marcus had taught him what not to do. But he must have remembered what I'd said about the dread of a knife. Leaning against the car now, I could still see the blade thrusting, glinting in the cool daylight streaming through the window, nicking my palm, the insides of my wrists, but nothing more, never going deep. Terrifying me would give him pleasure.

After he shoved me and I hit my head on the car bumper, he quickly tied the rope around my neck.

"Griffin, take off the mask," I said while I could still talk, before the noose tightened. Did he want my death to look like suicide? Or would he remove my body after I was dead? Stash me in his boat, take me out

into the Atlantic, past Block Island, where the trenches were so deep a person would never be found?

He threw the rope upward once, twice. It took him three times to toss it over the rafter, but then he began to pull, and I could hear the line inching and scraping the rough wooden crossbar overhead. He was strong, his body taut – athletic and lean.

My neck stretched as he pulled on the line, my lungs bursting with air I couldn't exhale. I rose onto my toes, up and up. I grabbed the rope circled around my neck and tried to loosen the grip. The insides of my eyelids turned purple and flashed with pinprick stars. *Breathe, breathe, breathe*, I thought, hearing the gasps and gurgles coming from my throat. I tried to keep my feet from leaving the ground, but they did, and I thrashed and scissor kicked the air. I passed out.

Through the fog of near death, I thought I heard a scream outside, a high-pitched wail, primal and wild. Is that why he left me there before he had finished killing me? Had the sound scared him off? Or had the noise come from my own throat? Had my attacker run into the kitchen, hidden in the house? Or slipped out the garage door and escaped along the beach path? He must have thought I was dead or would soon die.

I look up at the garage ceiling. One rafter is damaged, part of it lying on the floor next to me. I realize it broke under my weight, and my eyes fill with tears. This old carriage house was built around 1900, at the same time Griffin's great-grandfather, governor of Connecticut, the first Chase man to hold political office, constructed the "cottage" – growing up, I would have called it a mansion. We live at the edge of the sea, and countless nor'easters and hurricanes have battered this place. We've been meaning to reinforce the building for years. The rafter gave way, and I tumbled to the floor and lived. This weathered old structure saved my life.

My left ankle is bruised and swollen, and my legs are stiff. Will I make it through my backyard, over the stone bridge, into the marsh, and from there into the pines, the deep woods, to the safe place my

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father and I built together? It is a long way. Will my blood leave a trail for Griffin to follow? The state police have a canine unit. Griffin will make sure his minions send the cadaver dogs after me.

When will I be missed? I have until they first notice I am gone to get where I need to go. My whole body is shaking. Will I make it? What if the police find me first? They belong to Griffin. My husband rules law enforcement in Connecticut. He was already a man of power, and the backing he has for his run for governor gives him even more. The secret I keep could ruin his career. And once it gets out, his campaign will end, and the men who support him will be furious.

I think about the letter I received, and the warning it contained. Why didn't I listen?

My hands hurt. I picture the knife again, and my knees feel like jelly.

Using the garage walls for support, I stagger to a shelf at the back and take down a can of animal repellent—a foul-smelling powdered mixture of fox, bobcat, and cougar urine that I bought by mail order. It is intended to keep deer away from gardens, dogs away from borders. The smell of predators will raise their hackles, send fear through their blood. My woodsman father taught me the potion has another use: when spread in the wild, rather than repelling, it will attract the species of animals that excreted the urine.

Ever since my father's death, we have stayed connected in spirit, through the myth of a mountain lion said to live deep in the woods nearby. Perhaps that big cat is a ghost, just like my father, just like members of the Nehantic and Pequot tribes who lived here before us. But I have seen and tracked large paw prints, collected tufts of coarse yellow fur for my work, and I have seen his shadow. Could that have been the caterwaul I heard just as I was supposed to die?

The smell of the mixture will throw off the dogs. They will be intrigued by the possibility of a wild animal; they will sniff along the boundary line I will create. They will not cross it, and they will forget

about their quarry – me. My father’s lessons along with years of loving the forest, observing the behavior of its inhabitants, will help me escape.

I find a beach towel in the cupboard and use it to put pressure on my head wound. The blood soaks through – I am shocked by the amount because there is already a pool on the floor. How much have I lost?

I feel weak, and I bobble the tin. Some urine powder falls to the floor. I try to wipe it up, but the putrid stench nearly makes me vomit. When the search dogs get here, they will growl and back away from this corner; they will be on guard before they even begin.

I start to walk and trip on the rope around my neck. If I can’t untie the knot, I can at least cut through it. I look around the Range Rover for the knife my attacker used, but it’s not here. He must have taken it.

Garden clippers hang on a rusty nail; I use them for pruning roses and hydrangeas. The handles fit my hand, but it hurts to maneuver them. Do I have the dexterity to snip the line instead of my artery? I nick the skin, but victory – the rope falls to the floor. This effort has taken all my energy, so I sit down and hope I’ll be able to stand again before the police arrive.

Griffin’s police departments throughout eastern Connecticut will investigate my disappearance with the full force of his office behind them. Suspicion will fall on violent criminals he sent to prison – he will make sure of that. People will assume someone wanted revenge. Detectives will investigate every recently released convict. They will question the families of prisoners still incarcerated.

My husband will hold a news conference and say that the police will catch whoever harmed me, abducted me, or killed me and removed my body, and he very personally will prosecute that person, get justice for me. The tragedy will burnish his image: public servant, grieving husband. I will become a hashtag: #JusticeForClaire.

But he, someone on his force, or one of his political backers with too much to lose will find and murder me first.

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Terrified and half-dead, I choke on a sob. I had loved my husband more than anyone, this man who now wanted me dead. I am dizzy, can barely stand. I think, for half a minute, of going to my studio behind the house, grabbing the letter. But why? I ignored it when it mattered most, when it could have saved me. Let it stay in its hiding place. If I die, if I never return, it will be a record of what happened.

It is time for me to set off on a journey that will be short in distance, endless in effort. Maybe I'm delirious, just coming back from having been deprived of oxygen, but I sense that big cat padding silently in the woods ahead of me – my destination – and I walk cautiously. Fear is the gift.

It's how I will stay alert and alive.