

Trust No One.
Especially Your Neighbors.

A NOVEL

THE GHOSTS OF
THORWALD PLACE



HELEN POWER

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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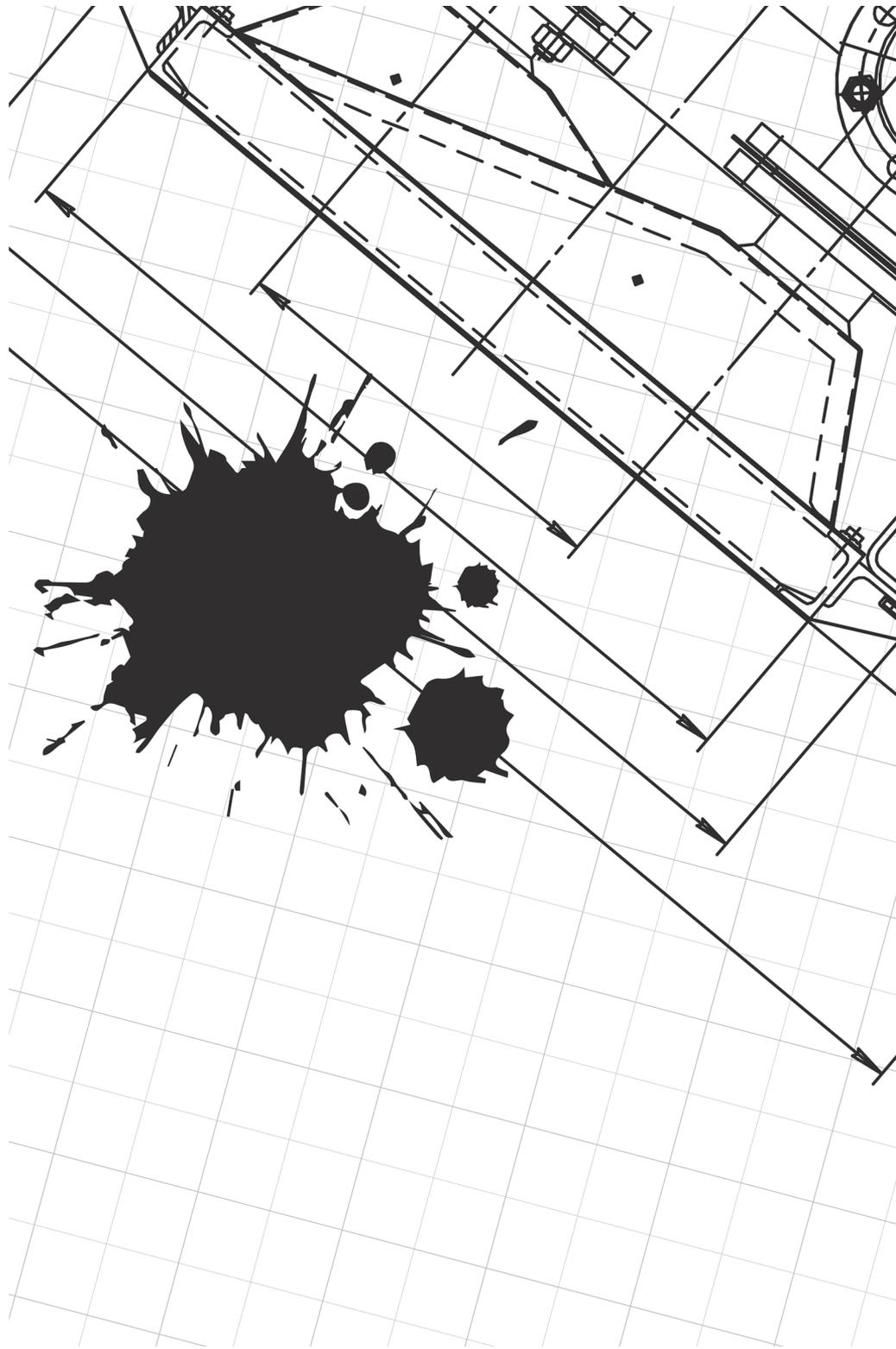
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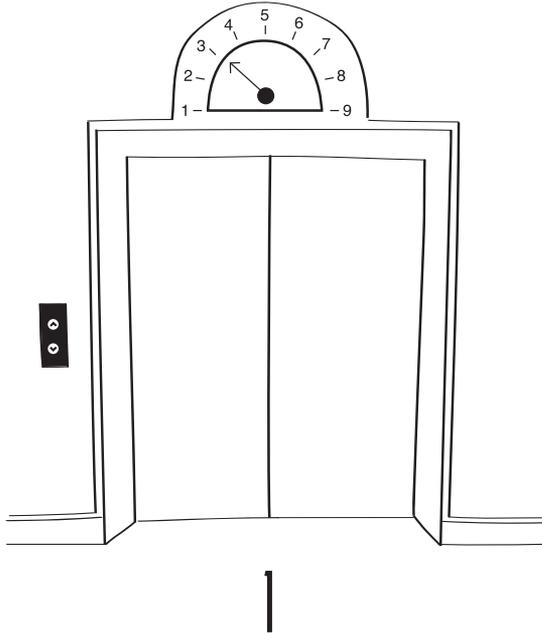
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For my mother,
who always believed in me.







“I think he’s going to kill me.” The voice is barely above a whisper.

I grip the telephone and take a deep breath. My eyes skim across the page in front of me. I know I should use open-ended questions, but I already find myself going off-script.

“If you believe your life is in danger, you need to call the police.”

“No! I mean, no. I don’t think my life is in danger.”

I frown. It’s not uncommon for callers to make grand, sweeping statements about murder or conspiracies and then recant moments later. But there’s something different about this caller. There’s something in her voice that makes me think she might have been telling the truth the first time.

“You can be honest with me,” I say. “Tell me about your husband.”

She pauses. “Well, he’s really sweet. He’s handsome. Generous. He buys me everything I could ever want . . .”

“But?”

“He gets horrible mood swings. He gets so . . . *mad* for no reason. I never know when he’s going to snap. I think he’s been having trouble at work, but he won’t talk to me about it.”

I bite my lip. “Has he ever hit you?”

The silence stretches like a yawning chasm as I wait for her next words to either topple me over the precipice or guide me safely away from the edge.

“No.”

My heart skips a beat. I don’t believe her.

“I wouldn’t even consider leaving him if it weren’t for . . .”

“If it weren’t for . . .?”

“If it weren’t for Shane.”

“Who’s Shane?”

She doesn’t respond.

“Is Shane your son?”

I worry that she might hang up, but she finally answers.

“Yes.”

“Has he ever hurt your son?”

“No.”

My frown deepens. Is she lying? “Listen . . .” I falter. Normally I would use a caller’s name here, to cement the trust I’m trying to build, but she refused to give it. “I think you should call the police.”

“I—can’t. I won’t.”

I want to push her—this might be my only chance to convince her to get help—but instead, I give her a list of places she

can go, emphasizing the discretion of the different women's shelters that are strategically located around downtown Toronto, where she has alluded to living.

"You can call any time you need to talk. Ask for Rachel, and they'll connect us if I'm working," I say. "I usually work a little later than this—from twelve to four."

I hear a muffled thump on the other end of the line.

"I have to go. He's awake."

My heart leaps into my throat. I open my mouth, but I'm cut off by the dial tone.

I reluctantly return the phone to its receiver, the springy cord of my vintage, black telephone snapping tightly into place. I take a deep breath and arch my back, stretching my arms to the ceiling. Some—but not all, never all—of the tension releases from my body.

I flip through the pages of the binder back to the first page, ready to start the process over again. I've been volunteering at the distress line for almost fourteen months now, but it never gets easier. The service helps all those in crisis, from teens who just want information about mental health programs to the elderly who are grieving the loss of loved ones. We also get many calls about domestic abuse. Too many. Unless the caller explicitly gives us permission, or if we have reason to believe that someone's safety is in immediate danger, we aren't allowed to contact the police.

Sometimes, I hate this rule. But one of the reasons people feel comfortable enough to reach out to us is because of our discretion. Still, it's hard to hang up and let go of someone who needs my help. I may never hear from this girl again. I may never know the rest of her story.

I make a note on the call log, both online and in my own personal records. I put down my pen and stare at the phone for several minutes, hoping that I can compel the girl into calling back. But it's nearing the end of my four-hour shift, so I likely won't hear from her again tonight.

Housebound, I volunteer for four shifts a week. Usually, I take the most unpopular shift of midnight to four, but tonight I'm working from eight to twelve. Because of my flexible schedule, the hotline has made an exception, and I'm allowed to work from home instead of at the busy call center. Of course, I didn't tell them the real reason why I can't leave my apartment. They think I have mobility issues, which I faked during the company's mandatory therapy sessions. I was given a clean bill of mental health. Ironic.

I head into the kitchen and turn on the kettle. I grab a box of Earl Grey and drop a bag into my favorite mug. The mug is plain and brown and has a tiny chip on its lip, but it reminds me of home, and I always use this one, even though I have a dozen other mugs crammed onto the shelf. I hug my arms across my chest as I wait for the water to boil. My wool sweater does little to warm the chill that has permeated my bones.

Once the tea is ready, I find myself back in my office, cradling the mug in ice cold hands. The wall to my left bears my collection of framed, black and white landscape photos. The only glimpse of nature I've had in over a year. My escape from the reality of being trapped in a city I barely know. To my right are several built-in bookcases, filled with the variety of leisure and professional reading I've amassed over the two years I've lived here. I approach the floor-to-ceiling-length window which fills the wall behind my desk. Toronto's bright city lights wink at

me. Down below, the trees whip back and forth in a sharp gust of wind. Heavy rainfall drenches the pavement. Across the street are tall apartment complexes, peppered with the illuminated windows of those who cannot sleep. I sympathize with them. I haven't had a full night's sleep in two years. Instead, I take sporadic naps, giving in only whenever the exhaustion is too great to conquer.

A shrill ring cuts through the silence. The mug slips from my grasp, bounces, and spills, scalding hot liquid ballooning out onto the floor, sinking deep into the rug. I hurry to my desk, leaving the cleanup for later.

"Hello?"

An automated voice greets me. "This is the Toronto Distress Line. You have a caller on the line. If you are able to take this call, press one."

I take a deep breath, then press one.

"Hello, this is Rachel speaking. How can I help you?" I sound surprisingly serene.

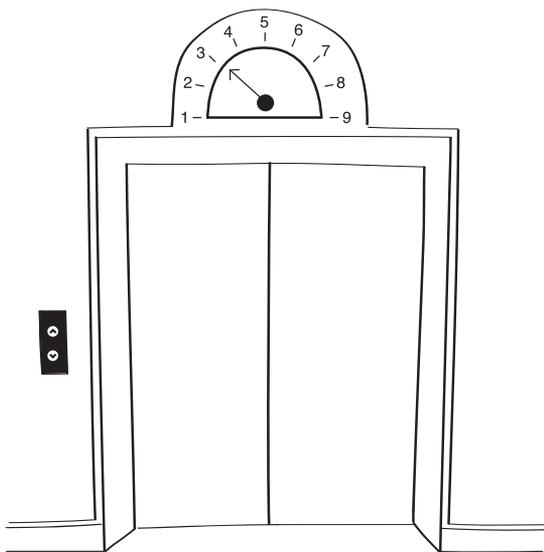
"*Rachel?*" The voice is strange. I cannot place my finger on what's wrong, but a sense of dread washes over me. I ignore it.

"Yes. You've reached the Toronto Distress Line. Anything you say is strictly confidential. Tell me why you called here tonight."

"I know where you live . . . *Kae.*"

"What—how do you know that name?" I swallow, my throat suddenly paper dry.

"I'm coming for you."



2

My chest tightens. My heart races. My breath quickens. My vision darkens. The room spins.

I push away from my desk and lower my head between my legs. I take several deep breaths, clenching my fists and relaxing them in time with my inhalation. I exhale through pursed lips. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.

Slowly, the crushing weight on my chest begins to lift, and the fog clears. I sit up slowly and lean back in my chair. I haven't had a panic attack in almost a month. I'd thought I was getting better. I shake my head. *Anyone* would be terrified by a call like that. Although, this isn't the first time it's happened. Predators enjoy making fake calls to the distress line to disturb and upset

the volunteers. We always block those numbers to make it more difficult for them to enjoy this twisted pastime. But I've never had a caller who knew my name—my *real* name.

The phone rings, and again, I nearly jump out of my skin. I don't want to answer it, but I'm glad I do. It's Luke.

The words tumble out of me almost faster than I can say them, and I barely remember to breathe. I tell him everything—everything except for the fact that the caller knew my name. Not even Luke knows my *real* name. No one in Toronto does, and I'd hoped to keep it that way.

“Are you okay? Do you need me to come over?” Luke asks in a quiet voice. He knows about my fears, my paranoias, and he pretends to understand them, even though he couldn't possibly. He doesn't know why I am this way. I never told him, and I never plan to.

“No, I'm fine. Really.”

“Are you sure? We could binge-watch Netflix like we used to . . . Your choice on the show,” he says.

“Tempting,” I reply. I find myself actually smiling despite the heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach. Luke is my only friend in the city, the only one that I've made in the two years I've lived here, but I haven't seen him in person for four months. I've been pushing him away. I've been retreating deeper into a prison of my own making.

Luke continues, “I'll bring my mace. To defend you from any potential intruders and that creepy concierge.”

At that, I laugh. Luke is six feet tall and heavily muscled, but he carries an illegal hot pink mace with him for self-defense. He's clumsy and has poor balance, and I can't help but imagine he would use it backward if he ever got into a fight.

“Not tonight,” I say.

Luke doesn't reply. The silence is deafening.

I bite my lip. I want to know more about the caller, but that information is classified.

Instead, I try a different approach.

“Has this person called before?” I ask, as casually as possible under the circumstances.

Luke is a volunteer like me, but he mostly works behind the scenes, scheduling the volunteers and directing calls based on specific requests. He also takes shifts answering calls from time to time, usually when other volunteers flake on their commitment. Despite having a full-time job as an IT professional, he pours a lot of his free time into the hotline, and I know it's because he feels a responsibility to help others in need. I don't know the details, but he once told me that his mother never would have escaped his abusive stepfather if it hadn't have been for a hotline like this one.

Luke never brought it up again, and I never asked. It's better if we don't talk about our pasts and only look toward the future. Easier said than done.

“I don't think he's called before,” Luke says. “I just blocked his number. If he had called before, we would have blacklisted it earlier. Of course, he could be calling from a different phone. Which is unlikely,” he adds hastily.

I know I shouldn't ask, but I do anyway.

“Do you have the caller's number?”

There is a pregnant pause. “You know I can't give out that information.”

I frown. Without knowing who called me, my options are now limited to one. Run.

“Rach, this is just another prank call. We get them all the time. I’ve had three in this last week alone. You’re perfectly safe, especially in your building. Thorwald Place is practically Fort Knox.”

He does have a point.

“Actually . . .” he says.

“What is it?”

“There’s something . . . unusual in the log.”

“What is it?” I repeat. I grip the armrests of my chair, my nails cutting into the well-worn, brown leather.

He clears his throat. “Rachel, the caller asked for you specifically. But, like I said, I don’t think he’s called before.”

I don’t respond. Of course the caller asked for me specifically, but Luke couldn’t possibly know that I know, because I hadn’t told him that the caller used my real name. The caller’s voice had been distorted, as if by some kind of voice transformation app. It’s possible that I know him, and I just didn’t recognize his voice. A familiar name and face cross my mind, but I shove them away, shutting them behind a locked door in my mind. I can’t afford another panic attack.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. He’s probably the angry boyfriend of one of your regulars, and he wanted to freak you out as revenge or something. He has *no way* of knowing who you are beyond your first name *or* where you are.”

He makes a valid point. As a distress line volunteer, you piss off a lot of ex-husbands and boyfriends.

“And my offer for a slumber party still stands. We can paint our nails, and I’ll even let you braid my hair,” Luke adds.

Caught off guard, I snicker. His hair is so short, I likely wouldn’t even manage a single plait.

“Thanks, but maybe another time,” I say. “I’m probably being paranoid. I just had a tough domestic abuse call, and I’m still a little shaken up.”

Luke is quiet for a moment. “Rach, maybe you should take a few days off.”

I don’t say anything.

“I mean, you volunteer with us a lot, much more than anyone else, and I don’t want you to burn out. Taking calls like these can be really draining.”

I don’t want to take time off. That would give me time to think about my own problems, which I’ve become an expert at avoiding. I could always use the extra time for my work, but translation is a lonely business. These four-hour shifts are the only human interaction I get. And it feels good knowing that I’m helping those in crisis. It wasn’t too long ago that I was in their shoes.

“Thanks for your concern, Luke, but I’m fine. That prank call scared me, but I know it’s just a one-time thing. I’ll go down to the gym and work off some of this pent-up energy. Talk to you later.” I hang up before he can object.

I begin to pace around the office—ten long strides before I reach the wall, spin around, and repeat the process. I fitfully gnaw at my thumbnail. I still need to know who made that phone call. What Luke said *might* be true. An angry ex-husband could have found out my real name, and he’s using it to intimidate me. But what if it’s someone who knows about my past? What if it’s someone *from* my past?

I imagine a man armed with a high-powered rifle, tracking my movements from a dark apartment across the street. I’m in the crosshairs, and I can almost feel the red laser dot dancing

on my forehead. I dart to the window and yank the drapes shut, plunging the room into thick shadows.

I stand there for several minutes, shaking, until I realize I'm standing in the spilled tea, which has gone ice cold, sinking through my socks and soaking my feet. I peel off my soiled socks and drop them in the hamper as I head to the bathroom to grab a towel. I return to the office and mop up the tea without turning on the lights, working by the slice of pale light that slithers through the gap in the curtains.

I've spent so much time being afraid, trying to avoid the dangers of the outside. Whenever I leave my apartment, I'm much more prone to panic attacks, which leave me helpless and exposed. The last time I left the safety of Thorwald Place, something spooked me, and my panic attack was so intense, I passed out. Somebody must have called an ambulance, but fortunately, I woke up before it arrived and was able to get out of there without anyone asking me any questions. But I haven't left this building since. Not for nine months. I cannot afford to be that vulnerable, not when he's still out there.

I'm being ridiculous. I've been so careful; he can't have found me. For all I know, the caller didn't even say my name, Kae, short for Kaela. He could have been saying the letter "K". Like how some people tack on an "eh" to everything they say, maybe this caller shortens the word "okay".

I take several deep breaths, taking solace in the rhythmic movements of scrubbing the floor. After I've finished, I dump the filthy towel in the hamper. I stride across my large living room, past the bookcases that overflow with books and the couch that sits opposite a flatscreen TV that I hardly ever turn on. I hesitate by the front door.

Slowly, I put my eye to the peephole. I see a long expanse of empty hallway. The dim overhead light casts stark shadows on the sloped, maroon wallpapered walls and in the deep depression of the doorways at the end of the corridor. The polished marble floors reflect the faint light back up at me. My apartment is closest to the elevator. I chose this one so I would have the quickest escape route.

On the seventh floor of this ten-story building, I'm too high for someone to climb onto my balcony, but not so high that I can't flee down the stairs if I have to. From my peephole, I can see everyone who comes off the elevator and recognize if it's someone who isn't supposed to be on this floor. If they loiter for too long, I call security. I used to linger in the foyer of my apartment, standing guard at the door any time the elevator ding announced that someone was getting off. I've been getting better, and now, I only check a dozen times a day—usually when the concierge is making a delivery or if a noise in the hall spooks me.

When I realized that I had to run and leave my old life in Ottawa behind, my cop friend, Catalina, helped me set up an airtight, new identity, and it was she who found me this safe haven. Thorwald Place. The condos are spacious, especially for Toronto, with only seven units per floor. The mortgage is high and the condo fees even higher, but it's worth the chunk out of my paycheck and inheritance, if only for the impressive security measures put in place. It is impossible for someone to get in unless they have explicit permission from a resident. There's 24-hour surveillance, and the security guards actually graduated from the police academy but chose this line of work for the higher salary.

Despite my vigilance, I don't know many of the occupants of Thorwald Place. Most of the inhabitants are multimillionaires, which, in my experience, usually leads to snobbishness. I don't mind. I've never had any intention of getting to know my neighbors.

A socialite named Sabryna Hyland attempted to befriend me when I first moved in. She thought a single woman working from home would be the perfect drinking companion. However, I made it abundantly clear that I had no intention of being friendly with *any* of the neighbors, and eventually, she gave up. While I sometimes find myself craving companionship, I can't run the risk of someone getting to know me too well, noticing the gaps in what I've told them about my past, and beginning to suspect that I'm not who I claim to be. Luke began to ask questions, which was one of the reasons why I had to distance myself from our friendship.

The authentic German cuckoo clock over the mantle chimes, informing me that it's already quarter to one. I've spent over forty-five minutes in a frenzy over a phone call that probably means nothing. It's great to note that my mental health is improving. Dr. Favreau would be so pleased.

I need to get out of the apartment. I need to prove to myself that I'm not a frightened child. I stride into the bedroom to change into my gym clothes. I like to work out at night, between midnight and five. The building's fitness center is open twenty-four-seven, but I rarely see anyone down there in the dead of night. Occasionally, I encounter a skinny twenty-year-old, but he sticks with the weights, and I go to the other side of the room for the treadmill. He's very pale, and large, purple bruises circle his sunken eyes. I suspect he uses exercise to deal with his insomnia.

I open my dresser drawer and stare at its contents for so long that I have to shake my head to pry myself away. Whether or not I'm being irrational is beside the point. The caller said a word that sounds like my name. I can't stay in this building a minute longer. I have to run.

I dart into my walk-in closet to grab my duffel bag. I should have prepared a pre-packed getaway bag. Why hadn't I thought of that before this very moment? Working in darkness, too afraid to turn on the light, I load the bag up with the bare essentials. Underwear. Shirts. Pants. I duck into the bathroom and return with my toothbrush. I hesitate, then add more underwear to the bag before zipping it shut.

I head into my office to grab my passport, IDs, and a wad of cash—both Canadian and American. I root around in my desk drawer for my diary. Where is it? I slam the top drawer shut and check the bottom drawer. It isn't there either. It's one of the only things I have left of my past, and I can't bear the thought of leaving it behind. I haven't written an entry since moving to Toronto, and I know I keep it in my desk, where I sometimes retrieve it when I'm feeling masochistic and want to remind myself of the horrors of my past. It isn't here.

Disappointment weighs on my chest as I realize I'll have to leave without it. I haven't any more time to waste. I run to the front door, the bag slung over my shoulder. Once again, I peer through the peephole. Sometimes, I plan what I would do if I see an eyeball staring back at me. Or the barrel of a gun. I would jerk back and flatten myself against the wall. Stick my keys between my knuckles as a weapon.

I unlock the deadbolt, slide the chain, and slowly open the door. The hall is silent, and the dim light reveals both sides of the

hallway. I shut the door behind me and lock it. I pull the handle three times to make sure it's locked, not just stuck. I race to the elevator, punching the button several times in quick succession.

I wonder if I'm being irrational, but I've never been able to be objective, not when it comes to my safety. Either way, I'm proud of the action I've taken. Only a month ago, a call like that would have rendered me immobile for weeks. But instead of cowering in the corner of my apartment, waiting for my death, I'm taking charge of my life. I'll get out of the building, find a cheap hotel, and pay cash for the night. Then I'll call Catalina—my closest friend from my past life—and she'll help me to find a new place to settle down. Or, at the very least, she'll look into the phone call. She'll figure out if it's a false alarm, or if he's found me.

The elevator arrives, and the doors slide open. Empty. I slip in. I press B. The elevator descends. It moves slow. So slow. Too slow.

I take a deep breath, and my pulse drops back down to the double digits. I continue to breathe deliberately as I watch the numbers gradually change as the elevator passes each floor. A sense of calm washes over me. I'm finally leaving. This is the first time I've taken control of my life since my husband died. I push away all thoughts of him. I can't afford to break down. Not when I'm so vulnerable.

I bite my lip. I'm far from safe. My car has been parked in the basement-level garage for *nine months*. It's been nine months since I last drove it. What if it doesn't start? What if—

Darkness envelops me. A loud grating sound erupts from the cabling above, and the elevator lurches to a stop. Silence. Blinded, I feel my way to the elevator panel and find the call button.

“Hello?” I try to keep my voice calm. “Can anyone hear me? The elevator shut down!”

Nothing.

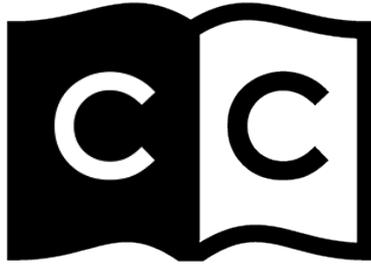
I push it again, but there’s nothing. No dial tone. No soothing voice on the other end. This time, I press the alarm button, but no siren emits. Shouldn’t there be a siren? I can’t tell if it’s working. Has the concierge been notified? Is security on their way? I punch buttons at random. Hysteria bubbles up, threatening to break through the surface.

No. I cannot afford to have a panic attack. I take several deep breaths. In through my nose. Out through my mouth. Again.

My head clears, and I lean my feverish forehead against the cold, gray steel of the elevator wall. There was a weather alert on the news tonight. The power is out because of the storm, that’s all this is. But shouldn’t the elevator have a backup mechanism for an emergency? I should have researched this myself, before moving into this building. I should have had a packed getaway bag at the ready, and I would have been out of the elevator before the power outage. I should have taken the stairs. I should have prepared for this.

I hold my breath and listen carefully. I definitely don’t hear any sirens . . . or anything at all for that matter. The elevator is deathly silent, except for the thumping of my heart.

It was around the third floor when the power went out. I drop my bag against the far wall of the elevator and assess the exit. Slipping my fingers into the crack between the doors, I pull with all my strength. It opens half an inch. I peer through, but I can’t see anything. Just a void. A cool breeze slips through the crack, caressing my cheek and carrying the faint smell of something rotten.



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EVERYONE HAS SECRETS. ESPECIALLY THE DEAD.

Rachel Drake is on the run from the man who killed her husband. She never leaves her safe haven in an anonymous doorman building, until one night a phone call sends her running. On her way to the garage, she is murdered in the elevator. But her story doesn't end there.

She finds herself in the afterlife, tethered to her death spot, her reach tied to the adjacent apartments. As she rides the elevator up and down, the lives of the residents intertwine. Every one of them has a dark secret. An aging trophy wife whose husband strays. A surgeon guarding a locked room. A TV medium who may be a fraud. An ordinary man with a mysterious hobby.

Compelled to spend eternity observing her neighbors, she realizes that any one of them could be her killer. And then, her best friend shows up to investigate her murder.



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