

"Shadows in Aisle Nine"

Part 1: The Watcher

The hum of the fluorescent lights overhead had always been something I tuned out. A Walmart on a weekday afternoon isn't supposed to feel threatening—just carts squeaking, children whining for toys, the occasional crackle of an intercom call. Safe. Normal.

But today, the air felt... off.

At first, I thought I was imagining him. A man somewhere in his fifties, wiry frame, pale eyes. He lingered at the end of the baking aisle while I compared brands of flour. When I moved on, he didn't follow directly, not at first. He just drifted past. Once, twice. By the third time, I felt my stomach tighten.

Coincidence. That's what I told myself. Big store, lots of people. Of course paths cross.

I pushed my cart all the way to electronics, deliberately zig-zagging through aisles. And still, he appeared. Walking back and forth, pretending to glance at DVDs, never actually picking anything up. His eyes always slid back to me.

I made direct eye contact. Hard. A silent warning: I see you. He didn't flinch. Didn't look away. Just stared.

My hands trembled on the cart handle. Every instinct screamed leave. But when I finally rolled toward the front registers, he moved too—beating me there, positioning himself near the exit like a gatekeeper. Waiting.

I froze. If I walked out, I'd be walking straight to him. He leaned casually against the frame, but his gaze was a hook, snagging me. My heart pounded loud enough to drown out the chatter of shoppers around me.

I forced myself into a checkout lane, pretending calm. The cashier's eyes flicked past me, then widened slightly. She'd seen him too. Without me asking, she whispered, "Stay here."

Within seconds, three employees clustered near. One on her walkie. One standing between me and the man. I risked a glance back—he hadn't left. Instead, he began pacing. Slow, deliberate strides, circling the registers like a shark around a leaking boat.

Four times he passed my lane. Each time his eyes lingered, unblinking.

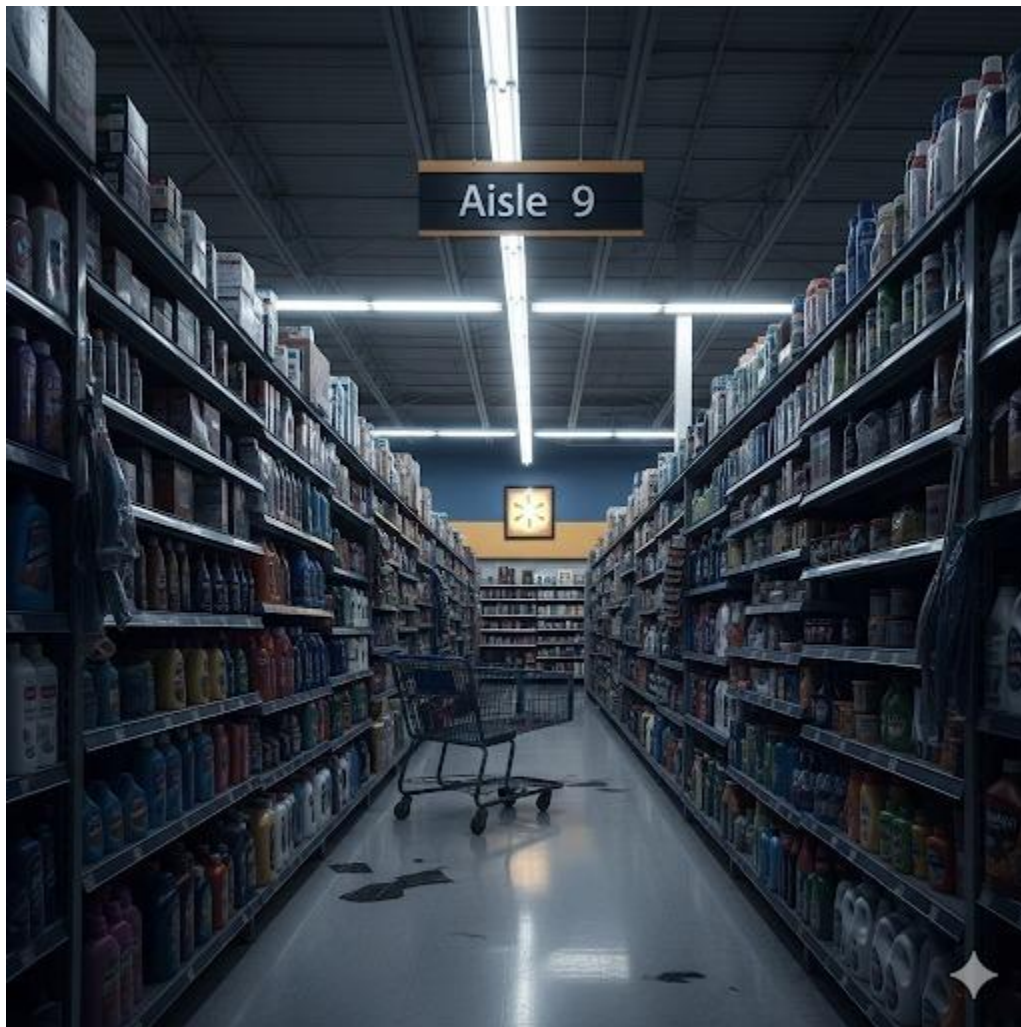
The intercom crackled. Somewhere, someone was calling for assistance. The store felt smaller, tighter, like the walls were closing in.

Then—two uniformed officers appeared. Relief nearly buckled my knees. But the man reacted first. He didn't panic. Didn't shout. He simply pivoted on his heel and disappeared into the maze of aisles with a calm, fluid motion, like he'd rehearsed it.

“Don't leave yet,” one officer said quietly. “We'll walk you out.”

I nodded, clutching my bag like a shield. My skin still crawled, though. Because even as the officers escorted me into the sunlight, I could feel it—somewhere, in that sprawling store, he was still watching.

And I knew this wasn't over.



"Shadows in Aisle Nine — Part 2: The Footsteps"

I told myself I'd left him behind. Walmart was crowded, parking lot well lit. The police had walked me to my car. He hadn't followed. Rationally, it should have ended there.

But fear doesn't obey reason.

That night, every sound in my apartment was sharper. The hum of my fridge, the tick of the bathroom sink. I left the TV on, hoping the noise would drown the echo of his pacing. Still, when I closed my eyes, I could see him—leaning against the exit, waiting.

Sometime after midnight, a sound cut through the low drone of the television. A crunch. Gravel shifting, slow and deliberate, just outside my window.

I froze. My apartment sat on the ground floor, facing the parking lot. Heart hammering, I crept toward the blinds, lifting just enough to peek out.

Empty. Rows of cars sat beneath the pale glow of the streetlight. Nothing moved.

I almost laughed at myself, the sound too brittle to be real. Sleep-deprived, jumpy. Maybe a neighbor coming home late. I let the blinds fall shut and told myself to breathe.

But then I heard it again.

Crunch. Pause. Crunch.

Closer this time. Like someone pacing.

The motion sensor light above my door flickered on. My breath caught in my throat. A shadow stretched long and thin across the pavement—but when I yanked the door open, there was no one there. Just silence, broken only by the electric buzz of the light overhead.

I didn't sleep the rest of the night.

The next evening, it happened again. Same hour. Same sound. I sat rigid on my couch, phone in hand, staring at the front door like it might burst inward.

Crunch. Crunch. Measured, patient steps.

I flicked on the TV louder, but it didn't drown the rhythm. Every step seemed timed to my pulse, syncing with my heartbeat until I couldn't tell if the sound came from outside or inside my own chest.

I worked up the nerve to look again. This time, when the motion light snapped on, I saw something—a figure moving out of the glow, slipping past the edge of the lot where the shadows swallowed everything.

I couldn't make out his face. But I didn't need to. My body knew before my mind did.

It was him.

I locked every window. Double-checked the door. Slept with the phone in my hand. Still, when dawn finally came, I wasn't relieved. Because the worst part wasn't the footsteps.

It was how calm he'd seemed. How patient.

Like he had all the time in the world.



"Shadows in Aisle Nine — Part 3: The Reflection"

By the third day, exhaustion weighed on me heavier than fear. I told myself the footsteps were tricks of a tired mind, that if I kept my routine normal, I'd eventually stop hearing him in every shadow.

So I went back to living. Work. Errands. Pretending.

But the world had shifted in some small, unbearable way.

In the grocery store, I caught a glimpse of movement in the freezer glass—someone standing at the far end of the aisle. When I whipped my head around, no one was there. Just a row of empty carts.

I laughed it off, the sound brittle. But when I leaned close to grab a carton of milk, the glass reflected a shape directly behind me. Broad shoulders. A pale face.

I spun so fast the carton slipped from my hands and burst at my feet. The aisle was empty. Completely.

Later, driving home, I noticed headlights trailing me. They stayed steady, two car-lengths back, through three turns and a stretch of highway. My palms went slick on the steering wheel. When I finally changed lanes, the car changed too.

Heart pounding, I darted down a side street. The headlights followed—until suddenly, they were gone. One blink, and the road behind me was black.

I pulled into my apartment complex shaking, staring into the rearview mirror. For a split second, I swore I saw his face reflected there. Pale eyes, watching from the back seat.

I spun around, clawing at the air. Empty. Just my crumpled jacket tossed across the seat.

But the image lingered, seared into my vision.

That night, I left the blinds shut tight. Still, I saw him. In the reflection of my television when the screen went black. In the dark gloss of the microwave door. In the shimmer of the bathroom mirror when I stepped out of the shower.

Always behind me.

I stopped trusting glass. Stopped trusting my own eyes. I even draped towels over mirrors, anything to block the surface that might betray me.

But reflections are everywhere. Storefront windows. Car doors. Coffee pots. They all shimmered with faint impressions, stretched faces and bent shadows. If I stared long enough, he was there.

Sometimes smiling. Sometimes not.

I told myself this was paranoia. Trauma echoing itself until it warped my mind. But deep down, I knew the truth—paranoia doesn't follow patterns. It doesn't linger with the patience of a predator.

He wasn't gone.

He was closer than ever.



"Shadows in Aisle Nine" — Part 4: The Call

The first call came just after midnight.

I almost didn't answer. The number was blocked, the ringtone sharp in the silence of my apartment. Against my better judgment, I pressed accept.

At first, nothing. Just silence. Then—breathing. Slow, steady, deliberate.

I hung up so fast my thumb ached from the motion. My phone buzzed again instantly. Same blocked number. I didn't answer.

When I checked my voicemail ten minutes later, my stomach dropped. The message was thirty seconds of faint static—and then, barely audible, a whisper: mine.

I couldn't sleep after that. Every shadow in the room pressed closer, every sound outside the window a threat.

The next morning, I tried to be rational. Maybe a prank. Maybe someone at work being cruel. But when the phone rang again on my lunch break, I nearly dropped it.

This time, I answered with anger. "Who is this?"

Silence. Then the same slow breath, like he wanted me to know he was listening.

I slammed the phone down, hands shaking. My coworkers noticed. One of them, a friend named Lila, pressed me until I confessed. She went pale.

"You need to go to the police," she said.

I wanted to believe the cops would help. But I remembered Walmart. Their polite shrugs, the way they let him vanish into the aisles.

Still, I filed a report. The officer typed into his computer with bored detachment, nodding along. "Could be a scammer. Could be a robocall. We'll log it."

"That's it?" I asked.

"Unless he makes a threat," he said, "there's not much else we can do."

Mine echoed in my skull. If that wasn't a threat, what was?

That night, I turned my phone off and buried it in a drawer. I told myself I'd sleep better.

I didn't.

The ringing dragged me out of dreams anyway. Not my phone—my apartment's landline, one I'd never even plugged in. Its shrill cry echoed through the dark like a smoke alarm. I

stumbled into the kitchen, heart in my throat, and stared at the dusty unit mounted to the wall.

It rang again. Slowly, insistently.

With a trembling hand, I lifted the receiver.

No static this time. No breathing. Just that whisper, clearer now, almost gentle:

“You can’t hide.”

My blood ran cold. Because no one should’ve been able to call that number. Not even me.

When I slammed the receiver back into its cradle, the kitchen window caught my eye. For just a moment, in the black glass, I thought I saw him outside—standing perfectly still, pale eyes locked on mine.

And then he was gone.



"Shadows in Aisle Nine" — Part 5: The Apartment Below

It started small. The kind of things you could dismiss if you wanted to.

One morning, I woke to find the front door chain unlatched. I always used it—I knew I had. My stomach twisted, but I convinced myself I'd been tired and careless.

Later, I noticed my favorite mug missing from the dish rack. Not broken, not misplaced—just gone. I tore through every cabinet twice, growing frantic, until I found it two days later sitting neatly in the refrigerator, handle turned outward.

That one stopped me cold. I hadn't touched the mug since washing it.

Then came the photo. A framed picture of me and Lila at the beach, once kept on my nightstand. I returned home from work to find it angled perfectly away from the bed, as if someone didn't want to see me while they slept there.

I barely slept myself after that. Every creak in the floorboards, every sigh of the building's old pipes, felt deliberate—like someone shifting weight just out of sight.

I tried to fight the paranoia with logic. Maybe I was misremembering. Maybe stress and lack of sleep were playing tricks. I even made a checklist by the door: chain locked, windows shut, stove off. Each night I marked it, each morning I checked again.

And yet, things still moved.

The worst was the closet. I came home one evening to find the door slightly ajar, though I never left it open. Inside, my shoes were arranged in a neat row at the front, their laces tied into perfect bows. I hadn't touched them in weeks.

My chest tightened so hard I thought I'd collapse. Someone had been inside. Not just inside my apartment—but inside long enough to settle in.

I called the building manager in tears. He swore the locks hadn't been tampered with and insisted only he and I had keys. He even changed the deadbolt in front of me, handing me the new set personally.

That night, I pressed a chair against the door and slept with the lights on.

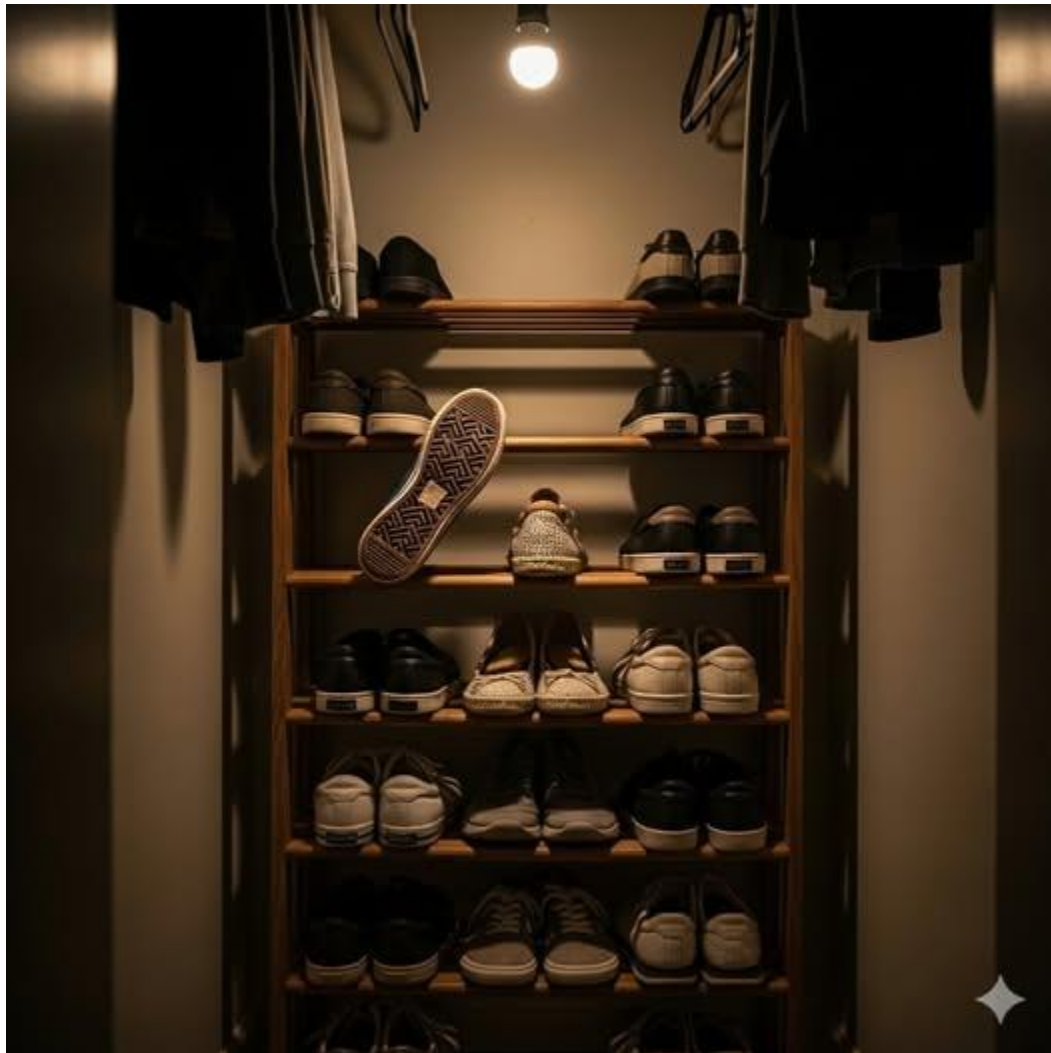
Still, at 3:12 a.m., I woke to the unmistakable sound of footsteps in the apartment below. Not the usual creaks of plumbing or settling wood, but steady movement. A floorboard groaning, a cupboard door shutting.

The unit below mine had been vacant for months.

I pressed my ear to the floor, heart pounding. For a long, terrible moment, I swore I heard breathing—low and steady, like someone was waiting for me to notice.

I pulled away, trembling, every instinct screaming that the locks didn't matter anymore.

Because he was already inside.



"Shadows in Aisle Nine" — Part 6: The Missing

By the time the closet door opened itself for the second time in a week, I couldn't ignore it anymore. My nerves were frayed raw, sleep shredded into fragments. I called the police.

The officer who answered sounded half-asleep. I explained everything—the noises, the moved items, the feeling that someone was in my apartment. Silence stretched on the line before he finally said, "What's your address?"

Two patrol cars arrived within the hour. They swept the building, checked the basement, even knocked dust off the door to the empty unit below. Nothing. No forced entry. No signs of tampering.

But when I described the man from Walmart—the pale eyes, the way he followed me—the officers exchanged a look. One cleared his throat.

"Ma'am, I think we know who you're talking about. A man matching that description... he's deceased. Suicide. About a week ago."

My stomach dropped. "That's not possible. He was here. He is here."

They were polite, professional, but the way their voices softened told me they'd already decided what box to put me in. Stress. Fatigue. A frightened woman living alone.

"Sometimes," the older officer said gently, "our minds play tricks when we've been through trauma. You're safe. There's no one here."

They left me with a card for "non-emergency follow-up" and a suggestion that I get more rest.

But that night, I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, the words echoing in my skull. Deceased. Suicide.

If that were true, then what had I been hearing?

The disturbances didn't stop. They grew bolder. A chair scraped across the kitchen tile at three in the morning. My shampoo bottle moved from the shower to the sink without explanation. The sound of humming drifted through the apartment one night—low,

tuneless, but familiar.

I checked the locks again and again. Solid. Untouched.

And yet the sense of presence thickened, crowding every corner. It wasn't just someone outside, waiting. It was here, breathing against the walls, sliding along the mirrors, circling my bed while I pretended to sleep.

Once, half-awake, I swore I saw a figure standing in the hallway. Thin, still, watching. When I blinked, the space was empty—but the air was heavy with the scent of him, the smell of stale cigarettes clinging to the dark.

I tried to convince myself it was memory, imagination. But memory doesn't move chairs. Imagination doesn't whisper my name from the other side of the closet door.

And if the man who followed me through Walmart was dead...



"Shadows in Aisle Nine" — Part 7: Evidence

For days I told myself I wasn't losing my mind. The police said he was dead, but the noises, the moved objects—they suggested something was still here. Something of him.

I wanted proof the world outside my head was real. What I got instead shook me to the core.

It started with a receipt tucked into my jacket pocket. A bar tab. My name scrawled across the bottom in my own handwriting, my credit card charged. The timestamp read 2:17 a.m. I hadn't left my apartment that night. I hadn't ordered whiskey sodas or signed anything. Yet the paper trembled in my hands.

The final crack came when Lila stopped by with a photograph. She said she'd taken it the evening before, at 8:41 p.m.

The photo showed me in the park, back turned, gazing into the dusky sky. The image was blurry at the edges, but the focus was clear: my shoulders tense, head tilted as if I were listening to something no one else could hear.

At 8:41, I'd been home—sick, curled under blankets with tea. I hadn't gone to the park.

I told Lila she was mistaken. She shook her head. "You asked me to drive you there," she said carefully. "You were acting... off. Then you walked away. I thought you just needed space."

Her words left me colder than the photo itself.

Then there was my phone.

I always left it on the nightstand when I slept. But my camera roll was filled with odd, close-up images—angles of feet, the underside of my chin, the hallway carpet—timestamps between 1:30 and 2:45 a.m. The front-facing camera had been active. One photo showed me asleep, jaw slack. Another showed the apartment doorway from the threshold, hallway light haloed in black.

I stared at them until the screen blurred. Whoever took those pictures had done it with my hands. Whoever signed that bar tab—it was my handwriting. Maybe it was me, moving without knowing.

The nights grew worse. I woke with bruises circling my arms, a faint scrape down my leg like I'd tumbled against stairs. My closet stayed immaculate, but the week's laundry was stacked neatly on the floor, folded with compulsive care. My shoes were tied into perfect bows.

I shoved a chair under the bedroom door—not to keep anyone out, but to keep myself in. For two nights it worked, until I woke to find the chair rolled halfway aside, as if I had been the one to move it.

Lila's face when I told her was the most dangerous thing I'd seen—pity edged in alarm. "You've been stressed," she whispered. Then, softer: "Have you ever sleepwalked? Blacked out? Taken something you didn't remember?"

I tried to argue, but my phone's location history betrayed me. One dot at a bar across town at 2:12 a.m. Another in the alley behind my building at 2:28.

I sat on the kitchen floor, receipt in one hand, phone in the other, trying to picture myself moving through those places with no memory of being there. The idea felt obscene and undeniable.

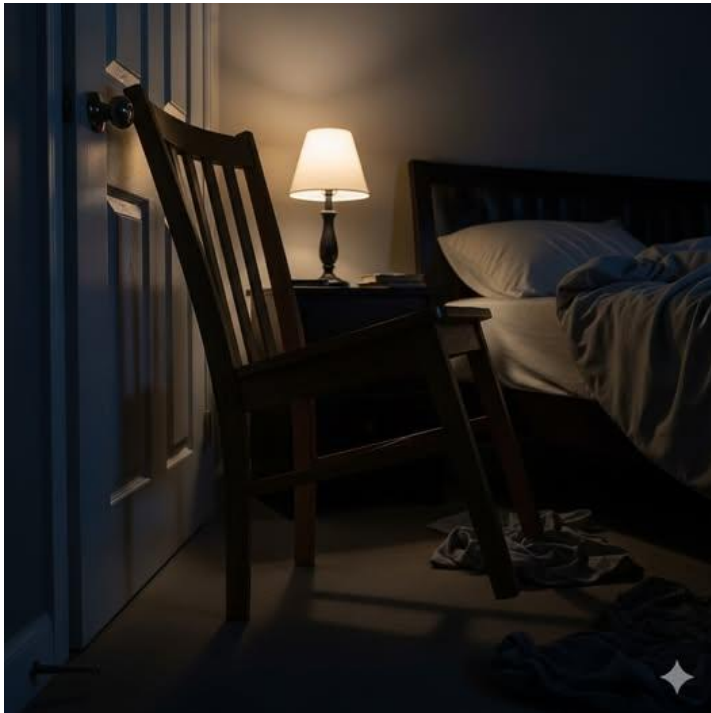
I had begged for an outside villain. Instead, the evidence circled back to me, patient and merciless.

The movements. The missing objects. The unlocked doors.

It hadn't been him.

It was me.

Or something wearing me like a mask.



"Shadows in Aisle Nine" — Part 8: The Fracture

Sleep had become a stranger. Every night, I braced for the blackouts, the empty hours I couldn't account for, the faint impressions of movement I couldn't remember making. I set up cameras, flour by the door, alarms on drawers—anything to prove what I already feared.

The first night was uneventful. Or so it seemed. Morning light revealed no evidence: flour undisturbed, drawers closed. But when I reviewed the footage, my stomach turned cold. At 3:07 a.m., I appeared in the living room, standing still for eight minutes, staring at the lens. My lips moved. Words I couldn't recognize tumbled in a low, guttural voice, almost a hiss.

I smelled it first—a faint tang of tobacco, sharp and acrid, cutting through the neutral scent of my apartment. I knew I hadn't smoked, not in years. A glimmer of foil on the floor near the trash caught my eye: a cigarette butt, crushed but unmistakable. The ashtray by the couch was empty—but the lingering smoke was enough to make my eyes water.

I tried to convince myself it was a prank, a mistake. But then I noticed the kitchen door slightly ajar. I hadn't left it that way. My shoes were lined up neatly, the laces tied into perfect bows, though I didn't remember bending to do it. And the chair I'd used to barricade my bedroom door—moved, again, halfway across the room.

Night after night, the pattern repeated. I woke sitting on the floor, my voice hoarse from speaking in tones I didn't know I could make. Sometimes the smoke was heavier, curling around my nose as if someone had been standing over me. And always, the cigarette butts—one here, one there—evidence of a presence that didn't belong to me.

I began keeping a notebook, jotting down the strange impressions I felt on waking: the ash's cold texture on the counter, the smell of stale tobacco on my clothes, the faint warmth of the chair where I had apparently slept. Each detail confirmed what I feared but couldn't fully grasp: I wasn't alone in my own body. Something of him—his obsessions, his habits, even his smoke-stained fingers—had taken root inside me.

The voice grew stronger, coaxing, ordering, pressing at my thoughts. I caught myself tracing lines along the countertop in patterns I didn't remember planning, opening cabinets to rearrange items. I was moving, acting, speaking—and yet not fully myself.

I could smell him everywhere: the smoke, the lingering odor on my clothes, the weight pressing at my temples. He wasn't just haunting me. He was in my mind, finishing what he

had started all those weeks ago.

And I didn't know how to fight it.



"Shadows in Aisle Nine" — Part 9: Hollow Hours

The boundary between night and day had become hazy, time became a vague continuum marked by unfilled intervals. Upon awakening, I would discover myself in peculiar positions lying on the bathroom floor or kneeling by the window with a hand on the glass, as if awaiting someone's arrival. My throat was scratchy, as though I had been whispering endlessly for hours.

The air was consistently heavy with smoke, not just a whiff but a constant layer clinging to my skin, mingling with my hair, and seeping into the bedding. Occasionally, upon waking, I could taste its sharp, bitter tang on my tongue, reminiscent of a night of chain-smoking. There were faint smudges of black residue on my fingertips. Once, I observed a circular, inflamed blister on my palm, as if a lit cigarette had been pressed against it.

I refrained from looking in mirrors due to the unsettling sight of my body twisted in unfamiliar poses — hunched forward, shoulders tense, bearing a faint resemblance to his half-snarl that used to unsettle me. A foreign expression stared back at me.

The voice no longer whispered externally but now intertwined with my own thoughts, insidiously infiltrating like a parasite. It switched between harsh assertions — weak, pathetic, claiming its necessity. It also took on a coaxing tone — offering help, suggesting taking control. Most disturbingly, it mimicked my voice with uncanny precision, blurring the line between my words and the implanted ones.

Lila stopped coming by, citing a dislike for the smoke and my changed demeanor. Though I couldn't recall treating her any differently, her trembling hands as she left spoke volumes.

In a futile effort to fend off encroaching fatigue, I tried to stay awake, clutching coffee mugs and digging my nails into my arms. But inevitably, darkness would engulf me, allowing him free rein.

One day, I woke to find the dining table meticulously set for two — plates, glasses, and silverware arranged with a precision I never possessed. A smoldering cigarette sat in the ashtray, giving off a faint warmth.

I had not been the one smoking it.

The chair across from mine was pulled out at a precise angle, as though expecting my presence.

Despite pressing my hands to my temples, the persistent pressure failed to drown out his presence. He permeated every aspect of my essence — my gestures, scents, and musings. Slowly slipping away, I was transforming into the vessel he had always desired.

The most terrifying realization was not the loss of control.

It was recognizing how effortlessly I had surrendered it.



"Shadows in Aisle Nine" — Part 10: The Severing

The nights stretched into weeks. I hadn't slept in any way that mattered. He prowled through me—my hands, my voice, my lungs—until I barely knew where I ended and he began.

But the last five days were different. They were war.

The first night, Lila refused to leave. "If you won't get help, I'm not letting you go through this alone," she said, settling onto the couch like a guard dog too afraid to blink. That night, she saw it for herself—the smoke curling from nowhere, the guttural murmurs spilling from my throat. In the morning, she looked at me like she didn't know me at all.

On the second night, she cried. I pretended to sleep, but her muffled sobs reached me anyway. "It's not you," she whispered into the blanket, though I wasn't sure she believed it. My lips twitched upward in the dark. Not my smile.

By the third night, she had to shake me awake, screaming my name. I stood over her with a lighter, its flame dancing inches from her hair. My fingers let it fall as if burned, but his laughter split my skull, delighted. Lila didn't sleep at all after that.

On the fourth night, we fought back—salt across the doorframe, every light in the apartment blazing. None of it mattered. Smoke still thickened the air, my reflection still sneered back from the glass, his voice still pressed through my throat. Lila held my shoulders as if to keep me anchored.

The fifth night bled into morning without sleep. My eyes burned from staying open too long, my body sagged with weakness, but I didn't dare surrender. The silence of the house pressed against my skull, humming with a voice that wasn't mine.

That night, the house became a battlefield. Doors slammed on their own. The lights flickered until bulbs burst overhead. My body bent and stiffened, every muscle straining as if he meant to wear me like a skin again. I screamed until my throat shredded, begged until the words blurred into sobs.

Lila didn't run. She stood in front of me, shaking but steady, and shouted into the dark: "You don't get her. Not anymore."

The air shifted then. The weight of him crushed down, forcing me to the floor. I clawed at the rug, nails tearing, fighting against the thing already inside my mind. A final scream ripped through me—mine, his, ours—and then it broke, like glass under pressure.

The house fell silent.

For days after, there was no more voice. No cigarette smell, no shifting shadows. My body still shook, but it was mine again. I spoke without him echoing me. Lila stayed, making tea, keeping me grounded when silence felt too heavy. She said I looked like myself again. Whole.

One evening, as twilight bled through the windows, we sat together at the table. She reached for her cup, and her sleeve slid back just enough to show faint ash smudges on her fingertips. My breath caught.

Lila noticed me watching and gave a nervous laugh, brushing at them. “Garden soil,” she said quickly, though she hadn’t been outside.

Later, at the door, she paused before leaving. Her head tilted—just slightly, just enough to tug at memory.

I blinked, and she smiled, warm and ordinary, and said she’d be back tomorrow.

When the door shut, I was alone again, staring at the dark window. Everything felt calm, finally. Too calm. And somewhere deep in the quiet, I couldn’t shake the thought that the danger hadn’t vanished—it had simply... moved on.



"Thank you so much for reading *Shadows in Aisle Nine*! I hope you enjoyed the journey and felt the suspense along the way. If you did, please like and share so others can experience it too — your support means the world!" -Dave