

Preface

Your existence is a light some people ache to switch off. If they could, they'd snap their fingers and kill your glow, then stand there smiling from ear to ear the moment the room gets dark.

They'll get tricky with it too; Some will order your demise to look self-inflicted, others will purposely put you in harm's way and lay back calm, careless, disconnected - letting your fate play out without getting their own hands dirty.

Terra knows this all too well. Her casket had been picked out for her many years ago. But despite her

failed execution, she was still alive - being antagonized for her rejectable presence.

As she wandered a graveyard of memories, her unwavering silhouette spread taller across the wall. It flickered away then reappeared, pulling the breath from her lungs.

The air weighed so heavy upon her shoulders, she could almost feel her feet sinking into the floor.

The room shrank, its corners pulling toward her with every labored breath she took.

Fists knotted, she stared into her shadow as it stalled ahead of her, wearing her darkness like thin skin. It stood there – bold, sharp, almost alive.

She gasped as it uncoiled from the surface and stepped forward, no longer mimicking her movements but now morphing into something born from her rage.

Chest heaving and palms sweating, Terra flinched at her double and finally responded, “.... But I survived, motherfucker!”



Prologue

A History to Remember

1985

‘Wicked’ is in the reflection of the beholder.

Mirrors hold that truth, which is why some people refuse to face themselves in one. Every blue moon, Terra would glance at herself in a mirror and think, *I’m not that ugly.*

But she cringed every time that word waved in her ears.

The first time she heard it, she was in a room full of other children – bunk beds, shared closets and twenty-four-hour residential care was the structure of the building that housed them. “Why yo face so ugly?” a tiny voice zoomed past from behind.

Terra spun around.

Her eyes landed on pig tails bouncing from the clamp of fluffy pink bows.

Eyes blurring, she smiled, rushing over to face the little girl. No one had spoken to Terra for a long while, and making friends was an idea she had adapted to after watching the others pair up.

She stared into the little girl's eyes. Her lips parted, but a taunting chuckle halted the sound that normally dropped from her mouth.

“Your eyes look like meatballs,” the little girl pointed at Terra, then to the mirror on the wall, “Look, you're *ugly*-ugly!” Laughter waved around

the room, a crew of other children rushing to the little girl's side.

“Amanda,” another young girl giggled, “You’re so mean.”

“I’m not,” Amanda huffed, “I’m just saying the truth. My mother told me never to tell a lie.”

The sound of feet thumping against carpet resumed. Amanda jerked her body back and forth before finally tapping Terra’s shoulder with the tip of her index finger. Then she dashed away

“You have to stay right there, don’t move,” she demanded, “that’s how you play the game!”

Terra stood there unblinking.

Mother?

She thought to herself, watching the crowd of kids point and laugh.

“Who’s gonna unfreeze’er,” Steven, Amanda’s older brother had asked. His voice dipped in and out of Terra’s space, “I’m not touching’er.” He thrust forward, waving his hand in Terra’s face, “... why you look like that, can you even see me?”

From Terra’s view, his body glowed in hues of red and gray. He looked at his sister, motioning for her to finish Terra off.

“You’re a monster,” Amanda frowned, “... with the face only a mother could love.”

“Not even her mother loved her,” Amanda’s best friend teased, glancing at the empty parking space just outside the window, “... Mine will be here soon. My worker is taking us for ice cream, then to the park. I hope you’re not still here when I come back.”

Mother?

The word flooded Terra’s thoughts, spilling from her mouth in a wet grunt. Her strained voice crumbled past her chin.

Head waving aimlessly, she found herself trapped in a whirlwind of laughter.

If she'd known anything about numbers, she would've lost count of the fingers aiming at her face.

Frozen in place, her guts shifted loose like she was falling apart from the inside.

A peppery static scratched her body.

Her blood felt like hot lava flowing through her veins. Tension pressing her skin tightly against her muscles, ice began to trail her skeleton from feet to head as bursts of adrenaline rocked her

Every bone in her body crackled.

A strange force was growing inside of Terra

She felt it pop out

With her arms suspended against gravity, she looked to her side and found her shadow spreading

along the wall like fire. She studied it with widening eyes, her inquiry now skating along its outline.

What's a mother?

If hope prevailed, a comforting answer would come from its darkness.

“Are you stupid or something?” Steven laughed, “...What’re you staring at? How’d you even get here?”

Together, the children surrounded Terra, singing out insults that she would never forget.

“The animal shelter must’ve dropped her off,” one kid said, “...they should’a put you in the zoo instead.”

“We don’t want you here, ugly.”

“Is it true someone tried to kill you,” a small boy scowled at Terra’s eye sockets, his heart dipping past his ribs, “... I heard someone say you were--”

“Ugh,” Amanda leaped back into view. Face frowned, she forced out a gag, “What’s that yellow stuff?” She pointed at Terra’s lashes, “ew, she’s pissing from her eyes.”

“No wonder *your mother* didn’t want *you*!”

Terra’s brain throbbed.

Heat covered her chest as the kids moved in unison, scrambling to get away from her.

With their grimacing faces peeked over their shoulders, they crowded into a corner then looked over at her like she had crawled from a grave and was hungry for their brains.

Their words were daggers to Terra's heart.

Her smile softened, her chin fell to her chest.

Finally realizing what was happening, another grunt eased from her lips, forced out by the other word that thumped against her skull

Ugly

Now, it was branded upon her brain

“Chelsea,” Amanda raced to the window and peeked through the curtains, “Your grandmother is here. I

hope she bought us some of that candy she gave us last time.”

One by one, the children leaped through the door, leaving Terra stiffened in a cloud of despair.

Across the room, her shadow warped into a figure she barely recognized. But it was her, Terra – watching herself from the distance.

What’s a grandmother?

she wondered, turning to the window in time to see Chelsea look up at an older woman then disappear into her arms.

What’s she doing to her, groans leaked from Terra’s mouth in globs of drool, *let her go.*

In her eight years of life, Terra had never been that close to anyone. She didn't know how it felt for someone to pull her in close.

wrap their arms around her

... say 'I love you.'

She stared past the curtains, a knot forming in the pit of her stomach. Needles of prickly energy crawled along her arms.

She swayed on her feet, an unfamiliar voice whisking through the ambiance, '*We don't belong here,*' it had whispered, '*Follow me.*'

Terra felt her muscles shift under her skin as she peeled away from the space surrounding her.

Away from the room.

Away from the faded, old yellow building.

Unconscious of the world surrounding her, she disappeared into the light of day.

As she stumbled in her own steps, the environments she passed through were like huge, life-size paintings. Buildings were hollow; flattened like billboards

Trees and bushes looked like blotches of green and brown paints

People were just flashes of dark energy sneaking through the atmosphere.

Nothing had substance, no one had a purpose.

Even the natural elements seemed unreal. Earth was an obstacle course crafted only to guide souls through the gates of hell; the sun was a ball of fire leaving streaks of hate along Terra's bare skin.

and the wind?

The wind was a stretch of loneliness, wrapping around her body to blow whispers in her ear, "they should'a put you in the zoo..." she heard them say.

Stuck in autopilot, Terra bolted ahead in her impromptu state of delirium day after day, step after step. After waking from a deep slumber early one

morning, she rose from a pile of leaves and stared at the distance ahead.

A sudden craving for iron sprouted along her tongue. She stood to her feet and stumbled forward, lost between space and time. Memories zipped through her head:

Strange voices

Distorted faces

colors, textures, patterns.

... A walking shadow that would flash in and out of her view at random. All of Terra's life she had been confused and all alone. But now she'd found company...

lurking in the dark corners of nightmares to come.

Chapter 1

Let's play a Game



Summer 2018: Palmdale, California

Darkness stretched into view, waving across three bodies settled beside one another. Backs against the wall, their shivering figures lined up in decreasing sizes – all of them curled forward in fetal position. Sweat laced their bodies.

A pool of blood on the floor ahead of them had jellied in the condensed rhythm of time, changing from cherry-red to a thick, sticky burgundy. Just outside the window a murder of crows lurked on the porch, the stench of human remains calling them to their next meal.

Marsha Newman raised her head just in time to look one of them in the face. The shudder of its eye lids caused her brain to wobble inside her skull.

She trembled and folded forward a few inches more. Her arms tightened around her legs; her heart thumped against her knees. She longed to hold her

kids; the slightest touch of her hand would provide them with a sense of calm - if only for a moment.

But thirteen-year-old Jason Newman was twelve inches beyond the reach of his mother's fingertips and Kaycee Newman, Jason's nine-year-old sister, sat fifty inches past the bend of her big brother's elbow.

Floorboard planks dipped with heavy footsteps that paced the room; the sinking sensation pulling at Jason's waistline.

Wood creaked as the steps slowed, stopping in front of Marsha. Her children's tiring cries throbbed

upon her eardrums, her shivering heart beckoned
thoughts of survival to form in her head

Run!

Her body twitched, she pressed her feet against the floor. But escaping wasn't an option; She couldn't leave her kids. Hope fizzled away with the rattling sound of bullets loading in the gun just inches away from her heart. Standing before her was a chilling reminder that the world could be a cold, dangerous place.

Curly, shoulder length hair protruded from the hood of the black sweater, sunglasses rested within

the wrinkles of her forehead. Inside the tight skin of the looming figure was a soulless giant

Shelly, the punisher

Black jeans hid her legs; black gloves covered her hands. Nothing could save the family from her darkness. Even the gun in her hand had a shadow.

Face covered in a black mask, Terra aimed her weapon at Jason's bowed head; her mind clouded with borrowed thoughts – her actions automatic.

“I dare you to move your legs,” She said to Marsha, *“his brains’ll be splattered over the floor, just like his father’s.”*

Marsha looked to her left, her eyes revisiting the glob of pinkish-gray tissue that had burst from her husband's head. The buzz of swarming flies reverberated in her ear canals.

“... let my children go,” She sniffled, “I don't care what you do to me. please – just let them....”

“Not gonna happen, Vanessa” Menacing words leaped from the mask, *“.... I didn't come this far to spare lives.”*

Kaycee's cries increased in volume, her strained voice barely climbing past her throat. Echoes of the deafening blast that had killed her father whisked

through her memory, the nagging reek of gun smoke plucked at her nose hairs.

“Mommy,” she whimpered, using her sleeve to clear the snot leaking from her nostrils, “...I’m scared.”

“As you should be,” Terra taunted, “... You should thank your mother here for your short life.”

“Thank you mommy,” Kaycee cried, hoping that if she did what she was told Terra would have a change of heart.

But Terra chuckled and licked a drop of blood from her bottom lip; The salty tang of protein had

been saved for this very moment. Flavors of
coppery-iron spread across her tastebuds.

She closed her eyes and moaned, euphoria tickling
her insides - whispers of insanity traveling her mind
finish them off, Shelly Demanded

Terra nodded, pacing the floor in a robotic trance.

Zeroing in on Marsha's cheeks, she saw something
she had missed when she was roaming the family's
home, studying pictures in the frames upon the walls
A birthmark, eggnog-brown... shaped like the sun.
Right above the arch of Marsha's high cheekbones.

This multicolored bitch, Terra heard the voice zip through her head, *looking like someone got tired of painting'er stupid ass*

Terra glanced at the piles of mail she'd strewn over the couches, flabbergasted at the title of the addressee

Current Resident

'fuck!' she thought

Her position as mail carrier had been a ploy all along; it provided her with the perfect cover to carry out her plot. For weeks she'd studied the Newman's daily routines, calculating the distance from the

drawn-out stretch of highway to the remote community.

The cluster mailboxes were 1,5000 steps from the main road, and there were approximately one-hundred steps between the neighboring houses. The crowd of surrounding trees would provide blind spots to conceal her mischief.

She'd lurked in their shadows with conviction and malice, studying every exit and entry point until she had mastered the realms of her criminal intent.

Chess, not checkers.

Now with his innocent face tucked between his knees, Jason's eyes followed the swing of Terra's

legs as he rocked on his bottom. A muffled thump leaped from a room upstairs. Terra froze, throwing her eyes toward the staircase.

Silence

Sasha, the housekeeper, had long ago succumbed to her injuries. Terra had made sure of that. In blood wars there could be no witnesses. Terra grinned, Recalling the nights she'd eased from the attic to grab a bite to eat while the family was fast asleep. But as satisfying a selection there was, nothing in the refrigerator compared to the tang of Luther Newman's semen mixed with his blood and sweat.

Punctuating an impromptu affair, the taste had lingered in her mouth long after she'd wrapped her lips around his manhood and clenched her teeth, almost severing his penis.

But Mr. Newman was long gone, his wife and kids left to face this terror alone. Terra swayed her eyes toward the back door, then to the bathroom. All these places in the Newman's home, she had frequented – the only trace of her unlawful entry being misplaced items that reappeared at random, and the constant need to repair the doors.

Marsha had attributed the broken knobs to her husband's heavy-handed nature but in hindsight, he

was never that rough. Now, she wished she had followed her right mind and changed the locks once more. “Please don’t hurt my babies,” Marsha cried *“it’s too late for all that.”*

“What have we done to deserve this?”

“Not WE,” Terra clarified, *“YOU, Vanessa.”*

“I don’t understand. Who, who’s Vanessa?”

“.... Don’t act stupid.” Terra raised the gun and ping-ponged the barrel back and forth between Jason and Kaycee, *“eenie, meenie, minie.....”*

“Please,” Marsha pleaded, “don’t shoot!”

“You know,” Terra laid the gun on the coffee table, reached into her boots and pulled out a

machete, “*You’re right. I prefer something more personal.*” A warm, yellow puddle spread past Kaycee’s legs. “*You’ve pissed yourself,*” Terra hissed, “*maybe you should be next.*”

“No!” Marsha pleaded.

“*Mommy makes the rules,*” hyper-focused on her target, Terra flicked her wrist back and forth, ensuring the tip of the knife would be a sharp shot between Jayson’s eyes, “*it’s your turn to die.*”

“Stop, please. You don’t have to do this!”

Jason sat quietly, losing his mind. His daddy had taught him to protect his mother and sister, and that's what he did on most days. He took pride in standing

up to Kaycee's bullies, and making sure his mother took her blood pressure meds on time.

He was the family hero but now, he was helpless to save the day.

Tears flooded his cheeks as he looked toward the ceiling, his bulging eyes locked with Terra's in a fleeting moment before dropping back to the floor. Huffs of shallow breath sprang from Jason's chest to his throat. He swallowed, his shivering body moistened in fear. The pain shooting through his rib cage ran so deep, it felt like his heart had burst open.

“I’m begging you,” Marsha repeated, “What do you want from me?”

Terra smirked, “*Nothing.*”

“Then why are you doing this?”

“*Let’s just say, I’m returning a favor.*”

“For who, or, or - for what? Please... tell me,”

Marsha’s eyes widened, a spark of desperation dancing in her dilated pupils, “I can make this right.”

“Don’t you hurt my brother!” Kaycee’s voice trembled. Ignoring Marsha’s plea, Terra slid the aim of the blade from Jason to Kaycee, “*You wanna go next?*”

“Dear God,” Kaycee pressed her palms together, her tiny voice sprinting into prayer, “please help us.”

“They’re just kids,” Marsha bowed her head

“*Don’t worry,*” Terra talked softly, looking down at Kaycee’s wet face, “*You’re gonna be with your daddy soon.*”

Gripping her heart, Marsha’s sobs eased out in a violin cry, “In the name of Jesus,” her voice fluttered, “...save my children.” With the back of the blade now resting against her lips, Terra closed her eyes and shook her head, “*No one is coming to save you Vanessa, you’re all gonna die. First them,*” she

smirked, reveling in the thought of making Marsha watch her carry out her evil deed, “..*Then you.*”