

Ch. 11

I remember a lot of things from that walk but I remember the darkness the most. It was intolerably dark out. The moon provided some light but no comfort. It really just illuminated the grays and blacks permeating the entire street.

Large weeping tree branches overhung in a dreary canopy. Snarled, twisted limbs intertwined up towards Heaven, reaching like a beggar's fingers searching for alms. The branches that stretched outwards over the road formed a fractured awning that let the slivers of moonlight through in random shards. The broken moonlight crossed and danced on the asphalt as we stepped down and up, down and up on top of it. Thorns wreathed round the trunks and several trees had branches that pierced through one another in a mad, chaotic attempt at order. The chain fence that ran along one side of the street had been engulfed by many of the hideous trees. They grew and enveloped the rusted links, merging nature and metal.

And everything was helplessly fighting off the shadow – it cloaked everything along the street. I saw no color, only various shades of black and gray. The mailbox, the fire hydrant and the street signs all sat silent like tombstones with epitaphs of “stop” or “local mail.”

Lily, hanging like an old coat off the shoulders of Lindsey and I, moaned inaudible phrases. We basically pulled her down the street like dogs with an empty sled. The night uttered nothing as we shuffled off the road, up onto the sidewalk in the direction of the main campus.

As we meandered away, the house party seemed far off in time and place. Before we got to the end of the street I looked back at the house, wanting to be sure it truly

existed. The blackness of the street hurt my eyes but the burning sensation they got when they focused on the house was unbearable. A distant, hazy and artificial glow of fluorescent bulbs and burning cigarettes contrasted the house against the pitch-black street. Imagine the Devil's dream house. It probably looks similar to where we just were.

I turned away, disgusted at my peers and myself.

Lindsey and I took a left onto Eaton Street with Lily in tow and caught sight of campus proper. Had we taken a right, walked a half-mile and taken another right, we would have been on the street that led to Primal. We definitely didn't want to go that way. That night, Primal was the beginning not the end.

We crossed Eaton Street and walked next to the varsity soccer field, stopping every few yards so Lindsey could catch her breath and I could make sure Lily was still breathing. I had seen overly drunk people before. I was a junior in college; I had been one of those overly drunk people on numerous occasions. But until that point, I had never seen someone that drunk. She wasn't just drunk she was intoxicated. Her system was poisoned. Lily wasn't right.

Eaton Street was a slightly inclined road and a short stonewall formed a boundary between the fenced in soccer field and the sidewalk. Lindsey leaned against it, resting Lily's hip on her knee.

"Ya know, for a stick figure this girl weighs a ton," she complained.

"Doesn't help that you're wasted," I snapped.

I shouldn't have. It wasn't Lindsey's fault. But she was the only coherent one in our traveling trio and I needed to vent.

"Fine, let's go."

She shifted to push Lily's limp body from off her lap when an acrid smell hit my nostrils. Lindsey's face melted and she started spitting out locker-room profanity.

"Are you kidding me?" She pushed Lily up into my arms and stared at the wet stain on her lap. "She fucking peed on me!"

Lily's eyes were closed and I knew she had no control over her motor functions. Lindsey was lucky it was only urine.

"I'm gonna kill her tomorrow. These are new jeans!"

"Relax, Linds. I doubt she did it on purpose."

I remember wanting to laugh but when I looked at Lily in my arms, with no ability to hold herself up, the humor of the situation disappeared. Lindsey eventually recognized it too. Her snarled lips softened with sympathy. She got up, grabbed a shoulder and we traipsed up Eaton, turned right onto Huxley Avenue and moved towards the beacon that was Lily's ten-story dorm building rising up from the center of campus.

Until September of our junior year, when the school completed construction on a new chapel, Lily's dorm building, McVinney Hall was the highest point in the entire state of Rhode Island. The new chapel's apex, a golden cross, allowed the house of worship to steal that title. That night Lily's dorm building, a utilitarian concrete behemoth full of double bed dorm rooms, underage drinking and parietal-breaking freshmen, would be our lighthouse and our guide, not the chapel.

As we approached the main gate of upper campus I decided to cross the main road, avoid that main entrance and take Lily up one of the less-well lit pathways. Besides the danger of the security guard at the main gate, I wanted to avoid the group of three guys sitting on the wall ten yards away. They all wore hooded sweatshirts, their faces

shrouded. The monkish anonymity added to the already palpable aura of danger they radiated. It was easily distinguished even from our distance.

All the orientation seminars and security department notices did nothing to prepare a freshman for the long walk down the dark road past the housing projects and the cemetery, to reach the college bars. Every weekend the hyenas emerged from their dens and stalked the local watering holes, crouching in wait for a wounded adolescent to fall away from the group, ready to be snatched up and devoured. Undergraduates learned very quickly what characteristics separated the generally naïve and thirsty students from the local thugs that preyed on them. Being juniors, Lindsey and I had run that gauntlet for years. Instinct improved with experience.

“C’mon, let’s take her up near DiTraglia Hall and around the chapel, I don’t like the look of those kids up there.”

“Seriously Shaw, grow up,” she said. “They’re probably just stoners. If we go that way we have more stairs to climb. And she’s getting heavy.”

Apparently Lindsey’s instinct wasn’t as sharp as mine.

“Then let’s go that way so security doesn’t see us and call it in,” I said, keeping the group of thugs in my peripherals.

“Alright fine, I guess it’s a good idea,” Lindsey said. “You know they’d just love to transport her to the hospital.”

Together we heaved Lily off one sidewalk and across the street to the other. Our awkwardly stealth maneuver may have eluded the security guard hut but the group of thugs noticed.

“Hey! Not bad, man, one passed out and one on the way,” one of them cackled.
“Can someone say threesome?”

“Haha, nah he’s probably too wasted for his shit to work. Maybe I’ll have to pinch hit for him,” hissed the tallest one. A discernable hooked nose protruded from the hood’s shadow. They started to cross the street towards us.

“I love drunk girls,” the other one said, “And I really love passed out girls.”

“She can’t say no if she can’t talk,” the tall one snickered.

“Just ignore these assholes,” Lindsey said. She was clearly losing patience with the entire night.

“Linds, if these guys come over here, run over to security,” I whispered.

“Oh please, PC guys don’t have the balls to fuck with me right now.”

“I don’t think they’re PC guys, Linds, they look like . . .”

A quick siren burst and green lights interrupted my observation. One of the security SUVs pulled up in front of the guys before they could cross the street.

“Show me your IDs, gentlemen,” said a portly security guard from the comfort of the car. The guard saw us but decided it was more important to first flex his muscles instead of offer us a ride. I wasn’t going to complain; just avoiding serious trouble with authorities would be a positive in a night of negatives. Lindsey and I took the opportunity to pull Lily off the sidewalk, along a pathway with two sets of stone steps, around a corner. By the time the new chapel loomed in front of us, we were out of sight.

Dragging Lily’s body through the chapel courtyard was slow going. Lindsey and I were both exhausted. Ooze pulsed in the newly formed blister on my right heel. Luckily, we knew the security guards rarely patrolled this area this time of night. The welcomed

feeling of safety slowed our pace and we stopped every few steps to readjust our grip on Lily and catch our breath. I used the relief to indulge in our surroundings. I immediately noticed the intricate detail inlaid into the chapel's edifice and its religious accoutrements. The brick walkway that wrapped around the building converged in a large, circular patio, on which we were standing.

The large reddish oak doors were usually open in the daytime, causing the smells and sounds of an empty place of worship to sneak out onto students passing between classes. The smell that wafted out was flowery, sweet and smoky. The aromatic flavors mixed with a faint, musical sound of tinkling metal and sloshing liquid. Whenever I smelled and heard the chapel during the day I always thought of Alice at the Mad Hatter's tea party. I don't know why, but something about those sounds added to those smells was pleurably inane. On the off chance I entered the chapel, I half expected (and half hoped) to see the head chaplain sitting around the altar surrounded by animals drinking tea. Maybe I just liked the idea of a world where party hosts spoke in roundabout riddles and wore senselessly large hats; where naïve young people stumbled onto something they could never truly understand, and left better for it.

But that night there was definitely no tea party in the chapel. The doors were shut. The smells were trapped inside. The lights inside were dimmed to almost nothing.

Above the doors on the façade was an upside down triangle, Latin writing etched around the outline. In the middle of the triangle was a single torch and a banner with the word, "veritas" scrawled across. It was the college's symbol, a torch to light the way to knowledge. One small spotlight shined from the ground onto the school emblem. Other

bigger spotlights planted at the edges of the patio beamed up to illuminate the golden cross that watched over campus and the state of Rhode Island.

Around the rim of the patio was a low wall of artistic stonework punctuated by six stone pillars. Atop each pillar sat the only other source of light in the courtyard: familiar stone angels, each holding a torch mimicking that on the school crest, save the 100 watt light bulb that cast an eerie blue glow over each angel's androgynous face.

Why, whenever I passed this chapel at night, had something horrible just occurred in my life?

Ch. 12

Lily was completely passed out as Lindsey and I pulled her through the chapel courtyard, past the indefatigable stone angels, down a bush-lined pathway and onto the Quad.

“Her room or your room?” Lindsey asked, taking a deep breath. She used to be an athlete but it was a long walk to be carrying dead weight. I was out of breath too.

“I don't know, I thought her room. I was heading in that direction.”

I stared up at the concrete tower breaching up above the rest of campus, save the golden cross. Most of the lights were out. The building didn't look was inviting from closer up. I changed my mind.

“On second thought,” I said, “we should probably go to my room. No security guard at my building. There's a few at Lily's.”

Lindsey and I both knew the first authority figure to see Lily's state would immediately call an ambulance. That should have tipped me off, but as was usually the

case with Lily, my emotions clouded my judgment. I wanted to keep her safe; I wanted to fix her myself. I was her hero, no one else.

We diverged, went across the grass on the Quad and through the side door of my building. No one else was around so we waltzed in undisturbed. The most cumbersome part of the trip was getting her up the stairs. Lily was no help whatsoever and by now Lindsey's strength had given out.

Instead of stairs we chose the rickety elevator that students barely used. We didn't have to wait.

Our motley crew fell into the elevator and Lindsey hit the button for my floor with her elbow. I leaned back against the metal wall and propped Lily up on my knee. The doors closed and we swayed upwards.

Lily's head bounced around too much. The color, or what was left of color, in her face drain completely. Her light pink freckles dissolved. Her jaw drooped.

Her dinner cascaded out onto the tiled elevator floor and splashed onto Lindsey's ankles.

Odysseus' wax wouldn't have been enough to muffle Lindsey's scream. Lily's full weight collapsed on my knee as Lindsey dropped the piece of Lily she was holding and scampered to the opposite elevator wall.

I had to laugh; there was no other response, what with the dire straits of Lily's health. She might not be conscious, but she still knew how to make me laugh.

Lindsey grunted and huffed at her apparel's misfortune.

Our elevator stopped abruptly, the doors opened and I heaved Lily across the rug to my door. Lindsey refused to help and followed behind.

“What in God’s name is that?” she said, as I reached my door.

“Huh?” I pushed Lily against the door and leant my body against her to prevent sliding.

Lindsey pointed at the floor and I followed her finger back to the elevator.

“That black stuff on the floor. Did that come out of her?”

Initially hadn’t looked at what Lily vomited in the elevator; I just assumed it was whatever she ate earlier mixed with a lot of booze and stomach fluids. I was wrong. A lumpy puddle of blackish-brown bile pooled on the elevator floor was spread in streaks across the rug where Lily’s feet dragged through the puddle and across to my door.

Lindsey didn’t realize what was on her shoes and neither did I. I didn’t know what kind of bile came out of Lily, but I knew it was not normal.

Lily’s head lolled over and her eyes opened. They were limes now, not emeralds. She seemed to be staring straight into me. I wiped some black drool from the corner of her mouth and she smacked her lips. She tried to say something, mumbling only syllables.

“Shaw, that’s not normal,” Lindsey said. I barely heard her. I was fixed on Lily’s face. She was uttering nonsense but the color gradually left her eyes. The limes were graying. I pulled my sleeve over my hand and wiped her entire face, licking the cloth to wet it. I tried to clean her off. With each pass it was like I wiped her with grayscale. She grew more ashen than before. I was doing no good. I was not helping. I was not saving her.

“Call an ambulance,” I yelled at Lindsey.

“What?”

“Call an ambulance,” I repeated as I lowered Lily to the ground and flung open my door. “Go in and call someone, now!”

“What? No, why? She’s fine.”

“Lindsey, what did I just say? Call the ambulance, call security, call an RA, I don’t care. Just get someone!”

Lindsey wasn’t as worried as I was. But Lindsey didn’t watch the life drift out of Lily. Lindsey took a few steps toward my door and stopped.

“But she’ll get in trouble,” she said.

I flipped Lily over onto her side. She lay in the middle of the hallway and I knelt beside her, my hands cradling her still soft hair. But the red had faded and clumped in places were hunks of black bile and floor grime. Her face was smeared with the same sludge and debris from the house party floor, my dorm room floor and the generally disorganized walk. She was a tainted icon, a tarnished statue, perfection smeared.

“You really think getting in trouble matters right now, Lindsey?” I said angrily.

“I’m not going to call security and have them write up my best friend for nothing and get her in trouble. She could lose her scholarship or her student government position or something.”

“*We* are going to lose *her*! I can’t save her!”

My hands trembled underneath Lily’s head. The horror of the situation revealed itself to Lindsey all at once. She leapt over us, Lily on her side across the threshold of my doorway and me, shaking and rocking back and forth on my knees.

Lindsey was in my room calling Security and the EMTs.

“I couldn’t save you,” I whispered uncontrollably to Lily. “I tried to but I couldn’t save you. I tried, Lily, I tried. I can’t save you. I just don’t know how.”

A security guard, the same one from earlier in the SUV, showed up within five minutes escorting an EMT.

They knew as soon as they saw her. I could tell by the way they quickened their pace and stopped chatting airily about some ballgame.

Immediately the first EMT radioed out to the awaiting ambulance. Within a minute a second EMT and a second security guard wheeled a stretcher out of the elevator onto my floor.

“Is that from her?” the second EMT asked as he pushed the stretcher through a puddle of black bile. I nodded. The EMTs nodded to each other.

“Come on, son, stand over here with me,” the second, older security guard said. I was still cradling Lily’s head and the EMTs obviously needed me out of the way. “She’ll be fine, son, come over here.”

I looked down into her eyes for the last time. There was a momentary flash of green flame before the lids closed. Something inside me slammed shut as well. I ran my fingers through her hair and gently lowered her head to the floor.

The EMTs were asking questions but I could barely hear them. Lindsey came out from my room and gently pushed me to the side. She willingly took the brunt of the interrogation.

They took Lily down in the elevator. I couldn’t fit so I walked down the stairs like a zombie. By the time I got outside the second EMT was slamming the ambulance door shut and ran to hop into the driver’s seat. I stood in the doorway alone and watched the

boxy white ambulance pull off the grass and into the Quad's roundabout then down the driveway to the campus exit. The ambulance's exhaust smoke lingered and wisped around in the brisk March air, visibly and playfully rising into the night sky like a wild specter searching for its final rest.

Lily died in the hospital that night during the stomach pump. We didn't find out until the next morning when the old security guard called my room and woke up Lindsey and I, who had fallen asleep lying close to each other on top of my comforter, still in the same clothes we wore the night before.

Doctor's blamed alcohol poisoning; she had way too much. Her blood alcohol content was over 0.20. They said there was also the possibility of foreign substances; someone probably put something in one or maybe more of her drinks. She most likely may have had an adverse reaction to some sort of drug or illicit substance. They would have to do tests to find out exactly what illicit substance.

At the one-year anniversary of Lily's death, we still hadn't seen any test results, been giving any doctor explanation or heard any truth.

As much as I had tried to be like the stoic, stone angels encircling the campus chapel, for Lily I had succeeded in becoming nothing more than an angel of death.

Ch. 13

It rained the morning of Lily's funeral, but only while people filed into the church. The girls cried. I even saw Shoddy wipe something out of his eye during the eulogy, given by Lily's father. Shoddy kept putting his hand on my shoulder asking if I

was doing ok. I never responded to him and, overall, I said very little that day. I didn't feel like talking.

By the time we reached the cemetery, the rain cleared and it became a crisp, slightly overcast March day.

I placed twelve white lilies on her grave. Shoddy, Lindsey, Emily and two busloads of students, teachers and faculty had gone to Connecticut for the ceremony.

Lily's parents introduced themselves to me and thanked Lindsey and I for our efforts to help. Lily must have talked about me at home because her mother hugged me and did not let go, like I was family.

We drove back to Providence in a silence.

One month after she died, and every thirteenth day of every month thereafter, I drove to Lyme, Connecticut to Riverside Hill Cemetery. I always went alone. I never spoke. I never cried. Eleven times I stood in front of her, placed a bouquet of white lilies on top of the gravestone and did nothing. My mind was usually empty. My breaths were even. After five, ten or thirty minutes – I never kept track – I would get back in my Explorer and drive back to Providence.

I always listened to the same CD on the ride back, the Refreshments CD Lily and I bought at the mall. But I barely ever heard the music.

For the year after Lily's death a menacing blade of guilt swung over my head, its rope fraying by the day. I hemorrhaged any emotions she had cultivated in me.

My friends bore the brunt of it, mostly Lindsey. What she wanted, what she deserved I could no longer give her. I pretended but any love I had to give went the way

of Lily's last breaths, intermingling with the ambulance muffler's exhaust rising into the cool March night.

Everything went behind the wall in my head, which had been braced and solidified. I learned to feign things like fun, excitement and desire. Internally I was numb: numb from the pain, numb from the guilt. I urged Lily to drink more that night. I made the choice to carry her across campus. I could have called an ambulance right there at the house party. But I was selfish. I wanted to save her. I tried to be in control when all the circumstances were spiraling wildly the other direction.

Was there something in her drink, roofies or something more sinister? Maybe. Probably. But I was the one who challenged her to consume more booze. It was my responsibility to keep watch, to prevent such evils from intruding upon my friends.

I was mostly numb inside from knowing that someday the guilt would overcome me. When it did, there would be a shockwave. There would be consequences.

END OF PART ONE