

FEAR NOT

If kissing Leigh were a drug, I'd be a hard-core addict. She'd finished the last of her Hot Tamales before I'd pulled her in for one last goodnight. The spicy cinnamon of her tongue burned against my own. Her full upper lip begged me to kiss it. And I did, every chance I got.

I pulled away, savoring the lingering fiery kick. With a sigh, Leigh twisted one of my damp curls behind my ear. Maybe I wouldn't cut my hair this weekend after all. Not if she looked at me that way. *Damn.*

"Want me to come in?" she asked in a purr rivaling Catwoman, her blue eyes darkening.

With equal parts frustration and want, my throat vibrated on a groan. "Nah, Dad'll be home soon."

Leigh settled back into the driver's seat. I glanced out at the dusky neighborhood and suburbanite street lights. Dad was an ass. We didn't see eye to eye on much, especially when it came to unsupervised visits from my girlfriend.

"Any news on the investigation?" Leigh tucked blonde hair behind her ear and slid her dark-framed glasses back on. She hated them, but damn if the naughty thoughts didn't creep into my head.

Most jocks at school dated cheerleaders, but I fell hard for the editor of the school paper. Maybe it was the librarian syndrome, I don't know, but smart, amazing girls made my blood run hot.

I shook my head, frowning at the dash. “Nothing. It’s been a week and not a peep.”

“I can’t believe your mom just took off like that.”

I could. I knew she needed some space when she disappeared a week ago. The note she’d left for Dad said she’d gone to her sister’s for a visit. She never got there. Some clothes, a small suitcase, and her bathroom stuff were missing along with her Camry. It wasn’t like mom to leave me high and dry.

“Yeah.” I took Leigh’s slender hand. Her brows knit as she struggled to say something else, to comfort me somehow. I smiled, but it fell flat. “Thanks for picking me up from practice. Coach is hell-bent on running us into the ground before the game against Lincoln.”

“Absolutely,” she grinned. “Seeing you all sweaty in football pads makes up for it.”

I laughed. “Is that all it takes? I’ve been playing this all wrong.”

“Ass.” Her sudden smile dazed me. “Thanks for showering, though. Not sure I would’ve had enough air freshener.” She flicked the candle shaped thing hanging from the rearview.

“Anything for you, babe.”

Leigh smacked my shoulder and I about doubled over. It felt good to laugh, and Leigh excelled at dragging it out of me. The playful look in her eyes didn’t quite match the worried set of her delicious mouth. I slid my hand around the back of her neck and pulled her in for another kiss. *Yum, cinnamon.* “See you tomorrow.”

Climbing out of her beat-up compact, I grabbed my practice gear from the floorboard and tossed my Varsity jacket on the seat. A pre-snow breeze burned inside my nose. Its clean iciness mixed with wood-burning fireplaces and filled the November air.

“Trey?” Leigh leaned over the gear shift to look up at me. “They will find her. You know that, right?”

My gut clenched and I averted my eyes. The love in her baby blues killed me. She knew today would’ve been mom’s birthday. *IS damn it!* I needed to quit thinking in the past tense. My eyes focused on the back of my Varsity jacket in the passenger seat. The stitching for my name, Rizzo, was frayed around the edges, coming loose. Mom would’ve been able to fix it.

I frowned, fighting the catch in my throat. “Yeah, I know.”

When I met her eyes, I knew Leigh was right. They’d find mom and we’d all go have ice cream or some other normal crap. This whole nightmare would be over. Having Leigh in my corner rocked. She knew Mom and I were close and my senior year shouldn’t be like this.

“Elephant shoes.”

“Elephant shoes,” I said back to her with a grin.

Last year we’d watched a comedian’s bit about mouthing the words ‘elephant shoes’ to a chick he didn’t like because it looked as if he’d said ‘I love you.’ We both cracked up. It stuck after that. I’d say the actual words, since I meant them, but this seemed more us.

Grabbing the last of my stuff, I walked up to the dark house. I flipped on the porch light when I stepped inside. Dad worked a lot these days, avoiding me as always. Too bad I looked

just like him, with all his dark featured Italian glory; else he might actually convince others I was a bastard child. That's how he treated me anyway.

Screw him. At the end of the school year, I'll be on my way to another state for college.

C'est la vie, as they say.

Tossing my gear at the foot of the stairs, I walked down the hall to the kitchen. I emptied my pockets onto the counter and grabbed a protein bar from the pantry. Planning to lose myself in studies, so I didn't have to talk to Dad when he got home, I turned back toward the hall. My feet froze in place at the doorway.

My heart skipped a beat and my skin broke out in goose flesh. The air turned to ice. The door to the storage room under the stairs, which stayed locked, stood open.

It wasn't open a few minutes ago. I would've noticed. For as long as I could remember, I've had an irrational fear of that room. As a kid I had nightmares about being trapped in there. They were so bad I've been medicated ever since. The little magic pills made sure I didn't remember any dreams at all.

But the pills didn't explain the now open door.

Feeling more than a little like a punk-ass bitch, I turned around, intending to ignore it and go through the dining room. A silvery light crossed my vision. Tears filled my eyes from the brightness. Cold surrounded me, burning my lips and nose like our harsh Midwestern winters. My breath puffed out in white clouds. Dark eyes appeared as if I were nose to nose with another person. Then everything went black.



It took me a minute to realize my eyes were open. The darkness around me was complete. I jerked upright and cracked my head. My forehead throbbed as I felt above me. A low ceiling, which wasn't much taller than where I crouched, sloped away from me. I scrambled forward, disoriented by the darkness, and crashed my shoulder into a wall. Jumping back, I smashed into another wall. They were barely more than shoulder width apart. Everything seemed to close in on me. I fought for breath as panic clawed its way up my throat. My heart hammered triple time.

Raspy breath scraped along my dry throat. The stale, mothball air didn't help. My hands began to shake. I was never great with tight places. Or the dark.

I stretched out my arms, gauging my space, and tried to ignore the giant knot in my gut. My elbow hit another obstruction. Boxes?

On my knees, I pushed at the cardboard boxes for any give. Nothing. Trying not to reach all-out-panic mode, I pulled the boxes away and reached an arm through the gap. A rough and chalky surface. Plaster. Another wall.

Pushing away from the boxes in frustration, my back slammed against the opposite side. My head brushed the ceiling, but I could kneel, though I wanted to curl into a tight ball. I tried not to think about how close the walls were, or how the darkness breathed down my neck. Its

invisible hands closed around my throat and writhed its way down my spine. I tried to think about Leigh and her smile.

Leigh!

I jammed my hand in my pocket. Empty. Shit! I elbowed the wall behind me, causing a numbing pain to shoot down my arm, and kicked the boxes. One fell forward and I punched it until the crappy cardboard gave under my fist and something that felt like an old wool blanket spilled out. I shoved it away from me and raked my fingers through my hair. *Okay, don't freak out, man.*

With shaking, bruised hands, I tried to calm down. I hunched over my knees, rocking back and forth. My chest burned with each ragged breath. My stomach twisted up and bile burned in the back of my throat.

With my face near the floor, a subtle draft caressed my damp bottom lip. I hadn't realized I'd bit it hard enough to bleed, but the metallic tang said otherwise. I reached for the wall to my right. Slender, vertical framing. Wooden surface. A door? I slammed myself into it and feverishly ran my hands over the door. There had to be a knob! My knuckles cracked against a metal object. A tiny knob. It didn't move. Locked.

Locked door.

Angled roof.

Boxes.

“Dad!” Panic cracked my voice as realization hit. “Dad! Are you there? Let me out!”

How the hell did I get in the storage room under the stairs?

I banged my fists against the unyielding door until my knuckles bled. The warm liquid slid between my fingers, making them sticky. Little boy tears burned behind my eyes. Was the room getting smaller? Sweat coated my face and neck. My sweatshirt clung to my clammy skin as tingles of fear pulsed through every nerve ending.

“Dad...” My voice was shot. I slumped in defeat. My forehead thumped against the door.

Something cold grazed my cheek.

“Jesus!”

I threw myself against a wall, away from the cold. A faint silvery light gathered an arm’s length away. I couldn’t move. The stagnant air of the closet turned to ice. My hot breath formed frantic puffs in the dim light. Goose bumps rose in a wave along my arms and down my legs.

“Dad!” My hoarse voice struggled for volume. I pounded raw knuckles and shoulders against the door. My clammy hands couldn’t grip the tiny knob. “Get me out of here! Dad!”

I glanced over my shoulder. The silvery light formed a blob of sorts about my size. Its pulsating shape grazed my shoe sending an icy jolt up my leg. I pushed away, but the closet wasn’t big enough for both of us. My stomach churned until I almost puked. I focused on my bladder so I wouldn’t piss myself.

“DAD!”

Trey.

I stopped pounding and spun around, throwing my back against the door. The word wasn't spoken, but a whisper in my head. My name. And I swear to shit it came from the silvery blob.

The blob cast a faint glow, bathing the tiny space in a silvery blue light. The outlines of boxes and contours of Dad's golf clubs were barely visible. The floor beneath the shape twinkled as if frost crystals had formed. The tingle skating down my spine had little to do with cold. This wasn't right. My chest heaved in rapid succession as I tried to mold myself into the door.

Boog.

I stopped breathing. The whisper in my head again, but this time I heard the nickname only Mom used.

The figure shifted and slithered into a vaguely human form. It had a fluid quality. The center condensed, nearly solid, with outer edges softening into a fine mist. And it moved like swirling storm clouds in time-lapse.

I saw eyes. And a smile. Both familiar. The tears sliding down my face weren't from fear.

"Mom?" I gasped with a rough voice.

The smile in the mist broadened with warmth.

“Are you--” I swallowed. More tears burned down my face. The cold of the room chased the tears like an icy blade. “Are you...dead?” The last word got caught in my throat. She couldn’t be. Not my mom.

Anguish. Sorrow. Pain. They weren’t words but sensations passing through me as if I’d experienced them. Like my soul felt them.

“Mom?”

Frustration. Irritation. The swirling mist grew erratic and the silvery light darkened.

“You can’t talk to me?”

The mist’s dark eyes saddened and another wave of *frustration* hit me. Her eyes hardened and *anger*, so potent sulfur burned in the air, plowed through my skull. My heart skipped a beat and I backed into the door again.

Anxiety and *regret* washed over me in cool current. The Mom-mist eyes softened and the torrent of swirly mist settled into silvery wisps of light. She thought I was afraid of her. I gave in to the *comfort* spreading in my brain, reminiscent of warm milk.

“What happened, Mom? Where are you? The cops have been looking for you.” I had so many questions, but the Mom-mist watched me patiently. The same *patience* warmed me like fresh baked cookies after school.

I took a deep breath and rubbed my face. Mom-mist couldn’t answer questions the way I asked them. I needed to work around this.

“Okay.” I choked back tears and the need to grab Mom-mist and cry. “So you’re--” I couldn’t say it. “You’re...gone.” Her confident smile urged me forward. “Do you know where your...body...is?”

Sadness, but *determination*. I took that as a yes. How to find her, though? I tried to formulate a question she could answer when the sulfuric *anger* came back. I cringed at the potency and her building storminess.

“Did you wreck?”

Nothing. The *anger* winked out. Not a wreck.

“Are you still in the car somewhere?”

Nothing. Just the patient Mom-mist eyes.

“Were you...killed? Like...not an accident?” My heart throbbed in my temples as *pride* flashed through my brain. No! This couldn’t be happening. I hung my head as sobs weighted down my shoulders.

“Do you know who did it?” I managed, scrubbing a sleeve across my face.

More *pride* glowed with the brilliance of a blazing star. Her misty form almost appeared solid.

“Holy shit, Mom! Who?” I leaned forward again. The sulfur *anger* came back with a vengeance. I sneezed.

“All right, Mom. Calm down. We can figure this out.” Being rational with a ghost probably border lined normal. The Mom-mist closed her eyes as if taking a deep breath. Her swirls steadied. “I need to find you. To find your...body.”

Pride blazed and her megawatt smile brought tears to my eyes again. *Boog*. My bottom lip trembled and I closed my eyes. *Trey*. How could I hear my name and nothing else? The comfortable weight of an embrace settled across my shoulders. I opened my eyes and the Mom-mist swirled all around me, urging me forward.

I flinched and pulled back. The Mom-mist flared a quick bright light and a warm blanket of *love* settled over me. The intensity of it rocked my soul. *Trey*. The *confidence* in Mom-mist’s eyes gave me courage to crawl further into the dark. Shadows from medicinally forgotten nightmares tugged at the corners of my mind.

My hand caught on a raised bit of carpet. Why was there carpet in here? It came loose. Mom-mist sort of melted into the wall and watched. In the subtle silvery light of Mom-mist, I saw the pattern matched the old carpet we’d pulled out last year. I shoved it over my shoulder.

I shifted my position. The shorter ceiling here made moving around awkward. The floorboard gave under my hands. I glanced up at Mom-mist and *determination* blazed behind her steady gaze.

Confused, I felt around the loose floorboards. They were all roughly cut. I cursed as a splinter dug its way under my fingernail. I found a catch in the boards and lifted.

“Oh God--” I coughed. A sickeningly sweet smell, like rancid meat, filled the darkness. Week-old garbage, or a dead deer on the side of the road in the middle of humid July, had nothing on this smell. I fought the urge to vomit and pulled the collar of my sweatshirt over my nose and mouth. My watery eyes met Mom-mist’s. *Sadness. Regret. Pity.*

Her dark eyes lowered to the space between us and back at me. *You’ve got to be kidding me...* Mom-mist’s subtle glow did nothing to penetrate the pitch black space beneath my knees. I knew what I would find there if I could manage to reach into the void. I needed to do it. Mom needed me to do it. I needed to man-up and push past the knot of fear and grief that froze me in place.

A cool, tingly sensation blanketed me. My head and heart filled with so much *love* I thought I’d bust at the seams. Mom-mist surrounded me again. The tears wouldn’t stop as Mom-mist hugged me. I rocked back and forth on my knees, wanting nothing more than to feel Mom’s arms. She was a tiny thing in life, not quite reaching my shoulder, but I was the small and breakable one in the dark.

Trey.

It finally made sense. When she whispered in my head, it wasn’t so much my name, but a mother’s infinite love I heard. Even in death, Mom was still a mother. The lead weight of sorrow bound my heart, making it difficult to breathe.

I sat back and Mom-mist settled in front of me. The *determination* in her eyes mirrored what hummed in my heart. I scrubbed my face dry with my sweatshirt and reached into the darkness below the floorboards. The support beams under the subfloor had been cut too. Uneven,

rough edges scraped my hands. Fabric. Canvas? A leather-wrapped handle. I pulled it out. Mom's small suitcase. The larger, but otherwise identical, piece sat in my room after campus visits.

Feeling along the edges, I found the zipper. I reached in and found a volleyball-sized bag packed full of stuff. Unzipping it, I nearly lost it as Mom's perfume circled around me. I'd know that jasmine scent anywhere. The bottle must have busted for it to be so strong. Setting her girl-stuff bag aside, I reached back into the case. Clothes, lots of them, were bunched up by the handful.

I closed the suitcase and shoved it behind me. Taking a steadying breath, I eyed Mommist. Her dark eyes were full of *purpose* and *confidence* settled over my shoulders, squaring them up. The hole, measuring four feet wide by my guess, had awkward, uneven lines.

Shifting to my side, I reached into the hole. My hand met the sturdy yet soft material of denim. A leg. A thigh. Gingerly, my fingers skimmed over her hip. Her body bent at the waist, curled in a ball. The silky fabric of her blouse, stiff in places from cold and damp, rang with familiarity. The red one, a deep red, her favorite color. I flinched at the coldness of her arm. The skin almost crumbled under my fingers like crazy overripe fruit.

My fingers grazed over something slithering under my touch. I snatched my hand back with a curse and caught it on rough-cut support beams. Growling back a string of due profanity, I reached back into the dark hole. I tried to ignore the maggots covering her body. My brows pinched and my lip trembled. Her shoulder. Hair.

I rested my palm on the back of her head and bit down on the inside of my cheek. Tears burned down my face again. My shoulders tightened and my throat closed on a sob. How could

this be happening? Taking an unsteady breath, I tried to push the grief away. I'd come this far, let's not fall apart now. *Patience. Admiration. Love.* They all swirled around me, mixing with the lingering scent of Mom's perfume and the gag-inducing sweetness of decay.

She lay wedged under the floorboards in a shallow section of crawlspace. I didn't want to know if anything besides the maggots had found her here. How did she die, though? Judging by the *anger* mixing with the dangerous edge of *betrayal* oozing from Mom-mist, she hadn't been expecting it. I searched for her neck. It was crazy bloated feeling, and sort of spongy, but found nothing. Her round skull flooded me with relief and her hair hung free. Nothing matted with dried blood.

Sliding over for a better reach, I ran my hand along her back. My pinkie grazed something. I tucked my hand in my sleeve, covering my fingers, and reached out again. *Damn it!* The handle of a knife stuck out from beside her shoulder blade.

I sat back up on my knees, measuring Mom-mist. Her steady eyes held mine.

"He knew, didn't he?" I asked her, knowing she couldn't really answer me. "The bastard knew you were leaving him."

Pride. Respect. I nodded at her confirmation.

"They won't believe me, you know? Courts will chalk it up to 'circumstantial.' I've seen Law and Order."

Bitter rage. Vengeance. Mom-mist's eyes lowered to my lap. I followed her gaze and caught the faint silvery outline of my hands on my thighs. I stared at Mom-mist, not

understanding what she meant. She met my eyes, and then pointedly looked into the pit where her body lay. I frowned and she repeated the stares. My hands, my eyes, her body. Her hands!

I lunged forward and smacked my head on the wall. With a curse, I reached into the hole again and fumbled around until I found Mom's hands. They were balled into tight fists, but the curls trapped between her fingers tickled my hands. She'd grabbed some of the bastard's hair! We knew one person with curly hair long enough to grab a handful.

Pulling myself out of the hole, I watched mom. Firm *determination* and *pride* welled in my heart. I nodded to her at her megawatt smile. *Love* so pure and vibrant brought tears to my eyes as the Mom-mist faded away in smoky tendrils. Before the storage closet fell into complete darkness, Mom's perfume scent blanketed me and the feather-soft sensation of *peace* filled my heart.

"I love you too, Mom."

With a deep breath, I rubbed my face. "Now I just have to figure out how to get out of this damned closet."

A soft click and my head snapped around to look over my shoulder, my heart in my throat. The storage room door slowly swung open, revealing the dim light from the kitchen flooding the hall outside. I smiled.

"Thanks, Mom."

I crawled out of the storage closet and staggered into the kitchen. My back muscles twitched as I fought for an upright position. The dark house, except the light above the stove, showed no sign of Dad. I grabbed my cell phone from the counter and dialed without hesitation.

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat. I wouldn’t allow him to get away with this. “I’d like to report a murder.”

The front door opened.

“Trey? You home?” Dad called out from down the hall.

I swallowed the bile of hatred building in my throat. “Yes, the murderer’s still here. He just came home.”