

SECOND CHANCE

I'm standing at the steps of a white-washed bungalow, as if I am waiting for someone. THEN suddenly I'm gliding down a hallway where apparently a wind blows because the pink ribbons sewn at the waist of my white cotton dress ... *lift and stream behind me*. It all feels strangely lucid as I float past my bedroom doorway where I stare at my mom who acts hysterical at the sight of me while my father tries to comfort her; but then he looks at me with blank sad eyes as I pass on by. Then illogically, I find myself behind the wheel of a car somewhere along an old unfamiliar country road. My pupils widen and my heart quickens at the sight of a solitary figure standing right smack in the middle of the road. 'What the FUCK,' my mind cusses at the apparent stupidity of some people. I move my foot to step on the brake, but there are NO pedals on the floor. INSTEAD The car speeds up ...by its own ghostly control as the figure looms ever closer. I peer through the windshield at the mysterious figure whose bloody palm warns me to stay away. SPLAT SPLUNK fat raindrops splatter, blurring my view. I lean forward until the steering wheel presses hard against my chest as I push the wiper lever up another notch. Then out of my throat rose a shriek as I stare in horror as the raindrops turn bloody and drenches the windshield in front of me.

'NOOOO...HELLPPPPP!' I wake up **stuttering** at the top of my lungs while my spine jerks and shivers race up to my neck in my pink cotton Tee that is soaked from my own sweat. "What the heck was that?" I wonder as I spring up to sit as if I am someone's puppet, my eyes stare at nothingness as my brain reboots while I prop another pillow under my head as I gaze about the room looking for answers. My bedroom doesn't look scary now in the morning light. There is no blood, no monsters jumping out so I turn my attention to the hunger growing in my belly as I blink away the lingering fogginess as thoughts of hot coffee and a sweet pastry fill my senses. 'Yum,' I think as I swing my toned tanned legs over the edge of the bed where I sit to pull off my sweaty shirt and reach for a warmer one where I catch my reflection in the mirror that stands near my bed. 'Who were you?' I say as I give myself a questioning glance. My reflection doesn't bite, it just stares back. I look back in wonder at my pretty self who is so unfamiliar that I've scared myself now several times when catching a glimpse of what I thought must be a stranger in the house.

'I definitely do have amnesia,' I think as I close the bathroom door behind me to shower and then dress into something nice for my appointment today with Dr. Owens.

'She's my psychiatrist,' I say out loud as if practicing a line in a movie. I frown at the thought that I have one and how explaining that should go. "Yes, I see a psychiatrist, Why? Uhhh... because I can't remember who I am anymore." 'Uh, that sounds like the plot of a horror film,' I say out loud to myself as I practice again how to frame my craziness as I study myself in the bathroom mirror. Hmm, I scrunch my skeptical face into a frown. I'm sounding like I do need a head shrink, perhaps I should casually say in a carefree tone like isn't *everyone* seeing a psychiatrist these days. "Oh, yes of course, and if you are looking for one, I'd suggest mine." Hmm, I give my reflection a skeptical look. I'm still not sold on my own sell, maybe I am *crazy*. I've heard the saying that if you think your crazy you're not and if you don't you *are*. My eyes cross, I've confused myself. I think as I shake my head while I turn on the hot water and peel off my clothes as I try to make sense of these nightmares. I suspect they have something to do with my accident.

After a long hot shower followed by a lather of lotion, I slip my lean self into a pair of black slacks, a black patterned top and a pair of black flats. My long dark hair hangs straight past my shoulders as I sip coffee and eat one of the danish that Karen had thoughtfully stocked for my return. I must remember to thank her. She will be here any minute to take me to the hospital for my mental checkup. I jump up from the table to comb my hair and add a dab of gloss to my lips... with the help from the mirror in the guest bathroom that I had recently installed. I watch myself paint my lips in a bare pink shade as I smack my lips at my reflection and I think how odd that when I returned home from the hospital, there **was not one** mirror hanging in the entire house. I didn't give it much thought then as my recovery consumed me. I just assumed Karen removed the mirrors in case my reconstructive surgery didn't work out. Most likely the doctors advised it so I'd give myself time to heal before being too critical... I pondered as I bit my lip. BUT The odd thing is that there are no nail holes or faded outlines where any of them might have hung before. It was as if the rooms were deliberately decorated without mirrors.

A car honking makes me put these thoughts aside as I rush out to watch Karen pulling into my driveway in her cute red sports car. A flurry of blond curls toss as Karen jumps out and comes towards me smiling while her piercing blue eyes study my face.

"Elle, is that you?" I nod as she comes closer to give me a hug. "I'm still not used to your new look. You do look amazing. I wish I could be so lucky to have plastic surgery like you..." when suddenly horror sweeps her face when she realizes how that sounded. She quickly interjects, "Oh I'm sorry, what a stupid thing to say."

"That's okay," then in my next breath, I add, "Karen, how did I look before? I can't find any pictures of me and there were no mirrors in the house. Is it against my religion or something?"

Karen's blue eyes show concern and then she looks away. Her eyes avoid my questioning ones.

"Elle, I know you must have a lot of questions but Dr. Owens told me to take it slow, not to answer them all too fast."

"What difference does it make to know what religion I am?"

Karen laughs and answers with a warm smile. "Okay, fair enough. Your parents raised you Catholic and you had your first communion at St. Phillips." I notice she finished her words with lowered eyes so as not to meet mine.

I stare at *her* head anyway and for the briefest moment I had a vision of long dark hair flowing under a communion veil. My small pale hands hold a pristine white bible engraved with my initials.

I snap back to the present seeing Karen looking very pale and nudging me "Elle, are you ok?"

As her face comes back into focus, she averts my eyes as she asks, "uh...did you remember something?"

I shake my head, "only a glimpse of a white dress, nothing more. No idea what that means."

"Well, let's go. We can talk more in the car." Karen says as she moves towards her car.

And as promised, on the drive over, Karen answers some questions but nothing clicks. She reminds me that the doctors said temporary memory loss is common from such severe shock combined with a concussion, AND 'that they are confident my memory will return, to just give it time.'

I listen to her pep talk and sigh. She's right, until my memory returns, I should be satisfied about what I do know ... I have lived in this town since I was five. Both my par-

ents are now dead, they died when I was 18; tragically taken by heart attacks six months apart. I went on to college and obtained an Art degree ...through an online curriculum. Since graduating, I've built a successful career as a freelance book illustrator, which is the perfect job for me as it allows me to work from home which I must prefer as I rarely go out. I bought this house from the money my parents left me. I was an only child.

Karen seemed reluctant to say much more even when I press her on why I seem to be such a recluse?

"You did go out occasionally." Is all she would say.

True, because at that moment, my memory presented such a vivid image that before I can stop them, the words spilled from my lips. "I did go to that party where I got into that terrible car accident afterwards. Isn't that what led to this whole mess?" I take a breath and continue on when she doesn't say a word in response. "Didn't you tell me it was some rich man's son that smashed into me?" AND with a snap of my fingers, I remember the son's name is Jeff. Hmm... *only* because I remembered getting flowers from a Jeff while in the hospital. "Anyway, you said he was drunk when his car plowed into mine so his dad paid for my hospital costs and more to keep his precious son from going to jail." I pause and add. "I can understand that, but all their money doesn't completely undo what he did to me." I glance over at Karen expecting an agreeing nod but instead her cheeks were pink and her eyes looked wet before she looked away and changed the subject. "We're HERE." She says sounding relieved and then adds as she stares a head as I get out of her car. "I'll be back in an hour."

"Ok," I say feeling a bit confused. 'Did I say something wrong?' I think to myself.

After checking in at the front desk, I'm told Dr. Owens will be with me shortly. I find a seat and am thumbing through a magazine when I hear my name shouted out. I look up to find Dr. Benjamin, my plastic surgeon, walking towards me with clipboard in hand.

"Well, how's my favorite patient?" Dr. B booms as he comes around to me and cradles my face in his warm firm hands and smiles as his eyes study me as if I'm a work of art. "Elle, you're my proudest work. You look beautiful. Your bone structure and skin grafts have all come together better than I thought." He added in a murmur.

"Thank you, doctor, its all your handiwork," I reply back. "Everyone says I was a mess before. Thank goodness, I don't remember. I don't think I ever want to."

"Well, Elle, going through a windshield isn't a pleasant experience, I'm sure," Dr. B says in his serious voice. "That's why you're seeing Dr. Owens, to help you remember and deal with what might trouble you."

"Did I hear my name?" says Dr. Owens who comes up behind him while I stand up.

"I saw Elle here and thought I'd admire my work some more," Dr. B says with a smile as I turn and look in the mirror hanging on the wall in the waiting room. I stare at my reflection.

"Why don't I remember what I looked like before," I say as my grey gold-flecked eyes lock with Dr. B's brown eyes."

"Was I really this pretty before or did you create beauty where there was none?" I touch my face with my palm and feel the contours of my cheek and smooth texture of my creamy soft skin.

With a big smile, Dr. B answers, "I may have removed a pimple or two." Then the smile fades as Dr. B adds, "Elle, your face had been badly damaged. I had to do a lot of restorative surgery to your facial structure but it's healed beautifully. So, my prescrip-

tion for you is to enjoy those terrific cheekbones I gave you and worry less about what was before." AND With that, Dr. B strolled out of the room.

Dr. Owens gives me a long look as she ushers me into her office. "Elle, tell me about those dreams of yours."

I settle into a chair and blurt out, "At first, I thought it was a random nightmare but they keep repeating, the same one every night."

Dr. Owens nods for me to continue.

"It may sound weird but I was awakened last night by this tapping sound, like this." I rap my knuckles on her desk. "The tapping sound gets louder as it seems to get closer. I freeze, unable to move when suddenly the tapping STOPS! Then it starts raining blood and I wake up screaming."

I leave Dr. Owens office feeling comforted and somewhat foolish. She explained that my dreams are a result of my unconscious coping with the nightmare of my accident.

"Everything will sort itself out, just give yourself time," she tells me.

After Karen picks me up, she takes me shopping. While she drives, I think how lucky I am to have someone like Karen as a best friend ...though my memory of her before the accident is vague.

'Your amnesia is only temporary and your memories will all eventually come back.' Dr. Owens assured. My memories along with who Karen is will eventually return but until then I just remember Karen from when I awoke from the initial crash. It was her fair face leaning over me, telling me not to worry as she would take care of everything ...and she has been true to her word. She has been there for me at every step during this medical nightmare and then when the hospital released me, I expected her to vanish. But instead, she stocked the fridge for my return with my favorite foods and picked out makeup and lipstick that fits my skin tone perfectly.

"Elle, you're awfully quiet. Is anything wrong?" Karen asks as she makes a left turn out of the medical facility.

"I was just thinking what a great friend you are. Have I thanked you yet?"

"I'm glad to be of help. To finally see your pretty face again is what I've always prayed for."

Her last comment doesn't make sense. What does she mean by 'always'? But I decide to let it pass.

"Well, here we are, I'll help you take the packages in." Karen said as she parked in front of my house. After Karen left, my head started to throb so lay down for a nap but instead fall into a disturbing dream.

Its very dark when the tapping starts, like knuckles rapping on the dresser top getting louder and louder, tap tap tap...**TAPTAPTAP**... until the tapping booms, sounding insistent now from my closet door. **TAPTAPTAPTAPTAP... ITS AT THE END OF MY BED**, I silently scream in my head. My voice freezes deep in my throat. I manage a rasp of "who are you, who is there?" NO answer, the room goes chillingly quiet. I force my eyes open to search the darkness when a scream takes hold in the hollow of my chest as I make out a figure standing in the shadows.

"Blood! Blood all over me!" I scream as the chilling words leap out of my mouth to pierce the air.

I wake up to the bright sunlight streaming from my bedroom window. My eyes stare at the streaking sunbeams across my blue comforter. My spine shivers. 'Another nightmare,' I wearily whisper to no one as I hesitantly look around as if I expected a monster to appear but it all looks normal, no blood, nothing to indicate anything is off. I let out a whoosh of air...What a relief, I think as I get out of bed.

I change into a clean rose-colored blouse and faded jean cutoffs that feel so good on that when I look at myself in the mirror, I bravely decide to go outside. Just a short walk, I assure my easily panicked self. But once I do, I feel so silly I hadn't done this before. It does feel heavenly being outside with the sun shining warmly on my face and arms and legs. 'I should do this more often.' I think... But then the hair rises on my arms; my senses are suddenly on alert as my heart quickens at the sound of a dog barking wildly. For some reason the barking makes me afraid. Very afraid! My eyes search for it until I find it ahead in a stranger's car. Its huge head hanging out of the upper part of an open window. A mongrel of some sort... He's baring his long canines at me as his forehead pushes against the glass. He does this again and again like he's trying to get to me. I'm startled when the car starts and slowly backs out of the driveway as the dog continues to push and snarl in my direction. The driver unaware of the drama its occupant has created, she steers the beast away from where I stand glued to the pavement by paralyzing fear. **AND THEN** I'm home again as if I appeared there by magic. I slowly shake my head on the whole surreal scene. Was that a dream? I pinch myself, No, it couldn't have been I tell myself.

Several days pass but the dreams continue. I think I must be losing it no matter what Dr. Owens believes. Even though I take my sleeping pills as ordered, I lay awake at night because when I dream, its always about blood and lots of it. Each time I dream, drops of blood that turn into buckets spill and splatter where I rest my head. Even worse is now that damn dog from the other day is in my dreams too. Barking crazily at me as he bares his blood soaked teeth at me. Then here's the craziest part, last night Karen joined the hellishness in my dream. At least it looked like her but a younger version. She was laughing and saying something like a chant while pointing at me with a blood soaked stick. She looked mean and crazy.

'It doesn't make sense. What's going on? Why does my mind keep doing this to me?' My mind begs as my mouth shouts out to no one, "PLEASE STOP! IT'S NOT FUNNY."

Since then, I'm too afraid to go outside again. I'm paranoid now that the dog will get loose. I've heard dogs can smell fear and will attack those who show fear, and since I'm dripping in it, I hide inside my own home like a prisoner. I don't even answer my phone. My tongue grows fat when I think of answering because I have no idea what to say. I've watched Karen's number pop up repeatedly and I'm feeling increasingly guilty when I don't answer so finally my conscience makes me pick up where I babble incoherently about the blood and the dog, which she then announces she is coming over.

It's not long when I hear a knock on the door. I answer with a yell for her to come in. I'm too tired to get up. So tired of trying to find a rational answer to everything.

"Elle, there you are!" says Karen, after finding me curled up on the sofa. I peer up at her from the comfort of the throw I wrapped around me like a child hiding. I look up at *her* bloodshot eyes, stringy blond hair and she's so pale that her freckles stand out like small topographical maps across her face. My mind continues to drift where I wonder hopefully if some flu bug that includes hallucinations is going around ...when I realize Karen is talking very seriously to me and I haven't heard a word-----

"...And I know Dr Owens said to take it slow in telling you some things--" Karen finished saying.

"What THINGS?" I interrupt.

"Please just listen. I've got something to tell you that will cause you to hate me ." Karen rushes to me and takes my hands into hers and presses as she continues to speak. "I was actually relieved when the doctors told me you had amnesia. I thought maybe

this was my second chance to make things up to you... And when Jeff's dad stepped up, I thought it could be your second chance too."

I interrupt her again. "Karen, you're babbling. I don't understand what you're saying."

"Elle, your deformity wasn't just from the car accident, it really was my fault. I was such a stupid kid. I... I..." Karen's words muffle as she buries her face in her hands.

"NO, I was deformed in the car accident which you had nothing to do with. It was stupid drunk Jeff. " I stammer at her.

Karen looks up at me with her eyes so full of tears that her black mascara streaks down her cheeks like tire skids on a road. I look at her and think - Gee, I thought I was freaking out but Karen is a basket case. Maybe my hallucinatory flu idea isn't so crazy.

"Elle, you're not listening to me." Karen rasps. "Oh god, this is so hard. I almost wish you could remember so I wouldn't have to tell you."

"Remember what." My mind whirls trying to make sense of what Karen is saying.

"Elle, when we were kids ...do you remember?"

I stare blankly back at her.

Karen sighs deeply and wipes at her tear-sodden eyes smudging her mascara giving her a ghoulish appearance. I don't say a word, I just wait. Karen then take a deep breath and continues. "You may not remember but you and I lived in the same neighborhood and went to the same church together. We weren't close friends then because I wasn't so nice because I was so jealous of you. You always had such pretty dresses. My folks couldn't afford much so I wore my sister's hand me downs while you had the prettiest dresses I'd ever seen. I particularly loved the white-laced one with the pink ribbons you wore when we were about nine years old. You looked like a princess. It's so silly now when I think of it but I guess a new pretty dress was important to me back then." Karen blushes as she pauses and looks me in the eye. "Elle, does any of this sound familiar?"

A rush of images play in my mind like a movie. Its Easter Sunday and I'm nine years old. I'm so happy. I got a new dress and a bunny. A real live bunny. My very own honest to goodness, living breathing Easter bunny. I naturally named him Peter after Peter the Cottontail stories.

In our backyard, my parents fixed up a cage for him where I feed him carrots and lettuce.

My parents let me invite some kids from the neighborhood and church over to see him. I'm so excited. Mom had set up a piñata for us to bust so Easter candy can spill out for us. While the other kids mill around outside waiting for the festivities to start, I go inside to help my mom bring out the refreshments when I hear laughter. It's not nice laughter, but mean sounding hoots and hollers. I then hear **tap tap tap** coming from outside. I run to see Karen and a couple of other kids hitting the cage using the sticks dad had gotten for us to smack the Piñata. Then Karen shoos Peter out of his cage.

Poor little bunny is so scared. Hunched and cowering as the mean kids poke and hit him with their sticks. I'm stunned when its Karen who is leading the insanity. She laughs shrilly and yells they should chase him into old Potter's yard next door where he keeps that mean old dog of his. "Maybe old Potter's dog likes rabbit," she yells and taunts as Peter scurries into her trap.

I heard myself screaming "Nooooooo!" as I ran after Peter into old Potter's yard where his dog barking and snarling raced toward my beloved bunny. Peter sits still, obviously frightened. I run towards him! I dive to snatch him away from certain death as the dog's huge jaws widen...just as I scoop Peter into my protective arms. BUT THEN I scream as sharp teeth gnash and tear at *my* cheek while my blood flies and smatters onto my arms and runs down my dress as the dog bites my face over and over again. Every-

thing goes hazy as I hear my mother's screams and see a fuzzy image of Mr. Potter pulling back his dog from where I lie still soaked in my own blood. My FACE! I let go of Peter as my hands feel bone protruding where flesh was ripped away. My FACE! The right side of my face has been horribly disfigured. KAREN! IT WAS KAREN!

"Elle, Elle! You're remembering, aren't you? Please don't hate me. I've punished myself every day since." Karen cried as her arms wraps around me as she breaks down and cries uncontrollably. I break from her and sink into the sofa. It's all back now. The old memories mixed in with the new. Karen got a hold of herself and bravely sat down to help me sort it out as the memories flooded my consciousness. Karen said that when Jeff's car crashed into me and I went through the windshield, the doctors said I would have to have complete plastic surgery to just function normally. There had been a lot of advances in reconstructive surgery in the past twenty years, and they wanted to try and restore my face. Jeff's father agreed to pay for it all. Whatever it took to end his own nightmare.

I hear Karen's voice break through my reverie. "Since that Easter, I have hated myself and swore I'd make it up to you. What made it worse was that you didn't blame me, instead you blamed yourself. The few times I was able to talk to you, you said all the bad things that ever happened to you must have been your own fault. Your face, both your parents dying suddenly so close together. You told me at their funeral you must have been a very naughty child for God to punish you so. You know, to protect you, your mom homeschooled you," Karen tearfully added. "I tried over the years to be friends with you but your mom understandably told me repeatedly that it was best to stay away. Then the car accident happened. I saw your car on the news about the crash and rushed over to the hospital saying I was your best friend. Since you had no family left, the hospital and doctors were happy to have me around to help you. Now, to see you looking so beautiful, and as beautiful as you would have been without my childish cruelty, made me believe wrongs can be righted."

Hours later, I'm still sitting on the couch absorbing all the memories that have flooded back. Karen left some time ago to give me time alone to think and I have to admit she's right. I have only hated myself for the past twenty years. I'd denied myself any happiness, I'd been more cruel to myself than even that damn dog and Karen too. I hadn't even researched the possibility of plastic surgery because I felt I didn't deserve it. On that Easter Sunday, nearly twenty years ago, I shut out the little girl in me. I became a separate person, never allowing her to be loved. I hadn't even seen her because I never looked into a mirror since the accident until that day in Dr. B's office when he removed the bandages. I had buried my childhood self in self-loathing and fear...but no longer. It is time to FACE my fears so I go to bed and lay waiting for whatever it is that has been haunting me at night. I'm ready to face my monster.

As the darkness surrounds me, I HEAR IT! The **TAPPING**.

My heart quickens and my hand covers my mouth when I realize its the sound of sticks hitting against Peter's cage. The tapping grows stronger and louder **WHEN IT** suddenly **STOPS!** The following silence beats down on me as sweat pours profusely from my pores while my heart thumps a frightening beat as I cry out "Where are you? Who are you?" My cry is answered with a nearby rustle as I smother the scream that rose from my throat as I hear the tap TAP TAP come closer while I fight an instinctive urge to dive under the covers *when I see the figure standing in the shadows*. It's the small figure from my nightmares. She wears the red stained white dress as she moves slowly into the light where one blood smeared hand reaches out to my newly reconstructed cheek and tentatively touches it. A warmth fills my being as understanding fills

me while I lovingly reach out to my childhood face and softly caress the broken side as I whisper, "Its time to let go ...our nightmare is over."