

## **Crossroads**

*Trigger/Content Warning: Violence*

I didn't realize it was past midnight until I got home from Monica's house. We spent the last six hours watching TV and catching up on the most recent events in our lives; I haven't seen her as often as I used to. Monica and her husband Nick moved out of the neighborhood eight months ago to a gated community on the other end of town.

She was the first friend I made when Theo and I moved into our house after we married, and the first person I confided in about how he treated me. The latest incident resulted in purple bruises blotching my neck; I tried to cover the bruises with concealer, but Monica immediately clocked them.

"You know what you need to do, and you need to do it tonight," she said after I told her what happened. I nodded as my tears streamed like silent raindrops down the contours of my face.

"Please, God. Don't let him be awake," I whisper to myself, my hands shaking as I close the front door. The only sound I hear is the ticking of the grandfather clock in the kitchen. *Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.*

We've been together long enough – three years dating and four years married – that I knew Theo's temper was questionable on a good day.

But, knowing what he was like after a night of drinking at O'Malley's Tavern downtown —

I touch my hands to my bruised neck and shudder.

I don't want to imagine what tonight might entail if he's waiting for me. He always tracked my location and demanded I tell him where I'd be and who I'd be with; if I didn't, he accused me of cheating and took his frustration out on me. When Theo told me he was going to O'Malley's, I took the opportunity to visit Monica and let him believe I'd be home all night – I knew he'd be too drunk to keep checking my location.

The floorboards creak as I carefully remove my sneakers from my feet and place them by the front door. I creep on tiptoe up the stairs pausing every few seconds to listen for any indication that Theo is awake.

Silence, for the most part. *Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock.*

*Once I make it up the stairs, I can sneak into the guest room. Theo was probably too drunk to even notice I wasn't home.*

I'm on the second to last step when I lose my footing and hit the upstairs floor with a thud. I want to get up, but

Before I can run to the guest room, Theo swings our bedroom door open. I don't need light to see the unbridled fury simmering in his hazel eyes, his features aggressively taut as all of his attention focuses on me.

“Theo, I just got home. I lost track of time, and I —”

He responds by grabbing me by my shirt, baring his teeth. The smell of beer on his breath makes me nauseous.

“Where were you?” he asks. My words catch in my throat, the fear all too consuming. “You’re cheating on me, aren’t you? You seriously think you could do better than me?”

“No, I was just hanging out with Monica,” I say, trembling. Theo backs me into the wall, towering over me.

“*Liar!*” he growls in my ear. At the same time, he slams me against the wall. “You’re *nothing* without me. Why don’t you understand that?” He presses his body against me, and he kisses my neck possessively.

“Theo, stop. Just go to bed, please,” I say, trembling. *Don’t set him off any further – just try to calm him down.*

But, Theo doesn’t stop. He presses his body against me harder as if to pin me in place.

“Theo, I said no.” But, he doesn’t listen. His grip on me tightens as he reaches under my shirt and runs his hands up my torso and chest.

I knee him in the groin and sprint down the stairs to the front door. The doorknob jams briefly, but I manage to kick the door open.

At the end of the street, there’s a set of woods behind the house where Monica and Nick used to live. I aim directly for the woods without a second thought.

The sound of footsteps hitting the pavement behind me, and I don’t need to look to know it’s Theo – or to know that he’s only a short distance behind me.

“Clara!” Theo yells. “Come back here, baby. I just wanted to talk to you!”

My legs throb with a dull ache, but if I stop now before I reach safety, I know how this will end. I make it about thirty feet into the woods and hide behind the largest bush I can find. I want nothing more than to catch my breath but hear Theo's feet crunching leaves.

"I know you're in here, Clara," he murmurs. "You know I love you, and all I want to do is protect you. C'mon out, and we can go home."

I hold my breath, willing him to leave.

Theo lingers, stalking. Suddenly, I hear the snapping of branches followed by a gunshot. The fear of being found by Theo now compounds with the fear of whoever is lurking in the woods with us.

*Pop! Pop! Pop!*

The rapid gunfire is enough to send Theo running.

I don't know how long I've been waiting in my hiding place until I decide I feel safe to leave my hiding spot. When I stand up, I see a green reusable shopping bag in front of a douglas fir.

I pick up the bag to find a cherry red Temple University sweatshirt with three tiny bleach stains on the hem. *Where have I seen this before?*

When I take out the sweatshirt to put it on, I notice an envelope at the very bottom. Inside, there's a check. It's not the amount of money written that renders me speechless; it's the name in the top left corner that does.

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On the back, there's a small blue sticky note that reads: "Go be happy. Let me know when you make it somewhere safe ♥ – Monica."

My head and heart pound in tandem, and my stomach churns like a boat navigating the choppy ocean waters. My chest aches as if I'd been lying under a pile of stones, my feet covered in dirt and sliced with scratches. My tears fall slowly, cathartically – the emotional release I've longed for for seven years.

Finally, I breathe deeply and start running again.