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Centralia

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PROLOGUE

• • •

Peter Ryan tossed his head back, rested it against the leather wing-back chair, and stared at the ceiling. A symmetrical swirl pattern in the plaster covered the entire surface. He wondered how long it had taken the plasterer to complete it. Must have required a ton of patience. These old buildings had such unique touches, such character and craftsmanship. The longer he stared at it, the more the pattern appeared to move and shift and change. The swirls curved in alternating directions, some clockwise, some counterclockwise, like an intricate network of cogs and gears skillfully crafted by a master clockmaker.

“Something you want to talk about?”

The gears on the ceiling halted their motion. Peter tilted his chin down and eyed Dr. Audrey Lewis. She was a plump woman,

full-figured with a large frame that fit nicely into her pantsuit. With her glasses on the end of her nose and her legs casually crossed, she smiled at Peter and waited for his response. Walter Chaplin, the departmental dean at the university, had insisted he see her, said it would do him good to talk to someone, to get things off his chest and out of his mind.

Peter wasn't so sure. He'd seen Lewis three times already, and she'd been no help. All she did was listen and ask questions, smile, and take notes. He could get that from any child in any first-grade classroom. And what did she do with all the notes she took, anyway? No doubt she used them as fodder for her social-media alter ego.

But there was no use resisting. If Chaplin wanted him to use Lewis as a psychological dumping ground, he would do it. It certainly didn't harm him any or cost him anything but a couple hours a week. "I've been having the dream again."

Lewis's eyes went to her notepad. "The house."

"Yes."

She looked up, eyeing him like an interesting specimen to be poked and jabbed, dissected and studied, and finally pinned to a foam board. "And the rooms—are they the same?"

"Yes."

"Same layout?"

"Yes."

"Same number of rooms?"

Peter closed his eyes and filled his memory with the inside of the house that he'd been visiting in his dreams. "Same everything." It had two stories, mostly unfurnished, and every room seemed to contain pieces to a giant puzzle; only the pieces never fit neatly together. The first-floor living area consisted of four spacious rooms. There was also a kitchen he'd never entered, only caught

a glimpse of the tiled floor and white cabinetry. The second story had a hallway lined with four rooms along the right side. The walls were gray, the wood worn. It was an old house, well used, stately yet sad. Many memories hid in the walls and paint and floorboards.

Lewis was quiet for a long moment, and Peter didn't know if she was thinking about a response or waiting for him to continue.

Finally, "Go on."

He sighed and recalled his latest dream, which had been exactly like all the other ones. "I'm in this house, the same house."

"And does it look familiar yet?"

"Nope. Never seen it before except in my dreams." At least not that he remembered.

"Go on." Those were two of Lewis's favorite words, and combined, they made up the majority of her contribution to shrink sessions.

The office was a room in Lewis's home. She lived down a county road, five miles outside of town. With the windows open, the curtains moved gently on a midafternoon breeze, but the outside world was quiet save for the occasional bird singing or squirrel chattering.

"I seem to have access to every room, just like always, except that one."

"Does the door look the same?"

"Everything's the same. The staircase, the hallway, the doors. They're all the same. Nothing ever changes."

"And did you go in any of the rooms?"

"Sure. I made my way down the hallway, just like I always do, checking each room. I have a feeling like I'm looking for something. An urgent feeling."

Lewis cleared her throat and apologized. "The same feeling you've had before."

Peter nodded. "Same as always."

“And what did you find in the rooms?”

“Same stuff I always find. Mementos, different objects from my life, from childhood up to just a few weeks ago. My old baseball mitt. A stack of comic books. Spider-Man. Daredevil. Archie. The tuxedo I wore when Karen and I got married. Lilly’s favorite teddy bear. A pile of unpaid bills. Just the stuff of life. My life.”

“And do you find what you’re looking for?”

“Nope. The feeling never goes away.”

“Is Karen in one of the rooms?”

“Yes. The same room. Third one. She sits in a chair, one of those overstuffed ones you find in a furniture store. We had one just like it when we were newly married. Checkered blue and white with some flecks of red. We bought it with a Christmas bonus I got that year.”

“And did she talk this time?”

“She never talks.” Peter closed his eyes again and saw Karen in the chair, her legs crossed, skirt just above the knees, hair pulled back from her face. “But she looks like she wants to. She has that look on her face, you know, when someone has something to say but either doesn’t quite know how to say it or wants to but something’s holding them back. Do you know that look?”

“I do. And then what?”

“And then nothing. I say hi to her, tell her I love her, ask her what’s wrong, but there’s never any answer. I plead with her, tell her it doesn’t matter what it is—just tell me; I can handle it. But no answer.”

Again Lewis remained quiet as the clock on her desk ticked softly. A shadow flitted across the ceiling, a flutter of activity, and then it was gone. Probably a bird outside caught between the house and the sun’s midafternoon rays. Peter kept his eyes on the

ceiling as those gears began to move again, setting in motion some major mechanism, maybe the machinery of his mind.

“And after finding Karen, do you still have the feeling that you’re looking for something?”

“Or someone. Yes.”

“So the someone you’re looking for isn’t Karen.”

Peter thought about that for a moment. He’d always assumed that he was looking for Karen. Or Lilly. But the feeling was persistent and wasn’t quenched with the discovery of Karen in the room. “I guess not.”

“What about the last room? It’s the same as always too?”

Peter massaged his hands and glanced around the office. It was nicely furnished, mostly with antiques. A floor lamp in the corner always attracted his attention. Its carefully sculpted brass stand was polished to a high sheen, and from the top dangled a bell-shaped glass shade with a hand-painted stylized C on it. Peter often wondered what the C represented but had never asked Lewis about it. “Yes, the last room. It’s the same thing. I try to open the door, but it’s locked. I dig through my pockets—all of them, frantically—but I have no key. I have no way of opening the door. I think whatever or whoever I’m looking for is in that room.”

“That’s new.”

Peter lifted his head and looked at Dr. Lewis. “Is it?”

“I don’t remember you ever mentioning that before—that you know the room contains what you’re looking for.”

Peter thought back to his other dreams. They were so vivid, so real, he could still remember each one in detail. “Or who. And I suppose it is new. Does that mean something?” Peter didn’t really expect Lewis to answer his question directly.

“What do you think it means?”

“I thought you were supposed to have the answers.”

“I don’t have all the answers. In fact, I have few answers. More times than not, the answers are in you.”

“Well, give this one your best shot.”

Lewis removed her glasses and placed her notepad and pen on the little round colonial table with a tripod pedestal beside her chair. “I think it means your subconscious mind is keeping something from you.”

“Keeping secrets?”

“In a sense. Protecting you from some memory you may not be ready to recall, some event in your life you may not be ready to deal with.”

Peter drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. “So what do I have to do?”

Lewis laced her fingers and rested her hands on her lap. She looked directly at Peter as if she were about to reveal to him not only the secrets of his past but the mysteries of the universe.

“Find the key.”

ONE

• • •

Peter Ryan rolled to his side and peeled open his eyes. Hazy, early-morning light filtered through the blinds and cast the bedroom in a strange, dull, watery hue. For a moment, his mind fogged by the remnants of a dream filled with mystery and anxiety, he thought he was still in the same unfamiliar house, exploring room after room until he came to that one room, the room with the locked door that would allow him no entrance. He closed his eyes.

Peter pawed at the door, smacked it with an open hand. He had to open it; behind it was something... something... A shadow moved along the gap between the door and the worn wood flooring. Peter took a step away from the door and held his breath. The shadow was there again. Back and forth it paced, slowly, to the beat of some unheard funeral dirge. Somebody was in that room.

Peter groped and grasped at the doorknob once again, tried to turn it, twist it, but it felt as if it were one with the wood of the door, as if the entire contraption had been carved from a single slab of oak.

Peter gasped and flipped open his eyes, expecting morning sunlight to rush in and blind him, but it was earlier than he thought. Dusty autumn light only filled the room enough to cast shadows, odd things with awkward angles and distorted proportions that hid in the corners and lurked where walls met floor.

He couldn't remember last night. What had he done? What time had he gone to bed? He'd slept so soundly, so deeply, as if he were dead and only now life had been reinfused into him. Sleep pulled at him, clung to his eyes and mind like a spiderweb. It was all he could do to keep his eyes open. But even then, his mind kept wanting to return to some hazy fog, some place of gray void that would usher him back to the house, back to the second story, back to the door and that pacing shadow and the secrets it protected.

He shifted his weight and moved to his back. Hands behind his head, he forced his eyes to stay open and ran them around the room. It was a habit of his, checking every room he entered, corner to corner. What he was checking for he didn't know. Gremlins? Gnomes? The bogeyman? Or maybe just anything that appeared out of...

There, in the far corner, between the dresser and the wall, a misplaced shadow. No straight sides, no angles. It was the form of a person, a woman. Karen. His wife.

Peter lifted his head and squinted through light as murky as lake water. Why was...?

"Karen?"

But she didn't move.

"Karen, is that you? What are you doing, babe?"

Still no movement, not even a shift in weight or subtle pulsing of breath. For a moment, he didn't know if he was awake or asleep or caught in some middle hinterland of half slumber where rules of reason were broken routinely, where men walked on the ceiling and cats talked and loved ones roamed the earth as shadowy specters.

Peter reached for the lamp to his right and clicked it on. Light illuminated the room and dispelled the shadows. If he wasn't awake before, he certainly was now. The corner was empty, the image of Karen gone.

Propped on one elbow, Peter sighed, rubbed his eyes, and shook his head. He kicked off the blanket and swung his legs over the edge of the bed, sat there with his head in his hands, fingers woven through his hair. The remaining fog was dispersing; the cloudy water receded. His head felt heavy and thick as if someone had poured concrete into his cranium and sealed it shut again. The smell of toast and frying bacon reached him then, triggering his appetite. His mouth began to water. His stomach rumbled like an approaching storm.

And that's when it hit him, as suddenly and forcefully as if an unseen intruder had emerged from the fog, balled its bony hand, and punched him in the chest.

He needed to see Karen, needed to tell her something.

It was not some mere inclination either, like remembering to tell her he needed deodorant when she went to the supermarket. No, this was an urgent yearning, a need like he'd never experienced before. As if not only their happiness or comfort depended on it but her very existence. He had information she needed, information without which she would be empty and incomplete, yet he had no idea what that information was. His mind was a whiteboard that had been wiped clean.

Had he forgotten to tell her something? He filed through the events of the past few days, trying to remember if a doctor's office had called or the school. The dentist, another parent. But nothing was there. He'd gone to work at the university lab, spent the day there, and come home.

But there was that void, wasn't there? Last night was still a blank. He'd come home after work—he remembered that much—but after that things got cloudy. Karen and Lilly must have been home; he must have kissed them, asked them about their day. He must have eaten dinner with them. It was his routine. Evenings were family time, just the three of them. The way it always was. He must have had a normal evening. But sometimes, what must have happened and what actually happened could be two completely different animals, and this fact niggled in the back of Peter's mind.

Despite his failure to remember the events of the previous evening, the feeling was still there: he needed to find Karen. Maybe seeing her, talking to her, would be the trigger that would awaken his mind and bring whatever message he had for her bobbing to the surface.

Downstairs, plates clattered softly and silverware clinked. The clock said it was 6:18.

Karen was fixing breakfast for Lilly, probably packing her lunch, too, the two of them talking and laughing. They were both morning doves, up before sunrise, all sparkles and smiles and more talkative and lively than any Munchkin from Oz. Some mornings he'd lie in bed and listen to them gab and giggle with each other. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but just the sound of their voices, the happiness in them, brightened his morning.

Peter stood and stretched, then slipped into a pair of jeans

before exiting the room. He stopped in the hallway and listened, but now the house was quiet, as silent and still as a mouseless church. The smell of bacon still hung in the air, drew him toward the kitchen, but the familiar morning sounds had ceased. The sudden silence was strange—eerily so—and the niggling returned.

“Karen?” His voice echoed, bounced around the walls of the second floor, and found its way into the two-story foyer. But there was no answer.

“Lilly?” He padded down the hall to his daughter’s bedroom, knocked on the door. Nothing.

Slowly he turned the knob and opened the door.

“Lil, you in here?” But she wasn’t. The room was empty. Her bed had been made, bedspread pulled to the pillow and folded neatly at the top. Her lamp was off, the night-light too. And the shades were open, allowing that eerie bluish light to fill the room. On her dresser, next to the lamp, was the Mickey Mouse watch they had gotten her for Christmas last year. Lilly loved that watch, never went anywhere without it.

Peter checked the bathroom, the guest room, even the linen closet. But there was no one, not even a trace of them.

Down the stairs he went, that urgency growing ever stronger and feeding the need to find Karen and put some life-rattling information center stage with high-intensity spotlights fixed on it. And with the urgency came a developing sense of panic.

On the first floor he tried again. “Karen? Lilly?” He said their names loud enough that his voice carried from the foyer through the living room and family room to the kitchen. The only response was more stubborn silence.

Maybe they’d gone outside. In the kitchen he checked the clock on the stove. 6:25. It wasn’t nearly time yet to leave for school, but

they might have left early to run an errand before Karen dropped Lilly off. But why leave so early?

He checked the garage and found both the Volkswagen and the Ford still there. The panic spread its wings and flapped them vigorously, threatening to take flight. Quickly he crossed the kitchen and stood before the sliding glass door leading out to the patio.

Strange—he hadn't noticed before, but the scents of breakfast were gone. Not a trace of bacon or toast hung in the still air. He'd forgotten about it until now, so intent was he on finding Karen and Lilly. It was as if he'd imagined the whole thing, as if his brain had somehow conjured the memory of the aroma. There was no frying pan on the stove, and the toaster sat unplugged in the corner of the counter. Prickles climbed up the back of his neck. He slid open the glass door. The morning air was cool and damp. Dew glistened on the grass like droplets of liquid silver. But both the patio and backyard were empty. No Karen, no Lilly.

Peter slid the door closed and turned to face the vacant house.
"Karen!"

Still no answer came, and the house was obviously in no mood to divulge their whereabouts. His chest tightened, that familiar feeling of panic and anxiety, of struggling to open a door locked fast.

The basement. Maybe they'd gone down there to throw a load of laundry into the washing machine. At the door, facing the empty staircase and darkened underbelly of the house, he called again for his wife and daughter, but the outcome was no different.

Had they gone for a walk before school?

At the kitchen counter, he picked up his mobile phone and dialed Karen. If she had her phone on her, she'd answer. But after four rings it went to her voice mail. He didn't bother leaving a message.

Peter ran his fingers through his hair, leaned against the counter, and tried to focus, tried to remember. Had she gone out with someone? Maybe Sue or April had picked them up. Maybe they'd planned to drop off the kids at school and go shopping together. They'd done that before. Karen must have told him last night, and he was either too tired or preoccupied with something that her words went acknowledged but unheard.

He picked up the phone again and punched the Greers' contact. Sue answered on the second ring.

"Sue, it's Peter."

"Oh, hi, Peter." She sounded surprised to hear his voice. If she was with Karen, she wouldn't be surprised.

"Do you know where Karen and Lilly are? Are they with you?"

There was a long pause on the other end. In the background he could hear music and little Ava giggling and calling for Allison, her big sister. The sounds stood in stark contrast to the silence that presently engulfed him.

"Sue? You still there?"

"Um, yeah." Her voice had weakened and quivered like an icy shiver had run through it. "I'm going to let you talk to Rick."

That sense of panic flapped its wings in one great and powerful burst and took flight. Peter's palms went wet, and a cold sweat beaded on his brow. "What? What is it?"

"Here's Rick."

Another pause, then Rick Greer's voice. He'd be leaving for work in a few minutes. "Hey, man, what's going on?"

"Hey, Rick, I'm not sure. Do you know where Karen and Lilly are? Are they okay?"

The pause was there again. Awkward and forced. Seconds ticked by, stretching into eons. In another part of the house, Ava

continued to holler for Allison. Peter wanted to scream into the phone.

"I'm . . . I'm not sure I understand, Peter."

Irritation flared in Peter's chest. What was there to not understand? "I'm looking for my wife and daughter. Where are they?"

"Man, they're not here. They're . . . gone."

"Gone? What do you mean, gone? What happened?" The room began to turn in a slow circle and the floor seemed to undulate like waves in the open sea. Peter pulled out a stool and sat at the counter. The clock on the wall ticked like a hammer striking a nail.

Rick sighed on the other end. "Are you serious with this?"

"With what?"

"What are you doing?"

Peter gripped the phone so hard he thought he'd break it. He tried to swallow, but there was no saliva in his mouth. "What's happened to them?"

"Pete, they're dead. They've been gone almost two months now. Don't you remember?"