

Devonshire District

Way to Hell

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*To every silent observer
who stayed long enough to understand— and to
those who never made it back
to tell the story themselves.*

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Foreword

This story does not rush to announce itself. It does not rely on spectacle or excess to earn attention. Instead, it unfolds with restraint, allowing unease to grow quietly, the way real fear does—through repetition, familiarity, and the slow realization that certain outcomes are not accidents but structures.

At its core, this is not a novel about ghosts or haunted houses, but about witnessing—about the cost of understanding something too clearly when turning away might have been safer. The horror here is not loud; it is procedural. Events repeat not because they must, but because someone remembers how they are supposed to end. The setting, the object, and the characters are bound by a system that values return over justice and continuity over mercy.

What makes this narrative unsettling is its refusal to offer escape as reward. Survival is not framed as victory, nor is death treated as release. Instead, the story asks a more difficult question: what happens when awareness itself becomes the trap? When the act of understanding is the final role assigned?

Readers should approach this book not expecting comfort or resolution, but clarity. The kind that lingers. The kind that reframes the ordinary. The kind that makes you reconsider how easily a place can be forgotten—and how carefully it might remember you in return.

This is a story that does not follow you when it ends. It waits for you to recognize it.

Introduction

Devonshire District did not vanish in a single night. It faded slowly, the way cities forget inconvenient truths—first through rumors, then through neglect, and finally through silence. A fire was recorded. A mansion collapsed. A few deaths were dismissed as accidents. Over time, the name itself became uncomfortable to say, and discomfort is often enough to erase a place from public memory. But places that burn do not always die. Some of them wait, preserving what remains beneath ash, time, and denial.

Four men lived ordinary lives within reach of that forgotten boundary. They shared a cramped apartment, shared disappointments, and shared the unspoken fear that life had already decided its limits for them. Dreams had shrunk into jokes. Ambition had become fatigue. The future felt distant, abstract, and increasingly optional. None of them believed in curses or ghosts or destiny. They believed, instead, in coincidence—and in the dangerous comfort of believing that one reckless night could not possibly matter.

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What followed was not chaos, but order. Not madness, but repetition. A room that learned their movements. A screen that showed the future before it arrived. Death that came not as surprise, but as confirmation. As the city continued breathing outside their walls, one man was forced to recognize the truth others could not: this was never about survival. It was about return. About a history that demanded witnesses. About a curse that did not hunt blindly, but patiently, ensuring that what was taken would always find its way home—even if the living failed, even if the dead were required to finish the journey.

Devonshire District does not ask to be believed. It only asks to be crossed.

And once crossed, it does not let go

Chapter - 1

The Weight of Ordinary Nights

Rain came down in thin, relentless sheets, turning the city into a blurred watercolor of yellow lights and wet asphalt. From the third-floor window of the apartment, Simon watched it fall, his forehead resting lightly against the cool glass. The sound of rain usually comforted him. Tonight, it only made the room feel smaller.

Behind him, the apartment breathed its familiar chaos—four men, one cramped space, and the quiet hum of disappointment they never spoke about directly.

Ryan's voice cut through the room, loud and animated, as if volume alone could rewrite reality. "I'm telling you, man, one solid break—that's all it takes. People don't fail forever."

Victor snorted from the corner where he sat scrolling through his phone. "Yeah? Then why does forever feel so permanent?"

Sam lay stretched out on his cot, one arm dangling toward the floor, staring at the ceiling fan as it rotated lazily above. "Permanent is just a word," he said. "Like 'soon.' Means nothing."

Simon turned from the window. The apartment smelled faintly of stale food, damp clothes, and cheap incense Ryan burned whenever he felt restless—

which was most nights. Four cots were arranged with military precision, as if order could compensate for everything else being wrong.

Simon had learned to notice small things. Cracks in walls. Changes in tone. Silences that stretched too long.

Tonight had all of them.

He moved to his cot and sat down, rubbing his palms together. "We should head out," he said, almost to himself. "Before the rain gets worse."

Ryan laughed. "You always say that. Like the rain's listening."

Simon didn't reply. He had grown used to Ryan's laughter—sharp, confident, slightly desperate beneath the surface. Ryan was the kind of man who believed boredom was more dangerous than fear.

That belief had gotten them into trouble before.

"Come on," Ryan said, grabbing his jacket. "One drink. That's it. We've all had worse nights." Victor sighed and stood. Sam rolled off his cot with a grunt. Simon hesitated, then followed. He always did.

The bar was dim, warm, and crowded—an island of noise against the storm. Water dripped from their jackets as they took seats near the counter. The bartender didn't bother asking what they wanted.

Glasses arrived. So did laughter, forced at first, then easier as the alcohol softened the edges of thought.

Ryan leaned forward, eyes shining. "You know what the problem is?" Simon watched the liquid swirl in his glass. "We don't?"

"No," Ryan said. "We're predictable. We wake up, fail politely, and go back to sleep. That's not living."

Victor raised an eyebrow. "And your solution is what? Dying creatively?" Ryan grinned. "Something thrilling. Something real."

The rain slammed harder against the windows, punctuating his words. Sam laughed softly. "You say that every time you drink."

"And one day," Ryan said, lowering his voice, "I'll mean it." Simon felt a tightening in his chest. "Ryan."

Ryan turned to him. "What?"

"Don't."

CHAPTER - 1

The smile didn't leave Ryan's face. "You haven't even heard it yet."

Silence fell between them—not uncomfortable, but alert. Ryan loved moments like this. Moments when people listened.

"There's a place," Ryan said. "Not far from here. Devonshire District." Victor scoffed. "That ghost colony? Please."

"It used to be rich," Ryan continued, undeterred. "European families. Big houses. Old money. Then one of them burned down."

Simon's fingers curled slowly around his glass.

Ryan leaned closer. "Lord Desmond. Merchant. Imported diamonds, art, antiques. While he was away, something happened to his wife. No one ever proved it, but the servants were blamed. When Desmond returned—"

"He went mad," Sam finished. "Yeah, we've heard this."

Ryan nodded. "Mad enough to lock the house, set it on fire, and disappear. His wife died. The servants died. The house died."

"And the necklace," Ryan added softly. "A diamond piece she wore every day. They say it survived the fire. Anyone who takes it doesn't live long. And no matter what... it returns."

The rain outside thundered.

Simon swallowed. "Urban legends thrive on nights like this." Ryan met his eyes. "So do choices."

Victor shook his head. "We're drunk."

"Perfect," Ryan said. "Then you won't overthink it."

Simon felt it then—a subtle pull, like a door cracking open somewhere he didn't want to look. He glanced at Sam, who shrugged, amused. At Victor, who was already halfway convinced.

Ryan stood. "Just a look. Nothing else." The rain welcomed them like a warning.

Devonshire District sat quietly, as if abandoned by time rather than people. Streetlights flickered weakly, illuminating rows of darkened homes with shuttered windows and sagging balconies. The air felt heavier there—thicker.

Simon noticed how the city sounds faded as they drove in. No horns. No voices. Only rain and the soft crunch of tires.

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"There," Ryan said, pointing.

The mansion rose behind an iron gate, blackened stone barely visible beneath creeping vines. Even in the darkness, it loomed—watchful.

Simon's pulse quickened. "Ryan. This is enough."

Ryan hopped out, rain plastering his hair to his forehead. "Scared?"

Simon hated that question. Not because it wasn't true—but because it worked.

They climbed the gate. The metal was cold, slick, unwelcoming. When their feet hit the other side, Simon felt it—a strange pressure, like stepping into a room where a conversation had just stopped.

The door yielded with a groan.

Inside, the mansion smelled of dust and old smoke. Their phone flashlights cut narrow tunnels through the darkness, revealing peeling wallpaper and broken furniture frozen mid-collapse.

Every step echoed too loudly.

Simon's breath fogged slightly. He told himself it was the rain.

They split briefly, then regrouped, laughing too loudly, touching walls too often—as if reassuring themselves they were still real.

Simon glanced back once.

For a moment, he thought the darkness behind them shifted.

Then Ryan called out, excitement sharp in his voice. "Guys. Look at this." An old cabinet stood half-burned, its drawer strangely intact.

Simon opened his mouth—to warn, to question, to stop. But

Ryan was already reaching in.

The click of something small and solid echoed in the room.

And somewhere, deep within the mansion's walls, something that had been waiting finally stire

Chapter - 2

Liquor, Laughter, and a Dangerous Idea

The rain followed them back.

It clung to their clothes, their hair, their skin—refusing to let go even after they slammed the apartment door shut behind them. Water pooled near the entrance, spreading slowly across the cracked tiles like something alive, searching for gaps.

Ryan was the first to laugh.

“Worth it,” he said, shaking rain from his jacket and tossing it onto his cot. “Tell me that wasn’t worth it.”

Victor kicked off his shoes with unnecessary force. “Worth pneumonia, maybe.”

Sam collapsed onto his bed, hands behind his head, grinning at the ceiling. “At least now we’ve officially trespassed into a horror story.”

Simon didn’t laugh.

He stood near the door longer than necessary, listening. The city sounds returned faintly—distant traffic, a barking dog, a horn—but something felt... delayed. As if the world outside needed time to remember them.

He locked the door.

CHAPTER - 2

The sound echoed too sharply.

Ryan noticed. He always noticed things when it mattered least. “You okay?” Simon nodded. “Yeah. Just tired.”

That was the lie he used most often. It usually worked.

Ryan reached into his bag and pulled out a half-empty bottle. “One last round. To bravery.”

“To stupidity,” Victor muttered, but he took the glass anyway.

Simon hesitated before accepting his. The smell of alcohol made his stomach turn, though he couldn’t say why. He drank anyway.

The room slowly filled with sound—laughter, arguments, memories exaggerated beyond recognition. The fear they’d carried out of the mansion loosened, reshaped itself into something manageable.

That was how fear worked. It waited.

Ryan sat cross-legged on his cot, leaning forward, eyes brighter than before. “You know what bothered me the most?”

Victor raised an eyebrow. “Only one thing?”

“The silence,” Ryan said. “That place wasn’t empty. It was quiet on purpose.”

Sam chuckled. “You’re reading too much into it.”

“No,” Ryan said, shaking his head. “Think about it. No rats. No birds. Even abandoned places have life.”

Simon’s fingers tightened around his glass. He hadn’t told them about the feeling—the pressure, the sense of intrusion—but Ryan’s words scraped dangerously close.

Victor waved it off. “You wanted excitement. You got it. End of story.” Ryan smiled faintly. “Stories don’t end that easily.”

The ceiling fan hummed overhead, slicing the air with rhythmic indifference. Simon lay back on his cot, staring up at it, watching shadows rotate along the walls.

Sleep came slowly.

When it did, it came wrong.

Simon dreamed of doors.

Rows and rows of them, identical, stretching into darkness. Every door was

closed. Every handle was warm. He

reached for one.

It opened inward—not into a room, but into fire. He

woke with a sharp intake of breath.

The fan still turned. The room was quiet. Too quiet.

Sam was asleep already, his breathing deep and steady. Victor lay on his side, phone dark beside him. Ryan's cot was empty.

Simon sat up.

"Ryan?" he whispered. No

answer.

He checked the bathroom. Empty. The balcony door was open, rain drifting in lightly.

Ryan stood outside, phone pressed to his ear, back turned. Simon

stepped closer. "Who are you calling?"

Ryan turned, startled. For a brief moment, something unreadable crossed his face—relief, maybe. Or disappointment.

"No one," he said. "Network's bad."

Simon glanced at the phone screen. It was dark. "Couldn't sleep,"

Ryan added quickly. "Needed air."

Simon nodded, though unease settled deeper in his chest. "You sure you're okay?"

Ryan smiled. It was softer than usual. "Better than okay." Simon

returned to his bed, but sleep didn't come again.

From the balcony, Ryan looked back at the room one last time. His gaze lingered—not on Simon, not on Victor, not even on Sam.

But on the small bag resting near his cot.

Inside it, wrapped carefully in cloth, something cold and brilliant waited.

And somewhere far away, in a district long abandoned, an unseen presence stirred—aware now that what was once taken had crossed a boundary it should never have left

Chapter - 3

The Legend Ryan Knows

Morning arrived without sunlight.

Grey clouds pressed low against the sky, and the city looked drained, as though the rain had washed away more than dust. Simon woke to the sound of traffic and the faint clatter of utensils from a nearby house, but the normalcy felt rehearsed—forced into place.

Ryan was already awake.

He sat on his cot, hunched forward, elbows on his knees, staring at nothing. The bottle from the previous night lay empty on the floor, tipped on its side like an accusation.

“You’re up early,” Simon said.

Ryan didn’t answer at first. When he did, his voice was quiet. “You ever feel like some places remember you?”

Simon hesitated. “That’s a strange way to start a day.”

Ryan finally looked at him. His eyes were bloodshot, but not from drink. “I mean it. Like you don’t just visit them—they visit you back.”

Simon swung his legs off the bed. “If this is about last night—”

“It’s not,” Ryan cut in too quickly. Then he exhaled. “Actually... it is.”

Sam groaned from his cot and rolled onto his side. Victor sat up, rubbing his face. The room slowly came alive.

Ryan stood. "I didn't tell you everything."

Simon felt it then—the same tightening he'd felt at the mansion gate. Victor frowned. "About what?"

"Devonshire," Ryan said. No one spoke.

Ryan walked to the window and pulled the curtain aside just enough to let the dull light in. "That place wasn't just abandoned because of a fire. People tried to live there afterward."

Sam sat up. "You didn't say that."

"Because it never lasted," Ryan replied. "Families left. Some disappeared. Others... didn't."

Simon watched Ryan carefully. There was no bravado now. No grin. Just a strange seriousness that didn't fit him.

"Where did you hear all this?" Simon asked.

Ryan smiled faintly. "My uncle worked in the archives. Old municipal records. Insurance files. Unsettled claims."

Victor scoffed. "And you just *remembered* all this last night?" Ryan turned. "I remembered what mattered."

He reached into his bag and pulled out a folded piece of paper, yellowed at the edges. He laid it on the table.

Simon leaned closer.

A black-and-white photograph stared back at them—a grand mansion, intact, its windows dark. At the center of the image stood a woman, elegant even in stillness. Around her neck glinted something bright.

"The necklace," Sam whispered.

Ryan nodded. "Desmond brought it from Europe. One of a kind. His wife wore it every day. After she died, people claimed they saw it in the ruins—untouched by fire."

Victor shook his head. "Photos can be faked."

"This one wasn't meant to be seen," Ryan said. "It was sealed with records of the fire. The official cause was an accident. But witnesses reported screams long after the flames died."

Simon's mouth felt dry. "You're saying the curse is real."

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"I'm saying," Ryan replied, "that Desmond didn't just lose his wife. He lost control."

Ryan folded the paper again, carefully. "They say the necklace anchors him. Keeps his rage bound to the place. If it leaves—"

He stopped.

Simon stared at him. "If it leaves what?"

Ryan met his eyes. For the briefest second, Simon thought he saw fear there. "Then Devonshire doesn't stay in Devonshire."

A heavy silence filled the room.

Sam laughed suddenly. "Okay, that's enough horror for breakfast." Victor stood.

"We should get to work."

Ryan nodded, slipping the paper back into his bag. "Yeah. You're right."

Simon watched him closely as they prepared to leave. Ryan's movements were careful—deliberate. As if he were carrying something fragile.

Or dangerous.

At the door, Simon paused. "Ryan." Ryan

looked back.

"You're holding something back."

Ryan smiled again—but this time, it didn't reach his eyes. "Some stories are better told when they're ready."

As the door closed behind them, Simon felt a chill that had nothing to do with the weather.

The story Ryan carried was heavier than words. And it was far from finished.

Chapter - 4

Roads Washed Clean by Rain

The city looked different in daylight. Not

kinder—just more deceptive.

Puddles reflected the sky like broken mirrors as Simon followed the others down the narrow lane toward the main road. Auto horns blared, vendors shouted, life moved on with stubborn insistence. And yet, Simon felt out of step with it all, like he'd woken half a second too late and missed something important.

Ryan walked ahead, hands in his pockets, unusually quiet. The bag slung over his shoulder bumped lightly against his side with every step.

Simon's eyes kept drifting to it.

They caught a bus toward the industrial area, where Victor worked short-term contracts. The vehicle rattled and groaned, every bolt protesting the road. Sam joked about quitting his job and moving somewhere "less cursed," and Victor responded with dry sarcasm. Laughter surfaced again, but it sounded thin—like a recording played one too many times.

Simon sat by the window.

As the bus turned, the scenery shifted. Familiar streets gave way to older ones—narrower, darker, their buildings closer together, leaning in as if sharing secrets. He hadn't realized how close Devonshire District was to

their daily routes until now.

A sign flashed past the window.

DEVONSHIRE ROAD – 2 KM

Simon's breath caught.

The bus slowed briefly at a signal. The sign remained visible through the rain-speckled glass, stubborn and undeniable.

Sam followed Simon's gaze. "Relax," he said. "We're not going there." "I know,"

Simon replied, though his voice lacked conviction.

Ryan didn't look up.

The signal changed. The bus lurched forward. The sign disappeared. But the unease didn't.

The day dragged.

Simon struggled to focus at work, his thoughts looping back to the mansion—the way the air had felt heavier inside, the way sound had bent oddly around them. He replayed Ryan's words from the morning.

If it leaves... Devonshire doesn't stay in Devonshire.

By evening, the clouds had returned, thick and bruised. Rain threatened again.

They regrouped outside Victor's workplace, exhaustion etched into their faces. No one suggested the bar this time.

"Let's just go home," Sam said.

Home.

The word felt provisional now, like something temporary they were borrowing.

As they walked, Simon noticed something strange. They

passed the same bakery twice.

He slowed. "Did we—"

Victor frowned. "No."

But Simon was certain. The blue shutter. The torn poster advertising a sale long expired. The cracked tile shaped like a crescent near the entrance.

They passed it again.

Ryan stopped.

"That's not right," Simon said quietly.

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Victor checked his phone. "Maps says we're going straight."

Ryan turned slowly, scanning the street. His jaw tightened. "We are." The rain began to fall.

Light at first. Then harder.

The streetlights flickered, one by one, casting uneven pools of yellow on the road. Shadows stretched and warped, bending toward them.

Sam laughed nervously. "Okay. That's enough. I don't like this." They turned down a side street.

It narrowed. Buildings pressed close. The smell of damp stone filled the air. At the end of the street stood an iron gate.

Blackened. Twisted.

Unmistakable.

Simon's heart slammed against his ribs. "No. That's not possible." Ryan whispered, "Devonshire."

The gate loomed before them, vines curling around its bars like grasping fingers. Beyond it, barely visible through the rain and darkness, the mansion stood—silent, patient.

Victor staggered back. "We didn't walk this far." Sam shook his head violently. "We didn't." Ryan took a step forward without realizing it.

Simon grabbed his arm. "Don't."

Ryan looked at him, eyes wide—not with fear, but with recognition. "It followed us."

The rain intensified, drumming against the pavement, drowning out distant city sounds. The world beyond the gate felt sealed off, unreachable.

Then, just as suddenly as it appeared, the streetlight above them burst. Darkness swallowed the gate.

When the next light flickered on down the road, the street had changed. No gate. No mansion.

Just a narrow lane leading back toward familiar shops. Sam let out a shaky breath. "We imagined it."

Victor nodded quickly. "Yeah. Stress. Coincidence."

CHAPTER - 4

Ryan said nothing.

They walked the rest of the way home in silence.

From the apartment window that night, Simon looked out at the rain once more.

For a brief moment, in the reflection of the glass, he thought he saw iron bars behind him.

He turned.

There was nothing there.

But somewhere, unseen roads were remembering them. And

Devonshire had learned the way back.

Chapter - 5

The Gate That Should Not Open

Night returned too quickly.

By the time they reached the apartment, darkness had settled into the corners of the city, thick and uninvited. The rain had stopped, but the air remained damp, clinging to skin and clothing like a residue that refused to dry.

No one spoke as they climbed the stairs.

Inside, the apartment felt unchanged—same cots, same cracked tiles, same ceiling fan—but Simon sensed a difference immediately. The silence wasn't empty anymore. It felt occupied.

Ryan dropped his bag near his cot with deliberate care.

Simon watched him. The way Ryan avoided looking at it confirmed what Simon had already begun to suspect.

"You're not telling us something," Simon said. Ryan froze.

Victor sighed. "Not again."

Ryan turned slowly. "You wouldn't have listened." "That's not your choice," Simon replied.

For a moment, Ryan looked like he might argue. Then he slumped onto his cot, rubbing his face. "I didn't plan for it to follow us."

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Sam stiffened. "Follow us?" Ryan

looked up. "The mansion."

Silence snapped tight around them.

"You saw it," Ryan continued. "On the road. That wasn't imagination. Devonshire doesn't move physically—but its reach does."

Simon felt cold spread through his chest. "Because of the necklace." Ryan didn't deny it.

Victor swore under his breath. "You took it."

"I didn't steal it," Ryan said automatically. Then, quieter, "I recovered it." Sam stood. "From a cursed house."

Ryan's voice hardened. "From a dead one." Simon stepped closer. "Ryan... where is it?"

Ryan hesitated only a second before reaching into his bag. He unwrapped the cloth slowly, as if prolonging the moment might lessen its weight.

The necklace caught the light immediately.

It was smaller than Simon had imagined—delicate, almost modest—but the diamond at its center burned with a cold clarity that made his eyes ache. It didn't sparkle. It watched.

No one touched it.

"I was going to sell it," Ryan said. "Just for a day or two. Enough to fix things."

"And then?" Simon asked.

Ryan swallowed. "Then I'd put it back."

Sam laughed sharply. "You really believe it would let you?" The lights flickered.

Once.

Twice.

Then steadied.

Victor backed away. "We take it back. Tonight." Ryan nodded. "I was hoping you'd say that."

They packed quickly, fear sharpening every movement. Simon checked the door before opening it.

The handle wouldn't turn.

He tried again.

Nothing.

Victor shoved past him and pulled harder. The latch didn't budge. Sam rushed to the window. "It's jammed."

Ryan moved to the balcony door. Same result. The air grew colder.

Not gradually—suddenly. As if someone had opened a door they couldn't see.

Simon's breath fogged. "Ryan."

Ryan stared at the necklace. "It doesn't want to leave." The television switched on by itself.

Static hissed, then cleared. The screen showed their room. Live.

From an angle none of them stood in. Sam's voice trembled. "Who's filming us?"

The TV volume rose slowly, amplifying the sound of their own breathing until it filled the room.

Simon felt the walls closing—not physically, but perceptually. The apartment no longer felt like a place they lived.

It felt like a room they had entered.

A room that belonged to something else. Outside, the city carried on, unaware.

Inside, the gate that should never have opened had followed them home. And it had closed behind the

Chapter - 6

What They Should Have Left Behind

The television stayed on.

No static now—only the room, rendered too clearly, every shadow sharpened, every movement delayed by half a heartbeat. When Simon raised his hand, the version on the screen followed a moment later, as if deciding whether to obey.

Victor reached for the remote. The buttons did nothing. “Unplug it,” Sam said.

Simon moved to the socket and pulled. The cord slid free. The screen remained lit.

A low hum filled the room, not loud enough to pinpoint, not quiet enough to ignore. It vibrated through the floor, into Simon’s bones. He felt it most behind his eyes.

Ryan backed away from the TV, clutching the necklace. The diamond seemed darker now, as if it had absorbed the light instead of reflecting it.

“We shouldn’t have opened the cabinet,” Simon said. Ryan flinched. “I didn’t know.”

“You knew enough,” Victor snapped. “You knew it mattered.” The hum deepened.

On the screen, the room shifted. The angle changed—slowly, deliberately—

until the view settled near the ceiling, looking down at them. The perspective made their cots look smaller, closer together, like props on a stage.

Sam whispered, "It's watching." The word landed heavily.

Simon's phone buzzed. The sound made all of them jump. He checked the screen.

No signal.

Another buzz followed—an incoming call, number unknown. He raised the phone to his ear. "Hello?"

Only breathing answered.

Not his.

He pulled the phone away. The call had ended.

Ryan's voice shook. "This isn't how it's supposed to happen."

"What did you think would happen?" Victor demanded. "That you'd walk out with it and nothing would notice?"

The lights dimmed. Not a blackout—more like a sigh, the room exhaling its brightness.

The TV flickered again. The image rewound itself, playing back the moment Ryan opened the cabinet in the mansion. The click of the hidden drawer echoed from the speakers—louder than it should have been.

Simon stared. "That angle... no one was there."

On-screen, Ryan lifted the necklace. As the diamond cleared the drawer, the image warped, lines bending inward, the frame trembling as if something unseen had leaned too close to the lens.

A sound followed—not a scream, not a voice—but the suggestion of both. Sam covered his ears. "Make it stop."

Ryan dropped to his knees. "I'll take it back. I swear." The TV cut to black.

The hum stopped.

Silence rushed in, sudden and total.

For a breathless second, Simon believed it was over. Then the temperature fell.

Not like air cooling—but like heat being taken away. The walls seemed to

sweat cold. Simon's breath fogged thickly now, each exhale a pale cloud. The door creaked.

They all turned.

The door handle twisted—slowly, testing. Victor backed into the wall. "We didn't open it." The handle stopped.

A pause.

Then three soft knocks echoed through the room. Measured.

Polite.

Simon's pulse hammered. "Don't answer." The knocks came again.

On the TV, white letters bled onto the black screen, forming one by one, as if carved rather than typed.

RETURN WHAT IS MINE

Ryan pressed the necklace to his chest. "It's already here." The letters dissolved.

The screen brightened, revealing the room once more—but something was wrong. There were five cots.

Five shadows.

Simon's skin prickled. "Count us." They did.

Four men.

Five shadows.

The extra one stood near Ryan. Still.

Waiting.

The lights went out completely.

In the darkness, the diamond pulsed once—cold, certain. And Simon understood, with a clarity that stole his breath:

Whatever they had taken from the mansion had not followed them by accident.

It had been invited. And it had arrive

Chapter - 7

Morning Without Relief

Morning did not break the night—it merely thinned it.

Simon woke to a pale, lifeless glow seeping through the curtains, the kind of light that suggested the sun was present somewhere but unwilling to involve itself. His throat was dry, his limbs heavy, as if sleep had been a negotiation he'd lost.

For a moment, he didn't move. He
listened.

The ceiling fan turned slowly. Somewhere outside, a horn blared. Life, ordinary and indifferent, continued.

Then he remembered.

The television.

The words on the screen.

The fifth shadow.

Simon sat up sharply.

The room looked... normal.

The lights were on. The TV was off. The necklace was no longer glowing— because it was no longer visible.

Ryan's cot was empty.

"Ryan?" Simon called.

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Sam stirred on his bed, groaning. "What time is it?"

Victor sat up next, rubbing his temples. "Feels like I slept under a truck." Simon swung his legs down and stood. "Where's Ryan?"

Sam frowned. "Bathroom, maybe?" The bathroom door was open. Empty.

The balcony door stood ajar, curtains lifting slightly in the stale morning air. Simon stepped closer and saw rainwater pooled on the floor beneath it, fresh.

"He went out," Victor said, though his tone lacked certainty. Simon's chest tightened. "With the necklace."

Sam pushed himself upright. "You're sure?"

Simon didn't answer. He was already pulling on his shoes. They found Ryan on the stairs.

He sat halfway down the flight, back against the wall, head tilted forward as if he'd nodded off mid-thought. His bag lay open beside him.

"Ryan," Simon said carefully. No response.

Simon knelt and placed a hand on Ryan's shoulder. The chill startled him.

Ryan's eyes opened slowly. They were bloodshot, rimmed with exhaustion— but focused.

"I tried," Ryan said hoarsely.

Sam rushed down the stairs. "Tried what?" "To leave," Ryan replied. "To take it back." Victor joined them, breathing hard. "And?"

Ryan laughed once, bitterly. "The road doesn't go there anymore." Simon felt his stomach drop. "What do you mean?"

Ryan looked up at him. "I walked for an hour. Every turn led me back here." He reached into the bag and pulled out the necklace.

Simon flinched.

In daylight, it looked different. Less brilliant. Older. The diamond seemed clouded now, like an eye filmed over with age.

"It didn't let me go," Ryan said. "And it won't let us either." Sam whispered, "Then last night wasn't a dream."

"No," Simon said quietly. "It wasn't."

They returned to the apartment together, moving as if any sudden motion might break the fragile calm. The door opened easily this time. Too easily.

Inside, everything was exactly as they'd left it. Except for the television.

It turned on the moment they stepped inside. No static. No sound.

Just text.

GOOD MORNING

Victor swore. "That thing talks now?"

Ryan dropped the necklace onto the table. The sound it made was wrong— not a clink, but a dull thud, as if it were heavier than it should be.

Simon stared at the screen. "It knows the time." The letters changed.

YOU ARE LATE

Sam shook his head. "Late for what?" The TV answered.

FOR UNDERSTANDING

The screen went black.

A second later, the power went out. But the TV remained on.

Simon felt something settle into place then—not fear, not panic, but certainty.

This wasn't escalation. This was routine.

Whatever had followed them home wasn't improvising.

It was continuing a process that had begun long before they ever climbed the gate at Devonshire.

And the worst part—the part Simon couldn't ignore anymore—was the quiet realization that the night hadn't truly ended.

It had only paused.

And it was waiting for them to catch up.

Chapter - 8

The Astrologer Who Hesitated

The astrologer's shop sat wedged between a shuttered tailor's store and a tea stall that smelled permanently of boiled milk and cardamom. A hand-painted board hung above the entrance, its letters faded unevenly, as if even language had grown tired there.

Simon slowed as they approached.

"You don't believe in this stuff," Victor said.

Simon shrugged. "Belief isn't required. Curiosity is."

Ryan walked ahead without speaking. The necklace lay hidden inside his bag, but Simon felt its presence anyway—like a weight tugging subtly at the room, at the street, at thought itself.

Inside, the shop was dim and narrow. Shelves bowed under the weight of old books, brass idols, and framed charts yellowed with age. Incense burned somewhere unseen, thickening the air until every breath felt deliberate.

The astrologer looked up as they entered.

He was older than Simon had expected—thin, bald, his skin marked by years of sun and worry. His eyes, however, were sharp. Too sharp.

They flicked from face to face. Then

they stopped on Ryan. Just for a moment.

Ryan noticed. His shoulders stiffened.

"You want readings?" the astrologer asked.

Sam grinned, trying to lighten the mood. "Just for fun." The astrologer didn't smile.

"Thumbprints," he said, pushing forward a small ink pad and blank paper. Victor went first. The astrologer studied the print, muttered something vague about delays and eventual stability, and waved him off. Sam followed— more jokes, more indifference.

The astrologer's voice remained neutral, practiced.

Then Ryan sat down.

The astrologer's fingers trembled as he took Ryan's thumb. Simon noticed.

The room felt tighter suddenly, as if the walls had edged closer.

The astrologer stared at the print far longer than the others. His lips moved soundlessly. He glanced up—toward Ryan's bag—then back down.

Finally, he cleared his throat. "You carry something that does not belong to you."

Ryan laughed. Too fast. "Everyone carries something." The astrologer did not look amused. "Not like this." Simon felt a chill ripple through him.

Ryan stood abruptly. "That's enough. We're done." "No," the astrologer said, sharper now. "You are not." His gaze slid past Ryan—settling on Sam.

"Sit," he told him.

Sam hesitated, then complied.

The astrologer took Sam's thumb. Pressed it to the paper.

The moment the print formed, the astrologer's breath caught. His hand froze.

The incense smoke stilled, hanging unnaturally in the air. "What?"

Sam asked, laughing nervously. "Is it bad?"

The astrologer stared at the print as if it were something obscene. "This... cannot be," he whispered.

Simon stepped forward. "What did you see?"

The astrologer shook his head violently and pulled the paper away, folding it before anyone else could glimpse it.

"I am missing materials," he said suddenly. "Come back later." Victor frowned.

"You just read ours."

"Later," the astrologer repeated, louder now. Sam

stood. "Is this some kind of trick?"

The astrologer's eyes were fixed on Sam's face—searching, frightened. "You should not be here," he said softly. "You should not be *anywhere*." Ryan grabbed Sam's arm.

"We're leaving."

As they turned toward the door, the astrologer spoke again—quiet, urgent. "One of you," he said, "has already crossed a line."

Simon paused.

The astrologer's eyes met his.

"And another," he continued, voice trembling, "has already crossed some- thing else."

Outside, the noise of the street rushed back in too quickly, like a lie told too loudly.

Sam laughed as they walked away. "That was dramatic." Victor

shook his head. "These people thrive on reactions." Ryan said nothing.

Simon glanced back.

The astrologer stood in the doorway, watching them go. His hands were shaking now, openly. When their eyes met again, the man lifted a finger—not pointing at Ryan, not at Sam.

At Simon.

Then he stepped back and shut the door.

The sign above the shop creaked in the wind.

Simon walked on, but a single thought echoed relentlessly in his mind, louder than traffic, louder than reason:

The man hadn't refused them out of superstition. He had refused them out of fear.

And whatever he had seen in Sam's thumbprint...

It was something that should not have existed at all

Chapter - 9

The Call That Breaks the Night

The night felt stretched thin, as if it had been pulled too far and might tear at any moment.

Simon rode his bike slowly, letting the cool air press against his face. Streetlights passed in uneven intervals, their yellow glow briefly illuminating puddles before abandoning them to darkness again. The city was awake, but distracted—busy enough not to notice him.

That was when his phone vibrated.

Once.

Then again.

He slowed instinctively, fingers tightening on the handlebar as he glanced at the screen.

Unknown Number

He almost ignored it. Something told him not to.

“Hello?” he said, bringing the phone to his ear.

Static answered him—thick, grinding, like a broken radio being forced awake. Simon grimaced and was about to pull the phone away when a voice broke through.

“Listen carefully,” the astrologer said.

Simon's heart jumped. "Sir? I can't hear you properly."

The wind roared louder on the line, swallowing parts of the words. The astrologer sounded breathless, strained, as if speaking itself cost him effort.

"You must not—"

The signal crackled violently.

"—come back to the house—"

"What house?" Simon shouted. "What are you talking about?"

For a moment, there was nothing but interference. Simon coasted to the side of the road, planting his foot on the ground.

Then the voice returned, clearer now—but shaking. "The boy,"

the astrologer said. "The one who sat last." Sam.

Simon's throat went dry. "Yes?" "He

should not—"

A sudden burst of traffic noise drowned out the rest. A bus thundered past Simon, horn blaring, its headlights flaring white across his vision.

"Sir!" Simon yelled. "Please—say it again!"

The astrologer's voice came back in fragments, words slipping in and out of static like pieces of a broken mirror.

"There is no life—"

"—already gone—"

"—last night—" The

call dropped.

Simon stared at the screen, his reflection faintly visible in the dark glass.

Call Ended.

For several seconds, he didn't move.

A chill crept up his spine, slow and deliberate. The street around him felt suddenly unfamiliar, as if the buildings had shifted slightly when he wasn't looking.

Already gone.

His phone buzzed again. Hope

flared—then died.

No call. No message. Just silence.

CHAPTER - 9

Simon swallowed and turned his bike around.

He didn't analyze the decision. He didn't debate it. His body moved before his mind could catch up.

The astrologer's shop lay only a few streets away.

As he pedaled, unease pressed harder against his chest, not sharp enough to panic, but heavy enough to warn him.

Some calls were not meant to be answered. Some warnings arrived too late.

And whatever the astrologer had tried to say...

Simon knew, with a certainty that made his hands tremble, that it was meant for him alone.

Chapter - 10

A Body That Should Not Be There

The astrologer's shop was dark.

Not closed-for-the-night dark, but abandoned dark—the kind that felt intentional, as though light itself had been told to stay away. The tea stall beside it was shuttered, its usual warmth gone, metal sheets rattling softly in the breeze. The streetlight above flickered, buzzing faintly, struggling to stay awake.

Simon stopped his bike a few steps away. “Sir?”

he called.

His voice sounded wrong here—too loud, too alive. No answer.

The door to the shop was slightly open.

That was when Simon knew he shouldn't go in. He pushed it anyway.

The bell above the door did not ring.

The air inside was thick with incense, but underneath it was another smell—iron-heavy, sharp enough to sting the back of his throat. His foot slid as he stepped forward.

He looked down.

Something dark smeared across the floor.

Simon's breath hitched. Slowly, unwillingly, his eyes followed the smear to its source.

The astrologer lay sprawled near the back of the room.

His body was twisted unnaturally, neck bent at an angle that made Simon's stomach lurch. One eye stared wide open, glassy and unblinking. The other was half-closed, as if death had interrupted a blink. His mouth was open slightly, frozen in a shape that might once have been a word.

Simon staggered back, his shoulder hitting a shelf. A framed chart fell, cracking against the floor, but the sound felt distant, unreal.

"No," Simon whispered. "No... no..."

There were no signs of a struggle. No overturned furniture. No broken locks. It was as if something had entered, done exactly what it came to do, and left.

Neat. Efficient.

Simon's legs felt weak. He forced himself to stay upright, eyes darting around the room, half-expecting someone—*something*—to still be there.

Nothing moved.

Except the incense smoke.

It curled upward, slowly, unnaturally steady, as if the air itself had stopped breathing.

Simon noticed the phone then.

It lay near the astrologer's outstretched hand, screen lit faintly, as though waiting.

Every instinct screamed at him not to touch it. He

picked it up anyway.

The screen was unlocked.

The call log was open.

At the top: **Simon – Outgoing – 3 mins ago**

There were no other calls.

No missed calls. No incoming numbers. Just him.

His fingers trembled as he tapped the screen. An audio file sat open, already selected, the play button glowing softly.

Simon hesitated.

Then pressed play.

The astrologer's voice filled the shop—calm, measured, terrifyingly composed.

"If you are hearing this, then I am already dead." Simon's

chest tightened painfully.

"I should not have read the sign. I should not have tried to warn you. But what I saw does not allow silence."

A pause. A slow breath.

"One among you carries a curse tied to a place that burns but never dies. That curse has begun to move."

Simon's grip tightened on the phone. "But another..."

"Another should not exist."

The voice faltered for the first time.

"According to every reckoning—every line, every sign—he died last night." Simon felt the world tilt.

"If he still walks, then understand this clearly: what moves now is not the boy you knew."

The recording ended.

The phone slipped from Simon's hand and clattered to the floor. The silence afterward was unbearable.

Simon backed away slowly, his heel catching on the threshold. He nearly fell as he stumbled out onto the street, gulping air like he'd been underwater too long.

The shop behind him remained dark. Too dark.

He mounted his bike with shaking hands and pedaled hard, lungs burning, heart pounding, the city blurring past him in streaks of light and shadow.

Only one name echoed in his mind, louder with every turn of the wheel.

Sam. Whatever lay sleeping in their apartment. It was not supposed to be alive.

Chapter - 11

A Voice From the Dead

Simon did not remember climbing the stairs.

He remembered the sound of his own breathing—ragged, uneven—and the way his hands shook as he fumbled with the keys. The lock resisted for a second too long, and panic flared sharp and bright in his chest.

When the door finally opened, light spilled out.

Normal light.

Laughter, even.

For a fraction of a second, hope surged—wild and irrational—that everything he had just seen was wrong. That fear had played tricks on him. That the recording had been a lie.

“Why are you running like that?” Victor asked, half-asleep, sitting up on his cot.

Sam chuckled from his bed. “Looks like you saw a ghost.” Simon closed the door slowly behind him.

The sound of the latch clicking into place felt final in a way it never had before.

Ryan stood near the table, the bag slung over his shoulder, watching Simon closely. His expression changed the moment he saw Simon’s face.

“What happened?” Ryan asked.

Simon tried to speak.

Nothing came out.

He crossed the room in stiff, deliberate steps, stopping beside Sam's cot. Sam lay on his back, one arm tucked behind his head, chest rising and falling in an easy rhythm. Peaceful. Alive in every way that mattered.

Simon stared.

"No," he whispered.

Sam frowned, turning his head slightly. "What's wrong with you?" Simon flinched at the sound of his voice.

Victor stood now. "Simon?"

"The astrologer is dead," Simon said finally. His voice sounded distant, like it belonged to someone else. "I saw him."

Silence fell.

Ryan's shoulders sagged as if he had been expecting this. Victor swore softly under his breath.

Sam sat up halfway. "Dead? What are you talking about?"

Simon pulled out his phone with shaking fingers and pressed play.

The room filled with the recorded voice—calm, deliberate, unbearable.

He died last night.

If he still walks... it is not the boy you knew.

When the recording ended, no one spoke.

Sam laughed first. It came out thin and forced. "Okay. That's not funny." Simon didn't look at him. He couldn't.

"You hear yourself, right?" Sam continued. "I'm right here." Simon whispered, "Did you dream last night?"

Sam blinked. "What?"

"Did you dream?" Simon asked again. Sam hesitated. Just for a second.

"I... don't remember," he said. The television clicked on.

Every head snapped toward it. The screen showed their room. From above.

From a corner no camera should have occupied.

Victor's voice dropped to a whisper. "We didn't turn that on."

On the screen, Simon saw himself standing beside Sam's bed. He watched himself reach out slowly, hesitantly—

In the room, Simon did not move. The

image continued anyway.

On-screen, Sam turned his head and looked directly into the camera. In reality,

Sam stared up at the ceiling, unblinking.

A soft buzzing filled the room as the power flickered. The lights went out. The television remained on.

Ryan backed away, knocking into his cot. "That's not possible."

The screen zoomed slowly toward Sam's face—too close, too intimate. The image distorted slightly, as if the camera were breathing.

Then text appeared, white against the dark.

HE IS NOT AWAKE

Sam swung his legs off the bed. "Enough," he said sharply. "Turn it off." Simon finally looked at him.

Sam's eyes met his—and for a moment, Simon thought he saw something wrong. Not monstrous. Not obvious.

Just... empty.

The TV text changed.

HE IS NOT ASLEEP

The buzzing grew louder, vibrating through the walls, the floor, Simon's teeth.

Ryan whispered, "Then what is he?" The screen went black.

In the sudden silence, Sam smiled. It was small. Almost normal.

"Why are you all looking at me like that?" he asked.

Simon felt the last fragile piece of certainty inside him shatter. The astrologer had been right.

Whatever lay breathing in Sam's place had learned how to pretend. And it was already home.

Chapter - 12

The Sleeping Stranger

No one slept.

They tried—lying down, turning away from one another, pretending that exhaustion could still overpower fear—but the room would not allow it. Every sound felt amplified: the tick of the clock, the scrape of fabric, the soft inhale and exhale of breath that Simon found himself counting without meaning to.

Especially Sam's.

Simon lay on his side, eyes open, watching the faint outline of Sam's body in the dim light leaking through the window. Sam hadn't moved since smiling. He hadn't spoken either. Just lay there, hands folded loosely on his chest, breathing slow and even.

Too even.

Ryan sat upright on his cot, elbows on his knees, staring at the floor. The bag with the necklace lay between his feet like a boundary no one wanted to cross. Victor paced quietly near the door, stopping every few seconds to test the handle again.

Still locked.

"This doesn't make sense," Victor muttered. "The lock was fine this morning."

Simon listened for the sound of traffic outside—anything to reassure him

that the world beyond the walls still existed. He heard nothing. "Maybe

it's a power issue," Sam said suddenly.

Simon flinched at the sound of his voice. It slid too easily into the silence, like it had been waiting for the right moment.

"The TV, the lights—maybe the wiring's messed up," Sam continued, sitting up. "Old building. These things happen."

Ryan laughed quietly. "You saw what we saw." Sam

turned to him. "I saw a screen glitch." Simon sat up.

"You didn't look at the screen." Sam paused.

"I heard you all panic," he said. "That was enough." Victor

stopped pacing. "You didn't hear the message?" Sam frowned.

"What message?"

Simon felt a slow, crawling dread spread through his chest. "You were right there."

Sam shrugged. "I must've zoned out." Ryan

whispered, "That's not possible." The air

shifted.

It wasn't dramatic—no gust, no sound—but Simon felt it all the same, like a pressure change before a storm. The room seemed smaller, the walls subtly closer, their presence more insistent.

The television clicked on. No

static.

No image.

Just sound.

Their own voices.

Simon recognized the words immediately. It was their conversation from earlier that evening—Ryan's confession, Victor's anger, Simon's question about dreams.

The playback was perfect. Too

perfect.

Victor backed away from the TV. "That's... that's us."

The sound continued, looping forward, reaching moments that had not yet

happened.

Simon's heart began to race. "It's not recording," he said slowly. "It's... rehearsing."

The TV image faded in.

The room appeared again—but colder, darker, the shadows deeper than they were now. On-screen, Victor stood near the door, his face contorted in fear.

In the real room, Victor stood exactly there. "Turn it off," Victor said hoarsely.

On the screen, Victor screamed.

The image cut away before anything else could be seen. The TV went black.

Silence returned, heavier than before. Sam stood.

The movement was sudden enough that Simon instinctively leaned back. "I'm tired of this," Sam said calmly. "We're letting fear make us stupid." He walked to the door and placed his hand on the handle.

"Sam," Simon said. "Don't."

Sam looked over his shoulder and smiled—that same almost-normal smile. "See? It opens."

The handle turned easily.

The door swung inward.

Cold air rushed in, sharp and biting, carrying with it a smell Simon recognized instantly.

Burnt wood.

Old smoke.

Sam stepped into the doorway.

Beyond it was not the corridor of their building.

It was a dark, narrow passage lined with blackened walls. Victor gasped. "That's not—"

Sam glanced back at them, eyes reflecting the dim light in a way that made them look deeper than they should have been.

"You wanted to leave," he said. "This is the way."

The passage stretched on behind him, disappearing into darkness. Simon felt his legs weaken.

The apartment door had not opened. It had connected.

Ryan clutched the necklace, his knuckles white. "It's pulling us in."

Sam tilted his head slightly, studying them. "No," he said gently. "It's calling you back."

The lights flickered once more.

When they steadied, the doorway was normal again. The corridor outside lay empty and familiar.

Sam stood inside the room, hand still on the handle. He let go.

The door closed with a soft, ordinary click. Sam turned to face them.

"See?" he said. "Nothing happened." But

Simon knew better.

The room had shown them a truth and then taken it back. And that, somehow, was far more terrifying.

Because now they knew the exit existed. And it wasn't meant to lead anywhere safe.

Chapter - 13

The Television That Watches Back

No one spoke for a long time after the door returned to normal.

Words felt dangerous now—like they might trigger something just by existing. Simon sat rigid on his cot, eyes fixed on the door handle, half- expecting it to turn again on its own.

Sam moved first.

He crossed the room slowly and sat down, folding his legs with deliberate calm. The gesture was almost gentle, almost familiar—and that made it worse.

Victor broke the silence. “You didn’t see it,” he said, voice tight. “The corridor.”

Sam looked genuinely puzzled. “There was no corridor.” Ryan stood abruptly. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” Sam asked.

“Act like nothing happened,” Ryan snapped. “We all saw it.”

Sam sighed, rubbing his temples. “You *think* you saw it. That place last night messed with us. The house. The story. Fear does strange things.”

Simon finally spoke. “Then why didn’t it do strange things to you?”

Sam met his gaze without hesitation. “Maybe because I’m not looking for them.”

The television turned on.

This time, there was no warning sound—no click, no static. The screen simply brightened, as if it had always been waiting.

A date appeared in the corner.

YESTERDAY - 11:42 PM

Simon's stomach tightened.

The image resolved into grainy footage of the mansion interior.

Devonshire.

They watched themselves enter the house again—four figures moving cautiously through the dust and darkness, phone lights trembling. The angle was wrong, slightly elevated, drifting smoothly from room to room.

"Who recorded this?" Victor whispered. The footage followed Ryan.

Closely.

Simon watched Ryan's past self pause before the old cabinet, glancing over his shoulder. The camera moved nearer, hovering just behind him.

On-screen, Ryan reached out. The

hidden drawer slid open.

The diamond necklace lay inside, untouched by ash or time.

The moment Ryan lifted it, the footage distorted violently. The sound warped, stretching into a low, grinding roar.

The image froze.

White text bled slowly onto the screen.

THIS IS WHERE IT BEGAN

Ryan backed away from the TV. "No. It began long before us." The text changed.

FOR YOU, YES

The footage resumed—rewinding slightly, then playing forward again, slower this time. The camera lingered on the necklace as it left the drawer, tracking its path out of the mansion.

Simon noticed something then.

In the reflection of a cracked mirror on-screen, a fifth figure stood behind them.

Tall.

Still.

No face visible.

"Pause it," Simon whispered. The
footage stopped.

The figure remained.

Victor swallowed hard. "That thing... it wasn't there last night." "It was,"
Ryan said quietly. "We just weren't looking."

The screen went black.

Then brightened again—this time showing their apartment. But not
now.

The room was darker, colder. Frost crawled along the edges of the walls. The ceiling
fan hung motionless.

On-screen, Victor stood near the door, pounding it with both fists, scream- ing.

In the real room, Victor stood frozen, staring at the image of himself. "That hasn't
happened," Victor said.

The image continued.

Something moved behind on-screen Victor—slow, deliberate. The camera
cut away before it could be seen clearly.

Simon felt his pulse thundering. "It's not just watching us." Ryan
nodded. "It's planning."

Sam stood again, irritation flickering across his face. "You're letting it control you."
The TV responded instantly.

The image shifted to Sam—close enough that his face filled the screen. Too close.
Simon's breath caught.

On-screen Sam did not blink. In
the room, Sam blinked.

The delay was slight—but unmistakable. Text
appeared beneath the image.

HE DOES NOT SEE WHAT YOU SEE

Sam stepped back. "Turn it off."

Simon's voice trembled. "It's not listening to us." The text changed again.

IT IS LISTENING TO HIM

The screen went dark.

The power cut out.

For several seconds, the room existed only in shadow and breath.

Then a low sound filled the air—not from the TV, not from the walls—but everywhere at once. A vibration, deep and rhythmic, like a heartbeat too large for the room.

Simon pressed his hands to his ears.

Ryan dropped to his knees, clutching the necklace. "It's syncing," he whispered. "The house. The room. Us."

The vibration stopped as suddenly as it began. The lights flickered back on.

Everything looked normal. Too normal.

Sam exhaled slowly. "See? Nothing's happening." Simon stared at him.

The television remained off.

But in its dark, reflective surface, Simon could still see the room. And behind them—

Just for a moment—

A fifth shape, standing where the wall should have been. Then it was gone.

Simon closed his eyes.

The screen didn't need to stay on anymore. It had already shown them the truth:

The room knew them.

The house remembered them.

And whatever wore Sam's face was no longer just observing. It was choosing.

And soon, it would act.

Chapter - 14

Ryan's Sin

Ryan broke first.

He had been kneeling on the floor for several minutes, shoulders hunched, fingers locked tightly around the chain of the necklace. The diamond rested against his palm like a shard of ice, unmoving, unyielding.

"This is my fault."

The words were soft, but they cut through the room more sharply than any shout.

Victor turned toward him. "Don't start."

"No," Ryan said, lifting his head. His face looked older somehow, as if the night had carved something permanent into it. "You deserve the truth. All of it."

Simon stayed where he was, watching Ryan carefully. He had known this moment would come. The house—whatever it was—had been tightening its grip ever since Ryan chose silence.

Ryan stood slowly and placed the necklace on the table.

The diamond caught the light, and for a moment Simon thought he saw something moving inside it—like smoke trapped beneath glass.

"I didn't just hear the story," Ryan said. "I studied it."

Sam leaned against the wall, arms crossed. His expression was neutral,

attentive—but Simon noticed how still he was. Too still.

"Years ago," Ryan continued, "my uncle catalogued old foreign settlements. Devonshire wasn't just a neighborhood—it was a private colony. Lord Desmond wasn't just rich. He owned everything. The land. The people. The silence."

Victor swallowed. "You said the servants were suspected."

"They were accused," Ryan corrected. "Never proven. Desmond's wife was found broken—bruised, terrified. She never spoke. When Desmond returned, the servants vanished. Some burned. Some ran."

Simon's throat tightened. "And her?"

Ryan's fingers trembled. "She lived just long enough to see the house burn." No one spoke.

Ryan went on, his voice gaining momentum now, as if the words had been pressing against him for too long. "The necklace was a wedding gift. Rare. Untraceable. She wore it constantly. When the fire happened, everything melted—metal, glass, bone. Everything except that."

Sam tilted his head slightly. "So the necklace survived a fire."

"It survived a man," Ryan said quietly. "Desmond believed her soul bound itself to it in terror. That the rage he carried had nowhere else to go."

Victor shook his head. "That's superstition."

"Then explain the records," Ryan snapped. "Every theft. Every disappearance. Anyone who removed it died within days. Accidents. Suicides. Illnesses that didn't make sense. And every time—without exception—the necklace returned to the ruins."

Simon felt a cold clarity settle over him. "You thought you could outsmart it."

Ryan laughed, hollow. "I thought I could borrow it." The television clicked on again.

No image.

Only text.

HE TOOK WHAT WAS NOT HIS

Ryan flinched. "Yes. I did."

He looked at Simon then, eyes burning with regret. "When I saw it in the

cabinet, I felt... chosen. Like it had been waiting for me. I told myself I'd bring it back. I even believed it."

The text changed.

THIEVES ALWAYS DO

Victor backed away from the table. "We need to return it. Now." Ryan nodded. "I tried."

Sam spoke calmly. "You already said that."

Ryan's gaze snapped to him. "You don't understand. The house doesn't exist as a place anymore. It exists as a boundary. Once crossed, it follows."

Simon's chest tightened. "That's why the road changed."

Ryan nodded. "That's why the door opened to something else."

The lights dimmed slightly, as if the room were listening more closely.

Ryan reached for the necklace again. The moment his fingers touched it, the air grew heavier.

"I thought the curse was tied to the thief," Ryan said. "But I was wrong." The text appeared slowly.

IT IS TIED TO THE WITNESS

Simon's blood ran cold. Victor whispered, "All of us?" The television stayed silent.

Ryan's voice dropped. "Desmond didn't just want revenge. He wanted remembrance. Someone to carry the story forward. Someone to keep the cycle alive."

Sam pushed himself away from the wall and stepped closer to the table. The light caught his face strangely, flattening his features for just a fraction of a second.

"And what does he want now?" Sam asked. The television answered.

RETURN

A pause.

Then another line appeared.

ALL OF YOU

The room seemed to contract inward, the walls subtly closer than before.

Simon felt his pulse in his ears, loud enough to drown out thought. Ryan closed his eyes. "He's not done with us."

Sam looked at each of them in turn, his gaze lingering on Simon last. "Then we should stop running," he said gently.

Simon's skin prickled.

Because the words sounded reasonable. Too reasonable.

And somewhere deep inside, Simon knew the confession had not ended the nightmare. It had only explained why it had chosen them. And why it would not let them go.

Chapter - 15

The Apartment That Seals Itself

The room changed without moving.

Simon noticed it first in the silence—the way sound no longer travelled outward, no longer thinned as it reached the walls. Victor’s breathing sounded too close. Ryan’s shifting weight scraped against the floor with unnatural clarity. Even the faint hum of the ceiling fan felt contained, trapped between surfaces that refused to let it pass.

“This place feels smaller,” Victor muttered. No one argued.

Simon rose and went to the window. The street below should have been visible—vendors closing their stalls, headlights streaking past—but the glass reflected only the room behind him. He wiped at it with his sleeve.

Still nothing.

“It’s fogged,” he said.

Ryan shook his head. “It’s blocked.”

Sam approached, placing his palm against the glass. “It’s fine.”

The moment his hand touched it, the window frosted over completely, ice crawling outward from his fingertips in branching patterns. Sam withdrew his hand slowly, staring at it with mild curiosity rather than fear.

"That's not normal," Victor said, his voice rising. Simon rushed to

the door again and twisted the handle. It didn't move.

He slammed his shoulder into it.

Nothing.

Victor joined him, pulling, then pounding. The door did not respond—not with resistance, not with sound. It was as if the concept of outside had been removed.

Sam stood near the center of the room, watching them calmly. "You're panicking."

"Because we're trapped," Victor snapped.

Sam shrugged. "We're inside. That doesn't mean trapped."

Ryan let out a short, bitter laugh. "That's exactly what it means."

The air grew colder again, sharper this time. Simon's breath clouded visibly now, hanging longer than it should have before dispersing.

The television turned on.

The screen showed the apartment from the outside. From the hallway.

Simon stared. "That's... impossible."

On-screen, the hallway stretched long and empty. The apartment door stood closed, unremarkable. No frost. No distortion. A perfectly ordinary door.

A neighbor passed by, phone to his ear, not even glancing at it. Victor's voice cracked. "They're right there."

Simon banged on the real door again. "Help! Can you hear us?" The on-screen hallway remained silent.

The neighbor continued walking.

The image zoomed in on the door handle—on-screen—then twisted it. The handle turned easily.

The door opened.

Not into their apartment. But into darkness.

Simon staggered back. "It's lying."

Ryan shook his head. "It's demonstrating."

The screen cut to black.

Text appeared.

THIS ROOM IS NOT A PLACE

The walls creaked softly—not settling, but tightening.

Victor slid down the wall to sit, clutching his head. “So what is it?” The text changed.

IT IS A HOLDING

Sam tilted his head, intrigued. “Holding for what?” The answer came slowly.

FOR THE RETURN

The necklace on the table vibrated faintly, the chain rattling softly against the wood. Ryan grabbed it instinctively, wincing as if it burned him.

Simon’s chest felt tight. “Then we give it back.”

Ryan looked at him helplessly. “We can’t reach the house.”

Sam stepped forward, placing a hand on Ryan’s shoulder. “Maybe we don’t need to.”

Simon’s pulse spiked. “What does that mean?” Sam met

his gaze. His eyes were calm. Empty. “Places don’t move,”

Sam said softly. “People do.” The lights flickered.

The temperature dropped another degree.

The room—now unmistakably smaller—seemed to lean inward, attentive.

Simon realized with sick certainty that the apartment was no longer simply trapping them.

It was preparing them.

Like a box around a gift that could not be refused.

And somewhere beyond its walls, something waited patiently for them to be opened

Chapter - 16

Calling the Dead

The power did not return.

The television's glow became the only source of light in the room, washing their faces in a pale, sickly blue. The countdown had vanished, but its absence felt louder than its presence—like a held breath that refused to release.

Victor broke first. "We can't just stand here."

Ryan nodded slowly, eyes fixed on the necklace in his hands. "The stories always say the same thing. When you don't know what a spirit wants, you ask."

Simon felt a cold knot tighten in his stomach. "You mean... talk to it." Ryan didn't look up. "It's already talking to us."

Sam shifted his weight, watching them with detached curiosity. "That's a terrible idea."

Victor shot him a look. "You've had terrible ideas all night." Sam smiled faintly and said nothing.

Ryan rummaged through a drawer and pulled out an old notebook, tearing pages from it with shaking fingers. He set them on the floor between the cots. A coin followed. Then a small glass tumbler, inverted.

Simon stared. "You can't be serious."

DEVONSHIRE DISTRICT

Ryan's voice was flat. "We don't have better options."

The air felt heavier the moment the makeshift board took shape, as if the room had leaned closer to watch. Simon's ears rang softly. He tasted metal.

Victor swallowed. "Just questions. No bargains. No promises." Ryan nodded. "Agreed."

They sat around the papers. The television dimmed, as if offended by the competition, then went dark entirely.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then the glass trembled.

Not a dramatic lurch—just a subtle vibration, like a finger tapping lightly against its side from somewhere below the floor.

Simon's pulse spiked. He forced his hands to remain on the rim. "Who is here?" Ryan asked.

The glass slid.

Slowly.

Deliberately.

It traced a crooked line across the paper, stopping at letters one by one. D

E

S

M

O

N

D

Victor sucked in a sharp breath. "Lord Desmond." The glass moved again.

W

A

S

Ryan's jaw clenched. "What do you want?"

The room grew colder. Frost crept along the edges of the paper, curling the corners.

The glass spelled:

R

E

T

U

R

N

Simon whispered, "The necklace." The glass paused.

Then moved again. N

O

T

A

L

O

N

E

Victor's voice shook. "Then what?"

The glass dragged harder now, leaving faint scratches on the paper. A

L

L

Silence swallowed the room.

Ryan closed his eyes. "You want all of us."

The glass tipped over violently and rolled to a stop.

A sound rose from the floor—not a voice, not a scream—but something like wood splitting deep inside a burning house.

Simon yanked his hands away. "That's enough."

Victor lunged forward, sweeping the papers into a pile. "Burn it." The moment the pages touched the floor, they ignited.

No flame source. No spark.

Fire bloomed white and unnatural, consuming the paper in seconds, leaving no ash—only scorched tiles beneath.

The temperature surged, then dropped again, plunging the room into an icy hush.

Sam stirred.

Simon's heart hammered as Sam's eyes opened.

Sam sat up slowly, blinking as if waking from a pleasant nap. "Why is everyone on the floor?"

No one answered.

Sam glanced around, then smiled. "You look like you've seen something strange."

He lay back down and closed his eyes. The fire vanished.

The room returned to stillness.

Ryan stared at the scorched tiles, voice barely audible. "It answered." Simon's hands shook uncontrollably. "And it heard us."

From the dark screen of the television, a faint reflection stared back at them—four figures, huddled together.

And behind them, just out of reach of the light, something taller stood patiently.

Waiting for the next question.

Chapter - 17

Fire That Refuses to Die

The room smelled clean.

That was the first thing Simon noticed after the fire vanished—not smoke, not ash, but an unsettling freshness, like rain after something had burned completely away. The scorched marks on the floor remained, dark and jagged, proof that what they had done had not been imagined.

No one moved.

Ryan still crouched near the blackened tiles, his face pale, eyes unfocused. Victor sat against the wall, knees pulled to his chest, breathing shallowly as if afraid deeper breaths might draw attention. Simon stood frozen, staring at Sam.

Sam slept.

Peacefully.

His chest rose and fell in the same steady rhythm as before, as though nothing had disturbed him—not the questions, not the fire, not the name spoken aloud.

“That’s not possible,” Victor whispered. “He was awake.” Simon nodded slowly. “He heard it.”

Ryan dragged a hand down his face. “Or it spoke through him.”

The thought settled like poison.

Simon stepped closer to Sam's cot, careful, as if approaching a wild animal that might bolt at the slightest provocation. Sam's face was relaxed, his brow smooth, lips slightly parted.

Alive.

Normal.

Simon reached out and hovered his hand above Sam's arm. The air around him felt... muted. Like sound underwater. Simon pulled his hand back quickly.

"Don't touch him," Ryan said hoarsely. Sam stirred.

All three of them tensed.

Sam opened his eyes and sat up, stretching his arms with an easy familiarity that made Simon's throat tighten.

"Why are you all staring at me?" Sam asked, yawning. "Did I miss something?"

Victor laughed once, sharp and brittle. "You missed a lot."

Sam looked around, taking in the overturned items, the scorched floor, the tension written on their faces. His smile faded slightly—but only slightly.

"You guys look awful," he said. "When did you last sleep?"

Simon searched his face for cracks—for anything that betrayed fear or confusion—but found none. Sam's eyes were clear, alert.

Too alert.

"We tried to talk to it," Ryan said quietly. Sam

tilted his head. "Talk to what?"

Simon felt a surge of anger. "Stop pretending." Sam

blinked. "Pretending?"

"You opened the door," Victor snapped. "You saw the corridor."

Sam frowned. "I opened the door because you told me to try it. It opened. That's it."

"The fire?" Simon asked.

Sam shrugged. "I smelled something burning. Must've dreamed the rest." Ryan stared at him. "You're not scared."

Sam smiled gently. "Should I be?" The

lights flickered faintly, once.

Sam's gaze drifted briefly toward the ceiling—just for a fraction of a second—then returned to them.

"Look," Sam said, his voice soothing, reasonable. "We're exhausted. We need to calm down. Panic will only make things worse."

Simon felt a chill crawl up his spine. Those

weren't Sam's words.

They were the kind of words someone used when trying to guide a situation— when trying to steer.

Ryan stepped back. "Don't tell us what to feel." Sam's smile

didn't falter. "I'm just trying to help." The television turned

on again.

No image.

Only text.

HE KEEPS YOU STILL

Sam glanced at the screen, irritation flickering across his face for the first time. "Turn that off."

The text changed instantly.

HE KEEPS YOU ALIVE

Silence crushed down on them.

Simon's voice trembled. "Alive for what?" The

screen went dark.

Sam exhaled slowly and lay back down. "You should rest." He

closed his eyes.

Within seconds, his breathing slowed into sleep. Victor

whispered, "That thing..."

Ryan nodded. "It's using him." Simon swallowed hard. The fire had been a warning. The calm that followed was the real threat. Because whatever had answered them did not need chaos anymore. It had found a voice. And it knew exactly how to sound human.

Chapter - 18

Death on the Screen

The television did not turn on this time. It
woke.

A low hum filled the room first, deep and rhythmic, vibrating through the floor like an approaching engine. The screen brightened slowly, as though light were being pulled into it rather than emitted.

Simon felt his pulse sync with the sound.

Ryan stood, drawn toward it despite himself. "It's showing us something." The image sharpened.

Their apartment appeared again—but altered. The walls were darker, streaked with long black marks that looked like burn scars. Frost rimmed the edges of the floor. The ceiling fan hung limp, its blades warped.

"This hasn't happened yet," Victor whispered.

On-screen Victor stood near the door, shaking it violently.

In the real room, Victor remained frozen, eyes wide, watching his own future unfold.

"Turn it off," Victor begged. The
image continued.

On-screen Victor pounded the door again, screaming something they could

not hear. The sound cut out completely, replaced by a piercing tone that set Simon's teeth on edge.

Then something moved behind on-screen Victor. At first,

Simon thought it was shadow.

Then it stepped forward. Tall.

Unnaturally tall.

Its outline shimmered, refusing to settle into a single shape. Where its face should have been, the image warped, bending inward like glass under pressure.

Victor let out a strangled sob. "That's not me."

On-screen Victor turned, panic etched across his face. The tall shape lunged.

The screen cut to static.

The hum stopped.

The image returned.

The apartment was empty.

On the floor, something dark pooled near the door. Simon's stomach twisted. "It killed him."

The TV text appeared.

THIS WILL HAPPEN

Victor screamed and stumbled back. "No! No, that's just—" The screen shifted again.

This time it showed Ryan.

On-screen Ryan stood by the table, clutching the necklace. His mouth moved, pleading with something unseen. His voice did not carry.

Slowly, his image began to fade—edges blurring, body thinning, as if reality itself were erasing him.

Simon felt a sharp ache in his chest. "It's taking him first." The text changed.

THE THIEF RETURNS LAST

The image jumped again. Now it showed Simon.

On-screen Simon stood alone, eyes hollow, blood running from a gash on

his forehead. He looked directly into the camera. Simon

felt dizzy. "That's not—"

The on-screen version of him raised a hand and pointed. Behind him stood Sam.

Watching.

The image froze.

The room was silent except for Victor's sobbing. The TV went black.

Ryan whispered, "It's not showing possibilities."

Simon nodded slowly, fear settling into something colder, heavier. "It's showing order."

Victor slid down the wall, shaking. "We can change it." Ryan shook his head. "It already accounted for that." The television turned on one last time.

Text appeared, one word at a time.

YOU WILL WATCH

The lights flickered violently, plunging the room into darkness. When they steadied, the TV was off.

Sam slept peacefully.

Simon stared at him, heart pounding. The future had been written.

And the screen had not shown them to warn them.

It had shown them so they would understand exactly how helpless they were.

Because knowing what comes does not stop it. It only makes the waiting unbearable

Chapter - 19

Victor's End

Victor did not scream at first.

He stood very still, back pressed flat against the wall, eyes locked on the dark television screen as if expecting it to betray him again. His hands trembled at his sides, fingers flexing uselessly.

"That's not how it ends," he said hoarsely. "It doesn't get to decide." No one answered.

Simon watched him with a tightness in his chest that bordered on pain. The image from the screen replayed itself in his mind—too precise, too deliberate to be dismissed as intimidation.

Ryan whispered, "Don't go near the door."

Victor laughed, a brittle, broken sound. "That's exactly what it wants, right? For me to freeze."

He pushed himself off the wall. "Victor,"

Simon said sharply. "Please."

Victor turned to him, eyes wet but burning. "If I stand still, I die scared. If I move... at least it's my choice."

He took a step toward the door. The air shifted.

Not colder—*heavier*.

The light above flickered, stretching shadows unnaturally long. Victor froze mid-step, swallowing hard.

“You feel that?” he asked.

Simon nodded. His ears rang softly, like pressure before a storm. Victor forced himself forward again and reached for the handle. The moment his fingers touched it, the television turned on.

Static screamed.

Victor cried out and jerked his hand back, but it was too late. The door handle twisted on its own.

Slowly.

Methodically.

The door opened inward—not to the corridor, not to the passage this time, but to something *in between*. The space beyond wavered, folding in on itself like overheated air. Shadows clung to the edges, writhing as if alive.

Victor staggered back. “No—no, I didn’t open it—”

Something stepped through.

It was not fully formed.

Its height was wrong, its limbs bending where they should not. Its surface looked like burned wood layered over shadow, cracked and shifting. Where a face should have been, there was only distortion—as if reality itself refused to agree on what it was seeing.

Victor screamed then.

The sound barely left his mouth.

The thing moved faster than Simon could process—closing the distance in a single, fluid motion. Victor slammed against the wall, pinned by an unseen force. His body arched violently, feet lifting off the floor.

Simon rushed forward. “Let him go!” Ryan grabbed his arm. “Don’t—!”

Victor’s mouth opened again, but no sound came out this time. His eyes bulged, veins standing out sharply against his skin. Something pressed against his chest from the inside, as if his ribs were trying to escape him.

The television image flickered once.

For a split second, Simon saw the exact same scene replaying on-screen— from above.

Then Victor's body went slack.

He slid down the wall slowly, bonelessly, leaving a dark smear behind him as he collapsed to the floor.

The thing did not linger.

It stepped backward into the distorted space beyond the door, which folded shut behind it without a sound. The door clicked softly into place.

Silence rushed in.

Simon dropped to his knees beside Victor, hands shaking as he reached for him. He already knew.

Victor's eyes stared upward, glassy and unfocused. His mouth was frozen open, mid-breath.

Gone.

Ryan sank to the floor, staring at nothing. "It followed the order."

Simon felt something inside him harden—not courage, not resolve, but a terrible, numbing clarity.

The television turned on one last time. No

image.

Just text.

ONE

The screen went black.

Sam shifted in his sleep, exhaling softly.

Simon remained kneeling beside Victor's body, his hands stained, his heart pounding in his ears.

The screen had not lied.

And now that it had proven itself right once—

Simon knew, with dreadful certainty, that it would not stop until it was right about everything else too.

Chapter - 20

Ryan Between Worlds

Ryan stopped speaking.

At first, Simon thought he had simply frozen in shock. Ryan sat cross-legged near the table, shoulders slumped, head bowed, the diamond necklace resting loosely in his open palm. His lips moved faintly, shaping words that never reached the room.

“Ryan?” Simon whispered. No response.

Simon rose unsteadily, stepping over Victor’s body. His legs felt hollow, like they belonged to someone else. As he approached, he noticed something wrong with Ryan’s outline.

It flickered.

Not like light, but like depth—Ryan’s edges seemed slightly out of alignment, as if he were standing half a step out of phase with the room.

“Ryan,” Simon said louder. Ryan looked up.

His eyes were unfocused, drifting past Simon rather than settling on him. When he spoke, his voice arrived late, distorted, as though it had travelled a longer distance than it should have.

"It's hard to stay," Ryan said. Simon

swallowed. "Stay where?"

Ryan lifted the necklace. The diamond no longer reflected light—it absorbed it, pulling shadows toward itself.

"There are two rooms now," Ryan continued calmly. "This one... and the one beneath it."

The temperature dropped another degree.

Sam stirred on his cot, rolling onto his side, but did not wake. "What's happening to you?" Simon asked.

Ryan smiled faintly. "I crossed first." The television flickered on.

This time it showed Ryan—not the one standing before Simon, but another version of him, darker, blurred, standing inside the mansion ruins. Flames licked the walls behind him, frozen in mid-motion.

Ryan looked at the screen and nodded. "That's where the rest of me is." Simon's chest tightened painfully. "You can come back."

Ryan shook his head slowly. "I don't think that's how it works." He tried to step forward.

His foot passed through a chair. Simon gasped.

Ryan stared down at his leg with mild surprise. "See?" The TV text appeared.

THE THIEF PAYS TWICE

Ryan laughed softly. "Once for taking it. Once for showing you." Simon clenched his fists. "Showing us what?"

Ryan finally met his eyes. For the first time since Victor's death, his gaze was clear.

"The truth," Ryan said. "Desmond doesn't just want the necklace back. He wants witnesses."

The word echoed unpleasantly.

"Every cycle," Ryan continued, "someone steals it. Someone dies. And someone survives long enough to understand what's happening—long enough to carry the story forward."

Simon felt a cold realization settle in his gut. “You.” Ryan nodded. “I was supposed to be the last one.” The text changed.

NOT THIS TIME

Ryan flinched.

The air thickened suddenly, pressing down on Simon’s shoulders. The walls groaned softly, like old wood under strain.

Ryan’s body flickered harder now, parts of him blurring in and out of focus. His voice faded in and out.

“He’s changing the order,” Ryan said urgently. “Because of Sam.” Simon turned toward Sam instinctively.

Sam lay still, breathing evenly, one hand curled loosely near his face. Perfectly at peace.

Ryan followed Simon’s gaze. “He’s already inside him. Not fully—but enough.”

Simon’s heart pounded. “Then Sam isn’t—”

“Sam is a door,” Ryan said quietly. “And the house doesn’t need to knock anymore.”

The TV image shifted again, showing Simon standing alone in the apartment, Ryan absent, Victor’s body gone.

Simon shook his head. “No.”

Ryan stepped closer, his form unstable, wavering. He placed a hand on Simon’s shoulder. Simon felt nothing.

“Listen to me,” Ryan said. “When it comes for me, don’t try to stop it. Watch. Learn.”

Tears stung Simon’s eyes. “I don’t want to learn.” Ryan smiled sadly. “It’s already chosen you.”

The lights flickered violently.

The television screamed with static.

Ryan’s image on the screen burned away, replaced by text.

RETURN COMPLETE

Ryan’s body convulsed once, sharply—then collapsed inward, folding into

shadow as if pulled through an invisible seam.

The necklace dropped to the floor with a dull, final sound. Ryan was gone.

Simon stood alone between Victor's body and the empty space where Ryan had been.

Sam breathed softly in his sleep.

And Simon understood, with terrifying clarity: Ryan had not been killed yet.

He had been *claimed*.

And when the house finished with him—

It would come back for the only witness it still needed.

Chapter - 21

The Thief Pays

The room felt wrong without Ryan.

Not emptier—*hollowed*, like something essential had been scooped out and taken elsewhere. The space where he had stood still seemed occupied, the air there denser, colder, as if his absence had weight.

Simon forced himself to move.

He knelt beside the necklace. The diamond lay motionless on the floor, dull now, almost ordinary. He expected it to burn his skin, to pulse, to react.

It didn't.

That frightened him more than if it had.

"Ryan," Simon whispered, though he knew there would be no answer. The television flickered back to life.

The screen showed fire.

Not wild flames, not roaring destruction—but slow, consuming fire, crawling patiently through the ruined halls of the Devonshire mansion. The image drifted forward, as if walking through memory itself.

Then Ryan appeared.

He stood in the center of a blackened room, flames frozen inches from his skin. His body was whole again—but wrong. His movements lagged, as though the air resisted him.

"Simon," Ryan said.

His voice came from the television and the room at the same time, overlapping imperfectly.

Simon staggered back. "You're—" "I'm finishing it," Ryan said calmly. On-screen, Ryan turned his head.

Someone stood behind him.

Lord Desmond did not look like a man.

His shape suggested one—tall, broad-shouldered—but his edges wavered, refusing detail. His surface looked like burned wood layered over shadow, cracked and shifting, embers glowing faintly within.

The diamond necklace floated upward, lifting from the floor beside Simon without a sound.

It drifted into the screen.

Ryan watched it approach, his expression resigned. "This is where it always ends," he said. "The thief returns what he took."

The text appeared over the image.

PAYMENT DUE

Simon shouted, "Take it! Take the necklace and leave us alone!" Ryan smiled sadly. "That was never the bargain."

Desmond's presence loomed closer behind Ryan. The flames brightened, feeding on something unseen.

"Tell him," Simon begged. "Tell him he won."

Ryan shook his head. "He doesn't want victory. He wants completion." Ryan looked directly into the camera—into Simon's eyes.

"Remember this," he said. "The house doesn't kill first. It *shows*." Desmond reached out.

His hand passed through Ryan's chest.

Ryan gasped—not in pain, but in sudden understanding. His body convulsed once, violently, as if pulled apart from the inside. Light flared through the cracks in his form, white and blinding.

Then Ryan collapsed inward. Not falling.

Folding.

The flames surged, then died instantly, leaving only ash and darkness. The screen went black.

The necklace dropped back onto the apartment floor with a sharp metallic clatter.

Simon fell to his knees, breath shuddering out of him. His ears rang, his vision blurred.

Ryan was gone.

Gone in the way Victor was gone—but worse. More final. As if even the idea of him had been erased from the room.

The television turned on one last time. Text appeared.

THE THIEF IS PAID

A pause.

Then another line.

THE WITNESS REMAINS

Simon's heart slammed against his ribs. He looked toward Sam.

Sam sat up slowly, eyes opening with calm ease. He glanced around the room—at Victor's body, at the empty space where Ryan had been, at Simon kneeling on the floor.

His gaze lingered on Simon.

"You look tired," Sam said gently.

Simon's blood ran cold.

Sam stood and stretched, entirely unbothered. "Ryan always liked stories," he continued. "He needed an ending."

Simon backed away until he hit the wall. "What are you?"

Sam considered the question, then smiled—not cruelly, not kindly. Patiently.

"I'm what's left," Sam said. The lights dimmed.

The temperature dropped.

And Simon understood, with crushing certainty:

DEVONSHIRE DISTRICT

Ryan's death had not ended the curse. It
had *unlocked* the next stage.

The thief was gone.

The house was whole again.

And now, with the necklace returned and the witness still alive—

Devonshire was ready to claim the only person left who truly understood what was
happening.

Simon.

And this time, there would be no screen to warn him first.

Chapter - 22

Patterns of the Damned

After Ryan vanished, time began to misbehave.

Minutes stretched like hours, then snapped back into place without warning. Simon sat against the wall, knees drawn to his chest, staring at the space where Ryan had been taken. Victor's body lay nearby, too still, too final. Sam moved about the room with quiet ease, stepping around the dead as if they were furniture that had always been there.

The television remained off.

That, somehow, was worse.

Simon realized something slowly, the way one realizes a truth only after circling it too many times to ignore.

It wasn't finished showing him things. It was waiting for him to notice.

Simon pushed himself up and approached the screen. His reflection stared back—hollow-eyed, pale, older than he remembered being. As he watched, the reflection lagged by a fraction of a second.

Then it moved on its own. The screen flickered.

Images burst to life in rapid succession—too fast to be random. The

apartment. The mansion. The corridor. Ryan holding the necklace. Victor at the door. Sam opening it.

Over and over again. Always
the same sequence.

Simon stepped back, heart pounding. "It's looping." Sam paused
mid-step. "What is?"

"The events," Simon said, voice steady despite the fear clawing at his chest. "They're not
choices. They're patterns."

The TV froze on one image: Simon himself, standing at the door, hand on the handle.
But something was different.

In this version, the door was open.

Beyond it lay the normal corridor of their building—fluorescent lights buzzing faintly,
chipped paint, an exit sign glowing red at the far end.

Simon's breath caught. "That didn't happen." The image
rewound slightly.

It showed Simon stepping forward, hesitating—then turning back, as if reconsidering.
The scene jumped again. Another
version.

Simon opening the door and running. The
screen went black.

Sam watched him closely now. "You think there's a way out." "I know
there was," Simon replied. "At least once."

Sam tilted his head. "And you didn't take it." "I didn't
see it," Simon said. "Not then." The television turned
on again.

Text appeared.

YOU ARE LEARNING

Simon swallowed. "You let me see the future deaths. Why?" The
answer came slowly.

BECAUSE KNOWLEDGE DOES NOT CHANGE THE END

Simon shook his head. "Then why show me this?"

The screen flickered, revealing the corridor again—the door open, escape possible.

New text appeared beneath it.

BUT IT CAN CHANGE THE PATH

Sam's expression tightened, just barely. The calm slipped for a fraction of a second.

Simon noticed.

"You didn't want Ryan to understand," Simon said softly. "You didn't want Victor to understand. You wanted *me*."

Sam smiled thinly. "You always were the observant one."

Simon's hands curled into fists. "You showed me a version where I leave." Sam stepped closer. "And what happens after?"

The TV answered for him.

The image showed the apartment empty. Victor gone.

Ryan gone.

The necklace gone.

The camera drifted outward—down the stairs, into the street. And there, standing near a roadside tea stall, was Simon.

Alive.

Breathing.

Looking around in confusion. The image cut to black.

Simon's heart hammered. "I escaped." Sam's voice was almost kind. "You fell." Simon stared at him. "What?"

Sam met his gaze steadily. "You didn't leave the room. You left the world." The television turned on one last time.

Text appeared.

EVERY EXIT HAS A COST

Simon understood then.

The pattern wasn't about survival. It was about continuation.

DEVONSHIRE DISTRICT

Someone always left. Someone

always remained.

Someone always returned the necklace.

And someone always stayed behind to remember.

Simon backed away, shaking his head. "You need me alive to finish the loop."

Sam nodded. "I need you aware." The

lights flickered.

The room creaked, tightening once more.

Simon looked at the open-door image frozen on the screen. The one

moment in the pattern where he moved differently. Where he did not

hesitate.

Where he ran.

He whispered, "Then I'll do it exactly the same way." Sam

smiled—not in triumph, but in anticipation.

"Good," he said. "Let's see if you can repeat fate... without becoming it." The

television went dark.

The room fell silent.

And Simon, for the first time since entering Devonshire, felt something dangerous take root in his chest. Not hope. Defiance. Because if the curse depended on patterns—Then patterns could be copied. And somewhere in the repetition, Simon intended to steal something back. His ending.

Chapter - 23

The Door That Once Opened

Simon did not rush.

That was the first difference.

He stood in the exact center of the room, feet planted where the floor tiles formed a crooked cross—he remembered noticing it weeks ago, long before the room became a cage. The air felt tight, expectant, as if the apartment itself were holding its breath.

Sam watched from near the window, arms relaxed at his sides. “If you’re wrong,” he said mildly, “you won’t get another try.”

Simon didn’t look at him. “I know.” He closed his eyes.

And began to rehearse. Not out loud—inside.

Step one: wait for the hum.

Step two: ignore the screen.

Step three: move before the room decides you’ve noticed it. The television came alive behind him, right on cue.

The low hum started—deep, steady, familiar now. Simon felt it in his teeth, his ribs. He resisted the urge to turn around. The screen wanted his eyes. That was always the hook.

Sam shifted his weight. "You're assuming the pattern stays the same." Simon opened his eyes. "You taught me it does."

The hum deepened. The temperature dropped. Frost crept along the base of the walls.

On the television, Simon knew without looking, the corridor would be forming—the ordinary one, fluorescent-lit and plausible. The one that promised escape if you believed in it hard enough.

He took a step.

The room creaked in protest.

Sam's voice sharpened slightly. "Careful."

Simon took another step—angling not toward the door, but toward the table where the necklace lay.

That was the second difference.

Sam's calm cracked. "That's not part of it." Simon grabbed the necklace.

Cold tore through his palm, biting down to the bone. White pain exploded up his arm, but he did not let go. He welcomed it. Pain was proof of position—of being here, now, and not somewhere the room had decided for him.

The television screamed with static. Simon turned.

The screen showed him running—empty-handed—toward the door. "That's the version you want," Simon said through clenched teeth. "Not the one I'm doing." He

moved.

Fast now.

Three steps. Pivot. Shoulder into the door. The handle turned.

The door flew open.

Not to the corridor.

Not to the passage.

Wind roared in, violent and sudden, carrying the sound of traffic, horns, voices—real ones, layered and chaotic. Simon glimpsed the street below, headlights streaking, people moving.

Sam lunged.

“Simon—!”

Too late.

Simon vaulted past him, momentum carrying him forward and out— Out of the room.

Out of the pattern. Out

into empty space.

For a breathless instant, there was no up or down, only rushing air and the sharp clarity of choice.

This is it, Simon thought. *This is the same*. But his

grip tightened around the necklace. And that—

That was new.

The apartment above him warped, stretching thin like an image pulled too far. Sam’s face appeared at the doorway, no longer calm, no longer patient.

Furious.

Then the world slammed upward. Pain

burst behind Simon’s eyes. The sky

shattered.

And everything went dark.

Chapter - 24

A Friend Turned Weapon

Pain returned before awareness did.

It arrived in layers—first as pressure, then as heat, then as a sharp, insistent ache that demanded attention. Simon tried to breathe and found the air heavy, resistant, as though it had to be dragged into his lungs by force.

He opened his eyes.

He was back in the apartment.

Not the way it had been—but the way it *remembered* itself.

The walls leaned inward at odd angles, their edges softened, like a photograph left too long in water. The ceiling fan hung motionless, its blades warped into subtle curves. Frost traced every surface, thick enough to dull color and sound.

Simon groaned and pushed himself upright. His hands were empty.

The necklace was gone. “Simon.”

The voice came from behind him. He turned slowly.

Victor stood near the door.

Alive.

Uninjured.

Unmarked.

Simon's heart lurched painfully. "Victor?"

Victor smiled. It was too smooth, too immediate—no confusion, no relief. Just recognition.

"You came back early," Victor said.

Simon staggered to his feet, dread crawling up his spine. "You're dead." Victor tilted his head. "Not here."

The television flickered on.

The screen showed the moment Simon leapt—the door open, the rush of wind, the fall. The image paused just before impact.

Text appeared.

ATTEMPT FAILED

Simon backed away. "No. I changed it." Victor stepped closer. "You *broke* it." The word echoed unpleasantly.

The air thickened suddenly, pressing in from all sides. Simon's limbs felt heavy, sluggish.

"You weren't supposed to take the necklace," Victor continued calmly. "That confused things."

Simon swallowed hard. "Where is it?"

Victor smiled again. "Safe."

A sound came from the corner of the room. A soft breath.

Simon turned.

Sam sat on his cot, watching. Fully awake now.

Fully present.

The calm was gone.

Whatever looked out from Sam's eyes was sharp, focused, irritated. "You almost tore the loop," Sam said. "That was reckless." Simon's voice shook. "You brought him back."

Sam nodded. "Temporarily."

Victor's body twitched.

Simon noticed it then—the slight stiffness in Victor's movements, the way his steps landed half a second out of rhythm. Like a marionette whose strings were being adjusted in real time.

"He's not Victor," Simon whispered. Sam stood. "He's useful."

Victor lunged.

The movement was sudden, violent, completely unlike the Victor Simon had known. Strong hands slammed into Simon's chest, throwing him backward. He hit the wall hard, the impact knocking the air from his lungs.

"Stop!" Simon gasped.

Victor did not respond.

His eyes were empty now—glassy, unfocused. His mouth opened slightly, but no words came out.

Sam's voice cut through the room. "Do it." Victor's hands closed around Simon's throat.

Pressure built instantly, crushing, merciless. Simon clawed at Victor's wrists, panic flaring as his vision darkened at the edges.

"Victor—please—" Simon choked.

For a fraction of a second, something flickered across Victor's face. Pain.

Recognition.

His grip loosened.

Sam's expression hardened. "No."

Victor's hands tightened again—harder this time. Simon's feet lifted slightly off the floor as his body convulsed.

Desperate, Simon drove his knee upward, striking Victor's ribs. There was a sickening crack—but Victor did not cry out.

Instead, his head snapped back unnaturally, as if pulled by invisible strings. Simon gasped for air and stumbled free as Victor collapsed to his knees.

Victor looked up at him.

Tears streamed down his face now.

"I'm sorry," Victor whispered.

Then his body arched violently, and something *pulled*. A sharp sound—like wood splitting.

Victor's neck twisted past its limit. His body went limp.

Simon fell to the floor, retching, gasping, sobbing. Sam watched without emotion.

"You see?" Sam said calmly. "Even your mercy becomes a weapon."

Simon stared at Victor's body—broken again, but this time by Simon's hands.

"I didn't—" Simon whispered. "I didn't mean to—"

Sam stepped closer. "Intent doesn't matter here. Action does." The television turned on.

The screen showed Simon kneeling over Victor's body. Text appeared.

THE WITNESS IS CORRUPTED

Simon screamed, clutching his head. "Stop!"

Sam's voice lowered, almost gentle. "You can't leave without paying something back."

Simon looked up at him, hatred burning through the grief. "What do you want from me?"

Sam smiled.

"Completion," he said. "And now... guilt." The lights dimmed further.

The room creaked, tightening again.

Simon curled in on himself, shaking. He had tried to escape the pattern.

Instead, he had been woven deeper into it—forced not just to witness death...

...but to cause it.

And Sam—whatever he truly was—had proven something far worse than inevitability:

That the curse did not need monsters. It could turn friends into weapon And make pull the trigger himself

Chapter - 25

Cold Enough for the Dead

The room kept shrinking.

Not visibly—not in ways the eye could measure—but in pressure, in proximity, in the way every breath felt borrowed from a space that no longer wanted to give. Simon sat on the floor where Victor had fallen, knees drawn tight to his chest, arms wrapped around himself as if he could hold his pieces together by force.

The cold crept inward.

It did not rush. It claimed.

Frost thickened along the walls, spreading in slow veins that reached for the ceiling, the door, the edges of the television screen. Simon's breath came out in dense white clouds now, each exhale lingering longer than the last, reluctant to leave him.

He looked at his hands.

They were trembling—blue at the fingertips, veins dark and pronounced beneath his skin. When he flexed them, the movement felt delayed, as if his body were answering from far away.

"You're fading," Sam said.

Simon flinched at the sound of his voice.

Sam stood near the center of the room, calm restored, irritation gone. He looked untouched by the cold. No fog followed his breath. No frost climbed his clothes.

"What did you do to me?" Simon whispered.

Sam considered the question. "Nothing you weren't already capable of." The television flickered on, dimmer than before, its light weak and bluish, like moonlight filtered through ice. The image showed the apartment again— but emptier now. One cot gone. Another folded inward, crushed against the wall. The floor cracked, lines radiating outward like fractures in bone.

Simon watched himself on the screen.

On-screen Simon moved slowly, dragging his feet, shoulders slumped, eyes unfocused. Frost crawled up his legs, locking his joints in place inch by inch.

"This is how it ends," Simon said.

Sam shook his head. "No. This is how it *prepares*." The image shifted.

The apartment dissolved into darkness, replaced by open night air and the sound of distant traffic. A roadside tea stall glowed warmly under a single bulb. People stood nearby, laughing, talking, alive.

On-screen Simon stumbled toward them, relief flooding his face. Then he stopped.

He waved.

No one looked back.

Simon's chest tightened. "You showed me that already." Sam nodded. "Because you keep mistaking it for hope."

The image zoomed in on on-screen Simon's face as realization dawned— slow, devastating.

Dead.

The screen went black. The cold surged.

Simon cried out as it reached his chest, a biting numbness that stole sensation and replaced it with a dull, spreading emptiness. His heartbeat slowed, heavy and irregular, each thud feeling like an effort his body resented making.

"I won't do it," Simon said through chattering teeth. "I won't finish your loop."

Sam stepped closer. The floor did not creak beneath his feet.

"You already are," he said softly. "You just haven't accepted your role."

Simon forced himself to stand. His legs buckled once, then held. The room tilted, but he stayed upright, teeth clenched in defiance.

"You need me to jump," Simon said. "You need me to believe it's escape." Sam's eyes gleamed faintly. "Belief makes it cleaner."

Simon laughed—a raw, broken sound. "Then you're wrong about one thing."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "What's that?"

Simon staggered toward the edge of the room where the wall shimmered faintly, thinning like ice about to crack. He could feel the pull now—the downward tug, the invitation masquerading as release.

"I don't believe anymore," Simon said. The cold reached his throat.

His vision blurred at the edges, darkness creeping inward like a closing iris. He thought of Ryan's last words. Of Victor's apology. Of the moment he'd felt the wind on his face as he fell.

Not escape.

Choice.

Sam's voice sharpened. "Simon." Simon took one more step.

And another.

The room groaned, protesting, tightening violently—as if afraid of losing him.

But Simon smiled faintly through numb lips.

Because even in the cold—especially in the cold—he understood something at last:

The room could trap bodies. It could replay deaths.

It could borrow faces and steal futures. But it could not force surrender.

CHAPTER - 25

And whatever waited beyond the edge—death, nothingness, or something worse—
It would not be taken gently. It
would be *chosen*

Chapter - 26

The Leap

The edge did not look like an edge.

That was the trick of it.

It shimmered faintly, the wall thinning into a wavering sheet of air, as if the apartment were being stretched over something vast and hollow. The cold gathered there, denser, sharper, pulling at Simon's skin with invisible fingers.

Below it—nothing. Or
everything.

The sound of traffic drifted up faintly, distorted, as if heard through water. A horn. Laughter. The clink of glass. Life continuing, unaware.

Sam stood a few steps behind him.

"Don't do this," Sam said—not angrily, not urgently, but with the mild disappointment of someone watching a plan unravel. "You know what happens."

Simon's legs shook, but he did not turn around. "I know what *you* showed me."

The room groaned again, a deep, protesting sound that traveled through the floor and into Simon's bones. Frost cracked along the wall, spreading like shattered glass.

Sam took another step closer. "You fall," he said. "Your body breaks. You

wake up somewhere else. You realize too late that you're still part of it."

Simon swallowed hard. His lungs burned with each breath. The cold had reached his jaw now, numbing his lips, slowing his tongue.

"Maybe," Simon said. "But you forget something." Sam stopped. "What?"

Simon closed his eyes for a moment.

He remembered the rain that first night. The way the city lights had blurred against the window. Ryan's voice telling stories he half-believed. Victor's laugh. Sam's calm, ordinary smile—before it meant something else.

He opened his eyes.

"You need me to be afraid," Simon said. "You need me to hesitate." Sam's voice tightened. "You're still hesitating."

Simon shook his head slowly. "No. I'm deciding."

The pull intensified suddenly, like gravity reasserting itself with interest. The room tilted. Simon's feet slid forward an inch on the frosted floor.

Sam lunged.

His fingers brushed Simon's sleeve—cold, unreal, barely there.

"Simon—!"

Simon stepped off the edge.

For a heartbeat, there was no falling.

There was only weightlessness, the sensation of leaving a room that had been pressing in on him from all sides. The cold vanished. The pressure released.

Then gravity returned.

Hard.

The world rushed up in a blur of lights and noise. Wind tore at his clothes, stole the breath from his lungs. Pain flared sharp and immediate as his shoulder struck something—metal, concrete, he couldn't tell.

The impact came a moment later. White.

Explosive.

Final.

The sound of his body hitting the ground echoed once—loud, sickening—

DEVONSHIRE DISTRICT

and then everything collapsed inward, folding around that sound like a closing book. Darkness swallowed him. And for a fleeting, fragile instant before it did— Simon felt something he hadn't felt since before Devonshire Relief

Chapter - 27

The World That Cannot See Him

Sound returned before pain.

Voices—unconcerned, ordinary. The hiss of boiling milk. Laughter rising and falling without meaning. Simon opened his eyes and found himself standing beneath a roadside tea stall, its single bulb swaying gently in the night breeze.

For one fragile second, relief flooded him.

He looked down at his hands. Whole. Unbroken. No blood. No fractures. “I made it,” he whispered.

A bus thundered past, so close he felt the wind rush through him. Men argued about cricket scores, their voices warm with life. Simon stepped toward them, heart racing.

“Help me,” he said. Louder now. “Please—” No one turned.

A man reached for a glass of tea.

His hand passed straight through Simon’s arm. The sensation was not pain.

It was *absence*.

Simon staggered back, staring at his forearm, watching the skin shimmer faintly, light bleeding through it where it should not have.

“No,” he whispered. “No... I fell. I didn’t—” Memory struck like a blade.

The edge.

The wind.

The violent impact.

His breath caught, though his lungs no longer burned. He pressed a hand to his chest.

No heartbeat answered.

Simon turned slowly.

Across the road, beneath a flickering streetlight, something swayed gently in the wind.

His body.

It hung from an extended steel road structure that jutted out from the apartment building—twisted rebar and temporary scaffolding left unfinished for years. The rope was taut. His head lolled forward at an unnatural angle. One shoe had slipped halfway off his foot.

The sight shattered whatever denial remained.

“That’s... me,” Simon whispered.

The world tilted, but he did not fall. He could not fall anymore. A low engine rumble broke the silence.

Simon turned.

A truck rolled slowly down the road, its headlights dull and yellow, cutting through the night with weary inevitability. The vehicle moved too deliberately, too carefully, as if every turn had been rehearsed.

The truck slowed near the tea stall. The driver stepped out.

Simon’s breath hitched. It was Victor.

Not broken. Not bruised. Calm. Intact. His face held the same empty stillness Simon had seen before—neither alive nor dead, but something in between.

Around Victor’s neck hung the diamond necklace.

It no longer looked dull. It

gleamed.

Cold. Complete.

Victor did not look at Simon.

He climbed back into the truck and started the engine.

As the vehicle pulled away, Simon noticed the license plate—old, rusted, stamped with numbers that matched the date Ryan had once mentioned during his research. A detail Simon hadn't understood then.

The truck turned at the junction ahead.

A weathered sign creaked softly above the road.

DEVONSHIRE STREET – 1 KM

Simon felt a pull in his chest—not physical, but final. The truth settled over him with crushing clarity.

Sam had never needed to drag the necklace back. The

curse had learned a better way.

It sent the dead to return it.

The truck disappeared into the darkness, carrying the necklace home.

Simon stood alone beneath the streetlight, the world flowing around his ghost as if he were nothing more than a shadow cast by a broken lamp.

Above him, his body swayed gently.

Unnoticed.

Unmourned.

Somewhere far away, in a district that never truly burned down, a mansion waited—its halls ready to remember, its curse satisfied for now.

Simon closed his eyes.

He had escaped the room.

But Devonshire had never intended to let him leave the story. The

necklace was going home.

And Simon—

Simon would remain exactly where the curse needed him most. Watching.

Forever.