

CHAPTER 15

I knew the world was nuts, by now. This wouldn't have happened otherwise.

What exactly *would* have happened otherwise? Well, there are a couple of obvious things. One, I wouldn't have been sitting in the driver's seat of my car, moving toward some destination that may or may not have existed. That's a given.

Two, I wouldn't have been given the directions in the first place. That's *definitely* something that wouldn't have happened in a normal world. In fact, in this world were *indeed* normal, if it were *indeed* predictable, that person wouldn't have even made his way into my life at all. Another given.

And three, my daughter would probably have been sitting safely and peacefully inside of her own home, instead of in some unknown place somewhere on this planet (or not on this planet!). Not so much a given, more like a guess. A hopeful guess.

Of course, while not everybody would be willing to believe something that a man dressed in metal told them, it seems plausible that Care's location was not a mystery at all. At least, not anymore.

Not that he directly said anything like that. In reality, the last thing that Hil had told me, before kicking my head and leaving, was "your life needs fixing. A lot of fixing." This was something I knew already.

His words were comforting. However, his small note - the one that lied directly on the top of my head, that I found there upon waking up in the morning - that was even more comforting, in a way. I was still skeptical, though.

On the top of this note were the words "fix it" in rather ugly handwriting. Below that were the directions.

I was a little optimistic about this, needless to say. While Hil had clearly promised me something, I didn't feel like trusting him completely. However, this felt like a very good time to get my hopes up, for if I hadn't, maybe I would have simply killed myself. While that was high on my priority list, I didn't want to resort to it.

Also needless to say, I brought the camera. It sat in the back seat of the car, waiting. I was eager to use it.

Not quite as needless to say, I brought the axe.

It wasn't my intention to cause harm. But bringing that axe felt like the right thing to do, whether or not it actually *was*.

When I was a kid, I always wanted to be a hero. A *super* one, even. That didn't look like it was going to happen at any point in my

lifetime, let alone during my childhood, and so I gave up on it. Still, I would dream about it every single night.

Do you think a person like me, whose only dream was to be a hero, would cause harm to anybody?

No. You don't.

It was way too early in the morning to be thinking about these things. In fact, it was probably way too early to be doing anything. Maybe it would have been better if I waited until later in the day to leave my house.

This probably explained why I was so optimistic. I was yet to truly wake up.

It was almost a gift, to be so tired. To feel so free of caution, or fear, or thought in general. Almost like nobody could stand in my way, not even myself. For the second time in the last few days, I was feeling like a real hero. Only this time, it seemed even more possible to me that these feelings were legitimate.

For this reason alone, I felt more than happy to prepare myself. In addition to bringing my taper, I also put on an official Tapers t-shirt. And some crazy glasses, just for the hell of it.

I knew where I was going, but didn't know entirely what to expect. My first guess was a small house, possibly belonging to Hil himself. For some reason, I was visualizing a large ring of angry, violent cats surrounding it. All made out of rock. It provided incentive to keep going and find out for myself.

What I *wasn't* expecting to find - and let me again emphasize the word *wasn't* - was a small school building, not surrounded by a large ring of cats, but instead a large ring of nothing.

The lack of cats didn't disappoint me, but the school definitely *did*.

Regardless of this disappointment, I didn't turn around or anything stupid like that. The school looked quite intriguing to me, like nobody had stepped inside of it for years - and it was basically in the middle of nowhere. Hil didn't seem like the kind of person who would waste my time.

I got out of the car, the camera in my hands.

The school was lovely. It looked old - very old, actually - but you could just *feel* the playfulness, the innocence, just by standing next to it, even though none of that actually existed anymore. Just standing next to that school created an astounding feeling. It made me shiver.

I held the camera up to capture this moment. Beautiful. My mood was lifted. After a few minutes of complete silence - reflecting on life, staring into nothing - I took my first steps toward the building.

It pulled me. I began running.

It was almost like only one direction existed, and taking into account that life was short and finite, I chose to dash forward in that direction and go as far as I could possibly go.

Of course, the time it would take me to reach the front door of the building was finite as well, and so I held my arms out in preparation. I opened the door, bolted inside, and then closed it, all in one swift motion. It all felt very natural, to be doing this.

Though, as soon as I closed the door, the feeling went away. The school's interior was nowhere near as magical.

The room was quite large, though it was fairly empty. There were only three doors (as far as I could tell, at least - I never looked at the ceiling or anything, though I admit that it would have been rather odd to find a door on the ceiling), one of which must have led to the classrooms. The others were probably stupid and boring, like offices and probably a library or something. Schools in general aren't very interesting.

This one, though, looked rather amazing from the outside. I still didn't quite understand why there was such a difference there.

"Hey!" I called. My voice echoed around the room. "Are you there? Answer!"

I knew Hil was waiting for me. He was always waiting for me. There was no longer a point in my life where I could feel safe from him.

And yet, I recieved no responce. Nothing happened.

"Hey!" I repeated. "Please come out!"

I was tapping my foot on the floor impatiently.

"I'm here!" I said. "I would like to negotiate with you!"

Nothing.

This was a very irritating moment for me. Partly because I didn't feel in the mood to go around exploring a creepy old building, and also partly because I was beginning to get a horrible headache.

No, really. It was a bad headache.

I trudged over to the door in front of me, dreading every step, and opened it.

A hallway. How fun.

At the end of it was yet another door, though considerably darker. It gave me a bitter look, that door - almost like it didn't appreciate my presence. What an odd thought. It was because of this that I arrived at my conclusion to try that door first.

"I know you can hear me," I said, walking down the hallway. "You're looking at me right now. Grinning. Laughing!"

I could almost *hear* him laughing. Mocking me. The laugh sounded mechanical - like some sort of machine, pounding away at nothing. It was like a washing machine, actually. A gigantic and complex one.

And I could actually hear this sound quite well. It was getting louder by the second.

In fact, it was shaking the entire building at this point - I could hardly keep my balance. I reached out for the door knob, though not before tripping and hitting my head on it (making my headache even worse). As I opened the door, ready to pounce inside, I realized that it was actually a door to the basement. If I had gone through with that action and jumped inside, I would have surely fallen and broken several bones.

That wouldn't have felt very good.

Interestingly, I didn't really have to open the door very wide before it flew open all by itself. And at the moment the sound got even more intense.

My Taper was ready. I could tell that he enjoyed this. He wanted so badly to finally catch Hil on film, and show him to the world. He wanted him to be exposed once and for all, to lose everything.

Don't tell anybody, butâ€¦ I kind of wanted those things, as well.

Hil himself didn't know this. He was falling straight into my trap. As soon as I finished negotiating with him, and retrieving what I came for, I would unleash my plan. I couldn't help but laugh a little. Hil was going to bow down to me before the day ended.

I didn't actually plan this "plan" beforehand. I didn't even know about it until just a few seconds before entering the basement and walking down the stairs. Usually, I would tend to think of my ideas on the spot. That didn't detract from the quality of these ideas in the least - in fact, it made them better!

I was overwhelmed with pride at that point. And with my stylish glasses, I felt even better.

The lights in the basement were already on - this was a clear sign that Hil was around waiting for me. This didn't scare me - I was powerful, strong, and ready. Nothing could have stopped me, not even a man with a solid rock tie.

"Come out wherever you are!" I shouted, proudly. "It is time for us to talk!"

Nobody responded to me. I stomped my foot on the floor as hard as I could.

"I can sense you! You are close!"

I couldn't actually "sense" anybody, but it sounded like a pretty neat thing for a super hero to say. And I thought that maybe it would scare Hil a bit, knowing that I could feel his presence.

My guess was that the loud machine-like sound was covering up my beautiful voice. Impossible, you may say, but I was competing against something louder than you could ever imagine. It didn't bother me in the least.

However, among all of those obnoxiously loud washing machine noises was a different sound, and I could hear it quite clearly. I looked at the wall in back of me, where the noises seemed to be coming from. It was a harmless little closet, in which I could hear what sounded like a constant pounding against the door. Almost as if opening it would unleash something deadly.

This amused me. It was firmly planted into my mind at this point that Hil was a silly, silly man.

"Is this where you keep your *cats*?" I asked, pointing toward the closet. I knew he was watching me, and so I had no trouble making gestures like that. "You're funny. Seriously, this is just hilarious. Do you think that those are going to hurt me?"

I was used to getting no reply at this point.

"Honestly. Pathetic!" I continued. "Here, just to humor you, I'm going to open up this closet and see what happens."

Surely enough, I did just that. And I really *was* expecting five or so cats to pounce at me. For that short moment, I felt almost invincible - a few little cats didn't scare me at all, even if they *were* going to eat me alive or something (which still felt unlikely). It was a little relieving to realize that behind that closet door lied nothing dangerous, but that relief was nearly ruined by the terror of seeing my daughter nearly collapse on to the floor the second I opened the door.

I didn't expect that to happen. Though, I knew that she was *somewhere* in the school - Hil had promised to me that she would be there. But I was really expecting to see some cats.

This, however, was much more fun than I had originally imagined. A great opportunity lied ahead of me.

"Ah, you!" I said.

"W-what?" she responded, looking up. Her eyes were half closed.

"I'm here to save you, little girl!" I said. "Get up, we're leaving."

"Leaving?"

I stood up straight and called out to Hil with my strongest voice.

"You hear that?" I said. "I'm taking the girl, and yet you stand there and watch! If we aren't going to negotiate, no skin off *my*

bones, man!"

The building continued to shake.

"What's going on?" said Care, trying to stand up. She still couldn't open her eyes.

"I told you, I'm saving you." I said, grabbing on to her hand. "You can call me Taper Man, by the way. Because that's who I am. Now, we should go."

I pulled her up and ran to the stairs. She responded by pulling in the opposite direction.

"No," she said.

"No?"

"I want something," she said, continuing to pull back.

"I'll get you whatever you want afterwards, we need to leave *now*."

Things weren't sounding very good. The noise was beginning to morph into something entirely different; now it sounded more like five thousand pennies dropping simultaneously every second. Onto a spinning propeller.

"He's building something with it," she said, as I let go of her hand. She pointed toward the room in which the machine was being created.

"Oh?" I said, curious. "He's in *there*, then?"

"Yes."

I began laughing uncontrollably.

"Hiding!" I said. The laughter wouldn't stop - I could no longer contain myself. This was just too great. "I love this! And he called *me* pathetic."

"He's *very* busy."

"Busy being a pussy. Here, just keep standing in that spot. What do you want me to get for you?"

"It's a round, flat thing - *this* big," she said, holding out her arms. "It's *reeaally* heavy."

This was great. No, this was *amazing*. I seriously didn't think the day would come - that I would win against my enemies this easily. And to the point that they would *cower in fear of me*. Maybe it was just my glasses and shirt, but I felt very happy and powerful that day.

And my camera, of course, was happy as well. This felt like a winner already.

I guess I don't need to mention that, as I opened the door to once and for all drive Hil out of my life, I had my taper completely ready to film every second of it.

What I ended up capturing, in the end, was almost as good. In fact, it was probably *better* in the long run. But I will tell you one thing that cannot be denied - it's not what I intended for at all. When Care told me, "he's building something," what I had assumed was that Hil was actually preparing his grave. It sounded like a fun thought, that he would be so scared of me as to do such a thing.

But these were just silly fantasies of mine. In reality, Hil wasn't actually preparing his grave - what a stupid idea! It made sense, really; that weird noise seemed not to register for the last several minutes I stood in the basement, but it was indeed still making its dreadful noise. *Something* had to be causing it.

The truth is that, when I walked into that room, I saw a gigantic complicated machine. Standing next to it was a man, but that man was *certainly* not Hil.

He looked at me for a moment, his eyes bursting with surprise. Nothing happened for several minutes.

Marvin wasn't sure what to think. But he knew what he was looking at, and wished so much for it not be true.

He saw me. He saw my camera. He recognized both. And to him, I was the hungriest man alive.