

CHAPTER 11

To be fair, Tapers wasn't actually my number one place to be. A close second, maybe, but definitely not number one. That's a strange thing to say, but believe it or not, it's nowhere near exaggeration. No, only *one room* deserved first place. It was a shame, therefore, that I was now beginning to forget what it even looked like. All I remembered at this point was a cozy bed and a rather bright shade of green.

Second place isn't horrible, so don't feel bad for Tapers. It's an accomplishment, really, to even be in my top *ten* list of awesome places to be.

If, however, I were to give a top ten list for camera stores, Tapers would be number one for sure. There's no doubt about that. There's also no doubt that CAMLANDAR would be number eleven (and I've only ever been to about *five* different camera stores in my life).

For most people, CAMLANDAR would be number one, and Tapers would be somewhere where they didn't have to look at it. I never quite understood why that was.

Nevertheless, it was a good feeling to walk inside of the near-empty Tapers store, with excellent music playing in the background, a terrific smell (admittedly coming from outside), and a cheerful young lad sitting behind the counter in front of an enormous wall of cameras, all of which were excellent.

"Good *afternoon*," I said to him. The music picked up my mood mid-sentence, and so naturally I put much more energy into the second word than I did the first.

The clerk put down his magazine (which he had already read through fifteen times).

"Oh," he said, and picked the magazine back up.

"Look," I said, in a completely different tone, walking to the counter. "I'm having some problems here, and I have nobody else to talk to."

"Yeah?" he replied, reading intently. He found a brand new article in the magazine; apparently a couple of the pages had been stuck together that whole time. It almost startled him when he discovered this.

The article was about a small company named "The Tapers." Supposedly it was causing a great deal of confusion for a lot of people, and thus, they were immediately ordered to change the name. However, they never actually complied with this demand, and so the confusion continued. "The Tapers", it went on to say, was a small company that provided taping services. They taped things together for people who were afraid of getting it stuck to their fingers or something horrible like that.

For someone who stood behind a counter all day and stared at the wall, this sounded like a lot of fun.

"Are you even listening to me?" I asked. The clerk looked up, in a shock.

"W-what? Did you say something?"

"Oh, no, nothing," I said. "Nothing at all."

The clerk returned to reading his article.

"But," I began. "If we had the choice of starting over, right now - putting ourselves back where we were only thirty seconds ago - and doing things the *right* way, then I believe the right choice would be to do so!"

"What are you suggesting?"

"*You* listening to *me*. That's what I'm suggesting."

"You seem disgruntled."

"Yes, well, I've been having issues, as I said."

Indeed I had been. There was a part of me that seemed to have drifted away silently, leaving me alone in this world. Some part of me that was already happy with my life, already okay with the fact that things were going downhill. But it was completely gone, and all I really had left was the door's lovely smile and the comforting music, both of which I could not enjoy anywhere but in Tapers.

I also had a camera, but sadly, nothing to film.

"I'm listening, then," said the clerk. He put down the magazine, but his mind wouldn't get off the fact that taping things together would be a pretty damn fun job.

I sighed gloomily.

"So, yeah," I started, slumped over the counter. "I'm feeling worse and worse about myself now. It's killin' me. I don't know quite what to do about it."

The clerk held his hand up and began to say something, but I interrupted.

"Oh, and," I said. "I'm *very* sorry for snapping at you. You're cool. We're cool. Okay?"

He felt touched for a second, but the feeling went away soon after.

"I've been thinking about this for a while, now," I said. "It's tearing me apart, you know? I feel like I may have made the wrong choice."

"Choice?" he asked.

He was sitting down now, though he wasn't allowed to be doing so. Employees at Tapers couldn't sit; that was perceived as a sign of laziness and an overall lack of enthusiasm. It would be a joke, though, for him to pretend that he cared about that rule.

I say this because he didn't actually care about that rule.

"Yeah," I responded. "And I screwed it up. I ruined two lives."

The clerk didn't feel like his question was answered, but it didn't really bother him. He didn't know what was going on anyway.

"So, do you suggest I call her?" I asked.

"Call who?"

"My ex-wife. Did you even know what I was talking about?"

"Well, actually, no."

It began to rain outside. We both looked for a second and returned to our conversation.

"She doesn't like me very much," I said. "That's it, really. I want to *do* something about it."

"Then call her."

"Oh, but I'm sure she'll hang up or something."

"Ah. Yeah, I would too."

The sound of the rain reached its peak in volume, but slowly started to calm down. The clerk stood back up, in fear of somebody finding out that he was sitting down. As much as he hated the rules, there were consequences for breaking them.

"I'm serious," I said. "What do I do?"

"Go to her house. That'll show her."

"*Show* her? I don't think you understand my intentions, here."

"Well, what in the hell *are they*?"

"I want to get back together," I said. "That's it. That's all I want to do."

He grinned, for the first time ever.

"And *then* you'll give'er a piece of your mind?" he said excitedly. The grin on his face grew even wider. "You know, this *is* starting to make sense to me. I'm sure we can think of something."

He was still wrong about my intentions, but I decided to give it a break. After all, he was about to help.

"You're right, by the way," he continued. "Woman are a mess. This one doesn't sound any different. I can come over there with you, if you want."

"Oh, no," I said. "It's alright. I'm good."

"If you say so," he replied, shrugging. "But you'll need a damn sharp axe to replace me. I could lend you one."

His new attitude began to disturb me - I hadn't expected this of him. I stepped back and shook my head.

"No, no, no," I said. "I think I've got this all covered, actually. You don't need to help at all."

"Really?"

"Really. In fact, I think I'm just going to go now, seeing as there's definitely nothing else in here that I am going to need."

I started walking slowly in the opposite direction, toward the door. The rain wasn't something I was looking forward to.

"Okay!" said the clerk. "You go take *good care* of that bitch."

I closed the door.

The life had been drained from her house. It was certainly there at one point, when things were better, but it seemed that was the past. There was a strange contrast between the house and its surroundings, like a thin barrier of nothing lied between them. You could have easily forgotten the time, assumed it was midnight, and turned around to see the sun shining as brightly as ever.

It felt like this house was in constant disagreement with the world, like it wanted nothing more but to live its own life and not be subjected to the whim of the sun.

There was indeed a contrast here, as the rest of the town was, at the time, pumping with happiness and activity. You couldn't have been in a better place, and I recognized this. In fact, on my way to this woman's house, I spotted at least twenty individuals dancing on the sidewalks, as if no other way existed to communicate one's satisfaction with life.

One would be crazy to say that this town was boring. Because it most definitely was *not*. In fact, even *I* couldn't help but feel happy.

It was odd. As soon as I stepped outside, I was nearly blown away. A sudden burst of confidence rushed through my body, like never before. I was going to meet her again. This was going to be the best day of my life.

At that same time, it stopped raining. I was shocked, but delighted at the same time. From that point forward I told myself that I would stop questioning things, and indeed I was successful at that.

If only such a thing would have happened to the house. That poor, poor house.

My ex-wife lived there, as well as her sweet little daughter. Ah, yes. I remembered holding her once, but that was as far as I could bear to recall.

Looking at that house - the black paint, the broken windows, everything you wouldn't want to see - I began to wonder what exactly could have happened. It worried me, but only served to boost my confidence. I felt like a hero, running in to save the day.

Having already knocked on this door a few days ago, I had a good idea of what to expect. I knew that nobody would answer it. But somehow this seemed worthwhile anyway.

Her door was staring me down. It had an interesting design on it that looked kind of like a frown. Not a good sign.

I knocked.

And then I waited.

â€

To my surprise, it didn't take long for me to begin hearing footsteps. And I knew that they were indeed footsteps, because I

could see them as well. Through the large window next to me I could clearly spot her, in all of her beauty, walking to the front door. I didn't think I could possibly have gotten any happier, but guess what, it was happening.

Though, she didn't seem to bother looking out to see who it was. It had apparently escaped her that the window was there, which worked for me - if she *had* indeed looked out and saw me, then perhaps she wouldn't have answered the door at all.

I was happy to rid my mind of that horrible frown on the door, for after the door had opened, it was brought out of my sight. And so it might as well have never existed.

She stood there, staring forward, only to jolt back in surprise after the first second.

"No," she said. "No. Please, no."

"Hey," I said, waving awkwardly.

It became silent for the next few seconds.

"No," she repeated, shaking her head and stepping back. "Please go."

"That's not a very good way to greet me. Aren't you going to say 'hello'?"

"I'm serious, leave. We don't need you."

She was beginning to close the door, but I stopped her.

"We, huh?" I said eagerly. "Where is she, anyway? I'd love to see her."

She was looking around now, thinking of what to do. I was making my first steps into the house, but she pushed me back.

"Go away," she said.

"Why would I do that? I just want to talk to you two."

"I didn't actually mean *we*. That was a mistake. I meant *me*. Leave *me* alone."

I smiled.

"Good, you're talking now. Lets keep doing that."

She wasn't paying complete attention at that moment - there were two other things on her mind. The first thing that she was thinking about was the fact that her daughter was still missing. In fact, that to her was the most significant thing.

The other thing was just a slight annoyance. As I took my first steps into the house, she began hearing a strange cracking noise above her. She was willing to ignore that, though.

She looked back at me.

"Yes, yeah, sure," she said. "Talking. You want to talk. I'll play your game. What are we talking about?"

"Well, I'd love to talk to our daughter too."

"You can't."

"Well why the hell not? What gives *you* special permission? I'm her father, you know."

She sighed.

"I don't have special permission. I can't talk to her, either."

"What are you talking about?"

"She went missing," she said, almost releasing all of her energy into that one statement.

This nearly stunned me.

"*What?*" I said.

"She's been gone for a while."

The entire world seemed to speed up in front of me. Or maybe it was just my own body, and everything else was normal. In any case, it was a horrible feeling, and my good mood had been crushed.

"Well what are we doing about this?" I asked.

"I don't even know if she's still *alive*. There's no way of knowing. I just want to get on with my life, for now."

"Look," I began. "Why don't we go inside and talk about this? It's been years."

She stood and thought about this. She wasn't very confident about letting me inside of her house.

"â€¦okay," she said, nodding. She let me inside.

As I walked inside, I looked around the house. The living room was a mess. The kitchen was a mess. The entire house looked like it had exploded, and every inch was covered with a thick layer of nightmares. These nightmares were the cause of many sleepless nights.

"I like what you've done with the place," I said.

She looked around.

"Thanks," she replied.

But she still couldn't get her mind off of that crackling sound. It was getting louder now, and beginning to irritate her.

"Uh, why don't we go into a different room?" she asked, hoping to escape from the sound.

"Sure."

We went to her bedroom, actually. It filled me with joy, as it used to be *my* bedroom as well, and thus was the one room I remembered the most of all of them. The cozy bed was what I mostly recalled. I also remembered the walls, but they were significantly less green now.

In fact, they weren't green at all. Same with the rest of the house. Completely black.

But it didn't bother me a whole lot. She sighed again as we sat on the bed, and we continued talking.

"This place brings back memories," I said. "Very exciting."

"I suppose."

I looked up at her and tried to make a smile. It didn't really work, though, and it was probably closer to a frown now that I think about it.

"So, what have you been doing for the past, what, five years?" I asked. She didn't really like answering questions, and I remembered this fact clearly, but I decided that it was worth a shot.

She thought for a second.

"Oh, you know, the normal parenting stuff. You?"

"I, uh--"

"I'm guessing you made some sort of hobby out of scaring innocent children?"

"What?"

"You were chasing after Care with a camera. Is there something wrong with you? You don't have to answer that, I know it's true."

I decided not to respond to that. It was too early to begin arguing about something so trivial.

She wasn't angry at the moment, but definitely just as irritated as before. As much as she didn't want to believe it, the cracking sound had followed her into her bedroom. It was just a little bit more than she could bear. As it only got louder, she slowly and steadily lost her sanity.

"What's bothering you?" I asked. She quickly snapped out of it and I regained her attention.

"Oh, nothing," she said. "I just have a madman in my house, that's all. There's definitely nothing wrong with *me*!"

"Hey, calm down. It's alright."

"Alright? What do you think '*alright*' even is? Was it just invented so that lunatics like you can calm people down before *killing them*? I don't think that's something I want to give in to. I don't want to be alright. I'm fine the way I am."

"You don't really believe that."

"Maybe I don't. Maybe I do. All that matters is that I have nothing left - not even a daughter - and now you're here. I can only imagine what you've come for next, even after you've already taken Care from me."

"Are you being serious?" I asked, standing up. "Do you really think that *I* took her?"

She stood up as well.

"Yes, I do believe that. I believe that completely. There's no reason why I *wouldn't* believe that."

"I'm got plenty of reasons."

"You've been stalking her. Following her around. *Chasing* her. She's a little girl. How do you want me to react to this?"

The noise was getting louder. It wouldn't stop. She felt like dying - maybe she was already dead, it didn't make much of a difference to her at this point.

"You can react by sitting down and listening to me," I said.

"I don't feel completely safe doing that. I'm being honest right now - *I think that you're going to kill me*. And there's nothing you can do to make that feeling go away. You're a dangerous person."

I was speechless. All I could do was stare at her.

The crackling sound, however, wouldn't stop. She covered her ears.

"Get out!" she screamed. I stepped back in surprise. "Get out! You're destroying everything!"

"Come on, you have to--"

"It's falling apart! Get out!"

"What's falling apart? There's nothing--"

"You're ruining everything. Please!"

The noise grew. There was no limit.

"Get out of this house. Get *out*," she said. "If you don't leave, bad things are probably going to happen. Leave!"

I started walking out of the room, but only out of pure fear, not because she was ordering me to. I could almost *feel* the house falling apart, even though it wasn't actually happening - her voice was ringing in my head and the pure chaos almost made it feel like the world was going to end.

"I'm leaving, I'm leaving," I said.

"Leave!" she screamed.

"I said, I'm leaving."

I closed the door, exiting the house.

And after that, it was completely silent.

She was lying on the floor at this point, but soon realized the silence and got up. It felt like the universe had collapsed into itself, and this was the aftermath - and yet, everything looked completely normal.

The cracking sound was gone. The madman was gone.

She was breathing heavily, but otherwise was very calm. It was all over. No more danger. It had been her fear for years to be caught up in this sort of situation, but luckily, nothing bad happened. She was safe.

It took her a while to get used to the quiet again.

As she was walking out of her room, she stepped on something, and as she walked back to check it out, she stepped on another one.

Below her, all over the floor, everywhere - chunks of black paint. On the bed. On top of every table, every shelf; it was everywhere. Quite naturally, she looked up at the ceiling.

Yes, no wonder. The black paint certainly wasn't on the ceiling anymore; or at least, a *great deal of it* wasn't on the ceiling.

What remained was a layer of bright green paint.