

# THE POSSESSION

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*This is for the Essex Witches:  
Tes and Eleanor, Matthew,  
& Bex and Kurt and Pip.*

The unseen exists and has properties.

—Richard Ford, *Lay of the Land*

# FROM THE FILES OF NOLAN MOORE:

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE—AUGUST 14, 1904

## WHO Built the Pre-historic WALLS Topping Berkeley Hills?



## Do the Miles of Mysterious Stone Barriers, Which Serve No Modern Purpose, Bespeak a Lost Civilization of Toltecs or Atlanteans?

Many of the great of California, and there are said to be many traces of their occupation of Northern California. It is probable that these walls were constructed in the early part of the last century, and the entire area which had been planned for agriculture would have been abandoned for purposes of protection.

The more modern men, however, with their eyes on the future, have not been able to see their great past. Systematic investigation might disclose the fact that they are indeed the builders of a new civilization in California.

How to Reach the Walls. The walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills, and the walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills, and the walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills.

Any one who would have a try at this strange and new work, should go to the walls, and the walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills, and the walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills.

It is evident, from the above statement, that the walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills, and the walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills.

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**D**id a colony from the Atlantic coast build the pre-historic walls which are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills, and the walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills.

These three latter startling questions are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills, and the walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills.

**A LONG STRETCH OF THE WALL.** The walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills, and the walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills.

**THE PASSING OF DYCE, ONCE A CITY.** The walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills, and the walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills.

**CLAY RELICS OF UNKNOWN PEOPLE.** The walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills, and the walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills.

**THE WALLS ARE SAID TO BE IN THE VICINITY OF THE BERKELEY HILLS.** The walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills, and the walls are said to be in the vicinity of the Berkeley Hills.

## PROLOGUE

She walked along the side of the road, and she walked fast.

Her legs were stiff, her arms crossed tight. Her head hurt. Badly. As if a metal band was clamped around her temples. Tightening. Her cheeks were stinging. Her neck felt naked and hurt around the back like a burn. Her best sneakers and her new jeans were getting soaked from the wet grass, and the gray-black mass of sky said there was more coming. Let it.

Everybody she saw was ugly. She had never felt more alone in her life.

And none of this was her fault.

She kept stomping homeward but after a while started to slow down, feet turning heavy and miserable. Her head ached worse than ever and her cheeks were wet now, too. And none of this was fair. She'd been so happy. She'd climbed such a big wall and all she wanted to do was share the view on the other side—not discover that somebody else thought they already owned it, that it wasn't hers.

Her vision was blurred with angry tears, but she'd walked this way so many times she could have done it with eyes closed. She didn't even notice the man sitting on the bench until she was level with him.

"Hey," he said.

Old guy. Gaunt face, black hair, bags under his eyes. She knew who he was immediately. Had seen him a hundred times. He'd been in their house, stood by the fireplace talking with her dad, drinking one of his beers. He'd always been in the background of her life like a dusty piece

of someone else's furniture, but she didn't want to talk to him now. Him or anybody else.

She kept going.

"You okay?" he asked. He stood, started walking with her. Not right beside. But at the same speed.

"I'm fine," she said, keeping her head down, wiping the back of her hand across her eyes. It was probably too late, but she didn't want him to see she'd been crying. She was fourteen. That's not a child anymore, whatever dumbass old people might think. Parents and teachers, everyone—but friends most of all. All they ever want to do is keep you small. They're scared of who you're becoming.

Of what you know. Of who you *are*.

"That's good," the man said. "Just being neighborly. That's all. I wouldn't want your dad to think I'd seen you out here, upset, and not checked if you're okay."

"I am totally okay, thank you."

"Is it a boy thing?"

She stopped walking, stared at him, hands on hips. "Uh, that would be none of your business."

He stopped too, looked apologetic. "Sorry. You're grown now. I get that. You got your own world. And I don't mean to intrude."

"So don't."

"But it's cold. It's going to rain. Probably before you get home. I'm just saying why don't I get you there. You look like you're having a bad day, is all."

"I don't need help."

"I know. Look, fine, I'll leave you to it. But I'll tell you one thing before I go, and you should believe me. Okay?"

"What is it?"

"Tomorrow's another day. And there's always a chance it'll be a good one."

She opened her mouth to retort, but closed it, suddenly feeling very tired. And dumb and guilty and small. She wanted to be at home, and

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warm, and dry. To start working out how she was going to fix this. Make it so she could start feeling happy again.

“Where’s your car?”

She knew as soon as he made the first turn that something was wrong. This wasn’t the way home.

“I’ve changed my mind,” she said. “I want to walk.”

He didn’t look at her but she saw him smile, and she knew she’d made a mistake and it was too late to do anything about it. That it would always be too late.

She was his now.



# PART ONE

We take our measure of being from what surrounds us; and what surrounds us is always, to some extent, of our own making.

—Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*

## CHAPTER

# 1

**Y**ou have reached your destination.

Kristy pulled gratefully to the curb and peered out the window. “Thank God for that.”

She was alone and so said it quietly. The vehicle made no response. Kristy hadn’t bonded with it yet—a loaner while hers was in the shop—not least because it adamantly refused to deal with her iPhone. On the eight-hour drive north the built-in navigation system had twice tried to lead her off the freeway, then retreated into panicked rerouting, before abruptly changing its mind and pretending the whole incident never happened. The car smelled pleasant and yet odd, as if doused with a scent designed to be an averaging out of the entire world’s conception of “fresh,” rather than pleasant to any single person or culture in particular. It was like being trapped in an elderly person’s guest bathroom. Having the windows open above forty miles an hour caused an unbearably percussive *whap-whap-whap* sound. There was a blind spot on the left that hid overtaking cars in a way that seemed specifically designed to cause accidents.

It was a dumb car. Right now it seemed confident of one thing, however.

Destination: 243 Shasta Avenue, Birchlake, CA

It struck her how often we refer to machines not merely for information but also reassurance, as we once would have with a parent, and

put a pin in the observation for a short think-piece at some point, or maybe never.

She got out of the car, wincing. It was dark and cold outside her cocoon. Both sides of the street were lined with buildings, few above a single story high, most fronted with wood and all weathered in old small-town style. Trees dotted along the sidewalks, leaves thinned into late-fall mode. A dim streetlight on the corner revealed a small but aspiringly upmarket grocery store. Beyond that, another couple blocks, a liquor store, then town kind of ran out.

Closing the car door sounded loud.

Birchlake looked pretty much as she'd expected. Thick forest on one side, river on the other, with further forest beyond. The narrow highway entered over a bridge at the southern end of town, passing an old motel and gas station. At the other end the road followed the river further into the mountains. The kind of place you'd blow straight through on a road trip without noticing, unless you were desperate for coffee, a sandwich, or the restroom.

243 Shasta Avenue was dark.

One of the handful of two-story buildings, the street-level space had fairly recently been an antique or bric-a-brac store, now shuttered. Originally the building looked like it had been a general store. The business next door was a hipster-style coffee shop, complete with intricately hand-chalked price boards and ironic hashtags, closed for the night. Convenient for the morning, though.

Kristy walked up to 243, stretching her arms and back. Three-quarters of the building's wide frontage was taken up by display windows flanking an old glass door, all of which had been whitewashed into opaqueness from the inside. On the right was a featureless wooden door with a large deadbolt. 243a. It looked secure but hardly welcoming. All reassuringly recognizable from the Airbnb listing, though a good deal less enticing at nine thirty on a dark, chilly night, a long way from home.

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She pulled up the confirmation email on her phone, already wishing she'd booked into the B&B at the north end of town instead.

Pick up key from Stone Mountain Tap—ask for Val.

Kristy turned and scanned the other side of the street.

The Tap looked like it had been a bar for a long time and knew its business and had few regrets. There was a dedicated drinking area on the left, stools along a counter, and a long and low-ceilinged restaurant section on the right, with heavy chairs and tables, booths along the side, and maybe twenty people spread among the seating. The floor was battered wood, the walls randomly dotted with tarnished mirrors and neon beer signs and murky retro advertisements in frames. The lights were low. The music was not. Right now it was Joni Mitchell—who always sounded to Kristy like a cat trying to communicate that it was dying, and sad about it. Shelves behind the bar held bottles of every hard liquor known to mankind. There were a dozen beers on tap, too, half from the local microbrew and called things like pInePA and Cold River. It was the kind of place her ex-husband would like, Kristy knew.

*There's a rare, fine line between anodyne and sketchy*, he would have said. *And this is it.*

A lean woman in her early fifties stood behind the bar. Cropped gray hair, nose stud, wearing a T-shirt that revealed tan, muscular arms dotted with Celtic-style tattoos. She had the loose, easy stance of someone who'd done years of non-dilettante yoga, and gave Kristy an appraising look as she approached.

"Are you Val?" Kristy asked. "I'm looking for—"

"Dangit," the woman said. "Thought my luck was in." She glanced at a scrap of paper thumb-tacked to the bar behind her. "I am indeed Val. Kristy?"

"That's me."

"Okay, so. Normally I'd let you in and give you the tour, but the Crown Prince of Uselessness didn't show up tonight, and so I'm

holding the fort by myself. I imagine it'll be self-explanatory. You look like a grown-up."

"I wouldn't go that far."

The woman took a while fishing a key out of her jeans. In the meantime Kristy cast a glance around to see if anybody was eating, and whether it looked edible. Nobody was. A tall, gaunt man in his sixties sat on a stool at the end of the counter. There was no glass in front of him.

He turned to look at her. Cloudy gray eyes, bags that spoke of a liver past its best, unnaturally dark hair scraped back from a high forehead. He looked so much like the kind of guy you always see in small-town bars that for a moment it almost felt as if she knew him from somewhere. Kristy realized she wasn't in the mood for a solo meal even if it was an option.

"So what brings you to B-lake?" Val asked, as she finally produced a key. Kristy could imagine her asking the same question, in the same knowing way, of every stranger who walked in the bar.

"Just exploring."

"Ha. Hope you brought something to read, because exploring will use up all of ten minutes. If you take your time. And to answer your next question, the kitchen closes at eight thirty on weeknights out of season. Sorry. The food's not bad, though, for future reference."

"Good to know," Kristy said, as she took the key.

"All part of the service. And don't lose that, cos I can't find the spare."

The door to 243a opened onto a narrow stairwell. Kristy found the light switch and carried her bag upstairs.

The apartment looked exactly how it had online, which shouldn't have been a surprise, but they didn't always. A five-second tour confirmed it had a small kitchenette and a desk and a door to the bedroom/bathroom—which had looked nice on the website and was an area on which Kristy wouldn't compromise. The furniture was old, but both it and the rug and pictures had been selected well enough to pitch the

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place convincingly toward shabby chic, rather than merely shabby. A bay window. Good enough.

She dropped her bag and went back down to the street. A woman was pulling in the sidewalk sign outside the grocery at the corner, but thankfully it hadn't closed yet. Organic vegetables. Local honey. An excessively wide selection of artisanal vinegars. The problem with seeing a lot of places is they all start to seem the same, especially the ones that are trying to be different. Kristy gathered up milk, snacks, a pre-made sandwich from the cooler. It featured an unnecessary amount of alfalfa sprouts, but she believed she'd be able to struggle through. A middle-aged woman with thick glasses took Kristy's money and gave her a bag without recourse to speech.

By the time Kristy stepped back out onto the street it had started to drizzle. The road was deserted, or so she thought at first. Then she saw a figure on the other side. Tall, thin. Hands hanging down by his sides.

He was lit, then unlit, by the flashing sign of the Stone Mountain Tap, and it took Kristy a moment to realize that he'd started crossing toward her.

He stopped a few feet short of the curb. His head still had to tilt to look down at her. Kristy was barely 5'4" and slim of build. Which was why, in situations like this, she always spoke first. "Can I help you?"

The man said nothing.

"You were in the bar, right?" She phrased it as a question only because most humans are straightforward animals and a trick that simple usually got them to respond more quickly.

Not this guy. He sniffed, wetly, looked away down the street. Remained silent. Kristy was not afraid. There was a dozen feet between them and her reactions were fast. She'd worn her running shoes for the drive. It seemed unlikely this man ran at least a 5K every day of the year, as Kristy did, or that he'd be able to do it anywhere near as fast. She was watchful nonetheless. You just never know, and there was something about this man that she didn't like.

"You're here about her," he said. His voice was quiet, unthreatening.

“Who?”

“The missing girl.”

“Like you probably overheard me say: I’m just exploring.”

“People sometimes disappear for a reason.”

“What kind of reason?”

“You’d be better off leaving in the morning, exploring some other town. But I don’t suppose you’ll listen.”

The man turned away, and started to walk back across the street. Stopped after a couple of paces, half-turned back. He paused a moment, lips pursed, looking at her.

“What?” she said.

“Sometimes it’s better if they stay gone.”

When he got to the other side, he turned left and disappeared around the corner.

## CHAPTER

# 2

It's still early," Molly said.

"It's really not."

She checked her watch. I'd done the same thing, less than a minute before. And a few minutes before that. "It's not eight yet. Your slot's until half past."

"Tell me, Moll. Have you observed the ebb and flow during the last hour, and been able to come to any conclusions regarding changes in the population density of customers in this retail establishment over time?"

"It's . . . less busy than it was?"

"There are exactly three people here, not including the comatose clerk at the register or the one hiding in the cooking section." I turned in his direction. "*I know you're there,*" I said, loudly.

Molly swatted me. "Shh, Nolan."

"Two customers wandered past without glancing at my book. The third picked up a copy and had a long, hard look, before putting it back as though worried about contagion. He's currently browsing the photography section, presumably in quest of artsy pictures of naked ladies. If I get any more bored I'm going to go give him the good news about the invention of the internet."

Molly made a face. "I'm sorry," she said.

"I hate to embarrass you, that's all," I said. "I know you pulled a favor to even get me in here."



Posters on the walls showed that Bookshop Santa Cruz's events generally featured literary A-listers, bestselling genre scribes, or winsome-looking people who'd written one achingly awesome short story and won a shit-ton of awards for it. I am none of those things. Normally their events involved an audience and a Q&A and wine. I'd been given a table behind the local history section from seven until eight-thirty, which on a drizzly Wednesday evening in late October is the bookstore equivalent of exile to a labor camp in Siberia.

Molly grew up in Santa Cruz and knew somebody in the store. Perhaps anticipating that my event might not lead to a long line of excited customers snaking away down the street, she'd volunteered to come along for the ride on the pretext of hooking up with some old friends.

"I'm not in the least embarrassed," she said. "People are stupid. Come on, nuts to this. Let's go get a drink."

"Now you're talking."

"Wait though. Didn't she buy a copy earlier?"

A young woman had come back in the store from the street, and was headed our way. "*The* copy, yes."

I smiled when she got to us, reaching for my pen. "Decided you'd like it signed after all?"

"Well no, actually," the girl said, looking awkward. "It was for my boyfriend. He's really into unsolved mysteries and stuff? But I just gave it to him and he said he only likes to read things by actual experts, sorry."

She held the book out to me diffidently.

"You'd like a refund?"

"If that's okay."

"And he sent *you* back to do this?" Molly asked.

The girl shrugged.

"You'll have to take it to the register and deal with them," Molly said. "Oh, and FYI? Your boyfriend's a dick."

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The girl backed warily away.

Molly helped me put the books back in the box and then in my car, after which we went and got pretty drunk.

Or I did, anyway.

Molly had a single beer and then went for a late dinner with her friends. I kept meaning to leave the bar and kept failing to follow through. I remembered after a while that I'd got drunk in the same establishment, years ago, when passing through town after visiting my parents up in Berkeley. The bar hadn't changed much. Neither, it appeared, have I.

Eventually I managed to go, and eleven o'clock found me on a lounge by the tiny swimming pool of my motel, smoking in front of the no-smoking sign and drinking from a large bottle of local beer that I seemed to have purchased along the way. The drizzle had stopped but it was pretty cold. The motel was called the Bayview, despite not having one and in reality being situated a brisk five-minute walk from the ocean.

I was sufficiently inebriated by that point to find this glumly metaphorical for something or other.

Hi. My name's Nolan Moore. You may have heard of me from . . .

Who am I kidding. Of course you haven't. Unless you ran across me in my previous life as a journeyman screenwriter in LA, my sole claim to fame is being the host of a very slightly popular YouTube show called *The Anomaly Files*, which investigates unsolved mysteries. The problem being that though it briefly looked like we were going to move up to cable, it fell apart for extremely complicated reasons that I won't get into right now, and so we're back on YouTube.

The problem with *that* is people who're interested in the subjects we cover don't go to YouTube, because it's the province of youngsters who want to watch other young people jabbering on about their inconsequential days. I'm aware that makes me sound old. I don't care. My point

is most people go to the site to see their pre-existing worldview reflected safely back, not to have their eyes opened to new things, or be shown what's going on in the shadows.

And this, as my producer/director/friend Ken has pointed out, more than once, is why our business model sucks.

In an attempt to generate PR for the show (and to bump my income to the level where I could continue to pay for the apartment in Santa Monica that had been home since I separated from my wife) I'd written up some of our previous shows. These had just come out in a large-format book from a real publisher, and that's what I'd been trying to sell tonight. The net result—after the reversal with the girl with the shitty boyfriend—had been zero (0) sales.

There were a dispiriting amount of zeros in the book's sales ranking on Amazon, too. I honestly hadn't realized there were that many books in the world. It seemed altogether possible that books that didn't even *exist* had sold more copies than mine. After spending a few confused minutes trying to figure out whether asking the publisher to withdraw the book from sale might push me higher up the bestseller list, I realized I'd drunk more than enough and should call it a night, especially if I was hoping to drive Molly and me the six-plus hours back to LA tomorrow.

I dislodged my phone from my jeans pocket during the process of standing, but managed to catch it before it crashed to the floor, somehow also avoiding flipping it into the pool. Buoyed by this evidence that I was in fact totally at the top of my game, I noticed I'd missed a call.

It was from Kristy. My ex-wife. Or, as it hadn't quite got to that point (and we'd recently been cautiously experimenting with walking back from the split) the woman from whom I was presently separated.

Our current policy of playing it cool meant neither of us expected the other to leap straight onto calling back. We'd had a few good evenings together in the last couple months, including one when we'd added each other back to the Find Your Friends app, as a cocktail-fueled declaration

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of . . . I don't know. Openness to a future. Or something. The fact that I'd not felt drawn to use the information, however, nor entitled to, showed there was still distance to cross.

It was late. I could have left it until I got back to Los Angeles. But I didn't. Despite the hour, and having been no stranger to alcohol, I went up to my room, made some very bad coffee, and called Kristy back.

Mistake.

## CHAPTER

# 3

I wasn't worried about waking her. Kristy switched to no-ring mode when she was done with the day. Not worried, either, that the delay in her picking up (necessarily) meant she was electing not to take my call. Kristy makes a point of leaving her phone on the other side of the room, usually somewhere precarious, to show how non-addicted she is. I've pointed out this shows she's thinking too much about her phone, but my wisdom fell upon unresponsive ears, as it so often does.

I waited patiently, picturing how she would lever herself up out of her chair and pad quietly across whatever space she was in, tucking her hair behind her ear in readiness. It's weird how someone not-answering their phone can remind you how much you know about them.

"Hey," she said, eventually.

"New phone, who dis?"

"Nolan, that doesn't work. You called me."

"I know. That's why it's funny."

"Pretty experimental use of the word *funny*, but let's move on. How did the booksigning go?"

"Really badly."

"I did warn you it might."

"I know. But I wasn't sure whether that was genuine concern or merely you being mean to me for sport."

"Bit of both, if I'm honest. Well, that's disappointing."

"I'll survive. So, what?"

"Huh?"

"Before I called you, you called me, remember? Where are you anyway?"

"Town called Birchlake. Forty miles from Shasta."

"Okay. Why?"

She didn't answer, and in that pause I heard an echo of previous pauses. Most of them good—the everyday beats of silence in a relationship that's past (or before) the "somebody has to be talking or it's not working" phase. Others not so good, like the hesitation of a person choosing whether to tell the truth, and if not, which untruth—something that would be consistent with previous untruths. You never understand those pauses for what they are at the time. Only in retrospect. And once you've learned that bad things live in the gaps, and the world may not be as it seems, it can make you paranoid.

"Ten days ago a girl called Alaina Hixon disappeared," Kristy said, and I realized all she'd been doing was marshaling information. "Fourteen. From Birchlake."

"Name rings a bell," I said. "The town, not the girl." And it did, now I'd heard it a second time.

"Can't imagine why. It's Nowheresville. Alaina lived a mile up the road. She and a couple of girlfriends went walking in the woods after school. It started getting dark and one of them turned to Alaina to suggest they head home. She wasn't there. They called out and looked for her, but got freaked and bailed."

"Nice."

"They didn't know what else to do, Nolan. And they went straight home and got their dad to call the police, so . . . The county sheriff and his guys were there fast. Then the Feds, and dogs. Nothing after five days of ground search. Nothing since. Nothing on social media. No contact with family or friends. Just plain gone."

"I'm surprised I didn't hear about it."

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“Bad timing. The day before she disappeared was that Walmart shooting in Chico. ‘Only’ four died, but—”

“There was that huge manhunt, right. That I do remember.”

“Exactly. Very bright and shiny. Took twenty-four hours until they pinned the guy down and blew his head off, then there were days of media analysis and handwringing after. Alaina missed her spot in the news cycle. She fell between the cracks.”

I tried to imagine what it must be like to have your child disappear like that, and realized it was nowhere I wanted to go inside my head. “Don’t they say that . . . ”

“The first day is critical, yes. If a child turns up deceased, in three-quarters of cases death occurred within three hours. Movies are all about hidden cabins and the drawn-out playtimes of evil geniuses. In reality it’s a panicky act committed by someone who’s broken and vile, and it happens fast. But we shouldn’t leap to that anyway. About eight hundred thousand people are reported missing every year.”

“Seriously?”

“But eighty-five percent are under the age of eighteen, and the vast majority resolve quickly. People operate on a hair-trigger, understandably. Most of the time the kid’s just late, or at a friend’s, or goofing off. They come home, everybody shouts at each other, then someone calls for pizza and it’s have-you-done-your-homework.”

“What about the rest?”

“Family cases are often custody-based and more likely to involve children under six. The probability of harm increases markedly from family to acquaintance to stranger, of course, but in the end only one in ten thousand missing children are not eventually found alive.”

“Dying is not the only deeply shitty thing that can happen to missing kids.”

“Of course. And those dangers are higher with acquaintance or stranger abductions, which *also* become more likely if the missing child is female. Like Alaina.”

"But why are you on this? It's terrible, of course. But you're not a detective."

"I was researching a piece on cyberbullying."

"Hasn't that been done?"

"Yes, it's been 'done,' Nolan. But, bizarrely, that didn't make the problem instantly disappear. And it's not only kids. Students do it to teachers, too—setting up sites to hassle them. It happens even more *outside* the school system. You don't want to see my mentions on Twitter any time I write something a teeny bit critical of the patriarchy, or suggest not having so many assault rifles in circulation might be a cool experiment."

"Well, you know my theory about that."

"Remind me."

"People are assholes," I said. I'd gotten to the end of the pot of coffee and couldn't decide whether it would be a good idea to make another, especially as the first seemed to have stirred ominous harbingers of tomorrow's hangover.

Instead I left the room and lit a cigarette on the walkway, looking over the wet parking lot. A homeless guy lurched along the road outside, shouting vaguely at someone who wasn't there. "So—is this girl's disappearance related to cyberbullying?"

"It wasn't," Kristy said. "Though I called the sheriff yesterday morning and suggested he look into it. Because, check this out."

My phone pinged. She'd texted me a picture. A pretty young girl. Pale skin. Long dark hair. Black jeans, black hoodie. She was standing in front of birch trees, with thicker forest behind. "That's her?"

"Yes," Kristy said. "Keep looking."

The image she'd sent was a screen grab, much taller than it was wide. I scrolled past the image. It'd been posted by "htilil♥2005" and had received precisely one like. I did the math and worked out that 2005 would have been Alaina Hixon's birth year. "What's with the white space underneath?"

"Somebody, or more likely two people, have posted comments."



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That's what those random sets of letters on the left side signify. But the comments are blank."

"That's a little strange. Unless it's just some pointless thing the young folks are doing this month."

"Not that I'm aware. On her other account there are normal comments. I've traced those posters back to kids at her school. But these? No idea. And keep scrolling."

The blank lines of empty post went on for a couple of inches of screen space. I was finding it hard to see this as cyberbullying worth the name (or Kristy's time), and was about to say so, when the comments changed. One of the same random-character accounts had posted a single word.

Witch

"Huh," I said. I kept scrolling. Something—the cold and dark, or a more atavistic response—was making the hairs on the back of my neck stir.

Witch

Witch

Witch

Witch

And then, at the bottom of the image, a final comment.

Time to join your mother.

"Okay, sure, that's a little weird," I said. "Any idea what the mother thing signifies?"

"Alaina Hixon's mother was in a car accident eighteen months ago. She's dead."

"Oh," I said. "Yeah. You should look into that."

Half an hour later I was at the tiny desk in my room. In the meantime I'd made and drunk more coffee and also—with the aid of the vast collection of notes I have stored on my phone—recalled in which context I'd previously encountered the general environs of Birchlake. I'd also had

time to think about Kristy, and to wonder what she was really doing up there in the mountains, and why.

I checked my watch. Quarter to one. Late. But you never know. I dialed a different number. It rang for quite a while. I was about to bail when it finally picked up.

“What,” Ken’s voice said, “the *fuck* do you want?”

Ken is a late-fifty-something pug of an ex-Londoner, and at times somewhat brisk in his social interactions.

“Are you awake?”

“Well I am *now*, you twat.”

“Good,” I said. “I think I’ve found our next show.”

## CHAPTER

# 4

After the call with Nolan, Kristy spent ten minutes tending her digital garden. There wasn't much to do. She scheduled a couple of tweets promoting upcoming pieces and dealt with her mentions. And that was that. The outside world had been dealt with, leaving only the inner one.

She wasn't even sure why she'd called Nolan. Reassurance, probably. Grounding. But she still wasn't sure it'd been worth coming all the way here.

Or if it had been a good idea.

She should go to bed. She didn't feel like it. It was very late, though. One last cup of tea. Then bed.

She put the kettle on the stove and a bag of chamomile tea in one of six identical mugs. There were six sets of silverware, six plates, and six bowls. None were chipped. All were perfect, patina-less, as if freshly minted. The distorted reflection of her face in the kettle showed Kristy's own patina was coming along fine. Only those few lines around the eyes, as yet, and that one outlying gray hair. But age happens. Thirty-five is not the first draft of being a human. There are editorial marks in your margins.

She turned off all the lights except for the lamp and sat in the chair by the window, cradling the hot cup in her hands, slowing her breathing, trying to feel her way toward sleepy, watching nothing much happening in the street.

From up here she could see along it in both directions. An evening of drizzle had slicked the sidewalk into black, shiny pools, reflecting the streetlights. She considered taking an artsy picture of the scene for her loyal 120K Instagram followers. She'd left her phone right on the other side of the room, though. And she'd surely paid sufficient homage to the gods of social media for one night.

She yawned, at last believing that sleep had become a feasible endeavor. There was a very loud crashing sound.

She froze. First out of shock—the noise was sudden, and extremely loud, seeming to come from somewhere very nearby—and then with confusion.

She'd been close to the window. Yet she hadn't seen anybody walking the sidewalk toward the building.

She only realized this after she'd turned toward the door to the apartment. She did this even though she knew that wasn't where the sound had come from. That's what you do. You check the perimeter. Hers was fine, but her heart was beating hard.

She pressed her face up against the window. Looked up the street, then down. Five, maybe ten seconds had passed since the noise. Nobody could have made it to either corner in that time. She wasn't even sure that's where the noise had come from—it had seemed to judder up straight through the core of the building, almost to start *inside* her—but it was the only explanation that made sense.

Which meant they were still down there. And that the most likely explanation for the noise was someone hammering on the front door.

So, now what? Call the cops?

Not for someone banging on a door. Nobody's coming out for that unless it's a *very* quiet night, and if they do, they're going to make you feel small about it. And—if you're a woman—they'll take the time to patronize the living crap out of you, too.

Kristy waited, braced to hear the noise again. If you bang on a door and nobody answers, you bang again, right?

## THE POSSESSION

Individual seconds passed, one by one, then thirty seconds in a block. Then a minute. And another.

If you bang on a door *that hard* in anger, it's unlikely you're in a patient enough mood to wait two minutes for a response. So it was only somebody walking home. Fresh from an argument with their spouse, or randomly furious with the universe in general. *Bang-bang* on a door: that's showed everyone. Then stand there, fists hurting, head bowed, realize you're being lame, and lurch home.

Kristy let these rational, comforting explanations stroll around her brain, feeling her heart rate tending back toward normal. It didn't get down all the way, though—and her hands were still gripping the back of the chair.

Still no sign of movement on the street. Must be over five minutes now. She could open the window and look, sure. Hard to imagine what would be gained by this apart from the opportunity to ask them to go away—which would just confirm to them that somebody was inside. Not so smart.

And then her calm, measured thoughts skidded to a halt.

What if they were inside the building?

She stood in front of the door to the apartment, holding her breath, eyes closed, mouth half open. Doing everything she could to make her hearing as acute as possible. No sound from the other side.

*Because there's nobody there.*

There was no way they could have gotten in. Of course. But was she going to feel comfortable getting into bed until she was sure?

She slowly and silently opened the door. The stairwell was empty. The street door at the bottom was still closed. She padded down. Hesitated behind the door, then unbolted and quickly pulled it wide. Stepped out.

Just a cold, dark street in the mountains, late at night.

She went back in and relocked the door, feeling very silly, then went back up into the apartment, relocking that door, too. The annoying thing was

she'd been ready for sleep, and now she was going to have to reboot the entire frickin' process. She headed to the stove to put the kettle on.

But stopped halfway. Her phone was in the middle of the floor.

She glanced up at the counter near the stove. She was prone, she knew—and had been hassled senseless about it by Nolan—to leaving her phone a little close to the edge of things. Tables. Nightstands. Counters, like this one.

In the year in which she'd lived alone, however, without someone to mansplain phone care to her, she'd made an effort to curb the habit. She was *sure* the phone had been six inches from the edge. Couldn't picture it—and knew how misleading that kind of mental image could be anyway, how easy it is to make yourself believe you saw something you never saw—but confident nonetheless.

And even if it *had* been there, hanging off, gravity works straight down, right? It would have taken something to cause it to fall. The thud when whoever banged on the door downstairs? Maybe. Except the phone hadn't been lying on the floor when she crossed the room to the door.

She picked it up. The front was shattered, glass twisted with lines that looked like branches against sky.

The screen was cloudy gray.

## CHAPTER

# 5

Alright then,” Ken said, as he steered my car one-handed out of San Jose airport, his other meaty paw clutching a quadruple espresso in a tiny paper cup. “You have against my better judgment lured me up to Northern California, fetid lair of pot-drenched hippies and start-up wankers hell-bent on game-changing and disrupting things that were perfectly fine as they are. To be honest, I was drunk when we spoke last night and had no memory of booking the plane tickets until I saw the email when I woke up.”

“You didn’t,” Molly said patiently, from the back. “You phoned me and told me to do it. At one thirty in the morning. I also booked a motel.”

“Oh,” Ken said, as he aimed the car firmly across several lanes of traffic toward the exit for 680, the freeway that would take us north of the Bay Area. Though we were in my car, when you’re with Ken, he drives. Twenty-five years of directing commercials and low-budget horror movies has brought him to the point where he doesn’t suffer fools gladly. Or anybody. Especially me. I’ve given up trying to argue the point and simply handed over the keys as he and Pierre came out of the airport. “Good. I’m sure you did a much better job. My point is, Nolan, compelling though your argument must have been, I’m hazy on the fine detail.”

“We spoke for half an hour, Ken.”

He thought for a moment, shook his head. “Nope. ‘Come to San Jose,’ you said. That’s all I’ve got.”

“I wouldn’t mind hearing,” Pierre said. Our cameraman was in back with Molly, an unusually small bag of equipment—he hadn’t been able to bring his usual ludicrous amount of gear on the hop from Los Angeles—stowed in the trunk. He looked a little more annoyingly handsome and tan than when I’d seen him a few weeks before. “All Ken would say is ‘It’s some stupid idea that Nolan talked me into.’”

“Nice. Well, I apologize to Molly,” I said, “who heard some of this over breakfast. But to teach you to pay attention, Ken—here’s the soup-to-nuts.”

Everybody’s heard of the Nazca Lines, in Peru. If you haven’t, look them up. I’ll wait. Okay, you know what? Just listen. The Nazca Lines are hundreds of extremely straight lines of scraped earth—embellished with vast parallelograms and narrow triangles longer than a skyscraper is tall, along with massive animal and plant geoglyphs of eerie sophistication. Believed to have been created between 500 BC and AD 500, the lines are assigned to the usual alleged yesteryear obsessions of celestial observation or “ceremonial walkways,” though neither makes much sense. Erich von Däniken and allied ancient astronaut nuts went all in on the idea that they were interstellar landing strips, but it’s hard to imagine why you’d require so many, that are so long, and repeatedly and chaotically cross, or why you’d need vast, stylized pictures of spiders and monkeys and hummingbirds for this purpose (unless they were the logos of alien cruise ship companies).

Much less famous are the Sajama Lines in Bolivia, again formed by scraping away rocks to reveal lighter undersoil and stretching for up to twenty kilometers across arid and unforgiving landscape. There are none of the cool geoglyphs found at Nazca, but they spread over twenty-two thousand square kilometers, making them fifteen times the size. There are further examples that are barely known beyond academics in the relevant countries—like the Big Circles, twelve massive rings of low stone walls in the Jordanian desert, ranging from seven hundred to fifteen hundred feet in diameter. Nobody knows who made them, or why.



## THE POSSESSION

The area around the nearby Azraq Oasis has hundreds of more complex circular structures dated to around two thousand years ago. Still in Jordan, there's a ninety-three-mile-long wall called Khatt Shebib, which stretches across a random stretch of desert. It is not (and has never been) high enough to form a barrier against anything. At times two walls run in parallel, pointlessly. Over in Kazakhstan, meanwhile, there's a collection of two hundred mounds, ramparts, and shapes—including a vast square with a diagonal cross, and a three-legged swastika—known as the Steppe Geoglyphs, some of which are believed to be eight thousand years old.

And so on and on. There are famous examples in Europe, too—like the stone lines at Carnac in France. More are being discovered every year, now that people have access to Google Maps. But this kind of thing is only found in other, dusty and ancient countries, right? The weird foreign ones?

Wrong.

There are lines in the United States, too. I'm not talking about odd collections of megalith-type structures such as Mystery Hill in New Hampshire, or Gungywamp in Connecticut—or even the stone chambers in New England that conventional archeology airily dismisses as “root cellars.”

Stranger, to me, are the stone walls.

There's no question that the scattered communities of sixteenth and seventeenth century New England would have needed to organize their environment, and likely spent some time piling up rocks for that purpose. A significant number of stone walls may be merely that. But in 1872 the US Department of Agriculture estimated there were 240,000 miles of walls in New England. Yes, all those zeros are correct. And still better than my Amazon sales ranking. A further report in 1939 nudged it up to 259,000 and still didn't factor in several areas that have especially large numbers of walls: modern researchers put the figure closer to 500,000.

That'd get you to the moon and back.

That's *a lot of walls*.

Let's put this in the context of the times, too—the period when (according to the few archeologists who've considered the phenomenon for five seconds) early settlers allegedly erected these features. In the highlands of Massachusetts there's a town called Hawley, for example. It was settled in 1770 and has never been large: its population in 1790 was 539, it peaked at 1,089 in 1820, and then it slipped back to 600 by 1879. These were farmers living in a harsh, rugged landscape—chopping wood, growing food, performing all the disappointingly tiring tasks required to hack out an existence in the New World.

Yet this small community apparently also had the time to build over *a thousand miles* of stone walls.

Their walls share odd characteristics with others across New England, lines that could circumnavigate the Earth twenty times. Let's run with the idea they're to keep wanderlusting sheep or errant chickens in check. In which case, why are some twelve feet high? And yet others built so low that they wouldn't form a barrier to a determined toddler? Why do some veer all over the place, in jagged or curling or looping lines? Why do so many start and stop suddenly and without apparent reason, failing to form a useful boundary? Why do others go through swamps, or up cliffs, or over mountains that were never farmed, sometimes scaling slopes that are hard to navigate without going down on hands and knees?

Dunno, right? So let's just ignore them.

That happens a lot. In the *New York Times* of December 18, 2002, you'll find a piece about a group of scientists diligently mapping the bottom of the Hudson River with sonar. They found evidence for several hundred of the ships recorded to have sunk there over the previous four centuries, which is doubtless fascinating if you have a thing for old boats, which personally I don't. There's a wealth of chatty information about the wrecks and items that divers had found—including leather, clothes, and food (blueberries, and a potato) that'd been held together by the mud for a couple hundred years.

## THE POSSESSION

But then, in the middle of the piece is an odd little paragraph. In throwaway style it's revealed that the survey also found "submerged walls more than 900 feet long, that scientists say are clearly of human construction," adding that the last time the water levels were low enough for building on dry land was . . . *three thousand years ago*.

Then they go back to drooling over the wreckage of Revolutionary-era ships, and the wall's never brought up again. If you don't believe me, look it up—though you'll have to head straight to the *NYT* piece because it's not mentioned anywhere else that I can find, and it's my job to look for this stuff.

Doesn't that seem *weird* to you? Half a mile of stone wall, built three thousand years ago, cited in the *New York Times* as discovered and mapped by real, named scientists—and yet everybody's "Huh, whatever"?

As *The Anomaly Files* has pointed out on many occasions, there's an awful lot of "Huh, whatever" in American archeology—especially when it comes to the country's prehistory. Which is curious.

Almost as if there are secrets we're not being told.