

# Heritage



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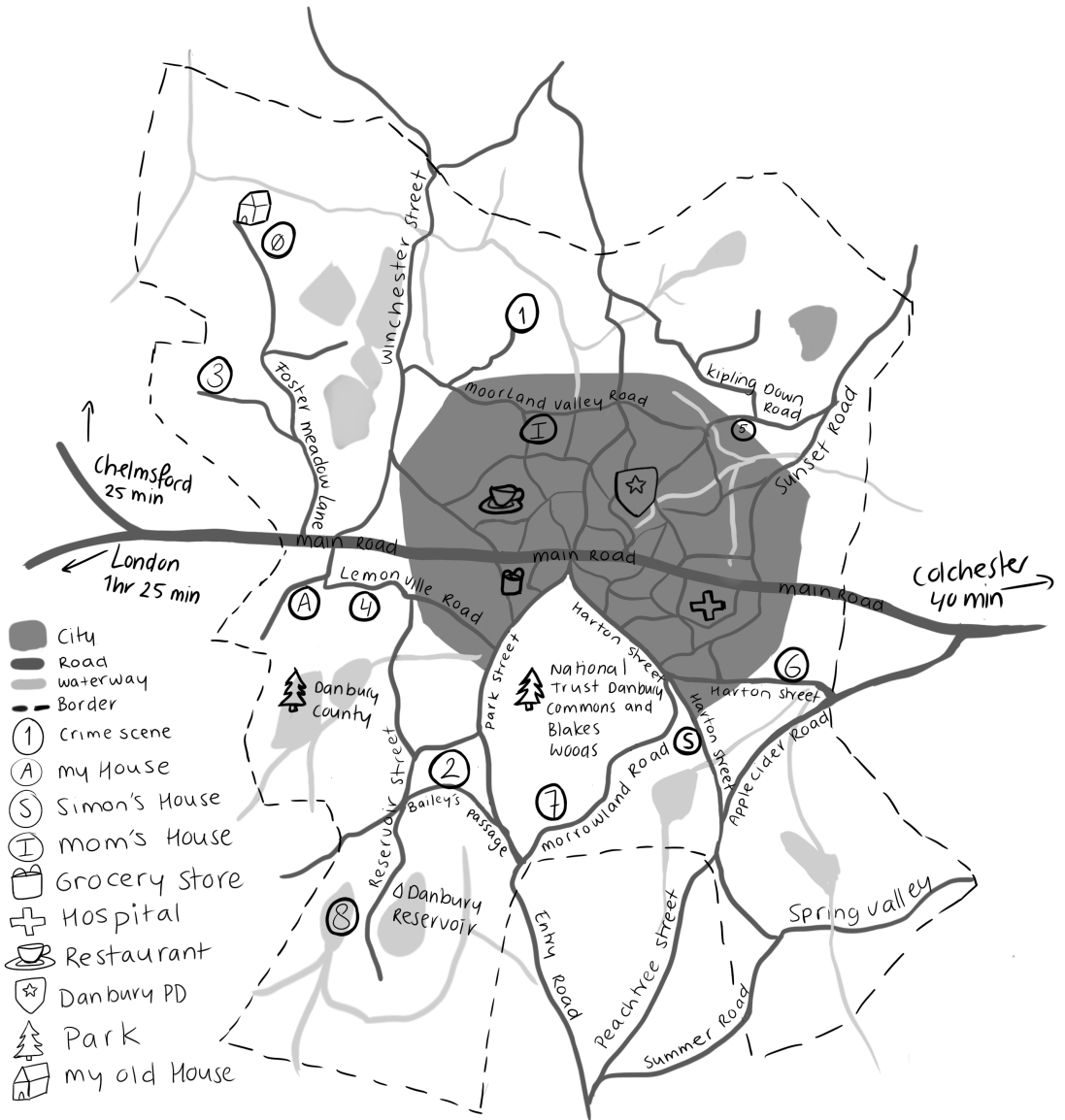
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*To everyone who said I couldn't.*

*To everyone who believed I would.*

*\*\*Trigger warnings on page 376; may contain spoilers\*\**

# Annabelle's Map



# 1. June

“Oh shit.”

The words came out before she could stop them. Her eyes flicked to the door, but there was no response. Of course, there wasn't. He'd be downstairs by now.

These were not the results she had expected nor the results she'd wanted. *'Are we even ready for this?'* The thought echoed through her mind on repeat. Her face in the mirror gave her the information she needed as she pondered her future. A sigh escaped her as she put her hair up in a thick ponytail. The dark brown curls came to about her shoulder now, even in a ponytail. The thought of cutting them off crossed her mind before she went out to join her husband downstairs. A glance at the clock told her she had twenty minutes to get to work.

“Good morning, honey,” his voice beamed through the kitchen when she entered. His voice was smooth and friendly, but he didn't look at her. Her husband's voice echoed slightly around her in the empty kitchen. They wanted to decorate the house when they bought it but never found the time to do so. Almost two years later, she didn't see the point anymore.

“Good morning,” she mumbled back at him. She grabbed the coffee; the steam rose above the dark ceramic cup. She could feel his eyes on her back when her hands wrapped around it. There was no time to face the test results, so she

walked away from him. He couldn't notice anything off about her in the few minutes together, so he didn't ask.

"Good luck today," he said when she marched to the front door. As the door fell into place, she let out the breath she'd been holding. The moment would come when she had to face him, but she couldn't think about it yet. Work would bring her the distraction she'd need; at least, she hoped so.

A sigh escaped her as she could see the Danbury Police Department around the corner. The time it took to get here, she had spent unfocused and full of daydreams. She drove into the side entrance of the building with the quaint red bricks and white detailing. Her favourite part was the tower-like structure that stood at the street corner. It had served as a former watchtower, but now it was mere decoration. The outside showed no signs of a possible basement. It had many other layers of hidden places, including the parking lot and the tunnel system with isolated cells. The building showed the grandeur of the past. With the shortages, there was no need for extravagant police departments. She imagined how it must have been decades ago when the town was still highly populated and thriving. Her eyes wandered to the stairs ahead of her. It took a moment to catch her breath and collect her thoughts before she got out of the car.

"Good morning, Annabelle." The voice of her colleague greeted her when she got into sight. She let her eyes drift around the room. The office had turned into a mess ever since the last case. It hadn't been a big case, but the remaining paperwork kept them on their toes.



“Good morning, Joan,” she answered, moving toward her desk. Nothing changed overnight, which left her with few things to do before the briefing. The stress of the previous case was fresh on her mind: an armed robbery gone wrong. The weeklong pursuit of the town’s gang had ended along with the life of her former partner. Her eyes wandered over to his old desk. All his stuff spread over it as he had left it. No one had imagined he wouldn’t come back to it himself. They should have cleaned it out already, but no one felt like it. She remembered the bittersweet victory of the case.

A soft smile spread on her face as she thought of him. The way he had rooted for them from the hospital, through the immense pain he must’ve felt. The way he wasn’t there when they celebrated the victory he had believed in. It hurt less now, but it was there when she focused on it. She could forget about her silly secrets and test results for a moment.

“You look tired, love.” Joan looked at her, and Annabelle hoped the secrets weren’t plastered across her face. “Are you okay, Anna?” Her colleague followed up when no reply came.

“I’m fine, thank you. I was thinking about Tim.” The words came swiftly, but she turned to rummage through the cabinet to be sure. Joan could always tell when she wasn’t telling the full truth, no matter how hard she tried. It was great for her to have those skills during investigations. Yet, she couldn’t appreciate it being used against her. The thoughts of that morning fluttered around in her mind like a horde of wild butterflies. The secret itself wasn’t her biggest problem. No,

she had to tell Rocco at some point. *How long could you keep a secret from the one you live with?*

The notes on her desk begged for her attention, as they had every day for the past month. A few missing-person cases and some lost pets were all they had right now. Annabelle didn't think they were much work, but the administrative part of the job had never been her favourite, and the first year of being a detective had been quite different than it was now. The police department cut out many people due to money and crime issues. There wasn't enough of either to finance a prominent police force. Only a good thirty of the original people were left.

She felt a soft touch on her right shoulder. With a shock, she looked up into the dark blue eyes of her colleague. Her heart calmed down immediately.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Joan asked, her head tilted to the side. Usually, that meant she was onto something. Most people stumbled enough for Joan to catch on. It didn't have to be much. When it happened, Joan cocked her head to the side. Something Annabelle started calling '*puppy position*'. Nothing funny about it now, she reminded herself.

"Yes, why?" She furrowed her eyebrows.

"I asked if you were joining me; Russell is in. The start-up is in five minutes."

"I didn't hear you, that's at all. I'll be there in a minute." Annabelle pointed at the file before her, signalling she wanted to finish that first. She looked down at the pen in her hand to hide the colour on her cheeks. She had been fumbling with it

throughout the conversation. Joan smiled slightly but let it be. There is no room to stumble if your life is a web of lies. Reminding herself of that, she gathered her thoughts and pressed enter.

“I’m ready,” she said to no one in particular. She got up too fast for her empty stomach to handle. To halt the fainting spell, she rubbed her temples in circular motions. She added eating to the mental list of things to do. Then she walked in the same direction she’d seen her colleague go. The dark mouth of the conference room gaped at her. With another deep inhale, she went inside.



A loud chatter overcame her as she walked into the room. She looked around and found Joan standing beside a row of empty seats. When they made eye contact, she gestured for Annabelle to come over. With a quick nod, she made her way over to the middle left row and sat at the end of the row with Joan right beside her. It left many empty seats between them and a few police constables on the opposite side of the row. Many of the people attending preferred the outside of the rows. Annabelle thought it was a habit they’d picked up from the academy. A way to keep an eye on what happens around you. She stared at her shoes, avoiding eye contact with anyone. Joan was whispering something to the people in front of them. The faces were familiar, but most of them never

spoke to her. Of the thirty people around her, she knew about a third.

The chatter softened when Russell Trevino walked into the room. The very reason they sat in this conference room. The briefing wasn't a daily occurrence. Instead, Russell called them all in every few weeks. He could show his face to the department and give the news simultaneously. Most of the time, nothing had happened, and it took about five minutes out of their long, dull days.

The whispering was audible to the whole room, a sharp hissing in her ears. They shot glances at their boss every few words. The tension rose in the room as they awaited his signal. Perhaps they hoped for something more this time. Not long after she thought this, Russell gave his signal; he stood before them and held up his left hand. Any leftover sounds died down immediately.

"Good morning, everyone." His voice embraced the room like a thick, warm blanket. Annabelle felt the comfort in his deep and warm tones. Few people liked Russell, but he had earned their respect over the years. He had been one of the best detective inspectors around Danbury but mostly took to being a chief inspector now. Annabelle didn't think it was hard if you were the only one in the area. He had taken her in when she needed someone, so she appreciated him. He continued talking after his eyes scanned the room; he was taking in his audience.

"There are things we need to discuss. I deemed them worthy enough to discuss with you all," Russell said in his calm voice. "We will be reopening the Mayflower case."

He dropped the words on them out of nowhere. Annabelle inhaled sharply, giving Joan a reason to look over at her. She avoided eye contact and instead focused on Russell. She wondered if he had paused to take a breather, too, or if he wanted them to feel the weight of his statement.

The Mayflower suicides, a ridiculous name the media had come up with, was a quick case. A month ago, they decided that sheer coincidence was the only connection between the two dead women. Annabelle couldn't think of a good reason to reopen the case. As the thought swirled around, she caught a glimpse of her sixteen-year-old self. Her endless begging at the police station to reopen *his* suicide case. Russell's eyes met hers as if he could hear the same pleading in his head.

"The family of the victim wants a second assessment of the case. I want this handled as if it happened yesterday." He looked at her again, and she nodded.

"Your team is on this case, Annabelle. At least it'll give you something to do, huh?" He chuckled at his joke, but she couldn't give him more than a polite smile. The room stayed silent, so Russell pulled at his shirt while his eyes ran down to his feet.

"In more exciting news, we have a new Sergeant."

A middle-aged guy stood up in the back of the room, his hand raised. Russell took it as his sign to keep going. "With so much work to do, it seemed right to introduce someone new."

Again, no one replied, and Russell kept looking at the new guy.

“Russell, thank you,” he said with a smile. “I’m Diego Conzalez. I worked at the mechanic around the corner but decided to put myself out there. I’m excited to work here.” He waved and sat himself down again. The dark brown eyes scanned the room and lingered on hers. Annabelle thought she could see a flicker of recognition as if he had been searching for her. The thought fled as quickly as it had come up. She shook her head to get her focus back before Russell spoke again.

“Annabelle, you’re on call. I doubt it to get busy, but you never know what happens.” He paused as he waited for a response. Instead, she kept her gaze locked on him, her face void of emotion. The thoughts in her head turned like a carousel. When the silence got to him, he repositioned his weight to the other leg and continued speaking, though no one seemed to be listening anymore. Annabelle couldn’t even hear him over the conversations around her. She tried to focus while her secrets grabbed her attention. The idea of reopening the suicide case and what it could mean for them fastened her heartbeat. She checked in with the world around her and met Joan’s eyes. They smiled as Russell muttered something and left the room.

Meeting Over.

Soon after, most people left the room in a noise that reminded Annabelle of static. A loud, continuous sound that couldn’t register as anything specific. Just the loud echo of

people moving and talking. Her team moved over to her desk, waiting for her to disclose the game plan. The problem, this time, was having no plan at all. She had no idea how to start this case or gather new insights. It had been a month; all the evidence was already there. They had to look past their initial thoughts of it being a suicide if they wanted to find anything new. She looked at her ensemble. It was the smallest it had ever been, but it was hers.

In the background, the office people retreated to their upstairs area. Every analyst, computer nerd and lab coat of the department. They only showed up at crime scenes and briefings. It left her with a party of six. As she was on call, she needed the street team. Two of which were present. She took a deep breath before locking eyes with them one by one.

"Listen up," she said. All the attention focused on her, and she hesitated as she felt their stare burn on her face. With a deep breath, she gathered all the strength she could find. She'd come up with a plan as she went.

"I have no idea what the best plan is," she said, shrugging to prove a point. "Since there are no new cases, PCs are in the field. We'll keep in touch about tasks, but for now, do your thing." She nodded at the new sergeant and the constable she had worked with before. Jacob Hellinger was the only Constable she knew by name and face. He had always been their first responder, securing their crime scenes to the best of his ability. He had been around quite a while. She smiled when their eyes met.

The rest of the team had nothing to do. Without a new case, there would be no use for most of their skills. Instead, she focused on gathering the evidence they had. "Ike, can you get me two copies of the death certificates and the autopsy results?"

Ike Warren, their medical examiner, nodded at her. She continued with the rest of her mental list. It would be easy, but she knew Ike wasn't happy about it. He wanted more out of this, like she did. She looked at the photographer standing next to him.

"Millie, can you get the pictures to my email? I want to print them for the case board, and I need better quality than the ones in the files." She smiled at the redhead, but there was no response. There was no acknowledgement of her leadership and role calling, which she was used to. It stung a little, but she decided to ignore it. She moved on to the crime technician to her left.

"Heather, I need two copies of the evidence report. Can you include the results from Renee, Khalid and Edith?" Again, there was no reply. She waited a few seconds as if still thinking of the next step.

"Thank you. I'll let you know when you're needed in this case. For now, it's just these simple tasks. There is nothing more than some fun administrative work for all of us." She tried to let the words flow as if it were a joke, but no one, not even herself, could muster as much as a smile. They weren't made for times like these; their absence did as much as their presence.



"I'm sorry, off you go," she said. Then she gestured for the people to leave. There was no need to mention it twice. Everyone seemed glad to be on their way. Another day of trying to find things to fill their days with. Short, simple tasks until it came time to go home. Annabelle sighed and let herself fall into the big office chair. This seat would have to keep her company for the foreseeable future.



Annabelle put the cup of coffee down on her desk. The hour-long walk had cleared her mind enough to get her started. Even if it was a suicide case, checking things over would not harm. The computer whirred as she pushed the power button. It had been a while since she used it, so it took longer to get started. When the log-in finally popped up, she entered her codes and clicked on the database. She sipped from her cup as she waited for it to load.

"Shit," she hissed as the hot coffee burnt her lip. For a moment, she wondered if she could drink coffee in her situation, but she shook her head. There's no time to think about that now. The database opened to the main screen, asking her what she wanted to do. After a glance at the case files, she typed in their numbers.

More than a month ago, these cases got called in. 'May 4th', she read on the filing date. The first one to pop up was Sky Allison. A twenty-nine-year-old with shoulder-length brown hair. As she moved through the file, she shaped an image of

what the victim looked like. She'd get to the pictures in the end, but for now, she kept herself from looking. There was no way she could think about *him* as long as she was nowhere near finished researching the case.

The young woman was found in her bathtub—two deep vertical cuts in her wrists. The partner denied that she was suicidal. The sight of her in that bathtub must still haunt him. A similar sight had haunted her for the past sixteen years. She took a sip of coffee before reading on. There were sleeping pills in her system; Annabelle assumed the reason was to ease the pain. There was nothing else worth noting in the file, so Annabelle clicked through the pages until she found the pathologist's results.

*'The cause of death: asphyxiation,'* it read. In her mind, she tried to connect the dots. There had been a note, so they ruled it a suicide. Her head had not been underwater when they found her.

An unpleasant tingling rushed over her scalp and down the back of her neck. She wondered if the partner had gotten her head out of the water. The pictures would tell her if that had been the case. She put it aside one more time. If she could get out of looking at the pictures, she would. It had never been easy to read files or to search the database. Especially not when the cases were so like his. One wrong click, and she could end up with his case on her screen. There was no way for her to know if she would crumble, so there was no room for mistakes. If she failed, if people would figure it out—

She turned around to look at the crime board to occupy her mind. She smiled when the empty board confirmed her suspicions. The drawer in her desk had all the equipment she needed. A few seconds later, she got up with magnets, two markers and a new distraction. On top of the board, she wrote the names, dates and addresses. The pictures would hang above the information, but she put one of the magnets as a placeholder for now. She made a space for physical descriptions, although she didn't know if it would matter in a suicide case. Finally, she put the cause of death along with her concerns. The blue colour of her questions stood out against the black information.

Happy with her work so far, she stepped back. The second victim's number was the same apart from the last digit. Annabelle read through the case the same way she had the previous.

Hafsa O'Brien. A twenty-eight-year-old brunette with an athletic build. The similarities to Sky Allison were uncanny, down to the facial features. If anyone would have told her they were sisters, she would've taken their word. Yet, these women had no connection for as far as they knew. She wrote down the same information on the other side of the board, below Hafsa's details. The cause of death was as she expected from someone who cut their wrists: exsanguination, or blood loss in terms Annabelle would have put it.

In her mind, she played through it again. Two suicide cases, mere hours apart. It is the same scene, but one dies of drowning and the other of blood loss. The sip of her coffee

made her shudder. The last bit of it had gone cold. Then, she returned to the computer to print the pictures and a map of Danbury.

She returned to work ten minutes later with her prints and a fresh cup of coffee. She reminded herself not to forget her coffee as she put it on the desk. The magnets clacked in place. On the map, she put two red dots. One look at the map made her realise how close together the scenes had been. Another tingling sensation spread through her body. She stood staring at the board for a while, trying to make sense of it. The door behind her creaked. Her heartbeat quickened. Immediately, she turned on her heels, her fists lifted before her.

“Jeez, Annabelle,” Joan said as she walked past. “One of these days, you’re going to have a heart attack.”

Annabelle shrugged at her and pointed to the case board.

“We need to figure out what to do based on this.” Her co-worker looked up but was still fighting to get her breath. Annabelle smiled at the scene in front of her. “I’m not the only one with a chance of cardiac arrest...”

“Hilarious, Anna. Let me grab a coffee so I can breathe. You want one?” Joan shot her a glance. Instead of replying, Annabelle pointed at the coffee on her desk. The steam swivelled up as if to prove a point. She grabbed the cup with both hands. The warmth comforted her while she stared at the board.

With her weight leaning on the desk, she waited.

“So... This is all we have?” Joan asked with her eyes on the board and a cup of coffee in hand. Annabelle couldn’t help but wonder what she was thinking about. Joan had figured something out that she failed to see. A nervousness spread through her mind. What if she did fail to see something?

She tried to remind herself that it was human to fail. This was the sole purpose of having a work partner. It was a weak attempt to calm her brain, for it wanted nothing to do with the sentiments. Instead, her insides kept churning away.

“We have nothing, do we.” Joan sighed.

Relief spread over Annabelle like a warm shower on a winter night. Her muscles in her hands unclenched themselves, and she could feel the blood return. The cup felt heavier now she wasn’t holding on for dear life. She nodded, unsure why they had to work on this case again.

“We can ask Ike those questions you wrote,” Joan started, “Maybe he can answer some. Ask Khalid if he has anything on the notes?” She paused to sip her coffee and think about more things to do. “We could always talk to the victims’ partners again,” she said.

Annabelle thought of the partners, of what they had gone through. There was no way they'd talk again without good reason. When she looked up, Joan was already holding her gaze. It was up to her to call the shots; Joan had provided ideas. She gathered some strength with the last sip and put the cup away.

"I'll go down to Ike to hang out and see if we can find something new. For now, keep yourself busy with something, will you?"



"Ike, are you in here?" Annabelle called out before entering the morgue. It wasn't a basement, but the energy of it felt the same. The musty scent, accompanied by the lack of daylight, was the right vibe for a morgue. She treaded through the hallway so as not to scare the older man. Ike Warren had worked with the dead for most of his life. It was easy for him to forget that people moved and breathed, at least in the normal swing of things. She hadn't been down to the Pit, as they lovingly called it, since the last case. Due to the nature of the Mayflower case, she had not been in here for their suicide victims. A pang of guilt washed over her as she had not even thought about them because they were suicides.

For the first time, she understood how the Detective had shrugged at her sixteen years ago, even when she was screaming at him with the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"In here." A muffled voice resounded from the metal caskets to her left. She rounded the corner to find Ike head first into one of the body slots. Seeing the bodies out in the open had never bothered her, but she was glad the table was empty. It wasn't her hobby, after all.

"What are you even doing in there?" She walked closer to see the whole sight, a grin resting on her lips.

"I'm... checking something. I didn't want to put him out on the table again. Something about letting them live." He straightened his back and looked over at her. She folded her lips inwards, hiding her smile. It took him a while to figure it out.

"Right, I guess this is why they say *'to let them be'*, huh?"

His voice rose at the end of the sentence, playfully creating a question. A hand came up with it as if stopping her from saying anything. She shrugged at his gesture, hoisting herself on the table immediately. Her feet dangled over the edge. It took her back to when her mother put her on the counter while cooking. The warmth of the memory washed then faded.

"What can I do for you, love?" She watched him remove the gloves and fold them inward before putting them on the shelf beside her. For a moment, he hesitated with his next moves as if he could interrupt her answer by making the slightest noise.

"I thought I could hang out here and talk through the case again. I mean, nothing else ever happens anymore." The words were rough and felt wrong, but she couldn't word it in a way that wouldn't break her heart.

The last year or so, she had not found the joy in life. Her job was everything to her, and as the hectic nature of it died down, so did a part of herself. She hoped Ike wouldn't notice it, for he was one of the only ones who had known her through it all. There was no way that she could handle his pity along with her secrets.

While pulling off his glasses, he turned to her. The sudden movement sent a wave of dead-body-odour toward her. In reaction, she put her hand in front of her mouth, keeping away the contents of her stomach. Ike had one rule: Don't come down if you can't stomach it. To her surprise, he didn't scold her but instead handed her a small container from his chest pocket. One look at it told her it was Vick's.

"What is this supposed to do? I'm fine." She tried to sound better than she imagined she looked. He smiled at her.

"Put it under your nose; it helps with the smell and the upcoming nausea." The smile on his face didn't fade, not even when she scoffed at him.

"Things down here," he said while she put the Vick's under her nose, "are as slow as up there." He closed the lid on the body slot and took the container from her before speaking again.

"Are you wishing for a new case, dear Annabelle?"

The question hit her harder than she expected. Perhaps it was the tone in which he'd said it. Soft, lilted, even playful. None of it felt as if he was talking down on her, ridiculing her. It was no surprise he even suggested it. Her mind could not comprehend the idea, even though she'd thought about it often. There was no good in wishing someone else's relatives dead so you'd have a job. She frowned and focused on her surroundings to make it easier to think.

Ike hadn't cleaned much around here, for she could see the dust that collected on the equipment. Yet, the metal of the body slots gleamed in the lights, indicating he'd cleaned it



recently. It explained the faint chloride infusion hovering in the air. One of the lights still flickered down by the door, as it had for years. Ike believed there was no need to fix something that hadn't broken yet. Another breath came and went, and she could feel the pressure of replying lurking around.

"I... I think so," she said. The words felt uneasy, as if they weren't meant to be spoken out loud. They bounced off the walls and metal around her.

Ike didn't stop in his tracks as she had expected; instead, he kept folding the linen coversheet.

"It's natural, Annabelle. It's your job to investigate crimes and put justice on the table for their families. Don't beat yourself up over wanting to be that hero for them." She wondered if he had read her mind. He walked up next to her with the now folded sheet in his arms. He put it on the top shelf, along with the others. This way, she couldn't smell anything besides the Vick's below her nose. On the way back, his hand rested on her shoulder for a while, and she flinched at the warmth of it.

"Can I ask you something?" His hand retreated, but something on his face made her uncomfortable. It would be a personal question, she could tell. There was no reason for him to hesitate regarding work-related issues. He knew how she thought of the meddling in her personal life. She nodded unwillingly. He stepped back, and she could look him in the eyes again. He was quite a bit taller than her, even when she was seated on the table. The man in front of her was getting

older; his once-dark hair had lightened up with pockets of colour remaining. Something about him had made her feel at ease in the department as if he could protect her from the world. Or at least keep her alive during the raging storms. He knew the questions and the answers for all her struggles.

"Are you okay? I don't mean right now. I mean at home too and—" The sentence cut off, as he wasn't willing to do more than insinuate what had happened in the past. He kept the memories at bay enough for her not to drown in them. Yet, she could feel them watching her from the back of her mind. He had been there through it all, albeit from a distance. It had never been a case for the medical examiner to get involved. However, he had heard about the calls and listened to the stories. He had seen the bruises and broken bones. There was never any judgment or acknowledgement, just his presence.

"I'm okay, for now. Thanks," she said. The curl in her lips could do nothing to persuade him, but she would try until the conversation ended. Maintaining eye contact took her a lot of effort, which made her smile falter for a second. He stared into her eyes, deepening his frown with time. Finally, she looked away, unable to suppress her nerves any longer.

"Is there something you're hiding?" His eyes locked with hers again, and she forced herself to keep her face untouched. The poking question pulled out different memories from that morning. It showed her the images that she had formed. The results, the upcoming confrontation, the painful death and the dreaded phone call. They all crashed into her like a tidal wave, taking down the remainder of her walls.

"I'm not hiding anything." The words came out too fast and uncontrolled. Her voice quivered worse with every word. Immediately; her head spun at the idea of him figuring it all out. It was her secret and hers alone, but she had ruined it. Ike said nothing, but a smile formed on his face. He turned away from her.

"Okay. Let me know if I can help you with anything."

A gust of air escaped her as she jumped from the table. Everything was loud, far too loud. Ike pretended not to notice, or so she imagined, so she nodded at him and left. She could feel his eyes as she stormed through the doors. Her eyes didn't leave the ground until she reached the upstairs. The steps seemed bigger than before, and her heartbeat sounded in her ears.

Still trying to collect her breath, she checked the time on the clock above the door. It was dinner time, and Rocco would be home by now. At a speed that could only be described as running, she got to her car. The rear-view mirror reflected the glimmers on her forehead. After the third try, she put the key in the ignition. She left the parking lot with her clammy hands gripping the steering wheel. The yellow sticky note on her dashboard went unnoticed.



The door closed behind her with a soft thud. Annabelle flinched at the movement of it. The thought of calling out

flashed through her mind, but she decided against it. Rocco's shoes were on the rack, so he had returned home before her. She told him it was part of the job whenever he mentioned it. Usually, he would leave it at that, but occasionally, he'd complain about her job for hours. She knelt on the floor to take off her shoes. Her shoes looked small compared to his. All while the festering secret kept her heart rate up. *'If you're keeping secrets from a man, is he even your man,'* her mother's comment raced through her mind. The thought relieved her tension; if anyone had the right to remain silent, it was her mother. The queen of keeping secrets from family members. She wondered if she took after her mother after all.

The kitchen light shone bright in her eyes when she opened the door. Frustrated about him leaving the light on, she grabbed a cup of coffee. She would need it to get through the night. She could hear something upstairs as she grabbed the almond milk off the counter. The thought of returning to the front door to pretend she had just gotten home passed her. Instead, she froze with the coffee and the almond milk in hand. Her eyes locked on the kitchen door, waiting for him to enter.

The door in the upstairs hallway closed. She could tell it was the bathroom. Footsteps to the stairs: one, two, three and then fourteen down the stairs. A few moments later, the door opened, and Rocco appeared in the doorway. His eyebrows raised as he glanced at what she was doing. Pretending not to see it, she poured the milk.

"I didn't know you were home," he demanded. There was no question, but the dark undertone in his voice let her know he wanted answers.

"I just got here, went to get myself a coffee. I figured you'd be upstairs and come down, or else I would have come upstairs with the coffee." Midway through the sentence, her breathing got shallow, so she gasped for air by the end. Quietly, so he wouldn't hear. She put the almond milk back in the fridge. A voice in her mind told her she hadn't gotten it from the refrigerator herself. Rocco hated it, so she must have forgotten it this morning; there was no other reason for it to be left out.

The discussion in her mind stopped when he stepped closer to her. Her weight shifted away from him. She could see the muscles in his arms tense up. Everything about his movements registered in her mind, which was ready to react.

"You're flinching. You don't talk to me. What the hell is wrong with you?" His voice went so low and soft that it almost sounded like growling. The hairs on the back of her neck rose. Something in the quiet, calm manner of speaking terrified her more than his screaming. He slammed his hand on the counter and turned away from her. "Answer me," he hissed.

"I've had a rough day at work; I was getting out of your way and grabbing my coffee." Short but precise with no extra information to use. There was still hope that this wouldn't escalate. Even if she couldn't agree with her hopes, he had no power over her; they were equals in this relationship.

"I don't owe you an explanation," she said before she could think about it. For a moment, her spine straightened, and she prided herself, but it faded right after.

"You're cheating on me. I know you are."

The accusation hit her right in the face, and for a moment, there was no proper way to react. She could feel it coming from her stomach, and then she giggled. With the coffee still in her hand, she went upstairs. Her hands shook enough for it to almost spill. Yet she couldn't stop herself from smiling.

Annabelle set her cup on the nightstand and dropped on the bed to watch the bedroom door close.

*What happened to them? Why couldn't they be happy?*

For years, it went well, but he had gotten angrier again. It reminded her of the darker times. She let herself fall back; her arms spread out like a starfish. It must have looked ridiculous to anyone watching.

The window could allow for people to look up into the bedroom. Even if it was their garden, surrounded by trees. The uneasy feeling of being watched crept down her spine. She decided to close the curtains, just in case. Right after she sat back down to drink her coffee, she heard the stairs creak. Anger flowed through her veins; she needed time alone, and he was not about to let her have it. Yet, there was something else accompanying it.

"You think you can walk out on me? Who do you even think you are?" The door hit the wall as he stormed in, following his words. She recoiled. So very little, but she was sure he had noticed it.

"I need some time alone," she said in the smallest voice she could muster. Every muscle in her body tried to make her smaller, taking up less space. She could do nothing to avoid his anger, but her body tried.

"You've had enough time '*alone*' lately. You don't listen to me. You need to respect me better. Or do you expect me to love and respect you when you can't even do your job here?"

The words stung like salt in the already opened wounds. She knew he wouldn't let go, but now he found something to hold onto. All the things she could imagine to say would only fuel the fire she could see in his eyes. His shoulders hunched forward, holding the tension in his arms. With one step, he could be next to her and grab her. Every fibre of his being was in fight mode, and she didn't want to engage it.

"Say something. Enough with the secrets; who's been touching my wife," he spat them out as if the words tasted sour, like the one vile grape in the bunch.

"Nothing I could say would be new to you." Though she had not wanted it to, the frustration and tiredness seeped through her words. Instead of replying, he lunged forward, his body closer to hers within seconds. His scrunched-up eyebrows cast a deep shadow over his face. The moment he reached for her, she gasped. There was no way back from this.

"You had a choice, Annabelle," he said. His dark eyes focused on hers, his hand tight around her arm. The half-hearted attempt to free herself made the pain in her arm worse. He squeezed harder before talking to her again.

“Tell me who he is, or don’t. The consequences are yours to bear.” With his face so close to hers, she could feel the words fall out of his mouth. His breath on her cheeks and his awful grin reminded her that it wouldn’t matter. The war had started again, and she had now lost this battle. It transported her back to the first years of their relationship. The time before, he promised to do better.

Her mind was lost in the sheer panic. In the late night phone calls for police. The bruises, the wounds and the broken bones. The pleas from her friends to leave him and her pleas for him to stop. Her mind went through the most challenging times in their relationship.

The movement of his hand hadn’t registered until after the pain in her cheek. Then his hand let go of her upper arm, and she fell back onto the bed with a loud gasp. She hoped he let go because he realised what he had done. However, she knew it wasn't true. He strode out of the room, and she could hear his keys jingle before the front door opened and closed. She listened to the faint noises of his car driving off. The only thing left with her in the room was the thick silence, a fog of memories and the anxiety.

Annabelle sighed when she looked over at her coffee. It had gone cold. She got up to clean the cup in the bathroom sink. In the mirror, she could see the red mark on her face, and she touched it, her shaky fingers feeling for damage.

“Shit,” she hissed as she sucked in a breath through her teeth. It would leave a mark for sure. She inspected her arm, too, only to see the skin turned red with tiny purple lines. She



pressed a cold cloth to her cheek, turned off the lights and went to bed.

Her sleep came without rest that night. A whirl of different memories kept her on the edge of being awake. The loudest memories were of the night four years ago. It had been a Sunday afternoon when it started. The endless bickering about small things she couldn't remember. They joked about it and said it was just '*married couple*' things. That he shoved her, hit her and broke things around the house was a regular part of that. He had been so loving and caring when she needed someone to care for her. Her mind was so troubled that any bit of his love felt like a warm safety blanket.

After a few months, he started criticising her, making minor remarks. There was nothing she could do right, which she knew because her mother had told her that many times before. After her father's death, nothing was left of her; she knew that much. However, she managed to get a job in the police department and climbed up to be a Detective. At the same time, at home, things had only gotten worse until that Sunday, when the endless bickering had led him to push her. For the first time, she hadn't been afraid; to this day, she blamed her job for that. When he had pushed her, she had stood her ground.

"Leave me alone!" She had screamed at him. His large, muscled body rushed toward her, but she stood there. He slammed her into the wall with his own body. The cracking sound of the bones and the unbearable pain that followed suit had doubled her over.

In the state between waking and dreaming, she could almost feel the pain again.

Getting up took her a while, but she knew she had to. With her hand around her ribcage and her other on the wall, she had struggled to her feet. The moment she stood there, the world tumbled around her, but she didn't fall. She remembered him staring at her like she had returned from the dead. Instead of keeping the distance or helping her, he rushed toward her with a closed fist. The movement of his powerful swing colliding with her jawbone had thrown her to the floor. Another crack, and this time, she could taste the blood as it poured down her throat. There was no fight left in her, and she had to put all her energy into breathing. When his fist came down on her other cheek, the world faded.

The next thing she remembered was her on a stretcher on the way to the ambulance. Russell stood over her, holding her light hand in his fatherly grip. She hadn't figured out how they'd known she needed help. Nor could she think of a reason he didn't kill her.

Sometimes, she wished he had.

A sound within the house pulls her back to the real world. The bruise on her cheek screamed louder now. Part of reality got intertwined with her dreams, making it hard for her to remember what happened. Another sound: the front door opening. Her heart sank at the thought of him coming home. The jingling of keys within the hallway cut her breath. All sounds within the house came to her attention, but she couldn't hear footsteps. Another dangling sound and then the

closing of the front door again. She sighed and allowed her body to sink back into the mattress, almost able to relax.

She stared at the ceiling, wondering what her life could be like. Her hand hovered over her stomach.

*Would she have a future with Rocco if there was another life to protect?*

Annabelle had thought the scariest thing would be his unleashed anger. The explosions that had cost them so many things. The outbursts of aggression that had almost killed her. He had promised to better himself, he went to therapy and changed his behaviour. Everyone had promised her it wouldn't last, but she hadn't listened. When he said things would be better, and they had been, a piece of her believed him. He hadn't hit her, shoved her or hurt her in the past few years. They still fought, and he would be critical of her, but she imagined every couple had those moments. Her mother and stepfather always fought, too; it was supposed to be that way. She never thought that the absence of his violence would scare her more. The secrets had thrown themselves around the relationship like a noose. Tightened with every lie or accusation, his life was never on the line; it had always been hers.

A new film of memories hurried past when she drifted back to sleep. About the way he had left the house after every fight and how he never put his hands on her. She imagined he regretted the fights as much as she did. The idea that she was unfaithful had hurt him so much that he'd resorted back to his old coping mechanisms. At least, she thought it had been.

She had screamed after him countless times while he took his keys and left. She was begging him to stay and fix it. Saying it didn't have to be this way. Neither her brother nor her friend cared about the phone calls if they'd even pick up. No one understood how awful it was to ruin your relationship, even to the point where your husband wouldn't fight anymore. She lay on the floor by the front door for more days than she could count. The regret of being a burden with her web of lies had prevented her from falling asleep. He knew she'd be waiting for him when he came home.

Annabelle had never wondered where he had gone when he left for days.



The sound of her alarm startled her. The night felt shorter than usual, as if she hadn't slept. The pain in her body reminded her of the night before. She stood and stretched her body softly to avoid making things worse. The room temperature had dropped during the night. It had been quite cold even on these days going toward the summer, especially at night. When she felt ready to move, she went to the bathroom to check on herself. Her hair stuck out in different directions, and her eyes were puffy and red. However, the big red mark on the side of her face pulled her attention. Her mind went through all the possible things she could say when someone asked. A bruise was not the biggest deal in the

world. *But how many situations would leave a bruise that big on your face?* Her arm felt warm and swollen but wasn't off much worse. She splashed some water on her face to freshen up. After getting ready as fast as she could, she went downstairs. There were no notes on the kitchen counter notepad.

Instead of writing him a message, she searched for a gynaecologist in Danbury and wrote down the phone number. The paper ripped off the pad, and she folded it into her front pocket. She waited for the coffee to be ready and rushed out the door. The empty spot in the driveway hit her in the guts, almost causing tears to flow again as she drove off.

Since their first day of work together, Joan had always greeted her in the morning. Whenever she walked in, Joan would be there. Then Annabelle would check her messages. She'd look through the papers to see if anything was new. Nothing ever changed, yet the feeling was different now.

"Good morning, Annabelle," Joan said. She ignored Joan's greetings and sat herself down with the paperwork. Today would be the day to finish working on the administration for the suicide case. Even though working on a case would do her good, this one wasn't it.

Joan's eyes pierced through the air around her, the unanswered questions floating between them. The kind of questions you knew would remain until you'd answer them. The ones that you couldn't get away from forever. Ones you didn't want to answer.

She tried to ignore the feeling and turned on the computer. The whirring of it almost calmed her down. They had done the research before and ruled it a suicide; *what else could they possibly want from this?*

*'Closure, peace or a reason,'* her mind filled in the blanks. Something she wouldn't have hesitated about years ago. When his face would have come up in the database, like the victims, his name and cause of death on the front page of the file. She sighed as the suicides opened in front of her. She read the case for a while to see if she could find anything new.

An email notification popped up and caught her attention away from the database. Joan's name burned the guilt back into her brain. She had been so deep into the case that everything else had been pushed aside. Something told her to ignore it, but it could be the only chance she got to make it up to Joan. Annabelle looked up and met Joan's eyes, who gestured to the computer. *'Open the mail,'* she seemed to say. With a shrug, she turned her attention back to the computer. The message in front of her asked if she was okay. The thoughts came back one by one: the fight, the nightmares and the painful parts of her body. Most of all, she didn't know where Rocco went. The words got fuzzier and more challenging to read, but she swallowed the tears. Again, she shrugged, harder this time, when she felt Joan's prying eyes on the side of her bruised face.

With a heavy heart and blurry eyes, she turned back to the cases. The two cases weren't much on their own; there were