

## **Prologue: Her**

**January 17, 2016**

Bryn Wallace was losing time as she stood in the shower, looking down at the unfamiliar hair that draped the drain. Her half-manicured toes – some still a vibrant shade of red, others chipped and abandoned – were poised a few inches away. She bent and fingered the netting, pushing the hair down into the darkness. She held her breath behind her tightened lips, keeping the tingling regurgitation down. The hair knotted around her fingers, holding on tight and refusing to release itself from her. She took deep breaths and turned her head away from the sight.

As a young girl, she had been inquisitive and persistent, quiet but curious, and she would stick her fingers between the tiny holes of the drain. She was always so tempted to explore the unknown, but doing this always ended the same way: getting her forefinger stuck. The drain would suction her finger down and keep her cemented to it. And she would cry out for her mother, who was doing laundry or watching a reality show, “Mom, Mom! Help me!” and then listen to her mother yell from the couch or washing machine then all the way up the stairs and into the bathroom.

“Jesus, Bryn,” she would say as she pulled her daughter’s finger out of the drain. “How many times are you going to do this to yourself?” It wasn’t always easy getting Bryn’s finger out, even when she consciously tried to relax it like her mother said. It was the periwinkle-colored puffiness that made her tense up again.

“Didn’t I tell you to look away?” her mother would hiss. If the finger was stubborn, her mother would eventually grab the bottle of Johnson and Johnson and pour it down the drain,

lubricating the finger and releasing it from the trap. Bryn could hear her mother cursing under her breath because she hated wasting good shampoo like that. But what other option did she have?

“I told you to stop putting your fingers in there, Bryn! Why do you keep doing this?” her mother would yell as she wrapped Bryn in a towel. “That’s it, bath time is over.” In that moment, Bryn officially became too old for baths.

Why would she reach down into the drain? The answer to her mom’s question was simple, really. Because down there was a lost world with mysterious beings. Monsters, of course. Large seaweed-haired creatures that would reach up from the darkness, snatch your foot and bring you down into its dark, green world. Bryn always feared that if she lost her balance or slipped, she might fall down the murky tunnel, and something about this threat lured her. She wondered if that place was somehow better than her home.

Like Alice, she thought now as she pulled away from the drain.

She wasn’t that little girl anymore. Not by a long shot. Not innocent or small enough to escape down the drain. She wished it were possible. Drink a little potion, unravel into a small doll, and float, down into the pitch black. Bryn, who had now released herself from the drain, sat there and thought about how cruel her mother was, even back then. And yet, how things seemed so simple and innocent. Just the two of them in their apartment, the yellow porcelain tub with its rubber toys and peach-scented suds. No desire to think about time. To have her mother all to herself. There was no point in looking back now. She had lost too many people, some of whom she had to consciously pull herself away from. But it was all for the better. It was safer here, now. She was safer now.

Bryn noted the lukewarm beads beating against her shoulder blades. They were sort of like bullets. Though they did not ricochet or cause any physical damage, they did convert into a pathetic remnant of something that was once explosive and powerful. *A clear indication of weakness. A sad excuse for the job.* In her mind, she knew she had been warned. That she couldn't cave into anything. That she had to be tough inside and out. She knew looks and American dreams and materialistic things would only get you so far in life. And if those sorts of things were all Bryn wanted in life, then she was a waste, a toxicity to the world. That's just how life goes. That's how her life went.

After ten minutes of squatting in the shower, staring at her feet and the water going down the drain, her hands were becoming ice blue from the cool water, but she didn't notice. She was simply there, concentrating on her past life, soaking in the silence.

She rose slowly, aware that her time would soon be up. She picked up her loofah and rubbed soap into the netting. She placed it on her shoulders and scrubbed in circles, over her collarbone, up her elongated neck. Her touch felt so necessary, so needed. Her fingers followed the fluid motion of the water back down into the base of her stomach and down the rest of her body as she began to complete her checklist.

She lifted her right foot up and placed it flat against the wall. She spread her toes out evenly and thought just one coat of polish will do. She glided the soapy orb up and over the tops of her feet, up to her knee caps, and over her thighs. Her legs, once toned and defined, were now thin and bony. Her thighs, too. She remembered a time when her thighs used to touch; now they were inches apart.

Once she finished the right leg, she moved on to the left, completing the same circular motion from the bottom to the top. When she moved to her hips, she noticed her curves had been

sliced. She was so much slimmer now. Her hips were once the same width as her shoulders, but now they were sunk in, weak. She once was made for jeans and curvy dresses; now she was only made for a nighty.

Her stomach was concave and empty now. She would do anything to eat something wholesome instead of flimsy eggs and stale bread. Her mouth watered at the thought of a home-cooked meal, but she pushed those thoughts aside. She circled her stomach with the loofah, softly pushing on her belly button and feeling the sensation it caused down below.

Her collarbone protruded from her chest, skeletal and sharp. Her neck was still slim and long and supported her oval skull, which was crowned by chestnut brown hair. She could not see her neck or her face, but she knew what they looked like. She knew the color of her deep-set cerulean blue eyes, the curve in her nose, the thickness of her lips, the arch in her eyebrows. She didn't have what one would call soft features, but she could pass for pretty. She acknowledged that everything was the same, no surprises except for her obvious weight loss. Her checklist was complete. She let out her breath slowly. A good meditation practice, someone once told her.

"Are you almost done in there?" a distant voice asked. It snapped Bryn back to reality. Her eyes opened. Had it already been fifteen minutes? She hadn't even washed her hair yet. It seemed as though her shower time was getting shorter and shorter every day. Of course, time did not go this fast in other parts of her daily routines. Only in the shower, her one moment of privacy.

Panic rose in her throat, forcing her to cough her words. "Uh huh! Almost!" She snatched the bottle of Suave. It almost slipped from her frozen hands, but she held on tightly. "I'll just be another second or two!" Her voice was growing a little higher now. She squeezed the shampoo

on top of her head and felt it slide down the sides and into her ears. She enjoyed the deafening effect.

*I know you can still hear me.*

“Who said that?” She paused, waiting for an answer. She grabbed the loofah tight and continued scrubbing, trying to beat the time. This side of her – the anxious and uncontrolled side – was coming back. No one answered her. Time was up.

It was useless for her to believe that she could feel any differently in here. Everything was exactly the same as it was, all the way from the beginning with the bath tub, the monster in the drain, the monster mom. She thought she could take the time to clear her thoughts, take out her own mental waste, and escape to somewhere other than here. She could find her own rabbit hole and fall and drift into a world where her fantasy could become her reality. But it seemed whenever she was getting close, something always pulled her back.

*Come with me.*

Bryn was about to answer, but the more distant voice piped up again. “Bryn! Let’s hurry it up in there!”

She was unsure of which voice to heed, so she continued to wash off the suds, nervous that she wouldn’t have enough time to finish. A sense of being soiled and dirty scared Bryn into taking showers at least once a day, even though no one else had that privilege. The thought of being the least bit unclean agitated her until she was able to shower again. And not just shower, but systematically clean herself. She wanted unlimited privacy, but unlimited wasn’t a word they used in this place.

The voice kept pushing itself on Bryn, suffocating her space. “Bryn! I won’t say it again.”

Her head pounded.

*Hurry, hurry.*

She quickly washed off the last of the suds and turned off the shower head. She placed her hand against the wall for support and tried to breathe, but the steam seemed to clog her lungs. It was thick and unbearable, and her head felt even heavier now. She noticed the cold settling into her skin, so she grabbed the towel that hung from the rail. She performed another quick checklist as she dried herself, bottom to top as always. She wrapped the towel over her head and forced herself to embrace the chill that seeped into her naked body.

She stepped out, left foot first, onto the cold gray tile. The chill rushed up her legs and electrified the hairs of her neck. She passed by the sinks and their accompanying mirrors, which were all fogged up from the steam. She didn't pay them any mind, but something, that voice, pulled her back.

*Don't you want to see yourself, Bryn? Aren't you curious?*

She paused and took a deep breath. The voice was right. She retraced her steps and stared at the film that filled the mirror and her blurred complexion which hid underneath. She unwrapped the towel from her head, her cold hair shriveled on her shoulders. She wiped the towel back and forth across the mirror, one row at a time. The mirror slowly became clearer until it revealed her face. It was nothing like she remembered, and the image sent her into shock.

There, in the glass, was a vision of an ugly, scarred girl. It was the kind of face that made people shiver in revulsion. She cried, "Oh God, what happened to me?" The scar tissue on her face was still so raw and bruised that she winced in both pain and horror. It was too much to bear. She tried to turn away, but the voice wouldn't let her.

*Look at yourself,* the voice said behind her, so close Bryn was certain she could feel its hot breath.

Bryn returned her eyes to the mirror, and the image was still the same. Half of her face was completely gone. Whatever skin and flesh remained hung on with stitches. Her eyebrows were thick and grown in. Dark, purple circles encapsulated her eyes and stuck out against her pale, unnourished skin. Her nose was completely deformed, squished down and twisted. Her mouth was half up, half down. She couldn't make it one way or the other no matter how hard she tried. She clenched her teeth down and tried with all her might to make herself smile or frown, but her mouth stayed a slanted line on her dented face. Her only cheek was hollow and emaciated. A long line of stitches ran from her chin to her ear.

*What happened to that beautiful girl?*

She watched her face melt into quicksand, morphing into a cakey, scabby-masked monster. It was a horrifying sight, and Bryn did not understand how this all came to be. Her first thought was her glasses. Where were they? Surely, she was not seeing this right because of her blurred vision. But then she remembered they were back in her room. She thought about makeup, something to cover it all up and make it go away, but there was no makeup here. They'd thrown that away a long time ago. Regardless, makeup wouldn't fix the mutilated. She lightly touched the perimeters of her face, the only part that seemed unaffected. But as she got closer to the bruising, she felt pain she was sure she had never felt before. This made everything more real.

No luck. No luck.

*No, look.*

Bryn held onto the edges of the mirror and pulled, trying to rip it off the wall, but her arms were much too weak. Her sight became blurry as her eyes filled with tears.

*What have you done, Bryn? How did you let this happen?*

“Leave me alone,” Bryn pleaded. “You did this to me!”

*No, you did it to yourself. You just don't want to admit that you –*

“Shut up! Shut up!” Bryn screamed until her voice cracked.

She fell to the ground, her delicate limbs hitting the tile floor and then her head. The remaining steam drifted around her, circling her, suffocating her. Too weak to lift herself, she wrapped the towel around her chest and propped her hands behind her head like two pillows. “I never did anything,” she whispered. “I don't care what you say.”

*You're nothing but a stupid, ignorant girl. You are nobody.*

“I just needed to shower, to clean myself. That's all. Just a shower.” Bryn covered her face with the towel, trying to make the space as dark as possible. She breathed hot air over her body to keep it warm. Her mind was hazy. “No more words,” she said. “Please, no more.”

But words – coming at her harder than the beads of shower water had – were all she heard.

*Admit it. Admit what you did.*

Bryn couldn't admit anything because her middle and forefingers were lodged down her throat, forming a familiar L-shape, pointing toward the back. Bryn remained silent, imagining the warm feeling of the thick blood dripping down and back into her throat.