

WEARILAND

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To MC. Your imagination is missed.

Prologue
Present Day
Saturday, June 15

Alice Archer couldn't remember the last time she drove her 1990 Nissan Sentra above sixty miles per hour. She couldn't remember a lot of things at sixty three. The needle shimmied past eighty. The car rattled in retaliation, but Alice shifted to fifth gear, her foot refusing to ease off the gas.

Other than the speed, the drive across rural Hertfordshire back to the cottage came naturally. It had to, with all the jumbling thoughts clouding her focus. Tarmals had been waiting for her at the exit. She had crossed over so many times, never failing to practice caution. The danger was always present, but lately it crept in like a thick fog weighing on her chest, squeezing the breath out of her.

She turned the bend on Brillig Street, her two-story farmhouse coming into view. The rearview mirror reflected no signs of the tarmals, but she suspected they were traveling by water. More may already be waiting at the house, but she had no choice.

Keeping a heavy foot on the gas, she swerved left off the road, flying over the half acre of

damp lawn and skidding to a stop. She cursed herself for locking the front door as she fiddled with her keys for the right one.

She flung the door open and hit the stairs. Her brain fell deaf to her aging body's pleas to slow down. The years of calisthenics kept her relatively fit, but running up twelve steps as if they scorched the soles of her shoes left her winded. She paused, feeling the burn in her lungs, then trudged on to the bedroom for the final task.

The two tarmals homed in on the distinct vibration pattern of Alice's car as they slithered through the sewer beneath it. The noise veered to the left, beyond the confines of the wet stink they had traveled.

The tarmals slunk their way to the top of a curb drain and peered out the slit. The car stood motionless around the corner in front of a farmhouse.

The first tarmal emerged from the drain slot. The dryness of the street and air was uninviting, but the tarmal sensed a source of water nearby. The oily mass oozed up the curb, crossed the moist grass, and slithered toward the nearby trees, where it congealed under the cover of low branches. The consolidated blob stretched itself vertically into the foliage, four limbs extending from the newly created torso. Two horizontal rows of spikes jutted out of its crown, stretching the head into a fusiform shape. It lowered onto its four legs.

The second tarmal glided its way near the first and worked on its transformation. Movement wasn't as fast in solid form, but the lack of immediate water made traveling in the preferred liquefied state virtually impossible.

Away from their energy source, they had to act fast. They approached the car, then moved past it, sensing its vacancy. The second tarmal moved to the back garden while the first aimed for the front door. Keeping still, its body let out a hum, rising in pitch to a high, piercing whistle. The tarmal stiffened as it stood upright on its hind legs. It charged the front door with a wet smack, ripping the solid wood in half from top to bottom. The second tarmal stood across the room with the remains of the back door scattered on the floor.

Shuffling emanated from above. The creatures looked at each other, gave a piercing screech in unison, and bolted for the stairs.

This is not how Alice pictured passing it on, but the shrieking below signaled the end. She furiously typed on her phone—Hiding place—and hit Send. She could only hope Lason would figure it out.

The smell of spoilage escalated the stairway. She grabbed the picture of Hank, the single photo left unhidden in her room. Clutching the frame, she sat on the bed, awaiting her fate. The screech of the tarmals as they attacked was the last sound she heard.

Tuesday, June 18

Chapter 1

Lason Davies cranked up the volume on her iPod. The drone of the plane wasn't enough to drown out the texted words of her dead grandma. Hiding place.

Her mom Caroline had broken the news in her usual disaffected way. Lason had arrived home from school and performed the ritual of food gathering from the cabinets to form a semblance of a meal. Caroline walked in for a glass of water to flush down her pills. Lason caught quite the assortment of colors. She liked to call it pillpourri.

While Lason crouched low and leaned halfway into the lower corner cabinet for a pot, Caroline spoke up.

“Grandma’s dead.”

The shock shot straight to Lason’s eyes. She turned to her mom in a tearful haze.

Caroline turned her back to the sink, glass still in hand. “Funeral is Tuesday. Which means I’ll be gone a few days.”

“What?” Lason’s head swirled with sadness and anger. First, at losing the only person she considered family, and then at the realization she wouldn’t get to say goodbye. “You’re going without me?”

“Trust me,” Caroline said flatly, “I’d rather stay here. You know how it’s been with my mother.” She put the glass down. “Your father will pick you up. You’ll stay with him until I’m back.”

“I’m old enough to fend for myself.”

“You know I don’t want you alone—”

Caroline shook her head, eyes closed. “Let’s not argue. I need to rest.”

Lason hadn’t argued. She simply called Dad and asked for a plane ticket. He perpetually craved ways to punish Caroline, and the proposed solution relieved him of both a trip to Iowa and time with Lason.

“Lason, stop doing that,” her mom said, jolting Lason out of her trance. Caroline’s hand held Lason’s. Must have been flicking her thumb and finger again. She always did when thinking, but never seemed to notice because, well, she was thinking.

Caroline pulled her unruly brown ringlets into a loose bun on top her head. She reclined in the stiff seat and shut her eyes.

Her mom’s lack of affection was nothing new, but took a toll on Lason, all the same. Juxtaposed to the incessant controlling and hovering, it made for a confusing relationship. Lason turned her attention away from Caroline to the window. The reflection of her pale, round face looked back, her light brown hair falling out of a once neat ponytail. It sometimes annoyed her how similar to Caroline in looks she was becoming. She cupped her hands around her blue eyes, blocking out the reading lights of other passengers. Not

much could be seen through the dark veil hovering over the Atlantic except the flickering light on the end of the plane wing.

“We still have two hours or so,” her mom said, keeping her eyes closed. “Get some sleep. It’ll be morning when we get there.”

Lason tucked the mini pillow between her seat and the outer wall of the plane, pulled up the thin blanket, and closed her eyes. She remained that way until the plane made its bumpy descent through heavy rain clouds.

Chapter 2

Deep within the maze of pipes in the farmhouse, the tarmals waited. The distinct smell of humans snaked its way into the bathroom and down the aged pipes where the two creatures sat liquefied beneath the house. The hideout offered abundant access to water.

Their assignment was only partially completed. They had taken care of the human, but the required item was nowhere to be found. Returning now, without it, would result in the ultimate punishment. The search could not continue until the humans were gone.

And so, the tarmals waited.

Chapter 3

Lason's irritation built over the fact that her mother rented a car. Riding on the wrong side of the road made her nauseous. Each time they turned onto another street, she braced herself, thinking they'd crash into oncoming traffic.

"Maybe these rental cars should have barf bags, too," she said.

"I'm trying my best," said Caroline. "The pelting rain doesn't make it any easier." She leaned in closer to the windshield as if that would improve visibility.

"If you'd let me get my instruction permit..." It irked her to lag a year behind everyone else at school when it came to driving. The only fifteen year old without a permit. And just seven months shy of intermediate license age.

"You're too young to drive a rental, anyway."

Lason folded her arms across her chest, fixing her gaze out the window.

"I've forgotten the joys of roundabouts," Caroline said, glancing over at Lason. "Probably shouldn't have gone through the city in the first place."

Lason had many more "probably shouldn't"s to rattle off, like "You probably

shouldn't drug yourself to not feel anything" or "You probably shouldn't have cut off ties with Grandma." But she had to choose her battles. Besides, the last one worked itself out since Grandma mailed her that cell phone. Who knew daily texting could foster a loving relationship.

"You're doing it again," Caroline said.

Lason wedged her hands between her legs and the seat cushion.

It took an hour to clear London's morning traffic and head northward on the M11 into Hertfordshire. Hatson Mills was situated in the northeast corner of the county. A short bridge led into Main Street, lined on both sides with iconic lampposts. A café and library occupied most of the north side, while specialty shops dotted the south.

"Do you remember any of this?" Caroline asked. "I know it was a while ago."

Lason shook her head. "Not really. I remember you showed me your school, but I don't remember it looking like these old buildings."

"Yeah, that's just south of here. Most of the businesses and homes are there. This is the old part of town. They try to keep it looking like it did in the Forties after The War. You know, keep its charm."

Caroline turned left near the end of Main. Within a kilometer, family farms sprinkled the area. She turned onto a gravel road and stopped at the end.

"Here we are."

Lason sat in the car and examined the structure in front of her. A post that may have been white sometime last century advertised the name.

The Inn at Shamble Creek. The one-story establishment had not fared any better. The outer stone housed multiple fissures crisscrossing a roadmap of misery. The roof supported more patchwork than the roads in Iowa after winter beat them up. Even with the incessant rain, the creek wrapping around the building looked, at best, like a scattering of thin puddles.

Lason couldn't help herself. "Top pick on TripAdvisor?"

"I admit, it's a bit under the radar. But when I looked for a place, I remembered that, on the rare occasion we had extended family visiting, they stayed here. I probably wouldn't have known about it, otherwise."

Lason secretly wished she hadn't.

"Can you grab the luggage?" Caroline exited the car. "I'll go check us in."

Lason grabbed her backpack, suitcase, and mother's bag and wobbled to the door. Through the window she caught sight of her mother and the innkeeper leaning toward each other in discussion. She opened the door and dragged the bags in to the front office. A bell hanging above the entryway signaled her arrival.

A hefty Rottweiler barked at Lason while the irritated innkeeper gripped its collar. Caroline backed away from the desk.

"Okay, thank you so much. I appreciate all of your hospitality. Come on, Lason."

It was weird to hear Caroline acting so cordial. Maybe being back in her mom's hometown will be a good thing, for both of them.

Caroline led her to the far back corner of the building and placed the key in the door marked Room 6.

“What was that all about, Mom?”

“What do you mean?”

“Back there, what were you talking about?”

“Oh, he was giving me information on this and that,” she brushed off. “It was nice of them to give us privacy.”

Lason had a feeling privacy was not the reason for their far room. She wondered if the first five rooms were taken, considering no other cars were parked outside and they hadn’t passed many driving into town. Then again, it wasn’t even noon yet.

The narrow entrance to the room required Lason to carry a bag in front of her and roll the other behind. The innkeeper practiced minimalism when it came to room décor. Two twin beds were separated by a table and lamp. The beds faced a desk used as the entertainment center for an outdated, boxy television. Lason placed her bags on the far bed and examined the black television set.

“Do you think this doubles as a microwave?”

Caroline didn’t bite. “Why don’t you change out of those clothes and we’ll get something to eat before we go over to the house.”

It would probably take the rest of their free time before the funeral to go through Grandma’s belongings and Lason wasn’t looking forward to it.

“It just seems wrong,” Lason said.

Caroline sighed. “What does?”

“Picking through Grandma’s stuff. It’s like

an invasion of privacy in some way.”

“Lason, she’s dead,” Caroline said, then sat silent. Lason thought she caught her mom choking up. But that wasn’t possible.

“Besides,” Caroline continued, “we’re what’s left of the family. Would you rather have a stranger go through her things?”

“No. I guess not.”

Lason unzipped her bag and grabbed a pair of jeans and a hoodie. The June air was cooler than expected and she couldn’t shake the chill in her bones. At least that’s what she wanted to blame the feeling on.

She walked over to the confining entrance and opened the only other door in the room. An ironing board tumbled at Lason with its taste of freedom. She caught it with a hand and shoulder and shoved it back in, slamming the door before it tried to escape again.

“The bathroom is next door,” her mother said. “It’s marked WC for water closet. Very old school here.”

Lason thought the door she opened should be marked DT for death trap, but felt the humor would’ve been lost on her mom.

After lunch, they headed for the house three kilometers north of the inn. An underlying familiarity warmed Lason as she gazed out the window.

“I think I remember this area,” she said.

They came upon a more densely populated neighborhood than the sweeping farmland and scattered cottages near the inn.

“Weren’t there woods near her house? Or at least some trees?”

“That’s a pretty good memory,” Caroline said. “What were you, seven?”

“Eight,” Lason corrected, sounding harsh once the words hit her ears. “At least, I think.”

Caroline nodded. “Several acres across the street were protected from development. We were always told it was because of the chalk mining a long time ago. Apparently, it left underground tunnels that could be dangerous to build on. My brother and I didn’t care, though. That was our playground.”

Caroline so rarely spoke of her brother, Lason practically forgot he existed. Whenever she did mention him, it seemed to be by accident, since Caroline either changed the subject or shut up.

They turned the bend around the protected land on Brillig Street and Caroline slowed. Lason drew her attention to the people ahead. Most were sheltered under umbrellas and some held cameras aimed at others with microphones. Blue and yellow checkered squad cars lined the street in front of her grandmother’s house and policemen wearing bright yellow raincoats scattered the crowd.

“What’s going on?”

“I don’t believe it,” her mother replied. “I mean, the innkeeper warned me, but...”

“What? What is it, Mom?”

“Lason, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before. I

tried to keep you shielded from this.” Tears welled in her eyes. Lason was stunned by her mother’s sudden flow of emotion and confused by the pandemonium.

“They’re all here about Grandma’s death,” she said, wiping her moist nose with her hand. “I didn’t think it would be this sensational.”

Lason’s world was crashing down on her. Grandma dead, Mother showing compassion. She expected a pig to fly by her car window. She looked directly into Caroline’s teary eyes. “Just tell me, Mom.”

Caroline inhaled, gaining composure. “These people are here because Grandma was murdered.”

“Murdered?”

“Yes,” Caroline said. “Right here in the house.”

Lason couldn’t comprehend it. Someone killing Grandma, on purpose? She pictured Grandma standing at the kitchen counter, humming while chopping carrots for soup. One of the fleeting memories of being in her presence. The vision flashed to an intruder’s gunfire, the bullet finding her grandmother’s flesh a sad excuse for a barrier.

“No!” Lason broke down, burying her head in her hands.

“This is hard for me too, Lason,” her mother said, wiping her own eyes.

Lason’s anger swelled. Did her mother plan on ever telling her the truth? Of course not. She didn’t even have the compassion to invite her daughter to the funeral. Lason’s composure barely

returned enough to outcompete the urge to lash out on her mother. "Tell me what you know."

"Lason, I—"

"Mom. Tell me." Lason and Caroline stared one another down, frozen in a silent battle.

Caroline gave in. "Apparently, it was a violent attack. The police think that could be why they were called in so soon afterwards. A neighbor may have heard it happen."

"Someone heard it but didn't try to stop it?"

"I don't know," Caroline's volume increased, hands hitting the steering wheel. Her heavy breathing relaxed as she shut her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Lason. Things with Grandma and me were complicated." She paused and turned to her daughter. "I didn't think she'd die before..." Caroline bit her lip.

Lason felt defeated. She didn't know who this woman was anymore. Cold shoulder, cordial, protective. Now open and emotional. It was exhausting.

Caroline pushed through the crowd with the car, creeping toward the house until a policeman waved her to stop. She rolled the window down halfway, allowing some of the rain in.

"Sorry, but you can't come through here," he said.

"I'm Caroline Davies." She permitted time for the constable to understand. He returned a blank stare. "The woman murdered was my mother."

"Oh, of course," he said. "So sorry. Hold on, please."

The man retreated through the swarm of reporters. A minute later, a taller man emerged, heading straight for their car.

“Ma’am, hi,” he said, and gestured for a handshake. Caroline rolled the window down all the way, receiving his hand and water trickling down his yellow rain slicker. “I’m Inspector Landry from the Royston Police Department. I’m assigned to this case.”

“Caroline Davies.”

Lason watched as the paparazzi of reporters and crew drew their attention to the rental car like her pet hamster from third grade attacked peanut butter on a spoon. The constables formed a line on one side of the car. Lason struggled to hear their instructions.

“Back off, please. Official business.”

“Please stay off the street.”

“I know this is a difficult time, Mrs. Davies,” Landry said through the din. It took time for Lason to interpret his accent. Her mom held onto remnants of hers, but it waned with age. Landry’s wasn’t the same, nor was it like the kind in British period movies, or Grandma’s. It sounded rougher. The day-old stubble framing his square jaw added to his ruggedness.

“And I understand you coming out here, but we would like to begin questioning you as soon as possible.” He looked behind him at the crowd. “At the station, of course.”

“Please, call me Caroline.” Lason cringed whenever someone addressed her mom as Mrs. Davies, seeing as her mother took it as a slap in the

face.

“We came out to go through my mother’s belongings.”

The inspector nodded his head.

“At this point we are still gathering evidence and can’t let you in. I know you may have been told otherwise, so I apologize. We would, however, like to speak with you more. I understand the services are this afternoon. Can you go to the station tomorrow morning for questioning?” He handed her a business card. “The address is on there, but feel free to phone if you need directions.”

Caroline looked at Lason.

“Again, I know this is difficult, and with the timing of your arrival, and the funeral—”

Caroline put up her hand, hushing the inspector. Lason thought her mother was going to tell him it’s all right, but Caroline didn’t manage any words. She rolled up the window and stared at the road as they passed the house she grew up in, now known as the scene of the most notorious crime in recent Hatson Mills’ history.