

Chapter 7

Not Who You Think

Kevin parked in front of Annie's house and got out. She handed him a grocery bag, and took another bag out of her beat up Honda.

We walked up to the breezeway and she opened the door. Kevin never saw her use a key. These were trustworthy folk around here, he figured.

The inside of the house looked just as dated as the outside. The breezeway was where the kitchen was, and it was done up in dark wood. Real wood, he could tell, not particle board. The fridge was green, and the flooring was orange linoleum stick-tile with a few tiles missing.

Annie put the bags down on the counter. "Have a cookie," she said. She opened up a tin and put it on the table, and it was full of walnut and oatmeal-raisin cookies. Kevin took one, and then another. They were amazing. Crispy with soft centers.

"Thank you," he mumbled between chews.

"Oh, you're welcome, dear," she said. Annie put her groceries away and looked out the back window over the sink. "Looks like rain comin' in. Too bad. It was such a nice day."

Kevin thought about that for a minute. He didn't notice, but the sun was actually out for awhile. And Annie was right, it did look like rain. "Yeah," he said.

Annie went into the next room, which was a large living room with a dining table near the kitchen. Kevin pondered whether to follow her, but took another cookie and waited for further instructions. Suddenly he heard a shriek.

Kevin looked into the living room, where Annie was standing with her hand over her heart. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Oh my goodness," she said, staring at the wall. "I saw it."

"Where?"

"Right there," she said, pointing to a spot at the bottom of the stairs. The wall was clad in old-looking wallpaper with a silver flowery pattern.

"Is it there now?" Kevin asked. He cocked his head and stepped further into the room. He could not see what she was talking about.

"No. It left as soon as you came in."

"Weird," Kevin said. His skin crawled. She was much too believable. He had to admit that he was buying it.

"Well, I've seen it before. Like I said, it's never when you look. I just came in to get the matches, and there it was."

Kevin looked at the space in the wall, but could not see anything.

"But something was different," Annie said. "It looked different from before. Like fear. Its eyes were like this." She opened her eyes wide and stared at me. She did look scared.

"I'm sorry I can't see it," Kevin said.

“Oh, don’t feel bad, honey,” she told me. “She does it on purpose.” She took the matches from the mantle and walked back into the kitchen.

Kevin turned around quickly and looked at the wall by the stairs. He saw nothing. He cocked his head to one side and tried to get the silvery sheen to reflect the light coming in. Still nothing. The sky outside got darker, as the clouds closed in, and the pattern in the wall stubbornly faded until Kevin could get no reflection at all. Rain started to patter on the window.

He suddenly realized he didn’t like being in this room.

Kevin heard a car door shut outside. It was too close to be anywhere but Annie’s driveway. A few seconds later, he heard the kitchen door open, and then he heard a familiar voice.

“Lo,” it said.

“How was the fishin’?”

“Same as always. Ran out of bait. Who’s car-”

“Oh, Howie, there’s a kid here to see the face,” Annie said.

Kevin shook his head quickly. “Howie?” he thought. He looked at the pictures on the mantle. There he was, standing on a dock holding up one hell of a huge fish. Another photo showed Howie and Annie standing in front of the diner with a bunch of other people. They were cutting a ribbon. Frank and Howie were holding the scissors.

Then Howie stepped into the room. Even through his deadpan expression, Kevin could see surprise.

“Hello,” Kevin said.

“Hey there,” Howie answered. He was drying his hands on a towel, and his coat showed some wet spots from the rain.

Kevin could think of nothing to say. This wasn’t good, he thought. He felt like an intruder in his client’s house. Howie and Kevin stood there for a minute.

Silently, he went back into the kitchen. Kevin followed.

Annie was lighting up the wood stove with a match. “Well, that’s one I haven’t seen before,” she said.

Kevin looked at Howie. “Yeah, well, we’ve met already,” he said.

“Can’t tell,” she said, still trying to light the stove.

Howie stood silently, still wiping his hands.

Kevin explained, “The selectmen are my clients, basically.”

Annie looked up at Howie. “Yeah, he’s the hardest working selectman you ever met,” she said. “Unless you’ve ever met any others.” She closed the wood stove, having got the fire lit.

Kevin looked at her and Howie. “Well, I guess I should go,” he said.

“Nonsense,” Howie said, finally breaking his rigid silence, if not the look on his face. “Have some coffee. How do you know my wife?” Annie was filling a pot with water, and Kevin saw a bag of ground coffee on the counter behind her. It looked gourmet.

“Oh, we met this morning at the diner,” Annie answered for both of them. “I wish I could have told you about it. I broke a coffee pot.”

“What?” Howie growled. “You know what those cost?”

“Twenty-six bucks. You gripe about it all the damn time,” she said cheerfully.

“Well, it’s a damn lot,” he said.

Annie took the pot and put it down on the stove.

“Howie, you got to hear this. This boy and his sister come in. And she’s cute as a button, right-“

Howie turned and walked into the other room.

“Howie?”

“Keep goin’, I’m listenin’,” he hollered from the living room.

“Okay, well they come in, sit down, and I go over to them and that girl just looks up at me and I scream. She looks just like the face in the wall.”

Howie came back to the doorway. He had taken off his coat and presumably hung it up.

“Honey, you know what I said about that damn face,” he said.

“Yes, I know, but these kids had to come and see it.” She turned to me. “I’d love for your sister-”

“Didn’t see it, did ya?” Howie asked, looking at me.

Kevin shook his head.

“He’s a stubborn old coot,” Annie said. Then she went into the dining area, gesturing for Kevin to follow. There was a

cabinet at the back end of the living room, and she started taking out cups and saucers and setting the table. “So Howie’s your boss? You said you were here for work.”

“Oh, um, the selectmen hired my company to design the new condos,” Kevin answered as he followed. Howie was right behind.

“You mean down at that old hospital?” she asked, turning around. She pulled out a chair for Kevin.

“Yeah, that’s the place,” he said, sitting down.

She looked at Howie. “I didn’t know you went ahead with that. Not a lot of people in this town are thrilled about it.”

Howie was silent again.

“What do you mean?” Kevin asked.

“That old ruin’s been there so long,” she said with a sigh. “Put it out of its misery, I say, but I’m not from here.”

“Well, a lot of people who are from here are attached to that old ruin,” Howie finally said.

“From what I hear, there’s some secrets hidden there,” Annie said. Wait. Let me show you something.” Annie went into a rolltop desk at the back of the room and shuffled around in a drawer. Howie started to get up, but she came back in with a thick brown book.

“You see,” she said as she put it on the table, and turned on the hanging lamp over the table. “We keep history around here. At least I do.” Howie looked at her fiercely as he sat down at the other end. His face was less deadpan now.

She flipped through the book. It was part album, and part scrapbook. There were a lot of old photos, like the ones Kevin's dad kept. They were that same sepia color, the same bowties and handlebar mustaches. The same women with the flat hair, big noses and sunken eyes. These were from the days before Botox. Hell, it was before Avon.

Kevin took a close look at one of the photos. He could swear he had seen it before. A vast family was posed on a porch in front of a big shingled house.

"Something wrong, dear?" she asked.

"Oh, no. Nothing," Kevin said.

"See this one?" she said. "There's the hospital in its glory." She pointed to a photo of the brick building, and there were a bunch of nurses standing out in front. "It's a shame. It's the only one we have. I don't know how it got like it is." Kevin could see what she meant. The photo was faded, but it was also badly damaged at one end, with everyone on one side obscured by crumpling.

Howie looked at the photo forlornly. "It is a shame," he said, still deadpanning.

"When was this taken?" Kevin asked.

Annie pulled the photo out of the scrapbook and looked at the back. "Oh, it says June 4, 1943," she said. "Howie, you said this was the week it opened, didn't you?"

"Uh huh," Howie grunted.

"Do you think the designer is there?" Kevin asked.

Annie looked at him questioningly. "Why would you ask that?"

"Oh, that's something I wanted to iron out. I actually was hoping you could help," he told her. "That's why I came by."

Howie looked at Kevin suspiciously.

Annie put the photo back down and looked at him.

"Why, anything we can do, honey," she said. "I don't understand, but--"

"Well," Kevin said. "You remember this morning, what the man said--"

"Oh, don't worry about those two fools," Annie said in a dismissive way. "They're just all talk--"

"No, not that. Not that," Kevin said. "It's what they said about this house. They said it was the Claremont house."

Howie looked up and furrowed his brows slightly, losing his neutral expression for the first time.

Annie looked at him. "Yeah, they did say that, but what does that mean?"

"Well, I got the original drawings this morning. By the way Howie," he said, remembering that he was a client. "They're being copied right now."

"Good. Thank you," Howie said.

"And the drawings list the original architects," Kevin told them. "There's an M. Claremont listed there." Annie looked at him curiously, but Howie's face went slack.

"I'm sure it's a coincidence, dear," said Annie.

“Probably,” Kevin answered. “I just wanted to try to see what the original designer intended when I design the condos.”

“That’s nice,” Annie said. “Howie, this guy’s a worker bee. You’ve got a good person here.”

Howie grunted in agreement again.

“You were here in those days, weren’t you?” she asked. “But it must be a coincidence.”

Howie looked at her. “No. It’s not,” he said.

Kevin sat up, surprised. He was now digging into some pretty cool stuff, and it made him feel like an intrepid journalist or something like that. He had pursued what was most likely a wild goose chase, and suddenly found himself holding the goose.

“Howie, really?” Annie asked.

“So M. Claremont lived here?”

“That’s right,” he said.

“You knew him?”

“Her. Yes.”

Annie stood up straight and said, “Well, now we need to know more.”

The coffee pot started to steam and whistle. “Why don’t you get that?” Howie said.

“Well, you can’t bring us into a story and then drop it,” she chided him.

“I’m not, but we’re gonna be here awhile. Get the coffee.”

Annie went to get the coffee, and came back in with the hot pot and a bowl of sugar. “I’ll be right back with the cream,” she said, and went back into the kitchen.

Kevin was a milk guy, but decided not to press it. Annie came back into the room and started pouring the coffee. For coffee, Kevin thought it smelled really good. Apparently there was something to that wood stove.

“Drink up, there’s more,” she said. He took about 4 scoops of sugar and Howie looked at him derisively.

“You’ll be bouncing off the ceiling, son,” he said.

“Oh, let him drink, Howie,” Annie said. She poured his coffee, and then sat down and poured her own.

Howie sat for a long time, as if he was deciding how to begin. He stirred his coffee and finally spoke. “Well, this was the Claremont house,” he said.

“They lived here awhile. They moved in during the depression. I remember this being fields before that. The subdivision was half-built, and they quit in ’29.

“The girl wasn’t really the architect, but she did so much work with them that they made her the honorary designer. It was like that. She was about 13.”

“Wow,” Kevin said.

“Yeah, she was pretty precocious. I think she went to college and was out by 16.”

“Wow,” Kevin repeated. This time Annie concurred.

“What was the girl’s name?” Annie asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Howie said. “Her name was Melanie.”

“Melanie Claremont,” Kevin said.

“And she lived here?” Annie asked.

“That’s right,” Howie told her. “Very smart kid.

Everyone loved her. I think she became a nurse at the hospital. Her dad was a doc there.”

“Oh, that explains some things,” Annie said.

“It explains nothing,” Howie said, sounding almost angry. “I said she was bright. Went to college at 14. She did it on her own.” He appeared to be a little defensive of the girl.

“Didn’t that place burn around then?” Kevin asked.

“You said it was sixty years.”

“That’s right,” he said. “In ’47. She would have been there a year. Place wasn’t open long.”

“So what happened to her after that?”

“Oh, she was gone by then.”

“What do you mean?” Kevin asked.

Howie took a long sip of his coffee. Annie silently stirred hers, and the clinking sound was suddenly the only thing making any noise. I started to notice the room was dark except for the light right above us, throwing a little circle of yellow light around us and the table. Howie looked up.

“One night, this was before the hospital burned, the girl disappeared. Poof, into the night. Nobody ever found her, or any evidence, or anything.”

Annie eyed the wall by the stairs behind Kevin. Howie caught her and looked down at the table.

“Where was she when she disappeared?” Annie asked timidly.

“Um, last I knew, she was in this house.”

Annie sat still, looking at the coffee pot, then back at the wall. She got up and went to turn on some lights. It had been getting pretty dark. She eyed the wall by the stairs every chance she could.

“Honey, there’s nothing to worry about with that wall,” Howie said with a glower.

“You let me think all this time you didn’t see it,” Annie yelled. “You knew what it was, the whole time.”

“Dear, you’re not seeing a ghost,” Howie said. Annie was buzzing about the house now, turning on lights. Kevin suddenly felt like he should not become embroiled in this. His coffee had cooled enough for him to guzzle it, which he did.

“The girl’s name is Melanie. Howie, I can’t believe you!”

Kevin had to admit it was weird, but these coincidences happen. He didn’t really believe her either. He started to feel really bad that he had stopped by.

“Honey,” Howie tried plaintively to calm his wife. “Everybody assumed she was abducted or something. She wouldn’t be here.” Kevin couldn’t tell if he believed in ghosts himself, or was trying to make sense for her.

“I see her about every day, now, you know,” Annie hollered. She took the coffee pot into the kitchen and turned on

the light, still shaking. Kevin could tell that this was her most polite display of pure rage.

Howie looked at Kevin and shook his head. This couple was going to get on each other's nerves for the rest of the evening, and Kevin felt it was time to make his way out.

"Well," he said, standing up. "I should go."

This time Howie said nothing. Kevin walked into the kitchen, where Annie was silently but vigorously washing out the coffee pot. "Honey, it's alright. I'm sorry about this," she said to Kevin.

"No. I'm sorry I came by to stir things up," he replied.

"Howie, get in here and say goodbye to our guest," Annie yelled. Howie appeared in the doorway from the living room.

"Alright, you better get," he said. That was one of the best sign-offs Kevin had ever heard, and he thought he might use it himself someday.

"Howie!" Annie yelled. She turned to Kevin. "I swear I'll never get over knowing the name of that face."

Howie stammered, "Annie, dear--"

"No. You knew her, Howie, and she," Annie said, turning to Kevin. "I can't believe she looked so much like your sister--"

"What?" Howie demanded.

"I told you I saw this boy's sister in the diner, and--"

"Broke a pot. Yeah, yeah, I know," Howie said impatiently.

"But it was her face. It's the same as the one by the stairs."

Howie narrowed his eyes and looked at Kevin. They all stood silently in the kitchen for a long while. Then Howie finally broke it. "Honey, that thing has you going crazy," he said to his wife. "I swear I'm putting up new wallpaper so your eyes quit playing tricks on you."

"Howie," she said.

Howie turned to Kevin. "Son, thanks for coming by," he said. "If you want to talk tomorrow about the drawings, I'll be at the Town Hall most of the day."

"And come by the diner for breakfast. It's on me," Annie said. Howie glowered at her, and she angrily shook her head at him.

Kevin thought about it for a minute. "Yeah. I will be there," he said. Then he turned and left, walking through the rain back to his car. The roads were slick and dark. He was standing in the lobby of the hotel before his mind sputtered to life again.