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The Rabbit Died - PART FIVE

Warning: this story contains body horror, death, gore, gun violence, mentions of sexual abuse, reproductive abuse, and vomit.

A cabin, two mothers, Hazel and Patient #5, who do we follow for now?

PATIENT #5

You stand in the grass, gulping down the blood running down the back of your throat. Nosebleed, you get them when you lie. You lied to Hazel, that makes you a bad friend. Bad friends deserve to choke on the purple taste of blood.

Hazel and Cody leave you outside, alone. You belong outside, you're a bad friend. You're a cry baby, too.

You wipe your nose and rub the blood off on your thigh. Sorry, baby, sorry that you have a bad mommy. Things will get better, pinky promise. Cross your heart, needles, die.

There is a payphone at the end of the driveway, you feel its dial tone brush against your skin. You swipe your tongue across your upper lip and tell your baby, "Look, look! We used to use those before cell phones."

Your belly flutters. She is happy.

"Want to get a better look? Okay, okay, we'll look."

You pad down the gravel drive towards the phone. Hands you on your belly, you lean to the side, head cocked, and squint at the dangling receiver.

You pick up the receiver and stroke the solid, black plastic. Smooth, unlike your picked raw fingers. Your nails used to be beautiful, you painted them shiny, bright candy colors. And sometimes, when you wanted to rebel, you painted them black.

You gently set the receiver back on the hook. "See, baby, this goes here. Like this."

The phone rings.

The phone is ringing, the phone is ringing! What a sharp, ugly noise, you jump back to escape its bite. Who the heck calls a payphone?

You pick it up. "Excuse me, who's this?"

"Hello?" asks a soft voice, one you have heard before in your dreams of the Nursery. The voice is older, more like the rough pelt of an old barn cat than the soft fur of a kitten, but it's hers. It's your baby.

"I know you!" you chirp.

"I don't know you."

"You don't know me? I'm Quintana. You must know me, we talk all the time." A drop of blood runs down your lips. Wiping it away, you ask, "That's a lie?"

The voice on the other end exhales. "Quintana, where are you?"

You can answer her question, but you have a question of your own, and you want that answered first. That is rude, though, to demand an answer without giving one in return. You're a bad person for even considering that.

"I--I--I'm sorry!"

"Quintana, where are you?"

"I'm at a cabin!" you say. "It's in a clearing. There's no signs - or a mailbox. I can't see a number anywhere on the door and, and, and, and I'm on a payphone!"

No response. You babbled too much, she must be upset that you babbled. You should apologize again.

"Thank you, Quintana," says the voice. "All that is helpful."

She thanked you! You nod, relieved, "You're welcome."

"Now, I need you to tell me how you got there and who brought you."

"Could you--could you tell you are, first? I'm sorry for being rude, but I don't want to, to, to--"

"They call me Inlé."

Inlé, black death on swift legs. Inlé, rheumy eyes spilling white tears. You press the heel of your hand to your forehead. "I'm not sure I like that name."

"Listen to me--listen! You don't have time to be distracted. Tell me what I ask, Quintana. Please."

You gather up your hair in your fist. "We were on the highway, I think. 77? 70? I'm not good with roads."

"Keep going."

"Yeah, okay, we took a fork, we went left into a big veil of black. It stretched like skin. We hurt it and now we're here, at the cabin."

And the black groaned and bleated in pained confusion. Its screams pawed at you, dumb and blind, and begging for comfort. You could do nothing to help.

"Who brought you?" Inlé asks.

"Cody, he's tall, shaved head. He has a scar on his face." You draw a line from your mouth to your ear. "And, and he has a gun."

He threatened to shoot you.

Inlé goes quiet. You hear leather being drawn tight. Gloves, maybe?

"I'm scared." You feel your baby flutter and lay a hand on your belly to still it. "I think he's going to kill us."

Silence.

"Are you still there? Please, you don't know me, but you sound like someone I know, and you don't have to--but, help."

The receiver slips a little in your fingers. Your palm is clammy, sweaty, and you switch hands to keep from dropping the phone. "Please, help us."

"I will find a way to help you," she speaks with a gentle finality.

Your chest hitches with relief. Violent, frightening things lurk in her name, but you trust Inlé. You trust her deeply.

"Thank you."

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Cody's voice cracks like a gunshot. He's outside, he sees you! Inlé shouts at you, beware, he's one in the thousand or one of the thousand. You can't make it out over the tramp of his boots as he storms towards you.

You should hang up the phone, you should, you should--you drop it.

Cody sweeps you up by the shoulders, rattles you hard as he holds you aloft. He demands answers, did you touch the phone, did you make a call, what did you fucking do?

Being shaken, being yelled at, your panic bubbles up, builds up, explodes and you scream. You wail, mouth hanging wide and lids clamped tight. The sound unending, even as the shaking stops. You scream and scream and scream.

Cody lowers you. "Whoa, fuck. Stop that."

"You shouldn't shake me! You might, you might hurt the baby." Your hair falls over your face as you check your charge. She is still there, aware, her heart beating like

hummingbird wings. "She's small."

You hear dial tone. Inlé has hung up.

Cody takes you by the face and forces you to look at him. His hands, large and calloused, cradle you with steel-hard fingers. "Ever touch that phone again and I'll break your jaw. Got that? Got it?"

His face is pale, his eyes stricken. Is he scared? Of what, the phone? You?

"Please, let me go," you ask him, looking everywhere, his scar, his freckles, his mouth, and his Adam's Apple. Eye contact is exhausting when you're scared. "Please?"

He lifts the hair from your face. Releases you.

"Sorry 'bout that," he says.

You walk around him, your feet whispering through the grass. A dandelion brushes your ankle, you pick it and twist its stem as you move along. The cabin greets you with indifference, door yawned open, and you frown at it for existing. You hate it, and you haven't even entered.

You worry at the dandelion, wringing the stem until it snaps and breaks. Your fingers grow wet. And metal, you smell rich copper. You gasp at your hands, all red, sticky and dull red. The flower is bleeding.

You awful little bitch, you killed the flower!

The dial tone cuts and you clutch the evidence of your crime to your breast. A ring and you slap a hand over your mouth, stuffing your breath back down your throat. A click and you chance a peek over your shoulder.

Cody is on the phone.

You prick up your ears and stand at a half-turn. Cody leans against the phone, elbow propped on the housing, and clears his throat.

"Moshi moshi," he cracks with a self-satisfied smile, "Fuck you, too - I know you hate it when I say that shit. I've got two of them here."

Two of them, Hazel and you. You stroke your belly, staining your filthy shirt with dandelion blood. You and Hazel, two of what? You bite your lip. Listen, listen to him, listen.

"Found them at a gas station, just fucking wandering."

He looks up, brow furrowed.

Quick, look away! He might shush up if he catches you watching! You start to inspect the dandelion, take in the crushed head, yellow, orange, and red. Poor dandelion, if you had known, if you had only known.

"What's that?" Cody asks. "Yeah, I did."

You hide your smile as you listen. He fell for it!

"I smelled her the minute she walked into the station," he continues. "Milk. She's gotta be from one of Hedgenettle's mills. I'm thinking it's the one Lucy infiltrated."

Lucy? Nurse Lucy? You loved being around Nurse Lucy, her voice was a like a warm hug. She gave your stuffed bunny. The bunny you left behind, along with Lucy's squashed bug of a body.

Cody punched the dash when you told him she died. If he knew her, then--oh, oh poor Cody.

"Lucy?" He hesitates, then pronounces with a whisper, "She's dead."

You drop the dandelion.

"She must've eaten something, the meat or the milk."

You squat down to collect the dandelion. Don't eat the meat, your baby said that in your last dream. Don't drink the milk.

"Hysterectomies stop conception, not the other shit. Do I have to repeat myself each time or what?"

Cody knew Lucy. Lucy worked with Cody to find mills. Lucy snuck into a mill to spy. Lucy ate something that killed her. The special food?

You shake your head, no, no, you are not going there. The Clinic, Adams, the special food, they can't be bad things! They gave you your baby!

The strength in your legs give and you roll onto your back. You sit up and hug your belly for strength. Keep listening, you have to know everything you can. Don't panic. Listen.

"Whatever," Cody says, "We'll talk about it later, just bring some testers. Hutch is empty."

Don't panic, listen. You cradle the dead dandelion in your hands and listen. These ugly crumbs of information, you don't want them. But you listen, you must listen.

"Boo hoo, Doc. You came up with this test, you don't get to bitch about it." His voice drops, and you strain to hear him add, "About one of them, she smells of cider."

You sit up.

Cider?

"I fucking know what that--yeah, yeah, I'll see you in the morning." Cody hits the plunger. "Bye."

He catches you then, watching, and you say nothing. Then, without breaking contact, he rips out the cord. Tears it out from the root, wires snapping, bleeding.

"Phone's dead!" he holds it up in a wide shrug.

He winds up his arm and pitches the handset into the air. It sails, the spiral metal casing on the cord dissolving, dial tone shrieking. Your stomach drops as it crashes among the trees.

You stay seated as he walks up the drive, clapping the dirt from his hands. He stoops down before you. "What do you think you're doing?"

You reveal the dandelion, head smashed, stem mangled into a knot. Cody cups your open hands with his.

"I killed it," you say.

He picks the flower up by the stem end and lets it drop into the grass. Lifts you to your feet. Rubs the blood from your palms. His hands are hard and cold, and you wait for them to snap and crush you.

"It's okay, it'll heal by morning."

"Are you being nice?"

He cleans the red off on his jeans, slouches. How old is he, your age, older? You angle your body to meet his gaze, your face clear of hair, and he falters a step.

"Cody, are you trying to be nice to me?"

"Maybe," he says.

"Why?"

The scarred corner of his mouth tics. You push forward, stealing another inch of his personal space. "Maybe," he says, backing up, "Maybe I want to be."

"You hurt me." You fix him with what you hope is a withering glare and inch further. "You shoved a gun in my face, you shook me like, like a doll. If you want to be nice, then say sorry."

"Sorry," he says.

"At least try to mean it!" You shove at him, shove hard and yip like a struck puppy when he doesn't budge. His chest is as hard as his icy hands. There is no give to his flesh.

He laughs, "Sorry!"

He is laughing at you, he isn't scared, he isn't bothered, he doesn't care. You're a joke to him. A cornered mouse chattering at a cat. "Don't laugh at me! Please, please

don't!"

He reaches for your face and you smack his hand away.

"Don't touch me! Can't you see I'm angry? Can't you see I'm scared?!"

"Here's what I see--" Cody scoops you up in his arms, bridal style. You kick at him, flail and slap his face, and it does nothing. You're trapped. "What I see is you like to work yourself up. Fucking chill."

He carries up to the cabin and you squirm, you scream. He might hurt you, you dumb girl, you and the baby. Inlé isn't there to protect you just yet. You need to be careful!

"Don't hurt me," you whisper, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"I'm not going to hurt you," he sighs.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," you can't stop the apologies. You're stuck in a pathetic loop, curled tight in his hold. After all the threats, what he did to the phone, what Inlé said, how do you know he's telling the truth? He's kidnapped you!

"You apologize too much," he says, carrying you over the threshold and into the dark mouth of the cabin.

INLÉ

Please, you don't know me, but you sound like someone I know, and you don't have to--but, help.

Please, help us.

You exit the gas station's office, your black bike helmet tucked in the crook of your arm. The ambulance lights flash in the windows, casting the front with pulses of red and blue. Behind you, the manager weeps in silence, face down on her desk.

"Thank you for letting me use your phone," you say.

She turns her head away and croaks, "When will the crying stop?"

"When the infection clears."

"What infection?" she demands, shuddering. She tears at her hair, "What have you done to me?"

You slip on your helmet to mute her cries. Explaining things more would take time, and you're running late enough already.

Please, help us!

"I'm sorry for the loss of your employee," you tell the manager. You shut the door behind you, feeling the click of the lock more than hearing it.

You truly are sorry.

You make your way over to the counter, stepping over a paramedic on the way. He sobs his thanks and your hands ball into fists. Men always seem to mistake your gifts for absolution.

"You won't be thanking me tomorrow."

He says more and, like with the manager, you ignore him. You hop over the counter. Your boot skids in blood and you grab at the cigarette case for support. Steadied, you inhale, your leather jacket creaking as your chest rises.

Slumped against the case, face frozen in shock, is a young man. He clings to a half-full bottle of cola. His eye is gone and behind his head, on the case's glass doors, is a bloom of blood and brain matter.

You drop to a crouch and prod at the socket, coating your gloved finger in his viscera. Gunpowder, oil, and the stink of a dog, you know what did this.

Cody, he's tall, shaved head. He has a scar on his face. He is one of the Thousand.

"I'm sorry," you tell the young dead man. "I truly am."

You peel off your glove, tuck it into your jeans' pocket, and grab your pinky. Teeth grit, you snap the finger base. Your molar cracks and heals as you twist, and twist, until the skin gives and tears.

"I have made a promise," you say as you shove the digit into the entry wound. "There is a girl named Quintana, the man who killed you has her. You're going to help me find him."

Your flesh worms through his and you see his life, you learn his name, you feel his shock. Tears spill down your cheeks. His last moment, he reached for a girl's arm to read her wristband. He can't read the smudged print. Hazel R--? Hazel Rah?

"Hazel Rey."

Hazel Rey, you heard that name from Lucy. The girl related to your--

You shudder through the gunshot, the crash of oblivion, and you bang your helmet. The Thousand have Hazel Rey. You are too late, you are always too late.

The body convulses as your pinky digs deeper. You slide back your visor and press your palm to the floor. "No, I am not," you mutter.

You missed Hazel at the Clinic, you missed her here, but you will find her. Her and Quintana.

You reach further inside of the young man, your flesh and bone melding with his. You find his soul, still clinging in the confusion of his abrupt death, and pull. His skull hatches open, and a rabbit, fur black as pitch, hops from the shell.

"Lead me to the man who killed you," you command it.

The rabbit cleans its face with its paws. Yawns. Looks up at you with startled eyes and leaps over the counter. You follow it out of the gas station. It bounds to the road and looks back, waiting.

You go to your motorcycle and mount it. The engine growls to life without the turn of a key.

Please, you don't know me, but you sound like someone I know, and you don't have to--but, help.

Please, help us.

"Don't worry, Quintana," you whisper, "I will find a way to help you."

END PART FIVE.

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