

LBBRIS

We know
books

**THEY
SAY
A GIRL
DIED
HERE**

**SARAH
PINBOROUGH**



ORION

The girl's body lies face up on the arid earth.

The ground is hard and parched and has been for so long that cracks create scars so dark they might lead down to hell itself. As night turns to day and a dawn breeze blows, a light coating of dust settles on the naked, pale skin that has been so carefully washed clean. Her empty eyes, still staring upward in the echo of surprise, begin to dry out, and the small stain of crimson at the back of her skull, tinting the fan of her hair, is thickly tacky, the moisture already sucked into the greedy land before the air can claim it, hungry for anything that might once again help the crops grow.

Despite the slow, thirsty death claiming this small Midwest farming town, by the time the sun creeps up over the horizon, away from the body in the barren field, the noise of life is returning. Trucks chug along the quiet roads and those residents who have remained, who have chained their short lives to this unpredictable place, stir and rise, pulling on their clothes and hoping for the scent of rain to finally hang in the air.

Soon, two things will happen at once. The first, a worried call to the sheriff's office—a girl gone missing, not where she should be, she's never done anything like this, she's a good girl, all the things always said—will come through. The second, a farmer, downbeat and already broken by one more year of a terrible harvest, the drought not letting up, will find the girl's body among the dry scraps that should be wheat. He won't see the six-inch square on her lower back, her skin removed, red flesh and white bone now stuck to the land that's like a leech or lamprey sucking what blood it can from her, but he will see the bruises from large hands around her neck, stagger backward, and shout out to his wife—who's too far away to hear him, rummaging for any eggs the hens might

have laid—to call the sheriff's office, for all that's holy, call the sheriff, and thus these two narrative strands will twine into a familiar story of horror, loss, and grief.

The town will come together, shocked and tearful. They will take each other's hands.

They will look to the Lord for answers.

And they will pray.

2

Anna's eyes opened to darkness as the thunder woke her. For a moment, she didn't know where she was, bleary, her head thumping unpleasantly in the muggy heat before the unfamiliar lines of her new bedroom, packing boxes still stacked up against the wall, settled into shape in the gloom. Bright light flashed through the open window. There was the faintest hint of a breeze teasing the edges of the curtains, but the air was endlessly hot and heavy. No rain. No surprise.

Her mouth was dry and her throat raw with the kind of thirst that only ever comes after unexpected sleep. She groaned as she sat up, jeans and tee twisted around her, and hunted down the earbuds lost somewhere on her sheets. What time was it, anyway? After Mom had got Grandma settled and left for work, Anna had come upstairs and plugged herself into an old horror movie on Tubi and must have fallen asleep.

When had that been? Eight? What time was it now? She checked her phone. Nearly four a.m. The time she was normally drifting off these days rather than waking up. *Shit. Caroline.* Had her little sister looked in on Anna? Probably. She felt a momentary pang of guilt but dismissed it. Caroline was nearly a teenager. She was more than capable of getting herself together for school and bed.

Anna got up, shook her clothes back into place, and peered out at the night. Lightning flashed again, illuminating the old cemetery that sat between their house and the town, the gravestones beyond the old wire fence like uneven worn teeth jutting out from the receding dry earth. She sucked in the warm air, trying to wake

up, and tasted the dust carried on the breeze. If there was rain anywhere, it wasn't over this sorry excuse for a town.

Her head still pounding, she padded barefoot out into the hallway. It was dark, lit only by the silent lightning cutting the sky outside, and when the thunder bellowed, she was sure the house shook a little, the foundations loosening in the parched country earth.

God, she hated this house. It was big—too big for just the four of them—and had the lingering smell of a building probably left empty for years. An *absent* smell. That of a desiccated corpse, the soul long gone. It was oppressive, despite the size, and the way the wood creaked and the rooms were filled with shadows always gave the impression there was something or someone in the corner of her eye that she couldn't quite see. The place totally creeped her out, like the home from those old Amityville movies.

She shivered despite the night warmth that snuck in through the old walls. Unnatural shapes formed in the shadows as she went downstairs, but she ignored them. A little fear was at least feeling *something*, and there were plenty who would call that progress in her post-trauma journey. For all her heart's pounding, she knew there were no monsters and ghosts. She'd learned the hard way that it was living people who did the bad things.

It was cooler downstairs, and from the hallway she could hear the kitchen tap dripping into the deep ceramic sink like a clock marking out the seconds between the flashes of light outside and the cracks of thunder that followed. She took a glass from the cupboard and flinched as the pipes squealed unpleasantly when she turned the faucet to fill it. She'd been glad to leave college after everything and thought she'd be glad to leave their home in the city—*running, running, keep running away from everything*—but that was before they'd moved in here. Sure, the house was big and cheap, but, just like the rest of the town, behind the facade, it was tired and worn-out.

She screwed the faucet tight but the stubborn drip continued. Another thing to add to the list for Lucas, the handyman Mom had called in, who seemed to come every day and still the jobs

didn't get finished. When Anna had complained about him, Mom suggested Anna could do some of the repairs herself if she wasn't happy. Something else for her to help out with when she wasn't doing her shifts at the diner. Something else to get her back in the world. Another sign that everyone's patience was wearing thin with Anna's moods—the unspoken *It was all kind of your own fault, after all.*

She took her glass and headed out into the dark heart of the house. Her head throbbed slightly, not quite a headache anymore but almost, and she hoped that if she got back to sleep, it would be gone by the time she had to be at the diner for her shift.

"I didn't faint."

Anna almost dropped her water as she spun around, clutching the banister for balance. As lightning flashed outside once again, the speaker was momentarily illuminated in harsh bright white. Grandma was standing in front of the sitting room window, so close her nose almost grazed it: a frail old woman in a sleeveless pale nightdress, arms thin and age-marked, skin baggy on the bones.

"I didn't faint," she repeated as she lifted her veiny hands and pressed them against the glass before tapping against it with one finger as if trying to get the attention of someone outside. It was creepy to see her like that, ghostly and decrepit. She didn't look like Grandma much, not anymore. Not during her "moments." Anna watched as she tapped and paused and started to half hum, half whisper some song Anna vaguely recognized from one of Grandma's old Barbra Streisand CDs she refused to put headphones on while listening to.

"Grandma?" Anna put her glass down on a side table and touched the old woman's arm. The soft skin was freezing cold. How long had she been standing here?

The singing became a quiet keening that wheezed out of Grandma and she leaned her forehead against the window, oblivious to Anna. "Is that me?" the old woman whispered.

Oh, great. There had been some vacant moments from Grandma

since they'd moved—forgotten words, moments of confusion—but this was the first truly weird episode while Mom was at work, and of course it had to be while Anna was up.

"Evelyn!" Anna said sharply, using Grandma's first name, and finally the old woman turned around, eyes wide and bewildered. "It's me. Anna. You're okay."

Grandma stared at Anna for a long moment, and it was hard to dislike her for her vicious tongue when she looked so vulnerable. When there was no spite in her, Grandma just looked lost and afraid.

"What are we doing in here?" Grandma glanced from Anna to the window and then at Anna again.

"You tell me, Grandma." Anna carefully led her back to her first-floor bedroom at the other end of the hall. "Because I sure as shit don't know."

"We shouldn't be here. Don't you remember?" Evelyn was still agitated. "We shouldn't be here."

"I think that every day," Anna said quietly. "But you all thought moving to this place was a great idea. So here we are."

3

The kitchen was no more appealing with the lights on. The faucet continued to drip as Anna opened the Formica cupboards to look for the chocolate powder as milk heated in the microwave. Although there was nothing wrong with the room, there was something dated about it, no matter how clean and new the surfaces were. She ignored the notes stuck to everything. Kettle. Milk. Sugar.

Your grandmother's sick. She's going to have confused moments more and more often and we need to look after her. She may think you're me when I was little. She may think you're someone from the past. She may seem lost. It might be scary, but she's still Grandma, and it's scarier for her than it is for us, and we have to love her and look after her.

Loving her and looking after her would be easier if Grandma had been less judgmental about what happened with Anna. Mom claimed that the nastiness was the start of the disease taking her. Before she'd been diagnosed. Anna hadn't been so convinced.

The microwave pinged and she checked that the milk was warm but not hot, in case Grandma spilled it or burned her mouth. Her care was less for Grandma—a year of Evelyn's less-than-silent judgment and *that's what comes of dancing down the devil's path* comments hadn't been wiped out by this sudden decline in her health—than the repercussions from Mom. The choice had been stark: Either Anna watched over Grandma and Caroline during her mom's night shifts or they'd have to get a nurse in. That in turn would mean Anna doing more hours at the diner or a second job *and* there'd be a stranger in their house during the hours only

Anna was usually awake, and she didn't like the idea of that at all. This was the easiest option.

She stirred in two spoons of chocolate powder, then carried the cup through to Grandma, flicking off the kitchen light as she went, leaving the faucet dripping alone in the darkness.

Grandma was sitting up in bed, looking sideways out the window. "Why doesn't it rain?" she said. No acknowledgment of the strange lost moment that just occurred. Her voice was back to normal. Brittle as dry summer twigs. "All this noise and light but no rain. What's the point without the rain?"

"It'll pass soon," Anna said. "Drink your hot chocolate and go back to sleep."

"Don't talk to me like I'm a child, girl."

There she was. The Grandma Anna knew. "I'm just trying to help, Grandma."

"Why are you calling me Grandma, Claire? What is the matter—" Her head snapped around, irritated, and she stopped mid-sentence. Claire was Anna's mother's name. The wrong person. A wrong moment. Anna stood there, awkward, as time settled back down around Evelyn. Maybe a nurse in the house wouldn't be such a bad idea.

"Good night," she said quietly.

She was pulling the door behind her when Grandma stopped her.

"Anna."

Her own name, at least. Grandma was back in the building.

"Yes?"

Evelyn stared defiantly at her from the bed, all her formidable God-fearing rage and strength now housed in that diminished, breaking-down body and mind, but if the old woman was afraid, she wasn't going to show it.

"Thank you for the hot chocolate," she said eventually. "You'd best get some sleep. You want to be fresh for work tomorrow." She picked up the cup, took a sip, and went back to staring out at the dry storm in the night. Anna took that as her cue to escape.

Found Grandma in the sitting room when getting water. She was pressed up against the window. Don't know how long she was there for. Maybe ages. Her hands were freezing.

She sent the text to her mother, then once back in her own room, stripped down to her T-shirt and underwear and got into bed. She was unsettled. Much as Anna didn't like Grandma, the idea of Evelyn getting out of bed and potentially hurting herself made her feel responsible, and she didn't want to be responsible for anyone.