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Her Every Fear

Written by Peter Swanson

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HER EVERY FEAR

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Every fear is a desire. Every desire is fear.

The cigarettes are burning under the trees

Where the Staffordshire murderers wait for their accomplices

And victims. Every victim is an accomplice.

—James Fenton, "A Staffordshire Murderer"

PART I

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LONG-LEGGEDY BEASTIES

CHAPTER 1

The fastest route from Logan Airport to downtown Boston is a mile-long tunnel called the Sumner. Dark, damp, and low ceilinged, the Sumner feels as though it were built a hundred years ago, which it very nearly was. And on Friday, April 24, a warm spring evening, a Boston University freshman ran out of gas halfway through the tunnel, reducing rush-hour traffic to just one slow-moving lane, instead of the usual two. Kate Priddy, who had never been to Boston and had no idea she would wind up in a tunnel under Boston Harbor, sat in the back of a stopped taxicab and began to panic.

It was not her first panic attack, not even of that particular day. She'd had one earlier that morning when she'd stepped outside of her flat in Belsize Park in London into a cold, gray dawn and suddenly felt like the whole idea of the apartment swap had been the worst idea she'd ever agreed to. But she'd done her breathing exercises, and repeated her mantra, and told herself that it was too late to back out now. Her second cousin, whom she'd never met, was on an overnight flight from Boston to London at this very instant. He was taking her flat for six months while she was going to live in his apartment in Beacon Hill.

But this attack, with the taxicab stalled in the dark tunnel, was far worse than anything she'd had for a long while. The glistening walls of the endless tunnel curved at the top. It was like being inside a massive constricting snake, and Kate felt her stomach fold within her, her mouth turn dry.

The taxicab crept forward. The backseat smelled of body odor and the flowery perfume of some car deodorant. Kate wanted to roll down the window, but didn't know what taxicab customs

were like in the United States. Her stomach folded again, starting to cramp. *When did I last go to the toilet,* she thought, and her panic ratcheted up a notch. It was such a familiar feeling: heart speeding up, limbs turning cold, the world sharpening before her eyes. But she knew what to do. Her therapist's voice was in her head. *It's just a panic attack, an accidental surge of adrenaline. It can't hurt you, or kill you, and no one will notice it. Just let it happen. Float with it. Ride it out.*

But this one's different, Kate told herself. The danger felt real. And suddenly she was back at the cottage in Windermere, crouched and cowering in the locked closet, her nightgown wet with urine, George Daniels on the other side of the door. She felt almost like she'd felt then, cold hands inside of her, twisting her stomach like it was a damp dish towel. There'd been the shotgun blast, then the terrible silence that lasted for hours and hours. When she'd finally been pulled from the closet, her joints stiff and her vocal cords raw from screaming, she didn't know how she was still alive, how the fear hadn't killed her.

The sound of an echoing horn brought her back inside the cab. She pushed the thoughts of Windermere, of George, away, and breathed in as deeply as she could, even though it felt like something heavy was sitting on her chest.

Face it. Accept it. Float with it. Let time pass.

The words weren't working, and Kate could feel her throat closing, becoming a pinhole, her lungs frantically trying to pull in oxygen. The back of the cab now smelled like that closet had, mustiness and rot, as though something had died many summers ago in the walls. She thought of running, and that thought filled her with even more panic. She thought of her pills, her prescription benzodiazepines, that she rarely took anymore but that she'd brought anyway, the way a child who doesn't need his blankie anymore still keeps it close at hand. But the pills were in her suitcase, which was in the bloody boot of the cab. She opened her dry

mouth to say something to the cabdriver, to ask him to pop the boot, but the words didn't come out. And that was the moment—one she'd had many times—when she became convinced that she really was dying. *Panic attacks can't kill you. Of course they can't,* she thought, and squeezed her eyes shut anyway, as though a train were barreling down on her. It was the worst thing to do. The world dissolved into a closet full of blackness, death choking her. Her insides began to liquefy.

Face it. Accept it. Float with it. Let time pass.

The cab jolted forward a whole car length, then stopped again, and that small movement made her feel slightly better, as though saying the mantra had caused the car to move in the first place. She repeated it again, while doing her breathing exercises.

The driver shook a hand, his fingers spread, and muttered something at the dirty windshield in a language Kate didn't understand. For some reason, she'd thought that cabdrivers in America would be stereotypically American—short men with caps and cigar stubs and loud American voices. But this cabdriver was turbaned and heavily bearded; except for the fact that he was sitting on the left side of the car, she might as well have been in London.

"How long is this tunnel?" Kate managed to ask through the partition. Her voice sounded cracked and timid in her own ears.

"There's something up ahead."

"Is it always like this?"

"Sometimes," the driver said, then shrugged.

Kate gave up and moved back from the partition. She rubbed her hands along her thighs. The cab kept jerking forward, a few feet at a time, but after it passed the stalled Chevy, two lanes opened up and the cab was moving again. Kate breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth. She unclenched a hand and one of her knuckles cracked. She began to tap her thumb against her fingertips in ordered succession. The pinhole that was her throat opened up a little.

They cleared the tunnel, and Kate caught a glimpse of swollen clouds dominating the sky just before the cab dipped and swayed into another tunnel, but one in which the traffic was barreling along. The cabdriver made up for lost time before emerging onto another fast-moving road that wound along the Charles River. There was enough light left in the sky for Kate to make out the backsides of brick houses whipping past on her left. On the river, a rower on a scull skimmed along its placid surface.

The driver took a sudden, lurching left, doubling back to get onto a narrow road, square, brick houses on either side, blossoming trees along the sidewalk.

"Bury Street," announced the driver.

"It's 101."

"Got it." The driver sped up, then slowed down and halted suddenly, one wheel riding up onto the sidewalk, in front of a brick archway surmounted by a small stone on which the number 101 was carved. Kate could see into a courtyard with a low fountain. The apartment building, three stories high, ran along three sides of the courtyard. Kate's stomach ached a little, a leftover from her earlier panic attack, and she thought guiltily of her second cousin, Corbin Dell, arriving at her unexceptional flat in North London earlier in the day. But he'd known what he was getting. They'd sent several e-mails back and forth. Her one-bedroom was cozy and conveniently located near a tube station, but Corbin's place—she'd seen the pictures—was like something out of a Henry James novel. Still, she hadn't been prepared for the courtyard entrance, very Italian, that seemed out of place with the small amount of Boston she'd already seen.

She waited on the curb while the driver removed her two bags—a large rollie and an even larger duffel bag. She'd gotten dollars at her bank in London the previous week and she paid the driver with the thin, papery notes, not quite knowing what to tip, so probably giving him too much. After he drove off, she balanced

the duffel bag onto the rollie and made her way through the archway.

She was midway across the courtyard, paved half in flagstone and half in brick, when the central door swung open and a doorman shaped like a pear darted out waving his hand.

"Hello, hello," he said. He wore a long brown raincoat over a suit, and a peaked cap. Under the cap he wore dark-framed glasses with thick lenses. He had dark black skin and a very white mustache, one side slightly thicker than the other.

"Hi," Kate said. "I'm Katherine Priddy. I'm here to stay in Corbin Dell's apartment."

"Right. I know all about it. Mr. Dell's moving to London for half a year and you're moving here. London's loss and Boston's gain, I suspect." He winked at her, and some of the tension that was still gripping her chest dissipated.

"I don't know about that," Kate said.

"I'm rarely wrong," he said. Kate had read somewhere that Bostonians were notorious for their lack of warmth, but the doorman was proving otherwise.

"I see you brought everything you own," he said, surveying the two bags. Kate sensed, more than saw, a woman pass by her and into the building. The doorman didn't seem to notice.

"If you can get the suitcase, I can get the duffel," Kate said, and the two of them managed to navigate the three worn marble steps that led to the building's lobby. He left the suitcase on the tiled floor and moved swiftly to the other side of the front desk. He was light on his feet for a heavy man.

"I promised Mrs. Valentine I'd call when you got here. She's the president of the building association, and wanted to give you the tour of your new apartment."

"Oh okay," Kate said, looking around. The lobby was narrow but beautiful. A glass-encased four-lamp chandelier hung from the high ceiling. The walls were painted in a lustrous shade of cream.

"Miss Priddy is down here in the lobby," he said into the telephone, then replaced the receiver. "She'll be right down. Let's get your luggage onto the elevator. You're on the third floor of the north wing. You have a nice view of the Charles. Have you been to Boston before?"

While Kate told him that she had actually never been to the States before, a tall, painfully thin woman somewhere in her seventies came down one of the side stairs, her shoes clacking percussively on the tiled steps. She wore a long black dress and a floral scarf around her neck. Her hair was silver and pinned up into an elaborate bun. Kate wondered if she always dressed like this or if she was going out later. The woman introduced herself as Carol and shook Kate's hand. Her hand was like a bundle of chopsticks covered in a layer of tissue paper.

"I'm sure you could have figured out Corbin's apartment all by yourself, Kate, but I thought it wouldn't hurt to have a welcoming committee." After the doorman had loaded Kate's luggage into the elevator, Carol got the key from him, then took Kate up the winding stairway. "Do you mind walking? It's my daily exercise."

Kate told her she was happy to walk, relieved that she didn't have to ride the elevator.

At the third floor, Carol turned left and Kate followed her down a dark, carpeted hall, with a doorway on the left, one on the right, and one at the end. A woman about Kate's age was rapping on the door on the left. Kate thought she was the woman who had flitted by earlier in the courtyard.

"Can I help you?" Carol asked loudly.

The woman turned. She wore jeans and a scoop-neck sweater. Her dark hair was cut in a bob, and she was almost pretty, except for the lack of a chin. It was so noticeable that Kate wondered, for a moment, if she'd been in some kind of terrible chin-obliterating accident.

"Do you work here? Could I get a key for this door? I'm worried about my friend." Her voice was nasal, pitched high with anxiety.

"Why are you worried?" Carol asked. "Is everything okay?"

"I can't get in touch with her. We were supposed to have lunch, and I called her work and she didn't show up there, either. And now I'm worried."

"Did you talk with our doorman?"

"No, I just came straight up here. It's not like her, you know. I've texted her, like, a thousand times."

"I'm sorry," Carol said. "I don't have a key, myself, but maybe you should speak with our doorman Bob. He'll know something. What's the name of your friend?" Carol had started to walk again, and so did Kate.

"Audrey Marshall. Do you know her?"

"I've met her, dear, but don't know much about her. Go talk with Bob. He'll help you. He *should* have helped you when you first arrived."

Kate found herself walking along the edge of the hall, her shoulder almost rubbing against the paneled wall. The upset friend, with her shrill, panicked voice, had caused Kate's chest to seize up again, the panic inside of her like an expanding balloon. She thought of her pills, in the toiletry bag in the rollie, unreachable for now.

"It's so unusual," Carol was saying, as she slid a key into the lock of the door at the end, "for someone to be in here without having gone through the doorman first. I'm sure there's actually nothing wrong with anybody." She said this as though nothing bad had ever happened to anyone anywhere. It was the type of ridiculous but well-meaning proclamation that Kate's father might make. Kate, herself, from the moment she saw the worried woman knocking frantically on her new neighbor's door,

knew that someone was dead. It was how her mind worked. And knowing that her mind worked that way—constantly stretching logic all the way to its worst possible conclusion—did not lessen her certainty. Already that day, Kate had *known* that the youth with the sweaty forehead and the fuzzy mustache in the departures lounge was carrying a homemade explosive device in his backpack. And she had *known* that the stretch of turbulence over the Atlantic Ocean would grow in ferocity until it ripped one of the jet's wings off as easily as a sadistic child shredding a butterfly. These hadn't happened, but that didn't mean that behind the door down the hall, there wasn't a dead or dying girl. Of course there was.

Kate turned her attention to Carol, who was still fiddling with the key. She wondered if the tumblers of the lock were too much for Carol's birdlike bones to handle, then heard, with immense relief, the oily snap of the door unlocking. Even though she'd never been in Corbin's apartment, she'd already taken possession of it in her mind. She badly wanted to get inside and feel the safety of a home. It felt like years since she'd stepped out of the comfort of her London flat, double-checking the lock of the outside door, a minicab idling at the curb. Carol swung the door inward just as Kate heard voices again in the hall. She turned to see the doorman, Bob, lugging the duffel bag, the chinless woman at his side protesting her case. "Let me take care of this young lady first, then we'll see to your friend," he was saying.

Carol ushered Kate into her new home, and Kate immediately asked for the toilet. "Of course, dear, there's one attached to the bedroom," Carol said, pointing, and Kate walked rapidly, barely taking in the extravagance of her surroundings before shutting herself into an enormous bathroom, tiled in black and white. She sat on the toilet lid, and even though she knew the pills weren't there, she opened her purse anyway. Inside, tucked into the side pocket, was her plastic bottle of benzodiazepines. As soon as she

saw them, she remembered moving the bottle from her suitcase to her bag early that morning. How had she forgotten that so soon? With trembling hands she unscrewed the lid and dry-swallowed a pill. A feeling of dread—almost worse than the panic—spread over her.

She should never have come to America.

CHAPTER 2

EVEN THOUGH THE APARTMENT WAS enormous, it shouldn't have taken Carol Valentine thirty minutes to deliver the tour, but she clearly relished the role. She pointed out the walnut-stained oak floors, the coffered ceilings, the working fireplace, and what she called the Juliet balcony, which was really just a hip-high railing one foot out from the floor-to-ceiling French doors that Kate knew she would never open. The apartment wasn't particularly high up, but it was high enough.

"You like it?" Carol asked, after the tour was complete, even though Kate had expressed her admiration about thirty times already.

"I do. I love it. Cozy."

"It's beautifully furnished, don't you think? You'd think a young man like Corbin . . ." Carol left the thought unfinished and smiled with just her mouth, the papery skin that covered her face shifting in such a way that Kate felt like she could see the exact contours of the woman's skull. "What's your apartment—your flat—like in London?"

"All of it would fit in this living room," Kate said. "I'm feeling a little guilty. I got the better bargain."

"Yes, but London . . ."

Kate yawned, quickly covering her mouth.

"My dear, you must be exhausted. I forgot all about the time change."

"I am tired," Kate said. "It's my bedtime if I were home."

"Well, try to stay up a little later than you usually do so you get used to it here. And as soon as you get settled in, you'll have to come and have a drink. I'm on the other side, exactly opposite.

Our place has the same layout as yours. These end apartments are the absolute best in the building. Especially yours, since you have a view toward the city *and* a view toward the river." She lowered her voice, as though the other apartments might hear what she was saying.

"It's beautiful," Kate said.

"The building was modeled after a Venetian palazzo, you know."

"I thought it looked Italian. The courtyard."

"The architect was from Boston, but he visited Italy and came back here. This was *years* ago, of course. My husband would love to tell you all about it when you come for that drink."

Carol left, and Kate shut the door behind her. She stood for a moment, still rattled by what had happened in the bathroom, finding her pills in her purse after forgetting that she'd moved them there. But since then, she'd talked herself through it a little, and she'd calmed down. Or maybe the pill was simply doing its job, spreading its calming fingers over her skin.

She retoured the apartment herself this time, taking in all the details, the built-in bookshelves, the paintings on the wall. Every room was beautifully furnished but somehow impersonal, as though all the items had been picked out by a decorator, which they probably had. In the bedroom, across from a king-sized bed with a cushioned headboard, there was a low bureau, the top of which was covered with about fifteen framed photographs. Family pictures, most in black and white, most taken on holiday. Boats and beaches. Kate studied them. She recognized Corbin's father, her mother's cousin, but only from other photographs she'd seen. He was in most of the pictures, usually with Corbin and Kate's other second cousin, Philip. Kate wondered why Corbin had no pictures of his mother on the bureau, but then it occurred to her that this apartment had been owned by Corbin's divorced father before he died, and these must be the father's pictures, not the son's.

Kate wondered how much of the rest of the apartment was in the style of the father. She guessed most of it. From what she'd gathered from her mother, Richard Dell had moved to Boston sometime in the 1970s to be with his American wife. His work had something to do with finance ("moving lots and lots of money around," Lucy Priddy told her daughter), and during the 1980s, he made a fortune. Richard and Amanda, his wife, had lived on the North Shore, in a seaside mansion in the town of New Essex. When their children were teenagers, they got divorced, Amanda keeping the seaside house and Richard buying the apartment at 101 Bury Street in Boston. The apartment had been left to Corbin after Richard died in a swimming accident while on holiday in Bermuda.

Kate had learned all this information two months earlier, during Sunday dinner with her parents.

"Your second cousin Corbin got in touch with me," Lucy had said. They were in the conservatory, done with dinner, but still drinking wine. Kate's father, Patrick, was taking Alice, their border terrier, for her walk.

"Oh," Kate said.

"I don't think you've ever met him. Have you met him?"

"He's your cousin Richard's son, right? The one who died a few years ago?"

"He drowned, yes. You met Richard, actually, at Charlotte's wedding. I don't know if you remember. I met Corbin for the first time at his father's funeral." Kate's parents had traveled all the way to Massachusetts for the funeral, although they'd tied the trip in with a driving tour up the Maine coast, something they'd both always wanted to do.

"He seemed very sweet. And so handsome. Almost looked like—who's that actor you like from *Spooks*? Rupert something."

"Rupert Penry-Jones. Why are you telling me this? I feel like you're on the verge of telling me you've arranged my marriage to a second cousin. Have we gone back in time?"

Lucy laughed; the spontaneous version, not the contrived ringing bells that sometimes came out in social situations. "Yes, darling. It's all arranged. No, but I'm telling you this for a reason. I haven't slipped into full senility. Corbin Dell is moving to London—a company transfer, or something—for six months, and he sent me an e-mail because he knows you live in London."

"He didn't ask to stay with me, did he?"

"No, no. Of course not. But he did say he wanted to check and see if you were potentially interested in a home swap. He said he'd love to have someone staying at his place in Boston, and then he could stay at your place, and that way he'd save some money, and you'd have the opportunity to spend half a year in America."

Kate took a sip of her wine. It was white, and far too sweet. "What would I do in Boston?"

"I thought that maybe you could take classes, like you've been talking about. They must have graphic design schools. And you'd keep drawing, of course."

"What about my job?" Kate had just gone from part-time to full-time at an art-supply store in Hampstead.

"Well, that's not a career, exactly, is it?"

Kate, who agreed with her mother on that point, was annoyed nonetheless and said nothing. A part of her knew that this was the type of situation she'd be foolish to turn down. Six months in another country. She'd never been to America, and Boston was supposed to be nice. A manageable city, she'd heard, not like New York or Chicago, or London, for that matter. She'd have a place to live. Probably a beautiful place to live. And the more that these reasons popped into her head, the more anxious she got, realizing that she would probably turn it down. It was too soon. She was better, but she wasn't completely well yet.

"I feel like I'm just getting settled in London, and everything is going smoothly, and I just don't know if I should rock the boat."

"Absolutely, Kate. He asked, so I thought I'd ask. I totally un-

derstand." As her mother spoke, Kate realized that her mother had never believed that Kate would actually take the opportunity to move to Boston for half a year. It was this thought that pestered Kate for the remainder of the afternoon. Her father returned from walking Alice, and the three decided to go to the White Swan in Braintree center for one more before Kate had to catch a train back to London. Kate was tipsy on the ride home, her mind picturing all the things that could go right in Boston, then all the things that could go wrong. And she kept thinking about the tone of her mother's voice, the way she'd clearly known that Kate was going to say no. It was that, more than anything, that caused Kate to ring up her parents when she got back to her flat in London and tell them that she'd changed her mind.

"Oh," her mother said.

"I think I'd be foolish to not do it. There's nothing keeping me here, right now. Except you and Dad, of course."

"We'd come visit."

"Tell Corbin I'd like to do it. Or better yet, send me his e-mail and I'll tell him myself."

She'd written Corbin that night, before she lost her nerve. He'd been thrilled. They arranged the swap from late April to early October. Kate had given notice at her job, then had found a graphic design school were she could take courses in InDesign and Illustrator. And now she was here, her first class scheduled for Monday afternoon. Kate walked back down the hallway that led to the living room, where Bob the doorman had deposited her bags. She knew she should unpack, but a wave of tiredness spread through her. Also, hunger. She went to the kitchen, with its limestone counters and stainless steel appliances. It looked like it had never been used. She opened the fridge. All alone on the middle shelf was a bottle of champagne, a yellow sticky note attached to it. *Welcome, Kate—Enjoy!* was written in cramped handwriting. A pang of guilt went through Kate that she hadn't left anything for Corbin in her flat,

although she'd left him a much longer note, welcoming him and describing the neighborhood.

Except for the champagne and an assortment of condiments, the refrigerator was practically bare. She opened the freezer and found a stack of frozen dinners from someplace called Trader Joe's. She read the directions on the back of a frozen boeuf bourguignon and decided she could handle it. The box was familiar and yet different, the nutritional information using ounces instead of grams and calories instead of energy. She figured out the microwave and began to heat up the dinner, then filled and emptied a water glass from the tap before wondering if the water was okay to drink. It tasted okay, but different than the water she was used to drinking. More minerals. After pouring herself a glass of champagne, she walked to the front door and pressed her eye to the peephole, wondering what had happened with the missing girl down the hall. Would Bob have let the friend in? Probably not, she thought, and wondered what the friend would do next. The police would probably not be helpful. Kate had watched enough American police procedurals to know that you couldn't file a missing persons report if the person had been missing for less than a day. The hallway was empty. Maybe Kate had overreacted and nothing was really wrong. Maybe the girl had grown tired of her pushy, chinless friend.

Kate ate the dinner, surprisingly good, sitting on one of the stools around the L-shaped granite island in the kitchen. She poured a second glass of champagne, took one sip, and was overcome again with exhaustion. Her head was heavy on her neck, her stomach slightly queasy. She had planned on unpacking and setting up her laptop so that she could send e-mails, and she'd hoped to watch some American television, but instead she rolled her suitcase into the bedroom, dug around in it to find her toiletry kit, plus the boxers and T-shirt she liked to sleep in, then managed to brush her teeth and wash her face before climbing between the cool, crisp sheets. Despite being exhausted, she lay awake for a time, listen-

ing to the barely discernible sounds of the apartment: the far-off rumble of traffic, the muffled click of a heating system, something else—a soft hissing—she couldn't identify. The bed, she thought, before falling asleep, was the most comfortable bed she had ever lain on. She sank into its grip.

KATE WOKE ONCE. INTERMITTENT BLUE lights were flashing along a diagonal stretch of the high ceilings. *Where are the sirens?* Kate thought. Then: *Where am I?* And, finally, after a confused two seconds, she remembered. Her mouth was dry and she was desperately thirsty. She heard what sounded like a distant train. She rolled to either side, looking for the illuminated numbers of a clock to tell her what time it was, but, except for the police lights streaking through the curtained windows, the room was black.

Kate sat up, then lay back down. She was far too tired to even find the bathroom and get a drink of water. What was the name of that neighbor again? The girl who was missing? Audrey Marshall, Kate remembered. She was good with names. It was her superpower, George had said. He'd dubbed her Never-Forgets-a-Name-Girl. Kate closed her eyes, heard someone whispering to her in a dream, and jolted awake again. The voices disappeared, and the room was dark again. Had she dreamed the police lights? *I'll find out about it tomorrow,* she thought, and let herself fall back into a black pool of sleep.