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The Taken

Written by Inger Ash Wolfe

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THE TAKEN

Inger Ash Wolfe



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Love never dies a natural death.

– Anaïs Nin

Prologue

What always broke his heart was the way they dressed themselves. Divorcées in wedding gowns slumped behind the wheel in their garages; stockbrokers in Armani hanging from basement joists; the jilted plunging from rooftops drenched in cologne or perfume, as if to say their wrecked bodies still had more to offer in death than anyone had ever known in life.

This one wore a pair of black jeans over Blundstone boots, a faded green T-shirt, and a black wool sweater. A thin leather cord served as a necklace from which a silver lamb hung, her only piece of jewellery apart from a gold hoop edged with a curlicue design, like a Sufi sun, dangling from one ear. He pictured someone giving her that lamb and wondered what had been meant by it. That she was innocent? That she needed protection? Obviously, it hadn't been enough.

They'd pulled her up onto the grass, and the discoloured lakewater drained from inside her pantlegs, a thin, greyish trickle that ran down between the green

stalks. He couldn't help thinking that the roots of the grass would gratefully take in this water, insensate to its origin, because it had been a dry summer and grass was oblivious to what came from it or what returned to it.

The photographer was taking pictures. The girl would never know. Her story was only just beginning to be told. You lived your life, making choices that you thought would become the plot of your life as you wanted to live it, but the fact was, someone else always wrote the end. It was no mystery people hated movies where the protagonist died: who needs that kind of realism?

He didn't want to imagine what she'd been through, but he was like a receptor that has no choice what signal enters it. He imagined the cold, pressing lake, the way water holds you, its molecules tight against your body. She'd probably heard it was a peaceful way to go: it wasn't. Even if you want to die, your body resists. You know breathing is the only way to make it work, but you don't want to, you can't. And then you begin to change your mind, you want to live because you've never felt pain like this, but it's too late, the screaming in the blood has started, the brain starving for oxygen, and you fight, using up all your reserves, the urgent craving for air gets worse. You're just an animal now, one in the wrong element, you flail for the surface, the sun fractured into diamonds above you, but finally you breathe and for the thirty seconds, before the water adulterates your blood and makes your heart a double

ruin, the agony is unnameable, your mind is a fiery mass, you really *die*, you feel every moment of it. He kneeled down beside her. All that terror was over now, but she still wore the surprised expression he'd seen too many times on floaters. She was no older than thirty.

For the rest of his life, she would be dead. She would miss all the changes that would have come to make her think twice about what she'd done. He, himself, would go through depression and contentment, joy and agony. He would fail, he would thrive, and still this girl, like all the others who couldn't give life one more day, would be gone. What he tried to do for them in death always felt like an empty triumph, but at least he would try to do it. *Tell me everything*, he said to her in his mind. *Tell me the truth and I'll let it be known.*

1

Thursday, May 19

Glynnis Pedersen's house was full of clocks. There were silver mantel clocks with lunar white faces, wall clocks made from antique car parts, clocks created from the refuse of old metal advertisements, a couple of small digital clocks, one grandfather clock in the front hall that no longer worked, and, beside the bed in the basement apartment, an LED motion clock that displayed a message in mid-air between two prongs. This one Glynnis had programmed to read 'Rise and Shine!!' which message it displayed no matter one's state of wakefulness. For Detective Inspector Hazel Micallef, once a Mrs Pedersen herself, it only served as a reminder of whom, exactly, Glynnis Pedersen was rising and shining with.

To have to take charity from a hated person was bad enough, but to do it out of necessity entailed a diminishment of one's sense of self that Hazel found hard

to accept. She knew loss of pride was an occupational hazard for those who were proud, but did it have to mean being vanquished as well? Sometimes it seemed to Hazel that the situation she found herself in was one concocted for her by the Greek gods. To punish what, she couldn't be sure. But she had a feeling she was going to find out.

She was now a tenant in her ex-husband's house. The roots of this strange situation were in an evening she'd spent the previous fall with him at the Laughing Crow. It was there, over drinks, that she'd hinted she might need some extramarital nursing if her damaged back finally gave in. She'd asked him to imagine her eighty-seven-year-old mother carrying her to the bathroom. He'd fairly blanched at what she was asking him, and Glynnis, hearing of it, laughed at it as if it were a hare-brained scam cooked up by one of her drug-addled clients. But then December had happened. A serial killer had drifted through their town like a deadly gas. A murder under her own roof. And a night in the bone-chilling cold and dark that left her back shattered and her mother nearly dead. Remembering, the events lined up in her mind with a kind of dreadful inevitability, but that didn't make them any more believable. She'd had emergency surgery, but by the end of March it became clear that, in the words of her specialist, her back had 'failed.' *Your first surgery is your best chance, your second is your last*, was something Dr Pass had been fond of

saying, but he'd stopped saying it in March. By that point, last chances were all Hazel had.

She and her mother had lived together not unpleasantly in the house in Pember Lake for over three years, since her divorce from Andrew. But the pain was keeping her from work, and more than once after the new year her mother had supported her on frail shoulders and taken Hazel to the bathroom: the hyperbolic scenario she'd described to Andrew boiled down to something real. Emily had finally gone to Andrew and Glynnis and laid it out. She characterized the discussion as 'brief.'

'I used legal language so they'd understand it,' she explained to Hazel. 'I said the statute of limitations on marital duties was five years and that it covered all pre-existing conditions.'

'How did Glynnis like that?'

'She was smiling so tightly I thought her lipstick would squirt off her little lips.' Emily smiled herself, that wicked smile that said she'd been in charge her whole life. 'That woman has a mouth like a cat's anus,' she said. 'Andrew understood though.'

'And?'

'They've given their tenants a month's notice. Family, they said.'

'Well that's nice,' said Hazel. 'At least we're still family.'

* * *

She lay in bed, staring at the small, high window in the wall opposite. The suggestion of late May sunlight was faint, but her mother had assured her it was there. She popped the lid of the little orange vial she was gripping in her fist and put the edge of it against her bottom lip. The thick, white pill tumbled onto her tongue. Sometimes she chewed it, this salty, bitter capsule. It worked faster this way, and the truth was, it had a little kick on it if it went down pulverized. It was now ten days after her second operation. She was taking three of them a day and there were two more refills on the label of the little orange vial. Sometimes the pain came back before it was time for the next pill and she'd take it early, send it like a fireman down a pole, the alarms shrieking everywhere. The one she'd just taken was already working: its promised six to eight hours of relief had begun with the May light outside the tiny window suddenly thickening. Glynnis might have had her clocks, but she had her pills, and they told the time with utter accuracy.

In her current state, she had more in common now with her younger daughter, Martha, that beloved and feckless child who kept Hazel more or less in a state of constant worry. Jobless, loveless, dogged by depression and incapable of making a constructive choice, Hazel sometimes wondered if Martha's problems were self-made, or if they were genetics. Looking at either side of the family (Andrew? Emily?) it was hard to credit

heredity, but shipwrecked and miserable as Hazel was, she had to wonder if there wasn't some kind of tendency in the blood to fall apart. Maybe only on the Micallef side. She hadn't seen Martha in a couple of months, and she'd been careful to keep upbeat on the phone with her: no point in getting the girl more worked up than she normally was. Hazel knew that Martha teetered on a thin line when it came to her mother: on one side was resentment for everything Hazel did and had to do for her, on the other was a savage terror of loss. It meant shielding her, softening reality for her. And with her elder daughter, Emilia, living out west, it meant that Hazel felt even more alone than she needed to. But such were the facts of her motherhood.

Her own mother came down the stairs bearing a tray. Andrew's beef stew, one of three things he cooked, all in the key of cow. Emily put the tray down beside the bed and arranged the pillows behind her daughter's back so she could sit up straight enough to eat. It was this routine three times a day: the prisoner brought her meals. 'Glynnis too tired to cook?'

'She's got a late night,' her mother said.

'He should keep tabs on her.' She accepted the bowl of steaming stew and the end of a crusty loaf. 'She's got a wandering eye.'

'That's wishful thinking.'

Hazel tucked into the meal. Everyone had a beef-stew

'secret'; Andrew's was Guinness. The only real secret was time. Given a pound of stringy, nigh-inedible beef, a few cups of water, two mealy potatoes, and maybe an onion, anyone with six hours could make a perfectly edible stew. She leaned forward to put the fork in her mouth and her scarred lower back resisted her. The pain was different than it had been before either surgery: it wasn't sharp, like there was broken glass rattling around in her; it was deep and resonant. Seated in her marrow. She had to breathe through it. 'You eat?' she asked her mother.

'I kept Andrew company.'

'Are you working both ends against the middle?'

'What's the other end, Hazel?'

'Glynnis.'

'I gather that makes you the middle.'

'I'm always the middle, Mother.'

'May 26 you get to be the middle, Hazel. Birthdays and anniversaries only. All the other days you're on the outside looking in, like the rest of us.'

'You had to remind me, huh?'

'Sixty-two,' said Emily. 'My little girl is finally going to be a woman.'

Emily continued to leaf through the growing pile of magazines beside the bed. Celebrity rags, local newspapers, travel magazines with colourful full-page pictures that teased Hazel with hints of a future out of bed. She ate in silence as her mother idly flipped the pages of one

of the celebrity magazines. She held up a picture of a woman no older than twenty, one of the new crop of pop stars whose names neither of them could ever remember. She was parading down a street in Hollywood in a dress big enough to cover a volleyball, almost, with a grease-soaked paper bag in one hand and her purse slung over her shoulder. A tiny dog with a pointy face poked out of the top of the purse. 'In a just society,' said Emily, 'almost everything this child is doing would be illegal. She should be arrested, stuck in a housecoat, and made to listen to Guy Lombardo records until she smartens up.' She held the page up to her daughter. At that age, the worst either of Hazel's daughters had ever done was wear torn jeans, listen to Madonna, and occasionally puke hard lemonade all over the bathroom. How did girls like this one get so lost? Did people get lost quickly, or did it happen over time?

Emily collected the tray off the bed. 'You want dessert?'

'No.'

She held up a newspaper. Thursday's *Westmuir Record*. 'You read this yet?'

'It's probably the same as last Thursday's. Not to mention Monday's. But leave it.'

'You're falling behind on your papers. You don't want your news getting stale, do you?' Hazel laughed at the thought of events passing so quickly in Westmuir that you'd have to make an effort to keep up. 'At least it'll

pass the time without your having to resort to staring at pictures of nearly naked girls eating hamburgers.' Apart from the biweekly visits from Detective Constable James Wingate, the *Record* was her only window on the world she lived in. The paper that had been a thorn in her side for all of the previous fall was now necessary to her sanity. She held her hand out for it.

'What are you going to do now?' Hazel asked.

'I told Andrew I'd do the crossword with him.'

'I should have seen Andrew's facility with those things as a sign.'

'Of what?'

'That he knew how to disguise himself.'

Emily Micallef patted her daughter's hand. 'If he didn't, he'd be the only man on earth who lacked the talent.' She put Hazel's fork and napkin in the bowl and moved the bowl into the middle of the tray. When she got to the door that led to the upstairs hall, Hazel called to her.

'Mum?'

'What is it?'

'Ask him to come see me. Please?'

'Read the paper,' Emily said. 'They've already started the summer short story. The *Record*'s gift to us all for putting on our best May-long-weekend faces.'

Hazel glanced at the headline – 'Welcome Cottagers!' – and immediately put the paper down.