

407: Outside

[Click; rattle]

[The storm is huge—filling our ears and Ash’s world]

Ash: I’m behind the house, trying to decide what to do. I couldn’t go through the front yard; the wind was driving from that direction. I thought maybe the house would block some of it if I came this way. I could feel whatever was on the stairs right behind me as I passed through the front door, but it didn’t follow me onto the porch. It just...let me go.

[She pauses, breathing heavily. Each breath burns with the cold]

I think there are houses behind the property that are closer than the ones further down Jackson Circle. I can see little lights back there, through the trees. Must be another neighborhood, backing up to this one.

I’ve switched places with the man in the black suit, I suppose. I’m crouching in the snowstorm while he watches me from the windows. I can’t see him, but I feel him. Or maybe it’s the house itself. Watching me. Waiting for me to make a move. It’s cold, but under the eaves here I’m protected from the worst of the wind. I’m trying to summon the energy to make a break for it, into the back yard. I think I can get over the back fence, assuming it’s the same height as the side ones. I can’t see it from here, but it can’t be more than a hundred yards.

I’m going to freeze to death if I stay here. Okay. Let’s do this.

[She runs]

[Theme music; credits]

[Click; rattle]

[The storm has receded considerably, but is still continuing, faintly, in the background]

Nothing makes sense back here. There are a lot of trees, many more than I remember, and they create a shelter from the storm. Once I got under them a little, there wasn't even that much snow underfoot, though it's pretty muddy. It's warmer too. Not warm, by any means, but not dangerous. At least, this flannel shirt over my Paradise Theater tee seems enough for the moment. I can feel my hands again. Fingerless gloves weren't the right plan, I'll just admit.

I'm leaning against this oak for just a minute, soaking up the respite from the storm. I can still see those lights back there, so hopefully I'm close to the back fence. As soon as I catch my breath, I'm going again.

[A rustle in the trees]

Hello? Who is that? Ginny?

[To herself] I wonder if there's squirrels or something back here? Do squirrels hibernate?

[Another rustling]

[Whispering] Oh shit. I think somebody's back here with me. I just saw a very human-shaped shadow cross behind that group of trees just ahead. I didn't see anybody follow from the house, but I don't think physics apply to whatever lives in Hawthorne House.

[She sneaks forward, we hear her boots on the leaves—no snow here. Faintly, the sound of voices]

Can you hear that? It sounds like several people just on the other side of this little group of trees. I'm gonna move in from this side and see what I can see.

[She does so. The voices become louder. There is laughter.]

What. The. Hell.

It's...it's a party? Like a garden party. It's a big open space with flat, mown grass, and there are strings of fairy lights hanging between the trees. There are people—quite a lot of people, actually—walking beneath the trees, holding drinks and talking and laughing. They're all wearing evening gowns and tuxedos. It's like the Great Gatsby.

It's more than that. It's like I'm watching a movie. They're glittering, somehow, or flickering. What would happen if I...

[Louder] Hello? Can you help me?

[A popping sound, and the talking and laughter is cut off immediately]

Damn. It's all gone. The lights, everything. I'm in the dark in the trees. Am I hallucinating?

It doesn't matter. I need to get to the back fence. I can figure everything else out later.

[Click; rattle]

[Click; rattle]

[The storm is not audible]

I need to record what's happening. I haven't gotten to the back fence yet, obviously. I'm beginning to think there isn't a back fence. But I keep getting distracted. I've had three more of those...hallucinations, though I'm beginning to wonder if that's what they are.

Two of them were the same—a 1930s garden party. I saw the fairy lights through the trees and went towards them, and the people and setting was the same. Both times the lights went dark the moment I spoke or stepped onto the lawn. I got turned around and now I can't figure out which way is the house and which way is the fence. I can't hear the storm at all. Just crickets,

which doesn't make any sense in a blizzard, right? Or in December at all.

The third time I saw the lights I was more careful. I tiptoed to the edge of the trees and stayed as hidden as I could. And it was not a party. It was...

It was Ginny, looking exactly like she had when I found her in the house, and Grandpa Bob, looking young like in the photograph album. At first they were very still, standing like they were posing, or like, I don't know, like they were on display? Like department store mannequins. Grandpa Bob was standing in front of Ginny, holding his hand out toward her, and she was looking at him. They were both smiling. As I peeked around the tree, they started moving. It was like pressing play on a videotape. Ginny raised her hand and took Grandpa Bob's, and he pulled her toward him. They kissed, and he pressed his hand into the small of her back. When they broke the kiss, they looked into each other's eyes. I felt like a voyeur, like I shouldn't be seeing this.

But then they both turned their heads and looked directly at me, like they *knew*, like the whole thing had been a performance. And they smiled.

And then everything turned wrong. Their smiles went wide, inhumanly wide, like Grandpa Bob's smile in that dream, and maybe I was dreaming again? But Ginny's smile was the same, and they looked so hungry. And then I glimpsed someone tall and dark step into the clearing behind them, and all the lights went out again and I was left in the dark, in the trees.

And that's where I am right now. I don't know which way I need to go, and I can't see anything at all. Just trees, and mist rolling in across the ground. The snow's all gone, and it looks like fog is replacing it.

I think I'm hallucinating. I feel wired, and I'm trying not to panic. I feel more trapped out here than I did in the house.

Everything is fucked. I need to pick a direction and walk.

[Click; rattle]

[Click; rattle]

[Whispering, again] The lights are back. They're in two directions from where I'm standing, both of them seem too far to still be in the back yard, unless I've gotten back very close to the house, and I don't anything like the back of the house.

But it's pretty obvious that wherever I am isn't the back yard. Or if it is it's some weird version where rules like space and time don't apply. For all I know I'm still in the foyer. Maybe whatever was on the stairs got me after all. Or maybe something else is going on completely.

[She begins walking]

At any rate, even if I'm just being manipulated by whatever's doing this, I don't have much of a choice, do I? It's pitch black out here, and even though it's not cold any more I can't just wander around, hoping. The fog has gotten thicker. The lights are the only landmark I've got. So let's see what it is they want to show me.

I'm moving toward the lights on the left. They look the same as the others—a string of fairy lights twinkling in the black. And as I walk, it looks like there's actually a path here? At least a flat area taking me toward the lights.

[Quieter] Here we are. Just behind this tree. It's another...

Oh god. It's...Ginny, and she's dead. Or she's lying on the ground, covered in blood. There's no one else here. She's in the center of a grassy area, spotlit like a stage. She's wearing the same dress. Her stomach is...ripped open. Her eyes are open, but she's not...

Oh, shit! Oh Jesus!

[She runs, wildly]

[Click; rattle]

[Click; rattle]

[She is breathing heavily, paused now]

I think I'm safe. It didn't follow me. I don't think...I don't know if they *can* follow me. It's like these tableaux are, I don't know, a film. Or a stage play. Like they're performing for me, but I don't know if the people I'm seeing are real.

She was...Ginny was lying there, murdered. Like she was in the photos, the ones that were stuck in that book. But when I stopped and looked at her, she sat up, smiling. She reached out to me, and something shifted in the shadows behind her, something coming out of the trees. And I ran.

I couldn't clearly see what was behind her, what was slouching into the circle of light. But I know anyway. A tall man in a black suit.

I'm crouching in another clump of trees, trying to figure out what direction is what.

[An indistinct sound off to her left]

What is that? Oh shit. More lights, right there. Like twenty feet from me. Why are they playing with me? I feel like if the man in the black suit wanted to kill me I'd already be dead? What is it they want me to see?

[She walks a few feet, peers around a tree]

Another clearing, but this one's empty. Fairy lights strung between the trees. And it looks like...yes! I can see the fence, just beyond the clearing! I made it!

[She begins walking quickly, then stops]

[Whispers] Fuck. It's not empty. And I'm spotlighted in the center of the clearing. Just in outside the circle of lights there's...

I don't know what to do. I can see the fence. It looks like houses on the other side. That means a phone.

But there are people here. Four people. Standing separate, each one against a tree at the edge of the clearing across from me. They're facing the trees, standing with their hands at their sides. I don't know if they know I'm here. Can I make it past them? Why are they so still?

[Two steps; she stops and cries out]

[Whispering again] One of them moved, turned its head toward me. He's not moving now. Just standing there, with his head turned. But it's Matt. Matt from last year. Dead Matt.

How fucking dare they?

He can't be real. None of this is real. I'm going over the fence.

[She runs]

[Click; rattle]

[Click; rattle]

[The storm is just audible. In the distance, perhaps?]

I made it! I'm over the fence, in the trees on the other side. They tried to stop me—they all reached for me. Matt face and hands, and the other three too, moving surprisingly fast away from their trees and reaching for me. They didn't get me, obviously. But I did feel one of them brush my shoulder, clutching at me as I pulled up and over the fence. So maybe they aren't just images?

Matt wasn't my fault. We argued, sure, and he was an asshole, but that was hours before what happened happened. He was cutting a board with the table saw, and he slipped. His hand got caught first and then he went down head first into the blade. He was already bleeding out when we got to him. It was tragic, but it was nothing like what happened to Ginny. He just

slipped. That's what the inquest found, so that's what happened.

[A beat]

I can sort of hear the storm now, but far off. Like I'm in a bubble, and the storm is outside of it. Like the opposite of a snow globe. I don't know what's real and what's not anymore. There's no way this is still Saturday night.

But I made it over the fence, so I'm almost free. The houses I glimpsed should be just through these trees.

[She walks; the storm gets louder]

It's snowing again. I've got to get to a phone. I've got to tell someone about Jack.

There! There's a house.

[The storm intensifies]

Good, there's someone in the yard. I just need to...oh no.

[Whispers] It's him. The man in the black suit. He's got his back to me, and he's digging. He has a shovel and he's digging in the ground just behind the house. There's something on the ground beside him. It's covered with snow, but I know what it is. He's burying her.

But worse than that. I haven't made it out at all. This is where I started.

I'm back at Hawthorne House.

[The storm is screaming]

[Theme music; credits]

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