

The Final Blackout

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Most people who pick up these kinds of books are searching for answers. Answers about why something happened. Answers about how they cannot make the same mistakes. Answers about what makes a person commit such horrid crimes. Answers about what makes us human and inhuman.

And some of you may feel like this book ends up giving you more questions than there are answers. Out of the 500,000+ bingo halls operating in the United States, what led Veronica Reed to the specific places that she ended up bombing? How did she plant the bombs without someone realizing something was wrong? What impact will this continue to have on the bingo community at large in the years to come?

To all those people, I cannot guarantee that this book will bring you the answers in the way that you wish it would. Life is often more complex than we give it credit for, and even now, I cannot give you the complete reasons for why Veronica Reed, the Bingo Bomber, did what she did. She is a woman that left behind a life in pieces, one that is almost as hard to reconstruct as the bingo halls she blew up and the lives she destroyed.

I don't write this account as a way to make you pity her, only to show you where the shades of gray exist in this story. I know that families have mourned for over two decades and will continue to mourn—I number among you—but I wish to bring some closure to this story as unsatisfactory as it may seem.

Most of what we know about the woman comes from what she left behind, what little that may be. Some of it can be verified through records and the people who knew the Bingo Bomber at one point or another. The rest may only be a fabrication, a justification

for the horrors she inflicted upon five communities. But it is all that we have left to look at, to examine to understand what bring a person to such a point in their lives.

The Final Blackout: Veronica Reed

Veronica smiles at the counter worker as she slides the ID back across the azure blue counter. The worker is tired, hiding it behind a facade of a smile. One that is far too thin to work as she likely wants it to. After tonight, she may find that her false smiles are even harder to conjure on demand. That is if she is ever able to smile again.

Turning away from the counter with her clear plastic bag in hand, she looks over the people settling into their seats for the night. Some are recognized as regulars from the other times she has come to the hall. The older woman who sits as close to the bathroom as possible to minimize hobbling distance. The couple that sits at the table next to the doors, seeming always ready to bolt out of their seats the moment the last number of each seat is called, desperate for the next drag of their cigarettes. The girl who doesn't come to play but to work, oftentimes looking even wearier than the woman behind the counter does. Tonight she looks like she is on the verge of tears, the dried remnants of those she has already cried marring her face.

A part of Veronica wonders for a mere second what caused her such sorrow, but that part is quickly consumed by the pulsating painful part. The part that has been coming to this bingo hall sporadically for months, each time with a new name and a new face.

She finally takes a seat, somewhere she has never sat before and will never sit again even if this place manages to survive what is coming. She does nothing to make herself memorable, nothing that will distinguish her in someone's mind later. She has found that it is better this way.

She goes through her cards, ignoring the excited chatter of the gaggle of teenagers down the table from her. It must be their first time playing bingo. It would not have been her way of celebrating her first steps into the world of adulthood. Sitting in this mostly windowless building,

light coming in only through the glass windows and doors near the front counter and through the shade-covered back door.

The whole point of the disguises and the fake names is to blend in enough not to draw too much attention while not being so obvious about it that she sticks out anyway. So Veronica comes in on random days for different sessions, buys the smallest pack possible, and asks only enough questions to make the workers and those around her believe that she is a novice bingo player. No one can guess the truth, or the whole game is up.

When most people who have never truly gone to play bingo at a bingo hall think of the game, they picture a bunch of old people hunched over cards they can hardly read while a just-as-old caller spins the handle of a little machine that spits out numbers that they can barely read as well. Well, that's nursing home bingo, not bingo hall bingo.

The games played in a bingo hall are populated with a variety of people from eighteen to a hundred and seven. The caller has number balls that are spun by air and pushed to their hand by demand. Number calling is a mere formality, more for the novice than anything else, as the numbers are flashed on a screen and recorded on a board. Bingos are electronically verified in most cases. The heart of the game may be the same as childhood experiences in a musty old gym, but the technology has changed how difficult it is on the people running it.

The big room, divided only by a dark gray painted wall that give the illusion of windows between the two sides of the room, starts to fill out, and in between counting the number of people settling into the dull brown chairs for four hours of bingo, she watches the two floor workers and two kitchen staff scurry past her. The young kitchen worker who looked on the verge of tears earlier seems less likely to begin leaking water now, but in between giving people

water and food and coffee, she glances at her phone as if she is waiting for a text that has yet to arrive.

By the time the caller leaves the front counter where he had been ringing up customers along with the other two counter workers, takes a seat at the stand near her, and pulls on the headset to begin the games, Veronica has counted the number of people present several times. 75, not counting the workers of which there are seven. Perfect, just like all the other times.

She touches the box in her pocket, a silent promise that after tonight she will never have to carry another of its kind. Though it is lighter than when she first bought it, a weight lays heavy in her pocket, one of finality.

Mechanically, she plays her cards, not caring if she actually bingos or not. That is not the game she is here to win tonight. It is one of numbers and winning, but it has nothing to do with paper or money. Well, perhaps that is not exactly true. Money and paper have their places in her games, but it is not the roles that most people want them to play.

The moments when Veronica is not watching the numbers flash across the screen in front of her, she is scanning the floor of the bingo hall, watching the people that sit unaware of what is coming in a couple of hours. The young worker keeps catching her eye, and again, a flicker of curiosity ignites in her chest as Veronica watches her glance down at her phone.

There is no place for pity in your heart tonight, she tells herself. You have a job today, and then you can finally be free. You need to care less about what she is worrying about and more about what you need to accomplish. Besides, for all you know, she is checking her phone to see if a dumb video she has been waiting hours for has been uploaded on YouTube.

Halfway through the first set, the old woman sitting in front of the teenagers at Veronica's table turns around and shoots them a nasty look. Sure, they are being a little loud, but

it cannot be expected that the hall is completely silent all of the time especially with little to stop the noise beyond the tables and the people. When she dares to look over at Veronica as if it is her responsibility to silence them, she gives the older lady a smile that must chill her to the very marrow of her bones. The expression on her face tells Veronica that a part of her deep within recognizes her mission tonight and realizes that noisy teenagers are the least of her problems.

She stifles a half-hysterical laugh that threatens to bubble out of her throat. There's always one person who recognizes that she doesn't belong, but they never quite figure out before it is too late for them. The set ends a while after, and a wave of people rises out of their seats, rushing to the bathrooms, to outside, to the concession stand, or to all three.

Remaining in her chair, Veronica continues her observations while running her fingers across the worn box in her pocket. One of the floor workers yells something at the girl working in the concession stand, and she half-shakes her head, gaze drifting over the line of people that her coworker is barely making a dent in. She disappears around the corner and a moment later, emerges with a coffee pot in hand, striding across the length of the hall.

There's another young girl standing outside in the entryway, a phone pressed against her ear. Her makeup is coated on heavily in a pathetic attempt to make herself appear older, dark lipstick and dark eyeliner. It only highlights how scared and angry she truly is as she talks to the person on the other line. The minute she hangs up, she weighs the cell phone in her hand as if she is trying to decide to put it away or heave it at the wall with all her strength. Then her shoulders curl inward, and she sinks to the floor as if the weight of the world suddenly was dropped onto her.

The concession worker appears to be the only one besides Veronica who notices the distraught girl in the entryway, and her gaze waffles between her and the line of people still

waiting for service. With a sigh that wracks her whole body, she walks back behind the counter, efficiently taking over the slack of her incompetent coworker. However, her eyes keep going back to that other girl whenever they have the chance.

The second set begins, drawing her attention back towards her cards. Veronica's heart starts to thrum against her chest. *Soon, soon, soon.* The floor worker that yelled at the girl earlier passes by her table, and she manages to contain the scowl only by thinking about what will likely be her fate. Her conscience whispers, *that's rather harsh*, but it is a mere buzz that she pushes away with much-practiced ease.

After the concession workers rattle by with their cart and half-whispered *Are you doing alright?*, Veronica notices that the two of them are having a debate over something in the back. The younger of the two, the one that had been on the verge of tears earlier, finally throws up her hands in frustration and takes the small jar containing the tips they have accumulated so far in the night. In front of the watchful eye of the other, she divides the money into two piles before dumping one back into the jar.

Then she walks out from the kitchen with the crumpled bills of the other pile shoved into her pocket and heads for the entryway where the heavily made-up girl has been sitting for the past half hour. She crouches down to her level and offers a hand. The other looks up with a mascara-streaked face, finally accepting the hand that has been extended to her before they both head outside.

Veronica pulls her attention away from the scene, realizing that she hasn't marked any of her cards for the past two games. *Never mind that*, she thinks. *It's time to finish this anyway.*

Quietly, she pushes back her chair and walk around the exterior of the tables, along the lighter gray walls that form the outside structure of the building. She could be a ghost for all the

attention that the other players pay her as she opens the glass door to the entryway. Now Veronica can see outside where the worker is sitting on the curb by herself, her pockets empty again and her eyes staring out at the last remnants of the sunset.

At that moment, she does something that she never truly planned on despite the voice whispering *don't mess this up now*. She reaches into her own pockets and pulls out a thick envelope, one that she had intended to leave far enough away from the hall that it would survive before she disappeared forever. Sitting down on the curb next to the girl, Veronica finds that tears are running down her cheeks, and she doesn't even notice the other woman's presence.

"Having a rough night?" she asks, the first words she has said aloud since ordering her bingo cards nearly three hours ago.

The other's body jerks with surprise as she turns to look at her. "Isn't that obvious? Heck, I've been having a rough year, but my struggles are nothing compared to that poor girl. It's funny that every time I think my life is the worst out there, I cross paths with someone who has it worse. What about you? Having any luck with your cards?"

Veronica shrugs. Obviously, she can't tell her that she's not really here to play bingo, and she could care less about how good or bad her cards are. "It's just a game. The money that I could possibly win would be nice, but I am not banking my luck on it. Hence why I am out here instead of inside playing the cards. Do you want to hear some advice from me that might make your night a little better?"

"Couldn't hurt," she answers with a little laugh, swiping a finger under her glasses.

"Take this envelope from me, get in your car, and go home. You're clearly not happy, and no one will likely notice that you are gone until this set ends if any of them notice at all."

"I can't just leave. There's so much work to do, and the last thing I need is my boss calling me to ask why I left without talking to him or clocking out."

Veronica smiles at her, not the one that she had shown to the old lady earlier that night, but one that she had forgotten that her lips could make until that moment. "Trust me. Leaving now might be the best decision that you make tonight other than helping that girl, and doing a little more work won't kill the girl you're working with. If your boss calls you to ask where you went, just tell me that your important phone call came through and you had to leave."

Uncertainty flickers across her face as she looks at the thick envelope Veronica is extending to her. Finally, she reaches out with trembling fingers and takes it from her. With a slight sigh, she stands up from the curb and brushes off her jeans. Before the girl walks away, she looks over at her and asks, "Why?"

"We all deserve a little happiness in our lives. Life is short, sometimes shorter than we think, and you looked like you could use a little boost tonight."

"Thank you," she says quietly. A minute later, she is buckled into her car and driving away from the bingo hall, pausing only long enough to wave at her.

Veronica takes a moment to gaze at the sunset that is still staining the horizon, memorizing the pale oranges, pinks, and reds. It has been a while since she took the time to focus on anything other than the game she is playing. *What happened to the life that I should have been living? What kind of a monster have I truly become?*

She shakes off the remnants of that thought, *too little too late*, before rising from the curb and reaching for the box in her pocket. Flipping back the worn lid, she looks at the single cigarette remaining in its depth. "Hello, old friend. Are you ready to finish what your brothers and sisters have started?"

She flicks the lighter she pulls from her back pocket and lights the thin white stick. She stares at the azure painted blue walls of the bingo hall with a sigh before walking over to the fenced-in smoking area. Dropping down on the bench there, she listens to the traffic she can only hear rushing by while discreetly reaching down to the rocks that run along the outside of the wall to lit the fuse that is hidden there, disguised by the string lights someone has left up from Christmas. With a melancholy smile, she rises from her seat to toss the box and lighter into the garbage and walks back through the doors.

Everyone has fears, obsessions, ghosts, skeletons in the closet. Mine started with dark rooms in the middle of winter. Empty shelves and an emptier stomach. Hidden paychecks and lies. Most of all, a hatred of the numbers 1-75. Now it's flames, shattered buildings, and ghosts that plead, plead, plead for mercy and justice.

I remember obsession, a hollow-eyed man making hollow promises. My mom walking out the door with shattered dreams, shattered hopes. Dad continuing his promising even as he absent-mindedly patted me on the head on his way out the door.

I learned that there is a fine line between enjoyment and obsession. That there are people in the world that believe everything can be fixed if they happened to get the right pattern of number on the right card at the right time, regardless of whether or not they are ignoring all other responsibilities in life or that they spent thousands upon thousands to get to that perfect pattern, that perfect jackpot.

Most people, they shake off the anger and pain. Me, me though, I nurtured it. Nurtured it even when there wasn't any light to do my homework by at night, no one there to tuck me into bed, no money to secure my future. And my small seed that I had planted grew and grew and grew until it became a jungle, choking out anything and everything else in my life. And rather than uprooting it, hacking at the overgrowth, I stood in the middle of it and let it entangle me even more until absolutely nothing else was left.

I don't want fame or fortune. I want eyes to be opened. To see the little girl huddled in the closet wrapped in blankets in an empty dark house, hoping desperately that the cycle is broken. Instead of dancing around her again.

The Look: Millicent Jones

Millicent Jones had left the house promptly at 4:45, her husband sequestered down in the den with his feet propped up in the worn recliner. He occasionally went with her to the bingo hall on the one night a week she went, but most of the time, Mr. Jones was more than happy to let his wife leave him at home for over five hours. It gave him a chance to both catch up on all the shows he had recorded over the week and to raid his secret stash of junk food without Millie harping on him about his health.

Mrs. Jones knew exactly why her husband was fine with her raking over the twenty or so dollars a week to play bingo on a Saturday night, but she let him think that she didn't have a clue what he did while she was gone. The shows and junk food were his way of relaxing; hers was sitting in a chair made comfortable by a cushion and dabbing numbers in certain patterns. And she usually won enough money to go back to the hall the next week. What she didn't need to spend on her cards, she set aside for other things that she considered luxuries.

Tonight, though, tonight felt special. Millie felt that there was something spectacular going down at the bingo hall tonight as she drove the old brown minivan that had once hauled around all of her children. The bingo hall's parking lot was populated by only a few cars when she pulled in, and most of them she recognized as regulars. She wouldn't consider any of the people at the hall more than acquaintances, but she loved the way that the workers would dote on her. Depending on who was working and how much money she won, she would sometimes tip a little more generously. She considered it one more way of contributing to the place she had come to consider her sanctuary.

It was exactly 5:00 when Mrs. Jones left her van and walked towards the door, saying hello to Jeff, who had been in charge of unlocking the front doors that night. She had brought her favorite bingo bag that night, the one that she had embroidered herself with bingo number balls that looked like yarn from afar. It had been hard work to complete, but she had considered it a labor of love. It contained a small box of tissues, two dabbers (dark purple and a striking red), a tube of chapstick, and her reading glasses.

Millie picked the same seat that she always sat in, placing her bag on the table before placing the cushion she had tucked under her arm onto the chair. It was exactly the right distance away from a board that she could see the numbers without straining her eyes overly enough but far enough away from the bathrooms and doors that the noise wouldn't disturb her too much. Once her place had been claimed, she made her way up to the front counter, taking a moment to study the special board to decide if she wanted to spend a little more tonight.

She decided not to by the time she had made to the front of the little line, telling Opal that she would have her regular pack. The worker was about the same age as the youngest of Millie's children, which might be why she always chose Opal's line on the nights she was working. She paused a moment longer than she would normally to talk to the younger woman since the hall wasn't terribly busy. Mrs. Jones always told her husband that taking moments to socialize with the younger occupants of the hall, whether they were customers or workers, allowed her to pretend that she was still young enough not to qualify for senior discounts.

Once she had left the counter, she returned to her seat, carefully sliding the cards out of the clear plastic bag that they always came in. The bag was left on the table where Isadora or Clara would pick it up for the counter people to reuse. Millie sorted through the cards, making sure that they were all there and that she had them in the correct order. Out of habit, she always

picked up a paper outlining the games and their order even though she could have likely played the whole bingo rotation in her sleep by now.

Satisfied with the appearance of her table with each set of cards sorted and her two dabbers sitting next to her bag, she rose out of her seat and walked towards the concession stand. Two of the younger workers were there that night. Annie, who had been a familiar face for several years and who had just returned from the university for the summer, and Maggie, who was by now also a familiar face after a year of working. Despite appearances, Annie was the younger of the two, and Millie considered her like another grandchild, one that she never grew tired of talking to.

Tonight, she had seemed very distracted, barely noticing the older woman until she had asked for a lid for the cup of water she had poured. Then Annie smiled at her, one that may not have been as bright as her usual one, but one that made Mrs. Jones feel special nonetheless. The young woman had secured the lid onto the cup for her while asking how her week had been since the last time she had come to the bingo hall. The two of them chatted for a bit until Maggie called for her help, and Annie wished Millie luck.

There was still about an hour before the actual games would begin, so she wandered back to her seat. Glancing around, she noted with satisfaction that it appeared that the bingo hall wasn't going to be terribly crowded that night. Fewer people always meant better odds, and while none of the fluctuating jackpots was at large levels, Millie had her eye on one of the more permanent jackpots.

It was the elusive \$5,000 prize, and she had a good feeling about her chances of winning it tonight. That feeling increased when she had found the cards that corresponded with the game and dabbed the numbers that one of the workers had drawn before the doors had opened. Of the

twenty-five numbers she needed for a blackout, one of her cards was only missing six. She had told herself that if she managed to get the jackpot, she was going to buy Mr. Jones that new recliner that he had not so secretly had his eye on for a while now. She would have some money left over after that, but that would go into savings.

Millie was pleased with how her night was going thus far. She had had two lovely conversations with some of her favorite workers, and Clara had been impressed with the state of her cards when she came by to pick up the bag off the edge of the table. She couldn't complain until the gaggle of teenagers sat down behind her.

One of the rules of the bingo hall, a rule that was repeated over and over again at the beginning of each set by the callers as well as written on the game sheet, was that during gameplay, players were supposed to keep their talking low and to a minimum. Mrs. Jones just knew the moment that the group of five teenagers sat down that they were not going to abide by this rule. And nothing ruined her night faster than having to focus on ignoring someone else's conversation in order to hear the numbers being called.

She managed to block out the teenagers' excited chatter for the first half of the set, but each time they didn't bingo, they got louder. It was beginning to grate on Millie's nerves, and she finally turned around, hoping that they would see how frustrated she looked. It didn't do any good. Desperately, she looked towards the woman sitting at the other end of the group's table, figuring that perhaps she would be just as annoyed with the noise level.

Instead, the dirty blonde gave her a chilling look, one that Mrs. Jones felt deep within her bones. The look bored into her, reminding her of the warnings that her children had pressed upon her a few years back when the Bingo Bomber appeared to make a reemergence. She had shaken

off their concerns at the time, but for a brief moment, she remembered those fears as they swept away all thoughts of jackpots.

She couldn't quite identify what struck her as wrong as she stared into the woman's hazel eyes. It's an emotion that the older woman couldn't put her finger on, something that was just enough to bring some of the old fears and worries back, but Millie managed to shake off the feeling of impending doom. After all, it's her night to win big, not to worry about some nonsense about bombings and destroyed bingo halls. Something that could never happen here anyway.

She turned back around as the caller started the next game, vowing that she wasn't going to look backwards again. No matter what she thought was happening.

Eventually, the teens started to settle down, the excitement and novelty wearing off. It was the beginning of the second set, and Millie decided that during the break, they must have run off some of their extra energy. She was still chilled from the woman behind her though, and on occasion, she could feel her eyes boring into the middle of her back. However, she pushed the lingering doom and focused back on her cards.

When the \$5,000 jackpot game began, she couldn't stop her foot from shaking nervously under the table. She had ten chances to get the last six numbers she needed on her card before the jackpot dropped down to \$100. The younger woman behind her had left to go outside some time after Annie and Maggie had gone around with their cart. Millie had only noticed the lack of her presence because she could no longer feel the gaze.

The number balls rolled around in their blower behind her, and she kept a careful eye on the screen as the first number of the game was called. She wasn't going to miss her chance if this was her night to win the jackpot. The first number was one of the six that she needed as well as

the next two after that. She was down to three numbers, and her heart was pounding against her chest.

Millie was barely breathing as the numbers called started to climb, and with two of the ten balls left before the jackpot dropped, she let her dabber hover over the last number she needed on her card. Her vision tunneled as she stared at the number: a 75, the largest number possible in a game of bingo. The second to last ball wasn't what she needed, and she hardly noticed the return of the woman behind her as she slowly raised her eyes to the screen where the last ball was making its way to the caller's hand.

It was the 75 she needed, and with a shaking hand, Mrs. Jones dabbed the last number on her card. The seconds that it was going to take the caller to actually say the number seemed to stretch on longer and longer as she waited, staring at the blackout that would guarantee her the jackpot.

Just as the sound of the O was coming out of the caller's mouth, and Millie's lips were starting to form the word bingo, the world around her exploded. In the split second before the wall nearest her started to tumble towards her, she looked back at the woman. The woman who looked too calm now, who had simply closed her eyes and accepted the impending death as if she had known it was coming.

At that moment, Mrs. Millicent Jones realized what had chilled her so much about the look on the woman's face earlier. It had been the look of death. If she had had time to cry for the loss of her sanctuary and the likely deaths of the people she had grown so fond of here, she would have.

But rather than crying or sending a hasty prayer to the heavens, she merely closed her eyes like the woman with the look of death and clutched her winning card tighter. The night had

been special, but it wasn't the kind of special any one of the occupants of that bingo hall had been hoping for.

I thought I found light once, a lantern to chase away all the darkness in my life. But it was overtaken, it had to be destroyed. Stomping out the small part that felt the security that was lost during childhood.

Thomas.

Did he know what shadows lurked behind the eyes he loved? If I was an overgrown jungle, he was a meadow by a river. Too trusting to see that tools he was giving me, what he was helping the skeletons to create.

He loved the faded version of me, the incomplete person. Took me around his childhood farm, telling me all his dreams, dreams that grew to encompass me. But only in his mind. Never in mine. There wasn't enough room, not with the ideas, the hatred, the ghost of a little girl screaming at me "never, never again".

He got too close to the truth. Or maybe it was the authorities hunting the elusive Bingo Bomber. No matter. Third bingo hall tumbles down and down comes dear Thomas, bullet silencing the dreams.

Apparent suicide. Some closure, some justice. Case closed.

But it wasn't. It certainly wasn't. But they wouldn't know that until five years later. Five years later when the fourth bingo hall was destroyed. And it became clear, oh so clear, that the neat tidy bow was a mess of sticky tape that did nothing to hold the box shut.

He's the ghost that yells the loudest now except he doesn't yell. He sits on the edge of my bed at night, smoothing back my hair from my face. And asks why, why, why, Ronnie. Why those people? Why me? Why this way? Years of telling him why should make it seem more like the truth, more justifiable.

Then why doesn't it?

How do I live with the ghost? How do I live with the memory of the look in his eyes when he realized what I was, who I really was? The last breath, the last light dying deep within his gaze?

I should have let him chase away the ghosts, scatter the skeletons, and push out the fears. A truncated end to a story. Why didn't I?

Dumb Luck: Penny Watson

I inherited my parents' dumb luck. I thought at first that I had managed to escape the curse that had been passed down through both sides of my family, but it caught up to me eventually, erasing that belief. Of course, it had to happen in the hot months of July, halfway through a year that I thought couldn't possibly get better.

Maybe that's why I am at a bingo hall tonight. Not to play, of course. With the dumb luck hanging over me now, I would somehow end up owing them money with every game I won. No, I am sitting here, watching people begin to play because bingo is basically all about luck.

I didn't even know this place existed until I had driven up the street, eyes blurred with tears I refused to let fall and happened to see the obnoxiously blue sign. It called to me like a beacon, a promise that perhaps if I went inside, someone's good luck would rub off on me enough to erase the dumb luck I had inherited. Never mind that didn't always hold true as something about bingo halls tickled the back of my mind. Something that I felt I should have remembered but seemed to have no meaning at the time.

So, I had parked my little rusty car in the half-full parking lot and flipped down the visor to reapply my mascara in the mirror. My armor, the protection against a cruel world that had just turned its fangs on me. I don't know how much good it actually does me, but it makes me feel better as if I am able to present the face that I want the world to see instead of the one that stares back at me in every mirror.

I had just opened my door when my phone buzzed against the hard plastic of the console, a sound that grated on my already frayed nerves. Warily, I picked it up to find that Jeremy had texted me.

We need to talk Penny you can't keep running from this

You had your chance and you blew it

I was surprised nothing was supposed to happen

Well it did and I'm the one who has to pay the price

I hadn't waited to see what his next message would have said because it was the same game that we had been playing since I had first called him with the news that morning. He had hung up on me, confirming exactly how big of a mistake I had made and how much responsibility he was going to be willing to take.

The phone came with me even though I was tempted to leave it behind in the car. My parents were gone again, and I didn't know if they had gotten my message yet. Knowing the luck that ran in my family, they had probably somehow received some jumbled version of what I had sent. It certainly wouldn't be anything that would make them rush to call me or even hurry home. And perhaps that was okay.

The door to the bingo hall opened smoother than I expected it to, a quiet scraping against the sidewalk, and I stepped into the cool entryway, my flip flops echoing loudly across the tiles. The place wasn't packed, not that I thought it would be based on the cars parked outside, but I was surprised to find it populated by both older people and people closer to my age. I stood there for a moment longer before realizing that one of the workers behind the front counter was starting to eye me suspiciously.

I gave her a tight smile before pushing open the door out of the entryway and turning to my right to avoid having to talk to her. The games must have just started because the red numbers on the electronic boards scattered across the room had a "one" underneath the area marked "game number". The wall I was leaning against was the same obnoxious blue as the sign

that first lured me in here. Quickly I scanned the faces that I could see sitting at the table as my phone buzzed against my hip, signaling that I likely had yet another text message from Jeremy.

The noise from the opposite side of the room clued me into the fact that they were here. It was a group of my classmates, sitting at one end of a table while a woman, maybe in her mid-thirties, sat at the other end. I had hoped that none of them noticed me standing there and quickly looked around for a bathroom, where I could hide myself away. Of course getting there meant I had to walk past the front counter, and that woman was still eying me as if she knew I didn't quite belong.

Miraculously I had made it, which left me here, sitting on what was likely the dirty floor of a women's bathroom in a bingo hall. I am locked in one of the larger stalls, not the one with the sink that was clearly designed for someone with a walker or wheelchair, but one of the other ones. My phone is sitting on the floor next to my hip with twenty new messages from Jeremy. My little purse is a crumpled heap on the other side of me, and I am staring at the item that had confirmed what I had only suspected before this morning.

It is funny how something so small can cause so much pain. I look at it once more before wrapping it back up and shoving it into the depths of my purse. The bingo games must be on break because I can hear people starting to open the door to the bathroom, and with a sigh, I shove myself to my feet.

Turning to the toilet I didn't use, I flush it, trying to validate my being in the bathroom. Then I unlock the stall after picking up both my purse and phone, avoiding the eyes of the person who quickly takes the stall that I was in. I stand at the sink, mechanically washing my hands and staring in the mirror at the girl who appears there.

This Penny looks far older than her eighteen years, but that is only because of the lines of pain and grief marring her face and not because of the makeup that she carefully applied. Looking closer though, I can see the fear that lingers in her eyes, the fear of what Jeremy is really going to say the moment that she has the courage to actually call him instead of just texting. The fear of what her parents, her friends, her community will think of her once the truth comes out. The fear of what kind of corner she has forced future Penny into.

When I realize that people are waiting for me to finish washing my hands, I jerk away from the sink and yank paper towels out of the dispenser, cursing whoever put in automatic ones as I wait for the next sheet to dispense. I whirl out of the door, almost running into the line of people waiting at the concession stand for who knows what. I skirt around them, feeling my phone vibrate once again. When it doesn't stop, I realize that it is a phone call instead of a text.

Glancing down once I make it away from the crush of people, I see that it is Jeremy calling, and I know that I can't avoid this conversation anymore. If I do, it is only a matter of time before he shows up at my house, and it will be even harder to ignore him. With a shaking finger, I slide to accept the call and press the phone to my ear.

"Decided to stop ignoring me, Penny?" Jeremy says, and while I can hear frustration lacing his voice, he sounds calmer than he did this morning when I first told him the news. "I was starting to think that maybe I was going to have to chase you to wherever you decided to disappear to."

"What do you mean?" I have reached the entryway, which looks less busy than outside where a half dozen people are smoking.

He sighs. "I drove by your house, and when your car wasn't there, I checked all the usual places you would be. Have you not been reading my messages?"

"Of course not. All you have done all day, Jeremy, is ask me how I could let this happen. As if the guilt rests on my shoulders alone. As if you had nothing to do with what is happening right now. If you were in my shoes, would you bother to read the text messages of the guy that basically told you, 'Thanks for the fun, but no thanks for any of the responsibility.'?"

I hate myself when my voice cracks with the threat of tears, betraying how much pain I am trying to hold back. I stare down at the murky gray tiles beneath my feet while I listen to him breathing into the phone.

"What were you expecting me to say? Neither of us can afford something like this right now. I leave for college next month, you leave for a different college then too. I can't just drop everything right now and tell you that I'll give up my future for this. Penny, we're not even dating."

"You don't have to remind me, but a best friend that has known me for years and who is partly responsible for what happened would be more supportive in my mind. I'm not asking you to uproot your whole life. I'm asking you to be a shoulder to lean on, someone I can trust when everything seems to be going wrong."

Jeremy doesn't say anything for a long moment. "I don't think that I can be that person right now. If you're looking for money, I will claim enough responsibility to help you out there, but I can't afford to do more than that."

"I don't want your stinking money. I know exactly what you would want me to do with it, and I refuse. So take your money and stuff it where the sun doesn't shine!"

I hang up on him, looking at the little section of wall opposite of me as I weigh the phone in my hand. It is so tempting to hurl it at the wall, to watch it and my connection to the world

shatter into thousands of little fragments. Knowing my luck though, it wouldn't break and instead somehow dial 911 or some other nonsense.

Finally, I let my hand drop to my side, refusing to let my hand close against my phone in a death grip. The last thing I need tonight to have glass shards embed themselves into my palm. With a sigh, I feel the last of the strength holding my body upright fade, and I let my body slide to the ground.

How long do I stay there, head buried in my arms, wondering if perhaps I should accept the escape that Jeremy is offering? I will never quite know, but eventually, what little light that is reaching me in my cocoon is blocked by someone else.

At first, I think that it is the counter lady from earlier or maybe the strange lady sitting at the table with all the kids from my school. That is until a soft young voice says, "Are you okay?"

I dare to look up at the sound of that voice to find one of the girls that I am pretty sure has been working the concession stand. She is crouched in front of me with a hand extended out towards me. Looking at her eyes, I notice that she is looking at me with concern, but there is no pity shining there. Well, at least not yet, but if I tell her why I am sitting there crying in the entryway of a bingo hall, that will soon change.

However, I stretch out my own hand and hoist myself up with her help, realizing that my legs have gone numb the moment that I stand. I manage to give her a tight smile as I say, "I must look like quite the mess if you are out here instead of doing something work-related."

She shakes her head slightly, using our connected hands to tug me towards the door that leads outside. "I know what it is like to have a rough day where everything you think you know comes crashing down around you. You looked like you might be having one of those days, and I thought that maybe you just needed a shoulder to lean on."

We sit down on the curb together. I wonder how much she is expecting me to talk, yet a part of me wants to talk to this girl. What sort of person does it take to look at someone around your age and instead of feeling deep pity, feel concern and compassion instead?

"I don't know what you are going through, and I don't necessarily expect you to tell me what has brought you to the bingo hall. I'm Annie by the way." A weary smile touches her lips as she stares out towards the setting sun. "And I know more about horrible days than I ever wanted to know. My fiancé is in the military in the UK, and I have been waiting for a call that tells me I can go visit him in whatever hospital they have stuck him in for over two weeks. I haven't told anyone because I don't want them to sit there and pester me for news or worse, sit there and pity me for the fact that his government has been keeping me in the dark."

Annie turns to look at me. "So, when I saw someone sitting there that looked as miserable and heartbroken on the outside as I felt on the inside, I felt like I had to do something. I don't know what you are going through right now. I don't even necessarily care, but I want you to know that regardless of what you may be feeling right now, you don't have to walk through the darkness alone."

Despite my own opinions on the matter, my body apparently still has enough water in it for tears to materialize again. With a sniff, I say, "Oh man, I thought perhaps I was done with the crying tonight. I'm going to have a killer headache after this."

She reaches over and wraps an arm around my shoulders, tugging me into a side hug. I let my head rest against her warm body. After the tears have managed to clear a bit, I whisper, "I'm Penny, by the way. Thank you for this. It's nice not to feel alone for a little bit."

"It's nice to meet you, Penny. I just wish it would have been under better circumstances." Annie withdraws her arm enough to press a slip of paper into my hand. "I am not always in town

because I go to school at the university, but if you need anything, feel free to call or text me. I will never refuse to answer you."

I manage to stand up, closing my fingers around the paper. She rises with me, and I don't hesitate to tug her into an actual hug, relief flooding me that at least one person tonight hasn't rejected me. When I pull away, she hands me my purse and my phone.

"Text me when you get home, and one day, when you are ready, I hope that you feel comfortable telling me what brought you here tonight. But for now, I am willing to let you go without the story because I can tell that whatever it is has already rubbed you raw enough for now without a complete stranger trying to drag it out of you."

I don't know how many times I mutter thank you to her before I manage to make my way to my car. She waves as I drive past where she is still standing, and I feel a genuine smile stretch across my face, not one that feels like it is about to fracture at the slightest word. While I am waiting to turn onto the main road, I look back to find that she is sitting on the curb again.

When I reach my house, I pull the slip of paper out of the cup holder and carefully enter the number into my phone before texting her as she had asked. Then I go to open my purse to place both the paper and phone into it only to find that it has been crammed full of crumpled money. I break down again in the driveway, wondering if I am ever going to be able to recover all the moisture that has fled my body today.

But I start to think that perhaps my parents' dumb luck hasn't been passed down to me. Maybe luck is more about what you do with the circumstances offered to you, whether you reach out and take the hand offered to you rather than shoving it away. In the driver's seat of my car, with so many parts of my future still uncertain, I touch my stomach and whisper, "I'm going to

give you the best chance that I possibly can. Just you wait. You're going to change someone's world."

With those words, I collect my things and shove open the door to stand in the fading light of the day with renewed courage. And when my phone vibrates a moment later, I don't feel scared.

Clover Bingo Hall. The first, the step towards the end. The only one where I bothered to read through the memorials and obituaries. The one that taught me that ghosts are less troublesome when you don't know what their lives were like, what they looked like, what their names were.

It was a town in Idaho. Or Iowa. Or Illinois. I can't remember now. It was the only time my resolve wavered. Or rather, the first time. It is one thing to feel as if everyone your plan killed or hurt or maimed was unredeemable. It's another to find out that they were someone's beloved mother or aunt or cousin or brother who went to the hall three times a year to socialize. To get out of an empty house. To try something new.

Most of their ghosts are screamers. Especially the younger ones, the one that had days and months and years left to live. There are a few, the older ladies and men who looked death in the face every morning they got up, who stare at me from the corner. Wondering, some of them praying, what I get out of all of this.

I got a name. The Bingo Bomber.

Some college student came up with it. I take his grandma, he gives me a name. I have been tempted to track him down sometimes, shake him out of the obsession he has built around me, tell him to delete the blogs and everything, get a life that doesn't delve into death and justice and vengeance. Do you know how much we have in common? Do you know what kind of a road we walk on? Parallel but not the same. Run before the ghosts take over your mind too.

Clover made me change my plans. I had planned on 75 bingo halls. Symbolism and all that. Final blackout for some, the ultimate blackout altogether. But I could barely handle twenty dead people invading my mind along with everything else. I didn't want hundreds upon hundreds haunting me.

It became five. Five halls, 75 players, every number possible in bingo lit up on the board. And the chances of surviving were based on luck, just like the chance of hitting a jackpot. Five and then maybe people would no longer be blind to what they were missing out on by gambling and ignoring the world around them. Five and then maybe the little girl in my head would stop screaming at me.

But the dead get their revenge. The ripped to shred, the burnt to a crisp, the bled out. They're all there and they're not leaving while I'm still here.

Stroke of Luck: Austin Harper

His apartment would shock some of his students if they ever had a reason to set foot inside of it. Far from the organized state of his on-campus office, every available surface is covered with newspaper clippings, internet printouts, half-organized manila folders, and enough photographs to paper the walls of half a dozen apartments.

Dr. Austin Harper stands in the center of what would normally be the living room and thinks about the best topic for his next podcast episode, a media that is fairly new to him even if the content that he is covering was far from new.

He had been the first one to recognize the pattern. A series of bombings targeting bingo halls across the country. Bingo halls that always had 75 players in them at the time of the deaths. In some cases, there were survivors. In others, searchers combed through the rubble in vain. He had yet to decide which case was worst.

The bombings had been going on for over twenty years. Austin had been the only one covering the story since the beginning, since the first hall was blown up in his little hometown. A bombing that had claimed the lives of friends and neighbors that he had grown up with. He had been the first one to call the perpetrator the Bingo Bomber, a name that clung to him as much as the ashes of 4 bingo halls.

He had been young when the first bombing had taken out the Clover Bingo Hall. There had been survivors that time, more than the second and third bombings. That had told him that the bomber was likely inexperienced, perhaps around his own age of twenty. College no longer seemed to be the most important event in his life especially when he arrived at the smoldering remains to find out that his own dear grandmother had been one of the victims that would never walk away from the bingo hall. Education had been a means to an end, and between attending

classes and working on his diploma, he pored over all the information that he could possibly get his hands to try to stop the bomber before they claimed more lives.

The same obsession over bingo bombings followed him first through the rest of his undergraduate program and later through the completion of his master's and doctorate in criminal justice. This was where he managed to make most of the connections that allowed to access to more information than the ordinary internet sleuth would be able to uncover, the information that he read through on his own due to the hindrances it could cause for the investigation if it found its way into the general public's hands. Information that had been withheld to ensure that law information could separate the copycats from the real Bingo Bomber.

Only one other bingo hall had fallen to the same fate as the Clover during that time, but there had been plenty of false leads and rumors of other bingo bombings that were later discovered to be due to gas leaks and other arguably mundane causes. However, the second bombing showed how the Bingo Bomber had grown in competency, and confirming, at least in Austin's mind, that this person was meticulous in their planning.

He continued to try to dig up all the information he could on the bomber, something that most people, outside of a few school friends, couldn't stomach or even understand. He was determined to bring the bomber to justice, whether it was through his own work or through someone else's.

Now forty-two, Austin has compiled a couple of decades worth of notes, pictures, and maps that had all but taken over his apartment. They chronicle his triumphs and defeats, showing that for every step forward he takes, the bomber always seems to be another five ahead of him.

While the story of the Bingo Bomber had initially brought alarm and concern especially among those who worked and played at such establishments, it had faded into the background for

the general public after it became clear that no easy solution was going to leap out of the woodwork. There was no heroic arrest of the person responsible by the authorities. There was no closure for the families of the victims and the survivors that had managed to find their way out of the rubble. The best that most people could do was shove it to the back of their minds and pray that they wouldn't be one of the next victims.

Most of his colleagues at the university have no clue just how obsessed he is with the bomber unless they happen to follow his blog or more recently the podcast series he is putting together. Some interest is accepted—after all, it comes with the territory—but his interest lies far beyond the week he spends teaching his students about it. He is viewed as eccentric by students and fellow professors alike, a lonely man starting to exit the prime of his life without a wife, kids, pets, or even very many friends. But Austin is never truly alone. He has the stories of survivors, police reports, and his faithful audience (even if they never number very high) to keep him company.

Tonight, though, he has trouble sorting through his thoughts. Standing in the middle of the room, he stares at the corkboard holding some of the information about the second bombing. All of this information is the kind that one could find on the internet if someone was interested in digging deep enough into the Bingo Bomber, specifically picked to prevent him from getting one of his old school contacts in trouble with their higher-ups.

The whirlpool of ideas ends up being interrupted by an alert sounding from his laptop. With a sigh, he looks towards the clock, which informs him that he has been standing there for several hours and that it is nearly midnight. Stepping away from the corkboard and abandoning the mental recollections of the account of a trucker that had witnessed someone leaving the scene

of the bombing minutes before the bingo hall had blown up, he makes his way to the table in the corner.

The laptop had been bought with the sole purpose of scanning through all the news outlets he could find for any news that happened to crop up about the Bingo Bomber. Sometimes the alerts were about events that ended up being unrelated to the bombing such as the bingo hall that had blown up because of a faulty gas line about a decade ago. *Please let it be another mistake. Not another community.*

This time, it most likely isn't from his initial glance. Another sigh escapes him, and he clicks on the first article, scanning through the details that the small town newspaper has to offer him. It seems to be consistent with the M.O. of the bomber: 75 people playing, the hall exploding from the outside in, so on and so forth. Another bingo hall that appears to be taken out by a ghost that Austin continues to chase for over twenty years despite never seeming to get any closer to finding them. *When will I managed to catch up to you?*

He abandons his plans for the next podcast episode, knowing that he is better off writing a blog post about the new bombing and spending the night scouring the online sleuth boards to see if anyone has more information. Dr. Harper pulls a well-used notepad towards him and hunches over the table, noting details: the town where the bombing took place, the name of the bingo hall, the date and time of the incident, and the person who had written the article.

He shoves away from the table, paper in hand and shuffles through the hall closet until he finds one of his empty corkboards. Up on the wall it goes and he secures the new information to the surface, running a hand across his face. As much as he needs to rest, his mind is whirling with the possibilities that this new bombing could bring to light even as he feels the pangs of his younger self finding out that his grandmother was gone in such a horrid way. He knows that

there are families finding out tonight that their loved ones have died or who are hoping beyond all hope that their grandma or uncle or child is going to be one of the ones that would walk away from the ashes.

After staring at the mostly-empty corkboard for an eternity, Austin turns away to return to the table that housed that laptop. He opens up the website that houses the mostly abandoned message boards devoted to each of the bombings. Some of the people he has gotten to know within the context of the tragedies are already starting to talk about the news. It doesn't seem like they know much more than what that one article had reported though, most of the messages being mere speculations, and he accepts that he will either have to wait until one of his contacts reaches out to him or he reaches out to them.

It takes two days, two days of slowly adding what little information the internet and the message boards could tell him onto the new corkboard. Two days of starting a blog post over and over again before deleting it. Two days of trying to forget the pictures that are imprinted in his mind of the other bombings, the rubble and the broken survivors.

When his phone rings, it is almost a relief. It pulls him out of the dark memories that have him staring at the photos he still has of his grandma late into the night and forces him to step away from the computer where all his open tabs are consumed by questions and heartache and anger.

“Austin,” the familiar voice of his old classmate, Agent Vincent, filters through the phone, “we’re pretty sure that we are chasing the Bingo Bomber again. Everything seems to fit their M.O. Right number of people present playing bingo, similar setup of the explosives, fuse likely lit by a cigarette.”

Even knowing that this was likely the case, Austin still feels his stomach sink from the confirmation. *Not again. How many times do we have to have this conversation, continue to chase this bomber?* He shifts in his seat enough to stare out the window at the birds flying past. “How many this time?”

“About twenty so far, but we haven’t finished combing through the rubble yet and it is likely that number is going to go up with each passing moment. It doesn’t get any easier each time I have to set foot in a community that has been torn apart by this bomber. I get why you don’t come to the scenes right away anymore. It makes me feel like a failure for not catching this guy, for not knowing where the next target was going to be.”

“At least there have always been survivors,” Dr. Harper says. *Not that that is really a reassurance. Not when they are walking away from this, changed in ways that they don’t even realize yet.* “From what I understand the bomber’s setup has become more sophisticated over the years. They could easily ensure that most of those people didn’t walk out of there. They could choose to target busier bingo halls or the same bingo halls on nights when they are more crowded.”

Vince growls a curse into the phone. This is familiar territory that they are treading over, thoughts that they have been had over the years. It doesn’t make it any easier.

“At least 50,000 bingo halls in the United States, Austin. Millions of people to protect, millions to warn, and how many of them brush off our warnings or only take it seriously for a few months until they feel like the threat has passed. And the bomber gives us very little to work with. Other than that false lead years back with that guy, Thomas Gratt.”

Now that is a name that brings back memories. Good memories that soured so quickly when the fourth bingo hall was bombed, and it became clear that the man they had believed to be

the Bingo Bomber was not. Unless he had somehow orchestrated events from beyond the grave. Vince and he had gone out for drinks and put the whole matter to rest. Austin had started to write a book about the whole mess, a book that had to be scrapped when it became clear that the story was far from over.

He reaches for his notepad, knowing that he is going to want to start noting down some of the information. “Did any of the workers survive this time?”

“Yes, there were two. One of them is in the hospital in pretty rough shape though she got pretty lucky based on how the bingo hall likely caved in. The other wasn’t even in the hall when it came down. She had gotten into her car and driven home fifteen, twenty minutes before. Didn’t really give me a straight answer as to why other than a customer told her that she should go home.”

“A customer told her to leave? And she actually listened to them? What did she have to say when you went to go talk to her?”

Vince sighs. “Not much beyond that, and I didn’t press too hard at the time. Poor girl is a mess with everything that has happened. And, before you ask, she is definitely not our bomber. Born after the first one happened. Clueless about some of the patterns and characteristics that only our bomber and us would have intimate knowledge of. I can tell that she didn’t tell me everything though, but I’m not going to try to talk to her again until things have settled down some. We have time as long as the bomber sticks to their previous pattern.

“Beyond that, I haven’t found anyone else that may have information. No one was out smoking when the fuse was likely lit because it wasn’t one of the breaks between games. The fuse was located in a smoking area that was mostly closed off by a privacy fence so no view

from the street or the parking lot. The people working at the front counter might have seen something through the glass windows, but neither of them made it.”

Austin notes everything down on the paper even as the agent continues to talk. The only promising witness seems to be that bingo hall worker, but they likely wouldn't get too much out of her for a while. He remembers how emotionally raw he felt after the first bombing, and he hadn't even been present, hadn't worked in the bingo hall where it happened. *I can still hear my muffled screams seeping into my ears despite the pillow. Still remember wondering how many other people in the dorms could hear me.* As tempted as he is to tell Vince that he should shake her down before memory fades, he has to trust that his friend knows what he is doing.

Eventually the two turn to other topics, lighter ones, allowing the conversation to naturally drift to a conclusion before exchanging goodbyes. Vince promises to call if he has any more information, and Austin promises the same if he happens to land upon something useful.

Setting the phone down on the table, he stretches and turns back to the computer, feeling more confident in his ability to write a blog post with the confirmation that this is the Bingo Bomber's work.

Through sources, I have confirmed that the bingo hall bombing two days ago was the work of the Bingo Bomber. The fifth hall that this unidentified person has claimed in the past twenty-some years with at least fifteen victims to add to their total count. The list of victims, both direct and indirect, grows longer with each bingo hall that is reduced to rubble.

It is a somber reminder that, despite all of the people that have devoted time, energy, and, in some cases, their lives to hunting down the person

responsible, we still have been unable to stop another community from experiencing the grief and pain that several others have over the years.

We still have no motive, no real leads to the person's identity, nothing other than the ashes and broken families that they leave behind them. Despite the tragedy that has occurred, and it is indeed a tragedy, it signals another chance to find this person and put a stop to them before they target another bingo hall. As usual, I urge anyone who may have been in the area or may know someone who was in the area to search their memories for anything they might have seen.

It might seem small to you, but it could be the break that local law enforcement and the other agencies that have been working on this case need to bring justice and closure. I am not free to discuss all the information I possess at this time, per usual. However, I mourn what has happened just as deeply as those of you who are reading this, whether you have been with me since the beginning or you are just now stumbling on this blog.

One day, we will find a way to lay this to rest, to bring peace to the families and survivors that have suffered at the hand of this bomber, this person who has evaded us for so many years. It does not mean that the road will get any easier, but we cannot give up even though it seems hopeless. My prayers are for those who are having to confront their new realities and for those who continue to strive on for justice.

A week later, Dr. Harper checks his mailbox at the university to find a thick manila envelope has been delivered. It's strange, but he has little time to ponder it on his way to his next lecture and instead shoves it into his bag to look at later.

Later turns out to be when he wanders wearily through the door of his apartment. Somehow he has managed to forget about the envelope until he opens his bag to pull out some papers that he has to put in grades for and see the orange color within the depths.

Abandoning his plans for the evening, he pull it out and checks the address, which tells him that it was sent from the very town where the latest bingo hall bombing occurred. Curiosity piqued, he sits down on his couch with a sigh and carefully peels the seal open before dumping the contents out onto his coffee table.

Inside is another envelope, this one sealed as well, and a folded piece of paper. Trying to not touch too much of the paper, he picks it up and unfolds it to find a letter written on it.

Dr. Harper,

You probably don't know who I am. Don't worry though; I don't expect you to know who I am. And, frankly, I wish I never had a reason to write this letter to you, to have initiated this kind of a conversation. I should have turned this over to the police or the FBI or some other agency like that, but I am sick of thinking about all the questions that they would ask me about it. The questions that they have already tried to ask me about what happened.

You see, I should have died. I was working in the kitchen of the bingo hall that blew up the other night, and I would have been one of the bodies they were pulling out of the rubble if I had stayed. However, I had gone outside to talk to someone that wasn't there to play bingo, a girl that seemed like she needed a friend. After she had left, a woman came outside and sat down next to me on the curb.

I didn't know her; she wasn't one of the regulars. She talked to me for a little bit about normal things, you know, like how are you doing tonight and that sort of thing. And then she looked me straight in the eyes and told me that I should leave and go home. And she gave me the envelope that I have enclosed with this letter.

I have been too afraid to look at what is inside the envelope especially after what happened. I might have opened it before learning what had happened, but now I am terrified to learn that maybe I spoke to the bomber. To realize that I might have saved all those people who died if I had just looked at the contents of the envelope earlier.

Perhaps now you can understand why I didn't want to hand this directly to the authorities. However, you are someone who has devoted most of your life to the pursuit of the Bingo Bomber. You have the connections to get this envelope into the right hands if it is indeed from the bomber.

Please. I am putting a lot of trust into your hands, and I am willing to talk to whoever wants to talk to me about this, but I need someone else to help me take the first step.

Sincerely,

Annie Russell

As much as Austin knows that he shouldn't touch the other envelope, that he should call Vince immediately and tell him what is going on, he can't help himself. He gets up from the couch and finds a pair of nitrile gloves that came with a first aid kit.

Gently, he eases open the seal on the white envelope, pulling out just a bit of the first sheet of paper to read it. The few sentences that he can see both thrill him and send a shiver down his spine.

In the past twenty-two years, I have bombed four bingo halls in various locations across the nation, killing or seriously injuring nearly 200 people. Tonight I will bomb the fifth, my last, the final one. My name is Veronica Reed, and I am the Bingo Bomber.

With shaking hands, he reaches for his phone and dials Vince's number. When the agent picks up, he says, "Vince, I have something that you need to see. I think we may have gotten a break."

Sometimes I wonder if anything would have been different if my dad was still alive or my mom took the time to hunt down the daughter that she had left behind. Would one of them realized the path I had decided to take and found a way to stop me? Would either of them have even recognized what was going on or would they have only seen what they wanted to believe was true?

I do have some regrets. I would be the first to admit that. In the middle of the night, when I am alone except for the plans brewing in my head, I think about how my life could have been different had I turned from this road I am walking.

I think maybe in another world I would have loved Thomas the way he deserved. That my nights would have been spent with him, together in that house that had been occupied and loved by generations of his family. Perhaps we would have had children, a chance for me to not repeat the mistakes that my dad made with me. In that world, Dad manages to shake off the bingo addiction.

There's no use lingering too long in that happy place though. I don't deserve it; I know that I don't. I have crafted a life full of blood and fire and broken dreams, leaving no room for happiness and joy. I live in rooms that have my notes etched into the walls, visible only to my eyes.

I thought that, after a time, I would grow numb to the destruction that I bring. That it would grow easier to read through the obituaries, to briefly hear the stories of the people who don't make it. It doesn't, at least, not for me, and I have to find ways to drown out what I have done.

Perhaps that is why it has taken me so long to reach the end of this game. I can't cluster them too close together because the ghosts will overwhelm me. I can hear them clambering for my attention even now as I am planning the end. They are as much as part of me now as the blood coursing through my veins.

Even the ones whose names I never learned are there, half-remembered faces and voices colliding with my dreams. I honestly haven't slept a full night since I started, at least not one that I remember. I figure it's okay to admit these things now. The darkness reminds me of what I have done, a time when I can't escape my sins. Others seek the oblivion of sleep, but I don't deserve that either.

Reversal of Fortune: Annie Russell

I'm still waiting. For a text message, a call, an email, anything. I would even take a telegraph at this point. My heart has been in my throat since the first phone call came nearly two weeks ago. It leaps nearly to my teeth each time the phone rings or someone walks to the door or I refresh my email. So much hope for good news, so much dread for bad.

They wouldn't even tell me much in that first phone call. Some nonsense about me not being a citizen of the country, so they couldn't tell me anything other than it was bad. The official talking to me didn't put it as inelegantly as that though. It was more along the lines of "We regret to inform you that Lieutenant Collins had been gravely injured in service to his country."

Yes, his country. Not my country; though after the rest of his stint in the military and my completion of my degree, I was hoping to work on getting a green card to his country and eventually becoming a citizen. It is the glaring lack of citizenship to their country that allowed the military to leave me out of the loop, other than informing me that he was hurt. Never mind that the United States is allies with them. Never mind that we have known each other for over four years, having met during high school when he came to my town as a foreign exchange student.

The only other thing they had been willing to tell me in that pathetically short phone call was that I couldn't visit him yet, but I would receive word when I had been cleared to. The call had thoroughly frustrated me because our relationship is beyond just dating at this point. His ring is on my finger. Well, it is without my parents' knowledge and only in the darkest moments of the night when I am missing him with every beat of my heart. Liam had promised me that he would do his last year, and then we would tell my parents that we were engaged.

Before all of this, my only concerns had been how my parents were going to react to the news. We had agreed that we were going to wait until my diploma was in my hand before I made the move to his country. Now, here I am, a month before he was supposed to be out of the military, waiting for anything telling me that I could finally visit my fiancé. I don't even know what his current condition is, if his grave wounds have healed or not.

I sigh and look towards the clock. I need to go to work, but each day without news makes it harder and harder to walk out that door. A small part of me believes that leaving would cause me to miss my chance to see him, but the bigger part has always managed to overrule it. That part is beginning to grow smaller with each passing day, and I wonder how much longer I can keep playing these games before I merely refuse to crawl back out of bed.

Finally, I pull on my shoes and walk out the door, car keys hanging loosely from my fingers. The bingo hall has been my place of employment for the past three years, the majority of which has been spent behind the counter of the concession stand, more often referred to as the kitchen by the workers. Somehow, it makes it sound less like a dingy little stand someone would find at a kid's baseball game and more like a permanent establishment. Honestly, the pay is kind of crappy, the job is rough, and most of the workers are almost too lazy to tie their own shoelaces, but I find that staying there is easier than trying to find another job just for when I came home from the university despite some of the worries that come with working at a bingo hall. Especially since it seems like they will never catch whoever is running around the country bombing halls every few years.

Tonight I am scheduled to work with Maggie, who is a nice enough person. I would probably have liked her a little bit more if I had never had to work with her. She just isn't a very motivated worker, which means that I will be having to pick up a lot of slack if we happen to be

busy. Perhaps the work will help to keep my mind off of the fact that I keep believing that I feel my phone vibrating every couple of minutes.

As usual, I am a little earlier than I need to be, mostly because I never know if Maggie is going to be late or on time. On a typical night, it takes me about twenty minutes to set up the kitchen by myself, but on Saturdays, I just have to check the warmers and refill some of the consumables. Which is basically everything in the kitchen.

Every time I come to work at the bingo hall, I tell myself that I really need to find a new job. People are starting to grate on my nerves more than they used to, and part of that can likely be contributed to the fact that I am still waiting for news on Liam's condition. The vast majority of it, though, is the fact that the bingo hall tends to attract a wide variety of people into its walls. The players range from those who come to play because they want the social interaction to those who come to play because they want all the money they can possibly rack in. The workers aren't much better. Some of the older ones seem to just be going through the motions, trapped in a job that will not really lead to better opportunities. The younger ones are either counting the days until they can work a different job or until they can go back to school.

Maggie is only a few minutes late today, which is fine because we don't have to set up the entire kitchen. And really, nothing can beat the day that one of my former coworkers showed up around the same time that we were set to open, and it took him over two hours to even acknowledge me, much less tell me that he had been very late for a reason. I should have been used to getting stuck with mostly crummy workers at this point, but I always had hope that the next person was going to be better.

I am more distracted than usual tonight, glancing at my phone whenever there is a lull to see if there is any news at all. There never is, and I look up a few minutes after the doors had

opened to find that Millie, one of the regulars, had been standing at the counter waiting for a lid. With an apologetic smile, I pull open the drawer and place the lid onto her water cup, running my fingers across the edges to make sure that it is secure. I make sure to take a few minutes to talk to her before I have to excuse myself to grab a drink for Desiree, who had just walked in.

The bingo hall has barely been open for half an hour, and I am already bored. Despite Maggie's every excuse to avoid doing more than the bare minimum, I have restocked the fridge and the few chip boats for nachos that were missing. Unfortunately, the slowness only causes me to check my phone more and more even though each glance only makes my anxiety grow. Maggie has disappeared somewhere, likely the bathroom, and if she told me before she left, I must have missed it.

My night falls into a normal routine, darting around the kitchen for snacks and drinks during intermissions, tidying up and restocking after the games have started, and then rolling out with the rumbling cart about five games into each set to see if any of the customers need anything. The only thing that breaks up the normality of the night is the fact that I keep checking my phone against my better judgement. Maggie seems annoyed at me because of it, but I ignore her, knowing that usually she is the one constantly on her phone and I have a good reason to be on it.

Not that I would tell any of my coworkers about why I am so attached to my phone right now. None of them know that I was dating anyone, much less that I am now engaged to him. I figure the less people who know about Liam and me, the less likely my parents were going to find out before we are ready to tell them.

First set ends far too quickly, which is not unusual. There's always something else that I wish I could get done, but my priorities have to switch when the bingo games take a break. I'm

busy grabbing food and drink refills for people when I see Clara looking in my direction, and I hear her yelled request as she points to the customer she is helping. I resist the urge to run a weary hand across my face and ignore the fact that I heard her. Instead, I half-shake my head at the line that Maggie is plodding through slower than a sloth and reach for one of the coffee pots sitting on the warmers.

It is on my way back, coffee sloshing against the glass walls of the pot as I walk, that I notice the girl. She might have looked familiar, but I couldn't place her in my mind at the moment. I keep an eye on her as her entire body tenses. Whoever is on the other side of the phone must be saying something that she expected but doesn't like to hear, and for a moment, I pause in the middle of the bingo hall. The coffee still moving in the pot is the only noise I hear as I look at the girl, feeling her pain as my heart beats against the cage of my chest. However, when I see that Maggie has maybe made it through two people since I walked out of the kitchen about a minute ago, my legs move in that direction instead of towards the entryway.

I go back to helping customers, but I can't stop looking at the girl. My own worries and concerns have been overshadowed at the sight of someone who seems to be having a worse time of it than I am. The overwhelming urge to go talk to her causes me to almost run the cart across several people's feet during rounds, and I mess up a few soda refills that I shouldn't have. At long last, I push the cart back into the kitchen and look at Maggie.

"I'm going to take my share of the tips early tonight."

It takes a second, but her phone drops from her hand to the ledge by the sink with a sharp thud. I guess I should just be glad that she wasn't holding one of the coffee pots or something because that mess would have delayed me even more. My coworker looks at me in stunned silence as if her mouth is trying to remember how to form words, a rare occurrence for certain.

"Why?" She says at last, and she leans back to glance at the clock hanging on the wall.

"The night is barely halfway done."

I shrug. "There's someone out there that I think needs the money more than I do. I will be back to restock the fridge after I am done talking to them."

It takes a bit of persuasion, but eventually Maggie watches me divide the tips that we have accumulated before I stuff her share back into the jar. I can feel her gaze burning into my back after I have jammed my portion into my pockets and started walking towards the girl who is sitting in the entryway. The door dings faintly as I push it open. There is no reaction from the other, but I hear the tattle-tale snuffles that indicate that she has been crying.

"Are you okay?" I ask quietly, hoping that if she didn't hear my approach that I don't startle her. After a pause, she lifts her head to look up at me with mascara-streaked cheeks. My very bones ache with such an obvious look of hopelessness seeping into the very lines of her face. Almost unconsciously, I find that I have stretched out my hand to her, and when she places her clammy hand into mine, I gently close my fingers around hers.

I don't think she sees me picking up her purse from where she left it on the floor. Once we are outside and talking, or at least, I am talking to her, I slowly unzip the bag and stuff the money from my pockets into it as inconspicuously as I can. I doubt the girl, Penny as she finally tells me, notices when I scoot the closed bag towards her.

I barely remember the conversation that we have. When I happen to see that about ten minutes have gone by, I slip her the piece of paper that I had written my phone number on in an impulsive move. Penny stands up, and I gather up her purse and phone before rising with her. Acting on another impulse, I reach over and pull her into a tight hug, knowing that even though I

probably smell like fryer grease and popcorn oil that she needs the reassurance that she isn't alone.

Once we break the embrace, I hand her belongings to her, wondering what she will think when she finds the money in her purse. I hope that she doesn't think that I did it out of pity. I hope that she understands. I remain standing until I see her old blue car pull out of the parking lot before I drop back to the edge of the curb with a heavy sigh. My fingers touch the hard edge of my phone, but I don't pull it out of my pocket, choosing instead to stare out at the fading sunset.

I feel weary, the bone-deep kind that even five years of sleep can't cure. All I really want in this moment is for my phone to ring and for Liam's voice to be on the other end, telling me that everything is going fine and that I am one of the strongest people he has ever met. Realistically, I know that it is unlikely that I am going to get a phone call tonight especially since it is the middle of the night where he is.

My phone does buzz, and when I glance down, I find that it is Penny. I save her number to my phone before replying. Then I place my phone back into my pocket, ignoring the time that glares up at me. I have no concerns about Maggie right now. Unless she has eaten half the kitchen, we are pretty much stocked for the games tomorrow.

Then the woman with the envelope comes to sit next to me. I would normally have brushed off someone telling me to leave work early, but the look in her eyes warns me not to ignore her, combining with the worry still swirling in my gut whenever I think about everything that could be happening with Liam. Almost against my will, I feel my fingers close over the thick paper of the envelope and my feet take me to my car.

I glance back through my rearview mirror at the turnoff onto the road. I can see the woman walking back into the hall, but something nags at the back of my mind, something more

just the fact that I'm leaving without clocking out, something more than concern for my fiancé. Looking down at the envelope sitting innocently on the seat next to me, I shake my head before turning the wheel to head home.

My goals never involved killing everyone. Though perhaps that would be a mercy compared to leaving behind survivors, people who have been touched intimately by the tragedy. They have to live with the guilt as much as I have to but for different reasons. I wonder what form their ghosts take, how often they are jolted out of sleep by some half-remembered moment.

I have tried to think of leaving my plans incomplete, of not blowing up that fifth bingo hall and leaving the country before everything catches up to me. However, I have spent so much time now that I feel it would be like digging into my chest and ripping out my own heart.

But still I think about the survivors, the people who are pulled from the rubble. How many of them make it past that first year? How many have decided that they can't live with the guilt and the ghosts and pain? How many families have I torn apart? How many people can barely take a step outside of their house without thinking about the multiple ways they could die?

Have my bombings claimed more lives than I truly know?

I can't dwell in that place for long either. It tears into my mind, poking holes into my logic behind what I do. But I am doing this to save others from my fate, to hopefully stop someone else from walking this road for the same reasons that I have. I have to believe that, or it has all been for nothing.

Tell me that I am not the true villain in this story. My choices may not have been the best, but they are something beyond just sitting somewhere bemoaning my childhood and fractured family. I am working towards a goal, working towards something that seems fuzzier and fuzzier with each passing year.

I never imagined that my life would reach this point. I don't remember what I dreamed of being when I grew up. Time and carnage has stolen that from me. Perhaps I never really had the chance to dream about the future, to look at it as the bright shiny almost-unobtainable thing that young children tend to see it as.

However, now, I feel driven on by the past, locked into a destruction of my own making. There doesn't seem to be any way out, no guarantee that, even after I have finished with the last bingo hall, that I will be able to walk away truly. There is not Bombers Anonymous, no support net of people waiting to help me out of the dark, evil hole I have dug for myself. I have lost sight of what could have been, destroyed my own moral compass, even though it crops up often enough to ask me if I am any better than the others who commit crimes for less.

I hate thinking about that, hating confronting the truth.

I am no longer the little girl hiding from the monsters chasing her.

I am the monster in her closet now instead.

The Fortunate: Clara Lewis

It takes five days before Clara fully awakens to understand what exactly has happened. And to start to realize how much her world has been tilted from its comfortable axis. Initially upon waking up in the hospital, she thinks that maybe her lung had collapsed again or some other such nonsense even though it doesn't explain all of the discomfort that she is half-conscious of feeling.

The doctors and nurses discuss what is going on with her, but frankly, she ignores it, uncertain if she wants to know what her prognosis is. It isn't the first time that she had stared death in the face, and she doesn't want to know if it is going to be the last time without divine intervention.

By the fifth day, she has accepted that she will likely not be departing this earth in the near future. She's feeling well enough to sit up and examine the hospital room that she has spent nearly a week in at this point. There's nothing special about it other than there are slightly more cards and flowers than she had expected. Squinting at what little she can see of the cards, Clara can't immediately spot one that bore Isadora's name. Perhaps she is waiting until they saw each other in person.

Clara reaches for the remote beside her to drown out the hospital sounds of beeping and carts rolling and people whispering desperately in the hallways. She idly flips through channels before something on the local news catches her eye.

“The police have not released new information about the Bingo Bomber to the public but have assured the public that the perpetrator is no longer a threat based on the evidence that they have gathered. Most of the bodies of the victims have been recovered from the rubble at this

time. There is still some work being done to identify those who were present at the bingo hall, and the public is being asked to contact the police if they are missing a loved one that might have been present at the hall on Saturday night.

“A memorial service is planned for the victims in the coming weeks, and a page has been set up to help support the families of the victims. To donate or receive information about resources available to you, the website is shown on screen. In other news...”

The rest of the newscast doesn't register in Clara's mind. It's too busy replaying the images of the destroyed hall where she had worked for the last twenty-plus years with Isadora. And she is starting to realize that she is in the hospital because of the bombing of the bingo hall, not because of a health reason.

A bombing. A bombing at a bingo hall.

No, not a bombing at a bingo hall. A bombing at the bingo hall she has spent about half of her life at. A bingo hall and the Bingo Bomber. A demon that has followed in the footsteps of anyone who works in the bingo industry, but why here? Why this hall?

She fuzzily remembers half-arguing with Izzie over who was going to go exchange Barbara's event game cards for the fifth time that night and winning the argument despite it being her turn to take care of the older woman. Watching her friend and coworker walk away from the wall that divided the main room of the bingo hall in half where they stood during the games when there was nothing for them to do. Walking towards Barbara who was seated at the table nearest to the kitchen. And then a loud noise, bright lights, and searing heat rushing at her before she could take another breath, blinding her and cutting off her view of Isadora.

“Oh no,” she says, feeling her breath catch in her throat and vaguely hearing the heart monitor registering her elevating heartrate. “No, no, no.”

A nurse has arrived at her bedside, signaled by the changes, but Clara can't force any word beyond her throat other than the hoarse no's. Something deep inside of her doesn't even need to ask anyone to tell her the truth.

Isadora, fierce stubborn independent Isadora, her friend and coworker that had worked at two bingo halls with her. Isadora was dead. Because of the Bingo Bomber. A jarring end to a life that should have continued on for years yet.

Her nails dig into her palms, the pain barely making a dent in her mind, as she resists the urge to tear out all the IVs and lines connecting her to this hospital bed and run screaming down the hallways until this wild all-consuming grief became just a memory. The nurse is talking to her, a muffled sound concealed behind the roaring in her head, Clara ignoring her.

At some point, her string of no's turns into a hoarse wordless scream, and someone else arrives to slip something into her IV. Something that takes away her thoughts, her grief, her pain, and sets her adrift in a sea of unconsciousness.

The next time Clara awakes, her husband is sitting next to her bedside, new lines wrinkling his forehead. Joe looks as tired as she feels, something in his face telling her that he knows exactly how close he came to losing her, that he knows exactly what she is going to end up asking when she manages to collect herself enough to force the words out.

"Hey, honey," he whispers, running a callused hand across the top of her head. It pulls her awareness to the sore points on her head that she had been able to ignore before the gentle touch.

"How many?" She asks despite not really wanting to know the truth.

Her husband sighs, gaze flitting around the room instead of looking at her. That's enough to tell her that it isn't going to be good, but she already knows that. Her heart beats against her chest, seeming to carry the sound of Isadora's name with it.

“Around thirty from what I heard. Mostly people that were on the left side of the bingo hall near the wall and those who were anywhere the kitchen. The fryer turned into a shrapnel launcher once the heat became too much for it to withstand along with anything else in that kitchen that wasn't design to deal with overly-high temperatures. Those are the people they're having the most troubling identifying.”

Clara reads the words that he is not saying in the tension of his shoulders, the sloping of his spine. Shrapnel, meaning that people had likely been torn to shreds. She thinks of all the components of the fryer, the heavy metal that had made a harsh echoing noise against the tile of the kitchen when dropped. Then she thinks about the glass of the popcorn machine shattering from the heat, joining the fray, even more lethal since it had been moved from the back counter of the kitchen to the front counter where the customers were served.

“Who all did we end up—” her words cut off before she can continue. She clears her throat, forcing herself to try again. “Who all have they confirmed—”

Joe places his hand over her left one, covering up the cuts and burns that still linger. He knows what she is asking even if her mouth refuses to complete the sentence. Quietly, softly, he works through the list of names, and Clara can picture each person, see where they were sitting when their world turned into chaos and pain and fire. Not all of them were regulars, but she spent enough time that night studying the customers that she can place even the unfamiliar names to fragments of memory.

Among those is the group of newly-minted adults, the still high schoolers that Izzie and she had spent the first couple of games helping them figure out how to play. Despite not really knowing them, a part of her mourns the loss of such young lives. However, hearing the names of the customers is nothing like hearing the names of the other workers.

Clara expects that Jeff would be among the dead. She can see him sitting in the caller's stand, headset balanced on his crazy mess of hair and hands maneuvering the bingo balls along with the electronic board embedded in the desk's surface. He had been on the left wall, back basically against it, so at least, it had probably been a quicker death than some of the others. Maggie would have probably gone quickly too as long as she hadn't drifted outside to take a smoke break. Opal and Theresa, the other front counter person working that night, might not have been so fortunate, likely taking the brunt of the glass doors and windows at the front.

Joe hesitates after naming those four. Clara knows that the last two will be the hardest to hear. Annie, the kitchen worker who had started working at the bingo hall months after turning sixteen and who always returned to work the longer breaks. She had shared a love for frosted animal crackers with Isadora and worked hard despite her grumbling some nights.

And Isadora. Isadora with her wicked sense of humor and borderline addiction to Mountain Dew. The coworker that Clara arguably knew the best, the one that had been willing to work four jobs to save up enough to finally buy a house.

Her husband seems to be gathering his thoughts, thumb rubbing against the back of her hand. "Izzie's gone, Clara. It took them a while to find enough to identify, but they have confirmed that she was one of those that died. I know that the two of you were close."

The salt of tears burn at the back of her eyes despite knowing the truth long before she was told. Even if the bingo hall opened again, even if it managed to recover from this tragedy, it would never been the same without Isadora there.

However, now is not the time to cry, not yet the time to mourn. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath to compose herself before looking at Joe again.

“Have they not found Annie yet?”

Clearly that is not the question that he was expecting because a look of surprise flashes across his face before a sound of relief emerges. “She’s fine. She has been helping Mike with the arrangements for the memorial service as well as helping to identify people if the need comes up.”

“How did she survive? If she was anywhere near the kitchen, she should be...” Clara pauses to swallow the strange tangled knot of emotions that have emerged with the news. “There’s no way she survived the bombing. She was standing at the counter when it all happened.”

“Honey, are you sure about that?” Joes says gently. “She wasn’t even in the bingo hall when it all happened. From what I understand, the bomber came outside while she was sitting on the sidewalk and told her to leave.”

“Then why go through with the bombing at all? What made one life more valuable than everyone else who wasn’t warned, more valuable than Izzie’s life?”

Clara hears the venom in her voice, the anger and pain laced in every word. She doesn’t expect that her husband is going to have any kind of answer for her questions. She doesn’t necessarily want him to even try. She is simply trying to wrap her mind around all the loss along

with the revelation that one of the other workers survived because of the very person who bombed the hall to begin with.

And finally the tears cannot be held back anymore. She cries for all the lives lost, for the memories that she could have made. She sees Isadora in her mind, all five feet of her, and she weeps for the children she left behind, all of them adult but all of them having to learn how to live with the loss of their only true parent in such an awful way.

But she also cries with relief that she isn't the only one who is left to deal with the aftermath of this tragedy. That she isn't the only one who is likely mourning the losses and trying to understand how to move past such an event. An event that she wonders if she should have seen coming but stubbornly ignored the signs. A mistake that cost Izzie her life.

Annie finally shows up on the second week that Clara has been in the hospital. During that time, the older woman has seen most of the surviving workers from the bingo hall including Mike, the manager of the hall. He came mostly to talk, about anything but the horrors that have woven themselves into the fabric of both of their beings. Clara knows that he feels Isadora's loss as keenly as her, having been the one to recruit them both from the first bingo hall they had worked at together.

Now she is sitting propped up in the hospital bed, acting like she can't see Annie hovering in the doorway, giving her time to collect herself. Finally the younger woman takes that first step into the room, one that looks like it takes all the strength she has left.

"I was wondering when you were going to decide to come see me," Clara says. Her tone is light and uncolored by the mess of emotions that threaten to rise. "I know that I look pretty rough, but I wouldn't have thought that would keep you away for too long."

Annie all but collapses into the chair next to her bed and buries her head in her hands. “I’m so sorry, Clara. If I had known...if I had just taken the time to think about how strange she was acting, maybe we wouldn’t be here right now.”

She can hear the emotions that form the undertone of those words: the apologies, the pain, the guilt, the relief. How many times has she felt all those same emotions during the time since she woke up to her new reality? How long had it take for her to move past blaming herself for convincing Isadora to do something she should have done, to move past wanting to scream at the ghosts why the bomber had decided to spare one person out of the eighty-three people in that hall?

“You are not responsible for what happened, Annie.”

The younger one lifts up her head, tears swimming in her eyes. “I should have done more.”

Clara shakes her head. “You made a choice. A choice that you regret now because you feel like you should have died as well. You didn’t know the truth about what was going to happen after you left. You didn’t force the customers to come in that night, you didn’t make any of us come to work that night, and you definitely didn’t know everything that was going to happen.”

“She gave me an envelope. The bomber did. If I had just sat there for a moment and actually looked at it, I would have known what she was about to do. I could have stopped her or saved more people. Instead, I was so stuck in my head that I left without thinking.”

“And you likely would have died along with all of us or it would have been worse than it was as everyone rushed to try to escape. I am not saying that the guilt will ever go away, but eventually the wounds will heal into scars, scars that are less painful each time you think about

them because they will no longer be open wounds. Izzie and all the others wouldn't want us to live our lives like we were gone too. They would want us to learn how to move past this.

“That doesn't mean that you will forget them. You will always care for them and carry them with you, but eventually, the good memories will overshadow the pain. It has to. Otherwise, you will be stuck in this cycle of guilt and grief for the rest of your life.”

Annie is crying at this point even as she reaches over to fold Clara into a hug that conveys everything that they can't put into words. And the older woman realizes what she said was right. They all have to remember the good and not allow this tragedy to become their friends' and coworkers' legacies.

She pats Annie's back gently, thinking about all the time she had with Isadora. Remembering how they helped each other through different struggles throughout the years from her health issues to Izzie's divorce. A faint smile tilts her lips, and some of the weight begins to lift from her shoulders even as she knows that this is only the first step in a long process of healing.

I am weary. Even as I draw this account to a close, I long for a night's rest where I am not trapped by what I have done. I write this not for my sake, not to justify my actions or even try to condone them to myself, but in hopes someone will bring to peace to the others. Peace to the survivors.

I don't hope to go down in history or any of that nonsense. I just want someone to see that I had regrets too, that I look back at this blood-soaked road feeling the enormity of what I have done.

I fear what waits for me when I leave this life. I don't know if there's an afterlife or God or whatever else that people may believe in. However, I do know that whatever form the beyond takes, there will be people waiting for me there. And not in the pleasant reunion kind of way.

They will want to rip me to shreds. They do now. But I am still flesh and blood. And they, they are something else. Fabricated memories. Perhaps rest will come to them. After they rip me to shred in whatever lies beyond.

And I think I would welcome it.

I don't know what I will do after the final bombing is done. I don't know how long I can live with what I have done without having to form the next perfect plan, without thinking about the fact that I could be caught before I can finish.

Since I came up with this idea, my life has stretched out in front of me in a fairly known way. I understood the steps I had to take to make it to my next objective. I knew what the end of each bombing would be like. I know what my role is.

However, when I look into the future, it just feels blank. Like there will be nothing left of me because my whole identity has been woven into this. I am empty, a jar whose contents have been slowly evaporating over time. I have just noticed how hollow I feel, how purposeless I truly am. Nothing but a woman haunted. Haunted by ghosts and the past.

Maybe I will walk out the wreckage this time like I did all the times before. But it will feel different if I do. It won't feel so much like a triumph, a perfect ending.

No, I think it will taste like ashes and smell of stale cigarette smoke.

Your Number Is: James Landwell

I throw the glass against the wall hard enough that it shatters and some of the ugly cream paint flakes off. The living room looks like a disaster zone, anything weighing less than a chair or table having been uprooted from its place. The television is a fragmented mess, cracks spreading out from the screen where the base of the lamp hit it.

I reach for another glass, drinking its room temperature contents before sending it soaring after its counterpart. It catches the edge of one of the few pictures still hanging on the wall and sends it to the floor with a noise that feels like it has broken my heart as well.

“You promised you wouldn’t go that night,” I whisper to the darkened room. “We both knew the risks, knew what could happen. If you had waited, we would both be here, able to sigh in relief that we didn’t go to the bingo hall on the day that the Bingo Bomber decided to blow it up.”

I heave myself out of the chair that has become my refuge for the past few days, bare feet sliding across the carnage-strewn hardwood floor. Carefully, I pick up the shattered picture frame and stare into the laughing face of my wife on the day that we committed the rest of our lives to each other.

Glass is cutting into my soles, but it’s nothing compared to the pain that has broken through the haze that I have been drifting in and out of since I received the news. Linda, my Linda, who had grown lovelier with the years is gone from this world. Her face in the picture becomes consumed with my final glimpse of her, lying cold and empty on a table. There was nothing left of the woman I had loved, something that hadn’t seemed real until that point.

I lurch out of the room, seeking something to try to numb the pain and anger that rushes through my veins faster than blood. The clock in the kitchen tells me that it is close to noon, but the curtains that Linda spent weeks picking out make it as dark as the inside of my heart.

Shoving aside the casseroles that friends and neighbors had brought over since hearing the news, I reach into the box at the back of the fridge. I can barely remember my wife's voice teasing me about my habit of keeping a single box of beer in the house for years even as my fingers brush the cardboard at the back of the box.

I let my hand drop out of the fridge, sinking to the linoleum floor in defeat. This isn't how it was supposed to go. We were supposed to have had many more years together, growing old and wrinkly together as we complained about the changing world around us. She should be right next to me, crouching down to half-heartedly scold me about messing up her living room and dragging blood around the house from my cut feet.

I close my eyes and lean my head against the cool stainless steel front of the fridge. If only she had stuck to our promise instead of allowing her best friend to drag her out to play bingo that night. If only she hadn't sat in a different place in the hall than usual, closer to where the outside wall would collapse. If only I could scrub the imaginings of her last moments, the moments when she knew she had to be dying, from my mind along with the sight of her body. If only someone else was still around who could have been the one to collect the body, to make arrangements with the funeral home.

It takes a moment to realize that I have fallen asleep against the fridge and another for it to register that what woke me up is the sound of my cell phone ringing. I stagger to my feet, bumping into every corner and piece of furniture between the kitchen and the living room as I attempt to get to the phone.

I can hear the final notes of the cheery ringtone fading into the corners of the room, and I search through the rubble of the room for the phone. Eventually I find it slid under the entertainment center, just barely within reach. I manage to fumble it out without pushing it further back.

I take the time to catch my breath and sit down in a relatively-clear part of the floor, staring down at the icon that tell me that I have messages in my voicemail. I don't recognize the number of the call that I missed, but whoever it was left a message.

“Hello, this is Stanley Comber calling for Mr. James Landwell. Mr. Landwell, I'm the mortician handling your wife's remains. When we spoke before, you indicated that you were not interested in holding any kind of services and just wanted to be informed when we had completed cremation. We have completed that process, and your wife is available to be picked up any time that we are open.”

The man in the recording sounds the part, both professional and grief-stricken as he tells me that the funeral home is saddened by my loss and so on and so forth. I vaguely remember talking to a man around my own age, still arguably in the prime of his life, but can't bring his features to the front of my mind.

The message ends, prompting my hand to click the appropriate button to delete it. The female voice then tells me that I have three saved messages and asks if I would like to listen to them.

Numbly I allow the phone to open up the saved recordings, trying to recall what would have been so important that I wouldn't have deleted it. The first is a message from an adoption agency, the lady cheerfully reminding “Mr. and Mrs. Landwell that they have a scheduled

appointment to talk about their options” available at the agency. I glance at the date on the phone and realize that date has already passed. I delete it.

Rising from the floor, I stumble back to my recliner before the next saved message starts to play. It’s from that night, and I flinch when I hear Linda’s voice.

“Hi, Jamie. I figure that you’re still at work, so you won’t hear this until you’re driving home, but I wanted to let you know that Cheryl and I are going out tonight. I know that we said that we would go play bingo on Monday together, but I think that Cheryl’s in a rough place and just needs something to take her mind off of things. I’ll call you at one of the intermissions and make sure that you made it home okay and actually ate something. Love you lots and I’ll see you in a few hours when I get home. Drive safe, dear.”

I lean my head back, fighting against the tears. My finger hovers over the 7 to delete this message too, but I know that it’s one of the last times I got to hear Linda so eventually I tap 9 to save the message again and move on.

“James, please tell me that you have seen the news and heard from Linda or Cheryl or anyone that was at that bingo hall. It’s a mess, they’re not letting anyone through, no one is telling me anything about what is going on. All I want to know is if my wife is alive or not and they keep telling me to just leave my contact information and go home until they have managed to put out any lingering fires and started to figure out what happened. Call me back immediately if you hear anything. Please, James, I just need to know what happened. Tell me it’s all going to be okay or some other garbage that people spout when something like this happens.”

I lift my arm to throw the phone before dropping my fist back into my lap in defeat. Hearing Mark’s panic from that night has reawakened all of the grief that I have been trying to

dull since I found out about the bombing. With a sigh, I prop my elbows on my knees and scrub my face until the physical pain overwhelms everything else.

“How am I supposed to move on, Linda? Why did it have to be here in this town and not somewhere else? The Bingo Bomber? Here?”

Against my will, I am transported back to the final time that I saw my wife in any capacity, the manufactured feeling of the funeral home that is supposed to comfort those who come there. The mortician had told me that she looked fairly good for having been through the bombing, and his words had allowed me to look into my wife’s pale face, wondering if the shrapnel would have ripped her to shreds somewhere else, if there were burns further down her body that I couldn’t see beneath the sheet.

I don’t remember signing the paperwork or telling them that she had wanted to be cremated. I barely recall brushing off their recommendation that I hold some kind of service, a way of both celebrating and putting the period at the end of her life. By the time that I walked out of those doors that day, all I could hear was the sound of rocks consuming my body, burying me alive.

But I can’t leave Linda to whatever fate awaits unclaimed ashes, so I eventually push myself out of the chair again. After a quick look in the entryway mirror to make sure that I don’t look completely unpresentable, I slide into my car and drive to the funeral home.

I think that the guy who called me on the phone, Steve, looks a little surprised to see me, but I brush off all the concern and questions and reassurance as normally as I can. Only once I am back in my car, urn containing all that remains of my wife’s body buckled into the passenger’s seat, do I realize that this is the first contact I have had with people since I left the funeral home the last time.

I gently touch the top of the urn.

“I would have gladly given my life for yours if I had known what was going to happen.”

I rest my head on the top curve of the steering wheel and close my eyes until the tears recede and my vision clears enough to drive home. Absentmindedly, I flip on the radio to drown out my thoughts, knowing I’ll have to face them again every day. But something tells me that I might be able to find some light in this drowning darkness, not right away but some day soon.

I pull into the driveway to find Mark sitting on the porch waiting for me. I slowly unlatch the seatbelt and reach for the urn. His head rises from his hands when he hears my door shut, revealing the dried remains of tears.

“Let’s go inside,” I say, cutting him off before he can start to say the words that are lingering on his lips. He quietly follows me inside, letting me shut the door and set down all that is left of Linda’s body on the table in the entryway.

“I see you’re holding up about as well as I am,” he whispers, the sound punctuating the silence that has settled. “I wish we had never found that bingo hall.”

My friend’s voice cracks, and I carefully steer him into the living room. I turn on the light, illuminating the room and all the destruction that screams louder than any words I could ever say.

The sight pulls a harsh laugh out of Mark as he sinks into the couch. “We’re a sorry lot, James. A sorry, sorry lot.”

“I know. What made you decide to come over now?”

He scrubs a hand across his scruffy cheeks, so unlike the well-groomed man I had known for years. “I couldn’t sit at home with the ghosts any longer. I wanted to see my best friend.”

I wait to see if he says anything else, but he stares at the drawn curtains, the look of a walking dead man. Quietly I rise and bring myself to actually dig out a casserole out of the fridge. By the time it has heated up and I have made up two plates, Mark is standing next to the wreckage of pictures, holding one in his hands.

“How many times did we tell ourselves that the Bingo Bomber would never come here?” He asks. “Despite us knowing that there was always a chance that she could.”

It’s familiar territory except for the fact that it is someone else asking the questions. I set the plates down on the coffee table before walking over to lay a gentle hand on his shoulder. “We don’t like to think about how fragile our lives truly are. How uncertain the future is.”

He sighs and hangs the picture onto one of the nails. Both of our wives smile out at us, two couples against an unknown future. A crack runs through the glass.

We managed to pick through the food, hesitantly bringing up memories. Fragments that stab at first before they lessen to more bearable stings as the evening grows older. I have forgotten what it feels like to have another living person to talk to instead of the empty echo of a house.

“We’re going to be okay, right, James?”

I hesitate for a moment. Even a few hours ago, I would have had a very different answer for him. But now, I glance over at what little of the urn I can see from the couch, the touch of happier memories still lingering in the air.

“Yes. I think we are.”

I won't walk away from this one. I have made up my mind.

The ghosts demand justice.

sorry.

Authorities have never truly identified Veronica Reed's remains. However, as of the time of the writing and publication of this book, there have been no signs of any more bombings that could be attributed to the Bingo Bomber. This case has finally been considered to be officially closed, for good this time. Most of this decision rests on the evidence of the written letter she left behind, and Annie Russell's assertion that she saw Reed walk back into the bingo hall that night shortly before the bomb destroyed it.

While this book has not focused entirely on Reed herself, the information that was included, however vaguely in the letter, was enough to confirm portions of her story and trace the past that had been concealed from those investigating the bingo hall bombings for years.

Of the others mentioned within this book, there is less mystery. Mr. Jones, without the influence of his wife Millicent to curb his bad habits, succumbed to a rather unhealthy lifestyle within a year of the final bombing. He soon joined her in death after suffering a heart attack. Surviving members of the Jones family claimed that it was, in part, because he couldn't find a way to live without her after all of the years they had known each other. Whether this is the truth, I will leave up to the reader.

Penny, while unable to salvage the remains of her friendship with Jeremy, decided to attempt to attend the university she had originally planned on despite knowing the challenges of doing so. After realizing that she needed the support system that remained at home, she transferred to a community college nearby. Her parents were not entirely supportive when they initially found out about her pregnancy, but by the time that their granddaughter was born, they had rallied themselves to provide her the help and love that

she deeply craved from them. Her daughter, Elizabeth Anna, was named partially in honor of the bingo worker who offered her a hand that night. She is currently working on completing her law degree, a choice that may have been influenced by the Bingo Bomber and the work done to investigate the atrocities.

Annie herself returned to university in the fall after the bombing, still guilt-ridden. It takes time and connecting with other survivors touched by the tragedies of the bingo hall bombings before she managed to start to forgive herself for events that were beyond her control. Shortly after returning from school, she finally received a phone call from Liam. Over the next two years, they visited each other regularly and eventually got married in a small ceremony. She frequently visits the newly-rebuilt bingo hall though she would be the first to admit that it doesn't quite feel the same with so many people she knew gone.

Clara spent her time helping rebuild the bingo hall after finishing her recovery. When asked why return to a place that now contained such ugly memories, she responded that she wasn't going to allow one person's evilness to stain her love for the hall and the people who spent time there, both living and dead. She continues to check in regularly with Isadora's children, who consider her to be another mom to them. It has helped her to remember her dear friend and lessen the impact that the bombing had on the memories that they had made together throughout the years that they had worked at the hall.

James managed to dig himself out of the dark hole that he had fallen into after his wife's death. It took regular therapy and talking with others impacted by the bombings to reach a point of healing and forgiveness, but he has devoted himself to working with foster care children. He pays special attention to those older children in the system,

perhaps in hopes that he can prevent someone else from growing up to follow in Veronica Reed's bloody footsteps.

And, what of me, the author? I have managed to lay to rest the burden of hunting down the Bingo Bomber. While this book has turned out far differently than I first envisioned all those dark years ago, I have sought to both honor the victims of this tragedy and show what drove Veronica Reed along her path. This book is the conclusion to my many years of research and pain, a way to honor my grandmother and all the other victims despite it not being entirely about them.

I may never fully stop pursuing the darkness that exists in the world, but for now, I am putting that aspect of my life aside and savoring the fact that I am alive. The darkness can touch our lives, but we have a choice in how much we allow it to influence us. So, dear reader, set this book aside and look outside. Tell the people in your life that you love and care for them. Because we never know when our last breath will be.