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I strolled along the cracked sidewalk, the chill of the night air threading through my soaked sleeves like icy fingers. The only sound accompanying me was the persistent patter of rain hitting the pavement.

Tap... tap... tap...

Each drop fell like a whisper from the sky, echoing louder in the silence that surrounded me.

I was heading to the only place that had ever made me feel safe. A forgotten place, buried beneath layers of memory and grief. The hollow treehouse loomed ahead like a ghost from my childhood, its white paint now chipped and curling away from the damp, rotting wood beneath—like old skin shedding from a corpse. Time had not been kind to it.

The ladder was still there. It looked more like a ribcage now; several wooden rungs were missing, the rest blackened by rot. Still, I placed my foot on the first step.

Creakkk...

The groan of the wood beneath me sounded like a warning. But I kept climbing, each step weaker than the last, the tree swaying gently as the wind pushed through its bare branches above. The final rung gave a sickening crack as I stepped on it. My heart surged into my throat. The damp wood snapped beneath me, and I nearly fell—but instinct kicked in, and I swung my legs upward, catching the edge of the treehouse with trembling fingers. My palms burned as I hoisted myself over the ledge.

I landed inside with a shaky breath. My chest rose and fell unevenly as I tried to steady my pulse. Despite everything, it was just as I remembered. My old sanctuary.

The inside was small, cozy in the way childhood memories should be. Dust curled in the corners like sleeping spiders. A tiny square table stood in the back of the room, weathered and faded. Rain dripped through a hole in the roof and filled the old teacups that sat upon the table's surface. A fragile smile tried to pull at my lips, but it didn't last.

On a chair, right where I left it, was my old Polaroid camera. My fingers brushed its edges gently, like greeting a long-lost friend. One arm wrapped instinctively around my waist as I stepped farther inside, scanning the clutter that had been untouched for years. Books with yellowing pages, paintbrushes stiff with dried color, crumpled coloring books with half-finished rainbows, and scribbled princesses.

Then, something else caught my eye—something I had completely forgotten.

A photograph.

The last one I had taken with my brother.

I picked it up, holding it like something sacred and cursed at the same time. The edges were warped, water-damaged. But his face was clear. That sweet, round face I knew better than my own. His dark brown hair looked almost blond in the photo. His bright blue eyes—except... they weren't blue.

They were black.

And that smile. That smile wasn't his. It curved too wide, too sharply. There was something unnatural, something off. My chest tightened. My fingers trembled.

Blink... blink... blink.

When I opened my eyes again, a chill danced up my spine. The image had changed. My brother was no longer beside me in the photo.

There was something else.

A figure, drenched in shadow, stood in his place. Its body was a void, black as the gap between stars. But it wore the same twisted grin.

I stumbled backward, my breath catching in my throat. My mind screamed that this wasn't real. I had to be imagining things. Grief playing tricks. The memories—they were messing with my head.

"I'm going crazy," I whispered aloud, though my voice was barely a sound at all.

I turned toward the entrance, heart pounding in my chest like a frantic drumbeat. I needed to leave. I needed to get out of here. But just as I was about to climb down, I froze.

Standing 20 feet away from the treehouse, barely visible through the curtain of rain, was the figure from the photograph.

I choked on a gasp and stumbled back, my hand gripping the doorframe to steady myself.

No, no, no. This couldn't be real.

The thing didn't move.

It just stared.

Its smile stretched wider—impossibly wide—filled with teeth that looked sharper than a neurosurgeon's scalpel. It didn't have eyes. Just emptiness. Black sockets.

Then—glitch—

It was closer. Like a bad frame in a broken film reel. One second far. The next, half the distance. No footsteps. No warning. Just a jarring shift that made my skin crawl.

My mind was a whirlwind, thoughts racing and tumbling over each other. My hands were slick with sweat. A dark, hideous part of me whispered that maybe I wanted it to reach me.

Maybe I deserved it.

The reason I hadn't come back here in years? The reason I had buried this place deep in the corners of my mind—was because of him.

My brother.

He died here.

We were playing tag. Laughing, running, and climbing like we always did. Our parents had trusted me. They said, "Watch him for a while, just until we get back."

They made the wrong choice.

Because I hadn't just watched him.

I watched him die.

It happened in seconds, but the memory plays in slow motion—every moment burned into the back of my head. We had been chasing each other around the treehouse, laughing, our feet thudding on the wooden floor. I pretended to be a monster, arms outstretched, growling playfully. He screamed with delight, darting toward the door and onto the ladder.

I shouted for him to be careful, but he didn't listen. He missed a rung; his tiny foot slipping through empty space—and then he was falling.

At first, it seemed like a simple fall. I waited for the thud and the whimpering cry, ready to climb down and dust him off, ready to say "You're okay," like I always did.

But the thud never came.

Instead, it was a wet sound. A horrible, unnatural crunch like a watermelon dropped on concrete. A sharp, ugly crack, followed by silence.

I screamed his name. I clambered down faster than I thought I could, splinters biting my skin as I hit the muddy ground. And there he was.

Impaled.

A rusted garden stake jutted from the ground like a warning, its jagged edge piercing clean through his tiny torso. It had gone straight in. Right under his ribs, and out the other side.

He was still conscious. That was the worst part.

His lips were trembling. His hands grasped at the air, at nothing, at me.

Blood soaked through his shirt, turning the cartoon dinosaur on his chest into something grotesque. His eyes, wet with terror, locked onto mine.

"I don't wanna die," he whispered.

It wasn't a scream. It wasn't loud.

It was a breath. A plea. Fragile and full of fear.

That sentence has lived in me like a parasite ever since.

I pressed my hands to the wound. I begged. I told him he'd be okay. I screamed for help even though I knew no one was close enough to hear. I screamed until my throat bled.

But his eyes stopped blinking. His mouth slackened. His body went still beneath my hands.

Now, standing in the ruins of the treehouse, the photograph still clutched in my hand, I stared into the rain at the figure.

It hadn't moved. Not really. But it was different now. Taller. Leaner. Its shape had sharpened like the tip of a blade.

It tilted its head slowly, like an animal trying to understand what it was looking at.

The black void where its eyes should have been burned holes into me.

And then—

Glitch—

Closer. So close now I could make out the dripping blackness of its limbs. It wasn't wet from the rain. It was leaking. Oozing darkness like the ink of a broken pen. The jagged, too-wide smile never faltered. It looked like someone had tried to carve a grin into its face and just kept going, slicing past what was human.

My body refused to move. My breath came in gasps, each one sharper than the last.

Was it real? Was any of this real?

No. No. I was tired. My mind was playing games again. It had to be.

I blinked.

And just like that, it was gone.

The rain continued falling, but the space it had occupied was empty. As if it had never existed at all.

A sob caught in my throat, but I didn't let it escape. I backed out of the treehouse and ran all the way home, shoes slapping through puddles, my heart sprinting faster than my legs.

Two Weeks Later

The sun hadn't even risen, but the smell of brewing coffee drifted through the air like a comforting blanket. I stumbled down the stairs, hoodie half-on, still brushing sleep from my eyes. The rain beat a steady rhythm against the windows.

"Bye, Mom!" I called, pausing just long enough to kiss her cheek. She was stirring something in a pot, already halfway into her routine.

"Good luck on your finals, baby," she said, smiling tiredly. "Drive safe."

I grabbed my keys and bolted, muttering cute substitutes under my breath as I checked the time on my phone. I was already late.

The roads were slick with rain—the kind of morning where the sky forgets how to be anything but gray. The windshield wipers dragged across the glass in slow, labored arcs, smearing water more than clearing it.

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. A small part of me whispered that maybe I should've stayed home. What were finals worth in the grand scheme of things, anyway?

I was just starting to talk myself into turning around when I saw it.

A white semi-truck.

Coming toward me.

But something was wrong.

It was on my side of the road.

At first, I thought it was just an illusion—maybe the slick road had made the lines hard to see, or maybe my mind was still haunted from that night in the treehouse.

But it wasn't an illusion.

It was coming straight for me.

There was no time to react, no time to think. The world twisted as my tires shrieked against the asphalt. I yanked the wheel, but the rain made the road slicker than oil. The car spun, and everything became a blur of gray and white and panic.

The impact came like a giant's fist, flipping the car. Metal screamed, glass shattered, and my body lurched violently as the seatbelt bit into my chest. My head slammed sideways against the window, stars exploding behind my eyes. The car flipped again.

And then again.

And then—stillness.

Smoke curled into the air. Rain hissed as it touched the hot metal. I was upside down. My ears were ringing.

I tried to move. Pain bloomed in my shoulder like fire, spreading fast. My hands scrabbled at the seatbelt, fingers trembling too hard to unlatch it.

My breath came in shallow gasps. I tasted copper.

Outside the shattered window, something moved.

My blood turned to ice.

No, please no.

It stood calmly in the rain, watching me with those void eyes. It tilted its head once again, that grin stretched wider than anything should ever stretch.

It was almost curious. Like it was enjoying this. Like it'd been waiting.

I tried to scream, but only a broken sound came out.

The black figure didn't move. It didn't have to.

Because something deep inside me already knew the truth.

It had always been following me.

It was always going to end this way.

It stepped closer.

And then closer still.

My hand reached toward the shattered glass as blood ran down my arm in warm rivers.

It was right there.

Outside the door.

Grinning.

Watching.

Waiting.

I closed my eyes.

And the last words I ever spoke weren't mine at all.

They were his.

"I don't wanna die."