

THE LAST VISITOR

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S P H E R E

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Prologue

Your partner's out in the darkness filming, and she's left her phone in the car with you.

You're taking a break, resting your eyes and stretching your legs, when its light snags your attention. She skimmed it screen-down across the dashboard as she left, and you can see its edges glow as an alert arrives. Your laptop's on your knees, the heater's on and you've been checking over a recently finished sequence, headphones in as you assess your footage. But now, you set your equipment aside.

You've been concerned about her for weeks.

There's been nothing concrete, but the strengthening of unease into suspicion has been as real as an approaching cloudbank threatening rain. When you began making the documentary together a year ago, she'd been in awe of you – gaze studious and brow furrowed, she'd memorise every throwaway observation you'd made as if it were gospel. And she'd shared everything; rough cuts and rushes were passed back and forth, ideas were

exchanged freely, trust was unconditional. That's why you know the passcode to her phone.

You lean across the driver's seat, flick the wipers on. With an arc of glittering raindrops swept aside, you can see the hire-car headlights illuminating the black ribbon of the lane and the chain-link security fence. The inkblot shadows of trees stand beyond. The silhouette of the abandoned terminal squats against the night sky. She's behind those fences somewhere. No sign of her emerging yet.

It'll only take a minute to check. You swipe her phone awake and key in the passcode.

There's a text message. It's from an unknown number, and it's only a few words long, but if ten years in investigative journalism have trained you for anything, it's knowing when you're being lied to. This – right here before your eyes – is confirmation of her betrayal. Fear stirs as the implications surface. She's done some sort of deal. Cut you out. Scalp tightening, you shut your laptop, bagging your stuff with trembling hands. *Drive away while there's still time.* You jink yourself awkwardly behind the steering wheel and grope for the ignition key in the dark.

It's missing.

She drove you out here, weaving along empty marshland tracks while you worked. She's still got the key. The fear within grows from fingers to fists, a pair of them gripping your gut. The nearest village is eight kilometres back. It's got to be ten minutes' drive to the nearest streetlight. You take a calming breath – in for

four, hold, out for four – and just as you’re beginning to wonder if you’re over-reacting, a pair of headlights blink into life in the blackness ahead. No reason why anyone might be out here in the dead of night unless . . . a cold shaft opens in your stomach.

This is very bad.

You can’t be caught sitting here. You slip out, knees weak, breath billowing, shoulder your bag and touch the car door shut as silently as you can. *Think*. The woodland beyond the fence would give you cover, but heading in the direction of the terminal takes you closer to her – and she’s betrayed you. All around, there’s nothing but flooded fields, the track you drove in on raised above dark drainage ditches. Your visitors are closing, headlights bobbing as the vehicle rides the rutted laneway. You’d bet anything there’s three or four of them in there – tough guys like the ones you ran into in California.

Somewhere distant, you wonder if that’s the sea you can hear, and a mad plan blazes into life. Slither through the sodden crops, cross the marsh to the coast, then follow the beach back to civilisation.

It’s not great, but it’s all you’ve got.

You back away, using the hire car as cover, and break into a run.

What have you done to me, Tess? you think as you flee. You don’t know it yet – though you’re beginning to suspect it as the lights draw closer – but these thoughts will be among your last. *Christ, Tess. What have you done to me?*

What have you done?