

# DEAD MALLS

# DEAD MALLS

a novel

**DARBY HARN**

FAIR  

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PLAY  

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BOOKS

DEAD MALLS

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# DIANE

The sun rises early Thursday night.

Sam and Diane die with the TV. You think, *We didn't pay the bill again*. But your mother doesn't scream when you don't have enough money for the electricity. She cries sometimes, sure, but she doesn't stand at the living room window and stare in shock at the fire in the sky. She doesn't grab you and run down into the basement. You ask what's happening. *This isn't happening*, she says, and believe her.

This never happened.

Thanksgiving is still a week away. Christmas is coming. 1984. The world didn't just end in a hail of nuclear missiles. You're still sleeping in your bed, the brand-new department store Christmas catalog better than a toy in your arms, hoping this year is different. Read the entire catalog, over and over again. The items. The features. The prompts for tomorrow, the holiday, your happiness.

*Endless possibilities await you this holiday season...  
turn to the next page for details!*

# CHRISTMAS 1983

GIFTS FOR THE  
ENTIRE FAMILY

WE'RE NEVER CLOSED!  
SHOP TOLL-FREE ANYTIME!

# SAM

BE KIND. PLEASE REWIND.

Perfect. Someone spray painted the food court again. Radiation yellow all across the mall directory. Not that an outdated map told you anything the overgrown weeds out in the parking lot didn't. This place is empty. Well. Theoretically, it is.

I thumb my radio. "Hey, Roger."

The radio crackles. "Go for Roger."

Least I can do is have fun with it. "Looks like The Joker left us another riddle down here in the food court."

I can already hear him running. "Code Blue."

"Pretty sure only somebody old can solve it."

Let's say trotting. "Hold position."

"So you'd better get down here."

"They could still be in the mall."

This will be the rest of the night. Going empty store to empty store through the entire mall to find out no one is in here but us. Check all the doors. Loading dock. Vents. Call the guy to come scrub the paint off. Pay him out of pocket so we don't have to file an incident report and the owners don't bounce us for another security outfit. Work for free tonight, because Roger underbid those other guys so much that I'm only getting paid out of pocket, too.

Theoretically.

“Clear,” I say, and slide the security gate down behind me.

Roger holds his taser to his chin. “Let’s move.”

He draws in a breath, holds it, and then hustles to the next store on the main concourse. In his mind, I bet we’re a special ops team dropped inside hostile territory in the dead of night.

May as well be.

The mall hums with wasted neon. Emergency flare red colors the main concourse. Aliens or robots could hide in the shadows, or at least I imagine they could whenever I’m bored.

So most of the time.

Roger likes to say the main concourse is longer than an airport runway, but the mall more or less forms a U shape. The old department store anchors the west side. Empty movie theater the east. The food court sits at the south entrance in the saggy center. The only remaining stores hold on the perimeter, leaving about half a million square feet split across two levels for someone to hide in. We clear the lower level and then move up the grand staircase.

Roger backs against the wall. “Draw your weapon, Sam.”

“It’s spray paint,” I say.

“You don’t know what it could be.”

“Guess it could be mustard.”

“Draw your weapon.”

I draw my taser. Thing looks like some kind of *Star Trek* doo-dad. “This guy’s going to be shocked when we find him.”

“Call the Code Blue next time.”

“I called you.”

“Don’t play around on the radio. Call it.”

“I’m just trying to make it fun.”

“I ever tell you about that guy at the bar?”

This is my own fault. “You told me.”

“Slumped against the bar. Bartender’s telling him he’s got to go but he won’t. I thought this was just some drunk, so I didn’t give him



a second look. Turns out he's packing a six-shooter in his belt. He came in to confront his girlfriend. I'm like, 'Reach for that piece, man, and you're going to end up on the news.'"

"Yeah."

"He was like, 'You're not a cop.' I said, 'I know. But I'm hired security. You have to be prepared for all contingencies.'"

"Right."

He goes to another vacant. "Check this one."

"The gate's secure."

"They can pick the locks."

"But they can't lock them from the inside. Roger. We should be checking the loading dock. It's the only way in."

"We need to clear the mall first."

"There's like three open stores left in here. Actually, I think the flower shop is gone. Have you seen them lately?"

"That's not the point. These YouTube guys come in here. If they steal stuff, if they get killed doing their stunts on the property, that's on the company. Guess who they're going to pin that on? I don't know about you, but I can't afford a lawyer."

The YouTube thing is a real problem, especially when you have a mall as rundown as ours. How it stays open at all, I don't know. Twelve people work here now. Eleven? Back in the day, it was 2400. Guess it has to do with contracts and stuff Roger talks about but doesn't ever really explain. When I first started working security with him, I wanted to go store to store. I wanted to exhaust ten hours on my feet every single night. The less time I spent out there the better. I don't know. Guess I'm starting to feel as empty as this mall.

Roger peeks into another empty. "This one."

Fifty pounds of gear I'll never use nearly carries me over as I bend down to unlock another gate. I don't even know what half these stores used to be. Some still got their signs up. Claire's. Sears. Even when I was a kid, it was half empty, and we really only came out here to go to the movies. My Dad, though. He talks about this palace. This cathedral to the 1980s. Like I missed out on the best time to be alive.

I flash the dark. "Clear."

Roger finally breathes. "We might have lost them."

"They're getting in through the loading dock. They have to be. We either need to be there all the time, or we need another person."

"We just have to be more on our game."

"Our game?"

Roger shuffles to the old iron banister overlooking the lower level. He looks out over the main concourse below like it's some unprotected retail frontier. Jowly old cowboy. This is his domain. He's the last vanguard of a dying civilization. No one gets it but him.

"The Joker doesn't leave riddles," he says. "The Riddler does."

Oh, man. "Is that what you're mad about?"

"Maybe this is too boring for you. I can put you on the detail over at the nightclub. Tim will swap. He doesn't care."

I back into something. Something hard. My arms go up. Wait. I just bumped into the wall. "Roger, I like it here."

"This is a serious job."

"I know."

"People think you're playing pretend to guard a mall nobody goes to anymore. But you've got just as important a job as they do."

"Roger, I know."

"I know it's not a lot of money, Sam, but... I pay you."

"I'll do better."

He sighs. "At least move your car every once in a while."

He shuffles back toward the grand staircase. He flashes his light into empties on his way to the security office on the lower level. I should be lucky. I should be grateful. If it wasn't for Roger, I wouldn't have this job. I wouldn't have anything at all.

"Roger," I say. "Thank you."

His sniff echoes through the mall. "Check in every fifteen."

"Ok."

"Sam."

"Yeah?"

"Every fifteen minutes."

I set the timer on my watch. “Ok.”

---

Time.

Why do I even think about my shift as starting or ending? I live here for all intents and purposes. I take my time checking all the places someone could hide. Loading docks. backrooms. Restrooms. Whoever our mystery graffiti artist is, they’re long gone. Mall sounds like a wood shop with the guy running his paint stripper. A light flashes down the way. Is that him? This electric sound buzzes through the mall. Not him. Not the neon. Something else.

VAMMMMM

The hell is that? More light. North corridor. Six seconds. That’s what it takes for me to run around from the south side to the north. Designing the mall with this big empty canyon in the middle probably made sense when you were forcing everyone to walk past every single store, but with less than ten-percent occupancy, it’s just depressing. A shadow runs down the north corridor. Shit.

They’re still in here.

“Hey,” I say. “*Hey!*”

They beeline down the corridor. This crinkle sound behind them, like the wind going through that battered old tarp Dad pulled over the Monte Carlo in the driveway.

I thumb my radio. “Roger!”

The north corridor ends in what I think used to be the old toy store. Closed around 2010. Security gate is half up. The intruder ducks underneath it. Don’t know why they’re going in there.

This is a dead end.

I shine my light in the store. “Don’t make me...”

Store is empty. Old fixtures. Big red and yellow signs saying EVERYTHING MUST GO! I duck under the gate. They must have pried this up by hand. Great. Probably some meth head who

doesn't know what they're doing. They could just freak on you and I'm never going through that again, so I draw my taser.

"Come out," I say. "Slow."

Small stock room in the back. I give it a once over. Nothing in there. Nobody. I check the door to the backrooms. Locked. They couldn't lock it behind them without a key. Where did they go?

The gate rattles.

I whirl around. "Freeze!"

Roger squeezes under the gate. "Hold your fire."

Shit. "They're gone..."

He army crawls across the floor. "Check again."

"Maybe there wasn't anybody..."

He picks up some kind of book. "There was somebody."

"What's that?"

"Old Christmas catalog."

He passes me the book and pushes up to his feet. Dad mentioned the catalogs. He used to look forward to them because of all the toys, I guess. Department stores put these out every year back in the day. Some of them are worth money if they're in good condition. I don't think this thing is money, though. Pages are as yellow as the curtains in my grandma's house. Some are laminated. Glue wore off the spine. Looks like they kept it together with duct tape. It smells.

"Soot," I say.

Roger probes the store. "What?"

"Smells like soot... was there ever a fire in here?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"You sure?"

"Some tweaker is probably burning pages for warmth."

"Roger... maybe I was seeing things. This thing has been in here for like a million years. It's older than you are."

He flashes the store room again. "Nice one."

"I try."

"Someone left that here."

"How?"

“That book wasn’t here before. I’d know.”

“We find old stuff in here all the time.”

He tries to shimmy the security gate up higher. “Someone messed this gate up. Retrace your steps. Do another sweep.”

“*There’s more for your life...*”

“What?”

This book. Cover must have torn off. Whoever left this here taped a fragment from it back on the first page. *There’s More For Your Life*. Wouldn’t that be nice?

“Hey,” I say. “Can I keep this?”

Roger pries out through the gate. “It’s evidence.”

“I’ll examine it.”

Look at this thing. Thumbprints all down the sides of the page. Maybe someone did leave this here by accident. Who was this? They obsessed over this. Old mail as book marks. Postdates from 1983. Some kid like my Dad maybe back in the 80s, pouring over toys he couldn’t afford. He had them in the pages, though. Whoever left this would be Roger’s age. They didn’t move like it.

They moved faster than light.

---

I sweep the mall again. *There’s more for your life.*

---

Sunset like an atomic bomb.

Ugh. I’m becoming a vampire. I stagger out the security door to the back parking lot. I forget the Christmas catalog for a moment. If I don’t, I’ll fall down in one of these craters in the concrete and it will be tomorrow before Roger figures out he’s replacing me.

Mail slides off the dashboard as soon as I close the car door. Don’t know why I keep any of this. I don’t open any of it. This only finds me because my Dad leaves it tucked under the windshield wiper

every Friday. I'd feel better about it if he ever left a note, or a twenty, or anything that told me I could drive over there to get it instead. I set the laundry basket in the backseat next to the cooler and stretch my feet out a little. So tired. Man, am I tired.

But this book.

Sort of like someone scanned all of Amazon into a fashion magazine. They wrote it like those game books I read all the time as a kid, though. Pick your path, or whatever.

*Your choice!*

Everything for sale is a life choice. Happiness rests on what you decide. Fulfillment. Those books you made the wrong choice and died. Maybe you could in the catalog, too. This is back when kids were choking on little knick-knacks that came with toys.

Way to make everything grim, Sam.

Pages fall out. Whoa. Just the middle. Catalog index page. I set it back in there, but it keeps falling out. Guess it just wants to stay with me. I fold it up and tuck it in my journal with the other oddities from the job. Other pages are loose in the catalog, but they should hold. Every other page is some woman. Happy. Warm. Inside some ridiculous house you know is full of family and friends and food. No one tells them to leave and never come back. No one punches them in the ribs. Something behind me. My arms go up. Nothing out there but concrete. Cars and trucks hurry down the highway to where life takes them. Some ridiculous house. Family. Friends. Food. I'd be in a hurry, too. I lean the seat back a little. Settle in. The catalog is heavy.

I like how heavy it is in my arms.

# DIANE

Ask to go back upstairs for some toys.

She won't let you. Wait three days for her to fall asleep. From the kitchen window, see dead birds in the ash out back. Dead squirrels. Get a few toys and go back down into the basement. When she wakes up, tell her not to worry. The volcano erupted again, you say.

That's all.

She nods with the same bleary confidence she's showed you in the checkout lane when it all rings up too much. *When things get better*, she always says, and you put back the candy bar or cheap plastic toy you wanted. Sometimes. Once there was this spaceship. Generic. White plastic. Bright red and yellow stickers.

*You don't want it*, she said, but you did.

You ran out of the store with the toy. A few minutes later, she tossed the groceries on top of you in the backseat and drove home. Never said a word. Don't voice this. Open the catalog. Crowd out your cold, your hunger, your fear with the future sure to come.

*Seize the future by taking a journey into the past...*

# SAM

My radio squawks. “Sam.”

God. I’m dreaming about work.

“Copy, Sam.”

Sweet death. Deliver me.

*Knock, knock.* My eyes crack open. Shit. Roger is knocking on the driver’s side window. “Morning, sunshine.”

The catalog slides down my lap under the driver’s seat. I dig it out from the empty pop bottles and hurry up and get my shit together. I grab my gear, follow Roger into the mall security entrance, and I tuck the catalog in my locker with my lunch bag. Leftover pizza again. I’m so hungry for homemade pizza. I should call home. Tell Dad about the catalog. Maybe after my shift I’ll drop by. He’s usually out in the garage in the morning. Sometimes, I think he just sits out there to get away from her. I know he said to come by anytime, but if she sees me out there, it all starts again and maybe I’ll call.

I’ll try calling first.

---

Unlock the main mechanical room. Turn on the front lights. Canvas the mall. Make sure no one got in overnight. Inspect the food court. Not all the eateries have gates or doors and you can get into the



kitchen by going over the counter. Roger found someone in the pizza place once with a stuffed panda bear.

He talks about it once a week.

Go back to mechanical. Turn on the back lights. Canvas again. This time, unlock the main doors. The mall walkers will be waiting for you to do this at 7AM, so don't be late.

The mall walkers are always waiting.

Same three people everyday. Every. Single. Day. Super skinny lady. Beer gut grandpa. Hairdresser before her shift starts. Find them at the door each morning. Waiting. Staring. Mannequins except they're set outside. No one says anything. All business.

10,000 steps to save your life.

Do a once around outside. Usually, it's just more mall walkers getting in early laps. In the winter, you see more homeless, especially near the exhaust vents. Open up the doors early on really cold days. Mop inside the main doors. Food court. Just enough to make it look good for the people walking through. Wipe down the tables. Surprise, you're the cleaning crew, too. Roger got this account because he underbid the other guys but threw in other things the owners don't really want to pay someone else for like janitorial. Sweep the bathrooms. Do this end of shift and start of shift, because panda bears.

Check the old department store. Exterior doors still open out to the parking lot, so theoretically, someone could get in. They'd make a lot of noise doing it. They'd make Roger really happy. Make a game of avoiding the rusted impressions shelves left in the linoleum. Clear the dressing rooms. Wipe off the toothpaste gunk you left on the sink in the employee bathroom and check your face. Crooked nose. You're always going to be broken. Whatever. 5AM blues.

Happens every day.

Switch the water on. Water is still connected to the mall mains, though the owners want all but one public restroom out in the mall disabled during the week to keep the bill low. Take a fast shower. Who knows why they put a shower stall in, but the mall used to be a

palace. Everyone came here for everything, and they didn't walk away disappointed. Now it's a wasteland.

A homeless shelter.

Head out to the crossing escalators and walk up to the second floor. Nothing up here but the shelves, cases, and random stuff the department store left behind. Nowhere really to hide except the stock rooms. Clear. The backrooms got walled off when the store closed, so the only way in and out is through the access door back into the mall. Lock it behind you. Kill time looking at pictures of the mall from better days printed on the wall sealing off the old department store. Imagine going back in time. Go downstairs.

Start over from the beginning.

---

Roger spends his lunch on his phone shopping for guns. Ammo. Equipment. All the time. Early on, I thought he was talking to a girlfriend maybe, but all those pings are other dudes quoting him prices on guns and stuff he never buys. Whatever. Not exactly representing excellence in the romance department here.

"Got a 9 millimeter here," he says. "Good weapon for you."

I shake my head. "I'm good."

"Something smaller?"

"I hate them."

He sniffs. "Find anything out on the book?"

I flip through the wrinkled pages. "It's from 1983."

"You said there were prints."

"Thumbprints, yeah."

"Maybe we can get a partial."

Just about every page is thumbed. "Let me call CSI."

"Funny. We need to figure out where it came from."

Thumbprints all belong to the same person. I think. They overlap, and some prints are bigger than others. If someone left this, they'll be back. They loved this thing. Took care of it, or at least tried

to. Some pages I can't tell if it's mold or dirt or what. Water damage. But, man. They did everything to keep it together.

I turn the page. "Or we could call like Federal Mall Enforcement. You know. Agents from a super secret government program who got experimented on that was run out of empty malls."

"Sure," Roger says.

"Dude. We could make a TV show. Like a YouTube thing. Instead of people breaking into malls, it would be us protecting them. It would be cool. Don't you think?"

"Sure."

"I'd like to make something like that. Be creative."

"Cool."

"Actually, I kind of wrote something. I wrote a book."

He blubbers his lips. "Six hundred isn't bad."

The light blinks overhead. "Don't you have guns?"

"You never know what could happen."

"What could happen?"

"You never know."

"You're not one of these zombie apocalypse guys, are you?"

"All I'm saying is you can never have too many."

"If zombies come for the mall, they can have it."

He looks up. "Our job is to secure the mall."

"Well. The mall won't let you wear a gun, so..."

He shrugs. "We can wear them on other sites. I got the long gun out in the truck for the bar tomorrow night. Just in case."

"Why?"

"Had a guy shoot someone across the street last week."

"They never should have passed that open carry law."

"Constitutional carry."

"It's not like you're going to use it."

"People see a gun and they think twice."

"No one thinks with guns."

"You need to think about getting familiar with a sidearm that isn't a taser. I need you to work the festival in the summer. It's

going to be people. It's going to be situations. I have to rely on you."

"I'm here every day, Roger."

"They pay me to keep the homeless out."

I close the catalog. "I'll get back to it."

He groans like a flat tire. "Sam."

I set the book in a box on top of the filing cabinet with the other lost and founds. "I'll case the old toy store again."

"I know it's easier to work a place you don't have to deal with people. Believe me. All I think about is that night in '99. So it's better I walk around here twenty times a night than work a door."

This again. "I don't want to hurt anybody."

"It's natural."

I put my lunch bag back in the fridge. "I'm not angry."

"It's ok if you are."

"I'm not."

"Someday, someone will get in here. You'll have to act. It's an ugly part of the job, but it's part of the job. You have to face it."

"Roger, do you want me to leave?"

"I want you to clock back in."

This guy. I mean, I'm grateful. If it wasn't for him, I'd probably still be in the ICU. He worked the door that night at the bar. I don't even remember being hit. What those guys said. What I said. I just woke up in the hospital and the doctor told me Roger pulled me out of there. After I got my feet under me, I really wanted to learn how to protect myself. He trained me in all his self-defense courses he does at the strip mall, but now it's guns. The mall is the Alamo, or Helm's Deep, whatever that is. We're the 300 or something.

I clock back in. Roger goes back to his phone. A message pings really loud. Echoes through the mall. The stalled horses on the merry-go-round and the abandoned mannequins all stand witness to the constant quotes from men selling guns online.

At least someone is talking to him.

I walk the mall. 3800 steps. Nothing and no one in the toy store.

Yesterday's dust. I peel off the scabbed tape off the floor the dealers left from the last comic book show. This is like a \$25 fine for every little blue spot, but Roger always tells me not to report it. If we make the comic book guys mad, they won't come back. He likes the weekends they have the shows. Guys leave their tables up overnight. Some of those books are like ten grand each or something. All I know is I get a lot of steps in. Maybe the comic book guys left the catalog. They might sell something like this. Some of them sell toys. I'll ask Roger.

I walk down the east wing to the frozen escalator down into the food court. I pretzel up the west stairs back to the upper level, kind of like an 8-bit version of a spiral staircase. I cruise the old department store just to see the door to the employee restroom is still there, and the shower, and I'm still something like a human being.

VAMMMMM

That light again. That sound. Ratty tarp in a windstorm. I thumb my flashlight on and there they are. My shadow. Upper level. North corridor. Toy store. Again. This time I cool it on the radio. Keep quiet as much and as long as I can. If I can sneak up on them, I might be able to catch them. I creep up on the old toy store, moving slow down the corridor. My shadow crawls around in the dark on their hands and knees. Like they're looking for something.

I flash my light. "Hands."

Wow. Called the tarp. They're wearing a blue one you cover cars with in the winter. Old. Dirty. Frayed. Tied around their waist with some cheap rope. Must be homeless. Can't see their face. Back to me. Woman, I'm guessing, with all that long, wavy copper hair like the pipe Dad used to pull out of old houses.

"Hands," I say.

She doesn't move.

I draw my taser. "Right now."

Nothing. Don't be like this. Please.

"*Now.*"

Her hands grab some sky.

"Stand up. Turn around. Walk toward me."

She faces me. Whoa. She's pretty, in a kind of I'm an extra from *The Walking Dead* kind of way. Not sure if she's a zombie or a survivor though. I think those are shin guards for like a baseball catcher. Maybe the chest protector, too, underneath the tarp. Hard to tell. Some kind of protective guards on her arms. Might be for baseball also, but this shit is old. This shit is busted.

I thumb my radio. "Code Blue. Upper Level, north corridor."

She's not even blinking. I lower my flashlight a bit so it's not blinding her. Those eyes. Fast as lightning. Did she just size me up?

She totally did.

"No funny business," I say.

She's still as a mannequin. "Where did you get batteries?"

"What?"

"For the flashlight?"

"Is that what you're looking for? What are you doing in here? Wait a second. Are you looking for the Christmas catalog?"

Now she blinks. "Do you have it?"

"Maybe. Come out here. Nice and slow."

"Do you?"

"I said come out here. Now."

Her voice is so raspy. "Give it to me."

"You're not hearing me."

"I need it."

"My partner is coming. He's really going to want something to happen, so nothing's going to happen. Right?"

She ducks under the security gate. "I don't want any trouble."

"Good, that makes two of us. I'm going to escort you off the property. You're not going to come back, or we call the cops. Ok?"

She steps toward me. "I just want the book."

"What's the deal with that, anyway?"

"Where is it?"

"Hey. Stop there."

She doesn't stop. "It's mine."

"We all have to grow up eventually –"

My taser twists out of my hand. What? My legs go out from under me. My ass hits the floor and something sharp and cold and fricking huge presses into my neck.

“Please,” I say.

I know that look. She’s used that knife on someone before.

“Don’t…”

She stares at me like I’m an alien or something. “You’re…”

Her mouth opens in shock. She tenses up. Convulses. 55,000 volts. No mercy. The knife drops from her hand and she rattles to the floor. She doesn’t cry out, though. Just that shock in her eyes. Hurt. She spasms as Roger drops his knee into her back.

“You were right,” he says. “They were shocked we found them.”

# DIANE

The shock comes later.

One night, or morning, the difference is meaningless after, your mother wakes up screaming. This goes on a long time. Ask her what's wrong. Never get an answer, not in words. Read the catalog as she pounds her fists on the basement stairs, as she knocks over everything stacked in the corner, as she throttles you with a hug that is as violent as it is reassuring. Ask her when it's ok to go back upstairs.

Never get an answer.

---

Burn books for warmth, but refuse to give the catalog up. She slaps you. Run up the stairs. This smell everywhere. Dead mice behind the wall. Behind the houses. The mountains. The clouds dragging the ground like those old, musty curtains in the living room. She drags you back down into the basement, and you don't know why. There's no difference in the damp and cold up there, out there, everywhere.

Burning the catalog never comes up again.

Sometimes, shivering in the long winter, she asks you to read from it. Never use the flashlight, because you have it memorized. Her almost smile forms as you read the product descriptions, the features, and the promises. Pages yellow. Print comes away on your fingers.



Fear ruining your only warmth. Keep the catalog under your jacket, warm and safe, taking it out only for emergencies.

---

Keep a calendar as best you can.

The sun a memory. Summer. Life. Christmas. Christmas morning unwraps in the basement, the venue different, but the outcome is the same as always. This time there is nothing to open but a little piece of candy your mother has been saving.

*I didn't get a chance to shop*, she says.

She tries to explain, again, there might not be any shopping for a while. There was a war. A nuclear war. Questions like, *Is it over? Did we win?* pop in your head but they don't stick. The only thing you really want to know is *Did Dad get a chance to shop? When is he coming over again? When can we go back upstairs?*

She smiles, though it's more of a frown. That's your mom. A smile that's kind of a frown. Remember this, years later, when you have nothing to share with someone you love but hope.

Hope is what you covet most.

It's not so much the toys you want; it's the smiles on the faces of the children in the catalog, bright but never indulgent. Never ecstatic and there was no need. They knew. Young as they are forever in four colors, the catalog kids express this surety you recognize but never define. The book provides, in ways it was never meant to. The book contains, and in it you have everything.

*(A) Never be in the dark with this durable flashlight. Comes in your choice of three distinct colors.*

# SAM

First big test.

Big fat F. Maybe Roger is right. I may not be cut out for this. He doesn't seem too disappointed, though. Actually, he seems thrilled. He drags the intruder into the security office and cuffs her to the rusty old radiator along the wall. She pulls at the cuffs, groggy, but she's still fritzing from all the lightning that flashed through her.

"Roger," I say. "We can't detain her."

He snaps a pic of her with his phone. "She attacked you with a deadly weapon. You bet your ass we can detain her."

I'm still fritzing, too. "It's against the law."

"So is breaking and entering."

"We need to call the cops."

Roger drops her knife on the desk. Knife doesn't begin to describe it. Some kind of iron stake duct taped to a broom handle.

"We call the cops," he says, "We have to file a report."

If the cops come here constantly, if the paint removal guy is here all the time, if we're replacing windows every week, then we're telling the owners we can't keep this place secure. Not that they care. They're fine with letting the rain get in. Insurance covers that. Not shit security. When the contract expires, they'll let us go and hire the other guys. They hire the other guys and I've got nowhere to go.

"So you're letting her go, Roger?"

He pulls out the chair at the desk. "We'll let her think about it."

I pull the other chair from the desk over to the radiator and set her up in it. “She probably needs an ambulance.”

“She’ll be fine.”

“We need to make sure she’s not injured, though.”

“She’s just a virgin is all.”

“That’s gross, Roger.”

“With the taser.”

“I know what you meant. Still gross.”

“If you can’t take a joke, how are you going to be able to take down a hostile intruder armed with... look at this thing.” He traces a line down the knife’s edge. “She sharpens it every day. She has to. See this on the handle? That’s not varnish.”

“What is it?”

He sighs. “How did she get the drop on you?”

“I don’t know... she was just so fast.”

“You had your taser drawn.”

“It was dark.”

“She disarmed you. I saw it.”

“If you saw it, why are you asking me?”

“She put you on the ground and put a knife to your throat in one move. Textbook. She should be teaching self-defense courses.”

“I did everything right.”

“You can’t hesitate. You have to act.”

“I did.”

“You were easy on her.”

“The hell I was.”

“She advances on you, you tase her. You never know who you’re dealing with. For all we know, she’s a serial killer.”

“And you’re not going to call the cops?”

He groans. “We’re not filing a report. But we’ll keep her on record if she comes back. Let me get some pictures.”

Roger snaps a pic of the knife with his phone. Then he takes hers. The intruder moans with the flash. Starting to come around. Roger goes back to the knife, but I stay on her. Something strange about her.

Homeless, obviously. Knots in her hair. Cracked nails. Dirty hands. Callouses. Ugly scar on her right hand. No stitch line.

I nudge her arm. "Hey. Knife lady."

She blinks.

"How did you get out of the toy store the other night?"

She tugs on her cuffs.

"No point being hard on her now," Roger says. "Go canvas the mall. I'll get to the bottom of this."

I adjust her arm so the cuffs aren't digging into her. "I'll stay."

Roger scrapes his forehead. "You worried about me?"

"Yeah."

"She's not a serial killer, Sam. She's just a meth head."

"I don't think so."

"This could be a YouTube thing, actually."

I shake my head. "We didn't find any gear on her."

"Maybe she left it somewhere. Maybe there's someone else."

"Where would they be hiding?"

He shrugs. "Vents, maybe."

She's skinny, but ventilation shafts aren't as big as movies make them out to be. Where did she go from the toy store the other night? Where would she be hiding in the mall? Definitely not in the old department store. I'd notice if I had a neighbor.

"Roger, didn't you say there's an old fallout shelter here?"

He nods. "Basement. Still has supplies in it."

"Supplies?"

"Survival stuff. Green drums with water. Old medical kits."

I lean against the wall. "So someone could live down there?"

"Whatever food down there is fifty years old."

"It's not on our checklist."

"No reason to be."

"When was the last time anyone was in the basement?"

"Been awhile. You know what? I don't want you going down there by yourself. I'll check it out. Guard the prisoner."

I sigh. "We can't detain her..."

He places the knife inside the desk drawer and locks it. “Don’t get soft on her. Whoever she is, she knows what she’s doing.”

“I wasn’t soft on her, Roger.”

Roger changes the cartridge on his taser. “Doors are 7AM.”

“I know that.”

He holsters the taser. “Not before.”

He heads out of the security office. I don’t have to ask him what he’s saying this time. Cold days, I open the doors early for the homeless. Maybe I let her in. I would have remembered her.

Don’t get soft.

I plop in the desk chair. “Man...”

Could use some aspirin right now. Coffee. The intruder stares at me. Maybe she needs some coffee. No. What am I thinking? I hand her a cup of hot coffee and she throws it back in my face.

I lean back a little. “Ever think you’re not cut out for it?”

She shifts in her chair. “I wasn’t going to cut you.”

“I wasn’t going to piss my pants, but I think I did.”

She sniffs. “You didn’t wet yourself.”

“I just say things. Did you? Wet yourself?”

“No. Why?”

“People usually do their first time.”

“What did he hurt me with?”

“The taser?”

“What’s a taser?”

“You serious?”

“It was like being shocked. I remember touching clothes right out of the dryer and they would snap. Nothing snaps anymore.”

Except maybe her. “We’ll let you go in the morning. But don’t come back. Don’t murder anyone with the knife thing, ok?”

“I don’t murder people.”

“That’s a relief.”

“I only cut men.”

“Oh. Ok.”

“Men you cut without question.”

“Why...”

“Because they only have one answer for you.”

God. What has she been through? “Hey... we’re not filing a report or anything, but Roger will ask. What’s your name?”

“Will you let me go?”

“Look... we don’t have to talk. We shouldn’t. But there’s a women’s shelter on Fourth. I can give you the number.”

“There aren’t any shelters on Fourth.”

“There is. I know, because... well. I sleep in my car.”

“Cars aren’t secure.”

“It’s just temporary. Until I save some money.”

“Did you have to abandon your home?”

“My parents threw me out.”

“Why?”

“Something came up. They found out I was... I was only back living with them because I dropped out after my first semester... my life sucks, basically. So. I understand life sucking. All I’m saying.”

“Where is the book?”

“Good talk.”

“Where?”

I glance at the box on top of the filing cabinet. When my eyes go back to her, the handcuffs are dangling from the radiator.

“Shit,” I say and nearly fall out of the chair.

She tucks tweezers back in her hair. “I’m leaving.”

We searched her. Damn it. I reach for my taser. Didn’t exactly work out last time. “You’re going to get me fired...”

“You’re not good at your job.”

“Wow. Ok.”

“You’re too kind.”

“What?”

“You can’t be kind and be expected to hurt people.”

“I’m good at my job.”

“Are you going to shoot me?”

We both know the answer. I take my hand off my taser. She pulls

the Lost and Found box off the top of the filing cabinet. Takes the catalog out. Lost treasure. Who was that guy? Indiana Jones. Dad would laugh right now. This is some ancient ruin. The catalog is some ancient text. She's found the big secret.

"What's with the catalog?" I say. "I mean, I get it. You could sell it, but it's kind of beat up. I'm guessing you're not selling it, though."

She cradles the book against her chest. "It's everything."

"It's worthless."

"It's priceless."

"Why?"

She moves toward the door. "Will you call him?"

Roger could come back any second. "Look, just wait it out."

Back to a staring contest. "Will you?"

"If he runs into you out there... you can forget about the book. You can forget about anything that isn't a trip to the ER."

She's like a mannequin. "You'd be dead if I wanted it."

"Good to know."

"I'll leave."

"Man... go out the security entrance. Right down the hallway."

"There's nothing out there."

"I know it feels that way, but..."

"I'd prefer to stay in the mall."

"You can't stay... why am I even... I'm doing exactly what Roger told me not to. This is not what we train for. We're just supposed to run you guys off, but let's be honest, Roger is having too much fun and I know you're having a really bad time."

"You know? Do you remember me?"

"If I let you in, you'd think I would."

She seems disappointed. "I forget everything."

"Must be nice."

"You have to, or else... nothing can ever be new."

"You have to be gone or cuffed back up. Like right now."

She half-steps into the room off the office. "What's in here?"

I sigh. "Are you hearing me?"

She goes in. Like the mall, the security office had its heyday. This other room served as the nerve center back when there was a full-time squad. A bank of six black and white TVs line the operations desk. Janky VCRs roofed over each one of them. I don't know how many VHS tapes line shelves in the back corner. Every feed, every day, from the ninety days or so prior to when all this became overkill.

I step behind her. "You can't be in here."

She marvels at the VHS tapes. "You watch the mall?"

"Not really."

Security cameras dot the exterior, but none work. Owners won't pay for them. City has been on them for years, especially after that one guy died in the parking lot, but they still won't put them in. No cameras at any entrance or common area. There's just one working camera. Upper Level. West side. Right below the big old clock. You get the main concourse, more or less. Kind of a dashboard camera. Some YouTuber put it there for a live feed for their video, but we found it. Roger figured out how to link it to his tablet.

She touches a screen. Grid burn ghosts every TV in the office. Nine squares. Numbers identifying every feed. 3/47. 54/40. You can't really make out anything in them, except maybe the lines where the floor meets the wall in the corridor it's focused on.

She's fixated. "Quick-start picture tube."

I stand in the door. "What?"

"Page five."

"Is that from the catalog?"

"Some TVs have these burns on them from when they died."

"Yeah, these are ancient."

"It was like the old world was trapped inside... trying to get out... when I was young, I thought all the TV shows were still going on. They were still making them. If I could get the TV to work, or find an outlet, then... I could just bring them back."

"What do you mean?"

"Do these TVs work?"

"No... I mean, I don't think so."



“Can I watch TV?”

“Roger is on his way back right now.”

“I used to sit in the electronics department and watch TV while my mom shopped around the store.”

“Is there somebody I should call?”

She turns around. “They’re all gone.”

I hold the door. “No one’s looking for you?”

Pages press between her arms. “If there were someone... they’d come here looking for me. We came here a lot.”

“So you’re from around here, then?”

“We didn’t have any money. But we came anyway. My mom... she just liked to look. She liked to imagine.”

“You have family in town?”

She goes to the tapes. “We couldn’t afford the VCR. They cost hundreds of dollars when they came out.”

“Are you like a collector or something?”

“A collector?”

“You’re into old stuff. I know VHS tapes because they’re always at flea markets, but... is that why you like the catalog?”

“I’ve had it since I was a girl.”

She’s my age, I think. “You didn’t find it here?”

“It came in the mail. The day before it happened.”

“Time out. You got it in the mail?”

Her fingers browse the tapes. “November 9th. Wednesday.”

“You ordered it off eBay or something?”

“The department store always sent them out.”

“The store has been closed for... the book is from 1983.”

“Yes.”

“It’s 2024.”

She blinks. “I thought this was my mall still. I get confused. I’ve been alone so long. Everything is... sometimes, I think I’m...”

“What are you telling me? You grew up in 1983?”

“I was nine. I think I was nine.”

Great. She’s crazy. “There’s help. We can get help. Ok?”

“I need help...”

“I’m going to help you.”

“I want to stay... but if The Denomenon finds me here...”

“The what now?”

“I have to go back.”

“Go back where?”

She turns back to me. “I get confused, sometimes. There are two malls. There are two worlds. It’s like VHS and Betamax.”

“It’s like what?”

“My world ended in 1983. Yours will if he finds me.”

I blink. “*What?*”

# DIANE

Pages in your life stick together.

Remember going through the drive-thru in the same crease you do running for your life through the woods. Suckle from your mother's breast as a baby, as a child when all the food is gone in the basement and there is nothing but the rats nipping at your heels. Subsist from the memory when she is gone, milk is gone, the salt and taste of people is gone. Your first memory of the mall. The last time you were there, before the war. When you finally returned, after. Four years for two miles. Always come back to this moment.

Your birthday.

Before. Small cake from the bakery. Some plastic animals on it. A card your dad got at the gas station. Five bucks. A board game. Behind you, they argue. *You got her that game last time*, your mother says, but you don't care about that. Take the plastic animals off the cake. Lick their plastic pedals clean of frosting. Vanilla true.

*It's all they had*, your father says, his tone so heavy it should seal off the conversation but you get your indomitability from your mother. He gave up on this argument years ago, on a night a lot like this one, but she didn't and never does.

*Every time I come here it's the same thing*, he says.

Open the game. Let the cheap cellophane drop to the floor. Throw out the instructions. After all, you're an only child; you pretty much always made your own rules for everything.

Replace the game pieces with the plastic animals. *Dad.*

*Nothing I ever do is good enough, he says.*

*You can't just show up and buy her off –*

*That stupid game cost me ten dollars –*

*You could have just bought groceries –*

*You could just get a job –*

*There aren't jobs –*

*No shit –*

*Dad, you say.*

The argument cuts out abruptly. He comes to the dining room table, smiling like everything's ok, and he kneels down beside you. He strokes your hair like he always does.

*“What is it, button?”*

*Show him the new pieces. “It's ok. I changed the game.”*

*You make the rules now!*

*Choose your style from the available options.*