# ONLY THEY CAN SEE THEM

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### Chapter One

Curled up in a chair next to her mother's hospital bed, Liz tried to sleep. But Memories took hold, dragging her back to the past.

Watching her mother die, from the same disease that claimed her grandmother, reminded Liz of a single mother's struggle to provide for her only child.

A grateful daughter, she was appreciative. Becoming an academic standout, who excelled at sports, and was popular with her peers, especially boys. Selective, she only dated up-and-comers, giving reason to her expectations. Even today, a grown woman with a family, her mother's admonitions rang heavy in her ears. "Find a man that's going places, and who can take care of you, not the other way around like I had to do your father."

Taking her mother's wisdom to heart, she made a life for herself, passing onto her daughter what she had learned early in life, the inspiration that grounded her in a world not always so understanding or forgiving.

It didn't matter now, given her mother's condition. Liz was just happy that she was getting treatment, despite a turn for the worse. She was hopeful, counting her blessings.

While the machine hooked up to her mother beeped, and flickered readings, she promised over and over things would be different. One more chance was all she needed to make things right–just one.

Weary, and on the verge of sleep, her promises were elusive, like the name that slipped through her lips. "William," she said, wishing he would go away, but knowing that he never could.

### Chapter Two

They met at a conference two years ago. It was innocent enough. Both, serious about their careers, held important management positions with their respective firms.

Immediately, there was something undeniable that neither of them dare address—a truth that could upend their lives, destroying their families. It was too heavy a burden to put on anyone, unless it was fate, and beyond their control.

When recently visiting a nearby city on business, William made an excuse to see her. He knew he was wrong, and getting over her annoyance at the imposition, she agreed to meet him for coffee at a cafe she'd never been to before, leaving no witnesses or footprints.

"You shouldn't have come here. What if I had said no?" She asked, sipping a warm brew.

"Did you need a warning? I thought about you, and you live in the next town over. Why not? Jacksonville's not that far away." Her eyes cut at him over the cup's rim then softened. "I guess. What about August? I planned to see you at the conference, and now I don't have anything to look forward to."

"This is better, now you don't have to wait. I'm here, in the flesh. Maybe something would've happened and there was no August? There're no guarantees with this kind of thing, you know that."

"God, you're so negative. Even with the possibility, we still have to take that chance, right?"

He finished his coffee, taking her hand in his, the brown and light-skin blending. "Okay, I'm sorry for ruining everything. For even giving a damn!"

"Keep your voice down," she snapped, removing her hand.

"Why?" He asked, looking around. "Do you know these people?"

"It doesn't matter. Anyone can walk in, and I don't want to see the looks and hear the whispers. You don't live here, but I do, and I don't need the headache."

"I'm a headache now? I'll believe it when you show me?"

"Show you what?"

Their eyes locked. Pretending that everything was good, she got up trying to act casual. "Goodbye William," she said, picking up her handbag and leaving him with more questions than answers.

### Chapter Three

With William heavy on her mind, that night, Liz couldn't sleep.

Turning over, she hugged Carl and was reassured, making herself content with what she had. They'd built a life, from top to bottom, and while still in their thirties, were comfortable in a split-level home on the water, where their boat was docked.

The envy of those that got close, their achievements hinted at entitlement and luck. Even though everything they had was earned, and the result of dedication and planning.

Ambition was more her, than him. There was always more to get or to be gained. This was how she was conceived, from uncontrolled desires that resulted in her sharp features and a complexion of light-skinned Cuban and Black American. She was attractive, even beautiful, which she had been told many times before, though weary of such compliments.

Her father, Jose, was a mystery. She met him a handful of times and not at all since she was sixteen. The last she saw him, he'd remarked about her looks, and how much she resembled his mother. Sherry, her mother, didn't

appreciate the comparison, given her common-law mother-in-law's disdain for her.

This resulted in Jose being cut out of Liz's life. It was a crushing blow, sending him reeling over the loss of his "Elizabeth," as he called her, before disappearing. The rumor is that he returned to Cuba when restrictions were lifted. That was years ago, and at this point his whereabouts are unknown.

Believing that Jose abandoned her, and craving masculine stability, she married Carl, the son of fifth-generation German Americans who owned a manufacturing company in the north, which allowed their descendants to relocate and thrive in the Sunshine State.

Carl, relaxed and comfortable with himself, was the head of a division in St. Augustine. His recent title, and the location, were tailored to Carl and his younger brother's taste, given that they detested the harsh cold of their New England origins.

Liz and Carl. The couple.

"A couple of what?" Liz would joke in mixed company. It was all love, and their daughter, Tracy, twelve, would respond. "What does that make me?"

The mother-daughter duo was good for laughs at the dinner parties Liz and Carl threw, mostly at her prodding and always business in nature. She never missed a chance to network, even inquiring about the aspirations of her neighbors.

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A couple of days after seeing William, she regretted the way things ended, if this was really the end. Feeling guilty, even though nothing had

happened, or ever happened between them, she felt like something had, which in her mind made it a fact.

Holding her phone, she was about to press dial, but chickened out. There was no reason for her to feel this way, given she had nothing to hide. Her inner voice didn't cooperate. Everything sounded like an excuse, pushing her further and further into denial.

The cracks were starting to show, becoming a landslide.

This couldn't go on, which is what she feared. She wanted it alleverything-and to not give an inch, no concessions, with nothing left to chance.

She found pleasure the way she always did, and who could blame her? It was personal, a private matter. Besides, Carl was a good man. Why hurt him in such a way?

During long baths or stolen moments, she gave herself something that Carl never did, or could. Not once had she enjoyed being with him, playing along for years before giving up all hope.

## Chapter Four

After a recent get-together, Liz and Jenny, a neighbor who divorced into money, cleared a table of dishes before Carl and Tracy volunteered to help.

Stepping onto the patio, the women were candid like never before.

"You've been tense all evening," Jenny said. "What's going on?"

Looking past the dock, where the family's boat was moored, Liz searched the darkness.

"I'm fine, what makes you think..."

Jenny cut her off, her blue eyes sparkling in the moonlight. "If you don't want to talk about it, I understand. I just thought you might need someone to listen?"

Hesitating, she looked at her friend. Unsure about everything, even what she knew to be true. "I love Carl, and I'm happy with the life we've created, especially for Tracy. I just thought by now it would be different."

"How?"

"Between us, you know?" she said, blushing.

"Oh, I see. Like it was before, without all the responsibilities?"

Liz's face became vacant, giving it all away. Jenny picked up on it like a radar beacon.

"Has it always been like that?"

No matter how awkward, Liz just said it, defiantly. "Yes."

For a moment they listened, hypnotized by the somber beat of the tide pushing against the dock.

Her friend went first "I've never told anyone the reason my marriage ended. Only Richard and the lawyers know. Kids should never be involved in these matters. But protecting them for all these years didn't change the facts. I wasn't in love with their father anymore. And believe me, we tried everything: counseling, group therapy, couple's therapy, retreats, this workshop, that workshop, hiking, deep sea diving, even AA, and we weren't alcoholics. Nothing worked. From the day I told Richard I wanted a divorce, it was over—really before that. I was done and all the *trying* was for me to save face and not wanting to seem like the bad guy. Though, in my heart I was, and the guilt weighed on me until I let it go. Then, I was free."

"And alone, in that big empty house?"

Jenny smiled. "It's never that empty... besides, my kids visit and my daughter's like 'mom, why don't you find someone to be with.' And I'm like, to myself, girl if you only knew. There've been too many for me to count."

"Oh, God, Jenny..." Liz whispered with delight.

"I'm just telling the truth. But I only count the good ones, if you know what I mean?"

"You're bad, definitely not right."

"I try, trust me. It's been my mission for twelve years."

Amused and excited by the thought of such decadence, the ladies high-fived their way back into the house and to their very different wants and frustrations.

### Chapter Five

Despite the thrill of their conversation, Liz wasn't sold on her friend's solution. It was girl talk, beauty shop gossip, which was often exaggerated, and in reality, not practical.

Her curiosity about William, which she dared to call feelings because it implied attachment, had grown since they hadn't spoken. Galvanized by his not pulling the trigger first, she'd make do, or better yet, let him and the entire schoolgirl matter run its course, coming to a natural conclusion.

It was for the best, she thought, sparing everyone the pain and humiliation for a few minutes of pleasure, as her freshman high school teacher once reminded a class. Then, she dismissed the very idea, chalking it up to Ms. Abernathy being old and long past such youthful desires.

Looking back, with grown-up eyes, she realized that her teacher wasn't actually that old. Fifty seems ancient when you're fourteen, though as she was learning, there's no expiration date on passion.

"That's alright, William," she told herself. "Fine, go away. And I will too, and you might not see me at the conference!"

Carl's strange behavior confirmed her decision to move forward.

Usually laid-back and outgoing, there was a circumspect quality to his responses the past few days. She couldn't get straight answers to anything, as though everything they shared had disappeared. "The future? What's that?" His attitude implied.

Suspicious, as only women can be, she thought he'd beaten her to the punch, stealing her thunder, finally seeing through her weak pretense.

Walking on eggshells, a turn of events from her usual position of control, she waited for the truth to roll in, and over her like an avalanche. She was certain that once he said it, and uttered the words, he'd become the most handsome man in the world, more desirable than any leading man until she could get him back in check, of course.

Relaxing on the sofa after dinner was the time for everything to be revealed. If he didn't come clean, she'd force his hand, and make him tell her that he was calling it quits—and for who. She wanted all the details as if her opinion could actually matter in such a situation.

Throwing a curve, Carl changed the game, taking her deep into whatever plot he had underway.

Looking in her eyes, as only a giver of good and evil can, he made it simple.

"I love you," was all he said, before describing a wonderful weekend he'd secretly planned for her.

Tears and guilt mixed with hugs and more hugs, calming her nerves, as she never wanted to let him go.

There had been nothing to worry about. It was all in her head. How sick and savage she was to imagine it to be something else? (Not from Carl, her rock.)

That night she prayed the outcome of their lovemaking would be different. Never had she wanted something so badly. It was dire and necessary to solidify the fractures in their relationship threatening to bring it down at the core.

Nothing changed. Hope dangled before her like a noose, each time leading her to the gallows of her discontent, and a yearning that carried one name.

### Chapter Six

When he called, it was as though she had conjured him.

Breaking the spell of her computer screen, she stepped into the hall.

"Yes?"

"Where've you been? Listen. No more games. I was about to tell Cathy last week, but it didn't make sense. Do you know why?"

"I don't." She hesitated. "Tell me?"

"You... What was I leaving her for, to sit alone waiting for a day that never comes?"

A couple of colleagues passed, and she played the at-work game, giving them a plastic smile.

"I can't get into it now. Can we talk later?"

"I'll see you after work," was all he said before ending the call.

"Wait," she said, to a dead connection.

Her head was spinning between obligation and desire. Far from work, scenarios, and lies, paraded through her mind's eye, each checked for

validity and based on what Carl would believe is the reason for her coming home late.

After the call ended, her workday was lost. Most of what she heard hadn't registered and she deferred to her assistants, giving them an opportunity to assert themselves and stir the pot of competitiveness. It was a good thing. She didn't have to do all the work, the thinking, and the day had been salvaged and productive in spite of her distraction.

Waiting out front, William was as eager as she was coy. Playing it casual, she lay far back worried about everyone and things associated with her job. She couldn't afford to be found out, especially like this with nothing to gain.

Defying pseudo formalities, he kissed her on the lips. Awkward enough, she dared not pull away, drawing further attention.

"Are you going to deny it now?" He said, as they walked to her car.

"Did I ever?"

"Not in words, maybe. But in every way else."

"There was nothing to prove. What was I holding onto?"

"Is it the same now?"

Their eyes locked. "I don't know."

"Liar."

"Did you come here to insult me?"

"I'm not. It's just the truth."

Entering the indoor parking lot, they found her car and sat inside.

Before she could rally her defenses, they kissed. A real kiss, with all of the passion that she'd been missing. Free from burdens and frustration, she was open, giving herself. Looking around, her nerves returned. They were in her company's lot, anyone could come through at any time.

"Not here, like this," she whispered. "Let's go to your place."

### Chapter Seven

Sherry took several sips of water, as Liz held the cup and straw.

"Would you like some more?" Liz asked.

Looking at her with x-ray eyes, Mom knew something was up.

"Why are you here? Don't you have to work?"

"It's evening. I'm finished for the day and wanted to see you."

"How's Carl and Tracy?"

"They're fine. Everyone's doing great. I just wanted to see you, that's all."

Sherry looked at her dubiously, resting her head on the pillows. "When you're ready, I'll listen. I've known you too long."

"All my life, Mom."

"That makes it official."

"And?"

"And? I know."

"Then it'll be our secret."

"The people here are as bad as you, keeping things from me. They don't tell me anything. A week? Month? Year? I don't know if I'll even see Tracy graduate?"

Liz giggled, relieved that her mother wasn't onto her. "Don't worry, you're going to see her walk, and much more."

Sherry was screw-faced. "Not unless there's some kind of miracle. But that's okay. I'm ready."

"Did the doctors tell you something?"

"No, I told you. They don't give straight answers around here. I got it from the source."

"The source? What's that mean?"

"You remember Walter?"

"Uncle Walter?"

"Yes, your great Uncle."

"He didn't like you. Why're you talking about him?"

"Well, he seems to have had a change of heart. I guess a little time alone can do that for a person," she chuckled.

"Mom, what're you saying? Uncle Walter's been dead for twenty years."

"Twenty-two, actually."

"Fine, whatever. What's he got to do with anything?"

"It was a surprise to me too. Walter never crosses my mind. But he came to me the

other night, just as clear as you're here right now. He apologized for everything and asked for my forgiveness."

"You must have been dreaming. He's dead Mom. Such a thing isn't possible."

"I thought that too. But Grandma Anna used to say that those leaving would

sometimes be greeted by people from the other side. Supposedly makes the whole thing easier."

"Dying, that's what you mean?"

"They're only trying to help. That's why Walter apologized. And from how he sounded, he really meant it. So I forgave him too, and feel better about whatever's going to happen. I know there're people that care waiting for me. That was the main thing that had me worried, not knowing. But now I do, and I'm alright with it."

Liz reassured her that it wasn't the case, that she hadn't seen a deceased Uncle. She even blamed it on the medications that Sherry was being given, believing that they caused hallucinations.

"It's alright mama. I'm glad you and Walter worked everything out."

"Well, it wasn't high on my list of priorities. But it was good to hear from him."

Driving home, Liz had to pull over. She cried. Cried like she hadn't in a long time. It was a release of everything that had built up inside of her, and boiling over, it had to come out. Afterward, she was relieved. The acceptance of her mother's condition, and doing all that she could for her, gave her purpose for as long as she was needed.

## Chapter Eight

"How was it?" Jenny asked.

Liz's expression soured fast.

"That bad?" Her friend added. "Then I won't rub it in."

"You don't have to. That'd be cruel and unusual."

"No candlelight romance?"

Liz cut her a nasty look."Hell no. Not even close." Taking a sip of wine, she turned philosophical. "It just wasn't meant to be. We're so different. Things have changed more than I could've ever imagined."

"What about your friend?"

She smiled. "I'll never tell."

"This is me. Don't be shy."

"What do you want, every groan and whisper?"

"If it'll spice up my evening, sure."

"Use your imagination. I'm sure it's nothing you haven't done a million times."

Refilling their glasses, Jenny was encouraged. "You're giving me too much credit. But, I'll try to live up to it."

They toasted the idea, getting tingles from the thought.

"He drives me crazy. I can't stand it," Liz said, looking around and lowering her voice. Even though they were in Jenny's living room. "He's kinky too, a freak, and knows all my secrets. Carl sure as hell doesn't."

"He's your husband. They never do."

They touched glasses again, to that one.

"I've felt trapped for so long, just going through the motions. I don't have to deny my truth anymore. I've finally got someone just for me."

"For how long?"

"What do you mean? I don't know, until..."

"Have you ever cheated on Carl before?"

Wheels started turning in Liz's head. Splitting hairs about what was cheating, she answered the question from an angle.

"Not that it matters, no."

Jenny knew the deal being a woman herself. "That means yes."

"No, it doesn't. A little harmless flirting isn't cheating."

"Girl, you can take that someplace else. I'm a woman and know the games. Giving another man your attention is cheating, if you want to be honest. It's nothing to do with touching or going the distance. The potential's there, maybe not the opportunity, but given a chance, who knows how far we'd go?"

Liz settled down, her slipping defenses replaced by pangs of guilt.

"Once something almost happened. It was so random. A repairman came over to fix the air conditioner. Carl was at work and this guy, a young man, just... I don't know what got into me."

"And, did you?" Jenny asked excitedly.

"Almost. It was so close. I was scared to death and couldn't. I told him to leave, that my husband would be home any minute, and that he'd kill us if he found out."

"He believed you?"

"Yeah, and was gone in a blur. He was young and dumb. Then I got an old man to fix our system; slow-moving and hard of hearing."

They enjoyed a laugh, catching the imagery.

"That's best sometimes. Less hassles. But you didn't answer my question?"

"What?"

"How long?"

Jenny shrugged. "Until it's over... I don't want to think about it. He's too good to let go."

The women exchanged a knowing glance before changing the subject and finishing the bottle of wine.

### Chapter Nine

The late-night air was clean and crisp, blowing her robe as she stood on the balcony.

"Hey, stranger?" William said, rubbing her shoulder and kissing her neck. "You're so far away tonight?"

Turning to face him, her eyes sparkled in the Moon's blue light. "You've given me so much to think about."

"That's good. Keep it that way."

"And my family?"

"We've been all over that. You can't go on punishing yourself, feeling guilty, because you're getting the pleasure you deserve. We're together, and that's all that matters."

Staring into the darkness, she sought answers to impossible questions. Instinctively, she knew that only time and faith could give her what she wanted; and the man she loved could give her all she needed.

"I know," she whispered, putting her head on his shoulder.

"When're you going to tell him?"

"Tonight... I'll do it tonight"

"Do you want me there, just in case? Things can go sideways fast."

"No. I have to do this on my own. Besides, Carl isn't like that. He'd never raise a hand on me-like it'd make a difference. It's too late for that now."

"Alright, but call me right after you tell him. Don't wait, I need to know that you're safe."

They kissed, long and passionately, with something at stake. She then got dressed, ready to leave.

"Wait," he said, stopping her in the doorway. "I want something from the deli. The food here sucks."

"Okay, I'll be in the lobby."

Waiting for William, she fantasized about the exciting things that lovers do, what she'd missed out on for years. However, when the elevator doors opened, everything went away, along with his hand slipping from a brunette's waist.

Jumping from her seat, she saw nothing else, locking eyes with Carl as he rushed towards her.

"Liz, please. She's only..."

However, she was gone, way beyond his grasp.

Driving into the night, she tried to put everything in perspective. Had he ever been faithful, or worried about such a thing the way she struggled with it? Did it matter to him? Did he care? Did she?

Accelerating through traffic, she wanted to beat him home to pack and get Tracy, leaving with no excuses. Yes, he had done this, all of it, forcing her to behave in ways she could never have imagined.

Distracted, she missed her turn while avoiding a semi, and just made it. The driver of the truck got out, apologizing. She was fine, everything was going to be alright.

They both continued on their way.

### Chapter Ten

An alarm echoed throughout the unit, waking up Liz and her mother.

"What's all the commotion?" Sherry asked.

"I don't know, something must have happened."

"I hope they're alright?"

A nurse entered. "How're you doing Ms. Sherry?"

"I'm fine, feeling much better. I was just startled by the noise."

"Yes, sorry about that. An emergency came in, a car accident. But I'm afraid they didn't make it."

"I was just telling my daughter that I hoped everyone was alright. Did you hear that Liz?"

"Yes, mama," she said.

"Ms. Sherry, are you talking to them again?"

"They're here, all the time visiting me. Tell her Liz?"

Liz tried to speak, but her voice became distant as she slipped further and further into darkness. "Mom..." she said, her words faint, trailing off.

"The doctor will be right in Ms. Sherry. He needs to speak with you."

"Is it bad news?"

"I'll let him tell you," The nurse said, leaving the room.