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About 2,140 Words

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Trigger Warnings: Graphic descriptions, murder, and mentions and scenes of suicide.

Readers discretion is advised.

Dollhouse

Written By Ashlee Winters

Every time I have this dream, I know the family will die, and nothing I try can prevent it. It was a family of five, the sixth member growing in the mother's stomach. They were a truly happy family living in a lavish home that secretly spoke to them individually.

To the mother, "Play with the beautiful vines by the pool."

To the youngest twins, "Reach out to the warmth of a flame."

To the oldest, "Follow the trail of the missing."

To the father, "Hunt the shadow that lingers in the halls."

The home was like a dollhouse. Something inside controls and persuades them all. A shadow that consumes the corner in any room. Its odor wafted from him in a black mist of pleas and cries from his victims. The family that moved in is its new set of dolls. The mother was the first one to play.

She was a woman who would welcome anyone who walked through her doors. Accepting people of all kinds and all ages with a smile and a warm hello. So, when a toddler no older than four reached for her hand, she reached back.

"I can show you something beautiful," the child said.

The mother followed the child blindly as it led her to the indoor pool. They walked past the kitchen and into the hallway littered with windows that illuminated midnight light. When they entered the pool room the moon stilled on tranquil waters and beautiful vines sprouted from the floor and dangled from the ceiling.

"Touch the vines, and you'll see," the child said, letting go of the mother's hand. The toddler walked to the door that led outside, opening it but not leaving. Instead, it stood in the entryway to gaze at her.

The mother was enthralled by a particular vine that swung softly with the breeze from the opened door. She reached for it like she did the child's hand, but the vine she couldn't grasp. She took a chair at a lonesome table and dragged it to the pool's edge.

The chair wobbled as the mother held her tummy and stepped onto it, the height just right, as it had her face to face with the vine. Her hands abandoned her stomach to caress the dark green spine of the plant, and it touched her cheek in acceptance. The touch of its leaves brought the mother to unknown tears, and the feeling of floating overcame her.

The chair splashed into the water and silently hit the bottom of the pool. The moon danced with the ripples. The reflection of the vines was replaced with the mother swaying slightly with a rope. The child, gone from its position at the door.

A burly husband's cries and screams woke the children in the morning. They followed the echoed howls and saw him holding their mother in his arms while he pleaded for her life and the unborn. He had cut down his wife and kept her close, protecting her from the biting breeze while they waited for help.

The wife's death was soon ruled a suicide. He refused to believe it and ranted about the possibility of an intruder. He piled up thoughts and theories to prove he was correct, and he continued searching for answers for a month while the next doll was chosen.

The twins were identical boys who always helped their mother in the kitchen. They made doughy sweets and warm meals to share with the family. When they finished, they'd fight for the remaining flavors left on the walls of an empty bowl. The kitchen gave the twins a warmth of love they couldn't walk away from. Yet, it ran cold, and the countertops turned to frozen stone. The twin boys picked at the edges of the boxed containers they ate from, wishing for the comfort of a home-cooked meal. No one entered the kitchen as it was their mother's space. Although, the boys took hopeful glances through the indoor window from the living room.

A month into slow healing and it became a routine. A look into the kitchen, whether it be when the twins passed by, watched television, or came home from school. However, one day it was their last glance.

They saw their mother past the open kitchen door, facing a stove. Dropping their school bags, they charged for her. She turned with a smile on her face, and the boys cried. They were no older than eight and couldn't tell her face was slightly distorted and her frame taller. The twins asked question after question, but all she did was smile and rest a hand on their backs.

"Did you make something?" one of the boys asked, whipping at his tears.

"I can show you. It's something beautiful," she said, her smile hitched too high on her cheeks.

The mother moves away from the stove she blocked. The boys glowed with excitement, seeing a pot full of water, a bowl of chocolates next to it on the counter, and a sheet of Oreos.

"Chocolate dipped Oreos!" The twins squealed.

"Get the matches. We can make them together," she said.

The boys immediately turned, searching through drawers to find matches. When they did, they ran back to the stove. The mother stood behind them, watching. They strike the box, and it doesn't light. Strike again, it sparks creating a flame that goes past the small piece of wood and spreads to the stove.

The twins never knew about the dangers of leaving a gas stove on for too long and igniting a fresh flame. It was quick for them. Smothering heat, dropping them to the floor, and consuming the cabinets and counters. However, the fire never passed into the hallways and was contained by firemen called by the sister, who showed up late.

The father was destroyed when he rushed home from work. His daughter was sobbing on the curb next to an officer. Behind them, paramedics left the home with a gurney and two body bags atop it. He charges for the front door, past the boys, and into the kitchen.

The kitchen was a scene of an attempt to cook, an accident. Two boys who shouldn't have been left alone. At least, that's what an officer would've said. The father saw an attack, a plot made against his family. So when a shadow lurking around the corner caught his eye, he chased it. He followed it into the hallway full of windows, but the shadow disappeared when it reached the light.

He searched the area but found nothing. He pleaded with the officers in the yard to search for the person he thought he saw. They obliged, but their efforts led to an end, and the same answer, *it was an accident*.

The daughter was sixteen and the spitting image of her mother. Both are beautiful women with hearts full of love for others. However, the daughter's heart was broken. The pieces missing with her lost mother and brothers as she functioned numbly.

She hasn't been to school in a month since her brothers passed, and her father stayed home from work to monitor the house. She'd tried to talk to him, wanted to help him come to terms with the accidents. He would refuse, sinking deeper into his theories. She did want to heal, but deep down, like her father, she wanted the glimpses she'd see of her family to stay.

Eventually, she gave up, letting her father roam around, mumbling to himself while setting what looked like traps in different areas around the house. If he wasn't messing with the traps, he would be on a single-seater couch in the doorway to the hall staring out the windows. He was waiting and watching for something she didn't understand.

The daughter had enough one night when he spotted a glimpse of a figure outside. He went running off like a madman through the back door. Her gaze followed him until he wasn't visible, and she sighed. She raised from the opposite couch, heading for the stairs.

A shadow blurs by the end of the hallway, a giggle echoing behind. It was a small figure the height of one of her brothers. She halted in the hallway, closing her eyes, hoping it was an old memory flashing by.

The footsteps continued, darting up the stairs. She opened her eyes. She sprinted down the rest of the hallway and looked up the stairs. At the top stands her brothers, looking down at her with smiles.

"Hide and seek, Sissy?" The boys asked.

She stared up at them, and tears pooled in her eyes. Words seemed thick in her throat, she opened her mouth to speak, but nothing was said. Her feet worked slowly at first, taking a step then another until she tripped over herself to climb the stairs quickly. The boys squealed and ran into the hallway out of her view. Her tears fell in heavy streams.

"Don't go," she chanted, tripping on the last stair. She stood and sprinted into the only door open; her room.

She gasped. The twins stood in the corner of the room, holding onto their mother's pants. All three were smiling, but the daughter could see the unnatural curve. She could see the lights from the vanity next to them bending their frames and shadows.

"We don't have to play, Sissy." One boy said.

"We can show you where we've been hiding." The other said.

Her mother held out her hand, "We can show you how beautiful it is."

The daughter backed towards her door, "You're not real."

The mother's face fell. "Of course we are. We came back for you."

She shook her head. "No. This isn't real."

The twins started to cry, and the mother took an abnormal step forward, her face flashing with a deep scowl and then into a gentle smile. "You're upsetting your brothers. They think you've forgotten them."

"You didn't find us," they cried. "Why didn't you find us sooner?"

The twins started to morph into their burnt and final states, an orange glow surrounding them. The daughter cried and turned out of the room.

"Don't leave!" They shrieked, but the voices sounded too high and too low with the blend of a million voices.

She reached the end of the hallway as her mother grasped the back of her zip-up hoodie, pulling her back. The daughter yelped when a cold cheek pressed to hers.

"Why aren't you listening?" The mother growled.

The daughter pulled at the jacket to free her arms and ran when she wasn't stuck. She got to the stairs and went to descend.

"Dad!" She screamed when a rough hand grabbed her and spun her in her spot. She sobbed harder, "Please."

Her father looked down at her, the mother nowhere to be found, and the brothers silent. He answered her pleas with a hard shove to her shoulders, pushing her down the stairs. He blinked, watching her still frame on the floor. The impact of her fall started to spread from the back of her head. The daughter was dead.

The father descended the stairs, passing numbly by his last offspring. He walked back into the living room and to the hallway full of windows. He sat in the single-seater, and he finally broke. He cried, and the realization of what he'd done sunk in.

He killed his family...

I killed my family.

I did everything I could to catch the intruder, the murderer, but the entire time it was me. I had a dream that drove me mad, and eventually, I couldn't distinguish my dream from reality. I would watch my family die, and for the life of me, I couldn't stop it. I would try to talk to them,

tell them to leave, but they couldn't hear me. I would move them and try to keep them all in one room. They would leave, and I'd turn around to see the aftermath.

We were a happy family, really we were. However, My wife was cheating, and the baby wasn't mine. When I found out, we moved to heal, but I drove her to take her life because I couldn't forget; because of a dream that manipulated my anger. A child never led her to the pool, I did. I convinced her to have a midnight swim with me. I grabbed her hand and set her up.

Then my kids. My sons, who just wanted a snack, saw me in the kitchen with their favorite treat. I lit the fire and left. My daughter pleaded for me. Who tried to heal us both, but I pushed her. I killed us all. My hands and my mind have killed us all.

BANG!

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