

Praise for *You Weren't Meant to Be Human*

A Washington Post Best Sci-Fi and Fantasy Novel

A Publishers Weekly Best SF/Horror Selection

A Goodreads Choice Award Nominee

A People Best Book of September

*“White’s adult debut encapsulates the best of the modern horror genre.”

—*Booklist*, starred review

*“[A] brilliant, page-turning piece of trans splatterpunk body horror and an earnest, heart-rending tragedy. White should win a whole new set of fans with this.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“Body horror is always about the strangeness of having a body, and White uses that device to tell a profound, unsettling story.”

—*Washington Post*

“This is one of those deeply disturbing books that I adore and abhor in equal measure, and I think that is exactly what makes it such a masterpiece.”

—*Grimdark Magazine*

“This visceral, gripping body-horror novel will satisfy your literary appetite.”

—*People*

“A tenderly beating, bloody heart of a novel. Relentlessly bleak and harrowing, White’s brutal adult debut also somehow manages to be deeply, devastatingly empathetic.”

—Kiersten White, author of *Lucy, Undying*

“*You Weren’t Meant to Be Human* is dysphoria bound into words. Andrew Joseph White captures a beautifully disgusting world that’s all too familiar to neurodivergent and trans individuals, with a plot that offers nothing but shocking pleasure with each page turn.”

—Linden Lewis, author of *The First Sister*

“Gruesome and unrelenting, Andrew Joseph White’s adult debut is a masterpiece of horror. White dares you to accept Crane’s humanity when all the veneers of politeness are stripped away, capturing the intersection of the alienation of neurodivergence and the pain of dysphoria with unflinching honesty.”

—K. M. Enright, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of
Mistress of Lies

ALSO BY ANDREW JOSEPH WHITE

Hell Followed with Us
The Spirit Bares Its Teeth
Compound Fracture

You Weren't Meant to Be Human



ANDREW JOSEPH WHITE

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**For anyone who ever put their
face too close to the fire,
or boiling water, or snapping dogs.**

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In addition to a graphic focus on pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion, and childbirth, *You Weren't Meant to Be Human* contains explicit depictions of extreme violence and gore, suicidal ideation, intrusive thoughts, self-harm, sexual assault, and abuse—sometimes alone, sometimes combined, sometimes indistinguishable one from another. A detailed list of warnings is available on the author's website at AndrewJosephWhite.com.

First Trimester

One

Crane doesn't know this yet, but he's been pregnant for almost three months already.

Two

Crane didn't say *yes* to this, though maybe that isn't the best choice of words. Crane doesn't say anything if he can help it. And he wouldn't have written it out, either, scrawled proof of consent like an exploited porn actor under duress, *I agreed to this I swear*. He stopped speaking for a reason. Writing it down defeats the point.

But Levi is still putting him over the manager's desk, a hand to the back trapping him between a broken printer and the security camera monitor, and his jeans are down to his thighs and there are bruises

under his jaw, and he can't bring himself to care about if he agreed or not.

Behind him, Levi mumbles, "Stay down."

Is Levi still smoking back there? He doesn't think so but it smells like it. God, that'd be hot, if he was—use the dips between the vertebrae as an ashtray, fuck up the cheap tattoo there with a scar, it'd look so good. Levi's body heat warms the bare backs of Crane's thighs.

Crane whines. It's pathetic.

There are sticky notes pasted around the security camera monitor, little things for him to focus on while Levi unbuckles his belt—the telltale jingle of metal on metal, the low rasp of the zipper. *Last feeding June 2. Reorder cigs. Y'all stop dying or we won't have no one to work the day shift.* That last one's a joke. Or Crane thinks it is. The gas station's never kept regular hours.

Then there're the camera feeds. The front lot with the gravel and pumps, the dark smudge of the road almost visible after nightfall but not quite. The sales floor with the register and self-serve coffee machines, currently unattended. The manager's office camera looking down at their backs. The locked room with the hive of worms and flies.

Levi grabs Crane's hips and pushes inside him. No condom, no lube, no foreplay to get him wet, besides the hand around his throat thirty seconds ago. It hurts. Crane lurches forward, gasps, nearly knocks the monitor off the desk. Levi steadies it. His thumb is on the screen by the hive, covering where blood's gummed up the tile grout.

"Easy," Levi says with that throaty rasp guys get when they're finally inside halfway-decent pussy. "God, you feel good."

He's right. It feels good. It stings, burns the way it does when you're unprepared as hell, but that's half the point, and Crane watches himself get fucked raw on the security camera monitor because he can't get off unless he feels sick to his stomach about the whole thing.

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That's how it's gone for as long as they've been together. Levi shoving him against a wall, pushing fingers between his teeth, and Crane taking it whether he wants to or not, because it's not as good if he gets a choice. Levi smells like Marlboro Reds and the gun cleaner he uses on his Mossberg 12-gauge. When he fucks, his dog tags clink together. Crane gets the idea that Levi likes the sound of it, and that's okay, he does too. Fine, he'll spread his legs as much as he can, hobbled by his jeans, whimper like a bitch in heat, reach down to get himself off. He can be a man while there's another man's cock in his pussy, if that's what he wants to call himself. Sure.

Something moves on the security camera, and it's not them.

Crane scans the cameras in a blur, tries to clock where he saw it but can't. He reaches behind him to get Levi to stop, hold on, he *saw* something, but Levi grabs his wrist and wrenches it behind his back. It throws Crane off-balance. He slams cheek-first into the desk, and his teeth cut the inside of his mouth.

"The hell you fighting for?" Levi rasps, suddenly so close to his ear. Still fucking him. Doesn't even break rhythm. God, that feels good, *please*— "Thought you liked when it hurt."

He does. He does he does. Never mind the screen, it doesn't matter, it can't be that important. He wants Levi to use the bruises on his throat as a map of where to put his hand again, squeeze until his vision goes black at the edges. Or, or he can struggle again, make a fuss, see if Levi might call him a *faggot*, because there's nothing quite like a slur to really make his cunt throb.

Unfortunately, when the monitor flickers again, he catches it.

A person. An indistinct column with a head and four limbs at the edge of the front lot camera 1, shambling up the gravel drive from Corridor H to the pumps.

And, on back room camera 5, the hive is awake.

Shit. Shit, *shit*.

Crane straightens up. Shifts his weight back, jams his free elbow against Levi's ribs. *Let go*. But Levi doesn't get it; doesn't see the monitor, doesn't grasp the situation, whatever. He grunts, "What are you—" and slaps a hand over Crane's face to hold him still.

So Crane bites.

"*Jesus!*" Levi pulls out with a sudden wet sound, backs away, and yanks up his pants like there're other things Crane might be keen on biting.

There aren't. Crane is too busy catching his breath, trying to cover up.

Crane's going to regret this later, but that's fine. He's looking forward to it.

"What?" Levi barks. As if shocked that the autistic guy he's been using as a sex toy for two years is acting like an autistic. A mark is blooming on Levi's hand. The imprint of each tooth is already black. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Crane points to the security camera monitor.

Levi strong-arms him out of the way and tilts the screen to a better angle. While Crane readjusts the padding of his sports bra and zips up his jeans, Levi inspects the feed of the manager's office, the two of them in the dark surrounded by files and old boxes and cleaning supplies, then the front lot, then the hive.

Levi says, "New girl, huh?"



Crane is not the best person to greet a terrified and potentially unwell stranger, but better him than Levi. Levi talks about putting down defectors the same way hunters brag about bagging deer. He drinks too

much. He'd been dishonorably discharged and only ever mentioned it to bitch about getting caught; what he did, Crane refuses to ask, but when he comes home with blood on his shirt, it's hard not to mull over the possibilities.

In comparison, then, Crane is the safer option. The boyish half-androgyny of twenty months' testosterone therapy—sparse facial hair, yesterday's eyeliner, almost-but-not-quite flat-chested, and a little too feminine around the mouth—places him squarely in the territory of *not a threat, probably*. It's just the dull stare and unblinking silence that throws people off and, well. This person will have to deal with it.

The girl is halfway across the parking lot when Crane steps out to meet her.

She's barefoot and glassy-eyed, one tank top strap slipping off her dirty shoulder. Hasn't showered in a while, given the state of her hair. The shitty fluorescent lights make it difficult to tell bruises from shadows. She's limping too. Feet are bleeding.

She walked here, then. From where? The closest town is a few miles up the mountain, but if she was from Washville, he would've recognized her.

She sees him and stops.

He waits a moment to see if she starts talking. She doesn't.

Down the gravel driveway, on the easternmost stretch of West Virginia's Corridor H, a truck grumbles past, headed toward the state line. To one side of them, there's old forest; one minute's walk to the other, the condemned livestock exchange. Nobody else for a good long while.

Crane's stomach hurts. He'd been in her place once, three years ago. Creeping too close to his eighteenth birthday, drunk for the first and only time in his life in the high school parking lot, striking matches and letting them burn out. He'd accepted a spot at a top state school earlier that year—majoring in political communication—and graduated

salutatorian that morning. The packing list for his dorm was taped to the fridge, and while his classmates kicked off the rest of their lives at the school-sponsored YMCA grad party, there he was in the dark alone, trying to figure out the logistics of self-immolation.

All his childhood prayers had fallen through. There'd never been a car accident or building fire to do the hard part for him. Time was up. Childhood was over, the real world was knocking on the door, and he was tired. He was too scared to die, but he needed it to stop, and it was then or never.

But even after years of fantasizing and hoping and begging God, he still didn't have the guts to do it.

That's when the swarm found him. Because that's what happens: it finds you. By the time it makes you an offer, it already knows you won't say no, and then you end up in front of a strange building, hours from home in the middle of the night, with blood in the back of your throat and burns on your fingertips.

Same story every time, it seems.

Crane takes one cautious step forward, then another. The girl in the parking lot wavers, looking warily over her shoulder like she's thinking of running. Nope. She made her choice. Running won't do her any good.

He clicks his tongue to get her attention and holds up a bottle of water. *Here*, the gesture says.

"Who—?" she says, sounding sick, like she has a head cold.

The bottle gets a shake. *Come on. For you.*

She blinks, then picks her way through the sharp gravel to accept it. It takes a few tries to get the bottle open, but when she does, she sucks it down like she hasn't had a drop for days. When she has to stop to wheeze for air, she pours some onto her face. She splutters, blinking, and aha, there she is. Wild with hunger and confusion. Alive.

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She starts to cry.

He'd cried too.

"Thank you," she sobs, "thank you," and Crane stands in the dark, looking past her to the road and rubbing the scar on his wrist, because he can't stand to look someone in the eye.



If he'd actually gotten the guts to do it that night, to actually set the match to something instead of shaking it out every time the flame licked his fingers, how would it have gone?

His burning—*Sophie's* burning, the brown-haired girl in a Forever 21 dress, the sweet female-thing that had existed in Crane's place for so many years—had been premeditated to a degree worthy of institutionalization. She knew she wanted only the face to burn. That was the most bang for her buck, or more accurately, the most visible damage in the least amount of time. She also knew she was a coward, and did not have the willpower to go up in stoic silence like a monk or the activists lighting themselves up in rows on the Capitol steps. The face was enough; it would have to do.

Maybe she would've siphoned gas from the car's tank to smear across her cheeks, or the liquor she'd been choking down would work. The logistics weren't important. What's *important* was that she burned. The scars would be permanent, and she would be free. She'd already written a speech in her Notes app for her future doctor, explaining exactly why she didn't want reconstructive surgery. It's expensive, she'd say, and extra stress on a delicate part of a human body, and it's not worth it, and *I don't want you to do it, please don't fix it, if you fix it I'll do it again, I'll do it again I swear I will.*

She'd say, *I'm sorry I didn't have the words to say it any other way.*



Crane leads the girl inside, turns off the OPEN sign, and locks the door. She's worse up close. White face discolored like it'd been beaten in, fingers bloody and broken-nailed. Her feet track a red-brown mess.

Is Levi still in the office? Thank god. Give her a second to get it together without him.

"Sorry," she sniffles. "You probably just mopped, too. I'm Jess."

Crane shrugs, because that statement presumes he isn't used to cleaning up bodily fluids, and reaches behind the register to bring out the basket. His manager, Tammy, put it together a decade ago, and some of the stuff is still that old: wet wipes, bandages, Neosporin and tweezers, fresh socks and snacks and dry shampoo and mouthwash.

Jess watches it warily before he nudges it toward her, offers some semblance of permission. She immediately snatches up every calorie she can find.

"Thank you," she says, hands full of cheap granola bars. "Uh. Can you talk?"

Crane nods.

"Oh."

It's been a while since the hive brought in somebody new. Used to be two other guys who worked here, Mike and Harry, but Mike died of mouth cancer and Harry started screaming about botfly larvae and tapeworms in his belly, so Levi had to put him down. Cleaning blood and bone pieces off the floor was bad enough, but the impact on Crane's work schedule for the past few months rubbed salt in the wound. He cannot wait to show this girl how to work the register.

While she finishes her water and demolishes the granola bars, Crane texts Tammy. Texting doesn't count as writing things down, as

long as it's a situation in which any normal person would text. Otherwise it's a no go. It drives Levi up the wall.

Crane: Got a new one. Let me know when ur up.

That's followed by, *Did u know?*

Tammy will get the girl a phone and some clothes, set her up in the guest room in the back of Tammy's too-old house, the sparse and drafty room that used to be Crane's. Some woman from a Georgia hive will build a fake ID and ship it up in a few weeks. Whoever Jess was before will shrivel away, and a new person will molt—so to speak—into its place. There's a lot of work to do.

But before any of that, fake IDs or instructions on how to clean the coffee machines, she needs to get those feet to stop bleeding.

Crane gives her the milk crate he sits on for slow shifts, and she slumps onto it, hoisting up a foot to assess the damage. Not as bad as it could be; more mud than blood, what with the summer rains coming through the mountains. Crane cracks open another water bottle to soak a paper towel and presses it into her hands. Clean up.

Her face nags at him, to the point he starts chewing on his lip ring. She's familiar in a way he can't put his finger on.

"Um." Scrubbing her feet, Jess takes stock of her surroundings: the cramped sales floor, dirty coffee machines, cigarettes behind the counter. She's adaptable, then. Even struggling through tears, she's trying to keep a cool head. Good. "What's your name? Can you write it down?"

"His name's Crane."

Jess whips around with a yelp. It's just Levi, though, leaning against the door to the employee area, nonchalantly pulling a cigarette from the pack and popping it into his mouth. Jess studies him. The muscles in her neck are taut.

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“Like the bird?” she says.

“He’s a mute. He ain’t silent or nothing, makes all kinds of noise when you get him going—” He grins, using the beat of silence to produce a cheap lighter and get the flame going. Crane’s face burns. “But besides that, good luck getting a word out of him. I’m Levi. You smoke?”

“No.”

Crane doesn’t make a habit of smoking, either, but he still makes a low noise in the back of his throat and holds out a hand. Even an inconsiderate roommate-slash-fuckbuddy-slash-boyfriend-is-too-strong-a-word-but-the-closest-they-have like Levi catches the drift. He comes over to place a fresh cigarette in Crane’s mouth and lights it with the gruff homoerotic flair possessed only by ex-soldiers, cocking an eyebrow at the door.

We’re gonna finish what we started, right?

Crane breathes in so the flame catches. Of course they are.

Levi, content with that answer, snaps his lighter shut and slings an arm over Crane’s shoulder. “So. You look like shit, missy. Where you walk from?”

“My boyfriend’s place,” Jess says cautiously. “On the other side of the lumberyard.”

Five miles as the crow flies; longer if she stuck to roads. Hell of a trek to make with no shoes. Still doesn’t explain why Crane’s never seen her, though.

“This about him?” Levi says.

Jess hesitates, but nods.

“We can work with that. You need anything?”

Jess inspects her fucked-up hands. The worms or flies don’t give a shit about morals, but it doesn’t seem like this boyfriend of hers will be missed any.

She says, “Can—can I see them? I want to say thank you.”

Of course, Crane thinks. He'd wanted to see them too; an animal desperation to meet the first things to understand him, no matter how horrific they were. So he helps her to her feet, steadying her when she hisses in pain, and Levi takes the key from under the register, and together they walk her across the sales floor through the manager's office, to the heavy iron door set into the dark back wall.

Jess holds tight to Crane's arm.

Levi fights with the lock for a moment, muttering under his breath before it gives way, and . . .

Oh child, the hive says with its thousand chattering jaws and the buzzing of a thousand wings; the flesh flies swarming in thick mats, the wet bodies of soft worms hiding in piles of regurgitated bone-pulp. The smell is revolting. ***Our cherished one, hello, hello, hello.***

As if only half-aware of what she's doing, Jess takes one step forward, then another. Crane, out of instinct, or maybe like a child, covers the scar on his wrist. He still remembers the sting, how for a moment he thought the worm would dig itself into his arm and never come out.

You've made it. You are safe. You are home.

Levi takes Jess by the arm and turns his own hand to show the ugly mark bitten into his skin. “Look at that,” he says. “You're gonna get your own. Hold out your— There we go. Don't flinch. You can take it.”

A singular, dripping worm extricates itself from the mass. Jess breathes in and nearly chokes on the rotting stink.

When it bites down, she screams only a little.

You will feel the sun on your face when we cannot.

Three

It's been a week, and according to Tammy, Jess hasn't tried to run away or kill herself yet—mainly just slept in the spare bed and crammed down every ounce of food she could find in Tammy's cabinets—so looks like the girl is here to stay.

Levi's gone on a work trip, headed to a hive that's rooted itself in an impound yard just outside McDowell County. Crane couldn't get the details before he left, but Tammy says a girl from down there asked after him. That hive is about to have a shit time, then. His F-150 in a parking lot is the equivalent of a pirate's black spot.

“He bought bullets, didn't he?” Tammy says as she gathers up the

accounting books. Half her fingers are arthritic and permanently straightened into sticks. Crane, chewing on a toothpick behind the register, wonders if she got to choose which position her hands would stay in for the rest of her life, or if her joints decided for her. His stomach's been turning all day and the toothpick kind of helps. "Thought I saw him at Walmart with a box of slugs. The price on them is getting real bad, ain't it?"

Crane makes a little noise: *I'm not interested in how inflation is affecting the price of ammunition, Ma.*

"Last I heard from down there," Tammy continues, "the old bitch that runs the impound lot—Beth, you remember her? She came up last year. She was getting into it with Billy. Now, I don't agree with the way she does things, but the way Billy reacted, that was just uncalled for." She bats away Crane's arm to pluck the large-print calculator from behind him. "And if word gets out and cops start sniffing around, that's no good."

Crane makes another noise, this one derisive. If a cop gets too close to this hive, he'll handle it. He's done it before.

"Exactly. So I think your man's just headed down to knock some sense back into him." She falls silent for a moment, propping her hands on her hips. "You doing good without him? You look a bit—hmm. You feeling alright, sweetheart?"

He feels no worse than usual, which is always a little bad. He gestures her away from the register. She has more important things to do than nag at him, like cook the books so the franchise owner down in Florida continues to ignore them.

"Fine," Tammy says. "I'll leave you be. I know how you kids are."

As soon as she's shuffled off and closed the door to the manager's office, Crane grabs his phone to open the encrypted messaging app.

In the group chat, Aspen and Birdie are talking about the latest

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rash of Supreme Court rulings. Their tendency to natter back and forth via text used to confuse him; they're married, live in the same DC-suburb townhouse, and have no problem with mouth-speech, so it seemed like an odd choice. But Aspen said they want Crane to feel included, so the group chat it is.

Talking to people outside the hive is the sort of thing defectors do. But it's not like that. He swears. He's not going to leave—seriously, why the fuck would he, he's not leaving the hive, even if it kills him.

Aspen and Birdie are worried about him. That's all.

Crane: It's fucking LATE. Dont yall have real jobs

Birdie: real jobs don't schedule people on holidays, it's the fourth???

He checks the calendar. Shit, it rolled over to the Fourth of July a few minutes ago. Washville really must be dying if nobody started cracking off fireworks at midnight sharp.

Birdie: but yes this country continues to be a nightmare

Aspen: I'm still reading, gimme a second. Some coworkers think it's not as bad as it sounds but we'll see. While I do that, how are you holding up? We still good for this weekend?

Oh *shit*, he'd completely forgotten he'd agreed to a—what did Aspen call it, a “proof of life” this week. But three hours down the mountain, three back up, this stomachache, Tammy's joints flaring up, and Jess to keep an eye on? Even with Levi across the state, it's not going to work.

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Crane: Manager thinks I look like shit but I'm fine lmao. Also we got a new trainee last week. Can't leave her alone for too long so. Can't come down. Sorry

Birdie: that sucks :(are you sure youre okay? we can do a video call instead if you want

Aspen: We'll miss you, but remember the drive isn't that bad if Birdie or I can get the day off. Anything you need at all, just let us know.

The idea of one of them coming up here makes his stomach turn.

Crane: I know

Aspen: Also I finished the release and yeah, it's bad. States' rights all the way, unless it's abortion in which case fuck us, right?

Birdie: ngl I miss the year where we actually had like three successful assassinations or whatever. bring that energy back!!! where is it!!!!

Crane stops responding, but Aspen and Birdie keep talking. They know it's tough for him. He turns the phone on vibrate so he can feel it buzz in his pocket, a reminder that he's being included in some way.

Maybe not visiting is for the best if he looks as bad as Tammy says. No need to freak them out worse.

Though it can't be *that* bad. He leans around the cigarette case to check his reflection in the dark mirror of the window, pulls down an eyelid, and wiggles the toothpick between his teeth. Besides the bruises Levi left a few days ago, finishing that unfinished business

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from the manager's office with a belt around Crane's neck, there's only the usual eyebags and unbrushed hair. That, and his most recent ink: a centipede above the left elbow. He's covered from his ankles to the back of his neck, a sketchbook for whatever artist is doing shitty flash work for cheap.

Birdie thought she'd seen through it all the first time she'd met him. The tattoos, the dozen piercings scattered across his ears and face, it was all clear to her. "It's gender-affirming, obviously," she'd said like she'd cracked the code. "I mean, look at you."

Crane hadn't had the heart to correct her and say that if he hadn't been able to set himself on fire, he'd needed to change *somehow*.

Either way. It's good to see yourself through someone else's eyes. He leans closer to the reflection and tries to step into another pair of shoes, inspect himself as if he was a stranger. It's not easy. A total lack of self-image, he's heard, is an autism thing. Or a trauma thing, Aspen would point out.

But he's not traumatized. A walking collection of bad decisions, sure, and a masochist with way too many messy kinks, absolutely. *Traumatized?* That word is for veterans and rape victims, not him.

After all, the hive saved him.

His phone buzzes one more time. Right. Might as well check out Aspen's official review of the country's current sociopolitical situation.

It's not them.

Jess: Hi, is this Crane? Sorry, I should've told you Tammy gave me your number

Jess: I think I killed my boyfriend

Jess: I don't know what to do

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As soon as Crane barges into the office and shows Tammy the message chain, she's shoving car keys into his hand. "Lord above, did she *walk* there? Go get her before she does something stupid. *Git!*" So now he's pulling eighty-five on an empty stretch of Corridor H past Washville, ignoring the upset whine of his achy old Camry and turning up the radio until high notes of some Top 40 song sting his eardrums.

Levi should be doing this. Crane is queasy and pissed about it. This is supposed to be *Levi's* job, and the son of a bitch is in *McDowell*.

Jess: Past the lumberyard, once you cross the one-lane bridge. You know where that is? Has a chest freezer on the porch, Chevy in the driveway, light's on

Jess: Jesus Christ

Jess: I'm gonna be sick

Jess: Oh shit I think he's moving

The lumberyard isn't technically in Washville, it's closer to Crane and Levi's apartment in the greater Wash County unincorporated area, but it's still the Washville lumberyard because there aren't any other landmarks for miles. Mike used to work there before the swarm found him. According to the stories, so many people ended up with nails in their hand that the injury was given the shorthand *crucifixion*, as in, *Did you hear that John got crucified last week?*

Jess: Yeah he's still breathing oh my god

Crane doesn't like it, but that doesn't mean he can't do it. Levi made sure of that.

Five miles, five minutes later, and Crane is in front of the house—this one-story gray thing plunked on the side of a dirt road—throwing the Camry into park and grabbing his go bag from the front seat.

Jess stumbles out to the concrete steps. She's a ghost backlit by the grainy porch light smothered with moths and skeeter-eaters, leaning against the chest freezer to keep her balance. It makes Crane feel like a horror movie monster: carrying a bag of murder equipment, tightening heavy-duty gloves, walking up to a girl in a cabin where neighbors would maybe only hear if she screamed.

He tries not to think about that last part too hard. Her hands have only just started to heal.

"I thought—" Jess tries. She's swaying nervously, keeps staring at the bugs swarming the porch light. She's following their panicked buzzing against the glass with her too-familiar eyes. "They said I should do it. I thought I—"

Crane catches her by the upper arms, squeezes, breathes in slowly to get her to do the same. She gets the hint, scrambles to follow his cue. He breathes out. So does she.

Easy, it says. Slow the heartbeat, get the lungs under control. It's what Levi told him when he was eighteen, covered in the shit-smelling pulp that spills out of a cut intestine. You can't lose your cool. You panic and you get stupid, and when you get stupid you get hurt.

She says, "I thought I hit him hard enough."

Good thing there's a fix for that.

Inside, the house is all wood paneling, crusty beige carpet, absolutely trashed. FOX News mutters on the TV, a corner of the screen exploded into a rainbow mess of pixels. A bowl of Cheerios sits un-

eaten on the coffee table. Crane casts around for an idea of what they're dealing with and finds it in a hunting photo on the wall: four guys in blaze orange with guns and bucks.

If Levi was here, he would've clocked the photo in an instant and put a finger against Jess's temple like a cold metal muzzle. "You find that gun cabinet and you keep an eye on it, girlie. If that poor fucker gets to it before you do: *pshew*." Gunshot noise from the corner of the mouth. "You're out."

Crane is studying it too closely. Jess clears her throat. "You, uh. Won't have to worry about that."

Fine. Time to show her the ropes.

This son of a bitch, as it turns out, is currently on the bedroom floor trying to get on his feet; key word being *try* because it's not going well. Crane wouldn't be surprised if he's being puppeteered by adrenaline alone. There can't *be* much else. His skull is dented, and the swelling is trying to squeeze his pale little eyes out of his face.

The latest attempt to stand fails. Gross, Crane thinks.

Jess wraps her arms around her ribs. She won't come into the room. She stands in the hall, toes barely crossing where the vinyl floor cuts to cheap carpet, studying the torn-up doorframe and old plywood nailed over the windows. There are too many locks on the door. Some of them are broken.

"Yeah," Jess says when Crane gives her a quizzical frown, making sure that this is: one, her boyfriend; and two, the state she left him in, not a total surprise. "Bad, right."

Those words—or maybe Jess's voice itself—sets him off. As much as someone can be *set off* with most of their brain destroyed. He swings his head around, tries to get an arm under him, can't manage it. Saliva drips from his cockeyed mouth.

"Jess," he slurs in the way half-dead people have a tendency to. "Jess."

If they wanted to, they could wait this out. That head trauma, that's something else. Seriously, what did she use? Crane sidesteps to check the room and finds a dumbbell halfway under the bed. It'd be funny if it wasn't such a bad decision. This is why she was supposed to wait for Levi—he'd have talked her through it. He'd have handled it like a soldier. He's not here, though, so the two of them could honestly shut the door, head to the living room, flip through the TV channels, and check back in half an hour.

But any risk is too much, and Jess has to learn.

Crane sets the bag down on the bed, digs out a hammer, and flips it into his hand.

This guy must have some sense left in that brain, must be able to see something, even with all his gray matter scrambled up, because he starts moving again. Trying to get away. Prone on his belly, he grabs the foot of the bed, hauls himself forward an inch, leaving a slick wet trail where he can't pick his head up properly.

Crane plants a booted foot on the lower back—no, none of that, thank you—and nods Jess in. Let's make it quick.

Levi would be explaining the situation right now. Every detail, starting with whatever weapon was in hand that day. It has to be a weapon with plausible deniability, he'd say, in case you bump into the law. Mike used to keep a nail gun in his truck at all times; Harry carried a knife in the same bag as a pair of antlers and a hunting permit; Levi's Mossberg shotgun is a self-defense model perfect for a rural county where 911 doesn't pick up half the time. A hammer's an easy sell to a cop, so it's perfect for a mute.

Jess steps cautiously into the bedroom like it has teeth—to her, it might—and tries to breathe through the mouth instead of her nose. There we go. The man squirms and Crane puts more weight on him, clicking his tongue to keep Jess's attention. Don't look at the windows,