

FADING FAST

by Sarah M. Chen

The guttural *meow* of a feral cat pierced the still night, making Sherry yelp. She stumbled on the gravel road and smacked into Justin, who crept silently in front of her.

“Jesus, what’s with you?” Justin whispered, spinning around. He held a finger up to his lips as if she needed to be reminded that they were supposed to be “stealth-like.” Justin’s exact words because this was all his plan. He didn’t even want her here but no way was she letting him do this without her.

“Sorry. Damn cat.” She hated cats. Mostly because that’s how they sounded late at night outside her window. Howling in that creepy, blood-curdling way.

His stern look softened into concern. “It’s not too late to back out, babe. Let me handle it.” His eyes traveled down to her bulging belly.

Sherry instinctively put her hand on her round tummy. She shook her head. “No, this is my thing.”

Their eyes locked in the darkness, illuminated by the full moon and the flickering streetlight behind them.

“It’s *our* thing.” Justin smiled and grabbed her hand. Gave it a squeeze. She squeezed back, and he motioned to the trailer about twenty feet ahead of them. “Ready?”

She nodded. Their footsteps crunched on the gravel as they closed in on the gray aluminum mobile home with the sagging bottom frame. The chilly night seemed to penetrate her bones, as if she weren't wearing two sweatshirts and a windbreaker. Or maybe it was her nerves. She shivered.

Justin climbed the creaky steps and tried the front door. It was locked, as Sherry knew it would be. Justin pulled out a flathead screwdriver and went to work. Ernie didn't bother with the deadbolt. Figured the few neighbors around knew better not to screw with him. Tonight, he was wrong.

The aluminum door frame bent easily, and Justin turned the knob. He hesitated, glancing back at Sherry. She held up her finger and listened for footsteps inside. Nothing. She nodded. They entered the dark trailer.

Instantly, the familiar smells of mildew, cigarettes, cheap cologne, and whiskey assaulted her. An unwanted *déjà vu*. What the hell was she doing? Walking back into this hell hole she fled five years ago?

It took a while for her eyes to adjust to the dark but it didn't matter. She knew the trailer's layout better than she knew anything. It appeared over and over in her sweat-soaked nightmares. Ernie towering over her. Dragging her from underneath the couch where she tried to burrow into the worn carpet like a mole. Crying and screaming for him to stop. His raspy laugh making her cry harder.

Sherry shook the horrid images from her mind and tried to concentrate. She could make out Justin's figure shuffling through the cramped living room toward Ernie's bedroom in the back. Sherry hesitated and tried to take a deep breath, but it was like her lungs shrunk.

Sucking down small gulps of air took every ounce of effort. She wanted to cry out to Justin to wait but no sound came out. Her limbs felt heavy and despite the frigid temperature, sweat pooled underneath her arms. Was this what a panic attack felt like?

“Sherry!” Justin hissed from the bedroom, motioning for her.

She needed to snap the fuck out of whatever mind trip she was on. Justin was here because of her and no way was she going to screw this up.

Sherry felt the roll of duct tape and nylon rope tucked inside the pockets of her windbreaker and edged past the same lumpy couch. The same cheap coffee table with the peeling black plastic revealing the thin plywood underneath. She accidentally kicked something and realized it was an empty Jim Beam bottle. Still the same old drunk. The only thing different was the giant flat screen TV. Fancy. Took up almost half the trailer wall, it was so goddamn big. Ernie always did love his pornos.

She stood behind Justin, her breathing loud and ragged. Or maybe that was Ernie’s. Because there he was. Splayed out on his bed like a hibernating grizzly bear, snoring with his mouth wide open.

He looked the same only much older, more haggard. His gut was bigger too, spilling over his tight, stained boxers. Sherry swallowed a wave of nausea. The urge to sprint from this home of evil tugged at her something fierce. Her instincts screamed *run, run, run*.

It’s too bad she didn’t listen to her gut because right then Justin let out a garbled shriek and launched himself on top of Ernie, straddling him. His hands wrapped around Ernie’s throat, who, by that point, had woken up, gagging and clutching at Justin’s hands, thrashing as if suffering from a seizure. So much for being “stealth-like.”

“What the fuck!” Ernie sputtered.

Sherry felt a surge of adrenaline and panic rise inside her. It was like watching the cats fight outside her window. Snarling, spitting, and yowling. A tangled furious ball of fur. Only this was worse. Because her man, her savior, was fighting the monster who haunted her no matter where she moved or how many meds she took.

“You rapist!” Justin screamed. “You like little girls, huh? You sick fuck!”

Sherry felt helpless, watching as Justin maneuvered himself behind Ernie, locking him in a one-arm chokehold. Justin watched enough MMA fights and YouTube videos to know how to knock someone out with just enough pressure on their carotid artery. Deprive the brain of blood. He’d wanted to test it on Sherry first but she said “fuck that.”

Ernie’s face turned crimson. His eyes bugged as he feebly slapped Justin’s beefy arm wrapped around his neck. Sherry wondered if Justin was doing it wrong—was supposed to only take seconds—and maybe the bastard would die.

Die, you sick fuck.

Wouldn’t be such a terrible thing. It was payback time, asshole. For all those years he had drugged her, yanked her panties down, stuck his fingers in her, his dick, whatever objects he could find. Laughed at her desperate cries. Her hot tears. Told her *Mommy wasn’t coming back. Mommy doesn’t love you anymore. The cunt left both of us.*

The son of a bitch was right on fucking target. Her mom never did return as she’d promised. Left her with Ernie in that trailer for nine long years. Until Sherry finally ran away at thirteen. Bounced around various foster homes until she met Justin at Café Vita in downtown Seattle when she was seventeen. Three years older than her but it was like he could see inside her mind. Know exactly what she was thinking.

She moved in with him two months later on her eighteenth birthday. Which is how he found out about Ernie. She didn't want to tell him—was too ashamed—but the relentless nightmares had to be explained somehow. He insisted she tell the authorities. What if he's doing it again? To some other little girl?

Because Justin believed in her and because he was right, she went to the cops and told them her story. Every disgusting detail. It took everything in her to keep talking because Ernie said if she ever went to the cops or told anyone, she was a dead bitch and he'd cut up her insides.

The stunned officer paid Ernie a visit and discovered hundreds of pills: Xanax, muscle relaxers, over-the-counter sleeping pills, Valium, and a dozen bottles of cough medicine in his trailer. They also found a stash of pornographic videos, all featuring underage girls, some as young as four years old. Ernie insisted the videos and pills weren't his.

Sherry repeated her story in court. As Ernie eyed her with a wolfish stare. She refused to let him trip her up.

Then Sherry's mother showed up to court the next day. Whether the defense tracked her down or she wanted to share her side of the story, Sherry couldn't say. Because her own flesh and blood defended that monster. Sat there in the witness box in her designer knockoff pantsuit, saying she would never leave her baby girl with a child molester. Sure, she'd been going through some problems of her own, but she always intended to come back for Sherry. *Jesus, what kind of mother do you think I am?*

It was the first time Sherry had seen her mother in thirteen years and she'd just called Sherry a liar to an entire courtroom.

Then Ernie did something totally unexpected. He changed his plea to guilty. Turned out the prosecution had an ironclad witness: Ernie's younger sister, now thirty-three. Her story was similar to Sherry's and probably many girls before.

Ernie was looking at ten years in prison. Not enough for Sherry, but it was something. Her life could begin again knowing he was behind bars. But for reasons only the heavens above or the demons below could understand, the judge placed Ernie on a five-year probation. No jail time whatsoever.

It was a punch in Sherry's gut. Bigger than her own mother testifying against her. Everything she thought about justice and karma was a twisted joke. A big middle finger.

Ernie had turned and looked right at her when the judge announced the ridiculous sentence. Cold dead eyes that sent shivers through Sherry.

She knew then she'd never be safe. Always wondering, waiting to see when he'd show up. Hunt her down for exposing his horrible secret.

It wasn't just herself she had to worry about. It was her and Justin's baby. Ready to meet the big, bad world in two months. No way was she going to let the asshole near her baby girl, which is why Justin came up with his plan to scare Ernie. Tie him up, threaten to kill him if he ever came near Sherry and their baby.

Die, motherfucker, die.

"Babe? Hello?" Justin said. "He's out!"

Sherry snapped back from her thoughts to her surroundings: the stuffy trailer, the big hairy man immobile on the bed, her fiancé wildly beckoning to her.

"I need the rope and duct tape!"

“You sure he ain’t dead?” Sherry eyed Ernie while pulling out the tape and rope.

Expecting him to leap up and attack her any second.

“I’m sure. Hurry. Before he wakes up.”

Sherry handed Justin the rope while she tore off a piece of tape. The plan was to tie him up real quick. Then when he came to, they’d beat him senseless. Warn him to stay away from Sherry or they’d kill him. Show him they weren’t fucking around.

Justin moved Ernie onto his side, grabbed both arms from behind and started tying his wrists together. Sherry smoothed the tape onto Ernie’s mouth, flinching as her hand grazed his stubbled cheek.

“Aw shit.”

“What?” Sherry panicked. “He’s dead, ain’t he?”

“Nah, I just tied the knot wrong. I gotta do it over or else he’ll be able to yank his hands free.” Justin frowned as he tugged at the rope. His body bouncing on the bed with each jerk.

“Jesus. Just tie any ol’ knot.”

“No, it’s gotta be the handcuff knot. It’s foolproof.”

“I knew we should’ve gotten zip ties.”

“I practiced this knot over and over. And now I can’t even get this thing...” Justin’s tongue poked out of the side of his mouth while he jerked the rope repeatedly. Sherry watched with mounting frustration. “Can you get me scissors, babe? Or a knife?”

“What for?”

“I gotta cut it. Hurry.”

Sherry hustled to the tiny kitchen on the opposite end of the trailer. This was already screwed up. Just being here was fucking with her head and now Justin couldn’t even tie a

goddamn knot right. She flung open a drawer, rummaged around for scissors. Found a big long skinny knife, the kind you cut vegetables with. Then she heard Justin yelling. Followed by a loud *thump!*

“Oh shit!” Sherry sped from the kitchen to the other side of the trailer as fast as her big belly would allow, the knife at her side. She found Justin and Ernie rolling around the carpet. Justin punched Ernie in the gut while Ernie clawed at Justin’s face, his hands now free. A muffled howl from Ernie but the bastard managed to get a finger in Justin’s eye. It was Justin’s turn to howl. They crashed into the nightstand, knocking a lamp and an empty tumbler to the floor.

Sherry kicked Ernie in the back as hard as she could but it was like kicking a brick wall. “Goddammit!” She kicked again. Nothing. She thought of leaping on top and prying him off Justin but it wasn’t the easiest thing to do when you’re seven months pregnant.

Ernie finally craned his head to see who the hell was kicking him and they locked eyes. Wrinkles creased around the duct tape strapped to his lower face as he said something unintelligible. His body shook. It took Sherry a moment to realize he was laughing. Motherfucker.

Then she remembered the knife in her hand.

Without hesitation, she plunged it deep into Ernie’s lower back. She staggered away from him, staring at the knife with a sick fascination. The handle poked out, reminding Sherry of a light switch. Flick it to turn him on and off.

Ernie jerked up, a tortured bellow desperately trying to escape from his lungs. He shook his head back and forth like a dog flinging water from its fur. He reached behind himself for the

knife, flailing around. Justin shoved Ernie off him, taking the opportunity to unleash a series of punches to his temple and gut.

“Kill him!” Sherry screamed. Fuck their plan. The bastard deserved to die. For what he did to her. For laughing at her. How dare he? She kicked Ernie in the ribs, the gut, the head, and the balls. Over and over. Fucking evil son of a bitch. *Die, die, die.*

It took her a minute to figure out that Justin was trying to pull her back. He was saying something but all she could hear was screaming. Like it was ricocheting, pinging around in her head. It stopped when she realized the screaming was coming from her.

“That’s enough, babe. He’s dead.” Justin’s voice was soothing, calming. Sherry took a deep breath. She felt like she’d sprinted for miles. They stared at each other and then Sherry collapsed in his arms.

“Oh god,” she choked. “What’d I do?”

“It’s OK,” Justin murmured, stroking her back. Sherry sobbed into his neck, making it slick with tears and snot. All the pain, the torture, the nightmares came rushing out. “Shhhhhh. It’s gonna be OK.”

When she felt dried up, like she had nothing left, she pulled away. Looked down at Ernie, his face a bloody mess, it was unrecognizable. His disgusting hairy body inert. Justin grabbed him by the ankles and pulled, his face barely showing strain at Ernie’s weight as he scooted backward.

“What are you doing?”

“We gotta get rid of the body. Clean up this mess.” His black hair flopped in his eyes and he jerked his head back slightly. Blew air out of his mouth. “We can’t leave it like this.”

Sherry felt sick as Justin dragged Ernie past her like he was rearranging furniture. She jumped back when Ernie's fleshy arm hit her sneakers. Gross.

Suddenly, something grabbed her ankle. Sherry looked down and screamed. Ernie's hairy hand was latched on like a determined terrier with a bone.

"Get him off! Get him off!" Sherry tried to yank her foot away but the asshole refused to release his grip. How he had the strength after being beaten beyond recognition was incomprehensible. She kicked Ernie in the ribs but he wouldn't relinquish his grip. He emitted strange growling sounds.

"Shit!" Justin scrambled over and stomped on Ernie's arm. A muffled howl from Ernie but no release. Justin stomped again. And again. Finally, Sherry felt his grip slacken. She yanked her foot away and stumbled back, almost tumbling to the floor.

"How can he still be alive?" Sherry cried.

"Who the fuck knows? But it ain't gonna happen again." Justin grabbed a piece of the rope and maneuvered himself behind Ernie, who was moaning, rolling from side to side. Justin looped the rope around his neck and yanked hard, pulling Ernie's head up off the floor. The asshole's hands flew up and clawed at the taut rope. Justin pulled harder. Ernie's legs kicked. His body bucked. Sherry could make out one eye bulging. The other eye was swollen shut and covered in blood. After what seemed like hours but was probably only seconds, Ernie stopped moving altogether. Justin relaxed his grip and Ernie's head thumped to the floor.

Sherry didn't dare move in case the motherfucker leaped out at her again.

"Jesus, let's do this. We've been here too long," Justin said.

"The Fitzsimmons are his closest neighbors and they're like, a mile away. There ain't nothing around but woods and deer."

“Still. I don’t like being here longer than we have to.” Justin picked up Ernie’s ankles again and pulled. “We gotta figure out where we’re gonna bury him.”

“Bury him? It’s fucking freezing out there. Ground’s gonna be like digging cement.”

Justin sighed. “Well, where do you suggest we put him?”

Sherry grabbed a towel from the bathroom and threw it on the puddle of blood on the floor. With her shoe, she wiped up the blood but all she managed to do was spread it around. “I know where. It’s perfect.”

Justin followed her outside, dragging Ernie down the steps. His head going *thunk thunk thunk*. A few stars were visible in the night sky. Peeking out of the heavy clouds. They only had a couple hours ‘til sunrise.

Ernie kept a giant freezer out back. Like the kind at liquor stores where the ice cream sandwiches and popsicles are kept. He was a big deer hunter and sometimes sold packets of venison to neighbors. The memory of the gamey smell that filled the trailer as he cooked it on the stovetop made her stomach churn.

She prayed it was still out back and sure enough, there it was underneath the bedroom window. Like a giant tomb. What she didn’t expect was the combination lock on it.

“It’s just a cheap lock,” Justin said.

Ernie’s trailer was propped up on cinderblocks. Sherry knew he kept motor oil, tools, and whatnot underneath. After rummaging around a bit, Justin found a hammer. The lock broke easily after a few cracks.

Inside were dozens of the familiar plastic-wrapped venison. A thick layer of ice coated the sides of the freezer. They flung all the meat to the ground. Sherry helped Justin stuff Ernie into the freezer, but not before Justin yanked the knife out of his back.

“We’ll toss this in the lake.”

They had to bend his knees to cram him in there. Like he was sleeping in fetal position. They slammed the lid and stood back, catching their breath.

“Nobody would dare open that freezer without Ernie’s OK. We got nothing to worry about.”

“Why the lock then?”

Sherry shrugged. “Bears?”

Justin looked dubious.

She pointed to the packets of frozen meat strewn on the ground. “Well, if we don’t pick those up, bears’ll come for sure. Might attract attention.”

Justin nodded. “You handle that while I clean up the trailer. I got an idea.”

By the time Sherry threw all the meat into the trunk of Justin’s Camaro, he’d bounded down the steps of the trailer, carrying a load of bloody towels. He tossed them into the trunk on top of the meat and slammed the lid. Sherry hated to think of what the trunk would smell like in a few hours.

“Let’s go.”

“Did you clean it all up?”

“Yup.” He looked beat, like he’d just been in a fight and lost. “I wiped up as best I could. Then clogged the bathroom and kitchen sink. Turned the water on. Place’ll flood and wipe everything clean.”

Sherry wondered if that was a good idea. Wouldn’t a flooded trailer attract attention?

But Justin was already in the car. Fuck it. She wanted to go home. Forget everything that happened that night. It was done. Hopefully it’d stay done.

“So how’d you get caught?” the teenage girl asked. “Was it the flooded trailer?”

Sherry looked at the young woman sitting across from her at the worn metal table. About the same age she’d been that hellish night.

Those eyes. Like Justin was staring at her. From miles away. Through the years. It was unsettling.

Hey, look at me. I’m here. I’m your forever. It’s OK.

Words she hadn’t thought of in years. Justin used to tell her that after she woke up soaked in sweat. The night terrors. Ernie coming to get her. To rape her.

“Was it the flooding?” the young woman repeated, breaking Sherry’s thoughts.

Sherry shook her head. “A neighbor came by for some venison. Saw the busted lock. Looked inside the freezer. Called the cops.”

The teenage girl nodded. “That’s when they found the camera. Folks were stealing the meat so he installed it a few days before. What shitty luck.” She snorted.

Sherry raised her eyebrows. “Your mom and dad tell you that?” Sherry hated saying that. She and Justin were her mom and dad. Not the fucking Crawfords.

The young woman shook her head. “Nah. I read it online.” Her hair was limp and chestnut brown just like Sherry’s. Straight as a stick. Gave Sherry years of frustration trying to tease it, curl it, perm it. Anything to give it life. Of course now Sherry didn’t give a shit about her looks. Prison does that to you. “I read most of it online. But I wanted to hear you tell it.”

Sherry nodded. It wasn’t easy for her to rehash that awful night. Took forever for the nightmares to finally stop haunting her. But her daughter deserved to hear how it really went down. What drove Sherry and Justin to do such awful things. Why they had to give her up.

“Then what happened?” Her eyes never wavered from Sherry’s, taking every word in. Like if she so much as looked away or blinked, the story would cease to exist.

Sherry cleared her throat. It was scratchy. She hadn’t talked so much in years. “Like you said, they got us on camera. Justin’s DNA was under Ernie’s fingernails.” She shrugged. “Wasn’t nothing we could do, you know? We both pleaded guilty. Your daddy tried to tell them that it was all him.” A small smile. “But no way was I letting him go down alone.”

“Do you miss him?” the teenage girl blurted out.

Sherry bit her lip. Jesus, it had been what? Eighteen years since she’d seen him. Last time was the courtroom when they announced his sentencing. Since the strangling was what actually killed the son of a bitch, they gave Justin a life sentence. “I don’t know about *miss*. I think about him. But after a while, the longing, the heartache goes away.” Her savior. Her hopes and dreams were all rolled into that one brave man who did everything in his power to protect her. To protect their child.

Who was now a poised young lady, thank fucking god. Tears filled Sherry’s eyes when she first saw the young woman with the skinny jeans and oversized sweatshirt cautiously walk in to the Washington Corrections Center for Women’s visitor room. An image of sunshine and strawberry lip gloss. A waft of vanilla as she sat in the plastic chair opposite her.

Becca, she insisted on being called. Sherry had named her Rebecca after her favorite book as a kid. *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*. The only book she ever had, really. It was old and outdated but Sherry had loved it. Recited it out loud word for word. Kept it even when the spine broke and she had to glue all the pages inside. Maybe because it was the only thing she had of her mother’s. Afraid if she got rid of it, her momma wouldn’t come back. Would think she’d given up.

A whole lot of good that did.

“So how are the Crawfords? They taking good care of you?” Sherry had only met Manny, Justin’s brother, once. A big man who didn’t talk much. She’d never met his wife, Leila. Didn’t even know what she looked like.

Becca shrugged. “I guess.” She splayed her hands out as if admiring the polish. Sparkly-painted fingernails. Her ring finger had a daisy decal. Sherry wondered if she had a boyfriend.

“Can’t believe they lied to me all these years.” Her face clouded. “It’s just—just so unfair.”

Sherry figured they’d hide the truth. When she signed over custody to them, she really had no choice. Had to go with whatever they said. Shit, it’s not like she had any kind of leverage. *Yeah, well you better bring my baby girl by every weekend and holiday. Or else I’ll swing by as soon as I’m released and pick her up. Just gimme fifty years.*

“I suppose they had their reasons,” Sherry said. Winced even as she said it. Jesus, she wanted nothing more than to badmouth the Crawfords and how they screwed her over. Took her kid, fed her a bunch of lies, and ain’t no goddamn thing she could do about it.

Becca’s eyes snapped up. “You think it’s OK they lied to me? Is that what you’re saying?”

Shit. Sherry was just making things worse. It wasn’t like she knew how to handle a confused, angry teenager. She’d been in prison for eighteen fuckin’ years.

“Maybe you told them to lie, is that it? You wanted to forget about me?” Her daughter’s lips tightened. “You’re just as shitty as they are.”

“Baby, don’t say that—”

“Don’t call me baby!” Amidst the low murmuring from other inmates and visitors, Becca’s outburst sounded like a gunshot in the dead of night. The guard swiveled his head toward them, tensed. Becca’s smooth baby face flushed pink underneath her tan. Her eyes—Justin’s eyes—blinked rapidly. Fighting to stay in control. “You don’t even know me. You know nothing about me.” She scooted her chair back. It screeched across the linoleum floor. She stood up, glaring down at Sherry.

Sherry stretched her hand out across the table. Palm up. *Hey, it’s OK, baby. Sit down.*

Becca’s eye flickered down then back to Sherry. She stiffened, jutted her chin out. “He’s dead, you know.” Her voice was flat.

“Who?”

“Justin.” A pause. “My dad.”

Sherry froze. “Where did you hear that?”

“It’s how I found out the truth. Dad told me everything when he learned Justin was dead. Said my real parents were murderers rotting in prison. They hate you. Said it’s all your fault my real dad’s in prison.”

“How did he—how did he die?”

“Heart attack.”

“Jesus.” Sherry sank into her chair. She felt rubbery. Numb. He was only three years older than her. How could a thirty-nine-year-old die of a heart attack? She wondered if Manny was telling Becca the truth. Maybe he was killed by another inmate. Or a guard.

“I wasn’t gonna tell you. Figured it’d hurt too much.” She snorted. “But now I don’t care.” Becca spun around and walked to the exit. Waited for the guard to escort her out.

Sherry crumpled in her chair as she watched the door slam behind her daughter. She wondered if she'd ever come back. Probably not.

"Tough visit?" the guard asked, putting the handcuffs on her.

Sherry attempted a smile. "Teenagers, you know?"

"Ah." He nodded like he knew. He probably did. More than Sherry.

As she walked down the hall to her cell, she felt heavy, lethargic. That meeting took a lot out of her. And she'd lied to her daughter. She hadn't thought of Justin in years. What was the point of hanging on to a person when you know you'll never see them again? When only a miracle or death would bring you two together? Just made life more miserable than it already was.

Because she was sure thinking of Justin now. Goddammit all to hell.

After a bit, the longing. The heartache goes away.

That wasn't true. Not one fucking bit. Because the heartache never goes away. It's always right there. Hibernating, lurking underneath until something pokes it. Then it rises, unfolds, reveals itself.

I'm here. I'm your forever.

Sherry lay down on her cot and when she closed her eyes she saw Justin's. And Becca's face. She wondered how long it would take to forget both.

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