

Prologue Black 26

Alexandra Crawford's first thought was that this was, at long last, the boogeyman from her closet finally come to get her. Great waves of smoke rose behind him, and he wasn't shaped like any other man she'd ever seen.

Usually, whenever she woke up during the night, she would soothe herself by looking up at the glow-in-the-dark stars and planets her daddy had stuck to the ceiling over her bed. Now the pale green constellations all seemed very distant, fuzzy, like the real stars that she could see outside. Sometimes clouds got in the way and the stars looked like they were about to burn out; that's what her personal solar system looked like now. But how could clouds have gotten into her room? Did the boogeyman bring them?

Alex blinked her eyes, which were watering, and started to sit up. The man put a thick, gloved hand on her shoulder and held her down, but somehow it wasn't scary. She stayed where she was and he said, "Hold tight, honey, we'll get you out of here. But we have to stay low, okay?"

She nodded, eyes locked on the big black number 26 that was on the front of his helmet. His voice was nice and his hand wasn't hurting her, even though it was holding her against the mattress. With his helmet and the heavy coat he was wearing, he looked like a miner. But why would a miner be in her bedroom? And why was he wearing a coat when it was so hot? It was too warm for her to stay under her princess-adorned quilt. He pulled the quilt down and drew her to the side of the bed, then set her gently on the floor. "You okay?" he said.

She nodded as she watched him fumble with something by his side. Alex was scared again, but only for a moment. He put the thing over her mouth and nose and told her to hold it there. She did as she was told, never taking her eyes from where his face was supposed to be.

"We're going to get out of here as quick as a flash, okay? But we're going to have to crawl first, because there's a lot of really hot air over our heads."

"Will it make us cough?" she managed in her small, scared voice.

"Yeah," he said. "I don't know about you, but I hate to cough. So we'll just stay low, okay?"

She nodded again and he bundled her to his chest, holding her with one arm and making a tent over her body with his own. He crawled on his knees and his one free hand, moving through the small bedroom with a speed that almost made Alex feel like she was on some kind of weird amusement park ride. She wrapped her arms around the monster-man's neck and held on as tight as she could. The thing he'd fastened on her face was slipping and she tried to rearrange it.

"No, honey, you have to keep that on," he said as he covered her hand with his thick glove. "I know it's uncomfortable, but it's better than what's out here."

As he crawled out of her room, she could see the living room and kitchen of their little apartment. That was where Daddy sat by the window and smoked his cigars, watching traffic go by. That over there was where Mommy did her crossword puzzles and looked in the dictionary because that was learning, not cheating. Something smelled bad, like when Mommy "flubbed one" in the kitchen and they ordered pizza for dinner.

Now they were in the hallway and she could see Jessica Harvell's apartment door across the stairway. It had been broken. Maybe by the monster-man. Maybe they were taking all the little girls. She felt scared, remembering the scary stories her daddy sometimes told her. She didn't want to be holding on to the monster-man anymore, she didn't want to be in this gross hallway; she wanted to be in her bed looking up at the stars like—

“You like stars?” the monster-man asked.

Alex jumped. Afraid that he could read her mind, she shuddered.

“I saw the posters in your bedroom when I was coming to get you. You like stars?”

“D-Daddy put up a solar system in my bedroom.”

“Did he? I missed that. Will you show me when we get your home all fixed up?”

Fixed up? What did that mean? She nodded even though she wasn't sure and then pushed her face against his neck despite how scared she was. The thing on her mouth and nose pressed into her skin and she wanted to yank it off but was scared of what the monster-man might do if she did. Now that they were on the stairs, he wasn't crawling anymore.

Over his shoulder, it looked like the upstairs of their apartment was disappearing in fog.

Like Alice, she thought. She followed someone away from home, too, only I don't think the white rabbit was quite as scary as the monster-man.

“My sister bought me a telescope one year for Christmas. Just sits in the corner of my living room collecting dust.”

“Daddy gave me a telescope.”

“Really? What kind is it?”

She rattled off the details her daddy taught her. She didn't know what they meant, but he'd seemed so proud when he presented it to her. She knew the gift had probably cost more than they could afford, so she had jumped up and down and kissed him on the cheek and said he was the best daddy in the whole world. And he was, because he didn't get another new fishing pole for almost two whole years after that. Mommy told her that. Alex still wasn't sure what it meant, but the way Mommy said it...

They were outside and it was so cold now. She clung to the monster-man while he carried her across the parking lot, mostly because he was still warm. There were so many cars, so much noise, and flashing lights all around, she was starting to get scared again when she heard her daddy's voice from across the parking lot.

“Alex? Alex!”

Twisting in the man's arms, she looked frantically for her daddy. He was in his pajamas, naked-chested, and running barefoot toward her. The monster-man released her and her daddy wrapped his arms around her at the same instant. She hugged him, smelling his smell instead of the stinky smoke smell of the monster-man.

“They wouldn't let me go back in,” her daddy was saying over and over again.

Her mommy was stroking her hair, crying really loud, and Alex wondered if the monster-man had broken something in the apartment. The street was so loud and so bright. Why was everything so bright when it was the middle of the night? Why was everyone being so loud? Didn't they know people were trying to sleep?

Holding her tight, her daddy sat on the back of a truck that was red on the outside and very, very white on the inside. He placed her on his knee and she leaned against him because he didn't seem to want to let her go. That was okay, though. Daddy was much better than the monster-man, even if he'd had a nice voice. She spotted the monster-man a few feet away, recognizing him because of his gloves — the little finger was torn and ragged. She remembered seeing that finger in her bedroom.

As she watched, the man took off his helmet and put it down on the back of the big red truck with a ladder on top. He yanked off something that was on his head — it looked like a stretchy sock — and a wave of black hair appeared. Someone walked past him and he turned, smiling at the other man's comment. Alex frowned, leaning to one side to look at the man's face.

“What is it, hon?” her daddy said quietly, rubbing between her shoulders. “What are you looking at?”

“That man.”

“What about him?” her mommy asked.

“He’s...” Alex screwed her face up and tilted her head, trying to find the right word. “He’s just...an ordinary man.”

“Yeah, honey.” Her father smiled, cradling her head to his chest. “Sure he is.”

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