

“I can’t tell you,” she said when I asked for the story last week. I had her over for dinner – I worried about her alone in her state.

Her under-eyes blackened, her pale lips cracked. A skeleton of the girl I met not sixteen months before. My first neighbor in my new apartment. The glamorous thought, a stark contrast against the coffee-stained carpet. Against the musty air between yellowed walls.

*‘I can’t tell you’* - but I saw the story claw through the cracks of her lips. The story bulged behind her eyes; it tore at the seams of her once-elastic skin.

“You need the release,” I pled. But her teeth sank into her tongue. Her eyes welled, and she did not tell me the story – not yet.

“You have no idea,” was all she said.

For a week, she got worse. Her gravel screams grew louder and longer through the nights. Plum bruises peppered her pale skin, and hot, burgundy blood wept from her nose. Last Thursday, I made her a sling from my pillowcase for her thrice-broken bone.

Yesterday, I asked again.

“You don’t understand,” she whimpered. “If I tell you-”

Last week’s tears sprung from ebony eyes. *You’ll take the burden*; they screamed when the words snagged in her teeth.

“Please do,” I begged.

I meant it when I said it.

I loved her like family. Like the sister I’d lost to my mother’s cancered womb.

“It starts with an uneasiness. Then, a knock at the door,” she began. “Then, a tripwire in the frame. If you open the door, you *will* trip.”

She told me a ghost story. If told by a stranger, I’d figure it a campfire fable. But I watched her rosy cheeks perish and her bouncy hair wilt. I believed her.

“The wire triggers the screeching. But only *you* hear it. You *always* hear it.”

She paused.

“Then, you become *its* host,” she said. “I don’t know what *it* is, but it’s demonic.”

*It burrows in your lungs. It feeds until you’re devoured. Unless – unless you provide a new host.*

My sweat scorched icy skin.

“It’s painful,” she sobbed, and I swallowed. Her voice faded in and out.

“...The hardest part is keeping it secret.”

She told me yesterday, and today she is better. She’s dancing again. The bass rattles my plates when she dances.

And- her screams did not wake me last night. For the first time in months, she rested.

But not I.

Today, I am queasy and tense. I’m slipping. Time is loud and slow, and wait-

*Thud. Thud. Thud.*

Someone’s at my door. It must be her.

*Thud. Thud. Thud.*

Rhythmic pounding against fragile wood. Heavier. *Louder.*

A drawn, constant pace.

*I’m coming!*

My palm finds the frozen brass knob. I turn it clockwise.

Booming knocks quiver under my fingers. Crawl up my arm.

Penetrate my bones.

The instant the door cracks, I remember she warned:

“Whatever happens... Don’t open the door.”