

# MUNCHKINS

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**John Boston**

Lauren Graham was not exactly what one would call a *kid person*. She had nothing against them, she just didn't see the point in mixing adults and children unless it was absolutely necessary.....with an emphasis on the *absolutely necessary part*.

Her sister had kids. Her friends had kids. She was happy with being an aunt. She liked being a part-time mom to her nieces. Full-time work was just not in the cards. She liked her life, though lonely at times, it was her life, a reflection of her decisions and choices.

She worked in a high rise in the city for an accounting firm. Nothing glamorous, just enough to pay the bills. Like most Americans, Lauren did just enough not to get fired. She always came through in the end, she just didn't see any point in being the best turd in the toilet. You were always just one flush away from going down the drain.

Her company paid her well, but she was never going to get rich being an accountant. She could always strike off on her own and open her own firm, but she would need a lot of clients to start making any real money..... a lot of very wealthy clients at that.

Most days, she began work at eight, lunch at noon, fighting off the tireds at two, then out the door at around five. She went home and repeated the same cycle the next day. She liked repetition. Her whole life was based around repetition and the simple joy of knowing exactly what was going to happen that day when you woke up. She had never been surprised in a good way in her life. She assumed that was true for most people.

Her boss or her boss's boss had decreed that Friday was going to be *Bring your daughter to work day*. Lauren knew the correct way to say it was to take your daughter to work day, but nobody liked a know it all. She was going to be rubbing elbows with tykes, toddlers, and teens. Lauren had no clue what the ladies running the company were thinking when they did this. They were an accounting firm.....not a daycare center. Lauren figured the company brass wouldn't expect much done that day. How could you, when you had to keep an eye on your daughter. She would make certain her desk was locked, and her computer was password protected. One could never be too careful in situations like this. She didn't want to appear *anti-kid*. Lots of women thought it was a good idea to pop out kids they weren't for. She would be the one with the towels and clean-up spray when kids do what kids do. It was only eight hours.....she could get through this. She had sat in board meetings that were almost this long.....with people she couldn't stand.

She came in early that Friday. She tried to prepare for battle. She made certain her coffee mug was full and that she was well-rested. No little rugrat was going to get the best of Lauren Graham. She had been eyeing a new hire named Jacob for a few weeks. They would smile at one

another as they passed in the hallway. She wasn't certain if he was married or engaged or with someone, but he was certainly interested in flirting. At this point in her life, that's all Lauren really wanted. Harmless, flirtatious banter, with a harmless, flirtatious man. She had tried the lesbian thing and quickly discovered it wasn't for her. Girls were way more dramatic than any man she had ever been with. You just couldn't put two of the same ends of a magnet together and expect them to hold.

One by one, the mothers and their kids trickled in. Lauren tried to be polite. She was friendly with a few of the ladies on her floor. Some of their conversations even involved something other than accounting. She smiled at one of the ladies dragging her little daughter behind her. Lauren gave them both a big smile. The mother never even saw her. But the kid.....Jesus what a scowl! Somebody needed a nap.

She watched others come in. Some were rambunctious. Some were quiet. Some were too old to be there but had gotten out of school for today and decided that alone was worth it. Most of the kids were young. Some were very young. Some were too young to be here unsupervised. Lauren knew what was coming. She had already been through this last year with *Bring your son to work day*. They should just move the office to a playground for all the work they got done. It was complete chaos. One of the kids had pulled the fire alarm. Lauren figured it was a chance for the moms to have a do-over and show everyone they weren't horrible parents.

None of the parents seemed to notice Lauren at her desk. Even her friend, Amanda with her two daughters, seemed to pay her no attention. Both daughters stopped and looked right at Lauren. Not just a glance.....*like they were looking into Lauren's soul*. She could almost feel their little eyes scanning her, probing for something. Once their scan was complete, they abruptly turned and walked away. Not a word was spoken. The little ladies seemed to be a tad *off-kilter* from the rest of humanity.

Only, it wasn't just the two girls. It seemed like all the little ladies in the building were sizing her up.....circling.....and preparing for their big move.

Or, so it seemed. Lauren just figured the kids could tell she wasn't into them and decided to feed off her vibe. Her boss called her and was nearly hysterical.

"What's wrong?"

"Those little pricks. They knew today wasn't supposed to be a real workday. We had this cleared months ago and they just dropped this in my lap this morning." said her boss.

"What?"

"The executives from CRUSH are coming here this afternoon. They want to go over numbers."

"Are you serious? We weren't supposed to have those ready until next week?" said Lauren in shock.

"Welcome to corporate America, Lauren. I need you on this ASAP."

"It's going to take me a couple of hours to run everything. Can't we just email it to them or something? What the hell are they coming down here for?"

"Cause they don't know what else to do? It's not like any of them actually do any real work for CRUSH. They just run around and sound important. We're going to have a staff meeting at eleven. I need anything you can pull up."

"I'm on it."

"I'm counting on you.....hell the whole damn company is counting on you."

*No sweat off my sack boss. I thrive under pressure, unlike the rest of you.* She thought to herself as she hung up the phone.

*Lauren Graham to the freaking rescue.*

CRUSH was one of their biggest corporate accounts, worth many millions. Lauren had four hours to do a week's worth of work. She realized it was impossible for her to do everything they wanted, instead, she would simply give them a bottom line and some trending lines thrown in. the software would do its magic, but she would have to punch in all the information. There was a lot of information to type in. If she made just one little mistake, it would be replicated throughout the entire program. At this point, it was just a bottom line and some educated guesses. She found these corporate types didn't really question anything too seriously, as long as you told them what they wanted to hear. She just had to hope and pray that the trends lines showed positive sales growth in their territories. She always assumed growing up, that most of these corporations would have their own accountants, but the DODD-FRANK WALL STREET REFORM ACT had put a stranglehold on many of the shady accounting practices done by the firms that caused the 2008 meltdown. CRUSH was owned by an investment firm that had their taxes done here also. Her company ran the numbers, then the corporation's lawyers looked for any loophole so they could find to get out paying taxes on their income.

*Silly rabbit.....only middle-class idiots pay any taxes. Back when Eisenhower was president, the corporate tax rate was nearly ninety percent. It made companies reinvest their earnings back into the company, or give it to Uncle Sam. It also created the biggest economy the world had ever seen. China does pretty much the same thing. The results speak for themselves.*

She was typing furiously, trying to ignore the fact that her office was now a daycare center. The munchkins were everywhere. The moms were glued to their computers, trying their best to do the impossible by eleven. The kids pretty much had free reign to do whatever they pleased, which seemed to be making Lauren's life a living hell. The girl stopped and looked right at Lauren as she was typing. She just stood there and stared at Lauren.

"What are you doing?" the girl asked

"Trying to get this report done by eleven," said Lauren not even looking up at the kid.

"Are you married?" asked the little girl.

Lauren stopped typing and looked right at the girl.

"No.....no, I'm not married."

"Why not?" asked the girl.

"I just don't think it's for me."

"So, you'd rather be lonely for the rest of your life?"

"Just because I'm alone doesn't mean I'm lonely," replied Lauren.

"I guess if you say it enough times, you might actually start to believe it." said the little girl as she walked away.

Lauren got up and followed the little girl. She really couldn't believe what had just happened. She had to see who this kid belonged to. When she turned the corner, the kid was gone. She thought she saw her on the other side of the room and decided to just let it go.

*Spare the rod and you spoil the child.* She thought to herself. That kid needed a good old-fashioned ass whooping. That was the problem with kids nowadays.....no boundaries. No rules. It was like they had to be the parent and child at the same time.

She sat back down at her desk and continued working on her report. The half-gallon of coffee she drank was beginning to make itself known. She walked down the hallway to the ladies' room. As soon as she opened the door, she could hear herself, she heard it. It was the strangest and most disturbing sound she had ever heard.

*The giggling. Like two demons telling each other a dirty joke.*

Lauren was almost hypnotized by it. She walked over to the stall and pushed the door open. She saw a little girl sitting on the toilet. She looked right up at Lauren.

"Are you okay in here, honey?" she asked.

The little girl got up and slammed the stall door shut, locking it behind her. Lauren sat down in the stall next to her and peed. She heard the strange noise again as she was reaching for the toilet paper. She was sure of it now. It wasn't just one weird voice.....there were two voices, both giggling, almost hysterically in the restroom. The problem is.....*there was only one kid in here.*

She finished up and got out of there as quickly as she could. She stopped and looked back at the stall. Whatever the hell was going on in there, she wanted no part of it. She had bigger fish to fry.

She spent the next hour plugging and chugging away, trying desperately to pull off the impossible. She couldn't understand how a project this massive fell onto her shoulders when over a dozen CPAs were working on it. Making a mistake could cost her plenty. She had to go over everything twice, just to make certain it was correct. She didn't want the IRS to do an audit and discover it was her section that had a mistake on it. Her fingers were beginning to ache from all

the typing. Carpel-Tunnel was pretty common for people in her profession. The human hand just isn't meant to do that much typing and punching. Some days after work, her fingers were so sore, she could barely move them. Just another day in the trenches for a certified public accountant.

As hard as she tried to concentrate, she just couldn't shake off the feeling that she was being watched.....from all over.

*Those little eyes.....those innocent little eyes, weren't so innocent after all. Why was Lauren the only one who could see right through them?*

Lauren felt as if she were plunged right into the middle of some weird movie. Every time she looked up, she could see one of them looking at her. Sometimes they would run right by her. Other times they would stop and stare. Two of them had stopped by her desk and asked what she was doing.

"Girls, I'm super busy here. Could you play someplace else, please," she said, trying not to lose her place in the journal.

"My mom says you need to put more effort into your work. She says you're a C-level student in a place that demands A+ level work." said the girl giggling.

"Tell your mom that if she puts any more Botox in her face she's going to look like a department store mannequin," said Lauren without looking up.

The two girls just started giggling and ran away.

Lauren had to stop and process what had just happened.

*Jesus, what poor bastard was saddled with these two for the rest of her life?* she thought to herself. Of course, the kids were probably just repeating what they heard from her mother. Then again.....how did the kids even know who she was? Lauren had to get some answers. Deadline or no deadline.....she had to know who was talking shit about her in the office. She walked all over the floor, looking for the two girls. She even checked the restroom, but they were nowhere to be found. That was odd? Maybe mom took them out of the building but, with the deadline looming, she didn't think anyone would dare leave now.

She sat back down at her cubicle and finished her report. She ran the report and so far, the numbers were good. Not great, but at least showing positive sales growth. Still, they were going to have to get much better for the company to be able to turn any kind of a profit on it. At least she had something positive to tell corporate suits when they came in this afternoon. Sales were up in all of their territories. Someone was bound to get a bonus off that.

She continued typing for the next hour. At some point, she turned around and saw a cute little girl, hanging over the cubicle beside her. She figured the kid belonged to her friend Angela. The two weren't really friends, more like acquaintances. They made small talk. That was about it. It was the closest thing Lauren had to a relationship these days. The girl was slightly older, maybe ten or so. She said nothing and just continued to stare at Lauren.

"What's up, honey?" Lauren asked the girl.

"Do you ever wonder who will be at your funeral?" she asked.

Lauren stopped typing to turn and look at the little girl.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Maybe it's something you should think about. Maybe no one will show up. It will just be you. How would that make you feel, knowing you were always just a weed in a flower garden?" asked the little girl.

Lauren got up out of her chair and tried to grab the little girl. She had just about enough of this insanity. This little shit was going to learn some manners if she had to beat them into her one at a time.

The little girl quickly scampered away. Lauren found Angela in the break room making a cup of tea.

"That's some kid you got there," said Lauren.

"What do you mean?"

"I just met your daughter."

"Oh.....I didn't bring my daughter. I kind of had a feeling today was going to be a shit show. I didn't want her to see mommy having a meltdown in front of her co-workers." said Angela.

"So....that wasn't your kid?"

"No.....why?"

"I can't believe anyone would want their daughters working in a place like this," said Lauren.

"Got to pay the bills somehow. It's better than stripping."

*Is it though, Angela?* She thought to herself as she walked back to her cubicle. She was already behind the curve. That meeting at eleven was going to be brutal if she didn't get some serious work done. She had only two hours left.....and these weren't the type of people that liked to be disappointed.

As hard as she tried, she just couldn't concentrate. The munchkins were everywhere. Running, climbing, playing. This was a business office, where adults to adult-like things. The Munchkins were running circles around her. As hard as she tried, she just couldn't shake the fact that these kids were watching her.....just waiting for her to drop her guard.

*They were stabbing her with their eyes.*

It was a very uneasy feeling. Something about these kids just wasn't right. These were not just a group of girls.....they were mean girls in training. Lauren also began to wonder just what these kids had overheard from their mothers. Were they really this nasty.....or were their moms really this nasty? Lauren knew she was swimming with sharks, but she figured the least these ladies could do was to keep their inner bitch to themselves. It made her even more nervous and anxious about today's meeting. Why was she the only one who seemed to be working? Why was she the only one tasked to do the impossible? Why was she being set up to fail?

She tried to get along with everyone. She had seen some very talented people with very lousy personalities not make it in this business. She knew being likable was important. She was now beginning to wonder if she had simply been *too nice*. That can be just as bad.

She needed to stretch her legs. She headed towards the break room to grab something to drink. She stopped and saw a teenage girl in the hallway staring out the window. The girl looked almost.....*hypnotized* by whatever it was she was looking at. Lauren felt almost compelled to ask her what she was looking at. She stood right next to the girl. The two of them just looked outside the window and down onto the street. Lauren had no idea what the girl was looking at.

"What are you looking at?" asked Lauren.

"I was just wondering."

"About what?"

"If you jumped out this window, onto the street, and killed yourself, would people think your job made you do it?" asked the girl.

"I don't know."

"If you jumped out this window right now, would anyone in this office even know who you were?"

"I don't know." said Lauren, perplexed.

"Suicide is the ultimate statement. To resign from this world in your own way. Maybe if more people jumped out of their office buildings, things would change for the better."

"Things never seem to change for the better."

"You should jump Lauren.....do it for everyone in here.....especially for yourself." said the girl looking at her.

"How do you know my name?"

"Everyone knows your name in here. You're special, but not in the way you think you are." said the little girl, cracking a smile.

"Who's your mother?"

"Ludmilla." said the girl with a smile.

Lauren had to take a step back. Ludmilla was the head honcho on this floor and pretty much ran the entire operation. She was from Latvia or someplace in that neck of the woods. Lauren had only met her a few times. She had the personality of an ice sculpture.

"I don't think your mother would want you discussing suicide with one of her co-workers.

"My mother is setting you up to fail today. Then she has a reason to fire you." said the girl.

"Why would your mother want to fire me?" asked Lauren.

*Cause you're the type of person who would go to a dance by herself.....that's why.* said the girl as she walked away.

Lauren tried to compose herself. Was the kid telling the truth? Did Ludmilla even know who she was? Why would she fire her? Then again, things were beginning to make sense. It was becoming all too clear. That bitch was setting her to fail! That's why no one else in the office was working. Of course, if she could pull it off and make the company look good, her plan would backfire. There was a reason Lauren had no girlfriends.....Ludmilla and girls like her were the reason.

Things were beginning to deteriorate at a lightning-fast pace for Miss Lauren. She had to somehow pull off a Hail Mary at this staff meeting. Sixteen other accountants would be following her lead. It was her make it or break it moment with this company. If she screwed this up, she may as well hand in her resignation. Then again.....what if the kid was telling the truth? What if she was being set up to fail? Why would Ludmilla have it in for her? They had only spoken on a few occasions and most of it was only a two-second conversation. Didn't make any sense. Nothing about this day was making any sense.

She sat back down at her desk and saw the light on the phone blink. She picked it up. It was Ludmilla.

"Lauren, I trust you have the reports ready to go for eleven?" she said in broken English.

"Yes, they will be ready by eleven."

"Good. Don't let me down," she said and hung up.

Lauren was used to dealing with deadlines and high-pressure situations, as well as corporate types with no soul but, today felt different. Like she was going sailing in the middle of a hurricane. Something about it just didn't feel right.

Lauren could tell her this account was not hers. She only ran a portion of it. She was just an accountant, not a sales or marketing person. You have a hard enough time just holding people's attention for five minutes, let alone a whole hour. She ran the reports again and got the same results. The results were mixed. Her only function at this point would be to report numbers. She had no idea what the actual tax rate would be on their profits. That was going to be the kicker.



The new tax laws had taken effect on January 1st, but no one could understand them.....*not even the IRS*, so how could her firm do their taxes when no one knew the tax laws? This meeting was going to be a nightmare.

Lauren was one of the last people to stuff herself into the meeting room outside Ludmilla's office. No one said a word as she came in. Much to everyone's dismay.....*she brought her daughters with her.*

The kids were well dressed and well-mannered, but Lauren could almost feel them staring at her, waiting for just the right moment to pounce.

"Lauren, this is your show. What do you have for us?"

Lauren plugged her tablet into the projection monitor and pulled up her reports. She went through all of it, line by line, number by number, item by item. It took her nearly forty-five minutes. By the time she got done, she was having a hard time just standing.

It was hard to gauge Ludmilla's reaction. She said nothing and just whispered something to one of her daughters.

"Well done Lauren. Does anyone have any questions? Okay then, as soon as they arrive, we can begin. We'll all meet in here when they arrive." she said.

Ludmilla's daughters sat in their chairs. Everyone had their backs turned to the kids. No one was even looking at them. One of them handed Lauren a handwritten note. She just giggled and ran away. Lauren opened it. It read in big bold letters:

Dear Lauren,

You smell like a loser.

From all of us!

Lauren couldn't believe it. She so desperately wanted to shove the note in Ludmilla's face but she knew it might open up a can of worms, she couldn't just throw it away. Lauren was angry but also very relieved at never having given birth to a child. What if they ended up like these brats? Lauren knew it was her mother's doing. She just wanted to throw Lauren off her game before the big meeting. She was going to have to do a whole lot better than a handwritten note by two spoiled brats.

*If these kids wanted a war, they've got one.*

Lauren had her war paint on as she entered the meeting room. Much to her dismay, the owner of the company and Ludmilla were talking to the executives from CRUSH. They were discussing their upcoming vacations to the Hamptons and which Seafood restaurant was the best in the area. It felt very relaxed.....almost too relaxed. As soon as Ludmilla saw her she motioned for her to come over.

"Gentlemen, I would like you all to meet Lauren, she is our top accountant here. She was the one who ran all of your numbers and will be preparing your tax returns this year."

Lauren could almost feel the wind being knocked out of her. This was not at all what she was expecting. Usually, these meetings are very professional and tense. This one almost felt like they were meeting in her backyard for a barbeque.

*Did Ludmilla refer to her as her top accountant? Did that really just happen?*

Lauren sat in the conference room and made small talk with one of the interns from CRUSH. The executives were in the building for less than an hour. She never even showed them anything.

"I gave them your numbers. They were so happy, they didn't even want to see the rest of the report. You saved us today kid. You're going to be my number one go-to around here from now on." said Ludmilla.

"Um.....thanks."

"We are going to have to get you a new office too. I want you closer to me. I hate going up and down those damn stairs."

Lauren felt like she was in the TWILIGHT ZONE. *Her number one go-to? New office? WTF?*

Lauren took the elevator back down to her floor. She sat down at her desk. She couldn't believe what had just transpired. She had gone from a nobody to an all-star in just one meeting.

"How'd it go?" asked Angela.

"Good.....I think. Ludmilla seemed happy."

"That's good. God, she is one ice cold bitch. I hate talking to her. She's like a pretty Russian robot. Not a cool robot either, more like a Russian Terminator."

"She's alright.....once you get to know her. That's the way those Europeans are.....until you get to know them."

Lauren had nothing to do for the rest of the day. She had more than enough of this shit show. She called Amanda and told her she was leaving for the day.

"You can do whatever you want. I just got off the phone with Ludmilla. She spent fifteen minutes telling me how awesome you are. Keep up the good work."

Lauren headed for the elevator. She saw another young girl standing by the elevator.

"Do you know where you're going, honey?"

*"I sure do.....do you know where you're going, Lauren?"*

"Sorry?"

"I guess today won't be the big day for you after all." said the child.

"What big day?" asked Lauren

"You know.....the big day. The day when you overdose on sleeping pills and cheap wine. I told the rest of the girls that you weren't the sleeping pills and cheap wine type of person. You're different. I think you're a jumper. Probably take a selfie of yourself on the way down to the pavement and cars below as you fall to your death. We're all just waiting for you to do it. We're just sitting and waiting." said the child with this hideous grin on her face.

Lauren was about ready to smack the girl when she took a giant step backward.

"Don't. I'll tell my mother you hit me!" said the little girl with a smile on her face.

Lauren was so angry, she was shaking. These little monsters weren't girls at all.....they just looked like little girls. She just had to get through this day and then she would never have to look at these little monsters ever again. She got in the elevator and took it down to the lobby. She walked out the front door and took a cab home, back to her loft. She opened the front door to her apartment and collapsed on the couch. Sometimes the quiet and stillness of the apartment caught her off guard. It took some getting used to, but now she enjoyed it.

*Silence really is golden.*

She was so unnerved by those little girls. She wanted to just strangle them. They were mean girls through and through and the very last thing this world needs is any more mean girls. She hated mean girls. The little monsters in training bras and braces. Trolls wearing make-up. At least she didn't have to deal with those little shits ever again. From now on, it was just regular, normal kids.....if there is such a thing.

She decided to treat herself to a meal at her favorite restaurant down the street. A little Italian place that served linguini that was to die for. She didn't even change from her work clothes. She opened the door to her apartment and walked down the stairs. She passed by a neighbor's kid. Lauren was pretty certain her name was Sadie.

"Hi, Sadie. Whatcha doing?" she said as she passed by.

"Hello, Miss Lauren. Just sitting here, waiting for you to go by." said the child.

"You were just waiting for me to go by? Why?"

"I have to pass a message on from the other girls," said Sadie as she reached over the railing and looked below. Lauren looked down below with her.

"What are you looking at?" asked Lauren.

"It's a long way down there, isn't it Miss Lauren?" said Sadie.

"Yes Sadie.....yes it is," said Lauren with tears in her eyes. She walked slowly back up to her apartment and unlocked the door. She walked into her closet and found her shoebox that contained the .38 snub nose her father had given to her when she first came to the city many years ago. Lauren took it out and held it in her hand. She had never even fired it. She just hoped it worked.

*Cause crazy old Miss Lauren was about to go munchkin hunting and didn't want to come back empty-handed.*

## MUNCHKINS VERSION II

Claire Hamil loved her kids. Maybe love was too strong a word. She strongly liked them. Most of them were good kids from broken homes. Mom and Dad had to work to keep a roof over their heads. Then came dinner, then came bath time, then sleep. There just wasn't much to do on weekdays, except to repeat the cycle. She had no children of her own, which was fine with her. She had to spend so much time fixing everyone else's kids, she wouldn't have any time for her own. Her mother didn't start working until age forty. From age 22 until Lauren went off to college, her mother never worked a day in her life. The only reason she did is because she wanted a new Mustang and her dad told her mom that she was going to have to figure out how to pay for it.

*She had to wonder if the boomer generation realized just how good they had it.*

Miss Hamil taught fourth grade. More like she babysat ten-year-olds. Trying to teach these kids anything was pretty much a waste of time. Most of them had the attention span of a chipmunk. Just keeping them in their seats was often impossible. She was more like a coach than a teacher and perhaps even that was a stretch. She had good kids, bad kids, apathetic kids.....then once in a very great while, she had a student like Norman.

Norman Greenbaum (no relation to the singer) was.....*unique*. She thought at first he was simply another, anti-social, autistic kid, somewhere on the spectrum. He didn't really associate with the other kids. He didn't play with them. In fact, he barely interacted with them unless it was absolutely necessary. She assumed he had ASPERGERS or something similar. No big deal, she had worked with her share of kids on the spectrum. It wasn't easy, but it wasn't a nightmare, either. Most of them had teacher aides, which consisted of an adult following them everywhere to make certain they didn't get into trouble.

Norman just rubbed her the wrong way from the very first day of class. Every time she called on him, he knew the right answer. He didn't ever laugh, smile, or seem to show any emotion which is very typical of children on the spectrum. For some odd reason, she didn't think he was autistic, he was just.....weird.

She met his parents at an open house. They seemed to be upper middle-class corporate types. Norman had a nanny who drove him to school and picked him up every day. He certainly wasn't wanting for anything. He was well-dressed and seemed well-groomed. He seemed just like any other Jewish kid, except he wasn't.

The other kids just left him alone. They purposely seemed to avoid him. Someone like Norman would be an easy target for bullying, but Norman wasn't being bullied. The other kids seemed downright *terrified* of him.

It was one crisp fall morning when she let the students out for class and he stayed behind. She didn't even notice him at first. He was just sitting at his desk with his hands folded.....*staring at her.*

"Norman, don't you want to go outside with the rest of the class?"

"No, I thought I would stay inside. I was kind of hoping we could have a chat."

"Oh, okay. What do you want to talk about?" she said as she moved closer to him and sat on one of the desks.

"Your name used to be Dorothy," he said, staring right at her.

"No, I've always been Claire."

"No, I mean in your last life. Your name was Dorothy something or other. You used to hang out at a pool hall on Sepulveda. That's where you died."

Claire wasn't quite sure what to make of this. She wanted to keep him talking to find out just what in the hell he was really thinking.

"Norman..... I'm not sure I understand. Are you implying that you somehow knew me in a previous life of mine?"

*"Oh, I knew you alright, honey. In fact.....I'm the one who killed you."*

He said it with this sick grin on his face. It was the strangest facial expression she had ever seen. It was kind of like a mix of extreme happiness.....and satisfaction. Like he had just figured out a puzzle that had stumped him for years.

Claire froze. She had no idea what to say or do. She had to play along, almost out of just morbid curiosity.

"Norman.....you know that's not true. You have to know that is simply not possible," she said trying to keep it together.

"So, then why do I think it's true? I don't just think it's true.....*I know it's true.*"

"Norman.....I'm afraid I'm going to have to call your parents. I don't think I have any other choice." she said getting up

"What are you going to tell them? No one would believe you anyway," he said as if he had already played this scenario out in his mind. The problem was, he had a very good point. It's so out there, who the hell would believe her? It was her word, versus his.

'Yeah, I remember I stabbed you so many times, I broke the knife off in your chest. Never saw so much blood in your life. I just stood there and watched you die. I don't even remember why I killed you. I guess I must have had a good reason.....oh, yeah.....I remember now. It was because I got you pregnant. Guess I figured I'd kill two birds with one stone." he said with that same satisfied look on his face.

"Norman, get out of my classroom. Get out of my classroom, now!" she said angrily.

"Look, Miss Hamil.....what's done is done. I can't go back in time and change it. Can't we just let bygones be bygones?"

"You can come back with the principal, Mr. Farnsworth. You're not coming back in here until you've talked to him and told him exactly what you're telling me," she said angrily.

"He's not going to believe you. You know my mom is running for school board in the spring. They can fire teachers, can't they."

"I'm in the teacher's union, so tell your mom to go ahead and....." She cut herself off when she realized what he was doing. She also realized she had a real-life monster, right in her classroom. He was a monster hiding in the body of an innocent-looking ten-year-old. What was behind those blue eyes of his was something evil. Something that should never have been allowed to enter this world.

Norman got up. He seemed upset. He began to realize just what he had done. Still, the grin had not completely disappeared.

"We all just play the hand we get dealt in life, Miss Hamil. You shouldn't be mad at me for just being myself."

"Norman? Do you remember the year you killed me? Or the time and place?" she asked, starting to shake.

"Oh, It was definitely at the beach. Yeah, I remember we had some port wine and you fell asleep, that's when I did it. You shouldn't feel too bad. I actually died two years later in Vietnam."

"I see. What was your name in this previous life? The one where you killed me."

"Not sure. I know everybody called me *psycho* if that helps."

"Be on your way Norman. On second thought.....just go back to recess. Tell everyone I'm giving them extra time. I guess this just has to be our little secret."

Norman's face lit up. He seemed almost delirious at the thought of it all.

"Cool. I won't tell anyone. Oh yeah.....do you know Cassie Craven?"

"Cassie in Mrs. Humphrey's class?"

"Yeah, her. I'm pretty sure she used to be your mom in your previous life," he said and walked slowly out of the classroom and down the hallway.

Claire sat down and had to compose herself. She had to catch her breath. She knew she had to talk to someone, she just didn't know who. Certainly, no one in this school, that much was for certain. She didn't trust anyone in here as far as she could throw them. She needed to talk to her sister, Anne-Marie.

"He said what?" asked a stunned Anne-Marie on the phone

"He said that he killed me in a previous life, with about as much thought as he would into taking a dump."

"Wow. What are you going to do?"

"Not much I can do. Every teacher had a problem child. I guess Norman is mine."

"Claire, he said he plunged a knife into you and watched you die because you were carrying his child. Those are not words that any ten-year-old should say."

Yeah, he's Satan's spawn alright. I'm still back to my original question: what the hell am I supposed to do?" she asked

"You have to tell somebody in that school. God only knows what else he's been telling the other kids," she replied.

"I have to be careful. He has very wealthy and very upwardly mobile parents. The kind that would just as soon shoot the messenger to save face if you know what I mean."

"They wouldn't want anyone to think their child isn't perfect? Well, news flash, most kids are pretty far from perfect, and so are most adults," said Anne-Marie

"His mom is running for school board if that tells you anything."

"Yeah, we got a future Karen-in-the-making here. Wouldn't want the whole world to know her pride and joy is a psychopath."

"I'm going to recommend that he have a chat with the school psychologist, Mr. Coburn. I've heard he's very good with the students. Maybe Norman will drop a bombshell on him and I will have someone to back me up when I get to the administration."

"Good luck kid, you're gonna need it."

Claire called Mr. Coburn and asked him to evaluate Norman. She said he was very quiet and aloof and had little to no interaction with his classmates. He said he would be happy to, but he asked: *Um Claire, have you run this by Mrs. Greenbaum?*"

"No, I didn't think I had to."

"You don't.....only it might not be a bad idea. From what I've heard of her, she can be quite.....*toxic*."

"We'll let her know after you spend some time with Norman, I'm really worried about him. He's just got that quiet, weird, awkward, *school shooter-type vibe*."

"Has he said anything to you that would lead you to think he's capable of something like that?"

"I'm just a babysitter, Mr. Coburn. I spend a lot of time with kids, but I am not a behavioral specialist. That's your job?"

"If that's what you want, but his parents will have to be notified."

"so, you're saying you have to throw me under the bus?"

"I'm saying that I have a whole laundry list of rules that I have to follow as well. My main job is not to help kids but to shield the school district from lawsuits. If I think the kid is going to harm himself or others, that's a different story. We can hide behind our lawyers. I just want to make sure you know what's involved in this before you sign on." he said.

"Could you just talk to the kid?" she asked.

Claire knew the principal and superintendent were never going to back her. They would want to know why she didn't come to them, first. Under normal circumstances, that's exactly what she would have done. Of course, *Norman Greenbaum ain't a normal kid*.

It began to eat away at her, like a flesh-eating bacteria. It starts off small at first, more as an annoyance, then builds into something that causes her to lose sleep at night. Norman had to be wrong. He couldn't be right. Still, the thought persisted, *what if he was right?* What if somehow, decades ago, he was responsible for her death? She decided to do a little investigating, just for shits and giggles.

Sure enough in August 1965, A woman named Dorothy Haggler, age 19 was found dead on a public beach in Santa Monica. She was stabbed to death. Police had a suspect, but no more information was given. The case went cold six months later.

Claire held her breath. It had to be just a coincidence. There were probably lots of dead bodies found on the beaches during the Vietnam years. There was simply no way possible for this to be true. It couldn't be true.

She thought back to her childhood and the terrible nightmares she had as a kid. She would meet someone on the beach and the next thing she knew, she was screaming. She could almost feel the



knife being plunged into her, even in her dreams. They were so vivid. It was as if she was being killed by someone she knew and trusted. That's what really hurt.

She put her phone down and had to take a second to compose herself. Was it possible, somehow, somehow that she and this Dorothy Haggler were the same person? The same soul in different bodies? Just how in the hell would Norman have known she was Dorothy? What magical powers did he have?

She had the day off and went down to the public affairs office of the LAPD. Since the death occurred outside of LAPD jurisdiction, they sent her over to the LA County Records Division. From there, they sent her to an obscure office in Santa Monica where she could be helped. Any case that has gone cold is open to the public, officially anyway. The reality is, they wanted her to contact the cold case detectives with any questions. If she did that, there were bound to be a ton of questions, namely, why she was so interested in a case almost sixty years old. Dorothy Haggler would be in her late seventies if she had survived. The woman working behind the counter looked like she had been there since the building opened. She really didn't seem to care.

"Look, could I just see the files? I just want the name of the man they had as a suspect. That's all."

"I'm not supposed to just give you the files. I could get in big trouble," she said.

"Please. I won't even take any pictures. I just want his name. The woman has been dead for almost sixty years. What difference does it make at this point?"

The old woman looked at Dorothy through thick reading glasses.

"What was her name?"

Ten minutes later, Claire had a large manila folder in front of her. She saw photos of Claire's dead body on a beach towel. She looked hard at the photo, but couldn't recognize her face. It meant nothing to her. The detective assigned to the case back in 1965 figured it was someone she knew, probably a boyfriend or lover. They brought her current boyfriend, Robert Fowler, for questioning. He said he was at Romero's Bar on Sepulveda at the time of her death. They interviewed two men who said he was with them all afternoon and into the evening. Detectives didn't buy their story, but they had to let Fowler go. They kept an eye on him afterward, but he was drafted a few months later and went to Vietnam, where he was killed. The investigation went cold after that.

Claire handed the folder back to the elderly woman and thanked her. At least now she had a name. She did a quick search for Robert Fowler and didn't find much. He was born in Kansas in 1946 and his family moved to Los Angeles a few years later. He was an excellent football player in high school, according to his obituary.

Claire went back to class the next day. She kept her cool and never even looked at Norman. When the class went out for recess, she pulled Norman aside in the hallway.

"Does the name Robert Fowler mean anything to you?" she asked

The look on Norman's face said enough.

"Touche," he said

"You stepped on a landmine in Vietnam and blew yourself to pieces. Bet that had to hurt."

"Look, I didn't tell you that to rub it in your face. I didn't want to kill you. I just had no choice."

"Of course, you had a choice. How did you not have a choice?"

"You're dad would have killed me if I got you pregnant. I wasn't ready to be a father."

Claire could not believe she was having this conversation, let alone with a ten-year-old kid. It was like she was in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, only this was very real and it would not have a happy ending.

"I'm still not convinced this isn't just something you made up in your head," she said sternly

"Go ask Cassie. She started the whole thing. She said she used to be your mom."

Claire did find Cassie out at recess the next day. She had to talk to her when she was alone and out of earshot of students and staff. Cassie went to retrieve a ball and Claire pounced.

"Cassie, could I talk to you for a moment?"

Cassie stopped and seemed hesitant to talk to her. She was shy and never made eye contact with anyone.

"Cassie, have you been talking to Norman Greenbaum?"

Cassie said nothing and tried walking away.

"I'm talking to you, Cassie. Don't walk away from me."

Cassie froze and turned to look at her.

"Norman is weird. Nobody likes him."

"Cassie, did you tell him that you were my mother in a previous life?"

"Yeah," she said looking down at the ground

"Why would you say that?"

"Cause when I see you, I get very sad. Then I remember the dream of where I was standing over my daughter's coffin. I'm so sad. Someone has taken my baby from me. Why do I get so sad whenever I'm around you? The only thing I can think of is that you were that person being lowered into the ground in my dream. It was such a sad dream. So sad and so powerful."

"Cassie, I was not your mother in a previous life, that's ridiculous," said Claire.

"No, Miss Hamil.....*crazy is letting Norman get away with murdering you.*"

Claire froze. She didn't know how to respond. Norman was her killer. As hard as it was to accept. Norman Greenbaum was the same person who had killed her back in 1965.

"Claire, I've interviewed Norman. Nothing out of the ordinary. Certainly, nothing that raises alarm bells. In fact, he passed the most important psycho test with flying colors. I mean it's really the only way to be sure." said Mr. Coburn

"What test is that?"

"I bring a folder with me of some really gruesome accident photos. I leave them on the desk and excuse myself, then I see if he looks at the photos. His reaction to the photos tells me everything. If he looks through all of them and isn't bothered by it, it's a major red flag. In his case, he saw the first one and pushed the photos away, which is exactly what a normal ten-year-old is supposed to do. I'm sure the excrement is going to hit the fan when his folks get wind of this. Principal Grundy is not my biggest supporter.....in fact, I can't really stand the guy."

"Yeah, I'm sure I'll be in hot water when he finds out. I can't stand the guy either."

"We have to stick together against this administration. I mean the kid is perfectly normal as far as I can tell. I would love to spend more time with him, but I doubt his parents will go for it. I just wanted to give you a heads-up."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

Claire had to put the pieces of this puzzle together. She had Norman, Cassie, and herself. She wondered if there were any more actors in this play. Were there any more surprises around the corner? Was any of this real? Had she just been suckered into some kind of game by these two kids? What was her next move?

Cassie thought about exacting revenge against Norman. The more she thought about it, the less she liked the idea. She was going to murder a ten-year boy over something he did sixty years ago. She was going off the deep end.

Each day in class with Norman was just torture. He was a demon hiding inside a little boy's body. He would just sit and stare at her with that horrible, evil grin on his face. He was probably giving her the same look on that beach in 1965 when he murdered her. He never answered for her death. He never had to face the music for his crimes. He would never know what it meant to spend your life in prison or on death row. Her family never got the closure they needed. None of it seemed fair. He wasn't just getting away with murder, he was rubbing it right in her pretty face.

The Greenbaums were furious when they found out what had happened. They wanted Claire fired. The school administration backed Claire, something that shocked the hell out of her. The superintendent told them that Claire didn't just have a moral concern, she had a legal one as well. She had to report suspicious behavior to her supervisors. She had to consider the well-being of

the entire school, not just Norman. They kept Norman in school, simply because Mrs. Greenbaum was running for school board. Fortunately, as she discovered, they cannot actually fire anyone, only recommend they be fired. It is up to the school administration and the teacher's union to decide if she gets to keep her job. They were totally oblivious to the little monster they had living underneath their roof. One day, they would be faced with the reality of who and what their son was. Claire wasn't even going to bother to try and make them see the light. It would be like talking to the wall.

In the end, Claire simply decided to take another position in the school district. She was working with high-risk students and students who needed constant supervision. Normally, she would be required to wait until the end of the school year to transfer. The school district was so desperate, they pushed it through and two weeks later, Claire was out of that school and away from Norman Greenbaum. In this case, a change of scenery was exactly what was needed for both of them. It was on the very next day after Claire left, that Norman approached Cassie and her friends. She hated that grin of his almost as much as Claire did.

"Betcha didn't think I could pull it off, did you?"

"Norman, you said if I lied to her you would leave us alone. You promised," said Cassie.

"You didn't think I could do it. Come on, admit it. You thought I was going to get caught."

"Norman, what you did was wrong and sick. How could you lie to Miss Hamil like that?"

"It just came to me one day when I was watching one of those unsolved crime mysteries on TV. It was about the unsolved murder of that woman on the beach in 1965. Then, the idea came to me, like I was struck by lightning. Man, I can't believe she actually fell for it."

"Norman, we liked her. She was nice to us. What if we get a new teacher who sucks. Everyone is going to hate you." said Melanie

"Relax, we just about a month left in the year, and then it's summertime. They're just going to use subs for the rest of the year. Easy-peasy."

None of the girls were impressed with what Norman had done. Cassie only lied about it because it was fun to play make-believe. Norman even told her what to say. She thought Norman was cute, but way too weird for her. He just didn't belong with the class. He should be with older kids. They were more his speed.

The substitute teacher's name was Mrs. Pochtny. She was pretty. Norman tried flirting with her at first, but that got nowhere fast. She had no interest in Norman, only taking attendance and making sure their assignments were turned in. Norman decided to have a little fun with her in the last few weeks of school. He told Cassie that if she didn't help him, he would tell everyone she sucked him off. Cassie was shocked. Norman was a grade-A piece of garbage, but she went along with it anyway, cause she isn't a very strong person and she just wanted to get away from him for the summer.

His delivery was perfect. She swallowed it up better than Miss Hamil did. He was just toying with her now, smiling and winking at her. She had to leave the class a few times to straighten herself out. Norman made sure the whole class knew what he had done. Everyone just seemed to avoid him. Even the tough Mexican kids wanted nothing to do with him. He was that *loco gringo* no one wanted to mess with.

Unfortunately, Norman and Cassie picked the wrong target. Mrs. Poctny suffered from borderline personality disorder and a whole host of other mental maladies. She was held together with duct tape and chewing gum on a hot day. One day after Norman spent the entire class smiling and blowing kisses at her, she simply snapped. During lunch, she went home and grabbed her .38 pistol. She was going to get even with that horrible little monster and anyone else who got her way. She was going munchkin hunting and was not going to come home empty-handed.