The warmth of her home should've been comforting, but Claire couldn’t stop trembling. Every breath scraped her throat. Outside, the storm raged through the upscale suburban neighborhood of Wellesley, muffling the world in white. The eerie silence was broken only by the wind's howl.

She tried to sit up, but a wave of nausea forced her back into the blood-soaked sheets. The air held the metallic tang of iron. Somewhere in the house—or was it the wind?—something creaked. Her breathing grew labored, and something wet and sticky clung to the back of her long blonde hair.

A fresh surge of nausea swept over her as she attempted to sit up again. Squeezing her eyes shut and reopening them didn't wake her from what felt like a nightmare. Each failed attempt spiked her panic.

Rolling onto her side made her wince in pain. How long had she been lying here? Her mind was foggy. Who else was home? Why wasn’t anyone coming? Someone must’ve broken in during the storm. She remembered a rattle at the downstairs door earlier that night.

A figure took shape in the shadows—tall, or maybe it seemed that way in the flickering light. His face was hidden, and his slow, deliberate breathing filled the room. A scream formed in her throat, but what escaped was a broken whisper, swallowed by the darkness.

A dull, persistent ache throbbed at the back of her skull. Dizziness and nausea pinned her in place. Each pulse landed like a hammer.

She fluttered her eyelids. The figure was gone. Where had it gone?

This has to be another nightmare, she thought.

She wished *he* were here. He always made her feel safe. Imagining his strong arms wrapped around her and his deep, comforting voice brought a fleeting calm. Her dry lips parted, but no name came out—just a hoarse whisper lost to the wind pressing against the window.

Claire propped herself up on one elbow and tried to gather her thoughts. She focused, her vision adjusting to the darkness.

The figure emerged again, and a familiar voice whispered, “It's me. I've been looking for you.”