

## Cold Feet

*POP!* The sound pierces through the cloud of cheering screams as colorful confetti rains down upon the women's undone and messy hair. They reach out their arms to collect the shiny falling paper, twirling and dancing while MTV plays in the background.

"Oh my God!" Audrey yells over the music, "You girls will have the neighbors complaining about us!" She crosses her arms, smirking at the other girls.

"What's a bachelorette party without a little Madonna?" Laci giggles and sings the lyrics, "crazy for you!" Laci holds an imaginary microphone up to her mouth and flips her freshly permed blond hair around pretending she's on stage.

Grace claps, "Give us a show, girl!"

As all four women cheer for Laci's pretend performance, Audrey begins to feel uneasy. She shudders as the hairs on her arms lift and chills race around her body. Her heart beats faster, causing her breaths to become faint and useless. She watches as Laci nearly trips on the ottoman while doing the running man. She turns as Bailey downs her fourth glass of White Zinfandel. Laci rises and yanks the empty glass out of her hand and pours herself some of the fruity pink wine. The lights seem brighter, and the music seems louder. Audrey places her hand to her heart; *I think I'm going to be sick.*

Grace, who's spent most of the party cleaning up after the other girls, looks away from the spectacle and is the first to notice Audrey's snow-white lips and glossy eyes. Concerned, she shouts over the music, "Audrey, there aren't any neighbors for well over a mile out here. No one is going to complain about a little music."

"Yeah girl, my daddy built this cabin to get away from the busybodies," Bailey snorts. "You know he was more than happy to lend us this place for your special day."

Audrey pinches her brows and closes her eyes; afraid she's ruining the fun, but the uneasy feeling won't go away. Grace walks over to her and clutches her upper arms, forcing her to look up and come back to reality. Grace brings her closer and hugs her tightly, allowing Audrey to rest her head on her shoulder. The warm embrace of her closest friend relieves Audrey's anxiety, "Thanks Grace," she says.

The other women settle down onto the comfy couches and chairs that surround the television. Before she sits down, Savannah turns down the volume. MTV begins playing True Colors by Cyndi Lauper.

"You've just got cold feet, honey." Grace says pulling out of the hug, "I can see it in your eyes."

Bailey walks over to the pair, gesturing for Audrey to sit on the sofa. She sits, and her breath begins to crawl back.

"Cold feet?" Bailey barks "Grace, Audrey and Jonothan are perfect for each other. It's just her anxiety!"

Audrey sinks into the sofa, feeling everyone's eyes burning into her skull. For the last four years, Audrey and Jon have been inseparable. They'd met sophomore year in chemistry. He'd asked her to tutor him when he already knew the material, so they'd sit in the library for hours staring into each other's eyes: daydreaming. Jon brought her out of her comfort zone and encouraged her to try new things. Something about his presence made her feel safe.

"Jeez Bailey, what's wrong with you?" Laci yells.

"It's just the facts," Bailey rolls her eyes and puts up her hand in the "talk to the hand" gesture.

The two have butted heads for as long as the group has known each other. Though no one knows for sure why Audrey believes they are at each other's throats because in middle school Laci stole Bailey's boyfriend. They were inseparable before that, but Bailey is one to hold a grudge.

Laci nudges Bailey on the shoulder in an 'It's just a joke' kind of way, and the two politely smile at each other. No matter their feelings for one another, they have always put it aside for the group.

It was Jon's idea to throw a bachelorette party, but up to her neck in stress planning the wedding, Audrey was hesitant to add another party to the list of things to do. He assured her that it was the wedding party's job to plan this party, and her bridesmaids would take care of it. Audrey had gotten the feeling he just wanted a night away before they got married, but she didn't think much of it. Next thing she knew, she was driving to Bailey's father's cabin deep in the Georgia mountains for a slumber party.

"No, it's okay," Audrey said. "I've been so stressed out planning the wedding. Sometimes I don't even know where my head is at."

"Oh, girl don't even worry!" Grace says, throwing her hands in the air, "Why don't you tell us more about the venue." All the girls lean in to listen.

"Well, it's a small white church, that Jon grew up going to," she says.

"Ah-yes," Bailey interjects, "Hillside, right?"

A little surprised by her immediate knowledge of the venue, Audrey nods.

"Y'all are such a beautiful couple." Bailey says, tucking her long black hair behind her ear, "I wish I could find a man and settle down."

Blushing, Audrey smiles reassuringly at her. She doesn't want to make anyone jealous, but it's weird to get married right out of high school. Audrey rubs her chilly arms, feeling like there is so much life left to live, so many more people to meet, and places to go, but everyone swears it's a good thing.

Audrey glances at the grandfather clock sitting next to the television: midnight. "I'm sorry girls it's already so late, and I need to get my beauty sleep."

"I'll take you to your room." Bailey rises from her chair, "We can't have any puffy eyes for tomorrow."

The girls exchange hugs and tell each other goodnight. Laci, already dressed in her nightgown, leaves the living room and heads down the hall to the bedroom. Audrey follows Bailey up the stairs and into the master bedroom—the only room on the second level.

As they enter, Audrey squints at the dark green walls and mounted deer heads. The room is unusually dark. She flips the light switch, but no lights turn on.

"Oh, the lights don't work in this room." Bailey apologizes, "I'm so sorry I forgot to mention that."

Planning on going to bed as soon as possible, the darkness doesn't bother Audrey. "It's okay. Thank you, Bailey." She says, "I didn't mean to seem rude earlier, I've had a great time."

"It's totally fine." Bailey smiles, "I know weddings are so stressful to plan."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Bailey hugs her while lingering her eyes just past Audrey as if she is staring at something on the wall that she's afraid to lose track of. Then she immediately begins walking backward out the door, shutting it and leaving Audrey alone in the semi-big dark room. Chills creep up her

arms and once again the hairs begin to stick up. Feeling uneasy but curious to see what Bailey was looking at, she turns around slowly. When she sees it, she jolts backward, bumping into the door. A dimly lit painting of a malicious and vile-looking man stares back at her. Audrey sighs a breath of relief, It's just a painting. It's hung above the queen-sized bed, positioned in a way the man could watch someone sleep below. His skin is coarse and wrinkly, and his eyes are sunken and black. Red hair appears in places only below his eyes, so his beard is frizzy and full while his head is bald. Long curly stands of hair seem to grow out of his ears and his nose.

Audrey's head begins to pound again. Her face is hot from all the alcohol she had drunk that night, and she feels out of control of her body. Afraid to make eye contact with the stranger in the photo, she grabs her nightgown out of her travel bag and rushes to the bathroom. With each creak in the wooden floors, her heart begins to race faster. She reaches the bathroom and quickly shuts the door and changes. In the security of the small bathroom, for the first time tonight, she feels safe and even a little giddy about the events of tomorrow. Imagining Jon in his suit smiling as she walks down the aisle. She hums the "Here Comes the Bride" tune as she applies her moisturizer. Satisfied and ready for bed she begins to turn the door handle but hesitates. Standing at the door just for a moment before she inevitably turns the knob. She walks through and over to the foot of the bed where she sets down her things. Still humming, she brushes her blond curls out of her face as she lifts her head to get another look at the painting, but when she looks the man is missing.

She stumbles backward but bumps into a wall, she tries to scream but all the air is trapped in her lungs. A draft blows on her pale face as she frantically looks around the room. Her eyes widen with terror as they land on the open window that she once thought to be a painting moments ago.

A scream fills the cabin, but it's not her scream. The sharp, piercing cry comes from downstairs. Oh no, the girls. She turns around quickly to find the door, but a large hand enclosed in latex gloves grabs and squeezes her neck. He slams her back, pinning her against the door. The stranger, whom she once thought to be just a creepy man trapped in a painting, now stood in front of her, crushing her throat. Silently gagging and clawing at his hands, she feels as if her eyes are about to burst from their sockets. His deeply sunken eyes burn into her own, and his teeth grit together as he pushes harder.

*Crash!* A loud boom followed by glass breaking makes its way up the stairs and breaks his focus. He loosens his grip but continues pushing. He is a blur to her now. All she sees are black holes in the universe, coming to suck her into death.

“What the hell?” Bailey’s shout carries loudly from downstairs.

The man swiftly looks up and within seconds he has left the room and Audrey drops to the floor. Hearing his loud boots stomp down the stairs, she gags attempting to regain consciousness. The wooden floors are cold, and her face feels suctioned to it. She takes a deep breath, but her mind is blank. Knowing she needs to get up, to run, she tells her brain to stand but it won't. I can't move, she thinks as her eyes shakily wander around the room. She lies on the floor for a minute, wondering why no one is screaming downstairs. It's too quiet, she thinks, they must have escaped.

Regaining focus, she realizes she must hide. Her limbs ache as she uses her arms to lift her stomach off the floor, preparing to crawl. Using all her arm strength she slowly wiggles under the bed. Her bare legs chafe against the floor, making it harder to crawl. Suddenly, her neck buckles under the weight of her head, and her forehead smacks against the floor. Her body won't let her move anymore, so she stops halfway covered by the dust ruffle, leaving her legs

exposed. Then, the sound of hushed footsteps creeps up the stairs filling her clouded brain. *No no no no*

Her heart rapidly beats into the floor as the door creaks open. Swift footsteps hurry to Audrey's frozen legs. Tensing as she feels cold hands grab her ankles, her stomach twists in knots as she is dragged out. A flash of hope flickers in her mind when she finally regains her voice. She screams, praying the girls will appear and save her from the freak. Screaming and clawing at the floorboards, sharp nails suddenly dig into her calf; making her cry louder. The hands successfully drag her out from under the bed, but she can't make herself look up. Crawling into the fetal position she shuts her eyes tightly, accepting her fate.

“Audrey! Get up!”

“Grace?” Opening her eyes quickly, Audrey pushes herself up and dares to look.

“We have to get out of here,” Grace says in a hushed yell. “She killed Laci.”

Questions race around Audrey's mind, stabbing into any bit of rationality she had left. Audrey begins to ask but her throat aches. She cuffs her neck with her hands, and widens her eyes at Grace, begging her to explain what happened.

“Bailey,” she says while frantically looking around the room. Her delirious eyes land on the window and then return to Audrey's. “She's finally done it. She murdered Laci.”

Audrey's heart sinks into the floor. Bailey? *No. She'd never. But she hated Laci. No. She'd never.* Distraught, she feels her eyes warm with water as her vision blurs.

“We have to go now.”

*No. It was a man. He came in here. He choked me.* Audrey tries to explain to Grace but the words are trapped in her throat.

Grace grabs Audrey's arms, her palms are wet with sweat. She helps Audrey stand, steadying her while ushering her towards the window. They climb onto the bed and peer out the open window. The abyss beyond consists of dark trees swaying in the night breeze. Trees. The tops of the trees. We're on the second floor. Shit. Her head begins to spin again. Every muscle in her body is throbbing, and she falls onto the bed.

"Get up Audrey! Get up! It's not over yet." Grace pleads.

Remembering how the man climbed through the window, there must be a ladder. Climbing over to the window, Audrey knees next to it and looks out. It lies motionless on the ground.

Suddenly the door slams open and frantic black hair rushes through it. Audrey turns around sharply to find Bailey closing the door and quickly barricading it with her body.

"He's guarding the door! There's no way out!" Bailey says without missing a beat.

"Get the hell away from us!" Grace shouts back as she stumbles over to the bed, positioning herself in front of Audrey.

"What are you talking about? He's going to be here any second, we've got to hide!"

"He?" Grace questions.

Audrey sits up on the bed and aggressively points at Bailey, urging Grace to understand.

"The man that killed Laci! Grace, you saw!"

The door suddenly swings open again. This time with such force it leaves a dent in the wooden cabin walls. The hall light exposes one side of his course and rubbery face, leaving the other half mysteriously shadowed. Like deer in headlights, they all stand shocked and motionless. As the color drains from their faces, they watch as the man slowly raises his shoulder to meet his head, deliberately taking time to wipe fresh blood off his cheek. Taking him in for a



second time but now in the light, Audrey notices his clothes are covered in splatters of bright red blood, and his grip now clutches a hammer. No one speaks as the women gaze at the hammer, hanging nose down beside his leg. Like the first polite pitter-patter of rain before a storm, the silence is only interrupted to make room for the drip drop of blood escaping the hammer and into the cumulated puddle beneath.

Then in one swift action, he smashes the hammer into Bailey's head. Audrey's knees go limp as she listens to the crack of her friend's skull busting open. Bailey's frail body hits the floor with a thud. The man, now standing over her body, brings his hammer up over his head. Just as he begins to swing it down, Audrey shuts her eyes tightly.

*Splat. Splat. Splat.*

He hits her repeatedly. Each time, the sound is different. In one swing her skull cracks again, in the next her brain juices while it flattens out. Hiding her face in her hands, Audrey clenches her teeth and prepares her body for whatever comes next.

*Thud.* She hears the hammer fall to the ground, so she cautiously opens her eyes, and peers through her fingers. Bailey's body lays delicately on the floor but neck up she is unrecognizable. Turning green, Audrey grimaces at Bailey's flattened head. Her beautiful black hair mixed with wine-red chunks of brain, creating a Jell-o.

The man looks up, slowly turning his gaze to Audrey. She stares at his bushy red beard, noticing his lips almost seem detached from his face. They hold each other's gaze as tightly as he held her neck minutes prior, but now his sunken eyes offer a familiar comfort. She breaks her focus to look at Grace, wondering if she also feels the weird sensation, but Grace is already looking at her.

Her back is turned to the man completely as she stands widely with her arms crossed, frowning at Audrey. Her dark bushy eyebrows narrow downwards mincingly, and a light pink smirk grows across her face.

Suddenly all the terror she has been holding turns into rage, and Audrey shouts, “WHAT THE HELL?”

The man hastily walks towards her, still hunched on the bed. Stopping right in front of her face, he grabs his woolly beard and tugs it, lifting it up and over his head to reveal a face. His face. Jon’s face.

Grace steps over a pile of Bailey’s brain to stand next to him. She puts her hand around his arm and delicately places her head on his shoulder.

Realizing what is happening, Audrey screams angrily. Her face burns while hot water boils in her eyes. Screaming and beginning to cry, “WHY?”

As she sobs, she feels sullen claws dig into her scalp that pulls her head back, forcing her to look at them. Grace is in front of her now, smiling with success. Grace’s electric blue eyes pierce through her own, but even without the mask to hide behind, Jon’s are still sunken.

“You didn’t have to kill everyone if you wanted to be with him!” Audrey sobs.

“Well, I couldn’t just take him!” Grace smiles showing all her teeth. She pulls Audrey's hair back harder and gets closer. “What kind of friend would I be if I stole a girl's fiancé while she was still alive.”

“You’re insane!” Audrey shouts, “Just take him!” Peering out of the bottom of her eyes, she watches Jon slowly creep across the room and hand Grace something. “What the matter with you!” She points, but he stays silent. Grace begins to lift the bloody hammer, her knuckles turning white with rage. Without anything left to say or do, Audrey begins kicking and

screaming. Thrashing with all her might to escape, the man grabs her legs and Grace pushes her down, pinning her throat to the bed.

“Oh honey,” she smiles “You’ve just got cold feet.”