



WHISPERS IN THE SHADOWS by Wendy Onyiuke

Chapter One : A New Start

Flora Williams pulled up to the old brick schoolhouse right as the first bell rang. A light rain pattered against the windshield as she gathered her things and stepped out of the car. She inhaled the musky air scent deeply, willing herself to breathe easier in this new place. Inside, cheerful posters lined the halls but she barely noticed them, replaying the tour with Principal Adele on a loop in her head. Basic facts, names, dates - anything to keep her mind occupied. She found her classroom with minutes to spare and began arranging her lesson plans, pausing only when the students filed in with tired morning faces.

"Good morning everyone, I'm Ms. Williams. Let's get started."

Her rehearsed greeting felt hollow but the students responded politely. As the lesson progressed, Flora found herself slowly relaxing into the familiar rhythms of teaching. These kids had no idea about her past, no judgments or pitying looks. For the first time in months, she felt

almost normal. After the final bell, she lingered at her desk catching up on emails as the building emptied. Once alone, exhaustion crashed over her like a wave. She slowly packed up to leave, desperate to collapse into bed with tea and a book. That's when she saw it - a small folded note tucked under a paperweight on her desk. Her heart leaped into her throat as she picked it up with trembling hands. In sparse block letters, it read:

"I know what you did."

Sheets of panic rose within her, the room shrinking into a suffocating box. Was someone watching her? Had they followed her here from the city? With shaking fingers, she shoved the note into her bag and rushed to her car, locking the doors the moment she was safely inside.

That night, every creak and rustle kept her awake, clutching the note now tucked under her pillow for protection. Who left it and what could they possibly know about her past? She replayed the day over and over, searching for clues in faces from the staffs or students in her classes. Nobody seemed out of the ordinary but the note weighed on her. In the following days, nothing outwardly changed but an invisible tension gripped her everywhere she went. Strange noises seemed amplified in the night and averted gazes lingered longer than normal in town. She started taking different routes home each day, constantly checking her rearview mirror. A prickling at the back of her neck insisted someone or something stalked just out of sight. One morning she awoke to find her car door left slightly ajar, though nothing appeared stolen. Panic tightened her chest as she fumbled to lock it with shaking hands. Who had been so close without waking her? That afternoon, an unfamiliar old sedan appeared in her mirror on the drive home, hanging back just far enough not to be obvious. She turned randomly down side streets, and still it followed, confirming her worst fears. Someone was watching her every move. That evening, Flora went to the police station to file a report, though she feared sounding insane. Inspector David listened patiently to her story but his brow remained creased with skepticism.

"I understand you're uneasy miss, but without solid evidence of a crime, there's not much I can do."

She left more unsettled than before, noticing the old sedan idling at the curb as she drove away. Someone was leaving her notes, stalking her movements and now the police refused to help. She was utterly alone.

Chapter Two : Strange Happenings

After another restless night, Flora awoke grateful for the distraction of a new school day. Her classroom provided a familiar refuge from the unseen eyes she felt following her everywhere else. But during lunch, a note was slipped under her classroom door that said only

"I'm watching".

She raced to Inspector David's office again with shaking hands but he remained unconvinced without proof of a crime.

On her drive home, the old sedan reappeared, slower this time, inching alongside her at every turn as if toying with her. She slammed her foot down on the gas, recklessly weaving through side streets before losing them in town. That night she double checked every lock and window, clutching a knife by her pillow. Hours passed slowly as she strained her ears for any unusual sounds. Around midnight, a twig snapped sharply outside, jolting her upright. She crept to the window and peered out to see a shadowy figure dart behind a neighbor's shed. With hammering heart, she called the police with shaking fingers.

The inspector arrived within minutes and did a sweep of the property with his flashlight, finding no intruder. I'm sure it was just an animal, miss. But please, try to get some rest. She nodded numbly as he left, pulling the curtains tightly shut. The mysterious notes and ghostly figure outside her home had her paranoid and on edge at every turn.

In the staff lounge the next day, she mentioned her troubles to the sympathetic janitor, Bose, who promised to keep an extra eye out. That evening, Bose called her frantically -someone had tampered with her car engine and cut her brake lines. Flora raced over in a panic, finding Bose and the inspector examining her totaled car with grim faces. Sir, please, you have to start taking this seriously, she begged. Whoever is after me is escalating and will hurt someone before long. He sighed tiredly.

"I understand you're frightened but we have no evidence this was anything but an accident. Please, get some rest and try not to worry yourself over what's likely nothing."

She walked home stunned and angry, hovering between fight and flight. Could no one see the depths of the danger right in front of her? That night, she awoke with a gasp, sure she heard the floor creak just outside her room. But a search of the house turned up nothing. She was losing her grip on what was real versus imagined, but the threats kept escalating regardless. In a desperate bid for answers, Flora decided to visit the auto shop the next day. After closing, she waited for the mechanic to leave and snuck inside the maintenance records. Scanning the pages, one name leapt out - Jude Lawson, the man who originally owned her old car before the crash. Something about his legend made her blood run cold but she was left with no other leads. It was time to take her safety into her own hands.

Chapter 3 : Digging for Answers

The next day, Flora called in sick and drove two towns over to do some digging of her own. A public records search turned up an address for Jude Lawson living alone on the outskirts of town. Steeling her nerves, she drove to his property, keeping a wary eye out for the old sedan. The isolated farmhouse sat back from the road, surrounded by overgrown fields. She knocked tentatively on the peeling front door but received no answer. Testing the knob, she found it

unlocked and ventured inside, calling out nervously. The stale air was musty and cold, shadows gathering thickly in every corner.

Upstairs, she found signs of recent disturbance - a pulled drawer, coat tossed aside. Someone had left in a hurry. Her heart leapt as floorboards creaked behind her. Whirling around, she came face to face with an imposing man blocking the stairwell.

"What the hell are you doing in my house?" he growled.

Flora stepped back instinctively.

"I - I just have some questions. About my car accident, a year..."

Recognition flashed across his weathered features, followed by cold calculation.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Now get out before I call the police."

She knew this was her only chance.

"Please, I just want to understand what happened to my fiancé Scott. He was driving my car the night he died but something wasn't right about the crash report. If you know anything at all--"

His face darkened menacingly.

" I said, LEAVE."

With startling speed, he lunged at her but she dodged instinctively, scrambling downstairs. He was right behind her, grabbing for her arm. She stumbled on the bottom step and swung her purse with all her strength, catching him square in the face. He roared in pain and rage, blood gushing from his nose. Flora bolted for the door and her car, fumbling with shaking hands as his enraged shouts chased her out. She slammed the vehicle into gear and raced down the long driveway, looking back once to see him stalking after her with fists clenched. Her mind raced as she drove, putting as much distance as possible between them. Jude Lawson knew far more than he let on about the crash that took her fiancé.

She recalled his frightened, hunted reaction when she first mentioned the accident. Guilt, or was it fear? Why run unless you have secrets to hide? That night, she sat up going over case files by flashlight, connecting vague clues into a terrifying picture. Scott had been driving her car the night he died, claiming he needed the practice for their upcoming road trip. But the crash report said the vehicle sped up seconds before impact, as if trying to lose a tail. What if Michael was being followed...or chased? A creak outside jolted her upright with pulse racing. Peering through the window, she saw a shadow pass under a streetlamp and disappear around back. With shaking hands, she dialed 911 and whispered a terrified plea for help before the line went dead. Her stalker had somehow found her isolated vacation rental, and he was closing in for the kill.

Chapter Four: In Danger

Flora crept cautiously through the dark house, fingertips trembling against the wall for balance. From the back porch came muffled scraping sounds, like tools being rifled through. She snatched an iron fireplace poker from the stand, steeling her nerves. With a deep breath, she flung the rear door open and leapt outside with a primal yell.

Nothing. Just shadows and silence greeted her racing pulse. She did a sweep of the yard with unsteady hands clutching the poker, finding no intruder. A lone footprint by the shed was the only sign someone had been there. As she hurried inside locking up, a chill crept up her spine that this was no animal or trick of the night. Whoever was after her had finally tracked her to this remote location, and time was running out.

The next morning, Flora reported the harassment to the reluctant Inspector, who promised extra patrols. But she knew his heart wasn't in it, still doubting the seriousness of her claims. Later, a tearful call from Bose revealed her tires had been slashed in the school parking lot overnight. She was falling to pieces under the constant terror with no one left to turn to for help.

That evening, headlights blazed in her rearview mirror, gaining steadily. She willed her rental to go faster down the winding back roads but the old sedan closed the distance, ramming her bumper. Screeching around blind curves, she struggled to keep control on the damp lane. Just as the trees opened to a straightaway, her assailant gunned the engine and smashed relentlessly into her back fender.

The vehicle spun out into a ditch with an explosion of glass.

Dazed, she glanced up to see the sedan reversing towards her through the curtain of rain. With a surge of adrenaline she kicked open the mangled door and stumbled into the woods, branches whipping her face. The engine revved behind her as she tore through the brush, thorns snagging her clothes.

A sheer cliff face rose abruptly ahead. She skidded to a stop at the rocky edge, heart sinking at the plunge below. Footsteps crushed leaves fast behind her. Whirling around, Flora came face to face with Jude Lawson, features contorted with hateful intent. Nowhere left to run. His arm tensed, readying to strike.

With a primal yell she charged him, catching him off guard long enough to get inside his reach. Her palm connected sharply with his nose in a familiar crunch. As he howled, she dove for his knees and they tumbled over the cliff's edge together. Wind rushed past deafeningly as they plunged into black nothingness, her final scream torn away.

Chapter Five : Confrontation and Revelation

Flora awoke with a start, rain pounding her face. She was sprawled halfway down the rocky cliffside, left leg bent at an unnatural angle. Gritting her teeth against the agony, she dragged herself carefully back over the edge into the woods.

Jude lay unmoving several yards below, blood pooling thickly under his head. She collapsed trembling, noticing her phone somehow unscathed in her pocket amid the wreckage. With numb fingers, she dialed 9-1-1 and whispered a strangled plea for help before darkness took her again

Voices roused her next, and bright light through heavy lids. Paramedics swarmed over her broken body while deputies cordoned off the area around the falls. An airlift was arranged to rush her to the nearest trauma center. As the world spun away, the Inspector's stern face swam into focus asking what happened through the haze of pain meds.

Weeks passed in a morphine fog as Flora slowly healed, piecing together the clues in her fever dreams. The police brought troubling new evidence - Jude Lawson was not who he claimed, and his fingerprints matched a Terrence Jones from five states over wanted for arson and assault.

Once released, she demanded answers from David, who sighed and admitted the initial crash report was falsified, rushed through due to corruption in the old police force. Forensic evidence now suggested two vehicles were involved in Michael's accident, one rear-ending the other off the

The missing pieces fell into place with sickening clarity. Scott must have witnessed something he shouldn't have that night, seen the face of whoever forced the other car over the embankment. Jude - or whatever his real name was - tried to cover his tracks by eliminating any witness and doctoring the police file. But Scott was too cautious, insisting on practicing with Emma's less traceable car instead of his own

It didn't explain why Jude targeted her now after so long, unless... A chilling memory surfaced of papers being rifled through at his abandoned farmhouse the day she confronted him. Old newspaper clippings chronicling Scott's accident as well as her return to town, meticulously followed. Someone had been watching and waiting all this time for any sign she remembered too much.

With new resolve, Flora asked Cole to reopen both cases, convinced the key evidence remained buried at that abandoned property. A search team descended on the farm under her direction, finding a hidden bunker beneath the chicken coop. Inside were damning clues - bloodstained clothes, forged IDs, maps tracking her movements. And tucked under a rifle was a faded photo of a smiling young couple she recognized with a start.

It was of Scott and herself from college, cut out of the local newspaper a year ago. A roar rose in her ears as everything clicked into devastating clarity. Jude wasn't just following her - he had been obsessed all this time, holding onto scraps documenting her entire life from afar like a crazed fan. The night he forced Scott's car over the edge was no accident - it was the trigger for a year's long vendetta against the happy life he could never have.

At the cliffside that fateful night, he meant to finish what he started by eliminating her too. But the fall had ended his twisted mission instead. As David led her away, Flora finally felt free knowing the ghosts of her past were laid to rest and she could start truly living again without shadows haunting her every step. There would be challenges ahead rebuilding her life, but for the first time in over a year, the horizon looked bright with hope and redemption.,