

## **Dreams Play Tricks**

Written by Mardelle Zhao

The hallway stretched on forever. There was no way to reach the door at its very end, outlined by the weak glint of light from within the room it guarded. But as discouraging as the long stretch of the dark hallway was, the room seemed to have a magnetic pull on Ava.

Trying but failing countless times to run, Ava eventually collapsed on the ground, desperately gasping for air, air that was thick with the smell of burnt dust and smouldering wires.

When she raised her heavy head to look up, she noticed the light inside the door changing colour, from a bright yellow to a dark orange.

Persuaded by curiosity, Ava struggled back up to her feet, feeling hurried by the ticking sound ringing between her ears.

The ticking was constant. No, not from a clock. It seemed to be coming from within the walls, rhythmic and hollow, like a heartbeat made by metal.

The floorboards groaned louder with every tiny step.

Ava tried to run. But her legs wouldn't move right.

Too short.

Too soft.

She looked down and saw the body of a child. Senses of familiarity washed over her. She recognized the body, but who was the owner? The hands of the child were stubby, and she wore a long nightgown decorated with floral patterns. Just like the hallway.

She tried calling out, but her voice caught in her throat. No sound. Only the ticking.

A doorknob seemed just out of reach, yet so far away.

And the ticking grew louder.

She reached for it anyway, stretching on tiptoe, the door pulling at her insistently. Her small hand trembled as her fingertips stretched out—further, further.

Behind her—footsteps.

Deliberate. Slow.

She turned.

A shadow walked toward her, slowly yet quickly.

Ava screamed, but soundlessly – her mouth gaping in despair, unheard.

Suddenly, hushed voices spoke all around her.

She tried making out the words.

Loose.

Ends.

Burn.

Easy.

The hushed voices spoke again. “Ava,” they said.

“Ava!”

The rough voices now a loud crescendo.

“AVA!”

The voices yanked her from sleep. She gasped and bolted upright, her sheets damp, her nightgown clinging to her body.

“You were shouting in your sleep again.”

She blinked and the pattern took shape. Her uncle, Theodore Solace, stood in the doorway holding a coffee mug. “Sorry,” she mumbled. “Nightmare.”

He stepped into her room, observing her closely. “You’ve been having them more often lately.”

“They’re not just dreams.” She rubbed her eyes. “I’m in the same hallway. The same door. Every time.” She sighed and looked up at her uncle through eyes of true want. “I think I should speak with a therapist.”

Dismissively, he smiled. “No need.” He chuckled, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes. “I say let it go.”

“Uncle, I haven’t slept in two weeks. I’m about to set off for college soon. Please—I need to get this dream figured out.”

Theodore tapped on the edge of the coffee mug. “Ava, you know we don’t have enough money for that! This is just some phase you’re having; I’m sure it’ll pass.”

Ava sighed, her eyes pleading. “This might sound crazy, but I think the dreams are telling me something!”

Theodore raised an eyebrow and muttered something to himself. “Little nightmares have no meaning, Ava. Dreams play tricks.”

She said nothing.

“Take the day off. Clear your head. You need it.”

“I’m fine,” she lied. “Are you heading out?” Theodore nodded.

Ava smiled. “Are you going to that house of yours that you’re renovating?”

“Yes, just finishing some last-minute paperwork.”

“What if I go with you to see it? If you’re going to rent that old house of yours, I’m sure more people will strike up an offer if they see how decorated it is!” She winked. “I have the best aesthetics.”

Her uncle’s smile flickered. “Of course, but next time. You need to rest up today.”

Theodore had mentioned the house casually the week before when Ava asked why he wasn’t going to his office. “Can’t keep a dead house forever,” he laughed. “I’m thinking of renovating. Could get some extra money if I rent it out.”

But something in his tone sounded wrong, off. Too rehearsed.

Maybe he was too sad to part ways with the house, Ava had thought.

She slipped off her bed, hearing her stomach growl. Craving some tea, Ava went to open the door to her uncle’s study. Theodore had brought back delicious tea from a recent trip. Perhaps, she thought, it might calm her nerves.

But today, for some reason, the door was locked.

Odd.

Ava furrowed her brows and went to fetch the spare key from a drawer in her room. She had found it by accident years ago, when she had just moved into the house.

She was only four years old then. Her parents had passed away tragically that week in a fire. Somehow, she was able to escape. Theodore was kind enough to take her in, and they moved into this current house soon after. While playing hide and seek, Ava had discovered the spare key.

Smiling at the memories, Ava pushed the key into the lock and turned it. With a click, the door opened promptly. At the desk, she opened the drawer to pull out the tea bag and her eyes were caught by a contact that lay there.

The bolded word: “**DEMOLITION**” caught her attention.

It was a demolition contract. Immediate clearance authorized.

Ava gasped, reading it closely. Was this the same house her uncle said he was renovating?

Why would he lie?

The next morning, Ava decided to follow her uncle to the house. It just did not sit right with her, especially after she once again awoke from the dreary hallway of her dreams.

She parked behind a couple of bushes, making sure her uncle did not notice her. In front of her was a little red house, beautifully built, just very broken down. Yet there was still an air of beauty about it—she could feel and sense the love that had built it.

It felt familiar.

A sudden voice outside startled her, breaking her out of that nostalgia.

Ava scrambled to hide in the bushes as her uncle returned with two men in construction hats.

“Are we taking down the house tomorrow?”

Theodore’s voice in response was calm. “Yeah. This house is too damaged by the fire. Can’t do anything with it now, honestly.”

Fire?

The worker laughed. “Whole place smells like smoke, actually.”

Nodding, Theodore muttered, almost too low to hear, “Loose ends burn easy.”

Ava’s breath caught.

That phrase.

She’d heard it in the dream.

After a brief back and forth about plans and timings, the men left. Ava crept from her hiding spot. She gingerly moved inside the house, still shaken. She wandered upstairs, breathing in the scent of rot and time.

She widened her eyes in shock as she approached the end of the stairway.

In front of her was *the* hallway.

The hallway decorated with floral patterns. The one in her dreams.

The hallway wasn’t fictional. She hadn’t imagined it.

It was real.

But there was no door at the end of the hallway. With caution, she walked toward the end of the corridor until something caught her foot and she tripped. Bending down, Ava found a small metal casing. The outer shell was split, revealing wires fused together in a mess. The

circuit board was blackened but still intact in places, with a silver disc in the middle about the size of a stopwatch. It was a timer.

Ava gasped in horror.

This was a bomb.

Frantic now, she hurried to the end of the hallway, where the door stood in her dreams. Pressing her hands on the wall, Ava could seemingly hear the ticking of the clock—the metronome of the dream that haunted her.

In frustration, she punched the wall. A light one, but enough force to make a piece fall off.

There was a crease in the wall. Her breath caught.

Ava wedged her hands into the crease and pried. The panel groaned, then split with a dry snap. Dust exploded out, making her cough as the wall crumbled.

A door—the one in her dreams—finally revealed itself.

With shaking hands, she opened it. Inside, she discovered a broken down yet eerily beautiful room.

Evidently, it belonged to a child. The floral walls, now faded, surrounded a beautiful little crib. Next to it, a mirror, now cracked. Scattered around the room were what seemed to be toys—or maybe books.

Next to the mirror, Ava found an old file cabinet. With a hairpin, she jimmied the lock curiously.

Inside were legal documents: a life insurance policy. She flipped through until a line stopped her cold.

“In the event of simultaneous death of Eric and Elizabeth Solace, all assets shall pass to the designated next-of-kin: Theodoric Solace.”

Ava’s knees gave out.

A fire... the sealed room... the ticking...

It wasn’t a tragedy.

It was a plan.

It was already night by the time Ava left the little charred house. She could not bring herself to go back to the house she shared with her uncle—it was all too much. After checking into a nearby motel, Ava lay down on the bed. Her mind was whirling, and exhaustion tickled her temples. Before long, she drifted off to sleep, into the familiar house of her nightmares.

Ava was back in the hallway. Only now, she knew that the little child was her.

Before long, the ticking started and the shadowy figure resumed his position.

Theodore?

She wanted to scream. She wanted to run. But a dream has no exits.

This time, she could open the door. Frantically searching for a place to hide, she saw her reflection in the mirror next to her bed. The little girl smiled, not innocently, but sadly. It wasn't the expression a four-year-old was supposed to have—her eyes seemed full of emotion. Slowly, her reflection reached out a hand, and unconsciously, Ava lifted up her arm to touch it.

The two hands pressed together.

The little girl's eyes looked at her. "Now you know. Please—don't let him get away with it. Save them. Save them both."

She smiled gently at Ava before finishing her declaration. "Not this time."

Ava bolted upright from her dream.

No—she wasn't in her bed, but in a crib. *Her* crib.

She looked around, eyes widening as she saw the familiar floral pattern of her room. Looking down, she was in the body of a four-year-old. Her four-year-old self. When she looked back up at the door framing her room, and the light that punctured through its crevices.

Ava narrowed her eyes in determination.

"Not this time..."