

# A NEW SILENCE

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SKIN ON SKIN. On one side of her, it's wet, sweaty. The other side, sticky. Her bare legs hit the tile floor, sending a shiver through her body. How is the body next to her sweating when the floor is ice cold? But she doesn't dare ask, doesn't dare speak, doesn't dare open her eyes.

A high-pitched squeal comes from inside her brain. She feels the other students against her, their breath racing and growing shallow. She doesn't want to hear anything ever again. Except she wishes the squealing would stop; it's giving her a headache. Headaches make Cora nervous. Grandpa died of a headache. Before she was born.

Cora leans against the shelves behind her and a few pieces of paper fall loose onto her lap. She runs her hands over the surface of one page and knows right away what it is. Stickers. She can't see what kind of stickers, but she secretly resents Ms. M. for holding out on her. Is it blood? Going down her arm?

The air stinks. Much more than just a sweaty smell. Like 100 rotten eggs or when Cora's brother Jackson makes a disgusting fart in her face. She covers her nose and mouth with her sweater.

Where is Jackson now? He could be dead. Is she going to die? Probably. This isn't the first time Cora has thought about death. When her mom lights the burners on the stove, Cora sees the house in flames. When she crosses the street to the bus stop each morning, she is hit again and again by a speeding car. When she and Jackson play on the swings in the backyard, the big tree falls and crushes them. But this is different. It isn't imagined. Today, death is certain.

Yesterday was great though, wasn't it? Her cat Molly's fifth birthday.

"We should make a cake," Mom said, smiling her beautiful smile.

"What's Molly's favorite flavor?"

They baked an all-chocolate cake and drew Molly on top with pink frosting. Jackson wanted orange.

A balloon pops.

Less squealing, more popping.

She has never loved someone so much.

Cora walks from the living room into the hall and into the kitchen, carrying Molly like a baby. Molly sleeps with her under the covers at night. When Cora is upset, Molly climbs onto her lap, looks at her with round, worried eyes. Human face buried in cat fur. When Molly goes to the vet, Cora always comes too. She doesn't want Molly to be afraid. If she dies today, will Molly miss her? Will Molly know she died afraid?

Glass shattering.

Cora's face is wet. Dry, old tears and new ones trickle down into puddles. She didn't realize she'd been crying. She scoops one up with her finger and licks it off. She's so thirsty. Hungry, too. It's probably lunchtime. Mom packed her a PB&J with carrots she is forced to eat and two chocolate chip cookies: one for her and one to share. She likes the peanut butter and jelly to ooze out of the bread when she takes a bite.

Cora licks her lips. A familiar taste finds her tongue. Blood. Sometimes when she gets a scrape on the playground she licks it clean, even though she doesn't like the taste.

Dad came home in time for Molly's birthday. He bought her a new toy, a blue and white striped mouse. Soft, and it jingles. Molly chased it for a while, then she put her arms around it and went to sleep.

Cora relaxes the muscles around her face and lifts her eyelids, tired of squeezing them shut. But almost nothing has changed. She is still sitting in darkness. The only difference is the smoke underneath the crack in the door.

More wet. In her left ear the ringing gets louder. She winces, covers it with her hand. It's blood. She's sitting in blood. The body next to her—not the sweaty body, the other—slumps.

Is she dead?

"Do you hear that?" says the voice next to her.

"Shh!"

She can hear. Well, sort of. The ringing in her left ear is different from the squealing in her right ear. He hears it too, the boy's voice beside her. A siren? Maybe they'll get rescued before they are killed.

Is she?

Do Mom and Dad know about the sirens? She wants to tell them about the smoke, the blood, the squealing. She wants to tell them how she got in the closet in the first place. The class was working on multiplication when pops and bangs came from the hallway.

“Everyone hide!” Ms. M. whisper-yelled.

A few kids nearest to the closet ran in; Cora did too. Darkness.

“Quickly!” she heard Ms. M. say. “Get away from the door! Get away fr—”

Shots. Voices. Screams. More shots. Ears squealing. The rotten eggs. A new silence. Her pulse filled her head. A girl opened the closet door and crawled in next to Cora. That’s her sticky arm. That’s her, slumped over.

This morning, she had a fight with Mom and Dad. About school. She didn’t want to go. She gets nervous and wants to stay home with Mom. But as with most mornings, she lost. Adults always think they’re right.

Cora hears something else. Shots from farther away. One. Two. Three four five. Six seven.

Will she see Mom and Dad and Jackson and Molly again? Water leaks from her eyes into her mouth and she swallows. Maybe she won’t be thirsty much longer.

Footsteps in the classroom.

Her heart hurts. Everything hurts.

“Shit.” A man’s voice.

Shadows under the door, instead of smoke.

Cora squeezes her eyes shut, holds her breath. There’s Mom’s smile.

Please don’t die, please don’t die, please don’t die.