

He held tightly to himself, afraid, cold, and exhausted. Reciting his new motto in his head, 'I am the real Stephen Glen.'

He had climbed into a large drain pipe to seek some kind of shelter, unwilling to chance being seen by anyone. His skin was so pale, still holding the visible marks of the clamps and medical devices which kept him there and monitored his body functions.

His beard and hair were long and unkempt, having not seen a brush or scissor in months, maybe years. He looked as if he had been living on the streets, beaten, dirty and weary, but knew he was still physically and mentally sharp.

How long had he been down there? How long had they kept him from the world and his life? The memories which clashed within his head had finally calmed, reliving some of the powerful headaches which had accompanied him since dragging himself from that horror-filled dungeon. Maybe after a decent night's sleep, he would be able to convince himself of the fact better.

His hands grasped into the cloth of his pants, thinking of his life before this. How long had he been missing, torn away from his family and suburban life? It was all that kept him going, an image burned into his mind of his wife, Angela, of his home on 37th street, their red front door, their dozens of photos lining the walls, and shelves. He had to get back. He had to see who or what now stood in his place.

He closed his eyes tightly, fighting back the Frankenstein-like images hitting him like a train, coming again and again. He saw himself in a room going on forever. There were no windows, no natural light, dim, cold, and silent, but for the beeping of machines and the flashing of dials. The dozens of cylinder chambers filled with an orange liquid and the hundreds of pipes were tracing the ceiling and floors. The tubes, the wires, and the smell. A putrid smell, so thick he was such he would retch.

That was when panic set in. Making his feet move without thought or direction—bringing him face to face with an image of himself. One more horrifying than he could ever have dreamed, and one more dead than alive.

What would be called a body lay in a bed, missing its limbs, ears, nose, and eyes, leaving open holes in its head. The mouth hung open in a disfigured and agonizing way. Half the wires, tubes, and pipes came into this room and either into or out of the body. Forced to keep breathing by machine.

He could feel this poor man's pain, all real as the blood in his veins, overwhelmed by the sudden and devouring feelings of hopelessness and utter black.

It was true horror, and soon he realized the smell was coming from the near corpse on the bed. Now, what little was in his stomach came, hitting the floor and his bare feet. He wanted death. But it didn't come. Instead, he ran, somehow finding himself outside, breathing the night air and still running. He didn't stop until he went outside the limits of town, taking refuge within this pipe.

His eyes fell closed, unable to hold them open any longer, even with the terror that lay behind him. He was sure there were others, many hundreds more, feeling their bodies somewhere within that facility with every door he passed. He was petrified to know as well that one of them stood in his place. A man who looked like him acted like him, smelt like him. Anyone would think it was Stephen Glen, but he wasn't the real Stephen. He was the true Stephen Glen.

As sleep neared, his mind moved into his bank of memories. Aware that many of the memories and images were very recent, some having happened within the last few hours even. He could see his house and car, and he saw his wife with a suitcase, knowing that she had left on business. He could see his body moving about the house, going to work, chatting with friends and family, all of it. It seemed like an endless movie playing before him, as familiar as it was, he had never seen before.

It was all there, down to the dents in the walls, and the creaks in the floorboards. It was all an imprint on Stephen’s brain. He saw what this imposer saw. He didn't know how it was possible, but without a doubt, he knew it was true. After everything else he had seen, he believed it all.

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He slept over sixteen hours, waking just as the sun had set, watching the dusk set on quickly. It was the smell that woke him, not of himself or the drainage pipe but of that body lying in bed. The thick smell of decay and bile, so near he could taste it.

Searching for a moment, needing to convince himself he was no longer in that place. He had made his way out somehow and still had a way to go before reaching his front door. He travelled once the sun fell beyond the horizon, remaining in the shadows and afraid of any person he saw. Sure, that if they knew he had escaped, again, he believed they did, they would be looking for him, and his house would be ground zero.

He spent the better part of an hour arguing with himself in a forgotten alley. Weighing the pros and cons of walking into an ambush, and if there would be one. Maybe they didn't need to send anyone, he knew a replica stood in his place, and he may have been all they needed. How many of those doors held clones behind them? How many of them were of himself? His wife? The neighbour? If there had been a hundred doors, each room could have held a hundred bodies.

Maybe he wasn't who he thought he was.

He shut the thought down, having led himself all this way to gain doubt was not an option. Going forward, that was his only option. He would take back what was his. Or die trying.

At a quarter after two, he came to the alley of his street. The lights, only two, stood at either end, both old, flickering, and swarming with moths. There was not a light in the window. Everyone slept, never knowing a man stolen from the world looked to regain his throne.

Coming around their neighbour's garage, he looked at his home. Quant, great deck, and well-kept landscaping, thanks to his wife. And quite possibly the only house to have a light on in the entire neighbourhood.

The kitchen light was on, and he was waiting inside. Even then, he wasn't able to move his feet any faster or remove himself from the shadows. The grass was cool and damp under his feet, the moisture making him aware of the many lessons he'd inflicted on himself on his journey. Still, it was the best feeling he had since waking in that tomb.

He stood at the backdoor, silent and still, thinking of his next move. He held the spare key in his fingers, snatching it from the fake from the pile of rocks without a second thought, holding it an inch from the nob.

Fear grappled with him again, making him take a second to rethink everything that had led him to this point. Yet, his mind was only able to create an image of walking through the door. He turned the key.

Coming inside, he shut the door without a sound and avoided every creak in the floorboards. He entered in silence, coming through the entrance, and stopped just before the arch to the kitchen, stepping into the light, his knees wobble. Seated at the table waiting for him is an image of himself, aware of the smell of coffee floating in the air.

The man was him. A clone, copy, doppelganger, nothing more. He was not the real Stephen; he was sure of it. This copy had come and taken his place.

Stephen took another step into the archway, giving each of them a fair look at the other. Neither spoke, but both men gazed at one another, each facing their realities and lies.

The clone sat there, a smile on his face, one that looked as though he'd stolen it.

"Take a seat." His hand was gesturing to the chair opposite him at the table.

Stephen's feet moved to the chair, but he didn't sit down.

"Do you want something to eat? I know you're hungry." The

'I *know* you're hungry' he didn't have to say it in such a way, but he had. But he refrained from answering, thinking of the well-stocked fridge in Angel's absence.

"I insisted." The man was up and away without another word. He was coming back from the shut fridge with a ham and cheese sandwich. He knew it was what he wanted, having been craving one since early that morning. There were three on the plate. Before sitting down, he refilled his cup with coffee, adding just a splash of milk. Just the way they liked it.

For a long while, he could only look at the plate of food, pondering if it was poisoned or laced. His memories and flashes of vision trace anything to make his suspension. There was nothing but the smell of mustard and ham. His hand reached forward over the table and onto the soft bread. As his mouth took down the second half of the sandwich, he just sat across from him, sipping his coffee, watching.

He didn't smile; instead, he wore a face of calm, possibly even indifference. It could have been infuriating, but since he had invented the look, he knew it had no foul intent beneath it.

They sat silent while he ate. Both were trying to keep clear heads, both straying to the moment, afraid of each step forward. Afraid to reveal any move or thought. For the most part, the taste of food on his tongue kept his mind distracted, more than he had wished. But finishing the third and final sandwich, he began to feel like his old self as close to it as he could, seated across from his replica.

"How did you know I'd come?"

"Same way you knew I would be here." The understanding was mutual. They had a connection. His mind jumped to the desperate and suicidal thoughts he'd had when he had seen that first clone. He sits down

"So, what do we do? Seems to me you may have done this before."

"once or twice." He wasn't going to say more than that.

"Where's Angie?"

"In Seattle on business."

It was the truth, finding memories within him to confirm Angela's family connection in Seattle.

"When will she be back?"

"We have enough time if that's your concern."

It wasn't, but it did bring about a pit in his stomach. He had come here unprepared, with no weapon, no prep, and no food. He was at a significant disadvantage. He couldn't understand why any of it had happened at all. Maybe the familiar stranger sitting across from him did.

"Why?" Stephen didn't have to explain. The man knew what the real question was. Why me? Why us? Why this life, this house, and this family? Stephen held cool, feeling his anger grow in every word from his trembling lips.

"Why did they wake up, and that place?

"I'm only privy to certain information."

"Only what they want to tell you?"

"Only what I need to know."

"Is that how you knew I was coming?"

He took another sip from his mug.

"No, I saw you coming. I saw your dreams, your fear. And you reach for the key just outside the door." Another long sip. "I know we are of many, but I do not know what the objective of our meetings were. I know nothing else." He did know more but knew he would get nothing from him. He had done this before, more often than he had said. How many copies had sat in this very spot as he did now? And where had they gone?

"Is this a test? To see which one of us can outdo the other?" His eyes traced about the kitchen, nothing seeming out of place, from what he could tell. "Is someone watching?"

"No. No one watches."

"But they tell you that?

"So how do we proceed? You're in my home living my life, sleeping in my bed with my wife." "What makes you think you are the original? Do your memories tell you so?"

Stephen remained silent. It was a rhetorical question; still, no one would convince him otherwise. He wanted this version of himself gone and to return to a life, he knew he once had. He needed to get rid of this fraud.

A sinister smile crossed the man's face as he took a sip from his coffee.

"I know what you are thinking because you are me, and I am you. You're thinking about removing me." He laughed. "I like that, can't even think of killing someone, can you?"

"And you can?"

"We may have the same DNA, but I know how far I can go." he took down the last of his coffee. "Do you know what's in you, what you're capable of doing? Or are you still tripped by the hell you pulled yourself from?"

"No, you aren't the first, and you won't be the last."

He sets the gun on the table between them. He knew what it was, a .22 calliper with a silencer, a favourite of the mafia. Also, an interest he and his long-since deceased brother had shared. It seemed almost fitting.

"So, does that make it easier for you?" Fear gripped him, pushing him back from the table and away from the gun. He lifted from the chair, looking at the mirrored face across from him. Aware that it could feel his reservation and stern mindset, moving from the table and refilled his mug. At first, insulted by the clone's confidence in his cowardice, then shame. Briefly allowing him to believe this copy wouldn't be able to pick up the gun either. It was all a game.

"I'm assuming you thought I would be more comfortable knowing you had that the whole time?"

The devil across from him smiled.

"I was hoping for a reaction. One which would give me the information I need."

He looked at the man closely, his eyes his face, even how he did his hair, an exact image of himself. "And what have you deciphered?"

"That life shaped a man. Builds him, tears him down, and forces him to build again." An image of his machine-skewered body came to him, bound by the shackles of life support. His life had not been like that. He had lived hers, had this life, not one built from within a machine.

"Is that what you see in me?"

He pulled a drink from his coffee, his eyes never landing on the gun.

"No, I see a man. Lost, uncertain, afraid." His anger rushed forward, almost sending his body over the table towards him, never mind the gun. But as strong as the anger was, fear screamed in the far reaches of his mind, distracted by the memories and sensations of the life within the house he sat. It all seemed so natural. He could taste it, yet beyond that, nothing.

"And you know who you are? You know, what? You were chosen to mock the rest of us and nothing more. What is your purpose? There was a pause between them and had finally taken the upper hand, if only briefly.

"To make sure no one wrecks what I have created."

"Then I know what I need to do."

"So, do I."

He watched the copy of himself reach out and grab the gun between them without hesitation. Giving only an instant to choke down a harsh horrified breath before his doppelganger pulled the trigger.

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His body fell limp to the floor, and he sat a moment, calming himself. It had become somewhat of a habit now, with this clone being the sixth. But the simple truth was this, they were still one person, and all their memories were shared, even the current ones.

That's why they knew. To come here, to find him, and to try and kill him. The first few times hadn't gone as smoothly, but he found with practice, he could manipulate the man across from him. Having already been shown the darkest fears within.

Standing up, he walks to the corpse stepping to its back and bending over the head. With his hand, he moves the man's hair, parting it just at the back of the skull. Seeing the tattoo, which was always there "21."

The weight was familiar to him, the awkward dragging down the stairs and over the tiled floor in the basement. A pool of loud was forming on the plastic, soaking through '21's' pants. There would be more, much more. He wished he could tell himself he had just seen a lot of movies, but his ability to do it almost remotely now was the absolute truth.

It was the only way to stay safe and not put those thoughts, images, smells, and feelings into the universe. In all her majesty and mystery, this cascading enlightenment between himself and his many clones was beyond him. He didn't know why it was happening. Who was doing it, or what all of it was supposed to achieve? But body after body he had placed within that furnace, terrified to ponder how long it would go on. How many clones of himself there were?

Each piece took an hour or more to burn. His technique is as streamlined as possible for the quickest and cleanest results. Still, he stayed awake long into the hours of the late morning. Coming upstairs, he could hardly lift his hand to shut the basement door. Only taking in the numbers on the clock before heading for the stairs and to the shower. Once he hit his pillow, he wouldn't wake for eighteen hours.

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He lifted his eyes from his paper as he heard her key enter the lock. The turn of the h Door handle was auditable, and soon, her voice followed.

"Hi, Hon."

"Hey babe, how was your trip?"

"Same as every other." She had set her suitcase by the stairs and began moving into the moving room and towards him. Nothing was out of place; everything was cleaned. Setting his paper down, he rose from his seat and stepped towards her, eager to take her in his arms. He gripped her tightly, the touch and smell of her calming him immediately. Her hand rubbed around his shoulders and back.

"I can tell work wasn't so great for you. How did the meeting go?"

"As often as we have them, they never get easier." She grasped his neck and moved in to kiss him, sending goosebumps over his skin. Tracing her hand upward, she danced within his hair, having never noticed the hidden '3' tattooed on his flesh beneath.