

Cheryl Doe, Episode Nine
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A note to readers

This work portrays a number of themes and concepts, some which may cause discomfort in one way or another. As such, this page contains warnings for content which include, but are not limited to:

Mental Illness

Dysphoria

Sex (mention only)

"Two tablets by day, taken with food and water." Her lips quivering, she returned her medicine back to its bottle, sighing heavily. Her eyes were absent as ever, watching years of her past repeat themselves like a broken record. She blinked, slowly – holding apart her eyelids as if she were straining to keep them open. Her morning routine proceeded as usual, although without much care or thought to it. She bathed and fed herself to the absolute minimal capacity she could manage; she clothed herself and prepared her belongings with an automatic deftness to it. When she walked into the office building, the security guards saw her face for the first time in four months, and it gave them an all-too-familiar sinking feeling they initially sensed those four months back. As the doe was setting up at her cubicle, Jim thought it a good idea to surprise her in a way that broke from his usual bag of tricks: the doe cracked open a book as he drummed on her back with open palms. Jamie didn't budge an inch, which prompted him to stop. There was an eerie silence to her, only broken by her asking "Are you done?" without reflection, or even turning.

The bear took a step back and prodded, "Jamie, are you okay?" sheepishly.

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure? You're kinda distant today."

"I'm fine, Jim."

"Then look at me."

Jamie turned to face the bear, her rust eyes were hollow, staring directly into his. He took a step back, startled and intimidated by the demeanor she wore. His sneer-grin was long gone, but a look of deep worry crossed him, and he spoke softly.

"Jamie, do you want to talk?"

"No." And the doe turned back to her station, mercilessly striking the keyboard, typing out notes.

Jim slunk away, waiting several steps before turning around when he walked off. Jamie hadn't spoken to anyone for the duration of her shift: she kept her head down, and anyone who dared to demand interaction only received from her a glare of pure revulsion. The only exception was Jacqueline, of whom she continued to keep at a mindful distance.

After work, Jamie trudged into her apartment, stripping naked and lied, sitting up, in her bathtub. She ran her fingers through her hair, and sighed once more. Then, she leaned forward and took hold of the shower faucet, gradually turning it as steaming water scolded her legs – she withdrew them in response, rubbing them to nurse the minute burns. While doing so, she noticed her thighs weren't as wide as she'd remembered, and her fingers appeared more slender as she observed her outstretched hand. She drew them into a fist, and crossed her arms over her chest – her breasts felt smaller, too. As she processed these notes, she dared not touch her own face – for feeling the outline of her jaw would drive her over the edge, which she now sensed as so close. But her fingers were restless, and she picked at the remains of the antlers between her ears; they had regained most of their stump-like contours. Her chest became tight at this, and the back of her eyes stung; the doe's breaths were short and staggered, and the echoes of her teenage years became vivid and sonorous – burning her with unbridled shame while reinforcing the abject loneliness she had maintained for so long.

Her breaths drew heavier, albeit just as short, and she began to feel her heart beat irregularly.

And then everything stopped. Jamie traced the edges of the rounded stumps on her head. Reality blurred back to consciousness, and the doe found herself shivering: the water had run cold. She got up, and forced herself to draw a lather from her body wash, then rinsed thoroughly as she coated her fur in conditioner. One more rinse, and she turned off the faucet and lied back down in the bathtub, her hair hung over her eyes and her fur was dripping; she shivered as she exhaled. The doe's phone rang in the bedroom hours later, but didn't leave the tub to answer it. *Just five more minutes*, she hopelessly repeated over and over in her head, *just need a little bit to get myself together*.

Jamie eventually lifted herself from the tub, her front dry while her backside was still sopping wet. She took her fingers up and down her chest; the fur was matted. A brush was in the medicine cabinet, but sighed again upon sight of it – instead fixating on her medicine bottle containing pills to help with her bipolar disorder. Regret stirred within her for not having taken them this morning, and she couldn't bear to look at it, yet continued to stare at it, longingly, almost expecting it to answer a question she had yet to ask. The doe pulled in her lips and shut the cabinet, wincing at her own reflection. Her phone's light was blinking as it rested on her pillow. She checked it after drying off and there were two notifications: eight text messages and two voicemail messages – three texts were from Francine, two from Nat, and three from Jim; she only opened Jim's messages.

Jim: Jamie are you okay?

Jim: Jamie???

Jim: Jamie im worried

Jamie: I'm fine, Jim.

Jim: You keep saying that

Jim: I dont believe you

Jamie: Then don't.

Jim: Ok...

Jim: Well ill be outside at 6 tmrw

Jamie: Don't worry, I'll be fine.

Jim: :\

Jim: You sure?

Jamie: Yeah.

A half hour passed.

Jim: Sorry cant let you

Jim: Mom says you need your horomones

Jim: Ill be outside at 6

Jim: Ok?

Jamie: Okay.

The next morning, Jamie had her hands in her pockets, work blouse underneath her hoodie. The morning air was brisk and drier as the season progressed: she was clutching her messenger bag for dear life as she stood in the complex's parking lot. Jim rolled up in his yellow car. Jamie went to open the passenger door, but it was locked, Jim rolled down the window with a worrisome frown.

"Do you have your meds?"

"I took them," said Jamie.

"Uhh, yeah... you need to take the bottle for both meds – with you."

"Why?" Jamie narrowed her eyes.

"Yo, I... I don't know what your meds do, but when you said you weren't coming, my mom lost her shit. So... bring your meds."

"Alright." Jamie went back up, and she showed Jim the bottle when she returned. He nodded and unlocked the door to allow her entry. She got in, her back hunched, and they rode to the Glocomovations office building in silence, Jim sighing heavily as he stopped the car. He looked to Jamie, and with an awkward smile asked, "Do you want a hug?"

Jamie's expression was dubious, but accepted as she leaned in. Jim wrapped his arms around her, and patted her on the back.

"Thanks," Jamie squeaked quietly afterward.

"Yeah, I was told to do that." There was a silence; neither Jamie nor Jim looked at each other. "Let– let's go inside," Jim said finally, and they hurried out.

Inside, Jamie was going through her phone: there were still two voicemails, and those five unseen text messages. Checking them, Nat was giving his usual greeting to start a conversation, and Francine was checking in, and sent a voicemail as well. The doe sighed, thinking of her previous relationships instead of Francine herself, reading the messages, and closed them out, now seeing her hands trembling. She took her anxiety medicine from her messenger bag, swallowing one tablet, and breathing deeply as Miss Brummel taught her to months ago. The doe's shift was monotonous, and by the end, her composure remained unfettered. Jim was waiting for her in the break room. With an understanding nod, they walked to his car and drove off – Jamie leaning out the window for the duration of the trip.

When the two arrived at his house, Jim unlocked the door, letting Jamie in first. Miss Brummel was waiting there, arms crossed. Jim closed the door behind Jamie, taking two long strides to the right. Miss Brummel approached the doe and paused, looking her sternly in the eyes. Then the old bear brought her into a deep embrace, rubbing the doe's back.

"Dearie, don't ever worry me like that again! You need your hormones *and* your medicine! Got it?" She pulled back and looked to Jamie with the same intensity as when she came in.

"Y-yes ma'am!" Jamie stammered.

"Good! I'll be in the kitchen, and I'll give you your injection after I finish these lemon squares," ending the sentence with a lilt, and then her tone again more serious, reminded, "Your health is important, Jamie, always." And then she trotted off to the kitchen, muttering, "Always, always, always..." Jim's jaw was hung at the exchange.

"What?" Jamie asked, turning around.

"She... she just gave you a frown!"

"And?"

"I got my shit kicked in last night, that's what!"

"Uh, why?"

"You didn't wanna come, and I told her, then she asked me why, and I was like, 'Jamie doesn't want her injections, big whoop,' and I got my ass beat with a slipper!" Jamie stared at him, and blinked. "Yeah." The doe giggled.

After her injection, Miss Brummel gave Jamie a kiss on the forehead as she advised the doe to stay safe (Jamie hoping neither one of them saw her cheeks burning). Jamie and Jim then headed upstairs, and the two ate a small platter of lemon squares. The doe was sat in front of Jim as he carefully kneaded the doe's back. His face was turned to the window on his left, expression contorted to hide his bashfulness. Jamie's face was blushing as well.

"You're not uncomfortable, are you?" Jim inquired, marginally succeeding in keeping his speech even.

"Um... nope, you're good," said Jamie, struggling with the same predicament. "Thanks, by the way – this is really nice of you."

"Yeah. No problem. Didn't know that bathtubs caused back problems."

"That makes two of us."

Jim pulled Jamie closer to himself, the doe, in turn, relaxed her body more so, draping her arms over the bear's thick limbs. He propped her up in his lap – the awkward tension at its apex as they gazed at one another. There was a silence.

"S-so, what is up?" Jamie asked in a stilted fashion, trying to break the quiet air, moving off to the side of him.

"Nothing much, nothing... oh! I've been chilling with Priscilla lately, and– yeah, that's new..."

"Booty call?" Jamie chided. Surprise crossed the bear's face, to which she simply added, "Nat."

"Dickweed..." Jim cursed under his breath.

"Tsk tsk, oh Jim, when will you ever learn?" remarked the doe jokingly, shaking her head dramatically.

"At least I'm having sex!"

"Don't remind me!" she exclaimed, playfully punching him.

"But... I am," Jim added slyly. Jamie pouted, then stuck out her tongue at him. The two joshed around until a quarter to eleven. Jamie saw the time as she checked her phone: a new unread message from Fran. The doe decided against responding – it had been so long since the initial messages, and now thoughts of her ex intruded when simply looking at her name. She hung there, a bit lost.

"Are you? Jamie?" Jim asked, snapping the doe back to reality.

"Huh?" she let out.

"Are you read to go?"

“Oh! Yeah, yeah. Thanks.”

The two drove to Jamie's complex, letting her out in the parking lot, and her texting the bear when she got inside. She placed a container in the refrigerator, holding some of Miss Brummel's lemon squares. She checked her phone before bed, with too many feelings and memories having clouded her thoughts; she resolved to go straight to bed – lest she text something foolish – and tried to make her mind quiet so her surfacing past and her can be put to rest.

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