The Blackwood Chronicles

Episode Two · The Last Wake-Up Call

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Chapter One

At the Briar Motor Lodge, wake-up calls were free. The woman in Room Eight had requested hers for six in the morning.

At 2:14 a.m., her phone rang.

“Mom?”

Denise Alvarez sat up so fast she knocked her glasses off the nightstand. The voice was her daughter’s, with the little catch in it that came whenever Lila was trying to sound braver than she felt.

“I need you to open the bathroom door,” Lila said.

Denise looked across the room. A thin strip of light shone beneath the bathroom door. She could have sworn she’d left it open.

“Where are you, baby?”

“Right here.”

On the other bed, Lila rolled onto her stomach and pulled the blanket up over her head.

Denise could hear her breathing. She could hear breathing on the telephone, too.

“Put me back,” the voice said.

Something on the other side of the bathroom door tried the knob.

By the time Garrett saw the motel sign, he could smell himself every time the Blazer’s heater kicked on.

“Vacancy,” he read. “And hot showers.”

“The H is out.”

“I’m willing to take a chance on Ot Showers.”

Roxy had the road atlas open across her knees. For the last thirty miles she’d been moving a pencil between the six marks they’d made for the missing truckers. The lines between them should have crossed cleanly. They kept landing a little to the left of where she expected.

“We’re close,” she said.

“To Little Rock?”

“To whatever it thinks Little Rock is.”

Garrett pulled in beneath a flickering blue canopy. A woman in pajama pants was barefoot in the parking lot, holding a tire iron in both hands. A girl of about twelve stood beside her with one shoe on.

Garrett killed the engine.

“Please tell me you’re here for the bathroom,” the woman said.

Roxy looked over at him. “You did say you wanted a shower.”

Chapter Two

Denise had called the police from the front office. An officer had opened the bathroom and found a clean tub, a dead lightbulb, and a window painted shut. He’d told her somebody was playing a prank. He’d taken a statement and gone.

“He didn’t hear it say what it said after we got outside.” Denise tightened her grip on the tire iron. “I did.”

“What did it say?” Roxy asked.

Denise glanced at her daughter. Lila had found a chair near the office heater and tucked her bare foot beneath her.

“It said, ‘Ask me what I did with the other one.’”

Garrett turned toward the row of rooms.

“Wait,” Denise said. “The desk clerk went to check the line after the officer left. His truck’s still here.”

Behind the counter, an open ledger listed the occupants by room. The clerk had written his own name in the margin beside a reminder to fix the ice machine. Walt. His coffee was warm.

Roxy lifted the receiver of the desk phone. She heard a pencil scratching, then three quick taps.

She set it down.

“You heard something,” Garrett said.

“Three taps.”

He looked at her. When they were kids, their mother had knocked three times on the other side of a bedroom door, even when it was standing open. She always waited for an answer.

“Walt might be in the service room,” Garrett said. “I’ll check it. You stay with Denise and Lila.”

“The phone’s wired into the same box as Room Eight. I need to see it.”

“Rox.”

“If we split up, you don’t know which version of me is coming back.”

Garrett picked up Walt’s flashlight from beside the register and handed it to her.

On the way out, Roxy asked Denise to keep Lila in sight and let any phone ring. Then she pocketed the ledger.

Chapter Three

The service room smelled of wet cardboard and bleach. A rack of towels stood against one wall. On the other hung a plywood board with a dozen telephone wires stapled to it.

Walt sat beneath the board, one hand pressed flat against the floor. His lips were moving.

Garrett crouched beside him. “Walt?”

“Counting,” Walt said. “Keep losing one.”

Roxy swept her light over the board. Eleven pairs of wires ran up through holes in the ceiling. The twelfth ran down, disappearing into a saw cut in the concrete. Someone had pressed a silver staple over it. The staple had split down the middle.

“Did you put that there?” she asked.

Walt shook his head. “It’s been there since my dad ran the place. He said leave it alone, so I left it alone.”

Garrett looked at Walt’s hand. Blood was seeping from beneath his palm. He reached for his wrist.

“Don’t lift it.” Roxy angled the flashlight. The shadow under Walt’s hand was moving against the beam. “What are you holding down?”

“My room.” He swallowed. “I sleep in Twelve. I heard the bell and came back here to check. Then I could hear myself snoring through the floor.”

A phone rang in the office.

A second rang through the wall behind the towels. Garrett heard a third outside, then another, working their way along the row.

Roxy knelt by the cut in the concrete. There were scratches around it, small and deep. She’d seen their father make marks like that on a windowsill before a storm, digging the point of a nail in at each turn so he could find his place in the dark.

She pulled the atlas from under her arm and opened it flat.

“The highway anchor broke,” she said. “Look where the last line goes if I fold the map along the river.”

Garrett watched the pencil marks meet under her thumb. The motel sat where the line crossed the fold.

“Somebody built a way through here before tonight,” she said. “And somebody else tried to close it.”

From Room Eight, Lila screamed for her mother.

The sound came again from the office. This time it was followed by Denise yelling, “I can see you, honey. Stay here with me.”

Walt looked up. “I’m sorry,” he said.

He lifted his hand.

Chapter Four

The back wall went away.

Garrett saw the motel walkway stretch into darkness, doors on both sides where there should have been a cinder-block wall. Water ran from the gutters. Out in the parking lot, rain struck an empty space where the Blazer ought to have been.

A man wearing Walt’s face stepped out of Room Twelve. He was barefoot. In one hand he held a telephone receiver by the cord. The cord trailed back into the room and drew tight as he walked.

Behind Garrett, the real Walt tried to get to his feet.

The man on the walkway opened his mouth. Every phone at the motel went quiet.

“Garrett,” he said in their mother’s voice. “The crawlspace. Take your sister and go.”

It was the order Garrett had given Roxy the night the Herald came. For half a second he could see the pantry again, the old wood floor, the stuffed rabbit Roxy had dropped in the living room.

Then he heard Roxy beside him, calm and close. “I need the iron tire thumper from the truck.”

“You want me to leave?”

“I want you back in twenty seconds.”

He ran.

Roxy dragged Walt to the threshold of the service room. When she tried to pull him farther, his legs stretched back toward the walkway. His jeans went taut at the knees. He cried out.

“Okay,” she said, setting him down. “Walt, which room does this phone call first?”

“What?”

“The one on the desk. If you pick it up and forget to dial.”

“Eight. Old manager’s room. They wired it direct.”

The thing on the walkway had made it to Room Eleven. The cord was sinking into the flesh of its hand.

Roxy flipped open the ledger and looked at the time Denise had written beside her name. She checked the page before it. Every time Room Eight had been booked in the past week, Walt had written a wake-up time. Beneath each one, someone had penciled in the same correction.

2:14.

It had called Denise first. Her bathroom was the first door it had tried. The line in the concrete led away from that door, down the row to where Walt slept.

The creature took another step. Walt’s heels slid across the floor.

Roxy caught his collar with both hands. “Garrett!”

“Seventeen seconds,” he said, breathless.

He handed her the iron and moved past her, taking Walt under the arms. His boots scraped across the threshold as he leaned back.

“Call Room Eight,” Roxy said.

Garrett looked over his shoulder. Denise was standing at the edge of the lot with her tire iron, Lila directly behind her.

“Denise! Pick up the phone in the office. Just hold it to your ear.”

Denise turned and ran.

At the far end of the walkway, a telephone rang. The man wearing Walt’s face swung toward it. His cord jerked taut, pulling him sideways.

For an instant Roxy could see where the wire crossed the cut in the concrete. She drove the end of the thumper down on the broken silver staple. It sparked. The cord in the creature’s hand snapped tight enough to lift him off his feet.

From Room Eight, their mother’s voice said, “Roxy, wait.”

Roxy struck the staple again. The split ends buckled inward until they touched, pinching the wire between them.

The concrete closed around the iron. The walkway vanished. Garrett fell backward with Walt on top of him, and the rack of towels crashed against the wall.

For several seconds, the only sound was the ice machine dropping a load of cubes into its bin.

“Fixed itself,” Walt said weakly.

Garrett lay on the floor, staring at the ceiling. “Put it in the ledger.”

Chapter Five

By dawn, Denise and Lila were gone. Walt gave them a refund from his own wallet. Lila came back for her other shoe and waited until Roxy went into Room Eight with her to get it.

Garrett found Roxy later, sitting on the Blazer’s tailgate. Across her knees lay a yellowed sheet of paper she’d pulled from behind the telephone board while Walt called the motel owner.

“Look at this,” she said.

It was an old diagram of the motel’s phone lines. The twelfth line had been added by hand. Beside it, someone had written *Leave the return open until you hear both voices.*

The R in *return* had a straight back and a long, slanting leg. On birthday cards, their mother used to make that same R in Roxy's name. It always looked like it was about to walk off the paper.

Garrett touched the ink with the pad of his thumb.

"You heard what it said to me?" Roxy asked.

"Yeah."

"That wasn't her."

Garrett folded the diagram carefully. "This was."

In the bottom corner was a date. Roxy had already done the math twice, hoping she'd gotten it wrong. She watched Garrett get there on his own.

"Four days," he said.

Four days after their parents had walked into the woods. By then the cabin door had been broken, the Blazer was gone, and the man who'd pulled them out had told them their parents had been taken across a threshold.

There was an address below the date. Roxy pointed to it.

"That's downtown," Garrett said.

She nodded. "I checked against the atlas while you were getting Walt up."

They sat for a moment, facing the empty parking space beside them. Then Garrett put the diagram in the glove compartment and started the engine.

The radio came on by itself.

Three quick taps sounded through the speakers.

A second set of three answered, farther away.

Garrett took his hand off the volume knob. Roxy kept her eyes on the road as he pulled out.

This time, neither of them reached to turn it off.