

Billie Baloney

THE TOWN
THAT SWALLOWED
ITSELF





DAVE ALTO

Billie Baloney

The Town That Swallowed Itself

By Dave Alto

Copyright © 2025

by **Dave Alto.**

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any form what so ever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations in critical articles or reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, or transmitted in any form, or by means, electrical, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the written permission of the publishers.

Book and Cover design by Dave Alto

Billie Baloney character Registered US patent office

Chapter One: Into the Fog

The fog rolled in like spilled milk—thick, pale, and unnatural. Billie noticed it first from her window. It didn't drift. It hovered. *Held its shape*, like something alive.

She squinted, then rubbed her eyes. Hadn't she just done that?

Outside, everything was hushed. No birdsong. No wind. Just the wet silence of a world on pause.

Max texted her: **"Meet at the end of Mason Street. Gotta check this out."**

She grabbed her bike, heart already picking up speed. Something about the air outside felt... off. Cold, but not cold. It was like stepping into static—her ears buzzed faintly, as if a TV had been left on somewhere.

They met by the corner of Mason and Hollow. Max was already frowning.

"You feel that?" he asked. "It's like..." He paused. "Never mind. Déjà vu. I think."

Billie stared down the street. The fog had thickened. A dim glow hovered over the pavement like a smothered sun.

"I've never seen it this bad," she whispered.

"You just said that," Max replied.

"No I didn't."

"Yeah. You did. Word for word."

Billie opened her mouth—then shut it. Her tongue tasted metallic. The trees lining the street looked slightly... wrong. Like they were repeating every few feet, the same crooked branches curling at the same angles.

They mounted their bikes and pedaled into it.

Every spin of the wheels felt slower than it should have, like time was dragging. The fog swallowed their sound—no chain click, no tire crunch. Just the steady, ghostlike hiss of their breath.

They passed a golden retriever on a porch. It barked once, twice.

They turned a corner. Passed a different street. Another porch. The same dog. The same bark. One, two.

“Did that house just move?” Max muttered.

“No. That was on—wait...”

They passed a man in a brown coat. He walked slowly, then tripped, groceries spilling—apples bouncing, a can clattering.

Ten minutes later, they passed him again. Same coat. Same trip. *Same damn apples.*

“Okay,” Billie said, skidding to a stop. “What is this?”

Max stopped too, but didn’t answer. He was staring down at his hands.



“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He looked up slowly. “I—I had dirt on my hands a second ago. I was just holding a stick.”

“You weren’t,” Billie said.

“I was. I *remember* it.”

Billie shook her head. Then stopped. Because—She did remember. Max holding a stick, breaking it, dirt under his nails.

Only that never happened. Right?

They rolled into her driveway.

Billie dropped her bike.

The door to her house was ajar.

“Mom?” she called. “Dad?”

No answer.

Max pointed. “Look.”

The kitchen clock was frozen at **7:09**. The second hand jerked, then stopped. Then jerked again—backwards.

Billie rubbed her temples. A whisper curled at the edge of her hearing—like her name being spoken, just under the floorboards.

She stepped into the bathroom to splash water on her face.

The mirror was fogged up. She wiped it clean.

And froze.

Her reflection didn’t match.

It was subtle. Too subtle. Her face was just a little off-center. One eye too wide, the cheek too long. Her reflection *smiled*, but she hadn’t. She stared at it.

Then the mouth opened—wide. Wider. An *impossible* O stretching past her chin, flesh splitting like wet paper.

Then it snapped back. Normal. She blinked.

Had that just happened?

She turned—and screamed.

Max stood in the doorway. "What?"



"You—your face—" she gasped.

But he looked fine now. Pale, but normal. Too normal.

They sat on the porch in silence.

Then Billie said, "We should go back to the square. Maybe someone knows what's going on."

Max nodded. "You just said that."

"No, I—"

"Billie." He pointed at her shirt. There was a splotch of dried red near the collar.

She looked down. It wasn't blood. It was... jelly?

When did she eat toast?

A bird landed on the railing. A blackbird. It croaked, flapped—and disappeared. Just *vanished*, like someone had yanked it out of the world with scissors.

Billie started to stand.

Max was already on his bike. He turned to her and said:

“Ready for our ride?”

Her blood ran cold.

That’s what he said this morning.

In this exact spot.

Same inflection. Same tilt of his head.

“Max...” she whispered. “What time is it?”

He checked his phone. 7:09 AM.

The exact same time as before.

Then he blinked, and blood trickled from his nostril.

Chapter Two: The Looped Ones

The sky never changed.

It remained locked in that dim, fog-muffled gray, like a photograph trapped in a freezer. Billie and Max rode toward the center of town, wheels whispering over asphalt that felt too smooth, like it had been paved *yesterday*—over and over again.

They didn't talk much. Billie's head buzzed with half-thoughts and flickers of memory—no, *repetition*. Max's bleeding nose had dried into a dark crust. He hadn't even noticed it had happened.

They reached the town square.

The fog thinned slightly here. The old shops still stood like stage props, hollow and too perfect. The bakery's window displayed bread with *no crumbs, no bite marks*. The barber's pole spun, though there was no wind.

That's when they noticed the people.

The first was a woman sweeping the same section of sidewalk. Her broom passed over a clean patch again and again. Her eyes were glassy, her face slack. She whispered something.

Billie leaned closer.

"Nice weather today," the woman murmured.

The broom lifted. Swept. Again.

"Nice weather today."



Same tone. Same pitch.

Billie's breath caught. She backed away slowly.

Across the street, a man stepped out of the hardware store. He waved, tripped, and dropped a bag of screws. The screws bounced—*clink clink clink*. He stooped to pick them up. Walked inside.

Ten seconds later, he stepped out again. Waved. Tripped. Screws. Bounce. Repeat.

Max's voice shook. "They're stuck. All of them."

Billie nodded, slowly. "But why?"

They crept past the library. A row of schoolchildren sat on the steps, frozen in place, blinking in perfect unison. Their mouths opened every five seconds.

One word.

"Help."

"Help."

“Help.”

Over and over.

Max reached out to one, a boy with a chipped tooth. His skin felt rubbery, unreal. Like he was already dead.

“Billie...” Max said, his voice tight. “Look.”

A poster on the bulletin board. Yellowed. Torn.

“Remember the Anniversary – Hollow Falls Ritual Disaster, 1947” Below, in faint print: *“Never forget those lost in the storm.”*

But there had been no storm.

Billie stared at the date. June 18th. That was **today**. Or... it was *always today*.

Her stomach twisted.

They had to find someone real. Someone *alive*. Not one of the looped puppets.

Then she remembered the old woman.



Mrs. Kindell's Antique Curios was a faded hole-in-the-wall at the edge of the square. Its windows were fogged not by mist but **from the inside**, like something was breathing against the glass.

Billie and Max stepped in.

A bell jingled—but the sound was *distorted*, drawn out like it was underwater. Shelves loomed around them, stacked with dusty dolls, cracked clocks, mirrors that showed angles of the room that didn't exist.

Mrs. Kindell sat behind the counter. Her skin was gray and papery, like she'd already dried out. But her eyes were sharp.

"I wondered when you'd wander in," she said. Her voice scraped like a rusty gate.

"You're not one of *them*, are you?" Billie asked, heart racing.

The woman laughed. "Oh, no. Not yet. But I'm wearing thin, child. This place—it eats what you are."

Max stepped forward. "What happened to the town?"

She looked at him. "You mean, what *is* happening. What always happens. Again and again. It began in 1947, with fools who thought they could trap time like a song in a bottle. My father was one of them."

Billie's mouth went dry. "A ritual?"

"A binding," she whispered. "A fold in time. They wanted to preserve Hollow Falls forever—a safe place, untouched by war or change. But they got the equation wrong."

Mrs. Kindell stood, her bones creaking. She shuffled toward a display case and retrieved a thin, cracked book. Its pages were covered in equations, symbols, Latin phrases, and symbols that hurt to look at. One of them seemed to *move* on its own.

"They anchored the ritual here," she said. "At the center. But it didn't stop time. It *looped it*. The same day. Over and over. Every cycle, a few more people lost themselves. Became *loopers*. Mindless. Eventually, the world forgot we were ever here."

Max frowned. "But we're not from 1947. We're real."

"Are you?" she asked quietly.

Billie felt her spine go cold.

The woman flipped to the back of the book. There was a photograph glued to the page.

A photo of Billie and Max.

In sepia, how photos looked a hundred years ago.

They stood on the square steps. Billie wore the same hoodie. Max's scraped knee was visible.

"But this—this is impossible," Billie said.

Mrs. Kindell sighed. "I've seen you come through more times than I can count. Sometimes you scream. Sometimes you melt. Sometimes you join them."

She pointed toward the window. "This is your twenty-eighth visit. And you never remember."

Billie swayed.

Her reflection in a nearby mirror watched her with narrowed eyes. Its mouth moved before hers did.

Max slumped into a chair. “My head hurts.”

Blood began leaking from his ears.

“No,” Billie whispered, grabbing his shoulders. “Don’t fall into it. We have to find the center. The *original circle*.”

The old woman’s eyes softened. “There’s still a way. A fragment of the spell—broken, unstable. Deep beneath the Masonic Hall. If you can undo it—really undo it—you might escape.”

“What happens if we don’t?” Billie asked.



The woman's lips trembled. "You become one of them. Waking up every morning. Looping. Bleeding. Repeating. Forever."

She turned away. "You'll know it's happening when your memories go first. Then your name. Then your face."

A mirror beside Billie shimmered.

In it, her face blurred at the edges. Her eyes swam like ink in water. She blinked—
—and it was normal again.

Max stood. His nose bled again, but he wiped it and smiled faintly. "Let's go," he said.

"You said that this morning," Billie whispered.

He froze.

They turned to leave.

Outside, the man in the brown coat passed by. He tripped. The can rolled. Again.

The schoolchildren still whispered, "Help."

The sky hadn't moved.

Billie clutched Max's hand tighter than ever.

And behind them, Mrs. Kindell whispered to herself, one finger tracing a mark in the dust on her counter.

"This time, let them get farther. Just a little farther..."

Chapter Three: The Cult That Broke Time

The door to the Masonic Hall moaned open like a mouth exhaling dust. The fog didn't follow them in. It clung outside the threshold as though afraid.

Inside, the air was thicker. Clotted.

Billie covered her nose. "Smells like... rust and mold."

Max didn't respond. He just stood there, staring at a wall as if it had something to say.

The lobby was preserved like a corpse dressed for its own funeral—dim sconces barely lit ancient wallpaper, curling at the seams. Pictures of men in ceremonial garb lined the hallway, their black eyes dull and flat.

One of them looked like Max.

Exactly like Max.

Billie blinked. Then the picture changed—just a man in glasses, slightly older.

She didn't say anything.

They moved deeper.

Each footstep echoed in slow motion. Like the sound had to crawl before it reached their ears. The stairs leading downward were steep, warped with age, and **wrongly spaced**, as if built by someone who didn't quite understand human anatomy.

Halfway down, Billie lost count.

"Did we go down seven steps or twenty?" she whispered.

Max rubbed his forehead. "I... don't know. My thoughts feel slippery."

The hallway below pulsed with red emergency lights that flickered randomly. Shadows moved in ways they shouldn't—sideways, diagonally, climbing walls.

They passed rusted doors etched with strange symbols. Behind one, something *scraped*—slow and heavy, like a wet sack dragging across tile.



Neither of them looked inside.

At the end of the corridor, an archway waited.

Above it: “**Sanctum Temporis – Beware the Echoes.**”

Inside, the room opened wide—circular, with a cracked ritual symbol burned into the stone. Bones formed its edges. Real ones. Long ones.

The center was sunk into the floor like a pit, with an enormous **mirror** standing upright at its heart.

It was *alive*.

Its surface swirled like water filled with oil, colors that didn’t exist shifting and writhing. Shapes moved beneath the surface—arms, faces, mouths that opened far too wide.

Max took a step toward it.

“Don’t,” Billie hissed, grabbing his arm.

But he was staring into the glass, entranced.

Reflections twisted behind them. Billie saw herself. Dozens of herself. *Versions* of herself.

One was older. One was hairless. One had no eyes—just skin stretched over the sockets, mouth agape.

One of them raised a hand and pressed it against the mirror.

Billie flinched.

Then *it* mouthed something.

“Let go of him.”

She shook her head violently.

“I’m seeing things. I’m not—”

Max’s voice cut her off.

“It’s not a mirror. It’s a door.”

He stepped into the pit.

The lights dimmed.

Billie followed, heart jackhammering.

As soon as her foot hit the pit’s edge, the **air shattered**. Literally.

A sound like breaking glass echoed through the chamber. Light bled down the walls in jagged lines. The mirror *screamed*—a thousand whispers in reverse.

The floor twisted. The walls *breathed*. Symbols on the ceiling *spun like clock hands*. Blood wept from the cracks.

And Max turned to her.

His eyes were gone.

Just black pits, swirling like galaxies collapsing.

“You were supposed to save me last time,” he said. But his voice was her father’s.

Then it was Mrs. Kindell’s.

Then it was her own.

The room folded inside-out.

She blinked—and they were on the school steps.

Then blinked again—and she stood alone in her bedroom, staring into her mirror.

Her mirror Billie was **laughing silently**—shoulders shaking, mouth wide, tongue long and black and *moving on its own*.

Then blink—Max in a hospital bed, old and withered, tubes in his arms.

Blink—Billie in a coffin, eyes open.

Blink—she was back in the pit.

Time was collapsing.

She felt her memories unraveling, as if pages were being torn from her mind.

“What day is it?” she asked aloud.

But her mouth didn’t move.

She had no mouth.

Only fingers. Then *too many fingers*.

She was on the ceiling.

She was inside the mirror.

She was *part of the pit*.



She screamed.

Somewhere, that sound *reversed itself*, slithered backward and played again, like a warped record.

Billie clutched her head. “STOP! STOP!”

The mirror stopped shifting.

Everything went still.

Except Max.

He was kneeling now. And his skin... was peeling.

Like paper.

Sheet by sheet, his flesh sloughed away, revealing dozens of *other* faces beneath—versions of himself, each layered like sediment.

“I’ve always been here,” he whispered. “We *always* come back.”

“No,” Billie said, voice shaking. “Not this time.”

She pulled the ritual book from her bag—she didn’t remember taking it, but there it was—and flipped to the page with the ever-moving symbol.

It looked up at her.

“Close the loop,” she whispered.

The pit shook.

The mirror convulsed.

Somewhere deep beneath them, something *woke up*.

A colossal presence stirred—vast, ancient, *hungry*. The town itself groaned like it was being split in half.

Faces—billions of them—swam behind the mirror, pressed against the surface, screaming soundlessly.

Billie chanted the words backwards. The symbols burned blue.

The room began to tear.

Max looked at her, a dozen versions of his face glitching over his skull.

“Don’t leave me again.”

“I’m sorry.”

And then she jumped into the mirror.

Darkness swallowed her.

Time shattered.

Her name unthreaded itself from her thoughts.

Then—

Breath.

She woke up gasping, in the middle of the square.

Sunlight. Clear skies.

Max beside her.

No fog.

People walked normally. Dogs barked.

It was over.

It had to be.

Max looked at her, normal again.

“You okay?”

She nodded slowly.

Then froze.

A man walked out of the hardware store.

Waved.

Tripped.

Screws fell.

Clink.

Clink.

Clink.

Chapter Four: Unraveling

The sun above was wrong.

It wasn't warm. It didn't move. It just *hung there*, frozen mid-rise, casting long shadows that never changed. Billie noticed it while sitting on the curb, knees hugged to her chest.

Max tossed pebbles into the gutter.

The same three pebbles.

Over and over.

They vanished the moment they hit the water. Didn't sink. Didn't splash.

Just... blinked out.

"I think we're still in it," Billie whispered.

Max looked at her blankly. "In what?"

She turned to him slowly.

His eyes didn't focus. His smile was too calm. Too plastic.

The skin beneath his left ear had started to sag—not from age, but like **it didn't know what shape to be anymore**.

Her stomach turned.

They went to the school again. The same children were on the steps, only now their mouths stayed open. No sound.

Just **gaping silence**.

Their eyes were bleeding.

Billie turned away quickly. Behind her, Max stared at one of the kids.

Then said, "I used to go to school here."

Billie blinked. "You still do."

Max paused. Looked down. "No... I don't think so. Not in a long time."



She felt a sharp stab of fear.

His voice didn't sound like Max anymore. Not fully.

It was like a recording, looped and slightly warped. A half-second delay. Words arriving out of sync with his lips.

They rode their bikes toward the edge of town.

Billie counted the houses. The street names.

At five blocks out, things were familiar.

At seven, the houses repeated.

At ten, the fog returned.

Dense. Oily.

Max stopped pedaling.

"There's no way out," he muttered.

Then turned to her and smiled.

His teeth were all the same size.

Exactly the same.

Billie's breath caught. "You're not—"

He tilted his head. "Not what?"

The fog behind him swirled.

A *second Max* stepped out.

Same clothes. Same face.

But this one *breathed*.

The first Max didn't.

Billie stumbled backward.

The fog swallowed both of them.

She screamed.

But only the echo came back—and it wasn't *hers*.

It was someone else screaming her scream.

She ran.

Through the alleys. Past the church with its clock tower frozen at 7:09. Past the diner that smelled of eggs and rot. Past the old graveyard where every headstone read:

BILLIE BALONEY "*Born again and again and again.*"

She fell to her knees, gasping.

Hands trembling.



She opened the ritual book again.

The pages were blank.

No, not blank. **Erasing themselves** as she watched.

Ink pulling back into the fibers. Letters unwriting. Symbols folding in on themselves like tiny black holes.

Only one line remained:

You've come farther than the others.

The sky cracked.

She heard it—not thunder. Not lightning.

Glass.

The clouds split, and behind them was not the sun—but **a massive eye**. Watching.

It blinked once.

And every building in Hollow Falls **shuddered**.

The loop was alive.

It knew she was trying to escape.

And it didn't like that.

She ran back to the antique shop.

Mrs. Kindell was there—but younger. Much younger. Her skin smooth, hair auburn.

She smiled with white teeth. Too many of them.

“Don't be scared, Billie.”

Billie backed away. “What is this?”

Mrs. Kindell stepped forward. Her shadow moved *in the wrong direction*.

“This is your home. It always has been. You're not outside the loop. You're part of it.”

“No.”

“You are the echo.”

“I remember escaping—”

“You *remember* what the loop wants you to remember.”

Billie screamed and threw the book.

It hit the floor.

Burst into **moths**.

They fluttered into the air, each with her face printed on its wings, each whispering:

“Let me out... let me out...”

She fled again.

Reality broke in chunks now. Houses melting like wax. People collapsing into puddles of reflection. Streetlights bent sideways, weeping black liquid.

Billie stumbled to her front porch.

The door was open.

She walked inside.

Everything was still.

The clock read 7:09.

Of course.

She looked in the mirror.

Her reflection was waiting. Calm.

The Billie in the glass smiled.

Then said aloud: "You never left."

Billie screamed.

Shattered the mirror with a trophy from the mantle.

The glass rained down like silver confetti.

But there was **no reflection** in the shards.

Just a deep, dark tunnel.

And a whisper from within:

"Come back to where it began."

She turned.

Max stood in the hallway.



His skin flickered. Glitched. Bones showing beneath. A thousand versions of him flashing through his shape, like a projector speeding through film frames.

He held out his hand.

His voice was hers now.

“You were supposed to save me.”

Billie ran out into the street.

The fog had turned black.

It rushed toward her like a tidal wave.

And above it all—the sky began to fold inward, pulled tight like a closing eye.

She had one chance.

One last cycle.

And she would have to go **back into the pit.**

Chapter Five: The Return to the Pit

The town peeled away like wet paper.

Billie sprinted through it, heart thudding like a war drum. The air shimmered—bending buildings into impossible angles, distorting streets into spirals, sky into a pale flesh-colored dome that *pulsed*.

Max's voice echoed behind her.

"You never saved me."

But it wasn't Max.

It was **all of them**. Every version of him. Every version of *herself*.

They whispered in unison, like a congregation of mirrors breaking:

"She came back again." "Again." "Again."

The Masonic Hall loomed at the edge of the world.

Its walls were cracked and bleeding black light. The wooden door pulsed in time with her heartbeat, as if waiting.

She stepped through.

The lobby had rotted—now filled with twitching, faceless figures wearing ceremonial robes. They didn't move. They *vibrated*, flickering in and out of focus, humming a note so low it made her bones tremble.

She ignored them.

Down the stairs. Past the walls smeared with names scratched in blood. The symbols no longer glowed—they *screamed*, etched with desperate fingernails, some still twitching.

At the bottom: the Sanctum Temporis.

The pit was wider now. Deeper.



The **mirror** had grown into a massive, rippling wall of oily light. It breathed. Faces pressed out from within, stretching the surface like skin under boiling water—some recognizable, others horrifying mutations of people she once knew.

The symbol ring had reassembled itself—burning red now, bones fused together like fused spines, twitching.

And standing at the edge of the pit...

Max.

But not the Max she knew.

This one wore a ceremonial robe. His eyes were filled with static. His mouth bled.

“You took too long,” he said. “You always do.”

Billie raised the ritual book—but it was just **flesh** now. A slab of skin etched with writing that bled when she looked at it.

She dropped it.

It screamed when it hit the ground.



Max stepped closer.

“We started this together, remember?”

“No,” she whispered.

He tilted his head. “Don’t lie. You helped write the original invocation. You were the spark. The loop isn’t *trapping* you. It’s **preserving** you.”

Billie backed away, heart racing. “That’s not true.”

“Isn’t it?” he said, and pointed at the mirror.

It shimmered.

And **showed her**.

1.

Two children—Billie and Max—standing at the edge of the pit, both smiling, both chanting as their parents looked on in horror.

Billie screamed.

“I was never there!”

Max smiled gently. “You were the first one in. You volunteered. And every loop after... you forgot. That was the price.”

The mirror cracked.

The surface *peeled open* like a slit in reality. An *eye* blinked open at its center. Enormous. Pale. Veined.

It looked down at her. Into her.

And spoke—not in words, but in memories.

Flashes of Billie chanting in ancient tongues, dancing in circles, laughing as the sky bled. Watching Hollow Falls fold into itself like an origami of horror.

She fell to her knees.

“No...”

Max knelt beside her.

“I’m not trying to hurt you. I just want you to remember. If you remember, we can end this. You can *finish what you started*.”

She trembled.

“If I finish it... will we escape?”

Max hesitated.

“No.”

He smiled. “But we’ll stop forgetting. We’ll become whole. We’ll finally be real.”

She stood.

Wobbled.

The mirror began sucking the air inward—winds pulling hair and dust and screams. Time fractured again—images flashing:

- Billie melting into a puddle of herself.
- Billie growing old in seconds.
-



- Billie floating above Hollow Falls, mouth open in eternal scream.
- Billie staring at Billie.
- Max whispering from inside the mirror: *"Save me this time."*

She stepped toward the mirror.

The bones beneath her feet *cracked*, groaning.

The eye blinked again.

And she whispered, "I didn't come back to finish it."

She reached into her jacket.

Pulled out the one thing she hadn't dared use—the **shard of the mirror** she broke in her house.

She gripped it hard, blood dripping from her palm.

"I came to break it."

Then she **plunged the shard into the center of the sigil**.

The pit exploded.

Light ruptured the walls, screaming as if the world itself was giving birth—or dying.

The mirror shattered—not in glass, but in **time**. Years, decades, centuries spilled into the room. Billie saw Hollow Falls in flames, Hollow Falls in snow, Hollow Falls abandoned, Hollow Falls floating in space—

And then:

Silence.

The eye closed.

The mirror collapsed into itself like a dying star.

And Max?

He turned to ash, whispering, “Thank you,” as he dissolved.

Billie was alone.

The pit was gone.

Only black dust remained.

She walked up the stairs in silence.

Outside, the fog had lifted. The sky was real. The sun was warm.

The clock tower chimed.

8:01 AM.

For the first time... time moved.

She stood in the center of town.

Everything felt... **alive**.

Real birds. Real breeze. Real colors.



Mrs. Kindell passed her and smiled—normal, old, wrinkled.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost, dear.”

“I think I was one,” Billie said softly.

The woman raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t we all?”

Billie turned, walked down the street, heart pounding.

Every step felt like the first.

And for the first time...

She believed she had made it out.

Chapter Six: The Echo That Remained

Two days passed.

Or at least, that's what Billie told herself.

Sunlight touched everything now. Birds chirped at the right tempo. Her clock ticked like it had a purpose. Time **moved**, like a river instead of a loop.

Max was gone. His absence sat in her chest like wet cement. She hadn't told anyone. What would she say?

That he'd flickered into a thousand selves and dissolved in a pit under the town?

No one remembered anything.

No fog. No loop. No ritual.

Not even Mrs. Kindell.

When Billie had returned to the antique shop, she found it locked. Dustless. Empty shelves. A *For Lease* sign in the window.

The world had reset without its cancer.

At school, her classmates seemed normal.

Almost too normal.

She sat through math class, tapping her pencil. The numbers on the whiteboard made sense, but only just. She caught herself writing backward at one point. Scribbling the same equation again and again in the margin:

"It was always today."

She blinked.

Erased it.

Then turned to look out the window.

Across the street, a man walked out of a hardware store.

He waved.



Tripped.

Dropped a can.

It rolled across the sidewalk.

Clink.

Clink.

Clink.

Billie stood so fast her chair scraped loud.

“Bathroom,” she blurted, and left the room without waiting.

She ran outside.

Across the street.

Stood in front of the hardware store.

It was closed.

No sign of life inside.

But the can still rolled across the sidewalk.

That night, she sat in bed, flipping through her journal.

One page—just one—was filled.

In her handwriting. But not hers.

It read:

“I broke it. I think. I hope. But I left something behind. A hair. A breath. A memory. Enough to start again.”

She slammed the book shut.

Went to the mirror.

It showed her.

Only... not.

The smile was off.

The Billie in the mirror tilted her head the wrong direction.

Raised her hand a second too late.

Then, slowly...

Mouthed something.

She leaned closer.

The mirror Billie whispered:

“We never left.”

Billie stumbled back, heart hammering.

“No,” she whispered. “No. I ended this.”

The mirror rippled.

The room **shivered**.

She turned in time to see her alarm clock blink.

7:09 AM.

Then blink again.

7:09.

Again.

7:09.

The second hand began to spin backward.

She grabbed her phone. Opened the camera.

Snapped a photo of herself in the mirror.

Looked at it.

In the photo, she was smiling.

But **not her**.

The thing in the reflection had too many teeth.

Eyes with no whites.

And behind her, in the picture, stood Max.

Grinning.

Billie screamed.

She shattered the mirror with her fist.

Blood poured down her arm.

She looked down...

...and the wound reversed itself. Skin knitting together. Blood pulling back into her veins.

She screamed again.



But it wasn't her voice.

It was **a chorus.**

Hundreds of Billie's, screaming in overlapping echoes.

The walls cracked.

The ceiling pulsed.

And outside—

Fog rolled back in.

Thick. Pale. Hungry.

It spilled over the rooftops like smoke from a god's cigarette.

Billie stood frozen.

Then turned to the window and saw—

Max.

Standing on her lawn.

Smiling.

Holding a bicycle.

He waved.



Called out:

“Hey! Ready for our ride?”

Billie backed away.

The world folded at the edges, colors draining.

Her reflection laughed silently.

And as the fog swallowed her house again, time snapped shut like a bear trap.

THE CLOCK: 7:09 AM.

Again.

Always.

Forever.

THE END.

Or...

THE BEGINNING. 🕒

It never really ends, does it?