Draw a connection with Israel. Ezekiel 5.

“Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because you are more turbulent than the nations that are all around you, and have not walked in my statutes or obeyed my rules, and have not even acted according to the rules of the nations that are all around you, therefore thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, even I, am against you. And I will execute judgments in your midst in the sight of the nations. And because of all your abominations I will do with you what I have never yet done, and the like of which I will never do again. Therefore fathers shall eat their sons in your midst, and sons shall eat their fathers. And I will execute judgments on you, and any of you who survive I will scatter to all the winds. Therefore, as I live, declares the Lord God, surely, because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your detestable things and with all your abominations, therefore I will withdraw. My eye will not spare, and I will have no pity.”

<http://bible.com/59/ezk.5.7-11.esv>

Add something where Choshek watches the town and desires evil. The first time it happens there is wind or rain or cold, some portends of evil. Then the same thing can happen again and again to the town so we know Choshek is watching.

See if there is any connection with the killed. Maybe draw some fake connections if possible. These people are the reason that his wife died.

The mayor will better give his allegiance if he is bribed or something to do with the election. He will be promised a win even though it is showing that he may lose to the new guy. The new guy is the up and coming politician that is everything that Wilson is not. Young, handsome, new to politics. When Wilson agrees, then the new guy will disappear, right before the election.

Add a connection with the man and Choshek and the temptation in the wilderness.

Jake stood on the cliffs above Vista Bay glaring at the town that took his wife, Elaine. The sun, still high in the sky but on its way down, made the town appear brighter than the dark thoughts slithering through his mind. The dark woods on the edge of the cliff would protect him for now. Anger roiled in his heart as the memories of what the town had done to him and Elaine flooded through his mind. If he had a match, he would have burnt the town with a single strike, or have ashes blacken his body as he lay in a grave.

He stood there, seething, the wind bringing tears to his eyes. The town below getting blurry. He pulled his coat closer to his chest and inhaled the cold air. Then, as if rising from the lake below, a dark cloud undulated over the land promising snow, and lots of it.

He stood miles from his abandoned car, thinking he would end it all either through exposure or a jump from this cliff. But seeing the town gave him something to live for.

The wind blew harder against him. He had to get out of it. Sure, he wanted to end it but he didn’t want to freeze—not anymore. The air had cleared his mind and the desire evaporated.

Another thought took over, revenge. He turned back toward the ditch where he’d left his car and his phone.

An hour later, his feet numb and his hands feeling like granite, he admitted he was lost. It wasn’t fair. The town owed him. He shoved his way through the underbrush and came to a fork.

He didn’t remember a fork on his meandering trek toward the cliffs. He had come the other direction and maybe the fork had been missed.

Bent forward against the blizzard, he climbed forward only to be blinded again by the blowing whiteness as he reached the top of a hill. This wasn’t right, he should have been descending. He shielded his eyes and surveyed the expanse of white and trees and prayed. He did not know to whom he was praying but the blackness in his heart asked for protection until he had achieved retribution. He held his hand before him against the frozen torrent then fell onto the cold snow.

The setting sun mocked by providing no heat, only bright reflections threatening to blind him. The black hatred within, the only thing keeping him alive. He squinted into the distance and for the first time, he saw it. A dark hole in the distance, a cave, lay ahead. He thanked whoever had answered his prayer and pressed onward.

Getting there was easier than the last hours he’d spent on his exiles trip. As he crossed into the lip of the cave, the wind outside shifted and he had to crawl with all his strength toward the back of the cave to stay out of the driving wind. He’d never seen such a blizzard.

He crawled over jagged rocks and around large boulders until he reached what he thought was the back wall of the cave. He could no longer see the snow blowing across the entrance and could not see the light. He was alone in the darkness. At least that’s how it appeared. There were sounds, like faint flutters and the billowing of large swaths of cloth. Despite the noise, he could see nothing.

As he moved deeper into the cave, he was overcome by an unnatural warmth like that of a roaring fire. He could almost hear the flames devouring the wood but there was no light ahead.

He felt his way along the wall and sat on the bare rock. The rock was cold despite the suffocating heat. The hairs on the back of his neck and along his arms stood on end. His heart beat faster and the cold sense of dread washed over him. He was alone he was about to freeze to death. Somehow, he remembered that people felt warmth right before freezing to death, sometimes stripping down to nothing and curling up in a ball before the end. He closed his eyes, prayed into the darkness once more, and slept, accepting the cold hand of death.

He woke, eyes wide, to something else. It was as if another person sat in the darkness with him. He could feel eyes appraising him, waiting to see his true intent.

“Hello. Is there anyone there?” There was no answer but an inhale and exhale in the distance that could have been the wind. “I’m just here until the storm blows through.”

The only response was the return of his voice as it bounced off some far away wall. He called again, this time with more timbre, but still no one answered. Maybe this was the last dream before death. Maybe the worst was over.

He hunkered down, waiting to see the sunlight break through the darkness at the mouth of the cave. His stomach rumbled for the first time in a few days. He’d not eaten in at least three days. Then, something shifted in the breeze blowing through the cave and he caught a scent like nothing he’d smelled before. The smell was so inviting that it almost drew him into the darkness. Someone *was* here, and they were cooking.

He felt his way along the wall. He brushed his hand across his mouth to stem the onrush of drool from his slackening mouth. The smell was too tantalizing to pass up.

Jake came around a slight bend in the wall of the cave and stopped. There was a roaring fire and across the top of the fire, a spit, with a chunk of meat, dripping and smoking. But there was no one around. Overcome with hunger, he rushed to the spit, hoping to steal enough meat before the owner returned. He reached forward.

The sound of a shoe scraping across the pebble-strewn ground stopped him. He looked up.

A man dressed in white appeared before him. His hair was golden but his eyes were dark. He had the scant trace of a smile that showed on his face but not in his eyes. When he spoke, the man’s voice sounded as if he had a legion behind him, repeating his words instead of just this one man. “Sit up friend.” He reached down to help Jake stand. “What is your name?”

He trembled but managed to squeak out, “Jake.”

“Very nice to meet you, Jake. Please, sit, join me. You look as though you’ve burned yourself.”

Jake blinked and looked down at his arm, his shirt had been destroyed and the skin underneath was hairless and red. He didn’t remember burning his arm at all.

Somewhere within his mind, Jake heard, “Call me Choshek.” Jake shook his head. He shouldn’t be hearing things like that. Deep within he felt a cool hand touch his soul and he ignored the thought. Everything was normal. “I don’t remember doing it.”

Jake leaned back, unable to speak. His face grew hotter as if the flames were now burning not just his arm but his beard.

“Would you like to sit with me and eat? There’s plenty and I have no one to share it.” Again, the voice scraped and clawed into Jake’s head, but it also comforted. Something in the voice told him it would be okay. He would be safe.

“That would be great. I haven’t eaten a good meal in days.”

Choshek gestured to a rock near enough to the fire to still bring warmth but not close enough to be burnt, “Sit. The wind won’t be stopping anytime soon.”

Jake crawled to the flat topped rock and sat.

“What brings you to this cave? Are you lost?”

“Lost enough never to be found again.”

Choshek brought his hand to his chin and rubbed it. “Such a predicament.”

Jake knew he should ask, but fear held him tight. “And you?”

“I roam the earth, no place to call my home. You could call me a nomad.”

Jake wrinkled his brow at this statement. It was odd, but it didn’t seem completely out of place. “I kinda feel the same way.”

Choshek reached across to the meat and turned it, the flames licking his hands and clothes but not burning him. “This will be done soon.”

When the meat was pulled from the spit, Jake ate greedily. He devoured the flesh as if he’d never eat again. The sweet meat was delicious; he couldn’t help himself.

Jake looked up from his greasy hands and into the dark eyes of the man sitting across from him. Choshek hadn’t eaten a bite. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. “I’ve never tasted something so good. I’m sorry for digging right in. Why aren’t you eating?”

The dark-eyed man smiled slightly. “I didn’t cook this for me. It was for you. More?”

Jake dragged his arm across his mouth. The feeling of burnt skin around his mouth not hurting at the moment. “Me? How did you --”

“I heard you and I provided for you.”

“You heard me what?”

“You asked for help, and here I am. I will help you. In return, you help me.”

Jake stood. The hairs at the base of his skull stood on end. “I didn’t ask anyone for help.”

Choshek nodded. “Oh, but you did and I heard you.”

“Are you--God?”

He laughed, his cloak dancing under the movement. “God?” He spat into the fire as if the word had a foul taste. “No, I’m not Him.” Jake heard the sizzle. “I go by many names. We can discuss that later.”

Jake swallowed, something caught in his throat.

Choshek nodded again. “Eat. We have a bargain to strike.”

Jake bowed back over his meal and devoured the meat. If he’d been able to see it, he would have been reminded of wild dogs gnawing at a fresh kill. It was as if the food was not meeting his stomach. He ate more and more until the whole chunk of meat was gone. When he finished, he wiped his hand across his mouth, which no longer hurt, one last time. “Where did this meat come from? I’ve never had anything like it.”

“No, of course not. You haven’t been worthy to eat it before. You may never taste it again, unless…” Choshek trailed off, his eyes only reflecting the angry red of the fire.

Jake leaned forward. He needed more of this delicious meat again. The anticipation of that next meal made his mouth water. “Unless?”

“Unless we strike a deal, you will never taste anything again. But work with me, and you and I will feast like the kings we were meant to be.”

Jake swallowed the drool and shook his head. “I was never meant to be a king.”

“But you were, and you will be. Do we have a deal?”

“I don’t know the terms.”

“If you did, you may not to move forward. If you trust me, you won’t regret it. In fact, food like this will become vile to you, everyday slop. You’ll eat better, have all the wealth you could ever desire and much, much more.” Choshek stuck out his hand to help Jake stand. “Do we have a deal?”

Jake examined the hand thrust toward him. The skin was hairless, smooth, if not a little red from the heat of the flames. It looked as though it was healing from a severe burn. He reached for it and felt warmth emanating from the hand, he shook the notion from his mind, it was the fire, not the hand that brought the sense of warmth. Jake grasped Choshek’s hand and stood. He looked the man, right into the darkest region of his eyes and nodded. “We do.”

The cave filled with brightness as if the fire exploded into a raging conflagration and Jake was sure he could hear screams. He felt nothing, sensed nothing but could only see the burning light from the fire.

Then there was darkness. The fire gone and his mind came back to him. His body was ragged as if he’d traveled leagues and years. Like he’d been dragged over miles of burning coals and through the rock itself. His throat was raw as if he had screamed for hours while gargling shards of glass. The stench of burnt flesh and singed hair mingled in the air. When Jake looked down, he saw a pile of ashes encircling his feet. He was naked.

He coughed once, his breath billowing out in the cold, and rubbed his hands against his arms, trying to bring warmth back into his body but the cave had sapped it from him. The fire was gone. Where it had been, lay nothing but black and cold ashes and a long bone.

It hadn’t been a dream, but where was the fire? Where was Choshek?

Before the question left his mind, he heard, “I will surface when needed. I am not gone.”

Jake twisted around, looking into the deep recesses of the cave and he could see everything. No dark corner hid secrets. He could see a rat gnawing on a chunk of the food near a small crack in the stone. The darkness was as bright as day. He searched for the light source but there was none.

He turned back to his empty fire ring and picked up the bone. The meat had been stripped from it and licked clean. He knew he’d done that, but didn’t remember the bone. He tossed it aside and stepped toward the mouth of the cave. He stared into what should have been darkness above him and saw a few bats huddled together. He watched them as he walked and tripped over something. When he looked down, he saw a man lying there. He was not moving, and with good reason. His leg was gone but there was no blood. Only a charred stump remained.

The man opened his eyes and screamed. “No, leave me alone. Don’t cut me again.”

Jake stepped over the man but not before grabbing the man’s coat that lay nearby. He pulled it on and felt warmth once more, if only for a moment.

Jake ambled to the opening of the cave and as he got closer, the brightness bleeding in was overwhelming. He had to shield his eyes as if he stood next to the sun. He stepped closer. The wind had died down and the way was clear but when he stepped out into the sun, he jumped back in pain. His eyes burned. He’d been in the dark cave for too long. He collapsed into the darkness and backed away from the entrance, scooting from the light and heat. He turned his back on the light and did not stop crawling away until the brightness was out of sight.

As he rounded the corner, the man who he’d left screaming in the darkness was farther away from the burnt ring of stone and ashes. Somewhere in the pile of ashes lay Jakes melted wallet and burned clothes. But right now, that didn’t matter. The man needed his attention.

The one legged man was struggling to stand but Jake put his hand out and stopped him. The man crumpled back onto the floor of the cave and didn’t move. Jake watched the slow rise and fall of his chest but the man still did not stir.

For something to do, Jake slid his hands around the man’s throat and squeezed hard. A crack echoed through the darkness. Jake felt a rush like never before slide over him. He dropped the man from his grip and the man fell, limp onto the ground.

Jake paced the small space, seeing more and more in the darkness. The ring of rocks, the pale thigh bone. The drippings of bat guano. There were even hints that people had been here before, a melted down candle, a glass bottle lay in a crag. His senses were coming to life. He felt his strength growing. He heard every sound made by every moth, bat, and rat living in the cave.

Then Jake woke in his bed at home. This was such an odd dream because it was so vivid, so real. The dream was first person. He could taste the meat, he could see in the dark. He had felt the flames on his face as his clothes burned off.

The only thing that didn’t feel right was himself. He didn’t feel like Jake. To him, it felt like Jake didn’t exist anymore, or that Jake was in his head, but pushed to the side by someone or something much stronger.

Jake rolled over to the empty side of the bed and placed his hand where the indentation of his wife’s body should have been and the rage burned within him again.

A voice came out of the darkness, “You will have your revenge.”

\*

The dog would not stop barking. No matter how many times Silas Motley leaned out the window and yelled at him, he would not shut up. He threw empty beer cans at the dog and when he had hit it in the past, the dog would usually quiet down.

Tonight, the stupid dog wouldn't take the hint. He’d have to go outside and teach him a lesson.

The dog quieted down for a second as Silas was about to stand up so he settled back into the easy chair and turned the television up some more. He cracked another beer and chugged it. This was his fifth or sixth in an hour and he was just starting to feel the effects of a good buzz.

He was finally able to relax after a hard day down at the shop. The single lamp in the corner of the room and the blue light from the flickering television were the only things that illuminated the room. This low light situation allowed him to relax. On most nights.

Then the stupid dog started barking again like a cat was sitting in his water bowl and simultaneously eating his food. The barking got louder and more frantic.

Silas pushed himself off the chair and went to the window. The barking grew louder. He opened the window and picked up another empty. He cursed. Then yelled, “Shut up you stupid dog.” Then tossed the empty into the back yard.

The can sailed through the air and clanked off the roof of the doghouse. He couldn't see the dog but knew he was still in the yard because he’d turned the shock collar up all the way; there was no way that dog was escaping again. The dog immediately went quite.

Then he started yelping like his tail was being twisted into a pencil sharpener.

Then the dog was silent as if someone clicked a switch.

Silas pushed the window back down and turned off the light so he could see into the dark yard. The bright moon only lit up a small portion of his property because the rest of was shrouded in the shade from the nearby trees.

The light from the television still cast too much of a glare on his window so he clicked that off and then squinted into the darkness. As his eyes adjusted, he could make out something moving in the shadow but couldn’t say what it was.

Silas slid the sliding glass door open and stepped out onto the cold, concrete step. He wished he’d put on socks before he came out here, but he wasn't going far. He’d teach the dog a lesson, maybe drag him inside and throw him in the basement for a few hours. And if that dog made a mess down there--

The dog was right ahead. He could see its breath coming in clouds as it heaved in huge gulps of air.

Sometimes the dog was too dumb for its own good. Probably saw a deer and wanted the countryside to know he was protecting those nearby. Maybe he wanted to chase it down, run through the woods with a pack.

Silas stepped down into the yard. The moon went behind a cloud and the yard darkened. The grass felt colder under his feet than the concrete had been. The ground wasn’t quite hard yet, but the mid-fall freeze would come soon. It always did.

A cold wind blew through his light shirt. He should have grabbed a coat.

He chugged the last of the beer he was carrying and tossed it at the dog. In the dark, he could see the outline of the animal, but something was off. His fur was matted and it gnawing on something on the ground.

Silas heard a growl, low and throaty, something Silas had not heard the dog do in a long time. He’d long since broken the dog from growling at him.

Something wasn’t right. He stepped closer to the dog house. Steam was rising from the thing the dumb mutt was eating. If he’d killed another cat, he’d have to put the dog down.

“What’er you into?”

The dog stopped eating and turned toward Silas. Now, something was really off. The dog didn’t seem to have ears. It was a trick of the light, that’s all. The moon would come out from behind the cloud and he would see that everything was right.

The dog’s eyes caught the light from the moon and glowed red. Silas’s slowed brain registered it but didn’t have the processing power to assess what this meant.

He stepped closer and picked up a large stick from the kindling pile. The dog might be quite now, but it still needed a lesson.

The dog went back to eating. The sloppy, smacking made Silas angrier. He hadn’t given the dog anything worthy of smacking his lips as he ate.

Silas stepped slowly and then felt something dig into the pad of his right foot. He doubled over and fell onto the cold grass. He brought his foot up to his knees. His foot was soaked and hot. Something black or brown stuck out of the bottom of his foot.

The cloud cover opened for a moment with enough time for Silas to see the sliver of glass sticking out of his foot. He grabbed it with thumb and forefinger and pulled.

That stupid dog had made him step on a piece of glass. Now he was bleeding everywhere. “I hope you’re happy, you dumb mutt.”

Silas looked over to where the dog was eating the mess of a meal and saw now that the dog’s skin looked shiny, red. He squinted. It didn’t have fur. The dog was hairless.

The dog, not dog, was also staring right at him. Silas, despite the coldness and the blood gushing from his foot, slumped his shoulders and stared straight ahead. He only felt the most overwhelming calm rush over him.

He lay down in the grass, staring up at the stars that had come out despite the cloudy night. He could feel the thing he was sure was not his dog coming toward him because in the last movement of the clouds, he’d seen the mangled remains of his dog, a chunk taken from his side. This thing had been eating his dog.

He tried to swing the stick but his arm wouldn’t cooperate. Then he felt warmth across his toes. The thing that wasn’t his dog was sniffing his toes. Something cold moved across the cut. A tongue. But they were supposed to be warm.

And then it was warm. Incredibly warm. His whole body was enveloped in a warmth that he hadn’t experienced since going to Cancun on Spring Break so many years ago.

Now it was as if he was on fire. Then he realized he was screaming. Screaming and threatening to spring a cord in his voice box.

And then, the thing tore out his throat. And everything went black.

\*

Pastor Denny put his fork down next to his plate and picked up the napkin to wipe the bacon grease from his chin. He patted his ample stomach in satisfaction of his most recent meal. Another one he wouldn’t be paying for. He had a few too many secrets on the owner. One was a recent infidelity that Pastor Denny had come across while conducting a little counseling of his own at the Lake Vista Grand Motel at the edge of town.

That little piece of information would not see the light of day as long as his hash browns were perfectly crispy and the bacon done just enough, not too chewy and not too crispy. Besides, as a man of the cloth, he didn't always make a lot of money. He would have to get what he can from those willing, or too stupid, to give it away.

When he pushed the plate aside, Marleen, the waitress, picked up the plate without a sound. Pastor Denny watched her walk away with a slight smile touching his mouth. Marleen may be a little old for his normal taste, but she sure knew how to walk away.

Pastor Denny fed cream and sugar into his coffee cup. Marleen would be back soon with the pot. He reached across the table for another sugar packet and looked up into the eyes of one of his summer deacons.

The man would serve on the deacon board during the summer weekends when he was in Lake Grand Vista at his cabin. Then he'd go back to city living during the rest of the year. Pastor Denny didn’t have any information on this man, he knew the man loved his wife, whom he recently lost, and not much more.

He didn’t need to know much about the man because of his involvement with the church. The Sunday’s that this man was a deacon sometimes involved a little bit of skimming off the top of the offering plate. But that was okay, the man, Jake was it?, always paid his tithes on time.

Pastor Denny sat there, looking the man in the eyes, and said nothing. It wasn’t until Marleen had filled his cup with coffee again that he felt it necessary to speak.

“And what can I do for you?” Pastor Denny was The Godfather holding council at the table. The only thing he lacked was the muscle behind him.

“I’ve been having terrible thoughts pastor.”

Pastor Denny smirked and watched as Marleen bent over a table, cleaning dishes off. “Don't we all.”

The man turned his head toward the direction that Pastor Denny stared then faced the pastor again. “This is more than that. I’m having dark thoughts.”

Pastor Denny nodded. “I understand. You’ve lost your wife. Anyone would have dark thoughts in your situation.”

The man said something but Pastor Denny either didn’t hear or didn’t bother to pay attention as he waved at a parishioner as they walked out the diner door.

“So what do you suggest?”

He looked back at the man. “I suggest that you follow your heart. The heart knows what it wants and it isn’t usually wrong.” He patted the man’s hand and when he did, Pastor Denny felt a coldness in the man’s hands that was not natural.

The man jerked his hand away. “That's all?”

Pastor Denny smiled and nodded. “The key to happiness is to follow your desires.” He leaned forward and put his hand at the side of his mouth, speaking conspiratorially. “The man upstairs wouldn't want you to be unhappy now would he?”

“But this isn’t a matter of happiness.”

Pastor Denny leaned back in the booth and took a sip of the slightly-cooled coffee. He smacked his lips at the taste. “There is only so much council I can offer. If you want to, you can find the answer within. It is always there.” Such platitudes rang hollow but it was all he could muster. “Now if there isn't anything else, I have a meeting with the mayor.”

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The man shook his head. “No, nothing else.” He pushed himself out of the seat and headed to his car. The whole way there he could do nothing but taste the sweet meat that Choshek had let him taste. Darkness clouded his mind but with the consent of Pastor Denny, he could feed the darkness in his soul without fear of repercussions.

He sat in his car and looked at his watch, it was time to get back home. It was a long drive and the man was a little worried that the time he spent with the pastor was less than fruitful. He never felt he got the man’s complete attention. But he did get the blessing of his summer pastor. So, these thoughts couldn’t be all that bad. Maybe he would feed on them this week.

\*

The water lapped on the shoreline of the Lake Grand Vista. The water met the sandy shore at some places, small groves of trees and marsh grass in others. In the places where the sand edged the lake, small beach shops popped up like little zits brimming with cheaply made beach toys and Lake Grand Vista memorabilia.

The summer season was winding down with Labor Day galloping toward the tourist spots like a colt let off the lead and into the pasture.

Lake Grand Vista was large enough to float a small lake ferry that ran three-hour lake tours featuring dinner and dancing. No self-respecting townie would be caught dead on the tour boat before September. These same townies were not too proud to dance the hours away on board during the late summer and early fall when the tours ceased and the town was reclaimed by the residents.

Joan held onto the slack leash as she walked her rescue mutt over the sandy beach. During the summer, dogs were strictly forbidden to even set foot upon the sand for fear they would ruin the small stretches of crystal-white grit that passed for sand in this corner of the state. The dog was connected to the leash simply to fulfill the town law but when the sun set a little more, the dog would be loosed and he would be free to romp in the sand and chase the waves as they came in.

Joan put her hand over her eyes to shield the light from a nearby ice cream shop with a lone server reading a book by the window, to see if the tour boat was out tonight or if it was taking a day or two off before the party season began. She could not see the dark silhouette contrasting against the trees on the far shore. She looked around, leaned down, and unclipped the leash from her dog’s collar.

Immediately, the dog knelt down, front legs splayed in play, and then bolted toward the water. The dog splashed and barked as the water came in and went out in its steady motion. Joan sat on one of the rental chairs without fear of having to pay for an hour if caught by Rusty, the guy in charge of the rental properties around here. He was also in charge of the beach rentals.

Rusty sort of had a crush on Joan and Joan couldn’t say that the feeling was not mutual. Despite any of that, she would work her feminine charms and coerce Rusty into allowing her to sit on the chair until the dog was done playing.

Joan laid back and looked up at the darkening sky. The pinpricks of the stars overhead were few but in an hour or so, the sky would be a light show of such beauty that no one could deny that God sometimes made beautiful things just because he could. She let her hand fall into the sand and traced her fingertips along the ground. And then she realized, she couldn’t hear her dog any longer.

She sat up and her vision was darkened as the blood rushed to her head. She shook her head and blinked quickly, clearing her eyes. The dog was gone.

She pushed herself off the seat and ran the few steps down to the shore. There was just enough light to see almost everything, but the way the light bent at this time of night, mixed with the choppiness of the water, it was hard to make out any shapes in the water. She put her hands to her mouth and called for the dog.

The dog didn’t respond and now Joan frantically searched the shore for any sign of the black and tan dog. She stopped to listen and thought she saw movement down the shore, away from the ice cream shop. She didn’t have much to do that night and wouldn’t rest until the dog was home safe so she took off down the shoreline toward the movement.

As she got closer to the marsh grass, she stopped and waited. Hoping to catch another glimpse of movement so she could make headway in that direction but saw nothing. She took a tentative step into the dark edge of the trees and grass and raised her hand to call for the dog again, when everything went black. She didn’t even have time to scream.

\*

Rusty thought he saw Joan walking down toward the shore with her dog. He was hoping to be able to go outside and give her a hard time about sitting on the rental chairs for free but when he thought about starting the conversation his hands started to sweat. Besides, a customer had walked in and was returning the key to their cabin.

“Have a great fall. We hope to see you next year,” Rusty said as the tourist finally walked away. Rusty was happy for the job but immensely happier when the tourists were gone and he could have a little time to himself. He clicked off the light to the rental office, who cares if it was five minutes early, and walked down toward the water.

He lingered next to the chair that he thought he had seen Joan using and saw the dog leash laying in the sand. Rusty thanked God for a legitimate reason to strike up a conversation but would have to go grab a plastic bag from the office because of his terrible allergies.

As he contemplated running back to the office or sitting and waiting for Joan to return, a man emerged from the darkness in the distance and walked toward the Grand Vista Hotel across the street. Rusty stared at him, watching the way the man carried himself. The man seemed to be hunched over, a great weight on his shoulders, but the man didn’t seem to have anything on his back.

Rusty dismissed it as a man coming in from sitting on the shore, unable to tolerate the mosquitos any longer. But something nagged at Rusty, something about the way the man loped. Something wasn’t right but for some reason Rusty didn’t think more of it. Instead he pictured the conversation he and Joan would have about the leash and the dog. He just hoped he wouldn’t have to pet the dog. The allergy medicine he was currently on wasn’t quite strong enough for him to take much contact with the thing.

He ran back to grab a plastic bag and as he was digging through his drawer, something else came to him. What if someone else found the leash and returned it to Joan. He would have missed out. Yeah, that sounded a little possessive but he was so love struck that he didn’t know of any other way to have a conversation with her rather than having something planned out. If she went off his pre-ordained script, he stumbled and mumbled until his resolve to talk to her petered off or she walked away.

As he dug through the drawers, the thought of the man lumbering out of the darkness kept coming back to him. He tried to push the thought away and focus on finding a bag but it nagged. The man was sort of like a wisp out of the night and then bled into the night once more. Rusty got chills. What if he’d done something to Joan? What if she was down there, bleeding, or worse, dead?

Before he knew it, Rusty was down at the edge of the marsh, panting hard from the sprint to the trees. But there was nothing there. Not even a depression where the man had walked through. Rusty called for Joan but got no answer.

He had imagined himself the hero, saving Joan, freeing her from the clutches of death. The cheering and hails as hero that were to follow. Maybe he and Joan would bond over the rescue, maybe even get married. How could she resist her savior?

He called once more, but didn’t hear any response. He lumbered back to the rental chair and plopped down. The plastic bag still in hand. He knelt over, the bag inside out over his hand and he picked up the leash as if it were dog droppings and he was being the contentious dog owner.

He sat there for a moment, he’d missed his chance. He stared out over the dark water. The Lake Grand Vista night cruise was underway. The tinny music echoed off the water, a peal of laughter or something similar occasionally drifted his way. At least he had the leash, at least there was something to talk about.

He stood up and turned toward the office. He’d left the door open but that didn’t seem right. When had run out, he was sure he’d heard the door slam shut behind him. He was almost positive. But now the door stood open, the darkness beyond a little off-putting after seeing that man lope through the darkness.

He gathered his resolve, pushed the door open the rest of the way and clicked the light on. There was a single wet footprint in the middle of the doorway. Someone had come in. Or had they? That was when he heard it. There was a whimper, or something coming from the far corner of the room.

Rusty picked up the granite nameplate from Susan’s desk and cocked it over his head, ready to strike at whomever was inside.

“I have a weapon. I’m not afraid to use it.”

There was another whimper and Rusty saw the dog cowering in the corner. Its fur was matted down with something dark or was it just wet. Surely it was just water. But as Rusty stepped closer the dog started to bark. It barked and barked as if a whole fleet of mailmen were standing just behind Rusty.

Rusty turned, just to be sure there was no one behind him, and then turned back to the dog. It was Joan’s dog. Something was going right. Someone was watching for him.

He knelt on the floor, unsure how to approach the dog. He’d read somewhere that rushing up to a frightened dog could get him attacked but the dog knew him. Surely he’d be okay. Rusty got a little closer and put his hand out for the dog to sniff at it. Right now, he didn’t know how he’d get the dog home, much less across town to where Joan lived, but he’d do something.

Now, as he was closer, he could see that it wasn’t water, was it mud? There was something matting the fur down. Rusty reached out and the dog snapped at him but as he did, the dog left a dark maroon streak on the wall behind him. Rusty stopped and backed away. He backed all the way to the door, grabbed the flashlight from Susan’s desk, and pulled the door shut. He didn’t want the dog getting out and he didn’t want anyone else getting in. He locked the door and ran back toward the shore.

He clicked the light on and tentatively made his way back to the marsh. The light was weak but its yellow glow was just strong enough that he could see enough contrast in the colors to be able to tell what was around him.

He stood there at the edge of the marsh, shone the light into the darkness and saw nothing. The grass was clean, the brush, unbroken. If there was something in there, someone in there, Joan’s body, he didn’t want to mess with the crime scene.

On the other hand, if he didn’t act, he could stop it from being a scene of the death and it would be just a scene of the crime. Maybe a place that he and Joan could come back to, just to remember.

He stepped over the front row of the small brush and before he planted his feet into the soft grass, he looked over toward the passing Lake Grand Vista tour boat. The party not quite fully underway as some people still hung out on deck.

Then he was in the marsh, the light splaying back and forth over the grass and leaves. As the darkness sucked him in, he stood there wondering if this was just his imagination. The dog could have rolled around in some garbage, gotten some ketchup on him or something and was scared because it was stuck in a foreign place.

Then, from across the water, a scream echoed. Rusty almost dropped the flashlight and the metal end landed on his toe. Rusty bit his lip and stifled a curse. Now there was more commotion coming from the cruise ship. Rusty ran back to the sand and saw the hulking figure of the tour boat stopped offshore. The music had stopped and there were bright searchlights shining over the dark water.

A girl was leaning over the edge and in the bright lights of the spotlights Rusty could make out a dark streak of vomit down the side of the boat.

\*

Crystal stood outside on the deck of the Lake Grand Vista tour boat. The music was loud, people were dancing and having a good time. She had been having a great time at the bachelorette party, even though it wasn’t hers. Greg wasn’t ready to set a date and she wasn’t going to push him. Then her thoughts stopped. That was because she saw Greg through the Plexiglas window dancing with his old friend Cynthia. That wouldn't have been such a big deal if Greg had not told Crystal that he was going out drinking with the guys. It also proved, once again, that Greg never listened to her. She'd told him at least three times that the bachelorette party was on the boat and even though he was watching a basketball game the last time she reminded him, she was certain he was paying attention because he'd said, “Yeah, you told me that already.”

So now Crystal was outside waiting for the right time to go in there and throw a drink in his face and make a big deal about throwing her engagement ring at him. If she played it right she might make it look like she was going home with someone else tonight just to tick Greg off.

She looked over the railing, watching the water pass by, watching the waves as they traveled to shore. It calmed her but also gave her a little resolve. She was going to do something.

She had an idea she’d take her ring off and put it in her purse then pretend to take it off and throw a nickel or quarter, whichever she could find, out into the water. She could sell the ring later, maybe make a down payment on a car or something. As long as the cheapskate didn't buy a cubic zirconia and tell her it was real.

She pushed herself from the railing and was making a move to pull the engagement ring off when she saw what looked like driftwood wearing a shirt out of the corner of her eye. She glanced back at it and saw the soaked through shirt dangling from the torso of a body floating in the water. The body looked like it had been attacked by a shark but that was impossible. Not in the lake.

Before she knew it, she was screaming. She recognized that shirt. It was her sister’s. All thoughts of grand gestures were thrown out. All thoughts stopped. Soon she realized the music had stopped, a spotlight shown down into the water and she was vomiting over the side.

The only thing that kept her from falling over the side was the railing. She might have drown otherwise.

\*

The man blinked and focused on the carpet as if it were the first time he'd seen it. He didn't remember sitting down on the bed and he certainly didn’t remember checking into this hotel. He leaned over to the bedside table. What hotel was it? It was fairly nice, far out of his price range. If his wife found out he'd checked in here. Then it hit him again. She was gone. She never made it home that night. He'd had to identify her body by confirming a location of a mole on her arm.

He stared at the pad of paper with the gold emblem naming the hotel as the Grand Vista Hotel. He couldn’t afford to be here. He stood up and saw that he'd left a red smear in the shape of his hand on the white bedspread. He ran to the bathroom and ran water in the sink. He grabbed a washcloth from the towel rack and ran cold water over it. The water in the basin ran red as the water splashed over his hands.

He looked up and stared into his eyes. Something was off about his face. It felt stretched. He leaned closer to the mirror and could see little flecks of black across his face. It looked like a painter had flung a paintbrush at him and splatter paint across his face. He could deal with that later.

Back in the bedroom, he was on his knees in front of the bed and was dabbing at the handprint, careful not to press the smear it into the bedspread. When that didn’t work, he yanked the bedspread off the bed, dislodging the perfectly tucked sheets in the process, and dragged the bedspread to the bathroom. There he ran cold water over the smear, dabbed it with soap then threw the thing into the tub to let it sit for a few minutes.

He grabbed the ice bucket and stepped out of the room. Before the door shut behind him he felt his pockets for the key, patted his shirt, he didn’t have it. There was no time to look for the key so he lodged the door open with a copy of the morning newspaper and ran down the hall.

The ice made such a clatter in the bucket that he could imagine the inhabitants of the two adjacent rooms sitting up in bed, looking around for the source of the racket.

He stepped back into the hall and looked left, then right, before heading down the hall back toward the room. Before entering, he checked to see if he was followed again and pushed the door open. Granted, there was nothing more suspicious than a man looking to see if he's being watched. But for some reason he felt guilty, he just didn’t know why.

He closed, then locked the door, thought about that for a second, then unlocked the door and to put the Do Not Disturb hanger on the outside doorknob but saw it was already hanging there.

He slid his shoes off, grateful now that he thought to check, that he was not tracking footprints, bloody or otherwise through the hotel. Even if no one saw him walking down the hall, any bellboy on his first day could see that bloody footprints up on the fifth floor were not on the proper décor list.

In the bathtub, he used a piece of ice and ran it back and forth over the smear. The cold and the water actually lightened the blood but didn’t clean it completely. He'd just have to tell the maid that he'd gotten a nosebleed or something. He'd been too embarrassed to call down in the middle of the night so he tried to clean it himself. Surely they'd seen much worse.

After washing his face off, he felt like he could maybe get some sleep if he took a shower. He carefully took his clothes off, laid them in a pile, and got under the hot stream. The water seemed to steal all his energy and it was all he could do to stand while the hot water buffeted his back.

Back in the room he went to the curtain to get some better bearings of where exactly he was when bright daylight flooded into the room. So, he'd lost at least a night. How much more time did he miss?

He pulled the curtains shut again and the room fell into relative darkness. He opened one of the closet doors to see if he'd thought to bring a suitcase in his blackout but the only thing he found was a dark blue trench coat, splattered with something that looked like blood. He slammed the door, stumbled back and collapsed onto the bed.

\*

Jeremy was playing soldiers with his brother. They had gone back and forth as to who would be the bad guys and currently Jeremy was the good guys. That meant that he got the better hiding spots and Theo was relegated to hiding in bushes and in trees.

Today, their playing had taken them near the lake, they were not to go in without their parents but they were sometimes allowed to play on the rock outcroppings along the shore. Even though both could swim, if they came back wet both of them would get in trouble because their parents knew that when Theo did something, Jeremy either instigated or caused it and if Jeremy broke a rule, it was because Theo was involved.

Jeremy had read in a book somewhere that there were some soldiers from Japan that were on some islands in the middle of the Pacific and they didn’t know the war was over. They didn’t want to surrender because they didn’t think that Japan would ever surrender. Jeremy imagined them living in caves, eating wild animals, and foraging for berries. Even though the Japanese had been enemies, Jeremy felt that doing something like that had showed guts.

So the plan today, at least for Jeremy was to find a good hiding spot in one of the caves that was near their house. The cave didn’t have to be deep because he couldn’t imagine going deep into the cave where there was no light. He didn’t want to admit it, but he was still afraid of the dark.

He thought he knew the perfect cave, it was close enough to their battle ground that it was still fair territory. Sure Theo would have to look a little harder and from his hiding spot in the cave he could pretend that the hiding spot was the perfect place to shoot from. He'd jump out, yell bang and win the day again.

As he listened for the rustle of leaves that showed that Theo was looking for his hiding spot far off, Jeremy quietly made his way around the stand of trees and toward the rocks a few yards away. There, he could see the perfect cave for hiding. The entrance was blocked with a large stone, at least it looked that way. There was sort of an entrance that he could shimmy into and he would be perfectly hidden.

When he was within the darkness of the cave, the strangest thing happened, he thought he saw a light near the back of the cave. Not a flickering light of a fire but the steady light of an electric lamp or another opening.

He and Theo had explored this cave before so he knew there wasn’t another opening, but there had been a few storms since they'd played in this part of the woods. Maybe the cave roof had fallen in. It would be a perfect place to lie in wait and pounce as if coming from underground.

Jeremy pushed his fear of the dark aside and stepped away from the entrance and toward the light in the back. As he did, Jeremy did not notice that the front entrance was getting smaller so the light deeper within the cave seemed brighter.

He pushed through the darkness as if he were swimming in a pool of blackness and came around a corner. The light was no closer and in fact, did not seem that much brighter either. Then the darkness got to him. His heart raced. His skin broke out in gooseflesh, and his eyes grew wide. He turned his head from side to side and spun around, the entrance was nowhere in site. He turned toward where he thought the opening was and rammed into the cold, hard, damp cave wall.

Stars flashed before his eyes in brilliant red and green.He blinked hard and crawled on his hands and knees, feeling his way toward the front. If he could just feel along the wall, he could see the opening. It was right around the corner, he knew. But when he got around the corner, there was only more darkness.

Jeremy screamed. Yelling for Theo but Theo was probably still out there hiding in the woods waiting for Jeremy to get bored of his hiding spot and try to ambush him. Jeremy sat down on the jagged ground and looked toward the light again. It had to lead outside. There couldn’t be any electricity running through here. It didn’t make sense for it.

"Jeremy." A soft voice called from somewhere in the darkness.

"Theo? I'm lost in this cave. Go get Mom."

The wind blew through the cave and there was a rasping sound. "I'm not Theo."

"Who's there?"

"Come to the light. I'm right here."

Jeremy pushed himself off the cold ground and stepped away from the light. Something inside his head warned him that what the darkness told him was not safe to believe. But there was nowhere else t go and he could fee his anxiety rising. Even if he knew nothing about rising blood pressure or the meaning behind the chills that were rising up the back of his neck, he knew enough to trust the instinct that was telling him to run. But where?

He closed his eyes and turned toward where he knew the entrance was supposed to be. He held his hands out before him and started to shuffle toward the rock. He would press his feet forward and then feel around with his hands to make sure it was safe to go ahead.

The voice called again, and this time it felt like it was right behind him. He could feel the warmth of breath and could almost smell a stench of rot.

He took another step forward, this one more certain. He wasn't going to get caught in here. The rock couldn't have locked him out, it wasn't possible.

Then as he slid his leg forward, feeling for the next step, he came to a wide open space. Some sort of pit that wasn't there when he entered the cave. Unless he'd somehow taken a wrong turn but that wasn't possible. He and Theo had explored these caves, they weren't deep, there wasn't much to them.

Something had changed this cave.

“I did it.” The voice said again.

“Did what?”

The hairs at the back of his neck that weren't quite long enough to be anything but stubble stood upright on his neck.

“I changed the cave.” The voice changed timbre and went deeper. Jeremy no longer heard the voice only with his ears. He could hear it inside his head. “Now come here.”

Jeremy shivered as if in the middle of a burning fever. He knelt down and felt along the edge of the hole. He couldn’t tell how deep it was, he couldn’t tell how far across it went so he scooted along the edge with one hand firmly on the ground and one hand skirting the edge of the rock.

He moved that way until he came to the wall. The hole seemed to end there as if dug out to block his path. He grabbed a rock that his hand rested on and dropped it over the edge and waited to hear it smash against the bottom. No sound came.

"Looking for the bottom?"

Jeremy closed his eyes and felt his way along the edge toward the other side of the cave. He did not want to look at the light that was now over his left shoulder. If he did that, he knew he wouldn’t be able to fight the urge to run toward it and something inside him told him that was the last thing he wanted to do.

He came to the end of the hole but this time it was before he came to the wall. He passed his hand over the ground next to the hole that led toward the entrance of the cave and scooted as he was able. There wasn’t much space, and he was focused on making it through without falling in. That was it. He went out three or four feet with the hole to his side instead of blocking his path before him. Then he stopped to feel before him so he wouldn’t go headfirst into a pit.

This was progress. This was something he could find to celebrate. Instead of saying anything or thinking anything, he forced himself along the ledge further but a hot wind blew from below, a wind that must have come from deep within the earth because it smelled of sulfur. The wind was strong enough that it threatened to force him off the edge.

Instead of letting this stop him, he pretended he was on the edge of the couch at home and that falling off the side would send him into boiling lava. He pressed his hand forward, exploring the rock before him. Then he would scoot forward and repeat.

He moved this way for about five minutes then the ledge that he was on petered out to a point a foot in front of him. He couldn’t go any further. He didn’t want to turn around but could do nothing.

He sat down and let his feet dangle into the hole. If he had a stronger imagination, he could have pictured creatures writhing in anticipation for him to fall. But instead of thinking that, he only focused on getting back home.

"Theo," he yelled again. "Go get Mom. Go get Dad."

The thing behind the light, because it still hadn't gone and hadn't moved, laughed. Then in a voice that sounded almost exactly like his, "Go get Mommy." The voice laughed again then boomed out, "They’re not coming. You're mine."

Jeremy's breath came in hitches. The darkness was so overwhelming. He wanted to move forward, he wanted to trust that he could make it to the other side, but there was nothing he could do. So he yelled for his brother, his mother, his father. He cried out to anyone that would hear as they passed by.

He wasn’t sure how long he did that for but his voice was hoarse when another light appeared ahead. This one wasn’t the artificial warmth of that fake light behind him, this was a flashlight.

"Jeremy? Is that you?" It was Theo.

Then the voice behind him said, "Yeah, it's me. I hurt my leg. I can't come to you. Can you come and help me." Then the light behind him flew over his shoulder and went into the pit. Jeremy leaned over to watch it, hoping to see it hit soon, knowing that the pit was not bottomless after all but the light fell and fell and seemed to never go out.

Then, there was some movement in the pit, way down, some thing moved. It moved with an unnatural jerkiness that made Jeremy turn away. The hole really did go on forever. Then he thought about something and yanked his legs out of the hole. He was afraid it would close up and he would be stuck there, in the ground and they'd have to cut him out.

But nothing happened.

"Where are you? Say something again."

Jeremy was too exhausted to say anything, besides, his voice was gone. He lifted his hands and waved, hoping that Theo would see him and stop. And that's what he did. It seemed as though he was fifteen yards away on the other side of a bottomless canyon. He was so close, yet miles away.

Theo shone his flashlight at Jeremy and Jeremy had to raise his hand to his face to block the light. He felt like someone that had been down in a hole for a month and was just seeing the light for the first time.

"How'd you get over there?" Theo said. He traced his light along the edge of the pit and along the wall and ceiling. "This place is bigger than I remember."

Theo took another step forward and kicked a rock into the hole. He shined his flashlight down into the hole. "I'm gonna go get mom. Will you be okay?"

Jeremy did not know how to answer that. The thing in the darkness could have gone with the light and it could be standing right next to him, he just didn’t know. "I think so. Hurry." His voice was strained, but Theo nodded and then turned toward the opening.

Jeremy watched the flashlight bounce away and then disappear. He let out a breath.

"That was close wasn’t it?" The voice came from behind and inside him. "He almost fell into my abyss."

Then the tears started flowing. He couldn’t hold them back any longer. "What's the matter? This next part is going to be fun."

Jeremy scooted away from the point and lay down on the ground. The wind from below blew again. It was stronger and hotter this time. His t-shirt ruffled in the air. Jeremy curled into a ball, his eyes toward where he knew they would come to him and lay there, waiting.

"You should thank me, this could be a lot worse than it is. Just yesterday- Oh, that's not a story for little ears." The voice laughed again.

Jeremy didn’t acknowledge anything. As he lay there, he seemed to find strength in each passing moment. His mom would come soon, she would figure something out and he could go home again.

He would never play in these caves again. The hairs stood on the back of his neck again. The voice was right behind him, whispering in his ears. "This is about to become real fun. We're going to make nightmares."

"Jeremy?" It was his mom.

The voice behind him said, "Over here mom." Then quietly, so only Jeremy could hear, "Get ready."

\*

The man woke up staring at the bottom of the bed. He was completely under it. He was wearing different clothes. A television was blaring in the room and the shower was running. He was hiding in someone's room.

He took inventory of what he had and where he was. He was lying in a lot of dust. So this couldn’t be the same place. The Grand Vista Hotel would never had allowed this much dust to accumulate under a bed. In fact, that place probably had a pedestal that the beds lay on. This bed was on a metal frame.

How many hotels had metal framed beds? He lay there and listened. There was no sound coming from water hitting anything but the side of the tub. So presumably, there was no one in the shower. That meant, if it could be deduced, that the person was still in the room or about to enter. Most people do not leave the water running then head out to do errands.

So he waited. He didn’t want to scare anyone, and didn’t want to get attacked as he was trying to sneak out. He was hoping to see feet pat by, walk toward the bathroom, close the door and he could pull himself out and leave.

He waited for about fifteen minutes and the only thing that changed was the sound that came from the television. It switched from commercials to the end of a gameshow then to the local news.

He wasn’t paying attention to what was on the television except that he knew it was the news because they kept talking about the weekend outlook. Then something caught him. The reporter’s voice lowered, there was a somber note in her reading.

"The body of local a college student was found floating in the water near Vista Cove. The body, which is not being identified until all relatives are notified, was mangled almost beyond identification. Authorities believe the female was out swimming and got caught in the wake of the boat and forced into the propellers."

The man felt a smile creep across his face but he had no reason to smile. This was something that he would never have smiled about. Ever but as the reporter continued reading the story, his smile grew. Excitement welled inside him until he felt as though he might explode from holding in for so long. A giggle was almost out of his mouth. He couldn’t help it.

Finally the story ended with a statement that police were still investigating, and moved onto a fluff piece about a dog costume contest that would be happening in the week before Halloween.

The man waited for any more mention of the girl and also for some movement from the room but neither materialized. After some more time, he wormed his way out from beneath the bed, his calves were hurting from bending his legs like that and was able to sit on the floor in front of the dresser that the television sat on.

He breathed in deep, he could smell the soap that was being washed away on the bathtub and could also smell something else. Something coppery.

For the first time, he looked around the room. This wasn’t a hotel room, this was someone's house. A house that he'd never been in before. He pushed himself off the floor and stood in front of the television for a few seconds and held his hand over the button to shut the television off. Because there was no other indication that anyone was in the house, he felt he could afford a few seconds trying to find out where he was and how he got here.

He took a few steps to the door and peered around the corner. There was a television on down the hall also. This was tuned to the same channel so he didn’t recognize that it was on also. He looked at the pictures on the wall. The family in the picture was not recognizable. They didn’t even look as though they were remotely familiar as if he'd run into them at a store and had some sort of memorable interaction with them.

The smell from the soap dissipated in the hall and he could smell more of the metallic copper smell coming from in here. As he walked toward the other television, he could see that it was a small living room with a large chair and a couch situated against the wall. The television was in a corner, a shrine to which every chair in the room could face for worship, and a small wooden coffee table strewn with magazines.

This room, like the bedroom was also empty. He spotted the door, not sure if it was the front or the back but headed toward it anyway. His heart raced and his mind reeled. Something was wrong with him. He wasn’t supposed to be in his house and he just wanted to get out before anyone, someone came in.

He stepped through the living room and went toward the door that stood next to the refrigerator. There, lying on the floor of the kitchen was a body. He could not tell if it was a man or a woman, they were so covered in blood and so mutilated, that to discern the identity would take a master at jigsaw puzzles.

He stood there, gaping. Should he call the police? Should he do something? This person was clearly beyond help. The only thing that could help them now would be final rites. The man took a breath through his mouth, trying not to vomit.

He looked at his hands, they were clean, his clothes were spotless. If anything, these clothes seemed out of style for him. He didn’t know where they came from and didn’t remember putting them on.

After a moment, he realized that his hands were not shaking and his mind was clear. Then he realized the feeling of vomit rising in his throat just minutes before was the involuntary and compulsory exhibition of seeing the body lying there. He didn’t really feel anything. Mostly, he felt like he should feel that way.

He didn’t feel the urge to be sick. He just felt--normal.

He put his hand on the doorknob and pulled the door open and stepped out into the night. He wiped his handprint from the doorknob with his shirt on the inside and used his shirt to close it from the outside.

The man walked into the darkness and faded into the shadows. If anyone saw him leave, it was not reported.

Later, when the police would be called to the scene, they would find two other bodies in the house. One in a back bedroom and one in the bathroom, lying, fully-clothed, in the shower. There was no weapon found, but all three bodies looked as if they'd been attacked by a very vicious, and very angry bear. The only clue was a pile of bloodied clothes in the hamper as if waiting to be washed in the morning.

\*

Rusty had the dog on the leash and was holding back a slew of sneezes as he walked down the sidewalk. He was glad to be returning the dog to his owner because his allergies couldn’t take the dogs presence any longer.

He'd attempted to give it a bath to get that stuff off of it but it went about as well as he'd seen it experienced in many sitcoms through the years. When the bath was over, there had been suds and water everywhere, more on him and the ground than had made it on the dog. He was glad for a hose and a way to spray the dog down.

He had made no attempt to see what the substance was because he couldn’t bring himself to admit that it was blood. He'd also had to clean out a few messes the dog had made in the office. In short, the dog was a nuisance and he was glad to be rid of it.

He'd talked on the telephone with Crystal about getting the dog back to her and his throat closed as he was hanging up. She sounded so much like her sister and he would never get a chance to tell her how much he cared about her. He'd talked with Crystal before, but because of his interest in Joan, he never really noticed her. She was a little younger than Joan, maybe two years or a year and a half.

Crystal was now living in Joan's apartment until she could find someone to take over the lease. Rusty thought how much of a shame it was that this would be the last time inside the apartment and Joan wasn’t in there. He'd been inside on a few occasions, nothing significant. He'd been over to return something she'd left at the office. He'd been inside at a few office parties before she went to work somewhere else.

The office mates were close enough that they would spend some time together outside of work.

He walked up the driveway and toward the sidewalk leading up to the front stoop. The dog ran toward the house, obviously recognizing it, but the dog's tail was not wagging. Rusty seemed to sense that the dog was just happy to be rid of him.

On the stoop, he looked over the list of names on the buzzers and pressed the button that still read Joan. The front door buzzed open without a response from inside and when he pushed the door open, the dog bolted toward the stairs.

Rusty was not ready for the sudden jerk and the leash came out of his hand. As he chased after the dog, it made it up to the first landing and headed toward the second before Rusty was even halfway up the first flight. The dog looked back over its shoulder at Rusty then disappeared into a propped open door. For a second, Rusty didn’t recognize that this was the correct apartment.

The door seemed darker, the light from inside that spilled onto the hallway seemed cold. The basic light and happiness that Joan gave off was gone from the world. *What a morbid thought.* Rusty shook his head and came to the door. He knocked and the door opened a little more.

"Don’t you think you can come here and ask for forgiveness," Crystal was saying into the phone. She had her back to the door and the phone pressed against her ear. Her hair swayed from side to side as she talked. She had her hand up, one finger pointing toward the sky.

"No, I saw you. Don't even think you can-" then she stopped and hung up the phone. She whirled around and looked directly into Rusty's face. Her eyes went blank for a second and then she gave a half smile. She set the cordless phone back on the cradle and sank into a chair.

Rusty stood there, brushing the toe of his shoe against the edge of the carpet. He looked down and shoved his hands into his pocket. Joan and Crystal were definitely sisters, the resemblance was strong He could see the same high cheekbones, the same hairline. They had the same eyes too.

"I-I brought the dog." Rusty pointed toward the floor where the dog would have been had he still held the leash. "I think he ran in here."

"Yeah. He came in. I think he went back to, to – the room in the back." Rusty stepped onto the carpet, sank down onto the couch next to Crystal and put his hand on her shoulder.

He looked back toward the back room and saw that the door was open, but the lights were out. He could just make out the edge of the bed post and could see a reflection of the hallway in the glass covering a poster.

Crystal leaned over and put her head on Rusty's shoulder. Rusty tensed for a second then rubbed his hand on her back. "I'm gonna miss her too."

She nodded and took a deep breath. She put her arm around him and squeezed him in a quick hug of thanks. She backed away and rubbed her eyes. Rusty took the cue and let his hand drop to his lap. "I'm sorry. Do you want anything? Need anything?"

"I don’t need anything. I'm glad I could get him back to someone that would love him. I can't be around dogs for too long. Allergies." As if to prove it, he sneezed into his shoulder.

"Bless you."

He nodded his head. "Thanks. Do you need anything? You sounded pretty upset when I came in, not just about-" he trailed off. He didn’t want to say her name. It was like a sacred object that could be experienced but never touched. He also didn’t know if he could muster the courage to give Crystal a comforting hug.

"Oh. That." She shrugged. "I knew it was coming. At least in here." She tapped her head and looked down at her left hand. There was a slight indentation where a ring might have once been but Rusty didn’t want to say anything.

"Look, I know you've had a rough few days. I'll get out of your hair." And on impulse he said, "Here's my number if you need to talk. I'm a good listener."

And that night, she did call. They talked for almost an hour about everything except what happened to Joan. That would have to be the secret thing that was between them. They would not speak of it unless Crystal brought it up. As far as Rusty was concerned, it was Crystal's heartache.

Rusty found himself surprised at how much she opened up to him. It was like a parishioner confessing to a priest. The anonymity that the telephone provided probably aided in the flow of the conversation.

Rusty was also surprised at how relieved he felt when she told him that she was single again. It wasn’t appropriate to make any move toward that relationship now, and he wasn’t ready, really, but he filed that piece of information away for a later time.

For now, he could be happy with being her friend and nothing more.

\*

Greg sat on the back deck of his house. He put the phone back in the cradle and stared out into the woods. The animals around him rustled in the afternoon. The evening was getting cooler and the crickets were not chirping as readily.

He sat on a plastic deck chair and watched a squirrel jump from branch to branch before finding a hole in a tree and hiding in it.

He couldn’t believe that Crystal was making such a big deal about his dancing with Cynthia. It was as if he was cheating on her. He wouldn't call it cheating, really. They’d hung out a couple of times. Sure, had dinner, but she was an old friend. He was entitled to friends.

From the chair, he watched the sun sink behind the trees. If there wasn’t a house next door and the trees blocking his view, he could see the lake from his place. He took a deep breath and blew it out. This whole thing would fix itself. Crystal would never leave him. They had plans for the future, things they were going to do. They were engaged. That meant something right?

He kicked the empty beer can that lay near the chair. Ashes from a cigarette that had been dropped in the can scattered onto the wooden deck.

She wouldn’t leave him. He knew.

He went back inside and plopped down in front of the television. He could wait for her.

When his phone rang ten minutes later, he smiled. This was the call he knew was coming. The question was whether or not to let the call go to the machine or not.

The phone rang three more times then clicked off when the machine picked up. After the machine shut off, the phone rang again. This time, he answered.

“Hey baby. Calling back huh?”

There was deep breathing on the other side of the line.

“Hello?”

More deep breathing. Then a voice came on. “If you have lost something, you must get it back.”

Greg blinked at the television screen. He thought that maybe the voice heard came from a show. But on the television a couple of kids were playing with a baseball and bat.

“Who is this?”

“I hold the answers. If you have lost something, you should fight to get it back.”

Greg pulled the phone away from his ear and inspected the handset. There wasn’t anything he could see wrong with the set, not that he could see much. He pulled the phone back to his ear. “I don’t know what you’re taking about but-”

The voice interrupted him. “You have no excuse.”

Then, before Greg could say anything, the line went dead and the line burred in his ear.

He hung up the phone and then his mind went in two directions. First, he thought of recent times he’d had with Crystal. Sure, there were fights, but there were great times too. Then his mind shifted to thoughts of Cynthia. Things were going very well with her.

Greg thought about the two different lives he could have with these girls and closed his eyes. He was asleep very soon and in his dreams, he saw himself in pursuit of a running woman. He couldn’t tell if it was Cynthia or Crystal, but he was gaining on them.

And he had a knife in his hand.

\*

That night, Rusty went for a walk down his dark street. Long ago the town had agreed to keep street lights to a minimum. Light pollution was just coming into the forefront of most resort towns and even though Lake Grand Vista was not a major attraction, the townsfolk could still enjoy the view of the night sky that the lack of street lights provided.

As he walked, different things from the last few days went through his mind. He particularly thought about the man he watched lumber from the direction of the woods. Rusty had not truly seen the man come out of the woods but there was almost no chance that the man had not been in the woods.

He tried to remember what the man looked like, how he carried himself. The man had on a dark coat that hung down to his knees. The way he was walking, hunched over almost looking like he was dragging a weight behind him, was the thing that stuck out the most. The man did not glance around as he walked, as if checking to see if anyone had seen him. The man didn't appear guilty at all.

If Rusty were honest with himself, that would be the thing that stuck out the most. The man didn’t appear guilty. He didn’t appear like anything. He just materialized, then when Rusty looked up at him again, the man was gone.

Rusty blinked and realized he was at a small cove near the water. This cove had an artificial beach with a sand volleyball pit and a pavilion large enough for about thirty people to huddle beneath. There was also a small parking area large enough for about fifteen cars and a small boat ramp. A pair of wooden benches was near the shore. And another pair was next to the sand pit. There was a light behind the benches at the pit, presumably so people could have a little more light or play later in the evening, but the light was out. Either it was shot out with a bb gun or when people reserved the pavilion, they also reserved the right to the light.

He stood there, looking at the furnishings of a nice afternoon and decided he could not handle looking out over the water. The water was always a little frightening to him at night. He'd been taught at a young age that the water was nowhere to be when it was dark. He was regaled with horror stories of young kids out for a night swim and getting run over by boats or not seeing an underwater chain or buoy and getting tangled and drowning.

He wasn’t the best swimmer but he could handle himself if need be. Because of all this, he took a seat on a bench that was near the sand pit. It wasn’t quite late enough in the year for the leaves to start changing colors and falling so the road was partially blocked by low-hanging branches that crisscrossed the trees near the street.

Despite that, when a car drove by, it was mostly visible in the night and because of the brilliance of the moonlight, if someone did walk by, he could see them if he focused on seeing the movement.

Rusty was facing the road but his mind was back to the evening when he was standing at the window and saw Joan walking toward the woods.

Then, out of the corner of his vision, he saw movement. He turned his head slowly. If it was an animal, depending on the species, the simple act of eye contact would freeze it. But this time, the movement was accompanied by the clicking of heels on the pavement. Rusty blinked from his dreaming and focused on the road ahead. He might even call out to the person if he could recognize them.

But this person, even though he recognized them, he would never call out. It was the same man. At least it looked like him. The man was the same size, he didn’t have the trench coat on, but he had a similar walk. This man was not carrying the weight of guilt on his back, in fact, this man was looking over his shoulder and into the woods around him. Despite that, Rusty was sure this was the same man.

He sat as still as he could be. Thankful that the light did not betray him. He made only the slightest movement as the man passed by. When he was out of visual range, Rusty stood and walked after him.

When he got to the street, he checked both ways to see if a car was coming, old habits die hard, and stepped into pace with the man. As Rusty walked, he was careful to walk with the outside of his shoes to lessen the sound of his shoes upon the pavement. This was a trick he'd learned from a roommate that had been in the marching band.

Rusty followed and the man seemed to lead toward the outer limits of the town. There, there were small clusters of houses split apart by large sections of wild land. In times gone by, these were the farmlands but since any crops were hard to come by in this cold climate and the weather played such a factor in the planting, most of the cropland hand long grown up into trees and scrub.

The man seemed to have a destination in mind and Rusty had a difficult time keeping up. The man moved faster than the average person out for a stroll in the night. Then again, this man hardly moved normally at all.

Suddenly, the man stopped in the middle of the road. He was far enough ahead of Rusty that the man could potentially not see him, but the road was not as thick with trees here and the moon was high and bright. Rusty may be practically glowing. Rusty crouched to the ground and moved slowly backward toward the tree line.

The man put his hand up to his brow and broke into a sprint, directly toward Rusty.

\*

Jeremy was thinking that he didn’t want to make a nightmare. He didn’t want to do anything that involved scaring his mother. He also didn’t want to have wet his pants, but that had happened despite his desires. The thought put a despair in his mind that wasn’t there before.

His mom came around the corner and shone her light directly where Jeremy was sitting on the ground. "Come on Jeremy," she said. Her voice was not angry but it was not calm either. The voice sounded like it came from a frazzled woman that had come to the end of her line and was trying, for his sake, to keep calm.

She took another step forward, toward the hole. She was not looking down.

"Stop, Mom." Jeremy put his hands up. "Don't fall in."

Jeremy's mother stopped walking forward. She held her foot out before her and looked down. "Fall in what?"

Jeremy coughed. "The hole. Right there."

She took another step forward then trained the light on the ground in front of Jeremy. "Did you trip and twist your ankle?"

"Mom. There's a huge hole, right in front of you." As if cued from off stage somewhere, the hot, sulfuric stench wafted from below. Jeremy felt his t-shirt ripple again.

"This is no time for games. Did you hurt yourself?"

Jeremy looked down into the pit. The darkness was encompassing. He no longer saw any shapes moving below him, but the pit was as open and as wide as it had been when he first felt it's edge. "Please. Can't you see it?" He pointed down to the area right in front of her.

She shone her light at the ground again. The hole was not there. She shined the light at him and he put up a protective hand. The voice from behind him said, "Can you lower that light, please?"

"I didn’t say that."

Jeremy saw the flashlight take another step closer to the hole. "Of course you did. Did you hit your head?"

"Please don’t come any closer." Tears welled in his eyes and he sniffled.

Mom instincts took over and she moved closer.

"Stop right there, Mom." The voice behind him was deep once more. There wasn’t any of the childlike innocence in there any longer.

Jeremy's mother stopped. She dropped her flashlight and it blinked out. Jeremy screamed. She picked up the light, switched it on. She shined it on the spot where Jeremy had been sitting. There was a gouge in the dust made by dragging feet. She played the light over the cave and ran toward where he had been.

Jeremy shrieked again. This time, she trained her light toward the sound. She saw his head, sideways as if someone was carrying him. She picked up her pace but found it harder to keep up. Jeremy had his hands outstretched. His mouth was open in a silent scream. His eyes were wide.

She kept focusing on him but then stumbled on a chunk of rock and sprawled out facedown in the dust.

In an instant she was up again. The pain in her knee where it had smashed against a stone on the uneven ground was only a dull throbbing. She pushed the pain away. She would catch her boy.

She moved toward where she had seen Jeremy last but he was not there. She waited for a long second. The blood beating through her veins at a rate that would kill just as fast as it would give life. The adrenaline took over.

She shined her light ahead of her again. There was another scream. Then she saw him and she realized that as he moved, she could see a dark band around his waist as if he were being carried by the darkness itself.

When she shone her light on him this time, he plopped to the ground. Then he stood up and moved to run toward her light.

Then, from the darkness, they both heard it. A deep laughter that sounded like it came from the earth itself. It had the deep rumble like rocks spinning in a cement mixer. Then it said, "Say goodbye."

Jeremy was still running toward her. His hands were outstretched. She reached toward him at a full out sprint. She stumbled but still lunged and lurched forward over the uneven terrain.

There hands touched briefly and then Jeremy was jerked back into the darkness and disappeared. Jeremy's mother still ran toward the spot where she thought she'd seen him disappear but smacked her head against the cold rock and laid herself out, flat.

Some time later, she woke up, rubbed the tender place on her forehead and on the back of her head where she'd bounced from the wall and smacked into the ground below. It was dark but she was certain she could find the flashlight. If need be, she would will it to her hand.

She swept her hand back and forth across the ground until her hand smacked against the cold metal cylinder. She stood up on wobbly legs, clicked the light on and saw only a rounded out wall. This was the back of the cave.

She trained the light on the ceiling, the walls, the floor. She got on her hands and knees and dug around on the rock, looking for some trap door. Something that could explain how she'd seen her son disappear into the rock.

Then, from behind her, Theo said, "Where's Jeremy?"

She broke into a fit of sobs then vomited. Her head was spinning and she was having a hard time standing up. Then, everything went black again.

In her dreams she could see Jeremy's pleading face, his outstretched hands, reaching toward her.

When she woke, it was to the bright light of a hospital. She stared out the window and only nodded or shook her head to the questions that were asked of her. The only think she kept saying was, "Did you find a door?"

\*

Mayor Wilson sat at his ornately carved wooden desk. The dark wood showed scenes of different events in the town history. Different mayors of years passed had commissioned scenes proving their leadership. Wilson was not thinking about their legacy, but his own.

Elections were coming soon and it wasn’t a matter of if he should run, but instead, how much time should he invest in the election process. His opponent was no more intelligent than the chickens he used to keep as a young boy. Mayor Wilson wasn’t worried about him either.

What was worrying him at the moment was the rash of violent deaths that had happened over the last few days. These deaths were not run of the mill deaths, things like drownings and boating accidents that a town on a lake must get used to, as much as it can get used to citizens dying.

No, these deaths were the type to make national news. And for this one time, Wilson was very glad that the town was out of the spotlight. Of course, he wouldn’t mind some publicity for the town, but for something like this to be the thing that brought Lake Grand Vista to the forefront of the American consciousness, it would ruin the town.

The tourism, what little there was now, would die. Longtime residents, without the tourist trade to line their pockets would leave. Then, if it didn’t happen before that, the town would simply dry up until the last citizen that was stuck here because of a social security check or had never known anything else had died. But long before all of that happened, he would get run out of office. And he refused to allow his legacy to be that of the one who let a flourishing town die.

As he sat at his desk, reading through the reports, he was considering his next step. Should he bring in some outside muscle, a detective or a police force for hire that could wrap a quick net around this issue and he could close the books on this terrible fall.

He focused on the four deaths that he knew about so far. The young girl could be explained away as a night swim gone bad. But those three in the house. There was no accounting for that kind of gruesomeness.

Wilson had a file on his desk with pictures of the bodies that the police chief had given him at his request, but so far, he had not opened that folder. He did not want that picture in his mind. He knew, from his time as an attorney, that there were certain things you couldn’t unsee.

Nevertheless, the folder sat on the corner of his desk as a reminder that he couldn’t let things in this town get out of hand. The worst-case-scenario had the town setting up lynch mobs, dragging alleged assailants out into the streets for justice. Granted, this wasn’t the old west, but sometimes rational people acted irrationally.

At best, there were some angry people that were worried that the town wasn’t safe, they would spread the news and things would die out quietly.

There was a knock on the door and then it was pushed open without his reply.

The chief of police, David Grayson, walked in. He had his wide brimmed, brown hat in his hands and he was feeding it from hand to hand as if turning a steering wheel.

Wilson looked up and set his pen in the holder at the edge of the desk. “What is it, Grayson?”

Grayson continued steering an invisible car as he looked out into the middle distance. “I’m afraid there’s bad news.”

The mayor steepled his fingers and rested his chin on his thumbs so his hands covered his nose like a mask. He exhaled, the breath sounding loud in the ornate office. “I’m ready.”

Grayson took a step into the office and pushed the door closed behind him. He hung his hat on the coat rack and took a seat in one of the maroon leather chairs that sat before the large desk. “It happened down by the lake. In the Mason Caves.”

“What did?” Sometimes getting information from Grayson was akin to crossbreeding roses; it took time and effort. Much effort.

“A boy disappeared.” For the first time, he made eye contact with the mayor. Wilson could see something in Grayson’s eyes that told him this wasn’t the normal disappearance. But, he’d have to wait.

“That’s unfortunate. Those caves can be tricky in places. Have you sent in dogs?”

Grayson inhaled, his shoulders moved with the effort and as he exhaled, it seemed as if his body melted into the chair. “That’s the thing. We don’t need to.”

Wilson leaned forward. The springs in the chair squeaked. “Forgive me if I don’t understand. But, I don’t understand.”

“I don’t know that I understand either, sir.”

The mayor resisted the urge to wave him on as if directing traffic. Patience*.* “Well. Let’s talk through it.”

“You see. It’s like this. His mom watched him disappear.”

“So, you get ropes, pulleys, lights, anything that’s needed and you bring that boy back to his mother. Dead or alive.” He pointed at Grayson. “You make it right.”

Grayson nodded. “Sir. If I could, I would. But we’ve been down that cave. It’s not very deep. There’s no holes. But the boy’s mom swears she saw him dragged away.”

“Where is she now?”

“She’s in the hospital. She’s being treated for a head injury.”

The mayor shook his head and was glad the door was closed. “A head injury. Are you sure she didn’t see something that wasn’t there?” He put air quotes around the word see so Grayson would understand his meaning.

“The doctor says she doesn’t have a concussion. She can tell you everything that happened up to the point where she smacked her head against the hard rock wall.”

To have something to do, Wilson shifted papers around on his desk. He leaned back. This one wasn’t as bad as the others, but it was something bad nonetheless. He just prayed that nothing would come of this and a broken and mangled body would not surface in the lake in a day or two. “Tell me what you saw.”

“I personally went down that cave. There’s nothing back there except some candles that kids sometimes use to, you know.”

“Yeah. I get the picture. What else?”

“Well, Mrs. Avery told me that her sons were playing in the woods. Her younger one, Jeremy, thought it would be fun to hide in the cave. When the older boy, Theo, went to look for him, he said that Jeremy looked like he’d twisted his ankle, he didn’t want to get up and walk out, so Theo went to get his mom. When she came back, she said she saw something drag Jeremy into the darkness. She chased him, almost got caught up, and then the boy basically disappeared into the rock.”

If Wilson was still a drinker, he would have knocked back a long slug of something hard about now. The town was getting out of hand. But he could handle it.

“And, besides the candles. Did you find anything else that was suspicious?”

“No, sir. I could see where the boy had been dragged back through the scrabble, but I couldn’t see anything else.”

Wilson nodded. “So. Either she really saw this or she did something and is hiding it.”

“It appears so.”

“Thank you Grayson. Let me think on this for a little while and I’ll get back in touch with you. Let’s keep this one close to the vest. We don’t want to scare anyone because we have a prank on our hands.” Grayson stood up and went to the coat rack for his hat. “And let me know if something else happens with the Avery boy.”

Grayson nodded, pulled the door open and walked out.

When he was alone, Wilson balled his fist, swore, and stood up to look out the window. What a legacy indeed.

\*

Rusty woke up staring at a stand of trees. He’d crouched in the woods for so long, fear had made him spend all his energy. He’d collapsed into the bushes, partially out of being tired, but also because an overwhelming sense inside him told him to sleep. Now, the cold had woken him up. What was he thinking following that man? He didn’t know anything about him. The man could have been a psychotic killer; for all Rusty knew, the man was deranged. He’d possibly killed Joan and now he was out, late at night, prowling through the darkness.

Granted, Rusty was doing the same thing, but he was doing it for the side of good. He stood and brushed pine needles and pieces of grass and leaves from his clothes. It was still dark but the lightening streak of sky in the east told him daylight was on its way. Despite all that, he didn’t know where the man went. He’d wasted the evening sulking, got far too curious, then followed a man for a mile before getting too scared to go on.

It was odd that the man had sprinted toward him like that. It was also odd that the man had left him alone. Rusty knew that if he sprinted toward someone to scare them off, he would be quite sure that he knew where the person was and that they were truly scared off. As long as he was wondering about things, he wondered why he’d fallen asleep. Sure, it had been a long few days. The dog was constantly pacing the apartment, his allergies kept him up, the dog barked often, either wanting to be let out or wanting attention. But that hadn’t been everything.

He remembered sitting there and something in his mind telling him to sleep. He capitulated without question. And that was scary. Something was at work that wasn’t right.

He turned back toward his house and in the distance, he thought he saw two red eyes staring at him. A chill washed over him. “That’s just a cat chasing some mice,” he said, and his voice sounded shaky and weak. Unconvinced by his words, he kept walking toward home.

The eyes disappeared but it was more like they sank into the darkness instead of running away. When he walked by the place where it seemed the eyes had been, he was glad he didn’t have a flashlight to see what was lurking in the bushes for fear of actually seeing something crouching there. A black form, hairy, misshapen. Evil, red eyes, dripping fangs.

Rusty picked up his pace and didn’t stop to look at the bushes for more than a glance to make sure nothing was going to jump out at him.

\*

Crystal, asleep at home, heard a voice call her name a few times while she was sleeping. She woke those few times and went out into the living room of the small apartment but she did not turn on the lights. Her heart beat at a normal pace, her senses were not heightened. She only felt curious.

Who would be calling her? Why?

Each time she laid back down, she stared at the ceiling thinking about the voice. It had sounded slightly familiar and was pretty certain that it was just the voice of hope in her dreams, waiting for Joan to come crashing through the door and demand her spot on the bed.

Of course, Joan was lying on a metal table in some cold drawer either waiting autopsy or waiting burial. The case had to be closed first and no one was in a rush to do that.

The police had not been certain that the cuts were from a boat propeller. The medical examiner on site had said that preliminary tests showed she hadn’t drown.

She closed her eyes again and this time slept until morning.

\*

Martin ran through the wooded trail as morning appeared over the mountains across the lake. The trail was mostly cleared with the occasional branch across the path. When he came to those, he would slow his running and jog in place. It if were possible, he would kick the branch off the trail so the next person would not trip. Otherwise, he would stop for the second or two and toss the branch into the scrub.

As he ran today, he took in the cooling fall air and the trees still holding onto summer’s leaves. The birds were not as raucous today as normal but there were some times as the days got cooler that the birds tended to sleep later and longer. Soon, the only birds would be those that didn’t head south for the winter.

On winter days, especially right after a snow, Martin liked to come to the trail and speed walk, running would be pretty dumb in deep snow, and enjoy the silence.

Right now though, the absence of the company of the bird calls, he felt out of place, like he was running down an unfamiliar trail in another state. The quiet gave him time to think if he needed. Usually the run was there just to help clear his mind. Sometimes, his mind would go down the rabbit trails that he refused to allow during the day.

This was his creative time. He would think about the different types of green on the leaves, the different shades of bark, how to mix paints to make that color. Not that he would ever pick up a paint brush again, he’d given that up long ago to pursue his business degree. There hadn’t been time for it then and now, as he ran, he could let the colors flow through his mind.

The other creative activity he would do would be to write his mystery novel in his head as he ran. He would usually write a chapter and by the time his run was over, the murder had occurred and there was another clue. Again, not that he would write this, there wasn’t time for such directionless nonsense. But he had to occupy his mind somehow and why not get the creativity out of the way early in the morning.

His friends would often ask him if he felt in danger when he ran so early in the morning. What would happen if he came upon a bear or an angry deer? So far, that hadn’t happened, and most likely wouldn’t. There was too much human smell along this trail that most of the animals stayed away.

It wasn’t like there were campsites nearby to attract the bear and deer were usually spooked by the tread of his feet and the rhythmic exhalations, that the likelihood to run across a buck in rut was low.

The real reason he ran so early in the morning was that he couldn’t stand the heat of the day and the later in the morning he ran, the more likelihood that he would run into someone on the trail and they would mess with his lap times.

Right now, he was tracking pretty well, there hadn’t been too many fallen branches. The good thing about running this trail all the time was that he knew where most of the exposed roots where and most of the holes. That didn’t mean that he didn’t stumble here and there, but it was rare.

He was coming across a place where the trail evened out and went straight for a few hundred feet. This was where he tried to regain the time he lost kicking branches off the trail. Even though the purpose of the run was to be steady, keep a normal pace, when he hit this straight part which he called the straightaway, he would sprint. There was enough visibility that he usually did not have to stop at all.

As he came into the last bend before he hit the straightaway, he thought he heard a scream. It was not abnormal, sometimes there were mountain cats that sounded like a scream. They were usually in the mountains across the lake and hearing them was very rare. But this one was nowhere near him.

He hit the straightaway and broke into his sprint. As he did, there was another sound, this time it sounded like a woman screaming for someone to stop. As much as he didn’t want to, human decency made him slow his pace. This would kill his time, but if he could help someone, it would be worth it.

He trained his ears on the surrounding area, readying himself to ignore the bird calls, but there were none. Against all suggestions from every running magazine and article in the newspaper, he stopped. His breathing was measured, but quickened. Without the wind rushing past his ears and the steady stomp of his gait, he was able to listen to the woods around him.

As he listened, he realized how unsettling this was. Was what he was hearing his imagination or was it something real? There were times when the stories he would write in his head got the better of him and he would sometimes see the heroine out of the corner of his eye beckoning to the hero, pointing out the corpse.

Sometimes he imagined he heard gunshots as the murder occurred just around the corner and the murder was getting away.

Because of that, he wasn’t certain if the scream he had heard was a woman’s. He leaned against a tree, exhaling loudly. There was a rustling through the woods ahead. Maybe there had been a mountain cat of some sort. He would need to be cautious.

“Somebody.” The voice trailed off to a labored sound. Martin turned toward the sound and stepped off the trail. She could be saved, there was no doubt about that.

Martin lifted his hands to his mouth and made a megaphone. “I hear you,” he said. His voice echoed off the water and came back in a repeat a second later. “Hello?”

The woman in agony didn’t call again, but the rustling off the trail didn’t stop. He pushed aside some bushes and low branches and walked softly toward the noise. Within the rustling sound and not quite audible, was the sound of grunting and ragged breaths.

He pushed another branch aside, and then he saw her. A woman was sprawled out on a small clearing and was covered in blood. Her arm had been torn open and it looked like an animal had been gnawing on her shoulder. Her eyes were closed and whatever had been here was gone. He knelt down beside the woman and placed his hand on her arm.

She sat straight up and grabbed his arm. She looked at him with wide eyes. The blue was just a slight rim around a deep hole of black. She coughed, blood sputtered out of her mouth. “Run.” She pointed toward the distance.

Martin stood and put his hand out to her. “Can you stand?”

She shook her head. “Run.” Her voice was raspy, at the edge of hysteria.

“I’m not leaving you.” He bent over and put his arms underneath her and lifted her off the ground. She moaned.

The wound at her shoulder was nothing compared to the ravages of her back. Her shirt was torn into ragged strips and the skin beneath was torn away exposing bone and muscle. Martin didn’t care, this woman deserved to get away. He carried her back to the trail and set her down on the ground. He put his arm under hers and tried to help her walk. She collapsed.

“What did this to you?”

She was shaking now. Her eyes wide, sweat and blood stood out on her face and forehead. Her whole body convulsed. He rolled her onto her side so her back was not exposed to the dirt any more than it already had been. She coughed hard, spit out more blood then closed her eyes.

Her breathing was shallow but he wasn’t letting her go. He patted her on the face. “Stay awake. Stay awake. What’s your name?”

Her blood reddened lips moved but he could not hear the name she spoke. He leaned in closely and thought he heard her reciting the Lord’s Prayer. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it. She barely squeezed it back.

If he weren’t so far into the trail he could just run back to one of the houses at the head of the trail and call the police from there. If she wasn’t going to make it, he could at least get the police here so something could be done. “Do you want me to carry you?” He bent to put her over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry that he’d seen in some movie. It was a little easier to hold her. Maybe they could send out a search party for the animal that did this and—

His thoughts stopped when he heard a twig snap somewhere behind him. Then a footstep. He turned and squinted into the sun that was now brightening the trail. It was later in the morning than he was used to.

He checked his watch; almost 8:30.

Another snap of a branch breaking. But it was overhead. Something wasn’t right. He took a difficult step back toward his car. The weight of the girl on his shoulder would make it hard, but maybe he would run into someone on the way back.

There was a low growl overhead and he craned his neck and looked up into the trees. He was expecting a mountain lion or another cat but the shape was undeterminable. At least from this angle. With the sun behind the shape, the edges where sharp but he couldn’t get a fix.

He turned away from it and ran as fast as he could with the woman on his shoulder.

Another scream came from the woods behind him. This one was deeper, but still recognizable. “Someone?”

He picked up the pace.

“Come back.”

Because he knew this trail so well, he took a cut through that wasn’t obvious to the normal runner or hiker. He was hoping to lose the creature in the trees.

He came around a sharp corner, a large boulder edged the trail and looked back. He thought he saw some sort of moving shadow in the trees but didn’t focus on that, he just needed to get back home. Get this girl help. Never run in these woods again.

As he ran, the branches above him shook and snapped where they couldn’t bear the weight of the creature. It was gaining on him.

Martin changed direction, took an artery off this small trail and went back toward the main trail. The ground was soft with pine needles, this was not an often-used trail by the condition of it and he stumbled a few times as he ran.

Then, the girl’s body was lifted away from his shoulder. He tried to fight back, to grab at the girl as she was being pulled away, but he couldn’t reach her.

He gave chase, watching as the creature moved through the branches. It looked like a very hairy ape with long, coarse, black hair. But it was moving too fast. He wished he had a gun, just to take the thing down.

Then, the thing picked up its pace and disappeared beyond Martin’s ability to keep up. The girl was gone.

He stopped running and sobbed. He didn’t know the girl, but this wasn’t right. He couldn’t tell anyone, he may not even be able to find this spot again if he tried. But he would try. He tore off a piece of his shirt, tied it around a tree so it would give him an idea of where to start looking with the police and then he headed back toward the trail.

When he was close to the main trail, he realized how he must look, he was covered in blood. It was all down his back and the front of his shirt. His shirt was torn. He looked like a murderer.

He tore the shirt off, turned it inside out and tied it around his taut waist. He knelt, retied his shoe and stood.

The creature was standing before him. Its red eyes stared directly into Martins. The bat-like ears stuck up on the side of its head.

Without thinking, Martin turned and ran. As he did, he heard laughter behind him. Mocking laughter. He didn’t want to turn but he had to see what was happening behind him. Was he being chased?

He glanced over his shoulder. Nothing. The creature was gone. He turned to face the right way and smacked directly into the creature.

Then everything went black.

\*

Greg woke. His eyes were dry and crusty. He had fallen asleep with his contacts in and now his eyes were burning. He pushed himself off the couch and walked down the hallway to the bathroom, his eyes only slits. There, he squinted into the mirror at a reflection he didn’t quite recognize. It looked like he had about three days’ worth of stubble. His hair lay in every direction imaginable and his eyes were bright red.

He rubbed at his eyes and pulled his contacts out. The act caused a burning sensation to overtake his face. It felt like lava was being poured into his eyes. He gritted his teeth and almost yelled out in pain.

His knuckles were white as he gripped the side of the sink. What was going on?

He felt around the sink and came across his eye drops. With his eyes still closed, he gave the bottle a shake, there was plenty in there, and unscrewed the lid. He felt his way to the toilet and sat on the closed lid.

With his left hand, he pried his eyelid open as he tilted his head up. The meager light from the vanity bore into his eyes like a miner inserting a core bit into hard rock.

He soldiered through and raised the small bottle to the bridge of his nose. He pressed lightly and the first drop of liquid met with his eye.

The sensation was somehow both cooling and burning and he couldn’t decide which was worse. The lava burning sensation returned and this time he didn’t stifle a yell. Instead, he groaned in pain and flexed his left fist to alleviate the pain.

He then put the rest of the drops in his eyes, screwed the cap on the dropper, and threw the plastic bottle into the apartment.

At this point, he didn’t care if it hit anything, the release of the anger helped him to relax a little. Still, he couldn’t open his eyes.

He felt his way along the hallway until he came to his room. He felt for the switch, the light was off, and then he shuffled to the bed and lay down.

He kept his hand over his eyes and moved them up and down, left and right, trying to get the medication to cover his eyes. Already, the pain was subsiding.

First, he forced his right eye open. The afternoon light shone in and he could just make out the blurry edges of the ceiling fan. Without his contacts in, he could barely see anything.

He rolled onto his side and felt around for the remote. He still didn’t have the courage to open his other eye. It could wait, the medicine would do its thing.

He found the remote and turned the television on. Whatever was playing would serve as just background noise. He didn’t really care what it was, just something to stop the ringing of the silence.

As he lay there, his eyes finally adjusted to the light and the pain subsided. He dug through his bedside table and found a pair of glasses at least one prescription out of date, but the match was close enough that he could see.

His stomach growled so he sat up, clicked the television off, kept his head down from the impeding light, and then found his way into the kitchen.

There, he barely registered the items he pulled out. A loaf of bread, some cheese, a packet of lunch meat and some mayo. He made a quick sandwich and ate over the sink.

When he was done, his eyes felt even better. He made another sandwich then went back into the living room.

There, he turned on the stereo. The volume was incredibly loud but he didn’t notice as he turned to face his seat. The wall behind his couch, the wall to his left and the wall around the front door were covered in red and black lettering. There were different variations of the phrase “take back what was lost” in a variety of sizes.

There were also many dents in the wall where he had either kicked or punched the wall.

He collapsed to the floor, the sandwich falling, uneaten, onto the dirty carpet.

\*

Mayor Wilson sat at the writing desk next to the window. He sometimes sat here when he wanted to appear that what he was doing required all of his attention. It leant an air of being part of the people. He wasn’t always behind that desk, he was approachable.

But this time he really was doing everything he could to remove the distractions and pay attention to the task at hand.

There had been two more deaths. These happened early this morning at the state-run park near the lake. There were trails all through the woods. Although he’d never been much of a hiker, he had walked those trails just to show it wasn’t a waste of taxpayer money.

This one would be hard to cover up. He’d have to talk to Grayson to keep this one out of the newspapers. Especially the man. This would ruin the town for visitors until something happened.

The girl was mangled, just like the others. That could be passed off as a mountain cat or a bear coming down into the woods. But the man. That was a different story.

He was hung by his feet in the crook of a tree branch that hung over the trail. The man’s throat had been slashed, and he’d been torn from groin to throat as if on an autopsy table. His organs were splattered on the ground below the hanging corpse as if left there to prove the man had once been alive.

Besides that, there was nothing more done to the body, as if that wasn’t enough.

Wilson folded his hands and did something he hadn’t done in a long time, he prayed for an answer. Something wasn’t right and he would do everything he could in his power to set things right again.

There was a knock at the door. Peggy, his secretary stuck her head in before he could respond. “Sir? There’s a couple of reporters out here. They want to talk to you?”

Wilson sighed. It was too late. Grayson had talked. Now it was his turn to answer questions. In a way he was prepared, but not completely. He feigned ignorance, “Do you know what they want?”

She rolled her eyes. “You know what they want. I’ve worked for you too long. Don’t play that game with me.”

He nodded. Moved to a small couch where he could be away from the picture and the notes. “Send them in.”

For the next half hour Wilson did an artful job of answering their questions without giving too much information away. He also did a fantastic job of not really answering the main question they kept asking as to what he was going to do about the death. He was very happy to learn that they didn’t know about the others, or at least didn’t make the connection. Grayson hadn’t been a complete moron. The only real connection was the state of the bodies and the evidence was too circumstantial to be anything more than that.

He wondered why Grayson hadn’t been the one answering the questions, or maybe he had and was unable to give them more. He ended the interview with a final statement. “I can tell you this, I will do everything in my limited power to make sure this town, and those surrounding it, are safe. If we have a madman on the loose, he will be taken care of. Now, I’d like to get back to trying to figure this thing out. Let’s do our best to keep this as low-key as possible. I don’t want to scare anyone.”

There was a murmur from the reporters but Wilson ignored it.

He stood and pointed toward the door. “If something like this got out before we had all the information, you could ruin this town. I’ve been in contact with Chief Grayson and he is going to step up patrols.”

One of the three reporters, Wilson wasn’t even paying attention to who, said, “So you are admitting that something is going on?”

Wilson put his hand on the door and pulled it open. He looked directly at the three in turn and nodded. “Anyway, I’m sure you can find your way out.”

The three reporters shuffled out the door and one tried a last question as he was walking out but Wilson deflected the question by again thanking the reporters for dropping by, then pushing the door closed.

He leaned against the door and the bookcase that came right to the edge of the doorjamb and rubbed his temples. He hated that the reality of the situation was anything as open and closed as he had made it in the interview.

He pushed himself off the wall, walked to the folder that contained the pictures of the man hanging upside-down from the tree and went to the shredder. He fed each picture, face down, into the grinding wheels of the shredder, then put the empty folder on the desk next to the shredder and walked back to his office door.

He pulled the door open, shut the light off, and went out. “Peggy, I’m heading out for a little. I need to clear my head.”

She stood, holding a notebook. She consulted it as he walked toward the front door. “You have a four o’clock meeting with the Water Works people. They want to talk about redoing the piping down in the Bay. So they don’t freeze in the winter.”

He held the knob to go out into the parking lot. “Can it be cancelled?”

She shook her head and said, “You’ve already rescheduled twice. Once more and they might go to the council.”

Wilson checked his watch. Then looked at it again because the time didn’t register the first time. “I’ll be back before then.”

Peggy sat back down and started typing. The sound of the clacking of the keys followed Wilson out into the cooling fall day. He fished his keys out of his pocket and opened his car.

He sat in the warm car, with the doors shut for about ten minutes staring off into space. He couldn’t decide where to go, or what to do. This indecision was very unlike him but he couldn’t figure out the next step. He went through some of the visualization techniques he’d been told about in college but that did nothing.

Number one on the priority list was talking to Grayson. The information sharing with the press would have to stop. He sort of felt like the mayor in Jaws there was that much riding on this. One little hiccup and the town could go bust. For what it was worth, he was glad this was happening in the late fall. Most outsiders didn’t pay attention to Lake Grand Vista news during the five months of the year when they were at home every weekend.

If this had been the middle of the summer, he didn’t know what he would do. If one positive note could come from this, this was it. He took a deep breath again. But what to do about now?

He sat like that for another few minutes. Then, he decided to go for an early lunch at the diner down the street. He looked into the rearview mirror and saw a piece of paper flapping under the rear wiper blade. He pushed himself out of the seat and lumbered to the back window.

The yellow piece of paper looked like a parking ticket from a distance but he could see the blue lines across it as he got closer. The paper was folded over a couple of times and was pretty firm in there. It wouldn’t have slipped away even if he’d started driving.

He leaned against the car, his energy waning even though it was not even noon, and unfolded the sheet. What he read not only gave him a boost of energy, but took the weariness out of his bones.

There was an answer.

\*

The man had been aware he was being followed last night. He did not hear the footsteps or see the pursuer. He could feel the man behind him the way an animal senses danger is near.

As he sensed the man behind him, he moved past his intended destination in the woods and continued walking until the man following gained a little courage and stayed out in the road.

The man had stopped, closed his eyes and through some sort of vision in his head, could see the surrounding area. The follower stood out in his mind like a shining red blob against a black background.

Then, when he turned and sprinted toward the follower, he intentionally ran by to let the man feel as though he had successfully hidden. Then, around the corner, and far enough that he knew the man would not see him, he stepped into the woods and into the shadows.

Some time later, the follower came walking down the street. He had a quick stride as if running but trying to convince himself that he was not running.

The man hiding in the trees could almost smell the fear coming from the follower and resisted the urge deep within himself to jump out and attack the follower just for being nosy. He didn’t have time to deal with this and didn’t know if the follower could overpower him. Even with his strange senses now, he didn’t want to attack the man. To attack would have been to answer to the animal side that the man did not want to admit was there.

He then gave the follower time to get far ahead, he pushed through the underbrush and headed toward home. Not the hotel room he had been renting, not toward some place in the woods, even though the overwhelming feeling to see to some business in the woods was strong, the man did not bow to those urges. Not this time.

Back at the Grand Vista Hotel, he found his car in the parking area and patted his pockets. Somehow the keys and his wallet were in his pockets even though these clothes were not his. He pulled the door open and sat in the car.

As he sat there, he ran through the oddness of the past few days. Things felt like they were changing inside his mind, and even though he was not completely complicit in the change, he did not feel the urge to shirk it off either.

He shifted into gear and drove toward home. He listened only to the steady hum of the engine and the tires as they rolled through the miles.

About an hour later, he pulled into his driveway. The house was dark, as he knew it would be, and pressed the button to open the garage door. As the door lifted, the dark bay where his wife’s car used to rest was empty. With some reservation, maybe out of sorrow, maybe out of habit, he pulled into the two car garage and parked in the middle. There was no need to get another vehicle in there.

He closed the garage door and went inside. The house was cooler than it should have been. The heat must not have kicked on while he was out. Maybe he hadn’t set it. Things and time were slipping his mind recently. He put his hand against the wall, supporting himself while looking at the thermostat but didn’t lift his hand to increase the temperature.

He went to the front door, grateful to have a mail slot in his door instead of a mailbox because there was a pile of mail from at least a week strewn around the door. The man sat on the floor and scraped the pile toward him. He hadn’t been gone that long, but didn’t feel a great need to go through the mail as it came during the week.

It didn’t take long to find the important mail. Things like bills and some correspondences from family far away. He set the bills in the bill slot next to the check writing desk and went into the back room.

He clicked the light on and tore the mail open, hungry for some good news. Unfortunately, the letters and cards were the same type of things that he’d gotten for the past few weeks since his wife’s death. There were sorrowful letters from relatives asking him to come see them. There was a note from his brother back east practically demanding that the man come see him at his house this winter and to get away from that cold, lonely house. He thought he saw a letter from the hotel in Lake Grand Vista, but as soon as he laid it aside, unread, he could not find it again.

A letter from his mom asking for some assurance that he was okay was the last one he opened before he set the pile down and leaned back into the chair.

The sparsely-furnished room showed signs that he had not been a bachelor all his life. There were trinkets decorating the mantle and pictures that only a woman, with her keen sense of style, would pick out.

If he had decorated it, there might be a taxidermy fish. Maybe some bones from a recent kill. No, that wasn’t right. He shook his head.

If things like this kept up, he would need to do something different. He could sell things, but he wasn’t quite ready for that. Maybe he could hire one of those organizers he’d seen advertised in the paper and get her to go through the house. It would be too painful to do it himself.

He pushed himself up from the chair, clicked the light off and stood for a moment in the total darkness. A faint red light shown in the corner, then disappear. He slammed his eyes shut, waiting for the sense of his surroundings to grow, but the only thing he could sense was the dark. Then he opened them again, the red was gone. The odd feelings that came over him when he was in Lake Grand Vista were gone.

He walked down the short hallway and opened the basement door. He clicked on the light and stepped down the wooden steps. In the empty house, noises seemed louder. At the bottom of the steps, he listened and could tell that the furnace was not running. He must not have turned it on at all.

We went, pulled open the grate and turned the valve to start the pilot light. He clicked the electric sparker until the blue light popped on and then turned the flow down. A moment later, a whoosh sound and some grunting of steel, and the furnace kicked on.

He went back upstairs and felt the warm air blowing from the vent as he walked past it on the way to his bedroom. He did not look at the pictures on the wall, he knew they would only deepen his sadness, and sat down on the bed.

He did not know what would happen if he closed his eyes because the last few times he had done so, he’d woken in strange places. But, exhaustion washed over him and he collapsed onto the bed.

In the morning, he woke, still in his bedroom, still on top of the covers. His sleep had been dreamless and he was glad for that. The horrors he had seen at that house and the strangeness that was pushing itself through his brain were enough to keep him from wanting to sleep. He was glad neither had invaded his dreams.

He went into the bathroom and peeled the strange clothes off and turned on the shower. He would have to get rid of these clothes. They were too incriminating. He closed his eyes when he got under the shower and opened them to watch the water running into the drain was slightly brown colored.

Now, the events of the past few days hit him like a bat to the stomach. He sank to the floor of the shower and dry heaved. What had he done? He didn’t remember killing anyone. Didn’t remember doing a single thing besides finding a body and leaving.

Sure, there was the sense that things were going crooked in his mind, being able to see things in his thoughts, like the man walking behind him. But that could have been anything, it could have been wishful thinking.

He finished his shower, got dressed, and went downstairs. In the kitchen he made coffee, scrambled some eggs, and planned the rest of his day. The mundane activities made him feel normal again.

He picked up the phone and called his boss. “Good morning, Hal, it’s me. I’m sorry, I had a terrible weekend. I’ll be in but I’m gonna be a little late.”

His boss, always cheery, always ready to help in any manner said, “Don’t worry about it. I’ll see you when you come in.”

When he hung up, he gobbled the eggs down like a dog scarfing down a meal before any other dog stole it, and then headed to the garage.

The normalness of the day made everything seem right. He pulled out the garage and drove to work.

Of all the uncertainty, he knew one thing. He would never go toward Lake Grand Vista again. Energized, he headed toward the building. He waved at the receptionist after he walked through the glass doors. He waited for the elevator without checking his watch, then finally made it to his desk. Even though he had been in this seat on Friday afternoon, just three days ago, it felt like a month had passed.

He opened the side drawer of his desk, pulled out a pad of paper and made some notes about his future.

1. Start enjoying life again
2. Try something new this week
3. Call the organization service

His hand hovered over the pad. He had an overwhelming urge to write end the lives of the miserable, but he dropped the pen instead.

1. Clean out the garage.

His boss walked by the door and the man put his hand over the list in case he had written number four as originally planned.

“Everything okay?” his boss said.

The man nodded. “Sure is Hal.” He opened the center drawer, dropped the list in and closed the drawer. He then pulled a binder from the shelf behind him and thumbed to where he’d last checked the numbers on the big account the company was working on now.

“Good to hear.” His boss knocked on the doorjamb twice then pushed himself out of the office. It was evident that Hal wanted to talk but the man couldn’t find it within himself to start a conversation.

When sound of the clicking of Hal’s loafers diminished, the man opened the desk drawer and felt inside for the pad of paper. Instead of finding that, his hand brushed against a hard, plastic object with a metal ring attached to it.

The man pushed it to the front of the drawer and saw a number, in gold letters, emblazoned across the key fob and the hotel where his stuff hung in the closet.

He didn’t remember, but he was somehow certain that he’d left the Do Not Disturb sign on the door of the room.

A fleeting vision flittered through his mind and he pushed it aside. He didn’t want to think about that now. It was too violent. His pulse was racing and he shut the drawer. The key slid across the smooth surface of the drawer and smacked against the metal side of the drawer.

He worked the rest of the day, skipping lunch so he could leave early. Before he left his office, he slid his hand into the back of the drawer, pulled the key out, and dropped it into his pocket.

He had one thing to do.

He’d have to check out. That one thing, then, he’d call the organizing service. He’d start the process of moving on.

On the road, he turned left toward the highway and Lake Grand Vista.

\*

Rusty sat at his desk, staring out the window. There wasn’t much going on now that the tourists were mostly checked out of their rentals. He would have to go through them in a day or so, make arrangements for the cleaning out but mostly, things were slowing down.

There were still some properties to maintain as some of the tourists maintained weekend homes here. They were almost considered townies because many would return every weekend until the snow came and many would continue to come throughout the winter if the town didn’t turn off the water supply to most of the rental cabins. One of Rusty’s main duties was to check the rentals during the week to make sure that things were still in order.

Years ago, many renters would return during the winter for a leisurely weekend at the lake to find a driveway slick with ice from a burst pipe. The only way that the town found to make that not happen was to turn the water off to most of that corner of town.

Sure, it made things difficult for some businesses but they were able to close down for the winter because sometimes it was more expensive to stay open than to close down for a month.

Rusty was making his plans of which rentals to go to first when the door opened. He looked up, expecting a late summer renter returning a key but was surprised when Crystal walked in.

Susan, the receptionist, was talking to Crystal and pointing back toward Rusty’s desk. He stood, and realized that he was happy to see Crystal a little more than he normally would be.

After the hello’s, Crystal said, “Do you have any dinner plans?”

Rusty blinked a few times then shook his head. His main plan was to have a bologna sandwich down by the water while it was still warm enough to eat outside. “No. I mean, I was going to, you know. I brought my lunch.”

She looked down at his desk. “Oh.”

“I mean, I don’t have to eat it. It’s just a sandwich.”

She smiled at that. “I was supposed to eat dinner with Greg today. I don’t even want to talk to him.”

He nodded. “Where do you want to go?”

“Well, I have a few free meals at the hotel dining room. We could head over there. I wasn’t planning on eating them alone.”

Rusty wanted to ask if she thought it was a little too quick with her just breaking up with Greg, but it seemed that she needed someone that could relate to her loss. At least that’s what he told her.

“I get out at five. There’s a few houses, I have a few things to do, I’m busy before then so I can’t leave any earlier than that.” He looked down and saw he was fumbling with the button on his shirt. He dropped his hand to his side.

“Okay.” She smiled. “I’ll be right out there.” She pointed to the bench across the street. The one he’d seen Joan sitting on a few times and harassed her about sitting for free after she quit.

He smiled at that thought and then blushed. He didn’t want to give Crystal the wrong idea. Not so soon after really getting to know her.

“I’ll see you there.” He smiled again and watched her as she walked out the front door. The bell over the door chimed and both he and Susan watched as she walked away.

“That was Joan’s sister wasn’t it?”

Rusty got from behind his desk and walked past the few empty desks that held summer helpers but now stood empty. He leaned against one. “Yeah. She’s having a rough time.”

“I think she likes you.”

He demurred. “What makes you say that?”

“A woman can tell.”

“Really?”

Susan just smiled and nodded. “A woman can tell.”

That evening before he was done with the final check list on a rental near the water, he saw, out of the corner of his eye, Crystal walk up to the bench, check to see if he was still in the office, and sit down.

That little movement told him something he didn’t recognize before. He was attracted to her and he didn’t mind that she was attracted to him.

“She just sat down. She looks pretty tonight.”

“I know. I mean I saw her.” Rusty packed his bags and pushed them under his desk. “You okay to lock up?”

“Tell her she looks pretty.”

“I will.” He pushed through the door and Crystal stood up. She was smiling and met him halfway as he walked across the street.

“Susan told me-I mean, I noticed too, but,” He took a deep breath. “You look nice tonight. Pretty.”

Crystal pushed her hair behind her ear and smiled. “Thanks.”

They walked the short distance down the edge of the carless road toward the Grand Vista Hotel. “I don’t know if I’m dressed right for this.”

She stopped him, then looked him up and down. She then reached up, adjusted his collar so it was more even and smoothed her hand over this shirt. “You look quite presentable. If they give you any trouble tell them you know the owner.”

“But I don’t.”

She winked at him. “They don’t know that.”

They walked the rest of the way, sort of close, their arms touching at times as they swung and made it to the hotel restaurant.

Rusty felt a little awkward when Crystal stepped toward the maître d’hôtel and left him behind. She leaned over the podium and showed him a card that she pulled from her small purse.

The maître d’ took the card, read it, passed it back to her and motioned toward the seating area.

Rusty stood there for a second, still feeling awkward, and almost didn’t see Crystal motioning him forward as she walked toward their seat.

He walked through the maze of chairs until they were shown a table in the middle of the dining room. The tables nearby were mostly empty and some, Rusty noticed, had not even been set with the full accompaniment of flatware.

Rusty waited for Crystal to sit then took his chair facing the lobby. Being a people watcher, this would normally be a terrible seat for him but with the state of the dining room and the emptiness of the street, he knew it wouldn’t be a problem paying attention.

When the waiter had come and gone with their drink and appetizer order, Crystal leaned across the table. “This is nice. Usually by this time in the meal, Greg would have already made a joke about the waiter’s outfits.”

Rusty blinked. “I didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary. This place is really nice. I don’t think I could afford it if I came here alone.”

She smiled at that. “I know I couldn’t, but tonight, we are dining on family money.”

Rusty smiled and sat back as the waiter brought their drinks.

After he left, Crystal leaned forward as if sharing a secret. “The real reason I wanted to come here, besides the free meal and some company, was to tell you about something that happened last night.”

Rusty’s eyes went wide at the mention of the previous night. He nodded.

“The strangest thing happened. I was sound asleep and, don’t make fun of me, but I think I heard someone calling my name.”

The hairs stood up on the back of Rusty’s neck. “What did you do?”

She took a sip of her water. “I got up and checked. There wasn’t anyone.”

“Were you in--” he was about to say Joan’s apartment, but it was hers now. “The apartment or at your place?”

“I was in the apartment. I was sleeping in the other room though.”

Rusty pictured the layout of the apartment. “Where was the voice coming from?”

“That’s the thing, I don’t know. It sounded like the living room, then it sounded like somewhere else.”

Rusty took a sip of his water, wiped the corner of his mouth with his fingers, realized his mistake, picked up the napkin and pulled the bread knife off the table. He wiped his mouth with the napkin even though it was dry and before he could bend down to pick up the knife, the waiter was at his side, presenting him with a clean knife.

“Were you scared? I would be.”

She shook her head. “That’s the weird thing, I wasn’t anything. I didn’t wake up in a start, and my heart wasn’t beating, not like it would be if I were the main character in a book.”

“So what’d you do?”

“I went back to bed.” She leaned back and laughed. “Can you believe that?”

Rusty shook his head. “No. I would have been out of there.”

“Normally I would too but this time. I don’t know.”

Rusty leaned forward, put his elbows on the table, remembered the countless talks about manners he had with his mom and dropped his hands to his lap. He looked around, then leaned forward. “What did it sound like? Did it sound like—her?”

“I don’t remember. It could have, but that’s the thing. It’s just so weird. I don’t remember. As I was telling you this, I could picture it in my head but as the words were coming out. I don’t know, the image just disappeared. The thing is, it sort of sounded like Greg’s voice, but sort of sounded like Joan’s.”

He smiled. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but, do you believe in ghosts?”

Then, as she was answering, Rusty saw a man enter the lobby. He stood there, looking around, the way someone would if they were looking for someone or looking to see if anything’s changed since they were there last.

It was the man from the night before. Rusty froze and if he exhaled, he was certain that frost would come out. The man stared directly at him. He then turned and headed upstairs.

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Because there was no day indicated on the piece of yellow paper that had been under his rear wiper, he had gone back to the park every day at the same time. He sat on the appointed bench, with the appropriate air of waiting for someone, making eye contact with strangers as they passed, turning toward every footstep. But no one stopped to talk to him.

Wilson had talked to Grayson and he had reluctantly agreed to keep his mouth shut. They would work on this together, maybe bring in an outside mind or two, but if anything happened, and Wilson had no reason to believe it wouldn’t, they would have a plan.

Grayson had sat there dumbstruck. His mouth hung open. “You mean a cover-up?”

Wilson had convinced him that it wasn’t a cover-up but a redirecting. Different injuries could look like others. Bears could be blamed.

The man could have done that to himself as part of a morning ritual and the bear had attacked.

Whatever the case, that fire was out for now. The meeting was all that matter.

And the devastating part was that he had a lot riding on this meeting. He was hoping to find some answers to the recent killings but no one was coming around. This was ridiculous. He couldn’t believe he’d been duped.

Then again, maybe the person that had the information he was waiting for was waiting for the right opportunity. Maybe someone he knew was nearby.

Wilson looked around trying to see anyone that looked out of place or looked away when he made eye contact with them. There wasn’t anyone out today, not really. There was a woman walking a ridiculously small dog wearing an equally ridiculous fur-lined nylon vest. The dog looked uncomfortable in the getup and took chances to sit down and paw at the vest.

A man reclined on a nylon folding chair with a built-in foot rest. He was reading a book, taking in the last rays of warm sun for months to come.

Wilson yawned. He had been getting by on far too few hours of sleep. He stretched and wished he had a footrest like the man in the chair. He looked so comfortable.

Wilson shook his head. He was getting really tired. This was odd, he’d had a few cups of coffee this afternoon. He would normally be wired until about seven or eight in the evening, ready to take on whatever obstacle came his way.

Instead, his eyes felt heavy.

Then.

He was walking through the woods. It was not the same woods where the body had been found. He didn’t know how he knew that, but the woods were different. They were greener, the air was cleaner.

Then, there was movement up ahead. An animal or something sprinted away. Wilson broke out into a quick run. The thing he was chasing looked like a person, but also like an animal. The vision was not clear.

The animal sprinted toward the left and Wilson stopped. He watched the creature bound off into the distance. He then turned toward a path. He was hungry in his dream but nothing would seem to satisfy him.

In his dream, he walked for a long time. Sometimes something would flash across his vision and he would track it as it ran away, but he never gave chase, not like that first time.

He could hear laughter, children playing some sort of game. A dog barked. The sound of running shoes slapping against the blacktop. The tick of a bicycle chain as it went past on the other side of the trees.

His pace changed to a slow shuffle-step through the woods. He pushed leaves aside. A bench sat across the path. A man slept on it.

Wilson looked to his left and right, he saw a man lying asleep on a nylon chair. Then he turned his attention to the man on the bench. He was facing away from the woods.

Then, Wilson came up behind the man. The balding head with black hair ringed around the edges looked familiar. He leaned over and sniffed. Then he took a deep inhale of air and could smell fear.

In his dream, he went around to the other side of the bench and put his face right into the man’s face. Then the face became clear. Wilson stared directly at his sleeping form. He took in one more breath. Yes, he was very hungry and found what could feed him. He felt the saliva collecting in his mouth. His tongue burned with the desire to taste the flesh. He opened his mouth. He could feel sharp fangs against his lips as his mouth stretched open.

He leaned toward his own sleeping form. Inhaled at the throat and opened wide.

At that, Wilson’s eyes shot open. He blinked at the contrast. In is dream and when he was awake, it had been bright and cheery. Now, dusk was settling into the night.

The man that had been sleeping on the chair was gone. The lady with the dog, nowhere. A chill went through his body. He looked around, then down at the spot where he, as the creature had stood. There were no impressions on the ground, where the thing had stood. Why would there be? It was just a dream.

He rubbed his eyes. He had been working in this thing for too long over too many sleepless nights. His mind was playing tricks on him, inventing things.

Then he felt a cold rush over him. He put his hands down onto the bench and steadied himself. His hand rested on the edge of a piece of paper held to the bench by a small stone.

He looked down at it. Considered ripping it from the bench but stopped himself and looked around to see if anyone was watching.

It was hard to see if anyone was in the distance and there certainly wasn’t anyone nearby. He scooted to his left, turned, and feigned adjusting his shoe. As he did so, he grabbed the piece of paper, and pushed it into his sock.

No one would be the wiser. He pushed himself off the bench and felt pins and needles rushing through his legs. He wobbled there for a moment, stamped a few times, then headed back to his car.

He drove home without turning on the radio and went right upstairs despite his wife’s interest in where he’d been. He knew she trusted him but right now everything else was just noise.

Upstairs, he went into the master bedroom, closed the door behind him, then went into the master bath. He clicked the light on, then the fan, and closed the door. For good measure, he locked that too. With trembling hands, he unfolded the paper. There were three lines scrawled across the paper in a reddish ink.

You have done well.

I will reveal my plan soon.

Someone will come to see you.

The paper shook in his hands as he read the note a few times. Then he ripped it into pieces, tossed these into the trash can, and sat on the edge of the garden tub.

His breath came in jerking motions. He stared at the yellow slivers of paper in the wicker basket and thought. Either this was real, or someone was playing a prank on him. One thing was certain, he couldn’t have that paper in the house.

He knelt on the floor next to the toilet, fished the yellow papers out of the mixture of bathroom garbage and then dropped the shreds into the toilet. Then, just to be certain, he dumped the papers from the trash can and dug through them. There were a couple of tissues, some used cotton swabs and some cotton balls with makeup smeared on them. He’d gotten all the paper.

Then he cleaned that up and flushed the toilet.

Just as the papers were going down, the water stopped spinning and then rose.

His wife knocked on the door. “Are you okay in there?” She jiggled the handle.

He coughed. “Yeah, just fine. The toilets clogged.”

“I meant to tell you that. Did it overflow?”

“Almost.” He dug through the closet. The plunger wasn’t there.

She jiggled the handle again. “What’s going on? Why’s the door locked?”

He pushed the lid shut as she tried the handle again, then opened the door.

“Are you okay?”

“I guess I locked it. I’ll get the plunger.”

She bent to lift the lid. He pushed it down. He couldn’t think of anything to say. “I’ll take care of it.”

He went downstairs and rummaged through the closet in the downstairs water closet.

When he got back upstairs, his wife still stood in the bathroom, but the lid was open. Sweat sprang out in his armpits. His lower back soaked. She stared into the bowl and shook her head.

He went in and almost pushed her aside, hoping the strips had not reformed themselves or something else. There were probably letters readable. What would she think?

Then, he looked down into the toilet. The water still sat high, but the papers were gone.

“Excuse me. This might get messy.” He gently pushed her aside and unclogged the toilet. As soon as the water cycled out, he had a momentary fear that something would come floating to the top. But nothing happened.

When he flushed the toilet this time, the water went down.

She put her hands on his shoulder, then clasped them before her chest. “My hero.”

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The man stared directly at Rusty. He could feel the eyes on him. The stare felt familiar. He thrust his hand into his pocket and ran his finger along the edge of the key. The ridges bit into his thumb as he pressed against the metal in his pocket.

“Excuse me, sir?” He turned toward the woman at the desk.

“I’m sorry.” He shook his head. “I was daydreaming. Where you talking to me? I can drift off sometime.”

She smiled, but the smile had a bit of an edge to it, as if she had been on shift all day and was biding her time until evening. Her tone told the story. “I said, ‘Can I help you?’.”

He pulled his hand out of his pocket. Now that he was here, he felt the urge to run out the door. The pull was overwhelming. “No, sorry. I’m meeting a friend. She’s upstairs.” He turned toward the bank of elevators.

Maybe because of how he had been standing there staring at Rusty, or maybe she just wanted to talk to the man one more time, the girl behind the counter said, “I can right your friend if you need me to. Let her know you’re here.”

The man smiled. His smile showed that he too was hiding a deep-rooted feeling that was encouraged by the day. “I want it to be a surprise.” He winked and then went over to the elevator doors.

He pushed the button for the fifth floor even though his room was on the sixth. If the girl behind the counter happened to be watching the elevator to see which floor it stopped on, he didn’t want to give any indication that he was staying on the sixth. Sure, he could have taken the stairs, but he was already heading to the elevators and he didn’t think that adding to the receptionist’s memory of him if he stopped and then took the stairs was the best course of action.

Besides, if the guy at the table was as bold in the lighted hotel lobby as he was in the dark woods, the man could have some trouble.

The bell rang, indicating the fifth floor. He stepped out of the car and looked both ways down the hall. Each end had a bright-red sign reading Exit. Since there was no one coming down the hall, he headed toward the closer set of stairs and climbed to the sixth floor.

When he got to his room, he again checked down the hallway for the guy from the dining room. He wasn’t being followed. At least not yet. He let himself into the room.

The Do Not Disturb sign still hung from the door. He exhaled, hopeful the sign had been followed. He pushed the door closed behind him, closed his eyes and sniffed.

The room did not have an odor of cleaning chemicals. There was a slight musty or earthy smell. The indication that the room clearly had not been cleaned was the bedspread hanging from the shower curtain rod.

The red handprint was gone. The bedspread was dry.

He settled onto the bed. It felt right. But he couldn’t be here. He had to work tomorrow. He didn’t have enough money to pay for the room.

There was a knock at the door.

The man froze. It was too late for room service. As he stood, to head to the door, an envelope slid under the crack in the door.

He closed his eyes again. This time reaching out with the sense he seemed to grow. There wasn’t anyone on the other side of the door. No one was waiting.

He could sense a man walking down the hall, most likely the deliverer of the letter. A couple settling in to bed next door. The man looking for the remote. Other than that, nothing.

He balked that he ever wanted to be without this power. Why ever leave the lakes region?

Because the desires were wrong, he thought. But that thought left his head like a wisp of air.

He stared down at the envelope. It was a plain white envelope with the logo of the Grand Vista Hotel in the corner. He felt that he knew what was in it before ever picking it up.

He lifted the envelope from the floor and tore open the edge. There was a single piece of yellow paper with blue lines in it. The paper was folded in three and he could see distinct writing on it.

He pressed the edges of the envelope to flare out the edges and tilted it down. The paper fluttered out and he caught it before it fell to the ground.

He dragged out the chair at the writing desk and sat on it, then placed the paper, still folded on the smooth, glass top. He didn’t want to open the paper, but felt an overwhelming compulsion to do so.

The paper sat on the desk, untouched for a few minutes as he stared at it. Then, with shaking hands, he reached for it and unfolded it.

Three words, in a very messy scrawl read, Come see me. Then a symbol beneath that, it looked a little like a hand-drawn fingerprint. He stood and picked up the room phone and looked at the receiver.

He wanted to call to the desk, see if the person that asked for this note to be delivered was still around. But most likely it had been prearranged somehow.

Instead of calling, he dropped the handset back onto the cradle and crumpled the paper into a ball. He dropped the paper into the wastebasket and sat on the bed. He didn’t want to leave, but he didn’t want to stay.

Something inside of him was telling him this was the right place to be. It was getting late. If he was going to drive back home, he would have to leave soon so he could get to bed at a decent hour and still wake up for work.

He laid back on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

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Crystal stopped what she was saying and stared at Rusty. “What just happened?”

Rusty blinked a couple of times, shook his head and then smiled. “I thought I saw someone. That I knew.”

Crystal turned around and looked into the empty lobby. If she had been a little faster she would have seen the man walking toward the bank of elevators but her focus had been spent on Rusty.

“Sorry. What were you saying?”

She smiled the way someone smiles when a stranger’s child tells a meandering story. The smile was sincere, but did not convey the whole truth.

Rusty focused on her eyes. “Honestly. I’m sorry. I’ll have to tell you about it, but not right now.”

She nodded, took a deep breath and said, “No. I don’t really believe in ghosts. Do you?”

“That’s hard. I didn’t before, but sometimes, if I happen to work late in the summer and walk home in the dark, sometimes I feel like I’m not alone on the street.”

“Everyone gets like that sometimes.”

He nodded. “But. Sometimes I might see something out of the corner of my eye. Something that looks like a person.”

“Same thing. It’s just your mind playing tricks on you.”

He leaned further across the table. “Do you ever get the feeling that someone is watching you?”

“Who doesn’t?”

“The reason that I spaced out a minute ago was because there was someone I thought I’d seen before, standing in the lobby. He was staring right at me. Almost like he was looking inside me.”

Crystal laughed. “That’s spooky.”

They both looked up as a couple entered the dining room and was inexplicably seated just a table away in the relatively empty dining room.

Rusty would have told the tale from start to finish but the couple was far too close.

“After we eat, I’ll tell you some more.”

The food was brought out a moment later and Rusty was glad to have the distraction of eating so he didn’t have to think about the man and the previous night.

They ate, commenting on the quality of the meal numerous times. Rusty enjoyed his grilled pork loin and Crystal here baked chicken.

There were lulls in the conversation as they were both savoring their meal, but Rusty did not feel the need to fill the silence. They shared a special bond already and the need to talk during every silence was no longer felt.

At the end of the meal, Rusty felt a dread in the coming telling of the previous night’s events. On one side, he wanted to tell her everything. On the other hand, he didn’t want to sound like a lunatic.

The check came, and despite his protesting, she did not let him pay for a single bit of the meal.

“This one’s courtesy of this gift certificate.” She handed the envelope with the check and the gift certificated inside, to the waiter and looked at Rusty. “I appreciate you coming out here with me tonight.”

“I don’t mind. Really. I mean. I had fun. Too.”

She laughed. “Let’s not go that far.” Then, in reaction to his furrowed brow she said, “Sorry, that was a bad joke. I had a great evening. Am still having a great evening.”

Rusty’s brow changed from furrowed to comfortable. It had been a long time since he was able to joke around with a girl and not feel the pressure to try to be something he was not.

As they walked out into the night, Rusty felt like he should be grabbing her hand, but it wouldn’t be right, she had just broken up with Greg and he didn’t want to across too strong.

They walked in silence, though completely comfortable for Rusty, until they came to a small bench along the path. It was just enough out of the way to be considered private, but not too private to be as though they were hiding something.

The night was cool and Rusty wished he had a jacket, just so he could offer it to Crystal. It seemed like the right thing to do. He leaned back, rested his arm across the back of the bench and let Crystal make the next move.

Despite her move, he wouldn’t expect anything. He didn’t even know where this was going. Were they going to drift apart once the memory of the happenings here recently faded away? What was he to her?

After a moment of staring at the stars Rusty said, “I want to tell you something.”

She looked up into the night sky, the back of her head resting on his arm. It was close but not intimate. “What’s that?”

“When we were sitting in the restaurant, I froze.”

“I noticed.”

“There was a reason.” He turned to her and looked into her face.

“What was it?”

He took a deep breath. He didn’t know how this was going to sound. It would sound a little spooky at least. “I saw someone that I recognized but I don’t know.”

“Yeah? I hate when that happens.”

He shook his head. “This wasn’t a good recognition. And I think he recognized me too.”

She frowned. “Okay.”

“See. It’s like this. After I left your apartment last night, I kind of walked in a daze. I guess it’s no surprise I had a thing for your sister.”

“I had a feeling. I think you two would have been good together.”

That stung him a little, but not as much as it would have last week. “Well. Thanks. I, I don’t know. That’s not important. Anyway, I was walking and thinking. My brain kind of took over and I sort of woke up at that park near the inlet.”

“Yeah, I’ve been to a few picnics there. They have a sand pit right?”

“That’s the one. So I was sitting there under the broken light. It was late when I left your place, but I don’t know how late it really was. And this man walks by. And I followed him.”

The words dragged out slowly. “Okay. That’s kinda weird.” She smiled and nudged him in the side to let him know she was kidding.

“Yeah, and stupid.”

“That too. What made you follow him?”

“I’d seen him before. The night, umm. That night.”

“Okay.”

He pulled his arm from the back of the bench and leaned over. She had shifted and was sitting closer, but no longer resting her head on his arm. “That same guy was coming out of the woods. I didn’t see him do anything that night but I’d seen your sister go into the woods then that guy come out. This was before you saw her.”

He took a deep breath. He knew this sounded crazy but it had to be said. If they were going to be friends, he needed to be honest with her. “Anyway, last night, I followed the guy and I was quiet. I mean cat burglar quiet.”

He paused, letting things sink in. “I don’t know what I was planning, but I wanted to do something. Well, after following him for a while, he stopped in the road and was looking to his left and right. It was really dark and I couldn’t see what he was looking at. But then he turned around and sprinted right for me.”

Crystal let out a nervous laugh. “I think I would have peed my pants.”

He laughed then too. “I’m not sure I didn’t.”

“Gross.”

“Well, when I saw him running, I bolted to the woods. I was hoping he didn’t see me following and maybe was thinking about something else. Maybe he remembered he had to be somewhere.

“Well, I ended up falling asleep for like an hour or so. And when I woke up, I knew it was safe. So I went walking, it was still dark. I didn’t look around. But, as I was walking, I saw these two red points of light out of the corner of my eye. Like someone was holding a little flashlight that was covered in red paper. I turned my head and looked out the corner of my eye and the red eyes, cause that’s what I’m sure they were, sort of faded into the night. Like the didn’t disappear as if someone was closing their eyes, the red, almost evaporated.”

Crystal shook in her seat. “That gave me chills. Are you trying to scare me?”

He shook his head. “That’s not all. The man I was following last night, the man I saw coming out of the woods. Maybe the man with red eyes, he was the same guy in the lobby of the hotel.”

“Have you told anyone else about this?”

“No one would believe me. I’ve only told you and I wasn’t planning on saying anything until I saw that guy in the lobby.”

“Do you think he’s connected? To,” she trailed off.

“I don’t know. If he is, he can’t leave town. The thing is, I never saw his face either night. But it was the way he walked. And a feeling.”

“Like what?”

“You ever feel like someone is looking inside you?”

She shivered again. “Spooky.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

“Well, that’s the feeling I got. Both when he ran toward me and when he showed up in the lobby tonight.”

She stood up, he stood next to her. “What do you think we should do about it?”

He thought for a long time as they walked aimlessly. “I don’t know that we can do anything about it. I don’t think I trust Chief Grayson.”

“Why is that?”

“I went to school with his son. You can tell a lot about someone based on their children.”

“If he has anything to do with her death, he’s gonna have to pay for it.”

“Yeah. But how can we prove anything?”

The conversation, at least on matters of the mysterious man, trailed off. They talked about hopes and dreams and nothing really.

They walked onward and eventually they were standing in front of Crystal’s apartment.

Rusty stood there, looking up at the building. Crystal looked down. She’d been quite most of the walk. He could tell she was thinking about things and the way they happened these last few days. Then she said, “I’m really tired. I had fun tonight.”

“I did too. I’d like to do it again. If you’re up for it I mean.”

She leaned in and gave him a hug. “That would be nice.”

He hugged her back, walked her to her door and held the door open as she walked in.

He went down to the street and looked toward the window. The living room light clicked on. She’d made it inside.

Rusty turned. A dark figure stood in the distance. The hairs on his arm stood on end. He blinked and the figure was gone.

A moment later, a cool air moved down his back. A door slammed somewhere behind him but he couldn’t pinpoint it. As he looked all around him he found nothing. He bowed to the urge to run home.

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In the dark, the man once again saw and heard all. He watched the follower come out of the apartment. He watched the girl meander around the rooms she rented. He could feel the eyes upon him even while hiding in the darkness.

Something was moving inside him and he was ready to listen to the voice.

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Greg too sat in the darkness. He could only see the lights on in the apartment but he knew what she had done. He clenched his fist and looked down at his right hand. A small knife was clutched in his hand. He did not remember picking it up. He blinked at this, then dropped it.

He quickly picked it up. He didn’t want a knife with his fingerprints found near her place. He blinked and realized where he was but didn’t remember how he got there. He turned and walked down the street toward his apartment.

A knife like this wouldn’t do. He would need something else.

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Crystal sat down on the sofa after barely closing the door. It latched, but if it latched the whole way, she was oblivious to it. She pulled a pillow that still smelled like her sister’s shampoo up to her face and cried.

She’d had a great night, but she missed her sister. And if this guy walking around had anything to do with her disappearance, she would want to do something about it.

The dog, Misty, jumped up on the couch and sat next to her. “Oh, you want to go out for a walk don’t you?”

Misty stood up, her tail wagging. Crystal wiped her finger under her eye, drying the tear. She pushed herself off the couch and grabbed the leash.

When they were downstairs, the dog was already yanking the leash and almost choking herself. Mrs. Johns opened the main door. She was holding a couple of canvas bags of groceries but still found the courtesy to hold the door for Crystal.

Crystal thanked her and followed the dog as she pulled. She got down to the bottom step and the door slammed behind her. She patted her pocket. She swore. She’d left her keys upstairs.

She stood there, looking at the door, considering heading back up the set of stairs and getting Mrs. Johns attention before walking the dog. But Mrs. Johns was getting her groceries put away. It could wait.

Misty wouldn’t be long in her business. She would sniff a few times, squat, and be done. Female dogs weren’t like that.

Crystal scolded herself for thinking that. Misty sniffed at every clump of bushes on the short dead-end street. She squatted more than once, apparently spreading her scent in many yards. “Come on.”

Misty ignored her and pulled Crystal down the street. There was a yard that particularly interested her. The owners had three dogs and a cat and when Misty was close, the house came alive with noises. Misty loved to bark at the house, then pee in the yard. She always faced the house as if daring the dogs to come after her.

“Can you hurry? I’m cold.” Crystal rubbed her hands on her bare arms. In her haste and grief, she hadn’t even brought a light coat. “Did my sister put up with this?”

Misty looked up at Crystal, wagged her tail, then pulled further down the street.

Crystal felt bad about not walking her at her normal time, so she put up with the cold. They were walking down toward the darker end of the street. The street lights were farther apart here and it was always a little unnerving, even in the summer.

Now, with the nights getting cooler, the bugs were quieter. Most of the night animals that were out were also silent ones. There weren’t any frogs to sing for a mate. The owls and other night birds had already found their pairs. In fact, many of the mammals that would usually pepper the night with noises were either somewhere else, or finding places to hibernate. It wasn’t cold enough for all of them to lay down for the long winter, but some may have been getting a head start.

Crystal stopped in front of another yard and squinted in the dark to see if Misty was pooping or not. A small roll of bags was in a container on the leash and she was pulling one out, ready to pick up the dogs offering. But, it was another false alarm.

Shivering from the cold, Crystal looked back toward the apartment building. She had a hard time calling it hers, it had been her sisters for so long. Her eyes teared up at that thought. Then she saw that the street light in front of her apartment, the ever illuminated light that shone into the bedroom at night, no matter how thick the blinds, was dark.

She reasoned with herself, maybe it was just cycled off for a little bit. Sometimes the lights did that. It was a cost saving matter. Wasn’t it?

She yanked the leash again. The small dog tags tinkled in the night. Misty let out a grunt. She was sniffing. “Come on.”

Finally, the dog produced and Crystal bent over to retrieve the mess. They could go in. She could continue her crying session. The night would get back to order.

As she stood up, she was looking at the stand of trees across the street. There were a few times a small group of deer had stood on the other side of the trees watching as she and Joan walked Misty down here. It got to be where they could talk and not spook the deer away.

The deer were not there tonight but Misty still wanted to investigate before heading in. Then, out of the corner of her eye, the streetlight in front of her apartment building clicked on.

Crystal turned that way, drawn by the light like a politician to a baby and blinked. A dark figure stood directly under the circle of light.

Her breath caught in her throat. She stopped the scream that would have escaped and blinked again. The figure was gone. She wiped her hand across her face. “You’re seeing things Crystal.”

She took a deep breath and yanked on the leash to pull Misty toward home. “You’re done. Come on.”

Crystal patted her pockets again, wishing she had brought a flashlight at least. It wasn’t so much for her protection as to find the turds in the yard. Now she wanted the comfort that more light would bring.

Then, up ahead, in another ring of a streetlamp, another figure stood, facing her.

Crystal’s hands were shaking and the dog was not moving fast enough. Now, instead of quietly coaxing the dog with a slight tug, she put more weight into it and pulled Misty from her stance. The dog grunted as she was pulled but moved along anyway, her nose was to the ground. She could sniff as they walked and she would be happy at that.

Except Crystal didn’t plan on letter her make any more stops. She felt so dumb for leaving her keys on the table next to the door. She wished she had them now, not just to get back in, but to use them as an aid in punching. She could slide one key in between each finger and have a sharp pointed fist.

As she walked, she stayed on the far side of the road that she had walked down, thinking that if a street separated her from whomever was walking down it, she had that much of a better chance to run.

But now, she could hear footsteps. There was no body attached to these steps and they were out of sync with hers so it wasn’t possible that she was hearing her own steps.

She pulled the leash again. Even though Misty was moving, it wasn’t fast enough.

Crystal broke into a run toward her apartment. It was odd to be walking toward the danger but she had no choice. She didn’t know any of the people down at this end of the street and behind her was a vast stretch of trees that she would quickly get lost in, or hurt.

She was working on convincing herself that she’d either seen something, or it was someone out for a night walk, perhaps someone that lived on the street.

When she finally made it to a street lamp, she felt no safer, in fact, she felt as though she were a large target, the limping zebra for the lion to take down even though it wasn’t hungry.

Despite that feeling, she felt reluctance to move out of the protective light. But she was almost home. Maybe the dark figure had also gone home?

Then Misty started to growl. Not the low growl that she often expressed when she was playing but a deep growl meant to warn off danger.

The leash went taut as Misty pulled toward the darkness ahead.

Then Misty barked. The loudness, and unusualness, sent a chill through Crystal’s bones that made her want to drop the leash and run home. That wouldn’t have been fair, but she didn’t care at this moment.

“I can’t see you. But if you’re there, know that my boyfriend will be out in a minute.”

Crystal thought she heard deep breathing, like that of an animal revving its internal motor, readying to attack. She backed away from that noise.

It was the wrong way. She wanted to go home. But she couldn’t see what was in front of her. The dog knew. Misty continued to growl.

“I have a knife,” Crystal said and put her hand in her pocket. She felt the smooth outline of a lip balm tube and pulled that out.

Misty barked again. She pulled at the leash. Crystal backed away from the edge of the darkness again.

Then the streetlight clicked out. There was an audible pop as it shut off.

Misty started barking as if surrounded by a thousand cats. There were approaching footsteps. Crystal couldn’t decide which way to run. She was about to scream when a car came over the small crest of the hill at the end of the road and shone its headlights right at Crystal. A shadow passed before her and headed into the woods at her side.

Crystal took this moment to run. She dragged the dog behind her who was still growling and barking. She didn’t care if she had to drag the dog along the ground, she was getting home no matter what.

Then the dog finally capitulated and Crystal was able to break into a run.

She was on her porch and ringing the bell for Mrs. Johns apartment. Crystal watched the car drive down the road. The red taillights blinking on as the car slowed.

Crystal rang again. Then knocked on the shared lobby door. “Come on.”

She could see Mrs. Johns’ door but the light from it was not spilling into the lobby.

She glanced back down the street. The car had stopped. Its headlights illuminated the dark beyond and the deer were slowly making their way across the street.

The red taillights illuminating the dark behind. And a dark figure stood in their light.

Now Crystal was banging against the door. “Come on. Mrs. Johns? Are you there?”

A cool wind blew down on Crystal. She rang the bell again. Pounded again. The streetlight in front of the apartment went black. Crystal turned and thought she heard a crunch of a footstep on gravel in the driveway.

Misty started barking in a frenzy again. Cool air enveloped her. Then, the sound of a footstep on sidewalk.

Crystal turned to bang on the door again and Mrs. Johns yanked the door open.

Crystal tumbled in, yanked the dog in, and shoved the door closed. At the same time, something banged on the outside of the door. Crystal felt it shove, then give away. Misty barked once, then fell silent.

“Oh my. Crystal, what’s wrong?”

Crystal’s breath came in rasping heaves. She couldn’t form words.

“Did you forget your keys?”

Crystal nodded and started to cry. Her adrenaline was kicking in and all the emotions from the night tumbled down upon her.

Mrs. Johns put her arms around her. “I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner. My buzzer doesn’t work and I was in the kitchen putting my shopping away.”

Crystal nodded, she pushed herself away and wiped her hand across her eyes. “It’s okay. Next time, there’s a hid-a-key in the rocks. I’ll show you tomorrow when it’s lighter.”

Crystal nodded again. She was still staring at the door. Misty was facing the door, but no longer growling or barking. She looked up at Crystal then sat on the floor. It was as if she was thinking not this again.

Crystal got control of herself and hugged Mrs. Johns tight. “I thought someone was following me. I guess I’m still paranoid. You know, after my sister-”

“You don’t need to say anything. I understand. As much as I can at least.” She went to the door and put her hand on the knob.

Crystal put her hands up. “Please don’t.”

Mrs. Johns dropped her hand from the brass knob and pulled the curtain aside. “Whatever or whoever it was, their gone now.”

Crystal forced a smile. “Thank you.” She turned, and headed upstairs.

Oddly, when she got to her apartment, she saw that her front door was cracked open. The apartment was dark. She toed the door open and reached inside to click the light on.

The yellow glow was not inviting or comforting. She pulled Misty in and grabbed her keys. It was the only weapon she had at hand.

She went through the whole apartment, keeping Misty on the leash in case she needed the dog to be a protector, and turned on all the lights. The apartment was empty.

She went back to the living room and sat on the couch again. Eventually, she would sleep. But not soon.

She turned on the television for some ambient noise and watched the door.

Downstairs, the front door opened, then closed. Footsteps echoed up the stairs.

\*

When Rusty finally got home, the apartment was dark. Normally that wouldn’t bother him but tonight, things were different. He’d been too close to the man tonight. He could feel the man’s gaze upon him.

Something would have to be done. He was sure about that. For some reason, he wanted to call Crystal and let her know that he made it home. He wanted the calm a nice chat with her would bring. But after dialing her number, he hung up before the exchange had time to connect.

She wouldn’t want to talk to me. He headed to his back room and grabbed a book he was plodding through. He read a page, then another and set the book aside. He put his hand on the phone. It rang.

He let the phone ring once more and picked it up. On the other end, he could hear breathing and a slight murmuring. “Hello?”

The breathing on the other end stopped. Then a quiet whisper was overtaken by a dog barking.

“Hello?”

He heard a sound as if the phone had been dropped then it dragged across the floor. The cord must have caught it. Then there was more barking and the sound of screaming and something metal smashing against a hard surface. Then the sound of glass breaking.

Then, there were so many sounds at once that it seemed like there were 100 sound designers from a movie competing to make a compelling soundtrack.

As he listened, he tightened his grip on the phone willing for an answer to come from the other end. He kept yelling into the phone but the person on the other end never picked up the phone again.

Then, the sound stopped. There was quick breath on the other end as if someone was listening. Rusty pressed the phone close to his head. “Hello?”

The phone clicked in his ear and the dial tone hummed.

Without confirmation, Rusty knew it was Crystal who tried to call him. He pulled his jacket on and ran outside. It may be too late, but he could make something happen. Maybe.

He ran as fast as he could, adrenaline pumping through his veins made the running easier. He’d never felt so energized. When he finally made it to the apartment, thing were a little different. All the windows in the place were broken, the lights inside were dark.

He ran up to the door and started knocking on it but nothing happened. He tried to knob but it melted in his hand. He looked down at the piece of metal that had turned to goo. He pushed against the door and it fell open.

Then he jerked awake. It was morning and he was sitting on his couch with the partially read book laying by his side.

The chills from the dream did not leave him. He got up, pinching his arm. He was awake this time. He looked at his clock. He had to get to work. If he didn't get there on time, then things could go bad. He needed this job and he also needed to talk to Crystal.

He jumped into the shower, skipped shaving, and headed out the door. He'd call Crystal from work.

When he got there, Susan was smiling as she looked at the clock. “So, I see you had a good date.”

“It isn't that. We did go out, but we talked for a little and,” he almost told her about being chased by the man, but decided against it, “I got home late. I actually fell asleep reading. My alarm wasn't even turned on.”

She nodded as she smiled, then winked. Rusty was glad for such a good friend in the office, but he couldn't bring himself to tell her about the man and the fear he’d felt last night. That seemed a little too intimate of a subject, to talk about fear. And besides, she would be telling him about the movie she saw the night before in a few minutes. Monday night was always movie night at her house. She would regale him with the story even if he had seen the movie. More irritatingly was when she would tell him the plot of a movie he hoped to see.

Instead of waiting for her to move into the next subject, or belabor the one they were on, he said, “So, tell me about the movie you saw last night.”

For the next fifteen minutes he sat, listening to the plot and not absorbing a word. She talked animatedly, doing voices, and acting out parts but nothing stuck with him besides the smile.

When she was done, he was able to sit at his desk and gather his thoughts. At this time, almost every Monday she would head to the coffee shop around the corner, grab a cup and maybe a box of day old doughnuts. While she was gone, he could call Crystal and that would be it. Susan would never know and could get on with her day too.

He looked up from his desk as the bell over the door rang. If Susan said she was stepping out, he didn't hear. He was trying to look like he was working but the only thing he could think about was his dream.

He dialed her number and waited as the phone rang six, seven, eight times. She wasn't there.

Then a cold feeling traveled down his spine. The eerie feeling he had last night, the slamming door.

He hoped it was a coincidence but something told him it was not. But it was a workday. She could be at work. He shook his head. She’d said that she was taking a few days off to get everything straight in her life, she was even thinking about moving away from town. She didn't have much here any longer.

Rusty stood and paced the small space behind his desk. He walked back and forth and over to the window until he saw Susan coming around the corner with her coffee cup in hand. Then he raced back to his seat so he could look unassuming.

When the bell over the door jangled he fought the urge to stand up, instead, waiting for her to get situated and then he would have his moment of remembering.

As soon as she was settled, he stood up and smacked his hand on his forehead. “I forgot, I was supposed to meet someone in ten minutes.”

Susan rifled through her papers and the calendar. “I don't have anything on the schedule today.”

“This one isn't your fault. I met this guy a couple of days ago. He was up from the city and wanted to talk. I forgot all about it.” He grabbed his briefcase, shoved a few brochures in and went through the door before she could raise any more questions.

He got to his car and tossed the case into the back and pulled out of his parking space. Unlike many days, he decided to drive simply because he didn't want to have to walk in the forecast rain.

He rounded the corner and pulled onto Crystal’s street. He stopped at the top. There was a police car at the apartment building.

\*

The man was sitting at his desk at work. He had a pile of papers to sort through but his mind was elsewhere. Last night had been a long night, but he was glad he got to experience it first-hand. He was so happy not to have had another blackout.

He was beginning to enjoy these late night sessions. There was so much power in his hands and his movements that he could feel the strength running through him. It felt fantastic.

He was smiling when Hal walked by but pretended to be sorting through a large stake of papers so as to not have to get into a conversation.

He lifted a hand to Hal as he walked by the door then went back to his musings.

If he really thought about it, really got down to things, he would admit that he enjoyed messing with the guy who had been following him. It was fun. The guy’s buttons were easy to push. All he had to do was do a little reaching with his mind and he could influence something one the guy.

The girl, she was a different story. She wasn’t as easy to influence. Sure, he scared her last night, but she wasn’t deterred for long. Maybe it was her loss that made her stronger, maybe it was the dog. He didn’t know but he did know that he would ask to take care of her in the future.

Now that was a good idea. He could take care of her. The potential things swept through his mind and he dwelt on them for little longer than he would have only a week before. Then his mind sort of fractured. Who would he ask? Why would he ask? He wasn’t led by anyone, was he?

Then, he shifted his gaze to another piece of paper on his desk. And then the picture of his wife, which he still hadn’t removed from his desk, poked at the things that used to matter to him.

They were going to have children, they were going to travel. He would open a business, she would manage the store, or whatever the business turned into.

But she was dead and those things could never happen. Not now.

He could only focus on the things that he had now. This new reach, this taste of power that he’d never felt before.

The girl would be interesting. The follower was just a nuisance.

Someone knocked on the door to his office and he looked up, anticipating Hal and ready to give an excuse as to why he could not go out to lunch. But it wasn’t Hal, it was a woman he’d only seen once from across the break room during a morning meeting.

They’d made eye contact and he had probably smiled to her. That was a couple of weeks ago and he couldn’t remember seeing her in the interval.

“Hi. Can I bother you for a second?”

The man blinked and nodded. “Sure. What do you need?”

“I’m Meredith. Hal told me that you could show me around.”

He tilted his head like a dog does when trying to discover the true meaning of what is being asked. “Haven’t you been around here for a while?”

“No. I just started.”

“I could have sworn I saw you during a meeting in the break room.”

“Yeah, that was the day of my interview. Hal asked me to stick around for it and then we could talk about what I heard. I was so confused. I didn’t know what was being talked about but it helped me in my interview I guess.” She smiled.

He nodded. “I guess it did.”

She stood there, looking at the pile of papers on his desk and then at the floor. “I guess. If you’re too busy, I could come back later.”

He pushed the papers aside and said, “No. I can always make time for the new guy. Or girl. What department are you working in?”

“I’m in accounting.”

“Ah, one of us.” He pushed himself up from the desk and walked her around the building. He introduced her to some of the staff. He showed her the best places to get a few minutes to yourself if things get crazy, and he showed her the company commissary.

“So, do you eat lunch in here?” she said.

“Sometimes. Other times I either eat off site with a client or at my desk.”

“Will you be around today?”

Now that was odd. Was she flirting or was she connecting because she didn’t know anyone else?

“I haven’t decided yet.” But at that moment he did decide, he would show up for lunch and see what happened.

When he sat down at the lunch table, he pretended not to look around but saw her coming over to sit with him. He pretended to be very interested in his bean salad that he didn't seem to notice her until she was standing over him.

“Anyone sitting here?” She said.

He pushed the chair opposite out from the table with his foot. “Be my guest.” He looked up at her and smiled.

She slid her tray onto the table. “This place is crazy but reminds me of high school a little bit too. I have to know, are you a jock or a nerd? I need to get into the right crowd.”

For the first time in a long while, he laughed. “Sorry to say I’m in the nerd crowd.”

“Don't be sorry. That's the right crowd.”

They ate their meal and filled the time with chatter with plenty of getting to know each other questions. He didn't let her know that he had been married and that his wife had died. It was too early for that.

Just like she didn't talk about her life outside of the work sphere. After lunch, they went their separate ways and only passed each other once as he was going to the copier and she was heading down the hall toward the ladies room.

As he sat at home that evening, he realized, after seeing a mug from a coffee shop in Lake Grand Vista, that he hadn't thought about this weekend for the rest of the day.

In fact, he’d only thought about work and a little about Meredith. But as he thought about her, something inside told him that he shouldn't get too close. It wasn't a voice in his head, the notion came from a voice within him.

\*

Jack Morrison, whose land bordered Lake Grand Vista, decided that he would till the land before the winter snows brought some minerals to the soil that would be washed away in the first thaw.

There were many people that thought he was wasting his time but he always felt like the soil quality was better when the moisture was low.

He was happy for one thing, that he didn’t have to plant to provide for his family. There wasn’t enough growing land and the season was much too short. He planted and harvested for the fun and the learning process.

Jack enjoyed the smell of the soil as it turned, the sound of the tiller as it worked through the earth, and the look of the field after the ground had been turned. He felt as though there was a newness to the field, an acre of possibilities.

He was thinking about the possibilities as he woke long before the sun and ate his breakfast. The possibilities went through his mind as he drank his coffee while watching the morning come alive. And the possibilities were about to become fact, at least in his mind, as he headed to the field while most people were still hitting the snooze alarm.

But it became completely evident that today was different and the possibilities were just lofty dreams. He was coming across rock after rock and had to stop frequently to clear the way of his small tiller. This was the only thing he didn’t like about the process. Some years it was as if the earth beneath his property was turning over and spitting out rocks. He already had a pile of larger stones at the corner of his property.

He would use the appropriately sized ones for certain building projects and dump the others in a pile near the house. Sometimes he would come across a really large one and he’d have to tie a rope around it and yank it out of the ground with the pickup. Rocks that size were sometimes sellable to a local artist that worked in natural stone but they were also rare.

Today, he was fighting with rock after rock in row after row. Normally the tilling didn’t take all day as it had today. But that was okay. He didn’t have much else going on. His wife wouldn’t be home from visiting her sister until tomorrow at the earliest and if he had to get up early in the morning to finish the job, he would.

He dumped the most recent rock in the corner of his property and walked back to the machine. The machine cranked easily and he was off again.

Then, as luck would have it that day, he got stopped almost immediately. The tiller ran into something and ground to a halt. Jack turned the machine off and kicked it. Another rock.

He stepped in front of the machine and got down on his knees. This one looked like a big one. He brushed the soil away from the edge and yanked. The rock did not move.

He kicked the edge of the rock and dug down around it. This was a really big one. If this one was so big, he might have to buy some soil so he didn’t have an indentation in the ground for the water to puddle and ruin a section of his crops.

He went back to his truck and grabbed his shovel. He found the edge of the stone and dug into the ground around it. At about eight inches, he found the bottom of the stone. Then he created a channel around the edges so he could work a lever underneath the edge and get a rope or something in here to get the rock out of the way.

After he exposed the edges, he found that the rock was a slab of stone almost six feet long and about three feet wide. It wasn’t perfectly rectangular, but it was close. He knew this one would be a hard one but had worked many rocks out of the ground, this one would just take a little more work.

He dug a little underneath the rock to see if there was anything he could do to coax the rock upwards with the use of a lever. After a little digging, the rock wouldn’t budge. He could break it up with a sledge hammer or try and dig under it and simply pull it out.

After doing a little digging and working, he decided the sledge was the better way to go. As he trudged back to his shed to get an appropriate hammer, he contemplated the possibilities. He could leave the stone there, plant around it, figure something out later. Or he could reclaim his land from the rocks that had invaded it.

He grabbed his sledge hammer and headed back to the cleared land with a new vigor, ready to break the stone apart.

His first swing landed square in the middle of the rock and sent a shockwave through him that rattled his teeth. Instead of giving up, that wasn’t an option now, he set his jaw, swung hard and smashed the center of the stone with enough force to send chips flying.

He huffed but looked at his work proudly, he had made an inroad. Next, he got his smaller hammer and a chisel and began to dig at the middle. He was sweating even in the cool air when he finally had a hole large enough to put a metal wedge in.

The sky was darkening as evening approached and he contemplated giving up now, but now he was so close. He forced the wedge into the indentation and swung with as much energy as he could muster. The hammer connected with a loud ping and then the rock split down the middle along the fault line.

Invigorated by this sight, he swung again and again until the rock was completely split. Then he shoved a bar under the rock, wedged it against one of the larger rocks he’d found in the field, and pulled down with all his weight.

The rock moved.

Seeing it budge, ever so slightly, gave him the encouragement to continue, even with the clouds coming in and stars appearing in the east. It wasn’t dark enough yet.

He jammed the metal rod in again, deeper this time, and got a stronger grip on it. This time, when he pulled down, the rock moved even more and he had to switch his position so he could get a chain laid down so he could tie it on to his truck.

He uncoiled a chain and approximated where the rock would tumble. If he was wrong, he’d do this again tomorrow. The thing that really matter was that he’d done it once, he could do it again.

With the chain in place, he grabbed the bar one more time and this time hung on the lever. The rock tilted, then rolled, right onto his chain. He clapped and whooped then went silent.

A shoe stuck out of the ground where the rock had lain. He knelt down and brushed the dirt away. The shoe was connected to a foot and a leg.

He vomited and ran inside to the phone.

\*

Rusty parked in the first available spot on the street and tentatively walked toward the old house. At first, everything looked normal. There wasn’t a lot of commotion so things must not be that bad.

If they were, he told himself, then there would be ambulances, firemen, more police. He stepped over a rock that had been knocked into the sidewalk from the edge of the flowerbed and pushed it aside with his foot.

Rusty remembered from some time before that there was an older lady that lived on the first floor. He wouldn’t want her to trip.

The rock didn’t feel right as he moved it with his foot. It felt a little too light. He looked around to make sure he wasn’t being watched, he didn’t know why, but this seemed important considering the past few days. He bent over and picked it up. The rock was light. He turned it over and found what looked like a seam running up the edge. Again, he looked over his shoulder then pressed the top of the rock one way and the bottom the other.

The top half of the rock slid aside and revealed a small, white, plastic indentation. This was a hidden key. Or at least it was at one time. The key was missing.

He dropped the rock into the flower bed, then picked it up again. If anyone in the apartment said anything about a hidden key, the cops would be down here to check the rock and his fingerprints were all over it.

He took it with him as he went up the steps. Then, before he could touch the button to call Crystal, the door flew open and a uniformed police officer ran out. He was talking into the microphone at his shoulder but Rusty didn’t hear a single word.

Rusty caught the door before it slammed shut and went inside. Things seemed normal in here too. There were no residents milling about in the hallway and no indication that the cop had even been in here.

He headed up the stairs to Crystal’s place and reached his hand up to knock. The door opened before him as if powered on its own.

As he stood there and the gap in the door grew wider, he told himself he didn’t want to look but he also had to. He closed his eyes tight and took a deep breath.

When he opened them, he saw Crystal, on the couch, holding a cup of steaming liquid. She looked up at him and gave a half-smile.

He dropped the rock for the hidden key and it bounced off his toe. She looked up in a jerky motion, her eyes went wide. She had puffy, red eyes. Her makeup was smeared and streaked down her face. She still wore the clothes from last night.

Before she had a chance to talk, he said, “Is everything okay?”

She nodded then shook her head. “No. I was going to lie and say it was okay, but what’s the use? The dog is dead. Someone killed him.”

Rusty walked over to her and sat down. “Where?”

She pointed down the hall toward Joan’s old room. “In there.”

Rusty swallowed hard then put his arm around Crystal. She rested her head on his shoulder and took a sip of her drink.

“I was scared, I saw the cop run out of here. I thought he was calling for backup or something.”

She laughed. “I think his wife just went into labor or something. He said he’d be right back. That’s why the door was open.”

He laughed at that and rubbed her arm. “I’m sorry about the dog.”

She hit him in the chest. The hit was not meant to bring pain, only a flirtatious move. “Don’t lie, you hated that dog.”

“I didn’t hate him. I am just severely allergic.”

She laughed through more tears. “Likely story.”

The smiles faded as they sat there and the awkward silence between them grew as if divided by a wedge. Crystal pointed toward the floor near the door. “What's that?”

Rusty looked toward where she was pointing. “That's your hide a key. It was sitting on the sidewalk.”

“What was it doing there?”

“My guess is that the person who killed your dog was the same person who took the key. This thing is empty.” He went to the doorway and picked up the rock. “I was going to give it to the police.”

Crystal stood up and went to the window. Rusty stood next to her. The police car still sat out there. The driver’s side door was open and the police officer looked like he was digging around in the floorboard for something.

“By the way, what are you doing here?”

Rusty felt his cheeks redden. He kept watching the officer digging through the car. “I don't want to say. Now that I’ve had time to think about it, this doesn't seem like a normal thing to be doing.”

“The past week has been anything but normal.”

He went back to the chair and sat down.

She joined him on the couch. “Come on, tell me.”

He took a deep breath. “I feel really stupid saying this but I dreamed about you last night.”

She smiled. “And?”

“It isn't that easy. It was more of a nightmare.”

She shivered.

“I actually dreamed that I came here and there was a police car in the front of the house. Then, when I came running closer to the house, I saw all the windows were broken. Then I ran up to the door and the doorknob melted in my hand. I tried knocking but no one answered. I couldn't get in. That's when I woke up.”

“That isn't great, but it isn't that weird.”

“That isn't everything. I forgot about something but I don't know how I did. My phone rang. And when I answered only heard screaming but I knew it was you. That's why I ran here. In my dream I mean.”

Before Crystal could say anything the officer came inside. When the officer stepped in, he looked directly at Rusty and his hand went to the butt of his gun. “Is everything okay Ma’am?”

Crystal laughed. “Ma’am. I went to high school with you, Arthur. This is my friend, Rusty.”

Rusty stood up and stuck his hand out. The men shook hands but the officer didn't take his hand off his gun until Crystal stood up and put her hand on his arm. “It’s okay, really.”

Arthur dropped his hand to his side and sat down. “I'm sorry I had to run out of here. I thought there was an emergency at home.”

Neither said anything as it wasn't necessary. Instead, Rusty held up the empty rock. “I found this on the sidewalk.” He handed it to the officer.

“What is this?”

“That's our spare key. Or was. It's empty now.”

Arthur pulled his notebook out from his pocket and jotted a note down.

“I'm sorry. I was just moving it out of the way so the older lady downstairs didn't trip on it.”

Arthur pulled a plastic bag from his pocket and let the rock drop into it. “Do you know if this had the key in it ever?”

“I'm not sure, but Mrs. Johns told me about it yesterday.”

Arthur wrote this down in his notebook. Then he flipped back through the pages and reread his notes. “I think that covers everything. I’ll have someone come and get the dog.”

Crystal sniffed again but the fill scale crying she had been doing had subsided.

Arthur stood up and handed Crystal his business card. He walked to the door and as soon as he had his hand on the doorknob a bark echoed from the back room.

\*

Janet Avery woke to the sound of the phone ringing. She had just been having the oddest dream and the medications she was on was doing something to her sleep. She would dream about the oddest things and the oddest places.

But at least she was sleeping now. The time at the hospital after Jeremy went missing was mostly shock sending her into sleep. Now, even though it was drugs that helped her sleep, she was on less of the drugs and her normal rhythms were taking over. That was until she remembered the screaming and the darkness and that voice.

She had just been dreaming about a field. There was nothing special about the field except that it was very rocky. That dream morphed into a strange scene where she was swimming in the field, or near it and couldn’t seem to get out of the water no matter how close the shore seemed to be.

She kept kicking and striving but just couldn’t seem to make it to the shore.

Now, with the phone ringing, she didn’t know if it was the ringing in the other room that woke her or the semi-nightmare. She could hear her sister’s voice coming from the other room. She was glad her sister was here until her husband out on the rig for the past three months, could make it home. He was supposed to be doing a six-month shift. His boss, no matter how evil he seemed during the year, let Carl come home with no questions asked and he wouldn’t lose time either.

Janet assumed it was Carl calling and waited for Tracy to call her to the phone. But she could still hear Tracy talking as she as she lay there. She could hear her muffled voice coming through the thin walls of the modular home.

She pushed herself up onto her elbows and strained her ears to listen. It was odd to her that Tracy would be getting a call, but it wasn’t unprecedented. She had been there for a day already and someone might have needed her.

After a moment more she heard Tracy say, “I don’t know. I’ll go check. I still don’t like this.”

There was a quiet knock at the door and before Janet could say anything, the door opened a crack and Tracy stuck her head in.

“I’m sorry. The phone’s for you.”

Janet scooted off the bed. “Who is it?”

Tracy pushed the rest of the way into the room. She folded her arms across her chest. “It’s the police. I tried to tell them that you didn’t want to be bothered.”

Janet stood, her knees threatened to buckle and she had to place her hand on the side of the bed to steady herself. A blackness washed over her for a second as her blood got used the exertion.

Tracy stepped in to help her sister but Janet put her hand up. “I’ve got this. What do they want?”

“I’m sorry. They insisted that I wake you.”

“Did they find him? Is he alive?”

“They wouldn’t tell me.”

Janet was now rushing into the living room where the better phone was. The one in their room sometimes gave out if the cord bent a certain way. She didn’t want to miss a single thing if they had some news about her Jeremy.

She fell into the couch and Tracy came next to her with the phone but held it farther than arm’s length away. “I still don’t like this.”

“Give me the phone.” She snatched it from her sister’s fingers and brought it to her ear. She could hear chatter on the other end as if there was a conversation going already. “Hello?”

There was more muffling and then it sounded like the phone was pulled away from a hand or a stomach because the sound got much louder. “Hello?”

“Oh. Mrs. Avery?”

“Yes. Do you have news about Jeremy?”

“Mrs. Avery, I’m just calling to see if you are up for going for a short ride today? Do you think you could come by the station?”

“I think I could do that. What’s this about?”

Tracy leaned into the living room from the kitchen. “I told you this was a bad idea.”

Janet waved a hand at her sister. “What time?”

“Oh, as soon as possible. We have something we want to talk to you about but we can’t do this over the phone.”

“It’s about Jeremy isn’t it? You found him. Right?”

“Ma’am, we will talk about this when you get here. I want you to get the whole picture.”

Janet agreed to go into the station, hung up the phone, and headed into the kitchen.

Tracy was eating half a sandwich and pushed a paper plate with the other half resting on it toward Janet.

Janet looked down at that food but didn’t touch it. Her hands shook and she had to sit down at the table. After a moment she said, “I need a ride to the police station. They found Jeremy and want me to identify him.”

“They told you that? On the phone? Why couldn’t they just bring pictures by? I don’t like this.”

“They didn’t tell me. They wouldn’t tell me anything, just that they want me to come in. That’s the only thing it could be.”

Tracy nodded. “It could be something else. Maybe they want to talk to you now that you’re not drugged.”

Janet shrugged. “Anyway, I’ll go get dressed. I’ll be out in a minute.”

At the police station, Janet and her sister sat on a hard, wooden bench while the officer whom they talked to was finishing a meeting with a teen. They were watching the officer through the large glass window in his office wall.

Janet watched as the officer behind the duty desk straightened things and fielded a couple of phone calls. Mostly, the office was slow with the summer crowd gone. She imagined how busy the office could be during the midsummer festival when Main Street is closed. During the festival shops and street venders clog the sidewalks and road. Food trucks that serve everything from burgers to beer line the street.

In contrast to then, you could sit on the double-yellow line that goes down Main Street today and not even risk getting hit by a blowing newspaper.

The officer came out of his office and walked a teenager to the door. Janet couldn’t hear what he was saying but the teen looked both relieved and contrite.

He walked back to his office, put a file in a desk drawer, stepped out, and called them in.

He pointed to the two wooden chairs before the desk. “Please sit.”

Janet took the chair closer to the desk and Tracy settled in closer to the door. Janet scanned the desk for a file or photos or something, but the only thing there was the normal desk items: a pen cup, a pad of paper, a phone, a name tag reading Wooten.

Officer Wooten turned back toward them and dropped a folder on the desk. He played with the corners of it, thumbing the edge and pushing the folder around the desk with his fingertips. He looked up, but his eyes showed that he was thinking hard about what to say next.

He bit his lower lip and drummed his fingers on the desk. All of these movements happened one right after the other and all at once.

Janet felt the tears welling up in her eyes. She knew. “Go ahead, tell me. I’m ready.”

He met her eyes and slid the folder across the wooden desk. She looked down at it but didn't touch it. She ran her ring finger under her eye, wiping the tear away. A sob threatened at the back of her throat but she choked it back, swallowing hard.

“Tell me.”

He leaned forward and tapped the green folder. His voice was soft as he said, “Open it.” He helped her along by pushing his finger under the edge and sliding it toward the fold. The edge lifted up and she reached out a shaking hand.

She finished the movement and opened the file the rest of the way. She lay her hands in her lap. The picture inside was face down. Again she reached forward but this time touched the edge of the picture, then flipped it over.

She slide it out of the folder and brought it up to her eyes. Her hands were shaking still. Tracy put her hand on Janet’s arm and helped to steady her.

The image on the picture was of a cleared section of land. The brownish black dirt lay in piles around what appeared to be a hole. She slid this picture aside and revealed the one beneath it.

A large rock, almost square, lay to the side of the hole. There was something in it. She could see what looked like the sole of a sneaker pointing toward the camera.

She laid this photo down.

She’d seen those sneakers before. She’d bought those sneakers.

“Is that Jeremy?”

As an answer, he leaned forward and pushed the edge of the folder toward her. “You tell me.”

The way he was talking to her was cruel. It was as if he was getting some sort of enjoyment out of her heartache. “Isn’t it your job to identify the bodies?”

“Keep looking.”

So she did. The next one was much closer. The composition showed the whole of a body buried in a shallow depression. The body had on the same t-shirt that she’d last seen Jeremy in although this one was torn and ragged.

“Is that my boy?” She asked again. “It can’t be.”

The skin on the body in the photograph was gray, almost black, it looked preserved by a master in the arts of mummification. The body looked like it had been buried for years.

She dropped the photos back onto the desk and closed the folder. She wiped another tear from her eye.

“I want to see the body. If that’s Jeremy, a picture won’t tell me.”

Officer Wooten nodded. “We can arrange that.”

“And I want to see the hole. If he was there, I want to see it.”

“Now, I don’t know if--”

“You can and you will. How am I supposed to get closure?”

“It’s a crime scene for the time being.”

“I’ve got a right.”

“You need to understand, you may--”

She cut him off again. “Where is he?” Janet could feel Tracy’s nails digging into her arm, telling her to be quiet. Janet shrugged her arm away. “Show me.”

Officer Wooten pushed the chair back and stood. Janet stood also, not willing to allow the officer time to move away from her.

Wooten put his hand on the door and pulled it open. The low din of voices in the precinct was louder now that the door was open. “Follow me.”

Janet and Tracy followed Wooten through the maze of desks and low wooden cubical walls, and then through a door at the back. The hallway they came to was long and vinyl tiled. The echoes of their footsteps was the only sound in the hall.

Janet did not want to talk or make any sudden statements for fear that this was another dream and she would wake, still looking for answers.

They passed a few doors and then Wooten pushed a door open and stepped aside. He let the women enter first, then looked up and down the hallway before stepping in.

In the room, two steel tables, large enough for a body, lay next to each other in the room. One table had a white drape over it, the other table was bare.

Janet held her breath, the smell in the room of preserving liquids and cleaning fluids, and something else, accosted her nose. She put her finger up to her nose to try and confuse her sense of smell. The gesture did not work.

“I’m warning you ladies, you may not want to see this.” He had moved next to the table with the white sheet draped over it.

Janet exhaled and nodded. “I don’t want to, but I have to.” She turned to her sister. “Tracy, you can wait in the hall if you need to.”

Tracy took a step back, almost as if she were ready to bolt, but she stood firm. “I’m here for you.” She put her arm around her sister and hugged her.

Wooten grabbed the edge of the drape and pulled it back. The thing under the cover was obviously a human child, with the unmistakable features of a youth and wearing modern clothes. But besides that, it looked like a mummy. The gray skin looked brittle and dry to the touch, the lips where puckered into a tight O around protruding teeth. The front top tooth was gone. The eyes were only gaping circles of darkness and the hair was stringy and sparse.

She shook her head. “That can’t be Jeremy.” But she knew it was. She’d just paid a quarter for that tooth and she was certain that she’d bought that shirt, even more certain than when she saw it in the picture.

“Ma’am, I’m afraid that’s the only person we can preliminarily identify.”

Janet breathed hard and had to support herself against the metal table. Tracy stepped closer and put her arm around her sister once more. “He looks like he’s been buried for years.”

Wooten picked up a clipboard. “The coroner said it looks like ten years but mummification.”

“How is that possible?”

Wooten shook his head and put the clipboard back down. “I’m not the professional, but that’s what it says.” He tapped the clipboard to punctuate his point. “Now, can you positively identify him?”

Janet pushed herself up and then hugged her sister. Tears were streaming down her face. She let her sister go then wiped her eyes dry with the back of her hand. “I bought him that shirt for his last birthday. And the tooth--”

She looked down at the body once more then up at Wooten. “And we paid a quarter for that missing tooth. I was going to say the tooth fairy, but--” she trailed off.

Wooten pulled the sheet back up over the boy and headed toward the door. He opened it and led them out. “Thank you. We will get the—him back to you in a day or two. So you can make arrangements.”

They walked a few steps down the hallway and then Janet stopped. “I want to see where he was found.”

“That’s an active crime scene.”

“I just want to see it.”

“Let’s talk back in my office.” Wooten stepped passed the women then headed down the hall. Janet followed, with the help of Tracy’s support.

They reversed their trip until they were once again sitting in the office, staring at the desk that held a folder. Wooten held up his hand when Janet and Tracy sat down, then he moved to the door and closed it, then returned to his desk.

“As I was saying, I can’t let you see the hole.”

“I will go over your head. What else do I have to lose?”

“Just give me a minute. I can’t take you to see the hole, but there is nothing stopping you from happening by.” He pulled his drawer open, and scribbled something on a piece of paper. He tore it from the pad, folded it twice so if formed a square and then pushed it across the table.

Janet looked down at the paper on the desk then up at the clock. It was almost time for Theo to come home from school. She reached up and put her hand over the paper. Wooten lowered his hand over hers.

“Please don’t get me fired.” He lifted his hands and she pulled the paper back and dropped it into her purse. She nodded.

Tracy was the first to stand up, perhaps she was assuming that they’d make one more stop before heading back home.

Janet looked up at her and smiled, then across the desk to Wooten. She stood up then put her hand out. “Thank you for everything.” She patted her purse with her left hand. “Don’t worry. You won’t get in trouble. And if you do. I know a few people.”

Wooten gave her hand a quick squeeze then ushered them to the front door. “If we hear anything, I will let you know.”

Janet smiled. “Yes, you will.”

They headed to the car with Tracy pulling the passenger seat open for Janet to sit in. When she came back around to the driver’s side and was seated she looked at her sister. “One more stop?”

Janet shook her head. “We have to be there for Theo.”

Tracy started the car and headed toward the Avery house.

\*

Mayor Wilson looked through the stack of papers again. He couldn't find a happy medium between the water people and the lake people. Neither would be happy until the other stopped encroaching on the other’s territory.

He moved the paper aside and found an envelope. It only had his last name on the paper and nothing more. He looked around the room as if someone were in there and could watch him open the envelope.

He slid his silver letter opener across the top of the envelope and peered inside. Again, the paper inside was yellow-ruled legal paper. Again, a note was scrawled across it.

It only read, “We will meet this weekend.”

He dropped the paper on his desk and went to the window. He watched the parking lot for an out-of-place car or a singular person standing around as if they were there to watch him open his mail. He shook his head. He would not know who this was until this weekend. If his secretary had been the one to drop this paper on his desk, she would have mentioned it. How did it get in here?

He tried the window near his writing table, it was locked. Same with the window behind his desk. The door leading to the balcony in the back was unlocked, but he’d been out there earlier and couldn’t remember if it was unlocked or now.

The paper must have been slipped into his briefcase somehow. He had left it unattended when he went to lunch but that didn’t give anyone an opportunity to slip him anything. Besides Rachel would have mentioned that someone was snooping around his case while he was in the bathroom.

Someone was watching him and he didn’t like it. Someone knew his routine all too well. As long as they didn’t know all his secrets, it would be fine. He paced back to the center of the room and looked at the room from the perspective of someone that was unaccustomed to being in there. They wouldn’t have put the paper on his desk under the papers, no one could guess that he would be working on those papers today.

His generally messy desk didn’t betray a routine. He shook his head then sat down at the easy chair at the other end of the room and stared at the place where the wall met the ceiling. Years ago there had been some water infiltration and sometimes when the light hit the wall just right, he could see the markings.

He searched for those markings now, giving his eyes something to focus on while his mind worked on the problem. He could solve this. He would solve this.

There was a knock at the door. He rushed back to his desk, shoved the envelope and folded note into a drawer and sat down. “Come in.” He moved a piece of paper and read through it as the door was being opened.

An old man, originally on the town council but now serving in an emeritus role stepped into the office. He pushed the door closed behind him and sat before Wilson could offer him a seat.

He leaned his deer antler cane against the old wooden desk and leaned forward. “Wilson. Something needs to be done.”

“You move right to the point don't you Mr. Glenn.”

“I'm too old not to. Now, you're the one in charge. You need to do something.”

“And what would that something be?”

“Don’t play stupid with me.” He shook his head and pounded his fist on the desk. “You know exactly what I'm talking about.” He lowered his voice as if speaking any louder would bring in a stampede of reporters. “The murders.”

Wilson leaned forward with his elbows on the desk. “The police are out on patrols.”

“And you’re still sitting here, doing nothing.”

He knew how some of the old-timers worked around here. They had ways of doing things and ways of getting things done. They could bring about change without him lifting a finger. In some respects, the power he had was sort of like a figurehead when it came to the old timers. If they wanted something done, they would throw in their personal money and their time and make something happen. “What do you need from me?”

Mr. Glenn sat back in the chair, the cane in his hand now, resting across the wooden arms of the chair. “We want to hire someone to do some digging around.”

“And then what?”

“Are you giving me a hard time about making this town safe?”

Wilson shook his head. “Of course not. But if we find someone, do you want him tried or is this going to start some sort of lynching?”

“The right thing would be to bring whoever is doing this to justice. You said him. How do you know it’s a man?”

Wilson waved a hand as if shooing a fly. “Just a guess based on some of the scenes. A woman couldn't do some of the things that seem to be happening here.”

“They are quite gruesome.”

Wilson’s brows went up involuntarily. “And how would you know?”

“Don’t pretend you are ignorant of my sources. I’ve seen the pictures, once, I saw the scene. I want something done.”

“We are doing everything we can.”

Mr. Glenn let out a deep laugh that surprised Wilson to be coming out of such a frail-looking old man. “It’s not enough. But we can help.”

Wilson knew who the we was without having to ask who. The retired council still had far too much sway. He had to tread lightly. Become too pushy in one direction and he would be out of the mayor’s office right after the next election cycle, but play ball and he would be under the thumb of the retired council for the rest of his term in office.

Mr. Glenn put his hands on the arm of the chair and repositioned himself. He rubbed his right hip as if it hurt. He bit his bottom lip. “So. What do you say?”

Wilson inhaled through his nose and rubbed his temples. He wasn’t getting a headache but if Mr. Glenn wanted to think that is what was happening and leave a little early, that was fine. The place where his leg touched the side of the desk felt warm, almost hot. He jerked his leg away but did not look down.

He wanted to rip the drawer open because it felt like a fire was burning through the wood and would soon consume the desk. He put his hand on his leg and felt the warmth from the desk.

He couldn’t take the pain any longer. He looked down, hoping not to see smoke snaking out of the drawer. He saw nothing. He pulled the drawer open, again nothing.

He pushed away from the desk, getting away from the heat then nodded. “I’ll see what I can do.” He looked out the back window, feigning being deep in thought. But his mind was racing. He wanted to tear the drawer out and toss it into the yard behind the office. Then he turned to face Mr. Glenn.

“You better. We got an election coming up and we wouldn’t want to see it turn out poorly.”

Before Mr. Glenn had a chance to push himself off the chair, Wilson said, “So, what does this say about our police force?”

Mr. Glenn’s mouth curved up at the corner. “That’s something you can answer for yourself.”

He turned back toward the window. “Do you have someone in mind for this job you want done?”

“Matter of fact we do.” Wilson turned to face him. He wasn’t surprised that something was already in motion but on the other hand, things had happened so quickly the past couple of days, it was also possible that no progress had been made at all.

Mr. Glenn went in his pocket and pulled out a business card and dropped it on the desk. He let the card sit there between them. It held a power. Then he stood up and offered his hand.

Before taking the offered hand, Wilson looked down at the card sitting on a stack of papers. If he took that card, he was in their debt. Not taking the card, he was under their scrutiny and subject to their whim.

Without touching the card, he reached across the desk, shook Mr. Glenn’s hand, and walked Mr. Glenn out of the office.

With Mr. Glenn gone, he ran back to his desk and tore the drawer open. He rummaged through the papers and miscellaneous office supplies. Nothing was hot. It must have been his imagination. He kept telling himself there, but he could still feel the effects of the heat on his hand and leg.

He shoved the drawer back into its slot and sat back. Then he inspected the underside of the desk. There was no burn mark there, nothing to register that the burning heat had penetrated the wood.

He returned to the seat and pushed into the desk. On his desk were two options. Maybe both would get him answers and maybe both would make these things stop. There were too many maybes.

Someone from the outside could bring bad publicity to the town. Sure, it was after the season but news didn’t stop just because the season was over and it hardly ever went away before the new season began. The old-timers needed something to gossip about during the cold winter.

His hand hovered over the card on the desk but before he could pick it up, something inside his desk shifted and a pen or something rolled across the bottom of the drawer. The heat returned. He pulled his hand back from the card as if he had pricked it on a sharp piece of glass.

He jerked his desk drawer open. There had to be a flame in there somewhere. The paper he’d shoved deep inside his desk as Mr. Glenn had come in was sitting at the front end of the drawer. It had a brownish tinge to the edges and when he brought the paper out, there was a slight scent of burnt paper.

He stood, went to the shredder and pushed the yellow paper in. He didn’t need the paper any longer, he knew the message.

As the shredder whirred, he stared at the business card sitting on the stack of papers. He would see what the meeting this weekend was all about then, if nothing came of it, he would call the number on the card.

He went back to his desk and used the piece of paper the business card lay on and dumped the card onto the desk. He wouldn’t touch it. Not yet. He wouldn’t compromise. The police knew what they were doing. He knew what he was doing. He was taking care of the town.

\*

Carl Avery sat in his living room on the old sofa. His wife’s eyes were red-rimmed but dried out. She didn’t have another tear in her eyes.

He had had arm around her and was comforting her as best he could. Theo was still at school and had been distant lately. He hadn’t said much to either Janet or Carl and Carl couldn’t blame him. Theo and Jeremy had been the first friend the other had.

Carl was not sad, sure, he was heartbroken, but he wasn’t sad. He was angry. There had been rumors that things were going in the wrong direction in this town. People were dying in mysterious ways, at least that’s what was being talked about at the bar downtown and that’s what people were saying when they didn’t think Carl was listening.

Most of the time people kept quiet when he was near, they didn’t want to dredge up anything that would be too hurtful.

He pushed himself off the couch and ducked into the fridge in the kitchen. He reached past all the bottles of beer and grabbed a bottle of hard liquor at the back of the fridge near the compressor.

He pulled a glass from the cabinet at poured a double. He shot that back then poured another. As the alcohol flowed into his blood, he got angrier and angrier.

He capped the bottle, pushed it back into the cold part of the fridge and went to the door.

Janet looked up at him, blinked a few times, then looked over at the collection of framed school pictures from years past.

“I’ll be back in a little.” Carl managed to croak out, and slammed the door behind him.

He walked down the street to the grocery store, bought a bottle of very cheap and very strong wine and went walking.

Eventually he found himself at the Morrison property. The field where his son had been found had been cleared and plowed again. He could see small, green buds of some sort peeking through the soil.

As he stood there, the anger in his heart grew and he screamed as loudly as he could. Then he took the half-empty bottle and threw it into the field where it smashed open on a stone in the middle of the field.

He staggered and fell to his knees. He would not let this injustice continue. Something had to be done.

\*

The man no longer needed to turn the lights on at his house to walk around in the dark. Yes, he’d lived there long enough to know where the furniture sat in the living room, but now, he didn’t have to know where it sat, he could see it. His vision was sharpening at night and he imagined this is what it was like for an owl or a cat on the hunt.

He walked through the house, dodging even the smallest of items. Then he went downstairs into the basement. Without the light from the street or the moon encroaching on the room, he was certain he would have to turn the light on to get around. Instead, he could see things in the basement with a sharp clarity that he almost didn’t feel the need to turn the light on ever again.

He found the box he was looking for and went back upstairs. Because he was home and he knew that the neighbors were sometimes nosy since his wife had died, he clicked the living room light on and set the empty box down on the couch.

He started at one shelf, looking through the knick-knacks there and sorted through them mentally. Most were things he could live without and placed them in the box. He went into the den and pulled a stack of newspaper used for kindling from the basket next to the fireplace and went back into the living room.

He wrapped the breakable trinkets in a piece of paper and placed it in the box with care. Sure, he never wanted to see this stuff again, but that didn’t mean he wanted shards of glass and porcelain rattling around in the box before he could get a chance to sell the stuff at a yard sale.

As he moved things into the box, he stopped and looked closely at some of the items. Some reminded him of his wife in detail. He could remember the place they were when they bought it.

The trinket in his hand was from a trip down south, they’d decided to go on a cruise and had stopped at a roadside store to get some gas and a bite to eat. The store happened to also have souvenirs from the region. This one, a snow globe with the leavings of a melted snowman, a little orange carrot, a pile of black coal, a hat and a scarf, was too niche for his wife to put down.

She hadn’t cared much for snow globes but she’d laughed for a long time when she was holding it. It was a little overpriced but he bought it anyway and stowed it in her luggage so she would find it sometime on the trip.

He smiled at the thought and sat down on a foot rest. He shook the globe and watched the carrot spin around in the water. Then inside the globe, he could see two dark sockets staring back at him.

He dropped the globe to the carpeted floor and it rolled aside. The plastic pieces clicked against the edge of the globe.

Surely that was just his reflection. He hadn’t really seen eyes in there. But he didn’t pick up the snow globe to check. This was something he didn’t need to know.

He packed a few more things in the box then sat down, facing the box. This was a difficult start but he could do it. Maybe Meredith could help. He sat back, where had that thought come from? They’d only just met.

But she was nice. And his parents and sister had urged him to get back into the dating scene. He shook his head. “It’s too soon.”

His voice echoed slightly in the room. He could almost hear a reply of, “Who says?” He shook his head and clicked the light off.

His eyes did not adjust to the darkness as quickly as they had before. He turned, headed toward the stairs and stubbed his toe on the leg of the couch. He cursed, jumped around a little, trying to alleviate the pain, and then sat on the couch.

He blinked, the darkness did not part as it had earlier. Maybe it was just a trick of the light. He exhaled, headed upstairs and got ready for bed.

When he finally lay down, an image of Meredith came in his mind, he would talk to her. Get to know her. Maybe take her to Lake Grand Vista and introduce her to my new friend.

He sat up. Was that what he wanted? No. They wouldn’t go to Lake Grand Vista. If it came to that, they would travel in the exact opposite direction.

But he didn’t even know if she was seeing someone. Why was he thinking about her? It was dangerous to go that direction with his thoughts.

An envelope fell through the mail slot. The man looked at the clock on the wall. It was too late for mail. He went to the window, there was no one walking down the driveway and the street stood empty.

He closed his eyes to reach out into the surrounding area but his mind wouldn’t make the connection it needed to. He only saw darkness.

When he opened his eyes, he realized what he’d just done. He was using a power, or something, to perform an act he shouldn’t be able to do.

He stared at the envelope sitting on the floor. He wouldn’t touch it. Even if he knew there was a check for a million dollars inside, he wouldn’t touch it.

He walked by the front door on the way to the kitchen. The envelope seemed to beckon to him the way he guessed a beer or a shot of whisky beckoned to an alcoholic on the slow road to recovery.

He grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator and took a long, cold drink. The cool water ran down his throat and he could feel it moving through his stomach. The coolness comforted him.

He passed the envelope on the way back to the living room but his desire to clean up was gone. It was late enough and he could work on the project tomorrow.

He refused to look at the floor in front of the door when he double-checked to make sure the front door was locked and headed upstairs.

As he walked down the hall on the way to his room, the envelope seemed to glow in the darkness. He could see it sitting before the door, ready to be opened.

He sat down in the hall and stared at the white rectangle in the foyer. He reached up and clicked the hall light off.

The envelope seemed to glow brighter. He wanted to go downstairs and snatch it off the floor and tear it open. He needed to, but something inside him warred with the idea.

Instead, he sat in the middle of the hallway, staring at the envelope, willing himself not to move.

\*

Rusty, Crystal, and Arthur turned toward the back room. None of them said anything. Rusty and Crystal looked at Arthur whose face had gone white. Despite that, he put his hand on his gun.

Then it sounded like a jingle of dog tags as if the dog got up and shook his head.

Arthur shook his head, took a deep breath, and pulled his gun out. “What do you want me to do?”

Crystal shook her head. Her eyes were wide, her pupils large black pools. “What can you do? That dog was dead. His head was nearly off.”

Arthur headed toward the back room. “I want you two out in the hallway.” He waved them behind him.

Crystal and Rusty did not need any coaxing. They both headed out into the hallway and pulled the door closed. They listened at the door and waited. They heard Arthur’s voice calling to the back room but they did not hear any other sound. Then they heard shouting and some loud thumping. Then screaming and some gunfire. At the sound of gunfire, they both ran downstairs.

As they ran, they heard barking again. There was more noise as they slammed through the door and into the yard. Rusty wanted to go up to the room but Crystal put her hand on his arm and made him stop.

“No, you can’t go up there.” Rusty took a step forward despite her protests but she grabbed him by the arm. “What can you do?”

“I can’t just leave him up there.” He put his hand on the door knob to head back into the building. When he did so, there was a frantic barking from upstairs, loud exclamations, and more gunshots. Rusty shivered and released the knob. Then, there was one more scream and then nothing.

At that, Rusty pushed the door open and ran inside. Crystal stayed behind.

\*

For Mayor Wilson, the weekend could not come soon enough. There were still three days for more bodies to show up and for more questions to go unanswered. He was already ignoring phone calls and turning away any visitor that wanted to talk about the killings.

He felt, to talk about the killings would be admitting that there was a real issue that he could not take care of. A murderer on the loose or something wrong with the town. Neither seemed right.

The major problem was that no one seemed to know anything. There was not a single person coming forward with any evidence leading to a killing, let alone a string of killings.

He sat back in his chair at his home office, the Mayor’s office was no longer a quiet place to be, and looked out the window toward the lake through the trees. Just yesterday his car had been egged by Carl Avery and the police had dragged him off before he could put a rock through the window.

This was a nice town and if something was inherently wrong with it, he would feel it. He’d lived there long enough. This was a good town, with good people.

In the meantime, between now and the weekend, he could get some real work done. Campaigning. Well, at least planning on campaigning. The election was not until next November but it was never too early to plan by greasing the appropriate palms and padding the select wallet.

He made a list of people that he would be in contact with over the next few months to ensure there support leaned his way. He would have to work with the Old Council and Mr. Glenn in particular. He wrote Mr. Glenn’s name on a piece of paper with a scratch of a note to write him a letter requesting support.

He pushed the piece of paper back and made a steeple out of his fingers. He sat there, mentally pushing himself to think about the future. It was odd, because he generally would not have to set aside time to think, but now, as he forced his subconscious mind into action, the only thing he could see was the pictures of the desecrated bodies. He didn’t think he’d ever get over those images. He was okay with that because it meant he was still human, he still cared about the town in a real way.

His wife interrupted his train of thought before it left the station. She had the cordless phone in her hand and was waving it at Wilson.

He made a shooing motion but she stepped forward and placed her hand over the receiver. “You have to take this.”

“Why?”

“Because this man won’t give up. He’s called ten times in the past thirty minutes. I have things I have to do too. I may just be the mayor’s wife, but I have my life outside of that.”

Wilson smiled. He did his best not to have a smirk but wasn’t sure it came across like that. “I know you do, honey. I just don’t want to talk to anyone.”

“This man,” she said pointing at the phone, “told me that if I hung up on him again without retrieving you, he would show up here and start ringing the doorbell.”

The mayor exhaled loudly. “Fine. What does he want?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “He won’t tell me. Wouldn’t even let me take a message.”

He stood up and crossed the small room to the door. He put his hand on the phone and gingerly pulled it away. He kissed his wife on the cheek, put his hand over the receiver and said, “Thank you. I’m sorry about this. It won’t happen again.”

She pushed him with both arms but didn’t budge his bulky frame. “I doubt that.” She smiled and pulled the door shut as she walked out.

Wilson turned back to his desk but decided to try a tactic he’d read about in a class on public speaking. Even on the phone, confidence could be felt if the speaker were standing. After a moment, he brought the phone to his ear.

He heard a roar of a truck engine as it passed on a highway far on the other end of the line. “Hello?”

“Who am I speaking to?”

“You called me. Who’s this?”

“Ah. Mayor Wilson, I am glad I could get in touch with you.”

The voice was distant; he couldn’t get a feel for the age of the person on the other end of the line. The voice was also gravely, but that could be because of the miles of phone cable between them or the state of the payphone this man was obviously calling from.

“So. Who is this?”

“Mr. Glenn told me he gave you my card. I’m coming into town.”

“But this wasn’t cleared.”

“It was. Mr. Glenn personally invited me.”

“Sir, Mr. Glenn does not run this town. He can’t hire any vigilante that he feels necessary to come in and straighten out this town.

The man laughed a deep, and long, laugh. “I’m no vigilante. I’m sort of like a detective.”

“A private eye? Like Magnum P.I.?”

“Precisely, and Mr. Glenn is my benefactor. For now. He did tell me that you would be taking over that roll soon though.”

Words seemed to stick in Wilson’s mouth like they were tangled in peanut butter. “Not I. The town would be your benefactor.”

“But you would be the beneficiary of my work.”

Wilson nodded as he thought this through. “I don’t think the police force would allow you to work alongside them.”

“I’ll take care of that. You just make sure that I have a place to stay.”

“But what about Mr. Glenn.”

The man laughed again. “Mr. Glenn said that I was your problem now. Lucky for you he paid me upfront but that’s going to run out soon.”

“Then you’ll leave.”

“Yes, along with everything that I find out. Which will be substantial. Do you happen to have a local newspaper?”

Wilson sat down. The confidence study was a lie. “We do.”

“Well, that paper will be indebted to me for the Pulitzer that my information will win for them.”

Wilson looked out the window, a slight breeze blew through the trees. A wooden swing at the end of a rope that hung from one of the branches in the neighbor’s yard swung back and forth as if an invisible rider was enjoying the cool afternoon. He took a deep breath. “When will you be here?”

“Tomorrow.”

“I’ll make sure you have a place to stay.”

“So. I’ve got a job?”

“It doesn’t seem like I can stop you.”

“True, there is that. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Wilson hung up the phone and threw it across the room. It hit the wall and plastic and metal pieces rained onto the floor.

A moment later, his wife, wide eyed with a worried brow threw the door open. “Are you okay?”

“Just upset. We’re going to need a new phone.”

\*

If you would have been outside while this conversation ebbed and flowed, you would have seen and felt things change for Lake Grand Vista. You would have seen the kid with the BB gun aim a little to the left so he could accidentally shatter a window. You would see the dog chasing the squirrel actually catch the critter and toss it in the air out of spite.

Boys would push down girls on the playground. Something would settle over the town. The afternoon would suddenly go dark and you would feel it.

But that would only last for a moment because Mayor Wilson was fighting for his side. But when Tom argued and eventually won, darkness settled over the town.

\*

Tom Cameron hung up the phone and went inside the diner. He could not get over the elation of actually having a paying gig after so long. Sure, he could find the person they were looking for, but he wouldn't find the guy easily.

At the door, the waitress took him to an empty booth and handed him a laminated, two-sided menu. He scanned the listing of food and then dropped the menu onto the laminate table.

He dumped out the bowl of half and half and made a small pyramid, then knocked it over. This was something he had done as a kid and it seemed like the right time to do that again.

The waitress returned. She was chewing gum, her dark hair back in a tight bun. She pulled a pen and pad from the front pocket of her apron and looked down at Tom.

He resisted the urge to point out her red-rimmed eyes that proved her lack of sleep. He also resisted the urge to hit on her. It wouldn't be fair. She was far too vulnerable.

“What’ll it be?”

“You recommend anything?” He smiled and looked into her brown eyes.

She smiled, her eyes actually lighting up at the question. “Depends. You looking for breakfast food or lunch?”

He looked at his watch. “Lunch.”

“In that case, I’d stay away from the corned beef and all of the soups.”

“I appreciate that. I’ll have a Sal’s Burger and a chocolate shake.”

She nodded as she wrote. “You want the shake with the meal or after?”

“After. How’d I do?”

“If there’s a diner that can't make a burger and a shake then they shouldn’t be in business.”

Tom handed her the menu and turned to the window as she went back to the kitchen to place the order. Because it was in the in between time of lunch and dinner, the diner was sparsely populated with clusters of people at the counter and at some close tables in the back.

Given their ages and lack of recently emptied dishes, Tom assumed they were the regulars or at least townies. Every diner he'd ever been in had the same clientele, just different layouts.

While the cook put his order together, Tom had time to consider the situation. He didn't want to bring out the pictures that Mr. Glenn had sent to him, they weren't meant for everyone's eyes, but he could picture them in his mind.

There was something about the scenes that showed this was not the work of a bunch of different people, no, this was a single person.

The man who committed all these murders had pure hate in his heart. Tom was looking forward to the day when he could hand the guy over to the police.

At the moment, he was working sort of like a vigilante or a bounty hunter, and that was okay with him. He didn't want to work for anyone right now. He could more easily get things done without questions being asked.

The first place he would start would be the Grand Vista Hotel. People like this were not usually locals. Also, because of the spacing of the murders, the person had not left town. In fact, the guy was most likely sitting in a hotel room right now, planning his next victim’s attack.

Tom pulled out a pen and jotted a note on a small spiral notebook he kept in his pocket. Then he would go to all the scenes and look for patterns. There always were patterns and that was one thing he was good at, finding patterns.

The waitress brought the plate and slid it in front of him. He put his condiments on it and ate while staring off into the distance.

There wasn't much to think about right now but he was getting his mind used to thinking about such things. As he ate, he closed his eyes and pictured the scene in the woods. The girl was walking her dog. He called the dog over, got his attention with a treat and then held her tight. Then the girl comes looking for her dog and he makes it bark but doesn't let it out of his grip. Then the girl comes closer and then she's in the water.

He shivered, put his food down and took a long drink from a glass of water that the waitress had put on the table while he was thinking.

He was happy he’d gone the route of tough guy with the mayor. That would pay dividends later. He could use the leverage he had bought by acting tough.

He paid his bill and went out to his car. There, he flipped through the files again. Yes, he could do this, yes he wanted to do this. Not only for the money but for justice to be done. Things like this shouldn't happen. If they were allowed to happen in a small community like Lake Grand Vista, they could happen anywhere. There were copycats everywhere.

Just before he was about to pull out of the parking lot, the waitress came running out the door and looked around the lot. She spotted Tom and walked to the car and stopped next to the driver’s side window.

He rolled the window down and looked up into her dark eyes. She was holding her order pad close to her chest as if hiding behind it. “Can I ask you something?”

He pretended like he was thinking about this then answered, “Sure. What's up?”

“This is going to seem really odd, but are you heading up north?”

Now she had his attention. He looked at her with wide eyes although he tried to hide his surprise. “I am.”

“Okay. Yeah. This is going to seem really odd then too.”

He rubbed his arms as if cold. “You’re giving me goosebumps, what is it?”

“Keep your eyes open. Be safe. It’s dangerous up there.”

He leaned back in his seat. “Is that all?” He did his best to leave the sarcasm out of his voice. He wasn’t trying to be mean but knew it came out that way. “Look, I appreciate it. I do. I don’t want to sound ungrateful for the advice, but the way you started. It sounded like you were going to deliver some dark omen or something.”

She nodded and slid her order pad into her front pocket. “I gave you the watered down version.”

“Don’t spare me.”

“I’m not. If I say it, it might come true. And I’ll have to live with that.”

“Has something like that happened to you before?”

She shook her head while looking off into the distance. “I can’t say that it has. Have you ever had a thought or an idea and you knew it was true?”

“I guess I have.”

“Well. I knew this was true.”

He shrugged and put his hands on the steering wheel then pulled himself forward and turned on the ignition. “Then give me the whole version. I deserve that right?”

She shook her head. Her hands were trembling. She clasped them together then folded her arms tightly at her chest.

The side door opened and a man in a diner’s uniform stuck his head out the door. “Are you on break?”

She turned to the man, gestured for him to wait a minute, and said something that Tom didn’t hear. He started to roll his window back up, the conversation was over. Then she turned and jumped toward the car.

She grabbed the edge of the window as he was rolling it up. “What I saw when I was sitting in the back taking a drink of water was your throat cut, but you weren’t bleeding out, not from that. You were holding something in your hands that looked like you bought ten pounds of sausage and were holding it in your lap.” She let the window go.

He stared ahead, the picture she described floating through his mind. She went to the sidewalk and stood there as he drove away.

When he looked in his rearview before turning at a traffic signal to head toward Lake Grand Vista, she was still standing on the sidewalk. The man who had come out to talk to her was standing next to her but he was saying nothing.

Tom shivered and headed north.

\*

When Rusty got up to the second floor, the apartment door still stood slightly ajar. There was no noise coming from inside the apartment. He could smell the acrid aroma of gun smoke in the air and the underlying scent of the dog.

He repressed a sneeze as he pulled out his small pocket knife. It wasn’t anything substantial, it wouldn’t be a knife that could scare anyone, but it was sharp and did the job he wanted it to do.

With the blade extended before him, he pushed the door open with his toe. When he entered the living room, he stepped around the couch and stepped into the small hallway in the back. Another underlying smell permeated the room. A coppery smell. He knew that one. Blood.

He took a tentative step forward, almost laughing at himself that this would be the time when the person hiding would step on a stick and alert the bad guys. His jeans caught a branch on an ornamental plant and sent the pot and plant to the ground.

He jumped back from them, expecting to see the dog standing next to the scattering of soil and ceramic shards but the dog wasn’t there.

He pushed himself forward. “Hello?” This is so stupid. “Arthur?”

There was no answer, not even the growling of the dog they had heard earlier that sent them downstairs.

Rusty peeked around the corner and saw the officer’s hat lying propped against the bottom of the door as if it had fallen off the coat rack in the room and rolled to the door.

Rusty swallowed and felt his throat stick. He should have told Susan where he was going. He took another step forward. “Arthur. You okay?”

Nothing.

He switched the knife from his left hand to his right and backed up against the wall so he could see into the room at an angle. The only thing he saw from this distance was the corner of the rumbled bed.

He took another step forward and the smell from the room got stronger. Now he could smell the dog’s fur and a stronger odor of copper.

When he got to the door, he pushed it the rest of the way open. He held the knife before him.

There, in the corner of the room lay the body of the dog. A bloody stump showed only where the head had been. The wall was splattered with red and black as if a balloon of paint had been thrown at the corner of the room.

He held the knife pointed at the dog and turned to find the police officer lying on the other side of the bed. His throat was a ragged mess of flesh and dripping blood.

The dog’s head lay at Arthur’s side and Rusty was sure he saw the eyes move.

He backed out of the room, stumbled into the bathroom and splashed water on his face. He cupped his hand under the running tap and swallowed a few cups full of water.

Then he went to down the hall, out into the living room and called the police. Again. He reported what happened then walked out of the apartment and closed the door.

\*

Greg was sitting in his old bedroom at his parents’ house. His landlord had seen the damage that he had done to the walls when he was dropping off Greg’s mail. He had pushed into the living room and stared at the writing. Then he’d forced Greg out and told him he couldn’t come back until he had the money to fix the walls.

Greg sat on the bed with the envelope in his hand. He’d read through the letter a couple of times, but it had not resonated with him. She was really done.

He tipped the envelope up on its edge and let the ring fall out again. He held it up to the light. It looked the same, but he would never know. He didn't even know if the thing was real. He’d bought it pretty cheaply but cheap didn't always mean fake. It was the thought that counted, that he even considered marriage.

The thing was, he didn't want to be tied down. This really set him up for some personal freedoms that he would not take advantage of again. And he could win her back, he always seemed to be able to in the past.

The only thing, he’d heard that she was hanging out with someone recently. She couldn't have moved on so quickly. It wasn't possible. Not after being with him. He knew he was a catch. He knew that a person like him didn't come along just every day.

She would be back.

From what he’d heard from his friends, this guy she was hanging out with was a real loser. He was allergic to all sorts of things, he was a major stutterer, and he’d had a thing for Joan. She may have talked to the guy out of pity, but Greg was the real winner in town.

Something in his head told him that he shouldn't let this go so easily. He could fight for what was rightfully his. She’d said yes to his proposal and she had no right to say no now.

He crumpled the envelope and dropped the ring into a small shot glass he’d bought on some school trip back in high school. The ring would come in handy later when she said yes again.

He threw the paper into the garbage and stood up. He stormed through the house, pushing doors open with gusto. His mom even asked him what he was doing but he ignored her dumb questions. Couldn't she see from his gait that he was going to get back what was rightfully his?

He didn't quite know where he was going, but he knew that he would be directed once he got there. This was the way things were working with him recently. It had happened with Cynthia and it happened many times.

He and Cynthia had started out just catching up after she went away for college. Once she got back, they had kept in touch, but very infrequently, if they saw each other in the supermarket, they might say hi to each other but other than that, they didn't talk.

That was until a couple of weeks ago. He had been coming out of the gym and she was coming out of the pet store next door. They smiled and talked for a little. She kept looking at his pumped up arms, he kept looking at the way the bag of dog food was pressing against her.

As they talked, he got closer, as if drawn to her and she would play with her hair or bat her eyes at him. She was practically inviting him over.

And he did go over, because she asked him and they had a very nice dinner. Over the meal, they caught up and covered what had happened since they knew each other in high school. He conveniently left out that he was engaged, what did it matter now? And he made it obvious that he was interested in her a little more than he let on during high school.

The night was filled with flirtations and near inappropriate conversation pieces but something in the back of his mind, maybe a slight feeling of regret, made him hold back. That was until their third date when they skipped dinner and went straight for dessert.

After that tryst, he had felt bad about lying to her so he told her that he was just getting out of a relationship. She understood and wouldn't push him for more.

But she did push him to go out dancing and that’s what started this whole thing. Really, it was her fault that she wanted to go to that stupid late-night lake cruise.

He stormed outside and yanked the door open on his pickup. The door squeaked and the sound reminded him of the sound of Cynthia’s voice when he told her they couldn’t see each other any longer.

He slammed the door shut and shoved the key into the ignition. He turned the engine over and felt the key bend a little in his hand. He pulled back, not wanting to snap the key off in the ignition and gripped the steering wheel. His knuckles shone white as he backed out of the driveway and headed toward Cynthia’s house.

On the way, the drive did nothing to quell his anger as nice scenic drives used to do. In the past, he could start out angry, go on a short drive through the country, and a mile or two in, he would be tapping his steering wheel to the beat of the song on the radio.

He was already five miles into the drive, getting closer to the woods that bordered the lake on this side of the town, and his anger did not subside. He was going to make Cynthia leave him alone, one way or another, and then he would convince Crystal that she had made a terrible mistake.

He passed by the street that Crystal now lived on and happened to glance down the road. He saw her car in the driveway and something inside him forced his leg to move to the brake. He pressed it so hard the rear tires locked and he left a long trail of black rubber on the asphalt.

He spun the truck around at the next turn off and gunned it back toward Crystal’s new place. He pulled onto the street and slowed. He could drive by this late in the evening and see the lights from her apartment. She had always been afraid of the dark and she would keep a light on in the living room, no matter the time.

As he drove by, he slowed, then stopped by parking across the driveway. He leaned over and looked up at the window. The light shone bright yellow in the darkness. So she was home. He would go talk to Cynthia, show her what she had caused, then come back here and convince Crystal that she had made a mistake.

That was the plan all along, he just realized. Then he saw a shadow come to the window. The shadow showed broad shoulders, and short hair. She had a guy up there.

He pulled into the driveway and backed into a spot in the trees with the front of the truck facing the building. He could still see her window. He turned the truck off, reclined the seat as much as it would go, and watched.

She couldn’t do this to him. He had given her so much of his life. He had given her so much of his time and energy and she was going to throw it all away on the next guy that came around.

He rolled the window down a little to let in the cool night air and turned the music on low to give him something to listen to while he watched and waited for his time to act.

The radio hissed unusual static for his favorite rock station so he had to change the channel a few times until he got a good enough signal.

He would have put in some music, but he had left the house so quickly that he did not have time to grab his music. He leaned forward again.

The shadow at the window had gone, but at least the bedroom light in the back had not come on. If it did, he would be up there in an instant. He would break the front door down if he needed to.

His shaking leg set the truck into an easy motion that helped him to focus on his anger a little more. This would be over soon. The guy would leave, then Greg could take care of things with Cynthia. His mind seemed to be on a loop.

A voice in the back of his mind told him to calm down. But a more rational voice told him that this anger he was feeling was not quite enough, there needed to be a little more added to what he was feeling for things to be real.

As the music played, he watched. Then, the light in the living room clicked off. He leaned down to watch the bedroom light. When it did not come on after a few minutes, he felt a slight bit of relief. But then realized that there were plenty of things they could do in the dark in the living room.

He clenched his jaw then saw the blue light from the television flicker on. He reached under his seat and found his handgun. This would take care of things with that guy and he could show Crystal that a real man meant business.

Another light flicked on in the apartment, it looked like the kitchen. Okay, snack time. Things were not too serious between the dweeb she was seeing and his woman.

Then the light in the bedroom did come on. He grabbed the door handle and slid the gun into his pocket.

Right before he was about to push the door open, there was a knock at his window. All Greg could see in his rage was a man in a dark outfit standing at the window.

“What’d you want?”

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you what you’re doing here.”

“I’m waiting for my girlfriend. What’s it to you?”

The man shone a light into the cab then into Greg’s face. Last, the light shown onto Greg’s hand which was resting at his side. “You typically wait for your girlfriend with a gun in your pocket?”

“Who said I had a gun?” Greg put his hand on the steering wheel.

The man shone his light back into Greg’s face. “Step out of the car please.”

“Who’s going to make me?”

“The Lake Grand Vista Police will.”

Greg blinked. A feeling washed over him like he’d just come out of a long sleep in which he tossed and turned all night. “Officer?”

“Come on, step out.”

Greg pulled the handle that he was still holding and opened the door. The weight of the gun in his pocket was obvious. He stepped away from the door and leaned against the bed of the truck.

“Keep your hands where I can see them.”

Greg only nodded. His head still swam in a thick fog. He had a vague notion of what he was doing but not everything stood clear to him.

The officer kept an eye on Greg as he shone the light into the cab. The mix of garbage and papers did not help the story. “You always wait for your girlfriend with a messy seat like that?”

Greg blinked, his eyes staying shut for a half-beat longer than normal. “I, uh, no sir.”

The light trained back on Greg. “Have you had anything to drink tonight?”

Greg put his hand up to block the light from shining directly into his eyes. “No. Nothing.” He shook his head.

“Drugs?”

“Never.”

“You mind telling me what you were doing out here then?”

Greg put his hand down and looked at the officer. He could feel his mind searching for the answer as if gears were turning in his head. “Seems like I wanted to see my girlfriend.”

“Are you feeling okay?”

“To be honest, no. I feel like I’ve been run over by a truck.”

“So. I ask again. Do you always wait outside your girlfriend’s house with a gun in your pocket?”

Greg looked down, then patted the side of his leg where the gun was stored. “I, no. I don’t know what was going on.”

“Did you intend to shoot someone tonight?”

“Look, am I being charged with something?”

“There’s a lot of stuff going on around here. Things that I’m not at liberty to talk about. One of the neighbors around here called, so I came out.”

“I’m not going to hurt anyone. Not tonight. Not ever.”

“Can you put your hands up please?”

Greg obliged as the officer stepped closer.

“I’m going to remove the weapon from your pocket and take it with me to the station. You can come pick it up in a day after you’ve gotten your head back on straight.”

“I don’t know that you have the right to do that.”

“I’m here to protect and serve and that’s what I’m doing. I’m not confiscating your gun; I’m holding it for you until you cool down. Something any friend would do.”

When the officer had the gun, he placed it in a small locker in the trunk of his car. He came back to Greg. “License please.”

Greg dug into his pocket and pulled out his leather wallet. He opened the flap and a couple of receipts fluttered to the ground. He slid his license out and watched the receipts as they caught the wind. He then bent over and picked them up and shoved them into his pocket.

The officer had a ticket pad out and wrote down Greg’s information. He then handed a carbon copy to Greg. “You can come by tomorrow and retrieve your weapon. I want you to get home now. It’s too late.”

Greg glanced up at the building and saw the living room light on in Crystal’s apartment. That didn’t seem right, but he could not place why.

He slid back into the driver’s seat and pulled the door closed. The officer stepped back and held his gaze on the truck as it pulled away.

Greg drove down the street in silence, the radio was no longer playing. Brief images of what he was sure he’d seen in the window came flashing back to him but he could not place if they were real or not.

He drove home without a single thought of Cynthia. At least for now.

\*

Miriam sat at the kitchen table while staring at her husband as he slept on the easy chair in the connected living room. The television played a late movie but the sound had been turned down. He had been watching a football game, but that ended hours ago and he had just moved to the next thing on the dial.

She knew that Dave didn’t love her any longer. She’d known that for months, but the feeling of that truth did not grow into being until now. He ignored her on a daily basis. Ignored her needs and desires.

He would watch whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. He sometimes ate the meals she cooked but he never once thanked her. And the times when he wouldn’t eat the meal, he would take a few bites, dump it into the garbage, and then dig out the potato chips without a word.

As she watched his chest rise and fall with each breath he took, she could feel the anger descending upon her as if an entity had entered the room and were coaxing her toward these conclusions.

She shook her head, both in disgust and at the notion that something else was controlling her thoughts. There was nothing else.

She stood and went to the butcher block filled with knives. As she stared at him, she remembered picking out a set of knives with black handles, she’d even had them in the shopping cart and Dave had come around the corner, his jowls bouncing and a smile across his face. He carried a set of knives with green handles. The same green handles she was looking at now.

The knives hadn’t seemed like a big deal at the time, but he seemed enthusiastic about the knives and she placed hers back on the shelf without a word but with resentment in her heart.

She slid the knife with the word butcher stenciled on the end of the handle and stared at the metallic gleam in the low kitchen light.

The low light was another thing. When he watched TV she couldn’t have bright lights on in the kitchen, there was too much glare or something. She turned on all the lights in the kitchen and still Dave slept.

She stared at the blade in her hand as she sat at the table again. What was she really going to do with this knife? And then as if in answer, a thought popped into her head. She was going to use it, that’s what.

Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the blade harder. She stood up. “Dave,” she said, “do you love me?”

Dave grunted in his sleep and shifted. A burp escaped his lips in a quiet exhale.

“No answer?”

This time he remained silent.

She stepped closer. “I’ve always loved you. Since the first time I saw you.”

She placed her hand on the back of the chair. A monster on television chased a screaming girl through the woods. If he had left the volume turned up, he would have been startled awake.

“I don’t think you love me any longer.”

She stood beside the chair now, the knife hanging down at her side. “I don’t think I love you any longer either.”

She lifted the blade above her head and held it in both hands. There was a spot on his chest that she could practically feel was calling for the blade. Before the blade could fall, the phone on the small TV tray next to the chair rang. She turned toward the ringing phone and watched as Dave stirred from his sleep.

His hand moved, as if on its own and groped for the receiver. When he got to it, he picked it up then dropped it back down, hanging up. In all, he did not wake.

She lifted the blade once more then thrust it down in a quick arc. The blade met the soft flesh of his chest, slipped through the ribs and plunged into his heart.

The quick action made Dave’s eyes shoot open. He groaned and stared wide-eyed at the blade in horror. The blade jerked back and forth with each heartbeat. He lifted his hand to pull the blade out. He groped toward the handle and Miriam pushed his hand away with ease. He tried with the other, but again, she did not allow him to grab the handle. When he finally got his hands on the handle, his strength was waning. His eyes were already starting to get heavy. His lids closing on themselves.

Then his hand fell away and rested at his side. He jerked a couple of times, then the knife ceased movement.

Throughout the whole struggle, he said nothing, he didn’t even look up into her eyes. “You didn’t love me.”

She picked him up by the armpits and stood him up then she forced him toward the kitchen and pushed him onto the floor. When he hit, the knife dug in further and his hands went flying to the side.

Miriam left the body on the floor, picked up the phone, dialed 911, then climbed the stairs to the attic. She pushed the window open and climbed out onto the roof of the two story house. She looked down at the cars in the driveway, so far down below.

The wind blew cold against her skin and she closed her eyes.

The affirmations that she was never loved kept flooding through her mind. She stepped closer to the edge of the roof, overlooking the cars. With her eyes closed, she could imagine herself on the beach, doing laps as the sun and the wind played over her body.

She opened her eyes once more when she heard the sirens blare in the distance. Then took a final step forward.

When the police arrived, the first thing they saw was her body laying atop the crumpled roof if a nine-year-old Chevy.

The officers had to break the door down and called in the homicide detective from the next town over when they saw the body lying in the kitchen.

\*

On an adjacent shore of the lake, all the dogs that were outside started barking at the same time. When their owners came out to check on what was going on, no one saw anything. The only thing that would get the dogs to quiet down was to take the dogs inside and even that proved difficult.

Jason opened the back door off his kitchen to the sound of his Golden Retriever barking and howling. It was sitting in the middle of the lawn, the light from the clouded moon shining directly on him.

When it was time to come inside, the dog usually ran in a bounding gait toward to the open door. The only thing needed to trigger the dog’s movement was the door opening. Tonight, the dog did not even turn toward the open door.

Jason stepped out onto the cool grass. His bare feet becoming instantly cold as he walked toward the dog. With each step, the howling grew louder. He had to hold his hands over his ears to stop the sound from digging into his pounding headache.

When he got to the dog, he grabbed the collar and pulled. The dog did not budge. Instead, the dog turned, and snapped at his hand then went back to howling into the darkness.

Jason wrestled with the dog until he was finally able to get it moving, then pulled it toward the house. As he closed the kitchen door, the dog stopped howling but shook as if freezing. Then the dog peed onto the floor and collapsed.

When Jason tried to move the dog after cleaning up the mess, the dog was dead.

\*

The next night, Greg found himself standing outside of Cynthia’s house. She lived in the house with three other girls and even though that made it difficult for them to find time alone, it also added to the excitement.

Greg’s hand hovered over the door, ready to knock. It was time to set things right. He had to take back what was his.

\*

Crystal and Rusty spent the next few days apart. Without talking about it, each felt that things has been too intense around them. But after a few days, Crystal started to miss Rusty.

Closer to the weekend, Rusty was likewise sitting at his house, the phone next to him on the couch. He would pick it up and dial four or five numbers but always hang up. He couldn’t get the image of the dog and the officer out of his mind.

He had only told Crystal a little of what happened. He hoped that the cops would fill her in. She didn’t ask questions either. She just accepted his silence.

Rusty woke up over the next few nights in a cold sweat. The memory of seeing the blood-splattered wall and hearing the low growling at the end.

At least that’s how he remembered it.

He was sitting at home waiting for his leftovers from the night before to reheat. He was looking out the window of his apartment. A red truck sat across the street.

The driver, or an occupant at least, was sitting in the front. He could not see the face, but every once in a while he could see the orange glow of a cigarette brighten as the occupant took a drag.

Instead of backing away from the window, Rusty grabbed a plate and pretended to wash some dishes. He stared ahead. His food bubbled on the stovetop but he ignore that.

He watched as the cigarette glowed, then was finished and tossed out into the street. Then another cigarette was lit.

When the match came to the face, he could only see a mustache. So it wasn’t the man that he had been following. That was good. So, who was this?

He grabbed a towel, made a show of drying his hands so the person at the window would see, then went to the table, pulled the blinds shut then went back to the stove. He grabbed a bowl and fiddled with the pot.

He pushed the pot off the burner, headed toward the table with the bowl, and then went back to his room. The light in his room was off but his blinds were open. He stood back away from the light streaming in from the street light and squinted through the bushes to the truck in the street.

The occupant was still sitting and still smoking. It would not be such a big deal if there was someone that lived across the street.

Sure the person in the truck could be waiting for someone in the apartment building but it was unlikely because the only other people that lived in the building were out. This small block of four apartments was peopled with very close neighbors. They usually knew each other’s goings and comings simply because there were so few of them.

His upstairs neighbor worked for a cleaning company that washed and waxed floors for a few of the commercial buildings around. He was gone nightly so no one would be waiting for him.

The lady that lived across from him spent more time out than in. She also didn’t entertain many men so this guy was clearly not waiting for her.

Then there was the girl upstairs. She was a waitress at a bar on the other side of the lake. During the week, she would stay out there because the commute was too much. Rusty was sure she had a boyfriend on the other side of the lake.

Unless this was a jealous customer or something, the guy sitting and staring at the house was not waiting for the girl upstairs.

As long as he sat out there and smoked, Rusty decided that the guy was no harm to him. He made his way back to the kitchen and poured soup into a bowl and ate while watching television.

He was sitting there watching a movie while thinking about his life. Then the horn in the truck started to blare. He jumped up and rejected the notion to run to the window and throw the blinds back.

He did run to his room and look out the window. The man behind the wheel had his arm out the window and was flipping the bird at the building. He honked some more then sped off into the night.

A silence followed that seemed supernatural. Rusty took a deep breath, waiting for something else to happen, the truck to come speeding down the road again, something. Instead, he stood at the window for about ten minutes and nothing happened.

He went back to the couch, plopped down into the old but comfortable couch and changed the channel.

Every so often he would glance down at the phone, hoping it would ring, but every time he did, nothing happened.

He fell asleep on the couch again.

\*

Mayor Wilson paced the floor of his home office. Because the weekend was so close, he could think of nothing else besides the answers that were coming. He was waiting, not only for the weekend but for that private investigator that Mr. Glenn had hired to show up.

Time was running short, his wife was out and would be returning soon. She didn’t need to know about the things going on in the town, she didn’t need to know about the danger she was in. No one needed to know and if he was able to gloss over everything, no one would know.

He heard a car in the driveway and went to the window to look out into the front of the house. The man, taller than normal, dark hair, strong build, stepped from his car and went to the front door.

Wilson heard the echo of the knocking coming from downstairs. He took another deep breath, this was the thing that could mean an answer, but not real answers. But if he wanted to win the next election, he had to play ball. That didn’t mean he had to play nice.

The knocking sounded again and he made his way down the stairs, taking each one at a time and resting between steps. No one said he had to be quick about helping. He still knew he could do this on his own.

When he finally made it to the door, he took a deep breath, pulled the door open and looked up at the man on the other side. He was slightly taller than Wilson. Wilson put his hand out to shake and the man pushed past him and looked up at the ornate chandelier hanging in the middle of the foyer.

Wilson clenched his jaw at the lack of respect and pushed the door shut. “You’re late.”

“Nice place you got here. Not as nice as my hotel room though.”

Wilson nodded. “Let’s go out back. It’s nice and we can sit in the shade.” He stepped past the man and headed toward the French doors leading to the patio. The man didn’t follow.

“You got anything to drink around here?”

“Lemonade?” Wilson said from the entrance to the kitchen.

The man laughed. “No. Something to drink.”

Wilson’s throat clicked as he swallowed. Of course he had liquor, but he wasn’t offering it, at least not yet.

“Not right now. Sorry. Trying to quit.”

The man nodded and finally started walking toward the back patio. When he came out through the doors, Wilson had already seated himself with the sun directly behind him.

The investigator slid his sunglasses off and looked down at Wilson. He smiled. “You know. I think I will take that lemonade. With ice please.” He gave another quick smile.

Wilson pushed himself off the chair and ambled toward the kitchen. He got a couple of glasses out and poured lemonade into each. Then, when he was picking the ice out of the ice bucket, the piece he was going to drop into the other glass slipped from the tongs, bounced off the edge of the countertop and them fell onto the floor. Wilson leaned over and picked it up to toss it in the sink, instead, he dropped it into the man’s glass.

When he came back outside with the two lemonade glasses, the man was now sitting in the seat Wilson had just vacated. He had his sunglasses on again and was staring up at the clouds. Wilson put the glass down in front of him and then took a seat at an angle to the investigator.

Before Wilson could adjust the pillow behind him, the investigator said, “I want to see the cave where the boy disappeared.”

“I can arrange that. My chief of police would be happy to make that available to you.”

He shook his head then looked toward Wilson. “No. I want you to show me. I’m not supposed to be here.”

“You don’t need to worry about my chief. He’s on the side of good.”

Wilson had just leaned back in the seat, he was getting comfortable again. Then the man stuck his hand out. “By the way, my name is Tom Cameron.”

Wilson looked down at the hand then scooted forward. “Most people around here call me Mayor Wilson.”

Tom nodded. “Uh huh. Thing is, you’re not my mayor.”

“I think it would be best to keep that out of the papers.”

“Right. So what do I call you?”

They shook hands and Wilson sat back. “Edward.”

“Okay, now we’re getting somewhere, Eddie. When can you show me the cave?”

“We can head out there tomorrow, early in the morning. I don’t want to have too many people asking questions.”

“What about Mrs. Mayor?”

Was this guy real? “She never asks me where I’m going. She knows my heart belongs to the town.”

Tom nodded then pulled his small spiral notebook from a pocket inside his jacket. He flipped a few pages, wrote something, then closed it and looked at Wilson. “I can’t tomorrow morning. I have a meeting with Mr. Glenn.”

“Fine. Then when are you free?”

Tom cocked his head then looked up into the sky again. “I’d say around noon. I’ll be hungry. Small town like this able to support a diner?”

Wilson closed his eyes and nodded. “Yeah. We can go to Memories downtown. Should be near your hotel.”

“Okay. About one then?”

“You said lunch. What happened to that?”

“One is lunch. Keeps the metabolism going.”

Wilson gritted his teeth again. If he kept this up he would crack one and have to go to the dentist to get it repaired. “Fine. Whatever works for you.”

Tom stood up. Brushed his knees off with his hands. He pulled his sunglasses out again. He hadn’t touched his lemonade. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Make sure you have some flashlights. I don’t want to get separated.”

Wilson wanted to jump forward and throw the glass of lemonade at the investigator but his cooler head prevailed. “I have a few.”

“Good.” He went through the door and into the darkness inside.

Wilson scrambled after him. “Okay. Good to meet you.”

“Sure.” He pulled the front door open and headed to his car. When the front door shut, Wilson punched the hard wood door. His knuckles screamed in pain.

\*

Rusty got to work the next morning and a large, yellow envelope sat on his desk. This type of thing was always coming to his office, it was generally a contract or something similar. He placed the envelope in his incoming bin and got back to work on the client list.

This list was more important than anything else he did in his job and this was the thing that kept him employed. The list, ever growing, was something that he had to keep as a general business secret.

The client list had a few prominent names on it and technically he had access to their homes in the winter months. He would never use this information and even if he was offered a year’s salary, he would turn it down.

So, because of the importance of this information he always went through the list at the end of the season. That way, there was no possible way that someone could come in off the street or a tourist could breeze in looking at some real estate and see the names of a few actors and politicians.

As he processed the list, he thought about Crystal. She was now part of his life and because they had spent a few days apart, he missed her.

He didn’t want to presume that she missed him too but he also didn’t want to presume that she didn’t miss him.

At lunch, he called her and asked her to dinner the next night at his apartment.

“Of course. I was wondering when you’d call me.”

Rusty smiled and hung up the phone.

Susan stood up and looked at Rusty over the desks. “I know that look.”

“And what is that?”

“That’s the look of someone in love.”

He shook his head and scratched his ear. “No. Not yet.”

She laughed. “Not yet?”

He stood up and went to the front of the office and sat on the corner of a desk. His feet dangled over the side. “I just really got to know this girl. And it’s weird, you know?”

“Because of Joan?”

“Yeah. Because of Joan.”

Susan shuffled some papers around on her desk. “I didn’t want to say this, but-” She stopped, took a deep breath. “I don’t think that Joan was right for you. She never was.”

“It’s hard to let someone go like that. I had a crush on her in high school.”

“What did you do about it?”

“Nothing. I was too scared to talk to her.”

“Why? What did you have to lose?”

“I don’t know. Whenever I got around her I couldn’t help but stumble. I’d trip over my words, I didn’t know where to put my hands. If we ever talked and walked. Forget it.”

“You’ve grown up.”

“I guess. I can see some of Joan in Crystal.”

“Because they are sisters.”

He shook his head and smoothed his shirt. “It’s more than that. I can’t explain it.”

They sat like that for a minute or so until a car drove by and honked at someone and broke the silence.

“By the way. How late were you here last night?”

Susan pursed her lips and then checked her desk calendar. “I think I left a couple minutes after you did. Why?”

“I was just wondering when that envelope was dropped off.”

“Which one?”

“The one you put on my desk for me to find this morning.”

She shook her head. “I didn’t put an envelope on your desk last night or this morning.”

He shrugged. Maybe it fell out of my bag and the cleaning staff picked it up or something.”

“What was it? Something I need to log?”

Rusty looked up and off into space while thinking about it. “You know. I didn’t even open it.”

“I’ve got a life too.”

“What does that mean?”

“If you’re hiding work for me to have to do late into the night, that means you are infringing on my rights to go home early.”

He smiled. “Fine. I’ll take care of this. The A clients can wait.” He pushed off the desk and lumbered back to his desk. He grabbed the yellow envelope and sat down. “I’m opening it now. If you have to log something and it takes too long, I give you permission to go home at the normal time.”

“You can’t tell me that. You’re not my boss.” She laughed.

He sat down at his desk and saved the file he had been working on. He closed the folder with the A clients on it and put it in the drawer, then locked it.

Rusty then pulled the envelope down from his inbox and looked at the address label. The white rectangle was void of an address. It only had his first name on it and nothing else. That was odd.

He grabbed his metal letter opener and slid it through the fold. “In fact, if this is something important, I’ll stay late tonight.”

“Not with a date you aren’t.”

“You’d really stay late in my place?”

“No, but I’d come in five minutes early to finish something.”

“I knew I hired you for a reason.”

“You didn’t hire me. I accepted the job opening.”

Just then, the mailman came through the glass door. There were a few large packages that had to be exchanged and some other signatures that had to be done. With Susan momentarily distracted, he slit the envelope open the rest of the way and dumped the contents on his desk.

Sometimes clients got home and realized they’d forgotten to turn in a rental key so they would mail it back. If they didn’t, they would be on the hook for the new lock and new set of keys. But this wasn’t a set of keys. This was a stack of blank pieces of paper and a single photograph.

The photo showed him outlined at his kitchen window. His head was down, presumably doing dishes or washing his hands at the sink. The picture was taken at night as evidence of the darkness surrounding the window.

He looked up. The mailman was now flirting with Susan and she was smiling, putting her hair behind her ear. She was leaned forward, showing interest in the conversation.

He grabbed the photo with the stack of papers and walked within proximity of the desk. He listened to Susan and the mailman chat about inane things and then he rapped the edge of her desk with his knuckles and walked out.

She waved at him as he turned back to check her out one last time and then he got into the truck and drove off. “Thanks for killing the mood.”

His hands were shaking as he dropped the photo on her desk. “You sure you weren’t here when this was delivered?”

She looked down at the picture. “What? No. What is this?”

“That’s what I want to know. Did one of my friends put you up to this?”

“Which friends?”

“Come on. I’m serious.”

She pointed down at the picture. “I don’t know anything about that picture and if I did, I would tell you.”

“You think this is a threat?”

“For what? What’d you do to get yourself threatened?”

He shrugged. He didn’t want her to know about following the guy or anything like that. “Nothing. Just things like this sometimes come with threats.”

Susan chewed her lip as she was thinking. “Does Crystal have a crazy ex?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“That could be who did this.”

“But how’d they get in?”

“Maybe someone on the cleaning crew. I don’t know.”

“A couple of nights ago I was at my house and I happened to look outside. There was a truck sitting in front of my apartment and there was someone inside. I could only see the glow of their cigarette, but after a little while, they drove off.”

“Did you call the cops?”

“Why would I? That’s nothing. Just someone smoking a cigarette and then driving away.”

She pointed at the picture. “Apparently not. You need to call the cops.” She handed him the phone.

“And say what?” He hung up the phone.

“That you’ve been threatened.”

“’What’s the nature of your emergency, sir?’ ‘Well, I got a picture of myself washing dishes.’ ‘Sir, this is an emergency line. Please hang up.’ That’s what would happen.”

“Fine. But leave that photo here. Don’t touch it. When the cops come here tomorrow to tell me you’ve been killed I want to point them to that picture.”

“Deal.” He smiled and scooped the picture into the envelope without touching it.

“Seriously, are you going to call the police?”

“No. Probably someone I know and they’re just messing with me. I’ll look into that.”

But when Rusty went back to his desk, he could think of no one that would do this. It wasn’t really a threat, but it wasn’t benign either. He could go to the police. Maybe he should, but this wasn’t a credible threat. The cops had other things to worry about.

The rest of the day was uneventful and Rusty left a little early to drop by the grocery store on his way home. He picked up everything to make a good steak and chicken dinner and headed home.

He couldn’t have known it, but someone was watching him the entire time.

\*

The man shook his head and realized that it was now light out. He’d been sitting in the hallway, staring at the envelope for a long time.

The thing was, he wasn’t tired. He didn’t feel as if he’d missed any sleep. Had he blacked out again? He looked around the hallway, nothing was disturbed and that envelope was still sitting there, waiting for him to pick it up.

He got up and went into the bathroom. When he looked in the mirror he saw he had a thick growth of facial hair, as if he hadn’t shaved in a couple of days.

He went downstairs and as he passed the front door, there was more mail sitting in the pile by the door than there was last night.

He went into the kitchen and poured a glass of juice. He drank it faster than normal and realized how dry his throat had been.

The red light on his answering machine was blinking. He went to it and pressed the play button. “Hey man. It’s me. Hal. Just wondering if everything is okay. We missed you at work today. Give me a call.”

He pushed the delete button. The next message played. “Hello. It’s me again. Hal. Two days in a row. I’m a little worried. Did you go out of town?”

That message was deleted and he pressed stop on the machine. He picked up the phone and called into work. When the reception desk answered, he was put through to Hal. “Hal. I’m sorry. I’ve been really sick the last couple of days. I couldn’t even talk.” He coughed for affect and came back on. “I’m really sorry.”

“I’ve put up with a lot, with everything that’s happened, you know. But things are getting a little thin around here.”

“I understand. I will be in. Tomorrow. I promise.”

“You better be. The new girl, Meredith, has been asking about you. Someone needs to train her better than what’s happening now.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. I’ll be in.” They chatted for a few more minutes and the man looked up at the clock over the stove. It was almost noon.

He ran upstairs and took a shower. He was thinking about heading in, just for a few to talk to Meredith and maybe convince her to go out some time.

Then, at that thought another voice entered his thoughts. Yes, that’s good. Show her your vacation spot.

The man shook his head and as he was eating a quick lunch, he realized there were a couple more messages on the machine. He pushed play and listened as he chewed. One was from Hal, it was asking him, pleading with him to be okay and if he didn’t hear soon, he was calling the police to check on him. When that message ended, the next started.

There was a low crackle, sounding like something burning. Then a deep, throaty voice, one that sounded familiar, came on. “Good morning Kevin, or should I say afternoon. I know that’s not your name but it’s what you told me it was. I’ve never asked, it isn’t my business. Why did you lie to me? Anyway, what I really called for is, I really think you should open that envelope at your door.” The line went silent. Then the tape rewound.

He ran to the door and snatched the envelope off the floor. He held the envelope in the middle, ready to rip it. As he held it in his shaky hands, the phone rang again. He turned to look at it and as he did, the machine picked up. He heard his outgoing voice message then the person on the other end got a chance to talk. “Don’t tear it. I’ll just send you another. I really want you to read it.”

The man stared at the envelope, then looked back at the phone. The line clicked off.

With shaking hands, he tore the flap open and pulled out the letter. There were three words, a period, then three more. “Come see me. Bring a guest.”

\*

Rusty got home a little later than he had hoped. An older lady in front of him at the store had taken far too long to check out. She had a story or memory about almost every item. The apples reminded her of her Bill. The pickles reminded her about when she was pregnant with her oldest. Then the cashier started in, actually encouraging the conversation. Rusty would have gone to another line of there was another line open.

He placed his armload of bags on the kitchen counter and removed the items that needed to go into the refrigerator. He let the chicken set out on the counter so it would be closer to room temperature when he started cooking it.

After all the groceries were laid out in their proper places, he cut the chicken into cubes and marinated the pieces in a special seasoning. This was one of his favorite meals and he knew how to make it almost without thinking.

The doorbell rang and Rusty called from the kitchen that the door was open. Crystal came in and put a frozen cheesecake on the countertop. “I know you said I didn’t need to bring anything, and I don’t know what you’re cooking, but this,” she tapped the cheesecake box, “this stuff goes with everything.”

“Do you need to put that in the freezer or are you okay?”

“No. I think it we let it sit out then it will be nice and soft when dessert rolls around.”

Rusty dropped the cubed chicken into a frying pan and then added the other ingredients. The house filled with aromas and they chatted while he cooked. Mostly, they paid attention to the cooking food.

Finally, the food was cooked and Rusty plated the chicken over pasta. He added some grated parmesan and placed it at the small table next to the window.

As they took the first bites, Rusty said, “Is everything okay back at your place?”

Crystal chewed then swallowed. “Yeah. Things are going good. I still can’t turn the lights off to sleep, but things are going good.”

“I know what you mean.” He nodded, then pointed toward the window. He told her about the truck out in the front and that the only thing he saw was the glowing, orange, tip of a cigarette. As she spoke, she grew paler and paler.

“What’s wrong?”

She shook her head, not in negation, but in disbelief. “That sounds like Greg.”

“Come on. Greg?”

“Who else could it be?”

Rusty took another bite and then drank some water. “Is he a photographer?”

Crystal furrowed her brow. “No. Not that I know of. Why?”

Rusty went to his case and thumbed through the envelopes, then he remembered, he’d left the photo with Susan. “Just that I got an envelope on my desk this morning with my picture in it. I was washing dishes. I think it was that night.”

Rusty then put his fork down and went to the window over the sink to look out. The street was partially blocked at the window next to the kitchen table but they had been eating with the blinds and curtain open.

Then Rusty leaned over the sink and squinted out into the dark. “Did Greg drive an orange and white truck?” He stood and turned toward Crystal because she didn’t say anything.

She nodded and joined him next to the sink. “That’s his truck.” She didn’t come into view of the window. “Turn that light off.” She pointed toward the light over the sink.

Rusty clicked the light off without question then backed away from the sink so she could get a better view of the street. “I don’t think anyone is in there, but that’s his truck.”

But as she was saying it, a woman came ambling out onto the sidewalk below. She was swaying as she walked on unsteady feet. The woman then pulled the door open and hopped into the driver’s seat.

“Have you ever seen that truck before?”

He shook his head. “No, I. The downstairs neighbors have a lot of parties. Could be someone there.”

She turned toward him and he was standing close. He put his arms around her and hugged her tightly. Then he kissed her on the head. “This has been a weird couple of days.”

She tilted her head up and hugged him back. She put her head on his chest with her ear against his chest. “It has. I feel like I’m always looking over my shoulder.”

Before the hug became awkward, Rusty let go and gave her space again. “I’ve appreciated how nice you’ve been to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your sister was the only one that was ever really nice to me. She sometimes flirted with me, but I think it was mostly to get something.”

Crystal wiped at her eyes with her hand and nodded. “I appreciate that you haven’t been all predatory with me. I mean, I just broke up with Greg.” Then, as a reaction to his big eyes, as if he were just punched in the gut, she said, “But I like spending time with you.”

He smiled. “Let’s finish eating.”

“Sounds great.” They finished the meal. There weren’t many leftovers.

Rusty dropped their dishes into the sink. “I’ll be right back.” He headed back to his room. He was self-conscious about his breath. He could taste that he had added a little too much garlic and, even though he wasn’t planning on putting any moves on her, he certainly didn’t want to have bad breath.

“Good. Where’s your knives? I’ll cut the cheesecake.”

He went into the kitchen and pulled open a drawer. “Take your pick.”

He turned and went back to the back bedroom. When he went into his bathroom and closed the door, he thought he heard something like a knock on the front door but it could have just as easily been her letting a cupboard door slam shut.

He brushed quickly and came out into the main room. “Sorry about that. I-” He stopped because the front door was open, there was a shattered plate with a smearing of white on it in the hallway, and a fork lying in the open doorway.

Rusty stood, flabbergasted for a second, then ran into the hallway. There were no sounds, no trails. They could have gone down a front set of stairs and a back set of stairs.

He ran to the back set, thinking that they hadn’t checked there when they were eating and saw nothing but darkness. Then he ran around the building to the front and saw a pair of receding lights going in both directions.

On the ground, across the street, lay, what looked like a pile of crumpled laundry. When he got closer, he could see the splayed arm of a woman and a spray of hair. It was the woman they’d seen stagger out to the truck earlier. He ran to her, she had blood running down her face but she was breathing. He tried to shake her awake but she moaned and then turned on her side.

He ran inside and called the police.

\*

Greg wasn’t saying anything. He stared ahead into the darkness, going a little faster than he should be on the twisting roads.

Crystal sat as far away as she could from him without being outside the truck. “What do you want?”

He laughed through his nose, then turned toward her. He smiled then turned back toward his driving. “Oh. You know.”

“No I don’t.”

He reached out in the darkness and moved his hand back and forth until he found her leg. She cringed back from his touch but he only patted her leg.

That wasn’t bad considering what had happened a few minutes before. She had been cutting the cheesecake while Rusty was in the bathroom. There had been a light knock on the door. Rusty had told her about a neighbor that was particular about a parking space and was thinking this was that person asking her to move her car.

She had opened the door while holding the cheesecake in one hand. She smiled as the door swung open, thinking that she could at least be endearing to the angry neighbor. But the only thing she saw was the deranged sneer across Greg’s face.

He lunged toward her and smacked the plate out of her hand. She opened her mouth to scream but Greg had clasped his hand over her mouth. She tried to kick and flail but he was too strong. He dragged her to the truck and threw the door open.

A woman was lying across the bench seat, Crystal had seen that her forehead was red with blood and Greg yanked her out by the ankle with one hand. The woman, it looked like Cynthia but it was hard to tell in the dark, fell into the grass and lay there.

Greg threw Crystal in and slammed the door. She kicked against the door and tried to pull it open, but it wouldn’t budge. The truck, she remembered, had a broken door that could only open from the outside. She fought with the hand crank to roll the window down but Greg was inside and had the truck started.

She had lunged at him and slapped and screamed at him but he just pushed her back. She bumped her head against the window and started hyperventilating. The combination of both, or maybe just the quick breathing caused her to black out.

So when she woke, she didn’t know if it had been a mile or an hour.

They bounced hard over uneven pavement. Even this early in the year, the frost heaves were working under the asphalt. Crystal rubbed her head. She felt okay but knew that head injuries like this were nothing to mess with.

She could think of nothing to say. He’d already ignored the question of their destination. Her mind went back to the girl. “Was that Cynthia?”

Greg looked over at her, blinked once, then back toward the road. “Yup.”

“Why?”

“I’m just getting back what was lost.”

“Did you kill her?”

He pulled back as if she had insulted him. “No. I’d never kill her. She did ruin us though.”

Crystal held the torrent of words that were forcing themselves out, back. She almost scoffed but didn’t because he was clearly unstable.

They rode a little further in silence and finally came up to a wooded road. There was a small turnoff into the trees that was not obvious from the road because it just looked like a space between two trees. The road was more of a path with only faintly visible wheel ruts.

The headlights shone as the only light source in the eerie darkness. There was the occasional set of silvery eyes of some animal in the distance that ran at the sound of the truck.

The path meandered through the scrub and the going was quite rough and slow. If it were a little slower, Crystal could jump out but then where would she be? She hadn’t seen a shotgun or a rifle in the truck but that didn’t mean he didn’t have one in the tool box in the back or behind the seat.

She didn’t think he was crazy enough to shoot her, but then again, he had taken her.

The path finally ended at a small cabin in the middle of the trees. The roof was mottled with green and black moss while the front porch was barely attached. Crystal noticed one of the supporting rails at a corner had rotted or broken and the front corner of the porch roof sagged toward the ground like a tin stalactite.

Greg stopped the truck but kept the lights trained on the side of the building. Crystal just sat there, unable to move because of fear and unable to run because she had no idea where she was.

Greg leaned over and popped the glove box open. He pulled out a set of keys and a small metal box. The popped the box open, pulled out a small, snub-nosed revolver, and loaded a couple of rounds into the cylinder. “You stay right here. I’ll be back.”

He pushed the door open then slammed it shut. She watched as he didn’t bother to lock it. She followed him with her eyes as he ambled around the side of the truck and grabbed a gas can from the bed. Then he came back around and walked into the wash of the light.

He went to the side of the cabin, bent over something, she couldn’t see to be certain, then the sound of a generator coughed to life. She saw a white plume of smoke billow through the lights then she lost it in the darkness.

As she watched him, something deep in the darkness shone thought the night. She was sure she could see something that looked like two pins of red light. She shivered at that, it was exactly as Rusty had said. He must be so worried.

Greg left the can next to the generator cover. He moved back toward the truck and then came over to Crystal’s side. He yanked the door open and she almost tumbled out. She did not realize she was still leaning against the door, reflexively pulling away from him.

He caught her and then lowered her to the ground. He held her arm in one hand and leaned across the bench seat to remove the keys. The truck chimed reminding him to turn the lights off, he did that then stepped back onto the ground.

They stood there for a moment and the surroundings became clear again. Crystal could see dark outlines of the cabin before them.

“I was going to fix this place up.”

Because she was afraid not to say something, she said, “Oh yeah? It looks like a nice place.”

“It is. We were going to have our honeymoon here.”

AS the outline of the house came into view a little stronger, Greg pulled her with a slight tug into the direction of the porch.

They stumbled up a stair and he was, polite wasn’t the right word considering the circumstance, courteous. That’s better. He was courteous enough to tighten his grip so she wouldn’t slip on the slight angle of the listing porch.

Greg fumbled around with the keys, Crystal could hear the ring jangling as he pressed one key, then another into the lock until he freed the bolt. They came inside and Greg pushed the door closed.

He flicked on the light to reveal a sparsly furnished, but furnished nonetheless, living room. There was one room off to the side, Crystal could see the white toilet gleaming in the harsh overhead lights.

There was a bed in the corner with a metal frame and a small kitchen area with a half-stove.

He pulled her over to the bed and sat down. When she didn’t follow, he pulled her down onto the bed next to him. She tried to pull away but he didn’t loosen his grip. He bent down, fished a shoebox-size plastic box from beneath the bed and popped the top with one hand. He pulled out a pair of metal handcuffs and slapped one end around her wrist. Before she could pull away, he had snapped the other end on her and had chained her to the bed.

“Now. Don’t worry. I’m not going to hurt you.”

He stood up from the bed. “I’ll sleep on the couch. It pulls out. You can sleep right there.”

Her mind raced. She couldn’t possibly sleep like this. Then an idea popped into her head. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

He stood up, went into the bathroom, leaned over the toilet and did something she could not see. Then the toilet flushed. When he stepped out, he looked over at her. “Okay.”

“Okay what?”

“You can go. I was just checking for spiders. Only found one. He’s gone now.” He wiped his hand on his pants and then grabbed the key from his pocket.

When he stepped near her, she cringed back. But he only undid the lock on the handcuffs.

“Go ahead. You can even close the door.”

When she got into the bathroom she could see why he had allowed her to close the door. There was only a small window and even if she was six she wouldn’t have been able to squeeze through there without a good coating of grease.

She didn’t really have to go, but she knew that if she didn’t, as soon as the lights were off and he was asleep, she would have to go for real.

She finished her business, flushed, and washed her hands. She didn’t see a towel or paper towels so she wiped her hands across her jeans. When she stepped out, Greg was stepping away from the door. He slid the keys into his pocket. She could now see that the lock was bolted with a key on both sides. She couldn’t get out without breaking through one of the small windows or smashing the window over the door and somehow getting out.

She was stuck. “Do I have to wear these?” She picked up the handcuffs and jangled them where they hung from the metal headboard.

“Can I trust you?”

There were so many things she wanted to say but kept them all to herself. “Completely. What am I going to do?”

Greg sat at a chair at the only table in the room. Now that Crystal was able to get a good look at him, she could see that something was different. His eyes were darker, a little distant, and not as caring as they had been when she fell in love with him. His hair, usually tamed under a hat or styled under a thick crust of hair gel now stood out in every direction. His brown hair looked like it hadn’t been washed in a week.

He did not make eye contact with her. Instead, he stared at the floor then pushed himself up by placing his hands on his thighs. He took the few steps to the bed and Crystal backed away and sat on the bed. He took a lunging step forward, slamming his foot against the wooden floor.

She put her hands up reflexively and when she did, he grabbed her wrist and snapped the cuffs on again.

Before she could protest, he said, “You could try and hit me over the head with a chair or a chunk of wood.” He shrugged and shuffled over to the couch.

Crystal jerked her arm back and forth, the metal of the handcuffs clanging against the metal posts on the headboard and biting into the tender flesh around her wrists. “What is wrong with you?”

He mechanically answered, as if repeating a mantra embedded during hypnosis. “I’m getting back what was lost.” He turned his back to her and flopped onto the couch. A small cloud of dust billowed into the air.

Greg’s normal reaction would have been to wave the dust away before he started a sneezing fit. Instead, he sneezed once, then blew his nose onto the floor like a teenage boy on a practice field.

This was not Greg.

“How can I trust you?” She was now standing, pulling on the cuffs as far as she could reach. He was barely out of reach and if she had a baseball bat, he would still be a hair’s width away.

His voice came out flat when he said, “You can sit down.” He hadn’t turned around.

Crystal sank back onto the bed and lay down on her back. She was shivering and close to tears now. The only thing she wanted now was for Rusty to come slamming through the door. Although, she smiled to herself, he would probably cough up his diaphragm with all the dust and damp air.

After they had been sitting there for a while, Greg staring off into the exposed rafters, Crystal thinking and failing of ways to escape, Greg stood up, went to the window above the generator, and clicked off the machine. The steady whine of the engine that she had gotten used to rather quickly died. The sound was replaced with various animals and some nighttime bugs.

She heard the springs on the couch squeak as Greg lay down. Then, she closed her eyes and darkness settled into the room. She would not be able to sleep soon because her mind was working on a plan.

\*

After calling the police, Rusty had banged on the door of his downstairs neighbor to come out and help with the girl and she had agreed. Rusty explained what had happened and how he must follow Greg. He was practically pushed out into his car and as he was adjusting his seatbelt, he saw the girl that had been laying on the side of the road sitting up, his neighbor had her arm around the girl’s shoulder and was helping her stand.

The police told Rusty to stay where he was and they would take it from here. That had been fifteen minutes ago and so far, he still felt like he was on the right trail. The lights he had seen most clearly looked like they were from a truck so he followed in that direction. The trail was not quite certain and he made guesses when he came to intersections about which direction to travel.

It felt like something deep down inside of him was directing the way.

As he drove with his hands white-knuckled around the steering wheel, he kept chanting, “Keep strong Crystal. I’m coming.”

\*

Tom Cameron was sitting on a metal chair outside of his motel room. He was looking forward to getting to switch to a nicer place once the mayor came through. The air conditioning unit was busted and the room had an odd, musty smell to it that could only be removed by airing out the room.

The heater seemed to work, but it whined and whirred so loudly that he didn’t plan on using it until he crawled into bed and covered up.

Sure, he was cold sitting out here, but he would still be cold with the door open. Besides, he was wearing a jacket. It was better to conceal his sidearm with. He leaned back against the wall, the front legs an inch or two off the ground.

He watched the cars drive by, not that there were many, but basically waited for the room to air out and for something to happen.

He had gone over the notes so many times that he could no longer see the content, he only saw words and pictures. Neither were clear or made sense.

He stood to stretch his legs, they were still tired from the trip, and walked down to the end of the sidewalk where the grass ran for a few feet before meeting, thick dark woods. There were scattered pieces of trash, the empty Bud can or cigarette butt. A few scraps of paper and plastic bags were tangled among the leaves.

So it wasn't just the room, he was staying near a dump too. He kicked a rock into the bushes and turned back toward the road.

An orange and white pickup truck drove by. Enough light from the parking lot lamps and the passing vehicles showed him that there was a man driving and a woman sitting in the passenger seat. The woman was unhappy. In his mind, he made up a story that they had been on a date and he ordered the smelliest food possible. She was looking forward to a kiss but knew it would be terrible if she let it happen.

Consequently, she looked like she was a hostage. He watched them drive by and into the tree-covered lane. He could see far enough in that direction that he was able to see the truck take a left into what looked like a wooded path but may have been a small bend in the road. He let his imagination follow them as they went through the trees to an overlook.

Must be going to a make out spot, he thought.

Then he went back to his seat and watched the road some more. He lamented that nothing was happening.

\*

Rusty’s car, an old beater, coughed as he waited at a stop sign for his turn to muster on. He waited a little longer at the sign and looked down the road to the left and the right. Neither had the feel of right. He closed his eyes and pictured the road before him. When he opened them, he felt more than knew that he should continue straight.

As soon as he came around a corner, an old, blue and white tractor meandered down the road. It’s orange flashers at the corner of the cockpit glared in his face and he had to squint from the harsh light.

In his patience, he swerved left and right, trying to see around the tractor so he could be on his way. Once, he pulled out into the oncoming traffic lane, but there was a car coming and he had to jerk the wheel to get back into the correct lane. The car sped by and honked when it passed Rusty. Finally the road straightened out and he was able to see far enough in front of the tractor to be able to pull around. As he did, the tractor gave a loud honk, Rusty waved and headed down the suddenly darkened road.

Soon the dark road completed its meandering through the dark woods. The woods would not be so dark in the summer when the summer people were back because the houses along the road here would be rented. He managed many of these properties.

As he came through the dark section of the town, he approached a y in the road. Going to the left would take him back around the lake, going to the right would be a path into the mountains. Either one made sense.

He pulled over to the side of the road and sat in the car for a moment. Something was going to come to him.

“If it were me, where would I go?” He tried to picture himself with Crystal in the car. He would go back around the lake to the other side, maybe they would go to a nice dinner, maybe to the community theatre. That was the wrong way of thinking. That was too nice.

His eyes popped open. The other side of the lake would be great. The driver could make a line to other places in the state. That was it, the other side of the lake.

There was a knock on the window. Rusty came out of his trance and looked across the passenger seat to see a man in a coat standing by the window. Rusty waved for the man to come to the other side then cranked his window down.

“You okay? If you’re lost, I can’t give you directions but you can use my phone.”

Rusty looked up at the man. He wasn’t from around here. At least Rusty hadn’t seen him before. “Thanks. I’m just trying to think.”

The man laughed. “Must have a lot on your mind to have to pull over and think.”

Not that it was this man’s business but Rusty said, “It’s not that. Just that. I was following this orange and white truck. We got separated.” There, that wasn’t the whole story, or even the important parts, but it was at least the truth.

The man scratched his chin. “Orange and white huh?”

“I was just about to head in that direction. I have a feeling they went that way.” He pointed toward the road that went off to the left.

“That would be my guess too, but if it’s the same truck I saw, they went that way.” The man pointed toward the dark, tree-lined road ahead.

“You sure of that?”

“I’m not sure if it’s your same friends, but I saw this woman sitting in the passenger seat and-”

Rusty cut him off. “They went that way?”

“Yeah.”

Rusty shifted the car back into gear and stuck his hand out the window to shake the man’s hand. “I appreciate it.”

“No problem.” The man stepped back and Rusty maneuvered the car toward the woods.

The man said something else, but Rusty wasn’t able to hear it. He turned and yelled a thank you out the open window and sped into the tree-lined way. If he would have paused to wait for what the man had said, he would have taken the correct turn. As it was, he sped right by it and up into the mountains. There was a summer camp up there that was all but abandoned in the later months. It would be the perfect place to have some privacy.

\*

Tom watched the car speed into the darkened road and when the car didn’t turn into the trees he was sort of glad that the guy didn’t hear when he’d told him that they had pulled off the road. He was kind of creepy and if they were getting away from him, maybe they deserved some privacy.

The other part of it was that he could have been trying to rescue the girl, the guy had been pretty excited at the mention of her, then maybe something was going on that he needed to be involved in. It was his job to be here.

He took one more look down the road watching the taillights glare in his vision and then made a choice. He’d go check out the girl and guy. Maybe this was the break in the case. And he’d been here all of a few hours.

As he made his way back to his car, he was already counting the money he was going to make by stopping this thing. Mr. Glenn had put a sizable reward on this portion. Why not get it now?

But what if it was a couple that just wanted to get away, spend some private time out in the woods? Who was he to stop them?

\*

Rusty pulled up to the small gated fence. The sign read “No Trespassing.” But the sign was old and faded, it was also attached to a fence that wasn’t latched. In fact, the lock had been cut with bolt cutters.

Instead of nosing through with the front end of his car, he stepped out, hopefully this would be a little quieter, and pushed the gate open. The gate squeaked as the hinges protested against the movement. Rusty hoped they hadn’t heard and for the first time, he hoped the man didn’t have a gun.

Rusty pulled through, then for good measure, pushed the swinging arm of the gate closed again. He was now on the property of the Lake Grand Vista Summer Camp. The name wasn’t all that catchy, but he’d spent some of his summertime as a kid and the memories came flooding back to him.

Over there was the snack shack. Over there was the place where campers could gather round the huge bonfire. Then in that direction was the cabins. That’s where he would go.

That’s where they were. He knew it.

He pulled over in front of the counselor’s office and stepped out into the cool night. As he eased the door closed, he could almost hear the kids yelling to each other to wait while another ran back into his bunk to get his towel for swim time.

Up here, the lake wasn’t for swimming, it was only for the boat races which would be held during the warmer months.

Rusty stepped to the back of his car, popped the trunk, and got out his tire iron. It was a little awkward carrying the large, metal T-bar with him, but he didn’t have anything else. It would have to do. When he eased the trunk lid down, he could hear deep throated laughter coming from the cabins in the back.

The laughter didn’t sound angry or harsh, it only sounded loud. Maybe he wasn’t expected.

As he crept through the darkness, he mentally pictured his approach. Undoubtedly, the man who had taken Crystal was overpowering. Rusty didn’t believe he was overly large or intimidating so catching the man by surprise would be to his advantage.

With the tire iron in hand, he slowly walked toward the noise. There was the sound of laughter again and a woman’s voice down low. It didn’t sound like Crystal, but it could be a trick that the buildings were playing on him. He pushed his way through the darkness and the growth of bushes to where the sound was coming from.

Then, it seemed as though there were more than two people. This didn’t seem right. He stepped over the fallen leaves and sticks as quietly as he could and came up to the edge of the area where the voices were coming from.

He gripped the tire iron in his hand, ready to smash it over someone’s head. Then he peered through an opening in a wall of bushes. He saw three figures sitting around a small fire. All of them had their backs to him, but they were reclining and drinking from brown bottles.

The snatches of conversations he heard were about a hated teacher. These were just kids out drinking, probably illegally, but these were not the people that had taken Crystal. He contemplated talking to them, but was quite certain that he would not have any luck with them; he was far too old and might be considered the enemy.

As he stood there, he closed his eyes to try and picture what he could but the only thing he saw in his mind was the kids drinking on the other side of the bushes here.

He went back to his car, he’d have to explore another route, go another way. This was the most logical place but maybe there was a cabin up here or something. One that he didn’t know about.

At his trunk, he pulled out a slightly dated surveyor’s map that he had been carrying around for a while. The map was mostly accurate. He grabbed his penlight and shone it on the map. He found the parcel of land that he was currently on and then checked up and down the roads.

Most of the land up here was owned by logging companies or some sort of habitat area. Some places were stuck in legal battles where patrons of the community had fought against a developer so their precious land would keep its value.

There wasn’t anything he could see that—his eyes went to a small tract of land down the mountain. The land may have been used for a hunting lodge or something, but it was worth a check. He folded the map and headed toward the lodge.

\*

Tom weighed both sets of options and decided that he’d have to think about it. He had a meeting in the morning, he would get to see the spot where the Avery kid had been taken. He would need his rest.

He went back into the room, pulled the metal chair inside, closed the door and turned the heat on. The heater clunked and hissed then finally gave in and came on with a deep, vibrating hum. Tom changed into his night clothes, an old pair of basketball shorts and a t-shirt. He flipped through the channels for a little while, then turned the light off and went to sleep.

Twenty minutes later, his sleep was interrupted by something akin to a nightmare. In it, he saw the girl, now she wasn’t looking angry, she looked scared. She was beating on the window and screaming. Tom rescued her and before he got his reward from Mr. Glenn, he woke up. Even though he had received a reward, the acceptance of it did not seem right. It was ominous.

He knew he had to save her, early morning meeting or not. He would save the girl if the guy who had asked him about them hadn’t saved her already. He slid out of bed, pulled on a pair of warm jeans, and headed out into the cold night.

The moon was still high in the sky and there were white rings around the moon. He slid into his car, the vinyl seats cold through his pants, and started the engine. As he sat there waiting for his car to warm up and for the last snatches of sleep to leave his eyes, he couldn’t get the dream out of his head. Something about the wide eyes and the scared circle of her mouth sent chills up the back of his neck.

He pulled out of the parking lot now that the car was warm, and drove slowly along the wooded road. It looked like the truck had turned into a lane but after going down the road on one side and seeing nothing, he turned around with the hotel still out of sight, and headed back.

He turned on his high beams and drove slowly. There was a small indentation in the bushes that could almost be a road. The grass and leaves looked disturbed but the little turnoff was there nonetheless.

The small car would not be able to make it through the woods and then make it out again. He could already see logs across the road and tight squeezes that the car would have to push through.

He took a deep breath, deciding what to do. His bright lights shown only so far into the woods and he could see nothing within.

He did have a flashlight and a warm jacket. He even had the right shoes for this. So, he pulled his car off the side of the road, blocking the entrance, and stepped out into the cold night.

Even though it wasn’t very late, there were no other cars on the road, not even the guy who he’d sent on an apparent snipe hunt.

He popped open the trunk and dug through his equipment until he found the suitable materials. He had a sharp knife, a small, but bright, flashlight, and his gun with extra magazines. He didn’t know how people around here felt about guns, but right now, he didn’t care. He wasn’t going into the deep woods without a weapon.

He checked himself mentally and decided, yes, this is what I’m doing, and stepped into the woods. As soon as he was there, he could feel the deep oppression of the darkness and the closeness of the trees.

He’d never been much of a camper as a kid and always refused to go on campouts, even in the back yard with his friends, so this was not a normal feeling for him.

Tom smoothed his hair back with a gloved hand, switched on the flashlight and headed into the darkness ahead.

\*

The man was sitting at a table in the company lunch room. He had just finished a small bag of carrots when Meredith came into the room. She was carrying a brown bag and looked around the room with a hopeful gleam in her eyes. She and the man made eye contact and he smiled. She ambled toward the table and pulled out a chair opposite the man.

“I hope you don’t mind.” She was already unpacking a bagged sandwich and a bag of chips.

He shook his head and crumpled the empty carrot bag. “Not at all.”

They ate in silence for a few bites each. He was looking toward the window, she was glancing around the room as if seeing it for the first time and wanting to know everything about it. “Are you feeling better?”

The man took a sip of his water and looked up at her with a slight angle like a dog trying to understand its master. “Feeling better?”

“Yeah. You were out for a couple of days, right?”

“Oh. Yeah, I was. I wasn’t sick though. I had some uh, personal matters to take care of.”

“Sorry. I just thought.”

“Don’t think anything of it.” He smiled reassuringly then opened the bag with his sandwich in it.

That seemed to break the ice and Meredith told him about some of the things he had missed. She would take a bite and tell a little bit of a story and soon she had made it through her sandwich. “In all, the days were quite boring.”

“Sad to miss those days. Sometimes things can get pretty crazy around here. There was one day, I dropped a whole box of paperclips just after I’d opened it. There were only 199 in a promised box of 200.”

“Yeah, real crazy.”

He laughed. “The craziest part was when I took my paperclip off my notebook and there was a paperclip attached to it. It really was 200.”

She leaned forward. “How could you handle such excitement?”

“I take it one day at a time and try not to overwhelm myself.” Then the man thought about Lake Grand Vista and his thoughts went dark. He could see Meredith in the chamber. He shook his head to move the thought away.

Meredith looked at her watch and crumpled her lunch bag. The man was folding his brown bag and sliding it into his pocket as they were both standing. “I guess I’ll see you around the office.”

The man nodded and added a smile. “I guess you will.”

The rest of the day went as normal. The man made arrangements with Hal to make up the time he had missed and promised that it wouldn’t happen again. He also finished out a large account and turned the paperwork into the processing department.

It was a little after five and since the time change, it had gotten darker quicker. He checked his watch a couple of times as he made his way to his car. Even though the office had just closed, his was one of the few cars in the lot and he made his way to the back of the lot where he always parked and sat in the car relishing the first breath of freedom in the evening.

As he was pressing the key into the ignition there was a knock at his window. He startled back and looked up, it was Meredith. He pushed the door open and stood up.

“Hey, sorry about that. I’ve got a flat. You think you could give me a hand?”

The man leaned in, pulled his keys out and locked the car. “I sure can. Let’s see what I can do for you.” He cracked his knuckles then walked to the car. He nodded when he saw the tire completely flat, the rim saved from the ground by the bowed-out black rubber of the flat tire. “I see the problem right there.”

She punched him in the arm. “Thanks, Sherlock.”

He grimaced as if the hit had crippled his arm and he rubbed at it with a look of mock pain in his face. “Before you hit me again, let’s check that spare.”

For that, she hit him again and opened the trunk. He went around back, moved a few things from the top of the spare cover and pulled it open. He looked up at her. “You ever have to use this before?”

She shook her head. “No never.”

He pulled it out, the valve stem was bent at an odd angle, the tire iron had been resting across it and the stem was bent. “Sometimes this can mean something bad.” He dropped the tire and it bounced with a hollow thud onto the ground. It too was flat. He bent over, put the spare back in place and closed the lid. “Well, I guess that’s that. I hope you get a ride home.” He turned around and for that, got another hit in the arm.

He turned back around, a large smile on his face. “Let’s go see if we can get some air in that tire. I hope you don’t have any plans for tonight.”

She shook her head. “Not if going home and heating up a pizza slice and watching TV a plan.”

“Sounds exciting.”

“Look. I just moved here. I don’t even know where the best place to get a good meal is.”

“In time. I’ll show you. For now, let’s get that tire filled.” He opened the lid again and hefted the tire out. He got it back to his car and tossed it into the open trunk.

There, in the darkness of the empty carpet was a small, white, envelope. It was just the right size to hold an invitation but he knew he didn’t want to RSVP.

He tossed the spare in without picking up the envelope and slammed the lid before she could come around to the back. He unlocked the car and held the door open for her as she got in. “You have any place in particular you want to take the tire?”

She shook her head. “I don't know. You know anywhere?”

He nodded and backed out and was on the road. As they drove there was an awkward silence between them. He had not been comfortable and with his wife dying so recently, he didn’t feel comfortable. Besides, he knew there was an envelope with her name on it and he was supposed to give it to her.

They pulled into the parking lot of the shop where he usually had his car worked on but the lights looked like they were clicking out. “I guess they close at 5:30,” he said and looked at his watch. “I don’t know of anywhere else to go.”

“It’s okay, maybe you can take me home?”

He exhaled. That really wasn’t what he wanted, he wanted to spend some more time with her, he wanted to show her a good time. But he didn't know how to say it. “Yeah. I could. Or, I could show you a place to get a pre-warmed slice of pizza, no microwave needed.”

She smiled and tucked her hair behind her ear. “That sounds good.”

“I still don’t know what to do about your tires.”

They headed toward a restaurant that the man had been at many times. As they ate, they got more acquainted and the conversation flowed easier. Still, the man didn’t feel as comfortable with her as he would without having the burden of the thing in his mind and on his back.

Everything that they said and did felt like it was being recorded by some outside being. The man could not get over the feeling that someone stood behind him and was looking over his shoulder.

There were even a few times that he turned and looked behind him, when it was natural in conversation and still he saw nothing. He knew there would be nothing just like he knew that the thing in the darkness had left the small envelope in his trunk.

When the waiter cleared the plates away and brought the dessert tray by, they both ordered something and ended up sharing it. The man felt himself smiling for the first time in what felt like months. Maybe things would clear up.

He excused himself and went into the bathroom, there, he did his business then washed his hands. When he leaned over to wipe his face, he was sure he had some sauce on it, he looked up and saw a dark shadow standing behind him.

The shadow was not there behind him when he turned around but when he turned back to wash his hands, he saw the dark shape materialize behind him again.

The edges of the shadow were not the crisp lines left by a strong light. The edges of the shadow wavered in and out, and constantly changed shape as if made of smoke. He stood there, staring at the shadow and said nothing.

A voice came from the darkness, it was harsh and unrelenting. It was not loud or overbearing but did have an authority that he was not used to hearing.

“I sent you an invitation. Did you not get it?”

The man’s throat went try and he coughed. He leaned over and cupped some of the running water into his hands and took a sip. It was cold and did nothing for his dry throat. He cranked the water off and nodded.

A stall door opened and a man exited from the cubicle on the other side of the dark shape. He had his head down and was adjusting his waistband. In the mirror the man saw the bald head poke through the edge of the darks shape in the mirror. At that, the bald man stopped and looked up as if he’d bumped his head. He rubbed the top of his head and looked at his hand.

He then went to the sink and washed his hands. He craned his head down and looked in the mirror.

The voice in the darkness said, “When will you answer my invitation?”

The man looked over at the bald man who was still inspecting his head in the mirror. Bald-pate shook his head, grabbed a towel and dried his hands. He was on his way out when he ran back into the stall, again passing through the dark shadow. This time, when he did, he put his hand over his mouth, and threw the door open. The man heard bald-pate vomiting into the toilet.

“I asked you a question.” The voice rumbled, the man could feel the vibrations at the back of his eyes. “Did I not feed you? Did I not teach you?”

The man nodded again, looking at the shape in the place he could picture the eyes.

“Then answer me.”

Bald-pate moaned from the stall. He wretched again.

The man turned and looked at the feet spread below the stall level.

“Don’t worry about him. He cannot hear me.”

This time, the voice seemed to echo off the tiles in the room.

“I. I don’t want to visit.”

The shadow grew behind him. It lengthened and widened. “That is not your choice. I invite, you accept.”

“But-” The man’s voice cracked. His forehead broke into a cold sweat.

“I invite, you accept.”

The man swallowed hard, then turned, skirting the edges of the shadow. He wasn’t falling into this cycle. Things had gone so well the few days he was rid of the dreams.

He pressed forward and fought his way passed slow-moving customers and waiters. When he got to the table he snatched the check from the table.

Meredith looked up at him. The smile that had been at the corner of her mouth faded to a frown when she looked up at him. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I just need to get out of here. I’m sorry, are you ready?”

He practically pushed his way through the people grouped by the door after he had paid. He could still hear the voice in the bathroom echoing through the restaurant.

Meredith finally made it outside and came up to the man as he was bent over, his hands on his knees. She put her hand on his shoulder and then jerked it away as she had put a hand on a hot stove.

“Are you okay?”

He nodded and took a deep breath of the cool night air. “Sorry. I just had a strong memory of my wife. We used to come here all the time.”

“It’s okay. You didn’t need to bring me here.”

“I did. I need to move on. She would want me to.”

Meredith looked at him. “I. I don’t know-”

“I’m sorry. That didn’t sound right. I’m not asking you to go out with me. We just met. I just need to be able to go out. That’s all.” The man was astounded at how easily this lie was flowing from his mouth. He didn’t even have to think it and the words seemed to flow from him.

“For the record, you could. I wouldn’t mind.”

The man looked up at her and blinked. His brain was still not registering the context.

The door burst open and the bald man came out of the door. He was being aided by a woman who had his arm in hers. They were shuffling through the parking lot while he was moaning and holding his stomach

The man shook his head and blinked. “Well then. Would you like to go out? I mean, under different circumstances?”

“As long as you don’t have to flatten my tire again to do it.” She laughed but when she said that, his brain formed a picture in his mind. He could see himself slinking through the parking lot, bending over and deflating her tire. At that moment he knew he had done it.

He laughed. “Okay. I won’t.”

She smiled. “You doing okay?”

“Yeah. I’m doing much better. You up for a cup of coffee?”

“You won’t believe this, but I know of a great place around here that makes coffee.” She again pushed her hair behind her ear.

“Okay.” He pulled his keys out and handed them to her. “Would you mind driving? My nerves are shot right now.”

She pulled the keys from his hand and opened the door. After adjusting the seat and the height of the steering wheel they were off.

The man wanted to pull down the passenger side visor and check his eyes and his face but he was afraid of what he would see sitting in the back seat.

“What’s this place called?”

“It’s called Mary’s place.”

He looked over at her. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of that place.”

“Yeah. It just opened up. A few days ago in fact.” Meredith turned the car into a residential neighborhood. A small playground at the entrance stood empty of children at this late hour, but it would probably be teaming with children when the time came for them to play.

“There’s a coffee place in here?”

“I never said there was a coffee place. I just said that I knew a place that made great coffee.” At that, she maneuvered the car into a driveway in front of a small ranch-style house. She stopped the car and stepped out.

The man followed her to the front door and when she opened it, she put her arms out indicating the foyer. “Welcome to Mary’s Place.”

The man looked around the room, it was sparsely adorned with only a few places to sit. There looked like there were more packed boxes than unpacked boxes. “Nice place.”

“Thanks. As you can see, I lack the motivation to unpack.”

“You need some help?”

Meredith’s face turned pink. “No. I can manage. You’re here for the coffee. You mind telling me how you heard about our coffee?”

“Yeah. Some crazy lady on the street told me about it.”

“You know what they say about the crazy ones, right?”

The man shook his head. “Sorry, never heard it.”

“I’ll have to tell you sometime.” They walked through the small living room and into the kitchen. Meredith took her coffee maker out of the box and set it on the countertop. Then she dug through another box and found some coffee.

“I thought you said this was the best place in town?”

“You don’t have a good memory do you? I said they make great coffee. That’s what this is.” She held up a bag of unmarked beans. She shook it. “This is my special blend.”

The grinder was loud and Meredith led him out of the kitchen. “My mom always said to show guests around the house, that way they feel at home.”

They went through the small house. Next to the television was a small bookshelf with about ten books on it. “Nice book collection. You read much?”

“Very funny. I haven’t unpacked them all.”

“I believe you. I just don’t believe that you read much.”

“Anyway, this is the room I’ll use as my office, once I get that set up.” There was a small desk and a collection of boxes. A bookshelf sat in the corner, empty.

“And this is the hall bathroom, we’ve all seen these.”

The man looked up into the mirror, expecting to see the black shape in the mirror. When he did look, the shape was not there, but the man still was reluctant to look for long. He reached in and turned the light off.

“Nice place.”

“Thank you. I’ve worked to make it so.”

“I especially like the decorating. What’s it called? In transit nouveau?”

“I like that. Maybe I’ll use that one when my mom comes by next week.”

As they sat down to wait for the coffee to brew, the man made sure that when he sat, that the mirror hanging on the wall was out of his eye line. As they talked, he grew more relaxed and finally was able to put the incident with the mirror behind him.

Although he tried, he still kept finding himself looking up at the mirror or catching sight of it in the corner of his eye. Then he saw it, a black thing floating at the edge of the mirror.

As he talked, he turned around and looked behind him.

“Are you okay?”

He turned back around. “Huh? Yeah, I thought I heard something at the door.”

She peeked around him then stood up. She walked through the space where the thing would have been but didn’t react to it. Maybe it wasn’t there. He turned back around as she went to the door and saw the black thing in the mirror again. He didn’t stand up but instead looked up at the ceiling.

There was nothing there.

The front door opened and heard Meredith say something.

The man froze. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end and he slowly turned around. Meredith was coming back. He turned toward her and tried to conceal his fright.

A shadow had cast itself across the ceiling, he could see it in the mirror.

He saw a black blur move behind her and she stopped and faced it.

This was it. The darkness was going to take her.

Then she bent over and picked up her cat. The black cat was large, and when the man saw the cat, relief washed over him. A cat.

She dropped the cat to the floor and he sniffed the air then jumped up onto the back of the couch, once again shooting a shadow onto the ceiling from a low-level lamp. “You were right. I think it was my cat. This is Justice.”

The man cocked his head. “Justice?”

“Yeah. I’m a Superman fan. Truth and American Way would be dumb names for cats.”

They laughed. Then the man said, “Justice though?”

“Look. If you don’t like it, he has claws. Get him.” Meredith pointed at the man and Justice, turned then licked its paws and sat down. The whole time keeping his eyes trained on the man.

The man did his best to keep his mind on the conversations that grew and shrank with them as they talked. He still had a feeling of being watched and every time he would look up at the wall behind Meredith and catch a fleeting glimpse of the corner of a wall mirror, he was glad to see that only the cat’s shadow

They had their coffee and then said goodbyes. It was as if neither of them wanted to leave but it was too soon to say that they wanted to stay.

“I enjoyed the time. Thanks for taking me home.”

“Yeah, I guess I’ll see you in the morning.”

She furrowed her brow.

“Yeah, you need a ride right? We can drop the tire off at the shop on the way in.”

“I’d appreciate that.” She hugged him and stood at the door as he walked down the sidewalk to his car.

He waved from the car as he drove toward home. A traffic signal turned red and he stopped. A car pulled up behind him and when the lights blazed through his back window, the back seat was shrouded in a gray mist.

“Did you have fun tonight?”

The man nodded.

“It looked like you did.”

“You can’t come in her house.”

The presence in the car seemed to grow and press itself onto the man. He could physically feel a weight on his shoulders and he had to breathe hard to keep from passing out. “Do you really thing you can tell me where I can’t go?” The voice boomed in the car and the man felt like he was standing inside a tower of speakers at a rock concert. His eyeballs moved with the vibration of the bass that was inside his head. “Do you think you have a say?”

The man rolled down the window to try and relieve some of the pressure, instead, the pressure increased.

“Do you?”

The man struggled to force himself to sit up. It wasn’t working. A little more pressure and he would pass out. He shook his head again.

“Then who are you to question me?”

The pressure relieved some and the man realized that the car behind him was flashing his high beams and honking repeatedly. The light had turned green and was now cycling to yellow again.

The man tried to move his foot to the gas but the unrelenting pressure on his back was too much to handle. He could focus on nothing more.

The honking continued and then the door of the car behind him opened. A large man wearing a black suit came up to the window. He bent over and looked down at the man.

“Buddy. What’s the deal? You see the light?”

The man looked up at him and bared his teeth. When he did, the pressure on his back released some more. “I saw it.” His response came through gritted teeth. “You want to wait for another one?”

The voice in the back seat said, “Yes. Feed the hate.”

Black suit took a step back but wasn’t deterred. He cursed, then flipped the middle finger at the man.

“Do you want to remove him?”

The man’s hands shook. He didn’t know what he wanted and he certainly wasn’t going to allow the darkness to overtake him. “No.”

“But he deserves it. You could have been hurt. He should have cared for his fellow man.”

The light turned green again and Black suit returned. He banged his hand against the roof of the car. “So what about it buddy? You gonna move.”

The man threw the door open and it smashed against Black suit who went sprawling into traffic. He yelled something but the man didn’t hear. He floored it, sending a gray cloud of smoke and road dust into the air. All the pressure left his back and his head. He was able to breathe again.

As he drove away, he watched the red tail lights of a car flash on and swerve as they went around Black suit.

“Now. Do you question me still?”

The man did not answer, but drove toward his house.

“I am growing impatient as I keep giving you these gifts. You owe me.”

The man gritted his teeth and drove onward. His night was over and he would need to put everything behind him if he were going to sleep.

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As Tom trained the flashlight on the ground, he could partially make out the wheel ruts only because of the indentation in the leaves. If a vehicle had traveled this way, it was recently and the trip had not been repeated many times.

He slowly walked down the path made by the wheels. A few times he lost the trail when he misjudged a left for a right but he always made his way back to the trail.

The moon was high in the sky and the interplay of shadow and white light made the tracking of the truck hard, but it also made it worthwhile. Tom stopped his tracking and made an intentional cut in the bark of a tree. He wanted to find the way back through here if he needed. He also needed a quick retreat. He’d done some research on this region and knew that if he made a wrong turn, he could be swallowed up by the wilderness. That wasn’t going to happen.

He pushed his way through the disturbed underbrush. There were snapped twigs and bent branches that proved that he was heading in the right direction.

An animal called in the distance, a canine of some sort, domestic or wild, he could not tell. He put his hand on the butt of the gun, its hardness was reassuring to him.

Finally he pushed through the brush and came to a clearing. The light from the haloed moon seemed to shine directly onto the open land before him. From here, he could see the woods on the other side of the clearing and what looked like a second clearing. This area looked like a logged field and it may have been, but the tracks he was following would not have been part of a logging operation.

He walked through the clearing, weary of being out in the middle. If the guy he was following was paranoid or something, he would certainly see Tom skulking through the darkness. He couldn’t even crouch down, the trees had been cut almost to ground level. In the harsh light, the stumps looked like shoulders recently relieved of the weight of a head.

The next stand of trees was not thick either and Tom didn’t really need to mark his way, the trail seemed a little more prominent here. This must have been part of a main access.

Finally, his walking and tracking made some sort of difference. He came across the truck with the orange and white paintjob sitting in front of what looked like a two room cabin.

The thing was, the cabin looked completely deserted. There was not a wisp of smoke emanating from the chimney and all the windows were dark.

Perhaps this was just a staging area. Maybe this was the parking area for the nearby, alluded to, make-out spot. Tom did not take any chances and clicked the flashlight off immediately. The sudden darkness where he stood felt cold and distant, even though he was standing right in the middle of it.

He crouched low and walked along the edge of the woods to try and blend in as much as possible. It was very possible that if there was someone being held against their will inside, then the captor could be looking out and see the movement in the bright light. In fact, those inside probably had an advantage that Tom did not, there was no reflection on the window to hinder their view.

As Tom slinked his way around to the back of the cabin, he could see that all was indeed silent inside. It may not have been empty but there were no other lights on in the house.

With that realization, he slowly walked toward the house in a low crouch. He pushed himself even though he didn’t want to go out into the open like this.

And yes, he was thinking about the thing the waitress had told him about his impending demise. But this wasn’t a cave so if she as telling the truth, he was safe. He would be safe tomorrow too.

Finally he made it to the side of the house and he stood slowly next to one of the windows. Without knowing the layout of the home, he couldn’t tell where the closest bed was and he still didn’t know if the person inside was watching for a face to appear at the window.

He decided to try for it and peeked his head over the edge of the window sill. He could see the outline of a man sitting on a chair facing the room proper. He wasn’t facing Tom but he wasn’t facing away. The man’s posture told Tom that the man was asleep simply because of how his head drooped. But I place of the darkened eye sockets, Tom thought he saw two faintly glowing pink orbs.

Tom dropped down, his heartbeat quickening to feel like it would burst. Had he really seen two glowing eyes? No. That couldn’t be, it was a reflection on the window. It had to be. He stood up and looked into the room again.

Where he thought he had seen glowing eyes, there was nothing. It was either a reflection or his imagination. Besides. Why would the man’s eyes be glowing?

Besides the man sitting slouched by the fireplace, Tom could almost make out a person lying on the bed. He squinted in the darkness, allowing for his eyes to adjust to the sheer blackness of the room and saw that the person, it looked like a woman, was handcuffed to the bedpost.

So. The woman was there as a hostage. He had to do something. He sat down on the ground underneath the window and thought for a minute. It may be best to go back to town, contact the police, and then return.

But that would take too long. There was a chance the man would wake, become paranoid, and move on. It was better to act now, alone, than to wait for the police to move. He wasn’t even sure he would be able to find his way through the dark again. It could take him hours to get back, get in touch with the police, and by then, it could be too late.

Tom made his way through the darkness to another window, this one closer to the girl. The man did not stir when Tom stood fully at the window. He tried the latch and the window did not budge. It must have been locked tightly. He then placed his knife in the small slit between the window panes and jimmied the lock open.

If the windows had been updated vinyl windows, he would not have been able pop the lock as easily but because the window was an old wooden window, the lock moved with ease. The only issue now as to make sure the window stayed up when he did eventually raise it.

He waited, in case the noise inside had been a little more pronounced than he thought. If the man woke, who knew what would happen next.

After about ten minutes, he slid the window up and tried to reach the edge of the bed just by leaning in. The bed was slightly out of reach so he pushed himself up onto the window ledge and was able to jostle the bed slightly. The handcuff chain rattled against the bedpost and Tom held his breath.

The girl turned and opened her eyes. She looked directly at Tom. Her eyes went wide at seeing a man in her bed and before she could scream, he put his hand up to his mouth and handed her a small key. It should work unless the handcuffs were newer than the set he had.

The girls hand moved over his and took the key from him. It was an awkward exchange in the dark but she was able to fumble it out of his hand.

She rolled over onto her side and lay there. He slid back out the window and dropped down onto the ground. As he stood there, he was conscious of the cool air on the back of his neck. He was hoping that the room temperature would not drop too much and the man would wake because of the cold.

The animal he heard call out in the darkness earlier screamed again. It was close. The noise echoed through his head and Tom was certain the man would hear. Why wasn’t the girl moving faster?

He turned toward the window again and saw, the girl was reaching up with the key. She was smart. She was moving slowly. As she did, her head jerked back and forth, checking on the man sleeping in the chair adjacent to her.

Then it happened. The key slipped from her hand and clattered onto the ground. The sound barked into the darkness and sounded like a gun going off in the dark. The man sat up, awake.

Tom stood there, frozen, hoping that even though he stood at the window, the tress behind him would blend him into the dark outline.

He would see the window, he would see the girl. The girl lay down flat and then looked like she was reaching to the floor.

“What’s going on over there Crystal?”

“I got hot. I opened the window.”

“Did you try and open your cuffs? See. You can’t be trusted.”

“How could I open these cuffs?” She jiggled her arm and the cuffs clanked against the metal post. “See?”

When the man stood, the chair he was in creaked loudly and the floorboards squeaked as he moved through the room. He grabbed Crystal’s wrist and shook it. He pressed on the cuffs and clicked them one more notch tighter.

“You’re hurting my wrist.”

“You hurt me too. I love you.”

“If you do, then let me go.”

“I will never let you go. I’m just getting back what I lost. We were meant to be together.”

She shook her arm. “If we were, then why do you feel like you need to keep me hostage?”

Tom’s legs hurt from standing still for so long. He wanted to move but knew if he did then the man would see him. Maybe that would be good. Maybe he could distract. But maybe, if he did call attention to himself the man would hurt Crystal.

It wasn’t worth the risk. Then, the second bad thing happened. The man moved a foot or something and the key clattered across the floor. “What’s that?” The tone was accusatory and almost a little hurt.

The man knelt down on the floor and looked under the bed. Tom imagined the man sweeping his hand back and forth on the floor. Then Tom heard the key slide over the floor. He balled his hand into a fist and held his breath.

The man stood, and brought the object to his face. “What is this?”

He then went to the other side of the room and clicked the light on. Tom dropped to the ground, almost stabbing himself on a branch jutting from a low bush near the edge of the house.

The man asked again. This time, his voice was louder. “Is this a key? Where did you get this?”

Crystal answered, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Where would I get a key? You must have dropped it.”

There was silence for a moment then the man said, “Nope. Here’s my key. Now. Tell me. Where did you get this key?”

Tom slipped his hand onto the butt of his gun and waited. He looked up at the open window, waiting for the man to stick his head out. When he did, Tom would figure it out, maybe shoot, maybe club him.

But the man didn’t stick his head out the window. At least not that one. The window at the front corner of the house opened and Tom heard Crystal yell, “Run.”

Tom turned and looked directly at the man. He was hanging halfway out the window, a rifle in hand. Tom didn’t take a second to react, he pulled his gun out and shot. The shot didn’t need to be accurate, just loud.

The man didn’t look like he even flinched. Tom took a step back away from the house.

“Who’s out there?” Then the gun trained on Tom and the bullet would have gone through his brain had he not tripped on a root as he backed up. His gun went flying into the darkness and Tom didn’t want to take his eyes off the man, not even to find his gun. The man fired again but clicked on a misfire.

“I’m gonna kill your boyfriend.”

Crystal said something that Tom didn’t hear because his ears were ringing from the two shots so close to his ears.

The man had to pull the gun back inside the window to reset the bullet and by the time he did, Tom had run into the darkness. He felt along the ground for his gun and couldn’t find it. He had to hurry. He turned, and hoped that the man was following. That way, if he could somehow get the guy away from Crystal, she would at least have a chance to run away.

Tom squatted down in the brush at the edge of the clearing, praying that the light would come on, that the man would storm out, that something besides a quick fire of the gun in the dark would end this. Tom now had the advantage.

A moment later, the front door banged open and the man came stumbling out into the night. Tom instinctively went for his gun, it would be a long shot but he could make it. But he didn’t have his gun. The thing was, something wasn’t right.

Then he realized, the man had Crystal right before him. He was using her as a human shield. He had his hand over her mouth but she was not struggling, she seemed to know that if she did, that would be the end. She was smart. Hopefully, she was also very lucky.

When they got down to the bottom of the steps, Crystal smashed her foot down hard on the instep of the man’s right foot. He jerked back from the pain and threw her to the ground. He hopped on one foot, holding it in pain then immediately stopped moving and switched gears. He stood still and pulled his gun from his waistband.

He held it on Crystal.

Crystal put her hands up and said something that Tom could not hear.

Tom stood up and yelled. He knew that if he could yell loudly enough and scare the man enough, he could get running, get his knife out and attack the guy before he had a chance to fire in either direction. He would have the advantage of surprise.

But he didn’t need it. Out of the darkness another man came running. He had a large object in his hands and, without hesitation, brought it down on the man.

The man collapsed and the other guy was on him in a second. He swung the metal thing down onto the man on the ground and didn’t stop until Crystal came over to him.

Tom walked over and had his hands up. “I’m safe. No need to worry about me.” But they were ignoring him.

As Tom got closer, he could see that the man had brought a tire iron and knocked the man unconscious.

“You want me to take care of him?”

The other guy stood up and could see that it was the guy he gave directions to. He put his hand out. “Oh. You. Sorry about the bad directions.”

The man shook. “Thanks. I think it worked out. What are you doing out here?”

“Same as you, looks like. Names Tom.”

“Rusty. Nice to meet you. Yeah, you can take care of him.”

Tom knelt down and put his knee on the guy’s back. He pulled out his handcuffs and tightened them around the guy’s wrists. “Who is this guy?”

“That was my finance. Never was the jealous type.” Crystal looked down at the man, breathing deeply on the ground. “His name is Greg.”

“Well, I’ll be happy to take him into the police station. I was going to go there tomorrow. Present myself.”

They both looked at Tom.

“You think Greg will mind if I borrow his truck?”

They laughed. “Not a bit.”

They hopped into the truck and tried the engine. It coughed and fought but finally turned over. The truck was loud and something told them that this was not over.

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The man sat in his driveway once more with the car running. It would be easy to pull into the garage, lower the door, and leave the car running. He could be rid of this thing that plagued him. But as he contemplated that, he thought of his wife. She wouldn’t want him to do this. She wouldn’t want him to end it and take the coward’s way out. She would want him to fight through it.

Meredith would want him to fight it out too. There was a spark there. He could feel it. It was there tonight.

He did pull into the garage but he also shut the engine off. That was not the way to end anything.

In the house, he saw two messages on his phone but let them sit there, unheard. He passed the stack of mail with the familiar scrawl across the envelope and went straight upstairs. There, he unplugged his phone and closed the door.

After setting his alarm for the morning, he went through the nightly routine and was in bed and asleep before the lightbulb in his lamp had a chance to completely darken.

His dreams were filled with memories. There was a memory of going to Lake Grand Vista with his wife. This melded into the time he and his wife enjoyed a week-long trip to the desert, then his time with his wife that ended in tragedy. He had caused her death. He was driving the car that night, he was the one that had had a few too many.

Then the cave.

And he woke up. Morning was almost here, the horizon lay bright in the distance and the few birds left in the area had woken for the morning.

He rolled over to look at his clock and when he did, there was a folded piece of paper covering the numbers. He reached over and pushed the paper aside. He still had an hour before he had to be awake.

He picked up the paper and looked at it. It was still too dark outside for the light coming in the window to be bright enough for him to read it. He also didn’t feel like turning the bedside table light on.

He opened the paper and could barely make out the letters. He rolled over on his side and dropped the paper onto the floor. He heard it drop and hit the floor as he closed his eyes.

He took a few deep breaths and was asleep again. He didn’t sleep long enough to dream and when his alarm went off in the morning, he as unsurprised to find that the paper was once again blocking his alarm. He unfolded it and read it.

“I would like a visit, friend. Bring a guest. Stay a while.”

The man crumpled the paper and tossed it toward his trash basket in the corner of the room. He heard it hit the corner and then bounce in with a metal clink.

He then sat up and got ready for work. Out at his car he realized that he’d forgotten to close the garage door. The windows of his car were covered in condensation, it would be cool in his car. He was not looking forward to that.

When he got to the driver’s side, he looked down at the window. It looked like someone had written on the window with their finger. The letters were small and familiar. The lines were straight and the letters were streaking so the words written there were still readable but clarity was fading fast. The note said, “Do not ignore me.”

The man got into the car and started it. There, the car warmed quickly and as he drove, the condensation blew off the car. The letters were still visible, but no longer legible.

The radio clicked on as he was driving and the first words out of the DJ’s mouth was “You’ll know her when you see her. Bring her to Lake Grand Vista. You deserve a break.” He clicked the radio off as quickly as if he’d heard a song that reminded him of a terrible tragedy.

As he pulled into the apartment complex and in front of Meredith’s apartment, he contemplated honking and he also contemplated leaving.

He didn't want to put her at risk of another one of his blackouts. But he had to take her to work. She needed a ride and he had promised.

When he pulled into the spot in front of her place, he got out of the car and stood next to the car. He was afraid to go in, afraid to bring her into his world.

He had his hand on the handle of his car when she came down the side steps and stepped onto the sidewalk. “I saw you pulling in. I hope you weren’t waiting for long.”

He blinked as she stood there before him. He was happy to see her. He smiled and went around to her side and opened the door for her. She put her hand on his arm as she went around him and let him close the door for her.

Back in the car, they rode in silence for a little while until the man remembered something. “I took your wheel in this morning. It should be done sometime today.”

She placed her hand on top of his where it rested on the center console. “I appreciate that. I just don’t think I could have done this without you.”

Again, the man had a vision of slinking through the cluster of cars in the lot and removing the air from her tires. “It’s the least I could do. I sort of feel responsible for your predicament.”

She laughed and they discussed their plans for the weekend. “I was going to go to a furniture store. I’ve got a few things I have to pick out for my new place. I’m so boring.”

“That’s not boring. Things like that have to take place. You gotta do something, right?”

“I guess so. What about you?”

The man knew exactly where he was going to be because an image of him standing in the woods talking to Mayor Wilson flashed vividly in his mind. They were discussing the future. The future both of them were bringing in. The peace deal they were brokering. “I have a meeting this weekend. Out of town.”

“Too bad. I could always use a second pair of eyes on the couch pattern.”

“You don’t want my opinion. I’m color blind. I couldn’t tell you if it clashed or matches.”

“That explains your outfits. It’s almost like a uniform.”

“Does it not match?”

“Oh, it does. It just seems like you’re wearing the same thing every day.”

“Makes it easier that way. I don’t have to have anyone pick out my close for me. Not anymore at least.” He looked down at the steering wheel as a wave of grief washed over him. It was so intense that he almost had to pull over.

They finally got to the office and the man contemplated dropping her off at the door so it wouldn’t look odd with them both walking in together, but that would look odd too. He pulled into his customary spot a distance away from the building but backed in instead of pulling straight in.

They unloaded and headed into work. Sometime around lunch the man got a call from the mechanic and went to pick up the tire. He pulled into the same spot, backwards again, with the trunk of the car facing a stand of trees that kept the area dark in the evening.

At the time, he didn’t know why he pulled in backward, it just seemed like the thing to do. He didn’t usually park that way, but he didn’t think about it as he walked away from the car.

When he got back into the office, he went to Meredith’s office. “Hey. I picked up your tire today.”

She looked up from her papers and smiled. “Thanks. I appreciate that.”

“I have bad news though.”

“You flattened the others?”

“No. I have a very late meeting. I can give you my keys if you think you’ll be okay to at least get your tire out.”

The smile fell from her face. “I guess so. I don’t really know how to do change a tire.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I can’t miss this meeting. If I do, I’m done. I’ve missed too much work recently. I could call you a cab to take you home and I could pick you up in the morning again.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“It’s the least I could do. Here’s my keys. If you decided you don’t want to grab the tire, that’s fine. We can meet up tomorrow.”

She took the keys and dropped them into her purse. “I’ll drop these off at your desk before I go. How late will your meeting be?”

“I may be out by seven. I hope. The meeting is with the west coast. Only time available.”

“I understand. Thanks for calling a cab.”

They said their goodbyes and for some reason, as soon as he turned to walk down the hallway back to his office, he forgot to call her a cab.

\*

Meredith sat at her desk, her hand poised over the keyboard, ready to make a notation when she collapsed inside. This was really weird. This guy has done so much but now he can’t change the tire. That isn’t fair, he has a meeting.

She shook her head. He didn’t have her keys when he picked up the tire and it is just the spare, it shouldn’t be too hard. She had the manual for the car and she should be able to figure it out. She reasoned that if she took just a short amount of time to change her tire successfully, she could have time to run home and make a meal for him and surprise him with the invite.

She made a note of some shopping to do and then got back to work.

At five she finished what she was doing and headed outside. It was getting dark but she’d parked under a street light just like her father had always taught her. She could be seen and no one would try anything under such a bright glare of lights.

She’d called her father and gotten a few tips on changing her tire. He told her to be careful with the jack and to not be afraid to call anyone for help. He would pay her bill.

Unfortunately his car was parked at the far corner of the lot and in a dark area.

She trudged to the back of the parking lot and found his car. It was just the spare, she could move it to her car, call a garage or tow truck, and her insurance would take care of it.

At the back of the car, she fumbled through the key ring to find the right key. There were two car keys on the ring and the first key she pressed into the lock did not turn the latch.

When she inserted the second key, the trunk lid popped open, but only a small bit. She pulled the key out and lifted the lid the rest of the way. Her tire was in the back of the trunk and sitting up on its side. It was wedged into the car somehow.

She leaned into the dark space and grabbed at the edge of the wheel. It did not budge. She heard footsteps in the gravel and stood up. There was no one there. It must have been her feet scuffing against the pavement.

She bent back into the trunk and tried to dislodge the wheel. How had it gotten stuck? She put one foot in the bottom of the trunk and leaned in. She couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary in there.

Meredith’s head was swimming from the exertion and the smell of the tire. It was newer and the rubber smell was overpowering. She stood up and her legs felt a little wobbly. She put her hands on the edge of the trunk and slipped forward smacking her head on the side of the trunk lid. She staggered back and then fell. Then everything went black.

When she woke, she was lying in a cramped space. There was the sound of the wheels going across road. The steady hum told her she was on a smooth road. This wasn’t near her apartment, most of those roads were covered in potholes.

She was in a trunk, or at least it seemed like that. This wasn’t the same car, at least it didn’t look like it. Her wheel was not in here for one, second, there was a lot of stuff in his trunk and barely anything in this one.

The hum of the tires over the asphalt told her that she was in the back of a car on the highway. She had to be. She lay there, listening to the sounds, trying to make something out. She could not hear a radio or anyone talking, so presumably the person driving was alone and if they were listening to the radio, it was so low that she could not hear it through the speakers at the top of the trunk.

She tried to move but she was unable. Her hands were bound and her ankles were tied together. She struggled against the rope holding her hands together and did what she could to loosen the knot. She tried biting the knot and moved the nylon rope some, but not enough to loosen the knot.

Then she heard a muffled voice. She could tell only that it was a man and that he was talking to someone. This was not singing along to a song, this was a conversation. But as she listened she heard no response. The man didn’t say anything for a while but then took up his half of the conversation again.

She heard raised voices and then silence. Still, she could not place the voice, there as too much background noise.

Then there was silence again.

Now the car was slowing and then turned wide. She slid as the car turned and bopped her head against the side of the car. As she struggled with the bonds, tears made their way down her cheek and puddled at the bridge of her nose.

She would not cry, or at least, she would not sob. Anything but becoming a puddle of tears. Yes, she could be scared, but she wasn't going to let whoever this was get the better of her emotions.

Despite how slow the car was moving, she could now tell that they were driving over uneven ground, maybe a field or a rutted road through the woods.

She finally was able to jerk her hands out of the knots and she frantically bent toward the knots at her feet. She needed to get out. Maybe she could kick the edge of the trunk open and make a run for it. The car wasn’t moving fast and any scrape she suffered would not be too bad.

The car bounced hard over a large hole, rock, or log. The bounce helped her to reposition, although uncomfortably, and she was able to kick the ropes off her feet. She rolled onto her back and folded her knees to her chest. With her feet flat against the trunk lid, she pressed with all her strength.

Then the vehicle smacked hard against something and the lid popped up a little. It bounced against her knees and she laid there and waited for a second before kicking the lid up and running.

She was waiting to see if whoever was driving would notice and stop her from running. As she waited, everything within her told her to run but her mind knew better.

So she waited.

She did keep her foot on the lip of the trunk lid so it did not click shut. She also held it with her hand so the lid did not pop up.

After a minute of slow driving Meredith took a deep breath and slow counted to three. She lifted the lid a crack and looked out into the darkness. She could see trees and bushes illuminated by red tail lights. So they were in the middle of the woods.

Running would be dangerous but she didn’t know what waited for her if she stayed in the trunk. It was now or never.

The car was slowing but she didn’t think it was stopping. The car was obviously maneuvering around some obstacle. She pushed the lid up, rolled over the edge, and dropped onto the ground. She walked behind the car, ducked down, so she could pull the lid shut. Then she backed into the trees and watched the car drive away.

So, she would have to wait. She convinced herself she could do that. But as the car moved away, the silence became overwhelming. She shivered, the night was cold. When the car pulled away a little farther, she turned toward the direction the car had come from, as far as she could tell. She walked in the edge of the trees hoping to keep hidden. The movement was difficult because of the thick trees and she did not feel she was safe enough to get back onto the trail.

But there were sounds in the darkness. Things that told her she was not alone in the dark. She took a chance and stepped out onto the rutted path and walked a little faster. She turned and saw the red lights far in the distance. She felt that she could move a little easier.

That didn’t mean she was safe. It didn’t mean she was even free. She picked up the pace and started trotting. Although uneven, the trail was easy to follow. The wheel ruts stood out in the grass and soil.

And then she made a mistake. She got uncomfortable and started to run. Her fear got the best of her. She sprinted and in the dark it was impossible to see.

Because it was impossible to see, she smacked her forehead against a low-hanging branch and fell down. Her head bounced against something hard and she saw bright flashed of blue light in the dark evening.

Then things went black.

\*

The car seemed to be moving under its own power and the man blinked. He could see that he was driving on the highway and he could see that he was not in his car. He looked down at the dash, the cruise control was set at 60, five over the posted speed limit.

In his state he was glad his was the only car on the road although something told him that if he closed his eyes and laid back that the car would continue under its own power.

He did not know where the car was taking him but he could guess. And, coincidentally, he looked up and saw a sign stating three miles to Lake Grand Vista.

“Where are we going?”

The voice in his head answered, “You know the answer to that. Why did you just ask me?”

“Because I could be wrong. We could be going somewhere else.”

“You finally accepted my invitation.”

“It’s not like I had a choice.”

The voice did not answer, only laughed.

The man looked up into the mirror and saw the red eyes staring back at him from the back seat. Since he was alone on the road, he chanced a glance behind him. As expected, the back seat was empty.

Not for the first time did he wonder if what he was experiencing was real. Could he be writing these letters to himself? Could he be the one committing these acts? That was not possible. There was no way to explain the extra sensory experiences he had recently. His perfect night vision, his increased strength and stamina.

He drummed against the steering wheel. “What do you want?”

The shining eyes turned and pointed in the direction of the trunk. If they could look hungrier than they looked now, the man would be frightened to see that.

“You know what I want.”

The man checked his side mirror and then leaned forward and turned the radio on softly. The smooth voice of the nighttime DJ crooned about the tune that had just finished and was introducing the next. The man did not pay attention to the song but used it to drown out the voice.

He glanced back into the mirror and saw the eyes still there. They moved closer and the man could feel the presence behind him. “You know what I want.” The voice was low this time, right in his ear.

The man blinked out of his daze and nodded. “Yes. I know.”

And he was aware. The car passed the sign welcoming visitors to the lake.

The red eyes were gone from the back seat.

\*

Mayor Wilson lay awake in his bed. He didn’t know what time it was and didn’t feel like rolling over and moving the alarm clock so he could see. The only thing that mattered was that he'd woken while it was still dark. There was not even a small taste of light in the sky.

The thing that had woken him was a dream. He couldn’t remember most of it, there was a girl in it. She had been taken from somewhere and was held against her will. The fact that she was in his woods, he somehow knew they were the woods near the Lake, was the most jarring.

Then, at the end of the dream, there was a loud bang like a clap of thunder. When he opened his eyes he fully expected to hear the rain drumming against the windows or patting on the roof.

When he opened his eyes to the calm night, he was almost certain he was still dreaming and that the dream had taken another turn.

He rolled over and couldn’t get the scene out of his head. Someone was doing things in his woods and he was powerless to stop it. He wanted to go out there and make them stop what they were doing but where could he go? He didn’t see any marks showing where he could look.

As his heart slowed, he turned toward his wife and put his hand on her shoulder. Her warmth and the touch of her skin calmed him. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

When he did, he saw two red pinpoints of light, off in the distance. If he was more imaginative he would have said they looked like eyes, but that wasn’t possible. There was just the red lights.

He drifted back to sleep but the vision of the frightened girl in his dream would not leave him.

\*

Carl Avery was sitting on the edge of his bed again. The rage that had been building over the last few days was not subsiding. He was still missing his boy but he was also still angry that nothing had happened.

They had talked to the police a few times, they had even been to the sight where he was found, but the investigation stopped there.

The police would not let him into the cave to see the spot. Apparently they were not done with there surveying. At least that’s what they told him. The major issue was that he knew he would not be able to live with the answers they had been giving him. He knew that the only way to get results would be to do things on his own.

That was the main reason he was sitting up in bed in the dark while his wife quietly snored in the darkness on the other side of the bed. He knew that he would have to take action. He would be the one to get the man that did this to his boy.

He clenched his fist and thought about the gun in the back of his closet. It was an old one, but a gun was a gun and would do the trick when he needed it to.

He would have to choose his time and the place to set things into motion in the right direction and he didn’t know the place to start. He only knew that he wasn’t returning to the rig until this was settled.

When sleep would not even entertain itself at the edge of his brain, he pushed himself off the bed and went into he kitchen for a drink.

He sat at the kitchen table, cold beer in hand, and thumbed through the newspaper. He noticed a few small reports about missing people. He had heard through the town gossip that there were a few people in town that had been killed but nothing had been corroborated. What he needed to do was get with Silas Motley and spend a few days out in the woods. They would find something.

The only thing was, he hadn't heard from his Silas since he got back and they would usually run across each other at the bar or in town somewhere.

He’d have to check on Silas in the morning. He looked over at the clock over the stove. It read 2:58. Too early to call Silas.

Carl pushed the seat back and went to the sliding glass door that overlooked the small porch. Fog hung low over the road and the grass. He slid the door open and stepped out onto the porch. The wooden decking was a little dewy and so was the deck chair, but he sat in it anyway.

The night was quiet and he had time to think about the last few days. He had stewed since his boy died and now he was just angry. It wasn’t fair but what could he do?

A slight breeze blew and there was a chill on his back. He shivered but did not go inside. He would acclimate to the temperature. He sipped at his beer again.

Then, as if someone whispered it in his ear, he knew what he had to do. He would track the killer and bring him to justice.

Called to action, he stood and went inside, pulled on warmer clothes and a good pair of shoes. He went outside and started walking toward Silas’s house. It would take a while but he had time.

As he got closer and closer to his endpoint, the need to do something strengthened in him. He knew he would be ready for action when the time came.

He finally made it to the long dirt driveway at Silas’s place and turned up the walk. He kicked at stones as he came to them, his feet finding them because the darkness of the tree-covered driveway was too enveloping.

At the end of the drive the trees opened to an acre clearing. In the back of the clearing behind a long stretch of overgrown grass, stood the modest two-story house that Silas had inherited from his parents. If he hadn’t been given the house, he would most likely be living in the trailer park on the other side of the lake.

The large fenced in area for the dog stood off to one side and Carl could not see the dog pacing in the darkness. There were many times when he and Silas had come here late at night after a fishing or hunting trip and the dog would be up, pacing back and forth. But tonight the dog was silent.

The house sat dark in the distance. Silas was the kind of guy to fall asleep with the television on more than often than off. Despite that, it was always possible that the house obscured the light from the television.

As he approached the house he took a rock and tossed it toward the corner of the chain-link fence. The rock pinged off the metal and Carl waited for the dog to come bounding out of the doghouse.

When it didn’t he titled his head, trying to thing about the possibilities. The dog could have gotten out again, but that wasn’t necessarily the answer. The dog may have died. That happened sometimes when there was so much property to roam and many dangers lurking in the grass. But it was too cold for snakes and too open for mountain lions.

He whistled and then sailed another rock into the pen. This time cracking it off the top of the doghouse. He was certain the dog would come bounding through the darkness then.

The closer he got, the odder things seemed. The sliding door stood partially open as if Silas had just stepped out and would be right back.

And there was a smell. Something like the coppery wetness of a slaughterhouse after the slaughter room had been hosed out.

He stopped a few yards back from the front walkway and stood next to Silas’s pickup. Carl eased the passenger door open and pulled the rifle from the cavity behind the seat and checked to see if there was any ammunition in the gun. He cocked the gun, feeling the next round take a spot in the chamber.

He dropped a few spare rounds into his pocket and shouldered the weapon. The night sounds seemed to stop and he plucked absently at the shoulder strap and thought through the next steps.

He trained the weapon before him and took a step toward the dog house. This seemed safer than entering the house. He opened the small gate at the kennel but didn’t shut it behind him. He thought he would need an easy escape. Odd that he was thinking of escape.

As he tread carefully through the pen, he could see that the chain the dog sometimes wore led toward the other side of the doghouse. He followed it and came to nothing. The chain ended and the dog was not there. There was only a few gnawed bones and nothing more. He shouldered the gun and looked around the pen.

Carl leaned down and looked into the doghouse. It was empty too. He whistled, thinking that maybe the dog lay in the back and the blankets in there somehow obscured him but the dog didn’t come.

When he stood up, the blood rushed to his head and he had to steady himself by putting his hand on the roof of the doghouse. The shingles were cold under his touch.

He went through the gate again and latched it back again, if only out of habit.

Carl stood at the steps leading up onto the deck and stared at the sliding door. As he reached toward the partially open glass door, he noticed that his hand was shaking. He clinched his fist to try and calm the quake but it only made it more noticeable.

He pushed the door aside and stepped into a puddle of water pooled near the doorway. So the door had been open for some time. He slid the door shut behind him and called out. “Silas? You in here?”

He knew the answer before he asked it but it felt right. Silas, no matter how little he cared for the house, would never leave the door open. Even if he went out to go hunting with his dog, the door would have been firmly latched and locked.

Carl patted the strap of the rifle slung across his shoulder and felt the minor reassurance that he was safe. At least for the time being.

He leaned down to the lamp on a small table and clicked the light on. The yellow light barely illuminated the living room and the hallway beyond but it was bright enough to see that this room was indeed empty. He stepped through and clicked on the light in the hallway and headed down toward the stairs.

He called for Silas a few more times but that was only out of a need to create some noise in the house.

At the stairs he placed his foot on the bottom stair and looked up into the darkened maw of the upstairs. He flipped the switch at the bottom of the staircase and the light at the top brightened the way.

When he got upstairs and went into Silas’s room he made note of the rumpled bed. This didn’t mean anything, he could have abandoned the bed a minute ago or a week ago.

He searched through the rooms upstairs and in the bathroom. He even pulled down the rope to look in the attic. The place was empty. No sign of Silas except that he was gone.

When he got back to the front room, the brightness of the day was peeking over the top of the trees and mountains. There was just enough light to see by and he looked out the large picture window in the dining room and saw what looked like a dead deer in the yard.

He stood, staring at the carcass for a few seconds and realized that, either it was a trick of the light, or a few animals were strewn about the yard.

Instead of going outside, he mounted the stairs again and went to the room that faced that direction. Silas had used it for an office, not that he needed one, and the small desk overlooking the yard was cluttered with papers and boxes. Carl moved a box aside and pushed the curtains open.

The scene in the yard below sent him to his knees. The yard was littered with bones and rotting carcasses. What he had thought of as a couple of animals was really a few ripped apart pieces of a couple of deer.

Then, in the center of the yard, Carl saw why Silas had not been in touch. There lay Silas, arms and legs spread out as if waiting for a hug from a large relative. His abdomen was ripped open with jagged edges and his intestines, what were left of them, lay sprawled out across the yard.

It looked like Silas had been lying there, in that condition, for a few days. His skin was gray and blotchy. It looked dried out a little. The most unsettling thing was that his eyes were open and his face showed peace. Either something had manipulated his face, or he had died without a single care.

Carl fumbled for the phone that was sitting under a pile of old bills and dialed the police. After he relayed the message, he only sat there, staring at the yard.

Some time later, the scene shifted from one of grisly chaos to one of grisly chaos with a few police officers taking pictures and making notes.

The day had brightened and Carl had not moved in the last hour. He hadn’t even given his wife a call to let her know that he was safe. He couldn’t.

As he sat there, he felt a presence behind him and turned to look. There was no one there. But when he turned back toward the window to watch the police work, the feeling returned.

There was a knock on the door below then the voice of Chief Grayson calling from below. Carl stood and the feeling of being watched did not leave him. He was glad for the interruption because he was getting the oddest feeling, one that told him to jump headfirst through the window and join the countless bodies below.

Carl made his way down the stairs and shook hands with the Chief. They talked for a little while and then Grayson offered him a ride home, which Carl gladly accepted.

\*

Grayson left the Avery house without as much as a single confrontation with anyone. He expected a shouting match because the case had gone nowhere. Jeremy’s case was still unsolved and now there was this grisly scene to deal with.

On top of this and all the other deaths that had happened over the last few days, they did have one person in custody. Grayson was happy for that. Maybe this was the clue they needed to get things moving forward.

It just didn’t make sense. Lake Grand Vista had always been a sleepy town, even during the tourist season, and it was very odd to have something like this happen, and in such an extreme case.

Now, he had to go to the Avery site with the private detective that showed him up by bringing Greg in today. The guy would probably be a little too impressed with himself to really pay attention.

Grayson couldn’t believe that Wilson had brought in a private detective. It wasn’t like him to do something like this. He wanted to keep town secrets, town secrets. If anything could hurt the locals like this particular scandal had potential to, Wilson would do anything in his power to make it go away.

He got into his cruiser and made his way through the woods to the main road and stopped at the motel at the outskirts of town. He stopped the car in front of number eleven and honked.

He didn’t particularly care if the p.i. was sleeping or not. Yeah, he was a little early, but he wanted to get this part of the day over with.

To Grayson’s annoyance, the door to the motel room swung open and the p.i. was dressed in jeans, a button-up shirt, and a light jacket. They waved at each other, but Grayson had a hard time keeping his smile straight. The only thing that was out of place was the man’s shoes. He wore a pair of sneakers. Grayson smiled to himself, those sneakers would be soaked through before the day was over because of the standing water in the cave and the low stream they would have to cross. Grayson thought about mentioning it, but let the subject lie where it was.

Before the p.i. could make it to the car, he snapped his fingers and turned back toward the room. He pushed the door open and came out with a plastic grocery bag. In the bag Grayson could see the top of a pair of boots with the laces swinging free.

The p.i. opened the door and dropped the boots in. “I figured you wouldn’t want me getting mud all in your cruiser. I wore those last night.”

“Yeah. Thanks. About last night. You should have waited for us.”

“There wasn’t time. The girl-”

“Crystal.”

“Yeah, Crystal, was in danger. If I would have come back here and called, you may not have gotten here in time.”

“I appreciate the confidence you have in the force.”

Tom raised his hands as if surrendering. “No. I have a lot of confidence. I just needed to do what I was going to do at that time.”

“It was dangerous.”

“Yeah. It worked though.”

Grayson didn’t have a reply. Instead, he gripped the wheel harder and drove toward the parking lot near the cave. The awkward silence in the car did not dissipate as they got closer. Instead, the p.i. thumbed through some crime scene photos that Grayson was not happy to see. Where had he gotten them?

At the lot, Tom pushed the door open and put his hiking boots on. Grayson went around to the back of the car and pulled out some equipment. A flashlight, his camera, and a spare magazine for his handgun. He didn’t think he’d need it but he didn’t want to take any chances. Something about this situation just rubbed him the wrong way.

The hike through the woods to the cave was uncomfortable and took longer than Grayson had hoped. The p.i. kept wanting to stop and take pictures along the way. Little random things, a broken stick, a pile of leaves, some footprints, all kept his attention.

When they finally got there, the p.i. had to change the roll of film in his camera. “Can you wait a minute?”

Grayson had already started into the cave. He had his flashlight on and his hand on his service weapon. “Yeah. Just hurry up. I’ve got a lot of paperwork to get done.”

Perhaps sensing the anger or perhaps because he was done, the investigator slung the camera over his shoulder again and pulled his flashlight out.

They did not really need the lights for the first few yards into the cave but as they moved into the back, things got darker and the flashlights almost seemed too bright.

Finally they made it to the end. The same thing here that Grayson had seem multiple times: burnt down candles, a few beer bottles, and showings that some people had used this spot for some private time.

“As you can see right there, that’s where Mrs. Avery said the boy was dragged away.”

“Uh huh.”

“And here is the place where she says she dug through the dirt to try and get to him.” There was a mess of rocks and strewn about dirt but nothing really looked out of place.

He stood back as the p.i. took picture after picture of everything from all different angles.

When he was done, they made their way out of the cave. Nothing odd had happened and in fact, it was quite a boring day compared to the last few hours.

“You guys have any theories?”

Grayson was pulled out of his daze. He didn’t feel like sharing theories. And he certainly didn’t want to talk shop with this guy no matter how experienced he might be. He went the easy way out instead of talking about all the angles they could go over. “No. Nothing that wasn’t in the report.”

“So either she did it and made this story up, or what? He was actually sucked into the rocks and down some deep dark passage?”

“We’re going with it being made up.”

“Of course.”

“But we don’t think that she did it. Could be she’s covering up for something her son did.”

“What about the body?”

“What about it?”

“The way it looked, didn’t it look like it had been buried for a long time.”

“We’re working on it. Look, are you ready to go?”

Tom looked up from a cluster of rocks near the entrance and then popped the back of his camera open to eject the spent roll. “Yeah. Do you guys have a lab to process pictures?”

“Of course.” He was thinking that the guy would ask to use the darkroom.

“Great. Could you get these processed? I need ‘em for my report.” He handed Grayson three rolls of film in a small bag. “Nothing big, just whatever paper you guys use.”

Grayson stared at the bag then snatched it out of his hand. “Fine.”

\*

When they got back to the station Tom walked ahead of Grayson as if he had worked there for years. He did feel like he owned the place, especially since he had brought in the only suspect they had. He didn’t stop at the duty desk to check in. He stopped in front of Grayson’s office and after checking the name plate on the door, walked right in.

Grayson came in a few seconds later and Tom was sitting in a chair across from his desk. When Grayson sat down, Tom leaned forward and spoke in a hushed tone. “There’s no reason to hide your real theory. You think she did it don’t you?”

Grayson, Tom was happy to see, went white. He was emotionally attached. Finally, he managed to stammer, “No. No I don’t think she had anything to do with this.”

“What proof do you have?”

Grayson leaned back and Tom scooted his chair closer. He didn’t want to let the man have an out, even if it was dodging the question.

“The biggest proof? The boulder we had to move to get the body out.”

Tom nodded and looked at the folder of notes he had carried in. “Yeah, that boulder was pretty large.”

“If you call needing a truck to pull it out, just large.” He put large in air quotes. “I saw that boulder myself, it was too large for that woman to move in any capacity.”

“Okay.”

Grayson adjusted himself in the seat, twisting his belt so his gun didn’t dig into his side any more. “Are you saying I’m incompetent?”

Tom shook his head, he put his hands up in that same gesture he used earlier in the day. “No. not at all.”

“I don’t know what kind of place you came from. Sure we’re a small town, but we have resources. We take care of things just fine.”

“Like Greg?” He jerked a thumb toward the direction of the holding cell. “He still here?”

“He’ll get transferred out of here to County later today, tomorrow maybe.”

Tom shook his head. “I want a chance to talk to him before he goes anywhere.”

“Look. You may have brought him in and we’re grateful for that, but you have no right-”

“But I do. Edward, Mayor Wilson, gave me full reign.”

Grayson looked at his watch and pulled open a drawer. Since Tom was seated he could not see the contents. “Little early to be thinking about a drink isn’t it Grayson?”

He slammed the drawer and leaned his arms on the desk. He pushed some papers aside and grabbed his coffee cup. “You interested in a cup?”

“No thanks. I’ve had enough police station coffee to know the truth about that stuff. You guys don’t know how to make a decent cup.”

Grayson hesitated at the door but left anyway. Tom thought he would get up and go through the drawer and see what kind of alcohol the chief had, but he didn’t really care enough. The guy was such an easy mark. So insecure.

Instead of snooping, Tom thumbed through the file. He wanted to see the site where the boy’s body was found and if he kept busting the cop’s chops he wouldn’t get anywhere in the town. Sure, he had full jurisdiction but he knew that didn’t mean anything, especially with the locals.

When Grayson returned, Tom closed the folder and stood. He stuck out his hand. “Look. I know you don’t want me here, that my presence is some kind of affront. But I want to help. Any way I can.”

Grayson looked down at the hand, put his coffee cup on the file cabinet near the door and shook hands. “I want to do what I can to help you too.”

“Great.” He patted Grayson on the arm. “When could I get ahold of those pictures?”

Tom watched as Grayson’s jaw tightened. “I could get them to you in a few hours. If that’s okay.”

“That will be great. I’ll drop by after lunch?”

Grayson shrugged. “See you then.” He pushed the door shut as Tom walked out into the hallway.

He stood at the door, almost thinking he would go back in, just like that TV detective, “Oh, one more thing.” But decided against it. He’d have to talk to Greg, that is, if he was talking today. He hadn’t said much on the drive last night. He’d have to talk to Greg.

Without even waiting, he went to the door to the holding cells and pushed. It was locked. “Anyone have a key here?” He turned toward the room and no one stood up to unlock the door. “Come on. Anyone?”

Finally, a desk sergeant stood, went to a drawer at the front desk and pulled out the set of keys. He tossed the ring to Tom. “Be my guest. It’s one of those.”

The ring had at least twenty keys on it and Tom didn’t want to look like an idiot fumbling with the keys but he had no choice. He started in the middle and worked back. That seemed to be the best avenue because the lock clicked open on the third key. He turned to the desk sergeant and smirked. He tossed the keys back to him and pushed the door open.

When he stepped through the door, a smell of something rotting and an uncomfortable warmth washed over him. He had to take a second look to make sure he had not walked into the locker room.

Greg was sitting in his cell, on the cot, with his head in his hands. To Tom, it didn’t appear that Greg was even aware that he had come into the room.

He pulled the door shut, loudly, to try to get Greg’s attention but even the slamming of the door didn’t make him flinch. “Greg. I want to ask you something.”

Greg didn’t move.

“Greg. Are you responsible for the recent killings?”

A deep intake and exhale of breath was the only response from Greg.

Tom tapped on the bars, stepping a little closer than the sheriff would have allowed had he been here.

Greg turned and thrust his hand through the bars, catching Tom at the neck. He tightened his grip at his throat and pulled him in close. When he was there, Greg smacked Tom’s head against the bar.

Tom did his best to fight back but the gumption within him was losing steam. He couldn’t move without inflicting more pain on his windpipe and he couldn’t make a noise.

Greg leaned closer, never showing how much force he was placing on Tom’s throat. “This is my town. You leave it. Or you die.” At that proclamation, Greg released Tom.

Tom staggered back, coughing and clawing to bring breath back to his lungs. He doubled over, inhaling deep gasps, reminding his body what it was like to breathe. In those moments, Tom understood what it was like to have been trapped in a sinking car while the water quickly pushed all available air out the windows.

For a moment, Tom was certain he would pass out, and if Greg hadn’t been there, staring at him, he may have succumbed to the weakness in his knees and fallen over but out of sheer willpower, he forced himself to stand. Albeit with one hand on his knee and the other on the wall.

During this production, Greg only stood there and smiled.

“You can’t make me leave. Not until what I was brought here to do has been done.”

Greg nodded. His head moving up and down as if watching a tennis match from above. “Yes. You will.”

Tom regained his composure and stood tall. His throat still ached and he was certain that his neck was turning purple but he would not let Greg stand there and mock him as he walked away. With a newfound determination, Tom left. He would go have lunch then refocus.

\*

Meredith woke and instantly remembered everything from the night before. She had run through the woods and then knocked herself out on a branch or something. She turned her head. It didn’t swim as she expected it to and realized that her head didn’t hurt where it should have. So, this couldn’t have been a head wound she was waking from.

When she was in college, she had knocked herself out when she stepped out of her dorm onto the ice-covered sidewalk. At that point, she had only been knocked out for a minute but her head rang for a couple of days and she had headaches off and on for a week after.

This was nothing like that. This was the feeling that one gets waking from a very restful sleep. She let her eyes focus on the surroundings and saw that she was on a bed, or a shelf of rock. It wasn’t uncomfortable so as to betray a stone slab. She put her hands down beside her and felt the thick blanket on which she lay.

She turned her head to the side, cautious that any minute the brain-searing nausea would overtake her and she would vomit out anything she’d eaten in the last day. But nothing happened. She even mustered enough strength to push herself up and dangle her feet over the edge of her bed.

When she looked down at her feet, she could not see the ground. It felt to her as though she were sitting on the edge of a cliff with a mile of air between her and the ground.

She gripped the blanket tight in her hands and pressed herself against the firm foundation beneath her. So, she was either asleep still or living out some horrible nightmare.

And then she heard the voice. The voice was deep yet soothing; strong, yet caring. “Relax. You will not fall.”

Meredith sat there and looked around. She could not see far in the dim light. The source of the voice seemed to come from all around her but also from within.

“Who’s there?” Her voice echoed as if the only one in an empty arena.

A moment later, after she was certain the voice would not answer, that it was really in her head, the voice echoed into being. “I am the one that invited you here.”

She looked around again. Seeing no one she said, “And where is here?”

“Exactly where I wanted you.”

At that, she was compelled to turn around as the voice seemed to materialize from behind her. And there, standing before her was a creature both dark and without shape. She could make out an eye and a mouth. The black gaping mouth. Her eyes went wide with fright. She could not even muster a scream.

“Come.” Out of the darkness an arm appeared and she was compelled to reach out. She did not want to, did not want to touch the hand but saw her own hand reaching out before her as if with a mind of its own.

And then there was contact and the force with which she was pulled yanked the shoulder from the socket with a pop that would have been heard if another person were in the vicinity.

For a moment, Meredith felt the burning, searing pain in her arm and then the darkness folded over her.

\*

The man sat outside the chamber, his hands clenched in tight balls. He liked Meredith. She was to have been the woman that helped him sort out his losses. She wasn’t ever supposed to come to Lake Grand Vista. She was supposed to stay away.

He drummed his fingers on the ground as he leaned against the cool stone. He stared at the chamber door, the ornately carved wooden door would stay closed until the time when that which was inside requested something which was outside.

Resigned to this fact, the man stood. There was nothing he could do, his bargain had been made. He knew what was coming next.

As silence overtook the next room, he stood in anticipation.

The door opened a slight crack and the candles in the room flickered as if sitting next to an open window. The sound of a large rock dragged over gravel emanated from the darkness.

The man looked down at his feet. Shame washed over him.

“You knew the bargain when you met me.”

“I did.”

“Why did you resist?”

The man, without an answer, studied his shoes further.

“I think you know what this means?”

The man knelt on the hard surface. The rocks digging into his knees elicited no pain. The real pain came within his head. He was forced to remember his wife, forced to remember what he’d done. What he had done to her, his first love.

The memories flooded back, those he had forgotten, those he had forced out.

First, there were flowers. They lay in a field, on a blanket. Their lunch was gone but their appetites remained. They longed for each other and their love was whole. The man had not known such love.

Then, the memory of a pillow. Not the pillow, but one just like it. One she had brought into the marriage. This one had a saying on it about how much love warmed the home. He always put that pillow in his lap and she rested her head upon it. He would rub her head and play with her hair and they would talk for hours.

Finally, the pillow. The one that ended everything. He’d thrown it in anger and when she had gone to pick it up, he’d pushed her from behind. Her head struck the edge of a table and he used the pillow to finish the job.

“Please make it stop.”

“I am only telling you the truth. If you don’t want to hear it, then you shouldn’t have gone down that road.”

The man tried to stand but the pressure on his shoulders to make it stay was great.

“Reaffirm your devotion.”

The man shook his head. He had been so close to freedom that he was ready to run away with Meredith. But Choshek was right, he had promised devotion.

“I reaffirm it.”

“What will you do for me?”

“Anything you ask.”

“Good. Now. Why did you bring her here if you did not want to lose her?”

The man opened his mouth, he was going to say that it wasn’t he that brought her but that wasn’t right. “I wanted to share my joy with you.”

“And you have.”

The man swallowed hard. He felt a loss in his heart for her but the loss was fading as if she had never been part of his life. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“You will know.”

The man nodded. Yes, he would know. “I reaffirm my devotion.”

“Good. Now go.”

The man stood and backed out of the room. When Choshek was in this type of mood it was not smart to turn your back on him.

\*

Rusty and Crystal woke up almost at the same time. They had been sleeping on the couch in Crystal’s apartment with the television on when sleep overtook both of them.

Crystal could not believe that she spent another night here especially after what had happened in the back room. The police had been through, then a cleaning crew had been hired. The business was taken care of and now Crystal could think about what she wanted to do next.

Rusty looked over at her and smiled. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“I didn’t either. Are you hungry?”

Rusty stretched and closed his eyes. When he did, Crystal could sort of see what her sister thought of him. He was kind of cute and he certainly didn’t pull any punches when he was coming to rescue her. He just came out and did it. “A little. You?”

“Yeah. I guess I am.”

“Well, let’s do something about that.” Rusty pushed himself up from the couch and went to the fridge. He stood in front of the open door and leaned in. “Not much we can do with these boxes of leftovers. And this.” He held up a plastic jug of milk and shook it. Curds rattled around inside like a wet napkin.

Crystal shook her head. “I guess I need to go shopping again.”

“I guess you do. Want to head to the diner on main?”

“Give me a minute?” She smiled then went back to the room she had used since moving into the apartment. She grabbed a new shirt, the one she had on was caked with dirt, and headed into the bathroom across the hall.

In the mirror over the sink she could see the dark circles around her eyes and the rat’s nest of hair. She splashed some water on her face and washed off some of the streaked make-up and smeared dirt.

When her face was finally clean, she changed her clothes, quickly brushed her teeth and came out into the main room. She could tell that her little cleaning had done its job because of how Rusty’s eyes lit up. He had been at the sink in the kitchen and was rubbing his face clean too.

He smiled. “You clean up nice. How’s my face?”

She came over to him, took the wet paper towel from his hand and wiped a smudge from his forehead. “You’d never know you had gotten into a fight with my ex in the middle of the woods and nearly been shot in the process.”

“Good. That’s what I was going for. Ready?”

She said she was and they walked down the steps and out into the small parking lot. They got into Crystal’s car and drove, the radio low during the drive to the diner.

When they got there, the normal crowd of small-town bigshots filled the booths.

The mayor sat in a corner booth, he looked up every time the small bell over the door chimed and ignored everyone that passed.

The pastor of the small community church, if he could be called a pastor and the gathering a church, sat at another booth. He spoke lively with anyone within earshot and as Rusty and Crystal found a seat, she noticed that he was particularly interested in one of the waitresses. He smiled every time she walked by and said something that made her laugh when she was within earshot.

Crystal turned from watching the pastor and leaned across the table before the waitress could show up with their water. “Do you think there’s something wrong with that guy?” She pointed toward the booth where the pastor sat.

Rusty pretended to look around the room as if checking to see the nearest exit keeping in mind that it may be behind him. “I don’t know. I’ve been to his church. He seems nice enough.”

“I have too. But nice doesn’t mean he knows what he’s talking about. And he hasn’t stopped staring at that waitress since we got here.”

Before Rusty could respond to that, the police chief walked in and strode right up to the table where Mayor Wilson sat. He slid into the booth and started talking immediately. He swung his hands in wide arcs, not doubt recalling the story from the night before. Crystal ducked down, trying to keep from watching so Grayson wouldn’t call her over. She wasn’t ready to talk, not yet.

Then, just as quickly as he stormed in, he pushed out of the booth and threw the front door open. When the glass door almost smashed upon closing, the entire diner fell silent, waiting for the glass to fall. The only sound was a methodical scrape and pound of a metal spatula on a griddle and the boisterous laugh from the pastor in the corner.

“I told you. But no one listened.” He laughed again. “This town needs love. I know something about love, that was not it.”

The crowd noises resumed and Rusty leaded forward. “I think that’s not a bad statement.” He reached across the table. “The town could use some more love.”

She reached across, squeezed his hand, then dropped her hands back onto her lap. Rusty leaned back and did the same.

“You think the Chief is upset he wasn’t involved last night?”

“I would say so. The real reason you are safe is because of that P.I. I can’t imagine the police being happy about that.”

When the waitress came by with the menus, she took a beat to mention something about coffee and both Rusty and she nodded.

Rusty didn’t pick up the menu. “I already know what I want. I haven’t gotten them in a long time and after last night I think I deserve them.”

Crystal glanced up from the menu. “Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“The cinnamon roll waffles.”

“Sounds sweet.”

“Almost too sweet. But just almost.”

When the waitress returned, she carried two thick mugs that looked like they’d been through the wash cycle a thousand times and still had more in them. She slid them onto the table, balanced a pad of paper and a pen on the small tray she was carrying, while she poured coffee into the two mugs. Before Crystal could thank her, she was gone again.

Rusty and Crystal chatted during the meal but Crystal could still feel the creepiness of the night before washing over her. As soon as they finished their meal she asked to leave.

“It’s just that I’m still feeling,” she trailed off and looked out a window.

“I understand. I couldn’t have been in the same place. I don’t know how I would have handled it.”

She reached across the table and put her hand on top of his again. “I just don’t know how to thank you.”

Rusty smiled. “Don’t let it happen again. That’s all.”

Before he could say anything else, the door slammed open and a woman wearing a crooked dress with the buttons askew, stormed in and stomped back to the table where Mayor Wilson sat. She pounded her fists on the table.

“Do you know anything about what’s going on in this town?”

The mayor spoke in a softened tone. “Now Janet, Mrs. Avery, please.”

Instead of quelling her anger, this made her all the more louder. “Don’t you Mrs. Avery me. Carl hasn’t been the same. Not sense he went out there.”

“I don’t think this is the time-”

“Then when is the time? I try to come in and talk to you and you’re busy or out. The police don’t care about my Jeremy.”

The mention of Jeremy brought a general din through the quieted crowd. Even though the mayor had done his best to quite the rumors, there were still some that persisted.

A voice rose from the other side of the diner. “Yeah Mayor, what are you going to do? Are we safe here?”

Another man spoke up. “I’m afraid to take the boat out at night.”

Then, on top of that, a woman said, “My dog’s been missing for a few days. They come after the animals first.”

Crystal jerked her head around the room as more and more people spoke up. Each story seemed to get worse but none could top the loss that Mrs. Avery had felt. Crystal looked back at the mayor, his face shone bright red. She hadn’t been around him enough to know if it was embarrassment or anger. Based on how the people were talking, it was probably a little of both.

He pushed himself out of the booth and put his hands up. The crowd quieted but was not silent. There were still a few people in the corners that were making their story known to those seated near them.

“Now, I didn’t want to say anything because there isn’t much to say. As the mayor I guess I am authorized to say something about what happened last night.”

A woman called from the bar. “What does that mean?”

“I’m getting to it. Just let me talk.”

“Is it true there’s a monster on the loose?”

The mayor laughed at that. It sounded forced to Crystal but it could have been the absurdity. She had seen the so-called monster last night in Greg. But if he was involved in all this, maybe there was something else to it.

“No. There is no monster. There was just a young man that sort of lost his way.”

“By killing some dogs?”

“And taking the boy?”

“I don’t know all the details, but I can say a young man was caught and I think that’s the end of it.”

A large man stood up and the motion caused his chair to scrape against the tile floor. “I don’t know about all of you, but if something isn’t done soon, I’m going to start taking things into my own hands.”

A roar of agreement rose over the crowd, at least that’s what it sounded like to Crystal. She may have added her own voice to the crowd too.

Mayor Wilson put his hands up. “No. We don’t need vigilantes.”

A voice from the back of the diner broke over the din of the crowd. “Then do something.”

Mayor Wilson looked around, his eyes wide. It was as if he knew there were too many people here and he would have to stand up to all of them. With his hands still raised in a politically calming gesture, he said, “The Mayor’s office is working toward a peaceable end.”

“What about you?”

“Rest assured-”

“Is the town safe anymore?”

“-Rest assured, I am doing everything in my power to work this out. Now, I have to get back to the office.”

Crystal noticed that the people were processing what the mayor had said and it wasn’t time for them to be worked up in a frenzy. But she could feel the vibe in the room and it was telling her that it wouldn’t take much more.

Everyone seemed to watch as the mayor made his way to the counter and paid his bill. There was a general din but it did not break into the cacophonous roar of a full restaurant until the door closed and the mayor was out on the sidewalk.

Pastor Denny stood up and spoke over the people. “This town does not need more negative thoughts and feelings. We need to focus on the positive energy that each and every one of you bring to this town.”

Rusty caught Crystal’s gaze and rolled his eyes in response. She smiled and nodded.

“If we focus all our positive energy and pray for God to take care of us, he will. He will give us everything we want.”

As if sharing the same line of thought, Rusty and Crystal scooted their chairs out together. Rusty reached across the table and dropped a couple of dollars in the middle and Crystal followed him out.

As they were leaving, Pastor Denny was just getting warmed up and she was afraid that before long he would be taking an offering for his little speech.

“I couldn’t be in there any longer.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” She brushed her hair behind her ear. “You really think that the mayor is doing something?”

“I didn’t think it was all that bad, outside of what we were experiencing. But it seems like everyone is going through something.”

“Do you trust Wilson?”

Rusty shrugged. “You know what they say about politicians. How can you tell when they’re lying? Their mouth is moving.”

They spent the rest of the day together and Crystal was truly sad to see him leaving that evening but knew that they could spend more time together.

That night, she tossed and turned with memories of her time as Greg’s hostage but at no time did she really feel in danger.

\*

Tom woke from a dark dream. Something in his mind was telling him that he had to take action, to move forward. But he couldn’t tell what that action was.

He looked around the room. A yellow bar of light shone in through the split in the curtains and not matter how hard he tried, they wouldn’t stay closed.

The heater cranked on as he lay there, staring into the darkness. The internal whirring sounded as though on the other side of a wall, a 12-cylinder diesel engine was running the small heater.

He closed his eyes again, trying to wash out the darkness that just spewed through his mind but couldn’t get one image out of his head. The image was of a boy, standing next to a woman. Both looked out into a darkened abyss. First the woman, then the boy took steps from their rocky precipice into the yawning mouth of the darkness below.

Neither the boy nor the woman made a sound as they fell. Tom had been just a second too late to save them and when he did finally reach the edge, both the woman and the boy were suspended in the air, just out of reach. Their bodies spun in the darkness as they were puppets on the end of strings that were put away for the evening in preparation for the next nights show.

The most jarring of images was that when they turned their faces toward him, their faces were both blank but carrying the image of a silent scream. They were in agony but unable to express it with their voices.

The image of the gaping mouths and the blank eyes stayed with him even as he lay there with his eyes open, staring at the white ceiling.

Then as if compelled to do so, he sat up and spun around so his feet rested on the floor. He moved his feet independent of his mind and found their way into a pair of sneakers he kept near the bed. He pulled a shirt from his drawer and yanked it on over his head and then fought with a pair of jeans, shoving his shoe-covered feet into the leg holes. There was an easier way to do this, he knew, but logic and automatic action do not always travel on the same wavelength.

After a few minutes of struggle, he pulled on his leather jacket, patted the pockets for his keys and wallet and walked out into the cool night.

Outside, the barking of the running heater was even louder and he was happy to find himself simply walking away from the noise to his car.

The night was dark, with only a small sliver of moon closer to the horizon than fully in the sky. The whisper of the wind through the trees and the call of an owl were the only noises as he pulled the door open on his car and sat in the driver’s seat.

He fed the keys into the ignition and pulled out onto the road. If he had bothered to look in his rearview as he pulled away, or up at the motel as he drove by, he would have seen that his hotel door was standing open.

As he drove through the night, the destination seemed to call to him. He turned onto a side road and then down a long driveway.

He blinked and if his mind had been fully functional, he would have recognized the house from a few hours prior when he had taken his last roll of film. He sat in the car, the radio silent, the soft hum of the idling engine the dominant sound in the night.

He reached toward the radio and clicked it on. The static of some far-off station battled with the trees and atmosphere. The occasional snippet of word broke through, but mostly the sound to the outside listener was pure static.

In his head, he heard something different. It was a repeated phrase. “You’ve come to the end. This is your destination.”

He turned the car off, but didn’t remove the key so the radio still played. He felt he needed to hear the truths being told to him by the voice on the radio. He left the door open as he stepped out into the grass.

A small space before him showed the darkened Motley residence. If there were lights on the scene. The audience would see multiple darkened spots in the grass. Many forms underneath tarps or sheets. Some nature-made outlines where bodies had once lay. They would also see many indications from crime scene investigators of locations of instruments and bodies.

Tom made his way through this maze of forms and markers and stopped at an open patch of land. There, he simply sat down on the cool grass and lay back with his arms spread wide.

He could not feel the cold that settled over him and as he lay there, unblinking, he simply lost the desire to breath. The voice in the radio changed, telling him that he could release himself. And that’s what he did.

As he lay there, his breath came in shallower and shallower gulps until there was at last a final intake and exhale, then nothing more. His eyes went blank and the only thing he could see in his mind as the darkness took over was himself, hopping out after the boy and the woman. He was flailing for their hands but they watched as he fell into the precipice below.

\*

Tom was not immediately missed as his interactions with the town folk had been less than kind. When he didn’t show up the next morning to finally take possession of his film, Grayson didn’t particularly miss him. He slid the envelope of pictures into his desk and closed the drawer.

Mayor Wilson, on the other hand, knew that something was wrong the instant he woke. His sleep was interrupted by a frantic pounding on his door. The pounding did not sound desperate, but intended to wake the sleeper and nothing more.

Wilson rolled over toward his wife, she was generally a light sleeper and would have been the first one awake at any sound but her soft snoring told him that she had not heard the noise.

He shook his head. Maybe it was a dream. He rolled back onto his side and heard the pounding on the door again. This time Wilson was sure his wife would hear and since he was up, he would take care of whoever made the sound.

He walked down the stairs and tightened the belt of his bathrobe around his waist as he stood at the door. He still was not sure he had not dreamed the whole thing and was surprised that someone was banging on his door this early in the morning.

Out of sheer anger, he yanked the door open. A large weight fell into the foyer.

He could tell it was a man, based on size and body shape but could tell nothing more. The leather jacket looked familiar and the buzzed haircut brought with it a small semblance of recognition.

It wasn’t until he was able to roll the body onto its back that he could see what he thought he would see. This was the private detective.

Pinned to the detective’s shirt was a yellow and folded piece of paper. Before he knelt down to read the note, he scurried out into the night to see if he could find the person who’d dropped he body off. The front gate was still closed and the morning was still quiet enough that he could tell that no cars were driving away.

He stepped back inside, over the body, and then pulled the paper off the chest. The note was simple. “This is my town. This investigation is over. His blood is on your hands.”

Wilson balled the paper up and pressed it into the pocket of his robe. He looked down at the body as if he saw one lying on his doorstep every day. The man laying crumpled on the ground was nothing more to him than a sack of dirty laundry he left for Marta to take to the cleaners.

As he stood there, he stared at the body. He had to do something with it, it wasn’t like he could easily explain this away. There was a dead body at the Mayor’s house. The body of a private investigator that he hired.

Wilson kneeled down beside the body and patted the pockets for something, anything that would help him know where the body had come from.

Instead of finding that, he found the hotel key and his wallet. No car keys. He felt along Tom’s throat but there was no pulse, just as he thought.

He looked up into the yard and across the street. The neighbors were not moving around. Wilson checked his wrist for the time but his watch lay on a brass dish next to his wedding ring, his money clip, and a pile of change.

He moved to the feet and dragged them around and pulled the body into the foyer so he could close the door. He reminded himself not to slam it because he didn’t want to wake Debbie. Even after all the pounding on the door, he knew she would be woken now, at the slightest sound.

He went into the kitchen, grabbed his keys off the counter, and headed through the driveway into the garage. The door was shut, which was odd because he was sure they had left it open last night because of a chemical spill in the garage that they wanted to air out.

No matter, the door was indeed closed and he didn’t have to worry about the rattle and squeak of the garage door motor waking Debbie either.

Inside, he popped the trunk of his car, leaned in to move some random boxed around, then got moving.

Back in the foyer he knelt down and dragged Tom across the hardwood floor. Every few steps he had to stop and catch his breath and also check to make sure the studs on the leather jacket didn’t leave any gouges on the floor.

Finally the body was in the living room but this would be an issue. The carpeting would not make the moving easy. He struggled against the weight and pulled as hard as he could. He rounded a chair and with the door in sight, the body stopped. It wouldn’t move. He pulled, jerked, and tugged in every way he could but it wouldn’t move.

There was a creak upstairs. Debbie was walking around.

He knelt down, as if getting lower would help to hide him from Debbie if she happened to come downstairs.

There was another creak, this one as the bathroom door closed. He was suddenly glad he hadn’t oiled that hinge. Maybe she would get in the shower. He stood up and changed his leverage.

He couldn’t worry about that, he pulled the body again and it wouldn’t move.

The toilet flushed upstairs.

He leapt on the body and wrestled with it to try and get it to move. But this time it was finally evident what was going on. The zipper was folded under Tom’s body and was caught on the rug. He fought with it to free the teeth from the shag and as he did, he heard the water come on in the bathroom sink and the door creak open again.

She was coming out.

He pulled and yanked and the zipper finally released and Wilson was able to drag the body into the doorway leading into the garage.

Footsteps echoed down the hall upstairs and he could tell that Debbie was going to the other side of the house. Most likely to search for him. He had to move quick.

He threw the door to the garage open and pulled the body inside. As he passed the door, an arm caught the edge of the door and it slammed against the wall.

“Eddie? Is that you? Where are you?”

He ignored her and pulled the body down the two steps and then hopped up the stair and closed the door.

The body slid easily across the concrete floor and within seconds they were behind the car. Wilson’s forehead glistened with sweat. His chest and back were drenched. His energy was gone.

“Eddie? Where are you?” The voice was louder and he hoped she would not think to look in the garage. He hadn’t gone into the office in a while, why would he start again without informing her. Still. There would be no explanation if she walked in now.

He leaned over the body and tried not to grunt too loudly as he bore the weight upright. Even though he didn’t appear so, Tom was heavy.

With the body more or less on its feet, Wilson felt he was almost done until his grip changed and the body fell over and smacked against the floor of the trunk.

The sound was so loud it would have woken Debbie if she hadn’t been awake already. Any second now she would come rushing through the doorway to investigate the noise.

Despite his fatigue, he gained a second wind and forced the body into the trunk. The stuffing was awkward and Tom’s body was starting to stiffen.

He fought with one leg and then the other until Tom was in. Debbie must be almost there, surely she would have investigated the rest of the house by now.

There was the sound of her stepping on the hollow-sounding spot in the floor in the living room. If he was looking around, she would see the marks in the carpet where the zipper had been stuck and could probably see the trail the body left as it was dragged across the room.

“Eddie?”

The voice was on the other side of the door.

“Are you in there?”

He pushed and struggled, the angle was wrong and he couldn’t get Tom’s arm to stay in without popping one of the legs out.

He opened his mouth to answer, was halfway on his way to the door lest she open it and see him struggling with the corpse.

The door handle rattled.

He was caught.

His mind raced through answers.

Then the doorbell rang. The clanging echoed through the house and gave him just enough sound suppression to shove the arm in and slam the lid. But it wouldn’t shut. He popped the door open again and still, it wouldn’t close.

He leaned in and threw his weight against the body, pushed it farther in, then closed the lid, right on the edge of the leather jacket.

The door closed and the black corner stood in contrast to the white bumper. He tried to pull the trunk lid up but it wouldn’t move. The clasp was jammed.

He heard the front door close. He had to do something. He had left the keys somewhere; he couldn’t remember now.

He fought with the trunk for a second more then had to give up. She would come back to her search once more.

He stepped through the back of the garage, around the bikes that hadn’t been ridden in more than a year and slipped out the back door.

Then he went around to the back and leaned against the glass pane on the French doors leading to the patio. He tried the latch, it was locked.

He could see Debbie walking through the living room and had her hand on the doorknob again. Surely she would see the black sticking out of the corner of the trunk.

He banged on the door and she started. She put her hand on her chest and smiled, then waved.

She came walking through the room and stood at the door. She smiled. “What’s wrong?” Her voice came muffled through the glass door.

He pointed at the lock. “I’m locked out.”

She put her hand up to her ear. “I’m sorry?”

With the speed at which his heart was beating, he wanted to punch through the glass and yank her head into the wooden crossing in the window. Instead of that, he smiled. Then he shrugged and put his hands up in supplication.

“Is it cold out there?”

He rubbed his arms as if to show her that it was and then blew out his breath. It didn’t steam out so the effect was lost.

She opened the door and he walked in.

She smiled and hugged him and he gave her a playful smack on the butt. “How’d you get locked out?”

“I went out to get the paper, I guess I didn’t unlock the door all the way.”

“Was that you with the doorbell? I went to answer but no one was there.”

“Guilty. I didn’t think you were up so that’s why I came around back.”

“I could have sworn I heard you in the garage.” She turned, as if to finish her investigation.

He put his hands on her shoulder so she would turn back toward him. “You may have. I tried to get in there too. Did you close the garage door last night?”

“Yeah. I didn’t want some animal getting in there and digging through our stuff.”

“Sorry I woke you.” It was all he could think to say without showing his continued interest in the garage. He wanted her mind off it.

“So where’s the paper?”

“The paper? Oh. I don’t think it came yet.”

She hugged him again and then pulled back. She reached into his pocket. The paper. She would find it. “What’s this?” instead of pulling out the wadded paper, she pulled out his keys.

He laughed. “I guess I forgot I had those.”

“Why’d you take them outside anyway?”

He shrugged. “Habit? I guess I picked them up without even thinking about it. I don’t think I slept too well last night.”

She kissed him and then put the keys back on the peg next to the fridge. “You want coffee?”

“Yeah. But I’ll make it. You got hop in the shower.” He moved to the coffee maker. “You don’t want to be late.”

She looked over his shoulder at the wall clock and gave a little jump. “Oh yeah. Thanks.” She kissed him then turned toward the stairs.

He messed with the coffee maker until the sound of the shower water told him where she was.

He grabbed the keys, went into the garage and forced the trunk open.

The pale face stared up at him and Wilson yanked the jacket out of the crack, threw it over Tom’s face, and slammed the lid.

When Debbie finally made it downstairs, her hair was perfectly done and she was surrounded by a pleasant cloud of perfume. Wilson was reading the paper and sipping his coffee as if this were the most normal morning.

\*

As Rusty walked through the town on his way to the office, he could feel something different in the air. The air felt as though it were electrically charged and any minute a great bolt of lightning would strike out of the clear sky. It was as if there would be a big explosion and he could hear the hissing fuse but couldn’t pinpoint it.

The normally cheerful residents that he would pass on his walk into the office were either not present on the walks or would rush inside at his approach. He didn’t feel like they were running from him, but running from everything.

He rounded the corner and the front of his office came into view. Two older men were yelling at each other. One had his hands raised and was gesticulating wildly. Rusty could not hear what they were saying but from their stance, feet set apart, squared shoulders, they were on the brink of fighting.

He felt the urge to cross the street and stay out of their way and as he did, he felt a twinge of something inside him. It felt wrong to stray from the evil being done here. He had confronted it, and recently, he could chase that feeling and help to set things right here.

As he crossed back toward them, one of the men reached out a knobby hand, his finger shaking, and poked the other man in the shoulder. “How do you like that?”

The other man adjusted his cap and puffed his chest out. He clinched his fists and took a stance of a man about to throw a punch.

This was not right at all. It was like the men were so focused on the wrongdoing of the other that they had to be avenged.

“If you bump into someone, you apologize.”

“And you were reading the paper, you should have been watching where you were going.”

Rusty stepped closer to them and decided he wanted to grab a paper from the box they were standing in front of. “Excuse me,” he said as he pushed his way through them.

The men blinked and looked at Rusty then the one with the hat snarled. “Who do you think you are? You think you can push us around because we’re old men?”

The second man chimed in. “What ever happened to respect for your elders?”

The man in the hat adjusted his angry gaze from Rusty and rested it upon the other man. “I don’t need any help from you. I’ve got this.” He raised his fist again.

Rusty dropped his change into the paper box and pulled out a paper. He let the door slam shut and the noise seemed to snap the men out of their anger-fueled daze.

The one in the hat dropped his hands to his side and blinked a few times. The other man ran his hands over his bald head and looked around.

“Look. I think I may have overstepped. I’m sorry about that.” And with that, the men shook hands and were off on opposite directions.

When Rusty stepped into his office, Susan sat at her desk sorting some papers to be filed later. “Something’s going on here. I don’t like it.”

She didn’t look up from her papers but said, “If you would get here on time, then you could help.”

Rusty cleared his throat and did his best not to let the anger within him bubble over. He could feel it in the pit of his stomach. It was like a burner had been turned on and the pot was about to boil over.

Instead of reacting to her biting response as he wanted to, he moved to the back of his office and went through the paper on his desk. This semblance of normalcy finally made him able to focus on the reality at hand. Things were not normal in Lake Grand Vista and they probably wouldn’t be for a while.

He settled in to work, uncertain what the day would bring but sure that it wasn’t going to get better.

\*

Wilson sat at the table reading the paper. He was leafing through the pages and waiting for Debbie to see the sweat running down his brow. It was very abnormal for him to do any sort of physical exertion, especially this early in the morning.

Debbie had her arms full when she stepped away from the refrigerator. “You sleep okay?”

Wilson lowered the paper and looked over the top of his glasses. “Yeah. I guess so. Why?”

“I woke up a few times, you were tossing and turning.”

“Yeah. That. I had a pretty bad dream.” He said this knowing full well that Debbie would not hear any of it. She had a terrible superstition that if anyone told about their bad dream it would come true.

She put down the egg carton and tub of butter and put her hands over her ears. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Wilson smiled. An easy way to get wrought the turmoil that was flowing through his body. He didn’t have to share a thing with her. But then, the alarm on the car started honking and sent everything into a tailspin.

Debbie dropped her tub of butter onto the countertop and managed to ease the carton of eggs down before spinning toward the door leading into the garage. “What was that?”

Wilson grabbed his keys from the countertop and ran into the garage. He jammed his keys into the ignition. The horn immediately stopped blatting. Then as he got out and slammed the door, the edge of his robe caught on something. The trunk lid disengaged and slowly rose up.

Debbie stood at the doorway, small mixing bowl in hand and stared straight at the rising trunk lid. The black coat with silver buttons glinted in the morning light streaming through the windows above the garage door. Her mouth stood open and the spoon dropped from her hand and clattered onto the cement floor below.

Wilson saw her grip loosening on the bowl and rushed over to her so he could help her sit down on the edge of the steps.

“What did you do?”

Wilson eased her down and took both hands in his. “I don’t know what this is all about.”

“Why is there a body in your trunk?”

A thousand possible answers streamed through his mind but he looked at her and said, “It was for the town.”

She looked down at her hands as if realizing for the first time that she was not longer holding the bowl and that his hands were wrapped around hers. She pulled her hands away and looked up into his eyes. “You killed someone?”

He shook his head and told her the story of the morning. He left out a few details about the notes but overall let her in on all the secrets. “You see, I had to do it. If we get pegged as an unsafe town, our livelihood is gone. This town dies.”

Wilson watched the realization come across her face and understood that she knew what that would mean. They would go back to her mother’s old home, move back into the neighborhood where she grew up and everything would be the same as it was thirty years ago.

“What do we need to do?”

“We don’t need to do anything. I need to get rid of the body outside of town. I think I know the place, but I need to look into it first.”

“I’m in this with you. There is no way that I will let this town die.”

“Are you sure?”

She took one final sip of her coffee and put the mug down. She nodded, then stood and pulled the keys off the hook. She jingled them. “Yes. But you can’t go out like that.”

Wilson went upstairs and took his time shaving. His hands were shaking but as he ran the razor over his face, he calmed. Everything would be back to normal. There would be no more snooping private investigator and the town would get back on track.

After his shower, he dressed and headed downstairs. Debbie rinsed off her plate and put it in the dishwasher. The plate jigged a little as she put it into the rack but she clenched her fist as if staving it off.

Wilson grabbed the keys and took his wife’s shaking hand. He kissed it then kissed her on the cheek. He took her hand and led her into the garage where they got into the car and drove just out of town.

The trees grew thicker as they climbed the mountain road and as he had suspected, they had met no one on the road. Even if they did, his car was innocuous enough that it would not stand out.

Finally, they got to the spot, a small lookout that showed the town below. There was a trail marker and a plaque outlining things for tourists to look at. Just now, the ferry chugged across the water in the distant haze.

Wilson backed the car to the edge of guard rail and stepped out. He stretched as if they had been driving and in fact, he did feel that he needed to remove some tension.

This morning had been hectic. It wasn’t every day that something like this happened. But, little did he know this portended of things to come.

Debbie stepped out and joined Wilson on the driver’s side. She gave him a side hug and looked out into the distance. From where they stood, they could get a good view of the road below and were isolated enough to hear any car coming from far above.

At the moment, the road lay quiet in both directions. Wilson bent into the floor well and popped the trunk with the release that had started this whole thing.

The lid popped open and a gust of wind caught the edge. The lid shot open like it was launched from a trebuchet and the body of the investigator lay in a crumpled pile. Wilson trotted over to the trunk and stood so his body would shield any view of the body in the trunk.

As they stood there, Debbie looked down at the body. “Now what?”

Wilson patted her on the side of the head and kissed her hair. “We do it and get it over with.”

“But what does that mean?”

He bent over the body, fumbled around under the arms and yanked. The body stayed put. It felt like a bag of Olympic weights. After a moment of grunting he said, “You’re going to have to help me with this.”

Wilson heard her swallow hard and then she bent over. She reached in, around the body but didn’t leave her hands in any one spot. “I just don’t know. What do you want me to do?”

Rage billowed in Wilson’s stomach and he almost shoved her over the edge but he took a deep breath to quell it. “Just help me grab him. We’ve got to get him over here.” He pointed to the other side of the guardrail. There was little space for either of them to stand but they managed to work together to pull the body out.

Finally, the body lay on the ground. The crumpled form vaguely showing the outline of the trunk, or at least showing that it had been in a tight space.

As the body lay there, a car rolled down the mountain road. Wilson was bent over the body, trying to get the legs into a straight form when Debbie tapped him on the shoulder.

“Do you hear that?”

“What?”

“I hear brakes squealing.”

Wilson stood up too fast and banged his head on the edge of the trunk. He readjusted his posture and rubbed the back of his head. When he checked his finger, there was no blood.

“I hear it too.” He slammed the lid down and grabbed the edge of the coat to yank the body out of the dirt beside the car and as far under the back end as possible.

“Help me,” he said between breaths. “I can’t do this alone.”

But suddenly he could. He had strength coursing through him that would have allowed him to lift the body over his head if he had felt adventurous enough to give it a try.

Debbie had barely bent over when he finally pushed the body under the car. He hopped up onto the lid and patted the seat next to him.

The squealing coming down the road grew louder.

Debbie hopped up onto the lid next to him and the shocks absorbed the weight of both of them and settled down.

Then a red truck with a broken headlight came around the corner. A plume of dust followed it as it drove along. Then, the back wheels locked and the truck turned into the lot next to them.

“We are just admiring the view,” Wilson said under his breath.

“Do you really think I’m that stupid?” She didn’t turn to look at him but he knew she was making a face at him. Instead, she put her head on his shoulder.

The truck backed into the spot next to them and Wilson turned as the driver hopped out.

His heart thumped hard enough that he was sure the man coming around to their side could hear it.

The man had a dirty baseball cap on his head although Wilson could not tell which team logo adorned the front, it was that dirty. The man also had a dark beard and wore dark sunglasses.

He came around and dropped the tailgate and hopped onto the bed. Wilson watched as he pulled a wrapped sandwich from a bag and took a bite.

With his mouth full, the man turned and said, “You folks from around here?”

Wilson felt his head nodding and heard himself say, “Yep. Never get over this view though.”

“Just passing through myself. Figured this was as good a place to grab a bite to eat as anywhere.”

“Very beautiful,” Debbie said. “I can see why you’d stop.”

“Better’n eating and driving. Safer too.”

Wilson was thinking that if this man, who just happened to be passing through, had been a minute earlier, he wouldn’t have been safer for him. He could still feel the strength coursing through his arms.

The wind cut through the trees and Wilson pulled Debbie closer. She rubbed her arms but Wilson pushed them down to her lap.

“Bit cold to just be out here dressed like that though huh?”

Wilson nodded again. “In the wind, but when the sun hits.” He trailed off as if drinking in the rays instead of perching over a dead body. At that thought, his heart pounded once more and he could picture himself lifting the man and throwing him over the edge into the valley below where only the circling birds would alert the authorities to his whereabouts. “We like to come out here no matter the weather.”

The man took one more big bite of his sandwich and hopped down. He wiped his hand across the front of his shirt and picked at something in his teeth.

He took a step closer to the car.

And then another.

Wilson leaned forward, ever so slightly, and looked down at the ground, hoping the man didn’t track his gaze.

It didn’t quite work because the man turned to follow Wilson’s eye line.

Wilson knew he’d been caught. His heart thumped hard. He clinched his fist, trying to draw the anguish away. The man was so close to dying and he didn’t even know it. All it would take would be one swing of his fist and the man would be tumbling over the rail.

But, before the man saw the body, which wasn’t as hidden as they thought, sticking out from under the car, he looked up to see Debbie pointing at something in the distance. “Will you look at that?”

The man, even though wearing dark sunglasses, shaded his eyes with his hand to look out over the distance.

“Isn’t it just lovely?”

The man mumbled an assent and kept looking. Wilson imagined the man searching the distance looking for whatever he was supposed to find lovely.

And in all reality Wilson didn’t think it was all that lovely. There were not many colorful leaves on the trees yet. It wasn’t quite cold enough to see wisps of smoke rising from the few chimneys of the occupied houses and the sun was at a harsh height. But it did the trick.

“Just lovely.” She hugged him tight again, kissing him on the cheek.

The man brushed his hand across his pants again and then turned back toward his truck. He looked at his watch as if late for an appointment. “Well, it was nice sharing this spot with you.”

“It’s not ours to keep. Glad you enjoyed it.”

The man went to the door and pulled it open. He hopped into the seat and slammed the door shut. After a few seconds of no engine sound, Wilson turned to watch him hopefully pull away.

Instead, the man stepped out with a camera and walked toward the railing. “You were right, just lovely.”

He pulled the camera out of the case and either the wind caught it or his hands were still greasy because it almost flew out of his grasp. It landed with a plop onto the dusty ground right beneath Wilson’s feet and close enough to the PI for him to grab the case if he were alive. The wind caught it again and it blew under the car.

Bile shot up into Wilson’s mouth and he could feel something else moving inside him also.

He imagined the man bending over, reaching under the edge of the car to pick up and seeing the body. He hopped off the car, was down on his knees picking the camera bag up, and was standing before the man had time to snap the picture and register the bag on the ground.

Wilson beat the dust from the bag and held it out to the man. The man grabbed it and slid it into his pocket. “Thanks.”

Wilson now stood, shielding the body in the best way he could. Debbie stayed put and he was glad for it. Who knows what would have been seen if there was no one holding the weight down.

The man turned to Wilson. “You mind taking my picture? I want this view in the background.”

Wilson blinked and then the ever-promising politician inside him nodded. The man started to turn around to lean against the rail but Wilson stopped him.

“You don’t want that in the background, come over to the other side of the truck.”

Wilson lead the man around the front of the truck then positioned the man with his back angled away from the body. Wilson framed the picture with the Lake behind the man and got as little of the parking area in the frame as possible.

The camera clicked and then whirred, rewinding the film. Wilson handed the camera back then looked over at Debbie. She still sat on the car and the body was mostly invisible, just some dark shape under the car that could have been a rock or a bag of garbage. Which it would be in just a few minutes.

Wilson put his arm on the man’s shoulder and steered him back toward his truck. He opened the door for the man, then stuck his hand out. “I really hope you have a safe journey.”

The man shook Wilson’s hand and then pulled the door closed.

“I will.” He nodded and the engine coughed to life.

The truck made a plume of dust as it drove away and Wilson turned back to Debbie but she was no longer sitting on the trunk, she was right next to him.

“I think I could have pushed him over the edge then pushed his truck over after him.”

Wilson stood there, his mouth open.

“I mean, I thought he’d never leave.”

Wilson snapped his mouth shut and nodded once. He didn’t want to say that the same thoughts had gone through his mind.

Debbie patted him on the arm. “I guess we should get to work.”

Back at the car, both Wilson and Debbie knelt in the dust and pulled the body out. When the stood him up as much as his stiffening body would allow, his jacket was half off. It had snagged on the edge of the chrome bumper.

Wilson held him there with one hand and adjusted the jacket with the other.

“What about fingerprints?”

Wilson shook his head. “When they find his body, if they do, it will be so decomposed that there will be nothing left of it.”

“Well.” They dragged the body to the edge of the rail and then pushed it over. The sound of an engine sounded behind them and they both turned as they heard the scree crumbling after the body.

Wilson looked down to see if it had gone all the way over and saw the black leather jacket disappear from view then turned to see another car slowly ambling by, the driver more interested in the view than the road ahead.

Wilson waved and Debbie put her arm around him and they made their way back to the car and got in.

When the engine roared to life, Debbie reached over and pressed the lever to full heat. “It was too cold to be out there that long.”

Wilson rubbed his hands together and then shifted into gear.

“I have one question,” Debbie said. “What about his car? It’s not at our house is it?”

“I have no idea where it is.”

“Then how did he get out here to jump?”

Wilson turned to her and looked at her with sincerity in his eyes. “You never know how far people will go when they are suicidal.”

She kissed him one more time on the cheek and he headed back to their house.

At that moment, Tom Cameron’s car battery was dying because the radio had been playing all night long.

\*

Rusty ate his brown-bagged lunch of a ham and cheese sandwich and a bag of greasy potato chips while sitting at his desk. He periodically wiped the grease on a paper towel sitting next to a pile of papers on his desk so he wouldn’t leave smudges of salt and oil on the papers he was processing.

When he finished the food, he decided that he’d spent enough time sitting at his desk for the day and Susan certainly helping matters. It seemed like every time he asked her for something she would snap at him like an angry rattlesnake.

So, when he finished his food and crumpled the bag to throw it away, the sigh that came from across the office was the end of it. He pushed himself from the desk, did a cursory glance at the papers on his desk, wiped crumbs from his chest, and made it way to the door.

“I’m heading out for a bit. You think you can lock up if you go anywhere?”

Rusty could see the muscles tensing at Susan’s jawline. She crumpled a paper in her lap. “I’ve got to do everything huh?”

“I’m not asking you to do any more than you normally would. I think I can take care of some of this later, maybe tomorrow. I’m going for a walk.”

Before she could snip at him, he was out the door and down the sidewalk. The crisp air bit at the inside of his nostrils and sometimes taking a deep breath hurt more than it should.

He walked down to the water and watched the waves lap against the shore. Then, he found himself sitting on one of the few chairs, the rentals he would occasionally watch, and stared out into the distance.

He hadn’t thought about Joan in a long time but this was one of the last spots that he’d seen her alive. He had been working up the courage to go talk to her when her dog ran off.

His last glimpse of her had been when she’d disappeared into the shadows down by the water. At an impulse, he looked that way, as if his mind was replying the scene but from a different vantage.

He could see her slim form making its way down the shore as her dog, now dead also, ran off into the woods.

Then a screamed echoed over the water and Rusty snapped out of his trance. Someone screamed down the shore. Rusty stood, the impulse to get involved far outweighed the impulse to ignore it as though he could not help. And he ran toward the noise.

Other people strolled along the walkway near the water but none seemed to turn toward the scream or even hear it. If they did hear it they went about their business, complacent in their role in life.

As he ran, his mind kept going over that night. If Joan had screamed he could have heard, if only he’d been outside. But no, he had been standing in the shadows watching her move about and thinking nothing of the consequences.

Then another scream washed over him and he broke from a slow run into a hard sprint. He would not let something like that happen again. He would not be an innocent bystander once more.

He rounded the corner and saw two children standing at the edge of a concrete basketball court. Neither child had a basketball and neither child moved. Both stood, staring toward the distance.

Rusty ran up to them. “Did you boys hear a scream?”

The shorter of the two, a boy with brown hair spiked in a few places but mostly lying down, said, “It came from there.”

The other boy, chubbier but still young enough to shed it before high school pointed a fat sausage of a finger toward the dark woods just beyond the edge of the court.

Rusty bound into the grass and crashed through the trees. His eyes took a few seconds to adjust to the dimmed light of the undergrowth but he could hear rustling leaves and snapping twigs.

His mind raced through the possible options, from some wild animal, to a murderer creeping through the underbrush. Based on the way things had gone over the last few days, he was almost certain it was the latter instead of the former.

Aware of his beating heart and the sound of his own footfalls, Rusty stopped his forward progress and waited. His mind told him he must stay put, maybe even turn and run, but his heart told him to soldier forward.

So he did.

As he made his way deeper into the dark, he could barely make out the shape of a man in the distance. The man had a woman by the hair and shook her violently. He raised his hand to backhand her and then looked up and directly at Rusty.

Then, the man turned back to the woman, smacked her with the back of his hand. Dropped the handful of hair and turned toward the trees.

Rusty stood there, watching the man in his progress as he seemed to weave through the trees and bushes with the grace of a cat making its way toward the kill. Rusty watched the man, it was indeed The Man, disappear into the distance and Rusty went to the woman and helped her up.

“Are you okay?”

“I think so.”

“Who was that man?”

The woman rubbed her hand across the red welt along her jawline. “I don’t know. I was walking and he grabbed me. And dragged me in here.”

“Can you make it out of here?” He pointed toward the direction he just came. “I want to chase that guy down.”

She swallowed hard. Nodded. “I think so.”

Before the sentence was out of her mouth, Rusty had turned and was pushing his way deeper into the trees. He kept getting a sense that this was supposed to happen. That he was supposed to see the man doing this and he was supposed to stop it.

Pride welled up in his heart but he pushed it aside because the feeling burning in his chest was distracting. A few strides later, and he found himself not in such a thick stand of trees as he had once thought. He was standing on the edge of a neighborhood.

He went past a few houses and stood on the sidewalk, scanning to the left and right but he saw nothing.

He made a note of the house numbers and the street as he walked back toward the office.

As he walked, the events of the afternoon seized him and he almost bent over to vomit. The adrenaline rushing through his body was subsiding.

As it did, a door across the street slammed open with a velocity that would have caused a thunderclap of air if the door hadn’t slammed against the wall.

The man stepped out onto the porch. He was covered in something, it looked like paint but from this distance Rusty could not tell. In fact, it looked like the man had had a whole bucket of paint dumped on his head.

Then the man stepped out into the sun, looked left and right down the street and shook his body like a dog spraying water after a bath.

Red droplets sprayed in every direction but seemed to disappear. Then the man stood clean in the sunlight. He turned and strolled down the street, unaware, or ignoring Rusty as he moved.

As Rusty stood there, the man disappeared into the distance. Rusty’s feet felt as though they were encased in blocks of cement and every time he tried to move forward, he lost balance.

Something held him firm to the spot. It wasn’t a metaphorical fear that kept him from moving, a force outside of his will kept him there.

Then the man was out of sight and Rusty flailed his arms as he fell to the ground. He blinked and looked around, no one held him and no one stood anywhere near him.

He rubbed his knee where it had smacked against the concrete sidewalk and then closed his eyes. He did something he hadn’t done in a long time because he felt no need. He prayed.

In his mind, he saw the man rushing from the house and running down the block. When he had turned the corner, Rusty had a vision that the man slowed, then checked his pockets and went into a nearby house. Rusty could see the number of the house clearly.

Then, with the clarity that he’d received, he turned and ran back toward his office. Before he got there, he thought better about what he was doing and stopped by a gas station and went to the pay phones around the back.

“Hello. This is, uh, anonymous.”

The dispatcher responded with an incredulous tone but Rusty moved forward without any pause, relaying the story and then the address that he’d seen in his mind.

He was smart enough not to say that the house number had been a vision and now he felt fifty percent sure that they officer would not do anything about it.

He hung up and went into the office to finish out his day. Susan had indeed locked the door and he slogged through the rest of the day but he did keep the lights low and the door locked.

\*

Jack Morton had been assigned to clean the area around that house deep in the woods. Most of the deer had been removed, taken off to some lab to see if there was anything that could be gleaned from the bodies. Jack didn’t care, he would get his paycheck for helping clean things up and then move on with his life.

His tow truck certainly didn’t get enough work now that the summer people were leaving and any opportunity to make some more marks on the black side of the finance sheet, the better.

He turned down the bumpy dirt road and made his way through the snaking lane toward the property. He almost overshot it because the trees were so high and the directions he had been given were not clear enough. He did know that he’d come to the right spot because there was a no trespassing sign hanging on a chain from a tree. The sign swayed in the breeze and Morton slammed the brakes on the rig and slide to a stop.

The truck backed with no real issue and he turned onto the narrow driveway.

When he crossed through the trees, he came across a wide opening in the sky. The air was no longer tinged with green and prematurely dark. Despite that, a darkness lay over the clearing. It was as if the light were tinged with grayness of the sun going down or the temperature of the light during an eclipse.

The birds still sang, so the feeling of darkness was only within him.

He turned the truck off and stepped out of the cab. He pulled his hat down and scratched his forehead with the brim, an act that browned the front edge of the bill, and one his wife hated.

The grass around the house was not too long and green in most places. He could make out spots where the carcasses had been because the grass was brown in those places, and in some, completely black with death.

One thing caught his eye and it was the car sitting at the edge of the driveway. The door stood wide open, the shadowed interior hard to see in the low quality light.

When Jack leaned over, he tried to see if a dome light brightened the interior in any way, but could see nothing. He took a hesitant step forward. The rumors were actually getting to him. This was a death house.

Now that he was here and looking at the mess before him, this was not where he wanted to be. The entire clearing felt as though it was ten degrees colder than the rest of the area.

It was also darker. Something that he couldn’t explain because there was plenty of light, or at least there should have been.

Instead of looking through everything, he backed his truck up to the car sitting at the edge of the driveway and stepped out.

He stepped toward the car as though it were electrified and he didn’t want to get too close and pushed the door closed with his foot.

The door swung shut. Jack stood there, looking at the car, waiting for something to happen. He wasn’t sure if something was going to happen but the air told him that something was going on.

When the car didn’t start up on its own or simply evaporate into nothing, Jack squatted down to make sure the tow hooks could find purchase without any hassle.

He went to the truck, unhooked his cable and got to work.

The car sat on the back of the truck in less than ten minutes and the sound of the truck working made him forget the stories he’d heard about this place.

The battery on the car will be dead but once they get it to the shop and the battery charged the music, or lack thereof will startle the mechanic.

The firelight touched Simon’s shoes and he backed away until completely hidden in the darkness. Something about the light made him not want to touch it. Almost like his skin would melt from his bones if the light touched his face.

There wasn’t much light yet, there was still time.

Rusty squeezed Crystal’s hand, he couldn’t bring himself to kiss her, not right now, not after all they’d been through

Need to feed clues into the story to make it seem as though Greg is the man. At least to those in LGV. He has to be the perfect stooge. So, when he is captured, this is a big deal. But then the man shows up and he’s taken and it is seen that Greg was just a pawn.

Add something about the local church has let things go lax recently and will not stand up for what is right. The pastor is one to capitulate on everything and maybe he is even involved in something he shouldn’t be. The church is weak in the town.

Make the Choshek and Man relationship like Teacher Mentee, Darth and Emperor type thing.

Rusty was in the middle of saying goodbye when Crystal heard a knock at his door. She waited as he walked through his apartment, his footsteps changing from the echoing of footsteps along the wooden floor in the kitchen to, what she imagined as inaudible steps of the carpeted hall. As he walked to the door, phone still in hand, she checked the time. 9:15 was a little late, at least in Lake Grand Vista. She listened intently, feeling a little jealous that someone was going to take Rusty away from her.

“Well. I guess I should go. Someone’s at my door.”

“I can wait.” She was hopeful not to hear a woman’s voice but then hopeful to actually hear a woman’s voice because the man doing all the killings, it wasn’t Greg she was sure of that because she’d known him too long, was still out.

“Just a second.”

Crystal stayed on not sure if he was talking to her or someone on the other side.

She heard the door creak and hoped he would answer the door before hanging up and that was the only thing that left him some sort of salvation because she was able to hear sound of the phone clattering onto the ground.

\*

Rusty let the phone fall to his side, his finger was over the button to hang up but the face at the door, or lack thereof, startled him and he dropped the phone.

A hooded figure stood at the door and the hall light behind him made his face seem darker.

The hooded figure leapt in, threw a hand over Rusty’s mouth and whispered something in his ear. Rusty crumpled to the wooden floor and then everything went dark.

\*

Crystal held the phone to her ear, not sure what she had heard but knew it was something falling onto the floor. She didn’t want to call out, hoping that the phone would go unnoticed and she could hear what was being said.

As she listened, she heard muffled footsteps and the sound of clothes rustling.

Something heavy, presumably Rusty, was being dragged across the floor. She closed her eyes and said a quick prayer that it was Rusty’s unconscious body instead of his lifeless body.

Then, the sound changed, she heard footsteps again, this time getting louder and the sound of the phone being lifted.

The person that had picked up the phone must have placed it near their head because she next heard breathing. The breathing dragged on for a few seconds and sounded like a dog sniffing a meal from an unknown person, there was interest, but trepidation. She heard muttering then a single word epithet. Then the phone hung up.

She pressed the phone closer to hear ear but after a second the dial tone sounded. She gripped the phone, trying to decide what to do, who to call. She didn’t have any of his neighbors’ number’s, they weren’t that close yet.

She stared at the phone pleading for answers but none came.

She tossed the phone down, grabbed her keys, and ran out the door.

\*

Sometime later he woke in the trunk of a car. He jostled against a spare tire and some old work clothes. Then things went gray again and the gentle swaying motion of the drive lulled him back to unconsciousness.

\*

Crystal got to the house, breaking a few laws and bending a few more to get there in record time. She slammed the car into a spot near the building, she didn’t care if it was an illegal parking job, and ran into the building.

She ran up the stairs, two at a time and then got to his hallway. Everything seemed normal. Maybe he had dropped the phone, maybe the battery had died. She hoped for the best.

She ran to his door and tried the handle. Locked. She pounded on the door and kicked at it. If he was asleep or in the shower, he would hear.

By now, it was almost ten.

“Excuse me.”

She kicked one more time and then realized the voice came from behind her. She whirled around, there was no one in the hall with her.

Across the hall from Rusty’s apartment, an older man opened the door and peeked through the opening. “I don’t think he’s in.

“Are you sure?”

He pulled the door open a little further. “I think so.”

She balled her hands into fists and then released them. “How can you be so sure?”

“Well, I saw him leave.”

“When?”

“I don’t know. Maybe half an hour ago.”

“Did he leave with someone?”

“Not sure. I heard someone knocking, thought it was my door and took a look through the peephole. I saw someone go in and then a little while later, Rusty and that guy left.”

“You sure you saw them both leave?”

“As sure of it as anything. I went to the window to watch for a friend, I saw that young man getting in a car and they drove toward the lake.”

“About half an hour ago?”

“Yup, give or take.”

“Did you see what kind of car? The color?”

“Rather hard to see, it was a dark color. Looked like one of those Honda’s.”

Crystal felt the elation build within her. She reached over and made the man’s night by kissing him on the cheek.

\*

The next time he woke, he was still in the trunk and the car had slowed. He rolled over to try and get a grip on the trunk to force it open when the car bounced over something hard and he slammed his head against the side of the trunk. He saw stars then he faded into unconsciousness again.

\*

He woke again on a cold slab of rock. The unevenness of the stone cut into his back and no matter how he moved, the pain would not subside. He was fully awake now, there was no denying that. He pushed himself up to a seated position and his head spun. He couldn’t quite grasp where he was or what he was doing. The only thing he could see was a slight red line of light somewhere in the distance.

He was also aware of one side of a conversation in which he caught a few words, his name being the most prominent.

Things to add here, Rusty needs to see the man commit a crime. He will report it to the chief and the chief will track the man to a house that he has either rented or it is his summer house. The man is there thinking about how things used to be, this is why he is so subdued at first but there is a confrontation with Choshek.

Chief Grayson had finally tracked the killer down. Or, another killer. He still wasn’t sure. After the events that had happened, he knew that Greg was not the safest person to be around. But then there was this man.

If he was true to himself, he would have known it was an outside person. No matter how much Mayor Wilson wanted to believe that this town was safe, it just wasn’t. This guy was proof and he would take him in, give him a trial, and prove that the town was safe again.

There had been many riots recently where the citizens protested that the Mayor was doing nothing while the town died. One of the protests had gotten so out of hand that it had damaged the courthouse and a small business that was adjacent to the courthouse building.

Grayson was lucky that the fire trucks were not out of town as they had been during the Grand Vista Fire fifteen years before. The whole town’s fire station was out on parade, showing off their truck and raising some funds for a second when a fire swept through two large swatches of property and left two dead.

Wilson had been able to sweep that one under the carpet because they had been able to raise money for a second fire truck simply because people now had an idea of what would happen if there was more than one fire in town at a time.

Anyway, the fire had been put out but the courthouse would not be useful for some time.

When Grayson had met with Wilson the meeting was brief. “This is the kind of thing that makes a town look weak. We are not weak.”

Now, as Grayson stood outside the house, he felt the itch to move it. He knew what taking care of this scum would do to the town. It would save it from more heartache and pain. He also knew what it would do to his career.

He clicked the call button on his shoulder mic and was about to ask for backup when something occurred to him, he could be the sole hero the town was looking for.

He let the button go and listened to the din of the evening calls on the radio. He sat in the car, watching the house that the suspect had just entered.

The house didn’t seem too large, probably two bedrooms and a single bath. He’d been inside many houses just like it and knew the approximate layout. Room in the front, bathroom in the middle, room in the back. Then on the other side, a living room and a dining room.

As he watched, only one light came on and shut off as he watched. So there was only one person in there. Good.

He let a little time pass as the sun lowered on the horizon. The gray evening took over and the sounds of the night appeared.

Grayson could hear the lake in the distance, the wind moving the water and splashing it against the shore. The wind was really picking up and had been for a few days. It was like the town knew what was happening and was trying to bring the water to cleanse the land.

As he sat there, he found himself snapping and unsnapping the snap on his holster. He didn’t want to use the gun, a dead man can’t confess to anything, but he was happy to have it there just in case.

The front room light came on and illuminated a small table. The single light above it showed the man sitting at the table with this back to the room he had just come from. The man clasped his hands in front of him and looked down at his plate. A moment later he picked up his fork and started eating.

It was now or never. Grayson pushed the door open and walked down the street to appear as though he were on an evening walk. Besides, it would be better to come at him from an angle.

As he approached the house, he realized that if the door was locked, it would be almost impossible for him to get in. Yet another reason for backup.

Grayson approached the house from the side yard and crept up to the front door. There, he reached up and tested the knob. It turned in his hand. He smirked, this would be too easy.

He stood, drew his weapon and threw the door open. The door banged against the wall and Grayson stormed in. “Hands up where I can see them.”

He had his gun trained on the man at the table. He hadn't even looked up. Grayson had to make his way through the kitchen to the dining room where the man forked another potato into his mouth.

“I said hands up.”

A low rumble emanated from the man and Grayson felt a tremble run up his back. Still, the man didn’t move.

Grayson kept his weapon trained on the man and he made his way around the table. The man sat there as though he were alone in a silent room.

Grayson did not feel as confident as before. He’d read some stories about lone officers getting overpowered by someone much smaller simply because they didn’t see a weapon or something that could cause damage. Right now, the only thing the man had was a fork and a butter knife.

Then fork clattered onto the table. The man reached across his plate and brought his glass of water to his lips. He set this down and looked up.

At the moment of eye contact, Grayson felt as though a large hand grabbed him around the chest, picked him up, and threw him across the room.

He smacked into the wall, breaking Sheetrock and sending a picture that had been hung on the wall crashing to the floor.

Grayson blinked. He wasn’t sure, but he thought he might have been out cold for a second or two. What he did know was that not much time has passed since he was thrown bodily into the wall. The dust that had been wrenched free when he was thrown into the wall still drifted down in a lackadaisical pattern.

He still had his weapon in his hand and saw, through the haze of falling dust, the man stepping toward the doorway. Training took over and Grayson fired without thought. The man, lurched forward as each bullet found a purchase.

The man fell onto his hands and knees and started crawling. Grayson pushed himself up, pointed his gun at the man on the floor. “Stop moving or I will fire again.”

The sound of Grayson’s voice was muffled from the repeated firings in the small room and he knew he would have to clear his ears like they were full of water just to hear correctly.

Still, the man kept moving. He crawled further forward.

Grayson stood there, blinking. This was not possible, the man had taken three, maybe four bullets to his mass and was still moving. And then Grayson noticed, there was no blood. The man was not injured.

Against his better judgement, Grayson holstered his weapon and lunged at the man. He caught him from behind and forced him onto the ground. The man jerked under the weight and still pulled forward with his hands.

Grayson rode on the man as he fumbled his handcuffs free. He reached down and wrestled the man’s arm behind him and forced the bracelet around his wrist. Then, he grabbed the other arm and pulled it behind the man’s back. The strength that had been there before seemed to be waning.

The man wriggled on the ground and Grayson pulled out his second pair of handcuffs. He sat on the man’s legs and forced the pair around the man’s legs, binding them together. The man kicked and rolled but did nothing to free himself.

Grayson pushed himself up and stood over the man. Only now did he consider calling this in, only now did he really have time. But as he stood there, staring at the man’s back, looking for blood, the only thing he saw were three small holes, tightly grouped, in the middle of the man’s back.

With the man lying on the ground, cuffed at the wrists and legs, Grayson finally felt safe enough to go to his car. He opened the back door, moved some things out of the seldom-used backseat, and turned toward the man.

The man was gone.

Grayson jerked his head around, looking up and down the street and sidewalk. Maybe he had made it to a standing position, maybe he was penguin walking down the sidewalk. It wouldn’t be hard to give chase. At least it shouldn’t.

But a man with two pairs of cuff shouldn’t be able to stand and walk away either. A man with three bullet holes in his back and two pairs of cuffs should not be moving at all.

Then he saw the man down the street. He was penguin walking with an uneven and unsteady gait that made him look like he had gone to the bathroom in his pants.

Grayson climbed in the car and started it. Then he wheeled around, leaving black tire marks on the ground and gave chase. The back door slammed shut as he plowed forward.

He laid on the horn as he came upon a group of kids walking down the middle of the road and the kids seemed oblivious to the man walking right by them with his legs bound together.

Instead of moving out of the way, the kids seemed to group together even more. They stopped what they were doing and spread out.

Grayson slammed on the brakes and revved the engine. The kids did not move. The man was easily getting away. Grayson put the car into reverse and backed down the street, then floored it so he could make it over the curb and knock over a few bushes without slowing his advancement too much.

When he got around the group of kids, he looked down the street and saw the man at the side of the road, watching.

Grayson didn’t know what he was doing other than pressing on the gas and within a second he was upon the man. He plowed right through him, the thump of the body against the front of the car was loud enough and distinct enough that he would hear it in his dreams for years to come.

The body rolled over the hood, the cuffs smacked against the windshield and starred the glass, then the body rolled over the roof and the cuffs must have snagged on the bar of lights because the man didn’t come down on the other side.

Grayson slammed on the brakes and threw the door open. The man lay on the roof, his breathing easy. He was looking up at the sky. And smiling.

“Had enough?”

The man turned toward him and showed his teeth. They were yellowed and straight but despite all that he had been through there was still not a drop of blood on the man.

The sight of the man, disheveled but unbeaten made Grayson pause before putting his hands out and pulling him off the roof.

As he did that, the man let out a cough. “What took you so long?”

When the man was on the ground again, Grayson looked the man over. He pulled the rear door open again and pushed the man toward the opening. Only then did he see the chain holding the cuffs together at the man’s ankles was stretched as if put under enormous pressure.

Grayson pushed the man’s head down and forced him into the car. When he was finally in, he slammed the door closed. Only then, did he take time to exhale.

He pulled his keys from the ignition, closed the door and locked the car. He knew the man could not have gotten into the front seat to drive away, but he also knew the man could not walk away with a set of handcuffs around his ankles.

He took a minute to get his adrenaline under control and walked around the car.

There was a body-shaped dent on the brush guard in the front, the starred windshield, and the dented roof. The light bar hung slightly askew but looked as though the wires were still intact.

He could still feel the tight grip around his chest that had lifted him up and thrown him down. But he felt confident that the man was staying put now.

Now, and only now, did he lean his head over and press the shoulder mic calling this in.

“Grayson here. I’m on my way with a perp. Have a room ready.”

He received his acknowledgement and pulled the door open again.

The past few weeks had been quite unsettling and now he felt as though things were turning around.

He put the car into drive and wound his way out of the housing development.

\*\*When he finally gets him in the car, the man stares into the mirror at Grayson. No matter where he looks he cannot break eye contact.

He is placed in a lineup and Rusty is asked to identify him. When he is there, the man talks to Rusty, calling out his name and threatens him. But Rusty is unperturbed and points out the man.

The newspaper leaks that there may be two killers in the jail and it seems like nothing is going to be done. There is a riot type situation on their hands.

Mayor Wilson calls a town hall meeting, the courthouse is there and some of the holding cells. These are burned. During the meeting a fight breaks out. In the fight, someone throws a Molotov cocktail through the window and burns the place.

The paper runs the story, shows pictures of the man.

He is convicted by the media. People show up to his arraignment and do a protest type thing, there are people with picket signs and the police have to be out there to hold things back.

People want answers from the mayor, they want answers from the town.

Things have been going downhill.

They want to know if the mayor is going to do something even though the new candidate is gone.

Wilson slammed the newspaper down onto his desk and knocked over his pen holder. The dried out pens clattered to the floor and rolled away. He didn’t care.

The front page of the paper showed the man that had been accused of a few recent murders, it also showed a picture of Wilson sitting at his desk near the window, reading a book, inciting that he did not care.

Wilson couldn’t remember the last time he had read a book in the office, the picture must be pretty old. If it weren’t for the disappearance of his opponent and once again running unopposed, there would be nothing holding him in the job.

He had run out of options, it was time to speak out and tell the truth.

Wilson pressed the intercom button on his desk. “Peggy?”

“Yes sir?”

“Can you schedule a town meeting for later in the week?” He released the button and stared down at the intercom waiting for a response.

The door to his office opened. Peggy stepped inside and closed the door behind her. She held a pad of paper in hand and pen. “Tell me what you want to say.”

“I just need to address the things that have been going on.” He pointed down at the paper. “And I need to do a little damage control.”

The night of the town hall came, and fast. The days before had flown by and Wilson found himself pacing back and forth in his office before heading across the street to the Town Hall building.

As he moved through the office from the back to the front it seemed as though he were emerging from a tunnel into a stadium full of people. The cacophony of voices grew as he emerged from the front door.

There were people everywhere. This wasn’t supposed to be the case as the approaching fall had sent most of the town away. It was as though people that lived here through the summer had shown up to protest.

Signs on picket stick were held by a few people. Some read slogans about how the town was no longer safe. Others wanted justice for this person or that. Not a single person there looked pleased to be there.

Anger permeated the air and seeped into the pores of everyone standing around. One man turned at the sound of another and accidentally, although the hit was timed just right, smacked another man in the back of the head with his sign.

The sign holder ignored the bump but bald man who had his had knocked off did not. He turned and shoved the man holding the sign.

This in turn knocked a woman down. She had been holding a paper cup from a fast food restaurant and spilled it on a man standing by, watching the action.

The man went from innocent bystander to in the thick of things. He couldn’t hear everything that was said but Wilson knew that if the man followed through on one of the promised threats, he would be jailed for the rest of his life.

Soda woman didn’t like where this was going and threw the first punch. As she stood over Wet Legs, he rubbed his hand against his jaw and picked up the paper cup and threw it at Soda Woman.

A brawl broke out and ended with metal trashcans being thrown through shop windows, people walking over broken glass to steal garden supplies and a flaming bottle was thrown through the first floor window of the courthouse.

The police had a very difficult time breaking through the crowd to allow the firemen to do their jobs but they were able to douse the blaze before much of the courthouse was burnt.

Make the man in jail in the following passage Greg.

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The man wiped the spit from his eye and shuffled into the precinct doors. There was a small collection of journalists, each pushing the other out of the way to get a photograph or a statement. Their voices came as one cacophonous outburst of questions which were ignored by the officer leading the man and the various attorneys after pushing through the mash of people outside the precinct.

As the doors swung closed, the clamor of voices from outside shrank to a low-sounding murmur. A single stone flew through the air and pinged off the metal crossbars of the door.

Judge Markum had been brought into the jail to preside over a small hearing because of the damage done to the courthouse. He pushed through the crowd also and then similarly ignored the reporter’s questions. He did pause and look toward a few cameras before entering the ready room but other than that, offered no statement.

The hearing included an appointed lawyer, who looked completely out of place with his mismatched jacket and slacks, and the District Attorney, in his impeccably matched dark blue suit.

The man was escorted into the precinct’s ready room and lead to a chair away from the row of windows along the wall. Even though there were trees and a low fence separating the windows from the crowd outside, the man was still accorded a modicum of safety by not being placed in harm’s way by being visible in the windows.

He sat down at the proffered table, his clasped hands resting on the brown surface. He wore a slight smile and vacant eyes. His eyes showed he didn’t know where he was or why he was here, the smile showed that he knew this was a farce but was going along with it simply to see what happened next.

When the judge walked in the appointed lawyer stood then put his hand on his client’s shoulder. The man jerked away at the touch and stood, but slightly away from the attorney as if he had rolled in manure before coming into the office.

The judge, also looking out of place because he did not have his robes on, sat at a table at the front of the ready room. His flannel shirt stood out against the white wall behind him. His jeans and sneakers made the outfit look as if Markum were a stand-in for an absent judge.

As the judge sat, the rest of the audience, save the man, sat in their seats. The judge, looked through the file sitting on the table before him. He was reading the charges, further familiarizing himself with the case.

A slight murmur from the crowd of police officers made the judge look up and see the man standing while everyone else in the room was seated. He cleared his throat.

“Is there a reason you are still standing?”

The man stared ahead, passed the judge, at a map of Lake Grand Vista attached to the wall. The map had pushpins in it marking the spots where people had disappeared or their bodies had been found.

“Did you hear me? Counsel, I suggested you get control of your client. I don’t have time for this. As you can see, I was enjoying some time away and now I have to be here.”

The man continued to stare and stand. Finally, his attorney stood and put his hand on his client’s shoulder. The man once again jerked away.

The attorney said, “Come on. Sit down. We will get this part over with.”

The man turned and stared directly into the attorney’s eyes. His eyes grew large and the pupils dilated. His lips moved but no one, not even the attorney who still stared fixedly at the man said anything.

The attorney nodded slightly as if agreeing to something under hypnotism and sat down.

Then, as the judge was motioning toward one of the officers seated nearby to intervene, the man slowly sank to his seat. He put his shackled hands on the table again and leaned forward. He said, “I’m ready to begin now.”

This time, the judge stood. He put his hand out accusingly at the man. “You should not presume to be in charge here. This may not be my courtroom but because of the circumstances, you will act as if this is my courtroom. I am in charge.”

The smile grew and touched the man’s eyes. “You are welcome to believe that.”

The judges face grew redder than the flannel shirt he wore. “Counselor, I suggest you reign in your client.”

“Judge, I suggest you reign in your temper before your heart bursts.”

As if pain could follow the word, the judge clasped his hand over his heart. His eyes grew large, he gasped for breath. Then spit out a lungful of air. He coughed then drank from a glass of water that had been sitting on the edge of the table. The ice in the glass tinkled against the side of the cup as his hands shook.

The judge put the glass back on the table. “Excuse me. I seem to be coming down with something.” His face showed something completely different but then he switched gears. “Okay. Let’s begin.” He shuffled through the papers on the table, trying to make a show that nothing had really happened. He could try to convince himself of that, but everyone saw what had happened.

The District attorney stood and said, “Judge. I don’t think we really need this hearing except to get the next portion started. The state requests no bail and a quick trial.”

At that statement the judge faced the defendants table. The man still stared ahead, the slight smile across his face. The appointed attorney had the same looks on his face as if he were a dog and had wet the new carpet.

The judge exhaled and looked over at the appointed attorney. He cleared his throat. “Do you wish to speak on your client’s behalf?”

The attorney shook his head then looked over at his client. The man also shook his head and then looked at the judge. “I can speak for myself. But I mostly speak for him.”

Judge Markum furrowed his brow and brought a hand to his bearded chin. “And who is that?”

“I speak for him who owns this town. Him who runs everything.”

The judge then looked back toward the appointed attorney. “In light of these statements do you wish to plead any case?”

The attorney shook his head once more. “Not even insanity judge.”

The judge looked around the room. The faces of the officers present showed victory tinged with a bit of fear. Their faces showed through the smiles and raised eyebrows that this case would be open and shut and they could get back to enjoying the peace that came with working this far north.

Both attorney’s stood and the court appointed attorney made a motion for his client to stand. This time, the man capitulated and stood.

“In light of this, I set the hearing for a month from now to give the state time to prepare their case and for the appointed attorney time to graduate law school and learn how to control his client.”

The judge rose from his seat and turned toward the door. On his way out, he turned to Chief Grayson, his arm in a sling and the stitches across his face, puffy and red, and said, “Now. So I can enjoy my vacation, I would appreciate some peace. Any objections to that?”

Grayson shook his head and held the door for the judge. The small crowd outside erupted in questions and statements. Flash bulbs lit the waiting room. When the doors swung shut, the officers seated about in the ready room began milling about.

An officer, about the size of a linebacker if he had eaten an interior lineman, stepped forward and put his hand out before the man, showing him the way to his cell.

Again, the man capitulated and stepped out into the open. The officer, using his better judgement did not shove the man forward. He had seen, coincidence or not, what had happened with the judge. He didn’t want to be next. He was only there for the show of muscle.

He stepped around the man, holding doors and holding back the small crowd of reporters that, when the doors swung open, left the judge, who was actually answering a few questions this time, standing there without anyone to talk to.

The muscle-bound officer put his arms up and held the crowd back as the man shuffled back toward the holding cells. His orange jumpsuit stood contrast to the earth tones of the police station.

When the doors to the holding cell area closed the reporters let out a collective sigh of disappointment and turned back to where the judge had been but he was gone.

They then turned toward the ready room doors where a cry of joy rose from the men inside. It sounded as if their favorite team had won the championship and they were celebrating with them.

The reporters looked about then pushed into the room and began interviewing whomever would talk.

Inside the holding cell, the man shuffled to his appointed cell. Unlike other prisoners, he was alone in his cell. The chief had thought it wise to keep him in segregation.

When the door was slammed behind him and the lock was checked, the officer said, “Bring your hands over here, put them through this slot.

The man obeyed and his shackles were released. He rubbed at his wrist then went to the small, barred window and rested his arm against the wall. He looked out into the late afternoon.

It wasn’t until about an hour and a half later that Mayor Wilson showed up. He had passed by the police station a few times and had seen the large crowd outside. He didn’t know how they would react to his being there, but he knew it wouldn’t be entirely positive.

Sure, he’d brought the man to justice, but at what cost? When the crowd was gone, he finally pulled up to the front of the station and went inside.

The officer behind the counter looked up then stood. He turned and immediately told the Chief that the Mayor was here.

The Mayor walked back to the Chief’s office, said a few words then went to the holding cells.

He sat in the holding cell area, alone, for almost an hour, then he came out. “Someone get that man something to eat. I’ll be back in a little bit. He and I have one more thing to discuss.

The mayor went out to his car and drove to the Bluebird Diner. He ordered a cinnamon roll, coffee, and a couple of eggs, scrambled. The coffee energized his mind and made the conversation that he and the man shared seem surreal. There was much to think about.

He chewed the eggs and roll without tasting much and drank the coffee, cup by cup, without noticing much but the warmth. The man was going to keep his promise. Wilson smiled and slid the empty cup across the table and indicated to Irene that he wanted the check.

Instead of heading back to the station, he took the long way back by way of the mountain road that overlooked this corner of the lake. He stopped at an overlook and got out of the car.

He looked down on the town, the night was clear enough and the wind cooperative enough that he could see the streetlight change from red to green and cycle through. A truck waited at the corner and sped through the red light when they were sure no one was watching.

The town was peaceful and it always deserved to be such. Sure, things had gone terribly the past few weeks. Part of it was his fault. He had not taken charge and allowed the old guard to run things behind the scenes. No more.

He stepped up to a picnic table and instead of sitting on the bench seat, he sat on the table and rested his feet on the bench. The moon peaked from behind a cloud.

In the darkening evening, the dark waters sat smooth across the face of the lake. Only a small ripple from the wind stirred the surface. Out, on the other side, he could see the Lake Grand Vista ferry lit up but moored and he could imagine the small party aboard just getting started.

From this vantage, he could not see the hurting citizens, he could not hear the wails of families that had lost loved ones to the scourge that had settled on this peaceful town. He could only see the quiet lanes and feel the need to make everything right in his town flow through his veins.

He smoothed his hair back and patted his thighs as he stood. It was time to get moving. Time to set this thing back upright.

It was time to talk to the man.

As he drove down the mountain pass, the music in his car seemed a little sweeter now that an answer was coming. He rolled down the window and let the cool air swirl around the car. A receipt from a gas station danced in the eddy of air.

When he stopped in front of the station, the bright lights of the parking lot and the building seemed to break his enjoyment of the night. This was harshness. He did not let it ruin his resolve though. He paused, listened to the crickets as they sang in the night and then pushed through the front door. The white lights were bright and stale above the desks.

The sharp contrast to the ease of nature and the strict lines of the office setting was almost saddening. The officer at the desk stood when the mayor pushed through the doors and once again disappeared into the Chief’s office.

This time, the mayor strolled by the chief’s office and into the holding cells. He could smell the aroma of fried chicken and something else, something earthy. He wasn’t sure what, but as he came around the corner, he saw that the man had gnawed the chicken to the bone and was eating a dish of a leafy green concoction.

The man looked up as the mayor approached and smiled. He had a large square of dark green embedded in between his two front teeth. He took one more overflowing spoonful and shoved it into his mouth.

“Welcome back,” he said, the leafy greens misting out of his mouth as he talked. “I knew I’d see you again.”

At that, the mayor nodded. “I said I’d come back.”

The man pointed his spoon at the mayor. “Yes. You said you would but that doesn’t mean you actually would. Actions and words, mayor.”

“Yeah. I know the saying. So what do you have for me?” He looked down at the other cells. They were mostly empty except for a man sitting on a cot a few cells down. He was staring at the man as he ate.

The man followed the mayor’s gaze and then looked back at the mayor. “Don’t worry about him. He won’t repeat what’s said here.”

“And why,” he started in a regular addressing voice then lowered his voice. “And why would it matter if anyone heard?”

“Because no one wants to be the one to admit to making a deal with the devil.” He laughed. “So to speak.” He turned toward the man staring at him, “Isn’t that right?”

The man three cells down slumped forward and then collapsed onto the floor. The mayor stopped and took a step toward the cell.

The man put his hand up. “No need. He just went to sleep.”

The mayor still took a tentative step down the corridor but at his first step, the man let out a snort showing he was indeed alive.

“If you want to make a deal, do it now. Do not take another step forward.”

He found a metal folding chair leaning against a wall and lowered the seat. Then he sat down, scooted a little away from the bars and looked directly at the man who was still shoveling piles of greens into his mouth. “So, speak.”

The man’s eyes went large and danced in a playful manner. “What am I, a dog?” He barked.

“No. You told me you would help me fix the town. I’m ready.”

The man leaned into the bars and stuck his arm through. “Shake my hand now. Tell me you will do what I ask.”

Wilson looked at the offered hand. The calloused palm showed that much work had been done with these hands. A black line of dirt was caked under the nail. “What if I don’t like the prospects?”

“I’ve said I will make this town better, and I promise. It will happen. You have to trust.”

“You have not shown me any reason to trust you. You killed a lot of people.”

The man shook his head back and forth and wiggled his hand. “I killed no one. Are we going to shake?”

When the mayor stood, the metal folding chair scraped against the concrete floor. He took one step forward and grasped the man’s hand. “For the town.”

The man nodded. “For the town. You know. I’ve always like this place. Back in my old life, I came here with my wife quite often.” He went silent and stared off into the distance for a moment. Then he smiled, showing the yellowing teeth in the back with his wide grin. “My. How things change.”

Wilson tried to let go, the hand was cold and clammy, as if he were shaking the hand of a cooling corpse. The man gripped harder.

“What do we do now?” The mayor looked down at his hand, the fingertips were going red.

“Now you trust me. That is all.”

“But you haven’t given me anything.”

“And I never will. But the one I serve has power and he will help you. First, there will be no more killings. Second, the town will have a revival of sorts. When spring opens, you won’t be able to beat them away.”

It was then that the man released the mayor’s hand and he was able to sink back into the metal folding chair. He adjusted his shirt and tie as he sat. “And how can you promise this?”

“As I said, the one I serve has power.”

“How will I know you’ve kept up your end of the bargain?”

“You will notice a change when you go outside. It won’t be so cold. The air will feel lighter.”

“So, a feeling? That’s it?”

“For right now. Where’s your faith?”

Wilson removed a piece of yellow paper from his pocket and unfolded it. It was one of the old notes that he must have forgotten to throw out. He looked on both sides, but the paper was empty. He sighed. “What do I have to do? Besides believe, I mean.”

“No need for sarcasm, mayor. Right now, you don’t have to do anything. Things are already in motion. Since you’ve agreed to the terms, that is.”

A thousand questions were flowing through the mayor’s mind. He couldn’t think of any of the questions to verbalize. This was too easy and easy was never good. The only question that paused long enough for him to ask it was, “What about the election?”

“You’ve already won.”

“It isn’t for two weeks.”

“And you’ve already won. Congratulations mayor.” The man laughed and then went back to the barred window and stared up at the sky. “We will be in touch.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

But the man didn’t turn and didn’t say anything. He stood at the window, his hands in the pockets of the orange jumpsuit.

The mayor stared at the man’s back for a few minutes then, when the man didn’t move or acknowledge that he was there, the mayor folded the chair, leaned it against the wall, and turned to walk down the hall.

He pushed through the door and things were getting back to normal. There were phones ringing and people talking. As he walked out, Chief Grayson didn’t step out to talk to him and that was just as well. The man had been through enough and Wilson didn’t want to tell him anything.

An officer walked pasted Wilson, he was headed toward the holding cell. Wilson went outside, climbed into his car. He did feel a little lighter. The air was just a little warmer. He leaned forward and looked up at the bright moon. Tonight, there was a slightly reddish orange tint that came to the moon this time of year.

Before he could stop the car, the officer that had gone into the holding cells as the mayor was leaving was running out to the parking lot. He ran next to the car and banged on the window for the mayor to stop. He rolled the window down. “What is it?”

“Sir? Where is he?”

“Where’s who?”

Wilson saw the man’s Adam’s apple bob up and down. “The prisoner, sir.”

Wilson pulled the key out of the ignition and then pushed the door open. He followed the officer back inside. “He was in the cell when I left just a minute ago.”

The officer held the door open and Wilson walked through. When he came to the cell where the man had been, the only thing left was an orange jumpsuit in a pile on the floor. Wilson walked back and forth in front of the cell, trying to get a better angle when the officer opened the door and went inside. He picked up the jumpsuit and looked around.

That was when they saw the man a few cells down. He was up against the railing but he wasn’t standing, only leaning. His eyes were vacant, his tongue hung out, and a red slash had been cut across his throat.

A warm breeze blew though the holding cells and then dissipated. Wilson thought he heard laughter, or something just at the edge of his hearing, but couldn’t confirm it.

In the future. The Lifted Light?

Anna put her tablet down and took a deep breath. Her heart fluttered and her cheeks felt warm. This was really happening, she was in love. The last email was the most heartwarming email she’d ever read.

She didn't want to tell her mom about it, especially since her mom did not approve of her finding love on the Internet. She didn't want to tell her dad about it either, not just because he was mostly absent, but because the times he did choose to be a part of her life, he was overbearing and controlling. He would completely lose his mind if she told him she was in love.

So, she did the only thing that she could. She wrote about it in her journal. She pulled the battered and well-loved book out from under her bed and laid down on top of her comforter. She collected herself and put pen to paper and wrote. Her true feelings flowed from her pen as she poured her heard out through the only outlet that gave her its full attention.

She wrote: I didn't know how I would feel about him in the first place, especially since he contacted me first. But that was what attracted me to him in the first place. He cared about me. He still does. He wants to meet me but I'm scared. I can't believe I'm about to write this but I'm in love. I really am. He validates me in ways that I don't think I've ever felt. This may sound gross, but my dad doesn't even make me feel this way.

I want to be friends with this guy, I want to get to know him even more, I just want to be around him. I think he would be okay with that. He’s never asked me to do anything I shouldn't. He’s too nice for that. I just can’t believe it. He’s just so far away.

There were footsteps on the stairs. She rolled over onto her stomach and tossed the journal under the bed. She didn't want to answer questions about what she was writing and she knew her mom would. She was too nosy.

She also knew her mom. She would come into the room without warning. She grabbed the book on her nightstand and lay back on the pillows. As soon as she opened the book, her door opened. She had to hold back so as not to yell at her mom although she wanted to. Her mom could be so annoying.

“Hey baby, what's going on?”

She couldn't hold back. “I'm reading mom. What does it look like?”

“Excuse me?”

“Mom. Come on.” She rolled her eyes. She knew she was doing it too. This one was on purpose. At that moment she decided she was going. She was going to go to Lake Grand Vista and meet Todd at the first chance she had. Todd was right, she didn't deserve to be treated that way.

“If you still want to go to the movies this weekend you’re going to have to fix your attitude.”

Anna slammed her book shut and dropped it onto the bed. She sat up and took a deep breath then let it out in a long sigh. “I'm sorry mom. What did you want?” She wanted to add, you could at least knock next time, but decided against it.

“I thought we could go out to dinner tonight. I'm tired, I don't feel like cooking.”

You never feel like cooking mom. Maybe that's why I'm so fat. “Like where?”

“I don't know. Do you want to try that new Italian place down the street?”

You already decided. “That place is for kids. What about the Chinese place?”

Anna’s mom thought for a few beats then shook her head. “I had Chinese for lunch a couple of days ago. Maybe we can go there next weekend for your birthday. Besides no one is too old for video games.”

Anna smiled, the corner of her mouth moving upward but not far enough to register. “Maybe. I don't know if that's birthday worthy.”

Her mom clenched her fists and stepped down hard. “It’s good enough for now but not for your birthday?”

“Mom, I don't know. I just don't feel like Italian tonight. And I don’t want to play video games.”

“Fine, we don't have to go. Or you don't. I’ll play Pacman alone. There’s bread on the countertop.” She turned to leave, walking slowly back to the stairs.

Anna didn't want to, but she knew this part of the game too much. “Okay mom. Italian it is.”

Her mom stopped and turned back toward Anna’s bright room. Anna knew this part was coming too. She could almost repeat it from memory. “Are you sure? I was just thinking that we don't have to go for Italian. I mean, I could throw something together.”

“But who wants to do dishes?”

“Exactly.” Her mom’s smile grew large across her face. “It's like we think alike sometimes.”

Anna nodded, conceding the point because they did think alike when they were always having the same conversations. “It sure is.”

“Just give me a few minutes so I can change clothes. I don't want to go out like this.” She gestured to her clothes.

“You look great mom. You know you do.”

Anna’s mom put her hand to her hair. “At least I could freshen up.”

“Okay.” Her mom stepped out of the room again.

“Are you going to wear that?”

Anna looked down at her clothes, she didn’t see anything wrong with her outfit. Then pushed herself off the bed. “I guess not.” She pushed the door closed and changed.

When they pulled into the restaurant parking lot Anna saw two of her classmates, not close enough to be friends, milling about in the front of the restaurant. They were far too overdressed to be out casually and none of them were with their parents.

Anna turned to her mom and looked at her over the rim of her glasses. “What are Sharon and Erica doing here mom?”

Anna’s mom smiled and turned toward her. “I don’t know.”

They pushed out of the car and Anna walked slowly toward the front door. Anna didn’t look at Sharon or Erica, and they didn’t look back at her. When they got inside, there were even more of her classmates sitting in booths scattered throughout the dining room.

When they finally got to their seat, Anna turned to her mom. “Do you know anything about this?”

She smiled again then said, “Nothing.”

“If this is a surprise party, the least you could have done is invite some of my friends.”

Anna’s mother couldn’t hold her wide smile any longer. “Okay. You got me.” She stood up, put her hands in the air and yelled, “Surprise!”

A small handful of the kids from her school clapped but then went about eating or talking. A few of the kids walked by and wished Anna a happy birthday, a couple of them dropped cards on the table in front of Anna and went back to their group of friends.

Anna’s mom was so caught up in the supposed festivities that she did not see the sneer of anger that slowly took root on Anna’s face.

When she finally turned toward her daughter, she frowned. “What’s with the sad face?”

“This is not my party mom. None of these kids know me. Not really.”

Anna’s mom threw her balled-up cloth napkin onto the table and crossed her arms. “Well, excuse me for trying. This was supposed to be a surprise for you, something special to help you fit in. I guess we’ll just go.”

Anna crossed her arms across her chest. She wasn’t falling for this thing again. “But we haven’t even eaten yet.”

“And who needs to? Your attitude has made me lose my appetite.” She scooted toward the edge of the bench.

Anna stood up and pointed toward the row of video games. “Do you have a quarter?”

“I thought the games were for kids.”

Her response, though controlled, was quick. “I thought you wanted to play Pacman.”

Anna’s mom smiled wide, both rows of teeth showed, and then went through her purse. “In fact, I have two quarters. We can both play.”

Anna did her best to beat her mom as they played. This evening’s display had been far too much to handle. Her mom, scheduling a surprise birthday party at a video game pizza place for her and what her mom assumed were her friends was an egregious example of how much her mom really cared about her.

Anna thought of this as she played. It was settled, when they got home tonight, she would feign exhaustion then head upstairs to bed. She would pack a few things in her suitcase and when her mom went upstairs to bed, she would slip downstairs and head to Lake Grand Vista.

She was excited about the prospects of finally meeting Brad. It would just be for the weekend, but it was a start. She might even look at the high school there in town so she could think about transferring.

With newfound XX she played with gusto and hope. As they played, she planned and as the plans seemed to become more real, she won.

By the end of the night, she was actually smile. Despite the party, if it could be called that, there wasn’t even a cake, her spirits were lifted.

When they got into the car, Anna thumbed through the small stack of birthday cards and looked to her mom. She felt close to her after spending the evening beating each other at a video game and she was about to tell her mom about her love.

“I can’t believe you did this mom.” Her tone was neutral. She decided she wouldn’t be angry for the birthday party. Yeah, it wasn’t her idea of fun. Sure, none of her friends were there, not like she had any real friends. But her mom tried. “This must have cost you a ton of money.”

“No. Not too much. I didn’t have to rent the place out.”

“Yeah. What about the food?”

Her mom changed lanes without needing to and pulled into the center turn lane. She slowed, and turned the blinker on. They were heading to an ice cream place. At least that’s what it looked like. Anna clinched her jaw. She didn’t want an ice cream cone. She didn’t like cones. She just wanted a piece of strawberry cake and a scoop of Rocky Road. None of that would be here.

“It wasn’t too expensive. Pizzas are cheap there. We spent, what? Two dollars on video games?”

“There must have been at least ten pizzas. And all those drinks.”

She pressed the gas a little too hard because she had misjudged the space between cars and had to get into the parking lot. “What are you talking about? We only got one.”

“What about all the other kids at the party?”

They parked. “What about them?” Her mom pushed the door open and stepped out then slammed the door.

Anna fought with her jacket and seatbelt and got out. “You did pay for them right?”

“And why would I? You know, not one of them said ‘thank you’ to me.”

Anna slammed her door, hard. The car rocked slightly. “You didn’t pay for them?”

“What kind of ice cream are you going to get?”

“Mom. Tell me you’re joking. You invited them to a party. You should have paid.”

“I never said I would.”

Anna could imagine school on Monday, going through the halls, being called cheap or something worse. “Oh mom. Thanks. You’ve made the rest of the school year, maybe even until I graduate, the worst time ever.”

Anna’s mom pulled the door open, the cool air from inside blew her hair back. “Don’t be so dramatic.” She let the door close behind her and walked directly up to the counter.

Anna stood outside, watching her mom talk to the boy behind the counter. Her mom laughing and smiling. It was almost like flirting.

She pulled the car door open and plopped down on the passenger seat. She clipped her seatbelt and crossed her arms across her chest.

Not once did her mom turn to see where Anna was. She didn’t even look as if she noticed she wasn’t there. She got her ice cream cone then ordered something in a cup which was handed to her a little later with a glance toward the waiting car. Anna thought she saw a lingering touch when her mom took the cup but wouldn’t ask. She didn’t care.

When her mom got back to the car she opened the door, climbed in, and slammed the door. “You are so embarrassing. I had to tell that boy you were sick and couldn’t come in.”

“You said I was sick?”

“Yeah, and that chocolate ice cream would do you good.”

Anna rolled her eyes then her eyes widened. “You told him I was on my period? Mom.”

“Well, I didn’t want him to think all this was for me.” She handed Anna the cup. “Here. This is your favorite.”

Anna opened the lid. A chocolate milkshake. Typical. She snapped the lid back into place and pushed the straw back in and held it in her lap.

By now, her mom had started the car and they were making their way back into traffic. “You could say ‘thank you.’”

“For what? A horrible evening?”

“If you don’t want that milkshake, then give it to me.” She rolled down her window and grabbed for it.

“Are you going to throw that out?”

“I don’t want it going to my hips. Or yours. Give it to me.”

They wrestled over the cup for a little while and then Anna’s mom leaned over and grabbed for the cup with a little more gusto. The car swerved into oncoming traffic and Anna’s mom had to let go of the cup to control the car.

“Fine. Here.” Anna said and threw the cup at her mom.

Glancing down, her mom screeched but caught it before much poured onto the carpet. She threw the cup out the window. “It’s a good thing that cup was plastic.”

“And mom. For the record. My favorite is Rocky Road.”

“Do you see what you made me do? I’m a litterbug now. You’re paying for the car to be cleaned out.”

Anna mumbled under her breath and her mom stewed under hers. Neither spoke to the other until Anna’s mom said goodnight.

Anna lay in bed, her small night table lamp brightened only a small section of the room. The colorful scene on the shade sent blues and greens across the wall behind the lamp. She listened to the television and the occasional footsteps downstairs as her mom moved about the house.

It was getting late but Anna knew her mom would head to bed soon. Based on the argument earlier, there was a good chance that her mom would come check on her. Anna lay fully-clothed, except for her sweatshirt, under the blanket. She had on a tank top that could be mistaken for nightwear.

She lay there, her legs sweating because of her jeans, waiting for her mom to stop by and kiss her goodnight. She was always sweetest when there was a big blowup. The only issue was that her mom would ignore that anything happened.

There were footsteps on the stairs. The tread sounded light, so she was heading into Anna’s room. She always stepped quietly when she wanted to sneak in to check on her. Just one more thing that was driving her away.

Anna closed her eyes as the footsteps drew nearer. She slowed her breathing and when the door opened with a slight creak, Anna rolled over onto her side, away from the door.

It was coming soon.

There were three steps to the far side of the bed from the door, then her mom sat down on the bed. She put her hand on Anna’s shoulder, Anna didn't move.

“Baby. I’m sorry about today. I just wanted you to have some more friends. You spend too much time in here, alone.”

Anna felt an urge in her stomach to roll over, tell her mom she was in love, and that she was going to meet him this weekend. But that would only start another fight and her mom would probably throw her keys into the trees behind the house again so Anna couldn't leave.

Then, her mom leaned over, kissed her on the cheek, and then reached over her to turn the lamp off. A moment later, the door creaked shut and Anna listened for the receding steps as her mom went into her room.

When the shower came on Anna sat up, pulled her sweatshirt on, and grabbed her weekend suitcase. She was in the car at the street before she even thought about the noise it would make. Sometimes when the car was started cold, the belt would squeal. Anna had told her mom about the belt multiple times, but her mom had just ignored her.

She put the key into the ignition and turned it one click. Then she engaged the shifter into neutral and let the car roll forward down the slight hill the house was on.

When she was a sufficient distance away from the house, two or three houses down, she braked then turned the key over the rest of the way. The car coughed to life and the squeal, although noticeable, was not as loud as it could have been.

As she exited the neighborhood and got onto the main streets, she turned up the radio. The song “Freedom” by George Michael came on. It was too perfect for the situation and as a good writer, she recognized the cliché and changed the station. The Doors came on next with the song, “The End” and Anna turned it up.

\*

Mayor Wilson, a little older now, was still not used to the email communication. Even though he’d been talking to the young people through email and other means of communication for the past few years, he still felt clunky in the experience.

He pressed send on the latest email hoping he wouldn’t have to write one for a long while. The years of grooming and coaxing had turned his formally smiling face in a wrinkled expanse of crags and deep valleys.

He stared down at the picture of his wife. Taken many years ago, the picture showed its age. Her hair, now long and flowy, was kept in tight curls of a Permanent. The flowery dress, so light and flowing when she originally bought it, now looked boxy and far too stiff with the pronounced shoulder pads.

This photo was one of the last he had of his wife. He exhaled and ran his hand through his thinning hair. The last few years had taken a toll on his hairline too.

The desk sat cluttered with papers and unorganized office supplies. There was a cup of pens at the corner of his desk that no longer held just pens but paperclips, scissors, and a granola bar probably a year passed its best by date.

He pushed himself up from the desk and left the office. His secretary had left the office hours ago when the sun was setting. She’d asked him if he needed anything from the corner market for dinner but he declined.

These late evenings were always hard. The office was quiet, and shadowy. Each corner could hold anything. And sometimes it did. There were times when darkness would descend upon the town and he would see the eyes watching from the corner. He would ignore them, never drawing attention to them. But he knew they were looking.

He walked out to his car and started it. He would make a report, then head home to his empty house.

As he drove, the few miles passed as the trees grew thicker. Then he came upon the turnoff. He checked for a tail again, saw none, then pulled off the road and stopped before a chain across the road.

He got out, the warmth of summer was still heavy in the night, and unlocked the chain. The old and rusted no trespassing sign would need to be replaced soon. He made a mental note as he got back into the car and pulled into the dark overhang of trees.

He stopped, stepped out onto the dry grass (it was always dry on this side of the chain) and relocked the gate. His headlights shone faintly ahead, only seeming to work at half-power in the dark of these woods.

He took one more breath, he could smell the woods and trees and that underlying smell as if a fire had passed through here recently.

With the road behind still clear, he drove down the rutted lane toward the dead end. There were sometimes old tires and the leavings of a fire at the end of the road. Many times beer bottles and cans littered the ground. But tonight, the area was clear.

When he got out, he could tell why. A heaviness settled over his shoulders that felt like he had a rucksack full of gear on his back.

He worked through the urges to leave, to run screaming through the woods, that he always felt when he came to this site. He pressed forward.

The path he took was not marked in any way. The pine needles and leaves lay strewn about the ground, with branches and twigs littering the path.

The night was no longer loud with crickets and singing night birds. It never was here. Things were always silent. There may be the occasional howl of a coyote or a call from a wolf, but generally animals stayed away from here.

Unless he called them.

Wilson walked further down the path and came to the rock outcrop that looked as though it led straight to the edge of a cliff. He pressed against the rock wall and then came to the gray metal door.

He knocked one time, waited three seconds, then knocked again. He inserted the key into the metal lock and twisted it. Then without any protest, the lock snicked open and the door swung in.

He took his last breath of fresh air before heading inside, swallowed hard, then stepped over the threshold.

Inside the dark chamber, the air was hot and carried the smell of a dog kennel that had not been cleaned in years. He pushed the door closed but did not lock it. He did not trust the creature in here despite their years-long partnership and agreement.

Despite there being no lights in the chamber, the room always carried a low, reddish, orange glow.

From the front of the room he could not see into the darkened corners of the room but he knew the man stood there and waited for him to announce his presence.

The man, the herald of the monster, would always be there, waiting. The man would wait in the dark, watch, take notes, learn and then use that information for his own gain.

In a way, Wilson feared the man more than the monster. He had an agreement with the monster, the man was only an add on. The bonus that was not asked for.

Wilson pressed forward and then suddenly, from a dark corner, the man appeared. “Welcome Wilson.”

Wilson did not turn toward the man as he emerged from the darkness. The man smiled as if he loved slipping into the room and frightening whomever entered.

“Where is he?”

“In the throne room.”

Wilson shivered at the mention. He had only been in the throne room twice before and swore never to go in again. The room stood in dark contrast to anything he had ever been near. The room had an odor of rotted meat and burning hair.

The first time he had gone in there was not by design. He had done something to anger the man and the man had come at him with a knife. Wilson had retreated, as he had been doing since he met the thing, and fell into the throne room.

The things he saw in there would never leave his mind. There were screams of pain and terror. While in there, he felt his life force being drained. His soul was infected with hate.

The second time, he’d had no choice. He had come to plead for the town again. And plead for the life of his wife. But that was long ago. He had matured and desensitized since then. That didn't mean he wanted to in there though.

Wilson walked toward the large, ornately carved, wooden door and knocked three times. There was not a code that was agreed upon, but it was the same cadence that the man had always used.

The door creaked open and the darkness mingled with the light like fog dissipating on a warming morning. Wilson stepped away, afraid the darkness would reach out and grab him. “What do you have to report?” Choshek’s voice from inside the room grated against Wilson’s ears like rocks being ground into a fine powder.

“There is a girl coming to see you.” Wilson’s voice, on the other hand, was weak and almost tinny.

“Good. When will she be here?”

“I don’t know. The girl has told me a few different times. But this one-”

Choshek’s booming voice broke through. “Then how do you know she is coming?”

“I. Well. She said that she was leaving tonight.”

The door creaked open a little more and some of the meager red light from the antechamber shone in. The light did not brighten much but Wilson could see the floor of the chamber clearly. Cracks lined the ground giving the terrain and uneven look. There were many that had entered the chamber only to be tripped up by the fissures and fall face down into the ground.

Choshek did not allow anyone prostrate before him to last long. He was usually on their body and devouring before they had a chance to look up. At least that’s how it was when he was particularly ravenous.

“You will report to me when she is here.”

Wilson nodded as he retreated further from the opening door. Choshek rarely crossed the threshold according to the agreement but Wilson did not want to chance it.

“I will let you know.”

Then the man was standing at Wilson’s left side. “You will let me know. Then I will let the master know.”

Wilson cringed back from the voice. He turned toward the exit. He put his head down, tiredness coming from his voice. “I will let you know.”

Before he was too far away, he stopped and faced the wooden door once more. The man had his hand upon the knob and was pressing the door closed. He took a deep breath, not wanting to say it but knowing he had to. “Wait. There was one more thing.”

Both the voice of the man and the voice of Choshek spoke at once, the man’s a mere echo of the latter. “Speak.”

“There is one more. I forgot to tell you. A boy. He just reached out. I think he’s a good candidate.”

“Tell me more.” This came from the darkened chamber.

“He’s just old enough to drive. He is interested in a girl he’s been in contact with.”

“Good.”

“He’s eager to meet. He’s liked the pictures.” The pictures were some that Wilson had used before. They were of a girl that had come to Choshek years ago but had supplied some pictures as a way of tempting the person Wilson pretended to be.

“Good.”

Wilson could almost hear Choshek’s mouth watering, if he did have a true mouth.

Choshek’s voice was closer, somehow inside Wilson’s head. He’d experienced this before but it still unsettled him. “Tell me. When will he be here?”

“I don’t know. The kids these days. They say one thing, then don’t follow through.”

Suddenly a great weight pushed Wilson to the ground. “More excuses?”

He pushed up on his elbows and backed toward the metal door. “No.”

“Then what?”

Wilson tried a different approach. “He’ll be here.”

“Even if you have to retrieve him.”

Wilson rolled onto his stomach and pushed himself back up. “Yes.” He brushed the soil from his clothes.

Retrieval was difficult. Not because he would have to go to another town and pull a kid off the street. No, it was difficult because the man would travel with him. The man, who had been given a small slice of Choshek’s influence in some bargain unknown to Wilson, would be the one to coax the boy into coming. If there was another way, Wilson would use it.

“Good. I expect results. You may go.”

Wilson did not look back but put his hand on the knob and slammed the door shut. Outside in the cool night air, he breathed in deeply. Another piece of him was gone, and more would go, such was the bargain he had struck.

He made his way around to the unmarked path and trudged through the trees toward his car. As he stared the engine, he thought once more what things would be like in Lake Grand Vista if he just hit the gas and slammed through the trees and went over the cliff.

Things would be bad and like it or not, this was his town. He was keeping it safe. He made his way back to the gate, repeated the motions of unlocking and relocking and drove down the road back toward his house.

The sun was hours away from rising and by the time Wilson got home, he was tired enough to accidentally leave the car running in the garage but he didn’t. Instead he turned the car off, lowered the garage door, went inside and fell asleep, face down on the couch without changing out of his clothes.

\*

Rusty squinted. The sun stood in the sky directly behind the swing set in the back yard. Sarah giggled as he did it. “Daddy, you’re making that funny face again.”

“I know. The sun is bright today. But I love watching you swing.”

She giggled again. Her long, blond hair flew out behind her. Then she pulled her hands from the chains and leapt out of the seat. In the arc Rusty had just enough time to put his hands up and catch her before she smacked to the ground.

“Oof. You’re getting a little too old for me to catch you.”

She patted him on the back as she hugged him. “Daddy, you’re so strong.”

He squeezed her tight and set her down. He brushed wood shavings from his shirt and sat down at the table again. He adjusted the screen on his laptop and scrolled through his emails.

“Do you have to work today?”

He nodded, then looked down into his daughter’s green eyes. “I do. I’m sorry.” He ruffled her hair.

She put her hands on her hips and said, “Then I’ll go to work too.” She turned and ran toward the sandbox. She dug in the sand with a shovel for a little and Rusty watched her as she lifted the shovel to eye-level and dumped sand back into the box. The wind carried some of the dust away but it was blowing away from her so it didn’t get in her clothes.

Rusty turned back toward his computer and clicked on an email from Crystal. She was away at a conference and would be gone for a few more weeks. Recently, the company she worked for had been part of an acquisition deal and she had to travel to get the other company up to date on their numbers.

She had promised that she wouldn’t be gone for too long but it had already been a week longer than normal. He was getting antsy for her return. He clicked on her most recent email.

Rusty,

I’m sorry I couldn’t talk longer last night. I was dead on my feet and talking wasn’t happening. I have a few minutes before we head into another meeting. It seems like that’s all we do here is have meetings. Anyway, I got word that I’ll be here one week more. Then I’m coming home. I know what you’re thinking and you can stop it. I have my ticket already. I know they can be changed, but I have a departure date.

The flight will be coming in late, so don’t worry about picking me up. Just make sure you’re ready to see me because I’m sure ready to see you and my little jumping bean.

So, I’ll see you next Tuesday. Promise. I’ll call when I get a chance, maybe we can Skype or something.

I love you. I’ll see you soon.

-C.

Rusty took a deep breath. The message in the email was almost identical to the one from a week ago. That one didn’t have the upbeat message about the ticket, but she did mention something about being home soon in that one too.

He shook his head. He wouldn’t believe she was home until she woke him with a kiss on the cheek.

He looked up toward the sandbox. Sarah had dug down to the bottom of the box and had piled all the sand on one side. She wasn’t making imaginary pies or anything like that. She was the foreman of a rock quarry. At least that was her job today.

Some days she would was the head baker. Some days she was a zookeeper. Her imagination was boundless.

She picked up her bulldozer and pushed some sand aside. “Okay you guys. You find any diamonds yet? ‘No, not yet.’” Then she made some more tractor noises.

Rusty came across a question in an email about a client’s contract and the length of time they had agreed to rent. He didn’t have the contract dates entered into his system in the normal places. This was not right. He clicked the files, then the backups and still could not find the numbers. He pounded his fist on the table.

“What’s wrong daddy?”

“Nothing. Just need to take a quick break.”

Rusty went inside but left the French doors open so the cool air could circulate through the house and also so he could keep an eye on Sarah. He pulled the fridge door open and rummaged through the various pitchers of drinks until he found the lemonade.

He poured a glass for himself, then poured some for Sarah. He leaned over the counter and yelled into the back yard. “Hey babygirl? I’ve gotta go upstairs. There’s some lemonade for you on the counter.”

“Okay daddy.”

He headed upstairs, went to the bathroom, then went to his office off the master bedroom. He dug through his papers, looking for a copy of the contract he thought he had brought home to update. The paper was not in his briefcase. He dumped the papers out onto the floor and shifted them into different piles.

He heard singing outside. The voice was sweet and soft. It was also too mature to be Sarah’s. He stopped his search and went to the window. The next-door-neighbor was strolling through her back yard. She was watering plants. It looked like she was still wearing a bathrobe but that didn’t make sense. It was not cold enough to wear that outside.

Rusty realized that the robe was not a robe at all but a light cover-up. The woman put her watering can down and went to a lounge chair in the sun. The soft singing continued as she dropped the cover-up to reveal a red and white bikini. He backed away from the window but did not turn away.

He was not sure how long he stood there, and may have watched all day.

“Daddy? What are you doing?”

Rusty blinked and shook his head. “I was up here looking for a paper.”

“Did you find it?”

He looked down at the papers strewn about the floor. Then, his eyes locked on the name at the top of the contract. “Yes. It’s right here.” He bent over, doing his best not to look out the window.

“What do you need honey?”

“I had to go to the bathroom. I also had to fire my workers.”

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

But he didn’t hear the answer. The woman in the next yard had rolled over and untied her top so she wouldn’t get tan lines. He shook his head. He really missed Crystal.

“Would you do the same thing?”

Without knowing exactly what she was talking about he said, “Yeah. I guess I would. What do you want for lunch?”

\*

Anna pulled into the motel where she was promised a room and had a moment of panic when she was certain this was all a joke on her. She had heard of guys or girls pretending to be someone else and carrying on fake relationships.

The only thing that was on her side with this was that she was so far away from home. Last night, she had slept in her car in the parking lot of a hospital and woke as the sun peaked over the trees skirting the lot.

The next hours were not smooth hours of driving and she was not completely alert because of her terrible sleep but she was getting closer to the person she wanted to spend the rest of her life with.

She had stopped to get gas and decided to turn her cell phone back on. Her mom had called her about fifteen times before Anna decided to turn the phone off completely. She would not talk to her mom. At least not until she was with her man and she could finally show her mom that she was old enough to make her own choices.

When she turned the phone on, her voicemail registered ten messages and she showed 50 missed texts. She scrolled through the text messages as she pumped gas and saw a message from him. He was again begging her to come see him. He would even put her up in a motel.

Anna smiled at that, he didn’t want her to come to his house. She was not some tramp that he would use. No he cared about her and he would find her a place to stay that weekend.

She replied that she was on her way and the hotel would be great. A few minutes later she got a reply with an address.

The promised motel stood before her. She swallowed hard. There was no turning back, at least for this weekend. She looked down at the text stating the reservation was in her name and all she would have to do was go to the counter and get her key.

The glass door was heavy and the lobby, if it could be called that, contained a small, glass-topped table with a two-burner coffee machine and a row of plastic containers of cereal.

The man behind the counter was sitting at a computer off to the side playing solitaire. He looked up as the bells over the door jingled, saw who it was, and then went back to his game.

She walked up to the counter and shifted the strap of her purse. The man looked up again, made one more move, then paused the timer on the game.

“Help you?”

She stood there, staring into his wrinkled face. His gray eyes looked trustworthy. “Yeah. A room for Anna.”

He pushed himself up off the seat and went to a small stack of papers. He thumbed through the papers, shifted one or two aside then pulled out a white piece of paper with writing on it. He slid it across the counter to her and then handed her a pen with the name of the hotel stenciled across the side.

She looked over the bill, as if she knew what she was doing. In reality, she frantically searched for a box that stated paid in full. She didn’t have the money and didn’t have a credit card on which to put the room.

Next to the box that showed the total for the weekend, was the greatly important paid in full marker. She signed her name on the indicated line and slid the paper back to the man.

When he took it, she noticed how gnarled his hands were, his knuckles were large, white orbs pressing under the delicate skin on his hands.

He turned toward a peg board with a key on almost every hook and checked the paper against the numbers. He selected a key in the lower right side of the board, then handed it to her.

“The rooms on the other side, away from the road. You can park right in front. If you need anything, let me know.” He smiled. A dark gap between two teeth showed as he grinned.

She smiled back and dropped the key into her purse. Her heart pounded as she turned to walk out the door and she didn’t hear the full announcement about the breakfast hours.

Hopefully she wouldn’t need them. She didn’t particularly like cereal and certainly didn’t want the cereal that was currently sitting here. Who knew how long it had been there?

She got back to her car, backed out of the spot, and headed to room 35.

The room was indeed in the back. It was away from everything. Only a small streetlight in the corner of the lot would light the front step. At least it would be quiet.

If nothing else, she could sit in here for a few hours, get her head back on straight, then head back home. She was beginning to realize how stupid this was.

Then she thought of her mother and the things she had done. Not just the party, but so many things other than that.

She stepped over the threshold. The room smelled of stale air as if the room had not been used in weeks. She went to the window, tried to open it, but it wouldn’t budge. She then clicked on the air conditioner and closed the door.

She didn’t know what to do next so she looked at her phone, willing it to ring. She did not want to be overanxious and call, but she certainly did not want to sit here, waiting for him to come over.

Then, she plopped on the bed, staring up at the popcorn ceiling. Looking at her situation now, she could see that the room wasn’t all that great.

Was this whole thing a mistake? He said he would take care of her, but this place? She rolled onto her side and saw a large chunk of the outdated, floral-print, wallpaper had been ripped off exposing a large swatch of gray sheetrock beneath.

The yellow curtains were worn at the bottom, with threads hanging loosely from the hem, as if they had dragged across the carpet for years. The two chairs at the small table in the corner were mismatched both in color and style.

She looked at her phone, there was still time to call home and have her mom put some money in her account.

Then, as if a voice from the other end of a phone line said, “Your mom is never going to change.” And it was true. With her dad caring little for her, her mom was supposed to be the stalwart in her life but she was exactly the opposite. Her mom was a lighthouse without a keeper, good in calm seas but useless when things got rough.

Anna went into the bathroom. It had been a couple of days since she had used a private bathroom that being able to close the door was a luxury.

When she stepped onto the tile floor, she was glad she was wearing socks. The white tile was graying in places and the grout was black in some places and missing in others. The tub looked well used with a visible ring around the base where water undoubtedly collected from a clogged drain.

Before she sat on the toilet, she wiped the seat down and put a few squares on the plastic seat to act as a barrier. This place was not worth it.

Maybe, just maybe, he was setting her up. Maybe he wanted her to come calling. Maybe, and this was a big maybe, he put her here so she would get so disgusted that he would come rushing in to save her from such squalor.

When she flushed, the water did not cycle smoothly. She had clogged a toilet or two and was able to see the tell-tale signs with the water rising slowly instead of clearing out. The water did rise slowly then something sounded as if it dropped inside the pipe and the water rushed out.

She washed her hands, primped for a minute in the mirror and then went back out into the room. She looked around the room, nervous about the next step. She had come all this way and all she could do was stand here? She sat on the bed and clicked on the television.

She cycled through the channels three times before dropping the remote onto the bed. Then she picked up her phone and stared at her reflection in the glass.

Her hand hovered over the home button and when she pressed it, she saw a message had been delivered to her inbox while she was in the bathroom.

She stared at the message indicator and made an arrangement with herself. If it was her mom, she would call her back tell her what was going on, and then head for home.

If it was Robert, she would call him back and she would be here, at least for the weekend.

When she pressed the voicemail button she had not bargained for another voice, the voice of her father, to be on the other end. “Hey kiddo. Sorry I missed your birthday party. I was out of town and the reception was terrible. I got home late last night and had to run out today. I was so frazzled this morning I left my phone. Give me a call. I love you.”

Anna picked up the pillow and hugged it to her chest. This was something she hadn’t expected. She hadn’t talked to her father in such a long time. Maybe since her last birthday. Even though he had been out of her life for the past few years, she still longed for his closeness. She dialed his number and lay back on the bed.

The phone rang three times and she was about to hang up, without leaving a message when the phone was answered with a breathy, “Hello?”

Anna was so taken aback that she sat there, out of breath for a minute. “Dad?”

“Hey kiddo. What’s going on?” He was huffing again. “I was on the treadmill.”

“Oh. No problem. I’m good. How are you?”

“Same old, same old. You know how it is. I’ve been busy for months. I think I’ve spent more days in hotels than I have in my own apartment this year. Maybe I should start renting it out.”

She laughed at this, then after his prompting, told how her birthday party was. The only thing he was able to say in response was, “I’m sad I missed that. So, what are you going to do for your actual birthday?”

She hadn’t really thought about that. It all depended on how the weekend went and if she was going to stay here or go back home.

“By the way, your mom called me like ten times. I wasn’t available but she never left me a message. You know what she wanted?”

“Probably to complain about how bad of a daughter I am.”

“Oh, come on. No one’s that bad.”

“Apparently I am Dad.”

“She probably kept calling because she probably thought I was on a date and wanted to ruin it.”

They laughed for a little about that and talked of the benign stuff of life but not once did she feel the need to tell him she was in love and that she was out on her own.

If her mom cared so much about where she was, she would have told her dad.

It was getting dark, she had to make a decision. “When will I get to see you next?”

“I might be swinging through in about three months. I have a client meeting nearby. Maybe I’ll drop by and take you out for Chinese.”

Anna was smiling so big that she was certain her dad could see it through the phone. He got her, as little time he spent with her, he got her. “I’d like that.”

So it was settled. She would spend the night here then go back home. She could wait out the three months for her dad to breeze through. Maybe she could convince him to let her move with him. He needed someone to take care of his place. She could do that.

She was about to say something to that affect when her phone chimed in her ear. While her dad was telling her about the latest airport debacle, she pulled the phone away from her ear. Robert had sent the text.

“R U here?” Then there was a set of praying hands. She took it for I hope you are.

She brought the phone back to her ear and listened to the story, laughing in all the places that he obviously wanted laughter, and chiming in with a declaration of surprise every now and then. She did have to admit it, her dad lived a completely different life.

She was on autopilot. She could respond to this story while listening with only a quarter of her brain. And that’s what she was doing. Her mind was racing through the possibilities.

Did she tell him she was there? Did she pretend to chicken out? No, she couldn’t do that. He would check his credit card statement. If not now, then when he got the bill next.

He did deserve an answer though. She wanted to answer but not as much as she did before she had the hope of moving in with her dad.

Sure, she had brought it up in the past. She was older now. She could drive, had her own car, held down a job. She could live there, maybe rent free if she promised to take care of the place while he was gone.

And Robert could come by and stay sometimes. They could at least hang out without any judgement. As the story wound down, she could sense that he was about to get an important interruption. So she did something out of the ordinary, at least with interactions with her father.

“Dad?”

Her dad stammered as if stumbling over an unseen speed bump in the conversation. “Yeah kiddo, what’s up?”

“I know we’ve talked about it in the past, but do you think, I mean, would it be possible--”

She heard a knock and then a voice in the background as he interrupted her. “Wait right there. Honey? Can we put this on pause for a little? Someone just dropped by. I really need to talk to them.”

“Yeah. But I just want to say one thing.” She gritted her teeth. The person in the background had turned the television on. She could hear a theme from a show in low notes underlying the conversation.

He exhaled. “Yeah?”

The exhale carried so much weight. “Next time. I’ll see you in a few months.”

“Huh? Oh yeah. I hope nothing changes with my plans.”

More weight heaped on her. “I love you.”

“Love you too kiddo.” He clicked the phone off before she could say anything else. And now she wasn’t even certain she would be seeing him when he came through town.

She sat up and leaned over the phone then scrolled through her text messages. She had two options for answers.

She typed, “Yeah. I just made it. I really stink and I need to sleep. Can we maybe meet later tonight or for breakfast?”

Then there was the waiting. She second-guessed the message, tried to read it from a few different perspectives. It could seem like she didn’t really want to see him, she could just be playing hard to get. She could be flat honest and he could take it that way.

This was so complicated. Why were there so many layers to everything?

She lay back on the bed once more and grabbed the remote from where she had tossed it. She turned the television on and let whatever show, some legal drama, play while her mind relaxed.

As she lay there, she realized how hot she was. The air conditioner was working, but doing nothing. She really was a stinking mess from sleeping in her car.

She looked at her phone once more, went to the front door, checked the lock, and then went to take a shower.

Hot water coursed over her as she washed the cares of the past few days away. The steam opened her thinking and she was able to see things from a few different perspectives that she hadn’t before.

She could always think in the shower much better than just sitting on a chair or laying on the couch. This was a great opportunity to prove to her mom that she was mature enough to have a relationship and to be on her own.

While she was drying off, she wiped the mirror free of the fog that had accrued during her shower. She got dressed and cleaned the streaking makeup off.

Then she wrapped a towel around her head and was heading out of the bathroom when she heard a knock at the door.

She froze. Her brain told her to beware, but her heart told her that her prince was here. Her heart started to beat hard and fast.

There was another knock.

She went to the door and peeked out the peephole. All she could see was a handwritten note on a piece of cardboard. It read, Welcome to Lake Grand Vista, my love.

Her heart fluttered and she threw the door open. The man holding the sign was not Robert, he didn’t even resemble Robert in any way. She took a quick step back with her hand on the door but the man shoved his way in, kicking the door hard.

When the door swung, it collided with her head and then things went black.

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The girl has to be a distraction so they can get Sarah.