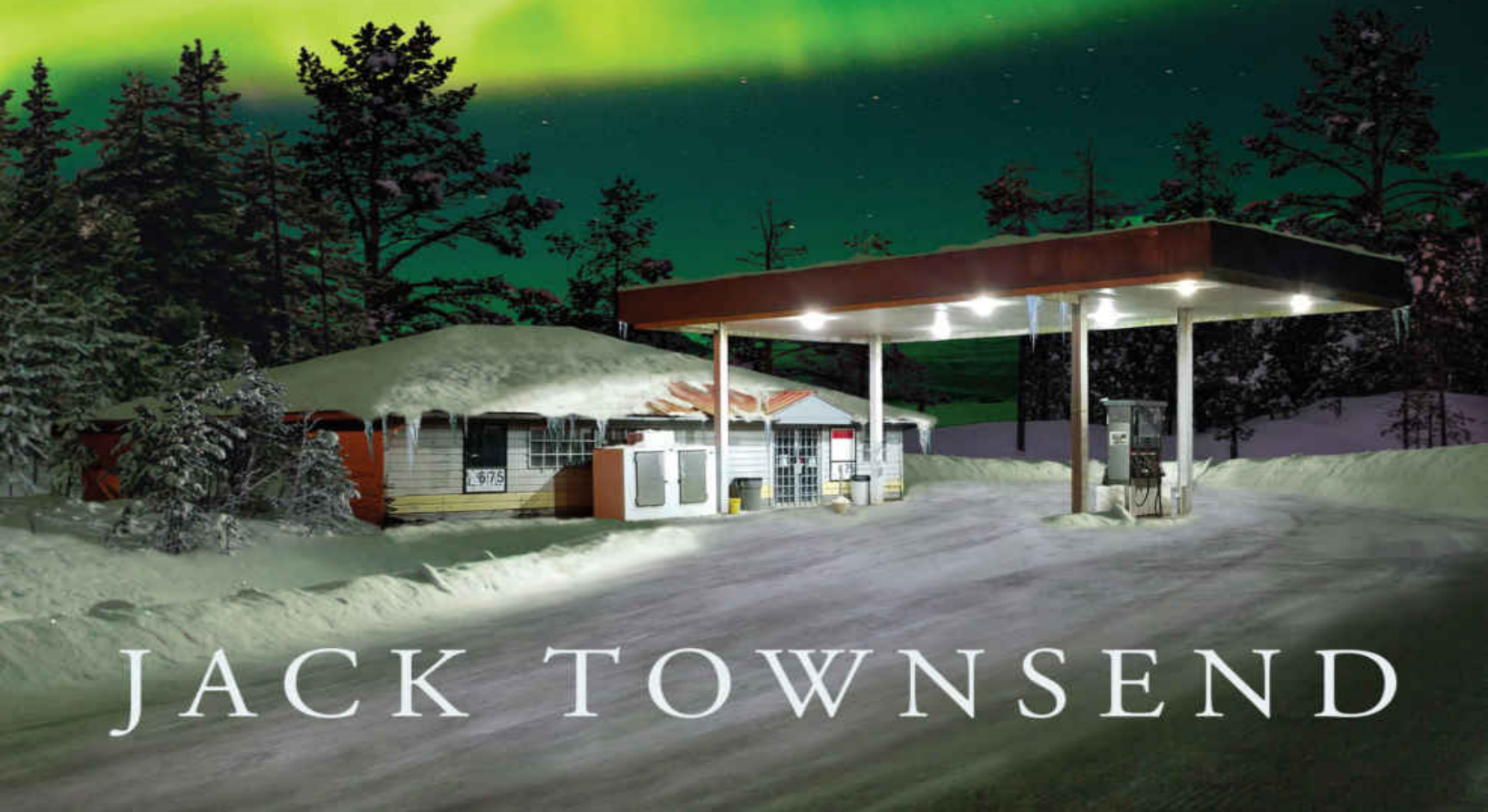


TALES FROM THE GAS STATION

V O L U M E T W O



JACK TOWNSEND



Volume Two

The book you are about to read is a work of fiction. Any similarities to real people, places, or events is entirely coincidental. (Especially Calvin Ambrose. In fact, that guy is so fictional, I heard he's started making surprise appearances in people's dreams. If you are unlucky enough to have this happen to you, just ignore him. He should go away on his own in a couple of hours.)

*This book is dedicated to you. Whoever you are. Thank you
for reading.*

*Also, special thanks to the Paingravy Discord. You guys
make me feel normal.*

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Chapter One

It had been a long and uneventful double shift—my third one of the week—and my body’s blood-to-coffee ratio was, as usual, close to fatal levels. The new guy wasn’t scheduled to come in and relieve me until dawn. In the meantime, all I could do was tread water and hope the snowstorm was enough to keep customers from bothering me too much. Only idiots and madmen would go out in weather like this, but unfortunately, our town had a surplus of both.

What started off as a “localized cold front” had just been upgraded to a “once-in-a-century cold air outbreak.” The temperature plunged into record-breaking lows while a windstorm noisily purged the forest of its weaker branches and small animals. The snow and sleet came in spurts, freezing the icicles sideways into long, horizontal spikes and coating the roads in a layer of black ice. Clearly, Mother Nature was drunk.

I’ve never paid much mind to all these “once-in-a-century” weather phenomena our town was so inclined to hosting, but somehow tonight’s attack felt personal. I could handle thunderstorms and flash floods all day long. I didn’t care about heat bursts or seasonal droughts, nor did I particularly mind that one summer when it started raining live frogs. But I’ve always had a special loathing for the cold. Each year, winter took up residence in my bones like a bad roommate, and no matter how many pots of coffee I drank, it never seemed to be enough to keep my insides warm.

I chose to pass the rest of my time by reading a book, same as always. No reason to treat this day any differently. The fact that my best friend, Tony, had been executed in front of my eyes just two weeks prior was a real tragedy. The fact that he tried to hunt me down and kill me first was an even bigger tragedy. But work and life and the universe can hardly be expected to make exceptions for every single tragedy. So, here I was, back where it all started, sitting behind the cash register and getting lost in an adventure story about a shipwreck survivor on an island inhabited by fish people.

I didn't notice when the man walked in. The periodic blast of cold wet air that sucked the warmth from the store each time the door opened was my cue to pay attention, but somehow, I missed his announcement.

Maybe I was putting too much mental effort into ignoring all those intrusive thoughts about Tony. Maybe I was distracted by the book's unexpected romantic subplot involving the fish princess. Or maybe this customer was *something* that didn't need to use doors. Whatever the reason, I only became aware of his presence after he began tapping his knuckles on the counter right in front of me.

Taptaptaptaptaptaptaptap...

It was as rhythmic as a metronome, yanking my attention back into the present. Like a good employee, I put my book away, apologized for my inattentiveness, and asked if there was anything he needed help with. But he didn't answer.

...taptaptaptaptaptaptaptap...

And he didn't stop tapping.

He was a tall man with a wide, pale face below a dark wool fedora. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of dark round sunglasses. He had no eyebrows or other hair that I could see, and his smile showed off a mouth full of dark yellow teeth—the only pop of color on his otherwise chromatically muted person. Something about the lack of hair made it difficult to pin down an age. He could have been a healthy ninety or a sickly forty or anywhere in between. All that, combined with his black trench coat and leather gloves, gave him the distinct otherworldly air of a cartoon supervillain.

I sat and studied him for a moment, uncertain of how best to respond. At first, I assumed he hadn't heard my question, but that wouldn't explain why he was standing there grinning and tapping the counter and staring straight ahead—not at me, but at something high on the wall behind me.

I cleared my throat.

...taptaptaptaptaptaptaptap...

The man continued to tap and stare.

"Hey mister," I said directly, "You okay? Are you having a stroke or something? Do you want me to call an ambulance?"

“How’s your math, Jack?”

His voice was deep and gravelly. About a half step up from a growl.

I took a moment to make sure I understood the question before answering. But the extra time didn’t help any. No matter how I rolled it around in my mind, his question didn’t make any sense. I decided to proceed with caution.

“I’m sorry. Did you just ask me about my *math*?”

“That’s right.”

He continued the incessant tapping with the cadence of a water drip, faster than a heartbeat, hypnotic and ever so steady. Before I realized it, the tapping had blurred into background noise. I couldn’t hear it anymore, and I couldn’t look away from the man’s face.

“I suppose my math is just as good as the next guy’s.”

“Don’t be so modest. You’re a smart cookie. You never made anything less than an ‘A’ on any of your math tests in high school. Isn’t that true?”

Normally, this is where a chill might run down my spine, but I was able to smother it with cold, hard logic before it had the chance. *No reason to get nervous yet*, I told myself. *So this guy knows about my grades, big deal*. There were plenty of reasons for him to know that. He could have been working for any one of those government agencies that were keeping an eye on this place. Or it could have been a lucky guess. For all I knew, I was dealing with a well-dressed twaker hopped up on bath salts.

Actually, that might be a good reason to get nervous.

In my experience, those on mind-altering drugs should be treated like sleepwalkers. Keep them away from vehicles and sharp objects. Give them plenty of space. And be careful not to bring them crashing back to reality all at once, or someone could get hurt.

He didn’t look like a traditional junkie, but just to stay on the safe side, I humored him. “The schools around here have pretty low standards. My last three math teachers were all named ‘Coach.’ Everyone gets an ‘A’ if they want one.”

“But you understand things, don’t you? Things others don’t. You’re special, Jack. And you should be proud of it.”

“I can assure you, special doesn’t mean good.”

“Take the damned compliment, Jack.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“Let me give you a quick math problem. One hundred and fifty thousand people die every single day. That seems like a lot, doesn’t it?”

He paused.

“That’s not a math problem,” I said.

“The wait was a courtesy. To let you cry, or mourn, or whatever it is you do.”

“Nah, I’m good.”

“Well, okay then. If a hundred and fifty thousand people die every day, then how often does a single human die? A real person leading a real life. Full of experiences, relationships, memories good and bad. A monumental event. The only thing in life that’s certain, yet the least understood. How frequently would you say that happens? On average?”

“About once every five hundred and seventy-six milliseconds,” I answered.

He lowered his gaze until his face was pointed at mine. From where I sat, I could see my own face reflected in his glasses as he spoke. “How remarkable! You did that all in your head? You’re even smarter than I—”

“No, of course not. You think I’d be working here if I could do that sort of stuff in my head? My phone has a calculator. Check it out.”

I held up my cell phone for him to see the screen. He inspected my work and grunted. “Zero point five six seven seconds. Do you have any sense of the scale? Think about it. In the time it takes to say ‘Mississippi,’ two people died. In the time it takes to boil an egg, one thousand people will die. In the time it takes to gestate a baby, forty *million* people—over twice the population of New York state—will perish.”

I could tell he was prepared to keep going all night if I didn't interrupt. "Okay. I get it. Death is not an anomaly. It's a certainty. We're all doomed from the moment we're born. Life is suffering. Free will is an illusion. The cake is a lie. So, what? What's your point?"

He said nothing. His only answer was *taptaptap taptaptaptaptap...*

I finally put it all together. "Oh. I get it now."

With that, he finally stopped tapping. The silence that took its place was annoyingly palpable.

The point he was trying to make, I realized, was that each of those taps corresponded to a person who had just died somewhere in the world. And he'd tapped hundreds of times since this conversation started.

"Would you like to cry some now? Knowing that all these people are dead?"

"Not especially."

"Then why should you shed any tears over Antonio?"

He was really trying to push my buttons.

"I don't know."

"What makes him any more important than the millions who've died since him?" His smugness shone through like a lighthouse in the fog.

"I don't know."

He raised his voice. "What makes this one so special?"

I tried to think up a better answer, but all I could come up with was, "I don't know."

His voice was louder now. "Face it, Jack. You're being ridiculous!"

"Okay."

He was suddenly on the verge of screaming. "*Well?! Are you going to do something about it?! Are you going to change your mind and get over it?! Or do you still care about this one little insignificant nobody?!*"

"Yeah."

"*Why?!*"

I matched his volume and yelled, "*Because he was my friend!*"

The sound of my voice startled me more than it did him. He laughed. I didn't.

His laughter was high-pitched and staccato, conspicuous as a car alarm, and very much on the other end of the vocal spectrum from his speaking voice, yet just as unnerving. He leaned over my counter and growled softly, "That's a pity. You had so much potential."

I waited for my heartbeat to return to normal, embarrassed over my unintended outburst. It wasn't like me to get emotional (I blame the caffeine). And despite what this asshole was implying, I did *not* cry when Tony died.

As he stood over me, his glasses slipped down his nose, and I watched as a jointed brown appendage unfurled from behind one of the lenses. It was skinny and bristly like the leg of a roach, but at least four inches long. The tip of it quickly caught the falling glasses by the rim and pushed them back into place before retracting into the space where his eye should have been.

He smiled and acted like the whole thing hadn't happened.

Okay. I guess the weird stuff is about to start back up again. The break was nice while it lasted.

I pointed at his glasses, "You know you've got a giant bug crawling out of your eye-hole, right?"

"No I don't!" he snapped back.

He wasn't terribly convincing, but I wasn't about to argue with the guy, so I let it go. Besides, maybe he was right. My grip on reality was never that strong to begin with, and lately that tether was tenuous at best and illusory at worst. Between the medications, trauma, general stress, and ludicrous amounts of caffeine, it was hard to know what was real and what was just another fevered machination of my diseased mind.

"Sorry," I offered. "You're probably right."

He rested his hands on the counter, took a sharp intake of breath, and sneezed louder than a gunshot. As he did so, a line of tiny orange roaches swarmed out from under both shirt sleeves and

across the counter towards me. They were small, ranging in size from strawberry seeds to pencil erasers, enough to pour over one another like liquid as they scurried away from the man.

“Oh, pardon me!” he exclaimed before scooping them all together into a skittering pile and brushing them off the counter into his open palm. He casually stuffed the lump of bugs into the pocket of his trench coat and smiled at me like this had been a perfectly normal thing for someone to do.

“Well, that was about the grossest thing I’ve seen all night,” I said. “Who are you supposed to be, anyway?”

“Me? I’m just a passerby who saw a person in desperate need of help. I’m not actually supposed to talk to you, but I feel like I’m looking at a poor, stupid, struggling turtle that’s been flipped onto its back. It takes so little effort to kick it over right side, and who doesn’t like kicking things? Right?”

“Is this what you think ‘help’ looks like?”

He leaned in closer, took a deep breath through his nostrils, and whispered, “Help doesn’t always feel good, Jack. Besides, I got you to scream, didn’t I?”

I was mildly peeved.

“Are you planning on buying anything?”

He stood up straight and looked around the store for a brief moment before announcing, “I would love to patronize this outstanding establishment, but I’m afraid I haven’t any money. I wouldn’t suppose you’d be interested in an *alternative* form of payment?”

I pointed at the door. “Please leave.”

The man giggled to himself and walked out into the icy cold night while I picked up my book and considered whether or not I should make another cup of coffee.

Chapter Two

In case you missed the first part of my memoirs, or in case someone (or something) erased your memory of it all, allow me to recap the important stuff:

At the edge of town, there's a shitty gas station open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Weird things happen there, and nobody seems to know why.

A few months ago, an ancient deity awoke beneath the gas station, possessed a bunch of minds, brought a slew of people back from the dead, and scared the crap out of me and my coworkers. We accidentally killed a politician named Kieffer (several times). I joined minds with the godlike entity and learned that a supreme being who feeds off pain and suffering was coming to end the planet. A monster hunter named Benjamin showed up. The dark god exploded. My coworker, Tony, revealed that he had been working for a mysterious shadow organization. Also, I barfed on a rabbit.

To be fair, it is entirely possible that *none of that stuff really happened*. I don't have any proof, and if you were to believe my highly-credentialed psychiatrist, the more likely scenario is that I imagined the entire thing.

I've been working at the gas station ever since I graduated from high school, and I'll be here until the day I die. But despite how it sounds, that's not exactly a long-term plan. I have a brain defect and sleep disorder that, by all accounts, should have already killed me by now, but for some reason I've always been really bad at dying.

Other than that, I'm a pretty boring guy. I don't go looking for trouble. I try to mind my own business. I know that curiosity kills and ignorance is bliss and "good enough" is good enough. Which is probably why the new guy, Calvin Ambrose, harbored so much animosity towards me.

“You’ll be happy to know that the tar pit is finally gone,” he said as I walked in to start my shift for the night. He delivered the news with a smirk, and I could sense that there was more than simply pride behind those words.

I didn’t know what else to say besides, “Oh, cool. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Good evening, officer!”

That last part was directed at the woman following me into the store. She returned his greeting with a courteous but silent nod before heading to the corner to fix herself a cup of coffee.

Deputy Amelia O’Brien had been giving me rides to and from work ever since an old childhood acquaintance of mine attacked me at the gas station, an unfortunate encounter that left me with a broken leg and him with an active arrest warrant should he ever show himself again. O’Brien was under the impression that my attacker, Spencer Middleton, was likely to return and finish what he started, and she was committed to making that task as inconvenient for him as possible.

As I made my way to the timeclock station behind the counter, Calvin added, “I also cleaned that spot by the coffee machine, got the last of the spray paint removed, and reorganized the cooler.”

He was claiming these accomplishments with a sense of personal pride, even though we both knew he hadn’t done any of that work himself. He was the kind of guy to delegate assignments to the minimum wage part-timers and take all the credit for himself. I had nothing against Calvin personally, but his and my management styles were completely at odds, which is likely why the owners—Mammaw and Pops—hired him as the new day shift manager.

For years, the gas station operated with a single full-time worker and a rotating fleet of part-timers, but after a minor disaster and subsequent grand reopening, the owners decided it was time to shake things up a bit. They tried to sell it to me as a positive development, delicately explaining how a manager for day shifts would split the workload and give me a much-needed break. The reality was transparent, though. Mammaw and Pops were on the short list of people who knew about my looming health issues. They

understood I wasn't going to be around forever, and they needed somebody in place to take over once I was out of the picture. I couldn't blame them, and I certainly wasn't one to complain about less work. But all things considered, I had to wonder if Calvin Ambrose was really the best they could do.

He'd been working day shift for just over a week at this point. We weren't exactly friends, but that was probably for his own good. After all, I had recently received an annoying and unsolicited prophecy about how I was cursed to watch all of my friends die. So far, it looked like Calvin was going to dodge that bullet by a mile.

He was about forty years old. Tall and thin, with a pasty complexion and flat, blonde hair always neatly combed to the side. He had a pointy chin and pointier nose, with a voice suggestive of a perpetual head cold. The only hair on his face was growing from the matching pair of twin moles at the top of his cheek bone. Moles that looked like creepy dead eyes when you stared at them for too long. Like shark eyes... Or doll eyes...

He drove a flashy silver Mercedes sedan that seemed wrong and out of place parked at the gas station, like a Starbucks inside a cemetery. He always dressed sharp, and this day was no exception. He was wearing khakis and a green sweater vest over a baby-blue button up. I, on the other hand, felt more than adequate in my usual attire of jeans, long sleeve t-shirt, and hoodie.

As I prepared to clock in, I noticed the letter he had printed out and taped next to the time clock. A short list of "reminders for all employees." While he hadn't called anyone out by name, he didn't have to. Most of the rules may as well have had "ahem, Jerry" spelled out next to them in red ink.

"Smoke breaks must be taken out back. Please no smoking inside the building!"

"No shirts, no shoes, no service applies to employees as well."

"Absolutely no alcohol consumption on the premises."

"Please do not feed the raccoons."

"All transactions must be made in legal U.S. currency - NO BARTERING!"

“Do not speak to the homeless man outside of the building.”

That last sentence caught me off guard. I hadn't noticed any homeless people hanging out near the gas station in months. Normally, when the weather turns cold, the hobos in our town leave and take an exodus further south until spring, and this was shaping up to be one of the coldest winters in decades.

I clocked in and turned around to see Calvin standing there with his countdown sheet, a little too close for my comfort.

“You ready to get out of here?” I asked, gesturing at the paper in his hand.

“Actually,” he responded. *Oh Jeez, come on dude. It was a rhetorical question, just let me count down your till and go home.* “I was wondering if you had a moment to talk.”

I looked around the store for any kind of out, but he knew better than anyone that I had absolutely nothing to do and no reason not to indulge him.

“Sure, why not?” I made my way behind the counter and took a seat by the register, propping my crutches against the wall nearby and sliding my backpack under the cigarette case. “What’s on your mind?”

“I just wanted to pick your brain. You’ve been here longer than me. Long enough to get a feel for this place. The atmosphere, the culture, the nuances.”

“Okay.”

“I’ve been in management for over two decades, and I’ve picked up a thing or two in that time. Especially when it comes to the importance of rules. I know that seems obvious to guys like you and me, but you’d be surprised how many people don’t care about the rules.”

He shifted his eyes towards the time clock, and for a brief moment, I could read his thoughts.

“Look, if this is about Jerry—”

He snapped his attention back to me and nearly caught me staring at the hairy moles on his cheek. “No, I’m not going to ask you to discipline him. I heard how he saved your life. As far as I’m concerned, that makes him a hero, and I’m not interested in

unsubstantiated rumors. If he is willing to shape up and get with the program, there won't be any problems moving forward."

"Well, that's a pretty big 'if.' I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you."

For some reason, that made Calvin laugh. I knew he despised Jerry from the moment they met. People like Jerry were kryptonite to people like Calvin, and "unsubstantiated rumors" was a very gracious way of referring to the two times in the past week that somebody spray painted the word "KILLER" across the front of the gas station.

"I just want to make sure you and I are on the same page."

"Well, yeah, I think—"

"The thing is," he interrupted, "I know all of the rules—the *written* rules. But every place has a long list of unwritten rules, too. You know? In my experience, those are just as important." He bounced his eyebrows and added, "Or more important."

"I don't understand."

He leaned in close enough that I could smell his hair gel.

"I'm asking for you to help me figure this place out. What makes it tick? What's under the surface? What are the unwritten rules of the gas station, Jack?"

He gave me an expectant stare, one that I couldn't comfortably return. I looked away from his eyes to his cheek, where those twin moles were staring at me just as expectantly, forcing me to look away completely. "I really don't know what you're asking."

"Take your time," he said in a sing-song voice. "Think about it. I bet you'll come up with an answer for me by tomorrow. Sound good?"

It most certainly did not sound "good." I could tell he was implying something, but I've never been good with implications.

"Yeah, sure."

I thought that would be the end of it, but then—

"Shake on it?"

I didn't want to touch the guy, but I was willing to do whatever it took to move this constipated interaction along so I could settle in for the night and get to reading my newest book. (It was a sci-fi

novella from the eighties about the far-off year of 2018, and I couldn't wait to see how much the author got right.)

His hand felt cold and clammy, like a raw turkey leg with fingers. After, he smiled and thanked me, then stood in silence while I counted the money in his cash drawer. As expected, Calvin was accurate to the penny. I bade him farewell, but before he left for the day, he remembered one last thing.

"By the way, you had a personal call on the store phone a couple hours ago. I told the man I'd pass his message along to you."

I don't get many "personal calls." If it were the owners, Calvin would have said so. If it was Benjamin looking for another status report, he would have hung up the moment he realized I wasn't the one who answered. There was only one other person who regularly called the gas station looking for me.

"Let me guess, Farmer Junior?"

Calvin raised an eyebrow. "Is that a real person's name?"

"Yeah, he's Farmer Brown's oldest son."

He seemed delightedly surprised. "There's a person in this town named Farmer Brown?! How quaint!"

"Well, there *was*."

"Ha! I never know when you're being serious, Jack, and when you're just goofing." He gave me a playful punch on the shoulder. I did not appreciate it. *What is it with this guy touching me?* "No, it was an old friend of yours named Spencer something-or-other."

My blood ran cold. I looked up to see if Deputy O'Brien was still there with us, but she had already left without saying goodbye.

"What did he want?"

Calvin fished a piece of paper out of his pocket, read the note to himself, and said, "Ah. Middleton. I knew it started with a letter. He wanted me to let you know that he is back in town, and that he'll be stopping by to visit you soon."

For the record, it's not that I was afraid of Spencer Middleton. I mean, sure, he beat me within a half-inch of death, broke my leg and a couple other minor bones, then left me in a hole until I nearly bled out, but that didn't mean I was *afraid* of him. Sure, he found a way to sneak into the gas station while all the doors were locked so he could subdue a man twice his size using nothing but a shovel. And he then overpowered me and two other coworkers without ever breaking a sweat. And he had extensive military training and probably belonged to some kind of black-op group dedicated to torturing puppies or something. And he once worked for a literal god. And I watched him get his throat sliced open and turn into a human Pez-dispenser and bleed to death and then resurrect from the dead like an evil Jesus.

But was I "afraid" of him? No, not exactly.

All the same, I felt like it would be a good idea to not be alone at the gas station that night. Shortly after Calvin went home, I spun the egg-timer, dropped a dollar in the till, picked up the store phone, and dialed Jerry's number. It rang ten times before he answered.

"Yo!"

"Hey, Jerry. It's me."

"Sup?"

"Not much. What are you doing?"

"Punchin' darts and breakin' hearts."

"I don't know what that means."

"I'm making some din-din and planning my takedown of the patriarchy."

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. Never mind."

"Never mind what?"

"I was just going to see if you wanted to—" It was only at this point that I realized I didn't know exactly why I was calling. Still, I powered through the sentence, "—come hang out at the gas station?"

There was a short pause. I half expected him to laugh and hang up, but instead he answered with, "How do you take your steaks?"

"Pardon?"

He said it again, a little slower. "How do you take your steaks?"

I had no idea what he was getting at, figuring that this must have been some kind of expression I was unfamiliar with. "I don't know. However."

"Medium rare it is! Give me fifteen. I gotta put on some pants and pack up my sixty-four and junk. You play *Risk*, right?"

"You mean the board game?"

"Yeah."

"I've played it before."

"Great, get ready 'cause I'm gonna take Australia."

"What do you mean by 'sixty-four'?"

He didn't answer. He had already hung up the phone.

Half an hour later, he was crouched behind the counter, plugging a flat screen television and Nintendo 64 into the overloaded surge protector below the register. He had brought a couple of steaks with him, wrapped in tin foil, and gave me the bigger of the two.

While he was setting up, I pulled a box of plastic cutlery and paper plates off the shelf, but Jerry didn't even give them a second glance. He simply rolled up his ribeye like a burrito and ate it one-handed.

I grabbed a couple six-packs from the cooler. Considering he'd supplied the food (as well as a 32-inch television, a gaming console, and a backpack full of video games), I figured it was the least I could do to provide the drinks. Under normal circumstances, I might have worried about introducing booze into the equation. But this late at night, he wasn't likely to make a scene in front of any customers. Plus, there was no risk of him driving under the influence. As far as I could tell, he didn't even own a car. The crazy thing was that Jerry had walked all the way out to the gas station.

We played "*Danger!*" (a Chinese video game knockoff of *Risk*) for a couple of hours before calling it a tie. After racking up the maximum number of armies allowable and settling into separate hemispheres, we saw no real reason for continued warfare and

declared an end to arms and a new era of world peace, thereby effectively beating the game.

He also brought a copy of “*Star Dog 64*”, “*Super Hit Siblings*,” “*Marco’s Cart*,” and (surprisingly) “*GoldenEye 007*.” He took that last one and loaded it into the console next. As he returned to take his seat on the overturned milk crate next to my chair, I noticed that someone had written a message on the game cartridge in blue magic marker. It read: “Property of Van!” There was only one person that could have been—our old coworker, Vanessa Riffin.

Vanessa was a good employee. And a good person, for that matter—one of those rare individuals everyone liked from the moment they met her. She was always friendly towards me, and she had a knack for defusing my awkwardness. She was smart and capable, and if she had stuck around for much longer, the owners probably would have offered her Calvin’s position.

She was the one to train Jerry while I was out recovering from Spencer’s first attack (to be fair, I don’t think that should reflect poorly on her; Vanessa did the best she could with the job she was given), and the two of them hit it off right away.

I’ve always tried to keep to myself. I enjoy other people’s business the same way a cat enjoys a cold bath. But a blind man could see that they were close. Sometimes they would hang out together outside of work. Occasionally they’d leave town to go see a movie or do any of those other things that normal people do with their normal friends.

On a few occasions, they even extended the hang out invitation to me. But I always turned them down. I knew they were just trying to be nice, and I didn’t want to ruin their fun.

The day she didn’t come back to work, I assumed she had followed the lead of so many other employees and simply quit without calling. But when Deputy O’Brien delivered the solemn news a few days later—that Vanessa was the town’s latest missing person and nobody had any clue where she had gone—I expected Jerry to be devastated.

Around here, the worst-case scenarios are the ones that usually end up being true, and Jerry knew that better than anyone.

Yet when I broke the news about Vanessa, he barely reacted at all. Instead, he shrugged and made a quip about how we're all disappearing, only at different speeds, then he clocked in and went to work like it was no big deal. Of course, that was before the small town rumor mill started doing what it does worst.

They showed up the first time a few days after her disappearance. When they arrived at the gas station, they wore masks and carried guns. I stayed inside while they spray painted their message across the front of the building.

They didn't come in, and it was all over in less than thirty seconds. When they had gone, I called Deputy O'Brien before going outside to read what they'd written.

It was one word:

"KILLER."

Soon, the rumors and accusations had made their way into every corner of town, and for the first time in a long while, I wasn't the biggest social pariah in our community.

They came out again a few days later with the same message, blaring country music at maximum volume while the designated artist defaced our store. And again, a few days after that. Each visit, they were in less of a hurry to leave, and I couldn't shake the feeling that they were working their way up to something that couldn't be fixed with paint remover.

It was with this in mind that I looked over at my coworker. He was sitting on his crate with a controller in one hand, throwing back his seventh or eighth beer. I knew he must have seen Vanessa's name on the cartridge before he plugged it in, but he made no effort to hide it.

Considering how it had started, this night had been surprisingly lowkey so far, and I didn't want to make things uncomfortable, but I couldn't help but feel like I should address the elephant in the room.

"You know, for the record, I don't think it's weird that you have Vanessa's game."

He gave me a puzzled stare. "What?"

"I noticed that we're playing a game that belonged to Vanessa. I think there are plenty of valid reasons why you would end up in possession of her stuff shortly after she went missing. And I don't think it's suspicious at all."

I could tell that was a swing and miss. But Jerry just chuckled and said, "Nah, it is a little weird when you word it like that."

"Right. Of course."

We sat in silence while he went through the main menu to set up a new two-player game in versus mode. I kept my mouth shut until after we finished the first match. I didn't want to say anything then, but I couldn't shake the urge to attempt some damage control.

"Hey, I want you to know that I don't think you're a killer."

"Thanks," he responded immediately. "I don't think you're a killer, either. The PP7 is garbage; you need to switch to a better weapon because I just beat you with the broken controller."

"No, I meant in real life. I don't think you killed Vanessa."

Okay, upon immediate review, I definitely should not have said that.

I could feel his eyes on me now.

"Thanks?"

Instead of shutting up, I kept digging. "I mean, I know you were one of the last ones to see her, and everybody in town thinks it was you who killed her, but I'm not even sure she's dead, you know?"

"Uh huh."

For some reason, I just couldn't turn it off. It was like an alien force had taken over my body while I was forced to sit there and watch. I was fascinated and horrified by the words coming out of my mouth.

"Because, seriously, I don't see you killing anybody. Even though you were a member of that murder cult. I don't think you would. Not that you couldn't. I mean, I think you were more than capable of doing it. I bet you probably have all the requisite tools and technical know-how to be an awesome serial killer if that's what you wanted to do. But I don't think it's your style to befriend someone and play video games with them and then murder them and steal

their game. Or at least, if you did, you probably wouldn't keep it a secret. You'd be much more likely to brag about it."

I took a breath, quickly reviewed everything I'd just said, and decided that now would be a great time to shut up.

But *instead*, I kept spewing words. "Wow, this is turning into a mess, huh? Look, I'm bad at these kinds of things. I know it's not much of a surprise, but I don't actually have that many friends. I mean, I was kinda friends with Tom before he died. And Tony, before he died. And Vanessa, too, for a little while there. My point is, I don't have a whole lot of practice talking to people other than customers and members of law enforcement. Honestly, I'm pretty sure my shrink hates me, too. If I said something tonight that crossed the line, please know I didn't mean it. Sometimes I get—"

"Dude," he interrupted.

"Yeah?"

"Hey, I'm totally listening to you, and I know it's important, but I just farted and it was really bad and I wanted to warn you because I've been eating broccoli all day and I think we should go wait outside for a few minutes."

That was the last time I ever felt awkward talking to Jerry.

He passed out around four in the morning. Fortunately, he made it to the hammock in the supply closet first, so I didn't have to worry about dragging him out of the way while I got the store cleaned and ready for the morning rush.

Sunrise was still a couple hours away when I heard the phone ring.

My heart started beating fast. *Why would someone be calling the store phone this early in the morning?* It didn't make any sense. Unless—

Unless it's Spencer, calling to let me know he's already inside the building!

I answered the phone with pretend confidence. My voice let out a friendly, "Hello?" But in my mind, I was rocking back and forth,

repeating one thing over and over like a mantra: *Please don't be Spencer. Please don't be Spencer. Please don't be Spencer.*

"Jack!?"

Oh, thank God. Not Spencer. It's just Pops.

"Yes."

"How's everything going over there?"

"Things are good. Except, you remember that guy who attacked me and broke my leg? Well, it turns out he's stalking me now. He called earlier, and the new deputy thinks—"

"Shut up about that for a second."

"Okay."

"I need to talk to you about something that's actually important. The new guy, Calvin Ambrose."

"What about Calvin Ambrose?"

"Tell me your thoughts on him."

"I don't get the impression he's trying to kill me, so there's that."

"Yeah? What else?"

"I think he's a perfect example of grossly overqualified and underprepared. I can't understand how you got him to agree to come work here."

"Uh huh. What else?"

"He seems nice."

Pops sounded genuinely upset now. "Why would you lie to me, Jack?"

"Sorry," I said. "He seems creepy. He seems like the human equivalent of a mayonnaise sandwich. He seems like the kind of guy who has stock options and orders his toilet paper off of Amazon and puts raisins in his potato salad, and I think he might be some kind of rule-fetishist."

"That's more like it."

"Is this really what you called for?"

"No. There's something else."

"Okay."

"I need you to do me a favor, and I'd like for you to keep this between us."

Here we go again.

“Can do.”

“I’m looking at the time clock report, and according to this, Calvin’s staying way over his scheduled hours.”

“He likes to linger.”

“This is very important. Crucial, even. Calvin doesn’t get any overtime. Understand? Make sure he clocks out and goes home when he’s supposed to. I don’t care what you have to do, just get him out of that place when it’s time for him to leave.”

I didn’t ask why it was so important, and I doubt Pops would have told me if I had. This wasn’t the first time I’d received mysterious instructions from the owners, and the fact that I never pressed them on it was probably why they kept me around.

“I’ll do what I can.”

“Thanks, Jack. I knew I could count on you.”

He hung up on me, and I filed away my new secret assignment.

As much as I hate to admit it, Calvin Ambrose was right about one thing. There is a long list of unwritten rules at the gas station, and that list was steadily growing.

Don’t ever follow a customer into their car.

Don’t eat any of the food that mysteriously appears from time to time.

If the gravity starts to act up, close the store, turn off the pumps, and get out.

Stay away from the woods. If someone calls to you from the forest, ignore it. Even if you recognize the voice. Even if they use your real name.

And now I had another one: *Don’t let Calvin go into overtime.* It sounded important, up there with *Never make eye contact with the fox lady* and *Don’t touch the lawn gnomes with green hats.*

I’m sure Calvin was used to being right, but on this point, I doubt he knew just how right he was. This town was weird. This job was weird. And if Calvin Ambrose really thought he was going to be the one to figure it all out, he was in for an unfortunate surprise.

Chapter Three

The morning rush was slower than usual. Recreational hunters have always made up a disproportionate amount of our early crowd (and our town's population, for that matter), but with the temperatures continuing to plummet and the pessimistic weather forecast dominating the news (the exact phraseology that locals were kicking around was "snow diarrhea"), most people were happy to give up a day or two of hunting to stay indoors where it was safe and warm. For once, I found myself in agreement with the vox populi.

I got around to reading that sci-fi novella and found the author's foresight accurate, if not a tad too optimistic. He missed a few of the bigger details, but totally nailed the concept of an advanced civilization utterly dependent on, and at the mercy of, technology. The story ended on a laughably somber note, with robots killing the last of the humans. I'm not so sure we'll make it that far.

"Why do you think the owners made such a big deal about Calvin not going into overtime?"

My coworker was standing on the other side of the counter, staring out the front door at the snow. I put the book down and picked up my coffee as I considered his question.

"I don't know. I guess it's just another one of those things."

"Don't you ever get curious?"

"Why would I? It doesn't have anything to do with me."

He turned and faced me, then walked up to the counter and leaned over to whisper, "You wanna know what I think?"

I looked him in the eyes and, for a brief moment, felt that something was *off* about him, but I didn't want to be rude, so I ignored the feeling. "Sure. What's your theory?"

He continued to whisper, "I think there's something wrong with this place. I think any time someone stays here too long, it starts to mess with them. The building gives off a kind of radiation, and the

more you're exposed, the worse it gets. I think that's the real reason why the owners were always so leery about hiring full-time workers."

It was an interesting thought, and it certainly had some merit. I took a sip of my coffee and noticed that it had already grown cold.

"But what about me and Jerry?" I asked. "We both practically live here."

"I think that you and Jerry are somehow immune to it. Maybe it's because your brains are wired wrong. Or maybe this place is doing a number on you, too. And you're already so far gone you can't even see it." He jerked his head to the side like a nervous squirrel and looked back out the window. "Even when it's happening right before your very eyes." He jerked his face back towards me. Then towards the windows. He seemed skittish. Nervous. This wasn't like him. What was he so afraid of, anyway?

"Is that why you never worked more than a couple hours at a time?"

Tony looked back at me and smiled.

"Could be."

"Wait a second..." Suddenly, I remembered something very important about Tony. "Aren't you..."

He laughed.

All the heat in the room disappeared, replaced by an unwelcome gust of cold, wet air that kicked me into gear faster than ten cups of coffee. I looked over to see a man in a hoodie, baseball cap, and sunglasses walking into the store. When I looked back at Tony, he was gone.

And yet, I could still hear him laughing.

I closed and rubbed my eyes long enough to take a few deep breaths all the way to the bottom of my lungs. When I opened my eyes, he was still gone, and so was the sound of laughter. I stuffed the novella into my backpack, trading it out for the old journal where I'd been keeping notes of these increasingly common episodes. Auditory and visual hallucinations. Check. Disorientation. Check. Confusion. Check and check. This was nothing out of the ordinary. At least I was still functional for now.

"Hey, Jack."

I looked up to see the man in the baseball cap and hoodie standing where Tony had (or hadn't) been standing just a moment earlier. As soon as I recognized him, my eyes instinctively darted towards the corner of the store where our old security cameras once were, but their conspicuous absence left me resigned to the effective certainty: We were about to be robbed again.

"Hi, Karl," I said. Was it a good idea to let him know I recognized him? Surely, he realized this half-assed disguise wasn't very disguising. I quickly tagged on an addendum just to be safe, "...if that is you, Karl. It's hard to tell. I just got back from my eyeball cleaning. Now I can't identify faces to any degree that would hold up in court."

Karl Thomas was a tall, stocky guy with curly brown hair that he never bothered to wash. He was once a gas station regular, but I originally knew him from high school. We were close in age, with him beating me by a couple years. We weren't friends, or even friends of friends, but in a town this small, everybody knows everybody's business whether they want to or not (as a general rule, I do not).

He was infamous for a number of small town scandals, the most scandalous of which was the time he beat his pizza delivery driver nearly to death in a drunken misunderstanding about the fifteen-minutes-or-it's-free rule. (The delivery driver explained how that wasn't a real thing anymore. Karl disagreed using fists and steel-toed boots.)

Luckily for Karl, his father was a judge, so he was able to make the whole thing disappear, legally speaking. Unluckily for Karl, the pizza delivery driver had a lot of friends, and there wasn't much any judge could do to stop or slow the juggernaut of small-town gossip.

After the pizza incident, Karl started to feel the consequences of his actions. He couldn't keep a job because all the employers in town knew what he had done. The local Baptist church expelled him from the congregation out of principle. And to top it all off, none of the delivery places would go out to his apartment anymore. It didn't take long for Karl to turn to a life of crime in order to sustain his snowballing drug addiction.

He would visit the gas station at least once a week to buy a lighter and a Chore Boy scouring pad. We never had any problems with each other until the day I came home to find him attempting to break into my house at four o'clock in the morning.

This was about a year after his first arrest, back when Tom was still alive and saddled with gas station duties. When I spotted Karl from the road attempting to pick the locks of my front door, I made the block and gave Tom a call.

Poor Karl must have thought he was losing his mind, using his fancy lockpicking kit to turn all three deadbolts one after the other, trying to figure out why the door still wouldn't open. If he'd been a little smarter, he might have figured out that I only ever turned the top and bottom locks. The confusion cost him enough time for Tom to show up and catch him in the act.

Once again, Karl's father pulled some strings. He managed to plead out to a simple seatbelt violation. I was a little miffed but at the same time relieved that I wouldn't be forced to go to court or testify or any of that nonsense. I tried to let the whole thing go, and Karl added the gas station to the list of places he wasn't allowed to show his face anymore.

Until now.

He took off his sunglasses, revealing a pair of unhealthy, bloodshot eyes. "You don't have to worry about me, man. I'm not here to start any trouble. I'm trying to make things right. I wanted to apologize and let you know I'm getting help."

"Glad to hear that. Speaking of help, I'm volunteering at the local animal shelter. I just adopted two rottweiler/pit-bull mixes with behavioral control problems. Fun fact: their previous owner played death metal every time he fed them, so now they associate the sounds of human screaming with dinner."

"Look, man, I'm not supposed to contact you. I could get into a lot of trouble for this. But I wanted to warn you—"

"Speaking of warnings, pitweilers are bred for their cunning. Did you know they're clever enough to set traps?"

"Jack!" He shook his head, frustrated. "You don't have to do that. I'm not going to bother you anymore."

“Why would you? I don’t have anything valuable in my home. You know, except the dogs.”

“No, you don’t get it. I wasn’t supposed to take anything *out* of your house.”

Once again, I was filled with that all-too-familiar feeling that I wasn’t operating with a full deck of cards.

“What do you mean? What were you ‘supposed’ to do?”

At that moment, his phone started to ring. He took it out, cursed to himself, then answered, saying, “Yeah?” He gave me a sad look before turning and heading out. “I told you, I’m on my way now.”

When he was gone, I remembered that I had been holding my breath.

About an hour after Jerry stumbled out of the supply closet and went home, Calvin Ambrose showed up unexpectedly, wearing a white button-down with a blue tie and slacks. Something about his wardrobe almost felt personally insulting.

“Good morning, Jack!” he said exuberantly. “How was your night? Any issues to report?”

I put away the book I was reading. “No, just the same old same old.”

“You working hard?” *Oh god don’t say it, don’t say it, don’t say it.* “...Or hardly working?” He giggled like a deranged clown.

As a professional courtesy, I forced a fake laugh before giving him the vaguest answer I could think of: “Oh, you know.” After that, I trailed off, hoping he’d get the hint.

He looked around the building, “The place is in good shape. Nice work.”

“Thanks.”

“Busy night?”

“Not particularly.”

“Did you have any problems with that homeless gentleman?”

“I never saw any homeless man, gentle or otherwise.”

“Really? Well that’s good news. Maybe he’s finally moved on to greener pastures. Knock on wood, right?” He proceeded to tap his fist against the side of his own head while giving me a huge smile and dead-eyed stare.

I could not bring myself to fake laugh at that.

“Why are you here?” I asked directly. “You’re not scheduled to come in until Devon gets off.”

Devon was one of our newest part-timers—a teenager with a face full of acne and the general demeanor of a fish in the desert. He spoke broken English, but managed to communicate from day one that this was his first and only job. He really wanted to do well, but he was terrified of everything. I had to sit him down on the first day and assure him that he was already overqualified.

I made it a point to schedule Devon exclusively for day shifts so that he wouldn’t have to worry about the fox lady. I had this job down to a lazy science, so when Calvin Ambrose kept trying to fix a system that wasn’t broken, I couldn’t help but feel annoyed.

“I was up and about and thought I’d swing by for some of Jack’s world-famous coffee,” he explained as he crossed over to the coffee machine, stopping briefly to stare at that mysterious stain that had once again appeared on the floor. I expected him to make a passive aggressive remark, but he surprised me. All he did was shake his head and proceed to fix himself a cup.

It was interesting to watch, to see firsthand as Calvin learned the unwritten rules of the gas station.

That’s right, Mr. Ambrose. We don’t acknowledge the stain. We don’t talk about the stain. And next time you feel like cleaning, you’ll do better by pretending the stain isn’t there.

He walked back to the counter, sipped his coffee, and made an over-exaggerated noise that sounded like “Yum.”

Keeping my secret assignment in mind, I did my best to push him out the door. “Well, enjoy your joe. And the rest of your morning. I’ll see you at the end of your shift tonight?”

A sudden barrage of noises filled the room. Like an earthquake, it came out of nowhere, and before either of us had time to figure out what was happening, it was already too late.

Only in the aftermath were we able to piece together the chain of events. The undercurrent was the sound of mixed engines from several pickup trucks. The high-pitched *screech* came from the tires as they fishtailed into our parking lot. They gunned their engines and ran donuts around the gas pumps. With their windows rolled down, their radios blared rock music while they shouted mock tribal jeers and fired shotguns and rifles into the air.

It's impossible to say for sure if this intimidating truck-dance was all they meant to do. But it says a lot about their aim if one of them was trying to shoot the sky and somehow missed. A single bullet went through the window over the booth table and lodged itself into our cold drink case. The sounds of glass breaking and cans exploding and Calvin screaming and falling to the floor to protect himself were all drowned out by the noises coming from the guns and the engines and the angry jeering mouths of the guys controlling them.

And then it was over. They left the parking lot covered in skid marks, hit the main road, and drove off before we could get a good look at any of the driver or passengers. Not that either of us were inclined to go outside and chase trouble.

When the moment had passed and reality sank in, I grabbed my crutches and made my way to the front door to assess the damage.

With the exception of a couple bullet holes, a spider-webbed drink case door, and some soda and coffee pooled onto the floor, we got through relatively unscathed.

"Okay," I turned to Calvin, "I think it's over now."

He was still on the ground, curled up in the fetal position (the ultimate defensive stance). He uncurled and screamed, "What the Jolly Rogers was that?!"

I made my way back towards the counter. "Just some bored townies giving us a hard time."

"Why?!" He got to his feet, visibly shaking.

"Probably because they're *bored townies*."

"Lock the doors!" His voice was somewhere between normal and screeching, like he was undecided about how to react. I

understood. People like Calvin Ambrose can go their entire lives without facing anything remotely as dangerous as this. The fact that he wasn't crying was something to be commended. "We have to-we-call-we should..." Now he was choking on his words.

"Take a breath," I said slowly. "It's okay."

"Jack! Lock the doors! We have to call the cops. We-Those were terrorists! We just got attacked by *terrorists*!"

"Nah, those were just idiots." I spun the egg timer and reached for the store phone. "I'll call Deputy O'Brien and let her know what happened."

He sputtered, "Wha, wh-why? How are you so calm right now?!"

"They're gone. I don't think they're coming back. I'll get this cleaned up. You should make yourself another cup of coffee."

"I don't think I need it anymore."

With that, he fell into the booth seat below the broken window.

Great. How the hell am I supposed to get rid of him now?

I tried everything I could think of to get him to leave, but after the drive-by, it was like he had grown roots. As far as traumatic events go, this wouldn't have even broken into my top hundred, but poor Calvin remained on the precipice of hyperventilating. He had finally begun to calm down when another car came screeching into the parking lot, causing him to reflexively jump out of his seat and hide under the table.

Deputy O'Brien parked her cruiser sideways in front of the doors. Her lights were flashing, and her hand was resting on her holstered weapon when she walked into the building.

Her eyes landed on the man under the table first. She stayed close to the entrance and scanned the rest of the room before looking my way and asking, "You okay?"

"I'm fine."

She walked towards me and pointed a thumb over her shoulder at the man crawling out from beneath the table. "What's his deal?"

He answered for me, "My *deal* is that those thugs tried to kill us!"

She turned to face him as he approached us in a huff.

"Did you get a look at the people who did this?"

"No, but they're already gone! You took your sweet time getting here, and now they got away!"

She nodded and said calmly, "I'll have the crime lab come out and collect the bullet. Doesn't look like they left any fingerprints behind. I'll see about putting a unit on the building in case they come back."

I know I'm famously bad at social interactions, but it sure seemed to me like Calvin was overreacting. He could have gotten the same message across in a calm speaking voice, yet he chose to yell at the top of his lungs, "That's not good enough! We want those criminals charged for attempted murder!"

"We"? Why is he going plural?

"I understand," O'Brian said.

"This is not okay! We demand to know what you're going to do about this! Right, Jack?"

O'Brien looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

I wasn't expecting to be put on the spot like this. "What? Oh, um, nah, it's... I mean... It sounds like she's got it under control."

"No!" Calvin Ambrose barked. "This is unacceptable!"

She turned back to him. "What would you have me do?"

He reacted like she'd just spat acid in his face. His voice rose to shrill levels disfavored by dogs and humans alike. "How about you start by doing your job?! Why don't you go out there and find the men who did this and put them in jail instead of just standing here, waiting for them to come back?!" He turned his attention to me again. I wished he hadn't. "Back me up on this, Jack?"

"Oh. Um, I don't really have anything to add."

Calvin continued his tirade, "This sort of thing doesn't happen all at once! You people sit back and let crime grow and grow until

someone like me—” he pointed right at me “—or like *Jack* end up getting killed over it! And it’s not alright! Do you understand?”

As he huffed and puffed, O’Brien began to respond, “The men who did this—”

But Calvin wasn’t quite out of steam yet. He pointed a finger in the air and yelled, “These punks don’t have any respect! Not for the law! Not for themselves! And sure as heck not for us. I’m terrified. Jack is terrified. Look at him! We can’t work if we don’t feel safe. Tell her, Jack! Don’t be afraid to say how you really feel.”

DUDE. STOP DRAGGING ME INTO THIS.

At long last, he stopped talking. He bent over and put his hands on his knees to catch his breath while O’Brien eyed him coolly, somehow keeping a straight face. When he finally pulled himself together and stood up erect again, she said, “I understand your frustration.”

“I sincerely doubt that,” he snapped. Then he turned his back on her (a brave move) and returned to his booth seat.

O’Brien left him to fume and walked over to join me. When she reached the counter, she rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue. I smiled and nodded in solidarity. *Yeah. That guy’s a real turd.* Then she put on her serious face and asked, “Did you see anything?”

“Afraid not.” I wanted to be more helpful, but I’d already told her everything I knew over the phone. If Calvin weren’t throwing such a huge fit, I probably wouldn’t have even bothered her. She was scheduled to come by after my shift ended anyway, and I hated to make her waste a trip over something so trivial.

“Any clue why they’d take a shot at you?”

“I don’t pretend to know why people in this town do anything, but if I had to guess, I’d say it was probably an accident.” I thought for a second, then added, “Unless...”

I let that word linger. She didn’t push it. She already knew.

Unless they were here for Jerry.

The deputy took a look at the bullet holes and determined it was probably a round from a hunting rifle. That limited our suspect list down to *almost every single person in this town*. She told us to stay put (like we needed that direction) while she went outside to inspect the tire tracks and bullet casings.

I took the opportunity to sweep up broken glass, my first time using a broom since becoming crutch-bound (it was exactly as difficult as you would expect). Halfway through, Calvin walked over with a handful of paper towels and knelt down to wipe up the spilt coffee.

I stopped to tell him, “You know you don’t have to do that, right?”

“No biggie. It’s my mess; I should be the one to clean it.”

“Don’t worry about it. I need stuff to do anyway.”

Oh crap. Why did I say that?

He stood up straight with the wad of soaked paper towels in his hand and dirty coffee dripping through his fingers. “If you need stuff to do, I’ve been working on a honey-do list to get this place back in tippie-top shape. First, we need to talk about the weathering on the windows. Second, the pest problem is getting—”

“—Hey, Calvin.” He stopped and gave me a blank stare. “Sorry to interrupt, but I think your ear is bleeding.”

There was a trail of blood running from inside his left ear all the way down his neck. He reached up with his free hand, tapped the liquid, and looked at the red on his fingertips.

“Oh bother!” he exclaimed. “I must have gotten hit. I’m telling you now, they aren’t going to stop until we’re all dead.”

Without giving it a moment’s thought, he pressed the dirty, wet, coffee-soaked paper towels against his ear. As he wiped at the blood, coffee squeezed out of the towels onto the side of his head, running down his neck and staining his nice dress shirt. I waited for him to realize his goof, but he acted like this was his intention all along.

“Are you feeling okay?” I asked.

With blood and coffee smeared against his chin and a glazed-over smile on his face, he answered, “Better now that it’s just

the two of us.”

This was a grown man. I shouldn’t have to tell him, but I did anyway. “You, uh, missed a spot.”

The smile vanished. “I know how to clean up a mess, Jack. I’ve been doing this since you were in grade school.” He was getting testy, so I backed off and pretended I couldn’t see him steadily bleeding all over the place.

“I really do appreciate the help, but you’re off the clock. Why don’t you go enjoy the rest of your day before your shift starts?”

He tossed the soiled paper towels into the trash bin and said, “You’re right. I shouldn’t be doing this ‘off the clock.’ I may as well get my day started early.”

“What?”

“It’s okay. I’m salaried.”

I called after him as he headed towards the time clock, “No, don’t do that! I’ve got this under control. Besides, Devon will be here in a little while.”

Calvin laughed as he punched in his employee code. He spun his head in my direction, splattering blood against the gas station wall. “*Devon* needs more training. He still doesn’t know how to operate the register properly. Someone needs to stick around to hold his hand and show him the ropes, because this sink-or-swim mentality you guys have around here isn’t working. A good company invests in its employees. An inch of effort early on is worth a mile of —”

I stopped listening. I’d already lost the battle. Calvin Ambrose was coming to work early whether I liked it or not. This meant we’d be working side by side until Devon arrived. It also meant I wouldn’t be getting any more reading done, which—in my opinion—meant the terrorists had already won.

I let Calvin drone on while I finished sweeping and moved to straightening the display of gnomes. Several had toppled over onto the ground during the shoot-out, even though the display wasn’t anywhere near the bullet’s path. I assured myself there was probably a perfectly good reason and didn’t give it too much thought.

I had tuned out Calvin's nasally voice up to this point, but my subconscious picked up on a phrase that immediately summoned my attention back to his monologuing. "*Blablabla, blablabla...* there's really no reason why you can't leave and go home early today."

I looked back at him. "What did you say?"

He was standing at the cash register. In a rather blatant display of presumption, he was already counting down my till for me, pausing long enough to say, "You're already twenty hours into overtime for the week, and unlike me, you aren't salaried. Let me take on some of the burden so you can go home and get some sleep. I know you must be tired, right?"

O'Brien walked back inside as I answered, "Exhausted."

"Then it's settled. I'll watch the store until you get back tonight. Enjoy the rest of your day!"

O'Brien gave me a *what-is-he-talking-about* look, raised an eyebrow, and asked, "What is he talking about?"

"Hey, would you mind if—"

She finished my thought, "You need another ride, huh?"

"Well, only if you're not busy."

She cut her eyes towards Calvin and answered, "Of course. I'm not doing anything important at the moment."

We stayed at the gas station long enough for her backup to arrive. Calvin refused to say another word to her, which was perfectly fine by all three of us. Once the new officer started writing up Calvin's statement, we took off.

We were only a minute into the car ride, but I felt like we were both holding our breath. She was never one to start a conversation, and I could never think of anything to say. This was how most of our interactions went. Both of us completely silent, me wondering if I was supposed to say something. Or if she hated me. Or if she had any opinion about me at all. Arnold—the deputy who had her job before her—was a bit of an asshole, but at least I knew exactly where I stood with him. I probably could have kept up our mutual silence

forever, but today felt wrong. After putting up with Calvin's unapologetic outburst, the least she deserved was a thank you.

I worked up the nerve to speak first. "Hey, thanks again for driving me. I don't know if I've ever really told you, but I do appreciate everything you do."

She was quick to reply. "Don't mention it."

We sat quietly for another minute. I spent the time reviewing what was just said to make sure I hadn't accidentally embarrassed myself. The analysis came back clean. But then I started to overthink it.

She never says "You're welcome." But that makes sense. I'm not welcome to her favors. They're an obligation, and she doesn't want me to keep reminding her. Hence, "Don't mention it." She doesn't like me, and that's okay. She doesn't want to make small talk. I'm just a job, and not a very fun one, so I should probably keep my mouth shut.

"Something on your mind?" she asked.

It was unexpected, and I didn't have any better response than, "Huh?"

"You look like you're about to put down Old Yeller."

"No, I was just thinking about..." I tried to think up a good lie, something that sounded better than *'how bad I am at talking to you.'* The best I could come up with was "...time-turners."

A few seconds passed before she said, "What?"

"Time-turners. From 'Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban.' They're basically plot breakers. Rowling introduced a completely O.P. time-travel device, but then the students never use it again, even when there's a literal war played out in 'Deathly Hallows.' If you have a time machine, why not just go back to before the war starts? Why didn't they just go *Terminator* on baby Voldemort?"

"And this is where your mind goes?"

"Sometimes."

"Hmmm..."

We went back to sitting in silence. I didn't have to obsessively review the conversation this time. I knew she thought I was an idiot.

But still, at least we were talking, and if we were going to be talking, there was one more thing I wanted to get off my chest.

“I’m sorry about what happened back there.”

“What do you mean?”

“Calvin was way out of line. I think he was just freaked out because he’s never been in a situation like that before and didn’t know how to react. I would be willing to bet he’s led a sheltered life.”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

She took her eyes off the road for just a moment to look at me and say, “Don’t make excuses for shitty people. Because they’re going to keep on being shitty, then you’ll have to keep on making excuses.” She returned her gaze straight ahead. “Some people are assholes. I know how it works. You didn’t do anything wrong. Don’t hitch your wagon to an asshole.”

Don’t hitch your wagon to an asshole. Words to live by, for sure.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

She turned the car onto a completely deserted Main Street. It was more reminiscent of a post-apocalyptic wasteland than normal. I stared out at the mounds of dirty snow piled up on the empty storefronts and sidewalks. Some of the businesses had newly-made “Closed” signs posted on their doors and windows. Outside of the post office, a pathetic three-foot tall snowman silently begged to be put out of its misery.

I assumed our conversation had ended, so it took me by surprise when she kept talking, “Everybody’s freaking out over a little snow. Back in Brooklyn, people actually knew how to drive in bad weather. I always looked forward to winter. Because whenever it started snowing, crime rates would take a dive, and I’d have fewer crazies to deal with. Of course, suicide rates would always go up, too, but that was someone else’s department.”

This was the most she’d ever opened up to me, and something about having already embarrassed myself took a lot of the pressure off.

“So,” I asked, “what happens when it snows during a full moon?”

She cracked a smile. “Oh, they cancel each other out. That’s just basic math.”

“Of course.”

Her tone turned more serious. “I wouldn’t count on the weather to keep you safe, though. I got a feeling Middleton isn’t one to take a snow day.”

“Oh, that reminds me. He called the store.”

“Who did?”

“Spencer Middleton.”

“Okay.” She flicked on her blinker and eased onto the brakes, even though we weren’t anywhere close to our next turn.

“Are we stopping?”

“Yep,” she said incredibly calmly.

“Why?”

“I’ve got to pull into one of these parking spots so I can yell at you.”

“What?”

She parked the cruiser in front of a small diner with a “closed for snow shits” sign posted in the window. She very calmly put the car in park, turned to me, then ripped me a new asshole.

“HAVE YOU LOST YOUR GODDAMN MIND?! DO YOU WANT TO DIE?! BECAUSE I CAN TAKE CARE OF THAT RIGHT NOW AND SAVE US ALL A LOT OF TROUBLE! WHAT THE HELL DID I TELL YOU?!”

I may have screamed a little, but only because that was the scariest thing I’d seen all week. She continued to tear into me for another minute straight, letting me know in graphic detail exactly what would happen to me if I neglected to inform her immediately about any more Spencer-related news.

“Okay!” I said once she was finally done, “I’m sorry!”

She studied my face while I waited for my heartbeat to return to normal. She must have decided that I was telling the truth, because when she spoke again, her voice was back to being perfectly (terrifyingly) calm.

“Good, but ‘sorry’ doesn’t keep you alive.” She went from zero to a hundred and back to zero in no time, and I decided then and there that I would rather let Spencer kill me than unleash O’Brien’s wrath again. “Now, tell me exactly what he said.”

“I didn’t talk to him. He called and left a message with Calvin. Told him to tell me he’s back in town, and he’s going to see me soon.”

“Why didn’t you call me right away?”

“I didn’t want to be a burden.”

“You need to get over that. Understand?” I nodded. “Let me be real for a second, if you end up dying all because you were too scared to bother me, I’m going to kick your ass.”

“Fair enough.”

She put the car in gear and pulled back onto the street, adding, “For the record, the reason they couldn’t kill baby frog-nose is because time-turners don’t work like that. The books were very clear. They only work on a closed time loop. You can’t change the past, only experience it from a different perspective.”

My jaw nearly hit my lap. “What?”

“Besides,” she continued. “The time-turners were all effectively destroyed during the Battle of the Department of Mysteries in ‘Order of the Phoenix,’ so there wouldn’t have been any left for the Ministry of Magic to use during ‘Deathly Hallows’ anyway.”

I just got schooled in Harry Potter trivia by Deputy Amelia “kick your ass for looking at her wrong” O’Brien.

“Did that really just happen?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Limpy. But if you tell anybody what you think you heard, I will kill you.”

As we reached the end of Main Street, another thought hit me. “Hey, I have a small favor to ask. You know, just to prove that I no longer worry about being a burden.”

The corner of her mouth curled into an almost smile.

“What do you want?”

“Would you mind if we made a quick pit stop?”

After a few seconds, she answered, “Where to?”

Chapter Four

Brother Riley was sitting behind the counter, eating a bag of M&M's and bobbing his head along with the song in his ears while the overweight store cat, Gunther, sprawled out in front of him and shamelessly licked his own buttohole. A pair of large headphones connected Brother Riley to the record player sitting atop the display case. When he saw me walk in, his eyes lit up and he yelled a little too loudly, "Hey man!"

Gunther immediately reacted to the noise by darting off the counter and disappearing into the back room. Brother Riley lowered his voice a couple notches before adding, "Long time no see. I was starting to think something happened to you."

Brother Riley wasn't from around here, and for the life of me I couldn't figure out what made him stay in this half-a-horse town. He grew up in the seventies, and a big part of him never left. These days, his long hair was just as much gray as brown, and his growing potbelly had stretched out all of his old rock concert t-shirts. If you ever got him on a roll, he'd tell you all about his old friends from way back when, before they all passed away or—even worse—gave into "the man." (I tried not to ever get him on a roll.)

He was the owner, operator, and sole employee of New Pages, the town's only book and music shop (and, depending on who you asked, the best place to buy weed). I could tell the moment he realized something was different about me. Although I'd been living with my cast and crutches for over a month now, this was his first time to see me since the attack. The smile on his face switched over to a mix of concern and confusion (confurnsion?), and he pulled off his headphones.

"You alright, kid? What happened?" He came around the counter towards me, but only made it a few steps before freezing in place. The look of confurnsion turned into a look of unbridled nervousness, like a cobra at a mongoose party. He tried to play it cool as he offered an innocent, "Hello there, Officer."

Deputy O'Brien walked in behind me and scoped the place out before focusing on Brother Riley. She spoke slowly, deliberately. "Smells like you have a skunk problem."

Brother Riley laughed and said, "Yeah, we got one of them pole cats stuck in the vents last week, and he made a real stink of things before old Gunther chased him off. Afraid we can't do much about the smell but wait it out."

I looked at her, then at him. It hadn't even occurred to me that there might be any kind of problem when I asked her to bring me here. She gave him a solid stare, then tapped a spot behind her right ear. When I looked back to Brother Riley, I saw him frantically grab the joint tucked behind his ear and stuff it into his jacket pocket before giving her prayer hands and offering a desperate smile.

"Relax, Woodstock. I'm not here to bust your balls."

He exhaled loudly. "Then what brings you into my fine establishment on a brisk winter morning such as this?"

I answered for her. "She's with me."

More confusion.

"Alright then," he said, backing away and returning to his spot behind the counter, "Let me know if you need help finding anything." He put his headphones back on and left us to shop in peace.

O'Brien gave the place a quick once-over. Then, to my disappointment, said, "I'll be waiting in the car." Her hint came through loud and clear: *make it quick*.

It had been too long since I'd picked out a new book. I've never particularly enjoyed shopping for most things. Buying groceries was a necessary evil. Selecting new clothes always felt like a chore. When it came to furniture, I normally got whatever was closest to the front of the thrift store. But searching for my next read at New Pages was different. I found it to be relaxing, therapeutic, meditative even. The bookstore was my mental safe place, and after everything I'd been through, I needed it.

I started up and down the rows, waiting for a good title (or sale price) to call to me. I didn't have anything specific in mind, but I trusted that I would know it when I saw it. Browsing was an important

part of the process, and probably the closest thing I'd ever do to hunting.

I was so deep in the mental exercise that I didn't even realize I wasn't alone until a voice behind me asked, "Find something?"

I jumped so fast I almost fell off my crutches. O'Brien laughed.

"Jeez," I said to her, "You scared the crap out of me."

"You really need to pay more attention. At least until we catch the guy trying to kill you."

"I thought you were going to wait in the car."

"I did. I've been out there for twenty minutes."

"What? That can't be right." I looked at my surroundings and realized that I was all the way on the opposite side of the bookstore from where I thought I was. In my hands was an old paperback Western about a corrupt mayor in a frontier railroad town. It was opened to chapter four, but I had no memory of ever picking it up.

"I'm gonna have to cut our little escort mission short. Today's been a busy one for the crazies and the sheriff needs all hands on deck."

I tried to act cool and play off my confusion, closing the book and placing it back on the shelf, but as I did, I took in the title and cover and noticed that neither looked the least bit familiar. *So how the heck did I know what this book was about?*

She snapped her fingers.

"Sorry," I said.

"You still with me? I said we gotta go. Duty calls."

"Why don't you go ahead without me? I'll be fine here."

She literally scoffed. "I don't know how long this call is going to take, but from the sound of it, there's a lot of blood involved. You'd be stuck here with Jeff Bridges and Fatter Garfield until I'm done, and this place ain't exactly a daycare."

"Then it's a good thing I'm not a child." She raised her brows at me, but I persisted. "Besides, it's not like I'd be any safer at my house."

She relented. "Okay, Crutches, you're an adult. But please be careful and try not to get into any trouble before I get back."

I gestured around us at the small store and asked, "What kind of trouble could I possibly get into?"

I tried to shake my sense of foreboding and slide back into the groove of the book hunt, but the mood was all but ruined. Whatever that was just now had left me shaken. Twenty minutes of my already shorter-than-average lifespan had disappeared without warning, and it wasn't the first time something like this had happened.

It was once a common occurrence. One minute, I'd be sitting behind the counter at work, and then time would skip forward, and I'd find myself standing knee-deep in a hole out back with a shovel in my hands and no idea how I got there. I thought all of that was behind me. Was this another isolated outlier? Or was it the dead canary in the coal mine?

I took a seat on the beanbag chair in the corner and pulled the journal out of my backpack. On a new page, I made a note of my new old symptom. "*Lost time.*"

I had to wonder who I was really keeping these notes for. Was I ever going to look back and read anything in this journal? Or was it all going to be collected and studied by the doctors and mad scientists long after I died? Were these thoughts going to end up in a textbook one day? Was some poor medical assistant going to have to go through and decipher my handwriting? Should I leave that person a nice little message of encouragement or joke to brighten their day?

The lights overhead dimmed and flickered. I held my breath and waited to see if the power was about to go out for good, but then everything returned to normal.

That's when I heard something peculiar on the other side of a bookshelf. It was a strong, full-bodied hiss, like the sound of a hundred soda bottles opening at the same time. I looked in Brother Riley's direction to see if he heard it too, but he was buried in a manga with his noise-canceling headphones doing what they do

best. The sound grew louder, then louder, then—all at once—it went away completely, and I was left to wonder if it was even real, or if my hallucinations were turning much more abstract and boring.

Only one way to find out. I set the journal aside and got to my feet.

I didn't know what to expect on the other side of the bookshelf. Maybe some kind of broken water pipe letting off hot steam or a rice cooker that just finished its cycle or a punctured car tire. Of course, none of those things would have made any sense to find in the middle of a bookstore, but neither did a perfect circle of swirling green and black hovering in the air at chest level. I'll let you guess which of those I found when I turned the corner.

It was about the size of a hula hoop, with a miniature lightning storm of green squiggles silently lighting up the center in pulsating bursts. Although the ring stayed in place like it had been securely fastened to an invisible wall, the interior was anything and everything but solid.

"Uh, Brother Riley?" I called out, hoping he'd hear me over his record. "I think you have a wormhole or something opened up over here."

There was a small part of me that wanted to know what it was. Where it came from. What would happen if I were to touch it. That infinitesimal piece of my subconscious where curiosity resides was whispering its temptation. *Let's go investigate...*

But there's a good reason I don't let that guy steer the ship.

Once I was confident the mystery circle wasn't planning to jump me the second I took my eyes off of it, I turned around. My plan was to go get Brother Riley and let him deal with it. This was his shop, after all. His problem.

I didn't even make it a single step before I saw the creatures standing there, blocking my path.

That's when I understood exactly what was going on... is an expression I hope to be able to honestly say one day. In an act of total desperation, I closed and rubbed my eyes hoping to pull off some sort of mental soft-reboot, but when I opened them again, the pair of familiar-looking creatures were still there, standing side by

side at the edge of the row of books, smiling (I think) and staring at me with giant black eyes.

“Hello,” I said. “Is this your portal?”

The slightly bigger of the two creatures took a step forward. His skin was dark grey and wrapped tightly around his muscular frame. His pointy ears aimed backwards. Saliva hovered at the edge of his lips as he opened his mouth to show off the rows of triangular teeth, sharp enough to shred flesh. And then, he began to speak.

“Akyak! Akyaka! Aka yak yak! Akyakakayakyak!”

The words were shrill and high-pitched. Their meaning was blunt. For no conceivable reason, I understood exactly what the creature was saying. *We have found you. You will not escape justice.*

“Who, me?” I asked.

The designated speaker continued, “AK! Akyaka yak ak yak yak... etc.” (You get the point.) “We have searched for many years, and at long last, we have found you. The stories did not do you justice. You’re even uglier than we could have ever imagined.”

“I think you have the wrong guy,” I said.

“Are you not the one they call...” (He legitimately tried to pronounce the name ‘Jack,’ and got pretty close.)

“Nope,” I said.

The creature who, up until now, had been standing silently by jumped into the conversation. “This one is very good at deception, but his identifying markers are identical to the one who selfishly murdered our great leader.”

“Hey! I got these identifying markers from a secondhand shop,” I said. “And what great leader? You mean Kieffer? That was an accident!”

The one closer to me had a harder time keeping his emotions in check. He took another step forward, pointed a skinny finger at me, and screamed, “You slew the great Akyak, son of Akyak!”

“Really? I’m pretty sure I’d remember something like that. Who are you supposed to be, anyway?”

The creature angrily scratched at one of his own teeth before answering, “I am Akyak the Brave. This is Akayak the Wise. You will

come with us now to face the Ak Yak tribunal. They will find you guilty of your crimes, and you will be killed."

"Okay."

"And then... You will be eaten!"

"Oh, okay."

"Now, step through the portal, where judgment awaits."

"No, that's okay. I'm good."

"He refuses?" asked Akyak the Brave. "He cannot refuse."

"You don't understand," said Akayak the Wise. "We are not giving you a choice. You must go through the portal."

"Or else what?" I asked.

Akyak the Brave screamed, "Or else we cannot judge you in front of the Ak Yak tribunal!"

Akayak the Wise laughed obnoxiously, "Come on, human. Surely you don't expect us to bring the entire tribunal all the way here to judge you. That would be far too impractical. Now stop making this hard for everyone and go through the portal already."

"Look, guys, I'm not trying to be mean or difficult or anything. I just don't see any kind of incentive for me to leave this bookstore. Surely you can understand where I'm coming from."

Akyak the Brave slashed his talons at the air in front of him. "We can make things very unpleasant for you here if you don't go through the portal."

"See, that's the other thing. I didn't want to bring this up earlier because I didn't want to be rude, but you two don't exactly look like the others of your kind that I've met."

"How do you mean?" asked Akyak the Brave.

"Well, how do I put this delicately? The other Akyaks were both..." I held my hand in front of me at about belly-button level.

They looked at one another, then back at me. Akayak the Wise stated, "I don't understand."

"They were both about this tall. You know? In the Danny Devito range. What I'm trying to say is that they were short by human standards."

"Yes?" asked Akayak the Wise. "What does that have to do with us?"

“Yeah,” chimed in the other one. “What are you implying?”

“Well, you two both appear to be about four inches tall.”

They looked at each other again. Then, Akayak the Wise began to cackle. “Oh, I understand now. How hilarious! Your misunderstanding of interdimensional physics is absolutely precious. I forget how stupid humans can sometimes be.” Akyak the Brave started nervously laughing along with him, but I got the feeling he was waiting for an explanation, just like me. “We had to go to great lengths to find a door to your world that still worked. All of the easy connections were already sealed in preparation for your universe’s imminent destruction.”

“Wait, what?”

“But we couldn’t allow you to die in agony with the rest of your world until after you had answered for your high crimes. Which is why we conjured a more complicated dimensional access point. Yes, it may appear to you that we are only—how do you put it—four inches tall. But from our perspective, you’re the one who is only four inches tall.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. We can’t both be smaller than each other.”

“Silly human, if you look across the road at a friend on the other side, does he not look smaller because he is further away? Isn’t it true that, from his point of view, you also look much smaller? This is a basic concept of dimensional relativity. Do you understand? Of course you don’t! Once we go through the portal, we will all be the same relative height once again.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “You sound confident, and you’re using some big words, but that doesn’t sound right to me.”

The wise one laughed, “You are much stupider than they led us to believe.”

“Enough of this!” screamed Akyak the Brave. “If the human refuses to come willingly, I say we bite off his limbs and genitals until he changes his mind!”

“Hey, come on,” I said. “That’s not cool.”

Akayak the Brave took another step closer. It probably wasn’t as intimidating as he’d intended, considering how tiny his legs were.

He would need to take at least another twenty steps before he was close enough for me to knock him away with my crutch. But he never made it that far, because in an unexpected flash of fur and blood, Gunther the store cat pounced on top of the brave creature and started shaking him viciously in his teeth.

Akyak let out a wild screech as Gunther rolled over onto his back and proceeded to eviscerate him with his hind claws. Through bloody screams, he managed to get out a few final words, “Aka.. Aaaak... ayaaak YAAAK!” (Roughly translated, “Avenge Me! OUCH! SHIIIT!”)

Akayak the Wise fell to his knees and screamed, “Akyak! Noooooooooo!!! My brother!!!”

I moved quickly to see if I could grab a hold of the creature and pull it free from Gunther’s maw, but the cat saw me coming, panicked, and darted away with the tiny alien corpse dangling from his mouth.

I bit my lip and averted my eyes from the tearful creature sobbing nearby. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Akayak the Wise screamed, “I hate you!” Then, he jumped to his feet, took a long running start, darted past me, and leapt into the air. As soon as his body passed through the hovering circle, the vortex blinked silently out of existence.

Before I could pull myself back up, I noticed a book on the bottom row with a clearance sticker. I pulled it out, gave it a once over, and decided it was worth the two-dollar price tag.

By the time I got to the front counter, I’d mostly forgotten all about the interdimensional bounty hunters, save for a tiny, nagging thought in the back of my mind: *I really hope this doesn’t come back to bite me in the ass one day.*

“Find what you were looking for?” the old man asked, taking off his headphones. He picked up the book—a suspense thriller about a serial killer who only targets clowns—and said with a soft chuckle, “Oh yeah, I read this one a few years back.”

“Any good?” I asked.

“Couldn’t tell ya. The old noggin ain’t what it used to be.”

“Yeah, I can relate.” I considered mentioning my strange episode of lost time to see what he thought. If there was anyone in this town who could commiserate, it was probably the old guy who spends all day with books and other mind-altering substances. But I didn’t want to make things weird.

“Hey, where’d your friend go?”

“She got called to another crime scene.”

“Oh, really?”

“No, O’Brien.”

Brother Reilly looked puzzled. When the joke landed a moment later, he guffawed out loud and punched the price into his ancient register, then he gave me my total and a curveball. “She’s really pretty, huh?”

“Who?”

“Your cop friend.”

I looked around to see who he was referring to. In time, my brain caught up and I realized we were still talking about O’Brien. “Oh. Yeah, I guess so. I hadn’t really thought about it.”

He put my book into a paper bag and slid it over to me. “You should think about paying more attention to the things around you, Jack.”

“Yeah, so I hear.”

I returned to the beanbag chair, book in hand, and took my seat. The journal was still sitting next to it, opened to a new page where I had started writing about my latest symptoms before the portal distracted me. I took a second to finish this most recent entry with a quick note: “*Hallucinations, Ak Yaks.*”

Next to it, I drew a small doodle of Akyak the Brave being eaten by a giant cat and pointed an arrow at him. *That ought to be good enough.* When I was done, I put the journal into my bag, cracked open my new book, and started reading. It was slow and somewhat predictable, but it held my attention until—

“Hey kid, I almost forgot.” I looked up from the pages to see Brother Riley standing next to me with a mug in one hand and a

framed photo in the other. He handed the picture to me. "I found this while cleaning up the back room earlier. Do you remember that day?"

It was a picture of New Pages, specifically of the modest crowd gathered inside during the store's grand opening. Brother Riley smiled for the camera from behind his counter. At the bottom of the frame, unaware that they were being photographed, stood a happy couple holding hands. I almost didn't recognize myself.

I held the picture in front of me and felt a weird, unfamiliar emotion somewhere between happy and sad. I didn't like it. I wanted it to go away, but at the same time I couldn't take my eyes off of the photo. There was something strange about seeing myself, standing in the same place on the other edge of this chasm of time. I tried to remember the moment, to recreate whatever thoughts had painted that dopey smile on my face. Past and present Jack both stared at the same person. From present-me's point of view, she was frozen in place, laughing so hard her eyes were closed. No doubt something past-me said or did (and almost certainly not intentional), but whatever it was that brought us such fleeting amusement, it was long gone.

"Yeah," I said, forcing myself to look away. "I vaguely remember that day."

I handed him the picture and he took another look at it before laughing. "Man, hard to believe that was four years ago. Wow, I look exactly the same, don't I? Look at you! You looked so much..." He took a second to stare at the picture, clearly struggling to come up with something to say that wouldn't come across as an insult. Eventually, he gave up and lied, "...also, exactly the same."

I forced a smile. "Thanks."

"Whatever happened to that girl, anyway? You used to bring her in here all the time."

It seemed crazy to me that Brother Riley wouldn't already know the story, but ever since the church labeled him "foot soldier for Satan," he lost his direct connection to the gossip mill. I couldn't blame him for asking what he thought was an innocent question.

"She moved away," I said.

“Well, I’m not surprised. She seemed smart. Like you.” I thought that was going to be the end of it, but then, “Do y’all still keep in touch?”

I was determined not to make this a big deal. “Not really. Last I heard, she’s up in Maine somewhere. Every now and then, I’ll see her at the gas station.”

“Well, you’re a young man. You’ve still got time. Why don’t you go and visit her?”

“I think it’s best if I just stay here.”

“Ahhh,” he said knowingly. “I understand.”

“You do?” (He didn’t.)

“I do. You two had a falling out. It happens. Take it from me, she’ll get over it. Time heals all wounds.”

When my phone started ringing, I was grateful for the excuse to get away from this moment. I checked the caller ID to see that it was O’Brien and answered immediately.

“Hey.”

“Are you still at the bookstore?”

“Yes, why?”

“Are you alone right now?”

“No. Why?”

“Ask Brother John Denver to lock the front doors. Don’t go anywhere until I get there. And don’t talk to anyone you don’t know.” I could hear the moment she switched on her siren.

“I’ll do what I can, but you’re starting to freak me out.”

“Do you know somebody by the name of Karl Thomas?”

“Yeah, he’s—” I took a second to decide how to describe my relationship with Karl. The best I could come up with was, “—a regular at the gas station.” I fully expected her to ignore my question again, but I tried anyway. “*Why?*”

“Were you close?”

Oh.

“I’m assuming from the past tense of that question that he is no longer a regular, huh?”

“I’ll be at the bookstore in five.”

“Is everything okay?”

She had already hung up before I finished my question.

As I put my phone back into my pocket, Brother Riley took a sip of his coffee and asked, “Was that your cop friend?”

“Yeah, I think she thinks I’m about to get murdered. Do you mind—”

“Don’t worry, I’ll go lock up and grab the shotgun.” He took a loud slurp from his mug, then asked, “By the way, have you seen Gunther anywhere?”

Chapter Five

The trip home was quiet and awkward, just like I was used to, but her face told me that this wasn't a normal ride. Something at that crime scene had left her rattled, and she wasn't the sort to rattle easily. She was gripping the steering wheel like she wanted to strangle the life from it.

This time, I didn't even think first before breaking the silence.

"Was it Spencer?"

She kept her eyes on the road and shook her head. "I don't think anyone in their right mind could have done this."

"To be fair, I doubt Spencer is in his right mind."

"What the hell is wrong with this town?!" She spat the words out like they were poison.

"That's the million-dollar question, isn't it?"

I felt a strange wave of *déjà vu* wash over me.

"I'm going to let you know something, Crutches, and maybe I shouldn't tell you this, but I'm all out of fucks to give. The coroner was already there when I showed up. Sheriff must have called him first, before any of us had the chance to inspect the scene. They've already declared the whole thing a suicide. No reason to waste our precious resources looking any further. But between you, me, and the seat cushions, this wasn't like any kind of 'suicide' I've ever heard of before."

"What do you mean?"

"The official story is that poor Karl slit his wrists at the dinner table. That's what the obit's gonna say, anyway. Sounds a lot better than 'removed his fucking hands with an electric jigsaw.'"

She left me with that graphic mental picture.

Wait a second... that doesn't make any sense.

He cut off his hands with a jigsaw? How does that even happen? One hand, sure. But *both* hands? Even with an iron will and pure dedication, the mechanics don't add up. I didn't want to come

off sounding macabre, but my curiosity was boiling over. Finally, I gave in and asked, “How did he saw off the second hand?”

“He didn’t. Once he’d hacked his way through the left wrist, he started chewing off his right hand. Everything, meat and skin, all the way down to the bone. He was a big guy, too, so he made it pretty far before the blood loss finally got to him.”

I regretted asking. It was a nasty way for anyone to go. But as horrific as it sounds, that sort of thing wasn’t exactly uncommon in our town. Karl was a messed up guy, and drugs are drugs, after all. I couldn’t help but feel like there was more to the story than she was letting on.

“That’s R-rated awful, but what’s any of this got to do with me? Not that I don’t appreciate the concern, but from your phone call, I thought it would be something more time sensitive.”

She delivered her answer like she was reading from a police report—all facts, no emotion. “We secured the crime scene until the body had been removed, then we searched his trailer. We found a compartment hidden behind a false wall in the closet of the back room where he’d been stashing pictures and stolen items. It looked like he’d built some sort of shrine in there.”

“I still don’t see what this has to do with me.”

“Do I have to spell it out? It was a shrine to you, Jack.”

“What?”

“There were hundreds of photographs in there, at least. Each one with the date and location of where they were taken written on the back. He must have been watching you for years. There was a chest in there, too. Filled with pictures and drawings, newspaper articles, a few guns and a lot of knives, plus some socks and hair clippings.”

“Oh my God is *that* where my socks keep disappearing off to?”

Her tone grew annoyed. “Jack, this is your first and only warning. Stop joking around. This isn’t funny.”

“I mean, I’m flattered. But if Karl’s dead, then what’s the big deal? I hate that the guy had to die, but it sounds like this problem took care of itself, so to speak.”

She shook her head. "You don't understand... I found his personal journal in his underwear drawer. I took a minute and skimmed it before the sheriff came back inside and kicked everybody out. He said there was nothing left to learn, and ordered us to drop it and move on."

"What was in the journal?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary, but that's not what bothers me."

"I don't understand."

"The handwriting in his journal didn't match the writing from the shrine."

"Oh." The ramifications of that detail hit me like a Mack Truck falling out of the sky. "So, you're saying whoever took all those photos in Karl's closet—"

She picked up the loose thread, "—is still out there, and probably still obsessed."

"Don't you guys have some kind of handwriting database or something you can run it against?"

"Yeah, we keep it in the drawer next to the Magic Eight Ball and divining rods."

Okay. I see that the 'no joking' policy only goes one way. Got it.

"What are we supposed to do now?"

"Nothing. Even if we did have the resources to track down the photographer, I wouldn't be allowed to use them. Officially, Karl committed suicide. Case closed. The sheriff has spoken."

"But you just told me that somebody was taking pictures of me for years without my permission."

"Not a crime."

"It's really creepy, though."

Her silence was a tacit agreement. She could see that I was growing uneasy. I could see that she was calming down. We met in the middle; the new mood in the car could best be described as disturbed, but respectful of the known unknowns (probably the same way the Native Americans felt when they first saw European ships on the horizon).

We pulled up in front of my house a moment later. O'Brien took something out of her front shirt pocket, then put it onto the center console without saying a word. I looked down at the wallet-sized photograph. She kept her eyes forward as I picked it up and looked at an image of myself, standing right outside the gas station with a broom in my hand. The look in my eyes was unmistakable. The Jack here wasn't the same Jack from Brother Riley's photo. The Jack in this picture hadn't slept in months.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, avoiding eye contact. "It's not like I was able to take anything away from the scene. That would have been illegal. But if someone were to recognize the handwriting on the back of one of the photos from Karl's place, maybe an anonymous tip could send the right people in the right direction."

I flipped the photo over to look at the flowery handwriting on the back. I didn't recognize it, but I made a mental note to stay on the lookout, and pocketed the photo. "If I figure it out, you'll be the first to know."

"Have you ever thought about carrying a gun?"

"Not really. I'm clumsy and prone to dropping things and I don't want to accidentally kill someone. Same reasons I don't like holding babies."

She took a second before responding, "Fair enough."

As I reached for the door handle, my cell phone began to ring.

I looked back at O'Brien, who was halfway through an involuntary eye-roll. She already knew what was about to happen. "You don't have to answer that," she said. "You don't owe them anything."

I slowly pulled the phone from my pocket, hoping that it wasn't who we both expected. Maybe I was going to get lucky and this was a wrong number, or telemarketer, or Spencer calling to ask where he could turn himself in. The caller ID quickly dashed those hopes. It was, in fact, the owners, which could only mean one thing.

I was about to have to go back to work.

I answered with a quick, "Hello?"

"Oi, Jack!" It was Mammaw. "I hope you're having a good day. Okay, enough small talk! We need you to get to the gas station, posthaste! I don't know what's going on, but there's a small emergency and you're the only human I trust."

"Okay," I said. "I'll be there in—" I looked at the phone and sighed. She'd already hung up. My next words were to the deputy, "Hey, do you mind if—"

She put the car in gear and peeled out of there like we were under attack. Ten minutes later, I was back at the gas station.

Chapter Six

The “small emergency” she was referring to wasn’t clear right away. When I walked in, Calvin Ambrose was standing behind the counter with his back to me, restocking the cigarettes. I looked around the store, but there weren’t any fires or monsters readily apparent. I chose not to announce my presence, and left Calvin to his task as I gave the store a closer inspection.

I headed towards the back wall, where a couple of garbage bags were taped over the cracked door of the cold drinks case. As soon as I turned the aisle, I spotted Jerry sitting cross-legged on the floor, sealing the bottom of the frame with a line of duct tape. He looked up at me and said, “Sup, bro? I didn’t know you were coming in.”

Mammaw must have called Jerry as well, I thought. Whatever was going on, it must have been a truly desperate emergency.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Did the owners call you out here, too?”

“The owners? Nah, they don’t talk to me anymore. Calvin called me in to help fix the drink case because he’s afraid of glass. Hey, isn’t it ironic that the bullet hole in the window is letting all the cold air in, while the bullet hole in the glass case is letting all the cold air out?”

“What happened to Devon?”

“Calvin fired him.”

“He *fired* Devon? Can he even do that?”

“I don’t know. I’m just the guy who fixes the drink case. By the way, I’m glad you’re here right now. I wanted to show you something. Listen to this.” He opened the plastic-covered door, then slowly closed it. “You hear that?”

“What am I supposed to be hearing?”

He stood up and gestured for me to come closer, then he opened the case again. I leaned in and let the cold air hit me. “*Listen*,” he instructed. “You hear it, right?”

“Hear what?”

“That *voice*?”

I shook my head.

He gave me a desperate look. “Come closer.”

“Jerry, I think we should talk about—”

“Please.”

He was being unusually serious, and I couldn’t forget that I still owed him for taking a bullet for me, so I complied.

“Okay, fine.” I took a deep breath, then I inched a little closer.

“All the way over here,” he instructed.

He stepped away from the cold drink case, and I took his spot. As I rested one hand against the frame, I felt something. There was a rhythm. A soft vibration. Almost, but not quite, like a whisper. Jerry smiled and gestured for me to get closer. I leaned my head into the case, past the frame, then I closed my eyes, and held my breath...

“Jack! What are you doing here?!”

...and quickly pulled it back out.

That voice was coming from behind the front counter. It was Calvin, shouting at me with a deranged smile. I closed the drink case door and started towards the front of the store while Jerry yelled after me, “You heard it, though, right?”

I decided to ignore him for now, at least until I had a chance to talk to Calvin and get his side of the story. He came around the counter and met me halfway, but his smell reached me several seconds before he did.

Something was off about the guy, more so than normal. He was sweating profusely, with pit stains the size of dinner plates ringing his arms and sleeves. As he walked over, he ran a hand through wet hair, leaving it sticking straight up. He came to a stop in front of me and wiped the sweaty palm onto his pants. From this close, it was hard to ignore the fact that he smelled like an elementary school cafeteria on sloppy-joe day, but I put on a polite face and tried anyway.

“Hey Calvin, Jerry says you fired Devon?”

He clicked his tongue and rolled his eyes, then said, “I didn’t *fire* him. I let him go. And now he doesn’t work here anymore.”

“Oh. Well, I can see why Jerry was confused.”

“It’s okay!” he said eagerly, showing off a giant grin. “Now we can find somebody better! Now we can bring in some good American help, someone who will actually learn how to do the job properly. Someone we can trust around the cash register.”

That was a lot to unpack all at once, and the only response I could come up with was, “I’m pretty sure Devon was American.”

He snapped back with a shrill, angry voice, like a teacher who just caught his students running an illegal dice game, “Jack, you’re being naive!”

“I’m just saying, I saw his stuff and—”

“This is what they do! They fake their documents. They act just like us. But they can never really blend in, can they? It’s not just about the language, although that’s a dead giveaway. He wasn’t one of us.”

“Are you feeling okay? You need me to take over the safe for you?”

“No!” he screamed, his lips peeled back in a grimace. “You’ve already got too much time. I’m just as hard of a worker as you are, and to imply that I can’t keep up... you know what that is? That’s a slap in my face! I have *years* of experience doing this, and you’re not going to stand there and tell me I need help. You’re just a kid!”

I gave him a couple seconds to catch his breath. “Hey, I’m sorry.” I wasn’t actually sorry, of course, but a fake apology can go a long way in defusing a hot situation. He relaxed, and his frown disappeared, so I kept going, “I didn’t mean to imply anything. I’ve never really had any help like yours around here before.”

He sneered and laughed, “Yeah, I can see that.”

“I know we both had a crazy morning, and I wanted to see—” I caught myself before ending that sentence. I was going to say “—*if you needed any help*,” but I didn’t want to set him off again. “—if you could show me a few things. Clearly you know this industry better than I do.”

It worked. He was absolutely giddy. “Of course! I’m glad to hear you’re finally coming around. Actually, there’s a very important lesson I want to teach you. See, the real reason I called Jeremy in today was so I could have a talk with him. And it’s great that you’re here, because I think you should be the one to do it.”

“To do what, exactly?”

“It’s time for us to show him the door.”

“I don’t follow—”

“Jeremy is a cancer on this place. He’s lazy and irresponsible, and worst of all, he’s attracting the worst kinds of people. That attack this morning made it clear. He’s going to be the death of us.”

I looked back at where Jerry was standing with his head inside the drink case, then turned to Calvin and said, “I don’t think that was necessarily his fault.”

“Maybe it was and maybe it wasn’t, but I’ve got a business to run, and I can’t take any chances when it comes to safety. He’s got to go, and it has to be now.”

“Okay,” I said. “Counterpoint: He’s still fixing the drink case. And we just lost Devon. And you and I are both pretty far into overtime for the week. What’s the rush?”

Calvin gave me his Calvin-Ambrosest creepy smile, took tiny steps until he was center stage in my personal space, then set a clammy, moist hand on my shoulder. “Jack,” he said in a loud whisper. “Let me explain something to you. Guys like Devon and Jerry—” (he couldn’t help but squeeze my shoulder as he said their names) “—they’re not like us. You know what I mean?”

“Not exactly.”

“We’re big picture guys. We actually care about the job. We understand what has to be done, and we do it. The drink case, the overtime, those are all small, secondary problems. They need to be addressed, yes, and they will be. In time. The terrorists, though—” (he squeezed again) “—That’s a big problem. And a good manager always handles the biggest problems first. Think of the gas station as a patient in the emergency room, and you and I are the doctors.

You're not going to splint a broken pinky when the patient is in cardiac arrest. A good doctor tends to the worst wounds first."

I fake sneezed so I'd have an excuse to back up and get Calvin's gross hand off of me. It was convincing enough that Jerry looked up from what he was doing and yelled out, "Godzilla!" before going back to work.

"You've got a point," I said. "But a good firefighter always puts out the smallest fires first. Think about it."

He made a face—one I'd never seen on a human before—then snarled, "A good mechanic fixes the engine before worrying about the paint scratches."

Oh, are we doing this? Then let's do this!

I retorted, "A smart cheetah always hunts the slowest gazelle."

"A good bomber aims for the biggest targets!"

"And a good survivor shoots the closest zombie."

He wasn't about to out-metaphor me. I read way too much to let that happen. This was my game, and I already had a dozen others loaded up and ready when Jerry interrupted us.

"Hey Jack, I almost forgot to mention something. This cute chick came in earlier today and dropped off her resume."

"Great," I said. "I'll let the owners know. Maybe she can take some of Devon's shifts."

"Yeah, or some of his." He pointed a thumb at the sweating man. Calvin gasped, then laughed like a lunatic.

"I don't think I'm going anywhere any time soon, *Jeremy*."

Jerry smirked, turned to face him, and destroyed him in two words. "Okay, dude."

Calvin's pale face turned bright pink in no time flat. I braced myself, but instead of an explosion, Calvin's head snapped towards the front door and his eyes grew wide like he'd just freebased a kilo of catnip. He screamed at someone I couldn't see, "HEY! What are *you* doing out there?!"

I tried to get a look at who or what could have possibly pissed him off worse than Jerry, but there was nobody there. Calvin

Ambrose charged towards the doors, flinging them open and yelling back at us, "You two stay here! I'll take care of this!"

The blast of cold air filled the room as Calvin screamed and ran into the parking lot after his white whale. Once the door had closed behind him, Jerry said what we were both thinking. "That dude has lost his mind."

I nodded. "I guess this is what Pops was worried about."

Jerry went to the tool aisle while I walked behind the counter to clock in for the day. Next to the time clock, Calvin had posted a new handwritten sheet filled with "Important Rules for Every Employee to Remember!"

I did a quick scan of the list, and noticed that some of the "Rules" made a lot less sense than others. Some of them looked okay only at first glance. Some of them were pure nonsense. All of them were pointless.

"Smile or you will be written up."

"No more birthdays."

"Employees must wash all hands and feet inside the building at all times."

"Nobody can be taller than the gas station has rooms. Don't forget to count the rooms."

"Do not believe the hobo. He is a liar and a killer."

"There are only 40 eye combinations."

"There will be consequences."

"Remember: We all taste like pork."

I'd read enough. Calvin had gone off the deep end.

I took out the picture from Karl's house and compared the handwriting on the back to Calvin's. Sadly, no match (if only it were that easy). Next, I tore the list off the wall, crumpled it up, and tossed it into the trash where it belonged. Then I joined Jerry next to the drink case. He had a hammer and screwdriver in either hand, with the door opened as far as it would swing.

"I guess this job brings out the crazy in some people," he said matter-of-factly.

"Speaking of which, what exactly are you doing right now?"

He raised his tools to the door hinges. "Oh, this? I'm removing the drink case door so I can figure out where that mysterious voice is coming from."

It was probably one of the least worst answers he could have given, and as long as he wasn't building another bomb, I was ready to consider it a win.

"You know," he said. "with Calvin going nuts and all, you think the owners might be willing to bump Van up to full time when she gets back?"

I didn't know how to respond. *Should I point out the obvious?*

"I don't think she's going to want to come back to the gas station."

"Of course she is," he said with a laugh. "Where else is she going to work?"

Does he know something I don't?

The front door slammed open and Calvin staggered back inside, screaming, "Jack! I need an ambulance!"

I raced back to the front as fast as my crutches would let me. As soon as I made it to the end of the aisle, I could see why he was screaming, and for once I didn't think he was overreacting. There was a trail of blood from the front door to the counter where he was crouched over, hugging his wet, red arm tightly against his chest.

I grabbed the store phone, twisted on the egg-timer, put a dollar in the register, and started to dial O'Brien's number. Halfway through punching in the digits, Calvin reached across the counter and slammed a bloodied hand on top of the switch hook, ending the call before it started. We locked eyes, and he smiled with his jaw opened wide.

I lowered the receiver and asked, "What happened?"

He whispered like it was a naughty secret. "It was that *gosh dang* hobo!"

"Does he have a knife or something?"

"He *bit* me! That son of a gun bit me like a wild animal!"

Jerry calmly walked up behind him, asking "Why would anyone bite a wild animal?"

I looked at Jerry, then pointed at the front door. “Do you mind?”

He cracked his knuckles, turned, and walked right outside, announcing as he went, “I’m gonna go kick this guy in the uterus.”

I yelled after him, “I meant, do you mind locking the doors?!” But it was too late, he was already gone.

Calvin was pooling blood all over the counter, but he wouldn’t let his hand off the telephone hook. “That hobo bit me down to the bone! What the H-E-double hockey sticks is wrong with the people in this town?”

I tried to pry his death grip open, but he wouldn’t budge.

“Okay, Calvin, stay calm. Is there any particular reason you aren’t letting me call for help?”

“Jack! Listen.” His eyes were visibly dilated now. “Can you-Can you do me a favor-Can we call someone other than that—” He darted his tongue out and back in like a snake tasting the air. “—one girl?”

“You mean O’Brien? Why?”

He wobbled for a second, but didn’t go down. “Look, I get it. I... I know... you’re stuck with her because she’s new so she has to give you rides and whatnot until she earns her wings, but this... this is a real emergency. So, *you know*.”

“Sorry, I don’t follow.”

“Come on, Jack. This is a little above her pay grade. Do you think we can request they send out a white guy instead?”

Wowwww.

“It’s not a Burger King. They don’t do special requests. And O’Brien’s the best deputy they have.”

“It’s a simple question. They can say no if they want, but it’s worth asking.”

“Is it, though?”

His eyes shot open wide like an owl’s, like he suddenly realized that he’d actually said those words out loud instead of just thinking them. But rather than backtrack, he dug in his heels.

“Hey!” he hollered defensively. “Let’s get one thing perfectly clear. I am not a racist! Okay? I watched every episode of Fresh

Prince! I used to babysit black kids! I don't have a racist bone in my body! I'm just stating a scientific fact. A white guy is going to understand us better."

I ignored the urge to roll me eyes.

"Okay, sure, whatever. Why don't you let me call for help, and then we can—"

"You gotta learn something, Jack. You can't be afraid of offending people. Guys like us can't even walk down the street these days without hurting someone's feelings. You can't... you can't let them win."

The blood had spread to the edge of the counter and was beginning to drip onto the floor, but he wouldn't let go of the phone.

"Calvin, you should probably stop talking."

"What kind of a name is 'O'Brien' for one of them anyway? Who do you think she married to get that name? Probably a green card marriage, huh? Typical. Micks are always cutting corners."

"Wow, dude."

"See? I'm not racist. I hate everyone equally! I'm just saying—I'm... I'm just... Is it hot in here? Or—"

With that, Calvin released the phone and passed out on the floor in a puddle of his own blood.

The ambulance transported Calvin Ambrose to the emergency room to get stitches, a rabies shot, and a tetanus booster while O'Brien stayed behind to take our statements. Once again, I wasn't much help. The only thing I witnessed out of the ordinary was Calvin Ambrose's uglier side coming up for air.

Jerry reported that there were no signs of hobos or hobo-like activity when he went to check outside, and loudly opined that Calvin had probably bitten himself.

I called and let the owners know what happened. Pops listened to my retelling and offered the simple condolence of, "That's too bad," before asking if I could cover the rest of Calvin's shift before mine started that night.

Chapter Seven

The doctors advised Calvin to take at least a couple of days off from work to let his arm fully heal. Unlike me, he was the kind of guy who listened to doctors' advice. We shuffled around a few shifts, and even tried calling Devon to get him rehired, but he never answered our calls. Curiously, he didn't leave a forwarding address, and he never came to pick up his last paycheck, either.

The owners let me know they'd be going through the applications to hire a fresh batch of "new meat" soon (their words), but in the meantime, I'd be picking up a lot of slack. Sunday was meant to be my first day off in two weeks, but after everything that had happened, days off were starting to look like a thing of the past.

But hey, at least Calvin isn't going to get any overtime!

I spent the hour before my Sunday shift pantsless in my living room, trying to find a way to scratch the relentless itch below my cast. I'd never had a cast before, and I was warned that these things would be "uncomfortable" from time to time, but words couldn't prepare me for just how bad it could be.

I had almost gotten used to life with my broken leg. My first day back from the hospital after surgery, I took a seam-ripper to the right legs of my four favorite pairs of jeans so I could still wear them over the cast. The crutch bruises under my armpits had mostly numbed over by now, and I'd perfected the art of putting on underwear every day with a wire hanger. Even the pain wasn't too much to manage; I'd already been living with a certain degree of physical suffering ever since my brain forgot how to fall asleep years ago.

But the *itching*... well, there's only so much a man can take.

I used a fork and scratched it out until I was sure I'd do some real damage if I didn't stop, then tried my best to completely ignore it. I learned that itching, like so many other things, grows stronger the more attention it gets. (Go ahead and take a moment to appreciate

the fact that you're not itchy right now. Just don't think about it too hard.)

O'Brien honked twice outside right as I finished safety pinning my jeans over the cast. It was time to start another work day, and I was thankful. Anything to take my mind off the itching was a welcome distraction.

With nothing to compare it to, I had no idea that the feeling in my leg wasn't normal.

Jerry wasn't behind the counter when I walked inside. For a split second, I thought he might have quit without notice, but then I heard him tinkering with something by the cold drink case and breathed a sigh of relief. When I saw what he was up to, I wondered if my relief had been a bit premature.

He volunteered to cover my overnight shift. I thought that was suspicious at first, but now I could see that it had something to do with the way he was hyper-obsessing over this... whatever it was.

He had connected another roll of copper wiring to the door frame, with one cable attached to the dismantled corpse of an old Walkman from the lost and found box. There was a paper sign dangling from the grid of wires that read, "Case closed! (for repairs)."

At his feet were a soldering gun and the multimeter that one of the Elm Street Irregulars mailed me unprompted so I could test the station for "ghost EVP's." From the look of it, he must have been working on this all night.

He perked up once he saw me walking over.

"Hey." I said. "How was your shift?"

"Boring."

"Did we have many customers?"

"I don't know, I wasn't really paying attention."

I nodded at the wall of wires. "What's all this folderol?"

He thrust the Frankensteined Walkman into my hands, saying, "I thought you'd never ask! First off, how much do you know about electronic circuitry?"

"I guess I know an average amount for a gas station clerk."

"So, next to nothing? Okay, perfect! I'll give you the simplified version. You know how refrigerators use a disproportionate amount of electricity? And you know how most buildings in America use alternating current over direct current?"

"Sure."

"Well, turns out the live wire running to the refrigeration unit actually spans the entire border of the gas station. There are ground fault interrupters set up every few feet, because—get this—there's a steady current running through the walls and doors and everything metal in the place. You're probably thinking, *that doesn't sound right*. And you would be correct! It's not, *unless* the person who designed the building was trying to build some kind of Faraday cage, like they wanted to block all outgoing signals. Think about it."

He tapped the side of his head and looked at me like he had just pulled off a magic trick, but I genuinely didn't know what he was talking about.

"Can you dumb that down for me by like, ninety percent?"

"Sure. Gas station electronics are all wacky."

"Why?"

"I don't know, but I do know this: something about the wiring in here turns the building into a perfect radio antenna. Check it out for yourself." With that, he pulled a pair of headphones out of his jacket pocket, plugged them into the output jack of the Frankenradio, and placed them on my head.

Suddenly, I could hear it.

"...will die before he sees it... First grade teacher Beatrice Hope has contracted head lice..."

A man. Speaking clear as day.

"...Her class will experience eighty percent lice outbreak within thirty-two hours..."

The voice was mature, but not too deep.

"The temperature at the center of town is negative five degrees Celsius..."

He spoke completely devoid of emotion or nuance.

“There are forty-one residential vehicles currently operating on the town’s roads...”

There was a robotic steadiness to it.

“The time is seven hours and fifty-five minutes...”

The accent was unfamiliar, but the way he rolled his r’s and hocked his h’s led me to believe that English was not his native tongue.

“The natural gas valve in Muriel Krasnov’s home has been improperly closed...”

He never paused to consider what he was going to say next. He never coughed, sighed, audibly breathed, or slowed down. He just spoke, unending, sentence after sentence. Seemingly random. Sometimes, one sentence led into the next. Most of the time, it was a jump. I listened to the words for way longer than I should have, but it only took a few seconds for me to understand that this frequency was not meant for our ears.

I pointed at the earphones and mouthed the words, *What is this?*

“Keep listening!”

“Paul Morris has systolic blood pressure of one hundred and forty-four millimeter of mercury... His dog has been run over by minivan... Kelly Pratt is driver... She flees from scene of accident...”

I could feel something happening. My mind was humming. I was getting a slight buzz, and the longer I listened to the voice, the stronger it got. I took the headphones off and handed the whole thing back to Jerry. He took it and offered a big, dumb smile.

“Eh?” he began, “Am I crazy, or is there a mysterious radio signal hidden below the audible wavelengths?”

He’d definitely found something, and despite the nagging feeling in the back of my mind that this was the kind of *something* that should not be found, I had started this day looking for a distraction, and my curiosity wouldn’t shut up.

“Okay, I’ll bite. If the gas station is some kind of antenna, then how far away is the source of this signal?”

Jerry scratched his chin, “Hard to say, exactly. But some simple math can give us a ballpark estimate. I’ve been working on

this all day.” He reached into the back pocket of his jeans to pull out a folded sheet of graph paper, handing it to me as he continued his train of thought, “We start by calculating the decibel milliwatts we’re getting with the antenna attached directly, compare that to the reading without the attachment to get a baseline for EM white noise. Next we measure the amount of slack on the variable capacitor while staying in range of the frequency, then reverse the polarity of the neutron flow, and boom! Bob’s your uncle! Take a look and tell me what you think.”

I unfolded the graph paper. “Jerry, this is just a drawing of a penis.”

“No, not that!” He shook his head. “It’s on the other side. Turn it around.”

I flipped the paper over, took a look, and sighed. “Jerry, this is just another penis.”

“No,” he corrected, “It’s a dick-butt. He’s one of the mascots of the internet.”

Despite my better inclinations, I took a closer look at the illustration in front of me—a crude pencil drawing of an anthropomorphic penis, complete with its own face, limbs, enormous buttocks, and a tail that resembled a smaller penis.

“Why are you—”

“I’m thinking about getting him tattooed on my back to cover that annoying bullet wound scar. I wanted to know what you thought.”

“Do you want my *honest* opinion?”

He read my face, took out a cigarette, put it between his teeth and lit it before answering, “No, nevermind.”

I handed the paper back to him, which he promptly crumpled into a ball and tossed on top of the drink case. As he did so, I felt an excruciating wave of itchiness surge across the top of my leg, from the area just above the knee all the way to where the cast ended near my thigh. I closed my eyes and focused on taking deep breaths, trying to wait it out until the itch became tolerable again, but it didn’t feel like this wave was subsiding any time soon.

“Hey, you okay bro?” I opened my eyes to see Jerry giving me a look of confusion as he puffed at his cigarette. “You look like you’re about to climax.”

“Sorry, I just... it’s this stupid cast. It itches like hell and there’s nothing I can do about it.” I tried scratching furiously through the layers of jeans and plaster, but all that did was annoy me. I took a deep breath, then decided that I’d had enough. “Hey, do you mind watching the register for a minute longer?”

I was already on my way back to the counter before he finished saying, “Sure, buddy.” I made a quick stop to grab a metal ruler from behind the counter, then I headed straight to the bathroom.

As soon as the door was locked behind me, I got to work removing the safety pins and pulling the pants free from the cast, then I slipped the cold, metal ruler into the space between the leg skin and plaster. It provided momentary relief, but then the itching spread in waves, deeper down my leg. I dug the ruler as far as it would go and chased the itch, scratching hard and carelessly, ignoring the pain and basking in the merciful relief until finally, the itching had abated. I relaxed on the toilet stall and took a deep breath, then I pulled the ruler back out.

As I did, a line of tiny orange roaches poured out of the space between my skin and cast. Dozens of them. Maybe hundreds. Skittering, crawling over one another in every direction. I screamed and swatted at them and tried to jump away, but there was nowhere to go. I fell into the space between the toilet and wall as the insects ran up the stall and across my stomach. I slapped and scratched and convulsed until I heard a loud knock on the bathroom door, followed by Jerry’s voice asking “You okay in there, dude?”

I snapped out of it.

There was nothing there. No bugs anymore. But no bug bodies either. Just a sober realization that they were never there to

begin with. I struggled to free myself from the disgusting space next to the toilet.

“I’m okay,” I called out, not entirely sure I believed myself.

“You hallucinating or something?”

“I sure as hell hope so.”

I managed to right myself on the toilet again. The itchiness was gone, for now. I reapplied the safety pins as fast as I could before getting the hell out of there.

Jerry couldn’t wait to get home before calling it a day and crashing. So, just like old times, he camped out in the supply closet, sleeping it off in the hammock while I counted down his till. I wasn’t fully sure what to make of the fact that he was nearly four hundred dollars over, but having too much money wasn’t something I was going to get worked up over. I put the surplus cash in an envelope in the safe with the words “Emergency Fund” written on the side.

I made a fresh pot of coffee, cleaned up the mess around the drink case, took the photo from Karl’s place out of my wallet, and compared the writing on the back to the “Case Closed” sign that Jerry had made. Despite some similarities, his handwriting was clearly not a match for my mystery stalker.

I almost felt guilty for checking.

The day chugged along like a rusty train engine. Customers came and went. Garbage appeared out of thin air. A truck dropped off our monthly supply of dry goods, and the delivery man stacked the boxes under and around the unconscious guy in the hammock. I read a book about a kaiju that falls in love with a giant robot and attacks cities just to get his attention. A man without any shoes came into the store, demanded to use the phone, then left after I told him it would cost twenty-five cents a minute (pay in advance, no

exceptions). All in all, it was just an ordinary day at the gas station, and it stayed that way until just before sundown.

Jerry woke up sometime in the afternoon and went right back to work on what we were now calling the “Russian radio.” His newest upgrade was a longer antenna wire and a set of external speakers so we could set the radio on the counter and listen to the mysterious voice while we “worked.” Much like the lovelorn monster from my novel, I could sense that what we were doing was wrong and possibly dangerous, but I didn’t do anything to stop it. After all, it was just a voice on a radio. What harm could possibly come from listening?

Jerry was standing on a stepladder, tacking the extension wire across the wall to keep it from becoming another tripping hazard when he spotted the truck parked outside.

“Hey, Jack. What do you suppose those guys are doing?”

I put down my book, picked up my crutches, and came around the counter for a better look.

At the entrance of our lot, a solid black truck was parked in such a way that no traffic could fit past it. The headlights were off, the windows were tinted too dark to see inside, the grill was coated in mud and bug pepper, and somebody was standing upright in the bed, looking our way over the cab. He was too far away to recognize, but that might have been the point. One thing I could clearly see was the green paint on his face, camo to match the rest of his clothes.

“I’m not sure,” I said.

“I’ll go see if they need some help.” Jerry dropped his tools onto the booth table, but before he could march outside, I grabbed him by the shirtsleeve.

“Wait,” I said.

“Huh?”

“I think we should lock the door and call O’Brien.”

It was almost like the truck was listening. Like it wasn’t even a vehicle, but a creature, and it knew the moment its cover was blown. The headlights flicked on, the engine roared to life, and the truck lurched forward, speeding right at us. For a moment, I was

certain they were about to kamikaze through the front wall and kill us, but at the last second, the truck screeched into a sharp turn, clearing the parking stones by inches. The man in camo released a crazy battle cry and lobbed something at the front door. Before I could see what it was, it had already collided and exploded in a red mist, turning the door into another web of fractured glass.

With a mad howl from the man in the back of the truck, the vehicle sped away.

I stood still and waited to see if there was going to be an encore performance. Around the ten second mark, Jerry walked over to the door, pushed it open, and jumped back as the curtain of shattered glass fragments crashed to the ground. Some of it fell inside, but most got caught in the pool of blood and gore on the concrete just outside the front door.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Looks like a severed head,” he answered just a little too casually.

“What?”

“It’s okay. I’m pretty sure it’s just a deer head.”

“How is that okay?”

I came a little closer, careful to stay clear of the glass pieces. From here I could see that Jerry was right. It was the head of a young deer with two nubs of antlers. A button buck.

For those of you not familiar with my town’s main pastime, allow me to explain. Button bucks are young deer, one step above a yearling and one step below a spike. Around here, killing a button buck is greatly frowned upon. It would be like beating your wife in most other places. Most of the time, if a hunter kills one by mistake, thinking it’s a doe, they leave it in the woods where it fell. Button bucks are considered bad luck. Garbage animals. Someone apparently found a better use for this one, and whoever it was took the time to nail an envelope into the animal’s skull, right between the eyes.

Jerry crouched down and grabbed the envelope attached to the makeshift projectile and pulled it free with a disgusting *snick!*

“Dude, don’t touch that. It could be evidence.”

“Too late,” he said, opening the red drenched paper and pulling out the note stuffed inside. He unfolded the inner page, read it, then offered it to me.

Well, I thought, he’s already tampered with it. What’s one more set of fingerprints? I took the page and read what somebody had written in sloppy brown handwriting big enough to fill the entire sheet. A cryptic message. Just two words:

“YOUR NEXT.”

“What does this mean?” I asked.

Jerry gave a shrug and answered, “Beats me.”

“Where’s the rest of the message?”

He looked around the deer head, but came up blank. “I don’t know. That’s all it says.”

I flipped it over, but there was nothing on the back. “What were they trying to say? My next... what? You think there was supposed to be another page or something?”

Jerry lit a cigarette and said, “Who knows? These guys are idiots. What did you do to piss off the redneck godfather?”

I took a quick moment to compare the handwriting to that of the picture in my wallet. Again, no match. Probably for the best.

“We need to call O’Brien, then get this mess cleaned up. If any customers show up, we’re not going to be able to—” I froze mid-sentence.

“What?” he asked.

“Where’d the head go?”

It wasn’t there anymore. The only thing on the ground outside was a puddle of glass and blood and a smeared trail leading off to the side. I know I’ve seen some weird things in my career. I’ve witnessed more than a few death fake-outs, but if I was about to see that deer head running away with nothing but its tongue, I was ready to call it and nope out of there for good.

I stepped outside through the new opening in the door and followed the trail of blood until I saw the scarred-up raccoon, gripping the deer head by the ears and dragging it into the thick cover of the tree line.

“Hey!” I yelled.

He froze and looked back with blood red eyes and a feverish smile. As soon as I took another step forward, that son of a bitch lifted the head, *winked* at me, and disappeared into the overgrowth.

I stayed at work until the glass repairman arrived around noon the next day. He gave me a friendly, "Heya, Jack. Which ones this time?"

I pointed out the window, drink case, and front door, then left him to it. Once O'Brien showed up to give me a ride home, I went into the supply closet and woke Jerry up. He fell out of the hammock, landed on a pile of empty cans, and asked, "Wha-where am I? What day is it?"

"It's your turn to watch the store. Put on a shirt. I'll see you in nine hours."

Ten minutes later, I was back at home.

I emptied my backpack and refilled it with a few books I hadn't read and a couple I didn't mind rereading, then went and cleaned myself up. After a quick shower, I made some eggs, picked out a graphic novel about a crime-fighting octopus, scratched the skin below my cast with a wire hanger for thirty minutes, then sat on the couch and started reading. This was how I planned to pass the time until my shift started that night.

I know how it sounds. Here I was with all this extra time, knowing that my days on this earth were running out, and not doing anything productive. But what exactly was I supposed to do? I didn't have any skills to speak of. I wasn't going to use my waking hours solving world hunger or helping NASA get to Mars. I wasn't going to leave a cultural impact. The only instrument I could play was the recorder, and I couldn't even remember where I'd left it. The truth was that the value of my legacy would be measured only after the dissection of my brain and journal, once I was finally done filling both with nonsense.

I was destined to be forgotten. But in the grand scheme, aren't we all? In a cosmic time scale, what's the difference between

being mourned for a minute or an eon? Five billion years from now, the earth will be gone. If humanity manages to escape in some shape or form, it will carry no memory of me. Nobody will hold a grudge that Jack Townsend didn't do more with his free time. I mean, it's not like I was going to end up being solely responsible for a series of events that would eventually summon an all-powerful pain deity to our world to enslave and torture humanity for the rest of eternity. I mean, that would be absolutely crazy, and who could blame me for not seeing something like that coming?

I put the book into my lap and stared at the computer sitting on the coffee table.

I wonder if anyone still remembers the old blog...

It had been a while since the blog unceremoniously vanished from the internet. I never figured out exactly what happened. One morning, I went to update my website, and it simply wasn't there anymore. A few hours of searching would lead any normal person to conclude that the blog had never existed in the first place. Much like Nelson Mandela's death in the eighties, the blog was just one of those things that scattered groups on the internet swore they remembered, but all evidence pointed to the contrary.

Part of me felt relieved. Part of me was annoyed. Part of me wondered if it would be a terrible idea to try and start the blog all over.

There was a loud knocking at the front door. This was alarming, not just because I wasn't expecting company and hadn't had a guest in years. This was alarming because the five-knock pattern came to the familiar beat of "*shave and a haircut*." I held my breath and hoped the sound of my heart beating wasn't too loud to give away my presence. Right when I started to think I may have imagined it, the knocks came again. Slightly louder, but fitting the same pattern:

Knock! Knock-knock-KNOCK. Knock. (Shave and a HAIRcut!)

I searched my immediate surroundings for any kind of weapon, then reached out and grabbed the twisted wire hanger.

Who the hell could that possibly be? O'Brien doesn't knock like that. Spencer doesn't knock. Our town doesn't do Mormons or JW's. Solicitors get shot or run out of town way before they reach my neck of the woods... So, WHO is unexpectedly knocking at my door?

"Jack. You in there, buddy?"

Oh God... It's worse than I thought.

Calvin Ambrose.

I'll own up to the fact that I've done some really stupid things in my lifetime. I've played with forces I didn't understand more than once. I've tempted fate. I let a middle-aged couple talk me into dropping acid and visiting a world of aliens and hippos. I threw a loaded gun at a recently reanimated psychopath.

But I've never done anything quite as stupid as this. My existential angst, curiosity, misplaced confidence that my home could keep me safe, annoyance, and the urge to tell the creepy man to go away all came together in a perfect storm. Before I knew it, the winds had carried me up to the front door, where I turned the deadbolts and opened it just a crack to see the pasty complexion, wide smile, and dead-eyed stare of Calvin "*doesn't understand personal space*" Ambrose.

"Hey buddy!" he sang. "I knew you were in there. I could hear you moving around." His ensuing laugh did little to ease my apprehension.

A hundred possible responses Battle-Royaled in my mind. *Go away. What the hell are you doing here? Excuse you, are you lost? I'm calling the police, did you have any more requests?*

I ended up going with the relatively subdued question, "What are you doing here?"

"Oh," he said. "I just felt like it was time you and I had a managers meeting. That way we could discuss some of the things that are going on at work. Do you mind if I come inside?"

He pushed the door open without waiting for permission. Fortunately, it only budged an inch before the slack on the door chain ran out. I reflexively took a step back.

"Actually, now's not a good time."

“Come on, Jack. I brought some chicken wings. I figured we could hang out and share some ideas about the future of the business.”

“What are you talking about?”

He squeezed his hand and arm through the cracked opening of the door and waved a box of fast food chicken in my general direction, singing, “Chicken wings, are calling your name! Chicken wings, are calling, your naaame! Come on, let me inside already.” With his arm still through the crack, he reached the long, skinny fingers of his other hand inside and hooked them around the chain. “This is a good security measure. Three deadbolts and a security chain. I knew you were smart, Jack. Guys like you and me can never be too safe, huh?”

I was too creeped out to even be mad anymore. Now all I wanted was for him to leave so I could spray every place he touched with disinfectant.

“Calvin, this really isn’t a good time.”

He yanked his appendages back through the door, then poked his face through the narrow crack like he was trying to squeeze through. His nose and chin and hairy twin moles were all inside my house now. His eyes darted around my living room.

“Why not? Wow, this is a really nice place you have. Reminds me of my house. You and I have a lot in common, you know that? Hey, I wanted to talk to you about what I said earlier when I was bleeding out. I want you to know that I’m not a racist or anything like that. Okay? In fact, my cousin is dating a Jew.”

“Calvin, I need you to leave.”

“Why?!” He sounded hurt, almost angry.

I tried a different approach. “I have... company over right now.”

“Oh,” he said. His lips curled into a devious smile. “Oh, I see. You devil. Well, I won’t interrupt. It’s very important for young men like yourself to engage in all that life has to offer! Here! Take this!”

His head retracted out of the space, and his arm popped back in, offering me the box of chicken. As soon as I had taken it, his hand formed a *thumbs up*, then an *okay*! He pulled his hand out and

I went to push the door closed, but it didn't move. That's when I realized he was leaning against it on the other side.

"Thanks," I said nervously.

"Hey, I'm going to go wait in my car, okay? Once she finally leaves, we can have our meeting. Let me know if you need me to do something to get her out of your hair, okay? I know how clingy women can get."

He's going to wait in his car?!

"Actually," I said. "You should head on home. I think she's going to be spending the night."

"Oh!" Calvin said with a sneaky laugh. "Oh, you dog! You devil! You *devil dog*! Nice. Good job." He put his open hand back through the crack for me to give him a high five. Regrettably, I gave him what he wanted because I couldn't think of any better way to move him along. His palm was extra sweaty, like he'd just washed his hands in butter.

"Okay, Jack. I'll get out of here. Call me when she's gone so we can talk. Alright?"

"Alright, man."

"You still have my cell phone number, right?"

"Yep."

"You want me to give it to you again right now just to be safe?"

"No, I got it."

"Okay. Call me. Good luck. Oh, one more thing!" He put his hand back through the door for the last time so he could hand me something else. If I'd seen what it was before taking it, I would not have taken it. "Just in case. I know you're a smart guy, but remember to stay smart even when you're distracted! Take it from me. I've been around the block a few times! Okay, have fun, you kids!"

He finally moved away from the door and laughed his way back to his Mercedes. I closed the door, turned the deadbolts, then went to the kitchen where I threw away the food and the plastic-wrapped condom that Calvin had just given me. After that, I went and took a hot bath with lots of soap, but no matter how hard I scrubbed, I still felt dirty.

Chapter Eight

I “forgot” to let Calvin know when I was “available.” I knew that was going to turn into a weird confrontation later, but that was Future-Jack’s problem. Present-Jack had enough to deal with as it was, like getting the gas station ready for another overnight shift and reading another book.

I picked out the one about an elderly superhero with dementia. I made it six chapters in before I realized that it wasn’t supposed to be a comedy, but by that point I’d sunk so much time into it that I felt compelled to power through.

Her voice was excited and friendly, and completely unexpected.

“Hi!”

I looked up from my dreadfully serious book to see her standing there on the other side of the counter, smiling wide and showing teeth. She was on the older side of college aged, a few years younger and a head shorter than me. Tan skin, with long, dark hair and pink highlights. She wore a white t-shirt and jeans under a baggy blue jacket.

“Hello.”

“Rosa Vasquez. Pleased to meet you!” She held out her hand, which I reluctantly took in mine. She gripped tightly and shook twice, almost like she’d practiced. When she released, she took a step back and stared at me. I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything. We just stared at one another in awkward silence for way too long until finally, she prodded me along. “You must be Jack.”

I nodded. “That’s right.”

“Well...” she looked around nervously. “I just wanted to come down and introduce myself, officially.”

I could tell this was going to be another weird interaction, so I went ahead and put the book away.

“Okay. Consider yourself introduced.”

“I’m really looking forward to tomorrow.”

“Why? What happens tomorrow?”

Her smile slowly began to drop, along with the volume of her voice. “My first day.”

“First day of what?”

“Work?”

“Oh. Cool. Congratulations!” I could tell by the look on her face that this wasn’t the response she’d been hoping for. Her smile was completely gone now, replaced with a look of confused uncertainty (confertainty?). She wasn’t saying anything, but she wasn’t leaving either. I had to assume she was waiting for something. This time, I prodded her along, “Where do you work?”

“Here?”

“Cool. Here where?”

I waited for her to elaborate, but she just stared at me with big, brown, confused eyes until finally, “At the... gas station? I’m your new coworker... ?”

“Oh.”

A small, cautious smile returned to her face.

“I thought you were aware.”

“I’m not supposed to be training the newest batch of part-timers until next week. Maybe you got your schedule mixed up?”

“Oh! No, I’m not a part-timer. I applied for a full-time position, and... well, I got the job.”

“What?” My brain was having difficulty translating what she was saying, which was extra worrisome considering I knew we were both speaking the same language. But her words didn’t make any sense.

“Yeah. I’m really looking forward to working with you. I’ve heard so much about you already.”

I tried to take it in a piece at a time.

“You’re the new full-time employee?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve heard so much about me?”

“... yes?”

“And you’re excited to start working here?”

“...uh... Yes?”

“Why?”

She looked around, like she was searching for the candid camera. My cloud of confusion must have been big enough to give her a contact high. “I... I don’t... I don’t know... Wow, you’re really intense, aren’t you?”

Thankfully, the phone picked that moment to ring, giving me a great excuse to put this train wreck of a first impression on hold. I made the international gesture for “one sec,” and picked up.

“Hello?”

“Jack! It’s Pops. How’s the station? Is it snowing?”

“No, no snow.”

“Really? Why not?”

“I couldn’t tell you.”

“Yeah, if you could, you probably wouldn’t be working for a dumb old fart like me. By the way, you should be getting a visit soon from a girl named Rosa. She’ll be coming on board tomorrow as our new full-time associate. Be sure to make her feel comfortable.”

On the other side of the counter, Rosa stared at the wall and rocked back and forth on her toes and heels. She did not look comfortable.

I leaned away from her and whispered into the receiver, “Why?”

“Why? *Why?*! Jack, you don’t ever ask ‘Why.’ What’s happening? What’s gotten into you? Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m just confused. I didn’t think we’d be hiring any more full-timers.”

“What can I say? She turned in an impressive resume, and Mammaw and I liked the cut of her jib.” He chuckled, but then his voice changed into something frantic, “Don’t ruin this for us! She might be our only hope!”

“What?”

“I said, ‘Mammaw and I liked the cut of her jib!’ Now get back to work. We’re all counting on you, Jack.”

He hung up on me in the same abrupt fashion that I’d come to expect from him. Still, I couldn’t help but stare at the phone and feel lost.

The girl asked in a cheerful voice, "Was that Pops?"

"Yeah."

"He seems nice."

"He's not."

"Oh. Noted. Well, I guess I'll be going now. See you tomorrow, Jack?"

"Yeah, I guess I'll see you then."

I watched as she left the store. Once the doors were closed, I grabbed my crutches and walked around the counter to see her getting into her car—a Volkswagen Beetle covered in bumper stickers. I watched as she drove away, then realized that something felt off. Try as I might, I couldn't shake this nagging feeling that things weren't going to end well.

Then it clicked. The reason I felt the way I did. It wasn't necessarily who she was or what she said that bothered me.

It was the timing.

If we'd met a month earlier, I might not have given her a presence a second thought. But that was before Tony died.

One of the last things he said was a warning. We were alone together, and he had no reason to lie. He told me that I was a dead man, and if he didn't kill me, "they" would just send somebody else to finish the job.

Well, he didn't kill me...

I snapped back into the now as soon as I heard the quiet voice coming from somewhere behind me. I turned and scoped out the empty room.

"Hello?" I said. "Somebody in here?"

The voice was faint, but steady, like a one-sided conversation or prayer. I soon realized that it was coming from behind the counter. I held my breath and took tiny steps back to my spot.

"Jerry? Is that you?"

I turned the side of the counter and saw that someone had arranged a ring of lawn gnomes. There were six of them, placed in a circle around the Russian radio, the source of the noise.

I looked around one last time to try and see who could have done this, but the building was empty. Whatever trickster was

messing with me must have snuck in and out the back door in the time it took me to watch Rosa drive away. But, how long was that, exactly?

Did I have another episode?

Did I lose time?

Did I do this?

I walked over to the gnome circle, bent down, and picked up the radio.

"...three hundred meters... Martin Wolf is experiencing myocardial infarction... He will die sitting in front of television before he knows anything is wrong... His wife will find pornographic magazine collection in attic... Marilyn's Diner has rat infestation... Rodent excrement has contaminated ninety-one percent of dry foods..."

I switched the power off and set to work placing the gnomes back on the display shelf.

Jerry came back to work around two o'clock in the morning. He told me he was bored, couldn't sleep, and didn't feel like being alone, but I suspected he just wanted to be close to the Russian radio. I didn't mind the extra company. Or the extra distraction for that matter.

I think that deep down, we both knew we weren't supposed to be listening, but I was curious, and something about the voice was strangely addictive. The smooth, velvety sound of an omniscient phantasm broadcasting directly to our ears with the cadence of a slow dream. The endorphin rush of hearing a forbidden story. The revelation of small-town secrets. A tale told in real time, beyond the constraints of typical structure, beginning, or end. A piece of living art.

Plus, it was a great way to pass the time until the morning rush, and it gave us something to talk about.

"Sheriff Clyde has forgotten about his daughter Mina's birthday... Mina will not attend her father's funeral... Happy birthday

to Mina... Saul Berthelot cries alone in his deer stand... His blood alcohol content is zero point three one one zero... He owns forty-two firearms... His favorite color is purple..."

We came up with a few theories. I suggested the whole thing was an elaborate prank. Maybe it was part of a database of sounds, like an audial B-roll for commercial purposes. Maybe a group of bored townies built a shortwave radio signal as a piece of experimental performance art. Maybe someone was testing out their new microphone, and wanted to say something more elaborate than "Test one, two, three."

But the voice never stopped, never broke, and never repeated itself. At seemingly random intervals, it would announce the time, and it was always accurate. Sometimes it would say something that sounded like pure nonsense.

"The collector is growing his army... Rita has entered her third stage of evolution... She will be ready to harvest by new moon...The gossamer is spun between the teeth... A hunter longs for warm blood... Dustin Peterson has locked himself inside his house... He does not want neighbors to know what he is planning to do... He engages in sexual congress with his Big Mac sandwich..."

Jerry wondered out loud if the voice was even human. I listened closely. His pronunciations were precise, but not quite as much as I would expect from a text-to-speech program. As impossible as it seemed, the announcer's voice sounded real.

"I don't think it's computer-generated," I told him.

Jerry responded, "That's not what I meant."

Before he could elaborate, we heard another noise.

Deep and loud, like the swelling roar of an oncoming thunderstorm. Blaring music, truck engines, and underneath it all, the wild screaming of a hunting party. It was coming from outside and growing closer, and as soon as I realized what was about to happen, I put my crutches into gear and went straight for the door locks.

"Crap crap crap crap!"

Jerry saw me spring into action, but he was several steps behind me, figuratively and literally.

"What? What's happening?"

“Go hide!” I yelled as the caravan of pickups screeched into the parking lot. “The terrorists are back!”

“Do what now?”

I almost made it to the locks, but the men jumping out of their trucks and charging into the store were way faster than a scrawny guy on crutches.

The gust of icy air that hit my face smelled like trouble (assuming trouble smells like ripe body-odor and whiskey sweat). A man with a bushy white beard down his chest slammed into my shoulder as he charged past, nearly taking me off my feet. As I struggled to keep from falling over, he yelled back to the others, “Grab him!”

The next two guys both got me by an arm and forcefully yanked me towards the center of the room. One of them yelled to Whitebeard, “This guy’s a cripple!”

Whitebeard yelled back, “Then put him on the floor!” The next thing I knew, I was hitting the ground with no idea where my crutches had ended up. The rest of them came flooding in and formed a crowd around me. Somewhere between ten and twenty, all decked out in head-to-toe camo.

Whitebeard seemed to be the one in control. He barked out commands, and the others followed. He yelled at one of them to “get the phones.” The guy closest to the counter ripped the line from the wall and smashed the store phone against the floor as the others whooped and cackled like drunken hyenas.

Jerry may have had a chance to make a run for it out the back door, but he never even took his shot. He just walked into the mass of them and quipped, “You guys must be here for the micro-penis support group. Sorry, today’s meeting got cancelled due to insufficient staff.”

Whitebeard pointed and said, “Get him.”

A couple of the bigger ones lunged forward. Jerry got out a quick “Ruh roh” before they latched on. I tried to sit up, but I was immediately met with a boot to the chest and fell flat on my back again. Jerry took a few hits himself before being flung to the ground next to me, and we both went into the fetal position as they circled

around us, screaming and laughing and kicking until finally Whitebeard let out a whistle like he was trying to break glass.

They stopped kicking, but I kept my head and face covered just to be safe. These guys were out for blood, and the fact that none of them were wearing masks told me that one of two things was happening. Either they didn't expect to leave any witnesses, or they weren't thinking straight enough to consider the consequences of their actions. Neither scenario boded well for us.

"Alright," said Whitebeard, "Y'all did good work. We got the fucker, and his little friend, too." Each of his sentences was met with a burst of cheers and laughter. These men were in a feeding frenzy, drunk on Whitebeard's words (and probably alcohol). "Now I got one question. Who here knows how to tie a noose?"

Another triumphant burst of cheers and jeers. Some of the men were spreading out, knocking over displays and raiding the shelves. I could hear glass shattering at the back of the store.

"Hey!" Whitebeard yelled to someone specific. "Bring that over here."

I tried to sit up and see what was happening, but the moment I got off my back, a series of kicks from every side put me back down.

Someone handed Whitebeard a bottle of expensive gin. He looked at the label and said, "Y'all know the only thing this piss water is good for?"

He raised it over his head and I immediately shut my eyes tight and covered my face. The bottle hit the floor right next to my head, exploding to the sound of raucous cheering. I could feel the stinging of glass shards where they had cut into the skin of my neck.

"Alright gentlemen, put that shit away! Everybody gather 'round."

The horde of angry men huddled around us tight enough to block out all light. We were in the collective shadow, under their breath, inside the powder keg. They were practically salivating over us.

Whitebeard started them up again, "It's about time we show this bitch what justice looks like. What do y'all want to do first?"

One of the hunters answered, "I got some rope. I say we drag 'em a couple miles down the road and see how they feel after they ain't got any ass skin left."

There was another hearty round of laughter, but it did nothing to convince me that anyone was joking. Somebody else offered, "I say we take 'em to the creek, tie 'em to a cinder block, and find out if they can swim."

There was some more laughter, and some cheering. Then another voice broke into the room, "I say we let them both go."

That was Jerry, using a fake falsetto. It went over like a turd in a punchbowl, and soon the mob was viciously screaming and kicking us all over again. They weren't holding back, either. My arms were bruised and bleeding, but I kept my head and face covered. A single errant kick could prove fatal, and these guys didn't seem to know what careful looked like.

I can't say how long it went on, but eventually Whitebeard got them all calmed down again. He ordered two of the men to grab Jerry by the arms and stand him up.

"I wanna look him in the eyes."

The men did as they were ordered, and the circle widened for them. Everybody wanted a chance to see what was about to happen.

"Alright," Jerry announced to the room, "before we get started, my safe word is 'banana.' Okay?"

Whitebeard had about three inches, thirty years, and a hundred pounds on Jerry, and up to this point, he'd been fine with letting the others do most of the work. But as he squeezed his hand into a fist, I realized that the worst of it wasn't over yet.

"You think you're funny, murderer?"

Jerry looked genuinely confused.

"What? I haven't murdered anyone... to your knowledge."

"You think hurting a little girl makes you special? All it does is make you a coward. Too much of a pussy to fight someone able to punch back." The men reacted to Whitebeard's words like a fired-up congregation, and he was clearly high on it. "You messed with the

wrong girl in the wrong town. Now let's see if you got what it takes to fight a real man."

"What? What the fuck are you even talking about?"

Someone in the crowd yelled, "We know what you did, *murderer!*" It took me a second to place it, but I recognized the voice. It belonged to a younger guy named Brian Locke, Vanessa's on-again off-again ex-boyfriend.

Whitebeard went on, basking in adulation and self-righteous fury. "You may think you fooled the cops, and you may think you got away with it. But God knows what you did, and ain't nobody gettin' away from what they deserve. Not if I got anything to say about it."

He leaned into the unreserved punch, landing it solidly in Jerry's stomach, forcing him to double over. If it weren't for the two guys holding him up, he would have collapsed to the ground. When the cheers had subsided and Jerry's breath returned, he stood up straight under his own power and said, "Banana! Jesus Fuck, dude. I thought you were supposed to be jolly."

"Hey!" I yelled, trying to get Whitebeard's attention, but before I could say anything else, somebody kicked me in the shoulder and knocked me down all over again. Unfortunately, it worked. I succeeded in getting his attention.

He took a step over to me, turned to make sure Jerry was watching, then pulled a handgun from the holster on his hip and pointed it right at my face. "Here's what's going to happen," he said. "We're going to kill you. You didn't leave us no choice. But your friend here, I don't give a fuck about him. I'm going to ask you some questions. Each time you lie, I'll put a bullet in his good leg." He looked out at the crowd and asked, "How long y'all figure before this Special Ed bleeds out?"

They all cheered. It was a truly nonsensical answer to a pretty direct question, but they were well past rational thought. They just wanted to see someone get hurt.

They all calmed down to watch the show, and I was finally able to get a clear look at the faces in the crowd. They were locals, for sure. I recognized some of them from all the times they came in to buy gas and hunting supplies. At least a couple were members of

the Baptist church. One was an old classmate named Travis Guidry. It's bad enough when strangers form a mob to revenge-murder you in a misguided attempt at vigilantism, but it's especially hurtful when it's someone you grew up with.

"Alright, first question. Where'd you put her?"

Jerry looked down at me. A line of blood flowed from a gash below his eye like red tears.

"Give me a little context. Where'd I put whom?"

Whitebeard pulled back the hammer of his gun and screamed, "Don't play stupid!"

"Whoa!" I shouted, "Calm down! He's really not playing. Look at him! He has no idea what you're talking about!"

"I'm talking about Vanessa!"

For one short moment, the room was deathly quiet. Then Jerry frowned and said, "Fuck you and the horse you rode in on. I would never hurt Van."

The room erupted in angry, loud screams. Whitebeard couldn't keep them together anymore. Somebody took the initiative to jump between the old man and Jerry and start throwing punches. There were cries of "Don't you dare say her name!" and "Kill the fucker!" Whatever control the old man had over them when they came in, they were completely out of it now. He tried screaming, then whistling, but nothing would calm them down. The mob was a wild animal, unleashed and unpredictable, and there was nothing to stop them from ripping Jerry to pieces.

I didn't see who it was, but one of the hunters couldn't get to Jerry fast enough, so he settled on the next best thing and kicked my cast right below the knee. I do not say this lightly, but the pain that shot through my body in that moment was worse than any I'd ever felt, and for a moment, all I could do was lay on the floor with my eyes squeezed shut and scream.

And then we heard the gunshot. I opened my eyes expecting to find that they had executed Jerry on the spot. The crowd moved away from him like he was suddenly toxic, but he was still alive and standing, and now he was looking at the front door. I followed his gaze to see Deputy O'Brien outside, walking across the parking lot.

The doors opened with a whoosh of cold air as the deputy let herself in and holstered her service pistol. The room was quiet enough now to hear a mouse blink. She scanned the gas station with a blank face, making eye contact with everyone inside, then slowly walked into the center of the room, right up to me. A few members of the pack circled around behind her, and for the first time I realized that at least half of them were holding guns.

O'Brien used a quiet, but extremely clear voice, "I'm gonna say this one time, and one time only: pick him up off the ground."

Whitebeard puffed up his chest. It seemed he didn't enjoy having his authority challenged. "Why should we listen to you? Don't you know who my brother is, *cunt*?" He spat that last word with disgust, like he was trying to get the taste of shit out of his mouth.

She kept her cool and locked eyes with him. "I don't give a fuck who you know, what your last name is, or who's your fucking uncle. I don't answer to the sheriff. Understand? You get one chance. After this, the only way out of here is in cuffs or a body bag."

He broke first, looking away from her and down at me. O'Brien slowly turned a full circle, addressing the rest of the room, "Now, looking at this crowd, I don't think I'm gonna fit everybody in the back of the cruiser. And it'd be a fucking shame to shoot every one of you. But I've got a feeling I won't have to do that." She finished her circle and looked back at Whitebeard, adding, "I bet the only person I'd have to shoot is you, and the rest will scatter. What's it going to be, Leon? You feel like testing me tonight?"

Whitebeard (or "Leon," apparently) looked at a couple of the other hunters and nodded in my direction. They took the silent order, pulled me to my feet, and stuffed the crutches under my arms. Somebody patted me on the back and whispered in my ear, "You know we were just messing with you, right?"

O'Brien raised her voice for the first time since walking in, "Listen up. All of you are going to go outside, get back in your trucks, and leave. If any one of you ever sets foot on this property again, you'll be lucky to go to jail." The men all looked at one another uncomfortably, like nobody knew what the next move should be. Her voice went deathly quiet as she asked, "Did I stutter?"

The man closest to the entrance didn't wait for Leon's permission. Once the door had opened, it was like a dam burst, and the rest immediately followed him out. The last to budge was Leon himself, but even he wasn't bold enough to stay in O'Brien's company without any backup. As he walked past her, he growled, "You're dead, cop-bitch."

The rest of the night was a foggy blur.

We gave ourselves a once over to make sure we still had the same number of broken bones that we started with.

I think we pulled out the med kit and began cleaning our wounds. To be honest, I'm not exactly sure.

I remember O'Brien asking something along the lines of "*Why do you look so pale?*"

And I think Jerry pointed out that I was sweating a little too much.

I know at some point, O'Brien felt my face and realized that I was running a high fever.

And that's about all I can remember.

As much as the first part of that night is forever crystalized in my memory, the rest is nothing more than fluid fragments of abstract feelings. I remember fear, anger, pain, confusion. All of these emotions bereft of any context, unattached to reason but strong and justified. My mind held a *how* without a *what* or *why*.

I learned the *what's* and *why's* a few days later. The drugs they gave me at the emergency room had blocked my ability to properly store short-term memories. I know, scientifically speaking, that it makes perfect sense, but the feeling of a hole in your mind where memories are supposed to be is something I'll never get used to. It's almost like knowing that a piece of you is missing.

The next thing I knew, I was alone in a hospital bed, watching "The Price is Right" on a tiny television in the top corner of my room and eating a cup of ice cream.

Something was wrong, I knew that much. But I didn't care because I was high as a kite. With the exception of a few brief glimpses of blood splattering against the faces of my surgeons and the unmistakable burnt smell of bone dust, the entire two days between the southern-justice vigilante party and this moment in the hospital room were completely erased from my memory.

Later that night, O'Brien and Jerry came to visit me at the hospital. That's when they told me the bad news.

Chapter Nine

A skinny old nurse with white hair tied up in a bun came into my room to announce that I had visitors. I was still riding a wave of hardcore pain killers, which is probably why I'd convinced myself that this elderly woman was actually my butler. I smiled and said, "Please show them in, Gaston."

She grunted and left. A second later, she returned with O'Brien and Jerry, whispered some warnings to them that I couldn't quite make out, then excused herself. The deputy took her spot standing at the foot of my bed while Jerry pulled a seat up next to me. He put a red balloon on my chest (no helium—just a balloon filled with mouth air and the words "Get Better" written on the side in black marker).

Hey guys, I said as I closed my journal (it was only then that I realized I had been reading my journal—or was I writing in it?). What brings you both out here?

Jerry's face was covered in dark spots like a dalmatian. In time, I realized that these were bruises, but I couldn't exactly remember why.

"How are you feeling?" She asked.

I'm good, I said. But why are you both staring at me like that?

"You doing okay?" He asked.

Yeah, I'm better than okay. In fact, everything seems a little funny for no reason, and honestly, I can't understand why people are always being so serious all the time. Did you guys come all the way out here just to see me? Or were you already at the hospital for something else? I'd hate it if you wasted-

"Can you hear us?" She enunciated her words carefully.

Yeah. Why? Can't you hear me?

O'Brien gave Jerry a worried look, then said my name a little louder. "Jack? Are you here with us?"

Of course I am. Can't you...

Oh shit. I suddenly realized that I hadn't been speaking out loud this entire time.

"Sorry," I said, "I forgot how to talk. I think somebody spiked my drink or something. Wait, where are my manners? Do you two need anything? Some food, ice cream, hot towel? Where did Gaston go?"

O'Brien leaned closer and asked, "Who's Gaston?"

"My butler."

Jerry laughed. "Did you save me any of them drugs?"

O'Brien cleared her throat. "You do know I'm standing right here, don't you?"

"Oh sorry," he corrected, "Did you save *us* any of them drugs?"

I stretched my arms and felt the dull ache of days-old defensive wounds. It wasn't normal pain; the medicine I was on wouldn't allow me to feel normal pain. Up and down my hands and arms were blue and purple ovals, just like the ones on Jerry's face. The memories started to come back to me in doughy clumps.

I'd been in a fight. But not a regular fight. More like a beating.

"What the hell happened?" I asked.

O'Brien sighed. "You still don't remember? They said it was going to take some time for everything to wear off."

A key piece of the puzzle fell into place.

I've been here before.

"Twilight anesthesia?" I guessed. She nodded. "Those Y'all-Qaeda guys must have really messed us up, huh?"

O'Brien and Jerry glanced at each other. Something else was going on. It sobered me up a notch. O'Brien walked up next to me, rested against the edge of my bed, then put her hand over mine in a gentle, caring, terrifying manner. That sobered me up a couple notches more.

"That's not why you're here."

My heart started beating funny.

"Okay..."

She continued, "This isn't the first time we've had this conversation, but the drugs keep making you forget."

I was seriously freaking out, but holding it in.

“Okay...”

“I’ll let the doctors explain the details, but basically, your immune system was compromised from your... other condition, and your leg got infected under the cast. Apparently, you’d been living with it for days without realizing the tissue was necrotic. Thankfully, they caught it before it reached your bloodstream. I know it doesn’t seem that way now, but you were very lucky.”

“Okay...” I waited for the punchline, but neither of them spoke. Finally, I asked, “What does that mean?”

“It was the only option,” O’Brien explained. “You were going to die.”

“Okay...”

I realized then that my broken leg didn’t itch anymore.

Oh.

Ohhhhhhhh.

I sat up and pulled back the bed sheet to see that the cast was gone, along with a decent section of my leg below the right knee. What was left was covered in a bowling-ball sized wad of gauze bandages, wrapped around the stump, soaked red and overdue for a redressing.

Suddenly, I was sober enough to drive a school bus in a rainstorm. With lucidity came waves of horror and realization. I kept it inside for now and slowly leaned back in the bed, all the while staring down my nose at the space where my right foot should have been. When O’Brien spoke, I forced myself to look away from it.

“It’s not that bad. You’re still alive, and this sort of thing is extremely manageable. In a couple years, you won’t even notice that anything is different.”

I couldn’t argue with that. She must not have realized that I was living with a terminal illness, and in a couple years, I would be dead. Or maybe that was what she meant, but that would be a pretty messed up thing to say.

I took a deep breath and tried to center myself. Yeah, this sucked, but at the end of the day, it was fitting. Some people like to dive into a pool all at once. I always dip my toes in the water first,

then slowly work my way into it in stages, starting at the shallow end. Now, I was going into death the same way. One piece at a time.

I opened my eyes with no memory of ever having closed them, then smiled at O'Brien and Jerry and said, "This... This is okay."

Another piece of my memory fell into place, and O'Brien asked why I was laughing.

"I just got that joke. '*Insufficient staff.*' Very clever, I nearly missed it."

"Wow," Jerry said, "You didn't take the news nearly this well the last couple times we told you. Maybe now you can try to remember it so we don't have to—"

Right then I threw up all over the bed.

After my visitors left, I flipped through my journal to see if I'd written anything useful, but this time around there were no grand epiphanies waiting to be learned. Instead, I found that all of my unremembered entries had been made post-surgery and under the influence of mind-altering substances. This explained why, for six straight pages, I had decorated every square inch of free space with drawings of eyes.

The pages were filled, front and back, with thousands—if not tens of thousands—of eyes. Not all human. Some were round, some oval. Some had horizontal slits for pupils like the eyes of a goat. Some were feline. Some reptilian. Some large and blacked out, and some clustered tightly together like the pebbling of a basketball.

Details varied. A few had eyelashes attached. Some even included the brow and bridge of a nose. Most were simply the eyeball itself.

The pupils were the color of the ink, which, around page three, turned from black to blue. I'd apparently killed an entire pen in the process and started over with a new one.

The eyes were frozen, confined inescapably to the pages, mere illustrations (and not very good ones at that), but somehow

they triggered a tingling in the back of my mind. A sixth sense. A strange sensation that as I stared at the images in the journal, someone or something was looking back at me.

As I turned the sheets, I struggled to remember what had possessed me to draw these things. Maybe there was no reason. With my inhibitions suffocated beneath the weight of first-class drugs, maybe the simplest version of my mind finally got a chance to steer the ship, and this was what came of it. Maybe it was the same subconscious motivation that drives dogs to pee on mailboxes or high schoolers to graffiti dicks onto their drunk friends' faces.

Or maybe I had temporarily become a conduit for something impossibly dark and powerful as it shifted ever closer to our universe. Maybe this was a warning I was too dumb to understand.

The next few pages were filled with finished tic-tac-toe games, like I'd been playing against myself until the second pen died as well.

I noticed that at least one page was missing, carefully ripped out at the seam. When a cursory search around my hospital bed didn't turn up anything, I was left to assume I'd probably eaten it.

I killed time reading a new book—a young adult urban fantasy about a female teenage hacker who was also a vampire. Jerry stole it for me from the hospital gift shop before he left because, as he put it, the cover looked like my kind of kink.

It was an okay read, but it took some time for me to sort everything out because it was part three in a series, and I hadn't read the first couple, and I was still pretty high from the surgery.

I must have been extra distracted trying to figure out what was happening in the book, because I didn't even notice I had another visitor until she sat down in the same seat Jerry had pulled up a few hours earlier.

I put the book down and apologized. She smiled and waited for me to realize what was going on. When it finally clicked, the look of surprise on my face made her laugh out loud.

“Hi, Jack.”

I couldn't believe it.

She came back... for this?

It took me a few tries to find my breath and say her name.

She stood up, moved closer, and sat down on the bed with me, placing her hand on top of mine as she said, “It's been a long time, huh?”

“Why are you here?”

“I heard what happened. How could I stay away?”

“But... you're not supposed to be here.”

She was every bit as beautiful as I remembered, except her smile wasn't as carefree and her green eyes weren't as full of joy. That was to be expected, though. She knew I was right. She wasn't supposed to be here, but I was happy to have her, even if it was just for a fleeting moment.

She studied my face, and I wondered what she thought of what I'd become. We were the same age, but she was young and I was old. Her smile faded as she traced the bruise on my jaw with her fingertips and said, “You're not supposed to be here either, Jack.”

“You're right. I'm supposed to be at work.”

I moved over on the mattress to make enough room for her. She kicked off her shoes, pulled herself onto the bed, and sat cross legged on top of the covers where my right leg should have been.

“Well,” she said, “we've got some catching up to do.”

For the rest of the night, we talked. After the surprise wore off, I quickly forgot how strange it was to finally be in her company again after all this time. Eventually, our conversation veered towards the inevitable topic of the gas station.

I asked, “Did you know we had a giant god living under the building?”

She laughed and said, “No, but that would explain a lot. Is Rocco still the alpha trash-panda?”

“Yes, but he might have some competition if Rita ever comes back. There was this whole thing with a glowing chrysalis, and she might be a werewolf now.”

“Is the bathroom cowboy still around?”

“As far as I know, but he’s been quiet lately.”

“What about the fox lady?”

“She got another one of our part-timers a month or two back.”

“How’s Tom?”

“Dead, I’m afraid.”

“Sorry to hear that. I always liked him. I guess I missed his funeral.”

“So did I. But I’ve never really been one for funerals.”

“I’ll be at yours, you know.”

“I know.”

She sighed and turned away from me to look at the door. “I miss you, Jack.”

I sat up straight. “I missed you, too, Sabine.”

That was all I could remember before time jumped forward again. The next thing I knew, I was alone, staring at *The Price is Right* on the television in the corner of the room with no idea how time had slipped through my fingers again. My door opened, and the not-butler nurse came in to let me know that the hospital was giving my room to a patient with better (as in, any) health insurance, and now it was time for me to pack up my things and go home.

Chapter Ten

Typically, an amputation surgery like mine takes about a month before the physical aspect can be considered “fully healed.” My staples could come out after a week. The doctor recommended I spend at least two whole months taking it easy, without any stress or physical exertion. No heavy lifting in the foreseeable future, and certainly no dancing. They informed me that my physical therapy plan could begin in as little as six weeks, and I was a perfect candidate for prosthesis, although it would take a little patience and a lot of money.

Of course, with no insurance, savings, or disability benefits to speak of, none of that was anything more than fancy doctor words. Besides, even if I could have afforded a replacement part, six weeks was a long time for someone like me to have to wait.

I was discharged from the hospital wearing the same dirty blood-stained clothes they brought me in. Less than three hours later, I was back at work.

One of the first things I did after O’Brien dropped me off at my house was plug in my dead cell phone. After it had time to recharge, I turned it on to see if anyone important had called while I was under sedation. Twenty voicemails were waiting. I took them in order.

“Hey Jack! It’s me!” Already off to a bad start. Calvin Ambrose’s shrill voice sent a shiver down my spine. “I wanted to call and let you know we still need to have that managers meeting. Give me a call back when you get this. My cell number is—”

Delete. Next.

“Hey Jack! It’s me!” Him again. “I’ve been working on the rules list, and I have to say, I didn’t realize how intricate this place is. Did you know there’s a half-second delay on the reflection in the

bathroom mirror? Call me back! We need to discuss this. My number is—”

Delete. Next.

“Hey Jack! It’s me! We have a problem. Jerry still thinks he works here. I’ve threatened to have him removed from the premises. Let me know if he tries to contact you. I don’t—”

Delete. Next.

“Hey Jack! It’s me! That manager meeting is going to be a lot more complicated than I thought. You need to call me so we can discuss—”

Delete. Next.

“Hey Jack! It’s me! What would you say if I told you—”

Delete. “Hey Jack! It’s me!” *Delete.* “Hey Jack! The hobo! He’s back!”

Delete. “Hey Jack! I figured it out. You’re one of them. Aren’t you?”

Delete. “Hey Jack. I know you’re ignoring my messages.” *Delete.*

“Jack. I was wrong about you. You’re just not management material. I’m sorry to do this, but you didn’t leave me any choice. You’re fired!”

Delete. “Hey Jack! It’s me. I just wanted to make sure you got my last message where I said you were fired. Call me back and let me know, would ya?” *Delete.*

The remaining messages all started out with high-pitched laughter. I deleted them all before I could hear any other words. Not that they would have been important anyway.

I’d just finished showering and redressing my leg wound when the phone rang again. I picked it up expecting to see Calvin’s number on the caller ID, but once I saw it was the owners, I answered right away. Mammaw described some vague “emergency” that required my immediate attention. I informed her that I’d been fired by Calvin. She told me I wasn’t getting away that easily. I informed her that my leg had just been hacked off, and she told me that it was okay; I wouldn’t need it.

O’Brien was almost as salty as I was.

“You know you shouldn’t be going in to work today,” she said as I buckled myself into the passenger seat of her cruiser.

“I know.”

She peeled out into the street the same way she always did—unnecessarily fast and aggressively furious.

“It’s still not safe. Spencer Middleton is out there somewhere.”

The mention of his name gave my mind a temporary reprieve from all the other horrible things taking up real estate. Somehow, I had forgotten all about him.

“I know you’re taking this manhunt seriously. Don’t get me wrong, I really do appreciate everything, but I’m starting to think Spencer is hardly the worst of my problems. Those guys who came out to the gas station—”

“I took care of it.”

“Did you arrest them? Did you arrest anyone?”

“I told you. I *took care of it*.” Judging from her tone, this was her final answer, and I would be wise to leave it alone. But if there’s one thing I’m not, it’s wise.

“That guy Leon, it sounded like you knew him from somewhere. He a friend of yours?”

“You really want to open this can of worms?”

“I just want to know what I’m up against. That’s fair, isn’t it?”

She nodded. I must have guessed the right thing to say for once, because she opened up and told me everything.

“Leon is the sheriff’s half-brother. And it wasn’t pure luck that I showed up when I did. Apparently, there’s someone going around town harassing young girls and breaking into the nicer homes. They say he’s a big guy, wears a clown mask and jumpsuit, somehow never gets seen by any of the security cameras.”

I knew she wasn’t one for non sequiturs, but I couldn’t see the connection.

“Yeah, this town is full of bored weirdos.”

“Sheriff issued the decree that any clown sightings require all hands on deck until we catch the SOB. Only problem is, I’m not even sure he’s real. The last couple times the hillbilly mafia hit your store,

it was within a quarter hour of a clown sighting all the way on the other side of town. Doesn't take a genius to see the pattern."

An uneasy feeling started to grow in the pit of my stomach.

"The night they came for Jerry—"

She finished my thought. "Station got an anonymous tip about a supposed 'clown breakin' down at the church. I heard the call for all available units to report straight there."

"But instead, you went to check on us."

"It could be that Leon was using a police scanner, waiting for his chance to strike while everyone was distracted. Or maybe the clown is one of them. Or maybe, there is no clown and the sheriff is in on it. Doesn't matter. I'm on the shit list now. But if I'd gone to the church when he ordered me to..."

She let that thought drift into silence.

We spent the next minute in quiet contemplation before her words snapped me out of it.

"He'll get his. They all will. I promise."

She was staring forward with singular focus on the job at hand. As much as I tried, I couldn't get a read. You know what they say about still waters.

"What did you mean by that?" I asked.

"What did I mean by what?"

"What you just said."

She shook her head.

"I didn't say anything."

As she pulled in, I noticed Calvin Ambrose's Mercedes parked at the edge of the lot, and made an educated guess that he was also here to help out with Mammaw's "emergency."

O'Brien parked in front of the entrance and took off her seatbelt.

"I got this," I said. "You don't have to come inside. I mean, unless you're just crazy about the free coffee."

"What, you embarrassed?"

“The doctors said it’s important that I try and do things for myself. You know, to retain my independence and sense of normalcy.”

The doctors had said no such thing. The sad truth was that she was right. I was embarrassed. I didn’t want O’Brien holding the door for me or acting like I was somehow weaker than before. I needed to know she wouldn’t start treating me any differently now. More than anything, I needed to know that she didn’t feel sorry for me.

“You sure you don’t want me to come in and take a look around first? Make sure there aren’t any murderers lying in wait?”

“Nah, it looks like Calvin is already here. If there are any murderers around, I’m sure he can help me fend them off.”

She laughed. It was unexpected, but genuine and welcome, and as she did so I wondered how she ended up so far from home. What did she do to deserve this punishment? Maybe I’d ask her one day. But this wasn’t the day.

As I opened the door, the greedy December air sucked every bit of warmth from the car. I tried not to let her see me shiver while I put my crutches into position and pulled myself out of the cruiser on the first try. Ironically, my mobility was a lot better now without the broken leg constantly getting in the way. As I started into the building, O’Brien rolled down the passenger side window and yelled out, “Hey, Tripod!”

Great. A new nickname.

I turned to see her smiling at me.

“Yeah?”

“Be careful.” With those parting words, she sped off.

I looked around the gas station, but if there was a grand emergency like the one Mammaw insisted I come and fix, it wasn’t immediately apparent.

Everything seemed to be in order. The aisles were mostly stocked and straightened. The pot of coffee in the corner was full

and hot. Nothing out of place. Nothing missing. Just a normal, empty gas station like the one I was used to.

After a few seconds, it dawned on me why that wasn't right. The gas station shouldn't have been empty.

Where's the clerk on duty?

"Hello?" I called out. "Calvin? You in here?"

I crutch-walked over to the bathroom and pushed open the door to see that it was empty. Next I made my way out back for a quick look around. Nobody there either. Had Calvin up and vanished? Could we be so lucky?

Maybe the fox lady took him.

I quickly pushed that idea out of my head. After all, the fox lady only ever comes at night. Besides, Calvin didn't really seem like her type.

When I got back to the front of the store, Old Bob Hoover was walking inside. He gave me a quick salute before heading toward the crockpot of boiled peanuts. The so-called "emergency" would have to wait until I didn't have any customers. For now, I needed to do my regular job.

As I made my way to the time clock, I saw that Calvin had posted a "revised work schedule" right above it, with every name scratched out and replaced with his own. According to this sheet, he had been working without a single break since I went to the hospital three days earlier.

Oh boy, I thought to myself. That can't be good.

Old Bob walked up to the customer side of the counter, picking his nose with his free hand and holding his wares in the other. I started for the cash register but froze when I saw what was covering the ground beneath it.

A large puddle of lumpy, fresh blood spanned the entire area from the wall to the edge of the counter. Old Bob stared at me, confused as to why I wasn't helping him. He couldn't see from where he was standing, but there was no way I could get to the register without stepping into what was almost certainly an active crime scene.

"Hey Old Bob."

He looked around before answering, like maybe I was talking to a different Old Bob.

“Yeah?”

“It’s on the house this time.”

His eyes got big.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

He wiped his free hand onto his overalls, then grabbed a praline from the display on the counter and asked, “This too?”

“Sure.”

He smiled big, showing off his single front tooth, then turned and left the building.

Once he had gone, I turned the locks and returned to investigate the puddle. It smelled rancid and contained clumps of hair and bone bits and globs of semi-solid material. One useful fact I’d picked up from those hundreds of morbid detective stories I’d read is that a human body contains about a gallon and a half of blood. This mess looked to be in that ballpark. It was only a morbid possibility, but I couldn’t rule it out.

I moved around to the front of the counter and, just for good measure, yelled as loudly as I could, “Hey Calvin?! You in here?”

Surely that puddle wasn’t-

“Yo, Jack! What’s happening?”

The voice came from right behind me. I nearly fell over trying to turn around to see Jerry standing there, eating a corn dog fresh off the roller.

“What are you doing here?!” I blurted.

“Mammaw called me and said there was an emergency and you might need some help.”

“How’d you get inside?”

“Back door. Same as always. Why?”

“I think Calvin Ambrose melted.”

“Sweet. That guy was a tool.” He pulled the remainder of the corn dog off the stick and finished it in a single bite.

I turned back to the counter, reached over, and grabbed the store phone.

“We need to call O’Brien and get her to come back.”

While I dialed her number, Jerry walked around to the other side of the counter and whistled.

“Yikes,” he said, crouching down to get a better look. “What a way to go.”

O’Brien’s cell phone went straight to voicemail three times in a row. She must have still been too close to the edge of town to get proper service. As much as I hated it, there was only one other number to call.

The woman answering the phones picked up right away with a cheerful, “Sheriff’s office!”

“Hi,” I said, “Good morning. How are you?”

“I’m great, darlin’. Blessed to be alive! What can I do for you?”

“Oh, I just needed to leave a message for someone. Deputy Amelia O’Brien.”

“Would you like her cell number?”

“No, that’s not necessary. Can you just ask her to turn around and go back to the gas station at the edge of town as soon as possible?”

“I sure can. Is everything okay?”

“Well, yeah, mostly, probably, but not really though.”

“I’m sorry. Is this an emergency?”

“Yes, but, like, a small emergency. Barely an emergency at all. Call it a micro-emergency.”

“A... ‘micro-emergency’?” She sounded confused.

“Well, it’s kinda hard to describe. But... I think one of my coworkers may have spontaneously liquified.”

What followed was a long period where neither of us said anything. Jerry filled the empty space with a loud laugh and an “I can’t believe you just told her that!”

Finally, the woman recovered her voice and asked, “Is this the half-pig guy?”

“Oh. You remember me.”

“I’ll let her know when she gets here. In the meantime, do you need me to send an ambulance?”

“No, I do not think that will be necessary.”

I considered covering the puddle out of respect, but we didn't have any old newspapers to spare, and I didn't feel like wasting another tarp. Instead, I grabbed the “Wet Floor” display from the crack by the drink case where the old tar pit was already beginning to reform and placed it at the edge of the counter.

Jerry was crouched down at the perimeter of the goo, poking at the lumpier bits with the corn dog stick. “You probably shouldn't do that,” I told him. “Calvin may have had some kind of communicable disease.”

“Yeah, you're probs right. He never struck me as a wrap-it-before-you-tap-it kind of guy.” He stood up and tossed the stick over the puddle at the garbage can on the other side, missing by a couple feet. “Now what do we do?”

There was no gas station protocol for this sort of thing, which is fine because if there were, I would be very worried. “Now, we sit tight and wait for O'Brien to call and tell us what we're supposed to do.”

As I made my way to the coffee machine, I couldn't help but wonder how the average person would react to something like this. Was I supposed to be grief-stricken? Calvin Ambrose was a terrible coworker and human being, sure, but did that make him unworthy of mourning? If the roles were reversed, and he found me in a goop behind the counter, what would he do? Would he cry? Would he care? Or would he force Jerry to clean me up and move right along with his life? I was, after all, very replaceable. We all were.

As I stirred my coffee, I let myself drift.

The tapping man had a point. People die all the time. *Why does any of this matter? What are we even doing here?* I allowed my thoughts to drift, and somewhere along the way they took a wrong step. Without realizing it, I'd fallen into my own head. Now I was tumbling down a rabbit hole of existential distress. Doctor V had warned me that my apathy was a defense mechanism. A wall I'd

constructed to keep the dark emotions from devouring me. He wanted me to prepare for the possibility that these floodgates would open one day, and I'd be at the mercy of whatever I'd forgotten on the other side. I didn't entirely believe him, but now, I worried over what might happen if I were to start caring.

"Boom, baby!" Jerry said, slamming something onto the table before falling into the seat opposite mine. I looked up from my cup to see that I was no longer standing by the coffee pot. Now I was sitting at the booth under the window with absolutely no memory of walking over here. My backpack was on the floor underneath me, and the crutches were leaning against the nearby wall.

I looked over at the coffee pot and tried to remember how I'd gotten over here. Then I looked at my drink. It was full and steaming hot, so I couldn't have lost too much time. This could have been another episode like the bookstore. This may have been a sign that my mind was circling the drain. Or it might just be another residual effect of the twilight amnesia. Would it be irresponsible for me to ignore this and pretend it didn't happen? Yes. Was that exactly what I was planning to do? *Also, yes.*

"What's this?" I asked, looking at the electronic device Jerry had put on the table between us. It looked like a Walkman ate another Walkman, exploded, then underwent reconstructive surgery in the dark with liberal amounts of electrical tape.

"This is what I've been working on while you were out. I give you..." He paused momentarily for dramatic effect. "...the new and improved Russian radio! What do you think?" He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"I thought we were done with this thing," I said. "I'll be honest; I'm a little confused."

"Well prepare to be even more confused, because I got this bad boy up and running better than ever! What mysteries will our Russian Rod Serling reveal to us today? Only one way to find out!"

He turned the radio around so the speakers faced me, then pressed the power switch. The smooth Slavic voice filled the room.

"...tortillas... Virginia Stegall's cat Boots has given birth to six kittens... Three kittens will die within twenty-four hours... Remaining

kittens will be adopted by Mark Shaw in ninety days... Virginia Stegall is in love with Mark Shaw... Van driven by Heather Webb has lost front passenger tire... No one will stop to assist... Heather Webb will change tire alone..."

I reached out and turned off the radio. Jerry looked up at me said, "Wow! What a roller coaster!"

"This is still going on?" I couldn't believe it. "How long is this transmission supposed to be? It must be on a loop or something."

"No loop. I've been listening to it since you left. He never stops talking."

"How is that possible?"

"Pure dedication. You know that means he's recording even when he goes to the bathroom?"

Suddenly, I realized what was different about the radio. I picked it up and turned it over just to be sure, then said. "There's no wire."

"There's no wire!" Jerry echoed excitedly. "We're wireless now!"

"How?"

"Well, it was actually pretty simple. I just needed to set up a short-range frequency transmitter and connect it to the incoming signal. Of course, I had to run a cable to a dish on the roof to get around the frequency jam, but now I should be able to pick up this station for a couple miles if the wind is right. It's going to blow Van's mind when she comes back to work and sees what we made while she was on vacay. And before you say it, I already know. I'm a genius."

Before I could question the wisdom of transmitting this mysterious broadcast to the world, the store phone rang. "That's gotta be O'Brien," I said. "I'll get it."

I made my way to the phone and answered without even thinking. "Hey, you're not going to believe this."

"I try to keep an open mind, Jack. You'd be amazed by some of the things I am willing to believe."

It was not O'Brien.

"Oh. Hi, Pops. I thought you were someone else."

“That’s easy. I can believe that. My turn: Did you know that watermelons are technically berries?”

“I did not, but I can believe it.”

“Well you shouldn’t! It’s not true. I just made it up! That’s the problem with beliefs, Jack. Sometimes you believe the wrong thing.”

“Ah. Okay. You got me.” Jerry walked up next to me and leaned against the counter. He pointed at the phone, and I mouthed the word ‘*Pops.*’

“Good small talk. Now, on to the matter at hand! How’s the new girl working out? She got her sea legs yet?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure Calvin already fired her. And everyone else, too.”

“What?! *Fired her?! Where’s Calvin?* I need you to put that knucklehead on the phone. Now!”

I hesitated for a moment, searching for the right way to break the news. “I’m sorry to have to tell you this, Pops, but I think Calvin may be deceased.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, his car is here, but he isn’t, but there is this thick slurry of blood and viscera behind the counter. I’m no doctor, but I can’t help but think maybe he... you know... metamorphosed into... human jelly? I can’t be sure—”

He interrupted, “Dammit, Jack! I told you! Didn’t I tell you?! I told you not to let him work for more than forty hours! I asked you to reign him in! Then what do you do? You go and take three days off in a row! Well, I hope it was worth it!”

“I was in the hospital. My leg got cut off. I almost died.”

In a flash, his tone went from angry to condescending. “Jack, I’m only saying this because I care about you, and I think you need to hear it from someone you respect: You’re coming off as a bit of a drama queen right now.”

“Did you know this could happen? Did you know Calvin might dissolve if he worked too many hours? *Should I be worried?*”

“Relax. Calvin didn’t ‘dissolve.’ People don’t just turn to liquid.” He lost himself in a short chuckle, then added wistfully, “Were it only so easy!”

“Okay... That’s not suspicious at all.”

“Look, he probably overworked himself and went for a little walk in the woods to blow off steam. Some of you full-timers don’t know how to take a proper break. Why don’t you go ahead and help yourself to a nice stiff drink—on the house—and take a second to relax? Then, once you’ve caught your breath, go get the meat sauce cleaned up and reopen the store. We can’t keep closing shop every time something like this happens. And if you see Mr. Ambrose again, let him know he’s fired.” As usual, he didn’t wait for a reply or confirmation before hanging up.

Jerry hopped onto the counter, leaned across the puddle, and grabbed a pack of cigarettes from the display case, then asked. “How’s Pops?”

“As usual, bizarre and sorely lacking in empathy.”

“Do you think the owners are robots?” he asked as he pulled the plastic wrap from his pack of unpurchased smokes. “That’s my current hypothesis.”

This was just another instalment in a long-running conversation between the two of us. Nobody in town, myself included, had ever actually seen Mammaw or Pops in person before, and when he found this out, Jerry glommed onto that fact like a raccoon to peanut butter. Where I didn’t see any need to think too hard about it, Jerry made it his new personal mission to figure out their story. Who were they? Where did they come from? What were they hiding? When I suggested that they were likely nothing more than eccentric recluses, Jerry dismissed the idea as “too boring to be true.” He instead put forth his own series of suggestions including aliens, minor deities, a time-traveling Bonnie and Clyde, and now: robots.

“Doubtful,” I said.

The phone rang again and I picked up right away, certain that it would be O’Brien this time.

“Hello?”

“Oi, Jack!”

Still not O’Brien.

“Hi, Mammaw.”

“Pops tells me that tomfool Ambrose fired everybody?”

“So it would seem.”

“Well what are you waiting for? Unfire them! Start with that girl. And if you see Ambrose again, kick him in the testicles for me.”

True to form, she hung up on me before I could let her know I can’t kick people anymore.

“So,” Jerry said. “How’s Mammaw?”

“Curt and totally lacking in social grace.”

“Uh huh,” he smirked. “Almost like a robot would be?”

I leaned over the counter and reached for the shelf below the register for the stack of employee applications. About half of them fell out of my grip and landed in the blood puddle.

Well, I guess those guys aren’t getting rehired.

As I worked through the remaining applications, Jerry snapped his fingers and pointed at me. “Oh!” he exclaimed. “Maybe they’re cats!”

I stopped what I was doing to look at him, as if that would offer any further clue as to what he was talking about. “What?”

“Cats. I bet Mammaw and Pops are both highly intelligent cats that learned how to speak and operate telephones. Think about it. It explains everything. *Everything!*”

“They’re not cats. Or robots.”

I found the application I was looking for and took a breath of relief that it hadn’t fallen into the grume pit. Jerry opened his pack of cigarettes and pulled one out with his teeth. “How do you know that?”

“Because I’ve met their daughter.”

I leaned away from Jerry and dialed the number from Rosa’s application. The phone rang so many times that I was amazed when it didn’t go to voicemail.

“Hello?” chirped a cheerful voice.

“Hi, is this Rosa Vasquez?”

“Yes ma’am,” she answered.

It was such an unexpected blow that I had to take a second to recover.

“Hi, this is Jack. From the gas station?”

“Oh!” she yelled in a nervous, high pitched voice. “Oh my god I’m so sorry! I thought you were a deep-voiced woman!”

“Do I sound like... never mind. I was calling because I’m working on the schedule, and we’ve got some shifts that just opened up.”

“Wait,” she stopped me. “I don’t know what’s going on here. I thought I was fired.”

“Why would you think that?”

“I came in to work with Mr. Ambrose and he said some really mean things and told me to go home and never come back.”

I took a deep breath and remembered exactly why I didn’t feel any sympathy for the man. “I’m sorry, Rosa. But you don’t have to worry about that guy anymore. He’s gone.”

“He got fired?”

“Yeah, that too. Can you start tomorrow? Let’s say eight in the morning? I’ll be the one to train you this time.”

“I have a job interview, but I guess if this is a real offer then I can cancel that.”

“Great. I’ll see you then.”

I hung up the phone and turned to Jerry, who looked like he hadn’t moved at all. He was still staring hard, smiling, with one cigarette hanging out of his mouth and another tucked behind each ear. He kept his eyes locked on me while he lit the cigarette, took a drag, and said, “The owners have a daughter?”

“Yeah,” I responded. “She used to work here a long time ago.”

“And why am I just now hearing about her?”

“Because,” I said. “She’s not important.”

“What’s her name?” he asked.

I looked at him. He returned my stare, turned up his chin, and blew a smoke ring into the air.

“Sabine.”

“Is she pretty?”

WHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE—

A strange sound from somewhere outside immediately ended any further discussion. A high-pitched, mechanical whirring, like a

chainsaw on helium, loud enough to pierce the walls and fill the room with noise for the next thirty seconds. All we could do was look at one another and wait for it to end.

When it was done, Jerry took another puff, blew it out his nostrils, then asked, "What the hell was that?"

"Oh good," I said, "you heard it, too."

He tapped the cigarette out on the heel of his shoe, flicked it onto the top of the cold drink case, and announced, "I'm gonna go see what's up. Stay here and guard the Calvin stew." He darted his eyes towards the space behind the counter and whispered, "I don't trust it."

Before I had a chance to say, "Hey, wait, don't go out there! It's probably not safe," he was gone. (I only made it to "Hey, wait—" before he was already out the doors.) Without thinking, I grabbed my crutches and hurried out behind him.

There was nobody outside when I stepped into the sub-freezing morning air. The noise had come from somewhere around the corner of the building. I took a step in that direction.

"Hey, dude?" I called out. "Everything okay over there?"

To my annoyance, he didn't respond. A large part of me wanted to turn and go back into the store and lock myself away until help came. But a larger part of me knew that I couldn't just leave my friend like that. Plus, there was another factor—that annoying voice in the very back of my mind, the one saying, *Come on! Let's go check out that mysterious noise and get to the bottom of things.*

Before I knew it, I was circling the corner, unarmed and half-legged. If there had been any kind of threat waiting for me, I would have been screwed. But there was no one there. The only things out of the ordinary were a blue five-gallon bucket and a red kitchen blender sitting on the ground next to it.

I scanned the area for Jerry, stopping long enough to look at the forest and wonder.

Maybe Pops was on to something. Maybe Jerry forgot what he came out here for and went for a little walk. It was a valid possibility. There were other possibilities, too, but none I wanted to consider. Possibilities involving unnatural predators in the woods...

The wind kicked up, sending a shiver down my spine and freeing me of my temporary trance. The woods and I had an understanding. Their inhabitants were none of my business. Whatever was out there could stay in its lane, and I would do the same. For now, I needed to focus on what was in front of me—those two objects sitting next to the store.

As I approached, I noticed several concerning details. First, the blender was not actually red. It was clear, and filled almost to the top with a thick slurry of dark red pulp. Second, the bucket was half-filled with that same chunky red liquid covering the floor behind the cash register. Third, the blender was plugged into an extension cord, one that ran all the way behind the gas station.

“Hey, Jerry?” I called. There was still no response. I couldn’t hear him, but I also couldn’t hear a monster chewing on his bones, so I hoped for the best and followed the extension cord.

I turned the corner and saw that the cord ran up to an outlet on the wall just a few feet away from the back door. There was still no sign of my coworker, and my worry was spilling over into annoyance. Why would he just run outside like that, with no plan, no backup, and no clue what was waiting for him?

“Jerry?”

Still no response.

Dammit, I thought to myself. *Is this how O’Brien feels all the time?*

I took a step towards the back door, then heard the sound of something moving through the trees nearby. With no other defensive strategy, I held perfectly still and tried to turn invisible (desperate times, right?).

“Hey man,” Jerry said as he emerged from the woods. He had a large tree branch resting over his shoulder like a battle-club. “What are you doing out here?”

“I came to make sure you were okay.”

“That was stupid.”

“I know! What were you doing?”

“I needed a good weapon in case we had to fight a grizzly, and somebody threw away my collection of whomping sticks. I think

it was Calvin.”

“I threw your sticks away. Remember? People kept tripping over them.”

He pulled the branch forward and tested it out, making a slow-motion swing through the air in front of him and imitating lightsaber noises. “This should work. I guess you saw that thing on the side of the building?”

“Yeah, what the hell is that?”

Before Jerry could offer any guesses, we both heard another strange noise. We turned to face the trees as the sound grew closer.

If you’ve never heard a distressed squirrel’s bark before, you’re not missing out. It’s a pretty annoying sound, like a high-pitched “Kukukukukuk,” somewhere between a squeak-toy and a pterodactyl. This was approximately what we were hearing, only much louder. Much more desperate. The wild animal was screaming for its life and being carried straight towards the gas station. Straight towards us.

Jerry pointed his whomping stick at the back door and said, “You wanna maybe—”

I didn’t need him to finish. We hurried to the door as quickly as we could. Jerry got there first, pulled it open, turned to hold it for me, then spotted something over my shoulder that made his eyes grow wide and his jaw drop open. The look on his face should have told me to keep on trucking, right inside to safety, but that part of my brain where curiosity resided was being especially articulate.

What is he looking at? WHAT is he looking at?! Come on! It will only take a second to turn your head and look back and see-

I gave in to the urge and looked...

The man—it took me a moment to decide that yes, this was a man—was down on all fours the hard way, hands and feet on the ground with his ass straight up in the air. He tarantula-crawled out of the forest with a distraught squirrel dangling from his mouth, trapped by the nape of its neck, bloodied, barking, and thrashing in a

hopeless attempt to escape. The man's face was covered in a thick bushy gray and white beard that grew in every direction with no regard for gravity. His hair was long and dirty, poking out from beneath a black fisherman cap, with some parts forming natural dreadlocks. He wore at least four layers of mismatched coats, a couple layers of pants, and no shoes, and his skin was darkened like he'd been sunburned on top of a severe heat rash.

"Sweet baby Jeebus," muttered Jerry, "I don't believe it. He's real!"

I hurried inside the building with Jerry close behind, and waited for him to shut the door before I spoke.

"I guess there really is a hobo."

Jerry looked at the door, then at me, then back at the door.

"Hey, what do you suppose he was doing carrying that poor squirrel over towards the blender?"

The loud, horrific sound of a mechanical whirring coincided perfectly with the end of the animal's calls for help. For the next thirty seconds, we stood still and stared at one another with horrified eyes until the mechanical grinding had finished.

With the room once again deafeningly quiet, I looked at Jerry and said, "I think I just became a vegetarian."

The silence was short-lived, though, as the telephone immediately started to ring. Jerry got to it first and picked up with a friendly, "Thank you for calling the artisan dildo emporium. This is your sommelier, Calvin Ambrose. How may I direct your call?" He watched as I walked up next to him, then handed me the phone. "It's for you."

"Hello?" I answered.

"I don't want to tell you how to do your job, but maybe you shouldn't let Stoner-boy answer the phones." It was O'Brien. *Finally*.

"Did you get my message?"

"I got a message, but I'm not sure what to do with it. Care to fill me in?"

"Well, to be honest, I don't know exactly what's happened. Calvin is missing. And now the hobo is here and killing squirrels."

"Hobo? Where?"

“He’s locked outside right now.”

“Is he armed?”

“He has a blender.”

“Why is it that you can never give me a normal answer?”

Slam!

I looked up to see the hobo’s black eyes staring at me from the other side of the glass door. In his right hand, he held the bucket. With his left hand, he pointed at me, then pointed at the lock on the door.

I yelled to him, “Sorry, we’re closed!” then said into the phone, “The, uh, hobo is here now.”

“Don’t let him inside. Just keep your distance. I’m already on my way.”

“There’s something weird about him. Something I think you should know.” She didn’t respond. “Hello? You still there?” Silence. Hopefully, that meant she was already close enough to the edge of town to lose cell reception.

Jerry walked up to the door, clapping his hands and saying, “Okay, old man, you heard the guy. It’s closing time. You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here.”

The feral man slammed a fist against the glass door.

Jerry responded by slamming his own fist against our side of the door.

“Dude,” I said, “I don’t think that’s helping.”

The hobo dropped his bucket onto the ground, then dashed off to the side where we couldn’t see him anymore.

Jerry looked at me and remarked, “That was easy.”

“Yeah,” I answered, “A little too easy.” Together, we both looked at the back door. I pointed and asked, “You locked that behind us, right?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Okay.”

“I mean, I’m pretty sure.”

“‘Pretty’ sure?”

“Why don’t I go double check?”

I watched him head towards the back, and then heard another man's voice.

"Jack."

It sounded like it was right next to me, but that wasn't quite it. It was above me, only lower, almost as if it was coming from inside my head. I looked up, then down, then snapped my fingers next to my ears to make sure they were still working correctly.

"Jack."

The voice again.

I whispered, "Yes?"

"Let me inside."

I turned around and saw him standing there again, on the other side of the front door, with his face pressed against it, staring at me while his breath fogged up the glass. I moved a step closer.

"No."

He spoke to me without moving his lips. The words, or rather, the meaning, was going straight into my brain, bypassing language and voice and flowing unfettered from mind to mind.

"You need to let me in."

"How are you doing this?" I whispered.

"You're already connected to it."

"To what?"

"You need to let me in, or else I will break in."

"You can try, but Jerry's got a mean whomping stick, and the police are already on their way. Why do you want in so badly? It sucks in here."

"It's hungry." He bent down and picked up the bucket of squirrel chum. *"It needs to feed, and you must open the door."*

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you fools are standing inside its mouth! Now open the door before it swallows you whole!"

Jerry walked up next to me and screamed, "Hey! Gramps! We're not interested. Go away!"

The man clenched his jaw at Jerry.

"This fool does not understand. He does not know what is at stake. His insolence will bring about the-what- wait-what the fuck-is

he really... Why is he taking off his pants?"

I looked over at Jerry, and sure enough, he was unzipping.

"Dude!" I said, averting my eyes. "What are you doing?!"

He turned his back to the door and dropped trou, explaining, "I learned this technique in survival class. It's called 'Bravehearting.' You gotta show the wild animal who's boss." He pressed his bare ass against the glass and yelled over his shoulder, "What the fuck are you gonna do about it? Huh?" The man looked genuinely bewildered (that made two of us). He put the bucket on the ground and took a few steps away.

Jerry spun around and started rubbing his scrotum on the glass next, laughing and teasing, "Yeah, take a look, punk. This is happening, and there's nothing you can do about it!"

The man turned around and took a few steps in the opposite direction. As we watched him go, I confessed, "I honestly did not expect that to work. Good job."

Jerry pulled up and fastened his pants and said, "Thanks."

The old man kept walking, all the way to the gas pumps. That's when I knew I had spoken too soon.

He pressed a button to select the fuel grade, removed the hose from its cradle, put the nozzle into his open mouth, looked back at me, and pulled the trigger. Suddenly, a stream poured out, erupting from his mouth and pouring down his body like a gasoline fountain.

"JERRY!" I screamed, "HIT THE EMERGENCY SHUT OFF SWITCH!"

At least, that's what I meant to scream. But everything was going so fast, my words were stumbling over one another and by the time they left my mouth, it sounded more like "JERITTHESHMORFOFF!"

That was good enough. Jerry immediately sprinted towards the counter and dove over to a triumphant battle cry of "Sproing!" He managed to smack the emergency shut-off button on the wall before landing in the center of the thousand island meat gravy.

I messed up. I should have checked the pumps as soon as I got here. It was part of my responsibilities as a gas station clerk. It

wasn't even an unwritten rule. It was a regular, day-one-of-training rule. The pumps must always be turned off unless a customer has already paid or swiped.

Someone must have manually turned the pumps on before I got here.

Jerry got to the shut off button way faster than I could have hoped to, but it was still a few seconds too late. The man was drenched from head to toe, out of his ever-loving mind, and standing in a puddle of highly flammable liquid.

He shook himself like a wet dog and turned back to me with a grin like a Cheshire cat in heat. When he started for the doors, I tried to tell myself everything was going to be okay. Help was on the way, and this guy had just guzzled enough poison to kill an elephant. He probably wouldn't be much of a threat for very long. All I had to do was wait him out. But when he started smashing his face against the glass door, I realized all bets were off.

SLAM!

His head bounced right off. The noise shook me, but it didn't seem to bother him at all, certainly not enough to stop him from trying again.

SLAM!

The second time, it left significant cracks in the glass.

SLAM!

The third time, the network of jagged cracks spread from edge to edge, leaving a dense lattice of fractures around the center that was, more or less, face-sized, and laced with hobo blood.

I turned to see if Jerry was seeing this too, but he was still behind the counter. He stood up, covered in squirrel butter and whined, "Aw, gross! It's everywhere! Aww, man, it's still warm!"

I turned my attention back to the front door and flinched hard at what was waiting for me. The man on the other side of this thin, shattered barrier was holding a handgun and pointing it at my face.

Lines of blood poured down his forehead and nose, around the curves of his wild smile and clotted together in his thick beard.

When my ability to speak returned, I tried my best to talk him down. "Whoa, dude, it's okay. I'll do whatever you want. I'll let you

inside. Just put the gun away.”

The man began to cackle, then he extended the weapon and pulled the trigger.

“Whoa!” I screamed. My poorly tuned fight-or-flight mechanism had never been more useless than it was now, where neither option was a possibility. I flinched hard from the surge of wasted energy that coursed through my veins with nowhere to go.

Then I realized that I was okay. And for one beautiful moment in time, I felt the calming presence of sweet, innocent relief. That gun wasn’t real! In fact, it was nothing more than a gimmicky butane-lighter. And when he pulled the trigger, instead of firing a bullet, he conjured a tiny flame, which he then turned upon himself.

The whole scene went in slow motion, or at least that’s the way my memory decided to immortalize it. His face was plastered with a huge smile as he pulled his arm back towards his body, bending the elbow, turning the lighter upwards to his mouth. His eyes locked forward, looking past the flame, right at me, and just before the fire touched his wet face, a blinding light took over.

With a loud *fwoom*, the man became a living fireball, flames reaching into the sky past where I could see. And then, I heard him again. Using his *Shining* voice. In my head, he spoke calmly to me. “*I have escaped what is coming. You will not be as lucky. This is your problem now, asshole.*”

He stayed there, standing, staring as the flames ate his clothes and skin. His beard hair singed off instantly, followed by the cheeks and lips that blistered and peeled away until nothing was left of his mouth but the skeleton grin. His eyes blackened and blistered away until they were hollow sockets of charred black, yet still, he stared at me.

“Goodness gracious,” said Jerry, who at some point had walked up next to me and was now standing by my side, watching the man burn.

I tried to peel my gaze away, but I couldn’t. I knew this moment was going to haunt me. Probably for the rest of my life. But there was no way I could get myself to look anywhere but straight

ahead. At long last, I managed to form the words, "How the hell is he still standing?"

"Huh," Jerry said. "That's a good question."

The burning, skeletal remains of the homeless man moved. He stepped forward and punched the door with his boney fist, smashing a hole in the glass large enough to reach through. He leaned forward and grabbed at me, laughing loudly and victoriously, all inside my head.

Jerry wasted no time reacting, shoving the end of his stick through the hole and into the burning man's face hard enough to knock him onto his back. There he stayed until the fire had burned out.

I watched the corpse burn as the sound of sirens grew louder and closer. I watched him as O'Brien's car screeched to a stop nearby. I watched him until finally, she grabbed my face with both hands and turned it away.

I made myself a fresh cup of coffee and sat in the passenger seat of O'Brien's car while the coroner and crime scene techs did their jobs. Jerry was lying down on a long towel in the back seat. O'Brien sat in the driver seat, looking at me. She waited until I'd had a couple sips of caffeine before starting her questions.

Once again, I didn't have much to offer. The whole thing happened so fast. It was one of those classic cases of *crazy forest man grinding squirrels to feed to the unspecified cosmic creature inside the gas station*. Apparently, he would rather drink gasoline and self-immolate than be locked outside in the cold. Or maybe it was the sight of Jerry's bare ass that drove him over the edge. Who knows?

"What did he look like?" she asked.

Jerry took this one for me. "Older guy, late seventies or eighties, Caucasian, five-foot-twelve, thick beard, poor-boy skinny, white hair, big nose, cool hat."

She wrote it all down in her notepad, then asked me directly, "You said something over the phone, right before we got

disconnected.”

“I did?”

“Yeah, you told me there was something ‘weird about him.’ Something you thought I should know. Do you remember saying that?”

“Honestly, I’m still in a fog. I barely remember anything.”

She closed her notepad and put it in her shirt pocket, then said, “Take your time. If you remember what it was, let me know. Okay?”

“Sure.”

She opened her door and left to join the others outside while we waited in the warmth of the car.

I felt guilty for lying to her, but I knew the truth wouldn’t have helped anyone. Of course I remembered what I was going to say to her on the phone. The weird thing about the old hobo. The first thing I noticed when he approached the front of the gas station. Those two, weird, matching moles on the side of his cheek.

They looked like they were staring at me.
Like shark eyes. Or doll eyes.

Chapter Eleven

The owners were not happy. They put up a fuss, made some angry phone calls, and even threatened to get lawyers involved, but in the end they didn't have a say in the matter. The sheriff ordered the business to stay closed until they had time to conduct a "proper" investigation.

The body of the burned man was never identified. Coincidentally, Calvin Ambrose was never found. A tow truck impounded his Mercedes, and a new missing person flyer was printed out for the notice board. Just like that, he joined the ranks of the countless other employees who left without so much as a goodbye.

I didn't have any plans for my unexpected day off. I didn't have any plans for *any* day off. In case it wasn't already obvious, I've never been the kind of guy to have plans. If I were able to sleep, I probably would have crawled into a bed and stayed there until it was time to go back to work.

Instead, I spent the time searching for an adequate distraction. I picked up a new book, but the memory of that day's events was holding me hostage. I read the first chapter three times in a row without absorbing a single word before calling it quits and putting it back on the shelf.

When dinner time rolled around, I decided I should do something about it. I wasn't exactly hungry (something about witnessing a violent death right in front of me always kills my appetite), but I knew that at my weight, skipping meals was dangerous. I still had the mental wherewithal to know that I was messed up and shouldn't be anywhere near sharp objects or open flames, so I played it safe and ordered a pizza.

The delivery guy showed up half an hour later looking strangely nervous. I didn't think anything was too unusual about the way he was sweating or how his eyes were darting from side to side. In this town, his was a dangerous profession. It wasn't until I tried to

pay him and he refused my money that I started to suspect something was wrong.

I should have known from the way he was acting that the order wasn't going to be right. I asked for a medium, thin-crust pizza topped with pepperoni and feta. I checked the box as soon as the driver left. Sure enough, it wasn't even close. The only things in there were a handgun and a white envelope.

I went to the kitchen and made myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, then came back to the living room, where I sat down in front of the pizza box, ate my meal, and wondered how I might have accidentally ended up on the receiving end of an arms deal.

This gun wasn't meant for me. Someone's probably waiting for it. Someone who will likely be upset when they don't get it.

I concluded that the pizza delivery guy must have been the world's worst gun runner, and when I heard the knock at the door a few minutes later, I was convinced that it would be him, ready to apologize and ask for the box back. I was prepared to return it, but not until he went and found my food.

"Just a second!" I yelled from the couch as I grabbed a single crutch and pulled myself to my feet (or rather, foot). It was a strange feeling, but once I was standing, I felt lighter, more mobile than I had been in a long time. I reached for my second crutch but stopped and wondered if it was even necessary.

I took a few steps with the single crutch and realized that without the bulky cast in the way, I could get around just fine single-handed now.

Interesting.

As I made my way to the front door, I felt like a kid riding a bike without training wheels for the first time. I was excited, but fully aware that I could mess up and hurt myself at any second. For now, though, I was keeping my balance just fine. It wasn't until I opened the door that I nearly fell over.

"Hey, bro," said Jerry.

He was standing there with a black graphic t-shirt that read "Do Crime, Y'all" over a picture of Winnie the Pooh, and he had a duffle bag slung over his shoulder.

“Hi. Also, what the hell are you doing here?”

“I was just in the area. Is this a bad time? I can come back later.”

“You were just ‘in the area’? Why?”

“Because I knew you lived here, and I wanted to check in and see how you were doing after the whole... ya know...”

“Yeah. I know.”

For some reason he whispered this next part, like it was our little secret. “...barbeque-man incident.”

“Don’t mention it. And I mean that. *Please*, don’t mention it. Between it and Tony and the leg thing, I’ve pretty much got post-traumatic as my new default setting.”

“Ah, good.”

“No. Not really. Not at all. What?”

“Well if you’re not doing anything important, I brought some booze and video games.”

“Wait. How the hell did you... *did you walk all the way here?*”

He laughed and said, “No, of course not. I’m not crazy. I hitchhiked.”

I took a step back and opened the door wider, “Come on in, I guess.”

He walked past me, stopped in the middle of the living room, and whistled.

“Man, this place is noice! How many roommates do you have?”

“It’s just me.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“You live here *all by yourself?*”

“Yeah?”

“Wow. I’ll be honest. I expected maybe a single-bedroom apartment or a storage unit with a cot in the corner. I thought for sure you were going to be a disgusting hoarder. Like, for real, I was convinced you lived in a shithole. I never would have thought you had a house as nice as this. No offense.”

Sometimes I wonder if people even know what that expression means.

"Thanks," I said.

"It's big. Not as big as mine of course, but way bigger than I was expecting. How'd you swing this on a gas station salary?"

I gave him the short version of the answer. "My foster mother's parents left it to us. Technically, I share the house with my foster brothers and sisters, but all of them were smart enough to get out of town a long time ago."

"You have a family?" He sounded a little too surprised.

"Something like that."

"Oh shit! Is that pizza?"

He dropped his duffle bag, opened the pizza box, and let out a disappointed, "Aww."

"I know!" I said, closing and locking the door behind me. "I think somebody somewhere is just as let down as I am, except they have my pizza. And they might be in danger."

"Did you read the letter yet?" he asked.

"No. Why would I?"

"Because it's addressed to you."

Jerry pulled out the envelope and held it out for me to see the words "*For Jack's eyes only!*" written across the front in flowery calligraphy.

"Oh," I said. "I didn't notice that. Maybe this wasn't a mistake."

"You should open it."

"Yeah, okay."

Jack,

Sorry for the unorthodox delivery. It seems they're watching the mail at the gas station now. I needed to take precautions to ensure this letter found its way to you. Very sad to hear about your

leg, but I guess that's why you have two of them, isn't it? (I wouldn't know. My legs don't work.)

It's been a little while since your last story, and I was beginning to think that maybe it's time for you to make a sequel. You should get ready, because I think this next part is going to have a lot more action! I don't know if you still have the gun I sent you, but just to be safe, here's another.

No need to thank me. I have plenty more where that came from.

By the by, Spencer Middleton sure has been quiet lately. I don't like that. Keep an eye out for him, and don't let anybody sneak up behind you!

Stay safe, OP. I love watching you work.

-Your Biggest Fan

I read the whole thing out loud while Jerry played with the gun.

"I thought I was your biggest fan," he said, a little down on himself.

My mind was swimming through questions. "What is this guy's deal? How did he find out where I lived? How does he know so much about me? Where the hell did my pizza go?"

Jerry was busy plugging his Nintendo into the television while he answered offhandedly, "Well, he did give you a computer. Those things come preinstalled with a camera, GPS chip, mics, and Wifi. Wouldn't be hard to adjust those things for nefarious purposes. Not to mention the fact that one hundred percent of the gas station internet filters through the SAT router he gave us, including passwords and porn. I bet he's been listening to us for months. That's what I'd do if I were him. Or her. Or it."

I went and grabbed my backpack to see if the computer was still in there, but it wasn't. I'd forgotten it back at the gas station. Probably a good thing. If it were bugged, at least my biggest fan didn't know we were on to him now.

A series of realizations took turns punching me in the gut, each one worse than the last. First: *Somebody knows all of my online-account passwords.* Second: *I'm going to have to get a new computer.* Third: *I can't use the gas station's internet anymore.* Fourth: *There's something awfully familiar about my biggest fan's handwriting.*

I dug through my bag until I found what I was looking for—that old wallet-sized photo of me outside the gas station, the one piece of evidence O'Brien rescued from Karl's trailer. I flipped it over and looked at the flowery handwriting on the back. "Jack. gas station. 8:30 AM Feb 14. Morning shift." Compared to the handwriting on the letter from my biggest fan, it was obvious right away.

This was the same person. Hell, it looked like he even used the same pen.

I experienced epiphany aftershock as another realization crashed into place: *My biggest fan has been watching me since way before I ever made a blog.*

Then another: *My biggest fan hired Karl to stalk me.*

Then one final realization, worst of all: *My biggest fan is a local.*

Jerry pushed a Wiimote into my hand and asked, "Have you ever played *Beerio Kart*?"

"Jerry, listen. I want to go check something out, but it might not be legal. There's a good chance it won't be all that safe either. If you think it's a bad idea, I'll understand and we can stay here and play video games, but something tells me there are answers out there and I'm so tired of not knowing what's going on."

He took the Wiimote out of my hand, tossed it onto the couch, then said in a serious voice, "I'm in. You had me at 'Jerry, listen.'"

"That was the first thing I said."

“Come on, Jack! Let’s go do some crime!”

I was already having second thoughts before I got to my car keys and handed them over. By the time we got on the road, I was on the eighth or ninth thoughts. But there was no stopping now. We were on our way to search a dead man’s flop for clues about the person who’d apparently been watching me in secret for years.

We pulled up and parked in an empty space a few trailers down from Karl’s place. Jerry killed the engine, then unzipped his duffle bag and pulled out two black ski masks.

I couldn’t decide which question to ask first: *Why do you have two ski masks in the bag you brought with you to play video games?* Or: *Why are you pulling them out now?*

I combined them both into a simple, “Why, Jerry? Why?”

“Obviously, so that nobody recognizes us breaking in.”

“Jerry, I only have one leg.”

“So?”

I thought about explaining why a ski mask wouldn’t do much to conceal my identity, but I felt like it would take a lot less effort to just put it on. Besides, it was really cold out, and a ski mask might not be too bad.

We tried to look as nonchalant as possible, making our way down the road in masks, me limping along with one crutch and Jerry kindly doing a slow-motion walk to match my pace.

To our surprise, the front door was unlocked. That worked out well because I didn’t have a plan in place for breaking in, and knowing Jerry, he probably would have kicked the door down (there was a small chance he still might before the night was over).

I locked the door behind us and took in the horrible prison Karl had built for himself. It looked like everything of value had already hit Craigslist or a pawn shop. The living room was almost completely empty. No decorations. No television. No real furniture, save for a folding chair and patio table set up in the center of the

room. Judging from the mystery stains on the walls and carpet, this must have been where he ate all of his meals.

“See, *this* is more like what I was expecting from your place. No offense.”

The smell of death and decay had already expanded to fill every cubic inch of stagnant air, and I could only imagine how much worse it would have been if it weren’t freezing cold in there.

The kitchen and laundry room were to our left. The bedrooms were to our right. Considering the fact that he had unhanded himself in the kitchen, I assumed the worst of the smells were wafting from that direction, so we went right.

“Alrighty,” said my partner-in-crime as he rolled his mask up into a cap. “What are we stealing first?”

I pulled up my own ski mask and said, “We’re not stealing anything. We’re looking for any clues that can tell us who hired Karl to break into my place.”

“The guy who lives here tried to break into your house? What a fucking asshole.”

“*Lived* here. He’s dead now.”

“Good. That’s what he gets. Thieving bastard.”

“Keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary.”

The first door we opened was to Karl’s bedroom. Not much here but a half-deflated air mattress in the corner, a scuffed-up dresser covered with pipes and needles, piles of dirty clothes, and a rickety shelf full of books. I instinctively gravitated towards the books while Jerry wandered down the hall in search of the bathroom.

The titles of the tomes told a sad story all on their own. They were mostly self-help books, most dedicated to overcoming addiction. I pulled out the one with the most spine damage and read the summary on the back. This one was of a different nature—*Taking Charge: How to Break Free from an Abusive Relationship*. There were a few dog-eared pages and notes in the margins.

Before I moved on, something else on the shelf caught my eye. A clean, crisp hardcover entitled, “*The Beginner’s Guide to Ventriloquism*.”

I'd told Jerry to be on the lookout for anything out of place, and this certainly fit the description. Karl wasn't the sort to engage in hobbies. There was only one reasonable explanation. This was a fake book hidden in plain sight, probably hollowed out and filled with his stash or some other kind of secrets.

Man, I thought. I would make a pretty good detective.

I checked for booby traps, pulled it out, and flipped it open... only to find that it was, in fact, an actual book about ventriloquism.

Man, I would make a terrible detective.

The next place I looked was the underwear drawer. It was still there in the corner, just like O'Brien said—a pocket-sized Moleskin notebook. I pulled out the dead man's journal and flipped through to the most recent entry.

"Today's the day I'm going to stand up to him. If I don't make it out alive, let this serve as my final will and testament. I don't have anything left to give but the truth, and whoever finds this needs to know that for the last year, I've had a monster for a roommate. He's made me do things I don't deserve to be forgiven for. I think he's asleep for now. I know I can't kill him. I doubt he can even die. But there is one thing I can do. I can stop him from using me anymore."

I put the journal down and took a second to pity Karl. He was way more messed up than I thought. And the way he wrote about his addiction leading up to the moment he tried to kill himself was chilling. The fact that he called it his "roommate" was as poetic as it was unnerving.

"Heyo, Jack!"

I left and followed Jerry's voice to the bathroom at the end of the hall. He was sitting on the sink counter, pulling a Ziplock bag out of an empty shampoo bottle when I walked in.

"Find something?" I asked.

"Yeah, check it out. I looked in the usual spots and found these guys hidden all over. Under the toilet, in the vents, behind the electrical outlets." He dropped the little bag of white pills onto the pile with the others.

"Not too weird."

“Actually,” Jerry said, “It is. I clocked some Horse and speed out in the open right when we walked in. Guy had Molly and weed sitting pretty in the drug cabinet.”

“Okay. So...”

“Think about it. Why’s he hiding naltrexone?” I stared at him, hoping I didn’t have to say it. Eventually, he got there on his own and said, “You don’t know what naltrexone is.”

“I don’t get out much.”

He proceeded to give me a crash course in recreational pharmacology—a topic he knew entirely too much about. Naltrexone, I learned, is a drug used to treat addiction. According to Jerry, if taken on a regular basis, it completely ruins any high one might get from drugs or alcohol.

I put the mystery together for him. “So why was this the only drug Karl was hiding, and who was he keeping it a secret from?”

Jerry pocketed the baggie of marijuana and said, “Who knows?”

I followed him out of the bathroom, hoping to find something more useful behind door number three. As soon as I flicked on the lights of the third bedroom, I realized we were in way over our heads and needed to leave immediately.

“Holy bad language,” said Jerry. “Is that what I think it is?”

I couldn’t say for sure, as I’ve only ever seen a real meth lab twice, and both times were when I was very young, but there was more than enough in there to warrant concern. A line of propane cylinders against the wall, a shit-ton of empty matchboxes, a table covered with lab beakers, funnels, coffee filters, drain cleaner, starter fluid, tubing, and fire extinguishers. Only one thing conspicuously missing.

There was absolutely no smell. Either my nose had stopped working, or the lab hadn’t taken its maiden voyage yet. Considering O’Brien was as observant as they come, I had to assume that all of this wasn’t here when she searched the place a week earlier.

Which meant yet another gut-punching realization. *Someone else is actively using Karl’s trailer as a home base for their new meth lab.*

“We should get out of here,” I said.

I started for the front door as fast as I could go with one crutch. If I'd been a little faster, I might have walked outside just in time to get busted by the two men coming up the steps. As it happened, Jerry and I were in the living room, only a few feet from the front door when we heard someone yank at the handle.

A voice on the other side cursed and said, “Did you lock it?”

Another voice from close by answered him, “No, it should still be open.”

I gave Jerry an *oh shit what are we supposed to do now* look as the men outside bickered back and forth.

“Well it's not fucking open. You must have locked it behind you.”

“You were the last one out.”

“The fuck I was! Give me the keys.”

“I'm looking for them! Give me a fucking second.”

Jerry reached over, grabbed my ski mask, and yanked it down across my face. I took a second to adjust it. When I looked up, Jerry had his own mask pulled down and the gun from the pizza box in his hand.

Chapter Twelve

There was an intense smile on Jerry's masked face. With his finger on the trigger, he whispered, "Do you trust me?"

"No, not really."

"Well, you'd better start."

We heard the key slide into the door lock. Whatever was about to happen was about to happen.

Jerry pulled the folding chair out and moved it to the other side of the table so it was facing the door, then he said, "Take a seat and follow my lead. I have..." He cocked his head to one side. "...an idea."

The man outside grunted. "Shit! That ain't the right key."

I didn't have time to argue or come up with a plan of my own, so I took my seat at the table. Jerry took my crutch and walked away towards the kitchen, leaving me stranded there, right by the front door, alone, with no way of running, no way of even walking away.

Did Jerry just set me up as a distraction so he could sneak out a window? No. Surely, he wouldn't have...

The front door opened, and two men stepped inside. The one in front was a tall guy with a big moustache. He looked like the kind of person who probably had a gym membership and lifted weights for fun. He took a few steps before spotting me at the table and freezing in place. The shorter guy was much younger than him, with a buzz cut and two-day beard. Not quite as muscular as his larger companion, but still big enough to squish me in a one-on-one. When he saw that the first man had stopped, he searched the room for the problem, spotted me, and made like a deer in the headlights.

When the door closed behind them, Buzzcut reacted to the noise like it was a surprise attack. He jumped, pulled a gun out of nowhere, pointed it at my head, and screamed, "Who the fuck are you?!"

I tried to think of something to say, but improv was never one of my stronger virtues.

Moustache's voice was booming. "You deaf? He asked you a question. Who are you? What are you doing in here?"

Right then, the door to the laundry room swung open. Jerry wandered into the living room with a half-empty beer bottle in hand and the gun tucked into the front of his pants.

"Where the fuck have you two been?" he said. Buzzcut pointed his gun at the masked Jerry, who casually walked into the center of the room, finished the beer in one long pull, then tossed the glass bottle over his shoulder. "What the fuck took you so long? Did you guys get lost on the way here or something?"

Buzzcut took his eyes off of Jerry and looked back at me. Then he looked back at Jerry and pointed his gun at me, then he looked at his partner and pointed the gun at the floor. His partner eyed us both hard, then said to Jerry, "Who the fuck are you two?"

"Who the fuck do you think we are? Your boss sent us as backup to make sure the job got done right."

The two guys looked at each other. Then Moustache asked, "You're saying you work for—"

Jerry interrupted, "We don't say his name. You never know who's listening."

"How do we know you aren't just two idiots who wandered in here off the street?"

Jerry laughed. "Yeah, we're just two random guys who wandered in here with absolutely no idea what's going on. Is that your theory? Does that really make sense? Look, if it'll get this show on the road any faster, you're welcome to call and double check. I'm sure he'll love the interruption."

He and Moustache stared each other down for a solid ten seconds before the other guy caved with a laugh and said, "That's alright. We just weren't expecting anyone to be here."

His laughter gave the other one permission to relax. Buzzcut cracked a nervous smile, put his gun away, and said to me, "Man, I almost shot you in the face!"

I held my silence.

Buzzcut looked at Jerry, jerked his head in my direction, and asked, "What's his deal?"

Jerry responded, "He's my muscle."

"*Him?*" another (slightly hurtful) laugh. "What's *he* supposed to do?"

"Pray you never find out."

They both looked at me doubtfully. I knew I needed to sell it, so I did the most intimidating thing I could think of. I winked. Apparently, that worked, because neither of them made eye contact with me again for the rest of the night.

"Where are your fucking masks?" Jerry demanded.

Moustache reacted exactly the way you might expect someone to react to such a completely nonsensical question. He looked around, shook his head, and asked, "What do you mean?"

Jerry turned to me and put a hand on his forehead, "Oh my God; it's like they've never done this before!" He turned back and scolded them for their carelessness. "Is this your training mission? Jesus Christ! No wonder they sent us to help out. Fuck!"

They both looked at the ground and mumbled, "Sorry."

Jerry walked right up to them and said, "It's fine. We all gotta start somewhere. Now, are you ready to do this?"

Moustache tried to look like a professional. He stood up straight, put on a serious face, and said, "Yeah, we have the you-know-whats in the trunk."

"Alright," Jerry said. "Let's go get them."

As Moustache opened the door, Buzzcut started forward, but Jerry caught him by the shoulder. "Not you!" he said. "I don't need some amateur with an itchy trigger finger cockin' it up out there. Stay here and think about what you did."

The guy stepped back and said, "Sorry, sir."

Jerry shook his masked head. "I'm not mad. Just disappointed."

They left Buzzcut alone with me. He looked around the room and tried to strike up a conversation. "I didn't know you guys were going to be in here. I thought it was just going to be a quick... you know. Do you guys do a lot of this stuff?"

I said nothing. He shut up.

I was growing to like my character. On the inside, I was screaming like a baby on a rollercoaster, but on the outside, all I had to do was stay quiet. Easy peasy. Of course, it got slightly more difficult to remain stoic when Jerry and the big guy carried in the first body. And the second body. It was certainly awkward keeping still and saying nothing while they arranged the crime scene. I almost blew it all by laughing when Jerry and Moustache got into it over the best way to arrange the corpses.

“I know you think you know what you’re doing,” Jerry argued, “but I say we set them up to make it look like they were busy having sex when the meth lab exploded.”

“Look, I just think that’s really weird and unnecessary.”

“Hey, I’ve been doing this for a long time! That’s why I’m in charge here! I want my crime scene to tell a story. Get off my dick about it!”

In a matter of minutes, the entire place was rigged to burn. While the two goons were standing in the pristine meth lab, Jerry walked backwards out to the living room, saying “Alright guys, everything looks good to me. Give us a five-minute head start before the fireworks get going, yeah? Okay, I’ll see you at the next one. Don’t forget your masks next time. This was fun. Hit me up on Facebook. Bye guys!”

Jerry had backed up all the way over to where I was awkwardly standing, trying to figure out how I was supposed to get out of there without my crutch and without giving away that I only had one leg. If they saw me hopping out of there, it was going to raise suspicion, and mask or not, it wouldn’t take much effort to compile a list of one-legged men in our town.

Before I could express any of this to Jerry, he had already grabbed me and thrown me over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry. He carried me over to the door, kicked it open, and carried me down the steps and all the way down the street to where our car was parked. We were speeding away before I could get my seatbelt on.

Jerry was the one to say, “We can *not* go to the cops with this. Our prints and DNA are all over the place. They’ll think we—”

I shut that down right away. “Of course we’re going to the cops! There is no way we’re not going to the cops! We’re going straight to the cops because you and I just witnessed a crime, and if we don’t go to the cops, the criminals who did the crime will still be out there, probably doing more crime, and possibly trying to figure out who we are so they can come and do some crime to us. In no scenario are we not going to the cops.”

“Fine!” he huffed. “In that case, we need to rehearse our cover story.”

“No! No cover story! We go to the police and tell them exactly what happened.”

He sputtered, “Sure-sure-yeah-sure Jack, let’s just-let’s go right to the sheriff’s station and tell them how we set up two dead guys to look like they were giving each other beejes while two real criminals staged a meth lab explosion.”

“You did WHAT?!”

I struggled to break eye contact with O’Brien, but this time she was the car, and I was the deer. She broke first, but only to drill her eyes into Jerry, who was sitting in the booth next to me. “You’re telling me that you two idiots sixty-nined a couple of corpses while two other chucklefucks eighty-sixed a crime scene?”

Our waitress dropped off a carafe of coffee and three mugs while Jerry blurted, “To be fair, we didn’t sixty-nine them. I just made them sixty-nine each other while Jack waited in the living room.” The waitress left without saying a word.

This was my best compromise with Jerry. Rather than go straight to the sheriff’s office, we called (and woke up) our trusty gas station guardian and asked her to meet us on neutral ground—the House of Breakfast Carbohydrates™ ten minutes outside of town. When she showed up, I almost didn’t recognize her. She was wearing a plain blue jacket and sweatpants. I didn’t expect her to

arrive out of uniform, but it made perfect sense. Even she had a life outside of work, and here I was ruining it.

She poured herself a cup and took a swig. When she spoke again, she sounded slightly less pissed-off, so that was progress. "Can you describe the guys who fire-bombed Karl's place?"

Jerry answered, "The dom was a big black guy with a huge moustache and kind eyes. The sub had a Forrest Gump haircut and a surly attitude, but he took direction really well."

"Wait," she pulled her cell phone out of her pocket, opened her photos app, and extended it across the table. "Did they look like this?"

Jerry and I leaned over to inspect the two men standing side by side in the picture.

"Yeah," I said. "They looked exactly like that. Except when we saw them, they weren't wearing uniforms."

She put the phone away, picked up her mug, and took another big sip before saying the uncomfortable words. "Deputies Franklin and Williams. I should have known."

"Told you so," Jerry beamed.

O'Brien blew the top of her mug and stared at the table. I could see the gears turning, and it wasn't long before her thoughts became words. "Williams has been with the department for decades. He's the guy the sheriff would go to if he needed to stage a cover-up. Like some junkies breaking into Karl's place to use it as a meth lab after he passed away. A bad accident leads to an explosion leads to no more evidence... but no more evidence of what?"

Before I could offer any more unhelpful suggestions, she spoke again. "You know what? It doesn't even matter. What matters is that the department's been compromised. Let me handle this. In the meantime, you two were never there. You didn't see anything. You don't know anything. This never happened. Got it?"

We both nodded.

"And Jack?"

"Yeah?"

"If you *ever* do something like this again, I will kill you."

The words escaped my mouth before I had the chance to consider. "What about Jerry?!"

He ripped open a handful of sugar packets and said, "No, I probably wouldn't kill you."

Our waitress never did come back to check on us. Eventually, I put some cash on the table, and we left.

Jerry celebrated our back-to-back combo survivals by getting shit-faced drunk and passing out on my couch.

Around noon the next day, I got a phone call from Mammaw, letting me know the good news: The official investigation into the burning man was a wrap. They had ruled the incident as another run-of-the-mill accident, and now I needed to get the gas station reopened ASAP.

I brushed my teeth, packed up a new book, and woke up my houseguest. Once Jerry had wiped the sleep from his eyes, I made a deal with him.

I offered to let him borrow my Nissan under two conditions: First, he had to drive me around whenever O'Brien was unavailable, and second, he couldn't break any laws in, on, or with my car. He swore on his life that he'd treat the vehicle like his own baby, then drove me to the gas station.

The reopening process was simple enough. A professional cleaning company came out and power-washed the concrete by the front door, replaced the broken glass panel, and sopped up all the squirrel goo behind the register. They were in and out in under an hour. I knew from experience that things were going to shake out like this, but I couldn't help but feel annoyed by how easily the hobo fire faded from the town's collective memory.

With the building more or less back to normal, there was only one thing left for me to do before I could settle into my regular routine. Amidst the excitement of the previous day's events, I had completely forgotten to let the new employee know she didn't have to come in. Now it was time for the awkward phone call.

When she answered, she sounded tired, "Hello?"

"Hi, Rosa?"

There was a short pause, and then, "Mom?"

"What? No! It's... do I really..." I sighed. "It's Jack, from the gas station."

"Oh my god! I'm so sorry!"

"It's okay. I wanted to call and see if you were still interested in the job."

Another pause. This one a little longer. "But I came out to the gas station for my shift this morning. There was police tape everywhere and nobody there. I knocked on the door. I tried calling ten times. Nobody ever answered."

"Well, I'm happy to say you passed our test. You can come work for us now."

"Are you serious?"

"How does tomorrow morning at eight sound?"

A much longer pause this time. I wouldn't have been surprised or offended if she hung up, but instead, "That sounds doable."

"Great. I'll see you then."

"You promise that you're really going to be there this time, right?"

"Of course."

I spent the rest of my shift conscious of the fact that my laptop was spying on me. I didn't want to alert the person on the other end, but I also didn't want an audience, so I kept the computer buried in my backpack in the storage room and let myself get lost in another book. This one was a mystery thriller about a psychic detective and his ghost girlfriend who solve crimes together.

The first customer didn't arrive until after the sun had set. When he walked in, he did so like I was supposed to be expecting him.

"Hello, Jack!" he sang excitedly. "I'm baaack!"

He had a long nose, light blue hair down to his shoulders, a black pork pie cap with a red feather sticking out of it, and a faded yellow wife-beater below a black suit jacket. His bristly chest hair was on full display. On his face, he wore a pair of glasses with Coke-bottle lenses and a wide, gummy smile with only a couple of front teeth. His delicate skin resembled milky cellophane, barely there at all, and I got the sense that a single well-placed papercut might chop him in half. In one hand, he carried a birdcage covered in fabric. In the other, he gripped a walking cane.

"Hello, hello, hello again!" he said, sideways-dancing up to the counter, leading me to conclude that his cane was purely for decoration.

"Hi."

"Remember me?"

"No. Should I?"

"We met a few months ago while I was testing out different business ideas. My discount food enterprise, I'm proud to say, was an immense success!" My brain finally connected the dots. This was the same old man who wheeled an ice chest into the gas station and left me with a scoop of ground meat as a free sample.

Strange. I thought I imagined that whole thing.

"Oh, right. I remember now. Congratulations?"

"Thank you! You'll be happy to know that I sold my meat business for ten million dollars."

"Why would I be happy to—"

"And now, I've undertaken a new endeavor. One that I hope you and your company may be so lucky to invest in at the ground floor. This is a brand-new once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! Consider yourself honored! Blessed by the gods, even!" I sighed and rubbed my achy eyes as he set the birdcage on the counter and lifted the cover with a loud, triumphant "Voila!"

Inside the cage was a tiny, live elephant, the size of a purse-dog. It looked at me and made a high-pitched *toot* before digging its miniature trunk into a saucer of birdseed and shoveling a load into its scary adorable mouth.

"Okay," I said. "That is not what I was expecting."

“Well, what do you think?”

“About what?”

“My creation!” he exclaimed, waving his hands over the cage like a campy magician.

“I don’t know; it’s pretty weird.” He stared at me with a blank smile on his frozen face. When his look still hadn’t changed a few seconds later, I felt compelled to elaborate. “I don’t really see the business opportunity here. How are you supposed to monetize a baby elephant?”

The smile snapped off of his face. “It’s not a *baby*! It’s a miniature—” He shut his eyes and rubbed his temples as he worked his way through a pained question. “Do you know... how long... it *took*... to create these things?”

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

He reopened his eyes and aimed them at the ceiling. “No, no, it’s fine. I just... You know what? You’re right. This is pointless. I don’t know what I was thinking. A miniature elephant?” He rattled the cage and crazy-laughed. “All they do is eat and poop. They aren’t any good for farm labor. I tried cooking one, but they taste like gristle and cauliflower. You know what? How about we both forget this whole thing ever happened? Okay?” He reapplied the cover in a hurry. “This was my mistake. I tried something new; I put myself out there, and it didn’t pan out. Good day, sir.” With that, he tipped his hat, scooped up the cage, and turned to leave the store. Once he noticed the display of lawn gnomes, he froze.

“What on earth are those?”

I leaned over to make sure I was seeing the same thing as him. Indeed, he was transfixed by the gnome army.

“Those are our garden gnomes.”

He set the elephantcage on the floor and tip-toed up to the display. “Where did you find these beautiful specimens?”

“All over.”

“Tell me, Jack, have you ever cut one open to see how they work?”

“No. Of course not. Why would anybody do something like that?”

“I must have them!”

I started to feel something almost like excitement, but tempered with a healthy dose of skepticism. If this guy could take any of the gnomes off my hands, that would make this entire interaction worthwhile. “How many do you want?”

The man turned and walked back to me, his flip flops slapping the ground noisily with each step. He dug a bill out of his jacket pocket and slapped it onto the counter. Once he’d removed his hand, I could see that it was a crumpled, wet, hundred-dollar bill with moth holes around one of the corners.

“How many can I get for this?” He spread his smile wide, showing off a mouth full of perfectly white, perfectly straight teeth.

Wait... did he always have that many teeth?

I leaned behind the counter, grabbed a contractor bag, and handed it to the man. “How many can you fit in this?”

He giggled and clapped his hands, then took the bag from me and went to work fitting the gnomes inside. He’d taken nearly our entire stock before finally stuffing the cane and birdcage on top and tying the bag off.

“Thank you, Jack!” he said, hunching forward and hoisting the bag over his shoulder like some kind of poorly-dressed Krampus. “’Twas a pleasure doing business with you.”

That’s when I noticed something. His beady little eyes looked wide with excitement, except... *that wasn’t right.*

“What happened to your glasses?”

He giggled and said, “Don’t be ridiculous, Jack. There’s no such thing as glasses.”

“What?”

He carried the bag over to the door, kicked it open with one freakishly long, skinny leg, then turned around and made eye contact one last time before backing out the doorway. Now I could see that he was, in fact, wearing a three-piece suit, complete with the vest and top hat and dress shoes. Whatever I thought I’d seen earlier must have been my imagination.

“Goodbye, Jack! Stay alive if you can!” With those parting words, he vanished into the night.

I rang up the sale, put the cash in the drawer, and went back to reading my book.

The book concluded with a twist ending that didn't make any sense. Turns out, the detective was the one who killed his own girlfriend. I'm sure the author thought he was being deep or clever, but really it was cheap and stupid. I hated it. Unfortunately, I didn't bring another book with me, so I didn't have anything else to read to cleanse my mental palate.

How did I get through this book so quickly? I wondered. It made sense—with the exception of the elephant-monger, I hadn't had any real distractions all night. In fact, since he left, there hadn't been a single customer.

I looked out at the gas station and noticed that, for a grand reopening, it sure was quiet.

...a little too quiet...

I put my book away, grabbed my only crutch (the other had been in the trailer when it went up in flames), and went to take a look around.

The first thing I noticed was a sign posted on the outside of the front door. I couldn't see what was written on it until I stepped outside into the frigid night air.

"Gas Station Closed for Repairs."

That explains it, I thought. One of the repairmen must have left this up. Except... *does that explain it?* Why didn't I see it earlier? Why didn't the creepy guy with the gnomes see it when he stopped in? Time is linear, isn't it?

I pulled the sign down and almost went back inside when I noticed something else. At the edge of the parking lot, there was a line of traffic cones blocking off our driveway from the main road. Someone must have set those up to make passersby think we were closed. Who would do something like that?

As soon as I realized the answer, I hurried back into the gas station, locking the door behind me before heading straight for the

phone. When I picked up, the line was dead.

Okay, Jack. Stay calm. No reason to freak out yet. You're safe. The doors are locked. You have time to come up with a plan. All you-

"Night night, bitch."

His voice was right behind me. Before I could turn around, an arm locked around my windpipe tighter than a noose. My crutch fell to the ground, and I lurched backwards. I couldn't see the man holding me in a chokehold, dragging me kicking and gagging past the aisles, past the cold drink cases, down the hallway past the bathroom and storage room and finally, right out the back door. I fought and scratched and thrashed, but the more I moved, the tighter he squeezed.

As the night air hit me and my vision faded, I felt like I was being pulled right into the bowels of hell. Just before my world fell away for good, he spun me around and tossed me onto the cold ground.

I sucked in as much air as I could between fits of coughing, and when I realized I was free from the chokehold, I jumped up in an attempt to make a mad dash for the woods. It took me all of one step before I remembered why a mad dash wasn't an option for me. My right foot failed to gain any traction from not being there anymore, and I barely managed to avoid hitting the ground face-first while Spencer Middleton laughed his ass off.

I rolled onto my back to see him pick up a shovel and walk it over to me. He looked exactly the way I remembered him. Tall, built for war, a wicked grin and hateful eyes. He wore all black: boots, pants, shirt, jacket, and soul. His hair was a little longer now, but his face was clean-shaven. The only thing that had really changed since the last time he beat me senseless was that nasty scar across the bottom of his neck from where Benjamin halfway decapitated him with a hunting knife.

"Oh. Hey, Spencer. Fancy meeting you here."

He stabbed the shovel into the ground next to my head.

"Hey Jack. You miss me?"

I tried scooting backwards, but that was a mistake. Spencer took a step forward, yanked the shovel back out of the ground, and pinned me in place by dropping his heavy boot and all of his weight right onto my bad knee.

I screamed, and he laughed. Then he took the shovel in his hands like a golf club and swung it at my head. It missed me by less than a foot, close enough for me to feel the woosh of air. I dropped flat against the ground.

“Whoa! Spencer, hang on! Hang on a second!”

He repositioned the shovel, locked eyes with me, and swung it again. This time, it grazed past my face by an inch. I tried to jump away, but the Earth was at my back, and I had nowhere I could go.

“Hold still,” he ordered calmly. “I want to see how close I can get.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to shrink into the ground, but Spencer ground his boot into my leg staples like he was putting out a cigarette. When I’d finished screaming, he asked, “Did I say you were allowed to close your eyes?” I opened them. “Much better.”

He swung the shovel at my face, and for a microsecond I accepted my inevitable death. The shovel came close enough for me to feel the metal touch my eyebrows.

“What the hell do you want?!”

He let the shovel fall down at my side, then he pointed at it and ordered me to pick it up. For the next two hours, he forced me to dig a grave.

To be honest, I found it a little encouraging to learn that despite my injury, I was still good at something. I think I surprised him by making such short work of it, especially considering I was on my knees the whole time and bleeding profusely through several layers of bandages. Spencer watched silently from a few yards away, sitting on the back of his black Mustang with a gun in his hand, reveling in my pain as the hole got deeper and deeper until finally, “Anybody ever tell you you’re really good at digging?”

“Thanks,” I said from the bottom of the hole. “I’ve had a lot of practice.”

He jumped down from the trunk and walked over to the edge. "That ought to be enough. Good work."

"Not to argue, but I think I can probably do a little better." It was only two or three feet deep, a shallow grave by any standards, practically a ditch compared to some of the others I'd dug back there.

He reached down, wrapped his hand around my shirt collar, and hoisted me out of the hole before dropping me at his feet. "You're not getting out of this, Jack. There is no running out the clock. Your time is up. I'm going to kill you tonight."

He was absolutely right. I couldn't just run out the clock. I needed a plan, and I'd spent the last two hours considering every possibility, every chance, every escape. What I'd come up with wasn't much, but it was all I had.

I grabbed the shovel, pushed it into the ground, and used it as a makeshift crutch to brace myself as I stood up and faced him. He grinned down at me as I said, "No, you're not."

He seemed absolutely delighted by this turn of events.

"Oh? I'm not?"

"Come on, Spencer. You came out here tonight to scare me, and you did it. I'm terrified. But we both know you're not going to kill me."

He walked right up to me and whispered, "And why's that?"

Now that we were face-to-face, our height difference felt like a lot more than I remembered, but I tried to stand tall and look him in the eyes as I spoke. "Because you're not a killer. You just get off on scaring people like me. You're good at it, but that's all it is. The dark god saw something in you. He told you not to kill anyone, and you were okay with it. I think, deep down, you're a soldier, but you're not a murderer."

He chuckled and said, "Funny. That's the same thing she said."

He delivered a wild haymaker like he was trying to kill someone standing behind me. The next thing I knew, I was on my back at the bottom of the grave, struggling to remember how to breathe. In time, the air came back. My head was pounding, my

body felt destroyed, but I was still alive, and the plan had worked so far.

“You don’t think I’m willing to kill you, Jack?” He was walking away from the hole for some reason. “I’ve killed plenty of men bigger and smarter than you. What exactly makes you think you’re so special?” I took advantage of his distraction and punched O’Brien’s number into the phone I’d swiped from Spencer’s jacket when he got too close. Lucky for me he hadn’t learned his lesson from last time. I knew exactly which pocket to pick.

I typed a quick text message: “SOS -J,” then hit ‘send’ and slid the phone into my pocket while Spencer popped open the trunk of his car. *Now*, I had a chance. *Now*, running out the clock was a valid strategy. But the clock wasn’t exactly in my favor. My leg wound still hadn’t fully reclotted, and Spencer was up to something. I could only imagine what he would do if he realized I’d stolen his phone again.

I tried to sit up, but the pain from where he’d landed his punch felt like I’d been shot by a fist cannon. I didn’t know at the time that two of my ribs were broken, but I did know something was wrong. It hurt to breathe. (It also hurt not to breathe, but it hurt to breathe even worse.)

I powered through, knowing that Spencer wasn’t the type to turn his back often. This was my chance to get away, to climb out of the hole and crawl into the forest and never come back because there’s no way anything out there could be as bad as what I’ve been through here in the so-called civilized world.

I pulled myself up and almost made it out of the hole when Spencer opened the trunk of his car wide and gathered something up in his arms. No doubt another weapon of torture, and I didn’t feel like sticking around for confirmation. I was almost out, but before I could make a crawl for it, I saw what he was holding and knew exactly why I wasn’t going anywhere.

He threw her to the ground, where she collapsed into a heap. Both wrists were bound together behind her back and a white bandage gag wrapped around her head cut off any chance for screams. When she saw where she was, she jumped to her feet and

tried to make a run, but he kicked her in the back of her knee, grabbed her by the hair, and pulled her to the edge of the grave.

She saw me sitting in a bloody mess at the bottom of the hole as Spencer dropped her to her knees.

“Hey, Vanessa,” Spencer said with a light-hearted voice like we were all old chums having drinks at the barbeque. “Did you know Jack thinks I’m not a killer?”

He knelt down at the edge of the grave next to her, wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

“What about you, Vanessa?” he asked. “Do you believe I’m a killer? You know the drill. Blink once for yes. Twice for no.”

She blinked once. Her eyes were desperately trying to send me another message, but I couldn’t understand what it was.

Spencer looked down at me. “And do you think either of you are getting out of this alive?”

She blinked twice. This time, tears rolled down her cheeks.

He laughed. “What about you, Jack? Do you still think you’re getting out of here?”

“Yeah, of course I am.” It was an easy answer. Even if I was wrong, at least I wouldn’t have to hear him say ‘I told you so.’

She stared at me with terror in her eyes as our captor abruptly stood up, turned his back, and walked away from us. He whistled to himself all the way back to where he’d carelessly left the gun on the roof of his vehicle when hauling the poor, frightened, teenage girl over to me. I knew he was playing with us, but I tried to reassure her.

“Don’t worry,” I said in a soft voice, hoping the sociopath’s bag of tricks didn’t include super hearing. “I’ve got a plan.”

She nodded at me. I moved a little closer.

“Are you hurt?”

She looked like she was thinking about her answer, then she blinked twice. *No.*

“Can you fight?”

She blinked once. *Yes.*

“Stay calm. I’m going to get us both out of here. It’s going to be okay.”

One of the things that made Spencer so dangerous was his unpredictability. Psychopathic rage is bad enough when you know where it's coming from or where it's going, but they broke the mold with this guy. Or he broke it himself, after killing the mold-maker and burning down the mold factory. I shouldn't have been surprised by anything anymore, but then he went and did something nobody could have seen coming.

He returned from his vehicle, crouched down next to the grave, pointed the gun at my face, then flipped it around and offered it like a gift.

"Here, Jack. Take it. See if you can save yourselves."

Why are people always trying to give me guns?!

I knew it was a trick. Or at least, I thought it was a trick. I was reasonably certain it was probably a trick. It might have been a trick? But then again, maybe it wasn't. My confidence was leaking out faster than my blood.

I extended my hand, and Spencer put the gun into it.

"Let's play a game," he said with a smile. "Who gets out of here alive? Here are the rules. If you put a bullet in your head right now, I'll let the girl go. Or, you can kill her yourself, and I'll let you go. Take your time and choose wisely."

Vanessa gave me a look and broadcast her thoughts so clearly she may as well have been speaking out loud. "Jack, what are you waiting for? Use the gun! Pop a cap in this mofo so we can get out of here!"

I looked at the weapon in my hand and understood that my choice wasn't really that simple. This was Spencer Middleton, after all. I ran through every possible scenario in my head, and only one thing made sense. He was screwing with us. He was an animal, playing with his food.

"Come on, Spencer," I said. "We both know you're not about to hand me a loaded weapon. What? Is this like a trick gun and it's going to explode once I pull the trigger?"

"What's the matter, killer? You don't trust me?"

He snatched the weapon out of my hand, stood up next to Vanessa, put the barrel against her temple, and executed her in front

of me.

I saw her die before my brain registered the sound of the gun going off. She jerked violently, then fell forward into the hole. Her limp body landed on top of me, and Spencer went to work burying us together. I struggled to get out from under her. She wasn't heavy, but after all the digging, there was no strength left in my arms. I fell back and screamed, "What the fuck is wrong with you?!"

I tried to push the body off of me as he shoveled the dirt on top of us. Her blood was still warm as it poured all over my face, and when I made the mistake of looking into her eyes, they were still wide open and full of fear.

I'm sorry, Vanessa.

There would be time to freak out and shut down later, but in order to do that, I first needed to figure out how to escape. The speed at which he was piling the dirt onto us guaranteed I was going to lose this race. Soon, it was all around me. I could barely move. The very act of drawing in a single breath was nearing impossible and getting harder with each shovel load.

"Stop it!" I screamed in desperation.

He threw the next load of dirt into my face and let out a gleeful laugh. I wiped the soil from my eyes and screamed, "What is your problem, asshole?! Why are you doing this?! Did you just not get enough hugs growing up? I'm so sorry I cost you your stupid job, but get the hell over it, you maniac!"

He stopped shoveling. As soon as the dirt was out of my eyes, I looked at him. The smile was gone now. "You think this is about a job?" He knelt down next to the hole, right above my face, and said, "You don't remember. Do you?"

"Remember what?!"

He stood up and screamed into the sky like a wild animal. The next thing I knew, he had me by the left arm, yanking me out of the grave with enough force that I thought he was about to tear another limb off. He dropped me onto my back next to the hole.

"How can you not remember?!" he growled.

I spat out dirt and wondered what I'd said that made him change his mind about burying me alive. "I forget a lot of things."

He grabbed the shovel, looked at me like he wanted to use it as an executioner's axe, and decided against it, settling for another kick to my bad ribs.

The shovel hit the ground next to me as Spencer recoiled, jerking back in an unnatural manner, shaking and clenching his teeth like he was having a convulsion. Then I heard the noise, a loud hissing from right behind him. He twisted, kicking at ghosts while I pounced on the shovel and started swinging.

He moved like a wounded snake in water, but I landed the first strike against his shin. He was still shaking when he went down to his knees. We locked eyes as I pulled back for another go. "Hold still!" I screamed, swinging the weapon at him. This time, I connected with the side of his head with so much force that the shovel fell out of my hands, and he collapsed to the sound of my screaming, "I want to see how close I can get!"

He was on his side, bleeding into the ground, his eyes wide open, his arms and legs jerking unnaturally. I didn't have time to wonder why. This was my only chance. I crawled up to him, pulled back, and punched as hard as I possibly could.

He went limp and fell onto his back. By all appearances, he was down and out, but I couldn't be sure until I saw brains. I crawled over to the shovel and raised it over my head, ready to strike with everything I had, but O'Brien got to me first. She caught the weapon, pulled it from my grip, and threw it to the side. "Jack, look at me, look at me." I couldn't understand what was happening. "It's me. It's Amy."

"O'Brien?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"What are you doing here?"

"I got your message. Don't worry. We got him. He's done."

"Oh..." I said, as it all started to fall into place.

She left me long enough to flip Spencer onto his stomach and put him in handcuffs. When she did, I realized that there were tiny pins in his back, connected by a coil of twin wires to the bright yellow taser gun on the ground where she had dropped it.

The deputy yelled into her radio mic, calling for all available units. She needed backup and an ambulance. Then she crouched

down next to me to ask if I was okay.

“Yeah,” I answered. “Why? Don’t I look okay?”

Chapter Thirteen

When it comes to ambulances and ambulance rides, I wouldn't exactly call myself an 'expert,' but I'm no novice, either. I've taken more than my fair share. Enough that I could tell that something was definitely wrong here.

The first red flag came at the start of my ride, when one of the EMT's gave me some pills for the pain without asking about my allergies or current medications or even the pain itself. The girl, a skinny goth with a neck tattoo and septum piercing, put the drugs in my hand and said "take these" before handing me a bottle of water to chase it with. I didn't think too much about it. They were the experts, after all.

The guy, a bleached blonde with a cauliflower ear and raised scars on his left cheek, redressed my leg wound while the medicine kicked in. In a matter of minutes, I was high out of my mind and couldn't feel anything anymore.

After a while, the two of them sat back and started talking.

The guy said, "He's not gonna remember any of this, is he?"

She answered, "When he wakes up, he'll be lucky to remember his name."

I asked, "Who are you guys talking about?"

The guy looked at me with surprise. "How's he still awake?"

She shrugged, "Fuck if I know."

As if things weren't weird enough already, this ambulance ride didn't end the usual way: at a hospital. For some strange reason, we stopped outside the sheriff's station. The two EMT's threw me into a wheelchair and delivered me unto Deputies Moustache and Buzzcut. I might have been tempted to panic, considering I knew these guys were knee-deep in murder conspiracies, but that mystery medicine was terribly effective at keeping me from caring about anything.

They put me in a small room with a metal table and two chairs and left me alone long enough for the high to wear off and

dread to set in.

Eventually, the door opened and a short, round man with a cherubic face and thin comb-over entered. He had tiny glasses, beady eyes, and a simpering smile. When he saw me, he walked straight over, extended his hand, and greeted me. “Good evening, Mr. Townsend. My name is John Normal, and I will be your *if you cannot afford an attorney* attorney today.”

He wore a black suit, blue shirt, and striped red tie. I shook his hand and watched him take his seat and open his briefcase before I asked, “Why do I need an attorney?”

He sorted through some papers as he answered, “Oh, well, technically, you don’t *need* one. But trust me, it’s a good thing I’m here. The charges against you are pretty grim, but don’t worry.”

I wasn’t worried until I heard my lawyer say ‘Don’t worry.’

“What charges?” I asked.

“Well, I’ve only been briefed on your case—ha! *Brief case*—but it doesn’t look great for you. This is a classic ‘he said/he said,’ and Mister Middleton has retained an impressive counsel.”

“I’m very lost. Am I in some kind of trouble?”

“I should say so! You’re looking at attempted murder, but I think we can probably plead you down to misdemeanor assault.”

“Assault of what?”

“Mr. Middleton, of course.”

“What the hell are you saying?”

My lawyer blew a raspberry into the air, then continued, “Look, I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but I overheard them talking in the lobby. They want to make an example out of you. Vigilante justice is becoming rampant in this town. Of course, there’s a small chance we can swing a self-defense argument, but it would have to be precise and exact and match up perfectly with the evidence.”

“Spencer killed somebody right in front of me! Then he tried to kill me! Who cares if I took a shovel to his face?”

John shook his head nervously, then said with a sad smile, “No, I’m afraid you won’t be able to prove either of those things. You see, they’ve gone over the crime scene with a fine-tooth comb. The techs didn’t find any other body. According to the evidence, it was

just the two of you out there. Alone. Take note, because here's what they say really happened: Spencer came to the gas station to apologize for prior *misunderstandings*. You, naturally, overreacted, pulled an unregistered gun on him, and forced him out of the store. He begged for his life, but you lost control. You nearly killed the unarmed man, and likely would have finished the job if not for the timely intervention of one Deputy Amelia O'Brien."

"This is crazy," I exclaimed. "And I should know. Crazy is kinda my thing."

"As your lawyer, I'd advise you not to say things like that ever again."

"Whose blood do you think is all over my shirt?"

"It doesn't matter what I think, Jack. All that matters is the evidence." John Normal slid a sheet of paper in front of me. "This is Miss O'Brien's official statement corroborating the story." He put another sheet on top of it. "This is the crime lab's official report confirming that your fingerprints were a match for the gun found at the scene." Another paper. "This is your tox screen, which shows the presence of several illicit substances in your blood, along with an unnerving blood alcohol content." Another paper. "Deputy Franklin's summary of your interrogation where you said way too much despite being told that it could and would be used against you." Another paper. "Here's an expert witness describing how you display callous and unemotional style traits consistent with a conduct disorder that might explain all these violent tendencies of yours."

I picked up the papers and noticed something almost as disturbing as the fabricated content. "These are all post-dated."

"That's not true. O'Brien's report should be from today."

"This is ridiculous!"

"Well," he stroked an imaginary goatee. "There is another way it can all go down." He cracked his neck loudly and put another sheet of paper next to the stack of incriminating "evidence."

"I've already prepared your official statement," he explained. "All you have to do is sign it and keep your mouth shut, and we can make everything go away."

I took a moment to read the paper in front of me, a firsthand account—my firsthand account—of Spencer’s most recent attack, only with a few interesting liberties taken.

According to this version, Spencer visited me at the gas station while I was alone (that’s about where the accuracies end). He held me at gunpoint while he confessed to the murders of Robert Hanchey and Doug Matherne, then forced me out back, where he had already dug a shallow grave with the intent of burying me alive.

O’Brien showed up just in time to save the day. When Spencer refused her verbal commands to drop his weapon, she discharged her taser. It proved ineffective, and a fight ensued. O’Brien managed to subdue Spencer with her standard-issued baton before putting him in handcuffs.

Meanwhile, in this version of events, I sat nearby and cried.

There was no mention of Vanessa Riggan.

“This is hot garbage,” I said. “Most of it’s not even true.”

He explained, “Try not to think of this in terms of true or false. Your statement is basically just a formality so the prosecution can move forward with their case against Middleton. We just made a few adjustments for the sake of simplicity. You do agree Spencer is a bad man, don’t you?”

“Of course, but—”

“Then don’t sweat the small stuff!”

“Why did you change the part about me digging the grave?”

“You? An amputee digging a grave that deep? In one night? We don’t want this report getting flagged for sounding unbelievable.”

“But I did dig the grave. It was really hard, too.”

“What, did you want a medal or something?”

“Who the heck are Robert Hanchey and Doug Matherne?”

“Why does that matter? The important thing is this, you and O’Brien get to go home as heroes, and Spencer goes to jail. Everybody wins.”

“Not everybody. Why isn’t Vanessa in here? How are you going to explain her death?”

His answer was nothing more than a pained expression.

Oh. They’re not going to mention Vanessa.

Before I could push the matter any further, the man took something else out of the briefcase. He put it onto the table in front of him with the barrel pointed right at me.

"I didn't want it to come to this, but there is an option C."

I looked at the tiny pistol and shook my head. "What the hell is going on? Why are people always trying to give me guns?!"

He seemed surprised. "What? No. This isn't for you."

"Oh," I said.

"I mean, it is *for you*. But not like that." He looked flabbergasted.

"I'm confused."

He took his glasses off, pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket, licked it, and used it to wipe down his eyeballs. When he was done, he put his glasses back on and tried to explain, "The gun was supposed to be intimidating."

"How?"

"You know, the implication. That I could pick it up and *pew pew*."

"Shoot our way out of here?"

"No! That I might, you know... shoot you?"

"Why?"

"Because you aren't playing ball with us. It's supposed to show how serious this whole thing is. That we're willing to kill you to keep you quiet. You're supposed to be intimidated!"

"I guess this is like when you have to explain a joke to someone, but then it isn't funny anymore because you explained it."

He picked up the gun, gingerly put it back into the briefcase, and exclaimed, "Most people don't question it, John!"

I almost didn't even correct him, but if he was going to be my lawyer, I felt like he should know. "My name is Jack. You're the one named John."

"I am? Oh, that's right, I got them mixed up again. I've never been any good at talking to humans."

"Yeah, me neither."

He let out a short, desperate laugh. "Hey, look at us, bonding over our similarities. I think you and me are going to be great friends."

Oh, wait, hang on, you're the one whose friends all die, right? Nevermind. We'll keep this professional."

"You're not really a lawyer, are you?"

"Whaaat?" he responded. "Of course I am!"

"This is all about Vanessa. Isn't it?"

"No, no, no. Of course not! This is about *appearances*. Do you have any idea how many murders and vanishings and other suspicious deaths happen in this town in a single month? We are way over our quotas here! You gotta keep an eye on this sort of thing or else people are going to take notice. It's a never-ending fight to stay off the radar. I'm sure you can relate. Please, Jack, take the 'W' and leave it alone."

He reached into his briefcase one last time and pulled out another piece of paper. This one was smaller than the rest. He put it on the table in front of him and said. "Cheer up. It's not all gloom and doom. I am happy to report that Spencer, it so happens, had a warrant by the federal government for unrelated charges. Do you know what that means?"

"Obviously, I do not."

"It means there was a reward offered to anyone who could provide information leading to his arrest." He slid the piece of paper towards me. I picked it up to see that it was a check for ten thousand dollars, made out to "Cash." When I looked back at John Normal, he was smiling and raising his eyebrows.

"So this is a negotiation?"

He scrunched up his face and made a shrill whine, then said, "I'm not really supposed to negotiate. This is more of a take-it or leave-it kind of deal."

"There are people in this town who still think Jerry's a killer. Was that part of your cover-up too? Were you the ones who started that rumor?"

"Please. Why would we want to make people think *another* murder occurred? No, no, no. We're the *good* guys. We keep the peace. We maintain the status quo. That was probably the Collector's idea."

"Who's the Collector?"

He shrugged. "If you figure it out, please let us know. That guy's been slaughtering our operatives wholesale."

"I literally cannot keep up with any more moving pieces."

He shook his head. "Tony was right about you. You're way too dumb to be a threat."

"Thanks. Also, fuck you."

"Tell you what. Sign the statement, keep your mouth shut, and we'll find a clever way to let everyone know that Jerry didn't kill Vanessa. What do you say? Do we have a deal?"

Chapter Fourteen

I answered the front door to see Jerry standing there in a tuxedo t-shirt and jeans.

“You ready?” he asked.

“Are you?” I replied, gesturing at his choice of informal wear.

“What?” he said. “She would appreciate this.”

I wasn’t in a mood to argue. I didn’t even want to go in the first place, but Jerry had insisted.

I was wearing the only black suit I owned—the one I picked out months prior in anticipation of another upcoming funeral. I didn’t want to put it on. Even the sight of it brought back a nagging reminder that my own big day wasn’t that far off. But if we were going to pay our respects, we might as well play the part.

The home’s previous owners had left a couple closets full of clothing before their abrupt departure. I went searching around in one until I found an old suit jacket for Jerry to wear over his shirt, and then we set off for the church.

So far, he hadn’t given me any reason to regret my decision to loan him my car. As long as I was in the passenger seat, he obeyed all the laws and speed limits, but still... I had to wonder where those muddy hoofprints in the back seat came from.

When we got to the church, the parking lot was already packed. Jerry shamelessly cruised to the front with the car windows rolled down and Louis Armstrong blaring through the speakers, double parked in both of the handicap spots, and killed the engine before taking out a flask and offering me a swig.

After I politely declined, he downed enough for the both of us, then we went on inside. I tried to ignore all the annoying stares while simultaneously searching the crowd for familiar faces. Brother Riley was sitting on a pew close to the back. When we made eye contact, he waved us over and pretended he’d saved a couple seats for us. It felt good being in the presence of another friend. I knew full well that

there were a lot of people in that church who would have preferred it if Jerry and I had stayed far away (I was one of them.)

He convinced me that we owed it to Vanessa to show up and support our fellow gas station orphan, so here we were, dressed up and going through the motions in a way that she likely would have made fun of us for. She was never one for formalities, and everything about this ritual rang hollow. But at least we had this. Closure was not in high supply in this town.

The official story was not the sort of thing I would have come up with. If you ask me, they could have been a lot less bleak about it, but I'm sure a pleasant death would have been too attention-grabbing, so instead they went with tragic and innocuous.

Vanessa got tired of the small-town life and made an impulsive teenager decision. She packed a bag, didn't tell anyone she was leaving, and went to explore what the world had to offer. She walked and hitchhiked until she was just far enough away from town as to not throw off our death statistics, then she found a public hiking trail where she must have slipped and fallen off a stone ledge. She broke her legs and died from weather-related exposure. A week later, some hikers happened across her body.

The worst part of this clever cover-up was that I had to go along with it. I couldn't say a word to O'Brien or Jerry or even Doctor V, and especially not to that guy from out of town who was calling himself Vanessa's uncle. This was a secret I had to keep, and if I dared step out of line or tell anyone what I really knew, Mr. Normal assured me that my friends would be the ones who paid for it.

The Baptist preacher began his generic sermon in front of the urn while the slideshow of pictures from Vanessa's phone played on a projector screen behind him. I didn't bother listening to what he was saying. The words weren't for me, anyway. They were for the crying friends and loved ones, her old classmates on the front row, the ultra-religious church-goers who never missed a funeral. They knew how to grieve. They had it down to a science. But I wasn't wired right for any of this pomp or circumstance. I just felt uncomfortable. And sad. And, frankly, a little bored.

“Hey bro, stay here. I’m going to the bathroom real quick.” I looked over to see Jerry already squeezing past the folks on the other end of the pew.

Brother Riley leaned over and whispered, “That boy doesn’t look like he’s coping real good.”

I nodded and whispered back, “I don’t think he knows how.”

He pulled a piece of cellophane-wrapped candy from his pocket and offered it to me, which I graciously accepted before going back to zoning out.

The preacher wrapped up the sermon and announced, “Now, Vanessa’s closest friends have prepared a few words in her honor.” He gestured to a young woman on the front row with glasses and blonde hair. She stood and took a step forward, but then Jerry came out of nowhere and took the microphone from the preacher’s hand.

There was a roar of murmurs from the audience as Jerry gave the bewildered preacher a kiss on both cheeks. He said into the microphone, “Thanks, Padre. I’ll take it from here.” Then he took the empty spot at the podium, put on a pair of reading glasses that I had never seen before, took another swig from the flask, and shuffled through some note cards.

Brother Riley leaned over, “Is he supposed to be up there?”

Oh God. Please don’t let him start with any of that Mathmetism crap.

Jerry cleared his throat and stared down the blonde girl until she took her seat, then he started, “Friends, family, enemies, frenemies, ladies...” He winked at someone in the audience. “...Gentlemen...” He winked again. “All y’all, I’ve got a few words to say. This isn’t going to take up a bunch of your time, but it’s important that you hear it anyway. In the field of multidimensional geometry, there is a numerical concept known as Graham’s number.”

Crap!

Someone on the other side of the church stood up and yelled, “You’re not supposed to be up there!”

Jerry pulled off his glasses and fired back, “Shut up Frank! Before I tell everybody what really happened to those Kmart mannequins!”

The man—Frank—sheepishly took a seat and didn't say another word.

"As I was saying," Jerry continued sans glasses, "Graham's number is a fixed integer used as a representation of the upper limit of dimensions necessary for hypercubes to maintain certain properties. Graham's number is also incomprehensibly large. Simply put, it's so big a visual representation of it couldn't possibly exist within a finite universe. If you were to write out the entire number in base ten notation, you wouldn't be able to fit it onto all of the sheets of paper on the planet. In fact, if you were able to write it out so tiny that each digit only occupied the space within a planck volume—the smallest possible unit of measurement of space—then the totality of the observable universe would not be large enough to contain all of its digits. The concept of infinity is easy, but Graham's number is a lot more difficult to wrap your head around. Yet it has actual function. It's used in mathematical proofs. It's a label encompassing an idea that no human could ever properly conceive of in its magnitude. And so, we represent it with a very simple symbol."

At this point, the slideshow ended and an image of an italicized G took the place of Vanessa's photos. It was white against a black background. He must have bribed whoever was in charge of the slideshow or hacked into the computer remotely. Neither option would have surprised me.

I looked over at Brother Riley, who seemed enthralled by Jerry's rambling. He nodded along and murmured, "That's deep, man."

Jerry was speaking quickly now. "It is literally impossible to imagine the size of Graham's number in practical terms. The number of nanoseconds that have passed since the big bang, the number of molecules necessary to fill up the entire universe, the number of baby spiders I can fit inside a regular piñata, add all of these together and it's still not even close to matching the scale of Graham's number."

Brother Riley asked, "What was that about piñatas?"

"And yet, here it is," Jerry continued. "We can talk about it. The number is condensed into a single-syllable word. And it's not

even the largest number we can throw around. How about G plus one? Or G times two? Or G to the power of G ? The great thing about language is that it can capture abstractions otherwise beyond the limits of understanding. We live in a world with truths our feeble brains aren't meant to comprehend, but we are able to interact with them by compartmentalizing their identity into a simple letter."

The preacher walked over and nervously reached for the microphone. Jerry slapped his hand away and continued, unfettered.

"There are, of course, other words more commonplace than G . Words that represent far more complex notions. When we lose somebody, we struggle to make sense of the void they leave behind. It's hard to grapple with the loss of someone you care about, but we have to find a way to make sense of it, so we all say that we *miss* Van. We think about what she means to us, and it's too much for our brains to visualize, so we say we *love* Van. These are just words, but we can look at the proof and see the mechanism working, even if we don't understand how."

Oh, I thought. He actually pivoted into a decent message.

"And now, I'm going to give you another word: 'Death.'"

...aaand there it is.

The preacher reached for the microphone a little more aggressively. Once Jerry smacked him in the face, he gave up and walked away.

I'm going to spare you the details. Suffice to say, Jerry proceeded to embark on a long tangent about how death is a 'human construct,' and as a concept, it failed under rigorous testing. He then attempted to prove *mathematically* that death does not really exist, using advanced numerical arguments that may as well have been Greek for all this audience knew. He paused every so often to take a flask pull, and by the time he was done, it was empty.

"...and so," he concluded at long last, "if death isn't real, it is with absolute certainty that I can declare that our friend Vanessa is not really dead. Which begs the question: who—or what—is really in the urn?"

Jerry walked up to the decorative receptacle of Vanessa's ashes and grabbed it into his arms. The combined sound of dozens

of people gasping and whispering all at once turned into a low, incoherent buzzing like thousands of bees taking flight. One of the men in the front row stood up and hollered, "You need to calm down!"

Jerry shot back, "Don't tell me which direction to calm! This isn't really Van's body! You people have been lied to! Fruit Loops are all the same flavor! The only difference is the color! That's not relevant, but it needed to be said and I don't often get an audience like this! Van is alive and you're all letting yourselves believe the lie because it's easier than knowing the truth!"

Brother Riley whispered, "Hey, isn't that your cop friend?"

I looked where he was pointing and felt both relieved and worried in equal measures to see O'Brien walking down the center aisle towards Jerry. She stepped onto the stage, walked over to him, and said a few words into his ear. I'll never know what it was she said, but evidently, it was enough to make Jerry reconsider his decisions.

He walked the urn back to its table, looked out at the audience and said into the microphone, "I guess it's time I wrap this up. Thank you for coming to my TED talk, and a pox on all you haters out there. Jerry out!" With a smile, he extended the microphone sideways and let go.

O'Brien caught it in the air and pulled Jerry offstage by the ear. She walked the microphone over to the preacher and looked around the room until she and I made eye contact.

"I think I have to go now," I whispered to Brother Riley. "It looks like my ride is about to leave."

Chapter Fifteen

Doctor V's office felt warmer than usual. I took my regular spot and pulled out my newest book to kill the time. This one was a horror novel about a giant alligator that terrorizes the same family for twenty years (at first, I caught myself wondering why the family doesn't just move away from the swamps, but then I realized how hypocritical that was). I had just started reading when the door opened and an unfamiliar woman entered the room.

She was slightly older than Doctor V, with light brown hair, a pearl necklace, and a white pant suit. She was volleyball-player tall and thin enough to be on the cover of a health magazine. I expected her to realize her mistake, apologize for barging into the wrong room, and leave me to my book until Doctor V sauntered in fifteen minutes later.

But she didn't leave. She walked over to me with that confident walk that models and politicians have down pat. She extended her arm like she was about to execute me with an invisible gun and said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Townsend. My name is Doctor Weaver."

In time, I realized that she was waiting for me to shake her hand. I did so, finding her grip to be unsurprisingly (but intimidatingly) strong.

All I could think to say was, "Hi."

She made things even stranger, taking a seat in the doctor's chair on the opposite side of the desk.

"I'm so pleased to finally meet you in person. I've been briefed on the particulars of your case. It almost feels like I know you already. Do you mind if I call you 'Jack'?"

"I don't mind," I said, looking at the open door to the hallway. "Who are you exactly?"

A random patient who wandered into the room?

"Like I said, my name is Doctor Weaver. I've been asked to come in and assist with your case. Doctor Vicedomini is unable to be

here today due to health concerns.”

“Is he okay?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.” *That sounds like a no.* “I’d much rather talk about Jack. Since your last visit, you underwent a very serious life-altering surgery. Would you like to discuss this?”

I couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling that this was all a big joke. Doctor V was fond of mind games. He liked to test me and see how I reacted, but if this was another ruse, he was taking it a little too far.

“Hang on,” I said. “Doctor V really isn’t here?”

“I’m afraid Henry will be unavailable for the foreseeable future. I’ve taken most of his work load, and I must say, none of his patients are nearly as interesting as Jack Townsend.”

She opened the drawer on the desk and pulled out a pencil and a notepad attached to a clipboard. She held them close to her face and scribbled something onto the top sheet.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Are we really not going to close the door?”

Doctor Weaver looked at the open door, then at me.

“Are you worried that a stranger will hear you say something out of context and form the wrong idea about you? Or are you concerned that somebody might be spying on you?”

“I don’t know.”

“How interesting.”

“It creeps me out to have a private psychiatric evaluation with a wide-open door, okay?”

“Why do you think that is?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would it make you more comfortable if I closed it?”

“Yes, please.”

“Interesting.”

She scribbled something onto the notepad, put it face down on the desk, then went and closed the door. She made a point to loudly click the lock into place before returning to her seat.

“Now,” she started, “I understand that you get uncomfortable with certain topics.”

“That’s true about everyone. Isn’t it?”

She picked up her notepad to scribble something else down.

"I also understand that you believe you have fatal familial insomnia. Can you explain that to me?"

"Excuse me?"

Her only answer was a blank stare.

Two can play that game, I thought, staring right back until she cracked.

"Would you like me to repeat the question?"

"Are you asking me to educate you on the symptoms of my disease? Or are you implying that I do *not* have insomnia?"

"I'm not implying anything. I can state that the record for the longest anyone in history has gone without sleep is eleven days. I want to know what your understanding of your condition is. I would like to make sure you know why you're really here."

Is it possible that I really do sleep and don't realize it? No. Of course not. That wouldn't make any sense at all. I went through this same mental exercise after Tony tried to convince me I wasn't really sick.

I regularly work for days at a time. My bed at home has been covered in old books for over a year. I have alarms on my phone to remind me to eat breakfast and change clothes and put in prescription eye drops because my eyes stay open fifty percent longer than the average person's. Of course I can't fall asleep! *She's messing with my head. Testing my reactions.*

"I see. You want to know if I'm so far gone that you can convince me that I'm not really an insomniac? Right? Don't worry. I'm still firmly tethered to reality. That world record thing is pointless anyway. Guinness retired it years ago because it was dangerous, and in fact—"

"Jack, what you're doing right now is called meta-gaming. You're trying to deduce the purpose behind my questions instead of answering them honestly. Please believe me when I say it's deconstructive in the purest sense of the word."

I shuddered. "That's what Doctor V said. Like, almost verbatim."

"Interesting." She wrote something else down.

“Are you serious right now?”

“You seem a lot more hostile with me than you were with Henry. Are you intimidated by women?”

“Do I seem intimidated?”

“Maybe we should talk about something else.”

“Yeah, maybe we should.”

“Why don’t you tell me what’s been going on in Jack’s world since the last visit?”

I told her almost everything, taking care to omit anything that might give her cause to recommend I be moved to special observation. She listened intently, punctuating my story with the occasional “Interesting...” or “How fascinating...” When I got to the part about Spencer forcing me to dig my own grave, I stopped.

Do I tell her what really happened? With Vanessa? Or do I go with the official version?

I chose to play it safe, and skipped the part where he murdered one of my friends in front of me. By the time I got to the big lie—that Vanessa was found on a nature trail—I felt dirty.

Doctor Weaver smiled and continued to write her notes.

“How’s your friend handling everything? Jeremy, was it? From what I understand, he and Vanessa were close. How did he take the news of her accident?”

“He hasn’t been to work since the funeral. He says he has the flu, but I’m pretty sure that’s all crap. If he were sick, he’d be sleeping it off at the gas station, same as he does with hangovers.”

“Let’s talk about Spencer for a moment.”

“There’s really not much to talk about. He tried to kill me, and O’Brien hauled his happy ass to jail. He’s not a problem anymore.”

She seemed almost proud of her response. “I’m afraid that’s where you’re wrong. He may be behind bars, but the battle is far from over. This is going to be a very difficult time for both you and your friend. You haven’t seen the last of Mr. Middleton. Even with a full confession, the wheels of justice turn slowly.”

“Oh,” I said with a smile. “I almost forgot to tell you the best part.”

“What’s that?”

“Spencer Middleton is dead.”

She blinked a few times, before making the same face I make any time someone asks me a question about cars. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“There’s nothing to understand. Spencer died a few days ago in custody. He tried to stage a prison break, and they got him. It took four bullets to the chest and two to the computer to put him down. A little faster than he deserved, but he’s done for good this time.”

I heard all about it from O’Brien, and although I wasn’t going to admit this to anyone, especially not the shrink, I suspected that Mr. Normal’s crew had something to do with his demise. As much as I oppose conspiratorial executions on principle, I just couldn’t bring myself to care about this one.

“Wait,” she blinked a few times. “Spencer’s *dead*?”

“Yeah. All the way dead.”

“Spencer Middleton?”

“Yeah. That one.”

“You’re telling me that Spencer Middleton is *dead*?”

“It doesn’t matter how many times you say it, Doc. I never get tired of hearing it.”

She placed the clipboard on the desk face down, stood up, and said, “I’m sorry. Something has just come to my attention, and I need to make a quick phone call. I assure you, I’ll be right back and we can continue this conversation.”

“Okay, nothing suspicious about that.”

She walked out into the hallway and closed the door behind her. It took me less than half a second to reach over and grab the notepad.

There were no notes on here about me. No notes about anything. The only thing on the paper was a doodle of a cat (and not a very good one). To make things worse, the cartoon cat was splayed out with its stomach ripped open and its entrails torn out.

That’s the moment I decided I didn’t really care for Doctor Weaver.

“Jack, we need to talk.”

These were the words that greeted me as I walked into the gas station a few hours later. I was here to start another shift because, it would seem, I hated myself. Or at least I didn't care enough about my own mental well-being to ask for a day off. O'Brien gave me a hard time about it, but she eventually caved and took me straight from the hospital to the gas station. The door hadn't even closed behind me before the newest part-timer was in my face and demanding attention.

His name was Brent. He was a husky guy with brown hair and a square jaw, a year or two older than me and almost always angry at something. In the three days he'd been with us, I hadn't learned a single personal detail about him other than his name, but I'd already witnessed him lose his temper and yell at customers, raccoons, the drink machine, and even himself. He wasn't the best employee we'd ever hired by a long shot, but he hadn't tried to kill me either, so I wasn't going to complain.

I would have bet every last penny to my name that he hated me, and I would have taken out a loan to bet he was about to quit on the spot. I'd seen the look on his face way too many times before, a specific blend of self-righteous anger, annoyance, confusion, and excitement. He was hopped up on that rare quit-your-shitty-job energy, a better-quality drug than most (or so I hear).

“What's up, Brent?”

He was bouncing with the words, “A lot. A lot is up.”

“Okay, well, do you mind if I take a seat first?”

I had been getting by with a single crutch ever since Spencer dislocated my shoulder. My backpack full of books, clothes, and prescription medicines was hanging precariously over my good shoulder, and the longer I stood in one place, the harder it was to keep my balance.

“There are some seriously messed up things going on around here.” Apparently, he did mind.

“I know. Let me get settled in real quick. We can talk once I'm on the clock.”

I tried taking a step, but he moved to cut me off. “I am sick and tired of you ignoring all the problems. You need to listen to what I’m saying.”

“And you need to *back the fuck off, Brent!*” The way I screamed the second half of that sentence surprised both of us. Amazingly, it worked. He got out of my way and let me go to the bathroom. I took my time in there, changed my clothes, brushed my teeth, and tried to prepare for whatever was about to happen.

When I came back out a few minutes later, he was standing in the same spot, on the customer side of the counter, watching me and seething in silence. He kept quiet until I fell into my seat in front of the register, then he said, “This is going to be my last day.”

I could tell he had been looking forward to quitting since the minute he started working with us, but I was hoping we could have kept him around for at least a whole Ambrose (that was the unit of time I started using to measure employee tenures—about thirteen days).

All the same, I had to respect the fact that he was quitting in person. Most of our employees weren’t so polite. Normally, fed up workers just wouldn’t show up at all. Sometimes, they showed up, but couldn’t reach the end of their shift.

The day prior, a part-timer named Patrick took a bag of garbage out to the dumpster and never returned. One time, a worker named Wilbur locked himself in the bathroom for his entire shift. We picked the lock, only to find the room completely empty. A septuagenarian army vet named Otis walked out while I was in the middle of counting down his till. According to his Facebook page, he was in China six hours later (we still get the occasional postcard from him). I’m not even going to get started on all the employees that have been taken by the fox lady. Eventually, you get used to it.

“Okay. We’re sorry to see you go. We’ll definitely miss you.” I was getting much better at casual lying, and I couldn’t decide if that was a good or bad thing.

“That’s it?” he asked, like I had robbed him of his chance at some glorious fight he’d been prepping for all day. “You’re sorry, and

that's that? Don't you want to do some kind of exit interview? Don't you want to know why I'm quitting?"

"Sure," I said while shaking my head *no* as clearly as possible.

"Agatha Sistrunk came by, driving a truck that looked like a freakin' tank. She made me pump her gas for her."

"Yeah, she does that."

"She tipped me for it."

"Oh, that's nice."

"She put the money into my waistband with her creepy old-woman skeleton fingers. Didn't ask either, just tucked it right in there, deeper than you'd expect. Then she gave me her address and told me to 'stop by sometime' because there was 'plenty more where that came from.' It was only a dollar."

"Yeah, I can definitely see why that might—"

"There's more. I know I'm not the only one that hears those voices when I'm alone. I've seen the ear plugs in the drawer. There's something else going on, something dark, and you guys pretend it's all kosher."

"Okay, I'll admit—"

"And what's with the gnomes? I've never seen a single gnome delivery. Where are they coming from? Why are we all pretending they don't move around on their own? Every time I touch one of the walls in the cooler, I get electrocuted. I went to the bathroom this morning, and the reflection was just a female version of myself. I keep having to chase raccoons out of the store now that they figured out how to dart through people's legs. When I'm all alone, I get phone calls from people saying they're my dead family members, and I can't tell if they're faking or not. And I know for a fact that the smoke detector doesn't work, because I watched one of the customers build a bucket fire next to the hot dog roller because he thought they were 'too raw' and wanted his cooked better."

He took a deep, loud breath through his nose.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"Yesterday, a spider crawled into my mouth."

"What?"

“A SPIDER, Jack. Crawled right into my mouth.” He tried to demonstrate with a hand gesture, as if that was going to help me to understand. (It did not.)

“Okay.”

“And one last thing.” He took off his name badge and tossed it down in front of me. “My name is Brett. Not Brent. You guys spelled it wrong. I’ve mentioned it at least a hundred times, but nobody will fix it. Y’all have been calling me ‘Brent’ for three days straight.”

I looked at the name badge, then at him. “Are you sure?”

“Fuck you.” He flipped me the bird and stormed out of the store, leaving me all alone with nothing but my books. This was shaping up to be a pretty good day.

So what if Brent/Bret was gone? Now I didn’t have to show anybody the ropes, I could just sit here in silence and read my books and pass the time ignoring all those horrible things right there on the horizon of my mind... things like Vanessa and Spencer and—

Nope! Not gonna think about that. It was getting harder and harder to push those thoughts into the background. What I needed was a distraction.

The universe must have heard my silent plea, because right then I got a big distraction—the man walking through the front door donned head-to-toe in camo. The universe must also be a twisted evil genie, because my wish was coming true in the worst way possible, and suddenly I missed Brent’s company more than I ever thought possible. He may have been a terrible coworker, but at least he could have made a reliable witness. Now I didn’t even have that.

Travis Guidry and I went all the way back to grade school. We were never going to be friends, but he always made a point to sit next to me in class so he could cheat off my tests. On a few occasions, he even paid me to do his homework. After we graduated, I didn’t expect to see much of him again. But it’s a small town, so we were destined to run into each other on occasion. I can’t say I was all that surprised when he showed up with the rest of the vigilantes that night I lost my leg.

O’Brien was very clear when she told them all to never come back, but there was a reason Travis always cheated off of me. He

was a bad listener and slow learner.

I looked at the store phone and wondered if I had enough time to call for help before—*Oh he's already here*. He put his hands flat on the counter in front of me and leaned over to say, "Hey, Jack."

I didn't see any weapons on him, but it wasn't like I could hold my own in a one-on-one anyway. The last thing I wanted was another fight after everything I'd been through, so when I spoke, it was with a careful voice, the same I'd use to try and calm a rabid dog with a knife in its mouth.

"Hi, Travis. What are you doing here?"

"I just wanted to come down and tell you... I'm sorry." I stared at him, waiting for an elaboration, but he just stared back. "Well, ain't you gonna say something?"

"I'm glad to hear you're sorry. But you know you're not supposed to be here, right?"

"I know, but you don't have nothing to worry about. I'm not here to hurt ya. I wanted to come and clear the air once and for all. You know? I wanted to get this off my chest."

"Okay," I said.

He stood up straight and crossed his arms. "I'm ready to put the past behind us. I'll be the bigger man and apologize for the misunderstanding."

I took my careful voice and threw it right out the window. This was no job for delicacy or subtlety. He needed to hear me honestly or he wouldn't hear me at all. "You beat the crap out of me, Travis! You tried to kill me! 'Sorry' isn't gonna cut it."

He responded to my volume in kind, going on the offensive and defensive at the same time. "Look, asshole, I'm trying to say sorry! You don't have to be such a little bitch about it. What, like you've never made a mistake before? You know what? Fuck you!" He slapped the basket of pralines off the counter in front of him, showering the floor behind me with the treats. "I'm glad we beat the shit outta you! I wish we could do it all over again. I wish we had killed you. Stuck up prick! Too good for my apology, huh? Fuck. You. You got a lot of growing up to do."

He tightened his lips and made his mouth as small as humanly possible as he glared down his nose at me, awaiting my response.

I felt like I had made my point. "Well, thanks for coming down, I guess. You know where the door is."

He relaxed his scowl and dropped his head with a sigh, then tried again, "Look, man, I'm sorry I lost my temper. I've been under a lot of stress lately, and the whole thing with you and Jerry, finding out y'all didn't have nothing to do with what happened to Vanessa, it's been causing me a lot of problems. I think if you just tell me it was all okay, it was an honest mistake, it would go a long way in helping me get some better sleep at night."

"No," I said.

"Aw man fuck you!" he screamed. "Fuck your whole face!"

The front door opened, and Jerry walked into the store wearing a fur coat and sunglasses. He looked my way and said, "Hey Jack!" Then he waved at the man standing across from me and said, "Wassup, Travis?"

Travis held up a hand and made a quick waving gesture. "Sup, Jerry."

Jerry grabbed a bottle of cheap whiskey and wandered off in the direction of the snack cakes, leaving me abundantly confused.

"What the hell?" I asked.

Travis glowered and said, "That's right. Jerry already forgave me. He knows we had our hearts in the right place. Now can I get your forgiveness?"

"No."

He screamed loudly, "Fuck you!" Then he pleaded softly, "Come on, man."

"Your absolution is not my responsibility."

He stared at the ground for a few seconds, then said to the floor, "Please?"

I sighed and said, "I'll think about it."

He looked up at me with a big smile, "Alright! I feel better already." He held out his closed hand for a fist bump. I knew what he

wanted, but I took it and shook it anyway just to be petty, then I grabbed my crutch and left my post to go find Jerry.

When I approached him, he was eating a snack cake and staring at chips with the whiskey bottle dangling at his side.

"Hey," I said. "You do realize you called in sick today, right?"

"Yeah, man. I've got it real bad. I already barfed three times since this morning."

"Then why are you here buying alcohol?"

"Oh, you know what they say. Starve a fever, drown a flu."

I followed him up to the cash register, where he went ahead and rang himself up, paid with a hundred-dollar bill, and made his own change. I didn't bother checking his math or counting along with the bills he pulled out. At this point, I just assumed he was always stealing from us.

"Are you okay, dude?" I asked.

He fake-coughed into his hand and slammed the register shut. "No. But I will be."

As he left the store, I watched him go and wondered if there was something else I should have said or done.

"Jack, you're an asshole."

"*Holy Jesus!*" I yelled.

"What?!" Travis jumped back and made karate hands. "What is it?!"

"Sorry. I thought you left already."

"Nah, bruh. I still gotta pay for my gas. Like I was saying: What the hell is wrong with you? Your boy Jerry is clearly depressed as fuck. And you dismiss him like his feelings don't even matter. That's cold."

"What are you talking about?"

"We all saw him at Vanessa's funeral. He's messed up bad."

"Are you seriously lecturing me right now? You tried to murder both of us!"

"Are you ever going to let that go? I'm trying to help you now! He needs his friend to talk to. Unless you just don't give a flying fuck about nobody. Man up, call your buddy, and go hug it out like bros, cause that's what he needs. Trust me."

As hard as it was to believe, I was beginning to suspect that Travis might not be completely wrong about something. Jerry wasn't the kind of guy to ask for help, and I couldn't pretend that everything was okay and wait for him to come around on his own. I made up my mind. I was going to go out and visit Jerry at his place once my shift ended.

Unfortunately, the newest part-timer never showed up for his shift, which meant I was about to work another unexpected double if I couldn't find somebody else willing to cover for him. The owners hated when I gave extra hours to part-timers, but I hated how long I'd gone without a shower even more, so I grabbed the employee phone number list and started at the top.

I'd long since become conditioned to the sound of the door swinging open, to the point that I almost couldn't even hear it anymore, but this time it sounded extra loud and important. I looked up without even thinking, like my subconscious was expecting company and forgot to tell me. Sure enough, it was a familiar face walking into the store. Our eyes met, and she walked straight up to the counter.

"Hi, Jack."

It took me a second to place the young woman. Her long hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She wore dress pants, heels, and a jacket the same bright shade of red as her lips. The first time I ever saw her, she came casual, but now she was dressed to kill.

"Hi," I said.

"I don't know if you remember me or not, but my name is Rosa. We met last week."

"Rosa Vasquez. Yes, of course."

"First of all, I wanted to apologize again for calling you 'ma'am' on the phone."

"If you came all the way down here just for that, trust me, it's not a big deal."

“Good. I’m glad. Secondly—” She widened her stance, put both hands on her hips, lowered her eyelids into a fiery glare, and raised both her volume and pitch by several notches. “HOW DARE YOU?”

Oh fuck.

I felt like the swamp frog who just learned the log he’s been chilling on was an alligator.

She repeated her words more deliberately. “How dare you? Do you think my time is worth nothing!? I gave up two other jobs for this! And on the day I’m supposed to start training, you ghost me? What, do you think you can just call me and have me come over for nothing?! Three times! You stood me up three times! I’m not some gas station booty call!”

She was so worked up she didn’t notice when the sheriff’s deputy walked in. I threw O’Brien a desperate look, but she just smirked, crossed her arms, and leaned against the door while Rosa continued.

“This isn’t women’s softball, Jack! You don’t get four strikes! I am so unbelievably *angry* right now, and if I start crying, I want you to know it’s because I’m angry! It’s not because I’m sad! I’m sorry, I just-I need a second to catch my breath!” She fanned herself as the tears swelled up in her eyes and threatened to flood the whole building, but she blinked them back and continued, “Everything about this is ridiculously unprofessional! All I wanted was to be treated with some common decency! But instead, I came in for my first day just so I can get called names and then fired by a guy who smells like a men’s locker room. Do you know how demoralizing that is? Then on my second day, nobody even bothered to tell me you were closed. Then my third day, you gave me your word you would be here and you *weren’t*.”

This whole thing was deeply discomforting. I felt ashamed. Not like regular shame, either. It was like getting lectured by a sweet old grandmother. The kind of shaming that lets you know you really fucked up. It didn’t help at all that Rosa was beginning to hyperventilate.

“It’s-it’s-I’m okay. I’m-okay...” She bent over, struggling to catch her breath. I grabbed one of the paper sacks we use for forties from below the counter and held it out. She took it with a quick, “Thank you,” and started breathing into it, stopping after a few breaths to say, “Sorry,” before returning to it.

Is she really apologizing to me again?

When her breathing slowed almost back to normal, I said “Rosa, I want to—”

She straightened back up and yelled, “Let me finish! I’m not done yet!” She waved her finger around for this next part. Not at anything in particular, just *around*. “Jerry told me you were cool. And you know what? You’re not cool. None of this is cool. This is the complete opposite of cool! You’re lukewarm, and you need to know it!”

She took a breath in preparation for the next wave, and I took my chance to squeeze in a few words while she was reloading.

“You’re right.”

She made a face like she’d just been stung by a bee. That might have been the exact right thing to say, or the exact wrong thing, but I didn’t have time to obsess. She’d lost the wind from her sails, and if I waited and analyzed and over-thought every little thing I was going to say, I’d never say it, so I shot from the hip and hoped I wasn’t about to embarrass either of us.

“You’re absolutely right. We were in the wrong here. We fucked up big time. Your time is worth more. You are worth more. We dropped the ball on this every chance we could.”

“Oh,” she said. It seemed the storm had begun to pass, but she wasn’t wholly convinced. She cautiously pushed me along. “Go on.”

“The owners should have followed up better after they hired you. When plans changed, I had a responsibility to let you know, but I didn’t. Calvin had no business being near... people. We failed every chance we got, and there is no excuse other than the fact that we’re irresponsible.”

“Oh,” she said. “That’s... yeah.”

I could have ended it there, but I didn't. "I'm not trying to defend what happened, but it has been a crazy couple of weeks. I think I was in emergency surgery the last couple times you came in. Honestly, I've been in and out of the hospitals so much lately, it's hard to keep track."

"Oh!" she exclaimed with emphatic sympathy, "Oh my god! I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

"It's okay, really. I just wanted you to know why things slipped my mind. I mean, if I didn't have Jerry dragging me along, I probably would have missed our friend's funeral a few days ago."

She covered her mouth. "Oh my god! I'm so sorry! I swear, I didn't know! I wouldn't have come down here if—"

"No, it's okay. I'm glad you did."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You caught me right when I was supposed to be getting off, but I had another employee quit on me without any heads up. I haven't had a break in a couple of days, and I wanted to go and check on Jerry."

"Jerry? Why? What's wrong?"

"I'm worried about him. He's been really sick ever since the funeral."

"Oh my god!"

"Do you think you can start now?"

"Start what?"

"Work? Like, right now? I need someone to watch the register for me. It will only be for a couple hours, tops."

She looked at the ground. "I mean... If you're serious, yeah. Of course I can."

"Great!" I grabbed my crutch and hopped up. "How far did Calvin get in your training? Do you know how to work the register and turn on the pumps?"

"Actually, he wouldn't let me near the register. He called me a 'dirty brown heifer' and said I was only good for cooking and cleaning."

Whoa. No wonder she was mad. The fact that she even came back to work for us, *twice*, was incredible. I wouldn't have held

it against her if she had burned the building to the ground.

I gave her a one-minute crash course on the critical stuff, told her if she had any questions to just follow her gut, and if there were any problems or complications to just cover them with newspaper until I got back.

The last thing I did was call Jerry. I warned him that I was on my way over to his place, and I was bringing a can of chicken noodle soup and something to drink.

Chapter Sixteen

A couple miles downhill from the gas station, deeper into the hungry forest, an unassuming dirt path intersects the main road. That path winds through the overgrown wilderness, leading to a metal gate—a scarecrow tied on with rusty barbed wire and a “Do Not Enter” sign posted on a tree nearby. Somewhere beyond that sits a dome-shaped metal building with no windows. This abandoned compound is all that’s left of the old Mathmetist community.

We pulled up in front of the building, and O’Brien put the car in park and honked the horn twice. I looked out the window at the bleak structure and wondered how it could be possible for a person to live alone in a place like this without losing his mind, but then I remembered who I was here to see.

As I unbuckled my seatbelt, O’Brien asked, “Do you want me to come with you?”

“No,” I said. “I think it might spook him if he’s outnumbered.”

“I’ll stay here and keep the car running.”

For someone presenting as such a hard-ass, her humanity had a bad habit of emerging from time to time.

“No, it’ll be okay. I’m not going to make you wait, and this might take a while.”

“Call me when you’re done. Or in case you need backup.”

“Will do.”

I stepped into the freezing cold with the drink and canned soup and crutch-walked towards the compound. As soon as Jerry opened the front door, O’Brien sped off, leaving us alone. He hustled out, quickly shutting the door behind him, then walked up to meet me wearing nothing but a bathrobe and pink crocs.

“Hey, bro, you really didn’t need to visit. Where’s O’Brien going?”

“She got called to another crime scene. You know how it is with this town. Never a dull day.” I handed him the bottle of Pedialyte

I'd snagged from the gas station, and he stared at it like it was an ancient artifact.

I explained, "It's to help out with the flu symptoms."

"What do I do with it?"

"You drink it."

"Oh. Oh good. Thank God."

The wind kicked through the trees, stinging my exposed skin. Jerry didn't flinch.

"Hey, you think maybe we can go inside where it's not freezing?"

He seemed surprised. "Uhhh... I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"Would it be better for us to wait here until O'Brien gets back?"

He looked over his shoulder at the entrance to the compound. "Yeah, no, sure, you can come in, but... um... don't judge me? It's usually a lot cleaner than it is now."

"I don't care. You've seen the gas station after the raccoons got in and had their way with it. It can't be much worse than that, right?"

It was much worse than that. It was so much worse than that.

The building itself was a simple barracks-style collection of twin-sized bunk beds, with a commercial-grade kitchen located at the far end. The floorplan was wide open, save for the bathrooms. Clearly, privacy was not high on the Mathmetists' list of priorities.

Garbage was piled up wherever there was space for it, with piggy trails from one end of the building to the other. There were more cigarette butts than I could count, but not a single ashtray. The place smelled like Jerry had misplaced some old seafood, and the faintest aroma of vomit formed the cherry on top of the layer cake of disgusting. The interior of this building was colder than our walk-in cooler, and I couldn't stop myself from blurting out, "How do you live like this?" He stopped and gave me a pained expression. "No, I mean, literally, how? I would freeze to death in here."

"Oh, I don't spend a lot of time in this part of the property anymore. I only come in here to use the bathroom, play my records,

and practice my parkour. It may be cold, but the acoustics are great. Come on.” He waved his hand and started towards the kitchen area. “I’ll show you my room. It’s a lot less tragic in there, I promise.”

I followed him through the mess, consciously making an effort to ignore my surroundings and failing miserably. There were cans, bottles, and empty condom wrappers, and I swear I saw some kind of six-legged rodent scurry through the mounds.

There were also a fair number of gnomes set up here and there, and it looked like he’d been collecting Christmas decorations from around town. In the kitchen, he’d built a six-foot tall sculpture using the body of a snowman yard ornament and the plastic head of a black Santa. It was wearing sunglasses and a parka riddled with moth holes.

“What the heck is that?” I asked as we passed the abomination.

“Just something I’ve been working on in my free time.”

“It’s horrifying.”

“Thank you.”

We walked past the scary Santa and up to the back door, which he pushed open. I kept close behind, following him outside into the back yard of the compound. When I saw what was there, I was blown away.

This must have been how Dorothy felt when she first stepped into the Land of Oz. The air out there smelled like summer camp, with an inexplicable warmth to it. Jerry had woven a canopy of white Christmas lights all above us, glowing bright enough that this place was probably visible from space. A gas generator grumbled loudly somewhere in the forest nearby, and I could see that he’d organized a collection of mismatched chairs around an enormous fire pit in the center of the yard, next to a tall stack of logs and car tires.

But the most impressive part were the sculptures.

All around us stood creepy humanoid creations. Like the Santa/snowman from before, they were unsettling monuments to what a man can achieve with too much time on his hands. The level of detail varied from one to the next. Some wore Halloween masks. Some were disturbingly lifelike. Some were little more than

scarecrows, fashioned from old clothing stuffed with newspaper and staked in place. There were maybe a dozen or so, standing at the perimeter of the yard like guards on duty.

A familiar school bus was parked on the opposite side of the fire pit, close to the tree line. It was the same one the Mathmetists had used to visit the gas station the day before they all ascended to the “feast of Samhain.” I quickly realized that this was where Jerry was headed. I stayed close and tried to avoid eye-contact with any of the sculptures.

When I followed him onto the bus, I was relieved to feel the warm blast of heated air hit me in the face. The bus itself was exactly what I expected from Jerry’s room.

All but the back two seats had been stripped from the vehicle, with the rest of the space converted into a humble hippy-style bachelor pad. There was a mattress against the wall, neatly made with sheets tucked in and a quilt on top. A couple bean bag chairs and a hot plate sat on the other side below the thick extension cord running through a duct-taped crack in a window. Somehow, he’d managed to find space for a hammock, a television with four different gaming consoles, and a bookshelf packed with comics, DVD’s, and—believe it or not—books. He also crammed in a work desk covered in loose papers.

He took a seat at the desk and cleared off the pages sitting on the bean bag chair next to him. I spotted a few other sheets of paper scattered about with notes written front and back. It was never my intention to snoop, but I couldn’t help but glean a few sentences as I passed by.

There were names of people, followed by short notes. The first one I caught was: “G. Johnson - Heroin.” On another page, he had written “Derick Taylor - Chronic masturbator.” I took my seat on the bean bag as he stacked the loose sheets together. On the back, I spotted, “Matt Peters - Shot dad in the stomach.” He threw the sheets into a drawer before I could read anything else, and I tried to make myself forget whatever I had just seen.

He smiled and asked, “Can I get you something to drink? I have water and, uh...” He read the name on the side of the container

in his hand. "...Pedialyte? I think there's still some whiskey around here somewhere too if you need—"

"I'm okay."

"I really wish you could have seen this place when it was tidier. I'm actually a very clean and organized person. You believe me, right?"

"I believe that *you* believe that."

"Okay, cool." He opened the bottle of Pedialyte and poured some into a shot glass, then threw it back like tequila and made a reflexive retching face.

"Listen," I started. "I'm glad I finally got a chance to come and see your place, and your nightmare Christmas army."

He laughed and made a single syllable noise that sounded like, "Chyeahright?"

"But I'm here this evening for a different reason."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. There's not really a good way for me to say this, and I don't have much practice with serious talks."

"Oh shit!" he exclaimed. "You're here to fire me again, aren't you?"

"I'm here because I'm worried about you. I don't think it's a good idea for you to wallow alone all the time, and I wanted to come and give you some company. Trust me, it helps to have somebody to talk to."

"What?"

"We can talk about anything you want. It doesn't have to be deep. It can just be two guys having a conversation."

He raised an eyebrow and said with a confused frown, "That's so sweet?"

"Look, I don't like how sappy this Hallmark moment feels either, okay? And I'm not going to pretend to know what you're going through. I can't describe the beetle in your box. But I do know what it's like to lose someone you care deeply about. To build your entire world around another person so that when they're gone, you don't know how to make sense of what's left. I know what it's like to lose somebody you love."

He narrowed his eyes at me and chewed off a hangnail in silence, then said, "You're not talking about Tony, are you?"

"No."

"Is this about that girl from your journal?"

Well, I guess there's no going back now. I told him we could talk about *anything*. I brought her up. I did this to myself. And maybe, on some level, I wanted him to ask me about her.

A sigh escaped my mouth. "Yeah."

"I'm sorry man, that really sucks. She... died?"

"There are some things that are worse than death, you know."

He looked at the ceiling of the bus and said, "Oh, trust me, I know." He grabbed another shot glass from the drawer, lined up two shots of Pedialyte, gave me one and threw back the other. Then he asked the question I was dreading.

"Who is she?"

"Her name is Sabine."

"The owners' daughter?! Is that why they keep giving you all the good shifts?"

This was not going the way I'd hoped or expected. But at least I had him talking, and that felt like a step in the right direction. So I bit the bullet, opened the vault, and told him the entire story.

I can't say for certain when we actually met. It's funny, I can remember my first tornado. I remember my first hot dog. I even remember the first time I saw a rat (I was four years old and very confused about why this tiny dog kept trying to eat my hair). But when it comes to *her*, I have no recollection of a time before. As far as my memory is concerned, we always knew one another.

My first foster home was only a couple miles from the gas station, and Sabine's parents thought daycare was a scam, so we spent most of our summer days exploring the forest together, building forts, climbing trees, catching frogs for her collection, wasting our time in sweet, generic childhood innocence. Of course,

this was before either of us knew about all the kids who'd gone missing in those woods.

She didn't go to any of the same schools as me, and I never questioned it. Every now and then, she'd drop an offhanded complaint about her latest tutor or the concept of homeschooling in general. I told her how I wished she could be in my class, while secretly being thankful that she wasn't around to see how low I was on the social food chain.

For most of my life, Sabine was my best friend. And though the transition was too subtle to denote a clear beginning, somewhere along the way she became my girlfriend. When it came time to find a job, she talked her parents into giving me a shot.

Like all things in life, it wasn't always perfect. We had our good days and bad, our ups, downs, and all arounds, but something about the veil of time obscures the finer details of even the most important memories. We broke up more than once. It was my idea, or her idea, or both. And we got back together, sometimes passionately and sometimes begrudgingly. But no matter where we were, we were always there for each other.

When I first noticed that I wasn't sleeping for days at a time, she was the one who pushed me to seek professional help. When the diagnosis came down and I learned I had at best another year before insanity destroyed my mind, she took me out for ice cream to say "It's not that bad."

And then we hatched a plan. If we only had a year left together, there was no reason to spend it in this shitty town working at a shitty gas station. We didn't tell anyone where or when we were going. We packed our bags and left with a clear goal: Head north and see what happens.

I volunteered to take the first shift driving, even though I hadn't slept in four days. It was okay, I assured her, for the first time in months I wasn't even tired...

Tom was the first responder on scene. The evidence pointed to a hit and run. Somebody collided with us from behind, and I lost control of the vehicle, sending us off the road and into a tree. The impact knocked us both unconscious. I was lucky to be alive.

I walked away from the accident with barely a scratch, but Sabine wasn't as fortunate. When she was stable enough to be transported, they moved her to the best hospital in the area. But no matter how many professionals were involved, the diagnosis remained the same.

She scored a four out of fifteen on the Glasgow Coma Scale. Little to no brain activity. After one week, it was the same. After a month, nothing had changed. The reality was as simple as it was devastating. Outside of a miracle, Sabine would never wake up again.

Her parents saw to it that she received the best care and resources possible. They moved her from one facility to the next in search of that miracle, and before long I lost track of her.

Tom came to visit me at the gas station on the anniversary of the accident. A year had passed, and I was still here. I thought about leaving town for good, finishing the trip that she and I planned together, but that idea ended as soon as it began. Without her, what would be the point?

He asked how I was doing. I told him I was fine, then I asked him a question that I'd wanted to ask since the moment I woke up. I couldn't remember anything that happened in the moments before and after the accident, and if not for his detective work, nobody would know anything. The car that ran us off the road was never found. I asked Tom directly if it was possible that there wasn't any other car, if I might have fallen asleep behind the wheel, if I was solely responsible for what happened to her. Tom swore that there was someone else to blame, but deep down, I had my doubts.

Jerry stared at me with his forehead wrinkled and a look of steady concentration on his face. When he realized my story was over, he took a couple of deep yoga breaths and said, "Wow. That is some heavy stuff."

"Yeah," I said.

"Thank you for sharing all of that with me."

"I'll be honest. I haven't talked about her in a long time. It's easier to just pretend that nothing's wrong." I waited for him to take the hint, but he just sat there, staring, waiting for me to spell it out for him. "I think it might be worth it to talk about how you're feeling now. Vanessa's death obviously hit you a lot harder—"

"Whoa, whoa, wait," he interrupted. "*That's* what you think this is about? No, dude! Van isn't dead."

This felt like a moderate setback, but I wasn't going to give up yet. "Okay. You do remember going with me to her funeral, right? It was a whole thing."

He smacked himself on the forehead and exclaimed, "Ohhh, I see! You think I'm depressed?"

"Well, no, not depressed. Maybe just..." I looked around his depressing little bus room behind his depressing compound where all of his old church family had mass-suicided without him in the most comically depressing turn of events to ever occur in this town. I couldn't think of the right word, so I looked back at his sad, depressed eyes. "...maybe you feel a little... melancholy?"

He screamed wildly and waved his hands in the air. I waited for him to finish before asking, "Feel better?"

"I'm not depressed! I'm just stressed out. I've been working my ass off and I'm not getting any sleep and I think I might be anemic, but I can't find anywhere around here that sells kidneys to eat."

"You haven't been to work in days."

"No, not gas station stuff. *Real* work. No offense."

"None taken."

"Okay, look, I didn't want to bring you into this because I didn't want to stress you out, too. But if it eases your mind, I'll show you what I've been working on." He reopened the desk drawer, pulled out a stack of papers, and handed them to me. I looked at the notes on the first page and saw row after row of names and details: "Mina Philips - addicted to Minecraft. Dee Gonzales - shoplifter. Frances Couns - insurance fraud."

I looked up from the sheets. "What is this stuff?" He was already holding the portable electronic device in front of his chest.

“It’s the Russian radio.”

“Are you serious?” I tried to mask my annoyance, but it was impossible to keep it from bubbling over. “You’ve been blowing off work so you can listen to this jibberish? I’ve been picking up your shifts-We’ve been worried about you-I brought you soup and told you my deepest secret-And you’ve just been sitting here, listening to your radio?!”

“I know you don’t want to believe this, but it’s not just random. I’ve followed up. Everything the guy has said so far has been true. Not just time and temperature either. The stuff he shouldn’t know. Stuff nobody should know.” He dropped his voice to a stage whisper. “Who doesn’t love who anymore. When the milk at the grocery store is going to expire. Who’s pregnant, and when the baby’s due. He called a car accident at the vape shop an hour before it happened. I’ve been listening to this thing practically nonstop for days, and not once, *not once* has it given me the winning lotto numbers. Ain’t that some shit?”

“Jerry, you have a problem.”

“Thank you.”

“In what way could that have possibly been a compliment?”

“I wasn’t really listening.”

“You need help.”

“It also told me about your deal with Mr. Normal.”

I held my breath.

“What deal? What exactly do you think you know?”

“Relax. I know they’re threatening you and you’re not supposed to talk about it. I also know that Vanessa isn’t really dead. It’s all just an elaborate hoax. Anyway, I need to get back to this before I miss something important.”

He put the radio onto his desk, switched on the power button like he couldn’t wait any longer, and released a long, unsettling moan as soon as he heard the dulcet voice.

“...birdhouse... Max Hopper’s computer has been stolen by ex-girlfriend Amber Harris... Amber Harris will sell computer to pawn shop on—”

There was no doubt in my mind. Jerry was addicted. He couldn't even wait for me to leave before satisfying this craving. He grabbed a legal pad and pen and started making notes as I leaned forward and clicked off the radio.

"Heyyy!" he whined.

"Why are you listening to other people's personal stuff? Isn't that voyeuristic?"

He stretched his arms and cracked his neck. "I don't *want* to do this. You think I like knowing everybody's deepest, darkest secrets? Do you know how often people masturbate in public? The radio does. It's a lot more than you'd expect." He widened his eyes and silently mouthed the words "*a lot*."

"Why are you obsessing over this?"

"Because what if I miss the next time he drops a major clue? What if I'd been listening the night Spencer came for you?"

"You've been sitting here in front of the radio in hopes that it will mention another crime so you can go and stop it? What are you, Batman?"

"I don't expect you to understand, but I am a Mathmetist, the last of my kind, and I took an oath. I can't just sit back and do nothing."

I thought about it for a moment before the moral implications started to overwhelm me.

"Actually," I said, "this is a pretty straightforward example of a classic philosophical argument. Do you automatically have a moral duty to act if you alone possess knowledge that can affect the outcome?"

"That depends on whether or not you buy into utilitarianism. Personally, I'm more of a deontological ethics kind of guy. According to Kant, the sign of morality is an intrinsic sense of duty, and goodness is the act of following up on it."

"Oh," I said. "I wasn't expecting you to—"

He raised his voice. "*To what, Jack?* Study philosophy? You know where you are, don't you? It wasn't all pancakes and orgies! Sometimes the syrup ran out and we talked about this stuff. Francis Bacon said that knowledge is power. And Uncle Ben said 'With great

power comes great responsibility.’ Ergo, I’m responsible for the radio. It is my burden.” He grabbed the device and held it to his chest. “It is... *my precious*.”

I snatched it from his hands. “Counter point: you don’t have any responsibility if you don’t know what the radio is going to say.”

He reached for it. “Counter-counter point: We have a moral duty to educate ourselves.”

I pulled it away before he could get to it. “Really? We do? Then why don’t you go to school and become a doctor? How many more lives could you save that way? Or how about a firefighter? Or 911 operator? Or even a rodeo clown?”

He poured another shot of Pedialyte, threw it back, and made a sour face. “How much of this stuff do I have to drink before I start feeling a buzz?”

“Face it, Jerry. You’re not doing the world a favor here. If the voice on the radio is legit, and I’m not saying it is, but *if* it’s really telling the truth, then that doesn’t make it your baby. Someone else created the signal, right? If they’re smart enough to do that, then any moral imperative to act is on them. The only thing we need to do is stay out of the way.”

“You know, it might just be the Pedialyte talking, but you’re making a lot of really good points. You ever think about starting a religion?”

I held the radio in front of me. “Are we done with this? Because I’ve got so much crap going on right now that I cannot keep up with all these different plotlines, and I really need you back at work. Part-timers keep dropping left and right like they’re on *Game of Thrones*. I cannot keep up on my own.”

“Okay, fine, I’ll stop listening. But just give me like ten more minutes.” he said, reaching for the device. I held it over my head and leaned back just out of his reach. “Come on, Jack, I could tell he was working up to something.”

“No, Jerry. It’s over. You haven’t showered in days.”

He faked like he was going to turn away, then lunged for the radio. I pulled it close and hugged it tight. He yelled, “I go days without showering all the time! It’s how I assert dominance!” He

jumped to his feet and bent closer. I tried to lean back but fell off my seat and hit the ground. The radio dropped onto the floor of the bus, slid into a wall, and turned itself on.

“...the collector has found another god to capture... Vanessa Riggin is trapped at old school...She cries in cage...She has fever of thirty-seven point eight five degrees Celsius...She has not eaten for twenty hours...A new calf is born on Farmer Brown Junior’s property...”

Jerry picked up the radio and turned it off. He looked at me in desperation.

“Dude. It’s Van.”

I pulled myself to a standing position. “Jerry. It’s not her. I hate that I didn’t tell you this sooner, but Vanessa is dead. I know she is. I watched Spencer kill her. The radio is a cruel lie.”

“Alright, fine. Prove it.”

“What?”

“Let’s settle this once and for all. The radio says Van’s at the old school, right? Let’s go get her. If she’s not there, then you’re right. The voice is a liar, and I won’t have to keep listening anymore. But if she is, then you owe me a Coke. Either way, it’s a win. Right? Come on, dude. Please?”

His puppy eyes were killing me. I looked down at the stack of pages he’d meticulously collected over the last few days and realized that this might be the only way to help him kick this monkey off his back.

“How much have you had to drink today?”

“Just those three shots of Pedialyte and a gallon of homemade orange soda.”

I knew I’d regret doing this. But I knew I’d regret doing nothing even more.

“Fine. We’ll go to the old school, pop in for a quick second, check it out, and leave. After this, you’re done with the Russian radio for good.”

“Deal.”

The old school was right where the town left it—in the middle of an unused and overgrown patch of land slowly being reclaimed by nature. Several generations ago, it served as the area's single elementary, middle, and high school.

There were plenty of stories about why we abandoned an entire building instead of repurposing it. Some say the black mold problem got too resilient to battle with conventional means. Some say the school board purposely let the place slip into disrepair out of spite after a certain court ruling went into effect back in '54. Some say there's bad juju ever since a senior prank to spike the football team's water cooler with LSD in the middle of a game went horribly wrong. Some say it was just too expensive to keep refilling the sinkholes in the playground.

I did some research, and the truth was all of the above. And so the town shed the old school like a snake sheds its skin, leaving it to wither and rot at the end of a pothole-riddled street that no longer served any purpose.

I would have suspected that Jerry was hitting every single pothole on purpose, but that would have required a degree of skill that nobody possesses. He cruised the broken pavement at about five miles per hour until we reached the rusted gates of the old school. They were the beginning and terminus of the long winding chain-link fence encircling the derelict structure. The barrier stood eight feet tall with razor wire spun in coils around the top—our town's final effort to stop the flow of bored teenagers from breaking in and having sex or seances on the grounds.

I looked at the chains and locks around the fence and took a last-ditch stab. "Seems like the place is closed down. I guess the radio was wrong."

Jerry laughed and said, "Good one."

Before I knew it, we were off-road, driving along the snow-littered grass, looking for something we both knew would be there. A quarter mile off the road, we found it—a break in the fence.

It didn't look man-made. Just a combination of bad weather, cheap craftsmanship, and time. The bottom of the fence had torn away from a pole and curled up like a Goliath's finger, calling us

hither. The space was just wide enough for us to duck under without needing to crawl, and when I spotted it, I cursed under my breath.

I guess this is really happening.

We left the car parked near the tree line nearby. If someone were to come looking, they wouldn't be able to see us from the road, and if we were lucky, the steady snowfall would obscure our tire tracks in time. Of course, if somebody else was going to come out here to the abandoned school in the middle of the woods, we probably had bigger problems to worry about.

As soon as Jerry turned off the headlights, I realized how dark it was. Snow clouds blocked the moon and stars, and there were no street lamps this far from the live part of town. But Jerry wasn't going to let a little blindness set us back. He flicked on a tiny keychain flashlight, held it under his chin to give himself scary-story face, and said, "Let's roll," before climbing out and starting for the school.

He went through the fence-hole first and made it look effortless. I handed him my crutch, tried to lower myself enough to duck under, and promptly fell onto my back. Jerry grabbed me by the collar, dragged me through like a piece of luggage, then helped me to my foot and gave me back the crutch. I didn't know whether to feel annoyed or grateful, but he didn't wait for a "Thanks" or "Fuck you." He turned and cut straight across to the closest door.

Amazingly—and disturbingly—it was unlocked, and my last hope of cutting this trip short was dashed to pieces.

Jerry was obviously motivated in his search. I trudged along as closely as I could, but the whole thing felt inappropriate. *I watched her die.* I knew she wasn't going to be here.

We went classroom to classroom calling out her name. But there was nothing. No fresh footprints. No cages. No signs of life other than the obvious rat infestation and enough spider webs to suspend an aircraft carrier.

The cafeteria was covered in old graffiti of swastikas and phrases like "Reagan is a Jew!!!" and "Fuck the police" and "Please help me! It's inside my brain and I can't stop it! Oh GOD! It's killing

me!!!” (I assumed those were song lyrics, but I never bothered checking.)

The place smelled like sawdust and cow farts. I kept my shirt pulled up over my nose, but Jerry didn’t seem to notice. After searching the room from one end to the other, he found a supply closet and transformed a broom handle, cotton rag, and some cleaning chemicals into a makeshift torch. It took him almost no time to build, and when he was done, he used the flame to light a cigarette. Clearly, he’d done this before.

We continued our search by torchlight, up and down halls covered in disintegrated ceiling tiles and mounds of rodent droppings. Through the principal’s office where the carpet had transformed into a field of mushrooms and mold spores that crunched beneath our shoes. Past the library where a possum and her babies screamed at us before skittering through a hole in the wall. We were almost done. There was just one last place to check.

The gymnasium was separated from the rest of the structure by a short covered walkway. When we reached it, I was annoyed to find the first locked door we’d encountered. I was about to suggest we circle around until we found another door or window, but Jerry was impatient. He handed me the torch, then removed his jacket, wrapped it around his fist, and punched out the small, thin section of glass above the door so he could reach in and open it from the inside.

With that out of the way, he casually shook the broken glass from his jacket, put it back on, snatched the torch, and headed inside. I followed, hoping that he would soon be satisfied and that our journey was near its end. But as soon as I passed the threshold of the gym, I knew things weren’t going to be so simple.

It was warm in here. There was no reason for it to be warm in here. And it was clean. Someone had swept recently, or at least shoved the dirt into the corners. And the smell was tolerable. Better than the gas station on a bad day, but worse than the gas station on a good day.

Jerry walked into the center of what was once a basketball court and called out her name. “Vanessa?” Then, for the first time

since we broke in, Jerry stopped moving. I immediately saw why.

In the center of the court, there was a metal cage. It was cube-shaped, about six feet tall and six feet wide and bolted to the floor. Jerry rushed over to it and slammed into the bars. By the time I reached him, he had already circled the enclosure twice, looking for a weak spot or access point before settling on his knees by the door piece. In the flickering light from the torch, I stared at the body and tried to make sense of what I was seeing.

The only thing inside the cage was a dead man lying flat on his back in a pool of blood. He had thin round glasses and an expensive-looking black suit that was almost definitely ruined. It took a few seconds before I remembered how I knew him. This was the body of John Normal, my “attorney.” (Well, most of his body anyway; there were a couple of pieces notably missing.)

I took out my phone to dial O’Brien, but *of course* this was another cellular dead zone. We needed to get out of here if we wanted help. I tried to get Jerry’s attention. “What are you doing?”

“I think I could open this lock if I had my kit. Do you have any bobby pins on you?”

“Why? He’s already dead.”

Jerry looked at the man on the floor, then asked, “Where are his hands?”

“How the heck should I know? You’re the one who’s been listening to the radio.”

Jerry turned around and yelled Vanessa’s name into the darkness once again, but it was met with only echoes and silence.

“Where is she?” he asked in a huff. “She’s supposed to be here!”

I didn’t know how to answer. I was too busy wrapping my head around Normal’s death. He said that *they* were being killed by the Collector, and it seemed as if he was righter than he knew. Someone had neatly removed both hands at the wrists. Judging from all the blood, this was likely how he met his untimely demise. I couldn’t feel too broken up over the death of a man who’d made implicit threats against my friends, but it would have been nice to get a few more details out of him first.

Right then, something happened that I didn't think was possible. The power turned on. The heating unit groaned to life like a leviathan waking from its slumber. Dirty air expelled from the vents overhead under the sound of a loud *CLACK CLACK CLACK* as each section of lighting cut on, illuminating our surroundings one piece at a time.

The gym was in better condition than I originally thought. Not a broken window, piece of trash, or rodent nest in sight. The bleacher seats were lined up on either wall. This could pass for the gym room of an active school on any given weekend, if not for the cage. Or the dead body in the cage. Or the enormous circle of blood painted around the cage. Or the hundreds of mysterious symbols meticulously drawn along the walls.

The arcane lettering spread around the gym in an uninterrupted loop near the ceiling, much higher than any human could reach unassisted. They could have been painted on or... *No time to waste admiring the decor. Someone's here!*

I looked to Jerry to see if he had any ideas. He had already removed his jacket and balled it up. In one swift movement, he used it to smother out the torch. Somewhere on the other end from where we had broken and entered, a door was scraping open. We darted straight for the crack between two sections of bleachers and hugged the shadows underneath. If we were lucky, they might not have heard or seen us.

We watched from our hiding place as *something* came walking into the building. At first, it appeared to be a man, but all the finer details hinted at something else.

He was tall. *Too* tall. Bulky and muscular, wide enough that he'd have to turn sideways and duck to fit through a regular doorway. He wore enormous black boots, a gray jumpsuit, and a generic rubber mask of a sad clown like the kind they sell at cheap costume shops. With each step the massive figure took, the floor trembled beneath us, and as he walked into the room, he dragged something behind him. I came to realize that it was a cinder block tied to the long metal chain that he had clenched in his oversized fist. His

hands were the size of a gorilla's, with the reddish blackish color of burnt hotdogs.

"Hey Jack," Jerry whispered.

"Yeah?"

"I just realized something."

"What?"

"Ants can see in the dark."

"What?"

"Because there's no light underground."

"What does that have to do with—"

"Nothing. But it just occurred to me and I had to tell somebody in case I forgot."

The "man" reached the cage in the center of the room, reached out, and pulled it open. (Apparently, it had been unlocked the entire time and neither of us thought to check.) Then, the monster of a man bent over, grabbed Normal by one of his feet, and pulled him out with the same effort it takes to pull a Kleenex from the box. He turned and dragged away both dead man and cinder block in the direction he came. But it wasn't over yet.

Another man-thing walked into the room. This one looked almost identical to the first, same size, same clothing, same cinder block on a chain dragging behind him. The only difference was that this man's clown mask sported a silly smile. This one clutched a mop in his free hand. They passed one another without so much as a nod of acknowledgment. As the first one disappeared from view with the corpse, the second set to work mopping up the bloody mess Normal had left behind.

Jerry tapped me on the shoulder. When I looked at him, he was pointing down the wall at the other side of the gym. I could see that there was a direct path to the exit. We could make it almost the whole way without leaving the safety of the shadows under the steps.

It took time and patience and careful maneuvering of the crutch, but we did it. We emerged from under the stairs far away from the man smearing blood around like he had no idea how mops worked. *You need a bucket and water, dude!* Now came the difficult

part. We had to get to the door. It was only about ten feet, but there were no shadows or structures to hide us. If the clown man saw us, at least we'd have a good head start. The only question was, *would it be enough for us to get to the car?*

"Alright, you ready to run?" Jerry whispered.

"Not exactly," I said. "But I'm willing to give it a shot."

Jerry pulled up the back of his shirt, then retrieved the handgun he'd taken from the pizza box. *Oh yeah. I forgot all about that.*

"Here," he said, thrusting it into my hands.

"I'm not really a gun guy." *Jeez, I should put that on a t-shirt.*

"I know dude. But in case something happens and we get separated."

"I don't want it." I tried handing it back, but as I went to give it to him, the exact, *specific* thing I was afraid might happen happened. I dropped the gun.

As it fell, time slowed to a crawl, giving me ample opportunity to mull over a few thoughts. Specifically, *I knew this was going to happen. And, I called it and everything. And, I'm a genius. And, Oh shit, I should try and catch that, shouldn't I?*

I reacted the way I always do when trying to catch something. I kicked out the closest leg to break the fall and hand to snag it in midair. Two decades worth of muscle memory failed me hard, but that was to be expected. I'd only been without a leg for about a week. My right leg failed to do anything, as it wasn't there. My right hand was the only thing supporting half my weight. And when I let go of the crutch and started to fall, I instantly tried to correct myself. It was too late, so rather than let the gun hit the ground, I ended up slapping it out of the air like a lunatic before crashing hard onto my bad shoulder.

From this vantage point, I could clearly see the gun slide along the gym floor like a hockey puck before coming to rest at the gigantic feet of the giant in the clown mask. Jerry and I froze and watched the man bend over to look at the weapon, then straighten up to look directly at us.

“Well,” Jerry yelled. “Don’t just stand there, dude. Kick it back!”

The clown dropped his mop.

I pulled myself up.

The clown jerked the slack out of the chain.

I looked at Jerry.

“Should we...?”

The clown lifted the cinder block and started rocking it back and forth. In a matter of seconds, he was swinging it in small circles, then larger circles, raising it over his head like a lasso. Then he let go. Block and chain careened through the air in our direction like a cannonball. If Jerry hadn’t shoved me out of the way, it might have taken off my head. Instead, it hit the wall behind me and shattered.

The next thing I knew, I was running—or at least doing my best version of running—for the door. Jerry held it open until I’d passed, then slammed it shut. I turned to see which way my friend was running, but he wasn’t. He was leaning against the door.

“Jerry!” I yelled. Through the tiny window, I could see the bulky behemoth clown coming straight for us.

“One sec,” Jerry yelled. “I’m gonna penny-lock the door.”

We were running out of time. “Dude! Leave it! That guy just one-hand-hurled a concrete block fifty feet. You’re not going to stop him with a bunch of pennies!”

He dug the last of the coins from his pocket and stuffed them into the slits of the doorframe. As soon as the man reached the other side, Jerry hopped away and yelled, “Ha!”

The man hit the door.

But somehow it didn’t budge. I’ve never been happier to be proven wrong.

He punched the metal door hard enough that the fist-dent went through to our side, but the door still didn’t open.

He took a step back, then slammed into the door with the full weight of his body. The remaining glass rained down, and the wall around the outside of the frame showed signs of cracking. But the door stayed shut. He would sooner break through the wall than separate the door from its frame.

In a last attempt to escape, the man tried to fit his hand through the thin window, but it caught at the swollen muscles of his forearm. Not far enough to reach us. Not even far enough to reach the pennies.

While Jerry laughed at the man and pointed and taunted, I noticed something important.

“Jerry!”

“What?”

I pointed at the side of the building, where the other clown was standing, staring at us through the eyes of the sad clown mask.

He pulled on his chain until his block was dangling. Then, he started to swing it over his head.

We dashed down the walkway and through the door to the old school. A few steps in, Jerry stopped abruptly, held out an arm, and caught me. Half a second later, the cinder block and chain crashed into the wall in front of us. The clown had lobbed it with unnatural precision through the window and doorway of a classroom, nearly ending both of us in a single shot. We went right back to running, deeper into the school, and around a bend where no light from the gym could reach. By pure luck, we managed to traverse the pitch-black halls until Jerry got his flashlight on. I followed him, trying to ignore the sound of doors slamming and giant clowns crashing through the darkness behind us. Jerry made a left, then a right, then came to a stop as soon as I whisper-yelled, “Wait!”

He turned back to me and said, “What?”

I pointed into one of the classrooms, and we ducked inside.

Those things were still back there. I could hear them running down the hall.

“Turn off the flashlight,” I said.

He did, and I held my breath and waited. In no time, the clowns were right outside, bouncing off the walls in an attempt to navigate the dark corridors. They’d slowed as they came closer. And then, once they reached us, they came to a stop right outside the open door of the room where we’d hidden.

Do they know we’re here somehow? Can they hear my heart beating?

If not for the sound, I wouldn't know where they were, but they breathed like Darth Vader with asthma—loud, steady, and obnoxious—and every step crushed something under their feet. One of them scraped noisily along the wall outside as the other lumbered into the classroom with us, dragging his feet with each heavy step.

I reached out to grab whatever was close by, maybe a rock or book, to throw past the clown, into the hallway. Anything to distract it. I needed to hurry, before our luck ran out. My hand touched a desk, and I slid my fingers along the surface until finally, they connected with something. I wrapped my hand around the thing, picked it up, held it over my head to line up the shot, and *then realized that I had just grabbed a fucking rat.*

It squeaked and shrieked and wrapped its long tail around my wrist in confusion and terror. The clown grunted and stepped loudly in my direction.

Now or never.

I fastballed the poor rodent in the direction of the doorway. It landed with a *SQUEAK* before fleeing down the hall. The clown turned and barreled out the room after his companion, who was already halfway down the hall chasing the rat.

I waited an entire minute before whispering Jerry's name.

"Yeah dude?" he whispered back.

"Let's get the hell out of here."

We climbed out of the classroom window and made the rest of the trek to the car in absolute silence. It wasn't until we reached the hole in the fence that I started to think that maybe we were going to be okay.

I put on my seatbelt, took a deep breath, and relaxed as Jerry returned the car to the school road. As soon as we were on pavement, I opened my mouth to say, "I can't believe we made it." It's a good thing I didn't get the words out, though. Otherwise, I would have had to take them back once the giant moving truck came crashing through the front gates of the school right behind us.

I checked the rearview mirror and saw nothing but grill. Jerry slammed the gas and redlined my vehicle right over the crater-filled road, smashing the potholes so hard my head hit the roof of the car.

“What.. the... f—”

The truck blared on its horn and switched on its high beams, smothering our senses in light and sound while Jerry tested just how fast my shitty little Nissan could really go. (The answer was: pretty fucking fast.)

Chapter Seventeen

We hit the edge of the abandoned school road and swung left. The white cargo truck almost clipped us but lost control and kept moving forward, off the road and into a ditch. It didn't stop, though. It barely slowed down, but forged ahead, angling through the field next to us, crushing overgrowth and small trees like they were made of paper mâché. Our pursuers' vehicle was outfitted with oversized tires—the kind that seem wildly impractical until the moment you end up in a high-speed off-road chase—and whatever they had under the hood sounded like a tornado. They picked up speed before reconnecting with the main road behind us.

The truck engine thundered, and the space between our vehicles disappeared. Soon, the difference was only inches, and I prepared for the monster truck to monster truck us.

Jerry yanked the wheel to the left. The moment we hit the lane of oncoming traffic, he slammed the brakes and sent us into a skid. The truck sped past close enough to chop off the mirror on my side.

Jerry u-turned and gunned the poor engine. But the cargo truck didn't take long to turn around and begin homing in on us at ludicrous speed. What the truck lacked in maneuverability, it made up for in acceleration, size, armor, off-road capabilities, and wow-factor. By the time we sped past the turnoff for the old school, we were already in the truck's spotlights. This was like a cow trying to outrun a dragon. At this rate, it was only a matter of time before they caught up and crushed us.

Up ahead, a wide acreage of farmland came into view.

"Hang on, dude," Jerry said, as if I wasn't already hanging on as best I could. "I'm gonna try to lose them in the cornfield!"

"That doesn't make any se—*HOLY SHIT!*" The Nissan flew off the road with enough speed to jump the ditch. We landed, bottomed out, bounced, and then landed again amidst the slush and dirt. Behind us, the truck made the same turn, crashing into the earth

like a meteor before quickly regaining speed. I tried again to explain what should have been obvious. "There's nowhere to lose them! There's no corn!"

This was the winter season, which meant all of the corn had already been harvested. We were flying through an empty field with nothing to protect us from the truck closing in. Jerry cackled and twisted the wheel.

My head smashed against the window as the car swung hard left. We went into a fishtail, then a donut, then a figure eight. The truck tried to keep up, cutting through the corners, slowing to double back, nearly running us over before speeding past. Soon, I didn't even know where we were in relation to the truck. Jerry hammered the gas and flew towards the edge of the field.

"Jerry," I said nervously. "You see that creek up ahead, right?"

He didn't answer.

He didn't slow down.

I tried again. "Right?"

The truck straightened itself out and blared its horns. They were coming at us like a torpedo.

The creek was coming closer.

The truck was closing in.

Jerry hit the gas, and yelled out something over the truck's horn and the Nissan's whining engine that I think was meant to be, "Trust me." Not like I had any choice.

Time slowed down as I surveyed the situation. His plan, I gathered, was to try another fake out, turn at the last possible second to miss the creek and hope they were too big or slow or stupid to miss the watery death trap that had already taken countless lives over the town's sordid history.

We used to tell stories about that creek. About the swimmers who got pulled to the bottom and were never seen again. About catfish big enough to swallow a man whole. About the ghosts of all the bridge workers who died in that freak collapse a few years back.

That creek was haunted, the stories go. Over twenty feet at the deepest part. The perfect place to dispose of a body. The last place I

wanted to be on a night like this. And here we were, shooting towards it as fast as my car could take us.

In that pocket of slowed time, I had the chance to calculate our odds. The trajectory was fixed. The car was accelerating. The path was inevitable. We were, as always, slaves to physics. Simply put, we were going way too fast. We were going to hit the creek.

The water's edge was fifteen feet away.

Now ten feet away.

Five feet away.

I pulled in a deep breath and prepared for the inevitable. If we survived the crash, we were going to have to make a swim for it.

Oh shit. Can I even swim?

I closed my eyes and braced for impact, but the shitty little Nissan glided over the creek's surface.

I opened my eyes in disbelief. The creek had frozen solid, and we were now atop a layer of ice thick enough to keep us on the right side of the water.

The truck didn't hesitate to follow our lead, plowing right into and through the ice, sending an eruption of freezing mist into the sky. As soon as our wheels hit dirt again, Jerry skidded to a stop. We were blinded until the ice cloud settled around us. Then, Jerry turned the car around and pointed our headlights back at the broken creek, where the truck was already being pulled under, the ass end pointed upwards as the bubbling waters swallowed them whole.

We didn't stick around long enough to see if there were any survivors. Instead, we took a shortcut through the forest and got the hell out of there.

It was either a miracle or a demonic practical joke, but either way, supernatural elements must have been at play in holding the car together long enough for us to get back to Jerry's place. For most of the drive, we were dragging something behind us. I don't know what it was, but judging from the sparks, it was made of metal,

and judging from the fact that the car kept going after it fell off, it must not have been too important.

We waited until the car was safely parked outside the compound before we said anything else (not that we had much of a choice; the engine was so loud now that we couldn't hear each other if we wanted to). When he finally shut the car off, it ended to the sound of a pathetic, high pitched gurgle.

We got out and moved a safe distance away, just in case it was about to explode, then Jerry pulled out his flashlight and pointed it at the car so we could survey the damage. The front bumper was crooked but otherwise in place. The hood and sides were dented all over. Mud was caked all the way up to its roof, and the windshield had a crack running from one side to the other. I didn't need to look at the engine to know I wouldn't understand what I was looking at. It got us here, and even if it never turned over again, it had done its job and saved our lives.

Jerry took a deep breath and said, "That... was... *awesome*... Did you see that? I drove us right over the creek!"

I tore myself away from the car and said, "How did you know that was going to work?"

"Well, I just did some quick math. Your car weighs about five hundred pounds. The truck weighs about ten cars. It's been snowing for two weeks at an average of twenty degrees each day, and ice freezes a quarter inch per hour. We were doing about a hundred when we hit the creek, so we would have been able to drive on the ice for two minutes while the truck would break through in half a second."

I shook my head to try and get the stupid out of my ears. "Jerry, not one thing you just said was accurate."

He turned and headed into the compound, saying, "You can't argue with results."

I followed. "I can argue with technique!"

We passed through the freezing bunker, out the back door, and into the school bus, where warmth and light greeted us. Jerry went straight for the radio, but I whacked his hand with my crutch as he reached out for it.

“Hey!” he yelled.

“What are you doing?”

“I have to see why Van wasn’t there.”

I couldn’t believe it. He was still buying into the Russian radio’s tricks.

“Dude, let me explain it to you. Van was never there. I told you already. I watched her die. If the radio knows everything, then it knew there were killers waiting at the old school. And it knew that Vanessa is your weak spot.” He stared at me in disbelief, but I could see the wheels were turning. I was making a lot of sense. “I’m sorry, Jerry. But the voice used Van to lure us into that trap. We were set up. By the radio.”

Before he could respond, the radio switched itself on. On any other day, I might have reacted with a little more surprise, but after the night we’d just been through, it would take more than a possessed radio to impress either of us. I would have turned it off right away if it weren’t for the first thing I heard.

“...fatal familial insomnia...He uses name ‘Jack Townsend’... He has one baby tooth...He is threat level eight...There is another man aware of transmission...His name is Jeremy Pascal...He is threat level echo...They have survived the old school...The collector’s men are drowned...Townsend and Jeremy are in presence of transmission receiver...Jeremy is moving towards transmission receiver...He is disassembling transmi—”

As he stood there staring down at the two pieces of broken radio in his hands, the only sounds left were the grumble of a generator in the distance and the low hiss of the space heater at the back of the bus. Finally, he dropped one half of the radio to the ground with a loud *clack* and fell into his seat.

He shrugged. “If thou gaze long into an abyss, be warned, for sometimes the abyss doth gaze back... something, something, monsters.”

“Friedrich Nietzsche,” I said.

“Gesundheit,” he responded.

I went and took a seat on the beanbag next to him.

“I think I’ll take that whiskey now. If you still have it.”

Jerry looked like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He gave me what I took to be a sincere smile and went to find the bottle and a couple of tumblers. As soon as he wasn't looking, I grabbed the half of the radio closer to me, ripped out the batteries and a couple other smaller pieces, and stuffed them into my pocket, just to keep him honest.

After we finished our drinks, we gathered up every sheet of paper where he had written notes about our town and the people in it, took them outside, and burned them.

O'Brien didn't seem to wonder why my clothes were covered in mud, or why I had a bloody gash on the side of my head, or why I was slightly inebriated. When she picked me up from the compound, she only had one question.

"Is he going to be okay?"

I thought hard before answering. This was the guy who chose to live with a group of doomsday harbingers in a giant tin can in the middle of nowhere. This was the same guy who cried for several hours straight when they left him. The same guy who once pulled the trigger on what he thought was a loaded gun against his head, just for the hell of it.

"I hope so."

As we drove back to the gas station, I almost told her everything. About Normal's handless body, about the high-speed chase, about the men in the clown masks. But something kept me from doing so. I knew I'd probably have to pay for it one day, but O'Brien didn't need to know any of that. The clowns were dead. And Normal himself had insisted I never mention him to anyone, so I compartmentalized it, put it away, and tried to prepare myself for whatever mess would be awaiting me when I walked into the gas station moments later. My imagination had a lot to work with, but the one thing I didn't expect to see was a perfectly clean store.

She had done an incredible job. The aisles were fronted, the counter wiped down, the pralines picked back up and stacked neatly

into a pyramid next to the register. There was an upbeat dance song filling the room with uncharacteristic joy and emphatic calls for me to "shake my body" (sorry song, not today). Somehow, even the lights seemed a little brighter in there. Strangest of all, the place smelled okay. Not great, but okay, which was a major improvement.

An elderly man with a gray neckbeard and overalls stood in front of Rosa with his beer gut resting on the counter. She was counting back his change when I walked up and took a spot behind him.

"Here's your change. Have a great day, Mr. Thibodeaux!"

He took his money and left, and she turned her attention to the next person in line—me. Her eyes went wide and she almost jumped.

"Jack! You actually came back!"

I took it all in. The bedazzled pink cell phone playing music on the counter, the lit candle next to it. Rosa's red jacket draped over the seat that she pushed into the corner because, evidently, standing suited her better. She was a few inches shorter than I remembered, but then I noticed her heels on the chair by her purse.

"You're not barefoot, are you?"

"It's okay! I swept and mopped the floors."

"We have a mop?"

She laughed. "I had to do something to pass the time! So, I cleaned. There were a lot of cigarette butts and baby pacifiers. Not sure what the story is there, but I didn't want to throw all those pacifiers away, so I collected them. Filled a whole pickle jar!" She picked up the jar from behind the counter and shook it at me. "We weren't using the pickle jar for anything, were we?"

"Rosa, this is incredible."

She blushed at the compliment. "Thank you."

I made my way behind the counter, shocked by how much cleaner it looked. *Were the floors always that color? We really should mop more often.* "No, honestly. I can't believe you did all this."

I used my crutch to push a milk crate over to the front of the safe and sat on it while I entered the combination.

"What can I say? I'm a pretty good worker. Some might even call me a catch."

I opened the safe and pulled out the envelope marked "Emergency Fund," checked to make sure the cash was still in there, then held it out for her. I couldn't imagine a more appropriate way to spend the money.

"Here," I said. "This is for tonight."

She took it and put it in her purse without bothering to count.

"This really wasn't too bad. Not how I thought my night was going to end when I came down here, but not bad."

I got up and made my way to the schedule. "When are you available again? I can start officially training you as soon as you're ready."

She looked away and inhaled sharply. "Oh, this is awkward. I actually got another job already. I just wanted to come down here tonight to give you guys a piece of my mind."

"Oh," I said. "Well, that really is too bad. I hate that I missed so many chances to work with you. I bet it would have made life a lot better having someone as cool as you around."

Did I really just say that? Am I... am I drunk?

She blushed again.

"Thanks, Jack. You're really sweet."

"You're welcome."

"Well, goodbye forever!"

She put on her shoes and jacket and walked out to her car. A minute later, I was sitting in my usual spot, digging through my bag for a new book to read and actively trying to forget all about my night. Especially Rosa. After all, it wasn't like I was ever going to see her again.

Chapter Eighteen

We called her the fox lady, but I couldn't tell you why to save my life. To me, she seemed tangible enough to pass for human, and nothing about her was notably foxlike, but I inherited the name from the clerks of gas station past, along with the stories and warnings, and I couldn't find the motivation to come up with a better moniker, even if I was the last person around who knew anything about her.

Once every couple months or so, going back to way before I started working, she would stop by to gas up her vehicle—a pristine black hearse. Nobody could tell me who she was or where she came from. She didn't work for the only funeral parlor in our town, and nobody had any memory of seeing her anywhere else but here.

Her behavior was as consistent as it was bizarre. She always came inside the store to walk around while the hearse fueled up, and if she ever made eye contact with anyone, customer or cashier, she would walk up to them and say the same thing.

“Will you come with me?”

Crazy? Maybe. Maybe not. I'm certainly not the best person to judge when someone is in or out of their right mind. But even the Mad Hatter could tell you that the only appropriate response to a question like that is some version of “No.”

Her success rate was, in a word, startling. In another word, impressive. In a much more appropriate word, suspicious. More times than not, when she came to buy her fuel, she ended up finding somebody—normally a part-time clerk—to leave with her.

I'd had a few run-ins with her myself, but I've never been one to go out of my way to make conversation or eye contact. She always paid at the pump, so I never had to talk to her if I didn't want to, and it's not like I had any reason to collect bonus points in customer service. There was one instance, however, when she caught me by surprise.

I was reading a book about space dragons when I felt a presence on the other side of the counter. The sensation of her gaze

was stronger than a heat lamp. When I looked up from the pages, I found myself staring into the eyes of the most beautiful person I'd ever seen anywhere in real life, movies, or imagination. She smiled an impossibly beautiful smile, gestured at the hearse outside, and asked, "Will you come with me?"

For a moment the span of a heartbeat, I was ready to follow whatever adventure awaited us, but the rational side of my brain yanked my consciousness back into the real world like it were a toddler heading into traffic.

"Oh, no thank you."

She seemed disheartened but persistent. "Will you come with me?"

"Nah. I'm good."

"Will you come with me?"

"Look," I said, "I think you're nice and all, but I'm pretty sure if I get in that hearse, you're probably going to end up killing me, and I'm really invested in this book and I've only got four chapters left to go, so... if you don't mind..."

She turned sadly and left the building alone. Tony walked up to the counter and stared hard as she glided away. "Who was that beautiful creature?" he asked.

"Don't know," I said, turning my attention back to the book. "Probably some kind of metaphor for death."

After that encounter, I decided it might be a good idea to get an expert opinion, and the closest thing we had to an expert was good old Tom. He always seemed to know things about things, and we had ample video evidence on the security cameras, so I gave him a call. He came down and pored over the footage with me one afternoon, but as a member of law enforcement, there wasn't much he could do. The only crime on those tapes was an unregistered and untagged motor vehicle.

Tom's brutal honesty did little to hide the guilt behind his words. "There's nothing for us to do here. Folks make their own decisions, and unless you can prove she's doing untoward things to these people, we can't stop her from taking them for a ride."

I studied Tom's face while he watched the screen. His eyes misted as his stare went deep, deeper than the footage, like he wasn't even seeing the recordings anymore. He was somewhere else. Somewhere far away. "She's a very beautiful woman..." His voice was barely a whisper. "Reminds me of my Georgette before the cancer took her. If she asked me... if I wanted to come with her... Maybe one day I can—"

I popped the security tape out of the VCR, and Tom reacted like he'd just come up for air and almost didn't make it.

He asked if he could hold onto all of our tapes of the fox lady to "make sure they don't fall into the wrong hands" (whatever the hell that was supposed to mean), then he locked them in a fire safe he had in the trunk of his cruiser for some reason. Before he drove off, he warned me that she would probably be back one day, and if I ever saw her again, I should do my best to ignore her.

Chapter Nineteen

Rosa was standing next to me with a big smile on her face and a brand-new nametag pinned to her shirt, listening intently while I explained how our time clock worked. She had a pen and pocket-sized notebook in her hands, scribbling away as I spoke (like there was any way she could forget “scan badge, type in employee code”). She was curious, full of questions, and eager to learn. Of course, none of those things boded well for her future at the gas station.

It had been an eventful week for both of us, and yet it felt like no time had passed since that night we last saw one another.

For me, the week had been uncharacteristically good. The follow-up appointment with my surgeon showed excellent progress with my bones and leg wound. They removed the staples and gave me a pamphlet on prosthesis options which I never bothered looking at. The gash on my head from where I accidentally headbutted the car window had healed over, and my bruises were all faded back to flesh tone. I’d pretty much mastered the art of walking with a single crutch, and with the exception of an occasional strange clicking noise whenever I reached for something on a high shelf, I was pretty much back to normal.

For her, the week had been less than good. Her new job tending bar at a little dive called “Cooter Brown’s” one town over seemed to be working out well enough until the place tragically went up in flames. Thankfully, nobody was hurt, but the building was ruined, and the authorities were unable to determine the cause of the fire. Later that day, Pops called and instructed me to “get that Rosa girl back before someone else hires her out from under us!” It was especially suspicious considering he knew about her sudden unemployment before the news had even reported on the fire, but I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation.

And so, only seven days after our *goodbye forever* moment, Rosa was back at the gas station, ready to officially start her training (again).

It was already dark when she arrived for what should have been a completely boring overnight shift. A light but steady sprinkling of snow had been falling all day, and by the time the sun drifted behind the trees, the world outside was covered below a thin blanket of white powder. Experience told me not to expect too many customers on a night like this.

I gave her the complete tour of the gas station, starting with the coffee pot in the corner. It didn't take long to explain how everything worked, even allowing the extra time for her to write everything down. She was highly observant and kept the silence at bay with *so many* questions.

"What's with that stain?" She pointed to the brown shape on the floor by the coffee machine.

I gave her a shrug. "It doesn't come up."

"What do you mean?"

I wasn't expecting to need to clarify. "I mean, it's been there for years."

I was already moving towards the next thing when-

"Well, where did it come from?"

I stopped. "What?"

"The stain? You said it's been there for years. I bet I could get it up if you told me what it came from."

I had to remind myself that we were in for a snowstorm and slow night, and we had nothing but time to kill. "That's the spot where Mrs. Andrews passed away after a massive heart attack."

Rosa made a sad "aww," like she just watched a video of a puppy falling off a couch.

"The coroner said the old woman died before she even hit the ground. I mean, not that I asked. He's the kind of guy who loves to overshare. And I know what you're thinking, but from what we could tell, all of her blood and fluids stayed inside her body until they took her away. Ever since then, that stain has been there. We've cleaned it up before. Several times. The problem is that it keeps coming back. Always in the same place. We tried covering it with a small rug, but then the stain appeared on top of it, too. We checked

above the ceiling tiles for leaks, but the only things up there were squirrel bones and empty cans of Mountain Dew.”

“Have you tried vinegar and dish soap?”

“We’ve tried everything.”

“Have you tried—”

“We’ve tried *everything*.”

She looked at the stain like a tiger stalking her prey, and I knew exactly what she was thinking. She saw a challenge, and she wanted to take her shot.

Next, I showed her the grocery aisles and explained how to front and rotate stock. When I looked back at her, Rosa was holding a lawn gnome in her arms—a female with long braided hair, *Dumbo* ears, and a yellow hat.

“Be careful with those,” I warned, hoping to finally get through to her. “Especially the ones with the green hats.”

“Why?” she asked, “What’s wrong with the gnomes with green hats?”

“Sometimes they bite.” She laughed, a good genuine laugh that told me my warning wasn’t even close to landing. I elaborated, “A few of our part-timers messed around with them and ended up at urgent care for stitches.”

“And you just leave them out in the open like this? What about the customers?”

“Yeah, most of them bite, too.”

She carefully put the gnome back on the shelf, wiped her hands on her pants, and made the sign of the cross.

“What do I do if I’m the only one here and I need to use the bathroom?”

“Great question,” I turned and started for the counter. “We actually have a system in place for this.” I showed her the handmade sign under the cash register that read, “*Be back in a minute.*”

She made a sour face, “What happens if somebody tries to shoplift while I’m in the bathroom?”

I shrugged, “People shoplift right in front of us all the time. Last week, a man stole two cases of beer, then came back ten

minutes later because he forgot his phone and stole another case of beer. There's nothing stopping them from stealing."

"I can shame them," she said confidently. "I can give them *the look*."

She tightened her lips, narrowed her eyes, and slowly shook her head at me. I had to give her credit, it was quite shaming.

"Not bad," I said. "But take my advice: If somebody tries to rob us, let it go. When—and I do mean 'when'—something crazy happens, don't try to be a hero. Don't go off investigating weird noises on your own. If something seems strange, or out of place, or impossible, just try to ignore it, and if you absolutely cannot ignore it, pretend. The less you get involved, the better off you'll be."

I might have gotten a little carried away, but I wanted to make sure my words were getting through to her. Judging by the blank expression on her face, Rosa had definitely heard me, but whether or not she understood was still a mystery.

She pulled out her notebook and said, "Could you repeat all of that?"

I sighed.

She was stubborn, but she was also a fast learner, which meant I was quickly running out of things to teach her. She already knew how to run a register, her time as a bartender would have prepared her for the temperament of our regulars, and the last time she was here, she found a batch of cleaning supplies that I didn't even know existed. It seemed the owners had overestimated the amount and quality of wisdom I could impart when they insisted on letting her shadow me for an entire overnight shift. But there was one lesson she hadn't learned yet, and I considered it my duty to educate her—to *warn* her—before the night was over.

"There are things that happen here, especially at night and especially when you're all alone. Things that happen for no good reason. You have to accept it and move on, or this probably isn't the job for you."

Thankfully, she didn't write any of that down. She just looked me in the eyes and said, "You're really intense. You know that?"

"I guess."

“Jerry said the same thing about the weird stuff. He says that there are strange animals out in the woods, and sometimes, when it’s quiet, you can hear them.” She had a goofy smile that in no way respected the severity of the words she was saying. It felt like she was telling a campfire story to a group of children. “He told me on clear nights, you can go outside and see constellations that don’t exist anywhere else. He says this place is a window to other worlds, and if you find the right way to look through it, you can see someone or something on the other—”

I cut her off. “Listen, Jerry says a lot of things. What you need to know is this: Things work differently here. It’s not a hard job unless you want it to be.”

“He also told me something else,” she confessed. “Is it true that you can’t fall asleep?”

At first, I was annoyed. But then I realized I had never told Jerry about my condition. Had he gleaned that information on his own? Or did someone tell him?

Judging from the smile on her face, she didn’t realize the implications of her question, so I wasn’t going to hold it against her.

“Yeah, it’s true.”

“That’s pretty cool.”

“No, not really.”

“I wish I had that problem.”

“It’s a fatal disease, and it’s literally killing me.”

She covered her mouth and shouted, “Oh my god I’m so sorry! I didn’t realize!”

“It’s okay.”

“Is that what happened to your leg? Oh my god! Never mind; that’s super rude! Please forget I asked!” She stared at the ground and stuffed her hands into her pockets. “Can we start over, please?”

“Why? I think this is going great.”

Right then, a gust of cold air and snow flurries whooshed into the room. We turned to see Jerry walking into the store, wearing nothing but a wife-beater, jeans, and a camo trucker-hat covered in fresh snow.

“You guys,” he announced as he passed us on the way to the liquor aisle, “it’s colder than a stepmother’s kiss out there.”

“Hi, Jerry!” Rosa said with a friendly wave.

He grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the shelf, then walked up to the counter and said, “Hey there, sweet cheeks. Oh, and hi to you, too, Rosa. Pack of Marlboros, please.”

“What are you doing?” she asked, “Aren’t you freezing?”

“Well yeah. Didn’t you hear what I just said? I’m as cold as a witch’s dick.”

Rosa handed over the pack of cigarettes and rang him up, saying “I don’t think that’s how the expression goes.”

“I don’t know much about expressions, but you ever felt a witch’s dick before? It’s pretty freakin’ cold.”

She laughed. “Does that line ever work?”

He was already unwrapping the pack of smokes. “You’d be surprised.”

She gave Jerry his total, but he just winked at her and said, “Put it on my employee tab,” before turning around and walking back out into the falling snow.

Rosa looked at me with a confused expression. “How do I ring something up under an employee tab?”

“We don’t have employee tabs.”

“So... ?”

“Yeah, Jerry just robbed us.”

We didn’t see another customer for the next half hour. When she came into the store, I instantly knew there was going to be trouble. But at least it was trouble I was familiar with, and trouble I knew how to handle.

My late friend Tom was percipient as always, and if he were still around I’d be the first to tell him that he was right. The fox lady had returned, and now she was standing in the center aisle, looking for another potential friend or victim or mate or meal or whatever it

was she wanted. The moment I recognized her, I looked down at my book.

Soon, I could feel it again. Her stare from the other side of the counter, a radiant warmth, reaching out to me, caressing me, enticing me. She may as well have been putting her hands on my face for how strongly I felt her presence. It was annoying as hell.

This is ridiculous. I'm an adult. I work here. I pay taxes. I shouldn't have to avoid eye contact just to get through a shift.

I took a breath and looked up at her, ready to explain how she couldn't just hang out creeping on people, and if she were done pumping her gas, it was time for her to hit the road. But the second I saw her face, all the words evaporated in my mouth and came out as a garbled noise that sounded like "whaa."

I knew she was beautiful. I could remember that from the last time I saw her, but my memory was like a blurry polaroid of the Sistine Chapel—the idea was there, but the beauty and detail was nothing compared to the real thing. To say she was immaculate would be an insult. She was perfection incarnate. She was amazing. Beguiling. Mysterious. Unnatural. Impossible. *Oh, wait, there it is. My rational thought here to save the day and remind me that something is definitely wrong. Real people don't look the way she looks.*

"I'm sorry, ma'am," I tried to get my words out before she had her chance to ask the question that I knew was sitting on the edge of her lips. "We have a new store policy regarding prolonged eye contact, and I—"

It took this long for the spell to wear off, for me to finally realize that I wasn't seeing what I expected to see. The energy coming from the other side of the counter wasn't meant for me at all. What I was feeling was a ripple of her real intentions. I was caught in the blowback and too arrogant to realize before now that she had her face turned, her cheek pointed at me, her eyes focused somewhere else... on someone else...

"Excuse me?" I said.

She turned and looked at me. We made eye contact, and I waited for the words I knew she was going to—

Oh, she's walking away now.

“Walking” may not be the best word. It was like watching her flow with a kind of grace and elegance unattainable and nearly imperceptible to humankind. *Wait... what the hell? She's not supposed to leave. We made eye contact!*

The new employee was on her knees working on the mystery stain by the coffee machine. In a moment, she was looking up at the fox lady and offering her a friendly smile. I reached for my crutch. This was going to take some intervening.

“Hello,” Rosa said.

“Will you come with me?”

“What?”

“Will you come with me?”

“N-no? That's okay. I'm working, and I don't know you.”

She knelt down onto one knee, bringing herself face-to-face with Rosa.

“Will you come with me?”

Rosa frowned. I could almost see the question mark over her head. I was about to step in when she took the conversation in an unexpected direction. “Cómo?” she said. “Qué estas diciendo? No entiendo. Sorry. I... no speak... English.”

The fox lady stood and took a step back. Her mouth hung open in surprise.

“Hey, Rosa.” I was standing between them now. She looked up at me and smiled nervously. “I need you to start the backroom inventory. Okay?”

She nodded and slipped away towards the supply closet with a quick, “Si, comprendo!” When she had gone, I turned to face the fox lady head-on. I couldn't tell what her new expression meant, but I assumed she wasn't happy.

“You heard her, lady. No means no.” She continued to look at me beautifully, and I found myself in the uncomfortable position of needing to carry a conversation I didn't even want to start.

“Alright, come on. Give me something. Who are you, anyway? What's your deal? Are you supposed to be some kind of vampire or demon or angel?” She continued to stare silently. “You seem to know what you're doing, and I don't mean to tell you how to

run your business, but why are you even here? This can't possibly be the best town for you. We're so small! We're running out of people! How long do you think you can keep this up before someone important starts to notice? Why don't you go to some big city and leave us the hell alone?"

She stared at me as beautifully as possible (actually, it was more beautiful than that). And when the time came and she turned and walked away, it was with the supreme beauty of a goddess. As she reached for the door handle I called out and stopped her. "Hey, fox lady."

She turned back beautifully and beautifully looked at me with an absurd amount of beauty that was literally making me sick to my stomach. "I don't know what you're doing with these people, but she's off limits, okay?"

When she spoke, it was with a horrendous amount of beauty, and I had to turn my eyes away or I was going to throw up right onto her beautiful feet.

"I will come back for you, Jack, and you will come with me. You will see that I only want to love and protect you. I will show you another world. A paradise with no pain and no suffering."

"Nah," I said. "I'm good here."

"Fine, loser. Stay here and die! Be worm food; see if I care!"

She held up two absolutely beautiful middle fingers, waved them around beautifully, then walked backwards out into the snowy abyss.

With that out of the way, I went into the supply closet to find Rosa with a clipboard and inventory sheets, diligently counting our stock.

"Sorry about that," I said. "Sometimes customers can be... tenacious."

"No problem! That guy was a creep, but I'm used to dealing with his type."

"Remember what I said about ignoring the weird stuff? Well, she's a good example."

"Who is?"

“The lady with the hearse. If she ever comes back in, just ignore her until she goes away.”

Rosa gave me an inquisitive stare, which I was beginning to equate as her default look. “What are you talking about?”

“That customer. We have a name for her. We call her the fox lady, but I don’t know why.”

“Are you talking about that weirdo who kept saying—” (she used her mockingest mocking voice) “‘Will you come with me’?”

“Yeah.”

“Why do you keep calling him a she?”

“Huh?”

“That guy driving the hearse. We’re talking about him, right?”

This was the conversation equivalent of the moment a zipper gets jammed on nothing. She and I both waited for the other to figure it out, but I could tell after a few seconds that it wasn’t going to happen. Finally, I tried a different tactic. “The person who kept asking you to leave... can you describe them?”

She laughed, but there was an element of nervousness to it. “Okay, sure. He was...” she smiled awkwardly, “you know... really handsome. Like, almost *too* handsome. Like, a really beautiful man. Absurdly so.” She stared at the ceiling and tried to think it through. “Actually, that’s all I can really remember about him.”

As I listened, it dawned on me that I couldn’t remember anything either. What was she wearing? What color was her hair? How tall was she? How many heads did she have? None of those details came through. I couldn’t describe her outside of that one feature. All I knew was that she was completely, horrifyingly, inhumanly *beautiful*.

Rosa went back to counting supplies and said, “I guess I should pay better attention, huh?”

Rosa had the patience of a saint, and a work ethic that would make ants feel lazy. Even the weird stuff didn’t seem to faze her. On the contrary, it was almost like she enjoyed it. She passed every test

so far, but the most difficult challenge, the one that had washed out so many other workers before her, was yet to come.

Gnomes and mystery stains and beautiful hearse drivers are worthy adversaries, but *boredom* is a different kind of beast altogether. It had been a couple hours since the fox lady went on her stupid, beautiful way. The snowfall had transformed into a veritable snowstorm, all but guaranteeing that we wouldn't see any more customers for the remainder of the night. I was in my regular spot behind the counter, a cup of coffee in front of me and a detective story in my hands. Rosa, as expected, was squirming.

She'd already cleaned the blood stain, as well as the walls and floors and everything else within reach. The aisles were fronted, the coffee was full, the garbage cans were emptied, and the cracks were starting to show.

She paced the aisles for the hundredth time, trying to find something to keep herself occupied like her sanity depended on it. She wasn't cut out for this. She was built to go and do. I, on the other hand, was right in my element.

The grind of long hours and the space between those events that form memories is where I like to hide, where I can relax and wait and forget about all the uncomfortable thoughts knocking at the door.

I wonder where Sabine is right now.

I tried to shake it off. Who let that thought out of the vault?

I wonder if Paul and Mama Susan are still alive. Probably not, right?

Okay, that's another weird one. Time to corral those unwelcome thoughts and force them back and focus on the shitty book I bought from the library clearance sale.

If Karl was getting clean, why would he cut and chew off his hands? There's got to be a better way to go.

I put the book down and rubbed my eyes. Something was wrong. Something was keeping me from getting inside my fortress of solitude. All I wanted was to go brain-numb until the end of this shift, but I couldn't. Was my autopilot broken? Was this permanent? Or was there something else subconsciously holding me here in this moment?

Rosa ran up to the counter with an enormous, proud smile on her face and a cardboard box in her hands. She slammed it down in front of me and said, "Check out what I found in the storage closet!"

On the side, somebody had written the word "Games" in Jerry's handwriting.

"What's this?" I asked.

"I figured you and I could play something until the snow stops!" She started pulling unloading the box onto the counter in front of me. "They've got *Uno. Connect Four. Checkers.*"

Before I could say, "No thanks," she flipped the entire box upside down and dumped the contents between us. There were several board games, card games, and half a dozen dead mice.

"Oh," she said, her smile instantly evaporating, "Oh my God... I'm so sorry. I didn't know about the mice. I swear!"

I put my book down and started refilling the box while she went to find some napkins and disinfectant. We worked in silence. I finished first, then watched as she carefully wrapped each rodent like a napkin mummy and respectfully set them inside an empty cigar box.

When she finished, she took the case in her hands and said, "I'm ready whenever you are."

I had already grabbed my crutch and pulled myself to a standing position before I realized I had absolutely no idea what she was talking about. "Ready for what?"

"They died on our watch. The least we can do is give them a proper burial."

"You're serious?"

"Don't I look serious?"

I assumed she was being rhetorical, standing there with the box of mice mummies.

"I don't know about this; the snow is coming down pretty hard."

"I can do it by myself, if you have something more important to do." She tightened her lips, narrowed her eyes, and slowly shook her head at me. I even knew how the trick was done, but that did nothing to diminish the effectiveness of her shaming. I wasn't going

to win this one. Besides, I needed something better than a bad book to help pass the time.

I took the “*Be back in a minute*” sign and put it on the counter next to the box of games. A minute later, I was standing out back in ankle-deep snow as she dug a tiny grave.

There was something particularly cathartic about watching somebody else dig a hole behind the gas station, thinking to myself that if she only knew all the things that had happened with that shovel, I doubt she would have been so gung-ho about putting her fingerprints all over it. I pointed her to one of the few spots where we hadn’t already buried something horrific, and once the mice were in the ground, Rosa gave a short eulogy.

“Dearly beliked, we are gathered here tonight to pay our first and final respects to these gentle creatures. Oh, closet mice, I’m sorry you all died in a box in the back of the supply room, but I’m grateful that at least you didn’t have to die alone. We pray that you don’t haunt this gas station. Instead may you find your peace in Heaven or whatever your mouse-religion equivalent is.”

“Valhalla.” I muttered.

“We will never know the circumstances of your lives, but we know how you chose to spend your final moments. Warm, and in the company of friends and boardgames. May we all be so lucky, and may you live on in our memories.” She looked at me and asked, “Anything to add?”

My mind jumped to a shortlist of mouse-based puns, but I decided against it. I knew very well that funerals were never for the benefit of the dead, and this one was—without any doubt—for her. Despite the abject silliness of a rodent funeral, I knew Rosa wouldn’t appreciate anything short of a respectful addendum. So I gave it heart and honesty and said the only thing I could come up with. “Somebody came into the gas station one time, trying to be a dick. He stripped naked and rubbed toothpaste all over his body and told me that I was nothing but a little mouse. I think he meant it as an

insult, but I didn't take any offense. Truth is, I'd rather be a mouse than most people."

She nodded. "That was really nice."

I leaned over and dropped the box into the hole, but my fingers were numb from the cold and my aim was just a little off. The corner of the box hit the edge of the grave and the mouse-mummies bounced out into the snow. I looked over at Rosa and muttered, "My bad."

She gave me a smile and said, "It's not like they're getting any deader." Then she scooped them all together into the hole and covered it with dirt and snow until it was nothing but a small mound.

As we made our way back to the gas station, I heard a voice from just beyond the treeline whisper, "Hey!"

Rosa stopped and looked back. "Did you hear that?"

The freezing wind carried with it a noise that sounded almost like children giggling as it blew against the back of my neck.

"Nope," I said, keeping my eyes forward. "Let's get back inside."

All in all, it was one of the better funerals I'd been to.

Chapter Twenty

I don't know if it's possible to catch any diseases from dried-up mouse carcasses, but just to stay on the safe side, we washed our hands thoroughly before returning to work. I took the box of games back to the supply closet while Rosa wiped down and disinfected the counter. I didn't even hear the telephone ring, but Rosa had already answered it by the time I came back to the front of the store. She was smiling and chatting with the person on the other side like it was an old friend.

That must be nice, I thought to myself, having someone in your life who cares enough to call and check on you at work.

I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but in a building this small, there was no point in pretending I couldn't hear every word she said.

"It's not bad, I think. This is my first day here... Oh, I like it. I think it's going to be a lot of fun... My name is Rosa... Yeah, actually, he's right here. Did you want to talk to him? ... Sure thing. I'll let him know... You too, Spencer."

With that, she hung up the phone, and I tried not to piss myself.

She smiled at me and said, "That was a friend of yours."

"Spencer Middleton." I almost didn't get the name out.

"Yeah." Once again, I watched the happy, innocent smile disappear from her face. "What's wrong?"

"I need to make a phone call, then I think it's probably about time that I told you something."

The first thing I did was call O'Brien, but it went straight to voicemail. My message was short and to the point. "Hey, it's me. Just wanted to let you know Spencer's alive again. Talk to you later."

The second thing I did was tell Rosa the entire story of Spencer Middleton (and by "entire," I mean only the parts that made

sense: he was a professionally-trained killer; he was arrested for murder; he hated my guts; and most unsettling of all, he was supposed to be dead and cremated by now, *not calling the gas station to chat*).

Rosa listened patiently. When I was done, she took her role as the honorary voice of reason. “Do you know who it might have really been? I mean, obviously, it wasn’t Spencer. He’s dead, right?”

I didn’t answer right away. I was lost in contemplation. The whole thing always felt a little too neat and perfect. The official story went that Spencer died in a blaze of gunfire. But that’s all it was—an official story. The man was nothing if not resourceful, and I would have been shocked if he hadn’t earned his merit badges for bribery, blackmail, and conspiracy. Was it possible he faked his death? Yes. Was it probable? Also yes. But did I believe that he found a way to escape from prison then—instead of making a run for it—stayed in town laying low and biding his time just to take another shot at me? Once again, yes, definitely.

Rosa sounded like she was getting antsy. “...*Right?*”

I owed her an answer. “Spencer might not be as dead as we had hoped.”

She was quick to ask the obvious question. “Do you have a gun or anything? In case he comes back?”

“No, I’m not really a gun guy.”

“Ninja stars? Bazooka? Flamethrower? Chainsaw? Any sort of weapon at all?”

“No. Not really.”

“Well,” she crossed her arms, “I guess if he kills you, I can always give him the shame look.” I tried my best to crack a smile, but I’m sure she could see right through it. “Would you like me to go lock the doors now?”

“Yeah, that’s another thing you’re not going to like. Spencer knows how to get inside the gas station even when all the doors are locked. He’s done it a couple times before, and we haven’t been able to figure out how.”

She gave me her *are you serious* look, then put her hands on the sides of her head and yelled in exasperation, “Crap, man! Is

there anything else terrifying about this guy that you would like to tell me?"

I once saw Spencer get his head cut halfway off and bleed out on the gas station floor, and he still somehow came back without any lasting damage.

"No. Not really."

Rosa squeaked and jumped as the front door swung open.

"Hey guys," said the drunk idiot in the oversized fur coat as he staggered into the store. He threw a thumb over his shoulder as he wandered across the room. "Y'all know the roads are all shut down?"

"Hi, Jerry," I said as soon as my heartbeat returned to normal. "Good to have you back."

Rosa asked, "What-What about the roads?"

Jerry braced himself against the frozen drink machine and fumbled with the Styrofoam cups. "Yeah, it's been all over the radio. Freak blizzard. They're calling it a 'thousand-year storm.' Supposedly, that means it's ten times worse than the hundred-year storm from a few weeks back. All the roads leading into town are completely impassable. You know the drill. Mandatory curfew. State of emergency. Cats and dogs living together." He waved his arms in the air dramatically. "Two dead, one missing."

He knocked over an entire stack of cups in his effort to grab one, picked one up off the floor, then filled it with a cherry-cola frozen drink and threw it back.

"If all the roads are impassable," Rosa asked, "then where the hell did you just come from? Did you walk here?"

I whispered to her, "Remember that thing I told you about ignoring the weird stuff?"

Jerry pulled the cup away from his mouth and screamed.

"What is it?!" yelled Rosa.

"Brainfreeze!"

"Well," I said a little too cocksure, "At least we still have —"

Right then, the power cut out, plunging the gas station into complete darkness.

I left the two of them lighting and placing candles around the front of the store while I borrowed Jerry's keychain flashlight and went to find our box of emergency supplies in the supply room. After a few seconds and a near-death experience (the box was on the top shelf), I managed to get it down and dragged it back out front. I leaned against the counter and caught my breath while Jerry sat cross-legged on the floor and dug through the supplies, handing them out to each of the four of us.

The episode with the dark god turning our building into a tree cocoon forced me to acknowledge how underprepared we really were for such things. Not just nudist zombie attacks, but any situation where we might be on our own without backup for extended periods of time. So I put together this emergency box and filled it with plenty of extra batteries, a USB charging brick, half a dozen flashlights, bottled water, protein bars, matches, flares, an army-grade first aid kit, and more than enough—

Wait a second. FOUR of us?

"Holy shit!" I yelled, fumbling with the flashlight Jerry had just handed me. After a painfully awkward few seconds, I managed to get the damn thing to turn on and pointed at all the other shadows standing in the room with me.

There was Jerry, Rosa, and... O'Brien.

"You mind not pointing that thing right in my eyes?" O'Brien asked.

"Sorry," I said, aiming it back down. "When did you get here?"

"Just now, while you were off bumblefucking around in the closet. I called the store earlier to check on you, but nobody picked up. I nearly killed myself ten times driving through this blizzard to get here. Where the hell were you? Why didn't you answer?"

Rosa perked up. "Oh, we were probably outside doing the funeral when you called."

She unsnapped her gun holster and said, "What?"

I explained quickly, "It was for a bunch of mice."

Jerry bristled. "And you didn't invite me?!"

O'Brien shook her head and said, "That actually does not clear anything up, but I'm glad you're okay."

"Well," I said. "Not necessarily. I take it you didn't get my message?"

She slowly curled her fingers around the grip of her weapon. "Were you waiting for a drum roll?"

I've always appreciated her no-nonsense candor. It made delivering bad news so much easier. "We got a strange phone call tonight from a man claiming to be Spencer Middleton."

Jerry opened one of the protein bars, took a big bite, and said, "That kid is so in love with you."

"But that's crazy, right?" I asked. "I mean, he's dead. Isn't he?" She didn't say anything, but her silence was answer enough.

Rosa took a wild stab at filling the tense quiet. "Maybe it was a different Spencer? It's a common name, isn't it? Makes a lot more sense than a bad guy coming back from the dead."

The deputy cleared her throat and asked, "Who are you?"

"Hi, I'm Rosa." She offered her hand. "It's my first day."

O'Brien took it and said, "Amelia O'Brien."

"Really? You don't look like an O'Brien."

"What exactly does an O'Brien look like?"

"Ummm..."

She held onto the end of that word for a long, uncomfortable few seconds until Jerry came to her rescue, exclaiming, "Yay! We finally passed the Bechdel test! This is a nice change of pace. Usually whenever we end up trapped at the gas station with a murderous stalker trying to kill us, it's a total sausage fest."

"Usually?" asked Rosa. "Has this happened before?"

"Once or twice," I answered.

O'Brien turned away from us and spoke into her radio microphone, "Dispatch, this is O'Brien, do you read me? Over."

Silence.

Rosa looked over at me with eyes that were somewhere between woeful and distressed. I couldn't tell if it was the possible killer, the record-breaking lethal storm, or the fact that she just embarrassed herself in front of the deputy.

“Dispatch, are you hearing me? Over.”

More silence.

O'Brien sighed and dropped her head in resignation, then turned back to me and dug a dollar out of her pocket. “I need to use the store phone.”

Before I could take her money, the phone began to ring. She shot me a look and pointed her light at the source of the noise. I took that as my cue and answered it.

Please don't be Spencer. Please don't be Spencer. Please don't be Spencer.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Jack. It's been a while.” It was his voice. There was absolutely no doubt in my mind.

“Hi, Spencer.”

O'Brien walked over to me and leaned in close. For a brief moment, I thought she was going for a kiss. By the grace of God, I realized what she was doing before I had the chance to embarrass us both, and I angled the earpiece out so she could listen in on the conversation with me.

“Who's your new friend? Rosa, was it? She seems nice.”

“Oh, her? She's my new Jiu-Jitsu instructor. I had to fire the last one because he said he'd already taught me everything he knew. I've been getting pretty shredded since the last time I saw you. Also, I'm taller now.”

“She doesn't sound like a Jiu-Jitsu instructor. She sounds like an innocent little girl. Why don't you do her a favor and send her outside? I promise, she'll be a lot safer.”

“I don't know about that. We've got a lot of firepower in here. Plus Jerry built a mech suit. I think we'll be fine until the rest of the sheriff's department shows up.”

He laughed. It was the same deep, sadistic laugh he'd had when he was swinging a shovel at my face. “Sheriff's department, huh? Let me know how that works out for ya.”

This might have just been another one of his mind games, but I couldn't help but take the bait. “What do you mean?”

“Christ. Give me one second.”

O'Brien's radio crackled to life as a voice came through loud enough to fill the entire room. "O'Brien!" It was him. "Can you back the fuck off for one goddamned second and let me talk to Jack in private?"

The realization hit us immediately. *Spencer is watching us right now!*

Rosa squeaked. Jerry hiccupped. O'Brien pulled out her service pistol, crisscrossed it with her flashlight in the opposite hand, and aimed it at the doors and windows, desperately searching for signs of Spencer and yelling, "Everybody take cover! Get away from the windows! Now!"

Jerry and Rosa darted below the booth table. O'Brien carefully circled the room, pinching out the flames on each of the candles until we were standing in complete darkness, save for the single illumination of her flashlight. Only then did I realize that I still had the phone against my ear.

Spencer laughed.

"I'd love to stay and talk, but I've got a lot of work to do tonight. If you die before I get to you, I want you to know one thing. All of this was preventable, and all of this was your fault."

There was an unusual threat hidden within his words. He loved playing mind games, but that was almost too subtle to be anything but a genuine slip up. "*If you die before I get to you...*" What the hell did he mean by that? *God, I hated him so much!*

"That's two things," I said.

"What?"

"You said you wanted me to know one thing. Then you said that this was all prevent—"

"Do you really want to piss me off, Jack? Because right now I'm the best chance you have of getting through the night alive. If I were in your shoe, I wouldn't—"

O'Brien snatched the receiver out of my hand and slammed it onto the cradle.

Jerry helped O'Brien cover the windows and front door with makeshift curtains of garbage bags and duct tape. It wasn't going to stop any bullets, but knowing that Spencer couldn't see us gave me some modicum of comfort.

I moved a few milk crates and packing blankets into the supply closet where we set up camp for the remainder of the night. The room was easily defensible, close enough to both exits in case we needed to make a run for it, and small enough that our combined body heat would—in theory—keep us from freezing to death before help arrived.

Jerry found his box of board games and broke out Monopoly, but he passed out under a blanket in the corner before I could even get the pieces sorted. Rosa wasn't too far behind, apologizing to me and saying she was just going to "rest my eyes for a second."

Somehow, despite the severity of the situation, the knowledge that we were being stalked and slowly freezing to death in the middle of an apocalyptic blizzard, the two of them found the power to fall asleep, almost like they were showing off.

I quietly cracked the door and let myself out. They deserved whatever comfort they could salvage from the night.

It was much colder out here, but O'Brien didn't seem fazed by the temperature (or anything, really). She was leaning against the hallway wall nearby, positioned to keep everything important—the front door, the back door, the supply closet—within her line of sight. She was a woman hard at work, focused on protecting three gas station clerks like it was a mission from God. Nothing was going to get through her steely resolve, but I was going to try anyway. It was the least I could do.

I carried an extra packing blanket over and took my spot on the wall next to her. After a few seconds of familiar silence, I held it up. Without any words, she took it from me and put half over her shoulders. I was surprised when she dropped the remaining slack over my own. Soon, we were both sitting on the ground, huddled under the cover with our backs to the wall.

When she spoke at long last, I could see her breath in the dim and erratic light of a dozen candles.

“They both asleep?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I don’t know how they can do it.”

“I’ve seen people sleep through worse. You find a way. Your body adjusts. Well, *your* body doesn’t, but most do.” I couldn’t help but laugh. It was the shortest kind, a single breath, involuntarily vocalized, but it was genuine, and it was all she needed for permission to relax. She put a warm arm around my shoulder. “You know, Hopalong, I’m really gonna miss you when you’re finally dead.”

She used a tone to disguise her words as a mere throwaway notion, as fleeting as the cloud that carried them for one unassuming moment before evaporating forever, but I suspected it went deeper than she cared to admit.

“Well,” I said, “That is pretty presumptuous of you. I’ve outlived or outlasted almost all the other deputies they’ve sent my way. What makes you so confident I won’t be the one missing you?”

She paid back my laugh with her own. Barely audible behind closed lips, but unmistakable and real. We silently agreed to let the question pass for now.

“I got through to the sheriff. He’s sending a snow truck first thing in the morning. I told him that this needs to be a priority, but evidently this is snowmageddon and he can’t afford to stretch his precious resources any further tonight.”

Coming from anyone else, that would have felt like a complete thought, but I could read between the lines. Spencer’s remark about the department, the sheriff’s relation to the vigilantes—there was more to say. O’Brien was always brutally honest, and the fact that she chose here and now to suddenly play coy was not lost on me. This was the start of a serious conversation, and she was offering me a chance to get off before the ride started. But there was no reason to dance around the subject like the mere thought would give it power. It wasn’t a yawn.

I picked up the thought. “It’s almost like the sheriff has some kind of ulterior motive for dragging his feet. It’s almost like he and Spencer are on the same team.”

"Could be. Or maybe he's telling the truth this time. The storm is real, and it's already claimed one person tonight. But I have to admit, if he isn't part of whatever's wrong with this town, then he's got to be the world's best useful idiot. At this point, I don't know which is worse. He actually laughed at me when I told him we were dealing with Spencer Middleton again! Told me I sounded hysterical!" She tipped her head back and exhaled forcefully. "I don't know what's going on here, but ever since I got assigned to gas station duty, my life has gotten exponentially weirder with every passing day."

"Yeah," I said, averting my gaze to the darkness in front of me. "Sorry about that."

"I don't know, maybe your crazy is rubbing off on me."

"Hang on," I said. "One person died?"

"Truck went off Second Street bridge. Driver probably didn't realize it was iced over. They called it before I got there. DOA."

"Only one person?"

She held onto her answer for a moment, no doubt trying to figure out where the sudden interest was coming from. But our conversation ended there, with another voice interrupting with urgency.

"Um, guys? Hello?!" It was coming from the supply closet.

O'Brien had the door pushed open and her gun in hand before I could get to my crutch. By the time I reached her in the doorway, she'd already assessed the situation and holstered her weapon.

"Did something happen?" she asked.

Jerry was on the ground in the far corner, staring at Rosa. He was the one who called out for help, but she was the one standing in the center of the room, facing us and frozen in a look of wide-eyed terror. She held the packing blanket against her chest with both hands, gripping it tightly enough to turn her fists deathly white.

Rosa didn't react to the question. She just stared forward, past either of us, with tears streaming down her face and cosmic horror in her eyes.

“Quiet!” she commanded in a deep voice that did not sound anything like her own. **“Do you hear that?”**

As she spoke, the hairs on my neck stood at attention. The look in her eyes, the voice that wasn’t hers—these were reason enough to worry, but my subconscious had latched onto something else. Something special that the rest of my mind was still catching up to. I saw it like a lighthouse in the fog, but I couldn’t piece together any more than the barest idea. *Something’s wrong. Something is very wrong.*

“Hear what?” I asked, cautiously.

“He’s coming,” she said in her foreign voice. **“He’s almost here. If he finds it, we’re all doomed. We mustn’t let him find it.”**

“Girl,” said O’Brien, “You are freaking us out. Who’s coming? Spencer?”

“He sees you from the other side of the void. His hunger is eternal. Soon, it will be too late.”

“She’s dreaming,” I said, proud to have found an explanation that fit so neatly within our comfortable realm of understanding. But that nagging feeling was still there. *Something is undeniably wrong.* “Yeah, one of my foster brothers used to do the same thing. Her eyes are open, but she’s talking in her sleep.”

Right then, as if to challenge my confidence, her eyes rolled back unnaturally far into their sockets, revealing nothing but veiny white bulges.

O’Brien asked, “Did your foster brother do that, too?”

“Okay,” I admitted. “That is different.”

“Should we wake her?”

“Guys!” Jerry called out. “I don’t think she’s sleeping.”

All at once, my perception caught up to what my instinct had already divined. There was something wrong, and watching Jerry speak, I realized what it was. His words and breath hung in front of his face, frozen momentarily by the cold. But Rosa’s did not.

Why can’t I see her breath?

She slowly began to inch forward, speaking in that unnatural voice that continued to warp and evolve with each syllable. **“If he finds you, every living being will be transformed into a conduit**

for agony and suffering.” Her shoulders stayed steady. She showed no sign of breathing, but the words continued to pour from her, unabated. I could hear other voices coming from the nothing, joining hers in a trickle at first, and growing into a storm. Soon, a chorus of hundreds were speaking in unison from her mouth, combined into a singular voice no louder than her own. **“You will all beg for death, but it will never come. An unfathomable horror from worlds inconceivable waits at the gate. Do not open the door.”**

Wait, so is it a gate or a door? Fix your mixed metaphors, creepy nightmare Rosa.

Her hair began to rise and flow in the candlelight as if she were coursing with static electricity. Then, she dropped the blanket, revealing the source of Jerry’s concern—*the bottoms of her feet were floating almost three inches off the ground.*

At the same time, O’Brien and I said, “Oh.”

She held her hands up in front of her, blood running together through the lines of her palms from where she’d gripped the packing blanket tight enough for her fingernails to dig through the skin on the other side. By the time she started speaking in another language that didn’t sound anything like English or Spanish, O’Brien decided that she’d seen enough.

It might have been an overreaction to shoot Rosa in the stomach with a taser gun, but then again it might not have been. I can’t blame O’Brien for not wanting to take any risks. The important thing is that it worked.

Rosa fell backwards onto Jerry and woke up in a screaming fit of expletives and confusion. It took about twenty minutes before she was calm enough to let us pull the prongs out of her skin and get her patched up.

Rosa sat on the counter by the register while O’Brien put the finishing touches on her bandages. The wounds on her torso were

easy fixes, but the bandages on her hands took a little more work. When it was done, Rosa looked like she was prepped for boxing.

"You want something for the pain?" Jerry asked.

"No, not really."

"Alright, I'm gonna go get you something for the pain. Are you a wine-cooler kind of gal?"

"No."

"Alright, I'm gonna go get you a wine cooler. Anybody else want anything?" I shook my head while O'Brien ignored him outright. He clapped his hands together and said, "Alright, fantastic. I'll be right back with three wine coolers."

"How's that feel?" O'Brien asked.

Rosa wiggled her fingers. "Feels better. Why did you shoot me with a taser?"

Always with the questions, Rosa.

I spared O'Brien the awkwardness of having to explain. She'd already done most of the hard work, and I felt like I needed to contribute. "You were sleep floating."

"Oh," Rosa said. "Sorry about that. I really didn't mean to."

"Hey guys?" Jerry called from the other side of the room. "What do you suppose that is?"

We shined our flashlights in his direction to see him pointing at something slumped up against the cold drink case. As first glance, it looked like a body. O'Brien's gun was in her hand before I even saw her reach for it. "Stay here," she ordered.

She kept her weapon trained on the ground and moved quickly, carefully, hugging the wall and searching for any evidence that this was a trap. She approached the body like it was a potential bomb, and when she was an arm's length away, she swore under her breath.

I took a step closer. "It's him, isn't it?"

"Keep back!" She yelled. The way she was reacting, it very well might have been a bomb. But I had a bad feeling we weren't going to be so lucky.

Rosa dropped down from the counter behind me and whispered timidly, "Who is it?"

Jerry beat me to it. "Holy crap on a cracker," he exclaimed. "Is that Spencer?"

He had a busted lip, swollen black eye, and scrapes and bruises covering his face like he had gone ten rounds with a dump truck, but O'Brien was smart enough not to let her guard down. She kept one finger on the trigger as she checked for signs of breathing. Sadly, she found exactly that.

She pulled him forward, rolled him onto his front, and cuffed both hands behind his back, somehow pulling the whole thing off in less than three seconds and with only one hand. She wasn't going to trust Spencer enough to put down her weapon and she didn't trust us enough to help her (both respectable calls).

Despite her clear warnings and our own common sense, we were inexplicably drawn to the unconscious man like mosquitoes to a bug zapper. In no time, we had him surrounded on all sides, but even in the heavy silence, I could tell we were all feeling the same thing. A sense of dread. A realization that this man didn't play by the same rules as the rest of us, and if he chose to come inside the building, then this was exactly where he wanted to be. Worse, if he *didn't* come in of his own will, then we were dealing with something none of us understood, and there's only one thing worse than the devil you know.

"Do you think that's going to be enough?" I asked. "One pair of handcuffs?"

O'Brien finally felt safe enough to put her gun away. "He's unconscious and unarmed. What exactly did you have in mind?"

I said, "Maybe we can tie him up," at the same time that Jerry blurted out, "Wooden stake through the heart!"

We compromised and found a roll of duct tape to secure him to a rolling chair, then we pushed the chair into the supply closet, then nailed the door shut. O'Brien gave me another dollar for the till and called it in right away, a tense and heated conversation that lasted less than one minute before she slammed the receiver down. From what I picked up, the sheriff wasn't too happy about this turn of events.

I wonder why.

A few minutes later, we heard the pounding on the roof.

SLAM!

The first one jolted us into high attention. We didn't have but maybe two seconds before the next.

SLAM!

We were huddled together, sitting on the floor in front of the counter and wearing packing blanket robes while Jerry cooked a can of ravioli over a candle-fire. We traded a few looks, uncertain of what to make of it. The silence that followed layered over the sound of my own heart beating in double time.

"Was that a tree branch?" Rosa offered. I was ready to accept her theory until—

SLAM! SLAM! SLAM!

They were coming consistently, like a muffled machine gun.

SLAMSLAMSLAMSLAM!

"What the hell is that?!" O'Brien cried over the noise.

SLAMSLAMSLAMSLAM!

They came together, five to ten each second. We covered our ears to muffle the pervasive pounding that echoed off the walls and floor of our tiny building (except for Jerry who couldn't be bothered to put down his wine cooler). And then, just as suddenly as it started, the percussion show on the roof came to an end.

I waited a few seconds to see if there was going to be an encore. When none came, I suggested, "Maybe it was a hailstorm?"

"Or maybe," offered Jerry, "It was him... *escaping*." He pointed at the door to the room where we were keeping our prisoner.

"How does that make any sense?" asked O'Brien.

"Lady, we are way past the point of making any sense," he answered. "I think you know that."

Amazingly, that was all it took to convince her. A minute later, O'Brien had the hammer in her hands, prying back out the nails on the door to Spencer's makeshift jail cell. Despite herself, she took a moment after the last nail was removed before opening the door.

Clearly, she was working up the nerve to do what had to be done, but it almost felt like she was pausing for suspense.

The door swung open, revealing that he was still there, slumped forward and duct taped to the chair in the dark. We breathed a collective sigh of relief, a short-lived and premature celebration. Only when we heard the soft, pained sound emanating from deep within the lungs of our prisoner did we realize our mistake.

It was a growl at first, coming in short, muted bursts, like an old car engine struggling to turn over. He stirred awake, his head rolled, and the mutterings fused together into one long, loud crack of devious laughter.

Spencer slowly raised his head as the final oddments of noise escaped through a sly smile. "Fuck," he said, taking in his surroundings with wild eyes. "Guess we're all still alive, huh? Now, which one of you wants to let me out of this chair?"

"Spencer Middleton," said O'Brien, "You are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say—"

"Christ, O'Brien, are we really going to do this again? Just set me free and give me a weapon. You clearly have no idea what's out there right now. You think I did this to myself? Trust me. You're going to need all the help you can get if you want any chance of surviving the night."

We probably should have gone with the stake.

Spencer was still screaming at us as O'Brien reclosed the door.

As we returned to our space at the front of the store, Rosa stayed close to my side. Her eyes kept pulling back to the door of the supply closet. I tried to warn her about Spencer, but maybe I should have put more emphasis on the mind games. He was good. So good, even I was beginning to wonder if there was any truth to what he was saying.

O'Brien's voice was a welcome distraction. Her words, not so much. "We need to check out what that noise was."

"No," I responded, "We really don't."

Rosa grabbed me by the arm for some reason. "You can't leave us alone with that guy!"

Jerry announced, "I'll go check out the noise. If I'm not back in five minutes, assume the worst."

"You're not going by yourself," snapped O'Brien.

"Fine," he said. "Then we'll all go together."

Rosa squeezed my arm tighter. "I'd rather take my chances in here."

"Okay!" O'Brien was near her wit's end. "Then we split up."

"Are you kidding me?!" I said. "Are we really going to Scooby do this?"

Apparently, we Scooby were. And after a few more rounds of discussion, we Scooby did. The plan went back and forth until finally we found the least worst version of it that everybody could live with. In the end, it was decided that Jerry and I would go check out the noise while O'Brien and Rosa stayed behind and kept an eye on the prisoner.

I wasn't particularly thrilled, but the knowledge that Spencer was tied up in our supply closet gave me some degree of comfort. As we prepared ourselves for this wholly unnecessary side quest, O'Brien walked up to me and whispered, "I can handle Floaty girl and Duct tape boy on my own, but you should take this. Just in case." With that, she pulled the weapon from its holster.

Why are people always trying to give me guns?

"I told you; I'm not a gun guy. The last time I had a gun—" I caught myself. "You know what? Don't even worry about the last time I had a gun."

"I'll take it." We turned to see Jerry walking over.

She pulled the pistol back right as he reached for it. "Have you ever fired a gun before?"

"That depends," he answered, folding his arms over his chest and raising an eyebrow. "Are you a cop?"

She let out a defeated sigh, then handed over her pistol. "Just *please* try not to die, guys."

Rosa looked at us nervously and offered some parting words of support. "Be careful. I'd hate for this night to turn into a... what's the opposite of a sausage fest?"

Jerry answered, "A clamboree."

“Right. I’d hate for this to turn into a clamboree.” That felt like a good enough note to end on, so without any more discussion, we set off.

Jerry pushed open the door and led the way with his two perfectly functioning legs, pointing the gun and flashlight in front of him and kicking a trail through the knee-deep snow while I followed a few steps behind.

We trudged through the frozen icescape until we were safely under the vehicle overhang next to the fuel pumps. It had only been a few yards, but the trek felt like a marathon. Once we were in the concrete clearing, I scanned the area around us with my flashlight, revealing dozens of small holes in the fresh snow, like baseball-sized craters. From here, we could see the roof of the gas station, as well as the piles of tiny, winged creatures caught up in the gutters and slowly being swallowed by snow.

I inched closer to the edge of the overhang, where I found the bodies of several dead birds, confirming my suspicions. I hated the fact that I knew exactly what I was looking at, but it wasn’t the first time I’d seen something like this.

Every once in a while, migratory birds passing through our town get confused and forget which way is up. On seemingly random occasions, hundreds of them will plummet into the ground en masse. Most of the time, it simply leaves an enormous mess in the woods for lucky scavengers or confused passersby. On the odd occasion, they pick a more inconvenient place to die, like the middle of main street traffic at rush hour, a high school football game, or even a backyard wedding.

Locals have blamed everything from fireworks to pesticides, but it’s all speculation, and if any scientists have bothered looking into it, they’ve kept the results to themselves. Much like the piles of dead fish that inexplicably pile up on the edges of the creek once every year or so, the cause of the bird disruption is officially unknown.

“Hey, check this out.”

I turned to see that Jerry had plucked one of the creatures out of the snow and was holding it about a foot away from his face.

"Dude, don't touch that, it might have herpes."

"Whoa. Look at this," he said as he pulled a long coil of thin copper wire out of the bird's corpse and inspected it under the flashlight. Unwound, the metal string was nearly long enough to jump rope with. "You think he ate this thing?"

I shrugged. "Can't blame him. Times are tough."

He threw the bird back into the snow and wiped his hands on his pants. "Case closed, I guess. Should we go back inside?"

"Yeah, in just a minute. But first, we need to talk." I really didn't want to do this part, but I didn't have much of a choice. We weren't going to get a better chance away from the others tonight, and this was a conversation that needed to be held in private.

Jerry read my face and knew I was on to him. "Fine. I'll come clean," he said. "The closet mice were mine. To be fair, though, they were already dead when I bought them! I was using them for snake food, and I didn't know—"

"That's not what this is about."

"Oh?"

"You said two people were dead already."

He shrugged. "Yeah? So what?"

"O'Brien said only one person died from the storm."

He raised an eyebrow. "Yeah? So?"

"I'm inclined to believe that she, a member of the law enforcement community, would have information as soon as it became available. So I'm wondering how you knew who was dead before she did? Maybe you knew information that wasn't available yet?" He pressed his lips together. It wasn't an agreement, but it wasn't a rebuttal either. "The Russian radio. You put it back together, didn't you?"

He blinked a couple times, slowly pulled out his pack of Marlboros, slowly put one in his mouth, slowly lit it and took a long drag, then exhaled a stream of smoke over my head and said, "Yeah. So?"

I didn't really have anything planned for this part. So I let his question hang there while he took another pull on his cigarette.

"Did it say anything else?" I asked.

“Not much. Mostly about the snowstorm. And...” He trailed off.

“And?” I asked.

“And it said that Sagoth has risen.”

I let that phrase work its way through my subconscious, searching for any sign of recognition and failing.

“Sagoth has risen?” I repeated. “Does that mean anything to you?”

“No, but... He kept saying it, over and over. Sagoth has risen... Sagoth has risen... You get the point. Sagoth has risen... et cetera. I thought it was kinda weird because I’d never heard him repeat anything before.”

“What else did he say?”

“Nothing. That’s it. The radio is busted. All he says now is that same three words over and over. Started up a couple hours back. I got sick of listening to it, so I came here for a drink.”

We stood there in silence until he had finished his cigarette, then he looked back up at me. “Are we cool?”

We both heard the sneeze at the same time. It came from somewhere down the road leading into the forest.

“The hell was that?!” I whispered.

“Sounded like a sneeze.”

“Where’s the gun?”

Jerry looked at the ground. I followed his eyes and pointed the flashlight at the blank spot in the snow next to the set of oversized raccoon-feet shaped prints leading off into the forest.

I repeated the question. “Jerry. Where. Is. The. Gun?”

“I set it down to pick up the dead bird. You don’t think Rocco made off with it, do you?”

“I highly, highly doubt that Rocco *didn’t* steal it.”

We both looked at one another with that what-do-we-do-now look, and then Jerry yelled out, “Bless you!”

A voice called back from somewhere deep inside the blizzard.

“Hello? Is somebody there?”

“No!” I yelled back.

“It sure sounds like somebody to me.”

A figure started to emerge in the snowstorm. A man-shaped figure. As it got closer, the details came into focus. Hands in his pockets, snow covering his hooded blue coat. Before long, the man was underneath the awning with us, casually walking towards me. He stopped just in front of us, shivering but smiling, looked at Jerry, and asked, “Mind if I bum one of those off of you?”

Jerry handed over a cigarette, which the guy took with a quick thanks. I watched as Jerry lit it for him, but couldn’t shake the eerie feeling that something about this guy was way too familiar. He was about five foot ten, early thirties, with dark brown eyes and a short and well-maintained beard, thin but in good shape. He looked almost like...

After he got a couple puffs out of the smoke, he looked up at me and asked, “You guys know if the gas station is open?” His voice was so tip-of-my-tongue familiar.

“There’s no power,” I answered, “but the phone still works if you pay in advance.”

“Who are you guys?” he asked. That voice... I knew it sounded just like... “You part of the emergency services crew or something?”

“No,” I said. “We work here and got snowed in.”

“No shit? I was driving through and got stuck. Been waiting in my car a mile down the road for the last couple hours. I was trying to wait it out, but the engine just died. Thought I was going to freeze to death out here. I’m Donald.”

He shook our hands and we introduced ourselves, then Jerry finally asked the question that was on my mind since we first saw this guy.

“Hey, don’t take this the wrong way, but aren’t you Donald Glover?”

He laughed. “Yeah, I am.”

I knew it! We were standing outside talking to *famous actor slash director Donald Glover!* At my gas station!

“Holy shit!” I said. “What are you doing here?”

"I was just passing by," answered *Grammy-award winning musical performer Donald Glover*.

"You were just passing by? Our shitty little town?" I asked. "Why?"

He gave a nonchalant shrug. "I got lost."

I looked over at Jerry, then back at *Primetime-Emmy awardee Donald Glover*, who asked, "So, is it cool if I come inside and get warmed up?"

"Of course!" yelled Jerry before handing a spare flashlight to *multiple Golden-Globe winning writer slash comedian Donald Glover* and leading the way to the front door.

Once we were back inside, we introduced O'Brien and Rosa to *five-time WGA Award recipient Donald Glover*. This was incredible. He was the second most famous person to ever step foot into the store (assuming that really was Elvis that one time), but the girls were not nearly as impressed as I felt like they should have been. It was almost like they didn't care about *musical genius Donald Glover*. In fact, they seemed much more concerned about why we were returning without O'Brien's pistol.

Jerry explained that we were attacked by a herd of ninjas, but O'Brien wasn't buying it. Before I could tell them about the birds, the store phone started ringing again. I was the closest, so I picked up while O'Brien gave *Hollywood superstar Donald Glover* a packing blanket to wrap up in.

"Hello?" I said.

The man on the other end of the call let out an annoyed growl before he bothered with any words. "Jack, it's me."

I leaned away from the others and whispered, "Benjamin?"

"How many times have I told you not to use my name over the phone?"

"Sorry."

The last time I saw Benjamin in person, he had just finished blowing up the brain tree of the dark god below the gas station. Since then, he'd played a minor role in a few of the more mundane supernatural occurrences around here. He called every now and

then for “status reports,” and to offer his expert advice, although his help was rarely useful and never necessary.

When I described the encounter with the bipedal deer, he recommended I buy a shotgun and keep it handy. When we found the crawling human tongue in the bathroom that kept escaping from whatever cage we put it in, Benjamin instructed me to bury it in salt and drop it into the ocean. When I told him about the black sludge in the faucets, he told me my only option was to burn the whole place down. In every case, I ignored his advice and things shook out fine on their own. The deer never bothered anyone, the tongue got carried off by raccoons, and a plumber from out of town snaked the drains and removed an old cross necklace that had fallen into the sink.

“What’s going on over there?” he asked. “I’m reading weather reports right now and the gas station looks like someone opened up a portal to the center of the ninth circle of hell.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s pretty bad. Thanks for checking on us. Are you going to be showing up this time?”

“Negatory. I’m in Greece right now, just looking for a status report.”

“Evidently, Spencer Middleton died again, but then he came back to life again, but then something beat the shit out of him, and we lost power again.”

“Hmm,” he grunted.

“By the way, does ‘Sagoth has risen’ mean anything to you?”

“Sagoth?!” The name exploded out of his mouth. “Yeah, Sagoth is an ancient evil. A shapeshifting demon that leaves his victims stripped of all their skin. If he’s anywhere near the gas station, you boys need to hunker down and pray, because that son of a bitch can look like anyone, and he’ll take whatever form you’re most likely to trust. He’s an agony-parasite and empath. You understand? That means he feeds off of pain.”

“Oh damn,” I said, “That must be what beat up Spencer. It’s a good thing we found Donald Glover when we did.”

What followed was an agonizingly long pause.

“Hello?” I said, “Did I lose you?”

“Who the hell is Donald Glover?”

“You know, the critically-acclaimed actor and musician? You might know him by his rapper pseudonym Childish Gambino. He’s a rapper. He raps.”

“Yeah, and I bet he’s a great kisser, too. Jack, did you somehow become dumber since the last time I saw you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Motherfucker, I just Googled him! Donald Glover is at home with his family in Atlanta right now. You’re in the presence of a shapeshifting demon.”

“Okay, or *maybe* the one in Atlanta is the shapeshifter, and the real one is in the gas station.”

He made that growling noise again and said, “The only way to kill a demon like this is to take off his head. Goodbye, dumbass.”

The line went dead.

Jerry walked over, sat on the counter, and said, “Alright, I’m not making any offers or anything. I just want to get your honest opinion. Do you think we’re more likely or less likely to have an orgy now that Donald Glover is here?”

“Jerry, listen closely.” I kept my voice low. “We have to kill Donald Glover.”

“Okay!” he said, hopping back to his feet. “Let’s do this. How?”

Jesus, he doesn’t even need an explanation or anything.

“We need to cut off his head.”

“Nice.”

Just like that, I had one ally on board, but I knew that convincing two more people to help us cover up yet another brutal murder at the gas station might prove more difficult, assuming we could even figure out a way to kill not-Donald-Glover, and also assuming that he really was a demon, and also assuming demons were even real, Benjamin was feeding me correct information, and none of this was just a vivid hallucination caused by my rapidly-deteriorating mental state.

Man, when I lay it all out like that, it sure is a lot to take on faith before committing decapitation.

Chapter Twenty-One

I'm not sure how differently the night would have gone if Spencer's phone hadn't picked that moment to start ringing, just like I'm not sure how I kept forgetting that he has the only private cellular network on the planet that reliably gets service out at the gas station.

O'Brien and I connected eyes and shared the same thought. *We forgot to take his phone?!*

"You guys hear that?" asked not-Donald as he looked in the direction of the supply closet.

It was a silly question—we were all in the same room. Rosa was seated a couple feet from him, with her back to the closet. O'Brien stood close behind her. There was no way we didn't all hear the ringing noise.

Jerry and I were only a running start away, and "Donald" was mildly distracted. This was our best chance to incapacitate him with our skin intact, but before I could yell "Get him!" and hope for the best, Rosa took the initiative to explain it away.

"I don't hear anything," she blurted between rings. She was probably the worst liar I had ever witnessed, but now that she had set the narrative, the others decided to commit.

"Yeah, me neither." said Jerry, pausing for the ringing between sentences. "Probs just the wind."

Donald-the-demon stood up, took a step away from the others, and pointed at the supply closet. "You don't hear that? The ringing coming from right behind that door?"

"No?" said Jerry.

"Ok, what about you?" he said to the deputy. "Are you going to gaslight, too?"

For some reason, O'Brien looked at me. I tried to make a hand gesture that could only have meant "*He is a demon! We need to cut off his head!*" but alas, the message didn't get through.

"Yeah," she said, confused. "It's nothing."

"It's nothing? Why are you people being so weird right now?"

Rosa scoffed. "We're not being weird. *You're* the one acting weird."

"Okay." He said, then he took a step towards the closet. O'Brien cut him off immediately.

A silent moment passed as they stared each other down. This was my chance. All I needed was an axe or something, and I could get behind him and—

Ah, who am I kidding? I could never cut off Donald Glover's head. Some things just aren't worth the risk.

Demon-Donald moved like he was going to turn around, but then he shined his flashlight into O'Brien's eyes. She flinched long enough for Demonald to dart past her to the supply closet door.

"Wait!" I yelled.

But it was too late. Demonald had turned the knob and opened the door.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked, pointing the flashlight at Spencer.

O'Brien put up her hands and said, "It's okay. I can explain."

Spencer started shouting, "Oh my god, please! Please help me! You've got to save me! These people are maniacs! They beat me and killed my wife! You have to get help!"

O'Brien yelled, "Close the door!" as she stepped forward.

"Hey!" yelled Demonald, "You stay back! Stay away from me! ALL OF YOU!"

Spencer was crying now. Real, actual tears. "Please! God! Get me out of here! She's not really a cop! They've killed people, so many people..."

I couldn't help it. I started slow clapping. Everyone turned their flashlights to me except for Jerry, who by now had started clapping along.

"You got something to say?" asked the shapeshifter-formerly-known-as-Donald.

"Yeah, how about we don't turn this into a huge farce? How about we all come clean here? No more lies. You're not really musical icon and famed television and movie star Donald Glover. You're really Sagoth, the shapeshifting demon."

“Do you have any idea how ridiculous you sound right now?” asked Sagoth.

“Of course I do.”

“These people,” sobbed Spencer, “They’re crazy! They’re talking about demons and angels and they’re killing people. There’s something wrong with them. Please run! Get help!”

Wait... why is Spencer staying in character? I just told him that this was Sagoth. Why didn’t he drop the act...

Unless...

Sagoth wasn’t the one he had warned us about. Sagoth wasn’t whoever or whatever had beaten him senseless earlier.

I felt a sudden pang of dread. Spencer and Sagoth were already too many moving pieces, if there was something else out there then... *Oh shit*. This situation was spiraling out of control way faster than I could keep up with it.

O’Brien attempted damage control. “Everybody calm down. Donald, my name is Deputy Amelia O’Brien.”

“You’re a deputy?” he asked, incredulously. “Named ‘O’Brien’?”

“Yes.”

“And tell me, O’Brien, you think I’m a demon?”

“No. Of course not.”

“But that guy does.” he waved the flashlight at me, then pointed it at Spencer. “And this guy right here?”

“He’s a criminal.”

“Oh, so that’s why you beat him up and duct taped him to a chair and hid him in a dark closet? Is that something deputies do around here?”

“No... not exactly.”

“Fuck this. I’m out.”

Before she could say anything else, Donald(?) turned and ran out the back door, letting another cold blast of freezing snow rush into the store before O’Brien raced out after him. The only sound in the room for the next minute was Spencer laughing.

No, not laughing. *Cackling*.

When he had finished, he said with a shit-eating grin, "This is getting fun."

If I had been able to run out after them, I would have. But they were gone. O'Brien was an adult who made her own decision.

I pulled the bag curtains off the front door, but I may as well have left them up for all I could see in the darkness outside. There was no moonlight, no starlight, and—most importantly—no flashlights. All I could do now was wait for her to come back and hope it would be in one piece.

The time crept by slowly. Intrusive mental images of a demon flaying my friend did not help. Neither did Spencer's comments.

"Hey, Rosa, isn't it?"

She looked up.

"Shut up." I said.

"Let me just ask you one question. What exactly did Jack tell you about me? Huh? Did he try to sell you that horseshit about me being some kind of sociopath?"

Rosa answered, "The exact word he used was 'psychopath.'"

Spencer laughed again.

"No, I've never hurt anyone before in my entire life. I came out here for Jack. I'm worried about him. You know what he has right? You know what prions do to your brain? His DNA is literally unraveling. He doesn't know what's real and what isn't. He shouldn't be out here near other people, he needs to be in a hospital where he can't hurt anybody else."

"What do you mean 'anybody else'?"

I crutch walked over to Spencer and considered hitting him, but I decided against it for two reasons. First, that would have been embarrassingly ineffective. And second, it was obvious that that's what he wanted. He already had his talons in Rosa's mind. Now his entire goal was proving to her that I was the bad guy.

I don't know why I thought it was a good idea to engage in conversation. "Do you have any idea how annoying it is? Living with what you did to my leg?"

"At least you're still alive!" he screamed. "How many people can't say that? How many people have you taken everything from?"

You know you're a murderer, and now you can't wait to do to me just like you did to poor old Kieffer. Or my old boss."

"Hey! I wasn't the one who killed your old boss."

A second passed before he cracked a smile, and I realized what I had done.

"What about Kieffer?" asked the soft, nervous voice from behind me.

"Oh," I said, turning to Rosa, "yeah, him either. I didn't kill anybody."

"Now let me ask you a question, Jack. You know, 'cause you're in such an honest mood right now. What ever happened to Tony? Huh? I've been sitting here in the dark all night, and I can't shake this weird thought. Am I the only one that wants to know why Tony isn't here?"

I looked at Jerry and said, "Put him in the cooler."

We wheeled the psychopath into the walk-in, double checked that the duct tape was secure, then closed the door and propped a chair up against the handle. He could scream to his tiny black heart's content in there and it wouldn't bother us.

Ten more minutes passed before O'Brien returned to the store. She came in through the front door, out of breath.

"He got away," she said as she dusted the snow off of her jacket.

Jerry shattered a glass beer bottle against the wall and pointed the jagged fragment at her, yelling, "Nice try, *demon!*"

She glared at him and said, "If you come near me with that thing, you better be ready to use it, because either I'm going down or you are."

"He's right," I said.

"What?!" asked Rosa and O'Brien at the same time.

"O'Brien was alone out there with Sagoth for how long? We have no idea if you're really you anymore."

"Jack, I think you're confused."

Rosa raised her hand and said, "Why don't we just ask her something that only the real O'Brien would know?"

"Good idea," said Jerry. "Is Jack circumcized?"

Dude! What the hell?!

“How the hell would I know that?” she answered.

Jerry looked at me, then back at her, then back at me.

“Oh, were you two not... ? Oh. I’m sorry, I think I totally misread that whole situation.”

“Remind me to kick your ass later,” she said, taking the words right out of my mouth before pointing her flashlight at the open door of the supply closet. “Where’s Spencer?”

I explained that he was trying to get into our heads, and we had no choice but to barricade him inside the cooler. It was self-defense. Amazingly, she didn’t disagree. It took a minute for the situation to calm down, but eventually Jerry lowered his bottle-knife. We came to a tentative peaceful resolution, with each of us agreeing to keep an eye on one another from a safe distance until daylight and backup arrived.

I lit the last of our candles and placed them all around the store, then got O’Brien alone in a corner. Jerry was still eyeballing us pretty hard, so I whispered quietly, “There’s something I think you need to see.”

“What is it?” she whispered back.

“I can’t say exactly. I need to show you.”

“Okay. Where is it?”

“I need Spencer’s phone.”

“Let me guess. It’s still on him?”

I nodded. In the midst of Spencer’s mind games, I had once again forgotten to steal his phone. I was losing my touch.

“I’ll be right back,” she said.

I followed as closely as possible as she crossed to the cooler and pulled back the chair.

“What’s she doing?” asked Jerry in an atypical voice that I would call “concerned” if it were coming from anyone else.

We didn’t answer. Instead, O’Brien opened the door, pointed her flashlight at the still smiling Spencer, and walked up to him. I waited until she had put her flashlight on a shelf and reached her hand into Spencer’s pocket before I sprung into action, slamming the cooler door shut and pushing the chair back into place.

I could hear her muffled scream and slams against the other side of the metal.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"Dude. What the hell?"

I leaned my back against the cooler and looked at the shocked faces of Jerry and Rosa.

Had I made a mistake?

"If that really is O'Brien, then we'll know in a few hours when help arrives. If it isn't, then we've got the demon exactly where we want it."

"What demon?!" screamed the ever-inquisitive Rosa. "When did you start talking about demons?! I'm willing to give the benefit of the doubt, but a person has their limits! All I know is that you've been acting strange all night, and then your friend shot me with a taser in my sleep, and then you come in with this guy that you're fawning over so hard I expect you to start chugging his bathwater, and then out of nowhere you start saying he's a demon?!"

"Well, when you put it like that, sure, I guess this does look bad."

"Where's the gun? Huh? You two go outside and then Jerry just 'loses' the gun? How do we know you didn't take it?"

"Yeah!" yelled Jerry. "How do we know *you* didn't take it?"

I gave him my coldest stare.

"I want you to let O'Brien out of the cooler. Right now, please."

She crossed her arms and tapped her foot.

"I can't do that."

"Why not?!"

"She called me 'Jack.'"

"So?!"

"Yeah!" echoed Jerry, "So what?!"

"So, she never calls me Jack. She calls me Crutches, or weirdo-boy, or some other slightly insensitive pet name. I've never heard her call me Jack before."

"Hmm..." said Jerry. "He does make a compelling point."

Rosa yelled, "Shut up!"

We were too late. Spencer had put the roots of doubt into Rosa's mind and there was nothing I could say that would get her back to my side. Fortunately, I didn't have to say anything, because right then the front door opened and O'Brien walked in.

"He got away," she said as she dusted the snow off of her jacket.

Jerry shattered another glass beer bottle against the wall and pointed the jagged fragment at her, yelling, "Nice try, demon!"

She glared at him and said, "If you come near me with that thing, you better be ready to use it, because either I'm going down or you are."

Fuuuck!

"How... how did you get out?" Rosa stammered.

"Get out of what?" she asked.

"Oh check it!" Jerry said to the room, "It's Rosa's first time witnessing something paranormal! Let's see how she reacts."

O'Brien put up her hands and said, "What the hell are you talking about? And why is there a chair next to the cooler? And where's duct tape boy?"

Rosa fainted.

It's probably a good thing she wasn't conscious for this next part.

Jerry covered Rosa with a blanket and made every attempt to keep her comfortable while I tried to explain the situation to O'Brien.

"You're telling me there's an evil doppelganger inside that cooler?"

"Yeah."

"And how do you know that's what it is?"

A magic radio and a monster-hunter told us.

"I just do."

"I need more than that to go on."

"Please. I'm not expecting you to blindly trust me; I'm just asking that you don't go into the cooler until after help has arrived.

You can wait a few more hours, right?”

I could see the gears turning. She was contemplating something, but she had always been hard to read. Was that the look of a woman who thought she was talking to a crazy person? Or was that the look of a demon, fantasizing about stripping off my flesh and feeding upon my suffering? Surely, if this was the shapeshifter, there wouldn't be any better opportunity to start picking us off than right now. Two of us were locked in the cooler, one of us was unconscious, I've never been much of a fighter even with all of my limbs intact, and Jerry was... well, *Jerry*.

Obviously, she did not kill and eat me, so I had to assume I was talking to the original O'Brien, and the one in the cooler was the double. But my confidence level—in anything, reality included—had hit rock bottom and started digging a long time ago.

A pair of headlights lit up the room as a snow truck pulled into the parking lot. Amazingly, the cavalry had arrived, and several hours early at that. Good news, for sure, but I wasn't ready to cash in that optimism yet. Somehow, I knew this was just another fake-out ending to our night from hell.

The “cavalry” was Saul Berthelot, the retired school-bus driver and owner/operator of the only snowplow in town. He pulled up next to pump two, honked twice, and waved at me in an unfriendly manner.

O'Brien stated the obvious. “I think the jagoff wants you to turn on the pump.”

“He knows the pumps don't work without electricity, doesn't he?”

“I'm guessing he does not.”

None of us wanted to open the door and go back into the freezing cold, but when the pumps hadn't magically switched on after a few seconds, Saul decided it would be a good idea to lean on the horn until somebody came out to help him.

O'Brien pulled out her car keys and started for the door.

“Where are you going?” I asked, stumbling after her and trying my best not to make it seem like I suspected she might be on her way to kill him and strip his flesh.

“I have a can of gas in my trunk. I was going to help him on his way, if that’s alright with you, Jack.”

I suddenly felt very small. It’s bad enough not being able to trust my own eyes, or memories, or mind. It’s so much worse not being able to trust my friends.

“Hang on a second,” Jerry said just before O’Brien pushed the door open. “You just called Jack ‘Jack.’”

“So?” she asked.

Jerry looked at me and waved his hands in the air. “Your entire basis for locking the other O’Brien in the cooler was that she called you ‘Jack’!”

O’Brien shook her head at me. “I call you ‘Jack’ all the time. It’s your name, dumbass.”

“Don’t open that door!”

Jerry looked back at Rosa and casually said, “Oh snap. She’s floating again.”

“It is not safe. Something has found you. It is waiting, hungry, outside.”

She slowly started to rise into the air by a few more inches until Jerry grabbed her around the waist. “I’m gonna have to tie her to a chair or a doorknob or something. Do you remember where Benjamin left all that paracord?”

“There is something on the roof!”

I looked her in the general eye area and asked, “Now, is this like a metaphorical something on the roof?”

“You fools! There is SOMETHING on the roof!”

With that, Rosa pointed outside. Past Saul’s truck. Up, at the awning over the gas pumps. At the *thing* standing on top, leaning over the edge, staring down at the snowplow with hunger and curiosity.

What followed is actually pretty difficult to describe. When we saw it, the three of us had a shared moment, a visceral reaction like we’d just been nut-punched right in the soul. Before that moment, I had seen some things that many people might have considered “horrific.” My own exposed bones, too many dead bodies, a vision of the literal end of the world, the floor of the gas station bathroom. But

after seeing this *thing*, I had to completely reexamine the concept of “horrific.” The very image of that creature (which is not even the right word for it, if human language is even capable of one) was something that eyes were never meant to behold. Its existence was an obscenity my perception couldn’t handle, and my mind catapulted past any human instinct to run away or cower in fear. All I could do was freeze up all function while in its presence, like my brain simply gave up and shat its pants. I did manage to get one word out. In fact, we all said it at the exact same time:

“FUCK!”

Rosa collapsed into Jerry’s arms, and he dropped her right onto the ground like she was a sack of dog food with cooties. We were transfixed at the horrendous beast crawling off the ledge of the awning. It unfurled an arm to the ground, the appendage as thick as a tree branch. From there, it lowered the rest of its form quickly but silently. Its head was the size of a beach ball. The eyes were sunken charcoal pockets like plumes of smoke that didn’t move in time or relation with the rest of its body. It had two nostril slits above a half open mouth filled with disorganized rows of serrated chalk-white teeth the size of steak knives. It had two spiraling horns, both at least a yard in length and shiny black marble in appearance. The thing’s clawed hands were tipped in jagged talons, blacker than black, and its skin looked like a third-degree burn, pinkish deposits of scar tissue glued upon layers of giant, ropy muscles.

Even more interesting was that we could see the beast in all of its monstrous glory outlined against the black sky, with no light other than the ones on the snowplow. Our eyes were picking up a new wavelength beyond the visible spectrum, and it was all coming from this thing.

Jerry called out, “Three-way jinx!” His voice snapped O’Brien and me back to reality, in all likelihood saving us from losing what was left of our minds. The deputy fell to the ground, loudly and gracelessly barfing.

“Hey!” yelled Saul from inside his truck. “Y’all got any gas left or what?”

He still hadn't seen the *thing*. His attention was on us inside the building, not on the enormous beast standing a few yards behind him. As much as I didn't want to look back out those doors, I had to. Saul was about to do something he had no idea would be the single worst mistake of his life, and this was a man whose life could best be described as a series of mistakes.

As a bus driver, he never hit the same pickup time twice. At least once a month he'd completely forget to stop and pick me up. If any of the kids dared complain, he'd accuse us all of lying and conspiring to get him fired. He drank and smoked on the bus, and he made it crystal clear that he knew all of our addresses. At the start of each school year (or whenever he felt moved by the spirits), he would stop the bus on the side of the road and swear to God that if anyone ratted, he'd take a tire iron to their parents' faces.

That threat wasn't reserved only for tattle-tales. He'd threaten our parents if we were too noisy, if he felt like we were talking about him behind his back, or if he just felt like scaring some kids.

He was an intolerable drunk, but after his wife left him, he became much more intolerable, and much more drunk. His own children would show up to school with bruises and broken teeth, but there wasn't much anyone could do, so like most problems, we all ignored it and hoped for the best.

He would spend hours at the gas station sometimes, refilling the same cup of coffee over and over and waxing poetically to anybody who would listen to him about which new group of people he had decided was ruining his country. "That's the problem with America today," he would say before playing fill-in-the-blank.

I guess my point (if I even have one) is that Saul was a shitty bus driver, a shitty husband and father, a shitty customer, and an all-around shitty person. He was a lot like most people in this town, actually. But even after all of that, I was pretty sure he didn't deserve to have his skin stripped away.

I got to the front door and pushed it open at the same time Saul took his first step out of the snow truck. I screamed, "Stay inside your vehicle!"

Either Saul hadn't heard me or he decided to ignore it, choosing instead to down the rest of his forty-ounce Natty Light before tossing it into the snow.

I tried again, "Saul! Go back to your truck! There's a gas leak or something!"

He didn't stop or even slow down. He just looked at me and yelled back, "Fuck you, I need to take a piss."

The creature lurched forward, reached its arm underneath the truck with a speed that was one frame rate above instantaneous. I could hear bones crunching as it wrapped its clawed fingers around Saul's legs. He barely managed to let out a scream before the thing yanked his feet out from under him and he went down face-first against the pavement. It pulled him to itself, under the truck, scraping against the ground and leaving a trail of bloody fingernails and teeth, then it stood erect, dangling Saul upside down, screaming and flailing, close to its mouth.

Saul was extremely lucky that he always kept a loaded pistol tucked into his pants. Not because that helped him survive this situation. No, don't get your hopes up. He died. He definitely died. But at least the pistol saved him from what could have been a feast of agony for the *thing*, which I had deduced by now was probably the real Sagoth.

Saul pulled out his revolver and popped off a couple rounds into the demon's face, but the mortal weapon was as effective as a bee-sting. All it did to the demon was piss it off. Enough to warrant immediate execution. The demon raised the tiny man over its head and slammed him against the concrete pavement below. As far as last words go, "*Fuck you, I need to take a piss*" are probably not the ones you want carved into your tombstone.

I heard the gun skitter across the lot, but I couldn't see where it went. I couldn't see anything, other than the beast in all its horrid glory and the broken body of the man it was now raising into the air. Everything else disappeared, overpowered by the unholy light that had overtaken my world. There was no snow truck. No pumps. No gas station. There was only Sagoth, a being of immeasurable power. From any distance, I could see every cell making up the black and

pink integument of skin. I could feel its body heat. I could hear each of its hearts beating.

Sagoth held the man in one hand and inspected him. I sensed the surprise and disappointment with how easily Saul had died. With its other hand, it poked at the body, attempting to revive it, to squeeze out just a second or two more of delicious pain. When the man didn't rouse, it extended a talon and opened him up and spilled his blood and organs into the snow.

I could feel myself falling, and then the familiar world I knew crashed into focus around me. My eyes readjusted to the lights they were designed to observe, and when I caught up with my surroundings, the first thing I saw was the ceiling of the gas station. Somebody had grabbed me and pulled me back into safety, then thrown me onto my back. I sat up to see O'Brien closing and locking the door.

Yeah, nice, lock the door. That deadbolt will be sure to stop the twenty-foot tall demon creature from getting inside.

She pulled me up, put the crutch under my arm, and said one word. "Weapons." When I looked back outside, Sagoth was nowhere to be seen.

When we couldn't get Rosa to wake up again, we considered it a win and carried her behind the counter. She was still breathing, and we saw no reason to mess with good enough, so we bundled her up in blankets, made a pillow out of some car towels, and left her there to sleep it off.

As a pointless precaution, we stayed as far away from the doors and windows as possible while we turned the place inside out looking for whatever we could use to defend ourselves. Sadly, our selection was slim pickings. Broken glass shards, chair legs, road flares, pocket knives, and plenty of flammables, if that sort of thing could even hurt a hell-born entity like the one outside. I'd watched what that thing had done to Saul. If we had to fight, we were going to lose. But I kept my opinion to myself. This task wasn't about making weapons. It was about giving our minds a precious distraction. Even the memory of that *thing* was enough to sting the walls of my mind like fingernails on a sunburn.

We were all working together in the supply closet, opening boxes, pouring out the contents into a pile in the center of the room.

Jerry asked, "You still got that box cutter?"

"What box cutter?"

"I'll take that as a no," he said before ripping into an unopened cardboard box with his teeth, completely overlooking the pile of pocket knives at his feet.

"I can't believe he's dead," O'Brien said, tossing a box of toilet paper to the floor. "Just like that."

"Whelp," Jerry answered, turning to face her. "At least he died doing what he loved. Shooting stuff." O'Brien shook her head in disgust. Jerry caught the gesture and asked, "Oh, I'm sorry. Were you and Rando close?"

"Dude," I said. "I know tensions are high and all, but read the room. A man just died."

"So what?" he asked, throwing the box in his hands onto the ground as if to emphasize his point. "Are we really going to pretend that any of us are broken up over that redshirt? If we can be perfectly honest for one second, the value of human life in this town is grossly over-exaggerated. Hell, out of the six people inside this building, Rosa is probably the only one who hasn't killed anybody."

He crossed his arms and stared hard, silently daring us to call him on that. I tried to think of what to say, but there really wasn't anything to say at all. For all his faults, Jerry could be very... *Jerryish*. Sometimes, it's easy to forget that when we first met, he was trying to convince me to join a murder cult.

"Well," I said at last, "give her some time. It's only her first day."

The room was perfectly quiet for a second. O'Brien broke first. Soon, we were all laughing at the absurdity of our situation, but only for a moment before returning to the weapons hunt.

I can't say exactly how much time had passed, but we all stopped once we heard Rosa's voice coming from the doorway.

"Hey guys? What happened?"

She was standing there, looking around at the mountain of supplies and shredded boxes with the abject horror that comes from

knowing you're probably going to be the one to have to clean this mess. She looked tired, like she just woke up with a migraine and a hangover. In one hand, she held a flashlight, in the other, Saul's revolver.

"Where did you get that gun?" asked O'Brien.

"It was sitting there on the ground right outside. Hey, did you guys know there's a snow truck out there?"

"How did you get it?" O'Brien asked, even though I think she already knew the answer.

"The door was unlocked. I walked outside and picked it up. Why?" The annoyance in her voice had ticked up a notch.

"Don't do that again." She wasn't angry. She had the same tone one might use to walk someone through defusing a bomb.

"Why not?" The annoyance in Rosa's voice had ticked up a couple more notches.

"Don't worry about it."

Jerry jumped in with, "You didn't happen to see a terrifyingly huge hell-monster while you were out there, did you?"

She squinted at him and asked, "Why? Did you lose one?"

While she was distracted, O'Brien reached out and snatched the gun from her hand.

"Hey!"

"Sorry, I didn't feel like explaining to everybody why I'm the only one here who should have a gun right now."

That was fair. I couldn't even be mad.

I was, however, mad about the "plan" she laid out next. We had all but finished our weapons search and come up empty. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and there was one resource we had purposely neglected to tap before now. We were going to need help fighting the thing outside, and whether I liked it or not, Spencer was a survivor. Whatever was left inside of the cooler might be our only shot.

O'Brien checked the revolver to see that there were four bullets left. Four bullets seemed to bring her a lot more reassurance than they did for me, but that's why she was the one volunteering to lead the way.

She moved the chair away from the cooler door with us right behind her. Our job was to provide backup in case things got hairy, which—she explained twice for Jerry—meant pointing our flashlights into the eyes of anybody or anything that might try to jumpscare us. Not diving into the middle of anything, and not going inside the cooler for any reason. She made me promise that if things got real bad, I would close the door and barricade it all over again, no matter which side of it she ended up on.

The first thing we saw when the door creaked open was the empty rolling chair in the corner.

“Hello?” O’Brien called into the room, “Is anybody alive in there? I’m not going to hurt you, but I need you to step out with your hands where I can see them.”

After a few seconds with no response, she stepped into the cooler, and I immediately regretted going along with this plan. Spencer was fast for a dead guy. He swooped in from next to the cooler door like he’d been waiting for this moment all night, hooked an arm around O’Brien’s gunhand, and spun her into the wall. The weapon clacked to the ground while the three of us tried frantically to keep our flashlights on him. But he was just too fast. He planted a boot solidly into Jerry’s solar plexus, sending him crashing into the wall on the other side of the hallway, then he snatched Rosa by the hair and yanked her into the cooler with him. Before O’Brien could even get back to her feet, Spencer had Rosa in a chokehold with the same pencil she was using earlier for inventory counts pressed tightly into her neck.

“You guys get bored without me or something?” he taunted. I kept my flashlight trained on him as he slowly backed deeper into the cooler. The deputy’s handcuffs were still around his wrists, but the chain had been snapped somehow. Now it was nothing more than a pair of fancy bracelets.

“Spencer, listen,” I started.

“Shut up!” he yelled back. “Here’s how this is going to work. First—”

CRACK!

Spencer released Rosa and fell to the ground, his head colliding with the floor and bouncing. Behind him stood... *Oh shit not this again...* Spencer, holding the weapon he had just bludgeoned the other Spencer with—the same flashlight that the O'Brien double had taken with her into the cooler—the same exact flashlight that I had given to Donald Glover earlier that night.

"Damn," said Spencer (the conscious one), "Is that what I look like? I am one sexy motherfucker."

The smile snapped off his face once he spotted something on the cooler floor. I followed his eyes and saw it sitting there, just a few feet away from him.

Saul's revolver.

O'Brien leapt for it at the same time as Spencer. They collided inches away from the gun, wrapped together, and went crashing into the shelves. I couldn't stand to watch anymore, so I broke my promise to O'Brien and dove into the cooler, crawling over the disgusting, sticky ground and feeling around in the dark until my hands met the warm, heavy piece of metal. I pointed it at Spencer, but there was no way I was going to get a clear shot, especially with Rosa's wild flashlight job turning the room into an amateur disco.

Spencer threw O'Brien into the rolling chair. She flipped over it and hit the floor nearby. He wiped a bead of blood from his face and took a step towards me, but that's as far as he made it before another body jumped out of the dark and tackled him from the side.

Here's where things got even more confusing. Pencil-Spencer landed on top of Flashlight-Spencer and started punching him hard, but not hard enough. In no time, Flashlight-Spencer had slammed his flashlight into Pencil-Spencer's fist, then flipped him onto his back and started wailing on him.

I had my gun aimed at the two of them while they beat each other stupid, but I couldn't tell the difference between the monster and the shapeshifter. I looked at O'Brien and said, "I don't know which one's real!"

"Who fucking cares?!" she yelled back. "Shoot them both!"

Both Spencers froze mid-fight, looked at me, and said in unison, "Huh?"

I hesitated. It was long enough for one of the Spencer's to get the upper hand.

Pencil-Spencer stabbed the pencil into Flashlight-Spencer's shoulder and twisted. Flashlight-Spencer winced and jumped off of him. Right then, Jerry called out from the cooler doorway.

"Hey butt-brain!"

He was holding a bottle of grain alcohol with a cloth fuse burning at the end—a Molotov cocktail. Before I had time to scream "Bad idea!" he had pitched the damned thing at Flashlight-Spencer... *who caught it in his fucking hand!*

Just when I thought things couldn't get any crazier, Pencil-Spencer punched the still-burning weapon hard enough to shatter it into a blue fireball that lit up the entire room for a brilliant instant before burning out and leaving us all in the dark trying to catch our breath.

Rosa pointed her flashlight at the figure sprinting out of the cooler. Pencil-Spencer ran right through Jerry, shoving him against the wall before escaping out the back door. After a few seconds, we collectively remembered that there was still one Spencer in the room with us and frantically pointed our flashlights all around to find him. First I looked at where he just was and found nothing but specks of blood and broken shelves. Then I pointed my light at O'Brien, who was breathing heavily and bleeding from a split lip; then at Rosa who was sitting on the ground pointing a flashlight back at me; then at the other Rosa, who was sitting right next to her holding an identical flashlight.

The Rosas both squeaked and crawled to opposite sides of the cooler, staring at one another with the exact same look of frozen shock while O'Brien got to her feet, walked between them, and spoke calmly. "Okay, so here's the deal. Spencer is gone now, which means that... *Oh God I can't believe I'm saying this...* one of you is the shapeshifter. That's who I'm talking to right now. We didn't come in here to hurt you. We came in here because we need your help. There is something outside the gas station. We don't know what it is, but we think maybe you do. It's some kind of impossible creature, and it's already killed a man."

I watched both of their faces and instantly knew. One Rosa looked up at O'Brien with wide eyes and asked in a soft voice, "Somebody died?"

The other waited about a second too late to mimic the look of fear and concern on the real Rosa's face.

I found my crutch, stood up, and walked right over to the shapeshifter. "You're busted."

Jerry walked into the cooler rubbing his chest and said, "Whoa, there are two Rosas now? Nice."

"No," I said, "One Rosa. And one shapeshifter."

She looked at me with that sweet little "*What did I do?*" look, but it didn't take long for her to realize she wasn't fooling me. Soon, the look changed into a wry smile. She chuckled and threw up her hands. "Hey, what can I say? You got me."

I heard O'Brien mutter behind me, "*Jesus.*"

"Alright," I started, "you seem to have a finger on the pulse here. Who, or what, is 'Sagoth'?"

The doppelganger got to her feet as she answered, "Oh, I don't doubt you've got a ton of questions, but I have neither the time nor desire to answer them. See, this has been a nice diversion. Thanks for that. But if what you say is true, then that means I need to get to work."

"You could have escaped any time you wanted, huh?"

"Of course. It's adorable how you thought a tiny wall was going to stop me. You humans are such curious creatures. But I needed something to do to pass the time until Sagoth showed up, and this sure was fun while it lasted. I'll be off now, and when you wake up you won't remember any of this."

The double waved her hand, and O'Brien, Jerry, and Rosa-Prime all fell to the floor unconscious. I looked at each of them long enough to make sure they were still breathing, then back at the faux-Rosa in front of me.

"Well, that certainly is strange." She chuckled nervously. "But when you wake up, this entire night will be nothing but a dream. Now, it's time for you to *go to sleep.*"

She waved her hand again.

I blinked a couple times.

“What,” she said.

“I don’t sleep,” I said back. “I thought I told you that.”

“You may have told Rosa, but I can’t copy memories, Jack. Only voices and faces. And certain emotions, when they’re strong enough. Take you. I see what you’re trying to forget. The harder you try to bury your feelings, the louder they become. I could feel your guilt a mile away.”

“Who are you?”

“I don’t have time for—”

I pointed the revolver at her and squeezed the trigger.

Now, I know that sounds bad, and I’m sure you moral absolutists out there are probably thinking to yourselves, “I would not have done that if I were in this situation.” Well, you know what? You weren’t. I was. And if the shapeshifter really could feel emotions when they were strong enough, she should have seen this coming because I was pretty pissed off. Not just because this asshole had been screwing with us, using us as bait to lure out the real demon, letting us all go paranoid on one another this whole time, but also because after all of the challenges I’d been through that night, all the hard talks and close calls, I was going to be the only one to remember any of it.

Besides, I had already worked out that a bullet to the chest wasn’t going to kill her.

“OUCH!” she screamed angrily, immediately transforming into O’Brien before my eyes. “Why would you do that?! All I wanted was to help you! But if I have to kill you to get to Sagoth, I will! And you’re not—”

I shot her again, aiming for center mass like Benjamin always said. The creature immediately transformed into Jerry. He smiled, and I shot again. That’s when he turned into someone else. Someone I wasn’t prepared to face again.

He turned into *Sabine*. The creature looked at me with her green eyes and asked with her soft voice, “Well? Are you going to shoot me again?”

I sighed and lowered the gun. “What’s the point?”

She changed one last time. Now I was standing in my own presence. And I must confess, it was quite the wake-up call. I didn't realize how rough I was starting to look until I was forced to see it in person. I desperately needed a haircut. The circles under my eyes were big enough to have their own zip codes. My cheekbones weren't just pronounced; they were *articulated*. And I was even skinnier than the mirror had led me to believe.

"Jack, I'm going to tell you something I've never told a human before. To me, your kind are a lot like hamsters. I don't feel compelled to explain my actions or motivations to people because you're all so primitive and unevolved that you simply couldn't wrap your tiny minds around it anyway."

"Okay," I said. "That's a fair assessment."

"There's no such thing as demons. That's just a word you invented to refer to certain things outside your boundaries of comprehension. Sagoth is no demon, but he is my responsibility. He sleeps inside one of the wrinkles of your universe, but something has awakened him. Something even I don't know. Someone in your town is conjuring and collecting gods, but if he thinks he can contain the power of Sagoth, then he is a fool. I alone can control the beast. I've been doing it for millennia. Every century or so, I have to put him back to sleep before he has a chance to start armageddon. That is why I'm here. Not to hurt you, but to help. The legends started a long time ago of a demon. People saw a shapeshifter every time Sagoth awoke and feasted, and before long humans conflated us."

"Hang on," I said. "This is all very fascinating, but can you maybe stop being me for one second? Maybe go back to Jerry or Rosa. I'm listening, I promise, but I can't get over the fact that my voice sounds like that. It's really annoying."

He sighed. "I'm going to go stop Sagoth from destroying your world now, Jack. But before I do, there's one last piece of information I want to leave you with. I can see things you humans cannot. I see emotions that you don't even know you have."

"Okay, so we're just gonna pretend I didn't ask you to stop being me. Got it."

“You and your friends are all kinds of messed up. It would take an army of psychiatrists to untangle the mental slinkies inside your minds. Rosa, Jerry, Amelia, *you*...” he shuddered.

“Thanks.”

“That wasn’t what I wanted to say.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“At the end of the day, your fucked-up brains aren’t all that special. But the other one? Spencer? I looked inside of him and all I saw was... nothing. Absolutely nothing. The same as I see when I look at a chair or a rock or a knife. He’s empty. He’s just a black void.”

“Yeah,” I responded, “we actually already knew that about him.”

I took a step back and let my doppelganger walk out of the cooler on his own two legs.

The rest of the night passed without incident.

The others slept in the cooler, right where they fell. I tried for almost an hour to wake them, but nothing worked. All I could do was make them comfortable with blankets and pillows made from bags of stale bread and hope that the effects would wear off on their own.

While the sun came up, I cleaned. There was enough garbage and debris to fill four contractor bags. After that, I started on the paperwork, writing up inventory loss slips for everything that had been damaged in the fights, broken or commandeered in the weapons search, or stolen by Jerry. It’s amazing how productive one can be when sleep isn’t a factor. I’d need to be careful not to do too good of a job, lest the owners start to expect it.

After everything was back in order, I took my usual spot in my chair behind the register and enjoyed the silence. Another night in the bag. Now all there was left to do was finish my book and wait for the others to sleep off whatever the shapeshifter had done to them.

When our first customer walked into the store about an hour later, I didn’t even bother looking up from my book. I had already

posted a sign on the door that said we didn't have electricity and couldn't sell gas or run cards or accept cash and nothing worked. The customer walked up to the counter and cleared his throat, interrupting me just when the story was finally starting to get interesting.

"Excuse me, do you have any band aids?"

I didn't have to look up to know. His voice was enough to tell me I was fucked. I took a deep breath, dog-eared my page, slowly placed the book on the counter next to me, and then, very carefully, raised my eyes to see him standing there, smiling, with a shoulder coated in dark blood from where he had been stabbed by a pencil hours earlier.

Spencer *Fucking* Middleton.

I quickly reached for the spot on the counter where I had left the gun, but my hand hit empty space. Spencer lifted the revolver and asked, "Was this what you were looking for?"

"Nooo," I said. I was aiming for innocent, but I think he knew better.

"Feels a little light. Did you really think you were going to take me out with the first shot?"

I leaned back in my chair, stretched, and said in a hopeful voice, "Is there any way you're actually just the shapeshifter?"

Spencer shook his head.

"Hallucination?"

He shook his head again.

"Ghost?" I said hopefully.

"Get up, Jack. I need your help."

A minute later, we were back outside in the knee-deep snow behind the gas station. Spencer dug the barrel of the gun into my back and walked me towards the woods. No matter how often it happens, being death-marched at gunpoint is something I'll never get used to. I prayed that this would be the last time it ever happened. Then I realized why that was wrong and prayed that this *wouldn't* be the last time it happened. Then I realized why that was wrong and prayed that—

“Stop!” We were right at the edge of the tree line, and for a brief moment, I considered making a run for it, but then I looked back at the man with the gun and realized why it wouldn’t work. I couldn’t leave if I wanted to. The others were still here, locked in the cooler, and if I ran, he’d make short work of them. Spencer looked around, smelled the air, smiled, and pulled a long knife out of its sheath on his belt. “Yeah, this will work. Are you left-handed or right-handed?”

“Why?” I asked.

“Never mind.” He grabbed my left hand and, in one quick movement, sliced my pinky finger clean off, then he grabbed my crutch and yanked it away from me. I hit the thick blanket of snow hugging my rapidly-bleeding hand wound tightly against my stomach.

As the pain and panic surged through my body, Spencer crouched down next to me and said, “Nothing personal, I just needed some bait. I got a new boss now, and he wants me to bag and tag something special for him, and you’re gonna help. Do me a favor and keep on bleeding. It won’t take long for the thing to catch your scent. For what it’s worth, if he doesn’t kill you, I’ll let you live.”

He turned and began to walk away.

“Hey Spencer!” I yelled after him.

He stopped. “Yeah?”

“You’re a dick.”

He laughed and walked back into the gas station with my crutch under his arm. I rolled onto my back, and looked up at the sky. Snowflakes fell into my eyes, and I heard the familiar sound of the gas station door closing, followed by the scraping noise of the deadbolt going into place. The hot, wet liquid pouring uninterrupted out of my hand felt strangely comforting, warming my torso. The snow on my clothes had already melted from the body heat, and underneath it all, I was soaking wet. The parts of me that weren’t stinging cold were already numb, and if I was going to give survival the old college try, it would have to be now or never.

I pushed myself along with my good hand and leg, leaving a sloppy trail of bloody snow behind me. Maneuvering in my condition was going to be difficult, to say the least, and I could sense that my

vision was beginning to tunnel, a particularly bad sign. If I were to lose consciousness, it would be because I was dead.

I managed to drag myself all the way to the back wall of the gas station before I surrendered to the reality that this was all a waste of time. I wasn't getting inside, and even if I did, Spencer would just drag me back out. There was nothing left to do but hope for one more miracle.

"Hey Jack. What are you doing out here?"

I looked up to see my old friend Tom, dressed in his deputy uniform with his white hair perfectly matching the snowy landscape. I squeezed my bloody nub under my armpit to try and slow the bleeding as I worked out whether I was looking at a ghost, hallucination, or the shapeshifter and realized that I genuinely couldn't tell.

"Spencer's using me for bait."

Tom instantly morphed into a seven-foot tall, four-hundred-pound Samoan man covered in scars and tattoos. That limited the options down to hallucination or shapeshifter.

"Spencer?! That punk is back?" he barked.

"Yeah."

He punched a fist into the opposite hand. "Well, I guess I need to teach him a lesson about—"

He stopped and turned back to the woods. Something out there was crunching loudly through the forest, snapping through branches and causing a hell of a lot of noise as it approached. The Samoan figure crouched next to me and whispered, "Sorry. It looks like we don't have time to get you out of here. Sagoth has smelled your blood and now he comes for you."

"Well that sucks."

"Listen to me very closely. There's one thing you need to know about Sagoth. He has one weakness, and that is this: He cannot hurt you if you don't look at him. Do you understand?"

"No."

"Close your eyes. No matter what happens, no matter what you hear, keep your eyes shut until you hear me say the word 'Salutem.' Until then, he will do everything he can to trick you into

opening your eyes. If you do that, all bets are off. He'll start with your eyelids. Do you understand?"

"Still no."

The shapeshifter sighed and said, "Close your stupid eyes!"

Right then, I saw it. Sagoth. Pushing his way through the forest. He stood as tall as the trees, horrendous and vaguely humanoid, with an aura of inconceivable terrors and a face that screamed all things dark and hateful. I squeezed my eyes shut and instantly felt blessed relief.

After that, it was nothing. My head pounded. My hand burned. There was a ringing in my ears and the world spun. I felt sick to my stomach. And then, the pain began to slip away.

The door scraped open and someone stepped outside.

O'Brien called my name.

"Yeah?"

"Oh my God!" she screamed. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"Spencer's around here somewhere."

The ground shook. O'Brien screamed. "What the hell is that thing?!"

"Close your eyes!" I screamed.

"What?"

"It can't hurt you if you close your—"

She let out a blood-curdling scream that climbed into the air.

"Amy!"

"Jack! The gun! Grab it!"

I tried to move despite the pain. "Where?! Where is it?"

"It's right there by your feet!" She screamed again.

"I can't find it!"

"Right there! Look!" I grabbed handfuls of the snow, but there was nothing there. "Open your eyes and look!"

Wait... O'Brien's gun was stolen by a raccoon.

I fell against the wall and screamed, "Nice try, but you're going to have to do better than that!"

Sagoth responded like it was a challenge. All at once, I felt them crawling all over me. Insects. They chirped and squeaked as

they flooded up my pant leg and under my clothes and even into my nose, ears, and mouth. I gagged and swatted at them but still pressed my eyes shut as hard as I could.

A vicious heat blasted across my face as I heard the giant being scream at me from inches away, **“MAGGOT. OPEN YOUR EYES AND BEHOLD YOUR DAMNATION!”**

“No thanks!” I yelled back.

And then he brought out the big guns. The next thing I knew, I was falling. There was no earth beneath me, only air, whipping against my skin as I plummeted down, down, down. (It’s a good thing I’m such a coward, because I think squeezing my eyes shut in a situation like that was actually my natural reaction.) After falling for what felt like ages, I finally landed in a warm ocean. This was about to get really tough.

I kicked and screamed at the water around me with no idea which way was up or down. I was certain that I was about to drown but still, I kept my eyes shut.

Eventually, I could feel myself rising. Was the air left in my lungs maybe possibly enough to pull me to the surface? I held off for as long as I could, until my insides ached with a pain almost as bad as death, but still I had not broken the surface. This was it. The moment I would finally die. But if I had to go, I wasn’t going to give that douchebag demon the satisfaction of knowing he had beaten me. I kept my eyes shut, put up two middle fingers, and took a deep breath of water...

...Which of course turned out to be nothing but cold air. As soon as I inhaled, I was transported back to the snow-covered patch of dirt next to the gas station, alive for now, but still freezing to death.

I felt somebody grabbing me and pulling my body into the gas station. I could hear Jerry’s voice right above me.

“Dude, are you okay?” He dropped me onto my back in the hallway.

“I’m fine.”

“Why are your eyes closed?”

“There’s a demon trying to trick me into opening them.”

“I think he’s gone now. You can open your eyes. If you want.”

“Nah, I don’t think I’m gonna do that.”

Rosa and O’Brien came rushing to my side. O’Brien ordered Jerry to call an ambulance and for Rosa to bring the medical kit and blanket. As my body temperature slowly came back to normal, so did the sensation in my extremities. My remaining toes and fingers stung as blood flow returned to normal. This was an interesting new trick, but I wasn’t going to fall for it. I would keep my eyes closed for as long as it took.

The ambulance ride was extra confusing for the EMT’s. I listened to their conversation, wondering just how elaborate this trick was going to get.

“Is he asleep?”

“No, he just refuses to open his eyes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I think he’s crazy.”

I chimed in, “Can’t open them until the shapeshifter gives me the all-clear, otherwise the demon will eat my flesh.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Doctor V was kind enough to schedule an appointment on short notice. We talked about everything that had happened since our last visit. We even talked about Doctor Weaver. I let him know everything she had said because doctor/patient confidentiality didn't seem to apply, and I didn't trust her. Doctor V apologized on her behalf.

"She's an associate who doesn't understand the finer intricacies of your treatment plan. It would be wise to completely forget everything she said to you."

"The thing about my memory is that I can't control what I forget."

He laughed. "Let's explore this newest symptom."

"Symptom?"

"That's what it is. Isn't it? You are incapable of believing reality is reality, despite objective proof and evidence. You refuse to accept that you are, in fact, safe. Is this a fair assessment?"

"Not exactly."

"Please, tell me where I'm misunderstanding."

"I am safe. Just as long as I keep my eyes shut. That's what the shapeshifter told me. If I open them, Sagoth will rip the flesh from my body and feast upon my pain."

There was a long pause. I knew he hadn't left me alone. I could still hear him breathing. When he finally spoke again, he didn't bother to mask the demeaning tone. "And you're telling me that you believe the demon has gone to such elaborate lengths that it's following you around, hoping to catch you opening your eyes?"

"Can we talk about something else now, please?"

For the next two months, my health continued its downward trajectory. Eventually, the owners had no other choice but to let me go. I wasn't upset. In a small way, I was actually relieved. I was

unburdened from what little responsibility I had left, and my remaining days would be spent in a hospital room, waiting.

O'Brien and Jerry both came out to visit me a few times early on, but it was a hell of a drive just for a short visit, and I was way less entertaining than anything else they could do with their precious time off, so when the visits turned into phone calls, I understood. And when the phone calls became less frequent, I understood. And when the phone stopped ringing altogether, I understood.

I could only hope that they were safe and happy. Other than that, I tried not to think about them at all.

There was no meridian between day or night. I neither slept nor saw the cycle of daylight and darkness. Time passed as a pulse of waves. Long periods of busy activity. The sounds all around me of a busy hospital, people talking, laughing, screaming, followed by even longer periods of silence. Occasionally, there would be a pearl in the mix, a day out of the ordinary. A doctor would bring his medical students to observe the genetic rarity. He would explain to the class how I was unable to sleep, a byproduct of a fascinating brain defect. That same defect manifested in other interesting side effects, too. For example, this poor idiot sincerely believed that he could not open his eyes, otherwise the demon Sagoth would rip the flesh from his body. While there was nothing physically wrong with his vision, his mental state would not allow him to believe it true. For all intents and purposes, he had self-blinded. The students oohed and aahed and wondered if they could ask me a few questions, and one even tried to get a selfie with me. All I could say was, "Nice try, Sagoth. You're really going all out on this one, aren't you?"

Aren't you???

Some volunteers brought me a pair of headphones and an mp3 player with a few podcasts loaded onto it about movies I'd never seen. I listened to them over and over until I had every syllable memorized. Books and movies and video games were a tragic sacrifice, and without them I sometimes felt like a Betta fish, existing in a tiny cage for others' entertainment. Food became my only source of reprieve from the boredom, but when my sense of smell

left, taste wasn't far behind. At that point, eating became another chore.

Many days my mind would cycle through an endless loop, wondering how long I'd been here, and how long I had before the disease ran its course, or before some crazy nurse took pity and angel-of-mercyed me to death.

One day, a medical student brought me an unexpected gift. She wrapped a piece of fabric around my head and said, "Alright Jack, this ought to make life a little easier. It's a blindfold to black out all the light. Now you don't have to keep your eyelids shut tight all the time because this will do the job for you."

"Thanks," I said.

"Give it a shot and see if it works."

"How?"

"Open your eyes and tell me if you see anything."

"Okay..." I stopped.

...Wait...

...Wait a fucking second...

"NONE OF THIS IS REAL, IS IT?"

She didn't answer me right away, and as the seconds ticked past, I started to realize something was wrong.

The months that had passed—all the time I'd experienced since that night behind the gas station—detached from their place in my memory like fattened leeches that had drunk their fill. As each memory disconnected, I could feel the ingredients spilling out, pouring all over the place in a hurry to evacuate my mind. An entire week vanished. Then another. And another. Capturing the substance was like collecting the rats as they scurried off the sinking ship. Some emotions remained, bereft of context. Some facts remained, without any explanation. And when the invading thoughts were completely expelled, all I was left with was a vague impressionistic picture of the whole thing. It was exactly like trying to remember an elaborate dream, only it was somebody else's, playing in my head without permission.

"Quit trying to *Inception* me, you big douche!"

The sensation of passing time was last to leave, and then I realized where I was. It had only been a matter of minutes since I closed my eyes. And I was sitting against the back wall of the gas station, freezing to death.

The air suddenly reeked of boiled eggs, and a girl's voice said into my ear, "You can open your eyes Jack. Sagoth is back where he belongs. He can't hurt you anymore."

"I'm not supposed to open my eyes until you say, 'Salutem.'"

I felt a tiny foot kick me in the side as she screamed in exasperation, "*You're not supposed to say the secret word out loud, Jack!* You stupid little-What if I was really Sagoth, pretending?! I thought you were supposed to be one of the smarter ones! How are you still alive?!"

"I don't know how it works! I've never done this before! And I'm still not hearing—"

"Salutem, you stupid dolt!"

I cautiously cracked one eyelid and looked at the gorgeous young woman standing in front of me with her arms folded over her chest. She had tanned skin, curly black hair partially covered by the hood of a long, white robe, and strange symbols tattooed under her eyes. My first impression was that she wasn't taking this opportunity to rip off my eyelids, which is always a good sign. "So," I asked, "he's gone?"

"For now. It's interesting. Most people break when the spiders start crawling on their skin. But you outlasted everything Sagoth threw your way. I don't expect this to mean much to you, but I'm actually impressed."

A metal pole erupted out of the center of her chest, and she fell to her knees, coughing up mouthfuls of dark blood. She looked down at the thing with a bewildered expression, then fell over onto her side.

It was thin like an arrow, covered in serrated hooks, and once she hit the ground I could see that it was part of a long spear, running right through her. A black cord connected to the base went all the way across the yard, up to the feet of Spencer Middleton.

He dropped the harpoon gun and whistled to himself as he walked the distance to where the shapeshifter was still gagging, twitching, and clutching onto the pole that had impaled her, turning the white robe into a bloodied mess. As he came closer, she started changing right before my eyes, form after form. A giant bodybuilder, an Olympic wrestler, a morbidly-obese man, a young child, Jerry, O'Brien, Me, Spencer. The desperation became apparent as the switching transformations went faster and faster. Ten different people each second, all of them holding onto the spear and bleeding out into the snow. It went through a hundred of them before it finally stopped and settled on that of a frail, old Asian woman. Tiny and wrinkled, with more white hair than black. Huddled in a fetal position as tears rolled down the side of her nose and into the snow. Something told me that if the shapeshifter had a "true" form, I was looking at it.

"Struggle all you like," Spencer said to her. "That spear is a tungsten silver alloy. You can't pull it out or break it. Dead or alive, I own you, bitch."

He put his arm around her neck, hoisted her up, and dragged her away. I wanted to fight back. I wanted to help her. But I couldn't even move anymore. All I could do was watch them go. She connected eyes with me until Spencer had pulled her around the side of the gas station, and then I was alone.

I was done. Even breathing had become a nearly impossible task. I thought about how strange this was going to look. To Jerry, or O'Brien, or whoever was unlucky enough to find me out here. Clutching my four-fingered hand under my armpit and staring out at the forest. The blood in the snow was already being erased below the snowflakes, and after an hour or less, it would look like none of this had ever even happened. People knew I had mental issues, so this wouldn't even be front page news. The only mystery will be "I wonder what happened to his finger?"

Oh well. I told myself. There are certainly worse ways to go. Especially in a world with monsters like Sagoth and Spencer.

Time passed as it ever did. A series of indistinguishable moments wandered by in no hurry. I watched the snow fall and

focused all of my effort on the labor of drawing in just one more breath. *It hurt.* And then one more. *It hurt even worse.* And then one more after that. *It might be pointless, but I'm going to get my last few seconds, dammit!*

And then, the back door opened. I couldn't turn my head to see who it was, but somebody walked over to my side, grabbed me by my shirt collar, and started dragging. He dragged me inside, down the back hall, and with the relative heat of the gas station shelter, I could instantly feel the blood rushing through my veins all over again. He took me past the cooler where my friends had fallen asleep, past the supply closet where we had first locked away our prisoner, all the way into the front of the store, and dropped me onto my back before crouching down next to me and smiling.

"I told you I'd let you live if I caught what I wanted. And a deal is a deal, right? Don't worry about the shapeshifter. I handed her off to my new boss, so she won't be bothering you anymore."

I took a deep breath of warm air and tried to find the right words to tell Spencer just how much I hated him, but I couldn't. He didn't seem to need me to anyway.

He chuckled under his breath.

"I get it. You think I'm the bad guy. In your mind, I'm some kind of monster, but that couldn't be any further from the truth. You just don't see the big picture like I do. The reality is that this place has a power to draw out the monsters people have hidden inside, and I might be the only one in this God-forsaken town it doesn't work on. I confronted my demons a long time ago. But you're so broken you can't even see what's happening. You think you're some kind of good guy, but you're the worst of them all. Do you understand what I'm saying? Blink once for yes, twice for no."

God, I hated him.

He stared out the front door at something I couldn't see and smiled a big, smug, self-satisfied smile. The feeling in my arms and fingers had started to return. I could move again. And I wasn't going to waste any time.

"You know, Jack," he said almost wistfully, "some things never change. Maybe they aren't meant to. Maybe they are the way

they are for a reason. I mean, it's been up and down for both of us, huh? We run away. We fight and struggle so hard just to end up right back where we started. We lost so many people along the way. Kieffer, Tony, Tom, Vanessa. The extra characters come and go, but at the end of the day, only two things are constant. You and me."

You're right. I thought. Some things never change. Like how you can never remember how good I am at picking your pockets.

"Hey Spencer," I said as soon as my voice had come back to me.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"I'm right-handed."

I stuck the tip of the revolver into his stomach and pulled the trigger. The look on his face was one of "*I cannot believe this shit just happened!*"

He fell onto his ass and looked at the gun in my hand, then at the rapidly growing circle of blood turning his shirt dark red. "You little piece of shit!"

O'Brien *final-fucking-ly* woke up and raced out of the cooler into the front room, yelling, "What was that noise? Jack, are you okay?"

Spencer grabbed his bleeding stomach and bolted out the front door. I tried to tell O'Brien to go after him, but the surge of adrenaline had run its course. I lost the ability to talk again, and instead I just closed my eyes and waited.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The doctor in charge of stitching up my hand wound assured me that they had done everything within their power to reattach my pinky. It was the sort of claim that fell in the Goldilocks-zone of “technically the truth” and “unnecessarily deceptive,” considering the fact that my severed digit was never recovered, and in all likelihood Spencer was keeping it as some kind of twisted souvenir.

Now that I was down to only three whole limbs and nine fingers, I was feeling more asymmetric than ever. But I tried to look at it optimistically. At least it was only the left pinky. In all seriousness, that had to be the best choice for finger to lose. Trying my damndest, I couldn’t conjure a single memory of any time that particular body part was absolutely necessary. I could still play video games, read books, feed myself, and do every conceivable aspect of my job. (Of course, I would have a slightly harder time turning on caps lock, but I’m neither elderly nor criminally insane, so I don’t think that button was meant for me anyway.)

Several times, I caught myself wondering why Spencer spared my life. Was he just prolonging my suffering? Could he really be that simple?

Other, bigger questions lingered. Why did he hate me so much? What made me special? What was he talking about that night he almost buried me alive? He was so shocked, so furious that I didn’t remember some major sin I committed against him. What could I have possibly done to warrant this attention?

I got my answer the day we reopened the gas station.

I had just clocked in and turned around when I saw the manila envelope sitting on the front counter. *Strange. It definitely wasn’t there when I first walked in.*

I left it alone while I got everything ready. Refilled the ice bins. Made a pot of coffee. Changed the garbage bags. Took down the “Closed forever, bitches!” sign that Jerry had made and stuck to

the front door with chewing gum. When I returned to the envelope, I found that it hadn't moved at all.

Not sure what I was expecting.

After a cup of stronger-than-average coffee, I decided to see what exactly I was up against. I took my usual seat, checked the envelope for any obvious explosives or booby traps, then carefully opened it.

Inside, I found two things: A DVD with a blank surface, and a sheet of paper with a handwritten message in red ink.

I wasn't curious enough to read it right away. Instead, I focused on finishing my coffee. I took my time and considered my options. I could call the new deputy they put in charge of gas station duty, but he told when he dropped me off that I wasn't supposed to bother him unless it was a life-or-death situation. I could throw it away and pretend I never saw it. That usually works out just fine. Or, I could act like I've learned nothing from my experiences and take a peek.

Come on, coaxed that voice in the back of my head. *What's the harm in looking?*

My coffee cup was empty and we still hadn't had a single customer. I picked up the note and told myself I'd just read a few words to see who it was from.

Hi Jack,

What a wild ride it has been! Glad to see you haven't lost your edge. But before you go and get comfortable again, I think somebody needs to remind you that the real fight isn't over yet.

There's another player in town. One smart enough to find a way to collect gods, and something tells me the shapeshifter wasn't his first.

Things have been fun so far, but it seems to me that a war is brewing. Make sure you're on the right side.

I like to think you're on my side.
Maybe you haven't picked a side yet.
Maybe you need some convincing.
Maybe this is the gift that will finally motivate you.

I hope you know you can always trust me.

I'll see you soon,

-Your Biggest Fan

I fired up the laptop, popped in the DVD, and opened the only file on there. It was appropriately titled "WhySpencerHatesMe.MOV."

I shouldn't have been so surprised to find that, despite our efforts to rid my workplace of all secret cameras, I was looking at footage of the gas station clearly taken by a secret camera. The scene playing back on my computer screen was from a night I could never forget.

Benjamin stood in front of the register, a gun in his hand, pointing it at me.

Tony came into view with a sack of deer corn over his shoulder.

Jerry walked into frame, just in time to get snatched into a headlock.

"Are you listening to me?! I just told you that the world as you know it is a façade. There's a devil here. And one of you is working for him!"

It all played out exactly the way I remembered, and yet I still jumped when I saw Spencer step out of nowhere to crack open the back of the bearded man's skull with a shovel.

I wanted to fast forward through this part, but I couldn't. Whoever sent me this video wanted me to know something, and I

couldn't afford to miss it.

Spencer took Tony to the floor, mercilessly beating him into submission while I sat behind the counter with a blank stare on my face.

I willed myself across the void of time to get up. *Say something. Do something. Stop this madman before he kills again!* But I was frozen. And from the look of it, I didn't seem to care at all. The complete lack of emotion on my face was the scariest thing in the scene.

Spencer locked Antonio and Jerry in the cooler, then came back. *I remember this part.*

He set up two chairs facing each other in front of the counter and made me sit in one while he took the other. Benjamin's lifeless body was on the ground behind him, bleeding all over the place. I thought he was dead. We both did. *I remember this part.*

We sat there, and he explained that the dark god wanted to talk to me. That this was the great plan. That he wasn't really sent to kill anyone. *I remember this part, and I remember what comes next. Benjamin is about to wake up and kill Spencer.*

I really didn't want to watch it, but I had to.

Benjamin rolled onto his side and moaned in pain. *Wait.* Spencer, alerted by the noise, turned to look at the man regaining consciousness behind him. *That's not how it happened. Benjamin caught him by surp—*

Spencer leaned over in his chair and said, "You're still alive?"

The me in the footage pulled something out of his pocket, lunged forward, and grabbed Spencer by the hair.

Suddenly, I remembered everything.

While he was distracted, I clicked the box cutter blade out, stuck it into his neck below the ear, and pulled. It was amazing how easily the sharpened blade designed for cardboard could slice through skin and arteries.

I fell into my seat. Spencer turned around in his chair and looked into my eyes as the fountain of blood erupted from his neck. He held the palms of his hands against the grisly wound and struggled to speak. When that failed, he tried to stand, but not even

that was possible anymore. All he could do was fall to his knees in front of his emotionless killer. He kept his eyes on me until the very end, when the life left him, and he collapsed onto the ground.

The footage continued for another four minutes. In that time, Benjamin slowly regained consciousness. He rolled onto his side, pushed up onto all fours, climbed to his feet, then studied the room. He must have pieced it all together. He tried talking to me, but I was unresponsive. I'd been sitting there, in my seat, staring at the body of Spencer Middleton the entire time. It wasn't until he took the box cutter out of my hand that I finally snapped out of it.

Benjamin kicked the body, spat on him, and said, "That's what you get!" He turned to me next, and said, "Alright, asshole. Where are the others?"

That's where the clip ended.

I stared at the computer, trying to wrap my head around this... *I remembered it wrong... Benjamin wasn't the one who killed Spencer... What else... WHAT ELSE have I been remembering wrong?!*

"Good morning, Jack!" she yelled with a big smile.

I grabbed the laptop and smashed it onto the floor as hard as I could. She screamed and jumped back as the computer shattered into several pieces.

"Oh, hi Rosa. I didn't see you come in."

With eyes wide open, she yelled, "What the hell was that?!"

"I was just... watching... a pornography."

"Oh. Sorry to interrupt."

"No problem. Are you ready for your first day?"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Rosa was standing next to me with a big smile on her face and a brand-new nametag pinned to her shirt, listening intently while I explained how our time clock worked. She had a pen and pocket-sized notebook in her hands, scribbling away as I spoke (like there was any way she could forget “scan badge, type in employee code”). She was curious, full of questions, and eager to learn. Of course, none of those things boded well for her future here.

I gave her the complete tour of the gas station, starting with the coffee pot. It didn't take long to explain how everything worked, especially considering that she already had it all written down from the last time I gave her the first-day-of-training speech. Apparently, she'd gone so far as to study her notes the night before, so this was mostly a refresher.

“What's with that stain?” She pointed to the brown shape on the floor by the coffee machine, just like I knew she would.

I gave her a shrug. “It doesn't come up.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, it's been there for years.”

“Well, where did it come from?”

“It's a long story, but the short version is this: We don't know. The shorter version is this: Magic. Yes, we tried vinegar and dish soap.”

“I bet I could—”

“You already did.”

“Oh.”

Next, I showed her the grocery aisles and explained how to front and rotate stock. It felt strange going through the motions all over again, but when the shapeshifter took away their memories, she cut deep. Nobody else could remember anything that happened after they arrived at the gas station.

Once again, the official report stated with certainty that there was nothing supernatural involved. Saul's disappearance, my

fingerection, and all the blood and damage to the building were blamed on Spencer. The sheriff begrudgingly admitted that O'Brien was right, and a closer examination of the circumstances surrounding Middleton's "death" revealed a series of innocent clerical errors and hilarious misunderstandings.

The new and improved *cover story 2.0* went thusly: Spencer staged a breakout, killed a guard about his size, stole his uniform and traded identities with him, then walked right out the front doors during the ensuing confusion. The autopsy of the guard proved beyond any doubt that it was *not* the body of Spencer Middleton, but this was the last autopsy before the coroner went on a week-long vacation, and somebody forgot to make a phone call and someone didn't read all the paperwork and somebody made some assumptions and "you know how it goes sometimes."

When I finished my spiel about grocery stocking etiquette, I looked back to see Rosa holding a lawn gnome in her arms—a younger male with a brown beard and a red hat.

"Be careful with those," I warned.

"I know. Don't touch the ones with green hats. Why is that, anyway?"

"There's some ingredient in the green dye that reacts to your skin and makes your hands smell funny."

She carefully put the gnome back on the shelf and wiped her fingers on her pants. When she spoke again, she used her serious voice. I was expecting this. Actually, I was surprised it didn't come sooner.

"Hey, Jack?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm really sorry I fell asleep and slept right through everything. I honestly don't know how that could have happened."

"It's okay. Try not to think about it."

"But it doesn't make any sense!"

"I know. Try not to think about it."

"But I've never done anything like that before, and—"

"Rosa, listen to me." She gave me her undivided attention. "Try not to think about it."

She looked me in the eyes, nodded, and said, “Okay.”

“Great. I think your training is pretty much done. There’s just one last thing.”

I walked her back to the front where my backpack was sitting on the counter, reached inside, and pulled out one of my favorite books—a fantasy-themed murder mystery about an Orc detective and his Elven sidekick. If things went according to plan, this was going to be a slow night. No surprises, no monsters, no Spencer, no Sagoth. And if that were the case, she would need something to keep her from going crazy out of boredom.

She ended up reading the whole thing cover to cover before the sun came up.

Amelia O’Brien came into the store the next morning, wearing jeans and a plain gray tee. Seeing her out of uniform was going to take some getting used to, but I was happy to see her at all. She bought a cup of coffee and took a seat in the booth. As soon as the other customers were gone, I made myself a cup and joined her.

“How’s everything going?” she asked.

What she really meant was *anything strange to report?*

“Things have been quiet. How about you?”

She sipped her coffee and muttered sarcastically, “I’m having the time of my life. A vacation like this is just what I needed.”

Rosa was annoyed with herself for falling asleep at the job, but aside from a little shame and embarrassment, there wasn’t any harm done. Jerry already had plenty of practice blacking out entire nights, so it didn’t take much for him to bounce right back. O’Brien, though, was a different story.

No amount of clever misdirection was going to excuse the fact that she was on location and asleep while Spencer wrought his unholy havoc. There were too many questions she couldn’t answer, and until the internal investigation into her professional conduct and state of mind had concluded, she was forced to take a leave of absence.

She promised me that she was going to take a vacation until the whole thing sorted itself out, but we both knew better. The gas station had its claws in her now, and for better or worse, Amelia O'Brien was stuck here just like the rest of us.

She looked at me and asked, "Have you heard anything from...?"

"No. But I don't think Spencer is coming back."

She knew I was lying.

"So that's it?" she asked. "Maybe now things can go back to normal."

"I'm pretty sure that ship has already sailed, crashed, burned, and sunk. Spencer was working for somebody. The sheriff's probably in on it, too. I can feel it. It's all building up to something bad."

O'Brien stared into her coffee and said, "I had a dream last night. I can't remember exactly what happened, but it had something to do with the gas station. There was this... unspeakable creature. A monster made of darkness and hate. It got inside my head. It told me that this was just the beginning." She raised her eyes to meet mine. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?" I shrugged, and she cracked a smile. "I didn't think so."

Jerry walked through the front door wearing an oversized blue t-shirt with a giant number "4" painted across the chest.

"Hey Rosa!" he said with a wave.

"Hi Jerry!"

He fixed himself a cup of coffee and came to join us at the booth, slumping into the seat next to me. "Hey, it's Notorious A.O.B.! I almost didn't recognize you."

"Cute," she said, sarcastically.

"Jack, you got my sobriety chips?"

While he sugared up his drink, I pulled a bag of barbeque flavored potato chips out of my backpack and set them down in front of him, as per our arrangement.

A couple days after the shapeshifter encounter, I went out to his place under the guise of playing video games. As soon as he was distracted, I threw the Russian radio into a roaring bonfire then threatened to kick his ass if he ever tried to rebuild it again. That

night, we hashed out a deal: he would put the radio behind him for good, and in exchange, I would help him unlock all the bonus characters in *Smash Bros* and buy him a bag of chips for every consecutive day he stayed clean. This was day four.

He opened the bag and offered them to us. O'Brien hesitated, but took and ate one.

"You busy after this?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I don't suppose I am. Why?"

"Because I have a third controller. You ever play *Smash Bros* before?"

The door swung open and a man rushed inside, screaming, "Oh my God! I made it! Oh, thank you, God!"

He was middle-aged, with a short beard and unkempt hair, wearing tattered and dirt-stained clothes, with no socks or shoes on. O'Brien moved to leave the booth, but I caught her by the arm.

"It's not your job anymore," I explained. "Plus, I want to see how she handles it."

Jerry noisily crunched down a chip and nodded in agreement. O'Brien slowly leaned back in her seat and watched as the man staggered up to the counter where Rosa was busy sorting the week's merchant credit card receipts. She shot him a smile and a friendly, "Hi! How are you? Can I help you find anything?"

"Yes! Please! You have to help me! I've been trapped out there for days! The rest of them are all dead! You hear me? Dead! I need to use your phone."

"Okay! Not a problem. It's going to be twenty-five cents a minute, pay in advance."

"Twenty-five cents? Per minute? Are you crazy? It's just a local call!"

"Sorry, sir. Store policy."

"That's ridiculous! I'm not paying that kind of scratch for a phone call. Come on! It's an emergency!"

As the man angrily tapped his bare foot, O'Brien looked back at me and whispered, "Should we do something?"

I shook my head. "No, she's got this."

“Sorry,” Rosa explained. “No exceptions. You’re welcome to wait here until the deputy comes around for his daily check in.”

“And you’re welcome to eat my butt!”

With that, the man slammed the counter and stormed out, never to be seen again. Rosa looked our way. Jerry clapped, and I gave her a thumbs up. With that sign of approval, she beamed and went back to sorting receipts.

It was undeniable. Things weren’t going to go back to the way they were before. But as I sat there in the company of friends just as messed up as me, I couldn’t help but dare to wonder, maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing.

