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Dana Kuntz

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**The Girl Next Door; Strings**

by

Dana Kuntz

A Creative Work

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

in English

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Thesis Committee:  
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## The Girl Next Door

All weekend he'd sat in his tree stand, hour after frozen hour. Out there, even in the cover of trees, the crisp wind reached its icy fingers through his thermal layers and latched onto his bones in a grip he couldn't shake off. In truth, he'd wanted to be anywhere but out there freezing his ass off; but he'd waited. One voice in his head whispered, "Just leave," and another answered, "One might come around the bend any second now." But, one didn't. In fact, he hadn't seen a single deer the entire weekend.

Sometimes he wondered why he was even out there, his love of hunting waning as it had over the last couple of years. There was a thrill in the past, as he sat silently in hiding, waiting for movement: a snap of twigs or a rustle of leaves. The game of becoming one with his surroundings, not moving, or making a sound so that the deer had no idea he was there until the last second had once been enough for him. The thrill of outsmarting nature and conquering his surroundings a testament to his survival skills. But it had lost its pull somewhere along the way. He wanted something more; he just didn't know what it was.

Most of the time, now, he just watched the woods come alive around him. There were several times on past hunting trips when deer did emerge and he never drew back his bow, arrow already notched and ready as it was, but instead just watched them move through the forest, marveling at their grace and poise. Would he take the shot if a trophy buck wandered into his sights? He wasn't sure any more. Exactly when it changed, he didn't know. He still went out every chance he got, still brought his bow and arrows, masked his scent and camouflaged his face to remain undetected, but everything was different now. He was different; at first, he thought going through the same rote motions and getting out there would bring back that old feeling of thrilled anticipation, but it didn't. He'd hunted since he was a boy, studied the woods

and animals until he'd perfected his technique of blending in so well with his surroundings that even the squirrels didn't know he was there. It had all been a challenge and an adventure back then. Now, though, it all felt a little empty—sitting out there alone for hours—the thrill still came when he caught sight of something moving through without detecting him, but it died quickly. He had no one to share it with, that's what it was, that exhilaration and awe of nature, he wanted someone to excite in it and love it with him. He'd grown up reveling in his ability to go it alone in the woods. He'd loved every minute of it, until now.

The woods hadn't come alive around him this weekend, a good reminder that a storm was coming. Every creature seemed to have hunkered down in readiness for it and though he, too, knew it was coming, he still waited. No squirrels, no birds and no deer anywhere. He needed to get going too, yet he waited a bit longer, cold, tired yet hopeful as if just one deer, just one would make everything right with his world. But one never appeared, and he reluctantly gave up. He'd be back, the very next weekend, so why he was so adamant and stubborn in his waiting he really didn't know.

Packing his things didn't take long, but even with the oncoming storm he moved slowly. It never felt right to leave, and he dragged it out every time. He'd only been about fifteen minutes on the road when the animal he'd waited for all weekend sprang out and froze in the middle of his path. Now there was a deer. *Now*.

He'd been driving long enough to leave the gravel road that led from his property behind for the two-lane blacktopped Echo Trail already slick with sleet freezing into a thin coating of ice. It had been long enough for his mind to wander from the task of driving and focus on work and all that was waiting for him when he got back. Lost in thought, awareness dawned at the last second and he reacted like an idiot who'd never been on an icy Minnesota road.

He jerked his head and slammed on the brakes. The brakes for God's sake, the one thing he knew not to do on an ice-slicked road. The realization that he had no control shot through him like a jolt of electricity running through a live wire; there was nothing he could do.

The truck slid sideways as he struggled for control. Every muscle tensed as he tried to right his original wrong and turn the wheels gently into the skid while taking his foot off the brake and gas. It worked, somehow, and he straightened with a relieved sigh. But, a split second later, the truck hit a new patch of ice that sent his practically bald tires spinning.

"Shit, shit, shit." The words flew from his mouth as his white knuckled grip gave way to frantic steering. The swearing and steering both came without recognition as he moved instinctively. His life didn't pass before his eyes, the past didn't flare up like in the movies as a slideshow laden with profound remembrances of things left undone or words left unsaid; instead he thought of how many times he put off getting the new tires that he knew he needed before winter hit. He was a fool to go all the way into hunting season without getting it done.

It wasn't like he was a newbie; he'd been in September ice storms and October blizzards many times, lived here his whole life, he knew better. Still, the unseasonably warm fall put him at ease.

The truck slid off the blacktop and hit a mound of dirt that would've been flattened without notice under normal conditions. But, sliding into it sideways caused the truck to tip and then roll. He toppled over and then over again into the wooded ditch. The black wall of trees that silently guarded the highway charged forward to swallow him whole.

He loved his forest green '78 Ford pick-up truck. He loved that there weren't bright yellow warning signs mocking him from the sun visor like his other car, the respectable sedan he drove to work, which declared the stupidity of human beings all throughout the interior with its

warning signs, back-up camera and constant dinging alarms when he didn't fasten his seatbelt right away or veered too close to the edge of the road. He hated the car, hated its constant nagging. As if he couldn't do a damn thing on his own. There was no chance he'd ever have bald tires on the company car, it wouldn't let him. And when his head snapped forward upon impact, there was no annoying airbag to keep him from smashing his face into the steering wheel.

He regained consciousness with a start. It wasn't a slight flutter of lashes or twitch of fingers like in the movies. Instead, his entire body flew backward; his eyes darted about frantically while his mind tried to piece it all together. The silence that enveloped him just didn't belong. The last thing he remembered was the thunderous roar of the earth ripping up under him and then over him as the truck rolled and he clung to the steering wheel in a death grip. He wasn't sure if he'd actually heard it, felt it or imagined it but just before he lost consciousness there was a crunching of metal that registered in him with a sickening dread. Such destruction like a tornado ripping through a lazy little town and tearing buildings to shreds as if they were made of paper as it went, should still be rumbling, at least off in the distance. Shouldn't it? But there was nothing.

He shook his head to clear his ears, but the silence stayed. It was thick, almost painful the way it hung in the air all around him. He tried to shake it away once more, but it clung to him, around him and somehow in him. He gave up on getting rid of it and focused on what he was feeling.

Afraid of sudden and sure pain, he gingerly felt his face and scalp. Holding his fingers up for inspection, he marveled that they were clear. He stared at them a long time trying to make sense of it all. No tinge of blood met his gaze. He remembered the steering wheel coming at his face, or was it the other way around? He wasn't sure, but he remembered the pain on impact, or

did he? Everything was a blur. His stunned and shaken brain couldn't piece the details together. He checked his face with his fingers again, this time with a little more confidence, a more thorough investigation—still no blood, no pain but a kind of numbness that felt like a void between his fingers and his face. He didn't wince or flinch or suck in a sharp breath with the sudden twinge of pain he expected to feel, exhaled deeply with bewildered relief and looked around.

Somehow, during its fight with the ditch, the truck had righted itself again. There was a pine tree resting on the hood, but that didn't seem so bad. The windshield held a spider's web of cracks where the tree rested with sliver thin lines stretching across its entire length in every direction. He ran his gaze along each line, his relief turning to a sick numb feeling in his stomach. The entire windshield was destroyed but windshields were easy to replace. He dreaded finding out what the rest of the truck looked like. Did he hit the deer? There wasn't any sign of it from what he could see, but that didn't mean anything, and he didn't relish the scene that could be waiting for him outside.

All weekend he sat deep in the woods waiting for a deer, searching and hoping to no avail and then there it was when he least expected it. "Shit," he shook his head and surveyed the windshield again.

He slid slowly to the door, his sloth-like movements controlled by the anticipation of pain. His legs felt odd; they tingled with pinpricks as if they'd been asleep, but they didn't hurt or protest moving. There was numbness in his muscles that he couldn't make sense of and didn't have time to worry about. He was lucky and he'd leave it at that. He made it out the door and onto the ground outside the vehicle without any problems.

Relief washed over him that there was no sign of the deer, and his breath puffed out in a white cloud before him as he took in the damage. The tree was bigger than he'd first thought, and the truck was in worse shape than he'd realized. Usually, if his truck had a problem, he could fix it. Even if it meant using a coat hanger and duct tape. There was no constant chime to tell him he'd done something unorthodox; no refusal to run because he didn't follow some car code of ethical behavior. It was a beauty all right; they didn't make them like this one anymore.

There would be no jerry-rigging it this time. The entire hood was caved in under its weight. Its branches had punched out a headlight, reached their claws right through the grill and into the engine where he hoped they hadn't punctured anything vital but couldn't tell. Wet clumps of mud mixed with grass from the torn earth hung to the twisted metal of what used to be the side mirror. He stood helplessly watching as a glob of grass and leaf-laden mud inched its way down the driver's door to land at his feet with a sick plop. The rest of the truck was much the same, covered in smears and clumps of wet muck that slurped down the once shimmering green paint he loved so much.

There was the sound of running water that he didn't pick up on until it changed to a steady dripping. He didn't have to look at the under carriage to know that most likely, every fluid was bleeding out in a quick and sure death.

His chilled breath huffed out in tiny clouds as he closed his eyes, pursed his lips, and turned his face to the sky in a silent fight to shake away the grief; the Ford was his baby. The first vehicle he'd ever bought; it'd never let him down, never been complicated or a mystery. It had seen him through years of working summer construction jobs to help pay for college, been his bed in those Podunk towns that didn't have any hotels or places to stay after hours of jack-hammering in 90 degree heat, and years later carried his canoes and gear without protest through

unchartered logging roads that led to the lakes he camped on in the Boundary Waters; it had been his mode of transportation when he took his first trip there and found the place he felt he'd always belonged.

Tiny, airy drops of icy rain pinged against his face, but they were light, hardly more than a drizzle, and they only tickled when they hit his cheeks; he opened his eyes and took in the dark gray clouds forging toward him like a slow-moving tidal wave from the north; things were going to get worse.

Even though he knew from past experience, he still checked his cell phone, but there was no signal. Service was sketchy at best throughout the entire area and he hadn't gone far enough to reach civilization, a fact he usually loved. His cabin wasn't all that far back, fifteen miles maybe. He could've run it without stopping in his twenties, with a full pack on his back and a few beers in his belly. Not now, he shook his head, no way. Now, he dreaded even walking it. But there was little choice in the matter.

He pulled the collar of his coat up to his chin, happy for the warmth of the lamb's wool lining, and started down the side of the highway. He moved in a steady controlled gait at first, filled with the hope that someone would be passing by any second, but also aware that he needed to conserve his energy if no one did. People still stopped for hitchhikers in these parts, not yet filled with the same fear of strangers like in the cities, not just yet anyway. But, no one came. Even the deer was long gone.

He started thinking about how no one would miss him and fought to control the path his mind was taking. Eventually, they would, he told himself. Doug and Stan would for sure, well maybe . . . no they would. He nodded his head; they'd miss him, by Tuesday at least. But Tuesday was two days away. . . He knew them and they knew him—that was the problem. They

wouldn't worry about him. They'd just chock it up to another one of his extended cabin weekends. "That's just Mike sloughing off work again and taking a few extra days at the cabin," they would say. "Boy, is he gonna catch hell when he gets back." He only had himself and a few of those unplanned extended weekends to blame.

The storm was no surprise; he never left anything to chance. Weather reports were always checked, and then cross-checked with aviation charts for wind speeds, and precipitation. Hell, he'd planned on leaving well before it was supposed to hit, but just kept finding reasons not to go. Dragging out leaving his cabin wasn't new. Things would always come up to delay heading back to the cities: there was one more stack of wood to chop, even though three cords were already piled and ready for winter, or there was that loose window fastener that had been on the to-do list for months that suddenly needed fixing right then. Sometimes he didn't even hunt or fish at all. Sometimes he'd just have to read one more chapter of a Louis L'Amour or Jack London tale he'd read a dozen times before, and sometimes he just sat in a meditative silence and pictured what life would be like when the cabin was finished and he was sharing it with someone who appreciated it as much as he did—whatever it was, there was always something he'd come up with to stay a little longer.

This time had been no different. Going back to his small, one-bedroom apartment in the growing-seedier-every-year part of Minneapolis was growing more tortuous each time he had to do it. The apartment was good enough for his purposes: sleep, eat, shower, work, then repeat, but it wasn't home. It was a rest stop; in fact, there was only one picture on the wall, a tiny hand painted rendition of the Last Supper that his mom brought to "cheer the place up and remind you of the true meaning of life", which in her opinion was good old Christian self-sacrifice and spreading the word. In her case, it was spreading the word about her self-sacrifice. Hanging it on

a nail that was left in the wall from the last tenant, he saw her nod with a grim smile and sweep a disapproving glance around the rest of the barren space. His dad would just sit there when they visited, sip his coffee and stare off into space. She would harp on him about how no woman would be able to stand coming there, then ask his dad to confirm what she was saying, wait for his grunt, and then launch into the fact that she needed grandkids. It was easy to tune her out, even though he knew she was right. He used to agree with her, all of his time was spent thinking about when and how to meet the right person, settle down, start a family and start his life—the life he was supposed to be living. But, somewhere along the line even that changed and dressing up his apartment for the right person seemed pointless. The apartment was temporary; his cabin was the place that would impress the right person. His cabin was home.

He'd had it two years now and never regretted the decision to buy it. He'd always planned on retiring somewhere near the Boundary Waters and, though he was nowhere near retirement at 32, had been planning and saving for it every day. Optic Engineering, the company he'd worked for since graduating college had a sudden boon a few years back, their shares went up astronomically with the release of the Diode 5,000—their laser measuring sensor that took three years to perfect, patent and release and that, for now, beat everything else on the market—and everyone (all 6 of them) who worked there cashed in their stock options and had money to burn. But, while everyone else bought boats or ridiculously priced cars and went on exorbitant vacations, he put every penny back into the stock market and watched it like a hawk. He searched the properties for sale near Ely, always confident that the right one would come available. He remembered every detail of the day he found it. A new listing with twenty acres just off the Echo Trail. It had 800 feet of shoreline and a ramshackle little cabin that needed a ton of work, but who cared about the house? It was the property that mattered. He called the realtor

and made an offer for the full listing price before another minute went by. Maybe it was ironic that a man who wanted nothing more than to live in the woods— far from the chaotic crowds and pollution of the city— had a mechanical engineering degree and made his living selling high tech laser measurement equipment, but he saw it as taking the fastest road to financial freedom. Did it matter, really, what he did to get there, within reason of course? And did it matter that he felt the walls close in on him Monday through Friday as the yellow glow and buzz of fluorescent lights sucked the life out of him in a continuous hum of torture? He could endure it to reach his ultimate goal. His dad had drilled that into his head since he was ten years old “You do what you gotta do as a man. Support your wife and kids and it doesn’t matter what it is. You just get it done, as long as it’s legal he-he.” Sometimes, he’d look at his dad and the way he stared off while sipping his coffee, silent as the dawn, and he’d wonder if maybe the old man ever regretted the way he soldiered through life, just doing what he had to for survival, head down, and muscles tensed, just trudging through to get to the end. It always made sense to him before; it seemed like good advice. Somewhere along the line it stopped feeling right.

The cabin was his way of staving off a future of wall staring. He would do what he had to do, always. There was no doubt of that, but he was damned sure going to do what he wanted to do, too.

The only problem with the cabin was Diane. Apparently, she hadn’t shared his dream of a life in the woods, though it was all he ever talked about. Apparently, she thought he should have taken the money he’d made and spent it on a nicer place, or at least some furniture—his was all handed down from relatives and friends or stuff he’d found at garage sales—a big ring for her and a vacation or two. She said things about growing up and being an adult with adult aspirations. “Isn’t a retirement plan an adult aspiration?” He’d asked in serious shock at her

response. “Why didn’t you say something before, like, say, any of the many times I talked about my dreams of living there or when I took you camping and told you it was the one place I could breathe?”

“I thought you’d get over it” she’d spat at him.

Get over it! Get over his one dream, the major goal he had for his life, the reason he saved every penny. Well, she let him know then and there that she hated the cabin, hated the woods, hated camping, hated everything he loved, and then added that if he went to the closing for the cabin, she would be gone before the ink was dry.

And she was.

It’s not that he’d doubted her; he hadn’t. And it wasn’t that he didn’t care. It hurt like hell. He wasn’t sure though, for a while, what hurt more: the fact that she was gone, or the fact that she’d listened to his dreams for three years, had gone camping with him every summer, and while he went on and on about how he felt when he was there, how the starry nights and living off of the land around them filled his soul with peace, she was only tolerating it—waiting for him to get over it and “grow up.”

He spent every weekend, holiday and vacation for the next year clearing the driveway, building a deck, scrubbing the walls and floors, and even picking out the perfect logs to make furniture out of—another fantasy he’d told Diane he’d always had. Had she really just let it in one ear and out the other?

There had been a time that he thought she was the one. She had everything he’d wanted: she was beautiful, all Swedish blonde, blue eyed and rosy cheeked, she was educated, able to hold conversations about science and politics, she was a successful businesswoman in her own right with her own substantial salary and best of all, there was no drama. He hated drama. People

who made bad thoughtless decisions and then wondered how their lives became tangled in a mess of chaos—idiots. It hadn't occurred to him during their time together that her lack of drama may have been due to a lack of feelings or emotions.

His grandpa always said that he just needed to find the woman that irritated him the least and he'd be happy. And his dad agreed. "One's as good as another," he said, "just pick one and stick with it. Stay true and do your job as a man." So, that's what he'd done. Diane never irritated him. They never fought, not really, until the end, and even then it was mostly a civilized parting. They never called each other names, threw things, or yelled at each other. There was none of that silliness of childish emotion.

It came to him while he sweat and cleaned and worked alone in his wooded paradise, that Diane always made sure he wore the right clothes, to bring out the green in his eyes, she'd said. But his t-shirts and beloved flannels slowly disappeared from his closet one by one as dress shirts and blazers took over. Sometimes he'd catch her staring at him and the brief warmth that filled him would dissipate when she'd say things like "When's the last time you got a hair cut?" or "Are you going to go for that promotion you were talking about?" She always appreciated his looks and told him so, but then she would pick away at him until he fit the ideal image of a businessman. At the time he just thought it meant she was into him, and he followed his dad's advice. He was supposed to please her, it was his job. They always had good conversations, at least he thought they had, but now he remembered that she would always say things like "With your mind, you could be the president of a company if you just played the game better." It wasn't him she wanted, he'd eventually realized. It was what he could be, with her help, of course.

Thinking back, he realized that she went on non-stop about her career, trips to Cabo, the newest hot restaurant downtown, and where to see and be seen. Maybe the fact that he bought

the cabin without even so much as considering asking her what she thought of it wasn't so innocent on his part after all. She never seemed to mind that he treated his apartment and job as tools for creating a bigger picture. He realized now it was just his bigger picture she minded. It took almost an entire year of solitude for him to realize that they had both been talking but neither of them was actually listening. There was something that had always been missing in his relationship with Diane. He realized then that he'd always known it. He just hadn't known what it was.

He shook his head and scanned the road for any signs of life. Nothing. He could feel the temperature dropping, the dark clouds still far enough away but rolling closer to his position with every second that passed. He stopped walking just in case the noise of his feet kicking up the gravel masked the sound of an oncoming vehicle. He had to be prepared to flag it down, lest they speed right by him not realizing he needed help, but he couldn't pick out any noises besides his own breath and heartbeat thudding in his ears.

Diane, wow, he hadn't relived those last days with her in a long time. Doug and a few other friends came around and he'd let them drag him to one club after another. He knew better now, was older and wiser. He knew how to listen this time. But his new found knowledge made for awkward conversations. He never was able to just meet a woman without looking deep, asking her what she wanted out of life, and what was important for her future. And for all of the talk women seem to do about how they want a guy who's serious, a guy who's truly interested in more than their looks, or who wants more than just a good time, the ones he met didn't. Frankly, his approach freaked them out. He'd asked one woman what her dreams were and she said "To dance with you". He pressed, "No your life goals, passions, dreams for the future?" "*Gawd*," she

turned away and threw her words back at him over her shoulder, “lighten up”. He watched as she sidled up to another man further down the bar.

But he wouldn't waste any more time and emotion on someone without knowing if they had a chance at a future together. It came to him once that he was acting like the women he and his friends made fun of, the ones who asked how they felt about marriage and kids on a first date. But, knowing that it wasn't smooth or charming didn't stop him from doing it. Wasting time with someone who didn't want the same things he did was out of the question. The game no longer held appeal; he didn't want to play anymore.

“You're too picky,” Doug had once advised without being asked. “You won't compromise. And what you want doesn't exist, man. There's no way you can meet a woman who's able to discuss politics and religion on the level you want, read all of the books you love *and* want to live in the middle of the woods. It just aint gonna happen.” Doug was the one person who should not give relationship advice. They'd been paired up as dorm mates at Bemidji State freshman year. He never imagined they'd be best friends and working side by side at the same company all these years later. Doug was that guy that just never went away. He wormed his way into your plans whether you wanted him there or not, offended all of your friends by hitting on their girlfriends, and brushed it off with a “they can always say no.”

It wasn't that he was a bad guy; he had a good heart, underneath all of his bad jokes, one-liners, and constant obsessions with one woman after another. He would give you the shirt off of his back if you needed it, provided there wasn't some new girl wearing it. It took Doug all of two seconds to throw himself at the feet of whatever woman would even consider dating him.

But Doug wasn't the only one who called him picky. His mom constantly nagged with the “When am I going to have grandchildren?” spiel. He could ignore his mom for the most part,

her goals were all about her and not, regardless of what she said, his ultimate happiness. She lived in her own made-up perfect world where everything was a TV show from the 50s: perfect hair, perfect kids and separate beds for the happy couple. But, even the one or two women who made it past the first date since Diane had sized him up by the second or third one and told him that he needed to lighten up and go with the flow, have some fun. “Hiking is fun; camping and relying on your skill to find food, building a fire, that’s fun; getting away from people, just you and nature, now that’s fun. At least it is to me and I don’t want to be with someone who doesn’t see that.” He’d said the same words to Doug, his mom, the few women whose names he couldn’t remember off hand; it had become his mantra. The more they pushed, the more he dug in his heels until compromising any of it would equal selling his soul.

Maybe, he conceded, as he walked down the empty highway and blew on his hands for the third time, clenching them back into fists to keep his fingers from getting frostbite, maybe he’d protested a bit more than he should have. He knew they were just trying to help him out of his self-imposed isolation. But he isolated himself precisely because he didn’t want to settle again.

It’s not that he wasn’t acutely aware of every day that slipped by without the company of a woman; it wasn’t as if his body didn’t ache for it, sometimes every minute of every hour was filled with the emptiness. But he just couldn’t do it. He couldn’t make small talk, couldn’t act interested in the latest series on Netflix or explain one more time that no, as a hunter, he didn’t kill Bambi, never had, never would or that Jack London wasn’t the guy in the latest *Bourne Identity* movie. He’d tried, he really had, but the problem, this time, was that he really was listening, and it was exhausting.

He remembered the last night he went out with Doug and a couple other college buddies. How he stood at the bar of another crowded, smelly and noisy club, got bumped into from behind three times too many, was asked what he did for a living in a way that was more like asking what he made per year after taxes, and he just couldn't take one more second. He didn't even bother to answer and couldn't even remember what she looked like, or where they were that night, but he remembered his skin burning like it was on fire, a sudden tightening suffocation of air, a frantic need to get out. Leaving his full drink on the bar, he just turned and walked out without one more word. He was done.

But now, months later, he'd started talking to himself most days as he worked on things at the cabin and the one-sided conversations were getting old. The projects that filled his time and energy were starting to feel a little pointless. There was no one to enjoy them with, no one to appreciate the vision of what it would look like when it was done, no one to bounce ideas off or tell him how great something looked. Doug came up for weekends sometimes and tried to give advice on where he should put things. He'd say something about curtains with a sheepish grin and then launch into a monologue about most women caring more about a hot tub on the deck. Doug, he shook his head and laughed out loud, at the very least he was comic relief, but he couldn't take his advice seriously, it was always laced with a personal agenda, as was his mom's. Why did she want grand kids so badly? Wasn't her life full as it was? Didn't she even care about who provided her these envisioned grandbabies and if not, why? Why didn't she care about her son finding a deeper, meaningful connection than what he had? He started wondering about both of his parents. When he was young, he just thought he would have what they had—a loving, solid marriage with no drama. Two salt of the earth people who worked side by side with the same dreams and passions—that's what he saw back then. They found each other at twenty-

years-old and for some reason he'd had that stuck in his head. Until he was twenty himself and there was no way he was ready. Diane fit the bill and life seemed to be on the right path. He did everything the way he was supposed to. But it never felt right. He knew something was missing, tried to just put his head down and trudge through like his dad advised, but he couldn't.

Lately, he found himself questioning everything he thought he knew. Why did it seem like everyone had their own plans and goals for his future relationship? What about what he wanted? He wanted someone who listened to his ideas, his desires . . . to him. But there was no one talk to—really talk to.

Maybe Doug was right, maybe it was time to lose his stubbornness and realize that he wanted something that didn't exist. He'd tried a few of the bars around Ely, at first, but even though there were some outdoorsy types hanging around—women who fished and hunted in their own right—that alone wasn't enough, there needed to be more, something deeper. Was he a fool to think he could find someone like that? It was starting to feel like it. But, should he really have to compromise on so many things just to not be alone? It was a game he didn't want to play, regardless of Doug's constant pestering. It wasn't that he believed there was this one person he was meant to be with and that when they met it would be like . . . like magic or anything, at least he never had in the past. But . . . well, there were all these people who said, "You know when you meet the right person, like you just *know*." He'd heard it a thousand times, maybe not a thousand, but enough to see that those people really believed it and somehow it stuck with him, and he wanted to believe it too. He wanted to just know, on every level.

He glanced up the road, gray everywhere, nothing but the desolate, depressing absence of sunlight met his gaze before having to shield his face from the sleet. The drops were coming faster now, the light airiness having turned to tiny daggers. Diane's last words—something about

him dying in the middle of nowhere without anyone even knowing for weeks—flashed through his mind.

“Don’t,” he muttered. He wouldn’t give in to hopeless thoughts—no sense to it. Worry is a waste of time. He chanted the words a few times in his mind until his feet were moving in a solid steady clip down the road and his breathing became the familiar in-two-out-one he’d practiced throughout his high school track career.

Another mile or so along the deserted road and he was losing steam and hope. There still hadn’t been a car, or truck in sight. The oddness of it hit him and messed up his calculated breathing. Why hadn’t anyone come by? It was Sunday during hunting season—where was everyone? Scanning as far as he could up the road, he looked for a puff of exhaust from an oncoming vehicle and listened for the rumble of an engine. Ha, he thought with self-chastisement, everyone else was smart enough to head out before the storm, like he should have. And now all he had was hope that someone had been as foolish as he had. As the sleet-filled seconds ticked by with out any sign of life coning down the road, that hope dwindled.

He spied a faint trail of what looked like chimney smoke drifting up above the trees to the south. He wasn’t sure where the smoke was coming from, but it didn’t look too far. Should he leave the open road? One of his favorite London stories, “To Build a Fire” filled his head as he stood in indecision. “That guy was an idiot,” he mumbled, shaking the thought away. That guy set out in the heart of a Yukon winter with only his ego to keep him warm. He’d been accused of having an ego himself a time or two, but he wasn’t a fool. The man had a dog with him but failed to watch the animal’s caution or listen to its cues; instead he abused it and forced it to do what he wanted, and even though the trusted animal whimpered warnings, the stupid man never listened, just barreled through with his own plan, never stopping to consider he could be wrong or that the

dog had more to offer him than just labor. Mike always identified with the poor dog in that story and hated the man. He and the dog, they were alike, respected nature, understood their place in it, and knew not to fight it. At least that's what he always told himself. Still, he looked up and down the road one last time to be sure help wasn't just around the next bend; it wasn't. He crossed the road, eyeing the white thread as it wove its way above the trees and trying to memorize its location. He couldn't tell how far away it was but the fact that he could see it said all he needed to know. Once in the woods it would be harder to spot, but he would find it, of that he had no doubt. He liked to tell people he was born in the woods, raised by trees or wolves or bears—he changed the parentage every time he said it—but the point was the same, he knew his way around a forest, didn't need a compass to know which direction he was going and knew how to survive without the comforts of premade food and shelter.

The change of atmosphere when he entered the shelter of the woods was like stepping into an entirely different dimension. The air changed, the tiny icy droplets that continued to fall on him as he walked the highway disappeared, protected as he was by the thick copse of trees. It was a different kind of silence, not like the stifling, desolate quiet of the empty highway. To him it was peace, safety and comfort.

There was no path or clearing to follow. He would have to forge his own way through the thick brush straight north for a few hundred yards. He looked harder at the tree line, hoping to spy even the slightest opening to traverse, but there was none. He may be able to survive in the wilderness and bushwhack his way through anything, but he also knew to look for the easiest route. It was slow going as he climbed over small bushes and tripped on tree roots while scanning for pathways that didn't exist. He stopped to catch his breath, get his bearings and rethink his decision to enter the woods. There were too many trees to see the skyline beyond

them and he had to keep stopping to reaffirm he was headed in the right direction. He could no longer see the smoke trail that he spied from the open road, so he used the map he'd drawn in his head when he first saw it, something he'd always done in the past. He had a perfect mind for direction and could imagine a mapped-out route as if he were staring at it on paper before him. And he'd never been wrong, off a few times by mere feet at the most. He liked to imagine what it would've been like to be traversing completely unknown territory like Lewis and Clark. Would he have been as good as they were? His ego said yes.

He breathed in a faint smell of wood smoke and smiled. He was close. Taking a moment to listen and breathe the scent in and out helped him maneuver in the right direction. The dark wood of its walls stood out against the lighter brown leaves and dark green of the pines surrounding him. Moving forward a few steps and pushing back the branches of a tall pine tree revealed the corner of the cabin. It was old, ancient really, hand-hewn logs with dovetailed notches wedged together the way they did it long ago. The time, workmanship, and skill that went in to building such a place made him suck in his breath and stand in awe for a few seconds before moving toward the door. His friends often teased that he was born in the wrong century. None of them sharing in his desire for a simple way of life, he shook his head, no not simple, uncomplicated maybe was a better way of saying it.

Making his way to the front door, he ran his hand along the outer wall, his chilled fingers not yet numb and able to feel something of the labor of love that created the place. He wanted to take it all in, walk around it and study every detail, every notch and board, but forced himself not to. Instead he knocked, backed up a space and waited; no one came. The door stayed shut; the house remained silent. "Hello," he called, "I'm sorry to bother you, I've had an accident. My truck is in the ditch just off the Echo Trail, 'bout a mile or so from here." No one answered. He

backed up, looked around the grounds and then up at the roof. Smoke still wisped from the chimney; someone must be here. He tried again, "I have a place a few miles away. I was just hoping to use a phone." They were probably just out chopping wood or something. He stepped back and listened for rustling in the woods, voices, cracking twigs under someone's feet but it was quiet all around him. Maybe they're pretty far out into the woods, he thought. That's alright, he could wait, it'd still be better than the hike back to his place. But, after another cold and silent minute, he wondered if he should've stayed on the open highway. Waiting seemed like it could cost him what precious daylight and energy he had left, and the sky still showed the threat of what was to come. Decision made, as disheartening as it was, he turned away and fought down the surge of desperation that hit him. The short trek through the woods had already exhausted him.

"Please, just go away."

It was so faint, he wasn't sure he'd actually heard it. Still, he turned back to look. The front door was opened to barely an inch and there was an eye peering out at him through the crack.

He realized instantly that the person behind the door was a woman and instinctively softened his voice, "I'm sorry. I saw the chimney smoke from the road and thought I might find some help." He smiled, but the door opened no further. "Uh, I could really just use a phone . . ."

"There's no phone here."

Something wasn't right. The door moved a little, it was almost imperceptible, but he caught the movement and diverted his gaze from the intense stare she was giving him to the doorknob. He'd already brought his attention back to her face, but the images were just now connecting. What was it that he'd seen? He looked again and it was unmistakable. The barrel of

a gun was leveled at him. His eyes widened and he held up his palms, “I, um...” He swallowed and backed away, hands still in the air. “Listen, I don’t mean you any trouble. I truly just need to get a tow truck or a ride to my cabin or town.” He could see the barrel shaking a bit in her hands and that scared him more than anything. Still, he thought, maybe when she realized he didn’t mean her any harm she would lower it and apologize or reveal that she did indeed have a phone. “Look, I can call from out here; you don’t even need to open the door.” He waited with what he hoped was an innocent and harmless look on his face, but all she did was stare. He heard a click that didn’t register immediately but having been around guns his whole life it finally settled into his confused mind. She’d just pulled the lever back. God, really? He backed up a space, then another. “Look, I can probably find someone else around here with a phone or something. Sorry to have bothered you.” His words tumbled over each other in his rush to get them out and get away from there.

“There’s no one else around here.”

He nodded. “Well, like I said, I have a cabin about fifteen miles up the Echo anyhow.” Backing further away, he kept his eyes on the barrel pointing out at him. He tried to smile. When he reached what he felt was a somewhat safe distance, he turned and walked as fast as he could, tensed for the sound of the gun firing at his back. He didn’t let out his breath until he reached the protection of the trees and forced himself to look back.

The cabin looked much as it had when he’d stumbled upon it, quaint and silent. “Shit,” shaking his head, he muttered about crazy women and backwoods ideals as he moved further into the forest. He’d gone about twenty yards through thick brush and over fallen tree limbs when he heard it. It was hard to tell what it was over his thrashing, but he knew it didn’t belong.

He waited, poised to move in any direction. Maybe he'd heard someone at another cabin nearby, someone with a phone instead of a gun. The sound came again. He tried to convince himself it was a crow; just the shrill annoying caw of an irritating black bird circling somewhere above, but he knew. There was no mistaking what it was or even who it was. That woman back there with the gun had screamed.

Even though going back to investigate could be the worst thing he ever did, he had no choice, somewhere deep inside he knew that whatever the reason, he had to find out. He just wasn't wired to ignore cries for help.

This time he approached as silently as he could, it took longer to avoid stepping on twigs and carefully move branches in a way that caused the least bit of sound, but he wasn't about to charge through the woods when he already knew there was a gun involved; not that guns scared him, but a gun in the hands of someone who looked to be on a hair trigger, well, that terrified him. He stayed hidden in the tree line when he got to the edge of the clearing and scanned the cabin from his camouflaged spot. There was a man at the door, just an ordinary looking man, not big and burly or weather beaten and woodsy. He had short, clean cut hair and more of a professional look about him than the guys he usually saw around here. It hit him then in a rush of relief, that this guy probably had a phone or could drive him to a gas station. He started out of the trees but stopped when he heard the man's voice.

"Anna," he called.

"Anna."

Over and over he repeated it without emotion, without recognition and without pause. Chills that had nothing to do with the dropping temperature ran up his spine and back down again. Okay, maybe not an ordinary man.

The hairs on his arms were standing on end and every nerve pin-pricked along his limbs with eerie fear. Maybe it was better to stay back; after all, this looked like a personal problem. Barry always told him repeatedly that the most dangerous situations he ever went on in his years as a Minneapolis cop were the domestics—the husband and wife/boyfriend and girlfriend fights that almost always ended in both of them turning on the cops that one of them had called for help— and he didn't want any part of it. Walking fifteen miles in an oncoming ice storm was looking more attractive by the second.

“Anna,” the man said. “Come on, Anna. I know you're in there.”

“Go away,” she shouted. “Leave me alone.”

Mike decided the guy was definitely her husband or boyfriend; they'd probably had a fight of some kind, best for him not to get involved. No, he decided with a firm nod of his head, he should just get the hell out of there.

“Please,” her voice pleaded.

Mike closed his eyes and turned his face up to the sky. His lips pursed over clenched teeth as he changed his mind almost against his will, that pleading desperation in her voice; he was helpless against it. He shook his head, exhaled through his nose; his teeth still grinding against each other, and stepped out from the trees.

“I think that's enough,” he said in the deep, no nonsense tone that had saved him from more than one barroom brawl during his younger days. It may have inadvertently helped start a few others, but he couldn't say for sure.

“Anna,” the man repeated without acknowledging him. “I know you can hear me.” The man rocked back on his heels, looked up at the sky, then back at the cabin, and shook his head as

if it was perfectly acceptable for him to stand there and call her name over and over again, and then blatantly ignore her obvious fear.

“Doesn’t look like the lady wants company,” Mike ground out as his muscles tensed for action, but he made sure to stay a good distance away.

“I have to go now, Anna. But I’ll be back. I promise.”

The man turned and walked slowly away, without the least glance in Mike’s direction. It rankled him. His fists were clenched, and he held a severe glare in his eyes until the man disappeared from sight. He wasn’t sure what to do. Should he follow after, he wondered, and make sure the guy was really gone?

Yeah, he knew he should, but he really, really didn’t want to. After all, the danger had passed, and he’d done the right thing. Hadn’t he? It could be over and done with. But, something about the guy’s manner, his cold and detached attitude, told Mike that it wasn’t really over. “Shit,” he huffed out, “dammit,” his feet moved forward in spite of his mind and he rounded the cabin to confront the guy.

There was no one there.

Where’d he go? He listened for the sound of a car pulling away or thrashing through the brush. But there wasn’t any noise, there was just silence and the dissipating clouds of his breath, which were coming out in adrenaline laced puffs. There was a path that led into the woods and another that looked like it led to a lake. He could see traces of the water through the trees in the distance. It seemed obvious the other path would lead to a parking spot for cars. He thought about heading down that one, maybe calling out to the guy and explaining his situation.

Whatever was going on between him and that woman didn’t need to involve him, he just needed a phone, but as he strained to pick up noise from either path, something in him said he needed to

check on her. Sometimes he wished he didn't have this chip on his shoulder that demanded chivalry. She may not deserve it, for all he knew, and his chance to get help was lessening with every second he stood fighting to make a decision. He stood a few seconds longer, listening and looking before he made up his mind and scanned the forest one more time before heading back around to the front of the cabin.

She stood there, one foot still inside the open door, her body tense and poised to dash back inside in a moment's notice. She wore a long-sleeved black shirt with a red and black buffalo checked vest over it, jeans, and hiking boots, which was a woodsy look he normally went nuts over on a woman, but he didn't pay it more than a passing glance now. Her skin was pale, so pale it was almost translucent; she looked like she hadn't seen the sun her entire life. Even her lips seemed void of color. Brown limp hair hung to her shoulders and was tucked behind her ears. She looked young and scared. She said nothing, but her entire body was shaking as her gaze darted frantically to the trees then back to him over and over until she finally settled on him. Her eyes, a faded grey when he saw them the first time through the crack in the door, now looked more like a soft blue in the half light from the ever darkening sky. They were opened wide, unblinking, but brimming with unshed tears. He stayed back but was filled with anger at the sight of her distress and a driving need to help her.

"You okay?" he asked though he was still shaken and wary.

Her lips trembled but never opened to answer him.

He tried to smile but wasn't sure if he'd accomplished it. He was so damn tired and more than a little uneasy.

"Thank you," she choked on her words, cleared her throat and started again. "Thank you for coming back." She looked at the ground and back up into his eyes with a solemn but

unblinking stare. “I ... the way I treated you—it’s just...that man—I thought maybe you were with him and...”

Mike held up his hands to calm her. “I don’t know him I swear. I truly just need a phone or a ride . . . uh, so are you okay? I mean what was that all about?” All she had to do now was tell him she was okay, that she and her boyfriend would work it out and he could go on his wet, cold way without the guilt and need to protect her demanding that he stay.

“I don’t know,” she whispered, and the tears finally spilled over and ran down her face as she swiped at them with the sleeve of her shirt and shook her head back and forth. It didn’t make any sense; he was already backing away when a crash of thunder boomed above their heads. He looked up to see the wave of threatening thunder clouds roll over the sky above them. Before he could move, the heavens opened and poured out their rage.

The rain mixed with sharp daggers of icy sleet came down in a fast and furious force that had him bowing his head and pulling up his collar for protection. The trees surrounding the cabin couldn’t stave off this onslaught of sheer power. He saw her jump lightning quick back through the door and looked through the onslaught to see her making a frantic beckoning gesture at him with her hand. Uneasiness took a back seat to survival and he took her up on the invitation.

The cabin’s interior was quaint and cozy in a way that spoke of the simple living from a time long gone by that he yearned for. Once in the door he spied a large stone set fireplace which spanned the entire wall to his left. An old, well-used brown leather couch sat in front of it with a large oval braided rug on the wood floor between the roaring fire and its once overstuffed, but now flattened cushions. The back of the sofa served as a sort of room separator for the tiny kitchen that he was practically standing in already—just inside the front door. A small oak dining table with two chairs, its leaves folded down so that there was just enough room to squeeze by it

on either side, sat directly in front of where he stood. The right side of the table afforded slightly more room to pass, but between it and the small refrigerator that looked to be from the 1950s, an apron sink, complete with a cloth skirt to hide its pipes underneath, and an old wood burning stove that crowded the wall, the kitchen was packed tight.

He had no idea what to do. His sweeping gaze landed on the rifle, propped barrel up, resting against the wall next to him and he darted a nervous glance at the girl. He could tell that she'd followed the path of his gaze.

“Um, yeah that . . . it's, uh, it's not actually loaded, I found it under the bed in the bedroom and . . . I don't know, it's just that, uh, when he showed up, I guess I thought maybe it would scare him off.”

“Well, it worked on me if that's any consolation.” He tried to make light of it, but his joke and half laugh fell flat. He looked at the gun again and sucked in his breath. “I think that's a . . .” He bent to examine it closer. “It is. My God, this is a—”

“A Henry? Yeah, I noticed that.”

“You noticed that? You know guns?”

“I know that gun. My grandpa had one, handed down from his father, it was his pride and joy. So, as far as I can tell it's old, but like I said it's not loaded or anything and there aren't any bullets as far as I could find. I looked.”

“Probably good that,” he said scratching his head, “I mean maybe it's in good shape but who knows how it fires—” he paused and looked back at her biting his lower lip in hesitation. “Say, do you, uh, I mean would you mind, if I just made sure it isn't loaded. Just so I can be sure?”

Her eyes narrowed with what looked like suspicion, he was about to change his tone and demand it, but she seemed to recover quickly because she just swept her hand in the air at the rifle. “Be my guest. There’s a hook right next to you, on the wall there, if you want to take off your wet coat first.” He stood in indecision for a few seconds, nodded and did what she suggested. He picked up the rifle carefully and whistled. It looked authentic and kept in good condition, though definitely used. He flipped it to check the magazine buffer and saw that it was all the way down. Relief flooded him.

“See,” she said, “feel better?” she asked, but there was a sarcastic ring in her tone, and he couldn’t help the glare he gave her.

“Have you ever had a gun leveled at you when all you needed was to make a phone call?” She had the decency to look down at least. “Well, I can tell you it’s a bit unnerving. So, yeah, I feel better. But I’m just going to check to make sure there isn’t one in the chamber if that’s okay with you?”

“Go ahead.”

She sat at the small wood table, perched on the edge of her chair, looking ever ready for flight. He worked the lever twice just to be positive; nothing.

“Now I feel better,” he said with a no-nonsense tone.

He looked up to see her staring silently at him, put the rifle back against the wall and stood there looking back at her clueless as to what he should do next. Neither of them said anything. He cleared his throat, but words failed him. Anything was better than the awkward silence hanging between them. Finally, he made up his mind, walked over, pulled out a chair and sat across from her. She stared at the floor without saying a word, the silence between them so thick it roared in his ears.

“So . . . uh, Anna?”

She looked up with a quick jerk when his voice broke through the silent room but then gave a small nod in response.

He waited for more, but nothing came. The weirdness of it all made him uncomfortable, unsure of himself and awkward. “I’m Mike.” He smiled but she didn’t respond her face stayed blank, the tracks of tears still visible on her cheeks. “. . . yeah, so, um . . . nice to meet you?” He didn’t know why it came out like a question, didn’t mean for it to, but before he could say something else, she laughed. Hearing and watching her laugh, after such a tense situation, started a slow spread of warmth through his chilled and weary body and his wariness melted a little.

“Well, hi there Mike, it’s nice to meet you, too.” She sputtered and giggled over her words and it took a while before she could stop. “Sorry,” she swiped at the tears coming from her eyes. “It just struck me as funny, as if nothing weird was going on.” She looked up at him, but he didn’t know quite how to respond. “Listen, I, uh, I can’t thank you enough for what you did—well, tried to do.” She looked like she was thinking about it and about to brew a fresh bout of tears. She went from laughing to crying in seconds and he was a mess of indecision and discomfort but jumped in quickly, wanting desperately to stop more tears from happening.

“Tried is the right word, I guess. I mean, the guy didn’t even look at me. Some help huh?”

She shook her head as he waited for her to fill in the gaps, but she offered nothing more.

“So, uh, were you just trying to get rid of me before and actually have a phone I could use?”

“Sorry. That wasn’t a lie.” She seemed to think better of her answer for a second because her eyes widened with a look of fear and she kept them glued to him without blinking. A long moment stretched between them as they both seemed to be sizing each other up.

He blew out a defeated breath, ran a hand through his hair without realizing it, and pursed his lips. “Well . . . shoot. Okay.” He looked around uncomfortably and then back at her. “So, uh, who was that guy?”

“I don’t know.” She ground the words through clenched teeth.

“You don’t know? I mean . . . C’mon.”

“I do *NOT* know!” She emphasized each word and her tone became increasingly agitated as she did. “I’ve never seen him before in my life. I don’t know what he wants. He never answers me.” She jumped up and started pacing. She walked by a closed door on the far wall, then back to the table, then over to the fireplace, and picked up a poker, which made him watch her even more closely. She stoked the fire and replaced the poker, then made her way back to the table before she finally spoke again. “He just . . . he just keeps coming. I never know when—” She choked back a sob, cleared her throat and swallowed what looked like a gulp of despair, “I don’t know when he will come, all I know is that he will. He always does. Saying my name over and over.” She shivered.

“What do you mean? I don’t understand. This guy just showed up one day calling your name like that?”

She nodded.

“But, but . . . come on, you mean that guy isn’t an ex boyfriend or your husband or, I don’t know the bagboy from the grocery store, or, or, the mailman?”

She shook her head furiously and suddenly stopped and looked at him.

“I don’t really know where I am.”

“Wait, what? But, I mean, whose cabin is this? It’s not yours?”

“No.”

God she was frustrating. He almost threw his hands in the air but stopped himself and stared dumbfounded instead. Her one-word answers just led to more confusion. It was driving him nuts.

“Okay, let’s break this down then. You’re in the state of Minnesota, just a few miles outside of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area—”

“Mmmrph.” She threw her hands in the air. “I know where I am. I mean I know that, okay? Would you stop looking at me like I’m on drugs?”

“Look, I just—shit I just wanted to make a phone call.”

She covered her face with her hands for a few seconds, took a deep breath and let them fall by her sides. “Okay. Okay. Sorry. Look, I know where I am location wise, ugh. I’m sorry. Everything has just been so, so . . . I don’t know, weird. But, yeah, I guess you wouldn’t know that.”

She looked at him, but he just stared back. It was time for her to divulge some information and he wasn’t about to stop her. “I was hiking with a few other people; we were just to the overlook when I slipped, somehow, I don’t know what happened.”

“Why would you go hiking during hunting season? Do you know how dangerous that is? My God, you’re lucky you weren’t taken for a deer. Seriously, I don’t understand what goes through a person’s mind sometimes—”

“Look, *Mike*, first, off it’s bow season . . .”

“I know it’s bow season, *hello*, I’m a bow hunter, but an arrow that can take down a 200 lb buck can take you down too. Were you at least wearing orange?”

Her cheeks flamed red and a hard look came over her face. “Listen, would you let me talk without getting all lecture-y. I know it’s bow season and I know what I’m doing. We were on private property, acres of it and no one can hunt there. We weren’t in any danger of that. I’ve been doing this for years, thank you very much. And of course we had blaze orange, just in case someone didn’t see the hundreds of signs posted, or decided to break the law.”

“Which happens all of the time.” He argued.

“Well, it’s never happened there. People around here tend to know where the boundaries of the camp are, and they respect that. Plus, we’re pretty diligent in prosecuting trespassers, especially if they’re hunting.”

“Well, I . . . wait, did you say camp?”

“Yeah, Camp Kinnikinnic. And we operate all the way into winter and give guided hikes every weekend, unless the weather is really bad, so . . .”

“But, wait. . .” His mind raced as he plotted a map in his head, “Camp Kinnikinnic? I know that one. It’s miles from here.”

“No, it isn’t, it’s just back . . . wait, what do you mean?”

“I mean I know that camp. It’s kind of, for city kids, right?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Yeah, I’ve heard of it. It’s a good seven miles north of where my cabin is and that is almost 15 miles back from here. You’re, God, you’re more than 20 miles from there.”

“That can’t be right. No, that’s not right. We were still on the property when I slipped. You must’ve gotten turned around or lost or something. Maybe we’re closer to your cabin than you think?”

“No, I don’t think so. I know where I went in the ditch. I’ve been coming here a long time.”

“Well, I’ve been coming here since I was six and I’ve worked at the camp for the past seven years, so I think I would know where I was.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense.” He stared intently at her, trying to piece the puzzle together. Was she lying? If not, then she went a lot further than she thought, but how on earth could she have come this far?

“Maybe we can figure it out. Maybe we can back-track what happened.” He tried to ease the tension by softening his face.

“I don’t really know how or what happened—I slipped somehow, we were pretty high up on an overlook, I still can’t remember how—but, the next thing I knew I was in the water. I must’ve been swept down a ways before I realized it because after I got a hold of a tree and worked my way to shore, I was alone. I yelled but there was no one there.” She paused and looked lost in thought. “I couldn’t have gone that far, really. It doesn’t make any sense.”

She looked at him, but he wasn’t about to say anything now, she was finally giving him some much needed information and he was afraid if he interrupted she’d go back to non-answers and head nods. “So, I just started walking. I don’t know how long or how far, but it wasn’t 20 miles I can tell you that. I was soaked, freezing cold and mad as hell. I can’t believe they just left, but there wasn’t anything or anyone around. I couldn’t figure out which way I was supposed to go, and I was panicking, then I saw this place. The door was unlocked, so I kind of, well,” she shrugged her shoulders.

“Well, with a fire going there must be someone close by . . .”

“I started the fire.”

He looked at her curiously. “You know how to start a fire?”

“Huh?” she asked with a confused look on her face. “Of course I know how to start a fire. What?”

“Oh, uh,” he cleared his throat, “I just, uh; I guess I don’t know, I haven’t really met many women who know how to do those things.”

“Well, I don’t know any who can’t.”

“I didn’t mean any offense. It’s . . . well, it’s, I mean I’m impressed.”

She rolled her eyes and kept talking. “*Anyway*, so, I thought once I was warm and dry I would head out or that my group would find me before now and I didn’t plan on staying here, but then he came . . .” Her voice stopped cold and her face paled even more.

“You know, that guy was probably sent by your friends to find you. I bet this is all a misunderstanding. How else would he know your name or even find you out here. God, that’s it! Mystery solved. You just need to talk to him . . .”

“I don’t know him.” She growled at the look of confusion on his face. “I thought that too, at first. I answered him. I asked him if they sent him, asked him who he was, his name—all of that. Over and over I asked. But he never answered. Still doesn’t answer. If he was sent by them why wouldn’t he answer me? But he doesn’t. Don’t you see?”

“It just doesn’t make any sense though. Maybe, you’re not remembering . . .”

She suddenly and fiercely pounded the table with closed fists and it shuddered and creaked under the attack. He sat shocked and a little frightened, speechless as he waited in helpless indecision for the table to collapse on him from the assault. “I don’t know him. I don’t know him. I don’t—” She practically screamed the words with each strike of her fist.

“Okay, okay.” He held his hands up in surrender “I’m sorry.” He ran his hand through his hair and tipped his head back. “Wow, this is just—well, it’s a lot to take in, is all.” He attempted a smile to calm her down but wasn’t sure that was accomplished, his mind and body were on full alert, his nerves firing off throughout every inch of his body telling him to prepare for flight to get away from her.

“He didn’t answer you either, you know.” She’d whispered the words, but he heard each of them clearly.

“That’s true.” He let out a rush of breath and focused on the eeriness of it. The way the guy just ignored him, it wasn’t even ignoring really, it was like complete disregard of his presence, like he didn’t matter at all. He tried to relax a little and put himself in her place and felt his mind ease, just a little. “You’re right, it’s weird. I guess I’m just trying to make sense of it.” She sat down on the edge of the chair again, her body looked so tense, and her face so frightened that he was suddenly overcome with anger at the son of a bitch who did it to her.

“Look, I know this sounds crazy—is crazy. But the only thing I know for sure is that he’ll come. I don’t know when, but he will come. He never answers me, just keeps saying my name like that. I . . . I don’t go outside at all. I don’t open the curtains. I’m stuck here. I just know one of these days he’ll probably kick the door in and then—” She shivered. “It’s so much worse this way,” she said. “I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what he’ll do. I feel like I’m losing my mind. I almost ran out the door at him this time. I thought, fine, I’ll go down fighting, I’ll claw his eyes out, I can’t take this . . . this . . . I can’t . . . But then you came. And, I thought . . . you know, well at first, I mean, I thought maybe you were with him, but when you came back and tried to talk to him, well then I knew you weren’t and I thought maybe . . . maybe you could help me get out of here.”

She'd rambled everything out so fast his brain could hardly keep up, but her terror seemed real. Her confusion and fear permeated the room. He cleared his throat, "I will help you get out of here, okay? We'll go together. We'll head to the Echo Trail and eventually someone will come by. I won't leave you here okay? I promise." There was no way he would just leave her there. Truth or not, crazy or not, he could never just turn his back on her and walk away.

She nodded and swiped at the tears that streamed down her face with the sleeve of her shirt which was now looking pretty stretched out and wet.

"So, why is he here then? What does he want? It doesn't make any sense, you know . . ."

"Please . . ." she looked up at him then closed her eyes and let out a breath, "please no more. Not now . . . it's all I think about. Can we just talk about something else, anything other than him? I don't want to think about him anymore . . ."

He wanted to plan for when the guy would be back, he wanted to be ready, and figure the best route out of there but the pleading look in her eyes was all it took.

"How long have you been here?"

"I don't know, two days, maybe . . . I think."

"Two days? And no one else has come looking? There must be a search party out for you by now."

"No, no one; except *him*." She breathed in and out heavily for a few silent seconds then spoke again. "I found this place, I was wet and freezing, like I said—started a fire, and just had my clothes off and drying over there," she pointed to the fireplace, "when there he was outside, calling my name. I would've thrown the door open and rushed out if I hadn't been wearing only the blanket I found on the bed in there," she thrust her hand at the closed door he'd noticed earlier. "But instead I answered him back, told him I just needed to get my things on and that I

would be right out. But, he didn't even acknowledge what I said, just said my name over and over and over. God, when I think how I would've just run out the door without thinking about it . . . he didn't even knock you know? Not even once, just kept saying *I know you can hear me.*" She shivered and wrapped her arms around her chest.

He didn't know what to do or say. Nothing made any sense. He wanted to say she was overreacting, that he was obviously looking for her and maybe just found her first. But what if she was right to be afraid of the guy? Why was he acting the way he was? Who just stood there and called a person's name without responding to their questions? But he did know her name, which must mean he knew her, or at least knew *of* her. Maybe the camp had notified the local media and Anna's name and picture were being blasted all over the area. Maybe he was just a search and rescue person, or Good Samaritan, but why ignore her like he did? He could be a predator—some crazy nut-bag who saw her on TV and headed out to take advantage of her distress. His mind zapped back and forth over the possibilities but couldn't settle on anything solid. Whatever the truth was, she was scared to death of the guy, he could see that, and right now he needed to calm her down.

"You know, I got a good look at the guy and I can honestly say I think I can take him."

The silence that met his comment made him flinch inwardly. Shit. That probably sounded arrogant or like he was some kind of Neanderthal—but before he could apologize, she laughed. He faced her then with a look of relief. "I thought you might think that was macho bullshit or something."

"I do." She said, but then smiled.

He smiled back at her, genuinely this time. His nervous tension and discomfort were dissipating more each minute. The rain suddenly hammered on the roof of the cabin with new intensity. He looked up at the ceiling then back at her with a shrug and small frown.

“It may be a while before this let’s up.” He offered.

She sighed. “I don’t want to stay here another second than I have to, but I think I can manage a few more hours. I mean, now that your—” She stopped and looked away. “Uh, I mean, you know, now that I can get out of here.”

“That’s a fact. You will get out of here, no doubt about it.” He looked around the room and then back at her. “So, why don’t we kill some time? It’ll make it go faster. Tell me your life story.”

She laughed and looked at him, her eyes dancing with humor.

He hadn’t meant it to be funny and cleared his throat, embarrassed. “I mean, might as well, talk about stuff since there’s nothing else to do.”

“Ah. That makes sense, I guess.”

She didn’t say anything else and he ran his hand through his hair in frustration. Would he have to pull every bit of information from her? It was getting exhausting. He reminded himself once again of how frightened she had been, just moments before, and decided he would remain calm and polite and do what he had to do.

“So, you’re like a camp counselor or something?”

She nodded again.

“Is that, what you do, I mean, for a living?”

She didn’t answer for a second or two and he looked around the room wondering what else he could bring up to get her talking, but she sighed and finally spoke. “It’s something I’ve

been doing since high school. It doesn't pay much but I still devote my weekends during the school year and at least one month in the summer. I just can't let it go. I love showing the kids and teens the wonders of being up here, and things like, you know, like how to build a fire," she smiled up at him and he felt himself blush, "and fish, cook over a fire, you know some of them have never seen anything like this before." Her eyes lit up with a spark he hadn't seen yet. He was trying to hide his admiration, lest it offend her again, and could feel the last strain of anxiety leave his shoulders. He was about to tell her that he'd never met anyone like her before, but she sat up suddenly, a frantic look on her face. "What if they saw me fall and tried to reach me and fell in too—what if something happened to them? What if that's why no one's come? Oh my God, those kids . . ."

"Hey, hey. That's not, I mean, that just couldn't have . . . listen, I'm sure that didn't happen. A whole lot of people would be scouring the area if that were the case, we'd see helicopters and TV News vans and all kinds of people." He tried to reassure her by speaking with confidence. "Nope, that's not something you need to worry over. I guarantee it. You know what happened, I bet . . ." He looked at her and waited for a response, but she was too far gone in her worry to respond so he just answered his own question. "I bet that you went a lot further than you think. You probably ended up where there was no path through or something and they couldn't get to you, so they went back for help. Yep," he nodded, "that's what happened. I'm sure of it."

She tipped her head back, closed her eyes, sighed and held the position for a beat or two before sitting back up to look at him with what seemed a grateful smile. "Thank you, you're probably right. Plus, we drill that very thing into their heads before we head out anywhere. I bet that's what they did."

“I’m sure of it. Don’t worry about them right now. When we get out of here, you’ll see that they’re safe and sound and just worried about you.”

He saw that her face was still tight with stress, fear and worry and his mind raced for a way to help her forget, at least for a little while.

‘So, then, if this is a volunteer thing, what do you do? For a job, I mean?’

“I’m not officially in my career yet. I’m in school.” He felt his face tighten with her answer. Just how old is she, he wondered? She didn’t look to be old enough to even have a beer.

“I’m getting my master’s degree in biology.” She added the last part without much thought, and without noticing his relief. That meant she was at least somewhere in her twenties, he stopped his train of thought, what was he doing? What did it matter how old she was? She needed help, so he would help. That’s all there was to it. But he knew, deep down, that maybe even the minute he saw her there, even with the gun, she was . . . she could be . . . he shook his head. Stop, he mentally demanded and responded to her information as if he hadn’t just had a conversation in his head. “So, uh, biology huh? Wow, that’s cool, um, what do you want to do then, when you graduate?”

She looked at him blankly for a second or two then answered. “I don’t know, teaching, maybe. I’d rather work outside, but so would everyone else with a biology degree. I’m mostly into plants, invasive species, that kind of thing . . .” her voice trailed off. She looked all taut, ready to climb the walls or scream or something. And he realized he had to work harder to get her out of her head.

A little voice in his head kept nagging him. Whatever she was into, he needed to remember, that she couldn’t be telling him the whole truth. There was something weird going on here, that much he knew, but he couldn’t just leave her here either. He had to help her now; he

couldn't turn his back on it, no matter how much he wanted to. Maybe if he could ease her fears a bit more, she'd open up and trust him.

“Do you know,” his voice cracked a little with the desperation he was feeling, he cleared his throat and started again, “do you know I spent all weekend in my tree stand and there was hardly even a squirrel to keep me company, then bam a few minutes on the road and the deer I should've had in my sights just stood mocking me on the blacktop. I was so mad I decided to hit him with my truck, but I missed and hit a tree or two instead.” Too late, he realized, after the comment that she may think he was serious about hitting a deer with his truck, or worse, the Bambi accusations would start . . .

But she just stared at him with a confused look at first and then he saw the visible signs of relief pass over her face, settle in her shoulders and then, she sat on the other chair and settled all the way into it for the first time since he'd entered the cabin. Pride filled him. He took a kind of arrogant ownership of her calming and it pushed him into finding more stories to fill the time. He regaled her with his hunting escapades from the weekend, then anything he could think of from his childhood and then he scrambled for more; he would do and say anything to keep the small smile on her lips and the calm that had settled on the features of her face. Every minute that ticked by seemed to fill her with more and more peace. The primal kind of pleasure that filled him for easing her fear had him searching his brain for anything he could find; he'd make stories up if he had to, just to keep her looking and feeling how she did right at this moment.

He was in the middle of a story about his childhood attempt to build a tree house and the raccoon who disagreed with his choice when the thoughts and feelings he kept pushing down just rose up and took over. There was no stopping them this time. He looked at her, and then around the room as he stumbled over his words and tried to remember what he'd been saying. But all he

could think was that he was sitting in the middle of the woods with a woman who loves everything he does; who knows how to build a fire . . . Had she been here all this time with just a few miles of trees between them? His inner voice tried to break through, demanded he think about the situation as a whole—the unexplained drama surrounding her, the uncertainty, a mysterious man, things that didn't add up at all—and the weird mess it seemed to be. She was involved in something she wasn't telling him the whole truth about and he shook his head to get rid of the warm feelings that were rising. Anna was vulnerable, she needed him and that felt . . . well, it felt damn good to be needed.

She was also like no one he'd ever met before. She loved the very same things he did, no matter what else was going on he couldn't look past that; he didn't want to look past it. He couldn't help himself, couldn't stop himself from going there.

His voice was getting raw, his memory bank running dry and his exhaustion taking over. Anna stared at the flames in the fire place and he followed her gaze. "Needs another log or two," he said and stood to take care of it. His legs almost gave out beneath him and he grabbed the little table to steady himself, almost knocking it over.

"Maybe you should just sit." She sounded concerned.

"I don't know, I think that may be the problem," he answered, and pounded his fists against his thighs. "I think my legs fell asleep from sitting too long. I need to stretch and walk or something."

He hobbled to the fireplace, embarrassed over his lack of physical stamina. Seriously? Done in by sitting too long, nice one. He could feel the heat of humiliation rising in his cheeks. It didn't just feel like they'd fallen asleep, though. There was a gnawing ache in his thighs deeper and more painful than the pinpricks of lazy muscles. A kind of searing heat crept up both of his

legs, not painful enough to cripple him but enough to cause a moment of concern. He'd felt the same thing when he got out of the truck. Did he have some kind of internal injury? He shook off his concern. He'd walked a few miles on these legs after the accident. There was nothing wrong with him except the fact that he was exhausted. He was sure of it.

“My legs are a bit sore, I think, from the accident or something. But, it's fine. I probably just need to walk it off.”

“Was it bad? The accident? I mean it must've been or you wouldn't be hiking around in the woods looking for a phone, I guess.”

“My truck is totaled,” he clenched his jaw to fight the surge of emotion he felt at those words.

“You're lucky to have not been hurt, then.”

He didn't answer for a few seconds. “I guess. I mean when you realize you're okay you kind of forget that part. All I can think about is my truck. I wonder if someone drove by and saw it or called the cops. I probably should have stayed to make sure it would be okay.”

“Really?” Her tone was a bit condescending and he turned to look at her. “You think you should have stayed, in this storm, to make sure your truck was okay?”

“I suppose it sounds stupid. Hey, I didn't though. Still, I saved up for that truck for 18 months, every pay check went into the bank. I was 19 when I finally had enough. It belonged to my dad's friend and he'd been hanging on to it for me until I had enough, but every penny had to come from me, and it did. A 1978 Ford pickup. A truck that still looks like a truck, you know. Not one of those curvy, sleek weird-looking things they make today for people who will never actually use the bed for hauling anything. A real truck, the color of pine trees, not neon or bright green, but that deep forest green you see up here in July when everything is in full bloom.”

“It sounds pretty cool.”

He looked at her face, but it didn't seem like she was mocking him or laughing at him, she just looked curious.

He knew he probably sounded stupid to her, but he couldn't help it. He finally had the time to think about what happened back there on the road. “Yeah, it is, I mean was,” he looked away quickly. “I get it, it's just a truck. Don't get me wrong it wasn't going to last forever or anything. Anyway, I've always been able to fix it, no matter what, but not this time.”

“I'm sorry,” she said and he could tell she was trying to empathize, which was nice. “Cars aren't really my thing, but I know a lot of guys who are big into them.”

“I'm not into cars. Just my truck. It was a beast for hauling. I could fit both of my canoes in the back end without a problem. They just don't make 'em like that anymore. I mean I can get another truck, but the chances of finding another one in that good of shape from that year, well, it's a long shot.” He turned back to the fireplace and picked a log up from the stack nestled in the alcove to its right. He took in the fireplace to change the path his thoughts were taking. It was all hand-placed stones from floor to ceiling. “This fireplace is amazing,” he whistled under his breath. He'd often dreamed of building a place just like this, just like the way they used to make them when all they had were their two bare hands and a hell of a lot of drive and determination.

He knelt down near the stone hearth and placed the log at an angle on top of the already burning remains of the others. There was something about fire, he could stare at the flames forever as they danced and licked at each other. Someone told him once it was because they never made the same pattern so the brain couldn't figure it out. There was no preset plan in the flame's path. It just went where it wanted to go. There was no stopping it, no telling it what it

had to do and when. He liked that. He watched a while longer, respect and the light of the flames shining in his eyes.

“I’m sorry about your truck,” her voice broke through his trance. “I’m also sorry to tell you that there’s no food here either, if you’re hungry that is. The cupboards are bare.”

“No bullets, no food, what kind of place is this?” he joked, happy to leave the subject of his muscle atrophy and emotional musings about his truck behind as he struggled to stand back up like an old man. “Seriously though, I’m not really hungry, I guess I hadn’t thought about it.” “What about you? Have you not had any food then?”

“I guess not,” she answered with a bewildered look. “To be honest, I haven’t really thought about food at all, until just now.”

“For two days?”

“Maybe I’ve been too much in survival mode and my body is living on reserves. I’ve heard of stuff like that happening before. I don’t know it just hasn’t been a factor.”

A loud boom of thunder crashed and shook the cabin. He saw her jump a little and her eyes widen. He walked over and sat on the sofa to ease his aching muscles, “You know, in my experience storms that come in fast and furious like these go out kinda the same way. Suddenly, it will be dry and sunny with the birds chirping and the only sign it was here will be a few downed branches and wet trees.”

She nodded.

“There’s this place in Ely that I go to when I come out of a trip. I don’t even know the name of it, but it’s a little cabin resort, over by Shagawa Lake.” He stopped and looked at her to explain where that was but could tell by the look on her face that she knew, so he continued.

“Well, anyway, they serve the most monstrous burgers you’ve ever seen. They’re a pound or a

pound and a half and seriously ridiculous, but after portaging and living off fish, or backpacker meals, they are the most wondrous thing you could ever behold. When the storm clears that's where we'll go. We'll go feed you one of those bad boys and get you back right as rain, call your friends from there and have them come and get you fat and happy."

He smiled at her in anticipation, but she had a strange look on her face, and he faltered. Did he say something wrong? He racked his brain trying to remember, but before anything came to mind she stood up and moved toward the sofa.

"I know the place you're talking about, Stony Ridge, I've been there." She smiled; big this time and he sank into the cushions of the sofa in relief.

"Really? It has a name? I've never been able to find out. There aren't any signs and no one ever called it by a name. I just figured it didn't have one. It's one of my favorites. I mean there's something so satisfying about looking at a meal like that after coming out."

"You ever show up at 4:00pm because you've already been waiting two hours for them to open only to see the little sign hanging on the door that says: *Be back soon?*" She smiled with a warmth in her eyes that made him catch his breath.

"You know, come to think of it that did happen once!" He laughed and let his head fall back on the cushions while she perched on the other end and crossed her feet up under her.

"I thought I'd found a secret hidden gem when I found that place. Whenever I'd come out I'd ask all over town where I could get a burger and everyone said Dairy Queen. Dairy Queen! I mean they have good burgers, I guess, but how could Ely not have a burger joint? Years and years, I've been coming and asking and that's the answer. Then one day, a guy sitting next to me at Dee's bar starts talking about how they're going to head over to this place, but he never mentioned the name of it. So, Stony Ridge, was that the name?"

He looked at her for reassurance and she nodded.

“And the bartender says, so it’s burger night then and I slapped the bar right then and made sure they told me where this place was.”

“Sometimes they don’t even open the kitchen at all, even though it says 4:00 pm, it all depends on what they have going on at the resort.”

“I can see that.” He laughed again. “They kind of operate on their own schedule, but that’s part of the charm, at least I think so.”

“You know what, now you have made me kind of hungry. Quick we need a topic change.” She smiled and he felt something course through him that he couldn’t explain. You’re just hungry too, he told himself, but knew instantly it was a lie.

“Topic change,” he said and looked away when he realized he’d been staring at her. “So, when you camp with these kids you head in to the Boundary Waters? Or do you stay at the campgrounds?”

“Well, that depends on the ages and skills of the group. So, both I guess.”

“But you’ve taken them in, like on portages to camp overnight not just day trips?”

“Of course!” She looked curious or suspicious or a mix of the two, but he just grinned back at her and kept asking questions.

“You ever take them up the Gunflint or stay around here?”

“We mostly stay around this area.” She sat up, slanted her eyes and tipped her head.

“Why?”

“You said topic change, so I’m changing the topic. So, let’s compare where we’ve been, I mean we’ve probably been to some of the same spots. So, name the hardest portage you’ve ever done?”

“Hmm, let’s see . . . there’s always differences I mean weather and bugs and stuff—”

“Nope, that doesn’t count. Forget bugs, rain and weather. The hardest portage in the best conditions.”

“That’s not fair, though. I mean weather can take a passably good portage and turn it into a death trap. . .”

“Good point, but still, everyone always complains about the bugs. I hate that, bugs are due to the time of year and the weather, not the campsites or the area. Anyway, tell you what, right now just tell me the hardest one you’ve done in pristine conditions. But it’s okay to add that it had just down-poured the day before and it was a mud pit because of it or it was flooded or there were blow-downs. How’s that for a compromise?”

She stared at the wall behind him for a moment and he could see her mind working over the question. “We kind of always take the same trips so, the kids always, and I mean *always* complain about the trek into Fourtown from Mudro.”

“Mudro to Fourtown? Come on, I’ve done those, they’re short. That’s wimpy.”

“Well, short but super steep and full of ankle-breakers, no easy feat when you’re carrying a pack and a canoe.”

“You carried a canoe?” He couldn’t help his astonishment. And then he blew it even further by adding, “But, it was a Kevlar I bet. Right?”

Her eyes slanted at him and he knew he’d said something wrong.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, nothing. I mean I want one someday. I just, I mean I have an Old Town that weighs 90 pounds and I was just pretty sure you weren’t carrying one of those.”

“Huh, well I had a Kevlar and a forty-five pound pack too. That’s almost 90 pounds so I don’t appreciate you’re just brushing it off. Plus, not to mention, there was about five unpracticed and whining teenagers along . . . I mean, one of them dropped their pack halfway and I had to go back and get it. So, I basically double portaged the whole way.”

“Shoot, you carried almost 90 pounds? You don’t need me; you can probably take that guy yourself.” He saw her smile fade and the light in her eyes die a little at his words and he swore at himself for reminding her. She turned her head and watched the flames dance for a long, silent moment while he tried to think of something to recover from the slip.

“I don’t know what it is.” Her voice caught on her words. “I have never been more afraid in my life,” she shuddered and shook her head before turning back to look at him. “When he says my name something in me just freezes.”

He tipped his head in apology and cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. I know. But, that’s over now. It’s not even a factor anymore, right? I mean I’m here now,” he suddenly heard had that might sound boastful or weird so added, “I mean you’re not alone and that makes it two against one, right? So, we’re just gonna walk on out of here and be gorging ourselves at Stony Ridge as soon as the storm clears.” She tried to smile but it was half-hearted. “I promise.” He reached out and touched the calf of her crossed leg before realizing what he was doing and pulled his hand back just as fast.

“But you know you didn’t really answer the question. You know, with the rules we set up? How about without the teenagers—just you—have you gone without them at all? You know just on your own with friends and not for the camp?” He waited hoping she’d take the bait and didn’t let out a breath until she finally did.

“Uh, hello? Many times. So, let’s see, I guess that would be... I don’t know, I’m drawing a blank. How about you? You look like you’re ready to explode with whatever you think is the hardest portage ever, just go ahead and spill it.”

She was right. What was wrong with him? What was he trying to do? Prove his strength? God, this wasn’t like him, he felt the heat climb up his neck and face again, he was acting like a child or a man who’d never talked to a woman before. He had to get a grip.

“Come on. I know you’re itching to brag, so let’s hear it.”

Her teasing helped ease his embarrassment but what in the hell was he doing? He had to try and recover, show her he wasn’t an arrogant chest beating mouth breather.

“Okay, well there are a lot that are bad, I mean blow downs from storms blocking the path or beaver damns being built right before the landing so you have to find a new way through to get to it. I’ve dealt with that a lot, some really bad ones further north but I guess the actual toughest that comes to mind from around here is the Angleworm, that one was one thing after another.”

She rolled her eyes and snorted. “Angleworm? Are you kidding? I was expecting something seriously hardcore. Angleworm is just long; it’s a road for crying out loud.”

“I wasn’t talking about the hiking trail from the parking lot.” He stammered and felt the heat climbing into his cheeks. He was irritated by her reaction and felt a surging need to tell her of all of his feats—working at a lumber camp in Alaska when he was 19 years old, camping without a tent in 22 below zero, making a snare the old-fashioned way and getting a rabbit when no one else could—he was the hero of that trip, that’s for sure. Oh my God, he realized he was doing it again and shook his head in disgust.

“What? You look mad,” she lost some of the light that was in her eyes a second before and he panicked.

“Mad? Heck no, I’m not mad,” think, think, he grumbled silently. What could he do to recover? “I just can’t believe after all of the stories I just told you, and how I fought off an angry raccoon no less, that you would think I was talking about the road from the parking lot. I mean sheesh haven’t I proven my Tarzan like skills yet?”

She laughed, thank God, and he blew out a breath of relief.

“No, ma’am, not the road. I’m talking about the portage from Trease into Angleworm. You know if you go into Hegman and then head past the pictographs to Trease? That way?”

“Huh, I guess I’ve never gone past the pictographs on Hegman. I mean I’ve been there many times. It’s a great day trip to take the kids on and the pictographs are awesome.”

“I bet those kids are floored by it. I would love to see the look on their faces when they paddle up and see it for the first time.”

“They are, you should see it. They canoe along all loud and obnoxious even though they’re surrounded by such beauty but, man, do they stop giggling and shouting when they see them and a kind of hush falls over them.”

“I remember the first time I saw it, I sat in my canoe and just stared at it forever.”

No one was quite sure what the images meant, he’d tried to do research a few times, years ago. But, he decided it didn’t matter, not really. The images were of a man, moose, dog or maybe a wolf, and a couple of canoes, one or two of them with two people in them. Pretty basic stuff for the most part, but he’d sat silent and awestruck. His breath had caught as he stared at the image of the canoes—just two people in them—and he couldn’t tear his gaze away from them. When he finally did, his heart was racing even though he’d been sitting still. His own canoe

drifted with the pull of the water and he took pains to silently paddle back—as if any noise would break the spell he was under. He looked at the images of wildlife and the man with his arms outspread, like a god. And it hit him that, to him, this was what he'd been looking for. The meaning of life was right there, showing him that everything he needed and wanted was now, and always had been the real Truth. Or at least it was his real Truth, and he wasn't going to change his mind.

He had been on one of many solo trips, working his way through Hegman to get to a lake much further north in the Boundary Waters, everything had been mapped out and timed in his mind to precision. But he'd stayed staring at that image and lost all track of time. He remembered now, that it was after that trip that nothing ever felt quite right again, nothing felt the same when he got home, and a sense of unease and discontent started to grow.

“I know what you mean about the pictographs. I mean there are tons of them in the area, but they still take your breath away.” She said and looked at him. “You know they say that those pictographs may be the Ojibwe's way of painting the constellations.” Her voice trailed off.

They were both staring directly into each other's eyes but seemed to be off thinking of other things. Mike was still thinking of the image of the two people in the canoe and how it became crystal clear to him that that was what he wanted more than anything else in the world. He suddenly realized he'd been staring at her and looked away quickly, clearing his throat. He was losing it, going places in his mind that he shouldn't, not yet.

“So, uh, have you gone past them to the portage then? The one I'm talking about?” He needed to change the path his mind had been taking and get his head out of the clouds, but he didn't know why anymore. A war was starting in his head over the possibilities of this woman

being *the one* and the asinine desperation of a lonely man jumping at the first woman he found with the same passion for the area he had.

It took her a second to register that he'd asked her a question, her trance not yet realized or broken. She shook her head slightly at his words, looked away and blinked a few times rapidly before looking at him again. "What? Oh, uh no. I guess I've never been on that portage."

"See," he turned back to look at her with a grin, "so you haven't actually done the portage I'm talking about."

"No, you're right." She tipped her head in acknowledgement, "I stand corrected."

"Well, it's not the like the portion that's just a long road from the parking lot, not even close. And I don't suggest you take a group of kids on that one, it's a nightmare, all blocked paths, flooded portions, boulders the size of cars and mud up to your . . ."

"Knees?" She cut him off with a laugh. "Sorry," she added when she looked at him. "It's just that everyone always says mud up to their knees and then it turns out to be a slight exaggeration."

"Well, I wasn't going to say that at all. No, it was up to my waist."

"Oh, I see."

"Seriously, it's not for the faint of heart, or those without hip waders," he added. She laughed again, and it was all he could do to not shift his position closer to her, his body was screaming out to be right next to her, to feel her somehow. He spoke quickly to get rid of the sudden thoughts filling his mind.

"And, hindsight being 20-20, I now know I missed the exit point and ended up forging my own path up a rock face that eventually hooked up with the hiking trail, the long one. What is that one like 650 rods or something, before I finally found my way to the lake." His words came

out too fast, almost tripping over each other in his attempt to shake the feelings running through him.

“Ah, so human error, and I might add weather, did play a part in this portage from Hell.” She raised her eyebrows at him.

“Okay, okay, I guess you have a point.” He said and looked at her. His eyes roamed up and down her cross-legged form and he looked away with lightning speed, lest she notice. She wasn’t as frail as he’d first thought, he realized suddenly. She looked sturdy and competent to him now. The color had come back into her face, whether from the heat of the fire, or maybe, he hoped, the company, she looked different, pretty and relaxed. “Hey, have you ever seen the ones off of the Kawishiwi River?” His words tripped over each other in his attempt to distract himself from the fact that she was sitting so close to him, “Those are pretty awesome too. I mean not in as good-a-shape as the Hegman ones, but really cool.”

“Seen them, I jumped off that cliff when I was . . . what?” She paused and thought for a moment and then answered. “Nineteen. God that was a fun trip. Just a group of us, no camp kids,” she looked over at him, a light of excitement filling her eyes. “So, we all hiked up the cliff trail, worked our way to the edge and just did it. We jumped off holding hands.” She laughed a little at her memory.

She looked like she wanted to keep talking about her memories of the trip, but he felt something strange rising in him. He didn’t want to hear about the great times she had with other people. He kept picturing a nameless, faceless guy holding her hand and taking the leap off of the cliff, with her. His mind went as far as to see them pop up out of the water, laughing and swimming toward each other. He shook his head with a quick jerk to stop his train of thought. What was he doing? Could he really be jealous of a time he didn’t even know her? It was insane.

Still, even though he knew he was being crazy, he didn't want to hear more about her fun trip and learn that there probably was a guy. "Did you get a good look at them though?" He asked, purposely steering the conversation back to the pictographs.

"The pictographs?" She had wandered back to the memories and forgotten the original question for a minute.

He nodded at her but looked at the fire again instead of her, trying to hide the jealousy and embarrassment he was struggling with.

"Well, yea, I mean as good as you can." She answered, "They're kind of in rough shape though."

"They are, you're right. That's why when I got home from that trip I used software and enhanced the pictures. I was able to get some really cool and crisp images from it. There are several that I didn't even know were there." He knew he was bragging again, but he just couldn't seem to stop himself.

"You did? That's . . . I mean, wow, that's kind of wild." She looked at the fire after speaking.

"Yeah, I just kind of know how to do stuff like that, I guess so I thought I'd try it and see what appeared, just for fun. Kind of nerdy I guess." He realized he probably sounded like a real dork telling her about software and image enhancement. He racked his brain trying to find a way to look a bit cooler, but worried it was too late.

"No, that's really amazing." She said with a smile that looked genuine.

"I guess I'm kind of weird that way." He smiled back but didn't have the confidence he'd been feeling earlier. What if she thought he was cocky or nerdy or boring? Did he say too much?

“I don’t think it’s weird,” she said. He looked at her but she looked away quickly. “So, uh, did you find anything amazing then? I mean maybe you should share what you did with the world or some anthropologist or something. The historical society for sure.”

He couldn’t help but warm to the topic and dive in head first. Nerd or not, whatever she may think, he loved this kind of stuff and couldn’t hide it. He heard himself start blabbing on and on about thermal imaging and the way he was able to pick out each image digitally, but he couldn’t seem to stop himself. It was suddenly more important than anything that she like the things he did and understand him. What was happening to him? This wasn’t like him at all. She was in a seriously weird situation and he was going all poetic and gaga over pictographs and the meaning of life within not even a day of meeting her. He was losing it. But, somehow, he couldn’t stop it. His mind was all over the place, but he couldn’t stop the track it was on now. It hit him then, out of nowhere, what if it didn’t matter that he was sitting there waging the pros and cons of a relationship with her, what if she had someone already? She could have a boyfriend, or worse. Here he was getting all worked up like a, a, God like a *Doug*. He had to calm down. Smooth, Mike, be smooth. You don’t even know her, he told himself over and over.

He looked over at her and saw her staring at him with a weird expression. “What?” he asked.

“I said, that I would, uh, well, I mean, if you want, that is . . . it would be kind of cool, you know, to see them sometime.”

“Oh,” he felt the air leave his lungs and his heart start to race. “Uh, sorry I got lost in thought there for a minute. That, uh, that would be . . . I mean yeah, absolutely. I’d love to show you or send them to you, you know, in case it would look weird or make someone jealous that you were getting together with a guy to look at pictures.”

She tilted her head, squinted her eyes and gave him a weird half smile. But she didn't respond.

He looked at her and swallowed, he knew he was being awkward and idiotic but couldn't seem to stop the next question from coming out. He hated the sound of his voice when it came out but said it anyway. "I mean would it, uh, make someone get the wrong idea or something?"

"You're funny," she said and left him sitting there waiting like an idiot for a few seconds. "No, there's no one who would be jealous, and I wouldn't take it too well if there was, just so you know."

He let out his breath and smiled, too relieved to be embarrassed. "Oh, well I was just making sure. Some guys are real hotheads you know. I wouldn't want anyone to get the wrong idea."

"What would the right idea be?" She tilted her head in that curious but cocky way she had and smiled at him.

A sudden coughing fit seized him as if he'd choked on air and he had to clear his throat a few times before he could speak. He had no idea how to take her comments, was she flirting? Hope filled him. He pictured them together, camping and canoeing to some of his favorite spots, and then hers. His imagination was getting the best of him when he remembered her story about the cliff jumping. As much as he didn't want to remind her of whoever she had fun with back then—and he was fully aware of the insanity of his thoughts because she never mentioned that there was a someone with her—he needed to know something. She was getting her master's degree so she had to be at least 22-years-old he thought. Ten years wasn't a huge age difference, not really. Plus she could be older than that, like 23, he thought. He suddenly needed to know. He told himself that it didn't matter, not really, not to him, but what if it mattered to her?

“So, that’s pretty cool that you jumped off the cliffs um, how long ago was that? I mean, you know, you were 19 so, a couple years ago?”

He could feel the change in the air when the words came out of his mouth. Could she know he was digging? Thinking about things differently than when he first came in the door and wondering if maybe, just maybe . . .

“*Ohh,*” her voice had a singsong lilt he hadn’t heard before, “well, how old do you think I am?” she asked.

She knew. There was no doubt about it, and it wasn’t like he was being the king of subtle right now. Still, her playful question made his heart pound in his ears.

“Oh, huh-uh, no way. That’s a terrible question to ask a guy. If I say too young you could be offended, if I go too old you could be offended. I can’t win in this situation; I’m not even going there.”

“Well, how old are you then?” Her tone made it sound like a challenge.

“I asked first.” He crossed his arms over his chest in mock stubbornness and raised an eyebrow at her.

“*So?*” she giggled but then crossed her arms in the exact way he had and raised her chin in the air.

He knew stone cold stubborn when he saw it, she wasn’t going to budge, so he blurted it out and waited for whatever her response would be, but part of him hoped she wasn’t as young as he thought she might be.

“Thirty-two?” She gasped, “I never would’ve guessed it.”

“I have a young face. Hey, wait that’s not that old, though. Is it?” He swallowed at the lump in his throat.

She didn't answer his question. "I have a young face too, late bloomer my whole life." She smiled. "I hate that people always think I'm an 18-year-old or something. I'm 26 for crying out loud. Everyone says I'll appreciate it when I'm older. . ."

He sprang forward and cut her off without realizing it, "That's not so bad."

"Gee thanks, I don't think so." She mocked.

"I didn't mean it that way." He stopped short when he realized he was about to say too much.

"So, what way did you mean it?" She looked him in the eyes and waited. Was that a flirtatious light he saw dancing in hers? She didn't look mad, she didn't look uninterested. His breath caught. He found himself noticing how pretty she was, the fire warmed her skin to a rosy glow, her eyes shined when the light hit them just so, and her voice was soft and warm. Why hadn't he noticed it when he first saw her?

She uncrossed her legs, reached out with one and kicked his thigh lightly with her foot. "Well, how did you mean it?"

"Oh, uh—" what was wrong with him? He felt like everything he said was idiotic, every look on his face revealing how he suddenly felt inside. He turned his face away quickly but then back again because he didn't want to stop looking at her. What happened to the guy who wanted to know if someone was a fit for him immediately and then move on if they weren't? That guy wouldn't have any of this fear or vulnerability. "I meant, uh, I guess . . . that you aren't that much younger than me." His face felt hot again.

She tilted her head and smiled. "No, I guess I'm not. I mean you could probably still keep up on, I don't know, the portage into Basswood from Fall Lake or something easy like that."

“Fall Lake—hey wait, are you talking about the one that’s so easy people use a portage wheel?”

“Uh-huh and in the winter they drive right over it with their trucks.”

He was offended and hurt at first until he saw the glint of humor in her eyes and heard her giggle. He liked the giggle, felt it in his gut first, and then felt it race like tiny tickling fingers dancing across his skin.

“Well, I mean as long as you carried the canoe and did the heavy lifting, I think I could manage.”

She snorted and kicked him lightly again.

He lost track of time, lost track of planning and somehow even forgot the odd situation they were in. There wasn’t a topic they didn’t cover. She grunted when he told her he was a salesman but seemed to understand that he saw his job as a means to an end, a way to make money and then move up there and do what he loved.

“I’ve always wanted to live up here too. I think that’s why I chose biology as a major, you know? Something that could get me a job and make a living up here rather than just coming on weekends. It’s that or work for an outfitter or stay at the camp, but the pay doesn’t quite cut it.”

It was almost too much, this woman and her match to all he’d ever wanted. He wanted to call Doug right that second and shout out “*I told you so.*” She does exist. No inner voice came this time. He’d found it and he knew it. Tiny shivers ran through him yet again and he welcomed them with an elated heart.

Another crash of thunder and a new onslaught of even heavier rain shook the windows. He looked over and patted her hand to comfort her. When he tried to pull it back she stopped him

and laced her fingers with his. He closed his eyes at the warmth of her skin and the pressure of her fingers on his. “You know, once this storm clears we’re gonna *Last of the Breed* right out of here. I’ll have you back in no time.”

“We’re going to what?”

“*Last of the Breed* only one of the best Louis L’Amour’s ever written, though they’re all classics”

“Classics?” she laughed, “I don’t know if you can label Louis L’Amour novels as classics.”

“Hey now, easy there. You’re talking about one of my favorite authors.”

“Yeah, but aren’t those like romance novels or something?”

“Ugh” he put his free hand to his stomach as if she’d punched him, never loosening his grip on the one that held hers. He didn’t have an ounce of irritation or anger over her words though, there was just too much adrenaline flowing through him. “Let me ask you this, then Miss high and mighty classics, have you ever read one?”

“Touché” she murmured.

“Hah, so you can’t judge until you do.” He admonished her with a teasing smile.

“Okay, okay, sorry,” she smiled back and held her hands up in surrender. “So, what does it mean to *Last of the Breed* out of here, then?”

“Well, you’re going to have to read the book. I’ll lend you mine.” He smiled and warmed to another of his favorite topics. “Basically, it’s about this guy who escapes from the Russians in the middle of the frozen wilderness with nothing and has to use all of his skill to get away. He’s against incredible odds but super hard core. He meets a woman and they work together to get to

safety. It's an awesome read, really exciting" he suddenly realized he was going on and on like an excited school boy and looked over in embarrassment.

She nodded slowly, "Okay. I tell you what. I'll read your book if you read one of my favorites."

"Deal," he said and smiled.

"You don't even know what it is yet."

"I don't care. I love to read, and if you like it I want to read it."

They looked at each other then neither of them blushing or breaking eye contact for a few seconds before she looked away. He felt a tinge of insecurity but then she squeezed his hand and he squeezed hers back. "Alright then, you have to read *Fifty Shades of Gray* Sound like a deal?"

"I already said yes. Tell me about it. What's *Fifty Shades of gray* about?"

"Really? You're like the only person on the planet who hasn't heard of it. C'mon, it's been all over the news, they're calling it mommy porn. Ring a bell?"

"Is it a romance then? I mean I've never read one, but I'll try it."

"Are you kidding me? Really? So, you'd read *Fifty Shades* if I asked you to?"

"Of course." He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it without thinking. She pulled her hand away and out of his grasp, but before he could worry she slid her entire body over and snuggled into his side. Putting his arm around her shoulders he let his head fall back against the cushions of the couch.

They sat in the quiet for a minute, the sound of the crackling logs in the fire filling the room along with the continuous patter of rain on the roof and against the window. She sighed deeply and turned her face toward him. "I'm so glad you're here," she whispered. He had to lean forward to hear it but when he did he pulled her in tighter.

“I’m glad I’m here too,” he whispered back, and realized that he meant it. He suddenly didn’t care about anything anymore. Whatever was going on with her, they’d take care of it.

“I was totally kidding, you know? About reading *Fifty Shades of Gray*.” She nudged him in the side. “I haven’t actually read it, just heard all the hype. I was messing with you. I can’t believe you’d read it just because I asked you too. That’s . . . well that’s really sweet.”

“So, you don’t want me to read it?”

“God no. It was a joke. I don’t really read much. I just don’t have the time. I’ll read your book though, I promise.

“So, you don’t have a favorite book at all?” He asked astonished.

“Not really, I mean . . .” her voice trailed off.

“What?” he nudged her, “Come on, what? I want to know.”

“Okay, well everyone is talking about Jane Austen all of a sudden, so it sounds kind of like a hipster, wanna-be pseudo-intellectual move, but I do really love *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*.”

“Done. I mean as soon as we’re out of this storm and back to civilization. I’ll read it.”

“Well, it’s two books actually.”

“I’ll read them both then.” He nodded his affirmation.

“Seriously? You are one of the, well, I mean, you’re not like other guys I’ve met.”

“I hope that’s a good thing?” There he was fishing again but he didn’t care anymore. He’d made up his mind, he wanted this—he wanted her.

“Well, hmm, the jury’s still out on that one,” she laughed and raised her eyes to his. The light dancing in them told him she was kidding again.”

“You joke around a lot don’t you?”

“Is that a good thing?” She was still staring at him her smile fading then reappearing as she waited for his answer.

“Well, the jury’s still out on that,” he didn’t finish getting the words out before she elbowed him lightly in the side.

“What? Can’t two play at that game?”

She didn’t answer but didn’t move away either.

“Alright, it’s settled,” he finally broke the silence, “You read *Louis* and I’ll read about this prejudiced woman who gets persuaded. What’s it about?”

“They’re two different books,” she laughed, “hmm, let’s see, I guess you could start with *Pride and Prejudice*, then. It’s about a woman who has to fit in and play by the rules of society, but she also wants things on her terms and she’s not willing to bow down or compromise. She’s sassy and full of grit, yet still classy and smart.”

“Huh? Hard to believe you’d like something like that. Doesn’t sound like you at all.”

“You think I’m sassy?”

“And full of grit.”

She laughed again and laid her head on his chest. “Did I say that I’m glad you’re here?” She sighed. “I really mean it, I feel safe for the first time in days and I, uh, well, I don’t know, I kind of feel like I’ve just always known you. I don’t know how else to describe it. It just feels right, being here with you. Does that sound weird?”

She felt so good nestled in next to him that he could hardly think.

“All this time,” he mumbled.

“What?” she asked.

“You could’ve been one campsite away, on the same lake, within a mile of where I was . . . all this time. No, it doesn’t sound weird, I feel the same way.”

She didn’t say a word but sighed and snuggled deeper into him.

Fit into the crook of his body the way she was, her warmth spreading into his; he’d never felt this at peace and full of desire at the same time. He laid his head back on the cushions of the couch for a moment and let it all wash through him. He wanted to wrap her in his arms and hold her, tip her head back and feel her lips on his. He was trying to figure out whether he should just do it or ask her first when the sounds of her deep and steady breathing broke through to him. He looked down at the top of her head and listened. “Anna?”

No answer, she was asleep. Well, that’s good, she was exhausted. He leaned his head down and lightly kissed the top of hers before laying his head back against the cushion again and letting his eyes drift shut. He was relaxed, content, and finally letting the rigors of the day take over his exhausted body. The continuous tapping of rain lulled him along with the sound of her steady breathing and he willfully gave in to a deep sleep.

Light filtered into his mind behind his closed eyes and he tried to ignore it. Not yet, he thought and jerked his head away from it. But the movement sent fiery pain through his face. It was excruciating; he sucked in his breath and closed his eyes tighter but couldn’t shut out the pain. He hurt everywhere; his body was ablaze with it. It felt like someone had jammed a knife into his skull, no matter which way he turned his head, the pain wouldn’t ease. His ears flooded with an undulating throbbing sound and he couldn’t shake it away. The noise pulsated through his brain and he could feel it vibrate through his entire body.

He threw his eyes open in a panic and the pain instantly evaporated. There was nothing but silence to greet him.

Every ache he'd felt completely gone. What in the hell just happened? He inhaled and exhaled deeply to get his pulse under control. A dream, he thought, it was just a dream. Panic surged through him. What if it was all a dream? What if she was a dream? It made sense, he realized, a perfect girl hiding out in a rustic cabin in the woods, just waiting for a knight in shining armor to save her from . . . from a story line that made absolutely no sense.

He clenched his eyes in mental agony and tried to stretch his stiffened muscles. He couldn't, there was a kind of dead weight holding him down and he struggled against it. A soft moan met his efforts as he struggled to move, and he stopped short. Peace passed through his body like a soft breeze and he opened his eyes.

Anna.

Relief flooded through him; stray strands of her hair covered her face. A stream of light shining in from the window lit the top of her head into a kind of golden halo. Mike gently drew the stray strands of hair from her cheek and studied her face for a long, silent moment. He breathed in and thought he smelled pine trees and earth and blue skies—the emotions that stirred with her scent sent his mind spinning.

Finally, he realized how creepy she might think it was if she woke up and found him staring at her, and, good God smelling her. He pulled himself up while trying not to wake her; a feat much easier said than done, but somehow, he eased his way off the couch. She rolled into the empty space he'd left and sighed but stayed asleep.

The bright, white light that lit her hair was fighting to get in from behind the dark curtains. If the sun was out already and the storm had passed, they should get up and go, he didn't want to, the thought hit him hard. But he also felt like there was nothing to fear. She would see him again, he knew it. This was the start of something— maybe *The* thing. There was

no way he wouldn't see her again. As much as he wanted to stay right where they were, he also knew he needed to get her to safety, to food, her friends and family, and he needed to get to his too, but his didn't seem to matter as much. He pulled the curtain aside to look out the window and check the weather, and his smile froze.

*He* was there, strolling casually back and forth in front of the cabin as if he had every right to be there. He stopped in front of the window, rocked back on his heels and pursed his lips.

Mike shook his head as anger like he'd never known ripped through him.

"Storm passed?" she asked in a drowsy voice from the sofa, but when he turned to her, and she looked at him, she seemed to know instantly what he'd seen. She shook her head and hugged her knees to her chest as the color drained from her face.

When the voice came, cool, confident and creepy; when he started calling out over and over again, they both whipped their heads around in shock.

"Mike," he called boldly, "I know you're there, I'd like to talk to you. Can you hear me? I know you can hear me Mike."

Anna's mouth opened and she stared at Mike with what looked like suspicion and fear. Mike's surprise and rage filled the room and she seemed to realize at once that he was as shocked as she was. He strode to the sofa, sat down in a rough drop to the cushions and grabbed the boots that he'd taken off at some point during their talking, thrust his feet in without lacing them, lurched up and strode to the door, all in a matter of seconds.

"This is gonna end," he said, "right now."

"No," she cried. "He'll go away. He will," she grabbed his shoulder. "Don't go out there." He pulled her hand down and squeezed it gently. "Don't worry," he smiled. "I'll be right back, and this will be over, for good. Okay?"

“Mike, no. Just wait. He’ll leave if we ignore him. He always does. Please. . . I changed my mind about the macho bullshit—just wait. Please?”

“He called my name Anna. *My name!*”

He released her hand and marched to the door.

“Mike don’t!”

“I’ll be back in a flash, I promise. This is over. Trust me,” he threw the door open just as she yelled out to stop him. But he’d had all the invitation he’d needed; it was his fight now too.

He charged out into the cold morning air, ready for action.

Blinding, burning, immobilizing pain crippled him. The light pierced his eyes; he couldn’t focus, he couldn’t see. And then suddenly the man was there, peering into his eyes. Mike tried to grab him, but his arms wouldn’t move. All he could do was stare; he couldn’t even speak.

“Hello Mike,” the man said. “I knew you were in there.”

Blackness seeped in from the corners of his eyes while his ears buzzed loudly. “No,” he struggled but knew he was about to pass out. “No,” he tried to grab at the man again, but it was too late. The darkness descended and his world went blank.

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He came to slowly, a constant barrage of annoying beeps, chirps and clicks berating his ears and mind. It had to stop.

The beeping made his head hurt. Groaning, he opened his eyes and looked into the face of a woman leaning over him. He jerked his head back and then winced and sucked in a sharp breath in pain. “Hi there” she spoke softly, “everything’s okay. I’m going to go get the doctor for you okay?” She walked quickly away before he could form a thought or speak. He looked

around the room as best he could without moving his head. A kind of tingling yet burning sensation in his left wrist made him investigate, there was an IV inserted there with two tubes that led up to the pole holding a bag of fluid and to something behind him. He could see the machine that was making the constant beeping noise and recognized it as a heart rate and blood pressure monitor.

A hospital? But how? Why?

The woman came back into the room followed by a man with his head bent over a chart. He walked up to the bed and then looked up into Mike's eyes. "Well . . ." he started to say, but Mike lurched up when he saw him.

"You! You!" He lunged forward in the bed and grabbed the man's arm in a death grip; he tugged the man closer and held tight as he felt him struggle to get away, but his strength failed as intense agony ripped through his body. He let go of him and fell back on the pillow. "What did you do to me? Where's Anna?"

The man stepped back with wide eyes, before concealing his features into a blank slate. "We'd better sedate him," he said to the woman.

Before Mike could move, she ran over to the machine and did something. He reached out toward the retreating back of the man. "Where's Anna . . ." he demanded before collapsing into a deep black sleep.

The annoying beeping and clicking entered his brain first and all he wanted to do was make it stop. He tried to reach for it but couldn't move. He tried again but couldn't lift either arm, they felt trapped. He tried to turn his body away from the sound but couldn't move anything. Even his legs felt trapped, as if he was under something heavy, unyielding. He was exhausted but put all that he had into freeing his arms and legs.

Nothing.

He couldn't move, the beeping intensified in both its volume and speed.

"God make it stop," he groaned.

"Mike?" He heard his name, recognized the voice but couldn't place it. His eyelids felt like they had weights on them, and he struggled to open them. "Mike?" The question came again. Somehow, he was finally able to open his eyes. The light stung him at first and he shut them again. After several attempts he was finally able to open them and focus. The first thing he saw was Doug leaning over him.

"Doug?"

Doug looked at him with an expression he couldn't understand. Instead of answering him, though, he bolted away yelling something he couldn't make out.

"God," he groaned against the beeping noise and struggled to move his arms. He looked down at his arms and panicked. Heavy straps were fastened over each of his wrists, pinning him to the bed rails. Jerking, pulling and fighting against the restraints caused sharp, stabbing pains throughout his body and he laid his head back panting in frustration and agony. What was happening? He struggled to piece things together, to remember what the hell was going on, but his head hurt, and his thoughts were unable to form through the fog that filled his mind. The same woman came into the room followed by Doug and leaned toward him.

"Welcome back," she smiled softly at him. "You've been through a lot. I want you to relax as best you can okay? Take some deep calming breaths if you can." She waited and he complied. "Good job. You have to take things slow right now. It'll all be okay."

He stared back at her confused and a little pissed off.

“I just have a few questions if you’re up for it,” she looked at him and he nodded, “can you tell me your full name?”

He answered but was confused by her question. What the . . . his name for God’s sake. What was going on here? He was the one who needed answers. “Why have you strapped me down to this bed?” He strained against the straps again but could hardly muster enough strength to do much of anything.

“Try to stay calm Mr. Tanner, those restraints are just a precaution. They’ll be off soon enough, I promise.”

“What the fuh—” he somehow stopped himself from swearing at the woman. “Where am I? Where’s Anna? What’s going on?”

He wanted to shake the woman until her teeth rattled and force her to tell him what was going on.

“Where. Is. Anna?”

He ground each word out half because of his anger and half because of the pain he was in. The beeping intensified briefly, and he growled.

“Someone shut that Goddamn beeping off.”

Mike saw Doug exchange a glance with the nurse and whisper something to her. She shrugged her shoulders and moved back as Doug came toward him. “Hey buddy, you need to relax a little, okay? She’s just doing her job. Can you just answer the questions?”

“Someone needs to tell me what is going on right now. Where’s Anna?”

“Anna?”

“Yes, Anna. She was in the cabin with me . . . is she here? What did he do to me?”

Doug closed his eyes for a second and then let out a deep sigh and looked over at the nurse. Mike saw her shrug. She came around the side of his bed and did something to the beeping machine. She smiled at him but stayed back from the bed.

“I’ve just increased your morphine Mr. Tanner that ought to help you feel a little more comfortable. Try to stay calm, it’s very bad for you to get too irritated right now. Okay? It elevates your heart rate which increases the beeping noise you hate so much. First, get some rest and then the doctor will be here to answer your questions.”

She smiled at him once more then left the room. Mike opened his mouth to yell at her, but Doug cut him off before he could make a sound.

“Listen, Mike. I don’t know how much I should say before the doctor gets here, they said not to get you excited or anything and you’re already pretty riled up as it is. But, uh,” he looked around the room and leaned closer, then whispered “Do you remember the accident?”

“Accident?” he stared back at Doug confused for a moment. “Wait, you mean my truck? That accident?”

A look of relief passed over Doug’s face. “Yeah, yeah, the truck. You remember?” He looked hopeful.

“Of course, I remember. I went in the ditch.” He instinctively tried to throw his hands up in frustration and a new surge of fury filled him over his restrained arms. “Get these things off me Doug. I don’t know what that guy did to me, but I have to get out of here.”

“Oof, well . . . uh” Doug stammered and looked around the room as if the answer were lying somewhere on the floor. He scrunched his face up and tipped his head to the side, “I can’t do that, man. I would—don’t get me wrong—I totally would, but yeah, that’s um, that’s hospital orders.”

“Orders? Why? Jesus, don’t just stand there. Do something! Help me.”

“Look Mike, you kind of, uh . . . well, you kind of assaulted your doctor okay? God, shit,” Doug threw his hands in the air then closed his eyes briefly. “You went like bat-shit crazy on him.”

“Whaat? What doctor?” His mind was so groggy and confused. “I don’t . . .” snippets of images were slamming into his mind—the man calling his name and then rushing out the door; the pain—“no Doug listen, that guy, he’s not a doctor. He’s after Anna. He’s a, a stalker or something”.

“You got to calm down man. Okay! Mike. Shit, just listen okay? Your truck went off the road”

“I know that! Goddammit Doug. Get these things off of me.”

“They told me to keep you calm, man, okay. They won’t let me stay if you get all worked up. We have to wait for the doctor to get here—”

“We don’t have time for that Doug. You need to get these off of me and we need to go get Anna. I promised her I wouldn’t leave her” he struggled against the straps on his arms.

Doug took a few steps back from the bed, his confusion evident. He looked around as if searching for something and then looked back at Mike. “Who’s Anna?”

Mike took a deep breath. Finally, Doug was listening to him. “Anna is a woman I met and she needs some help. You need to go up the Echo Trail about two miles north of that hiking trail—remember that one? What’s it called? You know with the signs right on the road?” He couldn’t get his mind to grasp the name of the trail he’d seen a hundred times. What was going on with his brain? The drugs—that must be it—he was being pumped full of drugs. He had to talk fast before they took over so he didn’t wait for an answer. “There’s this cabin it’ll be in the

woods on . . .” He closed his eyes hard for a second trying to think “On the left. I think. I can’t remember exactly where but follow the chimney smoke, if she’s still there, the fire will be going. You’ll be able to see it above the tree line—can’t be more than 300 yards in or less, I think it’s less—you’ll need to tell her that I sent you and for God’s sake answer every question she throws at you. And don’t be afraid if she points a gun at you, it’s not loaded.”

He looked up at Doug to make sure he was getting it all and stopped when he saw the look on his face. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t understand man. You want me to drive to just past that hiking trail, stop my car on—what the side of the road? And then, just walk into the woods looking for some random cabin? And I’m supposed to just ask for this Anna woman who’s touting a gun, but oh yeah, it’s okay though, cause it’s unloaded? Mind spilling some details here buddy? Like what in the hell are you talking about? Oh, yeah and you got an address, or do I just hoof it through the woods? In the snow?”

“There’s snow?” He shook his head in confusion, but decided there was no time for questions. “Yes. I think it shouldn’t be too hard. It’s the only one there and there’s the chimney smoke to follow.”

“Right, the chimney smoke. Okay, sure buddy so Anna huh? You been dating somebody up there and keeping it from me?”

“Please Doug? Please just go see if she’s okay. Can you do that? Since you can’t help me out of here. Can you at least do that?”

“Hey” Doug snapped. “I told you I can’t take those off, plus it’s not like you can just walk out of here you know? And why does she need help anyway? I mean by now she’s probably okay. I think you need more help than she does right now.”

He could feel the effects of the morphine coursing through his body—his pain easing—the fire in his head settling into a dull ache and his anger ebbing. “Please Doug. *Please!* You need to hurry okay? She’s scared and now she’s alone again and I promised her . . .”

“So, this girl, this Anna, you were what? You were going to get her before you went in the ditch or something?”

Mike groaned in frustration. “No, Doug. After I went in the ditch. There’s a cabin I found looking for a phone and she was there” He shook his head to clear the ever-increasing foggiess, and watched as Doug turned away from him, hung his head, and rubbed his eyes. Mike couldn’t see what he was doing but when he turned back his eyes were red and watery looking.

“So, you remember going in the ditch? And then you’re saying . . . um, you’re saying that you got out of your truck and met a girl? In the woods?”

“Yes! Damn it. And not just a girl Doug, *the* girl, *the* one. You have to help her. Then we can talk.”

“Uh,” Doug’s voice cracked, and he cleared his throat and shook his head slightly before speaking again, “listen, uh, the truck is um, it’s totaled. And you . . . uh, well it was bad man. Real,” his voice caught, and he coughed, “um, real bad.”

Mike stared at him in dumbfounded confusion.

“Uh, so you didn’t get out of the truck, okay buddy? I mean when they found you, you were still in it. And they couldn’t get you out and had to use those Jaws of Life things and then you were air lifted here. They thought you were dead. I, uh, I thought you were dead.”

Mike stared at him for a long time—the wrinkled stained shirt, the unshaven face, the exhaustion in his features, the sunken eyes, and the deep look of concern—he sank back into the bed unable to speak.

“It’s been five days Mike. You’ve been here five days. You got a fractured skull. Your brain was swollen. They thought you could be brain damaged, your mom’s a wreck” He stopped and swore under his breath. “I gotta go get your mom . . .”

“I don’t . . . none of this makes sense.” He shut his eyes and swallowed.

“But, uh” Doug’s voice was more normal this time, “somehow the swelling went down and you’re here now right—I mean you’re uglier than you used to be,” he tried to laugh but it came out as a kind of wheezing sound “but you’re back.”

“But I got out of the truck. I walked down the highway, and Anna . . .” his voice trailed off.

“Look, man, you didn’t get out of that truck and walk anywhere. You almost died.”

“They found me in the truck?”

“Man, they found you like melded with the truck. Jaws of Life. Air-lifted, the whole nine yards.”

“Five days ago?”

“You’re lucky someone was behind you. They called 911 but had to get into town to do it. We don’t really know how long you were in the ditch like that . . .”

Mike didn’t hear him anymore, he closed his eyes. If Doug was telling the truth that meant . . . that meant that none of it was real. He opened his eyes and stared at the wall unable to think straight.

A man knocked on the open door and came in the room without waiting for a reply. He smiled “Hi there, we’re awake I see. How wonderful.” He nodded at Doug as they traded places by the bed. “I’m Doctor Weston. You gave everyone quite a scare . . .”

Mike only half heard the words the doctor continued to say. At least it wasn't the man from the cabin, he stopped—cabin? No, there was no cabin. It was all in his mind. How was it possible? Was it all a dream? Was she a dream? Of course, she was a dream. She was too perfect—too everything he'd always wanted. Round after round after round he went in his mind. There were facts, there were details about her life and her work that he couldn't have just made up. Could he?

“Stony Ridge,” he suddenly yelled out.

“What's that now,” Dr. Weston asked.

“Doug,” Mike glanced around the doctor and pleaded with Doug. “Stony Ridge. She knew the name of that burger place we always go to when we come out of a trip. Remember, we've never known what to call it? How could she be in my head if she knew that?”

He waited for Doug's obvious enlightenment to follow but he just pursed his lips together and looked from Dr. Weston back to Mike. “I'm gonna go get your mom. She's in the cafeteria and she'll kill me if I don't tell her you're awake. Plus, I could use a coffee I think. I'll be back.” He left before Mike could say anything else. Dr. Weston took a pen light and asked him to look up and over and down. He did what he was asked, too defeated to fight anymore.

“You remembered your friend there, what's his name again?”

“Doug” he mumbled.

“Ah, that's right, Doug. And how long have you known Doug?”

“Huh? Um . . .” Mike struggled with all of the thoughts bouncing around in his brain. He let out a frustrated breath, “forever. We met in college. Can you take these things off of my arms?”

“Oh, soon I’m sure. Don’t worry about those right now. I know they’re irritating, but let’s concentrate on you right now. So, you remember meeting Doug in college? That’s good. Tell me do you know what year it is?”

“What?” Mike sighed, this again. He realized he was at everyone’s mercy. There was no one to help him get out of there, no one to help Anna. *Anna*. She couldn’t be just in his head. Could she? No, he wouldn’t believe it.

“The year?” Dr. Weston repeated.

He needed to think, to be alone, this was too much. He realized he needed to play along and answer the questions before he could find out what was really going on. He mumbled out the year and looked at Dr. Weston for the next one.

“Good, that’s really good. It may seem odd that we ask these things but we’re trying to establish how much you remember.” Mike’s eyes closed and opened again. The doctor was getting blurry and hard to focus on. “Listen you rest now, I realize this is a lot to take in. Everything looks good. Your memory seems intact, that’s good. Really good.” He patted Mike’s arm, “I’ll be back later.”

There were no dreams or visions or sounds while he drifted into blackness and the only thing he was aware of was the beeping and clicking of the machine near his bed. He struggled to open his eyes, unaware of how much time had passed. When awareness hit he thought of her, then felt a deep dropping emptiness hit his stomach when Doug’s words came back to him. When he finally was able to open his eyes again his mom and Doug were standing over him. His mom rushed up and grabbed the fingers of his right hand. “Oh my poor, poor boy,” she cried. He felt an intense pang of guilt at the tears streaming down her cheeks and remembered too late that his wrists were tethered to the bed. He strained against them once again and she put her hand on

him to calm him down and started chattering non-stop. “Your dad is here, he just ran downstairs to call the neighbors and have them check on the pipes. You know how they freeze when he’s not there to keep them running. He’ll be up in a minute or two.”

The fact that his dad was there meant it was bad. That man hated hospitals more than anything. He nodded at his mom, only half listening to her go on about something new now. He strained against the straps again and groaned in frustration.

“Oh, my sweet boy.” A fresh rush of tears slid down her cheeks and Mike tried to smile and ease her stress.

“I’m okay mom.”

“Oh, uh huh” she nodded and swallowed, “uh huh, of course you are. I know dear. I know.” She moved back, turned away and mumbled about finding the doctor.

It seemed to be mere seconds before she was back with Dr. Weston in tow. “Ah, well, here we are bright eyed again. Good, good.” He walked over to the bed and looked into Mike’s eyes. “Pupils look good. That’s a great sign.” He turned and looked at Doug and Mike’s mom then back to him. “So, why don’t we talk about what happens when the brain is in an unconscious coma state. Your friend and your mother are concerned over some of the things you’ve mentioned, but I assured them, and I can assure you it is all quite common.”

“It is?” Mike sank back into the pillow.

“Oh sure, sure.” Mike would’ve grimaced over the doctor’s sing-song voice, but it was too painful to move his face, instead he shot a look at Doug. Doug missed it though, too intent on what Dr. Weston was about to say, it seemed, to catch Mike’s eye.

“Well, now, maybe common isn’t the right word, it’s more a rare anomaly, but it does happen and has happened many times. There are dozens of accounts of patients coming out of a

comatose state and revealing vivid accounts of entire scenarios that they thought happened while they were unconscious. Why there's one gal who thought she was in Alaska, truly thought she was hiking through the mountains. She even felt the chill of the mountain air and the snow, but it all made sense when she realized she had been put in an ice bath while unconscious and that she'd been looking at taking a trip to Alaska before her accident."

Mike listened with a sickening and growing dread filling him. His stomach panged with a growling emptiness and he closed his eyes. "But she knew things," he mumbled, the fight and confidence he'd had leaving his body all at once.

"What kinds of things?" Dr. Weston asked without any tone of cynicism Mike could pick out. He just smiled softly and waited.

"She knew, I mean, well, she knew all of the portages I knew and, and the name of this restaurant that I always go to." It suddenly sounded pathetic to him, his voice, his arguing, and his insistence. He closed his eyes and knew what the doctor would say before he even said it.

"Some people smell things or hear things, imagine things, no one ever tastes anything—huh, well that makes sense because there isn't anything going past the taste buds, all intravenous feedings you know—anyway, so, it is not unheard of to wake up from a traumatic event such as this and think you were going on doing things, hearing things and living your life, when the whole time it was like a dream. Some people lose their short term memory and don't know the year or who their loved ones are. There's a lot of mystery still surrounding what happens to whom and why but, you don't have to worry about that. Your memory seems to be intact."

Mike tried to swallow but couldn't. He looked around the room at them. Doug and his mom looked tired, drawn and pale. Their sunken eyes held concern and fear. He closed his eyes. "Water . . . could I get some water?"

“I’ll get it,” his mom said and raced out of the room. He knew from experience that she did better when she had a mission.

“What about that guy—the one that was there? The one they say I attacked? He’s a doctor here, but how did I see him and hear him if I was unconscious? How could he be in my mind if I never saw him before?”

“Look, Mike, we don’t know what was happening when you were brought in here,” Dr. Weston said. “It could be that you were flitting in and out of consciousness . . . or, and this is more likely, considering the state you were in, it could be that you only think Dr. Haugen—that’s the man’s name who you’re referring to—it could be that he matches the man you imagined in your, uh, dreams. Perhaps you heard his voice somehow, it’s happened before. Some comatose patients have reported hearing the music their loved ones have played for them, favorite stories parents have read out loud by their bedsides, or words they’ve murmured to them. They’ve reported hearing these things even though the scans report that they were still unconscious. It’s possible Dr. Haugen’s voice broke through into your mind and you only think you recognize his face now because the memory of his voice is strong.” Dr. Weston patted Mike’s arm in a consoling tap. “It may seem like it was real right now, but it will fade with time. The human brain is an amazing organ, made up of billions of neurons that we still don’t have even a fraction of an idea as to how they function.”

“But she was . . .” Mike swallowed and weighed his words as he looked first from the doctor and then Doug. “It all just seemed so real.”

“Oh certainly,” Dr. Weston responded with a smile. “Don’t worry. Everything looks really good. There doesn’t seem to be any brain damage or permanent memory loss. I think we can get these things off of you now. It’s a lot to take in but you’ve handled it marvelously well.

Just try to rest now.” He nodded to the others and pressed the call button attached to a wire wrapped around the bed’s side rail. Mike lay back in silence and watched the same nurse from before come into the room. “We can remove the restraints now Mrs. Isaac. Mr. Tanner is 100% with us and no longer needs them.” He patted Mike’s arm again, nodded to the others and walked out of the room. The nurse, Mrs. Isaac came up to the bed and began fiddling with the strap on his right arm.

“Look, um, Mrs. Isaac is it?” She smiled at him. “Whatever I did to you, uh to that doctor . . . I’m really sorry. I was, well, I don’t know what I was. I just, um, I’m really sorry.”

She patted his arm as she removed the strap from his wrist and then moved to the other side of the bed to work on the next one. “I’ve seen much worse than anything you did. Don’t worry yourself about that, it wasn’t you and we all know that. If you need anything just push the call button okay?” She nodded to him, folded up the straps and walked to the door. She was gone before he could thank her or apologize again.

Over the next few days and nights Doug and his mom watched him like two circling hawks, their concern and fear evident in every pore on their exhausted faces. His dad came in once or twice but didn’t stay long; he could tell the old man was overcome with emotion. His eyes were strained and sunken into his paler than usual face, and his wrinkles seemed more prominent than ever. He didn’t say much but patted him on the arm and mentioned that he had a line on a new truck.

“Better than the old one.” His dad muttered with a small smile.

But Mike didn’t want a new truck. He wanted what he had before. He didn’t say anything to his dad, just nodded as if it was great news.

He assured all of them as best he could that he knew that he'd had some kind of hallucination, some weird thing his brain did due to pain meds and swelling. He must've convinced them because Doug became jovial and teasing about it while his mom went all spiritual and religious.

“Just think all this time we were worrying that you were gonna die, or be a vegetable the rest of your life, and you were happy as can be having a regular old Playboy fantasy in your head.”

“It wasn't like that”

“Yeah, well, leave it to you to keep it G-rated.”

“Oh, stop Douglas,” his mom cut him off, “don't be vulgar. God sent you an angel in your dreams to keep you from trauma and worry,” she reached over and squeezed his hand. “Your Guardian Angel sent to keep you safe and sound while you healed. Thanks be to God.” Tears sprang to her eyes and she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

“An angel mom? Really? A Goddamned Angel?” He lashed out the rage, anger and depression that filled him over of the last few days. His confusion, acceptance and constant politeness had reached their end.

His mom gasped, “Michael William Tanner! Don't you ever let me hear you taking the Lord's name in vain again.”

“Fine! So, God sent me an angel to, to what mom? Make me live in a fantasy world and feel all of the emotions and feelings and happiness I could ever dream of and then just—*Bam*—there you go back into a broken body with the realization that none of it was even real? That's one fucking cruel God.”

“Ah!” His mom opened then snapped her mouth closed and marched out of the room in a huff.

“Not cool Mike.” Doug shook his head and raced after her.

He felt a tinge of guilt over hurting his mom, but he couldn't take anymore, they didn't understand that it wasn't just a dream. She wasn't a hallucination. She couldn't have been, just couldn't.

The memories waged war back and forth in his mind. Anna—the things they talked about—it was all so normal. He remembered the feelings that coursed through him while he was with her, his awkward, insecure ramblings. Would he dream himself to be that way? But then there were the facts he kept getting presented with. He was battered and broken, lying in a hospital bed which he'd apparently been in for days. Days! He never got out of the truck, never walked into the woods. His mind raced back and forth, every time he realized that they were all telling him the truth—Anna was a figment of his imagination—he'd remember something else she'd said or did and try to deny it all over again. He was going crazy. He had to get a grip.

An angel, he thought, why not. Thanks then, God. Thanks a lot. Even though he thought the words, he didn't believe them. His mom was all about angels and demons for that matter, but that wasn't him. He was cold hard facts. And those facts said that he was delusional. Even though he knew it, deep down and all throughout his body and mind, he knew it wasn't real and even though he'd laughed with Doug and marveled with his mother over the amazing organ that the human brain is, he would never be the same.

He didn't want to find something like what he'd felt with Anna. He just wanted her. He could still smell her pine tree scent, feel her soft hair in his fingers, hear her voice and her laugh and see the way her eyes lit up when he'd finally gotten her to feel safe. Every time he fell asleep

it was with her face in his mind and her name on his lips. But there was no Anna waiting for him behind his closed eyes. She was gone; he begged his subconscious and even God, just in case it would help, for one more dream. He demanded that his mind obey, just this once. But he never was able to bring her back. It had all felt so real; she felt real, *was real*.

There was a gnawing and constant void in the pit of his stomach like an intense hunger that no amount of food could take away. He thought he'd been lonely before, but he'd give anything to go back to that. It had been a hopeful kind of loneliness, one that kept a spark glowing for that future someone. Now, he'd met her, felt the peace and fulfillment of thinking he'd finally found what he was searching for and it was all ripped away. It was in his mind, it was never real. He said the words over and over in his mind. But, the loss of her felt real.

Later, when his mom came back into his room, her eyes reddened and her chin held high, he apologized. "I'm not myself right now and I'm so sorry that I took it out on you . . . everything is just hard." She rushed to his rescue and brushed it away with a small smile and kiss on his forehead.

Over the next few days he knew he had to at least look like he accepted everything they told him, knew it was ridiculous not to and he did a good job, he thought, of keeping his emotions in check. He kept the memories of Anna from spilling out of him every time he thought of her, which was constantly. He allowed Doug's lame attempts at humor and even more talk about angels and the miraculous nature of the human brain and his dad to show him endless pictures of trucks on his cell phone from cartrader.com while he joked back or nodded or oohed and ahhed over a Dodge Ram full bed with four-wheel drive. It all worked—his calm and controlled attitude and acceptance of reality—and he could see the weight lifting from their

shoulders, their whispers outside his door no longer sounding scared and frantic and their smiles growing brighter each day.

He almost had everyone convinced that he was “back to normal,” but then *he* came. Dr. Weston knocked lightly on his open door and walked in with another man. “I thought perhaps it was high time you two met face to face.” He walked in with a smile on his lips, following behind and heading straight for his bed with his hand outstretched. “Hi Mr. Tanner, I just wanted to let you know that I understand completely”

But Mike wasn’t prepared for it. He lurched back in the bed at the sound of his voice and stared at him in horror. He couldn’t stop the seething anger that overtook him at seeing his face. He tried to recover but it was too late. Dr. Haugen stopped talking, clamped his jaw shut in the middle of a word, walked out and never came back.

Mike couldn’t help it—just seeing him, hearing that voice—he couldn’t control the feelings that took over. After that the guarded looks between Doug and his mom started all over again. Even Dr. Weston seemed concerned and used a soft, calm, and what Mike found to be a condescending voice to ask him if he was feeling alright or if he felt like he could use someone to talk to. He mentioned a “really good therapist,” and left the card on his tray table. “Just think about it. Everyone needs someone to listen, to help them sort things out every once in a while, nothing embarrassing about it.” He patted him on the arm and left. A shrink? Good God, he thought, there’s no way I’m going to a shrink. He learned to keep his emotions in check. There would be no more mistakes or surges of anger. No more Anna. Ever.

Every day after that an endless stream of nurses, doctors, specialists, and even a plastic surgeon, plus agonizing physical pain—when they cut the amount in the morphine drip—left him little peace or time to think about anything.

He had a broken nose, the plastic surgeon was itching to get his hands on reconstructing it but, even though Doug was right, and he was uglier, he didn't care much for the idea of a nose job. He had three broken ribs which no one could do anything about and a miraculously healing fractured skull. Both of his legs were broken, the left one in three places, and he was bruised and red and swollen on every visible surface of his face and body. His face had been so badly cut up from the glass that flew into it when his windshield shattered—his windshield had shattered in on him and not remained intact as he'd remembered, which was another fact he had to come to terms with—that his mom had to brush away tears the first few days she'd walked in and looked at him, but the swelling was down there too, the scratches and cuts scabbing and fading with each passing day. He would make a full recovery, so the doctor said.

“Lucky” each and every person who came into his room whether family, friend or staff kept telling him. “You're very lucky.” He did his part in nodding and agreeing. “Lucky,” he said back. But he didn't feel lucky or blessed or any of the other words his mother and everyone else muttered when they didn't know what to say.

The day he was discharged—a month and a half including the day he regained consciousness and discovered that Anna didn't exist—his mom waited while three nurses helped him into the wheelchair; two big and kind of burly guys named Steve and Jim who no one in their right mind would question, eased him into the chair with such gentle care Mike barely flinched. The third nurse was a chatty slip of a woman named Martha who took over once he was settled in and slowly maneuvered the chair with his two legs sticking straight out without the slightest bit of struggle and it amazed him that someone so tiny could handle his weight and the awkward bulk of the chair with him in it, legs poking straight out as they were. And before he knew it he was picturing Anna with a Kevlar canoe on her shoulders and a forty-five pound pack

on her back, trudging up the steep path from Fourtown to Mudro, a group of whining teenagers begging for her help. And she'd help them too. He shook his head as the familiar pain settled in his gut. He tried to focus on his mom and Martha. They made their way out the door, his mom plodding along next to them and chit-chatting back and forth with Martha. He didn't look back when they crossed the threshold, could barely contain the joy he felt at leaving the God-awful place. He swore he could feel the energy being sucked from him by the constant buzzing and clicking fluorescent lights above his bed. The slimy glop that passed for food, and the smell of pine sol and bleach, medicine, and infection all mixed together which constantly assaulted his nose were, he was sure, the real reason for his constant headaches. And the memories—Anna—he should leave those all behind too. Leave her and his hallucinations in the hospital where they belonged, all of them just part of a horrific accident where his brain malfunctioned. But he knew he wouldn't. Because every night when he woke up, finally alone in the dark of his sterile, suffocating room, he would wish with everything he had that he could go back. He would try to recreate it in his mind, that final moment when she grabbed his arm right before he stormed out the door and instead, imagined that he listened to her. He said, "Alright, I'll stay" or "You're right. We'll just wait." Even though he knew what it really meant—that he would have stayed in a coma, never to wake again—he didn't care. He'd found what he'd wanted and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that there was no one else out there who would compare.

Was he crazy? Probably, he realized. Time would take it away. That's what the doctor said, and it was probably true. But he didn't want it to go away. That's when he realized that there was no way he could ever physically return to her but, maybe there was something he could do. He could go back there, as soon as he was strong enough—walking again—he could go and try to recreate where he'd found her. Maybe there would be a cabin there after all, or maybe not,

but if he went there, just walked into the woods and sat himself against a tree amidst the birds and the squirrels and waited for sleep to come, “To Build a Fire” style, maybe he would find the doorway to the place in his mind where she waited. Then she’d come, just before he drifted into that frozen blackness and he’d call her name and she’d smile and laugh and tease him like she did before.

His grandpa was wrong. You didn’t find happiness in the one who never irritated you. No. You found it like a bolt of lightning, and you knew there was no one else in the whole world who you would ever want to be with ever again. His happened to be a dream or an angel or a billion confused neurons firing off like a downed wire. Well, he knew what he had to do to reconnect that wildly thrashing wire to its other half. He knew and didn’t care what it took anymore.

They were only a couple of feet down the hall when he happened to glance up at the wall to his right and notice the painting hanging there.

“Stop!”

The word flew out in a harsh command and both women jerked to a stop so fast he winced at the pain it caused. He looked up at the painting, stared so long and hard that his mother put her hand on his shoulder and cleared her throat. He felt something slam down hard inside him and the gnawing ache take over again. Finally, turning his head and looking at the cold, white linoleum floor he tried to swallow the lump in his throat but couldn’t seem to get past it.

“Are you ready to go?” Martha asked from behind his shoulder.

He nodded without speaking or looking up. The chair started moving again, slowly but smoothly under Martha’s steady gait. “Your dad has the car out front and we have the back seat all ready for you,” his mom said as if everything was normal, or would be normal once they left

there. He didn't speak another word, felt his mom's hand squeeze his shoulder and knew he should reach up and squeeze it back, reassure her, say something, anything—but, he just couldn't. He knew now, more than ever what he wanted to do, what he had to do.

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Dr. Haugen strode down the hallway, to make his rounds when he noticed the patient who'd assaulted him being wheeled out of his room. He stopped and stood back against the wall, hoping to become invisible. It wasn't that he thought the man had anything personal against him, but still, he didn't want to deal with it. He was glad he stopped and waited, the man shouted something and then stared at the painting on the wall for what felt like eons. Dr. Haugen shook his head. He actually didn't know for certain—regardless of what the man's family and friends said—whether he was a violent man prone to hallucinations before the accident or not and he felt for him, he really did. He had a long road ahead of him. The physical recovery aside, head traumas like that have hidden problems all their own.

Someone else would be in that very bed within hours, or even less than that, and he would be back in there checking on whoever that poor soul was without pause. Their names and faces blurred together in his mind, but he had a feeling he'd remember Mr. Tanner, at least for a while. It was no big deal, it wasn't personal, but the way the man thought he knew him—saw and heard him while he was in a coma—was a bit unnerving.

He watched as they finally started moving again and made their way to the bank of elevators at an irritating snail's pace; he waited until they disappeared into one completely before even moving from his spot. Shaking his head as he passed the room where Mr. Tanner had been, he made a point not to look in. He strode past it confidently but stopped to look at the painting that so attracted the man. He'd passed it hundreds of times without ever paying any attention to

it but, now he stopped and wondered what was so special about it. It was, he thought, actually kind of ugly with all of its dark browns and greens and a rustic ancient looking cabin with a tiny wisp of white smoke coming from its chimney sitting front and center. Art was one of those things, he surmised, that moved different people in different ways. To each their own he thought and continued a few feet more down the hall, before turning left and entering the room adjacent to Mr. Tanner's. He walked into the room and looked at the nurse standing at the end of the bed. "Hi Beth," he smiled, "getting ready for Thanksgiving? Is it at your house again this year?"

"Oof," Beth answered. "Twenty-two of them coming this year, I'm going to have to rent a hall if this keeps up."

"Aw, well, we all know you would take dozens more grandbabies if your kids would so oblige you, which it sounds like they might."

"Truer words have never been spoken," Beth chuckled.

"Well, what have we got going on today?"

Beth's smile left her face as she handed him the patients' chart. "Nothing's changed Dr. Haugen, still not responsive at all."

"It's been a little over a month now, is that right?" he asked.

"Seven weeks tomorrow, doctor," she said and shook her head sadly.

"With no change? That's not good," he mumbled, "not good at all."

Beth gave a somber nod while Dr. Haugen looked at the chart then glanced over at the patient lying in the bed and shook his head. He walked over to her, crouched down by the bedside and took her hand in his.

"I know you can hear me. I know you're there. Come on, Anna."

## Strings

There were still bits of yellow tape stuck to the frame of the front door. Claire ignored them as best she could, the key shaking in her fingers as she tried to insert it. She took a steadying breath, got the key in the lock, and freed the dead bolt. She stood still without crossing the threshold for a few agonizing seconds.

Her childhood home, a typical 1950s rambler her parents bought from her grandmother, looked small from the street and even smaller inside. A slab of four by four-foot brown linoleum meant to look like porcelain tile pretended to be an entry way; the truth was when you walked into the house you were pretty much smack dab in the center of the living room.

She avoided looking at the old brown sofa with the orange, yellow, brown, and white afghan that her great aunt had knitted her mother as a wedding gift; she knew it would still be lying in its familiar heap on the well-worn cushions. She walked straight across the linoleum, over the ten feet of carpet that was supposed to be a dining area and launched herself through the open arch that led into the kitchen. Unaware she'd been holding it; her breath came out in a gush of air. She'd made it to the kitchen without glancing at any of the pictures hanging on the living room walls. She couldn't handle looking at the smiling and laughing faces framed in those photos.

She focused on the little table by the far wall. One leaf folded down so it would fit in the tiny space provided—it had been like that for as long as she could remember. Three rolling chairs nestled up to the table, none of them tucked under its top. Those chairs, with their tweed fabric that would “hide the stains”, weren't the practical addition her parents thought they would be. Instead, they made the tiny eating space even more cramped and harder to maneuver than any area of the house. Oh, how her dad beamed when he bought those chairs. “They have wheels,”

he said as if that explained why they now had seating that was larger than the table itself. Her parents never bought anything, so it was a big deal when he made the purchase. And none of them ever mentioned that they were too big for the table or the room for that matter. Her dad had been so proud of them. As brilliant and accomplished as he was in his career, every-day things like changing a light bulb, cooking dinner, and buying furniture were foreign to him. So, they all sat in the oversized chairs, their knees as high as the table top, smiled at one another, and ignored the awkward way they had to lean over to eat their meals.

That little scarred wooden table with the three gigantic rolling chairs had seen her through learning the alphabet at five, multiplication tables at eight, bouts with acne, and awkward moments when gangly boys sat there stiffly trying to appear cool and confident before taking her out to the movies or McDonalds on first dates that were usually disastrous. It had held frantic and disordered piles of research articles for college papers and the late night hot cocoa therapy of her parent's attempts to help her through the agony of her divorce.

Claire could still feel her mother patting her hand, her mouth turning up in a soft yet worried smile for her heartbreak. Her father didn't quite know how to deal with human emotions. Problems that could be fixed with mathematical formulas and scientific equations, well, then he was your guy. The messy unanswerable details of relationships weren't an area he could be bothered with. He patted her shoulder and said something like "Well, uh, so back to the drawing board, huh?" And then he pursed his lips in confusion when her mother glared at him. "What? She's only 31-years-old. There's plenty of time to start again." He was perplexed when this statement caused a fresh bout of sobbing from Claire.

But that was eons ago, at least it felt like it. It was the most devastating thing she'd ever been through, at the time, and she remembered wondering if she'd ever pick up the pieces and

move on from it. She gave a small huff of a laugh at the memory. Her divorce from Tim had been five years ago. How things changed since then, how she'd changed. The agony of those days didn't even register any more. It was nothing compared to what she was going through now.

She stared out the small window above the table into the backyard. That postage stamp stretch of green grass had seemed like miles of adventure just waiting to be explored when she was little. It was no paradise, smaller than almost all of the other yards on the block, but to her young mind, it had been perfect.

When she was sixteen-years-old she discovered that they could've lived in a much bigger, much nicer house due to her father's status and substantial income, and she'd thrown a small tantrum about it. "All of my friends have big bedrooms and *pools*." She'd cried while helping her mom with the dishes after dinner. She remembered feeling embarrassed whenever the girls from the volleyball team planned a get together and mentioned that she'd never hosted. She felt the shame of her house, and her odd parents when she'd gone to her first sleepover with the team. It was at Julie Sorenson's house. Julie had a pool, a huge bedroom with a four-poster canopy bed that didn't even come close to touching her vaulted ceiling, and she had a finished basement that was solely meant for watching movies and eating popcorn. Not one of those girls had a dark, damp basement where their fathers spent hours muttering to themselves or small, box-shaped old houses in a worn-out neighborhood. Not one. She made lame excuses whenever it was her turn to host a "team bonding night". She'd quit the team after one season. Never able to face what the girls would say if they came over and saw where she lived and how her dad acted. She'd never told her parents why she quit. She knew somehow, even in the midst of her teen-aged selfishness, that it would be a hurt she couldn't take back. She did blow up at them though, that she just couldn't seem to stop.

The night she figured it out and lost her temper she had just been told that her father was up for an award—another award—for his work as a cancer cell research scientist. He was, in fact, a world renowned scientist. Her dad was famous. It didn't dawn on her when she was little, but it had burned at the forefront of her mind then. That night, as her parents talked about the award ceremony, she'd lost it on both of them. She knew it was childish, but she didn't have enough insight to keep it inside, not back then. Her dad just looked at her with the same look of deep thought he always had, cocked his head, and spread his hands out as if he couldn't believe she would question why they lived where they did. "I don't understand," he'd said. He went on about how the house was full of beautiful memories, first from his childhood and now hers, plus, he'd added, it was all they really needed.

Her mom, for her part, was too busy keeping her dad functioning as a semi-presentable human being to worry about a bigger house in a nicer neighborhood. But, to be fair, she also really didn't seem to care about the old banged up furniture and, too small, outdated house. They spent their money traveling, putting Claire through college, and lord knows how much of it actually went into her father's research lab in the basement. He never stopped working, not when he was home, out at a party, or even at the movie theater—not that those things happened often, but when they did, everyone knew he didn't want to be there. He was never really with them, even though he was physically there. His mind just couldn't stop worrying over formulas and concepts. The lab was his way of having a place to write it all down, test it out, and keep it organized, or as organized as he could manage.

The thought of the lab made her flinch.

In the end it was a good thing they didn't give in to materialistic desires because her dad was still paying what seemed to be an endless stream of crippling hospital bills. And now, she

realized, there would be more. The cold, impersonal white envelopes with the blue stamped address in the left-hand corner would continue to come, announcing the price of saving a life in neat rows of black ink. Numbers didn't care if no one had actually been saved.

Closing her eyes, she inhaled and held the breath deep in her lungs. There was no relief when she let it out, just a sagging heaviness filling her head and dragging her shoulders down. She couldn't shake it off. It pushed down hard—so hard that every second was a fight to just stay upright. The force needed to move her body across the kitchen floor was exhausting.

But she made herself move, faster this time, before she had time to think about it. She opened the door to the basement and flipped the light switch. The light from the dim bare bulb barely reached the bottom of the stairs. The fact that the power was back on bothered her. It made it seem like everything was normal.

Somehow, she made it down the rest of the steps. The basement was large, mostly unfinished, and swathed in an inky black that hid her own hand from the front of her face. The light from the stairs was just not enough to show the way to the next beacon in the form of a bare light bulb and base attached to the floor joist above; she moved forward cautiously holding her hands in front of her, just in case something she didn't know about had been placed in her path. She knew there wouldn't be anything there; nothing in that basement had been moved or even touched since before she could remember but being in complete darkness made her cautious.

She found the string hanging in the middle of the room, or more precisely, the string found her. It must've been just beyond her outstretched hands. It had brushed across her cheek, sending shock waves through her already tensed muscles, and she swiped at it reflexively. It dawned on her that it was the pull cord for the bulb after she'd hit it away. It didn't take long to

swing back toward her and, after a few fumbling reaches through empty air, she was able to catch the cord and pull the string. Light flooded the room.

Sight, there is usually such comfort in it, but Claire's relief was sucked out of her within a nanosecond. The basement was all concrete floor and concrete block walls stacked with years of her father's research stuffed inside an army of filing cabinets that lined the walls.

The lab was around the corner of a wall of cabinets that came out a few feet beyond the stairs. She had to maneuver around them to get into the heart of the basement. Claire moved slowly around the brown metal filing cabinet that ended the row and paused. The doorway to the lab looked like a dark cave entrance in the still dimly lit basement. It was a large room, longer than it was wide but it spanned the entire width of the basement and half the length of the house. Her throat itched and tears formed in her eyes, but she wasn't sure if they were from her emotions or the acrid air. The strong scent of the fire still hung everywhere. Beside the scent of charred wood and burned metal there was also the foreign yet distinguishable scent of burned flesh. She tried to shake it away but couldn't rid her senses of the smell or the memory.

The gray concrete floor was stained in a dark wet arc outside of the entrance into the lab. It reached at least five feet out from the doorframe and stopped with a snaking river of a brown stain framing its end. Splinters and chunks of wood and some chalky bits of wet sheetrock lay scattered around the gaping doorframe. She moved forward toward it, despite her desire to turn around and run out of the house. Reaching into the dark opening, she reflexively felt along the wall to her right for the light switch. She flipped the switch without thought and blinked in shock with the realization that it shouldn't have worked, not in here. Nothing should work in here.

His desk sat untouched. Piles of papers were strewn about, and drawers were half open as if a thief had sneaked in and ransacked it. But, that's how he always kept it. Amazing, she

thought. In one corner of the room it was as if nothing had changed. Looking at his desk, it seemed all was normal; still the same. The only sign something had happened was the squish of the wet carpet under her feet.

The other corner of the room told a different story.

The back wall was stained a thick black, the one small window covered with duct-taped cardboard, and the melted remnants of her dad's obsession sat squat in the center of it all. Blackened metal, hanging wires, and the gaping emptiness of where he'd sat when it happened met her horrified gaze and she couldn't turn away.

As she neared the hulking steel beast, rage filled her. If only she'd thought to bring an axe or a sledgehammer. But she hadn't thought of anything. She'd just come, not knowing what her purpose was. For once, she had no plan of action. Stepping cautiously around the large steel contraption, her foot connected with something hard, but movable. It rolled a few inches from the contact. She knelt down to investigate and choked back a sob.

It was his helmet. He was so proud of that stupid helmet. Now, the once gleaming "*Metabolic Neuron Interface*" lay blackened, malformed on one side, and forgotten on his basement laboratory floor. She knelt to pick it up as tears burned trails down her cheeks and into the collar of her blouse.

A sound like a howl tore from deep inside her. The helmet crashed against the far wall with a force only her rage could supply. Part of it fell off but it wasn't anywhere near the destruction she desired. She charged at it as it lay helpless and half broken. Instead of grabbing the helmet again her target became the piece that had dislodged. She plucked it from the wet carpet and held it in her palm as if testing the weight, and then squeezed her palms together with a force she never knew she possessed. The rough metal dug into her palms, two nails broke, and

she welcomed the pain. She squeezed with everything she could, willing it to explode in her hands; needing it to disintegrate.

“Break, damn it,” she demanded. “Break, you mother fucker!”

But it didn’t break. The harder she squeezed, the more it seemed to fight back. It made a sudden hissing noise and she dropped it in shock. She stared at it in a fit of fear and anger. It crackled again as she stared at it, and she cursed it in her mind. She thought about stomping on it; maybe it would break if she got a running start and jumped on it with all of her weight, but she just stood there staring at in a silent stupor of indecision, fear, and confusion. Finally, after it hissed and crackled again, she picked it up and turned it over in her hands.

The *heart*, she scoffed. That’s what he’d called it. “This little baby is the pièce de résistance, Claire, the heart of it all.” This was the ROP— or the Reverse Oscillating Portal—her dad had spent the last two years creating. She fell to her knees next to it; the dampness of the carpet soaking into her clothes.

She’d tried. She’d more than tried, she’d acted. But it didn’t matter now. All the time she spent worrying over her decision was useless. Guilt washed over her. She should have done something sooner, right away, right after they buried her mom, and everything went to shit. Yes, it was her fault. She felt a blackness growing in the middle of her stomach that grew larger every second and threatened to swallow her whole. She thought back to the days just after the funeral. Was it obvious then?

The service had been touching; everyone said so. But Claire had been numb, her mind and body on auto-pilot. People said things like “she’s finally at peace,” and “this can be a relief to you now,” or “your mom is finally healthy again.” She nodded politely throughout all of it.

One after another, everyone said the same thing until she snapped. She couldn't even remember who the poor guy was.

"Your mom is in a better place," he said with sad eyes and a soft smile.

"Is she?" Claire snapped. "How do you know?"

He blushed and mumbled something.

"No, really. How do you fucking know?"

"I uh, I'm so sorry for your loss," he stammered and hurried away.

The next person in line just looked at her, fear etched on her overly made-up face, and Claire snapped at her too. "What do you think? Is my mom happy now? Relieved?" She stormed away and spied her dad sitting in a chair. He was just staring off into space as people tried to talk to him; she watched as one after another they eventually gave up and walked away. Should that have been her first warning sign? Maybe. But he had always been like that. Always in his own head.

Or maybe it should have been earlier, when he'd retreated to the basement and spent every second in his lab searching for a cure to her mother's cancer, forgetting to eat, shave, or shower. But forgetting to do those everyday things wasn't abnormal for him. It had been her mom's job to make him look like the famed and brilliant scientist he was, he never had the time for such trivialities. Claire had taken three weeks off from work, used all of her vacation time for the next two years, and every sick day she had coming to help her mom. It was hard to see her deteriorating as she was; she had been so frail, and so weak that some days she couldn't even get out of bed. But she wanted to die at home, not in a cold and sterile hospital, and it seemed like a good thing to Claire when she was granted that request at least. There was a hospice nurse who came three times a week at first, but Claire had been there every day. She'd sat by her mother's

bedside, held a cup of water to her lips and dabbed her chin when it dripped down her face. She'd hidden her tears, held her mother's hand, and sometimes lay next to her in the bed just like when she was little and had had a bad dream. When it became clear that the time was near, her mother grew frantic, grabbed at Claire with a strength she hadn't possessed in months and clung to her tightly. "Claire," she managed in a hoarse and weak voice, "promise me please . . ."

"Anything mom, what is it?" Claire whispered trying to hold back the tears and keep her voice from cracking.

"Promise. . ." her mom had to stop and rest then, the effort to get the words out sapping her of what little strength she had. After a long and silent moment of scratchy breathing and wheezing, she tried again, "Take care of your dad, Claire. Please, he needs you."

"I will, mom. But dad will be fine. I want to take care of you. Don't worry about dad. Just don't worry, he can take care of himself."

How wrong she had been. Her dad was like a child. He was so wrapped up in his work he didn't even change his clothes, shop for groceries, clean anything—he lived in his lab in the basement—even after her mom passed away. Claire supported him in the past. Back when her mom was first diagnosed and he buried himself down there: researching, experimenting, failing, and then starting again. She'd supported him when he took a leave of absence from the Minneapolis Institute of Cancer Research where he'd worked since he'd graduated from college. It all seemed right back then. His reaction seemed normal. She was just as desperate for a cure as he was and it seemed that if he could just focus on her mom alone and nothing else, then his gifted mind would make a breakthrough and her mom would be cured. But she realized now, the months and weeks before her mother's death weren't the problem.

It was in the weeks after they buried her, when his research turned to quantum physics, string theory, and what he called inter-dimensional communication. All of his work on cancer cell research was forgotten, abandoned for this new endeavor.

His breakthroughs in the field of cancer cell research were still talked about in elite circles. How ironic that his wife would be diagnosed with the disease he spent his life trying to cure, and how awful that he couldn't do anything to save her. That's what people whispered at the wake; sipping their coffee while looking at the picture boards Claire had put together of their past happiness; their entire existence displayed for the curious onlookers who hoped they'd never have to go through something so terrible.

Where were they when her dad went off the deep end and obsessed over inter-dimensional communication? Where had she been?

He started talking about communicating with the dead, and the dead not really being dead because, "energy never dies." As disturbing as that was, back then, she still chalked it up to his way of dealing with the grief. Odd, yes, but how did she know? They'd never been through anything like that before. He was just hoping, she'd thought, hoping that something he'd never believed in was now a truth so that he could see his wife again. It was sweet and she got it. She wanted to believe in something like that too. By the time he'd unveiled the ROP, she'd turned a blind eye for too long.

Her dad was brilliant.

When she was younger, she wished he could be like other dads— the normal ones. Why did her dad have to say such big words that no one ever understood? Or respond to the simplest comments or questions with a whiteboard that seemed to magically appear from thin air? No

matter the question, a whiteboard would appear, and he would draw a diagram to help her understand the answers to questions she didn't even know she'd asked.

He pulled one out of the backseat of the car one time when they were at a park. She'd made the mistake of saying "I'm going to swing so high I'm going to touch the sky!" He responded by having her get off of the swing and look at the shadow it cast. "Wait, I'll draw it for you," he'd run over to the car while she stared after him wondering when she could get back on the swing. He'd come back with a whiteboard and marker, drew the swing set, the sun and a right angle from the height of the equipment to the ground.

"Now Claire, he said "can you see that the sun is at about a 30-degree angle to us?" She nodded but had no idea what he was talking about.

"And the swing set is casting about an eight-foot shadow?" She'd just stared at him and then back at the swing set with a sad desperation.

"We can use simple trigonometry to calculate the height of the swing set using the eight-foot shadow and the 30-degree angle easily by using this equation:  $\text{Tangent } \theta = \frac{X}{8}$ , and then we solve for  $X$ , see?"

"Daddy—"

He'd scribbled the formula out next to the drawing and showed her the whiteboard.

"And by doing this, you now know that the answer is 13.8 feet, so you are swinging 13.8 feet in the air if you reach the top of the swing set. So, you see dear, there is no way you could actually touch the sky—unless you mean that you are touching air, which the sky is. Remember when I told you why the sky is blue . . ."

She'd stopped asking questions and making comments around her dad for several years after one too many moments like that. She'd even demanded that he leave the house or stay in the basement if she happened to have a friend over.

Losing her mom had brought them together in a way she'd never imagined, and though the reason left them both numb and empty, they formed a bond Claire had never thought possible before. She enjoyed spending time with him after the funeral, as sad as it was; they talked about their shared memories of her mom: like when she taught Claire to ride a bike and then later to drive, and her dad shared how scared they'd both been the night Claire took the car for the first time. Science and math equations didn't come up. He told her things she'd never known, memories of when her parents had met and fell in love. He said he'd been walking through the halls at the U of M when he was a graduate student and had run right smack into her, "knocked her to the floor." He chuckled, but tears formed. "I was on my way to present my final project and my notes went everywhere—flew through the air like jet planes," he smiled again, but Claire's heart broke all over again. "I reached for your mom's hand to help her up and when we locked eyes, well . . . that was it for me. I didn't even remember where I was going. She had to pull her hand away, I wouldn't let it go." He sighed, "she helped me pick everything up and even arranged the pages in order for me. She said," he choked back a small sob and patted Claire's hand while he recovered, "said she would like to introduce me to staples and paper clips . . . that they had been taking the world by storm for more than a hundred years." They both laughed, then cried, and then looked at all of the pictures she'd lovingly organized in one of the family photo albums she'd worked so hard on putting together before she died. "She was so funny," he whispered.

Claire started setting out clothes for him, doing his laundry, and buying him groceries; somehow it just happened. The groceries would sit untouched and have to be tossed out, so she went one step further and cooked him meals or made extra when she cooked for herself and brought him a week's worth of food that only needed to be microwaved. She didn't mind, at first. It kept her busy, kept her mind off of the pain, a little. But weeks turned to months and he didn't get better, didn't snap out of it, and she couldn't keep up the pace any longer, or maybe she just didn't want to. She tried not to think that, it filled her with too much guilt, too much remorse over things she could've changed if she'd been willing. But a war waged in her head sometimes and she would get angry with him. She'd scream in her mind: *wake up, take care of yourself, what the hell is the matter with you?* But even though she never said those things out loud, the guilt from just thinking them weighed heavily on her. Mom had begged her to take care of him and she'd promised that she would.

It had been one of their typical Sundays together since the funeral when it finally dawned on her that maybe things weren't so normal after all. She always stopped by on Sundays now. It became their new tradition since her mom died. They would eat lunch, go to the cemetery, put fresh flowers on the grave, remove the old ones, and spend the rest of the day together just reminiscing about mom and the good old days.

Not on that Sunday though. She'd arrived at the usual time; she always used her key and just walked in, and she would always find him wrapped in the afghan on the sofa, waiting for her with a sad smile. The last few Sundays he'd been there looking through photo albums when she'd arrived. As painful as it was to look at the pictures, she would sit next to him and look at the same ones over and over as he told her the same memories as if they hadn't just relived them the week before. "That was the only time your mom ever got mad at me," he smiled over at her

as he pointed at the picture of her mother holding her as a red faced, pick swathed new born bundle. “She almost had to drive herself to the hospital. I had been so close to what I thought was a break-through on healthy cell reproduction . . .” his voice trailed off while Claire patted his hand. The first time he’d told her the story she’d laughed along with him, same with the second and even the third. But now, he’d repeated it so many times that she had to force her mouth into even the tight smile she gave him.

But that Sunday she’d walked in and he wasn’t on the couch, the living room was empty, as was his bedroom, the bathroom, and the kitchen; where was he? She’d called to him, but no one answered. She’d been filled with fear for a split second, something she’d experienced too many times since her mother’s death. Worry about losing her father, something that never entered her mind before, was now a constant companion. She moved through the house, fighting the anxiety that coursed through her, and felt the weight lift from her shoulders when she heard the echo of pounding coming from the basement. This was a good thing, she’d thought. He was up, working on something, ready to move back into his life. She’d called down from the top of the stairs, but he didn’t answer.

The lab was his sanctuary and she never went down there, mostly out of an old childhood habit. When he was in the basement, he wasn’t to be disturbed. But he never came up the stairs with his apologetic excuse about forgetting the time and she’d finally waited long enough. She’d gone down there to find him, and still wished she hadn’t. He was sitting in a rolling black leather chair situated under the monstrous metal frame with the weird helmet on his head. The ROP attached to the top of it; wires connecting it, and him, to the strange machine.

He hadn’t heard her come down and she’d stood in the open door watching and listening to him as he talked. She’d laughed at first, when she saw him like that; he looked like something

out of a bad sci-fi movie. She was about to tease him about it when his words finally penetrated her mind.

“What is going to be enough?” He asked. It wasn’t abnormal for him to talk to himself when he was deep in a project, but after a silent pause he spoke again. “I’ll have to figure out how to get enough power through it and then it will work. I know it will. It won’t be long now, honey, I promise.”

*Honey?* Who was he talking to? Was he talking to her?

“What dad?” She’d asked wondering how he knew she was there with that contraption covering his eyes. He suddenly reached up, took the helmet off, and looked over to her.

“Claire Bear!” He smiled. “How are you? I’m so glad you’re here. I’m so close. So close.”

“Dad, who were you talking to just now? And what in the world is this thing? What’s going on?” She’d smiled at him fondly, but still wondered when he’d had the time to build whatever the monstrosity was, he was sitting under.

He stood up and she suddenly noticed that he was wearing some kind of jumpsuit covered in colorful patches advertising motor oil, tires, and some bank name she didn’t recognize. She would have laughed, it would be funny in any other circumstance, but she knew that this was no joke. Her throat constricted and she coughed.

“What are you wearing? She asked when she could finally speak.

“This?” He asked and looked down at himself as if seeing it for the first time. “Isn’t it great? I got it for two hundred dollars off of that eBay place everyone talks about. It belonged to a racecar driver in the 90s. It’s old but still flame retardant. At least it should be.”

“Flame retardant . . . dad what . . .”

“What’s going on? Ha, the most amazing thing ever that’s what. This *thing* as you called it is the key to inter-dimensional transfiguration—Sara told me it’s possible. Oh, it’s so exciting.” He’d paused, stood up, rushed to his desk, and quickly scribbled notes on the first semi-blank piece of paper he found.

“Sorry, what? Sara? Sara . . . you mean mom? She told you something was possible—*mom*? In your research? When?”

“Why just now. If only I’d known you were there. You could have talked to her. She would have loved that.” He scribbled more notes, put the pen in his already ink-stained shirt pocket, scratched his head, and then looked at her again with a brilliant smile. He’d seemed like his old self again, like he’d snapped out of the grief that had eaten him raw for so long. But Claire had felt a shockwave of pinpricks move through every nerve in her body. She didn’t say another word, she remembered nodding, mumbling under her breath, and leaving him there without asking anything else. She still didn’t know why. The shock of it? The disbelief? Or was it that deep down she *knew*, and she didn’t want to face it.

She’d spent that week throwing herself into the piles of accounting work she’d been neglecting at the office. They had been talking, even briefly, every day on the phone until she could stop by in person on their Sundays. But she couldn’t do it, she didn’t know what to say to him. She’d ignored his calls, listened to his voice mails about wanting to update her on what her mother just told him and pretended everything was fine.

Everything was just fine.

As a matter of fact, when she’d finally gained the courage to Google reactions to grief, she’d found tons of people who talked to their dead loved ones. It was normal, granted none of them were wearing metal helmets and having actual concrete dialogue but she’d stretched the

situation to fit in with what she'd read. She knew she had to ask him about it and ran through scenarios of how to bring everything up. What could she ask? "Hey dad, how's mom? Is she happy? Did she like the flowers we put on her grave?" She didn't share her dad's situation with anyone. How could she? He was a world-renowned cancer research scientist. He would be ruined.

But was that even it?

Was she just denying the inevitable and pretending that everything was okay? Was she pretending it was a normal grief pattern just like the articles she'd found on Google said? He was in the denial phase, she'd told herself. He was just lonely and sad and pretending her mother was still there. And her mom was just directing him on how to create inter-dimensional travel.

Sure. That's normal, she thought, knowing the whole time that it was the farthest from "normal" a person could probably get.

The thought entered her mind once or twice or more like a thousand times. What if? Every time she thought it little shivers would run across her shoulders and she'd have a fleeting feeling of hope. But she knew better, shook her head and closed her mind against the idea. Brilliant or not, facts were facts and death was death. Her mom was gone, and her dad was losing it.

She had to check on him; she was already kicking herself for ignoring his calls and was beside herself with worry; for all she knew he starving and filthy because he hadn't eaten or changed his clothes. It was time to grow up and face the facts, that's what he would've told her. Well, the "he" that he used to be, before going off the deep end.

So, when Sunday came, she toyed with making an excuse and telling him she couldn't make it, but she couldn't do it. She had to go check on him, had to make sure everything was

alright, and she'd told herself repeatedly that it would be. By now, she'd reassured herself that her dad, the down to earth, practical man she knew, would be back at his research on cancer cells and saving the world. It was a glitch, she'd reassured her tattered nerves, a temporary need to feel her mother's presence. He would've shaken it off by now and realized, no *remembered* who he was and what he believed in, or at least what he didn't believe in.

So, she'd arrived earlier than usual and unannounced, because—well, because she didn't want to tell him she was coming and—if she'd really been honest with herself about it—because she didn't know if she'd actually go through with the visit. A million excuses ran through her mind as to why she couldn't stop by, and another million reassurances that he was okay answered her trepidation. But there was one thought that interrupted all of the others; one that just repeated in her mind with the question “what if he isn't okay”? In the end the one question won out. She'd had to go. She had been determined that everything would be back to normal, and if it wasn't, she'd make it that way. She had just shown up with flowers ready for the cemetery, lasagna fresh from her oven, and a big fake smile that said the world was perfect and everyone, including her dad, was where they needed to be.

She'd found him in the kitchen, drying his hands on a towel; a crumpled McDonald's bag lay on the little kitchen table. See, she'd told herself, he went out and got food. Nothing to worry about here. Maybe it was good that she'd ignored his calls for a while, maybe his sense of survival kicked in and, maybe, his sense of reality too. She'd smiled at him and held up the Lasagna.

“I brought food.”

“Claire,” he sang out with joy. “There you are! I’m so glad you finally got to leave the trenches of that horrible number crunching Hell you call a job. Your mother and I have been so worried about you.”

She’d almost dropped the lasagna but instead pulled it tighter to her chest. The sauce had oozed over from the careless tilt she’d held it at, and it stained her coat with a red glob or two before she’d realized it. When awareness and the feeling of gooey red sauce registered, she set the pan on the counter. She’d turned and smiled at him as if he hadn’t just said what he did. “Right,” she’d answered in a too airy voice that sounded foreign even to her ears. Claire, she’d mentally chided herself, face this. Do what you came here to do. She’d taken a deep breath; it was time to stop pretending that this, that her father, was normal. “So, dad, about that,” she’d paused and took another deep breath, “uh, so you’ve been talking to mom then, like really talking with her and you know, she answers you. I mean she *answers* you? You know that’s not possible right?”

He’d stared at her then and she looked deep into his eyes. He seemed actually with it, not crazed or dazed or dilated and rambling like a crazy person. All he’d had to do then was tell her that of course he knew her mom wasn’t really talking back to him, that he’d missed her and had conversations with her to fill the void. It was normal, she knew, Google said so. But, much to her hand wringing dismay, rather than apologize, or laugh it off as an eccentric and a sad trait of losing his one true love, he’d ranted with excitement. “Of course, she answers. She has always been my helpmate in these things. I don’t know if you ever realized how much your mother helped me in my research. She was integral to so many of my breakthroughs, so, so many. And now, she has set me free from the strain of trying to save the world from cancer. It can’t be done, you know. She told me that, what a weight off my shoulders. Here I’ve been trying for decades

to stop it, reverse it, cure it, and poof!” He’d snapped his fingers for emphasis, “just like that she has set me free. Cancer is not the problem Claire. There will always be cancer or something like it. She told me that, or really it was more like showing me. You see, honey, it turns out, we were never meant to be here all that long anyway. This place, earth, it’s, uh, how did your mom put it” he’d tapped his chin lost in thought and then held his finger up when he remembered. “It’s like an elementary school of learning, it is not the end goal—just a stop—just a place to learn and grow. Cancer, disease, accidents, any death really, they’re just inevitable and it isn’t the end. It is the beginning, or not so much the beginning but a launching point. Yes, a launching point.” He’d smiled brightly, so brightly in fact that she’d wanted to leave it be, let him have this fantasy, and just not worry about it. She hadn’t seen his face lit up like that in years. She had wanted to bask in it, hug him, laugh with him, and enjoy the fact that he looked alive again. The color was back in his cheeks, a light danced in his eyes, and she hadn’t seen him like that in so long, she’d forgotten that he wasn’t always the shell of the man he’d become when the diagnosis first came.

But she couldn’t ignore what it was that had brought him to this new state of enthusiasm. She couldn’t just pretend this was okay or normal. She’d stood still and just stared at him as her mind flip-flopped back and forth. She’d said nothing, couldn’t say anything really. And had just stared and then, without knowing why, she’d removed her coat and worked frantically at the stain with a dampened paper towel that she’d ripped from the roll under the sink. Suddenly, removing that stain seemed like the most important thing in the world. Removing it would make everything alright.

When she’d remained silent, leaning over the sink worrying at the red sauce on her coat, he’d walked over and put his hand on her shoulder. “I’m so close,” he said. “But there are rules, apparently.” He’d laughed then. “Rules. Can you believe it? There’s a whole hierarchy of red

tape just like here. Your mother is going to seek special clearance for me. I should know soon. But I just can't do it without them. There's no way. It's not humanly possible. I thought I could find a way. The arrogance of it! It's amazing Claire Bear. Just amazing."

He'd smiled at her then; a smile so filled with joy that she couldn't bring herself to say a word.

"Here, leave your coat for later. I want to show you something." He'd pulled her downstairs like a child on Christmas morning heading for the presents under the tree. He didn't let go of her hand until they reached the lab.

"Are you familiar with string theory?" he'd asked, as if he thought she should be. "Ah, well let me explain." He'd walked over to the large whiteboard near his desk, uncapped a marker with a small pop, put the cap in his teeth, and started writing out a formula. He stood back, took the cap from his mouth, and said "string theory—" he'd paused and turned to look at her. The look on her face must have triggered something for him.

"Sorry. I forgot that you don't like it when I do this."

He then stepped away from the board and scratched his head. "Let me put it this way. String theory in a nut shell is the idea that all particles are not finite points, but instead, tiny vibrating loops of strings. Now, the theory is that each type of vibration corresponds to a different particle. The different particles are like the different notes that can be played on . . . say a guitar or violin string. Do you follow?"

"Um—" She'd murmured, but he'd cut her off before she could answer.

"Basically, string theory asks us to believe in the existence of extra or other dimensions in the universe. It has led to the idea of compactification and M-theory, which delves deeper into the study of these other dimensions and branes," he stopped and tilted his head. "How do I

explain this? Branes come from the word membrane and basically means a two-dimensional membrane. There are p-branes and d-branes, now the p-branes basically . . .” he suddenly stopped and nodded his head but didn’t look at her. “I’m going on too much again aren’t I? I guess I get carried away. What’s most important is how these other dimensions aren’t visible and why they aren’t visible and as it turns out, though no one has actually discovered the answer just yet, that they are on the right track because those dimensions are there.” He’d looked up at her then when he finally took a breath but didn’t seem to notice the concern etched on her face. He just jumped right back into his explanation, never noticing that she was not sharing in his excitement and wonder.

“So, my dear, that is a quick description then of precisely where your mother’s soul resides now, on a different dimension. If we can find a way to pluck the correct string, we can open the gate to that dimension. And when we open the gate, we’ll be able to actually physically be with your mother again. Don’t you see? She’s not gone Claire! She’s still here! She still exists; she’s just in a different dimension.” He flailed his arms about as he talked; his excitement evident in every move.

“Dad, uh, um— wow that’s—so . . . but . . . um, did you say you were talking to mom, I mean really talking to her, like she was answering you back?”

“Yes! Don’t you see . . .” his voice had trailed off as he finally noted the confusion on Claire’s face.

“Let me try to explain it better.” He’d put his finger to his temple and shut his eyes; missing how her face had paled even more and how her hands trembled as she’d reached up to wipe a tear that suddenly slipped down her cheek. “Okay, so,” he’d said when he popped his eyes open, “we are all made up of energy, and that energy doesn’t simply cease to exist; it stays

here, see, but we can't access it. It's here but not. Get it? It's on a new plane of existence. Oh gosh, how did your mother put it? Ah, yes, she said it's like an elevator caught between floors. And, here's the really fascinating part, she can see us. She knows what we're doing, but we can't see her."

He'd paused then but not for very long.

"Until now that is. Because of—"he'd thrown his arm out like a model on a game show introducing the next prize up for bid—"the Reverse Oscillating Portal or the R.O.P. as I like to call it! With it I've discovered a way to tap into different dimensions—however," he'd laughed, "and this is where it gets even more fascinating, apparently those other dimensions have rules and governments and policies. Can you believe it? It's *fantastic*. Your mother told me I was on the right track, but that I'd never break through without permission. Can you imagine? Permission! She thinks she can get it too."

"But— but," Claire hadn't been able to form words. "You don't believe in God, or heaven, remember?"

"Heaven, Valhalla, Nirvana, Sto-vo-kor . . ." he'd laughed over the Klingon reference and smiled at her expectantly. "Get it? Sto-vo-kor? From Star Trek?" Her face had remained clenched in confusion and he'd shrugged. "Ah well, what I believed in and what is real is still very similar. It doesn't matter what you call it dear, it's all still science. Sara, uh, mom explained it best. 'Energy,' she said. 'We're all energy.' Makes sense, right?" He'd nodded to her as if she was floored by his revelation. It didn't seem to dawn on him that she was astonished by the fact that he believed he was talking to her dead mother.

“I mean, think about it. We split the atom and what did we find? Protons, neutrons, electrons— basically we found more. *More*. We found that there is no end, no place where energy ceases to exist. And that is what your mother has been telling me.”

“That’s what mom has been telling you? *Mom*?” She’d finally found her voice but still couldn’t believe what he was saying.

“I know, isn’t it great?” He’d chuckled then. Chuckled as if everything was just fine, no, better than fine. He was having conversations with mon, all was perfect in his world.

“Mom didn’t understand science any more than I do. It gave her a headache.” Claire had murmured, as if that would allow him to come back to reality and realize that he must be conjuring her mother’s voice in his own head. She’d nodded, yes, that would remind him that this wasn’t possible. She’d been sure of it. He’d just needed a nudge and he would be back to his old self again.

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“Well, I guess that all changes when you become one with the universe again.” He’d said.

“Again?” She’d asked.

“Mm hm,” he’d mumbled over his shoulder already back into tweaking the machine.

She’d left his house in worse shape than she’d arrived. There was no way to brush it off now. She had the truth. She’d tossed and turned the entire night over what she’d just witnessed. What had happened to her father? The man speaking to her of string theory, heaven, energy, and the existence of an after-life wasn’t her dad. Her dad was the man who pulled her aside when she was little and told her not to make fun of religious believers. He’d told her that people believed what they needed to believe to get through the tough times, and that not everyone understood

how life really worked, and that was okay. He'd told her she must never look upon them with disdain, but just understand that they needed their beliefs to survive.

*That* guy was her dad.

Her dad was the man who was fascinated by cancer cells, impressed with their ability to adapt and take over. Until, that is, they took over her mother. Then they were the enemy. But never once did he say, "it's in God's hands" or "let's try that prayer thing people do." Not even at the end when he was so desperate that he would have tried anything, *done* anything to help her. No, not even then did he believe in a higher power or life after death.

He'd snapped.

Maybe if she'd been more adamant back then, when it first started, maybe it wouldn't have come to this. He was still her dad; still that brilliant man who wowed the world with his discoveries. First, she'd contacted grief counseling services, found a support group, and drove him there herself.

A few weeks after signing him up, she'd received a voicemail stating that just because her dad wasn't coming to the group anymore didn't mean they'd issue a refund. It turned out that he was waving goodbye to her, walking into the building, watching her leave and heading right back out again. She'd made the decision right then and there to save him from himself.

She did it *for* him. At least that's what she told herself now.

He was lost in his grief, that's what it was. Her dad wasn't crazy. No, he was just having a physical and chemical reaction to trauma and loss. That she could understand. That she could fix. He would come out of it, but maybe not before he died of starvation and lack of sleep. She had to do something. He just needed a little bit of an intervention. It would be temporary. She'd

promised herself it would only be temporary, but there was a nagging feeling tingling through her that she might be lying to herself.

And that was why she'd looked into Sunny Brook— a quasi-retirement /hospital/ mental care facility. He'd needed constant supervision. He wasn't eating enough and if she had to, she'd thought at the time, she'd get him committed without his consent. It killed her but her mind was made up. She would not lose her dad too. Not like this. Not when she could help him.

She'd brought him to Sunny Brook under false pretenses; a fact that still filled her with guilt. "The ends justify the means," she'd repeated in her head over and over. The way he looked at her when he realized what she had done, where she had brought him and why—she would never forget it. The betrayal in his soft brown eyes killed her. She'd wanted to turn the car around and say, "Never mind daddy, I'm sorry". But she fought it down; she had to stick to this plan. It was for his own good.

It would have been better if he'd raged. She would have given anything to have him yell at her, scream, something. Instead he'd acquiesced to the tour, sat through the cheery introductions from the tour guide and even looked at the grounds and rooms with a half-smile. He'd asked questions, acted his part, and left them with rosy grins of accomplishment at sealing another resident. Even Claire had been fooled by his act. When they had reached the car and shut the doors, he'd shut down.

"Well what do you think?" Claire had asked.

"Why would you bring me here?" He'd asked quietly.

She didn't miss the soft tone or the way he stared out of the window rather than look her in the eyes. "Dad, it's just . . ."

“Is this where you think I belong?” He’d cut her off before she could offer an explanation.

“I— uh, I think it might be best, for . . . for now. Look, there’s just—I think you just need time to heal, but that’s not going to happen at home. Mom’s everywhere there, you know? I mean, you’re not eating and you’re in the basement 24/ 7 talking about how mom came to you and—God, dad you were having a conversation with her, you know? You were talking to her as if she were there.”

“And you don’t believe it was real, is that it?” He’d looked at her then, his chin tilted but the pain of what she’d just done etched into every pore of his face. His eyes had been the worst. The soft, tortured look in them nearly put her over the edge.

“Look, dad, I just think—” she’d glanced at him with pleading eyes and saw the way he was looking at her, the disappointment evident. It was the same look he’d given her when she had been a teenager and she’d stayed out all night at Tina Lamont’s bonfire. She’d tried to sneak back in at five in the morning, but he had been up waiting for her. It was the one and only time she’d done something reckless. She hated that look and seeing it then, after everything that they’d gone through with her mother’s death, something in her just snapped. He doesn’t get to be disappointed in me, she’d thought. Not with this.

“Look, you know what? You have never, not even once, asked how I’m doing with all of this, did you know that? No? Didn’t cross your mind to ask did it? And do you know why you don’t even realize that you’ve never asked how I was doing? Because you’re so wrapped up in that Goddamned machine and your hallucinations of mom and your own grief— I get it. I get it. But— you’re supposed to be the parent, you know? God damn it dad, I can’t take care of you the way mom did. I can’t. I’m sorry, but someone has to look after you. Someone has to make sure

you eat.” She’d wiped at the tears spilling from her eyes but didn’t want to look at him.

Knowing instinctively that she’d just gone further than she’d ever gone before with him and that she’d probably gone too far.

When she’d finally glanced over at him, the hurt shining from his eyes stabbed her through the heart. The guilt and hurt ate at her, but she had also been filled with a sudden rage at all he’d put her through, and she couldn’t stop herself.

“You are supposed to be taking care of me, you know? I know I’m an adult but still, mom died. She *died* and no one has been there for me. All of my grief and pain has to be stashed away and held back so that I can take care of you. You’re the parent, not me! It isn’t fair.” She was sobbing then; her words came out on top of each other while an inner voice had yelled at her to stop but she just couldn’t. It had all poured out as an attack on him and though she knew she sounded like a child, she didn’t care, not then. She’d wiped her nose with her shirt sleeve like a toddler and shook her head. “It isn’t fair dad.” She’d stared out the windshield, afraid to look at him. Even if she shouldn’t have reacted the way she had or said those words, part of her had been glad that she did. There had been a moment of relief that washed through her. She’d finally gotten it out.

“Okay,” he’d said without looking at her.

“Okay?”

“Okay. I’ll come here. If that’s what you need me to do.”

She’d turned to look at him then, her eyes red and puffy and her nose still running. He looked old she realized. Old and tired and underweight. She was doing the right thing.

“Really? It won’t be for long dad, I promise. It’ll just be temporary, just until you’re, you know, uh, back on track. I just think that— I don’t know, um, you just need a little help coping

maybe.” She remembered the excitement that filled her when he’d agreed. She’d known, deep down that it wasn’t what he’d wanted, but her relief took control of that moment and she hadn’t been about to back down. He’d finally be safe.

“Maybe I do,” he’d said staring out the car window. He’d turned and patted her hand again, then smiled. Biting her lip, she’d nodded, but her heart broke all over again.

How could she have been so blind that day? They’d signed the papers; he’d patted her on the back and had even given her a hug. If she’d been more aware, more in-tune, would she have sensed that it was all a ruse? She’d thought the tension coursing through her that day was easily chalked up to the situation. He didn’t want to move there, even temporarily, but he’d conceded for her. That was enough. She didn’t need to push him further right then.

She’d visited him at Sunny Brook every Sunday, just like before. Her guilt, still ever present, but lessened each week as she’d noted that he was gaining weight.

She’d made the right decision.

After he’d been there for a month, she’d hired a cleaning service for the house. She even told him about it that Sunday and he’d responded with a small smile. “They won’t touch the lab though?” He’d asked, his concern evident in his tone and the way his face had tightened.

“No, no I left instructions that the basement was to be left untouched. They don’t care, it’s less work for them. Don’t worry okay?”

“Well, when are they going to be there? Are you going to supervise to make sure?” He’d asked with a calculating look.

“No, dad, I can’t be there because of work. They’re scheduled for Tuesdays and Thursdays at 2:00 pm, every week. But I can check things out after work on those days and make sure the house is still standing if you want.” She’d smiled at him, she remembered, still

uncomfortable with everything, but he'd taken it all so well and he looked so good. She shook off the feelings and worries. Everything was going to be alright, she'd told herself. He was getting better. He seemed to take it all in, slowly nodding his head and then looking over at her.

“Thank you for all you are doing Claire. I know it's not easy on you, worrying like you have been. Tell me what's going on with you. Are you okay?” He'd looked like he actually cared about what was happening in her life. This, she remembered feeling, was a major improvement. She had her dad back, maybe even better than before.

She'd left that day with a renewed energy. Finally. Everything was on the right track now. She could dive back in to her life, focus on her career, maybe even go on a date, not that there was anyone knocking down her door, but she hadn't really had time to look. She'd finally felt a kind of peace settle in and it felt good.

A few weeks after that visit the second bill had arrived in the mail from Sunny Brook. It had come with a letter thanking her for using their services and a note about how they hoped, if she needed them, she would consider them again. Weird, she'd thought as she looked the bill over. Her breath had caught at the total. It was much more than the other bill. Something wasn't right. As soon as she had the chance, she called to ask about it. After being on hold, explaining the situation, and being placed back on hold again several times she finally had a real live person on the other end of the phone. She'd explained the letter and the amount being charged once again and waited for the woman who'd introduced herself as Cindy something or other who was in charge or something that Claire didn't hear and didn't really care about to admit a mistake had been made. Her irritation had been building but it was just one of those things, she'd told herself. Discrepancies happen and it wasn't this person's fault. She'd just hated having to take the time to straighten it out. But, the woman on the other end of the line didn't come back after looking in to

it and say it was a mistake. Instead she'd said everything was in order and that she no longer qualified for the monthly payments but had to pay the balance in full.

"I don't understand," Claire had growled into the phone. "Why did this change? We signed a contract with a determined fee to be paid monthly."

"Well," the woman had said, "yes, but that contract was nullified when your father dissolved it."

"Dissolved it? What?" She'd thought she hadn't heard the woman right at first.

"Let's see," the woman had mumbled, "yes, here it is. Your father broke the contract and signed himself out stating that our services were no longer needed. So, the payments revert to the bulk of what is owed being due all at once. It's clearly written in the fine print."

"What do you mean he signed himself out? I don't understand. He can't do that, can he?" Her heart raced and pounded so loudly that she'd had to strain to hear the woman's reply.

"Well, due to the fact that he signed himself in under his own recognizance means that yes, he can sign himself out. That's his right."

"But, but," she'd stammered unable to think straight. Her phone chimed that another call was coming in right when the woman said something else and she had to ask her to repeat it.

"All I was saying is that if you feel that he is not competent to make these decisions then you need to get a court ordered guardianship. It's pretty easy to get. You just need to show that he is a danger to himself or others and then you would be in control of his wellbeing. I can give you the name of an attorney we've dealt with in these matters, if you'd like. But, other than that, I'm sorry, the bill is correct."

She hadn't said a word and the woman added a parting comment to make her feel better, at least that's what she'd assumed the woman was doing, but her news had stabbed icy daggers of fear into Claire's heart.

"Listen," the woman had said, "I know you are concerned for your father and that is admirable. But I have to tell you the staff here feel that this just wasn't a fit for him in the first place. He was really only here for breakfast and dinner and that's a lot of money for two meals a day and a bed for the night. He was pleasant and well kept, and never late for supper, but he was gone all day and truly never took to the lifestyle we promote here. He didn't interact with anyone or take advantage of any of our services. It really is better for both of you this way. Don't tell anyone I said that, obviously."

Claire had hung up the phone in stunned silence. He wasn't there all day? He got back in time for supper? She'd realized suddenly that it never occurred to her that he would be able to just walk out and be gone all day. She hadn't thought about the fact that he signed the contract and he was in charge of the rules of his stay there. Where did he go? She'd wondered. He couldn't go to the house, she had the only set of keys, well, she thought, except for the one she had made for the cleaning crew. Oh God. *The cleaning crew!* He'd been so interested in when they would be there, down to the exact time. How long had he been doing this now? And he'd checked himself out, dissolved the contract. She'd been so stunned she forgot to ask when. She'd been trying to piece everything together in her mind when her phone chirped notifying her of a voicemail message.

The screen displayed her dad's name, and she'd shaken her head in anger. Oh, sure leave me a message, she thought. Nice try, I know your little game dad. She'd opened the voicemail even though she wanted to call him back without listening to whatever he had to say. She needed

the time to calm down and she couldn't help but wonder just what he would say. Would he lie and act like he was still at Sunny Brook? Anything was possible at this point. She let out an angry huff of breath and hit the play button.

*"I've done it Claire! It's ready. I know by now you've probably discovered that I am no longer a resident of Sunny Brook. Please don't be angry. I love you and all that you have done for me. But I was so close, I couldn't stop working on it. And now, it's done. I love you so much. Don't be mad. Oh, and maybe don't come to the house for a bit, just in case."*

She'd heard his words through seething red eyed anger, but each word he'd said caused fear to replace her rage. "Don't come to the house, just in case?" She'd jumped up. "Oh God, oh God. Shit." Running to the front hall, she'd grabbed her purse off of the little table there, digging frantically inside for her keys. "Damn it, damn it damn it." When she'd finally found them, she'd dropped them and swore again, but was able to scoop them off the floor and stumble out her front door in a rush.

She'd reached the house in record time, but it was still a whole forty-five minutes after his voicemail. The entire drive over had been filled with more swearing, fear, anger and then a concrete plan. She was going to get the power of attorney. This was the last straw. Her guilt ebbed. He was a danger to himself, and she knew she would have an easy time proving it. The gloves were off this time. She wouldn't feel any guilt or indecision. He had to be supervised. She never told Sunny Brook why he was there. Maybe that had been a mistake, but she'd believed that his reputation needed to remain intact. He would, after all, be returning to the Institute for work at some point. At least that's what she told herself. But, now, she didn't care. She'd decided she would tell the world if she had to. Her dad needed help.

She'd opened the front door with a bit too cheerful of a "hello." No sense letting him know her plans. He wasn't himself, she had to remember that. He was in a deep delusional depression, anger at his actions made no sense. Still, she'd had to take a few deep breaths to calm her rage. The living room was empty, no surprise there she thought. She knew where he was without any doubt and she'd walked through the kitchen toward the basement door, calling out to him as she went.

She had just reached the basement door and pulled it open when she heard it; a hiss followed by a loud pop. It only took a few seconds before the smell of smoke crept up the dark stairs. Her mind had still been trying to make sense of the smoke when a thunderous boom shook the entire house. She'd flipped the light switch, but there was no power. Grabbing the railing and feeling for the edge of each step with her toes, she'd moved as fast as she could. Missing the last two steps in her desperate flight to reach him, she'd landed on her knees and elbows with a painful thud that rang through her bones, but she didn't bother to get up. Instead she had crawled along the floor to avoid the thick hazy air.

The smoke was heavier; the smell filling her with nausea. "Daddy?" she'd cried out moving through the dark. She hadn't been able to see and pulled her cell phone from her pocket hitting the home button for light. The room, thick with black smoke, burned her eyes and lungs and made it hard to do anything. She'd crawled further across the basement floor aided by the light from her cell phone, but she couldn't breathe. The closer she got to the lab the harder it was to take in oxygen.

She'd just managed to find her flashlight app and turn it on when the door to the lab exploded in a deafening blow of deadly wood splinters. Throwing herself instinctively to the floor, her arms covered her head without conscious thought.

A concerned neighbor who'd heard the explosion had called 911. She had still been lying on the floor when the firefighters found her. They'd pulled her out of the house and left her sitting in the back of an ambulance with an oxygen mask on still trying to make sense of it all.

The wetness of the carpet seeped into her clothes and finally reminded her where she was. She shook her head and looked at her hand. She was still holding the ROP. Staring at it but seeing only the past. She should have intervened sooner; she berated herself again and again. She didn't even know why she came back here, she was on her way to the hospital with the signed papers stating that she was now the legal and court appointed guardian of her father's welfare. Maybe she needed to remind herself that she was doing the right thing. Maybe that's why she had to look at what he'd done one more time. He was lucky. He survived the explosion with minor smoke inhalation, a few scrapes and bruises, and some nasty burns on his hands, but nothing like it could've been. No one could explain it. The firefighters thought it could be because of what he'd been wearing. The *jumpsuit*—the stupid racecar jumpsuit—he'd been prepared for this, he knew it could happen. She could hardly take it all in. She didn't want to think about it. When she did, her mind went to all that could have happened to him or to her.

He was recovering in the psych ward of the hospital and would be until she signed him out and took charge of him, *took charge*, it sounded awful and she flinched even thinking the words. There would be no Sunny Brook this time; knowing what she had to do, where he had to go and what she had already done by getting the court order broke her. She'd cried the entire drive home when she got the signed papers declaring her the legal guardian of her father. It wasn't supposed to be this way. He wasn't that old, he didn't have dementia, at least not that she knew of, he just missed his wife. But he could've died. She went back and forth, wishing she could go back and change things. Her tears turned to rage over his selfishness and then despair.

No matter what, she was going to be alone now. She had to remember that with the proper care and treatment, he could get better. She was doing the right thing. Stopping here, on the way to get him from the hospital, was what she needed. Facing him was going to be so hard, but this time there would be no doubt and no guilt. She had to protect him from himself.

She shook her head. He could've died. And all because she hadn't . . . she should have . . . she threw her head back in agony and tried to blink away the tears.

The black mass in her palm hissed and crackled again. She didn't drop it this time, her anger had calmed into a kind of numb desolation. It hissed again and she recognized that it wasn't really hissing, it was more like static. It sounded like a two-way radio that couldn't get a clear signal. She brought it closer, inspected what was left of it, and suddenly was filled with crippling despair over the loss of a once great and gifted mind. Would he ever be the same? Would he come back to her the same man he was before? What if he didn't? What if he couldn't? She felt her chest tighten in pain. She'd never felt so small and alone.

"Claire," a scratchy, almost imperceptible voice called her name. The ROP grew hot in her hands. It couldn't be—"Claire," she heard her name again and there was no question where the voice came from.

"Claire, are you there?"

Whose voice was that?

She recognized the voice, she was sure, but couldn't place it.

"Honey?" The voice asked in such a familiar tone that she knew who it was without a doubt.

It wasn't the strained, exhausted croaking voice she'd grown accustomed to over the last few years. It was the energetic, happy, loving voice she knew from before the cancer. Chills surged through her.

“Mom?”