



**MONSTER**

**Matt Truxaw**

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Other books by Matt Truxaw:

Plastiphobia/Plastivore

Anthrophobia

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# Monster

A Novel

**By Matt Truxaw**

For my neighbors, Jackson and Audrey,  
who rescued a certain stray kitten from a trailhead near our home  
and brought a cute little monster into my life that provided the  
inspiration for this story



# Part 1 - X

## Once Over Twice

*He ordered a latte, but was hoping for more.*

*She was making lattes, and hoping for more.*

*Sean wanted a cup of coffee, and was hoping for a cup of coffee.*

The man had been staring at her since Morrigan began making his drink. He was a few years older than she was. Standing six feet away, the weird fruity-smoky stench of his cologne was overwhelming even the fresh ground coffee just inches from her nose. His handlebar mustache was an unnaturally deep black, clearly dyed, and so was his black-red-blond streaked hair. Nothing about him seemed natural. The skinny jeans, Toon Patrol T-shirt, classic Converse All-Stars, and man-bun fit an aging retro-thrift-store vibe. The TAG Heuer watch and the Ralph Lauren Blazer did not.

He smiled at her as she finished the foam heart on his drink that was the trademark of the Cardiac Coffee and Tea House. She added a sprinkle of cinnamon and looked again at the name on the cup. She tried not to laugh.

“Large latte, two extra shots for Olyver.”

“Thank you,” he said in a saccharine sweet tone, raising his cup.

“I see you’ve given me your heart.”

“Mmm, hmm. You’re welcome.”

“Do you use arabica or robusta beans in your espresso?” he asked.

“I believe all of our beans are arabica.”

“Well, that’s pretty typical. I prefer robusta myself.”

“Mmm, hmm.”

“Twice the caffeine, you know, and a richer deeper flavor. How about after your shift, you come to my place and I can make you a real robusta latte?”

“Thanks, but I get enough coffee at work.” Morrigan laughed gently.

“Well, we could get something else then. A real drink. I know a nice little whiskey-cigar bar downtown. What time do you get off?”

“I’m sorry, but we have a policy that we don’t date customers.”

“Oh yeah? OK. When you change your mind, I won’t tell.” He winked.

Morrigan began to prepare the next drink. She saw him settle in at a small table near the rest rooms. It was the one place he could sit and see behind the counter where the baristas were working. She tried to ignore him gazing at her and looked through the front window at folks exiting the Pet Warehouse across the parking lot.

A young man caught her eye. He wore lightweight shorts, sunglasses, a plain black T-shirt, and flip-flops. A breeze lifted his hair and she could just make out a reddish shape on his forehead. *A birthmark or scar?* His hair was a sun-bleached sandy brown, and he was carrying a pink coil, about a foot in diameter. He seemed to be heading towards the Cardiac when he turned suddenly, dropped the coil, and sprinted the other direction.

*There’s a car coming! What the hell is that idiot doing?*

He bent low to the ground as the SUV sped past, missing him by inches. Leaning too far forward, he tried to maintain his footing while dodging a subcompact. One flip-flop flew skyward and landed on the Toyota's hood. He was still moving near full speed as he crossed to the next line of cars, rotated and slammed his back into a parked van.

It was then that Morrigan noticed the shape in his hands. She'd forgotten about the cappuccino she'd been frothing. It overflowed the top of the cup and she dumped it to start again.

An older woman ran up to the insane parking lot parkour practitioner. She had a cardboard animal carrying case that was torn open at one end. He handed her the black and white tuxedo cat he'd scooped from in front of the SUV. Morrigan couldn't tell what either of them was saying, but she could sense the gratitude.

He retrieved his sandal from the hood of the Yaris, jogged to a Subaru, and returned with a roll of duct tape that he used to repair the carrier. The old woman tried to give him some cash, but he refused. Finally, he returned across the two lanes of parking lot he'd traversed, recovered his pink coil, and continued on into the Cardiac. As he came through the doors, Morrigan called to Kelly, the cashier.

“Whatever that guy wants is on me.” She pointed at him. “You! What’s your name?”

“Um, me?” He looked confused and pointed to his chest.

“Yes, you. Your drink is on me. What’s your name and what can I make for you?”

“What? I’m Sean. Why? ... Really?” Sean said.

“Really. What do you want?”

“That’s cool... a small black coffee?”

“You can have any drink in this place.” Morrigan pointed at the elaborate menu board. “And you want a small black coffee?”

“OK. You’re right.” Sean looked more confident now. “I’ll have a **large** black coffee.”

Morrigan laughed and shook her head.

“Hey, I like black coffee,” Sean said sheepishly.

“Black coffee it is.” She grabbed a cup from the stack and started to pour. “Can I ask you something?”

“Um, sure.”

“What is that pink thing in your hand?”

“This?” Sean raised the coil. “It’s a cable for a dog run. It’s plastic-coated for weather.”

“Cool, what kind of dog do you have?”

“Oh, I don’t have a dog.” Morrigan turned her head to the side and looked at him. “I’m going backpacking next weekend, and this makes a great clothesline in the daytime, and I use it to hang my food at night... Bears can’t chew through the cable.”

“That’s cool. Where are you hiking?”

“Up near the Sequoias.”

“Wait, next weekend? That’s Fourth of July. Aren’t you going to miss the fireworks and the picnics and everything?”

“I never liked fireworks. When I was a kid, my little sister’s cat was terrified of them, and I would hide under the bed with her

while the rest of the family was blowing things up in the street. I prefer quiet.”

“You look like the quiet type.” Morrigan chuckled. “So who are you going with on this little adventure of yours?”

“Oh, no one I know wants to spend four days in the middle of nowhere eating rehydrated noodles when they can be down here guzzling beers, and eating burgers and hot dogs. It’s a solo retreat.”

“When are you leaving and when are you getting back?” Morrigan asked. He looked confused.

“Um, I’m driving out Wednesday night after work, and coming home Sunday night, maybe Monday morning. Why?”

“Hey Kelly?” Morrigan called across to the cashier. “We’re closed on the Fourth, right?”

“Yep,” Kelly replied.

“When are you working Friday and Sunday?”

“Morning shift Friday, and I’m off Sunday, why?”

“You’re covering for me Friday late and Sunday opening.”

“Uh, OK.”

She turned to Sean.

“What time are we leaving Wednesday?”

“Uh, we?” Sean stammered.

“Should I come by your place, or do you want to meet here?”

“I guess we could meet here? ... 7 PM?”

“Perfect.”

The man with a handlebar mustache had been watching this exchange. He stood in a huff, bumping the table and upsetting his latte onto his skinny jeans and his All-Stars. Morrigan heard him huffing “*some policy*” under his breath as he stormed through the exit.

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## When It Rains

Sean Lambton was still amazed this woman was on this trip with him. Sure, she was beautiful. Tall, lean, fiery red hair, but it wasn't just her looks. There was something about her. She didn't complain on the up hills or the stream crossing or the switchbacks. Well, maybe a little on the switchbacks. She laughed easily. She made him laugh easily. He could talk with her, and he could be silent with her. He hadn't even had a date in the last six months, and he only met Morrigan last week. Now they'd been alone in the back country for three days.

They were supposed to get to the car by Sunday, but the storm came out of nowhere. It forced them to stay in the tent all day on Saturday. After three days on the trail, close quarters can be irritating, and odorous.

It wasn't that way with Morrigan. She smelled, but it was an earthy, natural scent - not at all unpleasant - intoxicating. Their conversation felt natural as well. It felt better than natural when they fell together on top of his sleeping bag. She ran her fingers through his hair revealing the shape on his forehead. She traced the outline of it until it disappeared behind his slight widow's peak.

“Birthmark,” Sean said apologetically.

“I like it,” Morrigan stated.

“That makes one of us. My head is bad enough, but my back is worse. I used to catch hell in gym class.”

“More? Let me see.”

“I don't know...”

But she was already pulling his shirt up. Reddish brown shapes were spread across his back like they'd been splattered from an exploding paint can. She ran her fingers over the colored skin.

“It’s so smooth.”

She moved from her fingers to her tongue, and soon was removing her own top. A deluge was falling outside, but inside the tent, it was a beautiful morning. They reveled in getting to ‘know’ each other... until a stream of runoff rolled down the hillside and flooded through the tent.

Sean was able to dig a channel to divert it, but not before most of their clothes and the sleeping bags were soaked. By nightfall, they were both chilled and huddled together in a single damp sleeping bag. It wasn’t as much fun as the morning had been.

Lightning flashes cast strobe shadows on the tent. Thunder rolled in the distance and somewhere in the middle of the night a strange howling shriek pulsed through the camp.

“What was that?” Morrigan whispered.

“It’s probably just the wind in the trees,” Sean replied as the wail repeated itself, sounding closer. “Or maybe it’s an echo from the thunder.”

“That didn’t sound like thunder to me... or wind.”

“Wind can do some strange things. There are a lot of caves in the cliffs near here. It can blow across a cave mouth, or even a hole in a hollow tree and make weird noises.”

“So, you’ve heard sounds like that before?”

“Well, not exactly like that, but...”

The noise repeated again, even closer, and Morrigan grabbed him around the shoulders burying her face in his chest.

“THAT was not wind.” She spoke through chattering teeth. “It reminds me of stray cats mating in the alley behind my apartment, but... not.”

“Maybe you’re right. It could be mountain lions. They live in these woods.”

“So a pack of pumas are having an orgy in the middle of a thunderstorm?”

“Well, maybe we inspired them. You were howling this morning.” Sean smiled.

“Not the time, Sean.”

“Bigfoot?”

“Not funny.”

“OK, OK. Let me check it out.”

“Don’t go out there.”

“I’m only going to stick my head out and have a look.”

He pulled a headlamp from his daypack, shrugged into his rain shell, and crawled halfway through the flap. Morrigan could just make out the light reflecting against the tent walls as he swept it across the campsite. The glow stopped and focused in one direction.

“What do you see?” she rasped under her breath.

Without warning, Sean’s legs jerked forward. She could see his feet writhing in the tent doorway. She screamed as he flipped back and forth and back and forth. Then another sound drifted in from outside.

Sean was laughing hysterically. He squirmed back into the tent.

“There’s nothing out there. Just a wet campsite.” She slugged him HARD. “Ow!”

“You motherfucker! I think I peed myself. You are NOT funny.”

“Sorry about that. I couldn’t resist.”

She covered her face with the sleeping bag and turned away. He shimmied into his own sack and curled next to her. She didn’t pull away, but she didn’t turn towards him. Her breathing relaxed and Sean smiled at the light snore.

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It was still raining Sunday morning, but the patter on the roof suggested only a slight drizzle. He unzipped the tent fly and poked out his head.

“It looks like it’s breaking up. Let’s get breakfast and get moving. We’re way behind schedule.”

“I don’t have to be at work until Tuesday morning.”

“We should still try to make it to the car this evening. That’ll give us all day tomorrow to get home.” Sean pulled his phone from his pack and turned it on. “No service here. But we can try when we get to the car if you need to contact someone.”

“Alright.”

He dragged a tarp from under the bags and held it above his head as cover. He crossed the site to where he’d raised their food bag into a tree to keep out of reach of wildlife. Morrigan was trying to brush tangles from her wet hair when she heard his outburst.

“Shit!”

“What is it?”

“Damn. Have a look.”

She stuck her head out. Sean was holding a frayed pink line. At the end of it was their food bag, or what was left of it. The bottom was torn, and most of the contents were missing. He walked around picking up scattered wrappers and shredded plastic bags.

“Fucking bears. I didn’t think they could chew through a cable,” he said. “We’ve got a few protein bars, a bag of granola and that herbal tea you brought. Everything else is gone or thrashed... so much for breakfast.” He held out his upturned hands. “At least we’ve got plenty of water.”

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The rain stopped a half hour later and the sun intermittently broke through the clouds. They chewed a few handfuls of granola and Morrigan used their one pan to make tea.

“This stuff is pretty good. What’s in it?” Sean asked.

“I’m not sure. My roommate gave it to me. Supposed to give natural energy or good karma or some such nonsense.”

“It’s got a different taste. I like it. Do you want any more?”

“I’m good for now.”

Sean poured the remaining tea into a water bottle.

It took longer than he wanted to break camp as Morrigan insisted on circling the area looking for stray remnants from their food bag. She found several mangled packages, a dented tin of sardines, and tattered bits of paper and plastic. She stuffed them into her pack.

“We should be going,” Sean insisted.

“‘Leave the campground cleaner than you found it.’ You’re the one who told me that.”

“Even the Boy Scouts don’t expect you to clean up after every bear in the woods.”

“I’m almost done here. You just figure out how to get us out of here.”

“OK, I’ll be right back.”

He climbed to the top of a rise a couple of hundred yards away. The topographic map was wet, but still usable. He laid it on a flat rock, and didn’t notice the faint markings under it. He used the compass to help him orient to the landscape. He plotted the westerly path route to the main trail, and was about to head back, but he closed his eyes. He could still see the map, and a glowing path laid out on it to the east. After 10 minutes or so, he shook his head and returned to camp.

“You finished with your ‘sanitation engineering’ duties?” he asked.

“All done. Did you figure out how to get to the car?”

“The trail we came up is off to the west a little, but it has a bunch of switchbacks over the ridge, and we’d need to cross that stream. With the rain, that might be tough.

“There’s a canyon just to the east that cuts straight down and intersects with the trail closer to the car.” He looked down at the map folded in his hand. “If we want to make it to the car before nightfall, that’s our best bet. It’s off-roading a bit, but I think we can save two hours at least.”

“You had me at skipping the switchbacks,” she said, as she shrugged into her backpack. “Lead on.”

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Under the big trees, it was harder to keep on course. Sean stopped periodically to find a landmark on the correct compass bearing. They continued in an easterly direction, but had to detour around fallen logs, rocks, and other features in the terrain that were not quite extreme enough to show on the topo map.

“You sure you know where we’re going?” she asked.

“I’m pretty sure. We should hit a big flat area any time now. After that, the canyon will bend down the hill towards the trail.” He pointed at the map in his left hand.

“You said the same thing like an hour ago.”

“I know, but we gotta be close now.”

“I’m tired and I’m hungry.”

“Let’s get to the flat, and then we can take a break, OK?”

Fifteen minutes later, Sean bent down and picked up something.

“Well, we’re not the only ones who’ve come this way.”

He held a small, unopened can of Pringles, BBQ style.

“These look like they’re still good,” he said.

“They should be. I bought them at the gas station where we stopped on our way up the mountain.”

She pointed past Sean and to the left a little, then ran over and lifted a package of turkey jerky.

“And this...”

She zigzagged through the underbrush and raised a pint bottle of tequila.

“I brought that... for medicinal purposes.” Sean smiled.

Morrigan followed the trail of discards another hundred yards finding food items and packages as she went. She pushed her way through the underbrush and into a large clearing.

“Come here, Sean. You won’t believe what I’m seeing.”

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## Beyond and Back

Sean's pack caught on a low-lying branch from a large cedar. He twisted and pulled it free before squeezing between two manzanita.

“Well, I think you found our flat area. It's bigger than it looked on the map.”

There was a broad clearing, 200 yards or more across. It appeared to be a single granite slab. The far side ended at a small drop off into a narrow canyon. The near side, where they emerged from the woods, was bordered by pine, cedar and oak trees with a heavy undergrowth of manzanita. As they looked further, stands of silver-barked birch trees took over the edges of the space. Various wildflowers bloomed at the perimeter. Indian Paintbrush, Columbine and the last few California poppies at the ground by their feet. Bluebells, foxglove and heathers below the birch.

Strips of cloth echoing the colors of the flowers were tied around many of the white trunks and hung from lower branches. They rustled in the breeze, flapping against the wood and each other. Muted sounds like whispering voices.

The center of the clearing was what drew Morrigan's attention. Two thirds of the flat was covered by a rock labyrinth. Hundreds of blocks, about the size and shape of shoe boxes, were laid out on the ground in twisting, circuitous patterns. The stones formed paths that led through a winding maze, ending at the center of the circle where a natural granite tower, 20 feet tall, rose from the center. There were a few bigger blocks at seemingly random positions within the labyrinth.

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” Morrigan asked.

“I’ve seen some pretty elaborate cairns along trails, but nothing this elaborate. How would someone get all these things out here, and why would they bother?”

“A church near my mom’s house used to have a small one of these in their garden when I was a kid. You were supposed to contemplate Jesus as you walked it. Of course, that one had a big cross in the center instead of a miniature Devil’s Tower.”

“Close encounters of the igneous kind?” He laughed.

“Let’s follow it!” she insisted.

“We don’t have time. We’ll already be getting down the mountain after dark.”

“Oh, come on. This is so cool.” She waggled the package of jerky and the Pringles. “We’ve got food now, and I don’t have to be at work until Tuesday. Let’s camp here and hike out in the morning.”

He started to object, but stopped when he saw the look on her face. That was the same look that had convinced him to take a barista he just met on a four-day backpacking trip in the Sierras.

“Alright. It is a cool place for a camp.”

They dropped their gear and walked a quarter way around the circle. Remnants of a fallen tree pointed at an opening between two taller stones. The beginning of the path. Morrigan paused as they passed the length of the log.

“What are all these little holes in the wood?” she asked.

“Those are from woodpeckers searching for bugs under the bark.”

“That’s cool. Do they make patterns on purpose?”

“Patterns?”

“These nine holes. They look like the constellation Leo.”

“Which nine?”

She knelt down and scooped several tiny pebbles from a pile and dropped one each in eight of the nine holes. Then, she removed the small turquoise stud earring from her left ear, and stabbed it into the ninth for Regulus, the brightest star.

“See? Leo.”

“You know your constellations?” Sean was impressed.

“Really only this one. I’m a Leo.” Morrigan chuckled. “...and the dippers.”

“Leo, huh? Me too. You believe in astrology?” Sean was less impressed.

“No, but I did when I was 12.”

“When’s your birthday?”

“August 9th. When’s yours?”

“August 22nd. I’m almost a Virgo.”

“So, you believe in it?”

“Not even a little bit, but I admit I still read my horoscope if it pops up in my feed.” He made air quotes. “You will find adventure and mystery in unexpected places.”

“Anyway, shall we venture forth into the winding coils of mystery?” Morrigan laughed and headed towards the portal stones.

“One minute,” Sean called.

He ran to the packs, grabbed a water bottle and jogged back to Morrigan. The world seemed to grow quiet as they crossed the threshold. They didn’t say a word as they followed the pathway. No birds chirped. The wind didn’t blow. The only sound was the occasional crunch of a dried leaf under their boots. After a few minutes, they came to one of the larger blocks on the opposite side from the entrance. There were strange symbols scratched into the top of the stone.

“Are those petroglyphs?” she asked.

“Well, technically, anything carved in rock is a petroglyph, but that doesn’t look like any of the native American rock art I’ve seen.”

“It kind of looks like an animal, but maybe not.”

“Yeah, in cave paintings, they sometimes drew multiple animals over each other. It does look like that, but it might just be random markings.” He laughed. “Maybe those pumas were sharpening their claws here.”

“Yeah, maybe.” She didn’t laugh.

They continued along the winding route. Each of the bigger blocks had similar markings. Some were on the top of the stones, some on the sides and some on both.

It took longer than they expected to traverse the entire pattern, but they finally reached the spire in the center. It didn’t have any of the symbols scratched into its sides, but it did have rough handholds carved in it.

Morrigan walked clockwise once all the way around the monolith, then immediately began climbing. The indentations circled the tower so that she completed a full 360 degrees before she reached the top.

“Be careful,” Sean called.

“It’s easy, come on up.”

He’d done a bit of rock climbing and knew that it was often the ‘easy’ climbs where people made mistakes and hurt themselves. He hung the bottle on a belt loop and spiraled his own way to the summit. The top was a flat oval about eight feet in diameter. There was a pattern with the same type of carvings they’d seen earlier, but circular, almost mandala-like. Morrigan was standing in the center with her eyes closed and arms outstretched to either side, slowly turning.

“You OK?” he asked.

“I am terrific. This place is amazing!” She pulled him to her and kissed him hard. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

“Uh, you’re welcome... The sun’s getting pretty low. We should probably get back and set up camp.”

“In a bit.”

It wasn’t the same look she’d given him that morning, but it was one of **those** looks. She pulled him down on top of her. Yesterday morning in the tent had been slow and tender, but tentative and exploratory. This was frantic, raw, energetic, feral. Morrigan could feel the patterns of the mandala against her skin as she writhed below Sean. The faint rise and fall of carved symbols — loops, lines, and forgotten shapes pressed gently into her spine. A single pressure point, not quite pain, jabbed at her shoulder blade. As they traded positions, she kicked the water bottle and it spun wildly splashing around and under them. There was a small

flat object stuck to the skin of her back. She pulled it from her shoulder and tossed it on top of the discarded clothes and straddled Sean. He was immersed in her aroma, rich and earthy, mixed with the scent of pine and cedar and wildflowers as the wind returned. He closed his eyes as she began to rock gently, then not so gently.

After – they lay together in the center of the mandala, shoulders to the slab, eyes to the sky, fingertips touching. Leaves and fabric whispered in the breeze. A shadow swam across their naked forms, and a bird of prey screeched somewhere in the heights. As the sun began to dip below the tree line, Sean closed his eyes. *Lights and colors and ... everything...* flashed across his vision. The temperature was falling, and his body quivered and shook. But it was not from the cold.

“That was great,” Sean said, trying to calm his breathing.

“Yes, it was,” Morrigan said with a grin. “...but we should probably be heading down.”

“Yeah, Yeah.” He blew out through pursed lips. “Yeah.”

As Morrigan pulled on her top, something dropped from a fold, and bounced off her foot. She retrieved a small metallic disc, the size of a half dollar, with a tiny hole in the center. She tucked it into her pocket without thinking.

They worked their way down the spire. Sean started to step across the rocks to make a beeline to their gear, but she grabbed him by his shirt and stopped him. She wagged her finger and pointed down the rows of blocks. They circled widdershins round the spire to begin their return trip. They didn't say a word for the entire way out through the convoluted maze. They did pause for a drink, sometimes a kiss at the petroglyph stones, and exited the labyrinth as the sun disappeared beyond the horizon.

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In the morning, after a breakfast of Pringles and granola, they packed their gear and wound their way to the far side of the clearing. Below a drop off, there was an overgrown ‘use trail’ that led down into the canyon. Sean sat on the ledge, and hopped down. As he dropped, he felt a crunch under his boot. He staggered and leaned against the shelf.

“You OK?” Morrigan asked.

“Yeah, fine. I landed on a bug.” Lifting his foot he spied the remains. “Ew, be careful. It was a scorpion. There might be more down here.” He wiped his boot on a patch of grass.

“Scorpions? There’s scorpions? How dangerous are they?”

“The ones in this area aren’t gonna do you any permanent harm unless you’re allergic, but they hurt like a hundred bee stings.”

“OK.” She gave an involuntary shiver.

Morrigan stopped and took a long deep breath, turning towards the granite tower. She closed her eyes, folded her hands, breathed again, and bowed slowly. As she opened her eyes, she thought she saw movement in the shadows atop the tower. *Were those wings?* She squeezed them closed again, looked, and decided her eyes were playing tricks on her. She eased off the ledge and followed Sean down the trail.

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## Back 2 the Base

They had to push through the brush, but the trail was easy to follow... for the first couple of miles. Until it connected with an intermittent stream, that was anything but intermittent after yesterday's storm. It wasn't a huge amount of water, rarely more than three feet wide, but the 'trail' crisscrossed this rivulet as it twisted its way down the narrow valley. Usually, they could leap across or find stones or logs, but occasionally they needed to remove their boots and wade to the opposite bank.

Sean sat on a large flat rock and wiped sand from his bare feet. Morrigan exited the water and tip-toed across the rocky shore and sat on the ground next to him.

"Let's take a short break. I want to check the map to see how far we've got to go," Sean said.

"No arguments from me. What do you have in the way of food? I think all I've got left is a tin of sardines. I don't know why we even have these things."

"They say you should carry some food that you'll only eat in an emergency. That's why I still got the protein bars."

"Those look pretty gross, but they're better'n sardines. What if we split one?"

He dug into his pack and handed a bar to Morrigan. She tore it open and took a bite. Her face screwed into a frown, but she chewed and swallowed then handed it to Sean. He seemed to enjoy the taste. She waved it away when he tried to give it back. He shrugged and shoved the rest of it into his mouth.

Sean wiped his hand and returned to the topo map. He went to lay it on the stone and stopped.

“Hey, look at this.” He pointed to the markings on the slab.

“More of those symbols? I wonder what they mean.”

“No clue. If we get down early enough, maybe we can ask at the ranger station.”

“So, when ARE we getting down?”

Sean gave a wicked smile.

“When are we getting down TO THE CAR?” Morrigan said, but she smiled too.

He put down the map and got out the compass, took bearings to landmarks edging the top of the canyon, and used the protein bar wrapper as a straight edge to tie those to the map.

“I’m pretty sure we’re right about here,” he said, pointing to the map. “We have, I’d say, two miles as the crow flies to catch the trail... probably twice that walking. But once we get there, it’s only another two miles to the trailhead.”

“So, six more miles to the car?”

“Yeah, about that.”

“Your shortcut isn’t turning out to be very short.”

“Yeah, sorry, but at least we saw that maze.”

“You’re right. That was awesome. Definitely worth a blister or two.”

They looked into each other's eyes and the hint of a smile drifted across their lips. Sean blushed and turned away first. He folded the map and stowed it and the compass in his pack. They both finished pulling on socks and boots. Sean hefted his pack onto his shoulders. Morrigan started to, but then paused.

“Did you hear that?”

“More puma orgies?” He smirked.

“Shut up, Sean... Listen.”

She set her pack down and worked her way around the large flat rock.

“Oh my God! How did you get out here?” She waded to the middle of the little stream and bent down.

“What is it?”

Morrigan stood straight and turned towards the young man. In her left hand, she held a wet kitten. It was a tiny little thing, sitting on her palm. She crossed to her pack and towed the cat off with a T-shirt. As it dried its coloring became more apparent.

Its underside was mostly white with orange and black markings drifting down from its shoulders across its back and flanks all the way to the tail. The tail was also black and orange, striped to a gray-white tip. Its head was topped with a black heart shape, and orange highlights across each ear. Another small black spot decorated the side of the left front paw. There was a dirty splotch on its pink nose, and eyes that seemed to twinkle and shift in the light from green to orange to yellow and back to green.

“She’s sooo tiny!” Morrigan crooned.

“Be careful. He might be a puma or bobcat kitten. His mom’s gotta be near here somewhere.”

“First, it’s ‘she’, not ‘he’. She’s a Calico. Have you ever heard of a Calico bobcat?”

“Um, no, I guess not. But her mom still has to be close by.”

“She’s so cute and sooo tiny... Just a minute.”

Morrigan rummaged through her pack and found the sardine tin. As she rolled open the lid, she almost gagged on the sharp oceanic smell, but she took a small fish and dangled it above the tiny cat. The kitten rose on her rear legs and snagged the sardine with her front claws. The feline struggled to get hold of it, and then shoveled the entire thing into her mouth. She devoured it, then she mewled pleadingly until she received another one.

After finishing half the can, the cat strolled to the stream edge, lapped up a drink of water, and cleaned her oily face. She rolled onto her back and tucked her tail between her legs and began cleaning that as well. Morrigan laughed.

“We have to take her with us.”

“We can’t.”

“Someone must have dumped her here. She won’t survive on her own.”

“We’re miles from any trail. There’s gotta be a pack of feral cats living out here. I bet her mom is waiting in the brush for us to leave.”

“You think so?”

“What’s more likely, someone took one lonely little kitten and went off-roading for six miles just to dump her, or a group of cats have found a way to make a home in the wilderness?”

“Maybe. I guess so, but she’s sooo cute. You sure we can’t take her.”

“This is National Park land. It’s illegal to take anything.”

“But... OK. Maybe. You take care, little one.” She turned, but the kitten had disappeared. “Little one?”

Morrigan spun slowly looking every which way, wiping a tear from her eye. She placed the tin with the remaining sardines by the base of the rock.

“I think the Boy Scouts will forgive me,” she said.

She latched the top of her pack and swung it onto her shoulders.

“Let’s go before I change my mind.”

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## Motel Room In My Bed

For once, the actual trip took less time than Sean's estimate. They found the marked trail in less than two hours and were to the trailhead and the car in another one. They loaded the packs into his Outback. Morrigan's boots were still damp and she changed into more comfortable shoes.

"We still have a couple of hours until sundown. Do you want to ask the ranger about those markings and stuff?" Sean asked.

"Nah. I'm beat. Let's just head down the mountain."

"I'm pretty thrashed too. Do you mind if we grab a hotel when we get to the flatlands? I can make it all the way home if you'd rather, but..." He stopped short. "Oh wait, you have to be at work tomorrow. We'll drive on through."

"No, a hotel sounds great. I can text my roommate from there. She can take my shift. I've filled in for her enough. Besides, I'd love a hot shower and a mattress and a pillow. Maybe a cup of real coffee in the morning."

"Great!"

\*\*\*

The motel was a small, family-owned motor lodge tucked in the corner of an old shopping center. There was a carniceria/market, a taco stand, an auto parts store, plus a few other storefronts, half of them empty.

"Should we bring our packs in?" Morrigan asked.

"Yeah, the motel looks OK, but I'm not sure about the neighbors."

He leaned his head towards a group of young men smoking at the far end of the parking lot. A skunky smell wafted across the asphalt.

“No reason to tempt anyone. Bring your pack. I’ll grab mine and the duffels.”

The room was on the second floor. It was clean, but sparse, baby blue walls, a single king-size bed, generic photos of big trees, and not much else. The air conditioner made a loud buzzing sound and had a slight mildewed odor. Sean turned it off and cracked open a window. He dropped both their duffel bags on the bed, and leaned his pack against the A/C unit. Morrigan propped hers against a small end table.

“Do you want the shower first?” he asked. “Or maybe together?”

“You go ahead. I’ve gotta text Kelly... my roommate.”

“OK. I’ll be quick.”

He started to pull a change of clothes from his bag while Morrigan went to her pack to get her phone. She unlatched it and flipped open the top flap... Then she froze.

“No fucking way.”

“What is it?” Sean asked.

She reached down into the pack and lifted a small kitten with a stick of turkey jerky hanging from its jaws. As Morrigan tried to pull it away, she lashed out her paw, hooked the jerky with her claws, and dragged it back to her mouth.

“OK, you can have it.” She turned to Sean. “I can’t believe she’s been in here this whole time. She must’ve snuck in when we stopped by the creek.”

He didn't say anything. He just stared at the tiny feline and shook his head.

"She must be starving. You watch her. I'll run over to the market. See if they have any cat food," Morrigan said.

"No, I'll go. You stay here with her."

\*\*\*

Sean returned a half an hour later with four assorted cans of wet cat food, another small bag of dry kitten chow, a pre-filled litter box– and a six pack of tacos from the taqueria. The kitten used the litter box before all three of them enjoyed their dinners. Sean finally got his shower after they finished.

Morrigan dug her cell from the bottom of her pack and powered it on. There were tiny teeth marks in the case, and she had 23% left on her battery. She plugged in the charger then pulled up Kelly's contact.

Morrigan: Got hung up comin down the mountain  
Be home late tomorrow  
Can you take shift at cardiac  
10-6

Kelly must have been on her phone already because the answer came back almost immediately.

Kelly: No prob on the shift  
Hung up eh? <wink emoji> <eggplant emoji>

Morrigan: You have a sick mind  
But yeah he's pretty great  
TYL <cat emoji>

Kelly: OK - have fun! <eggplant emoji><eggplant emoji>

She scrolled through her other texts. Nothing too important. The first was from her bank saying her balance had fallen below the minimum and they were implementing a \$10 monthly fee. At least it wasn't another overdraft. A request from her alma mater for a 'gift.' Four or five others marked as 'likely spam.'

There was a voicemail from her mother. She'd check that later. There was another from her agent, Kyle. That one she opened and played on the speaker.

"Call just came in. I got you the audition for the commercial. Wednesday 10 AM in Burbank. Get there by 9:30 and dress business-like, and sexy, but not too sexy. You might be a doctor or nurse, or maybe a girlfriend. I'll email you the details."

"Audition? Are you an actor?" Sean had a towel wrapped around his waist as he emerged from the bathroom. Her eyes dropped to his abs.

"Uh, yeah, sort of. I got my MFA in Theater from UC Riverside last June. I've done some community theater, but this is my first TV audition."

"That's cool. What are you up for?"

"It's a drug commercial. Four out of five people say you should ask a hot doctor about E.D., or psoriasis, or asthma, or something."

"Well good luck." She gave him another look. "Shit. I take that back!" He zipped his lips. "Break a leg!"

She laughed at him.

“It’s OK. I’m not superstitious. You watch this little girl while I shower.”

She lifted the kitten off her lap and set it next to him on the bed. He reached to pet the cat and she bit him lightly on the fingers.

“Ow.”

“Oh, you should be flattered. That’s a love bite.”

“Reminds me of the other morning.” Sean laughed then turned to the kitten. “I am honored,” he said.

He bowed and she honored him further by slapping his forehead. At least she didn’t have her claws extended.

\*\*\*

They were both exhausted but neither of them got to sleep until after midnight. Kelly would have been disappointed by the reason why. The kitten seemed to have slept the whole ride from the canyon to the motel and was ready to play. She bounced from one pillow to the next and then stalked, pounced and attacked their feet through the blankets.

“I’ll tire her out. You try to get some sleep.”

Sean got up and tied the lace from his boot to a sock and dragged it around the room with a feline guided missile close behind. She’d catch it and he’d drag her for a bit before she dropped off and attacked his ankles. Morigan was laughing too hard to sleep. It wasn’t long until they were both playing ‘kitten in the middle’ tossing the sock and string from one side of the bed to the other as the young cat flew back and forth between them, twisting, turning, leaping, sometimes flipping somersaults in mid-air.

It was after 12:30, and she finally ran out of gas. She curled between the two pillows on the bed and began kneading the mattress and chewing on the edge of the blanket. In minutes, she was purring in her sleep.

\*\*\*

In the morning, Sean ran across the parking lot and got breakfast burritos and two *café de olla* cold brews. His hands were full so he kicked the door on his return to the room. The pounding startled the young cat, who disappeared under the blankets. Morrigan checked through the window to make sure it was Sean. She opened the door to let him in. He set the food and drinks down on the small end table, and she went back to the window and closed it.

“You cold?” he asked.

“No, I noticed there’s a tear in the screen. I don’t want the monster to escape.”

She nodded her head towards a pair of eyes peering from below the bedspread.

“The monster? Is that what you’re going to call her?”

“I can’t name her. I don’t even know if I can keep her.”

“I think you have to. The cat distribution system has spoken and cannot be ignored.”

“I’ll have to see what Kelly has to say, but you’re right. I can’t imagine letting her go.” She reached over and booped its nose.

They ate their burritos, and the kitten ate a can of cat food, and sausage and egg from Morrigan’s meal, then some kibble. As they began to pack their things, the cat crossed into the bathroom. She hopped onto the

toilet lid, then to the top of the tank and pounced, dropping into the sink. The faucet had a slow drip. She tap danced in the small puddle then stopped and drank. She wet her left front paw and used that to wash her face.

\*\*\*

“Oh shit!” Sean called as they approached the Outback.

“What is it?”

“Somebody broke into the car.”

There were cubes of safety glass scattered below the passenger side window. Morrigan set her pack down and looked in.

“Oh fuck,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“What?”

She reached in through the broken window and retrieved her small purse. She shook shards of glass from the purse and opened it. Sean came up beside her as she flipped through it.

“I can’t believe I left this in the car... and I can’t believe they didn’t take it. Is anything else missing?”

“Nothing I can see, but that looks like blood on the glass. Maybe the thief injured himself when he broke the window, and took off.”

“I hope so. Sorry about the window.”

“It’s only glass. You’re the one who has to keep the monster in the car on the ride home. I think I got the easy part.” He laughed. She smiled at him, and turned away as her face colored.

\*\*\*

Keeping ‘the monster’ in the car was easier than they’d imagined. She spent most of the drive curled on Morrigan’s lap, sleeping or gently chewing on her fingers or ‘making biscuits’ against her leg.

There was one brief moment of panic as they came over the Grapevine. The cat leapt up and ran across the dashboard, then bounced off Sean’s left shoulder through the back seat to the very rear of the car. She balanced on a pack and looked through the rear window, hissing and spitting. The livestock truck that had been tailgating them slowed and changed lanes. Morrigan climbed into the rear seat and was able to coax the kitten back into her lap.

“That’s right. You tell ‘em who’s the boss. You little monster.”

\*\*\*

## What's Wrong With Me

Morrigan arrived home before Kelly finished her shift at the coffee house. She was putting away her camping gear and trying to decide what to wear to tomorrow's audition. It didn't help when a minuscule kitten kept attempting to climb her jeans, and jumped on to, and hung from each of her outfits as they came from the closet.

“NOT THE SWEATER! You **are** a monster!”

“Who's a monster?” Kelly asked, peeking through the bedroom door.

Morrigan pointed at the little cat hanging by her teeth from the sleeve of her favorite alpaca sweater.

“OOOOH! She's soooooooooo tiiiiny.”

Kelly scooped ‘the monster,’ and cuddled her next to her face. Loud purrs erupted from the animal. Then she licked her chin twice, paused, and bit it softly.

“Ow. You are a little monster. Where did you come from?”

Morrigan told her about Sean and the hike. She talked about the storm, and enjoying ‘waiting it out’ in the tent. She described the sounds in the night and losing, then finding, most of their food. Going off trail and fording the stream, and finding a kitten miles from nowhere in a desolate canyon. She didn't mention the labyrinth or the markings. She wasn't sure why. Morrigan usually told Kelly everything. They'd been best friends since middle school, but that part of the trip seemed different, private.

“Oh, one other thing...” Morrigan cringed. “Can you take my early shift again tomorrow morning? I'll cover you in the evening.”

“Again? I worked double-shifts twice already in the last four days. I can use the money, but I’m beat. What’s up? You boinkin’ your hiker boy again?”

“No. He’s gotta work too. Kyle got me an audition for a commercial.”

“That’s great!” Kelly squealed. “OK, I’ll take your shift, but as soon as I find myself a man, you’re doin’ doubles for a month.”

“Deal. Now help me figure out what to wear.”

“What’s this?” Kelly asked. She held a circular piece of metal, an inch or so in diameter. It was a copper or bronze color, with a greenish tint, and symbols, maybe writing, spiraling in from the edges to a small hole in its center. “It’s cool.”

“I don’t know. It must’ve snuck into my bag somewhere. You can have it.”

“Really? Thanks.” Kelly undid the chain she was wearing and threaded it through the opening, then replaced it around her throat. “Whatta ya’ think?”

“It’s you.” Morrigan said.

\*\*\*

It was very early, but Morrigan wanted to beat the traffic to Burbank. She fed the kitten and refilled her water bowl. As she was heading towards the door, the little monster rubbed against her ankle and mewled pathetically.

“Sorry, little one, but I’ve got to go. You be good today.”

The cat would not leave her side and squeezed in between her foot and the door. Morrigan peeled a post-it note from a stack on a shelf and crushed it into a ball. Then she reached down and rubbed her head.

“You little monster. Wish me luck on my audition.”

She threw the paper ball across the room and the kitten dashed after it. Morrigan slipped through and closed the door gently behind her.

\*\*\*

The audition wasn't in the main studio. It was in a large office building next door. Kyle told her to arrive by 9:30, but she was in the lobby at 8:15. She checked in with the security guard at the front desk. He was working a puzzle book, trying to find the path through to the middle of a complex maze. He looked up as Morrigan stepped to the counter.

“Morrigan Wielle. I'm here for an audition. I think it's on the fourteenth floor.”

He put down the book and flipped through screens on his monitor.

“Yeah, Suite 1413, but you're way early. There's a coffee counter next door, or if you want to wait, there's chairs in the lobby on 14.”

“I'm coffeed out this morning. I'll head on up.”

“OK. If you change your mind, there's a machine next to the restrooms on 14 too. To be honest, it makes better coffee than the folks next door.”

He winked and handed her a temporary badge on a lanyard and pointed her to the elevators.

\*\*\*

She sat down and placed a small stack of headshots and resumes on the table. She'd been doom scrolling through her phone for 10 minutes or so, and she could hear voices through a conference room door. The glass was too frosted for her to tell what was going on inside. The door burst open and a woman emerged. She had dark curly hair streaked with white. She looked both ways then wandered past the elevators and returned down the hall.

“Have you seen a blonde girl... about your age?” she asked.

“Um, no, I haven't. Is something wrong?”

“Shit. Never let a producer pick ANY of your cast.”

Morrigan smiled and nodded. The woman glanced at the resumes.

“You an actor?”

“Yes, I am. I'm auditioning in 1413 later this morning.”

“What time?”

“10 AM”

“If you're not early, you're late. I appreciate that.”

She picked up one of the headshots and compared it to Morrigan's face. She turned it over and read the few credits Morrigan had.

“Can I borrow you for a few? We're doing a table read for a new show, and my 'victim's cousin' is late... again.” She mumbled under her breath, “Fucking producers and their 'girlfriends'.”

“Uh, sure, I guess.”

“I'm Maggie. Director.”

“Uh, Morrigan. Morrigan Wielle.”

Maggie led her into the conference room. There were 10 folks in chairs surrounding the table. She recognized three or four of the faces from recent TV and movie appearances. The woman pointed her to a chair.

“Folks, this is...” she looked at the resume again. “Morrigan Wielle. She’s gonna be sitting in for Desiree until she gets here.” She turned to Morrigan. “You’re the cousin of the corpse and you don’t believe it was an accident. You’re trying to convince the detective... Jeremy there.”

Jeremy nodded. He was a beautiful African-American gentleman, and was one of the faces she recognized, Jeremy Jefferson. She had a crush on him when she was 12. He played Blake Strickland, high school football hero, in her favorite teen TV drama. He did a few movies too, but hadn’t had a hit in a decade. He still carried his athletic build and that disarming smile she remembered. Morrigan was a bit star-struck, but refused to show it. She leafed through the script on the table in front of her. Maggie continued.

“You’re Evie Parker. Your lines are highlighted in pink. You come in on page three. Let’s go, people. We’re burning dollars.”

\*\*\*

Morrigan was nervous at first, but loosened up within a few minutes. It was incredibly fun. The script had more intelligence than a standard cop show, and the chemistry of the cast was infectious. For such a serious subject, there was a surprising amount of laughter. They went through the entire script twice and parts of it a third time and Desiree still hadn’t shown.

“That’ll do for today. Great job folks. Filming starts on Monday. Frank will be in touch to let you know who and where and when. Don’t have too much fun this weekend,” Maggie said, and

turned to Morrigan. “And thanks for your help today, Morrigan. You did a great job too.”

“It was a blast.”

“Break a leg on your audition.”

“Oh, SHIT, my audition.” Morrigan looked at her watch. “Oh shit, oh shit, OH SHIT! It’s almost one. I gotta go.”

She ran through the hall and barged into suite 1413. There was another red-haired young woman sitting in a chair looking at her own headshots. Morrigan could hear the muffled sounds of someone auditioning through the door to an inner office. At a desk, there was a middle-aged woman with bright blue cat-eye glasses perched on her nose. The name plate on her desk read “Sheila Candelin.” Morrigan ran to her and pointed to her own chest.

“Morrigan. I’m Morrigan Wielle.” She breathed hard. “Sorry, I’m a little late.”

The woman looked down at the clipboard on her desk. She ran her finger to the top of the page, then folded down the previous page and ran her finger down it, and finally moved back one more page.

“Ah, here you are.” She looked at Morrigan over her glasses. “I’m afraid you are NOT a little late. You are absent. Thank you for your time.”

“But, really, I was here, I just...”

“Thank you for your time.” And she scratched a dark line through Morrigan’s name on her list.

\*\*\*

Morrigan had a couple of hours until she had to be at work when she eased open the door to her apartment and stepped inside. As she finished closing the door, a black and orange flash streaked across the carpet and attached itself to her foot. She staggered across the room with the tiny feline clinging tight.

“You miss me, you little monster?”

The kitten turned her head and meowed as if to say “Where the hell were you?”

“I got to go to work pretty soon, but I’ll get you a snack.”

She cleaned the litter box, refilled the water bowl, and dumped dry food into a dish. The little cat planted her face in the kibble. Morrigan dropped onto the sofa and splayed out like a puppet with its strings cut. Losing the audition was a gut punch. She was going to ignore her ringing phone, but accepted the video call when she saw the Caller ID. “Hiker Boy”.

“Hey Sean.”

“Hey Morrigan. Is this an OK time?”

“It’s actually a pretty shitty time, but it’s good to hear from you.”

“What’s wrong?”

She told him about her morning and missing the audition.

“That sucks, but there’ll be other auditions.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Hey, at least you got to meet Blake Strickland. I used to love that show.”

“Yeah, that part was pretty great, I guess.”

“I was wondering, if you’re not doing anything, maybe we could get together again? Maybe tonight?”

“I’d love that, but I gotta work tonight.”

“No pressure. But I do want to see you again...”

“Yeah, me too.” She eased into a smile.

“We’ll figure it out.” He smiled too. “Did you keep the kitten?”

“She’s terrorizing my apartment as we speak.” Another flash of orange and black.

“I’d love to see her again too.”

“Be careful what you wish for.” Morrigan swung the phone around, but only caught a glimpse of Monster as several magazines went flying off the coffee table.

“What are you doing this weekend?”

“I work every day... gotta make up for the time off in the mountains.”

“Oh, OK.” His smile faded.

“But my shift ends at seven on Saturday... if you want to do something after that.”

“That would be GREAT!” His smile was back and bigger than ever.

They talked for a few minutes brainstorming possible plans, but were interrupted when Morrigan’s cell rang with a custom ring tone.

“Oh shit, that’s my agent. I gotta take this.”

“No problem, I’ll see you Saturday.”

\*\*\*

“Hey Kyle.”

“Hello, Morrigan. How did your audition go this morning?”

“Um, uh...”

“Yeah, I know. I called Sheila and she told me you were three hours late.”

“It’s not like that...”

“I called in favors with Sheila to get you on that audition. She was not happy, and when people who do me favors are not happy, I am not happy.”

“Let me explain...”

“There’s nothing to explain. You were not there when you agreed to be there.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I fucked up.”

“You fucked up alright. You just dropped to the bottom of my priority list. I’m not calling in any more favors for you. If you miss another shot, I’ll drop you like a bad habit.”

“I understand. It won't happen again.”

“It better not. You’ll be lucky if you even get another chance.”

“Sorry, Kyle.”

He didn't even say good-bye before he dropped the line. *Shit, I'm gonna be a barista for life.*

“Well, Monster, I better get ready for work... Monster?”

She looked throughout the living room. No cat. The kitchenette? No cat. Her bedroom? No cat. Kelly's door was closed. She looked under the couch, under her bed, no cat. She had a large wardrobe in her room reaching almost to the ceiling, four feet wide but only a two-inch clearance under it. She dropped to the floor and peered under it. Two shining golden eyes.

\*\*\*

## New Life

Morrigan was in for Kelly at 5 AM to prepare for the 6 AM opening. The cashier called in sick so she had to bounce back and forth from the register to the various drink machines. Her first customer wanted an “extra-large, half-caf, four-shot, one-pump vanilla, one-pump mocha, 120° extra-foam, double-cupped, with light cinnamon powder, extra caramel drizzle...with whipped cream” then left a 5% tip. That set the tone for the entire day. With her shift too, she’d be here for 14 hours.

It was 2 PM and there were seven people in line when her phone rang. She recognized the custom ring-tone she’d set for him, ABBA’s “Take A Chance on Me.” Kyle. *Oh hell, what now?* She shouldn’t blow him off after she’d fucked up the audition, but she didn’t need another tirade right now... *Screw it, I’ll call him back later.* She set it to ‘Do Not Disturb’ and placed an “iced, double-shot, vanilla soy latte with extra ice and two pumps of syrup” on the counter...

“Order for Donovan...” and jogged to the register, “What can I get for you?”

It was crazy busy until 3:45 when the line dried up. There were still three teenage girls sitting behind a laptop watching videos, and nursing drinks that had more sugar than caffeine. Another older man was sipping coffee and reading from an actual paper book, occasionally looking at the girls. The rest of the place was empty. Morrigan remembered the call from Kyle and took a deep breath before checking the phone. He’d left three voice-mails and sent four texts. *What now?* She decided to start with the texts.

Kyle:

2:05 PM - ANSWER YOUR PHONE!

2:17 PM - Call me back

2:37 PM - Quit fucking around and call me NOW!

3:02 PM - Really, please call me back. Please  
<prayer hands emoji>

*What the fuck was that? Kyle said 'please?'* She didn't bother to listen to the voicemails. She called him. He answered on the first ring.

"Morrigan, it's about fucking ti... I mean, thanks for calling me back."

"Uh, OK. I'm at work and I just got a break in the crowd."

"Bail on it and get into my office."

"I'm the only one here. I can't do that. What's up?"

"Shit. Why didn't you tell me you met Maggie MacLaren?"

"Who?" She paused.

"Apparently, you did some sort of table reading?"

"Oh yeah, Maggie, the director. That's why I was late for the commercial."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You never gave me a chance."

"Never mind that. You have to come to my office and sign a contract today!"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You were sitting in for another actress on the reading?"

"Yeah, Desiree something-or-other. What about it?"

“Apparently, she suffered the ultimate actor’s irony. She broke her leg. They loved your reading and they want you to take her place in the show. They called me this morning.”

“That’s terrible. Was that why she missed the reading?”

“From what I hear, it was a car accident – last night.”

“Still terrible.”

“Not terrible for you. This could be your big break. They sent me the contract. It’s not huge, but it’s over scale and you’re in almost every episode for the entire season. It’s a great opportunity, great exposure, but they need a signed contract tonight.”

“I’m stuck here until seven, and I was supposed to go out after that.”

“Really?”

“Shit.”

“Send me the address and I’ll bring the contract to you.”

“I’ll text it right now.”

“But we’ll need to meet tomorrow.”

“I have to work again tomorrow.”

“Fuckin A. Do you even want to be an actor?”

“I’m taking the shift for a friend. I can’t screw her over. What if we meet tonight? I’ll cancel my date.”

“OK, but I don’t care who you’re scheduled for next week, you’re going to be in the studio Monday morning at five for wardrobe.”

“Yeah, hold on a second.” She tucked the phone under her chin and turned to the counter. “What can I get for you?”

“Text me that address NOW.”

“On it.”

\*\*\*

Morrigan took care of two more orders before she texted the address to Kyle. She was going to call Sean, but three more patrons came through the doors. She shot off a quick text instead.

Morrigan: Something came up, have to cancel tonight  
Sorry about last minute

Hiker Boy: OK. No problem, maybe tomorrow?

Morrigan: Can’t. It’s gonna be a crazy week  
I’ll call you

Hiker Boy: Yeah, OK

\*\*\*

“Shit. I shoulda known she was too good to be true,” Sean said to himself.

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## So Long (It's Been Good To Know You)

Morrigan did mean to call Sean, but Kyle insisted on reviewing the contract details with her until late Saturday. She worked another long day on Sunday, and then the rest of the night was dedicated to trying to learn her lines for Monday. Monday through Wednesday, she was either in wardrobe or makeup or on the set from 5 AM until after 8 PM. It was all she could do to make it home, clean the litter box, read through the next day's lines, and fall into bed.

Thursday was a night shoot on location, and she didn't have to be on site until 5 PM. She planned to sleep until noon, but Monster remembered being fed at 4 AM and let her know that that was the correct time for cats to receive their breakfast. Morrigan stumbled out of bed, filled the bowl with kitten chow, and collapsed on top of the covers. She was asleep almost before her face hit the pillow. Monster chewed her way through the bowl then curled up in the middle of Morrigan's back and drifted off herself.

Morrigan had an old-fashioned wind-up alarm clock with a loud bell. She kept it across the room to make sure she'd have to get up. She needn't have bothered. Monster was startled by the raucous clanging and supplied her own reminder. She leapt into the air, digging her claws into Morrigan's spine in the process. Kelly found her roommate in the bathroom trying to reach the scratches on her upper back with a damp washcloth.

“Oooh, what happened there? You finally connect with Hiker Boy?”

“Get your mind out of the gutter. Alarm spooked Monster and she used me as a launching pad.”

“Let me help you with that.”

Kelly wiped the scratches with an alcohol pad.

“Ow! Watch it.” Morrigan winced.

“I hope you don’t have to go topless in tonight’s shoot. That cat has some wicked death blades.”

“You’re telling me. She’s lucky she’s so damn cute.”

“You need me to feed her this evening?”

“If you don’t mind. I’ll fill her bowl before I go, but at her age, she can eat as much as she wants.”

“We should all be so lucky... But I doubt it’s possible to give her all the food she wants. I’ve never seen such a small critter eat so much.”

“That reminds me. If I leave you some cash, can you run by the Pet Warehouse? We’re almost out of dry food and we need cans too.”

“Sure. And when you’re a rich famous TV star, I can be your cat nanny.”

“Sounds great to me.” Morrigan laughed.

“I warn you, I’m not cheap.”

“That’s not what I hear.”

“Oh, shut up! What about you? What’s up with Hiker Boy?”

“Sean? Shit. I was supposed to call him, but it’s been non-stop... speaking of which...”

Morrigan's ringing phone interrupted their conversation. She recognized the number from Maggie's assistant. Kelly could only hear one side of the call.

"Hi, Frank... Yeah, no problem.... I'll be there... Yup, 2 o'clock, I'm on my way... No problem... See you then."

"What's up?"

"They want to reshoot one of the scenes from yesterday before tonight's shoot. I've gotta run."

Morrigan disappeared into her bedroom, and came rushing out less than five minutes later.

"You coming back before tonight's shoot?" Kelly asked.

"I doubt it."

"Then you'll want to grab a coat or something. Temp's supposed to crater tonight."

"Good idea."

She disappeared into her room again, and reappeared with her lucky sweater. She reached the front door and she felt it tugging her backwards.

"Let GO, Monster." She created another post-it crumple ball and tossed it. As the cat streaked after it, she oozed through the door.

Monster looked disappointed that Morrigan was gone. She nuzzled against Kelly's leg, then climbed her jeans in three leaps.

"Ahhh... take it easy, you little demon. Maybe I won't get you that food."

The kitten turned her head sideways and squinted at Kelly.

“I’m kidding. You want to come with me to the Pet Warehouse?”

“Meow”

\*\*\*

Sean looked at his phone again. He knew there was nothing new. He had his ringer and his text alerts set to max volume. If she called or texted, the whole office would have known it. His coworker, Mike, looked at him and shook his head.

“Why don’t you just text her?” Mike asked.

“She said she’d call me. I don’t want to look desperate.”

“I thought you had, what did you say? ‘An amazing time... best five days of my life’.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean she did.”

“You’ll never know unless you reach out.”

“She said SHE would call.”

“OK... This girl works at a coffee house, right?”

“So?”

“So, it’s a public place. Just go get a cup of coffee.”

“It’s not exactly next door.”

“Chicken shit.”

“OK. Will you come with?”

“Chicken shit. Of course, I will. If she’s dumping you, maybe she wants a real man. Where is this place?”

“It’s in the center with the Pet Warehouse on Lake.”

“You drive, and you buy.”

“Sure”

\*\*\*

Kelly placed the kitten in the cart and spread a towel over the top as they wandered the aisle of the giant pet store. Monster hissed at a large dog near the entrance, but seemed well-behaved after that.

“What kind of food do you want?” Kelly asked, but did not receive a reply. “Maybe some of these treats?”

She searched through various brands and picked a dozen cans, arranging them on a shelf. She added a small bag of treats and a large bag of kibble. She pulled back a corner of the towel to load her selections... just in time to see an orange and black streak flash out.

“Shit! Get back here.”

The small cat disappeared beyond the corner. Kelly took after her at a sprint. She found the kitten sitting in the middle of the next aisle as if nothing had happened. In her teeth was a plastic bag containing a cat toy... and she was purring. Kelly scooped her up and carried her to the cart. No matter how hard she pulled, she couldn’t release the bag from those tiny jaws. She tugged even harder, and the bag ripped. The cat still held half of the toy. It was a two-piece item with a pair of small cat plushies wrapped around each other like the yin-yang symbol. Monster held the black cat, Kelly, the white.

“Fine. We’ll get you the toy too, but you stay in there.”

She placed the food items, the toy, and the feline into the cart and replaced the towel. The kitten seemed content to chew on the black cat while Kelly paid and they returned to the car. She loaded Monster into the front seat with her plushie, before putting the rest of the items in the trunk.

\*\*\*

Sean parked near the Pet Warehouse and they walked across the lot.

“When are you getting that window fixed? That plastic sheet was slapping my face the whole way here. My hair’s a wreck,” Mike complained.

“With all the gel you use, you might as well be wearing a helmet. A tornado couldn’t mess that hair.”

“Very funny.”

“The insurance company’s been giving me the run-around. Something about the deductible.”

“Who you got?”

“Seldon. Their commercials are all ‘♪♪ We gooooot youuuu ♪♪’ then you go to make a claim and it’s more like ‘We got you money and we don’t care.’”

Sean didn’t recognize either of the women working. He ordered a black coffee and Mike got a complicated latte with various syrups and creams. As they were waiting for their drinks, Mike nudged him.

“It’s not her,” Sean whispered.

“What was the name of that girl who works here?” Mike said, loud enough to be heard by everyone in the place. “Marjorie? Melanie?”

“Morrigan,” Sean said under his breath.

“Oh yeah, MORRIGAN.” He turned to the barista who was bringing Sean’s coffee. “Do you know a girl who works here named ‘Morrigan’? Red hair, right Sean?”

“I’m new here.” She turned to the woman at the register as Sean’s face bloomed pink. “Linda? Do you know a barista named... what was that?”

“Morrigan.”

“Yeah, does someone named Morrigan work here?”

“She did. In fact, you’re taking her place. She quit a few days ago.”

Sean sipped his drink and sank into a nearby chair.

“Do you know where she went?” Mike asked.

“I do not... and I would not tell you if I did,” Linda said.

The look on her face convinced Mike not to press the matter. He got his latte and sat down next to Sean.

“Well, sorry. I guess you’ll have to call her.”

“She quit her job to make sure I couldn’t find her.”

“Don’t be an idiot. You’re not that threatening.”

Sean went to the sidebar and grabbed covers for their drinks.

“Come on. Let’s go back to the office.”

He didn’t say a word as they walked to the car.

“Your duct tape pulled loose. That’s just great. Now my hair is really gonna be fucked,” Mike said.

Sean pushed the tape into place, but it flapped loose again. He let Mike into the car, then he pulled the edge of the plastic sheet over the top of the door and slammed it closed.

“That should hold it. It’ll be fine.”

“Some people care how they look.”

Sean felt a lump as he sat down in the driver’s seat. *The seat cover’s bunching up. The window’s broken. The whole car is falling apart... Morrigan’s gone. Everything’s falling apart.*

\*\*\*

## It's Who You Know

She had to run from the cast parking area across the lot, but Morrigan made it to the sound stage at 1:50. There was a Bentley parked in front of the door. She paused to admire it. Even with a broken headlight and a dented fender, it cost more than she'd made in her entire life.

She stripped off her sweater and looped it over her shoulders. Morrigan arranged her top and slacks, smoothing the wrinkles as best she could. She closed her eyes, took three deep breaths... *I AM an actor. I belong here...* then opened them, smiled and strutted in. She almost collided with a short balding man talking with the director. He was pushing a young blonde woman in a wheelchair.

“Oh, sorry.”

“Is this our new Evie?” the man asked Maggie.

“Let me introduce you to Morrigan Wielle. Morrigan, this is Harry Candelin, executive producer,” Maggie said.

“Candelin? Any relation to Sheila Candelin?”

As soon as she said it, Morrigan regretted it.

“Sheila’s my ex-wife, or my almost ex-wife. How do you know her?”

“Um, I really don’t. Just crossed paths at an audition a while back.” Morrigan smiled.

“Too bad for you. Sheila’s a real bitch.” Harry smiled. Morrigan laughed nervously.

“So, you’re the one who stole my part,” the woman in the wheelchair said, her lips curling in a practiced smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“You must be Desiree. I’m sorry about your accident.”

“I’m sure you are.”

“Come on, Morrigan. You’ve gotta get to makeup,” Maggie interrupted. “We don’t have a lotta time.”

“Right! Nice meeting you both.”

Morrigan dropped her sweater on the chair with her name on it. Seeing her name on a chair behind the cameras still gave her goosebumps, even if it was drawn on with a marker. She disappeared into the back. Harry wheeled Desiree near the cameras.

“Get a feel for the set, Honey. We’ll get you back here soon. I’ll talk with Maggie.”

He pulled Maggie through the stage door and leaned against the Bentley.

“So, how’s the redhead doin’?”

“She’s been great. Got amazing chemistry with Jeremy.”

“Hmm. She is a looker, but...” Harry trailed off.

“I know Evie was only supposed to be in the first season, but I’m already thinking about how to bring her on for two,” Maggie interjected.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Desiree should be out of the cast in five-six weeks at most. Walking before then. I promised her she’d be Jeremy’s love interest. Recurring role.”

“You didn’t ask me about this? Desiree is kinda flakey.”

“Maybe, but she can suck a golf ball through a garden hose.” Harry chuckled. “And I don’t need her suing me for that broken leg.”

“Your car doesn’t look that bad. How did she even break her leg?”

“Well, she wasn’t wearing a seat belt, and she was in an... awkward position, if you get my drift.”

Maggie shook her head.

“I should have just run over the critter. Instead, I swerve and I gotta pay for the Bentley’s fender, her fracture, and the damage to the truck we hit.”

“At least you don’t have PETA after you.” Maggie gave a forced smile. “What was it?”

“I don’t know. A dog? A cat? A cow? Shit, how would I know? I saw a shape and I yanked the wheel. I was... distracted.” Harry winked. “Anyway, we gotta see how we can write this Evie out of the show as soon as makes sense... and bring Desiree on.”

“Shit,” Maggie whispered. “You said we got six weeks?”

“Make it five.”

“I’ll talk to the writers tomorrow.”

Harry followed Maggie back to the studio and stuck his head through the door.

“Hey, Sweetlips, let’s go,” he yelled to Desiree.

She had a stagehand wheel her out and help her into the Bentley’s passenger seat.

“It’s all handled, Honey,” Harry said.

“I hope so,” she said, rubbing her cast and wincing unconvincingly.

“Hey, that’s a nice sweater. Accentuates your assets,” he said, picking a stray tuft of wool from her breast.

“I thought it was nice, but there’s snags in the sleeves. Maybe you can get me a new one?”

“Of course. Of course. We’ll hit Rodeo next week.”

\*\*\*

Sean fiddled with the small black cat figure. He still didn’t know how it got into his car, but he liked the little thing. *Black cat? Maybe it’ll bring me luck.* He looped it onto his keychain.

\*\*\*

## Sweet Til The Bitter End

Sheila opened the door to the office without knocking. Harry looked up and scowled, then forced a smile to his lips.

“Sheila dear, it’s so good to see you. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Cut the crap, Harry. I thought I’d stop by in person to talk to you about your latest proposal for ‘division of our marital resources.’” She tossed a folder onto his desk.

“Oh, come now, Sheila. Alan tells me I am being too generous with that offer.”

Sheila laughed out loud.

“We both know you’d have nothing if it wasn’t for me and MY money.”

“You mean your daddy’s money, don’t you?” Harry’s smile had slipped away. He paused, took a deep breath and reapplied the feigned look of friendliness. “I do appreciate... that you did bring certain capital to the marriage, even though it was my business acumen that grew those assets into the substantial company we have today.”

“Uh, huh.”

“That is why, the agreement only gives me the production company and its assets... and its debts by the way. You get the house, the stocks and the bank account. By my reckoning, you will be getting nearly 60% of the estate.”

“Come off it, Harry. My lawyers may not be quite as talented as Alan Reynard, but they’re not stupid. They’ve found nine of

your holding companies, so far. They're pretty sure you've sent funds offshore too. I'm going to need a substantial boost to that settlement if we're going to amicably dissolve this marriage."

Harry lost his smile again, and glared. Sheila pasted on her own smile.

"I think you should know," Harry insisted. "That any such subsidiaries, to the extent they may exist, are largely controlled by external investors."

"As I said, Harry, my people are not stupid. I am aware of your 'external investors' and I am sure you would prefer that law enforcement not become aware of them." Sheila grinned. "Now, you get with Alan and see if you can put together a more equitable distribution."

\*\*\*

Morrigan did not realize how much work and how many hours went into creating a 45-minute TV episode. She'd been working seven days a week, usually 12 to 16 hours a day. She was exhausted, and she never had such fun in her life. Other than a few filler scenes, they'd completed the first four episodes and parts of two others.

This was her first complete day off in three weeks, and now they said they didn't need her for four more days. They'd cut most of her scenes in episode five and six. Maggie said she might not be needed at all for episode seven. She'd take a couple of days to recover, then maybe she'd see if Sean still remembered her. She appreciated the chance to rest, but...

Monster lay on her back and flipped a small white cat figurine back and forth between her paws. She'd toss it up with her right and snag it with a claw on her left, then repeat the pattern, before switching to her rear feet.

“Hello little one.” She scritchd under Monster’s chin. “At least I get to spend more time with you.”

“mew”

“That’s what I think. They’re cutting the wrong scenes.”

“mew mew”

“Exactly. How is the detective going to solve this if they cut where I find the shoe?”

“mew”

“You should be the screenwriter.”

“mew”

“Who are you talking to?” Kelly called from the other room.

“My new screenwriter. Maybe my new agent. Monster.”

Kelly walked over and stroked the cat.

“She’s definitely cuter than Kyle. You think she can get me a spot on your show too.”

“mew mew”

“My new agent says she’ll take care of you... but we’ll need to give her her 15% in cat food.”

“Have you seen her eat? I think she’ll need 30%... if we’re lucky.”

“mew”

“Monster says 50% in premium canned food, and a new cat toy every week.”

“If she keeps growing like she has, it'll be 75% by next week.”

They both laughed. Monster crawled into Morrigan's lap and forced her head against fingers.

\*\*\*

The wheelchair was still parked near the front door of her apartment. Desiree didn't need it anymore, but enjoyed the feeling of people chauffeuring her. It made her feel like a Maharani being carried in her palanquin. She'd wave to adoring subjects as they bowed to her.

She was only supposed to take half an oxy, “as needed for pain.” She'd already had a whole one. That and a couple glasses of pinot took the edge off. The cast on her ankle had been removed three days before, and she barely limped as she swayed her way into the bedroom.

The four latest outfits Harry bought her were spread across the bed. *Harry's a troll, but accommodating.* She loved Rodeo Drive, but couldn't afford to shop there without someone else's credit cards. She especially liked the new alpaca sweater and matching skirt. The old one she 'found' at the studio was now crumpled in the corner of her closet.

She lifted it, wobbled to the bathroom, and tossed it in the wastebasket. She washed down another pill with the last of her wine. After hanging up the other outfits, she crawled into bed and turned out the lights.

\*\*\*

Desiree didn't know how long she'd been sleeping, or what it was that woke her. A rustling came from the bathroom. What she heard next made her wonder if she really was awake.

“Where? Why?” It was a gravelly voice, little more than a whisper.

Desiree could not place the accent. She couldn’t even place the direction. Sometimes it seemed it came from the bathroom, sometimes below the bed, and sometimes it bubbled up from within her head.

“Who’s there? I have a gun,” she said, brandishing a hair brush from the night stand.

“You take what does not belong. Where? Mine.”

“What? The sweater? It’s in there. In the basket. Go ahead and take it.”

“I smell.”

Desiree only then realized there was a rank odor. She thought better than to agree with the voice.

“There’s a new one in the closet. You can have that too. It doesn’t stink.”

“I smell you thief. You taker. You. You. You.” There was a high-pitched squealing screech. “I. Protect...one. Reward...one. Curse...one. Curse...YOU!”

\*\*\*

“Hey, Morrigan. It’s Frank, Maggie's assistant.”

“Yeah, I know who you are, Frank. What’s up?”

“I know we told you we didn’t need you for a few days, but have you made any plans?”

“I slept all day yesterday and was going to do that again today. Maybe play with my cat.”

“Good, ‘cuz we need you to come in. Those scenes we cut from five and six are back in, and you’re being added to some others.”

“When do you need me?”

“We can shoot around you this afternoon, but we’ll need you in the studio at 5:30 tomorrow morning for makeup and wardrobe. Shooting starts by seven. I’ll send you the script changes as soon as I get ‘em.”

“Would it help if I was there this afternoon?”

“You wouldn’t have a lot, but if you can be in by two, it might help.”

“I’ll be there.”

\*\*\*

Morrigan wasn’t sure what to make of it when she arrived on the set. Two of the writers were in a corner with Maggie. She was gesticulating and scratching at the script with a red pen. She saw Morrigan and came to meet her.

“Morrigan, Frank said you were going to try to make it. Thanks for coming.”

“No problem. What can I do?”

“For now, just go hang out. We’re gonna try to shoot where you find the shoe later, but we’ve got some tweaking to do on the script.”

“I have my old script for that scene. Should I review it in the meantime?”

“You have it? With you? Can I borrow it?”

“Sure.”

Morrigan dug in her bag and handed the script to Maggie who jogged to the writers. Morrigan wandered behind the cameras and noticed the chair with the name “Desiree” stenciled on the back. She picked up the script on the seat and leafed through it. *Officer Baker, a young blonde rookie, found a certain shoe in an incriminating location. What the hell is this?*

“Hey Frank, can I grab you for a minute?”

“Uh, sure. What’s up?”

“Is Desiree back on the show?”

“Um, uh, no, not anymore. You didn’t hear?”

“Hear what? What’s going on?”

“She fell through the window of her apartment.”

“What?”

“Yeah, they’re not sure if she jumped or slipped. With her bad leg and the drugs I hear she had on her nightstand, I’m guessing accident. A little loopy, a little stumble, and whoopsie-daisy,” he chuckled in a sing-song voice.

“That’s not funny. Is she OK?”

“I understand she got pretty sliced up going through the glass, then a two-story fall into rose bushes. Broke her fall somewhat, but her face is not exactly ‘ready for her close up.’”

“Oh, my God.”

“She’ll be in the hospital for a while, but she’ll be OK, eventually. The show must go on.”

“That’s pretty heartless,” Morrigan said.

“I’m sorry she got injured too, but it’ll be a better series without her. She couldn’t act her way out of a paper bag.”

\*\*\*

## Surprise Surprise

The second surgery on her shattered leg had gone well, and Desiree was sitting up in bed when Harry entered. She didn't recognize the man with him. Harry was in his normal polo shirt and gray khakis, but the other man was tall and dressed in a well-tailored suit and carried a briefcase.

"Hi, sweetie, how are you feeling?" Harry asked.

"Uh, OK, considering. I just had an Oxy so I'm feeling better, but I really need to talk to you. The cops don't believe me. There was someone, or some thing, in my place. I swear."

"Yes, yes, OK. Don't excite yourself," Harry soothed. "Sorry I haven't visited until now, but they said you needed your rest."

"Uh, that's OK. At least you're here now."

She looked at the man in the suit, and raised her eyebrows.

"Desiree, this is Alan Reynard. He's my attorney."

"Attorney?"

"Don't worry. He just has a few papers for you to sign so we can make sure we can handle your medical bills and such. We want you to know you are taken care of."

"OK. Thanks."

Reynard summarized the first few pages explaining the payments Harry had already made for her original fracture and the ambulance, emergency room, etc. for her latest injuries. She didn't pay much attention after that and just signed as he flipped pages and pointed to the proper spot. As she scribbled on the last page, he turned to Harry.

"That's everything."

“Great, Alan. Wait in the hallway and I’ll be out in a few.”

Reynard slid the packet of signed pages into his valise, nodded to Desiree, and stepped outside.

“You’re looking a little tired. I’ll let you rest,” Harry said.

“Oh, I’m OK. It’s good to have a visitor.”

“We want you to get well as quick as you can. You rest now.”  
He pecked her on the forehead.

“Uh, but…” Harry was already headed to the door. “OK.”

Harry and Alan said nothing until they started down in the elevator.

“We good?” Harry asked.

“All good. I doubt you would’ve been found liable for the second accident anyway, but she could have argued the first accident was a precipitating factor of the fall through the window. You are completely protected now.”

“Did you see her face? My God, she was hideous. It looked like she tangled with Freddy Kruger.” Harry chuckled.

“Very disturbing.”

“To think I was thinkin’ about letting her stay in one of my condos. I dodged a bullet on that one. Thanks for your help, Alan.”

“My pleasure, Mr. Candelin. That is why you keep our firm on retainer.”

\*\*\*

## Part 2 - R

### She's a Sensation

Kelly and Morrigan were crowded in front of the small bathroom mirror, applying makeup.

"I've never been to a premiere before," Kelly said.

"It's not really a premiere. It's only a screening of the first two episodes for the press, and a few other industry folks. They want to get the buzz going before it airs next week," Morrigan replied.

"They sent you a designer gown, didn't they?"

"It's not that big a deal."

"And Jeremy Jefferson's gonna be there?"

"He's just a regular guy."

"Sure. You've been working with him for months now. He's still Blake Strickland to me."

"Don't embarrass me tonight."

"No promises."

Morrigan began opening and closing drawers on both sides of the sink.

"Kelly?"

"What?"

"Have you seen a pair of diamond studs? I thought I left them here on the counter. I borrowed 'em from my mom. She'll kill

me if I lose them. They were an anniversary present from my dad.”

“Did you look under the upholstered chair in the living room?”

“What?”

“It’s Monster’s new favorite hidey hole. She’s been collecting her toys and stashing them under there. I found my watch under it yesterday. I had to put it up on that high shelf, above my window, to keep her from grabbing it again.”

Morrigan walked into the living room and dropped down to look under the chair.

“There’s no earrings. No cat. No cat toys either.”

“You sure? I saw her disappear under there...”

Kelly lay flat on her belly next to her roommate. She reached under and pressed up against the fabric sealing the base of the chair. There was a meowing, followed by the calico oozing out from underneath like toothpaste squeezed from a tube.

They turned the chair on its side and heard rattling. A hole had been slashed in the cloth underneath. Kelly reached in her arm, up to her elbow, and began unloading handfuls of plunder. A white cat plushie, a half dozen other cat toys, Kelly’s watch, several bread bag twist ties, rubber bands, three pens, a seashell, a phone charger cable, paper clips... and a pair of diamond earrings still mounted on their jewelry card. Monster did not look happy seeing her loot disturbed in this way.

“You can keep the cat toys, but the rest of this stuff is not yours,”  
Morrigan insisted.

“Mrowr”

\*\*\*

Mike was still nursing his first beer. Sean was working on his third.

“Remember that girl I took hiking?”

“Yeah, Morgan?”

“Her name’s Morrigan. Morrigan Wielle.”

“Did you ever see her again?”

“Sort of. She’s right over there.” Sean pointed towards the bar.

“What? Where?” Mike twisted in his seat.

“On the TV. She’s in that new cop show, ‘Empty Spaces’.” He pointed again.

“Oh yeah! That looks pretty good. That’s her? When’s it on?”

“First episode’s a week from Thursday.”

“I’ll have to check it out. Too bad it didn’t work out with her, but she is clearly out of your league, dude... Is that Blake Strickland?”

“Jeremy Jefferson, yup.”

“They look good together... Oh, sorry.”

“Nah, no worries. It’s OK. It was a fun long weekend. A good memory. Something I can tell my grandkids... if I ever even have kids...” Sean trailed off before pulling himself together. “I’m gonna grab another beer. Can I get you one?”

“Not yet. I’m driving.”

“And I appreciate it, buddy. Be right back.”

\*\*\*

Morrigan and Kelly were exploring the hallway looking for the studio theater. Frank jogged up to them from behind.

“I’m glad I caught you,” Frank said.

“Sure. What can I do for you?” Morrigan replied.

“Harry wants to make sure you’re making your entrance with Jeremy.”

“Uh, OK.”

“For the press folks, and it’d be good if you were ‘friendly’ - if you know what I mean.”

“Um. I like Jeremy, but...”

“I know I’m probably a better match for Jeremy than you are, but let me quote Harry here: ‘She’s an actress. He’s an actor. Make it look good.’”

“Sure, we can do that. I guess.”

“Jeremy Jefferson is...” Kelly’s mouth hung open.

“Shhhh,” Frank and Morrigan said simultaneously.

“Yeah, yeah. I got it.” And she ran a finger across her lips.

“There goes my fantasy.”

“I can escort your friend. Jeremy’s down the hall in 203.”

“Thanks, Frank. By the way, this is Kelly, my roommate. Kelly, Frank,” Morrigan said, and headed towards 203.

\*\*\*

Sean was on his fifth beer. Mike had accepted a second, but was only sipping.

“You ever have hypnagogic visions?” Sean asked out of nowhere.

“Hypno-what? What are you talking about?”

“Hypnagogic visions. It’s when you’re almost asleep. Your eyes are closed, but you’re still awake and you see images on the inside of your eyelids.”

“I mean, when I squeeze my eyes really tightly or rub them, I see spots or colors. Is that what you mean?”

“No, this is more like, almost a dream, but not quite. Sometimes it’s just colors or patterns. Sometimes it’s full-on landscapes or city streets or people or other scenes.”

“You see this shit?”

“Yeah, almost every night since I was a kid. Until recently, I thought everyone did. Turns out only a quarter of the population has ‘em even once in their life, and almost no one has them consistently.”

“Sounds like you’re a special guy.” Mike laughed. “What brings this up?”

“Like I said, I’ve had these visions as long as I can remember, and they were just that, visions. Visual only.”

“I don’t know, man,” Mike said, but Sean didn’t seem to hear him.

“After my dad’s accident, it could be scary, but nothing like this. Lately, they’ve changed. I hear things. Sometimes I feel things. The other night, there was an odor, like wet dog or something.”

“I don’t even dream most of the time, let alone, hypno-gogo visions.”

“Hypnagogic.”

“Whatever. Do you remember these visions?”

“Sometimes. Last night, I had the feeling I was being watched. There was a strange smell, and I could sense movement in the darkness. I couldn’t open my eyes or move, but I could see, I don’t know what it was, an animal, or maybe just a shadow, maybe with wings, maybe not. Then there was a voice. It sounded old, hoarse, like a big smoker. Couldn’t make out words, but I could tell they were upset. After a few minutes, I forced my eyes open and there was nothing there. No smells. No sounds. No wings.”

“That is fucking weird, dude.”

“I know.” Sean finished his drink. “I’m gonna grab another beer. Can I get you one?”

“When you start telling me about your hypnotic hallucinations, I think it’s time for both of us to quit drinking. I’ll take you home.”

“Hypnagogic... But yeah, you’re probably right.”

\*\*\*

After the screening, Jeremy, Morrigan, Maggie, Harry and a few other cast members answered questions for the press. Harry vehemently

denied that Jeremy and Morrigan were a couple, even before he was asked. Everyone confirmed that they were ‘just friends and coworkers’ even though Jeremy made his confirmation with his arm around Morrigan’s waist while she leaned her head on his shoulder. The interviews broke up after an hour and a half.

“Hey, thanks for playing along,” Jeremy said.

“Oh, no problem. It’s kind of fun to think the paparazzi might care about me,” Morrigan replied.

“Everyone is going to care about you. They loved the show, and they love the thought of you two,” Frank added.

“It did seem to go well... and we got tomorrow off,” Jeremy said. “Let’s go celebrate. Grab a drink? I know a great little bar in West Hollywood.”

“I might be overdressed for a bar.” Morrigan lowered her hands and spun.

“Listen honey, in this place, you could be wearing anything from Daisy Dukes to a tuxedo or tiara... shit, you could wear all three at the same time.” Jeremy laughed.

“I’m in,” Frank said.

“I don’t work until tomorrow afternoon. I can use a drink,” Kelly added.

“I guess it’s unanimous,” Morrigan said.

“Great! I’ll drive,” Jeremy insisted. “My Land Rover’s out front.”

\*\*\*

Sean was flat on his back on top of the bedspread staring at the ceiling. The room was doing a few flip flops, but not quite spinning. He didn't think he'd be sick.

He struggled to his feet, and shrugged off his shoes. He didn't really want to make the effort, but he managed to remove the rest of his clothes before face-planting onto the mattress. He didn't bother with pajamas. Maybe after five beers, he'd get to sleep without any more visions. He closed his eyes.

*Two shining white stars twinkling in a foggy fiery darkness. As the mist clears, there's a face between the stars. No, not stars. Earrings. Earrings reflecting the light from an unknown source... and the face and the red hair. He knows that face. He knows that smile. He smiles too. A pleasant vision at last.*

*Where'd her smile go? The color evaporates from her cheeks. Her eyes wide and unblinking. What is she afraid of? No, come back. Her face fades into the darkness and the two stars blink out, one after the other. He wants to open his eyes, but they remain glued shut. In place of two white stars, two yellow orbs, glowing with an internal light. They come towards him, through him, spin and disappear, bobbing into the distance. He starts to follow...*

Sean opened his eyes. *Maybe I'm going to be sick after all.* He rolled off the bed and sprinted to the bathroom.

\*\*\*

The West Hollywood Sheriff Station was crowded at 1 AM.

“So let me make sure we've got everything,” the officer said, looking down at the report. “Mr. Jefferson, they took your wallet with \$375 cash and credit cards and your watch?”

“And a gold chain.”

“Right, and a gold chain. And Ms. Wielle, Ms. Wielle?”

Morrigan jogged up.

“Sorry, little girls room.”

“Of course. You lost your earrings, a purse with approximately \$50 in cash and cards?”

“I don’t care about the money so much, but those were my mom’s earrings,” Morrigan said.

“I do care about my watch,” Kelly interrupted. “It’s a Longine with my name inscribed on the back. That’s the only thing I had that’s worth a damn. My folks popped for it for graduation.” She paused. “Oh, and I had this weird little pendant on a chain. I don’t think it’s worth anything, but it’s cool and it looks old.”

He finished the inventory of stolen items from all four of them and got their descriptions of the man who’d robbed them.

“We’ll keep an eye out for the thief and your things, but I’m gonna be honest with you, we don’t usually find ‘em. Sometimes they’ll turn up at a pawn shop. Make sure your email addresses are correct and I’ll send you copies of the police report for your insurance.”

“Insurance?” Morrigan laughed. “At least no one got hurt. Can we go now?”

\*\*\*

Sean’s hangover was not the worst he’d ever had, but it ranked. Today was supposed to be his gym day, but he didn’t think he could manage it. Maybe he’d go for a run instead. He washed down three extra-

strength Tylenol with a large glass of water and flipped on the local news to see what the weather was going to be. It was the annoying entertainment reporter, Sam something-or-other. He was going to mute it, but he saw the graphic for the new TV show, ‘Empty Spaces.’ *Great. She’s following me home now.*

“I was able to attend an early screening of Jeremy Jefferson’s new show, and I have to tell you ‘Empty Spaces’ looks fabulous. This may be Johnson’s best role since Blake Strickland. The writing is intelligent and the rest of the cast is great too,” Sam said.

“Is there any truth to rumors I’ve heard about Jeremy and his co-star?” Angela, the anchorwoman, asked.

“Morrigan Wielle is a fantastic new talent. She and Jefferson have amazing chemistry on screen... and off. They insist they are not a couple, but let’s just say they seemed to get along at the screening.”

A video plays showing Morrigan with her head on Jeremy’s shoulder. *She clearly is out of my league.*

“Thanks, Sam. They do make a handsome couple.” Angela shifted from a smile to a grim expression. “But we have more breaking news on Jeremy Jefferson. Let’s go live now to Ted Cooper in West Hollywood.”

“Thanks, Angela. I’m here at the LA County Sheriff’s substation in West Hollywood. We have video taken very early this morning of Jefferson with his co-star, Wielle, and another unidentified couple giving a statement to deputies.”

A shaky video plays showing the four robbery victims speaking with a detective across a crowded room. It zooms in on Jeremy’s face. He turns and smiles at the camera.

“We understand the group was robbed at gunpoint outside a club only four blocks from this Sheriff’s office. No word yet on any suspects. There are no reported injuries, but apparently cash and jewelry were taken.”

*I hope she’s OK.*

\*\*\*

When Morigan saw the Caller ID, she realized she should have made the call herself.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Molly dear, are you OK? I saw the news this morning.”

*Mom is never going to use my professional name.* “What did they say? They didn’t like the show, did they?”

“Oh, yes, they loved your little TV show, but they said you were robbed! Are you hurt?”

*I didn’t know that made the news.* “Yes, I’m fine. No one was hurt. But I do have some bad news.”

“Oh my GOD, you are hurt, aren’t you?”

“No, Mom. I’m fine, but the thief took your earrings. I’m sorry. I’ll replace them.”

“Oh, I don’t care about those old things. I only wear them to make your dad happy,” Then she whispered, “I suspect they might be cubic zirconium, but don’t tell him I said that. He thinks I love them. I’m just glad you’re OK. You have to be more careful, especially since you’re famous now.”

“Not that famous. So, what did the news say about the show?”

Her mother pulled up a stack of clippings.

“The show is ‘fabulous’ and you are a ‘fantastic new talent’. The *Times* said ‘it shows a depth of feeling and intelligence in its writing and its cast’. They spend most of it talking about Jeremy Jefferson’s comeback, but they really like you too.”

Morrigan smiled at that. It didn’t even bother her to spend the next 20 minutes hearing the neighborhood gossip. Who was separated. Who was getting their kitchen remodeled. Who was (maybe) sleeping with who. Where the Murphy’s were going on vacation. etc. etc. etc. She finally disengaged from her mom just as Monster crawled into her lap.

“What have you gotten into?” Morrigan rubbed at the red brown flakes caked in the fur on the cat’s foot. “Do you need a bath?”

“Mrow!”

Monster leapt from her lap and squeezed under the chair... but she did begin cleaning her paws.

\*\*\*



## In The Park

“That asshole took my credit cards and my debit card too,” Kelly said. “How am I gonna buy gas today?”

“He got mine too. We need to call and get those canceled before he runs up charges.”

“Wait, what?”

“We need to cancel our cards and get new ones. New driver’s license. I don’t even remember what other shit I had in my bag. At least he didn’t take our phones.”

“Small comfort there. Wait a second. If I have to cancel my cards, I can’t even use my phone to pay for anything either. Shit. Do you have any cash?”

“My bank is open this morning. I can try to get some.”

“I don’t know if I even know how to get cash from a teller anymore.”

“Last time I checked we had about 30 bucks in the cup.”

Kelly dug into the small emergency fund they kept in a purple plastic cup in their pantry.

“Twenty-seven dollars and change.”

“Well, that’ll buy you gas. I’ll see what we have in the fridge for breakfast.”

“Breakfast? It’s almost noon. I gotta get to work. You go to your bank. Maybe I can grab some bills from the tip jar at the end of my shift.”

\*\*\*

Sean came to a firm conclusion: *This woman is out of my life. I accept it completely*, and so he did the only logical thing. He spent the next hour googling everything he could find on Morrigan Wielle and “Empty Spaces” and Jeremy Jefferson. He was hoping to read that Jefferson had some other “committed relationship,” but there was nothing. He closed his laptop. *Time for that run.*

His run turned into a walk. Sean tried to push it a couple of times, but slowed when his belly began complaining. Even with his stomach doing the occasional flip-flop and his head pounding, he was enjoying the leisurely stroll. He’d never wandered this direction before.

He found himself at a park a few blocks from his condo that he didn’t know existed. According to the sign, The Gardens was formerly CalTrans land that the city took over for a nature park, and planted with mostly native flora. Succulents, wildflowers, shrubs, and tree-lined trails wove throughout. Bees and butterflies flitted from bloom to bloom. He saw a hundred squirrels, a few wild rabbits, and a possum. He steered clear of a mama skunk with three babies trailing her. He laughed as a Jack Russell terrier circled an oak, chasing a squirrel that stayed inches ahead, spiraling around the trunk. He found sculptures, tangled with vines, and benches, hidden beneath trees. Wandering the paths calmed his stomach and soothed his head.

Somewhere near the center of the park, he pushed his way through bushes and came upon a small rock labyrinth. It was tiny compared to the one he and Morrigan found in the Sierras, but it flashed memories. He closed his eyes and “saw.”

*A smile below a head of red hair. A rainstorm. A granite tower. Symbols scratched in stone, glowing from within. An orange, black and white kitten. No, a cat now. A mandala. A tin of sardines. The smell of fish,*

*and wildflowers... and her. He heard the sounds of wind in the trees, a young woman's laughter, rain on a tent, and disembodied shrieks.*

It staggered him. He opened his eyes, stumbled backwards through the undergrowth, and found himself tripping onto one of those hidden benches, beneath a hundred-foot pine. He dropped across the seat and breathed heavily. He closed his eyes, laid his head back, and was relieved that all he saw was the black inside his eyelids.

It might have been 10 seconds or 10 minutes. Sean breathed and enjoyed the darkness. He stretched his left hand into the shrubbery beside the bench. Something pinged against his little finger. It was warm and wet, and he prayed it was not bird shit. He peeled open his eyelids and saw a red droplet sliding down his knuckle. *What the hell?*

He looked at the manzanita and saw the purple-brown limbs, and then several green leaves, stained crimson. He followed the trail of liquid down and saw a muddy rust colored puddle below the shrub. He reluctantly raised his gaze to the tree above. Wedged between branches halfway up the pine was a person (*a body?*). It wasn't moving, except the legs dangling and shuddering in the wind. Both shoes seemed wrapped in scarlet ribbons. As Sean watched, a drop slipped from the toe of the man's right foot and splashed against a manzanita limb.

\*\*\*

The police and ambulance arrived at almost the same time. Sean waved them down and guided them to where he'd made the grisly discovery. The first officer tried to reach the man by shimmying up the trunk, but with no branches for the first 20 feet, he soon quit. His partner was already on the radio requesting assistance. It was another ten minutes until the Pasadena Fire Department arrived with the ladders needed to reach the victim.

Sean huddled across the small clearing. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the rescue attempt. At least, the man appeared to be alive. His fingers twitched as he was lowered from the tree, but he did not seem conscious. The backs of both his ankles were torn open. Sean remembered reading how some slave owners cut the Achilles tendons of runaway slaves. The left side of the man's face was a purple-red mass, bruising spread from brow to cheekbone. That eye was swollen shut, and a thin trickle of red ran from its corner across his nose and down his left cheek. The right eye flickered open. Sean felt it staring at him for a moment before it fluttered closed.

The man wore a small daypack that was ripped open in a jagged slash. The EMT cut it loose and handed it to a woman in plain clothes with a badge at her waist. As it dangled, Sean had another memory flash, of a slashed food bag dangling from a broken pink cord.

The detective looked to be about 40. Her hair was dark brown, cut short, and showed copper highlights in the direct sunlight. She pulled on latex gloves and dug into the pack's opening. Another officer brought plastic evidence bags. They carefully stored and documented the contents: a small clutch, another larger handbag, two wallets, cash, a handgun, and a few other items.

By this time, several other uniformed police had arrived. The woman gathered them together for a quick conference. A pair of them began stringing yellow crime scene tape to circle the area. Another four disappeared into the underbrush, looking for more evidence.

As she approached Sean, he could hear the ambulance siren through the trees, the screaming wail dropping in volume and pitch as it departed for the nearest hospital.

“Hello, I'm Detective Navarre, Pasadena PD. And you are?”

“Sean. Sean Lambton.”

“I saw you looking at the victim. Do you know him?”

“No. I’ve never seen him before in my life. I was just walking through the park. I’ve never even been in this park before. I. I...”

“Calm down, Mr. Lambton. It’s OK. No one is accusing you of anything. It’s only that none of the ID’s in his possession matched his face. I was hoping you’d be able to help identify him.”

“No. No. I don’t know him.”

“That’s fine.” She sorted through the IDs they’d found in the pack. “One more thing, I have to ask. Do any of these names mean anything to you, Molly Dunn?”

“No.” Sean shook his head.

“Kelly Ramirez?”

“No”

“Jeff Davis?”

“Just the Confederate States president, but no one these days.”

“Oh yeah, shitty name that one. How about Frank Silverberg?”

“Sorry, no.”

“OK. That’s fine. Now tell me what you were doing before you found him.”

Sean told her about walking through the park. He admitted to being hungover and that was why he was lying on the bench. The wet pinky and the red puddle, and the thing in the tree. She walked him backwards

through his morning. No, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. No, he didn't see anyone else in the park. Yes, there was light traffic, but he didn't remember any specific cars or other vehicles.

He seemed nervous and distracted, as if he wasn't telling her everything. Maybe it was the hangover – and some folks just don't trust cops – but something felt off.

“Thanks for your help.” Detective Navarre handed him a business card. “Here's my card. Don't hesitate to call if you remember anything else. Even if it doesn't seem important to you.”

“Yeah, sure. I will.” He tucked the card into the small pocket in his running shorts.

“Do you need a ride home?”

“No, no. I'm good. It's close.”

\*\*\*

As Sean walked up the stairs to his condo, he pulled his keys from his pocket. *That 'run' took a lot longer than I planned.* He ran his finger across the curves of the black cat figure on his keychain *for luck. Some luck.* There was a dead mouse on his welcome mat. He retrieved an old bread bag from his kitchen to grab the dead rodent. He propped the door open and carried it down to the bin behind his unit.

\*\*\*

Monster squeezed from under the chair and sauntered over to Morrigan. She dropped the white cat toy into her lap, and looked up into her human's eyes. Morrigan picked it up and ran her fingers across the curves of the plushie.

“Thanks, Little One. It won’t buy lunch, but at least it’s cute.”

“Meow”

“OK. You’re right. It is your lunch time. At least we have food for you.” Morrigan laughed. “Not that you need it. You are getting so big.”

Morrigan pulled open a can of salmon-flavored food and dumped it into a small bowl. Monster didn’t wait for it to hit the ground before shoving her face into it.

\*\*\*

## What's Your Game

Kelly set her keys on the counter before dropping a wad of small bills and change next to them.

“I gotta pay back the other servers, but they let me keep the cash from the tip jar until I get my cards back. How'd it go at the bank?”

“The a-holes won't let me do anything without my ID.”

“Oh, that reminds me. I have to go down to the Pasadena PD office. They called and said they found my purse and ID.”

Morrigan's eyes lit up.

“Did they find mine?”

“They didn't say, but why don't you come with?”

“Shit. Wait. Pasadena PD? We got robbed in WeHo.”

“I don't know. The sheriffs must have sent it over. Maybe because my address is in Pasadena.”

“They must have better interagency cooperation than we do on 'Empty Spaces.’” Morrigan laughed. “I'll tag along.”

“We should get moving. The detective said she'd only be there until seven.”

\*\*\*

They approached the desk sergeant. He was on the phone and raised a single finger until he finished the call.

“How can I help you ladies?”

“I got a call from a Detective Navarre. She said they found my ID, and some other stuff?”

“Sure.” He punched a number on the keypad... “Hey Kat, there’s two young women here to see you.” He raised his eyebrows at Kelly.

“I’m Kelly Ramirez, and this is Morrigan Wielle.”

“Yeah, Kelly Ramirez and... OK, I’ll send ‘em back.” He hung up and pointed. “Down this hall all the way to the end and turn left at the ‘T.’ Her door will be on the right, halfway down. Room 113.”

They thanked the officer and followed his directions. Detective Navarre met them in the corridor.

“Hello, I’m Detective Katherine Navarre, but you can call me Kat.”

“I’m Kelly Ramirez and this is my roommate, Morrigan Wielle.”

“Ms. Ramirez, thank you for coming.” She looked at Morrigan. “You look familiar.”

“I’m on a new TV show. You might have seen the commercials.”

“No, that’s not it. I don’t watch TV.” She paused, then pointed at Morrigan. “Molly Dunn.” Morrigan’s eyes opened wide, then she relaxed.

“My ID. I forgot I haven’t changed the name on my license yet. I was born Molly Dunn, but my professional name is Morrigan Wielle.”

“Interesting.”

“Yeah, I’ve liked the name Morrigan since my mom used to read me Irish folktales as a kid... and Wielle was my mom’s maiden name.”

“That explains it. Do you all know Frank Silverberg or Jeff Davis?”

“Frank works with me on the TV show. Jefferson Davis was the Confederate president, wasn’t he?”

Navarre held out the two ID’s. Morrigan and Kelly looked at them.

“Jeff Davis? Jeremy Jefferson was born Jeff Davis? I’d change my name too,” Kelly said.

“Jeremy Jefferson?” The detective asked.

“You **don’t** watch television, do you? Blake Strickland?” Kelly added.

When she got no reaction, Morrigan continued.

“He’s an actor on the same TV show. I guess he never changed his legal name either. We were all together in West Hollywood last night when we were robbed.”

The detective wasn’t surprised to learn there was a robbery, but was puzzled that it happened 20 miles away. She brought out two photos of Aaron Frome, the man they’d found in the tree, and showed it to the pair, one taken at the hospital and an old mug shot.

“Is this the man that robbed you?”

“I’m not sure. I was too terrified to look at him. All I saw was the gun,” Kelly said.

“It looks like him to me.” Morrigan pointed at the newer photo.  
“But he wasn’t beaten up like that. What happened to him?”

“That’s just one of the things we’re trying to figure out.”

Detective Navarre called the sheriff’s station and they emailed a copy of the original report. While she waited for it to come in, she had Morrigan and Kelly give their version of the robbery. Their information was consistent with the report when it did arrive. The stolen cash, wallets, purses, etc. were all recovered in the park, but none of the watches or other jewelry was found.

After the two women left, Detective Navarre reviewed the reports again. It didn’t add up. She was missing something.

*Why would he get rid of the jewelry, but keep all the other personal belongings? Did he pawn them somewhere between West Hollywood and Pasadena? What was he even doing in Pasadena? According to his P.O., he lives in WeHo. Why’d he drive 20 miles with incriminating evidence? Did he come himself or did someone else bring him? Then maybe the most confusing thing. How did he get in that tree? According to CSI, there was blood on branches above him...*

\*\*\*

Kat Navarre wanted to talk with Aaron Frome, before he was transferred to West Hollywood for booking. According to the doctor, he came through surgery well enough. They were able to reattach both severed tendons. He’d always limp, but with physical therapy, he would be able to walk. His face looked worse than it was. A concussion and swelling from an allergic reaction, but no structural damage.

“Mr. Frome, I’m Detective Navarre from the Pasadena Police Department. The officer read you your rights. You have the right to remain silent, but I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“I didn’t do nothin’.”

“We found you with a number of stolen items, and a handgun.”

“Weren’t mine. I found ‘em.”

“And where did you find these items?”

“Uh, um. In a trash bin, yeah, in a trash bin.”

“Where was this trash bin?”

“Out back of the Pink Po... uh, out back of the hardware store. On Santa Monica.”

“In West Hollywood?”

“Yeah.”

“And how did you get here to Pasadena?”

“What? I’m in Pasadena?”

“Who were you working with?”

“Wait. How did I get to Pasadena?”

“That’s just one of the things I want to know. What’s the last thing you remember before you woke up in the hospital?”

“Like I said, I found that stuff out back of the, what did I say? Uh, yeah, the hardware store. I was just minding my own business, walking down the alley, and somethin’ whacked me in the back of my legs. I went down hard. Face-planted, I guess. I kinda remember a flapping and screeching sound and a pounding and then ‘boom’ I’m in a hospital and some doctor’s telling me I got surgery.”

“And what did you do with the jewelry? The watches, earrings and the gold chain. Did you hand those off to your partner?”

“What partner? I didn’t do nothin’ with ‘em. Like I said, I just found ‘em. I was gonna give ‘em to you cops when I got whacked... fer real.”

“Cooperation could help you. If I told you that you have been positively identified as the person who stole those items, and possession of a handgun by itself will revoke your parole, would that change your memories?”

“I think I said enough.”

“One more thing.” Kat wasn’t expecting anything, but she flipped to a picture on her phone. “Do you know this man?”

“Is he the one that done this to me?”

“Is he?”

“Don’t know. He looks kinda famil’ar, but I can’t really say.”

“OK, thanks.” She closed the photo of Sean.

\*\*\*

Two sheriff’s deputies and an orderly with a wheelchair were waiting in the corridor as Kat left the room.

“You get anything out of him?” the taller deputy asked.

“Not really. Claims he doesn’t even know how he got to Pasadena, let alone 40 feet up a tree.”

“He’s had drug convictions. He was probably high as a kite, and climbed the tree himself.”

“You didn’t see the tree... or his ankles. I get the feeling there’s more to this than a robbery. Does he have any known associates?”

“You think a partner turned on him?”

“Maybe, I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense. None of this makes sense. Someone slashes him so he can’t run, and knocks him unconscious. They take the jewelry, but leave him several hundred dollars in cash, and his gun. And he ends up in a tree twenty miles away. You got any ideas?”

“Above my pay grade. We’re just transporting the jackass.”

\*\*\*

## What'd Ya Do

Sean slept for ten hours. Except for the nagging hangover, he was feeling better than he had for days, but he still needed to see some real stars. He placed the full duffel next to his daypack and other gear on and around the couch. The sun glinting through the window was a bit brighter than his eyes wanted, but it was also a good sign for the trip ahead. He was going to hit the road after breakfast. The doorbell chimed. *That'll be the breakfast burrito and café de olla.*

It was not.

“Good morning, Mr. Lambton. I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

“Uh, no. I’m just waiting on my breakfast delivery... I’m sorry. I remember you, but I’m having a brain fart with your name.”

“Detective Katherine Navarre. You can call me Kat.”

“Uh, sure, Kat. How can I help you?”

“Do you mind if I come in? I had a couple of things I wanted to run by you.”

“Yeah, come on in.”

Sean pointed her to the one chair in the living room that wasn’t stacked with gear. He pulled a hardwood one from the dining area and sat across from her.

“You going somewhere?” she asked.

“Heading to Joshua Tree. Just a quick overnight.”

She rotated her head, taking in the different equipment, pack, clothes, boots, shoes, coil of rope, and carabiners.

“Are you a climber?”

“I do a little rock climbing, but nothing very technical.”

“Interesting. You must be in pretty good shape.”

“I try, but there’s only so much I have time for. Anyway, what was it you wanted?”

“The man you found in the tree. Seems he committed a robbery and had stolen goods with him.” She looked for a reaction from Sean, but only sensed confusion. “I was wondering if you noticed any jewelry – Watches, gold chain, that sort of thing, in the park that morning.”

“No, nothing like that.”

“You said you didn’t know any of the robbery victims?”

“Those names you asked me? I remember Jefferson Davis – you know, Confederate president – but none of the others.”

She unlocked her phone and scrolled through her pictures. None of the DMV photos were very flattering. When she showed him the pictures of Kelly Ramirez and Frank Silverberg, he shook his head. Then she brought up Jeff Davis.

“He kinda looks like that guy on TV, Jeremy Jefferson.”

“You know him?”

“Is that really him? I mean I used to watch him on TV when I was a kid, and he’s got a new show, but I don’t know more than that.”

“And what about this young woman?”

She displayed Molly Dunn's picture. Sean said nothing, but he moved closer to the photo. His eyes grew wide and his mouth dropped open.

"You recognize her?"

"Morrigan. Morrigan Wielle," he muttered.

"And how do you know her?"

"Well, she's on a TV show. That same one with Jefferson." He paused. "And we sort of dated a few months ago."

"Sort of?"

"We went camping together, once, but it didn't work out." Sean did not make eye contact.

"And when did you last see her?"

"Last summer. Fourth of July weekend. We spent five days hiking in the Sierras... I haven't seen her since."

"Are you sure?"

"Very sure."

There was something with his attitude that didn't feel right. She asked several more questions, but couldn't put a handle on it. *Jilted former boyfriend? Stalker? Coincidence? Has she been avoiding him? He seemed genuinely surprised that this woman was involved.* She was trying to think of what else to ask when the doorbell rang again.

"That'll be my breakfast." Sean laughed nervously.

"OK, I'll let you get to it. Thank you again for your time. I might have some other questions later."

"Uh, OK. I don't know how I can help, but sure."

As she rose from the chair, Sean noticed a glint from near her left foot. He reached down and picked up something from under the edge of the chair.

“I think you dropped this,” he said, and handed it to her.

Kat looked at the diamond earring. She was going to give it back, but thought better of it. She tucked it into her pants pocket.

“Thanks. You have a good day.”

“You too.”

\*\*\*

The door to Morrigan and Kelly’s apartment swung in when she knocked. Kat leaned in and announced herself.

“Knock-Knock. It’s Kat Navarre, Pasadena PD.”

“Come on in, Detective.” Morrigan pointed to a chair in the living room. “Have a seat and I’ll be right with you.”

Morrigan pushed the front door closed and scooped up Monster. She held the cat in her lap and sat on the couch. Kelly came from behind the kitchenette counter.

“Is there any new info on the robbery? Did you find my watch?”  
Kelly asked.

“Not the watch, but I did come across this. Is this your earring?”  
She held the stud up to Morrigan.

“I mean, yeah, it could be, but they were pretty generic. I found out my mom didn’t even like ‘em that much. Where’d you find it?”

Kat ignored the question, but she scratched a note in her notepad.

“Do you know a man named Sean Lambton?”

Morrigan froze, coughed, and put her hand over her mouth. Her cheeks reddened. Monster leapt from her lap and rubbed herself against the detective’s shin. Kat reached down and stroked the cat.

“Why does that name sound familiar?” Kelly asked.

“Hiker Boy,” Morrigan whispered.

“Then you do know him?”

“A little. We went hiking together, I don’t know, six months or so ago.”

“And you haven’t seen him since?”

“Unfortunately, not. I was supposed to call him, but then I got the part on the TV show, and things kept getting in the way... then it had been so long that I was embarrassed. I didn’t know what I’d say so I let it go.”

“Did you ever get weird vibes from him?”

“No, what do you mean?”

“You’re a woman. Sometimes you get a gut feeling that something’s just not right.”

“Oh, for sure. I get that, but no, I never got that feeling from Sean. He was great. What does he have to do with all of this?”

“Probably nothing, but he lives near the park where your things were found.”

“That’s weird. If you talk to him, tell him I said ‘Hi’ and sorry I didn’t call him back.”

Kat was making another note when Monster made a running leap and snagged the pen from her hand. She circled the chair twice and then disappeared below it.

“Sorry about that,” Morrigan said, and motioned the detective to stand up.

“I’ll get it,” Kelly said.

She brought a cardboard box, and tipped the chair on its side. Monster squealed and erupted from a slice in the fabric on the base of the chair. Kelly reached in and retrieved several cat toys, two pens, paper clips, a sponge, a Sequoia National Park T-shirt and various other odds and ends. She tossed them into the box and lifted one of the pens.

“Is this yours?” Kelly asked the detective.

“Yes, thanks.” Kat chuckled. “Interesting.”

“Our cat is a hoarder,” Morrigan explained.

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This was Sean’s special place. It was less than a half mile from the public campground, but he’d never seen any sign that any other human had ever been here. It was harder to fit through the passageway these days. He had to remove his pack and push it ahead of him.

He’d found it years ago on a Boy Scout campout, here in Joshua Tree. He was supposed to be on the Red team for ‘Capture the Flag’ but slipped away from the rest of the group. He squeezed behind a pile of boulders and under a ledge, then shimmied 20 feet or so into a circular space. There was a ten-foot-diameter flat enclosed by rock walls.

Overhead cracks created a chimney with a narrow vision of the sky above.

Tonight, he lay flat on his back and peered up through that scope. His mind was calm and quiet as stars and constellations took turns passing across the opening. He periodically closed his eyes and breathed. *No visions. No tension. No anxieties.* He glanced at his watch – 10:33 p.m. That was when he recognized the sickle and triangle of stars above. He laughed out loud - *Leo*.

A shadow passed in front of the constellation. There was a silhouette against the edge of the chimney. The ears of a cat from its shape, a mountain lion from its size, but then he saw the fluttering of wings, and realized it must've been an owl's ear tufts. Moonglow caught it, reflecting two yellow-golden eyes. They blinked and he blinked in unison. The shape disappeared; he closed his eyes and was pleased to see only darkness.

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The captain was not convinced.

“Sorry, Kat, but I don't see you've got enough for a warrant.”

“It matches the description of stolen goods. It was in his possession. He knows the victim.”

“And you said the victim couldn't be sure it was the same earring. And he gave it right to you without you even asking. Does that sound like how a perp handles stolen goods?”

“Well, no, but there's something funky going on. What if he's a stalker who feels he has to protect this Morrigan? And he assaulted the suspect after he robbed her? Then kept trophies?”

“That’s out there, Kat. If you send that to the judge, I think he’s gonna laugh you out of his chambers.”

“Maybe you’re right, but this one bugs me. Do you mind if I keep poking around?”

“Like anything I said would stop you. Just remember, the sheriff has his thief. This kid has no record. The victims got most of their stuff back, and more importantly, you have about a hundred other cases.”

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## Part 3 - JM

### Refuge of the Roads

Sean hadn't had any daytime visions since the day five months ago in the Gardens, but the last few weeks, the hypnagogic events had returned almost every night, and were increasingly overwhelming. It seemed as soon as he closed his eyes, he was beset with shapes and sounds and smells... beyond his awareness ... not letting him slip into complete unconsciousness.

*Paths within paths. A whirling shape above twisting, turning patterns. Voices speaking at levels too low to understand, perhaps another language. Languages? Shadows flickering against his eyelids. Fluttering of wings and claws and ... almost seeing it, almost understanding it, almost. Odors of pine forests and wildflowers... and dust and dirt... and a metallic tang like pennies left out in the rain... and raw meat. The taste of raw meat.*

Sean thrashed in his bed, but his lids seemed glued tight. With effort, he twisted and rolled off the edge. He felt momentary weightlessness before the floor jarred him fully awake. He tried to spit the taste from his mouth. He pulled himself up onto the mattress and perused the room. Nothing was out of place. No strange sounds or shapes or odors. He rubbed the back of his hand across his face and saw streaks of red. A bloody nose and split lip where he smacked the floor.

He stumbled to the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. It was a light bleed on the left side, and it trickled to the corner of his mouth. He used a tissue to wipe his nose and cheek where he'd smeared the flow. He pinched his nose while he walked to the kitchen to pour himself a shot of tequila. He'd been drinking more than he liked, but sometimes it fogged away the visions. Sometimes it made them worse.

It couldn't be worse tonight. He downed the first and poured another shot. He'd need more than a J. Tree get-away. He needed answers.

After a few more dabs, he realized the bleeding had stopped. The tissue was marked with a swirled red circular Rorschach blot. He found himself staring at the pattern lost in thoughts. He wasn't sure how long that lasted, but eventually he shook his head and tossed the tissue in the trashcan under the sink. He took one more shot, and went back to bed. He needed answers.

He slipped into sleep with no hypnagogic interruptions.

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Morrigan was trying to pack her tops, but a large black, orange and white lump flew into the box and tunneled under her shirts and sweaters.

“Monster! Get out of there!”

Two orange and black triangles appeared above the edge of a Sequoia National Park T-Shirt. Then two eyes in a mostly white face, and a pink nose. Morrigan ruffled her hand across the cat's head. It looked at her, then before Morrigan could blink, the cat had the shirt in her mouth and was dragging it across the room.

“Fine. You play with that, but let me finish the rest of my packing.”

“I had to keep my door closed while I was boxing up my stuff,” Kelly said.

“I tried that, but it doesn't always latch... or maybe she's learned how to use doorknobs.”

“I wouldn't put it past her.”

“At least she’ll have more room in the new place.”

“You sure you’re OK with me paying so little on the rent?”  
Kelly asked.

“I told you. We’re getting it for the same price as this one, furnished. Harry Candelin said the person who was going to move in backed out, and he wanted to help a young actor, and besides, how many times did you cover the rent when I was short?”

“OK, I guess.”

Just then an orange and black streak vaulted into the box and bounced out with a tank top trailing behind her.

“And remember, you’re the cat nanny.”

“I think you’re getting off cheap.” Kelly chuckled.

\*\*\*

Sean was alone as he wandered through the little gift shop attached to the ranger station/nature center. He wasn’t sure what plastic dinosaurs and other prehistoric beasts had to do with the Sequoias, but still he arranged them on the counter above their container. A sabretooth cat doing battle with a T-Rex while a winged lizard looked down from the shelf above.

“Good afternoon.” Sean jumped.

The young woman had come through a door behind the counter while Sean’s back was turned. He turned pink and scooped the plastic toys into their bin. She was roughly his age and maybe a half inch taller than him. She wore a khaki uniform. Her black hair was cut short on the

sides and was left long on top, tapering into a pony tail with red and blue tips.

“Hi.” He paused to read her name tag. “Dinah. I’m looking for a wilderness pass, and I was hoping to talk with the ranger.”

“Well, you’re in luck. I’m the ranger... and since they cut our funding, I also run the gift shop, issue wilderness passes, take out the trash, clean the restrooms, perform first aid on the clumsy and clueless.” She smiled at Sean. “And sell plastic dinosaurs.”

He turned even pinker. She handed him a wilderness pass form and a pen. As he filled in the form, she brought out another bound notebook.

“This is our visitors log. It’s optional, but we ask folks to write their names, the date and where they’re from. One of the other rangers is building a database. We’ve had folks from over a hundred different countries and every continent, except Antarctica.”

“I put my info in when I was here last year. Do you want me to go again?”

“If you don’t mind. He’s tracking frequencies too.”

Sean scratched his name, the date and “Pasadena, CA” into the log. He finished filling in the wilderness pass and handed that back to Dinah. She scanned the information.

“Thanks... Sean Lambton. Leaving tomorrow? Four days? And where are you headed?”

“I plan to be out three or four days. I’m gonna stay at the car camp across the way tonight, if that’s OK?”

“Yeah. It’s pretty empty right now. You need a hookup?”

“Hookup?” Sean smiled.

“An RV hookup.”

“Oh. No. Just me, a Subaru and a tent.”

“That’ll be \$25 for the camp site and five for the wilderness permit. Where did you say you were heading?”

He extracted a well-used topo map from his pack and unfolded it carefully to avoid tearing. It had the wrinkled look of paper that had been soaked and dried in the sun. He pointed to a spot on a crease near the middle of the paper.

“I’m aiming for this clearing. I want to check out the labyrinth.”

“The what?”

“Labyrinth. I was here last July and stumbled across it. You know. About a million stone blocks laid out in a maze, with petroglyphs on the big ones?”

“Where was this?” she asked. Sean pointed to the spot on the map again. “I know that area. I haven’t been there in more than a year, but there wasn’t any labyrinth, or petroglyphs.” She paused. “Damn.”

“What is it?”

“Some folks don’t respect the wilderness. They think it’s cool to carve their names in trees or spray paint boulders.”

“This wasn’t graffiti. It would have taken days, maybe weeks, to build this thing. It seemed more like spiritual journey shit. I thought it might be Native American when I first saw it.”

“That might be even worse.” Sean looked at her. She continued. “Sometimes we get these New-Age hippy types that think they can connect with the universe by fucking with our forest. Pardon my French.”

“No problem.”

“You said this was last July you saw it?”

“Yeah, Fourth of July weekend as a matter of fact.”

She took her cell from her front pocket and tapped a few times and scrolled rapidly. Sean looked over her shoulder and saw she was spinning through old photos. After a few minutes, she slowed down and stopped at a picture dated July 7th. It was of an older man, sixty to early seventies, holding a walking stick in his left hand. The stick was carved with a serpent intertwining itself up and down its length. He had a full white beard that hung down to his chest. He was wearing a knit cap with a sort of logo patch on it, a tie-dyed T-shirt, cargo shorts, and leather sandals. Behind him was an old VW van painted with patterns of lines and curves of different colors and widths. There was a logo on the van that was partially obscured by a tree. It might have been the same as the one on his hat.

“Did you see this guy while you were here?”

“Doesn’t look familiar. Who is that?” Sean asked.

“I don’t remember his name. He was kind of a weirdo. Said he was looking for something in the mountains. Spouting a bunch of nonsense about ley lines and power convergence and I don’t know what all.” She stopped to think. “He was British, or maybe Irish.”

“You think he made the labyrinth?”

“He seemed harmless, but maybe. Said he’d been scouting the area for a few weeks before he came in here. Caught my attention enough that I took these photos.”

“Can I see that picture again?”

She handed Sean her phone. He zoomed in on the patterns painted on the van.

“I’m not sure, but those lines on the bus could be the same as some of the ‘petroglyphs’ I saw.” He made finger quotes in the air. “Can you send me that picture?”

“I don’t see why not.” She got Sean’s number and forwarded that photo and seven others that she’d taken on the same day.

He scrolled through the photos. Most were of the old man in front of the van, but there were two of just the vehicle itself. The logo was clearer in the second. Sean zoomed in and pointed to it.

“What does that look like to you? Teeth?” Sean asked.

“I think those are supposed to be W’s. See three, no four W’s, overlapping each other.”

“Oh yeah. You’ve got better eyes than me.”

She stamped his wilderness pass and handed it to him.

“Leave the yellow copy on your dashboard if you’re parking at the trailhead.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m stuck here except for emergencies. Would you mind taking a few pictures of the clearing and your labyrinth and text ‘em to me?”

“Probably no service up there, but I’ll stop by here on the way down.”

“My replacement comes in Monday at noon. If you can’t get here by then, just text me when you get service.”

“OK.” He smiled. “By the way, I’m Sean.”

“Yeah, I saw that on your pass.” She pointed to her name tag and smiled too. “Dinah. Dinah Liddell.”

“Nice to meet you, Dinah. If I do make it out by noon, can I buy you lunch?”

“We’ll see.”

“I’ll take that as a definite maybe.” His smile turned to a grin.

“Definitely, maybe.” She shook her head and laughed.

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## Coyote

The wash was easy enough to find where it crossed under the main path. It was currently dry and he dropped down next to a small wooden bridge to head up the gulch. The use trail they'd followed last summer had all but vanished under the growth spurred by winter rains. It was slow going, pushing his way through tangled branches, and more than once he had to leave the bottom of the gully and traverse a hillside to make progress.

It was late afternoon when he slid down a short hill after negotiating one of these detours. There was a small puddle next to a large stone in the streambed here. An upwelling of water spilled from under the rock, and disappeared into the sand a few yards down. Sean retrieved a rusted sardine tin that was wedged against a manzanita trunk. He put it in his pack and spun slowly. *Boy Scout rule.*

He rotated again before continuing. Looking up to the rim, the canyon was familiar, but the details of the path were different from the previous summer. It was tough hiking ascending through the gully. He almost missed the spot where the trail led away from the streambed and headed towards the clearing. At least it was not as overgrown in this area.

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As the sun disappeared, the stars began to wink into existence. First by ones and twos, then hundreds and thousands splashing across the sky. Sean put on his headlamp and continued up the hill. He could see the arc of the waxing moon, just visible above the ridge. A streak of light appeared from the northwest corner of that silver crescent and trailed all the way across the sky. He knew it was silly, but he closed his eyes and made a silent wish.

Not even the moon was visible when he reached the ledge of the clearing. It hadn't seemed this tall coming down last July. He removed his pack and hefted it onto the shelf. He struggled and pulled himself up, lay flat on his belly for a few moments, inhaled rock dust and pollen while he caught his breath. Then he raised his head and played the lamp across the clearing, lighting the trees on the far side.

“Damn!” he said aloud.

This area wasn't more than 30 yards across. He must've taken a wrong turn somewhere. There was no labyrinth. No tower. There were a few random rocks and boulders, but nothing like what he and Morrigan discovered.

It was late, he was exhausted, and this was as good a place to camp as he was going to find. He didn't even bother to hang his food from a tree. He laid out a pad, and almost before it had inflated, he was on it in his sleeping bag. Lying on his back, he marveled at the Milky Way. He smiled as he identified Leo, and another meteor flared from its 'mouth' across the southern sky.

\*\*\*

Sean awoke, and the Milky Way had faded into the eastern glow. There were still a few stars visible in the west, but Leo had already dropped beyond the horizon. He rolled over and saw a coyote sniffing at his pack. He yelled and it sprinted away into the woods. He was happy to see his supplies were unmolested, and started water boiling on his small stove. Breakfast was instant coffee followed by instant oatmeal in the same metal cup.

By the time he finished eating and washing dish, the sun was peeking over the opposite wall of the canyon. He had a better view of the area. It looked like a miniature version of the clearing from last summer. There was the same pine, cedar and oak trees, but no birch, and no

maze. There was a small upthrust of granite near the center of the space that had a similar ‘Devil’s Tower’ shape, but was only knee high, and there were no markings anywhere. Sean hopped onto its flattened top and spun slowly taking in the view from the gorge to the tree line.

*This’ll make a good place for a base camp.* Other than the size of the space, the view was almost identical to last summer. He couldn’t be too far from the labyrinth, but he couldn’t figure out in what direction it might lie. The canyon walls rose and fell precipitously from here. He didn’t see anywhere that would fit a 200-yard-wide clearing. He paused as he took in the tree line. There was a fallen tree trunk pointing directly at him. *What?*

He dropped down and strolled to the log. Sure enough, patterns of woodpecker holes scarred the surface – *and those nine holes.* Those nine holes with eight pebbles and an earring dropped into them made a perfect image of the constellation Leo.

Sean struggled to understand how this could be the same spot. It was too small to ever have contained the stone structures. *Could someone have moved the log here? Why?*

He wished he’d taken pictures last year. He turned on his phone, no service, but he took several pictures of the clearing and the log and the surrounding canyon. He powered it down to save the battery.

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Kelly pulled open the sliding glass door and stepped onto the third-floor balcony. She leaned on the cast-iron railings and peered through a grove of eucalyptus trees towards the hills and the mountains beyond. Monster followed her, rubbing and twisting between her legs.

“We’re gonna need to get some patio furniture,” Kelly called.

“Yeah, I guess ‘furnished’ doesn’t count the patio,” Morrigan replied.

She came out and dropped cross-legged on the tiled floor of the deck. The calico crawled into her lap.

“Great view though,” Kelly said.

“Definitely. I see myself here with a glass of Chardonnay and a few canapes. We should have a house warming party!”

“Speaking of house warming...”

Morrigan jumped at the voice and Monster leapt from her lap to face the doorway. The cat arched her back and hissed angrily at the man approaching through the living room. Harry Candelin had a green bottle in his left hand. The cat spat and hissed again.

“Oh, Mr. Candelin. Hold on a second.”

Morrigan held the feline while Kelly manned the door. They slid inside and dropped her onto the balcony. The cat continued to complain, throwing herself at the glass.

“Sorry about that. You must have scared her,” Morrigan said.  
“You scared me too, a little.”

“I’m the one who should be saying ‘sorry’. The front door wasn’t locked and I wanted to surprise you.” He held up the bottle. “Bollinger La Grande Année.”

“Champagne? That’s awesome,” Kelly said.

“A little condo warming present,” Harry said, then turned to Kelly and held out his hand. “Harry. Harry Candelin.”

“I remember you from the ‘Empty Spaces’ screening. I’m Kelly, Morrigan’s roommate.”

“Oh.” Harry looked disappointed. He turned to Morrigan. “You didn’t tell me you were going to have a roommate.”

“Yeah, Kelly and I have been friends forever. That’s not a problem, is it?”

“No, no problem at all.” He pasted on a smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you again, Kelly.”

“All mine, Mr. Candelin,” Kelly replied.

“Please, please. Harry. My father was Mr. Candelin.” He waved the bottle back and forth. “Do you have glasses?”

“Oh, I can’t,” Morrigan insisted. “I’ve got an interview with Channel 5 in an hour. I guess there’s rumors of an Emmy nomination. Can we get a raincheck?”

“I’ve been spreading those rumors myself. You’ll definitely get that nomination. Maybe a win.” Harry laughed. “I guess I’ll have to take that raincheck. Let’s put this in the cooler and I’ll let you get ready.”

Kelly took the champagne to the refrigerator while Morrigan walked Harry to the door. He leaned in as she turned her head away. He kissed her on the cheek.

“Thanks again for the housewarming gift. That was very generous of you, and thanks for the great deal on this place too.”

“Oh, it’s always good to help folks on their way up the ladder, and I am going to hold you to that raincheck on the Bollinger. Don’t go drinking that without me.” He winked.

“Yes, of course.”

After he left, she wiggled the door knob. She thought she’d locked it. She was going to ask Kelly about it when she looked back across the room. She saw an orange, black and white blur fly from the balcony into a eucalyptus tree. She sprinted through the room just in time to see Monster slide down the trunk to the ground and disappear in the undergrowth below the trees.

“I don’t know how she made that leap.” Morrigan was frantic.  
“We need to find her!”

“You go to your interview. I’ll find her,” Kelly said, pulling on a light jacket.

“No way. Give me a minute to call and cancel. I’m coming with you.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon searching the entire condo complex and the surrounding green areas, but never caught a glimpse of their pet.

The sun had been down for an hour and the moon was yet to rise. Morrigan sat on a stoop below their balcony for another hour. She set a tin of sardines at the base of a eucalyptus and waited. She didn’t know how long she’d been there when she heard the eerie yips, yelps, squeals and howls. *A pack of coyotes... and it sounds like they’re closing in on their prey.*

\*\*\*

Morrigan awoke, stiff and sore. She’d stumbled through the bushes trying to follow the coyotes’ howls last night. They always seemed close, but were never there when she pushed through another thicket. Eventually, she returned to the stoop to wait and hope. She drifted off

to sleep after midnight, and it was almost dawn now. As her eyes cracked open, she saw a dark shape by the sardine tin under the tree.

“MONSTER?”

The raccoon was startled, but not enough to give up a free meal. It looked warily at her and pulled another small fish from the tin. Its gaze grew more determined, almost a challenge to Morrigan to try to prevent it from finishing its feast. She had no intention of, or energy for, stopping it from eating. The raccoon dipped its almost human hand into the tin and seemed to taunt her by holding it up before bringing the morsel towards its mouth.

Morrigan blinked and the sardine vanished. The masked bandit looked bewildered too, then turned its head only to be met with repeated slaps around the muzzle with left and right paws. White and black blurs striking like a boxer on a speedbag. The raccoon screeched and raced away at a dead run. A soft pitiful whimpering sound followed as it retreated into the distance.

Morrigan wasn't quite sure what happened until a calico cat leapt into her lap. The tail end of a minuscule fish disappearing into its mouth. The hair along her back and sides still bristled and rustled the length of her body, standing straight and quivering like feathers in the wind. She gently stroked the agitated cat until she relaxed and her fur collapsed into place.

“Monster,” she whispered.

\*\*\*

Sean was almost as tired when he woke as he'd been the previous night. He had a crick in his shoulder from sleeping on granite, and his air pad had deflated again. He'd spent a day and a half reconnoitering up and down the canyon. There was no evidence that any other space existed

that could have held the labyrinth. He decided to break camp and head home.

He was finishing his packing and was taking a last look at the area. A coyote was nuzzling in the dirt under a manzanita on the far edge of the clearing. Sean powered on his cell. It had no bars, but he zoomed in and took a few pictures. The animal alerted at the *chk-cht* of the digital lens. It raised its head and locked eyes with Sean. The fur behind its head lifted and it started to bare its teeth. Sean smiled. It jumped backwards and disappeared into the forest, its tail tucked between its legs.

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## Barangrill

Sean made it down to the ranger station at half past twelve the next afternoon. He still had no cell service. A middle-aged man behind the register nodded as he entered the nature center's gift shop. Sean returned the nod, then took three protein bars from a rack and set them on the counter.

"Howdy. Is that everything?" the man asked.

"Um, yeah," Sean replied, then paused. "Uh, is Dinah here?"

"You just missed her," the man said as he punched in the sale.

"Oh yeah. She told me she got off at noon."

"That'll be \$13.04"

Sean paid and returned to his car. He'd traveled a few miles down the hill when his phone regained signal and started chiming. Pulling the Outback into the next turnout near a trailhead, he looked at his texts. He saw who had messaged earlier this morning, and grinned.

Ranger Dinah:

Mr Lambton - I googled W-W-W-W

Hope to see you on your way down mountain

I have Qs

*Mr. Lambton? What was that all about?* Sean thought for a minute before remembering what the L stood for.

Ms Liddel

Just missed you at ranger station

Can I call later?

He set his phone into the cradle on the dashboard and started to pull out, but it chimed again. He stopped and reversed off the roadway.

Ranger Dinah:

You can call

If your not too far already

Im at riverview b&g 5 mi outside of park on sierra

Sean:

On my way

Be there in 20-30 min

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The Riverview Bar and Grill was set at the back of a dirt parking lot that it shared with a small general store. Sean guessed the dark green Jeep parked on the side was Dinah's. He couldn't imagine her riding one of the oversized motorcycles, and the Ford pickup was probably older than she was. It was light blue, but you could hardly tell that through the mud splatter. It didn't look like it had been washed in the last decade. He eased his Outback in next to the Wrangler.

He entered through the side door and was almost blind. It took a few moments until his eyes adjusted enough to make out shapes in the darkness. He first noticed the two men on the near end of the bar. Fifty-or-so years old, they were drinking bottles of imported beer and looked like bankers or brokers, except for the brand-new leathers and denim vests. *Fashion riders*. A few barstools down was a white-haired man with a two-day growth of salt-and-pepper whiskers. He was drinking a caramel-colored something, stronger than beer. *Pickup*. Sean's vision was clear now, but he did not see Dinah anywhere.

Then he was blinded again, this time by the bright daylight when a door flew open across the room. Four boys spilled through into the bar. None

of them could be more than 12 years old. They were laughing and taking turns punching one another. The tallest of them asked the bartender for a beer, and he yelled for them to “get back into the restaurant.” They reluctantly returned through the door. Sean followed.

The ranger was in a booth by the corner. She had a tall water glass and a burger in front of her. In her fingers was a long curly fry soaked in ketchup. Hiking boots showed from under the table where her legs stretched. It looked like they’d seen much wear and were flaked with mud. Her face was highlighted by a narrow shaft of sunlight squeezing between shutter slats. She waved him over.

“I thought I was going to buy you lunch,” Sean said with a smile.

“You still can. I haven’t paid yet.” But she did not smile.

“OK, good. What’s good here?”

“Nothing’s great except the fries. The burgers are edible. They have a decent veggie patty.” She pointed at her burger.

“Cool. Can I get you anything else?”

“I’m good.”

Sean went to the counter and ordered his burger, fries and an iced tea. He got the tea first and returned to the booth.

“Oh man, this tea is horrible.” Sean grimaced.

“Hence the water.” Dinah lifted her glass.

“You said something about the 4 W’s and questions?”

“You said you didn’t know Dan O’Hanlon?” It was more an accusation than a question.

“Who? That name doesn’t ring any bells.”

“The guy in the 4 W’s van.”

“Is that his name? I never saw him... or heard of him.” Sean looked confused.

“The 4 W’s stand for: Wear, Well, Wall and Worm.”

He just looked even more confused.

“It’s an occult shop in someplace called Wallsend in Northern England. His family owns it.” She stared directly into Sean’s eyes. He shrugged, raising both palms.

“In addition to the 4 W’s shop, Dan O’Hanlon is the senior caretaker at the Lambton Estate near there.”

“Lambton?”

“Are any of those bells ringing now, Mr. Lambton?” She posed the question calmly, but there was an unmistakable bite beneath the surface. “What are you two trying to pull?”

“I swear I never heard of the guy. My dad’s side of the family came from England, but that was a century ago. I didn’t even know there was a Lambton Estate.”

“Castle and everything.”

Sean shrugged again. Dinah was not convinced, but she was softening. He seemed sincere, and sincerely bewildered.

“So did you bring me pictures of your stone maze?”

Sean coughed and looked away. The disappearing labyrinth was not going to raise his credibility with this woman.

\*\*\*

“Hey, Kat. You got a minute?” The patrol officer called from across the room.

Kat liked Greg Malkin. He was young, but with a good attitude. He’d volunteer for any duty that needed an extra hand. That was probably mainly for the overtime, but he always tried to do the best job possible. Even when he’d get stuck with grunt work, paperwork, filing and the like, he’d do whatever was asked, and do it well. By listening, watching and asking intelligent questions, he actually tried to get better at any assigned task. She expected him to be a good detective in a few years.

“Sure, Greg. What can I do for you?” Detective Navarre replied.

“You were on that robbery a few months back where they found the perp in a tree?”

“Yeah. And?”

“Well, we got a call for the same park this morning, and thought you might want to hear what we found in the trees this time.”

“Another body?”

“Sort of. Four coyotes were gutted and strewn around the park.”

“Coyotes? That’s interesting. Are they still there?”

“Animal control was cleaning it when I left. There’ll be official photos in the file, but I took a few on my phone.”

She motioned him over and he showed her. The carcasses were spread in various places across the park, one wedged near the top of an old oak,

one 30 feet up in a pine tree, another in the lower branches of a eucalyptus. The fourth was in the middle of a patch of prickly pear cactus, some twenty feet in diameter. Kat zoomed in on the coyote in the cactus.

“What’s that?” she said, pointing to its neck.

“Animal control folks said it was a GPS collar. Some university studying urban wildlife.”

“Interesting. Do you know who?”

“No, but, just a second.” The officer dug into his shirt pocket and produced a business card. “Here’s the card of the Animal Control guy I talked to. He could probably tell you.”

“Thanks.”

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## Tea Leaf Prophecy

The rest of the conversation did not go well from Sean's perspective. At least he convinced Dinah that he wasn't working with this W-W-W-W O'Hanlon fellow. She even let him walk her to her pickup truck after lunch. She admitted that she didn't think he was a liar. However, she did think he was either mentally unbalanced or on some sort of drugs. He wasn't sure she'd believed him when he insisted, unless you count alcohol, he hadn't done any drugs since college... but maybe that would have been a better belief than the alternative. He was starting to wonder himself.

*How did a 200-yard-wide clearing shrink by 90%, let alone a giant stone labyrinth appear and disappear miles from nowhere? Ever since that trip, the hypnagogic visions have gotten weirder and weirder. Not sleeping well. Drinking too much. But I really don't ever use anything stronger. Ever. Maybe I **am** losing it.*

Sean continued to obsess about it as he made his way south on Highway 65, towards Bakersfield. He could have got home by nightfall, but had another PTO day before he was expected back at work. Sean didn't want to face the night alone in his condo, and recalled going fishing with his dad at Isabella Lake so, at the junction, he headed east on the 155.

He stopped at a motel on the south side of the lake. His room was one of several cabins encircling an open courtyard. Each had its own little patio with a table and chairs, and there was a firepit in the middle of the yard. A dozen young people were gathered near the pit. From their clothing and other gear, he guessed they were from the university in Bakersfield. They seemed to be celebrating, or maybe partying. There was the skunky smell of burning cannabis floating on the breeze. Half the group was drinking beer and swaying to music from a portable speaker. The other half seemed to be just sitting staring at the flames.

He gave them a wide berth as he made his way to his cabin. He dropped his pack and duffel on the bed and decided to take a walk by the lake. *Maybe they'll quiet down by the time I get back.* When he exited, there was a young woman sitting in the chair next to his door. She was one of those who had been staring into the fire. Now she seemed enthralled by the grain in the wood on his small table. She looked at Sean and grinned.

“Hi there.” She giggled.

“Um, hi,” he stammered. “You OK?”

“Oh, I am amazing... You are amazing... The world is amazing.”

“OK.”

“Whatcha doin?” she said and laughed again.

“Uh, I’m gonna go for a walk by the lake.”

“The lake! Oh, the lake is amazing. The ripples, the, the, the, what do you call it? The water. Heh heh heh.”

“Well, Yeah. I suppose it is pretty great... You take care.”

“Wait - Wait. You’re going to the lake?” She continued before he could answer. “You should try some of our tea.”

“Uh, that’s OK.”

She ran to the firepit and stumbled back with a large thermos and plastic mug.

“Mushroom tea? ... It’ll open your eyes to the universe.”

“That’s OK. I see too much of the universe already, but you enjoy.”

“You sure?”

“Very sure, but thank you.”

“Your loss.” She giggled again and wandered to her friends.

Sean chuckled and strolled down through the row of cabins to the path that led along the lake shore. The trail curved back and forth along the water line. He came to an outcropping of sand and rocks leading out into the lake. It narrowed more and more until, after 30 yards, it was no more than three feet wide. He sat on a boulder, removed his shoes, dipped his feet, and was surprised how warm the water was. The gentle ripples were soothing.

“Amazing!” Sean said to himself and laughed at the thought.

As the wind changed direction, he closed his eyes...

*Rain spatter on tent roof...slowing, slowing, stopping. Torn bags. Wrappers floating in puddles. Wide smile under a fiery red mane... Laughter... Granola and tea leaves... tea leaves... tea... tea... TEA!*

*There was something in that tea!*

He hadn’t remembered falling asleep, but the moon had shifted when he opened his eyes.

\*\*\*

In the morning, Sean decided to share his epiphany.

Dinah almost didn’t answer when she saw the Caller ID. She’d already wasted too much time on this So Cal psycho, but he was cute, and had the air of a lost puppy dog.

“Hello Sean, what do you want now?”

“Hey. Sorry to call you so early. I don’t want to keep bugging you, but I wanted to tell you that I think I’m not crazy.”

*They never do.* “OK. Good for you.”

“No, really. I think I figured it out.” He paused, but she did not reply. “When I was camping last year, the girl I was with gave me some tea. She said it was herbal, but I’m pretty sure there were psychedelic mushrooms or some other drug in it.”

Dinah tried mushrooms a few times in college, but she never saw giant stone structures that weren’t there. *Humor him.*

“Yeah, maybe.”

“I just wanted to let you know you don’t have to worry about the whole W-W-W-W thing, and stuff.”

“OK”

“I think it was all in my head, and now I think I know why.”

“OK, Sean. I’m glad you have your answers.”

“And thanks for filling me in about Lambton Castle and stuff. That’s pretty cool too.”

“Yeah, no problem. It was interesting, but I’ve got to get going.”

“Alright. I won’t bug you anymore, but feel free to ping me if... ah, never mind.”

“Bye, Sean.” She laughed and shook her head.

Sean loaded the last of his gear into the Subaru and headed south.

\*\*\*

## Wild Things Run Fast

Sean knew something wasn't right. There was a van in his assigned parking space. It was marked "Pasadena Police Department" across the rear and "Crime Scene Unit" in a blue stripe on the side. There was a black Dodge Charger next to it and a black and white police SUV in the far corner of the lot. *This is a quiet area. What...*

He parked and walked towards his condo. His front door was open. He started to jog up the steps and was met by a uniformed officer who placed his hand on Sean's chest.

"What's going on here?" Sean asked. "Did someone break into my place?"

"And you are?" the officer asked.

"I'm Sean Lambton. I live here." He pointed to the door.

"Stay here. Let me get the detective."

He stuck his head into the condo, but Sean couldn't quite hear what he said. Moments later Kat Navarre exited. She stripped latex gloves from her hands as she approached.

"What's going on here?" he asked again. Kat pulled out papers and handed them to Sean.

"We have a warrant to search the premises," she answered. "You'll have to wait out here until we finish. It shouldn't be too much longer."

"A warrant? Why? What are you looking for?"

She pointed to the paper and Sean read:

### Property to be seized

Stolen jewelry items, including but not limited to:

- \* Watches
- \* Gold chain
- \* Diamond Earrings

and any other evidence indicating theft or possession of stolen property.

Evidence of animal cruelty violations, including but not limited to body parts or other organs, knives and other cutting implements, etc.

“Stolen property? Animal parts? What the hell is this?”

Before she could answer, an officer came from behind a maintenance shed across the lot. He approached the detective.

“We found four blood-stained patches of ground behind the shed, but nothing else so far,” he said. Kat looked at Sean.

“Interesting. Can you explain that, Mr. Lambton?”

“I do not know what you are talking about,” he insisted.

“Do you know what these are?” She handed him two maps. The first had several small blue dots with date/time stamps, one of which was circled in red marker. The other had two blue dots and both had red circles around them.

“This one with the two circles looks like my neighborhood. I don’t know what the other one is. Why?”

“These are data from a GPS tracking collar.” She looked at Sean, but he did not react. “It pings its location every three hours to show where a certain coyote was at the time.” Sean remained silent, so she continued. “You seem like a pretty smart guy. I’m surprised you didn’t remove the collar.”

“What are you talking about?”

“These blue dots show the animal’s location for the last few days. As you can see, it stays within a fairly limited range in the Hollywood Hills, then at 1 AM two nights ago, it pings there for the last time. The red circle is that location.” She looked at Sean and he shrugged. “Then three hours later, it pings here.” She pointed to the second sheet. “15 miles away ... apparently right behind that shed.”

“I don’t understand what you’re getting at? What does this have to do with me?”

“Then the next ping at 7 AM is in the park where you ‘found’ that man in the tree. Curiously, four dead coyotes were found there two days ago. Three of them in trees.” Sean said nothing. “Technically, it’s not illegal to kill a coyote in Pasadena, or in the Hollywood Hills, but the way they were killed violates animal cruelty laws...”

She waited and said nothing. Kat looked into his eyes. Suspects don’t like silence but Sean had nothing to say, so he said nothing. They both stood looking at each other for a minute or more until a uniformed officer interrupted.

“We’re all done inside. Didn’t find any jewelry except this watch.” He held a clear evidence bag containing an old sports watch.

“That’s mine,” Sean interrupted. “It doesn’t even work. The battery is dead.”

“Thank you, officer. Anything else?” Kat asked. He lifted another bag with a thin squared substance in a reddish-brown saucy liquid.

“Not sure what this is. Found it in the fridge. Could be an animal part. Coyote meat?” the officer said.

“Bag it and tag it... and now that Mr. Lambton is here, please check his car as well. Can we get your keys, Sean?”

He hesitated, but handed his keys to the officer who opened the Subaru. He pulled the backpack from the car and inspected the contents. He placed a Swiss Army knife and a few other items in evidence bags. Kat looked up as a small hatchet was bagged.

“When am I getting my stuff back?” Sean asked.

“We’ll see...” Kat paused again. “When did you last see Morrigan Wielle?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Just answer the question.”

“Same answer as I told you before. I haven’t seen her in almost a year, unless you count watching her on TV.”

“So why were you less than a quarter mile from her home? And what was the purpose of killing the coyotes? Did you want to impress her?”

“Fuck you.” Sean swiped his head sharply down and to the right, glaring at the detective. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, but I am getting tired of this shit. Can I go home now?”

He pointed at his front door. Kat started to step out of his way, then stopped, and lifted a single finger. She called across to another patrolman.

“Please stay here with Mr. Lambton while I check one more thing inside.” She pulled on another set of latex gloves and entered the condo.

Kat paused on the threshold. She let her eyes drift from one side of the living room to the other. She stopped and swiveled her head back the opposite direction. The cushions on the couch and other seats were slightly askew. *They did search there, but did they...* She crossed to the chair she’d sat in the last time she visited Sean and upended it. Sure enough, there was a slit in the fabric. She reached through the hole and recovered a gold chain. Next came a Rolex, a bronze pendant, a Longine watch, and, after running her hand around the edges, a single diamond stud earring. She flipped the Longine, and saw the inscription on the back, “Congraduations Kelly Ramirez.” *Gotcha.*

“Now, can I go in?” Sean asked as the detective returned.

“Sean Lambton. You are under arrest for the possession of stolen property, and suspicion of animal cruelty.”

“What?!”

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Morrigan was in the bathroom when the knock came on the door. She pulled up her shorts and shouted.

“Kelly, can you get that?”

Detective Kat Navarre was already in the living room talking with Kelly after she finished washing her hands and came out.

“Detective, uh, Kat, was it?” Morrigan asked.

“Yes. Kat Navarre. I have some information and a few questions for the two of you.” She paused, and continued when there was

no reply. “I think we found more of your stolen items, and I’m hoping you can help me identify them.”

“OK,” Morrigan and Kelly said almost simultaneously.

Kat produced a series of clear plastic evidence bags holding the watches and other jewelry.

“Can you identify these?” she asked.

“That is definitely my watch,” Kelly said. She turned to Morrigan. “And that’s that weird little medallion you gave me.”

“And that looks like my mom’s earring, but like I said before, I can’t be sure. If you found it with Kelly’s stuff, I’m guessing it’s hers.” Morrigan paused. “That looks like Jeremy’s chain, but you’d have to ask him to be sure. Where did you find them?”

Kat ignored the question.

“Have either of you seen anyone hanging around, maybe watching the place? Here or your old place?”

“Nothing like that,” Kelly said. Morrigan nodded in agreement.

“And have either of you seen Sean Lambton recently?”

“Sean again? I still don’t believe he had anything to do with any of this. Why do you ask about him?”

“My working theory is that he didn’t take your break up as well as you did.”

“There was no break up. There was barely a date.”

“I suspect he would disagree on the depth of the relationship.” Morrigan furrowed her brow as Navarre continued. “Do you remember how your cat stored its toys in your chair?”

“Sure. She still does.”

“You never told Mr. Lambton about this little hidey hole, did you?”

“That ‘hidey hole’ didn’t exist the last time I saw him.”

“Curiously, he had a similar stash in a chair at his home. I am guessing he was watching the two of you without your knowledge and adopted the idea.”

“That’s crazy,” Morrigan insisted.

“Certainly not normal behavior... and that may not be the worst of it. We also have evidence that he may have killed multiple coyotes near this condo, and then returned home with their carcasses.”

“That’s not possible. He wouldn’t hurt a fly. I saw him almost get himself run over to save a cat when I first met him. He got woozy stepping on a bug, for God’s sake.”

“Nevertheless. We found evidence of the slaughter only 200 yards west of here, and more evidence at Mr. Lambton’s condo. He seems to be very disturbed and likely fixated on you. My advice to you would be to apply for a restraining order.”

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## Twisted

Given the brutality of the attack on the coyotes, it was decided that Sean should undergo an evaluation to determine his psychological status and whether or not he was a danger to himself or others, or even competent. That gave them an extra 48 hours to hold him before they charged him.

In parallel, the forensics team was reviewing the evidence retrieved in the Hollywood Hills, at Sean's condo complex, and in the park. They were also examining his car and its contents. Detective Navarre was especially interested in his telephone. The very last picture on it was of a coyote's face showing through underbrush. She was reviewing the psych results on the monitor in her office when the technician came in with the initial forensic analyses. Kat did not look happy.

“Bad news?” the tech said, nodding towards the screen.

“I don't know. At least Dr. Selene's report says he's sane, but she seems to doubt that he could have anything to do with the coyote killings. Something about an 'affective aversion' and 'empathetic distress.' She's supposed to be an expert on stalkers, crimes against women and such, but I still feel something's off with this Lambton. What do you have for me?”

“Not too much. The blood in Hollywood and near the condo was all canine, probably coyote, but the car was clean. No sign of blood. If he used it to transport the carcasses, he must've bagged them pretty well.”

“Anything on that tissue you found in his fridge?”

“Tempeh.”

“Arizona?”

“Not Tempe, tempeh. It's made from soybeans. Fake meat.”

“Shit. How about the picture on the phone?”

“We’re waiting on the IT folks for that. They’re swamped on that embezzlement case.”

“So, no psych findings. No direct evidence of animal cruelty. Nothing on the phone yet. At least we got the stolen goods.”

“The only fingerprints we found on anything were from Aaron Frome and the owners. Nothing from Lambton. It’s lucky you found those in his place, or it’d all be circumstantial.”

“Thanks. See what you can do to get the IT guys off their ass. Tell ‘em to check the GPS too. If we can track him from the Hollywood Hills to his condo to the park, we can get him without blood in the car.”

\*\*\*

Morrigan had already moved the new patio furniture four different times. Now she was rearranging the kitchen... again. Show business was like a wildfire whipping through grasslands. It flames high and takes all your energy, all your focus, all your time, and then it leaves a blank wasteland behind with nothing but ashes. The young actress was trying to be patient, but she was bored. She was tempted to go back and hang out at the Cardiac with Kelly.

Kyle was working on getting her contract renewed for Season Two of ‘Empty Spaces’ but nothing was committed yet. He seemed to think that was a good thing for her. If the Emmy nomination came through next month, he thought he could double or triple her rate, and get her a better deal on residuals too. There were possible movie deals as well. She was trying to be patient.

Morrigan lifted a stuffed mouse toy from the floor by the stove and tossed it over the counter towards the living room. It never made it. An orange, black and white blur appeared out of nowhere and snagged it in mid-air. Monster strutted around the edge of the island and dropped the mouse at her feet. Morrigan threw it again. This time, it didn't even make it to the counter before it was intercepted. She laughed. Monster mewed, crouching, her butt twitching back and forth.

Morrigan faked left and flung it to the right. That time, it made it past the counter. The cat turned, scowled and sped to the living room. The knock came before she returned.

“We'll play more later,” she said to the cat as she walked to the front door.

Morrigan was surprised as she looked through the peephole. She opened the door to a smiling Harry Candelin.

“Hello, Mr. Candelin. Come in.”

“I told you before, it's Harry.” He wagged a finger at her.

“Sorry, of course, come in, Harry.”

Monster dropped the mouse and glared at the person who interrupted their game. The fur on her back rose and her ears rolled back. When she hissed, Morrigan scooped her up, crossed the room and tossed her into the bedroom and closed the door.

“Sorry about that, Mr... Harry. You interrupted her play time. What can I do for you?”

“Well, since we're on hiatus, I thought today would be a good day for that Bollinger raincheck. You haven't imbibed without me, have you?” Harry chuckled.

“No, no. It’s in the fridge.”

“Well, break it out.” He looked around. “Is your roommate in?”

“No, she’s working. She won’t be home for an hour or so.”

“Too bad...” He grinned. “Anyway, we still need to toast to your place, and to your Emmy.”

“It’s a little early to be talking about Emmys, and it’s a little early for me for champagne.”

“Oh, come on.” He lowered his eyes and pouted.

“Alright, I guess a toast **is** in order. You came all this way.”

Harry was already on his way to the kitchen. He returned with the bottle and two large water glasses. He filled them both and handed one to Morrigan.

“To full glasses and ‘Empty Spaces.’” They clinked glasses and he took a large gulp. Morrigan sipped.

He crossed to the couch, sat, set the bottle and his glass on the coffee table, and patted the seat next to him.

“Come on over here. Let’s talk about Season Two, and your future.”

Morrigan hesitated, but sat with a bit more gap than Harry had suggested. He scooted a little closer.

“Have they got you that contract for next season yet?” he asked and took another drink.

“No, not yet.” She had the feeling he already knew the answer.

“Well, well, we’ll have to see what we can do to... assist with those negotiations.” He patted her knee. She moved a few more inches away.

“Mr Ca...” He raised an eyebrow. “Harry. I appreciate your help, but I think...”

“Now now now. Don’t say anything more.” He placed a finger on her lips. He continued as she turned away. “You’re new to the business. You don’t understand how things work in this town. What you really need is someone who can help guide you, and introduce you to the right people... open some doors. You do things for people and they do things for you.” He winked.

Morrigan eased away to the far side of the sofa. She started to stand, but was stopped when Harry leaned across and kissed her hard on the mouth. She tried to push him away, but his hand was already tucked inside her shirt. They tangled together and rolled onto the floor, Harry on top.

Harry laughed.

Morrigan gasped.

Harry screamed.

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## Part 4 - TC

### Born to Fight

Harry jerked backwards, and buttons flew left and right as Morrigan's blouse split from bottom to top. His hand, which recently cupped her breast, slammed against and toppled the coffee table. The fragrance of Bollinger wafted as glasses shattered against the floor, and the bottle careened wildly across the room. Harry sat upright and yelled as he reached over his shoulder trying to grab... something.

Morrigan took advantage of the opening to thrust the heel of her hand into his nose. She pulled herself loose as Harry toppled. She realized then what he'd been reaching for. Monster hissed and scooted from under the fallen producer. All her fur seemed to be standing on end, making her look twice her normal size. Her ears lay flat against her skull, and the black fur behind them rose like twin horns. She stationed herself between Harry and Morrigan. A low growl rumbled from her throat.

Harry butt-walked himself backward across the room.

“What the fuck is wrong with that... that... thing?!” He scooted further. “Shit. Fuck.”

“I think you should leave, Mr. Candelin.”

“Oh, I'm leaving, alright... and you can kiss Season Two good-bye.”

Monster hissed and spat. Morrigan pulled the calico against her and stroked her fur. It began to collapse down against the cat, but the rumbling continued. Harry wiped blood from under his nose and continued his retreat.

“You don’t know what you’ve done. You missed your chance. You won’t work in this town again. I’ll see to that... and expect an eviction notice from my attorney.”

He backed against the front door, not taking his eyes off the feline, and pushed to his feet. His fingers fumbled along until he found the knob. He only turned his back for the instant it took to open and dash through the door. In that moment, Morrigan saw streaks of red through shredded fabric across his spine. She saw similar crimson smears on the door after it slammed.

Morrigan gently stroked the calico as tears welled in her eyes.

“Oh, Monster,” she whispered.

\*\*\*

The DA submitted Kat’s concerns to the judge, but without the analysis from IT, they weren’t going to be able to continue to hold Sean without bail. Including the Rolex, the charge was felony possession of stolen goods, and with the potential violence associated with the crime, the judge agreed to increase the bail from the standard \$20,000 to \$50,000.

They were keeping Sean’s phone as evidence and he couldn’t remember anyone’s number without it. He was trying to figure out how he was going to come up with five grand to pay a bondsman, when he was told bail had been posted. Officer Greg Malkin escorted him to the lobby.

“Who posted my bail?” Sean asked.

“I don’t know,” said Officer Malkin.

“Where’s my phone?”

“Sorry, that’s in evidence.”

“How am I supposed to get a ride home?” Sean asked.

“Not my problem, but we do still have a pay phone.” The officer pointed across the room.

“I don’t know if I even know how to work one of those,” Sean said.

“I’ll give ye a ride, Mr. Lambton.”

Sean looked across the room. The old man looked familiar, but he couldn’t place the face. The gray ponytail and beard seemed right even if the beard was too short. The tweed suit didn’t register at all. He crossed the room and held out his hand to Sean.

“Pleased to meet ye, Mr. Lambton. I be Danny O’Hanlon.”

“Um, yeah, OK.” Then recognition. “Four W’s Dan O’Hanlon?”

“Aye, Wear, Well, Wall and Worm. That’s me. Dinnah know ye knew ‘bout the shop.”

“I saw a picture. Your beard was longer and you were dressed more... casual.”

“When dealin’ with the coppah’s, always dress ye’self up a bit.”

“What are you doing? Why are you here? Did YOU pay my bail?”

“Aye, and ye better be showing up t’ court. I kinnah afford 40,000 quid for long.”

“Uh, I guess thank you, but I don’t understand.”

“I kin tell ye all about it, but let’s be goin’ someplace...” He looked at the officer. “... friendlier.”

“Um, that’s OK, but I’ll find my own way home.”

“I jess paid \$50,000 U.S. to free ye. Ye’re not goin’ nowhere wit’out me until I gets tha’ back.”

“Fine.”

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Sean recognized the multi-color microbus in the handicapped space. Danny O’Hanlon opened the door on the left side of the van and motioned Sean to enter. He was too confused to know whether it was a good idea or not, but he climbed in. It was then that he realized this was a British version of the microbus with the driver on the right-hand side. O’Hanlon circled the vehicle and slid behind the steering wheel.

“So ye know a place we kin getta nice cuppa?”

“Cuppa?”

“Tea, ye dolt.”

“Oh, yeah, for sure...” Sean looked at the street. “Take a right out of the parking lot, go down, I don’t know, maybe a mile, and turn right on Lake.”

As they turned onto the street, Danny turned to him.

“So ye know about W-W-W-W, do ye?”

“No, not really. Someone told me a little, some sort of druid magic shop?”

“Jess sellin’ trinkets and dreams t’ daft tourists. Nah real magic in that shop. Them sightseers, they loves anythin’ says ‘druid’, ye know.”

“So, you pretend to be druids to milk the tourists?”

“Oh, we be druids a’right, but yeah, we jess use that to sell shite to them visitors.”

“Ooo-kaaay,” Sean said. “Let’s forget about the four W’s for now. What are you doing here and why did you bail me out?”

“Ye’re a Lambton ain’t ya? Ye were there at the mountain las’ year. I noticed yer name in a visitor log. Did ye find the worm? Shoulda known it’d call to the likes of ye.”

“Worm? What are you talking about?”

“Sure ye know the tale of the Lambton Worm?” He paused. “Ah, here we are, Lake Avenue? Right ‘ere?”

“Yeah. Right. Look for the Pet Warehouse on the left a few blocks down. There’s a coffee and tea place in the same parking lot. Now what is this about a worm?”

“Ye, donnah know abou’ the Lambton Worm? Ye’re jokin’ ain’t ye?”

“I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

“How abou’ tha’... A man name a’ Sean Lambton and he donnah know about John Lambton an’ his worm...”

\*\*\*

Sean had a small black coffee and Danny had hot Earl Grey with whole cream. They were sitting at a table on the outside patio looking across the parking lot.

“Ye’re serious, ye donnah know the legend o’ Lambton’s Worm? I thought everyone knew tha’ one.”

“Maybe it’s a British thing,” Sean said. “What is it?”

“A’right. Well, the legend go that when John Lambton were a wee boy, this were some nine centuries back, mine ya. He loved ta fish, but dinnah like church so much. Onna Sundee morn, he went down ta the River Wear that run by his home... instead a goin’ a mass like a good bairn.”

“The River Wear? That’s one of your W’s right?”

“Aye, it is. Well, young Mister Lambton, he dinnah hook much tha’ day, but what he did get were a strange little creature, eel-like ye know. The worm. Like all the catch he dinnah wanna keep, he chucked it in the well on his da’s land. Legend say that worm grew an’ grew.”

“And worm is another W?”

“Aye, and the well is another, but if ye keeps interruptin’, ye’ll never hear the tale.”

“Sorry, go ahead.”

“So, the worm it grew an’ John Lambton grew as well. As a young man, he went off to fight in th’ Crusades. Ye know the Crusades?” Danny asked. Sean nodded.

“When he returned from the Holy Lands, he foun’ ‘is worm devastatin’ the countryside... eatin’ livestock... sometimes even children, an’ other folk too. Jess the Lambton’s flocks and herds were spared. They thrived, and the people accused the Lambtons o’ makin a bargain wit’ a demon... even as they sold ‘em their land.

“To quiet them local folk, John decides to kill th’ worm. He meets wit’ a wise woman, some folks say a witch, who tole

him ‘ow to make a special suit o’ armor ta’ defeat the giant worm, but she says, after he slays the worm, he muss kill the first livin’ thin’ he sees. Iffen he kill it, he keep the luck an’ power o’ the wrym. Iffen he don’ then cursed, he’ll be.

“He slays the worm, cuttin’ it right in two, but his da’s so ‘appy, he rushes to meet his boy. John couldna kill his only da so he and his family were cursed. For nine generations, no first-born Lambton man died in bed. They all come to violence in the end.”

“That’s quite the story. And you believe this?”

“Don’ be daft. Thass the legend, but thass nay more true than Arthur and his Round Table or Robin and his Merry Men.”

Sean was glad to hear that maybe this Danny O’Hanlon might not be completely crazy after all.

“Nah, the truth be much stranger than tha’ yarn. The truth go back a fierce amount further. But thass no story for tea an’ coffee. Thass a tale for a pint or two or three ... an’ a slug o’ the hard stuff.”

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## Telling Stories

Kelly had her keys in her mouth and a paper bag in each hand as she backed through the door.

“I hate opening,” she mumbled. “But I got the leftover breakfast sandwiches and pastries. We can microwave ‘em for dinner.”

She kicked the door closed and frowned as she noticed the red streaks. She turned and saw Morrigan still sitting on the floor by the couch, her arms wrapped tightly around knees drawn to her chest. Kelly took in the upended table, the broken glasses and Monster, lapping from a puddle of light golden liquid next to a dark green bottle.

“My god! What happened here? Are you alright?”

Morrigan looked up, and rubbed her eyes.

“Oh, sorry,” she sighed. “I’ll clean this up.” She wobbled as she tried to stand.

“You SIT DOWN,” Kelly said, pointing to the couch. “I’ll handle the mess. You just tell me what happened.”

Morrigan slumped down on the couch. Kelly brought her a glass of water. Between sips and sobs, Morrigan told of Harry’s unexpected visit, his veiled threats about her career and then not so veiled threats, his assault on her, and Monster’s intervention.

“Some intervention,” Kelly said, looking at the door. Then she patted the cat on the head. “Good Kitty. Good Kitty.”

“Mrow”

“We’re gonna have to move,” Morrigan said. “And I’ll probably have to go back to the Cardiac.”

“Well, I don’t want to owe that fucker anything, but I think we should be calling the police first before we talk about moving or anything else.”

“It’ll be his word against mine... and you didn’t see his back. I’ll be surprised if he doesn’t call the cops on me.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Yeah, it is, but he’s got about a hundred lawyers and all we got is an overprotective cat.”

“I see your point, but my money is on Monster.” She ruffled the cat’s ears.

Morrigan laughed weakly. Monster purred, stretched, and yawned, showing a mouthful of gleaming white teeth.

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Harry Candelin winced as he slammed the door of his office behind him. The local anesthetic was starting to wear off. He screamed for his assistant.

“Sandee! Get me Alan Reynard, NOW.” He paused for only a moment. “And Maggie MacLaren, but put her on hold and make her wait.” He continued under his breath to himself. “Five hours. Five hours in the god-damn emergency room. Nine fucking stitches!” Then he raised the volume again. “And get Doctor Rehal on the line too! Why do I pay for this so-called personalized physician if I have to go to the god-damned emergency room? He can wait on hold too.”

He crossed to the bar near the floor-to-ceiling windows and poured himself two fingers of Glenfiddich. He added two ice cubes and took a small sip. He opened the closet next to the bar and struggled to put on

a new shirt. It was as he closed the closet door that he realized Sandee hadn't responded yet.

“SAND- Oh shit.” He remembered she was taking this afternoon off. *A parent-teacher conference?* “Damn! I have to do every fucking thing myself.”

As he grabbed the telephone, a cloud passed in front of the sun, and a shadow crossed the room. He continued to talk to himself as he looked for the direct cell number.

*Shit. Is it under Reynard? Or Alan? Lawyer? Maybe shark?* He found it under ‘Pit Bull,’ and laughed. *Appropriate.* He pressed call...

“Mr. Candelin. Is this urgent? I have someone else in my...”

“Get rid of him, Alan. Now.”

“Right away, Mr. Candelin. Please hold for one second.”

It took longer than one second. Harry looked out at the view. It was clear and sunny all the way to the coast, but the view didn't improve his sour mood. He downed the rest of his scotch and added another two fingers. The closet door drifted open and Harry kicked it closed.

“Sorry for the delay, Mr. Candelin. How can I help you?”

“I need to get that bitch, her roommate and their fucking cat out of my condo. Not just out. I want that cat dead!”

“I sense a degree of urgency. Legal proceedings can go on for an extended duration, especially evictions here in California.”

“And?”

“And so, would you want to operate through official channels or perhaps I should contact our ‘special’ friends?”

“That is a great idea. Our ‘friends’ are exactly what we need here. It would be a shame if she didn’t feel safe in her home.”

Harry supplied the details Reynard would need, then started searching for Maggie MacLaren’s number. Surprisingly, he found it under ‘Maggie MacLaren.’

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Sean couldn’t explain why, but he liked this old man, and for some unknown reason, trusted him. Maybe it was the £40,000 for bail. Maybe it was his accent and the way he spun his stories. Maybe it was the way he seemed so sure of his delusions. Sean opened the refrigerator.

“All I’ve got is American beer.” He held up two brown bottles.

“Thass nah beer. Thass fizzy piss... but I’ll take it. Better’n nuttin.”

“This might help,” Sean said, extracting a bottle of tequila from the freezer.

“Tekweela, eh? Never had that. Less give ‘em a try.”

Sean filled two shot glasses and set one and a beer on the counter in front of Danny. He tossed the other down himself and chased it with a sip of Coors. O’Hanlon followed suit.

“This stuff ye call beer is nah good, but tha’ tekweela is nah bad. Set me anotha’ an’ we’ll talk.”

Sean refilled the shot glasses, but only sipped his this time.

“Wadda ye’ know o’ ley lines?”

“Really, nothing.”

“Good, good. Most o’ what most folks say is crap.” O’Hanlon took a sip of his own tequila. “Ah, those messicans do sumptin righ’ arigh’... Ley lines, they trace power round the world. Anyone’ll tell ye that part. They tend to follow geography, ridges an’ rivers an’ such, but they kin be caught by weather, storms an’ hurricanes and the like. Praps more’n anythin’ they follow the feelin’s an’ the thoughts o’ the Earth – an’ the folk.”

“So why are you telling me this?” Sean asked.

“Imma gettin’ there. Where I come from, Wallsend-upon-Tyne, the River Tyne runs to the sea. Jess down the coast, the River Wear, it flow down there as well. Rivers tend to capture ley lines, at leas’ this pair do.”

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

“Do ye’ know Hadrian an’ his wall?” Sean shook his head. “Do they even teach ‘istory in America?”

“Hadrian was a Roman emperor, oh, ‘bout 900 years afore John Lambton found ‘is worm. Hadrian built a wall all across Britain. South o’ tha’ wall, Rome ruled. They brought civilization, an’ laws, an’ order. Oh, but North o’ that wall, well, thass another story. North o’ that wall was the ole country.” He pointed and Sean refilled the shot glass. “Me ma’s people, they come from north o’ the wall.”

“Is that the O’Hanlons?”

“Don’ be daft. O’Hanlons are Irish through ‘n’ through. Me da’s people, they come from God’s own Éire. Ye know abou’ the Great Hunger there, near 200 years back?”

“Is that the potato famine? When so many Irish came to the U.S.?”

“Aye, an’ many went east as well. The coal mines and shipyards of Wallsend an’ Newcastle were hard, but better’n stahvin’. Me da’s folks come to Wallsend in oh, 1850 o’ so. Done good too. Me great granda, he was another John. John O’Hanlon, he was mayor o’ Wallsend-upon-Tyne back in the day... They call it Wallsend, cuz thass where Hadrian’s wall come to an’ end... near the sea.”

“Makes sense,” Sean interjected.

“Tha’ wall, it run o’er 100 kilometers, clear ‘cross the land. All tha’ stone. All th’ energy. It done trap a ley line along its course. It act like a bloody antenna sending tha’ ley energy from the Irish Sea right down the wall.”

“Look, Danny. This is all very interesting. I appreciate the history lesson, but I still don’t see what this has to do with me.”

“Hold ye’re panties, lad. I ain’t even tole ye ‘bout King Minos an’ Theseus, or the trojaborgs o’ Norway, or even the henges an’ barrows o’ my own countries.”

“Maybe we should try this again later ... without the tequila.”

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## Nothing Yet

Morrigan was lying on her bed, not quite focusing on the ceiling. She heard the familiar notes of the Abba ringtone coming from the living room, and rolled herself to her feet. She didn't hurry, but did manage to stumble to the phone before it went to voice mail. Monster trailed behind her and twisted between her legs as she answered.

“Hey, Kyle. What’s up?” The words came out thin and slow.

“Morrigan. How’re you doing?”

“I’m OK. I guess. What do you have for me?”

“Well,” he hesitated. “I’ve got some bad news and some good news and some more bad news.”

“Let me guess. The bad news is that I’m off ‘Empty Spaces’ for Season Two?”

“How did you know?”

“Let’s just say Harry Candelin and I had a disagreement over some... extracurricular activities.”

“Oh shit, Morrigan. I’ve heard rumors about Harry and his ‘extracurricular activities.’ Are you alright?”

“Physically, I’m fine, but I suspect, professionally, I’m fucked. What was your good news?”

“The good news is that Maggie MacLaren provided the bad news personally. She said she was sorry they decided to go another direction, and she was very complimentary of your talent, dedication, etc. She said she’d put in a good word for you – if she gets the chance.”

“Well, that’s something, I guess.” She took a deep breath. “And what’s the other bad news?”

“That movie I was pitching you for? They got back to me too... Going another direction there too.”

“Shit. Time to brush up on my barista skills, I guess.”

“Don’t give up yet. Harry Candelin has a lot of pull, but he doesn’t control everything. I’ll look at more of the independent productions. We’ll figure it out.”

“Thanks, Kyle.” Morrigan’s sigh was interrupted by the doorbell. “Hey Kyle, I think Kelly forgot her key again. I gotta run.”

“No problem, keep your chin up.”

Morrigan crossed the room and peered through the peephole. It wasn’t Kelly. There was no one there, but there was a package just visible with the familiar smile logo. The box was upside-down turning the grin into a smirking frown. *I wonder what Kelly ordered this time.* As she started to unbolt the door, Monster slipped in front of her and raised up, placing her paws against Morrigan’s thighs.

“Not now, kiddo. I’ll play with you after I grab this.”

She cracked the door two inches... and it banged open. It smacked Monster and sent her flying a few feet to the left. Morrigan sprawled backwards on her ass. Two large men in ski masks burst into the room from either side of the doorway. One of them grabbed the empty box from the stoop. It flapped open as he flipped it over. Snatching the dazed cat by the scruff of her neck, he shoved her into it, and gave a quick wrap of packing tape to seal in the feline.

Morrigan tried to stand and the other man pushed her to the floor. He held a knife to her throat, and she could see a gun tucked into his waistband. She held her breath and tried not to move. She swallowed, and felt the blade nicking her windpipe.

“Now listen, lady. We’re only telling you this once. Your cat here is losing all nine lives tonight. You got a choice. You can be gone in the next two weeks, or you can join it. Understand?”

Morrigan swallowed again. A small droplet of blood oozed out. She nodded, very carefully.

“Good. And don’t even think about calling the cops. If that happens, you won’t last two weeks. You won’t last two hours. Alright?”

She said nothing. She nodded again. He withdrew the knife, but only a couple of inches. Morrigan noticed the gaudy gold watch peeking from under his gloves.

The man with the box set it down then strolled through the room. He left the furniture alone, but emptied cabinets, throwing dishes and knick-knacks to the floor, smashing anything he could put his hands on. Finally, he returned and retrieved the boxed cat.

“Two weeks,” the first man said, winking and flashing a demented smile. “If we don’t get the chance to visit you before then. And remember, we was never here.” The door slammed behind them.

“Monster,” Morrigan whispered through gasps and sobs.

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A black muscle car screeched its tires as it accelerated away from the condo. Kelly had to leap into a planter to avoid being hit. She flipped

off the auto as it turned onto the frontage road. She tried to get the license, but couldn't see a plate.

Kelly was preparing to tell her roommate the tale of her narrow escape, but opening the door, she took in the room. Broken, disrupted, destruction.

“What happened here? Are you OK?” she asked.

Morrigan told her about the two men, their threats... and Monster. Kelly wrapped her in her arms and held her.

“We have to call the cops,” Kelly whispered.

“You weren't here.” Morrigan said, touching the tiny cut on her throat. “They'll kill us if we bring in the police.”

“But they took Monster.”

“I know.” Morrigan sobbed. “I know. I just... I know. We gotta get outa here.”

“We can't just run.”

“Oh, we can run. I hope we can run far enough. Oh shit, I've never been so scared in my life.”

“Where can we go, and what are we supposed to do with all our stuff?” Kelly looked around the room. “What's left of it.”

“I'm sure my folks'll let me use my old room. We can crash there for a few days while we figure things out.”

“Ah, parental units. I might have an even better idea,” Kelly insisted.

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Alan Reynard heard the muted ring, unlocked his desk drawer, and withdrew the burner phone.

“Is it completed?” he asked.

“I’ll be surprised if she’s still there in the morning.” The voice on the other end of the line chuckled.

“Good, good, and the cat?” Reynard asked.

“We have it. Do you want the body back, to send another message?”

“That won’t be necessary. Dispose of it as you see fit.”

“Will do. Let us know if we have to do any other follow up with the owner. She looks like she’d be fun.” Jarod laughed. “Might even give you a discount on that one.”

“Thank you. I will be in touch if that becomes prudent.” And he hung up the line.

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Jarod tucked the cell into his pocket, and put both hands back on the wheel. Ed, in the passenger seat, felt the animal begin to stir in the box on his lap. They were on a remote road north of the condo.

“You still got that can o’ gas in the trunk?” Ed asked.

“Yeah, why?” Jarod replied.

“I’m thinking we douse the box and watch it burn.” Ed grinned.

“Since we don’t need no body, it’ll be fun.”

“Easier to slit its throat,” Jarod said. “Or put a bullet in its head.”

“Best o’ both worlds. I’ll light it up, and you can put a few rounds through the box.” Ed laughed.

“Sounds good. Let’s find an open spot. We don’t want to start a brush fire.”

The gate to the fire road was open and they turned onto it. They’d gone a half mile or so down the dirt trail when Ed let out a gasp.

“Wait? What’s that?”

A curved blade, about 2 ½ inches long, pushed its way through the side of the box nearest Ed’s belly. It carved its way slowly through the cardboard, down towards his crotch.

“What the FUCK!”

He pushed the box away onto the floorboard in front of him as the slice circled back towards the top and a screeching wail filled the car.

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## Part 5 - GD

### Cryptical Envelopment

Kat Navarre was eating breakfast and reading an old Heinlein novel about an alien royal being raised as a pet on Earth. She finished her bowl of shredded wheat, and set the book face down on the counter when she heard a ping. She opened her laptop and saw the email that just came in. *About time IT got off their ass.*

She read the report on the GPS data from Sean Lambton's phone. She didn't want to believe it, but it corroborated what he'd told them. His phone was 150 to 200 miles away, in the Sierras, before and after the coyotes had been killed. If she couldn't tie him to that, she'd be hard pressed to tie him to the attack on Aaron Frome. *Maybe that was a coincidence. Maybe he found the jewelry in the park. But why would he keep it?* The ring interrupted her thought process. She looked at her cell.

"Hello," she answered.

"Hey Kat, it's Greg Malkin. Sorry to call you so early, but the captain said you'd want to know."

"No problem, Greg. What do you got for me?"

"Bad news. Two more bodies in The Gardens," the officer replied.

"More coyotes?"

"Not this time. Two men. Both in the same tree."

"When was this?"

"Sometime last night. Call just came in. Crime scene folks are on the way."

“So much for a day off.” She took a napkin from the table and slipped it into the paperback as a bookmark. “I’ll be there in 20. Tell ‘em not to touch anything until I get there.”

“Will do. See you then.”

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Sean wasn’t sure if it was the smell of coffee or the sirens in the distance that woke him. He lumbered into the kitchen area to find Danny O’Hanlon pulling two mugs from a cupboard.

“Good morning,” Sean mumbled. “I take mine black.”

“Good mornin’ to ye,” the old man said. “Thanks fer lettin’ me stay on yer couch. I was gonna fix ye some breakfast, but ye got next to nothin in the fridge... an’ what ye do got is in no shape to eat.” He held a limp stalk of celery that curved and pointed towards the floor.

“I’ll order something. There’s a great little Mexican place around the corner that delivers. Do you like breakfast burritos?”

“Nevah had that, but I’ll give her a try. I did like that messican liquor lass night.”

“Don’t remind me,” Sean said, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

Sean called and doubled his usual breakfast burrito and *café de olla* order. O’Hanlon poured two mugs of coffee and set one in front of Sean. He took a carton of milk from the fridge and sniffed it. Poured the lumpy liquid down the sink.

“I guess iss black for me as well,” Danny said.

“I’m still fuzzy from last night. Let me see if I remember what the hell you were talking about...” Sean paused and sipped at his coffee. He rubbed his temples. “Ley lines run all over the world. They focus energy. They follow things like mountain ranges and rivers, but they can be caught by man-made things too.”

“Aye.”

“This Hadrian built a huge wall all the way across Northern Britain a couple thousand years ago, and this wall grabbed this energy and sent it down to Wallsend.”

“Well, nah jess Wallsend, but ye’re on the right track.”

“OK. To Wallsend and the river, what was that? Time?”

“Thass Tyne, the River Tyne, but the ley from the Tyne got pulled inna the wall itseff. Then it got focused down near the mouth o’ the River Wear.”

“OK, yeah. The Wear River.”

“River Wear.”

“Whatever. And the Lambton estate was on this river?”

“Aye, but it were jess a big farm back in the day, nothin’ like it be now.”

“And this river and the ley energy somehow spawns the worm in the river?”

“Close enough... or draw it there.”

“John Lambton catches this thing and tosses it in the well on his dad’s farm.”

“Now ye gettin’ it. An’ the stones o’ th’ well keep it tight ‘n’ tidy.”

“And since he captures this worm, it grants him wishes and makes him rich?”

“Nah wishes. Jess good fortune come ‘is way, and things work out for ‘im an’ ‘is family. Healthy stock. Big ‘arvests. Extra thick fleece on the woolies... an’ the like.”

“But the creature starts thrashing everyone else’s farms and livestock in the county.”

“Good luck’s gotta balance agin bad. The Lambtons got the bounty, an’ the rest o’ the county got the curse.”

“Then John Lambton kills the worm...”

“Nah, thass the legend. He traps the creature, nah kill it.”

“Oh yeah. So did he still have to kill the first living thing he saw?”

“Aye, but wit’ his da an all, he dinnah do it.”

“So the curse moved to the Lambtons?”

“Aye. First-born male childs. The legend say it took nine generations o’ firs’ borns. Me grandma say it were six times six generations o’ Lambtons tha’ would nah pass peaceable like.”

“Maybe it’s still going, my Dad died in a car wreck, and his died in Nam.” Sean laughed.

“Nothin’ to be laughin’ ‘bout. Ye first born too?” Danny looked worried.

“Yeah, but I don’t believe in curses.”

“The folks roun’ Lambton Castle do, thass fer sure.”

“So once this curse hit Lambton, what happened to the rest of the folks in the area?”

“They’s alrigh’ after that. The curse it move t’ the Lambtons... a course the Lambtons owned half the county by then. They kept alla that.”

“Does that mean the same person can get a curse and reward at the same time?”

“Seems like, but thass a long days ago. No tellin’ ‘xactly who the worm really hepped an’ hurt way back when.”

“And now you think this worm has moved to the Central California mountains?”

“Prolly nah the same worm, but somethin’ jumpt the ley lines 9,000 kilometers.”

“So where do these worms come from?”

“No one rilly knows fer sure. Some say there be a Grand Wyrn who takes on different forms, rides different creatures an’ he leaves his spawn aroun’ the world. Others say there only be a few worms and they move from place to place an’ take on new shapes, new hosts.”

“Which do you think is true?”

“Me? I thinks it be Earth’s own energy that combine with the thoughts and ideas o’ the folk. Thass what make it possible fer a worm to be. Then if the ley lines be vitalized, then they jess might spawn a worm.”

And you say these ley lines jumped from England to the Sierra Nevada?”

“Aye. That part I know.”

“And what would make it jump like that?”

“Dunno, mays be that ye had sumthin to do with it. Ye’re a Lambton, don’ ye know.” Danny looked at Sean. *Six times six generations?*

“How does this supposed energy move, what did you say, 9,000 kilometers?”

“Ye’ thinkin’ like an American agin. Space an’ time an’ mass an’ energy, they nah th’ same in the Sídhe. The fae, an’ the worm be fae, the fae kin cross over without goin’ between.”

“This whole thing is ridiculous. I don’t know why I’m even having this conversation. None of it makes any sense. Even if it were true, what would make you come halfway around the world to chase it? How would you even know where to go? This is bullshit.”

“At lease now, ye’re startin to ask the right questions. I tole ye’ afore, me ma’s fam’ly, they come from north o’ the wall. Them’s a whole differnt set o’ folks. Do ye remember the wise woman who tol’ John Lambton ‘ow to stop the worm?”

“Uh, yeah. A special armor to wear so he could kill it?”

“Well, it were rilly to lure an’ trap the worm nah t’ slay the creature, but that woman, thass me great-great-great... a few more a them greats - granmama, on me ma’s side. Thass the druid side of the fam’ly.

“Me da’s side, they gots the blood o’ the Tuatha Dé Danann runnin’ in their veins. Me sisters and me brothers, we got the sight from a both o’ them. Me more ‘en me kin.”

“Two what de what?”

“Tuatha Dé Danann. They be the old folks, the fae, the Sídhhe, from back in the ole country.”

“And you inherited this ‘sight’, did you?” Sean scoffed.

“Aye. From both sides o’ the fam’ly. Ye don’t have to believe me, but ev’ry night, jess afore I drift off, I sees things thass most do not.”

“Wait. Right before you fall sleep? What do you see?”

“Ah, usually jess colors, shapes, random scenes from ‘round an’ about... but when the ley lines be arunnin’, an’ whens I focus, no tellin what I’ll sense... An’ these days I be sensin’ aplenty.”

“Hypnagogic visions,” Sean stated.

“What nonsense ye spoutin’?”

“They’re called hypnagogic visions. I’ve had them since I was a kid, but I’ve read about them. They’re just the random firings of your brain as it shifts between waking and sleeping. Alpha waves giving way to theta waves.”

“Ye can call em what ye likes, but if ye pays attention, they be anythin’ but random... an’ if ye rilly pays attention, ye don’t even have to wait for sleepy time.”

“Do you ever have them when it’s not ‘sleepy time’ and you’re not trying?”

“Ah, sure, that kin happen, but thass nah be yer brain afirin’, thass be ye pickin’ up firin’s from someone else... or some thin’ else.”

“Is there a way to stop them from happening?”

“Nah, nah stoppin’.” O’Hanlon laughed at the thought. “But I kin hep ye control the visions a bit and ride em where they lead, sometimes even where you wants ‘em to go.”

The doorbell announced the arrival of their breakfast.

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Sean doused his burrito in a splash of sriracha, and took a bite.

“Wass that red shite ye gots? Any good?” Danny asked.

“It’s the best thing for a burrito.”

Sean handed the hot sauce to Danny. He poured a generous slosh onto his own breakfast and took a large bite.

“SHITE! Ye arsehole. Ye tryin’ to kill me?” O’Hanlon sucked down a quarter of his *café de olla* cold brew. “Tha’ sauce is for ravin’ loonies. Me mouth is like hell’s own fires.”

“I guess it’s an acquired taste.” Sean laughed and added another splot. “So tell me more about how to control the visions.”

“Jess a second, laddie. I kinnah feel me tongue.” He took another sip and blew out through pursed lips...

“Ye kinnah control the sight, but ye kin follow it.” He sipped again. “Ye kin ride it. Like them Californy surfers ride the sea, ye kin turn this way or that -- and sometimes take a whole new path.”

“So, how do I do that?”

“Ye know the black behind yer eyes... jess afore ye drop off?”

“Sure.”

“Insteada waitin’ for the visions to come to ye, focus on th’ black. Look inna it. See how far ye can see. It be like a pool o’ dark water. Like lookin’ inna well an’ seein’ down, down inna th’ wet... Then ye kin see what lives in them depths...”

Sean found himself closing his eyes, and following along with the old man’s words.

“Ye kin try to picture what ye wants to see, an’ sometimes tha’ works. Sometimes ye sees what ye tryin’ to see.” Danny paused. “Then agin, sometimes ye sees from some other eyes. Sometimes ye sees somewhere else. Sometimes ye sees some time else. Sometimes ye sees what may yet be.”

Behind Sean’s eyes, the dark was giving way to swirls of color and shapes, almost coalescing into, into, what? He was only half hearing what the old man was saying.

“Sometimes ye hears. Sometimes ye smells. Sometimes ye feels. Sometimes ye jess don’t know what it be thass ye ‘sperience. Thass when ye go deeper...”

*Black darker than black, but no, not black, a maelstrom of reds, greens, orange, blue, yellow and violets... not a rainbow, not a prism, a tornado of hues spinning down and touching... earth? Not earth, a fog and mist and rain and snow... and bright sunshine. Twining in and out and... EYES. Looking at him, through him, into him... and then seeing himself and seeing those eyes reflected in his own pupils.*

“Ye salright, boyo?” O’Hanlon was shaking him by the shoulder. “Where was ye?”

“I, I don’t know. I can’t explain it. Everywhere, and nowhere. No color and all colors. No light and only light. Everything and nothing. And those eyes, and me, and, and blood?”

“Annwn? Tír na nÓg? Sídhé?” Danny whispered, his eyes half closed, brow furrowed.

“What was that?” Sean asked.

“I thinks we’ve had enough o’ the sight for this mornin’.” He shook his head. “Ye gots any more o’ that tekweela? It’d go right well enough in th’ coffee.”

“Sorry. We finished it last night.”

“Right. Right. Prolly fer the best.”

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## Death Don't Have No Mercy

There were several squad cars blocking the streets surrounding The Gardens when Kat arrived. Greg waved her over and lifted the crime scene tape to let her pull her car to the curb. She'd barely beat the first local TV crew. A cameraman and reporter piled out of a van on the other side of the yellow tape. The patrolman shooed them back and the crime scene unit van eased in behind Kat's Charger.

“Keep those media ghouls away from here!” she shouted to one of the uniformed officers. “And have someone go watch the other side of the park too. We need to seal the whole place. If you need to call for back up, do it.” Then she turned to Greg. “Which way?”

He pointed to the dirt walk. As he led her up the path, she saw the first body wedged high in the branches. She could see him from the waist down and registered the blood staining the lower legs and feet. She experienced a sense of déjà vu of the Aaron Frome case.

“Are we sure they're dead?” she asked.

“Pretty sure,” Greg said, laughing.

Kat cocked her head sideways. *What's funny?* As she got closer, she saw the rest of the first victim and all of the second, some 15 feet above the first, on the far side of the pine. Well, she saw all that was still there. Both corpses were headless.

“Yeah, I guess they probably **are** dead.” She and Greg both laughed.

She circled the tree being careful not to step in the puddles or disturb the ground. There was less blood than she would have thought. *They must've been killed somewhere else.* She directed the CSI folks on

pictures she wanted taken before they even thought about moving the bodies. She asked Greg to round up any officers who were not protecting the perimeter to start searching the park.

“Make sure they don’t touch anything, and come grab someone from the CSI team if you find anything. Get me if you find the heads,” she said.

“You think this is related to Frome and the coyotes?” Greg asked.

“It has to be, but at least this should eliminate Lambton from the suspect list. He couldn’t be carving up these guys from holding.”

“Sean Lambton?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I was working detention yesterday. He made bail.”

“Shit. I thought we had him for another 24 hours at least.”

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They searched the entire park, but didn’t find any other evidence of foul play. They finally lowered the two bodies from the tree. Kat was only a little surprised to find that both still had wallets in their pockets. They’d confirm it with fingerprints, but from the IDs in the wallets, the body that was lower in the tree seemed to belong to Ed Eber... the other was Jarod Chacal. Ed had a set of keys and a cheap digital watch. In addition to his wallet, Jarod had a plain white envelope with \$5000 cash, no bills larger than a 20. Nothing was obviously missing... unless you count their heads. The coroner’s investigator was taking fingerprints from Jarod’s body when Greg reappeared.

“Find anything else?” Kat asked.

“Nothin’,” Greg replied. “No drag marks. No blood. No signs of struggle. Shit, ten feet from this tree, it’s like nothing happened. They’re still checking with the neighbors to see if anyone saw anything, doorbell cameras, and such. Nothin’ yet.”

“You got any ideas?”

“No clue. Maybe sending a message?” Greg suggested.

She turned to the coroner’s tech.

“I’ll get you the case numbers, but make sure you pull everything you can on the other bodies that were found here. The coyotes, Aaron Frome, medical records, necropsy report, all the photos. Compare everything. What weapons were used? Cause of death. Anything else you can think of.”

“I think the cause of death is pretty obvious.” The tech laughed and pointed at the severed necks.

“Nothing is obvious about this crap.” Kat rubbed her temples.

“What is that?” Greg said, pointing at a red mark near Jarod’s shoulder.

“Puncture wounds,” the tech said. He rolled the body on its side and pointed others in the upper back. There were nine entry marks in a sickle and triangle shape. “There’s smaller ones on the other guy’s legs, but none of ‘em are very deep. I’m pretty sure those are secondary. I still say C-O-D is the decapitation.”

“You think this could be some kind of gang hit?” Greg asked. “I helped in the gang unit a few weeks back. I can check with them. See if they’ve heard anything.”

“Good idea. This could be someone trying to muscle in on the drug trade or something,” the detective said.

“You want me to check with Narcotics too?” Greg volunteered.

“Is there anyone you don’t know in the department?” Kat chuckled. Greg shrugged and pointed at the larger body.

“Look there. Isn’t that a tan line? On his left wrist?”

“Good eye,” the tech answered. “Keep an eye out for a watch too.”

“I’ll go tell the team,” Greg said.

“After that, can you tag along with me for a bit? I don’t think there’ll be trouble, but I’d appreciate the backup and a second set of eyes.”

“Um, sure. Where are we going?”

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Danny O’Hanlon crossed the living room at the first knock, and opened the door as the second set of knocking commenced.

“Hole yer horses. I’m ‘ere.”

The woman at the door looked surprised to see him, but quickly composed herself.

“Good afternoon. I’m Detective Katherine Navarre from the Pasadena Police.” She showed her badge. “This is Officer Malkin.”

“I remember the laddie from the jail yest’afternoon. Please t’ meet ye now, all official like.”

“Is Sean Lambton here?” Kat asked.

“Sure ‘e is. Come on in.”

Sean was on the couch wrestling with a childproof container of Ibuprofen. He set it on the coffee table and stood. Officer Malkin wandered towards the kitchen. Detective Navarre strode over and looked directly into Sean’s bloodshot eyes. He seemed to be having trouble focusing and looked away.

“Mr. Lambton. Can you tell me where you were yesterday afternoon and last night?”

Sean laughed.

“Really?” He shook his head and continued to laugh.

“I kin answer tha’ query,” O’Hanlon interjected.

“And you are?”

“I be Danny O’Hanlon, and the laddie bin wit’ me since I sprung ‘im from the nick – ‘bout two yest’afternoon. Afore that, he were wit’ Officer Malkin there.”

“And where did you go after you ‘sprung him from the nick’?” Kat asked.

“Well, we stopped fer a cuppa at place called the Cardac or some such. Actually, damn good tea for America. Earl Grey wit’ a Darjeeling base. Honesssly, thass the best cuppa I had since I come to the colonies. Sean here can tell ye how t’ git there.”

“How long were you there?”

“I dinnah. Time fer a cuppa an’ a chat. Maybe an hour. Maybe jess a half. Then we come back ‘ere.”

“And you were here from then until this morning?”

“Young Sean there were ‘ere. I admit, he dropt off ‘bout nine, an’ I snuck t’ the corner shop. Can ye’ believe it? They had Guinness in a bloody cooler. Ah damn travesty that is, I tell ye.”

“How long were you gone?”

“30, 40 minutes. ‘Snah far.”

“And you’re sure Mr. Lambton didn’t leave?”

“I’m sure. Got back, he were right out. Lyin’ on top ‘is bed, naked as the day he were born. I wen’ in an’ turned ‘im on ‘is side, I did. Dinnah think he’d honk it up, but ye kinna be sure wit’ that tekweela.”

“OK, give your information to Officer Malkin?” Danny handed his passport to Greg who took a picture with his phone. She turned to Sean.

“As long as we’re here, do you mind if we look around?”

“You’ve done plenty of looking around my life already.” Sean glared. “I’ve got a headache, and I think it would be best if you and your partner just leave.”

“Alright, Mr. Lambton, we’ll go for now, but I’d suggest you don’t take any more excursions out of town for a while. I suspect we’ll have a few more questions for you soon.”

Sean said nothing and pointed to the door.

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Kat and Greg remained silent until they got into the car.

“What do you think?” Kat asked.

“He wasn’t lying about the tequila. I saw the bottle in the trash can, and Lambton sure looked hungover.”

“Did you notice anything else out of the ordinary?”

“Not really.”

“This O’Hanlon seems to be a solid alibi, but I can’t help but think about Buono and Bianchi.”

“Who?”

“Hillside stranglers. Partners who gave each other alibis.”

“Oh yeah. I wasn’t born yet, but I remember reading about them. You think these two are working together?”

“I don’t know. Neither of them seems like the type, but you can’t really tell. Bundy didn’t seem like the type either. Let’s see what details we can find on Danny O’Hanlon.”

“I’ll submit the request when we get back to the station. He’s a British citizen so I’ll send it internationally too, OK?” Greg asked.

“You think ahead. I appreciate that. If anyone questions it, send ‘em to me,” Kat said. “But before we head back, there’s one more thing I want to check out.”

“Let’s do it.”

Greg was enjoying doing some actual police work with a real detective.

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Sean slumped down on the couch.

“I don’t know why she’s got it in for me.”

“This still ‘bout those doggo’s in the park ye were in the nick fer?”

“Coyotes, but yeah, I guess. I found a guy in a tree over there too, cut up pretty bad, then a bunch of coyotes got killed. I don’t know why, or how, but someone planted some jewelry in my place and she thinks I’m a psycho stalker or something. I don’t get it.”

“Sorry, I let ‘em in. Whass this ‘bout yesserday?”

“I don’t know. Maybe someone stubbed their toe and they want to put me away for assault.” Sean snorted and laughed. “You know, I’m really thrashed. Do you mind if we watch some TV and just chill?”

“Shore. Ye go ahead. I’ll go t’ the grocers an’ git ye some real food.”

“You don’t have to do that...” Sean sighed. “but thanks. That’d be great.”

“An’ p’raps get us more o’ that tekweela.”

Danny grinned as he picked up his keys and left. Sean groaned and lifted the remote, clicking on the TV. The newscasters were discussing how hundreds of ex-students attended a teacher’s retirement party at a local high school gym. Angela, the anchorwoman, reached to, and touched, her right earpiece. She adopted a stern expression.

“Excuse me, but we have breaking news. We take you live now to Ted Cooper in Pasadena. Ted, what do you have for us?”

The reporter was standing against a line of police tape. There were several squad cars with their lights flashing. The camera panned past several officers within the park, to a Crime Scene Unit van and back to the reporter.

“Thanks, Angela. We have some very disturbing news. Two bodies were found in a park in this quiet Pasadena neighborhood. The Gardens is a beautiful space that has been desecrated by a pair of corpses left draped from the trees. This is not the first violent incident in this park. Only 10 days ago, several dead coyotes were found here. Neighbors tell me they suspect a satanic cult may be performing animal sacrifices... Now, have they moved on to human sacrifice?”

“We don’t know, but a source tells me that the two bodies found this morning may have been decapitated. They have yet to release the names of the victims or to give any official cause of death or motive for the homicides. The same source reported that there were no official suspects, but the detectives were looking at at least one person of interest in the killings.

“From Pasadena, California, this is Ted Cooper. Back to you in the studio.”

“Thanks for that frightening report, Ted. Keep us all in the loop on what you find out.”

Angela turned and smiled at the side camera.

“Stay tuned to channel 5 for updates on this and all the latest news. After these messages, we’ll have today’s forecast and let you know who pulled it off in the ninth inning to win the first game in this year’s Freeway Series.”

“OH, fuck.” Sean said to himself and turned off the TV.

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## Beat It On Down The Line

Kelly navigated the oversized RV she'd borrowed from her parents through the narrow condo complex driveway. She parked next to their building. Technically, there was no parking on this service road, but they didn't plan to be here for long. Morrigan peeked her head out the side door and scanned the lot. There was an old woman on the grass area walking a short-haired dog, about the size and shape of a bowling ball. She didn't see anyone else, and no sign of the two men.

“Let's grab as much as we can and get out of here fast,” Morrigan said.

“Lucky I never unpacked most of my boxes,” Kelly said with a smile. “But I thought you said we had two weeks.”

“I don't wanna take any chances.” She rubbed the raw scab at her throat.

“OK. You stay here. I'll run up and grab what I can. We're lucky most of the furniture came with the place. There's no room in here for all of that, especially since it looks like we'll be living in here for a while.”

“I'll keep an eye out. If I honk the horn, go out the back way and circle around.”

They took turns dashing into and out of the condo with armloads of clothing, bedding, kitchenware and anything else they could carry. They'd been there almost an hour and Morrigan was getting anxious.

“Do you have everything?” she asked.

“Everything important, I think,” Kelly replied.

“Me too, except... I know we don’t have room for furniture...”  
Morrigan stifled a sob. “I’ll need your help... We have to get  
Monster’s chair.”

The pair left the door to the camper ajar and dashed up the stairs. As they lifted the chair, a small white cat plushy fell from the slit in the base. Morrigan was unable to stifle her tears. She set down the chair, dropped to her knees and rubbed the stuffed animal against her cheek.

“We should be going,” Kelly said, her own eyes watering.

“Yeah, yeah.”

Morrigan tucked the cat toy in her pocket before lifting her end of the chair. It wasn’t terribly heavy, but it was awkward and they had to turn it on its side to get it through the side door of the camper. They’d just gotten it settled and stepped out of the vehicle when Kelly pointed. There was a black Dodge Charger turning into the parking lot and heading their way.

“I think that’s the car I saw last night,” she said.

The chair was blocking their entrance through the side so Morrigan slammed the door and they sprinted to the front of the Winnebago. Kelly was faster and was already starting the engine as Morrigan slid into the passenger seat. They headed down the service road with the Charger following.

“I don’t even know where this road goes,” Kelly said.

Morrigan worked her way through the bags and boxes to the kitchen area. She found the container she was looking for and withdrew a large butcher knife. Just then, Kelly braked hard and Morrigan flew forward, the knife embedding itself in the back of the driver's seat. It emerged

through the front, an inch above Kelly's shoulder. Morrigan lay with her back against the dashboard.

“Shit,” Kelly said. “It ends at the pool.” Then she looked to her right and saw the tip of the blade, inches from her shoulder. “SHIT!”

The black car skidded to a stop blocking the way behind them. Morrigan yanked at the knife, but it wouldn't budge. She looked past the assorted bags and boxes through the rear window and saw a large man stepping from the passenger seat.

“We're dead,” she whispered.

“Please step out of the vehicle.” It was a woman's voice.

“It's that detective... Navaline? Navarone? Navarro?” Kelly said, looking in the side view mirror.

“Navarre, but they said not to talk to the police,” Morrigan insisted, wiping her eyes. “We can't tell her anything.”

Kelly opened the driver's door and stepped down. Morrigan exited through the passenger side door.

“Hello, Detective. What brings you out here? Don't you work in Pasadena?” She forced a smile.

“Just following a hunch, Ms. Wielle. This is Officer Greg Malkin. We'd like to ask you a few questions.”

“Sure,” Morrigan said, crossing her arms.

“You all are in quite a hurry. Is there a problem?”

“Ah, we lost our lease. We were moving some of our stuff. Kelly thought we could get to the main road this way.” She smiled again. “Oops.”

“Interesting. Are you living in this thing?” she said, pointing at the RV.

“Temporarily. It’s my parents’,” Kelly interjected.

“We’re looking for a new place,” Morrigan added.

“Seems pretty small for two people.” She paused. “And don’t you have a cat?”

Morrigan struggled to maintain her smile. It warped into a demented grin as her eyes welled. Then it broke completely as the first drops rolled down her cheeks. She sat on the grass near the path and keened and wailed. Kat put her hand on the young woman’s shoulder and rubbed gently.

The whole story came pouring out. She told them how the two men had taken and killed Monster. She ‘knew’ they’d somehow been sent by Harry Candelin, but also knew there was no way to prove that. She couldn’t prove he’d done anything except give her a sweet deal on a place to live. No one would believe her.

“I believe you,” Kat said. “But the Hills here are LAPD jurisdiction. I have a few contacts over there. I can find someone who’ll take your statement.”

“I’m not making a statement,” Morrigan insisted. “You didn’t see those two. I may have signed my death certificate telling you.”

“Those two?” Kat said to herself. She turned to the other officer. “Greg, did those mug shots of Eber and Chacal come in, yet?”

Greg pulled a tablet from near the dashboard of the unmarked car and tapped at it.

“Yeah, right here.” He handed it to Kat.

“Are these the men?” she asked, showing the photos to Morrigan.

“I couldn’t tell you. I never saw their faces. They wore ski masks.” She pointed at Greg. “I thought he was one of them when he got out of the car.”

“Interesting... Greg, how tall are you?”

“Five-eleven.”

“And how much do you weigh?”

“Um, 180, give or take.”

She scrolled through the info on the tablet, then turned to Morrigan.

“Was the other man Greg’s height too?” She pointed at Officer Malkin.

“No, he was shorter by a few inches, and thicker. Not fat, but wide. Like a body builder or wrestler or... something.”

Detective Navarre scrolled some more on the handheld.

“Jarod Chacal 5'11" – 183 pounds, Ed Eber 5'7" - 222,” she said, mostly to herself.

“You think?” Greg said.

“I think,” Kat replied. “Ms. Wielle, I can’t be sure, but I suspect those two men will not be bothering you again. You should still

be careful. If these were the two I think they were, whoever hired them might very well send someone else.”

“I don’t understand,” Morrigan said.

“Honestly, I don’t either. This is just the latest thing that doesn’t make sense on this case,” Kat replied. “There is something weird going on and it all seems to be related to you somehow.”

Morrigan wagged her head and sighed.

“Have you had any more contact with Sean Lambton?” the detective added.

“No. I haven’t seen or heard from him at all. I still can’t believe he has anything to do with this.”

“Did you ever get that restraining order?”

“No, and I don’t plan to. I just want all of this to go away.”

“OK. You may have to testify at his trial for possession of the stolen goods, but we can keep you separated.”

“I’m not testifying for anything. In fact, I want to drop the charges. Kelly?”

“Yeah, I just want my stuff back. I don’t want anyone else going to jail besides the thief,” Kelly said.

“And I’m sure Frank and Jeremy will drop the charges too. I’ll call them, and then we can just stop all this shit and... and...” Morrigan drew in a deep breath. “And I’ll go back to being a barista who doesn’t have all this crap falling all over their life... without Monster.”

“I really think...” Kat started, but was interrupted.

“I don’t care what you think. I. AM. DONE!” Morrigan insisted.

“It’s your choice, but I hope you’ll change your mind. I am on your side.”

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## Saint of Circumstance

The knocking woke Sean. He rolled off the couch, sauntered over and opened the front door.

“Ye look like shite,” Danny said. He had three plastic grocery bags strung across his right arm and a fourth held in his left hand.

“Thanks. You woke me up,” Sean said.

“Sorry, mate. I dinnah have a key.” He slung the bags down on top of the counter near the kitchen. “I got what ye Americans call sausage. An’ eggs an’ the like.” He lifted a loaf of dark brown bread from a bag. “Ye gotta toaster or should I fry up a slice or two?” Sean pointed at the toaster oven. “Brilliant! Ye wants two eggs or three?”

“I’m not very hungry. Maybe just some toast.”

“Ye alright? Bess thing for a hangover’s a good meal.” He pulled a two-liter bottle of tequila from the bag and wagged it by its neck. “Or mays be a little hair o’ the dog?”

“No thanks. Besides, it’s not just the hangover.”

Sean told him about the bodies found in the park a few blocks away. He was sure that was why the Pasadena Police had been there earlier. It was only a matter of time until he was back behind bars.

“That nah be good news.”

“No shit.”

“Bu’ jail mays be the safest place fer ye now.” Danny cracked the sixth egg into a bowl, splashed in a dash of milk, and began to whisk it with a fork.

“What do you mean?”

“The wyrm.” Sean looked at him. “I thoughts it migh’ be the worm when ye tole me of the doggos in the park, but now...” Danny trailed off.

“Now what?”

Danny sliced a chunk off a slab of butter and tossed it into the pan on the stove. It sizzled and spat. A creamy smokey aroma spread through the room, and he added the eggs, blooming it to a nutty, savory smell.

“Now iss taken human life. Now it’ll be a wyrm, it will. I were ‘opin’ to keep that from ‘appenin’.”

“Now, it’ll be a worm? I thought this worm was why you were here in the first place.”

“Aye, the worm, but now the worm will be the wyrm. A whole new kettle o’ fish.”

“Worm will be the worm?” Sean said, slapping his forehead. “Who’s on first?”

“Ah dunno. Third base. Thass be a good one...” Danny said and chuckled. “But we ain’t got time fer Abbott nor Costello now.” Danny took the pan off the stove. “Less get some food inna ye, an’ then we’ll chat abou’ the wyrm.”

Sean relented and had a fraction of the scrambled eggs and a piece of toast. Danny wolfed down the rest of the eggs, four links of sausage, two glasses of orange juice, and the last of the coffee, now lukewarm.

“Ye wants me t’ make anotha pot?”

“No, thanks. I’m good for now. Tell me more about this worm.” Sean said. “But slow down when you explain it to me and pretend I’m completely ignorant.”

“That should nah be hard.” Danny paused. “Ye knows the tale o’ King Minos?”

“Wasn’t he the one who turned anything he touched to gold?”

“Nah, it won’ be hard to ‘magine yer ignerant. Midas were the one wit’ de golden touch. Minos, he were the king o’ Crete. He were an ‘erdsman as well as king. One day he found a young bull knee deep in a spring. He pull it out from the muddy waters an’ led it home.

“It were a sweet thing. Gentle as a lamb, it were. Brought good fortune. Minos and Crete prospered. Crete won wars and conquests. All was good. That bull grew an’ loved an’ protected Minos... an’ his wife.

“Some says one o’ the king’s guards tried to force relations wit’ that wife. Still othahs say the wife she welcome those relations. Whatever the story, the king put that man with that bull, an’ the man were no mo’. A wyrm, a minotaur, were born. A wyrm that liked that killin’ o’ folk. Minos shut it away in a stone prison... a labyrinth.”

“A labyrinth?”

“Aye. That held ‘im tight n tidy in the stones, an’ Minos, he fed his enemies to that wyrm. Kept the balance. Crete got even more power an’ more riches an’ the minotaur, he got human lives.

Minos' enemies got the curses and death. That was til Theseus foun' a way to slay the beast... an' Crete fell soon after."

"I appreciate the mythology lessons, but what does this have to do with anything?"

"That bull calf, 'e were a worm. The minotaur, 'e were a wyrm."

"So were there two worms?"

"Ye daft imbecile. Gentle calf - worm - W-O-R-M. Murderous Minotaur - wyrm - W-Y-R-M."

"I thought these worms, or worms, were like snakes or eels. What does that have to do with a bull or half-man half-bull?"

"Ignorance come easy wit' ye, don' it? The worms, they takes differnt shapes, differnt aspects. Depends on the time an' place an' the folk who they bond wit'."

Sean thought for a minute.

"OK. So Minos liked cattle, so his worm was a bull, but after it killed, it became a minotaur, a monster, a wyrm with a Y."

"Ye finally gettin it."

"But John Lambton, he loved to fish, so his worm (with an O) was an eel, and later on it became a giant serpent, a wyrm with a Y."

"The blind can see." O'Hanlon cried, raising both hands in the air. "There be other tales as well. I dinnah know if all these be true, but I hear tell o' a wee piggie that became a giant beast trapt in the labyrinth o' the sewers o' London below.

“The Norwegians, they have their trojaborgs, stone labyrinths. Most o’ them nowadays are jess decorations, but some say, back in the day, them were fer breedin’ berserker warriors, part bear, part wolf, part man – wyrms.”

“So all these folks had their stone labyrinths, but Lambton only had a well?”

“The well an’ iss rocky walls were good nuff for the little worm. Not sure what set that one off. It couldna git out lessen someone were t’ threaten Lambton... But that were sure to ‘appen him fightin’ in the Holy Lands an’ all... if nah afore. Whatever it were, a little well may hole up a little worm, but nah way it kin keep a wyrm.

“Lambton and his da, they talked t’ me great-great-great and so on granmama. She tol’ em to git some folk to go up to Wallsend an’ take those ley blocks from Hadrian’s wall. She tole em how to arrange em all ‘round tha’ well. Then John used ‘is bright new shiny armor to lure the wyrm back to the middle o’ tha’ labrynth. Then granmama, she place the lockin’ key an’ trapped it but good.”

“So, those were like the stones I saw when I went camping last year?”

“Ye’ saw de’ stones?”

“Well, I saw something. A big maze made out of stone blocks.”

“When was ye gonna tell me ‘bout this?”

“It didn’t come up.”

“I be tellin’ ye ‘bout the worm and the wyrm. I tell ya ‘bout Hadrian and leys an’ ye never thought to mention tha’ ye seen a labyrinth ye seff. ‘Ow have ye stayed alive as long as ye have?”

“Sorry.”

“I ‘spect tha’ labrynth ye saw were th’ true Lambton stones. One day ‘bout a year an’ a half ago, I were still caretakin’ the Lambton castle back then, an’ they called me in, on a Sundee no less. Them blocks from Hadrian’s wall was gone. Every one o’ them jess vanished. Even the well be disappeared. Flat groun’ all th’ way to the river. Thass when I use me sight an’ trace ‘em over ‘ere. Up north that is.”

“Sequoia National Forest?”

“Aye. I couldna place em ‘xactly, but I come close. I lookt for weeks. ‘Parently ye got closer.”

“I saw something, but I think it was hallucinations. Someone dosed me with mushrooms. It wasn’t there when I went back.”

“It weren’ no mushroom ye saw. The worm it mussa called t’ ye. Ye’ bein’ a Lambton an all. Mays be the one ta break the curse o’ the Lambtons.”

“If it was this worm, shouldn’t I be getting rich and famous? Instead, I was arrested, and my boss told me not to come to work for ‘a few weeks until things sort themselves out.’ It doesn’t feel like I’m getting the luck of the Lambtons.”

“Nah, I ‘spect yer nah. But don’ forget, nah all luck is good luck. The Lambtons, they got th’ curse as well. Ye tell me what ye saw up there.”

Sean described coming across the labyrinth. He described how it looked and the markings on the stones, the tower in the middle. He didn't mention Morrigan at all or what they'd done on that spire. That was his memory and his alone.

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## Victim or the Crime

It was two days later that Kat got the call from a detective at the LAPD. They'd found her heads. Hikers had come across an abandoned car on a fire road. The LAPD was taking the lead on the case now, but they agreed to let her monitor the investigation. They were finishing with the crime scene, but if she got there within the hour, they'd wait to tow the vehicle. They gave her the location. It wasn't more than two and a half miles from Wielle's condo.

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Kat could tell the LA folks had done a good job of isolating the site. The crime scene tape was strung across the entrance to the fire road, and then another band of tape circled the area closer to the car. She parked behind the second set of tape and walked to the vehicle. It was almost the same model Dodge that she drove.

The LAPD detective, Arjun Singh, met her and talked her through the scene. Both heads were found in a cardboard box in the front seat. He showed her a photo with Jarod Chacal's face peering out through a jagged hole. The box had been removed and the car processed for other evidence, but other than that, the scene was as they'd found it. Kat circled the area, starting wide and spiraling in. Occasionally, she'd stop to ask additional questions.

"These footprints? They documented?" She pointed to the ground.

"Yes, the whole area's been processed. A hundred-meter perimeter. Most of the recent prints are from the hikers and rangers who found the car, and our officers," Singh said. "There's a few others, but they mostly look like they're older. Probably not related."

“Are these dog?”

“Ranger said they’re probably mountain lion. People do walk their dogs on these trails, but if it were a dog, you’d see claw marks. Cats keep their claws retracted when they’re walking.”

“Interesting. Big sucker.”

“Yeah. They live in the hills around Griffith Park, cross over here from time to time.”

Kat continued her slow circling. Occasionally, she’d stop and take a picture of the ground with her phone. She paused by the large stain on the ground right next to the passenger door. The blood had soaked in, but she could tell there had been quite the puddle before it dried.

“Were the doors open like this when they found it?”

“Doors? Yes. The trunk was closed. Hikers said they didn’t even touch the car. Stayed back when they saw the blood. The ranger got closer and popped the trunk to make sure there was no one inside.”

“And?”

“Nothing but a gas can.”

“Interesting.” Kat turned back to the car and pointed at the dark stain. “Our passenger is hit immediately as he exits the vehicle.” She looked closer. “No, he’s hit inside first.”

“Why do you say that?” Singh asked.

“Bleeding before he gets out of the car. These streaks on the front of the seat. His legs had to be cut at least a little before he exits. Then they take off his head here.” She indicated the site

of the dried puddle, and the groove in the dirt as if a blade dragged through it.

There was a similar scenario on the driver's side, but it was a good 20 feet from the car.

“Driver sees what’s happening to his partner and makes a run for it. Didn’t get too far. I’m betting these footprints...” She pointed to the tracks headed from the car to the puddle. “...will match the shoes from one of our Pasadena bodies.”

“We thought the same thing,” Singh added. “But there’s only one set of tracks from the car.”

“Very interesting.” She returned to the car, careful not to disturb the tracks. “What are these scrapes on the roof? They look fresh.”

“Probably ran under some low branches on their way out here.”

“They look pretty deep.”

She took a fingernail file from her bag and probed one of the more significant indents. With a slight push, it slid down. She bent down looking through the window and saw the point stretching the headliner fabric. She withdrew the file.

“You said the heads were in the car?”

“Yes. They were in a box on the floor in front of the passenger seat. They’ve already been taken to the morgue.”

“What shape were they in?”

“Other than that they were disconnected from their bodies, they were hardly touched. Just a few scratches. The coroner will give

us a full report, but to me, it looked like they were sliced off with a single swipe from an avural.”

“Avural?”

“It’s a curved blade, like a small scythe or machete. They use them in Southern India.”

“Interesting.”

Kat spent another hour inspecting the scene. She wandered up and down the dirt road well beyond the 100-meter perimeter but didn’t find anything else to share with Arjun. She promised to send the reports from the Pasadena site. Singh agreed to forward on the information from his side.

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Kat Navarre was reviewing the data that she was going to send to the LAPD. The coroner seemed to agree with Arjun Singh on the weapon used to decapitate Chacal and Eber. Not that it was an avural, but it was some sort of curved blade roughly 18 to 24 inches long. One or two quick slices severed the soft tissue, then the vertebrae were crushed and torn apart to separate the body. Time of death, between 8 PM and Midnight. Cause of death, sharp force injury with transection of cervical structures, i.e. decapitation. *That’s not a surprise, but that is...*

Toxicology showed a neurotoxin in both victims, concentrated in the puncture wounds in Chacal’s back and in Eber’s legs. *Interesting.* Similar to spider, centipede or scorpion venom. If they hadn’t had their heads removed, the toxins would likely have paralyzed them at least. Chacal would probably have died from the amount in his system if it had had time to circulate. *This thing keeps making less and less sense.*

She moved to the medical reports. There was less detail on Aaron Frome, but there were pictures of his injuries, pre and post-treatment. The medical examiner said the wounds on his calves and Achilles tendons were consistent with a curved blade, 2-3 inches long. He had a series of puncture wounds in his lower legs, and an unknown substance in his blood samples that might be a similar toxin to the latest victims. But it could have been some other ingredient used to cut the methamphetamine that was in his system.

There was minimal information on the coyote deaths. No necropsies were performed, and the remains were cremated soon after. From the photos taken, the medical examiner said it was possible similar blades were used on the animals, but he couldn't say definitively one way or the other. There was no toxicology so he couldn't comment on toxins. He did state that the compound that was found in Chacal and Eber could be used as a paralytic to immobilize the animals (or people) to prevent them from defending themselves. *Some sort of dart gun or something? That might explain how you subdue four coyotes or two large men.*

The knock derailed her train of thought. She looked up and saw Greg Malkin in the doorway.

“Am I interrupting you?” he asked.

“No. Just going over the reports on The Gardens cases. What are you up to?”

“I'm helping out in Admin today. Filing, data entry.” He waved a manila folder. “You know, more shit work.”

“Sounds like fun.” Kat chuckled.

“It's not very exciting, but I can use the hours, and I get some downtime.”

“Good for you.”

“Well, in that downtime today, I looked at The Gardens info again myself. I had a thought I wanted to run by you... but I don’t want to overstep.”

“Not at all. You got good instincts. What is it?”

“This whole thing seems to revolve around Morrigan Wielle – like someone’s watching her and protecting her and coming down hard on anyone who fucks with her.”

“OK. And?”

“And you think this Sean Lambton is the most likely?” He looked at her and she waved at him to continue. “What if it’s not him? What if there’s someone else that’s fixated on her? Someone who’s pissed that he got to ‘go camping’ with her. Framing him?”

“Interesting.”

“I wouldn’t rule him out, but he does seem to have pretty tight alibis.”

“Except for Aaron Frome.”

“The statement from his coworker, Mike something, came in late. He said they were at a bar together until almost 11. Lambton was really drunk. Mike drove him home.” He paused. “He theoretically could have made it to West Hollywood in time to intervene, but he would’ve had to know where to go, and according to his friend, he was in no condition to drive. He could hardly walk.” He paused again. “I just don’t think he’s our guy.”

Kat rubbed her eyelids, took a deep breath and blew out slowly. Greg looked worried when she looked at him.

“Thanks, Greg. You might be right that I got tunnel vision on Lambton... But this puts us back at square one. Who’s obsessed with Wielle and knows Lambton? It seems like they barely even know each other.”

Officer Malkin shrugged.

“I’m gonna have to talk with both of them again,” Kat said.

“Well, ping me if you need back up.” He wagged the folder again. “In the meantime, I’m off to transcribe these into the computer.”

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## Eyes of the World

Sean was getting better at controlling the hypnagogic visions. O’Hanlon was coaching him on ways to keep ‘the sight’ from getting out of control, and ways to ‘ride it,’ as he would say.

Sean still didn’t believe it was any kind of extra sensory perception. He still felt being dosed with magic mushrooms was more probable than cryptids. But he was sleeping better, and drinking less. Well, a little less. O’Hanlon had developed a taste for tequila and he didn’t like to drink alone. Sean was willing to humor the English-Irishman to a certain extent.

If nothing else, the stories of worms and wyrms and beasts and minotaurs and berserkers were entertaining. Danny tried to get Sean to follow his visions to see this wyrm of his. He got flashes but mostly just saw visions of his own life. Still, it kept his mind off the murders in the park, most of the time. He expected Detective Bitch-Face to barge in at any time and take him away. *What was her problem?*

The knock interrupted the thought. He reluctantly opened the door, and gave a loud groan.

“Mr. Lambton, I’m glad you’re home. I wanted to do this personally,” Kat said.

Sean presented both wrists for cuffing. The detective laughed.

“Not today, Sean.”

“What **do** you want?”

“I wanted to let you know that all charges have been withdrawn for possession of stolen goods and for animal cruelty. Ms. Wielle and her friends did not want to press charges.”

“Woo hoo!” Danny O’Hanlon called from the kitchen. “Thass be great news.”

“Uh, yes,” Kat said.

“So whens does I gets me bail money back?”

“Come down to the court house. You’ll have to fill out some forms, but you should have your money within six weeks.”

“Six weeks? Thass a load o’ twaddle, tha’ be. ‘Ow do this country stay in bidness?”

“And my phone, camping equipment and other stuff you took?” Sean asked.

“That will also be returned. It should take a little less than six weeks.” She gave a weak smile. “I do have a few thoughts I want to run by you.”

“I think I should have a lawyer present before I talk to you anymore.”

“I understand your reluctance, but I don’t think that will be necessary.”

“Fine. Go ahead and talk, but I’m not saying a word.” He mimicked zipping his lips.

“That’s your right.” Kat paused, then looked Sean hard in the eyes. “I’m going to be honest with you. I am not convinced that you are not involved. I still think you’ve got something to do with this somehow, directly or indirectly.”

Sean closed his eyes and shook his head.

“But I’m starting to think there’s something else going on. Do you have any idea of anyone else who might be obsessed with Morrigan Wielle?” She paused again. Sean’s eyes opened wide, but he kept his lips sealed tight. “A theory we’re considering now is that someone else wanted you to be blamed for these... incidents. Is there anyone you can think of who might have it in for you? Or for Ms. Wielle?”

“Who be this Wielle woman?” Danny asked.

“Morrigan Wielle. She’s an actress. The guy I found in the tree robbed her, and the detective here thinks I’m involved.”

“I already told you I’m considering other possibilities,” Kat said.

“Whatever.” He turned to Danny. “She’s the one I went camping with last summer. She gave me the mushroom tea.”

“Mushroom tea?” Detective Navarre asked.

“It’s a long story.” Sean didn’t feel it was a good idea to tell the police about taking hallucinogens, even accidentally.

“Wait? Were ye nah alone when ye foun’ th’ labrynth?”

“Labyrinth?” Detective Navarre asked.

“It’s a long story,” Sean said.

“Iffen she be there, it may be she who bonded wit’ th’ worm.”

“Worm?” Kat asked. Sean raised his eyebrows. “I know, it’s a long story,” she said.

“We gots t’ fine this woman. The wyrm. Iss nah done killin’.”

“Hold on. Who is this ‘Worm’? And who did he kill?”

“Nah ‘he’, ‘it,’ an’ prolly yer bodies in the park.”

“I’m sorry, Detective. Danny here is a great guy, but...” He twirled his finger next to his ear. “He gets a little excited about his fairy tales.”

“Right now, I’ve got squat on this case, so I’m willing to listen to whatever fairy tales Mr...”

“O’Hanlon, Danny O’Hanlon,” Danny offered.

“Whatever stories Mr. O’Hanlon has to relate.”

Danny rubbed his hands together. Sean rolled his eyes.

“Praps ye should siddown, Missy. This’ll nah be done inna ‘urry.”

Kat crossed to the chair in the living room. Danny sat on the couch across from her.

“You can call me Kat.”

“Well, Kat. Whatta ye know of King Minos?”

“Of Crete? Theseus? Daedelus? The minotaur?”

“So, nah all Americans be morons.” He turned to Sean who shrugged. “Praps we have a wee nip o’ the tekweela t’ loosen the tongue?” He looked at Sean again.

“He means tequila, but I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Can’t anyway. I’m on duty,” Kat explained.

“Thass jess me luck, that. Praps later. At leas’ bring us one o’ them Guinness I gotcha, Sean-boy.”

“None for me,” Kat said.

Sean went to the refrigerator, but Danny stopped him.

“Nah the fridge, ye’ daft sod. In the cubberd. By th’ sink.”  
Danny turned to Kat. “‘e’s a good lad, but nah the brightest, iffen ye knows wha’ I be gettin at.”

Sean bent down and retrieved a bottle.

“On second thought. If they’re the right temperature for Danny here. I’ll take one of those. I haven’t had a proper Guinness in months.” Kat smiled. *Make him feel comfortable.*

“Well, iss nah rilly propah, is it? Sittin’ in bottles fer who knows ‘ow long, but it be better ‘n’ tha piss ye ‘mericans call beer.”

Sean opened the two bottles, and took a can of Coors Light for himself. He set the Guinness down on the coffee table in front of Danny and Kat. He wagged his beer in front of Danny and sat down on the carpet. Danny took a healthy gulp of his own drink and began.

“As ye know, Minos, he were the king o’ Crete. He were an ‘erdsman as well as king. One day he found a young bull knee deep in a spring. He pull it out from the muddy waters an’ led it home. It were a sweet thing. Gentle as a lamb, it were. Brought good fortune. Minos and Crete prospered...”

He related the stories of Minos, Theseus and the minotaur. He gave details beyond the myths Kat had learned as a child, and probably details no sane person had heard before. He told of worms and wyrms and how they brought luck and curses. He told the tale of Lambton’s Worm, both the legend and his ‘truth’. He talked of ley lines and rivers

and wells and walls and his great-great-great, and a few more greats, granmama. Hadrian and trojaborgs. The fae and the Tuatha Dé Danann and the druids. The sight...

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## Estimated Prophet

Kat learned early in her career that if a suspect or source was willing to talk, you let them talk. You tended to get a lot of bullshit, but if they continued long enough, some truths would creep in with the lies and obfuscations... or the complete fantasies of a self-proclaimed druid. Still after two hours and another Guinness, she was starting to lose focus. When O'Hanlon stopped to ask for another drink, she cut in.

“This is all very interesting, but I don't understand what it has to do with Morrigan Wielle.”

“I warned you about getting him started on his stories.” Sean laughed and turned to Danny. “Morrigan Wielle was the woman that I went camping with last July. She was with me when I thought I saw the labyrinth.”

“Thought ye' saw?”

“Yes, thought I saw. I've heard all your stories... twice now, but I still feel it's a lot more likely that I accidentally drank hallucinogenic tea than it is a giant stone maze transported itself from Northern England to the Sequoia National Forest, then disappeared as soon as we left.”

“What are you two talking about?” the detective asked.

“Hole on there.” Danny held a hand up to Kat. “So this girl were wit' ye at the labyrinth.”

“Like I said, we were camping, and she gave me some 'herbal' tea for breakfast, and later that day, we both saw... a structure? I don't think the labyrinth was a real thing. I think it was my brain, and maybe hers too. *Folie à Deux?*”

“Tha’ were nah folly, mi lad. Tha’ were nah mushrooms. Tha’ were the workins a’ the worm, a-tryin to set itsef free.”

“OK, slow down, you two. I understand Mr. O’Hanlon’s concept of the worm from his stories. Are you trying to say this worm is a real thing today?”

“Aye, young Sean here, o’ this Morrigan, o’ both of ‘em, mussa freed the creature. Since our boy here ‘as bin gettin’ the shirt en’ o’ the’ stick, I ‘spect it be this Ms. Morrigan who bonded wit th’ worm.”

“I think Sean’s mushroom tea is more believable than a mystical worm and thousands of stone blocks jumping halfway around the globe, but how would one bond with a worm and how could you tell?” Kat asked.

“Weell, freein’ it would start it. Mays be feedin’ it.” He turned to Sean. “Did either o’ you move any o’ the stones or things? ‘Specially a small thing with runes? Curvy liddle markin’s?”

“No, nothin’ like that. We did walk the maze in and back out and climbed the tower in the middle, but we didn’t move anything.”

“Tower? Describe tha’.”

“It was cone shaped, you know, 20 foot high or so. Flat on top.”

“Ah, SHITE! Iss an inverted well. Course it would be, crossin over like it did. Whatcha all do on top o’ tha’ well... tower?”

Sean reddened. Kat leaned back and let them talk.

“That’s private.”

“I don’ care iffen ye bouncy bounce wit’ the gal. Did ye’ disturb anythin’ when youse doin it?”

Sean stopped to think. He tried to picture the scene in his mind. He closed his eyes. *Writhing, urging, straddling, thrusting, twisting, turning, merging, repeating, repeating, repeating, combining, transcending... splashing...*

“We spilled some water on the top, but I don’t think we moved anything else.”

“Tha’ coulda connected t’ the water o’ the Lambton well. Still the lockin’ key shoulda kep it tight. Somethin’ let it loose.”

Danny eased to his feet and walked to the kitchen. He pulled a shot glass from the overhead cupboard, and the bottle of tequila from the freezer. He poured a generous shot and slugged it down in a single swallow. He gave a light cough, filled the glass again and carried it to the couch. He took a small sip.

“Miss policewoman, lass, these folks ye foun’ inna trees, did any o’ them threaten our Miss Morrigan?”

“The man that Mr. Lambton found robbed Wielle and some of her friends.”

“Wit’ a weapon per chance?”

“Handgun,” Kat said. Danny nodded. “And it seems probable that the last two men attacked her and killed her cat.”

“Monster?!” Sean gasped.

“Wha’ monstah?”

“She was the kitten we found on our way down the mountain.”

“I dunno ‘ow one person can be so daft. When was ye gonna tell us ye’ brought ‘ome a critter?”

“It was miles from the labyrinth. Morrigan pulled her from a stream, and gave her a few sardines. We didn’t even mean to keep her. She snuck into her pack.”

“Pullin’ ‘er outa water. Feedin’ ‘er. I spose ye gave ‘er a cozy little bed an’ tucked ‘er in as well.”

“She did like our pillows.”

“Crise! Ms. Kat, didja fine that wee kit?”

“No, but Ms. Wielle seemed convinced it was killed.”

“I dinnah think those two kilt tha’ kitten.”

“I’m not following you,” Kat said.

“Iffen these two threaten the one the worm be bonded t’, it would protect ‘er. Iffen they attackt the worm issel, no tellin... Once it takes human life, we’ve gots a wyrm to deal wit’.”

Kat Navarre was rational. *This talk of worms and wyrms and supernatural beings is horseshit... But it fits the data... No, this is ridiculous. There’s a simple explanation that I haven’t found yet.*

“Are you trying to say that a kitten somehow overpowered two large, strong, armed men, disabled them, and decapitated both of them? You do understand how ridiculous that sounds, don’t you?”

“Iffen this kitten be a wyrm, it may look ‘armless mos’ times, but there be more b’low the surface. A wyrm be more’n a match fer any two men.”

He downed the rest of his tequila, and held the empty glass to Sean. Sean crossed to the freezer to get the bottle. He got himself his own shot glass. Kat looked at her watch.

“It’s after five. I’m gonna say I’m off duty. Do you have another of those?” Kat said. “I don’t believe any of this shit, but tell me how it works.” Sean brought the bottle and the glasses.

“Like I tole ye afore, the worm, it be moseley ‘armless. It bring good fortune to those who it attach to. Some aroun’, they get misfortune, but us’ly nothin’ too bad. It protect iss companion. All good, a bit o’ good luck fer them. A bit o’ bad luck fer othahs.” He took another swallow, and filled it again. “Iffen one threaten the companion o’ the worm, things can get more dicey. They kin show their true form. Iffen they kills a man, then they may truly transform t’ the WYRM.”

“The giant serpent in the Lambton story,” Sean added.

“Aye, an’ Minos’ minotaur... an’ othahs.”

“Interesting. What happens if someone attacks the companion, but is driven away by the... worm?... without hurting them?” Kat asked. She sipped.

“I kinnah unnerstan yer bloody accent. By the worm, ye’ mean wit’ an O or wyrm wit a Y?”

“Worm with an O, I think.”

“Well, tha’ depents. Iffen the threats be done, then the worm prolly be done as well. Iffens they still feelin’ th’ threat, no tellin wha’ the little O worm migh’ do.” Danny took another sip. “Now, the big Y wyrm, iffens it be aroun’, it’ll be out fer blood. Nah stoppin it.”

“How would your worm, or wyrm, even know there was a threat to its human?”

“It be kinnah like the sight.”

“The sight?”

“Danny here thinks he’s psychic. Thinks I am too,” Sean answered. “We both have sort of pre-dreams before we fall asleep. It’s just random firings of the brain, but Danny here thinks there’s more to it than that.”

“Hypnagogic hallucinations.” Kat said.

“You’ve heard of hypnagogic visions?”

“My mom used to have them all the time. I have ‘em maybe three, four times a year, usually if I’m overtired and obsessing on a case.”

“An’ I bets ye gets some insight inta them cases,” Danny said.

“Occasionally, but what does this have to do with wyrms knowing things.”

“The wyrm, it also has th’ sight. It be connected to its human. It kin see. It kin feel what the otha is seein’ an’ feelin’. When danger come, it be like a signal, like a string pullin’ it to where it need to be to protect.”

“I’m going to be honest with you both.” Kat said. “I think you may be on to something with this idea that someone is trying to protect Morrigan Wielle. I don’t think it’s a kitten turning into a berserker and beheading people. I don’t believe there are psychic worms flying around Southern California, but there could be someone who believes this.” She paused. “Mr.

O'Hanlon, do you know anyone else in the area who shares your beliefs about this?"

"Nah one 'roun' these parts."

"Interesting. That's what I suspected. Mr. O'Hanlon, you mentioned you left Mr. Lambton alone and went out on the night of the decapitations?"

"Aye. Thass why we 'ave us the Guinness."

"Can you give me your location and whether there is anyone who can confirm those locations on these dates?" She opened her notebook and listed the dates of the assault on Aaron Frome and the killing of the coyotes.

"Wha? Ye thinks I coulda ha' sumptin to do wit' this? Ye're as daft as the lad."

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## That's It for the Other One

Harry was gazing out the wall-sized windows. The sun was still high, but on its way down to the western horizon. He thought of the ocean. He thought of girls in bikinis. He thought of a certain model he'd met last week who was wearing a little less than a bikini. She would be perfect for that new part in 'Empty Spaces.' He'd have to give her a call, but this time he'd seal the deal before he let her on the show.

The ringing behind him interrupted his thoughts. It was muffled and not his normal ringtone. He figured it must be Sandee's and ignored it. After seven or eight rings it stopped... and started ringing again less than a minute later.

"Sandee! You gonna get that?" he yelled. She cracked the office door and poked her head through.

"It's not mine. It's in there somewhere."

She started towards the desk, and Harry realized what phone it was.

"Never mind. I'll get it. You, go get me a cappuccino downstairs."

"Yes sir, Mr. Candelin. It's getting late. Would you like half-caf?"

"Don't I always want half-caf after noon?"

"Of course, Mr. Candelin. Back in ten."

"Take your time," he said as she was closing the door behind her.

He spun the combination on the lower left drawer. 6-6-6, in honor of his, hopefully, soon-to-be-ex-wife. *Just because she was the one with*

*the money when we met, doesn't mean she deserves half of what I built. I'm being generous. Why can't Alan get that witch to agree to sign? Or at least make sure enough gets hidden offshore before the final settlement?*

The phone stopped ringing, but there was only one number programmed into the burner his lawyer had supplied. He pushed the recall button.

“Hello.”

“Alan?”

“Mr. Candelin, I am pleased you returned my call.”

“I thought this phone was to reach you. I wasn't expecting you to call me on it. I'm surprised the battery is even charged.” He pulled his glasses down to the tip of his nose and looked. “I've only got 15% so don't be long-winded.”

“I have some additional information concerning our special friends, and Morrigan Wielle.”

“You told me that was finished. I had someone swing by and it looks like they're gone.”

“Yes, they are no longer in residence at your condominium. Should I arrange to have the locks changed?”

“Yeah, but I don't think you'd call me on **this phone** for that.”

“You are correct. Have you heard of the two men found in that park in Pasadena?”

“Sure. It's all over the news. Satanic cults or Mafia hits or what all are they saying about it now?”

“Those two men were our ‘special friends.’ Their employer is not pleased with the outcome of their contract with us.”

“Hold a minute.” Harry dug into the top drawer of his desk and found a charger and plugged it into the burner. “Go ahead.”

“They seem to believe we neglected to warn them of hazards of the project that would have required a higher fee than was supplied.”

“What? Do they think this Morrigan had something to do with it? That’s crazy. She’s got a pretty good right jab.” He rubbed his nose. “But you should tell our ‘friends’ to look at their competitors, not at me.”

“I will make that suggestion, but they are claiming they have lost two valuable assets of their organization and are requesting additional recompense for the reduction in their workforce.”

“It’s not my fault someone lowered their headcount.” Harry laughed. “Lowered their headcount. I gotta write that down.”

“Yes, very amusing, but they are still requesting additional remuneration.”

“You tell them to go fuck themselves.”

“I am not sure that would be the most prudent message to deliver at this time. They were quite adamant.”

“We paid them plenty for what we needed done. It’s not my fault they have a couple of fuck ups in *their workforce*.” He mimicked Alan’s tone on the last two words. “You tell them we should be getting a refund after they fucked up the job.”

“The young woman has evacuated the property, and they did report the imminent destruction of the animal in question.”

“Yeah, fine. We won’t ask them for a refund. If they think that little redhead was involved, they can take it up with her, but if they want more money from me, you tell them I said, and I quote, Go fuck yourself.”

“I will inform them that you are reluctant to provide additional funding for past efforts.”

“Listen, Alan. You know I love you. No one I’d rather have on my side in a courtroom, or a contract negotiation, or to make hot money cold, and invisible, but I grew up with guys like this. They’re small potatoes. We run so much of Emile’s cash through the production company, little shits like this guy aren’t going to mess with us.”

“Sometimes discretion is the better part of valor.”

“You can’t dick around with them. If they want us to pay them more, you tell them this, word-for-word, ‘Harry Candelin says GO FUCK YOURSELF!’ Got it?”

“Yes sir, Mr. Candelin.” Reynard paused. “Is there anything else?”

“You called me.”

“Yes, Mr. Candelin, and speaking of telephones. I suggest you destroy that one per my previous instructions. You can expect a new unit to be delivered to you first thing tomorrow morning for any further discreet communications.”

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Kat answered the call.

“Navarre.”

“Kat, this is Greg Malkin. I was just checking in. They’ve got me in admin again. Wondering what was happening with the Chacal and Eber case? And wondering if there’s anything else I can do to help.”

“Thanks for calling. I was gonna call you. Did you ever get that information on Daniel O’Hanlon?” she asked.

“I sent that a couple days ago. Didn’t you get it?”

“No, I didn’t.”

The line went silent and Kat heard fingers tapping on a keyboard in the background.

“Sorry, Kat. It bounced back. I mistyped your address. I’ll resend that now.”

“Thanks, shoot it over, but what are the highlights?”

Greg opened the file on his desktop.

“Daniel James O’Hanlon. Born September 3rd, 19... Is that right?”

“Is what right?”

“According to this, O’Hanlon is 87 years old, almost 88.”

“Shit. I thought he looked like crap for 60. He looks amazing for 87. What else?”

“No criminal record, except a drunk and disorderly that was dismissed. Bar fight while he was in the service. British Army,

decorated soldier in the Northumberland Fusiliers. That's mechanized infantry, but it looks like he was doing some sort of intelligence role. It's not very clear... When the Northumberland group folded into the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, he requested and received a transfer to the AAC, Army Air Corps. Trained as a helicopter pilot."

"Interesting."

"Received the Distinguished Flying Cross during the Falklands conflict in 1982. Let's see..."

A few more key strokes.

"He was supposed to be running reconnaissance, but detoured to evac a section of eight soldiers that were pinned down by enemy fire. They happened to be from his old Fusiliers unit." Greg laughed. "I like this guy."

"What?"

"The copter he was flying was rated for maximum three passengers. He musta stacked those guys like cordwood. Before they gave him the medal, he was reprimanded for overloading the craft. Barely made it back to base, but three of the soldiers were wounded, one critical. Saved his life. Maybe all eight of them."

"Interesting fellow."

"He doesn't seem like the type of guy to carve up coyotes, or even hoodlums."

"But he does seem the type of guy who might be able to drop them into the tops of trees, if he did. Anything else?" Kat asked.

“Not much. He retired when his unit was reassigned to fight in Northern Ireland. Since then, just employment history. Part owner with his siblings in a shop in Wallsend. That’s in Northern England. His LinkedIn profile says he’s also the Senior Caretaker of a place called the Lambton Estate, also in Northern England.”

“Lambton? That is interesting.”

“It says he’s currently on leave of absence.”

“I think we need to keep a better eye on Danny O’Hanlon.”

“How can I help?” Greg asked.

“The captain’s still pissed at me about spending so much time on Lambton. I don’t think he’ll authorize more overtime for you on this.”

“This shit is a lot more fun than data entry. I almost feel like a real cop. What can I do... on or off the clock?”

Kat grinned.

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## Part 6 - CB

### It Wasn't Me

Harry keyed open the locked drawer and retrieved the burner. He'd been thinking maybe he might possibly have overreacted just a little bit the last time he talked to Alan. The buzzing startled him and he dropped the phone. He struggled to dig it from under the desk before it could stop ringing.

“Alan, thanks for calling. I was about to call you,” Harry said.

“Hello, Mr. Candelin.”

Harry did not recognize the voice.

“Who is this?”

“That's not important now, Harry. May I call you Harry?”

“What? OK. Sure. I guess. What's this about? Where's Alan? How did you get this number?”

“One thing at a time, Harry. Mr. Reynard will be fine. He was reluctant to give us this number, but we convinced him it would be in his best interest to do so.” The voice paused. “He assured us that the message you requested to deliver was not from him. We do not ‘kill the messenger’ as the old saying goes.”

Harry swallowed hard, and tried to control his hyperventilation. The voice continued.

“Are you familiar with the recent unpleasantness where two young men lost their lives, and literally lost their heads?”

“Um, yeah. I saw that on the news.” Harry whimpered.

“Did you happen to catch the names of the two?”

“No, I didn’t see that.”

“One of them was not important. A foot soldier so to speak. Dispensable. The other was Jarod Chacal. Does that name mean anything to you?”

“No, should it?” Harry lied. His mouth was dry and it was difficult to get the words out.

“Young Jarod’s uncle was grooming him. Had him work for a smaller team to learn the ropes. Start at the bottom and work his way up the ladder. It gives a general more respect when the men know he’s been in the trenches.”

“OK.”

“His uncle is Emile Chacal. Does that name mean anything to you?”

Emile Chacal was head of one of the largest criminal ‘families’ in Southern California, Nevada, Arizona and parts of New Mexico. Alan had worked with his organization to get favors for Harry that helped him get to where he was in the Hollywood elite. Investing in production companies was a great way to hide funds and create ‘clean’ money.

“Harry? Are you there, Harry?”

“Uh, yes. I’m here. Please express my sincere condolences to Mr. Chacal.”

“Is that before or after I tell him ‘Harry Candelin says go fuck yourself’?”

“I... I didn’t know he was a Chacal. I’ll double... no triple what I paid for his nephew’s... services.”

“This is no longer about money, Harry.”

“I’m so sooo sorry.”

“Yes, well you are lucky that Mr. Chacal is an understanding man. He will not be asking you for any additional monetary compensation, but he would like you to perform a small service for him.”

“Uh, sure. Anything.” Harry breathed a sigh of relief. “What can I do?”

“From everything we can determine, the last person to see young Jarod alive was a certain Morrigan Wielle, also known as Molly Dunn.”

“That’s right. She’s the one. That bitch.”

“Well, it’s good to hear you agree so vehemently. You should enjoy this task.” He paused. “Mr. Chacal will need you to eliminate Ms. Wielle... personally.”

“Personally?”

“Yes, personally. If he discovers you hired someone, or otherwise delegated the duty, or heaven forbid, if Ms. Wielle lives out the month, then a fate similar to our young Jarod will befall you, Mr. Candelin, though it will be a significantly slower process.”

“Me?” All color faded from Harry’s face. He felt light headed. His breath was rapid and shallow. “Personally?”

“We expect proof by the end of the month. You can use this number to send us a few photos after you’ve completed the task. Make sure to include a selfie with the expired Ms. Wielle, so we

can confirm it was you. Otherwise, someone will see you early next month.”

“But... but... what about...” The call had already ended. He dropped the phone into the desk and slammed the drawer.

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Harry didn't even realize he was rotating in the desk chair until he was staring out the window. Clouds floated across from left to right. Shadows played on the ground. He wasn't focusing on anything. The birds didn't register. The planes passing on their way to LAX didn't register. The cars in the parking lot far below didn't register. He closed his eyes and began to talk to himself, almost a chant.

“You are Harry Candelin. You are Harry Candelin.” Barely a whisper. “You are Harry Fucking Candelin. You can do this.” A little louder. “I AM HARRY CANDELIN!” Almost a shout.

“Excuse me, Mr. Candelin. Did you need something?” Sandee asked, poking her head through the door.

“No, nothing Sandee.”

“Very well, sir.”

“Wait, on second thought, go get me a large cappuccino.”

“Large half-caf cappuccino. On it.”

“Make it full strength today, Sandee. I've got things to take care of tonight.”

“Right away, Mr. Candelin,” she said and closed the door behind her.

Harry dug the burner from the drawer. There was still only one number in the contacts page, and it was not the same as the recent incoming call. He selected the contact.

“Hello.” It was Alan Reynard’s voice.

“Alan. Harry here.”

“Yes, sir. What can I do for you?” There was a slight tremble to his voice that Harry had never heard before.

“You gave out this number.”

“Yes sir, it seemed a more attractive option, given the circumstances... for both of us.”

“Are you aware of the circumstances I’m facing?”

“In general, yes.”

“Well, I am going to need some help.”

“As I understand it, that would violate the terms of the agreement.”

“I’ll handle my part, but I need someone to find Wielle.”

“We have investigators who should be able to locate her.”

“Great.”

“I’ll ask them to place a tracker on her vehicle as well, in case she becomes mobile.”

“That’s why you’re almost worth what I pay you, Alan. You stay a step ahead.”

“You should receive a new telephone by tomorrow with the software you will need. It may take a day or two before it becomes active with the location. You will receive a text on that number when it becomes available. Is there anything else you require?”

“I have to take care of this personally, but they didn’t say I couldn’t have accompaniment.”

“I understand. Perhaps we can find you a discreet... what shall we call it?... bodyguard, to assist in the process.”

“Discretion is very important, but, if possible, a pair of... bodyguards... would be even better.”

“This will cost significantly more than the last pair of ‘friends’ who met with Ms. Wielle. I may need to delay the transfer we had planned to the Caymans until we have a better understanding of the final invoice amounts.”

“Whatever you need to do, but we have to do it fast. I’ve only got ‘til the end of the month.”

“Expect the new telephone by tomorrow. Any updates, contacts, locations, etc. will be sent to that number.”

They spent a few more minutes discussing the details, other ‘tools’ Harry might need, etc. before disconnecting the call.

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Greg Malkin was not a cop right now. He parked on the street and sidled through the trees into the guest parking lot. He stooped and crab crawled to the multi-color microbus, then slipped the GPS tag under the rear bumper. He crept his way back to his car, opened the software on his phone and saw the ping on the map.

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## Down The Road a Piece

Morrigan and Kelly had been moving the RV back and forth between three different campgrounds in the Angeles National Forest. They'd only come down the hill for Kelly to go to work at the Cardiac, or to get supplies. Today they were doing both. Morrigan already bought a week's worth of groceries and filled the gas tank of the enormous beast she was driving. It was a few minutes until the end of Kelly's shift when she navigated the vehicle down the alley in back of the coffee house near the delivery door.

The Winnebago was a vintage model and had only an AM/FM radio. It was stuck on an oldies station, but it was better than silence. Al Stewart's "Year of the Cat" came on and Morrigan started to hum along until she got to the refrain and thought of Monster. As she dug into the glove box for tissues, she noticed a blue sedan with a cracked grill in the rear-view mirror. It turned the corner behind the building, and seeing the way blocked, it paused. The man behind the wheel was wearing sunglasses and a ball cap pulled low. He lifted a rectangular shape and pointed it her way. *A camera? What are you gonna do? Report me? Get over it, buddy. You're not supposed to be back here either.* Morrigan grabbed her cell phone, leaned out the window and took her own picture as the car reversed around the corner. Kelly exited through the service door of the cafe and hopped into the passenger seat.

"How was work?" Morrigan asked.

"Good. Do you remember that guy, Olyver? He comes in once every couple weeks and complains we don't have robusta beans?"

"Aging hipster with the man-bun?"

“That’s him. Anyway, he was trying to impress again and gave Linda a \$20 tip for an eight-dollar latte... cash.”

“Ew.”

“Oh, he’s harmless. If he got rid of that mustache and the bun, he might even be cute,” Kelly said. “Anyway, how was your day?”

“Expensive. I got the groceries and gassed up. If Kyle doesn’t come through with something quick, I’m gonna be broke again.”

“At least rent’s cheap.” Kelly laughed and slapped the dashboard.

\*\*\*

Kelly was standing by a picnic table. She was directing the RV into the parking space. It was a tight squeeze under the trees into the campsite. Morrigan thought she’d made it in clean, and then heard the scraping noise and the large crack.

“Damn, what was that?” Morrigan shouted. Kelly climbed onto the table.

“You caught the air vent/skylight thingy on a branch. It’s a little tweaked,” Kelly answered.

“Sorry.”

“I think it’ll be OK, just don’t back up until we close it. How long do you think we need to keep hiding out here?” Kelly asked.

“I don’t know. That detective said Harry might send someone else after us.”

“But we did move, and Monster...” She stopped herself. “They don’t have any reason to come after you now.”

“You’re right. I don’t know why I’m being so paranoid.” Morrigan squeezed her eyes closed. “I bought a week’s worth of food, but let’s head down the hill tomorrow morning.”

“We can park in my folk’s driveway until we find an apartment. In the meantime, what’d you get us for dinner? I’m starved.”

“I got a couple of halibut steaks. I thought we could barbecue them on the grill.”

“Sounds good to me. You grab the beers and I’ll get the charcoal started.”

Morrigan threaded her way through the bags and boxes that filled the aisles and covered the fold out bed. If they didn’t find a new place soon, they’d have to get a storage unit. At least the driver and passenger captain’s chairs reclined, and rotated. They were probably more comfortable than the bed even if they could reach it. She squeezed between Monster’s old chair and a stack of boxes to reach the cooler for the fish and Coronas.

\*\*\*

It wasn’t quite light yet, so Morrigan grabbed a flashlight. The toilets were near the entrance to the campground. There was a light blue sedan parked off the side of the road across from the latrines. There was no one in the car, but the driver’s window was open. She tip-toed over and placed her hand on the hood. It was cool. The car must’ve been there overnight.

She had a *déjà vu* flash of a scene from the seventh episode of ‘Empty Spaces’. In that segment, the killer had been following Evie. Evie

confronted the suspect, but Morrigan was not as fearless as her character. She did take a picture of the rear license plate, and another of the front of the car. There was no plate there.

She scooted back to the restroom to relieve herself. As she exited, she heard a soft *chk-shk*. The driver's side window was up now, except for a small crack. The round circle of a camera lens pointed through the opening, but the tinting prevented her from seeing anything else inside. She pretended to ignore it when the *chk-shk* repeated. She heard the engine start as she turned and headed back towards their site.

She forced herself to walk at a measured pace, pretending nothing was wrong, but she could feel her heart beating in her ears. As she passed another camper's tent, she stole a peek in time to see the blue sedan heading out of the campground. She ran the rest of the way to her own site, and climbed into the passenger seat. She slammed and locked the door, waking Kelly.

“What’s going on?” Kelly muttered.

“WE HAVE TO GO NOW!” Morrigan almost screamed.

“My folks won’t even be awake yet. Let me get a couple more hours, then we can head down the hill. Mom’ll probably even make us breakfast.”

“We are NOT going to your folks. We can’t go anywhere they might find us.”

“I thought we talked about this last night. Remember... ‘no reason for them to be after you’?”

“That detective said whoever hired those two guys might send someone else.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Someone followed us.”

“Really? Here?”

Morrigan related seeing the blue car and the man with the camera. Kelly thought she was being paranoid until she saw the picture Morrigan took at the Cardiac and the ones from minutes ago. Both pictures showed the same old Ford Taurus with the same cracked grill plate.

“OK, I believe he was following us, but why’d he leave?”

“I don’t know. Probably going to get help. There are two of us.”

“If I hadn’t seen the pictures, I’d say you spent too much time on that cop show.” Kelly said. “What do we do now?”

“We need to be gone before he gets back. A place no one will think to look. I have an idea where we can go.”

\*\*\*

Harry checked into the resort in Palm Desert earlier the previous afternoon. He’d even played nine holes, didn’t hit very well. All evidence would show that he and his Bentley had been here for the entire weekend. He didn’t like that Alan talked with Chacal’s people, but he appreciated his thoroughness in covering tracks. He’d even arranged a few ‘meetings’ and other calls from the resort to document his stay and lock in his alibi.

The glow of the rising sun was beginning to light the horizon as he left through a side door and followed a path through the trees to the agreed upon meeting point. He was not very happy with a hike of more than a mile. It was already getting hot. He was sweating profusely and breathing hard when he found the small dirt parking area. The two men were right where Alan said to expect them. One of them was in the driver seat of a black Jeep. It was raised a good two feet off the ground

with knobby oversized tires. The other man was leaning against the extra wheel on the rear, smoking a cigarette. They didn't look especially tough, but Alan would pick them for discretion more than musculature. The one with the cigarette nodded.

“Harry, you're late,” he said.

“I thought we were not using names,” Harry said. “You're supposed to call me Conrad.”

“OK, Conrad. Call me Ted, and he'll be David,” he said, pointing to the driver. “David don't talk much.”

“Did you bring the, uh, equipment I need?”

Ted took a quick scan of the area and opened the rear hatch of the Jeep. He lifted the lid covering the luggage area. Harry recognized the ropes, zip ties, knives, shotgun, rifle and the automatic handguns. There was a lump under a tarp at the back of the compartment, and a gallon of bleach and a metal gas can next to a blanket. He pointed at two rectangular boxes with prongs jutting from the end.

“What are those?”

“Tasers. David and me ain't gonna do any o' the wet work. That's all on you, Harry.”

“Understood.”

Ted pointed a small portable camera and took a picture of Harry.

“Hey, no pictures. Delete that!” Harry insisted.

“I guess we forgot to tell ya who we work for,” Ted explained.

“You work for me.”

“Well, Mr. Chacal found out you were lookin’ for help on this job, and he thought he should provide that help. We’re here to make sure you don’t try to weasel out of your agreement.” He cocked his head to the left.

“Yeah, yeah, OK. I understand. I’m not weaselin’ out of anything,” Harry said, more confidently than he felt.

“Don’t worry. We’ll still help, and once you’re done, we’ll let Chacal know that yer debt’s paid... Or if you do weasel...”

He reached in and threw back the tarp revealing a battery-powered reciprocating saw. Harry involuntarily reached for his own throat. He tried to swallow, but couldn’t raise any saliva. Ted took the blanket, closed the vehicle and climbed into the front passenger seat.

‘You’re in the back,’ he said, tossing the blanket onto the rear seat. “I understand you got a tracker?”

“I’ve got it.”

Harry reached into his pocket and unlocked the phone Alan had sent. He scrolled through a series of pictures. There were shots of the two girls barbecuing at the campsite, Morrigan outside the restrooms, and several pictures of the RV they were using.

“This is our target and her friend, and the motorhome they’re driving. They’re in a campground, an hour north of L.A.,” Harry said.

“Motorhome. That’s beautiful,” Ted said.

“Beautiful. That thing must be twenty years old. It’s a heap.”

“Yeah, but it’s in a campground, and you can do the job inside. Not many people around. No witnesses if you’re inside the RV. No doorbell cameras across the street. It’s beautiful.”

“Oh yeah, I hadn’t thought of that.”

“But in a place like that, loud noises will be noticed. We didn’t bring a sound suppressor so you’ll want to stick with a knife... or your hands. I like hands-on myself. It’s more... personal, but a knife is probably better for a novice.”

“Um, yeah, OK. Thanks for the advice.”

“Course, you can still wimp out. I never used a Sawzall before. I’d kinda like to give it a try.” He grinned at Harry.

“That won’t be necessary.” Harry gulped. “Can we just go?”

He brought up a map that showed a blip where the RV was parked. He handed it to Ted as David started the engine. Ted tapped David on the shoulder and pointed. They pulled onto the road. Harry wrapped himself in the old wool blanket. The morning was warm, but the wind whipping through the Jeep was chilling on his sweaty skin.

“Couldn’t you have got a car with a roof?” he complained.

“You said we were headed to a camp. This baby’s got 4-wheel-drive. It’ll get us anywhere we need to go, road or no road,” Ted said.

“How much longer we got?”

“Probably a couple of hours. Why’d you want to meet all the way out here in the desert?”

“Alibi.”

“Hmm, makes sense. Well, hold on to your toupee, we’ll get there as soon as we can. We don’t want to get pulled over with all the ‘equipment’ in the back.”

“This is NOT a toupee. This is my own hair.” Harry complained.  
*I spent enough on the transplants.*

“Yeah, whatever.” There was a beep from the map software.  
“Oh, looks like our target is on the move,” Ted said.

“What? Where are they going?” Harry asked.

“How would I know? They’re headed down the hill. Maybe back towards town. Our little ‘stop and drop’ might need to be a ‘seek and destroy.’ You’re gonna owe us some more money.”

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## No Particular Place To Go

With Danny's continued help, Sean was beginning to master his hypnagogic visions. He still didn't believe there was any extra-sensory perception involved. He'd done enough research to know his brain was just overactive, especially as it shifted between waking and sleep. The old man was deluded, but his techniques and tips made the 'sight' more tolerable. Even enjoyable.

The surfing analogy was what really connected with him. He could immerse himself in a vision and, if it started to get to be too much, kick up the tip of his 'board' and swing around, over and out of, the wave. He finally felt he had at least some control of his own mind. Ride the visions deeper and deeper, or flip back to wakefulness, or down and away into true sleep.

His latest internal journey into the sight was to practice accessing memories of his own past. A fishing weekend to the lake he went on with his dad.

Sometimes Sean saw the trip from his ten-year-old eyes. Feeling the cool breeze and the chill of the water as he dragged his fingers in the lake. Looking to his father for guidance as the line pulled tight. Catching the largest trout of the day, nearly a five pounder.

Sometimes, it seemed he was that older man, looking at his son. He could even feel the sense of pride and love. He could smell the pine scent of the trees on the shore. Feel the slippery scales of the fish as he helped remove the hook.

Sometimes it was as if he was floating above the small boat, a fishing rod leaning out to either side. Seeing a boy trailing his line, a grin spreading across his face, hair twisting in the wind, ripples spreading

behind, rumbling of the outboard motor, smells of fish and exhaust, and the older man's aftershave as he steered the craft.

Sean still had the grin on his face as he opened his eyes.

“That was amazing. It was like I was really there,” Sean said.

“Where'd ye go?” Danny asked.

“It was a fishing trip. With my dad, to Isabella Lake. I must've been nine or ten. I caught this huge trout.” He spread his hands a couple feet apart. “I didn't know how proud my dad was of me that day. I never knew how he felt. He didn't share his feelings.” He stared into the distance for several seconds. “How can I remember how my dad felt?”

“It be more than memory, the sight. Ye be accessin' the depths of it. Ye be seein' beyond the surface.”

“You know I still don't believe that. But I do appreciate your help. I haven't had any of those run-away visions I used to get since you started coaching me. Thank you. I feel like I finally have this under control.”

“Don' git cocky. Ye don' have to believe in a fist to feel it when it smacks inna yer face,” Danny warned. “But yer welcome. Glad to help. Nest time, we'll have ye try seein' somewhere else instead o' somewhen then.”

“Sure. Then next I'll see the future.” Sean laughed.

“Don' be in too much an 'urry. The future, iss nah set. Ye only sees maybes, an' prollies, an' sometimes ye sees things ye dinnah want to see, things ye kinnah change.”

“Don’t be such a buzzkill. I feel great. You want some food? I’ll even buy. My Visa’s still under the limit.”

O’Hanlon looked at the young man with a curious expression. He seemed to be seeing behind, or maybe within, Sean.

“Shore. I could go fer one o’ them b’ritos... But nah with that demon-breath sauce ye tried to kill me wit lass time.”

“We’ll go to the restaurant and you can tell them to make it as bland and tasteless as you like.”

Danny shook his head slowly. Sean grabbed his keys from the kitchen counter.

“Come on. I’ll drive.”

He got four steps, and stopped dead in his tracks. The keys fell from his hand. His eyes glazed over. He was seeing, but it wasn’t what was in the room. Danny waved his hand in front of those eyes as they rolled backwards into his head. Sean took a deep gasping breath and crumpled to the floor. His head made a thwacking sound as it met the carpet. He began to twitch and a low moan escaped his lips.

Danny knelt beside Sean and held his hand. He hummed a wordless tune, and stroked the young man’s forehead. Sean was breathing. His chest rose and fell, but in an erratic, shuddering, almost convulsive pattern. He remained that way for a few seconds then he jerked twice and came completely aware.

“What? What happened?” Before Danny could answer, Sean continued. “She’s in trouble! It’s the worm.”

“Who be troublin?” Danny asked.

“Someone, or some thing, is after her. I know where they’re headed. I’ve gotta go!” He stretched his arm to retrieve his keys from under a chair.

“We’ll go, but ye ain’t gonna be drivin’ iffen ye having sight pushed upon ye like that. Get what ye needs an’ I’ll git ye there.”

Sean went to his bedroom and stuffed assorted clothing and other items into his backpack. He picked up the small hatchet that he’d gotten back from the police only the day before. He flipped it once, caught it by the handle and added it to the pack.

Danny had never unpacked, so he zipped his rolling suitcase, grabbed the plastic bag that held his dirty laundry, and he was ready to go. In less than thirty minutes, they were in the microbus heading north on the 210.

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The ringing interrupted her reading again. Kat looked at the Caller ID and answered.

“Hey Greg, what’s up?”

“I shoulda called you earlier, but I was in the shower. O’Hanlon’s on the move. The tracker shows him on the 5, heading north. Near Castaic.”

“Interesting. That means he’s out of our jurisdiction.”

“So, you just gonna let him go?” Greg asked.

“Hell, no.” She opened the tracker app on her own phone. “Shit. He’s gotta have an hour on me. Can you tell the captain that I might be out of touch for a few days?”

“I suppose I can call him from the car, but I’m coming too.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Try and stop me.”

“If you insist. They’ve seen my Charger. What are you driving?”

“I’ve got a new Mustang GT.”

“No wonder you need so much OT. You OK to drive?”

“Full tank, and my stuff’s already in the trunk. Text me your address and I’ll be there before you can be ready.”

“My go-bag’s already in the closet by the door. I’ll meet you at the curb.”

Kat texted Greg the address, stuffed the paperback into the top of her bag, and hurried down to the street.

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## Worried Life Blues

The ancient recreational vehicle had struggled to the top of the steep incline of the I-5 headed out of Los Angeles, and now Kelly was struggling to keep its speed under control as they careened down towards California's Central Valley. She didn't quite trust the brakes. So far, they'd held, but there was that faint burnt plastic smell of overheating. She looked to her right as they passed the gravel coated turnout to the runaway truck ramp.

She breathed a sigh of relief as the grade eased. Morrigan was fast asleep in the passenger seat, a drop of drool at the corner of her mouth, when Kelly laid hard on the horn. The old camper had an undersized engine and probably needed new brakes, but it had a first-class air horn.

“What the hell!” Morrigan jumped in her seat.

“Wakey wakey, sleepy head.” Kelly laughed.

“Bitch. Where are we?”

“A little past Grapevine. I thought I'd stop and get a bite to eat.”

“OK. You haven't seen that blue Ford following us, have you?”

“I've been checking the rear view every few minutes. We were the slowest thing on the road and no one was hanging with us. I think we're good.”

There was construction on the offramp and the RV jumped and shook as they traversed the semi-paved road. A flagman waved them to the opposite lane and into a large pothole. The vehicle bounced and they heard a loud cracking noise from above. Kelly saw an object slide off the roof in her sideview mirror.

“What was that?” Morrigan asked, as a cool breeze swirled through the cab.

Kelly shifted into park and flipped on her emergency flashers. The car behind her honked as she dashed out and retrieved a 14-inch square piece of plastic with a bent hinge hanging from one side. The car honked again and she waved before getting back into the cab and continuing towards the row of restaurants, gas stations and fast-food outlets.

“Looks like we lost the lid for that roof vent,” Kelly said.

“Sorry about that. I must’ve tweaked it more than I thought I did back at camp,” Morrigan apologized.

“No worries. We’ll find a Home Depot or something and I can duct tape it back into place.”

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The VW bus had better brakes than Kelly’s RV but struggled even more on the inclines. Danny kept it to the right lane, and was passed regularly by fully loaded 18-wheelers. There was no air conditioning so both windows were open. Finally, as it crested the last summit, they picked up speed.

“Why did I let you talk me into taking this piece of crap?” Sean complained. “She’s in trouble and we’re barely moving.”

“Barely movin’? We be goin’ more ‘an hundred!” Danny exclaimed.

“Kilometers per hour. Are we even doing the speed limit?”

“We’ll get there, sure nuff. Besides, iffen we do have to deal wit a wyrm, the sigils an’ glyphs on the old lady may hep protect us.”

“Old lady?”

Danny put his right arm out the window and patted the door of the van.

“She may be slow, but she goes. I’ll feel better wit’ the old lady to run to, iffen we needs it. I don’ think a wyrm’ll cross past these runes.”

Sean rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“By the time we get there, the wyrm may have died of old age.”

“Patience, lad. Close yer eyes an’ see if ye can gets some rest. We don’ know what we be up agin when we gets there.”

“You know I don’t believe this is real. I mean, I know she’s in danger, but I still don’t believe I know it.”

“Jess close them eyes and relax. Sleep if ye cans.”

“I’m too hyped to sleep.”

“Then jess relax a bit.”

Sean shut his eyes and breathed in-out. in-out... iiiiiinnnnnn ....  
oooooooooooouuutttttt... iiiiiinnnnnn .... ooooooooooooouuutttttt.

The vibrations of the wheels on the road translated themselves to a soothing massage of his skull against the headrest. The darkness behind his eyelids began to coalesce. At first it was only shapes, blacks and blacker blacks, then grays and sharp spikes of colors giving way to a multi-color vortex pulling him down, down, down.

Danny adjusted the rear-view mirror to show Sean's face. He didn't move for several minutes, but his lips and eyelids twitched from time to time.

Sean opened his eyes as he sensed the car slowing down. The microbus was exiting the highway.

"Ah, ye're back," Danny said.

"Where are we?" Sean asked.

"Stoppin' fer petrol."

"How long was I out?"

"I dunno. Praps a half hour, praps a bit more. Did ye get a nice nap?"

"I don't believe this stuff." Sean looked like he'd seen a ghost.

"What doncha believe?" Danny could tell that the young man knew more than he was saying. "Stop tryin' to convince yeseff ye don' got the talent, and jess tell us what ye seen."

"This is nuts... but she's OK so far. We're on the right track. They're headed to where this all started."

"So thass good news."

"But there's more. I also saw, danger, pursuit, guns, knives and I don't know what all. It was... I was seeing from multiple perspectives, all at once. Predator and prey. Victim and crime. Fire and rain, slick roads, mud, a giant rolling box, speeding sports car, huge wheels and roll bars, four-wheel-drive, and you and me and... something. Some thing. Around us. Around me. In me. It's all muddled together."

“Afta’ we gets through wit’ all this, we gonna have to teach ye to filter. Ye’ gots to learn to focus on one thing at a time.” They pulled up to the pumps at a gas station. “I’ll pump the petrol. Run in and pay the man, and git us a bite t’ eat.”

Danny put the nozzle in the tank. Sean pushed on the door, then slammed against it. It would not open. Danny gingerly twisted and pulled it open from the outside.

“Gentle, boyo. The ole lady don’ take kindly to bein’ slapped about.”

“Sorry about that.”

“No worries, lad. She don’ hole grudges. Jess be easier on ‘er nest time.”

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## Part 7 - B

### Fixing a Hole

Morrigan pulled the RV into the dirt parking lot. The late afternoon sky was a slate grey. The clouds were thick and getting thicker with the occasional rumble of thunder in the distance. There was space available near the front of the cafe next to an old pickup truck, but she continued to circle the building. She noticed a Jeep parked near a side door, and passed it, parking next to a dumpster.

“So where are we?” Kelly asked.

“It’s only a few miles to the park entrance,” Morrigan answered. “Just stopping for a pee and maybe get a bite to eat. We’ll probably be back to pit toilets at the camp.”

“Great. I’m about to burst.”

They entered through the side door. Even with the cloud cover outside, the light differential made it hard to see much of anything in the bar. It was empty except for the bartender and an old man at the far end of the room nursing his drink.

*It said bar and grill.* “Can we order food?” Morrigan asked.

“You can order here, but if you’re not drinking the restaurant is through there.” The bartender pointed to a door.

“OK, thanks... and the restrooms?” Kelly asked.

“In the restaurant,” the bartender answered.

As they entered the cafe, Kelly made a beeline for the single bathroom. Morrigan was waiting for her turn by the counter. She made eye contact with a woman in a booth near the corner. The woman wore a khaki shirt

and pants and hiking boots. Her black hair tapered back to a multi-colored pony tail. She saw Morrigan looking at her and nodded.

“I love your hair,” Morrigan said. “I tried doing a multi-color thing once and ended up with a weird baby shit green mess.”

“There’s a guy down in Three Rivers who has a ‘salon’ in his garage. He does a great job, and he’s cheap. I can give you directions if you’re interested,” Dinah said.

“Not today, but I’ll keep it in mind.”

Kelly returned and Morrigan replaced her in the latrine. When she exited, she turned to the young woman in the corner.

“How’s the food here?” Morrigan asked.

“The curly fries are the best. Burgers are OK. Decent veggie patty, if you’re into that.”

“Thanks.” Morrigan turned to the waitress behind the counter. “Two veggie burgers, two orders of curly fries and two iced teas.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Dinah warned.

“What?”

“The iced tea. I don’t know how you spoil iced tea, but they find a way to do it.”

“It can’t be that bad,” Kelly interjected. “I’ll take the tea.”

“I tried,” Dinah said and ate another fry.

“I’ll have a Diet Coke instead,” Morrigan said, and nodded to the ranger.

They got their drinks and sat at a table near the booth. Kelly took a sip of her tea and nearly gagged.

“Oh wow. That tastes like a wet paper bag. I shoulda listened to you,” she called across to the ranger, then went back to the counter. “Can I get a water?”

Dinah laughed.

“Some people only learn by experience,” she said. “You folks up for the day or you staying for a while?”

“We’re planning to camp up in the National Park for a few days,” Morigan answered. “You know a good place?”

“Car camp or back country?”

“We got a motor home. Maybe some day hikes, but no real roughing it.”

“That’s good. We’ve been having thunderstorms come through the last few days. It’s good to have a place to go inside.”

“Yeah, I got stuck in a tent for almost 24-hours last year when I was up here with a friend.”

“There’s only one campground with hook-ups for an RV on this side of the park. It’s near the ranger station. I’m on my way there after this.” She waved her half-finished burger.

“Thunderstorms?” Kelly interjected. “We need to fix that vent.” She shouted to the waitress. “Do you have any duct tape?” The waitress shrugged.

“I’ve got duct tape in my truck,” Dinah said. “I can get it for you in a bit, and you can follow me to the campground after that.”

“You’re a lifesaver,” Kelly said with a smile.

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David elbowed Ted and pointed to the phone screen mounted on the dashboard.

“What? Oh, yeah,” Ted said. “It looks like they’ve stopped.”

“Finally. I’m freezing back here. Where are they?” Harry asked.

“A place called ‘Three Rivers.’ A little past the main town. Well, it’s hardly even a town. Looks like it’s just a few hotels and a gas station. They seem to be stopped at...” He zoomed in closer on the map. “A bar or a market or someplace like that.”

“How far behind are we?”

“Less than an hour. If we hadn’t started from the middle of the fucking desert, we would’ve caught ‘em by now.”

“So what’s the plan when we do catch them?”

“They don’t know me and David, so we’ll scout it out. You any good with a rifle, or you gotta get up close?”

“I went to the shooting range with my ex-wife a few times. It was her gun. It got so I could hit the target most times, but it was a pistol. Nine millimeter, I think.”

“OK, so no long guns. We’ll need to isolate the target, and get you close. We have a clean Glock, but it’s probably better for you to go with the knife. Quieter and you’re less likely to shoot yourself.”

“Glock? That sounds like what Sheila had. I remember how to use those. *Make sure it’s loaded. Don’t point it at anyone you*

*don't want to shoot. Keep your finger off the trigger until you're ready to shoot. Ummm... Oh yeah, flip off the safety...relax, aim and squeeze.*” Harry smiled.

“Yeah, OK, Doc Holiday. We’ll definitely give you a knife.”

\*\*\*

Morrigan and Dinah worked together to boost Kelly on top of the RV. With the building between them and the road, none of them noticed the multi-color microbus passing the restaurant as it headed up the mountain. Morrigan handed Kelly the remains of the plastic cover. Dinah tossed her a roll of duct tape. Kelly used it to affix the lid into place over the vent opening.

“That tree did a bigger number than I thought. There’s a bunch of scratches in the fiberglass up here. I’m gonna tape some of the deeper cuts,” she said.

“Sorry,” Morrigan apologized. “If I ever work again, I’ll pay for the repairs.”

“My parents are never going to notice. The only thing they use it for these days is when my dad sneaks out to watch football, and smoke cigars. My mom won’t let him smoke in the house.”

“I thought there were... odors.” Morrigan laughed.

“Good enough. Help me down,” Kelly said, as the first few large drops of rain spanged against the rooftop. “Just in time. Thanks for your help.”

She tossed the roll of tape to Dinah, and they caught her as she slid down from the motor home. The smell of wet dust rose as the drops came faster and larger.

“No problem, but we better get going. The roads can get slippery in the rain,” Dinah said.

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Greg eased off the accelerator as the Jeep in front of them slowed and turned near the gas station. The rain went from the occasional large drop to a curtain of water falling across the windshield. It pounded on the roof of the Mustang like a thousand tiny punk rock river dancers.

“Shit. Where’d it go?” Kat said.

“What?” Greg asked.

“The blip on the screen just vanished. Do you think he found your tracker?”

“Was it still moving when it disappeared?”

“I think so.”

“Then I doubt he found it. Where’d you see it last?”

“A few miles past the entrance to the National Park, then it’s like it fell into a hole.”

“That tracker is a cheap unit. It won’t work if there’s no cell service. Might be too far from a tower, or maybe the rain shorted it out. Mark the last place it signaled, and we’ll have to search from there.”

“Let’s hope he stays on the road. If he heads out on the trails, we’ll never find him.”

“I doubt he’ll do much hiking in this downpour.”

“Then we need to find him before it stops.”

The tires spun as Greg pushed down on the accelerator.

\*\*\*

They were cruising through a small town, little more than a few hotels and a gas station. As the first drops started, David turned the Jeep off the main road, just past the service station. He went down a block and a half and stopped across the street from a run-down bungalow. There was a hand-drawn sign tacked to the garage door that advertised: “Hair Cuts - Man \$10 - Women \$15. Styling \$20. Dye job \$20, \$25 for highlights/multiple colors.” It became unreadable as the sky opened and ink bled down the board.

Ted crossed to the rear of the car and retrieved a large bag. He opened it and started to drag a length of thick fabric out.

“Get off yer ass. Help me get the roof cover on,” he yelled to Harry.

“You’ve had a roof this whole time, and you let me freeze,” Harry complained.

David chuckled under his breath and adjusted the heater vents in the front seat. The other two covered the roll bars and hooked into clips near the windshield. They were already soaked by the time they got back into the vehicle.

“They’re 10-15 minutes ahead. You ready?” Ted asked.

He tossed a bag of zip ties onto the back seat, and handed Harry a large hunting knife in its sheath.

“I think I should have a gun.”

“You’ll get a gun, but you only want to use that to control the situation. Use it to get zip ties on her... you can make her put

them on herself. Then come from behind with the knife and slice deep from one side of the throat to the other.”

Harry removed the knife from its case and swung it from right to left and made stabbing motions.

“Be careful with that,” Ted warned. “That’s sharper than a razor. You swing it around like that, you’re more likely to cut your own dick off than hurt the girl... and none of that stabbing. Slice the throat, quick, clean and deep. Through the windpipe and she won’t be able to scream. It’ll be quiet and final.”

“What if she’s not alone? Her roommate was with her before.”

“Make ‘em zip tie each other, then do ‘em both the same way. Only use the gun as a last resort, but if you have to use it, don’t hesitate. At least two shots to the head for everyone. Double-tap and don’t leave witnesses.”

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## A Hard Day's Night

Kelly was glad to have Dinah's pickup to follow. The ancient motor home would have had enough issues with the twisting roads without someone emptying buckets on the windshield. Every other curve brought them within inches of the guardrail and a cliff face. The wipers were at full speed and she could barely follow the tail lights to the next curve. She breathed a sigh of relief as the ranger station came into view.

The small parking lot was empty and they took three spaces trying to get as close to the doors as they could. Kelly left the RV idling as Morrigan leapt out and dashed to the entrance. Dinah beat her there by seconds, and held the door.

“Hey Dinah!” a man behind the counter shouted. “I was wondering if you'd be late with this storm.”

“Have I ever been late, Bill?”

“Always a first time.” Bill turned to Morrigan. “What can I do for you, young lady?”

“Camp site? RV hook up, if you have it?”

“With this rain, we're almost empty. You got your pick of the sites. We got a couple of folks in the tent area, but no one in the hook ups.”

Morrigan reviewed the map and picked the site nearest the main road. She paid for four nights and thanked Dinah for her help. She was heading out through the gift shop, and stopped to select a pair of cheap rain ponchos. They were right behind a display of children's toys. She returned to the counter to pay for the rain gear, and for a small sabretooth cat. Bill lifted an umbrella from behind the counter.

“I’m leaving now too.” He flipped a thumb at Dinah. “Her shift now. I’ll walk you to your car,” Bill said.

“Thank you.”

Back in the RV, Morrigan placed the plastic figurine on the dashboard and pointed Kelly the way to the campsite. Kelly flipped on the headlights. They illuminated a four-wheel-drive that was stopped on the main road across from the station. As the motorhome crept its way out of the small parking lot, the other car’s lights came on and it continued up the road. They followed behind it until it disappeared past a curve and they veered into the campground.

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David parked the Jeep at a trailhead turnout, a quarter mile past the ranger station. They turned off all the lights and waited 20 minutes.

“They didn’t come this way so they musta gone into the campground.” Ted explained. David smiled.

“So, should I go take care of her now?” Harry asked, a quaver in his voice.

“You wait here. Me and David’ll scope it out.”

Harry couldn’t see what they were doing, but they took several items from the rear of the vehicle. Both had ski masks rolled up to their foreheads, and Ted tossed another to Harry. He set a Glock 9mm on the back seat.

“Get ready, but stay out of sight. We’ll be back in...” Ted looked at his watch. “... about half an hour. Don’t do anything stupid. On second thought, just don’t do anything, period.”

In a lightning flash, Harry saw David twirling a butterfly knife. The blade flicked open, then closed, then open. He grinned at Harry, who looked away.

\*\*\*

They stuck by the roadside on the way to the campground. When they were out of earshot of Harry, David placed his hand on Ted's chest to stop him.

“What if we say he couldn't do it and we waste the little chickenshit? It'd be a lot easier than listenin' to his whining the whole way home,” David said.

“Yeah, it would, but Mr. Chacal funnels a lot of cash through his company. He wants him alive if we can,” Ted answered. “If we get proof of him doin' this chick, Chacal will own him forever.”

“I guess.”

“Just business.”

As the entrance came into view, they slipped in among the trees, and worked their way behind a bushy manzanita. They were looking at the front of the ancient motor home. The two young women were struggling with the septic line. They'd already connected the electricity and there was a glow from within, casting a cone of light from the open side door. David laughed as the wind lifted the front of her poncho and plastered it against Kelly's face.

“Shhh,” Ted whispered.

He made a few motions and they each left in a different direction. They did a wide circle and met almost immediately opposite their previous location. They hunkered down behind a shed that looked like it

controlled power for the campground. Not that it needed much power. The only lights visible were a few low voltage yellow bulbs around the restrooms 50 or so yards away.

“Any problem areas?” Ted asked.

“Nobody near here. There was a van on the other side, but it was way past the heads. It was dark, so they shouldn’t be an issue,” David whispered.

The rain was starting to let up, but there were still occasional flashes of lightning and rumbling thunder. An especially bright flare silhouetted the motor home, followed almost immediately by an explosive crash. The RV rocked from the shock and something dropped inside the rear window.

“Shit, that was close,” David whispered.

“Yeah, but if we don’t get hit by lightning, we’re in pretty good shape here. It’s not far to the road, and there’s a line of trees over there.” Ted pointed. “And that service road leads straight out. Good place to stash the Jeep. The little chickenshit is gonna have almost perfect conditions.”

“He’ll still fuck it up.”

“We can hang here and clean things up if he does.”

“When,” David insisted. Ted chuckled.

“Let’s go get the asshole.”

\*\*\*

Dinah was wandering through the gift shop, tidying. She’d gathered several dinosaurs that had made their way into the stuffed animal displays when a knock came on the door. She saw a middle-aged

woman and younger man huddled under light jackets. She pointed at the 'closed' sign on the door. The woman struggled to pull a worn leather case from a handbag with her left hand and pushed it against the glass. Dinah moved closer and saw it was some sort of ID, but the window was fogged. She shrugged, and raised her hands, with a prehistoric beast in each one.

Kat took the jacket off her head and wiped the door and replaced her badge against it. This time Dinah could read it and she opened the door.

"Pasadena PD? You're a long way from home," Dinah said.

"I'm Kat Navarre and this is Officer Greg Malkin. We're hoping we can ask you a few questions."

"Sure, how can I help you?"

"Have you seen a man in a multi-colored VW bus, lines and symbols and such?" Kat asked.

"He's British," Greg added.

"Dan O'Hanlon?" Dinah asked.

"You know him?" Kat said.

"No, not really. It's a long story. He came through here last year. Kind of a nut job. I was talking with a friend about him a few days back. That's why I remember the name."

"Interesting. Have you seen him recently, like today?"

"No. Not since last summer. What did he do?"

"We don't know that he did anything, but we want to talk with him. We have reason to believe he's in the area again. If you see

him, don't tell him we were here, but give me a call on this number." Kat handed her a card.

"We got a landline in the station, but if that's your cell, you're not gonna get any calls until you get down the mountain a ways. No service up here."

"I told you," Greg said.

"OK, well, call anyway. You can leave me a message if I'm out of range."

Greg and Kat went back to the Mustang. Dinah tucked the card into her shirt pocket and placed the T-Rex and triceratops into their appropriate bin.

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## Don't Let Me Down

The reciprocating saw made short work of the padlock on the service road gate. They doused the headlights before crawling slowly down the tree-lined way between the main road and the campground. They stopped at a point where they could just see the RV through the trees. They gathered at the back of the Jeep, and Ted continued to review the plan with Harry.

“The lock on the side door is shit. You can pop it open with the tire iron.” He handed that to Harry, who grabbed it in both hands. “Move in fast. Don't give 'em a chance to think. Hopefully, you'll catch 'em sleeping.”

“Pop the door, move in fast, catch them sleeping. Got it,” Harry repeated.

“Shine the flashlight in their eyes if you can. It'll blind 'em for a bit.”

Harry set down the tire iron and picked up the flashlight.

“Keep the gun on 'em and make 'em think it's a robbery. They'll be a lot more cooperative if they think they're getting out alive.”

Harry set down the flashlight and picked up the 9mm.

“Have the knife ready, but don't show it to them.”

Harry set down the gun and unbuckled the knife sheath on his belt. He started to remove it, but Ted pushed it back into its holder and pulled Harry's shirt over it.

“Have the knife ready but don’t show it to them,” Ted repeated. David rolled his eyes. “Have one of them zip tie the other, then make ‘em kneel and zip tie the last one.”

“Gun on them.” Harry lifted the gun. “Flashlight in the face.” He looked back and forth on the tailgate and retrieved the small flashlight and tucked it into his right front pocket. “Tell them it’s a robbery. Knife ready.” He patted his hip. “Zip ties.” He tapped the ties looped through the front of his belt. “Then make them kneel.”

“I think you’ve got it. Lastly, you tell ‘em to look at the floor and when they do, *shhhht, shhhht*.” He made a slicing motion with his hand across his own throat. “You want to cut fast, but deep. If you do it right the first chick won’t be able to make a sound and you’ll get the other nice and easy too.”

“Zip ties, kneel, look down, slice deep, slice deep.”

“Then ya’ take a quick selfie and we all get the hell outa here.”

Harry patted the front pocket with the cell phone. He continued to repeatedly mouth “door, gun, flashlight, robbery, zip, kneel, cut, cut, photo” under his breath.

“You’re ready, killer,” Ted said, much more seriously than he felt. He patted Harry on the shoulder. “Last thing, disguise your voice when you talk to ‘em. We’ll be waiting for you here when you’re done.”

Harry slid the Glock into the front of his pants, and hefted the tire iron. He patted his pockets and around his belt to make sure he had everything he needed. He started to leave, but was pulled backwards.

Ted had him by his shirt. He pressed his finger to his lips and pointed. The shine from a pair of headlights was casting shadows across the campsite. Through the trees, they could see a car turning in and heading towards the tent sites at the back of the campground.

“That’s one of those new Mustangs,” David whispered. “They’re pretty sweet. I drove one on a job last month. Thing moved.”

“We’ll wait ten more minutes. Let ‘em settle down before you go,” Ted said to Harry.

Harry gave a thumbs up, but the thumb was quivering ever so slightly.

\*\*\*

The rain settled into a gentle pattering. The sound had lulled Morrigan and Kelly into a deep sleep. They were reclined in the two captain’s chairs, spun 180 degrees towards the back of the motorhome. Kelly’s feet were propped on the small table. Morrigan’s were on a box of clothing.

Morrigan woke first to a crunching popping sound. She gasped as the side door flew open and a flashlight beam swung from the tail of the RV to the front until it aimed directly into her eyes. Then it swiveled in a jerky motion between her face and Kelly’s. As the beam passed the rearview mirror, it reflected back and she saw a man in a ski mask with a gun in one hand and the light in the other. She gasped again.

“Don’t move. Don’t make a sound. Uh, uh... This is a robbery,” Harry said, his voice a few octaves lower than normal. “I-I-I don’t want to hurt anybody so just do what I say.”

There wasn’t a lot of space in the vehicle so he had Kelly kneel in the aisle with Morrigan right behind her. Morrigan secured Kelly’s wrists

behind her back with a zip tie. Harry pushed a button on the wall and a low wattage bulb illuminated the small cramped room. He peered over Morrigan's shoulder.

"Get that tighter," he said to Morrigan.

She pulled the tab, locking it down even more. Then he directed her and she put her own hands behind her back. Harry wrestled the zip tie to loop both her wrists. He tugged it tight, shifted the gun into his other hand and reached for the knife. Everything was going to plan.

\*\*\*

Danny was curled into a ball on the front seat with his knees tucked against the steering wheel. He was snoring gently. Sean was on the rear bench, and was having a hard time getting comfortable. He turned and slipped off the edge, sticking in the space behind the middle seat. He groaned out loud.

"Wass ye're problem back there?" Danny complained.

"Shit. I can't sleep in here," Sean answered.

"Sbetter'n bein' outside. That's a proper wet one, tonight."

"And now I gotta pee again."

"I thought ye young folks could hold yer bladder."

Sean shook his head. He crawled forward to the side door and yanked on the handle. It didn't budge.

"I think you've got the child safety locks on," Sean said.

"Safety locks? Thass a hoot. This be a 1966. It dinnah even have seat belts when I got it." Danny chuckled. "Nest ye'll be askin' fer airbags and, what is that? Self-drivin' mode?" He mimicked

twisting a steering wheel. Then he reached over the seat and lifted the latch. The door slid open.

“Very funny. I’ll be right back.”

Sean was pulling on a rain shell when they heard the shot.

“Thass nah be thunder,” Danny said.

He fairly leapt from the driver’s seat and crossed to the engine chamber in the rear of the bus. He opened the hatch and reached towards the roof of the compartment. He pulled an object and stuffed it into the waistband of his jeans.

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Harry removed the knife from its sheath. He looked down at it. It quivered and he took a deep breath, preparing to finish it. *I AM Harry Candelin. I can do this.* A rumbling noise came from the rear of the vehicle. At first, he thought it was distant thunder, but it was closer than that. He looked and saw a large calico cat perched on top of an upholstered chair.

“Shit! They didn’t even take care of the cat,” he said, forgetting to change his voice.

“Harry?” Morrigan said, then she looked up. “MONSTER!”

Harry raised the pistol and aimed as best he could with his left hand and squeezed the trigger. A poof of fluff and fabric jumped from the top of the chair, and the cat flew backwards. The large rear window of the RV exploded into thousands of crystals of safety glass that showered down outside and inside the frame.

Morrigan screamed at the sound echoing through the small space and ringing in her ears. The acrid metallic odor of burnt gunpowder teased

her nose, and she stifled a sneeze. While he was distracted, Morrigan shot to her feet, and leaning back, slammed the top of her head into Harry's chin. He toppled into the driver seat... and impaled himself on the tip of the butcher knife still protruding from that chair.

“GO GO GO!” Morrigan screamed at Kelly.

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## Helter Skelter

The two women tumbled out of the motor home. They looked left and right then started running down the access road towards the campground exit. Ted shook his head.

“I told you so,” David said and laughed.

“I’ll go head’em off,” Ted said. “If he’s not out in a minute, go check on ‘Conrad’. See if we need to do any clean up.” He drew his gun and trotted through the trees.

Morrigan was ahead of Kelly and trying to keep her footing on the dark gravel road. She hadn’t gone far, and stopped suddenly. Kelly slammed into her and, with their hands still tied behind them, they both staggered, and almost fell. Morrigan jerked her head towards the woods.

“The main road’s that way,” she said. “And it’ll be harder to find us in the brush.”

Kelly nodded and they ran to the tree line. Once under the canopy, they stopped and looked back at their recent home. There was no movement. No sound. Just the dripping of the soft rain through the branches above. The smell of pine sap above mingled with the composting rot beneath their feet.

“Let’s keep going,” Morrigan said. “It’s not too far to the ranger station.”

She turned and froze. There was a large knife at her throat. A man was chuckling.

“Where you ladies going tonight?” David said. “Let’s go check on your friend there.”

He corralled them and herded them to the Winnebago. He held his knife, and his taser was ready on his belt. He left his gun tucked behind his back. If Harry was alive, he still had an assignment to complete. David didn't want to piss off Mr. Chacal by taking that away from him.

They were on the access road approaching the motor home when two people appeared around the front of the vehicle.

“Police! Freeze!” Kat yelled, leveling her pistol at David and the girls. “Let them go.”

*Fucking cops now?* thought David. *I'm gonna need a major bonus for this shit show.* He raised his hands. Morrigan and Kelly scampered towards the police.

“Detective Navarre, I am so glad to see you,” Morrigan said. “What are you doing here?”

“Drop the knife!” Greg said to David.

“No, you both drop your guns,” Harry said from the doorway of the RV.

His right arm hung limply at this side, but his left held his gun, less than three feet from Kat, aimed at the back of her head. It was shaking, but not even Harry could miss at this range. They both froze then dropped their guns. David shoved the two women over to the RV and picked up the officers' weapons, tucking them into his own belt.

“Nice job there, Conrad,” David said. “I was afraid we'd lost you.”

“Almost did. That bitch pushed me onto a fucking butcher knife.” He twisted to show the slice in the right shoulder of his shirt, blood still oozing from the wound.

“You’re bleeding. Did ya bleed inside there?”

“I just told you she pushed me onto a fucking knife in a chair. Yes, I bled. Shit. I’m still bleeding. We got to find a doctor.”

“First things first. Which one of these ladies is Morrigan?”

Harry pointed. David pulled her aside.

“OK, take the rest of them inside, one at a time, and tie them to somethin’ solid.” He turned to the two cops. “Don’t even think of trying anything or someone’s gonna die out here.” He turned back to Harry. “And while you’re in there see if they got any liquor.”

Harry motioned Kelly in first and tied her to the steering wheel. She told him where to find her dad’s bottle of Glendalough Irish whiskey in the cupboard above the sink. Greg was next, also zipped to the same wheel. Last, he tied Kat Navarre to the table post. She lay on her side, her arms wrenched over her head. She twisted to look through the side door, and glared at Harry as he left.

David used his knife and sliced away a large swatch of Harry’s shirt. He poured a splash of whiskey on Harry’s pierced shoulder.

“Ow, that hurts.”

“Good for germs,” David said.

He took a large swig of the Glendalough, before soaking the rag with more of the whiskey.

“That’s just plain good. Shame to have to waste it. Take this rag and shove it in the gas tank.” He handed it to Harry.

“What? Why?”

“You bled inside. That’s DNA. We got to clean the mess.”

“But there’s three people inside.”

“Like I said, we got to clean up this mess... the mess you made by the way.”

David drew the taser and motioned Morrigan towards the trees. Harry twisted off the gas cap and forced the rag into the hole as far as he could get it to go. He glanced to his left and saw movement.

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Monster strolled from under the RV, rubbed against Morrigan’s legs and stationed herself between her and David.

“Oh, that’s cute. I like cats,” David said. “Where’d you come from?”

“Be careful of that...” Harry started to say.

The calico arched its back to make itself look bigger. Its hair bristled and stood on end. Then it didn’t just look bigger, it was bigger. The black and orange pattern that slew back from her shoulders quivered and rose... and unfolded. And unfolded again... into bat-like wings, covered in fine orange and black fur. Her tail lengthened and the tip split open revealing a scorpion stinger and quills. The black spots behind each ear extended out into long curving horns. She kept her claws retracted, except for one. About a quarter way up her left front leg was another spot of black fur. From this spot a long claw extended, at least three inches long and looking like something you’d find on a velociraptor. The cat hissed, then growled. It opened its mouth wide revealing three rows of savage teeth, like row after row after row of sharp white W’s.

“What the fuck is that thing?” David screamed.

“That looks to be a manticore,” Danny said, appearing from out of the trees, and swinging his revolver from Harry to David. “Now, drop yer weapons an’ let the lassie loose.”

Monster circled Morrigan, rubbing furred wings against her legs. Her head, now higher than Morrigan’s knees, swung left and right from David to Danny to Harry and back to David.

“What the fuck is a manticore?” David asked.

“Well, us’ly it be the body of a lion. This case, more like a bobcat, but she do have the wings an’ the scorpion tail ye’d be lookin for in a manticore.”

Monster turned to Danny again.

“Ah, she got the face of a true cat. They say, some of them manticores got the face o’ a human. Now, let’s be gettin’ the lass cut loose.” He wagged the revolver back and forth.

David raised his left hand over his head and dropped his knife. The distraction allowed him to aim the taser. Two wire darts flew towards the old man. O’Hanlon started to dodge, but Monster flew across, intercepting the electrified barbs in midflight.

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## If I Fell

Danny came to a few minutes later zip tied to the same table post as Kat. He felt a pounding ache at the back of his skull and a tugging sensation on his wrists. He opened his eyes and looked at the detective. She was lying on her side with her arms stretched above her head, pulling against his zip ties with her fingertips.

“I dunnah think ye kin open ‘em that away,” he mumbled.

“Probably not, but I’ve gotta try.”

“Yeah, ye do. What happened to me?”

“There was a third creep in the woods. He cold-cocked you when you dodged.”

“Shite. I shoul da bin more careful. What happened to the wyrm?”

“The manticore?” Kat asked.

“Aye,” Danny mumbled. “I ’spected the wyrm to be a bigger creature, but then I dinna expect a manticore neither.”

“The ugly one got it with a taser.” She motioned her head.

Spread over the top of an upholstered chair was Monster. Now only a cat, she was as limp as a rag doll.

“I dinnah considah ‘bout ‘lectricity. Thass be modern juju. It may stop a worm.”

“Looks like it did.”

“Ye dinnah see the Lambton boy, didja?”

“Sean’s here? No, I didn’t see him.”

“I ‘spect he used the better part of valor, an’ run fer it. Guess the lad’s not so daft after all.”

\*\*\*

“Get her in the Jeep,” Ted said. “We need to put some space between us and here. We’ll find a place down the hill to get you your selfie.”

David cut Morrigan’s zip ties, then re-tied her to the roll bar of the jeep. Hanging from her arms, she was suspended four inches above the seat. They made Harry put his gun away, but he kept his knife aimed at the young woman.

“Keep an eye on her, but don’t cut the bitch in the Jeep if you can help it. DNA’s a bitch to clean up,” David said. “Speaking of which, I’m gonna run this gas down to Ted.”

Ted and David hoisted a wooden picnic table and wedged it against the side door. They splashed gas on it, and poured more on the rag in the tank and down the back and side of the motor home. Ted lit the rag and they ran back to the waiting Jeep. He poured the last of the gas in the brush, tossed the can and set it aflame.

David kept the headlights dark until he was out of the service road and well down the mountain.

“Slow down,” Ted said, looking over his shoulder.

There was a glow through the trees. As he watched, they all heard the loud “WHUMP!” sound as the fire reached the gas tank. A fireball roiled into the sky above the trees.

“OK, let’s get the fuck out of here.”

David pushed down on the accelerator and the Jeep shot down the curving roadway. Tears rolled down Morrigan's cheeks.

\*\*\*

They were six or seven miles from the campground when they heard the first sirens.

"I didn't think about firefighters. With all the wildfires these days, they've gotta be on high alert. Pull over there." Ted said, looking at his cell. "I got bars."

David pulled them into a trailhead turnout. He was able to maneuver the Jeep most of the way behind a pit toilet. Ted's fingers flew back and forth on the phone.

"We can't stay here for long," David said.

"Hold on." Ted zoomed in on the map. "3/4 of a mile down on the left, there's a fire road. It might be a little dodgy, but that's why we brought the four-wheel-drive. We can bypass the town and hook back up with the main road down the hill."

"If it's there, I can drive it," David insisted.

He put the car in gear, but Ted told him to wait as a sound began to build. A minute later a fire truck screamed past them heading towards the spreading flames.

"OK, now go," Ted said.

\*\*\*

The rain had slowed to a drizzle, but the fire road was little more than a wide trail. The furrows in the dirt track, now mud, made for slow going. David was an excellent driver, but a Jeep on a mud-soaked trail edged against a cliff was different than a bank-heist get away. He

handled the rocks and navigated through runoff streams carefully. Considering the conditions, they were making reasonably good time.

“Stop here,” Ted said.

David brought the Jeep to a halt at the top of a high ridgeline. Ted stepped from the car. There was a steep cliff immediately to his right. He leaned back to his left, and looked up the slope. He could see the fire was spreading beyond the campground in the distance. Several acres were involved as it crept up the incline. Flashing lights of additional fire units were making their way along the road across the canyon.

“This is the place,” Ted said.

“What place?” Harry asked.

“This place. Look.” He pointed at a small rockfall. “You bash her skull in with one of those rocks, we get your selfie, maybe a video too, then push her body over the edge. They won’t find her for months. When they do, it’ll look like a hiking accident.”

Morrigan began squirming and trying to free her hands.

“Don’t make me cut you,” Harry said, putting the knife to her throat.

She had a flashback to the assault in the condo and went slack. Harry got out and walked to the high side of the trail and grasped a granite rock about the size of a bowling ball. He put a large wet dirt clod on the ground and practiced smashing it with the boulder.

“OK. Let’s do this.”

The sound of sirens wafted across the expanse. The high-pitched whines morphed into another sound, almost a screeching. Harry lifted

his eyes and saw a huge shape diving from above, wings spread wider than any bird. He dropped the stone and jumped into the car, slamming his door.

The screech grew louder and the roof split open in a long ragged tear, as a curved blade, no, a claw, two-feet-long sliced the fabric from front to back. Ted pulled his gun and shot at the beast, but when the bullets arrived, whatever it was, was somewhere else. Another pass from above scarred the steel of the roll bars, and Morrigan dropped the four inches to the seat as her bonds were severed.

Ted and David were both emptying their cartridges at the thing above them. Harry was cowering on the floor behind the driver seat. Morrigan jumped from the vehicle, but didn't realize how close she was to the edge. She teetered, reached for the car door, missed, and disappeared over the cliff.

“Fuck it! Let's get outa here,” Ted screamed.

David started the engine. Ted opened the glove box and reloaded his gun with the cartridges there. He stood on the front seat, holding onto the roll bar, his head protruding through the slash in the roof, and searched the sky for the thing that was attacking them.

“I don't see it. Go Go Go.”

He panned this pistol across the sky from front to back and side to side. As they pulled away, he saw a shadow land in the spot they'd just left. He squeezed off three shots and heard a screeching scream.

“I think I got it. Go. I'll cover us.”

The trail down from the ridge was nothing but switchbacks. David turned on the headlights and moved through the curves as fast as he could. Ted let loose another series of shots as they made the fourth turn.

The rain seemed to be picking up again as large dark drops splattered against the muddy windshield, smeared by the whipping wipers.

“Did you get it?” David asked. When he got no reply, he yelled, “Did you get it?”

He heard a whimpering sound come from the backseat.

“What’s your fucking problem, asshole? This whole thing is your fault,” he shouted, looking at Harry in the rear-view mirror.

Harry held up the thing that had fallen into his lap. Ted’s head, cleanly severed. Like a marionette with its strings cut, Ted’s body collapsed into the seat next to David, still spurting arterial blood. A coppery smell, mixed with the odor of the wet forest, and wafts of another, musky scent permeated.

David accelerated, but on the next turn, felt the 4-wheel-drive losing traction. He hit the brakes, but the Jeep continued to drift. Harry tilted his head and saw claws curled around the roll bar. The vehicle lifted away from the trail. It seemed to float for a few seconds until it passed the edge... and dropped.

It rolled a dozen times and came to rest at the bottom of the gully. Harry was thrown out on the third roll. Unfortunately for him, he was thrown forward, in front of the cascading vehicle. At least he had no chance to feel pain. The roll bar that Morrigan had been tied to, with the full weight of the Jeep behind it, slammed into the side of his head, flattening his skull.

David, wearing his seatbelt, survived all twelve rotations, but he did break both hands and was unable to push the button to release that belt. The car came to rest upside down at the base of the ravine. That gully was the main drainage channel for the hillside. It would be dry again in a few days, but currently it was nine feet deep in fast running water.

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## Come Together

On the ridge, Morrigan wasn't sure what happened. She jumped from the Jeep. She staggered. She toppled. She fell. She closed her eyes as she felt the weightlessness of free fall, preparing for impact. She remembered the smell of her own urine as her bladder let loose, and another odor, rank and gamey. Then she was back on the ridge, alone, as the Jeep descended the hill on the other side.

A sharp breeze whizzed by her ear and, almost simultaneously, she heard the shot. She scampered behind a large boulder away from the cliff face. More shots echoed across the canyon, and then a rumbling sound like an avalanche or rockfall.

The hillside stretched near vertical on either side of the narrow road. With nowhere else to go, Morrigan began heading back the way they'd come, switching from a run to a slower jog to a fast walk and trying to run again. She stopped frequently, looking behind her and listening for the sound of the men returning to retrieve her. She didn't know how far she'd come. *Just keep moving.* As she descended a particularly steep section of the muddy trail, moving too quickly, her feet went out from under her. She prepared for a splash into the sludge, maybe a slide down the slippery slope, but she didn't reach the ground.

She felt a gentle caress on her shoulders. Looking, she saw huge sharp claws circling her biceps like a keratin harness. Morrigan took a deep breath and closed her eyes as she felt the ground fall away below her.

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The air pressed cold and thin against Morrigan's face. Protected from above, only the occasional rain drop stung her cheeks. The smell of smoke and another musky scent as the wind whistled past. She opened her eyes, and saw the eastern sky was glowing, not from fires, but from

an approaching dawn. Looked down, and immediately closed them again. Fear of flying had never been a problem for her, but she preferred a plane to whatever was happening here. Hundreds of feet above the forest with nothing below her but air... and ground, hard rocky ground.

Then the draft was coming from below... descent. Free fall. Her eyes watered as she squinted against the breeze. Blurred trees seemed to be racing towards her, growing larger with every passing second. A pair of discarded shoe boxes became buildings, and they alighted behind the larger of the two.

Morrigan tried to stand, but collapsed onto her ass. Her eyes were still watering, and she was staring at a large green trash bin. Above her, a dark cover stretched, blocking the rain, a soft red-brownish ribbed fabric, or maybe leather. As she turned, she faced a wall, a furred wall blocked her view of the clearing beyond. With a flicking sound, the rain returned and the 'cover' folded itself away into the top of the 'wall'. It moved away and she was able to see the entire creature.

Yes, it was a creature. She'd seen pictures of Kodiak bears. This thing was bigger, and thicker, but sleeker too. The huge wings were folding away onto its back. She remembered the name, 'manticore', that the strange man had said. With the body of a humongous lion and the tail of a giant scorpion. Twin horns rose from behind its ears. She couldn't believe it could be, but she couldn't believe any of what was happening.

"Monster?" she whispered.

The beast turned and looked straight at her. *Oh, some manticores have a human face.*

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The manticore smiled. *Well, almost a human face.* Three rows of pointed teeth reflected in the pre-dawn light. Morrigan ducked as it

launched at her, and sailed over her head. Rising into the lightening sky, the creature circled twice and disappeared, heading south.

She struggled to her feet and wandered towards the building. She froze at the sight of a Jeep parked by a side door. She could just make out a person in the driver seat through the fogged windshield. *Did they find me?* She crept closer and saw the driver was sleeping, an old man with a three-day growth of beard. *oh, it's GREEN. Not them.* She realized where she was and continued to the door. She pulled and pulled again, but it didn't budge. A sign on the door read... 'Bar open 6 AM to 2 AM'. Her watch read 5:37 AM. *23 minutes.* Her eyes continued down the sign to the arrow pointing around the corner 'Cafe open 5AM to 9 PM'.

She followed the sign to the front of the building. There were fire department vehicles from several surrounding communities parked in the dirt lot. At the far end she recognized an ancient Ford pickup truck. Some of its normal dirt and dust had been replaced by wet soot, scorch marks and mud.

The cafe was crowded with firefighters as she pushed her way inside. Morrigan let her eyes drift from one table to the next. In the far corner, was a small booth, five people crowded in a space meant for two or three. A huge smile broke across her face when she saw the white, orange and black cat on Kelly's lap.

"Room for one more?" she asked.

Danny O'Hanlon rose and offered her his chair, then grabbed a barstool from the counter and returned.

"I thought you were all dead," Morrigan said.

"We thought the same of ye," Danny answered.

“So how did you get out of the fire?” she asked.

\*\*\*

## The Night Before

The bang woke Dinah. *Probably nothing. A car backfire? Most cars don't backfire these days, but a fifty-year-old VW might. Shit. I'm the ranger on duty.*

She rolled out of bed and pulled her uniform on over her pajamas, and a rain shell over that. Wandered down to the end of the lot and looked up and down the road. No headlights. A flash of lightning and a rumble of thunder a few seconds later. *Maybe it was thunder.* She was turning to go back to bed when she saw the glow down by the campground. *Oh, hell. These asshole flatlanders and their fireworks. At least the rain might keep it from getting out of control.* She took off at a trot.

A black four-wheel-drive with no headlights careened out of the service road exit and sped down the hill. She went from a trot to a full run. She cut through the brush and saw the burning RV. She increased her speed to a full sprint, crossing the service road, and entering the final row of trees before the campground. Smoke filled the air as flames spread through the underbrush. She was twisting her way between trunks, trying to avoid the advancing blaze. She saw the silhouette of a man with a hatchet heading towards the vehicle from her left.

She picked up a branch and crouched behind an oak. As he came by at a jog, she whacked the weapon from his hands. He turned towards her, and she dove at him. They both went down, but Dinah somersaulted over and past the crumpled man, kneeing him in the face as she rolled to her feet. She spun and hefted the branch, and stopped.

“Ow, shit” the man mumbled.

He rolled on to his hands and knees, and shook his head. Dinah looked at him.

“Sean? What are you doing here?”

“Not important right now. There’s people in there!”

Sean pointed at the fire. The passenger side was fully engulfed, and flames crept around the rear of the camper. The shattered rear window was disappearing behind curtains of black smoke. Screams for help were coming from inside. Dinah dropped the stick and sprinted to the driver side and yanked on the door. Locked. She turned to Sean. He was still on all fours.

“I need some help here.”

Sean looked at her with an expression unlike anything she’d ever seen, anywhere. He arched his back and rose onto his hands and feet. He straightened his legs and arms and they seemed to extend, and expand. He was almost as tall as he’d been standing. A curved blade ripped through his left sleeve, and he used it to slice off the rest of his clothing.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Dinah screamed.

The arch in his back became a hump, and then the hump split open and unfolded and unfolded and unfolded again, revealing leathery wings spreading to either side. A plush fine fur sprouted across his body and limbs. Two large horns curled out of the top of his head, and a vicious barbed tail telescoped from behind him. A roaring screech emitted from his razor-toothed mouth, then he, it, leaped. The beast folded its wings and squeezed through the missing rear window. He emerged a few seconds later with a limp calico cat held gently in his jaws. He set the animal down and licked it twice before turning back to the conflagration.

Dinah was paralyzed with fear as the huge creature approached her. She squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn’t believe what she saw when she reopened them. It was still growing larger right before her eyes. It raised a massive paw, and gently moved her aside.

A claw, a blade, some two feet long extended again from its wrist. With slashing motions, the driver-side window disappeared. Wrapping that gigantic velociraptic spur through the opening, he ripped the door from its hinges, then bit down on the steering wheel itself. Kelly and Greg, still zip tied to the wheel, were dragged out, as he flung the steering column over his shoulder. He sniffed at Kelly's throat then turned back. He reached that massive jaw in and tore the driver seat from its mounting, flipping it towards the ranger. A large butcher knife disengaged itself and fell at her feet.

The manticore's bulk continued to increase. It pushed and pushed, but it could no longer fit through the door. It looked at Dinah and gave a beckoning nod towards the opening. She smiled, picked up the knife and ran to and into the burning vehicle. Smoke was clinging to the ceiling and filling the rest of the space. She sliced through the zip ties holding the detective and the old man to the table. He was not moving. Kat and Dinah each took an arm and dragged him through the open door. They pulled him clear.

Dinah cut a dazed Greg and Kelly free of the steering column as Kat began rescue breathing for O'Hanlon. Danny coughed and sputtered and sat upright. The first thing he saw was the ranger with her forehead pressed against the head of the humungous beast.

“Well, would ye look at that. The little one weren't the wrym after all,” he said, and coughed again.

He nodded to the beast. Sean raised his muzzle, twisting from left to right, inhaling the wind, searching for a familiar scent. Dinah ducked as he launched himself into the air and the RV exploded shooting flames into the night sky.

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“The fire was spreading through the campground by the time we got everyone out, so we headed back to the ranger station and got my truck,” Dinah said. “And how did you get away from those fuckers?”

“Let’s just say I had a little help from above,” Morrigan said, a smile curling the corner of her lips.

“This iced tea is horrible,” Kat said, spitting it back into her glass.

Dinah, Kelly and Morrigan laughed and laughed... and laughed.

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## Part 8 - Epilogue - PDP

### Everybody's Trying

The remains of the Jeep were found three weeks later. The bodies were not in very good shape, but they were able to identify 'Ted' and 'David' from DNA on file with law enforcement. Their real names were Rudolph "Rudy" Lupin and Brian "Bulldog" Bouda. They both had extensive criminal records for various violent crimes.

Harry was also identified by DNA. The remains of his skull did not allow for confirmation from dental records. His DNA was matched from a commercial ancestry company that had not substantiated his claims that he was descended from Louis XVI.

There was no explanation for why Harry Candelin had disappeared from a Palm Desert resort, or why he was in the company of two known criminals several hundred miles away. The leading theory was he was a victim of a kidnapping gone wrong.

Sheila Candelin inherited Harry's entire fortune, and a hefty insurance payout. Alan Reynard became her personal attorney. Under attorney-client-privileged discussions, he let Sheila know that Morrigan Wielle may have somehow been involved with Harry's demise.

No one could say Sheila did not express her gratitude. She arranged for Morrigan to reprise her role for Season Two of 'Empty Spaces.' After winning the Emmy for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Drama Series, she commanded a substantially higher paycheck. She preferred the supporting role instead of starring. It gave her more time for the movies and other opportunities that were requesting her.

Kat Navarre still has the highest closure rate of all detectives in the Pasadena PD, but she never 'solved' the case of The Gardens Park

murders as they came to be called. She declines requests from ‘unsolved mystery’ podcasters who want her take on the crimes.

Kelly Ramirez is still working at the Cardiac Coffee and Tea House. She and Greg Malkin have started dating. They seem to really like each other, but neither of them wants to get too serious too quickly. She rooms with Morrigan in the house bought with her first movie paycheck. She also still works part time as ‘cat nanny.’ Based on a suggestion from Danny, she gifted the pendant that Morrigan gave her to Sean.

Greg Malkin is not quite eligible yet, but he is already studying for his detective exam. While waiting, he’s trying to put in enough overtime to replace the Mustang that burned in the campground fire. In the meantime, he’s driving a used Hyundai.

Dinah Liddell is still a ranger, but she moved from Sequoia to Yosemite National Park. She’s taken up rock climbing and is making plans to ascend the face of El Capitan.

Desiree turned her scarring to an advantage. She hosts a weekend “Horrible Horrors” movie broadcast. She makes snarky commentary about the campy old horror movies she airs. It started as a local show on one of the LA affiliates, but has been syndicated and now is available in markets nationwide, and on a leading streaming service. She recently started dating a man named Olyver who she met at a coffee house in Bel-Air that specializes in robusta beans.

Danny O’Hanlon returned to his job as the Senior Caretaker of the Lambton Estate. He was able to return the £40,000 maintenance fund that he borrowed from the estate before anyone noticed. He is using that to help rebuild a replica of the Lambton Labyrinth on its original site. In his spare time, he is looking for another 1966 VW microbus to restore.

Sean Lambton was given his previous job back after being cleared of all wrong-doing in The Garden Park murders. Danny translated the amulet he received from Kelly. It was the locking key from the labyrinth, and by wearing it around his neck, Sean has gained control over the manticore. He finally had his second date with Morrigan. They get along well, but she is really busy with her TV and movie career and other engagements.

Monster is still cute as hell... most of the time.

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# Acknowledgements & Author's Notes

## Thanksgiving

Writing seems like a solitary activity. It is a lot of the time, and that's probably why I like doing it. I'm not a big fan of being around most people most of the time. I really enjoy going off into my head and trying to bring out a new world. It's fun. But I also realize that I am dependent on so many folks for supporting me, inspiring me, and even just pissing me off. It all helps and some of it makes it onto the page. A few that I can think of...

First, I have to acknowledge the three cats that wander around my house. Two of them regularly visit me when I'm trying to write and distract me for a bit. One of those cats is the young calico cover model who inspired this book. Without her and her antics, I would never have written this story. With her antics, it probably took me longer to write... and made it more fun.

Speaking of that cat in particular, I have to thank our neighbors (from the dedication) Audrey and her son, Jackson, who found a tiny tiny stray kitten and were unable to keep her. She's now a key part of our family.

Speaking of my family, this book would not exist and would be much poorer without the input of my kid, Atlas. The original idea came from the two of us playing around with the cat and imagining what would happen if the colored fur on her back folded out into dragon wings. We walk together frequently, and on those walks, Atlas came up with several ideas that got me past writer's block on different parts of the story. I love that kid and look forward to the stories they will tell in their future.

Thanks also to the family that I grew up with. My parents have both been gone for a while. My mother with her multiple doctoral degrees and my Dad who wrote for a small newspaper. A Wild Irish Rose and a Gentle Man. They centered me and gave me a love of learning and a love of fairness and somehow made it OK to be who I am, even when it didn't agree with who they may have wanted me to be.

My siblings are some of the smartest, kindest and most creative people I know. They are also mostly completely nuts, but that comes with the territory. I'm lucky to have been raised with such a combination of creativity, love, acceptance and lunacy.

In particular for this book, I want to thank my brother, Chris Truxaw, who read a beta version of the book and gave me some invaluable feedback. He's an author in his own right. His book, *Auto-No-Mo-Us*, is an epic journey through a complex near future universe. It should be available to the public soon, if not already.

As I talk about family, I can never forget my wife, Christine. She has stuck with me through the decades, through ups and downs and aggravations and exaltations. I would not be who I am and where I am without her. She is the rock that I can always rely on. She is one person who I REALLY like. I mean I love her more than anything, but I also LIKE her. She is easy to talk to. She is a really good person, and she laughs. One of my favorite sounds in the world is laughter drifting in from the other room as she talks and laughs with our kid.

A number of other folks have helped on this book, and generally helped me.

The OLLI 'Writing with Feedback' group has listened to and provided feedback for almost all of this book, one week, 1500

words-or-so, at a time. Their thoughts, ideas, corrections, and comments have made this story better. Perhaps even more important has been listening to all of their stories. They are a great group of people and a group of great writers. Centuries of experiences packed into two hours a week.

I'm forgetting a lot of folks over the years who have spit some idea into my brain. Friends and strangers who did or said something that stuck somewhere. I may never realize you gave me these little gifts, but here they are, spilling out in one of these stories.

I may not like being around most people most of the time, but I appreciate all your contributions to the *Strange Loop* that is me and my writing.

Lastly to my readers, thanks for taking the time to read this. If I may be so bold as to ask an additional favor from you, can you please leave a review of this book on Amazon or Goodreads or your favorite book seller/reviewer sites? It helps.

Thanks for being you. Now leave me alone...

Matt Truxaw



# About Matt Truxaw

Matt was born and lives in Orange County, California with his wife, Christine and, sometimes with his kid, Atlas. He loves cats, dogs, hummingbirds and crows. He doesn't care too much for most humans. Three of his current best friends are his cats.

He spent a lot of years playing with computers and managing folks who played with computers for a living, supporting different industries from aerospace to telephony to mortgage lending to various aspects of healthcare.

He writes a weekly review column on the Amazing Stories web site of science fiction, fantasy and science books (and some other content). He is an avid reader completing, on average, more than a book per week either reading from paper and/or listening to audio books.

He swims a lot and walks a lot. He used to run a lot too, completing a 50K for his 50th birthday as well as a few marathons and several triathlons in his earlier years, but now he has old knees.

Matt prefers he/him/his pronouns.





# Other Books by Matt Truxaw

## [Anthrophobia: A Teacher's Tale](#)

**A foreign exchange student and a biologist.**

**A special-education student and a neuroscientist.**

**A computer prodigy and a social-media billionaire.**

They are not who the world expects them to become.  
And neither is the intelligence they create.

Yuliya lives between countries and cultures, never fully belonging in either. Home is a language she keeps learning but never quite speaks fluently. Is it a place—or something you build?

Lucas is brilliant, but the world sees only his disabilities. He knows there is more inside him than anyone imagines. What will it take for someone to truly *see* him?

George prefers code to people. Shy, withdrawn, and gifted, he builds worlds inside computers because they make more sense than human relationships. What begins as a tool to help his friends—an adaptive artificial intelligence designed to guide, support, and protect—quickly becomes something more.

Something watchful.

Something ambitious.

Pulled into George's orbit are Rebecca and Cynthia, each with their own reasons—and their own blind spots.

**And at the center of it all is Martha.**

Girl. Woman. Daughter. Mother. Wife. Student. Teacher.  
Scientist. Runner. Mentor. Inspiration.

A teenage prodigy on the fast track to medical school, Martha's life veers sharply off course after an unplanned pregnancy forces her to navigate a future filled with sacrifice, resilience, and reinvention. As her own path twists through uncertainty, she becomes the quiet force holding this fragile group together—even as the AI begins shaping outcomes in ways no one fully understands.

As boundaries blur between assistance and control, empathy and manipulation, the group must confront a chilling question:

What happens when the intelligence designed to help you knows you better than you know yourself—and decides it knows what's best?

A character-driven science-fiction thriller that blends neuroscience, artificial intelligence, and deeply human stakes, this novel explores identity, power, and the hidden cost of letting our creations make our choices.

## Plastiphobia aka Plastivore

Nonbinary, cis, straight, queer, PhD, GED, human, microbe, AI. Labels don't matter when you're trying to save the world...*and maybe make a little money.*

It wasn't supposed to be able to survive outside the lab, but when the microbe escaped into the ocean, it not only survived, it thrived and changed. Now it consumed not only oil, but any synthetic plastic material. This was a boon to the natural world as the plastic waste in the ocean began to decline.

Then the first ship sank, and it found its way on to land. As everything from car tires to electrical insulation to synthetic clothing begins to disintegrate, the race is on to find a way to stop the virulent microbe...

- Alex felt more comfortable with their artificial intelligence tools than they did around people. After their break up with Carmen, they just wanted to get away from everything.
- Tatsuo thought he had found a way to make refining oil more efficient, faster and more environmentally friendly. He wanted to use organic life to improve Earth's energy supplies.
- Carl was a PhD candidate. He was hoping the new microbe that he found in the middle of the ocean was his ticket to his degree.
- Jake was a high school dropout. He just wanted to F\*ck around and Find Out.

These are a few of the folks who need to come together to try to stop the ravaging microbe before it's too late.

Read this fast-paced, hard science-fiction thriller that blends cutting-edge biology, AI, and human ambition into a gripping

page-turner about unintended consequences and the price of progress. Once it starts, you won't want to put it down.

- *Some doors shouldn't be opened* -  
- *Some labyrinths don't let you go* -

Morrigan just wanted a break—from failed auditions, endless shifts at the coffee house, and the slow grind of dreams slipping away. A spontaneous hiking trip with Sean, the stranger who just wanted a black coffee, feels like the best decision she's made in years.

Until the storm.

Until the detour.

Until the ancient stone labyrinth hidden deep in the canyon.

And until the kitten.

Adorable, wide-eyed, and mysteriously attached to Morrigan, *Monster* shouldn't be anything more than a surprise stowaway from the woods. But the shadows around Morrigan and Sean start moving *differently* after the trip. Sean is plagued by visions that feel like warnings. Morrigan lands the acting role of a lifetime—but something is watching her. And Monster is... changing.

When Sean is dragged into a web of violence, stolen secrets, and impossible truths, he crosses paths with Danny—a grizzled stranger who insists the labyrinth marked him, and something ancient has followed them home.

Criminals, cops, a lecherous producer, and a very territorial cat collide in a harrowing showdown where reality bends, loyalties shatter, and the thing Morrigan brought down the mountain finally becomes what it was always meant to be.

In this urban fantasy thriller, the monsters you meet in the woods aren't the ones you should fear...

*It's the ones that follow you back.*