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FALLS

By

Luke Anthony Thominet

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Graduate Studies Office

2012

## SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

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ABSTRACT

FALLS

By

Luke Anthony Thominet

Greg gets a call one morning from the police, saying that his father, Neil, is missing. Then Slim comes by for a visit, saying Neil is in trouble. The problem is: Slim has been dead for six months. These events send Greg back to his rural hometown, and ultimately to the underworld in search of Neil. After Greg runs into trouble and doesn't return, Susan, his very pregnant wife, goes to the underworld to look for her husband.

Separately, these two modern characters enter an afterlife split in two by ideologies, each seeking to eliminate the other. Greg and Susan face danger at every turn as they search for each other and for a meaning to life and death.

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2012

For the humid summer stars  
On nights we spent pool-side,  
For the gin we kept on ice,  
Those times you spoke of war

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So many people have been absolutely essential to the process of writing this thesis. I need to start by thanking my mother, Jennifer Thominet, for her constant support and encouragement. Without her, I would have never even pursued graduate studies. I also need to thank Jen Howard, who has been the best thesis director any writer could hope for. Your encouragement and insight have been irreplaceable. Next, I want to thank my readers. I couldn't ask for a better audience to test this story. Finally, I need to thank all the amazing people I've met in the Upper Peninsula. Thanks for the late night talks and cold beers. This book is about the U.P., and the only one I know has all of you in it.

This thesis uses the guidelines provided by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.



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## INTRODUCTION

*Taking a Hike: Short versus Long-form Fiction*

During the autumn of 2009, I went for a hike in the woods a few miles from Marquette. I was alone that weekend – being new to town, I had made only a few friends, and they had gone their different ways for a few days. Yet, it was a beautiful, warm day, and I had to get outside. Even in early September, I was already anticipating, with no small trepidation, the grey, bitter winters of the Upper Peninsula. I told myself that pleasant days shouldn't be wasted.

An even stronger urge truly sent me outside, though. In the back of my mind was an impending due date. I was in Rebecca Johns' fiction workshop at the time, and she encouraged us to write long-form fiction. I had a huge chunk of writing to figure out, and I hadn't even started.

One part of me definitely wanted to play it safe, to stick to writing a collection of short stories. I've always felt that I'm a better starter than finisher when it comes to fiction: An idea germinates for a while in my mind and then bursts full-force onto the page. After writing for some time, though, that initial growth seems to wither – it doesn't die, but rather seems to measure out its own end.

It wasn't the length of the project that really scared me, but the concept of writing a novel. Now more than ever, being a few drafts into *Falls*, I believe in Charles May's theories on the genres of fiction. In his essay, "The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction," he says that the novel and short story are innately opposed (May). He goes on

to say that the novel “takes place in the social world,” whereas “the short story is the primitive, antisocial world of the unconscious” (May). This might seem to paint the short story as the scarier project of the two, but it has never been so for me. It is easier to deal with these isolated fragments of experience, these insular, antisocial realities that I’m much more familiar with than it is to recreate the world.

When I write, I like to be surprised, to feel passion for the characters, to let them move and act as they please. Short stories let me play around with plot. I can drop the second half of the story on a whim. To build a fully real society, to understand the minutiae of its workings, (in short, to write a novel) requires planning and forethought, but I feared, in doing so, I would make my characters too predictable, stealing the discovery and excitement from writing.

My previous attempts at long-form fiction had done just this. They became long, repetitive explanations, bogging down on their own predictability shy of one hundred pages. Maybe this should have been a warning to me – but it served as just the opposite. Those past times had failed – I told myself – because I had not taken the project seriously enough, because I’d been too skittish, too willing and able to move on.

A thesis, however, did not allow the luxury of quitting. I knew completion would be easier with a hard-line, surly Director breathing down my neck about word counts and due dates (a marvelous plan foiled, for obvious reasons, by choosing Jen as said Director). These three semesters of thesis hours seemed to be the perfect time to finally overcome the difficulties and conquer my fears.

There was only one problem – I still had no idea what I was going to write my thesis on.

*Down the Rabbit Hole: Speculative Fiction*

In the interest of honesty, I've felt indirect pressure to write more seriously during my time at NMU. It seems that everyone else is tackling big issues appropriate to our degree in "Fine Art." Right or wrong, this was never my style in the past. Instead, I wrote and read because it entertained me.

My "pleasure reading" bookshelf (being defined as books I was not required to read) from the past three years would have: Borges, Camus, Eugenides, Oates, and Steinbeck. But it would also have: Attwood, Alexie, Bradbury, and Vonnegut. And don't forget: Neil Gaiman, Steven King, George R.R. Martin, and Orson Scott Card, among others (most notably all the nonfiction I've read in that time). All I'm trying to say is I switch up my reading a lot (and I enjoy some less than "literary" fiction).

As an undergrad, I did the same thing when writing. If I remember correctly, my application portfolio included stories about: a man turning into a tree, an elixir of life being sold through an infomercial, and a morose story about a dead man regretting his life (though I might have included the beginning to my first novel attempt, which was set in a post-apocalyptic Pacific Northwest controlled by woodsmen). I was always experimenting with plot, with point of view, with structure, but most of all, I was stretching reality. It was fun.

For my workshops at Northern, prior to starting my thesis, I wrote a handful of short stories that I can recall off the top of my head: 1) a failed romance set in Ireland, 2) a failed romance set during the first transcontinental road trip, 3) a failed romance set

during a modern transcontinental road trip, 4) a failed romance complicated by a dying mother, and 5) a grandson's attempt to save a dying grandfather. So, maybe these descriptions are oversimplifications of those stories, but for my thesis I wanted to do something fun, something a little off-beat (and not a story of a failed romance or dying grandparent).

It probably doesn't help that I was reading Orson Scott Card when I was deliberating over my prospectus. At the time, I'm pretty sure I was about halfway through his book, *Magic Street*. For those not familiar with the book (probably the vast majority of the reading world), it is a modern retelling of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with an African American cast set in modern day Los Angeles:

Titania flew with Mack Street in her arms, soaring over the buildings and streets of Los Angeles. The Santa Monica Freeway like a river flowing with cars. Hills that in her own country were thick with forest, but here were thick with houses. Still, the glory of Fairyland peeked through here and there. In the lush gardens tended by the hands of Mexican laborers. (Card 378)

Unfortunately, it is also a very, very flawed book with shallow characters, a sometimes incomprehensible plot line, and, often, truly awful prose.

Still, I thought, "I want to do something like that." It reminded me of what I loved so much in Neil Gaiman's books, especially *Neverwhere* (a modern *Alice in Wonderland* set in the London Underground). Something about that idea of combining modern life with a supernatural reflection of it appealed to me. It seemed like a fun thing to write. And why not enjoy writing as much as possible?

Fortunately, I'd already started such a novel – the one for Rebecca Johns' class. After much thought, I decided to use my time to finish that novel (or, more accurately, completely rewrite it from the beginning).

It is necessary now to return to that hike I took back in September of 2009. Like I said before, it was a beautiful day outside. I chose to walk a well-worn trail that one my friends had taken me to before. While passing into the woods, I noticed things I hadn't seen before, back when a full contingent of conversation and distraction had accompanied me. Leaves littered the trail, their lemon-colored flesh shot through with sanguine veins. The trees creaked around me, groaning in a breeze that sounded like static, or maybe like rushing water. And the path itself, it was obscured in places up close, but always evident in the distance.

Ostensibly, my goal on this journey was to find a waterfall. When we'd visited this trail before, my friends had claimed that such a thing existed at the end of the trail, but we were never able to find it. So I came back, intent on solving this mystery, even if I never would be able to write good fiction longer than fifteen pages.

I spent hours, climbing along that empty path. I carried with me a book of fairy tales and stopped in a sunny space near a steep cliff to sit and read. The stories brought me back to an earlier time, when the woods weren't so colonized by the constant presence of other humans, but rather by the presence of the unknown. As I sat there, several small clusters of people passed me by, reminding me not where, but when, I was.

As I recall it, though my mind surely has created some of this day on its own, I found the twin trees not long after leaving my sunny reading place. I remember it like this: the path wound up a steep ridge. I was keeping my eyes on the ground, wary of

twisting an ankle. And then, in front of me, so close that I almost ran into them, were two trees springing from the same roots. They stood in the middle of the path, arcing up away from each other and into the sky. Their bark was that feathered type and soft to the touch. No other trees dared approach within ten feet of these twins.

The path slid around either side of them, tracing the ways that so many others took, but I knew, beyond a doubt, that I had to step between them. I climbed up the path towards the trees and wrapped my arms around one, pulling until I was standing between the two. I stood for a moment, resting my hands on the trees, feeling them, before stepping through the gap.

I'd gone down the proverbial "rabbit hole." I knew then that I'd entered a different place. (Or maybe I'm just a strange person. Perhaps now is the best time to mention I've read *Alice in Wonderland* more times than any other book. Anyone entering my office might surmise this from the giant tapestry of Alice meeting the Caterpillar. It should come as no surprise that my initial love of the absurd sprung from that story.)

I never did find the waterfall that day, but I did run into a dog that stood, hackles raised, growling at me. And I managed to get slightly lost while taking a short cut. And I heard gunshots (I hoped from hunters and not murderers). All told, I probably spent four or five hours out in the woods. When I finally dragged myself back to my waiting car and sped out of there, the dream of my novel was already forming itself.

The day grew in my mind as I drove home. I knew that I'd entered a different place by going through those trees. I knew that the waterfall was out there somewhere, waiting to be found, and that it would, almost certainly, hold important secrets about life.

That was how *Falls* started. Over the next few days, I wrote the beginning to my novel, a story of a man who goes searching the underworld for his dead wife and daughter (which was, in retrospect, a little bit of overkill). By the time my piece was due, I already had forty-five pages completed. By then, though, I also thought the whole story was a waste of time.

*Afterlife in the Garden of Eden – Ancient Mythology and Judeo-Christian*

Before getting down to the “nitty-gritty,” I have to say that my original work wasn’t exactly a work of art. I hope I’ve improved on it greatly in subsequent rewrites, but all the concepts were there in the first version: an afterworld, a waterfall, Slim and Neil. It just wasn’t quite “right” yet.

I looked again at Rebecca’s feedback before deciding to rewrite *Falls* for my thesis. I want to quote the opening of her comments here because it made difference:

I have to say this is certainly one of the most inventive pieces of fantasy that’s ever come across my desk. Its world is fascinating and highly original. So much fantasy relies on forms and ideas that have gone before, so I’m always impressed when I see something truly unique. ... Although the idea is unique and drives the story, it’s in the execution that the good idea seems to go somewhat astray, especially in the second chapter...

In those few words, Rebecca summed up my general impressions of all my long-form fiction attempts: good ideas, questionable execution. Her words were positive enough that I stuck with the piece for another twenty-five pages before abandoning it for dead in early 2010.



The biggest blow to my consideration of rewriting *Falls* for my thesis was actually a word from the first complimentary sentence of Rebecca's critique: *fantasy*. I knew, for this final piece of my MFA, I did not want to write a mere *fantasy*. That term engendered in my mind the worst type of escapism, the type that caused grown men to dress in puffy shirts and don swords each year, only to drink themselves stupid at a renaissance faire. It was a term meant for using magic to fix plot holes. It meant a structured, predictable story I'd read a hundred times over.

I didn't want *fantasy*. I wanted *myth*.

Aside from *Alice in Wonderland*, some of my favorite stories have always been myths. I've sought out mythology courses at every level of education and devoured the books given to me. Traditional mythology has always been a part of common consciousness. Ernst Cassirer said myth could fundamentally influence our expression of experience:

From this point of view, myth, art, language, and science appear as symbols not in the sense of mere figures which refer to some given reality by means of suggestion and allegorical renderings, but in the sense of forces, each of which produces and posits a world of its own... Thus the special symbolic forms are not imitations but organs of reality, since it is solely by their agency that anything real becomes an object for intellectual apprehension. (Cassirer 8)

We can see here just how modes of understanding become generative of complete realities in Cassirer's theory. Lacking a removed, objective existence, Cassirer instead believes that the true qualities of material things are derived from how we express our perception of them.

In this way, I couldn't truly hope to create a fully new mythic work, but I might feed off of our existing collective consciousness. So, in developing my new world, I turned to existing myth, both Ancient Mesopotamian and Greek and Judeo-Christian. I should start with the underworld myths. Even before I came to NMU, I was interested in the repeated mythic view of the afterlife as a physical place. In ancient Mesopotamia, Ishtar (the goddess of fertility) traveled yearly to the underworld, where she was stripped of her powers:

Indeed, the daughter of Sin did set [her] mind  
 To the gloomy house, seat of the ne[therworld],  
 To the house which none leaves who enters,  
 To the road whose journey has no return  
 To the house whose entrants are bereft of light  
 Where dust is their sustenance and clay their food (Foster 78).

Later, the ancient Greeks and Romans sent their best known heroes to be tested in the underworld (notably Aeneas, Hermes, Heracles, and Odysseus all traveled there). The belief in this place became so great that several "death cults" (notably that of Adonis) thrived in ancient cultures (Frazer).

I'm not sorry to say that my conceptions of the afterlife have borrowed shamelessly from these myths. Much like Odysseus, my male hero, Greg, travels to the underworld in search of his father. The female hero, Susan, is summarily stripped of her power in the underworld, and her lover is, for a while, distracted and oblivious to her fate. From the above quote, I even stole the idea of the subsistence of the dead, when Evii tells Greg, "we were surrounded by fruit trees, [but] allowed to eat only dirt."

I didn't stop with the mythology of the "ancient world" though. No modern "mythological consciousness" would be complete without acknowledgement of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In this case, I was even more shameless, borrowing character traits and plot openly. I built each of my major "afterlife" characters from biblical figures. Aidan and Evii (Adam and Eve) reject their father and seek to build a life of their own. Their actions cause a falling from grace in which all are punished. Mikeel (the archangel Michael) wields the flaming sword to slay the dragon.

Lucy (Lucifer) was the probably the most developed of these "afterlife" characters. Her original conception was built on what I believe to be a Muslim myth. (I wish I could be more specific, but I have no citable source for this other than my memory.) The myth told of how the devil loved God above all else. He loved God so much he refused to adore anyone else. God had demanded that the devil love and respect humans, but he couldn't. It was because of this overwhelming love that the devil was banished. I took this idea of the devil loving too much, and flipped the around the object of love. Lucy, instead of loving God above all else, listened to the order to care for Man (the deceased, in her case) above all else. Her devotion to the deceased clashed with tradition.

Finally, on the topic of mythology, it seems necessary to mention the influence of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. While I did not try to stick to Campbell's mono-myth exactly, the initial steps of my novel were envisioned with an awareness of said structure. Greg, at least, follows many of Campbell's steps: the call to adventure (Slim's visit to the office), supernatural aid (Slim's second visit), crossing the threshold (the Cyprus trees), belly of the whale and road of trials (the attack by the Black

Coat through the fall), meeting with the goddess (seeing his mother), atonement with father (yeah... that one's obvious), etc. (Campbell).

*Forming Broken Narratives – Multiple Points of View and the Upper Peninsula*

At the same time, I've purposefully avoided a fully "mythological" plot. Much like my aversion to the idea of *fantasy*, I've wanted a story that reflects modern as well as mythological consciousness (though assuming I could do anything else might be overly complimentary of my abilities as a writer).

My initial draft of the story switched to a different close third person narrator with each chapter. For obvious reasons, this became unwieldy after only a few chapters. Still, in my mind, I knew I didn't want to tell the traditional singular "hero" story, but one with a foundation of a multifaceted world-view.

The inclination to tell the story mainly through the alternating view points of a husband and wife was actually sparked by another Orson Scott Card novel. In *Lost Boys*, Card tells the story of a Mormon family who face many real life problems after they move to a new town. About ninety percent of the book is realistic, but running through it is an eerie undercurrent – the other ten percent is a ghost story about murdered children. This focus on the everyday lives of the characters, on the family drama being narrated through the husband and wife, caught my attention. It clearly fit my goal of making fantastical elements organic to a story while not being the focus of it. This goal was well served by the alternating viewpoints, allowing Card to focus of the interactions between characters rather than a singular goal-driven plot.

My other attempts to vary and complicate the point of view were made with a bit less direct inspiration. Originally, in the first few drafts of the rewrite, my chapters were opened with bits of “found” documents. I’d included similar things in a previous story “LiveNow™.” The goal in doing this, as it was with most of my decisions, was to provide a more complete worldview. I felt like providing various documents from other “sources” within the story would help to verify what Greg and Susan were experiencing. Ultimately, this feature was scrapped because it interfered with the flow of the narration and acted as little more than an aside. I replaced it with a number of smaller point of view characters, which was also subsequently scrapped.

Finally, I settled on using only one additional point of view throughout most the piece, that of Slim. His voice allowed the dramatization of a few key scenes that neither Greg nor Susan could possibly experience. It also did something else: it expanded the story while keeping the balance between Greg and Susan. One fear I had when writing with multiple points of view was that the reader would latch onto the first character and ignore the second. By letting Slim speak first and last, while taking a backseat for the majority of the story, I was trying to place Greg and Susan as just two pieces within a continuity of other possible stories – as a piece of a greater mythology.

### *Final Words*

Previous to reading the novel by the same title, I read Card’s short story *The Lost Boys*. (I’d like to take this moment to nominate myself for the award of most Orson Scott Card references in a MFA thesis.) This story was equally intriguing in the way it integrated the magical into the everyday. In the case of the short story, Card wrote from

the first person, including many details from his own life, while creating a fictional eldest son who was murdered. In the afterword, Card said he met with reactions ranging from “annoyance to fury” for appropriating “the grief of a parent who has lost a child” (*Maps in a Mirror* 119). Card defends his decision by saying, among other things, that “ghost stories are most powerful when the audience half-believes they might be true” (*Maps in a Mirror* 119). Can’t the same be said of any story? This is why I’m strive for the *Alice in Wonderland*-style of movement from the real to the fantastic, why I’m opposed to real problems being solved by magic, and why I think strong characters with real desires have to be the foundation for any good fiction.

I’ve been trying to decide how to finish this introduction, but, like usual, inspiration has eluded me. Meanwhile, Marquette is having unseasonably pleasant weather again. All my friends are busy. I’m thinking I may just go for a walk and see if I can find the waterfall this time.

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## PROLOGUE

Slim knocked on the front door. Under the stolen trench coat and double-breasted suit coat, his body was wrapped in pounds of ice. He'd secured the bags to his already bulky frame in the vain attempt to stay cool, but it was summer out and hot even at late at night, so he could feel the cold water dripping down his legs and pooling in his cheap loafers.

Slim could hear some movement inside the house: floorboards creaking under slow moving feet. He looked around himself, at the house's white siding, at the green trees, at the rusty pickup parked in the driveway. He'd never expected to be back here again.

The locks clicked open, and slowly the front door swung. Neil stood there, a day's beard bristling about his face. "Slim?" he asked.

Slim nodded. "Can I come in?"

Neil turned around and started walking away. "Close it behind you," he said.

Slim followed his old friend through the house, padding lightly, even as his loafers squished and left wet tracks behind him.

In the kitchen, Neil was dropping ice cubes into a couple lowball glasses. Then he uncapped a bottle of whiskey and poured a small amount into each. "I was asleep when you knocked," he said, handing the glass over.

Slim looked down into the cup, and breathed in the smell of the whiskey, the brown sugar, honey, vanilla, and the darker note. It made him think back to black nights at camp, near a small crackling fire. He gulped down the drink, placing the empty glass on the counter. "I want you to come with me," he said.



Neil shook his head. "You shouldn't be here. It's not right."

"Your wife's waiting for you."

Neil knocked back his own drink and then refilled the glass. He looked down at the brown liquid. "How are you here? I saw your body," he asked.

"Trust me," Slim said. "I'll show you the way."

## CHAPTER 1

Greg ran into his office building fifteen minutes late. There was a three-day weekend ahead, but with the baby shower on Saturday and the annual report looming. It'd be a godsend if he even got six hours of sleep each night. And Susan snored so much in her sleep now that his eyes barely closed before he was staring at the ceiling again or feeling his way to the couch.

Elise, Greg's assistant, stopped him on his way to his office. "Your 9 a.m. is in there already. Big guy. Smells funky. And Bob wants to see you about the annual again before the meeting at 10."

Greg nodded. "What's this guy here for?"

"He got here right when I did. Said you wanted to meet with him. I figured it was something you set."

"I don't remember –"

"Sorry, I can get rid of him. Go talk with Bob and the big guy will be gone before you get back."

A random meeting sounded better than explaining to Bob Striker, Vice President of External Relations and World Heavyweight Pain in the Ass, yet again that the annual couldn't be finished until all the divisions submitted their data. Greg shook his head. "I'll take care of this, Eli. Thanks though." He walked to the door, grabbed the doorknob, and clicked it open.

The place smelled like cottage cheese and roast beef left to decompose. He gagged, felt the bile rising in his throat, and would have turned around, calling for facilities management, security, or anyone else, except he recognized the person sitting in

his office. A face from his childhood. From the hundreds of times the portly man rumbled up in his rusty pickup. From mom's funeral, when the man's size alone had held Dad on his feet.

His skin was dark and bloated, but Slim smiled. "Damn good to see you. It was hell to get here."

Greg shuffled into the room, covering his nose with his blazer, shut the door behind him, and then sprinted to the wastebasket, heaving a thin gruel into it – no time for breakfast that morning – just bile, and water, and some coffee burning back up his throat. "Sorry."

"Don't worry," Slim said. "Decomposition's a bitch."

"You're dead."

"You don't say. I wouldn't blame you for opening a window."

Greg turned and slid the glass pane aside, gulping at the air as it flowed in. City air – smoggy, and hot even in the morning. But alive. He stayed there, his back turned, his head thrust out the window.

A phone call had made Greg late to the office that morning.

"Greg Camp there?" A man's voice with the strong inflection of someone from up north.

"This is he."

"Yeah? Good. It's Brad."

"Sorry?"

"Brad Jiles. Old basketball team and all."

Greg looked down at his watch. Five minutes till he had to leave. It was a hell of a time for reminiscence. “Look, I’m running late for work. Is there a number where I can reach you later?”

“Oh, no, sorry. I didn’t handle this right. I’m a cop now, eh?”

Now the face stuck – blond hair, friendly and lopsided smile. “I’m listening.”

“We were just wondering if you heard from Neil recently.”

“Dad? I talked to him on the phone earlier this week.”

“You sure?”

“Definitely. On Tuesday.”

The sound of a pencil scratching against paper came over the phone for a moment. “And you’ve had no contact with him since?”

“No. What the hell is going on?”

“Well, some people around here seem to think he might be missing. Right now, we’re still just trying to gather reliable information and all.”

As a child, nightmares of this would send Greg scrambling to his parent’s room. Parents, friends missing; people disappearing, never to be seen – it’d panic him nearly to the edge of hysteria. Now, he felt almost nothing other than annoyance. “Explain it to me,” he said, trying not to let impatience creep into his voice. “Why would anyone think my dad is missing?”

“Neighbors haven’t seen him. His bar’s been closed, and vandalized a bit, but not too bad. You know, they’re saying he’s not been around for a few days. Maybe three, maybe just two.” Was there a reasonable level of vandalism? “And we’ve got his vehicle in impound.”

“The truck?”

“Big Joe found it on the side of the road a couple days back, but just towed it in this morning. He said he knew whose it was and figured it didn’t hurt nothing to leave it till Neil came back.”

Dad would never just leave his truck. A tightness grew in Greg’s chest, but he still wanted to reach through the phone and strangle Brad. This was shit timing to hear a bunch of conjecture. “That all?”

“Yeah. We’re just checking around right now. You know, your dad’s a good guy, and the boys want to make sure he’s ok.”

“Are you handling the case?”

“It’s not really a case yet.”

“But I ask for you if I call, right?”

“Yeah, but we got it under control. It’s probably nothing anyways. He’s gone out fishing or off to camp, and forgot to mention it. Happens all the time – nothing to worry about.”

“Ok, Brad. I’ve got to go, but when you find him, make sure he calls.” Greg looked down at his watch as he put the phone back on the hook. He’d never make it to work on time. Since it didn’t matter, he picked up the phone and dialed his dad’s house, then the bar.

There was nothing but endless ringing.

Seconds ticked off with Greg’s head still thrust out the window. He stared off at nothing, hoping, wishing, that he’d turn around and find an empty office.

Slim's voice broke his peace. "We need to talk about Neil."

Greg didn't dare to look back. "What's going on?"

"He's in a fix and you have to help."

"I heard. The police have it under control. They said he was probably off fishing."

Slim snorted and then broke out laughing. "Neil fishing? He couldn't snag a tire."

"It's not funny," Greg said, but he knew Slim was right.

Slim's voice dropped an octave, low and quiet. "It's not under control."

Greg took one more deep breath before turning to look at the rotting apparition.

"Care to explain?"

Slim nodded, his bloated fat jiggling. He was dripping sweat. Pools of the water gathered around his feet. "So you'll come?"

"Where?"

"Back home, to North. I can't do this by myself."

"Come on. Give me something to go on here so I'm not making fantasies the whole drive up. What kind of trouble is Dad in?"

"Kid, you wouldn't believe me right now anyhow. Just meet me there, ok?"

"I've got to run it by Susan, but I'll come."

"Good. Give her my best. By the way, when's she due?"

"Not for a month." Greg paused for a second. Susan had barely been pregnant when Slim died. She wasn't showing. She moved normally and was preparing for

another semester of teaching. He was pretty sure they never had a chance to tell Slim.

“How did you know?”

“Tell you what, I’ll be at Neil’s. We’ll talk there.” Slim stood up and smoothed the suit jacket he was wearing. He walked right past Elise, through the middle of the office, past half a dozen people. A few covered their noses or turned their heads. But no one screamed or ran. No one seemed to pay any attention the dead man.

Greg did. Maybe because he had known the man for so many years. Maybe because he had gone to the funeral and viewing with the oversized coffin just a few months ago.

Slim was dead – that much was sure. Poor diet and morbid obesity had left him lying on his beige living room carpet, clutching his chest and pressing the speed dial for Neil, while Christmas tunes crooned out of the stereo.

Three days later Greg had arrived in North with Susan. The funeral had been small – maybe two dozen people showed up. Most of them were acquaintances from around town, people just stopping by to pay their respects. Calls had been placed to the more important people, the ex-wife, the estranged son, and the members of the various bands Slim fronted over the years. Only vague letters of condolence showed up. Slim was forgotten history. He was lost baggage – a great mound of old disappointment and weathered flesh.

Of those who actually attended the funeral, Neil was the only one to cry. He broke down at the sight of his life-long friend piled into the casket. Greg did what he could to comfort his father, something he hadn’t been strong enough to do eight years earlier, when it was Emily Camp, Greg’s mother, in the casket.

The funeral progressed rapidly, almost business-like. Neil gave a choking speech. Tinny speakers played out a couple of Slim's hits: *Just a Lonely Highway* and *Sky Walkin'*. And that was it. Several large men muscled the casket into the waiting hearse and drove it to the graveyard, where fresh snow covered the ground. The grave was a dark cutout in the pristine canvas.

In the office, Greg watched Slim disappear through the doorway for the stairwell. Seven stories to go down, but a kind act for anyone who would otherwise have been trapped in the elevator with the man and his stench.

Nearby, Elise was clicking through pictures of patriotic cats draped in American flags, completely indifferent to his presence. "Elise," he said. She slowly swiveled around in her chair and looked questioningly at him. "Call Bob and tell him I'm busy, but I'll see him at ten." Before he made any decisions, Greg was going to get coffee, and maybe something to eat.

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Summer stretched on. Less than a month since classes had ended, and only a month more till her due date, but the time seemed indeterminate. Susan spent every day sweating in the AC at home, but she also made sure to get out, to do things when she could. She painted the nursery in pastels, but not pink or blue – they had decided not to find out. Then, she washed every surface of the house, even in the basement floor.

Now, while sitting on the sofa, sketchbook in hand, her feet on the coffee table and a glass of lemonade perspiring beside her, she was trying to figure out how to reshingle the roof without Greg noticing. The project had already been delayed until



after the weekend's baby shower to avoid any snooping relatives spotting the changes. Then, she'd have nearly ten hours a day from the time Greg left for work until the time he got back. In her condition, she figured it would take two days to finish each quarter of the roof, stripping the old shingles the first day and nailing down the new ones the next. The biggest problem was the front of the house and the side near the driveway. Greg would almost certainly notice if the shingles were completely gone one day, and the moment he did, he'd guilt her beyond all reason into stopping. She didn't think it was his decision to make.

During previous summers, she had trained for marathons and triathlons. She pushed her body every day, looking for that new personal best, for that next moment of inner silence. She came home exhausted and relished the chance to put her feet up and have a glass of sangria – the orange slice floating on top. It was so wrong that she had to be the one to give up all that.

Her baby kicked. Susan glared down at her bulging belly. "Pipe down," she said. "I'm trying to think."

This summer was driving her crazy. No matter what she did, it never felt like enough. She took long walks, going further and further out from the suburbs. She created little projects for herself, caught up on things that needed to be done. But none of it left her the least bit satisfied when she lay down to fight through another night's sleep, trying to adjust to lying on her side so her back didn't hurt so much.

At six, Susan heard Greg pull into the driveway. It was early for him to be home, especially recently. She stashed her notes on the shingling project and went to meet him at the door. That morning, he had called home, saying they needed to talk, but he hadn't

said what it was about. She was mildly curious, but foremost in her mind was the coming weekend. She'd even made Greg promise not to go into the office at all.

Tomorrow would be the baby shower. Her best friend, Kathy, had been planning it for weeks. They were supposed to meet at Kathy's house at noon and proceed from there. Of course, the shower itself wouldn't last that long, but afterwards, hopefully, there'd be a crib to put together. And Monday was the Fourth of July. She and Greg were invited to a barbecue in the afternoon, and later there'd be fireworks.

Susan opened the front door and watched as Greg dragged himself from the car. He pulled his briefcase out of the back seat and walked around to the front porch, taking each stair slowly. When he finally reached the top, he pecked her on the cheek and said he had to leave for the weekend, then he walked past her.

She'd been hoping they could go out somewhere tonight, even just down to the park for a walk once the air cooled a little. But it looked like there was little chance of that now. She caught up to him in the kitchen and leaned against the breakfast table that would usually be covered in neat piles of students' homework, tagged with red pen and numbers.

"And where exactly are you planning on going so last minute?" she asked.

"Dad's gone missing," he said.

"Have you checked with Cindy?" She was Neil's new girlfriend. They'd been together for a few months, and he sometimes spent a few nights at her house.

"It's not like that," he said, crossing his arms. "The cops called."

Susan pushed herself up from the table and placed her hand on his chest. "I'm sorry, honey. I didn't know it was that serious. What did they say?"

“That he’s fine and that I shouldn’t worry.”

“They’re probably right. He can take care of himself.”

He wrapped his arms around her, and pulled her in. “He can, but there’s more: I talked to someone else too, and now I just want to go up there and check it out. You know I’d be happy to go to the shower with you, but this can’t wait.”

“Who did you talk to? What did they say?” she asked.

He was quiet for a few moments. She listened to his heart beating. He always did this when he was thinking of how to phrase something. And often when he wanted to bend the truth. “It’s difficult to explain,” he finally said.

She tilted her head back and looked up at him. “Fine. Then you can tell me on the drive up.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

She pushed back and squared her shoulders. “He’s a dad now to me too. He’s going to be the grandfather of my child. I’m sure not going to get left behind to sit and worry about the both of you all weekend. If this is important enough that you need to go, I should too.”

“That’s kind of you, but it’ll put too much stress on the baby. We’ll reschedule the shower so I can go too, but you have to stay here. I’ll call Kathy for you. Why don’t you go out shopping or relax at the spa...”

Too much stress on the baby. She’d heard that line one too many times. Her doctor told her to stay active. Greg seemed to think she should be under house arrest, convalescing. “Make your choice, Gregory Camp, but if you want to go, I am not staying here.”

“Fine,” he said and then sighed. “But you have to try and take it easy.”

She picked up a list from the table, and, rising up on her toes, she kissed him on the cheek. “I’ve got to go pack. You call Kathy and help her contact the rest of the ladies to reschedule.”

They got a late start after the phone calls and packing. And with several rest stops, which Greg huffed about until Susan made a fist and threatened to use his bladder as a punching bag, they didn’t pull into North until nearly two in the morning.

But the drive itself generally wasn’t unpleasant. The low hum of the road beneath the tires made Susan’s eyelids feel heavy. About twenty minutes out of the city, she raised the center divider and laid her head down in Greg’s lap. He wrapped his right arm around her, resting his hand on her stomach.

They had gone on a road trip for their one-year anniversary the summer after they graduated. Greg had already secured his job with E. Thomas Group, but had delayed his start date for a few weeks so the two of them could weave their way west, until they could see the last grains of land before the deep wide blue. They’d left all their things in their college apartment and just gone. No planning. No cares. Back before he spent long hours slogging down coffee and before he started talking family. Back when she thought they could still outrun real life, and she spent most of the trip curled up, sleeping through the vast plains and red rock cliffs, listening only to the road.

Susan awoke, bleary-eyed, from her nap just after sunset, while a haze of light still clung to the sky. The radio stations had already turned to static and then to country ballads and rock bands singing about the saving grace of God.

She raised her head and looked around. Boundless Midwestern fields stretched off into the dark in all directions. Still dairy country. They wouldn't hit the woods for some time yet. "How long was I out?"

"Just an hour. You were so peaceful."

"I was remembering the road trip." Over the years, it had become something of lore, something they could cull whenever things got rough.

He nodded. "My favorite part," he said, "was when you'd pop up, looking guilty, and ask if I needed you to drive. Still with a line of drool down your cheek."

"I didn't drool," she said, but laughed and rubbed her eyes, slowly coming back to the present. It had been only a handful of years before, but it seemed like a different life entirely. Things changed far too quickly. That or they didn't change at all.

She asked him to stop soon and he promised to pull over at the next rest area. Then she laid her head back down on his lap, and asked, "Can you please tell me what happened now?"

He sucked in a deep breath through his nose and held it for a moment. She could feel the tightness in his stomach. "It'll sound stupid," he said. "Hell, I don't even know that I really believe it."

She was silent as he recounted Slim's visit to the office. He backtracked his story several times, adding in more and more detail – the way Slim's skin looked blackened and bloated and, of course, the smell – before he finally got to the part where he had promised to go to North. No details on what actually happened to Neil. Just Slim, dead, in the office. A strange story, even unbelievable. She didn't know what to think. Greg wouldn't tell this kind of lie.

So when he finished, all she asked was “How did the other people in your office react?”

“They saw him, but they didn’t really realize what he was,” he said and then pressed down on the brake pedal, swerving abruptly to the shoulder.

Susan sat upright, looking about. “Something wrong?” she asked.

He put the car in park and turned toward her, looking into her eyes. “I’m not just seeing things?”

Her eyes, sharp and dark, were back on his face. “And I’m not saying that.”

“But you don’t believe me.”

“Come on. It sounds like one of those stupid ghost movies, but I’m just trying to find out more details. Do me a favor – look at me. I’m here, right? I care. So can we just skip the whole hurt and pissed off stage?”

“Can I say something?”

She stared back stonily, not responding. When they had started going out, his protective, chivalrous behavior seemed cute. Before long, though, it became apparent often as a defense for a man who hated to be wrong, to be questioned; who wanted to be above reproach. She’d given him notice early on that such actions were unacceptable. And he’d done his best. The rest of the time, she learned to put up with it.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You’re right. But try seeing it from my side – I feel like an idiot right now, chasing after Slim – but I can’t just ignore what I saw.”

Her features softened and she smiled slightly. “You are an idiot,” she said, “but you’re my idiot and I love you. And I do believe you saw Slim, but sometimes we see what we have to. I know you’re worried about your father. Trying to find him is the

right thing to do.” She leaned in and kissed him lightly on the lips. “Now can we get driving again? This roadside is starting to look like a rather appealing bathroom.”

“Little one’s at it again, huh?” Greg said and put the car in drive.

“You have no idea,” she said.

## CHAPTER 2

The town was quiet by the time they arrived, the bars long closed. No one roamed the streets. Greg slowed the car down to a crawl. A streetlight flickered above as he pulled over to the curb and put the shifter in park.

“What are you doing?” Susan asked.

“Just want to take a look around. Won’t take long.”

He opened the door and cool air rushed in. It didn’t smell like anything, not like sewage or exhaust, or millions of bodies breathing and sweating and coughing. Only air and water, only freshness. He took a deep breath and stepped outside, leaving his door open.

From where he stood, he could see most of the main stretch of old downtown North. Back when his grandfather had moved there, it had been a major mining town in Copper Country, but the mine had shut down decades ago, leaving the picturesque buildings and inhabitants to slowly wither and die. Without jobs, most of the families just moved away. So few kids were still born and raised here that they’d closed the schools while Greg was still in them, shipping them half an hour to a new, consolidated school. Now North was almost solely a seasonal town, most residents coming for the mild summer and fleeing before the first snow.

On one edge of his view, Greg could see the old courthouse, a monolithic 19<sup>th</sup> century structure built of stone blocks, now converted into a hotel. This holiday weekend, it was probably over capacity with tourists, looking for a quaint backwoods to escape the city life. On the other side of downtown rose St. Anne’s – the only other large building in town. It was a nearly defunct diocese now, but used to be the guiding light of



men who were stuck below the earth most hours of the day. Out beyond the church, about three quarters of a mile away, and just out of view because of the buildings, was Lake Superior – the horizon of Greg’s childhood, beyond which was surely the end of the world.

Main Street lined with storefronts, catering to the rich summer visitors and their tastes – ethnic restaurants, niche boutiques, and organic food shops. Gone were the old places, from before North tried to re-envision itself, from before the affluent southerners trickled up: the barbershop and hardware store, the comfort-food family diner. During the winter, North’s residents were forced to drive nearly twenty miles through drifting snow to the nearest MegaMart just to buy their groceries.

Greg barely recognized the town now. He hadn’t lived here since high school. In the dark of the night, everything was battened down. The trendy stores weren’t just empty – they were dead.

Across the street, a large window was busted in. Jagged shards, still clinging to the frame, sparkled in the streetlight strobe. Looping letters were spray-painted on the walls. There never used to be any crime like that here – probably the work of some out-of-towners who didn’t give a shit. It’d be cleaned up in no time.

He walked over to get a better look. Back when he was a kid, Senior’s Hardware had been in that storefront. Senior, a burly, blond-haired old man, had crooked, grey teeth and could fix just about anything. Now, the hardware store had been closed for years. Ever since, Senior was little more than a ghost, appearing only in bars.

Greg crunched over loose glass and walked up to the window, squinting inside. There were no tools, no paint, or small drawers of nails. Instead, all the walls were lined

with clean metal shelves, packed with tiny little bottles. The store, *L'Eau de Toilette*, now occupying the space, sold perfumes and scented candles. The smell of the wares wafted out in noxious floral clouds.

Inside, a sack lay on the floor about a dozen feet off. It wasn't until it stirred and snorted, then turned and looked at him, that Greg realized it was human.

"Who there?" the rag-clad figure asked, standing and walking towards the window. Senior looked worse than ever. His face was dark and dirty and his front teeth were missing, replaced by an empty hole of utter black, his lip collapsed down over it, sagging. Yet somehow he still looked powerful, with wide forearms and a big, solid stomach. "Wait," he said, "aren't ya Neil's boy?"

"What're you doing in there, Senior?"

The old man ignored the question. "Your dad's gone missing. And the damned bar's been closed." From the sound of the man's voice, he hadn't been wanting for drink.

"I'm trying to find him," Greg said. "Why don't you come out of there?" He reached out his hand. "Come on. I'll get you a warm shower and a bed for the night."

Senior scrunched up his face in concentration. "Nah. Won't do at all." He fished around in the rags he wore and pulled out a glass pint of dark liquid, unscrewed it and took a long drink. "There's lots of cleaning to do first."

Greg tried one more time. "You sure?"

Senior looked down at his feet. "Glass everywhere. Damned kids got no respect."

Greg already had enough on his hands and honestly didn't need to be taking care of a drunk tonight, but Senior needed someone. He pulled out his phone while walking back to the car and dialed Brad.

"Hullo?"

"Your dad's down on Main," Greg said. "He's in his old shop and drunk. You ought to get him inside somewhere for the night."

"Wait, Greg? You're in North. I told you we had this under control. You think you could stick with him for a few while I get down there? Then we can talk."

"Sorry," Greg said. "I got to go. See you around." He got back to the car and slid through the open door.

Senior called out one more time from across the street. "Tell your dad that me and the boys will be back soon as he gets the place open."

Never doubted that in the first place. Greg slammed the door shut and thrust the shifter in drive and stepped slowly on the pedal.

"Who was that?" Susan asked.

"An old man I used to know," Greg said. "Let's just get to the house. We both need some sleep."

Susan reached out and brushed his face with the back of her fingers. "It'll be all right, honey."

The house stood back off the main stretch about a mile. Greg drove through a gauntlet of for sale signs on the way. The few people who still lived in North were finally throwing in the towel. Neil's house, at least, was its same old self, except the

truck was missing from the driveway. Impounded – no matter what, that would have to be taken care of before they went back south. No sense in paying extra fees on the beater.

He pulled in and shut off his car. The grass was unmowed and it slicked his shoes with dew as he hauled the luggage to the front door. Fumbling through his keys, he looked for the old tarnished one, his first key. He pushed it into the lock and turned. The door swung open easily.

At least the inside was clean. His father had let so much go the past few years that Greg expected the house to be a refuse pit. But the floors were mopped, the trash empty, and the dishes clean, sitting neatly in the drainer, save for a lone cup next to the sink, a circular coffee stain at the bottom.

All the windows on the ground floor were open, whirling a breeze through the house that kept it cool, comfortable. But it was obvious why they were really open, why everything was so damned clean. If he hadn't been expecting it, he probably wouldn't even have noticed, but a faint scent held to the house, a nauseating odor of rot and decay.

He walked into the kitchen, leaving the bags by the door, and flipped on the light switch, illuminating the evidence he was looking for – a note in Slim's hand on the table. Simple, short.

*Meet me at the bar tonight. Many things to talk about. -S*

Greg picked up the note and handed it to Susan as she walked through the door. "What do you think?" he asked.

She looked at the paper, brow furrowing for a moment, then back at him. “I think,” she said, “that we should wait until morning and make sense out of everything after some sleep.”

Greg frowned. She was right.

“But I also think,” she said, “if we try to wait, you won’t get any sleep.”

When Neil had built the bar, it had been bright and cheery, white with red trim on the outside, and potted plants and terra cotta tile inside. He wanted it to be a friendly place, a space to escape the cold and wild of North.

It wasn’t really even a bar then. He brought in a baker who made crisp, slightly salted bread that was placed hot on each table. The chef’s menu rotated regularly, but featured meals like pork and potato pasties and fresh whitefish with sweet potato fries.

Then, during summer, after ten, it was twenty-one and over. Neil turned the lights down, pushed back the tables, and brought in bands from Milwaukee, Chicago, and Detroit. The place filled up fast, and the dance floor wouldn’t ever empty until after last call.

And Neil had been grandmaster of it all. During dinner, he stopped by tables and served drinks behind the bar. At night, he went up on stage for a song, dragged by the pleas of the lead singer, to “show his chops on axe.” He was still there at last call, ushering happy drunks out the door, smiling and shaking hands with old friends.

Greg had taken Susan there to meet his parents. His mom had insisted Susan call her “Emily,” saying, “Oh, you sweet thing, you’ll be family soon enough, and I can’t

have you talking like a stranger to me.” It took him more than a year after that to propose. By then Emily was already dead, but somehow she’d known.

Without her financial guidance and emotional support, Neil’s became a proper bar pretty quick. And then a dive. The last time Greg visited, after Slim died, the bar had been honestly sad. The kitchen was boarded up. Sticky patches on the floor were left to fester. Paint hung in strips from the walls. And Neil had followed his bar south, a mangy beard bristling about his face, his cheek sunken, and bright red veins scarring his nose.

That was only a month ago. Now the bar managed to look even worse. A broken window out front was patched with a sheet of cardboard. Torn police tape hung from the front door. The white “N” from the “Neil’s” sign lay on the ground encrusted with dirt.

But the inside of the bar flickered like a jack-o-lantern. At first, it appeared to be on fire, but there was no thick, choking smoke as they pulled open the front door. Instead, an overwhelming gust of floweriness rushed to meet them. Susan coughed and her eyes watered. Greg took a deep breath of fresh air and pinched his nose. It was like burying your face so deeply into a bouquet that you couldn’t even breathe.

The inside was lit by hundreds of scented candles, votives in small glass jars. Slim sat in a large metal tub filled with ice. Next to him a huge menorah sprouted tapers burnt down to the nub and spilling over the sides. He clutched an aerosol air freshener in his right hand and was spraying out a steady stream as Susan and Greg walked in. Slim smiled as he continued to coat the air. “Figured it’d be better like this. Mood lighting, and,” he looked at the can in his hand, “spring mist.”

“Give it a rest with the mist,” Greg said. “Isn’t that stuff is flammable?”

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Susan's shoes crunched across glass on the floor. The candlelight illuminated the wreckage. The huge mirror that hung behind the bar had been shattered, and the bar stools lay in pieces on the floor, random circles and rods of wood through which a single path lay, probably cleared by Slim. Huge, bubble letters of graffiti were smeared across the walls. In the half-light of the bar, it was difficult to see what was written there, though she could make out a tree and some numbers.

Susan and Greg walked to the back, weaving through the wreckage. Once they were near, Slim motioned to two stools. "Take a load off," he said. "I'd suggest a drink, but there's nothing left. It's a damned miracle that they missed enough seats so we aren't squatting on the ground."

Susan sat down. Up close, the whites of Slim's eyes were yellowed and run through with dark veins. His skin was taut and dark – decomposing. She wanted to turn and run, to get out far away as fast as possible.

Slim smiled. "How long now?"

Reflexively, she ran her hand over her stomach. "35 weeks."

"You look radiant," Slim said.

"This isn't the time," Greg said. "We need to know what's happening."

Susan glared at her husband. He didn't appreciate what she was going through every day. Did it hurt so much to even acknowledge it? "Thanks, Slim," she said. "I'm sorry my husband's so rude, but he's concerned about his dad."

Greg stared straight ahead, not looking at anyone or anything, like a child who had been chastised. Susan kept her eyes on him, not blinking, waiting for him to apologize.

The moment of silence was broken by Slim. “So, I messed up big this time. What I got to say might not make a lot of sense, but then again, it’s me, right? A few months ago, I learned that your father wasn’t doing so well. I sometimes visited Emily –”

“You saw Greg’s mom?” Susan asked.

“Yeah. I mean she’s dead, like me, but not like this.” He motioned to his decaying body. “This gross shit doesn’t happen there.”

Susan looked away. Small shards of glass sparkled like glitter on the floor, like a thousand stars, twinkling in the night sky. Like heaven. “Is there a God?” she asked.

“Aw, hell,” Slim said. “I don’t have a clue. Just let me tell my story, please. All I know is that I died, woke up, and was in there.”

“Where?” Greg blurted.

Slim took a deep breath. “It’ll go faster if you just let me tell it. But everyone there calls it Falls on account of the waterfall.”

Slim’s story began shortly after he died, just as he went tumbling over the precipice. Falling and falling, hitting the bottom. Lungs filling with icy rush of water. Fighting to the surface. Coughing, gasping. Lights, twinkling out in the darkness, past the end of the lake.

Then he swam, his limbs exhausted, burning. Knowing he wouldn’t make it, he struggled forward, but the shore never seemed to get closer. Others swam around him,



multitudes paddling, pushing forward. Most eventually tired, stopped, and sunk like rocks, melting into the depths.

“I don’t know why, or how, but after a long time, just when I had meant to give up, I felt smooth stones below me.”

But so many hadn’t made it. Was death just as capricious as life? Susan didn’t want to believe that. Her mom was religious, going to church every week, even after Susan’s sister’s suicide, she still kept going. Susan had lost her faith over the years, filling it with the half-assed faith of a part-time believer, but she still wanted a better world than this, one with rewards, with punishment, with infallible justice.

“I stood and rushed forward,” Slim said. “Fighting against the water.”

And then when he couldn’t walk, he crawled, sinking his fingers into the gravelly shore and shoving himself onwards. Finally, his hands touched dry land and he gave one last heave. He seized onto to the shore and just lay there, panting. The air was cool on his bare skin. “Only then, away from the cold and pain,” Slim said, “did I realize I was naked.”

A few years back, Susan had trained for her first triathlon. She’d never been a competitive swimmer, and that first time she tried going a mile was hell. By the end, her legs were almost useless. She remembered finishing her final lap and crawling out of the pool only to lie on the edge for a while staring at the rafters. It was the closest she ever came to giving up on a race.

“After a long time,” Slim was saying, “I finally rolled over and looked back at the lake.” The waterfall towered above him, rising up into the sky, wide and tall. It didn’t look far away, but, even nearer, so many swam, leaden, towards the shore.

He locked eyes with a young man, dark skinned, barely thirty, who had hard muscles and was fit. That man's eyes were full of fear – wide, flashing slices of white. But there, barely fifty feet away, in shallow water, as the man stopped, his eyes softened. His face went slack. Slim watched him slip, without a ripple, below the surface. Behind, another man came crashing on forward, flailing, splashing water. Hardly anyone made it.

Then Slim felt a soft hand on his shoulder. He looked up. Emily was there, looking stunning, clothed in a simple white robe, and with her golden hair falling free in waves down her shoulders.

Her voice like honey, oozed from her lips, deeply, softly. She told him she was glad he made it, and then asked if he was cold, offering offered him a robe.

“Then she took my hand and I turned my back on those struggling towards shore.” He stopped his story and barked out a laugh. “Now you got no questions?”

Susan's eyes blinked several times, then she traced the outlines of the floor tiles, hexagonal stone pieces outlined in dark, grimy grout. The waterfall. The lake. Emily – an angel? Slim wouldn't answer that question. “Falls,” she said, measuring the word. “What's it like?”

“It ain't heaven,” Slim said. “Near the beach are some woods and old wrecks of buildings that aren't used anymore. Then there's a town center and some fields. Really, it's not much. Most people don't stay long. After all the work to get there, most eventually walk down into the river and never come back.”

“A river?” Susan asked.

“The water flows out from the lake. I don't know where it goes. I never tried following it.”

The watch Slim was wearing gave out a harsh beeping noise. “Sorry, I got to finish this quick. Here’s what happened with Neil: Lucy’s got these things that look like TVs, and we can see the living through them.”

“Lucy?” Susan asked. “Who’s she?”

“Just someone you go to when you need things. She lets us see people we miss. It makes it easier, sometimes. I’d watch Neil. And he was up and down. You know he was seeing Cindy still at the time, and he seemed happy when he was with her.”

“They broke up?” Susan asked. They’d been going out for almost a year now.

“That’s what I was saying. He beat himself up over it. He still held onto Emily, no matter what. Leaving Cindy was the first thing he did after I came to see him, after I told him I saw him from Falls. He went over there and told her that he still loved his wife, and that he couldn’t be with anyone else. I swear, that woman didn’t know what hit her.”

“Wait,” Gregory said. “Two steps back first – how’d you manage to come here and see Neil?”

Slim sighed. “It ain’t easy getting out. There are a couple of old timers in Falls, these geezers who found ways to stick around. Only they knew the way, and they don’t give information like that out for free. There’s always a price.”

“What did they want?” Susan asked.

Slim’s eyes flashed wide for a moment, then he looked down at his watch. “Just stuff, really – medical supplies and the like. I really got to get going.”

“Not yet,” Greg said. “Mom – why didn’t she come to see Dad?”

“I didn’t ask,” Slim said. “The geezers would have charged more – I know it. And besides, most hours, I’d find her sitting under a tree, just staring off into nothing, or maybe beyond it. She told me how tired she was of waiting. I started to think she’d be going into the river soon, leaving for good, you know. And I felt bad, knowing Neil probably wouldn’t see her again. That’s why I had to come for him and not the other way around. But, please, no more questions now. I really, really need to leave. Neil’s stuck there. The Bluecoats – they’re the guys who run the place – they have him. He needs your help. I need your help.”

“I need to think about it,” Greg said.

Slim picked up a damp piece of paper from next to the tub and handed it to Greg. “This will get you there. I’ll be waiting. You have to come. Think it over, talk it out, but do it fast because there isn’t much time.”

“Who are these ‘Bluecoats’?” Susan asked. “And why did are they holding Neil?”

But Slim was already up and out of the tub, dripping water as he jogged through the rubble towards the door. “I’ll explain later. Trust me.”

And then he was out the front door and gone. Greg was holding the piece of paper in his hands. Susan looked around the bar. Only then did she notice the puddle of water that had spread out from where Slim had sat, like he had been sweating an absurd amount. “Let’s get out of here,” she said. “We can talk at your parents’ house, and then get to bed.”

Pocketing the map, Greg nodded. He stood and helped Susan from her chair and they picked their way to the front door.

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Slim knew he should have left earlier. His body ached as he pedaled his bike through town in the early morning. He'd been away from Falls for too long, and he had decomposed so quickly over on this side. Sure, all the ice helped, but it wasn't enough to stop his bones and skin from bloating. It felt like he was being slowly torn apart from the inside.

That wasn't the only reason he wanted to get back. Originally, he'd planned on sneaking back into Falls before the morning sun. Now, though, he'd have to traverse all the paths in the light of day, out in the open where he was almost sure to be seen. And if the Bluecoats started asking questions, what could he possibly say?

He wished there had been another way, wished that he hadn't needed to bring Neil's kid into this mess as well, but Eithne had said Neil was in danger. There wasn't any other choice. Slim couldn't get through to Neil, the stubborn bastard. And it wasn't like Slim could just go to Mikeel and explain everything. If that self-righteous prick got even the slightest whiff of Slim's involvement, it'd be time to say goodbye to this second chance at existence.

Slim turned onto the highway, and started pedaling uphill towards the entrance to Falls, cranking heavily on the bike to keep it moving. It was a rusty old bike from Neil's garage, a pain in the ass with gears that clicked and ground when he tried to shift down. He stood up, time and again, stepping down with all his weight, but the bike inevitably slowed to a halt, and he had to walk it up the rest of the hill.

He'd "borrowed" Neil's truck from Big Joe's Impound for the drive down south, but, wish as he might, he couldn't abandon it on the side of the road and get Joe in trouble. So he'd snuck it back into its place as soon as he got back to North.

Cresting the top of the hill, Slim straddled the bike again and pushed off, resting his feet lightly on the pedals and feeling the cool wind in his face as he caught speed.

## CHAPTER 3

Greg was exhausted. He tried to get some sleep, but nightmares plagued him. He saw Susan being hurt, molested. The dreams were hazy, partially built things that melded into his thoughts just as he was drifting off and forced him back awake.

He had to be the man, had to take charge and protect her. She never understood. Her last words before going to sleep were “What time are we going to meet Slim tomorrow?” He’d been in bed only an hour, maybe an hour and a half, before the dreams and Susan’s snoring chased him from the room. Feeling hung-over, he stumbled to the kitchen. The map Slim gave him sat on the kitchen table. It was crudely drawn, like by a preschooler’s hand.

Instructions were written on the back:

*Drive about five miles west out of town on 530. Look for a cardboard sign that says “Falls.” (I made it for you, otherwise, it’s damn hard to find.) You’ll need to park and go into the forest.*

*Now the tricky part. You are looking for two identical cypress trees that are right next to each other (like 3 feet apart). They will look out of place. You need to pass between them.*

*Then will you see the path. Stay on it. I’ll meet you along the way.*

–S

It wasn’t much to go on, but it would have to do. Greg went to the closet and reached into the pocket of his coat, taking out the keys. He bounced them in his hand, feeling their weight. It couldn’t be helped. He felt bad about taking the car, but Susan could always get Neil’s truck from the impound.

He packed a few quick things from the basement, dust-covered hiking supplies that had belonged to his mother – a water bottle, old iodine tables, and a poncho – throwing them all into a small backpack.

Then Greg walked around the house, looking for a piece of paper. Finding Slim's original note, he turned it over and wrote a note to Susan on the back. Then he crept back into the bedroom, gathering his pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and a pair of his dad's boots. He left the note on his pillow beside Susan. Taking one last look at his sleeping wife, he left, closing the door behind him.

Half asleep, he drove the streets from muscle memory alone, winding back through the still town and out onto the thin, dark highway – a potholed strip of asphalt that the county didn't even plow fully in the winter.

Half an hour later, the tires on Greg's car crunched to a stop on the shoulder of the road. Slim's instructions had been useless. He crawled along, up and down 530, as wide-load logging trucks, piled with massive trunks, came hurtling up on him – those murderous trucks, with evil, glowing eyes. He drove the same stretch a dozen times over and still saw no sign.

He did the route one more time and stopped just over four miles from town. Of course Slim hadn't even bothered to mention which side of the road the sign would be on. Greg grabbed a piece of paper from his glove box, an old oil change receipt, and scrawled a quick note on it to the towing company:

*Big Joe,*

*Please do not tow my car. I assure you I will be back.*

*Thanks,*



*Greg Camp*

He got out of the car and put the note under his windshield wiper. The last thing he wanted to do was hitch a ride back town. Buttoning his shirt to the neck, he started trudging down the road. The sun was up, but the long shadows of the trees still covered the roadside. It would probably be humid in a few hours, but hopefully he would be back in the comfort of the house by then, joking with Susan about how it all had been a simple misunderstanding.

A distinct side of him didn't want to think that he was going to the afterlife. It wasn't remotely possible. Just a bunch of superstition fed by religion. Of course Slim hadn't been remotely possible either. Greg felt like smacking himself. He'd already decided on this. It was time to just do it.

And there the sign was, just like Slim said, but on the ground and soggy. Two muddy tire tracks nearby. Probably from Neil's truck. Those were a much better marker. *Falls*; the sign even an arrow pointing the way. How convenient! Greg pushed the sign stake back in the ground and sighed.

He turned into the woods, fighting his way through tangled brush. A few steps in, though, it all cleared out, replaced by wide-spread pines. Thick, huge trees, spotted about the needle-strewn ground. Certainly old, though probably not old-growth. Had this area been logged before? Most had. This close to North would be a prime spot, easy access, easy transport. But he didn't know. It only interested him now because it meant that this secret entrance of Slim's might not be all that ancient or hidden.

It was cool in the shade of the pines. Hazy mist hung just above the ground. He'd seen it before, when he was young, hiking with his parents. But it was ominous

now, otherworldly. He tried to walk as directly as possible away from the road and the civilization it entailed while trying to keep his mind off the task at hand.

He thought about Susan and the baby. It'd be a good idea to get out of the city more. Maybe his job was necessary, but it didn't mean his child should grow up never knowing the forest, never staring at stars, real stars, not just a lone dot or two but a blanket.

Birds chirped from unseen places among the trees. Far off, water or wind rushed by in a soothing static. This would be a good place to raise a family. No, North had been a good place, back when he was young and something real was still left. Why did places like this die, or if not die, then become grotesque and disfigured by progress?

Then he saw the mist again, felt the cold of the woods. No, this wasn't the realm of some wonderful childhood dream. It was eerie, dangerous. He had to remember that.

If he kept his head up, and eyes open, he might just—

Greg stopped in his tracks, tilted his head slightly. He looked back down at the letter from Slim – *they will look out of place.*

The trees stood a dozen yards off. Huge roots arched up out of the ground twisting together into two massive trunks. Bark full of deep chasms. Leaves obscured by dangling grayish moss that looked like old clumps of dust. The trees were shorter than the pines, but much wider.

Sure, they were out of place, but the forest continued on all sides of them. The note said to walk between them. The roots were bound together between the trees, forming a sort of slightly arched path. He was liable to twist an ankle trying to cross that. And there was no telling what was on the other side of those trees.

Of course there was something. He took a few deep breaths to steel himself. Despite all the doubts, he wouldn't have left Susan and come out here by himself if he expected only a leisurely walk in the woods. And so it made sense to be afraid, to want to turn around, to walk away from the trees, not through them.

He folded the note, stuck it in his back pocket, and approached the tangled bridge. Carefully, and mainly on his toes, he picked his way across, trying to not trip. A twisted ankle even this close to the road would be a real problem. He knew that was why you weren't supposed to hike alone, but who could he have possibly brought with?

When Greg reached the peak of arching root path, it was clear that the forest beyond was no different. There was a small path, little more than a deer trail, leading away from the trees. He clambered down the roots and began to wind his way through the woods.

Nothing changed – still the same pines and low-lying shrubs. Only, he could hear the stream more clearly now, a gentle but persistent rush and gurgle of water.

His mom had loved hiking. Likely, only a few miles away, was a trail that Greg had walked before. Every week, regardless of weather, Emily would wake the family and drag them into the car, down some winding roads, and to a dusty trailhead. They didn't talk much as they walked. Greg always knew she craved the silence – it somehow made them closer to not have so much noise between them. She kept it up, kept bringing them all out there, despite the men's protests and petulant, weary stumbling disturbing the peace. It was her weekly prayer, her cathedral. And she kept going even after Greg had gone away to college.

Until she died driving home. It was winter. Greg had been in his third year downstate, at the university, already with Susan. Neil had a cold and had begged off.

Snow and slick roads and *those fucking trucks*.

And after that, neither Greg nor Neil woke up early on a weekend to go hiking. Over half a decade and neither cared to step onto a trail. Always, it was Emily who'd planned, and packed, and remembered the locations of the paths they hadn't visited in a while. She remembered how important it was for them to spend time as a family.

She remembered the water too. Greg had already downed his supply, realizing how parched he was only when the stream came in sight. He'd walked in a near trance for some time and the air was already heating up, promising a hot, muggy day. He hoped the iodine tablets weren't expired.

Gregory stepped off the path and thought he could see someone standing in the middle of the stream. Did the person wave? The silhouette was motioning him on. Not big enough to be Slim, but the backlighting from the sun's reflection on the water was so brilliant it could be just about anyone.

But then he emerged from the edge of the pine forest and could see everything more clearly. The river's edge was lined with supple green moss and deep doughy mud, the kind he loved to play in as a child. Rows of nearly identical weeping willows ran along the bank, their sad garlands drooping down. Small silver fish swam about through the eddies and ripples of the flowing water. Infusing and surrounding everything was brilliant sunlight. Greg paused and looked up at the sky, spotted with drifting white puffs.

This place was too perfect, too idyllic, especially for an entrance to the underworld. It was more like an advertisement for vacation condos or antidepressants.

“Is this some sort of joke?” Greg asked.

But the man still looked like a shadow, skin jet black, face featureless, clothing only a uniform black robe. “Looking for Falls? Come on, it’s just over this way.”

“But where’s the grand entrance? Security? Anyone can wander through here and wade across.” Greg stared down at his feet, now thickly ensconced in the wet mud.

“I hate to tell ya, but everybody goes there eventually. Damn many already have. Not so hard to get in then, huh?”

“Yeah, but who are you?”

“Say I’m Sam. That mean anything to ya? Or I’m Shaun? Then what?”

Nothing of course. “Slim send you?”

“Course he did. So ya coming or not?”

Greg hiked up his pants and started wading out into the river. “Fine. Lead on.” The rocks under the water were slick and he had to let go of his pants and any hope of keeping them dry to keep his balance. He trudged forward, sloshing through the water.

The man waited until Greg was near, and then lunged out, grabbing him by the elbow.

Greg tried to pull his arm away. “It’s all right,” he said. “Let go.”

But the man gripped tighter, and pulled a long knife from his belt, a curved wicked blade. “Don’t worry,” he said. “You in good hands.”

“What?” Greg pulled back harder this time, twisting and tearing at the hand that held him, but couldn’t budge it. The grip held fast, hand cemented to Greg’s arm.

The man raised the knife over his head. “Sorry, brother, but this is your end.” He elongated this last word, drawing out the letters, and then licked his lips.

The knife flashed down at Greg’s face. He ducked away, squeezing his eyes shut, waiting. Nothing happened. He opened his eyes, keeping his head tucked down. The cool blade pressed against his cheek.

The man was blackened, charred. Tight skin clung to his skull, little more than dark tissue paper. And his eyes were white globes, seemingly visionless.

“What are you?” Greg asked.

The man smiled, showing off rows of long white fangs, and swept the knife cleanly through Greg’s skin. There was no pain, but warmth trickled down. The man laughed and licked the blade.

Greg turned his head left and right, looking at first, but then just shaking it. This couldn’t be real.

“Don’t go nowhere on me now. This is livin’, pleasure, pain. It don’t last.” The creature pressed the point of the knife slowly into Greg’s arm. “Feel it all.”

A throbbing sting erupted out from the point, and with it, a pressing, tight fear. He needed to flee, but Greg’s mind was locked onto that singular pain. He looked away, ready to throw up.

The blackened man started laughing, high and raspy like steam whistling through a small hole, as he slowly dug the knife deeper. Then he yelped.

The grip released, withdrawing the knifepoint and pain. Another pitch-black creature was behind the knife-wielder, this one a woman. She was taller than the first and

had black hair that draped nearly to the ground. Her hands were around the other's throat.

The knife-wielder made gurgling noises and flailed about, striking with its hands and its knife, but not making any contact.

“Let it go.” The woman's voice was low and powerful.

Greg's arm ached, blood slowly running the length of his forearm and dripping from his fingers. He clutched at the wound, trying to stop the flow, but never taking his eyes from the burnt creatures.

The knife-wielder nodded. “Yes, please, I do what you say.” The woman took her hands from his throat and it opened his mouth wide, sticking out its tongue, a single drop of blood sitting pearl-like on the tip. But it stopped, smiled and reversed its grip on the knife, spinning and stabbing at the woman.

She was faster, catching the knife-wielder's arm with one hand and gripping his throat again with the other. “You shouldn't have done that.” She twisted the creature's arm back and plunged the knife into its throat. The blade sunk in and a rush of ash poured out, like sand from a broken hourglass.

Greg turned and ran. Only two steps. Then his boot struck a submerged rock. Everything was slippery. He fell forwards, hands out, trying to brace. A large boulder in front of him, coming at his head. His hands extended, but the surface was too slick. His palms slid right off, barely slowing his fall as his head hurtled down. There was a brief, sharp sting, and then the world went black.

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Susan stood in Neil's bar running a flashlight beam back and forth over the walls. It was dark outside, night already, and the graffiti was cached in shadow, impossible to read, but she already knew what the words there said – someone else knew about the path. And they were painting the picture for anyone who looked.

The front door to the bar creaked, and she spun around. A shadowy figure stood in the doorway, holding a bright blinding light. Susan squinted and tried to shade her eyes. "Who's there?" she asked.

Earlier that day, Susan had rolled over in bed, reached out for her husband, and heard the crinkle of paper. She opened her eyes. He was gone, only a note in his place.

*Dear Susan,*

*Needed an early start and couldn't stand to wake you. You looked so peaceful sleeping. If you're feeling up to it, call that cop, Brad, and get his help taking Dad's car out of impound.*

*Love,*

*Greg ♥*

Susan sighed and rolled over. It was an asinine move – abandoning her, running away. It wasn't like she'd come to North just to sit around and worry. She could have done that back home. But knowing Greg, she still should have expected it.

Her baby started to kick inside her, so she sat up and rotated her head, feeling her neck click and pop – her forehead felt like something heavy had sat on it all night. A full night's sleep, though – no waking in the middle of the night with her bladder bursting –



she couldn't remember the last time that happened. With a concerted effort, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up. Yawning, she stretched and shuffled to the bathroom.

Sitting on the toilet, she wondered about the time. How long ago had Greg left? When would he be back? Today? Tomorrow? What if it took more than a few days? Susan breathed deeply. Worrying wouldn't help. "He will come back," she said aloud. For now, she would just need focus on what needed to be done. Shower, then food.

While waiting for the shower to warm, she walked back into the bedroom and laid out some clothes for the day – a light cotton shirt and some maternity jeans. She had felt like such an idiot buying those things. She picked them up and tugged at the waistband, promising herself to slim down again after the birth.

After showering, she scoured the pantry. Box after box of generic sugary cereal: Sugar Flakes, Honey O's, Marshmallow Madness. At least Neil had an unexpired half empty carton of milk in the fridge door. She opened it and sniffed anyways – smelled alright.

Susan tried giving Greg's cell a call. No answer of course, so she flicked on the kitchen television while she ate. The local news was on, and she only half paid attention until she recognized the location. The reporter and a wiry haired man were standing in front of the same storefront with a broken window from the night before. Weird. She turned up the volume. Something about catching a tagger who'd been terrorizing the town.

The man was saying how he was "terribly shocked at the damage done to the store." Then they flashed a picture of the suspect on the screen – Senior – that was who

Greg had spoken to last night. It'd been too dark to tell. For years now, every time she had come up, the old man had been a fixture at Neil's bar, sitting in the corner. She'd always felt sorry for him. He seemed so alone.

Then suddenly, the vandal story was old news and the anchors were talking about teen pregnancy. Susan shook her head and flipped the channel. Those dumb young girls were missing so much in life without even knowing it. But nothing would stop till someone found birth control that could temporarily sterilize teen boys. She rubbed her stomach. Give those girls a fighting chance.

Just one more bowl of cereal and then she'd plan the rest of the day. Again she wondered when Greg would be back. It was stupid, given what he was doing, but she couldn't help feeling jealous. Her day was only sitting around the house eating crispy grains and marshmallows and waiting for him to get back. Just eight months earlier, she'd been in much better shape than him.

But, of course, she also had reasons for wanting to go to the afterlife, reasons Greg wouldn't want to acknowledge. He wasn't the only one who had someone to look for, someone he lost. Maybe her sister would be there.

Megan had been three years older than Susan, just enough difference that their social spheres had always been awkwardly intertwined, but never convergent. When they were young, their relationship had been antagonistic, but they grew closer with time. By the time Megan left for college, Susan felt she was losing her best advisor and closest friend.

The distance reinserted that awkwardness between them. They talked on the phone when they could, but when Megan came home for fall break, she already seemed

like a different person. She had lost weight, losing that pretty childish plumpness to her face and gaining sharp angles that she highlighted with makeup. Susan's mother kept saying how pretty Megan was, while her father just seemed afraid.

Then Megan was back for winter break, and this time her hair was cut short, swooping up high in the back and dangling in the front in pointed tips that reached just below her chin. Megan's mother bemoaned the loss of such pretty hair and her father began to truly keep his distance, but Susan saw through the façade. Megan was still the same girl – the one with deep dimples and light blue eyes who loved cheesy romantic movies and popcorn.

They stayed up one night during break talking. At first, it was the same as the recent phone calls – distant, with Megan checking to see how Susan was doing, asking about school and boys and Mom and Dad. It took a while for either of them to open up.

“There's this guy,” Megan finally said. This guy was an art major and who made amazing paintings where the colors seemed to swirl out of each other across the expanse of the canvas. This guy had spent long nights with Megan talking about truth and beauty and, though she never did more than allude to it, fucking.

Two months later, Susan's cell went off at 2 a.m. She was already asleep, and woke bleary-eyed to stab at the answer button. Megan was crying. At first, it was difficult to make out her words, but eventually, Susan understood.

“He left.” And then, “I'm pregnant.”

This guy, this Mr. Truth and Beauty fled the moment Megan really needed him. Susan muddled through her responses, still half-asleep – you're better off without him, what will you do, love you, love you, love you, take care, good night.

It was the last time Susan spoke to her sister.

It wasn't the next day or the one after that or even the next week, but within a month, they got the call. Megan had taken a lot of pills. She was already gone when her roommate got back to the dorm. The baby never became more than a clump of cells.

Susan never told anyone about the midnight phone call because it was a secret between them and that was sacred. She had tried to bury her guilt from that. She only managed that through anger – at being made partially responsible, at being forced to hold that secret, at being left alone.

And she managed the anger by running. That was when Susan joined the track team and the cross country team – so she could have other people around who treated her like family, but also so she could run and run, going so far away from everything else and everyone who wanted to help her.

Now that she was pregnant, she wanted to talk to Megan and to yell at her, or maybe just to say that she was sorry. But it was stupid to even think of going out there. She'd never make it on her own. Not with her bulging belly. And it wasn't like the place was going anywhere.

The real problem was all the sitting around waiting. She had to get out. She needed a car. He'd mentioned the impound, but what competent lot would let someone not on the registration take the car? It was a small town, and it might just work with help from that cop friend of Greg's – Brad. She looked up the local police number and phoned in.

A deep, syrupy female voice. "North Police Department, is this an emergency?"

"No. I'm trying to reach Brad. Is he in today?"

“May I ask who is calling?”

“Susan Camp. Greg’s wife.”

“Just a moment.”

It was only in that lull that Susan realized she needed a convincing lie. Sure they’d come up because of Neil, but where could she say Greg was? What if they’d already found his car? It was probably near where Neil’s had been left.

A big and slightly too happy voice broke into her thoughts. “Susan! Any news on Neil?”

Susan took a deep breath. “Actually,” she said, “none yet, but I was hoping you might be able to do me a favor.”

“Sure, whaddya need?”

Ten minutes later, Brad’s cruiser pulled up outside of Neil’s house. Getting him to help retrieve the pickup hadn’t been hard. Susan just explained that Greg had gone out to search where Neil’s truck had been found and that she needed a car to get around. Brad didn’t ask any questions.

Susan was waiting outside on the front doorstep. It was a muggy day out, hotter than usual for North.

As soon as his car came to a stop, Brad came jogging around it. “Susan?” He was a tall man with a strong build and a wide, open face that showed emotion easily. In the uniform, he was actually pretty damn good looking.

“Yes,” she said, standing up. “Thanks for your help”

“You’re pregnant.” It almost sounded like a question.

“That’s what I’ve been told.”

He walked up to her and offered a tanned, burly arm like she was an old lady. Clearly hadn't spent much time around pregnant women. Too considerate to seem condescending.

"Thank you," she said. "But it really isn't necessary."

"Terribly sorry. Just had no idea you were, I mean Greg didn't say." He walked ahead and opened the passenger side door for her.

"It must of slipped his mind." She got into the car, clearing her feet so he could close the door.

Brad went around to the driver's side and got in. "You know, there's no reason you have to go. I could get one of the other guys to help."

"I want to. At least it's something to do."

"Already bored?" Brad smiled.

"Sounds horrible, huh?"

Brad shrugged. "You'd be surprised how many people get stir crazy round here."

"So what is there to do?" She'd been here several times of course, but had never been in charge of entertaining herself. If only it was a different summer, one where she could be running and training.

"Hiking, some shopping, the lake's probably nice today. And bars." His eyes lowered to her belly. "They have TV, and pool tables, and stuff. You don't have to drink."

"Where's a good place to hike?" It'd be nice to waste a little extra energy and forget about being stuck in the middle of nowhere.

“Bunch of trails off 530. But you’re probably looking for something closer, huh? There’s always the lakeshore. Path runs along it, real pretty. Personally, I like to go through the cemetery. No tourists and it has some neat old statues.”

Strange guy. What could be more appropriate? “Where’s it located?”

Getting the truck out of impound couldn’t have been easier. Brad’s overly helpful personality took over the exchange. He handled everything and even convinced Big Joe to not charge for storage. As she was leaving, he pressed his business card into her hand. “Give me a call if you need anything.”

She grabbed a few groceries on the way back – mainly ice cream and cheese. That was a new one. Cheese had always left a bad taste in her mouth – it was just moldy fat. Now, the taste was so enticing – nutty, sharp, with a mellow finish. She loved trying new kinds when she found them. This grocery store carried all of two choices – American and cheddar. She bought both.

It was only seven when she got to the house, the sun still a few hours from setting. She checked her cell and the house’s machine for messages. There were none. Knowing it still wouldn’t work, she also tried Greg’s cell again. Once you got away from town, reception just disappeared.

It was so tempting just to turn on the TV and fall into the couch. It’d keep her mind off Greg for a while. She even sat down and picked up the remote. But by nighttime, she knew she’d be antsy and nervous from being cooped up.

So she drove to the cemetery, parking on the road near the front gates. The nearby mines had drawn so many people that North was burgeoning on a small city

before the turn of the century. With falling returns on raw ore and the eventual mine closures, those days were gone. The graves remained.

The cemetery was an old place, its first seeds planted shortly after the town itself. Weathered stones stood like crooked teeth among the huge oaks and elms. Emily was buried here, but in a newer section with those small ornamental trees. A more modern, sterile place. Somewhere forward and left of the entrance. Susan set off in that direction.

The place was nearly abandoned – the vacationers were all at dinner, drinking and eating, not visiting old graves. Susan walked for a while, meandering in the same general direction, but detouring to look at old statues – angels with their faces worn smooth. She began to understand why Brad liked this place. It was tranquil in a strange way.

She didn't see even a single other person until she was near Emily's grave. A boy stood a ways off, his head bowed. Continuing to walk in that direction, Susan noticed his clothes first – a long trench coat and a wide fedora, the brim pulled low like some Dick Tracy detective. In the middle of summer, on a muggy day, it couldn't be comfortable attire.

His hands were moving. He was spray painting on a grave.

“Hey! You, stop that.” She started trotting towards him.

He glanced at her, but then took off running into the graveyard. She tried chasing him but quickly got turned around. He was gone, leaving only the strong scent of women's perfume. Had he been wearing a mask? As he had turned, his face was a solid field of black. Like there hadn't been a face in the first place. She found her way back to the vandalized grave and looked at it:

*Emily Marie Camp*



1958-2002

And then, scrawled in thick red letters over the part that should have read *Loving Mother and Wife* was 530 F.

The tagger. She checked her cell – two bars of reception. She took Brad’s card from her pocket and punched in the number. It rang two times before he picked up.

“Officer Jiles speaking. How can I help you?”

“It’s Susan. I’m at the graveyard and I’m pretty sure you’ve got the wrong guy behind bars.”

Within five minutes, a couple cop cars pulled up and parked at skewed angles outside the graveyard. As evening turned to night, Susan talked with Brad. It took a solid hour, in large part because he stopped every thirty seconds to inquire how she was feeling. “Need some water?” “Do you want to take a rest?” Then he needed the same details again and again as other cops taped off the area. What did he look like? A kid? Black, as in African American? No. A mask? Trench coat and hat? Which way did he run?

Only at the end did she finally get in a question of her own. “What was he trying to write?”

“Bunch of gibberish,” Brad said. “Don’t know why he bothers. Different thing every place. We spoke to some people down south who deal with this stuff more. They said he’s still trying to figure out his persona, his calling card.”

“Any idea about this?” Susan pointed at the F.

He flipped through his notebook. “Yeah. He writes it with the 530 a lot. Falls.” Susan’s stomach dropped, but Brad kept talking. “We checked out some campsites on the highway, but nothing was suspicious.” Then he stopped and looked at her. “You ok?”

She must have looked sick. “It’s nothing. Just the heat.” And the fact that it sounded a hell of a lot like Slim’s map was being spray painted about town. “If there isn’t anything else, I think I’ll get back home.”

Brad nodded. “Sure thing. You take care.”

Susan started to walk away, but then turned back. “Where else has he hit?”

Brad counted off the places with his fingers. “First, there was the break-in at White Crest General Hospital. Don’t know if that was the same person. Shortly after, it was the general store – he seemed to load up on ice and the spray paint there. Then the perfume shop last night, the church, and, of course, Neil’s.” He stopped for a moment.

The broken window. The writing on the walls. She had to go see.

“You know,” Brad said, “I’m not sure this is a coincidence.”

“Really?” Susan asked.

“Yeah, I mean, he hit Neil’s then here. It might be revenge or something.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. Actually, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll have a car drive by Neil’s house tonight a couple times, just to make sure.”

“Is that really necessary?”

“It’d make me feel better,” Brad said. “And if you would, I’d appreciate it if you have Greg call me as soon as he gets back tonight. I’d like to talk this over with him, see if he knows anything that might help.”

“Sure,” Susan said, and walked hurriedly away. She didn’t know why this person was painting the message, but it wasn’t revenge or random tagging. He was sending a message only she could understand.

Once inside the bar, Susan’s flashlight played over the spray painted walls. 530 Falls. A picture of identical trees, looking like a doorway. It was Slim’s path, hitting every important detail.

The front door creaked on its hinges. Spinning around, she found a bright light aimed directly at her eyes, and could only barely make out a figure holding it. “Who’s there?”

“Do you like my drawings?” The voice was high, almost girlish.

“They’re very nice. Who are you?” The light shut off suddenly, leaving Susan staring at a blue circle. She blinked, trying to dispel it and swung her own flashlight toward the door. A little boy stood there, squinting into the light.

“I’m Aidan,” the boy said. “Are you going to have a baby?”

“Yes, I am. Where are your mom and dad?” And why are you here? Why are you writing this message to me?

“They’re dead. I could take you to them if you want.”

Susan realized just how alone she was in the bar. And that the child was blocking the doorway.

## CHAPTER 4

Slim was in a cotton field just outside of Falls when he got the word of Greg's injury. The cotton had seemed weird when he first arrived – the plant was so foreign to the northern pine woods of Falls – but, eventually, he saw the logic. Mikeel, the leader of the Bluecoats, liked to keep the dead chaste and busy. The endless manufacture of white robes did just that. And since Falls seemed to have no clear seasons, the cotton grew steadily year-round.

Slim had spent the day helping the others harvest the crop, making sure to blend in and not attract too much attention. Like all the other workers, his bare hands quickly became crisscrossed with scrapes from the plants' dried bristles, but he kept at it, plucking the exposed fuzz and stuffing it into the sack that hung over his shoulder.

He'd planned on heading back to the path to wait for Greg as soon as his shift ended but noticed another man had worked his way over during the course of an hour or so, seemingly gathering at random from the plants. Slim made sure their paths crossed.

“Lucy wants to see you,” the man said when Slim grew near.

“Why?” Slim kept his head down, kept picking.

“All I heard was that she has a friend of yours. He got hurt coming here.”

“Thanks,” Slim said and moved away. It seemed Greg had gotten an early start – Slim hadn't planned on that, but he had to get over to Lucy's place as soon as possible. He kept picking as he worked his way to the edge of the field, near where it met the forest. Right before ducking between the trees, he looked up and around quickly to make sure no one was watching.

Then he ditched his cotton sack and started running.

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Greg came to, feeling cold and wet. He tried to use his left hand to wipe the water from his eyes, but pain tore through the arm. He screamed.

Then a voice came – a woman's. "Rest. I'm here."

Susan? No, far too low. "My eyes." His voice a coarse croak. Soft fingertips brushed along his eyelids, flicking away the moisture.

"I hadn't expected you to wake so soon. Regrettably, there wasn't time to dry you. I had to stop the bleeding and bandage your wounds."

He opened his eyes. It was dark. Soft light flickered, etching out curves of carved rock overhead. He had to be inside somewhere – a cave or mine? How? Then he remembered the nightmare, the faceless man with a knife – a vivid dream he'd have to tell Susan.

He tried to sit up, but his head swam. What had the woman said? Bandage? He fell back, as gently as possible, onto the bed. A bed? But it was lumpy and smelled like a barn.

The woman's dark face, the color and consistency of tar, came into view over him. The same as the nightmare. "Are you not feeling well?" Long black hair tied back. Skin pockmarked, crisscrossed with scars. Eyes simple white orbs, without iris or pupil. Blind perhaps, yet she seemed to look at him. She was not the knife wielder, but the other one.

"I'm fine." The attack had been real. This woman saved him, and evidently bandaged him as well. He glanced down at the swath of cloth bound round his arm.

“Here.” The lady offered him a ceramic mug with Team Building Exercise 1999 written on the side. “Drink.” He took the cup with his right hand, feeling no pain, and raised it to his lips, drinking. It tasted like chai tea.

Lowering the cup, he turned to look directly at her. “Who are you?”

“Does it matter?”

“The guy who attacked me said the same thing.”

“I’m not him.”

“I know. Thank you.”

She tilted her head. There was a strange innocence to the act that was heightened by her grotesque scars.

“For saving me,” he said.

She nodded. “He was wrong to do that.”

“Who was he?” And why won’t you say who you are?

“An old friend – he lost his way. Rest for now, though, and don’t worry about it. Slim will arrive soon, and then, I’m sure, you will want to go.”

“You know Slim?”

“He is a new friend,” she said. “Now finish the drink, it will help you sleep and recover.” He tilted the cup up again, finishing the liquid. Then she took the cup and walked away. She wore a simple white dress, tight to her slim figure, and her bare feet were covered in dust from the dirt. He closed his eyes again, trying to run through everything that had happened, but was too tired. Everything could wait. For now, at least, he was safe.

Slim was sitting by his side when he woke again, looking every bit as decayed as he had before. “Worried for you bud. I see you got a few bumps getting here.”

Greg rubbed his eyes. “Where were you?”

“Waiting down near Falls, ready to sneak you in, silent-like. Then I heard about what happened and got here fast as I could.”

“Is that so?”

“Swear on my mother’s grave, I never thought you’d have any trouble. This kind of thing isn’t exactly a common occurrence.”

“I was almost killed.” More awake now, Greg wanted to sit up, to rest against something, not his arms, so he wasn’t lying prone.

“Lucy wouldn’t have let anything happen to ya.”

“Lucy?”

“Yeah, she watched, just waiting for the bastard to show his colors. Then, bam! He’s done.”

Greg turned his head to the side again. Lucy, the one who you went to if you needed something, had watched the thing cut and stab him? If she’d just intervened earlier, he wouldn’t be lying bandaged in her cave leaving Susan and Dad waiting. He pushed the cotton blanket down and sat up. The world swayed, but he felt better.

“Whoa there, buddy,” Slim said. “Lady said it’d be some time before you’re going anywhere.”

“I’m fine.” He reached up and touched his fingers to his forehead and a twinge of pain shot through him. He’d need a real doctor. How much could she know living in a cave?

Lucy was walking towards him, a smile on her face. “Just a bruise.”

Past her, Greg saw the rest of the cave. The flickering light didn't come from candles or fire, but from a static-filled TV, an enormous wooden set. It must be where they watched the living from. The other furnishings were old and sparse. Tattered and worn chairs surrounded the television. And scattered about the cave were small lamps with decorative stained glass shades, all glowing meekly. Near a wall was a solid three-panel screen, painted with pictures of Japanese temples and cranes.

“Where am I?” Greg asked.

Slim smiled. “Sweet place, huh?”

Greg looked down at a thick wool blanket, out from under which straw stuck haphazardly. Now this belonged in a cave.

“I am sorry,” Lucy said, noticing his gaze. “I don't normally have need for a bed.”

“Can we just go?” Greg asked.

Lucy nodded. “Wait a moment first. I have something for you.” She went back behind the screen and returned with a cloth pouch. “Use these herbs if the pain is unbearable. Brew them in hot water for a few minutes.”

Greg looked from the pouch to the flickering TV screen and then back. Herbs? How about some good old-fashioned pills? He grabbed the sack. “Thanks.”

Lucy smiled, her thin, cracked lips displaying sharp teeth.

Greg stood and started towards the entrance. Slim followed after him and caught his arm. Just like the man in the river. Greg, heart pounding, spun quickly, ripping away from Slim's grip.



“What the hell do you want?” Greg asked.

Slim took a step back, and held his hands palm up. “Please don’t be angry,” he said. “I really thought you’d be ok.”

“I just want to find my dad,” Greg said. “And get out of this place, ok?” He turned his back on Slim and walked out of the cave, into the light. The sun lay directly ahead, blazing through thick gunmetal gray clouds, over a barren expanse. Perched high on the side of a mountain, he could see out into the distance, over miles of cracked, black ground. A tarry river sloughed along. Far off, a single spire rose from a deep crater. Nothing but desolation. He was lost.

Slim walked out and stood next to him. “Terrible, isn’t it?”

“What’s that?” Greg pointed at the spire.

“False: F-A-L-S-E. Mikeel and the Bluecoats make Lucy and her people live here.”

“Why?”

“Come on,” Slim said, turning around. “We want to go out the other side. There’s someone I want you to meet – one of the old timers. She’ll help us find you a way into Falls. Ever since Lucy offed the Blackcoat in the river, the Blues have been tightening down.”

“A Blackcoat? What the hell is that?” Greg asked.

“A Black is a Blue who followed Lucy and got burned by Mikeel. That was what attacked you in the river. Look though, I’m happy to explain, but we got to get moving.”

After taking one more look at the wasted land, Greg turned around and followed Slim back through the cave and silently past Lucy. It was more of a tunnel, actually. The

far wall, which he had thought to be solid was only an abrupt turn shielded by large boulders.

Out the other side, everything was green and alive again. As they descended the mountainside, away from the cave, Greg didn't look back, but he could swear Lucy stood at the entrance, watching him with her bone-white eyes.

At the bottom of the hill, Slim picked up a rusty, old bike and wheeled it along beside him as they walked. It squeaked continuously.

Greg took only a brief look at it. "Dad's old bike?" he asked.

"He probably hadn't used the thing in a decade," Slim said.

They spent hours trekking through quiet woods. Permeating the air was the soft, distant rush of the river. But other than that, only silence. No cars. No hum of machines. No birds even. They didn't stop till late in the day, long after the trees' shadows had lengthened and joined. The sky was still bright through the gaps, but the path was indecipherable from the forest around it.

Then a shadow of a human appeared ahead. Even in the failing light, the onyx skin was evident. Greg stopped and pointed. "We have to get out of here, it's one of those *Blackcoats*."

Slim laughed loudly. "Hey Eithne, he's scared of you."

A child's laugh answered. "Don't you know, Slim? I'm terrifying."

Greg followed tentatively as Slim approached the figure. It was just a little girl, no more than ten years old. Her face was black and scarred like Lucy's, but her eyes and teeth were normal, harmless.

“And I suppose you’re this ‘old timer’?” Greg asked. He was feeling better already. Just a little girl.

She nodded. “Slim’s phrase. Not mine. I’m still young at heart.” She skipped in a small circle, swinging her arms in an affected gesture.

“Sure ya are,” Slim said. “Just a cute lil thing.”

She stopped her skipping, facing them and cocked out a hip. Looking at her fingernails, she tilted her head to the side. “Damn straight and don’t you forget it.”

Ok, maybe not just a little girl. “Nice to meet you, I’m Greg.” He stuck out his hand.

“K. Now, if you don’t mind, we might want to get off the trail. Blues have been patrolling like crazy. I got a camp nearby. Sure you need a little rest.”

Greg couldn’t argue with that. He wanted to keep moving, but wouldn’t make it much farther. Everything hurt. The child led them back into the woods a few hundred feet to a natural clearing. A small lean-to was built from thin logs against a tree on one side. On the other, several stumps circled a fire pit, the kindling already set and ready.

“I’m sorry I can’t offer more,” Eithne said.

Slim dropped the bike on its side and stretched his arms. “Mind if I catch some Zs?”

“I’ll wake you when it’s time,” Eithne said.

“Thought you didn’t need to sleep,” Greg said.

Slim started towards the lean-to. “I like doing a lot of things I don’t strictly have to. Don’t you?” He slipped behind the screen of the branches.

“I made that just for him. Take a seat.” Eithne gestured towards a stump. “We need to talk.”

Greg plopped down on the log and leaned forward. “About what?”

“How to get you to your father.”

The plan was simple. They’d get Greg in close to the cliff-face of the waterfall. Then Slim would go take care of the hounds, Fall’s primary guards. Eithne would go into Falls and distract the Bluecoats while Greg got down the cliff. Then it’d be up to him to find Neil.

“Let’s wait till night though,” Eithne said. “I blend much more nicely then.”

“Why are you doing this?” Greg asked.

“I’ve plenty of good reasons. Just trust that I want you to get Neil out of here. Now go sleep for awhile. You need it.”

Greg got up and went behind the lean-to with Slim. Pillows were stacked across the ground, but there was barely any room. And Slim was already snoring.

The nightmares came hard and fast. Glowing eyes and sharp teeth. The knife sliding into his arm, then slitting his throat. Blood was everywhere – his, Susan’s, their child’s – streaming into a huge lake, which black creatures surrounded, bent around, lapping at it furtively like gazelles.

Greg awoke with a start, pain radiating in sharp white stabs from his arm. He peeked his head out of the lean-to.

Eithne was a little ways off, boiling water in a blackened kettle over a small fire. “Bad dreams?”

Greg grabbed a blanket with his good arm. He wrapped himself in it and shuffled over to the fire. Through the foliage, the sky was painted in red and oranges. He motioned to it with a nod of his head. “We leaving soon?”

Eithne kept looking at the fire. “Soon enough.” She took a thick pad in one hand and picked the kettle carefully off of the fire. “Tea?” She grabbed cups from behind her with her other hand.

He nodded and remembered the pouch of herbs and grabbed it from his pocket. His head and arm were both sore. “Here.” He offered it to Eithne. “Lucy gave me these.”

Eithne placed the kettle on the ground, took the pouch and pulled it open. “She likes you.” Taking a few leaves from the bag, she ground them between her fingers, and dropped them into a cup. She poured steaming water into each and handed the pouch and cup to Greg.

He sipped it for a few moments in silence. The relief wasn’t instantaneous, but a slow creeping thing that moved from his stomach out through his body. He could feel its flow seeping to his extremities. And the pain was gone. He bent his left arm, saw blood trickle down his forearm, but felt nothing.

“You shouldn’t do that. It’ll heal slowly here,” Eithne said.

He protectively tucked his arm back to his body. “It doesn’t hurt.”

She sipped her own drink. “Like I said, she gave you the best.”

“There was another like her that she killed.”

“Beel. It’s a shame. He didn’t deserve that end.”

“He tried to kill me.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I just meant before, he used to be kind, caring, the best of them and Lucy’s closest friend.”

Greg nodded. “Who is she really?”

Eithne looked up from her tea. “Back when I first met her, in the time before, they all used to be Bluecoats.”

“Before what?” Just how old was this child?

“Before the rift, before Falls became what it is. I heard, back before I arrived, we had sustenance, shelter. We could leave, but were never forced to. Then, right before I came, something changed. Mikeel and his Coats said there was a change in the plan, that we were unworthy of our second chance.”

“Ok, so who is that Mikeel guy anyway?” Greg asked.

“The lead Bluecoat now. He began to deprive us to encourage transition. Though surrounded by fruit trees, we were allowed to eat only dirt. Our homes were wrecked. To stay was torture. Lucy took pity and secreted food to us when Mikeel’s Coats were absent, saying we should have comfort here as well.

“But the others found out. And Mikeel was furious. Then, suddenly, Lucy was exiled. Some other Coats didn’t like it. They said Mikeel was acting out of turn, that he didn’t have the right and that the dead were never meant to be forced to the river. Those Coats left Falls freely, but they were told never to return. My brother and I went with. All the other deceased came too.”

“You can’t be serious,” Greg said. It was all too much to believe, even here. “I mean did this really happen?”

“Where we found Lucy, it was always cold, always dark,” Eithne said. “But now it is worse. You’ve seen the place, right? There is no day, no growth. No anything. When we first arrived, the deceased shivered in the darkness and wanted to turn back. Lucy and hers didn’t feel the cold, but they pitied us. They told us to stay, that they would find a way to make this place a home.

“Lucy disguised herself and snuck into Falls. She took just a bit of their light and brought it back, but it all went wrong. Mikeel had done something, or the land wasn’t ready. Regardless, it erupted in a blaze and kept burning for hundreds of years. All the other dead fled, screaming to Falls and quenched themselves in the river, to put out the flames. My brother and I would not.”

Greg felt sick, the poor girl. Was this all true? “You just stayed and burned?”

Eithne nodded. “We had no other choice, and bear the marks to prove it. We knew so little in life, and only desolation since. With Lucy and her Coats we swore to save those who came after from Mikeel, though eventually a tentative peace was reached between the sides, and the flames died. Since then, we’ve done everything possible to create comfort and shelter here for any who desire it. We’ve gathered small, forgotten things from the living world when we could, and built False, a home for those who need it.

“Yet it is never enough. The armistice is only for the Coats. Mikeel always follows the deceased, destroying what we make, capturing any he can. Forcing us to choose the river. He fears us. Fears that we might take Falls from him. I used to hope that one day we might.” She stood abruptly. “But enough of that. It’s time we go for your father.”

Greg downed the rest of his tea quickly. He was feeling much, much better.

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It was dark in the bar. Susan clicked her flashlight off and the child disappeared. His skin was unnaturally black, like the charcoal of a half-burned log. Burned – it looked exactly like that, but skin didn't burn that way. And it was also covered with a shiny film of water.

So do you want to meet my parents?" Aidan asked.

The words still sounded wrong, almost dangerous. "What exactly do you mean?"

She could hear his footsteps approaching, but couldn't see him till he was only feet away. Even then, still only a shadow. His light flicked on, pointing at the spray-paint on the wall. "I'll take you there."

"How?" Susan took a step back. He was too close. Even so small a child, he was unnatural.

"I know the way."

"Are you dead?"

He laughed. A child's laugh, high, descending in hiccupped squeaks. "What gave it away?"

Two dead people in two days, and none in the decades before. But Aidan didn't look like Slim. "Your skin," Susan started to say, but then caught herself, not knowing if the remark would offend him, "does it hurt?"



“It’s not recent. Besides, I have ice.” He took off his hat and showed her the bag of ice it concealed. “So do you want to go?”

She could see her sister. If only if it was possible to bring her mother. That woman deserved answers much, much more. “Yes, I do.” At the very least, Susan could make sure Greg was ok. That would have to be enough.

“Good. It’s too dark now. You wouldn’t make it. How about in the morning? First thing. You know your way to the trees?”

“I can manage.”

“Good. The less time I spend on this side, the better. I’ll see you there, then.”

Aidan shut off his light, plunging the bar into darkness again.

“Why help me?” Susan asked.

Aidan was quiet a moment. “Trade. I want trade.”

“What?”

“A gun.”

A bad idea in the hands of a child so young. He could hurt himself. No, he couldn’t. He was dead already. “Why?”

“Bring it to the trees tomorrow. Bullets too.”

The child didn’t walk, but ran away.

Neil kept a gun at the house. A small silver revolver. He never used it. She wasn’t sure he knew how. He wouldn’t miss it.

She walked to the front door and stepped out. The nearby streetlight flickered and sputtered. It was dark, but still much easier to see than inside. Someone had opened the tailgate of her truck and was sitting there, swinging his legs. “Aidan?” she asked.

“Shouldn’t talk to that boy.” The voice much lower. Gruff.

Susan approached the man. His hair, what was left of it, shone silver below the lamplight. Senior, Brad’s father. Wearing a dirty beaten coat despite the heat. “Why?”

“He’s no good. Painted up my store and had even my own son convinced I did it. I saw the boy do it, but nobody listens.”

“I see.”

“So Neil around here anywhere? He usually gives me one on the house every time I get out of a cell.”

“No, I’m driving the truck.”

“Damn. I figured he might just be fixing to open the bar again soon.” He pulled a pint of brown liquid from his inner coat pocket and took a long swig, a small trail snaking down the side of his mouth. Smelled like it could eat through iron.

“Well, he’s not.” Susan’s mind had already passed onto her plans for the next day. She’d have to get up pretty early. She didn’t want Greg beating her back to the house. But on second thought, let him. For once, let him worry, let him wonder. Still, she didn’t want to go out there on her own. It just wasn’t a good idea. Senior didn’t trust Aidan. Honestly, she didn’t fully either. It’d be nice to have someone else to come along, just in case, if she could manage to convince him. “Why don’t you come back to Neil’s house with me? I can make something to eat.”

Senior lowered the bottle and looked sidelong at her. “Pretty thing like you could do a lot better. Not to mention the state you’re in – it might not be the best thing for the baby.”

Susan blushed. That was not at all what she meant. Why would he think that?

“I’m Neil’s daughter-in-law. I thought he’d want me to help you.”

“True enough. That explains the truck at least. I didn’t know if you’d stolen it.”

“The offer stands.” As uncomfortable as it was now.

“Sounds great.” He climbed off of the tailgate, pocketing his bottle and walked around to the passenger-side door.

Back at the house, Susan scoured the fridge and pantry, turning up a few hotdogs in deepfreeze. She nuked them for a couple minutes till they were erupting in steaming boils. Senior barely let them touch the plate, covering them in a mess of ketchup and gulping them almost whole.

“Jail food,” he said.

Susan flipped on the kitchen TV and left Senior staring at it while she combed the house for the revolver. What kind of child wants a gun? It eventually turned up under the master bed, in an old cigar box, a handful of loose shells rattling about it. She stashed it with her things.

Then back downstairs, after turning off the TV, she faced Senior. “I could use your help tomorrow.”

“With what?” The booze was out again, in front of him on the table. He was rolling the bottle’s cap back and forth with his index finger.

“I need to look for Neil.”

“Where?” He arched an eyebrow.

A reasonable question. “His car was found on 530. I figure we start there.”

As soon as the road was mentioned, the old man was shaking his head, eyes squeezed shut. “No.”

“No?”

“Absolutely not. If he’s there, he’ll have to take care of his self.”

“But he’s your friend.”

“You think I don’t know that? But it’d be no good. I’ve heard things.”

“Like what?”

Senior took a drink from his bottle and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “Bad things. Like the dead not being dead.”

It sounded ridiculous the way he said it, like an old wives’ tale, regardless of how accurate it might be. “Really? And what, exactly, did you hear?”

“I heard what I heard and I’m not going near there.”

“Come on,” she said. “I want to know.”

“Scotty said Slim was walking about up there on the highway, and Scotty don’t lie.”

“Is that all?” She was almost disappointed.

“Isn’t it enough?”

“Just think about it, alright? I’m going and I could use your help.”

Senior capped the bottle, pocketing it inside his coat again. “Alright. I’ll sleep on it.”

“Why don’t you stay here? There’s an extra bedroom off the den. Then we can talk in the morning.”

“That’ll be fine,” he said.

Susan nodded and went upstairs to find some bedding. By the time she came back down, sheets in hand, he was gone, the front door left wide open. She swore to herself.

In the morning, she packed a small day bag, wrapping the gun in a hand towel and tossing the bullets into a sandwich bag. She also threw in an extra shirt and a couple bottles of water. She promised herself to be back by night. No matter what, she'd turn around by early afternoon.

She didn't want to do this alone. It'd been difficult to sleep – her mind flashed to all the worst possibilities, foremost among which was a nasty tumble down a hill, where she would lie, alone, with a tweaked ankle, a broken leg. She would yell and scream at first till her vocal chords just gave out and then she'd start trying to drag herself to safety. It was all so easy to visualize. Maybe from a few too many bad movies.

It would have been easier with Senior. Even easier if Greg hadn't just abandoned her in the middle of the night. But she wasn't going to just sit like she was helpless. So she pawed through the bathroom supply closet and turned up a few ace bandages.

Finally, she appended a short note to the bottom of the one Greg had left her, starting it "I went out looking too, in case you get back before I do. Don't worry, I'll be fine."

Everything set, she stepped outside and climbed into the cab of the pickup. She was just about to turn the key when a police cruiser came up beside her and flashed its lights. She sighed, taking the key out of the ignition and rolling down her window. What could they possibly want?

Brad stepped out of the car and walked around to lean against her car door. “So how’s she handling?”

“You really stopped by to ask about the truck?”

“No, I mean, I wanted to see how you were doing. And I never heard from Greg last night.”

Susan had completely forgot. “I almost forgot, I saw your dad last night. I’m glad you let him out.”

“Yeah? I never really thought he was the tagger anyhow. Now about Greg, Joe said there’s another car out on 530. He was going to tow it, but saw a note asking him not to.” Brad held up a plastic baggie with a piece of paper inside. “It’s dated yesterday. So, is there anything I should know?”

How could she answer? Shouldn’t she have called last night to report him missing? How could she say that she didn’t really expect him back this soon? “He never came home last night.”

“Damn it!” Brad slapped the hood of the truck. “I told him to let the cops handle it.”

“I know where they went,” Susan said. “Come with me, we can take a quick look around.”

“Not a chance,” he said. “I’m calling this in. Then you’ll tell me what you know and let me deal with it.”

“You can’t stop me from looking for my husband,” she said.

“Listen to yourself. You go out there and I’ll be looking for you too.”

She knew she should listen to him – it made a lot of sense – but her mind was already made up. “I told you about Greg because I need a friend I can trust, but you do what you want.” Susan turned the truck’s ignition and it rumbled to life.

Brad threw up his hands surrendering, and took a step back from the car. “Ok, calm down now, eh. Two healthy men have gone missing – what do you think you can do in your condition?”

The condescending bastard. Susan slammed the truck into drive and let it lurch forward before stepping on the gas and swerving around his car. In the rearview mirror, she saw Brad run around his cruiser and jump inside. He followed her, and started flashing his lights after the first block. Then he got on the PA system, yelling out after her in a robotic voice, “I’m sorry. Please pull over.”

She ignored him and kept driving, feeling antsy and hoping he wouldn’t try to charge her with anything. She drove through town, feeling her way back to the highway, rather than strictly remembering the route. It was a right at the boarded up gas station, then a left at the church. After following that for a while, it was another left at the pink house and then, there was the highway. She revved the engine, quickly getting up to speed. Brad kept following her closely, but he’d clicked off his lights at least.

Susan kept driving until she saw Greg’s car on the side of the road, then she swerved abruptly to the shoulder. Her tires slid loosely on the gravel for a moment before stopping. She grabbed her backpack and rolled out of the truck, trotting over to the cruiser as Brad pulled in, a bit more sedately, right ahead of the truck.

“This is very stupid,” he said after rolling down his window. “There are people paid and trained to handle this.”

“No,” she said. “I told you, I know the way. I’ll show you if you just come with.”

“How can you be so sure?” He wasn’t moving from the car.

“I just am, but I could use your help.”

Brad sighed. “Fine, but let me call this in first. I can’t disappear in the middle of a shift.”

“Fine,” Susan said. “I’ll check around the area.” When Brad gave her an exasperated look, she continued. “Don’t worry, I’ll stay in sight.”

It took close to five minutes for him to finish, but by then, she was already pretty sure that this wasn’t the right place. She’d been walking along the tree line, looking for Slim’s sign. It was nowhere to be found.

Finally, Brad sidled up next to her. He’d retrieved the shotgun from his trunk and cradling it in his arm across his chest. “So what are you looking for?”

“Was this where Neil’s car was found?” Susan asked.

“Just about – maybe a mile or so further down the road.”

“We need to go there,” she said quickly. It didn’t make sense that Greg would leave his car here, but that didn’t matter for now.

“Wait, how –” Brad stopped himself. “Fine, but you can ride with me. If we don’t find what you want, then you answer my questions.”

“Deal,” Susan said. “Now can we go?”

They piled into the cruiser and pulled back onto the highway. Brad drove slowly down the road for a few minutes before pulling over near some muddy tire ruts. “So



what are you looking for?" he asked after getting out of the car and retrieving his shotgun again.

"A sign," Susan said and started walking towards the woods, her eyes straight ahead. Brad held back near the car, watching her.

Then she saw it, sticking up out of the short roadside grass. She walked over and grabbed hold of it, pulling the stake from the ground and waving the sign over her head.

"This is it!" she yelled.

He trotted down the embankment, holding his gun in his left hand, and took the sign from her. "Falls," he read aloud. He looked up. "Wait, do you mean the graffiti?"

"Yes," she said. "He was painting it to tell us where Neil was."

"Who was? And why? Why not just come to the police?"

"I don't know." This was one lie Susan couldn't get around. "All I know is that Greg followed the same signs. We found them at the bar the first night."

"Then why didn't you two come to us?" Brad asked. "How the hell are we supposed to find anyone if you all keep us in the dark?"

"Come on." Susan motioned with her hand. She began to push through the tangled brush near the road. "I want to go find those trees from the graffiti."

This time, Brad didn't argue.

They walked through the woods for some time. There was no path to follow, so while Brad kept looking left and right for the trees, Susan kept her eyes locked on her compass, heading straight west away from the road, and trying not to go the wander off course. It wasn't easy. When they eventually did find the trees, Susan knew she couldn't

keep lying to get Brad to follow. Or at least she had to tell him some of the truth, leaving out the parts about the living dead for now.

Susan sat in an open spot where they could see the trees and patted the ground. “I need to take a quick break. Come sit down.”

Brad plopped down next to her, setting his shotgun to the side. “Are those the trees? Does this mean we go back so I can get dogs out here and do this search right?”

Of course they were the trees. They couldn’t be anything else, couldn’t be natural. But where was Greg, really? Had he found Neil? Was he coming back? Summoning up that disquiet, Susan turned to look at him, tears in her eyes. “I can’t give up yet. Let’s keep going, just a bit further.”

“Fine,” Brad said. “But we really can’t be out much longer.”

“There’s something else you should know,” Susan said. “I met the real tagger last night, back at Neil’s bar. I’m supposed to meet him out here.”

“Do me a favor and tell me what’s going on. No more of the half stories. Just trust me. Okay? So who is this person?”

“He’s just a kid – I really don’t know much more – but he says he know where Greg and Neil are.”

“How?”

“I think he’s been there, to the falls.”

“I told you before, there aren’t any waterfalls out this way,” Brad said.

“I know,” Susan said. “But we have to try.”

Brad was quiet for a few minutes after she finished. Finally he picked up his shotgun and stood. “No,” he said. “We have to go get backup.”

Susan lunged forward and grabbed him by the arm. “No. I can’t chance scaring this kid away. He might be the only one who knows where they are and how to get us there.”

He crouched down and looked her in the eyes. “This may sound harsh, but you are acting stupid. I don’t think Greg and Neil both came this way and just got lost. This kid, or the people he’s with, might be dangerous. We can’t just run into something we know nothing about.”

She stared back at him, not flinching. “I’m not going back without Greg and Neil. If I’d have thought police were the right idea, I’d have called them. But I thought you’d be willing to trust me.” She pushed herself up from the ground and started walking towards the trees.

“You’re in no condition to be doing this.”

She kept walking. The roots arching up over the ground looked treacherous. She slowed down and studied them. A reasonably solid weave of roots went along the center. She could probably make it if she was careful. But was it really worth it? She really shouldn’t try it by herself. But then she could hear Brad’s quick footsteps approaching.

“Fine. But we’re leaving at the first sign of trouble.”

“Agreed. Now, we’re supposed to go between those trees.” She didn’t even need to turn to register Brad’s confusion.

## CHAPTER 5

Greg couldn't tell how Eithne knew the way. It was dark out. They didn't follow a path or compass, and, for quite some time, it had seemed like the same forest stretching away on all sides of them.

He stopped Slim and motioned around. "Are we lost?"

Slim shook his head. "No way, man."

"How do you know?"

"The river. Can't you hear it?"

He couldn't, at least, couldn't well enough to know what direction it was in, to follow only the sound.

But the others could. They'd been walking for some time when the forest opened up around them in a long, narrow clearing, through which a shallow brook tumbled over mossy rocks.

"A tributary," Eithne said.

They followed it downstream to where it met up with more and more small streams, each braiding itself into a deeper, stronger strand of water. And then the noise was unmistakable. The volume was growing louder and louder, becoming fearsome.

"The falls?" Greg asked.

Eithne nodded and came to an abrupt stop. She dropped to a knee. Slim joined her, their heads close together. She motioned for Greg to join them. "We're almost there. Slim and I go first. Wait thirty minutes, and then follow the river to the cliff. Stairs are carved there, leading down. Once you're in Falls, you might be on your own

for a while. Don't go looking for Neil. Stay away from the Bluecoats. Get someone to hide you. We'll find you."

Greg nodded. "Ok, but who can I talk to?"

"Use your judgment. Most of the dead are trustworthy enough."

"What about Mom?"

"No," Slim said. "Absolutely not. Find someone anonymous."

"But she's his mother," Eithne said.

"But after what happened to Neil."

"We can't prove that."

"She didn't deny it."

"What happened?" Greg asked.

"Now's not the time," Eithne said. "Just get into hiding fast once you're down there. Ok? If you see Emily, get her help, but don't search her out."

The idea sat beside Greg even after the two dead left. It bothered him, comforted him, scared him, for the whole thirty minutes. Time slid like slow sap, each minute oozing by. He wanted to move, wanted to just act now and worry later, but he didn't. He eyed his watch instead, the hour and minute hands glowing faintly in the dark.

Mom. Dad had come for her. Had he found her? What would she look like? Eithne had been burnt; Slim had started to decompose. In each case, it showed, but those damages had been after they died. Mom couldn't show the signs of the accident. Greg knew he couldn't face her if she did.

Slim had said she cried when she watched Dad. Did she ever watch her son?

Mom had always been the strange mix of a strict disciplinarian and the sweetest woman ever born. She had been the perfect complement to Neil's play-it-by-ear style: an accounting major and perennial overachiever. It was her business smarts that had kept the bar afloat through the first six months. But she also had that inner warmth that made her so hard to escape. During college, Greg had talked to Dad on the phone only a handful of times. He talked to Mom nearly every day. And she sent small presents of candy or money with notes to say she was thinking of him.

A couple days after Christmas, during his senior year, he got the call from Slim. Greg had been with Susan for nearly two years and they'd spent winter break with her parents down state. They'd planned on heading to North a few days earlier, but a huge storm ripped through the area, leaving most of the roads buried in deep drifts. Greg hadn't minded: he liked her mother and father, even if they didn't seem to like each other very much.

"Hey, little man," Slim said when Greg picked up the phone.

"What's up? You keeping Dad in check?" It'd been so easy to just shoot the shit back then.

"It ain't possible. Thinks he's a rock star. Look, you got somewhere to sit down?"

Greg was standing in Susan and her parent's dining room. Susan was in the kitchen, chatting with her mom and throwing together a light lunch. He had been on his way to help. Susan's father was in the living room, screaming at the TV as his alma mater was crushed in a bowl game. There were a half dozen chairs less than two steps from Greg, but he didn't move. "What's going on?"

“Emily was in an accident.”

“What happened? Can I talk to her?” If he and Susan packed and left quickly, they could be there before midnight. He hated driving after dark in the black backwoods, when snowflakes became blinding mirrors of his headlights, but if he had to, he would.

Slim left a long pause before he responded. When he did, his voice was choked and watery. “Her car, she lost control. One of those big logging trucks – it couldn’t stop.”

There was another pause, one that seemed to stretch on and on.

“She didn’t make it,” Slim said.

Greg calmly hung up the phone and just stood. He didn’t feel the world dropping out or his legs grow wobbly. He just felt the stillness and fragility of everything. To move would be to break it all, the air a gossamer of spun glass.

He stood still for some time before Susan came in with a sandwich on a small ceramic plate. “There’s more in the kitchen.” But she must have seen his face. She put the plate on the table and cupped her palm around his face. “What’s wrong?”

He gripped her tight to him and didn’t say anything. He needed her strength, her solidness to forget the glass as he moved.

Greg tried to shake off the memories and stood up from the forest floor where he was sitting. Time had passed. He glanced at his watch: it wasn’t quite the appointed time. He knew he should stay, but had to move, to run.

Though it was too dark out to see clearly, he jogged downstream through the quickly diminishing forest. A few minutes later, he could just barely see the edge. At first, there was nothing notable about the sight – there wasn’t any person or structure

guarding the area. Nor was there anything particularly strange about the plants and land. The river just flowed on through sparse grass and scrub. Then it disappeared over the cliff. Beyond it, nothing but night sky.

Greg slowed down moving carefully over the rocky ground. It seemed too easy, but Slim had promised to take care of the guards. Even as he got closer to the edge, no land was visible. It wasn't until he reached the very precipice itself that he understood why. The ground plummeted directly down and was lost in cloud cover. He glanced above him. Hazy puffs drifted by. Then he turned to the edge again. No more than five feet below, the sky started again.

Eithne mentioned stairs. The river rolled off the edge to his left and plummeted in a freefall. He wouldn't be going that way. To his right, nothing but more cliff. Everything ahead was just a long fall.

Then came barking from behind him, loud and menacing. He turned and squinted into the darkness. Three massive dogs were running towards him, teeth bared. They were massive beasts, four feet tall at the shoulder and thickly muscled. They were covered in short, blue-tinged fur that seemed to shimmer with dim phosphorescence

Taking the up the rear was Slim. The dogs were quickly out-distancing him along the open ground. He was yelling something impossible to make out over the snarls of the dogs.

Greg stood frozen as the ferocious creatures bore down on him. Nowhere to run. It wasn't until the nearest dog was already in mid leap that he finally understood what Slim was yelling.

“Below you!”



And by then it was far too late. What he did next was out of reflex to the creature's enormous head and its huge white teeth. He took half a step back, trying to brace himself, but only found air and began to tip back over the edge.

The dog, aiming high, barely missed, its jaws snapping closed with a sharp crack just inches above Greg's shoulder. Its weight connected squarely with his chest, toppling him violently over the edge. If there was a stairway there, he and the dog both missed it.

It took a few seconds to even clear the misty cloud cover, his stomach jumping through his throat. Then he knew he was going to die. Far, far below him was the dark, rippling mirror of a lake. Everything relaxed, his body finally felt settled. He wasn't afraid because it was hopeless. Still, he tried his best to stop rotating and to aim his feet down.

He tried to have that moment when his life flashed before his eyes, when only the important things remained. It was all just a blur, a meaningless silent film. There were too many things to remember, too many that nothing important could elbow its way through. All he could think of was one day when he was seven. He had canoed with his parents down a rocky river, hitting the deep parts, fighting the current that tried to pull them under. Near a deep, clear pool, a tall boulder stood fifteen feet high. He climbed to the top with his mother, watched her jump down, but then he stood, unable to follow. It was too far. The rock was covered with little bits of sand and pebbles. He could slip. His mother had hit the water in a large splash. She was waiting for him, waving her arms. He didn't want to go. But his feet stepped forward and he was falling. It seemed to take forever.

Back at the waterfall, Greg started preparing for the crash landing. He arched his back slightly, tucked his arms in, and took a deep breath as he approached the water, spotting the falling dog out of the corner of his eye – it was a few hundred feet off, churning its legs and yelping.

And then he hit. The impact was instantaneous and crushing.

His lungs burned. The water was icy cold. He fought towards the surface, following the bubbles from his descent, and broke through, coughing and gasping. In the night, hundreds of bodies around him clawed at the water, all moving in the same direction, towards the distant shore. He began to swim with them, his body sluggish and heavy in the freezing water.

But it was if he was standing still. The others moved slowly forward, faster than him. He could barely stay afloat. But then again they were naked. He squirmed out of his backpack and coat and began trying to kick off his boots, but it was no use. They were too tightly tied. He took a deep breath, and lying on his back he freed his feet after several attempts. Then he stripped down to his boxers, letting each article of clothing drift off. The effort was taxing and the water had chilled him to the bone. Still, the churning crowd surrounded him, fighting ever onwards towards the shore.

He glanced around for the dog, but it was nowhere to be seen, if it even survived the fall. Then he started the arduous journey towards land. Just as Slim had said, the closer he got, the fewer people surrounded him. Ahead, a man might be steadily paddling away; the next moment he was gone, slipping beneath the black waves.

But Greg kept going. Despite the cold. Despite his numb body and mind. Only one thing mattered: land, solid ground – so he kept swimming. To stop was to give up, to

freeze and sink with all the rest. But the shore never grew any closer. It was always out of reach, too far for hope and barely visible in the dark night.

Eventually, he knew he wouldn't make it. He made floundering efforts to stay afloat, to regain enough strength, enough feeling for one more push. But he couldn't.

His last thought was an image of Susan's face on the day they were married.

They had their ceremony a little over six months after Emily's death. He proposed only weeks after the funeral. Friends said he was just reacting to loss, but he knew the truth.

He had wanted to propose for almost a year, but had held off, waiting for the right time. They were still in college. He didn't want to hurry things. She wasn't ready to settle down. Hell, he wasn't either. But he never wanted to live with anyone else. So down on one knee and hope she says yes.

They were married in a little chapel near Susan's hometown in the early afternoon on a rainy summer day. Susan was dressed in a glossy white gown and a sheer veil – simple clothing. What little money they had, they got from their parents. Greg wore his dad's old tux. It was little tight at the waist and a little long in the sleeves, but fit well enough. They had a small service. Emily invited a few relations. Greg had just Dad and Slim.

He didn't feel the typical pre-wedding jitters. Then, as Susan walked down the aisle, everything inside him swelled, so his chest hurt. He wanted her there with him faster, immediately. In his mind, they were married long before they got to the church – that was the great thing about getting married so young: never living alone for long enough to questioning the decision. After the vows, he stared into her eyes. The clouds

broke for just a second and lit the church with soft shadow. Her face glowed there, kind, loving, beautiful.

Greg tried to push one more time towards shore, for Susan, for their child, for everything he would miss, but he couldn't move. His body was too heavy, and the water too cold. Holding onto that last image of Susan, he let the air drain from his lungs and slipped below the surface of the lake.

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Slim watched Greg and the hound tumble over the edge. Though he was still fifty yards away, he reached out his hand as though it might somehow help. He'd failed, miserably, again. He brought Neil's son into this place, only to watch him die.

He didn't have long to contemplate his mistakes, though. As soon as their companion knocked Greg off the side of the waterfall, the other hounds skidded to a halt and turned on Slim. They bared their fangs – curved razors nearly six inches long – and let out a low-rumbling growl.

Slim threw up his hands like he was surrendering. “Be good, boys,” he said. “I'm not here to hurt you.”

The hounds started advancing slowly, keeping their heads low and eyes directly ahead. Then Slim began to step backwards. The hounds broke into a run. In half a second, one was on top of Slim, its jaws open wide. Slim closed his eyes and crossed his arms over his head, trying to protect it.

The hound let out a yelp.

Slim could feel warm liquid spilling down over his body, soaking him. He opened his eyes. He was lying in a pool of water.

Just feet from him, Eithne was crouched low. In the dark of the night, her blackened body was no more than a shadow donned in a white robe. She was eyeing the remaining hound, circling it with her knife drawn. The beast jumped at her, and she pivoted, ducking and swinging her knife up above her head in a neat arc. The blade sliced cleanly along the hound's stomach, opening it in a sudden gush of liquid. The hound crashed to the ground and tumbled a few times before rising, unsteady on its legs. In a flash, Eithne took two steps and rolled the dog onto its back, carving her knife around its throat in the same, smooth movement. The hound liquefied, crashing to the ground as nothing more than a puddle.

Eithne continued her roll, clearing the water, and then stood, brushing debris from her robe. She wiped her knife off and then walked to Slim. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Wide-eyed, he nodded. "Greg fell," he said.

"I know," Eithne said. "I was a moment too late."

"Do you think he'll make it?" Slim asked.

Eithne dipped her dark head. "I wish I could say yes, but I don't see how it would be possible."

Slim looked at the ground as well. "I never should have brought him here."

"It wasn't your fault," Eithne said.

"But it is," Slim said. "I wish I'd never made it to shore."

"You can't think like that," Eithne said. "Beat yourself up later if you need to, but, for now, you need to still think of your friend. He's in more danger than ever."

"You're right. I have to save Neil."

"Good. Go to him. Get him back to the trees and out of here, whatever it takes."

“I will,” Slim said. “Can I count on your help?”

“I wish I could,” Eithne said. “But I just received some terrible news, and I have to go elsewhere.”

“What’s wrong?” Slim asked.

“For your safety, and that of your friend, it’s best you don’t know,” Eithne said. “Go to him, though. Get him away from here and do it quickly. I’ll be in touch as soon as I can.” She took off running into the woods before Slim could ask her any questions.

He stood, wiped the water from his neck, and began to walk towards the stairs down.

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Susan wasn’t far past the Cyprus trees when she heard a child’s voice call out faintly, “Eithne!”

“Aidan,” Susan whispered.

“What did you say?” Brad asked.

“The boy, it’s him. Don’t you hear it?”

He stopped and cocked his ear out, waiting. “Nothing.”

“Shh. There it is again.” Why was he yelling? “We need to find him.” Listening again, she pointed off to the right of the trail. “That way.”

The calls slowly became louder. The child was so sad and alone. Susan needed to find him. “Aidan!”

The calls stopped – only silence in the forest. Susan turned and looked at Brad, who was cradling his shotgun. He shrugged.

She tried one more time. “It’s Susan. I need your help.”

A twig snapped behind her and she spun. There was the charred-face child with a hiking staff clutched in one hand.

“Who’s Eithne?”

“My sister. She’s not here.”

“I was so worried about you.” He was just a kid, nothing more, even if dead. Not dangerous. Senior had been mistaken.

“This is the vandal?” Brad asked.

Susan turned and stared angrily. “He was just trying to get someone to notice, and he’s promised to help.”

Aidan shook his head. “We made a deal. Do you have the gun?”

“Wait just a second,” Brad said. “What’s this about a gun?”

Aidan held his hand out to Susan. “Give it to me.”

“No.” Brad stepped around in front of Susan and imposed himself between the two of them. “You are absolutely not giving that child a weapon.”

“Then I won’t help,” Aidan said.

“We need him,” Susan said to Brad. “Please don’t ruin this.”

“No,” Brad said again. “I’ve gone along as far as I’m willing to.”

“Fine with me,” Aidan said. “We don’t need you.” He turned to leave.

Susan yelled, “Wait. Don’t go.” Susan looked back at Brad, who was slowly shaking his head. She shut her eyes and sucked a breath through her nose. They were both acting like children. The gun wasn’t important in the big picture. She slowly let out the breath and opened her eyes, locking her attention on Brad. “First, you need to stop telling me what to do like I’m some idiot.”

He nodded. "I'll try my best, but you can't give him the gun."

"Fine." Susan turned to Aidan. "Brad's right. You don't need a gun right now. But we did have a deal and I mean to hold to it. Please, can you take us to Lucy? She's with you, right? I'll give her the gun for safe keeping."

Aidan shrugged. "Fine, can we go now?"

Susan looked to Brad again. He nodded, but also asked, "Who's Lucy?"

"Not now," Susan said, putting the gun back in her backpack and marching after Aidan.

Susan felt uneasy from the moment they left the forest and began to climb up the mountain. This wasn't what Slim had described: his Falls sounded like a lush garden, not a rough hinterland. Brad marched beside her, not speaking or seeming to notice the land.

And it only became worse when they met Lucy. They climbed a long time to the top of a mountain only to find the mouth of a cave. The entrance was dry cracked earth.

Aidan stuck his head in first. "Lucy?"

Out of the cave walked a thin woman in a simple white dress with blackened skin like Aidan's. Her eyes were pure white orbs. "You aren't supposed to be here," she said.

The child had no family or home left. Susan couldn't take this lady's rudeness. "He's looking for Eithne. I thought you would help."

In a natural motion, the woman bent down and cradled Aidan in a soft hug. She patted his back. "I'm sorry, child."

Aidan started crying, his face buried in Lucy's shoulder. "Why isn't she here?" he said. "I miss her so much."



Lucy picked him up and held him close to her. “Don’t worry. She’ll come back. You know she will.” Then she carried him into the cave, motioning with her head for Susan and Brad to follow.

The inside of the cave was beyond shabby. Water ran in rivulets down the rock face and pooled in one corner. Light came from a flickering, static-filled TV in the back, surrounded by folding chairs. Susan and Brad sat and stared at the TV as Lucy settled the boy on a dirty pile of straw.

Brad walked over and fiddled with the knob, sending line patterns across the screen, until, suddenly, the picture snapped into clear focus. A middle-aged woman sat at a desk, typing away at a computer. Her hair was up in a bun that had two pencils thrust through its center. Around her, men in light tan uniforms walked, talking loudly.

Brad took a step back, still staring at the screen. “That’s Natalia at the office.”

Then, finally, the child was asleep and Lucy came back over. She turned off the TV. “Come have some tea. We have lots to discuss.” She smiled, her teeth wicked little points.

They sat in a silent circle as Lucy brewed tea over a small fire. The silence was oppressive. Susan fidgeted under its weight. “I don’t mean to be rude,” she said. “But I don’t quite understand.”

Lucy was pouring steaming tea into the cups. “About what?”

“What’s happening, I guess. Who you are. Where here is. Where Aidan’s sister \_”

“Eithne”

“Where Eithne went to. Why she’s gone.”

Lucy held out a cup and Susan took it. “What has he told you so far?”

“Slim told me a little about you, and my husband, he came this way looking for his father.”

Lucy smiled. “I met him yesterday.”

“He was here?”

Holding a second cup out to Brad, Lucy nodded. “He had a little fall, nothing serious. I took care of him.”

“And?”

“And nothing. Slim came to pick him up. I’m sorry, but I don’t know anything more.”

Brad’s cup went slamming down, sloshing hot liquid onto the dirt. “The only Slim I know is dead.”

Both women’s heads swiveled about to look at him. Susan sucked her lower lip into her mouth. Even here, it was too difficult to explain. Lucy could do better. “He doesn’t know yet. I haven’t had the chance to tell him anything.”

“So why are you here, Brad?” Lucy asked.

“She needed help, and I couldn’t let her go alone. What sort of man would I be?”

Lucy looked down and drew figures in the dirt on the cave floor. “Most people don’t come here by choice. They are missing someone or something. Or left something unfinished.”

“And where exactly is here?” Brad asked.

“It’s where the fallen rise. Some might call it ‘the afterlife,’ and others ‘the underworld.’ We call it Falls and False. Falls is where the dead rise, and False is the

Promised Land, a place where no one is shuffled off, no need is disregarded, where everyone is free to pursue their longing.”

“And I suppose you’re dead too?” Brad asked.

Continuing to draw in the dirt, Lucy’s finger shaped stick figures on the floor. A woman, a girl, a boy. “I never lived. I am here to protect the innocent, to give them hope. I am here because I always have been.”

Brad shook his head. “Just be honest, okay? Is this some sort of hippie convent? What the hell is going on and where are Greg and Neil?”

Lucy leaned and reached, cupping her hand around Brad’s chin. “You poor, poor thing. You really don’t get it, do you? Slim’s dead. Aidan’s dead. They’re all dead. And I just want to protect them from the man who once burned the land.”

Brad pushed back from Lucy’s hand and scooted a few feet along the floor. He glared at Susan.

She wanted to apologize. But it had all been necessary. This almost made sense coming from the mouth of a burnt woman in a barren cave, but it wouldn’t from the mouth of a pregnant woman in a rural mining town. “I’m sorry. We didn’t have the time. And how could I have?”

“No,” he said. “It’s impossible.”

Lucy was drawing again in the dirt. This time it was a waterfall and a lake. “Believe what you will, but it won’t change what is and what isn’t.”

Brad grabbed his gun and stood, holding it to his chest like a toddler. “I need real answers. Starting with you.” He turned towards Susan. “Where are we? Who is this lady?”

“You’ll have to believe me.” And if he still didn’t, then what? She’d look by herself if she had to. “Slim, the Slim, dead and all, he came and talked to Greg and me.”

“You sound like my father.”

“But it’s true. He came and told us that Neil was here looking for Emily, his deceased wife. So Greg came to look for him, all the while knowing exactly where he was going.”

“Then what happened?”

“You already know the rest,” Susan said. “I met Aidan at Neil’s Bar. Greg didn’t come back yesterday and I started worrying. I figured coming out here would at least get me some answers. I really didn’t mean to get you involved, but it seemed so much safer to have you with.”

He just shook his head. “I can’t listen to any more now. I’m going outside for some air.” He stood and marched from the cave.

Lucy reached her hand out and placed it on Susan’s arm. “I’m sorry that went so badly.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong. I wish I could have told him sooner, but I just didn’t think he would believe me. Don’t worry though, he’ll understand. He’s a good man.”

“Who is he?”

“I don’t really know.” Susan laughed. “A cop and a friend of my husband, but I just met him yesterday.”

“And he came here with you, not knowing where he was going. That sort of trust isn’t common.”

Susan nodded. Yet she'd betrayed that trust, time and again. But now he knew the truth. Hopefully, it'd be enough. "I still don't understand a few things. What happened to Eithne?"

"A mere philosophical difference. She's quite all right. Last I heard, she was going to help Greg and Slim."

More evasion, but she was used to it by now. Aidan really seemed concerned about Eithne. Susan knew what it was like to truly miss a sister. "What's wrong? Tell me how I can help."

Lucy angled her head like a curious dog, and drew her eyebrows together. "Have you ever been afraid of change?" Susan nodded. "Even if that change isn't necessarily bad?"

Susan lowered her eyes to this. "Yes, but it's never that easy."

"Have you ever wanted to run away from it?"

Of course. "But what is Eithne scared of?"

"She's scared that we might actually succeed, that we might be able to give the dead another chance at life."

The child was dead: existence was incredible enough. "You mean the dead would actually return to life?"

Lucy leaned forward, whispering. "More or less, yes. At the very least, the deceased might be able to move about the living world without the consequences your friend, Slim, has suffered. I've found things that suggest it is possible, and we have to try." She smiled – her mouth full of those sharp teeth – teeth of predators.

Susan looked away. "How?"

The last question unnoticed. “The important thing is to find her and your husband as soon as possible.”

“Where are they?”

“I don’t know. Maybe with the Blues already.”

“And if so?”

“Then it’ll all be over. Mikeel will leave nothing standing this time. It is exactly what he is afraid of – losing control.”

“And Greg, is he in danger?”

Lucy shook her head. “I think not, but can’t be sure.”

Brad came loping back into the cave, cradling his shotgun. “Thought you should know you have some visitors.”

Lucy jumped up and ran towards the entrance. “How many and in what direction?” He followed her and they disappeared outside.

Susan jogged over to Aidan, shaking his small body awake. “Time to wake up.”

He was on his feet in seconds. Then Brad and Lucy were back.

“The Blues are on their way,” Lucy said. “Ten, fifteen minutes out at best. They’ll lock the both of you up if you’re here when they arrive.”

“We have to get out, to find Eithne,” Aidan said. “They’ll find her and throw her in the river.”

“No,” Lucy said. “You have to go underground. There isn’t any time for games anymore. Take her.”

“I won’t.”

“You will.”

Aidan ran forward and hugged Lucy's leg. She leaned down and he whispered in her ear. "Just her," she replied.

Aidan nodded. He turned to Susan and stuck out his hand. "I need the gun now. If they overtake us, I need to be able to fight."

Susan dug in her pack, and not even looking to Brad for confirmation, handed the revolver over.

Aidan popped open the chamber and filled it with ammo from the sandwich bag. Then he tucked the gun in his waistband and started toward the back of the cave, motioning for Susan and Brad to follow. "We have to move. There's another exit on the far side." He ducked behind a boulder that seemed to be a part of the wall.

Brad shook his head. "I don't like this," he said and ran after him.

Susan took off in pursuit of them. The cave slimmed to a narrow path of cut stone behind the boulder. They wound through the mountain along that path for several minutes before breaking again into the chalky grey light. In front of her was a wasteland, so completely unlike the forest that Susan stopped and stared. "What happened here?"

Aidan slowed, but continued moving. "Mikeel happened. Now, we have to get some distance out of the way and then find somewhere to hide."

The day had grown almost unbearably hot during their stay in the cave. The air radiated a fiery burn across Susan's exposed skin. She was covered in sweat and breathing heavily by the time they hunkered down behind some large melted mounds ten minutes later. She didn't pay any attention to Aidan, but found a spot in the shade and pressed herself into it.

“I don’t think they saw us,” Aidan said. “But we can’t stay here. In five, we keep moving.” He took out the revolver and stared at it. “Brad, keep an eye out over the rocks and yell if you see them.”

Aidan had changed so much. He barely seemed like the scared little boy anymore. He was a soldier. Susan bolted upright at the sound of a loud click.

It took only a second. Brad was turned away, looking for pursuers. “I’m sorry,” Aidan said as he pointed his silver revolver at Brad’s back. “I wish you hadn’t come with.” He pulled the trigger and the sound reverberated across the empty landscape and through Susan’s ears, ringing in her head.

Brad turned around, clutching at his back as his body crumbled to the ground.

Aidan fired twice more at point-blank range into Brad’s head, sending fragments scattering out in a halo.

Susan didn’t move. She could see Brad’s body jolt at each shot. She covered her ears, but couldn’t block out the noise, the terrible crushing shock of it. The world swam before her eyes as they filled up with tears.

Then the gun was pointed at her. “Get up. We keep moving.” He had Brad’s shotgun slung over his shoulder and was staring down the barrel of the revolver at Susan.

“Why?” She wanted to attack him, but couldn’t. She was too afraid, devastated, but more than anything, just confused. The warm, trusting, helpful, infuriating man – she couldn’t look at Brad’s body.

“Get up.” Susan struggled to her feet, and then Aidan motioned her on. “We’re going underground.”



## CHAPTER 6

Greg opened his eyes. Dappled light of a pine forest canopy over him. A breeze rippled the needles, swaying the branches. He remembered slipping below the water, holding to his memories of Susan. He had looked up to see the night sky, the clouds bunched overhead. And now here, in the forest, daytime.

So obnoxious – this waking up and not knowing how he got there. He took quick appraisal of his condition. First, clearly in a forest this time, not a cave. Second, completely naked, but covered with a coarse white cloth the size of his body.

Third, his mother sat next to him.

This was his chance to say what he'd been thinking ever since he'd heard about the accident, that he should have been there, in the car. That he felt bad for being glad he wasn't.

“Hi Greg,” she said. “I never thought I'd see you again.” She leaned in and kissed him on the forehead.

He was all but naked. He rolled away clutching the cloth – a robe, like the one his mother wore. “Mom!”

“For the love of God, get dressed then. It's not like I didn't change your diapers.”

He reddened. It shouldn't matter, but why naked? Then he remembered the swimming, the weight, but also that he'd kept his boxers on. He slipped the robe over his head as soon as she turned her back. It barely reached his mid thigh. “Ok.”

She turned around. “I'd kill Slim if I could.”

Sure he fucked up with the dogs. Still, he'd tried. “He helped me find you.”

“I know.”

“How did I get here?” He’d honestly hoped he wouldn’t run into her.

“You were so close to shore. I had to get you.”

“You saved me?”

“I knew you weren’t dead and couldn’t just let you drown. I waded out and dragged you in.”

“And my clothes?”

“I had no choice. They would have made them notice you, to see you for what you are – alive.”

She’d waded out, stripped him, dragged him to shore. “But where are we?”

“Not far from the falls. Listen.”

He did. Behind the silence, the rush of water, the pounding of the falls. “How’d we get here?”

“The Coats told me I couldn’t take you from the water, but I kept pulling till you were on shore. One said to put you back, another said you had to choose for yourself now. They argued and argued. I couldn’t risk you being thrown back, so I had a friend help carry you here.”

“Thank you.” Another debt he couldn’t repay. And too many questions left, but one more pressing than the others. “Where’s Dad?”

Her head dipped. “I don’t know. Somewhere with the Coats.”

“Haven’t you looked?”

“No. They took him and nothing I do now will change that. I didn’t think they would hold him. Slim never should have brought your father here. I was ready to move

on, finally. And then he came with Neil. And now you're here, too. What business did he have dragging my son here?"

"But Mom," Greg said, "I'm glad I'm here. I was scared to talk to you again, but it's worth it, right?"

"No, you and your father, you both want all of me to be only what I was to you: a mother and a wife, but I was always more than that. And now I'm ready to leave that part behind. I should have left already. I don't know why I didn't. Then, when Slim came, I couldn't."

She was ready to stop being his mother? This wasn't the woman he remembered. "What'd you talk to Dad about when he was here?"

"I didn't mean to hurt him, really. I told him to go, but he wouldn't. It felt like a noose, so I told them he was here. I'm not proud of that."

She had been sweet, warm in life. So cold now. "Then why did you save me? Why not just let them have me too?"

"I'm not heartless. I told you, I thought they would just take your father back to where he belongs."

"Then, will you help me rescue Dad?"

She shrugged. "Honestly, they'll probably let him go soon enough – there's nothing they need from him – but, yes, I'll help. What, exactly, were you intending to do?"

He took a moment, considering where to begin. First, they had to find out where his father was. Evidently, the only people who knew were these Bluecoats. And he had

to wait for Slim and Eithne too. They had had a plan. Or had everything already gone wrong?

Greg heard approaching footsteps, slow and ponderous. A tall, gaunt man approached. He was staring intently up at the trees. The man stopped nearby and closed his eyes. “Lovely day. It is something of a dream.”

“Did you learn anything?” Emily asked.

“Oh, Bluecoats have a hound on a man. And they’re looking for you too, my dear.” The man paused and breathed deeply. “Can you smell the fragrances in the air? Like a blossoming spring day.”

“Thank you,” Emily said. “I hope you find this day peaceful.”

“Of course. The river sings sweetly. I might see if the water has warmed.” He began walking again, at his measured pace.

Emily turned to Greg. “He helped me carry you. I asked him to check on things hours ago, but he moves so slowly.”

“The Bluecoats are looking for you?”

“Nothing to worry about, I think. They’re unhappy about my rescuing you, but as long as they think it’s a coincidence, I should be ok.”

“So what will you do?”

“Go speak to them and show I have nothing to hide. But first, I need to know how you got here. Then I’ll locate a safe haven for you. Quickly though, the hound must have your scent.”

The hound. The one that followed him over the cliff? Had it survived? Could it even die? “A few days ago, the police phoned to say Dad was missing.” How many days

had it been? Two or more? The weekend had to be almost over now. Bob Striker, his boss, would be unpleasant on the next Tuesday with no update on the annual report, but that seemed to matter so little now.

“Go on.”

It took some time for Greg to fill her in on everything that happened. It was all so piecemeal in his mind. He told her about the catapulting over the cliff, then the attack near the river, and finally his meetings with Lucy and Eithne. “I think that’s about everything.”

Emily paused for some moments. “I don’t like it – how Lucy happened upon you and why Eithne wasn’t with Aidan.”

“Aidan?”

“Her twin brother. They are always together.”

“Lucy saw me getting attacked and stopped it.” His wound was puckered and pink around the edges. It’d need some antiseptic soon. That and a new bandage. Even as he moved, it seeped fresh blood lazily down his arm. “Can we get something to wrap this with?”

Emily nodded. “It might draw attention, but there’s no help for that now.” She tore a strip off her robe at the top, taking the right strap with it. The robe flapped open, revealing her breast.

Greg quickly averted his eyes. “Mom!”

She sighed. “Just deal with it.”

He felt the cloth pressed into his hands. “Are you decent?”

“This isn’t my body. That thing is in a grave back in North.”

When he turned back to look at her, she was holding the top piece of the robe up, covering herself. “You’re still my mother.”

She shook her head. “I’m not, but we don’t have time to argue that now. Eithne and Lucy aren’t done with you yet. I want to know what they’re up to, but I can’t drag you with while I do that.”

He started tying the strip of cloth over his arm, blotting up spots of red, not sure it would do any good. Keep loose dirt away perhaps. “So where do I hide?”

“Plain sight, where you can mix with the local. Let’s find you a Newly Fallen meeting.”

They weaved through the woods for several minutes and entered a small clearing. Two dozen people were gathered there, all wearing white robes. One man was standing, talking emphatically. The rest listened, occasionally nodding or murmuring assent, but otherwise remaining silent. Abruptly, the man finished his speech and sat. A middle-aged woman stood next. “Left my husband of twenty-three years last week. I had cancer for near two years and always thought I’d have time for one more goodbye, but it moved so fast at the end. I fought to stay, to tell him how much I loved him, but then started to fall so deep into myself, I couldn’t find the way out.”

A heavysset man with a thick white mustache let out a loud, emphatic “Amen!” The rest of the crowd turned and glared at him and he reddened.

“Take a seat,” Emily whispered. “If the group starts breaking up, tell a story of whom you left behind. Make them stick around. I’ll be back as soon as possible.” She turned to leave.

Greg grabbed her arm. “Mom? I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Not being there. Not hiking with you that day.”

She swallowed. “I’m not, anymore.”

“I am. I might have been able to do something, to stop it.”

“You wouldn’t have.”

“Mom, I love you and I’ve missed you a lot. You know that, right?” He had said it so many times over the years, and had held his head in his hands, kneeling, wishing she could hear it.

“I’ll be back soon,” she said, and then she was gone.

White-robed people surrounded him, each lamenting the loss of his or her precious life. This was all there was? Regret and yearning. Complaining. He hoped not.

“My youngest son was the only person at my side when I went,” the woman was saying. “He spoke to me, saying he loved me, saying ‘It’s okay to let go.’ Him sitting there, living, breathing, and telling me to die. So damned bored, he didn’t want to stay by me anymore, his poor, dying mother. No. His life was too pressing. He had to live, but it was okay for me to let go.” A murmur of assent went around the circle.

To Greg, the son sounded normal – he didn’t hate his mother, only her suffering. Yet he still understood some of what the woman was saying – some losses were so great that they ate at your core. He could only imagine losing everyone he loved, all at once.

The woman sat down and the man with the white mustache stood. “I been to church every day last twenty-seven years, ever since I let the Lord into my heart. But my lady, Georgia Ann, never did see the light of the almighty. And when I’m lying on my

deathbed, she says to me, ‘Horace, there ain’t no God out there waiting for ya, but I hoping ya find some peace.’ Now how I gonna find an ounce of peace with that woman saying heresy?”

They resented the living. All with unfinished business, things they would have done if only they had lived long enough to see them through. The stories progressed, one sad tale following the next.

So what did Emily resent? Guilt rose in Greg’s throat like bile. She wasn’t sorry “anymore” that he wasn’t in the car. Had she been once? She left him at this circle, purposefully, knowing he couldn’t help but grasp the tenor of the tales.

Slim too. That man had come here with some complaint, some regret.

A story he had barely listened to ended and the circle of people began to stare at him. There was some rustling about as people fidgeted, impatient with the wait.

Greg stood and opened his mouth, but no words came forth. What was his sad tale of loss and regret? Would he resent Susan if he died now? Wasn’t that the way of all them, those they loved the most were the only ones they could summon energy to hate? She would have the freedom to choose if he died. She could raise their child, find another man as well, someone warm to sleep beside her, to cuddle next to her on rainy Sunday mornings while Greg was cold, alone, in his grave. Or worse, stuck in this place, milling about with a mess of lost people, with body and mind, but no life.

“My wife is pregnant with our first child.”

A wave of gasps went through the crowd.

And then barking.



He turned. A hound ran in a full gallop directly at him. Behind it, also running, were two figures in brilliant cerulean robes. Bluecoats. Their porcelain skin seemed to radiate light.

He took off in the opposite direction, away from these things. The group around him disintegrated, fleeing every which way.

Greg made it only ten steps before a heavy weight hit him from behind, bringing him to his knees. The hound went tumbling over the top of him and rolled along the ground for a moment before regaining its feet and stood there, hackles raised, growling lowly.

Then the Bluecoats were shouting, their voices high, almost metallic. “Hands and legs out! Stay down!”

“Okay, okay.” He splayed out on the ground. Like a criminal. Like a caught fugitive. But there wasn’t law here. There weren’t any rights.

“Arms behind your back.”

Greg obliged and felt something wrapping painfully about his wrists, cutting into them as he was hauled to his feet. The dog still stood nearby, rumbling angrily. He kicked dirt in its direction. Damned thing was probably the same one that sent him over the cliff. Normally he was a dog person, but savored the idea of bringing this particular mutt to the vet.

The Bluecoats conferred behind him for a moment then one walked over and grabbed him by the shirt. Up close, the Coat was incredibly tall, nearly seven feet. His skin wasn’t pure white, but was marbled by pulsating blue veins like fine cracks in china. His eyes, like Lucy’s, were orbs, but these shone brightly, possessing a light of their own.

When he spoke, its thin blue lips remained firmly pressed together, unmoving, like a mask. “Why are you here? Who brought you?”

Greg shrugged. “Isn’t it tourist season?”

The Coat’s face placid, unmoving, even as he punched Greg in the side of his head.

Greg toppled the ground, the right side of his face consumed in a burning shot of pain. His mouth filling with blood.

The other Bluecoat hauled him to his feet.

“Don’t make me ask you again.”

Greg swallowed back the iron and anger. “I’m researching an article for Reader’s Digest.”

The Bluecoat motioned the hound. It trotted off ahead of its master. Greg stood still until he felt a nudge from behind. “Get moving,” the second Bluecoat yelled. Greg stepped forward.

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The smooth, melted land stretched on and on. Susan, at Aidan’s insistence, kept moving even after she felt she couldn’t take another step. She put one foot in front of the other, occasionally stealing a glance back at the child with the revolver. They shortly came to a sloppy, oily river that sluggishly rolled along. Turning to the right, they followed this putrid ribbon downstream. She shook her head back and forth. This place couldn’t be real. At least the other side of the mountains had shared a resemblance to the places she’d seen.

And why did Aidan kill Brad? The child had been playing her from the start, trying to get her to this place. What about his sister? Hadn't that been real? That betrayal was almost worse than the others. Susan had felt an empathy between the two of them, had meant to help him. Now she only felt overwhelmed by everything left unanswered. She was near the edge of breaking, of stopping and staying put no matter what the child said. She wanted to believe it was a dream, but if so, when had it started? On the day she saw Slim in the bar? Dreams never lasted so long.

But she kept moving, thinking of Greg and of her baby. She was supposed to be having the baby shower this weekend – that was reality. She was supposed to be worrying about keeping a wailing child happy, about sleepless nights, about all the little things like rashes and spit-up.

Eventually, as the day wore on, and the path became covered with a rough, crushed gravel, Susan's mind finally gave up looking for reasons, and started rehashing regrets. All had been fine just days earlier. Sure she'd wanted more excitement, more activity, but now she longed for the late mornings, the lazy walks, and the long daylight that stretched into night. She wanted her biggest problem to be figuring out a plan on how to reshingle the roof without Greg knowing. She wanted that pointless childishness back. How quickly it had all unraveled.

Susan kept her eyes on the ground as she walked, and tried her best not to think, until the ground just ended. Then she looked up. They stood at the edge of a wide black crater, the inside like smooth obsidian. The far end, barely visible, curved around in the distance. Below, inside the crater, a squalid shanty town circled around a stout black tower. The buildings were the color of rust, and the tower rose up above them, nearly ten

times their height. Smoke drifted up from this town in an thousand individual spirals, culminating in a sooty haze that spilled over the top of the crater. To Susan's left, the sludgy river slopped over the edge and fell into a mire at the bottom of the crater. This puddle spread out for some distance, grazing the edge of the dirty town. An acrid, nauseating smell permeated the air.

Aidan nudged her with the gun barrel in her lower back. "Down." He motioned to stairs hewn from the rock to their right, which wound down the edge of the crater, ending near the edge of the sludgy pond. These stairs had no rail, nor were they very wide.

Susan had no intention of descending them. She sat down, fed up and scared. She was not moving from this spot. They wanted something from her. As a bargaining piece or something else? She didn't really care.

Aidan trained his gun on her, balling up his face in a look of impatient fury. "I told you to move."

"Let's talk about your sister."

He motioned to the stairs. "Go."

"No." She crossed her arms and looked past him and his gun. No good going down there – it'd trap her. Why had she gone so far in the first place? He could have killed her before if he wanted to, but hadn't. She was tired of taking orders from this petulant brat. "Get me some water."

"There's water down there."

"That's not water." She motioned to the river next to them. "I want something fresh."

“Let me level with you, alright? You can make this easy if you move forward and stop being so difficult. We’ll treat you like a queen. If you don’t – our detention facilities aren’t exactly hospitable.”

She stood and took a step away from the edge. “Fuck your hospitality.”

The child grinned and lowered his gun at her legs. “One more step and I will shoot you in the leg. You know, slow you down some.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” She didn’t move.

“The way I see it, it’s my only option. A wound like that takes some time to bleed out, likely enough for me to get you some medical help. We might even be able to save your leg. Maybe not though – our medical supplies are slightly limited.”

“Fine. I’m going.” She turned and began walking down the stairs. “Is this why your sister ran away?”

There was a loud click behind her, likely the hammer on the gun. She stopped and looked over the edge and then back at him. “You know, I really don’t think you want me dead. I mean, it’d suck for you if I happened to fall, right? Lucy probably wouldn’t be pleased.”

“You don’t know anything about it.” He thrust the gun forward like it was somehow more intimidating that way.

She threw up her hands in mock surrender. “So what exactly is the problem with your sister? She’s not into kidnapping pregnant ladies?”

His face was red, and he clicked the hammer down. “Don’t push me.”

Susan rolled her eyes, but turned and kept walking down. “If you say so.” If she could only get that gun from the kid’s hands.

At the bottom of the stairs, they walked in an oblong curve along the edge of the pond. Dozens of dirty, naked people filled buckets along their path, but none even looked up. Then, as she got closer to the town, Susan could hear a continuous rumbling noise, like an old car.

The huts themselves were constructed with scraps and refuse. Some were basically lean-tos made from cinderblocks and a large sheet of corrugated metal. Others incorporated stacked logs or stones. Few were tall enough to stand in and many were falling apart, jagged holes pierced by shafts of grey sunlight. She and Aidan weaved through these shacks for nearly twenty minutes, occasionally spotting yet another dirt encrusted occupant sitting, smoking. The only clothes these people seemed to wear were odd bits of cloth or metal. Still, no one looked at them – each face averted, occupied.

Then they reached the tower. This was gilt in the glassy stone of the ground, rising to a height of perhaps fifty or sixty feet. Susan tilted her head back, staring up towards the top. Back home, this building would have been dwarfed, but here it was magnificent, a glowing gem surrounded by gritty sand. “What’s this place?”

Aidan glowed. He walked around front of her for the first time and grabbed a door handle that had blended seamlessly into the building. “Our home. The one we carved from the center of our punishment.”

The building was at once intriguing and ominous. She wanted to see the inside, and walking through the doors, couldn’t have been more disappointed by the interior. Two rows of simple wood desks, each with an old typewriter sitting on top, ran down the center of the room. These were old typewriters, the kind with circular keys that clacked

loudly when they were pressed. About a third of them were in use when Susan walked in – a bunch of naked, dirty people typing away. She couldn't fathom the reason.

It almost looked like a poor facsimile of an old office, but several details were off. In the very center of the room stood an old-fashioned elevator, complete with movable iron lattice, and next to it growled an old generator, spewing noxious fumes into the closed space. Then there were the stony-faced men posted around the floor, watching the workers bustle about.

Aidan took her right hand and gently began to pull her forward. “To the elevator.”

She pulled her hand away, sickened by his touch. “No more. I'm pregnant. And you've marched me at gunpoint for half the day. I want food. I want water. I need to rest.”

“Not this again. Food and water are down below. We'll get you a chamber too.”

“No. Just bring me something here, please, just give me this.” She dropped to the floor, sitting and leaning back on her arms. The elevator looked like a cage.

Aidan shrugged, then snapped his fingers and pointed at two of the guards and then at her. The large men lumbered towards her.

She crab-walked backwards until she hit the door with her back. She tried to stand, to push, to get outside of this place and run, but the men grabbed her by the arms, under the armpit, and hoisted her up. She struggled and kicked at them, but they simply deposited her in the elevator. Aidan joined the three of them there and closed the metal gate in front of them.

“Wasn't that pointless?” he asked.

She'd had enough of this homicidal child, enough of being pushed and shoved and carried, of being forced to go, go, go, enough of everything. So she kicked him square in the back of the head. His face smashed into the gate with a clang. It was so satisfying. The guards knocked her to the ground and pinned her there.

Aidan turned, a small amount of black liquid oozing from above his right eye. "Careful, you fucks." He slapped the men's arms aside and squatted down over her, smiling. "I was going to treat you nice." Then he kicked her in the ribs.

She recoiled and squeezed her eyes shut, curling up, but he kicked her again and again, always up high, knocking the air from her. When, he was finally done, she lay still, not wanting to move, struggling for breath.

The elevator began to descend. They went down farther and farther, slowly, for several minutes, the machine wheezing and whining, before screeching to a halt. The guards pulled her up.

In front of them was fifty yards of half-assed Vegas. A long, thin tunnel, carved from the rock, lined on one side with old fashioned slot machines with loud manual tumblers and long handles. Four dirty men wearing hardhats sat, feeding coins in mechanically, seemingly disinterested. The other wall was lined with old television sets like the one in Lucy's cave. Each was outfitted with a coin slot timer. Several more people sat at these, staring at scenes of parks and city streets.

Her group pushed past and continued down the corridor to where it became only a crude tunnel. Susan craned her neck back and watched the miners – for that's what they looked like – and past them, the elevator.



It was the only exit she knew of, but the top level had been guarded, making escape improbable at best. Still, she had to find a way. Greg would be worried, and rightly so. She wouldn't even have been here if it wasn't for him, or his father, but it was pointless to blame either of them, wrong even. She could only blame herself, or Aidan, or Lucy, for all the good it did.

Her body hurt everywhere. She clutched her arms about her chest and continued hobbling forwards. Every so often, one of the thugs would shove her from behind, speeding her along. Who were these monsters?

Past forking paths, deeper and deeper into the ground, there was a long row of alcoves with iron bars over their entrances. Aidan flung open the nearest of these. Susan stopped, but the men grabbed her from behind, dragged her into the cell, and left. The bars locked shut behind them into place.

“I hope you like your new home.”

The cell was barely lit from a flickering torch outside, but she could see a pile of straw in one back corner and a bucket in the other – her bed and toilet. The walls and floor were damp and slimy with condensation, and the smell of the place was atrocious. She glanced around, looking for food or water, but found none. Silence surrounded her quickly, creeping into every empty space. Feeling sick, she crawled over to the straw and rolled onto her side, staring at the wall.

She lay there for some time, tired but unable to sleep, the straw sticking roughly into her side. Her baby shifted a few times. Mechanically, she moved her hand to her stomach and rubbed it.

Eventually, a mute man came and pushed a tray under bars. She rolled out of bed, and hauled herself to it. There was a cup of clear water, unidentifiable soup, and a long piece of crusty bread. Barely palatable. But she gulped it down, hardly tasting.

Then a voice came from outside. "It's not worth eating that mess." An old woman's voice, a grandmother tired from too many years.

Susan swallowed the hard lump of bread in her mouth. "Who is it?" she asked, looking around.

"I'm just next door, darlin'. Back home, people call me Maddy."

Susan introduced herself. "It's nice to meet you," she said. Finally a friendly voice. She needed this, but couldn't trust it. And couldn't lose it, couldn't go back go back to silence, and this lonely, horrible place. In movies and books, prisoners always quizzed each other: "What ya in for?" – taking pride in having committed the worst crime. But even with bars, this wasn't a prison for criminals. Susan had no idea why she was here. Why should this woman?

"Just go on back to your meal," Maddy said. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"No. I want to talk. I need to. Honestly, I'm trying to figure out what to say. I guess for starters, where are you from?"

"Big mining town, called North. Born and raised."

"Really? That's amazing! I was just there yesterday. It's my husband's hometown."

"That recently, and you're already here?"

She thought Susan was dead. "Oh God, no. I'm fine, really. I'm not dead."

"Truly? I would love to hear your story."

Susan took a deep breath, thinking of where to start. What would this “Maddy” already know? Probably a hell of a lot more. “You’re dead?”

“Of course. I’d say you might be the only person round here who’s not.”

“Actually, my husband and his father, both alive, are here somewhere.” Susan had to ask. “So how did it happen with you?”

“Most people would call it ‘old age.’ It just crept in, like winter. Not all at once, no blizzard, but plenty of frost first and flurries. By the time it finally came, most people thought I should accept it. But there’s one thing they don’t tell you – you always want that one more day.”

“And how did you end up here? Behind bars, I mean.”

“Well, darlin’,” Maddy said, “I’d be more than happy to tell you, but I seem to remember asking you the very same thing. So back to the topic: you’re alive and yet you’re here. Your husband and his father too.”

“We came separately. My husband and his father were here first and taking a long time to get back. Then, this boy, Aidan, offered to help me find them.”

“That little imp.”

“Then he killed my friend. Beat me up, and had me dragged down here. All after I offered to help him find his sister.”

“Where’s Eithne?”

“I don’t know. Lucy doesn’t seem worried, though.”

“Lucy.” Maddy’s voice grew low. “If only I could get my hands on her.”

If only. “She put you here too?”

“Yes, but darlin’, we have not even begun your story yet. I want to know why they put you down here.”

“I can tell you the how of it, but not the why.”

“We’ll just have to find out then. Start from the beginning. How does a living person find a place like this?”

Susan sighed. The food was dragging her down. Her torso killed. She just wanted to sleep now. But would Maddy still be there in a few hours and willing to talk? “I’m sorry. You’re sweet and I’m glad I’ve got you to talk to, but I keep going over this again and again. And it never gets any clearer, any more intelligible.”

Maddy’s voice tinged with disappointment. “That’s fine, darlin’. We can try later.”

“Thanks,” Susan said. “We’ll talk. I promise.”

“We have plenty of time.”

Susan’s head nodded down. The remains of her soup had congealed into a cold mass. She pushed it away, disgusted, and turned to the straw in the corner. She’d never slept on anything more rustic than a sleeping bag. The very idea of this bed was itchy, but certain things had to be braved – she couldn’t very well stay awake forever. It was time to give up. Her eyelids already heavy, she plodded to the bed, rolled onto her side – she missed being able to sleep on her stomach – and was asleep in minutes.

Susan’s dreams were plagued by the image of a toddler, a young boy, on fire. Flames licked the small body and lit the surrounding darkness – flames coming from a figure standing nearby, a dark figure with glowing white eyes. The child wasn’t Aidan. He was Susan’s baby. She knew it even as she looked at him. He burned silently, mouth

and eyes gaping wide. She reached for him again and again, but the heat was always too strong.

When Susan awoke, sweat dripped slowly from her brow, to her baby jabbing her in the ribs. Her baby, the one that was burning because of Lucy. It was that woman's fault. She wrapped her arms around her stomach and held it tightly.

"Maddy!" she yelled.

"What is it, darlin'?" Maddy voice purred through the cell bars.

"Lucy. What did she do to you?"

Maddy's voice hard again, an edge that denied the earlier sweetness. "She tried to hurt some people who didn't deserve it, and I stopped her. Then she left me down here alone for a long time."

"But why does she want to hurt my baby?"

"You're a mother?"

"I'm expecting," Susan said. "But she was burning my baby in my dreams. She held him from me, burned them."

"And you want to know why?"

"Yes."

"Darlin', it's because she's the devil."

## CHAPTER 7

With the stoic-faced Bluecoats and their growling hound trailing closely, Greg marched through the forest towards the center of Falls. It was only then that he began to understand just how small and rural Falls actually was. Out of the forest, he first walked through a field of waist-high plants. Workers – the dead – in white robes, strode through these fields filling satchels with downy fibers from the plants.

As they got closer to the town, the fields cleared out, replaced by empty land spotted with collapsed wooden structures. Most were barely foundations, being taken back by the land, piece by piece. Trees grew through roofs and vines climbed walls. Their windows were nothing but empty frames.

And then they passed through a wooden rampart, and the town became uniform. First were a series of large buildings that thrummed with activity. Greg cocked his head to peek inside and saw yet more of the dead weaving wide sheets of white cloth on giant wooden looms.

Then, he and his guards came to the center of town. Here were perhaps two dozen houses, all well kept and cozy with low roofs and wood siding, simple white or faded grey. Lawns were neatly trimmed. Small wisps of smoke curled from stone chimneys. It looked like the old mining towns, the ones that just died one day, all their inhabitants gone. Years ago, his family sometimes visited them, poking around the ruins on a weekend for no apparent reason other than his mother's curiosity.

And everywhere, Bluecoats, with identical porcelain skin and glowing veins, marched in unison. Only a few people (all dead, Greg assumed) were here, being led one way or another by the Coats.

In the very center of all this, stood a tall, stone clock tower. A simple, square building, rising four or five stories high. The roof, shingled in clay, sloped gently to a single point. On each side, near the top, a clock whose face was a simple circle and on which a single arm stood still, or if it moved, did so imperceptibly.

Only a little ways off was the lake, edged by a sandy beach, where even as he watched, new arrivals climbed, gasping, to its' shores. Back beyond was the massive waterfall, stretching up above the clouds – a long, rippling ribbon of liquid. How had he ever survived the fall?

Gregory was marched through the scene, directly to this tower. One of his captors stepped ahead, pushing open a worn wooden door at the base. Then Greg was shoved inside, into a dark room.

A rickety wooden staircase led upward, to a bright light that cast dancing shadows on the walls. A Bluecoat led the way up the creaking stairs. The closer they got to the top, the more brilliant the light became until it was nearly blinding. The very walls seemingly aflame with searing white light.

“What’s up there?” Greg, shielding his eyes. Mute, they merely pushed him up the final flights of stairs, onto a platform that spanned the tower. He closed his eyes, but the light blazed through his eyelids.

“Greg Camp, son of Neil Camp, son of Emily Camp, father of Paul Camp.” The voice came from all directions, speaking slowly, pausing between words.

Father of? “We haven’t named him. Besides, we don’t even know if it’s a boy or a girl.”

“It is written.”

Bullshit. He'd name the kid whatever he pleased. "And who the hell are you?"

"Mikeel, wielder of light, defender of the deceased. Now, account for yourself."

Was this the one from Eithne's story, the one who opposed Lucy? Greg opened his eyes slightly, but could make out little of the blinding figure. He considered several claims, but settled on telling the truth. "I came for my father."

"And what of your association with the exiled?"

"You mean Lucy? I don't 'associate' with her. She saved me from a psycho, that's all."

"And which of my people brought you here?"

Greg started to say "No one," but instead heard himself rattle off the names "Slim, Eithne, and Mom."

"You have spoken and we have decided."

The light in the room dimmed rapidly and Greg opened his eyes. The world still swam by in muted greens and blues. But, slowly, he began to make out the image of the man before him. Short. Balding with white hair fringing his head. A flat nose and wide mouth. Like the Bluecoats, his skin glowed but translucent flames wreathed his body, flickering out like thousands of snake tongues. He smiled, his face crinkling up kindly.

"Thank you for your honesty. Your father does not wish to leave. But you will escort him back to your world, as you desire," Mikeel said. "Neither of you may ever return here until it is your proper time."

Meaning: until they died. The offer was enough, generous even, and exactly what Greg had come here for, but he felt that, on some level, he was abandoning Emily, Slim, Eithne. None of them liked this Mikeel, or what he did to the dead. Still, more than



anything else, Greg felt relief – he was going home, finally done with this place, seeing Susan again. Escaping death, and returning to life.

Mikeel was still smiling, Coats stationed on either side of him. Everyone seemed to be waiting for something. A thank you? A question? Why not ask something? When would he have another chance?

They were all still standing silently, when a loud, incoherent, screaming started outside, the voice vaguely familiar, if not immediately recognizable. As the yelling grew louder, clear words. “Greg!” Then a garbled mess. He recognized the voice from the phone call a few days earlier. Brad.

Greg turned and ran towards the stairs. The two Bluecoats tried to step in his way, but he ducked through the small gap between them, just fast enough to not be grabbed. Then he bolted down the stairs. The footsteps of the Bluecoats pounded after. Faster. He jumped down the last several stairs to the top landing. He had to make it away, had to know why Brad was here, because something wasn't right.

On the second-to-last landing, his feet slipped out, sending him plowing through the railing. He grabbed frantically, barely managing to grip onto the edge. He hung there, a twenty foot drop below him, listening to the approaching Bluecoats. If they caught him, what would happen to Brad? And what of the release he had just been promised? Maybe he had been an idiot to run, but the yelling – he had to know.

A Coat was overhead now, reaching down. Greg looked at the floor again and let go. He tried to tuck and roll, but the fall was too vertical and too far. He came crashing down, his ankle turning over beneath him, shooting pain that made him want to lie on the floor and scream.

He'd sprained it years earlier while playing basketball, trying an ill-conceived crossover. The pain had been incredible, laying him out on the ground for ten minutes while his friends got ice and pain killers. It was only a sprain back then. This time – probably broke. He tried to stand and had to gulp back the need to vomit. His poor body, bruised, cut, broken – it'd been through a war, but he couldn't stop now. He could hear the Bluecoats running down the stairs again. The outside was only about fifteen feet away. Greg knew he had to try. He propped himself up on his knee and pushed up to a standing position on his good leg. Then he started hopping as quickly as possible. Each time he jumped, the bad ankle bounced, and almost floored him, but he kept going. He pushed open the doors, leaned on the wall of the tower, and yelled for Brad.

There. Twenty feet off. Dripping wet. Stark naked. Angry. Brad whipped around, his eyes burrowing in on Greg. “You son of a bitch!” he yelled, and started running at him.

Greg put up his hands to ward off the attack, but Brad barreled through, knocking him against the wall. Greg tried to regain his balance, and put down his injured foot to gain leverage. The pain was instant, toppling him. Brad followed, pinning him to the ground and punching him. Greg's vision exploded into a haze of white. Then, abruptly, it was over – the weight of his attacker gone. Brad was in the hands of the Bluecoats, flailing and screaming.

Greg sat up, leaning on his uninjured arm. “What the hell?”

Mikeel walked slowly out of the tower, ignoring the Bluecoats and the naked, struggling Brad. He squatted down next to Greg's ankle, and examined it for a moment

before gently touching it. Even such a slight brush sent shudders through Greg's leg, but the pain numbed.

"It will heal," Mikeel said, and looked back at the Bluecoats, motioning them away with a wave of his hand. They dragged Brad away. Then he placed one arm under Greg's legs and another around his back. "This is easier if you help."

Greg slung his arm over Mikeel's shoulder and held on. He felt like a small child. This short, old, grey man lifted him effortlessly.

"Why was Brad like that?" Greg asked.

Mikeel looked ahead, his white-orb eyes half-lidded, almost sleepy. "The deceased often arrive in such a state. In time, he will come to forgive you for your part in his death and accept fate."

"I didn't do anything." It took another moment for the rest of the sentence to hit home. "Wait, Brad's dead?"

Mikeel nodded. "Yes, quite recently. But that is not your concern. You are not to interfere with the deceased. Do you understand?"

Greg nodded. But it was too coincidental. Why did Brad blame him? The first chance he got, he'd figure out what happened. "And Dad?"

"You will return to your own place as planned. My only requirement is that you close the entrance after yourselves. Can you agree to this?"

"Fine."

"Good. I will be sending an escort with you to ensure that this happens." Mikeel carried Greg to a small well-kept hut, and pushed open the door. The inside was nearly bare, just the approximation of an interior. Greg was placed on a wooden chair, resting

his foot on the chair's twin. "I'll send a doctor to look to your ankle. Several are in residence here, and one will assuredly be pleased to practice again." Mikeel left, closing the door behind him.

Greg sat back, lacing his fingers behind his head. Mikeel had seemed reasonable. The Coats were perhaps a little too enthusiastic in their duties, but their leader – Greg couldn't help but like him. His touch had been warm and gentle. He did not seem cruel or heartless in the way that Slim and Eithne described him.

Greg still wondered why – why had Mikeel held Neil, but now was only too happy to let him go? There was no answer. None, at least, that didn't start and end solely in conjecture.

So Greg tried to concentrate on other thoughts. How could he explain all of this to Susan, especially his injuries? Leaving Lucy out seemed necessary. But what about Eithne? Susan would surely have a soft spot for a young, dead child. And how could he possibly describe Mikeel?

Just thinking about her reminded Greg of how much he truly missed his wife. More than anything else, he wanted to get back to her, back to their life together. She probably wouldn't be happy that he left her behind, but it had been necessary. He was even more certain of that fact now. He also knew that the pregnancy had been tough on her, she had told him as much. It made sense in a way, after what her sister had done when pregnant. Greg wanted to be there for Susan. And he would be again, very soon.

A tapping sound came from a room in the back of the house. He craned his neck to look through the doorway, but couldn't see anything. An incessant noise. Tap, tap,

tap – on and on, a slow woodpecker. It was probably just the doc. “Come around front,” he yelled

Yet, the tapping persisted. Greg pushed himself up slowly from his chair and started to hop. The ankle hurt less than before, but it was still more than enough to make movement painful. And here he was, hopping around, just because some asshole couldn’t find the front door. He went into the back room, which was bare except for a beaten wood table and two chairs that matched the ones in the living room. A kitchen or dining room? But barren of all things needed to prepare sustenance. The tapping came from a small begrimed window. He unlatched it and pushed it open, only to be greeted by Slim’s horrifying, but somehow happy, face.

“Greg, my man! Glad to see you’re okay. I thought you fell all the way down. Damned hounds must have caught your scent, cause they took off like little rockets. I did all I could to keep up.”

“I did fall all the way.” Greg would have punched Slim if he could have reached him. The bastard was being so flippant. Nothing had gone well since he had first come into Greg’s office, and a good deal was directly Slim’s fault. If the fat man had just spoken to Mikeel, Greg wouldn’t have had to come in the first place.

“But you’re all right?”

“All right? Yeah, I’ve only been stabbed, fallen a shitty long way, almost drowned, and been attacked by dogs. Oh, and I might have broken my ankle. But, you know what? I’m going home. So yeah, I’m fine. Thanks for asking. Now, what do you want?”

“No need to get testy, right? I’m here trying to help.”

“And what about Eithne?” Mom seemed to think she was working with Lucy. What the hell did Lucy want anyways?

“She had to run off, other business to attend to.”

“Like what?” What could possibly be more important? Wasn’t she supposed to help with the Coats? Where had she been?

Slim just shrugged. “She didn’t tell me. Seemed a bit hurried though.”

Slim was as ignorant as he was incompetent. “Come inside. We need to talk.”

“Any guards around front?”

“Nope. Like I said, I busted up my ankle and they’re sending a doctor. It’s not like I’m a threat to run away. Besides, Mikeel seems to like me.”

“That so?” Slim came around and they sat in the kitchen, quickly running over the events. Greg talked about his fall from the cliff and rescue by Emily, his subsequent capture and the meeting with Mikeel. All the way up until the fight with Brad.

Slim talked of how, after Greg fell, the other hound had pinned him, but Eithne came by at the last moment and slit its throat with a long, nasty-looking knife. Then she left abruptly, apologizing and promising to come back as soon as possible. Slim had traversed the cliff stairs, making it to the bottom just in time to overhear that they’d found another living person in Falls. He said he had been overjoyed at the news.

After the stories were done, Greg sat back for a moment. He needed to get’s Slim’s help with figuring out why Brad was here, but first he needed to trust the fat man.

“I need to know something, what made you angry when you first got here?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Slim said.

“No, you do. I’m sure of it. You blamed someone for your death, but why? Heart failure was your own fault.”

Slim stood, knocking his chair backwards. Teeth bared, nostrils flared. His bulk loomed over Greg. “You think you’re so damned smart, but you don’t have a clue, so listen to me when I tell you to butt the fuck out.”

“Come on, just tell me.” Greg tried to soften his voice. He was angry too. Slim had no right to get up in arms. “I’m not judging. Please. After all I’ve been through, I think I deserve an explanation.”

Slim sighed, deflating. “I’ve tried, ok? I’ve done what I could for you. I really don’t want anything bad to happen to you. Or to Neil.”

“I’ve got to have someone to trust.”

Slim looked down. “It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Then who?”

Slim swallowed heavily. There were tears in his eyes. “Neil,” he said.

Surely Dad wasn’t responsible for Slim’s death. But then again, Greg had nothing to do with Brad’s. “Why?”

“It sounds stupid, but I have to start a while back. You know, at one time I had a good life: a wife, a kid, and a band. This was a few years before you were born, when your dad was still playing guitar for us. We got this big recording contract that came with so many expectations. Things were going well for a while, but our record didn’t end up selling well enough. My bitch of an ex left and took the kid with her. Maybe she was right, though – I was on smack at the time. Only your dad was there for me. I’ll never really know why. I knew I owed him.”

“You were like his brother,” Greg said.

“Yeah, and I always remembered. Then, when Emily died – you’ve got to promise not to say a word of this to him.”

“I promise.”

“He tried to kill himself. He swallowed a whole bunch of pills. I’ll never know why he didn’t use a gun. I came over that day on a whim and found him. I called the hospital, and waited for the ambulance with him. He was so blue already. I thought he might die.”

“When?” Greg asked. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“About four years ago. He wasn’t happy with living and wanted to be with your mother. After he was out of the woods, he didn’t want you to know, said you’d worry too much. I promised not to tell.

“I tried to explain to him then what he meant to me. It was like you said, we were brothers. And I didn’t have anyone left, except for him. He told me he wouldn’t try again.”

“Ok, so what does this have to do with you blaming him?”

“Around the time I died, he was spending a lot of time with Cindy. It was a good thing, really.”

A North woman who’d divorced her deadbeat husband decades before. Greg had gone to school with her children, but he barely knew her. She seemed nice enough, though. Dad had started dating her almost a year ago. She was his first long-term girlfriend since Mom died. “Yeah, you said he broke it off with her before coming here. What does she have to do with anything?”



“He just became unavailable.”

“That bothered you?”

“Let me ask you a question: Where do you think a big, old guy like me’s gonna find a lady? It’s not like I haven’t tried. No woman wants me. No woman I care to be with, at least. And Neil knew that. He knew I was sitting at home alone.”

“But he needed it. You can’t really be pissed at him for that.”

“No, of course not. I wanted him to be happy. But we were supposed to go hunting that weekend last December, and he never showed up. He knew my heart was bad, and left me to die on the floor like a bug. He should have been there. I didn’t have anyone else.”

The pieces clicked together. “That’s why you brought him here? For revenge?”

“No, I mean, I was basically over it by then. And I knew he’d want to see Emily. I wanted to see him too, that’s all. Is that so bad?”

“Ok, I trust you.” And it was the truth – if Slim did anything wrong here, it was by mistake, not malice. “I need your help though.”

“Anything. Whatever you need.”

“I need to settle things with Brad, for his sake and mine. Find out what you can, ok?”

Slim nodded and opened his mouth to say something else, when a noise came from the living room.

“Hello?” a voice said. “Anyone there?”

“That’s the doctor,” Greg said. “You’ve got to get out of here.”

“How?”

“Just figure it out.”

“Are you in the kitchen?” the doctor asked.

“Coming,” Greg called. He hopped into the living room and sat down.

“You could have stayed in there.” The doctor was a middle aged, tall, angular man with thick brown hair and wide muttonchops. He wore the same white robe as the rest of the dead. No lab coats here. “So where’s it hurt?”

Greg pointed to his ankle. Just as he did that, Slim went sprinting by behind the doctor. Pretty unsubtle overall. But he was out the door before the doctor fully turned.

“Who was that?”

“I didn’t see anyone. So, do you think my ankle’s broke?”

The doctor turned back around and started prodding at the foot.

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The prison was dark and shadowy, lit only by the undulating circles of light cast by flickering torches. The stone floor cold and moist, but Susan sat there, indifferent.

“You’re speaking figuratively, right?”

“No, darlin’. Wish I was. Lucy might not be your bible or your Milton devil, but she is an aspect of that same dragon.”

Susan ran her fingers along the stone, feeling the grit of it, the indents where the miners carved out the space she was in. “Is this hell then?”

Maddy laughed. “Not at all. This place isn’t a reward, that’s for sure. But it isn’t hell either, not when you can just leave. Besides, despite the current circumstances, Lucy

isn't that torture-your-soul kind of devil. Her intentions aren't bad – it's just how she goes about them.”

“So what does she want?”

“To free the dead,” Maddy said, “at any cost.”

“Don't listen to that old hag.” Aidan's voice came from beyond the cells.

“She's a traitor to her own kind.” Another voice, a little girl's. It had to be Eithne.

“Really?” Maddy asked. “And what, you think she'll listen to you instead?”

Two small children stepped forward close to Susan's cell and stared in. In every way, they looked identical. Their burnt skin, dark brown eyes, white robes. But the girl had long black hair whereas the boy's was cut short.

“You're Eithne,” Susan said. “I've heard a lot about you.”

The girl nodded. “Pleased to meet you. I had to come meet you when Aidan sent word you were here.”

Susan walked over, grabbed the bars and stared down at the children. “For what? What did I do to you? What did Brad?”

“Irrelevant,” Aidan said. “When he dies, he'll just come here and be saved with the rest of us.”

“Presuming he made it,” Eithne said.

He waved aside the statement. “A minor sacrifice in the grand scheme.”

“But why me?” Susan yelled.

“Irrelevant the grand scheme. It's not you we need,” Eithne said and waved her hand, clearly imitating her brother.

Aidan frowned at his sister. "I thought you agreed."

"What choice do I have?"

"Is this because of Greg? Because of Neil?" Susan asked.

Aidan's attention returned to her. "To be honest, their connection was only a matter of convenience."

"Then why?"

"Your baby. He can free us all."

"He'll what?" Susan asked.

"You're all deluded," Maddy said.

"Simply put," Eithne said, "Lucy believes your child's untarnished life force can be used to break the pattern of death and rebirth that creates this place, and in doing so, might allow the dead to rejoin the living."

"How can you tell her that?" Aidan asked. "We agreed that it was best she didn't know."

"At what cost?" Maddy asked.

Eithne came forward, and gently placed her hands on Susan's. "It is a horrible, unthinkable price we ask, but every people need a savior. Where is ours?"

"So the baby will die," Maddy said.

"Stay away from my child." Susan retreated back into her cell, cradling her stomach.

Aidan hung his head. "You fail to grasp the greatness of this moment. It isn't personal. We aren't monsters, but only people who've reached our final option."

"You're murdering a child," Maddy said. "You know this won't work."

“We should leave,” Eithne said. “We’re terribly sorry. I mean it.”

The two children passed out of the torchlight into darkness, arguing (“You shouldn’t have told her that,” Aidan said. “It isn’t right.” “But Lucy said.” “I know what she said.”) until their voices faded away.

Susan collapsed to her knees, and then fully down, tucking her legs against her body. Tears began to work down her face.

“There, there, darlin’,” Maddy said. “Don’t stress the baby.”

An old wives’ tale. Susan wished it were true. She’d rather lose the baby than let them take it. “You know, I wasn’t even sure I wanted this child.”

“Now why would you say that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because nothing will ever be the same. Maybe because this is the one chance at life I’ve got. What if I not ready yet?”

“Oh, child, don’t say things like that. You’ll be a great mother. I know it.”

“How do you know?” Susan was yelling.

“You’ve got a lot of love in you. It shows.”

Susan’s hands touched her belly, rubbing it gently. “This entire ‘being pregnant’ thing was hard enough without someone wanting to take my baby from me. For that matter, what did I do to them? Why take *my* baby?”

“I don’t know, darlin’. I’d guess that the children were being honest – you were convenient. Lucy’s breaking the armistice by bringing the living here. If Mikeel learns about what’s happening, there’ll be a full reaping.”

Susan sat up and leaned against the bars, keeping one hand wrapped protectively around her belly. She wiped her eyes. “A reaping?”

“Complete extermination. He’ll leave none behind.”

“But he doesn’t know.”

“Nor do we want him to,” Maddy said.

“We don’t?”

“Of course we don’t. A lot of innocent people would get caught and destroyed.”

“They aren’t innocent, Maddy. They watched Aidan march me here. They could have done something.”

“What did you want them to do?”

“I don’t know, stop him,” Susan said.

“Most of them probably didn’t even know what was going on. And even those who had an idea, what chance do you think they would have had?”

“Plenty,” Susan said. “There are a lot of them out there, right?”

“Ok, I suppose you’re right to be angry. They’d done something for you too, but the simple fact is that you really don’t want to go wishing for a reaping. You’ve seen what happened to the land last time. This time it will be worse.”

“So who do we turn to for help?” Susan asked. “If we can’t trust Mikeel or Lucy?”

“You can trust me,” Maddy said. “I swear by everything good I left behind, by my children’s children, that I will do everything I can for you.”

“And what until then?” Susan had no intention of simply waiting around. She wanted to break the bars now, to claw a chunk of stone from the wall, to be done with it all and back home in her house, settling down on the couch to watch a movie.

“I think it’s time you heard the story,” Maddy said, “of how I came to be trapped here.”

“Please, I’d love to hear it.”

“I came here from Falls not long after I died. At the time, I was mad at my husband for outliving me. I imagined this sordid life that I supposed he was living – one filled with fun and sex and carefree abandon.”

Susan looked down at her belly. Would it be the same with her and Greg? He’d gone to Falls without her, without even consulting her, without even knowing what he was getting into. It was an experience he had meant to deny to her. It wasn’t right. They’d become partners and meant to go through life together, not alone. He should have at least asked what she thought. “I think I understand,” Susan said.

“It all seems so childish to me now, but I couldn’t help it back then, so I came over here looking for a place free from morals and constraints. I found the reality of False to be very different from my fantasy,” Maddy said. “We were always working, always striving towards the realization of a better life. Lucy and the twins were always talking about the cleansing fire and the need to dig deeper, to where the flames couldn’t follow. So we did.

“We had a long spike that one person held while the others used sledges to pound a deep hole into the rock. Then we poured a detonating powder into the hole. The explosion would take out a few inches, maybe a foot, at a time. It was slow and difficult work, but we had all the time in the world and never grew tired. Instead, everything seemed to come through a filter, like it was happening to someone else.”

Susan was confused, but didn't care to admit it. The out-of-body sensation wasn't foreign, but the body was always real. Slim had said he was already whole when he fell from waterfall. But how could flesh spring forth from the water?

“Whenever I had free time, I tried to gratify those urges that drove me here.” Maddy said. “But you don't want to hear about an old lady being warm in the tail. Anyhow, it was a waste of time: there was that same feeling of distance as with everything else, that wall between being and feeling. It had none of the joy or meaning of life.

Maddy said her time there dragged on for a long time. Then everything changed one day when they were digging new tunnels. They set fire to the explosive and got out of there. When they came back, they thought we'd hit another level of our mine – there was a hole in the ceiling. They finished chiseling out the hole and were the first to go through. There was a mine on the other side, but the differences were obvious – the electric lights, the machines. It was night time, so no one was there.

“It was surreal – we were back in a place we'd never hoped to see again. None of us was terribly intent on hurrying back to Lucy. And then it turned out to be North. The town had changed so much, I barely recognized it.”

Susan thought that it was like time travel, like getting to see the future. Yet, the appeal of that was always the opportunity to return, not to just be where everyone is a stranger. “How long were you dead for? Did you see anyone you knew?” she asked.

“Awhile and no, but I'll get to that, darlin'” Maddy said. “At first, we just kept a low profile, and tried to avoid attracting attention, but that was hard. Lucy has always encouraged us to eschew clothing, saying the robes from Falls were just the trappings of



Mikeel's despotic control. I never understood that because she wears them. I'm sad to say I understand all too well now."

Maddy said their first bit of thievery sprung from the need for clothing. They happened on some mining clothes, big baggy coveralls, and threw them on. Then the four of them made our way to the surface and went their separate ways. They all said it was because they would attract less attention apart, but the truth was they didn't want to be reminded they were dead. Without the others around, Maddy said she hoped to stay like that, blending in and actually living.

"Of course, that was impossible. The changes in my body were slow, but before long, I could smell this horrible scent all the time. I really thought it was coming from somewhere else, from air pollution, the miasma of the future. Then the signs became more obvious – my skin started to darken and bloat."

Susan thought back to Slim's state and his attempt to mask it with scented sprays. It hadn't struck then that it was a direct consequence of him coming for Greg. "But it got better, right?"

"I wish," Maddy said, "but, darlin', that's just not how this works. I ran back to the mine as soon as I could, but it was still open for the day, so I lay in copse of trees and hid for the day. It was horrible: I was sweating profusely and my bones ached. Then, finally, the miners left and I sprinted back down into the mine and found the entrance to False. In the time since I'd been gone, they'd installed a metal hatch, probably to keep anyone else from crossing over. I knocked on it until it was opened and then climbed back down to False. Lucy had a couple guards waiting.

Maddy said that things started to change quickly after that. A team was sent out to investigate the world and came back with a big television instead, saying that people spoke to them from it. After that, the looting began full scale. Each night, new groups were sent out to gather what they could. They carried back through all sorts of things – sheets of metal, clothing, jewelry, even a handful of slot machines from the back room of a bar. From the people who were going out and stealing, I heard the living people had started to notice the number of objects missing. Still, more and more dead snuck out and returned without incident.

“We were finally able to start building a semblance of life here,” Maddy said. “But while many of the dead were out collecting things, Lucy was experimenting. We always had a few pools of water where we could reflect on the living world. Somehow, Lucy managed to start making the televisions work like that too. She set them up to monitor the town so we knew what the residents were doing.”

Susan had thought of the televisions as an odd but endearing quirk, a means to ease the difficulty of all the loss. She’d never thought of them as a means to spy. It wasn’t right. Those things gave comfort to so many people here.

“Then she turned to a different plan,” Maddy said. “Her Coats were never able to pass through to the other world. As soon as one tried, it turned to ash. So she gathered a group of the dead who she trusted – me, Eithne, Aidan, and two others – and told us we needed to get a live human to really start change. The others didn’t question her. I tried to ask what she was planning on doing, but she refused to give any details. I didn’t like it, but decided to go along anyways.”

Maddy said that the group spent some time wandering around the mine area until they found a man who was off by himself. Eithne and Aidan talked to him while the others circled around behind. They stuffed a bag over his head and started dragging him back to the entrance.

“It was more than I could take,” Maddy said. “I tried to tell them it wasn’t right, that this was my hometown and next they could be abducting one of my relatives. They called me a big sissy.”

Maddy said she looked around until she found an old, beaten coat, a hardhat, and a big sledge hammer, then she waited until morning and found someone who worked at the mine. She asked the man where the drain pumps were. He looked sideways at her, but pointed to a big building that rumbled and droned. The pump engine was a monstrosity of machinery – much bigger than anything Lucy had in False (the ones there were little more than a system of buckets). Maddy attacked it with the hammer anyways. A man in the building tried to stop her, but she swung the hammer and connected with the side of his head.

“He went out cold,” Maddy said. “I’m ashamed of that, but I’m pretty sure I didn’t kill him. After that, I was free to beat the living hell out of that big engine until it ground to a halt. Suddenly miners were running out, saying the place was filling with water, and fast. I got out of there as quick as I could, not wanting to be caught and held there where I would decay slowly. I had nowhere to go but back, so that’s what I did. Two of Lucy’s Coats grabbed me as soon as I passed back through. She’d been watching everything. The way through was completely waterlogged again in just two days. She tried to send some dead through that way, but they never came back.”

Susan had heard of the incident when she first came to North. It was one of the great mysteries of the area. Never had a mine filled so quickly with water. Yes, they knew the pump “malfunctioned,” but it still didn’t explain the rapidity of the flooding. Theories abounded, ranging from underground reservoirs to broken dams to aliens. Ultimately, it was that moment that closed down the mine, but all that happened back in the late 1940s. “Then what happened?” Susan asked.

“Nothing,” Maddy said. “They threw me in the cell, accusing me of desertion and betrayal, and left me to rot.” Then she was silent.

Susan wished her bars were not there. She could see, in her mind, the lined face, dragged down by age and trials. Defeated. She wanted to take that frail body and wrap her arms around it. “We’ll find a way out.”

The only response from the other cell was a whispered “Thank you, darlin’.”

Susan spent her next hours testing her prison, running her fingers along the crevices in the stone, tapping at the wall, gently shaking the bars. It was what they did in movies, how they found weaknesses in the cell. Of course, she found none.

During that time, her baby shifted and moved inside of her, as active as he had been in days. It made her think of the other ways she could get out – they couldn’t very well leave her locked up for the next month and still expect the baby to make it. Not if they kept her down here and treated her like a prisoner. Just the thought made her cringe. “Just how long have you been dead?” she asked.

There was a long pause. “Time passes a bit differently when you’re caged, every day a year, but every decade but a day. What I mean to say is that I don’t know.”

“Well, when did you die?”

“January 21, 1911.”

Susan stopped. She sucked in her breath and let it out slowly. Impossible. The time spooled out backwards in her head. Susan was twenty-seven now – just over a fourth of the time Maddy had been dead. She thought of all the things she’d seen. Late summer nights, dancing fireflies, snowmen with coal eyes. The day the Towers collapsed. The Louvre on that summer trip. And before she was born there was the Moon Landing, Vietnam, World War Two, and the Great Depression. When were airplanes made? Had Maddy ever flown?

“Has it been that long?” Maddy asked.

“As far as I can remember, the flooding happened over fifty years ago. And you died a hundred years ago.” Susan hadn’t been locked up much more than a day, but it felt like a week.

“That’s all?” Maddy asked. “I’d thought it was bad the way you acted, but a century’s nothing, especially if you compare it to Lucy and the twins.”

“How long have they been here, really?”

“How long have humans come here? When did they know light from dark? With Lucy, it might be a good deal longer. Honestly, I don’t even know.”

“Do you think the children know anything about pregnancy?”

“Maybe, but I suspect not.”

“What about Lucy?” Susan asked.

“I can’t say. For all I know, she doesn’t even have the right parts.”

“Good. That’s what I’ve been thinking.”

“And?” Maddy asked. “What does it matter?”

“We need to make them scared I’ll lose the baby,” Susan said.

## CHAPTER 8

Slim planned to make his way after Brad, who was almost certainly sitting in a circle with the other new arrivals, bitching and moaning about everything he had lost. Talking to Greg about those early feelings made Slim regret them all the more. It all seemed like such a bunch of bullshit. He was taking a side route around the Tower, skirting the river until it came near the cotton fields.

Then, far ahead, he saw a group of Coats near the water. He crept closer until he could hear what was being said, and then hid behind a hut near the water.

The lead Coat was speaking in an official-sounding tone. “As you knowingly aided the living in entering our home, and as this action has directly compromised the safety and privacy of your fellow dead, and as you have offered neither remorse nor reasonable explanation for your actions, it has been decided that you be immediately transitioned. Forcibly, if need be.”

Slim peeked out around the hut. Emily. They had Emily. His instinct was to run to her, to admit his own wrongdoing and save her, but it was useless – they would only throw the both of them in the river. He watched as Emily stood unmoving, staring into the water. One of the guards pushed her from behind.

She swung her arm around, knocking him away and then glared back. “I can do it myself,” she said.

The Coat that had pushed her lowered his arm, but stayed where he was.

Slim watched as Emily stared straight ahead and walked into the river. She stopped when she was waist deep. The water rose about her, like it was being dammed by her presence. She stood there, eyes straight ahead, away from the Coats, as the water

rose higher and higher, until it finally rose up over her head and collapsed back down in a wave.

The Coats stayed only for a moment longer, leaving as soon as the water was smooth again.

Slim moved cautiously along the shore, checking back between the buildings as he passed. When he reached the point where Emily had gone in, he knelt and stared into the water. She was gone. "I'm sorry," he said. "This is all my fault."

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The doctor was enormously unhelpful. He knelt down, poked at the ankle for a little while and declared it sprained. Then he tore the bottom hem off of his robe (evidently these things were not in short supply) and wound it around Greg's foot.

"There," he said, stepping back. "That'll support it." Then he frowned, walked forward, unwound the bandage, and wound it again tighter.

Too tight. It hurt. Greg jerked his foot away. "It's fine. Thank you."

The doctor, his hands still poised, raised an eyebrow and seemed ready to continue, but then he looked up, and noticed the bandage in Greg's forearm. "You might be right. I'll see if we can find some crutches, but first, let me take a look at your arm."

Greg shielded his arm, holding it close to his body. "No. It's healing, I swear."

"Nonsense, it's probably infected." He tried to pull Greg's arms out, but when that didn't work, he gave them a strong tug. "This is childish. I'm a doctor. Now let me see."

Susan had criticized Greg in the past for not trusting doctors, but this one was a little too eager. Still, the arm had been hurting. He relented and the doctor unwound the



sodden bandage. The wound was puffy and rimmed with red around a yellow milky substance. Not good.

The doctor shook his head. “How could you let it get so bad? I don’t even have antibiotics here. Any longer and you might get blood poisoning. I’ll have to amputate.”

“The hell you do.”

“Look, who’s the doctor here? I’ve done dozens of successful amputations.”

Greg pulled his arm back in again. Between muttonchops, amputation, and leeches, this man’s medical license might be out of date. “Really, it’s fine, I’ll just get some penicillin once I’m back home. Why don’t you look for those crutches?”

The doctor stood and walked off, muttering, “Crutches and a saw.”

Impatient, Greg stood up minutes later, testing the ankle. It hurt some if he put too much weight directly on it, but whatever Mikeel had done made the pain less immediate. By balancing towards the other foot, he was able to limp about without too much discomfort. He wanted to get home soon, but couldn’t completely ignore things here. There was still Brad. And Neil for that matter. Didn’t he want to leave? Was he even being held?

He hobbled his way to the front door and glanced around. Still no one watching. A few Coats were nearby, but they walked quickly with long strides and swinging arms, focused on whatever they were doing.

Greg wound around to the exterior of the door, clutching to the frame for support. The doctor was nowhere to be seen. Those crutches might be helpful, but not with the risk of amputation.

He made his way, hopping, limping, and leaning against walls, around the immediate vicinity. Most of the houses here were empty, but a few held signs of use – shackles chained to the rafters and floor. Greg walked around, glancing in these huts, staying away from the main square, unsure of what he was even looking for. Something that explained Mikeel maybe.

Eventually, he spotted a house with a Coat standing out front, back to the door, unmoving. He hopped over. “What you got inside there?”

The Coat didn’t answer, but someone was whistling in the house – the tune of an old George Jones song. It had to be Neil – he was always whistling behind the bar as he wiped down glasses.

“Mikeel wants me to take him back,” Greg said. “I can’t figure he’d mind it if I talked to him.” Still no response. The shimmering thing just stood there, face impassive, arms folded.

Greg hobbled around the exterior of the house, looking for another entrance. All the windows were boarded shut. He tried pressing against them, but couldn’t get any leverage without putting too much weight on the bad ankle.

So he tried yelling. “Dad!”

The whistling stopped. Inside, footsteps approached. “You dead?” The voice was gravely, emotionless, barely even curious. Definitely his father.

“No, I came to get you.”

“I don’t want to be got.”

He should have expected as much. Greg had gotten similar thanks for all his efforts since Mom died. “Well, we’re leaving soon.”

“How’d you find me?” Neil asked.

“For now, just focus on getting home. Susan’s waiting and I’ve got a million apologies to make.”

“Tell me how you got here, son.”

Even as he answered, Greg hated his own quick submission to filial duty.

“Slim—” But that was as far as he got.

“Fucking knew it. I knew that rat bastard wouldn’t leave it alone. He sent my son to do his dirty work. If you see him, tell him to fuck off. This isn’t his choice to make.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s none of your business, either. The deal’s between me and the boy.”

What boy? Aidan? “For once, give me an ounce of credit. I’ve been yanked back and forth, and knocked around for days. I’m tired of it. I came here because I thought you needed help. So what’s this deal you made?”

“Let it go.” Neil sounded tired. “In another few hours, it’ll be over anyways. Tell you what, you want to help me, then go find your mother. I need to talk to her before we go anywhere.” Footsteps receded from the wall.

“Dad!” Greg slamming his palm on the wood. “Talk to me!”

Silence.

A shadow grew onto the side of the cabin. He turned. The Coat stood just feet away. “I’m going, I’m going.” Greg held up his hands like he was surrendering. “Didn’t say anything anyways.” He hobbled off. The Coat followed him with its gaze.

Greg went in the direction of his own hut. If he had half a shot at getting the rest of the story, he'd need to have it from Slim. He'd probably need to find Mom too. The fantasy of the perfect, easy return home was starting to fade. He took a quick detour, heading to the center of Falls.

Standing outside the tower, he yelled for Mikeel. Several Coats veered off their paths and converged around him, creating a circle, hemming him in. Greg ignored them, continuing to yell. "I want to talk."

The doors of the tower swung open, Mikeel standing between them, a benign smile gracing his face. He shooed the Coats away and waved Greg inside. "Come in, I'll put the tea on. Aren't you famished? I'm sure we can find something."

Greg tried to count back. When was the last time he ate? He'd munched on junk food during the drive to North. And after that – he couldn't remember eating at all. He suddenly felt hungry, incredibly so. "Yes, please."

Mikeel led him back through the tower. Past the central atrium was a maze of hallways, low-ceilinged, dark, and claustrophobic. Faint light glowed from smoky oil lamps hanging from the walls. Finally, they turned into a long room hung with thread worn tapestries. A massive dining table stood in the middle of the room. Greg sat on one of the old heavy chairs, resting his leg. He could almost sleep right there.

Mikeel left briefly and came back with an apple, a bowl of berries and a hot cup of tea. These people and their tea – but Greg didn't question it, plowing into the berries instead – so sweet. Minutes later, the bowl was empty and he was licking the remaining juices from his hands. He wiped them on his shirt and picked up the mug. The warmth was soothing. Now he was sure he'd fall asleep.

“You seem exhausted,” Mikeel said. He was leaning forward, staring at Greg’s face. “I can procure a bed if you need to lie down.”

It was tempting – the past few days dragged on him. He just wanted to be home, to be with Susan, to lie next to her and feel her warmth and listen to her breathing as it slowed when she fell asleep. That was when he felt most comfortable (right up until when she started snoring). But then he remembered his dad alone in the cabin. He shook his head, trying to snap out of the funk. “I’m fine, thanks.”

“How did your visit with the doctor go?”

Horrible actually, the incompetent quack wanted to amputate – was he really the best doctor in Falls? “You need to let Dad see Emily.”

Mikeel shook his head and chuckled. “Right to business then? I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“He hasn’t been the same since she died, and he came all this way. Just a few words – you can even supervise it. Getting him to leave will be so much easier that way. She’ll convince him to go, I swear it.”

“He’ll have to do without.”

“I’m pleading with you,” Greg said.

“I’m afraid you don’t understand. I can’t help you. She has moved on.”

“She said as much to me, but, really, how could a few words hurt anything?”

Mikeel stood suddenly, toppling his chair backwards. It landed with a loud thump. “You’re not listening.” His smile gone. “The sanctity of the dead is my first concern. She went to the river. She is gone.”

Greg sucked in a deep breath, his stomach dropping. “Gone?” It was impossible. She’d pulled him from the river. She’d agreed to help. She wouldn’t just abandon her husband and son, no matter what she had said.

“I trust we’re done then. I’ll have someone show you out. Be ready to leave soon.” Mikeel turned and left the room.

By the time he arrived back at the first house, Greg was ready to sit for a while and rest. His ankle was swollen, already starting to bruise. It would be a beauty by the time he got back to North. Susan would probably have to drive them back. He stepped through the door and found Slim sitting on the wooden chair in the middle of the room. “You have some explaining to do. Let’s start with my dad is so angry with you,” Greg said.

Slim had been staring at the wall, unmoving. His body stayed still, only his head turned, swiveling to look at Greg. Eyes uncomprehending, blank and distant. He stood, slowly, pushing off his knees with his hands. “I didn’t mean for this to happen.” He grabbed Greg by the shoulders and looked into his eyes. “You have to know I didn’t want this.”

“What’s going on? What didn’t you want?”

“Emily’s gone and they have Susan.”

“Wait. What the hell do you mean, Slim? Who has Susan?”

“Lucy and the boy.”

Greg shoved Slim’s hand off. “Where? Why?”

“Brad didn’t know, but he was with her when the boy killed him. The rest of what he said didn’t make much sense.”

“Think.” Greg tried to keep his voice even, tired not to yell. “Where is she?”

“False. That’s the only place.”

“And how do we get there?”

“We don’t.”

“No, we do, we have to. I don’t care what it takes.”

“Look, it doesn’t work like that, okay? You’d just be throwing your life away.

What don’t you get about Aidan *killed* Brad?”

“You do what you need to, but I’m not leaving my wife to those monsters.”

Slim glanced down at Greg’s ankle. “I know these guys. I can get to her, but I have to do it by myself.”

“Let’s get Mikeel.”

“No way. Absolutely not.” Slim held out his hands, palms up. “Don’t you get it, man? He got rid of Emily because she was causing him problems. Do you really think he’d have any problem with getting rid of Susan too?”

“He *got rid* of Emily? He said that she went to the river.”

“Not voluntarily. He’s been known to get rid of people who overstay their welcome – and not infrequently either.”

Greg looked down at the floor. It was too much to process all at once. He’d known he’d miss his mother all the more when he had the time to think about it – their conversation had been so brief and meaningless. Yet, he honestly wasn’t that surprised – he’d wanted to trust that Mikeel was friendly and kind, but it seemed that no one here was. He should have trusted Slim from the start. “So what do you want me to do? Just wait around?”

“No. You get your father, get him back.”

“Fine,” Greg said. “But the moment you know something, you to tell me. So why’s Dad angry at you?”

“He wants to stay.”

“How can he?”

“He promised to get some supplies for Aidan in exchange for help ‘transitioning,’ but he’s deluding himself. Aidan can’t do anything to make sure Neil makes it to shore. That’s why I went for you. We had to stop it.”

“Fine,” Greg said. “What are you planning on doing about Susan?”

“I’ll find Aidan.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Stone cold. I’ll make that kid wish he never laid a finger on your wife.”

“Thanks,” Greg said. “I’ll try to get Mikeel to hurry up. Dad’s leaving if he likes it or not.”

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Susan sat in her prison cell, trying to be patient. The key was not to oversell her act, and it couldn’t be suspicious. So Susan waited until the children visited her again. It might have taken an hour, or it might have been four. She needed to start wearing a watch. After this, Greg could get her a nice one.

When they came, she acted normal, but kept the conversation brief. They were checking in to see how she was. She said she wished they’d leave her alone. Her illness had to be gradual – so she made sure to hold her stomach and to stay seated, to keep it subtle.



A while after they left, she lay down on the wet lumpy bed. After whispering reassurance to Maddy first, Susan began to moan lowly. Not loud or constant, but repeated, sure to attract attention. More like she'd eaten something bad – not a far stretch, given what they fed her. It didn't work till the next mealtime. The metal tray scraped across the ground under the bars. Footsteps started off and Susan pitched her moan a little louder.

“You alright, lady?” The normally mute man had stopped outside.

Susan moaned again.

“She's been like that for hours,” Maddy said. “Nonstop. Why hasn't anyone been by? I bet it's the baby.”

“I just do meals,” he said.

“Well, what are you going to do? Just stand there?”

“I'll get someone.”

“Can't you help her?”

“Wouldn't know where to start.”

“Then let me. I've had kids. More than enough. We were Catholics.”

The man wasn't quite gullible enough. “I won't be long.”

“She might die.”

“Sorry.”

It might have gone better. Susan waited for the man to leave and raised herself up on her elbow. “You were Catholic?”

“Lord no,” Maddy said. “Just improvising.”

“I'd have bought it.”

“Don’t you worry, though. I’ve seen my share of pregnancies. You’ll be in good hands if that baby does start coming.”

“Thanks,” Susan said. “Hopefully, it won’t come to that.” She lowered herself back down and stared up at the ceiling. Was it bad luck to fake pregnancy problems? She just wanted to be back in civilization with her doctor, a no-nonsense thirty-something woman who all but promised that everything would go smoothly.

Loud footsteps slapped down the hall. A key clanged into the lock. Susan raised her head slightly. The boy. She let out a soft moan, only partially acting.

Aidan threw the door to the cell open and stepped inside. “What’s wrong?” He walked towards her.

She waited until he was close, just feet away, then she sprung up and seized his throat. A small squeak escaped him as she clenched down. “You little shit.” Even as she did it, part of her remained appalled at her actions. She raised him off the ground. Throttling a child. What kind of mother could do that? But he wasn’t a child. He was dead and trying to kill her baby.

Kicking his feet, he clawed at her hands, slipping his fingers under hers and prying. It did nothing. His body was so light, so feeble. She raised him higher and walked forward, pressing him into the wall. Was he even killable?

“Darlin’?” Maddy sounded scared. “I think you might want to think about getting out of here.”

Of course. Susan pulled Aidan away from the wall. Keeping her hands around his throat, she bashed his head again and again until ashy, black liquid began to seep from it and he went limp. Unconscious or only faking? No time to find out.

She grabbed the keys and dropped his body on the ground. Flipping through the thick ring, she hurried outside. Dozens, all old, tarnished and oily. Long rods with individual teeth. It could be any of them.

She looked from the keys to the lock and back. There was no way to try them all. A hand snaked out between the bars and clutched onto her forearm. Susan looked up. Maddy had tears in her eyes. Hazel brown eyes scarred with dark veins. Her hair hung off her head in stringy white clumps. And her skin was bloated and dark, tinged with blue.

“You’re just a baby,” Maddy said.

“I don’t know which one.” Susan held up the keys, breaking into tears herself.

“Darlin’.” Maddy held out her arms and Susan walked into them, a weak embrace through the bars. “Give me the keys and run while you can. I’ll catch up momentarily.”

Susan shook her head. “I won’t leave you here.”

Maddy’s hand dropped down and gently took the keys. “You don’t have a choice. Now go.”

“Which way?”

Maddy pointed to the left. “There’ll be Coats coming the other way. You’ll have to hide. Whatever you do, don’t come out of there until it’s clear.”

“Thank you so much.” Susan squeezed Maddy’s hand tightly and then took off as quickly as she could, going deeper into the dungeon, past a few dozen cells, each cut into the walls of the cave. The inhabitants withdrew into the shadows in the rear of their containment as she went past. Only glimpses of bony figures. A hand. A cheek.

And suddenly the prison stopped. Beyond, the corridor continued, but in utter darkness. Susan turned back for a moment, grabbing a lit torch from the wall.

“You can’t go that way.” A voice from the nearest cell.

“Why not?” Susan walked forward, holding the torch into the cell. A young man sat in the center, staring back at her, his eyes glinting in the torchlight.

“It’s flooded”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. A friend and I, we tried to get out that way years ago – we’d heard the stories – but the waters are like the river. See for yourself if you must. You won’t make it.”

It would explain all the dampness, why the ground was constantly moist. Susan never guessed they were that close to Maddy’s underground gate. It sounded like more of a legend than anything else. She couldn’t get out this way, but she couldn’t go back either. She placed the torch back into the wall sconce and stepped back towards the darkness. Feeling her way, she walked slowly, searching for a side path. Eventually her hand met air and she turned, walking several steps farther, and just stood there, waiting.

It was cold here, far colder than the cells. And the walls were slick, the ground a shallow puddle already seeping through her shoes. She held her hand in front of her face. Nothing. Just black. She breathed as steadily as possible, closing her eyes to the dark. Each breath was so loud; it seemed to echo off the walls. In through the nose. Abdominal breathing – easy, slow.

Susan nodded her head down and focused. The air was humid but cold, and she started to shiver. She should have dressed warmer, but could never have expected this. She clutched her arms to her torso and rubbed.

Her baby kicked at her insides, connecting her stomach, making acid climb up her throat. She had to breathe deep to keep from throwing up.

She'd just breathe and stay warm and stay hidden. Maddy would come eventually. She had to. But what if she didn't? If she couldn't find the key? The guards would have arrived by now, found Aidan, and started looking for her. She had to go deeper into the mines, into the dark. She opened her eyes. Still just black. Back to the corner then. She moved carefully, trying not to trip. Trying not to make noise.

She looked back to see how far she'd come. The light was just a hazy halo. She turned back into the darkness and knew she couldn't go further. There was nowhere to go. It was flooded. But she couldn't stay here either. It was too cold. She wouldn't make it that long. Miners used to lose their lights. Strong winds, sometimes from a cave-in, would come through the mine and blow their candles out. And they would have to sit in the dark, waiting. Most couldn't wait. They would move, even when they knew it was dangerous. They would start searching for light, feeling their way along. Greg told her that one time when the power went out the night sky in the city was more full of stars than it had been in decades.

"You can come out now." Lucy's voice echoed down the chamber. "You have no way out."

Susan turned back to the darkness again and felt her way along for a few steps. No, she couldn't do it. She had to get out of there. So she walked back towards the

entrance, hating herself for giving in, even as she did. Eventually the torchlight resolved itself into a muddy haze again, in the center of which Lucy stood like a shadow. As Susan walked closer and closer, the light grew brighter and harsher; her eyes were slow at adapting from the total black. She walked forward deliberately, refusing to show any reticence.

When she was close, Lucy's hand snapped out and grabbed her arm. The devil, Maddy had said. This close up, it wasn't hard to believe. Breath like thick campfire smoke. Eyes smooth, glistening.

"You hurt my little boy," Lucy said.

"I meant to kill him."

Lucy's eyebrows lowered, her white orbs shining through thin slits. "Be glad you didn't." Two Blackcoats approached from behind her. "Keep constant watch over her. There will be no more mistakes."

The Coats lifted Susan from the ground and carried her back to her cell. As she passed, she glanced into Maddy's. Empty.

In her own cell again, a dark, wood chair had been bolted to the ground. A hole was cut in the center of the seat, the back reclining. Stirrups were attached to the legs. And shackles.

Susan pulled against the Coats' grip. "Please, not like this."

They placed her gently in the chair, holding her arms in place while they closed the manacles about them. Then they stilled her kicking legs and locked them in place.

Lucy walked through the open cell door. "Do you like the improvements we have made in your absence?"

Susan lay back in the chair, her legs up and spread, limbs locked in place, and she cried. She didn't want to, but it was all she had left. Maddy was gone. Her baby was soon to follow. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

"I'll leave you to acclimate yourself. Someone will be by momentarily to see to you." Lucy left the cell, followed by the guards, and clanged the door shut behind her.

Susan waited. Had the darkness been truly that bad? So terrible to drive her back to this? She hadn't thought it through then. But there was light here. Small comfort without Maddy. Where had they taken her?

Susan tilted her head down, looking to the front of the cell where the guards still stood. She wouldn't be able to escape again. No one was left to help her. "Who's coming?" she asked, not sure she even wanted to know. The guards didn't even acknowledge her words. They stood, statues, waiting with her. "Where did they take Maddy?" she asked then. Silence. "Because she was innocent. It was all me."

One of the guards turned. They were listening! There was still a chance. They weren't blindly obedient. They weren't heartless. "You have to let me go. Do you know what Lucy's trying to do?"

Or maybe they were. The guard had turned only to unlock the cell door. A lanky white-haired man with an arched nose strode into her cell. He carried a small black bag in his right hand which he placed on the floor near her chair. He took her hand in his. "My name is Doctor Marcus Campbell. It is a pleasure to meet you. I'll be here for you throughout the birth."

She held his hand for a moment and then let it go. A doctor. "I'm not due for a month."

“Lucy expressed some concerns over the safety of your baby. It is her opinion that your pregnancy should be expedited. She asked me to induce labor.”

Susan jolted against her restraints. “No, it’s not time. I’m only at 35 weeks. She just wants to kill it. Please, don’t do this.”

The doctor knelt down and retrieved a long pair of scissors from his bag. “I’m sorry, my only concern is that this baby arrives safely. Now if you’ll just hold still for a moment.” He cut into the bottom of one of her pant legs.

She began to thrash, twisting her legs as much as possible, nicking her calf on the tip of the scissors in the process. Only when he stopped did she hear herself screaming.

He motioned for the guards, who came into the cell and held her legs in place. One covered her mouth with a free hand. “If you would just cooperate,” the doctor said, “we could be done here momentarily.” He sliced the jeans off of her body. It was slow going through the thick fabric, particularly the seams. Once he tossed the remnants aside, he turned to her underwear, a simple white cotton pair that came in a pack of four. He snipped these off and peeled them from her flesh, leaving her bare from the waist down. The chair was cold.

She remained still through all of this, in large part due to the Coats holding her down, but also in part because she had lost any will to move, to fight. She wanted to curl into a ball, to be away from all this, to be back in the dark, in the cold.

He laid a towel over her spread legs, covering his work from her side only. “In a moment, you will feel a slight pressure. I am going to strip the membrane, which will separate the amniotic sac from the wall of your uterus. You may feel some cramping after this, but it should release prostaglandins and begin contractions.”



“Please,” Susan said. “It’s too early.”

“I assure you, miss. Both you and your child are in capable hands.”

She shut her eyes as his hand slithered inside of her. It didn’t hurt exactly. It did make her skin crawl. She tried to focus on her breathing again, to shut out the world. But it didn’t work.

Finally, after an incredibly long minute, he was done. He stood and snapped his glove off. “It may take some hours before you begin to feel the contractions. In the meantime, I have an IV of Pitocin to help the process. If you promise to remain still, I will have these men release you.”

She nodded and the guards withdrew to the exterior of the cell. “Why are you doing this?” she asked.

“It is for your own good. Your baby will secure a future for all mankind.”

“How?” Susan asked. “How can you be sure you’re doing anything other than killing a baby?”

“Don’t you long for a meaningful immortality as well? If there is even a chance of it, someone will have to sacrifice.”

“You selfish bastard,” she yelled. “You coward.” She pulled against the restraints, feeling them bite into her wrists.

The doctor motioned for the guards again. He took a white cloth and a bottle from his bag. “I’m afraid that you’re losing sight of the big picture. We are saving so many lives here.” While the guards held Susan’s head forcefully in place, the doctor held the bottle against the cloth, saturating it with a clear liquid. “This should help you get some rest,” he said and held the cloth over Susan’s nose and mouth.

She tried not to breathe in, but felt her head swim regardless. Then she was out.

Susan woke some time later and began crying, the tears pooling in her upturned eyes and sliding down her cheeks. Above her, the first thing she saw when she woke, was the nearly empty i.v. bag.

Then she heard a conversation outside her cell and looked over to see Eithne talking to the guards. “You can leave now,” Eithne said. “Lucy asked me to take over.” She held her hand out. “Give me the keys.”

The guards looked back and forth at one another for a moment and then handed the ring over. They stalked away down the hall, back towards the center of the mines.

Eithne flipped the ring about her finger, picking out a key and fitting it into the lock. She turned it, swung open the door and stepped inside the cell. Taking her time, she came over to the side of the chair, her head only level with Susan’s. “You hurt my brother.” She smiled. “Now it’s my turn.” Then she turned to the doctor. “You can leave as well.”

He shook his head. “Miss Lucy asked that I stay until the birth, no matter what.”

“And what if she told me different.”

“I can’t let you harm this woman, not while she’s my patient.”

Eithne nodded. “I thought you’d say that.” She looked back over her shoulder and yelled, “Get him!”

Susan’s eyes widened as Maddy came charging around the corner of the cell brandishing a large chunk of rock. She swung it down on top of the doctor’s head just as he threw up his hands to ward off the blow. He sagged backwards and fell to the ground.

Maddy dropped the rock and turned to Susan, smiling. “I told you I’d find a way to get you out.”

“What? How did you get free?” Susan asked.

Maddy shook her head. “Eithne got me out, but there’s no time to explain now. We have to get you out of here.”

Eithne pulled the IV smoothly from Susan’s arm, letting it drip the last of its poison out onto the ground.

## CHAPTER 9

Greg sat in the hut, waiting. He had no idea what was taking so long. Hours had passed since his discussion with Slim. And nothing. No word from the fat man. No sign from Mikeel or the Coats that they would move soon. Nothing. All the while, Susan was in the hands of those burnt-skin freaks. And who knew what they hell they wanted.

What if they only took her to enforce the deal that Neil had made? Could he let his father commit suicide to save Susan? If it came to that, he'd have to make sure Slim was nowhere near.

A loud knocking at the door. "Time."

Greg stood. He'd promised Slim he'd get Neil back, and that was exactly what he would do, but he wasn't staying away from Falls, not as long as Susan was here.

"Coming." He stood, feeling a twinge in the ankle. It'd be a hell of a walk back.

Neil was waiting near the central tower. He barked a laugh when he saw Greg. "You look like one of them." Of course, he was dressed the same as always. Jeans, boots, flannel button-up, sleeves rolled to the elbows.

"You look like the Marlboro Man," Greg said.

Mikeel, standing nearby, gave father and son a stern look. "You must realize your trespassing was unwelcome." Then his face lifted, his smile genuine, and rosy. "But I forgive you. Though you may not return, I hope your stay has not been inhospitable."

Neil leaned over and whispered, "No more than your average prison."

An inaccurate generalization: most wardens didn't kill inconvenient prisoners.

"Can we go now?" Greg asked.

Mikeel shrugged. “Of course.”

Greg turned around and grabbed his father. “You’re coming with me.”

“Two of my men will accompany you.” Two Coats walked up holding axes. “I need to make sure that the gate is closed behind you.”

Greg shook his head. “You can’t. They, she...” But he couldn’t say anything more.

“What is the problem?” Mikeel asked.

“Nothing.” He’d have to find his own way to stop the Coats. Greg grabbed his father by the shoulder and started walking him out of Falls. To his credit, Neil didn’t resist.

The walk back to the gate, in the company of Neil and the Coats, was entirely different than Greg’s first time down that path. They wound along the coast of the lake to the cliff face and climbed the carved stone steps that he missed in his descent. From the stairs, the sound of the falls permeated everything.

As they climbed higher, Greg could see out into the valley of Falls. The town itself was miniscule, a dozen houses clumped about the stumpy wooden tower. Radiating out were the large warehouses and two or three times as many broken houses, wrecks. Near the center were stone skeletons – once important, but now desiccated. Out from there, huts with collapsed roofs, single walls, just bits and pieces of a larger place. And how many more were wholly lost? What had the place once been?

And what would it become? A horrible thought – that he’d ever have to return, to be one of those people. Or worse, to be where Susan was, where he would have to go to find her, to save her.

As they continued to climb, the mist from the falls grew thicker, obscuring the view and finally obliterating it. They walked upwards through the roaring white, huddled close to the cliff face, each step careful on the slick stairs.

When they reached the top, the Coats allowed a moment's rest. Their faces impassive – machines, little more. They would do their job no matter what. There would be no explaining, no reasoning.

His father was grimacing, sweat stuck to his forehead and upper lip. This was the man who had never liked to hike, but who had come all the way out here after his wife. Looking more closely, Greg could see the lines etched on his father's face – the years that had passed since Emily's death. He had ground himself down. He wasn't young anymore.

Greg leaned in and whispered, "We can't go back to North. The Coats stood nearby, arms crossed behind their backs. How well could they hear? Greg couldn't risk it. "I can't tell you why."

Neil shook his head, a wry smile creeping onto his lips. "Slim stopped by and told me about Susan."

If the Coats heard this, they made no reaction to it, but continued to stand, staring passively. At ease, ready for inspection.

Greg stood. "Do you have any idea why they took her?"

"No, but I mean to find out."

"Is that all he told you? Did he say anything about Mom?"

"What about her?"

“Nothing,” Greg said, feeling guilty even as he did so. “I just thought he’d know how she was doing.”

A Coat turned to look at them. “We move now.” At first, the Coats lead the way into the forest, along the edge of the river, back towards North. An hour passed and then two. The land undulated, smooth and flat near the water, edged with deep muck, then rising in steep cliffs with pines rooted all the way to the edge.

Greg followed in Neil’s boot-prints, jealous – lucky bastard hadn’t taken the fall, hadn’t been stripped of his clothes. And his feet didn’t get caked, slime squirming up between his toes, only to crunch through dry gravel, which clung to the mud like sprinkles. And the robe did little to protect Greg’s legs or keep his body warm, but he kept walking, trying to think of how to lose the guards. He already knew he couldn’t out run or over power them. Maybe if he had a long, sturdy piece of wood, he could get enough momentum behind it to stun them. But then what?

He almost ran into his father. Looking up at the last moment, he saw that the others had stopped. The Coats were turned around, waiting. “Now you lead,” one of them said.

Greg had no idea where he was. His memory was a broken line from the trees to Falls, broken by the crazed knife-wielder. “I’ve no idea.”

Neil turned away from the river. “It’s this way.”

The Coats didn’t know the way to the gate? Was that why they hadn’t closed it yet? It would be so easy to wander astray, to lose them in the woods. Greg grabbed his father’s shoulder and stopped him. “Don’t show them where it is. We still have a chance as long as we’re on this side.”

Neil shook his head. “I’ve an appointment to keep.”

Greg removed his hand. “Dad, you can’t.”

“Can and will. It’s the only way.” Neil marched ahead.

In time, they found their way back to the narrow trail; the dirt was smooth, even soft beneath Greg’s feet. He didn’t envy his father’s boots anymore – that had been stupid. His father was willing to give up everything. He had to know that Emily was gone before it was too late. But what if it changed his mind and there was no other way to save Susan?

Or, what if he went through with it anyways? Even then, there was still the matter of the Coats with their axes. If they managed to shut the gate, any deal with Aidan would be meaningless. Susan would be stuck here.

Greg just hoped his father had a real plan. “Dad, can we talk?”

Neil slowed some. “I’ve already made up my mind. It’s best this way, you know.”

“That’s not it. If this happens, like you want it to, you’ll be dead. Knowing that you’re just over here won’t make it any easier.”

Neil stopped and looked back at the Coats. “Can we have a minute here?” They didn’t move, so he waved at them. “A little privacy, we’re not going anywhere.” The Coats took three steps away and then turned their backs. Neil sighed and turned to his son. “Look, I don’t need you getting all weepy on me here.”

“For Christ’s sake, I’m not being emotional.”

“Just like your mother.”



Not the mother Greg had last met, the cold one, the one who turned him in. “Hey, you’ve been the one moping in a bottle for the past decade. She died. You didn’t.”

“You have no fucking clue.” Neil was spitting now as he yelled, pointing his finger. “Got it? No clue what I’ve been through. Just go off, like you always have.”

This was their conversations typically went – they just didn’t get each other. Or maybe they were too alike. But even as his father yelled, Greg couldn’t help but feel pity. The old man was never really in control of his own emotions. He’d been a performer nearly all his life. First in the bands with Slim, then running the bar. Always something affected, not real. But he wasn’t a bad man. He clearly cared for his wife, and probably his son too.

No matter the cost, Greg had to do what was right for once. He couldn’t let his father go sacrificing himself for a wife he’d never get back. “She’s gone.”

“No, she’s not. I’m not wasting another chance.”

“Yes, Dad, she is gone. Down the river, gone, never coming back.” Greg stopped short of saying anything about Mikeel’s part in it: an ill-conceived vengeance was the last thing they needed.

Neil’s eyes widened. He took a small step back. “I don’t believe you.”

“And even before that, she wasn’t herself. This place changed her. You know that.”

“She wasn’t ready. She didn’t think I was here to stay.”

That was it then – why Neil was so ready to give everything up. It was a gamble. He knew that the woman he loved, the woman he couldn’t get over, had moved on. She didn’t need him, but he didn’t want to forget how much he had needed her.

“I’m sorry, Dad, but it’s true. It won’t get better this time. She’s really gone.”

Neil enunciated each word, talking like he would to a man hard of hearing. “How do you know?”

“Mikeel said, and Slim too.”

“See, you don’t know for sure.” Neil closed his eyes, shook his head. “But I’m sorry for earlier – you didn’t deserve that.”

The first apology, ever. Ok, maybe that was unfair, but Greg honestly couldn’t remember a previous one. “I won’t let you.”

Neil flashed a smile. “It’s a competition then. You try and stop me.”

“Now’s not the time,” Greg said.

Neil was still smiling. “Of course it is. I can’t think of a better thing to do.” He yelled over to the Coats, “Hey, it’s time we go.”

“Wait.” Greg held out a hand, asking them to stop. “He’s going to interfere with the dead some more. You can’t let him go.”

Neil laughed. “I’ve no idea what the boy is talking about.”

“We go, now,” a Coat said.

“But, we can’t. Didn’t you listen?”

Neil grabbed Greg by the shoulder, turning him and pulled him on. “They’ll do what they’re told to by Mikeel. So come on and stop worrying.”

The Coats were advancing down the path again, so Greg acquiesced. He’d have to get Neil back through the gate himself. The path wound through the forest for some time. Everything seemed so peaceful and quiet around them. Then the trees emerged in

the distance, stark monstrosities, alien to this land. Neil had slowed to a crawl, looking around, asking for a moment to breathe, wasting time and really playing it up.

Greg, for his part, tried to hurry them on. He grabbed his father's hand and pulled him on. "Come on. We're almost there." Hurry, hurry. If Aidan wasn't there (and how did they manage to plan a meeting time) everything would be easy.

Except for abandoning Susan here. Greg couldn't let his father stay, but also couldn't destroy the gate. And he was running out of time to think of another way out. But no matter how many times he tried to envision stopping the Coats, nothing worked. No argument – they didn't think. No force – they were too strong. No escape. But they were so close to the trees, so close to reality.

Neil put his fingers in his mouth and whistled – a man calling his dogs.

Greg spun and looked back at the Bluecoats just in time to see three dark shapes come crashing down from the trees. The Blackcoats surrounded the Blues, held their axes defensively. Long, sparkling knives flashed in the hands of the Blackcoats, driving forward, only to be turned aside by an axe's shaft. The Blues were faster, moving in blurs. One of the Blacks ended with a knife in his stomach and collapsed in a pile of ash. Another had his arms pinned, fighting to keep his knife from his own throat. The third Blackcoat took this moment to drive his knife into the occupied Blue's side. A high scream, a brief, brilliant flash, and the Blue collapsed in a pool of water.

Greg turned, ready to drag his father through the gate. It was so close – only a few yards away.

Aidan stood in the way, his arms at his sides, hand dangling a silver revolver. A bright swath of white cloth was bandaged about his head. “Don’t worry about them,” he said. “They have it under control.”

“Good,” Neil said. “Then I’m here to complete our deal. You can have my body, like we agreed, but there’s a new requirement.”

Another scream from farther back on the path. Greg looked back. Another Blackcoat gone in a puff.

“Damn it. I told her I’d need four or five.” Aidan strode past father and son. “Would you please take care of him already?” he shouted and raised his revolver, pulling trigger. With a loud concussion, the Blue was hit in the shoulder and knocked on his back. At that moment, the final Black pounced, sinking his knife into the Blue, rendering him nothing but a pool.

Greg sprung into action. Using strength he hadn’t known of, he grasped his father, lifted him, and trundled towards the gate. He would have carried his father right through, except he couldn’t even hope to make it over the root bridge. So he talked, fast. “We can’t trust him.”

Neil struggled. “We don’t have a choice.”

“Your deal was for your corpse? Really? Look, I don’t care if this is what you want, but we need to make sure he gives us Susan.” Greg put his father down. “And I need you alive until then.”

Neil nodded. “Congrats, you win.” He started climbing up the roots, Greg tailing closely.

Aidan noticed their flight. “We had a deal.” Another shot rang out, the bullet plowing into the trunk of one cypress, exploding the wood. And a gush of red burst from the tree. Blood.

Neil climbed over the peak and through the gate, scrambling down the other side, out of aim from the gun. Greg followed on all fours, gripping the roots with his hands. Another shot passed right over his head and he jumped, flinging himself over the top of the roots, crouching as he landed, trying to steady the impact.

His weakened ankle gave, slipping into a space between the roots. He heard a pop and screamed in pain.

Neil came back for him, grabbing and pulling his son from the roots, dragging him carefully down to the forest floor. They sat there, breathing heavily, unable to go any further, waiting for Aidan to come for them.

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Susan was impatient. It had been hours since she, Maddy, and Eithne had escaped the mine, and they still weren't out of False. Instead, they hunkered against a wall, just out of sight in an abandoned house – it was one of the more finished buildings in the area, its walls made of sheet metals with holes carved for windows and doors. The alarm had been raised almost immediately, and Eithne insisted they wait it out there. But how much time did they really have? Susan didn't know nearly enough about inducing labor yet, but didn't want to risk waiting too long. They had to get out now. She'd whispered as much to Maddy and Eithne.

“If we lose you again, we won't get another chance,” Eithne said

She was right, but it didn't help at all. "And what if the baby is born here?"

"You'll be in good hands," Maddy said.

"We'll do what we can to get you out." Eithne peeked out the window. Past her, the sun still shone hazily through thick cloud cover. "I know some people – rock disposers – they get rid of the waste from the mines. We might be able to get out with them."

"Won't Lucy be watching? And why would these people help us?" Getting more people involved seemed dangerous. Susan didn't want to have to trust even Eithne, let alone random strangers.

"They owe me," Eithne said. "And besides, they spend their days carrying huge baskets of rock on their backs. Lucy isn't exactly their favorite."

The baskets. "So we'll literally be carried out of here?"

Eithne nodded. "At least to the rock pile. From there, we'd have to get you back to the gate trees. Where, if I'm right, Aidan's probably waiting for you."

Aidan's gun – Neil's gun – the gun Susan had given the boy – it had been so loud when he shot Brad. And not a sign of remorse. "Isn't there any other way, back to the living world?"

"There was, but now you'd have to be able to hold your breath a long time."

"We talked about this before," Maddy said to Eithne. "It was being used for the wrong reasons. Just look what you've done by making a new gate." She motioned to Susan.

"You made the gate?" Susan asked.

Eithne nodded. “After the first one closed, Lucy wanted a way into the living world, something more than our viewing glasses. We needed things from there to make our lives better. It was the only way to find a better freedom. The trees were perfect, far out from where Mikeel’s Coats patrolled, but also far away from all the people here who might use it for their own reasons – they were all but invisible. I never thought it would endanger anyone.”

If there were two ways out, it had to be possible that there were more. “Could we make another gate?”

“Even if we had the seeds, it took nearly half a century for the last one to grow.”

Susan started to ask again about the gate, about the seeds, but she stopped and grabbed her stomach. Pain ripped through her body, starting in her lower back and radiating out. A contraction. Whatever that doctor had tried was working. It was too sudden, too painful. She exhaled an audible groan.

Maddy shuffled across the floor and lay next to Susan. She held the other woman’s hand, gripping it tight.

“Shit, don’t tell me it’s coming now,” Eithne said a little too loudly. Then she jumped and peered out the window, mouthing a whispered, “No, no...” She spun to look at Susan. “Can you move?”

Susan nodded, clutching at her stomach. As quickly as the pain had come, it passed, leaving her with an afterglow of discomfort, and the premonition of further pain.

“Out the back, quickly,” Eithne said. “And stay low.”

They crawled across the floor to a small room at the rear of the house. Maddy stood and pushed open the window, letting in a slight breeze.

“I’ll go first,” Eithne said. “Make sure it’s safe.” Maddy and Susan lifted the girl up to the window so she could swing her leg over the sill. She perched that way for a moment, swiveling her head left and right before tossing the second leg over and dropping to the ground.

A moment later, the girl’s whispered voice drifted through the window. “It’s clear, come on.”

Maddy knelt down and laced her fingers together. She nodded towards the window. Susan grabbed the sill and placed her right foot into Maddy’s hands. She pulled with her arms as her foot was pushed up. Twisting her body around, she sat on the sill and tucked her legs in close so she could spin through the open pane. Then she was outside again, standing, waiting.

Nearby, Eithne shuffled back and forth from one foot to another, clearly impatient. “We’ll hit another house, and you’ll lay low for a while. I’ll go see about the rock disposers.”

The memory of the contraction was too fresh, too recent. Susan figured she only had a matter of hours, maybe as much as a day, though she didn’t know exactly. “No,” she said. “We’re leaving now.”

There was a scuffling noise from inside the house as Maddy worked her way through the window. She was halfway out when a loud bang came from inside the house. And yelling. “Go ahead, I’ll keep them busy,” she yelled and dropped back into the house.

Eithne grabbed Susan’s hand and started pulling, frantic. They took off running away from the house, into narrow alleys littered with debris. Susan glanced back once,



hoping to see Maddy, but no one was there. She knew she should have let the old woman go first. It would have been faster. She could have saved her. Susan wasn't watching her steps as Eithne lead her in one direction then another, weaving between dirty hovels. How could she have left Maddy to lift herself out the window? But her hands had been strong, a solid step, a solid support.

Eithne spun around a corner and flattened back against the wall. "We can't stay here," she hissed through clenched teeth.

Susan had known that from the start. The city was a death trap wait to be sprung. It had already gotten Maddy. "We have to go back for her."

"We can't," Eithne said. "You'd be back in the dungeon before you knew it."

"But it isn't right. We can't abandon her."

"We don't have a choice."

They skulked the streets for a little while longer until they found another empty house to stay in for a few hours until the alert died down again. Then Eithne left briefly and returned with a small backpack full of water skins and supplies. Also inside was a flat package wrapped in oilcloth and tied with twine. She opened it and showed Susan. A dark, glittering blade six inches long, its edges curved in vicious lines. Rewrapped, the girl placed the knife back in the satchel.

After dark fell, they crept around the back side of the mine and crawled down the way they came, through an abandoned shaft, and down a disintegrating ladder. Eithne lead the way. At the bottom, she reached into her pack and drew out two flashlights, handing one to Susan.

The plan was simple enough. Eithne explained about an old tunnel, one of Lucy's failed projects. It was originally meant to house an underground railway, something to ferry the Blackcoats and supplies all over Falls and False, but they never could get the necessary components after the first gateway was closed.

Eithne said the tunnel was ultimately completed, but its initial size was decreased as it wound under the landscape, eventually surfacing several miles out from False, directly away from the mountains and from any real escape. It would add at least a day to their travels, with the extra distance and the need to circumnavigate False on the return trip. That was the main reason Eithne said she had rejected the route initially.

But there was also another reason, one she only admitted while showing Susan the knife: the way would be guarded. "I didn't want it to be like this. I know these people. They aren't evil. They don't deserve what I have to do to them."

People would have to be destroyed so Susan could escape. She tried to reassure the girl that it wasn't anyone's fault, but she couldn't believe it. This was more than just a moral action. It was personal and real, and the girl had let a brave woman be captured, tortured, maybe even destroyed, because of a stupid plan to spare Lucy's henchmen.

And then there was the baby. There had been two more contractions in the hours since the first. Each time, they surprised Susan, but they passed quickly. She'd glanced over a few books during the past months. The numbers were fuzzy, but she was pretty sure the birth wasn't imminent. Just "discomfort" for the time being, though that seemed an understatement.

They made quick time through the tunnels, Eithne not even pausing at the various junctions, but turning, confident, leading them deeper and deeper. And the stone walls

around them slowly changed, smoothing out as if finer tools had carved it, and growing wider apart, imperceptibly at first, and then suddenly into a great cavern.

Eithne shut off her light and squatted down just outside of the cavern and stared into it. At first, Susan couldn't see anything other than the darkness. She kept her eyes open, waiting for them to adjust, and began to notice a slight light at, she assumed, the far end of the space. It was a faint haze that marked the wall.

“You'll have to go first,” Eithne whispered.

“What?” This hadn't been part of the plan. In fact, there hadn't really been a plan. As far as Susan had imagined, they were going down to the tunnel and Eithne would take care of the rest.

“I need a distraction so I can get close. Keep your flashlight on, act casual. When the guards speak to you, aim your light right at them. I won't let them get to you.”

Susan waited behind for a minute while Eithne crept out into the cavern to get better position. Being the bait wasn't a fun idea, but it made sense. If these guards were looking for her, surely they had been told not to hurt her. At most, they would attempt to restrain her.

Susan flipped on her light and tried to walk calmly. She tried to saunter, to mosey, to do whatever those words meant, but her heart didn't listen. It thrummed a fast beat that she could feel from her temples to her fingers. What if these guards were eager murderers like Aidan?

A loud shout came from across the chamber. Susan almost stopped cold, but she forced herself to keep moving. They weren't close enough. She swung her light back and forth across the far edge of the chamber, but it found only the dark, dusty air.

Loud footsteps were approaching, but the sound came from everywhere at once, echoing off the solid stone walls. Susan still walked forward, swinging her light and trying to remember that Eithne was out there, that everything would be fine.

Then her eye caught something. She moved her light back, outlining the pale moon of a chubby man's dirty body.

"Stop right there," he said and raised a shotgun to his shoulder, staring down the sight at Susan. "The boss-lady said you try coming this way." Behind the man was another shape, still half obscured, approaching more slowly. Another guard. Susan wanted to get them both in the light, to make sure that Eithne could see them.

But another contraction hit just then and it leveled her. She managed one more shaky step and dropped her flashlight in the process. It hit the ground, breaking, and returning the cavern to pitch black. Susan put a hand on her stomach. Her insides felt too tight, like they were ready to pinch her in half. She dropped down to a knee and clenched her teeth, trying to ride through the pain.

Out of the darkness came a loud scream. Then the guard's gun went off. The shot briefly illuminated the darkness, the noise deafening, reflecting off the walls and growing louder. Susan took her hands from her stomach and clamped them over her ears. A handful of dust and rock particles rained down on her head.

Soft light flicked on a few yards off and bounced over the ground as Eithne came running over to Susan. "Were you hit?" she asked. The girl held the flashlight in one hand and the knife in the other, slick with the guards' blood.

"No," Susan said. "Just a contraction."

Eithne breathed an audible sigh. “I was really worried. I didn’t think they’d have a gun.” She placed a gentle hand on Susan’s shoulder. “Are you okay to move? The gunshot might attract attention, but we’ll still have a lead for now.”

Susan stood. “I’m fine. But the baby is coming sooner rather than later.”

Eithne nodded. “We’ll deal with it when we have to. Hopefully we’ll find a safe place by then.”

“Hopefully I’ll be back through to North.”

“We’ll do what we can.” Eithne handed Susan the light and cleaned the blood from her knife, wiping it on her white robe, leaving a long streak of red. Then she tossed the blade back in the satchel, not pausing to wrap it. “You might want to grab the gun. You never know.”

Susan had heard enough gunfire for a lifetime over the last couple days. She looked down at the shotgun. It looked exactly like Brad’s. As she trained her light on the corpse, she saw the man was still moving, his throat slit, along with his Achilles tendons. Deep slices severed his wrists to the bone, but still the man’s eyes blinked. And she thought she heard a low, gurgling breath sucked through the soupy mess that had once been a throat. She hurried on, not bothering to take the gun.

Silently, Eithne lead the way, through what had seemed to be a massive cavern. In actuality, the space was the beginning of the tunnel – nearly forty feet high, and a hundred yards long. They crunched along the ground, for a solid ten minutes before the tunnel once again became more human sized. Another hour further, the ground sloped steadily upwards. Susan was tired and sweating. Fortunately, the contractions remained spaced far apart. None of the subsequent ones hit with ferocity, only slowing her for a

moment before she returned to their steady, if hurried pace. And through the whole time, they heard nothing behind them, no sign of any chase.

Susan's mind strayed in the dark. She thought of the gun she left behind, of how she might need it, of the man, nearly decapitated, yet still twitching, maybe breathing even. And ultimately, guiltily, of the ones she'd abandoned so far, the ones who had been sacrificed so she could keep going. Maddy. But before her, Brad at the end of a gun shot. She wondered what had happened to him, if he was like Slim and Eithne now, or if he didn't even make it.

"Why exactly did you come for me?" Susan asked.

"I couldn't let them hurt you," Eithne said.

"No," Susan said. "I mean, how did you even know they had me in the first place?"

"Your friend, the one Aidan killed – he wasn't terribly subtle in his message."

Susan knew that meant others had probably figured it out too. The tunnel sloped upwards as it climbed to the surface. Then she climbed through a small hole carved in the ground. It was fully night, and nearly pitch-black, so that both the ground and the sky blended into a single darkness. It was good to be back outside. "Who else knows I'm here?" Susan asked, stretching her back in the cool night air.

Eithne looked down at the ground. "I'm pretty sure your husband will, if he doesn't already."

Susan knew he'd try to find her, to save her, but she wasn't sure that was a good idea. It might just complicate things even more – hopefully, he'd just go back to North and wait for her there. She didn't want him becoming a target for Lucy or Aidan's

schemes. She finished stretching, feeling her lower spine pop several times. She felt good for now, but the contractions would return. And Lucy couldn't be that far behind. They had to start moving again.

## CHAPTER 10

Greg sat with his father on the forest floor in the real, the living world – only miles from where he grew up. The sun had already set, but the air was still warm. It would be a beautiful night. Back when he and Susan started dating, they sometimes walked to local playgrounds on nights like this, claiming swings abandoned hours before by children. More than anything, that was what he wanted to do right then – just get up, walk out of the forest, see his wife, and see her smile.

Instead, he sat, his ankle throbbing, staring through the gate at the burned child. Aidan stood at the threshold, at the peak of the root bridge. In his typical way, he dangled the revolver lazily at his side, as though he honestly didn't care enough to raise it. "Come back here, Neil," he said. "And I won't kill your son." The trees on either side slowly oozed red sap. Greg had become convinced of that much at least, the trees weren't bleeding. Even after everything else, the tree couldn't possibly be bleeding.

"Bring his wife back first," Neil said. "Then I'll come willingly."

Aidan smiled a little tight smile, lips pursed, like something was funny, but no one else knew the joke. "You think for a second that I'd give you the bitch? You're delusional."

"What will it take?" Neil asked. "We'll give you whatever you want."

Aidan laughed like it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. "What a bunch of idiots." He hunched over, hands on his knees, snorting.

Neil stood and took several steps forward, chest thrust out. "What the hell is wrong with you, kid?"



Aidan stopped laughing, straightened up, and raised the gun at Neil. “You’re what’s wrong. You all are. You, the fucking woman, and her baby.” He thrust the barrel of the gun forward as he spoke. “You all think you’re so damn special, a precious little light in the darkness. Well, you’re not. You’re a bunch of tools, and the truth is, I don’t even need you. I already have a couple fresh bodies in here – your son’s wife, the guy she came with, and her baby.” He motioned back to the Blackcoat who tossed him one of the two axes. Aidan snatched it from the air and leaned it against the tree as he stuffed the gun back into his waistband.

“Don’t get carried away,” Neil said. “Come on, let’s just talk.” He took a tentative step forward.

Ignoring him, Aidan grabbed the axe and swung it at the tree. A piercing screech lit through the air as blood spilled out of the trunk, dripping onto the ground.

“No,” Greg yelled, trying to lift himself up off the ground, but his ankle couldn’t support the weight, collapsing over on itself.

Neil turned, glancing back at his son, and then took off in a headlong charge at the gate.

Aidan fumbled for a second before snatching the gun back out and leveling it at the charging man. The bullet seemed to move slowly through the air, tumbling out of the gun barrel’s blaze, sloughing through the thick distance, before penetrating Neil’s shoulder.

Greg watched his father knocked off his feet by the shot while Aidan motioned to the Blackcoat to get to work on chopping down the trees. “What do you want from her?” Greg asked, crawling over the ground to his father. “What the hell did she do to you?”

Aidan held up a hand, stopping the Coat for a moment. “You still don’t get it, do you? This place isn’t for you: it’s for the dead. Do you have any idea how these trees got here? We started learning how to make them a long time ago. Back when the first gate was open, we dragged an asshole a lot like you in and made sure he didn’t make it out again. After his new body came down the falls, I got him reunited with his old self. Dead body and living dead, right? And we planted both parts of that asshole right here. Both sets of legs right up in the air, arms and head buried, fingers intertwined. Your kid’s will be better though. His little unlived life will do more than make a small gate. It will make Falls a part of the living world.”

The Coat raised the axe high and swept it down at the trunk, cleaving deeply into the tree, which seemed to moan in pain. Aidan stood, arms outstretched as blood splattered his hands and face. Then he took a step back, waved mockingly, and said, “Take care.”

The tree on the right let out a loud crack as yet more blood cascaded out of the wound, spilling in a flood down to the ground. Greg stood and hopped forward, trying to get close to his father, to check if he was ok, as the wide trunk tilted precariously to the side and then sped forward, rushing into the opposite tree and felling it. In a heap of debris and dust, the trees crashed to the ground.

His father was bleeding badly, his shirt soaked in red warmth. But he was already sitting up, clutching the wound before Greg got to him.

“You alright, Dad?”

The old man just grimaced. “It barely grazed me. I could’ve still stopped him.” Blood was seeping out between Neil’s fingers. With a visible effort, he stood, tucking

one leg up under himself and pushing. Then he took one faltering step and slowly squatted down into a cross-legged sitting position. “I might need a moment.” He laid back on the ground, his knees up in the air, and closed his eyes.

Greg scooted over to his father and moved the old man’s hand. Blood had already soaked through the shirt’s upper sleeve. In the center was a dark, wet hole. He pressed his hand down hard on the wound. Neil moaned, but otherwise didn’t move. Remembering a moment from Boy Scouts (something Emily, not Neil, had encouraged) Greg looked around for something to tie a tourniquet with. He only needed a strip of cloth and a stick. He leaned back and grabbed a foot long stick from the ground.

It had to be done quickly, Neil was losing too much blood, and Greg couldn’t very well take the time to work the dirty button-up flannel shirt off of his father. Then there was the strip of cloth his mother had given him, but it was short, not nearly enough to wind around Neil’s shoulder.

It had to be the robe. Greg shrugged it off, taking one arm out at a time to keep pressure on the wound. At least it was a warm day. Then he folded the robe in half and wound it around Neil’s shoulder three times, tying a knot the last time and inserting the stick. He twisted the stick over and over, cranking the pressure down on the shoulder, trying to cut off the blood flow.

And then he held it in place. He hoped it was enough to keep Neil from bleeding out in the near future, but there was no way they could get back to the road. His father would have to wake up and be able to walk back.

And how would Greg be able to walk there? He’d need his father’s support to move at all. And once they got there? Greg’s clothes lost in the lake, his keys with them.

Even if his car was still on the side of the road, they'd have to hitch a ride back. And all the while, Susan was trapped in that other place. He didn't even know how they would get back, if they could.

That thought frightened him more than he thought possible. He couldn't lose Susan – the small things she did helped him get through the day – her funny “evil” laugh, the way she danced like a dork, the way she always knew how to cheer him up and to keep him from withdrawing. He couldn't manage without her. She was more a part of him now than anyone else ever could be.

“Put your hands up.” A low, commanding voice from in front of him.

Greg looked up, shocked. He hadn't heard anyone approach. But he clearly saw a man thirty feet off, half hidden behind a tree trunk, pointing a gun at him. He raised his free hand, keeping the other braced on the tourniquet. “Please, my dad's hurt, you have to help him.”

The man stepped out from behind the tree. “Greg?”

Brad's dad – Senior. He wore a bright orange button-up shirt and carried a small-gauge shotgun, yet he looked more together than Greg had seen him in years.

Senior jogged forwards and knelt next to Neil, feeling for a pulse. “What the hell happened?”

“He got shot.”

“By who?” He looked up and registered Greg's nakedness for the first time.

“And what the hell happened to your clothes?”

“I don't know who shot him,” Greg said. Then he motioned to the tourniquet.

“And I was wearing that.”

Senior nodded. “How long ago was he shot?”

“Not long. Five minutes, maybe?”

Senior eased Greg’s hand off of the tourniquet and loosened it slightly, peeking under. “He’s lost a lot of blood. We have to get him to the hospital.” He tightened the tourniquet again and gave it back to Greg, then reached in his pocket and pulled out a cell phone. He flipped it open. “We’re going to have to carry him out ourselves. Just a sec.” He stood and unbuttoned his shirt, then stripped off his undershirt and flung it at Greg. “You can wear that for now. Sorry I don’t have anything more.”

The shirt was wet and smelled, but it was huge. Still, it would only cover him a little past the hip, not enough for his modesty. He handed the tourniquet over to Senior and stood on his good foot, keeping the other raised in the air. Wrapping the shirt around his waist, he tied a sleeve to the bottom hem, keeping the knot to the side – a poor, makeshift skirt.

“Guess you can keep that,” Senior said. “What happened to your foot?”

Greg looked down. The ankle had swollen to nearly twice its normal size and was already spotted with colors. “I fell.”

“You able to walk?”

Greg shook his head. “I’ll find a way though.”

Senior glanced back over his shoulder, looking around. “Shit,” he said again.

“I’ll carry him then. You see Junior anywhere?”

Brad Jr. The one who attacked Greg in Falls. The one who was now dead. “No,” Greg said. “Sorry.”

The trip back out of the woods was slow. With no way to hold the tourniquet in place, they had to tie the robe tightly first, then Senior carried Neil over his shoulder, stopping every few minutes to curse and take a pull from his flask. Greg hopped along beside, gritting his teeth each time his foot bounced awkwardly. They didn't talk much, each concentrated only on getting out, back to the road. When they finally did hear the traffic, both slogged forward, picking up the pace, trying to cross that final space.

Then they broke through the tree line and saw the road, cars speeding past, and Senior's pickup parked off the edge of the road.

"There's no back seat," Senior said. "So you two will have to go in the bed. I'll take it slow, but just keep pressure on the wound.

Greg slid into the back first and helped pull Neil in behind.

Then Senior slammed the tailgate and ran around the front, sliding inside. "Hold him tight," he yelled out.

Greg clutched Neil as the truck's engine roared to life. The tires slipped and spun out on the gravel shoulder. And then they were on the road, heading away from town. The nearest hospital was close to twenty miles away. It took nearly thirty minutes to get there. All the while, Greg huddled down in the pickup bed, holding his father's wound.

When they got to the hospital, a medical team was waiting with a stretcher – Senior had called ahead as soon as he had cell reception. The medics slid Neil out of the back and rushed him inside. Greg tried to follow, to see if his father was alright, but Senior put a hand on his shoulder.

"Let them take care of it."

Greg wasn't about to let that happen. His wife was gone. His father shot. He pushed the hand away. "I'm going with him."

Senior grabbed Greg again, this time by the upper arm. "No, you're not. You're going to get your foot checked out, and then I have some questions for you." It wasn't an invitation. Senior had lowered his head. "Over coffee and some breakfast, my treat. But first your foot."

Greg waited by the truck for a couple minutes until an orderly came out with a wheel chair, then he plopped down, and let himself be taken inside. It took a lot of paperwork and nearly two hours, but Greg eventually emerged from the hospital with a light blue plastic air-cast, two silver crutches, and a clean pair of scrubs. The good news was that the ankle wasn't broken, but the doctor cautioned him to stay off it as much as possible. Then they cleaned and bandaged the wound on his arm, telling him to keep it dry for a few days and to come back if the infection got worse.

Neil had immediately been brought into surgery to extract the bullet still lodged in his shoulder – like hell it grazed him – but he was stable and asleep by the time Greg was done. And Senior was intent on talking somewhere more private. This time Greg climbed into the front seat of the pickup and they tooted down the streets of the small town to a beaten-up diner with small sign out front – The Gas Light.

Senior held open the door while Greg crutched his way inside. The place was almost empty, but Senior insisted on a booth in the back. The waitress came by with steaming cups of coffee and Senior ordered them two breakfast specials.

Then he started hitting Greg with the questions. "Don't give me no bullshit, alright? What the hell were you and your dad doing out there?"

Over and over, people demanded straight answers that they wouldn't believe. But then again, Greg had been that person once too, wanting to know. Knowledge was the prize. "It's a long story."

"Well, service is shitty here. We got plenty of time."

But what was even remotely plausible? "We were hiking, taking a look at the area."

"You gotta give me more credit than that, kid. Your dad's shot. You got a busted ankle and are bare assed naked. And you're both out where my boy's car was found."

It did add up to a whole lot of unexplainable happenstance. "I'd rather not talk about it," Greg said. "I don't know where Brad is. I wish I did, but I don't."

Senior slapped the table sharply with his meaty palm. "Listen. I don't care what you want or don't want. You're going to say what happened, or I'll turn you over to the cops."

Greg didn't flinch. Senior, for all his bluster, was still just a worried father. "Look, I'm telling you what I know. I didn't see who shot the bullet. I tripped and twisted my ankle. And my clothes – I like wearing robes, sometimes. That's not crime."

Senior leaned back in the booth, his gut a ripe mound pressing against the table's edge. He raised the ceramic cup to his lips and sipped at the black liquid. "Horrible stuff," he said, taking out his flask and pouring a bit into the cup. "You know what else though? I saw your wife a few days ago. She said she was going out there. Then I got a message from Junior saying he was gonna help her."



“You spoke to Susan? Is she ok?” Greg started to stand, hoping he sold it. He had to get away from this guy and look for her somehow. He had no idea how to start, but it didn’t matter.

“Sorry kid, thought you knew. Far as I know, she disappeared the same time as my boy.” Senior reached across the table and pressed Greg back into his seat. “No use though. They had dogs out there looking for them.”

Greg sat back down, propping his forehead in his palm. “Ok, so I wasn’t being completely honest. I was afraid you’d think I’m crazy. I did see who shot dad – a kid did it, just minutes before you got there.”

“What’d he look like?”

“Like he’d been burned really bad. Short, like nine or ten. But the burns were what stood out.”

“I knew it,” Senior said. “I told your wife to stay away from that kid. I saw him breaking into my old store and tried to stop him, but he was so damned fast. So what happened with him and Neil?”

Greg shook his head. “Truth be told, I just went looking for my dad. We were coming back when the kid came out of nowhere and shot him.”

“And where’d you find Neil?”

“By a lake way out there somewhere. Don’t know really. Hate to say it, but I got pretty lost.”

“It could happen to anyone.” Senior said, gratefully ignoring the holes in Greg’s story. He picked up the coffee again, blew on it, and then sipped it. “Shit’s horrible. Can’t see why they even serve it,” he said.

Greg figured this wouldn't be the last time they spoke.

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Slim was on his way out of Falls. He' learned what he could from Brad and knew he had to make it to Susan as quickly as possible, but every time he turned a corner, there seemed to be another Coat waiting there. Finally, he settled on looping through the far edge of the town and the forest back around to the cliff.

He'd almost made it out to the fields when he felt a light tapping on his shoulder. He turned around and groaned.

"Follow me," the Coat said. "Mikeel wishes to speak with you."

Slim almost ran right then, but he'd seen these things chase down other dead before. He had no chance, so he followed the Coat back through town, past all the workers' warehouses and the prison huts, straight to the Tower, Mikeel's home.

The Coat opened the door to the tower for Slim and ushered him inside.

The moment Slim stepped through that door, his worst fears were realized – the top floor of the tower was glowing. He'd heard rumors of this, fantastical stories of how the old man could see into your very soul and know what was there.

Slim tried to keep his determination sound. He mounted the steps and marched upwards. He kept his face flat and emotionless, but his legs were shaking and his breath was coming in shallow gasps by the he reached the top.

There stood Mikeel in all his glory, wreathed in flames so bright Slim had to turn his eyes to the ground.

"Two of my disciples have been sent back to the water. I felt their loss. The eldest boy child has done this. You will tell me why."

“I don’t know,” Slim said. “This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“Yet you know more,” Mikeel said. “I haven’t time for games.”

“He took a woman. She’s pregnant.” Slim blurted the words out, and then gritted his teeth, determined to say no more. The light in the room vanished rapidly. When Slim looked up, he saw that Mikeel was smiling.

“I see,” the old man said. “The traitor seeks to upset the balance.”

Slim stood tight lipped. He’d betrayed everything he’d promised to Greg. He felt less than worthless – a traitor and a slug. He should have run, have forced them to drag him here, to destroy him if need be. But he knew it wouldn’t have changed anything. Mikeel would have gotten the information no matter what. “Can you just throw me in the river already?” Slim asked.

Mikeel shook his head. “Don’t be absurd. I have much more important things you need to do. The woman is surely heading towards the traitor’s cave.” He held a knife out to Slim. “Take it,” he said. “Go to the cave and make sure that child is never born.”

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At the sound of voices, Susan and Eithne dropped to the ground behind a small rise. They were exposed, out in the open on the flat wasteland. If anyone found them here, it’d get ugly, fast. There was no way they’d out run anyone.

Eithne peaked out over it, staring hard into the distance. “I don’t think they saw us.”

Susan was famished and tired. They’d been walking for five hours with little in the way of rest and absolutely no nourishment other than water. They were heading

around the crater of False, back towards the forest. Eithne said they'd have to go through Lucy's cave in the mountains first, but it'd give them a chance to check out both sides. And there would be food there. And some herbs to help control the pain enveloping Susan's lower half. They couldn't get there fast enough. The contractions had gotten more consistent over the hours, now coming almost every fifteen minutes, which slowed the pace of the walk considerably. The baby was certainly coming and Susan wanted to be out of this place by then.

The voices were still clear over the ridge, but Eithne motioned for Susan to move again. "We need to move fast, but quietly."

Susan did her best, rolling through her steps so that her heels impacted the ground as gently as possible. She held onto her stomach as they moved, afraid the baby would just fall out with all the jostling.

Way beyond her threshold for exhaustion, for pain, Susan kept her feet moving. All the marathoning of the past helped. It taught you that your body didn't need to stop, that the wall you thought was impassable was only an illusion, albeit a painful one. You did what you had to and crossed the finish line no matter what.

And how many women had given birth on the move? Susan tried to appreciate that she wasn't the first to go through this. Hospitals hadn't always been around, nor medicine. Ancient tribes were constantly going, trying to keep up with their prey. Susan tried to recall her college lessons, tried to distract herself, because she sure as hell wasn't entering the running zone where her mind went blank, not with the baby insisting it was time.

But would the baby even survive? It was hardly impossible: the baby was a bit premature, but it would be fine in a hospital, with incubators and antiseptic. With only a little girl to help, Susan didn't want to think about it. It was too horrible to imagine.

She almost ran into Eithne. The girl was completely stopped, glancing to the left and right. "Something's not right. There should be more of them out looking. They should have our trail at least." She looked behind them, but there was nothing. "What the hell is Lucy doing?"

"We have to keep moving," Susan said. "I won't make it if we stop." She'd walked through two contractions during the last half hour or so. How much time left? She was supposed to go to the hospital when they were coming five minutes apart. "We need to get somewhere safe."

"I don't like this. We should head directly to the gate. It's safer that way."

"I need somewhere close, please. The baby's coming."

"How much longer can you..." Eithne started to ask, but stopped. "It doesn't matter. There's no other way. Damn it, I didn't plan on this."

The light slowly grew in the sky ahead as they continued their path towards the mountains. The girl kept looking around constantly, clearly worried. The plains had looked as empty as the first time Susan saw them, when she was being forced along by Aidan. She couldn't see anything to be worried about. But then again, she didn't know what to look for or where to look.

It was hard to keep her mind from the contractions. Each one felt worse than the last. And her body was exhausted. She wanted to lie in a hot bath for days and let all this

strain just steep out, but there was no stopping now. They drew closer and closer to the mountains, to their steep slopes. To the thin vein of a path that wound up the side.

Ahead, Eithne stood waiting, looking up intently. “Not long now.”

Susan nodded, breathing heavily. “I’ll make it.” She hoped she could. The cave had been pitiful, but it was better than the open air, the rough, dirty ground.

“I’m going first,” Eithne said. “I’ll signal if it’s safe. If I don’t, then just run. Go anywhere, but get away.”

Susan trailed Eithne by nearly fifty yards, hopefully out of view. She lifted her legs wearily, one after another, focusing on finding a way up the trail. They were less than a fourth of the way up when a contraction hit and refused to leave. Susan stopped and bent over, clutching at her stomach. She didn’t know how many more she could take. Especially when they seemed to go on and on. Probably for less than a minute, but time stopped acting in its usual way.

She felt the gentle touch of the girl’s hand on her arm.

Eithne looked up, her small face creased in worry. “We can’t stay out in the open here.”

Susan nodded, but said nothing. It was all she could do to take one step and then another after that. Even as the pain subsided again, she felt that any movement should have been impossible.

The girl gave up the pretense of staying ahead and keeping a lookout. She put her hand in Susan’s, keeping her on track. There could be no running now. They should not have been walking over the mountain either, but there was no other choice left.

Nearly three-fourths of the way to the top, Susan's water broke, spilling a slick stream of warm liquid down her leg. She stopped to watch it trickle down onto the hard dry ground, and then clutched hard to the girl's hand. "Let's keep going."

Thankfully the cave was empty. Susan surveyed it briefly, remembering her last visit with Brad, when she was still searching for her dead sister and lost husband. Nothing had changed, but the place felt different, at once older and smaller. For a brief moment, Eithne snuck out the far side to check around, but she came back smiling, and then started running around the cave collecting wood and building a small fire. Susan sat back in a wooden folding chair near the static-filled television, her feet propped on another chair. "How does this thing work?" She tried fiddling with the dials on the TV.

The girl was brewing herbs from a white jar in water while rushing to arrange some hay for Susan to lie down on. Though it was cool in the cave, she kept the fire small, saying she was afraid smoke could draw attention. She carried the cup over and handed it to Susan. "It's inconsistent at best." Putting her hand on top of the television, she closed her eyes. "You have to focus on a strong image first, a memory."

The screen fizzled for a moment, muted colors washing across its face that slowly solidified, forming the image of a verdant landscape – palm trees with languid leaves, and running between them, a swift stream tumbling over mossy rocks.

Susan stared. "It's beautiful. Where is it?"

Eithne nodded. "The one place I remember clearly."

"Really?" Susan wanted to try her own, to check on the house, the school, something to tie her back to reality. But first she wanted to check on Greg. "What about people? Can we find them?"

“No,” Eithne said. “They move and change too much. They die.” She stared at the screen for another moment and then took her hand away. The picture fizzled slowly into static, and then she turned away. “I have work to do.”

Susan caught the girl’s hand before she could retreat. “What happened there?”

Eithne sat down a chair next to Susan and rested her head against Susan’s shoulder. “My mother was a beautiful woman. My father never trusted her.”

Another contraction tore at Susan’s insides. She took deep breaths and closed her eyes, but did not move, afraid of scaring Eithne away.

“He beat her and accused her of lying with other men. Sometimes he hit us too, especially Aidan, calling him a bastard child. I don’t know why though – we’re twins.

“But my father also had these long periods when he became loving and attentive. They’d last for weeks or even months even. He showered my mother with gifts of beautiful things.”

The pain in Susan’s abdomen was sharper, more concentrated than ever, like the tip of knife burrowing into her uterus. Susan clenched her teeth and focused on the girl’s story, on this man who had betrayed her. The image of Susan’s own father came to mind, but not the one already graying at the temples. Instead, the image was of the picture her mother tacked above the television after – their wedding picture, standing outside together, mouths open in wide, genuine smiles. Had he ever suspected his wife of cheating? Did he even know his daughter was missing?

“On one of his good days, my father wanted to take us somewhere,” Eithne said. “He said it was very pretty, just like his wife. We gathered some food and he lead us away from our home. Aidan and I were tired soon, but our father kept goading us on,



asking us to go just a bit further. He laughed, smiled, and kept commenting how nice the air was.

“When we found the little grove, our mother smiled too. It was so pretty. She loved it immediately and thanked him, *thanked* him for taking us there.”

As the tension in her stomach lessened, Susan lifted the cup of fragrant liquid to her lips. She’d swallowed several pints of water as soon as they entered the cave, but it still wasn’t enough. She knew to keep drinking till you have to pee like crazy after all the long runs. Dehydration was no stranger to her. And though the herb-infused water tasted slightly musty, she drank it all.

“He let us eat – he sat there and watched us eating, saying he wasn’t hungry. If I only looked into his eyes, I might have seen the lie. Or I might have studied his smile and known from his teeth – they were crooked teeth, dull, and stained from years of eating, of consuming everything.

“As soon as we were done, he said Aidan and I should go for a swim in a pool downstream, that he and mother needed some time alone. Dutiful children, we went left them alone. Aidan was more perceptive than I – he didn’t take long before insisting on going back, on watching out for our mother.

“I did not want to anger my father and so I stayed for a while, splashing about in that cool stream until I heard the screaming. It was my mother’s voice, high and constricted. Then suddenly, she stopped yelling, and I went running back.

“Aidan was already dead, flung carelessly against a rock that had split his head. Father had mother’s head pinned below the water. He was yelling at her, calling her a whore.

“I flung myself at his back, clawing at him, trying to get him to release her. He did for a moment and she came sputtering and coughing to the surface. I don’t think he meant to kill me. Or maybe he did. He grabbed my hands hard, breaking my grip and he stood, letting me drop to the ground. I sat there, looking up at him as he swung the back of his hand at me. The next thing I remember is falling.”

Susan wrapped her arm around the girl, holding tight. To have gone through that. She had no wish to use the television now. All lives were tragedies. It was here, into this world that Susan was bringing a child. “I need to lie down,” she said.

Eithne stood and turned towards Susan. She grasped her hand and helped her stand. They walked together to the straw and Susan laid down on her left side, feeling another contraction growing quickly.

Eithne crouched and whispered the rest of her story. “It took years for him to come. Aidan and I watched him grow old. He had two more wives, but both died before him. And we waited. Lucy helped us when he came grasping for the shoreline. She carried him to the river, and threw him to the water. He stayed for days, moaning incessantly while slowly dissolving. We couldn’t go near the water after seeing that. Mikeel was furious. He said that Lucy was interfering with the dead and forced her to leave. Then, everything here started to change for the worse.”

Susan lay halfway between sleep and waking for hours afterwards. Her contractions came with regularity now, tearing at her body with piercing daggers of pain. Each time, she felt as though the baby ought to be coming, but there was no instinct to push, nothing but pain. Sometimes she stood and walked about in circles, her head a

fuzzy haze, sipping at the concoctions Eithne brewed. They helped with the immediacy of the pain, so she could get some rest, even if it was only illusory.

Between contractions, she would quickly drift off to a half-sleep, still aware of her surroundings, but seeing them melded, meshed with waking dreams. Dreams of a father drowning his children. Of a man caught in the flow, letting forth a liquid moan till the water became his voice and the moan Susan's own.

She saw Greg walking in through the front door of their house, flowers in his hands, saying he wanted to take her out for drinks. She saw the pregnancy test that had been sitting on their sink, the neat pink lines saying she was pregnant.

Or she saw herself when she was seven, dressing for gym. The other girls would make fun of her, calling her fat. One would take up this whiny voice – “Susie, she's such a big baby.” But the worst was another one, a little princess, with blond hair, who always tried to make Susan think they were friends. The girl would offer her presents – pieces of candy or cookies. Susan always knew, but tried to forget, that this girl was the one who always called her fat.

For what seemed like hours, these images flowed sluggishly through her mind as she closed her eyes, only to jerk them open again at some new jagged pain. Slowly, in the background of her consciousness, a noise began to grow, a low rumbling cacophony of confusion.

Then she felt gentle prodding on her shoulder and heard Eithne's voice. “Wake up.”

Susan opened her eyes and looked around the cave. Night was falling again, encasing the stone interior in a more complete darkness. A small smokeless fire, primarily embers, sputtered in the center of the space. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“He’s coming.”

She had no idea what the girl was talking about, her mind still with Greg. “Who is?”

“Slim. Come and see.” The girl helped her stand and lead her to the edge of the cave, looking down on the forests, back towards Falls. Far below them, a lone figure was slowly biking towards the mountainside.

“That’s Slim?” Susan asked. “How do you know?”

“I just do,” Eithne said.

Susan couldn’t see well enough in the dark to make out more than someone abandoning a bike and beginning to run up the mountain. “If you say so.” Closing her eyes, she bent over, sucked in a deep breath and held it, muttering, “Oh, God.” This contraction was different from the rest. She felt sick, like throwing up, except not up, but down. It was this sickening sliding pressure down her spine. “The baby’s coming.”

Eithne gripped her hand again. “What should I do?”

It was too much, the most intense pain Susan had ever felt. Whatever drugs were in the tea were gone, overpowered by the sheer immediacy of the moment. She let out a grating, gutter yell.

“Please.” Eithne was tugging on her arm. “I don’t know what to do. Do you want to lie down? I can make you something to drink.”

“Just let me be for a moment,” Susan said, breathing heavily. She felt nauseous, but forced her eyes open and took a step back, leaning against the wall. Ahead, she could see Slim still running up to the cave, his bloated sweaty face bouncing with each step. Susan began to breathe rapidly, trying to push down the pain, push it away. She waited, trying to control the pain before she moved.

Then, finally, Slim was there. “Let me,” he said, removing Eithne’s hand, he lifted Susan like he was carrying a bride through a threshold, and carried her into the cave. Gently, he placed her back on the straw.

The pain washed over Susan, leaving her feeling empty, a mere husk. “What are you doing here?”

“I never thought I’d actually find you.” He grabbed more straw from the bedding above and built it up behind Susan so she could recline without lying down fully.

“But you did,” she said. Even if he was the wrong person, not the person she wanted here.

“Mikeel is sending his Coats to destroy False for good. They’re coming this way. Lucy is too.”

Her answering “Oh” pitched high as her body tightened once again. “Please, please, please,” she breathed out through the pain. “Just make it go away.”

“Just breathe,” he said. “Try to relax.”

When the pain had passed, she looked at him and said, “I’m glad you’re here.” Then, “I need something for the pain.”

“I’ll do what I can. My ex-wife wanted a natural birth at home, so I had to learn things I never thought I would, just in case the doctor didn’t make it in time. So how long have you been in labor?”

Susan tried to remember back. The first contraction had been when she was in the house, hiding with Maddy, but the doctor had given her the i.v. a few hours before that. And since then, there’d been the travel through the mines again, and across the blackened plains. “A long time,” she said. “Six hours, or maybe more.”

Slim nodded. “Ok,” he said. “Have you been timing your contractions?”

“Partially. They’re coming pretty often now. Every few minutes.”

“Good,” Slim said. He turned to Eithne. “Get that fire going. We need warm water and soap. Quickly now.”

## CHAPTER 11

Greg spent a seemingly endless day in North. After getting his arm looked at and ankle wrapped, talking to Senior in the café and getting a ride back to town, Greg found the note Susan left. *Don't worry* – of course he was worrying. He had no idea how to get back to her. He got his car out of impound and tried driving back to where the gate was, but only found the two toppled trees and no way through. Then he tried talking to a few of the year-round residents, to see if they knew anything, but he got no further that way.

All the while, Neil lay in the hospital bed, unconscious and burning with fever. The surgery had gone well; the bullet was taken out with little further trauma. But getting to the hospital had taken too long, over an hour, and the wound had become infected. And so they pumped bag after bag of antibiotics into his body, hoping for the best.

Greg just sat there – in the café with the shitty coffee, by the side of his father's bed, in his father's house, with a six-pack by his side – trying to think about how to get back, but he couldn't come up with even a plan of how to start. So, instead, he just focused on how much he had failed Susan and the baby. He tried to think of how it could have gone different, of how he could have stood up and fought. He could have told Mikeel. He could have broken away from the Bluecoats. Anything.

Then, after a few beers, he called Bob at work. The fat fuck demanded to know what the hell Greg was thinking, going AWOL for so long. The closest Bob had ever gotten to the front line was the Happy Viet Buffet. Greg quit over the phone. Given the chance, he never wanted to be so far away from Susan again.

Hadn't his father lost his wife too? And what had Greg done? He just left the man alone. He had been absorbed in his own healing, in finding his own way out of that inner hell. And Neil had collapsed into himself and whiskey.

Greg followed the precedent today, drinking enough to close his mind off with static, but not all the way to oblivion. Just through that long day that didn't seem to end, that didn't want to let him drift off to sleep.

At night, he climbed, half-drunk into the car, and went to see his father again. The man had taken a bullet, trying to stop Aidan from closing the only way back to Susan. Yes, Neil had his flaws, but Greg loved him. Then, at midnight, nearly twenty-four hours after the gate had closed, Neil woke up.

Greg was by his father's side, a pint of cheap whiskey in and going nowhere fast. Home wasn't that far away, but he was too drunk and knew better – driving now was just an accident waiting to happen. So he'd stayed and accepted the blanket the nurses gave him. He'd fallen asleep in that miserable little chair facing his father. He awoke to the touch of a rough hand on his arm.

“There's another way.”

Greg opened his eyes slowly, his head pounding. “Huh?”

“To her,” Neil said, his voice raspy, like sandpaper.

“How?” Greg was awake now, leaning forwards.

“The mines. Flooded now.”

Flooded. “What mines, Dad?” An impossible way was so much worse than none at all.

“Through Lucy's mines.”



“Where?” Greg wanted to shake his father. Heroes always did that with the dying messenger in old movies – throttle the data right out of them. Instead, he just leaned in so his face was close to his father’s. “How do I find them?”

“Slim.” His father struggled to continue speaking, trying to say something. Greg poured a glass of water for him and he gripped it between both his hands like a toddler. “My pants. The pocket.”

It was just before dawn on the little ribbon highway that snaked across the wilderness, up into the mountains. Greg clutched the steering wheel tightly, wanting to go faster, wanting to take off and skim through the air over the treetops. Everything was moving too slowly.

Senior sat in the passenger seat, just as intent on the road ahead. The things a father would do for his son. Greg hoped to know someday soon what it felt like. He’d searched out the old man as soon as he found the note in Neil’s pants and read it.

*Hey buddy,*

*I hope you don’t need this, but it seems like you might need another way in.*

*There’s only one way I’ve ever heard of. Ya got to get to the mines. I think there’s a gate on the lowest level. Eithne talked about them once. I guess there’s a door down there.*

*Oh, and it’s flooded. If you do find a way through, you should end up in False.*

*Sorry. Wish I could tell you more, but I’ve never been there.*

-S

Greg hoped to hell he was right about the location. There were no mines actually in North, but a half dozen or so within ten miles. Only one of them ever serviced by the

town was famous for being flooded – The Black Cliff Copper Mine. It was a monstrosity dug right down into the gut of a mountain, blasting out massive tracts of the rich vein. As one of the most lucrative mines in the nation during the final decades of the nineteenth century, it was the main reason North even existed. Miners had flocked to the area, leaving homes in Europe to gut the ground of America.

Then, as the twentieth century carried on, the returns grew less and less, and the owners needed to dig deeper and lower. Then the place flooded suddenly. This was right after the Second World War, when most of the mines in the area were closing anyways. The pump failed and rather than a slow accumulation of water, the lowest levels were deluged in a matter of hours. Different suggestions were offered, but the reason for the sudden flood was never discovered. That was the final straw for the mine, and the owners closed it up.

A long time back, when Greg was still a kid, the state made a big deal out of the mine, identifying it as a major heritage sight, perfect for family friendly tours. Of course, the old facilities had fallen into disrepair, but they pumped out all but the bottom few levels, keeping those as a highlight of the tour – the mystery of the mine.

A flooded mine and no time to spare. What choice did he have but get some help? He needed to make things move, to get a lazy ass dive director out of bed at 2 a.m., and to convince a smarmy old historian that they needed the mines open immediately.

That's why Greg went to Brad's family home. Senior was less than enthusiastic, which had to be expected, but he sighed and nodded as Greg finished his brief version of the story that left out small details like Brad's apparent demise.

“So you want me to do a dive with you in a flooded mine?”

“Yes,” Greg said. “It’s the only way we can get them back.”

“And you’ve been there, to this place of the dead?”

“You got to believe me,” Greg said, his voice cracking.

“I do, unfortunately. I’ll come with, especially if there’s any chance of finding my boy. One thing though, you got any experience with this sort of thing?”

“Susan and I, on our honeymoon, well, she insisted we go see some reefs. We’re both certified.”

“Good.” Senior pushed himself up from the table where they’d been talking.

“That’ll have to do.”

Greg didn’t have to ask the same question of Senior. It was why he’d known that this was the man to go ask. Brad Jules Senior, the current town drunk, was formerly was known as Petty Officer 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Jiles of the Coastguard Divers.

And a little over a half hour later, after collecting dive gear, they were pulling into the gravel parking lot of the Black Cliff Heritage Center. The center itself was in a long wooden building that had been recently constructed. Spaced out around it were huge monstrosities of corrugated iron, housing the old lifts that had once dropped men into the dark abyss and brought back carts full of broken rock. Large towers, looking like telephone poles, ran between the buildings, though there was nothing left to connect them.

A short, bespectacled man wearing a black wool sweater and jeans was waiting in front of the quaint cottage. He hurried forward as Senior exited the car and thrust out his hand. “Dr. Halbreth, Director of the Center. Officer Jiles?”

Giving no indication of the lie, Senior caught the man's small hand in his own thick, meaty one. "Thanks for meeting us on such short notice."

"It was certainly an odd request."

"I said thank you." Senior's countenance was stormy at best.

Dr. Halbreth retrieved his hand from the other's grip and pushed his glasses up, which had begun sliding down the bridge of his nose. "Of course, I'm more than happy to assist the police in any way possible. Though I am a bit at a loss as to what might require such immediate investigation. What did you say the case was about again?"

"I didn't."

Greg was honestly afraid there might be a lopsided physical altercation brewing. He stuck himself between the two men. "Greg Camp," he said, quickly shaking the director's hand.

"And how, exactly, do you relate to the investigation?"

"Just take us to the mine." Senior growled out the words, clearly perturbed by the interference.

"To the tram then," said the director. "We'll be taking it down the hill to the newer entrance."

Greg and Senior grabbed their bulging oversized backpacks from the trunk of the car – air tanks and scuba equipment, fins, masks, dry suits, crowbars for the door, and even a dry bag holding Senior's precious shotgun– hopefully everything they would need. All together, each bulky pack weighed in at close to sixty pounds.

Dr. Halbreth gave the two of them a suspicious sidelong glance as he lead the way back between the buildings, but he clearly couldn't resist slipping into tour mode. "The

tram we're taking down will lead us all the way to the 90<sup>th</sup> level, currently the lowest, un-flooded one. The shaft descends at approximately 35 degrees, following the path of the ore vein." He opened the door to a large building with a tower, ushering Greg and Senior inside. "When the mine closed, they were still using cars shaped like staircases that attached to the same tracks that brought up the ore. We've refitted the tracks with modern vehicles for safety reasons."

They reached the tram, a single train car that rumbled loudly on the track. "I warmed the tram up before you arrived," Dr. Halbreth said. This earned him a slight nod from Senior, a major triumph all-in-all. "Now if you take a seat, we'll be at the mine entrance in about five minutes."

Greg could already feel the cold air rushing out of the mine, lowering the temperature of the air by several degrees. A large part of him, the logical part, said he should turn back. There was no way they would find the entrance, let alone get to Susan. How long had it been since he last saw her? It had to be nearing a week. He'd come this far and knew there'd be no turning back.

At first, the tram moved slowly downwards into the dark. Strings of lights were tacked to the ceiling of the shaft, glowing dimly. The slope was alarming. Greg found himself staring down at a small clump of gum stuck to the floor.

"Now don't worry," Dr. Halbreth said. "Our tram has special cog wheels that won't allow us to drop more than a few feet if the brakes go out. The safety is unparalleled. It is also one hundred percent electric. Our entire mine is now zero emission."

"Sure as hell is slow though," Senior said.

“So we’re entering on the 90<sup>th</sup> level?” Greg asked. “And the others are flooded?”

“Yes,” the doctor said. “In fact, there are ninety-two levels in all, making this the deepest mine between the Alleghenies and the Rockies. Have you heard about the ’47 accident before?”

“And how large is each level?”

“Overall, we have more than fifty miles of tunnels beneath the ground here. A true underground city if you will. The levels differ slightly based on the thickness of the vein.”

The tram ground its way down the slope for several minutes. As they descended, the air grew colder for a while and then began to grow warm again. By the time they reached the bottom, Greg was stripping off his coat. “The rocks actually heat the air, but we’ve managed, through passive circulation systems to keep the temperature manageable.” The tram finally came to a halt next to an open tunnel. Nearby, a jeep with wide, mudder tires was waiting. Beyond it lay the utter blackness of the mine entrance.

“I don’t suppose you have a map of the levels,” Greg said.

“Of course we do. But it’s back up at the headquarters. What exactly are you looking for here?”

“We’ll manage,” Senior said, shouldering his pack. “Take us in.”

The three of them climbed into the jeep. Greg was crushed into the backseat along with the packs. Dim lights lead the way back into the mine. The jeep’s rumble echoed off of the bare rock walls. The ground was sodden with water, and a small stream flowed languidly beside the raised ground they drove on.

“Where are we visiting today?” Dr. Halbreth asked.

“The vein,” Senior said. “And the closest shaft down.”

Greg clutched onto the heavy bags as the jeep shuddered to an abrupt halt, but they toppled forward anyhow.

“Please don’t tell me you’re planning on going down,” the director said.

“It ain’t any of your damned business,” Senior said. “Now get this fucking thing moving.”

“I’m sorry, but those levels are mazes. You could get lost.”

Senior vaulted out of the side of the Jeep and walked around to the other side. He tore open the driver-side door. “Get out.”

Halbreth stepped from the vehicle and placed his hands on his hips. “What do you hope to find?”

“Which way?” Senior crawled into the front seat, his large body crushed into the seat. Halbreth pointed forward and Senior stepped on the pedal, leaving the doctor standing in the dark tunnel.

The shaft down was just a small watery hole, a plaque commemorating the flood next to it. They’d driven past the main vein first – a huge empty space slanting hundreds of feet forward and up into the air – an ancient cathedral to precious metal carved jaggedly by many years of blasting. Its floor was water, but it wasn’t any way that humans could go. They were stuck to the small, claustrophobic spaces.

Greg stood by the side of the shaft and dipped his hand in the water, expecting it to feel like a bath. Somehow, it was icy cold instead. He was glad Senior had insisted on dry suits, but all the gauges and instruments seemed daunting.

Senior, for his part, was suited and ready to go in under five minutes. He helped Greg on with the tanks and fixed the younger man's weight belt so it didn't fall off. Then he pulled down his mask, gave the thumbs up, his hands covered with thick rubbery gloves, and stepped into the hole. He sank quickly, disappearing from sight.

Slipping the mouthpiece in, Greg stared after him, into the void, afraid that if he followed, he may never return.

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A battle was brewing while Susan lay sweating on the rough straw mattress. The noise of it invaded the cave – feet pounding the ground on either side of the mountain and each side shouting and yelling, signaling their presence.

What her mind might have left to imagination, Eithne filled in while running back and forth past the boiling pot of herbs in the center of the cave. “It's going to be a massacre. Mikeel's got so many more Coats. There he is, standing at the front. You should see him, Susan. He's wreathed in light and all his men are scattered around. It's like the moon and the stars that reflect its light.” Then she ran across and peered out the other way. “Lucy's barely got anyone left – it's just a sad line strung along her side. They're standing there, waiting. Why did they even show up? Direct confrontation won't work, plus this place is rigged.”

Susan's screams drowned out most of what Eithne said. If the initial contractions had hurt, then this new stage was pain unknowable. It had started with that nauseous feeling, but had rapidly progressed through a variety of equally unsettling phases. First there was the feeling like constipation – an intense pressure on her bowels. Then the searing, tearing pain inside of her.



“Push, come on, you can do it.” Slim was a cheerleader sans pompoms. “Come on, one more.” Obnoxious, but necessary – she didn’t know what she’d have done without him.

“The Bluecoats are starting to move forward,” Eithne said and ran across the cave. “The Blackcoats are starting to move back.” She came running back to the center of the cave. “Slim, I don’t know if it’s safe to stay here.”

In between her gasps, Susan asked, “Just where – could we – go now?”

“That’s great,” Slim said. “Now breathe, Susan. Keep breathing.”

Outside there was a booming concussion and flakes of stone and dust rained down from the roof of the cave.

“What the hell was that?” Slim yelled.

Eithne flinched. “The explosives,” she said. “Just a sec, I’ll tell you what’s happening.” She ran towards the Falls side. She came back hyperventilating. “The avalanche worked,” she said. “Be glad you don’t have to see it.”

Pain erupted through Susan’s lower half. Transition – she vaguely remembered the books, tried to focus on what she had learned if only to move her mind somewhere else, but it wasn’t easy. The pain felt like it was coming from everywhere at once. She didn’t so much try to push as just do what her body was forcing her to. It was out of her control.

“You’re doing so good,” Slim said. “It’ll just be a few more. Eithne, stop worrying about the fight and make sure that water’s warm, but not hot. We don’t need to be cooking the baby.”

Eithne slunk to the fire. “It’s a slaughterhouse out there. The Blues won’t be trying to take the mountain for now, so we probably have some time, unless the Blacks try.”

Susan pushed again, feeling her lower body contracting, pushing the baby out. But if there was movement, she couldn’t tell.

“Come on, come on. You’re so close. Just one more big push. Shit!”

She curled forward, sitting partially up, and pushed again, screaming, “What!” through the pain, the tearing, burning, and sharpness of it. It was all she could do.

“Just keep going,” Slim said. “I can see him, but he’s a breech. Don’t worry. It’ll be fine.”

No it wouldn’t. She knew it then. Breech babies got caught on their own cord and strangled. They collapsed their own chests, unable to escape. Doctors were supposed to be able to move them, to position them. “Turn him,” she yelled.

Slim just shook his head. “No way. You’ve got to push him out. Try as hard as you can now.”

She gritted her teeth and strained, trying to push everything out of her body, all the pain and worry and fear. Nothing moved.

“Flip over. We’ll try to use gravity,” Slim said.

Amid the immobilizing pain, Susan managed to turn over and kneel, raising her torso up and spreading her legs.

“Push again,” Slim said.

Susan tried, tucking her chin and tensing every muscle in her body.

“Ok, good. Just a second now. One of his legs is caught.”

“Just get him out!” Susan yelled, and then there was even more pressure as Slim pushed and pulled on the baby’s leg, repositioning it.

“I think we’re good,” he said.

So Susan pushed, and the pain started to slide out of her, to lessen so quickly. She thought she would be able to feel the baby leave, and she could, in a way, but only through the rapid dampening of the ache. The baby had been a large ball of energy, crackling at her insides, and then it was gone, leaving only an ache and an afterglow.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Slim was saying.

Susan had shut everything out in that moment after the birth. The immense relief had swooned over her, collapsing her, exhausted back onto the straw. She heard Slim’s voice like it was far off, under the water, muddled.

But the baby wasn’t making any noise.

Susan sat up suddenly, eyes wide. “What’s happening?”

She saw Slim dip his face to the baby’s mouth and pull back, spitting a small glob of mucus. Immediately the baby began wailing.

“He’s fine,” Slim said. “A healthy baby boy.” He held the child up so she could see.

Wet, covered in blood, his cord still intact. So small. His head tapered, mouth wide, still screaming. Her son. “I want to hold him.”

He handed the baby gently to her. She wiped some of the blood from the baby’s screaming face and looked at him, feeling happy, but exhausted.

Slim sat for a few minutes by her side, occasionally touching the umbilical cord. “Just waiting for it to stop pulsing,” he said. Eventually, he held a hand back towards

Eithne. She came forward and handed him a long pair of scissors, fresh from the boiling water. He held them aloft a moment, letting them cool, and then lowered them to snip the lifeline that still connected Susan to her baby. She reached out to stop him. The tiny boy would be on his own. She would try to protect him, but he could never be a part of her again. “Please, don’t,” she said. Her voice was barely audible, just over a whisper.

“He’ll be fine,” Slim said, gently moving her hand away. The click of the scissor blades was soft. Then Slim lifted the baby gently, cradling him in his arms.

“Will she be alright, Slim?” Eithne asked.

“Leave her be,” Slim said. “Go see how things are going outside, quickly now.” He carried the baby to the other side of the cave and knelt down, bathing it in the warm water.

Susan tried to sit up to watch, but she was too tired. Everything had gone out of her with the birth, though some pain continued to rhythmically emanate from her uterus. She managed to raise her head slightly, but that was all. Slim was so careful with her boy, dipping a bit of robe cloth into the water and wiping it along the child’s skin.

When he was done, he nestled the child in the crook of her arm.

“Congratulations. You’re a mother.” Her baby slowed its cry to a whimper and then a contented sigh. His small eyes were closed, delicate lashes rimming the edge.

Susan smiled. It was good. She’d planned it so many other ways, wanted it in the clean, safety of a hospital, but everything was fine. Her son was fine.

“We just have to get the placenta out. You’ll barely feel it.” Slim’s voice was mild and pleasant. He knelt down again between her legs. “Just give me a gentle push, ok?”

Still looking down at her son, Susan pushed when her next contraction came. She felt a gentle tugging and more warmth spreading out from her body. She realized then how cold she felt, and thirsty. “Can I have some water?” she asked.

Slim filled a glass and handed it to her. “Rest for now,” he said.

She drank down the fluid and gave a brief nod, laying her head back. She was so tired, so spent. A dark heavy curtain hung over her, muting the world, washing it out. All she wanted to do was sleep. She closed her eyes and listened to her son’s breathing.

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Slim stood back, watching as Susan cradled her son and fell asleep. Mikeel was an ass if he thought Slim would ever hurt that baby. After everything that had gone wrong, at least this was turning out right. Susan was free from Lucy and Aidan for now, and, hopefully, Greg and Neil were back in North.

As soon as the new mother was asleep, Slim walked over and lifted the baby from her arms. The little boy had begun to squirm, and the woman needed her sleep. Slim held the baby on the flat of his arm, being sure to support the head, and rocked it softly. He looked down and whispered a song, just as he once had to his own son: *“We’ve been heading for things so far away, as long as I remember. Always reaching, hoping, searching for our day. But if I could walk the skies with you, it’d be to our home.”*

Eithne came trotting back into the cave from the False-facing side of the mountain. “Slim,” she said too loudly. “We have to go.”

“Shhh.” Slim motioned downwards with his free hand. “They’re sleeping.”

“The Blackcoats will come up soon,” Eithne said. “We have to get out of here.”

“Susan is still bleeding,” Slim said. “We need to let her rest and recover.”

“The child is too important. We have to get him to safety. We can come back for the mother later. She’s of no value to anyone without the baby anyways.”

“Be quiet,” Slim said. “We’re not abandoning Susan. That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it?” Eithne asked. “What do you think she’d want us to do?”

Rescue them both, of course, but if it really came to a choice, Slim was pretty sure he knew the answer. “It won’t come to that,” he said. “Go see if there’s any way you can keep the Blackcoats away.”

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When Susan awoke, the world was in a haze. The cave around her was bright with diffused light. Though the air was warm and a large robe was spread over her like a blanket, she still felt cold, and was shivering. She could feel sweat coating her body and an uncomfortable wetness between her legs.

Her son wasn’t next to her. He should have been there, curled in her arm where she left him. She sat up, looking around, body still sluggish from exhaustion mixed with sleep.

Eithne and Slim were off at the far side of the cave, talking with their backs to her.

Susan couldn’t make out their words, but Slim looked upset. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

Slim turned around slowly. He was cradling her baby in his arms. “Sorry, he started to fidget and I didn’t want him to wake you.”

Susan held out her arms toward him. It was difficult, like weights were hanging off of her wrists, but she had to have her baby back next to her.

He walked over and knelt beside her. Keeping the baby in one arm, he lifted a blackened kettle and poured out ochre colored liquid into a cup. “Drink something,” he said, picking up the cup and holding it to her mouth.

She drank slowly, savoring the feeling of it sliding down her parched throat. The liquid was only moderately warm, but it felt good, like it was heating her, melting the chill. “More.”

He obliged, filling the cup again and giving it to her along with her son. “Drink slowly,” he said. “We don’t need you choking.”

She cradled the child next to her, looking down at him. He snuffled slightly, scrunching his nose and opening his mouth slightly. “Think he’s hungry?” she asked.

“You can try when he wakes up again.”

She nodded. It was strange that she wasn’t hungry. It’d easily been a day since she ate, back there in the dungeon with Maddy, poor Maddy, wherever she was. But now Susan just felt cold and drained. Nothing more. She was happy to hold her son, but couldn’t dredge up anything more, no motherly bliss or contentment. Just fatigue. “What’s happening?” she asked again.

“There’ve been some complications. You shouldn’t still be bleeding. I want to get you to a doctor, but it might not be easy.”

Susan still felt so tired. She was fighting to stay awake and there. If what Slim said was true, she might be in real trouble. And her son would be left alone here. Not alone – with Slim and Eithne – but without his family. She couldn’t let that happen, when he was still nameless, helpless. But could she even name him without Greg here – their son, not just hers. “How bad is it? Am I dying?”

Slim shook his head fervently. “No, I won’t let that happen. I promise. We’ll find a way, even if Eithne and I have to carry you out of here.”

“Thanks.” Susan smiled, laughing lightly. This small movement was more than enough to startle her son, as he woke with a startled scream. She looked down at his gaping mouth. “Probably time to give feeding a try.”

“I’ll leave you to it.” Slim stood and walked over to the fire.

She pushed herself up to a reclining position and shifted her right arm to pull down the top of her robe. She picked up her son, nestled him in her arm, and positioned him close to her nipple. He latched immediately and started sucking. It was so easy. Her chest throbbed slightly as the hungry mouth worked, but, like everything else, it all sifted through the gauze of her mind.

“Slim, what’s your real name?” she asked.

He laughed. “Paul,” he said. “Though I can’t remember the last time someone called me that.”

Paul. It was a good name. Of course, Greg would agree. She owed so much Slim now. “Do you mind if he has it then?” Her son had given up feeding and closed his eyes again, nuzzling up against her, so she pulled up her robe and laid back again.

“Who has what?” Slim asked.

“My son.”

Slim stood and walked over, looking down at her. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Tiny, little Paul Camp. Nothing could happen to him with Slim around.

“Then by all means. I didn’t even wear it out.”

“Thanks,” Susan said, smiling and closing her eyes.



Slim squatted down next to her. She could feel him brush his fingers gently along little Paul's head. He must have been a good father once.

When Susan woke again, the light was different. Everything was blurry and flickering abruptly like a strobe. The air smelled like smoke. Slim and Eithne had probably started a fire. Paul was still nestled to her side.

"Come on, Slim. There's no time." Eithne's voice was high, constricted with fear.

"Shit. Why the hell won't these things hold together?"

Susan turned her head. Slim and Eithne were amorphous blobs, moving faster than she could follow. The larger blob was initially kneeling, but it stood abruptly flinging something against the wall. She was sure the crash was loud, but it seemed distant in her head. She didn't know why he was so upset. Paul was here. They had a nice fire going. It was good.

"I told you that the chairs wouldn't work. We have to go, now!"

"Fine," Slim yelled back. "I'll carry her, you take the baby." Then his hands were on Susan's shoulders, trying to sit her up.

She tried to shake her head. "No." A mumbled whisper. Everything was too fast.

"Suz, the fire's coming. Mikeel's burning the shit out of everything."

It was just a nice campfire. Still, she wished she'd brought another sweater or a blanket. But as soon as she found Greg, they could cuddle up together. She could lean

into him, and he'd drape his arms around her. Then the cool air would feel good. Slim could play the guitar some, one of those sad, slow songs. The night could be so peaceful.

But they were taking Paul from her. She could feel it, the gentle weight being lifted. And he started crying, wailing at the top of his lungs. She needed to hold him, to sooth the pain and sorrow. She could sit with him resting against her as she leaned against Greg. It would all be so warm and comfortable.

"Hurry!" Eithne yelled.

"Up you go," Slim said. "We're getting you to a doctor."

Susan could feel herself being lifted. The pain was excruciating down in her stomach. She tried to tell him no, to tell him to leave her to the peaceful night, but all she managed was an indistinct moan. The world started to move under her, wobbling back and forth, with almost a tidal rhythm.

Then she was back at the campfire. Paul was there. Greg too. They stared up at the stars, twinkling above them. The air wasn't so cold anymore. It was all just right.

But they weren't at the fire; they were back at home, in their house in the suburbs. The city was just over the horizon, far enough away that all the smoke was gone, all the noise and voices with it. They were in their backyard in the middle of summer. The sun was bright and the trees were wreathed in green. Paul lay in a little carrier on the ground. They would all go shopping later, pick up some food. Oh, she was so hungry; she wished they had food now. But it didn't matter because the yard was nice. Most of the spring flowers were gone, but she'd planted a few new ones, little short-lived purple halos. It'd be better if they could last, but nothing ever did. They were pretty for the time being.

Then Greg was wearing a t-shirt and he was younger, and back before that bad thing with his mother. They were both so young. It was winter, a cold night. He'd come over, and they'd shared a bottle of red wine and gone to bed. He was curled around her, keeping her back warm, his arm slung over her, cupping her breast. It was right where he was supposed to be. She was sure it would last – even though these types of things so rarely did – because it was good and right.

Susan felt herself being pulled backwards, away from herself. She could see the back of her own head and then her whole body, and Slim carrying it down the slope of the mountain. She'd been so proud of that body, had tried to hone it to an edge. Slim was moving fast, trying to run with the weight, though it must have been lighter now after so much had been lost. And then Susan could see the mountain as a whole and, above it, a blazing blue light. It hurt her eyes, but she didn't turn away. The light was an old man with two great blue wings sprouting from his shoulders. He hung in the air above the mountain, pouring hate and heat down onto the land.

Now far below, Susan could see it all. The flames were roaring up the mountain. They'd already made it to the cave. And beyond, everything was alight, a great blazing plain that extended on to eternity.

Then a dark shape came flashing up out of the fire, four massive wings sprouting from its shoulders, propelling it up. Its flesh smoldered with a million tiny licking flames, like a transparent second skin. Lucy.

She moved so fast, a blurred black line shooting through the air at Mikeel.

But everything moved so slowly for Susan. She was nowhere and everywhere. She swung around the other side, looking into the short balding man's face, recognizing the wide eyes and gaping mouth.

Then she moved down beside Lucy, the bitch who wanted her child, her black face clenched tight. Sharp, needle teeth fitted together in a solid gash of white. Susan inspected the wings, each nearly six feet long. From their ends hung the tattered remnants of the robe. Susan knew Lucy was naked. But the black skin seemed something different entirely, crisscrossed with thick raised ridges and sagging in places like melted wax.

And everything started moving again. Lucy was streaking up. Mikeel was pushing backwards, directing all his flame directly at his attacker. But it wasn't enough.

The two of them collided together in a great flash of light and Susan held that moment. Each was young and beautiful again. Mikeel's hair had returned, falling down to his shoulders in auburn waves. His frame was compact, but muscled.

Lucy's skin was porcelain, her hair a dusty blond, eyes a deep blue. A perfect smile crossed her face, lighting the air around her.

Time inched forward again. That light, that smile, they winked out of existence. A huge gust of wind tore out from the space, extinguishing the fire.

## CHAPTER 12

The water around Greg was pitch black. Only the small cone from his dive light carved out sight along the flooded corridors. He'd been following Senior through the maze of tunnels for some time already, looking for a route to the next level down.

The tunnels themselves were rough-hewn rock. Stapled to the ceiling in most places were corroded strips of metal, though several had fallen off over the years, hanging vertically like lengths of rusty seaweed.

Each passage they reached was like just like the last. Greg had become lost long ago. He hoped Senior knew what he was doing. Fortunately, getting back wouldn't be impossible. At each junction, Greg had the unenviable job of swimming to the ground and placing a little L.E.D. on the floor to mark the way back.

And all this was done in silence. The weight of the water pushed in on all sides, constricting Greg's suit to his body. The only sound came from their breath, a heavy rushing and gurgling noise, and the kick of their fins. Louder still was his own heart, which pounded steadily in his ears.

Eventually they came to an angled shaft that lead down. They stopped for a moment above the space and shined their lights down, meeting no obstacle to their path, no sign of anything below them. Once again, Senior led the way, threading down through the tunnel, his light a bobbing beacon in the black.

Greg had to contort his body, swimming in several tight circles before he was aligned with the tunnel, then he followed the path down. Twenty, thirty, forty feet below – he had no way of telling, though he did have to equalize the pressure in his ears a few

times – then there was Senior’s light, holding still, off to the side. The vertical tunnel ended below. They were at the bottom.

He followed Senior down yet another tunnel to the first branch. They took a left. If the door even was here, there was no telling exactly where it would be. But Senior didn’t pause for a moment, making each turn with confidence as Greg marked the way back.

Greg checked his air gauge. They’d already used a bit over a tenth of their tanks – that limited their time to find the door. Before leaving, they’d agreed to turn back if they hadn’t found anything by the time they’d used a quarter of the tank. If they found a way through, anything more could make returning difficult.

And that seemed like a hell of a long shot to Greg, especially if they stuck together. What they needed to do was split up and check different ways, canvas the level as quickly as possible.

He almost missed it. His light sliding from wall to wall, digging into dark crevices. He was so focused on the walls he barely registered the floor. But something was there – a small raised square frame sticking up from the rock, each side only three feet long. Greg focused his light on it, running it along the edges. The square appeared to be made of corroded metal, pockmarked and tarnished with age with several small holes in the middle. And there on one side was a big, round handle, and next to it, an old chain eaten through, lying limp on the floor. And on the other side were hinges, big knots of rust growing from the side of the panel.

Greg wanted to jump, to celebrate, pumping his fist in the air. But that was difficult in the water. This had to be the door. Why else would they put a hatch on the

floor? He signaled Senior by waving his light quickly back and forth across the walls.

The older man turned around, staring back through his mask. Greg pointed down.

Senior swam back and gave the thumbs up. It looked good. They swam down. Greg placed his light on the ground, then took out his crowbar and wedged the tip under the edge of the latch, trying to pry it up, swimming down and pushing out with his arms. Nothing budged. But it had to; it was their only way in. He kept pushing and pushing.

It would have been a hell of a lot easier with some help. He let go of the crowbar and twisted around, flinging his arms up over his head. Senior had his own light pointed at his face, outlining the smiling wrinkles around his eyes. He aimed the light at the hinges.

Greg felt stupid. He'd noticed the hinges himself, and should have known they wouldn't be moving anywhere. They'd have to break them off somehow if they wanted to lift the hatch. He grabbed his light and crowbar, and was about to set off to try, but Senior held up a finger.

The older man swam up to the ceiling, about ten feet above the hatch. He held his crowbar and light close together, aiming them down at the hatch. Then he started to swim down, churning his flippers hard and building speed quickly. Right before reaching the ground, he thrust out with the bar, sinking its tip into the center of the rusted metal, and simultaneously, redirecting his angle outwards, so he didn't go slamming into the floor himself.

Greg stared as Senior worked the crowbar back and forth, opening a hole in the center of the metal. It was only a few inches wide – much, much too small to fit through, but they could widen it, chip away at the door bit by bit.

Greg swam to the ceiling and tried it himself, accelerating down and lashing out with the tool. But he had no stomach for it, turning too soon and losing momentum. His bar clanged ineffectually off of the door.

The work was slow going, with Senior being the only one to consistently strike his bar through the door. For most of the time, Greg stayed down near the ground, hooking the curved end of his bar into the hole and prying it back, trying to open it wider. But eventually, they managed to get the ragged gash just wide enough to slip through.

Greg lined himself up carefully, threading past the sharp metal edges, and down into the tunnel below.

As in the forest, there was nothing that immediately signaled any shift. He'd been expecting this, but was still somewhat disappointed, wanting to know for sure that they were on the right way. He checked his air meter again. They'd already used their allotted quarter tank, and were even over by a small notch or two. But, assuming this was the door, they could go until they were almost half empty before turning back. Or at least he thought so. They hadn't discussed it, hadn't really been expecting to find the door.

And what if they did get through? How could they get Susan out? Greg had argued for carrying extra tanks with them (even allotting one for Brad, though he'd never need it) but Senior had said that it was too much to carry, that they didn't even know if they would find this door from the note.

But now, through the door, Greg wished they had those tanks. No matter though. If it came to it, he'd stay behind and let Susan get out with their child. He had to. He'd give his life for her if it came to it. But could she even dive while pregnant? Would the



pressure hurt the baby? There were still too many variables, too many things he couldn't be sure about.

And then Greg saw two pillars embedded in the walls, glowing faintly, and he knew they were heading the right way. That mattered more than anything else right now.

The route remained linear for quite some time, just a single flooded tunnel carved through the hard rock. But the further they went, the more complex the route became. Greg and Senior continued to swim straight ahead, following the largest of the tunnels until it came to a dead end – a solid stone wall in front of them, with no other path.

Except up. Greg tilted his head back, staring directly above himself. A wide hole extended off into the darkness. He motioned towards it.

Senior shook his head, tapping his air dial.

Greg checked his own. Fifty percent gone, on the mark. He held up three fingers and then pointed up. They'd wasted time cutting through the door. They had a little more air to spare. Getting back faster wouldn't be a problem, and he could feel that they were close.

Senior didn't even nod, but just started moving. Fast, right through the hole, farther away from home.

They moved up slowly. Greg wanted to hurry it, wanted to go fast and get all the distance in that he could, but he knew better. And with Senior leading the way, he couldn't do anything else. They rose slowly for several minutes, the air steadily escaping out.

And then Senior disappeared, right into the black. And Greg could only see the reflection of his own light for a moment. Then he too broke the surface. He scrambled out of the hole onto solid ground, tearing his mouthpiece out and turning off the flow of oxygen. Forty six percent left. It would have to be enough to get back.

Senior started stripping off his gear and stuffing it into his rucksack.

Greg followed suit. "We'll have to leave it here."

Senior shook his head. "Can't. It's the only way out."

"Look. We might have to go several miles, fast."

Senior stopped. He'd stripped down just to the dry suit, his tanks sitting on the ground next to him. "Think about it for a second," he said. "Other people know the way out. They could come this way, find our gear, and strand us here. No way we're leaving it."

Of course it made sense, but Greg also knew that he wasn't making it that far weighed down on a bad ankle, and they had to move quickly. "Ok, but just until we can stash it."

Senior nodded. "Fine. Now get out of your suit and into something warm."

Greg had no objections to that.

Minutes later, they were hiking away from the hole in the floor where water lapped silently, still disturbed by their wake. They'd changed into jeans and sweatshirts and hiking boots. It was cold down here and a damn good thing they were mostly dry.

The caverns here branched out several times, but there was always a path going straight ahead, so they didn't turn, but followed the beams of their lights on and on. All the other paths seemed smaller anyways, thinner.

Far ahead, they began to see a haze of light. Already the weight was too much. The tanks were lighter, but the gear still had significant heft. And Greg's ankle already throbbed from the swimming. This time, at least, he'd remembered first aid supplies, most notably some painkillers. He pulled two pills from a small baggie and kept moving forward, swallowing them dry.

The light ahead was becoming more and more distinct, outlining the walls of the tunnel in soft, flickering orange. It was fire, flickering gently on the walls, torches. And then Greg saw the cells. Dozens of bar-covered alcoves lining each wall down the corridor.

Senior stopped for a moment and rummaged through his pack, drawing out his shotgun. "Prison makes people desperate," he said.

Greg was more than happy to let the older man lead. He wanted a gun as well, but his father's old revolver had been missing when he got back to the house, so there was no helping that anymore.

Greg stared into the cells as they walked past. Only a few appeared to have occupants – shadows pushed back to the far side of their enclosures. Or maybe they were just hallucinations. Nobody moved or stood near the bars, striking a tin cup back and forth, calling for water, yelling, and jeering. But then again, more than likely, they were all already dead.

Except one cell. He noticed it when they were still a few dozen feet away. A dark, pudgy hand gripped the bar.

"Who are you?" It was an old woman's voice.

Senior kept walking, right past the cell, ignoring the prisoner, but Greg stopped.

“Greg Camp,” he said.

The woman’s skin was dark and bloated, like Slim, but worse: her hair was barely hanging to her head and her eyes had turned almost milky. She smiled, showing only a handful of teeth. “Susan’s husband.”

This stopped Senior. He turned and raised his eyebrows.

“Yes,” Greg said, clutching the woman’s hands, afraid that she might fade away if he didn’t. Slim had said that the path would lead to False. Had Susan been here, in this dungeon? “Where is she?”

“You’re really him? God, Darlin’, she’s going to have the child. You’ve got to go, fast!”

The child. His child. Their baby. She wasn’t due for weeks. “Where she is?” he asked again.

“They’ll take the child to the water. You need to go there, too.”

“What water?”

“The river.”

“Why?”

“Just go! There’s no time.”

Greg dropped his sack on the floor and turned to Senior. “Leave them here.”

Senior dropped his sack next to Greg’s and turned to the woman. “Miss...”

“Maddy.”

“How do we get there?”

She pointed to the right, the direction they were already going. “The lift’s straight that way. Take it to the surface. Then you’ll have to make it out of False, up the side of

the crater, and across the plains. Head towards the tallest mountain. Lucy's cave is at the top. Once there, you should be able to see the Falls."

"Thanks," Greg said. He squeezed her hands once and took off, shouting over his shoulder. "We'll come back for you."

He was ready to start running down the tunnel towards the lift, but had to make himself calm down. No matter what he did, it was miles to Susan at the very least. He couldn't sprint the whole way, especially with the ankle.

Senior was walking at a similar hurried pace. "Think we can trust her?" he asked.

It hadn't even occurred to Greg. Ever since the woman said Susan's name, he'd been convinced. He wasn't sure, but then again. "What choice do we have?"

"She's locked up for a reason."

Yeah, he was a cop. "The lady who did that isn't exactly the nicest person ever."

Senior stopped walking. "Are you sure we're there? I mean, is this place really what you say it is? I didn't feel anything."

Greg stopped and leveled a serious stare at the other man. "We're there. I'd be happy to talk more after we find my wife and your son." He didn't like the way Senior still seemed tentative and unsure. This man was supposed to be his steady backup, his rock.

The tunnel only got stranger when they got close to the lift. For a hundred yards, leading to the elevator, there were old slot machines lining the walls. A casino and a jail right next to each other? Whoever designed the layout sure didn't seem to be able to make up his mind.

Greg stepped onto the lift and looked for a button, but there was a lever instead. He tried pushing it up. Nothing happened.

“Power’s out,” Senior said.

“Now what?”

“We take the stairs,” Senior said, pushing open an unmarked door next to the elevator and looking up.

Greg glanced up and groaned. It was a hell of a long way to go, and the wooden scaffolding supporting the steps looked rickety at best.

Their footsteps echoed in the confined space of the stairwell for half an hour. Greg’s heart was beating heavily five minutes in. He wanted to stop to catch his breath, but resisted the temptation – if he kept stopping, he’d never make it – but promised himself ten uninterrupted hours in front of the television when this was all over, his feet in a bucket of ice water.

They finally cracked open the door at the top of the stairwell and stared into a darkroom filled with desks and typewriters. This place was confusing as hell. Greg was glad that Senior had given up on questions, settling instead on a continually confounded look, because there was no obvious answer forthcoming.

Senior kept his shotgun at hip level, pointing forward. His head swiveled back and forth, staring into the darkness, but there was no one in the office. It was abandoned.

The heat finally started becoming apparent when they got close to the front door. Cool air circulating up from the mine must have kept most of the office cool, but the air near the front radiated warmth. And it only got worse as they got closer.

The metal of the door was searing hot. Senior bundled up his sweater in his hand and quickly grabbed the handle, jerking the door open, and propping it with his foot. In front of them lay a great black expanse, the ground still smoking from the heat.

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Behind all of Susan's feelings and thoughts, there was the presence of rushing water. She could hear it sloshing and rolling along before finally spilling over the cliff. She could smell its freshness, and feel the cool mist on her face. It called to her, sung a song of how they were destined for each other, an old 50's tune about how they would be together forever. But she wasn't ready to go to the river yet. She could feel that water pulling at her, tearing at her consciousness. It was impatient, not used to waiting, but she would make it learn.

Had it not been for her little Paul, had she not cherished the chance to watch him, she might have given in to the river's incessant call. But she loved to look at the boy's small face, at his tiny eyelids with their limitless lashes, at his tiny, quivering nostrils.

At the same time, Susan had seen the tower door swing open back in False. She'd seen Senior – the old thickset man with the features of Brad, the same light blond hair, almost colorless. A part of her still wanted to feel guilty about Brad, but his death seemed divorced from her own experience.

And with Senior, she saw Greg. She went around behind them, looking at what they saw, the glassy expanses of False, the stone grey sky, still clogged with the smoke of the fire so recently extinguished. Everything that had been built was now gone. It was utterly empty, except for that single stone building covering the entrance to the mines –

the one thing that managed to survive Mikeel's fires – how peaceful his face had been there at the end with Lucy, finally relieved of wrinkles and anger of all the years.

Susan then moved her attention back again to Slim and Eithne, watching them descend the mountainside, picking their way around the tumbled rocks. They'd hit the ground when the burst of winds came, tearing all the leaves from the trees below. Slim had fallen down, dropping Susan's body as he did so.

She'd watched him then, a while after she'd died, as he'd first noticed the change. He'd hugged her body. But first, he'd tried pumping her heart, breathing air into her mouth. She was mildly curious, watching her old husk being pummeled in an attempt to bring it back to life.

It was far too late, she knew it even as she watched him because if she stopped concentrating for a moment, she heard the river still, running loudly like static that drowned out everything. She could see it forming that bright mist down stream, the mist that danced about in the air, leading her on and on. It glowed.

But she did concentrate, watching Slim and Eithne, now long after he'd given up trying.

“Leave her,” Eithne had said. “We can't do anything now.”

But Slim had refused. He'd carried the body down the mountainside, his face streaked with tears. Susan was touched that he cared so much, even if she couldn't quite fathom why. She almost felt sad, thinking of the loss, thinking of the child and Greg and everything that they wouldn't have together, but at the same time, she didn't. The emotion was only a response, a distant one, one that she should be feeling, but one that wasn't really present.



When they got to the base of the mountain, Slim finally conceded. He looked up into the bare branches of the trees stretched overhead, had waded through the knee-high sea of leaves that carpeted the ground, still fluffed and tousled from the wind. “I’ll see you soon,” he said to the sky. Then he took Paul from Eithne and held the child close. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t do more.”

Susan wanted to smile, to tell him everything would be alright, to say that she didn’t blame him. He’d brought her son into the world, had handled him with such care. She was thankful for that, at least, and for every moment she’d gotten with the child.

Slim handed Paul back to Eithne, and built a waist-high mound of leaves that he laid Susan’s body on.

Eithne was impatient. “Come on, Slim. We have to get back to the gate.”

Slim gave one last look to Susan’s corpse and took off after Eithne.

Meanwhile, Greg and the older version of Brad were making their way across glassy wasteland of False. Her husband was sweating so much. He’d never been much of one for exercise. She’d offered to bring him training with her a few times early on, had tried to get him to take up running to fight off the fleshy roll that seemed to want to cling to his midsection. But he never seemed to care. And over the years, he was always working, working, working.

And truth be told, the fat didn’t really bother her. It was a part of him. Occasionally, she had looked at him and known that he would probably only get fatter, only get older, and had known that she could find a more attractive man. Yet, she’d never wanted to even try.

She moved close to him as he hurried across the waste, trying to smell his smell again, trying to look at the pale soft fuzz that clung to the back of his neck. She'd cut his hair a number of times over the years when money was tight and that was always her favorite part, the time when she could take the buzzer and run it up the back of his neck and he'd get goose bumps all over his arms. And then there would be this small mound of hair there that she could blow away like the fuzz from a dandelion.

She moved alongside him for a while, enjoying the nearness of his presence, even if she couldn't exactly touch him. She blocked the barren world around them out, replacing it instead with the quiet streets of the neighborhood where they first lived together. It wasn't far from the university campus, but it was an adult area, where people were in bed by eleven and up by seven. After everything quieted down, and most people were already inside for the night, she and Greg would go for walks if it was warm out. They usually had no special place to go, but went anyways, avoiding the indoors and the television, and everything else that wore everyone else down over the years. It was a good time, when the streetlights buzzed with insects and the windows of the houses glowed warmly. If she wanted to, she could see those walks, as well as those that were to have come but never did, the ones they'd have taken with a stroller, the slight breeze rippling through the warm summer air that would stir her hair and brush a light chill across her skin.

Even as she stayed beside Greg, Susan was also back with Eithne and Slim and little Paul. They moved slowly, deliberately through the thick leaf carpet. Eithne had given Paul to Slim again so she could carry her knife out in the open, that knife that had so quickly and ended another being.

Little Paul was awake now and upset at all the movement, but Slim rested the child alternately on his chest and his arm, always supporting the head, always careful, even reverent.

Susan wreathed what she could of herself around Paul, trying to calm him, and remind him that his mother would always love him. She whispered a soft word in his ear, singing songs of better times.

Whether it was caused by that, or the steady flowing movements of Slim's, the baby's eyes closed and he fell again into a soft, tumultuous sleep. Only hours old and he had lost so much already.

And she moved forward alternately with both Greg and Paul, trying to keep time slow, trying to savor each moment, knowing this peace would not last forever. She loved these two men. That emotion at least hadn't deadened at all.

## CHAPTER 13

The first thing Greg noticed when they came to the cave at the top of the mountain was the pile of bloody hay. There was no other sign of what had happened there, but he immediately began to feel sick – it was so much blood – but then he saw the other sign. At first, he had no idea what it was, the spongy liver-like thing lying there on the floor.

“Looks like you’re a father,” Senior said in his monotone grumble.

The afterbirth. But where were Susan and the baby? Was it a boy or a girl? What would they call it? The woman from the dungeon said the baby would be taken to the river, but Greg wasn’t sure. Susan would try to make it back to the gate where Aidan was surely waiting. He tried not to think of that. Focusing instead on what he had to do, though all he wanted to do was find a place to lie down and sleep for several days. What adrenaline or sustenance had been helping him along thus far had given up on the climb up the mountain. Now every step was a challenge, like moving through air that was thick, like jelly.

The trip had taken too long. So many hours, continuing over the ceaseless, arid blackness. No change at all except that the mountains grew larger and larger as they got nearer, imposing themselves upon the sky.

And now the cave. They rested for a moment, drinking some clean water that was left in a pitcher near the bloody straw. Greg took a moment as well to check through the herbs Lucy had stashed. He’d been chomping steadily on painkillers over the hours, but his ankle still throbbed consistently with each step. But the herbs weren’t labeled and he couldn’t take any chances that some were sleeping aids, so he stuck with the water.

Their respite was brief, only five minutes to gather themselves and hydrate some. Then, despite his exhaustion, Greg stood again, insisting they keep moving. If they stayed still any longer, he would be unable to keep going. And that was not an option.

So they exited the cave on the opposite side and stared out across the expanse of trees. It looked much more barren than it had before, all the branches stripped bare, reaching like spindling fingers towards the sky. He was confused by the sudden change. It was day here now, but still the sky was covered with uniform grey, obscuring the deep blue that Greg remembered.

Far off in the distance, Greg could just make out the gap in the trees and the blue lake of Falls. He pointed Senior towards it. "That's where we go."

Senior shifted his shotgun to one hand and rummaged around in a pocket. He pulled out a compass and stared at it for a moment before pocketing it. "Damned piece of junk. Guess we just do our best."

With that, they started down the hill. It was worse than walking up, each step adding a little extra jolt to Greg's pain. He thought back, trying to remember if he could take more pills yet, but decided not to. That would be all he needed, overdosing while searching for Susan and their baby.

When they got down to the bottom, he could finally see why all the trees looked so bare. Covering the ground, in a thick, uniform layer of green, were the leaves.

"This place is fucking weird," Senior said.

"It wasn't like this before," Greg said.

Senior nodded and kept moving. Always moving, always forward. They followed a slight path through the leaves. It was little more than a divot carved out of the mass, a shallow line where another had walked.

“I think we’re supposed to go that way,” Senior was saying, pointing off in one direction.

But Greg wasn’t listening. He was looking another way.

From a distance, he already knew it was Susan, knew it could be no one else. She was sleeping. That was his first thought and his second and third and fourth. It was his fiftieth, even as he started running towards the reclining figure.

*Just sleeping.* Even as he got to her and collapsed on top off her, toppling the tower of leaves on which she was resting. Even as he saw the dark red stain on the lower half of her white robe. Even as he felt her cold, clammy skin. It was too hard, too unyielding.

He shook her to wake her. Shook her and buried his face against her shoulder, hoping it would only be a minute and then she would start snoring so he knew she was fine. Then she would wake up and they could go back home.

No. No. It wasn’t like that. He’d forgotten. He was the one who was sleeping, the one who imagined horrible places where half the ground was black and glassy and the other half was stripped bare, ravaged by some unseen force. He’d wake in a moment, and turning over, see his wife’s pretty face. He’d nudge her awake to share his memories of the crazy dream, and she’d just smile, kiss him gently, and say he was silly for worrying so much.

But her face was right here and it was oddly colorless. And when he kissed her lips, she didn't kiss back. She just stayed there, impassive, like she never could have been. So unmoving, so still.

Senior's hand was steady on Greg's shoulder, gripping tightly. The pressure was bad. It was real and there and not a dream.

He whipped his arm up, knocking the hand away, and in one motion, he stood up, shoving Senior backwards. More than anything, he wanted to hurt the older man, hurt him for being too slow, for being there with him at all. "Your son is dead too," he spat.

Senior took a step back. "You're lying."

That pleased Greg. "No, I saw him, and he was already dead. He came here and died."

Senior was moving his hands around the stock of his shotgun, gripping, twisting, releasing. "This isn't funny."

"Dead," Greg taunted. "Dead, like, like—" And then he couldn't finish, couldn't keep hurting this man. He saw the pain in Senior's face, could almost see himself reflected in the man's eyes. "I'm sorry," he said. "I should have told you sooner."

"It's not true." Senior leveled the shotgun, pointing it at Greg. "Take it back."

Greg threw his hands up above his shoulders. "Don't. Please."

Senior relaxed at those words. "So he's ok?"

"No," Greg said. "I'm really, really sorry."

The fight left Senior, his shoulders slumping. "He's really dead?"

"Yes, but we'll find him. We will. He's here. It'll be all right." Senior would see Brad Jr. again. And Greg would find Susan. She'd be here as well. Greg looked

back at the body again in its wreath of leaves. His child was out there too. “We have to get to the river.”

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In the periphery of her senses, Susan knew of Greg’s grief. But she couldn’t watch, couldn’t see the raw emotion. It was too much. It made her want to flee from everything, to run to the water and never surface, just ride it away from all this pain.

She also was too involved in watching Slim and Eithne, and had been for some time. They drew closer and closer to the tree-gate. She’d been dreading that moment for some time, knowing there was nothing she could do, even though she had seen Aidan waiting there for some time.

He was alone. Susan had seen him murder the last Blackcoat with an axe moments after the huge wind swept through the trees. She knew that Slim and Eithne were moving into a trap just as they thought they were escaping. But she couldn’t figure out why Aidan had killed the Blackcoat right after closing the gate.

So it was with a general feeling of trepidation that she watched the corpulent man and burned girl walk through the woods towards the gate, knowing all the while there was nothing to be done about it, that things would have to fall the way they did. She was worried Aidan might kill Paul. That was something that she would not be able to watch. If it seemed likely, she would give herself to the rushing water. But if she timed it right, she might be able to meet Paul’s little soul, and carry it on with her, comforting it as she went.

But then she would know without a shadow of a doubt what had happened. As much as the thought pained her, something inside would still not let her go, would still



not let her abandon the child. She would wait until it was assured, until there was no other choice.

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Slim walked through the sea of leaves, cooing to the boy who was awake, if not completely aware of his surroundings. He still felt bad about leaving Susan's body behind. It was too casual, too uncaring. He should have insisted on burying her, on giving her a proper service. But then again, Eithne had been right – they needed to get the child out of Falls and away from danger as soon as possible. It was on this small baby that everything rested. This small baby, with the beautiful blue eyes that blinked and stared up at Slim, already curious about the world.

Eithne had fallen behind. It had to be so much harder for her to move through the leaves that easily reached her chest. Slim would have carried her as well but she had rejected his offer off hand. It was probably for the best anyways. He needed to protect the child, to “carry it with soft hands,” as his old ball coach would have said.

When he looked up again, Slim could see what was left of the gate. He turned back to Eithne and pointed ahead.

“We have to go check it out,” she said.

He nodded and handed her Paul – it was so nice of Susan to name the boy that; it made Slim feel special, like he mattered. “You hold onto him and stay back a little. If there's any trouble, hide.” She nodded.

Slim moved forward quickly through the leaves, swiping with his arms to clear a path. The two trees were toppled. The gate was probably gone, but he wouldn't accept that yet, not until he was close enough to see for sure.

And if it was? They'd deal with it and find a way through, even if it meant propping a tree up and sliding under it. Or he'd look for that gate in the mines, swim his way out and bring back help.

The trees were fallen, crumpled versions of their prior selves, one lying atop the other, covering the root bridge. Jagged shards like needles stood up from their stumps.

Aidan was waiting by their base, casually dangling a small revolver from his hand and inspecting his fingernails.

"You," Slim said, widening his stance and trying to block Eithne and the baby from sight.

Eithne walked up next to Slim, holding the baby in one arm and her knife in the other. "Brother," she said.

"Hello, sister," Aidan said. "It's good to see you."

"Get out of here, Eithne," Slim said. "I'll take care of him." He started to charge forward and saw Aidan square his shoulders, aiming the gun.

Then Slim felt a sharp pain in his leg. For a brief moment, he assumed he'd been shot. But it was on the wrong side, in the back of the heel, and there'd been no loud retort from the gun. And he found he wasn't running anymore, but toppling forward as another intense pain shot out from his other leg.

As he fell, he twisted over to see Eithne wielding her blade, slicing at his legs. He just didn't understand. Slim hit the ground hard, his impact only slightly softened by the thick layer of leaves. He lay there on the ground staring up at the sky, wondering where it had all gone wrong.

Aidan walked over and stood above him, staring down with a sneer. He pointed the gun at Slim's head, lining the barrel up with his eye. "You thought you had a chance against me?"

Then Eithne was there too carrying the baby in one arm and her blood-slicked knife in the other.

"Eithne, why?" Slim asked.

She laughed, her high light laugh that had always seemed so innocent, so amused with the world. "You were only fooling yourself all along."

"But what do you want with Paul?" Slim asked.

Aidan's finger moved to the trigger. "Goodbye, Slim," he said. "And thanks for all your help. We couldn't have gotten the child here and away from Lucy without you."

Then the world went black with a deafening boom.

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Susan watched all of this. She tried to yell as Eithne moved up behind Slim. The girl was so fast, but Susan could see it all, could see the menace in her face. She had trusted Eithne.

Susan thought back on the scared, worried, little girl she'd known. It'd all been an act – Eithne was no different from her brother – just a malicious user. Honestly, Susan didn't care anymore. All she wanted to do was wring the girl's neck, crush her windpipe and toss her corpse to the dogs.

And Susan knew exactly what she had to do, exactly where the twins were going.

So she let herself go too.

She fell into the white rapids of the water, felt them coalesce and slowly solidify, forming a solid from a liquid, molecule by molecule. She felt herself be reformed, rebuilt, given new life.

And then the next thing she remembered was falling.

## CHAPTER 14

Greg took the shotgun from Senior. The older man didn't resist at all. They headed directly towards the Falls, as best as they could. They moved quickly through the deep leaves, spent and tired, but relentless.

Greg couldn't block the image of Susan from his thoughts as he moved. He tried to focus only on the Falls, on how he would see her again when he got there and how everything would be like it was before. Except their child would be there too – which was a good thing. One foot in front of the other, it was all that had to be done. Nothing else could matter anymore, just the sound of the Falls growing louder and louder.

They passed ruins of old buildings, tall stone structures with arching windows and doors, now engulfed in the deluge of leaves. They passed into the outskirts of the town itself with its broken down huts, where he'd come only days earlier searching for his father.

And then they saw the figures standing side-by-side next to the river – two small black shadows against the rippling blue. They were right up at the edge of the river where it flowed out of the lake, staring down.

“Hey!” Greg yelled, aiming the shotgun even as he ran.

The two figures turned around slowly. Aidan on the right. Eithne on the left. They looked back at Greg as if surprised by his appearance.

In the girl's arms was a small naked baby, its skin pink and pale next to the onyx of the twins.

Aidan was grappling for his gun when the earsplitting roar tore through the air.

Greg stared on in horror. He hadn't meant to fire the gun. His finger had slipped, and the gun had kicked back, throwing off his already precarious aim.

The pellets streaked through the air, somehow finding their mark, tearing through the right side of Aidan's face, slicing the skin from bone, and sending him twisting and toppling backwards.

He threw his hands up, trying to counter his balance, as he fell into the water. It rushed over him with a sudden fury, rolling him under its weight and pinning him.

Eithne stared back over her shoulder wide-eyed as her brother's hand shot back up above the surface again for a moment before submerging again.

Greg leveled the shotgun at her, but his hands were shaking. "Give it up," he said. "It's over."

She just turned around and dangled the baby in front of her, hands under his armpits. The baby began to wail. "Shoot and you'll hit us both," she said.

"Why, Eithne?" he asked.

She spat on the ground. "Why, why, why? You sound just like Slim. You don't know what it's like to be here for so long, to have seen so many cross, and some of them not smoothly. How can you ever know that you're ready? Our father struggled here for days, screaming in pain, before he was finally swept away. And to what end? No. I'm not taking that chance. This child's life is all potential energy. It'll overload everything, ending this place swiftly. There won't be any more pain. We'll just be gone. It's better that way, don't you see?"

"No. I don't." Greg laid the shotgun on the ground. It was no use – he'd never get a clean shot. The girl seemed skittish and volatile to him. He had no idea what she

was talking about, and wasn't entirely sure she understood it either. "I do see a scared little girl holding a baby. Now can you give him to me, please? And we can end all of this without anyone else getting hurt."

Eithne shook her head. "No," she said. "That isn't how this ends." She started to turn, holding the child out, ready to toss him in the water.

Greg started running forward, but he knew he'd never make it. It was too far away.

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It was all Eithne's fault.

Susan had summoned everything in her, swimming as fast as she could, never noticing the iciness of the water or the swimmers failing all about her. She'd done triathlons, was used to the strain, to the moment when your body says you just can't go any further.

That was always just the first point. The body has so many reserves that can be tapped. She swam through the pain just as she always had, letting it drive her on, speed her through the water.

But unlike those few who did make it to shore, she didn't stop. Rather she turned and headed down the river, poking her head above the water and watching the scene develop.

She saw the twin, Eithne holding little Paul in her arms. They turned, and Aidan's face erupted in a spray of gore. But she was still far away, not as close as she wanted to be. She knew what Eithne would do next – trapped with her back to the wall, she would strike out the only way she could.

Then Susan felt, rather than saw the wave that overtook Aidan. She felt it rushing her forward, building in power and she rode it faster and faster, rushing towards the girl.

Finally, she saw Eithne hold Paul out, ready to drop him.

And Susan reached out. She tore the girl's leg out from under her, toppling her back into the water.

Eithne didn't react in time, didn't do anything but stare at the furious mother. Then she released the baby.

Susan instantly let go of the girl, and caught her son, careful that he not touch the river. She placed him gently on the shore. In a moment, she would join him, but she had business first.

She dove back in. Those same hands that had caught Paul so gently turned on the submerged girl, clawing out her neck.

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Greg was just as surprised as Eithne. He watched midstride, as the hand tore the feet out from under the girl, as the baby started to fall only to be caught gently by a beautiful woman and placed onshore.

It took him only a second to recognize Susan.

He rushed forward, took the baby and moved him back away from danger.

The waters roiled violently for several moments, churning like a thousand waves crashing in on each other simultaneously, spitting foam out in all directions.

He took his eyes off the senseless violence of the act and looked down at his baby whose face was so much like his mother's. A tiny baby boy, crying loudly. Greg



couldn't help but admire him. Tears streamed into his own eyes, rocking the child back and forth in his arms. The boy was safe. That was all that mattered.

He was still looking down when Susan emerged from the water, naked and dripping. Her hair had grayed completely -- silver from years she'd never lived to see. And there was something steely to her face that hadn't been there before. Despite all her resolve in life, she'd always held onto a soft side. That was gone now.

Still he took off his shirt and handed it to her. She took it from his hands and wrapped it around her shoulders, shivering.

## EPILOGUE

Inside the mine a decade later, Greg waited impatiently by the edge of the water. He was bundled tightly in several layers of thick wool. Even after so many years, he never got used to the cold of this place. He was edgy, wishing he could be doing something, moving forward somehow. Instead, he had to stand and wait for Paul to arrive. He'd tried to convince Susan that he should guide Paul back through the water from the other side, but she'd insisted the boy make the passage by himself.

Still, Greg worried. Even with all the markers he had installed over the years, the tunnels were treacherous places. At one point, he'd suggested seeking funding to drain them, but Susan didn't want the way open. She'd claimed it would interfere too much with the dead, so Greg's deal with the Black Cliff Heritage Center remained unchanged: he only came and went at night and continued to pay an exorbitant and unofficial "executive membership" fee. And now, his son had to swim back through the murky blackness all by himself.

Greg had other reasons for wanting to go too – he needed to see Susan one more time. She'd become distant from him, withdrawing more and more into the never-ending project to create a better Falls. ("We damn well deserve it," she said. "All of us who've made it here.") Now she didn't even want him there, and he was afraid of what life would be like without her.

It hadn't always been that way.

Right after the fight at the river, Susan had made Greg return to the living world to get formula for Paul (she flatly refused to breastfeed, fearing what it might do to the child), but after that, Susan was always there on the other side, waiting for him at the

mouth of watery tunnels. Greg and Senior made trip after trip, swimming through the watery mine, carrying baby supplies and other things for the dead. They were going back constantly – there was always more work to do.

It was several years before they moved Susan and Brad's bodies. In all those years, neither corpse had decomposed even slightly – Greg wondered about that, but never did find the answer. In the meantime, he had been interrogated and, briefly, jailed. Everyone in North assumed he knew something about the deaths, but there wasn't anything to connect him directly.

He'd thought to stay in town and help his father run the bar, but the suspicions followed him year after year. When he walked into a store, every head turned to stare at him. People made their way out quickly, leaving their purchases behind. Maybe they thought he would kill them too.

He couldn't live like that.

So he moved out to the country, to a small shack relatively close to the mine where he didn't have to see anyone else. He worked online, doing financials for a company down south. It was a lonely life.

But he still had his visits to Susan and Paul – he needed them to stay sane. He only saw them other once or twice a week, but each time was like returning home. She waited for him in False so no time was wasted. As soon as his mask was off, she'd take his face in her hands and kiss him. They built a comfortable apartment in Lucy's old chambers, complete with an air mattress and crib (each, alone, had taken a full trip), where Paul could run around, making his baby noises. Greg loved to bring him presents.

Over the months and years, though, Susan withdrew. At first, she moved into the cave on top of the mountain. (“I have to be closer to the others,” she said then. “We’re really starting to make progress.”) Even then, she still waited for him in Falls every time he came. They would walk together back over the glassy plains to her new abode. Greg never liked it there. He had far too many bad memories – it was where his wife died.

Then, when Paul was five, Susan left the cave and moved back to Falls – this added even more hours to Greg’s trip. If he had a heavy load planned, she would send an emissary to help, but she never came herself. And when he was in Falls, Susan made him stay in a separate house (“It would give the wrong impression, like I was somehow better than the rest of them,” she said). For five years now, Greg had not shared a bed with his wife.

In the mine, those ten long years later, Neil waited as well. Now he was an old man, his skin creased deeply with wrinkles. “Can’t believe I finally get to meet this son of yours,” he said.

“He’s a lot like his mother. Stubborn as hell, and smart too,” Greg said. “You’ll love him.”

“I never doubted it for a second,” Neil said.

The cavern around them glowed with the ever moving light of hundreds of candles. Candles stuck into a smooth white cake with the words “Happy 10<sup>th</sup>” written on it.

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The day had long been in coming. Susan held Greg’s present to Paul in her hands, staring down at the clean wrapping job and billowy blue bow tied atop it. She

knew its contents, had been expecting them for years now. Inside, there was a scuba suit, just like the one Greg used. He'd left the boy's tanks back in Falls.

They'd been planning this day for ten years now.

Paul seemed excited about it. He'd run around all week, telling everyone that he was going to the other side. Every citizen of Falls nodded, smiled, and wished him well. Susan was sure some of them envied his opportunities, but they didn't show it – they couldn't. That was the only strict law in Falls: hope for true life had to be rejected as too destructive. That law was why Susan had, over the years, drawn away from Greg, even though it pained her, even though she wanted nothing more than to cuddle up next to him and try to remember what life had been like.

The last time he visited, the last time he would ever visit, had been the worst. She'd purposefully avoided him the entire time. Anything else would have been too painful. She worked the cotton fields with her fellow citizens, led several workshops for the newly arrived, and even took a shift in the dye factory – the new designer from the living world had insisted that florescent colors were back in style, so Susan's hands were dyed a traffic-cone orange by the time she left.

Greg had been waiting for her outside the door. "We need to talk," he said.

"Then talk," she said, and kept walking.

He took a couple hurried steps, and kept pace beside her. "You've been avoiding me," he said.

"I've been busy," she said and lifted her hands, showing him their color. "I have a few more important things to think about than how to avoid you."

"On his birthday, I want to come get him," Greg said.

She shook her head. “No, not a chance. He has to make his own way. It’s his right.”

“The tunnels are still dangerous. A light might go out. He could lose his way.”

Susan stopped and turned toward him. “Has a light ever gone out?”

“No, but—”

“If you’re so worried, then double check them on your way back. Slap down extras for all I care, but Paul is making the trip on his own.”

“You wouldn’t even have to see me,” Greg said. “I could stay down in the water and wait for him.”

Susan pivoted on her foot again and walked away. “Stay on your own damned side,” she yelled over her shoulder.

Those were the last words she spoke to him.

She made sure to stay far away for the rest of his stay, out where he wouldn’t be able to find her. But he left a letter in her house. It said:

*I will always love you. –Greg*

Next to it was the present for Paul.

Now, a month later, Susan held the box in her hands as Paul came running into the house.

“My suit!” he yelled. “Can I have it now, Mom? I want to show all the guys.”

“It isn’t a toy,” she said. “If you got even the slightest tear in it, water would seep in and you could die from the cold.”

“I’ll be careful,” he said. “I promise.”

“Have you finished your chores?” Susan asked, though she knew the answer was no. They were such simple tasks: watering the flower garden they’d planed outside, sweeping the front walk, making sure all his toys were put away. She never could understand why he had so much trouble doing them.

“But Mom,” Paul said. “It’s my birthday.”

“You know, on the other side, it’ll be tougher. You’ll think back and remember how easy you had it here.” She regretted the words even as she said them, knowing they were a touch too true. “You’ll also love it there,” she said. “And you’ll have your father with you. Now go take care of the garden and then you can open your present.”

He turned and sulked out the front door.

Susan carefully placed the package back on the kitchen table. She hadn’t wanted to scare him, but everything she’d said was true. Including the part about the rip in the dry suit.

She drew a small knife from her pocket and flipped it open. She held it above the package. All she had to do was let it fall, let the weight of the blade and her hands carry it down. Then Paul wouldn’t be able to leave, not yet at least. Greg would have to come back at least two more times. She could meet him in False, say goodbye the way she should have. Or he could come stay here on this side with her and Paul, and everything would be right again, the way it was supposed to be.

And damn what any of the others thought – they’d do the same thing in her place.

She held the knife there for several minutes until Paul came crashing back into the house.

“I’m done. I’m done,” he said.

Susan flipped the blade closed and tossed the knife to him. “My present to you,” she said. “Happy Birthday.”

“Cool,” he said.

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It seemed like it happened so long ago – Slim could barely remember being shot in the head or even why it had happened. It was all a bunch of nonsense, just jumbled images without meaning or value.

What Slim did remember was the darkness. It was so black in those days after the shooting, blacker than anything he’d ever known. It took some time for his body to settle. He knew that now, even if he didn’t know why. His body had remained there in the forest by the ruined gate for several days, still solid, even if it wasn’t whole. Yet no one found it. No one was looking for him then. By the time they did search for him, by the time Greg’s voice echoed between the tree trunks, there was nothing left of Slim’s body but a puddle of the water – the same water it had been made from when he first came out of the falls – and that puddle had already soaked into the ground.

From there, the roots of a tree had drunk Slim up – that was how he came to know the nature of the trees. They were old things – much older than anything but the water, which was surely oldest of all. And even the water was not ageless – it had not always been here, nor would it always remain.

Yet Slim didn’t worry.

He met others in that first tree, many of whom had been there for a long, long time. Once, they had been different from him, but, now, they were all the same, all water.



In time, that tree breathed Slim out into the air and other trees breathed him in. He expanded in this way, beginning to know the forest as a whole, seeing it as one thing, connected, indivisible. And through that, he saw this world, this place of the dead – saw its shimmering edge, misted with the waters of the falls, where it met the other world, the place of the living. He also saw the other side, where the waters flowed on to wherever they went from here. Slim could not see into that place, but he didn't mind. He would get there someday, when this world became only a floodplain and everything was washed away.

For now, this was a good place to be. He let yet more trees breathe him out, and he expanded farther and farther, leaving small droplets of himself behind wherever he went, while creeping towards the edges of the forest. He liked that feeling – that thinning out.