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The Hermit's Lair

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The Hermit's Lair

By

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Chapter 1

Larkin Hunter glanced at her watch and took a sip from the heavy, porcelain mug cradled in her hands. Curling her nose at the tepid brew, she pushed it across the table out of her way.

From where she sat in the corner booth of the Waffle House, she could see the interstate off ramp through a rain streaked window. The parking lot, bathed in the garish yellow glow of street lights, was empty save for her Mustang and a panel truck that belonged to the man eating a short stack of pancakes at the far end of the counter.

“More coffee, miss?” asked a voice at her elbow.

Larkin turned to see the restaurant’s lone server holding a half-empty carafe. “Yes, please,” she answered.

The woman poured. “Can I get you anything else?”

Shaking her head Larkin replied, “Maybe later.”

The server retreated, her rubber-soled shoes squishing on the tile floor.

Larkin turned again to the window and watched as a silver sedan glided down the ramp. Her pulse quickened as it turned right on the city street, and then pulled into the parking lot. The driver spun the car back around toward the exit.

Brake lights flashed just as Larkin was about to bolt for the door. She paused, hanging half in, half out of the booth. “C’mon,” she whispered. “I know you want to tell me.”

The car sat idling in the rain. The traffic signal at the end of the off-ramp cycled from red, to green, to yellow and then back to red. During that time the driver’s head, silhouetted against the windshield, was a statue. It finally moved, and the car’s lights blinked off a moment later.

Larkin let out a breath and leaned back in her seat. She watched through the window as the driver’s door opened and a pair of long, slender legs swung out. With feline grace the woman stood, tugged the hood of her raincoat over her head and locked the car. Head bowed against the rain, she hurried across the parking lot toward the Waffle House.

The door swung open and a gush of fresh air whisked away the scent of bacon and vanilla. The woman flicked the rain-soaked hood back over her shoulders. Squinting in the white light she scanned the restaurant.

“I’m over here, Giselle,” Larkin said with a wave of her hand.

The woman crossed the dining room and slid into the booth across from Larkin. “I wish you wouldn’t use my name,” she said in a low voice.

“Okay. Would you care for some coffee? It isn’t Starbucks, but it’s not bad.”

“I won’t be here that long. I only came here to ask you to leave me alone.”

Larkin waved off the server, who had come out from behind the counter, and turned back to her companion. Piercing blue eyes stared back at her. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

“Quite sure. I should never have agreed to meet you in the first place. Now, if you’ll excuse me I need to go.” She turned and swung her feet out of the booth.

“I know about you and Jonas Burch.”

Giselle froze and then turned once again to face Larkin. “What do you think you know?”

“I know that he put you through law school.”

“He heads half the charities in Saint Louis! He’s helped hundreds of kids through school!”

“That’s true, but they aren’t afraid of him. You are.”

Giselle’s eyes narrowed and color rose in her cheeks. “You’re insane. Mr. Burch has been like a father to me.”

Larkin nodded in agreement. “I would expect so. That’s why I was so surprised by your reaction to him last night.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I was there too, in the Rose Garden Room at the Adam’s Mark Hotel. I saw the way you reacted to him. When he kissed your cheek, you flinched.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

Larkin pressed on. “That seemed a little odd, but not nearly as strange as what happened next. When Jonas spoke to your husband, you were terrified. Your face was so pale I thought you might faint.”

“Ms. Hunter, you are aware that I’m an attorney, correct?”

Larkin ignored the implied threat. “I asked myself what it might be about a kind and generous man that would make you so afraid. The answer is obvious. You were afraid of something Jonas might say.”

“I don’t have to listen to this!”

Giselle’s haughty tone was betrayed by the glint of uncertainty in her eyes. Larkin knew that her hunch was right. She leaned closer to her booth-mate and in a lower voice continued, “You were afraid Jonas would tip off your husband. The two of you had an affair, didn’t you? My guess is that he’s pressuring you to start it up again.”

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The two women stared at each other across the table. Larkin's discomfort grew with each ticking second of silence, but she refused to look away. At length her fortitude paid off.

"Jonas prefers his women younger—much younger," Giselle said, an icy smile ticking at the corners of her perfect lips.

"I see," Larkin said. "But you did have an affair with him, didn't you?"

"That's none of your business."

"Maybe. But the truth you've been hiding is eating you alive. Wouldn't you like to unburden yourself?"

Giselle pulled a day-planner out of her handbag and opened it to a blank page. "You'll have to get your story from someone who doesn't have a family and professional reputation to protect," she said as she scrawled with a Mont Blanc pen. She tore out the page and shoved it across the table.

"What's this?" Larkin asked, picking up the ragged-edged sheet.

"It's the address of the condo Mr. Burch keeps for the students he takes a special interest in. Maybe the current resident will help you. I won't."

"I know this building. It's very exclusive."

"Mr. Burch is very generous. He's also dangerous."

Larkin sensed that there was more. "Meaning what?" she asked.

Giselle slid the planner back into her handbag and fastened the clasp. "Meaning I'm giving you fair warning. Mr. Burch may be charming in public but he's not someone you want to cross. And that bodyguard of his is a snake. Take my advice and let this drop."

"You know I can't do that."

"Have it your way," Giselle said. She stood and gathered the charcoal-gray raincoat around her slender waist. "If you try to contact me again, I'll have you and your trashy little paper in front of a judge. Good night Ms. Hunter."

With a gush of rain-freshened night air from the door, Giselle was gone. Larkin stood and was fumbling with her umbrella when she heard an engine rev and tires squeal.

Through the window Larkin could see that Giselle was half-way across the parking lot, frozen in the headlights of the SUV that bore down on her. The impact sent her flying through the air, her raincoat fluttering like a bat's wings. Her handbag landed on the wet concrete beside her.

* * *

Marnie Thrasher laid her crochet in the basket beside her rocking chair and silently watched the boy working at her kitchen table. He reminded her of his

father at that age—strong and handsome with high cheekbones and thick black hair—but he was quieter and given to dark moods. At times like this she worried about him.

“Damn it!” the boy said, and shoved his fingers roughly through his hair.

Marnie slapped her chair arm with her hand. “Peter Grayfeather!” She scolded. “You will not use that kind of language in my house.”

Peter’s expression was blank for a moment, as though he’d forgotten where he was, and then he flashed a sheepish smile. “I’m sorry, Aunt Marnie. Guess I got carried away. I know it’s here if I can just figure it out. It’s making me crazy!” He closed the dusty journal he’d been reading.

“You shouldn’t fret,” she replied. “I’ve turned it over in my head for more than fifty years and haven’t found the answer.”

“Are you sure nothing is missing? Maybe I should go up in the attic and look again.”

“No, that’s everything he wrote.” Marnie smiled knowingly. “Everything that’s fit for a young man to read anyway.”

Peter got up from the table and put the journal back in the Hoosier drawer where he’d found it. “And you still hear him?” he asked

She nodded. “I do.”

Pulling on his raincoat, Peter said, “I’d better be heading home.”

“It’s pouring out there,” Marnie protested. “Call your father and tell him you’re staying here tonight.”

“That’s the whole idea, Aunt Marnie,” he replied. “I need to hear him too.”

* * *

Jonas Burch leaned against the fireplace mantle, mesmerized by the flames dancing in the hearth. A muffled cough brought him back to the moment.

“Ah, you made it back,” he said to his assistant, who was framed in the doorway. “How did it go with our little songbird?”

James Heller stepped forward. “She won’t be singing anymore.”

Gazing through the smoke that curled up from the burning end of the cigar in his right hand, Burch said, “That’s a damn shame. I was especially fond of her. Couldn’t be avoided though.”

“Yes, sir,” Heller agreed. “It’s not like she didn’t know better.”

“And her reporter friend?”

Heller shrugged. “It’s safe to say she got the message. Maybe she’ll back off.”

“Maybe, but I’ve got my doubts. Keep an eye on her for a while.”

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“Right away, sir. Anything else?”

Burch thought for a moment. “Yeah, let’s send a gentle reminder to the other girls.”

* * *

Larkin dropped into the office chair at the front of her editor’s desk. She’d been interviewed at the police station until well past midnight, and had been unable to sleep when she returned to her apartment. Her mood was as foul as the taste in her mouth.

“You look like Hell,” her editor said.

“Thanks, Perry. Good morning to you too.”

“You should’ve called me. I’d have gone to the station with you.”

“Guys your age need your sleep.”

Perry Stovall’s eyes narrowed over his reading glasses. “Is that supposed to be funny?”

“Sorry,” Larkin replied. “I had a bad night. I guess I’m a little punchy.”

“Tell me what happened.”

Larkin took a deep breath and began. “I had a tip about Giselle Ericson and Jonas Burch. I persuaded her to meet with me at a restaurant near her office.”

“A tip?” her editor interrupted. “From whom?”

Frowning at the older man across the desk from her she said, “Perry—do you mind?”

“Sorry,” he replied and gestured for her to continue.

“We met. We talked. She denied everything and threatened to take legal action if I contacted her again. As she was walking back to her car, a black SUV ran her over.

“I ran outside and tried to get a license number, but the driver had already turned the corner. The only thing I recognized was the Chevy bowtie on the grill.”

“That was pretty observant under the circumstances,” Perry offered.

“That’s what the police said. Anyway, I ran over to where Giselle lay in the rain and I knew she was dead even before I checked her pulse. Her neck...”

“I get the picture,” Perry said. “What did the police have to say?”

“They didn’t say much of anything. Mainly they asked me questions. The same ones over and over. I guess they thought I was holding back something.”

“Were you?”

“I don’t know anything, Perry. How would I hold anything back?”

The editor reached into a Mason jar on his desk and pulled out a piece of hard candy wrapped in red cellophane. Offering it to Larkin he asked, “Cigarette?”

Larkin curled her nose. Her boss had quit smoking and now sucked red-hot sticks incessantly. The smell of cinnamon made her eyes water. “No, thanks,” she answered. “Not unless you’ve got something coffee-flavored.”

With the candy tucked in his cheek, he continued. “Sounds like you’re at a dead end with your story.”

“Maybe. I’m going to do a little more digging though. Burch is up to something. I think he is responsible for Giselle’s death.”

“Now hold on just a minute,” Perry said, holding up his hands. “You’d better be careful throwing around accusations like that.”

“I’m not throwing around accusations. I’m presenting a theory to my editor. I didn’t offer an opinion to the police and I didn’t plan to talk to anyone else.”

“Good. Let’s keep it that way until you’ve got something solid. The last thing we need is—well...”

“Well, what?” Larkin demanded. A hot flush crawled up her neck.

“C’mon, now, I didn’t mean to get you all twisted up in a knot.”

“Well, then, why don’t you just come out and say it? You’re afraid I’ll screw up like I did in Seattle. You’re afraid I’ll embarrass you.”

The editor leaned forward and rested his weight on his elbows. “When you strike at a king, you must kill him.”

“That’s very poetic. Emerson?”

“I couldn’t say, but you get my point. Jonas Burch is a powerful man in this city. See what you can find out, but for now, let’s keep your theory between the two of us. Got it?”

The fatherly twinkle in her boss’s cocker-spaniel eyes melted Larkin’s anger. “I’ve got it,” she answered.

Perry smiled and leaned back in his chair. “Good. Now go home and get some sleep.”

* * *

Larkin went back to her apartment, but stayed only long enough to change clothes and pull on her running shoes. She knew the thrum in her head would never let her sleep, and an endorphin rush was the only way she’d found to drive the maddening sound away.

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Borrowing the back of a nearby park-bench to help keep her balance, she stretched until the knotted muscles in her back and legs began to yield.

With the morning sun gleaming from a cloudless October sky, it was hard to imagine that what had happened last night was real. Had the driver of the SUV really been aiming for Giselle? It had seemed so from Larkin's vantage point, but now she was less certain. Shaking off a shudder at the recollection, she crossed to the foot-path and began to run.

The first few minutes were a struggle as Larkin fought against fatigue. Concentrating on the rhythm of her shoes pounding the crushed-stone path, she willed herself to continue until her body responded the way she'd known it would. With each breath of crisp, autumn air, the drone in her head faded.

Buoyed by a surge of energy, Larkin lapped the small park and crossed into the network of winding streets in her suburban neighborhood. Navigating without conscious effort, she ran until the last bit of tension drained from her body. As free now as the breeze that ruffled the sleeves of her Cardinals jersey, she could have gone on for hours, but instead angled toward home, and the sweet oblivion of sleep.

Mid-day traffic was light on the street that ran in front of Larkin's apartment. As she reached for the key in the pocket of her shorts, a single thought shattered the silence in her mind.

Someone is watching me.

Larkin turned to see that a black Chevy Suburban had crept up behind her. Instinctively she darted to the protective cover of a nearby maple tree and watched as the SUV cruised slowly by. She couldn't make out the driver's face through the tinted windows, but had plenty of time to note the license number. It was as though he wanted her to have it.

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Larkin Hunter's Journal
October 16

The son-of-a bitch is stalking me now. I recognized the SUV as the same one that ran down Giselle. And the driver—I know he's the same guy. I'm sure he's one of Jonas Burch's goons. I could run the license number tomorrow, but there's really no need.

Burch thinks he's won, but he hasn't. I know his little secret and I'm going to take his pompous ass down no matter what it takes. I've got a solid lead, and tomorrow I'll see where it takes me.

Chapter 2

The cell phone in Jonas Burch's suit jacket vibrated. Checking the number, he turned to each of his two companions. "Gentlemen, I need to take this. If you'll excuse me for a moment?"

"Of course," one of them replied.

Jonas flipped open the phone, and in a voice meant to be overheard said, "I'm in a very important meeting."

"I understand, sir. But I wanted to let you know our lady reporter made it home without doing anything stupid along the way. It's been quiet since she went up to her apartment. I'm guessing she's asleep."

"That's good news, James. Did you deliver the message?"

"I think I made myself clear."

"Keep me posted."

"Yes, sir. I'll keep an eye on her."

* * *

The sun had dropped below the tree line, and Marnie Thrasher buttoned her sweater against the chilly breeze. "You're apt to get in trouble driving without a license," she called out from the top step of her porch.

Peter Grayfeather shot her a boyish grin from the open door of a pickup. "Yeah, right...like Sheriff Branson is going to write me a ticket for bringing you a load of firewood."

Marnie shook her head. The boy had been driving since he was old enough to see over the steering wheel. She'd ridden with him enough to know that he handled a vehicle better than most adults, but his disregard for authority troubled her.

Settling into the porch swing, she watched as Peter stripped off his shirt and put on a pair of leather work gloves. The muscles in his arms and back rippled as he lifted the split blocks of oak out of the truck bed and stacked them in a neat rank in the woodshed. No doubt the girls in his school eyed those broad shoulders and narrow waist with a different kind of appreciation.

"Come in and wash up," Marnie said when he finished. "I just took apple dumplings out of the oven."

Peter reached through the window of the pickup and grabbed his shirt. "Aren't you afraid I'll spoil my supper?"

“It’s more likely you’ll eat the leaf out of my kitchen table. Now put your shirt on before you catch your death.”

He did as he was told, and then reached into the truck a second time. “I’ve got something to show you,” he called over his shoulder. When he turned he had what looked like a hand-held radio in his hand.

“What is it?” Marnie asked when Peter trotted up the porch steps and handed it to her.

“It’s a GPS receiver.”

“Am I supposed to know what that means?”

“It’s a navigation device. It picks up signals from stationary satellites and measures exactly where you are.”

Marnie frowned and handed it back to him. “What on earth do you need that for? You’ve been traipsing around these hills all your life. Nobody knows them better than you.”

“It doesn’t just tell you where you are,” Peter explained. It collects coordinates and bearings. I can load the data into Google Earth and plot it all on a map. It’s like viewing the area from ten thousand feet above it. Closer if I want. I can see every tree at once and which direction it’s pointing.”

Marnie’s eyes went wide as it dawned on her what Peter was saying. “Oh my...”

* * *

Thin light filtered through the curtains, casting long shadows on the walls. Larkin stirred and wondered why she was wearing her shoes. Then it all came back to her.

She’d been furious at the guy in the black SUV, not just for stalking her, but also for bringing back the maddening thrum in her head. Pausing only to jot a few thoughts in her journal, she’d thrown herself on the bed in frustration. In moments she’d plunged into oblivion.

Her mind still dull from sleep, Larkin stared at the clock beside her bed and did the math. She’d slept for almost ten hours and it was still early in the evening. No wonder she felt so dazed. She kicked off her shoes and staggered across the hall to the bathroom.

Adjusting the shower to a temperature just shy of scalding, Larkin let the spray embrace her body. She stood and stretched in the rising cloud of steam until the apartment’s aging water heater had given its all. Reluctantly she turned the tap and slid back the shower door.

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The room was chilly and the tile floor was cold beneath her feet. Turning to grab a towel from the shelf beside the vanity, she looked into the mirror and screamed.

* * *

Dressed in a robe with a towel wrapped around her dripping hair, Larkin jerked open her apartment door the moment she heard the first knock.

“What is it?” the young woman in the doorway asked. Her chest was heaving and she had a white-knuckle grip on an aluminum softball bat.

Larkin stepped aside and pointed. “The bathroom mirror...tell me what you see.”

Her neighbor and friend crossed the open space on tip toes, with the bat held high. Bracing herself, she darted through the bathroom door. Seconds later she appeared again with a puzzled expression on her face and the bat hanging in her hand. “I see it, but I don’t get it,” she said.

Larkin joined her friend and they each put an arm around the other’s waist. The message written on the steam-covered mirror was as chilling as ever.

“I’M WATCHING”

“How did he do that, Joely? No way was he in here with me.” Larkin had felt vulnerable standing naked and alone in her bathroom, but now with her friend at her side she felt only a growing anger.

“You know who did this?” Joely asked, her voice laced with incredulity.

“I’ve got a pretty good idea.”

“And you’re sure he’s not in here with us?”

“I’m sure.”

Joely reached out and traced one of the letters. “It’s waxy—like maybe lip-balm,” she said, rubbing her finger against the thumb.

Larkin tried it herself. “You’re right. That’s why the steam didn’t condense there. He could’ve done this anytime while I was gone.”

“Does this guy have a key to your apartment?”

“Of course not!”

“Then he broke in. Call the cops and have his ass arrested.”

“It wouldn’t do any good. He’s too connected.” Larkin took the towel off her head and tossed it into a laundry basket. Picking up a brush, she began combing the tangles out of her shoulder-length blond hair.

“So—what are you going to do about that?” Joely asked, pointing to the mirror with the small end of the bat.

Larkin turned to her friend and was about to say that she didn't know when a thought occurred to her. "Come with me," she said and crossed the hall into the bedroom. Joely followed and joined her in front of the dresser.

"You know," Larkin began, gazing at their reflections side by side in the steam-free mirror. "We look quite a lot alike. From a distance we could almost pass for twins if it weren't for that black hair of yours."

Joely's eyes narrowed. "I don't think I like where this is going."

"How do you know? I haven't thought it through myself yet." Larkin pulled out a drawer and dug through a stack of clothes.

"I hope you're not looking for a gun."

"No, I keep that in my night stand."

"You're kidding me. Right?"

"It's okay. I've got a permit." Larkin pushed in the top drawer and pulled out the one beneath it. She resumed digging.

"Do you know how to use it?"

"My dad graduated from West Point. He taught me to shoot when I was a kid. He wasn't big on depending on others for the security of his family."

"No way! Can I see it?"

"Maybe later," Larkin replied. "Try this on first." She held up a black, hooded sweatshirt with the Missouri University logo on the front.

Joely took off her top and pulled the sweatshirt over her head. "How do I look?" she asked.

Larkin pulled the hood up over her friend's head and turned once again to look at their reflections in the mirror. "Even more like me," she answered, nodding with satisfaction. "How would you like to help me get even with this guy?"

* * *

Sitting ramrod straight behind the steering wheel of the Suburban, James Heller watched the entrance of the Larkin Hunter's apartment building. She hadn't been out since her run that morning, but he had a feeling she'd be on the move soon.

His instincts proved right moments later when she came through the door and jogged across the street to where her Ford Mustang was parked beside the curb. Swinging her slender legs into the low slung pony car, she turned on the headlights and sped away.

James followed her, staying far enough behind to avoid being seen. She headed north on Lindberg and turned into a strip mall where she parked in

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front of an Italian bistro. For several minutes she talked on the cell phone before abruptly starting the car and heading south again.

“Give me a break,” Heller muttered to himself as he once again fell in behind her. He followed the little red car through several turns until it stopped at a sports bar. Once again the reporter sat behind the steering wheel talking on the phone.

Heller drummed his fingers on the armrest. Something wasn't right. This woman wasn't the type to get crossed up on a meeting place. Headlights from passing cars flashed in the rear view mirror as he waited and watched. Finally she hung up, started the car and pulled away.

The reporter made her way back to Lindberg and continued south before turning east onto Gravois. Heller followed, wondering where she was headed now. He found out when her car suddenly turned into the Afton Precinct Station.

He didn't like the idea of following her into the parking lot, but he had no other choice. Choosing a spot with a good vantage point, he parked the Suburban and watched.

The driver's door of the Mustang swung open and the woman stepped out. Though the hooded sweater she wore hid her face, Heller felt a chill as he felt her eyes lock on him. She glanced briefly at the entrance to the police station before turning to face him again. Her smile was triumphant as she pulled back the hood and shook out her long, black hair.

* * *

Larkin pressed the intercom button in the foyer and waited.

“Yes?” came a woman's voice a few moments later.

“My name is Larkin Hunter. I'm with the Examiner. I'd like a few minutes of your time if I may.

“I have nothing to say. Now please leave me alone”

Burch, or more likely his goon, had warned her. So much for playing nice. “Have it your way, Larkin replied in a breezy voice. “I just wanted to give you a chance to comment before I run the story.”

There was only silence and Larkin began to wonder if she'd muffed her chance. At length the intercom came to life once more.

“You can't do that.”

Larkin detected a slight tremor in the voice now. Pressing the button she said, “You're going to have to give me a reason not to. Please—let me come up and talk to you.

The electronic lock made a soft click and Larkin was inside.

* * *

The door swung open until the safety-chain clinked taught. A woman's face peered through the narrow opening.

"Hi. I'm Larkin. Thank you for seeing me."

The door closed momentarily and then swung wide. "Elini Georgas. Please, have a seat." She gestured toward a spacious living area.

"Thank you," Larkin chose a spot on a leather sofa.

"I'd offer you something to drink," Elini said as she closed the door. "But you won't be staying that long."

Larkin watched her cross the room and sit across from her. Her complexion was as strikingly dark as Giselle's had been fair, with exotic features and olive skin. Her jet-black hair was pinned behind her neck and hung to her slender waist.

"I have to hand it to Mr. Birch," Larkin began. "He has an eye for beauty." She picked up an ebony statuette that glared at her from the side table. The weight of it surprised her.

"I'll let him know that you approve."

"Please do. And while you're at it, kindly ask him to call off the goon he has stalking me."

Elini's dark eyes twinkled with amusement. "Do you mind?" she asked, nodding toward the statuette in Larkin's hand. "That's quite expensive."

Larkin smiled and put the object back in its place. Turning to face her companion again she locked eyes with her and waited.

The amusement on Elini's face melted away as the silence built between them. With a petulant toss of the head, she glanced away and said, "Why is it you think that Jonas would listen to me?"

"Because you are his mistress."

"Is that what you think?"

"Yes it is. This apartment. Graduate school. I'm sure you get a generous allowance and probably a nice car."

Elini stiffened in her chair. "How did you know I was in graduate school?"

"I can see the books and laptop computer in the next room. You aren't just beautiful, you're also very smart. That's the way Jonas likes his women, isn't it?"

"Does that surprise you?"

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“ No. Of course not. You aren't the first to occupy this apartment. Does that surprise you?”

Elini brushed a stray hair back from her face. “What is it that you want from me Ms. Hunter?”

“Your story.”

“You mean you want me to give you all the lurid details of my arrangement with Mr. Burch.”

“Yes. That and anything you can tell me about the girls that came before you.”

“And why would I want to do that?”

Larkin considered her answer. “Burch has been taking advantage of you girls. Don't you think it's time he was stopped?”

Elini pitched her head back and laughed. “James said you were delusional, and now I believe it. My father was a drunk that ran off when I was five. My mother worked two jobs until her undiagnosed diabetes gave her a heart attack. Do you have a sister Ms. Hunter?”

“Yes. An older sister,” Larkin replied in an even voice.

“Did you ever watch her go down on a total stranger for money to buy crack?”

“Of course not.”

Elini's willowy body coiled as if to strike and her voice cracked as she spoke. “Then don't sit there and tell me how Jonas Burch is taking advantage of me. I owe him everything, and all he asks in return is that I not sleep with anyone but him. You can think I'm a whore if you like, but I don't care. When he gets tired of me and moves on I'll thank him and move on with my life.”

“I see,” Larkin said, and shifted her position on the sofa. “But I hope you know that it's never over with Jonas. He was pressuring Giselle Ericson to resume their affair when he had her killed.”

“You're lying,” Elini spat, but her eyes betrayed her uncertainty.

“I'm not lying. I was there. I saw the black SUV run her down. It's the same Suburban that's been following me around. The driver is a big guy with a military haircut. I believe you said his name was James.”

The fiery color had drained from Elini's face and she stared blankly at the floor.

Larkin pushed on in a voice barely above a whisper. “Jonas may be kind and gentle around you, but he's a dangerous man. Come with me and talk to the police. If you don't, you'll be looking over your shoulder for the rest of your life.”

“I can't do that,” Elini said, once again meeting Larkin's eyes.

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“Sure you can—if not for yourself, then for Giselle’s family. Don’t you think they deserve closure?”

Elini shook her head. “It doesn’t matter what I think. I know James is following you because he told me. If what you say is true, he’ll stop us if I try to leave with you.”

Sensing her companion’s internal struggle, Larkin considered her words carefully. “I gave James the slip earlier. We can get away if we leave now.”

“Why should I trust you?”

It was a good question and it caught Larkin off-guard. As she was grappling for an answer an unexpected image flashed in her mind. “Oh my God!” she gasped. “He’s here!”

The two women stared at each other in wild-eyed terror as they heard the scrape of a key sliding into the lock.

Chapter 3

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” James Heller said as he closed the door behind him. His smile was so cold it made Larkin shiver. He strolled to the kitchen and got a Heineken out of the refrigerator. “Please—continue your conversation. Pretend I’m not here.”

At a loss for words, neither woman spoke as Heller pulled out a drawer and dug through the contents until he found a bottle opener. He pried off the cap and took a long swallow. The bulge in his jacket suggested the butt of a gun.

“Where are my manners,” he asked theatrically as he paused with the green bottle half-way to his lips. “Can I get you girls anything?”

“We’re good,” Larkin replied. “Or at least we were until my stalker showed up.”

“A stalker you say? That’s disquieting. Maybe you misunderstood his intentions.”

“I don’t think so. Only a pervert would sneak into a woman’s bathroom.”

James’s smirk faded and the color rose in his already ruddy cheeks. “I should be pissed at you for wasting my time. Your friend led me on quite a tour this evening.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. We couldn’t stop laughing as we were planning it.”

Heller drained the Heineken and put the empty bottle on the counter. “As much as I’ve enjoyed this, we need to go. Grab your purse.”

“Excuse me—I’m not going anywhere with you.” Larkin braced her arms against the sofa cushions.

Elini rose and put a hand on his arm. “Leave her alone, James,” she pleaded. “I didn’t tell her anything.”

With an effortless shove he sent the young woman sprawling across the hardwood floor. “You stay out of this,” he said in a voice that froze her in place. “I’ll be back later with Mr. Burch.”

Larkin jumped up and put the sofa between her and the man walking leisurely toward her. “Keep your hands off me!” she shouted.

Heller circled one way, and then the other, as Larkin managed to stay beyond his reach. Losing patience he grabbed the back of the sofa and flipped it out of the way like a stuffed toy. “Let’s go—I haven’t got all night.”

Larkin reeled backward, as the hulk of a man reached out for her, and stumbled over the end-table. The ebony statuette toppled and she reflexively caught it as it fell. Off balance and retreating, she lobbed the objet d'art with all the strength she could muster.

Too close to react, Heller grunted and fell to his knees when the projectile struck him just above his left eye. He was stunned, but still conscious. He raised a hand to his brow and frowned when he saw his fingers dripping with blood.

Larkin's purse lay open on the floor where it had fallen during the struggle. On hands and knees she scrambled toward it.

Behind her, Heller dived to the floor. She cried out in pain as his hand clamped around her ankle like an iron band. Kicking him with her other foot, she grabbed her purse and pulled it to her chest.

Heller dragged her toward him like a fish on a line, tightening his grip until Larkin thought that her ankle would surely break. Fighting against panic she fumbled in her purse until her fingers closed around the stun gun.

Heller's eyes widened the moment he saw the device. Relaxing his iron grip on the flailing woman, he lunged for it with both hands.

Larkin jammed the contact points into his neck and pulled the trigger. An instant later he landed on her.

It might have looked like a parody of sex as Heller writhed and thrashed on top of her, but to Larkin it was anything but funny. She felt like a tree had fallen on her, and with his dead weight across her chest, she was unable to breathe.

"Help me..." she managed to call out in a thin voice.

Elini knelt beside her, and together they rolled the muscular man to the floor. Blood flowed from his head wound. His eyes stared sightlessly and his body twitched.

"I'll call 911," Elini said, and darted to the kitchen.

"Don't do that!" Larkin called out, her heart still pounding in her chest.

Elini paused with her hand on the phone. "But he's hurt! Look at him!"

"It's not as bad as it looks." Larkin picked up her purse and stood. On shaky legs she headed for the door. "His head wound is superficial and the effects of the stun gun won't last. We need to get out of here."

"Maybe *you* need to get out of here. James isn't pissed at me."

"Don't be stupid, Elini. Burch sent this guy to kill me just like he sent him to kill Giselle. Like it or not, you're a witness now. What makes you think it'll be any different for you?"

Elini's face paled. "I'll go to the police."

The Hermit's Lair

“That’s a good idea, but are there any cops that you know you can trust? You can bet Burch has his.”

James groaned and turned his head.

“Damn it, Elini, let’s go! We can figure out what to do when we’re safely away from him.”

“This is all your fault,” the young woman said as she turned to her work area and began packing her laptop computer.

“What are you doing? James could come around any second!”

“I’m not going anywhere without this. I have a paper due.”

Exasperated, Larkin jerked open the door and held it wide. “Fine! But hurry!”

Elini jerked the zipper closed and slung the strap over her shoulder. Together the two women ran for the street.

* * *

Where are we going?” Elini asked.

“Someplace safe.”

“Could you be a little more specific?”

Still shaken from the attack, Larkin checked the rear view mirror for the thousandth time and wondered if any of the river of headlights belonged to James. “We’re going to my sister’s,” she said absently, as she forced herself to slow down to the speed limit. The last thing she wanted was to catch the attention of the police.

“Where does she live?”

Larkin nearly snapped at her companion, but a glance at the cowering woman squelched her impatience. “In a little town you’ve probably never heard of. Actually she lives outside of town on a farm. Ever hear of Mount Moriah?”

“No.”

“I’m not surprised. It’s a village in the Ozarks. You know—Mark Twain National Forest, National Scenic Riverways—maybe your folks took you to see the Elephant Rocks, or Big Spring when you were little?”

“We didn’t spend a lot of family time together. You might recall I mentioned that.” Elini twisted in her seat to stare out the passenger window.

“Sorry,” Larkin said. “I was just trying to make conversation.” An uncomfortable silence stretched like a gulf between them. Larkin drove in silence.

Compared to her sporty car, Joely's aging Saturn handled like a cinder-block on wheels. She'd intended to switch back their vehicles after her meeting with Elini, but everything changed with her unexpected flight from the city. There was nothing to do now but herd her friend's car down the road as best she could.

As the miles ticked by, and traffic steadily thinned, Larkin began to relax. She was lost in thought when Elini broke her self-imposed silence.

"How did you know?" The petulance was gone now, having been replaced by what sounded like vulnerability.

"How did I know what?"

"How did you know that James was at my apartment?"

"He unlocked the door and came in."

"No. Before that. Before he ever touched the door. You said he was there and you were right. How did you know?"

Larkin squirmed in her seat and tried to affect a nonchalant tone. "I don't know. I guess I must've heard him in the hallway."

Elini was silent for a moment. When she spoke again Larkin was relieved to hear her change the subject.

"Are you and your sister close?"

"Not exactly. We get on each other's nerves."

"Then why go there?"

Larkin took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Because it's the one place I could think of where I know we'll be safe."

* * *

"What do you mean they both got away?"

James Heller winced and held the phone away from his ear. Burch was furious, and he really couldn't blame him. "I'm sorry, sir. I underestimated the reporter. She hit me with a stun gun and took off with Elini."

"That's disappointing, James."

"I understand, sir."

"I want this problem resolved—now!"

"I'll handle it, Mr. Burch."

"See that you do."

The connection broke off, and Heller seethed at Larkin Hunter for embarrassing him. He'd made a mistake taking it easy on her. It was a mistake he wouldn't make again.

The Hermit's Lair

* * *

From the driveway it looked like every light in the farmhouse was turned on. Larkin shut off the wheezing engine and turned to her passenger. "We're here," she said.

Elini took in her surroundings. Aside from the house and barn, there wasn't another light or building in sight. The headlights died in an endless expanse of trees and pasture. "You can't be serious," she said.

A light came on, bathing the front porch in a yellow glow. Moments later a man stepped out and waved.

"That's my brother in law, Guthrie. You'll like him." Larkin opened her door and got out. She was about to wave and call out a greeting when she felt a nudge on her leg.

"Snoot! Mind your manners!" Guthrie bellowed from the porch. He hurried down the steps.

Startled, Larkin spun around to see a dog looking up at her and wagging its tail. "Well, hello there," she said, squatting to pat it on the head.

Guthrie came up beside her, his feet crunching in the gravel. "Snoot, let your sister get the kinks out of her back."

Larkin laughed. "He's okay. But how did you come up with a name like that?"

"He's likes to sneak up behind you and goose you with that long snoz of his. He's like a Ninja that way."

The passenger door clunked shut, bringing Larkin back to the business at hand. "Guthrie, this is Elini. We need a place to stay for a couple of days."

Guthrie rocked back on his heels flashing a disarming smile. With his hands in his pockets and tails of his unbuttoned flannel shirt dangling, he said, "Nice to meet you, Elini. You sure are pretty."

Elini hugged herself against the night chill. "Thanks," she said her eyes wide in wonderment.

"I see you're as subtle as ever," Larkin quipped. "Can we go in where it's warm to talk?"

Nodding toward the barn Guthrie said, "Evelyn's sprucing up the loft. Follow me."

* * *

Larkin recalled that when her sister and Guthrie had moved to the farm, they'd lived in the old barn while building their house. With the loft finished

as modern living quarters, they'd lived in complete comfort. When they finished the house, they'd kept the loft as guest quarters. It was there that the trio found Evelyn.

After a brief embrace in the kitchen area, Larkin introduced Elini to her sister.

"I guess you've already met Guthrie", Evelyn said.

"Yes, we met outside."

"Larkin said you'd need access to the internet, so he set up a wireless network."

"The password is on a sticky note above the desk," Guthrie added.

"Wow! Thank you," Elini said, clearly taken aback by the gesture.

Evelyn eyed her sister with concern. "I called Sheriff Branson. He has one of the deputies watching the road, but he'll want to talk to you in the morning."

"Thanks. I'll be glad to tell him what I know, but I'm not sure what good it'll do."

"You might be surprised. Cliff is very resourceful. But enough of that. I've put sheets on the bed and fresh towels in the bathroom. Do you need anything else?"

Larkin turned to Elini who shook her head. "I guess not."

"I know you must be exhausted. Come down for breakfast in the morning and we'll talk then." Evelyn took her husband by the hand and turned to leave.

"Sis..." Larkin said. "Thanks for this."

Evelyn stopped with one hand on the door-knob and smiled thinly. "It's good having you."

* * *

Freshly showered and wearing a robe that her sister had thoughtfully left for her, Larkin felt at once refreshed and depleted. When she peered through the open door of the bedroom Elini had chosen, she found the younger woman typing on her laptop.

"Did you get connected?" she asked as she sat on one corner of the bed.

Elini stopped typing and looked at Larkin over the screen. "Yes, and it's faster than my connection at home. How can that be out here in the middle of the woods?"

"I'm sure it has to do with Guthrie's work. He's a computer engineer."

The Hermit's Lair

Elini's mouth fell open. "You're kidding. He looks like the guy they interview when a tornado hits a trailer park."

"No. He is an uber-geek with a PhD and a top secret clearance. Works for a defense contractor. All very hush-hush. The security of the country depends on him."

Elini suppressed a chuckle, but her face brightened with humor. Then it dimmed again. "He's really sweet, but your sister seemed a little subdued."

"That has nothing to do with you," Larkin replied. "The last time we were together we had a spat. And the time before that. Probably the time before that, too."

"That sounds intense."

"It'll be okay. Tomorrow we'll talk to the authorities. I'll call my editor. We'll be back in the city before you know it."

* * *

"I want both you ladies to stay put until I check this out." Sheriff Clifford Branson stood and slid the note-pad into his hip pocket.

He'd arrived shortly after breakfast with a female deputy at his side. Together they'd interviewed both Larkin and Elini, first separately, and then together. Expecting a backward, swaggering good-old'-boy, Larkin was surprised to find the law officer very professional. In his mid-thirties, she'd guessed, he had the intensity of someone wise beyond his years. Still, there was a boyish glint in his dark eyes that she found charming.

"That won't work for me," Elini said, shaking her head. "I'm taking extra classes this semester. I can't afford to fall behind."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed. "I can't stop you from leaving, Miss Georgas, but with what you've just told me, I think it would be unwise."

"I agree, Elini," Larkin added. "It isn't worth the risk."

"How about this," The sheriff asked, gazing thoughtfully at Elini. "Today is Saturday, so you won't miss anything before Monday. Correct?"

"I suppose not."

"Then give me until Monday morning. Can you do that?"

Elini turned to Evelyn, who had been watching the exchange from across the room. "Are you sure it's okay? What if James finds out I'm here?"

Evelyn held up her hand dismissively. "Cliff will look after us. You can stay here as long as you like. I'll drive you in to town later to pick up anything you need."

"I guess that'll be okay."

D. G. Bryant

“Good!” The sheriff and Evelyn Pike exchanged a knowing look. “I’ll be in touch.”

* * *

The sound of an engine and the crunch of tires on gravel brought Marnie to the front window. It was Peter Grayfeather, as she expected, his face glowing with anticipation. Climbing out of the pickup, he waved at her through the window. He had the electronic gizmo he’d shown her slung over his shoulder.

Marnie waved back and watched as the young man trotted across the open expanse of pasture, finally disappearing from view at the tree-line. A chill ran through her in spite of the sunbeam that fell on her cheek.

Crossing the small room, she sat in her rocking-chair and covered her legs with an afghan. After Peter had left the evening before, she’d stayed up past midnight re-reading her husband’s journals. Through the years she’d read them enough times to have them almost committed to memory, but she felt compelled to search for clues one more time. She owed her grand-nephew that much.

The way he knew those hills, he’d finish what he was doing today. Tomorrow they’d both know if he was right, and the possibility both thrilled and frightened her. What if Peter found the way after all these years? Would she try to stop him? She’d sooner die than lose Peter the way she’d lost Asa.

Chapter 4

Larkin was restless and in a sour mood. All during the trip to Mount Moriah and back, Evelyn had been as breezy as a make-believe housewife in a television commercial. No doubt the sunny demeanor was largely for the benefit of Elini, whose discomfort in unfamiliar surroundings was obvious. There was more to it though. Evelyn was on her high horse and would patiently ride it until the moment was right to pounce like a hawk on her baby sister.

Evelyn had always been the practical one. When they were growing up, it was Evelyn who never made any trouble, who always got straight A's, who was always showered with praise by her teachers and parents. In many ways she had been the son that her father, a career Army officer, had always wanted.

Larkin had been a firebrand. Passionate about whatever passing interest she was focused on at the time, she acted first and thought about it later. She was prettier, more popular with the boys, and always the center of attention. Looking back on it now, she was sure she had given her mother more than a few gray hairs.

Using her elder status to the best advantage, Evelyn had always jumped at any opportunity to bring Larkin's missteps to her parent's attention. During the scolding that followed, she'd stand in the background with a disapproving look on her face. It was that same look she'd been wearing since Larkin's arrival the night before.

With Elini buried in her school work and Evelyn playing taxi driver for the kids, Larkin was on her own with nothing much to do. She'd called her editor and was reminded in none too gentle terms that she'd promised not to do anything foolish. She gritted her teeth, accepting the criticism because she knew she had it coming. It had helped that she had her source safely tucked away under the protection of local authorities. She could tell that under his gruff exterior, Perry was getting as excited by the developing story as she.

With the sun just past its zenith in the late October sky, Larkin wandered through the barnyard enjoying the crisp breeze and colors of the leaves. The maddening drone in her head, that had reached a crescendo during her attack, had mercifully faded to silence the nearer she came to her sister's house. She was adrift in thought when Guthrie's voice startled her.

"Are you ladies getting settled in?"

Larkin spun around, finally spotting her brother-in-law on the roof of the house. He stood straddling the ridgeline, with his hands in his pockets and his hair fluttering in the wind. “Guthrie—what on earth are you doing up there?”

He nodded over his shoulder. “I’m tweaking one of the satellite dishes. The bandwidth is off a bit. I’m pretty sure it’s just a cracked cable.”

Larkin shaded her eyes with one hand as she gazed up at him. “I wondered how you got broadband way out here. It seems to work pretty well.”

“This new one’s a real sweetheart. It’s on loan from NASA. I needed the extra speed and encryption for a project I’m working on. I’d show it to you but it’s classified.”

“That’s quite alright. I’m sure it’d be over my head anyway. I’m curious though—does your wife know you are on the roof all by yourself?”

Guthrie grinned and stroked his bushy, black moustache. “What do you think?”

“I think I didn’t see a thing. I was going to take a walk, but I’ll stick around ‘til you’re done.”

“Thanks, but that’s not necessary. I’ve got my phone in my pocket in case I need to call 911.”

“Sounds like you thought of everything. Speaking of phones, I was surprised to see such a strong signal on mine. We must be miles from the nearest cell tower.”

Guthrie glanced again at the satellite dish and shrugged sheepishly. “I sure hope you aren’t with the phone company.”

Larkin laughed and held her palms up defensively. “Your secret is safe with me. I’ll get out of here and let you get back to work.” She turned to walk away, and then thought of something. “Hey, where does that road go?” She pointed to the parallel wheel paths that crossed the pasture and continued up the wooded hillside.

“Anywhere and nowhere,” Guthrie answered. “It goes up to the top of the ridge and splits. Left will take you to the Thrasher place. Right circles around and comes out on the river if you drive most of the day and know all the turns.”

“What if I just want a good, long walk?”

“I’d go left. Just past Marnie’s house you’ll hit the county road and end up back here.”

“That sounds perfect! I’ll see you later.”

* * *

The Hermit's Lair

By the time she reached the top of the hill, Larkin was breathing hard and had broken a sweat. She pulled the sweatshirt off over her head, tied the arms around her waist and began jogging along the narrow track. Quickly hitting her stride, the runner's euphoria set in.

Aside from her feet pounding on the rain-softened path, the only sounds she could hear were the wind in the trees and the birds overhead. The earthy scent of moss and wet leaves wafted through the air, as sun and shadow danced at her feet. The tunnel of overhanging branches twisted and turned as she ran along, and she felt like she could go on forever.

* * *

The garden was about done for the year, and that suited Marnie just fine. Come January, when even the lettuce and radishes in her cold-frame had frozen to the ground, she'd miss it for sure. But now, with the once lush plants looking as tired as she felt, the first frost would be a welcome thing.

With a pair of garden shears she bent to snip at the sage, stacking the fronds in a cane basket to be dried later. It'd been a good summer for her herbs—not too hot like it got some years. Rain had seemed to come right when it was needed.

Moving on to the basil she clipped a stem and held it up to her nose. Were there enough tomatoes left on the ragged vines for one last batch of tomato-basil soup? That would be one of the first things she'd miss when winter fell.

As she worked her way through the row, Marnie's mind drifted, as it often did, to times past. If she closed her eyes she could imagine Asa leaning on the hoe handle as he wiped his brow with that red bandana he always carried in his back pocket. He'd smile at her bent over the thyme, as she was now, and compliment her on the pleasing view of her bottom. It would make her blush, but she'd smile herself because she knew he meant it the right way. On a day such as this it was like he was still there at her side.

* * *

The slope of the path changed so slowly that Larkin didn't notice at first. When it steepened enough to catch her attention, she paused to catch her breath and take note of her surroundings. It was then that she caught a faint sound through the rustle of the leaves.

D. G. Bryant

It was a single note, perhaps a stringed instrument. But who would be playing in the middle of the woods? Forcing herself to breathe quietly, she struggled to hear, but the note faded away. Moments later it was back again.

At length it dawned on Larkin that it wasn't really sound at all. She plugged her ears with her fingers and the tone grew more distinct. She should have known, but the absence of people threw her. It seemed to be coming from further down the path, so she picked up the pace once more.

The further she went, the clearer it became, and other notes began to mingle with the first. Even over the sound of her pounding heart, it sounded like a wind chime in the breeze. She'd never experienced its like. Dodging washes and ruts in the path that grew ever steeper, she pushed herself on toward the valley below.

* * *

Peter Grayfeather glanced at the LCD display, copied numbers into a journal, and put the device back in its protective case. He was busily sketching when he heard the sound of footfalls in the distance. Startled, he peered through the dense copse of trees to see who it was.

Across the draw he saw a lone figure silhouetted against the sky. It didn't appear to be anyone he knew. Setting aside the journal, he prepared to cross the short distance required to intercept the runner. He didn't intend to allow trespassers to go unchallenged.

A flash of ponytail in the sunlight froze him in his tracks. As the runner drew closer, he saw that it was a woman—a young one as near as he could tell from his vantage point. He stepped into the shadow and hoped that she wouldn't notice him there.

Visible only through gaps between trees, Peter was able to tell only that she was slender, with long legs. He was frustrated, but dared not move out of fear that he might get caught spying on her. Instead he followed her with his eyes, hoping for a clear view.

The moment came when she was near enough that he could hear the steady puff of her breath and the squish of her Reeboks on the forest floor. Perhaps she heard something in the undergrowth, or perhaps she sensed his presence. Whatever the cause, she turned toward him, her face glowing in the mid-day sun. Peter's jaw dropped—the woman was beautiful.

* * *

The Hermit's Lair

The garden shears fell to the ground. "Oh my!" Marnie said to herself, as the approaching sound jarred her from her reverie. Who could that be?

She rose and turned to face the treeline. Someone was coming down the old road, and it wasn't Peter. It wasn't anyone she knew. The sound, like the ringing of church-bells, was coming directly toward her.

* * *

Ahead, the canopy of trees ended abruptly. Larkin burst into the clearing and stopped to take in the sun-drenched valley below. It might've been a scene from an old black and white movie.

The track she'd been following through the woods now made a long, lazy curve through a gently sloping pasture. At the center of the horseshoe-shaped valley was a cottage, with a low roofline that extended over a long porch. A wisp of smoke curled up from the fieldstone chimney.

She heard the chimes clearly now. The timbre had changed in the final moments of her run, growing even more enchanting than they'd been before. A glimpse of movement caught her eye, and Larkin spotted a woman standing in a garden at the side of the house. Their eyes met across the expanse.

The woman waved, and Larkin ran toward her, drawn like a moth to a flame. She didn't stop until she'd crossed the grassy expanse and stood in front of the woman with iron-gray hair.

"You must be Christine Hunter's little girl."

"Yes. I'm Larkin Hunter. How did you know?"

Wiping her hand on her apron first, the woman touched Larkin's cheek, turning her head slightly. "You look just like your mother when she was your age. Your grandmother too, come to that. The women in your family have always been so pretty."

"What a sweet thing to say. Should I know you?"

The woman squeezed Larkin's hand between both of her own. "Where are my manners? My name is Marnie Thrasher and I've known everyone who's lived around here in the last seventy years or so. I met you once when you were a child, but I doubt you'd remember."

"I'm afraid I don't."

"It doesn't matter. Come inside and I'll make us some tea."

Larkin wanted nothing more than to do just that, but the sun was getting low in the sky. "I'd love to, but I should be getting back. My sister will be expecting me."

D. G. Bryant

“Pshaw,” Marnie said, shaking her head dismissively. “Evelyn will get happy in the same pants she got mad in.”

Larkin burst out laughing. “I see you know her.”

“Oh yes. She’s a fine woman and a wonderful mother, but a little too bossy for my taste.”

The woman was utterly charming and Larkin couldn’t resist. “You’ve convinced me. I’d love some tea.”

“Wonderful! I promise not to keep you too long. Besides, Peter will be along shortly and he can give you a ride home.”

* * *

The inside of the cottage brought to mind images that Larkin’s childhood imagination had created when she read *The Hobbit*. The ceiling was low and cozy, with exposed beams, and hanging lights that cast a warm, yellow glow on the oak cabinetry. The focal point of the living area was a massive, fieldstone fireplace. Standing with her back to the hearth, she watched her host fill a teakettle from the tap and put it over the gas fire ring to heat.

“There we go,” Marnie said as she plucked two teacups off a shelf and put them on a trestle table next to a silver sugar bowl. “It’ll be ready in a jiffy. Please—make yourself comfortable.”

“Thanks,” Larkin replied as she lowered herself into a Morris-chair. “I just love your house. Your collection of antiques is amazing.”

Marnie chuckled softly as she sat in a rocking-chair across from Larkin. “That’s one of the oddities of getting old. Things that you bought new are worth way more than you paid for them.”

“Then you’ve lived here a long time?”

“Oh yes. Asa and I built this house when he got back from the war. I’ve lived here since.”

“Is that him?” Larkin turned to look up at a framed photograph on the mantle. The young man wearing an Army dress uniform stared back at her with piercing eyes that raised goose-flesh on her arms. He had high cheekbones and raven hair.

“Yes, it is. That was taken when he graduated from basic training.”

“He’s so handsome.”

“He was a heart breaker alright. You wouldn’t know it from the sour-puss expression he’s wearing in that photo, but he had a smile that lit up a room. It still makes my knees weak thinking about him.”

The Hermit's Lair

A silence fell over the room, and Larkin's eyes turned once again to her hostess. The silver-haired woman, whose face had glowed with life moments earlier, now appeared at the end of her strength. Her sadness was as palpable as the warmth from the hearth.

The teakettle's whistle broke the spell, and Marnie's smile magically returned. "There we are," she said as got up from her chair. "I'm in the mood for chamomile, but I also have Earl Gray if you'd prefer."

"Chamomile would be wonderful. Can I help?"

Crossing to the stove Marnie said, "Don't be silly. It's not often these days that I get real company. I miss playing hostess."

The teakettle fell silent. Humming softly all the while, the old woman measured tea and poured water. Carrying the cups on a serving tray, she rejoined her guest.

"It smells wonderful," Larkin said, taking a sip.

"Thank you. I grow it myself. But enough small talk. How long have you had the gift?"

Larkin paused with the cup halfway between her lips and the saucer. "Excuse me?"

"Forgive me for being blunt, but Peter will be along any minute, and I don't want him to overhear." Marnie's eye's had a conspiratorial twinkle. "You hear people's thoughts, don't you?"

An icy finger traced the length of Larkin's spine. How could the old woman know that? Surely she was just teasing. "Whatever makes you ask a thing like that?" she asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

A smile ticked at the corners of Marnie's mouth. "It's okay, dear. Your secret is safe with me. You see, I have it too—though mine pales in comparison to yours."

Larkin stared at her companion in disbelief. The old woman seemed to see right through her. "Are you saying that you can hear what I'm thinking?"

"Oh no. Nothing as exact as that. And I don't mean to say that I hear anything with my ears. It's more like a whisper in the back of my head that I can't quite make out. It's hard to describe. It's like I hear colors."

Larkin nearly dropped her cup. She'd thought of it the same way, but had never dared speak of it for fear of being thought insane. Now it seemed there was someone with whom she could share her burden. "You really consider this thing a gift?"

Marnie smiled triumphantly and put her cup aside. "Yes, I do. It can be a problem at times, but not if you control it."

Larkin's eyes widened. "It can be controlled?"

“Sure it can.”

“Can you teach me how? The sound in my head gets so loud sometimes I think I’ll lose my mind.”

“I can show you a thing or two. It’ll help that you are away from a lot of people. Crowds give me a headache too if I’m not careful.”

Larkin felt giddy with relief. “I should have guessed you were different,” she said. “Everyone else sounds like the low drone of an electric motor. Occasionally I catch a clear thought if someone nearby is very emotional. But you sound like wind chimes. It’s very sweet and disarming.”

Marnie picked up her cup and took a sip. A flush lit her cheeks. “Why thank you dear.”

“I’m curious though,” Larkin continued. “How did you know about me?”

Marnie suppressed a laugh. “Honey, I would think that’d be obvious if you can hear me like you say. I heard you a mile away. You’re broadcasting like a radio station.”

Chapter 5

Larkin squeezed the door handle and smiled uncertainly at Peter Grayfeather as he shifted the pickup into gear. Marnie had assured her that he was a safe driver, but she was skeptical. No way was he old enough to have a license.

He'd knocked on the cottage door only moments after the old woman's startling revelation about Larkin's ability. With her mind reeling from unanswered questions, she'd been dismayed when Marnie called the boy in to meet her new friend.

With raven hair, and the build of a running-back, Peter was at once boyishly handsome, and painfully shy. During their short time in the cottage, he'd mainly stared at the floor with occasional furtive glances at Larkin. Clearly he liked what he saw.

Marnie explained that Peter was her nephew, and that he was a good boy who checked on his auntie every day and helped her with chores. This caused him to fidget from foot to foot. The old woman swatted him on the bottom and told him that Larkin needed a ride home.

When they reached the end of Marnie's long, winding driveway, Peter signaled, stopped and looked both ways before making the turn onto the county road. Larkin breathed a sigh of relief. It looked like he knew what he was doing after all.

"Your aunt is quite an interesting lady," Larkin said. "I think it's sweet that you are so nice to her."

Peter shrugged. "It's no big deal. Everyone looks after Aunt Marnie. She's the best."

"She certainly seems that way to me. It frightens me though, thinking of her living alone in such an isolated place. She'd be so easy to victimize."

Peter's laughter startled her.

"I'm sorry?" she said, staring at his profile as he drove along.

He gave her a bemused smile and then turned his attention back to the road. "I guess it just struck me funny—the notion that anyone would mess with Aunt Marnie."

"And why is that?"

"Sheriff Branson, that's why. He'd shoot someone just for thinking about it."

"So, he's clairvoyant, is he?"

"I suspect he probably is."

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The answer seemed odd at first, but then she remembered her conversation with the old woman. She decided to let it drop.

They bounced along the gravel road in silence for a while until they came to the road that led to her sister's house.

"I'm curious," Larkin said as the boy made the turn. "How long has Marnie been a widow?"

Peter turned to her with a puzzled look on his face. "What makes you think she's a widow?"

* * *

Larkin felt the tension in the air the moment she stepped into the kitchen. Her sister had that look on her face that she always got when she was in a snit.

"Sorry I was gone so long," she said cheerily, hoping to diffuse the situation. "But I met the sweetest woman and she insisted that I come in for tea. Her name is Marnie—she said she knew you."

Evelyn's eyes raised a fraction. "You walked all the way to the Thrasher place?"

"I guess so. Actually it wasn't so much. On bad days I run farther than that to unwind."

"Well, we wouldn't want you to be wound up."

The overtone of condescension, more than the oblique verbal jab, irritated Larkin, but she brushed it off. "Something smells wonderful. Can I help?"

"Not now. It's nearly finished."

Larkin took in a deep breath and let it out. "Evelyn, I said I was sorry. I meant to be back in time to help you with dinner. I really did."

"Of course you did. You should go clean up and get your friend."

"I think I've lost my appetite."

"Then Elini has probably lost hers as well."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Everything isn't about you, Larkin. That girl has been alone in that loft all day. She might like a hot meal and some companionship."

"Oh, I get it—you're mad because I'm neglecting my guest."

"You're the one that drug her out here."

"That's right—to keep her from getting killed!"

"She wouldn't have been in danger if you had left her alone."

"I could have sworn that you were there this morning when I explained this all to the authorities. Jonas Burch already had one of his girlfriends killed."

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“And he did it because you coerced her into talking to you.”

“What are you trying to say? Quit being such a bitch and just say it.”

Evelyn shook a wooden spoon at her sister. “Okay, I will. You do this every time, Larkin. You act without thinking of anyone but yourself. I’d think you would’ve learned from that mess you made in Seattle.”

Tears of rage welled in Larkin’s eyes. She fought the urge to charge across the kitchen and slap her sister. “Don’t you dare throw that in my face. You have no idea what I went through.”

“There you go again—it wasn’t about you!”

“That’s right. And it wasn’t about you either, so butt out!”

“Fine! Let’s talk about your current mess. If it isn’t bad enough you put that poor girl’s life in danger, you bring her here. What if those people track you down? Did it ever occur to you that you might be putting my kids at risk?”

Larkin was on the brink of firing back at her sister when Guthrie’s voice roared from the living room.

“That’s enough out of both of you!” He appeared in the doorway and his face looked like it might explode at any moment.

Larkin had never seen this side of him before. His perpetual smile was gone, and the glint in his eyes doused her anger like water on a fire. The house became silent. Even the television was quiet.

Evelyn suddenly looked sheepish. She rushed toward her husband. “I don’t know what got into me,” she gushed. “The kids...”

“You know exactly what got into you,” Guthrie replied, in a voice that stopped her in her tracks. “It’s the same thing that gets into you every time you are with your sister.”

Turning to Larkin he continued, “And you’re no better. The two of you ought to be ashamed of yourselves squabbling like that.”

Larkin shook her head. “I’m sorry, Guthrie. I should go apologize to your kids.”

“Never mind them. You need to talk to Elini. She must’ve come in and heard you girls fighting. I saw her running back to the loft.”

* * *

Sitting cross-legged behind her laptop, Elini was once again in a world of her own. It hadn’t been easy, but Larkin finally managed to coax the young woman back into the house for the evening meal. It had gone much better than she’d expected.

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Guthrie was back in his usual high spirits and kept the conversation light with his dry wit. Evelyn was circumspect but polite. Her hostess smile had faded only once when she scolded the children for feeding the dog scraps under the table. When Larkin offered to help clean up, her sister had graciously accepted.

Content that things had been patched up with her sister, and that her companion would be self-absorbed for the rest of the evening, Larkin decided to relax and make a few calls. After snatching her purse off the table, she went into her bedroom and closed the door behind her.

She had forgotten to take the phone when she went for her walk, so she wasn't surprised to see the blinking red light indicating that she had messages. She sat on the corner of the bed and dialed the mailbox.

The first message was from Joely wanting to know when they could trade cars back. She liked driving Larkin's mustang, but there were books in the back seat of her own car that she needed for her classes.

The second was from her editor. He'd called under the pretense of clearing up some minor point of confusion in her story, but she knew that really he was checking up on her. He could be sweet that way sometimes.

The moment she heard the voice on the third message, her arms broke out in gooseflesh.

"Miss Hunter, this is James Heller. I just wanted to touch base and let you know I haven't forgotten about you. I'm sorry we were unable to finish our conversation last evening. I was a bit indisposed when you left.

"My employer was most upset when I briefed him on our discussion. He misses Elini terribly and wants her back home as soon as possible. He's willing to let bygones be bygones. He's even prepared to make financial restitution if an agreement can be reached to keep this unfortunate misunderstanding confidential.

"Please return my call at your earliest convenience."

Larkin stared at the phone in disbelief. He had some kind of nerve. "Nice try, James," she muttered to herself and snapped the phone shut.

* * *

Larkin was awakened by the sound of children's voices followed by tires crunching in the gravel driveway. Rolling onto her side, she peered through

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the window just in time to see her sister's SUV disappear around a curve in the road.

"Where are you going at this hour?" she mumbled as she rubbed her eyes and stretched. When she picked up her watch off the nightstand she was surprised to see that it was after 9:00. She never slept that late.

The loft was quiet. Tip-toeing to keep from waking Elini, Larkin quickly dressed and slipped out the door.

As she mounted the front porch steps, Snoot trotted past her and stopped in front of the door. He turned and stared at her expectantly.

"Are you guarding the place, boy?" she asked.

The dog pawed at the door and looked up at her again.

"I get it. You want me to let you in. Is this going to get me in trouble with my sister? She's already mad at me you know."

Guthrie's face appeared at the door. Grinning, he opened it. "I thought I heard voices. Who are you talking to?"

Larkin felt embarrassed. "The dog—does that mean I'm crazy?"

"Did he answer you?"

"Not in so many words."

"Then I wouldn't worry about it. Come on in."

Larkin followed him through the living room into the kitchen. The Sunday edition of the St. Louis Post looked like it had exploded on the table.

"Help yourself to the coffee," Guthrie said as he dropped into a chair at the head of the table.

"Thanks—I will." Larkin poured a cup and sat at the table across from her brother in law. "I heard Evelyn leaving earlier."

Guthrie nodded and picked up a section of the paper. "She took the kids to church. I begged off to see after our guests."

"You're doing a splendid job."

"Thanks. I take it Elini is still sacked out?"

"She must be," Larkin said, but then a chilling thought came to mind. The loft had been quiet when she'd slipped out—too quiet. Her mind had been too sleep-dazed at the time to notice that the distinctive tuning-fork hum of Elini's presence was missing.

"What's wrong?" Guthrie asked, frowning over his paper.

Resisting the urge to panic, Larkin stood and calmly pushed her chair under the table. "Nothing, I hope."

* * *

Something was wrong. The feeling of emptiness in the loft was so palpable that Larkin wondered how she'd failed to notice it the moment she'd awakened. A quick glance around the living room confirmed that the few possessions Elini had brought with her were missing.

Rushing to the closed bedroom door, Larkin rapped three times sharply. Elini—"are you in there?"

There was silence save for the rafters creaking in the wind.

"I'm coming in," Larkin called out and turned the knob.

As she'd feared, the room was empty. There was a note on the neatly made bed. Larkin picked it up and read:

Larkin,

I'm sorry to leave this way, but I knew you'd try to stop me if I said anything. I've been talking to Mr. Burch, and he's agreed to let me come back if I'll keep quiet about what happened. I'm walking out to the main road as soon as you are asleep. James will pick me up there.

I know you must be angry, but it's for the best. This way you won't be in danger any longer, and neither of us will be a burden to your family. Mr. Burch promised me that he had nothing to do with what happened to that other woman and I believe him.

Please don't try to contact me. I won't talk to you or anyone else, including the police. If you take my advice, you'll let the story drop. Mr. Burch will always be one step ahead of you.

Elini

A wave of despair washed over her. How stupid could she have been? James Heller had called her last night—it stood to reason that he and Burch could contact Elini just as easily. They'd probably been in contact from the beginning. The skirmish with Evelyn had pushed the frightened young woman over the edge.

The sound of footsteps on the floor brought Larkin back to the moment. She spun around to find Guthrie standing in the doorway.

"What's wrong," he asked.

Larkin handed him the note.

Guthrie quickly read it and swore under his breath. "I'll call Sheriff Branson. Maybe he can get her back."

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The strength drained from Larkin's legs and she sat on the corner of the bed. "I doubt that's possible," she said as she fought against the tears. "I'm sure James Heller has already disposed of her body."

Chapter 6

The sheriff was an interesting man, Larkin decided. Leaning against the fender of his Chevy Tahoe, his body language suggested that he was completely at ease. It was clear, however, that he was in charge. The two uniformed deputies, who had arrived minutes before him, stood at attention. Even Snoot stared up at him expectantly.

He finished reading the note and turned to Larkin.

“Have you tried calling her?”

“No. I thought I should wait for you.”

“Try it now.”

Larkin keyed the number. On the second ring, a familiar voice answered.

“I asked you not to contact me.”

“Elini—is that you?” Larkin locked eyes with the sheriff.

“Of course it’s me. Who did you expect?”

“I was worried sick about you.”

“I’m fine, so leave me alone.”

The sheriff motioned for her to give him the phone.

“Elini—hold on a second. Sheriff Branson wants to talk to you.”

Larkin handed him her phone and listened in disbelief to his side of the conversation.

“Miss Georgas, are you safe?”

“You could be in danger. Let me send a Highway Patrol officer by to pick you up.”

“Considering what you told me yesterday, I’d say that’s a very bad idea.”

“I see. I won’t take any more of your time.”

The sheriff closed the phone and handed it back to Larkin.

“Your friend says there’s nothing to worry about. She wants to be left alone.”

Guthrie put an arm around Larkin’s shoulders and gave her a reassuring hug. “That girl is in trouble, Cliff. What can we do?”

The sheriff turned to his deputies. “You guys can take off. I’ll handle things here.”

The two men nodded and headed for the patrol car. When they were gone, the sheriff turned to Larkin and said, “There’s not a lot I can do for Elini if she refuses to cooperate. My suggestion is to back off and leave her alone.”

Larkin shook off Guthrie’s arm and took a step toward the law officer. “Please tell me you’re not serious.”

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"I can't protect the girl," the sheriff replied. "Jonas Burch is going to watch how we react to that phone call you just made. If we push back now, it'll put her in more danger than she's already in."

"So, Jonas gets off scot-free."

"I didn't say that. I want to nail his ass as much as you do, but we don't have much to go on. Burch didn't get where he is by being stupid. I used to be a cop in Saint Louis. Let me dig around a little more before we decide what to do."

As much as she wanted to charge in to the rescue, Larkin knew the sheriff had a point. "Okay," she said. "I'll back off—for now. You'll let me know what you find out?"

"Of course."

"If I don't answer my cell, you can reach me through my editor. I'll give you his number."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed. "Miss Hunter, you aren't planning to go back to the city are you?"

"Well—yes. Why would I stay here?"

"You'll risk antagonizing Burch for one thing. For another, I'm as concerned for your safety as I am for Elini's."

"I can't live the rest of my life hiding in Guthrie's barn."

"I'm not suggesting that you do. Just give it a couple more days. Can you do that?"

Fuming as she considered the request, Larkin turned to her brother-in-law. "You're the most logical guy I've ever met," she said. "What do you think?"

Guthrie's face was as serious as she'd ever seen it. "I trust Cliff's judgment completely for reasons I can't explain."

Larkin felt the fight draining out of her. "Perry is going to have a fit. But if you think it's for the best, I'll stick around a little longer. Can I at least go pick up some clothes and return Joely's car?"

"I'd rather you didn't," the sheriff replied.

"If I leave now, I can be back by this afternoon. Jonas will never even know I'm in town."

The sheriff met her eyes with his. "I wouldn't count on that."

* * *

Traffic was light all the way to the city, so Larkin made good time even in Joely's wheezing old car. With a bright, October sun lighting her way, she

arrived at her apartment building just as it reached its zenith in the sky. She grabbed her bag and went inside.

Since Joely needed her books right away, she stopped at her apartment first. When the door opened, she greeted her friend by jangling the keys to the Saturn.

“My car!” Joely squealed and clutched the keys to her chest.

Larkin shook her head and laughed. “It’s good to see the two of you together again. You make a lovely couple.”

“Hey—it may not be much, but it’s paid for.” Joely pulled Larkin inside. “Tell me what happened?”

“There really isn’t that much to tell,” Larkin said as Joely got two mugs out of the cupboard and poured coffee. “Elini went back to Jonas, and now I’m back to square one. Actually, I guess I’m even further back than that.”

“Did that creep really attack you?”

“You wouldn’t believe how strong he is.” Larkin pulled up her pant’s leg to reveal the bruise on her ankle.

“Oh, my gosh! How’d you get away?”

“I gave him a blast with my stun gun.”

“Do those thingies really work?”

“Flawlessly. I gave him ten thousand volts to the neck.”

“Is that legal?”

“Does it matter?”

“No. It serves the jerk right for breaking into your apartment. Let’s go in the living room. I want to hear all about your big adventure.”

Larkin took a sip and shook her head. “I’d love to, but I can’t. I’m just here to trade cars and pick up some clothes.

“Why? Did you hook up with some hillbilly while you were out in the woods?”

“Very funny. No, the sheriff thinks my being here will put Elini in danger. He wants me back there for a while until things settle down.”

Mischief lit Joely’s eyes. “That sounds awfully convenient to me. Has country boy ever seen a real girl before?”

“Would you stop? The last thing I want to do is spend more time with my sister. I think he’s right, though. There’s something about the guy that makes it easy to trust him. I’ll play along for a while.

Larkin rinsed her cup and put it in the sink. “Thanks again for the use of your car, but I’d better go. Why don’t you pack some things and come with me. The Ozarks are beautiful this time of year.”

“I’d love to, but I can’t afford to miss work right now.”

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“Spoil sport. I’ll call you tonight and we’ll talk.”

“That sounds great!” Joely opened her purse and pulled out a set of keys.
“Your car is parked in the back lot.”

* * *

She knew something was wrong the moment she opened the door. Bracing herself to bolt if she had to, Larkin stepped into her living room and turned on the light.

The room looked just the way it had when she’d last seen it two days before. Still, a sense of wrongness tickled her skin like the legs of an invisible insect. With her heart pounding, she pressed on.

As she passed the kitchen, a faint whiff of aftershave halted her in her tracks. It was the same scent Heller wore. Was he here, lurking in the shadow until she came within reach?

She stood like a statue, listening. The apartment was quiet except for ordinary background sounds of her neighbors and street noise. She focused instead on the interwoven strands of thought that wove into a pulsing thrum in her mind. Heller’s shrill note was not there.

With her fear morphing into anger, Larkin made her way to her bedroom. The faint scent of aftershave came again—stronger this time. Dreading what she would find, she stepped through the door and turned on the light.

It would almost have been better if Heller had ransacked the place. As it was, she could tell that he’d been there, but the disturbance was subtle. The picture of her parents on the dresser was at a different angle. The clothes hanging in her closet were pushed to one side.

Outraged by the intrusion, Larkin checked each drawer in turn, trying to determine if anything was missing. Clothing was displaced in each, but it wasn’t until she checked her nightstand that a chill fell over her. The Model 19 Smith & Wesson revolver she kept there was gone.

With her sidearm now in James Heller’s possession, Larkin suddenly realized how vulnerable she was. She grabbed a suitcase out of the closet and began packing it with clothes. Elini had been right—Burch was one step ahead of her and had been from the beginning. For all she knew, he could be watching her now. She needed to get out of town fast.

* * *

“Wait ‘til you see this, Aunt Marnie,” Peter gushed as he held up a cardboard tube about three feet in length.

The heavy tread of Peter’s boots on the front porch had roused Marnie from her afternoon nap. Still groggy she said, “I take it your electronic gizmo worked.”

“I should have thought of it sooner,” he replied as he pulled a drawing out of the tube and spread it out on the kitchen table. “This is a satellite view of the area. See—here’s your house. Here’s our farm, and here’s the Pike place.” He pointed in turn to each of the map features.

Marnie was taken aback. “I never would’ve dreamed such a thing,” she said.

Peter shrugged. “It’s no big deal. I just downloaded it from the internet.”

Marnie let out a long breath. She’d sacrificed so much to live the life she’d chosen. She didn’t have any regrets, but at times like this she felt embarrassed by her lack of sophistication. “Does it tell you anything you didn’t already know?”

Peter began tapping on the map. “Each of these is a marker tree. I took GPS coordinates on each and transferred them to the map. While I was at it, I also took a compass bearing. That’s what the lines represent.”

Marnie leaned closer. The lines radiated outward like spokes on a wheel. “It looks like they are all pointing to one place?”

Peter’s face glowed triumphantly. “Not exactly,” he said. “They are all pointing *away* from one place.”

* * *

Larkin tossed her suitcase in the back seat and climbed behind the wheel. The throaty rumble of the Mustang’s exhaust was like the voice of an old friend. She put it in gear and squealed the tires pulling out of the parking lot.

The walls of her apartment had seemed to close in after she discovered that her gun was missing. Worse, she had the sickening feeling that someone was watching her. With one eye on the rearview mirror, she navigated to the interstate and merged into southbound traffic.

Larkin set the cruise control, flipped open a compartment on the console, and glanced at the selection of compact disks. She’d missed her music the past two days and looked forward to cranking it up during the long, solitary drive back to her sister’s house. Before she could make a choice, her phone rang.

“Hello,” she answered on the second ring.

The Hermit's Lair

“Miss Hunter—I just heard you’re back in town!”

Larkin felt a knot of anger twist her stomach. “Heller, you pervert, what is this thing you have with my apartment?”

“Come again?”

“You pawed through my dresser and stole my gun.”

“Why would I do that?”

“I figure you were doing something nasty with my underwear. I’m not sure why you wanted my gun.”

“If I did take it—and I’m not saying that I did—it would probably be to assure your cooperation.”

“That’s not going to work. I really like that gun. All you did was make me want to piss you off all over again.”

“I wouldn’t do that, Miss Hunter.”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“You’ll understand soon. Drive carefully, Miss Hunter.”

The connection dropped.

Larkin shook her head in disgust and put the phone back in her purse. What was Heller up to? If he was trying to intimidate her, it wasn’t working. All he’d accomplished so far was to make her more determined than ever to bring Jonas Burch down.

Returning her attention once more to the row of compact disks, she picked out one by The Eagles. She had just slid it into the stereo when a sudden movement in the rearview mirror caught her eye.

A police cruiser had pulled in behind her car and was riding her bumper. Moments later the emergency lights danced to life. Larkin put on the turn signal and pulled onto the shoulder at an exit ramp.

Two officers got out of the cruiser. While one approached her window, the other lagged behind with one hand on his sidearm.

Larkin rolled down her window and put both hands on the steering wheel. Something had these guys on edge, and she didn’t want any misunderstanding.

“Can I see your license and registration?” the lead officer said when he was even with her door.”

“Sure,” Larkin replied, her hands still on the wheel. “My license is in my purse and the registration is in the glove box.”

“Get them for me, please.”

Her purse was on the passenger seat. She pulled out her wallet and passed her license to the officer. He didn’t look at it until she’d handed him the registration as well.

“Stay here,” he said in a voice that struck her as unnecessarily stern. “I’ll be right back.”

Larkin watched in the mirror as he walked back to the car and began talking on the radio. His partner was a statue who never took his eyes off of her or his hand off his weapon.

Traffic sped by for several long minutes while Larkin waited. Something wasn’t right. She hadn’t been speeding, and she knew her documents were in order. These guys were treating her like a felon. She suspected that she had James Heller to thank for that.

The officer returned and glowered at her through the window. “Ms. Hunter, would you mind opening your trunk?”

Larkin stared back at him in disbelief. “Are you serious?”

“Yes I am. Please open your trunk.”

“I’d be glad to officer—the moment you show me a search warrant.”

“Lady, you can either open the trunk or I’ll punch out the lock. What’s your choice.”

Larkin’s temper flared. “Neither. And if you don’t drop the attitude I’m going to rip you to pieces on the front page of the Examiner.”

The officer’s face turned an ugly shade of red and he drew his weapon. Larkin could see the muscles in his finger twitch on the trigger.

“Get out of the car and put your hands on the roof. Now!”

Reaching slowly through the open window, Larkin tripped the door latch from the outside. “You need to learn how to relax,” she said as she swung her legs out and stood. “This is some sort of misunderstanding.”

The officer took a step back, keeping the pistol aimed at her head. “I said put your hands on the roof.”

Larkin did as she was told. She was waiting for rough hands and handcuffs when another cruiser pulled in behind the first. She was bemused to see that this one bore the markings of the State Highway Patrol.

“It looks like you brought plenty of help,” she quipped, and immediately regretted her words.

The patrolman got out of his car and adjusted his hat. “What the hell is going on here?”

Larkin heard feet shifting in the gravel behind her.

“We pulled this woman over for speeding and she became abusive. I’m arresting her.”

The patrolman sauntered up to where Larkin stood with her hands on the roof of the car. He loomed over her like a mountain. “That’s going to have to wait,” he said. “Miss Hunter is going with me.”

The Hermit's Lair

Larkin couldn't believe what she'd just heard. She spun around to face the patrolman. "Would you please tell me what this is all about?"

He looked down at her, stone-faced. "I've been ordered to escort you to the Sunbridge County sheriff. I suspect you'll find out why when you get there."

"I'm going to have to call this in," the police officer said, his sidearm now back in its holster. "Call whoever you want," the highway patrolman replied dismissively. "Miss Hunter, please follow me."

* * *

Never would Larkin have imagined such a drive. With the highway patrol Crown Victoria leading the way, she pushed her pony-car to speeds she'd never have attempted on her own. Her only fear was that the speed induced adrenaline rush might be habit forming.

Less than ninety minutes after leaving Saint Louis, the brake lights flashed on the patrol cruiser as they crossed into Sunbridge County. The sheriff and a deputy were waiting for them at the side of the road.

"It's good to see you, Nick," the sheriff said as he pumped the hand of the highway patrolman.

"You too, my friend. How's the new addition to the family?"

"Doing great. She's sleeping through the night now."

"That's good—a guy your age needs plenty of rest."

"We need to get the girls together before long and throw some steaks on the grill."

"Sounds good. Have Poppy give Lisa a call."

Larkin watched the exchange in disbelief. After being threatened at gunpoint, and driving through hills and curves at breathtaking speed, she wanted answers.

"Thanks for bringing Larkin home," the sheriff said as though he'd just read her mind.

"No problem. What was all the stink about, anyway?"

The sheriff turned to Larkin. "I'm not sure," he said. "I just got wind that some of my former fellow officers were up to no good."

Larkin shrugged. "I don't have a clue what they were looking for, but they insisted that I open the trunk."

"Would you mind opening it now?"

"Sure." She pressed a button on her key-fob and there came a metallic click at the rear of the Mustang. The trunk lid lifted a fraction of an inch.

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With the sheriff and patrolman close at hand, Larkin grabbed the trunk lid and lifted it. Elini's lifeless eyes stared back at her from within.

Chapter 7

Wispy cirrus clouds drifted across the sun, as falling leaves fluttered to the forest floor in a warming, westerly breeze. Marnie unzipped her jacket.

“Mare’s tails in the sky,” she said. “Rain is apt to follow.”

Peter Grayfeather turned to her, a glint of anger in his dark eyes. “That’s what I heard on the radio driving over.” He kicked a loose rock with the toe of his boot.

“Don’t be cross with me, young man. I’ve been at this a lot longer than you have. I’ve been disappointed more times than you can know.”

Peter stared at the GPS display and shook his head. “I just don’t understand it. This is the place. Right here. Exactly where I’m standing. And there’s nothing here but a rocky slope. How could they all be wrong?”

Marnie turned to the boy and her irritation melted away. Backlit by the sun, with the profile of a warrior, he reminded her of his father—and of Asa.

“They aren’t wrong. This is the place,” she said. “I’ve been drawn here often. I can feel his presence. I just can’t see it.”

“See what, Aunt Marnie?”

She shook her head and dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. “I don’t know—and that’s what makes it so hard. After all these years I still don’t know what I’m supposed to see.”

* * *

The courthouse smelled of fresh paint and Lysol. Not unpleasant, Larkin decided as she followed the Sheriff down the hallway, but sterile and unwelcoming. Their footsteps echoed on the hardwood floor.

At the end of the hall, the sheriff stopped at an open doorway. “This way,” he said.

Larkin stepped into a room occupied only by a uniformed woman behind a desk. Beside her was a two-way radio.

“Afternoon, Bonnie,” the sheriff said. “Is Artemas here yet?”

“Yes, sir. He’s waiting for you in your office.”

“Good.” He turned to Larkin and gestured for her to follow.

A man stood when they entered the room. He was taller than Sheriff Branson, but not as strongly built. His body language suggested a confidence borne of authority.

“Art, this is Larkin Hunter,” the sheriff said. She’s Evelyn Pike’s sister.”

The man stepped forward and took Larkin's hand. "I see the resemblance," he said. "I'm Artemas North."

"Art is the Circuit Judge," the sheriff added.

Larkin took a half-step back and eyed the judge suspiciously. His smile was disarming, but she was reluctant to trust him.

"A judge, you say? Do I need a lawyer?"

"Not yet," the sheriff said. "For now, both he and I are acting in an unofficial capacity. We're here to decide how to deal with your problem."

"And what exactly is the problem?" Judge North asked.

"Miss Hunter has a dead body in the trunk of her car."

"That's a problem alright. Do we know how it got there?"

"Not exactly. But we have a pretty good idea who's behind it."

"Anyone I know?"

"Yeah—Jonas Burch."

The judge's eyes widened. "The philanthropist?"

"The same. Turns out he has a dark side. Miss Hunter was about to expose it. She's a reporter for the Examiner. The victim was her source for the story."

The judge eyed Larkin. "That's bad. Burch set you up."

"That's not the worst part," she replied. "One of his goons stole my handgun from my apartment. I'll bet he used it to kill Elini."

"That'd be my guess as well," the sheriff replied. "And I'd say that the only fingerprints on the gun are yours."

Silence fell over the room as the trio processed the information.

"I'm curious about something," Larkin said after a time. "Neither of you know me, but you seem to assume that I'm innocent. Why is that?"

The two men exchanged a look.

"We know that you aren't capable of murder," the judge said evenly.

"How could you possibly know that?"

The judge's eyes met Larkin's. "I'm afraid that answering that question would put you at too much risk."

The evasive answer only piqued her interest, but the look on the judge's face made it clear that the subject was closed. She decided not to push her luck.

"What happens now?"

"The coroner will determine cause of death," The sheriff said. "When the evidence is collected, the body will be turned over to her next of kin."

"Then I'm free to go?"

"You're free to go back to your sister's place."

The Hermit's Lair

Dread washed over her like a cold shower. Burch had her cornered and there seemed to be nothing she could do about it. She searched the men's faces for a glimmer of hope.

"I'm sorry, Miss Hunter," the judge said. "But you need to understand something. As long as you are in our jurisdiction, we can protect you. If you leave, you'll likely be arrested for murder.

* * *

With her spirits as low as they'd ever been, Larkin dropped her suitcase on the bed and tripped the latches. She'd left the loft apartment that morning infuriated at Elini. Now she couldn't think of the beautiful young woman without tears brimming in her eyes.

When the few belongings she'd brought were folded in the dresser, she closed the suitcase and set it aside. Too tired to bother getting undressed, she switched off the lights and sprawled on the bed.

Through a curtained window Larkin watched as clouds nibbled away at the gibbous moon. Alone and bathed in complete darkness, she breathed deeply until the tension slowly drained from her body. Her mind began to drift.

With her Mustang impounded as evidence, the sheriff had dispatched one of his deputies to give her a ride back to the farm. He was a ruggedly handsome man, with the posture of one not long out of the military. Under better circumstances she would've made more of an effort to coax him out of his brooding silence, but she'd been too drained to make the effort. Maybe another time. It looked like she was going to be here for quite awhile.

Her sister's reaction wasn't as bad as she'd expected. Perhaps she'd felt a little guilt of her own for not making Elini feel more welcomed, or perhaps Guthrie had put his foot down. In either case, Evelyn had listened to the account of events with only occasional clucking, and a half-hearted lecture on the perils of acting without first considering the consequences. Larkin had taken it in stride and counted herself fortunate.

At the opposite end of the scale, her editor had chewed her up one side and down the other. No doubt the uncharacteristically caustic behavior was due in part to disappointment. Had Larkin been able to break the story, she would have elevated the paper—and by proxy its editor—to a new level of legitimacy. As it was, the story was dead, and his most promising reporter was in seclusion.

There was one other possibility that chilled her to consider. Perry had once been a rising star himself until alcoholism forced him to resign in disgrace

from a prestigious position on an east coast paper. He was recovering now, and trying his best to start over. She desperately hoped that her own failings hadn't driven him into relapse.

On a more positive note, Larkin had a gut feeling that there was a story right here in Sunbridge County, if she could find the right angle. Sheriff Branson seemed like a capable guy, but how could a local sheriff orchestrate her rescue from a city police department? And how could he say with such confidence that he could protect her from arrest? She had a feeling that Jonas Burch would have something to say about that.

The more she thought about it, the more the meeting in the sheriff's office seemed odd. Since when do law officers and judges speak to each other like fraternity brothers? Surely the folksy nature of the rural Ozarks community accounted for some of the familiarity, but not all of it. There was something peculiar about that relationship.

Noticing that a chill had crept into the room, Larkin kicked off her shoes and crawled beneath the covers. Sleep tugged her toward the abyss, but her last conscious thought made her smile. She might be cornered like a rat in her sister's barn, but it would be the perfect opportunity to go back and visit Marnie Thrasher.

* * *

The temperature had risen during the night, and the air was ripe with the promise of rain. Feeling much better than she had the evening before, Larkin trudged across the yard to the house.

"Is anyone home?" she called through a crack in the door.

"Just little old me," Guthrie replied from within.

Larkin went inside and met her brother-in-law coming down the hall.

"You just missed Evelyn," he said. "But help yourself to the kitchen. I'd keep you company, but I'm kind of in the middle of something."

"Don't let me interrupt," she replied. "I just wanted to let you know that I'm heading over to Marnie Thrasher's. I'll have my phone if anyone needs me."

"Why don't you take my Jeep? It's supposed to rain later."

"Thanks, but I could use the exercise. I'd borrow an umbrella, though, if you have one handy."

Guthrie dug through a closet and found a gaudy, red golf umbrella. "You could probably spot this thing from the space shuttle," he quipped. "But it'll keep you dry."

The Hermit's Lair

* * *

Carrying the umbrella like a spear, Larkin emerged from the tree line and saw Marnie's cabin in the valley below. She paused there for a moment, taking in the view. It was a story book setting, but it brought upon her a strong feeling of melancholy. What must it be like to live alone in such isolation? Marnie had to be a very special lady.

Minutes later she was on the front porch. Before she could knock, the old woman opened the door.

"I hope you don't mind me dropping in on you," Larkin said.

"Of course I don't mind," Marnie replied, her face beaming. "Come in."

Larkin stepped inside and was met with the aroma of bread baking in the oven. "Oh my! It smells wonderful in here."

"It'll be done directly. You can have a hot slice with some blackberry preserves. Peter says it's better than sex. Comments like that reassure me that he doesn't yet know any better."

Larkin laughed. "I'm sure he'll learn soon enough. He's a very handsome young man."

"Yes, he is. I guess you know he has a crush on you."

"You're kidding!" Larkin searched the old woman's face for signs that she was teasing. There were none.

"It's true. He doesn't say much, but I can tell. He's been smitten since he first saw you."

"I don't know what to say. I certainly didn't intend for that to happen."

Marnie shook her head dismissively. "I know you didn't. It's just nature's way. Come sit with me. I'll make us some tea."

Larkin followed Marnie to the kitchen. She took a seat at the trestle table just as the teakettle began to whistle on the stove. "Looks like I timed it just about right."

"I put it on to heat a few minutes ago," Marnie replied, an enigmatic smile tickling the corners of her mouth. "I heard you coming a mile away."

The whistle died as Marnie lifted the teakettle off the stove and poured.

"About that," Larkin said as she toyed with the string on her teabag. "This ability I have—or gift if you want to call it that—can you really teach me to control it?"

Marnie's hazel eyes locked onto Larkin's as though she was sizing her up. "Can we keep this between the two of us?"

"Of course, if that's what you want."

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“It doesn’t matter what I want. What matters is that you never speak of it to anyone. I can’t tell you why it’s important. You’ll just have to take my word for it.”

The old woman’s intensity made the skin on Larkin’s arms turn to gooseflesh. “You have my word.”

A warm smile returned to Marnie’s face. “The first thing you need to understand is that you were born with the gift. That’s why you are so much stronger.”

Larkin steepled her hands under her chin. “How did you get the gift?”

With a whisk of her cotton dress, Marnie stood and opened the refrigerator door. She got out a mason jar and sat it on the table in front of Larkin.

“That’s how I got it.”

Larkin picked it up. “It looks like water.”

“It is water.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Have you ever been to Mystic Spring?”

Glancing at the ceiling, Larkin thought about it. “It’s a park over near Homestead.”

“That’s right.”

“I remember Dad took us there when I was a little girl. We had a picnic lunch under a big oak tree.”

“That would be Theodosia.”

Memory leapt into Larkin’s mind. “I’d forgotten about that! It struck me so funny at the time that a tree had a name—and such an unusual one.”

Marnie began to turn the jar lid. “Theodosia is a special tree. And the water from Mystic Spring is special too. It’s what gives me the gift.”

* * *

“Thanks for nothing!”

James Heller snapped the cell phone closed and fought the urge to smash it on the console of the Suburban. The conversation with his police contact—actually Jonas Burch’s police contact—had been infuriating.

It had been bad enough when the reporter slipped his carefully laid trap, and escaped with Elini’s body to that God-forsaken place in the Ozark hills. The Highway Patrolman had swooped in without warning and pulled rank. He didn’t blame the local cops for that.

He did blame them for their vacillation since.

The Hermit's Lair

According to his source, Larkin Hunter was under house-arrest by order of the Sunbridge County Circuit Court. The Saint Louis police refused to press for her release to their custody because there was no evidence that she'd committed a crime.

Heller jammed the suburban into gear and floored the accelerator. If the cops weren't going to go after the reporter, he'd bring her back himself.

* * *

"This is so cool! I can't hear you at all!"

Larkin felt like a child who has just learned how to whistle. She jumped out of her chair and gave Marnie a hug.

"I told you it was easy when you know how," Marnie said.

Taking a step back, Larkin searched the old woman's face. "Will it work in a crowd? That's when it really bothers me—especially if I'm tired."

"Eventually it will. It's like any other skill. The more you practice, the better you'll get."

"I can't wait to try it on Evelyn. She sounds like fingernails on a chalkboard."

Marnie rocked back in her chair and laughed. "Oh, come now. It can't be that bad."

"Maybe not quite," Larkin said as she sat once again in the chair across from the fireplace. "But it's a sour sound, just like her personality."

"Is it like that all the time, or just when she's talking to you?"

Larkin thought about it. "Now that you mention it, it does seem different when she's talking to Guthrie or the kids."

"Would it surprise you to hear that her sound is rather pleasing around me?"

"Yes. It would."

"That's because what the mind projects changes in texture and intensity depending on your emotions. See if you can block me now."

Larkin took a deep breath and tried the mental exercise Marnie had taught her earlier. She sensed nothing at first, but then the laugh lines at the corners of the old woman's mouth dropped and her eyes closed. Pressure, like the tip of a finger on her forehead began to build.

Marnie's head lowered, and a tear welled up at the corners of one eye. The pressure now wrapped around Larkin's like a steel band, tightening as if by the turn of some unseen screw.

The mental block gave way, and Larkin gasped as wave after wave of sadness washed over her. The room spun, and she gripped the chair arms to keep from pitching face first to the floor.

As quickly as it came, the sensation was gone. Larkin felt Marnie's hand squeezing her own.

"Are you all right, dear?"

Gazing into Marnie's red-rimmed eyes, Larkin felt her dizziness fade. "What happened?"

Marnie patted her hand and returned to her rocking chair. "I thought of something sad. Did you feel the difference?"

"Did I ever! It was so intense. I would have cried if you hadn't stopped, and I didn't even know why I felt so sad."

"Primal emotions are even harsher than that. Anger, fear, pain. You're like a human mood-ring once you get the hang of it."

Nodding agreement, Larkin said, "That much I'd picked up on. I can tell when someone is lying to me, or if something I've said makes them anxious. But it was never anything like what I felt just now."

Marnie picked up the mason jar and held it up for Larkin before taking a sip.

"You really believe it don't you? That the water from Mystic spring makes you this way."

"Yes, I do. Me and quite a few other folks around here. I'm one of the stronger ones. You'll run into them if you're around here long enough.

Searching her companion's eyes for a hint that she was being teased, Larkin found none. The old woman truly believed what she was saying. It seemed such a whimsical notion, but she didn't have a better explanation."

"Can you read people's thoughts?" Larkin asked.

Marnie shook her head. "There are some that have premonitions, and others, like you and me that can sense what others are feeling. We leave it to God to know what's deep in someone's heart."

The clock on the mantle chimed three. Larkin stared at it in disbelief. "Is that the correct time?" she asked.

"Yes—within a minute or two."

"It feels like I just arrived, and I've been here all day!"

The old woman nodded solemnly. "It's funny that way. Time is different when you're inside your mind."

"This is embarrassing. I hope I haven't overstayed my welcome."

"Of course you haven't! You're welcome in my home any time."

The Hermit's Lair

Larkin took her cup to the sink and rinsed it. "I've really enjoyed today," she said. "But I should be going."

"What's your hurry? Stay and have dinner with me. Or at least wait for Peter to give you a ride home. It's started to rain."

Smiling sheepishly as she picked up her umbrella, Larkin said, "I think Peter has enough on his mind already. Besides—if I don't get in my exercise, I toss and turn all night."

* * *

With the Suburban backed into the woods at the edge of the road, James Heller peered through the rain-streaked windshield. In the distance he could see the crossroads where he'd picked up Elini two days earlier. She'd told him then that it was where the entrance to the farm met the county road.

Headlights appeared over the crest of a hill, and he watched as a blue Ford drew nearer, splashing puddles as it bounced along the washboard. When it passed, the man driving slowed and stared as he passed by.

"Mind your own damn business," Heller muttered, grateful that his own face wasn't visible through the tinted glass.

When the car disappeared around the curve, Heller realized that he was squeezing the steering wheel, and forced himself to relax. He felt exposed—out of his element. The street was his hunting ground, not a desolate stretch of country road.

The light shower grew to a drumbeat on the roof of the Suburban. Heller adjusted the seat and took a sip from the sports bottle in the console. Sooner or later, Larkin Hunter was going to go by.

* * *

Her timing was impeccable as always. Larkin had no more than hit the end of Marnie's driveway when the clouds opened up and it began to pour. With the red and white umbrella snug against her head, she picked up her pace.

The unpaved road turned her shoes into a sodden, muddy mess, but the oversized umbrella kept the rest of her warm and dry. She fell into a comfortable stride and let her mind drift.

Thanks to Marnie Thrasher, she'd just had one of the most remarkable days of her life. For as long as she could remember, the sound in her head that no one else could hear had been a torment. While she still didn't fully

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understand her ability, she now had hope of controlling it. More than that, she no longer felt so alone.

It was quaint the way the old woman thought that her own version of the gift came from water from the spring. Surely it had been a latent trait brought out by local superstition. Marnie was an unsophisticated woman and probably would be susceptible to suggestion.

The one dark moment in an otherwise perfect day had come when the old woman pushed aside her mental block. The sadness that came through had been so profound, it brought a tear to Larkin's eye thinking about it. How could such a sweet woman carry around a burden like that?

And how did she come to live such an isolated life? Her husband was gone, but an intelligent, attractive woman like Marnie could have easily made a life with someone else. For that matter, she still could. There had to be a story there, and Larkin made a mental note to learn what it was.

* * *

James Heller was about to doze off when a flicker of movement caught his eye. He started the engine and dialed up the speed of the windshield wipers.

A red and white disk seemed to hover and bounce above the road. As it drew closer, a pair of legs materialized under it. Some idiot was out running in the rain.

Heller smiled and put the Suburban in gear. He had a good idea who that idiot was.

* * *

A deep tone, like the lowest chord struck on a piano, jarred Larkin out of her reverie. It was an unwholesome sound—one that she instantly recognized.

Headlights bore down on her and the glistening chrome grill of the black Chevrolet SUV loomed. In desperation she searched for a place to flee, but there was an impenetrable thicket on both sides of the road. She closed the umbrella, and braced to jam the pointed end at her attacker's face.

The Suburban stopped beside her and the driver's tinted window whispered down. James Heller smiled down at her.

"Hey, pretty lady. Need a lift?"

Brushing a wet tendril of hair behind her ear, Larkin glared back at him. "Thanks, but no. Daddy taught me never to accept rides from perverts."

The Hermit's Lair

Heller's eyes narrowed and the humor faded from his face. "I really must insist. Get in."

"I'd really rather not," Larkin replied sweetly. "But I will do this much for you." Gripping the handle of the umbrella like a vice, she thrust it through the window with all her might.

Heller's reflexes were lightening fast. He batted the shaft aside with his forearm, and the tip buried harmlessly in the headliner.

Larkin grunted from the impact, but before she could regain her balance, a hand shot through the open window and grabbed the collar of her jacket. She tried to twist out of the wet garment, but the zipper jammed, thwarting her effort.

Rage welled in the pit of her stomach. In a blind fury she dived through the window and clawed Heller's face.

Blood and hair flew as she pressed her attack. Aiming for his eyes, she almost found her target several times, until an unseen elbow connected with her cheek. Stunned, she fell onto her back on the rain soaked road.

"Go ahead and kill me here," she said in a raspy voice she didn't recognize as her own. "I'm not getting in that car with you."

The door swung open and Heller got out. Standing over her, with blood dripping from his face, he said, "I'm afraid you're wrong about that, pretty lady. I need you alive and on the other side of the county line."

With quickness she wouldn't have believed possible from a man his size, Heller swooped down on her. Pain exploded through her body and the lights went out.

Chapter 8

With a bulging plastic grocery bag dangling from each hand, Peter Grayfeather trudged sullenly toward his aunt's cottage. As he was about to mount the first step, she burst through the door.

"Peter! We have to go!"

Adrenaline surged, and Peter felt his heart race. Aunt Marnie was the most placid person he knew. To be this worked up, something terrible must've happened.

"What's wrong?" he asked, as she bounded toward him. Her eyes were wide and her face was as pale as the white cotton apron tied around her waist.

Marnie grabbed his elbow as she passed, tugging him off balance. The bags of groceries tumbled to the rain-soaked grass.

"Larkin is in trouble. We have to go help her. Now!"

At the mention of Larkin's name, Peter's racing heart skipped a beat. He ran alongside as his aunt sprinted toward his truck.

"What kind of trouble is she in?" he asked when they were both inside with the doors closed.

"I don't know. Just hurry!"

Peter started the engine and shifted the transmission into gear. "Where is she?"

The old woman closed her eyes and rubbed her temples with her fingertips. "Coming toward us—turn left at the road."

* * *

Wincing as a tire slammed to the bottom of a muddy hole, James Heller lifted his foot off the gas pedal. With the reporter bound hand and foot in the cargo area of the SUV, he was anxious to get beyond the reach of the local law. That didn't mean he was prepared to ruin his car on this god-awful road.

A muffled groan came from the back. A shoe scraped against the carpet.

"You awake back there?" Heller called out as he adjusted the rear view mirror to take a look.

There was only silence save for the rumble of thunder and the sound of rain pelting the metal roof.

"I know you can hear me," he continued. "Be quiet or I'll come back there and taser you again."

The Hermit's Lair

The road ahead was a sheet of water, making it a nightmare to dodge the hop-scotch pattern of potholes. Creeping along at what seemed little more than a walking pace, Heller wondered if he'd ever manage to clean all the red mud off his Suburban. He shook his head in disgust.

In the distance, a pair of headlights appeared over the crest of a hill. Heller eased to the right, but before he could make room to pass, the oncoming vehicle closed half the distance between them.

"What's your problem, buddy?" Heller said as he braked to a stop with the passenger side tires off in the ditch.

The headlights flew toward him without slowing. He was about to throw his arms in front of his face when a white Chevy pickup skidded to a stop.

The passenger door flew open. In disbelief, Heller watched as an old woman in an ankle-length dress and apron climbed out.

Stepping out in the rain himself, he waited by the front bumper as she stalked up to him.

"What did you do to Larkin?" the old woman demanded.

Behind her a boy with thick, black hair got out of the driver's side.

"Lady, I have no idea what you're talking about." Heller shouted in his best drill sergeant voice.

She jabbed a bony finger in his face. "Don't give me that! I know you have her in the back of that thing. Let her go right now!"

In one fluid movement, Heller grabbed the old woman's wrist, spun her around, and pinned her arm against her back.

A split second later, a rifle cracked and the side window of the SUV exploded behind him.

Howling in anger, Heller shoved the woman to the side. "You little prick!" He shouted at the boy who now aimed a rifle at his head. "You could've killed me!"

The old woman squared off in front of him again. "If he'd wanted to kill you, you'd be lying on the ground flopping. Now open up the back of that thing and let Larkin go."

Heller fumed. He wasn't about to give in to an old woman and a boy. He'd have to play along and wait for an opportunity. "I'll need the key," he said.

"Then get it."

"Tell Tonto not to shoot me."

"Don't do anything stupid and he won't."

Heller took two steps backward and reached behind the steering wheel. As he plucked the keys out of the ignition, he spotted the taser lying on the passenger seat.

“I wouldn’t do that!” the old woman shouted.

His hand froze on the taser as he peered through the rain-streaked windshield. There was no way she could see what he was doing.

“Lighten up, lady!” he called back to her. “I just dropped the keys.” He palmed the taser and stood upright, the weapon still hidden behind the open door.

“Peter,” the old woman said without turning to look at the boy.

The rifle cracked a second time and Heller felt a bee-sting of pain. He reached up to find a piece of his earlobe missing.

“You’ve got no one to blame for that but yourself,” the old woman said as though she were scolding a child. “Now drop whatever is in your hand and get Larkin.

Seething, Heller tossed the taser into the weeds at the side of the road. “Okay, lady. I’ll open up the back. But your girl won’t be able to walk.

The old woman’s eyes narrowed and took a step toward him. “What did you do to her?”

Heller glanced at the boy with the rifle and decided not to press his luck with a taunt. “I gave her a little shock. She’ll be wobbly for a while.”

“Open it up. I want to see.”

Moving slowly, Heller walked around to the back of the Suburban and opened the hatch. The reporter tried to rise, but fell back again.

“Now come around the side where Peter can get a clear shot at you.”

Heller did as he was told.

The old woman went to the back of the SUV. “You’re safe now,” she said softly as she patted the reporter’s cheek. “I’ll get Peter to help you.”

Firing an accusatory glance at Heller, she called out to the boy. “Peter—I need you here.”

The boy came, never lowering the rifle the entire way.

“Let me have the gun,” the old woman said. “You’ll have to carry Larkin.”

The boy appeared to be in his mid-teens, but he was strongly built. He lifted the reporter with no more difficulty than if she’d been a child. He carried her back to his truck.

The old woman’s eyes followed the pair, and the gun barrel dropped a fraction of an inch. Heller braced to rush her, but her voice stopped him cold.

“You are one lucky man, mister.” She turned to face him.

Heller wiped the blood streaming down his neck and held his open hand out to her. “How do you figure that?”

The Hermit's Lair

With her wet, gray hair clinging to her cheeks, the old woman looked him in the eye. "You are going to die badly for what you just did. But it won't be today."

* * *

"Get out of those wet clothes and put this on," Evelyn said as she tossed a thick robe across the foot of the bed. "I'll get you a towel for your hair." She darted through the bathroom door.

Shivering from the cold and lingering effects of the taser, Larkin fumbled with the buttons on her shirt.

"Let me help you with that, dear," Marnie said. She gently pushed aside Larkin's hands and in moments had her stripped. She held up the robe and guided Larkin's arms through the sleeves. The soft fabric was like a warm embrace.

Her sister reappeared and began toweling her hair. "Wow—I'll have to get kidnapped more often," Larkin quipped in a voice that didn't sound like her own. She couldn't remember the last time her sister had been so nice.

Through the closed bedroom door she heard Guthrie questioning Peter. The boy's voice was calm and even as he described the encounter. Most grown men she knew would have been cowed by the likes of James Heller, but the boy had stood his ground. She was both grateful and impressed.

A knock came at the front door and more voices joined in.

"That's Jonny and Elaine," Evelyn said. "I should talk to them."

"Go ahead. I'll be fine."

When her sister had left the room, Larkin looked quizzically at Marnie.

"Jonny and Elaine Grayfeather—Peter's parents."

"Oh," Larkin said as she got up from the bed. "I should talk to them too. They must be frightened out of their wits."

Marnie put a hand on her shoulder. "There'll be time for that when the sheriff gets here. Right now you need to take care of yourself."

Tightening the sash on the robe, Larkin sat again. "I guess you're right. I can't seem to stop shivering."

Marnie put an arm around her waist and patted her hand. "How about if I slip into the kitchen and make you something warm to drink?"

"That'd be wonderful," Larkin said. "But I want to ask you something first. How did you know I needed help?"

Marnie stared back at her as though she couldn't believe what she'd just heard. "After this afternoon, I would think that would be obvious. You were

mad enough at that man to kill him. Then you went silent. I was afraid he might've killed you."

"I guess that does make sense," Larkin said sheepishly. "But I'm amazed you could tell so clearly from that distance."

Marnie chuckled and shook her head. "Sweetheart, that head of yours is like a mental canon. You knocked me right off my feet."

* * *

"It's nice to meet you both," Larkin said. "But I'm so sorry that Peter got dragged into this."

The troubled look on Elaine Grayfeather's face was one that only a mother could have. With raven hair and dark eyes, she was a strikingly attractive woman. "We're just glad that no one got hurt."

"No one but James Heller. What Peter did took a lot of courage."

Jonny Grayfeather gave his son's shoulder an affectionate squeeze. "Yes. It did. We're very proud of him."

Peter blushed and squirmed out from under his father's arm. "I heard Sheriff Branson's car pull up," he said. "I'll go let him in."

The boy disappeared down the hall and returned with the law officer close behind.

"Evening everyone," the sheriff said casually.

Guthrie pushed his chair back from the kitchen table and stood. "Evening, Cliff. The rest of us will clear out and give you some privacy."

"I'd appreciate that. It shouldn't take long."

When the others had filed into the living room, the sheriff took a seat at the head of the table. Larkin sat opposite him, with Peter to her left, and Marnie holding her hand on the right.

"Tell me what happened," the sheriff said. He flipped open a pad and began to scribble.

"I was walking back from Marnie's house," Larkin began. "Heller drove up in that big, black SUV of his and demanded that I get in."

"I take it you refused."

"Wouldn't you?"

"I probably would've shot him. But I don't recommend that to everyone. Please continue."

Larkin felt a grin tickling the corners of her mouth. Sheriff Branson's dry humor was disarming. He was awfully cute, too. "I tried to stab him in the eye

The Hermit's Lair

with my umbrella but missed. We struggled. Eventually he knocked me to the ground.”

The sheriff eyed the angry bruise on her cheek. “Are you hurt? I could have Doc Maguire come over.”

“Oh no,” Larkin replied, shaking her head. “I’ll be fine.”

“What happened next?”

“Heller shot me with a taser. When I regained my senses I was tied up in the back of the SUV.”

The sheriff nodded and scribbled on the pad. “Crude, but effective. Is that when Marnie and Peter showed up?”

“Yes. If they hadn’t come to my rescue I’d be in a really bad place right now.”

“I’d say that’s right.” He turned to Marnie. “Mrs. Thrasher—would you mind telling me what happened next?”

Marnie patted Larkin’s hand. “Peter blocked the road, and I got out to confront that man. There was blood on his cheek from where Larkin scratched him. He said he didn’t have her, but of course I knew better.”

Holding up one finger, the sheriff stopped her. He turned back to Larkin. “Hang on a second. Did you scratch Heller?”

“Like Marnie said, I got him pretty good.”

“Have you showered or bathed since then?”

“I haven’t had a chance yet.”

“Then his skin will still be under your fingernails.”

Repulsed by the thought, Larkin looked at the nails on her right hand. “That’s disgusting!”

“No,” the sheriff said as a satisfied grin spread over his face. “That’s DNA evidence. That, together with the eyewitness testimony of three solid citizens, means that I can have a warrant issued for Heller’s arrest.”

D. G. Bryant

Larkin Hunter's Journal
October 20

What a remarkable woman Marnie Thrasher is turning out to be.

This morning she taught me how to control the maddening psychic ability that I've struggled with for so long. She calls it the gift. I have a hard time thinking of it that way, but it sure is a relief to know that I'm no longer alone. And now that I can turn it on and off—I'll never be able to thank her enough for that.

I'll also never be able to thank her enough for coming to my rescue this afternoon. Heller ambushed me with a stun gun on the road back to Evelyn's house. Evidently Marnie was able to use her power—the gift, I should say—to know that I was in peril. She and Peter were able to take me forcibly from Heller. Thank God for that. I shudder to think what he might've done to me.

Sheriff Branson took DNA evidence from under my fingernails and seems confident that he can get a warrant for Heller's arrest. I hope so. My exile in Evelyn's barn has been enlightening, but I can't wait for my life to get back to normal.

Chapter 9

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come in with you?”

Larkin unlatched her shoulder-harness as her sister eased into a parking slot in front of the Sunbridge County Courthouse. “Thanks, but I’ll be fine. I don’t want to make you more late for work than you already are.”

Evelyn shifted the Trailblazer into park. “You’ve got my cell number?”

“Yes. And Guthrie’s too.”

“Call one of us if you need to go anywhere. That guy is still out there.”

“The sheriff said last night I could have my car back. If I take a walk, it’ll be way back in the woods.”

“You do understand that you can trust Cliff, don’t you?”

Larkin studied her sister’s face. “What’s up with all the drama this morning?”

Anger flashed across Evelyn’s face, but worry quickly replaced it. “There’s no drama. I just want you to understand that there’s a lot more to what’s been going on than you know. Cliff and Judge North will get it all straightened out, but you need to do whatever they say without asking a lot of questions.”

Larkin’s temper ticked up a notch. “Oh, I get it—you’re afraid I’ll embarrass you.”

“That’s not it at all,” Evelyn replied, her grip tightening on Larkin’s shoulder. “I’m afraid you’ll get impatient and do something impulsive. For once in your life, trust me to know what’s best for you.”

* * *

With her sister’s words still echoing in her mind, Larkin darted through the rain to the courthouse. What she’d said wasn’t as unnerving as the way she’d said it. It was almost as though she was afraid. She’d never known Evelyn to be afraid of anything.

While the courthouse had been a tomb the first time she’d come here, it was now a beehive of activity. Closing her umbrella she made her way down the corridor to the sheriff’s office.

A deputy stepped out from behind the counter as soon as she came through the door. He was the same stone-faced officer who had given her a ride home two evenings before.

“Please come with me, ma’am,” he said.

Larkin followed him the short distance to the sheriff's door. He knocked, and then entered without waiting for a response. "Miss Hunter is here," he said.

The sheriff was on the phone but gestured for her to sit. Larkin pulled up a chair while the deputy stood at attention by the door.

"Thanks for coming by," the sheriff said when he'd hung up the phone. "I'm sure you remember Officer Webster?"

"Yes. Of course," Larkin replied.

"I'm assigning him to keep an eye on you and Marnie Thrasher until we deal with James Heller. I didn't want you to be alarmed if you noticed him patrolling the area."

"I appreciate that, sheriff. I'm going to be more careful from now on, but I worry about Marnie living way out there by herself."

The sheriff nodded. "So do I. Collin will see that nothing happens to her."

Wordlessly Deputy Webster left the office and pulled the door shut behind him.

"Is he okay?" Larkin asked.

"Why do you ask?"

"He's so solemn." Larkin decided against mentioning that the deputy radiated melancholy.

The sheriff laced his fingers in front of his stomach and rested his elbows on the arms of the wooden swivel-chair. "Collin Webster was in the Special Forces. He was on his second tour in Afghanistan when his wife was killed in a car accident. He left the service to raise his daughter. It's been a tough time for him."

Larkin's hand went to her mouth. "That's so sad," she said through her fingers. "He should be with his family, not babysitting me."

"Not to worry," the sheriff said dismissively. "Both sets of grandparents are around to help with the girl. But Collin is a caged tiger. Hunting down James Heller will be good for him."

"I'm sure you know what's best."

The sheriff pulled open a side drawer and pulled out a clear, plastic evidence bag. In it was a stainless steel revolver. He put it on the desk in front of Larkin. "Does this look familiar?"

Larkin leaned forward to examine it. "Yes. It's mine. It's the one I told you about that Heller stole from my apartment. Where did you get it?"

"We found it in the trunk of your car next to Elini's body. Two rounds had been fired. Doc Maguire found the bullets in her chest. I'm sure the ballistics will match. I'm also sure we'll find your prints."

The Hermit's Lair

"Of course you will. It's my gun."

"That wasn't an accusation."

"Why aren't you accusing me? The evidence is overwhelming."

"Because I know you aren't capable of murder."

Larkin blinked. The matter-of-fact way he made the remark stunned her. "Excuse me, sheriff..."

"Please—call me Cliff," he interrupted.

"Okay, Cliff. You're right that that I'm not capable of murder. But how can you know that? You barely know me, and the evidence speaks for itself."

Silence filled the room, as the sheriff's eyes held hers. "Miss Hunter," he said at length. "That's a complicated question."

"Please—call me Larkin. And I take it you'd rather not answer."

"Okay, Larkin. It has less to do with what I want, and more to do with your best interest. You're just going to have to trust me on that."

"So I've been told. What happens now?"

The sheriff put the revolver back in the drawer. "The judge has ordered Heller to provide a sample of his DNA. When we have a match with the tissue from your fingernails, he'll be arrested and charged."

"He'll have the best legal defense money can buy," Larkin said.

"I'm sure he will, but that won't help him here."

"That's good to hear. Can you charge him with Elini's murder as well?"

A hint of a smile softened the sheriff's face. "That's why I asked you to come by," he said. "I lifted several sets of prints from your car. I'll need yours for comparison as well as those of anyone you may have lent it to."

"That'll be no problem. Do you really think Heller would be so careless as to leave his own prints?"

"You never know. After all, he was counting on you being arrested with a body and murder weapon in your trunk. I doubt he was overly careful."

For the first time in days, Larkin felt her spirits rise. "I never thought of it that way," she said.

"Maybe we'll catch a break. I'll get his prints for comparison when we book him for your assault."

A thought occurred to Larkin. "Would it help to have his fingerprint before then?" she asked.

"Sure it would."

Favoring the sheriff with her brightest smile, Larkin steepled her hands under her chin. "You can get the index finger of his right hand from the vanity mirror in my apartment."

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* * *

A teacup teetered on the edge of the cabinet shelf and then tumbled. Marnie made a grab for it, but it shattered on the edge of the sink. “Doesn’t that beat all?” she said, in a voice tinted with self-reproach.

“Let me help you with that,” Larkin offered and knelt to pick up the pieces that landed on the floor.

In short order they had the mess picked up and Marnie got a new cup from the cabinet.

“You’re hurt,” Larkin said when a drop of blood splattered on the floor.

Marnie turned her hand over to see. “So I am. My skin is getting so thin—the least little thing cuts it.”

Snatching a towel off the rack, Larkin took the old woman’s hand and cleaned the wound. “It’s a small cut. I don’t think you need stitches.”

“I should think not.” Marnie wrapped a corner of the towel around her finger and picked up the teakettle with her free hand. “The weather is dreadful and we both need tea.”

With cups filled, the women retired to seats near the fire. Rain pattered against the window panes.

“I’m curious about that pendant you wear,” Larkin said when they were settled.

Marnie lifted it from her chest and held it up so that Larkin could see it better. “You mean this?” It was the silhouette of a bird on a limb, contained within a circle.

“Yes. I noticed it because my sister wears one just like it. Then I noticed that Sheriff Branson wears a pin with that same emblem on his uniform.”

“You are a very observant girl.”

“Thank you. Does it have some significance?”

Marnie nodded. “It’s the emblem of the Mystic Spring Foundation. Your sister and Cliff are members as am I.”

“Is that some kind of club?”

“Most people would think of it as a benevolent society. The foundation is the caretaker of Mystic Spring Park.”

“That makes sense. Evelyn is a caretaker if ever there was one.”

Marnie’s eyes twinkled with amusement. “May I ask you a personal question?”

“Of course.”

“Were you and your sister ever close?”

The Hermit's Lair

Larkin thought about it. "I'd say we were pretty close when we were kids. Evelyn always thought that since she was the oldest, she ought to get to boss me around. As we got older, I put up more of a fight. It got pretty bad when we were in high school."

"Raging hormones?" Marnie asked.

"I'm sure that was a part of it. We didn't speak to each other for weeks after I stole her boyfriend."

Marnie grimaced.

"I know—I felt bad about it myself later. She had it coming though."

"Oh?"

"Evelyn was always the perfect student. She got straight A's, was the president of the honor society, never once got in trouble—a real tight-ass."

"And you were more of a free spirit."

"I was more popular than she was, that's for sure. And I made good grades too, just not as good as Evelyn's. That haughty attitude of hers really got on my nerves."

"So you stole her boyfriend."

"I did her a favor, really—the guy was a creep."

Marnie sipped her tea. "You girls must've driven your parents up a wall."

"Mostly it was my mom," Larkin said. "Daddy was career Army and away from home a lot."

"That must've been difficult for you."

Larkin shrugged. "I guess so. We moved around a lot. You get used to it after a while."

"Surely you two have tried to mend fences."

"Oh, sure. Things got a lot better after high school. When I was in Journalism School at MU and Evelyn was in grad-school at UMR, we spent weekends together pretty regularly. But then she got engaged to Guthrie. It seemed like she changed overnight."

"How do you mean?"

"It was the strangest thing," Larkin said as she gazed into the flames in the fireplace. "Evelyn and Guthrie went to spend the weekend at Gram and Gramp's. Mom and Dad were there too. They didn't come right out and say it, but I knew they were planning to make the big announcement."

"Anyway, the next time I saw Evelyn, she was all over me about how I needed to get more serious about life. She's been like that ever since—especially after the incident in Seattle."

Marnie shook her head. "Should I know what you're referring to?"

“Of course not,” Larkin replied sheepishly. “I’m just so used to Evelyn throwing it in my face, I get facetious without meaning to.”

“What happened?”

“It was my first real job out of college. A source came to me with a story about corruption in City Hall. I showed it to my editor. He ran it. There was an investigation. The politician I named resigned in disgrace. His wife left him. He later committed suicide.”

“You can’t blame yourself for that,” Marnie said as she put her cup on the side table.

“Actually, I can. It turned out that my source was a disgruntled employee who made the story up and planted the evidence.”

“How do you know that?”

“She bragged to me about it after the guy committed suicide. I swear she was giddy with excitement over what she’d done.”

“What did you do?”

“What else could I do? I told my editor. Eventually my source was arrested and I was quietly fired for not checking my facts.”

Marnie rocked silently for a few moments. “Please don’t take this the wrong way,” she said. “But given your ability, how was it you didn’t detect that this woman was lying to you?”

“That’s a good question,” Larkin replied. “And you are going to love the answer. She was a sociopath. She has no sense of right and wrong as you and I do, so she lies without remorse. I relied too much on the gift. What I should have done is check her work history. She’d tried that sort of thing unsuccessfully before.”

The room fell silent except for the crackle of the fire and ticking of the mantle clock. Larkin felt spent. “Now it’s my turn,” she said, trying to sound cheery. “May I ask you a personal question?”

Marnie’s eyes twinkled. “Turnabout is fair play.”

Larkin twisted in her seat, and tried to think of a delicate way to phrase the question. “Peter made the oddest comment the other night when he gave me a ride home. I’d assumed from our conversation that your husband had passed away. Was I mistaken?”

Marnie stopped rocking, and Larkin instantly regretted broaching the subject. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

The old woman smiled sadly and resumed rocking. “It’s okay, dear,” she said. “I was just mulling over the best way to explain it. Are you up for a little walk after dinner?”

“Sure I am,” Larkin replied. “Where are we going?”

The Hermit's Lair

“There’s something I’d like for you to hear. It’ll make it easier for you to believe the story I have to tell.”

A chill ran the length of Larkin’s spine. “I can’t wait,” she said.

Marnie stood. “Would you like to look at some old photos while we wait?”

“I’d love to.”

Picking up the empty teacups, Marnie said, “I keep the album in my bedroom. If you wouldn’t mind to poke up the fire, I’ll get it and be right back.”

Larkin pushed the embers together in the hearth and added a fresh length of firewood from a stack on the front porch. When she’d finished, Marnie was back in her rocker with a photo album on her lap.

Larkin slid her chair closer and was about to sit when she noticed Marnie’s hand. “Oh my god!” she gasped. “Your finger—it’s healed!”

Marnie held it up to the light. “So it is. I told you I didn’t need stitches.”

Unable to comprehend what she was seeing, Larkin knelt and took the old woman’s hand in her own. “You just cut yourself a while ago and it’s completely healed. That’s amazing!”

Pulling her hand away, the old woman looked Larkin in the eye. “Are you telling me you haven’t seen that happen before?”

Larkin knew there was no point being evasive. “Yes I have. I heal quickly like that.”

“Then I guess we have good genes.”

“There’s more to it than that. Isn’t there?”

“Yes there is. And one day your daddy will tell you all about it.”

“But you won’t?”

“That would be a very dangerous thing for me to do. You’ll just have to trust me that I know what’s best.”

Larkin’s eyes went wide. “So I hear—you’re the third person today who’s told me that.”

* * *

The hooded sweatshirt hid his bandaged ear, but James Heller still felt exposed loitering in the Maryville University parking lot. Standing beside the open back hatch of the Suburban, he pretended to be absorbed in a cell-phone conversation. So far, no one had seemed to notice him.

A pair of women exited the building, both talking at once as they came toward him. Heller glanced quickly at their faces and turned back to the cargo

area of the SUV. She was still inside. If she didn't come out soon, the failing light would force him to use another tactic.

He bent over and rummaged through an open book-bag until the women passed. They both got into a white Camry and drove away with the music turned up loud—that is if you could call that crap music.

When the music faded in the distance, he caught the sound of athletic shoes squishing on the wet sidewalk behind him. He put one hand on the open hatch as if to close it, and casually turned around. She was walking straight toward him.

"I should be out by 8:30," he said into the phone, loudly enough for the woman approaching to hear. He closed the hatch, and still carrying on the one-sided conversation, began walking toward the building.

When he judged that just enough time had passed, he stopped, turned back toward the parking lot, and snapped a photo with the phone.

* * *

"You wouldn't play a trick on a city girl, would you?" Larkin asked.

Marnie stopped and shined a flashlight on her young companion. "Why on earth would you ask a thing like that?"

For the past fifteen minutes, they'd been walking through the woods in near darkness. "I don't know," Larkin replied. "I just can't shake the feeling that at some point you're going to ask me to hold a bag open while you chase a snipe into it."

Brushing aside the joke, Marnie turned the light back on the path that only she was able to see. "We've got a ways to go yet—we'd best keep moving."

The rain had stopped earlier in the evening, but water dripped from the trees in fat drops that splattered on their ponchos. The air was heavy with the earthy scent of wet leaves. The women walked in silence until the elder of the two abruptly stopped and turned off the light. "This is the place," she said.

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Larkin saw that they'd come to the head of the long valley that opened up into the meadow at Marnie's cottage. Against the skyline she could just make out the low saddle where the ridgelines on either side of them hooked like a horseshoe and came together. "What happens now?" she whispered to the silhouette of her companion.

"Wait and listen," Marnie replied. "It shouldn't be long."

A gathering wind soughed through a copse of towering pine trees. In the absence of light, the sound was foreboding. She hugged herself under the poncho.

The Hermit's Lair

Marnie was a statue as the minutes ticked by. Larkin fought against the urge to shift from foot to foot and tuned into the sounds that surrounded her. Rainwater gurgled as it seeped out of the hillside and tumbled its way to the valley below. A pair of owls called to each other in the distance.

The effect was mesmerizing. In spite of her apprehension about being in the woods at night on an unspoken mission, Larkin felt the tension in her muscles melt away. It was akin to lying on the beach at night staring up at the stars.

Her reverie was broken by a sudden howl from the ridge above her. She turned to Marnie, but before she could speak, a chorus of yips erupted around them. "What is that?" she asked, grabbing the older woman's arm.

"Never mind them," Marnie replied without emotion. "They're just coyotes hunting something. They'll move on directly."

With her heart pounding in her ears, Larkin released her grip and reached out tentatively with her mind. The primal energy of the hunting pack was a rush unlike anything she'd ever felt.

As quickly as the beasts had come they were gone. The two women again were alone in the dark.

Larkin had lost all sense of time when she felt Marnie's hand squeeze her wrist. "It's coming," the old woman whispered. "Can you hear it?"

"Hear what?" Larkin whispered back.

Marnie didn't reply, but her grip tightened.

It began low and rose in pitch, like the wail of a police siren in a black-and-white movie. Higher and higher it went until it reached a crescendo that split the night.

Every hair on Larkin's body stood on end. Marnie's hand was an iron clamp on her wrist. Was that a human voice? It seemed so, but how was it possible?

The sound fell away, and in the silence that followed, Larkin heard her companion's soft cry of despair. "What in God's name was that?" she asked, as she turned to face the old woman.

Marnie slid an arm around Larkin's waist and pulled her close. "That was my Asa."

Chapter 10

With unsteady hands, Larkin heaped logs into the hearth. It was going to take a lot of heat to drive away the chill of what she'd heard in those dark woods.

After Marnie's terse explanation, the tortured wail had risen again for a second, and then a third time. The two women had clutched each other in the darkness, frozen to the spot by the anguished peal.

"I'm making coffee," Marnie said from the kitchen. "After a thing like that, tea just isn't going to do it."

Larkin stood and backed up to the fire. At a loss for words, she watched in silence as the old woman poured two cups and then got a bottle out of the cupboard.

The old woman unscrewed the cap. "I'm having mine Irish—can I tempt you?"

"That would be wonderful," Larkin replied.

When they were both seated in front of the fire, Larkin took a sip. The whiskey-laced brew warmed a glowing path down her throat.

"I would have warned you," Marnie said. "But I knew you wouldn't take me seriously."

Larkin thought about that. "I'll have to admit it would have been hard to believe. I'm not sure that I do now."

"You can believe it alright. You asked about my husband, and I wanted to give you a straight answer. The problem is that the truth sounds made up. Maybe now you can hear my story and not think that I'm off in the head.

"I grew up in the city, but my daddy loved to hunt and fish. We had a weekend place on the river near Homestead, and we went there every chance we got. That's how I came to meet Asa Thrasher.

"I was seventeen back then. World War II had just ended a few months before, and there was still a carnival mood lying at the bottom of everything that went on."

Larkin did a quick calculation—Marnie was at least 80—she'd have guessed twenty years less than that.

"I was at that stage where I was embarrassed by my parents," Marnie continued. "So when we came to Homestead for a visit, I'd run off to spend time with a couple of local girls I'd made friends with over the years. If Daddy had known some of the mischief us girls had got up to, he'd have had a fit long before he did.

The Hermit's Lair

“I was hanging around with Tessie—one of my friends from Homestead—on a balmy Saturday in June, when she convinced me we ought to take a float on the river. It was a stupid thing for two teen aged girls to do, really. Back then they didn’t have canoes and rafts that any idiot can manage. If you went floating it was on a wooden jon boat. Did you ever see one?”

Larkin shook her head and sipped her Irish coffee.

“It was a beast of a thing,” Marnie continued. “Twenty or more feet long—made of wood plank—weighed a ton. The men that knew how to handle them got along alright, but it wasn’t a craft that a couple of school girls had any business fooling with.

“Tessie had it in her head, though, and I didn’t have anything better in mind, so I hit up my dad for the money. He handed it over without batting an eye. Later I figured out he knew we wouldn’t ever get off the beach. It turned out Tessie knew it too.

“Back in those days there was a sportsmen’s club where the Homestead Livery is now. Daddy was a member, so Tessie and I headed that way to see about making arrangements. I figured out I’d been set up when we got there and Tessie walked right past the entrance and winked at me over her shoulder.

“‘There’s somethin’ you need to see,’ she says to me, and takes off at a run toward the beach. Like the silly girl I was, I took out after her.

“When we got to the edge of the water, Tessie stopped and waited for me to catch up. ‘I want you to look at a guy and tell me he’s not the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen,’ she said when I got there.

“There were a couple of women on the beach lying on blankets, and a few kids playing in the shallow water, but no men. I asked her what guy she was talking about.”

“‘That guy right there,’ she said, and pointed to a shop building half hidden by a copse of willow trees.

“I couldn’t see him all that well at that distance, but what I did see caused me to stare. He had one of those long, wooden boats upside down on sawhorses, and he was painting it. He was wearing khakis and nothing else.

“‘C’mon, I’ll introduce you,’ Tessie said and started walking toward him, wiggling her behind all the way.

“About halfway there, he heard us in the gravel behind him and turned to see who we were.

“‘What’cha doin’ Asa,’ Tessie asks him in a syrupy voice.

“He pulled a hanky out of his hip-pocket and wiped the sweat off his face. ‘Almost finished with the boat,’ he said. ‘I just have to finish painting it.’

“By that time we were right up beside him, and he flashed me a smile that nearly made my heart stop.

“‘Who’s your friend?’ he asked.

“Tessie twirled her hair with one finger and looked sideways at me. “‘This is my friend, Marnie. She wanted to take a boat ride, and the first thing I thought of was you.’

“He stuck out his hand. ‘Hi, Marnie. It’s nice to meet you. I’m Asa Thrasher.’”

Larkin didn’t quite catch the giggle before it slipped out. “Sorry,” she said, her face flushing. “It just struck me funny. Was he as good looking as she said he was?”

Marnie smiled knowingly, and she rocked a few times in silence. “Honey, you have no idea. Tessie always was a little boy crazy, but this time she was just as right as you please.”

“Like I said, Asa wasn’t wearing a shirt, and he must’ve gone that way a lot. You hear people talk about bronze skin, but his tan really looked that way. The Thrashers were descended from the Osages, you know, so he had that kind of complexion and the thickest black hair you ever saw.

“I took his hand and we shook. He was solid as a hickory trunk, with rippling muscles all up and down his arms and chest, but he was as gentle with me as if he were handling a kitten. Oh, he was beautiful alright, but there was so much more...”

Marnie’s eyes drifted to the fire. The flickering light danced in the single tear that traced a path down her cheek.

Larkin stood and picked up both of their cups. “How about you catch your breath, and I’ll make us another coffee.”

“That’d be nice,” the old woman said in a voice barely above a whisper.

Unwilling to risk breaking the spell of the fire-lit story, Larkin fumbled in the kitchen without turning on the light. To each cup she added a generous measure of Ancient Age. “Here we go,” she said when she returned to her place beside the fire.”

Marnie smiled up at her and accepted the cup with both hands. “Thank you, dear. I didn’t mean to go all weepy on you.”

“Not at all,” Larkin replied as she sat. “I can only imagine how painful it must be for you to remember.”

“Painful? Yes—but good, too. I knew from the first moment I saw Asa that he was something special. Tessie flirted and cajoled until he agreed to take us out in his boat when it was finished, but that never came about. Not with Tessie along anyway.

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“Later, when we met up with some of the other girls who were headed to a dance in Mount Moriah, I begged off and went back to the beach. Asa was still there working on his boat.

“‘Where’s your friend?’ he asks just as casual as you please when I walked up.

“On her way to the square dance,” I said, trying to sound like I didn’t have a care in the world. “If you hurry, you can probably still catch her.”

“He just laughed and grabbed an old nail keg out of the back of the shop. ‘Have a seat,’ he says, dusting off the barrel-head with his hanky. ‘I’m almost finished here.’”

“My stomach fell like it does when you top a hill on a roller coaster. ‘Oh,” I said. “What happens then?’”

“He shrugged, and I swear his face turned red. ‘I thought maybe you’d like to grab a bite of supper at the club.’”

“You understand I’d been out with boys before, but never a real man like Asa. I was thrilled and scared witless at the same time. I managed to accept the invitation without making a complete fool of myself.”

“How old was he,” Larkin asked.

“Twenty-two.”

“And you said you were seventeen—that must’ve caused quite a stir with your parents.”

Marnie chuckled. “Daddy was fit to be tied when he finally found out. But by that time it was too late for it to matter.

“Asa and I had dinner at the club and spent the rest of the evening lying on a blanket beside the river. He never laid a finger on me, though I wouldn’t have minded a bit if he had. Asa was always a perfect gentleman.

“He was a natural storyteller and told me all about how he’d landed on the beach at Normandy and fought the Germans in France. He left out the ugliness of it all, mind you. The way he told it, the whole campaign was a big frolic with his rowdy friends. I knew it wasn’t strictly the truth, but lying there under the stars with him that night, I was mesmerized all the same.

“Tessie was a little jealous when she found out the next day, but only for a little while. After that she helped cover for me when Asa and I spent time together. In fact, she came to fancy herself as something of a matchmaker.

“That summer Asa and I burned like a brushfire. The second time we went out he asked me to marry him. I pooh-poohed the idea at first, but deep inside I was jumping up and down and squealing. Come Fall, on my eighteenth birthday, we celebrated by driving across the state line to get married.”

Larkin held up one finger. “Now let me see if I’ve got this straight—your parents didn’t even know you were going out with him, and then out of the blue you show up married?”

“That’s about the size of it,” Marnie replied, smiling as she rocked. “Mamma took it fairly well, which was a good thing. She was very helpful in keeping Daddy from using a shotgun on my new husband.

“He stormed around the house threatening to get the marriage annulled and Asa arrested until I threatened to never let him see the baby if he didn’t settle down. I wasn’t really pregnant, but the shock of hearing me say I was stunned daddy into silence. It kind of left Asa standing slack-jawed too, but that couldn’t be helped.

“When all the dust settled, and my parents found out that Asa was a war hero with good prospects for supporting their only daughter, they warmed up to him a bit. By Christmas he was a member of the family and Mamma was hinting about wanting a grandchild. All in all, things went pretty well with my family. Asa’s was another story.

“Being an only child of well-to-do parents, and a brand new bride to boot, you can imagine that I was more than a little full of myself when we walked up the steps to his parent’s house. What we expected was a surprised but tearful welcome to the family. What we got was the exact opposite of what had happened with my folks.

“Asa walked in with that big, white-toothed grin on his face and introduced me. When his mamma and daddy found out we were married, they both got a look on their face like they’d just swallowed a turd.”

Larkin choked on a sip of coffee she’d just taken and bent over coughing.

“Are you alright, dear?” Marnie asked, putting a hand on the younger woman’s arm.

“Yes, I’m fine. But I can’t believe you just said that.”

Looking pleased with herself, Marnie laughed merrily. “What can I say? You loosen the old girl up with a couple of nips, and she starts talking like a sailor.”

“I wouldn’t exactly say that,” Larkin replied. “And the mental image you created was perfectly clear. Why do you think they reacted that way?”

“It was simple. They were disappointed.”

“Why? They didn’t even know you.”

“Who I was didn’t matter. They were upset because Asa hadn’t come to them before we married.”

“How pissy is that?”

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“They had their reasons. One day you’ll understand, but for now the particulars don’t matter. In time everything worked out, and they gave us this farm as a wedding gift. Together we built this house and I’ve lived here ever since.

“Asa had a good job working as a land surveyor for his cousin, Luther Grayfeather—that would be Peter’s grandfather—so I had the luxury of being a full-time homemaker. Not that that was unusual in those days. We made a big garden, and I had my hands full looking after the house and livestock.

“We hadn’t lived here long before Asa took me on a night walk, and I heard that God-awful wailing for the first time. I must say, you handled it much better than I did. I was shook up so bad that Asa had to carry me out of the woods. When we got back to the house, we climbed under the covers and he told me the story.

“You see, that cry in the night wasn’t exactly a secret. Asa had known about it since he was a boy, as had his family, and a few others that I’ll tell you about another time. They all referred to it as ‘the hermit.’ We are all guardians after a fashion.

“The Osages believe that this valley is home to an angry spirit who lies in wait for anyone who comes too close to its lair. According to legend, the voice you heard tonight is a trapped warrior doomed to cry out in vain through eternity.”

“The Thrashers and the Grayfeathers have been custodians of this land for countless generations. Asa was fascinated by the old stories about the hermit, and determined to unravel the mystery once and for all. I was not happy about that at first, but if you walk through those woods on a sunny day, the spookiness of it melts away. In the end I decided that if his little hobby was the worst habit he had, then I didn’t have much to complain about.

“Asa spent days talking to the old ones and poring over old documents that have been archived by The Foundation. Using markers left behind by his ancestors, we combed the head of the valley looking for clues.”

“So, you went with him?” Larkin asked.

“You’re darned right I did! I didn’t put much stock in legend, but I had heard that cry with my own ears. I wasn’t about to let him wander around up there alone.

“I came to enjoy those outings over time. There were a lot worse ways to spend a day than wandering through the woods on a spring day with my sweetie. Asa always hoped to find some geological formation that might somehow explain what we heard. After all, the wailing only comes on a night

like tonight when it's been raining hard for days, and groundwater bubbles up out of the sides of the hills. That was his theory, anyway.

"For the better part of two years, that was how we spent what little free time we had, and we never did come any closer to solving the mystery. I wish we had, or at least I wish I'd stayed afraid of whatever that damn thing is. Every time Asa went poking around in the head of that valley, I went with him, except for one—and I haven't seen him since.

"It was a day so ordinary, it might have been any one of a hundred others just like it. Asa came home from work one evening in June and ate supper with me just like usual. We were supposed to go over to his sister's house later that evening, but Asa had it in his head that he needed to go up the valley first and check out some new theory that had come to him while he was at work. I tried to put him off but he wasn't having any of it. He insisted that he'd run up there real quick and be back by the time I'd cleaned up the dishes and taken a bath. Like a damn fool, I let him talk me into it.

"When the sun began to set, and he wasn't back yet, I started to panic. I had the presence of mind not to run after him by myself, so I jumped in his truck and high-tailed it to his cousin's house. Luther Grayfeather rounded up Asa's daddy, and a couple of other men, and together we searched the valley.

"Asa might as well have been raptured for all we could tell that night. The next day Luther came back with even more men and a pair of hounds. They combed those woods every which way and never found so much as a broken twig or an overturned rock. We all had a sickening idea what had happened to him, but it would be three miserable months later before we knew for sure.

"The summer of 1948 was a real barn-burner. The heat set in like it does in these parts, and we didn't get rain to amount to anything until fall. During that time I watched the garden and hay crop wither just like my hope for a storybook life.

"It was hard not knowing anything, but everyone circled 'round to support me. Mamma tried to get me to move back to the city with her, but I wasn't about to leave Asa alone. She stayed here with me as often as she could, and Asa's family bunked with me the rest. I was never alone, bless each and every one of them.

"The dry spell finally broke the first week of October. The clouds rolled in and the rain came slow and hard. On the second day, when it was clear we were going to get a real soaker, the men-folk in Asa's family began to gather. Everyone was too wound up to have much of an appetite, but I cooked for them anyway. If I hadn't stayed busy with all those guys standing around,

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twiddling their thumbs and staring at each other, I'd have lost the little bit of sanity I was clinging to.

"On the afternoon of the third day the rain stopped. I don't think ten words were spoken as we all gathered our coats and lanterns and headed up the holler. When we got to about where you and I were tonight, we stopped and waited.

"I remember Luther Grayfeather and Asa's daddy on either side of me, each with a big, beefy hand on one shoulder as the Harvest Moon crept above the ridgeline. When it was full-dark, the wailing came and I fainted from the grief."

Larkin studied the old woman's face in the flickering firelight, as wind tossed the oak tree just beyond the window. "I don't understand," she said softly. "Were you hoping that that awful cry would go away?"

Marnie's eyes met Larkin's, and she shook her head slightly. "Oh no—I had a pretty good idea we'd hear something. What we were all hoping was that it would be just like it had always been in the past. At least then there would be some hope that whatever happened to my husband was natural.

"In that one, terrible moment, I knew hope was lost. The other voice was gone, and my sweet Asa's had taken its place.

* * *

Her tongue felt like it was covered with dryer lint, and pain thundered behind her eyes. Trying to fall back asleep, Larkin punched up the pillow under her head. The adjustment helped her headache a bit, but pressure in her bladder would not be ignored. She got out of bed and fumbled her way through darkness to the bathroom.

Rubbing her temples as she relieved herself, Larkin tried to remember how many Irish-coffees she'd had. She and Marnie had kept talking and refilling their cups until the clock on the mantle chimed twelve. Clearly too tipsy to drive back to her sister's, she'd quickly agreed to sleep over in Marnie's spare room. Sleep had come the moment her head hit the pillow, but now, with the first hint of dawn in the sky, her fondest hope was that she had some ibuprofen tucked away in her purse.

Stopping along the way to fill a glass at the kitchen tap, Larkin crept back to the bedroom. Her purse was on the nightstand. When she opened it up, the first thing she saw was the red light on her cell-phone winking at her from within.

D. G. Bryant

"I wonder who tried to call?" she mumbled to herself as she flipped the phone open. She thumbed a button, and a grainy photograph appeared on the screen. Her friend, Joely, was standing beside her old Saturn with a book bag slung over her shoulder. The accompanying text message read, "Call me," followed by a phone number.

* * *

The shrill ring of a telephone jarred Heller out of a blissfully sound sleep. He found the hateful device on the nightstand and brought it to his ear. "This better be good!"

"James Heller—somehow I knew it would be you."

Heller came fully awake and sat up in bed. "It's about time you called, pretty lady. I was afraid you were avoiding me."

"I just found your message, you sick freak. If you lay one finger on Joely I'll kill you."

"I'll make a note. Jonas wants to talk to you."

"Fine—give him my phone number."

"He wants to talk to you in his office."

"Does he really think I'm that stupid?"

"He wants to make a deal."

The reporter laughed.

Heller touched the bandage on his ear. "If it was up to me, I'd wait for you to come out of hiding and put a couple of rounds in the back of your head. But it's not my call. Jonas is serious. You have his word that you won't be harmed."

"He's already had two women killed that I know of. His word means nothing to me."

"I'll bet your friend's safety does. What do you say I send you a finger every day that you stay in hiding?"

The phone remained silent.

"I thought so. Jonas will meet you in his office at noon. Come alone. Come unarmed. Don't try anything stupid."

"No way—we meet someplace public, or not at all."

"You aren't in any position to bargain."

"I can hang up and call Joely. I think she can stay hidden until the good guys arrive."

"Fine—where do you want to meet?"

The reporter named a restaurant.

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Heller laughed. "I've got to hand it to you, pretty lady. You've got style. We'll see you there."

In a chilling sequel to Theodosia's Flock, The Hermit's Lair weaves another tale of supernatural horror.

The Hermit's Lair

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