

ARE YOU AFRAID OF THE DARK?
YOU WILL BE.

AFRAID

JACK KILBORN

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Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear—not absence of fear.

— **Mark Twain**

There is no decent place to stand in a massacre.

— **Leonard Cohen**

The hunter's moon, a shade of orange so dark it appeared to be filled with blood, hung fat and low over the mirror surface of Big Lake McDonald. Sal Morton took in a lungful of crisp Wisconsin air, shifted on his seat cushion, and cast his *Lucky 13* lure over the stern. The night of fishing had been uneventful; a few small bass earlier in the evening, half a dozen Northern Pike—none bigger than a pickle—and then, nothing. The zip of his baitcaster unspooling and the plop of the bait hitting the water were the only sounds he'd heard for the last hour.

Until the helicopter exploded.

It was already over the water before Sal noticed it. Black, without any lights, silhouetted by the moon. And quiet. Twenty years ago Sal had taken his wife Maggie on a helicopter ride at the Dells, both of them forced to ride with their hands clamped over their ears to muffle the sound. This one made a fraction of that noise. It hummed, like a refrigerator.

The chopper came over the lake on the east side, low enough that its downdraft produced large eddies and waves. So close to the water Sal wondered if its wake might overturn his twelve foot aluminum boat. He ducked as it passed over him, knocking off his Packers baseball cap, scattering lures, lifting several empty Schmidt beer cans and tossing them overboard.

Sal dropped his pole next to his feet and gripped the sides of the boat, moving his body against the pitch and yaw. When capsizing ceased to be a fear, Sal squinted at the helicopter for a tag, a marking, some sort of ID, but it lacked both writing and numbers. It might as well have

been a black ghost.

Three heartbeats later the helicopter had crossed the thousand yard expanse of lake and dipped down over the tree line on the opposite shore. What was a helicopter doing in Safe Haven? Especially at night? Why was it flying so low? And why did it appear to have landed near his house?

Then came the explosion.

He felt it a moment after he saw it. A vibration in his feet, as if someone had hit the bow with a bat. Then a soft warm breeze on his face, carrying mingling scents of burning wood and gasoline. The cloud of flames and smoke went up at least fifty feet.

After watching for a moment, Sal retrieved his pole and reeled in his lure, then pulled the starter cord on his 7.5 horsepower Evinrude. The motor didn't turn over. The second and third yank yielded similar results. Sal swore and began to play with the choke, wondering if Maggie was scared by the crash, hoping she was all right.

Maggie Morton awoke to what she thought was thunder. Storms in upper Wisconsin could be as mean as anywhere on earth, and in the twenty-six years they'd owned this house she and Sal had to replace several cracked windows and half the roof due to weather damage.

She opened her eyes, listened for the dual accompaniment of wind and rain. Strangely, she heard neither.

Maggie squinted at the red blur next to the bed, groped for her glasses, pushed them on her face. The blur focused and became the time: 10:46

“Sal?” she called. She repeated it, louder, in case he was downstairs.

No answer. Sal usually fished until midnight, so his absence didn’t alarm her. She considered flipping on the light, but investigating the noise that woke her held much less appeal than the soft down pillow and the warm flannel sheets tucked under her chin. Maggie removed her glasses, returned them to the night stand, and went back to sleep.

The sound of the front door opening roused her sometime later.

“Sal?”

She listened to the footfalls below her, the wooden floors creaking. First in the hallway, and then into the kitchen.

“Sal!” Louder this time. After thirty-five years of marriage, her husband’s ears were just one of many body parts that seemed to be petering out on him. Maggie had talked to him about getting a hearing aid, but whenever she brought up the topic he smiled broadly and pretended not to hear her, and they both wound up giggling. Funny, when they were in the same room. Not funny when they were on different floors and Maggie needed his attention.

“Sal!”

No answer.

Maggie considered banging on the floor, and wondered what the point would be. She knew the man downstairs was Sal. Who else could it be?

Right?

Their lake house was the last one on Gold Star Road, and their nearest neighbor, the Kinsels, resided over half a mile down the shore and had left for the season. The solitude was one of the reasons the Mortons bought this property. Unless she went to town to shop, Maggie

would often go days without seeing another human being, not counting her husband. The thought of someone else being in their home was ridiculous.

Reassured by that thought, Maggie closed her eyes.

She opened them a moment later, when the sound of the microwave carried up the stairs. Then came the muffled machine-gun report of popcorn popping. Sal shouldn't be eating at this hour. The doctor had warned him about that, and how it aggravated his acid reflux disease, which in turn aggravated Maggie with his constant tossing and turning all night.

She sighed, annoyed, and sat up in bed.

“Sal! The doctor said no late night snacks!”

No answer. Maggie wondered if Sal indeed had a hearing problem, or if he simply used that as an excuse for not listening to her. This time she did swing a foot off the bed and stomp on the floor, three times, with her heel.

She waited for his response.

Got none.

Maggie did it again, and followed it up with yelling, “Sal!” loud as she could.

Ten seconds passed.

Ten more.

Then she heard the sound of the downstairs toilet flush.

Anger coursed through Maggie. Her husband had obviously heard her, and was ignoring her. That wasn't like Sal at all.

Then, almost like a blush, a wave of doubt overtook her. What if the person downstairs wasn't Sal?

It has to be, she told herself. She hadn't heard any boats coming up to the dock, or cars pulling onto their property. Besides, Maggie was a city girl, born and raised in Chicago. Twenty-some years in the Northwoods hadn't broken her of the habit of locking doors before going to sleep.

The anger returned. Sal was deliberately ignoring her. When he came upstairs, she was going to give him a lecture to end all lectures. Or perhaps she'd ignore *him* for a while. Turnabout was fair play.

Comforted by the thought, she closed her eyes. The familiar sound of Sal's outboard motor drifted in through the window, getting closer. That Evinrude was older than Sal was. Why he didn't buy a newer, faster motor was beyond her understanding. One of the reasons she hated going out on the lake with him was because it stalled all the time and—

Maggie jack-knifed to a sitting position, panic spiking through her body. *If Sal was still out on the boat, then who was in her house?*

She fumbled for her glasses, then picked up the phone next to her clock. No dial tone. She pressed buttons, but the phone just wouldn't work.

Maggie's breath became shallow, almost a pant. Sal's boat drew closer, but he was still several minutes away from docking. And even when he got home, what then? Sal was an old man. What could he do against an intruder?

She held her breath, trying to listen to noises from downstairs. Maggie did hear something, but the sound wasn't coming from the lower level. It was coming from the hallway right outside her bedroom.

The sound of someone chewing popcorn.

Maggie wondered what she should do. Say something? Maybe this was all some sort of mistake, some confused tourist who had walked into the wrong house. Or perhaps this was a robber, looking for money or drugs. Give him what he wanted, and he'd leave. No need for anyone to get hurt.

“Who's there?”

More munching. Closer. He was practically in the room. She could smell the popcorn now, the butter and salt, and the odor made her stomach do flip-flops.

“My...medication is in the bathroom cabinet. And my purse is on the chair by the door. Take it.”

The ruffling of a paper bag, and more chewing. Open-mouthed chewing. Loud, like someone smacking gum. Why wouldn't he say anything?

“What do you want?”

No answer.

Maggie was shivering now. The tourist scenario was gone from her head, the robber scenario fading fast. A new scenario entered Maggie's mind. The scenario of campfire stories and horror movies. The boogeyman, hiding under the bed. The escaped lunatic, searching for someone to hurt, to kill.

Maggie needed to get out of there, to get away. She could run to the car, or meet Sal on the dock and get into his boat, or even hide out in the woods. She could hurry to the guest bedroom, lock the door, open up the window, climb down—

Chewing, right next to the bed. Maggie gasped, pulling the flannel sheets to her chest. She squinted into the darkness, could barely make out the dark figure of a man standing a few

feet away.

The bag rustled. Something touched Maggie's face and she gasped. A tiny pat on her cheek. It happened again, on her forehead, making her flinch. Again, and she swatted out with her hand, finding the object on the pillow.

Popcorn. He was throwing popcorn at her.

Maggie's voice came out in a whisper. "What...what are you going to do?"

The springs creaked as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"Everything," he said.

General Alton Tope had barely poured a finger of twenty-five year-old Glenfarclas into his crystal rocks glass when his pager went off. He unclipped the device from his belt and squinted at the display. The number 6735 appeared. Following procedure he mentally added the four digits of today's date, coming up with 6762 and frowning at the unfamiliar code. What the hell was a 6762?

General Tope headed for his bedroom, the Scotch forgotten. He made sure the blinds were drawn, sat down at his desk top, and punched in his password. A military virus detection program automatically ran, deemed his equipment secure, and allowed him to log into USAVOIP—the US Army Voice Over Internet Protocol. He snugged on the headphones, noted the attached microphone smelled faintly of cigarette smoke, and automatically reached for the pack of Winstons next to the monitor. He punched in another password and listened to the phone ring through the foam speakers hugging his ears.

"Good evening, General," came the same soothing voice that always answered. "Please

“speak the alert code.”

General Tope sometimes imagined a buxom young blonde owned the voice. But the likely culprit was probably computer-generated, programmed by some overweight civilian geek with posters of Wonder Woman in his bedroom.

“Six-seven-six-two,” he said, shaking out a cigarette and hanging it in the corner of his mouth. The lighter was in the same place he always left it, in a paperclip container next to the mouse. A plastic disposable. He’d had the same one for over three years; Tope only smoked during these encrypted calls, and they didn’t come often.

“We have a Fallen Angel, General,” the voice said. “Highest Priority.”

General Tope drew deeply, filling his lungs with heat. When he answered, he tried not to exhale.

“What type of unit?”

As the computer on the other end of the conversation processed his question, Tope closed his eyes, waiting the twelve seconds for the nicotine in his lungs to hit his bloodstream and activate the pleasure receptors in his brain. Four seconds prior to that happening, the reply came.

“Red-ops.”

General Tope coughed so hard that spittle flecked his monitor.

“Repeat.”

“Red-ops.”

General Tope disconnected from USAVOIP, sucked in more smoke, and clicked on the icon to connect him to the White House.

Big Lake and Little Lake McDonald formed a horseshoe around the small town of Safe Haven—a sixty thousand acre horseshoe which effectively acted like a peninsula, cutting off the town from the rest of northern Wisconsin. Safe Haven had a single road coming in and out. For years there had been talks of widening the road and adding some attractions. The lucrative tourist trade enjoyed by neighboring towns never reached Safe Haven, partly because it was so secluded, but mostly because the nine hundred and seven fulltime residents preferred it that way. At town meetings, the value of the US dollar was always outvoted by the value of privacy, so the road stayed narrow and the town stayed isolated, even at the cost of economic depression.

Sal was one of those residents, and the seclusion, along with the decent fishing, were the main reasons he and Maggie bought property here. They enjoyed the solitude. No neighbors to exchange fake pleasantries with. No strangers to worry about. No excitement, no crime, and no surprises. Sal had spent the first half of his life hustling in the big city. Retirement in isolation was his reward to himself.

It was October, and the snowbirds had all gone back to California or Florida or wherever they lived during the cold months, which left only a handful of people still on this part of the lake.

When the screaming began, Sal only knew of one person within shouting distance.

He adjusted the touchy throttle on the Evinrude and squinted toward home, still several hundred yards away.

Another scream. A terrible scream. The scream of someone in horrible, agonizing pain.

Sound did strange things over water. It echoed, amplified, reverberated, and made it

damn near impossible to pinpoint its location. But when Sal heard that second scream he knew whose it was, and where it was coming from.

Maggie.

The realization made his stomach roll. He pushed the engine as hard as it would go, beelining toward home.

What could make Maggie scream like that? Had she fallen, broken something? Burned herself? Appendicitis? A toothache?

Or was it something to do with that helicopter?

As the screaming continued, Sal felt his stomach go from sour to ulcerous. He had to get home. Had to make sure she was safe. Had to—

The motor chugged twice, then died.

“Goddammit! Goddamn hunk of junk!”

Sal lifted the large red tank by the handle, and found it still half full. He reached for the fuel hose, squeezed the bulb, discovered it firm. The motor was getting gas. He pulled the starter cord four times, and each time it failed to turn the engine over.

Then Maggie’s screams changed. They went from incoherent and bestial to forming words.

“STOP STOP STOP GOD STOP STOP!”

Sal touched his chest. The pain in his gut had shot up into his heart. Who was Maggie yelling at? What was happening to her? He stuck the oars in the locks, turned around on his seat, and began to row.

“NO NO NO NO STOP NO!”

Sal had to get home. He hadn't rowed in years, maybe decades. When the Evinrude refused to work, Sal would pop the cover and futz around until it started again. Sometimes it took an hour. Sometimes he had to flag down another boat and get a tow back to his dock. But rowing—never. That was for young men or those without patience. But he had to get to Maggie and had to get to her *now*.

“PLEASE PLEASE GOD PLEASE GOD!”

Sal's chest and arms screamed at him. His lungs were two burning bags, unable to get enough air. His back and his knees pleaded with him to stop, to rest. But Sal kept rowing. He glanced painfully over his shoulder, saw he was less than fifty yards away.

“KILL ME! KILL ME! KILL ME!”

Sweet Jesus, Maggie, what was happening? Sal's arms shook, and he could barely lift the oars out of the water, but he kept the rhythm, kept the pace.

Stroke.

Stroke.

Stroke.

Stroke.

Each stroke closer to home, closer to the woman he loved.

I'm coming, honey. I'm coming.

Sal hadn't thought anything could be more terrifying than his wife's screams. But he was wrong. It was much more terrifying when the screams stopped.

Sal put his entire body into one final stroke, and momentum took him to his pier. He fumbled with the line, hooked it to a cleat on the dock, and then pulled himself out of the boat.

“Maggie!” His shout came out more like a wheeze.

On wobbly knees, Sal shuffled up to shore, toward his house. The door was open wide. Maggie would never leave it like that. Someone was in their house. Someone doing something terrible to his wife. He looked around for a weapon. On the porch, next to the tables, he saw the two-by-four. He used it to club fish before he filleted them. Sal picked it up, reassured by its weight. Then he went into the house.

The living room and kitchen were empty. He smelled burned popcorn, and something else. Something he'd smelled before, but never so strongly.

Blood.

“Maggie! Where are you!”

No answer. He went up the stairs as quickly as his old legs could carry him, up to the bedroom.

Something was sprawled out on the bed.

“...kill...me...” it said.

Sal couldn't understand what he was seeing. It didn't look human. When he realized what had been done, that the thing on the bed was what remained of his wife, the board fell from his hand and hit the floor with a dull thud. He was barely aware when someone came up behind him and pressed a blade to his throat.

“You must be Sal,” the man whispered. “We need to talk.”

Ashburn County Sheriff Arnold “Ace” Streng had just settled down in his easy chair for a cup of microwave chili and a marathon of *Mythbusters* on the Discovery Channel when his cell phone rang. He set the chili on the TV table next to his chair and squinted through his reading glasses at the number. His phone blinked FIREHOUSE 4.

Safe Haven.

Streng sighed. Safe Haven required a forty minute drive, and it probably wouldn’t be anything more than a cat in a tree, or some campers annoying the residents with their fireworks. He hit the *accept* button.

“This is Streng.”

The line disconnected. Streng brought the phone closer, saw he had two black bars indicating reception. It flickered to one bar, then back to two. Good enough. The fault was probably on the other end. Why anyone in this county voluntarily used cell phones was beyond Streng’s comprehension. A typical three minute conversation usually involved being dropped eight or nine times. Streng often joked that instead of cells he was going to give his deputies tin cans tied together with string.

The phone rang again. Streng craned his neck so the phone was a precious two inches higher up, that much closer to the satellite signal.

“This is Streng.”

“Sheriff, it’s Josh VanCamp from the Safe Haven fire station. We have, um, a situation here.”

Josh was a good kid, tall and strong like his late father. *Kid* was probably a misnomer—Josh had to be over thirty. But Streng was nearing seventy, and that meant he considered almost

everyone a kid.

“Is this an emergency, Josh? I’ve got my old carcass parked for the evening.”

“It is, Sheriff. There’s been a...helicopter crash.”

Streng didn’t know of anyone in the county who owned a helicopter. He looked longingly at his chili. The cheddar cheese he’d crumbled on top had melted perfectly.

“A helicopter? You’re sure?”

“I’m standing at the wreckage site. And there’s been some...*fatalities*.”

Streng sat forward in his chair. “People are dead?”

“Two.”

“Did you call for an ambulance?”

“Uh, no. They’re dead, that’s for sure.”

“Where are you at, Josh?”

“Off the big lake, on Gold Star Road, two and a half miles down. I brought the tanker. Fire’s under control. We’ll keep the lights on so you can find it.”

“Gold Star, you said?”

Streng hadn’t been down Gold Star in a while. The last time was to visit his cousin, Sal Morton. They’d caught some walleye, tilted a few back, and promised to do it again real soon. That had been two months ago. Streng had planned to call him, see how things were going, maybe set up a date to get on the lake once more before it got too cold. They’d been close friends since childhood, and it was wrong they didn’t try harder to stay in touch.

“Yes, Sheriff. Should I call the staties?”

Streng considered it. The State Police were the ones who dealt with highway accidents,

but Gold Star was a private road. They wouldn't want jurisdiction any more than he did.

"No, this is ours. I'll be there in half an hour. Anyone with you?"

"Erwin."

"Tell him not to touch anything. Same goes for you."

Streng hung up, then pulled himself out of the recliner. He dipped his spoon into the chili, blew on it, and took a single bite. Delicious. Then he put the cup into the fridge, strapped on his sidearm, and went out to his Jeep Wrangler, reminding himself that he only had three more weeks until retirement. Then it would be someone else's job to take care of these late night calls, and he'd be able to enjoy a little chili in peace.

Erwin Luggs made up for his deficiencies in the brainpower department by being helpful, dependable, and an all around nice guy. He didn't have the strong jaw and athletic build of his buddy Josh, but his oversized frame and an abundance of hair accentuated his friendly demeanor. The ladies thought of him as a big, cuddly teddy bear. One particular lady, Jessie Lee Sloan, liked him so much that she had agreed to be his wife, and their wedding was set for next month.

The wedding troubled Erwin, because it was costing a lot more than he originally thought. He had the part-time fireman gig, and taught gym at the Jr. High nine months out of the year, but Jessie Lee had just added a string quartet to the growing list of wedding expenses. Even without totaling up the final numbers, Erwin knew he'd need at least two more jobs to cover all the bills.

But all thoughts of money, and the wedding, and Jessie Lee, vanished as he stared into

the cockpit of that chopper.

“Don’t look at it,” Josh told him.

“I can’t help it. Never saw nothing like that before. You?”

Josh was staring past the wreck, into the dark of the forest surrounding them. He shook his head and spat.

Erwin asked, “Which head belongs to which, you think?”

“Coroner will figure it out.”

“Must have been the helicopter blades, right?”

Josh didn’t answer. Erwin stepped away from the wreck, but his eyes didn’t leave it. Their fire truck—a 3000 gallon tanker parked a few yards away on the sand road—had its emergency lights on, teasing the crash site with alternating flashes of red and blue. Erwin and Josh each held flashlights, but even with those and a full moon they couldn’t see everything at once—the trees were too thick.

When they arrived, the fire had mostly gone out by itself. A few of the nearby pines had been scorched, but the rain from two days ago prevented anything major from starting. Debris littered an area of about twenty yards in every direction, though it was hard to see because their flashlights weren’t powerful enough. The smoking shards of metal were out of place in the woods, making it look like an eerie alien planet. Erwin didn’t like it.

He backed up until he could no longer see the corpses in detail. A twig snapped, to his right. Erwin startled, focusing his light into the woods next to him, wondering what deer or coon was curious enough to come and see the wreckage. As his beam played across the trees he saw a brief glint of two eyes, which quickly vanished.

Erwin looked over at Josh. His partner had approached the cockpit and was peering in reverently. Erwin glanced back to the woods. The eyes couldn't have belonged to a deer because these were side by side. A bear? Maybe, if the bear was standing up. But Erwin knew bears, and the whole forest shuffled when a bear moved past. Erwin craned his neck forward, listening.

The woods were silent. Erwin had the uncomfortable feeling that the eyes were still there, watching him.

“Hello? Someone there?”

He felt foolish saying it, and even more foolish when no one answered. Erwin moved the flashlight to and fro, trying to penetrate the trees, but saw nothing. Could someone have survived the wreck? Someone hurt and unable to answer? He glanced again at Josh, saw that he was busy examining the inside of the chopper, and decided to investigate on his own.

The woods became very dark, very fast. The canopy screened out the full moon, and the thin beam of his flashlight worked like a theater spot, only illuminating a small circle and nothing else. Erwin moved slowly, respectful of his environment. In his teenage years he'd disturbed a badger on a late night hike through the forest, and the bite he'd taken on the knee still ached when it rained. It had been the scariest moment in Erwin's life, and he'd been unable to fight back, his muscles locked with fear.

Since then, Erwin avoided confrontation of any sort. He stopped playing sports. He walked away from fights. Thinking of himself as a coward was much easier to deal with than the horror of being attacked.

Movement, to the left. Erwin got the flashlight there in time to see something black dart behind a large oak. Too tall for a bear. A person?

He opened his mouth to say something, but didn't make a sound. If it was a person hiding behind the tree, why were they hiding?

Erwin took a step closer, feeling his arms go goosepimply and adrenalin tingle in his bowels.

Then a deer came crashing out of the woods.

Erwin reached out his hands to ward off the impact, dropping his flashlight, bracing his legs. The blow came weaker than he'd anticipated. Weaker, and warmer. The deer's head connected with Erwin's chest, but didn't push back. It just sort of stopped—as if he'd been tossed a football—and then came a spray of heat that stung Erwin's eyes.

He took two steps backward, the deer collapsing at his feet, kicking out its legs like it was still running. Then it jerked twice and became still.

Erwin rubbed his eyes, realizing the heat was liquid, and the liquid was blood. He found his flashlight in a bush a few feet away and it was also soaked in blood, the smears on the lens making it cast red light. Hand shaking, he pointed it at the deer and saw a three foot gash in the animal's side, so deep it cut through the ribs.

“Josh!” he yelled, though it came out as more of a croak.

Then he heard something else moving in the woods.

Sal Morton hadn't cried in more than thirty years, but he was crying now. The shapeless, bleeding thing that his wife had become continued to twitch and gasp on the bed beside him, and rather than be allowed to end her agony, the intruder forced Sal to answer a series of inane questions.

“I don’t know.”

“When was it?” The man’s foreign accent was heavy, his voice breathy and almost feminine.

“A long time ago. Years.”

“Where?”

Sal eyed his wife, watched her undulate. How could she even still be conscious?

“Please. Just kill her. Kill us both.”

“Where were you?”

“In town. At the hardware store. Jesus, please, can’t you let her die?”

The man did something with his knife, and the thing that was Maggie mewled like a sick kitten.

Sal reached for her, touched her, and this prompted more screams. He pulled back his hands and clenched his fists, shaking so badly he almost fell off the edge of the bed.

The man appeared amused.

“Will killing her help you focus?”

“Yes. Dear God, yes.”

“Then go ahead.”

The man offered Sal a pillow. Sal stared at it, and wondered for the hundredth time if this was really happening, if this was real. Only a few minutes ago he was fishing, pondering the activities for the upcoming holiday weekend. Perhaps they would eat out, then see a scary movie to celebrate Halloween. But life changed when he walked into that bedroom. The whole world changed. He wasn’t ever going to a movie with Maggie again. Instead, he was going to murder

her. Could he do it? Did he have the strength?

Sal closed his eyes, tried to picture Maggie the first time he saw her. A blind date. Sal could no longer remember who had set it up, but he remembered every second of their evening together. Maggie had worn a pink dress, her hair all styled up, and she giggled when she met him, obviously as pleased with his appearance as he'd been with hers. They'd gone bowling and had a wonderful time, even though neither of them possessed any skill or even particularly liked the game. Every year since then, on their anniversary, they'd go bowling. November fifteenth. Just a few weeks away.

"I can't." Sal dropped the pillow.

"You love her."

"Yes."

"She's suffering. See?"

The man did something unspeakable to Maggie, and he kept doing it. Sal tried to shove him away, but the intruder had muscles like brick. Maggie made a sound that didn't sound human, a gurgling moan of pure agony.

"Stop it! Please stop it!"

The man didn't stop. He smiled.

"Only you can stop it, Sal."

Crying out, Sal took the pillow and pressed it hard against what was left of Maggie's mouth, putting his weight on it, trying to drown out her screams, her pain, her life.

She twitched under him, an oddly intimate sensation which reminded Sal of lovemaking. He sobbed and sobbed, and the twitching went on and on, and Sal couldn't tell if it was her or

him anymore, but he wasn't going to stop, wasn't going to check to see, had to make sure that she was safe, make absolutely sure that she didn't hurt anymore.

"You killed her," the man said. "You can get off her corpse now."

Sal didn't move. He felt a piercing grip on his shoulder and was tugged backward, the bloody pillow still held tight in his old hands.

Maggie's ruined face was still, her remaining eye staring dully at Sal.

Then her chest shuddered and she gasped, sucking in air.

"Well," the intruder said. "She's a tough one."

Sal squeezed his eyes closed, clamped his hands tight over his ears. He couldn't take anymore. This wasn't supposed to be happening. This isn't how their lives together were supposed to end. He'd always pictured a quiet, peaceful death for them. Going to sleep and never waking up. Slipping in the shower and a quick bump on the head. Dying in a hospital bed, the morphine drowning out whatever killer lurked in their elderly bodies. Not like this. Not awful like this.

"Here." The man handed Sal his knife. "Put it in her heart."

Sal held the knife like he'd never seen one before. Maggie's chest rose and fell, accompanied by a wet, rattling sound. He reached out tentatively, gently laying his fingers on her breastbone.

"Right there. Press down hard, so you get through the ribcage."

Sal focused on the spot, trying to block out the reality of the act. This wasn't his wife. He wasn't killing her. This was a normal, routine task, like filleting a fish. A job that needed to get done. Unpleasant, but necessary.

Sal pushed down on the knife, forcing it in to the hilt, making himself stone for her sake. He held it until Maggie's heart ceased to beat, until the vibrations in the knife's handle stopped.

"That did the trick." The intruder clapped him on the shoulder. "Congratulations, killer."

The moment descended on Sal, pierced him. He cried out, an ineffectual curse at the universe for letting this happen, and then tried to pull the knife from his wife's chest so he could plunge it into the monster who caused this. Sal tugged, but the knife stayed put.

"This knife is meant for more delicate work, and has no blood groove," the intruder said. "You have to twist it to break the suction."

He demonstrated. There was a sound like an infant suckling. The man freed the blade and then wiped it clean on the bed sheets.

"Now, let's try to concentrate on answering my questions."

Sal's body shook, but he thrust out his chin at his tormentor.

"No. I won't do it."

Darkness seemed to spill out of the intruder's eyes.

"Yes, you will. You think you know pain, old man? You know nothing of pain. You'll answer every question I have, and beg me to ask more of them."

"No," Sal said, folding his frail arms, silently swearing on Maggie's head to not give this bastard the satisfaction. "You won't get anything out of me."

It took less than three minutes for the intruder to prove Sal wrong.

Fran Stauffer dumped the used coffee grounds into the garbage can beneath the cash register and wondered—not for the first time that night—why she had traded shifts with Jessie Lee.

Merv, whose name graced the marquee of the diner, had hired Jessie Lee back at the beginning of summer.

“She’s a kid, needs to work to help pay for her wedding,” Merv had said, winking in a way he thought was charming but Fran considered condescending. “Besides, it’ll give you some time off. You’ve been running this place solo for seven years.”

Fran could have objected, and Merv probably would have listened. But badly as Fran needed the money—and everyone in Safe Haven seemed to need money these days—fewer hours at Merv’s meant more time with Duncan. So Merv hired Jessie Lee, but more often than not Fran wound up working her shifts anyway.

Al, one of their regulars, had grown roots on the last counter stool. He held out an empty cup of coffee as if begging for change. Al was sixtyish, fat, and sported a walrus mustache that was waxed to little curls on either side. Nice guy, so-so tipper, a little too talky and a little too flirty.

The diner phone rang. Fran made no move to get it. Dollars to donuts it was a local, wanted to know if he could get a meal in before they closed for the night. Fran opened the top of the coffee machine, put in a cleaning tablet, and pressed the brew button. She took the practically empty carafe of leaded and gave Al another hit of caffeine. After five rings, the phone stopped.

“That was probably a customer,” Al said.

Fran smiled a waitress smile. “I’m not in it for the money. I’m in it because I love filling

salt shakers.”

Al chuckled. “Well, you make a damn good cup of coffee.” He twisted the end of his mustache. “And you’re easy on the eyes too.”

Fran knew she was tired because—for the briefest instant—she imagined herself romantically involved with Al. She squinted at him, marveling at how desperate she’d become.

While Fran didn’t consider herself beautiful, she had a full head of long, curly blonde hair, and pale blue eyes, and a body that still fit nicely into a size six. Her late husband had told her, often, that she looked like Melanie Griffith. Fran could see the resemblance, when her make-up was on and she wore something flattering. She certainly didn’t lack for male attention. At one point or another, Fran had been propositioned by every eligible bachelor in town, and by countless others during the busy tourist season. But she hadn’t been on a date in months.

If she were in her twenties like Jessie Lee, she would have gone out more often. These days, romance came in the form of Lifetime on cable, books on tape borrowed from the library, and late night baths with plenty of bubbles and a detachable oscillating shower head.

She’d given up hope on men. And though she didn’t mention it in therapy, Fran knew she’d also pretty much given up hope for happiness as well.

A car horn snapped her out of her reverie. Fran glanced out the storefront window, saw a pickup truck motor past. Then a car. Then another car. Something was going on. Perhaps some kind of sports thing. A local team had apparently won, judging by the yells accompanying the horns. Fran didn’t follow sports, and she was in no mood for the diner to fill up with fans. She eyed the cat clock on the wall, its yellow eyes synchronized to its pendulum tail. Almost midnight. Merv had left an hour ago, trusting her to cook if any business walked in. None had.

And none would. It was time to get home. She walked to the front door, and flipped the hanging sign over to CLOSED.

Picking up a tray, Fran did a quick tour of the floor, pulling ketchup from the tables. She took the bottles back to the counter and unscrewed the caps, soaking them in some seltzer water from the soda fountain. Then she pulled a box of ketchup from under the counter and used the spigot to top off each bottle.

“This is kind of embarrassing.” Al held the check in his hand and a pained smile stretched across his hairy face. “I only have eight dollars on me.”

Fran sighed. Al’s bill was \$8.32. Some shift. She wondered if she even made enough to cover groceries; she’d planned to stop at the Circle-K on her way home.

“Don’t worry about it, Al. You’ll get me the next—”

Fran’s words caught in her throat when the lights went out. The darkness came fast and complete, as if someone had cinched a black bag over Fran’s head. She immediately shoved her hands out in front of her, banging her knuckles while reaching for the counter. Her fingers gripped the edge of the counter, tight, as if there were a chance it would be pulled away from her.

Since the accident Fran didn’t do well in the dark.

The silence carried weight. Along with the lights, the perpetual whir of the pie cooler had vanished, along with the white noise buzz of the overhead florescent lights, and the *whoosh-whoosh* of the dishwasher that Merv ran practically non-stop in the kitchen. Claustrophobia crawled up Fran’s shoulders and perched there like a gargoyle, ready to bite.

Something jingled—keys—and then a sliver of light came from where Al sat. He pointed the keychain’s beam in Fran’s direction. Her heart pounded so hard she could hear it.

“I...I guess we blew a fuse,” Fran managed, trying to keep the panic at bay.

“I don’t think so.”

Al directed the light away from Fran, toward the storefront window. The streetlights were out. So was the *Schnell’s Hardware* sign across the street.

A car honked and buzzed past, making Fran almost wet herself.

“Traffic signal’s out too,” Al said. “Might be a power line. Might be the generator.”

Al’s light played across the stools along the counter, casting long, creepy shadows. The darkness smothered Fran. It clogged her nose and pushed into her lungs, making it hard to breathe.

“Can...I borrow that?” Fran swallowed what felt like a golf ball in her throat. “I need to find candles.”

The beam hit Fran in the eyes. She stood there, clutching the counter, afraid to move.

“Missy, you look scared out of your head. Afraid of the dark? Is—oh...I’m sorry...I forgot about...”

Fran couldn’t see Al, but she could guess at the expression of sympathy his face now wore. She tried to make her voice sound stronger.

“I just need it for a minute, Al.”

The silence stretched. Fran felt a scream kicking around in her belly, threatening to come up.

“You know what?” Al finally said. “I’ve been eating here for twenty years, never been in the kitchen. How about I go with you?”

The relief Fran felt was physical. She sighed, filled her lungs, and walked over to him in

the darkness.

Josh VanCamp turned in time to see his firefighting partner and close friend, Erwin Luggs, run straight into him.

The tackle was high, off-center. Four years of high school varsity football practice instantly kicked in, muscle memory prompting Josh to roll away from the pouncing body, retaining his footing even as Erwin ate the ground.

Josh felt something warm and wet on his face, stinging his eyes, and he recognized it as blood just as he dropped his flashlight.

“Erwin, what the—”

Erwin rolled onto his back, illuminating Josh’s face with the light he still retained. This brought a burst of pain as Josh’s pupils dilated, and he held up his hands to shield the glare. Then, behind him, he heard the familiar sound of the fire truck starting. He glanced over his shoulder, saw the blue and red flashing lights pull away, down Gold Star Road.

Josh took two steps toward the truck, then stopped. He wasn’t sure he wanted to catch whoever was driving. Closer investigation of the headless men in the cockpit proved that a broken helicopter blade couldn’t have been responsible for their injuries. Josh hadn’t ever seen a decapitation, but he saw that the cuts were jagged, not clean, and the high seat backs were intact above the shoulder line. A spinning blade would have cut off the seats as well as the heads.

Someone had murdered them. And Josh had no desire to meet that someone.

He went to his flashlight and shone it at Erwin, who hadn’t yet gotten off the ground. Blood soaked his friend so completely he looked like a red monster. Josh ran over and knelt next

to him, hands and eyes seeking out the spot that was bleeding.

“Deer.” Erwin stammered. “Something killed a deer.”

“You hurt? You okay?”

“I’m okay.”

Josh offered a hand, helped the larger man to his feet. Then he dug out the cell phone in his front pocket. No signal. He walked ten feet left, and ten feet back, the phone before him like a talisman. Nothing.

He stared back at the helicopter, wondering what to do next. In the bay of the chopper were four empty seats, and a large gurney with thick leather straps that looked like something out of a Frankenstein movie. The distance from the neck restraint to the ankle restraint had to be near seven feet, and the chest strap was long enough to encircle a rain barrel. What could have possibly been strapped there?

“We need to call the state troopers,” Josh said.

Erwin was trying to find a clean patch on his shirt to wipe his face, but there were no clean patches and he only succeeded in smearing the blood around.

“What about Sheriff Streng?”

Josh knew that this was beyond Streng’s capabilities. He was a nice old guy, probably competent in his day, but whatever was happening was too big for him.

“You wait here for the Sheriff, I’ll head over to Sal and Maggie’s place and use their phone.”

“Josh...that deer...it was almost cut it in half. Whatever killed it...”

Josh finished the sentence in his mind: *Is out there in those woods.* He took another look

at the Frankenstein gurney, set his jaw, and headed into the trees.

Just before the electricity went out, the phones throughout Safe Haven began to ring. First one. Then five. Then twenty. Then several hundred, all within a five minute period. Late night phone calls usually didn't mean good news, but every resident who received this one immediately shrugged off any sleepiness and began dialing other residents, per instructions.

Land lines and cells, from old-fashioned rotary ding-a-lings to the modern rock ringtones programmed in by teenagers, echoed out through the night, through the woods, carrying across Big Lake and Little Lake McDonald, fading out and finally mingling with the crickets and owls.

An exodus soon followed, whoops and hollers and horns accompanying vehicles as they headed into town. At long last, prosperity had found its way to Safe Haven, filling the heads of every man, woman, and child with dollar signs.

The celebration would be short lived.

Sheriff Ace Streng pulled onto Gold Star Road, the Jeep's four wheel drive biting into the sand and gravel surface and leaving tire marks in its wake. His brights were on. So were his undercarriage beams, and the hunting spots on the overhead roll bar. All of that wattage, and the light still couldn't penetrate more than two feet into the forest. These trees were ancient, thick, and they lined the sides of the road, their tops bending over and obscuring the night sky. It was like traveling down a winding, high-arched tunnel.

Streng drove by a house almost entirely hidden by foliage, tried to recall the name of the owners. His mind gave up the answer a mile after he passed. The Kinsels. Snowbirds, gone

someplace that didn't have minus thirty degree winters and four feet of snow by January.

"Where are you hiding?" Streng asked himself, scanning ahead for the swirling red lights of Josh's fire truck. Streng could imagine a whole fleet of helicopters lost in these woods. If daylight never came, they'd never be found. The forest liked to hide things. A plane went missing ten years back—one of those experimental one-seaters flown by some rich moron who hadn't bothered filing a flight plan—and it had taken a week of continuous searching before they found the wreck, less than two hundred yards from Big Lake McDonald's east shore. By that time, a family of raccoons had already moved into the cockpit, and an egret had built its nest on the tail section. The coyotes took care of the pilot.

He reached down and rubbed his right calf, then his left one. Shin splints. The pain sometimes acted up when he drove. Every so often he toyed with the notion of seeing a doctor about it, but always dismissed that as weakness. As his late father liked to say, "It's better to have two bad legs than a single healthy one." And Dad knew that from experience.

His cell rang, and Streng peered down his nose at the number. Mayor Durlock, from Safe Haven. In a town of less than a thousand, a helicopter crash was a headline news, and the mayor never missed an opportunity to speak to the press.

"Sheriff? Something wonderful has happened."

"Not for the people in the helicopter."

"Helicopter? What? Oh." Durlock sounded sleepy. Or maybe he'd been drinking. "This is about the lottery."

"Lottery?" Streng asked. But he was talking to a dead line. No signal. He tried redial, it didn't work, and he tucked the phone away and concentrated on driving.

Still no sign of Josh, and the road dead-ended in maybe a thousand feet. Streng passed Sal's property, and was reaching for his cell to call the firefighter when he heard the sound.

Having grown up in the Northwoods, Streng knew animal calls. The warning hoot of owls. The howl of timber wolves. The crazy piccolo chorus of the loons. This didn't sound like anything Streng had ever heard before. It was loud, and shrill, but with a gurgling quality to it. Like a woman screaming under water.

Streng brought the Jeep to a stop and rolled down the windows, his ear facing the forest.

“OOOOHOOOOHOOOOHOOOOOGGGGGGGGHHH...”

This time it sounded less animalistic, more human. But what could cause a person to make a sound like that? Was it Josh and Erwin, screwing around? And where was it even coming from?

He pulled onto the grass alongside Sal's house, the Jeep in park, dug the flashlight out of the glove compartment, and stepped onto the scrub grass. The night was unusually quiet, as if the woods were collectively holding their breath. Streng adjusted the beam for maximum distance, unbuttoned the strap on his Kimber Compact Stainless .45, and walked in the direction of the sound.

“AAAAAAAHHHHHHH NOOOOOOOOO...”

That was someone in agony, and you couldn't fake agony like that. The fire truck was still nowhere to be found. All that lay ahead was Sal's place.

Reflexively, Streng pulled his sidearm from his holster and thumbed off the safety. He'd been carrying it cocked and locked. Now it was ready to fire.

He moved at a brisk pace, minding his footing but intent on helping the screamer. Streng

was old school, military trained. He kept the flashlight at his hip in a sword grip, and his gun before him at chest level. He'd been shown, years ago, a method of locking wrists so both flashlight and pistol were aiming at the same thing, a move favored by cops in the movies. What the movies didn't show you was the sympathetic limb contractions and hand confusion that occurred while under fire, where combatants would often shine their gun and try to shoot their flashlight. The new moves weren't always the best moves.

Another scream. Definitely coming from the house. Every light was off, making Sal's two story cabin look like the silhouette of a mountain among the trees. Streng directed his beam at the front door, and from a dozen yards away he saw the pry marks on the jamb, the splinters sticking out like witch's fingers.

Streng tucked the flashlight under his armpit and touched the knob cautiously, as if it was hot. The door opened with a faint creak, and Streng again gripped the flashlight and moved in a crouch as low as his shin splints would allow. The air in the house radiated warmth, and it tingled against his cool skin. The acrid smell of burned popcorn filled his nostrils. The silence seemed total, complete. Not even the click of the furnace or the hum of the refrigerator.

"JEEEEEEESUS CHRHHHHHHHHHHHIST!"

The scream brought Streng back in time, twenty years earlier, to a traffic accident scene. A pedestrian pinned under a trailer truck, his face pressed against the burning hot muffler. They couldn't move the semi, couldn't lift the semi, couldn't do a damn thing until the tow truck came, and as the victim's face cooked away the screaming became so intense that Streng had actually pulled his gun and considered shooting the poor bastard.

This scream conveyed the same thing; unimaginable pain.

He took the stairs two at a time, calves crying out, jaw set hard, gun steady and leading the charge. The top ended at a hallway. Streng went left, toward the scream, knowing he should announce himself as a police officer, but some instinct, some voice in his subconscious, told him it would be better to use the element of surprise.

Streng stuck his head through the bedroom door, shining his light, gripping his weapon, and he turned out to be the surprised one.

“Hello, Sheriff Streng.”

The intruder’s voice was high, breathy, with a foreign lisp. Streng’s beam spotlighted him, standing next to the bed with a gun to Sal’s head. Sal sat on the edge with his legs over the side, his chin and chest bobbing up and down as if he had an accelerated case of the hiccups. Streng glimpsed something on the mattress next to Sal, something bloody and naked and sprawled out—*Jesus, was that Maggie?*—and then Sal screamed again, the force of a fog horn, as the intruder twisted some sort of pink-handled knife into Sal’s arm.

No, not a knife. The intruder was manipulating Sal’s bone—either the radius or the ulna—which protruded through the split flesh.

Streng aimed his .45, centering it on the intruder’s face.

“Drop your weapon!” he yelled.

The intruder offered a humorless smile, continuing to jerk the bone back and forth. Sal’s entire body vibrated, his back arched in a scream that Streng felt in his fillings. It went on and on, briefly stopping for Sal to refill his lungs. Streng felt his stomach quiver and clench, the acid burning the back of his throat.

“Your hands are shaking, Sheriff. Are you sure you can hit me? I hope you don’t miss,

for Sal's sake.”

“Drop the weapon!”

In a blur the intruder switched aim from Sal to Streng.

“You drop yours first, Sheriff. I'm sure we can talk this out, like civilized men.”

Streng knew if he pulled the trigger it was likely he would die. This man was too fast, too cold. A pro. The best chance for survival was to diffuse the immediacy of the situation by retreating, calling for back-up, even though his soul cried out to shoot this creature.

In an eye blink he made his choice; get help. Streng stumbled away, out the door, Sal's screams sticking to him like a shadow. His radio and cell phone were in the car. He had to get down there, call the states, get a hostage negotiation team here.

Noise. Behind him.

Streng spun, only to see something impossibly huge coming up the stairs.