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CHAPTER 1

This is where they put you, Zane thought, his heart pounding.

This is where they put you when you're so fucked up you can't stand up straight and someone calls the police and you're going to sleep it off in a cell— if you're at the point you're climbing behind the wheel and about to careen into the opposite lane and kill a minivan full of kids. The white bricks walls, the solid metal door and the white hospital lighting told him he was in serious trouble. He just didn't know which kind. Before he remembered that they put bars on the damn things, he looked at the window, a small one near the ceiling. Just big enough to crawl through. And as soon as he put his palms on the wall and his fingers met the edge of the sill, he realized the window wasn't barred.

There was light coming through. Another strange light, not like the odd feel of the fluorescent, super-market lighting he was used to seeing any time he needed to sneak himself a meal.

Zane took a breath, looking through the glass. He could see the tops of trees on the other side. He didn't get the impression he was in some basement jail cell, the closer to complete consciousness he came, the stranger his circumstance felt.

It was enough to make him turn around and look at the solid metal door. It had a lever handle.

The handle is on the inside... he realized, wondering how he would murder any pigs standing guard on the other side. He let his palms off the wall and saw that there was no lock on the door. More than that, there were shelves, one on each side, and a yellow mop bucket in the corner. The shelves were decked with cardboard boxes, nothing was written or stamped on them, and they were so orderly in arrangement that he thought he might be in a janitor's closet.

He looked through the little window on the door, then traced upwards, looking outside— the kind of window they would put on a jail cell. But it was only a window, there wasn't any reinforcing wire and the glass didn't look very thick. On the other side he could see metal shelves.

It looked like the bodega in Chicago, only a lot bigger and better kept. The lights were off, but he could see dark rows of candy in their bins and packages lined up on shelves and other wares.

Through the tall windows on the other side of the displays he could see more trees.

This is not Chicago....

And it wasn't cold enough to be Chicago.

"...the fuck?"

Zane closed his eyes, "the lobby."

He had been in the lobby of a hotel, ready to drop the envelope off, and then— and then what?

"No," he hissed. Fucking Jacob, he set this up. He had asked Zane a bunch of favors and promised that if shit got real he could work out some kind of immunity, they could even make it seem like they gave it to him against his will.

But now Zane was here, somehow. In a janitor's closet. Looking at trees. Nowhere near the city.

He couldn't imagine how.

2

The fucking radio tower was right there.

Right. There.

Between the Wires (Sample)

Donna couldn't get a signal. She thumbed up and down the screen, opening the settings, into where the airplane mode was and back to the wi-fi, and then back out of the settings. The little symbols on the corner of the phone kept spinning, searching for a signal. Her daughter never really walked her thought how the cellphone worked, and it killed her; she'd lose signal in one instant but gain it in another, but the signal always came back. Be patient; try moving to somewhere where you'd think a tower would reach you. No, that's GPS, that's satellite information...

That's the part that always confused her, how could you get a beam from a satellite, through all that atmosphere to your phone but not between two hills. Hell, she had seen the moon landing as a kid; they beamed that motion footage back from the moon, as so she should be able to get a signal practically standing under a cell tower. All she wanted to do was call her daughter and get her to come pick her up.

She couldn't even get the weather application to load up.

NO CONNECTION.

"Fuck you," she hissed, looking back up at the tower; a single red light flashing at the top. It loomed a dense set of woods, trees growing so close together it would have been too hard to climb through them. A wide field stretched behind her, with what looked like mowed down wheat coming in. Thigh high. She pushed the phone into her back pocket.

It felt late in the day, and she was warm enough that she stripped off her jacket and wished she was wearing a short sleeve shirt. Beyond the field she could see single family homes on what might have been a subdivision street. She looked down at her belt, her badge rested on her right hip and her revolver was jammed into its concealed holster on her side. She didn't want to walk around with those exposed. Determined to sort out what was happening, she began to walk across the field, the warmth getting to her cold climate nature. She decided to wrap the jacket around her waist and fold the arms in front of her navel—that should hide the badge and gun well enough...

Then all sorts of horrific scenarios buzzsawed through her mind. She physically stopped in the field, almost mid-step.

You went to sleep on your couch in the fucking station. That's the last thing you did.

What if this is a set up?

She knew she hadn't driven home; and she could feel her car and house key in the front right pocket of her pants, her badge clipped to her belt and her wallet jammed into her back pocket. She stopped carrying a purse years ago, age and the nuisance of it convinced her to stop. She had everything she went to sleep with still on her. Everything she fell asleep with on the *Couch*. In the *Station*. Surrounded by uniformed officers and plainclothes detectives.

How many people have you put away in your career? And which one would fuck with you like this?

How could anyone have abducted her in the station? It was the most secure place in town. She didn't get up and sleepwalk out of there.

This climate is all wrong.

It's hot. It was February in Colorado and there was no way she slept until July. The temperature and greenery on the trees suggested it was late spring or early summer.

She couldn't convince herself that she had mistakenly put herself in this situation.

Someone put her here.

Donna took a breath, felt her heartbeat and told herself to not get worked up over circumstances she didn't yet understand. Donna looked across the field at the half dozen houses, wondering if she was being watched. It dawned on her how much stranger her situation was; not only did she wake up somewhere she didn't recognize at the wrong time of year, but everything looked wrong. Everything felt a little off. She had been in some rooms that didn't feel... she wasn't sure how to put it. Correct? Was that the word she would put in a report? They were places where it felt like the walls leaned in half an inch. She didn't believe in bad vibes until she visited her first double murder scene,

thirty years ago, and she distinctly remembered the weird, cramped, off-kilter feeling the house-turned-crime-scene exuded.

It felt that way now. Everything looked right, but it didn't *feel* right.

Donna couldn't see the houses well enough to tell if there was anyone over there, looking out their window at her, but she swore she could feel eyes. Slowly, she turned back to the radio tower, and pulled the revolver just out of the holster so that anyone at the houses wouldn't see what she was doing. If this was some drug lord's way of getting the revenge, they were wrong to leave her with the gun. She thumbed the cylinder open. It was loaded. None of the shells were spent. She pushed the gun back into its place.

"Alright," she said to herself quietly, turning back to the houses. *Let's see what the hell this is all about...*

3

At first Richard Pierce was confused, but now he was worried, confounded. The woman was lying on her stomach, her mouth stuck open in mid-scream. Her arms and legs were splayed, as if she were reaching with fingers and toes to grab on for dear life. The hatchet in her back was similar to the smaller tools they kept on the fire engine, lacking the crow's feet.

He stood on a street he had never seen before. He couldn't smell faint smoke on his shirt anymore. His hands felt fine, which made him think he was in some kind of dream. He could ball his fist; he could drive his fingernails into the pads of his hands without soreness working through his arms. He couldn't do that yesterday, he didn't have the strength and he couldn't have endured the pain; but the blue hell if everything felt fine now. He had been pumping his hands since he woke up in the unfamiliar hotel room.

"Is this a test?" he asked out loud, hoping someone would pop a head around a tree or the store corner.

This was like the training courses, he half expected to see a simulated building burning and supervisors standing off to the sides with clipboard in hand, barking orders and mockeries, but he was the only person here— other than the woman sprawled on the ground. It looked like a disaster simulation scenario, but he didn't have any gear, no direction, and the woman didn't have a pulse. He almost turned her over to see if she was a well-constructed dummy, but he knew better. Even from ten feet away he could tell she was real.

He turned to the dark gas station. There were no cars in the lot or at the pumps.

Or on the road. Or in the driveways that he could see.

Still gathering his bearings, he turned back to the fence.

Richard couldn't appreciate the construct he was looking at. Its structure, position and meaning led him to the conclusion that whatever purpose it served, it was of no good nature. It was a hellish twisting of barbed wire, chain link, razor wire and rusted metal cables crisscrossed in layers upon layers upon layers. It stood thirty feet high, ran out from the tree line on the left, crossed the road, and disappeared into the trees on the right. It was supported by a mix of thin and thick rusty metal bars that jutted out of the ground, forced through the earth and concrete. There was no particular pattern to this barrier, just a mishandled, cruel looking façade.

When you see a ROAD CLOSED sign, you get the impression that there's construction on the other side. When you see concrete dividers, you know it's there so that you don't go bounding off into oncoming traffic or over the side of a bridge. At the zoo, you see thin wires that probably pulsed a low voltage, just enough to keep the tigers from eating your kids. But those leave a good impression, the ones that say, *Obey and you will be safe*. They're built to be minimal, yet cautionary. Not over the top. Their purpose is to come across as protective, not harmful.

Stay the Hell Away or Die... That was what this barrier implied. Just a series of disorganized wires made to spill blood and tear muscle, create lacerations and infection that would go on for years. Richard wasn't sure that even a

very small child could manage their way through the death trap without severing a few vital arteries. It was going to keep people back, even if it meant costing them their lives. Richard couldn't imagine who would build such a thing, let alone put it in a neighborhood. Maybe this was an abandoned part of some town. Even then, you'd put a warning sign up, and settle for some cheap chain link fence. Only there were no signs here. There was nothing to warn him away other than the very sight of the gnarly thing.

He could just catch glimpses of what was on the other side. He could tell the road continued on, and eventually veered to the right. There weren't any houses. The trees seemed to continue on for maybe half a mile before finally disappearing off a hill. Behind that loomed a clear blue sky. But there was something odd about it. The trees were too perfect, the crown of the hill too uniform, as if the world ended just over there. He imagined that the deep blue sky above hung over nothing.

"Hello?" he shouted.

His voice drifted away.

Richard turned back to the gas station and wondered if he was losing his fucking mind. He wasn't a drug user, almost never drank (the guys at the station look down on the members who crack open so much as one beer, even in their off hours), and never understood why someone would get high just to drool on themselves while lying on the couch. He had been with the Fire Department for only two years, his initial training was over. Was this some kind of test they put people through? Or some rite of passage? He couldn't imagine the boys doing that to him, or the brass allowing it. As much as they pranked and screwed with the new guys, this seemed way too far. A lawsuit waiting to happen.

The gas station looked dark and empty. He tried to peer through the windows. He could just see the shelving with snacks and other items on them. There weren't any adverts in the windows, no soft drink advertisements. No glowing neon OPEN sign. As if construction had just completed, as if nobody had ever been inside.

And it wasn't just the station.

The world felt empty, dead.

It's all wrong. Not just waking up in a hotel he had never seen before, but the look and feel of the place. There was even something about the air that hit him different in an unsettling way.

And now, staring at the gas station, it hit him.

I'm completely alone.

The houses were dark. There weren't any cars. The houses he'd passed by all appeared empty. This place was abandoned.

Not just the absence of people.

He couldn't hear any birds.

Or insects.

Or the distant sound of a dog barking. Or an engine running. Or a plane overhead.

4

Charlie jumped to her feet and looked at the bed she fell off of. As soon as her eyes swept the room, she began wondering if she had been living some kind of dream for the last several days. She stood in a bedroom she had never seen before, dry, and even though her heart was going, it wasn't because of physical exertion. The hair on her arms stood up as if a bomb had gone off.

"Where the fuck..." She looked around the room, as a strange feeling dawned on her. She was still wearing the same clothes she had been wearing for days.

Between the Wires (Sample)

She tried to make sense of her new surroundings and didn't see her backpack or the rifle or the shovel or anything she had touched in the last week. This place felt like some kind of facility, but she didn't remember actually seeing the search and rescue team, just the dog on the other side of the bank. They probably would have taken her to a hospital once they realized she was dehydrated and malnourished, but there wasn't an IV stand or an EKG monitor—the bed was just a normal bed, just a mattress with sheets. It was a normal bedroom.

No, I can't be...

She felt her heartbeat pick up a few ticks as the blood drain out of her face. Was it really Search and Rescue that he found her? She was sure it had been. Could some hiker have picked her up and put her in here? Were they in the house calling 9-1-1? For the life of her she couldn't remember anything after being in the creek and seeing the dog. Charlie might have gotten up and walked through the creek—that might have been her imagination, but she was pretty sure she remembered it.

Charlie looked around the room again, and then took stock of herself. She wasn't as hungry or thirsty as she had been in the last few days...

She looked down at her elbow, there was no indications he had been given anything intravenously, no little piece of gauze with tape over it. She didn't feel any residual of the sticky adhesive things they attach the leads too. She wasn't covered in gauze across the small scrapes and cuts she had accumulated. Damn.

And she couldn't remember anything. She couldn't guess how she wound up here.

She immediately went to the door, grabbed the knob, and almost had a stroke when it actually turned and the latch clicked. She let out a breath she didn't know she was holding. The hall led to another closed door, and then, just a bit further down, an open living room. She couldn't hear anyone moving around, or talking or a tiny voice coming through the phone asking for a name and address...

She almost called into the house to see if she could get a response, but already knew she was totally alone.

5

None of them knew how much time mattered, but three would find themselves in the gas station in a matter of minutes, starting with Richard and Zane.

Zane saw Richard coming first. He was wearing what looked like part of a uniform without the duty belt. He had a small gold insignia on the breast of his dark shirt. The man was tan, built; he could have been a model. He was looking around, almost nervously, but at the same time, walking with a strange assuredness. Zane stood behind the last row of the shelves, closest to the big, glass door coolers in the back, and watched the big man as he approached. Zane was sure he was a cop.

The man stopped just outside the station doors and looked back toward the street, then took a few steps toward the gas pumps, peering at the LED screens. Zane looked around the shelves, small boxes on the cheap metal mantels, plastic blister packages from running racks. He couldn't guess what any of them were meant to be. He didn't see anything sizable, like a bat or a brick. He felt himself pumping up and down on the toes of his feet, ready for a fight.

The man turned away from the pumps, looked down the street and then turned back to the station.

Get a weapon... hide... Something...

Zane looked over the shelves again, then to the coolers. There were glass bottles with varying labels. He opened the closet door and reached in. It didn't dawn on him that the cooler and bottles were room temperature, and he didn't look at the label long enough to see the oddity of the figures stamped on. He flipped it over in his hand and gripped it by the neck.

While Zane was thinking about aggression, Richard was cautious, still wondering what this in the hell this was all about. The more he thought about it the less it seemed like this was some sort of a set-up, training scenario or practical joke by his colleagues. He was careful when he put his hand on the metal handle of the station's door, and he wasn't sure why. He had never really stopped to examine those big metal L-shaped pull handles, but there was something off about this one...

He pulled the door open, half expecting a bomb to go off or something, but nothing happened. The dark station was about the right size, filled those little packages of overpriced candy and trail mix hanging off of metal shelves. The tile floor was clean, the countertop where the cash register was neat, missing the little incense and lighter display. The register itself was a little too clean, too smooth.

I could grab that thing and run off with it, Richard thought. It wasn't tucked behind glass like what they did in the city. This region was clearly more country, maybe the outer suburbs. Maybe they were just more trusting here? He took a step into the convenient store, "Hello?"

6

Alarm bells were going off in Donna's head; she could almost see the swirling emergency light in her own skull and hear tornado sirens in her ears. They weren't really there, but it was the built in system—the instinct—that kept officers alive while they were moving in on some unknown, unforeseeable situation, often implied a vague description from dispatch of some drunken husband and bleeding wife, or some mental patient holding up in apartment who may or may not have a gun. Those were the developed instincts up and down the ranks, of uniformed officers, and it had been a couple of decades since she wore the blue.

Seeing the tall, black man walking into the convenient store gave her some level of relief. She wasn't alone, but also bothered her. He looked as confused and lost as she felt, walking from the street side to the store, only to stop and turn back to the gas pumps and examine the gas pumps, but she wasn't sure why it bothered her. Eventually the man walked over to the front door, placed his hand on the handle, and stopped. She waited, squinting. Donna didn't wear glasses and she knew her vision wasn't the keenest, but even from this distance she could tell the man was confused.

"What are you doing?" she whispered to him. She was kneeling down in the tall grass between houses, looking down the street. Her knees hadn't completely failed her, but she was well on the way to a replacement and she was conscious to lean against one of the house's walls before getting down. Whatever meniscus was left in the joint might be spared at least a little roughage.

From a distance the man seemed to look down at the handle he was holding; and after a long moment, pull the door open and peered inside. He held the door open for a few seconds and may have said something she couldn't hear from this distance, and then stepped inside, out of her view.

A moment later she pushed off her knee and walked toward the station. Even though she had just seen another person, she wasn't excited about it. He didn't have the air of assuredness about him, like he didn't live here, like he had never seen this place before either. She thought she had seen an emblem on his dark, tight shirt. Maybe EMT? Another officer? God she hoped he was a first responder of some kind; it'd be nice to talk to someone who's used to maintaining confidence in uncertain situations....

Then the yelling started.

7

Between the Wires (Sample)

“Jesus, Dude! Stop!”

“Get the fuck away from me!”

Richard was backing away, hoping to feel his boot hit the store’s swinging door. The guy in front of him was clearly not well, his pale face, sunken eyes, bad skin— Richard knew addicts, he had been on enough calls trying to render aide to them to know how hostile they can become. This one was tall, lanky, the leather jacket hung off his shoulders. He had a bottle of liquor by the neck, raised over his head and ready to strike.

“I’m going,” Richard said, his hands in front of him, palms down, trying everything he could to act demure and unthreatening. The guy took a step toward him, ready to strike. His eyes were wide, insane.

“Get away from the door!” the man yelled, taking a step forward.

“Move!” Someone else shouted. Richard flinched, half expecting the bottle to come crashing down on his forehead.

“Get out of the Goddamn door! You! Get on the ground!” A woman’s voice.

Richard took another step back, trying to make sense of the situation, how he got here, and how he’s going to get out. He felt his boot hit the steel frame of the glass entrance door, then felt it open. Someone was pushing their body against his, but Richard couldn’t turn fast enough to see what was happening.

The tall man moved.

Whoever was behind Richard was tugging on him, trying to steer him out the door.

The bottle missed his head by inches, and the big man immediately began to turn.

“Police!” The woman yelled. Richard just caught a glimpse of an aged, tired face with wrinkles just beginning to form under mascara covered eyelids.

“Fuck off!”

“Stop!”

Richard turned just as the bottle came across on the backswing, this time aiming for the woman. She was mid-step when the bottle smashed into her outstretched hand and shattered.

BOOM!

Her hand exploded, smoke blasted forward through as glass and liquid sprayed the air. She let out a shocked, pained scream. Richard realized she had a gun, and she had fired. If the crazed, coked up man hadn’t hit her arm with that bottle, he’d probably be dead.

“Fuck,” the woman yelled, leaning over and holding her wrist. Richard could see blood but wasn’t sure how bad she was hurt. The druggie turned and ran. Richard wasn’t sure if she had shot him; he didn’t think she had.

“Back up,” Richard said. He placed hands on her shoulders, trying to pull her away from the door, but she pushed him back with her good hand.

All his instincts to help kicked in, “Ma’am, you are hurt. Just get out of the door, did you hit him?”

She was still doubled over, but did move out of the door. She squeezed her wrist as if she were trying to stop all the blood from pumping to her hand; the small revolver was pointing to the ground. He could see her face tight with pain, fighting back a yell, trying not to swear.

“I’m with the fire department,” Richard said, leaning over and trying to meet her gaze.

She glanced at him with water in her eyes, and then turned back to the door, “Where did he go?”

“He went into the building, I didn’t see where.”

“Police!” she yelled, switching the gun to her left hand and tucking her bad hand under the opposite armpit. She wasn’t spewing blood, but Richard didn’t like how much he could see. If there was a shard of glass buried in her wrist it could be up against an artery or already through it. Richard had to fight every honed instinct to sit her down

and try to render aid, he didn't have his field kit, and she had already given him a hostile shove and told him to get away from her. He worried she would turn the gun on him.

"Just leave it," Richard said, "he's probably gone out the back."

"Who was that?"

"I don't know. I don't know what the hell is going on. I don't live here; I'm from Las Vegas—"

"Police!" she yelled through the glass door, "Get out here with your hands up!"

"He's probably gone out the back door."

"Fucking hell," The woman reached out with her bad hand and winced when she grabbed the L-shaped door handle. Richard could see the wound, but he didn't see any glass sticking out of her wrist, and the fact that she had enough strength to fling the door open told him she wasn't going to bleed out in the next minute, "Police! Show yourself with your hands up!"

"Please don't go back in—"

But she was gone, disappearing into the darkness of the station. Richard didn't know what to do with himself, on the one hand he was an emergency responder, on the other he wasn't trained to hunt down and find someone who might be labeled criminally insane. He peered through the windows and watched as the woman's shape as she ventured deeper into the station, pointing the gun down one row of shelves and goods, then moving onto the next. Before he knew it she was out of sight.

He turned away from the windows, his heart in his throat. There wasn't like any training scenarios he had been through, response to this sort of stuff had been left academic. There was no fire. There weren't any E.M.T. personnel running around. This didn't look like any mass casualty training session he had been involved in. Sure, maybe there was more to be found down the street and away from the barb wire nightmare that crossed the road— but that didn't give him any direction.

"This is fucking happening," he said, frustrated.

The woman with a gun...

She had screamed police, but that might mean nothing. The Crazy probably had a solid ten seconds head start, plenty of time to get around the shelves and out the back of the store. Every part of him screamed to get involved — "*you see some shit going down with another uniform, I don't give a shit what they wear, you get involved!*"—but the old bitch had made it clear, stay away from her and let her do her thing. He didn't want to chase a stranger with a gun. It reminded him of the time when a state trooper arrested a fire fighter on the freeway because he wouldn't move the fire engine while his men were opening a hole in a flipped minivan while a mother lay motionless and her screaming six year old was trapped in the back seat.

He knew better than to rush into the station behind her. The man was obviously a threat, had already improvised a weapon, and you realize fast as a Firefighter to not mistake yourself for a super hero. Richard learned early on in his training that fire fighters were incredibly timid when it came to their job, and that turned out to be a good thing. It kept them alive.

Richard looked back to the gas pumps, hoping to see some semblance of reality, but they were wrong, just like the fucking fence that ran across the road, just like this whole fucking place. It felt wrong, *he* felt wrong, and it was only then that he realized how anxious he had been. Ever since he woke up. A strange apprehension—

"You! Sit down," the woman commanded, coming back through the door, she had the gun pointed at him.

"I don't have anything—"

She jabbed at him with the pistol in her good hand, "*I Don't Give a fuck! Sit Down!*"

Richard felt his knees collapse on her command. She was in charge; the black, hallowed barrel of her gun stuck in his face told him she was. It was so normal for him to put his hands out and try to calm down a victim of a drunk

driver or someone who had just been involved in a serious hit in run, you always go in with palms down, telling them who you are and how you are going to help them. Richard was doing the same with the woman. Only it had nothing to do with training this time, just his own intuited reflexes.

He guided his eyes down as he sat, crossing his legs, as the police always seemed to like, “Alright... alright... you got it. My name is Richard, I’m with the Las Vegas Fire department. You don’t need to point that at me...”

“I saw your shirt,” she said, clearly breathing through the pain, “Why are you... what are you doing here?”

“Wish I knew. I thought this was a training exercise or something...”

“Do you remember coming here? The car ride over?”

“No.”

She looked up the street, toward the corner of the gas station, still holding the gun in his direction, the barrel pointed close enough to him that he didn’t want to jump up and try to stop her bleeding. Police would shoot you for rolling down a damn automatic window. He wasn’t about to take a chance with this woman, especially after she was injured. He didn’t let himself get mad at her, he told himself that she’s just as scared as he was.

The woman tucked her wrist back under the other arm and winced, trying to kill the pain.

“You think you’ve got glass stuck in there?” Richard asked.

“I think you better—”

She shot up, her posture perfect and her eyes went to the corner of the super market. The gun went after, pointing to the edge of the convenient store. Richard looked back far enough to see someone disappearing into the shadows of the at the edge of the woods, hundreds of feet away. He could just see in the corner of his vision as she slowly lowered the gun. Maybe the crazed man was too far away or she wasn’t confident that she could hit him.

“Fuck. Me,” She said.

Maybe it’s because she can’t shoot someone running away, he thought, regretting the cross legged position his ass sat on and knees construed into, “Well, he got away, you got a phone?”

“I was about to ask you.”

Richard took a breath in and tried to take stock of his situation. There had to be something more going on here. At least he wasn’t alone. Any possibility of this being some kind of training exercise vanished— the guy in the gas station and now this woman bleeding from her wrist —this wasn’t training.

8

Charlie was so sure this had to be a dream that she actually clasped a portion of her exposed thigh between her fingernails and pinched. It hurt, but it didn’t knock her out of a deep sleep; it wasn’t some phantom pain. She was left more confused than she had been when she first woke up. She looked down her at her ankle and ran a hand where the injury should have been.

She stood in the living room of a house she had never been in before. It was plain. There was chair, a couch, both covered with a strange fabric she had seen in pictures but never with her own eyes, and that was about it. No television or pictures or vases with flowers in them. Nothing personalized about the room, nothing to make it feel like a home.

The front door was closed, both forbidding and inviting. Light poured through the windows.

“God,” she whispered to herself. The idea of being totally free slowly dawning on her. She took two steps behind the couch, which faced nothing, and walked to the door. She wasn’t sore, which was surprising, she had spent so much time on her feet over the last few days she thought her thighs should have burned. Just yesterday she had been deliriously dehydrated.

Between the Wires (Sample)

Charlie grabbed the knob, expecting the same satisfying turn and clicking as the mechanism gave way under her power.

The knob resisted.

She turned the knob again; it gave, but then rolled back. There was a small sound on the other side of the door. She let go of the knob.

“What?” she said to the door.

“Hello?” a voice came from the other side of the door.

Charlie reached out and opened the door, this time it opened. Light spilled into the living room. A young boy stared at her. A few inches shorter, a few tones tanner, his mouth open and confused, his eyes wide behind thick glasses. A heavy, red book bag hung from his shoulders and he wore a matching red ball cap. The boy might have just stepped off the school bus.

Oh Jesus, you're in his house...

Before she could say ‘hello’, or explain what she was doing in the house, the boy’s face changed to a wide, awkward smile. He flipped the palms of his hands up and said, “Hey. I’m sorry. I’m a little lost.”

9

Kallen hid. The kid was on the front porch now; looking up at someone, saying something Kallen couldn’t quiet hear. There was another, responding voice a second later.

The little bastard looked lost as he was wandering down the street, walking slowly, looking at the fronts of the houses, turning around to look back down the street. Kallen almost called out to him, but decided against it, he didn’t know where the hell he was, either. He couldn’t even figure out what part of the damn country he was in, but if he had seen it before it would have been on television. This was a far cry from Arizona, and the more time he spent wondering the woods along the side of the road, the more he thought he was closer to some east coast suburb.

He listen as carefully as he could, his middle aged ears ruined by copious nights of loud music, booze, skeet shooting with friends and yelling across construction sites. He tried to peer through the small thicket of trees at the porch, he could just tell the front door was open, but couldn’t see who was inside.

There was definitely another voice there now.

So there are more people here...

He spent the last twenty minutes staying off the streets, trying to figure out how in the hell he went from covering his tracks and hunting javelina to a dead neighborhood. The escalation of confusion forced him to stop several times, made him wonder if he was drugged up, maybe he had done something, gone on the run and couldn’t remember it.

Then why the fuck are you in in camouflage with your fucking bow and arrow. The last thing he could remember was being in between two crags, tracking a day-old set of prints out in the high desert, going up to a plateau on a rancher’s property he had never met. He felt his hand shaking again, his anxiety getting the better of him.

The kid moved on the porch, turn around and look down the street. Kallen should have made himself known sooner, but what the hell was that going to look like? This kid just got out of school and be stopped by a guy in camouflage, looking like swamp thing, with a giant compound bow and arrow? ‘Hey kid, you ever seen this before? How do my eyes look right now? I don’t remember taking any ecstasy, but hey, you look a little lost and I sure as hell am, let’s be friends.’

Between the Wires (Sample)

Someone walk onto the porch, past the kid and stop at the edge of the steps. A woman, young, pretty, dressed for warm weather. She looked up and down the street. He could just hear her soft voice cross the street before she turned back to the boy.

From this distance Kallen couldn't really measure her up. She didn't seem like the mom, her skin was definitely too pale to be biologically related. He put an elbow on the tree in front of him and leaned forward, turning his head, trying to hear what they were saying.

“—I'm not sure—”

“— Do you know the name of—”

“—I don't think I've ever seen—”

Voices rose out of the distance and then faded away, back and forth, quickening, becoming frantic. They were so in and out they didn't sound conversational. There was the same anxiety there as he was feeling, hiding in the woods, creeping around, hoping not to make his situation worse.

They don't live here, he thought, they're in the same situation I am. They have to be.

But what was she doing in the house then? Why was she in there? She must live there, right?

She turned, looking toward the trees he was hiding in. Her eyes glanced over and just missed him, but his instinct made him duck back behind the tree anyway, dragging the compound bow along the ground with one hand, the green water bottle attached to his hip sloshing just a little too loud. He stared at the bark of the tree he hid behind, listening, waiting. Her voice continued, and then the kid spoke again.

How in the hell do I deal with this? Kallen wondered. He couldn't just jump now, could he? For fuck's sake.

He felt the hair on his arm stand up under the camouflage jacket. There would be police, and they would see his dilated eyes in the revealing light of day and wonder how he got here in the first place. He was carrying a deadly weapon, potentially. An officer just has to write it up a certain way and that would send Kallen up shit creek without a paddle.

“Calm down,” he whispered to himself.

You haven't killed anyone yet.

But he knew from experience that could change.

10

Donna didn't have much of a choice, but she kept the gun guarded with her still good hand while the fire fighter— Richard —worked on her injured hand. It wasn't just that the logo on the shirt or on his hat, the uniform of his pants and shine to his boots that told her he was probably in the right; it was his demeanor. She had worked around plenty of firefighters after investigations and there was a pointedness to their actions and speech. It as different from a police officer having to testify or give a brief while body cameras were rolling.

“You didn't tear up any veins or arteries. That's damn lucky, I can't tell if anything is broken, but there's definitely going to be bruising,” Richard had taken a tissue box from the station and now he was working away at the blood around the dozens of small cuts across her wrist. She couldn't help but notice that the box contained what felt like tissues for wiping noses, they were thicker, rougher. Almost medical, gauze like in nature.

“Can you get a reception?” Donna asked, “I tried earlier—”

“I didn't wake up here with my cellphone. I remember being at the station, I think I slept on one of the bunks so my phone would have been on the charger on the table.”

“And you have no clue where in the world—”

“I wish I did. I didn't see that radio tower you were talking about. Are you sure it's the kind for cellphones...”

“Is there any other kind?” Donna snapped. Her hand throbbed, and the longer he took wiping away the blood and examining injuries she had sustained, the more she felt the throbbing rising into her arm and to the back of her head, threatening a migraine.

She felt nauseatingly vulnerable. The man was gone, and Richard said he saw something on the back door. She told him to go back outside and he finally convinced her to take a seat while he tried to find something to mend her arm. He couldn’t find anything resembling an antiseptic— ‘maybe there was alcohol in the bottle that will keep it clean’ he had joked — but was rough while assessing and cleaning her wounds.

“This is the point I’d say we need an ambulance. I can’t tell what’s going on inside,” Richard said, turning her wrist over to inspect one more time. He dropped the bloodied tissue on the pile next to her. She was sitting on the edge of the sidewalk while he knelt on the dark blacktop of the parking lot. He pulled another tissue.

“I think that’s enough,” Donna said, but several small blackened and blued swells on her arm and shelf of her thumb were already running red with flesh blood.

Richard grabbed a few more tissues and pushed them into her wounded hand, “hold that over your head, above your heart at least. Give it a chance to clot...”

I knew that, dammit...

“...Let me go in there and see if there’s a phone behind the counter.”

“You okay going in there alone,” Donna asked.

“You just stay there a minute; you’ve got enough to worry about right now.”

“And if he comes back?”

“I’ll yell and you’ll shoot him. Deal?”

11

David Freedman could tell she was a cop, and that bothered him. The big black guy that looked like he was in off-duty black fatigues had been tending to her arm, and that made him worry even more. If they knew each other, from what he could tell at a distance, they didn’t like each other.

He had left his fucking rifle in the truck, and wherever he was now, nothing in the truck had come with him.

He wanted to kick himself in the balls.

There was a soft glare to the window, brushing away just enough detail that he could only see the two clearly if he knelt down and looked through the bottom left corner. The gas station was surrounded by trees, and the street continued down, toward him, past him. On the other side of the gas station there was something else, a fence manufactured in hell, a razor blade barricade.

He woke up in the bedroom, next to an alarm clock, and after quickly assessing his situation, realized the oddity of the space he woke up in. There were houses, finely cut lawns, thick woods as far as he could see, almost like a barrier, and sporadic wooden areas around the houses. Nowhere did he see a car, a wooden or chain link fence with a few warped wires where a Labrador had tried to chew through or weeds popping through the perfect lawn. It was all too neat. Too nice.

Movie studio nice.

He had been around a few in the past. There’s nothing like the allure of an Arizona desert, especially to a California producer. ‘It’s too much to put it in the movies’, his grandfather would say about the spaghetti westerns that were always filmed in Italy.

Even after the set had been cleaned up and the old barn on the opposite end of the ranch had been cleared of lighting gear and dollies, things would go back to feeling normal about those spaces. He had built plenty of fires

around the outside of a ruined cabin door to keep warm, and when a building was artificial—made to seem old—it was easy to tell. Mold is always dangerous, two week old paint made to look like mold was a relief, and he had slept in both.

But this place is different...

The woman was standing up, turning back to the station. David pressed the binoculars to his eyes, trying to see through the glare, and saw the bigger black man take a step back. She took a step to the door. She was the one making the decisions, David had seen it before. The first motion toward any kind of danger was always the move of a leader.

She had shot what? Once? Maybe twice?

David wasn't sure. The gun in her hand was small, likely a revolver.

He wasn't sure how to weigh her as a threat. Normally he would just move on, but he didn't know where the fuck he was or why, where his truck was and why it wasn't parked in the driveway.

He didn't remember driving here, but that didn't mean anything. He had woken up back in his own home after a cold eight hours under the Arizona stars before, defeated by the elements. There were times he couldn't remember even starting the engine.

David watched as the two disappeared into the gas station, and felt peculiarly alone again. He wanted to go over and ask them where in the hell they were, what they were doing there.

But there had been a gunshot.

And that made him uneasy. Even with the fake tin badge and semi-accurate uniform, he wasn't sure he could convince them he wasn't a problem.

There have to be more people here.

12

“Piedmont High, I just started a few weeks ago.”

“Seventh grade?”

“Eight.”

“And you know your way home? Where your parents live?”

“Of course. I walked home every day from middle school, the high school was a few blocks away. What about you? Does any of this look familiar?”

“None of it,” Charlie said, looking up and down the street, “I don't—I don't know. The trees are all wrong.”

“I noticed that too. I don't know what they are though. They're bigger.”

“Not pines, but they look like it, from the bark.”

“Pine?”

“Pine trees. Pine needles, you see them a lot in the south. Small brown needles that fall from the trees?”

“Heard of them. Don't know if I've ever seen one.”

They had been picking each other's brains several few minutes. The kid was strangely calm, while Charlie was starting to think this was some kind of fever dream—maybe from the snake bite.

Did that actually happen? Was that the dream and this the reality?

She didn't think so. She was still dirty, her shoes caked in dirt, but her forehead wasn't tender anymore from what happened in the bathroom.

“Want to split up? We can just go house to house and ask—”

Between the Wires (Sample)

“I don’t know,” Charlie said, looking at the houses, at the driveways, “I don’t see any cars. Do you hear anything? Dogs or engines?”

“I heard something earlier. Loud. Like a gunshot.”

“How do you know what a gunshot sounds like?”

“I hear them all the time. Usually at night. There’s a bad neighborhood a few blocks over.”

“Maybe an engine backfired.”

“I don’t know. Those sound different. Dad can tell the difference. There *is* a difference, but it’s hard to explain.”

“Maybe we should find a restaurant or something,” Charlie said, looking down toward a bend in the road. There were enough houses, but not built close enough to feel like the kind of neighborhood her friends lived in. It *felt* like there would be something nearby, a restaurant or a dollar shop, something.

“Are you okay?” the kid asked.

She looked down at him. He was pulling on one of the straps on his backpack with one hand and pointing to his forehead above her eye.

She reached up and touched hers, feeling the bump, “Yeah, it’s fine,” she said.

“You look like you were out hiking or something. Do you remember that?”

Boy, do I fucking remember it, she thought, “I was camping.”

“With other people?”

“For a little bit, then by myself. Let’s start walking, we’ll find someone and get some help.”

The kid adjusted the oversized backpack; every damn book the school could issue must have been stuffed in there. “You want me to carry that?” Charlie asked.

“No, it’s fine, I’m used to it. I have a lot of homework and stuff.”

“Teachers get bored of homework after a while,” Charlie said, starting down the street.

“I don’t mind it.”

The kid was so calm Charlie was starting to come down to baseline. She decided to lean into it rather than find reasons to panic herself, “What do you like to study?”

“All of it, math and science. I like this biology teacher, Mr. Hogg. He’s got these frogs in the aquariums. Says they’re a pain to keep though.”

“One of my teachers kept a snake.”

“I’ve also got a general science teacher. He made something for NASA once, some chip that went into a satellite.”

“That’s cool.”

They walked and talked for a while, and while Charlie tried to keep the conversation going, she was also trying to stay alert for any movement or sound. She figured she could probably drop the conversation all together; the kid wasn’t freaking out and seemed more preoccupied with talking than understanding their situation. Just an innocent inner-city kid. A Nerd. She thought he’d probably be the one making a circuit board for NASA one day.

But right now he was here with her, in a place neither of them recognized. Which implied more than Charlie cared to think about. A minute into their walk she looked back down at her ankle to see if the bite was still there. It wasn’t, but she thought she could just make out two black dots. What the hell happened between then and waking up here? How did this happen?

Somewhere ahead of them, Charlie heard a door shut.

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