



ALL HALLOWS EVE

-Sample Chapter-

W.M. DeSilva



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Chapter 1

Tommy Billings almost never left his office anymore. He had a team for that. But when he heard his high school friend was looking to let go of about a thousand acres, he had to get in on it himself. He stood next to Chuck Pierce on the hillside looking at the rolling crests and valleys, pines, dogwoods, and a creek that ran right down the center of the property. It had been cattle land, solely owned by Chuck, without easement or some electric company running gigantic power lines through it.

When Chuck looked at his property, he would always see cattle roaming around, even though it had been four years since anything that was domesticated and hooved roamed those lands.

But Tommy Billings saw a gas station, fast food spots, cellphone stores, private sector mailers and a big anchor store. Probably a big box store, a hardware place. That would fit this region of the state. There would be a four lane and maybe a cut through north to one of the other towns.

“Your kids won’t ever have to work again,” Tommy said.

“I’d rather they did,” Chuck said, “Life’s too easy and you never know when things turn bad. You know those people in Florida? That hurricane?”

“Oh, yes. I saw it. Horrible damage, sad really.”

“Those people don’t know what to do with themselves. No power, no internet, nothing. Some of them don’t know how to get a little clean water or food for themselves right now.”

“All the stuff our dad’s taught us,” Tommy said, just carrying the conversation. Chuck didn’t want to let it go; he had worked his ass off for the first fifteen or twenty years of his adult life to get it, and spent the next thirty maintaining it. There was an intense satisfaction in *earning*

something. Over time cattle prices soared and sunk, and it was clear even agencies in the government were getting in on the vegan meat plan; they preached the cult like gospel in harmony.

But that wasn't the point, the point was that Chuck saw it coming, had lived through it the last four years.

And that was Tommy's angle.

They were both pushing close eighty and were cut from the same childhood, having gone to the same middle and high school, back in the days when boys had to grow up quick. You go to school, come home to relieve your mother from her chores for an hour, and then grab you dad's twenty-two rifle and bring home quail or squirrel or even frogs for dinner. Dad was at the factory, bringing home just enough to pay to mortgage and put gas in the car, pay the local doctor when flu season tore through town.

They had taken different courses in life, Tommy worked the first part of his life of his away becoming a lawyer, while Chuck had worked on becoming a cattle man, going so far as to invest in an auction house, and later on a slaughterhouse. Both respectable walks in life, but they both understood that one was cutthroat and the other was humble.

And at the end Chuck's age and his children's lack of interest had made life difficult.

988 acres of land.

Billings saw money.

Chuck put a thumb to the corner of his eyes and swept lightly, as if pushing a tear back into his head.

"Everything's so changed," Tommy said. Years of practice in front of judges and clients had taught him how to quietly redirect another human's thoughts.

"I don't get the world," Chuck said.

“My kids tried to get me one of those smart phone things. Can you imagine that? You touch the damn screen and things just pop on up. I have a secretary for that.”

Chuck huffed, “I think this place could have been used for better.”

Tommy realized Chuck wasn't going to laugh this off, “It was, Chuck, and it as your blood, sweat and tears. I know that. Your paw and maw do, too. Your kids saw it, whether they got it or not.”

“Hell, they act like their whole world revolves around those damn cellphones,” Chuck said, “I can't believe it. I really can't believe it. I thought I'd pass away in that house Katie and I built.”

“There's no need to sell it,” Tommy said, for the first time in their conversation meaning it, “that's yours and don't you ever let anyone take it away from you. A house you built will always be home—”

“I can't look out the window and see all that construction, live with that noise. I'd rather try and pretend it isn't even happening, somewhere far away.”

Tommy could understand that. He had started his morning in Chuck's living room, sitting with him and playing catch up for a couple of hours while the sun grew higher in the sky. The coffee was something special, Tommy thought, whatever brand Chuck was buying tasted just like it did sixty years ago. Or maybe it had been the company and the conversation, sitting across from an old face long enough that it began to look like it did when it back in high school.

“You don't need to make this decision today—”

“No, I'm settled on it,” Chuck said.

Billings pushed down the sense of elation; It's not over until the ink is dry.

Chuck shook his head, maybe in disbelief that he had said it out loud, “...Let it go. Be done with it, get over the heartbreak. I'll have enough

money that the kids can't just throw me into a home; maybe I could hire someone to help around the house now again, wherever I move."

"They have services for exactly that," Tommy said, "I know some people in that business, I'll get you hooked up if you ever need it. I used them for a while until I realized I just needed someone permanent, but they're the right folks for the job."

Chuck's lips went tight as he looked over the pasture below them, then across the tree line. It was clear he wanted this to be the last time he was going to be standing this far out into the wild, surveying his land. After this he'd probably be a hermit in his house, probably sell the two tractors and various four-wheel drive, all-terrain vehicles he had accumulated, just to get it out of the way.

"You want a minute?"

"No. I want to be done with it."

"Come on," Tommy took Chuck around the shoulder and felt a fleeting flashback to when they were kids, maybe hanging out down in the water hole and talking about life, "I'll take us to breakfast and we'll head to the office, you know a good place around here? I know a few down in Atlanta. Reliable eggs and ham."

And like that, always so easy, Billings lead Chuck away from any physical evidence of his life's work.

Two weeks later Billings and Harrington, a law firm that had spawned three state representatives and crushed another, hired a new survey team to check out what had recently been Chuck Pierce's property. Everything was meant to be mapped, including refuse that was left out on the land. Anything that might have been a fence line would have to be closely

examined and removed before they started putting people and heavy machinery out there to start grading, changing the landscape. Chuck had changed his three main pastures up a few times, moving fences, and over time upgraded to the big heavy steel ones, which would sometimes be knocked down and left behind.

Over the years construction teams had become more timid about just walking into un-surveyed land. A twenty-dollar piece of steel hidden in the grass or just beneath the surface of the earth was enough to stop a half a million-dollar bulldozer and bring an operation to its knees for hours, days, or depending on the parts needed, even weeks.

It would take Lakewood's people several months to go over every inch of the near one-thousand acres with metal detectors and survey equipment. At the same time Billings and Harrington would bring regional executives out to sell their ideas, representatives from nearby towns to talk about how roads would connect, and to finagle them into possibly throwing some money into the pot. If you don't pay, you don't play.

And that's how Hunter Kirkland almost killed a rural community of retired folk and their children.

He was twenty-two years old, and had gotten the job through a friend. He was there on Chuck's property the first day, and immediately told to grab his pack, take the topographical maps and start walking, beginning with major trails. His job was to mark anything left behind. Rusted grates, fence posts, anything bigger than a chewing tobacco can had to be marked down and assigned a letter correlating to graph that designated how serious the litter was.

Two others were given the same task, and a small team was to start with the metal detectors and figure out a good spot they could eventually park the heavy machinery, build a maintenance shed and designate safe,

useful trails and paths so the machinery wouldn't be lost in a soft spot in the field.

As the dozen or so people started across what had been Chuck Pierce's land, the sun was rising, and the heat of another Georgia summer was starting to bear down. Before long Hunter was walking through the open fields at full pace and under the trees at a snail's. He sat down at about midday to try out the hydration kit he had bought for himself. When he was brand new a couple of months ago, he had a giant, one liter water bottle, and some of the guys who had been around a couple of years told him he'd want to kick that thing into a lake and get a pack that could carry a water bladder with a hole for the silicon tube to be threaded through.

Before long he had passed over the second hilltop and was walking through a break in the trees when he finally saw some substantial. A giant iron gate, rusted and flaking. It was bent in the middle, like something had hit it. The old thing was leaning against a tree, discarded. He couldn't guess how long it had been there, years, maybe a decade or more. He walked into the shade of the tree and marked it on the map, found the assigned letter and wrote that down. He wondered if he should take a picture of it just for reference, but thought some of the older guys would just rib him about making this a game and less a job.

Kirkland worked with unhappy people. People who didn't think they would ever be a way out of construction or surveying or plumbing. Kirkland was going to save up for school and learn horticulture. Hope was a powerful tool in one's happiness.

He looked around for anything that looked like a fence line, any tangles of barbed wire nearby, but found nothing. What good was a gate without the fence? He couldn't imagine that some rancher would want to roll up a bunch of barbed cattle wire and use it somewhere else.

After about fifteen minutes of poking around the small section of trees and sipping on his hydration kit, taking it slow in the shade, he gave up on the idea of finding more forgotten metals and stepped back into the sun.

The next thing he would have to upgrade was his ball cap; while his short haired scalp was well protected and the sun only occasionally dipped below the bill of his hat, he could feel the fireball overhead attacking the back of his neck. Everyone else wore those big floppy swamp hats, almost always white ones that collected dirt and grime from running around outside.

But he knew he would switch to the same hat everyone else did, and there would be more shitty comments from people who were convinced they lived shitty lives.

He went downhill and a few minutes later he found himself on the bank of a creek, looking for a way across. He could have turned back there, but that would screw up the search grid, and if he went down or upstream, he'd probably bump into one of the other guys surveying for metals and dangers to heavy machinery.

He walked about fifty feet down along the shore, peered around the bend, and then back to his starting location. There wasn't a good way across. The creek itself was probably, thirty, forty feet wide in some places, and at least three feet deep. After a few minutes of searching around, he figured it was an okay time to rest, recoup from the sun and heat.

Kirkland relieved himself behind a tree, thinking he might have heard one of the other guys rummaging around somewhere upstream, and found a downed log to sit on while he ate one of the power bars from the little pocket of the Hydration bag. He rested in the shade sipping from the silicon nozzle and taking small bites of the bar; the heat had taken plenty of the hunger out of him, but he ate anyway.

The longer he sat there, the more he thought he'd just have to take his socks and shoes off and wade into the water. The bad thing about being new to the job was how easy it was to get fired in your first three months, and the foreman was stingy about time and results.

After he took his time folding the plastic wrapper from the bar and stuffing it into his pocket. He walked to the edge of the creek, standing on rocks just before the mud really began. He took off his shoes and socks, balancing on one leg just long until his equilibrium failed him and he had to put one bare foot down on the rocks, squishing pebbles, sinking into the mud.

And this used to cattle pasture, he was sure one of the others had said.

He tried to push the thought aside, pulled off the final sock and tried to roll up the sleeve of his pants, realizing that there was no way he wasn't about to get soaked.

The water was so cold and shocking that he involuntarily inhaled, and then told himself to just get through the next thirty seconds of his life. He pressed forward, with every step the water wading higher and higher, half up his shin, then to the bottom of the bulb of his knee.

Each step was masochistic torture. He had done everything he could to try and stay out of the blistering daylight, to not get the red tan on his neck that would betray his upbringing, but the opposite thermal direction was heart pounding, ten times worse than being in the sun.

The water met the rolled-up leggings of his pants. This was at the point of no return. The surface of the stream lapped at him, reaching farther and farther up his pants, attacking the inside of his thighs where the heat from the day seemed to radiate. Another inch or two and the water would have touched his testicles; and that would have ruined his whole week. Mercifully, the creek bottom climbed out of the water much faster than descending down. In his agony he tried to distract himself by thinking that

the steeper side must be the water hitting and pushing on the bank, reforming it.

“God,” he whispered as he finally stepped onto dry land and looked down at his feet. They were covered in stirred up silt, and though he hadn’t stabbed his toes into the earth beneath, it had certainly collected under his toenails.

There’s got to be some parasite or obscure disease in all that water.

Worse, he had no way to dry himself.

But that didn’t matter. The water had soaked his pants, even though he had rolled them up as high as he could. He shook out his legs and tried to knock off as much of the water as he could, but his dark hairs clung to his shin and calf.

He looked to the trail head, still holding his socks and shoes. It was an upward hike that ran through trees, and he couldn’t see a break in them from where he stood, but the path didn’t seem too rocky. It shouldn’t be a big deal to leave the socks and shoes off, just walk until he could get back in the sun.

Once he was out of the woods he could find a spot to lay down where his upper body was in the shade and his legs were in the sun. A few minutes in the June heat would dry everything from the hip pockets down.

Then there would just be dried detritus clinging to his legs.

“It’s going to be one awesome shower,” he said, thinking he might manage to clog the drain when he got home.

Kirkland started up the trail, the wet feeling of his pants driving him insane. The weight of the water was undoing the roll up sleeves and not a minute into his walk they began to unravel. He stopped to try and squeeze them dry and roll them back up.

When he lifted himself back up to start walking again, something caught his eye. Not another gate or a fence post or anything metallic, just a dark spot in the forest about two hundred feet off the path.

A cave in the side of a hill. He could tell it wasn't just a hole. Rocks were assembled, several of them holding up a single, large flat rock that seemed to act as a ceiling to the entrance. It was at least five feet high and four feet wide.

Kirkland had never been in a cave before, but had seen pictures of his friends on social media who regularly went cave diving, and the pictures they were taken were wild. There was one recurring feature about the caves, the entrance. It was always smaller than the actual cave itself, for reasons he couldn't imagine. Maybe eons of water just does that.

But now you have to go over there, he knew. It was the kind of thing that the survey had been sent out for but nobody ever expected to find. He had only heard about it once in training, but never forgot it. It made sense though; they wouldn't want a machine rolling around on what looked like a natural mound to just suddenly start sinking.

"Damn," he said, looking back down at his soaked legs, then at the space between the trail and the cave. There was no way he was getting over there without stepping on thorns or a jagged branch. He briefly thought about going to the end of the trail, getting in the sun and drying off and then coming back, but if anyone else saw him they'd think he was just fucking off.

"I can't believe this," he said to himself, rolling down his pants legs. He was going to get so much flack for showing up with wet pants, but maybe Ben would fill him in on some tips or tricks on what to do when it comes to water ways.

He slipped his socks and shoes on, and as soon as he took the first step, he registered how uncomfortable it was walking around in wet clothes.

How come nobody on the team ever wore shorts? He hadn't seen one of them ever show up in a pair of gym shorts or cargo pants, always blue jeans. There had to be a reason.

Hunter Kirkland stepped off the trail and into the woods, already unshouldering his hydration kit to retrieve the topographical map and legend. The cave dipped down quickly, and then disappeared into blackness several feet in. The closer he came, the more he thought this was man made, the entrance was just too clean, and the large rocks a little too organized.

Then he saw the little stand, off to the left, about two feet out of the entrance. It was made of sticks and some rope like stuff that at first, he thought was twine, but looked a little too earthy. Three feet high and built with a wide, solid base. He could see the leaves had piled up around where the four sticks that held it in place were probably pressed into the earth. Above the cross section where the sticks came together and then bolted off in their own directions, there was sliced of wood that had been carved into a slight bowl. The basin was darkened, burned like something had been lit on fire and placed there.

Was it some kind of marker? He wondered.

At five feet away he could smell something, a strange, fresh, floral odor emanate from the opening. Not at all what he would have expected.

He had the map and legend in his hand, and reached up to the V of his shirt to grab a pen. Then for reasons nobody other than Hunter Kirkland would know, he stopped, unzipped a pocket on his hydration bag and pulled out his cellphone. He turned on the flashlight, pointing it at the entrance of the cave.

Then he took a step forward, peering in.

A second later he lifted his foot and stepped on another patch of leaves, stopping next to the stand, just two feet away from the entrance.

Looking into the black.

And then he went in.

3

Hunter Kirkland showed up at the team meeting that night and turn in his topographical map. Everyone chided him about being wet, about the shit that was in his hair and the mud on his face, but Kirkland didn't care.

He had never marked where the cave was on the map.

June turned into July and then August, and before long the leaves showed the first signs of turning in mid-September. October arrived and the cold nights began a couple of weeks in. Hunter Kirkland never told anyone what he saw, what he did, or what he brought home with him.

4

Endorphins are the only way to get over a broken heart.

Or alcohol.

At least that's what Amy reasoned, and while her friends drank themselves into happy stupors, she threw on her sneakers and went for a run. She was on her way back, mile seven of eight and a half.

One of the things she liked about running was coming around the corner on the road and see what cars had come and gone from their driveways since she had passed by. It was a mindless hobby, something to occupy her mind, only interesting because she knew who lived where. Sometimes she would see the neighbors out in their yard, on the ride-on lawnmowers or working the little gardens around their mailboxes. She would wave and they would wave back, and then they would realize that if she was running again, it was because she was single. Amy was well

aware how news travelled around this small community. Most of the time it was by word of mouth, but Amy thought it was better to just say ‘fuck it’ and put it on full display.

If Amy was running, there was boy somewhere who ought to have a tooth knocked out, some of them would say, but never actually do. It was always something dramatic, even if Amy went out of her way to avoid friction. Enough of her break up stories had filtered through the rural community that eventually she stopped telling them altogether.

She found it funny how the old people would ask anyway.

She passed by Benjamin and Harriett Meid’s house and caught the first person she had seen outside that day. Harriett was an old, tall lady, and amazingly not hunch over like her husband. She carried herself like a refined woman who had retained plenty of authority in her age, like anyone with two or maybe three generations of children wondering the earth. Amy couldn’t imagine what she was like before becoming a grandmother. Her face didn’t betray her sixty or seventy years on earth.

Amy could just see Harriett on the front porch with something in her lap. The old woman looked up, probably searching for the sounds of Amy’s sneakers slapping the pavement, and she waved first.

Amy responded in kind.

And there it is, it’s out, Amy thought.

She continued up the hill, debating if she should try and pick up her pace in the last mile, as if in some cosmic way it would prove a point to her ex’s. If she looked at the small black wrist monitor to check her pace and progress she’d just slow down.

Fuck it; she thought. She’d blast through the last stretch, pass the Millhouse resident as quickly as she could before she turned onto Kurt Street and make a last dash back home. She’d feel better afterward’s. Being worn out was always better than being sad.

And because fuck you; she thought into the collective world of every ex-boyfriend in existence.

But there was another reason. She didn't want to get caught by Jay Paige as she ran by. That would start some shit if he saw her out running past the house. The one bad thing about running in these parts was that it wasn't a neighborhood; the houses were spread out and sat back from the road and usually on higher ground, where people could see. If she ran past the Paige resident, there was a chance Wilma Paige would see her, or be notified by her husband, and then there would one of half a dozen young men, her grandchildren, hanging around the house in a matter of days. It wasn't a big deal that she would invite her college age grandkids over. The problem came when she would introduce them.

And Amy always knew on first sight whether it was going to be a yay or a nay. Over time she learned to avoid Wilma and her kin at all costs.

Secretly, she hoped that one of these old women would invite a young stud over and find some way to present him to her. It would take the hard work out of finding a guy in the countryside. Wilma just kept shooting her family members and missing.

As soon as the sign of Kurt Street entered view, she picked up her knees more, reached farther with her heel and began to stride down the blacktop. The trees on the side of the road gave way to the massive front yard of the Paige house. She dared not look at the driveway or front porch.

Please don't let her be doing the dishes, Amy thought, having some idea of the house's layout. The kitchen window overlooked Kurt, and Wilma, like so many traditional families of old, was the house cook.

She breezed a hundred yards up the slight grade and then over the hill, and for a split second considered dropping her pace but didn't.

Because fuck you

Being worn out was better than better than being sad.

Three minutes later, Amy kicked her sneakers off and using her sock covered feet, pushed them under the shoe stand beside the front door.

“That took you ten minutes longer than usual,” She heard her mother call from the kitchen.

“It was my first run since spring,” Amy said, smiling, knowing what was coming next. Once she was sure the shoes were out of the way and not a threat to anyone’s overlooking, she walked into the living room.

“It means you got fat!” her mother yelled.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Complacent!”

“You’re fat and complacent,” She said back to her mom.

“I earned it,” her mother said, “Chicken and soup for diner sound fine? Grandma’s got that vegetable stuff.”

That actually didn’t sound bad. Her mother had picked up on her grandmother’s recipes since they moved in.

Her grandmother, Ruth May Golden, was stationed in her recliner with a closed book in her lap, a smile creeping across her face, “Ten minutes longer than last time,” She said through the decades of a croaking smokers voice, “Did Wilma pull you over? Did she have some spicy young man to leave you alone with?”

“And is he a lawyer? A doctor?” her mother shouted from the kitchen.

“It was my first time back out,” Amy said, walking to the hall, “They just now found out I’m single.”

“Hah, then I’ll get on this phone and start calling everyone. The only replacement for a boy is another boy.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine without one for a while.”

“I had two kids by the time I was your age,” her grandmother said as Amy walked by, “Married. You better step on it, sweetie.”

6

Alan Maxwell walked through the halls of Billings and Harrington, wondering why in the hell his office was so far away from Tommy Billings. The criminal defense side of the firm had given way to more investing and corporate operations over the years, and as many times a week he had to rush down the hallway to present Tommy with some proposal or to let him know that some small start-up operation was about to be eaten up by Amazon or Google, he had to get up from his desk, walk out of his office, race across the damn high-rise to the elevator bank and then up one floor.

They made more money on the backs of business than they did defending some tycoons’ grandson from a DUI.

A part of Alan wanted to get back to California, where there was real movement and real action and where lawyers knew what was important—*who* was important —and where to station them in your life. Tommy Billings had hardly changed the landscape of his office while the economic landscape outside was churning and burning.

After a four-minute power walk through the building, he knocked on the secretary office, a young lady who had learned quickly there were some people in the office you don’t stop. She gave the signal that Tommy was all clear, alone in his office, and Alan pushed his way through the heavy double doors that led to boss’s place.

“Alan!” Tommy yelled as he turned to a table pressed against the wall, “These are preliminary,” he picked up a stack of papers.

“Well, good afternoon.”

“Never mind that nonsense. You’ve got what? Two in two hours?”

“Up north, yeah.”

“Perfect,” Tommy went back behind his desk and threw the stack of papers on it. There was a long rolled up one. That would be the initial layout of the land after construction started, he had seen this version from a few weeks before. Over time things would be adjusted here and there, move around slightly. The civil engineers just had to have their say, but he already knew enough about the relative layout of the initial thirty lots.

“They’ll want to be the first in,” Tommy said, plopping down in the high back chair behind the desk, “Unless you screw it up. The next eighty lots will come in five years. By then people will have picked out their local spots.”

Alan already knew that. He had gone through this a few dozen times before at other sites. They want in they would have to pay something up front, and with more obscure restaurant chains trying to throw money at their own survival, owners who would beg, borrow or steal to stay alive, there was plenty of pay.

“The chicken place will want in,” Alan said, walking between the guest chairs that faced the desk, “I’ll have them in three minutes. I don’t know about the burger joint, there half a dozen in each town all around, and I bet they’re aware of that.”

“Right,” Tommy said, his wrinkled face lifted into a smile, “but the chicken place will be easy. Like that, always easy.”

“This is more about getting the word out,” Alan said, collecting the files, “We won’t have a single store locked in until we have a major player.”

“Hell, I’ll get the interns doing cold calls. We’ll get every regional manager at a fast-food chain talking about this place.”

“Word of mouth will travel faster. It’ll mean more.”

“Get the chicken place at least. I bet I can find a few more, I want to talk to some cell phone providers about getting their butts in there.”

“Is there a cell tower in the area?”

Tommy waved a frail hand, “The hell if I know.”

Alan didn’t think there was, and as many hills as there were in that area, they’d have to be careful about the cell companies. The very first thing they’ll look for are the nearest towers and whether or not they will receive bandwidth from them. Alan had dealt with that in California, they would want a few stores within service area of single tower, it was just more efficient and cheaper.

Are you slipping, Tommy?

Part of the reason he came to work for Tommy was how much more meticulous he was. Around Silicon Valley, even the lawyers were strangely lackadaisical and often forgot to dot their I’s and cross their T’s. It was always something standing in the way of the next deal, only to be discovered hours before a meeting or signing. Tommy had been scrupulous in the beginning, he had a thorough game plan for everything. But his 80-year age was starting to catch up with him.

“We need to take a look at the towers nearby,” Alan said, tucking the papers under his arms, “It’ll be hard to sell if there’s no coverage, or even just bad coverage.”

“How many times you been down there? Alan? You know the lay of the land?”

“You’ve sent me almost every week for the last two months.” He took the papers and folded them.

“Ah,” the old man leaned back in his chair and looked at the corner of the ceiling, “Get the hell out of here and worry about the restaurants first.”

That was when Alan realized the old man wasn’t predicting the future the way he used too.

Alan turned, thinking he was about to take the first step on what would probably accumulate to over a hundred-million-dollar deal in the next five years, and decided not to question it.

A few minutes later he was in the parking garage, paid the days parking and was on 575 racing north.

Francis Maher waited all year for two events. The first was Halloween, the second Christmas, though he wished the holidays were switched around. Not as many people wanted to get out in the bitter December cold, but he liked the aesthetics more, and in a country community where half the population were retirees, it was a better time of year to get with the family.

In the weeks leading up to those holidays, he would decorate the barn (These days leaving the stuff meant to be put up high to his grandkids) and putting together the various booths, buying the bales of hay for the tractor ride through the dying corn field and having neighbors cut up a few pumpkins or bring their own cardboard bats to be strung up. Orange and purple lights would be hung, a few fog machines would be placed. The barn yard would be a child idea of happy horror.

There would be a few hundred grandparents dotting over their costumed children around his barn and across the gravel driveway that passed in front of it. Kids would be dressed up as bees or doctors or whatever came from the latest superhero movie.

It was a dying tradition. The elderly weren't getting younger. The kids would grow up and loose interest in going on hayrides or having their pictures taken while bobbing for apples. Such things were embarrassing.

But Francis was resolved to put it on as long as he could. As long as there were parents and grandparents making plans for it, he'd keep putting up the decorations and hope some familiar faces may showed up.

He stood in front of his barn watching a plastic skeleton being lowered from the hay loft, thinking about when he first started there must have been five or six hundred people showing up, now it was half that.

"That's probably good," Dana said, and the plastic skeleton jolted to a stop and bounced on the thin string.

"I always hated those," Francis said.

"Kids don't see those things the way we do," His wife said, "It's just for fun."

Even as they grew into their golden years, Dana had no sense of her own mortality. Francis did. They had found some fluid around his heart; the doctors were ready to increase his medications. He knew what loomed ahead, and didn't take risks anymore. He'd rather send his grandson up into the hayloft than climb the ladder himself. His wife on the other hand thought she was still thirty.

"After this, if it isn't too cold, you need to go get some paint and have the kids go over that barn," Dana said, just loud enough that the children might overhear, "We'll pay 'em ten an hour or something."

"The barn looks fine to me," Francis said.

"I see some spots down there near the ground. Termites it looks like."

"Those aren't termites."

"See how that wood splits?"

"You don't know what you're looking at."

"Hell. Then let the thing fall over," Dana threw hands in the air, "I hope nobodies inside when it does." She turned away as if she were going to leave and stopped, "Oh, wonderful, here's the next two hours of my life..."

Francis turned to see Harriett Meid's car creeping up the driveway, bouncing up and down on the gravel. The old woman might not have looked or acted out her age, but she drove like it. Even an old person who had maintained their young body didn't like to be bounced around. She pulled up beside them and rolled down the passenger window, "Girl, how you been?"

"I can't believe I have to stand here and supervise these boys," Dana said.

Francis could almost predict the conversation ahead, Harriett would laugh and say something to agree, and then Dana would turn the subject to what she had been up since she last saw her a day or so ago. He had been dragged into this opening sequence to conversations a hundred times.

Harriett laughed and said, "And you'll never stop."

"How's Jay? What have you been up to?"

"Visiting his brother for a few days."

And there it was; the opening salvo. *Run while you can*, every married instinct screamed at him.

Francis started walking into the barn, where the rest of the prefabricated wood had been left. There would be a few pieces he needed to replace, maybe a little water damage, but there would be enough for a dozen booths for the list of activities he would let the neighbor's and folks down the street come up with.

"You like the skeleton?" Jacob called as he came down the ladder from the loft.

"Perfect height," Francis said to his grandson.

"Can we deal with the booths for tomorrow?"

"No, we need to get started on those. It'll take all three of you to build them. It'll take two to hold the pieces in place and another to screw them in. You know how to use a power drill? They can get unwieldy."

Jacob looked at his grandfather with a tired face, “You’ve had us using them for the last two— no, three years.”

That’s right, Francis remembered. Jacob was the oldest, fourteen, and already showing the strength of his father. Francis tried to do for his grandkids the same he did for his son; start them early. Teach them to use a gun. Teach them to use tools. How to hang a gate, build a fence, change the oil, get the pilot light going again. They were just growing up too fast, so fast he had forgotten which one of the three had learned what and when.

“I forgot, you’re all turning into capable men faster than I can keep up with,” Francis said, thinking that was just another sign of his age. It had blown his mind that the boy was almost as tall as he was when his son dropped them off for the weekend.

The compliment worked, Jacob walked over to the rack of two-by fours and ply woods that had been cut up into appropriate pieces and started poking around, “The markers are fading.”

“Well, we’ll have to go back over them. I’ve got a pen in the toolbox, and grab the drill if you would. Make sure you grab a good battery.”

He wondered back outside and tried to sneak past his wife and Harriett, the instinct to run screaming at him, until his laughing wife, clasp a hand to her mouth and saw her husband walking by, “You know that Amy girl?”

Here we go...

“Let me guess,” He said, “She’s running again.”

“And you know what that means.”

I’ve only heard it a hundred times. “She’s pregnant,” he said.

“She’s single!” Harriett busted out laughing, “She does that after every breakup. I should get divorced and start running with her, let the men know someone’s free.”

Francis started walking again.

“There’s supposed to be people on old Chuck’s land this evening,” Harriett called through the window, “You want to run over there and shoot some guns? Raise their hair a little?”

“Chuck’s land?”

“Lawyers and people who want to build on it,” Harriett said.

He forgot about that too, and wondered where old Chuck was these days, if he had moved out of the house and Katie had spent in their whole lives.

“Let ‘em build and then we’ll start shooting,” He said, walking away from the potential disaster of a three hour meeting between women.

Ahead he saw the two younger brothers, Marty and Jesse, wrestling with a bunch of two by fours and lying them out where the booths would eventually stand. At twelve and eleven, they were already workers, and that gave Francis an intense sense of pride. He liked to think that boys were relieved to get off the video games and away from the television screens and burn off a bunch of energy. Francis felt like he was building a small troop of tough young men. Thank God they listened.

“Pops!” Jesse yelled, “Someone wiped away the marks on the wood. I can tell how they put together.”

“It’s just weather and time,” Francis said, walking over, “we’ll remark them as we go, but use your brain, which ones are the base? Which ones are the bottom and top? See those mars on the bottom of that board? I’ll bet that’s a bottom of the frame.”

Jesse looked down at the piece he was kneeling next to and saw where the wood had taken some cuts and scrapes, “Oh, yeah. That’s right.”

And he’ll never forget that, Francis thought.

Then, for some reason, he tried to remember which two of them he had taught to change the oil.

Three hours and fifteen minutes later Harriett was standing by the kitchen entryway, a finger wrapping around the corded phone her kids begged her to get rid of. She wouldn't give it up, though. She liked playing with the cord, it had cut her habit of twirling her hair, which had started to cause split ends and she was told her stylist could lead to a bald spot where the roots were being pulled on constantly.

"And I bet she waved," Wilma said through the phone, "I bet that little thing waved—"

"She certainly did," Harriett said, "And just kept on running by like there was nothing wrong with the world. But you know what that poor thing is feeling. To be young and heartbroken again."

"Well, I know some boys that could cure that."

Perfect; Harriett thought. It wasn't that she didn't like Amy; it was for her own amusement and to eventually hear the story of what had happened between one of Wilma's grandkids and her. Wilma feared none of her extended family would ever get married, and years ago the news played a piece about how young people weren't getting hitched, even dating less! What the hell else was there to do?

And that had started a strange series of conversations in their little part of the county. People began bringing around their newly minted adults, kids and grandkids to diners at other people's places. That summer there had been more bar-b-ques. More chances to meet and greet.

Wilma must have quietly obsessed over the topic, and worried about the future of her family. Everyone knew she was desperate to pawn her grandkids off.

And those grandkids would meet Amy, and eventually Harriet would get a good story out of it. What? He was too skinny? What do you mean his ears were as big as radar dishes? That's not very nice to say about a young man.

It took Harriett back her own days in high school.

"You should get him for the Halloween thing at the Maher's," Harriett suggested, "That would be the perfect time. I'm sure one of the men will be bringing by a few beers or something the kids could snag and take off with."

"I wonder if Amy would even goes to such a thing," Wilma said, "that's more for the babies and toddlers."

"It's Ruth May, you know how she is. Can hardly get out of the house, she talks about two things, going to Florida again, you know, wants to see the beach one more time before she goes—"

"Poor dear can hardly walk."

"—And she wants to see great-grandchild before she goes," Harriett giggled, "You know it must be driving her mad to have her grown adult grandchild living in her house."

"She loves that little girl," Wilma said, "She won't kick her out or anything, she wouldn't dare."

"Why in the world would she kick her out?"

"So her ass could live with my grandson!" Wilma cackled.

Harriett laughed. She couldn't wait for this one to blow up in spectacular fashion, likely on the first time they meet. She knew how Amy would meet someone local and then just blow by them when she was out on her runs or just throw a couple of fingers up to say the country 'hello', and drive right on by as the boy watched her taillights or backside disappear down the road. Harriett always got the story afterwards, and it

was never a disappointment. In a world of old, slow moving, forgetful people, you have to make your own amusement.

“I gotta get this dinner started, but I’ll be looking for her. Guess I need to call one of my daughters and figure who’s available and who isn’t. Call me Cupid. I’m going to alleviate that girl’s heart break.”

“You go do your thing. If you get one of your kids in the area for a while, bring him on by and we’ll do lunch or something.”

They said their goodbyes and hung up; Harriett left the spiraling phone cord swinging and walked into the living room.

“You’re starting that again?” Walker asked. He was sunk in his recliner, hunch over, with the television on mute so Harriett could at least sort of hear through the phone. He had wanted a new set as well, something newer and louder as his hearing diminished.

“Starting what?” Harriett asked innocently.

“Ya’ll need to leave that young girl alone. Stop giving those boys hope,” he said.

“You need to not worry about it and enjoy the show,” she dropped down on the couch and threw one leg up on the cushions, reaching for her sweet tea on the table next to her. She could see old grainy footage of nine-eleven playing on the television and wished he would turn the channel to something with a nicer picture.

“Are you really going to watch another one of these?” She asked, sipping on her tea.

“If it sends you out of the room,” Walker said, “And don’t you suggest we take a visit over there to Maher’s...”

“I got the grandbaby coming by this weekend.”

Walker grabbed the arms of his recliner and turned to look at Harriett with raised eyebrows, “The new one?”

“Yep. Got a little Halloween costume for you too, from what I hear.”

“Bah... I’ll see the pictures, just bring the baby over,” he said, settling back.

Harriett smiled to herself, sipped on her tea again and said, “I think you’ll like it.”

The daylight was waning, and all Alan Maxwell wanted was a drink and a hot date. He thought the meetings with the regional managers from various food chains went well, that he had at least hooked them all, and the guy from Casey’s Chicken definitely seemed interested.

But Alan knew the golden rule; nothing was done until the ink had dried.

He hurried back to Atlanta with what daylight he had left, it would give him a chance to get changed and head to the club, but it also allowed him to survey the back roads leading to 575 for radio towers. He would have been keeping an eye open on the way up, checking out tower locations and guesstimate distance from Chuck’s parcel of land if he hadn’t had Tommy on his mind. One part of him felt sad for his boss, while the other frustrated the living fuck out of him. ‘*Fix your fucking office*’, he wanted to tell the old man, *and all this other shit will get easier*. Especially now that the old guy was starting to diminish. Tommy almost never out of the office. He liked to tell stories about wheeling and dealing than actually doing it anymore.

At about twelve or fifteen miles out he saw the first tower looming off the side of the road. He thought back to the paved surfaces he had just casted a shadow over, and how many substantial hills he had climbed up and idled down.

So that's one, and that's on this side closer to the interstate. He wondered if there was another tower in the opposite direction of the development. Surely there had to be, Georgia was plenty rural up north, but it was nothing like down south where you could drive for long stretches and not get a reception depending on your service provider. He had gone down to Florida for weekend hook ups and clubbing enough times to know how fucking annoying it was not to have service for an hour of driving. If the people out here even had spotty service, there was no chance they would snag a couple of providers to open up shop and pay the rent.

He passed through one of the towns. He had been through this one a dozen of times before and didn't even have to look for the sign to the interstate. Slowly he was growing to hate these long drives. If he kept this up, he'd probably end up talking himself out of his next excursion south.

How can you not go?

At forty-two, with the career he had going for him and the good clothes hanging in his closet, he could get almost anyone he wanted, and Florida was where the top shelf women hung out. You had to push through a few tattoos and obvious skanks, but there were plenty of diamonds in the rough beachside.

Then his nightmare started. He was doing sixty-five in a fifty-five and found himself coming up behind one of those old lady cars. He gunned his Lexus up behind her and rode her ass, making sure his headlights were on. But grandma had made up her mind, "Fuck," he whispered to himself. There were too many turns and hill to risk passing her.

I can hear the club already getting started....

She was too old to drive anything more than ten under the speed limit. She took the hills like they might her fling off the road. She slowly weaved and leaned left and right in her lane, as if the paved road were making her do it.

The next liquor store, he thought, I'm stopping at the next liquor store and pre gaming until I'm in the fucking club...

10

Amy pushed the food savers into the refrigerator, there was hardly any room, so she just shoved things aside to make space. In a house of people who didn't eat a whole lot for their varying age and health reasons the fridge was always somehow filled with leftovers.

She walked to the stove and reached for the window over it, the small kitchen gathered and retained heat like nothing else, and the windows always stayed closed so the house would fill with the smell of home cooking until after the dishes were washed and reminder of dinner put away.

She lifted the window and could hear the sound of something metal clanging against metal. That stupid gate with the chain on it, she supposed. She looked through the dirty screen and oncoming darkness to the shape of the gate at the edge of the yard, a four-foot metal thing that was probably built to keep pigs and chickens out. But her grandfather had repurposed it for the edge of the backyard.

"Is that damn stove still on?" Her grandmother called from the living room, "It's heating up the whole house."

"It's off, I just opened the window."

"I got an idea," Her mother yelled from the laundry room, "Amy! Open the kitchen window."

"Ya'll will miss me when I move out," Amy said, walking out of the kitchen and into the living room. A split second later she realized what hell she had just invited and thought she might have to duck behind the couch to avoid the bombardment.

“What in the hell did she just say?” Her mother called from the laundry room.

“Ha!” Grandma howled, “You’ll be here into your thirties by the time you find a guy to move in with...”

“Something about moving out? Is that what I heard?” Mom hollered.

“...And I guess you’ll wait until for forties before you try and have kids.”

“Jesus, grandma,” Amy said, trying not to smile.

“What? I ain’t just saying it,” Ruth May Golden said, rocking back in her recliner, her eyes darting up and down her granddaughter’s form, “I’m looking at it.”

“I bet I’m the only girl a hundred miles around with a mother and a grandmother that talks to her like that,” Amy said, and started walking to the hallway.

“That’s on you,” Her mom called.

Amy walked into her bedroom, closed the door behind her and went for her cellphone.

One of the many little things she changed after every breakup had to do with her phone. She could have it at the kitchen table and press the damn home screen button until she was blue in the face, or she could just get the damn thing out of sight, away from her. She could always walk in and take off the charger and start texting friends or browse, but from the first time she started putting it aside she started feeling better. It was harder for her brain to expect to see a text from her ex if the phone wasn’t around. She wouldn’t take it on runs or let it touch the kitchen table for at least three months while she got over His bullshit.

She tapped her unlock number and hit home; several texts dawned the screen.

WE'Re Not Drunk

It's been a week, Are you still single?

I'll get pics for you.

Amy took two steps and rolled onto her bed. Outside her door she could hear her mom and grandmother talking, not loud enough that she could tell if they were talking about her, they'd come right to her door and open it up if they thought they had some new zinger to hit her with.

Amy started flipping through the phone, checking every social media account, telling herself she was just checking in on friends and her dad's side of the family, but deep down knowing that if *he* texted her right now her heart could jump into her throat.

Don't you start that shit, she told herself. It was the cardinal rule of getting over them: Never give yourself hope.

She spent five minutes against the soft back drop of her mother and grandmothers' voice.

And something else.

Something metal.

Then it dawned on her. The kittens! She had seen a big black and white cat roaming around in the spring. Then three weeks ago saw two more cats, only they were small fluff balls playing around the fence, one had even grappled with the gate like it was going to tackle down the giant metal structure.

She sat up and looked through the window into the back yard, but the night had set on too much. She listened, and heard the sound of metal on metal moving around. Not at any interval like there was a breeze, there was none, and she didn't think there was a weather system moving in.

Amy rolled out of bed and walked out her door, passing her grandmother who had just cracked open another Nora Roberts paperback.

She made it through the house with being accosted and hit the light to the back porch. She opened the door and pushed through the screen, flipped up to engage the light on her phone—

Just in time to see something entering the underbrush on the other side of the fence, pale skinned and slim. For a split second she thought it had to be a chicken, but nobody had any that just roamed around freely.

She panned the light to the gate, the hanging chain that would wrap around a nail on the post to keep it shut swung moved slightly.

A possum, she thought. That had been the back leg of a possum that must have heard her coming through the house.

“Damnit,” She whispered, wondering what happened to the kittens.

She heard her mother coming into the kitchen, “What are you doing out there?”

“Did you ever see those kittens again?”

Her mom looked through the screen door and into the back yard, “No, but I wish they’d come back. They can help us finish off that chicken. Did you see them?”

“No, something was playing with the gate and I thought maybe they were come back.”

“Well, the mother was with them, and we haven’t seen her. She’s moved them,” Then mom walked deeper in the kitchen and Amy heard the refrigerator open and her mother remark, “What a mess.”

Just for good measure Amy panned the phone light around the house one more time, looking from one corner, across the yard and all the way to the other corner of the house. Her light bouncing off the chipped paint of

the gutters, the dew on the grass, but never saw anything furry. Amy went back inside.

L A T E R . . .

“I can’t believe you,” Amy said.

“What?”

“Leaving like that.”

“It’s a ten-minute drive and it’s going to take an hour to charge the damn thing,” Chloe had them doing fifty-five in a forty, heading back to Amy’s house.

“You’re going to use up all my battery and I don’t have electricity to recharge it.”

“Aren’t you checking your phone once a day or something like that? Aren’t you heartbroken and don’t want to think about him? Did you let your closest friends think you were dead and quartered in the ditch somewhere? How many times can you charge a phone on that battery bank?”

“Five.”

“You can give me one. Just one.”

“Damnit.”

“Wait, you’re actually upset?” Chloe glanced over to the passenger seat, “Really?”

“I didn’t want to leave.”

“For ten minutes,” Chloe said flatly, “What did I miss. You tell your best friend, what’s wrong?”

“The guy,” Amy said, falling back into her seat.

“Ohmygod.”

“No, seriously.”

Chloe laughed, “You said you weren’t going to talk to him. You said that out loud in my ear with two hundred witnesses around.”

“You never know.”

Chloe laughed, “You were going to get me to go talk to him. Right?”

Amy looked at the side Chloe’s head in the darkness of the car and said, “That’s what I always do? Do you not remember?”

Chloe forced herself to stop smiling, “You can talk to your own men. Remember Amy, you’re a big girl now.”

They turned onto Levine Road and raced past Wilma’s house, and a minute later they were Amy’s driveway. Amy told Chloe to leave the headlights on so there’d be some light coming through the living room window, and they climbed out of the car.

“You know, I didn’t even get to see him,” Chloe said.

“My guy?”

“He isn’t yours, to your mother’s disappointment.”

They walked onto the front porch and something around the side of the house moved.

“Another one of your rabid critters?” Chloe asked, then suddenly gasped and bent her knees, ducking away from the ceiling, “I completely forgot about the fucking bats.”

Amy opened the front door and let Chloe in, she fished out her cellphone and turned on her phone light, panning it over the living room. She instinctively turned and kicked off her shoes, and pushed them under the shoe rack.

“We’re coming right back out,” Chloe said.

“Old habit. I got a grandmother who can’t afford to slip on any mud I bring in.”

“That’s his name now, Mud.”

“Will you stop?”

“Call your congressman.”

Amy turned, shined the light down the hallway and took three steps in when the front door slammed shut, hard enough that she heard a picture on the wall rattle.

“Chloe!” She spun around, “What the fuck?”

But Chloe was feet away from the door, looking at it, leaning away from it, “I didn’t do that.”

“Then what did?”

“I don’t know. The wind— wait, there’s no wind.”

Amy pointed the cellphone at the front door; it just stood there as if nothing happened. She tried to look out to the porch but the headlights from Chloe’s car were blinding.

“I hear something,” Chloe said.

“Chloe, seriously…”

“Dead serious. Something else happened after the door shut.”

“What?”

“I don’t know, I thought it was outside.”

They stood in the silence for a long moment, waiting, listening. Amy knew that Chloe could hear better than she could, or maybe she was just more attentive. If Chloe said she heard something, she heard something.

“I don’t hear anything,” Amy whispered.

“I don’t either. What the fuck? Has that door ever done that before?”

“No.”

They fell back into silence. Somewhere far, far off Amy thought she could hear a dog barking, but that was all there was. The house was so quiet it was unsettling. She was so used to the ambient noises of the house when the power was on that she found it strange that all the little sounds were missing. The air moving in the vents, the ceiling fan slowly turning on its bearings. All the little important details, gone.

“Let’s get the power bank and get out of here,” Chloe said, no longer whispering.

“You sure you don’t hear anything else?”

“Not now.”

“Can you not freak me the fuck out like that again?” Amy turned and started to her bedroom.

“I didn’t touch the door, literally did not touch the door,” Chloe followed her, “You opened it, you let me in, you kicked off your shoes and left it open. Did. Not. Touch.”

Amy had left one candle going in her room, just so they would see when they came in. Chloe followed her to the door and then stopped, looking back across the living room, “Those little night lights you guys have are off.”

“Batteries must be dead,” Amy went into her closet and got out her day back, where the battery bank was stored away. She realized how fast her heart was beating as she knelt and began searching across the half dozen zippers on the pack.

“I do this, and you consider talking to the guy,” Amy said.

Then the house filled with noise. Amy jumped straight up, her cellphone light going wild as she turned back to her bedroom door, just in

time to see Chloe's eyes go wide and her jaw clinch. She had backed into the linen closet door and slid her way into Amy's room, grabbed the knob and slammed her door shut. Chloe stood on the inside with both hands on the knob like something might try to let itself in.

Amy's heart accelerated. She hissed through her fear, "*Chhllloeee.*"

Chloe turned, put her back on the door and looked into the light, her face tight with angst.

"Whhhatt?" Amy said, feeling herself bounce up and down with anticipation.

Chloe breathed in, hard, "I think I saw that shaved cat."

"What?"

"That shaved cat, I'm pretty sure I just saw it run out from behind your grandmother's chair and across the living room."

"Are you fucking serious?" But she could tell Chloe was, she could see it written all over her. She wasn't putting on an act; her reaction to whatever she had just seen was real.

"How big was it?" Amy asked.

"I don't know. Like a cat? A big cat?" Her eyes reflecting in the phone light.

"Could it be a possum?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"It was walking on two legs."

L A T E R T H A T E V E N I N G . . .

She jolted in place like she had been hit by lightning at the sound of Chloe shouting.

I have to kill her...

Amy walked over, unlatched the window and pushed it open, “You there?” She called through the screen into the black beyond. She couldn’t see Chloe.

“I’m here.”

“What the hell are you doing?”

“I ran.”

“I saw that. What are you doing out there?”

“My car didn’t start.”

“You left your headlights on.”

“For two minutes!” Chloe said, “Did you see that thing in the kitchen?”

“Barely.”

“What are you going to do?” Chloe asked.

That was a good question, Amy wasn’t exactly anxious to go back in the kitchen, and a real part of her didn’t want to risk going back out into

the living room. The growling had gotten to her, hit her right in the fear center, “I don’t know. Can you come back in?”

“No,” Chloe said, exasperated, “I’m not coming in there.”

“There’s a broom in the Laundry room.”

“Did you hear that fucking thing? It’s like a damn jaguar or something.”

“It wouldn’t fit in my cabinet if it were a jaguar.”

“You know what I mean,” Chloe said, “Seriously, what are we going to do?”

“I need to get out of here and get someone to come deal with this thing. My grandmother can’t come back in here with that in the kitchen. I found shoes.”

“You’re not seriously going to go back out there? Through the front door?”

“I’d rather not.”

“Then how?”

Amy didn’t like the idea, and it felt a little over the top, but she was considering unlatching the screen and seeing if Chloe could help her not break her neck if she climbed out the window.

She reached up and felt the edge of the screen, thinking it over. Finally, she said, “I’m coming out the window,” Amy said, knowing it was a ten-foot drop.

“You’re kidding.”

“I don’t want to go back in the living room. Would you?”

“No?”

“Okay. I’ll come out the window, it’s not a far drop there right? Not a big deal. Can you see out there?”

“Barley, I can see that candlelight behind you.”

Amy reached up and found the small latches on the side of the sill. She told Chloe to back up and pushed the screen out of the way. It hit the ground with a solid thud.

“I think you broke it,” Chloe said.

“I really don’t care.”

Amy took a few steps back to the bed and grabbed her cellphone, then went back to the window and looked out, trying to see where Chloe was, “Can you take my phone? Can you reach it?”

She heard rustling outside as she leaned over the windowsill. The bottom of it was high, higher than her hip and she had to get on one foot to lean over, holding the phone down. She felt Chloe’s hand touch her arm.

“Lower, follow my arm,” Amy said, straining.

She felt Chloe’s hand wrap around her cellphone and take it.

“Okay, I’m going to try and climb out. You better catch my ass.”

“Wait. The power bank.”

Amy paused, then hissed, “Seriously?” then heard Chloe hiss back at her as she turned back to her closet. Her daypack was still set aside, leaning against the bathroom door. Somewhere in the kitchen, she heard something skittering, as if the animal in there had kicked one of the utensils on the ground. She began unzipping her backpack, and then in the low light of the candle saw something out of place.

The vent.

It was hidden behind the open bathroom door, out of the way where no furniture would ever be able to sit on it.

What the hell does mom call that? A register? It was the floor vent for heating houses. It had been pushed up and was lying on its top, a foot away from the hole in her carpet had been. She saw something around the hole, the carpet was dark, greasy.

She stared at it for a second, and then wrapped a hand around one of the straps of her backpack. She tried to carefully, casually, zip it up, her eyes going to the bathroom, shrouded in darkness. She glanced back at the carpet and saw a streak of grease run under where her backpack had been, and then run by her feet. Under her.

Amy turned before she stood up and realized she had made a mistake. She was hunched down, and probably looked like she was about to pounce. Any animal could read her the wrong way.

It was under the bed.

A pair of big green eyes reflected softly in the candlelight. As soon as she met them, the growling began.

Amy jumped. There was no calculus to her actions, no conscious thought, she just flung herself from the floor and landed on the top of her bed where the creature wouldn't be able to see her.

As she sailed through the air she saw something flash out from under the bed, striking for where her feet just were. It was a long arm with a big hand attached to it, two or three giant, silvery claws flashed in the flickering candlelight.

The creature's growl filled the room. It was unnervingly loud for something that could fit itself under her bed, which had a clearance no more than twelve or fourteen inches.

It's not a possum, Amy realized.

"What the fuck?" Chloe said from outside.

"It's in here," Amy called, already formulating a plan to step on her nightstand, drop the pack out the window and climb out herself. Beneath her the creature moved, moving from foot to the head of the bed.

It moved under me...

She reached over and grabbed the lamp off her nightstand and placed it on the pillow, and then stepped over. The nightstand creaked under her weight, and she could feel the wood under her old work shoes bowing.

“Amy?” Chloe called.

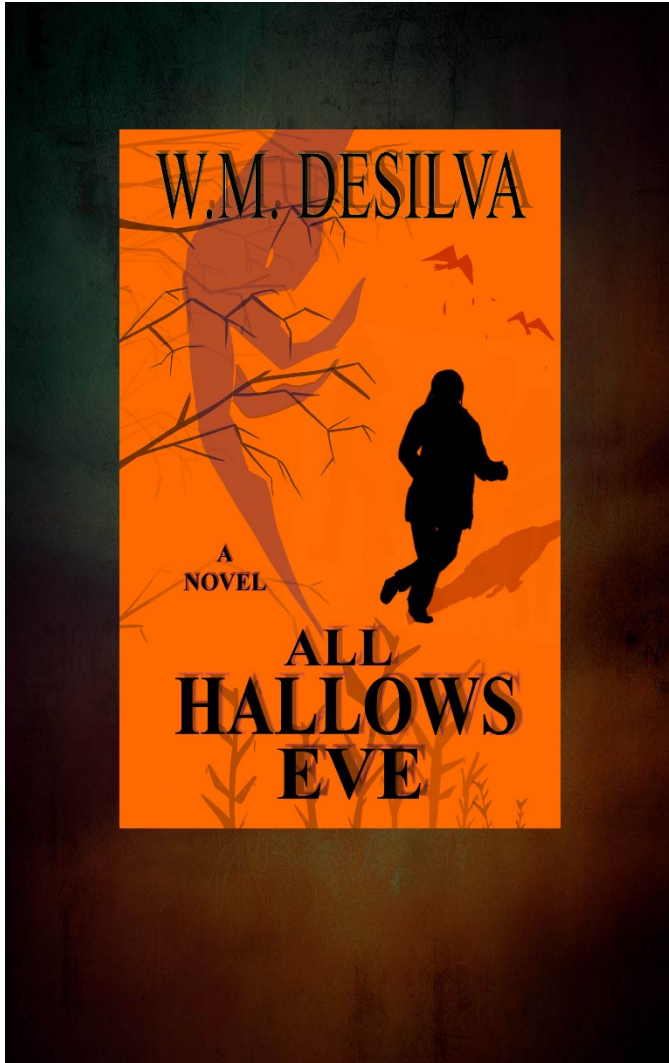
“I’m almost out, get ready.”

Ready for what? She thought. She’d break Chloe’s back if she jumped on her.

The growling kicked up again, right underneath her. She felt it as much as she heard it.

She grabbed the side of the windowsill, trying to take some of the weight off of the night stand, praying it wouldn’t break as she shifted from the bed to the stand. She looked down and saw the hand, same size as hers or possibly even bigger, reached out, touching the side of the nightstand with long claws. feeling. Exploring.

It’s not afraid of me, she realized...



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