

Play Dead

Kody Boye

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*For everyone who's supported
me since I broke into the scene
in May '07, and everyone who's
been supporting me before and
since then.*

*And thanks to Tennille for thinking of the
title.*

Play Dead



It's a game
of life...

It's a game
of death...

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*Run, run, boys and girls.
Go quick! Go quick!
To Headman's Hill you go!
It's a game of life, it's a game of death...
But when the devil comes a runnin', you better be playing
dead...
Because if you're not...
You may stay dead.*

Erik Paterson ran as fast as his body would let him. Around him, the forest cried out. Blackbirds screeched and took flight, small animals scurried back into their holes, and the sun's rays flickered in and out of passing tree branches.

How the hell did I end up in this mess?

Erik's body was scratched and bruised. His defined abs had cuts littering over them, his shirt long since abandoned after he had been caught in a tree branch. His legs were also scratched up from falling and landing on rocks, the blood thick in the hair on his legs.

You need to hurry up, he urged himself. They might make it there before you do.

Regardless of the fact that Erik was one of the most physically-fit guys on the local soccer team, that didn't help any. There were other guys--and even a few girls, for that matter--who were playing this sick game. He didn't have any idea why he was playing it, but he was here.

Peer pressure, he thought, ducking just in time to avoid a large tree branch. God, Trev; please let me see you again.

Erik shook his head and stopped just in time to avoid the pitfall of the journey Here, the land fell off into a deep sinkhole that threatened to swallow any unwary player.

Shit...

He was *sure* that he hadn't taken this route. This was the route that almost *no one* took, and this sinkhole was the whole

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reason why.

Fucking ass, he thought, grimacing.

Shaking his head, Erik took a few steps back and ran, jumping. He gasped as his foot didn't catch the other side, but managed to propel himself forward with a quick burst of adrenaline.

Run! Run! Run you fucking idiot!

With a small nod, he continued running. His legs were on fire and his body was aching, but he had to keep going on. He didn't want to be the one playing dead, not at all. Playing dead in this game was the worst thing that could happen, the worst thing in the world.

Just before he thought his body would cave in on him, he made his way through the clearing Headman's Hill was right in front of him, and he made the short sprint up the hill before he fell to his knees, gasping.

"Erik, you all right?"

Erik took in a deep breath and looked up at Trevor.

"God, yes," Erik said, gasping. "Thank God."

Trevor smiled and kissed Erik. Trevor parted Erik's lips and slid his tongue inside, giving Erik a small amount of comfort before Trevor pulled away as another guy came up the hill.

"Trevor," one of the men said. "Erik okay?"

"Yeah," Trevor said. "Erik's fine."

Trevor helped Erik to his feet and caught him before Erik could fall over.

"Thanks," Erik said, keeping his arms wrapped around Trevor's naked chest.

Trevor nodded and held Erik's body close to his own. After a moment, Erik pulled away and sat on the ground.

"Erik, you're bleeding," Trevor said, touching Erik's abs.

"I'm fine," Erik said. "Really, I'm fine."

Trevor nodded, but when he pulled his hand away, he looked down at the blood on his hand and sighed.

"God," Trevor said. "How did you get all beat up?"

"Trees, falling down, landing on rocks; the works," Erik said with a small, forced laugh.

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Erik looked up at the sky and saw that it was getting darker. The sun was steadily creeping toward the horizon, its rays fading, bleeding the sky orange.

"It'll be dark soon," Erik whispered.

"Yeah," Trevor said. "There's only three of us here"

As Trevor finished, a girl broke through the scenery and collapsed near the Possum Place.

"Two more to go," Trevor whispered. "Just two more."

"One more," Erik said. "The last one's the loser."

Trevor nodded, but didn't say anything. Erik knew his boyfriend knew the consequences of what happened if you were the last one to arrive at the hill. You'd be humiliated in front of the six competitors, but it didn't end there. Being the one who 'played dead' would get around by word of mouth, and soon that possum would be marked by the rest of the small town.

Another guy ran up the hill, breaking into sobs as he fell to the ground.

He's one lucky bastard, Erik thought. The last person's the possum.

Erik grimaced as he remembered the previous games. He had competed twice before this, and each and every time he had been lucky enough to not have to play dead. He had seen what happened though. The possum would be bound to the rectangular rock that was the Possum Place, and from there, anything could be done. Any of the players could choose a punishment that felt fit for the possum.

Erik had always did something simple, like casting water on the possum's body Trevor had done worse things, like forcing dirt into their mouths, but it was Trevor's way of fitting in. Erik didn't blame Trevor; hell, he thought that Trevor was noble compared to what some of the others did.

In the game of Play Dead, nothing was off limits...

Nothing was.

Erik jumped to his feet as he heard a scream. He looked over at Trevor, who was as shaken as he was.

"Who is it?" Erik asked.

"One of the girls," Trevor said.

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She burst from the woods below. Her hair was a mess and her face was covered in scratches. She didn't stop screaming as she saw the other five contestants at the top of the hill. Instead, she turned and ran, but was stopped by two other male contestants.

"Shut up!" The other girl said, slapping the mousy-girl's face

The girl only whimpered as the other men carried her to the rock. They bound her wrists to the two natural rings and stepped to the girl's opposite sides as she began kicking.

"So," the ringleader of the contest, Jared, said as he rose from his seat near a tree. "It's time for judgment."

Erik stared at Jared, but didn't reveal his hatred toward the man. Erik had been caught up in this game all because of one lousy friendship, and because of that friendship, Trevor had to suffer through the game as well.

"Who's going first?" Jared asked. "You all know that I go last."

Erik sighed and stepped forward. He took his bottle of water out of his pocket and poured it over the girl, stepping away and faked a yawn for a sigh. Trevor stepped forward and pulled a plastic box from his pocket. In it, a large spider crawled in it. Trevor closed his eyes, opened the box, and dumped it on the girl, where she screamed until the spider crawled off of her and skittered into the forest.

"It's all right," Trevor whispered, backing up and wrapping his arm around Erik. "There's nothing to worry about."

Erik nodded and leaned against Trevor, sighing as the girl threw sand in the girl's face and the two other guys took turns licking the girl's body. One of them even pulled himself out of his pants and raped her, but there was nothing that the girl could do or say. When you played the game, you accepted whatever punishment you got.

Finally, Jared rose and looked at the girl. His eyes wandered over the girl's body, particularly to her bleeding vagina. Jared shook his head and pulled a knife from his pocket.

"This is the first time," Jared said. "This is the first time that blood will be let."

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The girl screamed, but nothing could be done. Although Erik wanted to help the girl, it would be against the rules. He could be hurt, or worse, killed. He watched Jared dig the knife into the girl's arm and turned, burying his head in Trevor's chest.

"It's all right," Trevor said, nestling his head into Erik's neck. "It's all right."

In truth, it wasn't all right, but nothing could be done. Erik tightened his grip on his boyfriend's body. He held Trevor for what seemed like forever until the girl finally stopped screaming.

"It is done," Jared said, drawing away, his chest soaked with blood. "You two, dispose of her body."

The two men stared at the girl's body for a moment before untying her and walking to the edge of the hill, dropping her body off the side of the cliff.

"No one's ever died playing this game!" The other girl screeched "Jared, how the hell could you kill her?"

"It desires flesh," Jared said, looking at the bloody knife, his tongue darting out and licking at it. "And it desires blood."

Erik turned and retched, collapsing on all fours as he lost what little he had in his stomach.

"It's all right," Trevor said, rubbing his back.

"No, it's not," Erik gasped, gagging, spitting bile.

"Let's get out of here," Trevor said.

Erik nodded, stood, and followed Trevor through the forest.

"We can't change what happened, Erik," Trevor said. "You know that."

Erik nodded, but in the back of his mind, he *knew* he could've done something. Even though the water running over his body was warm, he felt like the coldest thing in the world.

"Do they know she played tonight?" Erik asked, looking up at Trevor. "Do they?"

"It's a private game, remember?" Trevor asked.

"But where does the humiliation aspect come in?"

"People say what they want to say," Trevor said, touching

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Erik's shoulder. "It doesn't have to relate to the game. Half of the time, it usually doesn't."

"Then how come people say they lost the game?"

"Because they did," Trevor said.

"But what about this girl?" Erik asked. "What will the cops do once they find out she died?"

"I don't know," Trevor said with a sigh. "But we weren't involved in her death, so we have nothing to worry about."

Erik nodded and drew close to Trevor's body, sighing and melting into Trevor's warmth.

"Trevor."

Trevor rolled over and looked at Erik.

"What, Erik? It's nearly midnight."

"I don't want to be a part of that group anymore," Erik said "Not after this."

"All right," Trevor said. "That's your choice."

"I want you to stop playing too."

Trevor sighed and sat up.

"What?" Erik asked, sitting up and looking at Trevor. "Aren't you going to quit?"

"Erik, you don't understand..."

"Don't understand what?" Erik asked.

"The thrill, the rush, the adrenaline..."

"And someone got killed tonight!" Erik said. "You're stupid if you think that the game's going to get any safer."

"I didn't say it was going to get safer," Trevor said. "But Erik, we *always* win."

"What if I fell into that sinkhole?" I asked. "I wouldn't have one."

"You would've been dead," Trevor sighed.

"That's my point!" Erik said. "Trevor, you don't get it, do you? That girl *died* because of that fucking game."

"It's part of the game, Erik. You don't know what to expect, which makes it more..."

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“More what?”

“Quit interrupting me,” Trevor growled. “It makes it more exciting with that element.”

“So if I lost, got strapped to that stone and got butchered, what would you do? Would you just stand there and watch, Trevor?”

“Erik...”

“Don’t ‘Erik’ me, Trevor,” Erik said. “I want you to quit playing the game.”

Trevor sighed and closed his eyes. His hands--which had been balled into fists--went lax and loosened up, his fingers spreading out.

“All right,” Trevor said. “I don’t know how easy it’ll be to get out of it though.”

“They can’t force us to keep playing,” Erik said. “That’s not part of the code.”

“No,” Trevor said, sighing, looking up at Erik. “But nothing in the code says we can’t stop playing either.”

It stirred beneath the ground. The creature was a being that had slept for hundreds of years. Eyeless sockets looked around the dark area. It was bound not by dirt, but by a shallow grave that was engraved with stones. Like a small coffin, the creature was protected from the elements outside. A worm slithered through the creatures fingers, but bone snapped the worm in two, where it fell at the creatures side.

The creature’s face turned up in a wicked smile as it claws reached up, pawing at the top of its coffin.

It smelled flesh...

It was hungry...

Its fingers slid through the cracks in the wooden coffin and began to dig, its mind calling it toward the surface.

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Erik awoke with fear clutching tight around his chest. He sighed and lay there, comforted by Trevor's snores. He reached out and touched his boyfriend's back, sighing, thankful that Trevor was here.

What happened tonight was not right, Erik thought. I hope we can get out of the game.

It'd be a week before the next group of people were supposed to play, and Erik had a feeling that he and Trevor would be two of the competitors. He had been asked to every single game since he had been invited to start playing.

So, you want to play, Erik?

I don't know, Jared...

Come on, Erik. It's fun. It's the most exciting thing I've ever done.

I don't know, Jared. It seems kind of extreme...

Humiliation only hurts as bad as you let it, Erik. Come on... it'll change your life.

And the game *had* changed his life. It had turned it into a spiral which could only lead down. The game was a vortex, a whirlpool; a black hole that no one could easily escape from once they started playing.

"I'll do something about it," Erik sighed. "We can't keep playing, not after tonight."

Before, it had only been about a little humiliation and hurt pride. But now, rape had been committed and blood had been spilled. No one in the group could say that rape and death were all right, even if it was just a stupid game.

Erik grimaced as he crawled over Trevor and out of bed, feeling the cuts on his abs and legs flared up. He grimaced once more as he set his feet on the floor before he walked over to the window.

It'll be all right, Erik thought. There's nothing to worry about.

The following morning, Erik stayed home while Trevor went

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off to work. Normally, Erik would've went to work as well, but what had happened last night was bothering him. How could he work if he was so upset?

That bastard Jared, he thought. He killed that girl and the fucking psycho was licking her blood off of his knife too! The sick fuck.

He shook his head and stood, walking over to the fridge. He pulled out a bottle of whiskey and sighed, looking at the amber liquid inside of it.

"Trevor wouldn't want me drinking his beer," Erik said to himself with a laugh, popping the cap and taking a swig. "But so fucking what?"

Trevor had went off to work, completely ignoring him.
So much for having a supportive boyfriend.

Don't run too fast...

Trevor stopped.

"Shit, where the hell am I?"

The game was an addiction, and regardless of the fact that he had told Erik that he was going to stop playing, here he was, playing the game. It wasn't often that they called a game so early in the morning, but Jared had called his cell and had said that there was a game.

So, Trev; you going to play?

Erik said...

Erik is weak, Trevor. I don't even know why you're dating him.

You don't...

Are you going to play or not?

And here Trevor was. His chest was scratched and sweat was running down into his eyes. He looked around the area and screamed, pushing his way through the trees

"Where the fuck am I?" Trevor roared, shielding his face from branches "Where the hell am I going?"

The branches whipped his arms and drew blood. He

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grimaced, biting his lip as warm tears spilled down his cheeks.

"I don't want to lose," Trevor whispered as he ducked under another tree branch. "I don't want..."

Trevor couldn't finish his sentence. His foot caught on an uprooted branch and he fell, his body collapsing on a group of thistles.

"Motherfucker!" He screamed, crying out as he pulled the thistles from his chest. "Motherfucking fucker!"

The tears were so hot that he thought that he would have burn marks from them. Trevor pulled the last thistle away and ran, jumping over logs, across streams, ducking under trees. He thought that he would never make it until he saw Jared and four others sitting on top of the hill.

"Thank God," Trevor said as he reached the top of the hill, collapsing to his knees. "Thank you!"

Jared looked down the side of the cliff, where the water was flowing down the small stream

"The body isn't there," the tan-skinned girl said.

"Yeah," Jared said.

"The bears must've got it," the girl said.

Jared nodded and gestured her away, but in the back of his mind, he knew his plan was working.

A wicked grin lit up his face before he heard Trevor screaming his thanks to God.

Erik looked up as the door opened up. His head spun for a moment before he saw Trevor standing in front of him.

"How come you're back so soon?"

"Erik, what the hell?" Trevor asked. "Why have you been drinking?"

"Because I wanted to," Erik said. "And because you left me, you bastard."

"Erik, I was at work," Trevor said.

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Erik glared at his boyfriend and stood, loosing his balance before Trevor caught him.

“Erik,” Trevor said. “Please, tell me why you were drinking”

When Erik slid his hand under Trevor’s shirt, Trevor jumped and tried to pull away.

“You weren’t at work,” Erik said, lifting up his bloody hand “You were playing.”

“I won,” Trevor said, smiling. “That’s the important thing, right?”

“Fuck you,” Erik said, pushing past Trevor and making his way toward the bathroom.

“You’re drunk, Erik,” Trevor said.

“I only had one bottle,” Erik said.

“You’re not that big of a guy either.”

“Who fucking cares?” Erik asked, catching himself on the wall as he stumbled. “You weren’t supposed to be playing, Trevor!”

“Jared called...”

“Jared, Jared, *fucking*, Jared,” Erik said in an almost-singsong voice. “Who the fuck is he to control...to control your life?”

“He wanted me to play,” Trevor said, taking another step toward Erik “He...”

“Why should I care?” Erik said. “You said you weren’t going to play anymore.”

“I never said that,” Trevor said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Get the fuck out of my apartment,” Erik said.

“What the *hell* are you talking about?” Trevor asked. “This is *my* apartment.”

Erik glared at Trevor and looked down at the bottle in his hand. He chucked the bottle at Trevor and missed his head by an inch before it shattered against the wall.

“Go to bed,” Trevor said.

“Maybe I’ll just leave.”

“I won’t let you leave,” Trevor growled. “You’re drunk.”

Erik shook his head and pushed past Trevor, stumbling,

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falling to his knees in front of the bed.

"You want some help?" Trevor asked, bending down beside Erik.

"Why are you still playing?" Erik cried, tears flowing down his cheeks "I thought I could trust you, Trevor."

"I didn't know what to tell him!" Trevor said.

"You could've said no!"

"I didn't know what Jared will do if I refuse to play," Trevor said. "I didn't know."

Erik sobbed and wrapped his arms around Trevor.

"Don't play anymore," Erik said. "Please, don't play."

Trevor held Erik in his arms, but Erik was too drunk to notice that Trevor hadn't nodded an agreement to Erik's proposal.

Bony fingers reached out and pawed at the heap of flesh in front of the creature. Its hollow eyes stared at the flesh before its fingers ripped a piece off. It lapped up the blood and tore the flesh away. The creature knew that a man had given it this offering, and it accepted it. It reached out and tore the stomach open, pouring out long trails of innards, tearing them open and lapping up blood.

Carrion birds flew overhead, but they knew better than to land. Once the creature was done eating, it would leave whatever was left of the carcass for nature to devour. Cruel nature would leave the spoils of death to her creatures.

A shrill, bloody cry of triumph rose from the creature's dead throat as it continued to feast on the body of a girl who had once played dead.

Erik's head was throbbing. He moaned and set a hand on his forehead, moaning once more before rolling over on his back.

"Trevor?" Erik called, grimacing.

"What is it, Erik?" Trevor asked, walking over to the bed and

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standing over Erik.

“What happened?”

“You drank my whiskey,” Trevor said with a sad smile.

Erik sat up and rubbed his head, sighing.

“What did I do?”

“Threw a whiskey bottle at me,” Trevor said. “But thankfully you’ve always had a bad aim.”

Erik wrapped his arms around Trevor.

“I’m sorry,” Erik said. “You know I drink when I’m upset.”

“I played the game, Erik,” Trevor said. “But I won, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“That’s why I have dried blood on my hand, huh?” Erik said.

Trevor nodded and pushed Erik away, stripping his undershirt off to reveal an array of fresh scratches on his chest.

“Why was Jared playing the game so early in the morning?”

“I don’t know,” Trevor shrugged. “He called me and asked if I wanted to play. I tried to get out of it, Erik, but I couldn’t.”

Erik nodded, but in the back of his mind, he couldn’t help but wonder what was going on with the whole game.

“We *Play Dead* because it’s...it’s satisfying,” Erik began. “Right? On some level, it actually feels good to win.”

“Yeah,” Trevor said.

“And last night, it felt good. It felt *better* than it had before, because we escaped death. Right?”

“Yeah,” Trevor said. “Right.”

“But the game is wrong. We don’t even know where the game came from, Trevor.”

“No, we don’t,” Trevor said. “But you know what, Erik? I bet if we tried *real* hard, we could find out where the game came from.”

“What about us?” Erik asked. “Are we still playing?”

“I think we have to,” Trevor said.

“What did Jared say when you tried to talk him out of it?”

“I never got the chance to try and back out of it,” Trevor sighed. “He used you as blackmail.”

“How...”

“Jared said you were weak,” Trevor said, cutting Erik off.

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“And he took a stab at our relationship. I was afraid of pushing him, Erik. I still don’t know what’ll happen if we quit.”

Erik nodded, but he couldn’t push away the image of the girl’s death. He couldn’t push away the sounds of her screaming as the men raped her, but thoughts of rape were nothing compared to the bloodcurdling screams that came from the girl when Jared killed her.

“Oh God,” Erik said, standing, wrapping his arms around Trevor and burying his head in his boyfriend’s neck. “God, Trevor. How the hell did we ever get involved in this?”

“It was a mistake,” Trevor said, rubbing Erik’s back. “It wasn’t our fault; it was a mistake, Air. Nothing more.”

Erik felt a little better after Trevor said his nickname, but it only helped a little bit. If he could wipe the memory of the girl’s death from his mind, he would’ve done that last night, after it had happened. Since he couldn’t do that, he opted for the warmth of Trevor’s body.

“I don’t want this,” Erik sobbed. “I don’t.”

“I know,” Trevor said. “I know.”

Jared sat on the Possum Place, his bare chest exposed to the air. The sun was starting to set, and as the sky was bleeding orange, he was bleeding red. His knife was covered with the blood from cutting his chest, spilling blood down the side of the cliff.

“I know you’re there,” Jared said. “I know you’re hungry.”

Some magnetic bond drove Jared to the creature. The girl’s body was only the offering; her death had been the trigger. He looked down at the knife, at the blood, and lifted it to his face. His tongue darted out and licked up the sweet, salty tang. He moaned. Tasting his blood was better than the bitch’s blood, that was for sure. His blood was saltier, sweeter, much like the seed that he had offered the creature earlier. His jeans were up, but his belt was only secured by his hips. The sweet taste of his seed was something else he enjoyed.

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“Are you going to reveal yourself to me!” Jared called as he licked the last of the blood off the knife. “Are you!”

Jared stood in silence. He watched the tree line below and sensed a disturbance. He was immediately aroused and he hardened, his pants tenting.

“Come,” Jared said, placing a hand on his chest and pulling it away, dripping blood over the side of the cliff. “I desire you.”

The creature appeared from the trees and raised its head. Jared watched it, his hand slick with blood, his erection throbbing in his pants. To look upon this beast brought the greatest satisfaction and arousal that he had ever felt. He smiled as the creature crossed the river with a few long strides and crawled up the side of the cliff.

“Thank you,” Jared said, offering the creature his bloody hand.

A slimy tongue darted from the creature’s skeletal head and lapped up the blood on Jared’s hand. Jared nodded and undid his pants, freeing his throbbing organ.

“You desire my seed,” Jared said. “And I give it to you.”

The creature bent its head and took Jared’s throbbing erection in its mouth.

“God,” Jared said, carefully placing a hand on the creature’s cold, smooth head. “Master...God...”

Jared remained silent and thankful as the creature reaped what it desired; his seed.

Erik sat in the back of the library, his fingers flipping through pages of a book on the old town. Even though the small town wasn’t on the map, that didn’t discount the fact that they lived *very* close to where the Salem Witch Trials went on.

The witch trials don’t have nothing to do with this, Erik thought as he stopped flipping through pages, sighing and standing. *Unless there was some kind of game that originated from back then.*

Shaking his head, Erik arched his back and turned, about to

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go back to his book before he felt a hand snake up his shirt from behind him.

"Hey, sexy," Trevor whispered.

"What're you doing?" Erik asked with a laugh. "Quit, Trevor; that tickles."

Trevor nibbled on Erik's earlobe for another moment before pulling away.

"I'm a little horny," Trevor said, snaking his hand up under Erik's shirt again. "Can you check that book out?"

"Are you that horny?"

"Yes," Trevor said, sliding his hand down Erik's abs. "You are too."

Trevor squeezed Erik's crotch, and Erik did his best to stifle the moan that came out of him.

"All right," Erik whispered. "Get away from me, you horny dog."

Trevor nodded and pulled away, giving Erik time to pick up the books he had.

"Kind of unexpected," Erik said with a laugh. "I never thought I'd get rubbed in the library."

"Well, now you have one last sexual experience to knock off your list," Trevor said, kissing Erik's neck.

Erik nodded, jumping as he heard Trevor's cell phone go off.

"Who's that?" Erik asked.

Trevor's face went pale as he looked at the number.

"Jared," Trevor said. "I'm not answering it."

Erik nodded as Trevor set the cell phone on the bedside table. Erik could only huddle in close to Trevor's chest as the phone continued to ring.

The one-night stand that had happened two weeks ago had yielded a boyfriend. Jared watched the young man's breaths rise and fall on the bed, sighing, sitting on the bed and patting the

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young man's leg.

And to think Simon's living with me because I bought him for a night, Jared thought with a guilty sigh.

The kid had been selling his body on the street, and while Jared wasn't one to go out and buy a prostitute's services, Simon had called to him. Now that Simon was living with him, it made Jared feel more secure.

The game...

Jared had to arrange another game for the weekend. He already knew that he was going to call Trevor and get both him and Erik to come.

That little pussy Erik is starting to get on my nerves, Jared thought, balling his hand into a fist until he could feel his knuckles pop. *I swear, if he keeps it up, I'm going to rip his fucking balls...*

"Jared?"

Simon's voice calmed the anger that had been running through Jared's body.

"Yes?" Jared asked, looking over at Simon.

"You still cutting yourself?"

Jared didn't need to say anything; his bare chest was visible.

"Why are you cutting yourself?" Simon asked, crawling over beside Jared and looking at the fresh cuts.

"I'm giving it blood," Jared said.

Simon looked up at Jared and frowned.

"And your come," Simon said. "Right?"

Jared gave his boyfriend a guilty nod.

"You need to leave it alone," Simon said. "Your game...I know you didn't mean to kill her, but..."

"I killed her, Simon," Jared said with a sigh. "And I did it without a second or guilty thought."

Jared closed his eyes. Jared could feel Simon's eyes staring at his large, fit form, at the cuts across his chest. Jared didn't need anyone to tell him that Simon was disappointed.

The last thing Jared expected was to feel Simon's arms around him.

"It's your curse," Simon said, sighing. "But I love you, and

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I'm sticking beside you."

"You're just saying that because I took you in," Jared said with a sigh. "There's no need to fake emotions to me."

"No, I *do* love you," Simon said. "Don't you feel something toward me, Jared?"

Jared opened his eyes and looked into Simon's eyes, one bright green, the other an ocean blue.

"Yeah," Jared said, touching Simon's face. "I do."

Simon nodded, stood, and offered Jared his hand.

"Come on; we need to do something about your cuts."

Jared took Simon's hand and stood, following the younger man into the bathroom.

"You find anything yet?" Trevor asked, setting a plate of spaghetti in front of Erik.

"No," Erik said, looking up at Trevor, then to the plate of spaghetti "Thanks."

"It's no trouble," Trevor said, setting his plate on the coffee table and sitting on the floor beside Erik. "You haven't found anything?"

"I'm still going through this town history book," Erik said with a sigh. "Did you turn your phone off?"

"Yeah, why?"

"It's vibrating."

"It's Jared."

Erik kept silent and began eating, his thoughts going out to the vibrating cell phone

Why is he so fixated on us? Erik thought. *Why does he want us to keep playing?*

"You haven't answered it since he's been calling?"

"No, I haven't," Trevor said. "I don't plan on answering it either."

"Is he leaving you voicemail?"

"I think so," Trevor said. "But I haven't checked."

Erik nodded, finishing his plate and standing, walking into

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the kitchen. He put his plate in the sink and ran some water over it, his eyes straying to the phone.

He's going to drive me nuts, Erik thought. If this sick fucker is going to keep this up, I'll call the cops on him.

"Have you thought about calling the cops?" Erik asked, keeping his back to Trevor.

"The cops?"

"Yeah. Isn't he starting to creep you out?"

"A little..."

"I think we should call the cops, Trevor."

"He could put it on us too, Erik," Trevor said. "Did you think of that?"

Erik stood there for a moment, his eyes set on the sink. He watched the water fall from the tap, each little drop mesmerizing him.

"No," Erik finally said. "I didn't."

"Well, that's something to think about," Trevor sighed. "We're not going to get out of playing the game very easily."

Erik nodded. He closed his eyes and gripped the edge of the counter until his fingers hurt. Tears came to his eyes and flowed down his cheeks.

"Erik," Trevor said, wrapping his arms around Erik. "You're crying."

"We don't deserve to live like this," Erik said.

"I know," Trevor said.

"It didn't help when you played without telling me," Erik sobbed

"I'm sorry, Erik," Trevor sighed. "It's actually fun, if you get past the humiliation, torture and..."

"Death," Erik finished.

"Yeah," Trevor said with a forced laugh. "You know what I mean."

"I don't want our relationship to mess up because of this motherfucking game," Erik said, turning and hugging Trevor. "I love you, Trevor."

"You mean that?" Trevor asked. "We've only been dating for two months."

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"I don't say I love you a lot," Erik began. "But I do mean it, Trevor."

"I love you too," Trevor said, kissing Erik's head. "I won't play the game anymore."

"You promise?" Erik asked.

Trevor pushed Erik away, looked into his eyes, and nodded.

"I promise."

Jared sat at the edge of the cliff, his feet dangling over the side. The creature was at his side, its front legs balancing its body out as the back legs supported its spine. Jared had just fed the creature his seed, but he had kept his chest bandaged, not wanting to anger Simon by cutting himself.

He just cares about me, that's all, Jared sighed. I can't blame him for caring.

The creature stared at Jared. Jared watched the creature with a mild fascination. Respect and arousal rose through his body at the sight of the creature. He couldn't explain it, but he wanted to please this creature in whatever way he could.

"I must go," Jared said, standing.

The creature defied its structure and stood on its back legs. Now, almost at Jared's height of six-foot-two, it stared up at him with its dark eyes.

"There'll be fresh blood for you soon," Jared said, bowing his head. "I promise you that."

Jared closed the door behind him and sighed, rubbing his arms. The bone-chill of the room was something he hadn't expected.

"Simon?" Jared asked, seeing his boyfriend on the couch. "How come it's so cold in here?"

"I guess the heater went out," Simon said, standing, revealing his scantily-clad body.

"And you're in your underwear?"

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"I was hoping you'd cuddle up in bed with me," Simon said, kissing the naked skin that peeked out from Jared's jacket.

"Yeah," Jared said, stripping out of his jacket and tossing it on the couch, letting Simon lead him to the couch.

Simon laid back on the bed and smiled. Simon was so small under Jared it wasn't even funny. Simon's ribs were still exposed through his chest and he was so skinny that Jared didn't think he weighed much more than a hundred pounds.

"How tall are you again?" Jared asked, setting a hand on Simon's chest.

"Uh...like, five-nine," Simon said. "Why?"

"You're too skinny, Simon."

"I know," Simon said with a sigh. "I wasn't eating much more than cock before you took me in."

Jared sighed and sat on the bed next to Simon.

"What?" Simon asked.

"It's just..." Jared shook his head and bowed his head

"What is it, Jared?" Simon asked, setting a hand on Jared's shoulder.

"I'm afraid of this thing," Jared said.

"You mean the thing that you've been," Simon swallowed a lump in his throat. "Feeding?"

Jared nodded and sighed, stripping out of his shirt, revealing the bandages that Simon had wrapped around him earlier.

"I-I don't know what to tell you, Jared," Simon sighed.

"I didn't think you did," Jared said.

"You're not mad at me, are you?"

"No," Jared said. "Why would I be mad at you?"

"I don't know," Simon shrugged, standing, walking to a nearby dresser and pulling out a thick quilt. "I guess it's just part of my personality."

"You told me some of the guys that picked you up pushed you around fairly bad," Jared said.

"Yeah," Simon said. "If you call getting raped pushing around. You know I made you wear a condom when you picked me up."

"Yeah," Jared said. "I was wondering why you were so

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cheap.”

“Yeah, twenty bucks is what you’d pay for a blow job around here,” Simon said with a small, forced laugh. “Being a prostitute made me feel a little more important, you know? Like I was actually helping someone.”

Jared nodded and wrapped an arm around Simon.

“It’s all right,” Jared said.

“I know,” Simon said, running a hand through the hair on Jared’s abs. “Will you be all right?”

“I’ll live,” Jared said, lying down, enjoying the message Simon was giving him. “Thanks.”

Simon smiled and spread out beside Jared, resting his head on Jared’s shoulder

“Get some rest, Jared. Everything will be all right. I promise.”

Jared nodded and closed his eyes.

He hoped everything would be all right.

The creature pounced on the rabbit and dug its teeth into its neck. It ripped the spine out in a single tear, tossing the bone with a flick of its head. Its desire was blood, and now that it was getting it, it liked it. It should’ve known that it wouldn’t have been able to depend on the human man for blood. The only thing the creature needed the man for was seed, and the man seemed more than willing to offer the salty life-blood of the male sex.

It raised its head, meat hanging from between its teeth and blood pouring down the smooth white that was its face. It watched a long, scraggly wolf come up, growling at the creature.

The creature let out a scream that sent the birds into the sky. The wolf whimpered and ran with its tail between its legs.

Nothing would keep the creature from its meal.

This was the creature’s home; not theirs.

Erik sat at the dinner table, his tired, bloodshot eyes slowly

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taking in each individual word. It was near midnight, and Trevor had fallen asleep waiting for him to come to bed.

"Come on," Erik moaned. "There has to be *something* here"

He shook his head and stood, standing, turning the light off and crawling into bed. Erik kissed Trevor's cheek and closed his eyes, but he already knew that he wasn't going to be falling asleep anytime soon. His mind was wandering too much. He wanted to know something--*anything*--about that damn game.

You'll go nuts trying to find out about it, Erik thought, rolling over, feeling his and Trevor's bodies touch. *You will.*

Erik sighed and closed his eyes. He laid there, feeling Trevor's body move in sync with his breathing beside him. He felt better, knowing that Trevor was in bed with him, but it didn't calm the storm that was brewing in his mind

"Great," he whispered, rolling over, touching Trevor's shoulder "Just great."

"Ugh," Trevor moaned, opening his eyes and looking at Erik. "You okay, Air?"

"Yeah," Erik said with a sigh. "I am."

"You were reading some stuff again, huh?"

"Yeah, I was."

"That'll get to your head if you let it, Erik."

"I know. I don't want that."

"You're not tired?"

"No...I am. It's just that I can't go to sleep."

Trevor nodded and sat up, leaning against the wall and yawning.

"You don't have to get up just because I can't sleep, Trev."

"It's fine, Erik," Trevor said with a small smile. "Besides, I doubt you're the only one who can't sleep tonight."

Erik gave a small, uneasy laugh and crawled out of bed with Trevor.

"Jared, why can't you sleep?"

Jared shook his head and rolled over, facing Simon.

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"Who says I can't sleep?"

"Umm...You're kinda hinting on it."

Jared sighed and crawled out of bed, walking to the window. He shivered and closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Simon," Jared said.

Jared felt the weight of the quilt on his shoulders. He let Simon wrap it around him.

"Thanks."

"It's no trouble," Simon said. "What's bothering you?"

Jared shook his head and sat on the windowsill.

"It's nothing."

"Tell me, Jared."

Jared turned his head away, keeping his eyes--and furthermore, his emotions--away from Simon.

"Come on, Jared."

"There's nothing to say."

"Yes, there is."

"No, there isn't," Jared said, thickening his words.

"Jared, please; don't do this to me."

Jared sighed and gestured Simon toward him. He helped Simon onto the windowsill and leaned Simon against his chest, wrapping the blanket around them.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?"

"No," Jared said. "You're not."

"All right," Simon said, laying his head on Jared's shoulder

For several long minutes, Simon didn't say anything. Jared took this silent to drown his bad thoughts in the good ones. Simon's warmth against his cold body felt great, especially when he was feeling so bad.

"So..."

Simon's word drew Jared out of his thoughts.

"What?"

"Are you going to tell me what's on your mind?"

Jared sighed and kissed Simon's neck. It wasn't a kiss of wanting; it was a kiss for comfort.

"The thing," Jared said.

Simon pushed himself away from Jared's shoulder and

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looked into his eyes.

"Can't you just leave it alone, Jared?"

"I...I don't know," Jared sighed. "I really don't, Simon."

Simon sighed, got off of Jared and stood, walking back to the bed. Jared's eyes followed Simon's body. He was slightly aroused, but he wasn't sure if he would pursue it or not.

Now might be a bad time to have sex.

"You're not mad at me, are you?" Jared asked, getting off the windowsill and walking back to the bed.

"No," Simon said, sighing. "I'm not mad."

Jared wrapped an arm around Simon's shoulder and kissed his young boyfriend's cheek.

"What was that for?"

"I wanted to," Jared said, forcing a smile.

"You usually don't do that."

"I need to start acting like a boyfriend," Jared said.

"You don't need to act like anything," Simon said, gently pushing Jared down, where he hovered over Jared's body. "You took me off the street."

"It's because I wanted to get laid," Jared said, touching Simon's thin, hairless chest.

"You came and got me the week after though," Simon said, kissing Jared's neck.

"I know," Jared said, pulling Simon's head away. "It's because I felt bad."

"You don't feel bad now, do you?" Simon asked, smiling.

"No," Jared grinned, feeling his erection stretching his boxers. "I don't."

Simon smiled and bent his head, kissing Jared's abs. He kissed and licked at each muscle, almost as if he was cleaning it. Jared moaned, feeling Simon kiss down to his boxers.

"God," Jared said.

"I might as well be," Simon said, pulling Jared's boxers away. "I've got you wrapped around my finger."

Simon took Jared's large cock and squeezed it, lapping at the large, oozing head before taking it into his mouth. Jared moaned and closed his eyes, afraid that they would roll back into his head

- Play Dead -

if he didn't.

"Twelve...Gorgeous...Inches," Simon said in-between breaths. "Twelve of them."

Jared moaned as Simon took his cock down his throat. He enjoyed Simon's tight throat and that way the warm, fleshy muscle was doing to his cock. He moaned and gripped the sheet, bucking.

"God, Simon," Jared growled. "Make me come."

Simon moaned and pulled back and sucked on the fat, purple head right before he exploded Jared growled and Simon moaned, pulling away and letting some of the come hit his face.

"Heh," Simon laughed, licking the come from his lips and chin off.

"You look..." Jared moaned and leaned forward, licking the rest of his come off of Simon's face before kissing him. "God."

Jared moaned and ripped Simon's boxers off. He took the younger man's cock into his mouth and moaned, deep-throating him for a good moment before Simon began shooting. He caught most of it on his tongue as he pulled off and moaned, swallowing all of Simon's come before he pulled away.

"That was," Jared stopped, taking in a deep breath, trying to find a word for it.

"Hot?" Simon grinned.

"Yeah," Jared gasped. "It was."

Simon laughed and wiped his hand over his sweaty, salty face before kissing Jared once more.

"I'm gonna go wash my face," Simon said. "You're a fire hydrant when I get to blowing you."

"Same goes to you, stud," Jared grinned, squeezing Simon's ass before the young man walked into the bathroom.

Jared smiled and spread across the bed, waiting for Simon to return.

"What's so funny?" Simon asked, crawling into bed with him.

"Ah, nothing," Jared said, kissing Simon's cheek and wrapping an arm around him. "You just made me feel better."

Simon smiled and fell asleep in Jared's arms.

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The creature's spasm woke it from its sleep. It wasn't aware of what was happening until it felt its orbs draw up into its legs. It screamed as a violent, bloody orgasm overtook its body, spraying the wall with blood.

It screamed, knowing that the lack of human blood was what caused this. It screamed and clawed at the walls, making deep impressions in the walls.

Its eyes bled as it screamed into the night. It charged out of the cave, lifted its head, and sniffed the air.

It could smell them...

Humans.

It would feed tonight.

"The violent murder that was found today outside of a local restaurant was something that this small town has never seen. The victim was almost completely eaten. Cannibalism is not a factor in this murder, regardless of the rumors that have been going around. Authorities are not releasing what is believed to have killed the man."

"Shit," Trevor said, pulling a shirt over his chest.

"You don't think it was Jared, do you?" Erik asked.

"Jared wouldn't go out and eat someone," Trevor said. "No matter how sick he is."

Erik nodded and sighed, standing.

"Were you going to shower?"

"Were you?"

"Yeah," Erik said. "You want to shower with me?"

Trevor stripped out of his shirt and followed Erik into the bathroom, where they undressed and got in the shower.

"Don't worry about anything, Erik," Trevor said.

"It's hard not too," Erik said, forcing a laugh.

"I know it is," Trevor said, patting Erik's shoulder. "But you've gotta try."

- Play Dead -

“You think that’s...”

Simon shook his head, looking up at Jared.

Jared sighed and shrugged, grimacing as Simon lathered some disinfectant on his chest.

“I don’t know,” Jared said.

“If you could have a guess, would you say it was the creature you had been...feeding?”

“I wouldn’t discount that,” Jared said. “You know what, Simon? That man could’ve been attacked by a wild animal.”

“How come there’ve been rumors that the man had been sucked off before he had died?”

“How am I supposed to know?” Jared asked, biting his lip as the disinfectant began to burn.

“Sorry,” Simon said. “I dunno. I was just wondering, because you’ve been...”

“I’ve been what?” Jared asked.

“I was going to say sucked off by the thing, but I didn’t want to be rude.”

Jared sighed and stood, letting Simon wrap his chest.

“I don’t care about that,” Jared said. “I mean your bluntness. That’s one of the things I like about you.”

“Thanks,” Simon said, smiling. “I try. Hold still, I don’t want to jab you with this pin.”

Jared nodded and looked at his reflection in the mirror. His close-trimmed beard accentuated his darker skin. He had his Latin father to thank for the natural tan, and he smiled as he ran a hand down his lower chest, running his fingers through the hair though

“What?” Simon asked.

“Nothing,” Jared said.

“You don’t have to tell me you were smiling at yourself,” Simon said. “You deserve it, Jared; you’re gorgeous.”

“Heh, thanks,” Jared said with a small smile.

“Seriously,” Simon said, slapping Jared’s arm. “You’re a Latin god.”

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"I'm not all the way Latin, I'm biracial," Jared grinned "I have some white in me."

"Hard to see that," Simon said, getting on his tiptoes and kissing Jared's cheek.

"Yeah," Jared said with a small laugh. "Whatever."

Simon smiled and took Jared's hand.

"I want you to know that you don't have to worry about anything," Simon said, kissing Jared's hand. "I'm here for you through thick or thin, Jared."

Jared smiled and wrapped Simon into a hug, thankful that he had taken the young, skinny prostitute and made him a part of his life.

"Is there a game soon?" Erik asked.

"I don't know," Trevor said.

"Has Jared still been calling you?"

"No."

"He hasn't?"

"He's pretty much stopped. He calls once a day, if anything."

Erik nodded and sighed, sitting down at the table, looking at his books.

"I think this has gone farther than a book will ever tell me about," Erik sighed.

"You think?"

"I think the game has something to do with this new death," Erik said

"How so?"

"I don't know, it just doesn't feel right. You know when you get that eerie feeling, like something's watching you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I have that."

"You don't think we're being watched, do you?"

"I hope not," Erik sighed. "I certainly hope not."

- Play Dead -

It was a deathly-late hour of the morning. At two AM, the only thing that was keeping Erik going was the energy drink that he had swigged down at nine. The print was still clear to him, but it was hard to just sit and stare at a book. He had to get up several times and move around to keep himself from going nuts.

That's why you don't drink energy drinks, he thought, stifling a laugh with his hand.

He sat back down and was about to turn the page before he found a poem at the bottom of the page.

Run, run, boys and girls, run, run.

Go quick! Go quick!

To Headman's Hill you go!

It's a game of life, it's a game of death...

When the devil comes a runnin', you better be playing dead...

Because if you're not...

You may stay dead.

He remained silent, his eyes transfixed to the page, his fingers fidgeting and his body trembling. He had found something that shook his body to the core, and he couldn't help but shiver.

God, he thought, touching the page. *This means something.*

"Trevor," Erik said, raising his voice. "Trevor."

"Ugh," Trevor moaned. "What?"

"You need to see this...I found something that needs to be looked into."

"Jared," Simon said. "What's wrong?"

Jared shook his head and took Simon's hand as he offered it. The two of them had gone on a date, one of the first they had gone on. Ever since Jared had invited Simon to live with him, they hadn't gone on a date. They slept with each other, but there had been no dating involved until now.

"Nothing," Jared said.

Simon didn't say anything after Jared spoke, and he was thankful for that. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked

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out over the water. The wind chilled his bare arms, and when he shivered, he felt Simon's arm snake around his waist.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," Simon said, leaning his head against Jared's shoulder. "I'm just worried about you."

"I know," Jared sighed. "I know that damn well."

Simon nodded. Jared sighed and wrapped his arm around his boyfriend.

"I don't try to act distant," Jared sighed. "It's just hard for me to live the life I'm living right now."

"I know," Simon said. "I'm here for you, Jared. You know how much I care about you."

"And you know how much I care about you," Jared sighed. "Right?"

"Of course I do," Simon said, kissing Jared's cheek. "You took me off the streets, Jared."

"I felt bad," Jared said. "I felt guilty that I had picked you up for a one-night thing."

"Well, that one-night thing turned into a relationship," Simon said. "And that's all that matters, right?"

Jared nodded and sighed, leaning against Simon.

"Jared, have you ever thought about moving?"

Jared looked down at Simon.

"I don't know if I can," Jared sighed. "It might follow me."

"We've got to try," Simon said. "How can you keep the creature away from you?"

Jared sighed, thinking. He tried to recall the ceremony that he needed to do in order to keep the creature away from him.

"We need to arrange another game," Jared said.

"Something tells me this isn't going to be one of the normal games," Simon sighed. "But all right. Just whatever works, Jared."

When he woke up, Erik was cold...
And alone.

- Play Dead -

He sat up and looked around, trying to find his boyfriend. When he couldn't see Trevor in the immediate area, he stood and pushed the bathroom door open. Trevor wasn't there either.

Maybe he went to go get something, he thought. Yeah, that's it; I bet he forgot something.

Shaking his head, he walked down the hall and into the kitchen, where he looked for a note. Normally, Trevor left a note on the kitchen counter saying where he went, but he could find no such note.

"Maybe it fell on the floor," he said, getting on his hands and knees and making his way around the cupboard. "Come on, where is it?"

He crawled around the kitchen for several minutes, desperately looking for the note. It was only after he realized he was acting childish when he knew that there was no note

Something was wrong.

He stood just in time to hear a cell phone ring, Trevor's phone. Erik ran and grabbed the phone, flipping it open and placing it to his ear before he could see who was even calling.

"Hello?" Erik asked. "Trevor?"

"No, Erik; this isn't Trevor."

Erik's breath caught in his chest as he heard the voice.

"What did you do with him, Jared?" Erik asked, trying to keep himself calm. "What did you do with my boyfriend?"

"He's right here," Jared said. "He's lying on the Possum Place."

No! He said he wouldn't play!

"Don't worry, he didn't play," Jared said. "But you need to play to keep him alive, Erik."

"What's going on, Jared? Why the hell did you kidnap my boyfriend?"

"I need to get away from the thing I resurrected the night I killed that girl, Erik, and the only way to do that is to either have a human sacrifice, or to beat the creature in a game."

"But you won't be playing," Erik said. "Will you?"

"Yes, Erik, I will. I have as much riding on this game as you do."

Kody Boye

"When?" Erik asked. "When is it?"

"Tonight," Jared said. "At midnight."

The phone ended before Erik could get another word in. The cell phone slipped from his hand and fell to the floor, bouncing a few times before it flipped shut. He collapsed, crying for every single bad thing that had happened to him in the past few days.

"Why are you doing this?" Trevor asked, shivering as Jared paced around the rock he was tied to.

"I need to get away from it," Jared said.

"From what?" Trevor asked. "What the hell do you need to get away from, you cock sucking, motherfucking bastard!"

Jared slapped Trevor so hard that he felt blood in his mouth. Jared shook his head and sat at the end of the rock, sighing.

"It awoke after I killed that girl," Jared said.

"What did?" Trevor asked.

"The devil, or whatever it is. If you ask me, it's close enough to the devil."

Trevor watched as Jared stood and walked near the rock. He felt Jared place his hand on his bare shoulder. Trevor wanted to recoil, but since he was tied down, it would do nothing. Jared's hand felt like disease snaking its way through his body.

"I'm still your friend, Trevor," Jared said with a sigh, getting down on one knee and looking in Trevor's eyes. "Right?"

"Why should you still be my friend?" Trevor asked. "You kidnapped me, tied me to a rock, and now you just hit me."

"You don't know how it feels to be who I am!" Jared cried. "You don't!"

"Why did you start this up anyway?" Trevor growled. "Why did you play with people's emotions, Jared? Why?"

"Because something came over me," Jared said. "And I need to get rid of it."

Jared stood and was about to walk back to where he had been sitting with Simon. Simon was wrapped in a blanket, watching Trevor with calm, sad eyes. Jared stood and stared at a

- Play Dead -

lone blanket before sighing, grabbing it and throwing it over Trevor.

"Go to sleep," Jared said. "Midnight's a long way off."

Erik was shaking. Every single nerve in his body was on fire, and all he could do was pace back and forth. It was still a half-hour from midnight, but he needed to make sure he was ready to leave. He was dressed in his cutoffs and an undershirt. He didn't care if it was going to be chilly tonight; his body was on fire, no simple chill would bother him.

"Here we go," Erik sighed, grabbing his car keys. "I'm coming to get you, Trevor."

Trevor grimaced as Jared spread cold blood over his body. He didn't know what to do or say, but he knew that he shouldn't fight or say anything that could anger Jared. The animal blood was one thing he could live with; Jared's wrath might get him killed.

"Why are you spreading blood over me?"

"It's part of the ritual," Jared said. "The creature needs to know what it's playing for."

Trevor shivered and heard the nearby bushes rustle again.

"It's here, isn't it?"

"Somewhere close by, yes," Jared said. "You don't have to worry about anything. If Erik gets here last, you lose. If I get here last, I might as well just kill myself. If the creature loses, well...then you and I will both be free."

Trevor closed his eyes as Jared finished spreading the blood over his body.

"Simon, come light these candles."

Trevor opened his eyes as the young male prostitute came up. Simon held a candle wand in his hand. Simon walked around the Possum Place, lighting the candles one by one until the six on Trevor's left were lit.

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"Please don't hate him," Simon said as he lit the six on Trevor's right. "He's not a bad person."

"He's killed someone, Simon," Trevor whispered. "You'd be better off without him."

"I'm in love with him," Simon said.

"You were in love with him before he killed that girl," Trevor said. "You..."

"And I'm in love with the man who also killed the girl," Simon said. "He made a mistake. We all make mistakes, Trevor."

"He could be making his biggest mistake yet," Trevor said. "And you could be too, Simon."

Simon shook his head as he lit the last candle above Trevor.

"Then so be it."

Around Trevor, six candles glowed on his right, left and above him.

Six...

Six...

Six...

"When the devil comes a runnin', you better be playing dead," Trevor whispered. "Otherwise you may *stay* dead."

Erik got out of the car and saw Jared sitting on a nearby stump. The man threw his cigarette on the ground and crushed it with his foot.

"You fucking asshole," Erik growled.

"That's no way to start this," Jared said.

"You kidnapped my boyfriend!"

"And we're not going to lose," Jared said. "You have Trevor's life to lose if you lose, Erik; I have my own life on the line as well."

Erik wanted to punch Jared, but he didn't. Although he wanted to see the man dead, he also didn't want to risk losing Trevor on account of some stupid mistake.

"Where's the creature?" Erik asked.

"There," Jared said.

- Play Dead -

When it came from the forest, Erik wanted to scream. The creature lifted its bony head and stared at him with hollow eyes. The things teeth clacked together and a fleshy, black tongue came out of its mouth, staining its teeth red with blood.

"It's a..."

"Skeleton," Jared said. "Yes, but it has that mass in its chest and between its legs."

Erik nodded, but as he looked at the mass of blood, fur and bones inside its chest, he wanted to turn and throw up. He could smell the rot coming from the creature's body. It was almost enough to turn and make him run.

"When do we start?" Erik asked.

"This will be played by moonlight," Jared said, pointing at the full moon above them. "The last one to get to the Possum Place loses."

Erik nodded, and before Jared could stand, he burst into the forest. He heard the long, bloodcurdling scream of the creature and began running faster. Every bit of his body was shaking, and as the creature continued screaming, he felt like ripping his ears off.

No! Fight it! You're not going to let this thing beat you!

Erik screamed and jumped over a deep pit of rocks, landing on the other side in a heap. He cried out as a branch lashed out and ripped a gasp in his leg, cutting deep into the muscle.

"Fuck!" He screamed, holding his hand to the wound, trying to stop the bleeding.

The thought of Trevor's death entered his mind. He stripped his undershirt off, tying it around the wound and continuing on. Although he was limping, he was still making a good pace.

You've gotta save Trevor. You can't live with yourself if you let him die.

He *wouldn't* be able to live if he let Trevor die. He would get to the rock and save Trevor, and that creature would be left to suffer in this surrounding wilderness.

He would save Trevor, or he would die trying.

Kody Boye

“Erik!” Trevor screamed. “Erik!”

“Calm down!” Simon cried, slapping him. “You don’t want the creature to hear you.”

Trevor stared at the young prostitute.

“W-What?”

“It might get here quicker if it hears you screaming,” Simon said. “I don’t want to see you die or watch Erik suffer, and I don’t want Jared to kill himself if he loses.”

“S-Simon,” Trevor stuttered. “I...”

“Just stay quiet,” Simon said, placing a finger to Trevor’s lips. “You have a better chance of living if you do.”

Erik was there! He made his way out of the clearing and saw Jared at the top of the hill, clutching Simon in a strong hug.

I made it! Erik said, increasing his pace. *I made it!*

Behind him, the creature screamed. Erik began running, despite the pain in his leg. He felt the undershirt slip off his leg from the pressure and cried out as warm blood ran down his leg and into his shoe.

“Trevor!” Erik screamed. “I’m coming Trevor!”

Erik was just about to jump up on the hill before he felt claws tear into his back. He cried out in pain, but he kept walking. He collapsed in a heap in front of the Possum Place, touching the rock with his finger.

“I made it,” Erik whispered. “I made it, you motherfucking thing.”

The creature screamed and recoiled. Erik rolled over just in time to see the creature over him. Its black tongue snaked out from its mouth and dangled close to his face.

You saved Trevor, Erik thought, smiling. *You saved your boyfriend.*

Erik closed his eyes and accepted his fate. There was nothing else to do. He had saved Trevor, and even if he died, his boyfriend would still be alive.

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“Erik!”

Erik’s eyes flew open as he heard Trevor’s voice. The creature screamed and raised a claw, ready to tear him apart.

A shot broke the night.

The creature’s skull shattered.

Jared stood, a pistol in hand.

Erik lay there, hyperventilating as the creature’s bony body collapsed beside him. Strong arms wrapped around his chest and pulled him up.

Those arms were Trevor’s arms.

“Oh, Erik,” Trevor said, holding him close. “You’re all right.”

“Yes, Trevor,” Erik said. “I’m all right.”

They embraced in the cool air, the eons of death thick in the air, but their love stronger than anything else.

“We’re gone then,” Erik said as Trevor packed the last of their things in their car. “We’re not staying here anymore.”

“No,” Trevor said. “We’re lucky to be alive, Air.”

“I know,” Erik said, drawing close to Trevor. “I love you, Trevor.”

“I love you too,” Trevor said. “More than anything, Erik.”

Erik nodded and pressed his lips to Trevor’s, falling against Trevor’s body and into his arms.

Everything was all right. They were both alive, and that thing would never come back again.

Never...

“Jared?” Simon said. “Are you all right?”

Jared nodded, but he couldn’t help but look up at the apartment building he and Simon had lived in.

“I’ll be fine,” Jared replied.

“No, Jared; something’s on your mind. Tell me.”

Jared sighed and leaned against the car, crossing his arms over his chest.

Kody Boye

"I'm not sure if it stops here," Jared said.

"What do you mean?" Simon asked, wrapping his arm around one of Jared's muscular arms.

"It took control of me after it had been dead for so long," Jared said "Even if I ground its bones into dust, I'm not sure if it'll stay dead."

Simon kissed Jared's shoulder and sighed.

"If it does come back, there's nothing we can do about it," Simon said.

Jared nodded, rubbing Simon's back. The truth was, there *wouldn't* be anything he could do about it. He did his best to keep the thing dead by grinding its bones into dust, but that didn't mean it wouldn't come back. In the foggy nights of a man's mind, he could do whatever he wanted, even resurrect a game as old as time itself.

Jared wasn't sure whether or not that game would ever resurface.

"Run, run, boys and girls," Jared whispered. "To Headman's Hill you go."

And in the distance, boys and girls *did* run to that place. They ran and played around the rock, and through that playing, they came up with a game. They decided that the rock would be where you would play dead after you ran through the forest, and you would play dead if you lost. And if you played dead, anyone could do whatever they wanted to the boy or girl who was playing dead...

They could do *anything* they wanted...

- Play Dead -



There are over 45,000 species of
animals on the planet Earth...
There is only one specie of human.

Kody Boye

“What are you doing? It’s going to get upset if you stick your hand in there again.”

Doctor Andre Couper looked up at his intern. The area that the intern had been talking about was the small square hole that he was monitoring the animal through. The intern was right though; the animal would get mad if he stuck his hand back in, maybe even bite him.

“So, what do you suggest I do?”

“Put the welding gloves on.”

“Welding gloves?” Andre with a frown. “You want me to stick welding gloves on my hands just so I can inject anesthesia into the thing?”

“How are you going to figure out if it’s what the other people are saying without doing that? You’re not going to know if it’s the monster unless you reach your hand into its mouth and pull, are you?”

Andre shook his head and looked out at the other scientists; those who were working at fending off the media. The long glass window was the only thing fending off the reporters, journalists and other such people that had been attracted to the facility because the rumor was that they had captured the supposed ‘El Chupacabras’ animal.

If it was indeed the El Chupacabras, it wasn’t like the mythical creature most people thought it to be. This animal was canine and bore striking red eyes and an adornment of razor-sharp claws on each paw. The back paws were a bit larger than the front, which could have suggested a bipedal creature, but it wouldn’t walk on its back legs; it was too chest-heavy to do so. At four feet tall the creature would’ve had trouble getting in through fences, but it did seem able to lift up onto its back legs for a moment just to tear sections of fence away. There was flesh that ran from the elbow of the creature’s front legs to its sides which could have suggested wings. They weren’t wings, but there were spikes; long spikes that ranged anywhere from two feet to six

- Play Dead -

inches long, starting at the two feet from the base of the head in a wicked crown and gradually getting smaller until it hit the fleshy tale, which only had the dark fur on the very end of it in a tuft.

The creature was why the media was here. They believed it was the real 'El Chupacabras,' the real bipedal, flying creature that stalked around the countryside and killed mercilessly.

If there were such a creature out there and it was still being seen, Andre didn't have it; all he had was this canine creature that looked like something that could have come out of a Stephen King novel.

Cryptozoology at its finest, Andre thought as he looked back at his intern, who was too busy watching the creature. *The thing's going to make me and this institution famous.*

Andre could see it now: a broad yellow billboard at the front of the building which read *Coupe Institute For The Outer Studies of Zoology* and then under that it would read *The institute that captured El Chupacabras*. If it was the El Chupacabras, anyway; for all Andrew knew it could have been the thing the little boy down the street called 'bun-bun.'

"*Dr. Coupe?*"

Andre was shocked out of his vivid daydream when his intern spoke.

"Yes, Marcos?"

"I think we should get this over with, Doctor. What if he breaks free?"

Andre looked back at the creature that was thrashing at the metal restraints that he had placed on it. They weren't chains, but bonds: rings that were attached to long poles to hold the creature's legs, neck and chest in place so that it wouldn't get away. The most he had ever done in his whole line of work at this institute was look at some skeletons that turned out just to be average nothings, but now with this thing, it would change the whole line of his work.

"All right," Andre said, grabbing a syringe. "Let's get this over with."

Andre put the welding gloves on and picked up the syringe,

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watching the creature before him. He was a magnificent animal, a magnificent, beautiful animal. He was an animal that could change the world if Andre figured out what it was.

“Stay,” Andrew said, half expecting the animal to act like the dog at home. “Stay and don’t move.”

It snarled, blood running out the sides of its mouth where the exposed, dark gums were. The blood ran down the sides of its mouth until it fell to the crystal-white tile below, and when Andre stopped moving the syringe the animal lunged at his exposed but gloved hand.

A second too late and Andre would have lost fingers.

“Did it bite its lip?” Marcos asked.

“No, it just started bleeding,” Andre said. “Be quiet and let me do this.”

Andre reached back in and stabbed the needle into the creature’s neck, draining the liquid into its bloodstream. It thrashed and roared, causing each and every hair on his body to raise before he pulled the syringe out.

“Now what?”

“It shouldn’t take that long,” Andre explained, placing the syringe on the cart. “Not that long at all.”

It didn’t take long, and when Andre reached into the containment area, the creature didn’t react.

It was knocked out cold.

Andre reached in and opened its mouth, waiting until his intern put gloves on. Marcos held the creature’s mouth open while Andre reached into its throat. He tried in vain for several hard minutes to find any source of a second, forked tongue. When his hand felt something rough and hard, he pulled until the organ was exposed to the open daylight.

The tongue was forked.

What he found was indeed the El Chupacabras, or something like it.

Andre couldn’t sleep that night. He was without a partner to

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talk to or hold him, as she had left him several years before. His teenage son was the only person he had, and he was sleeping in the house three rooms down from where he was.

His son didn't know about what he had discovered today, but Brad would know tomorrow morning. Tomorrow morning was the first day of summer, and he knew that Brad would be the first up in the house. At five-thirty in the morning Brad would rise in red boxer briefs with his bare, slightly-haired chest exposed, sitting at the kitchen cupboard in a bar stool eating whatever he first grabbed out of the cupboard.

Brad would watch the morning news.

Andre knew Brad knew that his work involved studying strange or little-known animals, and that sometimes odd things happened there, but he wasn't sure how much Brad knew about it.

El Chupacabras...

The thing flashed into his mind, exposing dull red eyes that only glowed when it was dark. When he had been shutting the place down, he had kept the creature in the same cell but he had taken extra precautions to make sure it wouldn't get out. When he had looked into the cell, he had seen the creature's glowing eyes. They had watched him for several minutes before it set its head down and closed its eyes.

That creature was here in the room with him, not in a real sense, but it would end up being in the room. He'd wake up in the middle of the night from the bad dream and see the red eyes in the corner of the room. Maybe if he was *unlucky* he would get the whole package: spikes, claws and all.

That would be fun, very fun. Maybe he'd scream and wake the whole block up.

"Just go to sleep," he said.

When Andre stumbled out of his bedroom and down the hall that morning, he saw Brad sitting at the kitchen counter, bare-chested, eating potato chips.

Kody Boye

“Hey, Dad.”

Andre blinked a few times before he took his son in. It was exactly how he looked at five-thirty in the morning, when he usually woke up on a break.

“How come you’re up so early?” Brad asked.

Andre shook his head and walked into the kitchen, reaching into the bag of chips and pulling a handful out before sitting down. He nibbled one before taking a bite out of it.

“I don’t know,” Andre said. “I didn’t sleep too well last night.”

“And you just woke up?”

“Yeah,” Andre said. “You shouldn’t get up so early, Brad; you’re supposed to be sleeping in on summer vacation.”

Brad shrugged, scratching the hair between his pecs and stretching his arms.

“You okay, Dad?”

“Yeah, I’m all right. What makes you ask that?”

“I don’t know. I just felt like asking.”

Andre looked at Brad for a moment before shrugging and reaching back into the potato chip bag. He didn’t see the want in his son’s eyes, the want that Brad always had in his eyes when he wanted money or to borrow the car. He blinked a few times as the television set exploded into life as Brad clicked it on.

Believe it or not, the head scientist at the Coupe Zoology Institute has confirmed that this animal is indeed the Cryptozoological phenomena known as the El Chupacabras. Dr. Andre Coupe has the day off, so he won’t be able to make further comment until today. His intern did say that the creature had the long, forked tongue that is common with the Chupacabras phenomena, but cannot explain any further because tests and observation have not been conducted on the creature. More later on this strange and amazing discovery tomorrow.

Andre could feel his son’s eyes on him.

“Dad, is this what kept you up last night?”

Andre nodded.

“Yes, son, it is. I want you to go with me to work tomorrow, all right? Would you mind coming with me?”

“I don’t care,” Brad said with a smile “If I get to see this big

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monster thing, whatever; it'll be worth the trip."

"It's not a monster, Brad, it's an animal," Andre said with a sigh. "But I'm not sure if it's really the Chupacabras. If it isn't, oh well; we found a new animal."

"Do you think there's more out here, Dad?"

"There could be, Brad."

"Where did you find it?"

"By the mountains. It was a lucky find, because the thing has been caught in an old net trap that some of the amateur Cryptozoologists put out. I was surprised that it didn't get away from the trap."

"What's it like, Dad? What is it like to have something that nobody else has never really seen look you in the eyes?"

My son sure asks a question, Andre thought.

"I don't know, I just felt like it was an animal," Andre said "I was a bit afraid because it kept snapping at me, but other than that I didn't feel anything from it."

Brad shrugged and stood, looking out the window for a moment.

"You don't care if I come?" Brad asked.

Andre smiled.

"No, I don't, son."

"Is this really the Chupacabra, Dad?"

Andre looked and watched his son look in at the creature through the shatterproof glass, shrugging as he scribbled the last note down before standing.

"I'm not sure, son; for all I know, this thing could be anything," Andre said, patting Brad's shoulder and watching the creature. "But if this is what people are saying it is, this is the Chupacabras."

"Chupacabras? I thought it was just called the Chupacabra?"

"El Chupacabras means 'The Goat Sucker' in Spanish, Brad," Andre said. "It needs to be fed."

"Can I come with you, Dad?"

Kody Boye

"You want to come with? I'm not going in the cell, Brad, I'm just going to go up a floor and toss a few dead animals down."

"I'll come."

Andre shrugged and entered an eight-digit pass code into the monitor before the door unlocked, and when it did he ascended the stairs with Brad following closely behind

"How come you have this here, Dad?" Brad asked. "It seems like you'd put the bigger animals here."

"I don't know what the Chupacabras can do," Andre said as stopped and looked down at the animal, his fingers clutching at the cold metal in a rough embrace. "I was afraid that if we put it in a different cell, it would get out."

"Are you going to put it out in the zoo for display?"

Andre shrugged and continued to walk up the stairs, his mind lingering on what his son had just asked.

I could do that, Andre thought as he stepped off the final stair. But I don't know how it would react to people viewing it. Besides, it'd probably need an electric cage, and even if we built a below-ground-level exhibit for the animal, it would have to be several feet deep, at least fifteen or more.

Andre shook his head and pulled two rubber gloves on. He opened a freezer and pulled a dark plastic bag out, watching his son lean over the railing ever-so-slightly to look at the animal that was pawing at the metal cell.

"It knows how to get out," Brad said to himself, but Andre thought that Brad was talking to him as well. "If somebody opens the door without sedating it it'll get out."

"It won't get out," Andre said, opening the bag and pulling out a dead, frozen chicken. "Chicken, son?"

"I'll pass," Brad said, taking a few steps back.

Andre smiled and threw the chicken over the edge, where it landed with a dull smack. If it hadn't have been frozen, the chicken probably would've broken several bones and punctured the exterior skin. He threw the last two down and placed the bag in a chamber, where it would be sucked down underground and then burned to get rid of any kind of contamination.

"What's it doing, Brad?"

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“Watching them.”

Andre looked over the side to see the creature staring at the dead chickens. He could see the thing's tongue licking the edges of its mouth before the thing lifted one of the frozen chickens into its mouth. He and his son were just at the right angle to see the creature's barbed tongue lash out from the confines of the canine-creature's long throat and pierce the chicken's chest in a sickening sound.

It was the sound of something breaking a thick layer of ice, like a bullet or a sledgehammer

“Did it just break through frozen meat?” Brad asked in a hushed but awed voice. “The thing's tongue is that strong? And look, it's not spilling a drop of blood.”

Andre nodded and took his gloves off before throwing them into the sterilization chamber. He stood there, watching the creature suck the chicken's blood out, hearing the roar of a fire burning his gloves to nothing from below.

“Dad?”

“What, son?”

Andre looked over at his son just in time to see him shake his head and wave him off with his hand. He shrugged and walked over to the sink, where he washed his hands before he and Brad walked back down the stairs and to the main observation chamber, where they stood as the creature tossed the limp chicken to the floor before it proceeded to another one.

“It must be hungry,” Brad said. “Do you think it really kills animals like it does?”

“I don't think it slaughters them, unless they're pack hunters,” Andre said as he beckoned for Brad to sit on the bench while he went back to his desk. “It's interesting though, how it broke through frozen meat with its tongue.”

Andre lifted a pen and scribbled the new discovery down. He looked up at the cell, where he could see the creature stalking around, leaving the other two chickens alone

“Hmm...”

“Dad, why is it leaving the other two chickens alone?”

“I don't know,” Andre shrugged as he watched the thing

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circle the chickens. "It must not be hungry."

"You didn't feed it yesterday?"

"No, we found it caught in the cage yesterday. It looked like it'd been there for a good while, so it should be eating more."

Andrew watched the animal stalk around for another moment before he heard fists pounding at the glass that separated the observation room from the main hall. He turned to see Brad jump away from the bench just in time to be bombarded by continuous flashes from cameras, both digital and film.

"Dr. Andre Coupe, we'd like to ask you a few questions concerning the Chupacabra!"

Reporters...

The word was a hiss in Andre's mind, and right now, he didn't feel like talking to reporters at seven-thirty in the morning. He also didn't want to let any of them in, because--knowing reporters and their so called 'need to get the case'--they would be flashing their cameras inside the area like a madman would a pistol, and he knew that so much light might cause the creature to go berserk. He didn't know much about it, but he could hear it barking in the background. It wasn't barking like a dog, but it was a deep sound; like the sound a bull would give when grunting. It had the force of a dog's bark and the deepness of a bull's grunt. It was bothered by all the light, and there was no place for it to hide because he didn't like placing shelters for the animals inside an observation area.

The barking continued, the flashing continued, and the reporters screams for an interview continued

"Shut the hell up and stop flashing your damn cameras!" Andre yelled, striking the glass. "You're going to send the creature into a frenzy!"

"Give us an interview, Dr. Coupe!"

"Where did you find the creature?"

"Did it fight you?"

"Does it really drain all of the blood from the animal's body?"

Andre yelled several obscenities at the reporters, most of them directed at the flashing cameras and the yelling while the others were directed at the aggressive onslaught of questions he

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was receiving from reporters.

They were here for a raise, because they knew--just as well as Andre himself did--that they *would* get a raise for being one of the first reporters to actually talk to Dr. Andre Coupe, the man who had caught the Chupacabras.

"Stay in here, Brad," Andre said. "Lock this door when I go out. I don't want no dumbass reporter pushing me out of the way and breaking something or letting the creature out."

Brad gave him a nod, and that was all that Andre needed. He made his way over to the door and opened it for a brief moment before being met with reporters.

"Get out of my way or I'm not letting you in!"

They did as he was told, and when they did get out of his way he closed the door behind him and heard the familiar locking sound of the doorknob behind him.

"I'll only take a few questions, and those questions will be the ones I want to answer."

Andre waited, dumbfounded that the reporters had suddenly went silent. There was film washed over their eyes. They were thinking of what to ask; the film was over their eyes because they wanted to answer the right question so that they could get an answer out of him.

That silence didn't last long.

"Dr. Andre, where did you find the creature?"

"No comment."

"Dr. Coupe, how hard was it to bring the creature in?"

"It took the amount of sedatives a horse would usually take."

"Dr. Coupe, are there any plans of displaying the creature to the public?"

"No comment until further notice."

Andre shook his head and sighed.

Today was going to be a long day.

It had been a long day, and by the time he and his son got home it was dark. The sun had since fallen. The two of them

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were stressed, tired and hungry. Thankfully the last of the three would be satisfied from the bag of McDonalds they had brought home; the other two would have to be slept away.

"You do that *every* day?" Brad said as he stripped out of his sweat-stained shirt. "I think I'd die of boredom if I had to do that every day."

"Yes, I do that *every* day, son," Andre said as he pulled out the food. "I do it so we can live comfortably and so I can put some extra money in the bank."

Brad nodded and shrugged as he unwrapped one of his hamburgers.

"Dad, are you really going to put that thing out so people can look at it? I mean...it looks kind of dangerous."

Andre took a bite out of his own hamburger before coming around and patting his son on the back with his free hand.

"I know it's dangerous, Brad. I'm still not sure what I'm going to do with the thing. One part of me says how much business it would bring in while the other part of me says that it's dangerous. I'm still not so sure about its behavior, so I'll have to have some of our scientists and animal experts tell me what they think."

Andre sat down beside Brad and continued to eat. While he was eating, he thought over what Brad had said.

The thing *did* look dangerous. He had watched the creature drain a chicken whole. It had left the other two chickens alone, but there was always the possibility that the chickens might still be in there. Andre hadn't thought of giving the thing more chickens, but he had made sure that somebody was on duty. The intern would feed the thing if it was growling or roaring at nothing.

"Dad, do you mind if I come with you again tomorrow?" Brad asked.

"I don't care," Andre smiled. "Just whatever you want, Brad."

Andre smiled. It had been such a long time since he and Brad had spent so much father and son time together, and if Brad was interested in spending time with him, he wouldn't deny his son that opportunity. He smiled, gave Brad a few pats on the

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back and continued eating.

Tomorrow would bring something new.

“What do you mean the chickens are walking around?”

“Dr. Coupe, I’m not sure myself. I came in this morning and saw them walking around.”

“I told you not to give any of the animals live food, Marcos, remember...”

“I didn’t, sir! I pulled them all out of the freezer.”

Somehow, Andre felt something was wrong, terribly wrong. The chickens couldn’t be walking around, he knew that they couldn’t, unless the Chupacabras did something to them.

“Dad?”

“Stay back, Brad,” Andre said, holding a hand up. “I don’t want too many people at the glass, it might startle the animal.”

Andre waited for a moment, waiting to see if his son--or maybe even Marcos--would say anything before he walked up to the glass. There were five chickens, including the recognizable two with the yellow wing markers, walking around with the three Marcos had apparently thrown in there.

The only chicken that wasn’t walking around was the one that the Chupacabras had viciously attacked, and it was still lying on the ground, dead.

“Marcos, are you sure they were dead?”

“Yes, sir, I am.”

Andre looked back at the chickens and noticed that the chickens that were walking around had small bite marks on their wings or chest area. They weren’t walking around like normal chickens were, but they just walked around, turning their heads every so often when the Chupacabras stalked past them, seemingly oblivious to food that was walking around it.

The chickens were supposed to be dead, but here they were, walking around plain as day, as if they were alive.

“Marcos, go get security,” Andre said, keeping his eyes on the chickens and the larger Chupacabras. “Tell him to bring

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tranquilizer darts.”

“What are you...”

“Just do it!”

Andre turned just in time to see his intern running out of the room.

“Dad, they were dead, right? I mean, you’ve heard how people could come back to life if they were frozen, if their brain shut down. Could the chickens have done the same?”

“I don’t think so, Brad, but I’m not all that sure. I’ve heard about some frogs coming back after being frozen solid, but never any other animals.”

Andre felt his son brush up against his side as he came to stand by the window beside him.

“Do you think the Chupacabras did that?”

“I don’t see any other reason for the chickens to come back to life; I still don’t know what the thing can do, so there might be some chemicals that could bring about such reactions, even though that sounds a bit far fetched”

Andre heard the electronic lock bleep in sound of release. Andre turned just in time to see Marcos and ‘Big Tim’ the security guard walk in. Big Tim was armed with a tranquilizer gun and was sliding darts into it just as he looked up at the glass.

“Holy Hell!” Tim said. “What the...”

“I don’t know either, Tim,” Andre said with a shake of his head. “Let me open this little shutter and you can shoot it from there. I still don’t trust the thing; it might attack you if you just walk in there.”

Tim grunted at his words. That was all Andre needed as a reassurance that Tim wasn’t bothered with tranquilizing the animal.

Andre walked over to the control panel and pushed a button, soon awarded with the sound of the shutter grinding against the metal sides before it stopped, when it was fully up.

“All right,” Tim grunted. “Here goes nothing.”

Andre turned just in time to see Tim jump back right when the Chupacabras ran at the now-open shutter. The creature

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barked and snarled, drool coming from the sides of its mouth in a fury that Andre hadn't seen in a normal animal.

"You all right, Tim?" Andre asked, watching the Chupacabras' dull, red eyes flash back and forth between them. "I'm sorry, I didn't know it was going to do that."

"It's all right," the big security guard said as he wiped a strand of sweat from his forehead, letting the rest soak into his beard before he lifted the gun to his shoulder. "I'll just tranquilize the damn thing and get it over with."

Tim had to fire five darts into the creature before it finally went down, and when it did it took at least five minutes for the chemicals to fully take affect before the creature went down for the count.

"How come you wanted it tranquilized?"

"See the chickens?" Andre said as he pointed at them. "I'm not sure if it was the chickens of the Chupacabras you were swearing at, but the chickens were dead when we gave them to the creature..."

"You mean that thing brought 'em back to life?"

"I'm not sure, Tim," Andre sighed, walking to the control panel and opening the observation room's door. "I want you to go grab one of them and take it down to the lab. You're not bothered with that, by you?"

"No, Dr. Coupe," Tim said, handing Brad the tranquilizer gun. "Hold on to this, will you kid?"

Brad nodded. Tim had to duck to get through the door into the holding facility. The man looked at each of the chickens for a moment before grabbing one of them, his large hands grasping the creature's side carefully and gently.

"All right," Tim said as he turned, biting his lip when the chicken started to struggle. "I'll just take it down to the labs and..."

Tim stopped speaking when the chicken gave him a nice bite on his index finger.

"Damn thing," Tim muttered, though loud enough for Andre, Brad and Marcos to hear. "Sorry, I didn't think it was going to bite me. It's not like I'm hurting it or anything."

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"I'm sorry, do you want a box or something?" Andre asked, closing the door as Tim came out.

"No, don't worry about it. I'll just run it down to the lab and get this over with."

Andre nodded and as Tim left the observation area.

Andre frowned, wondering why the chicken had just bitten a man who was as good with the animals as Andre himself was.

Andre and Brad had remained in the observation unit for the next hour while Marcos went and ran errands in other parts of the building. Andre had been filling paperwork out while Brad was watching the Chupacabras when Tim came back in.

"Dr. Coupe?"

Andre looked up from his paperwork to see 'Big Tim' looking anything but big. His face was beat red and his eyes had dark bags under them. Tim lost his balance, but luckily he grabbed one of the coat racks before he fell.

"Tim, what happened to you?"

"I don't know, sir," the big man said, lifting his hand to stifle the sneeze. "I felt fine when I came in this morning, but now I feel like shit."

Andre sighed, looking down at his notes for a moment before returning his eyes to the big man.

"Go down to the clinic, Tim; stay there for as long as you need to. If you can't drive yourself home, have somebody else do so. It doesn't look like you're doing so good."

"Thank you, sir," Tim said as he sneezed again, covering his hand in dark-colored snot. "I'll go down there now."

Andre nodded and watched the big security guard walk out of the room.

"Dad, do you think he's going to be okay?"

"Yeah, I think he'll be fine. He must just have a cold and it started to act up."

"Dad, if he would've had a cold he would've been sneezing when he was in here an hour ago."

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Andre nodded, looking back down at his notes.

Something hit him.

What if the chickens...

Andre looked up and turned his direction toward the observation unit for a moment before looking at Brad.

"He'll be all right, son," Andre said before he picked up a piece of paper. "Tim will get over whatever he has before you know it."

On the piece of paper Andre scribbled: *See what scientists have to say about the chicken*

"What exactly are you telling me?" Andre asked as he sat in a chair, his feet resting on top of his desk as he looked at the graphs the scientist was showing him. "All I see is a bunch of lines that jump up and down and left to right."

"Yes, Dr. Coupe, that is what you're seeing," the scientist said as he tapped one of the graphs with his finger. "What I'm trying to tell you is that the chicken you originally gave us and the other chickens you had us test on show unbalanced micro-cellular patterns."

"I don't deal with cells, I deal with animals," Andre said. "I toy in it a little, but it's rare. Let me see if I can get this straight: you're telling me that the chickens have different cell patterns than that of regular chickens?"

"Yes sir, I am..."

"Would that explain Tim Burton being sick?"

"I had no recollection that Mr. Burton had been bitten by the chicken. He was bitten, no?"

Andre gave a small nod.

"Yes, but..." Andre trailed off, letting his sentence end with a long sigh.

"Dr. Coupe, you should have immediately informed us that Mr. Burton had been bitten by one of the chickens. We don't know what the different cell patterns might indicate."

"Yes," Andre said, standing. "Thank you, I appreciate your

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time.”

Andre walked out of the room and down the hall, stopping when he watched the security guards being lead by a higher officer. He could see 'Big Tim' Burton in the front, his face still red as ever, his eyes sunk back and his cheeks looking hollow.

Andre stopped and watched for a moment before he saw Tim fall on his knees, coughing.

“Mr. Burton, you broke the circle!” The security officer said. “That’ll be fifty push ups for you.”

Andre waited for Tim to get up and do them, as he usually did if he got into a small disagreement with a higher-commanding officer. This time though, Tim didn’t get up. He remained on the ground and continued to cough.

“Mr. Burton! Get up now or I’ll report you!”

Tim’s response was to only cough more, and when the security officer came up to pull him off of the ground, Tim wretched blood all over the officer’s shoes

“Mr. Burton, what are you...”

The scientist didn’t have time to finish because Tim didn’t continue to cough. He fell face-first into the puddle of his own blood.

Everybody--including Andre--stood in silence for several long minutes before Andre rushed up to the officer.

“What the hell are you doing? Get him off of the ground and to the clinic!”

The two men that had been in the same line as Tim lifted the big man to his feet. They balanced him carefully as they prepared to spread his arms over their shoulders, but just at that moment Tim’s eyes snapped open.

Tim lunged at the commanding officer.

The officer cried out in surprise as Tim snarled and sent spittle over the officer’s face just as Tim began to lunge again, but he wasn’t able to do so because the other security guards restrained him by grabbing Tim’s arms and holding him in place.

“Tim!” One of them shouted. “Come on, snap out of it! He wasn’t trying to be rude, he didn’t know...”

Tim’s only response was to snarl and try to attack anybody

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around him. His teeth were barred in bloody grin, his eyes had small red veins running across the waxy-white cornea and his restrained arms were flailing as he tried to latch on to other nearby security guards.

"Get him down to the clinic and get him strapped to a chair!" The officer snapped. "He's mad!"

Andre watched the security guards back away, letting the others pass. For a brief moment, he thought everything was going to be fine until one of the security guards slipped in Tim's blood, loosing his balance and the grip he had on Tim's arm.

Tim snarled and grabbed the other man who had been retraining him, snarling right before he bit into his arm. The man cried out in pain just as the other security officers realized the intensity of the situation. They drew their batons and beat Tim off of the other security guard before one brave officer--a female with long blond hair--jumped on Tim's back and got his hands pinned behind his back. From there she proceeded to handcuff him, and when she did she grabbed the bandanna that she had tucked into her shirt and waited for Tim to raise his head before she wrapped it around his mouth, rendering him unable to bite.

"Are you all right, Armstrong?"

The man who the female security guard had called Armstrong nodded, visibly grimacing as his fellow security officers helped him off the floor.

"Fuck," Armstrong swore as he looked down at Tim. "What's wrong with him?"

Tim was trying to get the female security guard off of him, but she soon got him fully restrained when she borrowed another female guard's bandanna and wrapped it tightly around his ankles.

"Get both of them down to the clinic!" Andre roared as he looked over at the commanding officer. "You, go get the janitor to clean this mess up!"

Andre took one last look at Tim before he walked down the hall and into the observation unit, taking a look at the Chupacabras before he walked over to his desk.

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“Dad?” Brad said. “What happened?.”

Andre ignored his son and grabbed a sticky note and a pen. He wrote: *One week since Tim Burton was bitten.*

Andre looked back in and the Chupacabras, and for a moment he thought he saw the creature smile at him.

The animal park gave a sense of peace during a situation that had shaken up the whole facility. Around Andre and his son, birds chirped, the dingos bared and the other animals made their own occasional sounds as the day passed on.

“Armstrong went insane too.”

Andre looked at his son and frowned.

“Where did you hear that?”

“Just around. You already knew, didn’t you?”

Andre nodded.

It had only been two days since Armstrong had been attacked by Tim, and it had just been this morning when Armstrong had thrown up blood all over himself in the clinic before he launched himself at the old nurse. Luckily, she had fended Armstrong off with a metal food tray before she slammed the security button with the back of her fist before security arrived and dealt with Armstrong.

Like they had done with Tim, they locked him onto the hospital bed with the straps, and now both of them were in the clinic, snarling behind the curtains that covered their horrifying, violent features.

Below them, the Chupacabras stalked its cage. It had been placed in a cage that was fifteen feet below ground level and was protected--as an added precaution--with black bars that extended three feet away from the viewing area before the concrete rose up another five feet.

The people couldn’t get enough of it. They were flashing pictures and recording video of the famed animal that killed animals in the night by drawing their blood out of their bodies.

Nobody except the those within the building--as the

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employees--knew about what had happened with Tim Burton and Zack Armstrong. Their families had asked what had happened, and Andre had to tell the nurses to relay to the families that their loved ones were quarantined because they had gotten into a potential case of avian flu.

They had bought it, but Andre felt ashamed that he had to lie to the families. He didn't want to do that, but until something could be done, they couldn't say anything else. The chickens were being dealt with even as he and his son stood watching the Chupacabras, as cameras went off, videos were being shot and the people gasping and awing over the animal.

"What do you think's wrong with them, Dad?"

Andre looked back at his son for a moment before speaking in a whispered voice.

"I don't know, son...the scientist I spoke with said that the cellular levels in the chickens were different than a normal chicken."

"But Armstrong wasn't bitten by the chicken..."

"I don't know, Brad!" Andre shouted. "I'm sorry, I'm just worried about them. Tim was a good work friend of mine and I'm a little upset that he's strapped to a hospital bed because he's gone nuts."

Brad nodded and looked back at the Chupacabras.

"Dad...I have a bad feeling about this."

Andre nodded and wrapped an arm around his son's shoulder.

"I do too, son. I do too."

Andre was driving Brad home for the lunch break, both because he didn't feel like eating the crappy food that the cafeteria at the place provided and because they still had McDonalds at the house. He took a glance over at Brad from the corner of his eye just as he pulled into the driveway.

"Everything all right, Brad?"

"Yeah," Brad said, scratching a few hairs on his chin. "Why?"

Kody Boye

"I was just wondering. You were quiet on the way home. You usually talk to me when we're driving home."

Brad only shrugged as he unbuckled his seatbelt and jumped out of the jeep. Andre sighed before he turned the jeep off and got out, following his son up the walkway before he unlocked the door. Brad--as he always did no matter what day--stripped out of his shirt and walk to the fridge, where he pulled out a few hamburgers, piling them onto the plate. Brad put the plate into the microwave and set it for a minute

"Brad, are you sure everything's all right?"

"Yeah, everything's fine, Dad," Brad said. "Why?"

"You seem like you're bothered with something."

"No...I just found it kind of weird that Tim snapped after he got bit by the chicken, and then Armstrong snapped after he got bit by Tim."

Andre sighed.

"They'll find out what happened," Andre said. "They'll find out what happened."

The following morning, Andre woke up with an arm wrapped over his son. He remembered that he and Brad had slept in the same room because the power had gone off last night. Brad had said that he would be all right sleeping during the small power outage, but Andre had insisted that Brad sleep in his room with him.

Brad still slept.

Andre looked over at the clock and saw that it read seven-thirty in the morning, the normal time that he woke up.

He forgot to set the alarm.

"Shit," he swore. "And I have to be to work in a half hour."

He stood and was about to walk out the door before he saw a group of people. They weren't standing, but instead walking around on all fours, occasionally looking up for a quick moment.

"What the..."

He watched a woman across the street stumble out of her

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house, and when she saw the men and women she called to them, running out to see what was wrong.

That was when it happened.

They jumped and pulled her to the ground.

Tim...Armstrong...

He looked at the people and then back at Brad, who was still sleeping. He grabbed the remote, turned the TV on and watched in the background as guns fired and a red 'BREAKING NEWS' banner flashed across the screen. He could barely make out what the woman was saying, but all the people in the background--the ones firing guns and the ones being attacked by the crazy people on all fours--made the point that something was wrong.

"The origin of the outbreak is unclear, but it is clear that the city is in a state of emergency right now. Please lock your doors and remain inside. Call 9-1-1 if you see any of these violent suspects in your area."

Andre looked out the window and knew one thing; he had to get him and Brad out of here

"Brad," Andre yelled "Get up!"

"Dad, what..."

"They're attacking people all over the city, we have to get out of here!"

Andre grabbed his son's wrist and pulled him out of the room, fumbling through the cupboards and throwing all chips and canned food out of them, pushing them onto the ground before he pulled all of the bottled sodas out.

"Dad, what are you..."

"They're eating people!" Andre yelled at Brad as he continued to pull stuff out. "Go get that camping bag!"

Andre heard Brad's heavy footsteps run down the hall and to the storage room. It took Brad a minute to come back, and when Brad did Andre stuffed everything he had pulled out into the bag before he grabbed his jeep keys and went for the door.

Andre saw the baseball bat beside the door.

"Dad..."

Andre had no gun in his house, so it was the only thing he had to defend him and Brad with.

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“What are you...”

The thought of bringing a knife never crossed his mind as he picked up the metal baseball bat and opened the door, seeing a crazy woman roar and snarl as she caught sight of them coming out the open door. He threw the bag into Brad’s chest and hefted the baseball bat up in a hitter’s swing, and when she came in hitting distance he swung with all his mind, catching her upside the head before she rolled to the side and snarled, stunned by the blast.

“Get in the jeep!”

Andre and Brad ran to the jeep before the others took notice of them. By the time they did notice them, Andre and his son had already gotten in the car.

“Put your seatbelt on,” he said as he locked the doors and fumbled for his own seatbelt. “I don’t know how fast I’m going to be going.”

When Andre had his seatbelt on he didn’t even wait for Brad to buckle himself in. He rammed the reverse and sped backward out of the driveway. Brad’s head slammed into the dashboard. Brad pulled his head back and buckled his seatbelt in before he gripped his forehead with both of his hands.

“Dad...”

“I’m sorry,” Andre said. “Hold onto something.”

Andre put the car in drive and made a u-turn going thirty miles an hour, his speed still climbing as the crazy people continued to run at them on all fours. They looked like animals, the way they were following him. As he drove he watched other infected ripping flesh out of the unfortunate victims with their bare teeth, their hands ripping the torn flesh off.

He knew what they were then and there.

Zombies, Night of the Living *fucking* Dead zombies.

“Shit!” He screamed as one jumped out in front of him. “Hold on, Brad!”

Andre slammed into the zombie at seventy-miles-per-hour, hearing bone crunch and a snarl of pain as it flew over the hood and above the top of the jeep. Thankfully, the jeep wasn’t open, and it had a solid surface, unlike some of the jeeps which only

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had tarp-like material on the top. He turned the windshield wipers on and sprayed a dose of water up to get the blood off.

"Brad, are you all right?"

"My head hurts."

"We have to get out of here, son. We could get ourselves killed if we don't hightail it out of the city."

Brad began to cry from the pain, but Andre didn't think of his son as weak.

Tears of his own began to develop at the corners of his eyes.

The tears were those of fear.

Andre had pulled his jeep into an abandoned parking lot and put the car in park before he looked at his son's forehead. The colors were already starting to show, and he could tell that it was very painful.

"Are you all right, Brad?"

"I'll live," Brad said with a sigh. "They're all over the city, aren't they?"

Andre nodded and looked up for a moment before sighing, placing himself back in his seat before speaking again.

"Yes, they are. I don't know where we're going to go, Brad."

"What about the cabin, Dad? It's all the way up in the mountains, we might be safe up there."

Andre nodded. Going up to the cabin was a good idea, but it would take them a good while to get to the cabin. From their current point in the city they'd probably have a better chance holing up in a McDonalds than getting out of the city.

"Dad..."

"It'll be all right, Brad, I'll think of something."

"Are we going out to the cabin?"

"I don't know!" Andre shouted. "Brad, just let me think!"

He sighed and let his hand rest on his forehead, trying to think of how he was going to get his son up to the cabin. The cabin would be a good place to hide, and it could be easily boarded up if the need arise.

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"All right, that's what we'll do," Andre said as he started the car and drove out of the parking lot. "Is that all right with you, Brad?"

"Yeah, Dad, it is."

Andre nodded and took a deep breath before he continued to drive.

They were going to be in for a rough ride.

They had driven for about ten minutes before they were met by a bunch of the zombies. They were staggering after a person who had stood his ground, a machete gleaming in the light at his side.

"Dad, look!"

"I can see," Andre said as he got closer. "I can see."

When they got closer, they could see that the 'he' that they had originally seen was actually a woman. She was a very butch woman, with short-cropped blond hair, tanned skin and muscles adorning her bare arms. She looked up at them for only a brief moment before she cleaved the skull of one of the creatures.

Andre increased his speed, heading right toward the woman.

"Dad, what are you..."

Brad didn't get to finish his sentence because Andre slammed on the breaks right behind the zombies, sending several of them under the rough wheels of the jeep and the others to the sides.

"Come on!" He yelled. "They're going to kill you if you don't!"

The woman nodded and decapitated one of the corpses that jumped at her. She took a moment to clean the bloody, shiny surface of the machete off on one of the creature's shirts before she jumped into the back seat.

"Thanks," she gasped as she fumbled for the seatbelt. "Have you seen anybody else?"

"No," Andre said. "You're the first person we've come across that have actually been fighting them."

"Poor bastards," she said. "They're so convinced that they're

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not going to hurt them that they just stand there and let themselves get eaten.”

Andre took one of the side streets, keeping his eyes on the road while he watched his son take occasional glances at the woman in the rearview mirror. They were more than occasional glances; it was obvious that Brad liked her.

“Keep your eyes to yourself, lover boy,” she said, Andre watching her wipe sweat from her hairline with the back of his wrist. “I’m a dyke.”

Brad shrunk away at the woman’s words, but Andre kept his eyes on the road, ignoring the fact that Brad had just been struck down.

“You have a name?” Andre asked as he looked at his son for a moment. “Mine’s Andre, and this is my son Brad.”

“It’s Kat,” she said. “Thanks for backing me up. I thought those fuckers were just going to keep coming until one of them managed to take a chunk out of me. You do know that if you get bit you turn into one of them, right?”

Andre felt the breath go out of his lungs for a moment before he turned, barely avoiding a power line that had fallen and was now sparking at the very end.

“I figured something like that, but Brad was the one to bring it up.”

“Yeah,” Brad sighed. “This guy got bit by a chicken, right? And then the guy got sick and within a week he became like them. He bit one of the security guards on the arm...I guess they broke through the straps that they were restrained in.”

“Restrained? You mean that the stupid nurses at the clinic didn’t transfer them somewhere else?”

“You know me by looks?” Andre asked the woman, guessing that Kat did know who he was, since he had been all over the news since he had captured the Chupacabras.

“Hell, everybody knows you, Andre; you’re the guy that brought that big motherfuckin’ animal to the zoo thing you have going.”

She has quite the vocabulary, Andre thought as he took another glance back at Kat. *She knows all the words in the book.*

Kody Boye

"You went and saw the Chupacabras?"

"Yeah, that thing was one fucked up dog," Kat said. "Didn't you know that it's gone?"

"Gone, what are you..."

"I ran from the zoo, that's where some of the crazy people attacked some of the normal people. Yeah, I saw that thing jump out of the cage after I took one of the batons from the security guard and cold-cocked one of those ugly zombies"

Andre took another look back at Kat and sighed.

"We're going to our cabin up in the mountains," Andre said. "You want to come?"

"It sure beats getting eaten by ugly motherfuckers," Kat laughed. "I'm in."

Only four more hours to go, and now Brad was driving up the mountain pathway in the dark Andre was sitting in the back seat, on the verge of sleep while Kat was still awake, nibbling on a piece of chocolate.

"Either of you want any of this?"

Andre shook his head, but Brad took a small piece and began to nibble on it as he continued to drive.

"Uh, I'm tired," Andre said, stretching his arms. "I might fall asleep, Brad."

"It's all right, Dad. I slept for a good while before you woke me up. Sleep as long as you like."

Andre nodded and looked over at Kat.

"Did you ever sleep on the way up here?"

"A little, not much though. I owe you both a lot for saving my ass."

"You don't owe us anything," Andre said, smiling, a yawn soon following that. "We stopped because we were afraid they were going to kill you."

She gave him a smile.

"Thanks."

Andre nodded and turned his head, letting it rest on the

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window before he closed his eyes, letting himself wander off into the dark place of sleep.

Andre woke up when Kat was shaking him awake.

"Andre, we're at the cabin."

He nodded and lifted his head off of the door, rubbing his eyes to make the blur fade away.

"Dad, the key's on the ring, right?"

"Yeah, Brad, could you go unlock the door for us?"

Brad closed the door before Andre unbuckled his seatbelt and got out, hearing Kat's door close right after he closed his.

"Nice cabin," she said as they walked up the dirt walkway. "Did you build it yourself?"

"I had somebody do it, but I laid out all the interior design," Andre said. "Hopefully the canned food storage is still good. Me and Brad gathered up some chips and some other canned stuff, but other than that, we don't have anything. We might be stuck up here for a while."

"I sure as hell don't want to go back down to the city anytime soon."

Neither did Andre, but they would eventually have to go back down to the city for food. It was undeniable. He and Kat made their way up to the front door, where Brad had just unlocked it and entered inside.

"I don't think the lights are going to work. If the government's working on this problem, they'll want to get all of the electricity they can for themselves," Kat said.

Andre stepped in through the darkness of the cabin after Kat and his son did. He heard Brad's footsteps walk across the room until he went to the kitchen cabinets, where he pulled out a flashlight and turned it on, letting the beam cut through the darkness.

Andre closed the door behind them.

"I don't think any of them followed us," Andre said. "Let's just all sleep in one room for the night, all right?"

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They all agreed and made their way upstairs, where they spread themselves out in the master bedroom before falling asleep.

The cool bitter chill of morning woke Andre, and when he was fully awake he jumped in surprise as he looked at his surroundings. At first, he couldn't remember the drive here, but after a few startling seconds he remembered what had happened. The news, them driving, them finding Kat, and then driving some more.

He turned and looked around. Kat was sprawled out on a loveseat, her short hair barely covering her startlingly masculine features, while Brad was sleeping on the floor under her, his bare back turned to him.

He would have to find his son a shirt.

Sitting up, Andre took in a deep breath and looked out the window, to the dense wooded landscape around him. The mountain would've normally been beautiful, except for the fact that they were all stuck up here on the side of the mountain, trapped like pigs in a pen before they were sent off to the slaughterhouse. The simple beauty of it did make him feel a bit better, but he didn't want to let his guard down.

There could be more zombies out there.

He doubted the possibility that any of the strange 'zombies'--as Kat called them--had gone to such limits as to follow them up a very steep mountain road, but it was always possible. He hadn't anticipated Tim to open his eyes and try to attack the commanding officer, and he sure as hell didn't expect the big man to turn around and take a big chunk right out of his coworker's arm.

"Tim..."

The big security guard--even though he had rarely seen him in life--had been a friend in Andre's eyes, and it hurt to lose a friend.

"What time is it?"

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"I don't know," Andre said, looking at Kat. "I just woke up."

He watched her give him a small nod before she rose, careful to throw her legs over Brad's sleeping form before she stood and stretched, lacing her fingers together and putting her palms face up in the air as she yawned her sleep away.

"You got a bathroom in this place?"

"Yeah," he said, standing. waiting for her to open the door before he followed her. "There's one right down the hall from here. I'm not sure if it works, but if I were you I'd flush the toilet before I'd use it."

Kat gave a small nod and began to walk down the hall.

"Kat..." Andre waited for her to turn and look at him before he continued. "If the toilet does work, see if the bathtub will run."

"How come?"

"I want you to fill it with water. If we can have some clean water to drink it'll be better than nothing."

She gave an army salute before turning and walking down the hall, closing the bathroom door behind her.

"Damn, she's hot."

Andre jumped at his son's words.

"She already told you she was a lesbian, Brad; give it up. You're not going to make her change her sexual tendencies just because you think she's hot."

"You think there is a way to change a person's sexuality, Dad?"

"No, I don't," Andre said with a smile, wrapping his son in a chokehold while ruffling his hair. "Lay off Kat, all right? She doesn't need you bothering her. Besides, I think she could kick your ass in half a minute."

"No she couldn't!" Brad said as he broke free of Andre's chokehold. "Just because she was out in the middle of the streets killing zombies with a machete doesn't mean..."

Andre smiled as his son finally caught his point.

"See? I told you."

Brad only shrugged and followed Andre down the stairs and into the living room. A large--fake--moose head jutted from the wall above a stone fireplace, the furniture was dark blue, and the

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kitchen separated itself from the living room area with a thin sheen of redwood paneling. It was a cozy little cabin, one that had thick wood and high windows that would, hopefully, keep the zombies out.

"Dad, the door..."

"I think that's something you and Kat can work on when she comes down," Andre said. "We don't need to be stuck in here, but it'd be nice to have a few pieces of wood and some smaller pieces that could bar the door so they couldn't get in."

"Do you think they'd try the doors?"

"I don't know, Brad. I didn't know they actually ate people either; I just thought Tim taking a chunk out of Armstrong's arm was just a strange side affect. We just need to be careful."

Andre sat on one of the couches and watched his son cross his arms over his bare chest before turning his head, where Kat came down the stairs, her boots hardly making any noise at all.

"Kat, could you help Brad with the door? We need to make sure that they don't get in. You ever watched those medieval movies where they bar the doors with a big board?"

"Yeah."

"We need to put a few of those across the door. I need to see if my old hunting rifle's still here."

"On any chance, would you happen to have any bullets for a revolver?" Kat pulled the gun out from a holster on her side and set it on a low wooden table by the couch. "I wish I had more, but the stupid fuckers are hard to hit when they're jumping right at you, you know?"

Andre nodded before he stood and pointed to a closet.

"I keep the two by fours in there. You'll probably have to cut them down a little, but there's a handsaw in one of the drawers. Brad knows where my tools are."

Brad gave him a thumbs up. Andre smiled and returned the gesture to his son before turning and walking upstairs, passing the bedroom the three of them had slept in the previous night and stopping at an old room, one that he had kept his hunting gear in before he had given up the habit.

"Well, hopefully the gun's still there," he muttered as he

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placed his hand on the doorknob, "I don't remember if I loaned it out to a friend or not."

If he loaned the gun out to a friend, he was halfway to screwed. Halfway wasn't bad, but it was still worrisome; anything could happen and they might need the gun to protect themselves. He couldn't depend on Kat's super-hero-ninja-Wonder Woman fighting skills if something happened. He was sure Kat could keep them protected for a while, but he didn't want to keep the burden on her to protect them. She'd have her weapon, he'd have his, and with his weapon he could protect his son and let Brad use the metal bat.

He opened and entered through the door and was met by a cloud of dust a mile high. Placing over a hand over his mouth, he coughed while fanning the dust away from his face. He hadn't heard of a person dying from breathing in dust, but he still didn't want to take the chances. After a moment, he blinked, letting his eyes adjust to the light before he looked around.

He looked toward the cabinet, where he could see the rifle leaning against it. His heart leaped at the sight, and when he walked back over his heart leaped once more when he saw bullets for Kat's revolver. There was also a smaller handgun and a half box's worth of ammunition, but it was better than nothing.

He made a quick prayer to God and walked out of the room, stopping when he heard the water running in the bathroom. For a moment, he thought Kat had just left the sink running, but then he remembered that he had told her to fill the bathtub with water for them to drink.

Pushing the cracked door open, he walked in and bent down to stop the water, which was on the verge of overflowing. Kat had clogged the bottom drain with a washcloth and had blocked off the drain higher-up with one of the stickers that a person would place on the floor of the tub so they wouldn't slip. It looked like she had a hard time clogging it up, but there was water in the tub; he wouldn't complain as long as he had some to drink. He grabbed a piece of antique china and filled himself a cup before placing it to his lips. The taste alone was grand, and the possibility that they could make this water last for a long time

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made him smile.

He set the china cup back in its place and turned...

Met by red eyes and a gaping mouth which revealed razor-sharp teeth, he cried out before he realized that it was just a trick of the light reflecting off the mirror.

"Dad! Dad!" Brad yelled as his footsteps thundered up the stairs. "Dad!"

"I'm all right, Brad," Andre said as he looked up, seeing Kat behind Brad. "I thought I saw something, but it was just a trick of the light."

Brad helped him up before they walked downstairs.

"Did you find the rifle and bullets for my revolver?" Kat asked as they stepped off the final stair.

"Yeah," he said. "I did."

By the time night fell, they had started seeing them on the road and in the tree line. They were stalking around on all fours, heads raising every so often to show blood-beards, a gruesome sign that they had been feeding. Andre stood, looking out the rifle's scope through the darkly-lit hunting room, the sound of Kat loading her revolver thick in the room.

"You've got it loaded?" Andre asked.

"Yeah," she said as she walked over to the window. "Why?"

"I have a feeling that we might be needing the gun tonight," Andre said as he pushed the camouflage curtain back in place. "Where's Brad?"

"Downstairs opening some fruit for us to eat. How come?"

"I think we should move the food upstairs for the time being, at least until they lose interest in the area. I don't know if they're smart enough to watch for shadows moving through the windows, but if they are, they might see Brad moving around in the lamplight."

Andre turned and caught a glimpse of Kat's nod before she picked up the revolver and followed him out the door. He let his hand trail down along the railing of the stairs before he saw Brad

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spooning fruit and vegetables onto paper plates.

"We need to get upstairs, Brad; they're outside."

"They are? I didn't see them..."

"Farther out, on the road," Kat said, waving her gun at the window to emphasize her point. "We need to get upstairs in the hunting room. We can sleep in there tonight."

Andre nodded and gave Kat a pat on the shoulder before looking at the door, seeing that the bars had been placed down. He looked at the door for a moment before he turned to the windows, seeing that they all had a few boards placed across them so they couldn't get in if they did break the glass.

"Good," Andre whispered. "It'll keep them out."

They made their way upstairs, Kat taking the lead while Andre let his son go before him. Being the last one up the stairs, Andre had caught sight of a shadow moving across the window.

"Slow down, I saw one go past the window."

"What?" Kat asked, stopping, Brad almost running into her. "They don't walk upright unless they're trying to grab onto something"

Andre felt a cold bead of sweat run down his neck. They wouldn't be able to get on the roof very easily, but if they did get on the roof, the upstairs windows weren't barred.

"Just keep going, but be quiet."

They walked down the hall and into the hunting room, where Andre closed the door after Kat checked the farthest window.

"Nothing out there?" Andre asked as he locked the top chain.

"No, just those dumb corpses," she said. "Hopefully they'll start to rot and die out soon."

Andre nodded. He wasn't sure if they would die like that; the Living Dead movies showed that they could go around for a pretty long time, but he would pray that they would die out.

They sat down and ate, keeping to themselves as they forked vegetables and fruit into their mouths.

Brad spoke after several minutes of silence.

"Do you think they followed us?" Brad asked, wrapping a blanket around his bare chest. "They came out of nowhere."

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"They might've followed us," Kat said, stabbing a peach with her fork. "I think it was just dumb luck that a few of them followed us"

"Dumb luck?"

"Yeah," she said in response to Brad's question. "You know how when something good happens to you and you're not usually a lucky person? That's dumb luck, but in our case we got lucky and something bad happened."

Andre listened to the two talk before he stood, walking to the window and parting the curtain. They were moving in groups of two or three, but in total there were only ten. The straggler was the one moving around the house; he could barely see it from where he was. It was the one that had been walking around near the kitchen.

"They act like animals," Kat said in the background.

"Animals?" Brad asked.

"Yeah, haven't you seen them run and walk around? People don't run and walk around on all fours. Now I can understand zombies eating people, but they don't eat like the zombies in the movies, you know, the good ones that don't suck ass? They eat slow or with some kind of practice, but those things. They jut rip into the meat and eat until they're satisfied, sometimes they don't even leave a scrap of meat on the bone."

Andre nodded, even though the words weren't directed at him. Kat was smart; she seemed to know what she was talking about. He hadn't even asked her what part of the town she had been in, but he wouldn't broach the subject with her, not yet. He wasn't sure if she was still dwelling on the fact that everything in the city was fucked up as it is.

Andre turned to look back at the ones in the group. They were all watching him with their heads raised, their eyes giving off a yellow luminescent glow in the orange twilight of the sunset.

Every single hair on his body stood rigid, gooseflesh erupted along his skin, and he felt his heart beating like a jackhammer.

They snarled and rushed at the house.

"What's wrong?" Kat asked. "Andre!"

- Play Dead -

Downstairs, fists started pounding on the walls.

"Oh God," Andre said as he backed away from the window.
"Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary."

He heard Kat spin the chamber of the revolver she had.

"You guys stay up here."

It had been quite a while since Kat had gone downstairs--a few minutes to be exact--and since then they hadn't heard anything. They were still pounding at the door, but they didn't know where Kat was.

"Dad, she's been down there for a long time," Brad said.
"Shouldn't you..."

Andre gave a small nod and picked up the rifle.

"Brad, you stay here."

"Dad..."

"Do what I say, son," Andre scolded. "Stay up here."

Andre waited for his son's nod. When it finally came, he gave Brad a nod of his own and opened the door, gesturing his son to close it. The door closed behind him before he carefully walked down the hall and the stairs, where he saw Kat sitting on one of the couches, staring at the floor.

"Kat?"

"We need to get out of here," she said. "We need to jump off the roof and make a run for the jeep."

"Jump off the roof?" Andre cried. "Are you mad, woman? If we jump off the roof somebody's going to get..."

Andre wasn't able to finish.

The door began to crack.

"Go," Kat yelled. "Go!"

Andre bounded up the stairs. Downstairs, the door continued to splinter as the two of them ran, and when they finally got to the bedroom they burst in through it, startling Brad from his place in the corner, a shot dislodging from the pistol he had.

Pain flared through Andre's shoulder as the bullet tore through skin and muscle

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"Dad!" Brad cried. "Dad!"

"Forget about it," Andre said, clutching his shoulder. "Kat, open the window."

She did as she was told, setting the revolver down before she went to the window and tore the camouflage curtain from it. She cast it onto the bed and pushed the window up before securing it in place.

"I'll go first and get the jeep!" She yelled as she climbed out the window.

Andre nodded and let his son cry into his chest.

He hoped Kat would make it to the jeep alive.

Kat made her way along the side of the house until. From here, she climbed down the side of the house where the thick, dense climbing plants were, her muscles rippling as she steadily moved down.

"Keep going," she coached herself as she felt a thorn bite into her skin. "They're just little things."

The big things were around the house, trying to get in. The little things she never worried about, but the big things that were running around were the things that she was worried about.

Go! Make this jump and run like hell!

She looked over her shoulder for a brief moment before she jumped the last four feet. She bent her knees to absorb the impact of the blow and rolled in a complete circle before she jumped to her feet, watching the corpses from the corner of her eye. She pumped her legs and increased her speed, jumping the last few feet from where she was to the jeep. She opened the door and reached for her machete.

It was when she touched the cold metal that she heard one of them directly behind her.

She kicked out with her foot and hit a head, spinning around and managing to bang her head on the top of the door. She swore and saw stars before the corpse came back at her, snarling as it

- Play Dead -

jumped.

In a warrior's stance she gripped the machete as hard as she could with both hands and slammed the blade down onto the creature's skull. Her arms shook from the impact as a bloody mess came from the creature's skull in brain matter, pus and coagulated blood.

She smiled

You hit home field, girl. Now go get your boys out of the house.

Andre grimaced as he moved over to the window. His heart had taken a big leap when he saw that thing tried to get Kat, but when she kicked it and came around and hit her own head, he was worried that she wouldn't be able to defend herself. He cried out in joy when he watched her split that thing's skull almost in two.

"Dad, what's wrong?"

"She's at the jeep!" Andre cried. "She made it!"

It didn't take her long to get the jeep over to where they were, and when she did he gestured Brad out the window.

"You can make the jump to the jeep," he said. "Just jump to the top and then help me, all right?"

Brad nodded before he crawled out the window. Andre watched his son jump from the roof and to the jeep, and when he did Brad called for him to come.

"Dad..."

Andre ducked under the window and started to go out. He cried out in pain when he felt the jar in his shoulder. Warm blood pooled down his arm before he got out of the window. When he did, he was afraid to jump; afraid that he wouldn't jump right and fall to the ground and break his legs.

"Dad!"

The door in the room behind him collapsed and the corpses ran in, snarling.

"Come on!" Kat yelled. "Come on you stupid son-of-a-bitch

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bastard!”

Kat’s words were the only thing that spurred Andre on as he jumped from the roof. He closed his eyes, afraid he was going to die, before he felt Brad catch him. He cried out again from the pain in his shoulder, but Brad helped him jump off the side of the jeep and put him into the back.

“Go!” Brad yelled as he slammed the back seat door as he clambered in “Go, Kat! They’re going to catch us!”

Kat down on the gas before she went barreling down the side of the mountain.

They had made it...

Their food was still back in the cabin.

Five hours later and well past the city, they stopped the jeep in a field near a large farm. Andre had almost passed out from the drive, but thankfully Kat’s army tank top had stopped the bleeding.

She’d been driving in her bra the whole time.

“Hold still,” she said as she pulled her shirt away from his shoulder “Damn, you got a good shot off, Brad.”

“Don’t blame him, he just was just startled by us bursting through the door.”

Andre turned his head to look at Brad and saw his son’s worried, red face. Brad had done his fair share of crying on the way down from the mountains. He blamed himself for shooting the gun before he even saw who came through the door.

“I wasn’t,” she said. “He’s a good shot.”

Andre gave a small, nervous laugh as he felt Kat’s fingers gently prodding the area of the wound. It had stopped bleeding, but anytime he moved he could feel the bullet. If it hadn’t have been for the shirt, he probably would’ve bled to death.

“You think anybody’s in that farm house?” Brad asked.

Andre looked out at the farmhouse. What a relief it would be if somebody was still up in that house. He’d be able to get some help and be able to lay on a nice soft bed. He wouldn’t have to

- Play Dead -

feel pain every single time he moved because he could remain in a fixed position while he was laying down.

"Kat, what do you think?"

"I think it'd be a good idea to check," she said as she pressed the shirt back onto the wound, brushing her bloody hand across her forehead, leaving a red streak across the front of her short hairline. "You're hurt, and if we don't get that bullet out of your shoulder it's going to get infected. You ever see a man with an infected gunshot wound, Andre?"

"No."

"Well I have, the son-of-a-bitch had to get his arm amputated after the gangrene set in. You don't want to have to see your shoulder slowly rot away, do you?"

Andre gave a very hasty shake of the head before climbing back into the jeep, grimacing as Kat started the jeep up, slowly making her way up the hill between the rows of corn.

The house rose up in front of them like a pop-up book with a sick, ghastly image to it. The woodwork was beginning to rot away on the porch and it didn't seem to safe to go crashing into it with their jeep. The whole house would probably fall on them if that ended up happening.

"This is it, we better..."

Kat trailed off and screamed as a bullet hit the front window, shattering it before skidding past her head and into the back seat, where it halted to a stop between Andre and his son.

"Bastard!" She screamed as she reached for her revolver. "Take some of mine!"

She fired three shots off toward the direction of the house before jumping out of the vehicle. A man came out, raising his hands in surrender as Kat leveled the revolver on him.

"Son-of-a-bitch, you just shot at us!"

"I didn't mean to, missus. Please don't shoot me, I have children in the house."

"I don't care if you have children or not, explain yourself," she said as she lowered the revolver. "I'll blow your balls off if you don't."

"Al'righ, al'righ, I'll explain miself to you, missus Please

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leave mi balls be.”

Kat shook her head and kept her gun lowered at the man’s crouch as he continued speaking.

“I was jus’ protectin’ my children from ‘em, mi own missus is ill from hay feva’ and I be needin’ to look afer’ ‘em. Yous just come a strollin’ up here and I was afrai’ that someone wanted to hurt mi and me children’...please don’t shoot, missus...me children’...”

Kat shook her head and gestured back to the jeep with her gun.

Andre felt the breath run out of his chest as he heard Kat and the man’s conversation. She had made sure that none of them had gotten injured, doing so in a very calm manner.

The man had probably shit his pants after seeing Kat’s gun.

“My friend is hurt,” Kat said. “He got shot when a weapon discharged and we need to get him in a proper bed. I didn’t have anything to get the bullet out.”

The man nodded and let his arms fall to his sides, curling his fingers into his hands so hard that the popping sounds could be heard before he gestured to the jeep.

“Come on out y’all,” he said. “Yous jus’ come out now and I fix you up, sir.”

Andre jumped out of the jeep after the man had finished, grimacing as he felt pain flare up in his shoulder again. He cried out as he moved the first few steps, but he soon got over it as he took the next few steps.

“Mi name’s Mr. Paul Andrews,” the man said as he pulled a cigar out of his pocket and lit it before offering his hand. “Jus’ Paul if you would, sir.”

Andre gave a small nod and shook the man’s shoulder before he returned it to his shoulder, pressing Kat’s tank-top into the wound as Paul helped him up the steps.

“I’ll jus’ take you into the back room, I gots a bed back there that’ll do you some good, sir.”

Paul led Andre down the small hall and to a back room. The room was bare, save for a mattress that only held a quilt and a sweat-stained pillow.

“Righ’ there, sir,” Paul said as he helped him onto the bed

- Play Dead -

“Let’s take that shirt off and see yer shoulder.”

Andre nodded and carefully removed Kat’s shirt, feeling a small amount of blood come from the wound.

“That’s a nasty sumbitch,” Paul said as he rose. “I’ll be right back, you jus’ wait there.”

Andre didn’t have to say that he would because the country man already knew that he wouldn’t move. As Paul walked out of the room, Kat and Brad walked back in.

“Are you all right, Dad?” Brad asked.

“I’ll be fine,” Andre said. “Don’t worry.”

Andre heard Paul’s footsteps and he looked up. Paul held a long hook-shaped object, a smaller piece of wood in that same hand, and in the other a long bar.

“Put this in your mouth,” Paul said. “We’s got to dig the bullet out.”

Andre watched Kat tie his feet to the footrest bars of the bed before going for his hands, soon tying them up as well. He accepted the piece of wood as Kat placed it in her mouth.

He screamed as Paul began to dig into his shoulder with the hook.

Andre had lay in bed for the rest of the day with only a few ibuprofen to dull the pain of having a bullet dug out of his shoulder, then to have the wound cauterized by a bar that would have been used to brand cattle. Thankfully, the mark was just a straight impression of a bar being placed on the skin.

As night was coming, he looked up at the ceiling and entertained himself with the fact that he would be feeling better soon.

Yeah right, Andre thought as he felt the pain in his shoulder once more. You think you’re going to be feeling better soon? That’s bullshit.

It was bullshit, because he knew that it would take him days to feel better, then weeks for the wound to heal. He didn’t want to be in pain, but at least he had been taking ibuprofen. He’d be in a

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lot more pain if he hadn't been taking medicine.

"Dad, are you all right?"

Andre was startled by Brad's sudden entrance, but he gave a small nod and gestured his son over to the bed with his free hand.

"I'm all right," Andre said, giving his son a forced smile. "What is that you've got there?"

"Bread. That's all these people have been eating, bread. That's all they have."

Andre gave a small nod and accepted the bread his son offered it. It was a brand that he didn't like, but it was food; he wouldn't push food away, regardless of what it tasted like or how old it was.

"Where's Kat?" Andre asked after a moment of chewing.

"She's out on the porch, smoking a cigarette."

"You mean a cigar?"

"No, a cigarette," Brad said with a small smile. "I can tell the difference, Dad."

"Did Paul ever find you a shirt?"

"He has clothes for all of us. His wife has some clothes for Kat as well. Mrs Andrews thought she was a man when she first saw her."

Andre laughed before giving Brad the other half of the bread.

"You eat it."

"Are you sure? I've already ate some."

"I'm sure, Brad. I'm not in the mood to eat anyway."

Brad ate the last half of the bread before he stood, looking out the window, at the darkness that had since descended on them.

"Mr. Andrews wants all of us in bed when the sun goes down," Brad said as he held the plate in his free hand as his other circled around the doorknob. "All of us."

"Why?"

"He says he gets a lot of 'them sumbitches that walk on all fours.' As long as we're safe I don't care what time I have to turn in."

- Play Dead -

“Where are you staying?”

“In this room to the right with Kat.”

Andre nodded and told his son goodnight before he closed the door. At least he wouldn't have to worry about running or worrying anymore. Kat had her gun, Paul Andrews had his, they were in a house that was safe and had high windows. There was only one door, so the corpses couldn't get in.

He was thankful that Kat had enough guts to jump out of a jeep and shoot at a man who was shooting at them without any cover at all. He supposed that her short time in the army--the short time before she had been discharged for beating a man twice her size up, she had told him--had toughened her up and made an already ruthless woman even more ruthless, but he was still thankful.

Kat was wild; if wild could protect them, he would take it.

The dark omens would be circling around them for the whole time they were here, Andre already knew that. He wasn't sure that if the Chupacabras he had seen in the cabin had been real or not, but if it had been...God have mercy on his soul, he wouldn't be able to get away from it.

It had his scent.

If it was pursuing him, anyway; he couldn't be sure if the creature actually was following him. He had never heard of an animal seeking revenge, especially on a human handler, unless it had been abused for several long and hard years.

He hadn't been abusing the Chupacabras when he had had it.

But Kat said it was gone...

He would be sleeping light tonight.

When he woke up the next morning, he woke up to the sounds of something steaming in the kitchen. It was probably tea, or coffee, or some other kind of hot drink. He sat up and felt the pain flare back up into his shoulder again, making him cry out in pain, stirring tears in his cheeks until they flowed down

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his cheeks.

“Dad? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Andre gasped as he looked up at Brad. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t, don’t worry. Come on, Mr. Andrews is making breakfast for us.”

Andre nodded and accepted Brad’s hand. His son was gentle and careful as he helped him out of bed. He was thankful for that. He didn’t want to feel more pain in his shoulder if he didn’t have to. The two of them walked down the hall and into the kitchen, where Kat was at a stove, frying bacon and flipping pancakes while looking out the window in front of her.

“Ouch,” Andre said as he moved his arm again. “Could you put this into a sling, Paul?”

The man nodded and tore a piece of cloth away from a dishrag and tied a few of them together, constructing a sling and getting Andre’s arm situated in it.

“Thanks,” Andre said. “I appreciate it.”

Andre sat down at the table and cradled his arm as he sat down, looking out the kitchen windows in front of him.

“You didn’t board them up?”

“Nah,” Paul began. “Didn’t bother with it. Them sumbitches come up ‘ere on the porch and I’ll blow their brains out.”

Andre heard Kat mutter something under her breath, but Paul didn’t seem to take mind of it. He took off his hat and brushed a hand through his short hair before scratching at his stubble.

“Any of you two got a razor?” Paul asked as he looked from Andre to Brad. “This stubble’s a bitch, making mi face all itchy.”

“Sorry,” Andre said, watching Brad shake his head shortly after. “We ran from town as soon as we woke up and saw them killing each other. We found Kat on the way, fighting them off.”

“I’m sure your missus could kill all of ‘em,” Paul said as he took a cigar out of his pocket and lit it, taking a drag before he continued “She’s a helluva shot, almost hit mi with that revolver o’ hers.”

Andre smiled as he watched Kat put a hand to her mouth

- Play Dead -

and muffle a snicker.

"Wha's so funny?" Paul asked.

"Nothing," Kat said.

Kat came over with the plates piled with pancakes and bacon just as Mrs. Andrews and their two children came out.

"Paul, who are our guests?"

"Linda, these are the folks I shot at yeserday'," Paul said "This is Andre, Brad and Kat. Kat's the one who made me come out of the house."

Kat gave Paul's wife a small smile, but Linda didn't return the smile, not one bit. She was angry that Kat had been shooting at her husband.

"Well, as long as we got more people here to protect the children I won't turn them away," Linda said as she cut up some of the bacon and pancakes for the two small children. "Even if we have some wild woman here."

"Wild woman, why you..." Kat would've went on, but the sight of the small children kept her mouth shut.

"She means that in a good way, missus Kat," Paul said as he tore a piece of bacon off. "It's in respect. Jonah, Carrie, say 'ello to our guests."

The children retreated behind their mother's long, pioneer-styled dress.

Andre felt bad for them. The little boy looked only seven and the little girl was probably only five. It was sad because they hadn't even begun to live their lives out yet when this started.

"That's fine," Andre said with a smile. "They don't have to."

"Dad, look."

Brad stood and pointed out the window, where they all turned to see a group of five of them wandering around not too far away from the old, weather-battered porch.

"Linda, get mi my gun," Paul said as he took the cigar out of his mouth and exhaled a cloud of smoke. "Them sumbitches gonna get up 'ere and try to hurt us."

"You can't kill five of them by yourself," Kat said, grabbing her revolver. "I'll go with."

"Missus, you can't..."

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Kat was already out the door before Paul could finish.

Kat raised her gun as she watched the five corpses sniffed and looked around the area like dogs would when they were looking for food. That's all they were, dogs; humans that had turned into animals after getting sick. She was very tempted to raise her gun and take a shot at one, but if she did that she could endanger the rest of the family, especially the children.

She would wait and see what they would do.

Right now, she wished that she had the rifle that Andre had brought from the cabin. She hadn't shot a rifle in a long time, but she knew that she could knock one of those stupid bastards out of the ballpark with a good shot. Moving targets weren't her thing with the rifle unless there were a lot of them, and with there only being five zombies out there, she couldn't afford to waste rifle shells on something she couldn't hit.

"Missus."

She felt Paul's hand on her shoulder and turned her head, watching as the man put a knee on the porch, just as she had done.

"There's five," he said. "Why aren't you shooting?"

"Your children, I don't want them..."

"They've seen enough blood already," Paul said with a sigh. "I had to shoot their grandma afer' she turned."

Kat raised her gun, taking aim and getting ready to fire.

That was when one of them looked directly toward the porch.

"Shit, duck!"

She and Paul hid themselves as best as they could, but it didn't work. They snarled and came at them like a bat out of hell. She was the first one to stand and get a shot off, but the bullet only grazed the zombie's shoulder, drawing dark blood. She heard the crack of a rifle and saw one of them fly a few feet after taking a shot to the chest.

"Bitch!" Paul swore. "Bitch!"

His rifle had jammed.

- Play Dead -

“Brad!” Kat screamed. “Get your dad’s rifle!”

She didn’t wait to turn back around and get another shot off. This time it hit dead on, blowing half of a zombie’s head off before it slumped to the ground in a bloody mess. She was about to raise her gun again and fire when she saw them stop in place. They weren’t five feet from the house and she and Paul were clearly visible, but they had stopped.

She looked at the four remaining ones, watching them. She wanted to see if one of them would play stupid and charge them. She was trigger happy, but she held her hand steady, not wanting to bring the remaining five feet between them and the zombies to a close.

“Here,” Brad said as he ran out of the house. “Here’s the gun.”

One of the zombies howled, falling to the ground and clawing at its face as it continued to scream and howl at nothing.

“What the hell? What is it...”

She watched a crown of horns split from the zombies skull. Blood dripped down them as the creature’s fingers elongated, splitting off into bone before the very end of the fingers stopped moving in sickly claws. Spines erupted out of their backs and lingered in the air as bloody bones before the zombie looked up at them.

Whiskers were growing out of this male zombie’s upper lip. Its eyes darkened and sunk back into its head before the jaws split, revealing teeth that a bear would have in the prime of its life.

“Shoot that motherfucker!” Paul screamed, raising his gun and taking a shot off. The bullet skimmed off of one of the two bony horns, causing a snarl to come out of the lead creature before the remaining four charged.

“Brad, take my gun!”

She swapped her revolver for Brad’s rifle and ran to the stairs, crouching and pulling the trigger. She fell back onto the stairs and cried out in pain as she received a nasty scratch on her arm. She could see the zombie that she had shot at slump to the ground, dead.

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Paul killed the other two zombies while Brad was left to fire at the mutant zombie. Now that the others were dead, Paul trailed his gun on the creature and fired. It hit it in the chest but it continued to charge. It would charge and tear her apart if she didn't do something.

Right before she became zombie food, she thrust the barrel of the gun at the creature, letting the creature swallow the barrel before she fired.

The zombie tore the barrel of the gun off right before it died.

"Are you telling me that one of those things mutated?" Andre asked as he looked at Kat, watching her bandage her arm.

"Yeah, you'll see if once we leave."

"Leave?" Paul asked. "We can't leave, the children..."

"Paul," Kat said, slapping him. "Your children and your wife are going to die if we don't leave."

"Don't you hit my husband like that."

"Shut up, bitch. I'm the one who killed the fucking monster that would have killed your husband."

"I don't care about that, I..."

"Let's see you pick up a gun," Kat growled. "Let's see you pick up a gun and be like I am."

"Kat, back off," Andre said, standing. "Brad, go start packing the clothes up." He turned to Paul. "Kat's right, Paul. There's no way we're going to be able to stay here. Those things are going to be swarming on this house by midday if we don't get out of here."

Paul turned to his wife.

"Linda, get the food and the children ready."

"We're not leaving, Paul. We're staying at this house."

"Linda, we'll die if we stay," Paul said, pointing out the open door with his gun. "Those things will tear you apart."

"You killed my mother and then you expect me to leave this house? You leave, Paul, I'm not leaving, and neither of the children."

"Linda, I..."

- Play Dead -

She stormed off into her and the children's room, slamming the door behind her.

"Paul," Andre said, placing a hand on Paul's shoulder. "Regardless of whether or not your wife and children are coming, you need to come with us."

"I'm not leaving without 'em," he said. "I'm not."

Andre sighed.

They were leaving by noon, and if Paul couldn't convince his wife to go with him, then so be it; they would go by themselves.

Andre looked up at Paul as he came out of the bedroom. The man had been in there for hours, trying to convince his wife to go with them, but it didn't seem to have worked. Tears were flooding down his face, but at the same time, he seemed determined.

"She be goin' to 'er sisters," he said, wiping tears from his eyes. "She be takin' the children with 'er too"

Andre looked over to see Kat and Brad giving the man concerned looks.

"How long is she staying?" Kat asked, running a hand through her hair "I'm sure you told her that she can't keep the children here for longer."

"I told 'er to go," Paul reassured them. "The children are upset, but they know they can't stay. She told 'em they were goin' on a lil' trip."

Andre nodded and stood, sighing as he readjusted his arm in the sling. Damn, it hurt so bad.

"Kat, Brad, do we need to stop somewhere?"

"For food," Brad answered. "Paul, sir, is there a store around here?"

"A stop-in," the man said. "Prob'ly looted by now though."

Andre watched Paul for a moment before he turned to look out the window. Outside, the sun was slowly setting, becoming a golden hue across the horizon.

"We need to leave," Andre said. "They might come back."

"What 'bout Linda?" Paul asked. "She can't be left 'ere."

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"Go tell your wife to get in your truck and take the children if she isn't coming," Andre said. "She can stay."

Paul nodded and walked down the hall before knocking on the door, waiting a moment before he disappeared inside of his bedroom.

"Dad," Brad began. "Where are we going to go?"

"I thought about going back to the cabin, but there's a possibility that we might be able to go elsewhere."

"Like where?" Kat asked, fingering the machete at her side. "You saw what those motherfuckers almost did to me. They'll tear us to pieces, and now it looks like they're turning into something else."

It seems as though a big mess has been made for everybody, Andre thought. *Kat's saved our asses a few times, I might as well take her advice.*

"Do you know where we can go?" Brad asked Kat. "Do you know of any place, Kat?"

"My best bet would be to get as far away as we can from here," she said as she, looking out the window. "They might be following us."

"How could they?" Brad asked. "I can understand them following us if they've seen us, but how else could they?"

"Maybe they're pack hunters," she said. "They don't seem to mind coming at us in a swarm."

Brad was about to ask another question, but the footsteps coming from down the hall stopped him.

"She's gonna leave," Paul said. "We should be too."

Andre nodded and looked at Brad and Kat. Kat lifted the extra rifle that Paul had given her and slung it over her shoulder, while Brad kept the revolver close as they made their way out of the house.

Before Paul could go any further, Andre gripped his shoulder, waiting for Kat and his son to continue before speaking.

"You said goodbye, right?"

"Yes," Paul said. "I did."

"I'm sorry," Andre said. "You can't force her to go with you."

"I know. Linda and the children know that we need to go

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different ways.”

“You might not ever see them again,” Andre said. “Are you sure that you don’t want to say goodbye again?”

“No.” Paul uncurled his hand and lifted it up. “She’s already made it clear that she doesn’t want another goodbye.”

Andre looked down.

In Paul’s hand was the wedding ring that Linda had had on her finger.

That night, Andre and Kat slept in the front seats while Paul and Brad were sleeping in the back seats. Paul was spread out on the back seat while Brad was on the floor, sleeping peacefully. He and Kat were trying to go to sleep, but it wouldn’t come to them.

“You can’t sleep either?”

It was the first time Kat had spoke.

“Yeah,” Andre said. “I can’t.”

“We might as well drive then,” she said. “I mean, they can still follow us if we’re just sitting here.”

Andre nodded and her reach for the keys. They had been sitting in the cup holder. For a moment she stopped and looked at them, seeming to contemplate on whether to start the car or not.

“Go,” Andre said. “We need to get out of here anyway, why waste our time just sitting here?”

She nodded, picked up the keys and carefully inserted them into the ignition.

It was as if she was waiting for something bad to happen.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know, I feel like I should wait for something.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.”

For several long moments, he waited to see what she was waiting for.

“Go, Kat!”

“Goddammit, I will!”

Kody Boye

Just as she turned the jeep back on, the lights illuminated the scene before them.

There were three zombies in front of them.

"Not mutants," Andre said. "You can run them over, Kat."

Sweat was dripping down his neck. The very sight of them--just standing there on all fours in different positions--was enough to make him sweat. He rarely sweat.

One of them shrieked and hurled itself onto the hood, where it clawed at the glass with dirty, bloody fingernails. The others launched themselves at the sides of the jeep.

"Go!"

Kat slammed down on the gas pedal and the jeep flew in reverse. The zombie flew back on the ground while one of them cried out. It was sucking on the severed fingers on its hand, glaring at the jeep.

"What's wrong?" Brad asked from the back. "Oh shit!"

"Son!"

"Dad!"

"Just shut up you motherfuckers!" Kat screamed. "Buckle up and hold on!"

Kat slammed on the gas pedal and sent the jeep flying right into one of the zombies. It flew into the air, staining the front window in a bloody mess before it was taken care of by the wiper fluid.

"Kat, what the hell are you thinking?" Andre roared. "You could've sent us off of the road!"

"And I didn't, did I? Shut the fuck up, Andre; leave the driving to me!"

Andre nodded, sighed, and did what Kat asked.

She would take them wherever the hell she wanted to.

A casino was probably the worst place they could have stayed in, but it was better than nothing. They were safe on the upper floors, and they had all the food they could ever want. The bagged foods were plentiful, and by the time they had got

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themselves settled in, breakfast was only a machete away. Kat slammed the blade of the machete into the glass, backing away as the glass shattered. She brushed away the last bit of glass around the corners with the blade before she reached in and grabbed an armful of chips, pretzels and scoops.

"It's better than nothing," she said with a sigh. "Eight, Andre?"

"Yeah," he said with a soft laugh. "It is."

Andre and Kat were the only two who were talking. Brad had said a few things, but not enough to make him a real part of a conversation; Paul was too upset to say anything, preferring to just sit where he was and sigh every few minutes.

"Paul," Andre said. "Everything okay?"

"Ever'thin will be, Andre," Paul said in his thick accent. "Don't bother about mi, I'm fine."

Andre looked over at his son, who only gave him a nod in return.

"You think they have rooms anywhere here?" Andre asked. "We need somewhere to sleep."

"Hopefully they do," Brad said. "Do you want me to go look?"

"I'll go look," Kat said. "You guys stay here."

"What if you get ambushed, though?" Andre, looking from Paul to his son and back to Kat again. "Those things might kill you."

"I've been ambushed before, Andre," Kat said, tapping the machete. "This bad boy's the thing that's kept me alive."

She soon disappeared down the wide halls and the flashing games.

Kat looked from side to side as she wandered through the game booths, her eyes drawn to each and every flash. She knew that by the time she got back to the group, she would be seeing rainbows. Blues, reds, yellows, greens and purples of every color swarmed on the games. Normally, she might have been tempted to play, but she wouldn't.

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It'll be a good source of dough though, she thought as she stopped by one machine and rapped on it with her knuckles. *If there is anymore people, anyway.*

She wasn't sure how much good money would do now. It could do some good if the world did go back to normal, but she had a feeling the world was pretty fucked up by now.

"You'd make a pretty good comedian," she said. "Too bad you were a kick-ass lesbian in the ghetto."

She smiled at the thought, but that smile faded away when she heard something.

The electronic sound of someone winning a game machine.

She froze, trying to find the source of the sound. Her eyes darted from machine to machine, trying to find what had caused it.

It walked out in front of her. The zombie stood there on all fours for a moment before snarling, jumping at her. She jumped out of the way to be greeted by a game machine, and when she ran into it she cried out in pain. She felt the thing tugging at her tank top and for a very short moment she thought she was done for.

The gunshot whizzed right by her before it hit the zombie.

"Come on!" Paul called to her. "Look out!"

She turned just as a zombie came at her. She took the fine liberty of kicking its torso before slamming the blade down on the back of the neck.

She turned and ran with Paul.

"What's taking so long, Dad?"

"Be quiet, Brad," Andre said. "don't worry about them, everything's all right. Kat's saved our butts more than once. Besides, Paul went to look for her."

Brad nodded. The fear was etched visibly on his face, as if someone had taken bright pink lipstick to his face.

The gunshot sent shivers up Andre's spine.

"God," Andre said, his limbs twitching, ready to spring at

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any moment “Something happened.”

Just when he thought that things had turned out for the worst, Paul came running up.

“Where’s Kat?”

“Right here!” She said as she came up from behind Paul. “This place isn’t as safe as I thought it would be.”

“Where did it come from?” Andre asked.

“From the games. I heard one of those wheel-spiny things or whatever the hell you call them. Thankfully, they seem to be stupid enough to run into things like that, otherwise I would’ve been dead.”

Andre nodded and looked at the four of them, sighing. All he needed was to be in a dangerous place, that’s all the fuck he needed. They seemed to have been in a good spot right up until now.

“Should we leave?” Andre asked. “That was close, Kat; you know that just as well as I do.”

She nodded, brushing a hand over her brow and flinging the sweat off of her hand.

“We should go. For all we know, we’re better off in the open wilderness anyway.”

They *did* seem to be better off in the wilderness. The small area that they had stopped in had its own stream. For the whole day, they didn’t even have a problem with the zombies.

Maybe they weren’t following them.

“You okay, Andre?”

Andre nodded as Paul sat on the rock with him.

“What about you? Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Paul grunted. “I’ll live. It’s hard, but a man does what he needs to do, right?”

Andre nodded and sighed, looking over the stream at Kat and Brad. The two of them were walking around, talking to each other about something he would probably never find out.

“Something wrong?” Paul asked.

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"Nothing," Andre said. "It's just that, well, I don't know how to explain it."

"Try."

"I just feel like I'm guilty for all of this."

"How come?"

"I think the creature I caught was the thing that started all of this."

The following silenced made Andre nervous. He didn't dare look over at Paul's face, but he was sure that he already knew what he was doing. His face would have gone blank and then reformed itself with wonder, with worry for a friend.

"What did you catch?"

"The Chupacabras."

"That thing," Paul said. "Hmm..."

"What is it, Paul?"

"Nothin', Andre, nothin'."

Andre nodded and sighed, feeling more alone than he had ever felt. He stood and got off of the rock, making his way over to the jeep, where he leaned against it and looked up at the sky.

It looked like it was going to rain.

"Dad?"

"What is it, son?"

"You okay?"

"I'm fine, why?"

Brad shook his head and leaned against the jeep.

"You and Kat talking about anything in particular?"

"No, nothing in particular."

"You do know that if something's bothering you, we can talk about it, right?"

Brad nodded, looking around the campsite and sighing.

"Do you think we're safe here?"

"I don't think we're safe anywhere, Brad; we just need to keep moving around. In a few week's time, my arm will be better and I'll be of more use."

Brad nodded and wrapped an arm around him.

"I love you, Dad."

"Love you too, son," Andre said. "More than you'll ever

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know.”

For the next two weeks, the two of them had drove up the coast until they hit Washington. When they did, they entered the town of Richland. Immediately, they felt a sense of peace here.

That seemed like a bad feeling.

“Your arm okay, Andre?” Paul asked. “Don’t mess with it too much.”

Andre nodded, smiling. Since Paul had started traveling with them, he had seemed to loose most of his accent and talked normally now. His arm had also healed, though it was still stiff.

“What’s wrong, Kat?”

“We need to find somewhere to stay. You know that we can’t just go into some kind of building and coop up there. We need to find a better position.”

“What do you suggest, then?”

“I don’t know, maybe a convenience store or something. We’d have to find a pretty big one though.”

She stopped at an intersection, placing the car in park and sitting there, trying to figure out what to do.

“This is bad, we really need to find somewhere to stay.”

For a moment, everything seemed to fall into place *too* well. There were no zombies, the roads were clear of any debris, there were no fires.

“Shit!”

From around them, men in green suits--masks and all--came from the darkness. They raised their machine guns and other weapons before approaching the car.

The man on Andre’s side banged on the glass.

“Get out of the jeep!”

“What do we do?” Andre asked, looking to Kat.

“We better do what they say. I for one don’t want to be blown to pieces”

Andre nodded and turned to roll his window down.

“We’re getting out,” Andre said. “Please, don’t shoot. There’s

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four of us in here.”

The man signaled to the others around him and they, in turn, signaled to the other men around him.

Andre unlocked the door, got out and had guns trained right on him. Brad got out of the back seat on the passenger’s seat while Paul and Kat walked around, soldiers closely following the two of them.

“We can either do this the easy way or the hard way,” the man rasped through the ventilator on his mask. “We’re taking you into custody”

“Custody? What the hell do you think...”

Andre didn’t have time to say anything because a man forced him to the ground, holding the side of his head down.

“You’re under *arrest*, sir. Put your hands behind your back and don’t fight us.”

Andre nodded, pushing his hands behind his back as the man cuffed him. The man helped him to his feet and he could see Kat, Paul and his son accepting the handcuffs without any question.

“All right,” the military man who had arrested them said. “Someone bring the tank around.”

“Sir, the tank would draw too much attention.”

“Do I *care* if it draws the zombies to us?” The man growled. “Don’t disobey my orders. Get the tank.”

The other soldier reached to his belt and pulled a radio from it, clicking the side and speaking in a low voice.

“Sir?” Andre began as he looked at the man. “Are we safe here?”

“You’re as safe here as you would be on an island,” the man said, firmly holding Andre’s arm.

“Thank you, sir. We were looking for somewhere safe.”

The man didn’t say anything, but gave a small nod and watched as a large tank came around.

“All right, men, get on the sides, fire at anything that comes at us. You know the drill. Someone open the door, these men need to be placed inside.”

“I’m not a man,” Kat spat. “You jackass.”

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The man who was holding his arm released him, turning to Kat and slapping her hard across the face.

"No woman speaks to me like that," he growled. "Watch your tongue, bitch. I haven't had a woman in a long time and I'll do more than just slap you if you keep that up."

"I'm a dyke, you fucker," she said. "You really think I would enjoy anything you did to me."

Andre saw the man smirk through his gas mask.

"It doesn't have to be enjoyable for you as long as I get what I want."

The tank door swung open and he gestured the other soldiers to get them inside.

Andre sat down on the hard metal bench next to his son and Kat, Paul taking the seat at the very end. As soon as the tank started and all the soldiers had their attention elsewhere, he turned to Kat.

"Are you all right?" Andre whispered. "Did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine," she said, turning her head away. "It looks like I've got to watch my back here, huh?"

Andre gave a small nod, but at the same time he was more than worried for Kat. She didn't just need to 'watch her back,' she needed to 'watch her ass.'

The man had sounded more than serious.

When a soldier came walking down the aisle toward them, Andre went dead silent as the man looked at them with disapproval.

The gun at his side was more than enough to keep them all silent.

With a sigh, he rode the rest of the way in silence.

Andre tried to fight them off as they took Kat out of their cell. Paul and Brad were easily taken care of with stun guns, but he avoided the shots. He ended up landing a punch to a man's gut before he was backhanded, sending a spray of blood from his nose.

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"Fuck with us again, you're dead," the guard who Andre had hit said before slamming the cell door.

"You guys okay?" Andre asked, looking over at Paul and his son, who were just recovering from being stunned.

"Yeah," his son gasped. "But Kat, Dad!"

Andre curled his hand into a fist.

"Those motherfuckers."

She screamed as he threw her onto the bed, as he cut her clothes away with his knife. She couldn't fight back because he would kill her, he had said that. The screaming did nothing to stop him; it only turned him on. He freed himself from his pants and straddled her before slamming in. She screamed in pain and disgust. Never in her life had a man forced himself into her, and now that one was, she was infuriated

"You're a good fuck," he moaned above her. "You're..."

She screamed and punched him in the gut before forcing the knife from his hand. She stabbed it into his groin and felt warm blood splash onto her body. She didn't stop there though; she stabbed it into his gut and trailed it up and down and every other way she could before he fell dead at her side.

She pushed him off of her and stood, shivering in pain and disgust.

She took the knife and began to draw it across his body.

He wouldn't escape her torture, not even in death.

The scream they heard was Kat's, but then they heard a man scream. They waited in terrified silence until gunshots went off.

"Dad," Brad whispered. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," Andre said, looking over at Paul. "Paul, what do..."

The door slammed open to reveal a bloody Kat.

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“Kat!” Brad said, jumping to his feet and hugging her. “You’re all right!”

“That fucker raped me,” she said. “But I got him. Come on, we need to get out of here.”

From here, she distributed the three extra handguns between them. They rushed out into the hall and avoided shots and returned them, Kat picking off a man with a shot to the head.

“God,” she said. “We need to run! This whole place is filled with zombies.”

“What?” Andre yelled. “Zombies?”

“The fucking scientists had them in cages. When I pushed a big red button, all the doors opened and the zombies came out.”

“Now you know why you don’t push the big red button,” Andre said.

“Who fucking cares! Come on, let’s get out of here.”

They ran through the halls and made their way into a garage, where they jumped into a jeep and barely had time to buckle their seat belts before Kat slammed on the gas and through a crowd of zombies.

“We’re out of here,” Kat said as she crashed through the chain-link gate.

As the base exploded into gunfire behind them, he looked over at Kat.

“Where do we go from here?” Andre asked.

She sighed.

“Somewhere where there isn’t so much human rage.”

Andre nodded, looking in the back seat, at Paul and his son.

They both agreed that there would be no more rage in their lives.

Andre now knew that things were better left alone. Had he not caught the Chupacabras, none of this would have happened. Rage had been born of a terrible devil, and now the world was all but gone, full of rage.

Kody Boye



Forever is the shortest time
in the world.

- Play Dead -

Part 1: Aaron and the Monster

~~~

Aaron was spread out on a large blanket under the setting sun by the beach. His shirt was off, exposing his muscular chest as he allowed it to soak in the sun's rays. It had been a long time since he had worked on his tan and he needed to catch up on it.

He pushed his sunglasses up his nose and put his hands behind his head, laying there and enjoying the sunset. He needed to get home to his little boy, but the babysitter was taking good care of him. He could work on his tan in peace.

A singing voice startled him.

"What the..."

He waited.

He heard the voice again, and this time he knew that it was a woman. The last note seemed to flow across the length of the beach in a clean note; a perfect pitch, a rare talent for a person.

"Hello, is anybody there?" he asked as he positioned his elbows under him, pushing his upper body up so he could see the area better. "Hello?"

There was nothing more than silence.

Aaron shook his head and was about to put his head back on the blanket before he heard the singing again. This time he stood and, to his surprise, saw a figure standing in the water. Though the sun was setting, he could see her. Her arms were stretched up to the sky as she seemed to capture the sun within her arms.

He took a step forward and watched as the woman looked up at him. Her hair was a shocking raven black, and although he couldn't see her eyes, he knew that they were a blue color. Some strange, omniscient part of his conscience knew that her eyes were blue. His eyes were drawn to her shoulders, and from there he saw that she naked from the waist up. Her breasts were small and round like lemons; the nipples like cherries on the top of iced cream.

## Kody Boye

He found himself looking at her chest, but the woman didn't seem to mind. His cock grew hard, leaving a noticeable tent in his shorts.

He looked up at the woman in embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, I..."

She shook her head as a small smile crossed her lips.

She took a step forward.

"You're a beautiful singer," he said, trying to make up for his embarrassing erection. "Are you from around here? I don't recognize you."

The woman shook her head and smiled her small smile again, slowly getting closer to him.

She didn't seem to talk. Maybe she was a mute, but he couldn't be sure about that. He didn't know too many people that were mute, but there was a man that lived down the street from his house that he knew. He was mute, and he acted like this woman; using simple gestures to get her meaning across.

"I'm sorry, I should be going," he said with a smile. "My little boy's at home and my babysitter is charging by the hour."

He turned to leave, but he felt the woman's hand grasp his erection. She took it in her hand and squeezed it, sending shivers through his body.

"Miss," he said. "What are you..."

She smiled and came closer to him. He could smell the ocean water that bathed her skin, but she smelled of a certain thing that he couldn't place. It was probably some French perfume, it seemed foreign.

She began to stroke his erection through his shorts.

"Miss, I really have to..."

She shook her head again, leaning in closer to him. A tongue darted from her mouth and licked at the side of his face, trailing her tongue down until it met his mouth. Unable to control himself, he wrapped his arms around this strange woman's shoulders. His lips parted and he allowed the seductress' tongue inside him.

They continued to kiss as they came to his blanket, and when they got there he pushed himself on top of her, his eyes

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trailing down to her waist. The skirt she wore was one of the grass skirts that the Hawaiian women would wear, but this one was open, and he could see her womanhood. He smelled her now; he could smell that woman smell.

She moved her hands from the side of his head and reached down to his shorts, pulling them down until the waistband rested underneath his testicles, exposing his throbbing manhood.

In a simple motion, she thrust herself onto him from below, grinding her hips into his in a circular motion, stirring moans from his chest.

“Good God,” he said as he felt her push up on him, the lips of her womanhood swallowing the head of his penis. “I shouldn’t be...”

He shook his head and started to thrust in and out of her, letting his lips trail down to the cherry-like nipples protruding from her breasts. He licked and sucked on them until she gripped his shoulders, pushing him onto his side. She climbed on top and began her thrusts. For several minutes she rode him., but she wasn’t moaning, so obviously he wasn’t at his best right now.

“Do you want me to get back on top?” He grunted. “If you don’t think I’m doing good...”

She thrust herself down until he was fully embedded inside her. She leaned in closer to his face, her lips closed in a silent, erotic smile. He had only seen her smile once, and her mouth had been barely open at that time.

“Miss...”

The woman shook her head.

She opened her mouth.

He watched in horror as her lips stretched to the sides of her face, extending to her mid-cheeks before she opened her mouth to its full extent. Rows upon rows of teeth that were sharper than any shark’s were revealed. She leaned in closer to him, giving him a fanged smile.

“Jesus Christ!” He yelled as she grabbed at his wrists, trying to force him down. “Get off of me!”

He fought with the creature until he got a hold of one of her wrists, trying to force her off of him. She would not budge. They

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were one while he was buried inside of her.

“No!”

He gripped at the base of her neck and squeezed as hard as he could, trying in vain to get her off of him.

She would not budge though. The creature was too strong for him.

In a rush of adrenaline, he released her neck and grabbed both of the breasts before she could force him to the ground. He twisted them as hard as he could. The scream of rage that came from the creature was enough to give him some power over her. As she screamed, he threw her from his body, casting her into the three inches of water that kissed the beach’s sand.

He ran from the beach as sweat ran down his armpits and chest. He felt his semen on the base of his cock, and it was then that he pulled his shorts up to hide his sex as he ran toward his house.

He was scared out of his mind, and all he wanted to do was to get as far away from that beach as he could.

### 1

Aaron bounded up onto his deck and collected himself as he thought back on what had just happened. He had gone to the beach to work on his tan, then came across this woman. The two of them had sex, and then she ended up almost killing him at the very place that he enjoyed going to so much.

It was all very confusing, too confusing for him.

Aaron walked into the house and saw his four-year-old-son Jake watching television. The babysitter--a fifteen-year-old teenage boy named Mark who lived across the street--looked up from a magazine he was reading.

“Daddy, you’re back!” Jake said as a bright smile crossed his face. “I thought you weren’t going to be home until it got dark outside.”

“No, Jake, I’m back,” Aaron said with a small smile. “I’m back.”

“Daddy, what do you have all over your pants?”



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Aaron took a glance down at his crotch to see that the front of his orange swimming trunks had a large stain in the front of them.

*Oh shit, I must have exploded a second time when I pulled my shorts up.*

"It's nothing, Jake," Aaron said, trying to keep his face straight as he said so. "I got my shorts wet, that's all."

Mark rose from the couch and walked into the kitchen with Aaron. Aaron reached for his wallet and began to count off the dollar bills that he needed to pay the teenager.

"Looks like you were having a little fun down at the beach," Mark said with a smirk. "Find somebody you like or were you just playing with yourself?"

"Knock it off, Mark," Aaron warned as he lowered his eyes at the teenager. "I'm the one who's paying you."

"Hey, I was just asking," the kid said as he rose his hands in mock surrender. "It's kind of hard to not wonder what went on when the front of a man's pants is wet with..."

Aaron glared at the teenager again, gesturing him away.

"Go on home, all right?"

Aaron ignored the teenager's muttering as he walked out the door, shaking his head and placing a hand to his brow, sighing.

"Great, now I've got a stupid teenager who's going to tell all his friends that I had sex with a woman or jacked off on the beach. And on top of what just happened..."

"Daddy, are you okay?"

Jake stood in the doorway, his eyes showing a concern that an innocent young child would have for his parent.

"I'm fine, Jake," Aaron said as he bent down to ruffle his little son's hair. "What makes you think that I'm not okay?"

"You were looking at Mark weird when you two walked in the kitchen."

"Don't worry about it Jake," Aaron said with a soft sigh. "Did Mark keep an eye on you?"

"Yes, Daddy; Mark kept a good eye on me. He just started looking at his magazine when you walked in through the door."

Aaron nodded and stood, walking back into the living room

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with his son. A cartoon was playing, and the characters were running around in circles chasing each other with pies in their hands.

"I'm going to go put some different clothes on, all right?" Aaron said as he down the hallway that led to his and Jake's room. "Stay in the house, all right?"

Aaron's son was too preoccupied with the television set to hear him, but he knew that Jake wouldn't leave the house. The child never left the house by himself, not after what happened to his mother.

The thought of Aaron's deceased wife made him sigh as he walked down the hall and into his room. It had only been four months ago that June had walked outside to cross the street. She had been going to visit a friend when the damn drunk had hit her with his pickup truck, killing her on impact.

He brushed a tear from his eye as he entered the bedroom, stepping out of his shorts and throwing them into the corner of the room, where all the dirty or worn clothes went. He could smell himself now; the semen was plastered in his pubic hair, making him very uncomfortable down there. He ignored the fact and walked into the bathroom that conjoined his room, taking a washrag and wetting it before cleaning himself off.

The woman had been standing in the water before she had somehow seduced him. She had just been standing in the water, minding her own business until he came up to her. Maybe if he hadn't spoken to her, none of this would have happened.

"No, quit thinking stupid shit like that," he said as he walked back into the bedroom, dressing into cut-off denim shorts and an undershirt. "You were just seeing things, that's all."

His psychiatrist had said that he might see things with all the stress he was going through. Ever since June had died, he had been in counseling because he didn't think he could go on. But when he remembered his son, everything changed. Jake had since become the only thing that he cared for in his life, and he was glad that June hadn't woken him up to go across the street to see Mrs. Dendardre.

If she would have woken Jake up, Jake would be dead

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too ...

He brushed a hand over his unshaved face and walked out of his bedroom and down the hall. When he came out he saw that the television set was off.

Jake wasn't on the couch anymore.

"Jake?" Aaron asked. "Where are you?"

"Here, Daddy."

Aaron jumped when he felt Jake tug at his shorts.

"You scared me," Aaron said with a smile as he bent down and picked Jake up. "Don't scare Daddy like that. I was afraid you left the house, or something had happened to you."

"I'm sorry, Daddy," Jake said, his eyes getting larger, almost as if he were ready to start crying. "Are you mad at me?"

Aaron shook his head, giving his little boy a smile.

"No, I'm not mad at you, Jake. You just scared me, it's no big deal."

Aaron kissed his son's cheek and carried him into the kitchen, setting him on the counter as he looked through the fridge.

"Did Mark ever make you something to eat?"

"He made me a PJ sandwich. He offered to make me something else, but I was full."

"Do you want me to make you something else to eat?"

"No, Daddy. You make yourself something."

Aaron nodded and pulled out a piece of cold pizza, taking a bite out of it as he leaned against the wall, looking out the window. From here, he could faintly see the spot where he had been tanning. The blue blanket that stood out so much against the tan-colored sand was gone, probably whisked away by the wind.

Or taken away by the monster...

"Monsters don't exist," Aaron told himself. "Monsters don't exist."

"What did you say, Daddy?"

"Nothing," Aaron said with a sigh. "Don't worry about it, Jake. It's almost time for bed, go get ready."

Jake climbed off of the counter and dashed out of the kitchen

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before Aaron could remind him to brush his teeth. A smile came across Aaron's face as he continued to eat the cold piece of pizza.

His son was the only thing that mattered to him. He wouldn't let some monster get into his mind.

"Monsters aren't real," he whispered. "Monsters aren't real."

## 2

June was crossing the street on a quiet January day. The sun was out and all was peaceful, save for the barking of a small dog that was chained up in the neighboring yard. She brushed a hand over her forehead as she looked across the street--back and forth--before she took her first few steps onto the street.

"Hi, June! Are you going to take some lunch over to Mrs. Dendardre's house?"

June turned around and let one foot rest on the sidewalk, the other firmly positioned on the side of the road. Carol Bird was watering her flowers, which were in full bloom, ready to be placed in the upcoming Mermaid Flower Festival that the small seaside town had every year.

"Yeah," June said with a smile as she waved at her next door neighbor. "The poor woman, I feel so bad for her. I thought I'd make her lunch again."

"What a sweet soul you are," Carol said with a smile. "Well, I won't keep you waiting."

June nodded and clasped the bottle of soup to her breast, checking both sides of the road again before she began to cross.

She was always careful on a road, even if it wasn't a dangerous one. Bad things happened to people who didn't pay attention on roads that could have big trucks passing on them.

With her mind wandering, the bottle of soup slipped from her grasp, falling onto the ground and beginning to roll down the street.

"Wait!" She called with a smile, chasing after it. "I need to take you to Mrs. Dendardre's house!"

She finally caught the bottle of soup and looked up toward Mrs. Dendardre's house.

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She only saw the oncoming truck for a brief second before it killed her.

\*\*\*

“No!”

Aaron jolted from his sleep as he sat upright, his breath coming in short gasps as he relived his version of his wife’s death. June *had* been going across the street to Mrs. Dendardre’s house--according to what Carol Bird had told him--before she had dropped the bottle of soup and chased after it before getting hit by the oncoming vehicle.

The man had been drunk, and now he was sitting behind bars for vehicular manslaughter.

It didn’t help Aaron’s pain though; his wife was still dead, regardless of the fact that the harbinger of her death was behind bars.

“Daddy, are you all right?” Jake asked from his side.

Aaron jumped when he heard Jake’s voice, but he soon calmed down. His son had been sleeping in his bed with him since June had died, both because Jake seemed to be more comfortable and because the psychiatrist suggested it. The man had said that his little son might be able to make his nightmares go away.

Those nightmares were still there.

“I’m all right, Jake,” Aaron said as he spread himself out on the bed, stroking his little son’s head, letting the short locks of blond hair glide between his fingers. “I just had a bad dream.”

“What was the bad dream about, Daddy?”

Aaron felt his chest tighten as his son asked the question he always did when he woke up at night like this. It had only been two days ago that he had burst from his sleep like this, only two days.

“It doesn’t matter, Jake, go back to sleep.”

“It was about Mommy, wasn’t it?”

Aaron looked back at his little son and saw the concern in his eyes. He knew that the child knew about his dreams. Jake

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knew that his father was having them because of what happened to his mother.

"Yes, Jake," Aaron said with a sigh. "It was. It's all right though, because Mommy's in Heaven with God right now. God's taking good care of Mommy right now, right?"

Jake gave a small nod and snuggled in closer to Aaron, his face brushing into the dust of hair under Aaron's arm.

"I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too, Jake. Go back to sleep, okay? I'm all right."

Jake had already fallen asleep after he had snuggled in closer. Aaron was thankful for that. He didn't want the little boy dwelling on the bad dreams he was having; Jake didn't need to be concerned about that. The little boy didn't need to have the burden of his father's nightmares on top of his mother's death.

Aaron drifted back to sleep shortly after his son did.

\*\*\*

She was sitting on the edge of a rock not too far from the coast of the beach. It was the rock that the teenager's called 'Virginity Rock' because it was a rock that some of the more risky teenager's had stolen each other's virginity on, the one virginity was taken on for the sake of cheap thrills.

Her hair was blowing in the breeze as the sun was setting, the dark locks like raven wings. Her voice rose in song as the ocean moved around her.

Her legs were dangling over the side of the small rock, locked together in the grass skirt, seemingly trying to hide the woman that was under it. Her shirt was still off, but Aaron could not see her naked breasts from where he was standing.

Aaron didn't want to see this monster of a woman.

She began to sing.

Her voice went so deep in the note that shivers went down Aaron's spine. He was standing at the foot of the water, watching her as the tide came in. The water granted soft embraces to his feet while the remaining minnows came in closer, kissing them with their lips, desiring the flesh that was there. He ignored both

- Play Dead -

the fish and the water, shifting his footing, sending the fish back into the deep.

The woman's legs shifted for a moment before she caught something in between the very end of her toes. She lifted her foot out of the water and caught the minnow that was there in between her middle and index finger. Her hair hid the monstrous lips that devoured the meal as she lifted it to her face.

Aaron shivered again as he watched her. Surreal beauty was there in that creature, but the monstrosity that lay within the beauty was always the thing that killed the men.

Monsters always hid where beautiful things were placed.

They always did.

Her head turned to look over her shoulder, and Aaron could see the trail of blood that dripped from her lips and onto her chin. Her mouth was almost closed, but the teeth were still visible, visible enough for him to see in this faint lighting.

Her lips curled into a smile, and when she turned around, her voice once again rose in song.

Aaron was drawn into the water as her melody continued on.

\*\*\*

This time when Aaron woke, it was not forceful and he did not scream. He remained in a sleeping position as his eyes opened, registering that his son was snuggled in beside him. The sight of his child made him feel better, and his arm reached out to caress his son's back.

The creature in his dreams had lured him into sexual intercourse not more than several hours ago, and he was still frightened by the experience. He was afraid that she would come up to the window that he was now looking out and smile at him. She would smile her fanged smile and begin to sing again, and then he would be drawn from his bed, attracted to her voice.

She would capture him and make him her own.

It was odd, how this woman would reveal herself to him suddenly and without any kind of purpose. It was odd how this woman--this creature--wanted him enough that she was to go so

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far as to coming into his dreams to try and capture him, to tell him that she was what he desired.

Was he the only one who was seeing this creature, this monster, this beautiful thing that looked human but was not?

He carefully slid out of the bed and walked to the window, drawing the curtains over them before he returned to bed.

This monster was not going to be coming back into his dreams tonight.

### 3

It was dawn when Beautiful Serenity made her way to the surface of her waters, when she looked upon the beach. The rock that was her own called for her, beckoned to her, and she swam toward it. Her red lips kissed the rock before she forced herself up onto it.

Though the wind was lightly blowing this morning, it did not chill her as it would a normal woman. It ripened the nipples of her breasts, but it did not chill her skin. She was one with this area, as she was one with the water around her. She was in tune with this area so much that she could tell when her lovers were coming.

She raised her arms for a brief moment, and then lowered one to her side, the other trailing to the area between her breasts.

The song escaped her lips as she began to lure them in.

\*\*\*

"How come we're coming down here so early, Steve?" The fifteen-year-old asked. "It's not even six in the morning."

"We're coming down here to get off," the big African-American man said, sarcasm thick in his deep voice. "Come on, Chase. I knew a white boy could be a pussy, but I didn't know you were one. I already told you that we're going swimming."

"Hey! I was just asking," Chase said. "Besides, why are we ..."



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Chase stopped when he heard something out in the distance.

"Did you hear that?" Chase asked.

"Hear what?" The big black man asked. "I didn't hear anything."

"That!" Chase said when the noise got louder. "It sounds like somebody's singing."

"Who would be singing this early in the morning?" Steve asked as he slapped Chase on the back of the head. "Come on, Chase. Get some sense into that thick head of yours."

Chase rubbed the back of his head as Steve slipped out of his vest, the slow-rising sun seeming to make his dark-skinned friend's muscles glow.

"Come on, take your shirt off. You are going in the water, aren't you?"

Chase gave a small nod and pulled his shirt over his head, tossing it beside Steve's vest as he walked to the water, thankful for the fact that it was warm.

This time, both of them heard the sound.

"I told you somebody was out here!" Chase said as he watched Steve's reaction. "And you thought I was just hearing things!"

Chase watched as Steve shook his head and placed his hand over his eyes for a moment before looking up.

When Steve did look up, he saw something, and that was when Chase looked where Steve was looking. A woman was coming up from the water and walking toward them. She was naked from the waist up, her breasts immediately drawing Steve's attention.

"Hot damn," Steve muttered under his breath. "There's a half-naked woman coming right at us, Chase."

Chase didn't answer Steve because he was too preoccupied with staring at the naked woman. It was the first time he had actually seen a naked woman, especially one so beautiful such as this one. His hand reached down to his crotch, where he rubbed the erection through his shorts.

"Yeah, that's right," Steve said as he looked over at Chase's bulge, "We're going to have us some pussy today!"

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The woman walked up to them and looked at the two of them intently, her eyes resting on Steve for a moment.

"Hey, beautiful," Steve said, lowering his deep voice so it could be as sexy as it could. "What's a girl like you doing up so early?"

Her lips moved in a smile, but she didn't show her teeth. Instead, her eyes wandered to Chase, where she watched him rub the front of his pants.

"H-h-h-hi," Chase stammered as he caught himself rubbing his cock. "S-s-s-sorry, m-m-m-miss ..."

The woman shook her head and smiled again, looking over at Steve. Chase caught her looking at Steve's shorts, which did little to contain the enormous bulge that threatened to tear the seams in half.

The woman's attention turned back to Chase, where she smiled again and descended to her knees, grabbing the elastic waistband of Chase's shorts and pulling them down, revealing the throbbing member. She gripped it with her hand and slid it into her waiting mouth.

Chase moaned and looked over at Steve, who was obviously jealous of the woman choosing him over his bigger, adult friend. Chase could only give his friend a small smile and moan again as the woman swallowed more of him.

"Here," Steve said as he pulled Chase away from the woman. "Have a piece of *man* instead, baby."

Steve pulled his shorts down and revealed the large cock that black men were famous for. The woman wasted no time in swallowing the black cock that was before her.

Chase watched as his friend gripped the woman's head, forcing more of the thick cock into her mouth. The woman didn't seem to mind though, as her mouth continued to stretch over the organ until her nose was buried in his pubic hair.

"God," Steve moaned as he began thrusting in and out of the woman's mouth. "Chase, come over here."

Chase did as his friend asked, watching as the big black man pulled his steel-hard cock out of the woman's mouth. Steve pulled the woman up to her feet and parted her grass skirt, revealing

- Play Dead -

her womanhood.

"You get this," Steve said as a grin came over his face. "And I get her ass."

Chase wasted no time in getting in front of the woman. He let his hand trail down between her legs, feeling the wetness that was coming from there. His hand lingered there for a moment before he heard Steve moan.

"Go on, it's not that hard," Steve said as he grabbed the woman's hips, thrusting in and out of her ass. "Just put it in her pussy."

Chase nodded and guided himself to the woman's opening, thrusting himself in. He gasped at the warmth, but he found that he wanted more. He began thrusting in and out, in and out, in and out...

In the early morning hours of dawn, two men screamed as they were attacked and drowned in the beach of Mermaid Cove, one of them only a boy who had just lost his virginity.

4

Aaron woke to his little boy's hands shaking at his shoulders. He called, 'Daddy' as he shook Aaron over and over, trying to wake him up.

"What, Jake?" Aaron asked as he opened his eyes, grimacing as he felt the heat from not sleeping enough well up in them. "I'm all right, what's wrong?"

"You weren't waking up, Daddy," Jake said as he looking into his father's eyes. "Mrs. Bird is here."

Aaron gave a small nod and climbed out of the bed, pulling the denim cut-off shorts that he wore last night up his legs before he walked out of his room and down the hall, Jake scrambling out in front of him. The little boy only wore his underpants, but Carol didn't mind; he was, after all, only a little boy.

The door was open so that the screen was only there. Carol stood in the doorway, a paper bag held in her hand.

"Hey, Carol," Aaron said as he pulled open the screen door, leaning against the door frame as yawn passed from his mouth.

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“Sorry, I just got up.”

“It’s not like I haven’t seen a man without his shirt, Aaron,” Carol said with a small smile. “Looks like you didn’t get much sleep last night. Your eyes are all red and everything.”

Aaron brushed a hand over his face, scratching at the stubble on his cheek for a moment before nodding.

“I didn’t sleep well last night,” Aaron said as he yawned again. “Jake, go get dressed.”

“But Daddy, you’re...”

“Please, Jake, do it for Daddy?”

Jake gave a small nod and ran back down the hall.

“You were dreaming about June again, weren’t you?”

Aaron gave a small nod as he let his next door neighbor into the house, sighing as he closed the door.

“Yeah, I was. I woke Jake up too, and I think he was a bit worried about me.”

“He’s been worried about you, Aaron,” Carol said as she followed him into the kitchen. “It’s only natural for your little boy to worry about you.” She sighed as she placed the paper bag on the counter. “I’m sorry, Aaron. I still blame myself for what happened to June. If I hadn’t been watering those damn flowers she would still be alive.”

“Carol, don’t blame yourself,” Aaron said as he yawned again. “It wasn’t your fault that June ...”

Aaron shook his head and opened the fridge, pulling out the jug of milk as his eyes returned to Carol.

“It’s all right, Aaron. I know it isn’t my fault, but still. I wasn’t even one-hundred feet from her, and if I would’ve seen the truck coming,” Carol shook her head and placed a hand to her brow. “I’m sorry, I came over here to bring you and Jake some breakfast and I come here bringing bad memories with me.”

“Thank you, Carol,” Aaron said, forcing a smile. “I appreciate all that you’re doing to help me and my son.”

“It’s no problem, dear. I need to go back home now, my daughter’s throwing a fit about how her dress ripped because I didn’t make it a little bigger. I need to fix it.”

Aaron gave a small nod, but he was surprised when Carol

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kissed his cheek.

"Feel better, all right? Make sure Jake stays out of trouble. If you need anything, call."

Aaron gave a small nod as Carol walked out the door, and when he heard it close, he touched his cheek. He shook his head and sigh as he heard Jake come into the kitchen.

"Did Mrs. Bird bring us breakfast again?"

"Yes, she did," Aaron said, giving Jake a smile. "She's a nice lady, isn't she?"

"Mrs. Bird was wondering where you were, Daddy. She thought that you might have 'drank too much sweet water again.' What's sweet water, Daddy?"

Aaron shook it off as he poured his little boy a glass of milk, pushing it in his direction and gesturing him to drink it as he went to grab the paper bag. 'Sweet water' was what Carol called alcohol when the children were around, but it still bothered him. There were times when he turned to alcohol because he was so upset about June's sudden death, and the woman came over every day just to make sure he *was* all right. She'd been coming over every day after his psychiatrist had called her and asked her to keep an eye on him.

"Look what she brought us," Aaron said as he pulled out a warm bottle. "Eggs."

"She brought eggs!" Jake said with a large grin. "Yay!"

Aaron smiled as he pulled a plate out from a cupboard and spooned a few eggs out of the bottle and onto a plate for his son. Carol knew that Jake liked eggs for breakfast, and Aaron was thankful that he had a woman who cared so much for him and his little boy. Her husband was also a good friend of his, but he rarely saw George because he was out of town on business trips most of the time.

Aaron put a single egg on his plate and grabbed two forks, giving one to Jake as he sat down beside his son.

"Daddy, how come you're only having one egg?"

"You know I don't eat in the morning, Jake," Aaron said as he put a bit of the egg in his mouth. "I get sick, remember?"

Jake gave a small nod and began to eat his breakfast,

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leaving Aaron to think back on what Carol had said. Carol had been June's best friend when she had been alive, and the woman still blamed herself for his wife's death. Aaron remembered going outside after they had gone to the funeral and seeing her take George's axe to her flowers. She had cut every single bulb off of her award-winning flowers--every single bulb--all because she figured they had been the ones to kill June and not the drunk man in his big pickup truck.

Carol was a good woman, one whom Aaron loved as a mutual friend very much.

"Daddy, are you all right?"

Aaron blinked a few times before looking over at Jake.

"I'm fine, son," Aaron said with a small smile. "I was just thinking."

Jake gave a small nod and pushed his plate back, finishing his glass of milk before he climbed off of the chair.

"Can I go watch TV now?"

"Go ahead," Aaron said with a small smile. "Stay inside, Jake."

"I will, Daddy."

Aaron's little boy disappeared from sight, and he was reassured by the sound of the television being turned on that Jake *had* went in the living room. Aaron always worried that Jake would run out into the street and meet the same fate as June had.

The phone ringing startled him from his train of thought.

Aaron stood and walked over to the phone and picked it up, pressing it to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Hi Aaron," the man on the other end of the phone said. "How are you?"

The man on the other end of the phone was Cliff Lake, his psychiatrist.

"Same as ever, Cliff," Aaron said with a sigh. "Can you give me a moment."

"Is something wrong?"

"No, I just don't want my little boy to walk in on me." Aaron

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placed the phone to his chest and looked around the corner, where he could see Jake watching the television. "Jake, could you go in your room and watch TV for me?"

"Why, Daddy?"

"I need to talk to my doctor, and my doctor wants to be the only one to hear me."

Jake gave a small nod, got off of the couch and walked down the hall to into his room, leaving the sounds of the cartoon channel in the other room.

"Sorry," Aaron said with a sigh. "I just don't want him to hear anything."

"I understand, Aaron. You seem tired; did you have a rough night?"

"I just had another bad dream, Cliff."

"I'm sorry. Was it about June?"

Aaron's psychiatrist didn't need to know why Aaron had went silent to know what had happened.

"Have you been taking your medication, Aaron?" The man asked after he didn't speak again.

"No, I haven't, Cliff."

"It will help you with how you're feeling, you know that?"

Aaron had been diagnosed with post traumatic stress syndrome after the first few visits, and Cliff had suggested that he take medication to help him with his bad dreams and depression. He had bought the medication, but he had abandoned it after a week's use because of it made him irritable; something he did not want to be around his little boy.

"Cliff, I've already talked to you about this. I don't want to take the medicine because it puts me in a bad mood. I don't want to be around Jake that way."

"Aaron, I have an opening today. I think it would be best if you came into my office today."

"But Cliff, I..."

"Aaron, you're just going to give me another excuse again, I already know that. Carol Bird isn't at work today, right?"

"No, but..."

"Then ask her to watch your son. Aaron, I'm worried about

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you. I'm afraid you're going to do something to hurt yourself."

Aaron sighed and looked over at the clock. It was only nine-thirty, which gave his psychiatrist several hours worth of time to talk to him.

"All right, I'll call her," Aaron said, a pang of regret coming to his heart. "I'll be there in a half hour."

Aaron exchanged goodbyes with Cliff and hung up the phone, taking a moment to collect himself before dialing Carol's number.

"Hello?"

"Carol, this is Aaron, could I ask you a favor?"

"Hi, Aaron, what is it?"

"Yeah..." Aaron sighed again as he leaned against the wall, wrapping the phone cord around his index finger. "Could you watch Jake for me today? My psychiatrist wants me to go in and see him."

"I can watch him, Aaron. Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine, Carol. He's just concerned because I haven't been taking my medication."

The other end of the phone line went quiet for a minute as Carol yelled at her screaming daughter.

"Aaron, that's bad," Carol said in a soft, almost inaudible voice. "You know that not taking that medication can ruin your health."

"I know, Carol, but it puts me in a bad mood. I don't want to stress Jake out."

"All right, bring him over and I'll keep an eye on him."

Aaron said goodbye and put his dish in the sink and the milk jug back in the fridge before walking down the hall and into Jake's room.

"Jake, I need to take you to Mrs. Bird's house."

"Is something wrong, Daddy?" Jake said as he looked up from his toy cars.

"My doctor wants me to go visit him. You won't mind staying at Mrs. Bird's house, right?"

Jake shook his head. "No, Daddy."

Aaron nodded and walked down to his room, pulling an



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undershirt over his head as he slipped his feet into his sandals. A sigh passed from his lips before he walked back out the door and to Jake's room, gathering the little boy up so he could take him to Mrs. Bird's house.

5

"Take a seat, Aaron," Cliff Lake said with a smile, "I'm glad you could make it."

Aaron nodded and seated himself in the gaudy leather chair, brushing a hand over his knee, letting the hairs there tickle his palm before looking back up at his psychiatrist.

"Just whenever you're comfortable, Aaron," Cliff said with a smile, brushing a hand across his short black beard. "I'm ready when you are."

Aaron nodded and turned his head, looking out the window and to the street. The cars passed by in blurs of color as the lunch hour came up, making him realize how late in the day it was.

"I'm sorry for how I look," Aaron said as he returned his attention to Cliff. "You called while we were eating breakfast."

"No, it's fine, I don't care how you look," Cliff said with a small smile, nonchalantly putting his feet up on the desk as if he were in the room alone. "You mentioned on the phone that you had a bad night last night. Have you been having bad dreams again?"

Aaron gave a small nod and sighed, but made no attempt to tell Cliff what he had dreamt about.

"It was about June, wasn't it?"

Aaron looked up at Cliff, his eyes registering the man's concerned look.

"Yes, it was."

"You haven't been taking your medication like I asked you to," Cliff said as he reached into a drawer, pulling out a stack of papers and leafing through them for a moment before pulling one out. "Post traumatic stress syndrome. I'm sorry, I would've remembered but the phone's been ringing off the hook all

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morning.”

“How come it’s not ringing now?”

“I placed it on silent,” Cliff said with a smile, his face becoming serious after that. “How come you haven’t been taking your medication, Aaron?”

“I already told you, Cliff; it puts me in a bad mood, and I don’t want to stress my little boy out because I’m in a bad mood.”

Cliff gave a small nod and leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes for a moment as he placed his hands behind his head. Cliff entered one of his phases of deep thought before speaking.

“Have you ever considered putting your son in a temporary foster home while you’re getting over this?”

“Absolutely not!” Aaron said as he stood. “I would *not* do something like that to my son, Cliff. You know me better than to suggest something like that.”

“Aaron, I wasn’t trying to be rude, I was just making a suggestion.”

“That’s all that ever is with you, Cliff; suggestions, suggestions, suggestions and more suggestions!” Aaron shook his head and sighed as he placed a hand to his forehead, trying to still the tears that were coming to his eyes. “My little boy is all I have to live for, Cliff. If you take him away from me, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“I’m sorry, Aaron. My words weren’t meant to hurt you.”

“I think it would be best if I left now,” Aaron said as he walked to the door, his hand reaching out to clutch the doorknob. “And I think it would be best if we postpone our visits until I feel more comfortable about the situation I’m in.”

Cliff nodded.

“All right, Aaron. I’m sorry for what I said.”

Aaron gave a small nod and walked out the door and to his car, ready to get back home and to his son.

\*\*\*

Carol Bird looked up from her sewing to see Aaron’s car pull into the driveway opposite of her own. Jake had fallen asleep on

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the couch watching a cartoon, and her daughter was sitting in the recliner, reading a book.

"The poor soul," Carol said as she put the needle and dress down. "He needs somebody to love him, at least one person. Me and George are the only two friends he has."

Carol sighed as she pushed open the door, waving for Aaron to stop as she crossed the lawn in front of her picket fence.

\*\*\*

Aaron waved back at Carol as she walked out of the house and toward him, trying to keep the smile on his face. The meeting with his psychiatrist had put him in a bad mood, and he was fighting to contain his emotions as his neighbor walked over to him.

"Hey, Aaron," Carol said. "You feeling all right?"

"No, I'm not," Aaron said with a sigh as he felt the tears come to his eyes. "The psychiatrist suggested that I...That I put Jake in a foster home until I get over this whole mess."

Aaron turned his head away as he let the tears fall from his face, brushing them away from his eyes.

"God Carol, can my life get any worse at this point? I lose June, and then my doctor's telling me that I need to put Jake in a foster home." Aaron shook his head, letting tears fell from his eyes and onto the ground below him.

"Aaron, it's all right," Carol said as she took his hand. "Honey, Jake is just fine with you; don't listen to anybody on how to raise your own son. You and only you know what's best for your little boy."

Aaron nodded and looked at Carol for a moment, looking over her shoulder at her house.

"Where's my son, Carol?"

"He fell asleep on the couch, bless his heart. Do you want to come in and get him?"

Aaron wiped the tears from his eyes as he followed Carol into her yard and up her now flower-devoid path, giving him chills that went up and down his spine. He smiled at her and

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walked into the house, seeing his little boy sleeping on the couch.

"Hi, Mr. Ashbrooke," Carol's daughter said from the corner of the room.

"Hi Christen," Aaron said before turning his attention to his little boy. Jake was peacefully sleeping in a curled up position, his small breaths rhythmically going in and out of his mouth, his chest rising and falling with every single one. He picked his little boy up in both arms and placed Jake against his chest, letting one support his back as the other caressed his bottom.

"Thank you, Carol," Aaron said with a small, forced smile. "I appreciate it."

"It's no trouble, Aaron; just whenever you need something, dear."

Aaron nodded and walked out of Carol's house, through her yard, making the right turn and walking up the small path that led up to his house before he opened the door. He felt Jake stir in his arms before he got through the door.

"Daddy, where are we?"

"It's all right, Jake, I'm just bringing you home."

"Did your visit with the doctor go all right?"

Aaron nodded as he stroked the back of his little boy's head.

"It went just fine, Jake," he lied, "it went just fine

## 6

Beautiful Serenity swam through the beach waters just off of the sandbar that separated the small beach from the open waters. As she looked down, she could see large sharks swimming by the bars, catching fish that were too busy dawdling on the smaller minnows that they were feeding on. The sharks were ripping them into tiny little pieces of flesh. She too would feed on them, but not right now. She was still satisfied from her last visit with the men.

She had killed the younger man with a single bite to his neck, while she made a much more hazardous move with the bigger, darker skinned man. He had put up a fight after she had killed his friend, especially after he had pulled out of her and

## - Play Dead -

tried to take his revenge.

She had done the more simple method of death with him, simply by dragging him under the water and drowning him, where she fed off of the majority of his body before dumping it off for the sharks that came up from the deep blue horizons of the sea. The boy had been cast out to the sea as well, but she was more than sure that it would drift into the rocks and remain there. So would the black man, but he would be little more than bones by then.

She descended deeper into the water and touched the sandbar with the tip of her finger, letting her long, clean nail trail through the sand before she lifted it up. The sand particles that fell from her finger were like diamonds amidst a sea of dead, flawed stones that meant nothing to her or any other creature.

Her eyes trailed to the shark that she was following. It was a beautiful creature, a great white that was at least twenty-three feet long. She liked following these big creatures because she could feed off of the extra fish they didn't eat, and she also liked following them because they led her to the different beaches up and down the coast line. She wasn't sure how far she would follow it, but she would follow it until she either got bored with the creature or found a small underwater cave to take shelter in.

The white stopped swimming for a moment, sensing her behind it. The big female turned around in a swift arc, her eyes trained on her naked upper body.

*Beautiful creature*, she said, even though her lips did not move. *Silence your anger.*

The female had reared back her gums and exposed the sharp teeth that lined every side of her mouth when she saw Beautiful Serenity, but now her mouth closed as if sensing that she was not a threat.

*There now*, she wooed. *Now, tyrant creature of this area, would you like to do something to help a creature that is far more superior to you?*

The shark reared her head and raised her mouth so that all of her teeth were visible, but when she did this Beautiful Serenity did the same thing. Unlike the shark's teeth, her own

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were of a more powerful variety. She would never lose these teeth in a fight, they would never rot away, and they would always maintain their sharp edge that rivaled that of any knife.

The shark cringed as Beautiful Serenity smiled, her teeth catching the light and sending it into the great white's sensitive eyes, temporary blinding her.

*Now, do you fear me? Good, for you are going to do something for me. You are going to allow me to follow you until I see fit... And then you will serve me as I see fit.*

She touched the tip of the female's snout with a long, glossy red fingernail. A small light came from the tip of her fingernail until it sunk into the creature's flesh. The shark closed its eyelids for a moment until the creature felt Beautiful Serenity's conscience touch her own.

Beautiful Serenity had just made the female her servant. With this power, she would strike fear into the hearts of the people who lived on the coast of California.

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"In other news today, it has been reported that the two men who had gone missing earlier today seem to be the victim of a vicious shark attack." The anchor woman's dark Asian skin absorbed the light from the cameras, bathing her in a divine glow. "This is Carrie Greenwood with Mermaid Cove News. At dawn this morning, two men--one of African American descent, Steve Matthews and the other a young Chase Daniels--went down to the beach to enjoy a leisurely swim. Sadly though, they did not get that. Police report that a great white shark that is at least twenty-three feet was spotted off of the Mermaid Beach, and that was when the remains of Chase Daniels were discovered. Daniels' remains were also found next to a skull that had flesh attached to it, and police believe that this is the only remaining appendage of Matthews. We'll bring you more updates as the story progresses."

Aaron swore under his breath as he felt Jake pulling at his undershirt.

- Play Dead -

"Daddy, is there really a big sharky swimming around the beach?"

"I don't know, Jake," Aaron said as he turned the television set off, thankful that Jake was just a child and didn't remember things easily. "Just because they saw a shark, doesn't mean that the shark did what they were saying."

"The sharky got those guys, huh?"

"I don't know, Jake. Hey, why don't I make you something to eat?"

The change in conversation was enough to send Jake scurrying into the kitchen. Jake would forget about the shark in due time.

Another sigh passed from Aaron's lips, because for some odd reason he believed that it wasn't the shark that got them. No. He believed that it was the beauty down at the lake, the one with a mouth that opened up into a maw, a maw that contained a brigade of silver warheads, silver warheads that had tore them to pieces; almost what she had done to him.

"Fuck off," Aaron said, obviously directing his curse to the creature that was in his mind, smiling at him with her silent smile. "I don't need to think about you."

Sharks didn't just attack people for no reason, especially two men that had just gone down to the beach. One shark wouldn't have killed two people; one shark wouldn't have been able to.

"Daddy, Daddy, come here!"

Aaron was up and at his feet as he heard his little boy yelling for him, bounding out the front door, where Jake had headed. His little boy stood at the foot of the road, looking at an arrangement of people in costumes that were going across the street.

"What is it, Jake?"

"Look, the parade is going on!"

*Shit*, Aaron thought to himself as he wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. *I forgot that this was today.*

"Good eye, Jake," Aaron said as he descended to a knee, wrapping an arm around his little boy's body. "Just stay on this side with me, all right?"

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"I won't go in the road, Daddy."

Aaron nodded and walked back to the porch, pulling a few chairs out and dragging them back toward where Jake was standing, his eyes intent on the parade before him.

"Come here and sit down Jake," Aaron said, patting the chair next to him. "Okay, son?"

Jake came and sat by him as Aaron had asked. He gave his little boy a smile while ruffling his hair.

"I love you, Jake."

"Is something wrong Daddy?" Jake asked. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Jake," Aaron said with another smile, wrapping an arm around Jake's shoulders. "Don't worry about me, okay? Let's just sit here and watch the parade."

"All right, Daddy."

Aaron sighed as he looked out at the parade, seeing the different floats and the people. He could almost see June up on one of them, as she had always been one of the women who tended to the Mermaid Cove Flower Float. It pained him to see this float again. It pained him so much that he could hardly bear to look at it, but he would, even if he was only doing it for Jake.

Aaron was doing it for his little son.

## 7

That following night, Aaron held his son close to his body at almost midnight, savoring the warmth that passed from his little boy's body. He didn't know why he couldn't go to sleep, but it seemed to be a constant nagging in the back of his head. It was something about seeing the parade today; it was something that had frightened him. He didn't know if it was because of June not being on the float or because of the monster that had met him two days before.

"June," he whispered. "Why did you have to leave me?"

His wife hadn't left him, of course she hadn't. It had just been an odd, evil coincidence that she had to be crossing the street when the truck driver was coming. It had just been an odd, evil coincidence when she had dropped the bottle of soup, and it



- Play Dead -

had just been an odd coincidence how the truck driver had just come out of nowhere and struck her down.

Finding that he could no longer sleep, he drew his arms away from his little son's body and covered him up, walking out of the room and down the hall, into the kitchen. He opened the fridge and drew a cola out, soon closing it before he made his way out onto his front porch.

Tonight was one of those warm nights that a man could enjoy. It was a night where a man could prop his feet up on another chair and crack open a drink of his choice and look up at the stars, savoring the good things in life. He did just that, but the only thing that he didn't do was savor what he had in life. He was in such a deep depression that he couldn't think straight. His mind constantly wandered from his son, to June, to the woman at the beach.

*Why did you come to me?* He thought to himself as he sipped at his drink. *Why did you and I have sex on the beach, and why did you almost kill me?*

In a way it seemed as though the devil had sent his mistress to hunt him down and then pleasure him in a most painful way. She had come out of nowhere and nearly killed him, almost taking him away from his little son.

"Jake," he whispered under his breath.

"What is it Daddy?"

Aaron jumped at his boy's voice, but soon calmed down. He turned to see Jake in his underpants, standing in the doorway with the kitchen light turned on.

"Why are you sitting on the porch, Daddy?"

"I couldn't sleep, son," Aaron said as he gestured Jake over to him, allowing his little son to crawl up onto his boxer-covered lap. "I'm sorry I left."

Jake shook his head and rested his head on Aaron's chest, enticing a small smile out of the mourning father.

"I love you Daddy."

"I love you too, Jake," Aaron said as he set the drink down, stroking the back of his little son's head. "I can't tell you how much I love you."

## Kody Boye

“How come you couldn’t tell me, Daddy?”

“Because I wouldn’t know how to tell you Jake,” Aaron said as he kissed the top of his head. “I love you that much.”

Jake didn’t say anything after Aaron spoke, but he did adjust his position against his chest.

Aaron sighed as he felt Jake’s small body loosen up against his chest, taking the cola and sipping on it before he stood and carried him back into the house, locking the door before turning the kitchen light off. He carried Jake back to his bedroom and crawled into bed, setting his little boy at his side before he covered the two of them up.

“I love you Jake.”

\*\*\*

Beautiful Serenity looked out toward the dark beach and watched the bonfires. The lights flickered in several different areas on the beach, but she herself wasn’t sure how she would make a scare here. She wanted to get a few of them out into the water--or somewhere close to it--but she wasn’t sure how she would go about doing that. She remembered these fires from the times that she had come here when she was younger, when she had just burst from the beast’s womb, when she was let into a world where something like her was forbidden by forces that were not in control. She remembered that humans came to the beach to celebrate around this time every single year. They came to celebrate the time when the spring was coming and when the fall would soon come.

The big female broke the surface of the water, feeling her mistress’ need to lure a human into the water.

No, Beautiful Serenity said as she reached out to touch the female’s dorsal fin. *You will only cause them to hunt you more than they already are.*

She knew that the big mechanical objects that made the waves move with their big rotating blades would not see her through the water, but she knew that they would see the big female. She was getting bigger every day through her power, and

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it would only be a matter of time before she would make a creature of long ago real again.

The shark descended until only the tip of her dorsal fin was above the water, but she was agitated, Beautiful Serenity knew this. She knew that her servant wanted to please her in whatever way she could, but she could not get the humans right now. Humans disappearing here from this beach at the current time would only make the humans afraid, and when the humans were afraid they put the yellow string by the water.

The yellow string meant that the humans wouldn't be able to come into the water, and that would leave her and her servant without the form of the food they now desired, the food they now needed.

*Come*, Beautiful Serenity said as she touched the female's large gray side again. *We will go find an old friend.*

She turned and made her way down the beach, where she would rise from the water and find the man that had got away.

\*\*\*

Aaron stirred again at a dream in which June was alive, and the part of his brain that knew the truth came alive when she first appeared caused him to wake up again.

"June, why are you in my dreams so much?" Aaron asked with a small smile. "You care, I know, I'm sorry to ask something like that. You want to be here with me and our son."

He stroked his sleeping son's head and sighed, looking toward the window, which was covered with the curtains. He still feared the creature that was outside, the creature that he had escaped from. The creature that was beauty in the form of a monster.

He must have already thought about the creature that way because the short saying was implanted in his head.

"The creature that was beauty in the form of a monster," he muttered to himself as he held a strand of Jake's hair between his fingers. "It's a bunch of messed up shit."

Unable to even think about sleep again, he rolled out of bed

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and carefully made his way out of the room so he wouldn't make any noise, wiping a hand over his forehead as he looked over at the clock.

Midnight.

He seemed to be waking up like this more than once a week now. He would probably sleep better with the medication, but he didn't want to take it. A guilty pleasure that medicine would be, but he wouldn't take it; he didn't need to take it because he didn't need to make Jake any more worried about what was going on. He would be starting preschool soon, and that would be worry enough on his mind.

Shaking the thought of Jake starting school soon from his head, he made his way into the kitchen and opened the window, standing there and letting the cool night air come in through the thin curtains. He had draped them there for the same reason that he had started pulling the curtains back in the bedroom; because he was afraid that it would come back to see him again, to smile at him and then try to kill him.

He would not let that thing kill him.

Jake still needed him, and until his son didn't need him anymore, he would remain.

## 8

Living in a time where the world revolved around what you were doing, what you dressed like, how much money you had and how many friends you had revolved around your inner circle was one of the toughest things a person could go through, especially when you were a man that was dealing with the loss of his wife. Aaron sat in a rocking chair in pure silence. There was no TV playing in the background, there was no Jake in the background making 'vroom-vroom' sounds while he played with his trucks, and--the most painful of them all--there was no June singing to a song on the radio.

His mind constantly roamed on what he was thinking about. First his thoughts went out to Jake, who was over at Carol Bird's house, probably annoying her older daughter; then his thoughts

## - Play Dead -

went out to June, who's ghost was haunting his mind; and then his mind went to the strayed emotions that alcohol caused, which also brought out the monster in the background. There was that beautiful monster, with her long dark hair and her beautiful tanned, almost golden skin; that beautiful monster who was no beauty, only defined as a monster with the teeth that could easily tear something in two.

"Jake," he first whispered. "June."

The tears came shortly after he said her name, the name of the woman whom he had married on the beautiful California beach where his life was almost taken by a wraith that had came out of the water.

He could see that wedding as if it happened yesterday: he was wearing a pair of yellow swim trunks and June was wearing a makeshift coconut bikini and a grass skirt, something the local church called the 'Mermaid Paradise' wedding. He could remember the water that had splashed against his bare feet, and the soft breeze that made June's hair look like wildfire; that beautiful brown wildfire that her hair was whenever it was windy. He could remember the sound of the seagulls outside, and he could see that the ice statues that they had ordered were sweating a watery sweat. He could remember his and June's lips touching each other, and he could remember the priest saying, 'These two be joined forever in loving and eternal gratitude in both body and soul.'

Forever was a very short time, a very short time indeed. Father Time laughed at him in whatever third or fourth or fifth--or whatever realm--he existed in, and he knew that. Father Time liked to laugh at how short forever was, just like a clown liked to laugh at one of his obnoxious jokes; constantly, eternally, 'with eternal gratitude.'

The glass of vodka that he had put in a wine glass would make him drunk sooner rather than later. Without any food in his system, it would make him drunk quickly. He didn't want Jake to come home and see him drunk, he didn't want Carol to have to tell Jake that daddy had drank too much 'sweet water' again and that he needed to stay with her for the night.

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He grabbed the phone on the table beside him and dialed Carol's number.

"Carol."

"Aaron, what is it?" She asked from the other end of the phone. She waited a moment before speaking again, and her tone changed from its usual nice tone to one of fury. "Goddamn you Aaron! You're drunk!"

"You need to keep Jake at your house tonight, Carol," he said as he raised the vodka glass to his lips. "I'm not feeling very well."

"Damn you and your drinking Aaron, you stupid bastard. You sent Jake here so you could drink yourself silly."

"Carol, it's not that. Goddammit! Carol, you don't understand, I *miss* her."

"And you're using alcohol to try and bring her back. Face it, Aaron, drinking isn't going to bring June back. If there was something that could be done to bring her back I would've already done that! Fuck you and your drinking, Aaron. You can come pick Jake up in the morning, and just to get it through your thick skull: fuck you, that's f-u-c-k you!"

The phone slammed down on the other end, and it was clearly audible because Carol missed the receiver the first few times. The fifth time she whispered 'fuck you' into the phone before she slammed it down for a final true time.

He raised his drink to his lips again and began to cry.

## 9

Mrs. Bird came in from the kitchen with a red face, and Jake looked up at her with a soft look of concern on his face. It was getting dark, and he knew that his daddy didn't like it when he was anywhere after dark.

"Mrs. Bird, is something wrong?"

"Your daddy has to go into town and he wants me to keep you here for the night," Mrs. Bird said, her red face giving a white smile, the colors contradicting each other. "All right? I can have a place set up for you before we go to bed."

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Jake gave a small nod and went back to playing with his toy fire truck as if Mrs. Bird had never brought up him having to stay the night. It wasn't the first time that he had had to stay the night here, and Mrs. Bird took care of him. She would fix dinner for them and before bed give him a glass of warm milk, then she would tuck him in and tell him goodnight and that she loved him.

*Like Mommy used to*, Jake's inner voice that he couldn't hear said, the voice that spoke to him in a different way, even though the words were there. *Just like Mommy used to tuck me in.*

The child's inner voice was not heard in his mind in any form, just like any child's inner voice happened. It would advise things, but the child would never digest it. The child wouldn't start to fully understand these meanings until he went through puberty.

Carol Bird's daughter, Christen, came out from down the hall and looked at Jake for a moment before walking into the kitchen, starting--as she usually did-- to scream at her mother for no apparent reason at all.

"Christen, go back to your room!" Mrs. Bird yelled from the kitchen. "You're grounded!"

"Mother..."

"You heard what I said Christen, go back to your room."

Christen came out of the kitchen with a red look on her face, and for a moment she looked at Jake before she ran back down the hall, yelling something that he couldn't hear.

"Hey," Mrs. Bird said, causing his attention to stray from the hall back to her own face. "I'm sorry about Christen, she's still mad ..."

"About the dress," Jake finished for her. "She's very mad."

"She'll just have to get over it," Mrs. Bird said with a smile. "It's getting late, Jake, and I'm sure that you're getting tired."

"Yes, Mrs. Bird," Jake said, almost on cue with the yawn that came shortly after those words. "I am."

"I'll bring you some dinner out in a few minutes, all right?"

Jake nodded as he watched Mrs. Bird disappear back into the kitchen, looking back down at the toy truck that sat in front of him. It seemed wrong to be playing with it at a time when so

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much was going wrong. Christen was freaking out over a dress, Mrs. Bird was stressed out, Daddy was in town...

As Mrs. Bird said, anyway; knowing her she had probably just said that to distract him. Mrs. Bird always got a weird twinkle in her eye when she was saying something different from what she wanted to say.

She brought dinner out and Jake ate plentifully before Mrs. Bird led him down the hall and into a bedroom. She handed him a small glass of milk, tucked him in, read him a story and told him goodnight and that she loved him right before he fell asleep.

\*\*\*

Carol gave a small sigh as she walked out of the little boy's room, carefully closing the door so that only a strand of light shone on the child's face. He looked like an angel sleeping in a bed that only mortals slept in. He seemed heavenly, ethereal, as if nothing in the world could hurt him.

"Damn you, Aaron," she swore as she looked back into the little boy's room one final time before walking back down the hall and into the kitchen. "Damn you to Hell for hurting your little boy like this."

## 10

As with Aaron's usual hangovers, he woke up with blurred vision and a headache that threatened to make his head explode. He had passed out in the same chair he was sitting in; the glass that was half-filled with vodka was sitting on the table right beside him.

"Ugh," he moaned as he placed a hand on his head. "I must've had a bit too much last night."

*No duh, you stupid fucker,* he heard Carol's voice say. *You drank too much last night. That's usually what happens when you drink a flavorless alcohol.*

Carol's voice always came into his head when he did something wrong either to himself or to Jake and--as memories



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from the night before came back--he remembered that he had asked Carol to watch Jake while he drank himself silly.

*A bit too silly*, June used to say to him when he had too much to drink, when she was still alive. *Too silly for your own good*, Aaron.

"Yeah, I still am," he said, shivering at the reminiscence of an old, happy memory. "I'm still too silly for my own good, June. Thanks for reminding me."

The phone started ringing inside the kitchen.

"It must be Carol."

He made his way across the room and into the kitchen, where he gripped the end of the phone for a moment before picking it off of the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Aaron," Carol said from the other end of the phone. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, June. I'm fine."

"Did you just call me June?"

Aaron felt heat rush into his cheeks, which would have normally caused a blush if he was sober. All it managed to do was return a bit of color to his pale skin.

"Did I, Carol?"

"Yeah, you did," she said with a soft sigh. "It's all right, Aaron, don't worry about it."

"Sorry, Carol... I was just thinking about June a minute ago. Is Jake all right?"

"He's still sleeping, but you don't have to worry about coming over and getting him, dear. I can carry him over."

"Are you sure, Carol? I can always come get him, it'd be no trouble."

"Aaron, don't worry about it, carrying Jake over to your house is no harder than carrying Mrs. Dendardre breakfast. I'll be over in a few minutes; hopefully Jake won't wake up when I take him out of bed."

Aaron let her hang up the phone before he did, and when the phone was securely back in its receiver he made a point to drink a heavily-caFFEinated soda before he walked back into the living

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room to clean up the half-eaten piece of frozen pizza and the vodka glass. He did this as quickly as he could, because he knew that it wouldn't take too long for Carol to walk over here.

"There she is," Aaron said as he walked back out of the kitchen, wiping his slightly-water-damp hands on his brown cut-off shorts. "And here I am half-naked again."

Aaron had stripped his shirt off before he had started drinking, because last night had been a hot night, but she had already made the point that she had seen a man without his shirt on before; she was a married woman, after all.

"Aaron!" Carol called from outside. "Are you there?"

"Right here," Aaron said as he unlocked the door and opened it. "Sorry Carol."

"No worries, Aaron. He's still asleep, is there anywhere in particular you want him?"

"The couch will work just fine."

Carol nodded and slid Jake out of her arms and onto the couch, making sure that she straightened his head out so that he wouldn't kink his neck while he was sleeping.

"Aaron, we really have to talk about this problem you have."

"Carol," Aaron said as he walked into the kitchen, trying his best to avoid her. "I had a little too much to drink; it's nothing more than that."

"It's way more than that when you're a single father," she scolded as she gestured for him to sit in a chair. "It wouldn't be a problem if June was still here, but June isn't, Aaron. It hurts me to say that, but June isn't here anymore. You can't be drinking yourself drunk while you have a four-year-old son."

"Carol, I..."

"There's no need for you to try to explain anything, Aaron. You and I both know that what you did last night was wrong, way wrong."

Aaron gave a small nod, but all the while she had been talking he had been trying to fight tears back. He already knew that his eyes were watered over with that sparkle that showed the tears, even if none had been shed.

"Aaron... Have you ever considered trying to find someone to

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fill that hole in your life?"

Aaron let out a startled sob before the tears came.

"Carol, it's been four months since she died," Aaron said as he placed a hand on his forehead, blinking a few times and watching the tears fall onto the table below him. "You really expect me to go out and start dating just after four months?"

"Aaron...I-I didn't mean it that way." Carol stood and walked over beside Aaron, putting her arms around him in a loving embrace. "I shouldn't have said that. God, I'm so stupid."

Aaron wrapped his arms around her, and for the first time in months he actually felt love from someone else other than his son. The people who had come to the funeral had been her family because his family was all but dead, and they didn't like him enough to offer no more than a forced condolence. But Carol, she was actually showing compassion, showing love to him in a way he hadn't had for four months. Jake had been the only one loving him, and he had accepted that as the only kind of love he was going to get, thinking it was the only other love that he would ever get.

Carol proved this to be wrong.

"Thank you Carol," Aaron said with a small sigh as he wiped his tears away. "Really, you don't know how much it means to me."

"I know, Aaron. I need to get going. If you need anything feel free to call, and if you ever need somebody to talk to I'm always next door."

Carol kissed his stubble-ridden cheek before she walked out of the kitchen and out the door.

Once again Aaron brushed a hand over his cheek, smiling.

"Thank you, Carol."

Visiting a dead woman's grave was like opening your chest and letting the world see the heart that was there. If you hadn't lost somebody, your heart was red, but when you did lose somebody your heart was black; charred by misery to a degree which made the heart look heart-less, per say; as in not looking

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like a heart at all, but something that was dead.

Aaron stood at the base of the grave and hung his head in silence. His eyes were closed in a sorrowful remorse, and the tears that were coming made it all the more hurtful. June was buried here under this earth in a wooden coffin surrounded by a stone shield; a shield that would remain for all time, keeping her body protected until the world ended in 'Fire or Ice,' as Robert Frost had said in his poem.

"Aaron?"

Aaron felt Carol's fingers brush against the dark suit that he wore. He had decided that if he was going to visit his beautiful wife's grave, he would do so in honor. He didn't think that there was anything better to wear, but the color brought out the pale in his cheeks that had developed before Carol had driven him over here. He would've driven himself, but he was too heartbroken to do so.

Carol was a good woman, a sad woman who wore a dark veil in front of her best friend's grave.

"I never thought that I would ever be standing in front of her grave," Carol said as she lifted the dark handkerchief to her eye. "I always thought that we would end up as old women who played cards on a Sunday afternoon when we were supposed to be in church."

"Neither did I," Aaron said as a sigh as he gripped her hand in his own. "I never thought that I would be standing in front of her grave. I thought she and I would grow up to be the grandparents of Jake's children."

"She would be happy to know that you're here, Aaron. She would be happy to know that her man loved her so much."

Aaron nodded and smiled as he saw June's face in the gray surface of the stone. It wasn't real, but he could wish it was real. June showed herself in many objects, but it was the first time he had seen her in her gravestone.

"I love you," Aaron said with a small smile as he bent down to place the yellow rose--the color of roses that they had had at their wedding--on the dirt before the gravestone. "More than anything in the world, June."

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Aaron stood and looked over at Carol, who bent down and placed her own offering on the dirt before the stone. It was an arrangement of roses in the shape of a small heart, and holding it together was a gold-colored chain. Although it wasn't real gold, Carol wouldn't have been able to afford that, though God knew she would do that in a heartbeat. Inscribed on the locket was 'Friends Forever.'

"Even in death," Carol whispered as she placed her hand on the stone. "Friends forever, June."

Aaron bent his head one final time before he looked up and out at the cemetery. So many gravestones, just so many gravestones, too many gravestones in this beautiful field of green grass. He never would have imagined visiting June's grave; he always figured that it would be her visiting his when she was an old woman. He had imagined that during all of those married years, but he never would have thought it would be him visiting her grave, not in a million years. But here he was, standing before his wife's tombstone where flowers had just been laid and tears were now being spilled. He never would have imagined this, never in his whole life.

'Never ever,' Jake would have said, and then June would have followed with, 'Ever never.'

Never ever...

Ever never...

The world was truly a cruel place...

And forever was the shortest time in the world.

12

Aaron returned home with a sad outlook on life, but when he saw Jake coming out of the hall he instantly straightened out his emotions and made himself calm.

"Hi Daddy," Jake said. "How did your meeting go?"

*Meeting?* Aaron thought, a frown crossing over his face. *What meeting?*

"Oh!" Aaron said with a little too much enthusiasm, remembering that he had made up that excuse to trick Jake into thinking he wasn't going out to the cemetery. "It went fine, Jake,

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it went just fine. Has Christen been taking good care of you?”

“Yes Daddy, Christen yelled at the men who wanted donations for the church. They ran out of here like they saw a ghost!”

Aaron gave a small smile at his little son, ruffling his hair.

*Yeah, I wouldn't be surprised,* Aaron thought, a smirk coming over his face. *The girl would send the Devil running for his money.*

“Mr. Ashbrooke?”

Aaron looked up and saw Christen standing not two feet away from him. Her blue eyes held a peace that he had once saw in June's; the peace of an ocean waiting to let loose a tyrant.

“Hi Christen,” Aaron said as he gestured Jake back to his room. After Jake had left, he spoke again. “Was he good for you?”

“Just fine, Mr. Ashbrooke. I barely had to say anything to him.”

“You didn't talk to him?”

“I tried, but he wouldn't talk to me. I was trying as hard as I could, but I couldn't get him to talk. I think he was worried about where you went. He did say something about ‘too much sweet water’ though. He must've picked that up from my mother.”

Aaron shrugged and reached into his pants pocket, fumbling through it until he pulled out a fifty dollar bill.

“Here,” Aaron said as he passed it into her hand. “Buy something nice.”

“Mr. Ashbrooke, I can't take this,” Christen said as she tried to return the money. “Please, don't make me take this.”

“Christen, you took a Saturday that you could've been at the mall off to watch my little boy, I think you deserve something to spend some time with,” he said with a smile, looking out the door. “Thank you, Christen.”

“You're welcome, Mr. Ashbrooke.”

Carol Bird's young daughter walked out the door and off of the porch, where she walked down the concrete walkway until she turned, disappearing out the side of the window.

“Nice girl,” Aaron said with a smile. “She has a bit of a temper, but she's a nice girl.”

- Play Dead -

Christen yelled at the men who wanted donations for the church. They ran out of here like they saw a ghost!

Aaron laughed again as he called Jake out of the bedroom.

"What's so funny, Daddy?"

"Oh, something I heard at the meeting," Aaron said with a smile as he bent down and gathered Jake into his arms. "How was my little buddy's day?"

"Okay, Daddy. You asked me that when you came in the door."

"That's right," Aaron laughed. "Thanks for reminding me. Hey, are you hungry?"

"Yeah," Jake yelled with enthusiasm.

Aaron could only smile as he walked into the kitchen and began making a sandwich for his boy, all the while his thoughts going back to June.

13

June had had a secret that she had never been able to tell Aaron, and it had been bothering him ever since he got back from the cemetery, after he remembered that his wife had been telling him something and he wasn't listening.

'I'll tell you when I get back from Mrs. Dendardre's house,' she had said as she gathered the lunch bag--filled with the afternoon lunch leftovers--into her arms and opening the screen open. 'It's nothing important, Aaron. I've been meaning to tell you, but I forgot about it until just now.'

'Uh huh,' he had said as he poured himself over the bills in front of him. 'Yeah, uh huh.'

It turned out that June *hadn't* been able to tell her secret, all because of a red truck that barreled down the highway at an excess speed of at least sixty miles per hour while she was running after a bottle of orange juice.

June had a story, but he wasn't sure what it was.

He had to find the diary that June had written in. It was always in a place where he couldn't find it; she made sure of that. A normal man would have took this as a sign of a secretive wife having an affair or hoarding money, but not June; June wasn't

## Kody Boye

that kind of woman.

He had to find the diary, or else he would end up in a nut house.



- Play Dead -

Part 2:  
June

1

June's trip with her gal-pal Carol Bird had ended in buying out a good amount of the store. Lots of groceries had ensured that the barbecue June's family and the rest of their friends were going to have down at the beach for the fourth of July would be a good one.

"That was fun, wasn't it?" Carol asked as the two of them sipped lemonade spiced with cranberry juice. "At least we won't have to do the shopping at the last minute."

"Yeah," June said with a smile. "Aaron says I have a bad habit of waiting until the last minute to do my shopping."

"You do!" Carol laughed. "You almost killed the poor man by feeding him your mother's stew."

"That was the only thing we had!"

"That's my point exactly!"

The two of them had a stare down for a moment before they both burst into laughter. June fell back on the porch and nearly spilled lemonade all over herself.

"Well, what are we supposed to do now?" June asked with a smile. "I mean, it's getting late."

"I need to get home to Christen," Carol said with a sigh as she lifted her lemonade to her lips again. "I'm not going to be able to get her to shut up if I don't."

"All right," June with a smile as she watched Carol stand. "I'll call you tomorrow, Carol."

"Okay, just don't wait up too long for Aaron. He'll be back before you know it."

June lifted the glass to her lips, watching Carol walk down the walkway with her own glass of cranberry lemonade in her hands. Through her glass, she could see Carol's distorted form turning to wave at somebody on the other side of the street. It was probably Mrs. Dendardre, but she couldn't be sure; the person was too far away.

## Kody Boye

June needed to go visit the woman again, as she was lonely and her husband wasn't much of a help having left not five years earlier with another woman. Mrs. Dendardre had had a terrible car accident and it had paralyzed her from the waist down.

"I should go see her," she said as she looked down at her gold watch, a present Aaron had given her. "The poor woman's lonely."

*And will probably die before she even reaches her fifties*, she thought as she stood, taking another sip of her cranberry lemonade. *The poor woman's hair is already starting to gray.*

The woman was as crazy as a loon--as the saying went--which was why June was reluctant to go over there. June would go and make dinner for the woman first, then walk across the street to her house. She could say that she was expecting a call from her husband and that she couldn't stay for very long.

That was what she would do, and besides; it was her turn to take something over to Mrs. Dendardre anyway. She'd *have* to do it, regardless of whether her moral actions told her that the woman was perfectly capable of getting something out of the fridge herself.

*Yeah, but she can't cook*, she thought with a sigh.

She turned and walked into the kitchen, beginning to prepare something small for herself and something a little smaller for Mrs. Dendardre.

## 2

June had just closed the door when she looked out across the street to see Mrs. Dendardre's lynx-like cat running across the road and up the porch, where it disappeared in an amount of shadow caused by large hanging plants and an amount of vines. She wasn't sure if Mrs. Dendardre was sitting on the porch or not, but she *did* know that Rampant--the lynx-like cat--would be throwing quite the hissy fit if Mrs. Dendardre didn't hear her.

"Pretty cat though," she muttered to herself as she adjusted her grip on the lunch bag, making sure that the can with the lemonade was still in with the rest of the food items. "I just hope it doesn't attack me trying to get the bag."

- Play Dead -

The cat probably wouldn't do that, and she normally wouldn't have been worried about a cat trying to steal whatever she had in a lunch bag. But Mrs. Dendardre's cat was *huge*. It was no pussycat, as her husband had taken a liking to calling it.

"Pussycat," June said with a laugh as she walked down the path, waving to Carol Bird, whom she had bent over her award-winning flowers. "That thing is no pussycat."

She checked both sides of the road three times before crossing, making her way across as quickly as she could. That was something she had complained to Aaron about after the two had moved into the house. The road was the most dangerous thing that you had to worry about in this area, other than the occasional Man-of-War jellyfish at the beach, and even then it was very rare when somebody got stung by one of them. She feared the road more than anyone could have imagined.

She could hear her husband calling her 'The Road Maiden' just as she finished crossing the street.

"Smartass, Aaron," she said. "I am no 'Road Maiden' or however you said it."

She did entertain the notion though, since it helped her cross the road over to Mrs. Dendardre's house a lot easier.

Upon coming to the woman's house, she could smell the deep, damp thickness of hanging plants and other vegetation. She could see a spider weaving a web in a dark corner, and she shuddered at the thought of running from the huge cat and then running into a different monster. She would scream, and then Mrs. Dendardre would probably be found dead from a heart attack the following day by her friend Carol Bird.

"Rampant?" June asked. "Where are you, kitty?"

She heard a low growling in the corner where the spider was weaving the web. She was glad that the cat had no intentions of attacking her. She walked to the door and knocked before she opened it.

"Mrs. Dendardre?"

June gasped in surprise as she saw the large black-and-white collie come over to her, its tongue hanging out of its mouth, where it waited for her to give its head a few pats.

## Kody Boye

“Hey there,” June said to the disabled-persons dog. “Where’s Mrs. Dendardre?”

The dog turned around and led June deeper into the living room, where a reading lamp was on. Mrs. Dendardre sat in the wheelchair, reading a book in the faint light of the lamp was enough to cast a luminescent glow over the old, yellow pages.

“June, I didn’t know you were coming today.”

“I brought you dinner,” June said with a smile, hearing a yowl from the cat outside. “Do you want me to let the cat in?”

“If you want, it doesn’t bother me; do what you want.”

June turned and walked back to the door, carefully opening it and stepping a good distance away before the monster kitty known as Rampant ran through the open door. She then closed the door and walked back over to Mrs. Dendardre’s side, setting the lunch bag down.

“Let me get you a plate.”

June walked into the kitchen and pulled out a large plate and a fork. She set the fork down on the plate with a resounding cling and walked back into the living room, removing the lasagna from the bag and forking some onto the plate.

“I just made it, so it’s still warm,” June said as she handed it to the woman, watching as Mrs. Dendardre’s thin, bony and slightly-curved arthritic fingers reached out to clutch the plate. “I hope it’s enough.”

“It’s better than not having anything, June. Thank you.”

June nodded, took the bottle of lemonade out and removed the cap, placing it on the tray that the woman had had custom-installed onto her wheelchair.

“Cranberry lemonade,” June said with a small smile. “Me and Carol made it.”

“Cranberry lemonade?” Mrs. Dendardre asked as she put the fork down to take a sip of the lemonade. “It’s very good.”

“Thank you. And the lasagna, I hope I cooked it right.”

“It tastes perfectly fine, June. You worry yourself too much, girl.”

June smiled, and for that moment her worries of being at the woman’s dark, barely-lit house disappeared. She forgot about the

- Play Dead -

odd cat and she almost forgot about the collie until it nuzzled her hand with its snout.

"Jido," Mrs. Dendardre said, the dog perking its ears up afterward. "Go get mamma a washcloth."

The dog walked into the kitchen and disappeared for several moments before it came out with a washcloth, only the corner of it clenched between the dog's teeth.

"Good boy," Mrs. Dendardre said as she reached over to the side and plucked a dog treat from a metal urn. She threw it for the dog, where the collie picked it up in its mouth and walked away.

The woman continued to eat for several more minutes before she looked up at June.

"Where's your husband?"

"He's off on another one of his trips. The man works his butt off doing what he does."

"Nobody ever said a little bit of acting now and then was an easy job, dear." Mrs. Dendardre put the fork down and watched June as she began to gather up the now-clean plate. "You're going to be having a barbecue sometime soon, aren't you?"

"Yes," June said with a smile. "Did you want to come?"

"No, I'm perfectly fine here."

June nodded and walked back into the kitchen to clean the plate and fork off. It was when she got into the kitchen when she frowned, feeling a sadness at the woman's handicap. She couldn't imagine not being able to walk, to not be able to feel anything below the waist. She quickly shook it off before she walked back into the living room.

"Are you sure you don't want to come? Carol and I could drive you down."

"No, I ain't going nowhere near that water," Mrs. Dendardre said, her curled fingers balling into fists. "*It* is down there, girl, and I think you would be wise not to go down by the water when *It* is there."

"*It*? Mrs. Dendardre... W-What are you talking about?"

"*It's* dangerous, girl! You shouldn't go down there!"

June felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end, and

## Kody Boye

that was when she stood and smiled, forcing it beyond the way she normally was able to force a smile. She could feel her jaw hurting from the strain she was putting on the muscles.

"I'm glad you thought the lasagna was good, Mrs. Dendardre. I put it in the fridge if you want the rest for later...Bye."

June made it a point to get out of the house as fast as she could.

### 3

June felt the cold sweat break out around her neck and upper arms as soon as she passed through the door and into her own living room. The sweat was a cold chill, a chill that would probably not go away for the rest of the day, maybe not even until Aaron returned home. She brushed her arms as she sat down on the bed, sighing as she looked out the window, back toward Mrs. Dendardre's house. As usual, none of the lights were on, but she was a bit thankful for that. That way, if Mrs. Dendardre were standing there, she couldn't see the crazy old woman.

"She's not crazy, she's just lonely," she said.

*Yeah, she really yearns for a companion or a friend if she scares you off with her talk of 'It' and other 'Its.'*

"She just hadn't taken her medicine, that's all. She doesn't usually act like that."

*Unless she was telling the truth, June; you know that the old woman was prattling on about her husband sleeping with someone else just before he ran off with her, and you knew that she was nervous about driving with him down to L.A that day they got into the accident, the one that put her in that wheelchair.*

"No. She wasn't telling the truth," she said, trying to fight off her wandering mind. "She couldn't know about something in the water. Are there sharks?"

*No sharks, darling. You heard on the news that sharks being sighted around Mermaid Cove are at a record low.*

She felt a cold finger trail down her neck, and it was then

- Play Dead -

that she decided to lock her troublesome conscience into the back of her mind, where it went when it scared her to the point where she would not leave the house until Aaron got home from his trips. This had happened more than once, especially when her mother had went to the hospital for some reason, when her brother had called and said, 'Mom has something wrong with her and the doctors can't find out.' That was probably the worst time that her conscience had done what it had just did a moment or two ago, and she had hid in the house until Aaron got home. Then she bawled her head off until she fell asleep in his arms.

Would Carol come over if she called? Yes, Carol would, because Carol wouldn't want her to be in this kind of mood.

June walked into the kitchen and gripped the phone, gripping it until she could feel the blood draining out of her knuckles before pulling the phone from the receiver. She dialed Carol's number.

"Hello?" Carol asked from the other end of the phone. "Who is it?"

"June," June said, sighing when she heard Carol's voice. "Could you come over here?"

"What happened, Carol? You sound like you've seen a ghost, and I'm more than sure that you look like you've seen one too."

"Mrs. Dendardre said not to go down near the water, said that *It* was down there."

"June, what are you..."

"I don't know what she meant, Carol. I'm having a panic attack. I need you to come over."

"I'll be over there in a minute, June. Just stay calm, and don't try to call Aaron's cell phone. If it's set on silent and you keep trying to call, you'll scare the hell out of the man."

June gave a small nod before she hung up the phone, letting her back sink against the fridge as she trailed down the side of it until she sat on the floor. She brought her knees up to her breasts and wrapped her arms around her knees, taking slow, even breaths.

*Slow, easy breaths, darling*, Aaron had whispered to her last time this had happened. *Everything's going to be ok.*

## Kody Boye

Everything's going to be ok.

Those were the words that had stuck into June's mind, and those were the words that resurfaced whenever she felt like this. Those were the words that would keep her calm, and those were the words that would keep her from screaming and causing the little yap of a Pomeranian next door to bark.

"June, where are you?" Carol called from the door.

"In the kitchen!" June called back. "I'm all right, Carol."

She only had to wait for a moment until she saw her friend's calm, concerned face bending down at her side. Carol's hand touched her smooth leg.

June envied the warmth of her best friend's hand on her cool skin.

"What happened, June? What did Mrs. Dendardre say to scare you so badly?"

"She said that I shouldn't go down there because *It*' was there."

"*It*?" What did she mean by that, June? Did she say anything about this *It*?"

"No, she didn't," June said with a sigh. "She didn't say anything about it... She just said that we shouldn't go down there."

Carol sighed, a small smile coming to her face as she seemed to have a flash of insight.

"Well, then let's go down to the beach and see if this *It*' is really there."

## 4

The two of them stood at the very end of a docking ramp. Carol's arms were crossed across her breasts in mock satisfaction while June stood with her hands in her pockets, looking out at the ocean as her black hair blew back in the soft breeze.

"See, I told you nothing was here," Carol said with a small smile. "I told you there was nothing to worry about."

*Yeah, but you weren't the one at Mrs. Dendardre's house listening to the crazy woman rant on and on and on and...*



- Play Dead -

June broke her train of thought by giving her friend a small nod, her eyes still set to the ocean, where they scanned below the water.

"I know, Carol," June said, her voice almost a whisper. "I know there's nothing to worry about."

The only problem was that June *didn't* believe there was nothing to worry about. She could tell when a woman was lying or not, and Mrs. Dendardre hadn't been lying. She hadn't been lying about a single thing. Not about how June's lasagna was good, about how the cranberry lemonade was good, or about how the supposed *'It'* that was out here.

The woman hadn't lied.

June felt the hairs on her neck go up again.

"You all right, June?"

"Yeah," June said as a rush of breath came out of her lungs. "I'm fine. Why?"

"I was patting your shoulder and you didn't do anything."

"Oh," June whispered. She didn't have an excuse for that. "Sorry, I was thinking."

"About what?" Carol asked, placing her hands on her hips, her body language saying, *About Mrs. Dendardre? I ought to smack you upside the head and then push you in the water.*

June hadn't anticipated that.

"Aaron," June said. "I was just wondering when he's going to be back. I really miss him."

Carol's body language took a complete u-turn and said, *You poor dear thing.*

"I know you miss him," Carol said, either playing along or having been fooled by what she had said. "I feel the same way about my husband."

"But your husband's home, and you don't have to worry about what a crazy old woman said."

*Strike three and you're out,* Aaron said in her head. *That's the third time your mouth spoke before your head did.*

"See, I knew it!" Carol barked. "I knew you were still worrying about what Mrs. Dendardre said!"

"Strike three, I'm out," June said with a small smile.

## Kody Boye

“What?”

June could only smile again as she looked out at the water, sticking her hands back in her pockets again.

“Just something Aaron says, Carol.”

“Your husband is one odd man,” Carol said as they turned and started back toward her old station wagon. “One odd man indeed.”

June agreed with Carol, but she wished that her husband was at home with her.

### 5

That evening at around eleven-thirty at night, the headlights of an old car pulled into the driveway. June rolled over in bed and looked out the window. It was Aaron’s car, the one that her father had given to him. She would walk out and meet him.

June got out of bed and walked down the hall, toward the door, where she plucked Aaron’s red and white sport’s coat from the coat rack. After donning it, she opened the door and walked out to meet her husband.

In the dim lighting of the headlights, she could see a tired man, a man who had three day’s growth of stubble and red lines running through his eyes. She smiled and kissed him when he walked up to her, wrapping his arms around her in a gentle embrace.

“I’m glad you’re back,” she said. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too, babe,” he said, his deep voice tired and filled with a rasp. “Sorry, I think I picked something up in Idaho.”

“It’s all right. Do you want me to help you unpack?”

“I only have two bags. You can take one of them if you want, but it’s no big deal. I can take both of them if you want to get back in bed.”

“No, I’ll help.”

He led her over to the car, where she could see the brown leather interior. Cast in a soft yellow light, it looked almost as old as it was. If Aaron hadn’t have redone the interior, it *would* look old.

- Play Dead -

"Here," he said, passing her the bag. "It has all my underwear and shit in it."

*Underwear and shit*, she thought with a smile as she watched her husband crawl in through the front door to grab the other bag. *You don't know how bad I missed you, hon.*

"What's so funny?" He asked with a yawn as he shut the car door a little too roughly.

"Oh, nothing, just you," she said with a smile as she followed him into the house.

She closed the door behind her and watched as he dumped the bag by the couch.

"God, I'm tired," he said with a yawn. "I don't think I can take a shower tonight, doll. You don't mind sleeping with a dirty man, do you?"

She put his bag down, took her coat off and smiled; revealing her almost-naked form, save for the undergarments of her bra and panties.

"Do I look like I care?" She said with a smile as she pressed up against him, softly kissing him on the lips. "Come on, Aaron. Let's just get to bed."

"I can't tonight, June. I'm too tired," he said. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head with a smile.

"It's fine, Aaron, I didn't expect you to anyway."

She led him back to the bedroom and helped him undress before she crawled into bed with him, snuggling up against his chest while he covered the two of them up.

"So, anything happen today?" He asked as he wrapped an arm around her. "Anything interesting?"

"No," she said with a soft sigh. "Not really, but Mrs. Dendardre..."

He fell asleep before she could finish.

She sighed and closed her eyes, resting her head on her husband's chest. She would tell him in the morning, she would.

The morning's coffee rested between both of June's palms.

## Kody Boye

She heard the bathroom door open down the hall and smelled her husband even before he walked into the kitchen. He liked to spread his cologne across his chest in a seemingly small but large amount, so whoever came near him would be able to smell the brand he used. It didn't bother her though; she liked the smell, and she liked her husband being home with her. She was still trying to figure out how he managed to not use a whole bottle in a few days the way he spread it across his chest like he did.

She looked up as she watched him readjust the towel around his waist before he sat down in front of her, lifting his own cup of coffee to his lips before returning his eyes to her.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning," she replied.

The two of them remained silent for several more minutes before she finally spoke up.

"So, how did it go?"

"You mean the trip?" He asked, waiting for her nod before he continued. "It went fine, hon; there wasn't much for me to do, other than my short half-hour part. Ah well, at least it helps feed us."

"Your day will come, Aaron," she , touching his hand. "Don't you worry about that."

She drew her hand away after a moment, placing it back on the coffee cup, putting it to her lips, hiding her eyes from Aaron's. When she lowered the cup, she could see his eyes locked on her own, concern and worry in them.

"What's wrong, June?" He asked. "You're keeping something from me, I know it."

She set the cup down and looked at it for a moment. How was she going to tell her husband what she wanted to tell him? She didn't want to stress him out or panic him in any way, but she knew that she would have to tell him eventually. Last night had been a failure in doing so, but right here, this morning, at the coffee table, it could be a different story.

"Aaron, I don't want to stress you out or anything, but..." she folded her hands into her lap and sighed, her determination to say what she wanted to say fading away ever so quickly.

- Play Dead -

"June, tell me?" He said. "Please, babe, just tell me. You won't stress me out or scare me. Please, I love you."

She gave a small nod and looked up at her husband.

"Aaron, I think it's time that we think about having a child."

He jumped up so fast that his towel came off from around his waist, exposing his naked flaccid penis.

"June, I..." He shook his head and walked away from the table, completely oblivious to the fact that he was walking around the kitchen naked. "I don't know what to say."

"Aaron, you lost your towel," she said as she picked it up for him, handing it to her husband. "Sorry, I didn't mean to."

"You've seen me naked before, June. We're a married couple, you know?"

She smiled and nodded, feeling his gentle hand on her own as he took the towel from her, holding it out in front of him, covering his nakedness.

"Go put something on, Aaron," she said with a small smile. "I don't want somebody to walk by and think something."

"What would they think?" He asked with a large grin. "That we're playing some kind of sex game?"

"Maybe, but I don't want the neighbors to start thinking bad things about us, especially me. I'm the one with clothes on."

He smiled and pecked her cheek before walking out of the kitchen, not even bothering to cover his ass as he walked across the living room and down the hall.

"That's my husband," she said with a grin.

He returned a few minutes later in his underwear, not boxers but underwear, the white underwear that made his package look huge, not that it wasn't, of course, but he *was* big.

*Bad girl*, she thought with a smile. *You shouldn't be thinking about that stuff until tonight.*

*"He did it," she said. "Not me."*

He grinned at her as he walked into the kitchen.

"What are you looking at?" He asked with a smile, letting a hand rest on his side, his right thumb hooked into the waistband of his underwear.

"You," she said with a smile.

## Kody Boye

“Oh,” he said, a smile spreading across his face. “I figured you were. Come on, let’s go into the living room.”

She nodded, rose, and followed her husband into the living room, giving him a smile as the two of them sat down on the couch.

“So,” he said, dragging his word out. “You want us to have a child?”

She gave a small nod.

“Yeah, I do,” she said. “I do, Aaron. I think a baby is what we need right now.”

“I wouldn’t be home very often, June,” he said as he touched her cheek. “I’m on the road a lot, you know? It would be hard for me to play a father figure with a child around.”

“I know, Aaron,” she said. “But I know we can manage. I think a baby would be good for us. Besides, I think we need another person in our life.”

He smiled and kissed her.

“Well, if you want a child, June, I guess we should try and have one...Right?”

She smiled and nodded at him.

“Right, we should.”

## 7

Aaron had gone off to the grocery store. June decided that she would make the short walk down to the beach and see the sights for that day. She had dressed in a bikini, should she decide to swim, but over that she had on a long-sleeved shirt with the sleeves rolled back to her elbows and a pair of small cut-off shorts.

She looked up at the sign that said ‘Welcome to Mermaid Cove Beach’ and smiled, thinking that maybe she could work up on her tan. She could do that, but what she was really here for was to evaluate on what Mrs. Dendardre said. *‘It’* was down there. Not that it was down there, of course; she just wanted to prove that this *‘It’* wasn’t actually at the beach.

This *‘It’* would have to come out and show itself if it wanted

- Play Dead -

to be seen. She crossed over to the beach and let her toes sink into the sand as she looked around.

There wasn't anybody at the beach, and it was the middle of the afternoon.

"How odd."

Then she remembered that the mayor was celebrating his birthday and everybody had been invited to come eat free food. Most people didn't pass up free food. Still, she was surprised that there was nobody here. If she was the only person here it wouldn't bother her. It would just give her more privacy to see if this *It* was actually here.

She walked to the boarding ramp for the smaller boats and to the very end of it, where she looked out at the sea. This was where she and Carol had stood not too long ago, only yesterday.

Movement caught her eye.

At first, she thought it was a dolphin, or even a small shark, but when she looked around she could see nothing.

You'd always be able to see a shark or dolphin.

"Hmm," she muttered. "I wonder what that was."

This time it was a splash.

"Is somebody there?"

She was answered, but it wasn't by a voice.

It was by a figure coming out of the water.

June watched as a startlingly beautiful woman--naked from the waist up with beautiful, gold skin and shockingly black hair--rose up out of the water not too far away from her. She looked like a Goddess that had just come out of the water to greet a mortal.

June studied her for a minute before decided to speak.

"Hi."

The woman smiled.

June smiled back at her.

*Okay, this woman isn't going to hurt me.*

"Sorry if I startled you, I didn't know there was anybody else down here," June said. "I didn't mean to scare you if I did."

The woman raised a hand, revealing long red fingernails. She smiled again and shook her head, pointing out toward the

## Kody Boye

water.

*Is she mute? June thought. Oh God, I hope she isn't mentally ill or anything. I could get charged with trying to kill her.*

"You came from the water?" June asked, playing along with the woman's game. If the woman was harmless--she didn't seem to be the dangerous type, though looks could be deceiving--she would say no.

The woman nodded.

June froze.

The woman smiled again and looked around the beach before looking back at June. This woman advanced toward the dock, and in an incredible burst of adrenaline launched herself out of the water and onto the space before her.

"What are you?"

The woman opened her mouth and revealed a maw of razor sharp teeth.

June fought the urge to scream and backed away carefully before she realized that the woman wasn't going to come after her.

Then she turned and ran faster than she ever had.

## 8

June burst into the house with silent fear as she looked around for something--anything--that she would be able to defend herself with. She had a feeling that the woman was going to be coming.

*Woman? Her mind screamed back at her. What woman? There was no woman down at the lake. That was the thing that Mrs. Dendardre was talking about!*

She shook the thoughts away from her head and sat down for a moment before she heard the rev of a motor outside.

Aaron was home.

She made herself look casual, but she couldn't do that. She already knew that she wouldn't look casual sitting on the couch, with her face red and her breathing still rampant and out of



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control.

*Go, her mind said. Go take a shower, you won't look suspicious.*

She scrambled up into the bathroom and got out of her clothes in record time, and just as she got in she heard Aaron call.

"June!" He yelled. "Where are you?"

She let the warm water rush over her for a moment before she heard her husband open the bathroom door.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm in the shower."

"No worries," he said.

She peeked out of the small gap where she was standing just in time to see Aaron take his shirt off.

"You don't mind me showering with you, do you?"

"No."

She shook her head and watched as his fingers went for his belt. It had been a good while since she had felt Aaron's touch on her body, other than his embrace and her cuddling with him last night. He was gone a lot because of the work he did. She hated it and she knew that her husband hated it to. He hated being away from home for so long away from his wife, she knew that. She knew that he would prefer to stay home and work a normal eight-hour job, waking up at seven in the morning and then coming home at three in the afternoon.

She knew that.

She jumped as she felt her husband's arms wrap around her from behind.

"You all right, June?" he asked. "I didn't mean to scare you like I did."

"I'm fine," she lied. "Just fine."

If he caught her lie, he didn't show it.

She was grateful that her husband wasn't the best at catching things, at least around her, anyway. She wasn't sure if he caught other things, and if he did, she was surprised. She was surprised because--even though her husband was an intelligent man most of the time--he had his moments, especially when he had just gotten home from the grocery store and was here with

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her.

She loved Aaron, despite his small flaws.

She knew that he wouldn't let the woman--the monster--come and get her.

"Are you okay, June?"

She nodded and fell into his embrace, allowing him to kiss her neck.

"Yes, I'm fine," she said. "Just fine."

## 9

It was the fourth of July when she woke Aaron up at seven-thirty in the morning to get him ready for the barbecue. They had started the day off with a shower, then Aaron had made breakfast, and June had gathered up the rest of the food before they made their way down to the beach. They had reserved the very end of the beach so that they could have privacy and so that their family and friends could have a nice little fourth-of-July outing. What a penny that had cost to just go and reserve the beach; a few hundred dollars to the city to reserve them a small slab of beach was worth it.

June looked over at Aaron, watching him as he drove down the street. Since they had reserved the far end of it where the docks were located, that night they would all be going out on George's yacht.

'Nice boat,' Aaron had said. 'A nice, *big* boat.'

She had agreed with her husband, but it was nice of George to lend them the large boat. There was going to be at least fifty or more people coming to the party, and a big boat would be nice.

Aaron turned and pulled into the beach side parking lot before he stopped the car and got out. She followed him out and toward the barbecue pit.

"June!"

June embraced Carol for a short moment before Carol turned to embrace Aaron.

"Long time, you old goat," Carol joked as she slapped Aaron on the back. "It's good to see you."

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"Thanks, Carol," Aaron said with a smile. "It was really nice of George to let us use his boat."

June nodded at her husband and brushed the strand of her thin coat around her. She was wearing the coat open with a bikini under it and a skirt, which under that hid the bottom part of her swimsuit.

They might go swimming, but June wanted to be on the safe side. Besides, the weather was too hot anyway. Aaron had driven here shirtless, in shorts and sandals, so she wouldn't have to worry about anything.

Most of the others were dressed the same way.

"Well, come on," Carol said, gesturing them to follow with a wave of her hand. "You're missing all of the fun."

They followed Carol down toward the barbecue pit, where music was blaring and the smell of cooking meats and fish filled the air in their own pleasing tastes. June watched Aaron set the cooler they had brought down.

"We're lucky that we got the area reserved," Aaron said as George came up and passed him a plate. "Otherwise we would have had to deal with the other people. Thanks, George."

Carol's husband went back to the grill and returned shortly after with a plate for June, which she took thankfully.

"You didn't have to do that," she said with a small smile. "Thank you, George."

George smiled and raised an arm at her before returning to the grills to continue with the food.

"God, it's hot," Carol said, fanning herself. "It'll probably cool down a little bit when it gets dark, that's a good thing."

June shrugged and looked up as George returned with a plate for Carol. She began to eat her own food. She smiled.

It had cooled down when the sun went down. The rest of the friends and family got on the boat and prepared to watch the fireworks. They had all assembled on the front of the ship, which was facing out toward the city. They had gone out a pretty good

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ways before they had stopped and pushed the anchor down.

June felt her husband's arm wrap around her as the first firework blasted into the sky with a boom.

"It's nice out here, isn't it?" Aaron asked with a small smile. "Don't you think so?"

June nodded and smiled.

"Yeah, it is nice," June said as she wrapped her arm around his waist. "It's even nicer that you're here, Aaron. I didn't think you would be home for the fireworks."

Aaron smiled.

"I made sure that I would, June; I made sure that I would be here just for you."

June nodded and smiled, but for a moment there she looked back at her husband.

Aaron's eyes beckoned for her.

"June, can I talk to you for a few minutes, just the two of us?"

June nodded and followed him to the back of the ship, away from all the people.

"Aaron, what are you..."

Aaron smiled and placed his hands on her sides, moving them the way he would only do in bed.

"I want you."

"Aaron, we can't, there are people..."

"Nobody's going to find us," Aaron said with a sexy smile. "No one will find us."

Aaron hefted June up onto a small crate and parted her skirt before he reached down and pulled her bikini down off her legs. He soon reached down and pulled the elastic waistband of his underwear down, revealing his hardened cock. He parted her legs before he slipped in, and when he did both of them moaned in lust as he began his thrusts, hard but most pleasurable thrusts.

"Aaron," June gasped as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Aaron, Aaron..."

June whispered his name over and over as he continued to thrust in and out of her, and when the time finally did come for orgasm, he moaned and thrust into her as deep as he could before

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he did so. She also gave way, and when they were finished Aaron pulled out of her and fell to the deck with her, cradling her in his arms.

"I love you," he said as she pulled the bikini up her legs. "So much."

She covered his softening cock and helped him up before the two of them returned to the front of the deck.

"I saw fireworks," he whispered to her. "I did."

She nodded.

She had saw fireworks too.

11

Aaron had fucked June for hours after they had gotten home from the fourth of July party. She hadn't thought it would stop as she lay there, allowing him to explore her body with his hands and mouth in gentle but savage ways. She was afraid that he would hurt her, but he never did; not a single time.

Aaron never hurt her.

He had came at least eight times in the period of four hours, and all the while he had remained hard. She was amazed at his stamina, but he had never let her down before.

She knew he had something to tell her, he always did when he and her had this kind of sex.

It ended with one final orgasm before he fell in bed beside her, stroking her long, dark locks with his fingers.

"Aaron, what's wrong?"

"What do you mean 'what's wrong?'"

"You're not telling me something, Aaron. You always make love like this when something's on your mind, like you have to leave."

"I do."

The words struck her hard. He had only been back for two days, and when she looked up at him she could see the tears in his eyes.

"Two days," he whispered as he let the tears fall from his eyes. "That's all we had, June; two days. Now I have to leave tomorrow morning."

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She felt her own tears and accepted the embrace he offered, and she let him cry into her shoulder as she held him in her arms.

"It's all right, Aaron," she said. "I'm not mad."

She wasn't mad.

She was afraid.

\*\*\*

The next morning, he woke her up before he had to go. He always left at the crack of dawn or before, and since the two of them had been up until three in the morning, he had only gotten four-and-a-half hours of sleep.

"Aaron, you should sleep a little longer, what if you..."

"I'm taking a cab, June. I can sleep on the airplane and rent a car from there."

She nodded, wrapped her arms around him and kissed her husband that was adorned in a suit while she herself was still naked, lying on the bed like the virgin who was waiting for her lover to come to bed.

"I love you."

"June, you're shaking. Do you not want me to leave?"

"No, Aaron, I don't," she said. "But if you have to--if you *want* to--you can."

"I don't want to go, June, but I could get fired if I don't. I couldn't make this kind of money anywhere else."

She nodded and allowed him to kiss her softly on the lips before she let go and when she did, she watched her husband pick up the suitcase.

"I love you, babe," he said with a soft sigh. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

She nodded and watched as he walked out the door, and when she knew that he had went out the front door, she began to sob. When she heard the car start up and the noise died down as he drove away, she got up and walked to the bathroom. She stepped into the shower and turned the water on.

She would close all the windows and pull all the blinds back

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tonight, she knew that.

She knew that the monster who looked like a woman would get her otherwise.

12

June drank a strong brew of dark coffee, very dark coffee. She hated black coffee, but she wasn't sure why she was drinking it. Maybe she was drinking the coffee dark because Aaron liked to drink his coffee dark, but she couldn't be sure. Maybe she just wanted to drink it for the hell of it.

Maybe she just felt like doing it because she wanted to.

*It's down by the shore, June, and now you've caught Its attention. She won't take her eyes off of you until you find a way to get rid of her or until you're dead in the ground.*

It was Mrs. Dendardre's voice she was hearing, she knew that. The old woman had warned her and yet--because of her curiosity and stupidity--she had went down to the shore. She had went down to the shore because she had been stupid enough to believe that poor old Mrs. Dendardre was crazy.

Apparently the woman wasn't crazy after all. If she had been crazy, June wouldn't have saw the woman--creature--in the water.

June looked around the kitchen and then out the window for a moment before she caught a fleeting form of dark hair.

*Oh no, she thought, she's here.*

She ran to the phone and dialed Carol's phone number.

\*\*\*

"June, are you sure you saw somebody snooping around the house?"

"Yes, I'm sure!" June cried, letting her tears spill openly. "Whoever it was must've been waiting for Aaron to leave, I know nobody would try to break in if he was here."

Carol gave a small nod and looked up and over at the window before frowning.

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"I'm staying here, June."

"What? What about Christen?"

"George can watch our daughter just fine. Besides, she's usually quiet when it's just him and her at the house anyway. I don't want anybody to get their grimy, dirty little fingernails in you, June. I don't want you to end up like the people they found at the beach not too long ago."

June shivered as she remembered what Carol was talking about. Supposedly, there was a serial killer going around the area, and after the last victim was found--barely nothing had been found, other than ripped flesh, the only thing that had identified the victim--there had been panic.

June didn't blame Carol for wanting to stay at the house with her.

June *wanted* Carol to stay at the house with her.

"I'll be right back," Carol said as she stood, "I'm going to go get my gun."

"Your gun? Carol, you couldn't possibly..."

"I'd shoot somebody if they tried to hurt you, June; I'd do that for you."

June smiled and watched Carol walk out the door. She was thankful that Carol would be staying with her, because right now, she believed that the monster that disguised itself as a beautiful woman was still trying to get her.

June would wait for Carol to come back.

She got up and locked the door.

## 13

June went to the door and unlocked it after she heard Carol's loud, urgent voice calling in to her. June took a glance out the door and past Carol before letting her friend in.

"I've got the gun, so there's nothing to worry about," Carol reassured her as she raised the small little handgun up. "It's loaded, June."

"What did your husband say when he saw you with the gun?"

"Nothing, because he didn't see it. That's why I brought my



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purse.” Carol cast her purse onto the table, where the dull thud of something heavier than makeup sounded in a dull ring.

“What is that?”

“Ammo,” Carol said. “If we need it, June. Who knows, the nut job who’s watching the house might be looking to do you in.”

*Yeah, really,* she thought to herself with a small inside laugh. *That monster is going to do you in real good, honey.*

June shook her head and led Carol into the living room. Carol had entered from the side door, so they would have to walk into the living room, past the window that June had seen whoever it was looking in.

*It’s the monster!* Her mind screamed at her. *The monster’s going to eat you, June! She’s going to eat you!*

June shook her head again and sat down on the couch, watching Carol pace back and forth for a moment before she stopped.

“Where’s your husband?”

“Gone,” June sobbed. “He got called off again, said he’d be making some big money this time.”

Carol smiled.

“If he’s going to be making some good money you shouldn’t be mad, honey.”

“I’m not, I’m just upset because we only got two days together,” she said with a sigh as tears began to fall from her face. “Only two days Carol, only two goddamn days!”

June felt Carol’s hand brush against her own for a moment before her best friend in the whole world sat down beside her.

“He’s not going to be gone forever, June, you know that. Besides, if he can make a little extra money that you two can put away, it’s better than nothing, isn’t it?”

June nodded. Having some extra money that they could put in the bank *would* be better than nothing because they needed the extra money, more than she or anybody else could possibly imagine.

“Yeah, everything’s going to be just fine,” June said with a smile. “Everything’s going to be just fine.”

Carol gripped June’s hand, She smiled, feeling the hard band

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of Carol's wedding ring against her finger.

June was glad she had a friend like Carol, because Carol would help her with anything she could or would ever need.

### 14

Missing her period during the week she normally had it passed June's mind the first few days. Not having all the pain, cramping, headaches and nausea was better than having blood, that was for sure.

That was when she remembered what she and Aaron had been doing before he had left. It had just seemed like fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck and even more fuck, and when she remembered the words she cried out in surprise.

*I guess we should try to have a child.*

She was pregnant!

"Oh my God," June said as she stood and ran into the kitchen, her fingers madly clutching for the phone on the wall. "Oh my God!"

June's fingers slammed into the numbers until she heard the phone ringing.

"Hello?" Carol asked after a few minutes.

"CAROL!"

"June, what is it," Carol said from the other end of the line in a worried voice. "What's wrong?"

"I'M PREGNANT!"

June heard Carol's shriek of joy before the under end of the phone slammed down on the receiver, not going dead for a moment until it finally found its way back into its latch.

Not less than a minute later she heard Carol screaming as she ran into the house, bowling through the open door and running to June.

"Are you sure?" Carol asked as she looked at June. "Are you sure you're pregnant?"

"Yes I'm sure!" June shrieked. "What do you think I am? Not sure? Carol, I'm pregnant. Oh God, I have to call Aaron, I have to call him ..."

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"June, what if he's working and he doesn't hear his cell phone? You'll scare him..."

"He'll call back and I'll take the cordless phone with me wherever I go," June said with a smile that could have dwarfed any stupid man's grin, "I have to call him, Carol!"

Carol only shook her head with a shrug as June reached for the phone and carefully dialed Aaron's cell phone number, not wanting to mess it up for fear that she would call the wrong number and yell into the phone to somebody that she didn't even know that she was pregnant.

That would be *very* embarrassing.

June heard the phone ring three times, and when she heard it pick up she calmed herself down.

"June?" Aaron asked from the other end of the line. "What's wrong? You only call my cell phone when it's an emergency."

"It's not an emergency, Aaron," June said in a lighter tone. "You need to come home, Aaron."

"June, what's wrong?"

She took a deep breath.

"I'm pregnant."

June heard his gasp from the other end of the line, and she could've sworn that he dropped the cell phone because of the delay she got before she heard his voice again.

"June, the doctor..."

"I don't need to go to a doctor to have him tell me I'm pregnant," June told him. "But you need to come home, Aaron. It's time that you take a vacation anyway."

15

Nine months later, June went into labor at three in the morning, and when Aaron had called Carol and told her that June was in labor Carol had screamed for him to drive. He had driven June to the hospital, and for several long painful hours she had been in labor with a child that didn't want to seem to come out.

Now, as June's breathing came in short gasps of air, she looked up at her husband. He was covered in three day's worth of

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stubble because she had nearly went into labor the last three days, and now that she was going through it he didn't look at bad.

"It'll be all right, June," he told her, squeezing her hand. "It'll be all right."

\*\*\*

Several hours had gone by after he had said those words, and when the baby had finally come out of the room she screamed to God a thank you that made the hairs on all the nurse's necks stand on end.

"Do you want to hold your baby, Mrs. Ashbrooke?" The male nurse asked as he took a glance over his shoulder, where a female nurse was tenderly washing the newborn infant.

"Yes," June said. "I do."

She took the crying baby in her arms, and when she looked into its eyes it seemed as though the whole world flew into her. Eons of hidden knowledge and incoherent truths lay in the child's deep, blue eyes and when June began to cry the baby did too, but she felt her husband hush it from her side.

"It's all right," he whispered. "It's all right, son."

June hadn't known the sex of the child until her husband had spoken it, and when he did she smiled. She had been hoping for a little boy, but it wouldn't have mattered if she had got a little girl.

She was just happy that the labor was over.

"So, do you two have a name for the baby?"

June was the one to speak.

"Jacob," she said. "Jacob Daniels Ashbrooke."

She felt her husband's soft lips kiss her cheek before she drifted off into a deep sleep.

In her dreams she saw the woman, stalking after her as she pushed the baby in its stroller down by the beach.

It was several months later when she pushed the stroller

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down the sidewalk and toward the beach. Four months kept the long distance of the dream that she had had away from her mind in such a way that she felt nervous, even though she knew that there were people around.

*Why are you so nervous?* she thought as she looked down at the baby. *Why are you so nervous, June? Nothing's going to jump out and get you.*

She didn't think that, but it was always nice to be reassured.

"Excuse me."

June turned around just in time to see a woman dressed in a grass skirt and a brown coconut bra. She was one of the dancers for the parade, she knew that, but something seemed unsettlingly odd about the woman.

"Yes?" June asked. "Can I help you?"

"What a beautiful baby," the woman said as she bent down beside the stroller. "How old is he?"

"Four months," June said, a bit irritated and worried about her infant son. "Is there something I can help you with?"

The woman didn't answer, her eyes only remaining on the baby.

"Miss, please, tell me what you..."

June saw the woman open her mouth, and when June did she let out a scream that traveled back all those months ago, last year, when she had saw *'It,'* the woman that was the monster.

"No!" June screamed as she hefted her purse into her hand. "Leave him alone!"

June slammed the purse into the monster's head just enough to knock her off balance, and when she was knocked off balance June turned and started to run with the crib.

She was being chased by the devil again.

*Aaron, she's going to go after Jake, you can't let her. You can't let her get him, Aaron, because she's following us. She knows where we live, she knows who we are, she knows our family.*

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*You can't let her get Jake, Aaron... You can't let her get Jake.*

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Part 3:  
In Ten Years

1

Ten years had gone by, and Aaron had felt the years fly by like the wind in a breeze. He eventually stopped mourning for June as much as he did; he stopped drinking alcohol and blaming himself for her death. He had forgotten about the past because he had shoved it to the back of his mind. He was thirty-four-years-old now, and with that he had grown up from his younger self.

Aaron heard the door close as his son got home from school.

"Hey," Aaron said. "How was school, bud?"

"It was fine, Dad."

Aaron smiled at his son. In ten years, Jake had grown and now stood at his height of six feet, his hair was dark and the sign of facial stubble was just starting to appear on his face. Jake had been involved with sports ever since middle school, and his physique was starting to develop nicely along his tall, lean frame.

"Something wrong, Dad?"

"No, nothing's wrong," Aaron said as he stood and messed up his son's hair. "Are you hungry?"

Jake shrugged and followed him into the kitchen, where Aaron proceeded to make sandwiches for the two of them. Every so often he took a glance up at his teenage son to give him a small smile.

"What's wrong, Dad?"

"I'm just happy to see you, Jake," Aaron said with a smile. "Do you mind?"

"No...I'm just making sure everything is all right, Dad."

Aaron smiled at his son and pushed his sandwich toward him, watching Jake open a bag of chips and grab a few out of the bag.

"You want any of these?"

Aaron took his own handful of chips and set them on the plate before he sat down beside his son, ruffling the boy's hair for a moment before taking a bite out of his sandwich.

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"The fair's coming up again," Jake said from his side. "Did you remember that?"

"Yeah," Aaron said. "Did you want to go? I wouldn't mind, Jake; just whatever you want to do."

"No, I just wanted to stay home," Jake said. "Is that all right with you?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"You're always upset the day of the fair...Because Mom died not too long after the January fair."

Aaron nodded and sighed, wrapping an arm around his teenage son's shoulder.

"I know," Aaron said, letting his head rest against the side of his son's own. "I know, Jake...Your mother liked to be in all of the different kind of fairs throughout the year."

Jake nodded and took a bite of his own sandwich before he looked back up at Aaron.

"Dad, you mind me staying home tomorrow?"

"Are you not feeling good?"

"Not really."

That was all that was said about that matter.

\*\*\*

Even to this day, Jake had trouble getting over the fact that he didn't have a mother, and to this day Jake still slept in the same bed with him. Aaron stroked the back of his son's head, letting the locks fall between his fingers before he looked up at the ceiling, sighing as he felt a breath of cool air against his chest.

"June..."

It had been such a long time since he had said his wife's name. Aaron knew that he said it in his dreams sometimes, but it had been such a long time since he had actually said the name June. He missed his wife so much, and it was so hard to say her name.

He remembered when he was ten years younger, when he had been mourning for June after six months of absence. It was



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like the days when Jake used to call him 'daddy' and used to run to the door in his Spiderman underpants.

Aaron sighed.

"June," he whispered again, "I love you."

2

Aaron met her down at the beach. She was a beautiful woman, one with strikingly black hair and beautiful golden skin. Like a goddess, that was what her skin was like. She was wearing a red bikini, and Aaron watched her bend over for a short moment in the water, he felt himself growing hard in his shorts. Thankfully, it was earlier in the day and he and her were alone at the beach. Jake was still asleep at the house, and he had written his son a note saying that he would be at the beach.

She looked up and noticed Aaron.

Aaron waved at her, watching her stand fully up and walk toward him.

*She's coming this way,* Aaron thought as he shifted his footing, trying to adjust his raging boner in his shorts. *God, I don't want her to see me.*

"Hi," she said with a smile. "I'm surprised somebody's down at the beach this early."

Aaron smiled back at her, but when she looked down at his pants he knew that she saw the hard on.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't mean..."

She shook her head.

"I take it as a compliment," she said as she wrapped her hand around the tent in his shorts. "It doesn't bother me one bit."

She started stroking him through the shorts. Aaron moaned, but not loud enough to be considered more than a small cough.

"Wanna do it, hot stuff?" She asked as she continued to stoke him. "I know you want to."

Aaron let his hand trail out to cup one of her breasts, watching her smile at him.

"Come on, there's a nice place under the pier."

Aaron followed her as she took his hand, allowing her to lead him under the wooden rafters. It was nice, but there was a lot of

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sand. It wouldn't bother her, he figured that, so it wouldn't bother him.

She undid her bikini top and let it fall to the ground, smiling at him as she turned around.

"You like?"

"I do," he said as he led her down into his lap, where his hard on was still sticking out hard. "They look so good."

Aaron leaned around her and took one of the nipples into his mouth, lightly sucking it. She ground herself onto his hard cock, and he moaned around the nipple that was in his mouth.

"You're so good," she said. "Let me off."

He did, but he was reluctant. He watched as she got off of his lap and got on her hands and knees, walking on all fours as she came toward him.

"Somebody looks happy," she said as she slid her fingernails into the waistband of his shorts. "Maybe he'd like a little attention?"

She pulled his shorts down and slid his shorts down his legs before she wrapped her lips around the head of his cock, slowing swallowing the entire length until her nose was resting in his pubic hair.

"Don't stop," he told her. "You're so good."

He rested a hand on the back of her head and allowed her to suck him, feeling the fire inside of him start to act up.

"I'm going to come soon."

At those words, she released his cock from her mouth. At first he was a bit disappointed, until she shucked her bikini. He watched as she straddled him before pushing herself onto him.

"Ride me," he said. "Do it."

She did as he asked, and it wasn't long until he came inside of her. She slid off and kissed him before collapsing beside him.

"I like you," she said. "You're fun."

"I like you too," he said. "A lot."

She smiled.

His eyes were now closed, so he didn't see the slight gleam that her teeth had.

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3

Aaron returned to his house with a smile on his face, brushing a hand across his chest, wiping away flakes of sand. He was sure that the woman would be seeing him again, he knew of this.

Maybe it would be good for him to get sexually involved with a woman now that it was so many years later. He no longer mourned for June as he had once upon a time ten years ago; in a drunken stupor.

"Jake!" He called as he walked into the house. "Where are you, son?"

"I'm here," Jake said from the couch. "Sorry, Dad."

Aaron shook his head and closed the door behind him. When Jake had asked if he could stay home yesterday, Aaron had thought that his son just hadn't felt like going. Jake didn't miss much school, and if he did it was because he was sick.

Jake was wrapped in a blanket on a warm day.

Jake was sick.

"Is something wrong, Dad?"

"No," Aaron said with a sigh, "I was just making sure you were still here... I worry about you, Jake."

"Is something wrong, Dad?"

"No..." Aaron said, brushing a hand across his bare chest. "Nothing's wrong, Jake...Don't worry about me, all right? Nothing's wrong."

Jake gave him a small nod before Aaron walked off, his thoughts going back to Jake, wondering if he suspected something.

*No, Aaron thought. Jake doesn't expect anything...Why would he?*

Why would Jake have reason to suspect that he was having a relationship with a woman? He couldn't really call it a relationship because he had just met her today. Then again, he had just fucked her at the beach, so maybe a relationship was the best thing to call it.

"Are you sure you're all right? Do you want me to give you

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some Tylenol?"

"I don't care..." Jake sneezed a few times before continuing. "Just whatever you want, Dad."

Aaron shrugged and walked into the kitchen to get the bottle of Tylenol from the cabinet. He hated it when Jake was sick, because when his son got sick he *always* got sick, no matter what he had. Jake would have the flu, he'd catch that; Jake would have a cold, he'd catch that; hell, if Jake had a runny nose, he'd get one too.

Like father like son...

Aaron grinned as he pulled two pills out of the bottle and got a soda out of the fridge. As he walked in, he heard something on the news.

"This is just in, another giant shark was spotted just off the beach of Mermaid Cove, California. This shark is estimated to be at least thirty-five feet long, larger than any great white shark that exists today. Scientists have been dispatched to the area to see if it's a mistaken whale shark or if it indeed a new breed swimming around the beach. This has been the largest shark sighting since nineteen-ninety-five, when a shark that was at least twenty-five feet was responsible for the deaths of two men."

Aaron felt a cold ghost from the past come back to greet him. He remembered that shark, and he remembered how only the skull of one of the men had come back to the beach, proving--from the bite marks--that the skull was from the two men that were taken from the beach.

But he remembered something else. Sharks didn't--or couldn't he believed--take two adult men from the beach, especially at the same time.

## 4

"Hello?"

"Hello, Aaron."

Aaron held the phone close to his ear. The woman he was speaking to was someone that he had never even met, and here she was calling him.

- Play Dead -

"Who is this?" Aaron asked, a nervous tone creeping into his voice.

"You don't remember, Aaron?"

"Remember what?"

"June and I were good friends before the accident."

*The only friend she was really close to was Carol*, Aaron thought as his grip on the phone tightened. *Who else was she close to?*

"Please, just tell me who you are," Aaron said, trying to keep his tears contained. "Who are you?"

"This is Mrs. Dendardre, Aaron. I'm the woman June was trying to deliver lunch to on that horrible day."

Dendardre's words made oceans run from Aaron's eyes. His tears dripped onto the end of the phone, and for a moment there he wondered whether or not the phone would stop working because of the water.

"If it would make you feel any better, Aaron, I have something of June's here."

"What is it?" Aaron cried. "Tell me!"

"She always thought something would happen after that blond-haired woman started stalking her," Dendardre said. "The blond-haired woman that tried to kill your son when he was just a baby."

*She never told me anything about this*, Aaron thought. *Blond-haired woman, what is...*

"She gave me her diary the day before the accident," Dendardre continued. "I have it here, Aaron."

"And why are you giving it to me now of all times!" Aaron cried, raising his voice. "Why didn't you give it to me ten years ago!"

"She told me to wait," Dendardre said. "She told me to wait until someone else entered your life."

"Why? Why did she want me to wait?"

"It's all in the diary," Dendardre said. "It's all in the diary."

## Kody Boye

Aaron poured over that diary the whole day, the whole damn day. His anger toward Mrs. Dendardre had disappeared immediately when he had entered her house. The woman was old; her hair was gray and in thin wisps, her fingers were so crooked that they resembled bird talons, and her eyes seemed devoid of any color.

'She told me to wait,' Dendardre had said. 'I'm sorry.'

And Dendardre had kept to her promise.

Aaron couldn't be mad at her for that.

"Dad?"

Aaron looked up at his son.

"What is it, Jake?"

"I'm sorry."

"About what, son?"

"About what I said about Mom."

Aaron gave a small nod and gestured his son to sit beside him. When Jake did sit beside him, he put a piece of paper inside June's diary and turned to his son.

"I'm sorry, Jake," Aaron said. "I'm not with that woman anymore."

"You had sex with her."

"I've had sex with a lot of women, son. She's the only one since your mother."

"I'm sorry I said that, Dad. It's just...It hurt me to see you and her together like that. It hurt me."

Aaron embraced his son and sighed.

"It's okay, Jake," Aaron said with a smile. "I'm sorry."

Aaron would always be sorry for what he did to his son.

## 6

*You can't let her get Jake, Aaron...You can't let her get Jake.*

## 7

Jake and his friends had decided to go to the beach today. It

- Play Dead -

was a typical Saturday in Mermaid Cove; the sun was high, there were lots of people on the beach, and--to his friends--a lot of hot girls.

"Look at them," his friend Chase said, "God, I'm so horny."

"Shut up," his other friend, Mat, said, "You know you're not going to get a piece, you know it."

"What about you, Jake?" Chase asked. "I bet you'd love to get yourself a piece of ass."

*I'd rather not*, Jake thought to himself, *I'm not as horny as you think I am*.

Jake's friends continued to bother him while they walked down the beach. Mat and Chase continued to hit on girls as they walked, but they were soon at the end of the beach, near the deserted 'Long Cove' portion of it.

This was near where 'Virginity Rock' was.

"God, how fucking awesome would it be to get a fuck on that?" Chase said as he pointed at the rock. "Come on, guys, let's swim out there."

"We should stay out of the water," Jake said, "There's a shark, remember?"

"No shark is going to get us," Chase said. "Come on, virgin boy, let's go!"

Chase and Mat made their way into the water, but Jake stayed behind, trying to coax them back.

"Come on, guys!" Jake called. "Please!"

"Come on!" Mat called.

"Nothing wrong with a little water," Chase added.

Jake sighed and shook his head, sitting on the sand.

*The water brushing against the tips of Jake's toes was enough.*

8

Beautiful Serenity watched the two boys from below, and beside her the monster female kept pace with her. It remained beside her as Beautiful Serenity watched them. Beautiful Serenity's eyes were eagerly intent on them, but it would be foolish for her to attack them.

## Kody Boye

There was supposed to be a shark in the area, and right now there were other people near.

It wouldn't work to kill them herself.

*Go, Beautiful Serenity whispered. And take them both.*

### 9

"Come back, guys!" Jake called to Chase and Mat. "Please, come back!"

"Come on!" Chase called back to him, who was already on the rock. "Here Jakey Jakey Jake!"

"Chase, come on!"

"There's nothing to worry about, Jake, I..."

In a blink of an eye, a monster shark jumped from the water and plucked Chase from his place on the rock, dragging him into the water in a bloody mess.

"MAT!" Jake screamed. "COME BACK!"

His friend was in the water, frozen in horror.

"MAT!" Jake cried. "COME ON!"

Mat turned to swim back, but before he could another thing jumped out of the water and landed on top of him.

It was a woman with a maw of razor-sharp teeth.

Jake screamed as he saw her.

### 10

Aaron heard his son scream and he only increased his pace. Aaron's legs pumped, the muscles in them flexing. His speed was based on pure adrenaline and nothing more than that.

"JAKE!" Aaron screamed. "JAKE!"

The gun in his shorts was the only thing that would be able to protect him and his son.

He jumped over the curb that separated the parking lot from the beach and made his way onto the deserted side of the beach. He could see the woman advancing on his son.

*Ten years ago, Aaron...*

*She was riding you, Dad.*



- Play Dead -

*Don't let her get Jake.*

Aaron raised his gun and fired at her, the first bullet missing and going completely out of its direction. On this side of town, his bullet would be heard. Jake's screams wouldn't be heard by anyone.

The only reason Aaron heard them was because he had read the diary.

"JAKE!" Aaron screamed. "RUN!"

The Lamia latched onto Jake's wrist and pulled him close, ready to sink her teeth into him.

Aaron fired.

The bullet hit her chest, causing her to release his son.

Jake ran past him and back toward town, where he would disappear into town and probably call 911.

The friends Jake had came here with weren't anywhere to be seen.

The monster shark that had been in the news surfaced in a tide of blood.

Through this distraction, the Lamia jumped on Aaron. She forced him to the ground, her mouth open, her silver teeth reflecting the light and blinding him.

*She'll kill you!*

Aaron brought his knee up and struck her in the groin, which caused her to reel back in pain and release his hands.

Aaron brought the gun up and fired.

The bullet went straight through her head.

She screamed and stumbled back into the water, where her eyes blinked one final time before the most earsplitting scream entered his mind.

She shattered into droplets of water before drifting out to sea.

When Aaron heard the sirens in the distance, he raised his gun and fired at the shark.

Aaron had relinquished himself of his greatest fear.

The Lamia was gone.

## Kody Boye

Aaron and Jake had just come back from Mat and Chase's funeral. Jake was in tears and went to the safety of his room to mourn. Aaron was more concerned about Jake than anything else.

The creature had tried to kill Jake.

*You saved him, June*, Aaron thought as he looked over at a picture of her that hung on the wall. *You saved our son.*

Aaron walked over to the picture and touched it, sighing, feeling more alive than he had in ten years. Her death and the monster that had been haunting him had put him in such a deep depression.

Aaron walked to Jake's room and held his son.

"It's all right," Aaron whispered. "Everything's better now, Jake. That monster's gone from our lives."

That monster would always be gone.

June had saved both of them.

*June...*

Aaron swore he saw her smile from behind Jake at the two of them before she disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Tears came down his face.

"I love you, Jake."

"I love you too, Dad."

In the midst of it all, an angel with dark hair with the name of June wrapped her arms around the two men, one of them her husband, the other her son.

In the deepest pits of the earth, a malignant creature with eyes of fire and tentacles of death cried out. Blood in the darkest color spewed from her genitalia, and from her womb, a creature festered, its presence pulsing, its mind fully becoming aware.

The creature burst from the womb. She tossed back her head, her bloody blond hair flashing in the brief light that spewed from below. The creature opened her eyes, her mind traveling, her carnal nature driving her toward the surface.

- Play Dead -

In the deepest pits of the ocean, a creature that personified the most beautiful evil had been born, and her song of life echoed throughout the ocean, signaling death to anything that dare cross her path.

*A Lamia had been born.*

Kody Boye



The tastes, the smells, the  
textures...

## - Play Dead -

### Prologue

In the marsh waters of the Florida Everglades, the alligators swam and in the sky, large birds often mistaken for monsters flew, their cries echoing sounds that shattered the land in noise that would have woken the dead.

But on the ground--on the solid ground--there were other noises. Normally, these would have been noises of small rodents, deer bedding down for the night, or the sound of foxes skipping over large, fallen tree trunks. But on this night, all the natural noise was gone. Not a trace of them remained.

Something else was stalking the underbrush. It wasn't one of the panthers that lived in the Everglades, and it wasn't a bear or two competing with each other for territory. This was something much, much larger than any of the two.

This creature nuzzled its long, dark snout into a patch of dirt and searched through it until a clump of bugs managed to find their way into its mouth. They were a small meal for this large animal's diet.

The creature made almost everything else in the forest appear small, except the black bear, and even then the creature was bigger. The dark hair that covered its body made it invisible in the darkness, and although nothing in the marsh would be attempting to hunt it, it was still better to be safe.

None of the animals in the Everglades were large enough to attack the creature, not even the alligators that swam up and down the channels. To this creature, the alligators were no more than a small nuisance that managed to get in its way when it went down near the water.

Like its kind, the stench that exuded from its hide was enough to keep the majority of the animals away. The animal was clean by the standard of its kind, but it still smelled.

The creature's fellow animals in the forest would have liked to dine on its flesh. It would have made a meal that could have put any animal away from hunger for a very, very long time.

Now the creature's snout trailed over a bush, removing any

## Kody Boye

of the food that was there, including the berries and the bugs that had nestled there for the night.

Its hunger was still not satisfied.

Meat was what it was looking for this night, but it had not found what it was looking for. There were no dead animals that the panthers or bears had left behind.

The other animals knew that the monster was there, and they didn't want it to get at their food. Hunting here in the Everglades was a challenge for an animal of a large size, and it was even a greater challenge at fending off other animals from the meal. There were reptiles--like the alligators--who would go up right to the carcass and drag it back down into the water for its own pleasure, while the hunter that had worked so hard to get its food watched from the land; it was a game of chance, hunting.

The creature didn't have to worry about alligators getting at its food - never.

A dead scent came up from the wind.

With its nostrils flaring, the animal absorbed the scent and squealed as it beckoned any and all to challenge its presence.

The creature charged into the forest, bushes and weeds bashing at its hide. Mud and water splashed its lower legs as it ran in pursuit of the food, making its dark hide even darker. It didn't care if it was getting dirty, and even though the creature had learned that there were sometimes holes when it was as wet as it was, it didn't care.

The smell of dead flesh was all that it wanted right now.

As it ran, the creature could hear a large booming and smell a strange smell. It was the smell of something that was not of the forest. The smell was too charred and too out of place to be of the forest. That meant something out of the forest had come and made the big banging sound.

It was something big, that was for sure. The sound seemed to have come from half a mile off.

As the behemoth neared the smell of warm, dead flesh, it could see a bright source of light coming from a floating object on the river. Whatever it was, it was bigger than the alligators, that

- Play Dead -

was for sure.

The animal could smell the bad smell now, and it could also smell the warm blood. The smell of blood drove all thoughts of the bad smell away from its mind.

It trotted up to the dead animal and began to tear into it.

A startled shout came from whatever the large floating thing on the water was, but when the creature turned its eyes up. it was caught in a large light.

A squeal came from the bowels of its throat, followed by a horrendous sound from the floating object before it sped away.

The floating thing was screaming.

## Kody Boye

### Part 1: Drops of Blood

"You're telling me that some man came out of the Everglades and said he saw some kind of monster?" Matthew Crawman said, looking up from his desk. "Do you think I was born yesterday? What did he see? The Skunk Ape or something like that?"

"No, sir," one of the reporters said. "The man said that the animal took his kill."

"What was a man doing hunting in the Everglades anyway? I thought that place was supposed to be a wildlife reserve?"

"It is, sir, but he said he was allowed to hunt there. He bought a tag for a deer, *one* deer. He said that it took his kill and squealed at him. He didn't even get a good chance to look at the thing."

"Did he say what the thing looked like? Anything at all would help."

"No, sir. He's down at the county hospital right now, sleeping off a sedative."

Mat sighed and scratched at the stubble on his chin, shaking his head. Being one of the only private investigators in the Tida Reserve area was a stressful job, if not madness itself.

"All right, you can go. If you get anymore information, call me on my home phone"

"You're leaving, sir?"

"I was at the bar a little late last night," Mat said with a shy grin "I've got a hangover that's threatening to put a hole in my head."

"All right, sir," the reporter said, helping him gather up his papers "Sorry for your trouble."

"No worries," Mat smiled, taking the papers as the reporter handed them to him. "What's your name, kid?"

"Daniels, sir. Park Daniels."

"All right, Park. Thanks for all your help. Next time I'm at the bar, come sit down. The drink will be on me."

"Thank you, sir."

Mat nodded and slipped everything into his briefcase,



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bidding Park one final goodbye before walking down the hall and to the elevator, where he pushed it to the bottom floor

Elevator music started up as the contraption began moving toward the bottom floor, and from what Mat knew, it was some seventies tune. Probably something that Madonna sang, but without the lyrics.

Either way, it wasn't bothering Mat. Having been born in the seventies, he had been through many different styles and transitions, and he was starting to like the way the 21<sup>st</sup> century was working.

He didn't want it to change anytime soon.

He looked out the window at his side and watched as the parking lot came into view. The building wasn't big--no more than ten floors--but he was deathly afraid of heights. If the elevator was the worst thing he would ever ride in, then so be it. He doubted that he would ever set foot off the ground, let alone get in a plane, even if it was large or small.

Shaking his head, he walked out the door as the elevator made its 'ding' sound, checking out with the desk clerk before he left.

"You not feeling well, Crawman?" The clerk asked with a smile. "Out at the bar drinking again?"

"Yeah," Mat told the man. "I have a bit of a hangover. I don't have anything else going on, so it's all right if I leave, right?"

"Yeah, sure," the clerk said as he punched numbers in on the keyboard, stopping as his name came up. "Says you haven't missed a day"

"Perfect attendance," Mat said, a cocky grin spreading over his face "I guess I'll go then."

"All right, have a nice day."

Mat shrugged and made his way out the door, where he walked down the aisle of parking spaces as he looked for his car. He knew that the plaques that represented some of the more important employees--like himself--would tell where his vehicle was parked, but it wasn't much help looking for it. He wasn't wearing his glasses, and he didn't want to bother going through his briefcase to get them.

## Kody Boye

“Funny, I forget my glasses, then I forget where my car’s parked.” He said with a laugh. “That’s some pretty fucked up shit.”

He laughed again as he finally found his car. He reached into his coat pocket and found his key ring. He fumbled through the keys for a few minutes before he finally found the one for his car. He pushed his key code combination into the electronic lock and opened the door, pushing the key into the ignition and starting his car up, carefully backing up before turning into the road.

He was glad there was hardly any traffic at this time of the morning. There was *always* traffic during three portions of the day: morning, afternoon, and at night; he was just thankful that he wasn’t stuck in any of it.

He planned to go home, make himself something to eat, then plop down on the couch and sleep off his hangover. By then, his teenage son would probably be at his house. The next two weeks his son would be allowed to stay at his house, which was something Mat was thankful for.

That bitch of a woman that used to be his wife had proposed a, 'Let’s share the kid' plan, and the court had went all for it. They didn’t suspect that a woman who had been cheating on her husband had done anything wrong, and the fact that she had ended her marriage because she had liked the new man better had--in their opinion--been the ‘right choice.’

“Right choice my ass,” Mat mumbled as he stopped at a red light, shaking his head as he fumbled with the radio. “I walked in on you while you were screwing with your new boyfriend, what kind of ‘right choice’ is that?”

He shook the thoughts from his head as he started the car again, steadily making his way down the street until he turned into his driveway. The car gave a startled lurch as he repositioned his foot, which startled the hell out of him.

“Goddammit!” He yelled, swearing several more times before he finally got the bad words out of his mouth. “This car. I swear, I’m going to sell it and get my money back from the crazy bastard who sold it to me in the first place.”

The man had been a good enough salesman to sucker him

- Play Dead -

into buying the piece of junk, that was for sure, but that had been five years ago when he had been twenty-five and stupid. Well, not too stupid, since he had just gotten out of college, but it was still a stupid mistake to buy a car that he couldn't even see the records on.

Now that he was at his house, he would be able to relax more. There would be no more intrusions from people who didn't know what they were doing, no more reports that meant nothing, and no more jackasses that wanted to give him a bad time.

He pulled the keys from the ignition and opened the car door, grabbing his suitcase and pulling it out of the old, broken vehicle behind him. The door shut, but he could hear something different than just the usual thunk that meant it had closed properly.

More of a tearing sound.

"I'm not dealing with it right now," he said as he walked up to the front door, pushing the key into the lock and turning it, "I'll deal with it tomorrow, or on Sunday."

He nodded as the door opened up, and as he walked inside, he placed his briefcase on the counter top and removed his jacket.

Loosening his tie, he walked back to his room and removed the rest of his clothing, changing into an undershirt and a pair of jeans.

His *comfort* clothes felt *much* better.

He walked back into the kitchen and made himself a sandwich, eating it quickly, and walked to the couch, where he sat down. His hand fumbled for the remote, but he knew that the television was something he did not want to listen to right now. The noise of the commercials that they put on would drive his mediocre hangover headache into a migraine.

"Best to sleep it off," he mumbled as he spread himself out along the couch, placing his hands behind his head. "I want to get this over with."

He thought about taking some pills before he fell asleep, but he didn't feel like getting back up and walking to the kitchen. It would just require him to get back up, and if he did that, he would feel more pain in his head.

## Kody Boye

He rolled over on his side, got comfortable, and waited for sleep to come to him.

\*\*\*

He woke later that day, near the time when the sun was starting to go down. His head was no longer throbbing, and the indigestion that had plagued his stomach was now gone

He blinked several times before rising, and as he did so, he yawned, stretching his arms and looking around the room.

Something didn't feel right.

That was when he heard somebody shuffling down the hall. Looking back, Mat noticed that there was a man coming down the hall.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing in my house?" Mat yelled, his hands balling into the fists. "Get your ass out of here before I call the police!"

"Dad?"

Mat was a bit surprised by the statement. The man walked into the light, revealing himself

"Chris," Mat said with a smile. "Man, you've gotten so big!"

"Come on, Dad," Chris said as he came down the hall, smiling. "You saw me a few months ago."

"Six months is not a few months ago," Mat said as he embraced his only son, patting him on the back. "Your mother been treating you all right?"

"Yes, Dad," Chris said with a smile. "Mom's been fine, Dad."

Mat nodded, sitting back down on the couch and gesturing his sixteen-year-old to do the same

"You getting along with your stepdad?"

"He's fine, Dad," Chris said with a sigh. "He yells a lot when I'm home though, I don't think he's used to me. And whenever I come home from school or from a friend's house to study, I can always hear them upstairs."

Chris didn't need to say what the two of them were doing upstairs for Mat to know. Mat already knew how much of a slut his ex wife was. For all he knew, she was probably going behind

- Play Dead -

Steve's back and making extra money at a strip bar at night.

"I'm sorry, Chris. If I could get you here with me, I would."

"I know, Dad."

Mat smiled and patted his son on the shoulder, standing and walking in the kitchen, preparing to make dinner.

"Did you find the key all right?" Mat asked as he began to fumble through the fridge, deciding that he would make lasagna, since Chris had finally gotten here. "I didn't know if you had forgotten where it was."

"I found it, Dad, don't worry. Sorry, I knocked for about five minutes, but I figured you were either out or at work. I just let myself in."

"I'm sorry, Chris. I stayed out at the bar a little late last night," Mat said as he looked over at his son. "I'm going to meet a friend tonight, would that be all right with you?"

"Yeah, Dad. I mean, it's the weekend, it's not like I'd have to go to school or anything."

Mat nodded, swearing under his breath as he grabbed a pan.

Mat's ex had some kind of superstition about Chris being able to stay in a good schooling environment wherever he went. She had made Mat sign Chris up for school here in Tida Reserve as well, and she expected Chris to be in school whenever he was supposed to.

"Screw school here," Mat said with a sigh, looking back at his son. "Chris, can I ask you something?"

"What is it, Dad?" Chris asked as he walked into the kitchen, sticking his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "You can ask me anything."

"Do you like living at home?"

Mat continued on with preparing the lasagna as he let his son go over what he wanted to say. Mat didn't expect an immediate response with such a question; it was something that he had wanted to ask his son ever since he and his wife had split up.

Mat knew Chris had things on his mind.

"Not really."

Mat looked up at Chris and frowned.

Kody Boye

“Steve’s giving you a hard time?”

“Yeah, and Mom’s not much of a help either. I already told you about their fixation with being up in their bedroom whenever they can, but Mom...I don’t think she likes me anymore.”

“Is she blaming the problems me and her had on you?”

“It wasn’t your problem!” Chris shouted, lowering his voice as he turned his head away. “Sorry, Dad. I was just going to say that you didn’t do anything to make Mom like she is now.”

“I don’t think I was showing her how much I loved her,” Mat said with a sigh as he placed the food in the oven, setting the heating temperature as he turned back to his son. “I really don’t think I was. At first, I wondered why she had been having an affair, Chris. But now that I think about it, I think that it’s my fault that she started going out with Steve in the first place.”

“Please, Dad, don’t,” Chris shook his head. “Mom’s constantly blaming you for you two breaking up, I don’t need to hear it from you.”

Mat nodded, sighing as he walked around the counter, placing both hands on his son’s shoulders.

“I don’t know if I can do anything right now, but I’ll see if I can get your mother to let you stay for a little bit. You do know that if I keep you here that you’re going to have to go to school here like you normally would, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And you do know that if I did take your mother to court to try and get custody of you, you would have to make a statement, right?”

“Yes, Dad, I know.”

“All right,” Mat sighed, embracing his son for a short moment before he walked back around the counter. “Did you get everything unpacked okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s in my room.”

“And did your trip out here go well?”

“Yeah, Mom paid the traveling bus to get out here.”

“She put you on a bus again?” Mat asked, growling under his breath. “What the hell was she thinking? Orlando is almost two-hundred miles away from here!”

- Play Dead -

"I don't know, Dad, I think she just wanted to get me out of the house"

*She wanted to play pole stripper on Steve's cock, that's why she wanted to get Chris out of there. It's amazing he hasn't killed her with that dick of his, knowing how big it is.*

A smirk appeared across Mat's face at the thought. He wouldn't have thought of the man's dick unless he hadn't of actually seen how big it was when he had walked in on the two of them. How could he have not seen how big that motherfucker was? Charlotte was moaning and screaming.

She wasn't screaming out of pain though; she was screaming for more.

"You all right, Dad?" Chris asked.

"I'm fine," Mat said with a smile as he turned, crossing his arms over the chest as he watched the oven. "Just thinking about something"

"Well, I'm glad you feel better, Dad."

"You don't know the half of it."

Another smile appeared across Mat's face, and as he flexed the muscles in his arms, he began to realize how late it was.

"How long ago did you get here?" Mat asked.

"About an hour, an hour and a half ago. I was busy getting my stuff in here. I tried to wake you up, but you seemed out of it."

"Sorry, I was sleeping."

Chris nodded, watching as Mat pulled out the lasagna and dished it up.

The two of them set down to eat a nice, quiet meal.

\*\*\*

"Ugh!" Charlotte moaned as she drove herself even further onto Steve's massive cock, seeing the pleasure contorting on his face. "Are you just going to let me ride you this whole time?"

"I'll hurt you, doll," Steve said as he grasped at her sides, his fingers tickling at her pubic area. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You shit," Charlotte said as she moaned again. "You know

## Kody Boye

you won't hurt me."

Steve smiled, and he grabbed her and switched positions with her in one swift motion.

It was amazing that he was still inside of her.

"You're good," Charlotte said as he felt his thrusts become more frantic. "I never knew a man had so much talent."

"We may not be as smart as you women brain-wise, but we have other talents."

Steve manipulated his penis inside of her, enticing a moan from Charlotte.

"You're my bitch now, all right?" Steve said as he grabbed her hair, forcing her head close to his and kissing her, his tongue darting into her mouth.

Charlotte moaned as she sucked his tongue. She knew that his orgasm was building. She knew that Steve only did this when he was about to burst.

With a fast motion, he threw her head back and pushed himself in to the hilt, grunting as he exploded inside of her.

Charlotte moaned as she felt the last of his liquids enter her, and as he fell beside her, he remained inside, his penis bent in a way that was only natural in a semi-flaccid state.

"God, I needed it that rough," she said as she stroked his head, letting him move it so that his long, dark hair was falling close to her breasts. "You always know how to make me feel good."

"Me make you feel good?" He asked, a smile appearing across his face "I think that you're the one who's making me feel good, hon. I'm the one doing all the action."

"Not always," she said with a smile.

"What? When you're blowing me? That's all the action you ever get, I'm always the one doing everything."

She shook her head and grabbed the remote off of the nightstand table, flicking the television on.

'It was reported that, last night, a man who went 'hunting, legally' in the Florida Everglades 'supposedly' saw a monster that was big enough to steal his kill. There are no further reports on this sighting.'



- Play Dead -

"Doesn't your ex work near there?" Steve asked as he squeezed one of her breasts.

"That bastard? Yeah, he works down there near the Everglades, why?"

"I was just asking," he said as he eyed her breasts. "God, they are natural, right?"

"Of course you big-dicked horse, what do you think they are, lollipops?"

"They sure look like they could be," he said as he trailed a finger over one of her nipples, getting a soft moan out of her. "You ready for some more, love?"

"You dumb ass, you couldn't have possibly recovered from that, much less your balls."

"I'm always ready for you," he said with a smile as he placed his head on one of the pillows, sighing. "Maybe we should wait an hour"

"Or two. Come on, stud, even you know that you can't get yourself back into shape that fast."

He grinned and deeply kissed her, smiling.

"I know, doll..." He trailed off and looked back at the television set "How long's that kid going to be down there?"

"You mean in Pembroke?" She asked, her eyes scanning down his muscled chest, the shiny sweat catching her eye. "He's going to be down there for a week or so."

"We'll need somebody to mow the lawn by that time," Steve said as he placed a hand on the side of his head, resting his elbow on the pillow. "I don't know how you can stand him."

"Stand what? My son?" She asked, placing a hand on his chest. "He's a good boy."

"He doesn't like me, Charlotte. The boy gives me no respect at all."

"Come on, Steven, lighten up," she said, using his full name and smiling "He's still a bit upset about me and Mat separating."

"You think he would have gotten over it by now," Steve said, shaking his head as he caressed her hand, lightly kissing it. "The least he could do is show his stepdad some respect."

"He'll come around, don't worry," she said. "He's still trying

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to figure out who you are.”

Steve nodded, shaking his head as he brushed his dark hair out of his face.

“Do you really want your boy down there while your ex is all jumbled up in whatever this mess is?”

“You mean down in the Everglades? It’s not a mess, it’s some stupid hunter who was illegally hunting being a jackass about seeing something in that forest. For all we know he could have saw a dog.”

“All right,” he said with a shrug, “I was just wondering...Because if you want me to go get the boy, I will.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said with a smile, just as she began kissing him.

\*\*\*

“Sir, I didn’t think you would be here today,” Park said as he sat down opposite him. “I thought you were sleeping off a hangover.”

“I was, Daniels,” Mat said with a smile as he called the waiter, ordering a small beer for the two of them. “I’m not going to drink much tonight, but I’ll still get you a drink, like I said.”

Park nodded and smiled, looking out the window.

“It’s quite a sight, the lights out there,” Park said, gesturing at the boats on the ocean. “I like to come here at night and see them, even if I don’t have the money to drink.”

Mat nodded, sighing.

“Sir, is there something wrong?” Park asked.

“Nothing you should be concerned about,” Mat said as he accepted the beers, paying the waiter before he left. “Me and my wife are having problems.. We just got divorced, and now the kid’s going back and forth between the two of us.”

“Do you want to talk about it, sir? I mean...If you don’t want to, you don’t have to. I’d understand if...”

“No, Park, I came here to talk,” Mat said with a smile. “It’s nothing you should be worried about though.”

“I know, sir. I’m just here to help.”

- Play Dead -

Mat nodded, lifting his beer and taking a small drink out of it.

The taste was almost enough to make him vomit, since his earlier experience with the hangover returned to his mind.

"She and I broke our marriage after I caught her and her boyfriend screwing in the living room."

"Ouch," Park said, grimacing at the words. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Are you married or have a girl, Daniels?"

"No, sir...I...I'm more of an 'all around' kind of guy, if you catch my drift."

"I get ya," Mat said, nodding. "You haven't found someone yet?"

"No, sir."

"That's good, it's always good to wait and see if you can connect with someone you *really* know before you hook up with her. I married Charlotte after a few dates...I guess it's the whole reason why the two of us aren't together anymore."

"I'm sorry, sir...If you ever need anything, I'll help as much as I can."

"You mean that, Daniels?" Mat asked with a smile. "I appreciate that."

"Yes, sir, I do."

Mat nodded as he finished the last of his beer, setting the small glass bottle aside and watching Park take another drink from his own.

"Is that the only one you want, sir?" Park asked.

"Yeah, I don't want to get drunk again. Did you want another?"

"No, sir, no thank you. I don't want to drink too much. I'm not a heavy drinker, sir."

Mat nodded, standing and shaking the younger man's hand.

"It's a pleasure talking with you again, Park. Thanks for being here,"

"No, thank you sir, I enjoyed talking with you."

Mat nodded, smiling as he bade Park another goodbye before he left the small bar.

## Kody Boye

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“Chris!” Mat called as he opened the door, letting in a cool night breeze as he did so. “Are you still up, son?”

After a moment, heard Chris rise up from the couch, yawning.

“I’m here, Dad.”

“Sorry,” Mat said with a guilty smile as he closed the door, turning and locking it behind him. “I wasn’t out for too long, was I?”

“Not very long, Dad. I just fell asleep, that’s all. That bus ride wasn’t very fun, especially when it was somewhere around twelve hours long.”

Mat nodded as he listened to what his son said, removing his shoes and placing them by the door.

“Did you eat anything?”

“I made myself a sandwich an hour ago, so I’ll be all right.” Chris said, looking over at the clock. “Eleven? I didn’t think it was that late.”

“Sorry,” Mat said, scratching the back of his head. “I didn’t mean to stay out so late, son. I was talking with a new friend.”

“You made a new friend?”

“Yeah, a kid not much older than you. Park, that was his name, Park.”

“Not much older? If he was at a bar, then he’s at least five years older, Dad.”

Mat shrugged and gave his son a few pats on the back as he walked past, seating himself on the couch.

“I’m going to be going to bed in a few minutes. You made sure that all the windows were locked, right?” Mat asked.

“Yeah.”

“And the back door?”

“It wasn’t unlocked, but I double checked, just to make sure.”

“All right, then. Let’s get to bed.”

Chris nodded as he rose off the couch, walking beside his father as the two of them walked down the hall.

“Dad...It said something about a monster being sighted in

- Play Dead -

the Everglades. Is that...Was that where you were working on before I got here?"

"No," Mat said with a sigh, stopping as his son entered his room, leaning against the door frame. "Park asked me about it this morning, and that's when me and him got talking. I told him I'd buy him a drink, since he helped me pack up all that junk that I always carry around."

"Oh. All right, I was just wondering about that. It kind of interested me."

"You were always one for that weird shit," Mat said with a smile, ruffling his son's hair. "Get some sleep, Chris. Thanks for coming out to see me."

"It's no problem, Dad. I like visiting with you."

Mat smiled and gripped his son's hand for a minute before he told him good night one more time, walking out of the room and closing the door behind him.

Mat leaned against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest, his mind going back to what his son said earlier today, right after he had woken up from his hangover nap.

*I can always hear them upstairs.*

"Horny bitch," Mat said as he walked into his room, stripping out of his clothes and into his underwear. "She could've been having that much sex with me if she had told me."

Mat wasn't a sex hound, like Steve seemed to be, but he had never met the man, so he couldn't tell. Sure, he and his wife had made love to each other at least once a month, if not more, but Charlotte wanted it *every day*, as it seemed to be the case with Steve. She had been so horny that she couldn't have waited before taking Steve out of the house. No. Instead, she and Steve had ripped their clothes off and did it right in the living room, the middle of the fucking living room.

"Fuck it," Mat said as he crawled into bed, closing his eyes. "Bitch can die from over exerting herself from sex for all I care. Maybe she'll even split her herself a nasty wound by riding Steve every single day."

These thoughts continued to plague Mat until he fell asleep..

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\*\*\*

Mat woke the next morning with a faint ray of light crashing down from outside his window. He covered his eyes with his arm. The position his bed was in and the position of the window was probably the stupidest things he could have ever done in placing the bed. The only reason he did do this was because the electric furnace didn't push its heat all the way back here, and at least the rays of light kept him warm in the morning.

Shaking his head, he rose and threw his legs over the other side of the bed, wiping the sleep from his eyes.

Mat remembered that Chris was here at his house now, and for two weeks! He had missed his son so much in the six months that it had taken to settle the court case, but now that he was here, Mat intended to spend as much time as possible with him.

Pulling on a pair of jeans up his legs, he grabbed an undershirt and walked out of the room, toward the bathroom. It was slightly cracked, so he figured that Chris was in the bathroom right now.

"Chris, you in there, bud?"

"Yeah Dad, I'm just finishing, sorry." A few moments later, Chris came out of the bathroom, bare-chested and clean-shaven.

"Sorry, son, I just got up. I hope I wasn't bothering you."

"No, Dad, I just showered and shaved, that's all. You didn't bother me."

Mat nodded and clapped his son on the shoulder as he walked out, grabbing a new shaving razor from the pack as he opened up the cabinet. He popped the plastic off the top of the cream and wet his face, then lathered it. He guided the blade over his face and finished within a relatively short time, since there was hardly any stubble to begin with. He washed the razor and his face, threw on some aftershave, and walked out of the bathroom, pulling his shirt over his head.

"I hope you slept well last night, son," Mat said as he walked down the hall and into the living room, wiping a hand over his face. "Sorry if it was cold in your room."

"It wasn't cold, Dad. The furnace kept the room fairly

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warm.”

Mat nodded and sat down beside his son, putting an arm around his shoulder.

“I’m glad you’re here with me, son. It’s gotten pretty lonely without you around the house.”

“Yeah, I missed you too, Dad,” Chris said, leaning his head against Mat’s shoulder. “You know, I was pretty depressed after you left. Mom wasn’t doing much, Steve kept yelling at me to mow the lawn or wash the dishes, it was hard...”

“Steve hasn’t hurt you in any way, has he?”

“If you’re talking about hitting me, no, he hasn’t. Steve may yell at me most of the time, but he hasn’t hit me.”

“So...Other than the yelling, is he good to you?”

“Yeah, he’s good to me. He just works me a little too hard...I think he’s lazy.”

*Probably because he’s too tired all day,* Mat thought with a smile. *He’s not much of an off-the-bed person, son.*

“Something wrong, Dad?”

“No, nothing’s wrong. I was just thinking.”

Mat rose from the couch and walked into the kitchen, preparing to make breakfast. He opened the fridge and removed the egg carton, placing it on the counter as he pulled pans, butter, milk, and bacon. He got to work on making breakfast while Chris turned the television on.

Mat could hear the familiar sound of the Florida news station, and he smiled, cracking an egg into a pan and putting it on the oven. It began to simmer, and he did this with a few more eggs before he had a desirable amount.

“Do you need any help, Dad?” Chris asked from the couch. “Sorry, I should’ve asked before.”

“No, I don’t need any help. Thank you, though. Just relax, Chris, it’s your time with *me* here. I’m not going to make you help me unless I need your help with something.”

Chris nodded and returned to watching television.

*That bastard has the kid scared pretty bad,* Mat thought as he cut the bacon up, putting it on the oven. *He’s got Chris scared so bad that he’s even scared here at my house, the fucking*

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*bastard.*

Mat shook his head as he continued to think about Steve and Chris' relationship. It seemed like Chris was a little nervous talking about his stepfather, even in his real father's own house. Apparently, Steve was mentally abusive to his son, and that made Mat angry. He continued to make breakfast trying to keep his cool, but he knew that he would eventually explode during the day. He would go out to get pizza or hamburgers for the two of them at lunch by himself, park into a deserted parking lot, and scream and yell until he felt better.

That was a plan Mat intended to stick with.

After breakfast was ready, the two of them ate at the counter, Chris sitting on a stool while he stood opposite of his son, smiling at him.

"Is it good?"

"Yeah," Chris said with a smile. "It is. Why would you ask if it was good though?"

"I don't know...I was just making sure that I didn't mess up while cooking it."

Chris nodded and continued to eat, concentrating on his food after he had spoken. The kid seemed a bit nervous about being in his house, Mat could see that clearly.

"Did Steve say anything to you before he left?" Mat asked, breaking the tension.

"No...Just to be good. Why?"

"You seem a bit nervous; I was just concerned."

Chris nodded and stood, taking his plate to the sink and cleaning it of the leftover crumbs. He placed it on the parallel side of the sink and let it dry there in the sun.

Mat smiled and walked back into the living room with his son, sitting on the couch as the two of them shared a nice father-son moment together.

"Chris, would you rather have a break from school while you're here?"

"What do you mean, Dad?"

"I mean, well, I don't see how the two schools can keep track of your grades if you're going to be coming here and back every



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other two weeks” Mat shrugged and gave Chris a few encouraging pats on the shoulder. “They can’t make you go to school here, since you’re technically enrolled in Orlando High School. Would you rather just stay home and relax?”

“I guess,” Chris said with a sigh. “If that’s all right with you, Dad.”

“Of course, it’s all right,” Mat said with a smile as he stood “You can stay home from school while you’re here at my place”

Chris nodded. He turned the television set up, a news reporter with a picture of the Everglades behind him spoke up.

“Today, a search team is going into the Everglades to see if they can find whatever it is that Joe Hinder saw only two nights ago. Apparently, the animal was, ‘Large enough to steal his kill’ and had a sound that, ‘Could have easily wake the dead.’ More updates will be brought to you regarding this story.”

\*\*\*

This part of the Florida Everglades was dark, with the large trees blanketing the rivers and ground below them. The small group that was hunting for the monster that Joe Hinder saw was in almost complete darkness, and it didn’t help that they kept hearing noises around them.

“Be quiet!” One of them shouted in a whispered voice. “I thought I heard something.”

“You be quiet,” another one of the men whispered. “All you’ve been doing is babbling on about how you keep hearing things.”

“Quiet, both of you,” Mark Tinderman said, shaking his head. “I don’t want to scare it.”

“Scare what?”

“The monster you fucking prick! That’s the whole reason why we’re here!” Mark said, shaking his head. “None of you are listening to me. Just be quiet and let’s see if we can find it.”

The other men nodded and turned off their normal flashlights, opting for their night-vision goggles.

Mark turned his own goggles on as he looked around the area. The river could be seen from where he was standing, and

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he could also see a seemingly endless expanse of trees and shrubbery to his right. They threatened to swallow him and his group whole.

“All right, there’s six of us, right?” Mark asked.

“Yeah, there’s six!” One of the men shouted back, followed by the muffled curses directed toward the man.

“All right, I want us to split up into three groups. One of you come with me, and the other four of you split up together.”

Mark nodded as a man came up beside him and clapped his shoulder, the two of them setting off into another part of the forest.

“You think they know how to get back out to the front?” His partner asked.

“They better know how to get back out to the front. Otherwise, they’ll be stuck here.”

The man nodded and kept quiet as the two of them continued walking.

They weren’t finding any traces of the ‘monster’ that Hinders had seen while he was out ‘legally hunting.’

In simple terms, the man was a class-A jackass.

“Hey, sir, I need to piss,” the man said, placing a hand on Mark’s shoulder. “Can you hold up a sec?”

Mark grunted his approval and leaned against a tree as he heard the man zip down his pants, followed by the splash of urine.

Something rustled in the bushes near Mark.

Mark looked around, the hair rising on the back of his neck, fear rushing into his blood. He *knew* that something was going on here, he knew that for a fact. He shifted his footing, expecting there to be leverage by the bushes that he was standing by. There wasn’t. It was a silent threat as he backed into the bushes, when his foot slid from the ledge, when he went tumbling backward, down into some place hidden from human eyes.

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*The way the bushes had creaked from above had told the*

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*creature that something had fallen, that something had just been stupid enough to fall over the ledge down to the small stream bed below. It could hear the large thing tumbling down toward where it was hiding, hiding in wait.*

But when the thing finally landed, it landed with a thump, and it also landed with a snap. Moans of pain escaped from the bowels of its being, but the companions that the creature had brought into the forest would not be able to hear them.

It was too far down.

The creature was sturdy enough to support its weight on the back of both legs, which meant that the meat would be evenly distributed through its body.

Already, the creature could smell the blood, could smell the blood coming from this animal. This creature that could walk on two legs was bleeding from a wound that would eventually end its life, if the merciful one did not give mercy to the stupid animal.

The large creature broke through the brush that it was hiding in, but the thing lying on the ground--its next meal--heard the sound of it approaching.

The animal started yelling out vocalizations that the creature couldn't understand, but the dumb thing wouldn't be alive for much longer.

It was going to be a plentiful meal, oh it was. The blood was already running out of a leg, snapped, the bone protruding from the skin like a tree would from the ground.

One final scream came from the creature before the dominant one ripped into its prey.

\*\*\*

Mat had went to get hamburgers for the two of them that following afternoon, and he had went into an abandoned parking lot and screamed until he felt better about himself. He screamed at Steve for being so abusive to his son, he screamed at Charlotte for being such a slut, and he screamed at the world for putting this incredible burden on his shoulders.

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He sat in the parking lot and calmed down before he took off again. He wanted to get home quickly, before the traffic started to get worse around lunchtime. He fumbled for the radio as he drove, and heard a shocking revelation as the radio station man spoke.

‘Search and rescue units are now looking for a man named Mark Kinderman, who recently went missing in the Florida Everglades. If you or anybody you know would like to join the search for him, please, come down to the town of Homestead. Any and all helpers are needed, and we will turn nobody away.’

A chill ran down his spine as he continued driving.

*Missing in the Florida Everglades.*

So, maybe there was something in the Everglades.

His mind was roaming with this possibility as he drove.

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“Hey, Chris!” Mat yelled as he came in through the door, placing the hamburger bags on the counter. “Where are you, son?”

“Coming, Dad!” Chris yelled from down the hall, walking out of his room and placing his hands in his pockets. “I was wondering what was taking you so long. Did you get caught up in traffic?”

“A little, but I got us some hamburgers. Take what you want out of there, I got a bit of a variety, I think the fries are on the bottom.”

Chris nodded as he began to get the food out of the bags. Mat looked out the window. He watched as one of their neighbor’s cats was chased up a tree by a rather small dog, the dog barking for the cat come down. He imagined that if the dog could actually talk, it would probably say, ‘Here kitty, kitty, kitty. I want to play with you.’

Quite the disturbing image itself.

“Dad, how much did all of this cost you?” Chris asked as he put the other hamburgers back into the bag. “It looks like it cost a fortune.”

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“Not a fortune, somewhere around fifteen dollars. I figured you might be hungry...I didn’t have any junk food, so I knew that the two of us wouldn’t be eating it.”

“All right... And you’re right, there wasn’t any junk food.”

Mat laughed and sat down beside his son, unwrapping a hamburger and taking a bite out of it

“At least they got the order right,” Mat said through a mouthful of hamburger. “I usually have to scrape all the condiments off of the burger and put them back on.”

Chris nodded and dipped one of his fries in fry sauce just as the doorbell rang.

“Were you expecting company, Chris?” Mat asked as he stood, walking over to the door. “Did you invite a friend over?”

“No...I didn’t invite anybody over.”

Mat gave a shallow nod as he walked over to the door, unlocking and then opening it.

Park stood in the doorway.

“I’m sorry if I’m bothering you at home, sir,” Park said, rubbing the back of his neck. “I just came over to talk. Is this a bad time?”

“No!” Mat said with a smile. “I just got some lunch. You hungry?”

“Oh no sir,” Park said as he stepped in through the doorway. “I couldn’t possibly take something that you bought for you and your son”

“No, I think I bought too much anyway,” Mat said as he turned around to face his son, giving him a smile. “Right, Chris?”

“There’s no way I’m eating what you don’t eat, Dad,” Chris said with a smile.

“Well, there you go.” Mat said as he pulled a seat over for Park, smiling as the man sat down beside him.

“Thank you, sir.”

“No trouble. Park, this is my son, Chris.”

“Pleasure,” Park said as he shook Chris’ hand, giving him a smile. “Your father’s told me a lot about you. He says you’re a good student.”

“Yes, sir,” Chris said with a smile, “I try my best.”

## Kody Boye

"I'd say straight A's are the best you can get," Park said with a smile. "Keep it up; you'll be surprised with how far your grades take you."

Chris nodded and smiled, before they continued eating. It was a slow meal with lots of conversation, but by the time they were done, they had eaten all the food.

"Don't even bother making dinner," Chris said with a laugh. "I don't think I'll be hungry again for days."

They all laughed at this comment, and as Mat stood to gather everything up, he looked over at Park.

"Was there a particular something that you came over her for?" Mat asked, throwing all of the trash in the garbage can. "Sorry if I sound rude, I just wasn't expecting you."

"No, you aren't being rude, sir," Park said, scratching his cheek. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Chris, could you let me and Park talk for a few minutes?" Mat asked

"Yeah, sure, Dad."

Mat nodded and gave his son a smile as Chris left the room.

"Good kid you have there," Park said with a smile, sipping his soda. "I hope my kid will be as good as he is."

"He will," Mat said. "You just have to find somebody to settle down with first."

Park nodded, sipping his soda, swishing the ice around and listening to the pieces knocking against each other.

"What was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

Park sighed and took one final drink from his soda and set it down, pushing it away, resisting the temptation to take another drink.

"Sorry, I don't drink soda often. It's a rather bad habit I have, so I stopped drinking it."

"No problem."

"All right..." Park sighed and rubbed his hands together, as if they had been cold. "You know the man who went missing in the Everglades, right?"

"Yeah, I heard it over the radio," Mat said, walking around the counter to sit beside Park. "Something about it bothering

you?”

“Well...Yeah, kind of.” Park nodded, rubbing the back of his neck, like he did before he came into the house. “You do know that there were six men in the group?”

“It was just one that went missing, right?” Mat asked, trying to remember what the radio had said. “I didn’t hear the radio, the station was fuzzy.”

“It was,” Park agreed. “And yes, it was only one man who went missing...I find it kind of odd, because the man had told his men to split up into groups to look for whatever the hunter had seen.”

“It is odd, and rather stupid if you ask me,” Mat said, shaking his head. “How come they would split up like that?”

“I think they were some kind of cryptozoology group. They’re always getting themselves into bad situations. It’s hard to believe that more of them haven’t gone missing around here before this.” Pat only shrugged and reached out for his soda again, taking another sip.

Mat sighed and shook his head.

“Great, just great,” Mat said. “Now we have a missing man on top of one who said he saw something in the same area. Just fucking great.”

“They’ll want us to run a news report on this Monday, you know that, right?” Park asked, sitting the drained soda on the counter.

“Yeah, I do, Daniels,” Mat sighed. “This is such a bad time for all of this, what with my son here and all.”

Park nodded, brushing at his short hair as he rose.

“I guess I should leave, sir. I don’t want to disturb you and your son while he’s here.”

“You don’t have to, Park,” Mat said, his tone sounding like a child who didn’t want a friend to leave. “I mean, well, I enjoy your company, that’s all, and my son likes you.”

“I know, sir, and I enjoy your company too,” Park said as he grabbed his jacket. “I have to get ready for a date, and if I don’t leave now, I might not be ready.”

Mat smiled

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“Have fun.”

“Thank you, sir. Enjoy the rest of your night.”

Mat bade Park one final goodbye as he ushered the man out the door.

“Hmm...” Mat said. “He’s a good kid.”

Chris came out of his room from down the hall, murmuring under his breath as he held his hand.

“What happened, Chris?”

“Stupid spring on the bed caught my hand when I was looking through the stuff under there,” Chris said, showing Mat his wounded, bloodied hand. “I didn’t think it was that sharp.”

Mat held his son’s hand and looked at the wound. Blood was pouring freely from a gash that had ended up puncturing a good way into his skin, and it was flowing down onto his own hand.

“Dammit,” Mat swore, walking his son into the kitchen as he went through a cupboard, trying to find a first aid kit. “That looks pretty bad.”

“How bad is ‘pretty bad,’ Dad?” Chris asked as he held his hand, grimacing as some of it fell onto the counter, staining the gray top.

“Bad enough that you might need stitches.”

Mat removed the disinfectant and cleaned Chris’ wound off, then placed a large cotton strip over the wound as he wrapped the bandage around his hand.

“We’ll see if it’ll stop bleeding in the next few minutes. If it’s not, I’m taking you to the doctor.”

Chris cringed as he said doctor, and Mat knew that his son had a personal phobia of hospitals. Chris had never liked them, and it was for good reason. A male nurse had hit Chris for a reason that he had never really spoken about, either because he couldn’t, or because it was still brought back bad feelings.

“I know you don’t like hospitals, Chris, but I don’t want you to get sick. You know what happens when a cut gets infected.”

“Yeah, I know, Dad. They taught us about that in health class last year.”

Mat nodded and sighed, looking at his son’s hand.

“Is it still bleeding?”



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"You just bandaged it."

"I know. I just want to know. Is it bleeding bad?"

"As bad as it was before."

Mat shook his head, grabbing a cloth and wiping the blood off of the counter, disinfecting it as well.

"Come on, I'll take you to the doctor."

\*\*\*

Even though Chris hadn't liked going to the doctor, he still did, and they had given him stitches. It was the first time that his son had any type of injury that involved stitches. He had never broken or fractured a bone, and he had never come down with any life-threatening illness.

No; this bizarre psycho spring incident was the worst Chris had ever had.

"Is your hand all right, Chris?" Mat asked as he drove him and his son home, looking up in the rearview mirror to catch a glimpse of his son.

"It hurts, but it's better than it was before."

"I'm glad. Sorry that they had to stitch you up on so little medication. I'm really sorry, Chris."

"Dad, I'm fine, don't worry about it. My hand will feel better later, I promise."

Mat nodded and turned into the driveway. He walked up to the porch with his son, an arm around his shoulder, trying to make him feel better.

\*\*\*

"God, Charlotte," Steve said as he pulled an undershirt on, shaking his head. "Why do you want me to go get the boy *now*? I thought you and me were going to have sex again."

"You're one horny sonofabitch, aren't you?" Charlotte said, shaking her head. "I want you to go get him because I don't want him down in Pembroke, you already know that."

"Charlotte, wouldn't that be called *kidnapping* if I just went

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and picked him up without Mat's consent?"

"Since when have I cared about having *his* consent, Steve? I divorced him so I could be with you."

Steve shrugged and shook his head.

"You do know that I probably won't be back until tomorrow? It takes six hours to get there, and it's almost six already."

"You'll be there by midnight, and then you can sleep in your car around a corner until six, then you get him and come back. You'll be home by twelve, if you're lucky...But knowing you, you'll probably get stalled somehow."

"You know it might take me a little bit to convince Mat to let me take him," Steve said, kissing her. "Are you sure you want me to go get him? You know how horny I am all the time, and I could really use these two weeks for us."

"I know how horny you are, Steve," she said, rubbing at his hardening erection. "Just go get my son, and maybe tomorrow when you come back, I'll reward you."

Steve growled and kissed her one final time before she pushed him away, gesturing to the door. He grunted and pulled his jacket around his shoulders, grabbing the car keys and looking back at his lover.

"I'll be back tomorrow. Love you, doll."

"Love you too."

Steve shook his head as he walked out of the house, turning back one last time to glance at Charlotte in the window.

All she did was smile, blowing him a kiss.

In conjecture to what she had just done, he raised his hand and closed it, smiling and mouthing, 'I love you' to her.

Shaking his, he got into his car, started it up, and began the long, perilous task of driving to Tida Reserve.

\*\*\*

Mat knew that his son was in a lot of pain, and for that, he didn't make him do anything other than sit on the couch and get better. The pains in Chris' hand were coming and going.

"Here," At said, handing Chris a painkiller and a glass of

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water. "Take this, and don't start to get smart with me."

"Dad...I don't like painkillers."

"That's what I meant," Mat said with a smile, still holding the pill in one hand and the glass of water in the other. "Come on, Chris, you heard what the doctor said. Isn't your hand hurting?"

"Yeah."

"Then take the damn pill."

Chris sighed and nodded, taking the pill, popping it into his mouth, and swallowing it with a swig of water.

"I'm going to fall asleep in an hour, Dad, I hope you know that."

"Yeah, I know; you usually sleep when you're on painkillers."

Chris nodded, sighing and placing the glass of water on the coffee table in front of the couch. He placed his head on the back of the couch and closed his eyes, taking a few long, deep breaths.

"You okay?" Mat asked, rubbing one of Chris' shoulders.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry...I just don't feel all that good."

"Why don't you go lay down?" Mat said, offering his son a hand "You'll feel better if you get some sleep."

"Yeah, sure," Chris said, gripping his hand with his own good one. "I'll go do that. Thanks, Dad."

Mat nodded and watched as Chris walked down the hall, giving a light sigh as he heard the door close.

Chris was growing up so fast.

Shaking his head, Mat sat on the couch and turned the television, flicking through the short amount of channels he had and finding nothing to watch. He pushed the power button on the remote and watched the screen die in a flash of light.

He stood and walked back into the kitchen, thinking about Park had said about the man in the Everglades. The events surrounding the wildlife reserve was disturbing, and now--with a man having gone missing right after another man had said he had seen a 'monster'--it wasn't a big help on his nerves.

He would more than likely be put on this case come Monday, when he was back in the office

"Damn that bed," he grunted, standing and walking back into the kitchen "I'm getting that thing thrown out this week,

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and I'll be sure to raise a complaint with the place that I bought it from."

He nodded and looked outside.

It was starting to get dark.

\*\*\*

Steve had drove all night, and now that it was dawn--with the digital clock showing that it was twelve o'clock in the morning--he decided to pull into a rest stop and sleep.

He had driven to Palm Bay, and even though he had drove for six hours, he had been stuck in traffic numerous times. If he had been at home right now, he and Charlotte would probably be having sex again. The only bad thing about this whole trip was the fact that he was going to have to go get the kid *early* from his real father's visit.

"Fuck it," he said as he pulled the key out of the ignition, locking the driver's door and crawling into the back of the seat. "I don't care."

But the fact was that he *did* care. He and Charlotte were supposed to spend the two weeks without the kid by themselves, *alone*, in complete solitude, where the two of them could stay home and have sex while having an easy income from his model money.

He was getting hard.

Normally, he would have masturbated, but he was too tired and too drained to even do that. Besides, he was in a public place, and he could get arrested for 'indecent exposure.'

Shaking the thoughts out of his head, he threw a pillow at the end of the back seat and placed his head there, resting his feet on the other end. The position he was in wasn't very comfortable, but it would work just fine for now.

Charlotte said that she would 'reward' him when he got home, so at least he would get something out of this little adventure of 'stepdaddy going to get stepsonny.'

He placed his hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling, thinking about Charlotte. It was by pure chance he had

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manage to come by her, but the first time they met, there had been a connection. That, and she followed him into the men's room and rode him until he had succumbed to orgasm, the only desired release that he had wanted for that entire day.

He hadn't realized that he would miss her so much, even if he was only going to be gone for a day or two.

"Stay safe, Charlotte," he muttered, right before he fell asleep.

\*\*\*

*The creature knew that the men had been looking for the meal when it had taken it, and they had shouted strange words, desperately looking for their missing ally. The man that the creature had taken was now dead, and there was a majority of flesh missing, almost all of it.*

Still, after a day of eating the man, blood still stained at the creature's snout, a goatee of stained blood trembling at the end of its chin. Bathing wasn't a natural instinct for the creature, so blood would remain on its snout and neck area for several days, if not weeks.

The only time a creature like it was ever clean was by accident, and it never did stay fully clean after it did so.

Now, as it was bedding down for the night, the creature raised its snout and sniffed at the air. Cold wisps came into its nostrils, but to the creature, the air didn't feel like cool air; it felt like fire singing its way through its being.

Sneezing, the nasal pathways that the creature used were clear, and it placed its head down to sleep that night, for soon, sleep would overcome and take it away.

Its eyelids were becoming heavier and heavier, and as they closed, something caught the creature's attention, drawing them up to a normal position, one of which put it at full alert.

Beams of light danced through the brush, catching the eye shine of fellow creatures that the men probably didn't notice. The creatures would take no notice, nor would they care. An irritated feeling may pass through their brain at being woken up--and

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possibly even temporarily blinded--by the bright light, but they would get over it.

Small rodents didn't care.

Beside the large creature, a snake passed by, the soft hiss of the tongue darting in and out of its mouth fully audible in the creature's ears. The snake did stop to take a look at the behemoth, but a grunt scared it away, making it slither up into a tree, where another, smaller creature screamed in surprise.

The lights continued to dance, and when they crossed near it, the creature retreated deeper into the brush. The mud from the recent rain would hide its existence to men, and it would not have to worry about getting found.

Sleep overcame it, but lights continued to dance, searching for something they would probably never find.

\*\*\*

Mat woke up early, so early that the sun hadn't even come up. Still, sunshine or not, he rose and walked out of the bedroom and to the bathroom. A grunt passed from his lips as he fumbled for the light switch and as he stumbled out of the boxers His naked body was pale, but he didn't bother to look at his reflection He knew that he looked like hell in the morning, what with his hair in disarray and his eyes bloodshot from his troubled nights of sleep.

As he stepped into the shower, he scratched at his beard stubble and turned the water on, jumping as the first bits of cold water came over his body. He shook it off as the water adjusted. He ran soap over his chest and washed his hair, letting his senses waken before he turned the water off, shaking the last bit from his hair before he stepped out of the shower.

He didn't bother to shave today, since it was a Saturday and--as usual--it was one of his lazy days where he usually just laid around the house doing nothing. He pulled a pair of underwear and shorts up his legs, followed by an undershirt as he walked out of the bathroom, nearly tripping in the process.

"Dammit," he swore, straightening himself out. "Stupid

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mornings.”

He shook his head and made himself a cup of coffee, sitting down on one of the bar stools and getting his morning bearings before he decided to do whatever it was he was going to do. It was pretty damn depressing when a man his age couldn't think of anything to do on a weekend. Not that it was all his fault though; Chris' hand was still hurting, and it made no sense for them to try anything strenuous on his hand anyway.

The day would be spent here at the house, probably in front of the television, watching the news or some other program that was meant to sucker people who didn't have anything else to do into watching it.

“I just want today to be a good day,” he muttered, sipping his coffee “I feel like something's gonna come knocking at my door and bite me in the ass.”

Shaking his head, he finished off the rest of his coffee and walked to the couch, sitting back down on it. He wanted to go back to sleep, since he hadn't gotten his fair share of it last night, but he would wait, he would have to.

He wanted to wait and see if Chris would get up or not.

It was somewhere around ten o'clock right now, and he knew that Chris would wake up soon. It was just an odd feeling, but one that was probably going to be right, nonetheless.

Chris *did* come walking down the hall shortly after that thought passed through Mat's head.

“You feeling better, son?” Mat asked, patting Chris' shoulder “Did you sleep all right last night?”

“I slept fine, Dad, and my hand is feeling better. It hurts a little, but nothing I can't deal with.”

Nodding, Mat walked into the kitchen and began to fix breakfast, smiling.

Today was going to be a good day.

\*\*\*

Around twelve o'clock in the afternoon, a car pulled up outside, an old dark blue one. A long, dark-haired man sat in the

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driver's seat.

Mat already knew that something was going on.

Chris was in his bedroom, sleeping off another pain pill, so Mat would be able to deal with the stranger appropriately.

As the man walked up to the door, Mat was shocked to see that it was Steve, Charlotte's lover.

*Shit... What does he want?*

Calming himself, Mat waited for the man to knock on the door before he walked to it, opening the door and looking out at Steve.

"Mat," Steve said, a smile coming to his face. "I hope I'm not bothering you."

"No...It's fine," Mat said, breaking a small smile of his own. "Come in, come in."

Steve obliged and walked through the door.

"Charlotte wants me to bring the kid home," Steve said, looking around the house. "Is he all right?"

"He's sleeping in his bedroom...He had a rather rough day yesterday"

"Did something happen, Mat?" Steve asked, lowering his deep voice. "He didn't get hurt, did he?"

"He cut his hand...I had to take him to have stitches."

Mat knew that he should have chosen his words more carefully. He could feel the anger coming from Steve, and it made the hairs on his arms and neck rise.

"I'm sorry," Steve said, rubbing the back of his neck and casting him a look. "I thought you just said that my stepson had to be taken to the hospital for stitches?"

"He cut himself while pulling stuff out from under his bed," Mat said, trying to stay calm. "He's all right though, I'm making sure he's taken care of."

"No, you don't understand," Steve said, shaking his head as he walked away, putting a hand on his head. "Me and Charlotte expected you to take care of him while he was here."

"I am taking care of him, Steve, don't you believe me?"

"No, Mat, I don't." Steve turned his eyes on Mat. They showed a fiery hatred that would have killed, had they been



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some kind of weapon. "Where's my stepson, Mat? I'm taking him home with me."

"Why, so he can listen to you and Charlotte screw each other's brains out?" Mat challenged, finally losing his temper. "That's all you two ever do, and I know it. I walked in on the two of you screwing in the middle of the living room, and I'm sure that the two of you had been screwing in my bed while I was gone on those days. That's all you are Steve, a sex hound, and all Charlotte wants is that huge piece of meat between your legs."

Steve had about had it by now. His face had turned a deep shade of red, and now, his hands were balled into fists. His left eye twitched.

"You bastard..."

"Oh, I remember. She was riding you like a bull, and when you pushed her against the couch, she screamed at you to fuck her as hard as you could. And you complied with that. You two were screwing each other and didn't know that I was watching, and when you finally did take notice and pulled out of her, you exploded all over the couch. You know how disgusted I was that your sperm was all over the couch, Steve? Do you absolutely have any idea how it felt for me to clean that up?"

Steve had since broken, and now, his face had returned to a normal color, Steve sighed

"Look, Mat, it's not my fault that Charlotte isn't in love with you, but I do take fault for my actions. I'm...I'm sorry"

"No, you're not! If you were sorry, you wouldn't have had an affair with my wife, you wouldn't have taken her from me, and you sure as hell wouldn't be banging her at least a dozen times a day."

Steve took a swing. Mat dodged and counterattacked with an uppercut to Steve's jaw. The man grunted and fell backward into the wall, holding his chin.

"Damn you," Steve growled, just as Chris was coming down the hall. "Bastard, I could sue you for hitting me, you know that, right?"

"You swung at me first."

"You provoked me!"

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The man turned and looked at Chris, his eyes narrowing.

"Go get your stuff, we're leaving."

"I thought I was staying..."

"Do as I say, boy!"

"Yes sir." Chris said as he turned, walking down the hall and retreating into his room.

Mat was tempted to hit Steve again, but he thought better against it. Steve was right; he could sue him for that hit.

"Steve..."

"Shut your fucking mouth!" Steve roared, holding his chin. "I don't want to hear another word coming out of your fucking, cock sucking mouth!"

"You think I'm queer? I wouldn't be surprised if you had a little bit of action in that department before you and Charlotte got together. I've seen what you wear in those magazines, Steve; those skimpy thongs that show your ass and can hardly keep that huge dick of yours in."

Steve lowered his hand from his chin and was ready to strike him again, but when Chris came out of the room he lowered his hand.

Chris dropped his suitcase, holding his hand.

"Ouch..."

Steve turned his attention away from Mat and to Chris, and for a moment, his nature seemed to calm and become more fatherly.

"Come on," Steve grunted, picking up the suitcase and placing an arm around Chris' shoulders. "I'll take you home."

Mat was about to say something, but the glare that he received from Steve was enough to silence him.

Chris, in both pain and out of fear for his safety, didn't say anything, but nodded a short goodbye.

Mat could only watch as Chris and Steve left in the old, blue car.

\*\*\*

Throughout most of the first hour of the drive, Steve kept

- Play Dead -

quiet, every so often lifting his hand up to rub at his sore, bruised chin. He was completely ignoring Chris for the most part, out of hatred for the man that was his real father.

When Chris grimaced and uttered a small, almost inaudible cry of pain, it snapped Steve out of his angry state, turning his attention toward his stepson.

"Chris? Are you all right?"

"Sir...My hand hurts," Chris said, keeping his eyes away from his stepfather "I'm fine, don't worry about me."

"But I am worried about you," Steve said, returning his eyes to the road as he sighed, rubbing at his chin again. "Do you want me to look at it?"

"No, sir. I'm fine."

"Chris, why are you calling me 'sir' all of a sudden?"

"Because that's how you wanted me to talk to you at home," Chris said with a sigh. "I didn't want you to be mad at me."

"Why would I be mad at you? You're my...You're my son."

Steve was a bit surprised at what had passed from his mouth. In the six months that he had married Charlotte, he had never referred to Chris as a son a day in his life, but now that he just did so, it was a surprise.

"Sir...Do...Do you really mean that?"

"Yes, Chris, I do," Steve said with a sigh as he pulled over on the side of the dirt road, looking over at Chris. "I'm sorry that I've been making it so hard on you. Now that I think about it hurts me, knowing that I've been being so mean to you."

"Why did you try to hit my dad?"

"Your dad said some things that I wish he hadn't said," Steve said, sighing. "I don't want you to think of me any differently, Chris. I'm trying to be the best stepdad I can be."

"Sir...I..." Chris turned his head away, tears now coming from his face. "I'm crying now."

Steve pulled Chris in closer and embraced him, giving a soft sigh as he felt Chris embrace him as well. He could feel a small amount of tears staining his own face now.

"It's all right," Steve said, letting Chris bury his face in his chest. "Please, son, don't cry, I'm sorry for all that I've put you

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through. I never meant to do this, I'm so sorry I'm so mad at myself for putting you through all of this."

"I know, Dad. Thank you."

It warmed Steve's heart to hear Chris call him dad at that moment, and he knew from then on that he had to change. Chris was going to hate him if he didn't.

All he did was hold Chris as he continued to cry.

\*\*\*

Mat was angry, but he couldn't help but feel a sense of guilt that had washed over him. Maybe Steve had been right about him not taking proper care of Chris. He had known that the bed had a loose spring under it, and he had neglected to change it. He knew that Chris might have been coming, and he knew that there was a possibility that his son might get hurt on it.

"Calm down," he said to himself, sighing. "You'll be fine, Steve isn't going to sue you, he can't sue you. He came here to get my son before the two weeks is up, and I didn't want him to take him. I could sue him if I wanted to."

Mat wouldn't sue him, though; it would be too much effort and would take too much time. Plus, everybody in Pembroke would know about it, and he didn't want to get his reputation ruined.

He knew that tonight, he would have to go to the bar to drain his sorrows away. Hopefully, Park would be there to console him, and--more than likely--to take him home after he got too drunk.

He knew that was what he was going to do, and he would make a plan of it.

"Damn, I should have got the kid's number," he muttered to himself, shaking his head. "Ah well, he said that he goes there every night. It's Saturday, so the bar's open later than usual."

True to the fact, he called the bar and checked to see when it opened and how long it stayed open.

\*\*\*

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It was around six o'clock in the evening when Steve finally pulled into the driveway, and by then, both he and Chris were drained from the travel. Steve himself was ready to rip somebody a new one--especially Charlotte--after what she had just put him through. He grabbed Chris' suitcase out of the trunk and watched his stepson get out of the car, carefully closing it behind him.

"Sir, are you mad at me?"

"Chris, I'm not mad at you," Steve said with a soft sigh as he shut the trunk, walking up to the front door with the suitcase in hand. "Why would I be mad at you?"

"I was just wondering."

Steve shook it off and gave the door a few raps, waiting for Charlotte to come out from wherever she was an unlock it.

"Chris, son, I'm sorry about how I treated you for the last six months, I had no right. I guess I wasn't used to having a kid around me all the time. I was just used to your mother before."

Chris gave Steve a small nod, but in the back of his mind he knew Chris was thinking about the affair that the two of them had before Charlotte had divorced his real father and married him.

The ring on his finger was enough to show that, the soft gold catching the sun's light.

Charlotte came to the front door, and after parting the blinds, she opened it.

"You're home sooner than I thought," she said, gently kissing him. "What happened to your chin?"

"Me and Mat got into a little fight, hon. He hit me."

"I'll sue him for this, I swear I'll..."

"No, Charlotte," Steve said, gesturing to the kid. "Not now."

With a small nod, Charlotte looked down at Chris' hand, a look of worry crossing over her face.

"What happened?"

"I cut myself, Mom. No, don't mess with the bandage, I have stitches."

"Stitches!"

"Charlotte, calm down. He cut himself on the bed and Mat

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made sure that he got to the hospital. Just let the boy go, all right?"

She nodded and let Chris walk back into the house, hearing the door to his bedroom shut with a softer slam.

"What the hell were you thinking?" She said, slapping him across the face. He could sue you for attacking him."

"He won't sue me," Steve said, rubbing his face. "That hurt, you bitch."

"It was supposed to hurt," she growled. "How stupid are you?"

Steve shook his head and set the suitcase on the counter, rubbing at his cheek and chin

"And how did you respond to Chris getting hurt?"

"I was angry."

"Is this how the fight started?" She asked, tapping her fingernails on the counter. "Tell me how it started, Steve. I want to know if your stupid ass actions were the cause of the problem."

"I told him I was taking him home and he started yelling something about all Chris hearing was me and you screwing each other. Then he challenged me by saying that all you wanted out of me was sex, and he insulted what I did to bring in money Then he said that I was a fag and I lost it, Charlotte. I swung at him, then he hit me on the chin."

She sighed and shook her head, walking back around the counter and hugging him.

"I'm not mad at you, Steve, and I'm sorry that I slapped you, I love you."

"I love you too, hon." Steve said, lifting her cheek and softly kissing her. "I'm sorry I was so stupid and tried to attack your ex, I'm really, really sorry. Can you forgive me, please? Just forgive me."

Charlotte nodded, kissing him again.

"I forgive you." She took his hand and turned, walking down to the bedroom "Now, you get your reward."

\*\*\*

- Play Dead -

Mat did go to the bar that night, and Park was there, sitting at the usual table he sat at. The bar did have a nice view, what with the ocean not too far away. The small, hilled area that the bar had been built on still allowed anybody who looked out to see the ocean, and the many lights from the big boats that were out there.

“Sir?” Park asked as Mat sat down opposite him. “What are you doing here?”

“That fucking bastard came and took my son back to Orlando, that’s what I’m doing here,” Mat said as he called the waiter over, ordering several strong drinks. “I’m going to drink away my bad feelings. You have any problems with that, Daniels?”

“N-N-No sir,” Park stuttered. “There’s nothing wrong with you here, I’m sorry if you took what I said that way.”

“Whatever,” Mat grunted as he grabbed one of the beers, draining half of it in one swig. “Sorry, I’m not in a very good mood, as you can see.”

“It’s all right sir, I’m not angry,” Park said, picking up the hamburger sitting beside him and taking a bite out of it. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really. What’s there to say? Steve got angry, the two of us exchanged some words, and he tried to hit me, I hit him back, and now that I think about it, I realize that it was a really stupid thing to do, but at least it made me feel a bit better.”

Park nodded, his green eyes drifting out to the ocean.

“The ocean...It’s such a wonderful sight, isn’t it, sir?”

“Yeah,” Mat said as he finished his first beer, shaking his head as he began to drink another one. “It sure is.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to eat anything with all that, sir? You do know that if you don’t have any kind of food in your system that you get drunk faster, right?”

“And when I do get drunk, I’ll more than likely throw up. You do know what happens when you have food in your stomach and you throw up, right, Daniels?”

Park gave a small sigh and nodded, taking another bite out of his half-eaten hamburger

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“Sorry, sir; I’m not much of a drinker, you learned that a few nights ago. I didn’t even drink the whole glass of beer, I don’t think I even drank half of it.”

“If I told you I wasn’t much of a drinker, would you believe me?” Mat asked as he set his glass down, looking into Park’s eyes.

Park looked at the glasses for a moment before looking back up at Mat, and that was when he turned a shade of red.

Mat burst out laughing.

“Seriously, I don’t drink all that much unless something’s bothering me. You don’t mind sitting with me, do you Park? I don’t get mean when I’m drunk or anything, and I’d really appreciate it if you’d stay here. I don’t like being alone if I get drunk.. It makes me nervous, not know what’s going on.”

“I’ll stay, sir. I don’t have anything better to do anyway. I’m glad I have somebody to talk to now.”

With a small nod, Mat continued drinking, taking another look out the window and out the sea before he ordered another beer.

\*\*\*

*The forest remained silent, and there were no longer lights that were dancing overhead in the sky. It was this that had allowed the creature to go back out into the open, to eat, and most importantly, to show any and all its fellow creatures that it was the dominant one here.*

Raising its snout, it sniffed the night air. It could easily smell the water that came from the nearby river. As its own mouth began to emit the need for liquid, the creature treaded through the brush and made its way to the river. Here, the mud was slick from the splashes that the alligators created when they pulled a deer or another animal in, and this particular spot was fresh water. It was not afraid of the alligators. The reptiles were no more than a nuisance to the creature, and they knew that to attempt to attack this larger creature would end in failure and death.



- Play Dead -

As it lowered its snout to the water, it could see the familiar, bumpy ridge of an alligator's eyes rising out of the dark blue depths. Though they didn't attack, they only watched in curiosity.

A deep rumble came from the creature's throat, and the alligator soon retreated back under the water.

This was where the creature rose from its drink, and as another light from a higher area caught its attention. This was where the people came from, across the small river and over a small portion of land.

The creature placed its body into the water and began to swim across, the alligators fleeing in its wake.

\*\*\*

Park ended up taking Mat back to his small apartment when the man had gotten drunk, and it was from here that the man's car had stayed. The bar owner had said that it would be all right to leave the car there.

Park turned into the driveway of his small house and helped Mat out of the car. He lugged the man's weight up to the door, and as he unlocked it, Mat mumbled something unintelligible.

"Whatever," Park shrugged as he opened the door, helping Mat through. "As long as he hasn't passed out yet."

"I haven't passed out," Mat said with a laugh. "But you sure have!"

Park rolled his eyes and shut the door with a kick of his foot, placing Mat on the couch.

"Mat, you're staying at my house tonight," Park said, speaking slowly so Mat could hear him. "Do you understand?"

"Course!" Mat said with a smile. "Now, I will just go to sleep."

Park sighed his relief as Mat passed out.

Walking back to the door, he locked it and pulled his coat off.

"Guess I better cover him up," he muttered as he walked over to the couch, taking a blanket and throwing it over Mat. "Just stay there, all right?"

Even though Mat didn't answer, it was a bit of relief to just

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say it. Park doubted that the man would get up, but then again, men who drank too much did strange things while they were under the influence of alcohol.

Shaking his head, he walked down the hall to his room, stripping out of his shirt as he did so. It felt good to just have the cool air glide over his bare chest, and it felt good knowing that he would soon be in bed, relieving himself of the day's stress.

He took off his shoes as he walked into the bedroom and crawled into bed with his jeans on, sighing. At least he was home now, and at least he didn't have to worry about Mat getting kicked out into the cold, or getting beat up by a bunch of gang members for absolutely no reason at all.

Closing his eyes, he let himself drift away in his own thoughts, waiting for sleep to come to him.

\*\*\*

Mat woke in a soft daze the following morning, and at first, he wondered where he was. He recalled last night, and all the beer he had drank.

He felt like throwing up.

But now, he was in Park's house; he knew that for a fact. The kid had been kind enough to take him back to his place to make sure that he would be all right.

"God," Mat moaned, placing a hand over his stomach. "I've got to get this stuff out of me."

"Sir?" Park asked. "Are you all right?"

"I feel sick."

"It's the first one on the left."

Mat obliged and stood, walked into the bathroom, and spewed the contents of last night into the toilet. He held himself up with his other hand and waited to see if anything else would come up, and when nothing did, he flushed the toilet, cleaned and disinfected it, and cleaned his mouth out with a swig of tap water before walking out of the bathroom.

"Thanks, Park," Mat said. "For bringing me back here, and for everything else. You're a big help."

- Play Dead -

"It's no trouble, sir."

"Mat, please."

"All right, Mat. It's no trouble. I didn't want to leave you there by yourself."

"My car?"

"It's still there; the bar owner said I could just leave it and come and drop you off today. You're not going anywhere for a little bit though, right? I wanted to make sure that you're all right."

Mat nodded as Park walked into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Do you want a cup of coffee? You must be a little shaky from last night, and I find coffee to help."

"Sure, you can pour me a cup," Mat said as he sat back down on the couch, placing his face in his hands.

*How could I have been so stupid? I drunk myself to the point where I passed out, then I had to have Park take me back to his place...Poor damn kid, he must think I'm a real asshole.*

"Sorry about all this, Park. You must think I'm an asshole."

"No, sir, I don't," Park said as he walked into the living room, handing Mat his coffee. "I'm a friend, and I was just doing what a friend's supposed to help: help you out."

"Yeah," Mat said, sipping his coffee. "That works. Thanks for bringing me back to your place. I get nervous when I get drunk, and people leave me alone."

"It's understandable, I would be too...The only problem with what you're saying is that I don't drink, so I don't have to worry about getting too drunk for my own good."

Mat laughed, sitting his cup on the glass top of the table.

"Sir, you are feeling better though, right?"

"I have a hangover, but I'll get over that."

"Do you want some medicine, sir? I'm sure I can find something that can help."

"If you want to look for something, kid, go ahead; make my day."

Mat smiled and slapped Park on the shoulder. He stood, walking back into the bathroom.

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It was going to be a long, long few hours.

\*\*\*

Chris had stayed home from church that day and had relaxed, laying in his room, watching old movies on the small television set, and occasionally getting up to get himself something to eat or a refill on the water he was drinking. During all of this, he was not able to find his parents; they had gone out, but he didn't put much faith in the fact that they were *not* screwing each other.

Whatever took their fancy.

He shook his head as he walked back into his bedroom and placed the food on the small night stand beside his bed. He leaned his head against the headrest and took a bite out of the sandwich.

He didn't care what his parents were doing, as long as he wasn't hungry

He shook his head as his thoughts returned to his parents, who were--just yesterday--obviously normal people. Then today they were at it like rodents were: constantly screwing without any end in sight.

He picked up the remote and clicked through the channels until he was able to find something to watch.

He would see what was going on down in the Everglades today.

As he turned up the volume, he heard the familiar sound of 'a monster is being tracked' in the background.

When continued to watch, he nodded and sighed.

There was another expedition going into the Everglades.

\*\*\*

*Blood was the taste that the creature had developed a liking to, and it was the blood of man that it savored the most. No longer was it tracking down humans as its primary source of prey, and no longer were the humans the more dominant*

- Play Dead -

*predator of this swamp.*

No.

It was the more dominant predator.

As the humans continued to come in and out, searching for whatever they were searching for, one would stray from the group, and this was when the creature would strike

Now, as a human had fallen off the same familiar ledge, the creature came up to it, drool pouring from its snout.

Hunger was being satisfied.

\*\*\*

"Now another one went missing?" Mat asked, running a hand over his face "Great, just great."

"Sir, what, I mean, what is..."

"No need to explain yourself, Park," Mat said with a smile. "I don't know what any of this means either. I think they should close the park to tourists and these stupid Cryptozoologists and scientists."

"I agree with you there, sir," Park said, nervously shifting his coffee cup on the table. "The lunch break is almost over, and my editor will want me to have the story done by the end of the day so it can go into tomorrow's newspaper."

"I've read some of your articles, Park. You're really good at writing."

"Thank you, sir. I don't really think so, but at least I get paid for something I like to do."

"Whatever you like, as long as you're enjoying it," Mat said, patting Park's shoulder. "Keep it up, kid. I'm sure you'll get out of this small job someday."

"God, I hope so, sir. This town is...boring."

"I agree with you there," Mat said as he raised his coffee cup, as if making a toast. "You'll get out, don't worry."

Park raised his own glass.

"Thank you, sir. That really helps."

The two of them stood, threw their empty bags from the fast food joints and their coffee cups away, and went back to the work

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that they did to make their living.

As Mat walked past the cubicles and to his office, he could feel the tension that was coming off of the people. It was a hot, wired tension, the kind that a person normally felt on another only when there was a death or some tragic event that had just happened.

He had felt the same kind of energy during 9-11, and particularly the passing of several presidents that he had experienced throughout his thirty-eight years of life. It was also how he had felt when Charlotte had been pregnant with their son. At only twenty-two, the two of them were fresh out of High School, and could still pass as horny teenagers to other adults.

“No, now’s not the time,” Mat said as he entered his office. “Now’s not the time to think about Charlotte.”

Mat still hadn’t gotten over Steve coming and taking his son, and the thought of suing the man for literally kidnapping his son had been a dark conscience at the back of his mind for two days. The only thing keeping him from doing anything was the fact that he didn’t want Chris to suffer the after-bouts of Steve’s anger.

The man had a temper, and he had nearly experienced that the last time he was there. Thankfully, Mat still had his old moves from the karate lessons that he took.

Shaking his head, Mat watched as the login screen came up. From here, he entered his password and accessed his computer, beginning the work that he would have to do.

He had been assigned to a drug bust the previous week, but now, there was a new email in his inbox.

He clicked on it and read:

Mat,

You are being reassigned to the case down in the Everglades. I want you to investigate the killings and the strange animal sightings that have been going on down there I want you to go down there with one of the journalists, Park Daniels. You’ll be given access to the traveler’s cards, so the expenses will be paid.

- Play Dead -

Get a room in a hotel, and buy the necessities that you need. Don't go drinking at the bar every single night, but do feel free to stop in every other night.

Sincerely yours,

Clive Bakeman

"Great," Mat said as he closed the email, sighing. "Now I have to go down to the Everglades."

Shaking his head, Mat stood and walked out of the room, winding through the cubicles until he found Park. The young man's fingers were flying over the keyboard as he wrote up the article that he was currently working on.

"Park," Mat, knocking on the cubicle. "We have to go."

"Go where, sir?" Park asked, looking at Mat and realizing that they would have to leave the building. He saved his article and shut down the computer "What's up?"

"The boss wants us to go down to the Everglades," Mat said with a sigh "Something tells me that this isn't going to be pretty."

\*\*\*

Chris sat on the couch, watching his stepfather walk around the counter, carefully moving papers around as if they were gold coins meant to buy an empire worth of objects

Behind Steve, breakfast simmered on a pan.

"Sir, where did Mom go?"

"She went out a little while ago. She said something about visiting her sister for a few days," Steve said, looking up from the papers. "You were wondering where she was?"

"She had just left, I thought she would've been helping you with whatever you're doing."

Steve gave a small nod and continued to mess with the papers, arranging them in small piles.

"Dad," Chris began, nervously walking over to the counter, hoping that Steve wouldn't get mad for not calling him sir. "What

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are you doing?"

"Not much, really. I'm looking at these...I don't know what to call them, house forms and such."

"House forms?" Chris asked, looking at the papers. "Why would we need house forms?"

"Your mother and I thought it would be better if we moved out of Orlando and into Miami..."

"Why?" Chris asked, realizing his mistake shortly after. "Sorry, sir."

"It's fine," Steve said, patting Chris on the shoulder. "I don't know why your mother wants to move to Orlando. I think it's because most of her family lives there, other than the sister who lives in Pine Hills."

Chris gave a small nod and grimaced as he accidentally knocked his stitched up hand into the bar.

"You have to be careful," Steve frowned. "You're going to rip your hand open if you keep knocking it against stuff."

"I know," Chris said as he placed his bandaged hand in his lap. "Thanks for...for caring so much."

"Chris, I want you to understand that I'm not the same man as I was when I married your mother. I was stressed out because of all the bullshit the court was putting us through, and I was, well, I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to get along with you."

"Get along with me? What made you think that it would be hard to get along with me?"

"I never had a kid before, Chris. It made me nervous wondering if I could be the kind of father that I wanted to be," Steve sighed and walked over to the oven, removing the eggs and bacon from the burners and placing them on small plates. "I was afraid that I would do something stupid and mess up, you know...like how I lost my temper at your real father's house. It was something that I was nervous about when I went to go get you."

"Meeting my dad?"

"Well, yeah. I had never spoken to him in person, outside of the yelling and arguing before your mother divorced him. I-I just wanted to look like someone who could take care of my son,



Chris.”

Chris gave a small nod. He could see the sorrow that was welling up inside his stepfather. He could see that Steve *was* actually being remorseful about what he had done in the past, and he could tell that it wasn't a setup.

“I understand, Dad. I don't blame you for acting like that when we first moved in here. I'm sorry if I did anything to make you feel bad.”

“Other than being yourself, Chris? No. I can't blame you for just being yourself, so don't worry about any of it. I was just in a bad mood because of all the stuff the court did. Don't worry about it.”

Chris nodded, accepting the plate of food that his stepfather offered him.

It looked like Chris' relationship with his stepfather was going to get better.

\*\*\*

By the time they had packed everything they needed to for the trip, it had been six o'clock in the evening, and by the time they had made it to Homestead, it was past midnight. The two of them checked into a hotel room and prepaid for a week's worth of stay, then went into the bedroom and prepared for bed.

“God, that was a six hour bus ride,” Park moaned as he loosened the tie on his shirt, opening the top half so he could let the air conditioning work its way onto his chest. “I hope we don't have to leave anytime soon.”

“I doubt we would have to leave in a big hurry,” Mat said as he took his business shirt off, pulling an undershirt over his head. “The boss likes the job done before we stop doing it, unless he has other plans for us.”

“Yeah, I guess you're right about that,” Park said, sliding the tie out of his shirt and removing his shoes, lying on the bed that he had chosen for himself. “At least we're able to sleep in a nice hotel without having to worry about the expenses.”

“Yeah, I agree with you there.”

## Kody Boye

They went to bed in peace that night, but with a feeling that something strange was about to happen so close to the Everglades.

\*\*\*

Bart Lawman sat inside one of the small outpost buildings near the border of the Everglades national wildlife park, smoking a cigarette and watching the gates that prevented civilians from getting in.

The ashtray beside him produced a steady amount of smoke, and with the window barely cracked, it gave the interior of the small, single-roomed building the smell of the outdoors.

Camping outdoors. He hated camping, and he hated being in the outdoors by himself. He also hated being so close to the Everglades while there was a monster running amok.

He crushed his fourth cigarette and reached into his pocket for another smoke. He took a deep drag, sighing as he felt his nerves calming down.

"Damn that boss of mine," he said. "The old man's probably sleeping with a prostitute by now."

Shaking his head, he raised his watch to view the time.

12:30 AM.

"Great, another five-and-a-half hours and I'll be out of here," he said, taking another drag. "Whoop dee fucking do."

He raised his hand to place his cigarette back in his mouth until he heard something crash outside.

"Shit!" He cried as he fell out of his chair, burning his hand on the cigarette. "What the hell was that?"

He knew that bears or panthers didn't get this close to the outpost building, and he was sure that an alligator wouldn't have come up this far from the water. The only reason a snake would have come so close was if they were chasing a rodent, and they were scared of the lights.

Drawing his pistol from its holster, he reached for the door handle. Under his touch, he could feel the rough, metal texture of age and bad manufacturing. He could also feel bad omens coming

- Play Dead -

off of it, like they were seeping in through the keyhole from the outside.

“Knock it off, get a hold of yourself.”

He opened the door and walked outside. The overhead lights bathed the surrounding area in a ten foot radius of light, enough so that he would be able to see what was outside the building. Occasionally, a crazy bear would come up and start messing with the garbage can, but even that was rare.

He watched the area with caution as he raised his gun and swerved it around, making sure to keep it at a level and position so that he would be able to move it into a firing position if the need arise.

He couldn't see what could have caused the sound...Not yet.

Taking a deep breath, he took a few steps around the corner to the garbage can.

A giant creature that could have only come out of a horror movie stood at the overturned garbage can, rummaging through it with its long snout. He could only stand where he was as the creature pulled its head from the garbage can. Bits of paper and wads of ash fell away as it moved its head, revealing the creature in its full form. The eyes stared at him with a malice and hunger that only a creature like it could show, and the short tusks protruding from the inside of its mouth glistened in the dull light that reached this side of the building.

The wild boar must have easily weighed over fifteen-hundred pounds, if not near a ton at that. The creature was almost as high as his waist, and he was a tall man of six foot three inches.

Screaming, the creature charged at him.

He screamed with the creature as he raised his gun in an attempt to fire at it, but his chances were short lived as the creature tackled him, driving the air out of his lungs and sending his only form of defense flying away from him. Adrenaline was the only thing that was fueling his body as he wrestled the creature's snout away from him, attempting to keep the jaws and tusks away from his neck, which would surely kill him if he was to slip.

## Kody Boye

He could feel warm blood coming from the wounds in his arms and chest, but right now, he didn't care; he was immune to the pain that would only weaken him if he was to feel it.

Placing his hand steady under the creature's snout, he drove his hand back into a fist and slammed it into the creature's eye as hard as he could.

It was enough to get the creature off of him, and this was where he took his chance.

He leaped to his feet and ran from the giant boar, his legs automatically responding to the turn function that his mind was able to send to them. He dove for the door and grabbed it with his hand, and that was when he felt the creature bite into his leg. He cried out in pain as warm blood splattered over the side of the building.

With his free leg, he kicked at the creature's head until it released his leg, and when he opened the door, he ran in and slammed it shut, locking it.

Outside, the creature attempted to bang the door down, but to no avail. The door and the structure itself was made out of steel, and it would keep the creature away.

He reached to his belt and pulled out his radio.

"Bart to HQ, Bart to HQ, over."

"HQ responding."

"I've been attacked...I'm hurt."

"What were you attacked by?" The man on the other end asked. "Over."

"A boar...The hunter must have seen it, over."

"We're sending help right now. Hang in there, Bart. Over."

Bart nodded, releasing his hold on the radio.

Outside, the creature continued to bang into the door, desperately trying to get the meal that it had lost.

- Play Dead -

Part 2:  
A Monster Has Come

Mat and Park were some of the first people to hear the story of the man named Bark Lawman being attacked by the creature that he described as, 'The pig from Hell,' and they knew now that they were dealing with one of the most dangerous and vicious predators of the animal kingdom.

This pig, from Mat and Park's view, was the cause of the disappearances of the other men.

The creature had a taste for blood, human blood.

"Shit," Mat said as he wiped a hand over his face. "Just shit."

"I agree with you there," Park sighed. "Looks like we got ourselves into a bad predicament."

"Bad? Bad doesn't begin to describe this, Park."

The younger man sighed and nodded, placing a hand on his head and looking down at his bare feet.

"Why do I always get dragged into something bad at the last possible moment?"

Mat could only shrug as he walked into the bathroom, stripping his shirt off and looking back out at Park.

"I'm going to take a shower and get ready to go do some...investigating, I guess you could call it. You better take one too."

Mat watched Park nod and closed the door, stripping out of his boxers and stepping into the shower, turning the knobs until the water ran smoothly over his body, enticing him into an alert state.

After cleaning himself off, Mat got out of the shower and shaved, dressed, and walked out, giving the bathroom to Park.

As Mat heard the young man taking his own shower, he looked at the television, wondering if anything else about the creature would come on. It would sure help him learn more about it, and what exactly he needed to get to make his boss happy. He knew that they would eventually have to meet up with the man who had been attacked by the creature, but at this particular moment in time, it would be rude to barge into his hospital room

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and ask him questions. He would, more than likely, still be in shock, but who wouldn't be if they were attacked by a monster that could have easily barreled over a small car? This monster would have to be big to not be attacked by bears, panthers or the alligators in the reserve.

The water in the bathroom stopped running, and he knew that Park had finished showering. It would take him a few minutes to dry off, dress and shave, so Mat would use this time to relax a bit more.

Laying back on the bed, Mat placed his hands behind his head and closed his eyes, dangling his feet at the end of the bed. These few minutes would be short, but at least he would have time to bask in the fact that he was able to catch up on a bit more rest. Last night had been stressful for him. His dreams had been filled with lurking creatures in the dark, Steve barreling down on him with fists of fury, and Charlotte sleeping with other men. Chris wasn't in these dreams; he had been thankful for that. He didn't want to see his son in that kind of situation.

Mat gave a slight jump when he heard the bathroom door close, but he quickly relaxed as he realized it was just Park.

"Sorry, sir," Park said with a small nod. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's fine," Mat said with a soft smile. "Sorry, I was just thinking about my dreams last night."

"Yeah, you were tossing and turning like something was attacking you," Park said as he pulled a shirt over his head, brushing his bangs out of his eyes

"Sorry if I kept you awake."

"No, it's fine," Park said, gripping Mat's hand and helping him off of the bed, "I was just worried about you falling off."

"I think I did once," Mat laughed, "I was wondering why I was on the floor."

Park smiled and reached for a belt on his bed.

"Where do you think we should go first?" Park asked as he slid the belt through the loops in his pants. "I have no idea...I thought about the hospital, but what if they don't let us see the man?"

- Play Dead -

"I thought about the hospital too, but maybe we should wait. If we can't find anything else, we'll go there last."

The two of them agreed, picked up their wallets, threw their jackets over their shoulders, and walked out of their room, heading for whatever information that was out there, waiting to be found.

\*\*\*

*Because they had left the gates open after taking the man that had almost been its meal, the creature had been free to escape, and that was exactly what it did. The surrounding trees and wilderness left it free to several different varieties of hiding places, along with new sources of food. Here--outside the park--it didn't have to worry about the other animals stealing its food, or being attacked by stupid ones.*

In the end, the creature always won, but it had been revealed to the world by a man who had gotten away.

The giant pig sniffed the surrounding area as it raised its snout, tasting strange air. Metal, gas, overabundant excess of sewer water, and many other strange tastes entered through the boar's nose, but it would never be able to know what was truly in the air.

No.

It knew that it was in a different environment.

The imprints that its feet were making would soon disappear, because there was rain in the air. Dampness would cling to the creature's coat if it didn't get into some kind of shelter soon.

But where would it go? There had been places under the large trees in the forest to hide when it rained, but here, there didn't appear to be any places to hide from the water that fell from the sky.

The creature grunted as it trudged on, coming up to an impressive structure. Logs upon logs were piled up on top of each other, and there were areas where the creature could see in. Shadows of men moved past the windows, causing the creature to

## Kody Boye

grunt again.

They would not bother the pig.

Humans were afraid of such creatures.

That was when the creature heard the barks of another animal. It turned, and before it stood a little scruffy creature covered in fur. This animal was like nothing the boar had never seen before, and with that, it didn't care.

Squealing a great roar of dominance, the small animal's fur stood on end, then it squealed in terror and ran off, hiding under the house.

The small structure that lay before it would work for now.

Crawling inside, the boar settled down for a nap, the humans inside unaware that there was a monster sleeping just outside their doorstep.

\*\*\*

The two of them hadn't been able to find any information in the city, and, of course, the police wouldn't let them anywhere near the Everglades, so they were off to the hospital.

"You sure they'll let us talk to him?" Park asked from the back of the bus that they were on. "I mean, the man got attacked just yesterday."

"I know, but we have no choice. There's no other information we can get, and I'm a private investigator, so they'll *have* to let me talk to him. I can charge them for refusal to cooperate, or something like that, if they don't."

Park nodded as the cab driver stopped. Park handed the cab driver the money that the fare was and stepped out, walking up to the building with Mat.

"Well, shall we?" Mat said with a grin as he pushed the door open, walking up to the front desk. "Excuse me, ma'am."

"What can I do for you?" The desk clerk asked, looking up from her game of Sudoku.

"I need to see the man who was attacked by the wild animal in the Everglades."

"Sir, I can't..."



- Play Dead -

The woman was cut off as Mat flashed his badge in her face.

"You were saying, ma'am?"

"Please, come with me, sir."

Mat gave a nod and placed his badge back in his pants pocket, following the woman down the hall.

"I didn't think she would buy it," Park whispered as he took stride with Mat. "I mean, you don't really look like a cop."

"That's the whole point, wise guy," Mat said, punching Park's shoulder. "I'm not supposed to look like a cop."

Park grinned and punched Mat back, but stood on edge as the woman turned.

"He's awake, but try not to upset him. He has a bit of a blood pressure problem."

"Yes, thank you ma'am," Mat said with a smile, knocking on the door before he entered.

"Private investigator Mat Crawman," Mat said as he fished his badge out of his pants, showing it to the man. "We need to ask you some questions, sir. Would you be comfortable with that?"

The man turned his head toward Mat, and for a moment, Mat felt like he somehow knew the man.

"Mat?" The man asked with a smile. "Is that you?"

"How...how do you..." Mat trailed off for a moment, mentally taking away the man's jaw beard and looking him over. "Is that you, Bart?"

"I knew it was you!" Bart cried. "It's so good to see you again."

Mat smiled and shook the man's hand for a minute before he heard the door close behind him.

"He's your cousin?" Park asked as he crossed his arms over his chest. "You didn't know he was attacked?"

"No, I didn't," Mat said with a sigh. "Sorry, Bart"

"It's not your fault, Mat. My wife has to drive all the way out from Miami to get here, and she only got the call from the nurse an hour ago. Poor Danielle, I feel so bad that I wasn't awake when the nurse called."

Mat patted Bart's shoulder, watching as the man rose, using his bandaged arms to support his weight as he moved.

## Kody Boye

“How bad are they?” Park asked as he looked at Bart’s arms, taking a seat in one of the chairs that were beside the bed, as Mat had. “Looks like you got hurt pretty bad.”

“Bad, kid. That animal would have killed me if I wouldn’t have gotten away.”

Mat nodded, reaching into his jacket and pulling out a tape recorder.

“Would it be all right if I ask a few questions, Bart? I don’t have paper, and I don’t have the patience to write out the questions I ask and what you tell me. Could I record us?”

Bart took a look at the recorder for several long minutes before turning his head to the window, sighing.

“You know that I haven’t been really good about these things, Mat. I’m not good with people knowing what I say about something in particular, especially if it’s about me.”

“I know, Bart, but we need this information. It’s vital that we know more about your attack, so we can protect the public from this thing.”

The color drained out of Bart’s face.

“Shit.”

“Shit what?” Park asked, nervously rubbing his arms. “What does that mean, sir?”

“They didn’t close that gate there! The creature might have gotten out!”

They went silent for several long moments before Mat placed a hand on Bart’s shoulder.

“It’ll be fine. Are you sure you want to do this?”

Bart nodded.

“Yes, Mat, I do.”

\*\*\*

The young couple had walked outside of their log cabin home to discover that an intruder had present in their midst. Prints that came from a large animal were scattered across the front yard.

“What the fuck?” The man said as he bent down to examine

- Play Dead -

the tracks. "What the hell could have made tracks this big?"

When the man looked back up, he realized that his wife had walked off on him.

"Real smart, woman. What if whatever it was that made these prints comes back and..."

The woman screamed and the man bolted to her side.

He was sickened at the sight.

"It got Snookers!" The woman screamed as she fell before the mutilated dog corpse. "It got my baby!"

Police sirens could be heard in the distance as the nearby police force sped off in the direction of the house, right after the man terminated the call on his cell phone.

\*\*\*

"Mr. Lawmen, what time were you attacked by the creature?" Mat began as he cast a look over at the record player.

"It was about twelve-thirty in the morning, if I remember correctly. Yeah, that was it, because I was beginning to complain like I usually do."

"All right. What made you want to go outside on the night of April twenty-second?"

"I had heard something outside," Bart said, pausing for a moment to take a breath. "I thought I heard one of the garbage cans being knocked over. I thought it was a bear at first, so I got up and went outside."

"What did you do from there?" Mat continued, his anxious fingers drumming on the wooden armrests of his seat.

"I-I walked around the security place for the gate and that was when I saw it."

"What was it that you saw? Was it the pig?"

"Please, just give me a moment."

"Take your time."

Mat leaned back in his chair and sighed, shifting his place in his seat and getting comfortable. He hated doing this to Bart, but he and Park needed the information.

Their boss would be pissed if they didn't get it.

## Kody Boye

"All right," Bart continued. "Yes, I saw the pig that I told the reporter about before I passed out."

"A pig?" Park asked, putting a hand over his mouth as he realized his mistake. Mat gestured him to go on. "There aren't any wild pigs in the Everglades, they...they'd be eaten by the bears and alligators"

"It wasn't a *normal* pig, young sir. This thing was fucking, and I mean *fucking*, huge."

"How big was it?" Mat asked as he checked the recorder to see if it was still recording. "Weight, and how high off the ground was it?"

"It was about to my waist, and how heavy it was. I don't know, I'd say about fifteen, sixteen-hundred pounds, maybe even a ton."

Mat stopped breathing after Bart said those words.

"Excuse me," Mat said, opening the collar of his shirt a bit, trying to ease the heat that was forming under his arms and on his chest. "Please, would you say that again?"

"I said that it was fifteen, maybe sixteen-hundred pounds, with the possibility that it could even be a ton."

Mat nodded, looking over at Park.

"Yes. Thank you, Mr. Lawman, that will be all."

\*\*\*

The police had taken the remains of the dead dog with them, and now they were sent to a local veterinarian for an autopsy to be made.

Katrina DeLion was the woman who was going to perform an autopsy on the dead animal.

Katrina DeLion stepped out of her car, revealing very long, sexy legs to the male public as she closed the door behind her. Whistles came and went, along with 'Here Kitty, Kitty, Kitty.'

Kitty was one of Katrina's rough nicknames, one that she took a fancy to whenever she pleased, or wanted a guy. It just depended on her mood, what was going on in her life, or if she had just broken up with another boyfriend.

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Her current one looked like a keeper.

"DeLion," the man at the desk grunted as Katrina opened the door, slightly startling her. "It's about time you got here."

"It's still early, Jim," Katrina said as she watched the man looking up and down her legs. "You're ten years older than me."

"What's thirty-six?" Jim asked, leaning back in the chair and placing his hands behind his head. "A pretty little thing like you would probably just *love* to come home with me."

"Save it for out of the work perimeter, Jim," Katrina said as she walked past the desk. "I'm in no mood to be your eye candy right now."

"Oh, don't worry; you'll be my candy every day."

Katrina heard his laughs as she passed into the small locker room, where the doctors and employees kept their uniforms if they were veterinarians or animal autopsy technicians

Katrina did both, but she preferred not to brag; she had enough on her ass, especially Jim, who was almost literally there.

She slipped into her autopsy uniform and walked into the back room. It was a morgue, if one would even consider it that. They didn't keep too many dead animals here, but the one that had been brought in earlier this morning, it was kept in one of the freezers.

Pulling some rubber gloves over her hands, she gripped the cold iron and pulled free the small compartment, removing the bag that the corpse was in.

She would be having a fun day, a very fun day.

She walked out of this room and into another, where the temperature was stabilized to a human-suitable degree. This was where her autopsy would be performed.

She reached for her tools and grabbed the scalpel, holding it up to the light.

"Let's get this over with," she said before she cut the top of the bag off and began to work on the remains.

\*\*\*

An hour later, Katrina had managed to find only one thing

## Kody Boye

out about the dead dog, and it wasn't the most pleasant thing that one could find out. It had been attacked by a huge animal, an animal that could have easily ripped it into pieces and gorged on more of the body if it had been left out for much longer. The animal wasn't normal to the area, and that was all she could put down in the report.

She placed the remainder of the animal back into the bag and walked back into the morgue, placing the long-dead dog back into the freezer.

"That works out just great," she muttered as she washed her hands, watching the blood seep down into the drain, almost as if it was thirsty for it. "Now we've got some other sick thing wandering around here."

She wasn't one to believe that the animal had been attacked by an unusual animal, but she couldn't be sure. She wasn't psychic, and in no way was she able to know just by looking at the corpse what the poor creature had been attacked by; she didn't have that gift. The only thing that she could do was use science to the best of her abilities, and from there, let nature take the course that it intended to, whether it made her angry or not.

As she walked back into the locker room--careful to remove her uniform so that blood wouldn't get on her skirt--she remembered what had been said on the news earlier

*'Pig from Hell...'*

"Pig from Hell," she said, giving a small laugh after realizing her stupidity. "How reliable is that?"

The man had probably been attacked by a bear, but then again, his wounds had been inflicted by hard, external objects, which would result from the tusks that protruded from a boar's mouth. But if there really was a giant boar roaming around the Everglades National Park, why hadn't anybody found it? Why had this man been the only person who saw it up close and personal? The hunter had seen it, but he hadn't said what it was.

She would go home and enjoy the rest of her week off, and she would enjoy it well. She had a feeling that her boyfriend was finally going to muster up the courage and ask her to marry him.

The thought of it made her smile.

- Play Dead -

Picking up her pace, she walked out of the back room and up toward the exit. She knew that she would be running into Jim again. He was *always* here when she was.

He had probably paid his employer a nice sum just so that she and he could have the *exact* same hours on a regular day.

"Hey, hot stuff," Jim said from behind. "You seem a little tense, maybe I can help loosen that up."

He slid his hand up to her shoulder and fingered the bra strap under her shirt.

God, he was daring today. Jim had never physically touched her in the entire year that she had begun working here, but now that he was, she didn't know what to do.

"Jim, don't touch me," she said, not wanting to anger him in any way. "I don't want this."

"No?" He asked as he encircled her shoulders with his arms, whispering into her ear. "I thought that you *did* want this."

*Want this?* She thought as his hands went over her shoulders, down to the area above her breasts. *When did I say I wanted this?*

"You don't remember then, do you?" He said as he leaned in and inhaled her scent, exhaling as if he had just taken a long drag off of a satisfying cigarette. "You don't remember when you were staring at me the day you came in, the day you winked and placed a hand on your ass. I *knew* what you wanted, Kitty, but you were pushing me away the week after you started coming into the clinic."

The week after she had come in to the clinic.

Wasn't that the week that she had first started working here?

Yes, it was. Now she remembered. It *had* been the week that she applied for a job here when she had casually flirted with Jim, when she had placed her hand on her ass the way a woman did when she wanted a man, when she wanted him in bed with her. She knew that it had been the week after she had come into the clinic that she had been refusing Jim's advances.

"I do remember," she said as she felt his hands dance over her curves "But...I can't do this, Jim."

## Kody Boye

"Nobody will know," he whispered. "The door's locked, and the sign says that the clinic is closed. The two of us are the only two here, and we're the only two that'll be here for the whole day. It's company holiday, remember?"

Katrina shook her head, removing Jim's hand and backing away from him.

"Not now, Jim...maybe later. I need to go home now. I'll see you around, all right?"

She nodded and walked out the door.

At least she didn't have to worry about this right now.

\*\*\*

"Mat, you're all right, aren't you?" Park asked as the two of them sat down at the small table in the hotel room.

"I'll be fine. I'm just a bit shook up, that's all," Mat said. "I just need a break from all of this."

Park nodded and removed his shoes, slipping them beside the night stand.

"Do you think the boss will be happy with what we got?"

"Not enough to get us out of here," Mat said, stripping out of his business shirt and reaching for an undershirt. "But it's better than not getting anything. Maybe we'll go out to the bar later and celebrate, if you want to do that?"

"Sure, sir," Park said with a smile. "I'd like that, at least we wouldn't be stuck here with the hotel food."

"God, I almost got sick off that stuff last night," Mat said, rubbing his stomach. "I'm not eating here anymore."

"Well, the boss never said that we couldn't use the card to get our own food, right?"

"Nope, he sure didn't."

The two of them laughed and smiled, enjoying a moment where they were finally able to relieve the stress that the day had on them. The interview that they had done with Bart had drained them.

"So, what time do you think we should go?" Mat asked.

"Why don't we go at six? It's a bit later by then, and the bars



- Play Dead -

will have more activity, which means better drinks.”

Mat nodded and clapped Park on the shoulder, smiling again.

“I swear on my grave that you’re a genius, Park.”

“No, not really, sir, just resourceful.”

Mat smiled and sat on his bed, tossing Park the remote and letting the young man scroll through the channels until they found something interesting.

\*\*\*

They had watched a slow movie until six, then the two of them got into the car and drove down to a bar, where they drank beer and ate dinner, making small talk about the day’s activities.

Park was hit on by several woman during this time.

“Sheesh, what did you do?” Mat asked, watching as another woman walked past after waving at Park. “You put some kind of cologne on or let out some extra testosterone?”

Park choked back the beer that he had in his mouth.

“Sir!” Park said, startled by the remark. “That was rather unexpected.”

“Hey, I was just asking,” Mat said as he leaned back, sipping on his own drink. “And if you did put something on, I want to know where you got it.”

Park grinned.

“Sorry, but I can’t give away my secrets.”

“Aw, come on?” Mat said with a grin. “Not even for me?”

Park leaned over the table, a stupid grin passing over his face.

“My secret is that I have no secret.”

“Bullshit! You have to be doing something.”

“Nope, I’m not doing anything at all,” Park said with a smile, looking over at a nearby television set. “Look, the news is on.”

“Today, a young couple reported that their dog had been savaged by a strange creature. Katrina DeLion, the veterinarian who performed the autopsy, said, ‘It was no animal from around here, so it’s either an escapee from a zoo or a large lost pet.’ If any

Kody Boye

of you have any information on what may have killed this young couple's dog, please call the number below.'

"Damn," Mat said. "Do you think it's the pig?"

"Bart said that it might have gotten out, so I don't doubt it," Park said with a sigh, leaning back in his seat. "This is really confusing."

Mat nodded, shaking his head.

"Well, I guess we just wait and see what happens."

\*\*\*

The tastes, the smells, the textures: they were all different outside of the forest that it had once been trapped in, and now that it was in this new world, it would be able to do as it pleased.

There were no animals bigger than it here in this masterpiece of metal and wood and stone and gravel, and it would use that to its advantage.

Blood from a fresh kill dripped from its chin, forming with the pool the dripped around the corpse. The teeth that littered the inside of its mouth were sharpened in a way that nature had allowed it to be, right after it had left its mother, when it had fed on the first animal.

It had grown as it had because of the way it ate, and the way it was able to survive

There were no men in this house, and it knew that. No big metal beasts were lying dormant in front of the entryway into the domain of the creatures that rode inside them, so there was no need to fear.

This creature was larger, and made it much easier to eat the parts that it wanted to eat.

But in the distance, large screeches came from somewhere.

Raising its head, it watched as the lights started to get closer, and this was when the creature bounded off into the trees, where it would soon lose track of the creatures that would soon be hunting it.

\*\*\*

“Another?” Mat asked as he rolled over on the bed, stretching his arms and looking at Park, seeing that the young man was shirtless in this early-morning hour of four-thirty. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No, sir,” Park said, sighing. “Another one. I don’t know if Katrina is doing the autopsy though.”

“You think we should talk to her?” Mat asked as he sat up, leaning against the headrest. “Wouldn’t she have some information on these things?”

“I’m not sure if she’ll be free to answer our questions,” Park said. “Remember how she didn’t appear on the news yesterday? Maybe she’s camera shy, or maybe she just doesn’t like all the attention.”

Mat shrugged and yawned, placing a hand on his forehead and expelling a breath of air.

This was getting way too complicated and confusing, even for him, a man who had worked on gruesome murder cases.

“It looks like we’re going to be here for while,” Mat said with a sigh. “I don’t think we’ll be able to get the leads we need unless we have concrete proof of the creature’s existence.”

“It’s not like it’s a Cryptozoological animal, sir. It’s a pig for God’s sake.”

“I guess you’re right about that. The only problem I have with trying to get proof is the creature’s size. I mean, would you believe that there’s a fifteen-hundred pound pig here if I told you and didn’t have a picture to prove it?”

Park sat there for several moments before shaking his head.

“No, sir, I wouldn’t.”

Mat nodded, and with another sigh, closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. This was going to leave the two of them in a position where it would be hard to get information

They would have to find some way to get in touch with Katrina, because she was an important lead at this current moment in time.

“Where do time do you think she goes into the animal clinic?”

## Kody Boye

"Maybe around noon," Park said as he shut the TV off, crawling back into bed. "Maybe around noon."

\*\*\*

"Katrina, what's wrong?" Vincent, her boyfriend, asked as he rolled over in bed, touching her arm. "Why can't you sleep?"

"I don't know, Vincent," Katrina said as she rolled over, cuddling up close to his bare chest. "I must be nervous."

"Shh, it's all right," he said, kissing her forehead. "I'm here for you, don't worry."

"Thank you, Vince," she said as she softly kissed his lips. "I love you."

"I love you too, doll," he said with a smile, brushing a hand through his hair. "I hope I haven't been neglecting you."

"No, you haven't," she said. "You haven't been."

It made her feel guilty that she hadn't tried to stop Jim in a more forceful way. But then again, Jim was a large man, a very large man who could have easily raped her if he had wanted to.

"Vince, I'm sorry if I've done anything to upset you," she said as she closed her eyes, leaning against his chest and using it as a pillow of sorts. "I didn't mean to."

"Kitty, what are you talking about?" He asked as he placed an arm around her. "You didn't upset me. Is something bothering you?"

"Yeah. You won't get mad if I tell you, right?"

"Why would I get mad at you?" He asked. "I love you, Kitty; I wouldn't get mad at you for anything."

"Jim was hitting on me again."

"Again? That's not surprising..."

"No, Vincent. He was *touching* me. Touching me in places that only you touch me."

Vincent was silent for several long minutes before he spoke up.

"Did you...try to stop him?"

"I did...only after I made sure he wasn't going to try and do anything. You're not mad at me are you, Vince?"

- Play Dead -

She was nervous at his quietness. If he was mad at her because of this, it could ruin the relationship. She wouldn't be able to live if he broke up with her, and she knew that.

"Vincent? Are you mad?"

He swung his legs over the bed and sat up, making her nervous.

"Are you..." she swallowed. "You're not leaving, are you?"

"No," he finally said, breaking his code of silence. "I'm not leaving, and I'm not mad at you. You should have told me earlier, Kitty."

"I wasn't sure if you would be mad at me or not."

"I wouldn't have been mad, Kitty..." He trailed off, sighing "Do you want to call in sick tomorrow?"

"Why?"

"I want to have a talk with this man at your work. If he's going to touch you, especially in a sexual way, I want to deal with it."

"You're not going to hit him, are you?"

"If it comes down to that, I'll leave. I'm not going to make life around here harder for you. I know that you're a very attractive woman, but as far as I know, you're still my woman, right?"

She smiled and seated herself in his naked lap.

"Yes, you still are, my little love slave."

He smiled and rested his hand on her thigh, kissing her.

"I'm glad I am. Let's go back to sleep now. I want to be rested up before I go to your work tomorrow."

She crawled back under the covers and kissed him one last time, a smile breaking across her face.

He still loved her.

\*\*\*

Mat had just finished buckling his belt as Park walked through the door, carrying a few bags of food in one hand.

"Sorry it took me so long, there must have been a thousand people in that drive through."

"No worries," Mat grinned, seating himself and taking a bite

## Kody Boye

out of a hamburger. "You know, it didn't seem like you were gone all that long."

"Really? I must have been gone for a half hour, almost forty-five minutes."

"I was looking at numbers in the local phone book."

"Did you manage to find Miss. DeLion's phone number?"

"I did, but it said that it didn't take unsolicited phone numbers. I guess we could always go to her house later today."

"If we can't contact her through her phone, I guess we should do that."

As they finished eating, they cleaned up their trash and put the remainder of the food in the small refrigerator in hopes that it would still be good to eat later.

The two of them walked out of the room, hoping that they would be able to speak to Katrina DeLion today.

\*\*\*

Pulling into the driveway, Mat and Park got out of their small business car. "Wow, look at it," Park said. "I feel like I've stepped into the country."

"Well, this is no country," Mat said, patting Park's shoulder. "But it might as well be, with this pig running around. Come on, let's go talk to the lady."

Park nodded and walked up the driveway with Mat.

\*\*\*

Katrina guided her hands up to her head, the shampoo sticking to the long locks of her blond hair. She heard the doorbell ring three times, followed by another two a minute after.

It was Vincent's way of ringing the doorbell.

Smiling, she crawled out of the shower, dried herself off, and put a bathrobe around her, evenly spreading the material so it would show her breasts.

She walked through the house and to the front door, opening it with a smile.

- Play Dead -

“Hello Vince...”

She trailed off as she saw two complete strangers standing at her door.

\*\*\*

Mat and Park could only stare at the cleavage that the woman had cleverly exposed with her bathrobe before they finally turned their heads away.

“Excuse us, ma’am.”

“I thought you were my boyfriend,” Katrina DeLion said as he moved the bathrobe over her breasts. “I’m terribly sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Mat said with a small smile. “Don’t worry about it. Do you mind if the two of us come in?”

“My boyfriend isn’t here,” Katrina said. “He went to talk with another man who was trying to put his hands on me.”

“I’m not that kind of man, Miss. DeLion, and neither is my friend.”

Mat sighed, knowing that the woman wouldn’t let them in. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his private investigator’s badge. “Can I come in now?”

Katrina stared at the badge for a moment before nodding.

“Yes, officer, you can come in.”

Mat nodded and stepped into the house, waiting for Park to come in before turning to Katrina

“My name is Mat Crawman, Miss. DeLion.”

“Please, just Katrina.”

“All right, Katrina. I’m with the police force up in Tida Reserve, and I’m here investigating the hunter’s sighting and the attack on Bart Lawmen. You’re the woman who did the autopsies on the animals, right?”

“Yes...Officer...”

“Mat, please.”

“Yes, Mat. I was the woman who did the autopsies on the animals.”

“Let’s sit down, this might take a while,” Mat said with a sigh. “A long while.”

## Kody Boye

\*\*\*

Vincent pulled into the driveway about an hour later, angry and with a small cut on his jaw. The damn man had punched him, and had cut him with the ring on his finger.

“Shit,” Vincent said as he pulled his hand away, seeing more blood. “Dammit! That fucker.”

The man had denied the fact that he had ever touched his girlfriend, and after Vincent had told the man several times that Kitty had specifically told him what he had done, Jim had been angry. Jim snapped when he mentioned that Kitty said that he had told her, ‘Nobody will know.’ That was when Jim had punched Vincent, and that was when he had fled the veterinary clinic after Jim threatened to pull his knife out.

Vincent swore one more time before he got out of the car, careful to keep his hand under his chin so that blood wouldn’t drip of Kitty’s flowers.

Kitty liked her white flowers, and Vincent wasn’t going to taint them with his blood.

Vincent opened the door and came inside. He growled as he saw two other men and his girlfriend in only her bathrobe.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Vincent. “Are you here to try and fuck Kitty too?”

Katrina stood.

“No, Vincent, they didn’t do anything. They’re police officers.”

*Shit..*

“No, Katrina,” the taller man said as he stood. “I’m a private investigator, my friend’s a writer for a local paper.”

Katrina shook her head and walked up to Vincent, seeing the blood that covered his hand

“What happened?”

“Jim and me got into a fight, he threw a punch and his ring cut my chin. I’m fine, Kitty, don’t worry.”

“No, I am worried. Come on, I’ll clean and bandage it for you.”



- Play Dead -

Vincent gave a small nod, taking a quick glance at the two other men before he followed Kitty into the kitchen, where she began to clean and bandage his chin.

\*\*\*

Katrina's boyfriend had just walked in, and now it would probably be harder for Mat to get the information that he needed. Mat didn't know if Vincent would make a big deal about the cops being in his home, but he would keep his mind away from that possibility right now.

Mat wanted to know what Katrina knew about the giant pig that was stalking around the area

Mat shook his head and stood, walking over to the couple.

"I could go arrest the man, if you want me to."

"No, don't bother," Vincent said, grimacing as Katrina spread some disinfectant on the wound. "The bastard will get his own."

Mat gave a small nod and watched as Katrina finished bandaging Vincent's chin, kissing him.

"Go on, hon; go take a nap or something. I'm sorry the trouble I put you through."

"It's all right, doll," Vincent said, kissing her cheek before casting another glance toward Mat and Park before walking down the hall.

"Sorry," Katrina said as she sat back down. "I just worry about him. He doesn't cause trouble, but it comes to him a lot."

"I'm sorry for what happened," Park finally spoke up. "Have you ever considered telling the police about the man at your work?"

"No. I was afraid that if I went back to work, he might hit on me, or worse, rape me."

"I understand," Mat said. "Could we discuss the dead animals now, please? We don't want to bother you while you're at home"

"Yes, we can discuss them," she said as she sat down. "Ask whatever you need to."

## Kody Boye

“The dogs, what kind of wounds did they have on them?”

“Sharp wounds, like they could have been done with a knife,” she said as she picked a piece of paper up, drawing marks similar to the ones on the animals “Like these.”

Mat nodded, looking back up Katrina after a minute of staring at her drawing.

“Could it be possible that there’s some psychotic man or woman going around and killing the animals?”

“And eating them?” She asked. “I don’t think there are any modern-day cannibals living here in Homestead.”

“But it could be a possibility, right?” Mat asked. “There could be someone eating these animals?”

“I guess. But the animals were half eaten, officer. I don’t think a human could eat that much meat from an animal.”

Mat nodded

“All right then, let’s keep going.”

\*\*\*

For the next hour and a half, Mat interviewed Katrina DeLion, while Park remained on the couch, sitting and listening or entertaining himself by looking at the knick knacks from his place on the couch. They were nice, charming knick knacks, ranging from cats to dogs to flowers and other small sculptures. The couple surely had a nice start

Vince made his appearance once again, the bandage taped to his chin, a soft look struck over his face. Vincent leaned against the wall and watched as Katrina talked to Mat, and in turn, Park watched him. Vince didn’t seem like a violent man, but he could pass as a biker if he wanted to. Vincent had spiked hair; from the point of view that Park was in, though a small amount of fringe hung in his face, dark eyes, and a hooked chin; the chins that seemed to split in two down the middle.

Park brushed the fringe out of his eyes and looked out the window, where the sun was setting, steadily getting darker and darker. Soon, it would be pitch black outside, and the creature would come out again.

- Play Dead -

"Hey," Vince said as he sat down beside Park, rubbing his chin. "Sorry about yelling at you guys earlier."

"It's fine," Park said, giving the man a small smile. "You were just worried about your..."

"Girlfriend," Vince said with a smile. "She's my girlfriend."

Park nodded, looking down at his watch and seeing that it was well near six o'clock.

"Mat," Park said as he stood, walking over to the chair and placing a hand on Mat's shoulder. "We need to leave."

"I know," Mat said as he turned the recorder off. "I know."

"Is that all you need?" Katrina asked.

"Yes, it is," Mat said with a small smile. "Thank you, and we're sorry that we had to bother you and your boyfriend."

"No trouble," Katrina said with a smile. "No trouble at all."

Park and Mat gave the couple a goodbye as they walked outside, climbing into their car and driving back to their hotel.

"Is it enough?" Park asked with a sigh as he looked at the recorder.

"I...I don't know," Mat said with a sigh. "I don't know."

\*\*\*

Little dogs who went bark-bark-bark in the middle of the night were the ones that ended up dead. That was why people started chaining them up close to the house and muzzling them. It was all they could do to protect the animals.

Katrina was going back over her notes on the autopsies, she frowned.

Something didn't fit in with the way the dogs were killed. The larger one was half eaten, whereas the little one was almost completely devoured. Why would that be? If the bite wounds were that large, wouldn't the creature had eaten the dog?

A hand touched her shoulder.

"Get away!"

"Kitty, it's just me," Vincent said with a small laugh as he hugged her from behind. "What's wrong?"

"Sorry. I was distracted."

## Kody Boye

"Come on, Kitty, you're always distracted," Vincent said with a smile, kissing her cheek. "You've been that way since we met two years ago."

"I know," she said with a sigh. "I know."

\*\*\*

Vincent frowned. He felt something in her sigh that he had been putting off for the longest time. He had been afraid to commit himself to her entirely, but now he knew that he had to do it. He knew that if he didn't, he could lose her, and he didn't want to lose Kitty.

Walking over to the fireplace, Vincent slid aside a picture and grabbed the small, black box that was there. Inside was the ring that he had bought two months ago, but until this time, he had been too scared to ask for her hand.

But now, he would.

Vincent walked over to Kitty and touched her shoulder.

"Doll, can I ask you something?"

"Yes," she said. "You can."

"Stand up."

\*\*\*

At first, Katrina thought it was an odd thing for Vincent to ask, then a rush of divine joy went through her blood.

"Kitty," he said as he got down on his knee. "Will you marry me?"

When he opened the box, Katrina was almost blinded by the diamond that was on the ring. She knew that it was big enough for her mother and her friends to say, 'Let's go skating,' and it filled her heart with joy.

"Yes," she said, tears coming to her eyes. "Yes, Vincent."

Tears came to Vincent's eyes and he stood, kissing her deeply as he embraced her.

"I love you," Vincent said, smiling. "I love you more than anything else in the world, Kitty."

- Play Dead -

"I love you too, Vincent," she said, burying her head in his chest. "I love you so much."

\*\*\*

Mat shook his head. He turned as a road block stopped them from going back to the hotel. He swore as he realized that they would have to go into the wild wilderness before they could get back to the city.

"Are you sure we should be going this way?" Park asked. "What if something runs out in front of the car and we crash?"

"That only happens in the movies, Park."

"It happens in real life too!"

"The way you're thinking only happens in the movies," Mat sighed "We're not going to get attacked by a giant pig, so don't worry about that."

Park took another deep breath and let his body sink into the chair. For the most part it worked, since it looked like he had shrunk a considerable amount. Park still looked like a man who was nervous as hell about being in a forest with nothing but the front lights of a small station wagon to light the area in front of them

"Park, chill," Mat said at Park's slow, deep breaths. "We're just fine. The worst we could see is a deer or a wild dog crossing the road."

"All right, sir," Park said, straightening up in his seat. "I'm all right now."

Park probably wouldn't have said that if he had known that there was a creature lurking in the darkness, ready to cross the road.

As the lights crossed over its dark-colored fur, it turned and the eyes reflected, making Mat stop exactly as the creature stopped in front of them.

Mat was in shock, and Park was panicking. The creature watched them with its two large eyes, and though they were squinted, they showed a ferocity that would have killed them if they were weapons.

## Kody Boye

“Turn the lights off, sir,” Park said, reaching over and gripping Mat’s arm. “You’re making it angry.”

With tentative, shaking fingers, Mat turned the car off, plunging them into darkness, making the creature disappear into nothing.

The only light that managed to come in was soft strands of moonlight, but even that wasn’t enough to calm their fears. Park’s breathing was still rampant.

“Fuck, do you have asthma?”

“Not bad, no...” Park said as he tried to collect himself. “I’ll be fine...just...just be quiet, sir.”

Mat nodded and gripped Park’s hand, trying to bring Park some form of comfort. Park gripped Mat’s hand back, which relieved Mat of almost all his worries.

“Come on,” Mat said, scanning the darkness. “Where did you go?”

“T-T-Turn t-t-the l-l-light on,” Park stuttered. “M-M-Maybe it’s g-g-gone.”

With a shaking hand, Mat reached forward and turned the car back on. The lights came back as large orbs of light that would scare any normal, small animal out of its mind. But the pig was nowhere to be seen...

Not in front of them, anyway.

Mat looked out his window.

The pig’s snout was pressed right against it.

A rabid squeal escaped from the bowels of its being just as Mat slammed his foot on the gas, going from zero to fifty in but a blink of an eye.

“Is it after us?” Park screamed. “Come on, Mat, is it?”

“Shut the fuck up!” Mat yelled as he sped around a corner, nearly sending them off the road. “We’ll be just fine if you do that!”

For several long, painful moments they continued on in painful silence, and it was only when they broke through another side entrance to the city that Mat calmed down.

“Sorry,” Mat sighed, looking over at Park, who had tears spilling down in his face. “Park, I’m sorry.”

- Play Dead -

"It's not your fault, sir," Park said as he wiped away the tears. "I'm sorry... I've never been scared that bad in my life before."

Mat nodded and embraced Park, letting him cry into his shoulder.

"We're fine now," Mat sighed. "Nothing's going to happen to us now."

"I know," Park sobbed. "Thank you, Mat."

Mat nodded, and as he looked up to look out the window, he could see the streetlights before them.

The streetlights had bad omens dancing under them.

\*\*\*

"You all right, Kitty?" Vincent asked as she rolled over, afraid that his fiancé might be worried about something. "I wasn't too rough, was I?"

"No, it's not that," Katrina said "It's nothing, Vincent. Please, don't worry about it."

"Come on, Kitty, tell me."

"I..." She shook her head and snuggled up closer. "I don't want to go back to work tomorrow. What if Jim tries to hit me? Or worse..."

"Kitty, don't worry about it," Vincent said, kissing the tip of her nose. "I'll come in to work with you tomorrow."

"What if the others..."

"I don't give a shit about what the others think about me being at work with you, Kitty. You already know that I work here at the house most of the time, so I'll come to work with you tomorrow. I don't want to risk that bastard hitting you because of what I did."

Katrina nodded and kissed him, closing her eyes and sharing his pillow.

"Good night, Vincent. I love you."

"I love you too, doll."

\*\*\*

## Kody Boye

That morning, Katrina woke to the sound of his zipper sliding up Vincent's pants

"Morning, love," he said, leaning over to kiss her. "I hope you slept all right."

"I slept fine, didn't you?"

"I thought it was a bit hot," he said as he sat on the bed. "I don't know...I guess it was from us having sex."

"You're so vulgar," Katrina said with a smile, slapping his leg. "But I love you."

"I love you too," he said, kissing her, pulling away when he remembered that he hadn't taken a shower. "Do you want to shower with me?"

"I guess," she shrugged. "If you want to."

Vincent offered Katrina his hand and helped her out of the bed, the two of them stepping into the bathroom, stripping of their clothes.

"You all right?" He said as he stroked her wet hair, kissing her neck. "You seem a bit nervous."

"You've never asked me to do this before."

"I'm sorry I just put this out there, Kitty. I thought that you would enjoy showering with me."

Katrina nodded and rested her head against his opposite shoulder, allowing him to kiss her neck. She shampooed both his and her own head, allowing him to continue his own personal lovemaking on her neck. He sent shivers down her spine when he did this, and it took all her willpower to not grab his shoulders to stabilize herself

"We need to get dressed and eat," Katrina said as she pushed him away "Come on, Vincent."

"I could shower with you all day," he said. "I could."

"And I could too, but we can't do that right now. Let's wait until this weekend."

After getting out of the shower and dressing, the two ate a small breakfast and got into the car. He took the driver's seat and started the car, looking over at her as she climbed into the passenger seat.



- Play Dead -

"It's going to be all right," Vincent said, touching Katrina's shoulder. "I'm going to be there with you, and I won't let you out of my sight."

"You promise?" Katrina asked.

"I promise."

The two kissed before he started the car and backed out of the driveway.

Vincent occasionally took a glance over at Katrina, listening to her directions.

"There it is," she said as she pointed to the veterinary clinic. "My parking place is right there."

He parked in Katrina's place and turned the car off, sticking the keys into his pocket and getting out with her. Katrina could see the people looking out at them, but she knew they were looking at Vincent more than they were here.

They had heard about Vincent's fight.

Word traveled fast in a small area.

Katrina got out of the car and led Vincent into the building.

"Hi, Vincent," a young black woman said. "How are you?"

"Just fine, Latoya," he said as he leaned against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. "Just fine."

When Katrina walked over to her three friends at work and raised her hand to them, they all burst out in shrieks.

"Look at the size of that thing!" An older, red-haired woman, Madonna, said.

"Let's go skating!" Latoya said, sending the three into laughs.

\*\*\*

Vincent smiled at his wife-to-be and her friends. He had been going off into his own little world until he felt somebody slam him with a hug.

"You finally asked for her hand," Latoya said, grabbing his face and pinching it. "You're so romantic."

"Thanks," Vincent said. "Watch the chin."

"Oh," Latoya nodded and took a few careful steps back,

## Kody Boye

smiling. "Sorry."

"No problem," Vincent smiled. "No problem at all."

There hadn't been a problem until the back door slammed open.

"You asshole!" Jim yelled. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Get over it, Jim," Madonna said. "He's bigger than you, and he could kick your ass."

Vincent was surprised at Madonna's language, but he didn't care; it made him feel better.

"Shut up, you whore," Jim said, turning his eyes back to Vincent.

Everybody gasped when Jim called Madonna a whore. It wasn't a remark that was normally said, but there were a few people--especially those at the clinic--who knew about Madonna's past prostitution.

"Oh no you didn't!" Latoya said as she began rolling up her sleeves. "Want to take this outside, big boy?"

Vincent backed away as Latoya came up. Even for her size, Latoya could easily kick somebody's ass; Vincent had seen her do it. Some man had gawked at Madonna on the street while Vincent, Kitty and the rest of her friends were out for a friendly gathering, saying something rude that Madonna took offensive, running to the bathroom and crying.

Latoya had that guy running out of the building with a broken nose.

"Want to try it, nigger?" Jim said, balling his hands into fists. "Come on, I'd like to see you try."

"You're just chicken, big boy!"

Before Jim could raise a hand to Latoya, Vincent stepped in, grabbing Jim's hand

"Stop it, Jim."

Jim's fist slammed into Vincent's face.

Vincent dropped.

"Vincent!" Katrina yelled as she ran to his side, watching as Latoya got that fierce look in her eyes.

"You asked for it now. You gonna wish you were never born."

- Play Dead -

Now I'll teach you how we in the ghetto deal with our problems."

"Madonna, call the police!" Katrina yelled as she was tending to Vincent

That was when Latoya's first punch flew, hitting Jim square in the chin.

Vincent could tell Katrina's world was spiraling out of her control as he heard Madonna's frantic cries for the police to hurry up, Latoya and Jim's brawl, and his own staggered, slowed breaths.

"Vincent, Vincent, come on, Vincent, snap out of it!"

Vincent heard Latoya cry as Jim slammed her back into a wall, beginning to advance on her

"You bitch," Jim roared. "You're going to wish you were never born."

Then, Helen--who had been in the background trying to avoid everything--took action.

Jim was met by the barrel of the pistol.

"Back up!" Helen yelled. "Don't you lay a hand on any of us women or her man."

Jim did as he was told, raising his hands, just as the police barged into the veterinary clinic.

"It was him!" Madonna said as she pointed at Jim. "He attacked her man after he tried to hit Latoya, then he hit her and the two of them started fighting. It was all out of self defense. Take him away!"

The police officer looked over the scene and then to Jim, who had his hands raised.

"Put the gun down, ma'am, we've got everything under control"

Helen nodded and put the gun back in her purse.

Vincent watched another officer request Helen's concealed weapon's permit

The police officers dealt with everything, and by the time the police were ready to close the scene off, Vincent came back to his senses.

"Vincent!" Katrina cried as she hugged him. "Are you all right?"

## Kody Boye

"Fine," Vincent coughed. "What about Latoya?"

"They're taking her to the hospital..." Katrina said, tears coming to her eyes. "She might have broken her wrist."

"Go with the ambulance. I'll drive home."

"But Vincent, you're hurt..."

"I'm fine, Kitty. Go make sure your friend's all right."

Katrina nodded, and as she, Helen and Madonna went out the door to get into the ambulance, Vincent sighed.

Everything in this town was going to hell.

\*\*\*

The following night, Mat and Park were a little shook up, but not as bad as they had been. Their nerves were beginning to calm, and at least now they didn't have to worry about a giant, monster pig attacking them.

"Park, you holding up all right?" Mat asked, setting a hand on Park's shoulder.

"Fine," Park said, forcing a smile. "Just fine."

Even though they were safe and sound in their hotel room, Park was still worried. Mat was that Park hadn't slept last night, with the way he had been tossing and turning.

*Poor kid, Mat thought. That really freaked him out.*

"Are you sure, Park?" Mat asked as he sat down beside him, putting a hand on Park's shoulder.

"Yes sir, I am."

"You want to talk about it?"

"I...I guess," Park said with a sigh. "Sir, I'm still afraid of the dark outside, for the most part. I'm all right if I'm in a car or with somebody else, but...if you told me to go walk around outside after the dark, I wouldn't. It didn't help that I was scared out of my mind by my friends when I was a little kid."

Mat nodded, giving Park a few pats on the shoulder.

"It's fine, I'm here. To tell you the truth, I wouldn't want to go back out there anyway. That monster's been killing the dogs, and who knows when it might attack a person."

Park nodded, stood, and pulled an undershirt over his head.

- Play Dead -

"I didn't sleep last night."

"I can go get some downers from the pharmacy," Mat said. "If you want me to, anyway."

"No, sir, I'll deal with it. Don't worry, I'll be fine."

Mat sighed and walked around the room, cupping his hands behind his lower back, thinking about what had happened last night.. Here was the giant pig that the two of them had been searching for, but now that they had found it, what were they supposed to do? Join the hunter that was 'legally hunting' in the Everglades? Or would they do the alternative by joining the men who had died and gone missing in the wildlife reserve?

The thought sent a cold finger down Mat's spine, and as he shivered, he looked back at the recorder he had used to interview Katrina DeLion.

'Wounds made from tusks,' 'ripped apart,' 'large animal that could not be native to the area,' and, 'a taste for blood.'

They all hit the perfect note on the chorus that was death.

"Park, are you sure you don't want me to get you any medicine?" Mat asked, trying to distract himself from his thoughts.

"I..." Park trailed off, sighing. "I guess, sir. Just don't spend too much on the medicine."

Mat nodded and eagerly grabbed the keys to the company car, making his way out the door. He walked down the hall and to the elevator. He stood, waiting, for several long minutes before it finally came up.

"Fuck," Mat said. "I got the two of us into a real predicament here."

Why were they lucky to have seen the creature face-to-face last night? Why were they lucky enough to actually get away without being hurt or injured? And why were they lucky to have escaped without anything other than a bad, restless night of sleep?

Mat couldn't dwell on his thoughts that moment because the elevator opened and a rush of people came in.

"Let me out," Mat said, pushing his way through. "I'm getting off here."

## Kody Boye

The people moved out of his way, and Mat left the elevator with a better feeling in his chest. He had been a bit miserable, but bossing people around did cheer him up.

*I'm one rude bastard, the way I pushed them out of my way.*

There was one philosophy with being a human that every single man--and in some cases--women, had to know, and that was that one had to be vicious to survive in the big bad world of the big city. Carnivores were what the people were, and if one just sat back and let the world surround him, he would be doomed for demise.

The cold breeze hit Mat like frost would winter. He pulled his jacket to his body, almost hugging it as he walked to his car. He released his arms from his body after situating himself in the seat, pushing the key into the ignition and casually backing out of the hotel's parking lot. Hiss eyes were on the road as he made the short trip to the pharmacy, sighing as he pulled the car to a stop. He noticed that his cell phone was ringing.

He made a grab for it, but it had already stopped ringing.

"Damn," he cursed. "Who would be calling this early?"

He placed the phone to his ear.

"Hey, Dad, call me back later, please?"

He sighed as he placed the phone in his pocket, got out of the car, and walked into the pharmacy.

\*\*\*

Chris sighed and let the phone fall away from his ear, his index finger going to the off button and turning the phone off. He figured that his father was probably still asleep and had turned his cell phone off.

"Dad," he said, looking at his digital alarm clock. "I hope you call me back soon."

Steve had picked up his bad habit of drinking again, and now he was starting to get mean. Steve hadn't hit him yet, but he had yelled at him enough to force him into the bedroom.

"I'll have to get up sometime," Chris said, throwing his legs over the side of the bed and pulling a pair of jeans up his legs.

- Play Dead -

"I'll sleep all day if I don't."

He pulled an undershirt over his head and pushed a belt through the loops on his jeans, sighing.

*Let's see if I can walk out of the bedroom without getting yelled at.*

Chris opened the door and peered out into the living room, where he saw his stepfather reading the morning paper. For the time being, Steve seemed like he was in a better mood.

"Dad," Chris said. "You're not still mad at me, are you?"

Steve put down the paper. Chris could see his stepfather's bloodshot eyes.

"Chris? No...no, you're fine. I'm sorry I was in such a bad mood last night." Steve patted the seat beside him on the couch. "Come sit with me, son."

Chris gave a small nod and slowly but carefully made his way over to the couch, sitting by his stepfather's side.

"Chris, I'm sorry I got drunk last night. You know how stressed out I've been since your Mom's been gone to visit her parents. I'm sorry." Steve sighed and wrapped an arm around Chris' shoulder "I feel like the worst father in the world, Chris. A bastard like me doesn't deserve a good son like you."

"It's fine, Dad. I'm not mad at you, I understand."

Steve forced a smile and stood.

"I'll make breakfast. You must be hungry?"

Chris nodded and watched Steve walk into the kitchen. At least the man was starting to act a bit more decent, instead of yelling at him stepson all the time.

*Thank you, Chris thought. Thank you.*

They ate a small breakfast. Chris only talked when his stepfather spoke to him, and only at that time. At least Steve was resisting the temptation to grab a beer out of the fridge. When the man drank, he drank a lot, more than a normal person should. The only reason Steve hadn't passed out last night before he went to bed was pure, dumb luck.

"You all right, Chris?" Steve asked as he speared a piece of sausage "You seem worried about something."

"I'm fine, Dad. It's just..." Chris shook his head and sighed.

Kody Boye

“Just what?”

“I tried to call my father earlier, sir, just to see if he was all right. He hasn’t checked in with me for a while.”

Steve gave a small nod and set his fork down.

“Did you ever get a hold of him?”

“No, I called him before I came out of the bedroom. I just wanted to make sure he was all right.” Chris swallowed a lump in his throat, turning his head away. “You’re not mad at me, are you, Dad?”

“No, I’m not mad. Why would I be mad?”

“The fight you two had...”

“It was my fault, Chris, and I’m sorry. I should have never tried to hit your father.”

Chris looked out the window, watching the birds outside. It was a distraction that he used when he was nervous, especially when he was talking to his stepfather.

“Chris, you don’t have to be nervous around me, you know that.”

“I know, Dad,” Chris sighed. “I’m still getting used to you and my mom being together.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. Chris, I don’t know why your mother stopped loving your real father, but I love your mother so much more than you know I’m sorry if you’re still hurting because of this.”

“I-I know, Dad.” Chris said, taking his plate to the sink. “Don’t worry about it. I’m going up to my room for a few minutes”

Steve nodded and gestured Chris off. Chris returned the nod and walked back to his room. His cell phone was a calling card.

Maybe his father had called back.

He flipped the cell phone, pressed it to his ear, and listened.

“Sorry Chris, I turned the volume on my phone back up. Call me back, son. Tell me what’s on your mind. I love you, call me soon. Bye.”

The message ended. Chris sighed, punching in his father’s number.

Hopefully, his father would answer.



- Play Dead -

\*\*\*

Mat was just walking out of the pharmacy when his cell phone rang, startling him. He was so caught off guard that he almost tripped. If he would have tripped, he would have landed face first into the gutter, and that would not have been a good thing. It would equal a trip to the hospital.

"Dammit," he said as he stood up, brushing himself off. "I could have hurt myself."

He jumped into the car and groped for his cell phone.

"Hello?" Mat asked.

"Dad? Is that you?"

"Chris," Mat said, seeing his smile in the rearview mirror. "Sorry I didn't get your call earlier, son."

"No, it's fine, Dad. I was just wondering if you were all right."

"I'm fine, son. What would make you think that I wasn't all right?"

"You promised that you would call every week. You didn't call last week, and I was starting to get nervous. I was wondering if something happened to you."

"Oh," Mat sighed, swearing inside at his stupidity. "Chris, I'm sorry, son. I've been really busy and everything. My boss had me and Park come down to Homestead to look into the wild animal attacks."

"Dad, you didn't do anything that could have gotten you hurt, did you?"

*It had walked out of the forest and in front of the car with an abandon; one so simple that it had only required to stand in front of the car. It had intended to scare them, and its eyes gave the soft reflection of white as the headlights of the, making it appear as though the creature was a denizen from Hell itself.*

"Dad, are you all right?"

Chris' words snapped Mat out of his thoughts.

"I'm fine, son. And no, I didn't do anything that could have gotten me hurt. I'm fine, don't worry about me."

Mat heard a sigh from the other end of the phone, making

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him nervous. What if Chris wasn't falling for the lies that he was telling him right now?

"Dad, are you sure you didn't get yourself into any kind of trouble?"

"I'm sure, son sure. How about you? Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Mom went to see her parents, so it's just been me and Steve here."

"He hasn't been hitting you, has he?" Mat asked, his good mood sinking a notch.

"No, Dad, he isn't. He got a bit drunk last night, but other than that, he's been fine."

"You'd tell me if he was hitting you, wouldn't you, son?"

"I would, Dad, don't worry. Steve hasn't been being mean to me, but he did yell at me because I accidentally got in his way last night. Then again, he was drunk, but I don't blame him."

"He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No. I just went into my bedroom after he started yelling. He was really upset about the whole thing this morning, Dad. He made me breakfast and we talked, you know, like stepfather and son. Steve's finally getting the fact that he has to treat me like I'm his stepson now."

Mat nodded Even though Chris wouldn't be able to see it, he hoped that some form of understanding would go through the phone.

"I'm glad he's treating you better, Chris. What about your hand? Is it better?"

"It's almost healed. Steve's taking me to the doctor today. I hope I can get my stitches out today."

"I'm sorry that happened."

"It's fine, Dad..." Chris trailed off for a moment before speaking again. "I guess he wants me to get ready."

"Will you call me after you get back from the doctor?"

"Yeah, I will."

"I love you, son."

"I love you too, Dad."

"Bye."

"Bye."

- Play Dead -

Mat sighed as he ended the call. It felt good to talk to his son again, and at least he had more than a few minutes to do so. He and Chris had talked for almost twenty minutes, and if Steve hadn't of told Chris to get ready to go to the doctor, they would have talked longer.

Mat *was* thankful that Steve had distracted Chris, since Chris was starting to get into the subject of his work. Mat was sure that he couldn't keep this from Chris for long. Eventually, Chris would find out, because he would eventually have to tell his son about his encounter with the giant pig.

Shaking his head, Mat started the car and put it into reverse, making a steady drive back to the hotel. Hopefully, Park had calmed down a bit more, and maybe the young man would be willing to take his medicine and go back to sleep.

The ibuprofen wasn't for Park, of course; it was for Mat's own head, which was throbbing like a heart inside a chest, repeatedly, over and over.

Pulling into the parking lot, he grabbed his bag and walked up and through the building, waiting for the elevator, and when he got off, walked down the hall and to their room.

"Park?" Mat called as he came into the room. "I got your medicine."

Sighing, he put the bag on the table and walked deeper into the hotel room, trying to find Park.

"Kid?" Mat asked, peeking around the bend in the room. "Where are you?"

"In here, sir."

Mat walked into the bathroom and noticed that Park was in the shower, but no water was running

"Kid, what are you doing?"

"Fuck," Park said, more or less to himself. "I'm fine, sir...I just didn't expect the razor to get me that bad."

Mat frowned He knew that there were men who preferred to shave while they were in a shower, with a mirror in front of them, but he didn't know Park was one of those men.

Mat grabbed the end of the curtain and pushed it open, instantly letting it go as he saw the extent of the damage. The

## Kody Boye

blade had ripped a good gash into the side of Park's face, and from it, blood steadily dripped, pooling down at his feet where he had accidentally let a washcloth slip down, blocking the water from leaving the tub.

"Fuck, Park. How did you do that?"

"I thought I heard somebody come in, you bastard...sorry," Park sighed and moved his foot, which also moved the washcloth. "Could you get me a rag or something?"

Mat grabbed a cloth from the counter and handed it to Park, giving the young man a hand as he climbed out of the shower.

"I'm going to need stitches for this," Park said, looking up at Mat. "Would you drive me to the hospital?"

"Yeah, I can do that. Come on, let's get you dressed."

\*\*\*

Katrina stood in the kitchen with Vincent, bandaging his chin again, pressing a damp washcloth to the side of his head. Even though it had been a day since Jim had hit him, the lump on his head was large enough to give him migraines that sent him to bed.

"You all right?" She asked as she pulled the washcloth away, running more cold water over it before putting it back on his face. "I'm so sorry, Vincent."

"You shouldn't be worried about me. A little cut on my chin and a bump on my head isn't going to stop me, Kitty. You know that."

She nodded and put the damp wash cloth in the laundry basket, leading him to the couch. The two of them were given a week off, so they would be able to heal and enjoy the time that they had together, and maybe-just maybe-start making wedding plans.

"I love you," she said, kissing his cheek. "I wouldn't want anyone else in the world."

"Neither would I," he smiled. "You're the only person I've ever loved like this, Kitty. I hope you know how much I love you."

"I do, Vincent, I do."

- Play Dead -

She put her hand over his and smiled.

"Come on, let's go shower." She said with a smile, standing and dragging him along with her. "I think we both need one."

\*\*\*

From that shower, they had shared erotic emotions, and from their bed, they had shared the love that the two of them had for each other. Their lovemaking had been the longest session that the two of them had ever had, and now they lay in bed together, exhausted, their fingers intertwined with each other's own.

"I love you, Vincent," she said with a smile, kissing him.

"I love you too, doll."

The two of them began discussing their wedding.

\*\*\*

*Blood, death, violence; they seemed to roll together in a strange atmosphere that left the creature wanting more. Blood dripped from its snout as it fed on another fresh kill, but this time, it was in the relative safety of an outcropping of trees. Other animals were coming in, attracted to the smell of gore, but they stayed away. They knew not to mess with the creature that was slowly becoming the dominant predator in the area.*

It lifted its head to make sure that there were no humans around. With this look proving that there were none, it continued to dig into the corpse.

That was when it heard the grunt of another of its kind behind it.

Turning, the creature saw the smaller boar, but still large enough to pass for a formidable creature. It grunted at the presence of the newcomer, but at the same time, excitement built inside of it.

The newcomer grunted, and as it came closer, they felt the urge to do the one thing that all animals had to do to survive.

Mate.

## Kody Boye

\*\*\*

David Colvar sat in the back of a bar, his legs stretched out and laying across the table and a cigarette resting between his lips.

"Excuse me sir," the waiter said as he came up, his eyes moving from David's face to his brown-haired legs. "Are you feeling well?"

"Fine," David grunted. "My beer's empty."

"Would you like another, sir?"

"Does it look like I'm waiting for somebody to blow me? What do you think?"

"Yes, sir, I'll get one."

The waiter began gathering up the glass bottles and soon, retreated back to the bar to pour another.

"Stupid fucker," David said, taking another drag. "I've only been here for two hours. He couldn't of asked a stupider question."

The man soon returned with the beer.

"Thanks, and excuse what I said. I have a headache."

"Yes sir. Would you like me to call a cab for you? It'd be no trouble."

"I don't know. I guess so. I think I just spent all of the money in my wallet though."

"It's no trouble, I'll give you some money."

David nodded and allowed the man to support him as they walked out of the bar. The man waved a cab down and gave him a twenty, bidding him a polite goodbye before the cab driver drove off.

"Where do you live, sir?"

David gave the man his street address and leaned back against the leather seat, expelling a breath. His head was throbbing.

Within a few minutes, the man was stopped and accepting the cash that David was offered

"You have a good night, sir," the cab driver said, tipping his

- Play Dead -

hat with a small nod before driving off into the night.

David muttered something that he couldn't even understand--or hear for that matter--and unlocked the door, stepping inside and locking it before he tossed his keys on the small coffee table. From here, he collapsed on the couch and passed out.

\*\*\*

The next morning, he woke with a moan of pain, placing a hand on his throbbing head. Beer was a temptation that he could rarely resist, but he had gone too far last night. Too many beers was not good for a person, especially someone who would have normally done his errands on a weekend.

"God," he said as he rose. "My head is throbbing."

He searched for whatever form of pain medicine he could find, and when he found it, he popped the pills into his mouth. He would relax for the day without doing anything strenuous, because he knew that he didn't want his headache to get any worse.

He took a drink of water, sighing with relief that his headache would soon be gone.

"Good, it'll start to get better soon."

He walked back into the living room and seated himself on the couch, letting his weight sink into the back of the couch as he groped for the remote, turning the television set on.

'Today, another animal has been found. The 'Beast' has been attacking dogs for the main source of its food, but the true cause of this large animal's attack isn't known. Today, we spoke with a man who was attacked by a large animal that he claimed to be a 'large pig from Hell' He stated that the creature was the pig. Nothing further was said. We will keep you updated on this story.'

David's eye twitched with the anticipation of a large animal. If the animal was killing dogs, people would want it dead, right? As an avid big game hunter, he was always looking for a big animal that he could claim as his own. He never did keep the

## Kody Boye

heads, and he wasn't one to keep them on a wall.

This one would be an exception to that rule.

His eyes strayed to his bedroom, where his rifle hung on the wall. Though he couldn't see it, he knew that it was there, waiting for him to hold it in his hands

He would go after the monster.

Now, all he had to do was go find the man who the news reporter was talking about.

\*\*\*

Bart was home with his beautiful wife, laying on the bed while she continually kissed his face as many times as she could.

"Lillian, you're going to suffocate me," he said with a laugh, "I'm fine."

"I'm going to kiss you as much as I want, Bart Lawman, so don't stop me. You almost died. Lord bless you, Bart. I love you so much."

"I love you too, dear," he said, cupping his wife's chin. "Your face was the last thing that went through my mind before I almost died, Lillian, and if I had died it would have been the last thing I would have ever seen."

She smiled and started crying again, burying her head into his chest.

"I love you, Bart. Please don't ever leave me again."

"I won't," he said. "I won't."

\*\*\*

Later that night, he woke and noticed Lillian was no longer awake, but sleeping.

"Good," he said as he got out of bed. "Now I can watch television without her smothering me in kisses."

He smiled as he stopped and walked to the kitchen, grimacing as he moved his arms a little too sharply, sending jolts of pain to his wounds.

"Dammit. I should be taking it easy."



- Play Dead -

Shaking his head, he turned to walk into the living room, but a flash of eyes caught his eyes.

He looked out the window and saw the giant pig, standing in the back yard, watching him.

\*\*\*

"Bart said he saw it again?" Park asked, grimacing as he fingered the bandage on his face.. "When did he call?"

"Early this morning," Mat said. "That man's gone through enough, what with being attacked by it and all. I told him to come over here later while his wife was at work if he felt up to it."

"Uh huh, yes, sir."

"You feeling better, kid?"

"A bit, sir," Park said with a sigh, stretching his body across the bed. "I'm not feeling the best, but I am feeling better."

Mat walked over to Park, giving a few pats to his shoulder.

"Your face will be better in no time, Park."

The young man nodded, but Mat could see that he was drifting off to sleep. Last night hadn't been the best night for the kid because of the new bandage, and he had to get up and out of bed to change it a few different times.

"Go to sleep, kid. You need it."

Mat was about to pat the kid's shoulder again, but he saw that Park had fallen asleep.

"Sleep well."

A few knocks came at the door. Mat smiled.. He knew that it was Bart, coming to talk to him about what he had seen last night. As he opened the door, he was greeted with Bart's half-smiling, half-nervous face.

"Hey," Bart said with a soft laugh. "Mind if I come in?"

"Yeah, the kid's sleeping," Mat said, closing the door behind Bart. "He did a good number to his face yesterday."

"What happened?"

"He cut himself while shaving in the shower. The blade went in pretty deep after the razor broke."

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"Broke? You should sue the company."

"I would, but Park said that he didn't want to bother with all of the court bullshit."

"I don't blame him," Bart laughed. "I wouldn't want to either."

Bart arranged himself while Mat walked to the refrigerator and grabbing a few beers for the two of them.

"Thanks," Bart said. "I need this. Lillian stole all of my beer and put it somewhere. I can't find it."

"She's just concerned for you," Mat said, taking a sip of his beer. "You've got a good wife. I wish I still had mine."

"I never did think Charlotte was the right woman for you," Bart said, grimacing. "I don't mean that in a bad way."

"I know. What do you mean though?"

"I never did think Charlotte was good for you, Mat. I mean. God, she was always a woman to slide the neck of her dress down just to show off her breasts. Still, I'm sorry that she was sleeping around. It makes me feel bad."

"Thanks, Bart," Mat said, leaning over and carefully patting his shoulder "It helps."

For several long, dull moments, silence ensued, and the room was starting to get a chilling atmosphere. Mat watched Bart mess with his fingers, twiddling his thumbs as he usually did when he was nervous.

"Bart? Are you ready to talk about what you saw last night?"

Bart took a quick glance up at Mat for a moment before looking back at his hands, nodding

"I-I guess."

Taking a deep breath, Bart began his story.

"I had woke up last night from my nap, and I had been planning on leaving Lillian in bed so I could go watch television. When I got out of bed and walked out to the kitchen to get myself something to drink when I saw it, Mat, *saw it*. It was just looking at me through the window." Tears came to Bart's eyes. "I was so afraid that I felt like crawling under a rock and staying there."

"What did you do after that?"

"Closed the blinds, got myself some ice water and went back

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to bed. I swear, I held Lillian so close that I could feel the breath coming out of her nose."

"At least she's still with you," Mar sighed. "I'm sorry, Bart. I keep going back to myself, and then I feel guilty about changing the subject. I should be talking about your problem, not mine."

"It's not your fault, Mat. I know it's been hard in the...half year that you and Charlotte have been away from each other. I'm here to talk to you."

"All right."

"How's the kid been?"

"Chris? I guess Steve's been treating him like a human being now. Chris said that he was yelling at him a few days ago when he got drunk, but other than that, Chris seemed fine."

"What does Charlotte think of Steve?"

"That he's huge," Mat said with a stupid grin. "It's surprising he hasn't killed her yet."

The same stupid grin that Mat had appeared on Bart's own face, and the two of them burst out laughing.

"God, Mat, you crack me up."

"Thanks," Mat said with a smile. "I'm glad I can make you feel better."

"Me too, because it beats staying at home and just sitting in bed."

Mat nodded

"Bart...What do you think we should do about this?"

"I think we should deal with it, Mat."

\*\*\*

Chris could only sigh and shake his head as he finished packing his own suitcase, looking over at his stepfather as he placed it on the couch.

"Why did you suddenly want to go to Homestead, Dad?"

"I just need to go down there, son. Besides, if there's a big pig, there'll be some kind of reward for the thing, right?" Steve asked with a smile. "I'm taking you with me because we need to bond more. I feel like I'm here and not doing anything to try and

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get to know you better.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Dad. What’s Mom going to do while we’re gone?”

“Your mother’s staying down with your grandmother for a little while longer, just while we’re gone.”

Chris gave a small nod, and as Steve walked into a kitchen to prepare some food for the trip, Chris smiled. Steve was actually trying to bond with him, actually trying to understand him for who he was.

“You all right, kid?” Steve called from the kitchen. “You look like you’re about to break your face with that grin of yours.”

“I’m fine, Dad,” Chris said. “I’m just glad that we’re going on this trip together.”

“Me too, son,” Steve said as he brought the cooler with the food into the living room, ruffling Chris’ hair. “You don’t know how much I’m looking forward to this.”

Chris smiled, and for one of the few times, he looked at his stepfather in a different light. There was a small amount of love, if but a bit, but it looked like it was getting better. Steve seemed to be more concerned about what was going on in his stepson’s life.

It felt good.

“You okay, kid?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine, Dad.”

“Good, because we’re leaving right now. Do you have everything that you want to take?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you sure? There isn’t anything you might have forgot? I can wait if there’s something extra that you wanted to take.”

“No, Dad, I have everything.”

“All right, make sure the windows and the back doors are locked, Chris. I’ll put this stuff in the back seat.”

Chris nodded and made sure that everything was locked up.

“That’s done,” he muttered. “At least now we can leave”

Making his way back down the hall, Chris pulled the key out of his pocket and locked the house up as he walked out the open door. He made sure that it was locked well before he turned and

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walked down the driveway to where his stepfather's car was  
"Dad!" Chris called. "The house is all locked up!"  
Steve poked his head up from the other side of the car.  
"All right, Chris. Thanks!"  
Chris walked to the car, opening the door and getting in.  
"So, are you ready for this trip?" Steve asked.  
"Yeah, Dad, I am."

\*\*\*

"Mom," Charlotte said as she sat on the couch. "Do you want me to get you anything from the store?"

"Just an antacid or two will work, dear. Go run your pretty little self to the store now. And be sure to buy food for the kitties, you know how they start looking at me when they're hungry."

"Don't worry, Mom, I'll go buy your kitties the food," Charlotte smiled. "I'll see you when I get back."

"Take your time, dear."

Charlotte grabbed her purse and walked out the door, getting into the fancy pink car that Steve had bought her.

*I love this thing almost as much as I love him*, she thought, her hand trailing along the pink leather of the seats.

She pushed the key into the ignition and pulled out of the driveway, letting the air flow through her long, brown curls. The cool night air felt good, especially in Florida

She would be at the store at the steady rate she was going, and she would be buying antacid and cat food, just like her mother had wanted for the two weeks she had been here.

"Hopefully Steve and Chris will bond during their trip," she muttered as she pulled into the supermarket. She grabbed her purse and got out of the car, walking up the incline and to the front of the store, where the doors opened up for her automatically. Charlotte was always one to *pretend* that they opened up for her because she was marvelous.

She smiled and walked down the aisles, trying to find where the pharmacy was. She had been in this store two or three times already, but she could never find the pharmacy

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She stopped at a magazine rack and looked through them, finding one that caught her eye.

The title read *Buff Men Magazine*, and she wasn't surprised to find Steve on the front cover, strutting himself in a type of thong that she had bought them after she had gotten divorced from Mat, showing all that he had in high definition

"Damn, I wish I was with him," she said as she licked her lips. "He is one hot stud."

She grabbed her magazine and walked toward the pharmacy.

"Excuse me," Charlotte said. "Can I get an antacid?"

"Yes, give me one moment."

Charlotte grabbed the cat food and walked back to the counter.

"Can I pay for this here?"

"Yes, ma'am, you can."

Charlotte put the cat food and the magazine on the counter, watching the woman's response when she saw the magazine.

"You like this magazine?"

"My husband," she said, tapping the cover. "That's him."

The woman only stared in shock.

"He's gorgeous," she whispered, leaning in closer. "How *is* he?"

"Just the way I want him," Charlotte smiled. "But if you really want to know, he makes you feel like you've died and gone to heaven."

The woman could only smile, ring up the items, and bid her goodbye as Charlotte left the store with a small paper grocery bag.

"Now I can go back to my mother's and look at Steve's new magazine," she smiled. "At least I'll be able to see him, even if he's not in flesh and blood."

Another smile broke across her face, and as she turned down the road to take a shortcut to her mother's wilderness area house, she slowed down a bit, trying not to hit any of the bumps in the road.

That was when she saw it cross the road.

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For the most part, the giant pig seemed to be ignoring her, but she didn't take any chances. She bit down on the inside of her cheeks and prayed that no sound escaped from her throat, waiting to see if it would disappear into the opposite side of the wood.

It did disappear.

That was when she pushed down on the gas and let out the most horrific scream that anything in that area had ever heard.

\*\*\*

*Watching..*

*Waiting..*

*For something...*

*To happen.*

The female boar laid in the bushes, waiting to see if her partner would return. She didn't expect him to do it soon, but she wanted to see if he would return before she left.

Several moments went by, several moments that were dull and silent, save for the occasional yip of one of her new favorite types of prey. She knew that there would be young in the not-so-distant future, and she knew that she would be burdened with them for some time.

It would be the first time that she had ever had young.

Ever had little things to take care of.

It was the first time that she felt so...different.

She lay her head down and let her snout rest in the soft, cool leaves.

She fell asleep.

\*\*\*

Katrina fumbled with the sleeves of her dress, trying to make them look perfect on the most important day of her life. She wished that her mother was here, but her mother had died right before she had met Vincent a few years back. She also wished that her father was here, but he absolutely despised

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Vincent, which is exactly why she had nothing to do with her father anymore.

She wouldn't dawdle on her parents.

She was at her wedding, and she intended to make this the best day of her life.

She smiled, knowing that she would soon be spiritually bound to Vincent.

\*\*\*

"Come on, bro," Vincent's older brother, Michael, said, watching Vincent shave the little stubble off of his face. "I don't think your fiancé is going to care if you're clean-shaven or not."

"I know that," Vincent, turning to Michael to show him his half-shaved face. "I think I'd look pretty stupid walking up the aisle like this."

"It'd give everyone a good laugh, that's for sure," Michael said, raising his wine in a mock toast. "You know I'd never let you live that down."

"You never let me live anything down," Vincent said, turning to view his naked chest and half-shaven face in the mirror. "I still get hell about you walking in on me and Katrina when we were staying at your place."

"How was I supposed to know you two would be doing it on the hammock?" Michael laughed. "I'm still amazed that you two were able to stay in the air."

"I think it requires that the heavier one be on bottom," Vincent said, a smirk coming over his face as he came up with a comeback. "It'd sure make it easier on you and your girlfriend."

"Hey! I'm not heavy, I just look big."

"That's because you are big, you oaf," Vincent laughed as he finished shaving. "Toss me my shirt."

Michael tossed Vincent his shirt, smiling as he pulled it over his head.

"It's a bit sad that Mom isn't here. God, I sure do miss her" Michael said with a sigh. "She always used to say, 'If you two don't get married by the time you're twenty-five, I'm putting you



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in a shrink.' God, I'm thirty and I'm not even married. You're doing pretty good with yourself if you're only twenty-seven-and-a-half, little bro."

"I suppose so," Vincent said, rubbing some aftershave on his face. "You ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

Michael drank the last of his wine and stood, gripping Vincent's shoulder as the two of them walked down the row of seats.

"Vincent, son," his father said as he embraced Vincent. "It's about time you tied the knot."

"I know, Dad," Vincent said, pulling away from his father. "You look like you haven't aged a day."

He didn't look a day over forty and resembled Michael with the large, muscled build.

"You know me, son; I want to live as long as I can."

"Don't worry, Dad, you'll be around for a while."

His father nodded and sat back down, allowing Vincent to walk to the front, where he met the priest by the altar.

The door to the church opened and out came the flower girl, spreading the petals and letting them catch in the wind.

By the time the flower girl had made it to the front of the aisle, Katrina came out, donned in the most beautiful white dress Vincent had ever seen. He could only stare and watch as she came up the aisle and toward him.

Vincent smiled priest began speaking, but he didn't hear the man's words. He *couldn't* hear them. Katrina's beauty was the only thing that he could absorb right now. The only thing he did manage to catch was the bit about presenting the rings, so he slid his ring up on her finger, and she placed her ring on his finger.

"... and by the power invested in me, I pronounce you man and wife."

Vincent lifted up Katrina's veil and mouthed the words 'I love you' before he kissed her.

Cheers and claps went up, and cries of joy followed them...

They soon turned into cries of panic.

Vincent broke the kiss between himself and Katrina as he

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saw the thing charge into a row of seats. It took him several minutes to see what it actually was. He thought that they were playing tricks on him, but his eyes were playing no tricks; what he was seeing was real.

The boar was as big as any small car, and the tusks looked like they could easily rip through flesh. The eyes showed a rage that Vincent had never seen in an animal...

They turned on Vincent and Katrina.

Katrina screamed as the animal came charging at them and Vincent grabbed her, throwing them over the side, where they rolled down the hill. Had it been a moment later, one of them could have been seriously injured. The podium was thrown aside as the boar slammed into it and the priest cried out in surprise as he was thrown several feet away.

"Come on, Katrina!" Vincent screamed as he grabbed her wrist, pulling her up and running toward the parking lot. "We need to get out of here!"

Katrina ran with him toward his car, but she stumbled several times over the heels. She ended up kicking them off so she could run easier.

"Get in the car!" He yelled. "We need to get the hell out of here!"

He slammed the key into the ignition and backed out of the driveway as fast as he could, getting out of there right in time for the boar to go into the road.

When they were a good way away, he stopped the car and kissed her, thanking God that she hadn't been hurt.

"I love you, Kitty."

"I love you too."

\*\*\*

When the giant pig attacked the wedding, it had come across the news later that evening Nobody had been injured badly, but the priest did go to the hospital to be treated for minor cuts and bruises. David knew that he would have to deal with this animal or else somebody could get hurt.

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Today had been a very special day for the young couple, and the pig had ruined it. There was no excuse for someone's wedding day being ruined, especially when an animal did it.

"I will find you," he said as he shut the television set off. "I will find you and kill you, even if it's the last thing I do."

He smiled

His eyes trailed to the wall to where his gun was.

"Still fresh and in the glass case," he said as he walked over and opened the glass case up. "You're going to help me kill that pig."

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### Part 3: Pig Hunt

"Now we've got a dangerous animal on the loose here," Mat sighed. "Great, just great."

"Do you think that we should call the boss, sir?" Park asked as he bandaged his face. "I don't know if you want to take that suggestions to mind, but still: if we got something he wants, he might want it now."

"I already called him."

"When?"

"Earlier when you were sleeping," Mat grinned. "He wants an article on the thing, no more than two-thousand-five-hundred words."

"Thank God!" Park cried. "Finally, something for me to do instead of laying around and sleeping all the time!"

"Get on it, kid," Mat said, slapping Park's back. "I know you'll make everybody at the office proud of you."

Park nodded, walking out of the bathroom.

With Park gone, Mat could think without any distraction. Not that Park was a distraction though: he loved the kid like the older son that he never had, but he would be able to think easier this way.

The orange-colored bathroom tiles were a reminder of the fact that he was away from home, and now he was starting to feel homesick. He wished that he was back in Tida Reserve and that everything was normal again. He wished that he and Charlotte were still together, and he wished that Chris was still living at the house full time. He also wished that he hadn't gotten caught up in this giant mess of a problem

"Sir?" Park called. "The boss sent me an email. Well, it's actually to you, but still..."

Mat walked out of the bathroom, taking the laptop as he offered it to him.

"Clive Bakeman," Mat smiled. "That man's name still makes me smile."

"You like the boss, sir?"

- Play Dead -

“Not really, but he’s the man who pays me to sit around at my desk all day, even when I’m not doing anything. I’m sure he pays his top journalist some good cash, doesn’t he?”

“I guess,” Park said with a smile. “If you can keep a secret, the boss pays me a pretty good sum...probably around what most people make in a week on a seven-hour fast food shift.”

“Damn, kid, and those are articles you put out on a daily basis?”

“Yeah. Hey, I could still be just an out-of-high-school teenager working at a fast food joint. Thankfully I found out that the boss needed a writer, so I got on the job.”

“The email’s not coming up,” Mat said, returning to the original topic. “Do you password protect your email?”

“Who doesn’t password protect their email or Internet nowadays?” Park asked as he typed in his password. “Not doing that is like putting a gun to your head, pulling the trigger, and expecting it not to go off when the chamber’s full.”

Park handed Mat the computer.

Mat,

You really need to get yourself a laptop so I can stop sending your emails to your colleagues that *do* have laptops. That’s not what I’m here to talk about though.

I want you to try and talk to the young couple who were married that day... DeLion was the lady’s last name, but I believe the man’s was Lee.

Aside from that, go talk to them, and make sure you type up everything you find into a report, double-spaced, and sign it. If you’re still in Homestead for another week or so, that’s fine. Just make sure that you don’t get yourself or Park into any kind of trouble.

Sincerely,

Clive Bakeman

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"So?" Park asked. "What did he say?"

"He wants me to go talk to the Lee couple," Mat said, watching Park's face mess up in confusion. "You know, Katrina and Vincent. He just wants to know their side of the story."

"Oh. Okay, I see."

"Do you want to come with?"

"I'd prefer to stay here and write my article, but if you want me to come, I will."

"Don't worry about it, just do what you need to," Mat said. "I'm leaving now so I can get a head start. I'll bring back burgers or something."

"All right, see you later."

"See ya."

\*\*\*

"Dad, this hotel is a bit expensive," Chris said as he placed his suitcase on the bed. "Are you sure you have the extra money?"

"Chris, it's no secret what I do. I make some good money off those pictures. Don't worry about it. I have enough to make sure that the two of us are comfortable while we're down here."

"Are you sure?"

"Son, quit nagging," Steve said, patting Chris' shoulder. "This is a nice place, but it's cheap enough to let me have a gun here."

"Security took it though..."

"Well, you'd expect them to do that, wouldn't you?" Steve said with a laugh. "No worries though."

"You're really going to go out and see if you can get that pig, Dad?"

"Yeah, I am," Steve said. "That doesn't bother you, does it?"

"No. I talked to my dad earlier and he said that it was my uncle Bart who got attacked by the pig a little while back."

"Which is all the more reason for me to go and get that son of a bitch," Steve said. "Get comfortable, Chris, I'll go out and get us something to eat."

- Play Dead -

"All right, Dad," Chris said. "Thanks."

"No trouble. Just lock the door behind me. I don't want anybody trying to get in here while I'm gone."

\*\*\*

"It's you, Mat," Katrina said as Mat Crawman came into the house. "Is something wrong?"

"My boss wants to know a bit about what happened," Mat said with a smile "I can leave if the two of you aren't up to talking about it right now."

"No, it's fine," she said, watching Vincent came out of the bedroom, bare-chested. "Vincent!"

"Oh. Excuse me, Mat," Vincent said with a soft, embarrassed smile. "I wasn't expecting company."

"You being without a shirt doesn't bother me," Mat grinned. "Besides, with a chest like yours, you deserve to show it off."

Vincent smiled as he fingered his chest, giving a small nod.

"Thanks, I guess. What did you come over here for anyway?"

"My boss wants me to talk to the two of you about the wedding," Mat sighed. "I'm sorry about that accident."

"We're going to redo the party thing," Vincent said. "This time it'll be here at our house, where no giant pig can ruin all of the happy moments."

Mat nodded and sat down in one of the chairs, flipping his notebook open.

"All right, I guess we should get this over with then."

\*\*\*

Bart shifted in his seat and flicked through the channels, trying to find something interesting to watch. Ever since that new sighting had come in, people had been in a panic, and big game hunters were flocking in from everywhere.

The pig was up for grabs, and since it was causing an uproar in the community, there would be no need for people to buy a tag. It was a free kill.

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That was when he heard the phone ring, and he cursed as he stood, walking over to where it sat on the counter.

He picked it up and placed it to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Bart Lawman?"

"Yes, that's me."

"I need to ask you something."

"What is it?" Bart asked. "If this is some stupid kid asking if I live on smiley street, you can forget it."

"What did the pig you were attacked by look like?"

Bart stopped breathing.

"Why do you want to know this?"

"Because I'm going to kill this pig."

\*\*\*

Chris looked up as Steve fumbled around with the stuff that he had packed in his suitcase, listening to his stepfather talk to himself. It sounded as if his father was talking about 'getting that damn pig,' or at least something along those lines.

"Dad, are you all right?"

"What?" Steve asked, startled. "Oh, I'm fine, Chris. You know that I talk to myself when I'm nervous."

"You're going to go hunt that pig, aren't you?"

Steve remained silent for several minutes as he fumbled for something in his bag, soon pulling out a box of rifle bullets.

"Yes, I am, Chris."

"Dad...Can I come?"

"What?" Steve asked, the shock evident on his face. "You actually want to come with me? I didn't think that you were into the whole hunting animal thing..."

"I never said I wasn't, but I don't have money for a gun," Chris said with a smile. "I'd like to keep you company while you're out in the wilderness."

"You know what?" Steve asked, walking over and wrapping an arm around Chris' shoulder. "I'd really like that, son."

Chris gave a small smile.



- Play Dead -

"I would too."

\*\*\*

David knew it was the time to do this. Now that he had the information, he knew what the pig looked like. He knew that he would be able to find it, he knew it, but if he was going to go hunting, he had to do it soon. There would be people flocking in by the hundreds to try and get their hands on this creature's head.

"All I need is a few days," he said, laying out his hunting supplies "That's all I need. These stupid fuckers don't even know how to hunt."

He grinned at his smart remark, and knowing that it was true. He let out a deep laugh that he had kept inside him for a long time.

"They won't get that damn thing," he said with a smile. "Because I'll be the one to get it!"

He smiled and laughed, pounding his chest.

"I will get it!"

\*\*\*

"Vincent," Katrina said as she rolled over, scooting closer. "What's wrong? We haven't...you weren't in the mood last night, and tonight..."

"I'm sorry, Kitty," Vincent said, pulling her naked body closer to his own. "I'm just thinking about some things."

"Thinking? Vincent, please. If something's bothering you, tell me. I don't want you to feel alone in your problems."

"Kitty, I," Vincent sighed, sitting up and leaning against the headrest "I'm thinking about going after that monstrosity that nearly killed us."

"Vincent, you can't go hunting that thing!" She cried. "You don't even have a license!"

"I used to do some small game hunting before I started dating you, Kitty. I know how to shoot a gun."

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She buried her head in his chest and started to cry. Vincent held her, stroking the back of her head.

"Everything will be all right, Katrina," Vincent said. "Everything will be all right."

\*\*\*

"Are you sure you're up to this, Park?" Mat asked. "You don't want to tear your cut open?"

"I'll be fine, Mat. It's not like anything's going to happen to my face while we're out here hunting this thing."

Mat nodded, looking over at the small case that lay between them.

The contained two handguns, and although they weren't big rifles that some of the hunters would be coming with, they were better than not having anything at all. He had originally thought of only getting one, but that was when Park came to the conclusion that an animal so large couldn't be killed with one handgun.

If they did run into it, hopefully two handguns would be enough to bring the creature down

Pulling into the driveway, Mat the guns from the cases and transferred them into two separate holsters, handing Park one with a small, thoughtful smile.

"We'll be fine," Mat said. "Everything's going to be all right."

Park accepted the handgun and got out of the car, leaning against it while Mat pushed a few buttons on his keypad, locking the doors.

"All right," Mat said, walking to a nearby table. "We need to figure out where this thing might be."

Park watched Mat point to specific places on the map. From memory, Mat remembered that they were the places that the animals had been killed. They were so close to the Everglades, it could be impossible to track the creature; how he planned to do it, he didn't know.

"Hey, guys!" Somebody called from behind. "You guys are here too?"

- Play Dead -

Mat looked over his shoulder and watched as Vincent came up from behind them, a glossy ebony-colored rifle leaning against his left shoulder.

"You're here too?" Mat asked, repeating Vincent's question. "I just want to get pictures, if at all possible."

"Well, we're not here for picture hunting, boys," Vincent said with a smile, scratching at his unshaven face. "We're here to hunt."

"We are too," Mat said as he moved his coat, revealing the pistol. "We just don't have a big gun like you do."

"Which is why you would find it better to stick close to me," Vincent said with a grin. "I have this bigger gun right here." He gave the but a few pats with his hand. "It'd be safer for us to do that anyway."

Mat nodded, looking out to the wooded area around them.

"I guess. Park, could you get the sleeping bags?"

"Sleeping bags? You're giving yourself a death sentence with a side trip to Hell there," Vincent said. "I brought a tent, it's in my backpack."

Vincent shifted the pack on his shoulders, drawing both Mat and Park's attention to it.

"All right, I guess we should be going then." Mat said.

Mat turned and was about to go, but that was when he heard a familiar voice.

"I didn't expect you to be here."

Mat turned back around to see Steve coming up, a gun resting across his back from a strap.

"Steve," Mat said, keeping calm. "What are you doing here?"

"Hunting, you?"

"Same."

Steve gave a small nod and looked past him and toward the forest, a frown appearing across his face.

"This is going to be difficult..."

"I'm sorry about all the things I said before," Mat sighed. "I didn't have the right to say the things that I said. Is your jaw all right?"

"It's fine now," Steve said plainly, as if nothing had ever

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happened between the two of them. "I've taken harder punches in life. Hey, at least you didn't break anything."

Mat didn't expect Chris to come up from behind Steve.

"Dad?" Chris asked, looking over at his real father. "Are you here to..."

"Yes, Chris, I am."

Mat was a bit nervous now that his son was here. There would be deeper feelings going on through the three of them; Chris being the son while Mat and Steve being the biological and stepfather.

"Why is he with you?" Mat asked, leaving the sarcasm out of his voice "Is...is she not there?"

"Charlotte is visiting with her mother, and I brought Chris along because I didn't want to leave him alone. Besides, I prefer company when I'm driving a ways."

Mat gave a small nod, looking over at Park and Vincent.

"Were the two of you planning on camping out, or..." Mat trailed off, waiting for Steve to explain himself.

"Me and Chris were just going out for the day, until it gets around dark. Are you planning on doing that?"

Mat gave a small nod.

"Vincent, how many people does that tent of yours hold?"

"It can hold up to six people, Mat. With only five of us, we should have plenty of extra room to place everything we have without worrying about accidentally shooting ourselves."

Mat nodded, looking at the rest of the small group.

"Should we go then?"

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They had walked through the wooded area until they had found a spot that they thought was suitable for a camp ground. It had taken a good hour or so, and now daylight was starting to fade. The birds would soon stop chattering, and that would be replaced by the smaller night animals. Vincent and Park had just finished putting up the tent when the last strands of light were starting to come, while Mat and Steve were putting a fire

together.

"There's no hard feelings between the two of us, right?" Mat asked. "I'm sorry, Steve. I guess I was just mad about Charlotte leaving me."

"I didn't take her from you, Mat, I swear to Hell and back again that I didn't. I guess Charlotte was...I don't know, feeling bad about something. She was telling me how miserable she felt about not being able to satisfy you enough, and then she started crying. God, Mat. If you would've been in my place, you wouldn't have wanted it to go any farther than it did."

"Was the night that me and her got into a disagreement--the night that she didn't come home until early the next morning--the night you..."

"Had sex for the first time?" Steve whispered, looking over to make sure that Chris was still by Park and Vincent. "Yeah, it was. Mat, I didn't want to, but..."

"You don't have to explain why you did it," Mat said as he got the fire going. "That's between you and her."

With that little bit of conversation dying down into nothingness, Chris and Park came over, Vincent soon coming behind them with a barbecue top, which Mat placed on two large rocks when Chris placed them there.

"Hot dogs," Vincent said with a stupid grin as he pulled them out. "Sorry, but there's not much else I brought. I have sandwiches, but I prefer we save those for in the morning when we're out and about all day."

"What's not to like about hot dogs?" Steve asked as he sat on one of the logs. "We're camping, it's in the spirit of it."

They all laughed at that remark, and after eating a few hot dogs and talking for a little bit, they put out the fire and went into the sleeping bag.

Vincent lit a lantern and set it in the middle of the room while everyone else was preparing for bed.

"Tomorrow's going to be it," Mat said. "Right, guys?"

They all gave small nods or said something.

Mat, on the other hand, wasn't sure. He just hoped that nobody would get hurt

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They all huddled close together, trying to keep quiet and warm as they waited to see if the bait would draw in the monster.

"Here," Steve said as he pulled out a tube of something. "Spray this on you."

"What the Hell is it?" Mat asked as he took it.

"You've never heard of scentless spray? We don't want the damned thing to smell us before we get the chance to shoot it!"

Mat gave a small nod and sprayed a bit of it on his chest, passing it on to Park, the young man doing the same to Vincent soon after he had sprayed it on himself.

"How do you know it's going to come this way, Steve?"

"I don't know exactly, but..."

"The tracks were fresh," Vincent interrupted, looking over at Steve. "Weren't they?"

"Yeah," Steve grunted, gesturing for Vincent to finish putting up the camouflage flap. "They were. Hopefully, we'll get lucky."

"It's still dark," Park said. "It looks like it's going to rain."

"Hopefully it won't," Steve said. "That'll ruin the whole thing."

Vincent had just finished setting up the flap when they heard a twig snap.

"Get ready, everyone," Steve said as he took his gun off safety, raising it so that he could view the area from the camouflage. "This could be it."

They waited for several long minutes, but when another twig snapped, they got anxious.

They heard swearing.

"Goddammit!" Steve roared, though softly enough to that only the immediate group could hear it. "I'm going to rip that man's balls off."

Steve stood and walked away from the flap, walking down the hill when he saw the man come into view.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I stepped on a damn branch," the new man said. "What do

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you think I'm doing?"

Steve swore under his breath and shook his head.

"Come the fuck on, you're coming with us."

"What? Why should..."

"Because only a fucking idiot is stupid enough to step on a twig while hunting."

Steve shook his head, leading the man up the hill and back to the flap.

"Did you see anything?" Vincent asked, looking out through the flap. "I wasn't sure if something could have been scared off."

"No, I didn't see anything," Steve said as he sat back down beside the rest of them. "Where's Chris?"

"Over here," Mat said, gesturing to Chris, "I guess he was a bit shook up last night."

"How come?"

"I don't think he was ever one for sleeping in a tent, especially when it gets cold outside."

Steve could only shrug.

Vincent sighed, scratching his face.

"Do you think it'll come if we wait?" Mat asked.

"The bait should bring it out," Steve said. "Hey, what's your name?" He asked the new man.

"David," the man grunted. "Sorry for interrupting your hunt"

"Doesn't matter," Steve said. "It doesn't matter if one or the other of us gets it, we can still say we all got it."

They shrugged and nodded.

With the darkness still surrounding them, they waited, just as thunder cracked in the distance.

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Several hours had gone by, and now, the group was starting to get annoyed. They hadn't seen or heard anything in those hours, and they were beginning to give up hope of anything actually coming out.

"We wait," Vincent muttered. "We wait."

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*The distant rise of the hill was coming into view, and now, the pig raised its snout, sniffing at the air. It had been smelling the humans on and off for the entire day, and now it was getting nervous. Everywhere it went, the creature had to be wary of the men who carried the long sticks that made the noise. Already they had taken down smaller animals, and they had died what sounded like a painful death.*

Its hooves were grinding into the ground from its impatience. The creature shifted its weight to one side and then to the other, not knowing whether or not to step out into this clearing.

These humans were smart, and that was all it needed to know.

It took its first step out of the trees behind it.

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“Holy Mother of God,” Steve said as he saw it come into view. “Look at that monster!”

They all watched in awe and horror as it came out of the clearing. Huge, gargantuan, a behemoth of the animal kingdom in all of its glory, the creature could easily dwarf any other animal around here, even the black bears that were spotted on and off around the area at times.

It raised its snout and sniffed the air, scanning around the area.

“That is a pig, right?” Park asked in a nervous tone. “The thing looks like a goddamn bear.”

“Of course, that’s a pig,” David grunted, raising his gun. “That’s the one we’re looking for.”

Steve and Vincent raised their guns as well, and the three men took aim, preparing to pull their triggers.

With an almost psychic sense, the creature turned its head, right toward where the camouflage flap was.

“Holy shit!” Steve yelled as the creature squealed. “It’s



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coming right at us!”

They all scrambled out of the flap as the pig came at a dangerous speed. It collided with the flap, revealing them to the pig.

Mat and Park raised their pistols and started firing, but it did little to nothing. The only bullet that had hit it wasn't even a good shot, and it had only grazed the creature's backside.

“Park, get out of the way!” Mat yelled, shooting in the air as the creature turned on Park. “Come on you bastard! Come get me!”

The pig turned its attention toward Mat and squealed, charging at him.

*Oh God, Mat said. I'm too scared to move.*

Shots and shots and shots of bullets came at the creature from both the rifles and Park's handgun, but none of them did anything to stop it. The pig was in a rage that would not be stopped.

Mat could only watch as the creature got closer and closer...

It would be on him soon.

Mat turned and ran, leading the pig away from everyone else. His legs pumped and his chest heaved. He wasn't sure how much longer he could keep going...he...he...he...

Mat's foot caught on an uprooted branch, sending him to the ground.

“No!” Chris yelled as he forced his stepfather's rifle out of his hands. “I won't let you hurt my dad!”

Chris ran at the creature until he collided with the side of its head, and as the butt met the area just below the left ear, he fired a blast that dislocated the shoulder. He cried out in pain as he was sprayed with blood and brain matter, and he collapsed to the ground, kneeling before the thing.

Dead...

The pig was dead.

Mat fell to his knees and stared at the creature before him.

“It's over,” Mat said, tears coming to his eyes. “It's over!”

Mat turned to Chris and embraced his son, stroking his hair. Steve came to their side and embraced the two of them.

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“Everything’s all right now,” Mat said as more tears came. “Everything’s all right.”

Mat wouldn’t have to worry about anything anymore. The pig was dead, Steve wasn’t mad at him anymore, and Chris seemed to have healed from everything that had happened.

All was now well.

# Acknowledgments

I don't really know how to start this.

Then again, I think I'll just start it like that.

Writing *Play Dead* was an adventure, that was for sure. Writing a series of novellas that had been planned as novels (all except the *Play Dead* novella) was something I had never intended, but it eventually worked out. I think people would be surprised to know how the novellas came about.

*Pig*—my adventure into the giant-animal form of writing—was greatly inspired by a program I had watched on the National Geographic channel.

That one particular day back in February of 2007, I had watched a documentary on a creature called Hogzilla, a monster pig that weight a few hundred pounds more than the average pig.

Of course, since Hogzilla, we've heard more infamous stories; the one about the eleven-year-old boy getting his one-thousand-plus pound pig was amazing, but I later found out that the kid's dad had taken him into a ranch and the pig was supposedly someone's pet.

Yeah...

Guess you know that I don't see hunting as much of a fair sport, huh?

*Lamia* was a much different story. This was a novella that had been *greatly* inspired by Stephen King's novel *Bag of Bones*.

If you read the *Lamia* novella and King's *Bag of Bones*, you won't find much in common (although I do like to think that my writing is good—good enough to get published, anyhow—it's worse than lower class to King's writing) with the novella.

I had fun writing the novella; I mean, it was my first attempt at using a mythological creature as the main element. I took my own twist on the Siren/Lamia/Mermaid myth and made my Lamia a sexual but at the same time dangerous creature.

The ghost story was really based off of the whole relationship that the main character had with his dead wife in

King's *Bag of Bones*. *Bag of Bones* is still my favorite novel as of the date I'm writing this.

***Rage*** went through a title change before it got its final title. Before, it had been called ***Zombimal***, which was weird in its own right. ***Rage*** was my different take on the zombie genre, and although it never reached novel length—as I had intended—it was my way of trying to reinvent something new.

***Play Dead***—the novella that lines the front of the book—was written last. (I'm quite clever, so I wrote each novella's summary or whatever the hell you want to call it in the order I wrote the novellas.)

The novella was inspired by the cover image, which I say in the next little part. I thought of a game, a dangerous game, and played with it.

I also played with the way Jared worked as a human. While we see Jared as a sociopath with a desire for sex and blood at first, we soon find that he is a kind, caring man who got trapped in a bad situation, something that can happen to anyone.

I'd like to thank everyone who's been along for the ride. There's way too many people to list (as in there would be pages upon pages of names, which would probably bore you, the reader,) but you all know who you are. You're the people that mingle with me on the messageboards, who email me and see how I'm doing.

I'd also like to thank Cinsearae Santiago, my cover designer and good friend. If anyone can get an extra novella out of you just from a piece of cover art, it's Cinsearae, people.

Again, thank you, all of you; you don't know how much it means.

~ Kody Boye

March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kody Boye broke into the horror scene in May 2007 with his short story *[A] Prom Queen's Revenge*. He has gone on to author stories such as *Notice Me*, *Love Bites*, *Happy Ending*, and *Mauldgen*. To learn more, visit him online at [www.kodyboye.itrello.com](http://www.kodyboye.itrello.com).

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