

STEVEN RAMIREZ

A close-up photograph of a blood-stained axe lying on a dark, cracked concrete floor. The axe head is silver and has a significant amount of red blood smeared on it. The handle is made of dark wood. The floor is dark grey with some yellowish-brown stains and cracks. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the concrete and the metallic surface of the axe head.

TELL ME WHEN I'M

**DEAD**

Book One of TELL ME WHEN I'M DEAD

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# TELL ME WHEN I'M DEAD

Book One of Tell Me When I'm Dead

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STEVEN RAMIREZ



Glass Highway  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

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## Praise

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“A hard-hitting splattergore zombie thriller, told by the ultimate antihero.”

Travis Luedke, author of The Nightlife Series

“Very nearly as good as Stephen King.”

Amazon Reviewer

“Just when I thought the genre might be on the wane, here comes a fabulous zombie read!”

Amazon Reviewer

“So good, I bought the lot.”

Amazon Reviewer



## About the Author

Steven Ramirez is the author of the horror thriller series *TELL ME WHEN I'M DEAD*. He has also published short stories as well as a children's book, and he wrote the screenplay for the horror thriller film *Killers*. Steven lives in Los Angeles with his wife and daughters.

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Also by Steven Ramirez

*Dead Is All You Get* (Book Two of TELL ME WHEN I'M DEAD)—Fighting to protect his wife, Holly, from the hordes of undead, Dave Pulaski discovers the truth behind the contagion—a revelation that will drive him past the limits of faith and reason. “A shoot first then shoot again horror thriller of the highest order.” —Simon Oneill, author of *Magic Is Murder*

*Even The Dead Will Bleed* (Book Three of TELL ME WHEN I'M DEAD)—In Los Angeles, Dave Pulaski is on a mission to rescue an innocent girl from a secret facility experimenting on humans, then kill the man responsible. But he encounters dark forces that will deliver him to the brink of hell. “Death, despair, and the way things are.” —Danielle DeVor, author of *The Marker Chronicles*

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Tell Me When I'm Dead / Book One of Tell Me When I'm Dead / Steven Ramirez. — 1st ed.

Edited by Neal Hock  
Cover art by Kevin Asmus  
Cover design by Deborah Bradseth

*For Richard Matheson. You are legend.*

The world's gone mad, he thought. The dead walk about and I think nothing of it. The return of corpses has become trivial in import. How quickly one accepts the incredible if only one sees it enough!

"Oh, Robert," she said then, "it's so unfair. So unfair. Why are we still alive? Why aren't we all dead? It would be better if we were all dead."

—Richard Matheson, *I Am Legend*

## In the Shit

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NOT ALL DRAGGERS WANT TO EAT YOUR FLESH. SOME WANT REVENGE.

This was what went through my head as I lay frozen in the corner of a cold storage area, my body halfway to dead and my breath like a broken concertina. The pounding on the metal door was deafening. The wailing of the undead tore at my brain like a glass dagger. It was a matter of time before they got in. I might be able to take out one or two—even without a weapon—but in the end they'd finish me.

I couldn't get my mind clear. I thought I heard automatic gunfire and the sound of people screaming. How had the draggers broken in? Wasn't anyone defending the doors? Maybe my captors were passed-out drunk.

It would've been so much better for me had I done the same. I wouldn't feel anything as I was ripped to pieces by animal-like claws and razor-sharp teeth that reeked of carrion, the filmy grey eyes unseeing and unfeeling.

In my delirium I prayed Holly and Griffin made it to the Arkon building and under the protection of Warnick and his men. There was no way for me to check. My cell phone was busted. I hadn't slept for days. I was hurt. Bad. Surrounded by huge aluminum tanks of ice-cold beer waiting to be tapped. Nice touch, Lord. Back atcha.

Through the pounding and the screaming I wondered if my friend Jim was outside with the others, trying to claw his way in and shred me

up out of hate for what happened to him. It wasn't my fault he turned. It wasn't anyone's fault.

In the days preceding this—I don't remember when—I saw a horde tear a guy apart. Big as he was, he was no match for them. In a matter of seconds they had him on the ground as they ripped his belly open, exposing the soft, pulsating organs. They cored him like an apple, from bottom to top. His head was the last to die, I remember, his eyes frozen in the terror of seeing his own hollowed-out body shudder into stillness. I wished I had a gun.

But it was the screaming. I'd never heard a man scream like that before. Was I capable of making that sound?

I stared at the door, wondering if it would hold. There was no way to lock it from the inside. Besides, I was too weak. The nailheads had left me in here and were planning to kill me according to the one they called Ulie. It didn't matter that I'd agreed to join their insane movement. Or the draggers would find me instead. *You 'member that guy Dave Pulaski? Whatever happened to him? Oh yeah, he's dead. Just like all the others.*

So far the horde was unable to pull the door open. I needed a beer bad.

I thought of Black Dragon and the Red Militia. Both proved to be false remedies in these delirious times. The soldiers—private military contractors really—were overwhelmed. And the militia, which started out as a movement to “save” people, turned into ravening chaos and violence. They fought Black Dragon, they fought civilians and they fought themselves, all at the behest of their insane leader, Ormand Ferry, with his dream of a new order, which was disintegrating into a long, debauched night of madness here in this out-of-the-way brewery.

I didn't know which was worse—the draggers or Ormand Ferry. Either way you were dead.

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IT WAS SO cold in here as I sat there thinking about these last weeks—about Holly, Jim and Missy. Everything went wrong after that night—that lost night. And what about me? I was a good person—I *am*. Used to be ... I don't know. But it was after that monstrous night when everything went sideways and Hell came looking for the good people of Tres Marias.

Rabid

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I REMEMBER. IT WAS JULY 5—THE NIGHT WHEN JIM GOT SHITFACED AND found his way to my house in the dark. He must've fallen, because when I answered the door well past ten, his upper lip was bleeding and one of his teeth was chipped.

"Got any beer?" he said through blood and saliva.

"You know I don't."

"Communist."

Tres Marias was one of those towns in Northern California you passed through on your way to something better. There was nothing to do here except get drunk. Since high school that's pretty much what Jim and I did. Before that I used to play hockey, and when I wasn't on the ice I devoured books like a glutton. My favorites were by Faulkner, Steinbeck, Vonnegut and Dick. Somewhere along the line I decided beer was better. There was no reason for it other than it tasted good and got me high. What followed were no college and no high-paying job far away from the stink hole I called home. Instead of promise, every day I looked forward to low wages and getting lit.

Then I met Holly. I don't know why she spent two minutes on me. As we lay in bed the first time she said, "I can't wait for you to become the man I will make you." Any other guy would've walked. I stayed.

I attended AA meetings and took community-college classes. Poor

Jim kept on going the way he was going. Though he was still my friend, it got harder to see him. Because when I was with him, I saw myself—my old self. And I didn't like it.

Holly padded down the stairs and stood behind me, her arms folded. I knew she was mad. She told me she disapproved of Jim, fearing he'd get me drinking again. But I knew better. I'd changed my ways for good.

"What do you want, Jim?" she said in that short tone of hers—the same tone she used when I forgot to take out the trash.

Holly was a knockout of a girl with a high-school education. Smarter than most people I knew. Her all-time favorite movie was *The Notebook*. Though she was a head shorter than me, when she got into her power stance, her fine blonde hair hanging over her shoulders and those huge green eyes boring into you like some kind of industrial laser, she was scary.

Jim opened his mouth to say something and threw up on the star jasmine.

"Oh, for—Dave, get him out of here. Puh-leeeeez."

"I'll drive him home," I said, getting my wallet and keys.

Jim lived way out up the 5 at the edge of town near the national forest, in the house his father built. Both his parents were dead—like mine. He used to have a dog named Perro, but he went missing a few weeks back. He'd been following Jim on one of his drunken nighttime hikes along the 299 when an eighteen-wheeler almost ran them over. I always thought the tractor-trailer was meant for Jim and the dog sacrificed himself. But the dog had disappeared. Once I read a story about a dog that saved his owner's life in a house fire and later died from smoke inhalation. It was the romantic in me, I guess.

"So what happened?" I said as we glided along the dark highway, not a car in sight.

"What do you mean?"

"Why did you go on another bender?"

"Thinking about the old days, I guess."

Jim Stanley and I used to be best friends, as close as any two brothers. We went to high school together. Got summer jobs together. Celebrated twenty-one together by driving up to the Point and drinking enough beer and vodka to bring down a moose. We passed out up there too. It was December and we almost died of the cold. When we woke, it was in the twenties and we both had hypothermia. Ended up in the hospital. Still, it was the best birthday ever.

We liked pretending we were badasses, but we never did any real harm. My mom—sick as she was—kept me in line, and whenever Jim came over to hang out and eat, which was much of the time, she went to work on him too. When it came to advice, Jim always did have a tin ear though.

“Jim, I keep telling you. Those days are gone.” I smelled the beer and puke on his breath, and I was glad we were no longer hanging out. I don’t know how I made it to twenty-four. Holly had everything to do with it, I guess.

I met her working at Staples, where I managed the copy center. Two years younger than me, she was the new cashier and seemed to have her eye on me from Day One. I don’t think a week had gone by when she invited me to dinner at her mom’s up in Mt. Shasta. Then we went back to her little apartment. She was all over me in bed, but right before anything happened she laid it on the line. I’d have to stop drinking—that was the deal. No sobriety, no Holly. I saw the determination in her eyes—it was like she was on a mission from God. And it made me even hotter for her. So I signed on.

After Holly and I married, Jim came around less and less. I’d see him downtown sometimes on my lunch break, but mostly he was out of my life. Things changed forever the night he showed up again.

“Why don’t we hang out anymore?” Jim said. He sounded like a hurt child.

“Aw, come on, man. Don’t do this.”

“What?”

“Lay the guilt on me. I’m married. I have responsibilities.”

“She’s nothing but a piece—”

“She’s my wife, asshole.”

I looked over to see if he was crying and found him trying to pull his lower lip up over his nose.

“So?” he said. “What about a boys’ night out once in a while?”

“Next you’ll be wanting a sleepover.”

“Shit, let’s do it.”

“No.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because I don’t have time for this anymore, Jim. Why don’t you grow up?”

I didn’t mean for it to come out like that, but I was pissed off. And it’s not like Jim didn’t know the score.

The silence carried us for another mile. He started singing the sappy chorus from “Someone Like You.” I don’t know what made me angrier—him knowing this song always brought tears to Holly’s eyes or what he might be insinuating. I smacked him hard across the ear. When I turned back, I saw something in the road coming at us and swerved to avoid it.

It was Jim’s dog—I could swear it!

After that I don’t know what happened. I couldn’t get on top of the situation. Next thing, we were going over the embankment, headed for the trees. Neither of us made a sound. It was at this moment I regretted never having fixed the passenger air bag.

A hundred-year-old pine stood in front of us. We hit it hard. My air bag stopped me, thank God. Jim wasn’t wearing his seat belt, and his head went through the windshield with a sickening crunch. Then everything got quiet and my eyes closed.

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WHEN I WOKE up I was alone. Beads of glass were everywhere. I looked

over and saw a large hole in the windshield, dripping with blood, bits of flesh still hanging from the jagged edges. The passenger door was open.

I saw raccoons vaguely in the glare of the headlights, their eyes shiny and hungry with anticipation. I knew as soon as I got out they'd be all over the windshield.

It was hard to move—I was jammed pretty good against the steering wheel. I inched sideways and, feeling intense pain from my neck down, forced the driver's-side door open and fell out onto the dry pine needles. I heard an owl hooting and the sound of the wind through the trees.

As I searched for my friend, I called out but got no answer. "Jim! Come on, man, this isn't funny."

It took me almost half an hour to get back up the embankment. I'd get a good start, but there was so much pain in my neck, back and legs. I kept slipping on those damned pine needles and gravel and sliding down to the bottom. Cursing, I'd go at it again, but I needed to rest after each attempt.

At last I reached the top, and lay there on my side till I could catch my breath. I couldn't see Jim anywhere. He had to be in pretty bad shape. He might be lying out there in the darkness somewhere nearby, bleeding to death.

"Jim? Where are you?"

I was in the middle of nowhere surrounded by silence. I dug into my jeans pocket for my phone and realized I'd forgotten it at home. It was a long walk back. I took one last look at my car down below. A gaze of raccoons pawed at the windshield. I hoped they didn't cut themselves on the sharp, bloody glass.

As I started down the road, I saw Perro again. The dog stared at me in the moonlight. There was something odd about him. His head was low, his body expanding and contracting like a bellows. I realized he was panting. Though it was dark, the animal's eyes seemed to glow hot and red. Then he came after me, snapping and snarling.

I ran, but I couldn't move very fast. And I couldn't turn my head

because of the pain. I had no idea if he was gaining on me.

Blue-white headlights came up behind me. A horn blasted, and I heard a meaty thud followed by a grisly yelp. I stopped running. A white van with a logo I didn't recognize was stopped in the middle of the road, the engine still idling. The blinding headlight beams illuminated the dog, which had been thrown several feet.

I heard a car door open and saw the dark shape of a man getting out. He approached the softly panting animal.

"Be careful," I said. "I think he's rabid."

"You okay?"

"I could use a ride. Did you see anybody else on the road?"

"Like who?"

"My friend Jim. We were in a car accident. I need to find him."

"Sorry, I didn't see anybody."

The dog howled suddenly and we backed off. The man ran back to his van and got a catch pole, but by the time he returned, Perro had limped off down the embankment and into the woods.

"Shit," he said.

"Are you animal control?"

The man looked at me. Then he said, "Come on, I'll give you a lift."

As I climbed in I was able to read the side of the van. ROBBIN-SEAR INDUSTRIES, OLD ORCHARD ROAD, TRES MARIAS, CA. Both the name and address were unfamiliar to me.

The Good Samaritan looked to be in his early thirties. He was dressed like an academic, wearing a sport jacket and jeans. Pale, with curly black hair and horn-rimmed glasses. A thin scar went from his upper lip to his nostril, and I realized he'd been born with a cleft palate. He said his name was Bob Creasy.

"Good thing you stopped," I said.

He didn't say anything. He seemed to be distracted and kept checking the rearview mirror. I must've looked pretty bad, because even though he tried to be helpful, he insisted on driving me to the police

station rather than my house.

"Did you get bit?" he said.

"What? No, but if you hadn't come along, it would've been over."

"You sure you weren't bit?"

"I'm sure."

A noise coming from the back of the van startled me. It sounded like growling. "What was that?"

"Lot of injured animals on the road tonight," he said.

He didn't seem to want to talk, preferring instead to fool with the car radio. At the police station he looked like he was in a hurry for me to get out.

"Take care, buddy," he said.

I watched as he shot away, almost taking out a parked patrol car. Then I went inside to call Holly.

She never said so, but I knew she was upset. We stopped at the emergency room even though I insisted I was fine. Good thing. The X-rays came back showing there was spinal damage at C3 and C4. They made me put on a neck brace. Said I was lucky I wasn't paralyzed.

While we waited, a man with a goiter came in, complaining about a kid in the park who had bitten him.

On the way home, Holly and I "talked."

"So were you drinking?" she said. That was always her first question whenever I screwed up. If I broke a glass washing the dishes, she'd ask me where I'd gotten the beer.

"No," I said. "Holly, how long is it going to take before you trust me?"

"Well, let's see. You stopped going to AA three months ago."

"It was two months. And anyway, I don't need those people telling me I have no power over alcohol. I do and I'm fine, FYI."

"Then why did you lose control of the car?"

"I swerved to avoid a dog, okay? Smell my breath."

"Never mind," she said. Great, now she was getting weepy. "I was

worried.”

That was the thing with her. She acted all hard on the outside, but inside she was like a marshmallow. I knew I was supposed to be the man, but I was still pissed off. So I let her stew in it. We drove on in silence. I closed my eyes and let myself drift.

The ER doctor had prescribed Vicodin for the pain, but I asked for Motrin instead. When we got home, I was so sore I couldn’t make it up the stairs. Apparently over her hissy fit, Holly kissed me and made me a bed on the sofa in the TV room.

“I need to find Jim,” I said.

“Dave, you need to rest. Come on, let me help you.”

I lay down, and a few minutes later I was gone.

In my dream I woke up in daylight. Jim was standing there wearing a curious expression, a dark red gash ringing his neck like a twisted reddish lei. I tried screaming, but when I opened my mouth, blood gushed out. Gallons of it, running down the sofa and spreading like a lake on the oval area rug and covering the hardwood floor. Shiny parasitic things that looked like kidney worms writhed and convulsed in the blood. Had I coughed them up too?

Someone touched my shoulder and I opened my eyes. It was night, and Holly was standing there in the Giants jersey I’d bought her the previous summer. She looked so good, I wasn’t mad anymore. I took her hand.

“You were moaning,” she said.

“Bad dream. What do you think happened to Jim?”

“I don’t know. He’s prob’ly back at his house, sleeping it off.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You’re right. He was pretty damn drunk.”

---

I STAYED home for a few days, in too much pain to work. I felt bad about not looking for Jim, but since I’d filed a missing person report, I figured

the cops could take care of it. Because someone had been injured and was now missing, they impounded what was left of my car as evidence. A Detective Van Gundy called later to say he'd taken a ride out to Jim's house. He didn't find anyone.

At work I felt like a spaz wearing the neck brace. But Holly insisted and I owed her for looking after me. Besides, she'd know if I took it off. I practiced turning with my whole body—I was like a robot. And I got headaches from the pressure on my jaw. There was an upside, though. Holly tied my shoes for me, which even in my compromised state turned me on.

At lunch I took a walk outside, hoping to see Jim. Everything looked normal. Cars went in and out of the parking lot, mothers pushed children in strollers. Some girl dressed as the Statue of Liberty hawked cheap prepaid cell phones. One or two stew bums hung out under a tree, their short dogs tucked inside wrinkled brown paper bags. Some things never changed.

As I said, Tres Marias had always been a strange little backwater town. But over the next few days, things got even weirder. On the local news, reporters described people acting "erratically" in public. Then I saw one for myself—a pizza delivery guy. The halting steps, the strange glazed-over look, the difficulty putting words together. The sports guy on the local TV station dubbed the condition "the jimmies."

At first it was funny to see how these people acted. Then we saw them urinating and defecating in public. Later we heard stories of healthy people and animals being attacked, and it wasn't funny anymore.

While I was outside, I saw the guy from the emergency room who'd been bitten, the one with the goiter. His gait was halting and strange—the jimmies. Kids on skateboards hounded him, some following behind and imitating his walk, others laughing cruelly and calling him a tard. If it had been me, I would've kicked their middle-school asses. This poor guy kept lurching down the sidewalk, oblivious.

Across the street a crowd gathered in front of city hall, which in true Tres Marias fashion was an old saloon that had been converted into an office building and stood next to a Dunkin' Donuts. A man dressed in a crisp brown suit and red pocket handkerchief stood on the steps with a megaphone. It was Ormand Ferry, self-appointed leader of a "charitable organization" known as the Red Militia. Behind him were what I supposed were his lieutenants. One of them I recognized as Travis Golightly, owner of the Beehive, the bar Jim and I used to hang out at in the old days. Travis was a bully and a racist, but we never paid much attention because the beer was so cheap.

As his followers collected donations, Ormand spoke passionately of "the blood of our countrymen" and the coming apocalypse. Some in the crowd chortled, but I found his manner disturbing. He was slender and tan, with blonde hair cut short like a Marine and wearing thick, round glasses that glinted whenever he moved his head. And he wasn't stupid. He made every effort to sound reasonable. He talked about the charitable work his group was doing, feeding families in need and giving the homeless a place to sleep.

I recalled something I'd read a long time ago about Satan. When he appeared, it wouldn't be as a demon but as an ordinary-looking guy with a convincing message of peace. As I walked past the crowd, one of the volunteers handed me a pamphlet. There on the cover was an image of a black wolf with bright red eyes, slavering and feverish with disease. And at the top a single word in large red print—PREPARE.

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AFTER TWO WEEKS, the neck brace came off. A new set of X-rays showed that my vertebrae were fine. Jim never did reappear, and the cops didn't seem interested in finding him. Everyone thought he'd wandered into the forest and died. A search party turned up nothing.

Something was weird. Over the same period people's pets went

missing. Then a hunter found a deer that had been gored. It was hardly breathing when the hunter sent a bullet through its brain. That was all anybody wanted to talk about at Staples. People coming down with the jimmys and animal mutilations.

"It's nothing," the store manager, Fred Lumpkin, said. "Probably rabid bats or something."

Fred was a pudgy, likable guy who was not quite thirty and who had a weakness for Baby Ruths and Diet Coke. He never got mad and was always good for an advance if someone found themselves short. Holly didn't like anyone taking advantage of Fred. I guess she was protective of him.

Fred always saw the bright side, even when the evidence irrefutably pointed towards the book of Revelation. I didn't know if he'd suffered a breakdown at one time and this was the only way he knew to cope. I imagined him losing it one day and chopping everyone up with the fireman's axe we kept in the back. Or maybe he was a nice guy. And there was no one better in the world than Fred to talk you off the ledge. Nevertheless, I always thought he was full of it.

In the middle of all this strangeness, Holly announced at dinner one night she was going off the pill. I kind of freaked at first, but once she explained *reasonably* how bad she wanted to start a family, I warmed to the idea. We were young, but wasn't this how it's supposed to be for married couples? Especially since she was a practicing Catholic, though I was so very out of practice.

"Are you sure?" I said.

"I'm sure." She punched me in the arm. "Well, come on. I want to hear what you think."

"Holly, I don't know. I'm scared, I guess."

"Okay."

I took her hand. "I never thought about me as a dad. Are you sure?"

"You asked me that already, Dave." She was laughing.

Then it hit me. I realized for the first time in our relationship she

trusted me. She believed I had gotten control of my disease and would make a suitable father. I guess I *was* the man she made me—or at least within spitting distance.

“Yes, I want to,” I said and kissed her.

This was the happiest time of my life. I was sober and I had a beautiful young wife. My Camry was totaled in the wreck, and I used the insurance money to buy a new black Dodge truck. I had a job. I had my books. I was on top of the world.

But you know happiness is temporary, right?

## We're Not Done

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PANIC TORE AT MY CENTER AND NUMBED MY EXTREMITIES.

*When can I see you?*

The text message on my cell phone glowed as I woke in the morning to the faint sound of the television downstairs. I'm not a brave man. In fact, I'm a wuss when it comes to trouble. Holly could have seen the message. I recalled hearing my cell phone ding through a pasty fog of sleep. Looking over, I realized I was alone. She must be in the kitchen.

I dressed in a hurry, jammed the phone into my jeans and headed for the stairs. I passed the spare bedroom and saw Holly sitting on the floor, wearing her work clothes and facing the windows. Blue light streamed in, illuminating her hair. She looked like an angel, and I smiled as I walked in.

"What're you doing?"

"Just imagining," she said, and kissed me. "Once I'm pregnant we're going shopping for baby furniture. I already know what I want."

I kissed her head. "I need to shower."

"It's your day off. What's the hurry? I'll be leaving soon."

"I want to get started. Got a lot of random stuff to do."

I kept my phone with me in the bathroom. After a quick shower, I went downstairs and grabbed coffee and a bowl of cereal. Holly had the morning news on. A local woman was missing, last seen going for a run.

I got the sense Holly was watching me, but I think it was my imagination. As I ate, she kept her eyes on the TV.

“We know her, right?” I said.

“Yeah.”

“I hope they find her.” I got up.

“Why are you so busy?”

The way she looked at me, I felt she knew what was going on. Just my imagination. That and deafening guilt.

“I’m going out for a while,” I said.

She pulled out her phone and snapped a pic as I rinsed off the dishes in the sink. “There. The perfect husband.”

I felt around for my keys and kissed her. “Have fun at work.”

“Oh, sure. I hear we’re getting in a pallet of red Swingline staplers. Whoo-hoo!”

“Say hi to Fred.” I gave her a thumbs-up and ran out the door.

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THERE WAS a Starbucks up the 5 in Redding. A lot of tourists stopped there on their way to Mt. Shasta. We’d decided to meet there to avoid seeing anyone we knew in Tres Marias. When I walked in, she was already sipping tea out of a huge blue cup and reading something on her phone. I looked around the store, found nothing but strangers and took a seat across from her.

When she saw me, she smiled in a sad kind of way. She looked amazing, her straight, shiny dark brown hair pulled back, huge dark eyes and full lips. Everything about her was hungry for my company. She wore a white V-neck T-shirt cut way low and denim shorts that showed off most of her tanned legs. I smelled the perfume I’d bought her when we visited a Sephora one time. If things had been different, I might have ended up—

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey.” I spoke in as neutral a voice as possible. “So why did you text me?”

“Do you want a coffee or ...”

“No.”

I was somewhere between angry and turned-on. It had been two months since Missy Soldado and I last saw each other—way before any of the current craziness in Tres Marias started. Towards the end I was going over to her house two or three times a week. I blamed it on the fact that I was struggling to stay sober and needed a distraction. But I think it was because I was getting ready to end it and I wanted as much of Missy as I could get before she was out of my life for good.

I’d planned to go to her house one last time and break it off clean, but ended up having sex—the best sex I ever had with her in the six weeks we were together. Then I left. I hadn’t seen or spoken to her since.

“Why did you text me?” I said.

“I had to see you again. I’ve been thinking a lot about us. I drove over to Staples the other day and saw you inside talking to Holly. I almost went in.”

“Missy, you need to let this go.”

“I know, but I can’t.”

“You knew how things were. I never lied to you about my situation.”

“People split up all the time.”

“Well, I’m not doing that.”

“So you feel some kind of obligation to Holly? What was she, your high-school sweetheart?”

“Lower your voice. No, I feel love for her.”

“You felt love for me once. You can’t be in love with two women, Dave.”

“You’re right, I can’t. Look, I don’t want to make a scene. Please try to understand. We’ve been together for three years. I love Holly. We’re planning to start a family.”

She stirred her tea and avoided my eyes for a long time. “I don’t

believe you. You just don't have the cojones to get out of a dead relationship."

Disgusted, I got up and looked around the store. A family of four was ordering the works. Some businessman with a laptop and earbuds was on a call. At another table some sincere-looking guy was trying to sell a middle-aged woman life insurance. Across from them several baby-faced religion students argued about Corinthians and Saint Paul's views on marriage. At that moment I would have given my soul to be any one of those people.

"What did you even see in me anyway?" I said. "Was it the fact that I was married? Is that it? Was it a big thrill for you? You could have any guy you want. Go find somebody who's single."

"I don't want somebody else." She was crying.

"Don't contact me anymore," I said. "I mean it."

She shook her head and smiled bitterly. "No, this isn't over. I'll do what I have to."

I grabbed my chair and slammed it down next to her, startling the people around us and giving Missy a scare. Did I mention I have a temper?

"What exactly does that mean?" I said.

She looked up at me, her eyes defiant. "It means I love you and I'm not giving up on us."

I hated her and wanted out. This wasn't fair. She needed to understand that what happened, happened. It was nice, but it was over. Time to move on. Did she think she was going to talk me into leaving Holly for her?

I moved my chair next to hers and sat. "Now listen carefully, Missy. I'm going to say this once. There is no 'us.' There is you with your life and me with mine."

"I have no life, Dave!" People were looking at us again, and she lowered her voice. "Not without you."

I saw those around us getting uncomfortable. One of the baristas

whispered something to, I assumed, the manager. I knew what came next—seen it a thousand times at the Beehive. First they would ask us to leave, then they would call the cops.

Missy felt the same awkwardness and laughed. “You’re so funny,” she said, touching my face.

I snatched her wrist, making her wince, and placed her arm on the table. When I released it, I saw the reddish outline of my fingers. Without another word I left, nearly colliding with a toddler who had wandered away from his mother’s side.

“Sorry,” I said.

A commotion in the street prevented me from getting out of the tiny parking lot. Sirens wailed, and when I did pull out, I saw a car wrapped around a streetlight and the female driver sitting on the curb, bloody and surrounded by onlookers. As I waited at the light, I heard voices saying something about the jimmies and the woman losing control of the car. There was no denying that the sickness was spreading.

I needed to think. Wandering the aisles at Home Depot always seemed to calm me. It had to be the orange aprons. I had a lot to do around the house and figured I’d take the day to get everything done. On the way over there, I thought about Missy.

We’d met when I started going to the gym. At first we’d acknowledge each other on the treadmills. After a while, I stopped watching television with my earbuds and we talked the whole time. I’d always found her attractive, but I never thought about doing anything.

One night she told me someone tried to break into her house and she was scared. She asked me to follow her home to make sure no one was waiting for her. As I said, I’m a coward by nature. But being the awesome gentleman I was too, I did just that. I sat in my car as she parked in the driveway, went to the door, looked back at me for the longest time, then went inside.

The next time she said she wanted to thank me for helping her out. She offered to buy me a drink afterwards. When I told her about my

history, she suggested Starbucks.

The truth is, I knew what I was doing. I fooled myself into thinking the whole thing was innocent and nothing was going to happen. When I walked her to her car, she grabbed my face and kissed me hard on the mouth. I didn't pull away. She pressed into me and I was gone.

After that episode I didn't need to be talked into following her home. Here's the irony. It was Holly's idea for me to get exercise. Part of her master plan to change me. Not that I blame her for Missy. That was all me.

Maybe Missy was bluffing. The girl was twenty and emotional. She needed time.

I felt my phone vibrate. Digging into my pocket, I pulled it out and stared at the text message. *We're not done. TTY soon.*

Real panic set in. I looked up and slammed on my brakes at a red light where tourists were crossing. What if she planned to confront Holly? I knew my wife, and if she ever found out, she'd leave me cold. I couldn't allow that to happen. I didn't deserve this. I made a mistake and I fixed it. Everything was supposed to be normal. I was supposed to be happy—supposed to make Holly happy.

Something would have to be done.

---

THE AFTERNOON DRAGGED ON, and I spent the remaining hours organizing the basement, all the time worrying that Missy would show up. When I came into the kitchen after five, Holly was chopping onions for dinner, still wearing her work clothes. The TV was on. I did my best to hide my uneasiness.

"How was work?"

"They still haven't found that missing woman." She nodded towards the TV.

We watched footage of police and community volunteers combing

the forest with dogs.

"You must be tired," I said.

"Just my feet. What have you been up to?"

"Fixing stuff. The toilet upstairs doesn't leak anymore."

"Wait a sec, I need to call my mother and gloat."

I kissed Holly's neck and turned her around. Her eyes were red-rimmed from the onions. "Let me buy you dinner," I said.

"Did something happen?" I felt her body tensing up.

"Why would you ask that?"

"You didn't wreck the new truck already?"

"No. Can't a guy want to take his wife out to dinner?"

"Okay, sorry. Clam down."

Holly had a charming habit of inverting the letters in certain words at inappropriate times. She was my own Mrs. Malaprop. She'd gotten it from her father, who was a career salesman and used the technique to break the ice with new clients.

She scooped the onions into a plastic container and took off her apron. As she did this, an overwhelming feeling came over me. I reached around and touched her breasts.

"I thought we were going to dinner," she said, slapping my hands away.

"We will, I promise."

"Why don't I believe you?" She was laughing.

"No, really. Let me take care of something real quick and ..." I turned her around and pulled her towards me, guessing she was enjoying the attention.

"Dave, why is there a road flare in your pants?"

I was so hot I picked her up and carried her upstairs. I was a caveman, and all I wanted was to have my way with her. I almost didn't recognize myself. She was the same woman, but she wasn't. I can't explain, but it was like I was seeing her for the first time. And I adored everything I saw.

"I thought we agreed no animals in the house," she said.

I let out a growl. As we reached the top of the stairs, the doorbell rang.

"Aw, man."

"Let's pretend we're not home," I said.

"Both cars are in the driveway."

I set her down, sighed theatrically and limped downstairs to open the front door. It was Detective Van Gundy.

"Oh, hi," I said. I'd forgotten how huge he was. He was easily six feet eight, with dark brown wavy hair and a worried brow, smelling of cigarettes.

"Sorry to bother you, Mr. Pulaski. Can I come in for a minute?"

"Sure." I stepped back and let him into the foyer.

This guy was a humorless bag of nothing but. His being here made me nervous as I led him into the living room.

"What can I do for you?" I said. "Any leads on Jim?"

He sat on the floral sofa, pushing his tree-trunk legs out in front of him. His shoes must've been size sixteen. This guy was Herman Munster.

"Play any basketball?" I said.

"No. Heart condition." He turned as Holly walked in wearing a loose-fitting summer dress. She was gorgeous. The detective got to his feet.

"What's going on?" she said.

"Detective Van Gundy wanted to give us an update on Jim."

"Oh?"

I sat opposite the policeman, and she leaned against the arm of the leather chair. I could smell her perfume. We reached for each other's hands.

"I can see you're going out," the detective said. "I'll make it quick. We haven't located your friend, but we are investigating a number of animal mutilations in the area near where he lives."

"I read something about that in the paper," Holly said. "You don't

think Jim had anything to do with it?"

"We're still looking into it. Would you describe Jim Stanley as a violent person?"

"No," I said. "He drinks, though. But I've never known him to harm anyone, even when he was hammered."

"How long have you known him?"

"Since high school."

"And you, Mrs. Pulaski?"

"Three years," she said. "Detective, you're not asking these questions because of some missing pets."

Detective Van Gundy looked down at his enormous Frankenstein shoes. "No. This morning a jogger found a body in the woods."

"Oh no," Holly said and squeezed my hand.

"It was pretty messed up."

"Was it the missing woman?" I said. "We saw a news report that said they're still looking for her."

"We're not allowed to say until the family is notified." He went to the front door. "I'm sorry. I hope I didn't ruin your evening."

"It's okay," Holly said. "I'm so sorry. I agree with Dave, though. I don't think Jim could've done that."

"Please let me know if you hear from him," the detective said.

"We will," I said and took his card.

"Listen, I have to ask. Are you sure he hasn't tried to contact you?"

"No. Why?"

"Sometimes well-meaning people think they're protecting their friend by ... holding back."

"Honestly, we haven't seen him."

"Okay, but you let me know if he shows."

"We will."

When the detective was gone, I put my arms around Holly and kissed her nose. I could always tell when she was upset—and this news had gotten to her.

"It's that woman—I know it is," she said. "Whoever did that is still wandering around Tres Marias."

"Let's forget about it for now. I want us to have a good time, okay?"

"I'm not sure I feel like it."

"Please, honey. It's got nothing to do with us. Let's just be together, okay?"

"Dave."

"Please?"

"Fine. Let me get my purse."

I took Holly to one of our favorite Mexican restaurants, a place called La Adelita. They had the best *carne asada* in the area.

"That detective thought we were lying about Jim," she said.

We were both drinking iced tea, but I craved a beer. It didn't help that people all around us were celebrating with oversize margaritas and beer by the pitcher.

"Don't you think?" she said.

"What?"

"Dave, are you even listening to me?"

"Sorry, I got distracted. Look, he's a cop. He's asking routine questions."

"Would you tell me the truth if you'd seen Jim?"

"What? Of course. Why lie about something like that?"

"I don't know. I guess things have gotten strange the last few weeks."

---

THERE MUST'VE BEEN a power outage, because many of the streetlights were out as we made our way home. Holly decided it was a good idea to massage my thigh while I drove.

"I hope this is going somewhere."

"Could be. We'll see when we get home."

Up ahead, I spotted a dark figure on the side of the road, tottering

towards us, his head down. I slowed and went around. As my headlight beams shone on him, he looked up at us. His eyes were vacant. The way he moved, I could see he had the jimmies.

“See, this is why I don’t drink anymore,” I said.

My joke fell flat. The sight of this guy chilled us both, and we rode the rest of the way in silence. I kept thinking about how this thing was spreading. Could Holly or I come down with the sickness?

At home in familiar surroundings we couldn’t wait to get into bed. It felt like when we were first dating. All my senses were aroused. I smelled her hair and got lost in it.

“We’re good together, aren’t we?” I said.

“Like fleas and parrots.”

I kissed her perfect fingers, then her wedding ring. She was everything I wanted. And I would do anything to protect her. Anything.

I pulled her close and kissed her. “I love you so much, Holly.”

“You butter,” she said and pushed me onto my back.

Jim's Place

---

WE READ THE DISTURBING HEADLINE IN THE PAPER—*MAN SEES BODY OF Missing Woman*. A local hunter told reporters he found the body of the missing woman, a local named Sarah Champion, in the woods. She'd been eviscerated. He went to get help, but when he returned with the police, the body was gone. The only things left were blood, hair, bits of clothing and a finger.

Sarah was a writer in her forties who loved to run. Holly and I had seen her many times in the early morning on our way to work. She left behind a husband and two young sons. The hapless hunter was not considered a suspect.

Holly and I carpooled whenever we had the same work schedule. With the news of Sarah's slaying, fear had taken over our lives. Fear of the forest, fear of the night and fear of other people. I thought about buying a gun.

Everyone at work talked about the killing. Some believed the hunter had murdered Sarah himself, hidden the body and gone to the police to taunt them. Those people watched too much cable television.

"It had to be a drifter," Fred said. He was incapable of believing anyone in Tres Marias would commit such an atrocity. "A psycho from across the border."

"And by 'border' you mean Oregon?" I said.

“Exactly. Or farther north even. Remember the Green River Killer?”

“How do you explain the animal mutilations?” someone else said. It was Zach, the wiseass kid who spent all his time in the alley smoking dope when he wasn’t stocking inventory.

Fred regarded him like a patient teacher. “I told you, Zach. There’s a rabid bear or something out there.”

“Or maybe one of those freaks with the jimmys did it.”

“Why don’t you unpack those fax machines.”

“I’m tellin’ ya, man ...”

Zach was the one person Fred ordered around. The rest of us knew our jobs and did them without being asked. I often wondered why Fred didn’t fire him. I suppose it had something to do with the fact that Fred was the one who had hired him. He saw himself as a good judge of character.

“Zach’s just rough around the edges,” he said one time.

---

AT SUBWAY, Holly and I tried to keep the conversation light, but it always came back to the weird events that consumed our lives. In my head I saw Missy everywhere, and I was terrified she would confront me in front of my wife.

“Don’t you like your sandwich?” Holly said.

“Not that hungry, I guess.”

“I like the way you held me this morning.”

I tried ignoring the pain in my gut as my hand found hers.

---

WHEN WE GOT home in the late afternoon, I fell asleep on the sofa in the TV room. Holly insisted on going to the grocery store even though I’d promised to go later.

Something woke me. When I opened my eyes, Jim was standing there. Terrified, I rolled off the sofa and scrambled to my feet. He was gone. Had I dreamt this? I looked at the carpet and saw dirty footprints.

When Holly returned, she found me in the kitchen. If there was ever a time that demanded a drink, this was it. Instead I made a pot of strong black coffee.

“I suppose you expect me to clean up that mess?” she said.

“I didn’t do it.”

She must have seen my hand trembling as I struggled to bring the coffee to my lips. “What happened, Dave?”

“I saw Jim.”

“What? Are you serious?”

“He was standing next to me when I woke up. Then he was gone.”

“No, it had to be a dream.”

“Dreams don’t leave footprints.”

“Well, how did he get in?”

“You must’ve left the front door unlocked when you went out.”

“Oh God, Dave! What if he’s still in here?”

We never considered Jim a threat before. Holly stayed in the kitchen clutching a carving knife while I locked all the doors and searched the house. There were no other footprints—nothing. I was beginning to doubt Jim had ever been there. I went back and checked the TV room. Nothing was different—other than the footprints—yet something *was* different.

“Holly, can you come in here a sec?”

“What is it?”

“There’s something about this room. I can’t ...”

“I don’t see—” She reached up towards a shelf on the wall near the TV. “Dave, look at this.”

I saw where she was pointing. The shelf was dusty, but there was a spot which was dust-free.

“There used to be a picture here, right?”

“Yeah,” she said. “It was of you and Jim.”

“I remember. We were showing off the fish we caught at Shasta Lake. Right before you and I got married.”

Jim might have recalled that as a fun time, but I remember it as tense and awkward. It was our last trip together. He spent the whole time drunk, and it was hard for me not to join in. I kept thinking of my future together with Holly and refused to take part. A tourist happened to catch us in a good mood and snapped the pic. After that I didn't want to hang out with my friend anymore.

“That was a great trip,” I said.

---

OVER DINNER we tried to take our minds off what had happened and made plans for an imaginary baby girl named Jade. So far we had her graduating from Berkeley and going into a graduate program at Stanford. Then the subject of Jim came up again.

“He could've been disoriented for a long time, then found his way out of the woods,” I said.

“Dave, he knows those woods. He would've made it home in no time. How did he look?”

“Like he was hurt bad. I'm going to take a ride out there.”

“Tonight?” I heard the scared in her voice.

“I need to see if he ever made it home.” I rinsed off the dishes and put them in the dishwasher.

“What if he's not ... normal?”

“Jim was never normal.”

“You know what I mean. What if he's—”

“Dangerous?” She nodded. “You mean as in he killed Sarah Champion? Then I'll hit him with a shovel and call 911.”

This didn't make Holly feel any better, but it eased the tension. Trying not to think too much, I headed out.

“Lock everything up tight,” I said. When I kissed her, I knew she sensed how afraid I was.

“Dave? Make sure you’re not being followed, okay?”

“Good point.”

I walked to my truck without looking back. The last thing I needed was that dour detective on my ass.

The moon was huge and bright through the trees. Though it was summer, the air was crisp and smelled of pine. When I was younger, I used to want to get away from this place. Move to San Francisco or LA. After I met Holly, I saw the beauty around me—the trees, the fresh air, the quiet—and I understood why my parents had settled here.

Checking the rearview mirror, I made sure I wasn’t being followed. A colony of bats swooped out of the forest into the night. You can never tell with bats, whether they’re scared or out on a joyride. A lot of times they carried disease—primarily rabies. I wondered if that’s what caused the recent rash of people with the jimmies.

An owl hooted somewhere nearby. I heard a shriek and my heart thudded. I pulled over, rolled down the window and listened. Nothing but the wind.

“Mountain lion,” I said.

When I arrived at Jim’s house, everything was dark. I grabbed a flashlight from the glove compartment and got out to investigate. I stepped on something soft. It made a crunching noise, and when I shone the flashlight, I found an orange house cat that looked like it had been gored with a screwdriver.

I jumped away from the rotting carcass, wiped my shoe on some grass and shone the flashlight all around the front yard. There were dead animals everywhere—hundreds of them. Most were dogs and cats. As I moved towards the house I saw a raccoon and what was left of a weasel.

For a second I caught myself thinking this was like one of those horror movies where the audience is screaming “Get out of there now!” No one would be stupid enough to enter the house in real life. Yet here I

was, and I believed it made sense. I had to find out what happened to my friend.

The front door was unlocked. Jim never locked his doors because he didn't think he owned anything worth stealing. Being familiar with the sparse furniture and lack of refinement, I had to agree.

I tried the lights—they came on. I expected to see the walls smeared with the words HELTER SKELTER in blood, but what I saw shocked me all the same. A huge sculpture of green longneck beer bottles rose from floor to ceiling, suspended by iron rebar that had been fashioned into a massive wall with a hole in the center. When had Jim built this?

I stepped on an orange tail that must've belonged to the cat from outside. I stood in the living room for a time, admiring the work and remembering all those nights we drank ourselves stupid. There were so many times I woke up in the morning on Jim's floor. I tried picturing myself there and wondered to the depths of my soul what in God's name I had thought I was accomplishing. We'd spent so much time here, and I couldn't remember a single intelligent conversation.

Much as I'd done at home, I did a careful check of the house, calling out Jim's name. After fifteen minutes of searching, I took a seat in the kitchen. It was painted avocado green. The used aluminum table and chairs looked like they had come from a condemned diner. Jim had sold off his parents' furniture long ago.

The refrigerator still worked. It was one of those old round-cornered Frigidaire jobs that might've looked good in the 1950s. I opened it and found what I expected. Nothing but beer. With the stress of these last few weeks, I craved that wicked drink. All those shiny bottles dusted with condensation waiting for someone to twist off the tops and try to quench a thirst that could never be satisfied. Catching myself, I slammed the refrigerator door shut and choked on a scream.

Jim was standing there, watching me with a birdlike curiosity.

His clothes were a mess, caked with mud and what looked like dried blood. His sandy hair was matted with dirt. His eyes were like two

wafers of slate, grey and lifeless. His eyelids were rimmed with red. A whitish goo had formed near the tear ducts. His mouth was filthy with old blood.

I don't know if it was the fluorescent lights or I was tired, but he looked livid. The gash ringing his neck was dark and ragged. His skin was a kind of greyish and his fingernails were a blackish purple. And here was the weird part. Although he seemed to be alive and aware, there was no indication he was breathing.

Instead of panicking, I sat back on the chair and sighed. "Been watching me long?"

A riverless silence made the air heavy. I thought he hadn't heard me, but when I looked over at him, I could see he was trying to form words but nothing came out. He moved towards me stiffly and I got to my feet. Why in hell hadn't I brought the shovel?

"Jim, what're you—"

He brushed past me and went to the refrigerator. I smelled excrement and saw he'd shitted himself. He grabbed a beer and tried to twist the top off. His fingers were stiff, the tips doughy, and he couldn't manage it. This was the worst I'd ever seen him. I took the bottle and opened it for him. He stared at it for the longest time like he didn't know what it was for. Then he drank.

As bad off as he was, I envied him because of the beer. I kept thinking about all those other bottles in the refrigerator. Why shouldn't I join him for one last round?

The sound of him drinking was indescribable—like dirty runoff down a storm drain. He didn't even swallow. He let gravity pull the beer down into his gut. I expected liquid to come squirting out of the gash in his neck.

Jim could finish a beer faster than anyone I knew. We used to have contests, and I always lost. It was the same now. The bottle was empty in a couple of seconds. He always belched afterwards. This time, he gawped at me stupidly.

“Where have you been all this time?” He stared at me through dead eyes and tried to form a crooked smile. “We had the whole town out looking for you.” I kept talking, more to keep myself calm than anything. “I think you might need a doctor. Can I have a look at your neck?”

I kept my palms open and in front of me. He smelled of rotting meat, and I had to fight to keep my gorge down. His dull eyes followed my hands as I examined his neck.

I didn’t see any recent bleeding, thank God. Using my finger, I felt the tear. I reached the left side, where a large flap of mortified skin—dried out and crispy at the edges—lay loose over the shiny dark red muscle. As I lifted it, something fell out, which sounded like a pebble when it hit the floor. I glanced down. It was a glass bead from my car’s windshield. Jim looked at it too and groaned, as if remembering the accident all over again.

Suddenly the flap moved by itself, and my stomach lurched.

At first I thought I imagined it. When I lifted up the skin, a fat kidney worm dripping with gore raised its bald, blind head and glared at me. Hearing its silent scream in my head, I shouted and fell backwards against the gas range. I didn’t know I was still holding the flap of skin, and I pulled Jim with me. His head slammed into the range hood, making a dull, squishy sound.

Enraged, he stood straight and bared his teeth, which were covered in half-eaten animal sweetbreads and fur. I tried scrambling away but got pinned in a corner of the kitchen. As he hovered over me, I tried to calm him down.

“Jim, I’m sorry! It was an accident!”

He grabbed for my legs, pincer-like, and I had to kick him away, which made him even angrier. I caught him in the nose with my boot and heard the crunch of bone and cartilage. It didn’t stop him.

“Jim, you need a doctor. Let me drive you to the hospital.”

He stopped and straightened up like he’d heard something outside. I expected his nose to be gushing blood, but there was nothing. Though it

was bent to one side, it didn't seem to bother him. He craned his neck around, and I heard the faint sound of stretching tendons and cracking bones. As he backed away from me, I got to my feet and scooted towards the door.

"I'm calling an ambulance," I said.

I turned, and he was in front of a cupboard. He opened the door and reached inside. I fumbled for my cell phone to dial 911. I didn't notice he had turned around to face me. Before I could call, he brought his hands up and showed me what he was holding.

It was the photo of us at Shasta Lake, bloodstained and filthy.

Jim stared at me with those cold, crazy eyes, which seemed to look through me. Feeling my heart exploding, I ran out of there, got into my truck and drove off over dozens of dead animals. After a mile or so, I calmed myself and tried to think. I remembered the missing pets, the mutilated deer. And now the dead runner. I considered the fact that Jim no longer spoke.

I thought about all the townspeople with the jimmies. No one had any idea of how the condition spread so quickly. I was scared because I'd touched Jim—touched his blood. I needed to see a doctor as soon as possible.

I was about to call 911 when a text came through. I thought it was Holly. *I'm outside your house. Where's your truck? Should I knock?*

It was Missy. I didn't answer. I was dirty and scared. I needed a doctor. Didn't I have enough on my plate? I told myself I was a good person, I didn't deserve this. But I couldn't ignore her—I had to do something. And what about Jim? He'd have to wait. I decided to go to Missy's house to have a talk.

By the time I got there, she was waiting at the door, barefoot, legs shaved, dressed in tight cotton shorts and a soft V-neck T-shirt with no bra. She knew how to get me to come to her. I was like a trained dog. She played me with a bad hand, and I fell for it every time.

"I was at your house, you know," she said as I came up the walk.

“Want to come in?”

I stood at the front door, glaring at her. Something made me want to hit her, but I knew if I resorted to violence she might go to Holly right away. She smelled so good.

“You need to stop this.”

“It’s like I told you, Dave. I’m fighting for us.”

My anger seethed as she threw her arms around my neck and kissed me, pressing her warm, luscious body close.

“Ew, what do you smell like?”

She turned her head and took a deep breath. Then she rubbed up against me again. I was still attracted to her and I felt myself getting aroused—I’m sure she felt it too because she rubbed harder. And that made me even angrier. I pulled her arms off me and stepped back.

“I know you still want me, Dave,” she said.

“I’m not leaving Holly.”

“Is that what you came here to tell me?”

“Yes.”

She pulled her T-shirt up, revealing her firm breasts. I tried not to look at them.

“Still not leaving her?” she said.

I reached over and pulled her shirt down. “Stop it, Missy.”

At first she looked hurt. Then her face turned angry, and she raked her nails across my face. I backed away, holding my cheek. It stung. I felt the wet, sticky blood.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She stood there, defiant, as I headed for my truck. “Say hi to Holly for me.”

I didn’t look back.

---

“DID YOU FIND HIM?” Holly said when I got home.

“No. I checked his house and everything. It looks like he hasn’t been there for a long time.”

“How did you get so dirty? And what happened to your face?”

“It was dark. I fell.”

She came up to give me a kiss, but I motioned for her to stay back.

“Sorry, I don’t smell too good. I need to shower. There were a lot of dead animals.”

“Animals?”

“I think he’s been eating them.”

“Oh no. That poor man.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Guess his luck ran out.”

---

I SAT in the small plastic chair rather than on the examination table with the white butcher paper when the doctor walked in.

“Hey, Isaac.”

“Dave, what’s this all about? I don’t have time to visit. There are a lot of actual sick patients.”

“I know, I saw your waiting room.”

Dr. Isaac Fallow was a medical examiner but still had an internal-medicine practice in town. He was a genial man, somewhere in his sixties. He’d been our family physician, and I’d known him since I was little. It was Holly’s day off, and to avoid suspicion I had made a lunchtime appointment.

Isaac motioned for me to take a seat on the examination table, stuck a thermometer in my mouth, checked my blood pressure and took my pulse.

“I’m worried about this thing spreading through the town,” I said.

“So am I.” He checked my eyes, ears and throat. “Be still.” He listened to my heart, then checked my breathing. “You seem fine. Want a sucker?”

“The other day one of those sick people came into the store. I think I might have been exposed to something.”

“Well, we don’t know how this thing spreads, but what I’ve noticed is that in each case the person was either bitten or infected with the blood of another sick person. Did the customer bite you?”

“No. I think I might have touched something that had their saliva on it, though.”

“I see.” He put his things away. “Well, did you wash your hands right away?”

“I used hand sanitizer.”

“Soap and hot water is still the best. But I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

“Great. Do you know what this thing is?”

“No, but it seems to act like a virus. Might be related to the flu. We just don’t know yet.”

“I’ve noticed it changes people’s mood.”

“Yes, I’ve seen that too. There’s a rage factor in some cases.” He was halfway out the door.

“Any advice?”

“Don’t piss anyone off. See you, Dave.”

## The Missy Problem

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HERE WAS THE MISSY PROBLEM. DID I TELL HOLLY EVERYTHING AND HOPE she could forgive me? Or did I try to stop Missy before Holly found out?

Like I said, I'm a wuss and I avoid confrontation. I didn't want to tell Holly the truth. Sure, I was scared she'd get mad—but I was more afraid of her leaving me. That might sound stupid coming from a guy who spent six years of his young life getting drunk. I'd already proven I didn't give a rat's fart about things like marriage and family and living a good life. Shit, who knows—maybe I'd changed.

All I wanted was to protect what I had. But I knew confronting Missy again would piss her off and make her blow the whole thing up. So I had no choice but to confess. Next to quitting drinking, it was the hardest thing I ever did. It meant telling the actual truth. I went all in.

It was getting dark outside. A hot wind blew, rattling the windows. In the distance, sirens wailed. Holly sat across from me at the kitchen table. It was hard to read her expression, but it looked like shock.

"Say something," I said.

"Why?"

I saw a hurt that would never heal—not in a lifetime of good deeds. If I became a missionary and spent the rest of my miserable, groveling existence ministering to lepers, it wouldn't matter. Nothing would take away the pain I saw in her eyes.

"I don't know what made me get mixed up with her. No idea."

"Where ..." She poured herself more tea. Stood by the stove and looked at her quivering hands. "Where did you meet her?" Her voice was small and distant, like she'd already left the room.

"The gym. It started out as talking. Just talking. There was never any discussion of ... They were conversations to pass the time."

"Yeah, I can see how that could lead to sex."

"She asked me to follow her home because she was scared of a break-in."

"So you were being noble. Did she ask you inside? Did you look under her bed? Did you role-play?"

"I left. But after that one time I don't know what happened. It's all mixed up in my head. I let myself get sucked in."

"Those nights you were gone." She was crying and holding herself. "You said you were with Jim. And I thought you'd started drinking again. What a relief."

"I broke it off. That night I went to find Jim I went to her house afterwards and told her. I never wanted you to know. She thinks we were meant to be together. She said she wouldn't stop till we were."

"And what did you say, Dave?"

"I told her to forget it. Look, I never wanted you to know. She's crazy. I just want to protect us."

"Oh. I guess you're forgiven then."

We sat for a long time. A faraway, bone-chilling shriek tore the silence. I told myself it was a mountain lion. I had no idea what was going through Holly's mind.

"What're you going to do?" she said.

"Tell her that you already know. That I don't care what she does. I'm hoping she'll come to her senses and leave us alone."

"But you said she's crazy."

"Crazy, confused ..."

"Will she try to hurt us?"

“No. Maybe—I don’t know. I don’t know what else to do.”

“Do what you need to. I can’t be around you right now.” She put her cup in the sink and walked out.

Despite the pain in my gut, I felt the worst was over. Things would be rocky for a while, but I could see Holly forgiving me. I’d gone to her with the truth. I wanted *her*—not Missy.

Sometimes we lie to ourselves to get through the next five minutes.

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THE NEXT DAY WAS SATURDAY. I had slept on the couch in the TV room. Holly went out early—I don’t know where. After I showered and dressed, I called Missy and told her I wanted to meet. I heard her excitement and wished I could avoid seeing her.

When I arrived, she was waiting on the porch, ready for action. I’d already been through hell with Holly. Now it was Missy’s turn. There’s nothing worse than delivering bad news to women. I hoped I wouldn’t get good at it.

“Want to come inside?” she said.

“Let’s take a walk.”

Her house stood at the edge of the forest. Though it was after nine, the air was already hot and sticky. We walked behind her house and found a trail that led into the woods.

“I told Holly everything.” I looked straight ahead as we walked. A deer cut across the path in front of us. Squirrels scampered around in the pine needles.

“Oh.”

“So now you know I was serious when I said this is over.”

She took my hand and we stopped. “But it’s not over.”

“Missy, Holly knows everything. There’s nothing you can do to us.”

“I never wanted to *do* anything to you, Dave. I want us to be together.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Do you think this is a game? That you can just ... be with me for a little while, then go back to your life?” Her hand was clutching mine hard—it hurt.

“I don’t love you.”

The words stopped her cold. She released my hand and backed away like I’d slapped her. Behind her, Jim staggered towards us from the shadows.

He looked crazy, with what was left of his clothes draped over his bony, putrefying frame. Most of his hair had fallen out and his eyes were scaled over. All of the flesh around his neck had slid away, exposing dry, dark red muscle and a grey esophagus. He moved towards Missy, his head twitching.

“Missy!”

“What? You want to apologize?”

“Missy, run!”

She turned too late. Shrieking, Jim grabbed her, his vise-like jaws snapping at her face. She screamed and writhed, trying to get away from his teeth. I ran to her and took her arm. Elbowing my friend in the face, I pulled her away. We ran.

Why is it when you’re scared you lose all sense of direction? Instead of running towards Missy’s house, we headed deeper into the forest. In my mind I knew it was wrong, but I couldn’t stop.

Then I was alone. I looked back—Missy had fallen. Jim came towards her fast, his movements like those of an enraged animal.

“Missy, get up!”

She looked back as Jim grabbed her foot. Kicking at him with the other foot, she scrambled away.

I didn’t wait for her.

Up ahead, I found a small ranger station built out of flagstone and heavy wood beams. Standing under a cool canopy of pine trees, it had a slanted roof and a single door I prayed was open.

“Help! Somebody help!”

No one came out. I ran to the door. Glancing sideways, I saw a large cord of wood and an axe. I pounded on the door.

“Please! Someone! Help us!”

Missy was still far away, with Jim right behind her. She screamed the whole way. “Dave!”

I tried the door handle. Unlocked. I fell inside, and without hesitation I locked the door.

Even now I can't describe the fear that contaminated my blood like black ink. My heart raced, and I tasted copper. I couldn't think, couldn't reason. All I could do was focus on survival.

“Dave!”

Missy was getting closer, but I knew Jim was out there too, no longer my friend but a demon. If I opened the door to let her in, I might die. I knew what Jim had done to those animals. And I guessed he was the one who'd torn Sarah Champion to pieces in the forest.

“Dave! Please!”

Missy beat her fists on the door. My lungs were on fire from running and my eyes were blinded by tears of shame. My hands shook, and no matter how much I wanted to save Missy, I couldn't open the door.

Outside, Missy sobbed, scraping the door with her fingernails and calling my name. I pressed my head against the rough wood and closed my eyes. “Sorry.”

Then I heard the most horrific sounds of fighting and tearing and screaming. After what seemed like forever, I heard a dull crack, then a groan.

Then silence.

I didn't move for a long time. Eventually, I wiped my eyes on my sleeve and opened the door.

Jim's body lay sprawled at an angle on the ground, his head split in two. His arms and legs twitched for a second, then he was still. A dark stream of infectious black brain blood leaked into the earth. The greasy

axe lay next to him. Bloody footprints led away into the forest.

Missy was gone.

I felt a lunatic's laugh welling up inside me. This was perfect. Somehow Missy had gotten the better of the situation and killed my friend, who I knew was already dead. She'd stop at nothing to get me—and Holly too.

I ran back to Missy's house. Her front door was unlocked, and I went inside. "Missy?"

I checked the entire house. She'd disappeared.

My heart still pumping hard, I walked towards my truck, and before getting in I vomited on the ground.

Once I was on the road, I checked my cell phone. There was one voice mail. It was Holly wondering where I was. I called her back, trying to make my voice sound calm.

"Where've you been?"

"I went to see Missy."

A long silence. "Will you be home soon?"

"On my way."

After I hung up, a text message appeared. I almost crashed as I read it. *You shouldn't have done that, Dave.*

This was it—I was screwed. Missy would call the police and report me. Is there a law against not helping someone in danger? I could see the cops thinking I'd planned the whole thing to get rid of her. Holly and I had no money for an attorney, so I'd end up with some lame-ass public defender with bad breath and dandruff. I'd be convicted for sure, with Holly left on her own while I rotted in prison.

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"THEY FOUND JIM," Holly said as I walked in the front door.

"What? Who?"

"It's pretty bad. Come into the kitchen. You smell like Death."

I took a chair at the table and rubbed my eyes, trying to suppress a giggle. I felt like I was in a long, dark drainage pipe and Holly was at the other end, leaning in and trying to get my attention. When I looked up, I saw she'd turned off the kettle and poured out two cups of tea. I had trouble holding my cup without spilling anything.

"Detective Van Gundy called," she said. "They found Jim's body at a ranger station. A neighbor reported hearing screams and called 911."

I sipped at my tea and burned my tongue.

"Someone killed him. And you know Van Gundy—he won't say any more. Since Jim had no family, they want you to go down and identify the body."

"What? Now?"

She looked away, pretending she heard something. "So what happened over there?"

"I ended it," I said.

Things would have to play out. I was a spectator who had gotten free admission to a freak show. I stood to get more tea and heard myself saying, "I ended it." A picture of Missy bringing down the axe on Jim left me weak. I knew she was coming for Holly and me.

My legs gave out, and I crumpled to the floor.

"Dave," I heard Holly say. "Listen to me. You have to get it together."

"I'm okay," I said. Holly helped me to my feet, and I sat. "Jim must've gone crazy. But now he's dead. It's over."

I was sick to my stomach and pushed my tea away. Holly turned on the TV, which was already tuned to the local news. We watched footage showing the front of Missy's house. There was police tape everywhere, and cops trying to keep everyone back. A local reporter named Evie Champagne kept trying to jam her microphone into Detective Van Gundy's face. It was pissing him off.

"Detective, can you confirm that this is the home of Melyssa Soldado?"

"Not confirming or denying anything. We have to notify the

family—”

“Didn’t you find the entire inside of the house drenched in blood?”

“Where do you people come up with this—”

“Where is Ms. Soldado, Detective? Is her body still inside the house?”

“No. We have officers looking for *the missing woman* right now.”

“And the attacker? Who is he?”

Detective Van Gundy hesitated. “John Doe,” he said.

“Excuse me, but isn’t the man you found Jim Stanley? Isn’t he the missing accident victim you’ve been looking for?”

“You’re unbelievable. No more questions.” He pushed his way off camera.

Evie spoke into the camera. “There you have it. Police neither confirming nor denying the identities of the attacker and his female victim. This is Evie Champagne. Back to you, Felix.”

I turned off the TV and took Holly’s hands in mine. My legs felt like cooked spaghetti. A searing pain shot through the core of my head. My neck hurt again, and I felt woozy. My plan had disintegrated—and me along with it.

Holly stared at me. “So you *were* there.”

“I need to tell you what happened,” I said, unable to block the sound of Missy’s screaming in my head.

“Please, no more of your confessions, Dave.”

I went to the sink for no reason. The faucet was dripping, and I made a mental note to replace the washers. I felt woozy.

“Yes, I was there.”

“Please, just stop—”

“You need to hear this. I was at the ranger station. I was there when it happened.”

“What did you do?” She stood next to me.

“It’s what I didn’t do.” I turned to her, my whole body hard with tiredness and regret. “I didn’t help her.”

“What?”

"We were walking in the woods near her house. I was trying to convince her it was over. Then Jim showed up. But it wasn't Jim. He was like a ... some kind of monster full of rage. I tried to get Missy to run, but she fell. I ran and hid in the ranger station."

"You didn't go back for her?"

"No, I was too scared."

"Then you killed him, right?"

"No, I stayed inside."

"You left her out there with that thing?"

"I guess."

Holly moved away from me and walked in circles. It was like she was playing the scene in her head over and over. She grabbed her teacup and threw it at me. I blocked it, and it bounced off my forearm and shattered on the floor.

"You left her!" Holly's voice was shrill.

"I don't care about her, I care about *us*. Why aren't you happy that it's still us?"

"Because what you did was evil," she said. I heard the disgust in her voice. "You don't leave someone to die."

"But she *didn't* die. She got away."

"It doesn't matter. You wanted her to die."

"I wanted her out of our lives." I made a move towards her, but she backed away. I thought she was scared of me. "It wasn't my fault. She split his head with an axe. I'm sorry." I was blind with anger and frustration and didn't notice she'd taken a seat at the table. "Holly?"

"Shut up, Dave. I need to think."

She sat with her hands folded in front of her, staring straight ahead. I wanted a drink bad. I imagined going to Jim's house and emptying out his refrigerator one bottle at a time. How long could I survive on beer and dead animals? Instead I refilled my cup. The tea had cooled, tasting like pond water.

"I was almost going to forgive you for what you did," she said. "It

was a lapse, I know. And I'm pretty sure you wouldn't do it again."

"Never."

"But to stand by when someone is being attacked. What in hell were you thinking? What if it had been *me*?"

"It wasn't."

I needed something to do, so I went to the hall closet to get a broom and a dustpan. Her face was expressionless as I swept up the broken cup and threw the pieces into the trash. The tea set had been a wedding present from her mother.

"Is she crazy?" Holly said.

"What do you mean?" I felt tired. All I wanted was to sleep.

"I mean, genius, whadda you think she'll do next?"

"Come after me probably. She's a vindictive—"

"Great. Well, we can't stay here—we have to leave."

"We?"

"You're not off the hook." She buried her face in her hands. "You stupid, stupid bastard."

"What about our jobs?"

She looked at me like I was some kind of imbecile. "We have to get out of here, Dave. At least until the police find her and we can, I don't know, get a restraining order or something."

Holly had always been smarter than me. More practical. More focused. Especially when it came to solving difficult problems. She was right. We'd have to leave town.

"There's one other thing," I said.

"You started drinking again." She wanted to hurt me, and this was the best she could do. I let it go.

"No," I said. "It's about Jim. He ... When I saw him, I don't think he was alive."

"Was that before or after the axe to the head?"

"*Before*. It was like he was decomposing or something. He wasn't even breathing."

“That’s crazy, he was sick. Like all these other people wandering around. It’s a virus.”

“Maybe.” I thought of the kidney worms and the maggots. No. He was sure as shit dead already. “Are you going to leave me?” I said.

She didn’t answer for a long time. “I need time to think,” she said, and got up. At the door, she stopped. “You’re a real prick, you know that?”

Guilty as charged.

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I WAS STILL upset over the fight with Holly as I rode the elevator down to the morgue, where Detective Van Gundy was already waiting. In the movies these places are always creepy. But this room was clean and pleasant, with comfortable chairs and bright artificial plants in the waiting area. The magazines on the side tables had nothing to do with Death. No *Morticians Monthly*—just *Us*, *People* and *Cosmopolitan*.

Detective Van Gundy led me into the viewing room. A few minutes later a morgue attendant brought Jim in on a stainless-steel table with wheels. The body was covered in a white paper shroud. As the attendant pulled back the paper, I told myself it wasn’t Jim anymore—it was a piece of meat. I moved closer and gritted my teeth.

His head had been pushed back together and secured with surgical staples. I turned to the policeman, reminding myself I was never there. “What happened to his head?”

“We think Ms. Soldado split it with the axe we found. It’s how he was killed.”

I still couldn’t believe she was capable of that kind of violence. The same could be said about my own cowardice.

They’d gotten rid of the maggots and the kidney worms. There was a surprising lack of blood. Other than the reddish seam running down the middle of his face and neck, he looked the same.

“For the record, can you identify the body?” Detective Van Gundy said.

“Yes. It’s Jim Stanley.”

For what seemed like a long time I stood there, trying in my mind to picture Jim alive again. Then I turned away and threw up in my mouth. When I recovered, I heard a loud banging coming from another room. Another attendant ran in and said to the first, “One of them’s alive!”

They both hurried out of the room, leaving the detective and me alone with Jim’s body.

“I wonder how often that happens,” I said. No one laughed.

Sitting in the hospital lobby with Detective Van Gundy, I thought about how long it would be before they connected me to Jim’s death. I knew Missy hadn’t contacted the police—otherwise, why hadn’t the cops arrested me already? And other than the one text, I hadn’t heard from her again. What was she waiting for?

Revenge.

“Do you know if Mr. Stanley knew his attacker?” the policeman said.

“What?”

“Ms. Soldado. Did Mr. Stanley know her?”

“I don’t know.”

“So this was random?”

“I guess—I wasn’t there. I’m sorry, I don’t feel well.” I headed for the exit. Detective Van Gundy followed me.

“I understand,” he said. “I’ve got more questions, but they can wait.”

“What about the woman?”

“We’re obtaining her cell records. That should tell us something.”

“Right,” I said, trying to mask the dread that chewed at my guts. “See you.”

As I walked off, the detective called to me.

“Yeah?”

“Seeing as Mr. Stanley had no next of kin, were you planning on handling the burial arrangements? The hospital said to ask you.”

I hadn't even thought of that. It was true, Jim had no one. "Yeah, I'll take care of it." I didn't know where the money would come from, but it was the least I could do for my friend.

I left the cop and found my truck. I couldn't shake the feeling he was watching me the whole way. Like he knew what had happened and was waiting for me to slip up. Even if this was all in my head, it was a matter of time anyway. Once they went through Missy's cell phone records and saw all the calls and texts to me, it was over. Now would be a brilliant time to get my affairs in order.

As I left the parking lot, a naked woman with greyish skin and red eyes staggered in front of me. She looked like a mean drunk. Her abdomen was cut open, and I saw a piece of white plastic tubing protruding from the incision. I think it was a Lap-Band. Her hands sliced the air as she bared pin-like teeth. I thought she was a patient—till I saw the toe tag.

I slammed on the brakes as the two morgue attendants and an orderly came out and grabbed her. Shrieking, she pivoted and sunk her teeth into the orderly's face. He screamed as she ripped away his ear and part of his cheek. The attendants backed off, looking confused and terrified.

I couldn't move. There was a crowd of people behind my truck, and in front of me, the woman. She waved her arms like windmills, gibbering and drooling. Then she stared at me through the windshield, her metallic eyes cold and dead. I recognized that look.

Detective Van Gundy appeared, his gun drawn. He pushed the wounded orderly away and waved the others back. I saw the fear on his face as he took aim.

"Lie down on the ground! Now!" the policeman said.

She ignored him. He shot her twice in the chest. I saw two holes in her the size of quarters but no blood. She kept coming. The detective wiped his face with his coat sleeve, took careful aim and fired point-blank at her head.

The bullet tore through her forehead and exited out the back of her

head, leaving a huge hole and shattering the windshield of a nearby car. As the car alarm went off, the woman dropped to her knees, her tongue lolling in her bloody mouth like a writhing red eel, and she fell face first onto the pavement, motionless.

I shut off my engine and got out as the cop closed in, his gun still drawn. People all around stared. The two attendants helped the wailing orderly, his face covered in gore, back into the hospital.

Still shaking, Detective Van Gundy holstered his gun and turned to me with haunted eyes. "Eighth one this week," he said.

END OF SAMPLE