

My Wife's Husband
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Wife's Husband: A Family Thriller

“But in the murderer, such a murderer as a poet will condescend to, there must be raging some great storm of passion – jealousy, ambition, vengeance, hatred – which will create a hell within him; and into this hell we are to look.”

Thomas De Quincey, “On the Knocking on the Gate in *Macbeth*”

“Mortui vivos docent” – the dead teach the living

Dedication

To Jonathan, my son; my wife Chris; my teachers, John Yount & Thomas Williams

PART ONE

Chapter One: No Backing Down

The ex-convict Armand Laurent picked a summer night when the moon was in the last quarter, shrouding his hiding place in the woods in total darkness.

Dressed in black, he was nearly invisible lying prone on a bed of pine needles in a thicket a hundred yards from the target, Corbin. He peered through his binoculars at the farmhouse. Dark except for the light spilling from a fluorescent lamp over the kitchen window. An hour had passed since the last light in the house had been put out – enough time for all to be asleep. From prison he'd learned the virtues of Zen-like patience and stillness, and could endure long hours motionless, especially if it meant the difference between life and death.

Now, he rose silently from his makeshift blind, stretching, flexing, untensing. He was a big man, six foot four, with bulked arms and shoulders from weightlifting, and a neck as wide as a fireplug. His massive head was tucked between his shoulders, like a prizefighter.

His eyes were adjusted to the dark, his ears attuned to the sounds of the night. He patted his coat pockets, feeling for the rope cut in measured lengths, duct tape, and a folded commando knife. He had no need to check on his gun, a .44 magnum, tucked snugly into the small of his back.

He would have little trouble gaining entry through the sliding glass kitchen door at the back of the house. They always left it unlocked. He'd been watching for days, always arriving after dark, disappearing before dawn, careful not to leave any signs behind.

He was familiar with all their habits. They had a French bulldog he overheard them calling "Bruzza," who usually slept with the family indoors. Sometimes they left him out, like tonight. Laurent had sedated him earlier with a tranquilizer-laced hamburger from McDonald's, which he'd tossed into the doghouse.

All things were in place. This was *his* time, the night, with its comforting solitude. He was ready, come to take back what belonged to him. Because of what society, the law had done to him – years of incarceration for a crime he was innocent of – he no longer considered the consequences of his actions.

Once he got past the snoring dog, he slipped inside the kitchen by raising the sliding glass door a hair to reduce friction. He stood still, barely breathing, hidden from the cone of light above the sink, listening for sounds from the upstairs bedrooms.

Hugging the shadows, he made his way to the carpeted stairs leading to the second floor, where the usurper slept alongside Viviane, *his* beloved, in the master bedroom. Down the hall was the son, finally done with his X-box marathon, signaled by the end of the flickering light-show on his window shade.

Laurent led the way with his pistol. Though he'd had it in his possession only a few days, repeated handling made it feel familiar.

A step groaned under his weight and he stopped, listening for any movement from above, before continuing.

How will Viviane react when she sees him now, transformed by the hard years served in her honor? Will she recognize him, truly see him – strip away the dross of jail to reveal the true face of the young lover he once was?

In his fantasy, she stirs from the warm bed of the usurper – her husband by default for almost as long as his imprisonment – and leaps with a joyful cry into his arms. They'll make a new life – in Canada or Mexico, wherever. She'll paint; he'll write. How could it be otherwise?

Of course, the boy, her son and Corbin's – a gawky teen, Teddy she calls him – has to stay behind. She'd understand he'd be in the way. He pushed aside the thought of having his own son one day; didn't know if there'd be room in their new lives.

As for Corbin, he'd provide the wherewithal, the cash, to make it all happen. And keep his mouth shut if he wanted to go on living.

Wrapped in equal parts of hope and rage, Laurent mounted the last few steps of the stairs, intent on trampling this union of man and wife, and replacing it with his own.

There could be no backing down.

Chapter Two: The Usurper

The man of the house, Jens Corbin, middle-aged novelist of some note, slumbered deeply if uncomfortably, caught in the grips of a repeated dream – one which has haunted him since childhood.

Despite all the trappings of success – he's the winner of the prestigious Mystery Writers Poe Award, has a book on the bestseller list (but not too recently), owns two homes outright and two late model cars, has a son in private school and a handsome, talented, accomplished wife snoring beside him – he was troubled.

In that state between reverie and consciousness, when fragments of ideas mix with shards of the past, he rehearsed certain events, *ad nauseam*, before launching into the dream.

Two teenaged boys walk silently along a wooded path banked by oak and maple, their branches bursting with buds or fluttering with rust-colored leaves, depending upon the season. They cradle scoped rifles in their arms, pointed down, like trained hunters. Whenever Jens, five years younger, anxious, inexperienced, begins babbling, older brother Nils hushes him with a severe glance. Jens, who hates hunting, did not want to come, but Nils insisted. He idolized Nils.

They spot a matted knoll where a deer herd was bedded down for the night. They go on alert, following spoor and the trail of waist-high broken branches, leading deeper into the woods. The thunder of the herd fleeing at their scent – trampling brush and snapping low-lying tree limb – sets them swinging their rifles up. But the deer are already gone. A ghostly silence descends in their wake, gathering, growing with menace.

He stirred restlessly in his sleep, moaned rising up through the stages of REM as he tried to stop the nightmare that has haunted him forever.

And with it, the knowledge that he accidentally killed his older brother that day.

Chapter Three: Oh, Horror

Back in the Corbins' bedroom, hidden in the shadows cast by an inconstant moon, Laurent observed Viviane toss an arm and a leg carelessly over Corbin, a gesture at once familiar and intimate, intended to rouse him from his nightmare.

With growing horror, Laurent watched as she began to foot-message the crotch of the man he'd convinced himself she only tolerated not loved, as a means to an end. That end being *their* reunion. No fool, he'd long ago accepted the inevitability of *their* coupling but never expected to be condemned to tolerate, let alone witness it.

Hadn't she kept an ember of their love alive over the years, just as he, faithfully, had fanned his in the solitude of his prison cell? Hadn't she read the letters he'd mailed her in the last few weeks, announcing, after years of silence, his release from Concord State and his arrival in Portsmouth, to be with her? Wasn't she expecting him?

He was unable to look away as the Usurper responded to her ministrations. Eyes clenched, Corbin embraced her in a ceremony of love that both aroused and repulsed Laurent, especially when he saw how willingly she responded, even dominated their lovemaking.

In a welter of nausea, Laurent aimed his pistol at the proverbial double-backed creature, an icon of lovers as old as original sin. He aimed first at Viviane, writhing atop her lover; then at Corbin, as they switched places.

How could she? How *could* she?

His pain carried him from the room, down the carpeted stairs, out the sliding kitchen door, which he left open, unsure of whether he was coming back that night to finish the job. Unsure what the job was, exactly, now that everything had turned to ashes.

Stumbling into the woods, his gun hand smacked against his thigh.

A shot rang out, *booming*, seemingly without end.

He ran into the night.

Chapter Four: Assassin's Creed

Teddy, a light sleeper, overwrought by the electronic games he was obsessed with – especially those featuring hard men, efficient killers, like Desmond Miles from Assassin's Creed – came downstairs to investigate the noise that had awakened him.

Finding the kitchen door open, he examined it for a break-in, found none, and stepped out onto the porch, ready to vanquish any and all, weaponless except for his wiry arms and legs, which he imagined were registered weapons of destruction.

This image of himself as a fearless warrior was the alter-ego he privately cultivated. He hadn't told his dad yet, but he planned to join the Marines out of high

school. Good thing, as he was failing most subjects except for physical education, but was willing to raise them for the Marines.

Satisfied that the noise he'd heard was likely a jet breaking the sound barrier on maneuvers from the nearby airport, he was about to return to the comfort of his bed when he noticed that Bruzzer, a barker, was oddly quiet in the wake of the *boom*, whatever it was.

He found the dog inside its house, snoring loudly, his jowly head resting on black and tan paws. Lost in thought, Teddy hit his head on the low roof, forgetting to duck.

That's when he saw it – a thin wedge of pickle in the far corner, chewed and discarded.

Really?

He backed out, the pickle gingerly held. Oddly, it was still moist. At once he recognized it as coming from a McDonald's burger.

Now, where "the-f" did this come from, he wondered, peering into the bleak woods, looking for an intruder who may have – what? – shared his late night snack with Bruzzer.

Baffled, he plunged a few steps into the woods, then halted, restrained by darkness, wishing he had night-goggles like a proper warrior.

"You out there, fucker," he hissed, spooking himself. More boldly: "I'll get you, you bastard." He pointed an imaginary gun into the dark. "Come out!"

No answer was forthcoming – only silence wrapped in mystery – the kind Teddy had to come to relish.

Like about his mother's letters from a man named Laurent that he'd been intercepting for the past few months. Had she really been with a convicted murderer before marrying dad? What else didn't he know about her?

And what did that make him?

Chapter Five: Flight

Laurent had been stumbling in the dark, dodging branches, ripping through the thorny brush, across stubbled fields. Blindly, through endless rows of corn. Over barbed wire and post fences that rent his flesh and clothes.

Finally, at last, he catapulted onto the road which led back to the safety of his motel room in Kittery, by way of a series of switchbacks and rural roads through Lee, Durham, Dover Point, and Newington.

For hours, he trudged on, driven by shame, determined to put the humiliation of the night behind him. At the Little Bay Bridge at Dover Point exhaustion overtook him.

Having passed this way before – years ago in another life – he remembered the boat launch park at the north foot of the bridge. The picnic tables there would make for a hard place for a nap, but he was used to such discomforts.

With dawn approaching, a rough looking character like he would stick out this time of night, making him easy prey to a passing police cruiser and certain rousting.

Once over the bridge on the Newington side, he'd have a hard time eluding the cops who congregated at the DMV beside the Turnpike, drinking coffee and kibitzing in their cruisers, waiting for their shift to end.

Though not a parolee, having served out his sentence, he was free to move about as he wished, in theory. Laurent knew that once they run his prints, he'd likely be back in jail, regardless. Branded for life.

He tripped, half-slid down the embankment to the picnic tables growing visible in the nascent light. A scan of the park revealed a dumpster off to one side and garbage barrels interspersed among the tables. Employing the convoluted logic of a con – it had gotten him through many a scrape in the slam – he decided to hide his gun in one of the barrels rather than the dumpster.

Wrapping it in newspaper, he placed it beneath a mound of fish guts and food scraps – to discourage its discovery. He found a picnic table with a relatively clean surface and lay down on it.

He'd only just settled into a light sleep when the familiar *crackle* of a police scanner roused him. A forest green cruiser, New Hampshire State Police, turned into the parking lot. Fun time! They aimed a mounted spotlight in his face, blinding him.

"You, there! Asshole!" growled the voice of authority, familiar yet no less unwelcome. "Wake-the-fuck-up!"

Hours later, after being fingerprinted and treated to a new set of mug shots, he was released with a warning: the next time he was caught kipping in a public place, it was back to prison for him. Even though he was not a parolee, he'd "maxed-out" his sentence, they would find a reason, or manufacture one, to send him back where he belonged, scum like him. "Get out of town!" they admonished.

Not wanting to admit to having a hotel room, he hid his room key under the picnic table, between the slats, resolved to come back for it – and his gun – later.

In the harsh light of day, he stuck his thumb out for a ride to the Portsmouth traffic circle, knowing that he stood little chance of getting a ride.

Chapter Six: Viviane

At last she lay in the claw-foot tub she so loved, up to her neck in bubbles, celebrating her solitude – now that she'd shipped her husband Jens and son Teddy off to the mountains with a hearty breakfast and the admonishment to be nice to each other.

With a pleasurable *moan*, she sank down into her sudsy heaven, submerging, surfacing – a submarine breaching the depths – the sea rolling off her breasts, belly, and thighs, her velvety skin tingling, steaming.

What luxury, not to have to worry about anyone else. Not attend to the needs of others. No after-school pickups, doctor's appointments, shopping, liaising with teachers, guidance counselors, or parents on Teddy's behalf – though truth be known, Jens shared equally the burdens, if not the joys, of raising their son. True, he handled most of the family business too – banking, insurance, utilities, home and car maintenance.

Why not? He's a man – the breadwinner – that's what he's supposed to do.

And moi? Mother, artist, dreamer, creator, lover. I nurture.

She spat out a mouthful of soapy water inhaled with her laughter. Pushing up to a sitting position, her flanks hugging the contours of the tub she'd ordered special when they were renovating with Jens's book deal money, she sponged her arms, torso, and legs, all the while thinking about the painting she'd been working on.

A watercolor of the Hampton Beach salt marshes captured in late August, the leafy trees and grasses shimmering, resplendent, in tones foreshadowing fall's color riot – of cranberry, chrome green, lambent yellow, pale white, lilac, vermillion and, her favorite, the scintillating ultra blue of the sky.

Hyperrealist, painting from color prints from her camera, she wasn't satisfied with her rendition of the marshes. Trees and sky she was good at, she knew. Watercoloring, an unforgiving art form, employs a technique that preserves the highlights as unpainted virgin paper. In her painting, grass greens and stalk browns bleed into the white areas – unacceptable – destroying the illusion of silhouetted blades of grass.

The thought of this imperfection roused her from her bath. She rinsed off, skipped shaving her legs, which she did only occasionally to please Jens, less and less often.

As she dried off, wrapped a towel around her wet hair, and stepped from the tub into flipflops and her terrycloth robe, she thought about her loss of desire. *Was it hormonal?* At thirty-nine, wasn't she was too young for menopause? No hot flashes yet, thank God. Still, it had been a long time since she thought about making love to her husband as other than a duty. Despite last night, which she could not account for.

The part of her past – which she'd disciplined herself never to glimpse or acknowledge, *not ever*, pushed itself into consciousness. The image of the man she'd once loved, her childhood sweetheart – dead to her for decades – now appeared. Teasing, tantalizing her painfully of their bittersweet love, the kind that comes only once in a lifetime if we're lucky.

In flashes, vivid fragments from *their time* fluttered behind her eyes, tormenting, beckoning. Why now?

"Armand," she whispered. "Forgive me."

Chapter Seven: Daniel

Empty cans of Red Bull littered the floor of the cab, shifting like flotsam with the SUV's turns, attesting to the solitary, exhausting drive he'd made up from Florida. He soldiered on, his determination and will, even at sixty-nine, as rigid as the flinty rock for which New Hampshire – his home state going back forty years – was known.

Daniel Rodman sat ramrod straight on the seat of his black Escalade SUV, a ministering hand at noon on the wheel, eyes straight ahead, not seeing the fleeting landscape of flora bordering the highway. North in the distance lay the slate-colored ridges of the White Mountains, where glacial cirques had once carved out the mountains, as though by a thick-fingered God.

Sighing, he pushed back a silver-white lock, his hair surprisingly still full. He glanced in the rearview mirror, finding his once-patrician features unfamiliar, alien. The nose listing; lips rubbery with age; ears elongated, bristling with hairs; the blues of his pupils watery, borderless. He frowned, shook his head, failing to recognize himself.

Anyone could see he was a sad man, a man who has suffered one of life's terrible blows – the loss of a loved one, a child or a spouse, or a disappointment that cuts so deep there is no healing – turning him into one of the walking dead.

He opened the glove compartment. A matt-black, semi-automatic pistol with a stainless steel slide, nestled efficiently in its canvas holster, confirmed, finalized his decision. He shut the compartment, shifting his eyes back to the road.

The gun's name, *Desert Eagle*, kept turning over in his mind, compelling him to pair it symbolically with the turn his life had taken. *Desert of sorrow* was the only thing that came.

Finding the gun was a sign, an omen. Hours earlier, at the Portsmouth Traffic Circle, he'd been too tired to drive on. The park at Cedar Point, with its picnic tables and boat launch – called Hilton Park in his time – had beckoned him once he crossed the bridge. After a powernap in the backseat of the Caddie, reminiscent of his time on ER duty – he'd been a doctor – he'd taken his trash of empty Red Bull cans out to dump.

In the trash barrel, poking out from underneath the garbage was a metal shaft, tooled and oiled. Overcoming his repulsion, he retrieved a perfectly-functional pistol with a clip of five rounds.

Arbiter of life and death, the gun's finality gave him, temporarily, peace of mind. When the familiar assault of images and feelings – of shame and self-recrimination – returned with a vengeance, he stomped the gas pedal, ready to put an end to his suffering. Nodding to himself in the rearview mirror, he permitted himself a weary smile.

He was coming home to die.

Chapter Eight: Father & Son

Driving in their Subaru, Jens and Teddy were approaching the crossing of the White Mountain Highway and Route 16 near the town of Ossipee, when Daniel's speeding Escalade suddenly appeared behind them, bearing down, then pulled out to pass them.

"What's he doing – a hundred, hundred'n ten?" Teddy's head turned as the Escalade blew past.

Jens steadied the wheel against blowby, which threatened to suck their economy-size Subaru into its slipstream.

"Eight thousand pounds of gas-guzzling road hog." He nodded in disgust.

To anyone born and bred in the conservative atmosphere of New England in the late 60s – early 70s, like Jens, driving a Cadillac, let alone an Escalade, was like giving everyone else on the road the finger.

"Asshole," they said in unison, breaking into laughter. Exchanging looks with Teddy, Jens proudly noted that his son had grown a half a foot taller, seemingly overnight.

They'd set out earlier that morning from home in Lee, headed for their log cabin at the foot of the Black Mountains in Jackson, to spend the Labor Day weekend hiking and fishing.

"Can we stop for drinks?" Teddy pointed to a mini-mall ahead on the right.

Jens pulled off the shoulder into the parking lot of the convenience store aptly named, he noted, Foothills Pickup.

As they exited the car, he pushed from his mind his perennial concern for his son, who suffered from attention deficit and processing issues, which materialized primarily as an utter disinclination for anything academic and accounted for his poor grades. By compensation, he was only interested in working out, marijuana, girls, and X-box.

Jens, fifty-seven, had come to fathering late in life, in his 40s, and couldn't help indulging his only offspring, who brought him back to a time of innocence and promise. Recalling his own pre-occupations at that age, he reminded himself that sex had been on his radar – very much so. But so were books, theatre, art.

Viviane was quick to accuse him of being too hard on their son for not accepting him as he was – with his *differences*, not limitations. She warned him that his severity with Teddy over his studies was planting deep seeds of resentment. This weekend, Jens had set himself the task of not showing his disappointment and simply enjoying the boy's company.

That's what the hurried "don't worry" he'd tossed Viviane as they'd loaded up the car this morning was meant to convey. Skeptical as always, she'd only raised an eyebrow.

She'd hugged Teddy, but not Jens, which he interpreted as her way of saying, "you got yours last night." Viviane, Jens reminded himself, was not one to confuse sex with sentiment, and he'd learned not to take such slights personally, common as they were. But how could he not?

Inside the store, Jens drew himself a coffee from the urn of "gourmet" blend and smiled at the dowdy, gray-haired woman behind the counter. She stared back at him, a sheen of sweat on her brow, despite the droning air-conditioner.

"Mojo not working, daddio?" Teddy plunked his juice drink onto the counter.

Jens refused to let her deflate his good mood at the prospect of being with his son and spending time at the cabin away from Viviane, who criticized them to death or ignored them completely, obsessed with whatever new painting she was working on.

"That be all?" Her voice was a breathless rasp.

Jens nodded as he added a dab of milk to his coffee and watched it dissolve, sending his thoughts back to the scene he'd been writing the previous day – of a body face down in a tidewater pool framed by seagrass. Like all of his crime novels – this was his fourth – it began with the discovery of a body, the *corpus delicti*, revealing the details of his story with seasoned reliability.

But that wasn't happening – he was blocked and had been for too long to remember. Despite his patience, an array of corpses *in situ* had come and gone, but none had triggered the usual flow of imagery, character, and plot needed for writing a novel.

The *shucking* of the cash register as it opened brought him back to the present. The woman behind the counter was silent as she made change. Jens noticed her labored breathing. He glanced at Teddy to see if he'd noticed.

Just then Daniel's dusty SUV careened into the lot and parked. A spry older man with a shock of white hair and a harried yet authoritative air pushed into the store, made a bee-line for the drinks cooler, and grabbed a handful of cans of Red Bull.

"Look who's here." Jens glanced at Teddy. "White Gold Rolex Presidential – 18k dial with diamonds and sapphire markers," he whispered.

This was a familiar game they played – guessing at a stranger's identity and background from clues, like a character in a novel.

"Distinctive, elegant, and *very* expensive," answered Teddy, enjoying the game.

Jens smiled at his word choices, which constantly surprised him with their sophistication, despite his son's aversion to academics. It reminded him of the precocious

transitional words and phrases Teddy used as a first grader, like “incidentally,” “in contrast,” and “decidedly,” which amazed his teacher, though she thought him slow in other respects, and had been the first to raise the alarm about his attention deficit.

“That watch would pay the taxes on the house in Lee for the next few years.”

“Retired?” Teddy discreetly looked the stranger up and down.

Jens nodded, deciding Mr. Red Bull, for lack of a name, had fulfilled a position of authority in life, as he still projected an aura of self-importance.

Daniel, his face lined with fatigue, plopped his cans on the counter in front of Jens.

“Do you mind?” Not waiting for an answer, he waved a large bill at the cashier.

Jens held up a mollifying hand.

“You go right ahead since you seem to be in a hurry.”

Daniel glared, reaching over him to pay,

Stepping aside, Jens noted his manicured hands, too delicate for a man his size.

He was wearing wrinkled cotton pants and shirt, both of light ply. Jens glanced outside at Daniel’s dirt-caked Escalade, looking for a plate to confirm his suspicions, but the SUV was parked nose in, with no license plate in front.

“From Florida, doctor, most likely,” he told Teddy, no longer concerned about the rude stranger overhearing.

“I get Florida. Why doctor?” Teddy hissed.

“Hands – manicured, educated.”

Teddy nodded, dubious.

“Want a bag?” the cashier asked the impatient older man.

Suddenly, she put her hands to her throat, and her face turned red, contorted with pain. With a gasp, she clutched her chest and stumbled back, pawing the air.

“Can’t ... breathe.”

As she fell backward, her arms struck the shelves of cigarettes, cigars, and candy behind her, sending everything crashing. She collapsed onto the floor, sucking for air, eyes filled with terror.

Jens bolted into action, charging around the counter to where she lay. Her face was livid; her body rigid. He turned to Daniel.

“Don’t take this wrong, friend, but I know you know what’s wrong with this woman and what to do about it. You’re a doctor, aren’t you?”

Daniel didn’t reply. His mouth was drawn tightly, deliberating.

Meanwhile, the woman clawed her throat, unable to draw a breath. Her eyes fluttered and closed. She went limp, her skin pasty and sweaty.

Jens tore his eyes away from her, found Teddy.

“Call 911!”

Jens glared at Daniel.

“You going to help or what?”

Chapter Nine: Bear

Daniel, aka Red Bull, tore up The Kancamagus Highway in his black Escalade SUV, cursing himself for getting manipulated into rescuing that poor woman, the cashier, at the convenience store back in Conway. That obnoxious man and his son, somehow they knew he was a doctor, had shamed him into feeding her aspirin to arrest her heart attack.

He'd only stopped to pick up more Red Bull to stay awake. Driving for over twenty-four hours straight from Ft. Lauderdale, he had less than an hour to go.

He'd even forgotten his Red Bull, which he didn't need anymore, charged as he was on adrenalin and self-loathing. He'd sworn never to lift another finger to uphold his Hippocratic Oath, not after what had happened to Leah. How could he call himself a healer when he'd been unable to help the one person who had mattered most? What arrogance.

The Escalade seemed to know where it was going – back to that lookout facing Black Mountain Ridge, back to where it all began so many years ago, back to where it would all end, in a few hours.

Daniel stomped on the gas, anxious to join Leah's ghost.

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After their run-in with the doctor at the convenience store, Jens and Teddy stopped for a late lunch in North Conway, at a disappointing restaurant claiming to serve the best burgers in New Hampshire. It turned out to be a combination tourist trap and local high school "hang".

Teddy enjoyed his burger, licking the juice and ketchup off his fingers as he ate. Jens wrestled his into a semblance of unity, but it kept falling apart. He tried to get the waiter's attention to bring more napkins, but he was more interested in regaling his buddies from high school, seated in adjacent booths, than paying attention to his customers.

Teddy got up and snatched a sheaf of nappies off the bar. Eventually, the waiter presented the check with a smarmy smile, mouthed a "whenver you're ready," and went back to his friends.

Irritated, Jens brought the bill to the cashier and paid. He debated whether of not to leave a tip, but in the end, cursing himself, his civility overruled. Hadn't he been a bartender himself ages ago? Under Teddy's smirk, he left two worn single dollar bills, hoping the waiter would read it as an insult.

#

Daniel maneuvered the Escalade over the last few bumps in the switchback, following the familiar signs mounted on trees of a hiker brandishing a staff. The paved road leading to Black Mountain Lookout was swollen in places from previous winter thaws, forcing him to maneuver around the moguls.

He turned into the lot at the foot of the trail, finding it much the same as he remembered it years ago. A corral of seasoned post-and-rail fence encircled the dirt lot. At the far end, near where the official trail forked to the right, there was a private road with a locked gate. Beyond, at the very foot of the mountain, a cottage sat surrounded by shade trees and rose trellises. Everywhere he looked summer's end was in abundance.

Conifers and firs towered over thickets of wintergreen and partridge berry. Amid the bracken and fern, a plum-colored Canadian wildflower bobbed in the mid-afternoon breeze.

Daniel stopped the SUV, opened the driver's window, turned off the motor. In rushed the sounds of nature, dominated by trees rustling in the breeze. Balmier air wafted down, riffling fields of hay, toasted by the sun. How his heart ached. He was home. Back to where it had all begun. He jerked open his door and tumbled out, swept away in feeling.

If he was going to do this right, he needed to make a clean sweep – leave no trace of himself. He lurched back to the car and tore open the passenger's door. From the glove compartment, he took out the registration and insurance. Then he tore through the car, removing anything else that might identify him, obsessed with the idea of effacing all traces of his earthly existence. Why, he couldn't say – only that it felt right: neat and final, like a doctor caring for his patients.

A nearby trash barrel loaded with tinder-dry refuse caught fire almost instantly when he dropped a match on to it. He fed the remnants of his life – wallet and car papers – into the flames, watching it all go up.

The ritual over, he was ready. He ducked back into the car and emerged holding his new-found semi-automatic. Discarding the canvas holster as he ran, he charged past the quaint cottage and mounted the trail that canted uphill.

#

The bear – a black sow of the family *Ursus americanus*, with a summer-thick pelt thinning where she'd purposely rubbed against low-lying tree limbs – caught scent of the fire burning in the trash barrel at the foot of the trail. Having pupped in the spring, she was still nursing her litter, and her dugs were full and cumbersome. They swayed heavily as she dropped cat-like from her perch in the tree, where she'd been scavenging ants, eating to store up food for the long winter.

Her primal fear of fire made her anxious for her five-month-old cubs, playing outside a den she'd fashioned of boughs dragged against a leeward outcropping of rock, on a high ridge, downwind from the trail. Standing on her hind legs and sniffing furtively, she rose to her height, revealing herself to be, at nearly five and a half feet, as tall as the male of her species. She easily weighed two hundred and fifty pounds.

She began running, the muscle beneath her pelt scissoring her haunches and paws in a powerful loping motion, as she picked up speed in a blur of black maternal fury.

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On a trail a few miles east, father and son trudged through the long grasses edging the woods, in pleasant conversation, warmed by the slanting sun. Seen from afar, they configured silhouettes in a time-honored rite of passage.

What would the future bring for Teddy, Jens silently mused, as they passed under a canopy of pine and spruce. What promise lay in the boy's soul? What seeds of greatness might emerge? How could he, Jens, water the seeds? Wasn't that a father's job?

Lost in thought, he was startled when Teddy called out to him from a bend in the trail, which led to the dirt parking lot at the foot of the mountain.

"You won't believe it – it's the Escalade." Teddy shuffled backward, arms swinging.

Teddy waited for him while Jens lumbered on, walking gingerly, cursing himself for not having his plantar warts attended to earlier in the week. He couldn't remember how many times he'd had the doctor burn them off; still they returned to plague him, now sending shock waves of pain along the nerves of his feet, as he made contact with rocks and tree roots, with predictable regularity.

Suddenly the air was acrid with smoke. At the same time, he noticed the SUV's rear plate, from Florida, as he'd predicted.

Teddy inched closer to get a look inside. "The keys – they're in the ignition."

"Don't touch anything, something's not right." Jens glanced around nervously, noticing the trash can off to the side emitting a thread of smoke. He went to the can and peered inside.

Teddy joined him at the barrel. "Look – a wallet."

Jens picked up a stick and poked inside the barrel, stirring up the ashes; he scooped up the still-smoking wallet, dropped it onto the ground to let it cool.

"What do you think happened?"

Jens shook his head. He poked the wallet with his finger. He peeled it open and removed the driver's license. The plastic coating had melted, blurring the name and address.

Teddy peered over his shoulder, trying to decipher what the fire hadn't completely eradicated. "'D'... 'a'" he read with difficulty. He looked closer. "The last name has no first letter, but the second is an 'o'; then there's an 'm' followed by more letters, but I can't make them out."

Jens nodded, swiveled his head around, all the while expecting the peculiar man from the convenience store, *Dr. Red Bull*, to charge out of the woods and do what? Attack?

Given what they'd found, it seemed to Jens that anything was possible. He felt like one of his story protagonists sorting through the clues at the scene of a crime – only this was real. What kind of man destroys his identification?

"Shouldn't we call the police? You brought your cell phone, right?"

Jens shook his head. "No signal up here." He opened the wallet again, looking for another form of identification. Plastic credit cards had melded together in a wad, leaving no trace of a name.

He pulled open all the compartments. Stuck to the lining of one was a black and white passport photo – of a young woman, early twenties. Pretty, her short light-colored hair worn in a style long out of fashion – perm-curls piled on top. Her blouse was high-collared, prim. Jens handed it to Teddy.

"Looks like from your time." He gave it back with a smirk.

Jens put it in his jacket pocket along with the charred license.

"I'll keep that in mind the next time you ask to play X-box."

#

The sow charged uphill through the dense woods, forepaws clawing, hind legs springing. She grunted as she ran, making a *mewling* sound, as she called out to her cubs, warning them of danger, assuring them she was coming. Her paws landed heavily, pulverizing dead limbs in her path, snapping them with a loud *kerak*. She had to get back to her cubs.

#

Jens and Teddy mounted the same trail as Daniel had earlier – the way ascending steeply within a few yards. Teddy, wearing his prized Dunham hiking boots which Viviane had bought for him, bounded ahead, seemingly liberated by the woods.

Jens crabbed after, the incline trying his arthritic joints, his plantar warts forcing him to step with care along the uneven trail. Every so often he winced in pain, as though he'd stepped on a nail.

Teddy noticed his difficulty and picked up a sturdy fallen tree limb, splintered at one end where it had broken from a tree.

"Take it."

Jens shook his head. "No crutches."

Teddy tossed it to him. Jens caught it, swung it under his arm like a baton, deciding to keep it. They trekked on, the incline ever steeper, forcing Jens to bend over nearly perpendicularly. Teddy chattered away, about the beauty of the woods and how much he liked the peace and quiet – unaware, Jens noted – of the irony.

Jens labored on, silent, conserving his strength. With each step, the cane bit into the web of his hand, soon blistering the skin. He gripped it firmly, trudged on, letting it bite: uncomplaining, unwilling to show weakness, the mystique of his identity wrapped in silence

Kerak.

Something large – Jens couldn't say what – was crashing through the woods. Turning reflexively, he saw a dark form, low to the ground, knifing through the trees.

What the –? At first, he thought it was a man on all fours, dressed in black, scrambling up the ridge. *How absurd.* The hackles on Jens' neck stood up.

Bear! Shit.

He watched it pounce uphill, *mewling* ferociously. Keeping an eye on the beast's progress, he picked up a rock, ready to do battle. In the other hand was his knobby staff.

#

Daniel winced with pain as he climbed the last few feet of the path to the lookout. He grabbed an overhanging tree branch to steady himself. Heaving, out of breath, he took in the view, a spectacular one-hundred-eighty-degree panorama. It was just as he remembered it. Some miles to the north across the steppes lay the Black Mountains, smoky-blue in the afternoon sun, beasts at rest. South, to his dismay, the forested ridges were desecrated with a sprawl of red-roofed developments, clinging to the hillsides, sprung up in his absence. Exhausted, Daniel drew in the crisp mountain air, fighting to clear his head.

Forty years ago he and Leah had stood precisely here, wrapped in an aura of first love. Striding vigorously hand-in-hand, they'd practically bounded up the steep trail to the ledge.

Now, he collapsed onto the weathered granite outcropping that capped the trail, perspiring and heaving with exhaustion. He lay still, looking up at the vast sheltering sky, thinking of Leah, whom he'd be joining shortly

He slapped the gun in his pocket, confirming that it hadn't fallen out during the climb. All his life he had played God with the lives of his patients; now it was his turn.

A noise in the thicket below the ledge caught his attention. It sounded like *growling* dogs, though higher pitched, more primitive. He got up from the rock and peered over the edge, holding onto a sapling, careful of his footing.

He jerked back as though struck – then risked another look.

Below, three cubs cavorted behind a barrier of bracken and tree limbs, trapped against a hollow in the granite wall. He smiled as they paused in their play, sniffing the air tentatively because of him. They soon lost interest and returned to their ritual of dominance: pouncing, rearing, surrendering.

Back on the ledge, Daniel made his peace with himself and the world. He had no need of last-minute declarations of love – he was ready. Leah was waiting.

With hands accustomed to healing, he put the gun to his temple without hesitation, placed his finger on the trigger, and squeezed.

#

Teddy was farther along on the trail, leaping like a mountain bock – oblivious to any danger. Jens glanced warily in his direction; told himself that black bears rarely attacked humans. For all the good it did. His primitive brain had taken over; he was ready for fight or flight. He scrambled to catch up with Teddy.

“Teddy – bear.” *Shooshing*, he pointed in the direction of where he’d seen her disappear into the woods.

“Where?” Don’t see him.” He sidled up to his father, scanning the woods. “You seeing things, old man?” Teddy slung his arm around him.

Jens gave him a gentle elbow in the ribs. “I saw what I saw.”

#

Nothing happened outside of an impotent *click*. Daniel lowered the gun and studied it. Shaking his head at his stupidity, he fumbled with the gun until he figured out how to pull back the slide and drop a round into the firing chamber.

This time, though it was a difficult angle, he raised the pistol to a point between his eyes, confident that the .44 caliber bullet would punch through his skull and cerebral cortex, destroy his autonomic nervous system, and kill him instantly.

He tightened his finger on the trigger and – squeezed.

At the exact same instant, there was a *roar*.

He barely registered a dark flurry of movement out of the corner of his eye, hurtling toward him.

Bear.

Just as his finger negotiated the last millimeter of the trigger, she was on him, claws extended, teeth bared. *Roaring*.

Time stopped. He heard the plaintive *yips* of the cubs calling to their mother; a cloud cluster spoke to him of eternity; a glimpse of blue sky disappeared in the penumbra of the bear, as she bore down on him with all her terrifying certitude of muscle, bone, gristle, and pelt.

The shot rang out – *BOOM* – reverberating loudly in the thin mountain air.

Coveys of birds darted out from under the ledges and trees, arching in different directions, as though pointing the way to the beyond.

#

Back on the trail, Jens exchanged a wary glance with Teddy. Did Red Bull have a gun, wondered Jens? With the sound of gunshot, the mystifying evidence back in the parking lot jelled into certainty. *The doctor shot himself.*

“Hope that’s not what I think it is.” Teddy lurched up the trail before Jens could react.

“Wait!” Jens stumbled after him, wincing with pain as his warts landed with uncanny precision on roots and rocks.

“Don’t shoot!” Jens turned the bend onto the ledge.

Teddy, first to arrive at the ledge, stood frozen, speechless.

The bear had Daniel’s head in her jaws and was shaking him violently side to side – his body limp as a rag doll’s, the whites of his eyes showing – as she clawed his flesh with her talons. Her drool slathered her jaws and spilled onto Daniel, mixing with blood from the gashes.

Trembling, Teddy inched forward, reaching behind him for Jen’s cane. “Give!” he hissed. Jens pushed in front of him and jabbed the stick at the bear – at her head – as she crunched down on Daniel’s skull with a bone-splintering snap of her jaws.

Jens gripped the stick and let loose a terrifying *bellow*.

“Hey, you – you son of a bitch!”

Panting furiously, the bear looked up, showing bloodied yellow fangs and feverish red eyes. She *roared* and jawed down on Daniel.

Stepping in like a batter meeting a pitch, Jens swung the thick staff with all his might, landing it with a resounding *thwack* on the padded head. She ignored him. He rained down blow after blow, striking her everywhere, but she continued to ignore him, caught in a frenzy of destruction meant only for Daniel. Jens readied to make another assault on her, while Teddy groped for the pistol in the grass.

“Don’t!” Jens lurched for the gun.

The bear looked up, seeing – as though for the first time – Jens, then Teddy. She dropped Daniel and launched herself at Teddy, scrambling on all fours. She was nearly on him.

Jens fired a shot into the air. *Boom!* She was still going for Teddy. He fired again, *Boom*. The bullet creased her furred scalp.

As though recovering a buried memory – of man and his cunning weapons – she stopped, rose up on her hinds, and *roared* and *roared*.

Terrified, Jens stepped back, his arm extended rigidly, his finger on the trigger, aiming for at her head. He didn’t want to kill her, but he would, cubs or not.

They glared at each other, the beast heaving with fury; the man shivering with resolve, ready to fire.

The *barking* of the cubs furred up from the ledge below. *Mewling* loudly, the sow dropped onto all fours with a grunt and scrambled off the ledge to her cubs.

Later, when Jens sat down to write about this moment, he would wonder at the mysterious understanding that seemingly had passed between them, man and beast, parent to parent.

Awed, Teddy stumbled over to him, halted.

“Hey. You okay?”

Jens wondered why he was whispering. He shook his head, not sure what he was feeling. He gripped the gun, fist white-knuckled, his look turned inward.

Again, softly: "Dad, we gotta go."

He let Teddy take the gun from him. He stooped beside Daniel. Blood was pooling from the gashes on his head; there was a raw wound behind his ear, the edges singed with gunpowder.

Jens pulled off his own shirt and wrapped it around Daniel's head. He felt his neck for a pulse.

"He's alive!"

Wife's Husband: A Family Thriller