

Errata

Cynthia framed her eyes and peered through the window.

"It's all dark inside."

Not the Swiss chateau she'd pictured. The house, with its Roman temple columns and putty-colored stucco, belonged among McMansions in some ostentatious suburb, not here among the white pines and lapping water of a northern lake.

"I'll try the door," Jordy said.

Cynthia looked back at the long, winding driveway. "Where are they?"

"Front door's open," Jordy said.

"That's odd."

The two stepped inside.

For Cynthia, the woodland monstrosity was her entry into *his* world -- the now deceased father she never met.

"Hello?" she called out.

No answer.

"Something's wrong," Cynthia said.

"They said today, right?"

"Anybody here?"

"Feels like we're trespassing," Jordy said.

"Can you find a switch?"

Jordy brushed his fingertips along the nearest wall. A chandelier came on.

"We're to meet in his den, wherever that is."

Cynthia's ponytail swung like a pendulum out the back of her baseball cap. She wore a crisp-collared white shirt under a denim jacket and yoga pants under a skirt. A small backpack straddled her shoulder. She veered left through glass-paned French doors into a spacious hardwood-paneled room with vaulted ceilings.

"This must be it."

“Ahh!” Jordy gasped, seeing wild animal heads mounted on the walls.

“He called himself a sportsman,” Cynthia said.

“You call this sport?” Jordy stood in the doorway in faded jeans and hooded sweatshirt, hesitant to enter. “It’s a zoo of death.”

“Where are they?” Cynthia stepped to an oak desk big as a ping pong table. She pulled the chain on a bronze table lamp and called her aunt again.

“A polar bear,” Jordy said. “Really? Who shoots a polar bear?”

“Not picking up.”

“And they stuff it standing, as if it walked the arctic like that.”

“Margo, it’s Cynthia, we’re at the house, are you coming?”

“You sure they said this house?”

“His lakehouse.” Cynthia unstrapped her backpack, pulled out a laptop and turned it on.

Jordy moved about the den. “Lions and tigers and bears ... and why?”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“Try texting them,” Jordy said.

“I mean it’s important to get the news out asap to make the deadline, right?”

“Yeah, if it’s for tomorrow’s obituary section.”

“One last time.” Cynthia punched a button on her phone.

“Hey, Margo, it’s Cynthia. I’m at the house. Where are you?” She closed the call, lowered herself into a cushy, executive chair and rolled to the lip of the desk. “We might as well get started. You said there was a template.”

“Not so much a template.” Jordy pulled out his phone, tapped and scrolled. “Just standard information ... like your father’s full name ... his age when he died.”

Cynthia typed aloud, “Franklin Brandt ... don’t know his

middle name ... passed away Friday, September 8th. He was 51 years old.”

“Keep it short. Like a social media post.”

“Do I say how he died? Or where?”

“Poor moose.”

“Jordy. Do I say how he died?”

“Do they know?”

“Margo just said his heart gave out.”

Jordy squinched his nose. “You smell that?”

“Jordy!”

“Yeah-yeah.” He read on. “Put in: ‘He is survived by,’ and the names of relatives.”

“He is survived by ... his sister, Margo Townes ... and his daughter, Cynthia ... No, that’s not ... I should put ...” She re-typed: Hyacinth Carson. “Feels strange to write my given name. Okay ...” She drum-rolled her fingers on the desk. “... and how about Able George?”

“Is he a close relative?”

“I call him uncle, so ...”

“What’s he like? I mean you told me your aunt is a steamroller.””

“He’s into all kinds of Native American stuff. Claims to have Navajo in his blood.”

“Don’t you find it weird they’re not here?”

“I find it weird *I’m* here.” Cynthia picked up her phone, changed her mind, set it back down. “What’s that smell?”

“You smell it now. Yuck. Makes me gag.”

“Okay ... so what else?”

Jordy looked at the screen on his phone. “Occupation, interests ... and a picture of him if you want.”

“Definitely. Would you look for one?”

Cynthia tried the desk drawers and found them locked. Thinking Franklin would hide the key nearby, she reached under the desk. A breath caught in her throat when her hand bumped a

hard bulge. It could only be one thing—a holstered handgun. Its barrel pointed at a leather couch across the way. Fingering its contours, she wondered if he wired the place with booby traps.

Jordy went about eyeballing gilded-framed photographs on the walls. Each one found Franklin in a different country—on safari in Africa, bear-hunting along an Alaskan river, grinning on a boat as he hoists the slack upper jaw of a tiger shark.

“Okay,” Jordy said. “Here’s one with him standing with a big ass rifle next to a dead hippopotamus.”

“Oh, god.”

“Comes with a plaque that says, ‘Big Game Hunter Franklin Brandt’— blah, blah. Big game? That’s so *not*. A hippo isn’t game you eat. This is trophy killing.”

Cynthia stared at the monitor, pondering a way to use it in the obituary. “So, how about: ‘He was an avid outdoor enthusiast and hunter.’”

“I can crop the photo and just have his head.”

“Okay.”

“No-no, change that.” Jordy lifted another framed photo. “This one’s better.” He walked it over to Cynthia. “Here he’s kneeling with his arm around a Labrador retriever.”

“Yeah, let’s use that one.”

“The guy’s got a crooked grin.” Jordy took a snapshot of the photo and sent it to Cynthia.

Cynthia typed: He loved dogs.

“They also say to include the person’s accomplishments. But, based on your father’s reputation, you may want to skip that.”

Cynthia’s fingertips floated momentarily above the keyboard. She’d heard stories about Franklin’s business dealings, the rack of pending lawsuits and the “swindler” and “scumlord” name calling. But was he really that? Or was he the kind people envy for amassing wealth through his craftiness? Maybe he risked it all on a cutting-edge start-up? “Just a matter of time ‘til the bank seizes ownership of the lake house,” Aunt Margo had told her.

“Yeah, I’ll skip that,” Cynthia said. “Okay.” She rolled back the chair. “Would you read what I wrote so far?”

Jordy stepped to the desk and mouthed the words she’d typed.

“It needs something more,” he said.

“I don’t know any more.”

“How about him being entrepreneurial, or a self-made somebody.”

“That may work.”

Cynthia recalled the time she drove to his house in the gated community to tell him that her mother died. But because her name was not on the guest list, the security guard couldn’t let her pass. All she could do was leave a note and her number.

“‘Entrepreneurial’ doesn’t look right.”

“How about world traveler? Generic enough?”

“Okay.” Cynthia started to type when the black bear on the wall caught her eye. It moved. Her spine crimped with a chill.

“Did you see that?”

“What?”

“Nothing. Seeing things.”

“It’s creepy here,” Jordy said.

She could’ve sworn the bear’s head twitched.

“Okay, so, lastly, the funeral arrangements,” Jordy said.

“Oh, right. Margo was emphatic.” Cynthia typed: There will not be a funeral. “No, can’t say that. It might change.” She deleted the statement. “I’ll put: Call to inquire and I’ll leave Margo’s number.”

Jordy held his phone for Cynthia to read. “Here’s the newspaper site where you send it.”

Cynthia re-read the obit. Shook her head. “Just seems wrong to do this without them.”

“Tick-tick-tick.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She glanced back at the bear. Took in an audible breath. “Oh well, here goes.”

She hit SEND.

“Good,” Jordy said. “Now let’s get out of here before these animal heads start barfing blood.”

“Wait. I want to take a quick look around. I’ve never been here.”

Cynthia walked out of the den and down the hall. Jordy followed.

Even though it had been twenty years since her mother last set foot in the lakehouse, Cynthia half-expected to see some remnant of her presence, perhaps in the colors, the furnishings. A feminine touch, or hint of a second wife.

The wainscoted hall was decorated with hand-carved African masks. The phantom faces seemed to glare at them as they passed. Some brightly painted, others lacquered black with white-ringed, gyrating eyes.

So taken by the wooden masks, they didn’t hear the front door shut, or Margo’s hard-soled shoes clack across the foyer’s travertine tiles as she came in cradling a hyacinth in a ceramic vase.

“I have prayed for this day! Good God how I’ve prayed!”

Right behind Margo strode Able George, her long-time companion. He gripped a canvas bag in one hand and a well-worn leather satchel in the other.

“Hell-o?” Margo set the vase on the desk. She wore claret-colored pants, a knitted, unbuttoned vest, and a long-sleeved vanilla blouse. Transition lenses dangled from beaded straps over a pink, loosely knotted, silk scarf.

“Cynthia?”

“Hey-hi!” Cynthia called out from the hall.

“There’s my girl!” Margo beamed.

“Didn’t think you’d make it!” Cynthia said, entering the den.

“Surely you saw the food we put in the kitchen?” Margo gave her niece a warm hug. “You look more like your mother every time I see you.” She broke the embrace and held Cynthia’s

shoulders at arms' length. "I should have such smooth skin."

"I called and called," Cynthia said.

"We went out to buy some liquid fortification before we tackled it," Able George said. He lowered his bag on the parquet floor to the sound of clinking bottles.

Margo glared at Jordy. "And you must be ..."

Cynthia clasped Jordy's elbow. "Oh, this is Jordy."

Margo took in the lean, chestnut-haired young man. A lightweight, in her snap assessment, fuzz for a beard, no visible tattoos. "I'm Margo, Cynthia's aunt and this is Able George."

The tall 58-year-old man with bright penny eyes reached out his hand. "Good to meet you." His callused palm enclosed Jordy's as it would a wounded bird.

"And how was your drive from the city?"

"Okay if you like to slink along in heavy traffic," Jordy said.

"Too many people, too many passwords," Able George said.

"Why did you want to meet here?" Cynthia asked Margo.

"To dethrone the tyrant king in his summer fortress."

"Dethrone?"

"My brother ..." Margo deferred to Jordy. "... though thankfully gone, still needs a final reckoning."

"There's like a rancid smell," Jordy noted. "Do you guys ...?"

"I smelled that earlier," Able George sniffed. "It's the decay of western civilization. No, scratch that. More like a dead rodent."

Margo ambled to the desk, her left knee replacement still sore. "This should take the odor away." She lifted the vase toward Cynthia. "I brought your namesake." And walked over to Jordy. "Cynthia's mother named her Hyacinth as a repellent." She pressed the purple flowers into Jordy's nose. "The smell of spring. Franklin hated the scent."

Jordy took a whiff. "Mmm."

"Okay." Margo pivoted. "I see you brought your laptop, so, shall we dive in?"

Cynthia trailed Margo. "We didn't think you were coming, so

we went ahead and wrote something.”

“Without us?”

“We should’ve left a note,” Able George said.

“Want to read it?”

Growing irritated, Margo said, “But you didn’t *know* him!”

Cynthia reached around her and clicked the emailed obituary. “I kept it short. Hope it’s okay.”

“You sent it *in*?” Margo stroked back her sienna-brown dyed hair to hook her reading glasses. “No! No! This will not fly! Able get over here!”

Able George soft-stepped to the desk in cowhide moccasins. He read the obit and shook his head. “That’s barely the scaffolding.”

“Call the paper and cancel it right now!” Margo said.

Able George plucked a Post-it note from his vest pocket and punched the number on his phone. “Never thought I’d say, ‘Stop the presses.’ Hello? Uh-oh. Wrong number.”

Jordy strolled over to the velvet draped picture window.

“Must’ve mis-dialed.” Able George tried the number again.

The room exploded with light.

“Ah, the sun!” Jordy exclaimed as he parted the heavy drapes.

“Good god!” Margo shouted.

“Hey ...” Able George visored his eyes. “Give us a head’s up when you’re about to nuke our retinas. No, not you, sorry. I’m calling about an obituary that needs a re-do.”

Jordy waved the flit of curtain dust from his face.

“What? ‘He loved dogs?’” Margo convulsed. “Jesus. We will not sugar coat this. Your estranged father suffocated souls.”

Cynthia felt the dull throb of a headache pressing her temples. She reached in her backpack, uncapped and dry-swallowed two Advil.

“The name of the deceased is Franklin Brandt.” Able George paced as he spoke on the phone.

“He would belittle you in razor-sharp bites.” Margo went on. “Like a piranha. I’m surprised he doesn’t have one mounted.”

“He wasn’t like that to me,” Cynthia said.

“So, what does that mean?” Able George waved to get Margo’s attention.

She didn’t notice.

“Dear, you spoke to Franklin on the phone what, twice?”

“No. Three times,” Cynthia said. “And he was going to meet me ... in the city.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“You would have objected.”

“Damn right. Look, I can understand wanting to meet your long-lost father. I do, but ...”

“He was so pleasant. And curious to know all about what I was studying at the U.”

“Of course. Sucker you with sweet nothings. The man used words like cotton candy—sticky, sugary, empty air.”

There was no room to question Margo about it. She always had the last say. Again, Cynthia wondered why she was asked to come.

“It’s too late,” Able George announced. “It went to print.”

“What?”

“Evidently, Sundays have an early deadline.”

“Damn it!” Margo snorted.

“That’s why we...” Cynthia didn’t get it all out.

“Alright then, we write a retraction, a correction. What’s the word in newspeak?”

“Oh ... what is that? Oh yeah, ‘errata,’” Able George said.

Still at the window, Jordy stretched out his arms. “What would it be like to be the sun? A light without shadows radiating your total self in all directions.”

Hearing him, Able George smiled.

“We’ll say the previous obituary was bogus,” Margo said. “A mistake that we need to make right.”

“I wonder if the sun receives our hello’s?” Jordy said.

Able George turned to Cynthia. “Your friend is a balloon.”

“Young body, old soul,” she said.

Overhearing, Margo grunted, “Hmph.”

Able George picked up his canvas bag. “Mister Jordy. I’m looking to liberate some drinking glasses. Want to join the search party?”

Margo turned to Cynthia. “Okay, let’s you and I write a real one.”

“He’s gone. Does it matter now?”

“Jesus! If we don’t tell it like it is, we perpetuate the harm he did.”

Hearing Margo, Jordy turned to Able George as they left the den. “I wonder if every time Jesus hears his name his spirit is drawn to the call. ‘Jesus’ and he zips here, ‘Jesus Christ’ he zips there. Must send him reeling, like hyper-speed jet lag. Makes me dizzy just thinking about it.”

“Do you mind typing?” Margo said. “My fingers are so stubby they’ll make a mash of typos.”

“Depends. If it’s about you just needing to vent ...”

“This is about exposing the truth, my dear. The hidden and hideous truth.”

Cynthia glanced at the laptop but stayed standing. “Yes, but knowing the truth about someone starts with their history. Understanding the challenges. What shaped them, or mis-shaped them.”

“Spoken like a psych student.”

“Judge not.”

“Oh, please.”

“Margo, some are never taught how to care.”

“And some hoard caring for themselves.”

“I only know what mom told me, which was two words: ‘bad man.’ And that never cut it. There’s always more to us. There has

to be.”

“Has to be? That’s like saying Hell has to have some redeeming qualities. What could they be, an epic barbeque? No, we all have choices.”

“Well, something happened. Something made him choose to be the way he was.”

Able George’s laughter carried down the hall.

Margo ignored it. She positioned the chair for her niece to sit. “So, now *we* have a choice—be silent or unmask the evil so it’s not normalized.”

Cynthia folded her arms across her torso. “Evil is a lazy, catch-all word that fails to recognize people who’ve never been loved or are mentally challenged.”

“Oh,” Margo countered, “So give it a clinical label like ‘sociopathic tendencies’ and voila! suddenly it’s less offensive? Buckle up sweetheart. There are no meds for evil. And it’s not the sole domain of a serial killer. Evil is also a serial belittler.”

“I’m not saying emotional abuse absolves anyone.”

“Oh, my dear, what you don’t know.”

“Like what?”

“Nothing. I promised your dying mother I would never go there.”

“Like what, *Mar-go?!?*”

Her aunt recoiled as if dodging a punch. “Ohh-kay. How about Franklin demanding your mother abort you? When she refused, he threatened to carve you from her womb with a corkscrew.”

“No!”

“Not something a caring mother would ever tell her child.”

“That’s a lie!”

“Can’t have a new-born baby stealing attention away from Franklin.”

Cynthia covered her mouth with her hand. Suddenly, she wanted to flee the place.

“I’m sorry and I’m not sorry,” Margo said. “They may not teach this, but there’s a difference between psychological issues and evil. And that difference is cunning. Cunning without remorse. Do you know what Franklin loved?”

There came the thwoop! of a bottle uncorked in the kitchen.

“He loved diabolical ways to torment and rip apart anyone in his path. Gut them like these stuffed creatures.”

Cynthia was about to say she shouldn’t have come when Jordy and Able George stepped through the French doors with two open bottles and four glasses.

“A philosophy major?” Able George said.

“That’s right, third year,” Jordy said.

Then the question I have to ask is: If Nietzsche ate ceviche would his outlook been more peachie?”

Jordy didn’t hear him. “It’s the water,” he told Cynthia. “It smells like sulfur.”

“Libations anyone?” Able George set the bottles on the edge of the desk.

“Jordy doesn’t drink,” Cynthia said.

“This isn’t hard liquor. Just a bubbly elixir.” Able George tipped the bottle of champagne and poured equal amounts. “Let’s toast to what took Franklin out.”

Margo lifted a glass. “A stroke ... of luck.”

“Sometimes great elation comes from simple relief,” Able George said.

Everyone drank but Cynthia. “I find it all very sad,” she said.

“Too bad your mom’s not alive to toast with us,” Margo said. “Here’s to her.”

All but Cynthia lifted their glasses.

“Carolyn was a saint.” Able George said. “The suffering she endured. Took balls to leave and deny his domination.”

“That’s not accurate anatomically,” Jordy said. “Courage doesn’t come from the testicles, it comes from the heart. Courage, in French, *coeur*, the heart, in Latin ...”

Margo looked to Cynthia. "Does he always talk like this?"

Cynthia ignored her. She was outraged and was about to spring Jordy into leaving when Able George chimed in.

"Who's hungry? We brought a feast dejour to devour."

Jordy nodded to Cynthia. "Sounds good, let's eat."

Margo and Able George laid out a lunch of sourdough rolls enlivened with crab cake spread, herbed cheese, sliced turkey, pesto, and sun-dried tomatoes.

They pulled up chairs and dug in. Other than sounding off with lip-smacking "yums" and "tastes so good," they ate with few words spoken.

The sandwich and grapes, topped off with caramel squares, lifted Cynthia's mood. As Able George poured another round of Champagne, she said, "Can we at least do a blessing? A prayer for his soul?"

Margo scoffed. "Dearie, if Franklin went soul searching, he'd first have to find his asshole."

"I wouldn't want Franklin's past life," Able George said.

"You believe in reincarnation?" Jordy said.

"At some point this will be my past life, and I'll have to reconcile the choices I made and am making right now."

"If that's what you believe."

"What, so whatever you believe about the afterlife, that's where you end up, heaven, hell, nothing?"

"If you die with a rigid belief in your mind, wouldn't it color where you go?"

"Mom hoped to go to a place she called The Quiet Shore," Cynthia said.

"Carolyn died so young," Margo said. "Withered away ..."

Jordy stopped sipping and was now swilling the bubbly. "I plan to be belief-less when I pass away," he said. "Open as the sky. I don't want some concept or fantasy to trap my soul like frozen dew."

"Frozen dew. I like it!" Able George lifted his glass. "Here's

to an open death.”

“Well, I just pray we take our life lessons with us,” Cynthia said.

After a weighted silence, Able George lifted his glass again. “And here’s to life lessons.”

Margo finished her drink. “All I can say is if any of Franklin’s victims meet him on the other side, they’ll tear him limb from limb.”

Cynthia sighed. “It’s all so sad.”

Margo patted Cynthia on the shoulder. “Don’t you go feeling sorry for him.” She gestured to Able George. “Okay. We’re good here, why don’t you go do your thing.”

“What *thing*?” Cynthia said.

Able George turned to Jordy. “Care to help?” He lifted his satchel. “Ever smudge before?”

“You mean like burn sage?”

Able George nodded. “We have some deep clearing to do.”

The two headed out of the den and down the hall.

Margo wiped her lips with a cloth napkin. “Shall we try this again?”

Cynthia reluctantly took a seat at the laptop, feeling like her aunt’s personal stenographer.

Margo leaned over Cynthia’s shoulder and nearly toppled on her. “Oh, sorry. It’s my new knee. I’m listing like an old barn. Alright now, take this down: Franklin’s greatest joy was ...”

Cynthia typed: “Franklin’s greatest joy ...”

“... was demeaning people.”

“How so?”

“Well, take a softie like your boyfriend. Franklin would’ve denied him oxygen. He’d make every word that came out Jordy’s mouth wrong or stupid. So, type: Franklin may not have gunned down people, he just assassinated their character to mute oblivion.”

“Too fast.”

“If it gave him an edge, he’d find flaws with the Creator.”

“Wait ...”

“No, don’t type that.”

“Wait!”

“Instead say: This was no captain of industry. This was a deranged ... no, strike that ... a maniacal ...”

Cynthia threw up her hands as if the keyboard was going to bite them.

“That’s it, I’m not doing this.” She rolled back the chair, hurried away, and poured herself a drink.

“Fine.” Margo took her place at the laptop.

Taking the carpeted stairs off the kitchen, Able George led Jordy to the lower level. They walked through an exercise room equipped with a stationary bike, treadmill, rowing machine, and dumb bells. All of which looked unused.

“What are we doing?” Jordy said.

“There’s supposedly a room in the far corner.” Able George stopped at a tan metal door fitted with a keyed, double-cylinder lock. He pulled the handle. They entered a furnished, one bedroom apartment. “No windows. Soundproofed. Like Carolyn said.”

“Who?”

“This is the room he locked away Cynthia’s mother.”

“W-what!” Jordy shuddered.

“She was pregnant. Refused to have an abortion and was secretly planning to leave him. But he found out.”

“Oh my God.”

Able George pulled a brass bowl and a fat wooden dowel from his satchel. “Captivity leaves a dense, smothering fog. Heavier than air. This place also carries the captor’s imprint. So, let’s bring him out.”

“I don’t understand ... bring?”

“Here’s the broom we’ll use to sweep the place. It’s a singing

bowl. You rub the rim clockwise with this dowel.” Able George demonstrated. The bowl gave off a high ring tone. “Hear it swell?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, now you try it.”

Jordy took the bowl and dowel but held up. “Wait. So, what happened to her?”

“After three days she got out. She waited behind the door, patient as a wood tick. When he unlocked it, she smashed the door in his face. Knocked him down and ran.”

“Ohhh, Jesus!”

“Nobody opposes Franklin Brandt.” Able George struck a match and lit a smudge stick. The tip of the dry sage burned a red-orange glow before issuing a curly wisp of smoke.

“I didn’t believe it when Carolyn told us. But Margo did. And now, being here twenty years later, I concur. She described this room to a T.”

“Does Cynthia ...”

“The bowl, son. Make it hum like a hymn.”

Jordy rubbed the dowel around the rim.

“Faster.”

The chime made the air shimmer.

Waving the smoking sage in an arc over his head, Able George belted out: “Call of my heart. I call for Superior Forces to bring a healing touch to this house of distress. And may this touch release the suffering of captivity and the fear of times past.” Able George circled the perimeter of the room. “And may this house and this land, from this day forward, be transformed.” He pointed to the bowl in Jordy’s hand. “Keep it singing. Faster ... faster ... that’s it. Good. Do you hear that, Franklin?” Able George raised his voice to match the high pitch of the singing bowl: Frank-linnnnn!”

A subtle wind spooled the air.

Franklin Brandt appeared, looking like a manikin made of white gauze. “What’s that awful sound!” he wailed.

Before him stood Able George and a young stranger stirring

something in his hand.

“You!” he bellowed. “What are you doing?!”

Able George couldn’t hear or see Franklin, but he sensed the man’s gummy soul as a knot in space.

“He’s here.”

“Who?” Jordy asked.

“Keep rimming the bowl.”

“Look at me when I’m talking to you!” Franklin moved with stiff joints. “You with your feathers, your chants and crap. Pathetic.”

Able George faced Franklin’s ghost. “This is where you held her. But she escaped.”

“You don’t know shit!” Franklin shouted. “I loved her! She tried to stop me from loving her!”

“So, now that we have your attention.” Able George pointed to the ceiling. “Your daughter awaits you upstairs in the den.”

Cynthia stood looking out the window at the lake when Franklin’s ghost appeared.

“Where is she? Where’s my daughter?” Being short-sighted, the only person Franklin saw was Margo, typing. “Not you! You’re forbidden here!”

“I pity those who this will hurt,” Margo said. “When people read the obituary, or hear that Franklin died, the scab will come off and they’ll re-live the wounds he inflicted.”

“Then don’t write it,” Cynthia said.

“Dead?” Franklin glanced at his hands. “How can I be here!?”

Although Margo couldn’t see Franklin’s specter, his mere presence raised the heat of her skin like a rash of hives. She fanned her face and kept typing.

“What are you writing?” Franklin lurched his way to the desk only to recoil at the sight of hyacinth flowers.

Tipsy from the wine, Cynthia turned from the window. “I’ll say it again, it’s not for us to condemn the dead. Leave that to

God.”

“Is that my daughter?” Franklin said. “She looks like Carolyn.”

“Yes dear. And this way God gets fair warning who’s coming.” Margo kept typing. “It was always about power. It fueled his need to be superior. And it was never enough. He wanted to be imperishable.” She smirked. “Not so imperishable now are you, Franklin? Props to Death!”

“I am a conqueror of worlds. Put that down, bitch!”

Cynthia stepped to the desk and refilled her glass. “He was my father! Who can say what might’ve happened if he got to know me. I could have made a difference.”

“You? With your blind compassion?”

Cynthia stumbled backward as Margo bolted upright, pushed the chair aside and squared off with her.

“You think you could endure his incessant undermining?” Margo jabbed her finger at Cynthia’s chest. “Nibbling away. Nibbling away until you’re nothing but a hole in the air. You’re eleven years old! And you say you could make a difference?” Margo pulled up her sleeves, The scars on her wrists looked like pink worms tunneling under the skin. “Not on your LIFE!”

Cynthia shuddered. “Oh, Margo ...”

“I had to *die* to reclaim who I am!”

Jordy and Able George entered the den. Jordy still worked the singing bowl.

“Stop that ringing!” Franklin shouted.

“We’re back.”

“Keep it going, Jordy.”

Margo rolled down her sleeves. “Oh Jesus, I-I didn’t want to do that.”

Cynthia blinked back sobs. “I’m sorry, I had no idea.”

“Get out!” Franklin shouted. “My daughter can stay, but the rest of you out now!”

Able George set his hand tenderly on Margo’s shoulder.

“Margo? What happened?”

“I lost it.”

“Out with that thing!” Franklin tried to shove Jordy, but found himself physically powerless.

“So, it’s not about others,” Cynthia said. “It’s about you. Your pain.”

“Yes and no, dear.” Margo knuckled a tear away. “There are victims. Like your mom. But I was first. I was the test kitchen. What he learned from tearing me down he used as a recipe on others.”

“And he’s here,” Able George said. “The monster is in the den.”

“What monster?” Cynthia glanced around the room. “What are you talking about?”

Margo lifted her chin. “Okay, Franklin, meet your daughter.”

“It’s out of our hands now.” Able George set his satchel down and stubbed out the sage stick on a plate. “You’re doing good, Jordy, just keep it ringing as you circle the den.”

Cynthia glimpsed a waxy form in her periphery. “What’s going on?”

“Some house cleaning.” Margo gestured for Cynthia to follow her to the couch. “Come dear, let me explain.”

Cynthia took her drink to the couch. She remembered the handgun under the desk and slid out of its line of fire.

Able George sat at the laptop and read the obituary. “This could use some tidying up,” he said, tapping the delete key. “And we need to say: There will not be a funeral. Nor a grave. Nor an epitaph.”

“You waste of a man! Stop that typing right now!” Franklin hollered.

“His ashes will be cemented into a long brick. A parking curb. And the world shall be a better place.”

Jordy strolled around the room like a drummer boy, rimming the singing bowl, unaware what was happening.

No one heard the disembodied growl except Franklin.

“What was that?”

“It’s been said that evil eventually eats itself,” Margo said to Cynthia. “Don’t buy it. Evil concocted the term ‘eventually’ to postpone its demise as some distant, inevitable fate.”

The disembodied growl deepened to a roar.

“No, removing evil requires a severe intervention,” Margo said.

Out of a gathering mist, brighter than eyesight, the lioness took shape.

“No fuckin’ way.” Franklin back peddled. “You’re dead! Jesus Christ, I killed you in Botswana!”

Cynthia gasped and pointed. “What’s that?”

To her the African cat looked like a nebulous puff of steam, arching its back, baring its teeth.

“It’s nothing, dear.”

“Help me god dammit!” Franklin shouted.

The lioness reared and sprang. Franklin staggered, trying to dodge the beast. “Shoot it!” he shouted. “My bolt action’s on the rack!”

With lightning ferocity, the lioness plunged her claws deep into Franklin’s chest and shredded him sideways with rapid slashes. Franklin’s cringing shriek pierced the room like a siren.

“What’s happening?!” Cynthia spun around to Margo.

“It’s meant to be, dear.” Margo set her hand on Cynthia’s forearm.

The polar bear lowered onto all fours and with one swipe of his massive paw severed Franklin’s head.

“Stop it!” Cynthia slumped and sunk her face into the couch.

The moose leaned down, lifted Franklin’s tattered remains off the floor and rumbled off, streaming in its antlers the limp threads of his soul.

“Okay, Jordy. That’s enough,” Able George said.

Without speaking, Margo’s raised eyebrows asked Able

George: "Is he?"

Able George nodded.

"All over now." Margo softly patted Cynthia on the back and strode to the desk. For her and Able George there was no fanfare. No fist-bumps. Simply weary sighs of relief.

"I re-worked the obit a bit," he said.

As Margo reached for her reading glasses, Cynthia dashed out of the den and slammed the front door behind her.

"I think she saw it," Margo whispered.

"Oh, goodness, no."

"What happened?" Jordy set the singing bowl on the desk. "Did we clear the place?"

"We did, thanks."

"Where'd Cynthia go?" He started for the door, but Margo stopped him.

"Hold on. Best I go," she said.

"Hey, Jordy," Able George said. "Let's you and me clear the decks."

Margo found her niece amid a grove of towering pines staring at the lake. A fixed scowl on her face.

Hearing Margo's footfalls she said, "How could you?"

"Dear ..." Margo reached out her hand.

"Don't touch me!" Cynthia slapped Margo's hand but avoided eye contact. "I know why you asked me to come. And it was *not* to write an obituary! 'The monster is here.'" She quoted Able George, then lifted her chin and mimicked Margo's voice: 'Okay Franklin, meet your daughter.'"

"He may not have come otherwise."

"You betrayed me. You and Able George used me as bait to lure him into your trap."

"Very observant, my dear. How shallow of us to think you wouldn't see a thing."

"You mean your séance? Your sacrificial rite?" Cynthia

gulped back tears. "I'll never un-see it!"

"A necessary eradication. Obliterate every speck of his soul. Never to be reborn on this earth."

"And who's the real monster? It's you. You who pontificate about the ways of evil."

"If I told you our intentions, would you have come?"

"And let you play God? Not on your life."

Margo scanned the lake. Not a ripple in its blue, sky-tinted water.

"We set the table, yes. But did we know how it would play out? No. Only that we might need you here. Turns out we did, and I can't thank you enough for coming."

Cynthia shot her a look as menacing as the African masks in Franklin's hall. "You were there for my mother," she said. "And you were there for me after she passed away. Which makes it all the harder for me to say—I never want to see you again."

Slammed by Cynthia's words, Margo inhaled a stuttered breath. She was about to apologize when Cynthia howled, "Get out of my sight!"

Margo trundled back to the house. Her artificial knee stung with every step, far more painful now.

Cynthia will get over it, she thought.

She hoped.

Able George and Jordy moved about the kitchen, filling bags with leftover food and utensils.

"Say, Mister George, would it be okay if I wrote something about what you do in my blog?"

"Your blog."

"*Wanderings and Ponderings.*"

"Oh, I guess so."

"Great. So, one question: Does burning sage and ringing your brass bowl clear the ghosts and suffering from a place?"

"Not really," he said. "But it starts to shake things up so

Mother Nature can come along.”

“Nature?”

“She has the final say in correcting things.”

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