

The Strangers

by

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Chapter One

It was late August in western Minnesota as Josh Freedman and his best friend Kevin Harrison cruised through a number of indiscriminate, small towns, seemingly indifferent to the sights and sounds around them. It was a sunny day with a light breeze that was unusual for the time of the season, and both men held an arm out their respective windows, each failing to take notice of the brighter shades of red sweeping up their forearms. Even if they had taken note or indeed felt the growing sunburn on their skin, it was clear neither of them seemed to care too much. It was too nice a day to worry about the small things, and the freedom of the open road was a welcomed change from their otherwise chaotic schedules.

Josh, who was driving, was the older of the two. A man of thirty-seven, he casually looked himself over in the rear-view mirror before picking up a half-empty Coke bottle at his side and taking a spit, the residual tobacco juice moist against his lips. Josh was coarsely shaven, allowing for the gray of his beard to show through, and it sat in stark contrast with his other more youthful attributes. Apart from the scattered gray hairs sprinkled across his face and neck, he much more resembled a man in his early thirties or even late twenties. His shoulder-length hair was swept back behind his ears as it fluttered in the wind, and his steel-colored eyes sat behind a pair of brown-tinted aviators settled atop a Romanesque nose. Bringing the bottle to his mouth once more, he gave himself another look in the rear-view mirror before spitting a final time and placing it back at his side.

Kevin, who was three years Josh's junior, bore a striking resemblance to his friend. Apart from Kevin's shorter hair and brown eyes, the two could have easily been related. Indeed, it wasn't uncommon for people to come across the two friends at the same time and point out the

similarities and conclude how the two “*must be twins,*” or at the very least “*brothers.*” Of course, it didn't help that they both wore plain white tee-shirts and baseball caps regularly, which further reinforced the closeness. Yet, while anyone confusing the two for brothers based on their looks could hardly be at fault, it was even more apparent with their mannerisms and personalities what made the two men nearly indistinguishable. Both were of a laid-back and quiet disposition that often made it hard to tell whether they were severe in nature or simply indifferent.

Perhaps it was for those reasons that very little conversation had taken place between the two on their drive, which was now slowly coming up on eight hours. Even now, as they passed through another micro-town of less than two hundred, neither felt inclined to disrupt the sound of wind in the air or faint notes of radio that blurred between melody and static. To be fair, though, it wasn't as if there had been a great deal to talk about during the drive, especially the last few hours. Each town had been nothing more than the previous with a few rundown shops and farmer's stands on the outskirts, mixed alongside the inevitable pizza parlor or greasy spoon-bar, all conjoined together as one on *Mainstreet* in the culmination of small-town USA. Aside from these monotonous scenes, there had been little else to appreciate. Even the towns themselves suggested as much with hardly a person appearing here or there to indicate that others might be engaging in some more rousing intercourse or activity as the sun lazily arched across the sky.

Accelerating over the abandoned railroad tracks and leaving the umpteenth anonymous town again in the rear-view mirror, there was little to capture the imagination or cause a faint stir of excitement. Instead, the bareness of the deserted cities only gave way to more repetitiveness. Now, it was the sight of pine trees lined one behind the other, with only the occasional birch tree jutting out in a manner that suggested it too was trying to break free and escape from its shackled and claustrophobic surroundings. Though the pine trees were numerous, they eventually gave

way to more open space in the form of lightly rolling farmland, dotted with dilapidated houses and barns that, perhaps, in an earlier age, might have seemed positively hopeful and triumphant over the otherwise endless expanses of forest and dirt. But as quick as the open hills and land found their way out of its denser surroundings, the pine trees would inevitably crop up again to show their hold and dominance over the providence of the land.

It was only a matter of minutes before the truck was coming up on another town, and taking his foot off the gas in anticipation of another speed limit sign, Josh pulled the dip from his lip and broke the silence. For the first time in over an hour, words were passed as he reached to turn down the volume dial on the dash.

“So, have you ever been through here before?” Josh threw his pinch of tobacco out the window and glanced over at Kevin.

“Where?” Kevin was caught off guard. The truck had been silent for so long he hardly realized Josh was talking to him at all. “To Drew’s cabin, or just through this part of the state?”

“I meant the cabin -- but either or I guess,” replied Josh.

“Neither, how bout yourself?”

Josh took a few seconds to scan their surroundings before answering with a hint of nostalgia in his voice. “Not the cabin, but I’ve been through this part of the state before.”

“What the hell would have brought you way out here?” Kevin searched the vast and empty land surrounding them.

“I camped out on a lake around here a few times with Shayla back in college,” said Josh, the same hint of nostalgia and fondness resonating in the words.

"Shayla?" For the second time in less than a minute, Kevin had been surprised. He hadn't heard Josh mention Shayla's name in a long time, and his startled response was not at all lost on his friend, who, along with a calm demeanor, was a keen observer of those around him.

"Yeah, Shayla, why?"

"No, nothing, I just haven't heard you talk about her in a long time," replied Kevin.

Josh took a moment to consider his friend's words. "Well, like you said, it's been a long time," he finally replied before looking to change the subject. "I tell you, though, I do remember all these little Podunk towns. Not a population over three hundred, and you have to drive through every damn one of them even on the highway."

"I can't believe Drew used to live around here," said Kevin, starting to laugh. "Hell, I can't believe anyone would live around here. What do you do all day?"

"From the number of cornfields we've passed through, I'd put my money on farming."

"No, I mean like what do these people do for fun, entertainment? There's nothing here." Kevin shuttered at the thought of having to live in such a place. "I mean, Christ, I'd go nuts out here."

"Well, there is a bar or two in every one of these shitkickers, so whatever that might tell you," said Josh grinning.

As the few blocks of homes and rundown shops crept by, Josh pointed out a sign on the side of the road that read, *Hoe of the Minesot State Fidle Competition, August 6th-8th*.

Unfortunately for the town, it was missing several letters. "I guess there's your answer," he continued with another smile. "They have themselves a little ho-down."

Kevin turned in his seat, incredulous the sign actually meant what it implied. "Who would possibly come to a state fiddle competition in the middle of literally nowhere?"

“From the looks of that sign, I would say it’s been a few years since Minnesota’s finest bluegrassers have been around these parts.”

Having left the latest town with a good laugh over remnants from the past, the truck struck a silent tone. With the wind beginning to howl once more in one window and out the other, it was clear that what little conversation had taken place had run its course. Having turned the radio back on, Josh swept a hand through his hair, settling back into his seat in what could only be viewed as a retreat from the few words that had been sparingly exchanged. Kevin briefly considered speaking over the static to keep the discussion going, but after taking a quick glance at Josh's withdrawn demeanor, he decided it would hardly be worth the trouble. Such remained the situation for another hour before the silence was again interrupted, this time by Kevin, who had been growing restless long before they had driven through the previous town an hour earlier.

“You ever miss the small-town life, the quietness?” He was hopeful the casual tone would help strike up another conversation, his boredom evident.

“Do I miss it?” asked Josh, confused by the question. “I grew up in a town a hell of a lot bigger than this.”

“Yeah, I know, but you know what I mean,” continued Kevin trying to keep the dialogue going. “You grew up in a small town, went to college in a smallish town, and now we’re on the road all the time in and out of states and cities, never really at home, you know?”

“I don't know. Would you miss all this?” The tone of Josh's voice was salted with irritation.

“Me, hell no,” said Kevin, picking up on the agitation. “But Drew sure still talks about it every chance he gets. All the fishing and four-wheeling, the seclusion. I can’t believe he ever left.”

“I guess he wanted to move on to bigger and better things,” said Josh. “Speaking of Drew, have you heard from him yet?”

Kevin glanced into his lap, surprised to find that the phone he had been resting there for the past several hours was no longer attached to his charger. Twisting from one side to the next, he ran his hand along the bottom of his seat before reaching towards the floor to continue his disordered and frantic search for a phone he could have sworn he had been holding only seconds earlier. Josh frowned as Kevin's search turned its attention to the center console between the two men.

“How do you lose a phone sitting inside a truck?”

“Yeah, I got it all right,” said Kevin, pulling the phone from his pocket, immediately beginning to thumb through the screen.

“Any word from him?”

“No,” said Kevin. He was already holding the phone up to the window in an attempt to get a better signal. “And from the looks of it, I’m thinking we aren’t going to have great reception out here. I don’t understand why the hell they just didn’t come with us.”

“Yeah, I’m guessing Alyson had a thing or two to say about it,” said Josh.

With the mention of Alyson, Kevin sensed another opportunity to pass some time. “What do you make of that whole thing anyway?”

“What whole thing?”

“I mean Drew with a serious girlfriend,” said Kevin. He could see the glazed-over expression on his friend’s face but didn’t care. He was bored. “I don’t know -- it just seems kinda odd that he would get himself involved with someone given the circumstances.”

“They just met,” said Josh. “I don’t exactly hear wedding bells in the air yet. Try him again.”

Kevin had already hit the call button, and holding the phone to his ear, shook his head in the negative. "No answer," he said, irritated. "It makes no sense why they didn't just come with us. It's his damn cabin we're staying at."

Josh reached for the radio, turned up the volume. “Just keep trying him,” he said, lost back into his own thoughts.

“Do you think Drew misses being out here?”

“What?”

This time, Kevin reached for the volume knob to turn it down. “Do you think Drew misses it out in a place like this?” His current irritation gave him a more forceful tone. “Maybe that’s what this whole thing with Alyson is about, getting out of the rat race.”

Josh shot a sideways glance at Kevin, confused by the sudden inquiry. “Why do you keep asking me all these questions and getting sentimental? Suddenly regretting some choices in your own life or what?”

“No, but...”

“And before you tell me you’re secretly in love with me and want to move out to the sticks to start a family, I’m not interested,” said Josh. He relaxed into another casual grin.

"I think I'll pass on that," said Kevin, the phone still pressed to his ear. "I'm just curious and trying to make a little small talk. You haven't exactly said much since we left. And yeah, I guess I think about it from time to time," continued Kevin, suddenly aware of his own thoughts on the matter. “You have to admit this life and schedule with traveling isn’t exactly easy.”

Josh sat quietly for a moment, reflecting. "You're trying to tell me all these little towns aren't fascinating to you with their "*ah shucks*" vibe?"

"I get more of a *Children of the Corn* thing," said Kevin, catching a glimpse of a dilapidated church a few hundred feet off the side of the highway.

"Well, we have about another fifteen towns or so to get through before we get to his cabin," said Josh, turning the volume back up louder than it had been. "He's still not answering, or you can't get service?"

"No, it just keeps going to voicemail."

"You don't have Alyson's number?"

"Well, given the fact we've only met her once, why would I, do you?"

Josh shook his head in the negative and rested it back against the seat, content to keep driving on toward their destination. The afternoon continued winding down, and the two friends sat quietly as the land slid by with its varying open spaces and clustered miles of forest on all sides. Town begat town, and the drive legged on with only the occasional vehicle here and there, indicating Josh and Kevin weren't the only two traveling in the sparsely populated countryside. The sun had begun to sink below the tree line methodically, and the once bright light of the afternoon sun now only glistened out between the treetops occasionally.

"It's gonna be great sitting in the goddamn truck waiting for him to show up for three hours," said Kevin, breaking the silence after another call to their friend went unanswered.

"Drew always does this type of shit."

"I wouldn't worry about it too much," said Josh. "He gave me a key."

The news caught Kevin's curiosity. "He gave *you* a key? Why did he give you a key and not me?"

“Did you ask for one?”

“No.”

“Well, there you go,” said Josh, glancing down at his own phone. “I think we’re coming up on Logilvie Lake, and Drew said the cabin’s only a few miles past that.”

“I thought you said we had fifteen more towns to get through.”

“The phone says we’re coming up on Logilvie Lake next, and the phone never lies.”

“Are you getting a call signal?” Kevin realized he was the only one trying to reach their friend for the past hour. “Why don’t you try calling Drew?”

“Only my GPS’s working,” said Josh, waving the phone in the air, irritated. “And even that’s not great.”

A quick turn in the road caused Kevin to look up and note the changing scenery ahead. “Is this Logilvie Lake?” The town on the horizon had seemed to materialize out of nothing.

"Looks like it," said Josh, easing his foot off the gas. He was glad to finally be in a town with some semblance of, if not a big city, at least a community.

The ride there had been long, and it was evident that both men were relieved to finally be somewhere with more than one passing main street. Neither of the friends spoke as they passed by the well-maintained log and flower welcoming sign reading *City of Logilvie Lake, Home of the Tigers*, but instead looked on with curiosity at the strikingly different world they suddenly found themselves a part of. While it was clear that Logilvie Lake was no metropolis or even a city of five-thousand, it was the first town that the two had come upon in the past three hours that did have a stop sign and more than a few houses sparsely plotted about, half decaying into dead farmland.

In fact, for the most part, Logilvie Lake seemed to live up to the lakeside community their buddy Drew had told so many stories about during their days back in college years ago. While at first glance it came off as just more of the same, once through the outskirts and around a lofty bend in the road, the two found themselves in an entirely different realm from the one they had just spent several hours driving through. Ahead of them now lie a quaint community abounding with droll, family-owned businesses and knickknack stores offset by a placid, yet murky, shoreline, awash with queer little docks and boats along the embankment, that as if by illusion, popped up out of nowhere. The water itself was clear, yet the shadows cast upon it from the lingering pines that loomed high and tight to the shoreline left the water with a macabre and gloomy feel.

Even though the lake itself undoubtedly had its own stories to tell, the city of Logilvie Lake was not without its own peculiarities and charm. Breaking from the traditional block streets and typical city plan, the entire town was set up in a half-moon configuration to acquiesce with the lake it bordered. This led to streets coming together at all manners of odd angles. This inevitably led to newcomers feeling like they were continually driving or walking in circles when trying to get from one block to the next. While the town's setup was unique to its character, the shops and homes themselves were familiar enough. The typical house was a two-story Laneway with parking mainly in the streets or back alleyways that proved to be little different from the streets themselves. And yet, while the charms of Logilvie Lake were not lost on Josh and Kevin, there was one specific detail that seemed to stand out, and it was Kevin who decided to bring the fact up first.

"Have you noticed we haven't seen a person in any of these towns we've been through yet besides a few riding tractors out in the fields?"

"What's your point?" Josh was more concerned with figuring out where they were going than he was with Kevin's idle chit-chat.

"I'm just saying that it's crazy compared to Chicago," said Kevin, still looking around for any signs of activity. "I could look out my apartment window at two in the morning and see more people than we've seen all day. There's something kind of quiet and nice about it."

"Quiet maybe, I'm not sure about the nice part," said Josh becoming more relaxed, having gathered his bearings amidst the quirky, slanted streets.

"What do you mean?"

"That it might be quiet and nice not to have to deal with people all day, but on a personal level and coming from experience, living in a small town is far more claustrophobic than any city."

"I'm not really picking up on that," quipped Kevin, fascinated by the lack of motion and energy within the small community.

"Trust me, you would," said Josh, spotting a gas station ahead. "In towns like this, everyone knows your name, what you're doing, and where you're going. There's no privacy."

"I take it that's a little left-over resentment from growing up in *Mayberry*?"

"No, I'm just saying that's how it is," continued Josh. "In the city, you can get lost, do your own thing, and become anonymous. You can't do that in places like this."

"Well, on the plus side, no one knows us here," said Kevin jokingly.

Josh looked at his friend with a quiet and questioning glance.

Chapter Two

Passing by a row of carefully maintained shops, specifically fashioned to attract out-of-towners like himself, Kevin took in the sights and sounds of Logilvie Lake as the truck advanced down the main drag of the city. The peaceful storefronts were neatly kept, and it wasn't hard to imagine individual shopkeepers out on the sidewalk early each morning with a broom in hand getting ready for the day ahead—a hallmark of a simpler way of living that reminded Kevin of summer nights as a kid, staying up late, and watching *Nick at Nite*. Half expecting to see a milkman setting down a fresh bottle of *hope* at each doorstep, Kevin's daydream was abruptly throttled back into reality with the disturbing rattle of a dirt bike engine revving its pipes in a display of attitude off in the distance.

“How far past town is Drew's cabin?”

Josh glanced at his phone, thankful to be picking up a better signal since reentering *civilization*. “I think just a mile or two, but Drew didn't really say-- he just gave me the address. I know he said it's pretty buried back in the woods.”

Josh flipped on the blinker and pulled into the center lane.

“You got your eye on a Logilvie Lake t-shirt already or what?”

“I'm going to stop at the station up here and see if we could get a can of gas for the boat,” said Josh, ignoring Kevin's sarcasm. “I figured we could grab some food there too.”

The mention of food caused Kevin to realize the two of them hadn't eaten in the past six hours. “It looks like they got a restaurant in there,” said Kevin, suddenly noticing his own hunger pangs. “Did you just wanna eat here?”

“No, I thought we could just grab some meat and grill it at Drew’s. We got the cabin, which he never shuts up about, so we might as well make use of it.”

“Oh, and would you look at that, another gas station combined with a grocery store,” said Kevin mockingly as the truck pulled into the parking lot. “It’s a three-in-one.”

Josh pulled up to a pump on the far side of the lot. “Yeah, you can’t go wrong with that,” he said, bringing the truck to a gentle stop.

The convenience store sat on a corner lot near the end of main street, across the road from the lake. Built in a triangular design, the station itself was the leading point, and the grocery store and restaurant filled out the opposite two sides. Although the building had likely been on the plot of land for decades, the modern awning and updated paint job provided the casual observer with a neat and clean look. However, the chipped and stained bricks lining the left half of the wall told the story of its actual age to a more discerning eye. The building itself fit in well with the rest of the town's odd angles, most notably because there was only one entrance located directly in the middle of the storefront despite having three businesses connected together.

Looking back over the road towards the lake from the parking lot, the town's character took on mostly the same ambiance as it did when first driving into the city. The only difference being the sight of a small marina jutting out into the depths of the murky water near the opposite end of town, hardly visible, just poking out from behind the pines, close to where the highway first came alongside the lake. Oddly enough, for a city reliant on its proximity to water, this was the only place in the city that a person could see the pier and boat landing floating out into the dark abyss. Nevertheless, the view of the sails and houseboats lent themselves to the small-town charm of the lakeside diner within the building, helping to create the impression a person was on an east coast boardwalk instead of landlocked in western Minnesota. It was a feeling only

reinforced by the cobblestoned walkway along the waterfront that was suddenly busy with visitors and food trucks providing the carnival-like atmosphere that the tourist city undoubtedly relied upon for summer business.

Josh reached into the backseat of the truck and threw on his baseball cap, pulling down the brim tight to his aviators. "Do you want to see what they have for food in there?"

"Yeah, what are you thinking?" Kevin stepped down from the truck and stretched his arms. "Burger meat, steaks?"

"I don't care," said Josh, quickly moving around the backend of the truck towards the entrance. "If you get burgers, don't forget buns. I'm going to see if they have a gas can."

Josh reached the storefront first; Kevin was a few steps behind. Pushing the door open, a string of bells in the entryway rattled an obnoxious jingle causing the few shoppers inside to look up from their quiet affairs and see what had caused the unwelcome distraction. Despite being the only grocery store in town, only a few people other than the clerk were inside. An elderly woman pushed a cart in the grocery store section, a woman in her thirties with her son stood near a candy rack, and a man in his seventies prattled on with the clerk behind the counter despite having been rung up several minutes earlier. Of those who did notice the men entering, only the clerk smiled and nodded in their direction. The rest quickly went back to their business, all except for the young woman, who remained running her eyes over Josh a few seconds longer as he held the door open for his friend -- a glance that Josh had been reciprocating.

"I'm gonna go see what they have then," said Kevin picking up a hand cart, leaving Josh alone, standing stiffly by the door waiting to get the clerk's attention.

Josh waited a moment and took a look at his watch. He was growing impatient, and it wasn't in his nature to let unproductive time slip by, especially not waiting on the old man in

front of him. It wasn't hard to see that the old guy was starved for attention and had no intention of losing out on his chance to talk with anybody for as long as they would listen.

Josh couldn't wait any longer, and the words spilled out his mouth involuntarily. "Do you have gas cans here?"

The clerk smiled again and waved his hand in the air vaguely to his right. "They're at the end of aisle three."

Josh gave a half-hearted smile and nodded his head slightly in confirmation, all the while trying to avoid the sullen look on the old man's face whose story he had just interrupted. Walking off in the general vicinity of where the clerk had pointed, Josh scanned the aisles for a sign to indicate which was aisle three, and in his focus, collided with something at his knees -- the small boy who had been picking at the candy rack when he entered. Although surprised by the sudden collision and unaware of what he had run into, Josh knelt down and put his arm onto the boy's shoulder to make sure he was okay.

"I'm sorry, little man. Are you all right?"

The boy, equally stunned by the abrupt shock, took a fearful step back and tried to make out what had happened. Searching frantically for his mother, the boy swung away from Josh in a panic, reaching out for his mom, nearly toppling over in his haste. Remaining knelt down, Josh watched with fascination as the boy scrambled to get his bearings and finally steady himself against his mother's leg. Josh reached down and picked up the candy bar, which had fallen during the collision.

"He's fine," said the woman smiling at Josh and putting her hands on the boy's shoulders for reassurance.

"Here you go, little man," said Josh, still kneeling and holding out the candy bar.

The boy, ostensibly still disoriented, remained hesitant.

“Go ahead, Tommy,” said the woman smiling, acutely aware Josh had been checking her out.

"I'm sorry about that, ma'am," added Josh, averting his stare and dropping his eyes back to the ground.

Josh grinned as the boy took the chocolate treat from him, albeit timidly, and tottered off towards the checkout counter with his mother. Having been startled himself in the whole interaction, it took Josh a few seconds before he remembered what it was that he had been looking for before the collision. Catching a glance of Kevin across the store, it quickly came back to him, and he located the gas can he had set out to get all along. Meeting up with Kevin at the checkout, Josh placed his single item on the counter as Kevin began unloading his overflowing cart filled with food.

“You really think we need all this stuff?” Josh had already been counting the items of food Kevin had been unloading silently in his head.

“We gotta eat, don't we? And I wouldn't talk about over-packing if I were you. How many bags do you have in the back of the pickup again?”

“Are you guys staying in town?” asked the store clerk with the same friendly smile he had given when they first entered.

"No, just passing through," replied Josh, jumping in before Kevin could respond. "Can we get five dollars of gas too; I think it was pump twelve."

Verifying the pump, the clerk added it to the register and continued ringing up the groceries.

Josh looked around impatiently. “Is there a bathroom in the store?”

“There is, but it’s out of service right now,” replied the clerk, abandoning his familiar smile for a frown.

“Is there one in the restaurant?”

“We share the bathroom between the businesses,” said the clerk scanning the last of the items. “There’s one around the back if you’re up for the walk.” Reaching under the counter, the clerk pulled out a single key and handed it to Josh. “Try not to lose it,” he said, regaining his welcoming expression of friendliness. “It’s the only one we have.”

“I’m going to run to the bathroom,” said Josh, taking the key and turning to Kevin. “Can you get this?”

“Really?”

“Most of it *is* yours,” said Josh sternly. Grabbing only the gas can, Josh shoved back out the door, leaving Kevin to pull out his wallet and credit card as the annoying clanging of bells jangled throughout the store once more.

Josh walked out into the parking lot and took a moment to look around. It really wasn't a bad town, after all, he thought, having caught a glimpse of the houseboats tied up in the marina back on the far end of town. Sure, it was small, and he would never want to actually live there, but something was satisfying about its rural, quiet demeanor. Of course, he would never give Drew, or Kevin for that matter, the satisfaction of admitting it. He had already faced several uncomfortable questions from Kevin on the drive out, so there was little interest in opening himself up to more inquiry about his thoughts on small-town living. That part of his life was well behind him. Lost in thought, Josh realized he had no idea where he was going.

On the far edge of the building, the remains of an old cement walkway were visible, looping around the corner of the building to the back, and it was there, Josh set his motion. It was

evident that the pathway hadn't been used for some years, weeds sprouting from its numerous cracks, and the entire side of the structure was overrun with waist-high overgrowth. Sticking close to the edge of the building, Josh hastened his pace around the sidewall, imagining the number of bugs and animals that made their home in the thicket surrounding him. The very thought of it was already making his skin crawl.

It also didn't help matters that the cicadas were out in full force, and the sound of their *singing* seemed to be growing louder and louder as he neared the final turn. Josh could hear the generator hissing around back, and as the cicadas grew more vociferous in their electric hum, it was as if they were buzzing in harmony with the generator in one long and building crescendo. *BZZZZZZZZZ*. The humming droned on, gaining in intensity. Turning the final corner, and at the height of the cicada's fevered pitch, Josh was shocked by the presence of another individual, barely visible out of the corner of his eye, racing through the high grass towards him in a panic. For a brief moment, the incessant humming of bugs and electricity ceased, and time took on a slow, surreal quality, but only for a split second.

“Uhh!” exclaimed Josh jerking upright, aghast in disbelief at the menacing figure racing at him through the weeds in an unsettling state of mind. Josh covered his face instinctively in self-defense and braced for a collision, but then, nothing. The pulsing wave of bugs rose once more and fell back to a steady hum.

Regaining his composure, Josh looked out over the overgrowth again, only to find an empty field of weeds giving way to a denser forest beyond. Pausing and taking a moment to survey the wild expanse around him, it was evident whoever had been there had managed to disappear before he was able to get a second look. Seconds earlier, Josh was sure he had seen someone rushing towards him, sure to run into him in fact, and now, they were gone. And yet,

that wasn't even the most bizarre thing. The strangest part of it all was that he could have sworn it was the woman from inside the store with her son. Pulling off his aviators for the first time in hours, Josh pinched the lenses between his plain, white tee and squeezed before perching them back atop his pointed nose and continuing around the fenced-in generator to the bathroom. *It had been a long drive through rural America*, he thought.

Josh was still wondering if he had caught a reflection somehow in his sunglasses when he reached the bathroom door a few seconds later. A reflection definitely could have explained the odd experience, and just like that, he let the mystery fade out of consciousness, happy to accept the most likely answer. Placing his hand on the rusted knob, it was immediately apparent that the door was locked, and it was only then that Josh remembered he needed the key the store clerk had given him. Pulling it from his jeans, he quickly inserted the key into the slot, eager to relieve himself, but as always seemed to be the case with outdoor bathrooms, the key wouldn't fit. "Oh, what the hell," snapped Josh, frustrated, left squeezing his bladder to hold out a while longer.

Josh jiggled the key to the left and right, pulled it out, and reinserted it, all without success. However, the door refusing to budge should not have come as a surprise given its current condition. Rust lined one side of the door frame up and down, and the door itself had several dents covering it from people trying to kick it down over the years, presumably for the same reason Josh was now giving that very idea a passing thought. It was then, after taking the key out once more, that he was again startled by the sound of someone, *or something*, moving around on the other side of the thin tin door. The sound was distinct, and Josh stopped a moment to take notice. After all, maybe that was why the door was locked in the first place. Taking a

second to listen, the rustling sound, though faint, was unmistakable. There was no doubt that something was definitely stirring around inside the tiny concrete room.

“Hello,” said Josh knocking on the door. “Is someone in there?” Josh pressed his ear against the hot metal frame. Was it possible that the person he thought he had seen simply went into the bathroom? He tapped again against the door, this time knocking louder. “Is someone in there?” There was another distinct rattle responding in turn.

Fumbling with the key in a more urgent attempt, Josh was finally able to get the key to roll over, allowing him to pull the surprisingly heavy door open. Expecting to find a few teenagers smoking pot or maybe some kids making out, Josh was confused to find the bathroom wholly empty and dark, a wave of musty air wafting past him out into the open. Flipping on the light switch, the room began to flicker with the early bursts of an old fluorescent bulb forcing itself to shine as Josh waited for the room to fully illuminate. With the room finally lit and humming a tune of its own from the dusty fixture above, Josh glanced into the lone stall, making sure no one was inside. Taking one final glance around the tiny concrete bunker, Josh placed the gas can on the sink and moved to the urinal for his intended purpose.

It didn't take long, mid-steam, in fact, before Josh again heard the same rustling sound he had heard back on the other side of the door. The only difference was that he was now inside this time and was able to see what had been causing the sound all along. The bathroom door had a slight opening at the bottom, which allowed a draft to sweep into the room, and every time it happened, the door to the stall would ripple slightly on its loose hinges, setting off the faint rapping sound he had been hearing. Pulling up his zipper and walking over to the stall door, Josh waited for the subtle rumbling to occur again, and when it did, he grabbed the loose door frame causing the confounding noise to cease.

Smiling to himself, pleased he had figured out the mystery, Josh walked over to the sink to wash up. He took a moment to look at himself in the mirror before removing his sunglasses and placing them on the countertop. The cool water felt nice against his freshly sunburnt skin, and he cupped a few handfuls to splash over his face. After taking a few paper towels to dry off, he returned the aviators to their familiar resting place and took another long look at himself in the mirror. The truth was that he was feeling a little embarrassed by how jumpy he had been, especially after figuring out it was nothing more than a draft and springy door frame causing the sound. Still, his ever-active mind couldn't help but wonder whether or not there really had been someone behind the building, and if there was, why had they disappeared so quickly trying to avoid him, or did they even see him at all? p

Making sure he still had the key to the bathroom on him, Josh grabbed the gas can and made for the door only to find it fastened tight in place all over again. "You have to be kidding me," he sniped, incredulous that the handle could be stuck once more. Jiggling the knob and pushing against the frame, Josh didn't mess around this time and put his full weight and shoulder into the obstruction while simultaneously twisting the handle. The door gave way without much resistance, and Josh nearly tumbled out behind it, bringing him unexpectedly face to face with someone on the other side of the door, and this time, the person was definitely real. Fortunately, it was Kevin.

"Whoa," exclaimed Kevin, pulling back his armful of groceries. "Little jumpy there or what?" There was a slight amusement in his voice at the sight of Josh's flustered expression.

"No, just surprised someone would be that stupid to stand that close to a door that swings out that way," said Josh irritated. "What are you doing?"

“I was gonna use the bathroom quick,” said Kevin, handing Josh the grocery bags. “Can you put these in the truck?”

“Did you get more stuff?” It hadn’t taken him long to spot the fresh bottles of alcohol Kevin had half-heartedly tried to tuck away under the food.

"I was wrong. It's a four-in-one convenience store."

“You really think that’s a great idea?”

“We’re on vacation,” said Kevin, stepping past Josh into the bathroom.

Chapter Three

By the time Kevin returned from the bathroom, Josh was anxious to get moving again. That was simply his nature. He didn't like wasting time, and he especially didn't like waiting for others who chose to waste their own. In the short time it took Kevin to take a piss and amble back to the truck, Josh had returned the key to the clerk, filled the can of gas, and spent time making sure all the luggage in the back of the flatbed was still secure. He was eager to finally relax after a long day on the road, and the sight of all the food Kevin had picked up had left him counting down the minutes until he could get the steaks on the grill.

Kevin opened the door and hopped back up into the passenger seat. "Are we ready?"

"Should be," said Josh, seatbelt on, the engine already running.

"Did you bring the key back inside?"

"I did." The question itself irritated Josh, but he also wasn't surprised. The peaceful silence he relished had been broken by the stop, and that meant Kevin would now expect the two of them to talk until they reached their destination. The truck wheels had barely hit the blacktop of the highway again before Kevin, without hesitation, started the inquisition.

"Why did you tell that guy we weren't staying around here?" The question had been eating at Kevin since it occurred minutes earlier.

"Because we aren't staying in town, and there's no reason for him to know anything else," replied Josh defensively. He reached for the radio. "I told you how people in small-towns are."

"Wow, you really are paranoid about this whole small-town thing and people knowing your business, aren't you?" Even after knowing Josh for as long as he had, he was still surprised by how evasive his friend could be at times.

"I just hope Drew gave us the right address because I'm gonna be pissed off lost out here in the middle of nowhere."

"Are you sayin you wouldn't want to go back and stay at that nice little Lakeview Inn motel?" Kevin smiled, pleased with himself for such a witty line. "Really get to know the people around here?"

Two queries in, and Josh was already losing patience with his friend's questions. "Did you try calling Drew again?"

"I tried him three times when we were at the store," said Kevin looking again at his phone. "Two times it went to voicemail, and one time there was no answer."

"Well, good thing I have the key," said Josh pulling off the road, the truck coming to a rest near a sagging, wooden mailbox brimming with last notices on the side of the highway. "Because I think we're here."

"You sure this is it?" Kevin looked with quiet hesitation at the otherwise unmarked dirt path leading into a maze of tangled branches and wilderness.

"That says four-one-six, doesn't it?" The tone of Josh's voice suggested he wasn't asking a question.

Kevin's eyes continued to follow along the row of tall, foreboding pines lining the narrow driveway. "Yeah," he said finally in a hushed tone.

"Do you have any service here? If you do, call Drew again."

"I got nothin'," said Kevin, holding up his phone sheepishly. His cautious reluctance reminded Josh of a third-grader shyly displaying his *show and tell* to the class.

Josh put the truck back into drive and slowly eased the wheels on the crude pathway. Within seconds, nearly all traces of daylight had disappeared, blocked out by the dense, webbed forest, enveloping the truck in an eerie and silent darkness. The driveway slithered from side to side, and the constant bumps in the road forced Josh to cautiously crawl forward, taking care not to go off either side of the lane into a steep ditch that lined both edges. Each twist and turn in the driveway left both men guessing what would be around the next corner, though, continually hoping it would be the cabin. As the truck continued to weave its way deeper and darker into the woods, an occasional stray beam of light would break through the wall of pine trees just enough to cast shadows scattered about on the side of the road. With the light dancing in all directions under a mind of its own, it was difficult for both men to trust what they were seeing in the path ahead.

"How the hell far can this go?" Kevin's eyes were transfixed on the roadway and creeping shadows advancing past the truck. "We were right next to the lake two seconds ago."

"Shit!"

Josh slammed on the brakes. Even with the truck's slow speed, both men felt the jerk on their bodies with the sudden deceleration throwing each of them forward in their seats. In the middle of the road was a downed sapling that was too big to drive over and blocking enough of the pathway to make driving around impossible. Josh had been lucky at all to see it coming around a blind corner, reacting just in time to avoid a worse collision with the fallen obstacle.

"Now, what the hell do we do?" asked Kevin. "How much further can it be?"

"We're going to have to get out and move it," said Josh, not wasting any time, shifting out of gear and hopping out of the truck.

The two men took a minute to examine the decaying piece of wood on the ground. There was no indication it was still attached in any way at its base, so Josh grabbed the lead end of branches and gave it a tug.

"Can we move it?" Kevin passively grabbed a few branches himself to get an idea.

"Yeah, it's light," said Josh, already sliding the fragmented tree back off the road. "It's not attached to anything anymore."

Leaving the downed tree hanging off the edge of the road, Josh got back into the truck while Kevin walked up the driveway towards the next turn. By the time Josh maneuvered around the discarded branch, which had barely been moved far enough out of the way, Kevin had already disappeared around the curve ahead. Getting around the last turn himself, Josh was relieved to find the driveway widening out into a clearing that led up to what looked more like a sprawling three-story estate than it did a mere rustic shack on a lake as their friend so often described it.

"We made it," said Kevin with a grin, stepping aside as Josh slowly drove past him up into the open lot towards the cabin.

The *cabin*, if it could even be called as such, was settled atop a slight mound in the land that helped create the illusion it was perhaps more prominent than it really was. Nevertheless, even in contrast with the tallest of trees surrounding the one-acre plot of land, the cabin's grandiose design lent the structure an air of influence over the backwoods in its midst. Its dark-brown and green wooden siding sat in perfect conformity with the shaded forest and steely blue water that surrounded it, making it feel less of a building but more a fixture of the land itself.

Likely with that concept in mind, the designers utilized an earthen, circle driveway that led to the cabin entrance, at which point a short stone footpath made its way to the front porch. From there, four steps then led a guest up beneath the first of many gables which made up the front face of the cabin, supported by two rock columns on opposite sides. The outstretched front porch swung around the left side of the house, leading to a larger deck off the back of the structure that sat on high wooden stilts above the gently sloping land overlooking the lake.

From the spacious deck on the backside of the home, twelve steps led a person back down to the ground level, which sloped off in a gradual descent until the land once again flattened out for a few hundred feet. Eventually, it met a narrow strip of sandy waterfront, that from all appearances, served as a private lakefront beach for the cabin's occupants. In noticeable contrast, however, despite the rather impressive view of the lakefront property, the landscaping in the backyard was far from anything remarkable. In fact, it looked as if no one had taken the time to mow the grass or pull the weeds from the shoreline in several weeks. Apart from a slightly more well-maintained firepit a hundred or so paces off the back of the deck and a grass *volleyball court* that sat dead center of the back yard, the grounds looked only mere weeks away from being completely overrun by weeds.

On the lake itself, there was a short, L-shaped dock that sat low in the water, holding in place a tarp-covered pontoon boat, which, much like the backyard, had apparently been neglected for an extended period of time. Leaves and sticks from overhanging trees shed upon and soiled the white tarp, and even the boat's interior had not been spared due to the careless nature in which the thin cover had last been slung recklessly across the top of the boat. The water out on the lake had picked up movement since the men first drove through town, and the light roll of the waves now lazily slid up onto the sandy shoreline before retreating back into the dark

expanse of water. The lake was shallow near the shoreline. So much so that the pontoon hardly needed to be attached to the dock, having already been firmly planted in place, run aground the sandy shoal months earlier.

Looking past the end of the dock and onto the lake, there was little else besides the vast desert of water and shoreline to look at. The queer little boats and docks that had dotted the shoreline back near town only two miles up the highway were no longer visible, and any other signs of life, barring a few ducks floating along the bank, were altogether absent. An uninhabited island only a few acres in area could just barely be made out past the edge of the bay. It was only a sandbar jutting off the island's tip that caused a break in the water to make the island scarcely definable at all against its mirroring forest backdrop. Although the shallow shoreline and sandbars present on the body of water gave the impression the lake as a whole was depthless, the great expanse of water was uncharacteristically deep, with sudden drop-offs occurring only forty feet from shore. These sudden changes in the lake's geography created several illusions on the lake as the windblown water would run against the hidden slopes, causing ripples to appear out of nowhere before quickly submerging once more into the dreary depths.

The front yard and sides of the cabin were not maintained much better than the backyard. The grass was slightly shorter in the front, and it was evident that someone had at least taken the time to run a mower over it somewhat recently, but from the looks of it, with no real care or attention to detail. Branching off from the cabin's front steps extended two stone footpaths that made their way around the structure on both sides, creating a moat-like presentation, minus the water. Far off from the left side of the cabin sat a small wooden shed tucked closely to the tree line, which, given its dark green luster, was hardly visible at all in its forest surroundings, tangled woods encircling it on three of its four borders.

Minor details aside, and having only seen the cabin's exterior thus far, both Kevin and Drew were pleased with the looks of their weekend getaway. The ride had been long and boring, and except for a few minutes of unproductive chat, the men were happy to have finally arrived at their private retreat destination. After all, that was the reason they agreed to drive out to the middle of nowhere in the first place. Their work had been stressful over the past few months, and the two men were undoubtedly eager to have a few moments of free time away from the constant and growing pressures back home. Even if it was only for a couple of days, their friend's cabin definitely looked like it would make an ideal place to lay low and unwind for the next forty-eight hours.

"Not too bad, Drew," said Kevin aloud despite Drew's absence. "Not too bad at all."

"I see why he talks about it a lot," said Josh, hopping out of the truck and making a beeline to the flatbed. "Hey, why don't you grab your stuff here before you start walking off and exploring?"

"I don't know what the hurry is," said Kevin, turning back, having made it all the way up to the cabin steps. "It's not like we know where we're supposed to put anything."

"Well, we can at least get it out of the truck and into the cabin," said Josh, lifting more bags onto the ground. As far as Josh was concerned, the quicker things were squared away, the better.

Letting himself in first, Josh held the screen porch open for Kevin, who twisted his way through the door frame, arms straining from the weight of several bags he had insisted on carrying all in one trip. Hardly getting one foot past the threshold, Kevin let the cumbersome load of luggage fall to the ground with a dull thud.

“I hope you don’t have anything breakable in there,” joked Kevin, surprised at the weight and sound of the bags hitting the hardwood floor. “What the hell do you have in these anyway?”

“You’re an idiot,” replied Josh with a heated glance.

Continuing to scowl at his friend's laziness but eager to take a look around, Josh stepped past the clutter and scanned the dark interior of the cabin. Off to the right of the entryway was the main living room. It was neatly arranged with an oversized, L-shaped sectional couch facing a flat-screen TV on the near-wall along with a matching recliner in the corner of the room, both loosely wrapped in vinyl slipcovers that seemed too outdated for the modern furniture they protected. A pair of closed French-style glass doors made up most of the far-right wall leading into a master bedroom that, for the time being, remained closed and curtained off to the new arrivals.

Looking through the living room and a partial hallway wall that acted as a slight separation between rooms was the kitchen. The rest of the interior was spacious and well furnished with modern chrome amenities that sat in stark contrast to the dark wooden walls and cabinets surrounding them. The entire cabin was laid out in an open floor plan, so even from the entryway, Josh and Kevin could still see most of the kitchen and even out onto the back deck. As with the master bedroom connected to the living room, a pair of sliding glass doors took up most of the far wall of the kitchen, leading out onto the rear patio. In fact, the first thing that caught Josh's attention stepping inside was the sweeping view out into the backyard overlooking the lake. It was a view that seemed both familiar and foreign to him all at once.

Slightly off to the left, past the entryway closet, was a wrought iron spiral staircase ascending to a second floor; at its base, a wooden door leading to the basement. Beyond the stairs stretched a hallway that passed by a bathroom, miscellaneous bedroom, and what

ultimately led to a room that Josh and Kevin could only guess was some type of study or sunroom at the far-left end of the corridor. Having finally caught a glimpse inside the vast home, it made sense why the cabin had looked so big from the outside. It was because it really was that big. Nevertheless, even with the open space and numerous windows, the luxurious dwelling was uncharacteristically quiet and dark for a home of its size. The everyday buzz of electronics and life was absent, and nearly every window had its shades drawn except for the glass doors leading to the back deck. From there, the last bit of sunshine outside was able to glean inside and provide what little glow of light was still present throughout the otherwise lonely collection of rooms.

"Apparently, Drew's family is not big on natural light," said Kevin, noting the drawn shades and concealed windows.

Josh took a few steps further into the living room to run his finger across a dust-covered coffee table. "Or cleaning."

"Well, that's the least of our worries," said Kevin signaling with his phone he was still unable to get a hold of their friend. "I tried him twice again, and he's still not answering."

"Is there a signal here at least?"

"Yeah, better than on the road, but not much."

"You want to hit the lights?" Josh looked at the pile of bags still in the doorway with an irritated grimace. "Let's get this shit put away."

Kevin found the control panel just off the side of the front door, four switches in all, everyone in the off position. He flipped the first nub... nothing. Trying the second and third likewise ended in disappointment. It wasn't until he tried the fourth and final switch that the house seemed to come alive again with light and sound, but only momentarily. Like a dying

person gasping for one last breath, there was a temporary rumbling of appliances straining to power back on, air filtration systems struggling to push air again, and lights flickering in unison, but all unsuccessfully. For a fleeting moment, the entire cabin had felt like a carnival ride slowly powering up for the evening's entertainment. Still, in an instant, with one final sputter, the house choked out its last gulp of air, returning to its previous state of gloomy silence.

“That’s not good.”

“Are you sure those aren’t the lights for the front yard?” Josh took a step closer to see for himself. He had already been irritated by the bags being left in the doorway, and the fact Kevin had just caused the cabin’s power to short out wasn’t helping his mood.

"I'm looking out the door here, and I don't see anything turning on out there, so..." Kevin trailed off, lost in concentration on the position of the switches.

“You obviously tripped the damn breaker,” said Josh, physically putting his hands on Kevin to push him aside.

Kevin’s face took on a look of seriousness as he pointed to the panel of switches. “Let’s hope that’s the case,” he said quietly. “It looks like someone cut into the wall around the plate to get at the wires. It’s gonna be a short vacation if we don’t have power.”

Indeed, a patch of wood just above the light switch panel didn't match with the same grains as the rest of the wood on the wall. It was clear that someone had cut through the paneling, sloppily and hastily trying to glue the pieces back together and sand it down.

“That’s great,” said Josh, turning away in frustration. “We have a great place to stay for the weekend, and there’s no damn power.”

Kevin moved back to the panel and began fiddling with the switches again. “You think the box is outside somewhere?”

“No, this is a newer house, so it’s probably downstairs,” said Josh, already halfway to the door leading to the basement.

Kevin could see his friend was quickly falling into one of his moods, and despite knowing it wouldn't make a difference, he offered assistance, already knowing that Josh wouldn't take it. After all, did he ever? "Do you want to look for a flashlight or something first? It's gonna be pitch black down there," he said, turning back to the row of switches on the wall, preparing himself for the explosive response.

“No, I’ll just use my phone,” replied Josh tersely. “Start putting the groceries away.”

“That’s not gonna do much good if we don’t have power.”

“It’s going to keep cold longer in the fridge than it is sitting on the floor,” snapped Josh, not happy about being questioned and making sure Kevin knew it.

Kevin turned and looked at the pile of bags sprawled across the floor. “All right, do you want me to move any of your *five* bags anywhere?” He made sure to put extra emphasis on the number.

Josh glanced up the spiral staircase. “No, one thing at a time.”