

The Strangers
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Chapters 1 – 3

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Chapter 1

It was late August in western Minnesota, and Josh Freedman and his best friend Kevin Harrison were making good time, cruising through one small town to the next, indifferent to the sights and sounds around them. There was a light breeze in the air with unending sunshine, and both men held an arm out the window, oblivious to the ever-growing shade of red sweeping up their forearms. Even if they had noticed the budding sunburn, neither seemed to care too much. It was too lovely a day to worry about the small things, and the freedom of the open road was a welcomed change from their otherwise chaotic lives.

Josh, the older of the two, was driving. A man of thirty-seven, he looked himself over in the rear-view mirror before sipping from an Aquafina bottle, the cool water moist against his lips, a small bead dripping down his chin. He was coarsely shaven, allowing the gray of his beard to show through, and it sat in stark contrast to his otherwise youthful appearance. His shoulder-length hair was swept back behind his ears, fluttering in the wind, and his steel-colored eyes sat behind brown-tinted aviators settled atop a high and pointed nose, Romanesque to the last. Wiping his mouth, he placed the bottle back at his side and reassessed his look in the mirror.

Kevin gazed mindlessly out his window, fascinated by the vacantness of the countryside. Although three years younger, he bore a striking resemblance to his friend, so much so that it wasn't uncommon for onlookers to point out the similarities, concluding how the two "must be twins" or, at the very least, "brothers." And while anyone confusing the two based on looks could hardly be at fault, their personalities made them indistinguishable. Both were of a quiet disposition that often made it hard to tell whether they were severe in nature or merely indifferent.

Perhaps it was for those reasons that very little conversation had taken place on the drive, which was slowly coming up on eight hours. Even now, as they passed through another farm town of less than a hundred, neither felt inclined to break the silence, preferring the sound of wind and radio, a soft hum caught between melody and static. It had been this way for the past three hours, and there wasn't much feeling the mood would change.

To be fair, there hadn't been much to discuss. Each town had been the same as the last. A few run-down shops here and there, mixed alongside the inevitable pizza parlor-greasy-spoon bar, all combined as one on Mainstreet in the culmination of small-town, rural living. It was a place of solitude, and even the towns suggested as much, with quiet streets and vacant lots, dispelling any notion that perhaps the locals were engaged in more lively intercourse elsewhere as the sun lazily arched across the sky.

Accelerating over abandoned railroad tracks and leaving one small town for the next, the bareness of the scene only gave way to more repetitiveness. As far as the eye could see, pine

trees soon lined both sides of the road. If not for the occasional birch bulging out in a manner that suggested it, too, was trying to break free and escape its shackled and claustrophobic surroundings, it would have been easy to grow dizzy in the interminable wave of green.

Still, even the monotony of the pines couldn't last forever, and the roadside again weaved into more wide open spaces. This time, it came in the form of lightly rolling farmlands dotted with dilapidated farmhouses and barns that, perhaps, in an earlier age, might have seemed positively hopeful and triumphant over the otherwise endless expanses of woodland and dirt that the locals affectionately refer to as "God's Country." But as quickly as the open land appeared, the pine trees soon cropped up again to show their dominance over the providence of the land.

Such had been the case for the better part of the Minnesota portion of the drive: pines, farmland, small town, repeat, none of which had led to any significant discussion on the way to the friends' final destination. That's why it was such a surprise when Josh turned down the volume dial on the dash, and for the first time in hours, words were passed.

"So, have you ever been through here before?"

"Where?" asked Kevin, unsure what to make of the sudden question. "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 moment to scan the surroundings, answering with a hint of nostalgia. "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 squinted, unimpressed with the bleakness of the surroundings.

"I camped out on a lake around here a few times with Shayla back in college," he said with the same warmth.

"Shayla," Kevin said, dumbfounded. He hadn't heard Josh mention her name in years.

"Yeah, Shayla. Why?"

"No, nothing. I just haven't heard you talk about her in a long time," responded Kevin, unsure what else to say.

Josh took a moment to consider his friend's words. "Well, like you said, it's been a long time," he answered. "I'll tell you, though, I do remember all these little Podunks. 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, laughing. "Hell, I can't believe anyone would live around here. What do you do all day?"

"From the number of cornfields we've passed, 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."

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

"Not a bad way to pass the time, I guess."

As the few token blocks of homes and run-down stores crept by, Josh pointed to a sign on the side of the road:

"Hoe of the Minesota State Fidle Comtition, August 6th-8t."

"I guess there's your answer," he continued, laughing. "They have themselves a little ho-down."

"Who would possibly come to a state fiddle competition in the middle of nowhere?"

"From the looks of that sign, it's been a few years since Minnesota's finest bluegrassers have been around these parts."

With the truck again picking up speed, it was clear that what little conversation had taken place had run its course. Having turned the radio back on, Josh settled back into his seat, retreating from the few words sparingly exchanged. Although Kevin considered talking over the static, seeing his friend's withdrawn demeanor led him to believe 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 the brief chat an hour earlier. "You ever miss the small-town life, the quietness?" he asked, hopeful the curious tone would make his boredom apparent.

"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 moving. "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?" Josh's voice was irritated and stiff.

"Me, hell no," said Kevin, sensing Josh's annoyance. "But Drew sure still talks about it every chance he gets. All the fishing and four-wheeling, the seclusion. I'm surprised he ever left."

"I guess he wanted to move on to bigger and better things," said Josh, already growing tired of the conversation. "Speaking of Drew, have you heard from him yet?"

Kevin glanced at his lap, surprised to find that the phone he had been resting there for hours was no longer attached to his charger. Twisting from one side to the next, he ran his hand along the bottom of the seat, blindly groping the floor in a clumsy and disordered search.

Josh frowned. "How do you lose a phone sitting inside a truck?"

"Yeah, I got it all right," said Kevin, pulling the phone from his pocket, already thumbing through the screen.

"Any word from him?"

"No," said Kevin, holding the phone to the window. "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, already seeing the glazed-over expression on his friend's face. "I don't know -- it just seems kinda odd he would get 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 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 turned the radio up, lost in his thoughts. "Just keep trying him."

"Do you think Drew misses being out here?"

"Huh?"

"Do you think Drew misses being out here?" He knew Josh didn't want to talk, but what else could he do? He was irritated and wanted to kill time. "Maybe that's what this whole thing with Alyson is about, getting out of the rat race."

Josh shot Kevin a sideways glance, confused by the 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, grinning.

"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," he continued, suddenly aware of his thoughts. "You have to admit this life and schedule with being on the road all the time isn't exactly easy."

Josh reflected on the topic, thinking of ways to change the subject. "You're trying to tell me all these little towns aren't fascinating enough for you on their own with their "ah shucks" vibe?"

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

"Well, we have about another fifteen towns to get through before we get to the cabin," said Josh, turning the volume 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, glancing at himself again in the rear-view mirror, content to keep driving toward their destination. If the conversation had been in trouble of losing pace before, it was definitely over now.

The afternoon continued winding down, and the land slid by with its varying open spaces and clustered miles of forest. The sun had begun to sink below the tree line, and the once bright afternoon sunlight now only gleamed between the treetops occasionally. Town bled into town, and the drive legged on with minimal traffic, though just enough to keep Josh aware of his speed. The last thing he needed on the long drive was being pulled over by a local with an out-of-state license.

"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 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 signal? Why don't you try calling Drew?"

"I don't have any phone signal, only GPS," said Josh, waving the phone in the air, annoyed at the suggestion. "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?"

"Looks like it," said Josh, easing his foot off the gas. "This is certainly different."

The ride there had been long, and it was a relief to be back in civilization. After the dullness of the past few hours, it was nice to be greeted by the sight of other people and a flower-adorned sign reading the 'City of Logilvie Lake, Home of the Tigers,' welcoming their arrival. And while it was clear that the city was no metropolis, it was the first town within hundreds of miles with any sign of life and more than a few houses sparsely plotted about amongst browning farmland.

Had a passenger taken their eyes off the road for only a few seconds, they would have thought they were transported to a new place and time. Ahead of them was a quaint waterside neighborhood 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. If not for the macabre look of the water shaded by close-knit pines along the waterfront, it certainly looked and felt as though Logilvie Lake would live up to the active lakeside community their buddy Drew had told so many stories about back in college.

Still, it was readily apparent that the charming waterside burg was not without its peculiarities. Breaking from the traditional city plan of block streets and right angles, 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, which unfortunately also led to newcomers continually driving and walking in circles when trying to get from one block to the next. A feeling that Josh understood all too well, struggling to gain his bearings as he rolled along the waterfront, unsure if he was moving toward the lake or away.

"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?"

Josh glanced at his phone. "What's your point?"

"I'm just saying that it's crazy compared to Chicago," said Kevin, confounded by the quietness of the town. "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 nice about it."

"Quiet, maybe. I'm not sure about the nice part," said Josh, 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 community's slow pace.

"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 frowned, focusing on the gas station ahead.

Chapter 2

Kevin marveled at the sights and sounds of the quaint tourist town as the truck cruised down the waterfront Mainstreet, passing old-timey shops, one after another, all whimsically made up and fashioned to attract out-of-towners like himself. With elaborate flower arrangements, handcrafted trinkets, and "WELCOME" signs adorning store windows, it wasn't hard to imagine shopkeepers out front early each morning, broom in hand, preparing for the day ahead. It felt like a scene from a 1950s sitcom: cheerful and welcoming. Half expecting to see a milkman dropping off a bottle at each doorstep and children jumping rope in the streets, Kevin's fantasy was throttled back into reality with the piercing rattle of a dirtbike engine revving its pipes in a display of attitude off in the distance.

"That kinda ruins the vibe," said Kevin, annoyed by the disurbance. "How far past town is Drew's cabin?"

"I think just a mile or two," said Josh, glancing at his phone. "But he didn't really say-- he just gave me the address. I think 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 can get a can of gas for the boat," said Josh, ignoring the sarcasm. "I figured we could grab some food there too."

The mention of food was a reminder the two hadn't eaten in several hours. "It looks like they got a restaurant in there," said Kevin, suddenly hungry. "Did you just wanna eat here?"

"No. I thought we could grab something 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. "It's a three-in-one."

"Yeah, you can't go wrong with that," said Josh, pulling into the last row of pumps.

The convenience store sat on a corner lot near the end of Mainstreet, across the road from the lake, overlooking the harbor. Although the building had been there for decades, updated signage and a lavish awning gave it a stylish Cape Cod feel, even if the chipped bricks and backup generator squealing around back told a different story. For this reason, the store saw a lot of foot traffic, with summer vacationers eager to grab that first great snapshot of the trip, replicating the images on the magnets and postcards sold inside.

There was no denying that the view lent itself to the city's aura, helping to set the mood of an oceanfront boardwalk rather than that of a gas station in rural Minnesota. A feeling that was only reinforced by the cobblestoned walkway along the waterfront, busy with visitors and food trucks sprawled along the shoreline, complete with a Ferris wheel and the strong scent of fried dough that the city relied upon for summer revenue.

Josh grabbed his ballcap from the backseat, pulling the brim down low. "Do you want to see what they have for food in there?"

"Yeah, what are you thinking?" Kevin's stomach was already growling at the scent of fried food in the air. "Burger meat, steaks?"

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

As the friends entered, a string of bells rattled against the door, causing the few shoppers inside to look up, annoyed by the unwelcome distraction. An elderly woman pushed a cart near the groceries, a young woman with her son stood near a candy rack, and a man in his seventies chatted with the clerk, eager for attention. Ironically, for a tourist town in the heart of Minnesota, only the clerk smiled. Most returned to their business, having seen enough travelers to last a lifetime. That is, except for the young woman, who ran her eyes over Josh just a few seconds longer-- a glance that wasn't lost on him.

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

Josh paused anxiously for a break in the conversation between the old man and clerk, looking at his watch. He was growing impatient, and it wasn't his nature to let unproductive time slip by. He shifted in place and looked at his watch again, trying anything he could, hoping to get the clerk's attention. With no response, the words popped out. "Do you have gas cans here?"

The clerk waved his hand vaguely to his right. "They're at the end of aisle three."

Josh gave a half-hearted smile, trying to avoid the sullen look on the old man's face, irritated his chat with the clerk had been interrupted. Walking off, Josh scanned the rows, focused on what he needed. Not paying attention, he stumbled into the young boy, who had burst with a bolt of energy from the candy rack with his coveted chocolate bar in hand, eager to get to the register, his mom following closely behind. Surprised by the collision, Josh knelt down, putting his arm on the boy's shoulder.

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

The boy stepped back, confused. Searching for his mother, he swung away from Josh in a panic, reaching out, nearly toppling over. Josh watched with fascination as the boy scrambled to get his bearings, finally steadying himself behind his mother's leg. Josh reached down and picked up the candy bar, an O'Henry, which had fallen during the collision.

"He's fine," said the woman, smiling, putting her hands on the boy's head for reassurance.

"Here you go, little man," said Josh, holding out the treat.

The boy, still puzzled, remained hesitant.

"Go ahead, Tommy," said the woman, growing flush, aware Josh was checking her out.

"I'm sorry about bumping the lil' guy, ma'am," added Josh, averting his stare.

He grinned as the boy took the candy bar, albeit timidly, and tottered off towards the checkout counter, happily leading the way, his mother struggling to keep up. Disorientated, it took Josh a few seconds to remember what he was doing. Catching a glance of Kevin across the store, it returned to him. Finding the gas can, he met Kevin at the checkout, only to see him unloading multiple items from an overflowing cart.

"You really think we need all this stuff?" Josh was counting the items in his head, annoyed.

"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? Six? Seven?"

"Are you guys staying in town?" asked the store clerk.

"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." 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 items. "There's one around the back if you're up for the walk and aren't afraid of some weeds." 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 trademark smile. "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 flatly. Grabbing only the gas can, he shoved back out the door, leaving Kevin sulking, having to charge it to his own credit card as the clanging of bells jingled again throughout the store.

Josh walked into the parking lot, taking a moment to look around and appreciate the day. "It really isn't a bad town," he thought, catching a glimpse of the houseboats tied up in the marina. Sure, it was small, and he would never want to live there, but there was something satisfying about its rustic, quiet appeal. Of course, he would never give Kevin the satisfaction of admitting it. He had already faced several awkward questions on the drive and had little interest in opening up to more inquiries about his thoughts on small-town living. That part of his life was behind him.

Lost in thought, Josh noticed the remains of a cement walkway on the far edge of the building, looping around the corner of the store to the back. Evidently, the pathway hadn't been used for years, and weeds sprouted everywhere, overrun with waist-high undergrowth. The clerk certainly hadn't been joking. Sticking close to the edge, Josh scurried around the sidewall, imagining the countless creepy crawlies that made their home in the thicket surrounding him. The thought made him squirm, and it didn't help that the cicadas were out in full force. Their *singing* grew louder as he neared the final turn, buzzing in harmony with the generator in one long, building crescendo. *Bzzzzzzz*. The humming droned on, gaining in intensity. Josh could practically feel the bugs on him. *Bzzzzzzz! Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!*

Turning the corner at the height of the insects' fevered pitch, Josh was shocked by the presence of another individual behind the building, barely visible, out of the corner of his eye, racing through the high grass towards him in a panic. The incessant sound of bugs and electricity ceased, and time took on a slow, surreal quality.

"Shit!" exclaimed Josh, in disbelief at the menacing figure rushing at him through the weeds, troubled and staggering. He covered his face, instinctively bracing for a collision with the terrifying apparition. A few seconds passed, but nothing. Josh dropped his hands, glancing around. The pulsing wave of bugs rose again and fell back to a steady hum. The field was empty.

Josh was baffled. Seconds earlier, he was sure he had seen someone running at him, sure to collide with him, and now, there was nothing. How could it be? Where did they go? Stranger still, he could have sworn it was the woman he had just seen inside the store. Pulling off his sunglasses for the first time in hours, he pinched the frames between his shirt, cleaning the lenses. *It had been a long drive through rural America*, he thought.

Not the type to believe in ghosts, Josh wondered if he caught a reflection in his sunglasses from the parking lot. That would explain what he saw and why there really wasn't anyone there. Calmed by the simple and most likely explanation, Josh grabbed the doorknob only to find it locked. Swearing under his breath, he remembered the key in his pocket and put it in the keyhole. He really needed to piss, but as always seemed to be the case with outdoor bathrooms, the door wouldn't open.

"Oh, what the hell," he snapped, frustrated, left squeezing his bladder.

He jiggled the key, but the handle refused to budge. Given its current condition, it shouldn't have come as a surprise. Rust lined one side of the door frame from top to bottom, and the door had several dents, presumably from people trying to kick it down over the years, probably for the same reason Josh was now considering that very same idea.

He shook the key again, hoping another quick jiggle would do the trick. Instead, he was startled by the sound of someone, or *something*, moving around inside. Prrrrrrtttttt. Prrrrrrtttttt. The sound was distinct, and Josh paused, listening. Prrrrrrtttttt. Prrrrrrtttttt. What the hell was going on? First, the strange reflection, and now this. Was someone already inside? Taking another listen, the rustling sound, though faint, was unmistakable. Prrrrrrrrtttttt. Prrrrrrtttttt. There was no doubt that something was stirring inside the tiny concrete room.

"Hello," said Josh, knocking. "Is someone in there?" He pressed his ear against the hot, metal frame. Could the person he just thought he saw have gone in there? He tapped the door again, this time knocking louder. "Is someone in there?" He was met with another rattle.

Fumbling with the key, Josh got the knob to turn. Hesitating, he pulled open the surprisingly heavy door, tense, unsure what he might uncover. Expecting maybe to find teenagers smoking pot or kids making out, he was confounded to find the bathroom 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 and hum with the early bursts of a fluorescent bulb forcing itself on. Josh glanced into the lone stall, but the tiny concrete bunker of a room was empty. It was just him and the soft murmur from the fluorescent tubing above. Josh placed the gas can on the sink and moved to the urinal. After all, he still really had to piss. The weird noise would have to wait.

It didn't take long, mid-steam, before Josh heard the rustling again. Prrrrtttt. Prrrrtttt. What the fuck? It had been too long a day driving for this. Prrrrtttt. Prrrrrrtttttt. Fortunately, he was now inside the room and could see what had been causing the sound all along. The bathroom door had a slight opening at the bottom, which allowed a draft to enter. Every time it happened, the stall door would ripple on its loose hinges, setting off the faint rapping sound he had been hearing. Pulling up his zipper and walking to the stall, Josh waited for the subtle rumbling to occur again. Sure enough, a second later, it happened. Prrrrrrtttttt. Prrrrrrtttttt. He grabbed the loose door frame, causing the noise to cease.

Josh walked to the sink, still irritated but happy to have solved the mystery. He looked himself over in the mirror, placing his sunglasses on the countertop and running his hands under the faucet. The cool water felt nice against his sunburnt skin, and he cupped a few handfuls to splash over his face. Drying his hands, Josh put his sunglasses back on and took another long look at

himself in the mirror. He was embarrassed by how jumpy he had been. It was out of character, especially after figuring out it was nothing more than a drafty room and loose door frame. 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. Were they trying to avoid him, or did they even see him? Either way, it was a troubling thought.

Making sure he still had the key, Josh grabbed the gas can and made for the door, only to find it fastened shut again. "You have to be kidding me," he whispered, incredulous that the handle could be stuck again. Jiggling the knob and pushing the door, he didn't mess around this time, putting his shoulder into it while twisting the handle. The door gave way, and Josh nearly tumbled out behind it, bringing him unexpectedly face-to-face with someone on the other side. However, this time, the person was definitely real. It was Kevin.

"Whoa," exclaimed Kevin, nearly dropping his armful of groceries, smiling. "Little jumpy there or what?"

"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 Josh long to spot the 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. "Lighten up."

Chapter 3

By the time Kevin returned from the bathroom, Josh was anxious to get moving, which was simply his nature. He didn't like wasting time and really didn't like waiting on others who chose to squander their own. In the time it took Kevin to piss and amble back to the truck, Josh had returned the key, filled the gas can, and checked the luggage in the truck bed, eager to get to the cabin and relax in solitude after a long day on the road, not to mention a much-needed distraction from the strange things that had been happening.

"Are we ready?" asked Kevin, lazily pulling himself into the truck.

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

"Did you bring the key back inside?"

"I did." The question irritated Josh, but he wasn't surprised. The silence he relished had been disturbed by the stop, and that meant Kevin would now expect the two of them to talk until they reached their destination, something he considered a hindrance more than anything else. Sure enough, the truck wheels had barely hit the blacktop before Kevin started in.

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

"Seems a bit paranoid," said Kevin, looking out his window, avoiding Josh's scowl. Even knowing him like he did, he was still surprised by how evasive his friend could be. "How far yet?"

"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 losing patience. "Did you try calling him again?"

"I tried him three times when we were at the store," said Kevin, annoyed, waving 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 back off the highway, the truck coming to rest on the side of the road near a litter-ridden ditch and drooping wooden mailbox brimming with mail, weeds overgrown and thick. "Because I think we're here."

"You sure this is it?" Kevin hesitated, glancing at the dirt path leading into a maze of tangled branches and wilderness.

Josh nodded towards the numbers on the mailbox. "That says four-one-six, doesn't it."

Kevin's eyes followed the towering pines down the narrow trail into the woods. "Yeah," he said, unsure what to make of the situation. "Not much of a driveway."

"Do you have any service here?"

"I got nothin."

Josh pulled forward over a small culvert and eased the truck onto the crude pathway. Within seconds, nearly all traces of daylight vanished, blocked out by the forest, enveloping the vehicle in hushed darkness, all remnants of the bustling lakeside city a mile up the road gone. Even the sounds of nature familiar to the forest were absent, just an uncomfortable isolation and stillness left in their place. The driveway, if it could be called that, slithered from side to side, up and

down over loose gravel, puddles, and mud, constantly winding, forcing Josh to crawl forward, a constant cycle of breaking and accelerating, taking care not to go off either side into the ditch. A situation that would surely put a damper on the start of their vacation.

Each twist left the friends guessing what would be around the next turn, anxious for the cabin, only for the trail to continue, more pines, more gnarled jungle, seemingly forever. At times, it was as if they were driving in circles, seeing the light at the end of the road, a break in the trees, only to find more hidden darkness. The truck curled deeper, only the occasional stray beam of sunlight breaking through, casting shadows across the trail, a surreal combination of light and darkness dancing, making it nearly impossible to tell what lay ahead in the witching twilight. The only certainty was that the pathway continued, weaving endlessly, for how long was anyone's guess.

"What the hell -- How far can this go?" Kevin's eyes were fixed on the road, creeping shadows playing tricks with his mind at every turn. "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, de-accelerating, throwing each of them forward in their seats. In the middle of the road was a downed tree that was too big to drive over but blocked enough of the road to make going around impossible. Josh had been lucky to see it coming around a blind corner, reacting just in time to avoid a worse collision, which had already been jarring enough.

"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, half-rotted, fungus and worms falling off at the slightest provocation. Not seeing any signs that the tree was still attached to the ground, Josh grabbed the lead end of the branches and gave it a tug.

"Can we move it?" asked Kevin, passively grabbing a piece to gauge how heavy it was.

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

Leaving the tree hanging over the roadside, Josh returned to the truck while Kevin continued up the path, jogging and disappearing around the bend in the road. Anxious to catch up, Josh sped around the turn, only to find an empty path and more of the same, minus Kevin.

"God damn idiot," muttered Josh, annoyed at his friend's running ahead. "Probably got lost already." He was in no mood to start searching the woods.

Josh banked around another corner, and still no sign of Kevin. Irritated, he sped forward, twisting again, first left, then back right, and still nobody. It wasn't until he came upon another opening in the treeline that he caught sight of his friend jogging along the road, relieved to see

the roadway 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, grinning, stepping aside as Josh drove past into the open lot towards the cabin.

The *cabin* was settled atop a slight mound in the land that helped create the illusion that it was more prominent than it was. Nevertheless, even in contrast with the tallest trees surrounding the home, the cabin's grandiose design lent the structure an air of influence over the wildness surrounding it. Its dark-brown and green wooden siding perfectly conformed with the shadowy forest and steely blue water, making it feel less like a building and more like a fixture of the land, manmade and nature, living and growing as one entity.

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 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, rustically elegant and Romanesque simultaneously. The outstretched front porch swung around the left side of the house, leading to a larger deck off the back 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 down to the ground level, which sloped off gradually until the land once again flattened out for a few hundred feet, just enough space for the firepit and grass volleyball court that sat dead center of the backyard, eventually meeting a narrow strip of sandy waterfront that, from all appearances, served as a private lakefront beach for the cabin's occupants, secluded, tucked away in a harbor of its own.

On the lake 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 evidently been neglected for an extended period. Leaves from overhanging trees had shed and soiled the white tarp, globs of mud and plant matter smeared across, even reaching the boat's interior, exposed to the elements from a carelessly secured strap, one corner still loosely fluttering in the breeze.

The water on the lake had picked up movement since the men first drove through town, and the tranquil mirror of liquid now lazily slid onto the sandy shoreline before retreating back into the shady expanse of water and reflected sky. 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 dock, there was little to see other than water. The queer little boats and docks that had dotted the shoreline near town only minutes up the highway were no longer visible, and the only signs of life were a few ducks floating along the bank. A small, uninhabited island could barely be seen past the bay's edge, only a few hundred feet long, hard to spot if not for a sandbar jetting off the island's tip, causing a break in the water, making the island scarcely definable against its mirroring forest backdrop.

Although the rocky shoreline and sandbars gave the impression the lake was shallow, the water was actually uncharacteristically deep, with sudden drop-offs occurring only twenty feet from shore. It was a topographical anomaly that helped create illusions on the surface, causing ripples

to appear out of nowhere before quickly dipping back into the dreary depths, not unlike a certain Loch in the Scottish countryside famed for its mythical creature. And all though Logilvie Lake didn't yet have a monster to call its own, it certainly wasn't from a lack of sightings over the years.

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 without 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, twisted wilderness encircling it on three of its four borders.

As for the maintenance on the property, the grounds had seen better days. The backyard was mere weeks from being overtaken by weeds, with downed branches and leaves scattered about in naturally made drifts, the front yard not much better. However, it was evident someone had at least taken the time to run a mower over it recently, even if it was done with no genuine care or attention to detail. Perhaps it was this sloppily manicured lawn that Drew dubbed rustic, as there was nothing remotely rustic about the cabin itself otherwise.

Minor details aside, and having only seen the cabin's exterior, Kevin and Drew were pleased with the looks of their weekend getaway. The ride had been dull, and except for a few minutes of unproductive chat, the men were happy to have finally arrived at their private retreat in the woods. After all, that was the reason they agreed to drive out to the middle of nowhere in the first place. Life had been stressful the past few months, and the two 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 few days, the cabin looked ideal for laying low and unwinding.

"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 bee-line to the truck bed. "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, protesting, having already made it to the cabin steps. "It's not like we know where 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," he joked, 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, annoyed by his friend's careless act.

Eager to look around, Josh stepped past the clutter and scanned the unlit 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 and a matching recliner in the corner of the room, 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 remained closed for the time being and behind curtains to the new arrivals.

Looking through the living room and a partial hallway wall that acted as a separation between rooms was the kitchen. The rest of the interior was spacious and well-furnished, with modern chrome amenities that contrasted with 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 the back deck. 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 of the backyard overlooking the lake. It was a view that seemed 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, a 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.

Standing inside, it made sense why the cabin 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 peaked inside to 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 entered 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 that he could still not reach their friend. "I tried him 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 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. Yet, 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, 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 the grain pattern of the rest of the wood on the wall. Clearly, someone had cut through the paneling, trying to glue the pieces back together sloppily.

"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, fiddling with the switches. "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 fuckin 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 was sure to place extra emphasis on the number.

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