

OF THE KINDG. Wells Taylor (eBook Sample)

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Edited by Katherine Tomlinson Cover Design by G. Wells Taylor More titles at <u>GWellsTaylor.com</u>

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Acknowledgments:

A special thankyou to **Katherine**

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And many thanks to photographer **Robert A. Cotton** for his contribution to the cover art.

For my dearest friends, the many beautiful shores, and the best of times shared.

Tuesday, June 15, 2021

Prologue

Cecile Nadeau could not get back to sleep. She was exhausted, but she could not stop thinking. The days in Covid lockdown were long and uneventful. Life was a dull gray line.

So why did her restless nights in bed feel even longer? A woman her age needed dreams when her life became boring. Often, they were all she had.

And yet, when sleep should have come easily, those dreams were denied.

It was usually worry that kept her mind racing.

But tonight's distraction was different.

It began as a small thing. A mere whiff of the dark stranger's cologne had warmed her aging body, and set her alight with desire.

It was foggy when Mr. Ralen arrived that night.

Not long after sunset, Cecile had remarked to her husband, Henri, how unsettling the surrounding forest appeared when half-drowned in creeping murk. It was like something from out of an old horror movie.

Her nerves had been such a wreck when the pandemic first hit, and that anxiety had only worsened as its perils shadowed each part of daily life.

And the nights ... The nights were

terrible, especially when the spring temperatures mixed and caused the rain to drum and tap upon the roof, and the fog to crawl around their old bed and breakfast house.

The conditions tonight had tempted Cecile to tell Mr. Ralen that there were no vacancies. They were not a motel, and usually only accepted guests who arranged their visits in advance on the Internet.

Cecile was in no mood for walk-ins. She was fed up.

She had spent too much time indoors that winter and now most of the spring. She'd had too much time with her doubts, her fears, and Henri's cable news.

Would she wear a mask? Would that make her a coward or patriot? Was the government lying about the virus? Or was it China's fault—or Russia's?

Those daily glaring divisions had finally struck at the heart of Cecile's marriage, family, and being. They had cut deep into her soul and left her numb.

Things had not improved with the arrival of the vaccine. *Arrival?* The much-touted rollout was barely discernable. There was not enough to go around outside the red zones, so most everyone else had to wait and observe the protocols.

Stand back, and wash your hands! Where is your mask? Don't touch your face! Don't touch ME!

Henri believed that the liberal news was to blame. He claimed that they were working with the scientists, Saudi billionaires, and the Ottawa elite. Henri was a proud Québécois from a long line of Québécois patriots who considered themselves Quebecers first and Canadian second! He would not hide behind a mask, or obey any English-Canadian quarantine. *He* would decide his family's fate, not the pandering party politicians in parliament.

According to him, the media had used the virus to frighten and confuse people, as their partners in crime took control of daily life.

And the people had believed the lie and behaved like frightened sheep.

So said Henri.

But it was no hoax to Cecile. It was clear to her that the coronavirus had run rampant, killing so many and spreading terror across the world. As the months had passed, the true measure of its destructive power had been realized in isolation.

Why would she doubt that? It was right there before her eyes.

The virus was as real as her fear, and months of fear had eventually undermined her faith, for how could God have let this happen?

Was it a test? Would she have to find her own way out?

The patriot Henri had rarely moved from his seat in front of the TV, so she

knew most days that she was on her own.

Cecile had already felt small and lost where they lived beside a highway that wormed its way through the ancient heart of a sprawling old-growth forest.

So she'd been startled when Mr. Ralen came knocking at their door.

Cecile had been in the darkened living room watching an infomercial for spray-on sanitizer when headlights rushed up the drive to dazzle against the blinds and send bars of light sliding over the opposite wall.

It was nearly midnight.

Cecile spent a breathless minute waiting for the *thump* of a car door

closing that never came.

She was tiptoeing toward the front entrance when Mr. Ralen had appeared like an apparition gliding past the

like an apparition gliding past the window glass by the side door. His black skin, hat, and overcoat almost nullified his humanity, as he seemed to take form out of the fog.

It was left to his bright, blue medical mask to ground his presence in reality, for the lower half of his face was covered in accordance with pandemic protocol. His dark eyes hinted at the pleading smile beneath it.

She'd hesitated before opening the door to close her old bathrobe, and mouth a half-hearted prayer that hours of TV had not left her looking too rumpled.

She did not bother with her drooping, gray hair, but thanked God as she slipped behind the mixed blessing of her medical mask: *out of sight, out of mind!*

Cecile had been prepared to turn the man away, but Henri always reminded her that they were too cash-strapped to let any opportunity go by. The pandemic had put him out of work at the lumber mill, and despite some government aid, they'd just about gone through all their savings.

They needed money. They'd never had a lot, and keeping their kids afloat through the pandemic had also eaten into what reserves they had. It was partly why their grandniece Sofia was visiting. The pandemic pressures had all but

ended her parents' marriage and they had sent money with her to help pay expenses while they decided what direction their lives would take.

These thoughts had undercut most of the hesitation Cecile felt about renting Mr. Ralen a room. She really didn't care that he'd driven the old van up to the house so late. Nor did the man's foreign accent or his black skin raise any alarm.

It was the fog that had awakened her malaise. The fog that seemed to gather around the stranger's van where he'd parked it behind Henri's truck. The fog that had thickened in the porch light until the vehicle all but disappeared.

Mr. Ralen must have sensed some

apprehension because he apologized for the lateness of his arrival, explaining that he had already lost his way twice, and would prefer sorting his directions out in the light of day.

And he'd even flashed a handful of

cash and said he was happy to pay any amount.

"Disruptions of this sort are the opposite of hospitality," he said,

opposite of hospitality," he said, jauntily. "I run the risk of disturbing your other guests."

"We've no others," Cecile remembered saying in heavily accented English, even blushing as she accepted the ten twenties he paid for the eighty-dollar room.

The slow rollout of the vaccine had

loosened some restrictions on behavior, but she welcomed Mr. Ralen so long as mask, hand sanitizer, and socialdistancing rules were followed.

Henri would be happy with the handful of money—particularly since he'd earned it while sleeping.

"Is there space for me down here?"
Mr. Ralen had asked, lowering his voice. "I would prefer a ground-floor room."

So, Cecile put him in the spare room at the back of the house. It was the smallest but the only available if he wished to have something on the main floor. She and Henri shared the room at the top of the stairs and Sofia was using the one opposite it. There were two

more up there empty at the end of the hall.

Only then had the man introduced himself as Mr. Ralen, before returning to his van to retrieve his things.

Cecile showed him to the room, and pointed out the small bathroom across the hall.

Mr. Ralen had thanked her profusely, and bid her a good night.

So, Cecile had climbed the stairs to her own bedroom, sniffing at her hand that had accepted the man's greeting clasp. It was a floral scent she had smelled then, floral with a little musk—very refined and strong. It suited what finely chiseled facial features she had

seen around his mask, and the robust physique that moved so gracefully beneath his sleek suit and grand overcoat.

Accepting the stranger's handshake had marked a profound break with coronavirus protocol, and her disinclination to wash up after was more a result of her husband's failings.

A tingle had traveled across her belly

as Cecile savored the cologne, and she let out a quiet laugh as she closed her bedroom door and slid into her place by Henri. She'd heard about black men having a special prowess, and power ...

Cecile had tossed and turned since then, with her mind caught between the dreary day, and the night's welcome distraction until she finally drifted off to sleep.

She awoke to the gentle squeeze of Henri's hand upon her shoulder. "Cecile—someone's down there," he said, eyes wide in the reddish glow from

the alarm clock display.
"A fellow came late," she explained.

"A black man—Mr. Ralen."

"Well, who's he talking to, then?" Henri croaked, squinting in the dark.

Cecile held her breath, hand clasped over her mouth.

She heard two voices.

"That's outside!" Cecile observed.

"I'll go have a chat with them," Henri said. "Maybe he had someone in his

car."
"It's a *van*—and he paid well, Henri.

Be nice!" Cecile said softly, climbing out of the bed and into her bathrobe. "I'll see that Sofia isn't disturbed—*oh*, don't forget your mask!"

Her husband slipped into his mask with a whispered curse, and descended the stairs as she moved quietly over to Sofia's room and pressed one ear against the door.

The bedroom was as quiet as a tomb.

Then, the clasp on the side screen door snapped shut.

She heard Henri say something outside—a cautious word—but another noise cut him off—a *growl*.

"Henri?" Cecile whispered,

wondering if Mr. Ralen had left a dog in his van. Perhaps that was why he wanted the main-floor room.

She hurried down the stairs and

paused on the last step.

Henri had left the side door open, by

Henri had left the side door open, but the outer screen door had closed on its spring.

Cecile moved quietly toward the doorway and peered through the glass into the night.

Henri had turned the porch light on.

It showed his truck, and Mr. Ralen's van behind it.

But the fog was there, thicker now than before. Cecile couldn't see the gravel lane, or the vehicle tires upon it. The gray mist lapped at the fenders. "Flashlight!" she breathed, moving to the closet and reaching for the top shelf where Henri kept it.

Her fingers closed upon the long aluminum shaft and flicked its light on. Cecile kept the beam aimed at her feet as she returned to her place and pushed the screen door aside.

The spring creaked as it always did, when she held it open. The concrete porch was cold underfoot.

There was a heavy *grunt*—then came a scrabbling noise like feet on wet gravel!

Cecile swung the flashlight beam through the fog toward the sound.

Henri lay on his back beside Mr.

Ralen's van!

He was staring into the night sky, and hugging something to his chest.

A dark blotch in the murk loomed over him.

She saw a spray of whiskers moving in the flashlight beam, white amidst dense gray fur and fog. Pointed ears framed the back of a head—blunt and square as a cinderblock on a thick neck.

Spiky hair ran the ridge of its spine like a wrought-iron fence.

The big dog, a wolf—or a *bear*, was crouched over her poor Henri!

Its toothy maw, dribbled blood on her husband's torn throat.

Cecile wanted to call out—to *scream*, but there was Sofia to think of!

She was not safe. She would come at the call, and this *thing*—this thing would hurt her.

Henri's rifle! He kept it in the same closet as the flashlight.

Cecile turned to run for it, but

stepped breathless into Mr. Ralen's embrace. He'd been there in the shadows, in the hall just inside the door.

"Oh help, my God, please!" she said, gesturing dumbly over her shoulder. "My husband ..."

"He should have stayed in bed," Mr. Ralen said, grabbing her elbows and then turning her so that her back was tight to his muscular chest, and his strong arms were locked over her breasts. "My employer was preparing for the hunt

when your husband stepped in his way."
Mr. Ralen lifted her effortlessly and held her still as he pushed out onto the porch. The screen-door swung shut behind them and closed with a *snap*.

Hanging out over the top step, Cecile started squirming in his grasp—and then froze.

Mr. Ralen had wrenched the flashlight from her hand, and used it to illuminate the foggy scene.

She watched the beast tear Henri's face off. Her husband's eyes pleaded with her, and his exposed jaws moved as if he was speaking. His hands fluttered weakly against the beast's hulking shoulders as it lapped at his bloody skull.

"Oh, help him ..." Cecile whimpered, shuddering, still too terrified for Sofia to scream. "It's not real. It's a devil!"

"It is *life*, Madame Nadeau," the man whispered, "life moving into death, and death moving into life. Nothing could be more natural. *Beautiful*, really."

"Henri!" Cecile sobbed.
"You are a Christian?" Mr. Ralen

asked, his powerful arms encircling her. "You nod your head, then *yes*? Yes? You need not worry. By your god's counting

you will soon be reunited with your husband in Heaven—or Hell ..."

"Tantine?" It was a little girl's voice

calling from inside.

Cecile shivered, entangled in the

man's embrace.

He sighed. "A child is here?" he breathed.

"Sofia ... my niece's daughter. She is innocent. Have pity ..." Cecile answered, voice rising like she was about to scream.

"Pity her?" Mr. Ralen said, his grip suddenly tightening over her breasts.

A storm of pain exploded in Cecile's chest as the ribs snapped. Her breath blew out in a bloody plume.

"I pity you all," he said, as Cecile's hearing began to fade.

Friday, June 18, 2021

Chapter 1

Nathan Chambers was glad to be back up at Needlewalk, and standing in the shadow of its towering trees on the shore of Lake Kipawa. The bright blue afternoon sky glowing past the high, jagged branches promised good weather and better memories.

His family had been coming to the cottage on the Quebec finger lake since he was a little boy, but this time it was a bittersweet reunion. Life had changed for him and his home away from home.

The cottage was a rare find, a well cared for and affordable mid-sized "house" in a cathedral forest. His father

had first discovered it decades past, there on the densely wooded lot of soaring white and red pine, and sticky old spruce—with the odd sprawling birch thrown in for good measure. The property was accessed by an old

lumber road that had been upgraded by the provincial government to service the development of land on suitable bays around the lake.

The first thing to catch a visitor's eye

coming in the Needlewalk drive was the tall, enclosed water tower that loomed behind the cottage and stood almost twice its height. The tower was constructed of split gray pine logs, nailed horizontal to its great hardwood frame with irregular gaps left between. It

old-time fur-traders, natives, and forts.

The tower had stood for years, and used to hold a heavy two-hundred-gallon

had a rustic look that made Nate think of

water tank that fed the cottage. A look at the structure inside suggested overkill, since it was made of formidable timbers that were reinforced by the surrounding cover of logs.

It was built to last.

It was built to last.

However, the lofty reservoir had been removed after the purchase of a reliable electric pump that drew water directly from the lake to supply the cottage plumbing.

The now empty twelve-by-twelve water-tank room atop the tower was reached by climbing steep stairs made of

stout planks.

Nathan and his friends had used it as a fort where they could congregate to

launch imaginary adventures as boys, or to sneak joints and make out with their girlfriends during the teenage years.

The tower's ground floor was home

The tower's ground floor was home to firewood, maintenance tools, leisure equipment, a beer fridge, and lots of empties.

The cottage stood fifteen feet from the tower's heavy front door.

Needlewalk had three small bedrooms and a bathroom that opened on the shared living area and kitchen that had a counter running half the length of the east wall. There was a cast-iron woodstove on a brick pad, a couple pull-out couches for guests, and a velvety easy chair under the ceiling fan.

The front deck faced south on a wide channel that wound from the MacAdam Bay Two development in the east, past Needlewalk and on to the main freshwater lake in the west.

Needlewalk was one among several properties representing MacAdam Bay *One*. The shoreline was an alternating collection of fine tan-colored sand, stony beach, and granite boulders and ledges, depending where each particular cottage had been built.

Needlewalk had a sandy shore that dropped at a steep angle to fifteen feet at

the end of the dock, and twenty in the center of the channel.

It was two hundred feet to the far side where a dense and wild forest with a sand beach rose quickly to granite hills. Its twisted trees grew together to form a near-impenetrable web of branches that made travel on that side very challenging.

The lake's slow development had left forests, swamps, and rocky fields relatively unchanged since Canada's founding. Lumber companies still ravaged some areas, but the vast expanse of the finger lakes muted the destruction, with clear-cutting hidden by great distances, or by a fringe of forest left in place wherever the work came close to

the water.

Much of the landscape had a wild and rugged profile that made accessing it

rugged profile that made accessing it, much less logging it, too expensive.

This primeval quality was the main

This primeval quality was the main appeal to Nathan. He fondly remembered his childhood summers collecting leeches, tree toads and fireflies, and hiking through the long tracts of forest. The area was populated by birds, squirrels, foxes, lynx, moose—and even bear and wolves in the wilder parts.

But the animals generally kept a respectful distance from populated areas. Those that came close like loons often did so by stealth and after sunset.

Nathan faltered, unpacking the truck, smile fading at a bittersweet thought. He and his *fiancée* Veronica had hoped to honeymoon at Needlewalk, but the pandemic had postponed their wedding.

He drew in a breath of fresh air, eyeing the dense carpet of needles that covered the dark earth down to the dock. He laughed.

His dad had a many years' long battle with those needles. Every summer, he'd sweep and sweep and sweep the cottage, and never get ahead of them.

But it was all about fun in the early days ...

Nate was in his first year studying Environmental Technology when the pandemic hit, and he'd pressed pause on things after finding the online learning too difficult. He'd always been easily distracted, and without an instructor and class to keep him focused, Nate often found himself skimming news or hockey web sites.

So, he went back to working full time for the city as an arborist.

"Kipawa ..." he whispered to himself, and sighed.

Nathan hadn't been up to the cottage for the last three summers.

Not since his parents had separated.

And now in finalizing their divorce, they were selling the place, so Nathan *had* to come up, or live with never visiting Needlewalk again.

He understood that divorce was a

common thing, but his parents had kept their growing discontent off his radar.

So, the news hit him hard, and he ended up having a falling out with his father in the early days of their separation that led to him avoiding the cottage altogether.

Nathan had guessed that he needed some time apart, even though his mother had managed to see him when she used *that voice*. But he found her company more agreeable because she didn't want to talk about the past.

His father was different. He grew frustrated if Nate was slow to answer a text or email, because since the divorce, he was all about communication and feelings. But Nate didn't feel like communicating, and he didn't like the way he felt.

They'd still meet for coffee or beer, but his dad's expression would slowly get that somber cast, and Nate would know the group therapy session was about to begin.

He was happy to avoid that whenever he could. He just wanted to move on.

His little sister Hailey seemed to have taken it all in stride. She'd been amused to hear that the divorce had blindsided Nathan in the first place. Of course, she was three years younger and had always shared a tight connection with their mom, with her being the baby, and a girl, and now a young woman.

It was hard for a son to compete with a connection like that, but somehow Hailey had seen the divorce coming. She'd always teased him about improving his communication skills.

Again with the group therapy ...

Nathan had his own life to live, anyway, so if his parents could focus on their individual interests instead of family, then he could, too.

And here he was!

He wondered how much their marital difficulties had influenced his decision to propose to Veronica.

Everything was fine up to that point! They had just got their first apartment together.

Things took a turn after the pandemic

started. A few "okay" months in and out of lockdown with his *fiancée*, and the wedding was cancelled over safety concerns ...

That left Nathan wondering if he had dodged a bullet.

And now he wasn't sure he wanted to

And now he wasn't sure he wanted to get married at all.

During another lockdown, he heard about the impending sale of Needlewalk — frustrating, since he couldn't buy it himself.

Nate stared down at the dock, remembering the anxiety he had felt crossing the Temiscaming dam from Ontario into Quebec. With parts of Canada still shifting in and out of

was discouraged. In fact, they'd just lifted the most recent travel ban days before, and authorities hoped people would only make such a trip in an emergency.

This was kind of an emergency ...

lockdown, movement between provinces

The COVID-19 vaccine rollout was taking too long. The government had only half the population fully inoculated. Smaller outbreaks meant that

lockdowns still loomed, so Nathan decided to make a run for Needlewalk. His work trimming trees had been slow anyway, so he'd planned to take a couple

weeks off to think things through.

And then Veronica had insisted on coming along. The company she worked

for still hadn't returned to the office full time.

"Hey! Are we unpacking, or are you going to murder the dock?" Veronica called down from the front deck that loomed over his truck.

Nate swung around to look up.

Ronnie's long auburn hair drifted on the breeze; an errant lock swept under her smile.

Beautiful woman, my fiancée.

Dazzling eyes. Fantastic body. Any man would be happy to marry her, so ...

He smiled back at her and the open beer she held in each hand. The bottles were dripping from the cooler ice.

"Sorry, yes *please!*" he said, reaching

up for one of the beers
"You look dangerously sober," she
said, with a laugh, before clinking her
bottle against his. "Once we get the
supplies put away, we'll be officially off
duty—and locked down!"

"That's right," Nate said, tipping the cold beer back. "Locked down!"
"Oh ... But in a good way!" Veronica

grinned, provocatively.
"Yep. *Good*," Nate drawled.

"Cheers!" She smiled and took a drink.

shrieked on its way down the channel.

They'd had a fight on the way up

He turned away when a hawk

They'd had a fight on the way up. Something stupid, about traffic. They were still stressed from the months in lockdown—and 2021 was turning into an extension of 2020.

They weren't mad at each other. They

were just running out of things to say. Neither of them had the heart to draw blood or quit.

The pandemic had left them a little numb.

That hawk has it right ... Spread your wings and ...

"Daydreaming *again*," Veronica sang, now standing beside him. He'd missed her coming down the stairs from the deck.

"Always," he said, clinking bottles again. "I love this place."

Veronica pulled two packs of cigarettes from her hoodie pocket and

offered him one.
"When these are done, we quit

smoking ..." she said.
"Sounds good," Nate replied,

pocketing *his* unopened as Veronica lit one.

He set his beer on the top step, grabbed four grocery bags off the truck's tailgate, and started for the stairs. Veronica made a move to help, but he

shook his head.

"I've got it, *Ronnie* ..." He puckered

up for a kiss as he passed. "Have your smoke."

She held her arms around his neck, lingering ...

"I've been looking forward to this," she said, green eyes flashing. Her pale

skin glowed.

This was Veronica's *first* visit to Needlewalk, which had made it

Needlewalk, which had made it impossible for Nathan to come up by himself for his *last*.

"Me too," Nate answered, hopefully. "Just the two of us."

Their parents were still in Ottawa. His mom and dad would be up separately at the end of the summer, and his sister had never been a fan of the

his sister had never been a fan of the place.

The only company he and Veronica expected over *their* holiday was other cottagers. He knew that many were retired and in permanent vacation mode. And he'd heard that some regulars were riding out COVID-19's last summer up

on Kipawa.

But, to start things off, Veronica had arranged a stopover for a couple of old friends, Dillon Moore and Trisha Patil, from North Bay, who would stay two nights at Needlewalk before heading to Ottawa to see Trisha's parents.

The visit ran contrary to Ronnie's "just the two of us" motivation, but it was *her* idea, and he'd be happy to ease into their own private lockdown.

The couple was expected tomorrow afternoon around one, which would give Nate and Veronica Friday night to themselves.

She gave him another squeeze.

"We really needed this break," she said, smiling. "It's going to be so much



Chapter 2

Sundown was hours away with the weekend warming up in the kids' imaginations. School was soon to break for the summer, and most of them were having trouble sleeping at night, excited by all the ways they wanted to spend the holidays.

Parents could argue the point, since most students had had very little inperson schooling that year with the pandemic keeping everyone safe and bored at home.

But, school was school whether you were sitting at a desk looking at a teacher in class, or taking your lessons

on the family computer. You still had to do the work, and with mom or dad at home in lockdown to supervise—the kids could argue that learning at-home was stricter than being in class with your peers.

With those considerations, the long Canadian winter, and safety protocols keeping gatherings small—the kids were looking forward to summer more than any kids ever had.

They didn't care about vaccinations or the economy. They just wanted some sun on their faces and wind in their hair. The kids wanted to scream without anybody *shushing* them.

Chris and Jerry first spotted the

stranger walking through a collection of old monuments, moving from stone to stone and pausing a moment here and there to read inscriptions or stare at graves. The mysterious man kept to the angled shadows cast by the big cedar, pine, and maple trees that edged the Valley View Cemetery grounds. The boys were hanging around up

there to kill time before heading home for the night, daring each other to kiss the gravestones of young women who'd died in days long past. Daring each other, and taking the chance of being followed home by any ghost that took offence at their mischief.

It was a silly game, but they were bored.

They'd been kicked out of their houses after supper when their weary mothers had discovered them inside on a beautiful evening playing video games.

They'd texted each other and grabbed

their bikes to ride up and down Main
Street, before racing to the cemetery, in
hopes that other Bent Steeple kids were
hanging out up there.
But when they found the graveyard

empty, they defaulted to the awful boys' program of swearing, spitting, and peeing on things until randomly switching to the "kissing" game. It was usually played with the other kids in the village, including some girls, whose presence added excitement when the dares inevitably turned to kissing them.

The boys were just getting bored with the game, when they saw the stranger, and ducked behind a weathered monument to spy and theorize about the fellow's business.

It wasn't long before he climbed onto his motorbike, and drove down the winding Valleyview Road that cut through the dense cedar bush that crowded Bent Steeple from the east end of Main Street all the way out to Highway 17 in the west.

The stranger was in no hurry, but the

boys could never keep up to his streamlined machine on their bicycles. They quickly lost sight of him, but kept going anyway, hoping that their paths might cross. Jerry swore he'd seen the Honda crest on the motorbike, but Chris recognized the Harley Davidson from its design. *He* considered himself an expert since his uncle had left a copy of *Bikers Monthly* magazine when visiting the previous summer.

Chris had carried it around for months to impress the kids with the photo spreads, especially the Biker Babe shots, which included a centerfold of a nearly naked blonde woman straddling a concept motorcycle that looked like something from Star Wars.

For the rest of that summer, the boys had affixed hockey and playing cards to their front and back bicycle forks so the tire spokes struck them and made a

powerful "engine" noise. It was rumored that goalies and aces made the most realistic sound.

That fad had yet to make its postpandemic appearance.

The boys hurtled along the silent Main Street and past its various stores and offices, pedaling furiously and breathing hard, rising up at intervals to look for signs of the strange biker.

The boys were locals, born and raised, so they didn't notice how barren the village had become during the outbreak.

Jerry's dad was a mechanic, and had lamented the slow business at Laval's Filling Station, though he remained employed there because of government grants given out to help small shops stay open during lockdowns.

So, the boys were frequent visitors to Laval's to see him, and because the pop machine out front still sold cans for fifty cents. As a result, the station had become a hangout for kids, at least until old Mr. Laval shooed them away.

"Race me, *motherfucker!*" Chris growled in his best biker voice, and Jerry took him up on the offer.

They pulled their best "thug" faces, something that was hard to do convincingly at ten years old while sporting cherubic features and freckled cheeks under tawny locks. Their superhero T-shirts, saggy jeans, and

NBA sneakers did nothing to support the menace.

The pair roared past Clawson's Shopping Mart at the west end of Main Street and kept going along the curving road until it turned to gravel where it led out of town.

On their approach to the hill by the burned-out church, the boys raced to pick up speed, but their bikes bounced and rattled, and slowed on the washboard ruts.

Neither boy gave the ruin more than a glance as they passed, straining now to climb the slope side by side, but Chris saw Jerry stare past him with his eyes wide, and he almost crashed his bike when he pointed.

Chris skidded to a halt and followed the gesture back toward the church ruins. "The biker!" Jerry panted.

The mysterious man's motorbike stood halfway along the overgrown drive to the wreckage where the old church's foundation lay as a ridge beneath long grass, vines, and ferns, and defined a couple, large rectangular holes cluttered with crumbled stone and brick.

Summer weeds grew thickly along the roadside ditch and the leafy trees had filled in to hide the boys as they walked their bikes to the soft shoulder where they watched the man again.

He had dismounted, and stood atop one crumbled wall.

The biker was dressed in dark

motorcycle boots. A black leather jacket gleamed in the angled sun. He surveyed the destruction with his back to them, tilting his head from side to side. Then he half-turned, sliding his

hoodie, black denims, and tall

Then he half-turned, sliding his sunglasses up over his forehead, and pushing the frizzy black hair away from his face. He jumped into the foundation behind a lush wall of green.

"Black Panther!" Chris whispered, and Jerry punched him on the arm.

Their new vantage point had provided a better look. The biker was black!

His skin color merited such violent confirmation, since there was only one other black person in Bent Steeple. Dr. Langlois treated pretty much everyone in town at the Medical Clinic. Black Panther was also Chris'

favorite superhero movie.

"Come on!" Jerry pulled on his friend to follow him into the leafy green beside the road. Both boys knew the terrain well because to them the old church was an ivy-covered castle in the summer and a frozen ice cave in winter.

They dropped their bikes on the soft shoulder, and Jerry leapt across the ditch and ducked to crawl under a thick raspberry bush. Chris followed, cursing as the thorns raked his scalp and plucked at the back of his T-shirt.

They continued climbing.

The dirt trail was strewn with shards

of granite that could hurt the knees, but it rose to the left of the church ruin so that the boys could look down from it. The same ridge circled on around the property from there.

Late in the summer, that particular

path was impassable, when the whole slope grew into a dense jungle, but it was still early enough for them to see across the stony bank and into the ruin.

The stranger was in there on his

knees digging through a collapsed foundation wall and the depression that lay behind it. He pulled on layers of old planks and broken branches to expose the basement floor, but gave up finally when he realized everything in there was attached, and threaded through with

sturdy vines, wire, and string.

Jerry and Chris knew it all too well and why.

Once the good weather got going and stayed for summer, local kids swarmed all over the site, regardless of what their parents told them about staying away. Some people had died there years before, and the kids were asked to show

respect.

They played there anyway, and turned the wreckage into a fort by tying and nailing bits of lumber together, and weaving long, dead branches into the piles of stone to form a roof and makeshift wall that collapsed every winter and had to be rebuilt.

The boys struggled to contain their

outrage as the stranger kicked at the twisted structure beneath the jumble of refuse and leaves.

They'd put most of that junk there not a week before in eager preparation for another summer's use.

They had also been over the site for returnable bottles and cans, since it was a hot hangout for the local teens who took advantage of the fort's relative privacy as the discarded condoms declared.

"Let's go," Chris said, squeezing Jerry's arm. He was always the first to use discretion, and to get while the getting was good.

He gave a final glance at the foundation and his breath caught! The

man was gone, and from that angle, they couldn't see the motorbike, either—but neither had heard a thing.

"Holy shit!" Jerry said, as Chris indicated the empty space, and both boys scrambled to hurry back down the trail to their bicycles.

But the mysterious man stood there straddling the sloping path with his face turned down at them. His sunglasses were back in place over his eyes and his hair bounced about his head as he tipped it left and right while studying them.

Up close like that he looked to be around thirty years old, and his features were plain. The skin was pitch black over a high forehead and big cheekbones. Rose-shaded lips and a

wide chin were sheltered by a thick, biker moustache.

A mocking grin exposed his sharp, white teeth.

"Sorry, Mister!" Chris blurted.
The man frowned.

"We just ..." Jerry started. "That's our fort!"

The man was standing with his right fist on his hip. The left was out of sight behind him. He brought it around and they saw he held a bent and twisted cross, the very steeple that rumors said used to sit atop the old church, and for which the village got its name.

Or so the stories went. In fact, it had been a legend until just then. The boys were born the year after the church burned, and locals had been all over the ruin to look for the artifact that was never found.

"Wow," Chris said, eyes and mouth

gaping. "It's the cross!"

"Staapla" Inrugerrented

"Steeple," Jerry corrected.

The stranger handed it over and the

boys held it between them. It was bent and about four feet tall with another rounded metal bar forming the crosspiece two thirds of the way up. The rusted steel was pitted and discolored by intense heat.

"Those marks are from the fire, Chris," Jerry said, lifting his head and saying, "Where'd you find—"

The man sniffed the air, his face regarding the boys steadily. They could

the black glass.

He smiled at Chris and said in a quiet

feel his eyes studying them from behind

voice, "Your father ..."

Then be gestured at Jerry "Is ficking.

Then he gestured at Jerry. "Is fucking *his* mother."

The boys looked at each other. Jerry's lower lip shot out and started trembling.

"You people think that if you do it in the dark, no one will see." The stranger shook his head. "That no one will know."

He looked to the sky.

"But you're only fooling yourselves." He spread his arms wide. "You've lost

whatever edge you had."

Chris inched closer to Jerry.

"For future reference, the wind was

at your back *here*—and at the graveyard." The man stood motionless, and then he pointed into the ruin. "You see?"

Chris and Jerry turned to look, but they couldn't see anything that had changed among the overgrown stones.

They swung back around to ask, but the man was gone from the path.

Jerry looked at Chris, incredulous, until a loud roar startled them. It came across the distance from the church grounds.

The man was back there, and so was his motorcycle. He coasted slowly down the grass-choked lane before heading up the hill and out of town toward the highway.

"I almost shit myself," Chris said, wondering how the man had crossed from the dirt path to his motorcycle so quickly.

They took the bent steeple back to their bikes wondering if they could ride and carry it between the two of them.

But the boys groaned when they saw their bicycles. The tires were twisted and bent. The spokes were broken.

"Wait!" Jerry marveled aloud. "Your father is—what?"

Chapter 3

Nathan swung the axe, and another chunk of birch flew apart. He reached for the next hunk smiling, placed it center to the chopping block, and swung again.

Thunk! The wood split and his axe struck deep into the block. The battered surface gripped the steel head and held it fast, so Nate had to wrench on the handle until the embedded blade came free.

It was a good axe, a gift from Veronica.

Nate had a wide range of cutting tools available to him for use at work, but he had joked once with Ronnie that a real lumberjack should have an axe of his own.

There was some truth to that.

As an arborist, he worked mainly with chainsaws and other motorized blades and trimmers. Often the job involved clearing downed trees and broken limbs in emergency situations where fuel or electricity might not be available, so a traditional axe could be vital in those conditions.

Nate had previously owned one that was intended for exclusive use at Needlewalk. He'd received the gift from his parents on his fourteenth birthday, unaware that accepting it made him the chief woodcutter and fire starter for the cottage woodstove and fire pit.

Sadly, the blade went missing one fall when someone left it out after locking Needlewalk up for the winter. His father had replaced it, but the magic was gone. Nathan told Ronnie the story one

night over drinks, and she'd surprised him the following Christmas with a single-bladed felling axe. It weighed four pounds in total with a three-footlong handle, so was designed for dropping trees, but he loved the feel of it.

Nate had kept it in his truck ever since.

He started piling the split wood by the fire pit, pausing frequently to gasp and thump his chest. *Heartburn*. They'd had barbecued sausages, roasted potatoes, and salad—the Needlewalk combo.

Several glasses of wine had technically put him over the legal limit for chopping wood, but he had always been a cautious lumberjack. His methodical approach made him a natural for a job that often had him in full body harness and hanging in the trees with cutting tools.

Calm was required whenever a small error could kill you.

Light by the dock caught his eye as he picked up the axe.

The long bright rays from the setting sun poured down the narrow channel and set the cedar and spruce on the far bank to bright orange flame.

The tall pines on Nate's shore were thrown into highly detailed silhouette—

thrown into highly detailed silhouette and he sighed. He'd missed this place. Nate tipped his head back to view the

trees that towered around him. They grew up out of the twilight, while their highest boughs were burnished by the sinking sun.

The trees appeared as a vault over him. The perspective distorted their soaring trunks and made them seem to arch inward.

He stepped back to catch his balance.

Jesus the wine! He laughed, and then added sadly, "Enjoy it while you can ..."

Nathan had stopped coming to Needlewalk to stay clear of his parents' separation, but he'd always planned to come back once they had things sorted out.

You snooze, you lose.

He was going to miss the place. Needlewalk had started his love affair with nature, and inspired many of his life choices.

In hindsight, his parents' divorce wasn't a total surprise. They hadn't seemed very happy for Nathan's later teen years. It was as if they had disconnected from each other—and then only communicated with biting humor and tension, sharp words, and general displeasure.

To be fair, he had felt a simmering fury in both of them. Turned out they

were going through the motions at the end.

I wonder if that's happening to Ronnie and me ...

When they first told him that they were going to sell the cottage, Nathan was furious they wouldn't wait until he could afford to buy it himself. His sister didn't have the cash, or the interest. Hailey had always preferred city life—and had started avoiding Needlewalk as soon as she was old enough to opt out of family trips.

He'd made a vain attempt to raise the money on his own, but the educational opportunity came along—followed by the coronavirus!

Suddenly, that kind of an investment

was out of the question. All he could do was hope the pandemic would delay the sale, and not force his parents to sell it for less.

The delay had come and gone. They were divorcing. The real estate market was heating up. The Needlewalk sale was out of his hands!

And other shoes had dropped.

He and Veronica had been slated to marry in July 2021 until COVID-19 canceled the occasion. Now the plan was to wait for the summer of 2022—though, none of their venues had been booked yet.

It was never going to be a big ceremony, but they had planned a party to remember ... A video call would

So what was the rush—or the point?

never do it justice.

Nate was surprised when Veronica took the postponement so well, but he guessed that people had been so overwhelmed by the pandemic, that they were getting used to upsets and delays.

Unless she was having doubts about it, too.

"One can only hope," he muttered, looking toward the cottage.

Where was she? Everything was put away, the cottage was aired out, and the beds were made. Ronnie said she'd meet him down at the dock—and now he'd cut

wood for forty-five minutes.

He glanced at the sky again. The light was slowly fading.

A cool gust of wind from the west was answered by a tinkling sound that drew his eye to the antique water pump that stood between him and the deck.

The red iron relic's fluted spout and

handle rose from a barrel-shaped stand constructed of vertical pine planks.

His mother had hung wind chimes from the supports on its cedar-shingle roof. At a distance, the setup looked like

roof. At a distance, the setup looked like a wishing well you'd see in a children's book.

You'd need a wish to get it going.

The pump had not worked in Nathan's lifetime.

He scanned the deck for his empty wine glass, and unopened pack of cigarettes.

Nah, fuck it!

He'd wait for Veronica.

Nathan rested his axe against the chopping block and cast an eye over the channel.

It was early in the season, and early in their stay, too. There'd be other sunsets over the next two weeks.

Of course, that cool breath of air coming down the channel reminded him how fickle Lake Kipawa could be.

The weather was hard to predict. Standing at the end of the dock gave a clear view west down the channel toward the main lake, and a slightly crowded look at the horizon.

The looming trees blocked parts of the sky everywhere else so that vantage point on the dock was best.

Unfortunately, if the weather was approaching from any other direction, then all bets were off. Only fragments of

approaching from any other direction, then all bets were off. Only fragments of sky could be seen at the best of times looking up through Needlewalk's tall trees. Even straight across or down the channel east into the bay, you'd only see a small portion of the sky past the treetops.

So, you had to make the most of whatever good weather you got.

Nathan had been surprised by storms in the past, but he loved it. The weather was so raw on Kipawa, especially early in the summer when things were still unsettled by the cold water and changing seasons.

Nate grunted, craving a sip of wine now. He knew he'd switch to beer soon, so decided to wait. Wine could be unpredictable, too.

"I'm glad you could make it," Nathan said, accepting the offered beer.

Veronica gave him a warm smile.

He had set two plastic Muskoka chairs out on the dock after checking the pontoon boat cover. It was a habit he had picked up from his dad to keep the damp and rain out.

Veronica had joined him there, carrying their drinks and cigarettes. The clouds were moving in as the sky darkened but left a vast expanse of deep blue directly over them that was ringed

in by a dramatic mountain range of cloud.

The first dim stars were winking to life.

Nathan hoped the thunderheads would keep off until after the sky was black when the constellations burned and reflected in the water.

"I decided to give you a few minutes to yourself," Veronica said.

"Thanks, but you could have come down," Nate said, taking a seat. "The sunset's behind the clouds now."

"There's no rush," she said, shrugging. "Anyway, I've seen you do that when you're thinking." Veronica brushed her hair back. "You tend to get quiet and busy."

"I guess so," Nate said, tugging at his whiskers.

The beard was getting long, but it suited his face well—or so, Ronnie had said. Apparently, it made him look like a Viking in conjunction with his clear blue eyes, prominent nose, strong cheekbones, and shaggy brown hair.

Of course, his wiry build and fivefoot-nine height challenged the comparison.

"So what were you thinking about?" Veronica asked with a grin, as she slid into her chair.

"Well, Ronnie, up here on Lake Kipawa ..." he started. "I always think about the good old days."

"Oh," Veronica said, with a mock

pout. "Aren't we having some good old days *now*?"

"We are—oh yeah—wow, yes, we're gonna," Nate said, reaching out to take her hand and squeeze it. "But, so many good experiences happened right here."

"Well, we'll make some good ones, too," Veronica said, leaning over to kiss him and then settle back.

The first gray mists were floating along the far side of the channel, and down where it narrowed into the bay.

Nate got up and knelt in front of Ronnie's chair.

"Here's something might be worth remembering," he said, moving close and kissing her.

Ronnie shifted forward on the chair,

spreading her legs so she could wrap them around his hips and pull him closer. For a minute, they shared that kiss,

slowly grinding together, their breath soon coming in gasps.

If only this was all we needed. Nate

thought, heart racing. We're great at this!

"Wait, honey—look at that ..." Veronica said, raising her eyebrows to indicate the channel to the east.

Nathan turned his head to see fog slowly rolling over the water toward them.

"Beautiful ..." He kissed her hard and slid his hands down over her breasts to her hips. *Maybe it's enough*. "The water's so calm."

For now ...

"Take it easy, mister," she smiled.

"Don't forget your drink."

"Not thirsty," he whispered, kissing her neck, hands squeezing her thighs, sliding down to her knees and back up.

He bent to kiss her belt buckle, but she tensed, and pointed out into the channel.

"What?" Nathan breathed huskily, looking up at her. "Want to go up to the cottage?"

"Yes, but ..." Veronica said, kissing him atop the head before she lifted her chin toward the water. "A boat ..."

Nate twisted on his knees and saw an older aluminum fishing boat near the middle of the channel. It slowly drifted

west with the fog, twenty yards from the end of the dock.

A man was standing in the stern, straddling the bench in front of the idling outboard motor. His wide-brimmed camouflage hat was pulled low, obscuring his features, and a long darkgreen raincoat hid all but muscular shoulders.

The stranger watched them quietly with face dipped forward into shadow. "*Hey* ... Is that?" Nathan started,

lurching upright. "Phil!"

The man in the boat remained motionless.

"Phil!" Nate waved, glancing at Veronica. "That's Phil Gardner from down the bay!" "Well," she chuckled. "Remind Phil that *three's* company ..."

Nathan laughed, waving again, but now the man was sitting with a hand on the tiller. The outboard rumbled, water kicked up behind the craft and the boat started west toward the main lake.

"Well, Phil's not very friendly," Veronica drawled, reaching out to grab and caress Nathan's hand.

"That sure looked like his boat. Phil drives a *Princecraft*, but he's got an *aluminum* like that, too!" Nate frowned. "Or—maybe he's renting his place out." He shrugged. "We'll see tomorrow. Phil and his wife, Leslie, always came up with their kids."

"We'll see," Ronnie got up and

wrapped her arms around his waist. "You looked so sad when he didn't wave."

He kissed her quickly.

"I always remember Kipawa as such a friendly place." Deep down, Nathan was hoping Needlewalk and its neighbors weren't changing like everything else in his life. "Shocked me when he didn't wave back. Phil was like an uncle ..."

It was possible that the pandemic had taken a toll on him, too.

He caught a hint of worry in Veronica's eye, so he covered his introspective moment with another kiss.

She didn't miss a beat.

"That's better," she purred, pulling

him close as one hand slid into his belt.

"I'll show you friendly ..."

Chapter 4

Glen Walker pulled his Toyota Corolla onto the highway soft shoulder just north of Orillia. The sun was going down. Toronto traffic had left him tense.

He squinted back between the headrests to watch the hitchhiker gather her gear, a backpack and a bag, before she hurried to the passenger side door.

Walker had slowed on approach after first glimpsing her elfin form in his headlights, with the small hand and thin, upturned thumb protruding.

She was petite, but still had to bend at the waist to look into the car. Her piercing eyes studied him from under an old ball cap. The headgear matched her weather-beaten coverall, quilted denim jacket, and hiking boots.

"I'm headed to Mattawa—east of North Bay," she said. Her voice was high, and her words had a lilt to them.

An *Irish* accent?

"You're in luck," Walker said. "I'm going just short of there—*Rutherglen*."

The girl's eyelids half-closed as she consulted some internal map, and then she smiled showing little white teeth.

"That's fine!" She lifted her bags.

"Throw them on the back seat,"

Walker said, pointing with a thumb, as he snatched a quick breath.

He had been sucking his gut in through their first exchange to avoid

looking fat and trollish lit by the overhead light, and stuffed behind the wheel—especially with his added *quarantine* weight.

There was nothing he could do about

his jowls short of plastic surgery, but he knew that once the door was shut and the light was off, the car interior would take on a spectral glow from the dashboard's many digital readouts.

Then you can work your magic ...
The girl buckled her seatbelt and looked over at him.

What magic? She's gotta be twelve!

The girl's face was in shadow, but the pale skin and freckles jumped out in the bluish light from the dash. Her features were delicate, making her eyes look

large. She kept her hair tucked under her hat, though a few curly locks trailed out the back that were red or brown—and long.

Yeah. She's young, and then some.

"All ready?" he said with a smile, and then glanced into the rearview mirror to watch for a space in the

northbound traffic.

It was Friday at sundown in June. City folk were choking the lanes on their run to cottage country, so a minute passed before Walker spied an opening.

"Vacation or die!" he growled under his breath, giving the girl a wink as he tramped the gas and joined the streaming taillights. "Worse every year." His passenger regarded the cars ahead.

"Toronto empties with one big *FLUSH!*"

The girl held a smartphone in her hands. The display surface was cracked and the case holding it was dirty and battered.

She noticed him looking over, and shifted uncomfortably. "Your phone!" Walker tried to cover

his gawk. "A traveling companion, eh?"

She lifted the device and smiled. "I guess so," she trilled.

She was young.

She was young

Walker blamed her outfit for blurring the awful truth. Out on the road in the headlights she had looked fifteen at least. But now, he could see she was under that by a bit.

Criminally under ...

"I'm Glen," he said, hoping to put her at ease with some conversation.

The girl regarded him a few seconds, her eyes gleaming with intelligence.

"They call me *Morgie*," she said with a grin, before she looked down and activated her smartphone. Some kind of game or social media app *dinged* as it appeared on the screen.

"Morgie?" Walker repeated, nodding. "You *live* in Mattawa?"

The girl looked up again, her gaze

softening as she scanned his face.
"No," she said. "I'm meeting friends along the way."

Walker was sure of her accent now.

"You Irish?" he blurted, as the girl's eyes returned to her screen.

She glanced up, and then slid her phone into her jacket breast pocket.

"Used to be," she said, as a squeaky stomach sound made her grin, and wrap her small hands over her gut. "Sorry, I'm a little peckish."

"Oh, well," Walker said, gesturing to the rear seat. "I've got a couple tuna sandwiches in a bag."

"Sounds *lovely*, but no." Morgie shrugged. "I never eat on the road." She grimaced, and pretended to put a finger down her throat. "Car sick."

"Oh, okay!" Walker said. "Let me know if you need to stop."

"Actually ... *Glen* ..." Morgie pushed her seatbelt away from her body, so she could bend her left knee and slide that

foot under her. "Would you mind me resting my eyes a pinch. I been on the road all day."

"Oh, sure!" Walker agreed heartily, covering his disappointment. "I'll just drive."

An hour later, he stared at the yellow line with a song repeating in his head. Walker was frustrated. He couldn't name the tune.

They were just passing Huntsville, and he hadn't heard a peep from Morgie. She had spent the time breathing slowly, and quietly, with her arms hanging over her lap and her hat brim tugged low.

She had pulled both legs up to cross them under her, so she now sagged

forward in her seat with her back arched, belly thrust out, and knees spread wide at the edge of the cushion like she'd have fallen off if not for the seatbelt.

That clink and bell sound. Her phone?

He gave his head a shake. That damn

song. What is it?
Wait! Walker listened. It's Morgie!

He snapped out of a daze to realize he was focused on the sleeping girl's breathing. The passing dotted lines and floating taillights ahead were hypnotic, but could be lethal when mixed with the

calming sound of her respiration.

Mixed music for Morgie. That's what we need. To match what's playing in my

head! So, he turned the radio on, kept the volume low, and started searching for

songs she might like.

The girl was quite young. *Too young!*She *was*—by a long shot.

Glen Walker was a thirty-eight-yearold carpet and tile salesman—divorced, and overweight. His romantic options were all but closed, he knew that much. At least, options that would love him for who he really was.

Was that a chime, now? Damn music's playing. Maybe her ringtone? Instead, Walker was left to his dreams, fantasies, and the Internet. He was a regular Brad Pitt online. Of course, he'd been warned in the past after engaging with some underaged girls in an online chat forum that got carried away.

They started it. He wasn't the one talking about sex.

What a mess, though. Walker was taking a big chance even having Morgie in the car with him.

The dim dashboard light followed the line of her legs inside the coverall. They were slim, not skinny—and were taking on some curves—showing a female sweep where the flesh pressed the canvas. A *young*-woman's legs—then ... a *teen's!*

Walker had avoided charges because one of the online girls had a suspicious mother who went through her daughter's phone, and found the dirty thread.

They lied about their ages ... said they were older. It was just talk. That's what he had told the cops, so they let

him off because there had been no crime.

He'd been watching too much porn in lockdown.

He'd been single too long.

Walker's wife had given up on him when he started getting fat, and she'd found he was into online porn. She'd been shocked by the type of movies he liked.

Schoolgirl fantasies were still fantasies!

Walker finished fussing with the radio after finding a station with music a girl Morgie's age might like. She stirred when he turned the volume up a twist. "Sorry," he said, nodding at the radio. "I was getting sleepy."

Morgie smiled at him, and straightened in her seat.

"You want that sandwich now?" he asked.

She shook her head, pulled her phone out again, and turned it on.

"How old are you?" Walker gave a sidelong look. "You seem kinda young for hitchhiking."

Morgie's belly grumbled again. She frowned comically, hugging her jacket closed.

"Let me guess," he said, blushing.
"You dress like a teen, but your face ...
twelve?"

She pulled her cap off and turned to him drawing her left knee up to her chest. The seatbelt strained against her movements.

"Way older than that," she said, staring. Her irises flickered green and an electric pulse ran through Walker. His heart throbbed suddenly, and his face tingled.

There's a trick! Must be the light ...

The familiar song returned in his head again. *What?*

She slipped her hat on and turned back to watching the road.

"You headed home?" Walker asked.

"I said I was meeting friends," she drawled.

"That's right ..." He gasped, heart

thumping. "Look, I get off the highway at Rutherglen—for *home*. Won't feel good leaving you out there."

"Sorry, Glen," she said, slumping in

her seat. "I need to rest my eyes again."

"Sure, sure," he said, as the thrill
drained from his body. "Let me know if
you need anything."

When they stopped for gas in North Bay, Walker stretched his legs outside as the pump slowly clicked.

Margin had stayed guint for almost

Morgie had stayed quiet for almost two hours. She'd curled up on her right side at one point, and he figured she'd fallen asleep. But from that angle, he'd noticed the sleek shape of her outer thigh and firm buttock. That had led to a few terrifying seconds where he contemplated dealing with the erection that had started throbbing in his pants.

A subtle slip of the hand—and you go to jail!

Walker almost convinced himself that no one would know. He hadn't had sex since his wife left him.

Follow that with jail for sexual assault on a minor!

Luckily, his early years as a Catholic had stepped in to shame his arousal away. He had often thought it ironic that the teachings of *that* church could put him on the straight and narrow.

Morgie was shifting around inside the car now—waking up. She reached over

the back seat to retrieve a flask from her bag and drank from it.

Glen Walker's hands started shaking.

They were going east on Highway 17 to Mattawa.

"Pandemic's bad, eh?" Walker said, trying a conversation again.

Morgie pursed her lips.

"I live alone," he said, blushing. "Sorry." He coughed. "I was just thinking of you on the highway by yourself."

"Friends are picking me up," Morgie said, raising her phone. "Once I call."

"I was just thinking you could wait *there*," he said. "Or at *my* place. For them to pick you up."

"Highway's fine," Morgie replied.
"Why didn't you take a bus, Morgie?"
Walker waved at the road ahead. "Safer

Walker waved at the road ahead. "Safer than hitchhiking."

She turned to grin at him.

Morgie could look after herself ...

"Oh, saving money," she sighed.

"That would do it, then," Walker said. "Where you from?"

"Ireland—*originally*," she said, before pushing her hands against her stomach when it rumbled again.

"You better feed that thing!" he joked.

Morgie smiled and her eyes

flickered.
"Wait Iroland! Okay I get it Sorm

"Wait ... *Ireland!* Okay, I get it. *Sorry* ..." Walker shrugged. "For prying ...

You're right to keep to yourself. I'm just

curious—and now I'm worrying."
"Why?" Morgie asked.
"I hate to see young people making

decisions like this. Whatever your problem with your parents is, you know —I can tell ... This is a crazy risk!" He gestured at the forest passing to either

side. "It's pretty lonely out there."

He hoped he hadn't been too forward

—what? A scent like lilacs now! He
sniffed the air. Now he was sure of it.
Had Morgie put some perfume on when

he wasn't looking?
"My friends won't be long," she

explained.

"Yeah ..." Walker said, pursing his lips. He still smelled that perfume, and something else. Was it musk? It was

earthy whatever it was. He reached to turn the radio down, but it was already off. *Wait*. What was that? He'd heard chimes or bells—music ... *Chill out. You're too excited!*

"Look, I could loan you a couple bucks, if you need money."

Morgie turned her head to him, and frowned.

There are the hells again that some

There are the bells again—that song

"How can I repay you?" she said, as her eyes glimmered. "We won't likely meet again."

"Maybe you wouldn't have to pay it back ..." Walker peered into the shadows at her feet. "We could find a place and talk—work that part out—and maybe come up with something, with a way for you to *earn* the money."

"Farn it? Are you sure?" Morgie

"Earn it? Are you sure?" Morgie said, innocently. "It's nice of you to offer."

"It's no trouble," he said, flushing, looking over at her, and gulping for air.

"But what could I do to earn money all the way out here?" Morgie's grin was either mischievous, or threatening.
Walker couldn't tell. "It's just you and me ..."

"I can show you ..." His voice lowered. Something in her tone bothered him, but he was afraid to disrupt what was happening.

"Really? Well, I guess it would be dishonest to say I couldn't use some

money ..." She lowered her chin and looked up at him. "And I'm a fast learner."

Walker's heart was pounding in his ears. His whole body throbbed.
"The old baseball diamond in Rutherglen's been closed the whole

Rutherglen's been closed the whole pandemic." Walker said. "Just off the highway ..."

"That'll do," Morgie said, her

"That'll do," Morgie said, her stomach grumbling again. "Sorry, Glen, I haven't eaten all day."

Chapter 5

Nate walked out onto the deck clad only in T-shirt and plaid pajama pants. The boards were damp and chill underfoot; in fact, he was tempted to go right back in to where he had left Veronica tangled in their nice, warm bedding.

"I wish ..." he said, moving quietly to the top of the broad stair that led down from the deck. Going back in now would just restart his tossing and turning. He couldn't sleep despite the food, drinks, and lovemaking. They had gone to bed rather early, too, before he awoke hours later ... tense and angry. Just before sleeping, they'd embraced, face to face, hearts racing with orgasm. They'd proclaimed their love for each other ...

Easy enough ...

And then Veronica said she couldn't wait for the wedding.

Nathan had hesitated a millisecond before repeating the sentiment. *Barely a breath!* But that was enough. Veronica had stiffened under him to show that he'd spoiled the moment.

After his clumsy attempt to cover the

"delayed" response, Veronica had just smiled sweetly, so beautifully, in the dim amber light leaking through the half-open door, before she turned onto her left side to face away from him.

So it wasn't a fight, but ...

She was onto him. Veronica could read his uncertainty. It wasn't rocket science. If a person hesitated before answering a question, it showed his lack of clarity on the answer. And when it came to *love or marriage* ...

Ronnie had been supportive during the pandemic—they'd both been there for each other. And she had listened to his bitterness about his parent's divorce, and the impending Needlewalk sale.

But, that was separate from *them* and love. What did those things have to do with their relationship?

Veronica was solving the riddle without really trying.

Okay. What if it was the wedding?

Couldn't they just go back to living together and put it off indefinitely?

No. If it was the wedding, then it was also *them*. Nathan loved Veronica, he had no doubt, but the pandemic had put a lot of pressure on them.

He worked outside in an essential service, so his job had continued pretty much the same for him, while her design work at the shop had been relegated to remote buying online and video consultations with clients.

Ronnie never left their apartment except to exercise, sometimes going for a jog or a long walk, and to shop for food and the essentials.

Which left Nate's dream of coming home to his beautiful girlfriend for love

and quickies, more about dealing with—no—managing her growing anxieties.

And that just lit a fire under his.

The wedding cancellation had gone pretty smoothly. It was out of their hands really. They didn't even lose their deposit on the banquet hall, but Ronnie's disappointment and Nathan's relief had been pushed down by practicality, and

Until the opposing views they represented began to resurface during life under lockdown.

pandemic protocol.

Ronnie was quickly bored with streaming movies, home workout videos, and the intermittent remote assignments from her work. While people were enthusiastically renovating their homes during the pandemic—Veronica still did her part over the phone, the net, and video call—it left long stretches of the day, *every* day, unfilled.

Nathan had encouraged her to take up hobbies, read books, or enroll in online courses to focus her energies, but she said the stress of confinement left her unable to concentrate.

So, he tried to provoke her interest in *his* work, by giving backgrounds on his coworkers, updates of daily life on the truck and in the branches—even describing the life and death realities involved in the mundane pruning of park trees near power lines while hanging far from the ground in a harness.

Predictably, other than the odd weird

Covid-related incident, his work failed to impress her. It was all action, so not all that interesting to hear about. Though Nate and the crew still laughed about the time a property owner insisted he wear a medical mask while fifty feet up in a tree.

In time, Veronica's stress added a little tone to her voice if he reported on his day. Just an edge that hinted at, "oh, what historical tree did you trim today?" The random slight was likely unintentional, but it was obvious, and had caused a couple of good arguments.

All of that just underlined how much Ronnie depended on him, her work, and on a "normal life" to be happy. Nathan lived in the moment. He always had. It was why he was so comfortable climbing trees close to nature, and away from the noise. It was why he loved Needlewalk.

Veronica's job had a social and interactive element that seemed to feed her. She really got off on the sale, and the design and installation of her clients' renovation projects—but the pandemic was starting to show that she didn't know what to do without it—or *him*.

They drank together, but without

They drank together, but without company in lockdown, they often got into silly disagreements.

Nate preferred the big picture. He didn't care to focus on the fiddly parts of it, while to Ronnie the small components were all that stood between success and

failure. So, Nathan had begun to wonder

whether he would ever be enough for Veronica, and if he could handle the responsibility of being such a large component of her world.

Especially if I'm already starting to bore her

Nathan also wondered if he had accepted the cancellation of their wedding ceremony as an unfortunate side effect of Covid, or if he had taken advantage of a loophole.

Was he just being a selfish dick? How many guys were lucky enough to find a girl who was cool with a City Hall wedding?

He took a cigarette from his pack and started down the steps without lighting it, then halted on the cold, concrete patio stones at the base of the stairs to dig into a pajama-pants pocket for his lighter.

The trees were black around him—
the sky showed in fragments of dark
blue. There was a moon up there
somewhere.

Note append his sansas to the andless

Nate opened his senses to the endless forest. The massive space around him echoed with an empty presence all of its own.

This is what life's about. No virus here! This is the BIG picture!

The enormity of Kipawa dwarfed the imagination and could awe as it terrified. He remembered coming out to

pee on moonless nights, when the forest was black around him; and only after several frightening moments could his eyes adjust enough to make out the tall gray tree trunks like silent sentinels on all sides.

Which did nothing to calm him down. So many trees for things to hide behind.

"Oh yeah," he said with a smile. A

nervous thrill ran through him as he

remembered the terror. Then, off to his left there was the repeated *preep! pree!* pree! of insects or penny toads. Somewhere behind the camp, a thick branch cracked like a gunshot and rattled its way through the trees to land on the forest floor with a *thump!*

A loon called from down the lake on his right and another answered nearby to his left.

The wind swept through the needled branches high above.

Something splashed by the dock.
Then, he heard another sound down

there. A *knocking* noise.

Nate started toward the shore with

his unlit cigarette clenched between his teeth, pausing only to wrench his axe from the cutting block and carry it across his chest with both hands.

Its weight and lethal properties loaned a surge of confidence as he moved between the trees toward the channel, their dark trunks passing close.

Still, distant things made rattling

noises on the forest floor. *Could be skunks*, he reassured himself.

Could be anything!

His bare feet stepped lightly over the needles.

Nathan made a final frantic sprint and leap to reach the dock with the crackling forest at his heels. It was still dark there under the stars, and he thought about the moon again, reminding himself now to look up the lunar phases when he could —with hopes of a full moon during their stay.

The stars were impressive by themselves, burning up there in all their glory—fiery white motes flickering against the inky black where towering clouds gaped on cold space.

He set a hand on the boat cover,
testing it. The canvas was still taut
between its metal fastening domes. The

between its metal fastening domes. The big pontoon boat had to be the source of the sound. Even though the channel was almost still, he could feel it rock on the slow-rising swells.

A metallic *bang* and *scrape* came from out in the water like an oar had struck against a boat gunnel or rail.

Nate's fingers tightened on the axe as he strained his ears on the night.

There was a *patter* and *splash*. It repeated, and had to be a wet paddle in motion out near the middle of the channel, some distance from the dock.

A canoe? Some kind of boat was out there, but he couldn't see more than the dark and the thin mist on the water that started thickening ten yards out and on from there to obscure the distant black shore.

He glanced mournfully at the dock light that was mounted atop a stout tenfoot pole between him and his boat, knowing the switch that turned it on was in the cottage. So he set his axe down and pulled his cell phone from his pocket.

Nathan held the device overhead, turned it to the water, and activated its flashlight function.

Bright eyes reflected like a flash in

the thin fog.

They flickered, and dropped out of sight behind the battered gunnel of an old

wooden boat that was floating with the

current almost center to the channel.

It was a cedar strip outboard—and was ancient. The wood was gray, and varnish curled off its prow like dead skin

But other than the fleeting glimpse of what looked like eyes, there was no more movement or sign of anyone aboard.

Any *person*. Nate was reminded of stories where animals accidentally launched small boats that had been improperly tied off. A raccoon did that on the Ottawa River and had everyone

up in arms!

True, a person *could* be hunkered

down out there behind the gunnel, but why hide? There was no value in stealing an old boat like that.

He couldn't see any hull identification numbers on it, which didn't tell him much. They had likely worn off with the varnish. It was old, rotten—and would soon be at the bottom. It wouldn't take much chop on the main lake to sink it.

Then, Nate remembered a retired America couple, George and Carol Abbott. They were the closest cedar strip owners that he knew on the lake. But their boat was shorter and had an enclosed bow. They'd always taken great care of the craft, too.

"Hey!" he called quietly, not wanting to cause a ruckus. Likely, the boat had

come free of its mooring and drifted off by wave action alone.

It happened all the time.

And the reflecting eyes? Where were they now? The shine could have come from farther back—behind the boat. Maybe even the other side of the channel

Or he was seeing things.

A howl rose up in the woods behind him!

Nate whirled with his phone up and its beam lighting the nearest roughbarked red pine trunks. Distantly, a wolf, coyote, or dog started tuning its pipes again.

He knelt and grabbed the axe with his

It wasn't the first time Nate had heard them howling up on Kipawa. Old Don Morley from out on the main lake had said it was wolves on one occasion, but that guy always told the tallest tales, so was an unreliable news source. In his telling, it would be a rabid Chihuahua with six-inch fangs—and then he'd

Of course, many of the regulars had enjoyed filling young Nathan's brain with fantastic tales.

Those were the days.

laugh.

After a minute of listening for more creatures in the forest, he turned his light

back toward the channel, but could not see the boat in the mist.

Nate shrugged, figuring it would sink,

drift on, or run aground. They might see it somewhere on Sunday when he took their friends on a boat cruise.

He hurried back to the cottage with his cell-phone flashlight high, riding its reassuring gleam forward as the world closed behind him in darkness.

At the door, he paused to glare back the way he had come. A realization and surge of adrenaline caused the hair on his arms to bristle.

Nate was sure he had caught the scent of a dog as he ran.

He carried the axe into the cottage, and locked the door.

Chapter 6

"Watch for moose! They come out of the ditch and—*BANG!*" Charlie Kim said gruffly, squinting ahead as the van headlights cut through wall after wall of thick fog.

His constant calls for caution kept everyone aboard on edge whenever he broke from his anxious watch of the centerline to study the soft shoulder to either side. "And where would the young sprat be?"

"Mind your tone!" Mrs. Dorothy Robins warned from the seat beside him where she sat with hands folded neatly on the map draped over her thighs. She had taken the role of navigator for this unique journey. It was their combined duty to watch over their passengers who were arranged among the three bench seats in back of the converted cargo van. "We work for these fine people, Mr.

Kim."

He grumbled something unintelligible.

"You drive and watch for moose," Mrs. Robins said, peering ahead. "I'll watch for the girl." Miss Morgan had called on her portable phone with directions.

The pairing in front represented the best driving arrangement since neither hibernated, and therefore could stay current on highways, and destinations. It

was also one of their tasks to keep updated on political and social trends, modern rules, and regulations.

They had been hired to do this sort of thing, after all; though, neither had been prepared to do it *together*. It was yet another unusual element to this expedition.

Charlie Kim had worked for their

passenger, Mr. Fletcher, for most of his life. As the South Korean expat had told it, his service was counted at intervals paced by his employer's average hibernation length. He'd been brought on at ten years of age to apprentice for the last familiar halfway through a sleep of three decades.

When Mr. Fletcher rose for the next

twenty-seven years, Kim had accompanied him, before standing guard another long sleep that was interrupted at fifteen by the Call to Challenge.

Mr. Kim was sixty-seven years old, and likely ready to acquire his own replacement.

The dark-skinned Sarah on the seat just behind Mrs. Robins, had first employed a twelve-year-old babysitter then-named Dorothy Leonard in 1963. With Sarah being a light hibernator of five-year spans, she and Dorothy had gotten to know each other well over the four decade-long wakings they'd had together.

Miss Leonard became Mrs. Robins in 1985 during the second hibernation of

her employment, though her work quickly conflicted with her matrimonial duties—*fatally*, with her husband Bradley going to his reward in 1988. Sarah's shorter hibernations were an

effect of her physical age at the time of her making, combined with responsibilities that she dutifully carried out when she was awake. She had surprised Mrs. Robins when

she rose from her most recent hibernation after just four years, but then her familiar had only passing knowledge of the Call to Challenge tradition that the excited girl awoke chattering about.

Mrs. Robins was seventy and close enough to retirement to be training an apprentice of her own. However, the last candidate she'd found had proven to have a larcenous streak that drew unwanted attention, and so had to be put down.

Since then, Mrs. Robins had been on the lookout for a new girl with hopes of finding someone better suited to the task, or of a figure more conducive to dismemberment. The familiar's right shoulder still ached from injuries received while preparing the failed applicant's remains for disposal.

Minor discomforts aside, Mrs.
Robins didn't feel any older than fifty thanks to the benefits offered by her employment with the Kind, which included special tonics and ointments that had originated in the distant past but

were still used in familiar care and training.

She felt more than capable of carrying on her watch.

"A half mile past the *Rutherglen* turnoff," repeated Sarah, who sat on the bench seat with her right arm positioned protectively over the large canvas tote bag at her side. She gestured with the cell phone in her free hand to remind her companions that *Morgie* had called *her*. "Not far."

Sarah's boast fell flat with the others, since only she and Miss Morgan carried phones, though their male counterparts borrowed them when necessary.

The devices were trackable, so ...

"We just passed Rutherglen!" Mr.
Kim reported, scanning the soft shoulder.

"How's little Otto making out?" Mrs. Robins whispered, glancing back and

smiling at the silent nod Sarah gave in answer. The boy's breathing came muffled by the sturdy canvas bag.

Mrs. Robins returned to watching the

road. They all knew the toddler would soon be up again, so they should enjoy any respite his nap offered. He was active enough in the daytime, no doubt, but the night brought him full around.

He was always a handful.

"There!" Mr. Fletcher blurted, from the bench behind Sarah. His sharp eyes had pierced the distant darkness past the front windshield. The van had no side "Not so loud!" Sarah reminded, hands closing over her tote bag.

windows in back

"Just as she said," Mr. Kim confirmed, slowing the van and pulling it onto the gravel shoulder past the girl.

Miss Morgan was wearing a cap, boots, canvas coverall, and jacket. She heaved the sizeable pack and bag onto her shoulder as Fletcher reached forward and slid the side door open.

"Quiet now!" Mrs. Robins cautioned.

Morgie grinned climbing into the van, reflexively holding a finger to her lips as she rolled her eyes at the toddler's canvas sleeping bag.

Fletcher grabbed her gear and threw

it onto the rear seat, then pushed the side door closed, and activated the overhead light as silent welcomes were passed around.

But Sarah hissed, snatching Miss

Morgan by the arm to pull her close. "What's *this?*" she snapped, using her free hand to smear the flecks of blood amongst Morgie's freckles.

Mrs. Robins clapped a hand over her mouth, while Mr. Kim shook his head sadly and drove the van back onto the highway.

Miss Morgan could be most careless. It was rumored that five of her last six familiars had made the ultimate sacrifice due to her reckless behavior.

And she had forced the sixth to

commit suicide.
"What have you been eating?"

Fletcher growled, leaning forward over the seat as Sarah angled the girl's face into the light. A flash of ire reddened Fletcher's usually pale features.

"Nothing—nothing bad," Morgie said, glaring as she pulled her face away. "I been waiting a good while out there in the cold, you know. A girl gets hungry traveling all the way from the border in a day." She smiled, sliding her hands over her thin abdomen. "You'd be surprised what you find creeping around these woods at night."

"You know the rules!" Sarah warned, slowly shaking her head.

"I tried to hold off," Morgie said,

waving at Mr. Kim's reflection in the rearview mirror; but he missed the greeting as he drove. "And what I ate won't be missed."

"Just remember as more gather—more the danger!" Fletcher's white face was deadly serious in the severe overhead light. "We aren't here on a lark."

"God Almighty! Don't hunters have to hunt ..." Morgie laughed. "I haven't seen you in a dog's age and here you're laying down the law!"

"We must be careful," Sarah said.

"Times have changed."

"Times do," Morgie agreed. "I see Miss Sarah hasn't!"

"It's the rules!" Sarah insisted.

"And we are what we are!" Morgie said. "I don't fear that like some do ..."

Mrs. Robins sighed. It was exciting to be brought together for an occasion as important as the coming challenge, but it could also be disorienting. To rise from hibernation properly required patience, and a methodical reacquaintance with the myriad survival techniques vital to the Kind.

It also took time to find one another, let alone to gather from their disparate resting places—especially with the world the way it was now, with borders closed against the pandemic virus, and half the population hating the other.

Impulsive behavior could kill one of the Kind.

"Look at *you!*" Morgie backhanded Fletcher's chest. He opened his arms, and she dove into his embrace.

Then casting around, she addressed the pair at the front.

"My god, that's you, Mrs. Robins!"
Morgie cried, stretching forward to poke her shoulder. "Ah! You look so old."

"Thank you, dear. It is always a pleasure to be reminded of my long and rewarding service to such company," Mrs. Robins said, with great restraint.

Miss Morgan provoked others to cover her own shortcomings. "Hopefully, my experience has prepared me for the challenges that await us."

"And Charlie Kim!" Morgie continued. "Hasn't Fletcher *retired* you

yet?"
"I am told he would be lost without me," Kim said.

"So, you're still talking to yourself, *then*," Morgie joked, and Fletcher smiled.

Mr. Kim slumped at the wheel.

"Sorry, Sarah ..." Morgie turned back to press her hand against her friend's raised palm, and the pair shared a warm look as they kissed. "I'm such a hothead!"

"Think I don't know?" Sarah smiled warmly.

"So where are we going, *pups?*" Morgie asked, running her fingers through Sarah's black hair.

"Mr. Zachary gave very specific

instructions," Kim said, as he worked the steering wheel.

"Please, not again," Mrs. Robins groaned.

"A village called *Carrefour* that *also* goes by the name Bent Steeple," Kim continued. "There's an interesting reason, too ..."

Mrs. Robins saw the keen glimmer in the old fellow's eye as he gauged his passengers' interest in the rearview mirror.

But the others were quiet. Kim had repeated the story every time the village's name came up. Silence reigned and then ...

"Why?" Morgie asked, and a sigh went through the van. Mrs. Robins cursed as Kim launched into his story.

"Well, this place has an old church on the way into town where a priest long ago was up to no good ..." Kim gave a knowing look to Mrs. Robins. "When

lawmen found out, the Father hung

eye.

and so great were his sins that the iron cross bent forward beneath the weight of them."

"Why didn't they just fix it?" Morgie said, with a mischievous twinkle in her

himself from the steeple atop the church,

"I don't know," Kim replied, sadly.
"But after they cut him down, people stopped calling the village *Carrefour*—and started calling it Bent Steeple because of the tale."

"What's *Carrefour* mean?" Morgie pushed, her grin broadening.

Mr. Kim tugged on his lower lip and shrugged.

"It's French for *crossroad*," Fletcher said, without enthusiasm.

"Ah!" Morgie turned with hands entwined to point double-index fingers at him. "Zack told you that!"

"Sarah Googled it for me," Fletcher said.

"Googled ..." Morgie frowned, with lips twisted in puzzlement before she nodded unconvincingly. "Oh, yeah, yeah, Googled—right!"

The group would never deride or tease its members for any gaps in knowledge. Memory issues often

Mrs. Robins knew that one of the first things those of the Kind did when

coming from hibernation was to start filling in any blanks. Familiars were charged with updating their employers, and others of the Kind were wise to help as well. With individuals sleeping anywhere from five to thirty years, a lot of catching up could be required.

And in recent decades, technology

And in recent decades, technology was taking leaps and bounds. The use of antiquated language, and referencing outdated news, products, or machinery could be dangerous.

"So, that's why it's called *Bent Steeple*," Mr. Kim said, with some finality.

"Thank you, Mr. Kim," Mrs. Robins said, with a roll of her eyes. She was half-turned, looking back at the others.

"Bent Steeple ..." Morgie leaned over the first bench seat and looked down at Otto's sleeping bag. "That's where the fucker was killed?"

"Yes," Fletcher said, his eyes looking inward.

"It's near a place called Mattawa, Miss Morgan," Mr. Kim said. "I learned the turnoff last time we got gasoline."

Morgie fell silent, staring into the dashboard light that made the tears in her blonde lashes glimmer.

Mrs. Robins could not deny the girl's sad tale. It's why she never took much offense at Miss Morgan's rough

character or ways.

The poor thing was lost in time.

"Zachary went ahead to see if he could catch a scent," Fletcher said softly. Despite his impassive bearing, he was protective of Miss Morgan, and knew her fondness for Mr. Zachary.

"Does he know who killed our maker?" Morgie asked, scowling down at Otto's sleeping form. The toddler had kicked the closing flap aside and was sleeping on his back with his chubby fists sticking up out of the bag.

"Zack's working on it," Fletcher breathed.

"He'll find out," Morgie said, almost touching Otto's hands, but snatching her fingers away at Sarah's disapproving challenge goes to some *jerkwater*?"
"No," Fletcher said.
"Farther north, there's a lake I've

look. "So then, it's Bent Steeple—the

dreamt of ... it's remote," Sarah said in a monotone, studying Otto through half-closed lids. "Hopefully, Bent Steeple will show us exactly where it is. We'll catch the scent Zack's looking for, or he'll leave a new."

Mrs. Robins listened to the silence that followed. Any time the Kind went quiet, they went all the way, becoming as still as corpses. There wasn't even the sound of breathing.

"I wanna see Zack," Morgie said, still looking downcast.

Saturday, June 19, 2021

Chapter 7

"Wolves?" Veronica glanced at the cottage from where they sat on the dock. "Well, probably ..." Nathan yawned, beside her. "Or dogs."

"There are wolves up here?" She gave him a sternly comic look.

"They're all across Northern Ontario and Quebec—most of Canada," Nate explained. "But they're too smart. You never see them."

"Just *hear* them in the middle of the night ..." Her eyebrows jumped. "That's comforting."

Nathan chuckled.

"I'm glad you're able to relax," she

said, over her coffee.

"Yeah? Look!" Nate swept his hand toward the channel's forested far shore.

"It's pretty easy to relax here."

"Tell that to the wolves ..." Veronica

drawled, placing her cup on the Muskoka chair's arm to light a cigarette.

"I was expecting red squirrels," Nathan said. "I haven't seen any."

Their chatter was usually the first thing you'd hear upon arrival at Needlewalk.

He hadn't seen many birds either. The forest was home to whiskey jacks, chickadees, crows, and a host of others.

chickadees, crows, and a host of others "Maybe the squirrels are the smart ones," Veronica observed.

They'd gone to bed pretty early and fairly sober the night before, but they were still a bit groggy in the early light.

The morning sex had been intense, and washed away Nate's doubts about their relationship—for the time being.

While the coffee was brewing, he made a quick check of the shore, taking his axe and walking a dozen yards east and west of the dock to look for sign of the drifting cedar strip boat. *Or the shining eyes!*

He found nothing.

Since then, the pair had wandered down to the dock in their pajamas.

Nathan had finished his smoke, and was well into his coffee.

They'd plan the rest of the day over

breakfast. Dillon and Trish were arriving after lunch.

"The main thing is you're relaxing,"

Veronica said, taking a drag on her smoke before a sip of coffee. "I was worried it might have the opposite effect—considering all the back and forth you and your parents were doing." She made an exasperated face.

"They know how to wind me up,"

Nate agreed. "But, we're here in heaven, and they're back home in Phase 3 of the lockdown. They know we want some time alone, so they'll leave us be." He dug into his pocket, pulled out his phone. "And the bad connection up here is a good excuse to let any calls go to messaging."

"They've been calling?" Veronica's smooth brow tightened.

"Texting," Nathan said, and slid his phone away. A few texts had come in from both parents overnight. They'd downloaded while he searched the shore, before he lost the signal again. "I cc'ed them a quick 'hello."

"Great," Veronica said, settling back in her chair. "I should probably do the same for my mom." She sighed, crossed her legs, and then sagged as if her bones were made of rubber. "Or not!"

"Signal's best early morning in good weather," he said, stretching out in his chair. "I can't get enough of this space." He held his arms wide. "Pandemic? Maybe it was all a bad dream!" His

laugh was cut short by a droning sound coming from the channel mouth.

"Uh oh, Ronnie ..." He gave her a sidelong glance. "They're onto us!"

They twisted in their chairs to watch a small aluminum boat with a single occupant buzzing east along the channel. It took a sudden sweep out toward the middle before looping in at the dock.

"Murdoch ..." Nate groaned. "And the world suddenly got a whole lot smaller!"

Don Murdoch putted up to the dock in an antique aluminum boat that was powered by an equally ancient 8horsepower outboard motor. He shut the engine down and drifted in front of them, walking the craft forward with his hands on the decking when he got close enough. "I'll bet that's one of the smoothest

approaches you've ever seen on Kipawa!" he said, and laughed, a deep repetitive, goading laugh. Nathan always compared it to a dying tractor engine. "Course, I'm not into the drinks, yet."

"Honey, this is Don Murdoch," Nate said, getting up and gesturing to their visitor with an open hand. "Don, this is Ronnie—er, *Veronica* Wright."

"Forgive me not shaking," Murdoch said, from where he remained sitting in his boat. "But I hear they're arresting people who don't follow pandemic rules." He laughed again, looking

Ronnie over from head to crossed ankles. "Well, protocol be damned, I'm going to have trouble keeping my hands off vou!"

He sniggered, winking up at Nate with the early morning sun glaring on his glasses.

Murdoch had to be in his late sixties now, but had kept himself in good shape. His big teeth shone in his weathered face beneath a thin graying moustache. He was wearing a battered fishing hat, and stained denim pants and jacket, with a thick canvas vest and tall rubber boots. "I hope you've been doing your duty,

"Yes—he has, Mr. Murdoch,"

young man." Again the ratcheting laugh.

Veronica attested, looking somewhat

shocked, amused, and uncomfortable as her gaze turned to the far shore.

It was a common response to Don Murdoch.

"You been down to see your Uncle Jack, yet?" Murdoch asked, his dark eyes shifting. He glanced along the channel toward the MacAdam Bay Two development where Jack Chambers and his wife Elly had a cottage.

The pair had an off-again-off-again relationship with Murdoch.

"Jack won't be up until tonight," Nate said. "And Elly's coming to the lake sometime tomorrow."

"Oh yeah?" Murdoch grunted, and rubbed his chin. "I thought I saw him coming out out of Canal Bay yesterday." He plucked his glasses off, blew on them, and rubbed the lenses against his shirtsleeve smiling.

"If the weather holds we'll cruise over in the boat tomorrow." Nathan squatted, and held a hand out for Murdoch's mooring rope. "Why don't you come up, Don? I'll get you some coffee."

"No, no thanks, boy." Murdoch repositioned his glasses, gesturing to the fishing rod and tackle box stowed along his boat's starboard gunnel. "I'm just taking an early spin to drop a line and to let my nudists get their day started. *Hah, hah, hah!*" He looked to the channel mouth. "I'll go back once they've showered and shaved, and there's

something to look at that isn't *bristly*."
He threw the rope to Nate and said,
"Just hold that. I won't be staying!"
Murdoch leaned back and pulled a
six-pack of beer up from behind the gas
tank. He held it out until Nate shook his

head, and then cracked one for himself.
"Yeah," he said, smiling broadly.
"Nudists! Can you believe that?"

He chortled, as Nate and Ronnie shook their heads.

"You meet all kinds," Murdoch said.
"Back in the nineties a bunch of us used to visit a nude beach across the lake in Dorval Bay." He slurped at his beer. "A storm came up one summer, and ten women visiting from Germany—*TEN*, all *nude*—had to take shelter in my little

cabin." His eyebrows pumped up and down. "Well, you can imagine the night *they* had."

"I sure can," Veronica said, deadpan.

"Oh Nate, I meant to say ..." Murdoch snorted. "I added another couple bunkies." He shrugged. "In case a storm ever comes up and catches you two somewhere with your pants down—and you need a place to put it in for the night."

"No. Don, we'll never do that ..."
Nathan said, dryly, flashing a grin at
Veronica. Her expression was frozen in
place now, as if Murdoch had somehow
broken her brain.

"Tell me, Don," Nathan said, reaching for his coffee as Murdoch

crushed his empty can and opened a new beer. "Do you ever go down to the Bear's Den?"

"Not since they went missing—god no!" Murdoch said, with a shake of his head. "That's more than ten years Hal, Al, and Merv are gone, and still no bodies."

"It's so weird," Nathan said, "and sad ..." He remembered Hal Bronson letting him drive a boat for the first time. The big man gave him the controls when he was seven.

Of course, he'd been sitting right there on Hal's knee.

"Nate, is that the men you told me about?" Ronnie said, softly. "They were ice fishing ..."

Nathan nodded slowly. He had told her about their disappearance. And losing Hal—it had broken his heart back then—and it still hurt.

"The Bear's Den is pretty much abandoned," Murdoch said. "With the virus hanging on. Hal's wife did her best to use the place up to then—with the kids—but the memories were too hard. She's ready to sell, but couldn't get what

"Poor Diane," Nathan said. His family had tried to do what they could for her, and she'd appreciated it. But that was years ago.

she wanted now ..."

"Once the pandemic's over," Veronica said. "People will start taking vacations again." "It'll go to someone from off the lake." Murdoch burped, steadying his boat with his free hand on the dock as the wind started the water to chop a bit.

"How's your parents, boy?" he asked, a cautious smile cutting across his ruddy face. "It's too bad they broke up.
They're missed on the lake. I used to

Hah, Hah ..."

"They're fine," Nate answered,
brusquely. There were no boundaries

enjoy your mom's bathing suits. Hah,

with Murdoch.

"I guess they did okay," Murdoch said, grabbing a third beer. "How long was it for them—twenty years?"

Nate just shook his head slowly. His father had tolerated Murdoch, but his

mother found him funny. She always invited him to their campfires.

Unless that was just to dig at dad. "Of course, to a ladies' man like me,"

Murdoch chuckled. "I'm lucky if my relationships last through the night."

"I'll bet you can count them in

minutes," Ronnie said.
"Or you could count them for me!"

Murdoch leered.

"Okay ..." Nathan finished his coffee.

"We better go. Friends are coming up."

"Any single women in the group?"

Murdoch asked.

"Sadly, no," Veronica said, tipping the last of her coffee into the water. "I'd love to introduce a man like you to some of my girlfriends. They'd be speechless."
"Just the way I like them!" Murdoch

said, through a broad grin.

"Okay, Don," Nathan said, standing up and hefting the tie rope. "Good to see you."

"Listen Nathan, I gotta level with you," Murdoch said, urging them to come closer. "I lied before. I have been up to the Bear's Den. At least once a year I pop in, just to remember old Hal Bronson."

"How's it holding up?" Nate asked, as Veronica rose to join him.

Murdoch held his arm out in front of him, and moved it in a wide, downward sloping arch.

"What's that mean?" Nathan squinted.

"The roof on the main cottage,"
Murdoch said, beer gleaming on his lips
and moustache. "It's going fall in."
"We'll have to tell Diane." Nathan

squeezed Veronica to his side.

"But there's something else."

Murdoch hunched his shoulders and lowered his voice. "With God as my witness, I saw Hal at Sandy Portage *last week*. It was a cloudy day, but I was heading down to Camp Island anyway, and there he was standing where the sand ridge narrows, not a mile from

property," he said. "I was curious so I had my lantern ready when I coasted up to his dock. I flashed the light up at the

Bear's Den! And on the way back it was

getting dark, so I slowed at the

shadow."

"Did you go look?" Ronnie asked.

"Oh, I was raring to go," Murdoch said, eyes gleaming earnestly. "But the thought terrified the woman I was with.

She wouldn't come with me, or let me

bunkie, and I saw old Hal standing by it
—looking back! You know the place.
And I even called his name, but he just

stepped past the corner and into

"Why?" Nate blurted.

leave her alone."

"Well, Hal didn't look too goddamn good," Murdoch reported, with a slight slur. "His skin was gray, and his eyes went red when he moved into the dark!"

Nate groaned. He remembered having many talks with Hal about Murdoch.

Once into his rum, the big man had sworn he would punch Murdoch next time he saw him for telling inappropriate jokes in front of Hal's adult daughter.

He would hate to know he was the

subject of one of Murdoch's tall tales.
"It had to be someone else," Nate said, pointing at the beer. "Maybe you were drunk."

"Of course, I was drunk, Nathan," Murdoch said softly, leaning in. "But you remember Hal. Biggest man I ever knew. His hands were four times the size of my own. You think *you'd* mistake *him* for someone else?" Murdoch gave his odd braying laugh. "I might mistake him for a Sasquatch." His eyes twinkled. "But I've

never seen one of *those* this far east."

"Ah, Don! You had us going there!" Ronnie said. "Nate warned me about you!"

"Why? What did he say?" Again came the repetitive bray, and disconcerting leer.

"We really gotta get ready for company," Nate said, remembering how Murdoch's behavior grew worse the more comfortable he got.

"Are you having a fire tonight?"
Murdoch started gathering up his dock line.

"It's supposed to rain," Nate said, quickly. "And with pandemic protocols, we'll have to do something small and intimate."

"Small? Oh, intimate ... Then I'll be

Murdoch's laugh was both mocking and deliberate. "You walked right into that one, boy! *Hah! Hah!* "He started his outboard, grabbed the tiller handle and steered the craft away from the dock.

sure to visit, Hah, Hah, Hah ..."

They waved, and he gave them a wicked grin under devilish eyes. His laugh rang over the water.

"I used to look up to him when I was a boy ..." Nathan sighed, with Veronica waving beside him.

"Makes sense," she said, nudging him suddenly with her hip. "I can't imagine that act working on any women."

Chapter 8

"There they go again!" said Miss Morgan, where she squatted on the ground by the ruin. Her bulky clothing protected her freckled skin from the rising sun, though her exposed cheeks and hands made her supposed youth quite obvious. "Chirping like birds."

Out there in the morning light, she looked every bit a girl of ten to Mrs. Robins.

"They flicker on and off," Morgie continued, with fingers wriggling. "Like fireflies and cinders."

Mrs. Robins couldn't see anything. She was halfway along the overgrown

drive between the group, and Mr. Kim who stood by the van some yards distant where he'd parked it to block access from the road.

But being closer wouldn't have helped Mrs. Robins see what her wards were seeing. They, like others of the Kind, had a special sight that came from living their lives with one foot in the gray land.

"I think—is it ... I think I can see it there—a *flicker!*" Sarah blurted, "Otto sees it, too." She hefted the toddler in her arms. The little boy's eyes were rolling in his head as they followed his wandering hands a step behind the places where he pinched the air.

Otto's head was almost hairless, and

shone white in any light. He wore a T-shirt and cloth diaper, and would suffer no other clothing.

"I've seen it in old graveyards," Sarah said. "Hard to believe they last so long."

"Echoes fade but will endure until the line ends," Mr. Fletcher said, looking glum where he crouched on the ridge of crumbled stone that formed the burnedout ruin's foundation.

Sarah came from Native American stock, of the Lakota tribe, she claimed, and was a beauty at her apparent age of twelve. She kept her long black hair tied up in leather strings and out of Otto's reach.

The girl wore no makeup on her dark-

brown skin and didn't need it. Sarah preferred pants, jackets, and outerwear—anything sturdy that could put up with her sometimes rough and tumble life.

Sarah wore a leather necklace under her clothing from which dangled a long pair of fangs. Early on, she had terrified Mrs. Robins, who was still Miss Leonard at the time, with the story of taking the teeth from a big wolf she hunted and killed far from home in Germany's Black Forest.

In 1895, Sarah and an older cousin had been part of a small entertainment troupe assembled by a New York showman, Captain Drake Windsor, and taken to London where he'd drum up investors for a Wild West stage show

that he was creating to rival Buffalo Bill's.

Sarah would take part in historical re-enactments as well as care for livestock that would travel with the group. They would hire actors locally as required to fill out the cast.

After England, they met with investors in France, but Windsor dropped dead of a heart attack leaving the little group penniless on foreign soil.

The troupe broke up in their struggle to survive. Sarah's cousin met with disgrace in a failed criminal undertaking, and Sarah met her maker while working on a farm in western Germany.

The incident where she battled the

wolf had happened soon after when she was first flush and intoxicated with powers of the Kind.

Sarah had delighted in alarming young Miss Leonard with tales of derring-do back then, but had settled down over the years, and now preferred more contemplative exercises. She'd grown into her life as one of the Kind, and embraced its demand for privacy.

Sarah stood near Fletcher's perch, holding Otto tight to keep the boy in check. He had been crawling around the ruin, exploring, and giggling as he grasped at invisible things, when he wasn't snatching up and chewing the green stalks of grass that grew around.

"Like electric Christmas lights, I guess," Miss Morgan said, of the echoes, finally. "Ringing noises of teacups, too—like there's a party of toffee-noses in

"A room you want to avoid, my friend," Fletcher cautioned.
"I could do with a cup of tea myself,"

another room."

Mrs. Robins remarked, with a glance at Mr. Kim.

The old man only grunted, and continued his dire watch upon the road.

"They're like the one we heard last night," Fletcher explained, with a glance in the direction of the cemetery they'd just visited.

Mr. Fletcher was the second oldest of their group aside from Mr. Zachary, full-

grown, and also favored to be a contender in the coming Call to Challenge. At least in his companions' estimation.

"They're like us, but they didn't survive," he said.

"Or the *Maker* let them die," Miss Morgan sneered, with a cold look in her eye.

"Remember, Morgie," Fletcher cautioned. "We're not to bring people over!"

"No *bastards*, I know," she replied, her green gaze warming. "And orphans be damned!"

"Lord! Such a somber group," Mrs. Robins chided, after taking a couple steps closer. She was not immortal in

any way, and so felt some frustration with her wards' preoccupation with death. The time for worms and oblivion would come for her, so she considered graveyards and ghosts to be empty promises. "Better to be *something!*"

Miss Morgan laughed, as Fletcher's shallow smile soured. Mrs. Robins appraised the poor

fellow with as much empathy as she could muster. He had a pale and youthful cast, though his features were arranged in a serious fashion: a low hairline, deep-set eyes, and prominent nose that appeared to be broken. These were framed by a solid, square chin, hard round cheekbones and thick brows.

Fletcher's full, colorless lips and

pencil-thin moustache were often twisted around a sardonic grin.

Mrs. Robins supposed his original parentage to be Eastern European. She had only met him once before, but his look, words, and bearing were the same: the personification of grim.

It was two o'clock that morning when Mr. Kim had finally found the turnoff for the little village of Bent Steeple. The road in was not well lit, so they accidentally drove right by the overgrown church ruin in the dark, and past it into town where they had to ask a drunken man on the sidewalk for directions.

Once the sot had informed Mr. Kim of

their need to backtrack, Fletcher had interrupted to ask where the local graveyard could be found.

Mrs. Robins had been awakened from a short nap on their way into the village, and it was all she could to do contain her opposition to Mr. Fletcher's macabre interests.

But it was ever the way of the Kind to visit such dark and unpleasant places. They did so to nose about for scent of others like themselves, or for proof of

their work in the local population.

Her experience with the Kind showed them to be a solitary lot who relished chance meetings and clues to the

But it was not for her to say.

existence of their brethren.

The road up to the Valley View Cemetery was clearly marked.

Mrs. Robins had waited in the van with Mr. Kim while the others spent a few hours feeling about in the dark, using the girls' smartphones as flashlights to date gravestones, or crawling the fringes smelling for signs of others like themselves.

They'd quickly detected Mr. Zachary's scent, but nothing else to indicate recent visits of the Kind.

In time, the group had counted at least three graves of a date that matched what Sarah had divined from the Call to Challenge and her dreams. They linked their maker's death to kills made in the Bent Steeple village over ten years past. Later, Morgie had called them all to the back of the graveyard to show them

the back of the graveyard to show them twelve much older stones with occupants of an age and type that suggested they'd also been put there by *their* maker during another winter even farther back in time.

It was among those gravestones that

Miss Morgan had heard a sound come up from underground. A quiet cry, she had described, like a ghost all boxed and buried.

But Fletcher had pointed at the date upon the stone to show that a child was put there almost fifty years before. "He's not more than dust and dirt now."

"But you know he's a he!" Morgie

had said. "We was young when it happened."

"Not *dust*, Morgie," Fletcher had clarified.

It had wrung Mrs. Robins' heart to see Miss Morgan's sad face fall in the poor light from her smartphone, but there was little they could do.

Still, Morgie had stood firm on opening the grave herself until the others swore they'd come back and see to him after the Call to Challenge.

And now after driving back across the village in the growing light, and gathering at the place where their maker had met his end, they had found more signs of his work.

The small group gathered around the burned-out ruins of the old church. They'd all had dreams or visions of the place, though there was little to mark it: a stone foundation, a hump of earth, a broken wall, and a shallow hole in a tumble of rocks. All of it was tangled over with brush and bramble, and the grass grew long on the slope they'd walked up from the winding road.

They'd been over the site many times. Morgie had found Mr. Zachary's

scent in minutes.

The sun was coming up and the sky burned orange. Tree-topped hills hid the horizon and went black against the distant spangle. Across from them through the trees, where the land and forest formed a shadowed valley, sunlight glimmered on window glass to show the village nestled, and preparing for the day.

Still, the little group lingered.

that," Mrs. Robins said, coming closer. She'd left Mr. Kim to watch the road, and was soon having a time of it wrangling the rugged toddler Otto by one hand after Sarah had asked for a rest.

"Are the Maker's killers still in the

"So pretty amongst the leaves like

village?" Morgie asked, studying Fletcher's stony features.
"There is one ..." He sniffed the air.

"But he would see us coming. His fight with our maker has left him with eyes

like ours, but he's not one of us. Better to get him after the Call to Challenge."

"But how can a *human* kill a pack leader?" Sarah frowned.

"With help," Fletcher said, reaching out to touch Otto's smooth, round head as the child dragged Mrs. Robins near.

The boy pursed his lips and purred. "The Maker's killer needs help with *all* things."

"A *cripple* killed Veneur?" Miss

Morgan laughed, blowing a raspberry.

"Don't lie if you can't see it!"

"Take a breath, Morgie. Open yourself to the story in the scent,"

Fletcher said, eyes looking dreamily at the distant village. "He had help from

someone who knew the Maker well—a

woman. Can't you smell that?"

"Good heavens, it wasn't a

familiar!" Mrs. Robins burst out,
pressing her eyes with her free hand.

Otto looked up at her to coo with worry. It was every familiar's fear to hear that one of their number had betrayed the Creed.

"No." Fletcher's dark gaze resolved to glare at the distant window flash. "Humans will always work together

against us."
"Curse him ... Veneur was mine!"

Morgie snapped, tears in her angry eyes. "... And I was *Veneur's!*"

"We should go, Mr. Fletcher!" Mr.

Kim shouted, keeping a steady watch on the road.

Mrs. Robins was impressed by the old man's work ethic. Kim was worried that they had already been in Bent Steeple too long, *and* the sun was rising.

However, there was no need for him to take airs. Such precaution went without saying for those of the Kind. Kim's constant repetition of his charge's vulnerabilities was an overreach, and could be seen as a vainglorious assumption of power.

That was a dangerous position for a familiar to take.

"We'll find a safe place to pull off the road," Fletcher said, "and sleep away some of the day before continuing on."

"That's good to hear," Mrs. Robins agreed. She knew that the van's jostling

could make an uneasy sleep for Otto, and that would mean the same for Sarah and the others.

"But what about Zachary?" Miss Morgan asked, looking around as the group began a slow walk toward the van. "I thought we'd meet him *here*."

"Morgie ... He went on ahead to get things ready for us," Sarah said, kicking at the earth. "Haven't you read his scent?"

"I haven't marked any clear direction in it, *yet*," Morgie said, lifting her nose and breathing deeply.

"I have," Sarah answered, smiling.

"Temiscaming."

"I smell it too, Morgie!" Fletcher said.

"Isn't that amazing, Otto!" Mrs. Robins had lifted the boy and started toward the van, when she paused to watch Miss Morgan snuffle the air around her.

"Oh, *Temiscaming* ..." Morgie blurted with a smile, looking at her audience sidelong. "Got it!"

Chapter 9

Driving from the coast and traveling into the Canadian heartland had been an anxious affair that involved the theft of a van, and the penetration of two guarded provincial borders. While preparing for their sojourn, Mr. Ralen had read that such obstacles were in place as part of Canada's safety strategy during the pandemic.

The barriers themselves were little more than isolated traffic stops that were easily identified by the flashing lights or lines of cars—if there were any other travelers at the time of night they passed.

But rather than risk authority

entanglements, they had retreated on each occasion so his employer could summon a thick fog to cloak their passage. The ruse involved Ralen speeding blindly through the nighttime murk with his headlights off.

The police on guard would have heard a rushing sound, and may have marked a disturbance in the mists, but in the darkness, they would have difficulties verifying any suspicions. Additionally, de Graaf said that he had employed other means to confuse their senses and thoughts.

Worling de Graaf was fearless when it came to such adventures since his ailment pushed him into any act that might decrease his discomfort. The close confines of the van caused his limbs to cramp and spasm despite their frequent stops.

This misery of delays was compounded when after much investigation they discovered during a fuelling stop, that the name of their destination, "Bent Steeple" as foretold by de Graaf, was a local nickname for a small Ontario village officially called "Carrefour" that had highway signage to that effect.

They learned that they'd driven past the turnoff at least once during their search.

Now, Mr. Ralen sat in the van sipping

water, and watching his employer wrestle with his demons.

Worling de Graaf lay on the overgrown heap of dirt and gravel, writhing in the light from the midday sun. His tortured features wriggled and reformed behind his oversized sunglasses, and his body squirmed beneath the great cloak and blanket he used to cover his nakedness.

His condition had deteriorated to the point where maintaining the camouflage of clothing was too great a strain for his depleted resources, and his flesh could not abide the daylight for long, so he made use of the crude apparel for protection and concealment.

He had collapsed after crawling

snuffling and slavering for any scent or sign. His faculties were strained by loss and failure, and by his insomnia, his fear of sleep, *and* need to hibernate.

Worling labored to decipher the

frantically about the church ground ruins,

knowledge written in the smells, tastes, and sights of what was left behind here.

From his wailing and weeping, it was clear that he did not want to know what

he was learning. He had begun to piece together the messages in the various spoor.

The call had drawn him to this place.

Ralen got out of the van where he had parked it just off the gravel road in the grassy lane that led to the debris field. He had waited and watched while his

employer explored the ruin undisturbed
—at least, until this moment. Now that
the situation had got the better of de
Graaf, he would require some counsel to
proceed.

Ralen walked the short distance, and knelt by the twitching mound of cloth that concealed him.

"Are you well, Graaf?" he asked, as his ward shuddered and wept beneath the hooded cloak.

"They're so angry! By the gods,

Ralen. I cannot shut them out!" Worling sobbed, raising a monstrous and scaly seven-fingered hand to keep his sunglasses from falling off his changing face. "Do you hear *his* ghosts? They hate *me*?"

Ralen listened, but was unable to substantiate his employer's claim. He heard only the wind in the trees, and the distant random Saturday afternoon noises from the nearby village.

He hoped the ghosts were actually there.

Ralen was worried about de Graaf's sanity. His employer's illness had been growing worse by the day, almost as if travel abroad had intensified its symptoms. The powers of the Kind were substantial, and would never be questioned by one of their familiars.

However, de Graaf's long illness had included hallucinations, memory loss, and emotional outbursts, so Ralen was often forced to verify the sensational

claims he made.

He held a comforting hand over his employer's quivering shoulder, but withdrew it before touching him. There

employer's quivering shoulder, but withdrew it before touching him. There was no telling what de Graaf's response would be. Historically, he might mock such sympathetic signs as weakness. While at other times, when Ralen laid

a helping hand, Worling responded with howls of pain since the ravages of his insomniac state had left his mutable and powerful flesh a weeping ruin.

"This is where it happened," de Graaf wept anew. "Where my poor friend was murdered!"

"That is terrible, Graaf," Ralen said.

Those of the Kind of Worling's age and power were able to read much in the

they hunted, and entire histories in the scents left by others like themselves which could include instructions, messages, and warnings. In some cases, they even encoded their final moments should any who care happen by—a plea for vengeance could be left in place.

"The one who did this must die!" de

spoor and sign of the natural creatures

Graaf said, shuddering, drawing in his breath as he raised his sloping shoulders and misshapen head to nose the air. "He is nearby, the devil! And a *cripple*—but how?" His brows fell like melting cheese. "Unless, it was in battle with Veneur that he was injured. *Yes*—there can be no other answer!"

"May I suggest you postpone your

revenge, Graaf," Ralen said. "We must be close to where others of the Kind will answer the Call to Challenge. You must heal first—then you can avenge." "Yes. Yes. I must heal. I must drink

..." A sob shook de Graaf, as he started crawling forward again. Ralen could hear him sniffing at the ground.

"Silence children!" Worling hissed at

the earth. "Go tell the Devil!"

Ralen studied him at his work. He had watched his employer interact with the unseen world before, since the Kind always kept one foot in the gray land.

And while Worling's behavior at this moment was outlandish, it did not look like madness. It seemed he had recovered some small self-control—

however tenuously he held it.

"Others of the Kind have been here,
Ralen. Oh, if only you could smell
them!" Worling laughed and dragged his

face over the grasses, riding an erratic mood around rationality. "Their blood is potent. *Oh! Oh! Oh!* Such promise there!"

"I understand, Graaf," Ralen said,

more comfortable with Worling's current reading of the clues. He lacked his employer's uncanny tracking abilities.

Worling's were impressive in days gone by. Back then, de Graaf could read the terrain and a week's activity from a single whiff of tracked-over ground. He used his powers when hunting savanna lions back home, before his sleepdeprivation had made him capricious and incapacitated.

Worling suddenly howled and surge

Worling suddenly howled and surged to his knees with arms raised in apparent supplication to the sky, before he fell forward again amidst the broken, and overgrown detritus.

"Oh Ralen, NO! It was them! We

missed the very ones *of whom I* dreamt!" he moaned. "I mistook their telling scent while the death of my dear friend and *their* maker overwhelmed me. Oh, he had a taste for the young, and here we have missed them by hours—as I waste time raving!"

Worling snarled, his hands grew leathery, and the fingers curved like ribbed talons. One hand shaped itself like an eagle's foot to rake dark furrows in the earth, as the other became a broad, jagged claw that dug the debris as a spade and overturned the crumbled pile of stone and waste in the ruins until old charred wood was exposed.

Black dust rose up around Worling as

he pushed off against the ground to lean back on his knees again, panting.
Rivulets of earth and mucous ran from his ragged mouth and down his bristly jowls.

"If my mind were straight!" he wept anew. "If I could *focus*—we'd have found them *here!*"

"Have you any indication, yet, who made the Call to Challenge?" Ralen asked. This was a sore point for him,

and a more pressing issue. Since he was charged with protecting Worling de Graaf, he was responsible for gauging and identifying threats. His employer had been in a healing trance when he received the telepathic "call" from another of the Kind.

Ralen knew from the *Creed* that the Kind made such challenges when a pack leader was identified and determined slain or had died, and needed replacement. Pack members made by the deceased were the first to receive it, then friends, and finally the more ambitious of the Kind.

Succession was determined through combat.

But always, one of the Kind was first

to make the call, most often by one who bore some relation.

"I am blind!" his employer wailed.
"That is the ailment, not Worling de raaf. You will soon be free of

Graaf. You will soon be free of sickness," Ralen said. "You are still powerful, and considering its negative effects upon you, we have made great progress."

Mr. Ralen was impressed by his employer's strength. Despite his damaged mind and body, he had finally managed to focus that night at the bed and breakfast a week past.

He had hunted and killed like a beast of prey.

Ralen had previously been concerned

by de Graaf's excesses as his illness worsened. Worling reveled in the blood of his prey, and seemed unconcerned by the attention he might draw to himself.

But that night, de Graaf had shown his true self in spurts.

Ralen's stomach sank at the memory. He was still disappointed in himself for his carelessness that night. He had been unaware that a girl was sleeping upstairs. Such an oversight could have killed Worling had she the means to summon the authorities.

It was Ralen's duty to know these things, and he had not that night. True, he had been exasperated and exhausted from being lost for endless miles on the forest highway, but there was no excuse for failure. He should have done a complete check on the house before encouraging de Graaf to go on the hunt.

Mr. Ralen would see that such an oversight did not happen again.

The girl *had* paid a price for surprising him, though she gave de Graaf a challenge before the end. She had run for the forest while Worling made a meal of her aunt and uncle, until he was drawn to her scent and fleetness.

Then he was upon the girl's spoor, and a hunt commenced that lasted half an hour.

Her death had been excessively bloody. Worling's self-control had slipped during the kill until he rolled in her steaming guts in a way unfit for his hunting dogs at home.

He had wanted to hang the bodies in the trees around the house, as he said he had in ages past, when fighting over

had in ages past—when fighting over territory in Europe. He had felt in his madness that his exploits would impress all future prey and others of the Kind.

Especially with the Call to Challenge having come.

But, Ralen had convinced his employer that it was too early to announce his arrival.

So, de Graaf had relented, and offered to help bury the old couple and what remained of the girl.

However, Ralen better understood modern police practices. He knew that when any "number" of people went missing there would be an exhaustive search. He had kept himself abreast of advances made in forensic science via the Internet and through television programs on the subject.

A medical examiner could learn too much if allowed to analyze a corpse.

So, Ralen had put the dead back in their beds and burned the house down around them. All his research suggested that fire remained the best accomplice if one wished to avoid detection.

"Truly, it is my sickness ..." Worling agreed, from where he had resumed creeping around the church ruin. "Yet I can still smell them. Their conversation echoes like perfume, do you not hear

that?"
"I do not."

"We must hurry if I hope to catch them," de Graaf gathered himself together, and got to one knee wheezing.

"As you say," Ralen said, understanding his employer's enthusiasm.

Though he had received the Call to Challenge, Worling had no interest in leading a pack of his own. But, ancient lore described a cure for his sleeping sickness that could be found where the "call" brought the Kind together. "I might remind you that your end game is of greater importance."

Worling de Graaf lurched across the gravel to lean against the van. The

pulled his hood down over his face.
"You must give them time to gather,"
Ralen said, on approach. "Had you
found this group here, you would have

fender buckled beneath his weight as he

met with one or two ..."

"And I'd miss the others," Worling

panted, nodding. "That is correct—yes. We must move cautiously."

"And once they gather, it is best that

we meet them only when you are ready."
"Yes." Worling adjusted his blanket
with mismatched hands. "As you remind
me."

"As is my duty ..." Ralen said, eyes fixing on Worling's sunglasses.

"Then one by one or all at once," Worling said, with a laugh and started

limping around the van. "For age and strength master all!"

"Have you nosed out *their* future movements and *ours*, Graaf?" Ralen asked, taking a step.

"Of course I have," Worling said, turning an ugly frown to him. It spread across his ravaged face as he spoke. "I read it in the scent—and in the echoes.

They go to a place called *Temiscaming*." "Temiscaming?" Ralen said. "What is

Temiscaming?"
Worling shrugged his massive shoulders. "I will leave that for *you* to discover."

Ralen sighed, reaching into his pocket for the keys. He was not looking forward to another such drive.

Chapter 10

Dillon and Trisha arrived at
Needlewalk around quarter to two with
the lead edge of a storm system in tow.
Clouds rolled in behind them with a
chill breeze off the lake that forced the
group's immediate retreat from the dock
to the relative shelter of the cottage
deck.

Nathan hoped his guests had taken his advice to bring sweaters, jackets, and boots along with their summer wear, since the seasons on Lake Kipawa usually lagged about three weeks behind southern Ontario and Quebec.

After the boys unloaded the gear and

supplies, Nate cradled their beers while Dillon parked his lime-green Honda Civic behind the water tower where a couple spaces were cleared of brush for that purpose.

Dillon left the car on the far side of Nathan's truck and walked toward him with a hand raised for a "high five."

Nate gave a glance back at the deck as he moved in for the beer handoff, before throwing caution aside and returning Dillon's offered palm with a loud *clap!*

Laughing, they clinked their bottles.

"Oh god! We broke protocol," Dillon

moaned, inspecting his hand and wincing. "No sign of Covid, yet!"

"Hey, man," Nathan said, "you look

great!"
Dillon stood about six-foot-two, and was thin, which exaggerated his height.

He wore hiking boots, canvas trousers, and a loose-fitting jacket.

"You, too!" he said, and they clinked bottles again.

"But we *will* have to watch protocol up here," Nathan warned, voice dropping. "Ronnie's mom has emphysema, and some older neighbors might stop in."

"Sure, sure," Dillon agreed, dark eyebrows rising toward his receding hairline. He had a long face with pleasant features that he used for dramatic effect, or to distort in cartoon fashion for comic relief. "No problemI'm just so fucking tired of it, but me and Trisha, we don't have any symptoms!"
"Neither do we," Nathan assured, turning with him to walk back along the side of the cottage toward the deck

where the girls were pouring themselves a glass of wine. "But when we see Uncle

Jack tomorrow, and especially Aunt

Elly, we wear masks!"

"Gotcha—she's a nurse, right!"

Dillon said, with an easy shake of his head. "And to do our part for the health of the nation ..." He stopped to dig into

his shirt pocket and pull out a couple of

hastily rolled joints. "We'll have to

smoke one each."

"For the Queen!" Nate said, taking a joint.

"I heard she uses a bong," Dillon muttered, stabbing a joint into his own mouth and lighting Nathan's.

They puffed happily on the way up the side stairs to the deck where they shared the joints exclusively with their girlfriends.

Halfway through their second drinks, Nate swore up at a bank of clouds that had stalled overhead to block the sun completely. The temperature plummeted, and the group responded with curses. Dillon and Trisha shivered, really hamming up their discomfort. "I was going to wear sandals!" he

snapped, holding Trish close. She beamed up at him, her dazzling smile enhanced by neon lipstick against her dark, East Indian skin. Her tight top revealed an ample bosom, and her Lycra denims suggested some extra weight from quarantine. Nathan wondered how long it would

take before they were all talking about lockdown and vaccinations. Both he and Ronnie had discussed getting their first jabs, but like a lot of people their age, they were slow to jump on the bandwagon.

The older population needed it more,

The older population needed it more, but now that *they* were getting their second shots ...

"Did you bring some warmer clothes?" Veronica asked.

"Done and done!" Dillon nodded at

movement. "Bags are inside, right?"
"Yep!" Trisha screamed, as they ran
through the screened-in porch and into
the cottage.

his girl, curly black hair echoing every

Nathan's forearms. Her eyes were bloodshot. "Do you think?"

"Oh!" Ronnie blurted, squeezing

"What?" Nathan stared at her vapidly. Dillon had some really nice weed.

"Fashion show!" Veronica whispered, and the pair of them laughed, hurrying to sit in the far corner of the deck's wraparound bench.

The laidback stylings of the classic rock group that Nate had selected to play, was suddenly replaced by a techno-pop number charged with a

frenzied beat.

Dillon and Trisha stalked out of the screened-in porch, moving to the rhythm,

channeling New York fashion models.

Both were dressed in glaring, extralarge plaid shirts that trailed down over their bright blue denims. Dillon's plaid was neon green and Trisha's was pink. They strutted up and down the deck, making sure to do their sexy turns while hovering over Nate and Ronnie's laps.

When Dillon leaned against the cottage wall to twerk, Nathan and Veronica exploded with laughter—then Trisha lost control and fell against Dillon giggling.

"They're blinding!" Nathan roared, shielding his eyes from the garish plaid.

"I need sunglasses."

"Now you can find our bodies if we get lost." Dillon shouted, and Trich

get lost," Dillon shouted, and Trish slapped him.

"Don't be

"Don't be like that," she said, wriggling in place while Veronica gasped for breath.

"Like what?" Dillon said, lifting his fists and pulling a comic frown.

The pair began a pantomimed boxing match that Nathan and Veronica soon joined in, and within seconds, the group was wrestling on the deck, and laughing, until Trisha screamed, "COVID!"

And they all scrambled and rolled to get away from each other.

A few hours later, they were sitting

around the dinner table as evenly spread out as possible. The cottage kitchen and living room shared one big area, so they cleared other furniture away and positioned the table center to it, to allow for social distancing.

Nathan and Dillon sat at opposite ends of the oval table to make room for their longer legs, and the girls sat across from each other where it narrowed.

Veronica had insisted on keeping the windows cracked for a cross breeze, so insects could be heard buzzing in on kamikaze dives and pelting the screens as they tried to get in.

A small fire in the woodstove kept out the evening's growing chill.

"Yeah, it was Skinbo," Dillon said.

"He's a cop now."
"Skinbo?" Trisha started with a roll of her eyes.

"He was a guy we knew back in grade eight," Nathan explained. "Turned into a major partier in high school, so I'm surprised to hear he's a boy in blue."

you," Veronica said, as the others chuckled.

Nate's laugh was half-hearted, more a

"I guess that means there's hope for

cough, and his features twisted with curiosity. He must have missed the point.

So, a cop's better than arborist—or everything is ...

But he just kept eating his salad. "That's great dressing," Trisha said, reaching over to set a hand softly on

Veronica's forearm.
"Thanks!" Ronnie said, lifting her

drink. Ronnie said, lifting her

"She opened the bottle herself,"
Nathan said, and then lowered his eyes
to his plate when he saw Veronica's
reaction.

That was unnecessary.

"I'm—uh—just glad we arrived in one piece," Dillon stammered, registering her look, but forging ahead with his knife and fork. "Your neighbor almost ran us off the road!"

"It's no big deal," said Trish, pursing her blazing pink lips.

"What?" Veronica paused with her drink in hand, eyes flashing to Nate.

"Some asshole on an all-terrain

vehicle—an ATV, I guess—it had four wheels ... Anyway, he was going full out along the road when we were coming in," Dillon said with a mouthful of steak, holding his napkin up to cover it. "I remember you talking about the evil Frenchman."

"Think it was him?" Nathan buttered his roll as his guest shrugged.

"He's lucky the Civic wasn't going any faster," Trisha said. "The trees overhang the road and force you into the center."

"Sorry to hear that," Nate said. "Why'd you think of Denis?"

"This guy," Dillon said, topping up his glass with wine and doing the same for Trisha, "this *fucker* was flying a

Quebec flag off the back of his machine."

"Dillon!" Trisha said, shaking her head. "Why do you have to say 'fucker'?"

"Sorry, dear ..." Dillon said, as he chewed. "Fuckwad ..."

"Dillon, please! We're going to stay at my parents," Trish pleaded. "And they will not put up with that shit!"

"Sounds like fun!" Dillon said, sarcasm on full.

"Quebec flag? That's Denis!" Nathan groaned, dropping his fork. "Flies it from the safety flag mount." He pointed toward the kitchen. "He owns the cottage over that way. Thank god there's a vacant lot between!"

"The fucker!" his friend laughed.
"Dillon!" the girls shouted
simultaneously, eyes glimmering. The
wine was going down well.

"Remember I was telling you about Nate's neighbor," Dillon started, grabbing Trisha's hand. "The Frenchman's border war."

"Oh, yeah," she said, nodding. "A war ..."

"With my dad mostly," Nathan said.
"But it's not Dad's fault really, he just reacted. Uncle Jack says Denis hates English Canadians buying property on his French Canadian lake." Nate took a bite of roll. "It almost got violent a couple times."

"Well, it'll get violent with me—

fast!" Dillon warned, in a Clint Eastwood voice, and Trisha reached over to swat his shoulder.

"Not the gunfighter!" She grimaced, good-naturedly slapping him again.
"Ouch!" Dillon whined, in a wimpy

voice, nursing his shoulder like it was broken. "You didn't have to go and hit me!"

"There's our hero!" Nate said. "A super soldier."

"Super *baby!*" Trisha said, giggling explosively when Dillon started sucking his thumb.

"Well, that settles it." Veronica dabbed at her face with a paper napkin across from her. "If I didn't have Covid before, I've got it *now!*"

"Hey, Nate," Dillon joked, with a lascivious batting of his eyelashes. "I guess that means we're clear for swapping, *now!*"

"Dillon!" the girls screamed, and laughter filled the cottage.

The girls went to bed around midnight. The boys were left to get their jackets and sit in the screened-in porch to finish their drinks.

That ate up a half hour.

Then it took a twenty-minute conversation to decide not to refill their glasses. Ronnie was hoping to get up early so they could get the most out of the following day.

Dillon lit up an inch-long roach but

Nathan passed on it.

Minutes after that, war-weary and

red-eyed, Dillon shuffled off to brush his teeth in the bathroom.

Nate filled a glass with bottled water, charged his toothbrush with paste and stepped outside onto the deck.

The night had continued to cool so the bugs were gone.

He brushed, spitting over the edge of the deck until he finished, finally rinsing and gargling.

Nathan washed the water around in his mouth as he moved along the railing to where the side stairs ran down to the driveway.

He spat a stream of foamy white, then dabbed at his mouth with the back of his

hand.
Nathan froze—listening.

Ahead of him in the dark, he had heard a thrashing sound in the broad overgrown no-man's land that lay between Needlewalk and the neighboring A-frame cottage.

A raccoon? He listened a few seconds more, but the sound had stopped.

He started back toward the screenedin porch when a distant *thump* came from behind him.

Nate turned to see that a pale blue light had appeared in the A-frame's big front patio door and windows facing the channel.

A rattling sound drew his attention to

the neighboring cottage's driveway. A white light was moving behind the trees that edged the lane and crowded the A-frame. The silhouette of a man holding a flashlight or cell phone moved through the branches. A box or case was balanced on his shoulder.

Nathan could just make out a linear glare as the light flashed along the side of a dark van parked in the drive twenty feet from the building.

Then semething rattled in the

Then something rattled in the undergrowth down by the water. Nate squinted, but he could only see darkness.

He wondered if Tony the soldier had finally returned. If so, he had to be near retirement age. Perhaps he'd hung up his guns and come back to Canada for his golden years.

Tony had showed up after buying the A-frame, back when Nate was a boy. He

had done that just before being deployed to Europe. The cottage had been left to rot during the intervening years.

So, he saw Tony that one summer

So, he saw Tony that one summer long ago, and never again.

Until now?

As Nathan tiptoed into the cottage, he remembered Don Murdoch pushing a story about Tony being killed in Afghanistan. No one believed him, because that same night he'd told a tall tale about a bear coming to his camp and throwing his charcoal barbecue five hundred feet "with one swipe of its paw."

The gathering around the fire had shouted him down, but the curmudgeon had not given an inch.

As a kid, Nate sometimes wondered if Murdoch's stories only happened in his head. And he figured if that was true, a day might come that something happened to the man that no one else would believe.

The Murdoch who cried wolf.

Nathan chuckled as he locked the front door.

End of this eBook sample.

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G. WELLS TAYLOR was born in Oakville, Ontario, Canada in 1962, but spent most of his early life north of there in Owen Sound where he went on to study Design Arts at a local college. He later traveled to North Bay, Ontario to Journalism program before receiving a degree in English from Nipissing University. Taylor worked as a freelance writer for small market newspapers and later wrote, designed and edited for several Canadian niche magazines.

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He joined the digital publishing revolution early with an eBook version of his first novel When Graveyards Yawn that has been available online since 2000. Taylor published and edited the Wildclown Chronicle e-zine from 2001-2003 that showcased his novels, book trailer animations and illustrations, short story writing and book reviews alongside titles from other up-andcoming horror, fantasy and science fiction writers.

Still based in Canada, Taylor continues with his publishing plans that include additions to his Vampires of the Kind books, the Wildclown Mysteries, and sequels to the popular Variant Effect series.