

The Mountain Specter

by James Lynn Smith

She spotted a rural country store with chairs on its porch. Pulling her maroon sedan off the county road onto the lot in front, Elsa noted that it was still early morning. After opening the door she stepped out onto dusty gravel and looked toward the store. *I'm totally out-of-place here, but might as well ask.*

Two elder natives of the area were sitting on the porch. Both wore overalls but one was tall and rawboned, unlike his plump pal in the next chair.

Elsa saw that they were watching her approach and talking as if she couldn't hear. *Codgers are loud. Must think others are deaf, too.*

"Well looky here, Otis," the tall one said. "I do believe a fine, red-haired pullet from the city is gonna grace the store with her presence."

"Prob'ly lost, Lem," Otis said. "Dressed like she's going to Sunday meetin'."

She stopped short of the porch. "Hello, gentlemen. My name is Elsa Drake and I'm looking for the Stage Crafters of Lower Appalachia."

Lem looked at Otis. "Do you know of any stage crackers in lower Appalachia?"

"Nope, but there's lots of crackers around these parts. Some of 'em might like to get on stage."

Assuming they misheard, she said louder, "Stage *Crafters*. I wasn't being demeaning."

"We don't feel you meanted us," Otis replied. "Lem is the only *real* cracker I know, but I claim to be one too."

“You’re so full of it your overalls are ‘bout to bust at the seams,” he said. “Anyhow, the lady wants to know where such a crowd might be meetin’.”

“Could be Antioch Church or maybe the back room in Gill’s Cafe. Both five miles up the road,” Otis said.

She smiled and nodded. “Thank you, I’ll drive on and keep asking. Must be someone who can solve my problem.” Elsa turned and began walking toward her car.

“Hold on,” Lem said. “Maybe we can help.”

“Yeah,” Otis added, “Lem never met a problem he couldn’t make worse.”

She smiled again, faintly, and came back.

Lem settled back in his chair. “What you want with these people?”

“I’m a drama coach,” she said. “And I’ve been in contact with the organizer who invited me to come for an informal workshop. Have you seen any theater presentations around here?”

Lem directed his eyes skyward. “Nope. I visited my daughter’s family in Knoxville years ago. They *did* take me to a...symphony. At first, all these people in black come in. Then they start tootin’ and scratching around on their instruments. Sounded like a chicken coop with a fox in it. They ought to do that before the show starts...Anyways, that’s all my recent performance exposure. ”

Elsa’s brow furrowed.

“Ignore him,” Otis said. “He didn’t take his Metamucil today.” A snickering snort erupted from his throat.

Lem feigned a backhanded swing and frowned. “I’m trying to be honest and a little bit cultured with this nice, young lady.”

Sensing efforts toward good-natured humor, Elsa decided to play along. “Behind the culture, there’s a lot of boring, down-to-earth sweat and work. I was in gymnastics and ballet at one time.”

The edges of Lem's flaccid lips raised, his hands tracing along an imaginary hourglass shape.

"Are you trying to be fresh?" she asked, stifling a laugh.

"Young lady, your body fairly makes me tingle. But at my age, a tingle is all I get."

Otis slapped both his thighs. "That sounds fatal. Maybe you should shoot yourself. You'll feel better." He guffawed.

"Oh hush," Lem barked. "You sound like a gruntin' hog stumbling down the side of a bluff." He reached down and picked up a jar of clear liquid. After sipping, he made a face, shook his head, and then sighed with a broad grin. "This 'lixer of the mountains soothes the mortal beast."

She rolled her eyes. "You're a bad boy, Mister Lem."

"Who is this organizer, Miss Elsa," Otis asked.

"His name is Jason Walker. I met him at a drama conference in Chapel Hill, North Carolina."

"Jason," Otis said, "Ain't that old man Walker's grandson, Lem?"

"I think so," he answered. "But that 'old man' ain't as far along as we are."

"Well Jason's a mighty sporty lookin' lad. I can see why he was able to pull someone like this pretty, green-eyed miss out here into Appalachia."

Flattery gets a grade B smile. She forced a grin.

"What's he want you to do for him?" Lem asked.

She paused, not knowing how much to say. "He said he wants advice training some students and alumni to act in community theater, bringing performing arts to this part of Appalachia. By the way, why do you think they refer to themselves as *lower* Appalachia?"

Lem rubbed his chin. "Might be because this area is kind of low compared to more mountainous areas. Valleys in here have farms and a few small towns."

“I see,” she said. “What have you heard about Jason?”

He looked upward as if in thought. “Seems he finished school with a diploma. Nope, it was an associate degree or certificate in something at a community college in the next county, and then he spent a few years in the army.”

Jason’s more mature than I thought. She nodded, hinting for additional information.

“When he came out,” Otis added, “He was moody, had a dark side. Don’t know why he would choose to start a theater in these woods. Take a lot of energy to get that started out here. Only people interested might be tourists.”

“You said he was moody?” she asked. “When I met him, he was the epitome of charm and grace for a country bum...” *Damn, I’ve shown my colors now.*

“Bumpkin,” Otis said, completing her statement.

“I apologize. Unkind expressions plague our speech. I didn’t mean that.”

“No offense taken,” Lem said. “That’s what the boy was, least in the beginning. But he changed, spent time readin’ a lot and travelin’ off to Atlanta and Pittsburgh. Folks around here said they couldn’t understand what he was talkin’ about half the time. Worked odd jobs here and off somewhere. Fact is, ever since he got back from the service, strange things happened. Like he was the harbinger of bad news.”

The word’s “harbinger.”

Otis raised a finger. “Molly Thornhill shot herself for no reason. She worked in the post office. And Fred Dunaway hung himself from the rafters in his barn. Strange because times weren’t bad. No drought or floods. The sheriff couldn’t find no connection with Jason or anybody else. It’s one of those unsolved mysteries. People go crazy, like Myrtle Sommers. She’s always been nutty, listenin’ to all this fem’nist talk you hear about.”

Now, wait just a minute here.

“But somethin’ else got to her, too,” he continued. “Her old man came home and found her out in the feed lot, crying and curled up in a fecal position.”

That’s “fetal,” bozo.

“Now she’s been committed,” Lem added. “Her husband’s so lonely, he’s about to lose it too.”

After a few more minutes, conversation lagged, and Elsa said her goodbyes. Her next stop would be Gill’s Cafe, as Otis had suggested.

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A waitress directed Elsa into a back room where several people, teens to middle-aged, sat in a semicircle around a young man in a fold-up chair. When he stood, she recognized him. Jason was about four inches taller than she was, with coal black hair and brown eyes. His dress was casual, khakis and light blue shirt.

“Ms. Drake, I’m so glad you could come,” he said with enthusiasm. “We don’t have a formal place to meet yet, but I was hoping you could find us by asking around.”

“At first it was a puzzle, but a couple of older men at the store five miles back helped.”

“That must have been Lem and Otis. They’ve haunted these hills for years.” Muffled laughter broke out among the group.

“Friends,” Jason said, “this is Elsa Drake. I met her in Chapel Hill at an acting conference. She has more experience than I have and will give you some pointers today. We can work on some of her training scripts.”

“Good morning, fellow thespians,” Elsa said, smiling politely. “Community theater is one of the first signs of cultural enthusiasm in an area. At the conference, Jason told me you already had a name and were ready to go. I know some of you have jobs or other duties, so I’ll get on with it...”

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Two hours later, everyone took a lunch break for pulled pork and fried catfish orders brought in from Gill's kitchen, and Elsa had a chance to talk with Jason alone. She sat beside him at one of the small tables pushed aside for the activities. "Where will you perform your theater and get financing for sound, lights, and props?"

"An evolving issue," he said. "Some of the acting crew are putting their savings into it, including me. I've worked in hardware stores in nearby towns and spent time in both Atlanta and Pittsburgh, where I took jobs at Home Depot and such. I could have spent the money on getting a degree in drama, like you, but felt a pull to invest in this area."

"And why is that?"

He looked around and lowered his voice. "It's personal, but I'll tell you. When I returned from the service, I saw a lot of deep depression here. It's typical in certain areas of Appalachia due to limited opportunities. There's also strip mining that cuts mountain tops away, producing dust and carbon monoxide. Add poverty, silent family feuds, remembered horrors, and more. Finally, it got to me too, but rather than escape the area, I wanted to fix it. These people here are smart and creative, despite bad grammar and humble origins. They need creative outlets. Nothing better than the seven arts of theater to send the blues away."

"That's quite an undertaking. But where would your audience come from?"

"To start with it's our members, a few farmers, school teachers, and people who commute to work in mining areas. Some people learn about us when we do skits illustrating spiritual themes at Antioch Church. I know the reverend well, and he's all for a wholesome theater here. Since the church is small and run down, members are building a new one and willing to let us start up a theater in the old building for free until we can pay rent or buy the place. Eventually, tourists will come through. We'll have signs at the interstate to direct them along the county

road.”

“You’ll need to get exposure in the media. That might take some troupe travel and performance at larger venues.”

“Yes, thorny problems exist. Also actor availability; most of them work for a living. We’ll face all that in due time.”

I wonder if this is sensitive with him... “Jason, I’ve been told there were some suicides around here in the last few years. Did that happen after you returned from the Army?”

“Yes, they’ve happened in the past two years. Molly Thornhill and others. I’ve asked everybody I know about it, and the only thing they had in common was offers to buy their land. Some realty company, called Nature’s Eden, is offering ridiculous, substandard prices. No one wants to sell that low. A niece of Fred Dunaway said she found a stack of papers in his house. One was a letter threatening to reveal some dark secret if he didn’t go along with the property sale. He hanged himself soon afterwards.”

“Who was the letter from?” she asked.

“It was signed ‘Servant of the’—something illegible. I’ll simply call him or her ‘Servant.’ The sheriff couldn’t prove it had anything to do with the realty company. Could have been someone who just wanted Fred to move away, or else figured they could get his property cheap from the realty company.”

“Were there others?”

“Though Myrtle Sommers didn’t kill herself, she had a mental breakdown. Her husband, Tom, said his wife also received letters from Nature’s Eden offering a dirt-poor price for the property she inherited. He didn’t see a connection; said she was always superstitious. Depression and hard times made it worse. Myrtle claims to have seen a ghost on several nights. She wanted to get away from this area at any cost, but Tom didn’t want her to sell cheap. Maybe the stress of indecision was

too much for her.”

“Did Myrtle also get a threat after the offer to buy, like Fred?”

“No one’s looked for it, I guess. Another threat of disclosure if she didn’t sell would suggest several people around here have something to hide about their past. Wouldn’t be surprised; only a few decades ago there were all kinds of insane arguments, rapes, and shootings. A cloud of guilty secrets is probably part of the prevailing mood here.”

Elsa pushed a strand of red hair from her forehead. “It could also mean the person who’s threatening knows a lot about his or her neighbors.”

“Yeah, or spends a lot of time looking through county courthouse records and old newspapers. But they’d need local gossip too. Don’t think people around here would be telling anything to a stranger.”

“Maybe it’s somebody who’s moved away and willing to tell an outsider.”

“You have a point,” he said. “Perhaps someone from here in prison talking to a cellmate, now released...” Jason looked at his wristwatch. “Whoops. Look at the time, another two hours of workshop to go.”

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By mid-afternoon, most of the workshop participants were gone. Only two stayed longer for special practice on pronunciation. After they left, Elsa and Jason remained in the cafe’s back room.

“Wow, that was a good workshop today,” he said. “You instructed the group well, and I picked up a few tips on how best to direct actors.”

“I’m glad to have helped. You have some enthusiastic people here.”

“Where are you staying tonight?”

“It’s a quaint, bed-and-breakfast Inn back near the interstate.”

“That’s not too far. If you are interested, I could take you by the little church we will be operating in. Maybe you could suggest necessary modifications.”

“I’d be happy to do that,” she said.

On their way out from the back room, the cafe owner, Gill, appeared reluctant to acknowledge Elsa. When introduced, he barely nodded and muttered, “Okay, got to get back to work now.”

Outside, Jason said, “Don’t take offense. It takes Gill a while to warm up to strangers. He’s friendly enough when he knows you.”

Turning back, Elsa saw him, a shadowy figure peering from behind the window curtain.

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When they left, Elsa had agreed to be a passenger in Jason’s car. Upon arriving at the church, they saw the front door was open.

“Wonder what’s going on?” Jason said. “That’s Tom Sommers’ car. Remember, he’s the husband of Myrtle who had that breakdown.”

They entered the front door. A man, Elsa assumed was Tom, sat in a pew near the altar. A tall man with grey hair and glasses stood nearby, talking quietly to him.

“Hello, Jason,” the tall man said. “Who is your guest?”

“Reverend O’Toole, this is Elsa Drake. She came to help me run the workshop today. If you two are in private conference, we could come back later.”

The reverend paused until Tom nodded.

“Not necessary to leave, Jason,” Tom said. “We’re talkin’ about somethin’ that’s been spookin’ folks ‘round here. I’ve had strange things happen on my property too, like the fence torn down, stuff scattered in the tool shed, and my stock attacked.”

“Could it be a wild animal?” Jason asked.

“Not like I ever saw. Kilt one of my pigs and purposely mutilated it. No wild animal does that. I’ve also heard calls or howls, sorta like a wolf. Last night I was

fed up and fired my shotgun at somethin' back of my feedlot. Faint whitish color and upwards of eight foot, like it was floatin' above the ground. Didn't faze it."

Elsa looked at Jason. "That sounds sinister."

"It's not just me," Tom said, "Molly Thornhill's daughter still lives in her mom's house. Few nights ago, she heard wailin' sounds and saw a specter outside, like Myrtle did. Ghostly thing in the dark 'bout four hundred feet away. Seems to have come from the direction of Cone Head Mountain."

Elsa lifted one eyebrow.

Rev. O'Toole looked at her. "It's not really a mountain, more of an Appalachian foothill."

Jason looked at the reverend. "What do you make of this?"

"Something's making life in this area difficult," O'Toole said. "Tom was wondering if he should get Myrtle to sell out and get away. Maybe Molly's daughter feels the same."

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On the way back to Gill's Cafe to get her car, Elsa realized they had forgotten the original reason for going to the church. Jason was quiet and she knew he was bothered by what he heard. Her heart went out to him, a decent, responsible and caring boy—or rather, *man*. She was maybe a couple of years older, with a degree he didn't have. He was nevertheless grown, and his spirit of determination impressed her—also the fact he was good-looking.

"Elsa, I'm going to do a stakeout at Tom's place tomorrow night. As we were leaving, he told me this disturbance was happening most every night now. If some 'mountain specter' comes around, I want to follow and see where it goes. I'll carry my pistol. But before I go, I'm going to talk to the sheriff and see what else I can sniff out."

"I'm going with you on the night watch."

“No way, I couldn’t allow you to do that, Elsa. You’ve already done enough and it could be dangerous.”

“I’ve always been independent and hard-headed, Jason. I’m going with you and that’s final. I’ll meet you in front of the church tomorrow—say, seven-thirty pm. And then we can go together to Mr. Sommer’s place.

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The next day passed slowly for Elsa. After a quick evening meal at the inn, she was happy to leave for her rendezvous with Jason. Driving toward the church, she thought over what she knew, sure that Jason would turn up even more. Normally, ghosts were not a part of her belief system, but, so far, her number of human suspects was small. There were the two old codgers, Lem and Otis. Also Gill, possibly Tom Sommers, Reverend O’Toole, the two group members who stayed for extra practice, and—Jason himself. All were natives and could possibly know about dirt on various residents. The fact that trouble started with Jason’s return from the service was probably coincidence. After being around him, seeing his reaction to Tom’s experience, and having their open discussions, she could not imagine him being the problem.

Other possibilities chilled her spine to think about. Could some supernatural force of evil actually exist? She had no concrete evidence to the contrary.

Jason was already at the church. “Let’s go in your car,” he said. “No one is familiar with it. We can park a quarter-mile from Tom’s and walk the rest of the way. He’s expecting us.”

“Sounds good,” she said, unlocking the doors from inside.

Jason slid into the passenger side. “Down the road here, straight ahead.” He took a deep breath. “I went to the county courthouse records archives and the sheriff’s office today. He’s a good guy. Told me things we haven’t heard officially.”

“Like what?”

“Molly Thornill’s daughter not only said she saw a specter, but told the sheriff that she also found a threatening letter among her mom’s things. It was in an odd font, kind of gothic, urging her to leave the ‘sin infected area’ and made reference to the ‘angry spirit from a child of unholy union.’ It was signed ‘Servant of the Damned.’ A few nights later her daughter heard unnatural sounds downstairs, like something struggling against the front door. The next morning, a dead, badly deformed piglet was lying on her doorstep. The sheriff didn’t speculate on what that meant, but said he needed evidence of criminal activity to get involved. He wants us to be very cautious but tell him about anything we learn.”

“That pig thing’s gruesome. It’s a symbol for something.”

Jason rubbed his forehead. “It’s not hard to imagine incestuous families, secret births, and hidden deaths in days gone by. Trauma sometimes imparts guilt to the victim and that magnifies fear.”

“They come to expect bad things?”

“Yes. But, on another note, I found recent newspaper archives had been moved to the courthouse annex. There was a ‘town meeting’ in nearby Parsonburg months ago where a lot of our community met with others to discuss the land purchase offers by Nature’s Eden. Everyone said the company was vague about the intended use. Most said letters implied that they wanted land for resort communities.”

Elsa turned toward him briefly. “Resort? Out here? This is pretty far from any sizeable city or impressive geological formations.”

“That’s what I thought and talked about it with the sheriff. He suspects the Nature’s Eden is a shell company, and has contacted the FBI for information. He’ll have to wait his turn; they are more concerned with terrorist plots presently—Turn to the left here.”

Elsa took the gravel road he indicated and drove about a mile.

“Let’s pull over and park here,” Jason said.

They walked along the road to Sommer’s house, a modest sized structure with peeling white paint and a rusting corrugated metal roof. Jason went to the front door and greeted Sommers who handed him a blanket and flashlight. After a short conversation, he approached Elsa. “Tom won’t be joining us—his arthritis and night air don’t mix. We’ll hold our stakeout in the milk shed. It’s not used anymore. There are stools in there and a concrete floor. We can see the feedlot and barn as well as his house through open windows.”

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The sun had gone down and it was cool. Windows had no glass panes but once had shutters, now off their hinges. Smells coming through the openings were both rank and nostalgic to Elsa, reminding her of visits to her grandmother’s farm when she was little. Jason placed the blanket around Elsa’s shoulders and used the flashlight to load his pistol, making sure the safety was engaged. The only natural light came from a half-moon, so surroundings were barely visible.

She stood up, laying the blanket over the windowsill, and did a few knee bends.

“Yes, I know it’s boring,” Jason said. “We may have to call it off if nothing happens pretty soon.”

A distant howl, much like a wolf’s, penetrated the air. Cattle in the feedlot became restless. Before long, another howl was much closer. Elsa tried to imagine human imitation, but it seemed more authentic. The eerie quality of the werewolf in her childhood nightmares came to mind. “I expected a ghostly apparition,” she whispered.

In a hushed voice, Jason said, “Remember Tom already shot at a ghost night before last. The specter’s now changed form. If true to the threat letters, it’s

probably some shapeshifter sent by the ‘Servant of the Damned.’”

“Shapeshifter? That’s—” Loud impacts slamming against the house and feedlot gate startled her.

Jason grabbed her arm. “By the woodpile, throwing firewood.”

Alarmed, the three cows and calf in the lot began darting around. The shadowy shape by the woodpile then scaled the fence and leaped into the feedlot with a grunt. The next sound was loud bleating by the calf. The unmistakable sound of the animal falling to the ground was followed by the attacker scrambling back over the fence.

“Assaulted the calf,” Jason hissed. “We’re following this thing.” He moved out of the shed and craned to see the attacker. “Behind the house, off to the right. It’s headed for the woods. Bring the flashlight but don’t turn it on.”

Passing by the feedlot fence, Elsa saw a dark pool underneath the calf’s upper body. Silently, she followed Jason around brush and tall field grass, approaching a patch of trees.

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Once they were deep among the trees, moonlight was less effective. However, Elsa noted there was a path. *Once a logging trail, most likely.* Something alongside the path registered in the periphery of her eye. “Jason, what’s that?”

“Come past it and shine the light back on it. That’ll keep anything ahead from seeing the flashlight.”

When she pressed the light on, the circle of illumination fell on a wrinkled, white sheet, mounted to wooden strips, one narrow and long and one shorter near its top, fastened crossways. “The ghost?”

“Yes,” he said. “Held up in near darkness, it would look like a ghost floating over the ground. This is what Tom used his shotgun on night before last. See the holes? It was dumped here when the culprit retreated. Let’s go on and see where

this trail goes. Maybe we can catch the perpetrator.”

Elsa was tired and amazed at Jason’s zeal. The trail led farther away and graded upward, but he never wavered.

Finally, he stopped. “I think I see a narrow road ahead. Maybe a dirt driveway. This is beginning to look familiar.”

Soon a small clearing and cabin were barely visible. Wary of being detected, they crept behind a hedge in the side yard and peered around it at the cabin.

“What are you thinking?” Elsa whispered.

In a quiet voice, he said, “Think I know this place. We’re at the bottom of Cone Head Mountain. I’m trying to remember who lives here.”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” an angry voice said.

They turned to face a tall figure with a double-barrel shotgun pointed at them. It was too dark to see the face, but the vocal quality was familiar. “Lem?” they said together.

“I’ll take that pistol, Jason boy,” he said. “Both of you, get inside the cabin.”

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Just inside the front door, Lem swung the shotgun butt hard against Jason’s head and he crashed to the floor.

Elsa screamed, “You didn’t have to do that.”

He pointed to a closet. “Get in there, or get the same.” Holding the gun on her, he pushed her inside and locked the door behind her.

A few minutes passed and the door opened. She saw Jason, still on the floor, feet bound and hands tied behind him. Lem had more rope in his hand.

Come on out, missy. I’m tying you, too, and if you fight, I’ll squeeze the life out of your scrawny neck.”

“Please don’t tie my hands behind me.”

“You must think I’m senile. I’m neither stupid nor as old as I look. You

could bend over and untie your feet. That's not happening." He tied her hands behind her, pushed her down and then bound her feet.

Jason moaned and his eyelids fluttered, finally opening. "My head—what?" He peered at Lem, frowning. Eventually, he shook his head and said, "What are you doing?"

"Don't worry about that, showboy. First, I want you two to tell me what you know."

"I notice," Jason said, "that you've lost your country accent."

"Like you, I was born here, but didn't always stick around. So I can sound down-home or discuss business with corporate types. Now talk."

Both Jason and Elsa remained silent.

"Okay, let me get you started," Lem said. "You've figured that somebody's been trying to scare people enough to sell out and leave. You followed me here and know that person's me. Do you know why?"

"What are you going to do to us?" Elsa asked.

"Answer *my* questions," he said, and clamped his big hand about her neck while glaring at Jason.

"Easy," Jason blurted, "let her be. It's because you want folks to sell out at ridiculous prices to Nature's Eden."

"You've figured out more than that. Now spill it." His hand applied more pressure on Elsa's neck, causing her to grimace.

"Okay, stop hurting her," Jason said. "You probably get a big compensation from Nature's Eden. How can you do this? These people are your friends."

"Big deal, like that fat-ass, Otis? He couldn't tell an outhouse from a Swedish sauna. And, kin or not, these other people who inherited scrubby mountains and valleys from their folks deserve to lose it. My old man got cheated out of land by their parents, and my genetics are marred by forced couplings in my

own family.”

“Genetics?” Jason asked.

“Yeah. All my people look older than we are. Baggy, wrinkled skin. When she was thirty-nine, my mom looked like Pruneface from Dick Tracy.”

Elsa said, “But these things are in the past, the present generation is not guilty.”

A sardonic grin twisted Lem’s lips. “Retribution for sins of the fathers is visited upon the descendents. I don’t have the slightest sympathy. I’ll have a bundle of cash, and the bumpkins in this area will either be landless and gone or stay to witness shaved-off mountain tops while they suck in dust and fumes from the—” He stopped, mouth still open.

Finally, Jason asked, “So strip mining is behind Nature’s Eden?”

Lem walked slowly to the front door. “You touched my anger button and I said too much.” He turned off the overhead light, opened the door, and went out.

“Where’s he going?” Elsa asked.

“The cat’s out of the bag now. He’s got to finish us off. We have to escape somehow. He’s probably going for a drop cloth to protect his floor and wrap our bloody bodies in. I could kick and buck, but with these ropes on, it won’t do much.”

Elsa needed her hands free. There was only a dim light from a kitchen range coming through the door, but it helped. She saw a desk with a pen in a glass. She backed up to it, grasped it, and tried to manipulate it between the strands of rope around her wrists. It didn’t work.

She had to get her hands in front. Desperation drove her mind to a doubtful possibility. *Can I loop my hands under my feet and come up to the front?* She was once highly flexible in ballet and gymnastics. Stretchy ligaments allowed extreme bends. She knelt down and pushed her hands back and downward, grabbing her

feet. The rope around her wrists still did not clear her foot. She would need to do an extreme back-bend and almost let her shoulders disjunct. Grasping her toes and relaxing her shoulders, she was able to stretch her arms and finally enable her tied wrists to pass under her feet toward the front. Then she leaned forward.

As her bound hands looped under and cleared her knees, she could now hold things in front with her bound wrists. She took the pen and wedged it between the tight strands of rope around her ankles.

Jason looked over. "That's amazing. Keep it up."

It was a long struggle, and she was wet with perspiration by the time the ankle ropes were loose enough to untie. Then she heard Lem approaching the front door. *Oh God, out of time.* Looking around, she saw a stone paperweight on the desk. She grasped it in her tied hands and ran behind the door.

The door swung open and Lem walked in with a rolled-up tarpaulin over his shoulder. She raised the weight and pounded it against the side of his head.

"Bitch," he shouted. "It'll take more than that." He tossed the tarpaulin aside and raised his hands to catch the next down swing of her weapon. On catching it, he gibed, "Hah, not so smart missy, now you're gonna—"

From the floor Jason swung his legs horizontally against the man's ankles, knocking his feet from under him. Once on the floor, Elsa wrested the weight away and pounded it against his forehead several times. He went limp.

She felt for Lem's pocketknife and rushed over to Jason, cutting the ropes around his wrists. Once free, he cut her wrists loose and finally sawed away on the ropes around his ankles.

Jason said, "He had my pistol. No telling where he put it. I don't even know where the light switch is. See if you can find our flashlight."

"I must have dropped it when he caught us, I'll go look." She went outside; though still too dark to see much, her foot hit something. Luckily it was the

flashlight. Picking it up, she turned it on and went back toward the front door.

Alarm slammed her chest like a hammer.

In the doorway, Lem had one arm around Jason's neck from behind and the other holding a pistol against his temple. "Try to run, he gets it through his brains, and you're next. So get that light out of my face and turn around. Slowly walk over to the woodshed, there on the right."

"So you can make killing us less messy?"

"See the bright side. At least it'll give you a little more time."

Elsa reluctantly turned and walked toward the dim structure he indicated.

When there, she faced Lem.

At once, he released his victim's neck, raised his foot and kicked him to the ground. "Less splatter this way," he mumbled.

With horror, she saw the pistol pointed toward Jason and heard a yell. The deafening gunshot jarred her senseless. Knowing she was next, her thoughts could only race over lost dreams, sadness and injustice.

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Elsa didn't understand. After the demanding voice called out, followed by a loud discharge, it was Lem lying on the ground. A dark liquid was spreading underneath him. Jason stumbled to his feet.

"Sure hated to do that," a voice said, waving a flashlight over the body and tugging a night vision mask off. "He didn't obey my command to stop." The man with the voice approached and briefly pointed the light at his own face.

"Otis?" Jason said. "How—"

"Been followin' y'all ever since Tom told me about your thinkin'. Figured you'd get yourself in deep trouble or else find out somethin' so I went to the sheriff." He knelt down and felt Lem's neck. "Dang, he's not even gonna stand trial. I always figured Fred Dunaway had help hangin' hisself."

Finally able to speak, Elsa said, “You saved us. Thankful is an understatement. But why were *you* concerned with all this?”

“Been years since I’ve been a deputy. But the sheriff deputized me, temporary-like, to find this specter. He figured something serious was about to go down, and needed a cracker that knew this place. Feel bad about putin’ Lem down. Thought he was one of us good ol’ boys.”

Struggling against his weighty girth, he stood. “I might’ve knowed somethin’ was wrong though. Sometimes, for no reason, he could get all pissed, like a dog done snatched his supper away. It’s a cryin’ shame. He weren’t one to win no beauty contest but he was sharp as a quill.”

Otis looked away. “Now I gotta get on the truck CB and get the sheriff out here. You can wait on the porch. Sun’s comin’ up soon.”

As the deputy waddled away, Jason shook his head. “God, what’s just happened has my mind boggled. Seems unreal.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Elsa said. “I’m still weak-kneed”

After a pause, Jason took her hand, leading her toward the porch. “I believe things are going to be a lot more stable around here from now on, Elsa. You’ve been a part of some amazing events the last three days.”

She looked at him, sensing that he, too, must be feeling a bewildering sense of wonder. There was no absolute way of knowing who might be the true heroes and villains in life. But she knew whose project she would be taking an interest in for the future. Jason would need a lot of help. Assuming his assembly of talent was committed, she could provide contacts, even help him arrange to get a major in drama and minor in business.

Despite her intentions, she didn’t yet know how to classify her relationship with Jason. *Is he like a brother or something more?* Smiling, Elsa knew one thing. She was wide open to whatever possibilities would come.

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