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An Empty Tree
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Chapter 1

1. The Man in the Cap

Looking up from the cracked linoleum of the floor, the woman saw the man standing over her. She needed help. She knew she needed help; she just couldn't remember why. Maybe he would help her.

Dark eyes set deeply into a stubbled face looked down at her under the brim of a blue baseball cap. The patch on the front had been ripped off. It seemed strange. Why he would do that? Why take the patch off? She wanted to ask him but couldn't. She needed help. Her mouth moved. There was no sound. The man in the blue cap smiled at her.

Pearl Hendrix and her husband John had owned the small store and gas station for forty years. Their kids had worked the store growing up. They were gone now, but Pearl and John still opened every morning. Sitting on a country crossroads fifty miles out of Kansas City, business was steady. The till probably had over four hundred dollars in it, even so early in the day.

Moving her mouth, Pearl tried to speak again. "Help me." It was barely a whisper, but it was audible.

The man in the blue ball cap nodded, and smiled understandingly. Kneeling, he took Pearl's hand in his and laid it on her stomach.

Her eyebrows furrowed, puzzled. She was wet. Her stomach was wet. When he let her hand go, it slid off her stomach and came to rest in a sticky pool on the linoleum. Opening her eyes wider trying to understand, Pearl tried to speak. She shook her head feebly side to side. No.

Drawing his other hand quickly across her neck, the blade of the heavy knife prevented any sound from escaping. What little blood remained in the old woman's body drained rapidly from the severed carotid artery onto the floor.

Standing, the man in the cap moved behind the counter. He stepped over the thin old man lying on the floor, careful not to step in the blood that was already drying to a rusty brown at the edges of the puddle. Lifting the cash drawer out of the register, he dumped the contents into a brown paper sack that he took from under the counter. Who used brown paper sacks anymore? Then looking at the two bodies on the floor he nodded to himself with a smile. Oh, right, old people.

He had money. He needed transportation. Pushing the glass door hard enough that it banged against the wall, rattling the glass, he stopped and scanned the lot, then walked quickly to the gas pumps.

Alerted at the sound of his footsteps behind, the girl filling the old Toyota turned an instant before the tip of the big knife's blade plunged through her kidney. That saved her life.

Wide-eyed she stared into the face of the man in the cap. The eyes were blue, luminous, startled but not fearful. They drew him in, fascinated him. She would live, at least for a while.

2. Moving Day

Lying on his back, slowly gaining consciousness, he stared through slitted lids at the spotted ceiling and thought the thought. One good day. It was the idea that began every day.

He was pudgy, balding, with a wisp of silver hair circling his head. He mouthed the words. One good day. Can I have just one? Maybe it was really a prayer. He wasn't sure about that. Who would be praying to? God? Maybe, maybe not. Someone. No one. It didn't matter.

He closed his eyes, putting his arm over his face and waited for the pain to subside. Awakening slowly, parting the cobwebs and joining the living, his brain began to review the day ahead.

Barry Broomfield, Regional Sales Manager, Marketing Rep, Order Taker, Customer Service Phone Answerer and President of Atlanta Electronics and Supplies, was moving today. Leaving the small one-bedroom apartment that had become his base of operations since the big day, he was headed west. He had heard somewhere that Sioux Falls, South Dakota was a burgeoning high tech center. He had heard that from some other salesman at an airport bar in a city that he couldn't remember. In between flights, they sat sipping scotch, slowly pickling their brains and talking about the trials of life on the road and the dumbass store buyers they were forced to deal with.

Barry didn't recall much else about the conversation or the face of the man who had shared the drinks with him, but Sioux Falls seemed as good a place as any to relocate his small electronics supply business. He liked the sound of the name - Sioux Falls. Western, different, cool and clean, it would be a good place for a new start, far away from Atlanta. Some place quiet, some place to think and make sense of things. He hadn't figured much out in the last year, but at least he had made a decision. He was moving to Sioux Falls.

3. Natural Born Trooper

"Forty-two Alpha, 10-48 I-229 at Berington Road, mile marker fifty-eight."

"10-4, Forty-two Alpha, traffic stop, 229 at mile marker fifty-eight, Berington Road." The dispatcher sounded young for the fifty-three year old grandmother that Sorensen knew her to be.

Straightening the 'Smokey Bear' campaign hat squarely on his head as he stepped from the car, Sergeant Paul Sorensen approached the vehicle walking slowly on the left, close to the side of the car. Greater than the likelihood of a threat from the driver of the car, was the possibility of some dumbass watching the blue lights and not the road. They called it the 'moth effect', drivers transfixed by the emergency lights and steering right into them. More than one trooper had been injured, not paying attention to traffic, a driver sideswiping them as they stood beside a car on a routine traffic stop. Some had been killed.

His right hand trailed along the side of the car, pulling up on the trunk lid as he passed ensuring that it was latched, and no one would be popping out behind him. His eyes scanned the backseat

briefly - empty - and returned to the driver watching him approach in the side mirror.

“License and registration, sir.”

Sorensen appreciated that the man, mid-forties, well dressed, driving a Ford Fusion, rental car license plate, did not make the standard inquiry...‘Is there a problem, officer?’ A point in his favor. The contract on the seat, confirmed what the dispatcher had told him when he had them check the tag prior to making the traffic stop. This was a rental car. Leaning forward, the driver reached into his rear pocket for the wallet containing his driver’s license, Sorensen watching closely.

Smiling, he handed Sorensen the license and said only, “Here you go. It’s a rental. Have the contract but no registration. Picked it up at the airport in Sioux Falls.”

Sorensen nodded, looking under the wide brim of the hat at the license, holding it so that he could see the man as he scanned the information on the license.

“From Texas, Mr. Perkins?”

“Yes, I am.” There was just the slightest hint of twang.

“Know, why I stopped you?”

Smiling a ‘you got me, officer’ smile that he had probably used a hundred times, he said, “Well, I’m pretty sure I was speeding. Sorry about that.”

“Yes, you were,” Sorensen said, nodding in confirmation. “Eighty miles per hour. Speed limit on the interstate is seventy.”

“Yep, I know. Sorry.” Mr. Perkins seemed resigned to his fate and waited patiently for the trooper to finish the customary inquisition.

Another point in his favor, Mr. Perkins avoided the usual excuse that the speed limit in South Dakota was seventy-five and he had just forgotten to slow down when he crossed the state line. Feeling generous and not really in the mood to ruin anyone’s day, he gave a small smile to Mr. Perkins as he handed the driver’s license back.

“Alright, keep it down then.” He turned and walked back to his cruiser, with a pleasant nod.

Waiting until Sorensen was seated in his car, Mr. Perkins, the man from Texas driving a rental car from South Dakota, pulled steadily from the shoulder onto the interstate, merging with traffic carefully. The trooper watched appreciatively. Perkins was the ideal traffic stop. Not argumentative, not ingratiating, not whining, he just conducted business, straightforward and courteous. It was just business. Sorensen knew that Perkins had probably used those tactics many times in order to avoid citations, and he didn’t care. So be it. All was right with the world.

Sergeant Paul Sorensen was feeling good. The new stripes on his shirt were fresh, still stiff and starched. It had taken eight years, slower than most, but he had finally made sergeant. It had never really been an issue.

Sorensen had been content, in fact, had loved, doing exactly what he had always wanted to do. A natural born trooper, he relished the independence of the road, working with no one looking over his shoulder. Some of the local cops, county and city, liked to poke fun at the troopers saying they were traffic cops and didn’t do real police work. It didn’t bother Sorensen. Sitting in diners over coffee

with local officers, he was good-natured. He just enjoyed being an Iowa State Trooper. It was all he wanted to do. Sometimes he thought he would have paid them to be able to do it.

He reached down and turned the volume up on the police radio. The swirling chatter from troopers and dispatchers filled the car. Smiling, he accelerated and merged into the interstate traffic.

4. No More Pretending

The tiny apartment in an Atlanta suburb was on the opposite side of the city from the large Cape Cod Barry's wife occupied. Actually, she was his ex-wife. It had been their house, now it was hers, along with all of the bank accounts, savings and personal possessions and the monthly alimony check amounting to half of his income. Barry's friends were astonished at the divorce settlement. Some were divorced, others were contemplating it, but none had ever seen an agreement so one-sided. They chided Barry pointedly, that he was making it harder for everyone by giving in so easily.

Georgia was not a fifty-fifty community property state. It was an equitable distribution state when it came to marriage and divorce. He had not really understood what that meant until going through the process. In the words of a drunk friend commiserating with him over beers one night, equitable distribution meant that the wife was a victim until proven otherwise. Of course, that was not a technical legal definition, but it did seem to be the practical application.

So on the day, the judge, charged with the law and the moral responsibility to protect southern womanhood, determined in a very southern-gentlemanly way that his ex-wife got everything. Barry was left with peace. He considered it a fair trade and perfect settlement. That had been the big day.

He got his eyes open again. Looking across the small room to the window, he saw a few hopeful rays of sunlight down on the floor, shining through the slatted blinds in long thin horizontal blocks.

The light through the window made his eyes hurt again. This time the needles didn't pierce through his pupils to lodge somewhere in the center of his skull. There was merely a dull, throbbing ache behind his retinas that seemed to circle his head, definitely an improvement.

He sat up on the sofa pillows he had thrown on the floor the night before and looked around the empty room. The entire apartment was empty. A fourteen-foot rental truck sat in the parking space outside, loaded with all of his possessions. It was more truck than he needed, but was the smallest he could rent and still pull a car trailer with his old Nissan on the back.

Knees creaking and cracking, he pushed himself slowly to his feet. He had loaded the truck the day before, struggling with some of the big items, but managing to cram them all in. He had left out the sofa pillows so that he would have some place to sleep after his good-bye party at the bar and grill at the end of the street.

It wasn't much of a party really, just the regular evening of drinking and making small talk with the bartender, Trish. Paying his tab when he stood up to leave, he placed a larger than normal tip on the credit card slip. It was a farewell after all. Trish had said goodbye and that she would miss him, trying to sound like she meant it.

Now, dragging his body slowly and painfully from the floor, he went to the bathroom and performed the morning routine. It was done out of habit. Teeth brushed, he dragged a razor over his stubble then sat on the low john seat and took a dump. The final step was to squeeze into the tiny shower and stand under water as hot as he could bear to clean himself and get the blood flowing to his brain, warming it up to at least minimal functioning speed.

When the routine was completed, Barry locked the door, leaving the key inside on the windowsill as the apartment manager had instructed, and headed out to the truck. There was no need to delay...no reason to delay. No one was waving goodbye or waiting to give him a farewell hug. No need to make it harder than it was. Just crank it up and go.

He had allowed himself a week's vacation to get moved and resettled in the old farmhouse he had found in South Dakota. In the rental truck, Sioux Falls was a hard two-day drive, and he had slept through the easy, early morning driving hours. Now he would have to fight the Atlanta rush hour as he made his way north. Well, at least once there, he had a place to stay, and he could work his business from anywhere. That was a good thing. Perspective was everything he was beginning to think. Moving to South Dakota, a place he had never been until he went to look for a house was a good thing, although he wondered how that perspective would hold up during a South Dakota February. Too late to worry about that now, it was time to go.

He threw the sofa pillows and shaving kit in the back of the truck, checked the tire straps and safety chains on the car carrier and climbed into the cab. Cranking the old rental up, he was relieved that it started. It was not the newest of trucks. He figured they didn't give you the best rigs for one-way, cross-country rentals. Never knew what shape they would be in when they got where they were going.

Pulling from the parking lot onto the street, Barry checked the mirrors frequently to make sure the car carrier was still behind and following the truck. He wasn't all that comfortable that he had the Nissan properly secured on the carrier, but it seemed to be tagging reluctantly along behind. He had the cab window cranked down. Outside the air was already hot and humid, although it was the first week of October. It felt strange that, for the first time in his life, he would not see the Georgia autumn come on, slowly and gently.

Winding through the suburban streets, Barry found his way onto the ramp to I-75 northbound. Twenty minutes later, he looked in the truck's side mirrors and saw the Atlanta skyline. Goodbye, he thought. Thanks for everything, for life. I'll keep in touch.

Watching the city diminish in the distance as he put miles between them he could almost hear it talking to him. "I reckon you won't keep in touch, Barry. This is goodbye. Don't pretend it's not."

Barry nodded, to himself. Right, it was goodbye. No more pretending about things. The journey began.

5. Can You Guess My Name

The driver hummed. Then, he whistled and then he hummed some more. He was happy. It was surreal. The girl in the car with him couldn't believe it. His self-contented humming was more than annoying. She was in hell. He was singing like a lark as if putting a knife to her ribs and kidnapping her was just a normal day. It was bullshit.

The humming pulled her from a distant, tortured nap that had been her refuge. Slowly forcing her eyes open, she focused on the car's interior. It was bare. The kind of car a young woman on a tight budget would drive. The dashboard and seats were nondescript beige plastic. Looking up and straight ahead, she saw bug spatters on the windshield. A fly buzzed and bounced off the inside of the windshield trying to escape its prison of glass.

Becoming aware of the tension in her right arm, she looked down. Her arm was firmly secured to the seat frame by the thin leather belt she had worn. It cut a deep groove in her right wrist, and there was blood smeared around her hand and on the belt.

Humming. There it was again. He was humming a melody that was familiar, but just beyond recognition, over and over, repeating the same tune. It was irritating beyond belief. She turned her head to the left and looked at the man. He seemed content, almost harmless, but not quite.

"Who are you? Why are you doing this?" she asked softly, swallowing down her irritation, trying to keep her composure and not provoke him.

The man's head turned towards her. She cringed. The look of contented harmlessness evaporated. The eyes bored into her, hard and vicious. A smile still lingered on his narrow face, but not the carefree smile of content she had seen from the side. It was a smile that held a mean secret.

"Call me..." He thought for a moment. His head turned towards her, grinning and showing a set of perfect white teeth. "Luther. Call me Luther."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Why, I needed a ride, a car, and now I'm just giving you a ride," Luther said letting his face morph into a full grin.

The grin was more annoying than the humming. "So you just took me. That's it? You took me. You used a knife. You tied my arm." The grin widened on his face. The taunting arrogance made her angry. Fuck him. "Who the hell do you think you are? What gives you the fucking right just to take me?" She jerked her arm savagely, trying to free it.

"You might not have let me give you a ride." He spoke softly, matter-of-factly. "Somebody else might be giving you a ride. Couldn't have that could we?" The grin was still on his face as Luther turned back to focus the road.

"I don't need a ride. This is my car." Her logic was futile, she knew that. "Let me go. Please," she said as firmly as she could manage.

Luther turned back towards her, examining her closely, the grin gone from his face. She was adapting, struggling to find a way to cope with the situation. Not good. He reached his right hand out. She turned her face away, but Luther grabbed her chin and jerked her head back around. He felt a tingle in his groin at the instant of fear in her eyes. Then he saw that other look come to the

front, and the fear was forced down. Determination. The look said she would get through this. She would find a way. So she thought. Luther smiled.

“Well,” he said, “we can talk about letting you go tomorrow maybe. Right now I’m giving you a ride.” He let go of her chin and put his hand back on the wheel.

The girl stared at him until the humming started again. Turning her head to stare out of the passenger window, she felt her mind slipping away again, out into the passing fields, anywhere to get away from the car and the humming man. Forcing away those thoughts, she pulled herself back into the car, into now. She had to stay in the now if she was going to find a way out. She was not a girl for tears, but the frustration and uncertainty sent one trickling down her cheek. She shook her head. No tears.

Luther hummed again. The words of the Rolling Stones song came out in a half whisper, as he beat out the rhythm on the steering wheel with his hand. ‘...Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my name...’

He glanced over at the girl. She was staring out the window, but she was alert, conscious and thinking.

He felt the thrill coursing through his body, in his gut and balls. He had needed money. The store had money. They elderly owners were convenient targets. Targets of opportunity. The girl too, she was a target of opportunity. He was going to make the most of that opportunity when the time came, but not yet. They had time, and he had to put some miles between him and the little country store in Kansas.

“Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my name,” Luther sang softly.

Leaning against the passenger door, she stared at him. Luther, or whoever he was, seemed to be the master of the situation. She had to find a way to fight back. It was that or surrender to whatever he had in mind. That was an unpleasant thought, and enough to send a shiver up her spine.

Lighting a cigarette, he rested his left elbow out the window. The cigarette dangled from his fingers. Wind rushing by his arm, blew on his face and hair. He was at ease, in control, all powerful. And he knew it.

...excerpt....

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