

Prologue

A flutter of wings broke Maeve's concentration. Raising her eyes to the open skylight Maeve watched a raven descend, its iridescent plumage rustling, recalling the sound of silk blowing in the wind. It glided throughout the cavernous library that operated as an office and base of operations. Stirred by the bird's wings, dust motes swirled in the sunbeams radiating through high arched windows on the second level.

The raven landed on the back of a visitor's chair opposite Maeve's desk, wings outspread for balance. Feathers ruffled, the feet stepped side to side, and the wings folded in. A grating "*kraa*" from the thick beak addressed Maeve.

Maeve leaned forward, steeping the fingers of her hands beneath her chin. "*Dia dhuit ar maidin* Morrigan. What news have you brought me?"

Maeve blinked and an ancient woman occupied the chair across the desk. Her shoulders slumped forward, the flowing black hair hanging below her chin. Below furrowed brows, the crone considered Maeve for a moment and cleared her throat.

"Good morning to you as well Meave. I have flown to you with news of a vision."

Visits from Morrigan were rare in the past years. Visions were even rarer. "My dear Morrigan, you've come to me in a diminutive state, dressed in rags. I assume you believe this to be bad news. Out with it."

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“The Hound of the Forge will rise in this life. I see your empire bathed in blood at his hands.”

Maeve cocked her head for a moment, stood up, and walked to the large windows behind her desk. Crossing arms before her, Maeve studied the rolling hills, recalled nations she had built, pondered the corporations at her command.

“The Hound is gone Morrigan, you guaranteed long ago that your plaything would never again nip at my heels. In return I have held my promises to you. I move the pieces; you stir unrest and lap up the carnage.”

Morrigan fidgeted in her chair, her chin twitching rapidly. “I have feasted for many years my Queen.”

Morrigan stood and shuffled to Maeve’s side. The top of her head rose to Maeve’s shoulder. Morrigan’s glance met an impenetrable facade. Loose red hair framed a strong jaw, smoldering eyes and strangely intoxicating lips.

Morrigan’s dry voice crackled, revealing her strain and underlying fear of the younger woman. “You honor me with your patronage. I have lived through your generosity alone and would not bite your hand.”

“Tell me then, who is left that could possibly return the Hound to flesh and blood?” Maeve turned to the ancient crone and held her face in open hands. The wrinkles and flabby neck disgusted her but she bottled the desire to push Morrigan away.

Small black eyes darted left and right in an attempt to avoid Maeve’s cold blue stare. “One of your kind, maybe?” Maeve asked. “Are there any left?”

“There are some, but the old ones are forgotten and weak.”

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Maeve released her hold, trailing fingertips down Morrigan's shoulders to gently grasp the frail hands. Stepping back she addressed the shabby form, looking from the top of the scraggly locks to the mud-stained hem of a voluminous dress.

"Red has always been your color Morrigan, but tell me, why do you come to me in such a miserable state? Are you afraid I'll be angry and your fragile appearance will soften the blow?" Maeve curled her lips in a knowing smile.

"Kraa," Morrigan coughed and moistened her lips with a narrow, black tongue. "I am simply feeling my age today, dear Queen. You must admit, the coming of the Hound is a distressing thought."

Maeve dropped her hands and motioned to the desk and their seats. Stepping to her comfortable, high-backed chair she mocked the visitor, "You fear him, don't you? You think I have not considered his return. That I would be unprepared when he falls upon us again?"

She settled herself, letting her hands hang loosely at the end of the chair arms and looked expectantly to Morrigan.

An entirely different form responded. In place of the crone stood a woman of extreme opposition to the cowering, nervous hag. Shining, iridescent locks pulled tight to her skull. High cheekbones and slim lips drew a tight line across her mouth. Slim and powerful, Morrigan rose and leaned forward, red-stained nails gripping the desktop. Fires in glistening black eyes burned into Maeve making it difficult to hide a sudden discomfort. Gone was the trembling servant. The Morrigan of battlefield glory addressed her queen with steel in her voice.

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“There is nothing on this earth I have to fear, Maeve. It is you who should worry. Your blood filled my vision as well.”

Feathers burst where Morrigan was standing. Maeve tracked the raven’s return flight into a clouded sky. She leaned forward, reaching for the phone.

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All Falls Down

Chapter 1

The terror of plummeting through a void. Reaching out but never finding purchase. Silently screaming but suffocating without oxygen. A seeming eternity of freefall and no promise of an end. Even the crush of meeting the ground would be welcome, but it never comes. Flailing wildly, screaming, calling out, grasping for a handhold that must be there. Panic reaches its peak, flowing into madness.

Cullen woke, gasping for air. Limbs akimbo, bed sheets clenched in white-knuckled fists, he frantically pieced reality together. Classic rock whispered from a clock radio three feet away. Large green numbers told Cullen he slept ten minutes past his 5:40 alarm. He reached out, fumbled for the snooze, and silenced AC/DC's Back in Black.

A headache pounding in his temples and neck tight from sleeping on his stomach, Cullen rolled over to scan his bedroom. Streetlight filtered through the blinds. A fan perched on the ceiling, waiting for the summer months. At the bed's far corner a tortie cat lay curled in a ball, one eye lazily peering back.

Sitting up with head in hands Cullen placed his feet on the floor, steadying himself through a dizzy spell. When it passed his fingers crawled along the side of the clock again turning the volume up for the next morning and canceling the snoozed alarm.

The dream was a haunting remnant of his childhood. Something he used to wake from as a toddler, though he could not remember a time in the last

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twenty years when it had visited. Shaking it off, he made a mental note to ask his mother about the nightmare later that day. That and taking out the garbage.

Cullen cast a glance over his shoulder and addressed the aloof cat, "Let's get this party started Lola."

"I'm going to kill you. I mean it, if I have to tell you one more time not to leave your pants in front of the washer when there is a hamper nearby I'm going to kill you." Nora actually had fire simmering in her eyes. A great thing about living with Cullen's wife was her wit. She could have been a native New Yorker.

"I'm sorry; I thought they were too dirty to go in the hamper, really." His hands held up in submission Cullen surrendered to the overwhelming force that is NORA.

Suddenly he was cornered in his own kitchen, back against the counter with only a toaster for defense. That wouldn't work though, since he was patiently waiting for the toast to pop, and his idea of breakfast did not include crumbled bread sacrificed in the heat of battle. Defenseless, Cullen waited for the first blow to land.

"There are six hampers down there, right next to the dryer. Is it so hard to take one more step and lift a lid?" Six hampers might seem a lot to most people considering our little family consisted of only the two of them and a cat, but Nora had a way of organizing menial tasks. Most of her clothes were to be separated

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from his and then they divided into color or clothing type. Something along those lines.

“Aye aye, captain!” Left arm pinned against his side and the right still quivering from a crisp salute.

She tattooed his chest with her knuckles and groaned while drawing away, “If the cat pees on a pile of clothes sitting on the basement floor I sure hope they’re all yours.”

He couldn’t resist; she was walking away completely unprotected. A quick, playful pat to her backside while she was still within range was Cullen’s only attempt to fight back.

“Hey!” She spun around scowling and bore down on him like a laser-guided missile. One would be surprised at how menacing a petite woman can appear in a nursing smock and pants. Making a show of protecting his own hind-end they circled the small kitchen, feinting playful swats and threatening each other, “You’re going to get it mister-man.”

“Come and get me. My arms are open in surrender.” She moved in reaching around for her free shot, and just as the sting came he encircled her in a much gentler embrace.

Her face bore a playful scowl as she looked up from inches away, “That was a dirty trick. What are you going to do with me now?”

“What does any spider do when it catches a fly in its web?” He gave her a quick kiss on those twisted lips only to be rewarded with playful disgust.

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That gentle face Cullen adored so much shrunk up as though a bushel of lemons had been crammed in her mouth. Turning her head to the side she spit out the imaginary sourness, “Ptuh, ctuh, ctuh, ctuh. Yuck, boy germs.” Nora’s sapphire blue eyes danced to meet his in that moment and he realized yet again that all of the love and fulfillment he’d ever need rested in her.

She rested her head on his right shoulder, placed her white tennis shoes on his socks, and they danced as clumsily as a penguin. Waddling in a tight circle, they shared a few brief seconds that erased the world around them. With eyes closed Cullen focused on the way she felt in his arms and the comfort of her own embrace.

A needle-sharp pain in his left thigh shot him to reality. Releasing Nora, he leaned down to discover their jealous companion Ruby, an all-around furry feline child. Addressing her in conciliatory tones he apologized, “Oh Lola, you little green-eyed monster. Were we ignoring you? We’re a bad cat mom and dad, aren’t we?” Her round head tilted up, the lips cracked open a bit and she meowed as her confirmation.

He bent down to pick her up, that tortoise-shell colored mutt of a cat they adored, cradled her upside-down in his arms and examined one of the forepaws that dug into the pajama pants. At least one curved talon sprung forth and Nora groaned, “We need to clip her nails tonight.” Suddenly the moment was lost as she drew away and zipped up her lunch bag. “I have to go now or I’m going to be late.”

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Zooming in for a quick peck on the lips she offered the usual morning blessings. "Have a good day honey. You can do it."

"Thanks, I love you," He spoke to her retreating back.

She made for the back door as Cullen leaned to the window where they kept a remote for the garage door. This also gave him a view of the rear driveway and the two-car garage in the back. Just before pressing the button Cullen spotted two rabbits nestled closely together amid last night's snowfall. They must have found a morning meal. He frequently left handfuls of corn on the ground for the birds and the few other winter animals that dared to stick around in the cold months.

The back door creaked open with Nora's exit, and as she closed it the noise startled the little fuzz balls. They bounded off for the snow-laden lilac bushes adjoining the far side of the garage and disappeared in the shadows as Nora came into view.

The screen porch door slowly bounced to a close behind her on its air-filled spring while Nora traversed the animal tracked snow under the welcome light of a motion lamp. Driving to work at quarter to six every morning guaranteed that she would leave the house in darkness during the winter months.

When they moved into the house a few years ago she pleaded to install the light and sensor now hanging below the second-story eaves. Growing up in the country Cullen had little fear of the dark, but her city nerves were always on

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the lookout for undesirables that bumped in the night. He never understood it really.

Their town, though large enough for Wisconsin standards, at over one hundred thousand residents, was not a thriving metropolis by any means. Where major cities eroded through constant waves of crime, even a pebble thrown into their little pond made large ripples.

A few days ago he heard at work that a man had entered a Walgreen's and held up the pharmacy at gunpoint. That was a shock and maybe a first as far as any locals could recall. Nearby neighborhoods were immediately warned and a few housewives were encouraged by their husbands to remove trigger-locks from the household pistol. The following day they heard news of a robbery at a local hotel.

A regular crime spree had broken out. To Cullen it may as well have been on the nightly news out of New York. He was well insulated, confident that they held nothing worth taking.

Lost in thought he had forgotten to raise the garage door. Convinced there was nothing but bunnies and squirrels hiding in the shadows, Cullen pressed the button causing the door to ascend. The overhead light illuminated the two-car garage on Nora's approach, further assuring her safety.

Sometimes he stood there leaning his elbows on the counter and watched her pull out of the garage. That time Lola popped up beside him and rubbed her fuzzy side in his face. Blowing cat hair from his lips and out of his nose Cullen dutifully rubbed her whiskers with one hand and held her tail in the other.

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The Jeep's lights turned on; the vehicle rolled backward packing the snow in ruts that he would try to follow on the way out. Cullen caught Nora's attention by waving Lola's tail as a good-bye and was rewarded with a wave and a smile.

All was right with the world.

The engine sound retreated, he let go of Lola, patted her off the counter, and edged toward the toast. It had probably popped during the penguin dance and had become cold hard bread better suited for croutons than breakfast. That would hardly be enough to ruin the day.

Telling himself to remember the toast for the squirrels Cullen downed a glass of milk and headed for the upstairs bathroom.

Chapter 2

Cullen glanced back at his computer screen, temporarily lost in thought. A second cup of morning coffee steamed on his desk. Tapping out a rhythm on the keyboard wrist-pad, he faced the challenge of enlightening undergraduates on the ancient Central American practices of ritual sacrifice.

Then again, maybe the bridge spanning the past and present was not as long as he thought.

Cullen tapped out a few more notes on his screen while noticing the increase of foot traffic outside the office. How would a twenty year old in the twenty-first century connect with people who suffered through self mutilation during prayer or worship. Then there were the Mayan dental inlays of stone declaring one's social status.

Colleagues heading to morning classes offered “hellos” and “good mornings” as they passed. Knocking out the final touches for the ten o'clock class awaiting him, Cullen responded in distracted mono-syllables.

A rap on the door broke his concentration, and Cullen looked up to see one of his favorite colleagues.

“Well, to what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from our esteemed Head of Anthropology?”

Dr. Houltersund waved off his greeting. She smiled brightly and always seemed to warm up a room with her presence. Casually stepping inside the

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cramped office, Erin pointed a thumb over her shoulder to identify a young man in the doorway.

“Very funny Cullen. I’m doing the rounds, introducing my new teaching assistant for Celtic Cultures. Laeg comes to us all the way from Belfast.”

Cullen stumbled out of his chair, rounded the desk corner, and extended a hand to Laeg.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Laeg. I can’t imagine what Dr. Houltersund had to promise that lured you to our quiet university in the middle of winter.”

Laeg shrugged his narrow shoulders. Aqua green eyes darkened for a moment then glimmered as a smirk jumped along his lips. The lilting accent of an Irishman replied, “Ye may not think so here sir, but where I come from the good Dr. Houltersund is a national treasure.”

Cullen squinted at Laeg an instant then cocked his head to Erin. “The students and faculty don’t adore you enough already? You had to recruit more from overseas?”

The room broke out in laughter. Erin reprimanded Cullen with a slap on the shoulder. Smiling, she wagged a finger between the two men.

“I think both of you actually have a great deal in common. You should tell stories over a few pints sometime this week. I’d be happy to entertain, but the department head probably should not be seen out boozing it up with her new T.A.”

“Absolutely. I can share experience gained from years of dodging the good doctor’s whip.”

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"I'm up for it. I could use a bit of an introduction to the local nightlife, if you know what I mean." Laeg flashed a grin and self-consciously ruffled his close-cropped auburn hair.

Erin clapped her hands before them.

"Good enough. That's settled, and I will not want a report on your activities." She patted the young man on the shoulder, "Laeg, can you please wander down to my office and wait for me there? I need a few more words with Cullen."

Laeg waved over his shoulder, "Tonight OK?"

"Probably," Cullen called out. "I'll check with my wife to make sure we don't have plans. Stop back in sometime after three o'clock."

"Got it."

Cullen returned to his seat and absentmindedly bumped his computer mouse to keep the screen-saver away. He motioned to a visitor's chair across the desk. Dr. Houltersund took a seat, crossing one leg over the other and resting her clasped hands on her knee.

Cullen regarded the retirement-aged woman before him, still vibrant and fit. Strands of silver invaded her braided red locks but did little to diminish her presence. He often wondered what kept such an accomplished anthropologist in a tiny liberal arts university. Tucked away. Nearly forgotten and underfunded in Wisconsin.

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Erin glanced out the window, squinting under the glare of reflective snow. “Isn't it beautiful here after the snows? It reminds me of a clean sheet laid over the world.”

“Huh, I guess you would think that after leaving your condo this morning. Some of us have an hour of snow-blowing to look forward to tonight.”

“Someday you'll miss that Cullen, not having a sidewalk to call your own.”

“You'll have to do better than that. My next house is going to be in the suburbs, with no sidewalk and definitely an attached garage.”

They both smiled and relaxed, easing into a relationship worn in like a comfortable pair of gloves.

“Cullen, I wanted to take the time to tell you something.” She sobered a bit but continued to exude her natural warmth. “I'm so proud of you. The youngest associate professor this department has ever seen. Your publications and translations have amazing insights. Yet all of that would be purely academic if I did not account for your energy and attentiveness to the students. You make the department look good and by extension make me look great. Thank you.”

A little taken aback Cullen tripped over the thoughts and responses jumping in his head. He settled for a simple, “Thanks Mom.”

Erin Houltersund stood from her chair, leaned forward, and took her sons hands in her own. Mother and son held each other's gaze until the phone rang and Cullen pulled away, an emotional tear dripping from the corner of his eye.

“Have a good day dear.”

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“It's pretty good already.” The shadow of his morning nightmare faded to a distant memory.

Waving and smiling, Cullen reached for the ringing phone.

“Good Morning, this is Cullen.”

“Hi, this is, um, Rosario from INAH. We would like to provide you with an enormous research grant allowing you full access to your favorite archaeological sites in Mexico. Can you be here tomorrow? Don't forget your wife.” Her voice was serious although this was a game Nora lovingly played once or twice a semester when she knew stress was wearing on him.

“Um, yeah. I think I can work out my teaching schedule, move some things around. But someone will have to take my wife shopping while I sweat it out in the jungle. And, you'll have to throw in a Jeep for personal travel.”

Ridiculous as that statement was she didn't miss a beat, “Okay then, Oceanic flight 815 takes off at five p.m. Should I book your flights now?”

That was a new one. Cullen actually snorted into the receiver. “That's a good one honey. Thanks for trying. Are you looking for a way out of the winter blues?”

Nora sighed on the other line, “I just need to get away sometimes, you know?”

“I really do. My drive in was awful this morning. There must have been three times I nearly slipped off the road. How's your day?”

“Pretty crappy.”

“Oh, I'm sorry babe. Has there been a lot of lifting today?” She worked as

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a nursing assistant in a county healthcare facility taking care of mostly Alzheimer's patients or other neurologically afflicted residents who could no longer support themselves or hope to be supported by family help alone. There were days when Cullen could not believe the difficulty of her job compared to the compensation, and he was spending the morning worrying about his next class discussion.

"No, I'm serious, it's been a very crappy day today. You wouldn't believe what they can do with the stuff. I was walking down the hall..."

"La, la, la, la, la. I can't hear you. Don't want to know!" Cullen burst out, trying to cut her off before the gory details. He knew she had to get these things off her chest or be unable to deal with her job but sometimes he was really not in the mood. Especially just before lunch. "Tell me later okay? By the way what do you want for dinner tonight?"

She grumbled a response, "That's actually what I called for. My supervisor asked if I could fill in and work the PM shift today. That would mean time and a half for those eight hours. What do you think?"

"I think its eight o'clock and you're probably dead on your feet already. How are you going to get through another fourteen hours?" There was quiet space on the line. Apparently he was called to agree rather than argue but still had to press the point. "We don't need the money Nora; there's no sense knocking yourself out."

"You know me though. Those eight hours could be the heating bill this month. Besides, I have the day off tomorrow and can sleep in to catch up." She

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was always concerned about money, and Cullen seemed to be able to watch it flow through his hands like sand. Nora focused on paying the next bill and killing car loans a year and a half early while he zeroed in on acquiring the next book or gadget that would temporarily satisfy his impulses.

Cullen surrendered, throwing up his hands and ignoring the fact she couldn't see it. "Okay. I'll just go home, grill some steaks, drink a few beers, and watch movies all night without you."

"You wouldn't dare. I bought those steaks so we could have them on the weekend." Her voice was lowering, assuming command of the situation.

"Don't worry," he chuckled. "Mom has a new T.A. she wants me to show around. I'll introduce him to the local wildlife and get back home in time to blow the snow, get the dishwasher loaded, and if I'm feeling really generous clean Lola's litter box."

"Are you kidding? Oh honey that would be terrific. Could you wash my uniforms too?" He had actually intended on washing his own work clothes. Oh well. "And if you're going to clean the litter box please remember to sweep up in front of it and wipe down the inside. It's been pretty stinky lately."

Right on the brink of complaining he remembered what she does for a living every single day and resolved himself to acquiesce. Cullen dropped his voice into Super Hubby, "You've got it. I'm your man."

"Yes you are, and I wouldn't have it any other way." That was just what he needed. Those words could drive him to do anything: move mountains, lift a car

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to save a child, or ignore the ache in his back that shoveling snow brought on.
Ahh, the things men do for love.

While he was soaking in the glow of her words Nora carried on, “Sorry honey, I have to get going. The morning food service came late today and it threw off our break schedule. Gotta go. I love you, have a good day.”

“Love you. Call me later if you want.”

“Okay, bye.”

“Bye.”

He waited a few seconds until hearing the dial tone. That was a habit, always wondering what she was doing on the other side of that broken connection. Cradling the receiver he turned back to the computer screen, contemplating the comparisons between modern body piercing and the ancient ritual bloodletting of piercing one’s own genitalia. Cullen shook his head and chuckled.

Chapter 3

Cullen was no match for Laeg's insatiable appetites. Whether it came to downing pints of ale or charming college girls with his Irish accent, Laeg was a dynamo. Cullen found it hard to imagine his mother's new T.A. being of any use in tomorrow's classes until he remembered his own college years. Though he hadn't been a prolific hound dog like Laeg, Cullen pushed his limits on a number of occasions and paid the price.

He looked around the bar. Undergraduates met shoulder to shoulder, leaning in to hear over the pounding music. With a certain nostalgia Cullen remembered nights and work-study paychecks spent in the endless pursuit of a perfect evening.

Those really were some wonderful times, before responsibility and repercussions forced their way into life. Feeling a brief twinge of ghosts long passed Cullen decided to unhitch his new friend and make his way home.

The two clanked glasses in a final toast. Assured that Laeg would have no trouble getting a ride home, Cullen clapped the jovial Irishman on the shoulder and wished him good luck. He squeezed toward the door, apologizing along the way. Shivering, laughing co-eds charged in the moment he reached for the exit. A blast of cold air greeted him. Cullen zipped up and pulled a stocking cap from the coat pocket, cinched a scarf tight around his neck.

Wisconsin winters hit in full force by January. Though there had been a few snowfalls in December the ground just hadn't frozen to the point where the

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white fluff could make it through a day without melting. Overnight old man winter had settled in to stay for a few months by dropping at least eight inches of heavy, wet snow.

Driving home on the slushy highway Cullen spotted definite signs that the locals were not entirely prepared. At odd angles to the road a few cars waited for rescue in the ditch. Brightening the encroaching gloom of night, hundreds of brake lights fluttered ahead on the miles that separated him from home and more work.

As an adult Cullen was never cut out for life in a winter state. The stiffening cold was bad enough, huddling under four blankets in bed, one of them electric, but then forking out over two hundred dollars a month for the heating bill was insane. On top of it all he had the distinct pain of removing snow from a long driveway and sidewalk that evening.

His plan to arrive home after yet another snowfall had melted away was not about to be realized. Most drivers were re-learning how to safely drive in the snowy conditions by slowing down long before the next stop and stopping completely before making turns. Nothing could stop those few brave souls who had more faith in their driving abilities than their own car did. After a few mishaps of his own in the past years Cullen learned to constantly remember that a Plymouth Neon was not a Hummer, no matter how earnestly he wanted it to be. Little modified imports fish-tailed into corners and gas-guzzling SUV's barreled through intersections well into the yellow warning light.

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Between the hot air pouring from his car fan and the extra fifteen minutes of stop-and-go driving that was tacked onto the commute Cullen began nodding off at the wheel. He welcomed the turn onto Maple Street, appropriately named after the sheltering canopy lining the sidewalks. Cullen's spirits picked up a beat after spying the mounds of plowed snow clogging the driveway.

He shifted the automatic transmission into low and crossed the center-line in a curve that would provide a direct approach to the obstacle ahead. Gas pedal to the floor, the Neon climbed toward at least one hundred horsepower. Cullen charged over the two foot high pile and spun across the sidewalk to the safety of that morning's ruts.

Chapter 4

The wind blew icy needles into the thin space between zipped-up collar and low-hanging cap. Cullen's face stung after an hour of clearing snow. Head ducked and shoulders driving forward he pushed for the garage while the snow blower finished the hard work. Cullen killed the throttle and stepped back swiping an accumulation of snow from a wet parka and gloves. Water droplets hissed on the hot engine and the wind buffeted the outside walls in the relative silence following the engine's roar.

Cullen shed the winter coat and snow pants then hung them on the blower's handlebars. They could drip dry in the garage rather than create a pool in the coat closet.

After piling boots, gloves, and hat on the mud room floor he entered the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee. Carousing in the bars with Laeg had nearly finished him for the night. If Cullen hoped to get through any more housework he would need a little warmth and a lot of caffeine.

Drifting through the dining room he passed the front door, checking the deadlock out of habit. Lola stepped down the second floor staircase. She greeted Cullen in a chirping, inquisitive voice.

"Hi Lola, I bet you've been lonely here all day."

Cullen bent over to pet the cat, but sparking pain forced him hunched over into the living room. He crashed onto the couch, propped feet on the coffee table. Cullen leaned his head back against the cushions and listened to the

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burbling coffee maker. Lola jumped to his lap and kneaded his belly. Giving in Cullen raised a hand and stroked a steady rhythm along her arched back.

“Just five minutes fuzzleball. There’s a lot more to do here tonight.”

Panicked cries shattered Cullen’s sun-filled dreamscape. Waking with a start he heard it once more then bolted to his feet. Cullen steadied his blood deprived legs after nearly falling on his face and stumbled toward the kitchen. He found Nora huddled on the floor, back against the kitchen cabinets, fumbling with something in her hands.

Cullen braced hands on the door jamb while shaking out the needles flowing in his veins.

“What’s going on?”

“Get down!” She looked up and frantically waved Cullen to the floor.

He crouched, reaching for Nora's shaking hands. She was pressing the wireless phone's talk button over and over. Wild eyes full of fear looked up at Cullen, and she burst out in a rapid fire whisper.

“Someone followed me home. I knew it. I even drove around the block once. The car stayed with me, all the way around. I came back down the block as fast as I could but it didn't work.”

On the edge of hyperventilating Nora placed her hands beneath her and shot a glance at the kitchen window. Cullen had never seen her like this.

Frightened.

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Hunted.

He knelt down, holding her close, rocking back and forth, whispering assurances.

“It’s okay now, you’re home. No one is coming to hurt you. Are you calling the police?”

She snapped to, lips quivering, tears swelling, holding the phone in an open hand. “It’s not okay. When I ran to the back door someone was walking up the driveway. And the phone isn’t working.”

Cullen’s stomach clenched. He plucked the phone from her hand and held it to his ear while crab-walking through darkness toward the mud room. Only the on/off beep of the Talk button replied. Breaking the threshold of the back room Cullen froze.

A pair of eyes, framed in a black mask, stared through the pane of glass in the back door. The door knob rattled. Nora stifled a scream behind him. The phone clattered to the floor as Cullen rushed back to Nora, dragging her to a standing position.

She was crushing his right hand in her grip and held onto the counter top with the other. Cullen cradled her jaw in his other hand. Speaking quickly and firmly he kept Nora's eyes tuned to his own.

“Go upstairs. Run. Right up to the attic and drop the latch. Throw down anything you can to block the door.”

“Where are you going? Come with me.”

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“The gun is in the basement. Once I have that, no one is going to make it upstairs. Trust me. Go. Now!”

Nora's head shook. She clawed at Cullen's shirt as he tried futilely to grip her wrists. Now was not the time to argue. A heart-pounding thump from the back door halted their struggle.

One more look into her eyes. A kiss on her tear-stained lips.

“I love you.”

She nodded.

“Go!”

Nora back-pedaled into the dining room. Cullen rushed through the kitchen, daring a glance at the back door as he passed by the mud room, and barreled down the basement steps.

Veering left at the bottom of the stairs, he ran headlong into pitch blackness, straight for the root cellar. Cullen unlatched the door and threw it open as he reached overhead for the light-bulb string. Harsh light momentarily blinded him. Hands sweeping the shelves, he finally found the black plastic pistol case on the bottom shelf.

Years ago Nora had demanded the hunting pistol be locked away in the basement. Back then it was a simple request he'd agreed to. Now Cullen would give anything to have the loaded handgun tucked away in his bedroom nightstand.

He flipped the case latches, tossed it open, and shook a handful of .357 shells from an ammo box. Unbuttoning the leather holster, Cullen squeezed the

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Ruger Blackhawk's rubber grips and let the holster fall on his way back up the steps.

The pounding continued above. Splintering wood told him there wasn't much time left. Lighting was better on the return trip. Cullen opened the revolver's guard and fed cartridges into the cylinder as quickly as he could. Several clattered to the floor before he closed the guard.

Taking a deep breath, Cullen stepped into the mud room again, gun raised. Silence held the moment in a quivering grip as Cullen sighted on the intruder nine feet away. Both knew he could not miss at that range, any damage inflicted would be deadly.

Cullen's breath escaped in a ragged hiss. Barely recognizable through a maze of cracked glass, the intruder's head cocked, a hawk regarding its prey. Cullen squared his stance and reached his thumb for the hammer.

A gloved fist burst the glass, fingers searching for the deadbolt lock. Cullen's heart raced, a jackhammer beating in his chest, adrenaline and panic triggering primal instincts to flee.

He cursed himself for not pulling the trigger but held the thoughts at bay with the excuse that Nora needed protection. Stocking feet skimmed over hardwood floors.

Slipping in the dining room he careened off a chair.

Headed for the staircase.

Wait. Something was not right.

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One hand on the banister, one foot on the steps, Cullen looked over his shoulder to see the front door ajar.

Did Nora run out the front door? No, she wouldn't leave the safety of the house. That meant...

Movement inside the open coat closet drew Cullen's attention. Before he could raise the Ruger in defense a searing pain blinded him.

Uncontrollable muscle spasms racked his body.

Cullen crashed against the railing, the front door, fell to the floor, one-hundred thousand volts of electricity fusing every cell in his body.

The back of his head and heels thrummed against the floor.

Just as quickly the agony released him. Electrical impulses faded in Cullen's trembling extremities. Vision gradually came back into focus.

A black-clad figure loomed over Cullen, straddling him, boots pinning his forearms. No features were discernible beneath his attacker's mask. Strange goggles prevented a glimpse of his eyes.

The smell of singed flesh and cigarettes hung in the air. Unable to raise a hand against the intruders, Cullen felt a scream of rage escape his lips, rising to a crescendo when he glimpsed two men dragging Nora down the stairs.

She kicked back at their shins. Nora thrashed against their arms, bit the air around her head.

Nothing halted their descent.

“Noraaaaaaaaaaa.”

She cried Cullen's name in return.

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Cried for help.

Screamed for the entire neighborhood to hear, right there in the sanctum of her front door.

A fourth man entered from the dining room, the one who kept them at the back door. He pulled a handful of cloth from a pant pocket and stuffed it between Nora's teeth, silencing her screams.

Cullen squirmed and kicked on the floor as she was carried over his prone body, their eyes searching for each other amid a wash of tears.

Something raised inside Cullen, a dark beast howling in his blood, straining at the leash.

Cullen redirected his gaze to the faceless enemy six feet above and bared his teeth. Forearms and shoulder muscles drove against the body mass restraining him.

The dark form shifted. Opaque goggles bore down on Cullen. Waves of fetid cigarette scented breath washed over him. A Taser, its wires still connected to his chest via dart-like electrodes, swung in an arc below a gloved hand.

Low, menacing laughter was the last sound Cullen heard before lightning coursed through him. Absolute, merciful darkness followed quickly on its heels.