

La-Z-Boy Lies

by J. Weld

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Still in uniform, Sheriff Jerome Jones sat snug in his La-Z-Boy chair, Scotch in hand, transfixed by what he saw on the three o'clock news. It was still hard to believe. Earlier that day, his ex-wife had murdered a man.

He took another sip. Cubes chilled his lips as he sucked mostly water from between them. His hand shook slightly.

Setting the glass down into the chair's plastic cup holder, he whispered "Damn, Angie."

All of this was going to bring the same unwanted attention as her court case. Everyone was going to wonder again if he was the bad guy that she said he was. If not that, they'd at least wonder why in the world he was ever married to such a crazy ass woman.

"Bonafide bitch," he said through the haze of inebriation, over the drone of the news anchor's voice. The guy kept saying the same shit.

Anchor: As you can see behind me, in that white van was a crime scene investigation team who just exited that van and entered the Copper Creek County Jail. Action News Team, here live on site. We believe that these were blood splatter technicians out of Reno. We're still putting the pieces of this puzzle together as they come to us. A guard here, John Dahner, died this morning, a victim of the attempted escape of three female inmates. Mr. Dahner leaves his wife and two kids behind. Our hearts and thoughts go out to them. But I have to tell you that this specialized team is a sign that Mr. Dahner's murder had a grisly side to it. A lot of blood. Of course, two of the escaped suspects have been caught. Margaret Hazel and Frances Morgan. Now, what we have learned, through my exclusive contact with the Copper Creek PD, is that these women are not suspects in the murder. The primary suspect is still at large...

He rolled his eyes at the ceiling and said "Fuck" louder than desired.

The more spectacular this became, the more he'd come under scrutiny. Right when he thought all of the bullshit had gone away, this new shit happens. It could be years – literally, years! – before all of this would go away again. He thought about praying but decided that he had prayed enough.

He picked up the watery Scotch and swirled it around. The cubes inside it softly rattled against each other and the glass. He didn't feel energetic enough to darken things up a bit.

He licked his lips and said "Putz" to the news anchor instead.

News Anchor: The questions truly abound! Was Ms. Jones strong enough at 5'3, 135 pounds, to somehow overtake the 6'2 240 pound ex college linebacker, John Dahner? How could she do it? She was facing a sentence of less than five years. Five ... years. Why suddenly kill an officer of the law? She has

been described as suffering from “schizophrenic traits.” Is jail where she even belonged? The Sheriff’s Department has no known leads at this time. With more questions than answers, Action News Team remains on site ...”

“No leads, no shit,” he said, feeling how sore his feet were from standing most of the day, organizing the search. Even after being convicted, he thought, this woman still knew how to cause trouble.

She always found a way.

“Bitch-ass bitch.”

They’ll probably give her the chair, he thought. I’ll be here in my La-Z and she’ll be there on some cold metal hot seat getting 2000 volts. He shrugged his shoulders and sighed.

“Done deal.”

Anchor: I know that I’ve said it before, but I have to stress again this. Incredible twist. The escaped prisoner Ms. Jones, now wanted for a brutal murder, is none other than Sheriff Jerome Jones’ ex-wife.

“Fuck you.”

Anchor: In fact, until State troopers took over, Mr. Jones was the lead officer conducting the search for Ms. Jones, his own wife, who is now a suspected murderer.

“Ex-wife, you double-talkin’ dip shit.”

Anchor: Mr. Jones has refused to comment on this aspect of the search.

“No shit.”

He felt his phone vibrate in his right pocket. He glanced at the display’s white light shining through the brown fabric of his slacks. A text message. From Cindy, no doubt. Again. He squirmed his heft around enough to finagle his hand into the pocket. He pulled it out.

From: Cindy Jones

Any news about mom? Really worried. Sorry about earlier. ;-(

You don’t need to be sorry, he thought. I should be sorry.

He grimaced and shook his head, remembering how he had barked at her earlier that day, before she got out of his SUV. She had only been doing what any other worried daughter would do. Asking questions. Her mom was a fugitive. Her dad was in charge of the search. Of course she’d want to know more. He had been patient for a while, up until she wouldn’t get out. Parked and idling in front of her friend’s house, those questions kept coming. On and on. He remembered staring at her friend’s dumb droopy banner hanging off the eaves in front of them (“Happy 13th Birthday Charlotte!”). And then he snapped: “Enough! You’ll know when I know! Got it?” He remembered how her eyes had widened and her face nearly curdled into a cry. She was silent for a few seconds before finally getting out with a huff. He had then backed out a little faster than needed to. He winced at the thought of it.

Well, he didn't feel any regrets about blowing up at her at the time, he noticed. He just wanted to come home. Relax.

Why? He considered. Why didn't I want to talk to her more? Wasn't that more important? Being a good dad? Isn't that what a good dad would do? Why not a hug goodbye instead of yelling? She felt as much stress as me. Maybe more.

He knew the answer. He looked at the swirling Scotch water in his hand. The truth: He wanted a drink. He wanted to get home and get lit. He could be 100 proof positive of that.

Still looking at the glass, he thought: Maybe this was the source of all the problems. Maybe we'd still be married if it wasn't for this good shit. Maybe nothing would've happened at the very start.

"Yeah, maybe so," he whispered. He tried not to think about it.

He put the glass down and opted to let his semi-numb thumbs text back "Sorry too please enjoy party babe."

He wondered if he shouldn't call her "babe." There might be a new investigation into some of his wife's allegations. His daughter might be talked to again, etc., etc. They could subpoena text messages. "Babe" was, after all, what he used to call his wife.

He backspaced-cleared "babe" and hit Send.

He tried to get the phone back into his pocket and it was too tight of a fit. He left it on his lap.

He tried to think of where else his wife (ex-wife!) could've gone. He reviewed what he already knew. They had thoroughly searched the fields around the jail. The K9 unit had lost track of her at the road. So she had gotten a ride. She had gotten it from her mother, very likely.

He remembered how grandma looked at him when she opened the door several hours ago. She had the same hateful eyes as her daughter. Her lips had been tightly sealed in a frown and she said nothing when he showed her the warrant and explained what they were about to do.

Now there was a woman who'd believe her own psycho-daughter over the town's Sheriff any day of the week – and maybe she should, he thought, given the truth of the matter. Good for her. Way to go, gran-mom, the original bitch-ass bitch – the one who birthed the biggest bitch-ass bitch in the world.

He had no trouble at all unleashing the search dogs. If she didn't wanna talk – fine. The hounds could do some talkin'. Barkin'. Scratchin'. Tearin' shit apart. Enjoy your silence, ye old black bitch.

He cracked a smile when he remembered telling members of the search team to break down a wall next to the kitchen. The dumbest dog had just alerted there. Seeing her face while a sledge hammer exploded dry wall for no reason whatsoever, standing there aghast with her arms crossed... Well, that was some funny shit. Yep, funny shit right there.

After that episode, they had canvassed all around and inside of his own house. He remembered the sound of the dogs sniffing and scrambling pointlessly, nails biting into hardwood. The scent was the strongest upstairs around her boxes of clothes.

He'd have to get on his hands and knees to clean up the dirty paw prints all over the place, especially up the stairs.

"Fuck that," he whispered.

Perhaps he'd ask Cindy to do it. He imagined what her ass would look like on her knees, scrubbing. No, don't think of that, he scolded himself.

He pinched his forehead with his hand, squeezing his temples. He searched his mind for his wife's intentions. He knew her best – or should. Where would she go? Where else could she go? If she was smart, she'd be long gone. Real long gone. She would've taken that ride from mom way, way out of town.

They had already searched the bus station. The train station. Airport. Airport parking lot, long term and short term. It had been one of the biggest "man" hunts that he could remember in his 20 years of service.

He thought of how much she hated him, though, and he felt that her running away forever was pretty unlikely. She'd be somewhere she could plot against him. Where?

He thought again of how those dogs had burst up the stairs, so sure of themselves. None of the boxes of clothes were big enough to fit in. Besides, someone already searched the attic.

Clean. The upstairs had to be clean.

One mystery did occur to him. When he got home after dropping Cindy off, he had walked through the kitchen to get ice from the freezer. He was pretty sure that a Bigelow tea box was out on the counter. The more he thought about it, the more he was sure. He was too lazy to verify now. The box read "Constant comment" on the top, in white cursive. Black box, red trim.

So... Why was that box out?

He stopped massaging his temples and muted the TV. He never used that tea. Cindy wouldn't have used it. No officer would've randomly pulled it out. But Angie – she drank it. Every morning. Either that or coffee.

His heart quickened. Now – TV still muted – he listened carefully. At least a minute passed in silence. Any move at all upstairs and his old country house would sing – some floorboard somewhere. He heard nothing.

The paradox lightly knotted his stomach: If she wasn't here, why the hell was the tea box out?

He breathed deep through his nose and whispered "Oh, no." It was a smell he vaguely remembered when he entered the house. Now it was more distinct, recognizable. (Or was it some kind of alchy-induced delusion?)

It occurred to him what the smell would be. Exhaling, he said "Son of a bitch." Her damn hair junk. He tried to remember the name and pictured the purple plastic bottle. Gold label. He remembered how deft she was at dropping the perfect amount of that white crap on her hand before applying. What was the name? Oh, yes. "Vitalis."

Spooked by the tea box and smell, he reasoned that maybe his mind was playing tricks on him. The mind conjured smells all the time, he had read once. Fear was the biggest trigger. But it made little sense: Why would she escape, come here, a place that would be searched for sure, and fix tea ... and then her hair? No. It was dumb. The woman was crazy, not dumb. Besides, the dogs had done their search. He should trust them more than his alchy-head.

Tea, Vitalis. "Pfffffft" he said to the silent TV, now showing a commercial for a drug that cured restless leg syndrome while probably giving someone a heart attack.

The tea box was a coincidence. Smelling the hair shit was mental. Maybe Cindy tried some on or spilled some. Whatever. Maybe she had some tea, too.

He smiled and chuckled. He kicked down the La-Z-Boy's leg rest and reached for the bottle of Famous Grouse on the coffee table. He darkened up his Scotch before reclining back into comfort and taking a big throated sip. It stung good.

He was about to unmute the TV when he heard something. The floorboards, maybe. No, it was more of a rocky, grinding sound. He wondered if it came from behind him – from the top of the stairs. It felt like it. The back of his neck tingled like a thousand tiny spiders crawling across it. The loose knots in his stomach tightened up. He didn't want to turn and look. He wanted to sink into his chair and disappear.

His rational mind took over and asked Why? Even if she were here, why should that bother me? I'd just arrest the bitch and bring her in. No one would blame me for whomping on her some on the way. So why in the hell am I scared?

The answer came to him. I hate the way she makes me feel. She knows the truth and I don't want to face it. I've already reckoned with my evil. I don't need to do it again. I don't need to talk to her. She can go to hell – and God willing, she will.

His nerves subsided and he snorted loud enough for anyone in the house to hear. He craned his neck to look up the stairs. He had almost turned enough to look when his phone buzzed again, almost falling off his lap. Another text from Cindy, no doubt. He quickly snatched it up and cancelled the vibration.

Phone in hand, he repositioned to turn and look up the stairs. It was deeply shadowed, especially towards the top. He saw nothing. No sign of life. No apparent cause of the weird sound.

Then something caught his eye at the very top, second step from the landing. He could barely see it in the shadows, an orange line (he thought) resting on top of the stair step. From his angle in the chair, the ceiling obstructed a full view of anything higher. He took a few short breaths and whispered "What the hell?"

He ducked down lower to improve his angle. Then ... he saw them. Orange socked feet. Hovering high water above those – it looked like the bottoms of blue pants. The socks and pants were straight out of CCC jail.

He blinked several times in disbelief. The swaths of color were real enough. The more he peered into the dark at them, the more he saw feet. It had to be her, right? It simply had to be.

“Holy shit. Holy, holy, holy shit” he whispered. A pin-prickliness spread over his whole body.

They were so still. Frozen. Like mannequin feet. He wondered if it could be a prank and decided that it couldn't be. This was absolutely real. She was trying to sneak up on him, slowly but surely.

He wondered how long she had been patiently doing it. Five months in solitary could give anyone a healthy dose of patience. Muting the TV must've cramped her silent progress.

“Damn, damn. Holy, holy shit” he repeated.

Again, he told himself that he shouldn't be scared. She wasn't a monster. She was a murderer, maybe, but not a scary one. She was a tiny black woman, for Christ's sake. A stay at home mom. There wasn't anything she could do to him.

Not unless she had a weapon.

The possibilities ran through his head. He tried to think of what weapons there were in the house, besides his own Glock in the closet, under the stairs (and she hadn't been downstairs since he'd been home). Nothing. Nothing that she could get into. There was just the gun safe. That's it. She didn't have the combo, did she? He never in his life saw her open it. Then again, she did give him the safe as a Christmas present.

“Fuck.”

He could make a break for his Glock in the closet under the stairs. But no, moving fast was risky. Well, this was his own house and all. He could leisurely walk over there in a not so alarming way.

No matter what, he should call this in. That he didn't think to do it sooner meant that he was drunk. He looked at his phone. He couldn't actually call. She'd hear. He didn't want her to see the phone or know that he even had it. Any confrontation needed to last a long time. She couldn't know that there was a clock running with troops en route. If she was armed, time was his only weapon. He felt clever for considering the clock idea.

He held the phone in front of him, close to his giant turtle shell of a belly, angling it into a position where she shouldn't be able to see, even if she ducked from up there. He navigated the display to text his deputy Steve Goodall.

He got “She” pecked out before he thought he heard something, maybe another creak. It sounded more muffled, like it came from outside. He winced and kept his finger on the “Send” button, stuffing his phone down between the armrest and seat cushion.

He stared straight ahead, as though he had just been caught doing something wrong. There was the putz news anchor back from a commercial break, no doubt talking about the psycho on the stairs. Without another sound for several seconds, he slowly pulled the phone back up. He kept it at that careful spot and noticed his hands were sweaty and slightly shaky. Adrenaline this time, not the alchy-shakes.

The moment he started to type some more (“She is”), he heard something else. Another muffled sound, maybe just air blowing from the vents – but maybe, just maybe, her socked feet moved. He

didn't dare look. Not yet, not with the phone out. He panic-pushed "Send" and stuffed the phone back into the cushion.

He tightly gripped both arm rests for several seconds. He breathed deep twice before twisting his heft to look up the stairs again. He thought for sure that his eyes would meet hers and hers would pierce his soul and tell him everything that he didn't want to be reminded about himself. Those eyes that he once fell in love with would now throw daggers. Just the thought of it made him feel shame. His sweat felt like a thin film of scum all over his body.

When he looked, all that he saw were those damn feet. In the same spot, just stuck up there.

Drunk doubt settled in. He slowly kicked down the foot rest and stood up. He let the blood rush to his head and stood still for a little bit, staring up the stairs and waiting for the short darkness to pass and his vision to clear. He then meandered over to the stair well with his stiff legs and sore feet.

As he got closer, he felt a smile creep over his face.

"Well, there you have it."

The "feet" weren't feet at all. They were a couple of damn towels sitting there on the second step. One was dark orange and the other wasn't even blue (unlike the inmate pants) – it was chocolate brown. He had put those towels there himself days ago when he intended to use them to wash his rig.

"Well, that's what I get for being lazy."

He was surprised by how they weren't even close to the same colors as CCC inmate garb. They just looked like it – somehow – in the poor light, combined with some kind of delusion. Maybe the Scotch. Maybe he was tired. Maybe ... well, maybe whatever. It didn't matter.

"I must be losing my mind. She's alive out there somewhere, but in here, she's haunting me like a ghost."

He shook his head and whistled.

"Damn skippy!"

As he was turning around to get back to his drink and the La-Z, something shiny white outside of the front window caught his eye. It was a police SUV travelling up his driveway, rolling at high speed, kicking up plenty of gravel and dust. Sheriff's Department rig. Beautiful, he thought. This was one hell of a fast, professional response to his vague text. His team could really pull it together.

His mind immediately ran through what he could say about the message. He didn't have to admit to his earlier fears or drunk-delusions. He was prepared to thank Stevie and say that the "She is" message was just an error. That she was here was outrageous, anyway. He decided to conceal that he was drunk, of course, which shouldn't be hard to do. He had alchy-functioned on the job for years.

Proud and relieved, he smiled and said out loud "There it is. Stevie on his A-Game. All right!"

As the rig got closer, the smile disappeared. Squinting, he read the license plate. Nevada, E732609. It was his rig's plate. But it couldn't be. No. His mind was playing tricks again.

Only part of the driver's head cleared the dash. He could see eyes and a forehead, dark complexion. Not Stevie.

His SUV had been securely parked in the detached garage. It couldn't be hauling ass up the gravel driveway.

But as it got closer, it was his SUV, complete with its heavy-duty black grill guard. And it wasn't slowing down. And it was heading straight for his house. And the driver – the driver's chin was tilted up and he could see her familiar, determined eyes floating just above the steering wheel. Fuck.

His ex-wife was going to ram his own rig through his front door.

He raised the flats of his hands and pumped them as if hopelessly directing traffic. He almost headed for his gun in the closet but decided not to. The front door was in front of the stairs and she was going so fast that she might smash through all of it. He jostled himself sideways instead, getting out of the way.

The wreck happened with a loud smack and blur. The rig suddenly replaced the space that was the entry way and first several stair steps. At the same time, something (wood, trim, drywall, he couldn't tell) shot out and hit him on the forehead. His arms covered up like a boxer after the punch.

Pain wrapped around his whole head. Instant headache. Dazed, he lowered his arms. The sight of the SUV parked up into his stairs was shockingly unreal. Light from the new hole in the wall lit up the floating dust. Before he could consider what to do, the door rocked open and one of her feet hit the plastered ground. Pivoting around the door, apparently unfazed by the wreck, she pointed some kind of silver hand gun at him. He read only ill intent off her eyes and thought she was going to shoot. He held up his hands.

"OK, OK." He tried to give a relaxed chuckle but his throat was too taut. "You got the drop. I'm unarmed."

He ID'd the gun. It was his dad's 1955 Colt Anaconda from the gun safe upstairs. It hadn't been used in years. He wondered if it'd even work.

She fired twice over his head.

It worked.

"OK! OK!" He was surprised to hear himself say ... alive.

Four shots left, he tracked.

"Turn the fuck around! Put your hands on top of your head!"

He turned around, faced the TV, and threaded his fingers on top of his head. The putz was still reporting from the CCC. If only he knew ...

Her feet crunched debris into hardwood on her way over.

"You call the cops?"

“No.” His heart was racing but he felt oddly calm. In his twenty years of service, there were few situations where he had a gun pointed at him. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever been in a situation this dangerous before. Still, he was oddly relaxed but ready. Cop mode.

She haphazardly searched him, slapping around at areas where he could have a back-up. Waist, legs, ankles. He hadn’t carried one in years and never wore it on his off-time when he did. She should already know. She was doing whatever she considered appropriate from things she’d seen on TV. He thought about all the cop shows they’d watch together.

Angry but controlled: “Go ahead and sit in your chair.”

“You’re the boss.”

He headed over to it, more numb than sore now. There was a new smell – a combination of burnt rubber, gas and dirt. The new hole in the house let in more light. A slight breeze helped to clear the air.

As he sat down on the La-Z, playing it cool, she circled around in front of him, with the gun aimed at his head. She slowly sat on the couch. Only the coffee table with a bottle of Scotch, junk food wrappers and magazines separated them.

Their eyes locked and his looked away, at the backs of his own hands and then at the TV. When he looked at her again, she looked older than ever. Her hair was flattened in some places and afro-frayed in others. The flat parts glistened. She must’ve tried some of her hair stuff when she had gotten into the safe – whenever that was. Sometime after the dogs.

He smiled. “So when were you upstairs?”

“Nothin’ to smile about here, motherfucker.”

He held both hands up again. “OK, OK.” He looked at the Colt and noticed that the hammer was cocked.

“You can lower it. I’m unarmed. I’m just sittin’ here.”

She didn’t take her eyes off of him. “Pull up the footrest.”

He did.

She didn’t uncock the hammer but she took her finger off the trigger and let the barrel pendulum down towards the brown throw rug. She was calm and confident, which was scarier than the gun.

It was strange to see her hair in disarray. She had always been particular about it, like everything else around the house. He considered it a sign of what was going on in her mind. This situation was going to take some untangling.

There was still a good chance that Stevie would come. He needed to buy time until then. That was the strategy. That was how he could get out of this alive. The clock strategy.

“Look,” he began, slowly lowering his big hands down to the armrests. “I have some things to apologize for and I will. I’m sorry.”

“Won’t do you much good but go ahead.”

“Well, you gotta know that not a day goes by when I don’t think about you and the mistakes I’ve made.” He tried to summon words that he thought might work, thinking about the best things a guilty defendant could say before a judge. “I wish things had been different. I wish I had been different. But what we still have is the future, believe it or not. And we can fix this. One day at a time, we can fix this... I know you haven’t killed anyone. I know you’re a good person...”

“You’re drunk. I know your bleary eyed bullshit when I see it. But keep talkin’.”

“Honey, OK. You can read me like a book. It’s been a rough day. A day of regret. But I know that I am the root cause. This all started with my own attitude. I’m sorry.”

“Attitude? Really? That’s what you call it? Attitude?”

He didn’t want to go in this direction. Distract, distract, he thought.

“The root, yes, the most basic thing. But please, I need to know somethin’. There’s something that’s real hard for me to believe. You’re a good person. I know that we’ve had our troubles but I also know that deep down, you’re a good person.”

He spoke calmly despite feeling his heart pounding under his chest.

“Right now there are a lot of people sayin’ that you killed a man.”

“I did.”

The curt response startled him. “No, no. I can’t believe that.” He could. He did.

She was silent, content to stare.

After a pause: “I did.”

“John was a big man, honey. How in God’s name did you do that?”

“Big black man. He reminded me of you. While I was beating him over the head, on the face, I imagined your face getting bloody. I couldn’t smash it enough. My friends had to pull me off.”

He thought of the dinner tray at the scene. It was what they suspected someone used to beat him. He huffed and stared her down for a hot second. She was so small. Alone? How? Those trays were made out of a thick, heavy plastic, he remembered. He wondered why John would ever have his back turned toward her. Maybe she had gotten a job as a trustee. It didn’t matter.

He started the interrogation.

“No help?”

“Didn’t need it and I wouldn’t tell you if I did. My only family is in there now after you made Cindy abandon me. I’m not the kind to set one of them up.”

She was alluding to what he had done to her to get her arrested.

“So you pulled him down by yourself and started beating him with a tray. Unlikely.”

“No. I snuck up behind him and hit him as hard as I could with the damn tray. He fell. I kept hitting.”

“This happened in the morning, not at dinner time. So this happened before or after breakfast?”

“After shut the fuck up.” Her grip tightened on the Colt.

He felt his phone vibrate through the thick leather cushion and cleared his throat and squirmed some to mask the sound.

She tilted her head to one side and hesitatingly scanned the room.

“This is my mission,” she muttered, almost like she was talking to herself. “No one can save you.”

He bit his lip and looked up at the ceiling for a moment. Glaring at her now with a raised voice: “From what? You gonna kill me too? For what? I’m the only one who can help you now.”

She was silent, staring more through him than at him. It was almost as if he wasn’t there.

“Hello? What is it, Angie? What do you want from me?”

She shook her head, coming out of the trance. She fixed her eyes on his again, leaned forward and spoke slowly, thoughtfully, like she had rehearsed these lines: “First, I want you to squirm. Then ... I want you to learn. After that, the learnin’ won’t do you much good – because ... I want you to die.” She paused to let it sink in.

He shook his head and bit the inside of his lip but was silent. He saw his chest rise and fall a little faster. There was a new dampness under his arms. He wasn’t going to say anything foolish. That would be a short-cut to being shot. Buy time, just buy the time, he advised himself.

She raised her eyebrows. “You don’t have to die slowly and torture-like. That’s what you deserve but unlike you, I’m kind-hearted. It’ll be over fast when it’s over.”

His gaze turned to steel and he tilted his head down. He was still trying to contain the hate but knew that it was seeping out of him like the sweat and Scotch from his pores.

She brightened up. “There you are! Nice to see some honesty.”

“I ... I don’t know what you mean.” “True emotions. Progress. I’m here for the truth. So you can finally be the man I know you can be. I thought I’d give you that chance.”

“What do you want me to say? Do you want me to say that I hate you? I hate you. Are we good?”

“You brought all of this to your own doorstep. We had a good life, a good family.” Her voice cracked a little.

“It wasn’t just me,” he said.

“Well, tell me, then. How do these things play out to you? And hurry. I got to assume you got word out. It’s part of our plan. Tick-tock, tick-tock.”

She waved the barrel like the pendulum of a clock. He wondered why she said “our plan” as if there was another party involved.

Distract, distract, he thought.

“Nope, no word got out, babe. It’s just us. We’ve got all the time in the world. So, it’s been bugging me. When’d you get upstairs?” They both knew how she got into his rig (the valet key was in the garage), but he acted curious about how she got over here and avoided the dogs.

Visibly irritated: “After.”

“After what?”

“Never entered the house before. Watched you from a ways off.”

“Smart,” he let slip. The dogs would’ve gone out and found her if she had gone in before the search.

“Don’t change the subject.”

Now he knew what she had done. Grandma dropped her of here, she hi

With a sigh: “All right... Here it is. I know you slept with my brother years ago and I just ...” He knew his next words could trigger the wrong reaction in her current mood but she seemed in control enough. “I just never knew for sure about Cindy.” He sniffed.

“I was always true to you.”

“Well, I had my doubts. I didn’t believe you.”

His old allegations of infidelity seemed to be safe ground. The topic was on her and off him. Besides, she had flirted with him, after all, and he never would’ve started drinking if it wasn’t for his suspicions. So, in a way, none of this would’ve happened if it wasn’t for her possible infidelity with his own brother.

“Then why not get a paternity test? Cindy ... is ... yours. I loved James the way you did. As a brother. You’re saying this to avoid things. It’s not gonna to work.”

“Maybe I was afraid of what a test would say.”

“Is taking that chance worse than this? To what ... to what you think all of your doubts have brought? To Cindy. This attitude, as you called it?”

“Look, I’ve never done anything to hurt her. I never would.” It was another gamble but he was going to stick to the original story.

She tilted her head and blinked once, slowly.

“The doctor’s report didn’t mean that I did somethin’,” he defended. “We had this discussion more than once. I don’t want to do it again.”

“I know my own daughter. I saw it in her eyes. I know what you did – more than once, Jerome. How could you? How ... could ... you?”

He shook his head. He looked away again, around the room and then at the back of his own hand. He remembered how that hand looked in the dark after the last time, resting on his daughter’s warm shoulder. Her back was turned to him and she was curled up in a ball. She shook like she was fighting a chill, silently crying while trying to stay strong for her dad. As he spoke to her softly there in the dark, she didn’t talk to him with her voice. She nodded to respond. “Yes, daddy – I won’t tell mommy ... Yes, daddy, it’s our secret, I promise ... Yes, daddy, I know you love me ... Yes, daddy, I know the pain will go away.” Her whole body screamed a different message. The message was that what he had just done was evil. Pure evil. He remembered looking at that big hand of his and thinking that her whole body used to fit in it. His hands used to keep her safe. Now his life was in her hands. He needed her to agree with him – more than he had ever needed anything from anyone. And she did. She had given him the gift of silence. And he wasn’t going to break their silent agreement. Not now. Not ever.

She continued: “I know you don’t want to talk about it. So much that you framed me as a meth user. I was protecting my own daughter, Jerome.” She straightened her posture and raised her head high. “And I still am, you son of a bitch.”

He remembered planting the drugs in her car before telling Steve to pull her over and search. He remembered how afraid he was of her at the time. It was the morning that she said she’d tell the news.

But he wasn’t going to do anything again. Not ever. Not after her allegations went public, after the arrest. Not after that whole battle with the press and getting her evaluated as a lunatic. Not after the whole damn shitstorm.

Bottom line. He was innocent of recent re-offense. He had stopped. She wasn’t even around anymore and he had stopped.

Her eyes glanced at the Maxim magazine on the coffee table. There was a cute, young black woman on the cover. Ms. Black America. She resembled their own daughter some. So what? He thought. It’s just a fuckin’ magazine.

Light headed, he felt like he was on the precipice of a cliff and couldn’t help taking one more step.

“OK. No! Look, we’ve been through all of this. Now the situation has changed, all right? I am a man of God. I am a man of justice! I am the Sheriff! I protect those in need of protection. Me! You are an escaped convict. Now ... a murderer. You have been deemed by the Court to be ... highly unstable. A Court mandated psych eval – says you’re fuckin’ crazy! These are facts. You have no proof. None!”

She stood up and fired. The muzzle’s flash was tiny compared to the sudden Boom. He felt a hard slam next to the left side of his head. With a piggish squeal, he threw up his hands and the La-z toppled over. A feeling of weightlessness was followed by a heavy slam through the chair’s thick head rest.

Still seated, he now looked at the spinning fan on the ceiling. His hands waved around, searching for balance before latching onto the armrests. Only one of its lights under the fan was on. The rest were burnt out, one tinged brown.

Ears ringing, he blinked several times, assessing whether he'd been shot. He touched the left side of his face and it felt hot. Rationally, he knew that a passing bullet wouldn't warm his face.

"Get on up" he thought he heard her say.

He flopped off the chair to his left. His arms and legs were rubbery and he struggled to get on all fours. When he did, he hovered above the hole in his La-Z's headrest. The area around it was flattened. In his blurred peripheral vision, he saw pieces of yellow padding scattered across the hardwood floor. The words "Hollow point" ran through his mind. A hollow point bullet just blew that damn padding all over the place.

She was certainly in charge. His little stay-at-home-mom ex-wife.

"You're the boss," he slurred.

"C'mon, get up."

He couldn't balance worth a damn but stumbled up anyway. He looked at her and she pointed the barrel at the other chair, the one she used to sit on when they watched TV together. Now that felt longer-than-ever-ago.

He sat down and slumped some. A few moments ago he was the big Sheriff, a king on his throne, and now he felt like a schoolboy about to get a stern talking-to by the principal. A psycho-pissed principal with a gun.

He realized that he was looking at her mostly with his right eye. The left was teary and it stung. He didn't know why a passing bullet could make his eye sting (or face warm). Maybe it was caused by the thing that hit him on the face, he reasoned.

He looked for pity in her eyes and saw none. For as haggard as she looked, she still had pretty eyes. Cindy had her eyes.

His breath quickened, taking all of this in. He couldn't tell if he was in slight shock or if he was sorry. He thought about how happy they were when they first got married. He remembered how, when the preacher said "You may kiss the bride," he paused right before that kiss, and looked deep into those sparkling eyes. In that moment before the kiss, with those eyes looking up and into him, he knew that she trusted him. She trusted him with her life – and with their daughter's life. He would be their protector. Now, years later, he was a failure. This is what failure looked like. Gunfire. Falling down.

Shame covered him like a warm blanket. His throat tightened to the point of silence. He felt tears welling up. He thought of how his daughter would sometimes cry when he was on top of her, when he was drunk enough to do the deed and not care. He couldn't remember the last time he cried himself.

In the back of his mind, he hoped that the cavalry would come. Maybe he could still be saved and she could just finally leave him alone. If she could just die – please die. Just go away and die, you bitch.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked with a shaky voice.

"Admit it. The truth."

He looked down. "I do." He cringed hearing himself say those words. Those two words had once bound the two of them in holy matrimony. They once represented his true intentions as a protector and father. Now they represented his failure at both.

"You do admit it. Good. How could you?"

He shifted uncomfortably and stared absently at the Ansel Adams picture of Mt. Rainier hanging over the couch, above her head.

"Well?"

"I dunno" he mumbled.

"I asked you a question, Jerome. How could you do that to your own daughter?" He didn't have to look to see her nose flare. Mama bear (down from the mountain), here to protect her own.

He felt like one of those young perps he'd talk to before sending home or arresting. Half-despondent, half-guilty. If they didn't handle his lecture right, he'd bring them in and ask them along the way: "Was it worth it?" He could ask himself that same question: Was it worth it, Jerome? All of the trouble that's been caused. His failure, her being here now, all of the upset, all of the suffering, all of the tears – was the sick-evil worth it? No. No, it wasn't. Of course it wasn't.

Would he do it again? No. Then he wondered, doubtfully: What if you were drunk enough? Or ... What if you knew she liked it? His ultimate fantasy. No, no, he thought. Sick evil.

He wasn't so sure.

As he started to feel ill, a voice in his head came to his moral rescue: You were drunk! Every time, you were drunk. There were a few nights where you acted evil. You don't have to. You won't anymore. You haven't. You're fine.

I can self-regulate, he told himself firmly. It's that simple. Just don't drink so much. Problem solved. Permanently.

Raising his crackling voice: "I said what you wanted me to say!"

"Oh, I see. You're saying that ... maybe I've forced a confession? Did you rape your own daughter, fucker?"

His rolled his tongue over dry teeth. His eyes absently roamed the room again, looking for something. He nodded. He nodded because he didn't want to get shot.

"I see," she said.

He finally fixed his gaze on the Jameson bottle. Mouth agape, he dug at his left back molar with the tip of his tongue. Half-heartedly pointing: "May I?"

"Yes. Yes, you may."

He shifted forward and reached. The chair creaked with an uncommon sound under his weight. When his hand was almost to the bottle, she (in one fast-fluid motion) stood up and shot it. Glass shards and Scotch sprayed all over his hand, arms and face. A stinging, burning sensation hit him all over. He curled his hand up to his chest before he even realized what happened. The bang and disappearing bottle meant that – that –

The bitch killed my Scotch!

Fingers forming a claw next to his chest, he pounded his chest with it and screamed “What the fuck, woman?”

She just stared at him, barrel pointing down again.

The smell of Scotch hung heavy in the air and there seemed to be a faint mist of it.

Down to one bullet, he thought. Down to one.

He took deep breaths and he could feel hot tears in his stinging eyes. He screamed: “What do you want from me? What do you fucking want? Fuck you! You wanted me to admit it. I admitted it!”

He kept pounded himself in the center of his chest with his clawed up hand. His voice cracked again: “What else, Angie? What the fuck else?”

She laughed a little. “Well, I told you I wanted you to squirm. You’re squealing like a fat pig. Good. Smells like rotten chi-mo bacon up in here. Blackened.”

“What the fuck?”

She was almost smiling. “I’m already happier.”

He felt a tear drop down his cheek but didn’t bother wiping it. Caused by the Scotch spray, he told himself.

He knew what he had to do. Counting, she had just that one bullet. He could still get out of this if she missed or hit him somewhere that didn’t count. Maybe he could get to her before she got a shot off.

She tilted her head up to the ceiling and moved her lips like she was talking to someone. Bad sign. He knew without a doubt that if he didn’t act, she would kill him. He listened for any sound of tires on gravel outside and heard nothing. No one was coming. It was just him. He had to prepare for a fight.

He squeezed his eyes shut and started to pray. Lord, give me mercy. I am so sorry for my actions. Lord, so sorry. But I need you now. I need you to help me out of this. Open a door, oh Lord. Open a door somewhere in this mess and let me walk out into your good graces. Into your heavenly arms. This won’t be like the last times. When I asked for forgiveness before, it was out of sin, out of shame, oh Lord. That won’t happen again. I walk with you now. I walk with you.

“Are you praying? Your lips are moving. Let’s hear it.”

He opened his eyes and shut them again and tilted his head up like what she was doing earlier. He let her hear: “Oh Lord have mercy on me. Forgive us, oh Lord, for we do not know what we do.

Please help Angela see that killing is not the answer. Please help me in my plight to change my ways. To be a good dad, a good husband, if Angie would have any mind to take me back.”

He squint-opened his right eye to see how she reacted. She was smiling from the corner of her mouth. Not a good smile.

“I know there is an open door out of all of this, oh Lord. We pray for the wisdom to see it. A door that you can show us and we can walk through, hand-in-hand, as husband and wife again. We can do this. We can make it out of this wilderness of anger with your wisdom and guidance. Once I’m on the right path, I know that together Angie and I can conquer anything. I could help her with the legal problem, a problem I caused her to have. I am sorry, oh Lord. And I am, and I know she can help me with my inner addiction. Yes, I know that I am an alchy, Lord. Maybe I should just openly admit it.”

He squint-peeped at her again and she had the same smile but maybe with a little more warmth to it – maybe. A long-winded prayer was a terrific way to buy time, he mused.

“I am an alcoholic. I am. But I know I have the strength to change. But I need support. I need the support of my wife. My family. Their love. I miss her, Lord. I miss her presence in my lonely life.”

His voice unexpectedly cracked under the words. Another tear started rolling down his right cheek and he wondered if what he was saying was true. He was getting hotter. Sweat matted his shirt to his arm pits.

“We can solve this together, oh Lord. I feel your presence. You’re with us. I can feel you with us. I feel that you are here. You’re here to guide us. Tell us. Tell us, oh Lord, how we shall manage this. Lead us unto you, the path of righteousness.”

He went silent for a few seconds. Then he nodded and hummed a Bible Hymn for a few more seconds. It sort of felt like a light started to shine within him, a warm heavenly type light. He had an idea. One hell of a good idea. It could draw her close to him, possibly. If she let down her guard, he could beat her down, handily. Or, if it didn’t bring her closer, this could still buy more time.

He kept humming.

Where the hell is Stevie? Any fuckin’ minute. With no communication after the “She is” text, Steve should know that something was up. God dammit.

The new idea was good. Good enough to try. A trap definitely worth trying.

Only one bullet left. So only chance left.

No better time to pray.

“She wants a confession, oh Lord. She wants one and she shall have one. But not just a confession to her. It will be a confession ... to the world, Lord. Written by your hand guiding mine. A confession for all of the things that she said I’ve done wrong. I will write it. My truest apology. Then I will show it to whomsoever she wants me to give it unto. Signed in my name, with my blood if she shall desire it. This is life or death. Life or death. My apologies are as deep as the river Jordan. I can show her and I will show her how I can change my wayward ways.”

He peeped again and she had one amused brow raised, her mouth slightly agape.

“This is no laughing matter, Lord. We shall gather what we need. Paper. A pen. And we shall work together, side-by-side. Together we shall channel words of which even you could approve – unto the paper. If it means that I go to prison, so be it, oh Lord. I’ll pay for my crimes.”

“You’re a full blown idiot,” she said.

Rage flashed through him. He looked at her with his stinging eyes and said “This is what you wanted. You said you wanted me to confess. This is a God damned confession.”

“Don’t use the Lord’s name in vain after praying, you idiot. That’s exactly what I mean.”

“Well, I wouldn’t do that if you’d stop calling me an idiot.”

“Well, first of all, no one like you should ever think that prison’s a way out of anything.”

He struck a confused look even though he knew what she meant. He knew where this was going and a feeling of helplessness swept over him.

“Let me spell it out. You’re black. You’re a child molester. You molested your own child. And you’re a cop.”

He shook his head. His “trap” – to work on a confession together – had just fallen apart. “Look, honey, wait a minute. Wait, wait ...”

“If there has ever been a bad combo, that would be it. Black chi-mo bacon? At first sight, the brothers are going to tear you apart. State-side, high profile? You’re as good as dead.”

He started breathing hard again. The feeling of helplessness was building into rage. There was only one way out. His eyes, for the briefest moment, glanced at the Colt. The gun was dangling in her hand, still pointed down, shimmering light from the SUV’s hole in the wall. The hammer wasn’t cocked. Her grip tightened when she noticed the glance.

He felt sick to his stomach. All of this was now so real. She was going to shoot. There was no question about it. Praying, pleading wasn’t going to help. He nodded defeat and felt more tears welling up. He didn’t have the nerve to act. He was too scared, too weak, he realized.

He looked around the room, whispering “OK, OK,” and sniffed to keep his nose from running. There was more of Scotch smell than tires and oil now.

With the truck parked off to the side and her sitting there about to kill him, the room felt different. What was once his sanctuary felt like a foreign place. The TV was showing a commercial with a man trail running through the woods. It was furthest place from where he was now. He felt another tear roll before he knew he was crying again.

Unexpectedly, a few sobs racked his body and he said again – louder – “OK, OK. I’m sorry. I did it. I raped our own daughter and I’m sorry. I was so sorry to her, too.”

Part of him couldn’t believe that he was saying this. It felt like a different person had opened up within him to speak.

“She’s my angel and I’m so sorry. But I do love her and I haven’t done it again since you went away. I stopped and I’ll never do it again. It was wrong, it was wrong.” As he heard his own words, some of them were muffled sobs. The same part of him that was speaking almost wanted to die and didn’t fully believe that he wouldn’t hurt Cindy again.

“I can promise to be a good dad. Please give me that chance.”

“You’ve had your chance.”

When he focused on her face, he noticed that her eyes were glassy. It was the first sign of pity and he was too worn out to think of anything to do about it. He felt himself nodding again. Probably, there was nothing to do. This was it.

She stood up and pointed the gun at him with a very steady hand.

“Lord have mercy,” he said.

“Lord ain’t with you,” she said. “You have me here, your grand-dad’s Colt .45, and you have had very little time. Now your time’s up. I told you that I wanted you to squirm. You’ve squirmed. I told you that you needed to learn. You’ve learned.” Her own voice was cracking, which gave him a bit of hope. “Look closely at me, Jerome.” He looked. Her watery eyes widened again and her nose flared and that tiniest bit of hope left him. The Colt was still aimed steady, right at his head. He looked into the black hole at the tip of the barrel. The last thing he’d see would be that muzzle’s flash. “Learn. Learn your consequences. I was once your wife. We shared a sacred gift from heaven with our daughter. Now. Now I stand before you as your grim, grim reaper – you little, little fucked up man.”

He decided he didn’t want to see the muzzle flash. He closed his eyes.

With a heavy lump in his throat and knot in his belly, he leaned forward to meet his demise. Meditatively. The words “pure acceptance” floated past his mind. At that moment, all of this somehow felt like the right thing.

He heard a click.

He was still alive. He opened his eyes and first saw the coffee table before he looked up at her angry face. “Misfire” was the next word that ran through his mind.

This was it. His only chance. God had given it to him. His body responded with a surge of adrenaline. All of his muscles tensed up at once when he started out of the chair. His arms reached out for her: To grab the gun and beat her down. He would take this heaven sent chance – and he would survive. She wasn’t moving at all, the gun still aimed between his eyes. Her trigger finger twitched and she was trying to fire again. But it wasn’t going to fire. No way. He’d get to her, to the gun, take her down, beat her down, win his life back –

The muzzle flashed.

2

Angie collapsed back onto the couch, crying. The gun shot had shattered her hardened veneer. Whatever strength she had left seemed to come crashing out in sobs.

The image of his head exploding ran through her mind. At the Boom and kick of the Colt, his head had jerked back, half of it replaced by red mist. His body had simply slumped to one side and fallen down onto the coffee table, crushing it.

He had stood up with his arms straight out, which was the oddest thing. Why? She wondered. It was like he wanted to strangle her. But she had just cocked the hammer (with a “click” that broke the silence) and she had been just standing there, pointing the gun at his head. All she had to do was pull the damn trigger.

Eyes closed, hopelessly trying to rid her mind of the head jerk and fall, she heard – and felt through her feet – a thump-thump on the floor. She looked over and saw his leg twitching.

The last signs of life.

She felt an urge to shoot him again. Old magazines and junk food wrappers were heaped at his side. He was the biggest piece of trash there.

Locked for five months in her cell, twenty-three hours of confinement per day, languishing in dim fluorescent light, looking for answers that she couldn't find, imagining this moment, hoping against all odds that she could someday see him die at her feet – she thought that this would make her happy. Slaying the monster. Saving the princess. Saving Cindy.

It didn't.

It didn't feel right.

She closed her eyes and leaned all the way forward, arms across her stomach. Sharp pain radiated from her right wrist, from the Colt's kicks. A tear rolled off her cheek and fell down to the brown, crumb-ridden rug.

“That was the man I once loved.” She remembered how he'd sometimes come up behind her and hold her around her waist and kiss her neck and how she felt safe and complete, in his arms. “Not anymore. He changed, he changed. Not the man I married.” She thought about his twisted face moments ago. “No, not him. Not ... that ... monster,” she whispered. The sense of emptiness surprised her. His death had left a hole inside of her instead of relief. She reasoned: Maybe I still loved him – or some forgotten part of me did – and now that part is gone. Just gone.

“He was the love of my life.”

She considered how the lonely feeling could come from knowing what's next, too. The sacrifice.

“But she’s not saved yet.”

Angie had to finish the story – as planned. As agreed.

She looked up at the only working light hanging from the room’s fan. “Dad? Dad, are you still with me?” she asked no one. She heard her dad say “Always” and she smiled, feeling a warmth rise up within her. She felt his presence emanating from the light, which was how it worked in her cell, too. She’d stare at the dim constant light there and feel like she was talking to him. It reminded her of how they used to talk together in his garage, as he worked on his old cars, back in her childhood home. Out there, she could ask him any question, tell him about any problem. He always came up with the right words to say.

“Thank you. Thank you for guiding me here, but ...”

“Your love is true. You can do this.” He often said the same words when he spoke to her in her cell – to build up her courage to escape. He had done it once when alive, too: When dying in the hospital, after she told him how she couldn’t live without him, without his wisdom and guidance. Since his death, she knew, his spirit had been with her in one form or another. He was her guardian angel.

Slowly, tears rolling, she asked a question she had already asked a hundred times before: “Is the next thing ... is this the only way?”

“This is your life, your story,” he said. “They will take it from you and make it theirs. Don’t let them. Don’t. Let. Them.”

She nodded.

If he wasn’t real and he was only in her head, she considered, the next step could be a mistake. But his voice felt real enough. Certainly, she trusted his words enough. She trusted them enough to get here, to save Cindy. Her father had guided her through hell and now he was guiding her back out of it. She had to listen.

He said “Cindy will have a good life. We will make sure of it. Together.”

Now was not the time to deny a sacred pact.

Her grip on the Colt tightened and her wrist felt like a nail went through it. “One more thing,” she said. She wondered if she was strong enough.

“You are” he reassured.

As she put the gun in her mouth, ready to pull the trigger, there was a soft vibration somewhere in front of her, emanating from the floor. She scanned the room and saw a faint light shining from under the credenza, way off on the other side of the room. Was it ... Jerome’s cell phone? She had forgotten all about that.

She wondered if she was hallucinating again, if her mind was conjuring this up to stop her. She was used to the illusions that came with prolonged solitary, but this was suspiciously well timed. “I need to talk” she mumbled into the barrel. To whom, she couldn’t remember.

She took the barrel out and tasted metal. She tilted her head and wondered how the hell the phone got over there – if that’s where it was. Why didn’t her dad remind her to look for it? Wasn’t that part of the plan, too? She couldn’t remember.

It buzzed again.

She squinted her eyes at it. Jerome couldn’t have hidden it there. Before the crash, she remembered seeing him through the front window, hopping up and down like someone who had to pee – hands out, motioning her to stop. That wasn’t a man hiding a phone.

“And then I searched him, didn’t I?”

Her dad was silent.

“Oh.” She remembered faintly hearing something like a vibration from the La-Z. She had looked around the room and written it off as imagined. Most hallucinations were voices, but there had been plenty of clicks, taps and drips as well. “If he had stashed his phone in his throne, then ... it popped out when I shot the headrest” she told her dad. She knew she was right, so he didn’t respond.

She remembered how Jerome threw his hands up with a girlish scream – like an idiot on a rollercoaster – when the La-Z toppled over. “Yes, OK.”

The credenza sat below the front bay window. She got off the couch and walked towards it. Out of the window, there was no one coming up the driveway. Contours of the cloudy sky were dark enough to rain. She caught her own reflection. She saw a woman with messy hair who looked sad but calm, belying the recent double-cop-homicide. She swallowed hard and watched her Adam’s apple move up and down.

“Oh, what are you doing, Angie?”

She looked down and noticed the framed picture of Cindy on top of the credenza, from when she was ten. “Ohhhh, I need to call you, sugs.”

Suddenly, nothing else mattered.

“Why didn’t I remember? I’m slippin’, slippin’. Dad? Why didn’t you remind me?”

No response.

She got down on her knees, fitted her hand under the credenza and pawed out the phone. Black, flat and much bigger than her hand, a red light blinked on top of it. She swiped the blank face. A picture of Jerome and Cindy together greeted her. Translucently overlaying their smiling faces was a number pad. As she studied the picture, a lump formed in her throat. She remembered taking it, on their last family vacation. They were in front of the gates of Disneyland, in Anaheim, California. Jerome and Cindy had their heads together, sunglasses on, and were giving mom their best white smiles. Above their heads were the magical kingdom’s entrance gates, and above that, a clear blue sky. It was taken over a year ago.

“A lot can happen in a year.”

It was funny how Jerome never changed the pic. He probably didn't know how. Mom did most of the family gadgetry. She inputted the password that she had given him, 101002 (the month (10, October), day (10th), and year ('02) of their marriage). She saw new texts from Cindy and from someone else - a "Steve Goodall." She recognized his name from her discovery. He was the asshole deputy who arrested her with the "evidence" her husband had planted in her Lexus. She clicked on his conversation first and scrolled to the top.

From Jerome

She is

From Steve Goodall

She is what? Who?

No position to respond?

Just type y for yes, n for no. Is Angela there?

Report came in, crash at your house.

En route

The "En route" was texted ten minutes ago. It took about twenty to drive out to the country, she noted, if the fucker was starting from the station.

Heart pounding, she thumbed out and into the Cindy conversation. The messages she saw were the last ones sent, asking her dad to respond. She scrolled to the top, to start with the first message of the day.

From Cindy Jones

I heard about mom.

From Jerome Jones

Searching, honey

From Cindy Jones

Will you find her?

Dad?

Did mom really kill him? Mom wouldn't do that! I'm really, really worried. You have to find her. Please don't hurt her.

From Jerome Jones

Doing our best

From Cindy Jones

Where are you? They talked about you on the news. They said how she said in the trial how you got her arrested and she went skitzafrentic or whatever. I know you didn't but I feel sorry for her.

Angie pulled her eyes away from the phone to look out the window. No one was out there yet.

Looking at her own reflection again, it occurred to her that something was wrong. Very wrong. Exactly why would Cindy reach out to him? He was her constant rapist. The messages – they showed an almost normal father-daughter relationship.

She watched herself shake her head and bite her lip. She kept reading.

Dad do you think she did it because of me?

Don't like how we lied to her. I know we had to.

I've been thinking where did she go? She wouldn't kill someone and escape for no reason. She already knows everything she's always angry like you said but why would she escape unless because of us?

Did she really kill the guard tho?

They say ton of blood???? It's not mom!

Is it my fault?

From Jerome Jones

It's not, never home soon No more texts and will talk soon Love you

From Cindy Jones

K

Any more news about mom? Really worried. Sorry for earlier. ;-(

From Jerome Jones

Sorry too please enjoy party

She looked up at her own reflection again. Her face struck her as that of a stranger's. "How?" she asked herself.

"How did you save her?"

No one but her could know the answer, she realized. She had to make sense of this.

For months in her cell, she had known – without a hairline fracture of doubt – that Cindy was being abused. Raped. Nightly. She felt it. It was as real as the stale air she breathed and the steel and

concrete surrounding her. But if that were true – if Cindy were being abused – then how could she be friends with her dad? She should be afraid of him. She should want to see her mother, her savior.

“How? Maybe I’m wrong.”

There was a sense of weightlessness, as if the ground had left and she now hung in mid-air. For just a moment, she wondered if she could’ve imagined the abuse – and then quickly supported her own sanity. “You talked to the doctor,” she reminded herself – in something more like her dad’s voice than her own. “You talked to him in his office. Alone, without Jerome, Ang. He agreed that Cindy had been hurt. He said he could report it but ...”

Now she spoke in her own voice: “He’d be reporting it to the Copper Creek Sheriff’s office, as required by law. Nothing he could do about it, even if I thought the abuser was the damn Sheriff. My own damn husband. I didn’t imagine being in that office, talking. I didn’t. That ... was ... real.”

She stared hard into her own eyes for several seconds, losing time. “Maybe Cindy forgave him. Maybe he had stopped, like he just said. Maybe he wouldn’t have touched her again. But he’s been a liar!”

Well, “maybe” a lot of things. Not a lot of maybe’s matter when ... he’s dead. Cindy’s only dad is dead.

She looked over her shoulder at the corpse for a moment. “No, no, no, no, no” she whispered. “OK, OK.”

She wiped her eyes and kept reading.

From Cindy Jones

Guess no news? Everyone at the party knows about mom so its kinda weird now.

Dad they say she could be there at house announcer guy on news says a suspicion!!

They’re showing cruisers from news helicopter going to our house WTF!!

Lots of them

Getting ride home from Char’s mom

News showing them on freeway!! They’re coming hello?

Dad, respond

Can you respond? Shit, is mom there?

As she was reading, one more text came in.

What’s wrong? Why can’t you talk?

Stomach knotted, she breathed deep several times before pressing the button towards the bottom with the green phone outlined on it. "I can, honey," she said. Her voice was shaky.

It rang. Her daughter picked up.

"Dad! Did you even get my texts? There were so many cruisers on the news going home. The news is showing the land around our house right now! The pond. It's flying over. Wait, is mom there? This is crazy!"

"Sugs, baby, it's your mom."

"The McKenzie's were riding their horses by and saw your car crashed into the house. That's who called the police, says the news. Really, a crash? I should be home soon, in fifteen," Cindy said, not hearing.

Angie looked outside again to no one coming.

"Sugs, it's me, your mom."

There was static.

"What? You sound weird."

"Mom! It's your mother!"

Silence. After a few seconds, Angie couldn't tell if the call was dropped.

There was the faint sound of a helicopter. At first she thought it was coming through the phone. She looked up at the ceiling and tilted her head to one side. It was coming from above.

In the window's reflection, she looked at the TV and saw her own house being shown on it. She didn't bother turning around.

"Oh, sugs. Are you there?"

"Yeah," she said, barely audible. "Where's dad?"

Angie took another deep breath. She couldn't remember the exact words that she wanted to say, the ones that she had memorized in her cell for this occasion. "I had some things to say, honey. I couldn't let him hurt you. I came out to protect you. I was led here by the light. Your light. Do you understand? I had to make sure he couldn't hurt you... Baby, can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"That's why I came here. You've been my light, my one and only light. My light in a dark place. I've had a guide, too, honey... I love you so much."

"Mom, what happened to dad?"

She felt off balance and put one hand on the credenza, by the picture of her ten-year-old Cindy. She could barely talk, her throat tight.

“No, no, it’s going to be OK. It’ll be OK for you. You’ll be with Uncle Robert.”

“What? What did you do to dad!? Mom! Put dad on! Where is he!?”

There was more static over the line. She wondered if the helicopter was making it worse.

“Honey, no, please listen to me.”

“No, put him on, mom! Where’s dad?”

“Um ...” She didn’t want to have to say words like this, when there was regret, when there was static, when there was a God damn news helicopter overhead. She said them anyway. “Dad’s gone. I ... yes, honey, he’s gone.”

“What?”

“Dad’s gone!”

Silence settled in between bursts of static. Angie felt like she had been punched in the stomach and knew that her daughter felt the same.

She concluded that maybe she had lost some of her mind back in her cell. Maybe the psych report was right. Escaping and saving her daughter from a monster was supposed to bring freedom, empowerment. She felt more confined than ever.

She looked at herself, the stranger in the window, and shook her head, wanting to die. She still had to die.

“I’m not a bad mother” came out next, in a croak.

“What happened!?” Cindy screamed. “Mom, what happened!?”

“I had to save you. He was hurting you and I had to save you from him.”

“No, he wasn’t! No! Mom, no, he never hurt me! You hurt us when you got mad! He didn’t hurt me! Is he really dead? Did you ... oh my God, no.”

Angie bit her bottom lip – hard. In the window, she saw a thin coat of blood form on it. She dropped her hand with the phone in it. Cindy kept screaming things that Angie couldn’t hear.

She saw a white cruiser rolling up the long driveway with its blue and reds on, no siren. Just one so far. She closed her eyes. These would be her last words to her daughter. Maybe her last words ever. The end of her story. She would trust her dad (herself, she knew, her own inner voice) and trust that everything would be all right – as long as she followed the plan.

She put the phone back up to her ear. “Sugs, honey, enough! Shhhhh. Can you hear me?”

“Yeah.”

“I killed him and I’m sorry. I thought he was hurting you. I couldn’t talk to you and I’m sorry. I have to finish what I started. Remember how I told you to always finish what you started? I will. I’ll always be your mother.”

“No! No, no, no!”

Angie hung up. On the phone, the picture of Jerome and Cindy flashed back on the screen. She Frisbee tossed it to the side and heard it slap and skid on the floor. Only the first slap was louder than the helicopter.

She grabbed the gun off of the credenza and held it loosely at her side. She stared out the window, not really seeing the cruiser or her reflection anymore. The helicopter dipped lower and hovered over the front lawn, right above the tire tracks that she had made earlier, leading to her front door. They were filming her, perhaps.

It didn't matter.

She reminded herself of why this was practical, too. She had just killed two cops. They were going to kill her no matter what. Death today or a life sentence tomorrow. It didn't matter. Whatever she had – and whatever money Jerome couldn't pilfer – would go to Cindy. Uncle Rob could take care of the rest. Besides, like grandpa had said, this was her story. It was up to her to write the ending.

“It'll end when I say it ends.”

She focused on the cruiser: “You're going to kill me any old way. You can't. No, I got this. I ... got ... this.”

She clicked back the hammer and nestled the tip of the Colt's barrel onto the roof of her mouth. She pushed up hard, cutting into the skin. She felt and tasted blood on her tongue. She saw her eyes go wide in the reflection. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw what was on the TV behind her: A woman with a gun in her mouth – her, from the perspective of the news helicopter in front of the house. It was eerie to see a woman about to commit suicide on TV and to know that it was herself.

Fuck you. My story, not yours.

She pulled the trigger. She felt and heard a click and then her own moan, as if it came from someone else.

She cocked the hammer again.

She shoved the tip even harder up into the roof of her mouth, forcing her head back a little. She bit down hard on the steel, trying to break her own teeth, feeling her front ones split apart. Pain shot through her mouth and around her head before she pulled the trigger again.

Click.

Nothing.

She pulled the gun out of her mouth (full of blood) and looked into the revolver's cylinders. Empty. All of the holes were empty. All of her God damned bullets were gone, spent on that piece of shit lying on the floor.

Maybe that's why Jerome got up, she thought. Maybe he believed there wasn't any bullets left.

She spit a long string of blood onto the floor.

She looked out the window at the cruiser again, now much closer. She looked at her own reflection, at the crazy black bitch with blood seeping out of her mouth.

The phone started drumming hardwood on the other side of the room. Cindy, probably. Angie figured she had just seen her mom's failed suicide, streaming live on Action News.

She was surprised by her sudden upbeat voice, talking to her daughter as if she were there: "You can't kill two cops and not die yourself, honey. Something's gotta give."

She looked towards the closet under the stairs, where Jerome would've kept his gun. A good section of drywall had broken off when she crashed the SUV through the foyer – and now a slab of it was in the way. She looked outside at the cruiser again and guessed that it was still about fifty yards out.

She heard her dad say "Go get him, cookie."

Gripping the Colt tight, numb to the pain in her wrist or mouth, she turned towards the crashed SUV and charged out of the opening next to it (what was once her front door). A heavy cold wind from the hovering helicopter pressed against her. She ran through the wind, across the lawn towards the cruiser, pointing the Colt at where the driver's head should be. He braked, tires skidding on gravel until he stopped. She ran up to the driver's side and recognized the asshole behind the wheel: The same asshole who arrested her: The asshole from the text messages. Goodall – or whatever the fuck his cheese dick name was. "Get out!" she screamed.

He got out and put his hands up (too slowly). He was old and wrinkly eyes looked scared. She sensed that he was weak. He probably had a wife of 50 years, kids, grandkids, she thought. She remembered him being apologetic and reluctant when arresting her and decided not to kill him – once she got a hold of his gun.

"You were his bitch, huh? His old, white nigger bitch! Give me your gun, heel first, fucker." He still didn't move fast enough. "Wanna live?"

She glanced down her driveway to see another cruiser turn up it, way off in the distance.

(She wondered if this was all real. Maybe she was still in her cell, dreaming. It felt too good, though, so maybe it couldn't be a nightmare.)

He said "Now, now hold on."

She put the Colt's barrel up to his forehead and stared into his crow nested eyes.

"Nowwww."

He took his Glock out, heel first.

The helicopter was getting lower and closer.

She grabbed the gun with her free (left) hand and took a few steps back. She flung the Colt away, swapping it for the Glock. She flipped the safety off and screamed at Goodall to get on his knees and kiss the ground. He did.

She then pointed at the helicopter and whispered "Film this."

The first several shots hit the yellow letters spelling “Action News” on the side. Holes formed in its dark blue shiny paint around the “A,” “c,” “w” and “s.” She wasn’t sure why she was doing this. She simply wanted to.

The helicopter pulled back and up.

She aimed for anything hanging that could be a camera, mostly missing. After several shots, sparks flew off the tail’s rotor.

The helicopter started to spin.

She felt her lips part open into a Cheshire-cat-wide smile. Blood in her mouth – she squeezed it out from behind her teeth. It flowed over her lower lip and chin, reminding her that she had broken her front teeth on the Colt’s barrel. It reminded her of what she needed to do next. The plan. The sacrifice.

The helicopter got closer and closer to the house.

“This is my story!” she screamed at the men she saw in the cockpit, bracing themselves for the crash.

The helicopter tilted off to one side before nose diving into the side of the house. The first blade slashed down through the roof and exploded the front bay window. It turned the eave trough into a V, catapulting leafs high up into the air. The last two blades quickly followed. She could feel their heavy thumps through the gravel. Plenty of white siding splintered off across the lawn.

She expected a big explosion but there wasn’t one. The helicopter just settled in, nose down, next to the house. It looked like a big, broken misplaced toy.

Exhausted, she fell to her knees, hardly feeling the sharper rocks bite through her pants. Off to her right, Goodall was getting up, with his hands still in the air. The second cruiser pulled up behind him – and in her peripheral vision, she saw more. Someone yelled “Put your weapon down!”

She looked up into the blank grey sky and shoved it into her mouth instead. The tip, hot as a fire poker, singed the blood on her tongue. Wisps of smoke-steam rose up before her eyes.

Numb all over, she heard her dad say “Yes.” She pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Biting down, she dry-fired into the roof of her mouth – click-click-click-click-click-click. The clicks clinked her teeth, vibrating around her skull.

Nothing.

Bullets – again – all gone.

“No, no, no, no” she mumbled.

Spent on the mother fucking Action News.

There were more cops pulling up, getting out, yelling. It was hard to take the gun out of her mouth. It meant failure. Silently, she said she was sorry to herself and to her dad. She lowered the gun and spit.

Then she lowered her head.

“Another time” she said.

Her shoulders slumped.

Uncontrollably, her head tilted back up to the sky and her whole body tensed up and shook for several seconds.

She heard a lot of shoes grinding gravel around her. She comprehended a common shout: “Put your gun down!”

She tossed it to the side.

She closed her eyes and started to cry. Thick hands pushed her down, face first onto the rocks. A knee dug into the small of her back, the weight of a heavy man behind it. Sharper points poked into her belly, pelvis, breasts. Shoes scuffed rocks around her head. What they said to her now was distant, on the other side of a tunnel.

Her right wrist was grabbed and her arm ripped around to her back. Then her left wrist was grabbed, ripped around. Her hands touched the heavy knee when the cuffs went on, pinched tight.

All at once, the pressure came off and she was lifted up. She felt weightless and fragile compared to the thick hands latched onto her arms, knees and ankles.

She opened her eyes. She was being carted towards a cruiser several yards ahead. She looked down and in the gravel were grass blades amongst the rocks. One of her tears dropped. A breeze moved her hair and chilled her watery eyes.

Part of her wasn't sure that any of this was real. Another part of her didn't care. She closed her eyes again and listened for her dad's voice. It was gone but she didn't want to hear him as much as she wanted to turn inward. To help block the pain before it got started.

Someone, an officer – Goodall, she sensed – fumbled to get the back door of the cruiser opened. The men carrying her stopped and waited and said something to him with their far away voices.

When it was opened, she was shoved in, crimped onto a plastic seat. She put her knees up on the blue metal wall in front of her, under the Plexiglass separating her from the front cab. Her position kinked her cuffed wrists.

Her mouth started to hurt.

Behind the Plexi, it was Goodall who sat down in the driver's seat. He started shakily punching keys into a terminal protruding from the dash.

She hung her head low. There was a ringing in her ears and she barely noticed the blood running down her chin. Now, she only wanted back into her cell. To sleep. It was going to take days to get there.

She'd be re-processed at CCC, where she had just killed the guard. She'd have to wait for hours in a tank before she got her bedding. Then she'd be ushered into a quiet-but-cold anti-suicide unit for a long time, maybe weeks. At least I can keep my eyes closed for most of it, she thought.

Nicely, somehow, the murders and attempted suicide lessened the burden of life. Gradually, as she sat there, listening to the inner ringing and Goodall's key strokes, she felt less emotional pain and more of the physical (burnt mouth and lips, knees, wrist). Crammed into her space tight, she nonetheless felt loose and light. As if she could float away.

After several minutes of soft numbness, the voice of Goodall wanted something. He wrapped his knuckle on the Plexiglas. A word came through – "daughter." She swam out of her daze.

"Whaaa?"

"Your daughter. Your daughter is here. Do you want to see your daughter?"

"Yeah."

He opened his door and got out. It was now brighter outside. Squinting, she looked out the window and didn't see Cindy. She looked down at the blue metal wall in front of her, the one that her knees were touching. She wondered if he just asked her about Cindy. She slowly shook her head. It didn't make sense. Then she remembered how Cindy had mentioned being on her way home. Angie realized that she was still outside of the house.

Someone opened her door and cool air rushed in. It was Goodall and he started wiping her face with a white towel. He pressed hard, which felt like sandpaper on her burnt lips. She saw dark blood when he pulled it away.

He repositioned her with one foot out the door.

She looked down, not into his eyes. He spoke slowly, quietly: "I'm sorry... For arresting you, even. I know how he was. I regretted it. Um, I've known how he's been for years. I ... um, I never stood up to him. I saw what he did to you and I'm sorry. Your grievance doesn't surprise me. You surprise me, but your grievance doesn't."

She didn't respond. Grievance? She didn't know why he used that word.

He chuckled. "Some of the others are smiling because they hate Action News. They really hate it. I hate it. Obnoxious as hell." He laughed again, more uncomfortably than honestly.

She hadn't notice anyone smiling.

She noticed that the sun was shining, though, breaking through what were once dark clouds. The breeze was warmer. She looked around for her daughter and saw only uniformed men, some of them watching her. Some of them held coffee cups. One of them smoked a cigarette. Their light brown shirts and slacks were brighter in the sun. She noticed a flash of light from Goodall's badge as he stood there, holding the bloody towel, waving at someone. She didn't know why but she wished she had killed him.

Way off to the left, she spotted blue jeaned legs. They were worn by someone shorter than everyone else. From her seated position, she couldn't see much above the knees. The legs were behind

a wall of brown uniforms and green jackets. But they were Cindy's. They had to be. When Angie noticed the white Chuck Taylors, it was unmistakable. Mother and daughter had bought those jeans and shoes together at the Gap, right before the Disneyland trip. The memory of Cindy trying them on flashed before her mind. Now, that memory seemed to be of a different world – a faraway place where a mother and daughter could do something as simple as shop together. I'll never be able to do it again, she thought. I'll never be able to do anything with her again, not after this. I won't be able to hold her. This is my last chance.

With a lump weighing down her throat, she screamed hoarsely "Cindy! Sugs!"

She tried to get out and Goodall put his hand on her shoulder, keeping her in.

The uniform wall parted some and she saw her daughter standing there, arms crossed. Even from a distance, Angie could tell that her daughter had been crying. Her eyes looked suspicious and confused, too. She didn't move. One of the officers had given her a jacket and it hung off her shoulders, past her waist. Goodall waved for her to come forward.

Cindy still didn't move, not until a nearby officer nudged her. As she walked, she swallowed hard, holding back tears.

As Cindy got closer, Angie said "Oh, I'm sorry, honey. I'm sorry." She tried to stand and got pushed down again. She kept trying to bring her arms around to prepare for a hug, forgetting that her hands were cuffed.

Cindy stood still, only a few feet away. Her eyes were welled up and there were wet streams down her cheeks from the tears. Mother and daughter stared into each other's eyes for several seconds. Angie could tell that her daughter would forgive her. She was upset but she would be kind.

Finally, Cindy leaned in for a hug.

Angie whispered "Oh my God, honey. Oh my God. I love you so much and I've missed you so much." She felt her daughter collapse a little and start to sob.

"Mom?" she mumbled.

Angie spoke fast: "You were always my light. You were always with me in the dark place. While I was gone, you were with me. I heard you. You'll always be in my heart. You'll always be with me. No matter where I go, no matter what. You're in my heart. I'll be watching you. I will."

"Mom?"

"I thought you led me here. I was supposed to come here to save you. I was told to. I've been talking with grandpa, sug. He's been with me, guiding me to you." Cindy started to cry harder.

Angie felt herself smile. "I found the way to you. I did it, honey. I thought I saved you ... and maybe I was wrong. I just ... I just want you to be OK. I just want you to live a good life. And you will. You will. I didn't know. I didn't know your dad wasn't still hurting you ... well ... I ... I ... just didn't know."

Cindy's hug got tighter. Angie tucked her chin between her daughter's neck and shoulder, knowing that this would be the last time she'd see and feel her. The jacket on Cindy's shoulders dropped

to the ground. Angie closed her eyes. She didn't want to see anyone come up and tell her that their time was up.

She started to say the same words over and over again: "I didn't know." It was her confession and her apology, to the only person who mattered.

She could accept that taking lives was a mistake. But she couldn't accept that she'd never get the chance to make it up to her daughter. One way or another, she was going away forever. She said "I didn't know" until she could barely hear herself say it anymore.

Eventually, through the soft cries, her daughter nodded and whispered back "I know, mom."

When Angie heard this, she felt free. Her story didn't have to end with her death. It was all right if it ended here, at this moment, with this feeling. The feeling of her daughter trying to set her free.