

Go Away

By

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"You know you're in love when you can't fall asleep because reality is finally better than your dreams."

~ Dr. Seuss

CHAPTER 1

Karen

I tried not to scream.

Standing at the base of the wooden dock was a...

Thing.

It looked like Bigfoot.

I think.

Huge bushy beard and wild hair with burning bloodshot eyes peeked out from the Chewbacca-like face.

Yes, definitely Bigfoot.

Except it was wearing clothing. A dirty windbreaker and sawdust-frosted jeans with grimy looking work boots made a strange Sasquatch if I ever saw one. There was also a grungy ball cap on its head.

It spoke.

I gasped in shock. It knows how to talk! my mind wailed in horror.

Its eyebrows drew down. "What are you doing here? Who are you?" The voice was raspy, as if thirsty or unused.

I straightened to my knees. It didn't seem appropriate to be sitting with my drawing pad when a vagrant was so close – now that I had identified the shaggy thing with a man. I made a thrusting motion with my hand. "I rented this cabin. Go away."

The furry face around the mouth moved as if chewing, then stopped. Then he just walked away, shuffling along the lake's edge as if he hadn't just been in a

short conversation with me.

Day one and I was facing a homeless man? On this beautiful lake above the mountain town of Pine Creek?

To calm myself, I listened to the hollow and distant sound of wind through thousands, if not millions, of pines. An unending melody of liquid din lapped against the wooden supports of the pier. Apart from these soothing sounds, birds occasionally chirped and a woodpecker stuttered intermittently nearby.

It was idyllic.

It was what I needed.

Did Bigfoot have to be here, too?

Pine Creek, well below the lake and the closest thing to civilization, certainly didn't look depressed enough to have homeless people in it. And what would a homeless man be doing up at the lake, anyway?

I watched him disappear behind the nearest trees, blending in as if he were truly a Sasquatch wearing clothing.

Is he dangerous? Should I call the police? My panicked thoughts produced nothing rational.

No, he hadn't really done anything.

I picked up my drawing and hugged it to my chest. I had rented the cabin for six months as an inspirational vacation. Rippy the Rat in His Top Hat was my creation – sold to hundreds of thousands of young children through Scholastic Book Club. I needed another book.

I needed solitude to get it done.

Men! Always making a mess of things with their selfish attitudes and deplorable faults. Like my ex.

My illustrations almost always came first and I definitely did not need distractions during my periods of artistic expression.

I used my pencil to sharpen the upper edge of the little rat's top hat and then sighed with resignation. I collected up my pencils and placed them in my artist's box. I carefully spread a sheet of vellum over my work and closed the pad.

Bigfoot had interrupted my flow.

No matter, I had six months to float with it and pamper myself with relaxation and leisure.

A single interruption is all it was. Calm yourself, Karen. I repeated that to myself and assumed a semblance of serenity. People only ever see a Bigfoot once in their lives. He won't come back now that he knows I'm here.

My thoughts turned to my creation, Rippy. The perfect representation of man: calm; funny; gracious; and so very sympathetic to the plight of the female rats in my stories. Of course, it was a fantasy, because men were nothing like Rippy. Men were selfish; Rippy was romantic.

If only little boys would read my books and understand how to grow into proper men.

The world would be a better place.

Yes, I was on a crusade to change the world. And it all started with my endearing little rat, Rippy.

CHAPTER 2

Troy

I put the woman out of my mind almost as soon as I left her. I had no use for people. No use for talk.

The woman had been attractive, certainly, but I had long ago learned none of that mattered. Even the most beautiful people were hateful and spiteful. Out of the prettiest mouths came nothing but loathing and condemnation.

But I deserved all that.

Pariah!

I kicked the old cabin door shut and tried not to resuscitate the woman's image in my mind.

And failed.

Wild, curly hair, thickly arrayed about her head as if she were wearing a show piece for stage – I was sure strands would brush either side of any doorway she passed through. Her hair and porcelain face, skin pale against the light brunette flaring mane, struck my mind and stayed, as if I had accidentally stared at the sun and could not rid myself of the image burned into my retinas.

I removed my windbreaker and hung it next to my sheepskin coat.

With her on my mind, despite my efforts to forget about her, I looked into the mirror over the hat rack.

I had not done that since...

I even avoided the bathroom mirror in the mornings, barely registering the ghost of someone I used to know facing me and mimicking my teeth cleaning.

I didn't care to look. I didn't care to care.

But what I saw in the mirror now reminded me that I needed to be careful of my grooming. My beard was definitely out of control – a bed and a convenient hiding place for ticks falling out of trees when I was out on my walks around the lake. Though I had never suffered the assault of one of the little bloodsuckers, I was determined to avoid any in the future.

I went into the bathroom and creaked into the familiar position in front of the sink. I used my foot to scoot the small trash bin over and grabbed up my long-unused pair of scissors.

If anything, cutting it all down would at least save me time from brushing out wood chips at the end of each day.

I didn't trim everything down for the woman, or for anyone in town. Definitely not them. I did it for myself because I only had myself.

Outcast!

I snipped, faster and faster, letting fall the long bunches of beard. I carefully watched for any unwanted bugs, though I knew there would be none: I was not an unclean person.

Except in the minds of the townsfolk. I was the worst of the worst to them. Reviled and hated, I was shunned, insulted, spat upon...

Villain!

Only one or two had any modicum of neutrality towards me: Rhonda Lee Kelly and her daughter, Teagan Marie - to whom I had lost my virginity so many years ago. Was that the only reason they were neutral? Had sex caused a connection that precluded hate?

I took my electric shaver out of the cabinet and plugged it in. I affixed the stubble comb attachment and turned it on. Working fast, I savaged my beard and mustache. I didn't feel better when I was done and I hadn't done it to feel better in the first place. I had done it because I was a practical person, and even villains could be practical.

Pariah! Outcast! Villain!

I picked up the scissors again and began clipping my hair. That was much easier since I combed it all back, anyway. Who cared about hair on the town's most hated inhabitant? Only me.

Only me.

I finished and began the arduous process of cleaning up the clippings – every single hair. My thoughts returned again to the woman and her crazy hair. It looked like someone had set off a bomb inside her head and all her hair just stuck out in wild curls and frizz.

I snorted to myself.

She looked like she had been about to scream.

You should've screamed, lady. I am outcast! If you don't know now, you will soon; the whole town will tell you who I am.

Troy Jonathan Reagan, murderer.

CHAPTER 3

Karen

The town of Pine Creek probably held less than the 8,000 souls it claimed on the road sign. I found the two main streets to be quaint and adorable – shops from yester-century crowded together and still adorned with architectural designs long since abandoned.

I half expected to see men walking in cowboy hats and guns slung in holsters, and ladies in bustled dresses carrying dainty parasols. The church at the end of the road dominated the joining of the other primary business street that formed the "L" shaped business district. The steeple stood high, weathering all winds and time itself.

I could almost imagine a parade of people and children, in their Sunday finest, filing out after a sermon – back in a time when religion and belief were integral parts of everyday lives – when families and faith mattered and were important.

Other than the tourists aiming their phones around, the residents either walked alone, drove alone, or had their heads bent over their phones – alone.

Wait, this is progress?

Something in my soul mourned that which I beheld. At the same time, I was comforted that all was well and some colony of aliens hadn't settled with fake smiles to seduce unwary travelers into oblivion.

Alien meal? Me?

I parked in the diagonal parking spot in front of the dress shop. My intended destination was the grocery store, but all of the spots in front were painted blue for handicap parking and all the spots were empty.

Did Pine Creek have no one in wheelchairs? Veterans who had lost a leg or both? Perhaps they didn't need groceries at this instant. From the outside, Cherry Hill Grocery looked like a paint or hardware store. The entry was set in a little

and the windows displayed nonfood items, such as: a steel wash tub; several potted plants; a portable wheeled barbecue; and a stack of wrapped long-burning fireplace logs.

The inside of the store was as bright as the old hanging fixtures allowed, and at least the interior was cooled by air conditioning. I selected a small half-cart. The wooden floor creaked and groaned under each of my footsteps and made me conscious of my weight.

I'm not a huge person! I was horrified by the sounds I caused as I passed the register.

The older woman smiled as I passed. "Good morning."

I blinked at her and my steps faltered and I stumbled. "Oh, hi." I was a bit taken aback by the friendliness. In California, I only got scowls.

She did not appear fazed by my surprise.

I recovered and wandered the aisles, horrified and amused by the paucity of goods. I realized one could tell a lot by the grocery store in a small town – what kind of foods the people generally ate and what they avoided. Other than the omnipresent and ubiquitous displays of Coke and Pepsi, there was a section of organic iced tea, but not Arizona Iced Tea. There was grassfed beef, but no organic bacon. There was a plethora of organic loaves of bread, but very little Wonder Bread. However, not a hint of organic crackers.

I selected mostly fruits and vegetables and at least Cherry Hill Grocery had a selection of organic produce that satisfied me. I didn't want to drive another hour to find a bigger grocery store for a better selection. Not being a chain grocer, Cherry Hill lacked some of the little things that I missed in a big commercial outlet. I missed the chip clips conveniently displayed and hanging in the way of the bags of chips. I missed the suggested mayonnaise display situated next to the cans of tuna. And did I mourn the loss of sugary ketchup packed right next to the freezer door that held the frozen breaded fish sticks?

There was something practical and humble in the approach by Cherry Hill – something that made me realize the big commercials were condescending: "Here, look, have some of this to go with that – because you're too stupid to know any better." Although I knew it was more about quick-grab impulse

purchasing for profit rather than any real convenience.

I wheeled my cart to the register and waited behind an old man buying Tums.

The checker was saying, "I'm telling you, olive oil. A spoon a night for a month will stop all that indigestion permanently."

The man grunted sourly. "These are easy to take."

She blinked, smiling placidly against his rejection. "See you next week, Mister Jeffries."

"Bah." The man shuffled out swinging his plastic bag. At the door, he said, "Have a good one."

I stood for a few seconds, stunned and considering his genuine congeniality at the door contrasted with his indifference to her advice. I lethargically loaded the small conveyor from my cart as I mused over his manner.

The woman's tag named her Rhonda Lee. She began talking to me as if she hadn't just started. "I tell him, but his daughter is a nurse, you know. And she told him she'd never heard of such a thing and not to listen to me." Her hands moved, scanning, but her eyes focused briefly on me. "About the olive oil thing."

"That really works?"

A bright nod and a quickened scanning was followed by a sudden slowing of her hands in grabbing my purchases. "My ex had indigestion really bad. I read that extra virgin olive oil completely cures acid reflux. He took a tablespoon of it a night for about a month and suddenly I realized he wasn't waking me up with gagging and throat clearing anymore. Completely cured."

"Wow."

Her eyes got large for emphasis. "He used to wake me up every single night, without fail. He had it bad. No matter how many antacids he popped, he would suffer every night." She huffed and groaned with aggravation. "Hard to get any sleep with all the coughing and clearing."

"I can imagine..."

She tilted her head at me. "You're new in town?"

"Yes. Here for a while."

"Seeing the sights? It sure is beautiful here, isn't it?"

"Actually, I'm getting away from it all so I can write and draw. I write books for children."

Her smile brightened. "How wonderful." She stuck out her hand. "I'm Rhonda Lee."

"Karen Ross, pleased to meet you."

Rhonda Lee waved her hand. "Oh, no need to be so formal; Lee is my middle name." She scanned the last and placed it in a plastic sack. "Would you like help out with that?"

"No, I can get it all."

Since no one was waiting, she struck a waiting pose and said, "So you write books like Harry Potter?"

I guess she wanted to talk. In California, the checkers grimaced if you lingered. I suppressed my own expression of surprise and impatience. "Not exactly. Younger. I write Rippy the Rat."

She tilted her head again, this time in confusion. She shook her head slightly.

"In the Top Hat?"

She kept shaking her head.

I laughed. "I guess not everyone has heard of my book. A humbling experience..."

As if not catching the slight barb, or even ignoring it, she replied, "My daughter is all grown up now." She blew out a wistful breath. "It doesn't seem all that long ago, but I bought her Doctor Seuss and Nancy Drew."

I admitted, "Classics."

"Do you have any children?"

I was prodded by my memory of my ex and burst out, "No, thank God."

She gave me a curious look.

"I'm sorry. I divorced—"

She placed her hand on mine. "So did I."

"Anyway... no children. I can't seem to pick men – or good ones don't exist."

She pursed her lips and gave me a slow nod as if she was afraid to utter it out loud. "Mine cheated."

I drew in a deep breath and let it out silently. "So did mine." What I didn't tell her was that he went gay – for a boy in high school. It wasn't any of her business.

She lowered her voice and gave me a very sincere smile. "It was nice meeting you, Karen. You'll come back again?"

"I will; I'm here for six months."

She clasped her hands together. "Wonderful!"

I left Cherry Hill Grocery feeling as if I had found a place much more comfortable than California.

CHAPTER 4

Karen

I awakened in the early morning to vigorous pounding in the distance. The sound was repetitious.

Thock thock thock.

The impacting echoes might have been muted through the walls and windows of the cabin, but the rhythm was incessant and aggravating.

I peered at the clock. 7:18 am.

So much for sleeping in. I rolled out of bed and planted my bare feet on the woolen rug. Substantial and solid, I felt grounded to the day – despite the rude awakening.

I showered under the thin stream of hot water and I could still hear the annoying sounds, faint under the light tinkle of water. As I brushed my hair, the sounds drove my brow into furrows. There were other cabins around the lake, but only mine had been rentable. Thomas Ward, of T. Ward Properties, had said that I would be the only renter up here. Did he have some man up here fixing something up?

I finished brushing out my hair and started the laundry.

Thock thock thock.

Gritting my teeth, I dressed in jeans and t-shirt, stamping my feet into my light hiking boots. My irritation was growing to colossal proportions.

I stomped out onto the porch, trying to ignore the beautiful morning and the lingering chill before the sun broke the treeline. I marched towards the sounds. Winding through trees along a small path, I glimpsed a man and a cabin ahead not much more than a hundred yards from my rental.

As I neared, I saw him swinging an axe, savaging a tree – wood chips flying.

He was severe, muscular, and intent. He did not see me coming.

I raised my voice. "Excuse me! Hello? What are you doing?"

The incessant sound stopped as he pulled his axe in and glared at me. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

I was horrified by the huge gouged wedge chopped into the trunk. "Why are you killing that tree?"

He sneered, "It's already dead."

I looked up at the vibrant branches and pine needles on the young tree. "It's alive, you idiot."

He dropped his axe and took the one step towards me that closed the distance. He grabbed my arm with a gloved hand and pulled me roughly towards the tree. His voice grated with anger. His other hand pointed. "See there? Pitch tubes."

"What?"

"Look down there. Boring dust."

"What are you talking about?"

He looked at me with a grimace that implicated my ignorance. "Pine bark beetles."

"So?"

"They'll kill all the trees around the lake if they aren't contained."

I yanked my arm away from his grasp. "You're making a lot of noise."

"My chainsaw is broken."

I groaned. The howling and growling of a chainsaw all day would drive me insane. Maybe another tack would get past this idiot. "Are you Thomas Ward's man?"

"No." His answer was immediate, strenuous, and filled with contempt. "Go away, lady; I have work to do."

"Is he paying you?"

He picked up his axe. He squinted at me. "Go away."

I realized in that instant that this was the... thing... that had accosted me at the little pier. I dropped my mouth open. "You're the homeless man!"

He snorted.

"You shaved? What, for me? I'm not impressed."

His eyes drew down to squinty slits. "Don't flatter yourself." After he said it, his eyes dropped and rose, giving me a vapor-fast once over that didn't change his scowl.

I said, "Are you squatting here or something?" I pulled my phone out of my pocket and began recording him.

His eyes intensified. "Put your phone away and get out of here. Go back to your cabin."

"I'll report you."

He stamped the head of the axe down onto the ground and leaned on the handle. "For what, exactly? Saving the forest? Or putting you in your place?"

The man was every reason why I wrote Rippy as I did. He was the perfect example of masculine obstinacy and lack of reason. I envisioned a skit where Rippy would graciously relent to the woman's position and stop the murderous assault on a beautiful tree. No, Rippy would never pick up an axe to be so destructive; best to have Rippy correct a man about his awful tendencies.

But I put that out of my mind for the moment. I said, "It's too early for this nonsense."

"Nonsense? You're right; I've had enough of talking to you. Go away."

"I'll call the police." I lifted my phone and dialed 911.

"For what?"

"Trespassing." I held the phone up to my ear and listened to the ring.

A strict female voice came on. "Nine-one-one. Please state your emergency."

The man said, "I own this property."

I coughed into the phone and said to him, "You own this?"

"Ma'am?"

He pointed to the cabin behind him. "That's my cabin."

"I thought T. Ward owned all of this?"

"Ma'am? Do you have an emergency?"

The man erupted in laughter. "Uh, no."

I coughed in annoyance and said into the phone, "Uh, no, sorry. Mistake." I thumbed off before I could get a lecture.

He lifted his axe. "Now would you please get off my property and go away?"

"How long are you going to be hacking away?"

"A couple of hours."

"This is intolerable."

He took a step towards me again, scowling. "Where are you from, lady?"

"California."

He smirked. "Figures."

Incensed, I asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"You're all a bunch of freaks. You come strutting around pushing your whacky ideas on other people and forcing other states to bow to your superior will. You freaks need to shut up and mind your own business."

Horrified at the audacity, I said, "What?"

"You're not in California. Stop trying to ruin other states. If you're so fired up to cause pain and misery, go back to California." He was pointing his finger at me.

"I'm not a freak."

He laughed maniacally.

"And I'm not trying to 'ruin' anything."

"Then stop telling me how to be responsible on my own property. You didn't know the first thing about a diseased tree."

I snapped my mouth shut and glowered. I knew what he was talking about: many Californians left the state and spread the same plague of policies that caused them to flee California in the first place. Most other states hated Californians. But I wasn't one of 'those people.' I wanted to escape the state's insanity as much as any other sane person.

But was I trying now to do what he implied? Spread my idea of proper peace to a community that didn't want it? Was it proper for trees to be handled as such at this time of the day?

I backed away a step in consideration. Asking the man probably wasn't the brightest idea, but I knew who would gladly answer my questions: the owner of my rented cabin, Thomas Ward.

I firmed my lips and lifted my chin at the man. I spun as best I could and marched away.

Behind me, he muttered loud enough to be heard, "Good riddance."

I fumed all the way back to my cabin.

CHAPTER 5

Karen

I took up my drawing pad and artist box when my nerves settled an hour after the mad chopping sounds had stopped.

The little pier was peaceful over the calm lake and blessed by the warmth of the late morning sun. I settled down and arranged my tools. Daring to whip out a concept piece on an inspired whim, I began sketching. My hand moved with energy and creativity. In moments, I had Rippy done. Next I would draw a representation of what had transpired earlier this morning. Perhaps the scene would make it into one of my stories and produce beneficial effects on the future of impressionable boys who would turn into men.

There was no silence as such about me as I worked, but the noise of nature was very soothing and different. Birds occasionally cried. Distant twigs snapped. The air moved through the trees in an unending sigh of peace and tranquility. The light lapping of the water on the supports of the pier lured me into a state of deep serenity.

And yet, my brow furrowed, and I sharpened and deepened the lines on the man confronted by Rippy. In a rush of inspired genius, his image flowed and clarified under my artful hand. I started to soften some of the deeper impressions but hovered over the paper with my blending stump.

No, he looks perfect as it is.

The man's sharp lines suggested evil and rage – a maniacal misogyny that Rippy would erase with his plucky panache.

Being concept art, the page limited the more nuanced expression of a portrait – a caricature more than a life drawing. I decided to intensify it to the truth slightly: I notched a couple of fangs on the man's face and deepened the eyes to give a more crazy look. It was flawless. Wanting to dive more into the vile nature of the man, I decided to save the concept drawing and start a more detailed life drawing of the hurtful man's face in the next cabin. I set the pad on my lap and

began a broad outline with light sketches.

I thumbed my phone in my other hand and pressed the contact for Thomas Ward.

"T. Ward Properties?"

"Mister Ward? This is Karen Ross. I rented the cabin up at Lake Lapis?" I kept making the broad shapes with light scratches.

"Yes, yes, of course, Miss Ross. What can I do for you? Is everything okay with the cabin?"

"Yes, everything's fine; it's wonderful."

"Good to hear."

"I was wondering..."

"Yes?"

"How would you handle a tree that has beetles?"

He paused, hitched his breath in thought at the strange topic, and said, "Well, some can be chemically treated, but it's best to just remove it. Why do you ask? Did you see a tree that looks like—"

"The man in the cabin next to me was chopping one down by hand."

His response sounded a little taken back. "Oh..."

"So him chopping the tree down was the right thing to do?"

"Chopped, you say?" A loud knocking sound resounded in the background.

"With an axe."

"A chainsaw would've been faster..."

"He said his was broken."

"Where are you now?"

"At the cabin."

"No, I mean where at the cabin?"

"On the pier? I was drawing."

"Ah, I see."

"Why?"

A voice called out, "There you are." Thomas Ward came around the side of the cabin behind me, phone in his hand. He pocketed it. "Good morning!" He waved high and theatrically. His sheepskin jacket was more an affectation in this warm weather, though the temperature was still cooler than sunny California. The jacket was hanging open. His white cowboy hat was perched snugly on the old man's head. His jeans were new and his leather hiking boots clean. Mister Ward was the model of a mountain rancher.

I said, "Oh, I didn't know you were here."

"I was coming out to check on you – make sure everything was all right. I had a lot of work done on that cabin bringing it up to standards. I trust everything works and you're satisfied with the rental?"

"I..." I briefly thought of the man in the next cabin. "I am."

He turned his head in suspicion to peer at me with one eye. "Are you certain? I sensed a little hesitation there."

I closed my drawing pad as he mounted the steps of the pier. "I was just thinking of the tree... and the man."

"I take it you met Troy, then."

"Troy? He didn't introduce himself. Shaggy beard? All hairy and wild?"

Thomas coughed and looked down. "Yep, that's him."

"Is it normal to cut down a tree early in the morning?"

"What do you mean by early?" He looked up at the sky as if to gauge time by the

sun.

"Seven in the morning?"

He pursed his lips and shrugged. "That's a fairly responsible time in these parts, though eight might be more suited for town."

"I... see."

"Where was the tree?" He looked all around.

"By his cabin."

The man grunted in understanding. "Did he bother you?"

"Yes. Well, no, not really. Just that it was early. And he frightened me two days ago on my first day here. He stood there on the shore and asked me who I was. I thought he was Bigfoot or something."

Thomas scratched at his chin. "I don't imagine he'll bother you anymore, but I can go talk to him. Has he talked to you since?"

"No, just this morning. I... went over there to see what all the noise was."

He grunted again and looked along the shore. "He's a strange one. Many in town don't like him, but he'll leave you alone after I talk to him."

"I don't want to put you to any trouble."

He lifted his head and posture. "Not at all."

"Is he renting that cabin?"

He looked surprised. "Troy? No, he inherited it. His grandfather's cabin. Cal Reagan was a close friend of mine."

"The grandfather?"

He made a positive noise and dipped his chin. "A good man," his eyebrows drew down, "but the graveyards are filled with good men, aren't they?"

I didn't know whether to agree, laugh, or question him. I wasn't very in tune with mountain-style conversations. Did the differences between here and California have to do with hardiness? Practicality? A simpler way of life? Perhaps people in mountain towns were more concerned with whether or not their chickens laid enough eggs for breakfast rather than if someone got triggered and keyed their cars in the Walmart parking lot. Maybe people here were more at the mercy of the weather than Californians being at the mercy of endless traffic jams. Perhaps these differences amounted to chasms in conversations between Californians and Flyover Country residents.

I might have to do a Rippy skit based on that idea...

Thomas said, "I'll go have a word with him." His face and jaw were set.

"I don't... want any trouble."

He looked at me with a scoffing expression. "It's no trouble. I need to talk to him anyway."

"Oh..."

He waved with a simple lifting of his hand and climbed down the steps of the pier. He walked energetically along the shoreline and disappeared among the trees.

I put down my pad and set my artist box on top of it. I scrambled after him, hoping to glean what I might. Just the little jog along the shoreline toward the break in the trees left me panting and out of breath. The air was much thinner up here than sea level California. I slowed and let the spots swim around until they disappeared from my vision. I heard voices.

"—pay you—" That was Thomas.

"—her—Californian!" That was the angry man Thomas had named Troy.

All I was getting were snippets – single words that held little meaning. But Thomas had confirmed that he was paying Troy – for something. Did that not make him Thomas Ward's man? Did that not thus make Troy a liar? What was he hiding?

I almost jumped at the sudden silence. I walked as fast as I dared back to the pier. I expected to be caught returning, but saw no one emerge from the trees until several minutes later. Thomas bore a stern and satisfied look, determined and decidedly dour.

He said to me when he came up to the pier, with a finality that relieved me, "He won't bother you anymore."

I clutched my drawing pad to my chest and thanked him.

CHAPTER 6

Troy

I dismissed the old man from my thoughts; I had more stacking to do. The beetle-bored wood would sit on a tarp and be covered over by others after a liberal dusting of diatomaceous earth. The silicon fossils would eradicate the beetles more efficiently than chemical treatment – and at a fraction of the cost.

Later, I would burn the wood.

More troubling was the woman from California. Was she going to be harassing me for the entire six months of her stay? As much as I resented or deserved the hatred from almost every woman in town, why couldn't the pushy woman come down with the contagion of hatred and just leave me alone?

I slept that night, tossing and turning from my usual nightmares.

Pariah! Outcast! Villain!

The chill of the summer morning was a caress of promise that would be fulfilled around the first big November snows.

I came out of my woodshop and heaved a long sigh in the predawn light. Already worked over and weary from chopping the tree down the previous day, I hefted my axe, determined to make a start on my winter wood stock. Two winters previous, I had set foot in my grandfather's cabin, and had been forced to chop wood in the snow and cold to keep warm.

Sobering.

Just the tonic I needed after...

I was forced to chop every day or I would freeze. There was something of responsibility in that, at my lowest point, that stuck with me now as a grim reminder of my life.

Chopping became a struggle within my soul, played out with each swing of my axe: to live or to die. I swung and chopped as if I were in a battle against myself to just give up, though I desperately wanted to give up.

It was an ongoing, running battle, everywhere I went, with everything I felt.

Give up and die, or live.

Everyone in town, or almost everyone, wanted me to die. Were they right? Was I cheating them of the only justice they could exact? If I was, then they were certainly justified hating me.

Pariah! Outcast! Villain!

I twisted the handle, spinning the axe in my loose grip: I had two cords of wood to split and chop. Between the cabin and the woodshop was an ancient stump that had been there for as long as I could remember. I could almost see grandpa swinging his axe in controlled drops onto a block of wood, splitting it easily.

And here I was, older, with a newer axe in hand, ready to carry on the laborious tradition all alone with no one to watch me as I had watched him.

Where are you now, grandpa? Are you in heaven? Watching? Do you cheer me on, or do you turn away from the spectacle of my life?

I set a log section standing on the stump and considered the grain and position of the knots.

There and there.

It wouldn't do to sink my axe into wood right near a knot. That was futility. Wood became dense and tough around knots; I knew to make my splits well to the sides of them. Knowing this caused each section of cut log to be a different task that produced different slivers of firewood. Each section was unique and created fireplace logs of differing sizes. Each would go into my winter stack with as much thought as it took to chop them: efficiency required the fitting of differing sizes in like pieces of a puzzle.

I swung my axe lightly at first, testing my swing and the soreness of my muscles. Satisfied after a few swings that I was fit for serious work, I swung

more and more with my customary force and intensity. Sections split halfway at first, then completely through as I settled into the fury of my swings.

Murdering logs.

One swing sliced off a perfect chunk of firewood. Reset the section if it fell over and slice off another. Three chops made for wood too thick to really be of much use, though sometimes knots forced it. Four pieces were better, and five optimal. Six or seven slices made for great fire starters and there were always plenty of thinner slivers for kindling.

I was well into a cord when I heard: "What the hell are you doing?"

I stopped, dizziness washing around my head at the sudden cessation of effort. I hadn't eaten yet, though the momentum of chopping banished such concerns until... pauses like these.

The woman stood there, wild hair everywhere, clutching a light jacket at her throat as if it were cold or she was worried I'd try to look at her breasts.

Pariah! Outcast! Villain!

I wasn't going to look. I didn't care.

I said, "What are you doing here?"

Her eyebrows drew down with more determination. "Do you realize what time it is?"

I grunted, "Yeah, time to chop." I set up another log section.

"You woke me up."

"It's not my fault you Californians like to sleep all day."

Her eyes widened in feigned outrage. "I do not sleep all day."

"I've been up for hours."

She shook her head, those pretty frizzies swinging around in agitation. "Next, you'll chop at midnight."

"No one chops at midnight."

"You woke me up," she repeated.

I arranged a section and hefted my axe. "If it bothers you so much, do the adult thing and buy some earplugs." I swung down, splitting off a perfect slice.

She flinched as if I had swung the axe at her and she backed away a step. "I'll report you to Mister Ward."

I scowled at her. "Knock yourself out." I shook my head and muttered, "Crazy Californians."

"I'm not crazy!" She added a petulant afterthought, "And I'm not like other Californians."

I leaned on my axe and laughed at her. "Oh? Is that so? Tell me who you think you act like? An Alabaman?" I rolled my eyes at her.

"You're insufferable."

I nodded at her, firming my lips. "So everyone else thinks so, too. Proving you're just like everyone else, and a Californian even more so."

"Quit harping on me being from California. I've been thinking of moving out of state." Her porcelain face hid something.

I groaned, "Great. I pity the poor state, wherever you go, that has to suffer imported Californian meddling." I swung my axe again and then silently cursed for not paying attention: my axe was wedged into twisted grain right next to a knot. Great. I yanked up on the handle, careful not to try twisting it side to side.

She actually sounded distressed. "You are hurtful and mean."

I placed my boot on the log and yanked upward. The axe came out. I said with a rush of victory, "Then maybe you shouldn't be subjecting yourself to me? Go away."

Her pout and scowl made me wince. Her twist away from me was silent.

I watched her stomp back along the path between the two cabins. Before I could catch myself, I glanced down at the lavish – but not too lavish - curve of her hips, and her slender waist. No boyish, emaciated Californian figure on that one...

Then I realized what I was doing. With anger, I swung my axe down on the log and split off a slice so easily that my axe sunk down into the stone-like weathered surface of the old chopping stump.

Damned woman!

Leave me alone!

Another vicious swing.

Pariah! Outcast! Villain!

CHAPTER 7

Karen

I was furious. Troy whatever-his-name-was had to be the most misogynistic example of alpha male badness that could be imagined: rude; uncouth; uncaring; unconcerned; socially stunted; and undoubtedly toxic.

I slammed the door of the cabin and stood, fists to hips, wondering how I could get back at the aggravating man.

Why was it the handsome ones that were so bad?

Stunned by the odd thought, I opened my artist's sketchpad and looked over my life drawing of him. Then I looked at the caricature with its heavy lines, scowls and fangs.

I definitely did not catch enough badness there. I took out my pencils and bent over the sketch. Normally I sat comfortable. No, this required immediate attention to correct such a glaring error. I etched in deeper scowls, longer, sharpened fangs, and a more evil-looking downturned mouth.

Straightening, I felt the relaxing catharsis of having set my error straight.

Next, I looked at my life drawing of him. It was unfinished. Immediately, though, I began making small corrections: making the lines at the mouth softer; the eyes more intense without being insane; smudging the heavy brow lines; and adding the stress wrinkles around the eyes that bespoke something distant and hidden.

I sat as if I had decided to just drop myself into the chair. Angry at him, at myself, and at my caricature, I considered the depth that I was seeing emerging in my life drawing.

What secrets were those hurt eyes hiding? Why did everyone else not like him?

I couldn't deny the pride I took in my life drawings to be as exact as possible.

Eyes and nose done, I began filling in the details on the indistinct shape of the sensitive lips without the severe caricature in mind.

How might Rippy turn the caricature into something more palatable, like my truer drawing? How might that story play out?

I took the sketchpad in my hands and settled back, working faster to the flow of my most recent memory. Dismissing the aggravation, I redirected its energy into producing accuracy. I gently finished off his lips and considered the level of accuracy. I made a few alterations, deepening and softening where I found discrepancy.

Next, I began the peripheral details: the ears; his hair; his stubble...

It was around noon when I was finished. I placed the pad down and stood, mortified that I had spent so much time on Troy's face when I could've been drawing concepts of my new Rippy story.

I looked down at the pad.

I tilted my head in consideration.

Yes, it was accurate. The hurt eyes, deep and mysterious, dark and forbidding, stared back at me with a hint of accusation. His brow was lightly furrowed with strain and pain. The masculine nose over the sensitive lips promised nudging kisses that...

I shook my head and firmed my lips.

Yes, it was accurate. But the man was mean.

He was vile and toxic.

Best to be avoided.

I closed the pad on his stare, shutting him out.

Shutting him away.

CHAPTER 8

Karen

I walked across the creaking floor of Cherry Hill Grocery pushing my cart. I had a spring in my step.

At the register, I set down all three six-packs of Doctor Zevia on the conveyor. I added my other purchases.

Rhonda Lee gave me a funny look. "You like these? Not Coke or Pepsi?"

I shook my head. "I love Zevia; I was surprised to see it here. If I had really looked when I was here last week..."

The older woman dragged them across the scanner. "We order them for Elaine Parker. She wanted to try some, but she only buys a six-pack a week." She frowned thoughtfully. "I guess we'll have to order more."

"I just love it here; everything is so laid back..."

"Is it?"

"I'm giving serious consideration to moving here. I could use the peace and quiet." Except for Troy the Angry Man.

"Oh?" She brightened. "Where are you from?"

With an embarrassing abashment, I said, "California."

Rhonda Lee's face froze. Her tone dropped off in disappointment. "Oh..."

I felt compelled to rush on. "It's too crazy there. Conflicting laws, fines, fees, broken promises, lies, and you get sued over every little thing..."

She tilted her head, considering me. "I can't imagine living there."

I shrugged helplessly, hoping she would see I wasn't like what everyone else thought of Californians. "That's why I want to move."

"A lot of them move out and about, and then try to make where they move exactly like—"

I placed my hand on the conveyor belt as if to touch her, reassure her. "I would never do that. Good heavens."

Rhonda Lee gave me a relieved smile. "It must be hard living there."

"For me, yes. It takes forty-five minutes on the freeway to go two exits. I can't handle the traffic anymore."

She looked at me as if such a thing couldn't possibly exist. Then her eyes darted out the front window at not a single passing car: no traffic. "We all hope the crazies just stay in California, but they seem to want to force whatever state they move into to become like what they left." she shook her head. "If it's so wonderful there, why didn't they stay? And if it was so bad there, why are they trying to ruin the state they move to? It doesn't make sense."

I said, "Not much does where I'm from."

She looked me up and down as if sizing up my honesty. She pursed her lips and let go of a reluctant nod. "I suppose I would be moving, too, if I lived there. It sure sounds awful." Her tone, however, implied she didn't fully accept that some place could be so different than Pine Creek. "That'll be forty-four nineteen."

I swiped my debit card.

"So... are you thinking of moving here to Pine Creek or somewhere else in state? I hear a lot of non-mountain people complain about a half inch of snow."

"I like Pine Creek, and snow doesn't scare me."

Rhonda Lee laughed. "It's funny to see people move in and then pack up in a mad rush over the first snowfall. They don't stick around long enough to see two or three feet of snow on the ground." She handed me the sacks.

I transferred them back to the cart to push outside.

"Are you in town?"

"No, I have a little cabin on the lake. It's so beautiful there."

"Oh? Which lake?" There were three immediately around Pine Creek.

I stopped moving away from her and turned, rather expecting that she would be saying goodbye, but pleased she wanted to talk.

She was busy, though, scanning the cart of a tired-looking lady who was reading something on her phone. "Hi, Pam."

I waited.

Transaction concluded, she turned to me, striking that waiting pose she habitually struck after every customer. "So, which lake—" Her phone chimed. "Oh my gosh, hold on." She snatched her phone out of her apron pocket and glanced at it. "I'm sorry, it will be just a second. It's my daughter."

I shrugged and nodded, looking outside.

"Hello? What are—You what?" She listened for a moment. "It's not hard, honey—There's nothing to be afraid—Just talk to him. Wh—Did you call him? Oh. Well—" She sighed with a heavy weariness. "Teagan Marie, don't be silly."

I tried to pretend I wasn't listening, but one-sided phone conversations weren't really my thing.

Rhonda Lee sighed again. "Yes, exactly. So—Right. Right. Okay, good, you do that. Yes, I'll talk to you later." She thumbed off and shook her head. She said to me, "You'd think your grown daughter would have the sense to talk to a boy..."

A mother and her three daughters came up to the register.

Rhonda Lee looked at me and mouthed, "Sorry, I'll talk to you later."

I left Cherry Hill thinking casually of my artist's pad and my drawings. Where I might normally think of Rippy and perhaps a new skit to draw, I was thinking of my drawing of Troy's head – the clean lines, the thoughtful eyes, and the sensitive lips.

That someone so handsome could be so rude was the crux of modern man: thoughtless; selfish; unsympathetic.

Troy needed to be a lot more like Rippy to be a real man.

CHAPTER 9

Karen

I took my materials out to the pier late morning on a quiet day. The immense swishing of the mountain breezes through the pines sounded like a distant waterfall.

I could brave a few flying bugs under a climate of paradise like this.

I glanced over my drawing of Troy's face and shuffled that carefully into my portfolio case for later. I turned to my latest Rippy and removed it, putting it also into the portfolio case. I selected a clean sheet and began sketching Rippy's outline. Drawing like this gave me my inspiration as I imagined various poses and story content that could accompany it. Soon, I was etching in details.

I was relaxed, peaceful, and in the zone of drawing. My moves were certain, fast, and accurate. Rippy's shape and detail took form flawlessly.

Until I heard the gunshot.

My spasm of fright produced a horrid-looking jagged line off Rippy's ear.

I looked around wildly, then heard it again.

Except it wasn't a gunshot.

Thock!

I growled incredulously. What? Again? Now? Of all times!

I scrambled to my feet feeling the fury soar to almost insane proportions. I tucked my drawing pad under my arm and stomped down off the pier. The short trek to the trees blocking our cabins still left me out of breath, but I was huffing with indignation and rage anyway. I reached his cabin and glared my anger at him as hard as I could.

He had seen me coming and had stopped his infernal chopping.

I lashed out, "Why do you have to murder more wood right now of all times?"

He muttered, "Triggered, are you?"

I shouted at the top of my lungs, "I'm not triggered!"

He scowled at me. "What's your problem, lady? First you complain about me chopping too early, now you're over here screaming in my face when I give you a little courtesy and chop later. I have work to do."

"Why do you have to chop at all?"

He gave me a very dry look. "It gets chilly when it's twenty degrees below stupid. Most of you city people cry when it cools off to fifty degrees. Just wait until winter. You are staying until January, aren't you?"

I huffed and puffed and couldn't blow anything down. My anger still burned hot, but I controlled my voice. "Yes."

"You'll be using that wood you have chopped up along the side of your cabin, guaranteed."

"Well, I suppose I might. What's that have to do with you chopping right now?"

He said matter-of-factly, "Getting' it outta the way. The summer isn't getting any younger."

"Why didn't you do it before I came?"

He stalked towards me and angled so he could point one shoulder at me in challenge. "Because I was too busy chopping wood for your cabin."

I straightened. Ha. So you do work for Mister Ward. Liar. I lifted my chin against his direct misogynistic brutality. I took my pad out and shook it under his nose and caused him to recoil, much to my satisfaction. "I am vacationing here so I can maximize my inspiration. I draw for my own books."

He grumbled, "Yeah, Thomas said something about that."

"It helps when I have the utmost peace and quiet."

His pained eyes took on a slightly curious expression. "What do you draw?"

"Have you ever heard of Rippy the Rat?"

"Whoopy the Who?"

I said more clearly, "Rippy the Rat."

"No, should I have?"

I coughed in outright disgust. "It is illustrated literary children's fiction."

"You don't say." His sarcasm wasn't lost on me.

I parried it and thrust back. "I don't expect you to have the skills to understand anything other than basic, banal instincts, such as how to fork meat into your mouth."

He shrugged. "I prefer stories like Huckleberry Finn and Call of the Wild. Maybe some Steinbeck if I'm feeling introspective."

"What?" I scoffed. "You? Please. I'd expect you to be more of the football type – no, no, more ultimate martial arts pit fighting, probably. As bloody and violent as it can get."

He took a step towards me, eyebrows furrowed down.

I refused to step backwards and I lifted my chin at him.

His arm snaked out and suddenly I was in his arms, his mouth pressed to mine and those sensuous lips teasing my own and causing the most distressing and tantalizing shivers to run down my back.

My tension was changed in an instant from rigid furor to ragdoll pliability. My temples pounded at the sudden rush of instant change. My anger switched to ardor so fast that I was left dizzy, fully supported by his arm around me. Had it not been for his embrace, I would've fallen. I kissed him back, unaware that I had decided to do any such thing. My tongue fought his and my body went

totally numb as the shiver passed down to my toes.

Was I even standing or was he holding me up?

All I knew was that I wanted to explore what was happening and to delve the very depths of this forbidden kiss.

The insanity!

And yet, I couldn't stop.

I felt his warmth and drank in the smell of his skin. Despite chopping – or having just started – his skin was cool and clean. He smelled refreshingly... plain. No hint of cloying deodorant or cologne tickled my nose. No aftershave – not with that steel wool stubble scratching my face!

And yet, everything so plain and simple about him was exhilarating.

For a brief instant – however long the kiss lasted – I was ecstatically comfortable in his arms and being kissed.

Then he let me go.

If anything, he scowled harder. "That was a mistake."

I couldn't make sense of anything at all, not with the dizziness and giddiness causing my world to spin and heave. I found myself on my feet and stumbled forward into him to my embarrassment and shame.

He braced my shoulders to keep me from falling to the ground, or falling back into his arms.

I pushed away from him and regained my balance. I tried some heat to cover over my flustered composure. "That's right it was!"

He tilted his head. "I don't even know your name."

"Karen Ross."

He mouthed my name and I was suddenly entranced at the way his lips formed my silent syllables. Shivers once again rattled down my back. I hugged my arms

to myself and trembled. He stooped and scooped up my drawing pad.

I hadn't even realized it had fallen.

He opened it and looked at the first drawing – the one I had been working on when he had interrupted me with his chopping. His eyebrows twitched upwards. "This is Rippy, I take it?"

I was panting, trying still to catch my breath. "Yes, it looks like a rat, doesn't it?"

His face twitched from serenity to agitation, then back again. He closed the pad and handed it to me. "Yes, I was going to say you're a great artist, but..."

Something felt like it was falling inside me, as if I had missed an opportunity to catch something and I was at a loss as to what it was or how to get it. "I..."

He firmed his lips. "I need to chop this wood at some point or other." His tone hardened a little more. "Should I make an appointment with you to get it done?"

At a total loss for words now, I stammered, "Well—When..."

His eyebrows drifted higher in question and expectation.

"I, uh... guess that tomorrow morning would be fine. No, in fact, just do it now. How long will it take?"

"A few hours, if you leave me alone."

A chill chased the previous shivers down my back and I desperately wanted to apologize, but I wasn't sure for what. I clutched my pad to my chest and looked at his boots – anywhere but his face.

"Then I'll do it now." He picked up his axe from where it was leaning against a tree trunk.

I stood there, uncertain as to how things had changed so suddenly and at a loss to recall the place I had been that had felt so heavenly.

He frowned. "Unless you want to stand and watch me all day, now would be a good time to go away."

Nothing he could've said would've driven the hurt deeper.

CHAPTER 10

Troy

Damn woman!

I struggled inwardly to deny the sensations that traveled from my head down to my dick. Why couldn't she just stay away? Mind her own business? She acted as if total silence had been included in the Bill of Rights for Karen Ross under a unanimous act of Congress, penned by George Washington himself and stamped and sealed by Thomas Jefferson.

I had to wonder if the woman would last all six months, or pack up in a huff and return to the endless noise of the big city.

As if chopping wood was worse.

I swung my axe, splitting and kicking pieces aside. I worked fast – not so much for her sake as for mine. The faster I finished, the less chance the wild-haired woman would come huffing and stomping back over to my cabin and rag on me about silly things.

I stopped, blowing heavy breaths, and stared at the wood grain of the log section I had set up. But, I wasn't really seeing it. For the first time in a couple of years, someone had approached me and talked. Other than the expected Thomas Ward and his annoying requests, and perhaps Rhonda Lee at the grocery mart, everyone else avoided me.

Pariah! Outcast! Villain!

A freshness to the situation frustrated my balance. Someone was actually looking at me for who I was rather than by what I did.

Was redemption possible?

What was it about the woman that was causing me so much grief? Her spunky attitude? The mellifluous timbre of her voice? The brassy confrontational

posture whenever she saw me? The delicate curves and angles of her facial features? The way she couldn't hide the jerky sway of her hips behind the stomping of her march?

Damn woman!

I resumed chopping, faster, and with much more effort. I growled through each stroke of my axe with futility and frustration.

I got off on the wrong foot with her.

I stopped in the middle of a swing and blinked.

Where did that come from?

I shook my head and put my mind to splitting the rest of the log sections. If I was going to give her the peace she wanted to inspire her stories and drawings, I needed to be done with this.

I exhausted myself, finishing earlier than usual for two cords of wood. It was with great pleasure and relief that I showered in my old cabin and sluiced away the day. Was I confused because she was so different than the others in Pine Creek?

She knew nothing of me; what would she think if she knew? It was doubtful Thomas Ward would tell her; he wanted the income from renting out the cabin. Should I tell her?

And to what end?

The woman barely tolerated me as it was.

Why ruin...

Ruin what? It wasn't like we had something going. The whole kiss had been a mistake and she had vociferously and vehemently confirmed it. I was surprised I hadn't received a visit from Sheriff Gormund over sexual assault. Even smiling at a woman was considered sexual harassment in the more "liberated" parts of the country.

I laughed in the shower.

It could have been maniacal: considering my past, it should've been. Except that it was weak and thready, uncertain and uncomfortable.

Surely, the kiss had been a huge mistake. But I hadn't been able to stop myself, nor been able to even consider it before my body had acted and grabbed her up. What insanity was that? I was not an impulsive person.

What had caused me to thoughtlessly kiss her?

Some women considered a kiss like that to be rape. Would Karen Ross now hold a sign that read #MeToo? Would she require years of therapy and medications to overcome the horror of being kissed?

It was what she needed.

I shook my head in the shower, sending droplets spraying. I coughed, laughed, and panted in distress. Where were these thoughts coming from? And why was my member hardening?

I got out of the shower; this was getting ridiculous.

Women held nothing for me. None could cause this effect. None could reach deep into the recesses where I had discarded my heart on the refuse pile of my past.

I clenched my fists and dried off.

I needed to pull my head out, or I was going to lose it.

Tomorrow.

CHAPTER 11

Karen

I took my drawing materials and headed out of the cabin. The mid-morning sunlight in a sky only partially blotted with a few fluffy clouds was already warm and promised a good sun-baking out on the little pier.

Then I stopped dead in my tracks as I looked at the wooden structure.

On it, swinging his legs, and holding a fishing pole was Troy. He was hunched over in a horrible posture and wearing a tank top over his jeans. His hair was combed back but still looked unruly from the rear.

As if sensing my presence from a dozen yards away, he turned his head just enough to peer at me with one squinted eye. The bad boy appearance would only have been enhanced by a filthy cigarette dangling from his mouth and a drifting cloud of polluting smoke.

Frustration and futility escalated inside of me. How was I supposed to draw and be creative when he was hanging around? What was he doing on my pier? Why was he intruding on my privacy?

I stomped down the slope and mounted the steps. "What are you doing here?"

He turned a little more, lowering the end of the fishing pole as if to set aside his intent to capture a helpless fish. "Good morning to you, too." His eyes held curiosity and wariness.

I wasn't going to be diverted by niceties. I stamped my foot. "What are you doing here? This is my pier."

The curiosity dimmed in his eyes and the wariness increased. Something fundamental shifted inside of him that I could easily read; I just didn't know what it was. He grated, "It isn't your pier."

"It's on the lot of the cabin I rented. I am renting this pier. It is mine and you

have no right to be here."

His voice took on a more dangerous tone, brutal and masculine. "My grandfather built this pier."

"I don't care if he dug out the lake and filled it by hand and planted every tree; I am renting this cabin and for six months, this is my pier. I rented this so I could work on my book, not be hounded by some vagrant man who abuses my privacy. I can't be having so many interruptions and distractions. I need to be creative, not have to deal with your reckless and rude bullying. I have a book to finish." By then, I was standing, bent forward, fists on my hips. I felt the anger on my face.

His eyes dropped down slightly, focusing.

Good god, he's looking down my top. I straightened and dramatically clutched my shirt closed at the neck. "Get out of here!" I was enraged. At the same time, I experienced a...

I experienced a thrill.

How ridiculous. However, I lost some of my anger to confusion.

He scowled bitterly and yanked his pole up, reeling in. "Fine, woman. I thought we could talk, but I guess I was mistaken. You're like all the rest." He hung the hook on a ring and drew the reel to tighten it secure. He stopped and picked up his tackle box. "Excuse me, Miss Perfect. You need to move so I can leave." His face was a rigid mask.

Somehow, my position of superiority had crumbled all around me. I felt it slipping away as surely as watching a train leave and pick up speed to dwindle in the distance and dust.

Wait, what am I losing here? What's going on? I stumbled out of his way and felt his anger pass me like a force of wind – a gust of displeasure that convicted me with its passage. I opened my mouth to speak, but said nothing because no witty words were there to repair the damage I had caused, but could not adequately identify. Finally, I said to his retreating back, "Wait..."

It was all I could say.

It was not enough.

He disappeared through the trees.

I sat down hard, wondering what had just happened. I opened my portfolio and slid out my caricature drawing of Troy and Rippy. I had altered it several times already, accenting or softening the features of the man depending on my mood. My last alteration had been a softening. I used my pencil and drew sharper, more exaggerated fangs. I deepened the eyebrows back to maniacal. But I was dangerously close to ruining the drawing with too many alterations.

I started with a fresh paper. I would do a caricature of the face, only, as if it were a facial life drawing. I sketched my anger rapidly. Lines flowed and sharpened. Detail was added to the glinting fangs and sneering mouth lines. The eyebrows became ferocious and malevolent. The eyes, intense.

Except...

I frowned in concentration as I studied the near-finished caricature. Evil and vile, certainly, except that the eyes...

The eyes.

They showed pain and hurt, not evil intent.

My confusion over the encounter had come out in my drawing.

The sense of loss returned to my mood and remained, poking and prodding me with conflicting thoughts.

Had I not been right?

The dock was mine, essentially, for the remainder of my rental. Mister Ward had even talked up its value for my inspirational purpose. It wasn't my fault Troy's grandfather had built it.

Or was that a lie, too?

Add it to the lie that he didn't work for T. Ward Properties? How much of what Troy said was a lie? How many more lies was I going to hear over the next five

and a half months?

I changed the facial caricature to reflect a more shifty-eyed appearance. Once done, I looked at it critically and felt discontented with the results.

Had I really missed something?

CHAPTER 12

Troy

Damn woman!

I tried to be nice and she surely showed her big city bitchy attitude towards me. It proved only that even pretty women from California could be just as bitchy as small town women.

Once again, I was confirmed in my entrenched attitude that women were vile, vicious creatures filled with loathing and hate.

I was a bully?

I shook my head in my wood shop.

How could such a beautiful woman be so cruel and cold? I had gone to offer an olive branch and she had savagely snapped it in half.

You want war, Karen Ross? I'll give you war.

I paced all day. I tossed all night.

In the morning, I picked up my axe and went out to re-chop some wood. I didn't need to; I wanted to. And I made sure it was before sunrise.

I worked with a passion, ambitiously swinging my axe as if driving the blade down between myself and other people.

No need for a relationship with anyone.

Not even Thomas Ward.

Not even Rhonda Lee's pathetic attempts at playing nice. I knew what she was up to.

And her daughter...

All useless. All vile. All hateful.

But I deserved it. I deserved every hatred and scornful epithet thrown my way.

Pariah! Outcast! Villain!

What would a beautiful woman want with a man like me? To laugh? Jeer? Revile? To demonstrate her superiority with pompous virtue signaling?

I was nothing.

And deserved nothing.

But the hateful woman next door was going to pay.

I chopped wood every morning for three days in a row before my wild train wreck of noise brought her out.

Not while I was chopping, but later on that third day.

I heard the twigs snapping as she walked towards my cabin. Half expecting to see the sheriff or that bothersome Thomas, I poked my head out of my wood shop and saw her.

Her eyes were circled just a little: I had obviously awakened her every morning with my needless chopping.

Good. I hope you suffered.

I wiped varnish off my fingers and stepped out.

She came differently, approaching me with arms folded and looking down. She stopped, uncertain, and ventured a glance up into my eyes.

I forestalled her tirade, though she hadn't launched herself at me with anger and recrimination. I said, "Oh, excuse me. Am I doing something that bothers Miss California High and Mighty? Going to call the police? Going to report me to the FBI? Come to call me names?"

She jerked her head to the side, which I detected as a negative signal. She said, "No, I..."

"What complaint is it now? Am I stealing your air while breathing?"

She hugged her arms to herself harder and shook her head. Her eyes glanced again at mine, suspiciously, warily – filled with uncertainty. "No, no complaints. I wanted to say I was sorry for overreacting on the pier."

I jerked, half stumbling as I lost balance. "You're s—" I shook my head in disbelief. "You..."

She looked up at me with more courage. "Your grandfather really built that pier?"

"Before I was born. He and I used to sit out on it and fish when I was younger."

Something in her eyes held a look of disbelief.

I shrugged mentally: it was the truth. But I looked at her in confusion. Why would you not believe that?

She lifted one shoulder in half of a shrug and looked away. "I guess I can share it. Maybe... you could use it when I'm not."

I tilted my head back in utter bewilderment. I squinted at her face to see what it might be hiding, but I detected nothing I could decipher. "Share it?"

"Sure, why not? You like to fish?"

I grunted noncommittally.

"I get up a little later than you," her eyes drifted to the stump where I chopped wood, "and isn't fishing better in the early morning?"

I glowered at her: she was obviously offering to let me fish from the pier to keep me from chopping wood and waking her up. I sneered at her, though she wasn't looking at me. "Oh? Make a schedule so we don't... bother each other?"

She looked at me then, ignoring my sneer. "Sure, why not?"

I gripped the door frame of my wood shop hard and thought about her offer. Is this your version of an olive branch? I studied her for several seconds until the silence became uncomfortable for both of us, then I shrugged. "All right, then."

"You can use it in the mornings all you want. I only get in the drawing mood around ten."

I nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "Best fishing is around sunrise and just before. Okay, then."

"Do you fish for food?" Her tone was curious, not challenging.

I said, "I eat what I catch, yes."

"Just so I don't get in trouble because it's on my pier, you have a license for that, right?"

"I don't."

She shifted uncomfortably. "Well... I guess it's none of my business..."

I blinked in surprise. "A Californian pretending to respect other peoples' privacy? Are you kidding me?"

She lifted her chin at me, but not forcefully. "I'm not like the extremists there." There was a softness to her eyes and features that offered no hint of hurt or effrontery.

I found myself nodding slowly, reassessing. "Okay..."

"Anyway, I wanted to come and make that arrangement... and I wanted to apologize." She stuck out her hand. "Let's try this again. I'm Karen Ross."

I shook my head in wonder at her, disbelieving her attempt at neighborly sociability, but forced to accept it because I couldn't pick apart her motive. I shook her hand. "Troy Jonathan Reagan." I gave her my full name as the newspapers had printed it.

Murderers always had three names.

CHAPTER 13

Karen

Damn that man!

How could his brutality surface and submerge on a whim and confound my sense of equilibrium? How could one man be so churlish one moment and charming the next?

It was maddening.

I was flustered to the point of pacing in my cabin. I certainly wasn't getting any real work done and I had gone there in hopes of easing away my doubts and concerns.

I hadn't made anything easier. Just the opposite.

Was there a Ripper story in this? I couldn't see one; just endless aggravation.

But I had extended a peace offering, hoping he would cease his morning chopping knowing it bothered me. Would it work? His handshake had seemed genuine. But what was a lie with him? He had lied about working for Mister Ward, had claimed his grandfather had built the pier and it seemed like he was telling the truth.

But was he really?

On the one hand, I sketched what I felt in a personality like a psychic putting impressions on paper. I had sketched his shifty eyes and character. He had definitely lied at least once. But should I expect any different from a man? He had certainly taken the opportunity to visually rape me when he had looked down my top.

He was really no different than the common misogynistic alpha-hole that silly women loved to read about in romance novels.

But I had experience with bad boys. They were bad for a reason and no, they did not change. There was no magical spark that caused the scruffy bedroom bad boy to become the tamed, angelic, perfect husband of a woman's dreams. It just didn't happen.

Ever.

I had experience with that.

My ex-husband's suave bad boy attitude and sexy bedroom eyes had been turned not just on me, but also on a fifteen year old boy in high school. He had ultimately chose the boy over me, despite me threatening to turn him in to the police. The boy had proclaimed he was gay and blared it across Facebook: calling the cops on my husband would've possibly backfired on me by virtue of forcing my sexual views down the boy's throat.

Can't do that where I come from.

My threat only would've worked if it had been a girl he had been molesting. As it stood, my motives would've been skewed by others to be that I was hurting the boy, not my husband.

Can't change a man. Ever.

No, I had no illusions that Troy Jonathan Reagan was any different. He was a typical man. Evil, rude, uncaring, bullying, abusive...

I stared at my facial caricature of him.

I still could not get the eyes right. Instead of orbs of lying and deception, they were pained and sensitive, as if those were the real fundamentals of the man's personality hidden behind the boorish behavior.

What was the truth?

Had his earlier acceptance of my offer been an act? Would he chop wood again the next morning? Would he keep his promise to fish in the early mornings and leave the late mornings to me?

Like a bolt from heaven, I knew with a certainty that I had made a mistake: he

was just another asshole man.

CHAPTER 14

Karen

Four days passed in blissful peace. On the fifth, I looked out the window and through the single line of trees that partially blocked my view of the pier.

He was there, feet swinging on the pier like a little boy.

It was adorable.

I looked over my second caricature sketch and approved of the changes I had made: less vile countenance; more sensitive touches. I nodded approvingly at the emotive expression I had captured that encompassed the pain and sensitivity I felt existed. I compared it favorably to the facial life drawing I had made and was satisfied that I had caricatured properly.

The only problem was that it had become less of a caricature and more detailed in reality. I stuffed them both back into my portfolio and poured two cups of coffee.

Carrying both cups out, I climbed the steps of the pier.

His head turned, eyeballing me with that squinty eye of his. He grunted in greeting.

I teased him, "Good morning to you, too."

He did something unusual and strange.

I wasn't sure whether he was dying, or choking, or convulsing. Then I realized he was laughing. I handed him a cup.

His laughter died as he studied the offering. His hand accepted it with hesitation. He turned so he could see me with both eyes, squinting up at me in scrutiny. "For me?"

I rolled my eyes. "No, I just want you to hold it while I stand here and finish this cup."

His mouth twisted and churned. His voice was quiet and considerate. "Thank you." He sipped at it, testing the heat. Then he took a gulp.

I squatted next to him, just a little behind. "I hope that's okay; I don't like my coffee scalding."

"No, neither do I. It's perfect. Thank you."

Pleased that I was seeing a non-confrontational side of him that validated my drawings, I said, "Aren't you cold?"

He was wearing one of his tank tops. "Nah, very comfortable. It gets cold enough later on to be putting on jackets. I like to enjoy the heat while it's summer."

I thought it was chilly, personally.

He asked, "Do you fish?"

I shuddered at the thought. "No." I kept the revulsion out of my voice, though; I didn't want to start an argument. "But I'll eat fish."

He looked at me again, eyes glittering with amusement.

I said defensively, "I'm not vegan."

He chuckled.

"What?"

He shrugged. "I don't care either way. Everything eats something else; it's nature."

I wanted to change the subject. I looked out over the water and said, "So you and your grandfather used to fish here together?"

He nodded wistfully.

"What about your parents? Did your father fish here, too?"

He coughed in derision. "No."

"I'm... sorry?"

He twitched his shoulder in half a shrug. "It's nothing. My mother and father were never around."

"Your grandfather raised you?"

"Mm-yep." It was a hummed word that implied a lot more than it revealed.

"Are your parents still alive?"

He made that strange sound I understood to be laughing: it wasn't mirthful, but more rueful. "I have no idea. Last I heard, they were hiking across South Africa."

"That sounds wonderful."

He smirked.

"What, you don't think embracing culture is a good thing?"

He shrugged both shoulders. "At the cost of dumping their inconvenient kid? I'm surprised I wasn't aborted."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's no matter. Not a lot of love lost there."

"So... what do you do for work?"

"Restore my grandfather's rowboat. It's done, if you want to see it."

"No, I mean, like an actual job..."

"Nothing." His eyes shifted away from mine.

So, you are a vagrant. I pursed my lips together to keep from saying anything.

Apparently, he felt a little inclined to elaborate. "I inherited money from my grandfather. I'm living off that, right now."

Well, that's a little better. "No career aspirations?"

"Yeah, getting the rowboat done. Renovating this pier."

"You aren't going to work on this while I'm here, are you?"

He looked at me for a while, studying my face.

I grew uncomfortable.

"No, I guess I don't have to. If you like it as it is, I can wait until next summer." He banged his fist down on the cracked wood. "It's not going anywhere."

"What did you do before... your grandfather passed away?"

"Backhoe operator for the county."

"You didn't like the work?"

"It was okay. Paid well." He hesitated for a second. "But they decided later on that they didn't like me. No one likes me." He didn't say it, however, in any sense of self-pity.

I puzzled at his matter-of-fact declaration, but he wasn't forthcoming with any more information. "So, do you keep the rowboat hidden away because the dock is on my rental?"

His lips widened into a grin. "Anxious to row around, are you? No, not hidden. I was varnishing it a couple days ago. Should be all dried and cured by now." He stuck his pole in a metal bracket at the edge of the pier.

I lifted my eyebrows. "I wondered what that thing was for."

He grunted. "A fisherman's convenience." He got up. "Come on." He set down his empty coffee cup next to his pole.

I followed him down the stairs and along the lake. "So I actually get a boat?" I was more teasing than serious.

He looked back at me. "Have you ever rowed a boat?"

"No, but I've seen plenty of movies."

He laughed, mirthful and clean.

I lifted my chin. "What?"

"If you watched a movie about someone driving, would you know how to drive a car?"

"It can't be that complicated."

He approached his shed. "It isn't, but it still requires a bit of learning." He flicked on the overheads of his shop. Tools were hanging everywhere: some old; some new. In the center of the floor on supports was an overturned boat. It looked huge.

"Wow, it's big."

It was long and painted red with an ivory trim around the edges.

He waved his hand at it. "It looks like it, but when it's in the water it looks really small. When I take you out in it, you'll be wishing for something bigger."

"Take me out in it?"

"Sure, I didn't restore this antique just so you could take it out on your own and capsize it."

I felt a little peeved, but understood his effort and concern. "Is it really that dangerous?"

He grunted dismissively. "Just follow my instructions and you'll be a pro in no time. Then, if you want to row by yourself all over the lake, you can." He stroked his hand over the varnished bottom. "It's a family heirloom..." He squatted a bit, peering along the curve of the boards. He ran his hand smoothly over the finish.

"It looks beautiful."

He straightened abruptly and stuffed his hands into his jean pockets. "Thank you."

"Mister Ward didn't tell me the rental came with a boat."

"It doesn't, really. But that's where it sat – at the pier."

"It's nice of you to share it with me, then."

He came close and reached out his arm.

I thought he was grabbing for me and I flinched.

He snapped off the overhead lights. He stood there, looking at me with curiosity and interest. His eyes were locked on mine.

At least you aren't looking down my top again... I began breathing harder, trying to get air into my starved lungs. Had I been holding my breath?

His hand came up and brushed his fingers across my cheek and back to my hair at my temple.

I shivered as cascades of tingles raced down my arms and back. My lips parted as I opened my mouth wider to try forcing in more air. I was getting dizzy.

He bent his head down, his eyes flicking down to look at my lips.

I licked them, aware I was standing there gaping like an idiot.

His hand snaked around my waist and he pulled me to him with a gentle firmness that allowed no refusal.

We kissed, comfortably, hotly, and thoroughly. This kiss was different: it was smoother; more sublime; less contentious; and certainly leisurely and relaxed. I melted into him because I wanted to. No cares or concerns assaulted my senses as we shared something nice. My arms ached to hug him harder – to draw him into me and squeeze us together as one. His strong arms encircled me, holding and comforting me with steady surety.

I could stand here all day and kiss like this. Except that it was over just as I was

really getting into it. Heat had blossomed inside me in the most aggravating and satisfying ways. It's not fair to stop like that...

His eyes glittered down into mine. He said, "That was no mistake..."

I wanted to laugh. I wanted to rage in disappointment at the brevity of it. I wanted to cry that it was over. Damn you. I panted, looking up at him.

He whispered, "You're all I've thought about."

A little girl dressed in a ballerina outfit leapt up inside my soul and did a pirouette. I said, "Yeah, me too."

He did not respond.

I realized my answer sounded lame and stupid – like all I had done was think about myself.

Could I have sounded any dumber?

CHAPTER 15

Karen

I sat on the pier before noon, taking a break and gazing at the sketches I had done of Troy. I had progressed well on Rippy and my newest book, scratching up four new scenario sketches for the story.

Now I looked at my Troy drawings. He would play a prominent part in my story, changing from a mean brute into a sensitive, caring man under Rippy's gentle guidance. I admired my capture of Troy's facial expressions and the reality behind the veneer. The pained eyes, the sensitive mouth, the bold nose, the handsome balance of his features – I had them perfect. I understood, too, the cause of them all: his grandfather's death and his abandonment by his parents at a young age. This was why he lied.

It was easy to see.

Rippy, on the other hand, was an avatar of privilege. He did not have such a damaged upbringing, but had a wealth of experience helping others who were damaged to see the better light of hope and love.

Rippy could bring that to Troy – through me. I could be his Rippy the Rat.

A small gust of wind, no more than a breeze to ruffle my papers, caused me to pat my hand down protectively on the edge of my stack of drawings. At the same time, a massive booming sounded right behind me and the pier shook.

Panic ripped through me. Had the dock blown up? I scrambled frantically, twisting to look at the calamity behind me.

A huge monster was trying to eat the pier. It was red and enormous, and had legs.

I shrieked in fright and kicked one leg out from under me. Unfortunately, my foot swiped the stack of drawings and three of them went spinning over the edge and down into the water. In a panic, I reached for them, arms shaking in horror at

the loss, and went tumbling off the pier after them.

I hit the water in a frenzied splash that shocked me until I breached the surface in a gasping hysteria spurred by the amazing chill of the water. It was very warm on the little wooden pier. How could the water be so cold? My eyes focused on the monster.

It wasn't.

Troy peeked his head out from under the upside down rowboat he was carrying on his back. His alarmed look mirrored my panic. He tossed the boat over and leapt onto the pier. He hauled on my waving hand and pulled me out.

I stood there, draining water all over the place and shivering. He was bent over plucking my drawings out of the lake. With a last lunge, he almost toppled in himself snatching one that had landed the furthest out.

He shook his head. "Do these dry out?"

"N-no. They're r-ruined." I was quivering cold and bitter. "Why d-did you have to scare me?"

"Didn't you hear me coming?"

"No!"

He looked down, abashed. "Sorry." He bent his head more and picked up one of the drawings. It was the first caricature I had drawn of him, evil, malign, and brutal. His mouth quirked. "This is what I look like?"

I tried to snatch it away from him, suddenly feeling ashamed of it. He moved it slightly, evading my grasping fingers.

He tried hiding a smile and muttered, "I guess I need to do a better job of filing down my fangs." He slapped lightly at his mouth as if to find his protruding teeth. "Do they really hang down that far?"

I growled in anger and finally yanked the sketch from his hands. Frustrated at his teasing and at my loss, I yelled, "You ruined my work! Days wasted!"

His mouth went from amused to concerned. "I said I was sorry. I was just bringing the rowboat..."

I threw my hands up in the air. "I'll have to redraw all of these!"

He picked up another and it was the facial life drawing of him. He said in wonder, "You're really good..."

I hadn't wanted him to see that, but it was one of the ones that had fallen in the water. Already, the drawing was soaking through and the lines beginning to run.

He added, "You must have spent a lot of time drawing me..."

Which was not what I wanted to hear. I most certainly didn't want him thinking all I thought about was him. I screamed, "Just go! Leave me alone!"

His head snapped up and he looked at me in confusion and hurt. His lips were parted as if he were going to say something, but then they closed, firming. He looked away and climbed down off the pier.

I had been humiliated, and there was nothing I could do to bring back my sense of equilibrium.

He left the boat where it was.

And walked away.

CHAPTER 16

Troy

Damn that woman!

I hadn't meant to frighten her.

And when I had wanted to look at her and appreciate that she had taken so much time to draw me, obviously thinking about me, she had yelled like I had hurt her.

I had felt so... flattered.

No one drew me.

No one thought of me.

No one cared.

But she had, and I was moved.

I had wanted to take her out on the rowboat and teach her how to get in and sit, how to row. And... I really just wanted to spend a little time with her. But now she was angry with me, as if I had thrown all her work into the lake myself and then laughed at her.

The flattery I felt was submerged under confusion.

I was happy that she had drawn me; why was she so angry about it? She was a fantastic artist; shouldn't she be proud to show me how she'd drawn me?

And why the fangs?

It had been a cute picture, more comic book than life-like. I guess I knew what I'd look like in a cartoon.

It dawned on me with recall.

My fanged personage had been bent over, scowling. The man-sized rat in the top hat next to me had been standing proud and tall, chest thrust out and hands on hips in an attitude of eager presentation. The rat had been confronting me.

I was the villain.

Pariah! Outcast! Villain!

Darkness and denunciation corroded my soul.

Swept away in a heated flash that left my skin clammy was the hope that Karen had viewed me as a man and not a murderer.

Did she know?

I didn't think Thomas Ward would've told her: no, he wanted to rent the cabin. Had she met people in town? Heard the horrible truth?

I ground my teeth together until my jaw hurt.

Maybe I'll tell her myself. Who cares what Thomas thinks?

I slumped down onto my grandfather's rocker and leaned my head back, staring at the ceiling. Four small blood splats stained the ceiling above me. Four little droplets. The blood had launched up when I had... I wrenched my thoughts away in disgust.

No, I won't think about the past. It serves nothing. It matters nothing.

The here and now was that Karen Ross rented the cabin next door and I was...

Smitten, Troy. You idiot. Smitten with a woman that hates you. I listened to my thoughts berate me. Condemn me. Convict me. Maybe they should've fried my ass in the electric chair. I fumed in fury at the injustice and my mood darkened considerably further.

I was a villain to Karen Ross. Villains were fought, combatted, defeated. She wrote children's books and that meant the villain was bad.

Well, she had that right.

Whether she knew or not, she had accurately interpreted who I was in her simple drawing. Villains were unworthy of respect, of consideration, of love. Especially not love. Villains were portrayed to be defeated.

My hands shook on the arms of the rocking chair.

No matter how I lived my life, I could not escape my past.

She was too good for someone like me: too pure; unsoiled; and unspoiled. How had I ever imagined that she might like me?

The murderer of Pine Creek: perfect inspiration for the evil to be defeated in her stories.

I got out of the rocking chair and went out to the wood shop.

It was useless to think I could ever have a relationship again. Especially with the woman in the next cabin. Thoughts of her plagued my sanity, driving me wild with the desire to act.

I picked up a knife: a very sharp knife.

CHAPTER 17

Karen

I didn't see Troy for four days.

Not a peep of sound or snap of twigs announced that he even existed. No chopping sounds came from his cabin and he didn't use the pier in the mornings to fish.

That was good.

I didn't think I could face him with the shame of knowing that he knew I had drawn him.

How embarrassing!

Recapturing the Rippy drawings I had lost weren't really that big of a deal; I certainly knew how my story was progressing and had plenty of time to redraw the couple I had lost. I even started redrawing the ruined life facial of Troy. I would make sure he never saw the new ones.

At the same time, as the days passed with relief, I grew uncomfortable at his absence. I... missed seeing him out there.

The rowboat still lay where he had dropped it. I walked past it when I went to sit out and draw. But it sat there behind me on the shore like an accusation and a very constant reminder of how I had gotten rid of him.

Except... I didn't want to get rid of him; I just wanted privacy. Now I had it and I wondered what he was doing.

My inspiration flowed with fruitful fluidity. I was well onto working out the middle part of the book where Rippy chastises the villain about privacy and the importance of respecting a woman's efforts.

Of course, it was the beautiful lake and forest that provided the inspiration; Troy

was just a prop for flavor.

Of course.

Where was he?

Was he mad that I demanded a modicum of respect? Was he exhibiting the sexism men had that put themselves first in everything? Was he just another proponent of the immoral patriarchal system of servility?

Why did that thought raise bile in my throat? Why did it seem hollow with Troy?

A loud crashing and swishing came through the trees back towards his cabin.

I twisted around and looked that way.

Troy became visible, swinging an axe and smacking the flat of the blade against tree trunks and branches. His voice called out, "Can you hear me?"

I rolled my eyes and sighed. Men have to exaggerate everything. "Yes, I can hear you."

He called out warily, "I don't want to sneak up on you..."

"No, I don't think you're in danger of that." I covered my drawing with onionskin paper and carefully closed the pad.

He approached the little pier without his axe.

I glanced back towards the trees and saw it leaning there, awaiting his return. "Are you going to be chopping today?" I felt magnanimous now that he had approached with respect, rather than sneaking.

He shook his head and climbed up the steps.

He reached behind him and drew something out.

His eyes were hooded and dark, peering at me with suspicion.

I tilted my head at him in curiosity.

From behind his back, he whipped out a bandana-covered object. He unwrapped it with care and lifted up something made of wood. Instantly, I recognized a top hat.

It was a Rippy the Rat carved from wood and looped from a leather thong.

He handed it to me. "I... made this for you. I wanted to apologize for scaring you and ruining your work."

I marveled at the carving. Only about two inches tall, it was delicately carved and stained and varnished. The wood stains were subtle, suggesting more vibrant colors. Rippy's tail curled around his feet. The whiskers were implied by deeper carvings and the application of darker stain into them.

I took the gently swinging offering, knowing instantly that the villain in my story would learn from Rippy that gifts could be a wonderful way of apologizing. I traced my finger along the tail.

He cleared his throat. "Yeah, his tail was the hardest part. It kept breaking off until I just formed it as part of him. I had to start over three times." He scratched his stubble. "Found a Rippy tail in my boot tread this morning."

I giggled suddenly. "Poor rat."

He didn't answer right away. His eyes studied me while I looked between his gift and him.

I said, "Thank you." I saw the thong had a little metal clasp crimped into the leather. I unhitched it and drew it around my neck. Settling it into place, the wooden pendant hung just below the nape of my neck. I stroked it delicately. "Thank you..."

He looked away and shrugged. "I'm really sorry about your drawings; you obviously put a lot of work into them."

I didn't want to dwell on the drawings I had done of him. "Well, they were nothing..."

He nodded, still looking away, but his eyes tensed with strain. Then he turned as if remembering something and climbed off the pier.

I opened my mouth to protest his leaving so abruptly, but he bent down to turn over the boat. Lifting one end, he swung it towards the water. Then he moved around it and swung the other end. He slid the boat out to float next to the pier. Up to his knees in the water, he reached in and lifted a rope. He wrapped the end around a metal thing up near where I sat. He tested the boat by pushing it against a piece of rubber.

I said, "Oh, I see, that's why there's a bit of tire tacked to the side..."

"Yeah..." He sloshed out and started along the shore away from me.

I expected him to come back, but he grabbed his axe from the tree and kept going. I stared after him, where he had disappeared, wondering why he had been so distant.

My fingers were on the pendant, caressing my gift.

CHAPTER 18

Karen

Troy began fishing again. The first day back on the pier was a drizzly day of gray. I thrilled to see him out there and felt sociable enough to go out to him now that he had apologized.

I took two cups of coffee out.

He was sitting, swinging his legs in that adorable fashion. Despite the drizzle, he wore a tank top again. The curve and sculpt of his shoulders was pleasant on the eyes. His tackle bag was next to him and also a knife standing beside him - stuck blade down into the wood.

Stepping down the slope, I had a vision of scaring him that almost brought a giggle. Except that he might have been doing something with the hook and if I scared him, I could imagine the hook sinking into his thumb and blood squirting.

No, that wouldn't be good.

I coughed loudly and said, "I'm coming with coffee. Don't stab me."

His head whipped around faster than I could see him move it. His eyes peered at me, bristling with bitterness. When I climbed up, he said, "What do you know about me?"

I paused a second, then handed him a cup. "Nothing, really. Troy Jonathan Reagan, living off your grandfather's inheritance. Considerate, and only occasionally loud."

He studied me for a moment. "Been talking to people in town?"

"Not really. Except for Rhonda Lee at the store."

"And what's she told you about me?"

I looked at him curiously. "Nothing. You know her?"

He grunted and looked away. It wasn't really an answer. "Ask around; plenty will be happy to tell you everything about me. Or whatever little is in their heads."

I froze, sensing a deep division between him and the nice people in town. "They don't like you?"

He barked a harsh laugh. "That's an understatement."

"Why not?"

He gripped the knife handle and pulled it out. "Wanna go for a ride?" He indicated the rowboat. A second later, he slipped the knife into his tackle bag. He reeled in his line.

"In this weather?"

He shrugged indifferently. "Sure. The water doesn't come up or anything."

"Aren't you chilly?"

"Ha. No."

"Why the laugh?"

He smiled at me lopsided and shook his head. "It's sixty one degrees. This is t-shirt weather."

"Brr..." I shivered dramatically to show what I thought.

He laughed, brighter, cleaner. "Well? A ride?"

"Sure, I guess. Can I bring my coffee?"

"Of course. Set it down at the edge there." He fixed his pole into the bracket and got up. He set his coffee cup down next to mine and climbed over the side and down into the rowboat. He said, "The trick to getting in is to step as close to the center as possible."

"What? Why?"

"If you step on the gunwale, you're high up on the edge. The boat will react to your weight and dip. If you get in wrong, you can capsize the boat."

"Gun whale?"

He patted the ivory-painted trim of the boat – exactly where I imagined stepping. "You want to put your first step here." He pointed at the bottom of the boat, near the center. "That will put weight on the bottom of the hull, where it belongs."

I stood at the edge until he beckoned me. I was glad I wasn't wearing a skirt.

"Just turn around and put one leg down. There's a ladder built in there..." He pointed.

"Oh, I see." I climbed down and put my foot on the bottom. It felt like a stretch, but then I was down. The boat dipped deeply on the side I was facing.

"Just move back a little and twist onto that seat there."

I did and the boat settled even. I was shocked by how much it moved. "I guess that wasn't so hard."

He grinned happily, our conversation of a moment ago forgotten. He stood, carefully balancing his feet and posture, and retrieved the coffee cups. He handed me mine. Unhooking the oars, he used one to push off from the pier.

The immensity of the lake came rushing to me as the distance to the pier increased. I gripped the sides. "We'll be safe in this?"

He nodded, saying nothing. His arms worked, pulling on the oars as the little pier became smaller – even if we weren't that far out. He looked at me for the first several strokes, then looked away. Occasionally he looked behind him to see where he was rowing.

"Where are we going?"

He didn't look at me. "There's a little fishing spot there where grandpa and I used to fish. It's very pretty in the sunlight, but still nice even when it's like this." He stopped, took up his cup and gulped some coffee. He replaced the cup in the holder built into the side. "This makes for a light workout, if you're into that kind

of thing."

"Do I look fat?"

He gave me a dour look. "Just saying." He rowed a few more strokes before adding, "No, you don't look fat. You look fine."

I arched my eyebrows. "'Fine'?"

"Very fine."

His answer left me speechless and... tingly. At first I had thought he meant 'fine' as a way to insult me by using a woman's dismissive answer back at me. But I was 'very fine'? I couldn't hide the smile that spread on my face. "You don't look so bad, yourself."

He gave me one eyebrow. "That bad, huh? Don't like stubble?"

"It's fine." I laughed. "Well, I didn't care for that beard you had the first day."

He grunted over the swish of the oars through the water.

"I very much like the new version. Do you ever shave completely?"

"No." Simple, direct, to the point. He prodded back at me, "Do you ever cut your hair?"

"No."

He smiled.

"You don't like my hair?" I patted at the curls.

His grin went toothy. "Actually, I like it. It's all wild and—"

"I brush my hair," I said defensively.

"It has a lot of body."

I scowled.

He leaned forward, fixing me with both eyes under hooded brows. "That's a good thing, Karen."

Relief washed through me. "Oh." I felt the tickly tingles again.

He rowed in silence for another couple of minutes until we glided around a small rocky outcropping. A small inlet was cupped by the surrounding forest and overhanging branches reached out over the water. It was idyllic.

He muttered, "Like I said, it looks better in the sun..."

I was touched that he wanted to share something with me. "It's beautiful." Emotions rose in me so energetically that I felt dizzy. I went with the flow of my feelings. I leaned forward and down to the bottom of the boat. I crawled to him.

"What are you doing?"

I laughed breathlessly and teased him with my look. I arched up, bringing my face to his. I offered my mouth and we kissed. His soap-scent was light and fresh. His stubble scratched lightly along my chin and upper lip as we explored each other's mouths. His skin and tongue were warm in the morning chill, accentuating the light layer of moisture that had drizzled onto my face and hair. I moved up farther, pushing my hands over his chest.

He protested, mumbling through our kiss.

I pulled back. "What?" I gave him my best come-hither look. What was he like? Would he be attentive? I wanted to find out.

He gasped, "We can't do much more than kiss out here."

"What? Why not?" I looked around. "Someone will see? I thought we were alone on this lake?"

"We are, but the boat won't..."

"Huh?"

"Do you want to end up in the water?"

"No!" The thought made me shiver.

"Well, other than maybe a kiss, rowboats aren't made for anything heavier."

I understood. "Oh. It'll tip that easy?"

"Balance is required. It's not that it'll tip so much as get very wobbly. Then keeping your balance becomes extremely difficult."

"Oh, sorry."

His smile was warm. "Nah, don't be. I can row us back to solid ground..."

I wondered if the moment was lost. "Oh?"

His grin said it wasn't.

CHAPTER 19

Karen

My legs trembled with tension as his tongue teased my clit. I lifted my hips, panting harshly as sexual intoxication fluxed through me. The dizziness that accompanied it all washed away worries and objections.

That he appeared to enjoy this was enough to quell all reservation and reluctance at being naked with this man.

Was I falling again for the bad boy? The wrong man? Was I destined for failure and disappointment? Would Troy turn into another cheater?

Except, those worries were swept aside as mere echoes of a distant event that had no bearing on the soaring tension and urgency right now.

I groaned, close.

His hot tongue moved on the cooled surface of my clit, but the fire that burned hotly, spreading behind my clit, was equal to or greater than the slick ministrations of his tongue. I didn't care if he was a bad boy. Not at this very moment. If he was going to hurt me, then he could start right here and I might call it all even later.

A sharp pulse lifted my hips as the tension strung tautly inside of me. I called out wordlessly and then settled as the imminence slowly receded.

Wow, he's good at this.

My entire body was shaking.

Then he stopped.

I scowled down at him in disgruntlement.

He crawled up onto my bed over me and I saw his manhood.

No.

No, it wasn't even manhood. It was too...

It was too sexy to be called manhood.

I saw his cock.

Thick and pulsing, it jutted out ready to devour my pussy. Smooth and strong, it begged me to grab onto it.

I couldn't reach.

He did, grabbing it and pushing the head down across my clit.

The touch was electric and caused the most distressing surrender from my body. I moaned and thrust my hips up as the velvety skin of the tip pushed down and slid against the wet lips of my opening. There was no thought about stopping that reaction: it was torn from me and I went with it.

He was looking into my eyes.

Damn him.

But I wanted it anyway and I held nothing in my mind about stopping him. But...! In a flash, I panicked. I blurted out, "Are you clean?"

Instantly, his cock was removed. I felt air and loss at its absence.

His eyebrows furrowed. "Very. You?"

I collapsed, relieved, and laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing... I'm safe, too."

He frowned in irritation and leaned forward. The smooth head parted my lips and pushed against my opening.

I gasped and clutched his forearms.

With a wriggle, he pushed harder and began invading my femininity. Instantly, I was frozen with the passage of his stiffness past my lips and into my depths. His rigidity impaled me, sliding through my opening and deep into my pussy.

I shuddered as if someone had plugged me into a wall outlet.

As ever, when a man sunk into me, I marveled at my softness accommodating a man's hardness. I relished the contrast between my wet acceptance and his rigid insertion. Stretched, I felt both used and consumed – igniting feelings in me that were intense and insistent.

He pressed his hips forward against mine, sliding that thickness deeper and deeper until I felt so filled I couldn't move.

I clutched his shoulders as he leaned down on me. I pulled and thrust my hips up, wanting to help him and wanting to know how far I could take it.

His lips sucked the consideration of my success from me as our mouths met and moved. Spinning dizzily from the sensual impressions from my mouth and pussy, I moaned deliriously in approval and surrender. Whatever his personality or attitude, I needed this right now.

He stopped kissing me and leaned up for leverage. Then he began forcefully thrusting his cock in and out of my wanton pussy. Over and over, I was filled and emptied in the most enjoyable way. He moved slickly, fucking me with such intensity and passion that I couldn't help but be lost in our union. I rode his efforts, relishing the friction his shaft made against my pussy lips. His hips came down with each thrust and my clit was pressed and rubbed by his efforts. The duality of the sensation lifted me again, tightening that coil inside of me with inevitable imminence.

He grated, "What a beautiful woman..."

I tried to laugh in derision, but it only came out as a harsher groan.

His voice turned to a whisper, "What an amazing pussy."

Whatever his sentiments, his voice alone lifted me even higher. I squeezed my eyes shut as the tension became so tight that it had nowhere else to go – and it tightened yet further. Fire exploded from my pussy, ripping out along my body

and limbs in a flash so fast and hard that I bucked up underneath him. I cried out at the scalding passage as the unleashing of the tension whipped through me and tumbled me down a long, satisfying slope of pulsing releases.

He whispered again, "Beautiful."

I couldn't hear him. Or I did, but I didn't care. Well, maybe I did care, too.

He moved faster as I calmed down and I knew he was preparing to finish. In my delirium, I wondered about stopping him, but I felt it wouldn't be fair. Besides, I was really liking this.

My surrender was complete.

Troy heaved above me, burying his hard cock so deep in me that I could feel the tip throbbing way up inside of me. He growled ferociously, gritting his teeth and pushing harder. He was definitely trying to finish as deep as he could. There was no evident attempt or desire to pull out of me, and for that, at least, I was thankful. Sometimes men pulled out and hosed me down. I didn't like that.

With a savage gasp, he let loose several strong streams of cum inside me. I felt his shaft swell and jerk. I felt the scalding hot splashes begin wetting my deepest recesses. The finale of his efforts elicited a singular pulse from me that answered his orgasm like an echo. I gasped and jerked with the passage of it and then collapsed into a mess of listless tingles.

His arms quivered and crumpled, allowing his body to fall gently onto mine in exhaustion. There I received him with a welcome embrace, craving the heat he applied and accepting his masculine form to enclose my feminine figure. With his cock still buried inside me, there was a perfect sense of completion and harmonic integration that can only be consummated by a man and a woman together.

How had two different people produced such a partnership of pleasure?

Troy Reagan? And me?

Insane.

But true.

CHAPTER 20

Troy

I panted wearily into the mass of her hair. The drifting euphoria that left me drained and helpless with exhaustion was especially pleasurable.

I remembered sex was good, but had it always been this good? Was my memory dulled in between each sexual encounter such that each time was a new experience?

But I didn't remember ever having been blown away by the act and aftermath.

This had been... the best.

I was certain that I had thought that before. I knew I had these same thoughts running through my head the previous times.

Except that I hadn't directly compared the experience as a unique event.

Sex was great, each time.

Mostly.

Maybe the first time was awkward and could've been better. But after that? It was great.

But now?

Sure, what I had just done was great, but it was on an entirely different level of experience than those other times. This had reached deeper, enhancing the physical with...

Emotional?

I rested on her, carefully semi-propped on my elbows and forearms so I didn't crush her, and felt my pulse return to normal.

Had this been so different because I felt fuzzy things about this woman? Or had I felt these things before with the others?

No.

No, I had not felt exactly like this. Not at all.

Sex had been a function for relief.

This was...

I drifted, losing track of my thoughts as my mind, body, and soul floated along currents of gratification. Sex with Karen had been a palliative where I had expected less. Much less.

I pulled out with an effort that seemed to rip the rest of my strength out of my limbs. Women often complained about men falling asleep after sex, but they just didn't understand the release of sleep-inducing chemicals and hormones in the male brain. I fell over to her side in a stupor, already feeling the drowsy effects. My eyelids became heavy.

I didn't fall asleep, though.

I felt her cuddle towards me, snuggling into my arm. The closeness provided its own heat, mingled from our two bodies together, and imparted comfort that encouraged sleep.

I resisted.

I had slept with the renter.

Probably not a good thing, despite how good it had been.

What was going to be the aftermath?

Would I have to face down an outraged Thomas Ward?

Would the townsfolk find out?

Would I be accused of rape?

And what of Karen?

She was soft in my arms, hot with comfort, and breathing so peacefully that I thought she was surely asleep.

I enjoyed this, immensely. Just the act of lying here with her on her bed in the rented cabin was something so perfect that I didn't want it to end.

But would she regret all this?

Would she wake up and tell me to leave?

I wanted to stroke her shoulder and back, but I didn't dare move. What if I woke her and she became accusatory and belligerent?

What if she kicked me out and once again treated me like all the other women I knew?

What if this had all been a big mistake?

Suddenly, I wanted to get away.

I felt the desperate urge to make my escape before she turned back into the bitchy woman who faulted everything I did – whether or not her criticisms had been fair.

She wasn't ugly, but I understood the desperation that men claimed when suffering the coyote-ugly complex: chew your own arm off so she doesn't wake up when you run.

No, she wasn't ugly.

Maybe not the most glamorous and beautiful woman in the world, but definitely not ugly.

Maybe another woman would be better for me?

But why was I even thinking thoughts like these? It was just a bout of sex. Nothing permanent. No, not at all. More like a cold: temporary, passing away. In a few hours, I would be back at my cabin, back to normal.

Except...

What is wrong with me? Why...?

I couldn't control the conflict in my head.

I had something special right here; why would I run?

Because she's still going to hate you. She's going to blame you for everything and make it all your fault. You're the villain, remember? Can't escape what you are, Troy-boy. I ground my jaw in frustration at my thoughts.

Sure, it might have been good. Great, even. The best ever.

But reality had a way of unmaking what we held as most special.

No, this was going to turn out bad.

She was still going to hate me.

I had...

I had made a mistake.

CHAPTER 21

Karen

He rose, pulling away from me sometime later. His movements were slow and heavy, but accomplished in a way that implied secret motives – as if he were trying to be quiet and unnoticed.

I lifted my head. "What's the matter?"

He stiffened. "Nothing." He began picking up his clothing. His lean, muscular form that had provided so much joy was now stiff with rejection.

Loss washed through me in a gentle and not-so-subtle wave. Something had been missed. The warmth chilled instantly and the comfort turned to confusion. "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah, just need to go. Got some things to do." His voice was muted, mumbled, and mournful, despite the façade of indifference.

The chill deepened.

He was slipping from my fingers as easily as had all the other men.

Just another bad boy.

Why me?

I watched him silently, holding the bedspread up to my neck as if to hide my nakedness or to keep the failing warmth we had shared. I could hold my tongue no longer. I would lash out at him. No, I would plead. My heart felt as abandoned as a ghost town – empty and lifeless. Whatever connection there had been, shared and relished, had been ripped away. I blurted, "I..."

He stopped in the act of tucking in his shirt. He looked at me suspiciously. The pain and stress around his eyes were as stark as ever. However, they softened almost immediately and his shoulders released tension. His lips took on a less

severe set.

I became aware of excess water in my eyes. I hoped he didn't see it.

He sat on the edge of the bed and reached out to me, stroking my hair over my ear. Then he leaned over and kissed me, taking away all my fears and worries. The swing in adrenaline and exhaustion left me shaking.

His departure a few minutes later was quiet and serene. I felt no animosity or typical scoffing, bad boy behavior.

No arrogance.

No selfishness.

The kiss had muted the loss to a foundation that left no lasting impact. It provided no answers.

Where were we?

Was he now an interest in my life?

Did I want him to be one?

Was he going to pursue me?

Maybe I should put a firm foot down that it would never happen again?

Maybe I should expect more?

Thoughts such as these plagued me to the point that in the hour after our sex, I developed a headache.

It wasn't a fun headache for kicks and giggles; it was a pounding force behind my eyes and temples that made me wince with each beat of my pulse.

I couldn't think like this, much less be creative.

What would Rippy do in Troy's place?

He would've stayed and professed his undying love.

But Rippy wasn't Troy and life didn't always wrap up in twenty-four pages with amusing illustrations. No, Rippy still would've stayed, even if his story glossed over the longer details of real life. Rippy was packaged faster for children, not adults. But the lessons were the same.

Rippy would've stayed.

I couldn't think through the pounding and I had no aspirin.

I got into my car and drove to town: I needed whatever pain relief Cherry Hill Grocery offered. Tylenol? Bufferin? Or did sleepy little Pine Creek use wooden clubs? And if they did sell wooden clubs for headache relief, were they imprinted with barcodes? Or would they be carved in a town like this?

I touched the carved Rippy medallion hanging at my neck. My fingers felt the varnished contours of the careful etchings – as delicate as my own artwork.

One of the parking spaces in front of the grocery store was taken by a van with a blue sign hanging from the rearview mirror. With chagrin, I noticed the license plate was Californian.

What are they doing here?

I went inside and was welcomed by Rhonda Lee's smile and voice. I nodded, feeling no inclination to upset my headache any worse than it was by uttering syllables rife with pain and strain.

By the time I found a plain bottle of aspirin and returned to the counter, the van outside was gone. Had I even seen the customer?

Rhonda grabbed the single bottle and said, "Ow, I'm sorry. Sometimes I get bad ones, too. But for me, it's because of my age." She looked twenty years older than me.

I nodded.

"So, you didn't tell—"

I lifted my stressed eyes and found her staring at my neck.

Her words were rapid and startled. "Where did you get that?"

I touched the carving. "This?"

Her eyes flicked up to mine, searching and boring into my skull as bad as, if not worse than, my headache.

I stepped back involuntarily. "It was a gift..."

"Which lake are you staying at?" Her friendly tone was now one of accusation.

What had happened? Why...? I cleared my throat and received a corresponding burst of painful throbs behind my eyes. "Lake Lapis."

Rhonda Lee's expression hardened and she leaned backwards, folding her arms. Her lips pursed tightly.

I asked, "Is something wrong?"

Her eyes were hot with opposition. "You don't know who you're dealing with. Why did you pick that lake? There are—"

"I answered the ad Thomas Ward put in Blue Lakes Travel Magazine..."

She blew her breath upward, disturbing her bangs and rolled her eyes. Then she refocused on me, leaning forward over the scanner. "Listen, Troy Reagan is bad news all around. No one here likes him." She tossed her head. "Well, most of us here..."

"Why?"

Rhonda Lee went through a series of facial contortions in an inner struggle to articulate her response. "People... in town," she fidgeted frantically, "will tell you he's... a murderer."

I jerked my head back. "What? A murderer?"

She nodded once, but kept her mouth shut.

"Him? How? When?"

She flung her head to the side and looked out the window. "I don't want to gossip."

I sighed in frustration. How had I gotten stuck next to... a murderer? Did Thomas Ward know about this? Aggravated by the cashier's sudden intransigence, I picked up the bottle of aspirin and rattled it.

Rhonda snapped her attention back to me and relented. "Oh, that's three twenty-nine."

I swiped my debit card and left with no further words passing between us.

I walked into the tiny office Thomas Ward kept on B Street.

The man was hunched over sideways in his chair, leaning over to his laptop at the side of his desk. He glanced, startled, as the little bell on the door tinkled. "Oh, Miss Ross." He straightened and ran a hand back over the white strands remaining on his balding head.

I could tell he missed his cowboy hat when inside.

"What can I do for ya? Everything all right up there?"

I sat squarely and firmly across from him and set my hands on the arms of the chair. I asked clearly, "Why didn't you tell me the man in the next cabin was a murderer?"

He immediately began to fidget. His finger tugged at the collar of his shirt. His eyes dropped to his desk and then away. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Well, I... uh..."

"Don't you think information like that is important? I mean, a murderer?"

His face had deepened into a light shade of red. "Well, he's not... I mean..."

"Not a murderer?"

"Well..."

"Is he or isn't he? This kind of information should've been revealed at the outset —"

"I understand, I understand, Miss Ross, but..."

"Can I get a straight answer here?"

He stuttered and grumbled for a few seconds, his eyes flicking around for escape.

I wasn't going to let him off the hook for this. Unfortunately, my head was pounding harder than a wrecking ball against a building. "Answer me, damn it."

He sighed and looked to the side. "Well, technically... Yes, he was arrested and brought up on charges of murder—"

"Who?" My head was clamoring for relief and it was making my eyes water. I couldn't blink fast enough to clear them and every blink caused more pain.

"Well, he... uh..."

"No, who did he murder?"

Thomas Ward's silence would have been deafening but for the incessant pounding whump in my ears.

I repeated my question. "Who did he murder?"

The answer drove my head pain down deep into my chest. "A young boy."

I rose from the chair and stumbled out.

CHAPTER 22

Karen

I avoided all contact with Troy Jonathan Reagan.

Frankly, I was scared.

For two days, I hid inside my cabin, afraid to go outside. The man I had taken into my bed, into my body, had... I shivered endlessly.

To think, I had sex with someone who was a murderer! I was chilled to my soul. Had my life been precariously close to an unwitting end? Had he been planning death by axe? Or that knife he liked to handle? Where would it have been? In my cabin? Or his? Maybe his workshop?

I scratched fitfully at my caricatures and facial life drawing, deepening lines and contrasts until the hidden evil became much more apparent.

Troy Jonathan Reagan had lied to me.

I didn't see him until the second day in the morning. He sat out at the pier, fishing.

No way was I going out there to be gutted like a fish and thrown in the lake. Had that been...?

I set my coffee down on a crisp morning and began doing searches on my phone. The information I wanted wasn't hard to find at all. The Pine Creek Gazette had several pieces on him that told me all I needed to know.

A promising football hero at the high school had been run down in a drunken revenge rage. The boy, Frankie Waller, had spent a celebratory party at Lapis Lake, inadvertently vandalizing a rowboat belonging to Troy Jonathan Reagan. The older man had later become drunk and drove looking for Frankie. Spotting him on the street, he had accelerated and took the boy's life in a drunken rage. He had been arrested and charged with murder.

I had seen enough.

Everything I had detected in my drawings was now vindicated and true. The man was a horrible criminal, capable of the worst human acts.

In revulsion, I tore up my facial life drawing of him and threw it away. The mere thought of possessing it sickened me. The caricatures I had drawn of him were almost ripped up. How could I possibly use these? Rippy versus a murderer? I couldn't write something so heavy to the age group at which my books were aimed.

The man was a liar above all liars: despicable; rotten; selfish; and so very bad. And I had gotten involved, once again, with a bad boy.

It wasn't bad enough that I had divorced one of them, I had to have sex with a murderer, too.

Why me?

I looked out the window, ranting at myself and wanting to pass this blame anywhere but myself.

And I saw it.

Movement on the dock.

Someone else was out there with him.

The overwhelming urge to discover yet more truth about this liar compelled me to action. I went outside, quietly, and snuck as close as I could within my thin circle of mature pine trees. I hid behind the trunk of one and peeked out.

I was too far to hear anything, but I saw very clearly: Troy was up on the pier talking to a pretty woman around my age. Maybe a few years younger.

So you're some harmless man, right? Liar.

And you're up here all alone, right? Liar.

And you don't work for Thomas Ward? Liar.

And you're not a murderer? Liar.

And everyone in town hates you? Liar.

The girl up there stood close. Intimately close. Whatever they said was totally lost – I couldn't even hear snatches of syllables what with the wind in the trees and the birds and...

She reached up and touched his face.

Don't you know he's a murderer? A filthy criminal who will run you over? Or has he lied to you, too?

The girl was pretty, dressed poor, but made up to look... trashy.

Was I about to witness a hooker murder?

Instead, I witnessed a kiss. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his lips. Troy looked away, out to the lake. Then he glanced towards me – at my cabin.

I ducked back, afraid he might have seen my hair, but it blended very well with the tree trunks around me and I had it in a ponytail anyway. I peeked back out.

Troy was talking to the girl; he hadn't seen me.

Her hands were on his chest in a possessive clutch.

He frowned, firming his mouth and took one of her upper arms in his grip. He turned her away from the lake, towards me, and escorted her off the pier. Then he led her away towards his cabin.

Liar!

I fumed silently and watched them disappear into the trees. What a sicko! Take advantage of me and any skirt that comes along! Liar! Murderer!

I stayed in my cabin, alone, for another three days.

Then, in the dusk of a cloudy day, the door to my cabin resounded to pounding as if the Angel of Death had come booming his presence in the deep gloom.

Troy was at my door.

CHAPTER 23

Troy

I banged hard on her cabin door, driven into a furor of desperation and demand.

She wasn't going to escape me.

She wasn't going to hide.

I knew exactly where she was.

"Karen, I know you're in there."

Her voice came through the door, "Go away!"

"What's wrong?"

"Go away, or I'll call the cops!"

"What for?"

Panic painted the muffled tones through the door. "I know who you are."

"Of course you—" I stopped, aware of the sinking feeling inside – that doom that descended like smothering dust over everything in my life. "I..."

"I'm scared of you. Go away."

The wine bottle in my hand felt like a dead weight. More than an axe. More than a tree trunk. It dragged down on my arm like all the weight in the world. "You've been talking to people in town."

"That's right. And I looked you up."

"Great..." But there was no conviction in my words – just my soul.

She opened the door a crack and peeked out with one wild eye. It was adorable

and made me want to cry at the loss. Her words were hot with grief and came in a rush. "Why didn't you tell me? To think I drew pictures of you. I drank coffee with you. I let you... into my bed!"

I sighed, dejected. There was no sense trying to talk sense into someone: common sense had died long ago with the advent of sound-bite social media. A simple meme of me - my face, my name, title underneath: Murderer.

She opened the door a little wider.

I saw her looking down at the wine bottle.

Before I could say anything, she launched into an attack. "Were you hoping to trick me? Make me another victim? Strip away my defenses so you could prey on me? Kill me in a drunken rage?"

I snapped. It was too much.

I threw down the bottle. It went tumbling away off the wooden porch without breaking. Reaching, I thrust open the door and grabbed her upper arm.

She shrieked.

I hauled her out of the cabin and began pulling her along with me. With angry resolution and a fever of frenzy in my thoughts, I was going to show her.

"Help!" she yelled.

I yelled back, "Stop it. No one's going to hear you scream out here."

She wailed louder.

"Yell all you want."

She did.

Then I realized she was really frightened and I felt ashamed. I let all the defeat I felt rush into my words. "Stop it. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Terror was in her eyes, barely visible in the deepening gloom of dusk. "You're going to kill me!"

I snapped again. "I am not!" I realized my grip on her arm was too tight and I loosened it a little. We had stopped near the trees that blocked the view of each other's cabins. I breathed heavily at her, my heart pumping with rage and hurt. I looked her in the face and scowled all the pain I felt. "I'm not going to hurt you; I'm going to show you something."

She stumbled after me as I began walking again. Her tone was uncertain. "What are you going to show me? Where you bury the bodies?"

I growled ferociously and stomped up the steps of my cabin. I thrust open the door too hard and it banged against the coat rack, knocking it over.

She whimpered.

I hauled her over to my grandfather's rocker and leaned into her face. "Stay right there. Don't move."

I turned and, out of habit, looked up at the bloodstains.

CHAPTER 24

Karen

I was about to pee myself in fear. I had never shook so badly in all my life. His fierce look was savage and murderous. He told me to stay put.

And then he looked up.

I looked up, too.

And saw the reddish brown stains above the old rocking chair. I gibbered in fear. "You killed someone here!"

A part of me felt that he wasn't going to kill me, but the other part wasn't so sure. Worms of revulsion crawled all over my skin like wet things, slimy and sick. I was in the presence of a murderer!

He coughed in disgust. "The hell I did. Dammit, Karen, listen to me."

I pointed a shaking finger. "If you didn't kill someone here, then what is that?" I was barely coherent.

He thrust his hand at me.

I presumed a slap. That's what all murderers do, right? Slap their victims before stabbing them to death? I clenched my eyes shut and quivered.

He shouted, "Look!"

I didn't want to, but I didn't get the slap I was expecting, so I popped open my eyes. What was there? A bloody head? Some trophy bone from one of his victims? I swear I was about to pee myself.

No... it was his palm, and he was pointing.

His eyes were angry coals of rage and pain. "See there?" He was indicating a

thin white line on the edge of his palm.

"Wh-what?"

He pointed. "See that? That's what happens when a young boy plays with his grandfather's carving knife. The same knife I used to make your gift." He poked his finger at the place I had worn the medallion.

I wasn't wearing it now; I had thrown it away.

Then he thrust his finger up at the ceiling. "It hurt so bad I jerked my hand. Blood hit the ceiling. That's my blood, not someone else's."

My body went numb at the shift from fear to understanding. But I was still scared of why he had brought me here. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

He bent over the rocker and reached under the reading lamp. He withdrew a newspaper and shook it at me. With his free hand, he grabbed me again and pulled me over to the kitchen counter.

Amazingly, the cabin was almost identical to mine.

He flicked on the kitchen light and spread a ragged copy of the Pine Creek Gazette, flipping furiously and in danger of ripping the pages. He pointed, stabbing his finger down with such force that it echoed in the little cabin.

I looked at the spot he was indicating. The newsprint was smudged around the little column at the bottom of the page.

Correction to the story dated...

I began reading.

His breathing was ragged with outrage, but didn't distract me from what was there on the page.

An article on Page 1 about the death of Frankie Waller incorrectly attributed Troy Jonathan Reagan as being drunk at the time of the boy's death. Frankie Waller showed elevated blood alcohol levels, not Troy Jonathan Reagan.

I reread it. "Uh..."

His voice was a mixture of anger and anguish. "I wasn't drunk."

I stared at the newspaper, momentarily dazed by the information in front of me.

He sighed, weary and forlorn.

My shakes began to subside. "What... happened?"

He ran a hand back through his hair and shook his head. "Life happened..."

"No, I mean, what really happened?" I glanced over and up to the old blood spatters. If I had been wrong or saw things from a colored lens that hid the truth... What else might I be wrong about?

He turned away, his posture filled with loathing and surrender. "The kid was a star football player." He sat heavily in the old rocking chair and looked up at the ceiling – at the blood, at his past, and at whatever inner demons with which he dealt. "Sports scholarship and all that. It's all in the newspapers."

"I read them."

He coughed bitterly. "Yeah, front page headlines, and not the correction weeks after the fact buried away on page nine. After I threatened to sue."

"You ran over a boy?" My life with men seemed to revolve around young boys. My ex and his molestation – but don't call it that! – and Troy and his killing of a young boy. Why couldn't I meet real men who didn't have problems with little boys? I crossed my arms.

He chopped his hand down dismissively. "I did. And if that's all that matters, then nothing else does, right? Doesn't matter I was accused of being drunk when I was as sober as a nun on Sunday. Doesn't matter that he ran out in front of my truck drunk, does it? Doesn't matter that not a single towns person could have possibly stopped in time. I'm a murderer."

My contentious thoughts settled into curiosity. "You didn't run him over deliberately because of the vandalism?"

He gripped the arms of the rocker so tightly his knuckles turned white. "No!" His shout echoed through the cabin and out amidst the closer pine trees. He tossed his head to the side and ran his hand through his hair again. "If I could take back that drive, I would."

I sat quietly on the couch and waited.

His eyes were down, glum and sullen. The lines of pain and stress crinkled around his eyes. "The kid came out with a couple others to celebrate his scholarship, so I heard."

I continued to wait while he struggled to force out the story.

"I heard noise. Whooping and hollering. When I went out to see what all the racket was, I saw them going wild on the rowboat. Frankie had an axe and was," he shook his head in rejection, "he was destroying my grandfather's rowboat. They were all obviously drunk—"

"What did you do?"

He looked up, eyes pleading to be understood. "I yelled at them. That's all. They ran."

"That's it? You weren't in your truck?"

He waved. "No, that was later. I recognized Frankie; kid was plastered all over the papers. Big promising town hero. When I saw the damage, I got in and drove to his house. I was going to tell his parents and let them decide how to rectify what he had done.

"It was dark and..." He stopped, looking down. "The kid was still whooping and hollering when he dashed out in front of my truck. I don't even think he saw me. I was only doing twenty-five, but..." his voice cracked. "But the kid went flying. He died there in the street, not three doors from his own home."

My soul heard the truth: bare; bald; and utterly believable. How could the newspaper get it so wrong? I shook my head.

He said, "Everyone was against me from the start. The town hero, slain by the vicious murderer. Even the sheriff knocked me around. I was cuffed and

arrested, and dealt some pretty vicious punches later. The newspaper painted me the worst villain since Osama bin Laden." He scrubbed at his forehead as if to rub away the pain or erase the useless memories. Then he went on slower, weaker, like none of it mattered anymore. "Only the county prosecutor and state attorney general saw through it all and declined to prosecute me – and only because they're not from Pine Creek."

I furrowed my brow. "But... that means... you're not a murderer."

His dry response was filled with futility. "Tell that to the people of Pine Creek."

CHAPTER 25

Troy

I stood and offered her my hand to shake. "Let's start over, shall we? Hi, I'm Troy Jonathan Reagan, murderer."

Her face melted with sympathy and compassion. "Stop it; you're not a murderer." She glanced at the newspaper still spread open to the correction. She knew now that I hadn't been drunk. I hadn't been prosecuted.

And I knew very well how rumor and accusation could become fact with certain people.

She stood and shook my hand. "And I'm Karen Ross, fool and author."

My mouth twitched, but not towards a smile – more a line of stress and impatience. "You're not a fool."

"But... I listened to everyone. Rhonda Lee, Mister Ward—"

"Did they say I was a murderer? They're about the only two people in town who think I'm not." I muttered in addition, "And one other..."

Her eyes lost focus and looked up, thinking. "All I recall was the pounding in my head that day, really. But I'm sure they did."

I frowned ferociously, my eyebrows drawing down to murderous levels. I said through gritted teeth, "They did, did they?" The burn of betrayal was not pleasant. More fire applied to what had been protective scar tissue...

"I'm sorry."

I grunted in dismissal and took her arm. "Come on; let's get you back to your cabin. Wouldn't want a murderer sneaking up on you in the dark, now would we?" My bitterness was rampant.

People were ruled by lies and accepted it. Truth had no more meaning than what soundbites applied to it. Spin and perception.

Reality had no room for truth.

People scrambled for the latest lies so they could fit in with the mass of the social outrage. Everyone else believes it; it must be true.

I muttered under my breath, "We're back to the times of flat earth believers."

"What?"

I shook my head, though she couldn't possibly see it in the dark of the new night. Still, I led her unerringly through the trees. I had walked this path thousands – if not tens of thousands – of times. I knew my way.

I knew who I was.

At her door, still standing open, I thrust her inside – not roughly.

She turned immediately, mouth parted in anticipation.

I blinked. Of what? I looked at her, trying to study her intentions. What did she want to say? What could she possibly add to what had been a horrible night?

She said, "I'm sorry about... everything."

I shrugged it off. Some people apologized; most didn't. I was beyond caring.

Pariah! Outcast! Villain!

She grabbed my forearm and somehow leeches all resistance from my muscles. I don't think I could've pulled my arm away from her if I had braced my feet and hauled. Her touch was dynamic.

I looked down at her touch, trying to discern what power she possessed that could turn my muscles to putty.

She said, "You should've told me."

I coughed, blinked, and cleared my head in an instant, as if a bubble of stupor

had burst. "Told you what? That I was a murderer? Anyone in town can tell you that." I muttered under my breath in addition, "Apparently..."

She gave my forearm a tug. "No, the truth. Real men are always up front. They don't hide—"

"I stubbed my big toe and cracked my toenail when I was eleven. It grew back with a funny little ridge—"

"Stop it. You know what I mean."

I lifted my eyebrows at her. What was there to say? I didn't just fly off the handle with everyone I met detailing all the ugly incidents of my life in one sitting.

She stepped closer as if advancing to the head of the line before someone else could grab it. She stood close, looking up at me with those dreamy brown eyes. Her voice was desperate, pleading, and barely contained. "I don't want to be wrong about you."

It was deeply personal and her intent stunned me.

Sure, we had engaged in sex and it was... special. But was she hinting at more?

Before I could register the funny fuzzy feeling in my chest, she tiptoed and kissed me. It wasn't a forceful rape-kiss, but it demanded participation.

And I succumbed.

Overcome by driving emotions stronger than I had ever felt, I lifted her and carried her inside. It felt right. It felt wrong. It felt wonderful. She clung to me, kissing harder as if to suck my soul from my mouth.

My dick responded.

But I hadn't come here for that.

I hadn't intended to ply her with wine to get her into bed. I had come to offer another olive branch. I liked Karen. I wanted there to be nothing standing between us. I had rethought my initial feelings of our sex being a mistake and had wanted to enjoy her personality for who she was.

But here I was, carrying her inside and leaving the bottle outside where I had discarded it.

Welling inside me was another, more insistent, need. She formed right into my arms and we wore each other like snug coats. Until I tossed her down onto the bed.

She bounced and panted, flinging her hair out of her face. The movement of that beautiful feminine mass was too much for me. I growled, surprising myself with my barely contained bestial lust. I tore out of my clothes.

She had barely removed her sweater and bra before I pulled her jeans down with enough force to leave her sprawling on the bed in her panties. Those I yanked down as if they were useless impediments to my desire.

I stared down at her trimmed pussy and swallowed. I had no patience for play right now – none at all. My cock was erect, throbbing, and stiff. It needed one thing and it needed it right now. Nothing was going to get in its way.

I pushed her knees apart easily.

She glared up at me defiantly, but the smoke of lust burned in her gaze, too. Her lips were parted and she panted heavily through her mouth.

I stabbed my manhood forward, spearing into that delicious wetness that enveloped my aching shaft so perfectly. Every nerve in my body lit up with intense participation with what I felt on the skin of my dick. Hot, velvety slickness accepted the entry of my cock. I pushed in, heaving forward, desperate to feel her all over my erection.

I was in and the inflammation of my lust was immediate. Every nerve and muscle on my body stood on end and quivered.

Her womanly cry was responsive and not adversarial. It did nothing except spur me on.

I thrust fast, wanting to feel her pussy on my cock with all the speed of dire need. My body vibrated at the sensations twirling through me from my dick.

And then I slowed.

I was staring down at her cute face – so plain and adorable. So beautiful. I shoved in deep, feeling my intensely erect shaft throbbing almost painfully up inside of her. My arms supporting me began to tremble. All my strength was robbed by the pleasurable perception experienced through my erection. That such a small part of me could deprive me of all my masculine brawn was astounding.

I fell slowly onto her and without any desire for resistance. Just before I kissed her, I breathed, "You're beautiful, Karen."

CHAPTER 26

Karen

I hummed happily in the chill of the morning. Skin still hot from the shower, I moved around the small kitchen making coffee. I looked out the window trying to see the dock.

He wasn't out there. Maybe too cold.

And I knew I would lose the shower-warmth very soon and feel the infectious frigidity of the oncoming mountain autumn. The days were still hot, but the mornings were getting colder.

I had a man.

Sort of.

All to myself on this gorgeous lake.

Kind of.

I frowned as I waited for the coffeemaker to do its work.

Troy had surprised me the previous week, taking me from fright and fear to lust and...

Dare I say it?

Dare I believe it?

Love?

Me?

Him?

Did he think so?

It's hard to believe I've been here two months already... So much has happened.

I ran a hand over my arm to scrub away the creep of cold and doubt. I faced a quandary now; I was not a stupid woman. I had believed something wrong about him – was that the only thing I got wrong? What about the woman he had been with on the little pier? What about him working for Thomas Ward? What about the living off his inheritance thing?

What if I was wrong about all of them, despite what I had seen and heard?

There was no way I was going to allow myself to be ruled by suspicions. Talking was the fastest way to determine the truth. If I wanted to know if Troy worked for Thomas Ward, I needed to ask him. Directly. I already had, of course, but the conversation had shifted. I needed to nail down the truth and I...

I shouldn't let another day pass if I've been mistaken.

I poured my coffee.

Resolution stiffened my spine and provided motivation for the day. My work to reproduce my drawings was done and my story progressing. There was only one thing I lacked to restore my balance to what it had been and it was that I had thrown away Troy's cute little Rippy carving.

I couldn't call that back by force of will or remorse.

I couldn't tell him.

I couldn't admit that shameful failing in me that I had thrown away his gift in a fit of mistaken perception.

Maybe he wouldn't notice.

If I don't bring it up...

Some things were best left unmentioned.

Covered over.

Hidden.

I shouldn't have to hide anything from him, but this was one that definitely had to remain secret.

Of course, he shouldn't have anything to hide from me, either.

But... was he? Did he? Would he? Was he just another typical man? Another user and abuser? Another misogynistic monster? A patriarchal pustule that needed excision?

I drank my coffee, eyes glazed over as I stared out the window and into my inner thoughts.

The pounding on the door would have been disastrous if I hadn't drunk most of the cup. As it was, I almost dropped it. Then I realized the pounding was just a regular knock, despite it sounding loud in the cabin.

I croaked and scrambled for the door. "Who is it?" My heart was thumping from being startled.

A familiar growl. "Troy." Not harsh.

Light leapt in my pounding heart and I pulled the door open. Adrenaline juiced my words like a rushed relief. "Hi! Want some coffee?"

His eyes darted over my face... and to my neck. His expression was unreadable. "Sure."

I welcomed him inside, feeling as if my balance had finally settled perfectly: he was here with me. I barely gasped out through my initial fright and subsequent eagerness, "I was wanting to talk about... some things." There, my intro was out of the way and we could proceed according to my desires and dictates.

Except that the aggravatingly handsome man didn't play along. He interrupted my mental flow with a question as blunt as my deepest fears. "I noticed you haven't been wearing the carving. You didn't like it?"

Instantly off balance, I struck back very defensively, hoping to cover that ugly truth. "I loved it; it was perfect—"

"But you don't wear it? Was there a rough part on the back? I can refinish it—"

His eyes were sensitive pools that drew me in and asked for the truth.

I struggled against that disaster. "No, it's fine." I heaved several panicked breaths, desperately not wanting to talk about his gift I had discarded. I launched the only diversion I could think of – a direct attack on his integrity. Make him defend himself and he'll forget his carving. "You lied about working for Thomas Ward, didn't you? I heard him talking about paying you."

His eyebrows sank over his eyes and those orbs hardened into glittering gems of distance and... rejection.

I backed up a step and used another accusation as a defense against the shift from a pleasant visit to disturbing discord. "Real men are honest and forthright —"

His interrupting answer was as gritty as gravel under a boot heel. "Like Rippy the Rat, right? The perfect gentleman?"

I lifted my chin. "How would you know?" I said it in a heated rush to claim my ownership and signal my virtue. Unfortunately, I realized too late that it sounded belittling.

His jaw flexed and his eyes didn't move from mine. He said, "I bought your book and read it."

I couldn't keep the incredulity from my voice. "You?" You aren't eight years old...

"Yeah, me." His eyes sharpened and his back stiffened. "I have money to buy books. What's so strange about that?"

I tried to correct what I felt was a dangerous swerve away from the straight road I had planned to drive. "A child's book?"

"I wanted to read your work. You sure as hell wouldn't dare let me see any of it." He was getting angrier.

Did I do something wrong?

I tried to calm myself. I gripped my cup with a firmer hand and stared down into

my remaining coffee. "This isn't going right. This—"

"Damn right it isn't. I come over here to say hello and you're on me like an attack dog."

I forced in, "I'm sorry."

He said nothing.

"You caught me off-guard is all. I'm sorry." Please accept it.

His shoulders shifted, slumping. He let out a long sigh. "What you do to me... woman..." He looked away.

"What?"

He shook his head. "One minute I can't get you off my mind and the next I hate you. Then you spin it all around again."

Do you really think about me? I took a step towards him and stopped.

We shared a faltering look in silence.

I tried again, carefully and composed, "Would you like some coffee?"

The corner of his mouth twitched, but his eyes didn't show the beginnings of mirth. He grated, "Sure, Miss Ross; that would be just lovely." He finished with a partial bow.

I couldn't contain my reaction and let out a burst of relieved giggles. I poured him a cup and refilled mine. I indicated the little kitchen table. It was a wooden thing that looked...

As I sat, I said, "I bet your grandfather made this."

His lips twitched again and then formed into a pleasant smile. "How did you know?"

"It looks carved."

"It is, though he could've finished it with a more polished look. It was meant to

be rugged."

"I like it."

His eyes left off considering the table and latched back onto mine. "What's with the deal about me and Mister Ward?"

I wanted to be careful here and not annoy him again. "You had said... that you didn't work for him, but I heard him say something about paying you..."

His face soured a little, but not much. "I don't work for him, but yes, I sometimes receive payments from him."

I felt a tickle of hilarity squirm inside, but stamped down on it with ruthless force. "How is that different?"

He blinked and shook his head as if clearing it of distracting thoughts or confusions. "He works for me—"

I laughed. "And he pays you to do it?"

He closed his eyes and held them shut for two seconds. "No... He's worked for my grandfather for decades. He rents out the cabins—"

"I thought he owned these? T. Ward Properties? He said they were his."

He shook his head. "He wishes."

"So... you're saying you own them?"

"Thomas Ward was an old friend of my grandfather's. He's a property manager; I don't think he owns anything outside of his home and a vacant shop on Birch Street. Yes, I own these cabins."

"Mine and yours...?"

"All of them." He swung his arm around. "This was the first one I renovated. With Mister Ward's help, of course."

I blinked in confusion. How had I been so wrong about it all? "Oh..."

He leaned back and sipped his coffee, studying me with a critical squint. "I suspect Thomas was hoping my grandfather would leave all these to him. Maybe he thinks I'll give him some of it; I don't know. A lot of people want this lake."

"You own the lake?" Even as I asked it, I doubted it.

He nodded. "It's private and that's the way I like it. Don't need a fishing license for it."

I laughed in relief. "Oh, that's why you..." I had thought he was being a criminal fishing without one. I changed the subject. "So you really bought my book?"

He nodded as if it were nothing, but knew his response meant a lot to me. "I see now why you have issues."

Now I was really blinking. "What?" The coffee cup went still in my rigid hand.

"Rippy is your example of the perfect man—"

"Yeah, that's right." I said it with challenge.

"But he never makes mistakes. He's too perfect—"

"But—"

"He isn't human."

"He's meant to be a banner under which young boys can learn—"

"People learn by making mistakes. Rippy never made one in your first book. He was like an incessant nag berating little boys about how bad they were and how perfection was so much nicer."

I sat there, stunned, open-mouthed, and speechless with outrage.

He continued, "Rippy is a standard no one could ever attain—"

"He's meant to teach—"

"Little boys won't identify with him."

"I've sold over two hundred thousand books to—"

"And not instructed a single one, likely."

I was furious. "How dare you?" I slammed down my coffee cup.

"Your ex was that bad? You had to write a book about perfection so unattainable that you'd feel vindicated being single?"

I rose from my chair in a rush, knocking it over. "Get out!"

He smiled at me, lifting his eyebrows in challenge.

"Out!" I pointed at the door.

He stood slow and sure, stretching as if he had just finished watching a long, satisfying movie.

I said through gritted teeth, "I have never met any man so rude, crude, and literally misogynistic in all my life!"

His smile widened as he considered me, but then faltered and vanished as if he weren't seeing what he expected to see. He started to open his mouth, but then shook his head.

He turned and left.

And took with him my rage.

His footsteps died away outside into whispers and then nothing.

I stood in the cabin, alone and bereft.

CHAPTER 27

Troy

Damn woman. She twisted me around so much I didn't know which end was which and which way was up or down.

I had been defensive and suspicious; I couldn't help myself. And my instincts had lashed out at her as an ingrained reflex. Too many people were jealous of my inheritance. It wasn't like I was wealthy. I was too normal to be rich. I was just a man who had picked up where granddad had left off.

Where my parents refused.

The lake was prime property. Grandpa Bill had rejected countless offers for the land and rights. A politician even tried to coerce the issue by moving to declare the lake a national monument and strip grandpa of his property.

My grandfather had stood firm.

There were those in town and abroad who thought I would be weaker and more desirous of money.

I didn't want their damned money.

I loved Lake Lapis: it held my only good childhood memories.

Karen had immediately raised alarm flags asking about it all.

Another gold-seeker?

Was she part of some nefarious plot by that old Ward? Some developer wanting to bulldoze everything and erect timeshares? Rip out a bunch of trees for a cell tower? Foul the lake with oil-spewing motorboats?

Not my lake!

But I didn't think Karen Ross, author of the plastic, one-dimensional rat, had those designs.

Still, she was overly sensitive: very typical of someone from California. Everything was an outrage to her. She had quivered with rage over my...

I spent the next day realizing...

She had been enraged over my blunt and obviously rude criticism of her creation.

Well, okay, maybe I had been a little...

I had been honest is all.

I dove into my work, trying to clean up the next cabin before the season became unworkable. The snows would put a stop to all but the lightest interior renovation. I wasn't going to tent a cabin and spend godless amounts of money heating it so I could repair a porch.

Next summer would have to be my grind.

I had six more cabins to renovate. All six required new porches. If I was fast and efficient, I could get all of them done and still have time to fit out at least one of the cabins for a rental. That rotten old man Ward ought to approve.

Getting a place ready took work and time.

I certainly didn't have time to be moping about over some renter.

Even if I couldn't get her out of my mind.

I avoided her.

I spent days happily evading contact. No dock visits for fishing. No rowing out on the lake. Instead, I pulled off hinges and doorknobs, soaking them in solvent to remove old paint and decades of caked grease. I stripped and recaulked windows.

Days?

I discovered the length of my solitude when I found a single flower on my porch and a card from Teagan Marie. A birthday card.

I held the card in trembling fingers outside my door. I was not just bone weary from all the work and no lunches, but from shunning this woman when all I could think about was Karen Ross.

Teagan Marie had always been there for me. She had stood by me from the beginning – mostly – and especially when I had... been accused of murder. I had much history with her and I declined the woman at every turn.

Did she deserve that?

Was she really my only real ally in the world?

She was definitely a better fit for me than Karen from California.

What was she doing now? Was she really all that angry with me? Did she hate me? Was I just some backwoods hick to her?

Why was I obsessing over someone who would be gone in a few months?

Why?

CHAPTER 28

Karen

I had asked him to get out weeks ago.

Why did I regret it?

The days and nights turned colder.

I reworked my story to include a period of waiting, longing, and a resolution of patience and trust. Of course, Rippy was perfect and Troy was not.

It was really that simple.

And so very detestable.

I wanted to scribble my anger and frustration onto my drawings and I did exactly just that. I drew a Rippy, bursting with poise and perfection, and then I took my heaviest compressed charcoal stick and marred it with my underlying conflicts.

I set it up next to my other perfect Rippy concept. Next to that was my newer life drawing of Troy's face.

Again and again, as now on a cloudy and gloomy day, I was drawn to the pain I had depicted on his face. How could he have been so hurtful? Was he right? Was Rippy a scion of perfection absolutely unattainable for young boys?

How else were those boys going to grow into better men than those I had met if they didn't have a high, demanding standard?

Rippy was the perfect teacher.

Firstly, he wasn't human in the real sense; he was a rat – a cutesy animal that drew in young, impressionable minds and taught lessons. Secondly, Rippy's tutoring was exactly the answer to today's uninvolved parenting style. Too many moms just stuck their child in front of the TV while they flipped through social

media on their phones.

Rippy had a purpose: a good purpose.

And yet...

Troy was right. Rippy was too perfect.

Were young boys getting the kind of teaching they needed if Rippy was simply instructing, instead of being someone those impressionable minds could emulate? Would they even want to pattern their personalities off a creature with which they couldn't sympathize?

Weren't our vulnerabilities those things creating the most sympathies?

Was I really missing my mark with Rippy?

I was wasting my time if I was writing just for a cute story; I wanted to make a real and lasting impact.

Maybe Troy was right. Maybe I needed a more sympathetic Rippy.

And I looked at my latest notes and perfected storyline and wondered if it was all wasted on perfection. Where would the connection be? I didn't want my child readers to just like the pictures. Or the engaging story. I wanted them to learn – to be so wrapped up in Rippy's experiences that they...

Booming echoed in the distance.

What the hell was that? Explosion?

Rippy.

Troy.

Who would I listen to? The man? Or the rat?

I suddenly despised my creation.

And I learned a truth from a man who complicated and crowded my creativity with thoughts of...

Love.

There it was again.

I can't be in love. How silly.

Not with another bad guy type. Not with another typical man who was only interested in little boys.

Except that Troy isn't interested in little boys, duh.

The booming sounded again, hollow and airy.

I moved from where I had stood, rooted, in front of my pictures I had displayed on the carved kitchen table. I peered out the window.

Overhead, the sky hung heavy and dark. Wind disturbed the pines all around.

Thunder? I had never heard such in California – not like this. Thunder was always sharp and right overhead in the worst of storms. And rare.

I watched the branches sway slightly and the pine needles flash in frantic quivers. No more thunder came, but rain did. Big, furious drops plummeted down with gathering force and a white mist seemed to hang in the air. Drops drummed on the roof of the cabin in a worrisome harbinger of leaks and misery. But no drips appeared anywhere and eventually the sound soothed me with persistence.

The roof was solid and sound.

Had Troy worked over the roofing up there before I rented it? Had he labored to insure I was safe from the pressing drive of rain I was now witnessing?

A flash of other movement caught my eye out the window.

I scanned the area but only saw rain.

Then I saw it again.

Down by the pier, someone was moving.

Troy.

Rushing up inside me was an undeniable fountain of futility and urgency that defied rational thought. I stamped into my boots and flung on my coat. I rushed out of the cabin, leaving the front door standing open.

Immediately, the ferocity of the rainfall struck me with the immensity of nature. Instead of high buildings to block out the sound of a storm, the pine trees of Lake Lapis seemed to magnify it all. Thousands of trees whispered under the onslaught as water struck needles and branches. Overhead, wind buffeted the tops and sent them swaying.

It wasn't a heavy storm, no. But nothing solid blocked nature from delivering a heavy rain. Trees bent and moved in contrast to steel and glass in the city. It was almost as if the trees were a part of the storm – engaging in a mutual dance that complemented rather than resisted.

I ran down to the lake.

Troy was there, hauling in the rowboat. He shifted it over on the shore, carefully turning it upside down. Then he noticed me.

His face took on an angry look of curiosity. He called out, "What are you doing out here?"

I stopped in front of him and drank in the man and his question. Water ran over his face in sporadic long drips as the rain contrived to either fall on his head or not. One or two at a time, the drips ran in rivulets down his face to soak the top of his work shirt. Large wet patches at the neck and shoulders weighed heavier against the partially wet lower areas of his shirt and his jeans. Only his boots were as fully wet as his shoulders and head.

I felt the rain wetting my hair as well and knew I was going to look pathetic in seconds. I said, "I saw you..."

He tilted his head and stared into my eyes.

At the same time, we both said, "I'm sorry."

I shook my head. "No, I'm sorry—"

He was shaking his. "No, I was an ass—"

I had no thought except the welling frustration and desperation. The rain pelted down every other thought.

I launched myself into his arms.

Into the safety of his embrace.

CHAPTER 29

Troy

I caught her leap and enfolded her shivering body against mine. Her wet mass of hair was cold against my face and tickled it with tactile sensation and aroma of shampoo.

I swayed on my feet, overcome with the intensity of the second. Without a conscious effort to do so, I found my hand stroking her back, calming her.

I murmured into her wet hair, "I was mean to you."

She shook her head silently.

"I'm sorry about all of it. Maybe you should get back to your cabin out of the rain—"

"No, it wasn't your fault. You were right; I made Rippy into the perfect man — one that can't possibly exist."

I didn't offer anything and just let her say what was on her mind.

She said, "I've turned you away at every opportunity and... it feels like all I have done is make mistakes."

I laughed, wet. "I sort of feel the same."

She rocked my world in a way that could not be denied or dismissed. "Would you love someone as broken as me?"

I reeled. In the act of dizziness, I clenched her harder. I rasped, "And what of me? Everyone hates—"

"I don't. I love you, Troy Jonathan Reagan."

I stumbled. I swear the ground shifted under me. My head was spinning with

surprise and shock. "Me?" I feared for a second that my weak response wasn't heard over the driving hiss of the rain.

She pulled back a little to look into my eyes. Her earnest intentions were as plain as the rivulets that ran down her face here and there. "Yes, you." Her eyes also held pleading and hope... and a barely covered horrific expectation that I might deny her.

I had to stop any insecurity she might have immediately.

I did the only thing I could think of.

I kissed her, hotly. I attacked her mouth with brief kisses. In between and mumbled into her lips, I said, "I love you, too, Karen. You're all I can think about."

Her voice was quavering. "Don't send me away."

"I won't."

I pulled back just a little.

Her face fell instantly with loss.

I shook my head and drew out of my jacket pocket what I had been carrying all week. I let it fall, dangling from the delicate chain I had bought for it: a new, smaller, smoother Rippy pendant.

I might have mistaken the occasional rivulet of water running down her face as a tear, but I could not mistake the sudden swell of water in both eyes, or the compressed quivering of her lips.

She shook her head. "I'm... I..."

"Take it, please."

She couldn't hold back her tears. "I'm sorry, Troy. I... threw the other one away when I thought... you were a..."

I clutched her back to me. "Shh, don't cry." I stroked her hair and felt her

trembling against me. "That's okay. That's okay."

She sobbed. "I was so wrong—"

"So was I. So was I."

She pulled back, sniffing loudly and wiping at her nose. "You really made another one for—"

"I thought the other one might have been rough."

"It wasn't; it was beautiful and I threw—"

"Shh. Let's leave the past in the past."

She looked up at me again, deep into my eyes, searching for a promise there that caused me to question something deep inside of myself.

Was I ready to leave the past in the past?

For myself?

For her?

I pressed the better carving into her hand and closed her fingers over it. "Let's both leave the past in the past."

She fought a raging battle on her features caught between relief and sadness. She squeezed her hand tighter over the carving.

And then I threw my neck out there in the hopes that no hidden blade would fall. "I... want you in my life, Karen. I can't think of anything else. I... Would you stay with me?"

Something like horror crossed her features. "Me? Do you mean it?"

"Would you... marry me?"

The horror vanished.

A brilliant light of joy lit up her face and erased her tears.

EPILOGUE

Karen

I felt hot and protected as Troy plowed me from behind. I had been on top, then he, then now with me kneeling. I luxuriated to the feel of his thick shaft moving back and forth through my lips and massaging that hungry ache within me.

Yes, the sex was good. Certainly better than it had been with my ex.

But this was just more than better – it went deeper in the metaphysical sense. Not just a wonderful feeling of physical satisfaction, our union was a representation of the release within our souls that made the act all the more meaningful.

I pushed back against him hard and stopped. I asked, "You can really handle me being your wife?"

He coughed, or sniffed, or huffed behind me – I couldn't tell which. He gripped my hips harder and thrust forward roughly. "As long as you can handle me being your husband."

I closed my eyes and bit my lip to the exquisite sensations his answer and act drove within me.

Then I popped open my eyes and pulled away from him. I twisted over and regarded his annoyed face. "I need to know one thing."

His erection throbbed angrily at the interruption. His question was tinged with desperation. "What?"

"Who was the chick on the pier with you?"

He grunted. "Oh, you saw that..."

"I saw it."

He shook his head. "No one."

"She kissed you."

He sat back on his ankles and slumped his shoulders. "She's Teagan Marie..."

I frowned in memory.

"We... lost our virginity to each other," he rushed on, "but there's really nothing there. I don't have feelings for her."

A light bulb went off in my head. "Oh, she's the daughter of Rhonda Lee."

"Right."

I snapped my fingers. "I heard a phone call from Teagan."

"Teagan Marie."

"Yeah, right. Anyway, her mom was trying to tell her to have courage to talk to a certain boy—"

His face crumpled into concentration. "Rhonda..."

"Was telling her to do it and coaxing her to go and talk—"

His lips firmed. "So... it's like I thought: Teagan Marie was just playing nice. Her mother has talked enough that I know she'd like to get her hands on the lake. So... she wanted to do it through her daughter..."

"I guess?"

He shook his head. "No, it makes sense. I wondered why they both were the only ones that sort of stood up for me when all that crap happened. Her mom I pretty much guessed, but not Teagan Marie." His face soured further.

I gently laid my hand on his knee. "I didn't mean to spoil all this—"

His response was a grating, "Bah!" He picked me up and tossed me down. "Let's forget all that and pick up where we left off..."

When he plunged back inside of me, I knew he was mine.

And I was his.

I might not have found my life-like Rippy, all perfect and pure, but I had found something better: a real man who would love me.

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