Nature Undeniable

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Written Without AI

This book was written by an actual person and it has a human touch that no machine could ever replicate.

Special Thanks

This book is dedicated to all those who are wild at heart.

To my folks, Stephanie and Richard Whitcomb, for your feedback regarding this book. All of your hard work helped to polish this book and its world.

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Chapter I
Windows

A young man sat in a half cubicle. There was a computer in front of him with a *Data Network Solutions* logo on the screen. He was paying it no mind. Head turned to the left, he was looking past another cubicle and out the window. His glasses reflected the mountain in the distance. It seemed to stare back at him.

It was covered in thick trees with a bald snowy top. The wind whipped outside, causing the foliage to shiver. He looked back at his terminal and resumed typing. His yellow hair stared back at him in the screen's reflection. Chatter in the office flowed around him.

"It's cold in here!" a woman in a professional blue office top said.

She hurried to the thermostat.

"It'll always be the same temperature. We work in a controlled environment," a deep and confident male voice said to her. A young man leaned on the side of his half-cubicle. While drinking from a mug, he dribbled some coffee onto his work shirt.

"That thing must be wrong," she muttered, "At least it's Friday."

He pushed back his red hair, "Have any weekend plans, Janet? How about the rest of you?"

Two women, a short petite lady and a tall lanky one, were by the breakroom entrance. They stopped quietly chatting about something. "Oh! Gina and I are going to Bill's Hometown tonight. After that, I plan to go to a Miggy Danvers concert Sunday. Still going?" The shorter one said while looking to the taller one.

The taller lady with long braided blonde hair nodded as she forced her curved glasses back up. She sighed exaggeratedly, appearing both bored and annoyed with the sudden interruption.

The man with the warm steel coffee cup in his grip, looked back to the woman at the thermostat. In the fading evening light, his shiny brass name badge twinkled with *Andy*.

"I'm just going to go with my husband to the flea market, then clean the house, and watch a movie." She shrugged and pushed back her puffy black hair. "Past that, not much." She arched her neck up to see into the short cubicles near Andy.

Two guys were left to answer. The first, a dark short-haired man in a Hawaiian shirt was propped up against the wall. He listened intently with a smile that caused the pencil behind his left ear to nearly fall out. The other was a short potbellied man in a white collared shirt.

"I bet you're going to the gym, aren't you?" The Hawaiian shirt man asked him.

Andy nodded and playfully flexed his arms which caused his short sleeves to nearly burst open. "You bet, Manny!" Then he changed to a heroic pose to flex his triceps. "You should go, good fun and plenty of nice women in spandex to look at!" his voice raised eagerly.

Manny shook his head. "I appreciate the offer, but I've got family plans this weekend. Louie has a soccer game and we have to run some errands."

"Ah, the crisis of marriage." Andy snorted back a chuckle, then looked past him into the last cubicle in the corner.

Typing could be heard emanating from it. The young potbellied man with steel glasses almost had his nose to the computer screen as he hunched over the keyboard.

"Hey, little guy? You'll go with me to the gym, won't ya?" Andy asked in a sarcastic high pitch.

The man didn't answer, absorbed in his work.

"Ken, you're being asked a question," Janet said as she pushed out wrinkles from her blue shirt.

His yellow hair and glasses popped up above the cubicle as he stood up. "What? Oh, sorry, what was the question, Janet?"

"Andy was asking you what your weekend plans were."

"Not much. I was just going to lounge at home while playing games, get some rest, you know?" He carefully slid his glasses on top of his blonde hair.

Andy waved dismissively and walked toward the breakroom and shoved past the two whispering ladies.

"Did I say something?" Ken shrugged.

Manny laughed. "Don't worry about it. It's almost quitting time anyhow." He began to shut down his computer, pack up his backpack and grab his lunch box.

As Ken reached for the power button, Janet came around to his cubicle just before he could turn off his terminal.

Manny leaned his head out to listen, with interest.

"Can you finish up the security detailing reports before you get off? I'll approve the overtime," she half-asked and half-told him with her tone's inflection.

He withdrew his finger. "Oh, I, um –"

"You don't have any plans, but everyone else does. That way no one else has to stay late." Her tone softened with a twinge of insincerity.

Ken broke eye contact, lowering his head slightly. "Yea, sure, I guess."

"I can stay too, to help get it done faster," Manny said, poking his nose into the conversation.

Ken looked past Janet and at him. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure Rosa and Louie want to see you at home."

"Ah come on, you've got to get out and do things too! Enjoy the Friday night."

Janet whipped around toward Manny. “You heard him. Go home,” she snapped.

Manny sorrowfully shrugged.

“Thanks anyway, it should only take a few hours,” Ken said as Manny left his workspace.

“I appreciate it!” Janet said brightly.

Ken turned back to his work as the office quickly emptied for the weekend. The light automatically shut off as he clacked away on his keyboard. He released a long sigh once he was alone in the dark. There was much more left to be done according to the log. In the dim auxiliary lights, he set to work while activating a techno playlist on his smartphone.

Moonlight filtered through the windows. Ken finished his overtime tasks. Tiny yellow monitor lights dotted the mostly dark room like watching eyes.

He finally shut off his terminal and leaned back in the chair which made his sitting pad slip. Adjusting it, he got up and grabbed his superhero lunch pail. It still gave off a familiar baloney scent. Plodding past the vacant cubicles and toward the door, he stopped. Unconsciously, he found himself looking out the window. Lights coated the city and enfolded the night.

Farther north, where the illumination died in the dark, the mountains loomed. They were crested with sharp trees that popped out in silhouettes. Their shadowy appearance felt cold and remote, even from his warm office. A yearning compelled him to move closer to the glass. His nose almost touched the pane. As he studied a distant mountain, it seemed to breathe, to be alive. A primal beat pounded in his heart – one of wandering, of living, of being.

Chapter 2
In the Blind

A man put his green eye to a scope on an old bolt action hunting rifle. He panned it over the stretch of alpine wilds before him. Carefully, he pulled his head away from the scope and the blocky night vision attached to it. The weapon was lowered and he rested his big hand on a forest camouflaged gun barrel.

Stillness settled into the wilderness. Squinting, he studied further down the scope from under a hidden hunting blind. There was movement in the distant grass. It was three hundred yards away, near the tree line, and past a bubbling stream which cut a meadow in two. His finger slipped onto the trigger.

"So, did you see that game last night?" A voice broke his concentration.

Lowering the scope, he looked to his right at George, who was picking trail mix from his short beard. "No, Heather wanted to have a night out," he replied.

"Usual spot? I mean, it's not like there's much unless you drive out of Isabella." He cradled his basic hunting carbine. "How is she anyhow? Haven't seen her in a time."

"She's getting along. It's been six years for her here and I still think she hasn't adjusted – gets bored a lot," he said. "We went into Duluth. We had a nice enough lobster dinner, even if a little pricey."

"Hell, Jake, I'd still pay for that. Been a while since I've had lobster, especially something decent."

"That's 'cause the Lake County Sheriff pays you like shit," the tall, broad-chested man answered in his deep voice. He smiled at his own observation. "You've got to get out of there."

"Nah, the wife and I can't beat the benefits and retirement. Plus, where else could you drive fast and carry a gun for a living?" He chuckled a little.

Jake threw him a narrowed eye. "A hunter." He lifted the binoculars up, checking the spot where the swishing foliage was.

Reaching down, George took a sip from a steely beer can in the morning light. "The driving fast part is not legal on your side."

There was more rustling. Something was there. "Hey George, shut up. Part of hunting is being quiet."

Grumbling, he did as he was instructed. George began to sneak crackers from under his orange hunting jacket. Slowly, he unwrapped the noisy package and started to crunch on them. Crumbs rolled down his front and collected on top of his bulging belly. His chewing was audible.

Jake cut him a nasty glance. He stopped, and then lifted his rifle.

Down Jake's scope was a doe in the softly blowing grass. The doe sniffed the air. Her wide ears panned around. Gracefully, she emerged into the hushed meadow. After a few more inspections, she lowered her young head.

Leaning in, George watched intently. The shot from their blind in the tree was a long one and the deer was straight on. She lifted her neck again. Gunfire cracked. The doe's head snapped back and then she fell sideways, disappearing into the foliage.

"Damn fine shot," George grinned at him. "You bought antlered tags this season, though."

Working the bolt, a shell casing ejected and he caught it. "It'll taste just as good." He put the casing into his jean pocket. "These are my woods. I shoot what I want. Plus, who's gonna know? I know all the nooks and crannies out here; there'll be no trace."

"As always, venison is venison," George replied happily.

Chapter 3
That Old Familiar Feeling

A keyboard clattered in the dim light inside a tiny apartment bedroom. The place was cluttered with superhero action figures. Computerized medieval music played. Flashes leapt from the monitor, then calmer music played.

Ken's eyes were locked to the monitor. Images of a knight gallantly charged over a battlefield. In his hefty armor, he easily strode over piles of the dead and lifted his great sword up. All the while, a bright blue gamer tag of *Sir Hendsworth* rested above the character.

Another big swing at another player. This one had a shield and was dressed head to toe in chainmail. His shield deflected the massive swing. Grunting, Ken clicked his mouse again for another go. The sword lifted as the other player stabbed from behind his protective shield. Ken didn't relinquish his attack. His plate armor absorbed most of the damage.

Suddenly, another enemy player came up from behind Sir Hendsworth. That other player slammed a long hammer onto his head. Sir Hendsworth collapsed.

Ken let out a long sigh, took off his glasses, and cleaned them with his white shirt. His game was over. He was back at the matchmaking lobby, waiting for more players. A blip sounded and he sat up in his chair, excited. The message that popped up at the bottom of his screen. That text was from Glattor56. Pushing his empty cheese puff bowl away, he looked closer.

You were late to the match tonight. Had to stay at work again?

Yea, boss voluntold me to stay, Ken replied.

Why is she always picking you? You're late almost every Friday.

I don't know. Getting tired of it.

You work hard for our guild, you must do the same at work. Doesn't seem right to heap all the duties on you. Glattor56 sent a shrug emoji. *Oh well, she's probably just a bitch. Ready for a weekend of gaming?*

His fingers started to move automatically and type *sure am*, but then they suddenly stopped.

That primal beat, that urge, from viewing the mountain, flickered through his sternum and into his heart. Getting out of his overly worn computer chair, he took three steps to the window nearest his bed.

With a yank, he drew it open. The peak of that mountain reached out over the trees. It was far away, toward Canada and was barely visible through the light pollution.

Its verdant green trees were bunched so tightly that they were like a warm fur over its rocky skin.

Peeling himself from the third floor apartment view, Ken sat back down, and typed. *Nah, I had a funny idea. I was thinking to go hiking, maybe even camp a night.*

What?! Glattor56 messaged. *Are you feeling okay? Hit your head on something? You barely go outside, let alone want to do physical labor!*

Yea, I just need some change. Maybe getting away from the computers and the indoors will help me feel refreshed.

I heard there's a comic con in your area. You could do that, they'll have internet connection too! Galttor56's message returned quickly.

Ken paused. He wiggled his fingers over the keyboard, thinking. Checking over his shoulder, he watched the mountain a second. He felt it watching him back.

Nah. I've made up my mind. He checked his phone – no texts.

Really? The woods? There's nothing out there! Boring!

Whatever, I'll be back next weekend. Ken messaged.

You're going to miss out, but alright. Glattor56 joined a game and ditched him in the chat.

Ken reclined back in his chair and then logged out. Getting up, he took one last long look at the mountain in the distance. It was waiting patiently. He closed the blinds and climbed into bed, ready for Saturday.

Chapter 4
Saturday

The trip up Minnesota Highway One was a long one. The highway's flanks were brimming with pines and underbrush. The drive itself was only an hour and a half, but it felt longer. Ken kept watching the cracked old road disappear under his car as the blue partly cloudy sky looked to expand forever. A sign for the town named *Isabella* popped into view.

After entering the township's border, he saw there was only one little gas station beside the highway. An old beaten sign for *Deer Ridge Fuel* stared back at him. There was but one pump in the whole place.

Just a bit farther down the road was a diner, just as weathered, titled the *Rock Creek Eatery*.

The compact gray car squeaked as he opened the door once he parked in the gas station. The pump looked as old as the trees around the station. Moisture and coolness floated around him. When the car was full, he re-hung the nozzle just as a big abused, blue pickup truck rolled in. It parked by the adjoining convenience store. A big man got out.

Fumbling his wallet, Ken withdrew some cash as he pushed inside the store. The spring coolness stayed at the door, blocked by the warm interior.

Rows of dusty racks held snacks and only three of the four overhead lights were working. The clerk, a heavy lady in a loud red overcoat, watched briefly. Thumping steps echoed in the store, like a lurking animal between the rows of goodies. They came from the big man who exited the truck earlier. Halting at a rack, Ken grabbed a couple bags of chips and pretzels. After getting his goods, he went to the counter and under the woman's unrelenting gaze.

"Just these and some gas," He told her.

She dropped the neglected celebrity magazine in her palm. "Haven't seen you around here before."

"First time." He smiled at her. "I came out to spend a night and see what it was like."

Her eyebrows lifted, and her face seemed to lighten. "First camping trip?"

"It is," the young man responded.

"Not sure that you're the type for the woods." A deep, rough, voice came from out of the salty snack rows. "You've got to be stronger than it, make it bend to your will, or it will bend you."

A tall man, wide-armed, wide-chested, and sporting an unshaven face emerged. He smiled, but it was too broad and clearly forced. With monstrous steps, he neared the counter. Two packs of jerky and a six pack of cheap beer hung from the fingers of his massive hand.

"Wh-what, do you mean?" Ken asked, looking up at the towering man.

"Like I said, it could be a bit dangerous out there, for you. You're city folk."

Leaning on the counter, the clerk seemed to overflow it. "He's right, you know. City folk should stay in the city. I was looking through your little car windows as you pulled up. I didn't see much gear inside."

"I um, just wanted a change of pace. To see it, you know?" Ken took a step back as the lady bagged his items roughly.

The large man shook his head. "Fine, I just hope you don't run afoul of a bear, fall off a cliff, or something."

Ken quickly gathered his things once the clerk finished. "Uh, thanks for the warning."

He rushed out the door and to his little gray car. The locals' eyes could be felt on his back as he jammed the plastic bag on the passenger seat next to his daypack. Looking into the rear seat, a freshly purchased tent seemed to judge him as well. Next to it, the new sleeping bag, felt as if it was laughing.

Taking one more gander at the store, Ken lowered his head. Hesitantly, he blew out a deep breath. Ken's hands stopped shaking. Courageously, he forged ahead. His car lurched out of the parking lot and rolled down the westward road, farther away from so-called civilization, and into the wilds.

Left behind was the small gas station where the clerk and the big man watched him depart.

"Did you see his face?" Jake laughed. "What a bitch. He won't last a night in the cold. Pack up his things during the wee hours like they always do and drive back to town." He set his items down.

The clerk chuckled from under her long curly black bangs. "Yea, little frail thing he was. Like he'd never done a real day's work. There's not a scrap of man in him."

"City people need to stay indoors."

She rang up the jerky with her old gnarled hands. "So, any plans this weekend?"

"Hunting – need to get my money's worth with my antler tags."

With a nod and a deep grin, she made eye contact while handing him the bag. "You'd better. Meat keeps getting more and more expensive. Hey, if you shoot one, can I get some?"

"Of course, Margaret."

"Oh, and tell Heather 'hi' for me. Been a time since I last saw her."

Jake curtly nodded and turned to the front door. From beyond the glass, a figure was coming in. A short womanly one in a tan uniform. Around her waist was a gun belt. Seeing Jake, she stopped and opened the door to let him out.

"Mister Jake Stills."

He looked down at the short dark-haired lady with deep freckles. "Ranger Hart."

After a quick look at his arms carrying the beer and dried meat, she said, "Opening that *after* your road trip?"

"Of course." He rolled his upper lip, ruffling his beard. "Not looking to cause any trouble. Are you?"

"You know I am." She narrowed her eyes. "Out for another hunting trip?"

He nodded slowly in a condescending and exaggerated manner.

"Guess that's what you do." She craned her ear toward the paddle mic on her shoulder, then turned down the squawking radio a bit. "Found a half-buried doe yesterday near Camp High Top - barely skinned. Most of the meat was taken off fast, jaggedly. Seen anything like that before?"

He held a cool expression. "Sounds like a poacher, a shitty one too. I'm too professional to leave such a mess. Guess you should get on that." He stepped past her, toward his truck.

Getting in, he pulled out slowly in the rumbly thing. She looked at him through the dirty windshield and he pulled back his long leather coat sleeve. Departing, he tossed her a rackish grin.

He headed west on the bumpy old road, rolling down the manual windows. The morning breeze was just right, perfect for a solitary trip.

With a snap, the first can of beer opened. Taking a sip, he leaned back in his seat. An old bolt action rifle was beside him.

The tree blind squeaked as Jake nonchalantly reached for a red and yellow booze can. Taking long sips, he stroked his beard and watched the tree line near the edge of Perent Lake. Looking from the south, the north bank was quiet. Rugged pine trees dotted the shoreline over patches of soft soil and sand while massive grey boulders loomed over the water's edge.

Jake leaned back against the deep-furrowed and rough tree bark which he could feel through his jacket. He adjusted for a more comfortable sit. It had been three hours since morning, and still nothing. Looking at the old beaten up conductor's watch on his left wrist, the big man frowned. Talking echoed over the waters of the lake.

There were two fishing boats a half mile away – both were near one another. Orange life jackets hovered above their white hulls as the boaters flung out their lines and chatted noisily. He spit in their direction.

With a long snort, he reached into his camo backpack that hung from the ladder on his blind. With a crinkle, the snack package opened. Pepper and salt seasonings dripped from the plastic slit.

Jake chewed the jerky voraciously, the noon sun slid over the lake and onto the shore before him. From above, the empty plastic package floated to the ground. Jake climbed down the ladder with a beer in hand. Quickly downing the last of the beer, he tossed the metal can into the ferns nearby. With the blind's ladder over one shoulder, his rifle over the other, he marched back to his truck, empty-handed.

Chapter 5
To Be Touched

Ken smacked his lips at the sight of the roadside campgrounds as he passed. They were nice, spaced out, and even well kept. Ken's green eyes squinted in the fresh sunlight of morning. The squinting made his abundant freckles cluster and seem to magnify in his thick glasses.

There weren't many campers this weekend as a thin layer of snow still littered the benches and fire pits. It was still a bit early in the spring season. He kept on past them. Sure, it would have been nice to stay there, but something called him farther off the beaten path, deeper into the wilds.

At a sign post on the Ely-Buyck Road, he spotted his quarry: *Norway Trail to Pine Creek*. Once his car was safely pulled into the trailhead parking, he got out. Emptiness drifted through the dirt parking lot. He was the only soul there.

He made certain that his park pass was visible in his vehicle's windshield and locked it up. Slogging toward the entrance, he shuffled awkwardly in the new camping clothes that hung from his thin body. He trekked on with his tent under one arm. Hanging from his shoulders was a dangling backpack and sleeping bag.

He went over a small bridge by the trailhead. He paused, thinking of the path ahead and the hike before him. The dense forest waited. Hesitation crept into his legs.

It was cold and silent this far out. No climate-controlled offices, idle chatter, bustling cars, or computer friends to talk to. A wind softly blew over his back. It went through his collar, rustled his long blonde bangs and iced his ears.

Suddenly, a primitive beating smote his heart. It was much stronger than any successful video game raid or pay raise. It vibrated down his spine and pounded through his sternum. The wind seemed to both push and pull him onward. The woods felt as if they were calling him to something mysterious, unseen, and important. Toward something he couldn't define.

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For five long hours he sucked in oxygen and breathed deeply, tiredly. His body ached; his steps became smaller and smaller while he barely kept hold of the tent under one arm. Stopping, Ken fished out his canteen and took generous long sips from it; it was just as cold as the winds.

Ken kept going for a time until there were stringy patches of grass pushing up from the snow. They seemed to peek at him from behind pine trees. Their buds were just starting to green for the coming season. Moisture was in the air, possibly a nearby thawing creek or pond. He spied a nice open dirt patch just inside a copse of dormant trees. It looked as good of a spot as any, being fifty feet off the trail.

Plopping down the tent, he started to unpack it, but stopped to doff his pack. Once his shoulders were clear, it took several attempts to set the tent up. The fabric tried to crawl away in the breeze and the poles were tough to lock into place. In about thirty minutes it was ready. He was then off to gather stones, which were in decent supply within a hundred yards of the camp. Using about fifteen heavy rocks, he created a fire ring twenty feet from his tent.

He collected dead branches and twigs, then unskillfully cut them to size with a foldable saw – nearly nicking his gloved fingers. Once wood was ready, he piled it beside and in the fire ring. Out of his backpack, he pulled two past issues of a gaming magazine. Crumpling their pages up, he stuffed them into the pit. It seemed that everything was ready for a little warmth. The afternoon sun felt tired from his few hours of work.

A tic made him reach for his cellphone to check for notifications. Sliding it out of his pocket, he paused, then gazed around at the wildness. With a shake of his head, he put it into his backpack to be forgotten.

Getting up from beside the pit, he wandered a short distance into a thicket. Pine needles pushed over his red beanie and tugged at his glasses. The spindly shrubs rasped his pants as he stopped in their midst, tucked away from the world. From out of the needles and branches, he watched the taller mountains farther north in the distance.

They were much closer than from his apartment window and the air was clearer here too. In a couple of still moments, life flooded back in and around him now that the critters were more accustomed to his presence. Small birds could be heard chirping between the winds and little rustles came from the trees above.

Looking about fifteen feet up through the branches, he watched a reddish and gray squirrel cock its head at him in several angles. Its quick movements shook the tiny stick it was perched on. A brown spider with a bulbous abdomen caught his eye. It cautiously creeped over a low branch like a determined skeleton just inches from his face.

His eyes were wide, taking it all in. His breaths were hushed, his body still. It was as if he'd disappeared, enveloped by the woods. In his chest, his beating heart thumped. The beats were in tune with what felt like the earth, the foliage, and the animals. It all commingled as one.

A fluttering of feathers snapped him from his daydream, his connection. From a few trees over, a crow cawed. The sun had now sunk, barely over the western horizon. With a long sigh, he stepped back into camp. His exhales were even more visible in the cooling atmosphere. It was now he realized that he was colder than he'd ever been.

Anxiously, he bent over the fire and clicked a freshly bought lighter to the magazine pages. With a few areas ignited, the pages hardly burned and their gloss melted. Ken blew on the tiny struggling flames. They soon grew into a noticeable fire. He huddled close to it as the warm flames reflected in his glasses. A little smirk grew on his face, from the pride of his own work.

Grabbing at his pack, he withdrew some discount hotdogs. Each was carefully skewered onto a stick and held up over the crisping flames. The scent was better than any meal he had ever smelled before. Eating, something about the hike made the hotdogs even more delicious. All eight disappeared quickly, without condiment or bun.

Darkness had obscured the world, but revealed the twinkling night sky. Looking above, he watched the giant stars that seemed to rest on his head. Not one building or powerline impeded his view. The moon, just over half full, felt as if it looked back down on him, watching. Unknown hours passed as he sat enraptured. The cut branches were finally gone, the fire was enjoying its last roar, and tiredness draped over him.

Shuffling in the underbrush caused his head to snap toward the noise. There was something out there. It sounded bigger than any animal he'd seen yet. He inched toward the fire for safety, and drew his hands close to his chest. He gasped. Nothing could be seen beyond the flame light. The closer it neared, the bigger it sounded. Heavy steps from the dark seemed to encircle the camp.

Abruptly, a gray-haired woman stepped into the light. She carried her head high and there was a dark walking stick in her right hand. Ken dropped his hands, confused. Softly, she smiled. She got closer and held her weathered hand out to the warmth. There was a strange wildness in her charcoal eyes, something sharp.

"May I join?" Her long fingernails stood out in the light and her voice was rough, just like the woods.

He blinked starkly. "What?"

"It's impolite to join a camp without permission," she answered and shook her head. Her smile broadened, showing her unnaturally long-in-tooth grin.

"Oh," he said while gathering himself. "Apologies, I thought you were going to be a bear or something."

She listened and leaned on her long walking stick - it looked as if it was carved from a twisted old pine branch. Furs dangled off her green jacket. Politely and quietly, she waited.

"Sorry. Yes, I'll share the fire," he said with his light voice.

Giving a relieved sigh, she stepped toward him and into the orange light. Her face was wrinkled, clean, and resolved as she pushed back a long white ponytail. With a plop, she sat to his right, only a few feet away. A musk of fur and a whiff of sage came with the old lady. Her eyes seem to liven with a feral glint in the firelight.

"Never seen you before." She turned her face to him, revealing four long jagged scars down her left cheek.

He pulled his limbs close, nervously. “First time out here.”

With a sudden motion, she uncoiled her boots out from under herself and put them toward the warmth. They were old rubber snow boots, painted with red and purple crisscrosses.

Ken noticed a few hawk feathers fastened to her furs. A long series of predator fangs and claws were tied around her wrist; under them was a ring of fang-like scars on her own flesh.

She looked at his tent. “Staying the night?”

He nodded with his head low and near his knees, much like a child ready for a scolding.

“Next time, pitch your tent closer to the fire pit, but not too close. That way it’ll be warmer when you sleep.”

Perking his brows and head up, he relaxed some. “Thanks, I’ll remember that.”

She chuckled softly. “I saw you earlier too, marching with the tent under your arm. Put it in a sack or tie a sling over it to hang from your backpack. It’s much easier and keeps your hands free.”

“I’ll do that”, he replied a bit more cheerily and his fatigue seemed gone. “When did you see me? I didn’t see you.”

“I saw you the moment you entered these lands. What brings a city person out here? Especially at this time of year?” She cracked her old crooked fingers.

He blushed some, embarrassed. “I, um, I –”

“Child, I’m not judging you. I’m just curious.”

“It’ll sound stupid.” He rubbed his left arm.

“Try me.”

He paused, reflecting. “I was looking out my window, and saw the wilderness, the mountain far off. I felt pulled to it. A need of some kind. Maybe I need to get away from my sad life.”

“Hmm.” She looked into the flames.

“So, I just packed up and came without a second thought.”

“Well,” she said. “Was it worth it? Was it what you needed?”

A little smile finally slipped from him. “Yeah, it was. It was amazing to just feel the wind. It seemed to push me on, want me to go further. Once here, I stood in the trees for a long time. I was a part of life, a part of the world, a part of the woods. The hike was beautiful too. It was so quiet that I thought about a lot: My job, my life . . . my purpose.” He sighed. “I know I don’t belong out here. I’m just a useless city slicker – an office paper-pusher.”

“That’s not stupid at all, that’s what being connected is all about.” She exhaled as she sat up more erect, forgetting her age. “Listen,” she tapped his shoulder and he instantly lit up at being touched, giving her his full attention. “The wilds choose who belongs in them. No one else. The land knows no owner.” Her stark gray eyes stared

straight into his. “Spend time here, make sacrifices to do so, and you will adapt. The wilds will learn about you, and you about the wilds. In them, you’ll find yourself. You’ll stop being so disconnected.”

“That’s good to know.” He pushed up his glasses which were slowly slipping down his nose. “I do plan to come back.”

A soft chortle floated from her. “It can be addicting, being out here. I’m addicted to it. A power comes with the freedom it gives. You will find your soul, your freedom out here. That freedom is dangerous until we learn to harness it properly. A price is always paid when there is a great transformation. Such is the nature of change.”

After, he looked her up and down with some confusion. “I’m not sure I follow. You seem to easily get around out here, despite your age. I don’t see a tent or backpack with you.”

“Let’s just say that I’m old enough to be your mother, young one.” Her little chuckle became a small laugh. “You needn’t worry about me. In fact, I take care of many others. Some don’t even know it.”

Deeply, he nodded and listened, trying to untangle her cryptic language.

“I don’t know if I’ll run into you again out in the vastness of the woods, so let me give you this.” With that, she reached into her furs.

“Oh, you shouldn’t,” he declined.

In a swift whipping motion, she withdrew a small brown pouch. “To commemorate our meeting. May these bring you protection.” She gently offered them to him. He took the gift, curious, and covered it with his left hand.

“These are very special. Now, I must be going,” she said while looking at the dying fire. “You must rest, too.”

His body sagged as if mentioning exhaustion drew it to him. “Where are you off to?”

“Home.” She gathered the furs around her. “I go to the north. Far by your standards, but not for me.” She smiled. “I hope to see you again. Enjoy the wilds and your time here.”

“Thanks, you too!”

Nodding, she pulled herself up with the walking stick. She wandered away from the camp, seemingly more spry than when he first saw her. Ken, intense, watched her leave.

She disappeared into the darkness, fading from the firelight. With caution, as if she had given him something dangerous, he opened the little pouch. In the dim light, he held up its contents: four long black claws. The claws looked to have belonged to some sort of predator. He checked the coals of the fire, they were dim. The night wrapped around him.

Chapter 6
Lightly

The front door rattled. The knob turned, keys jiggled. A short woman in a plain shirt and pants watched the knob move. She closed her eyes while pushing back her long red hair. Getting up from her patched old couch, she went toward the entry. The door opened and coolness flowed in with the thumping of heavy boots.

"You're home a bit late," she remarked to the large man with grubby hands.

He put down his pack and ladder from the hunting blind. "Sorry Heather, I lingered too long."

"Not a big deal," she said while running her small hand up his chiseled arms. "I was waiting to start dinner, but figured that a late lunch would do."

His big hands wrapped around her waist, and played with one of her denim belt loops. "Fine by me. Going to cook some more venison?"

Reaching up, she pecked him on his bearded cheek. "Sure, I'll cook that. I haven't been to the grocery store yet." She slipped from his grasp, and departed from the jacket and rifle-filled vestibule.

"Some damn fishers scared off the deer." A cracked and tilting bench squeaked as he sat on it, removing his boots. "At least that means more people are starting to come here. Paydays will soon follow. The mountains are my bread and I plan to dine on it."

Heather reached into the freezer and pulled out a slab of home-packaged meat. "That's good though, winters aren't as busy for hunting guides."

Jake shrugged. "We survive, just like we always do. It takes more than a winter to kill off us mountain people." They entered the small dusty kitchen with oily stains on the stove and oven glass.

Heather was busy placing a pan on the grill near the fridge when Jake suddenly flung open the fridge door. Her shoulders flinched. She shook her head. The door had blocked Jake seeing her. With a sigh, she twisted the nob and a clicking signaled the start of the burner.

"Want to eat out tomorrow?" Heather asked.

He sat at the kitchen table, which he dwarfed. "Nah, not till I get another guided trip booked. The wallet is getting a little tight." His eyes blinked slowly, as he watched her from behind as she cooked.

The meat hit the pan and sizzled aromatically. "Well, you better get to it."

He didn't answer. In the silence, she looked over her shoulder. Jake was glaring at her while slumped over the knobby and crumb-filled wood table.

Once she looked away, he rubbed a fingernail over the rough surface. “Nothing yet. I need to get down to the hunting stores and check the meeting spots to see if anyone is asking around next weekend. They’ll pay handsomely for a seasoned guide.”

“Yea, well, that can happen tomorrow.” She reached into the white paint-flecked cupboard, took out salt and pepper and then laid the metal spatula down. “Tonight, how about we watch a movie?”

His stubbly cheeks lifted, showing a small smile. “That sounds alright. Any specific one?”

“Hmm.” She playfully tapped her finger against her chin. “Not sure, I didn’t check the movie channel listings yet.” With a quick twirl, she faced him and her voice gained a sultry edge. “It’s not like we really watch much of them anyway.”

He lowered his gaze to meet hers. Eagerness was on his lips. “That so?”

“Oh yes, it is.” Heather jammed the spatula under the meat and flipped the venison cutlet. “Unless you have a better idea?”

“Sure don’t.”

“Good, not much else to do around here anyway.”

He chuckled. “Best part of being way out here, in the isolation.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” she said as she leaned on the table, caressing his hand with her palm.

Nearing her, he patted her hand lovingly. “I’ll take a shower. Will it be done soon?”

“If I would have known you’d wash right away, I wouldn’t have started dinner.”

The chair pushed out as he stood, towering over her long hair and big soft eyes. “Who says it can’t take a break?”

“I like how you think.” She ran her hand over his shoulder and into his coarse chest hairs, then dashed over to the stove. “It can wait.” She clicked it off.

Their clothes shed like autumn leaves as they mingled toward the bathroom. Laughter and sharp gasps followed the whole way. The water ran hot, fogging the windows in the hallway. All the while, a cold spring night had settled in. Yet, for them, it was as warm as summer.

Chapter 7
Six to Four

Black laced patrol boots stepped on the edge of a jerky package that blew in the wind. A leather glove scooped it up. There was something shiny in the ferns close by. The ranger's sharp blue eyes spotted a beer can. Taking the jerky package into her other hand, she put the trash together, then stuffed it in a small wrinkled plastic bag. A logo was on the bag's side – *Deer Ridge Fuel.*

Ranger Hart looked out over the lake and at the boats filled with older men and impatient wives, or rowdy youngsters. The sun felt cold, the world was simply a reflection in the undulating water. Without a care for time, she watched the morning slowly unfold toward afternoon. Crunching behind her alerted her to something, someone.

Turning around, she saw a familiar face: an old, keen-eyed man with a crater-face poorly concealed by a patchy beard. He nodded at her. A big white fluffy dog wagged its tail beside him. Two teenage boys were following him with fishing poles in their arms. Smiles, they were made of all smiles.

"Monday-Funday morning to you, Ranger Hart." His long-toothed grin became wider. "What brings you out to Lake Perent? Usual patrol?"

"That it is." She gave a grin back at him. "Those your boys?"

The old man held onto his straw hat in the breeze. "Nephews. Their Mom wanted me to take them out for a day."

"I see. Shouldn't they be in school?"

He winced a little, raised his shoulders up, and put a finger to his lips. "Not too loud now, wouldn't want the law to hear." His smirk grew into a little chuckle.

She shook her head at him.

"Doing some trash duty?" He gestured to the bag in her hands with his tackle box. "Slow day?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, and just because humanity cut trails into the wilderness, doesn't give fools the right to toss their trash all over."

"That's good of you. Shame people toss their crap like that."

Rolling the bag up into a ball she sighed. "Yeah, but thanks to them I've got a job. Someone to keep an eye out for the knuckleheads."

He snorted, which made his front teeth whistle. "Don't worry about us, Ranger, we take back what we pack."

"I know I won't have to watch you, it's all those others. Well, gents, have a good fish."

"Take care, now." He pointed at her playfully with a crooked finger and the two teenagers nodded with him.

She trekked about half a mile around the lake on both the east and the west sides before wandering south, and to the camping area. Going past all of the open dirt patches, she inspected the payment post before each site. Being Monday, there were only two. Both had their tickets and there was no reason to hassle them, so she moved on.

Near the recently clean bathrooms with their green trim and brown stone walls, she tossed the trash into the can. Afterward, she climbed into her white patrol SUV. The radio was quiet. Taking a long sigh, she rolled down her windows, then leaned on the door frame getting a long breath of cool morning air. It looked like today would be yet another slow one in a long string of them until the off season had fully withered away.

Chapter 8
Buckle

"Did you finish the reports? How's the security look on the servers?" Janet asked as she vacantly looked over some printed-out documents that Ken had given her.

"Top notch so far. The data integrity looks solid as well and next week we'll suggest that the company have all their employees update their passwords. Let's just hope they actually do it and pick unique ones instead of modifying their originals."

Nodding, she flipped over a page from the report. "Right. Are they configured? I don't care to get a call over the weekend."

Ken shook his head. "They're our best customer, so I double checked everything. I wouldn't expect any calls."

"Wow." She checked the clock hanging over the coffee machine where Gina and Misty were busy talking. The time was four-thirty-two. "All that and even before five o'clock. Not bad. Looks like no one will have to stay late this Friday."

Ken let out a large sigh.

"Seeing as we're set for the weekend," Janet said as she tossed the papers on her messy desk in the corner of the room, "I suppose we can call it quits early." She looked at Ken, who was headed back to his organized desk next to Manny's. "You two wouldn't mind staying until closing, just in case one of our contractors or a rep calls?"

"Not at all," Manny answered.

Ken nodded as he typed an email.

"Yay!" Gina said loudly. "Thanks for staying, guys." She quickly went to her desk and gathered her overly large purse dangling with trinkets. Hastily, she made for the exit.

Misty was close behind her. "Yea, thanks," she mumbled while prepping to leave.

Both ladies rushed out with purses over their shoulders. Andy nearly bumped into them coming back inside the office. He quickly stepped aside, holding his coffee mug up to avoid a collision. It read *World's Best Not a Dad* on the side.

"Where are they going? Did I miss something?" he asked.

Janet, who had grabbed her matching wide-brimmed sun hat and scarf, popped up behind her desk. "We're closing early." She quickly walked toward him which made the frills on her red work dress bob. "I've got to go, bus to catch." With that, she was out the door.

"Have fun in Chicago, hope they win!" Andy smiled, causing his red goatee to broaden. "Heck, I better get going too. Wouldn't want to get stuck here like you guys."

Ken sunk in his chair more and typed more loudly with annoyance.

"Yeah," Manny said, "Better hustle."

Andy quickly went into the breakroom where he noisily poured out his coffee mug and ran the faucet.

Manny rolled his eyes at Ken with a smile. "That guy is a caffeine fiend." He leaned on the half-wall separating them. "Any plans this weekend?"

Ken didn't stop clacking his keyboard. "Well, I, uh, no."

"Huh," he curled his lips. "That's a weird answer. You usually say 'games'."

Ken's face flushed some. He concentrated harder on the email he was writing. Yet, Manny was still waiting for an answer. "I was thinking about camping, again," he finally said.

"That's great! I like to –"

"Camping!?" Andy said loudly and unexpectedly. He had slinked to his desk that was just ten feet away in the little office. "Wow, Ken. That's really a whole new level for you!"

In response, Ken hunched more into his typing.

"Yeah, said he already went once," Manny said.

"Nice!" Andy's rough voice erupted. "Just don't run into a bear. It'd break you in half!" Andy grabbed his stylish leather jacket and threw a lazy wave when going out the door.

"What a jackass," Manny muttered once the big man was gone. "Well, where are you going to camp?"

Ken relaxed in the void created from everyone else departing. "I've been thinking about it, but I haven't fully decided."

"You should go, sounds fun."

"Surprised?"

Manny looked over at the wall clock, only ten minutes until close, then back at Ken. "Why wouldn't you go?"

"People keep saying I'm going to get mauled by a bear or something."

"That's just because they're too scared to be out there themselves. You're a smart guy, you'd know what to do if you saw one. Maybe get some bear mace just in case?" Manny replied with a snort.

"Yea, I'm not new to the idea of a bear. I mean we live pretty close to some wilderness. It's best to just stay away from them mostly. I suppose a can of mace can't hurt." Ken shrugged

Manny grinned. "There you go, more confident sounding already." He reached over, silenced the phones and turned off his computer monitor. "I hope to hear all about it next week. Now, let's get out of here too. We can't let our office mates have all of the fun."

Chapter 9
Chew

"Sorry Jake, Luis gave up hunting last year." She threw him a big smile over the polished and scratched wooden bar. "That means his buddies won't be coming up from South Dakota, either."

"Damn." Jake's hairy paw-like hand enveloped the tall narrow drinking glass. "That's a shame." He drank some frothy amber liquid. "Did he say why?"

The woman near the cash register fluffed her hair which made her straight brown locks wiggle. "In a sense, he did. Said it was something to do with rising costs and feeling too old." A customer approached her as she popped the till open.

"Rising costs?" Jake dropped the fork on his shiny porcelain plate and wiped his beard with a Rock Creek Eatery napkin. "I never once raised my prices, not once. Is he in the kitchen? I should ask him myself."

She smiled at an old woman and man, giving them their receipt.

"See you next time, Nina." The old lady said as she barely made it to the door by heavily leaning on her husband.

Nina focused on Jake once the customers were gone. "No, he ain't. He's out fishing with the nephews. Took the day off and our neighbor is cooking right now. Ammo prices go up too, and hunting licenses. Honestly, he's been getting a little fat as well."

"Age will do that. Business is just drying up. Doesn't anyone hunt around here anymore? Have people forgotten their roots? Forgotten how to tame the wilds?" Jake's fists balled.

She played with a smooth gold ring on her left hand. "I haven't seen many young hunters. Times are changing."

Quietly, Jake looked into her old pale green irises, frustrated. Only the fuzzy nineteen-sixty rock music and silverware scraping on plates answered him.

"Done with your meal?" she asked, leaning forward.

He pulled his arms off the bar, giving her room to grab it. "Yeah. I guess I'm just about done with this place too," he voice became sharp.

"Not coming back?" Her tone was hurt as she passed the plate through the food port and into the kitchen.

He ruffled his beard. "No, I plan to come back. Just this whole country, this town, seem different. A little bit more after every winter."

"Like I said, times are changing." She slid him the bill with a soft smile and nod.

Jake reached for the wallet in his back pocket, under the tail of his plaid red shirt. The door buzzer sounded.

A thin potbellied man in an oversized winter coat stepped in. He adjusted his glasses while looking at the menu over the bar. Blonde bangs dropped over his freckled nose. He stretched his hunched back while he cleared them away.

The big man's eyes narrowed. "Didn't get eaten by a bear, I see." Jake's words were hammer hard.

Ken stiffened at Jake's voice, his familiar voice. "Uh, no." With some effort, he brought himself to look back at the imposing man on the bar stool. "Just, um, getting some, um, food."

Jake got up, then approached him. "Good, good. Wouldn't want you to go hungry now." He sniffed, which brought in the scent of cheese puffs and sweat from the smaller man. "Heading back out? Looks like it."

Ken gazed down at the black and yellow zig-zag carpet. "Yeah, I am."

"Perfect." He nodded his head, which was a good eight inches above Ken's. "I like to see new faces."

Ken gazed up at him now, a bit more relaxed and surprised.

Noticing something on the smaller man's wrist, he pointed to it. "That yours? Can I see it?"

"Absolutely," the young man held his arm up so it could be seen. Even Nina poked her nose over the counter to inspect it.

With his index finger, Jake tapped two of the four long and hook-shaped claws. They dangled from the leather string bracelet he wore, like a slack noose. The thing was clearly a bit too slack upon Ken's right wrist. Jake's green eyes lit up.

"Do you hunt?" He asked.

Ken pulled the claws back down and under his jacket cuff. "Oh, no. I've never hunted anything in my life."

"Really? With such a nice trophy as that?" The brightness in his eyes dulled.

"Really," Ken's voice weakened some, sensing the lost enthusiasm.

"Ever consider trying it? Lots of excellent game out here. It'll make a man out of you – bring out that pioneer!" Jake's eyes lit up at the prospect of another customer.

"I, I just don't think I have it in me. No reason to hurt an animal."

Jake grunted, snorted, and then pointed threateningly toward Ken's nose. "Well, a nice set of wolf claws doesn't mean anything from a man who didn't make his own kill." His voice had gone from sharp to just plain biting.

With that, Jake quickly reached into his wallet. Ken had to step away to not be bowled over by Jake's arm as he tossed a twenty on the counter at Nina. "Keep the change, all of it," he said curtly as he stomped out the door in his towering leather woodsman boots.

Frozen, Ken watched him disappear into the parking lot through the streaky glass door. Turning back, he looked at the hostess near the till. She was busy jamming the twenty inside of it.

"Don't worry about Jake. He takes the whole outdoors thing far too seriously." Ken nodded while he listened to her. "How about some chow? What dragged you in here? The Chicken? The Pie?"

Crawling onto the yellow bar seat that seemed too big, Ken smiled widely. "The fries, I can smell them cooking from outside."

She chuckled. "Fair. They're to die for. What'll you have with them?"

"Got any veggie burgers?"

Her grin flattened, but re-inflated quickly. "Sorry, no. Just the good old fashioned country grub."

"How about some cheese curds then."

With a ding, she pressed a button on the register which seemed to echo in the small, eight booth diner. "Coming right up, dearie."

Chapter 10
Box Voices

"Are you feeling well?" The clear, but electronically buffered, voice asked. "Your brother hasn't seen you online for almost two weeks now."

Sighing, Ken replied, "I'm fine, Mom."

"I can't hear you. You sound muffled."

Pushing the earpiece microphone closer to his mouth, he said more loudly and slowly, "I'm fine. I just haven't felt much like playing games."

"It's not polite to leave us waiting to hear from you and it worries us. You never called last week, either." Her voice escalated to a higher pitch.

"I'm an adult. I don't have to call anyone," a piercing quality entered his voice in response. "One week won't kill you."

"Kenny, I'm your mother, I care about you. When you're acting funny, I check in with you." She inhaled, her nose whined. "Is it about your birthday?"

"No."

"We haven't seen you in over two years since you left Portland. You never come visit."

"No, mom, it isn't. I don't care about my birthday."

"Give it here." Scratchy sounds came from his earpiece as the phone was passed to another with a familiar, over-smoked voice. "Ken, we're coming over to celebrate. We'll be there in two weeks, just in time for it."

"Dad, no, it's too far to travel for just a birthday." Ken's voice trailed off meekly, half-acceptingly. "I might have plans too," he quickly added.

"Then clear your schedule. Two years is too long for any parent not to see their child. Daniel will be there too. He wants to see you as well."

"You're just dragging him along as always. He doesn't want to see me. He just wants to be at the mall with his friends." Ken retorted.

Somehow, his father's voice got even deeper. "There'll be no more discussion! We already pulled Daniel out of school for the road trip. Plan on us being at your doorstep." More muffled cloth went over their receiver as it changed hands.

"Mom, this –"

"Not another peep. You can't be so selfish as to not see us. Don't you want to see us too?"

He hushed, his eyes pointed down sternly at his car's hood.

"Kenny, are you there?"

"Yeah." He murmured as his compact car hit a bump in the road that caused his hiking backpack to slip from the passenger seat.

"Good, see you in two weeks." The call ended.

When the assaulting voices silenced, he ripped off the earpiece and powered the cellphone off. Once in the glove box, he looked up just in time to catch the "Powwow Lake Trail and Pose Lake campsite" sign. This Saturday's drive was a bit longer than the last and farther into the deep woods. Nearing the parking lot, he spotted the lake just beyond and a thicket of low foliage.

Tall dead trees loomed around the water's rim with their old unbending branches held straight out like a beacon from another eon. Smaller juvenile firs and pines ringed them closely. Reeds leapt from the lake's edge and mixed bouncily with waterlilies.

A freshness that only comes from new life, spring life. The sun that seemed to skip over its own gleams. Ken's tires came off the old chipped and into the dirty unpaved parking lot. His speedy advance abruptly came to a halt, dying, when he noticed another vehicle.

There was a white SUV with light-bars and the Park Ranger logo. Leaning against the front side of the vehicle was a short woman in a tan uniform. Her eyes were locked onto the lake until she checked over her shoulders at his entrance.

Ken came to a stop on the opposite side of the parking lot, near the entrance. He got out and locked his car with the fob. His head was down as he drifted toward the trailhead a couple hundred feet away. Uncut blonde hair dangled in his face as he lugged along his backpack – trying to rush onto the trail unnoticed. However, a firm voice caught him.

"Heading out?" It was from the ranger, who was standing just behind him. "Looks like you are."

He whipped around to face her. Quickly, Ken pushed up his glasses and pulled his arms, and the wolf claw bracelet, into his sleeves. "I, um, yeah." Looking up to her, she smiled with a bag of trash in her left hand and her other upon her right, gun-side hip.

"What's your name? I usually only see locals this time of season," she asked.

"Ken," he answered, then looked at her last name on the breast of her uniform. "Ranger Hart?"

She looked at his pack. From it hung a tied-on sleeping bag. "Looks like you know what you're doing. How long will you be out?"

He blinked behind his thick glasses which made his eyes seem too large. "Does it matter?"

"Yea, it does." She gestured to his car. "If your vehicle is still here after you plan to be back, I'll come searching for you."

He let out a long puff of air and his shoulders loosened. "Right, that makes sense. Just a night, my car should be gone after tomorrow."

"Just remember to not damage any live trees. There aren't any fire restrictions but put out your fire thoroughly and pack your trash out."

"I see some others have failed at the last one," he remarked as he pointed to the bag in her hand.

"Some never learn and when I catch them, they'll feel it with a hefty fine."

Ken finally let a tiny grin slip between his thin lips. "You won't have an issue with me, Ranger."

"I appreciate that." She waved and started to go about her duties, but stopped. "Oh, and if you see a bear, back away slowly. If they're out this early in the year, they could have awoken too soon and will be aggressive."

"Thank you. I'll take care."

She mounted up and rolled out of the parking lot while he trod down the trail and into the woods.

Into solitude he went. To a place where his essence could once more entwine with the branches, the soil, and the world.

Past the bend in the trail, when civilization was fully out of view, relief washed over him. It caused shivers as he stared hard into the distant northern mountains. They were a challenge to be conquered one day.

The wind swept over the trees, rattling them, and went through the foliage surrounding Ken. It pushed him forward and he stepped with eagerness, ready for the challenges ahead. That wind went into Ken's being, past his flesh, and nestled in his soul. Something unnamed within him stirred, something old, eons old.

Chapter I I
Quarry

"Oh yea, there are plenty of bears around here," Jake said with a confidence in his tone that overshadowed the tree copse where they hid. "Might be a little early in the year, but I think we can stir one up for you, especially with the bait I put out today."

"Good, good. I want something to show the family when I get back," commented a tall and swollen-bellied man in a flashy orange vest.

George scratched his stocky neck as he adjusted the carbine over his shoulder. He took long sips from his steel thermos which steamed in the early morning air.

"Sure there's a bear around here?" the tall client asked, pulling a large rifle from his back. "I paid good cash, you know."

Jake lowered his binoculars harshly and grumbled. "You'll see a bear, Justin, no doubt. I tracked this one last summer, it should still be around here. I own it; I know how it thinks." He lowered his voice. "Keep quiet, don't want to spook it."

A muffled rustling came over the meadow they were watching. Just past it was an expansive grove of trees, thick, undisturbed, and verdant. It seemed a place not only isolated, but a fortress against invasion.

Justin had a reddened face and he snugged his thick plastic glasses against his nose. George was next to him. He started to breathe heavily, excitedly, expectantly. They seemed ready. Jake lifted his back and peered out of the shrubs.

"Has to show up soon. I can feel it, Justin," Jake said softly, clearly in the hunter's mental zone. "Remember what I told you."

Justin leaned his body against a pine, using it for support while aiming.

"Fire when it reaches the feed barrel. Wait until you have the perfect shot to hit it behind the shoulder and through vital organs," Jake whispered.

Looking into the binocular's tube, Jake focused on the worn blue feed barrel staked into the soft earth. The fifty gallon drum was cut in half, exposing a mix of berries. The shot would be at seventy-five yards, just ten feet inside of the meadow on the opposite side.

There was a shift in the foliage across the meadow, in the trees. The head of a dark-colored bear cautiously scanned the area from behind the trunk of a jack pine. Through the lens, Jake watched its nose twitch – luckily the wind was just right and the hunters were covered in a masking scent. After some ear twitches, it pushed out through a barren blueberry shrub, and toward the barrel.

"Ready?" Jake asked quietly.

"Yeah," George said. He was breathing heavily, excited.

Jake looked over to George, then his customer. "Not you. Are *you* ready?"

Justin nodded and nestled his eye to his scope. His heart thumped. Jake, however, was still and calm like the professional he was.

Plodding, the bear came into full view. It sniffed around the barrel and touched its nose to it, investigating. It was a massive specimen of a black bear. A white patch adorned its chest and its skull seemed far too large to get inside the half barrel's opening.

"Wow." Justin quietly said. "You filming?"

"Yup," Jake said in a hush. "That's a beautiful one. Male and has to be over five-hundred pounds. We'll need the sled, George."

George nodded and checked behind himself, toward their gear. The sled lay there, the rope was already affixed to it.

Jake held up his client's fancy camcorder just over the scrubby grass.

The bear neared the edge of the barrel and stretched its neck for a nibble. That caused the beast to take a single step forward with its front leg. Its ribs were wide open, exposed and vulnerable. A shot rang out.

The bear stopped, jumped up in surprise, and then reared its head. Jake, seeing that his client had missed, quickly unslung his rifle with one hand while holding the camera up. George dropped his thermos and also went for his weapon. Justin cycled the bolt to his rifle.

It was too late. Hearing the shot and the racket they were now making, the bear rushed back toward the security of the foliage.

Jake dropped the camera and then readied to fire. Another shot rang from the client. The bear let out a deep hoarse yelp. Turfs of fur leapt off its shoulder.

George got his carbine ready, and pulled the trigger sloppily, it refused to fire. "Fuck!" He said loudly, then clicked the safety off, but the bear had vanished back into the thicket.

"I think I hit it, maybe," the tall man said, breaking the quiet after the gunfire.

Jake nodded without looking at him, without showing his scowl. "I bet you did, with that second one."

"What now?" Justin asked.

"We wait. About thirty minutes should do." Jake shouldered his gun. "Don't want to get close to a wounded bear."

George picked up the camcorder, brushed off some dirt, and passed it to Jake, who took it.

"Let's check out the footage while we wait," Justin put his hand out.

"Had to drop it to get ready, just in case," Jake said coolly. "Didn't want you to miss your chance for a score, or have it rush us."

Quivering, the man watched the camera. Jake stood ten feet away pretending to check his gear in the backpack next to George.

"Shit, I should have been ready to drop that bear," Jake said quietly. His furry eyebrows arched in anger. "I can't believe I was videotaping even if he paid me extra."

George shook his head. "I should have been more ready too. Think that bear will be taken down?"

"Probably not, they usually don't get far if it's a good shot." He looked back over his shoulder at Justin watching the camera in the tall grass. "Stupid son of a bitch can't shoot worth nothing. He said that he's gone hunting before. Bullshit! I shouldn't have let that S-O-B into my woods."

"What if it's not dead? If it gets away?"

At first Jake didn't seem to have heard the question. "Might have to cut him half his cash back. I just hope he's happy enough to even be able to try and shoot a bear. I jumped too quickly on this hunt. Next time, I won't promise as much. Next time, I want to see them shoot first," he finally replied.

Jake's boots crunched on pine needles. He panned his rifle at the ready, angrily shoving aside branches and trampling shrubs.

George was following, just as ready, but not as steady. He nervously kept his carbine up and was nearly hyperventilating. An eerie silence lingered over the thicket, where the bear had retreated from the meadow.

Their client was in the last position of their line. He held his weapon up clumsily.

Following the broken low branches, and deep paw prints, it wasn't long until they saw droplets of blood smeared over the pinemat growing just on top of the soil. Jake knelt low and carefully eyed the path.

"Wasn't a good hit. That behemoth is still running," Jake commented. "We can follow it a little ways, but I think it's long gone, or worse, in hiding. Might be too dangerous to follow."

Justin lifted his head from studying the blood trail. "Should we come back Saturday? Will it return?"

"Probably not," Jake said and took a few steps forward. "If it's stupid enough to come back, it'll be very cautious. The feed barrel might not work again, either. Our chances are slim."

"Well, my knees are hurting and I'm tired. How about we call it quits? I can pay you for an extra day tomorrow, for Saturday?" Justin said, "I think just another chance to even hunt it would be a great story back home."

"Sold," Jake quickly said. "How about I pick you up at the hotel again around five-fifteen a.m.?"

Chapter 12
Snarl

A cool wind blew over Ken's shoulder that Friday evening. It seemed to hover there at times, to just chill his bones before passing. He pulled up the collar on his jacket which made the wolf claw bracelet clack. The fading sun's red rays were shoving through the trees. There wasn't a soul in sight on this unpopular trail. He was already three miles into his hike.

Once the old growth had thickened, it formed a seemingly impenetrable wall on both sides. The needled trees mixed gracefully with the tall grass at their bases. The windy path Ken was following seemed to carry on for a blissful eternity.

Stopping, Ken adjusted the strap on his shoulder with a satisfied grin. The world was becoming still in the dusk. He seemed to be the only person on the planet in the isolated backcountry.

Carefully, he went to the right side of the road and he eagerly patted the tent dangling behind him. A gentle slope flowed downward, into the grasses and ferns. With each step forward, his heart raced with excitement for a night in the wilds. In the distance he noticed a flat spot in a cluster of pole-like trees. It was perfectly sheltered by the old growth.

His rubber-soled boots stopped themselves. An anxiety coursed over him, one that he could not fathom as he stood near his destination. An unearthly silence lingered. Not even a bird fluttered in the branches. The squirrels were still. The wind was gone.

Scared, he hunched lower. Near the rim of his glasses were some branches forming a vine-like wall. Some were clearly snapped. Looking down, he saw big slide marks in the mud, from claws. The air seemed heavier as his nostrils widened. They flared at the stink of blood that had escaped him earlier.

Standing up slowly, shakily, he took one step back, retreating. An explosion rocked forth from the underbrush. He tripped backward over one of the many tree roots. From the undergrowth came a massive black bear with a torn open shoulder. It snapped at his legs while he tried to scramble away.

Pulling himself away from the danger, Ken tore loose the tent hanging off his back and reached behind himself to use the foliage as a lever to pull himself toward safety. The bear rushed over him. It stepped on his thigh and he shouted in pain. He pushed at the face of the bear in a panic, trying to get it off him. Biting, it gripped onto his right bicep. Ken screamed again. Blood dribbled down the wound. He felt and heard the teeth rip through to his bone and grind.

The wanderlust was gone. Now in its place was fear as his heart pounded. He helplessly kicked at the animal and desperately slapped its face with his free hand.

Another sensation came to him. His blood boiled. The unknown urge came back into his chest much stronger and fiercer. Something beyond, not just the bear, fueled it. His nostrils flared as the bear refused to let go. The wild charcoal eyes of the old woman flashed before him.

The bear raised its claw to Ken's chest and raked down hard. Through the jacket and undershirt, the claws tore. More blood poured as he screamed even louder. Yet, his voice was not his own. His vocal cords stretched unnaturally deep, more primal. His jaw bones snapped inexplicably, and elongated.

A guttural growl came from his throat as his face contorted. Horrified, he watched not only how the bear raked his body, but his body rejecting its fate. Excruciatingly, his hands stretched as his spine snapped taller. His torso expanded and his bones solidified. Cracking, knife-like fangs painfully forced their way into his mouth. Instinctively, they gnashed at the bear. It reared back in surprise at Ken's shifting form.

The blood flow staunched. Wiry black fur knitted together over his wounds. A world of smells came into his nostrils – blood, anger, soil, pine, and fear. At first, shock washed over his face. Then his mouth smiled on its own. Two long ears unfolded atop his skull and the universe was noisier than ever.

His muscles moved without his consent. With a great shove from his now massive clawed hands, the bear was forced back. It snorted out mouthfuls of his former flesh, his once weak flesh.

As the bear backed away, he swatted at its muzzle with his long dark claws. They ripped open the bear's lips, revealing its own long teeth. The bear yelped painfully, then charged furiously. The beast lunged and latched onto his right arm again, the one he swatted it with. Intuitively, Ken opened his jaws and hammered his fangs into the neck of the bear. It tasted of dirt, gore, and frightened animal.

The bear bit harder. Ken could feel the pressure on his new hide, but not any pain. His veins were too filled with adrenaline and his heart with too much primitive rage. Forcing his teeth harder into the bear's gristle and fur, he jerked his neck down. The bear stumbled but then stood firm. It reached up with its front claw and shredded down at the arm it had pinned.

Again, Ken's wounds closed before they could truly gush. His broken arm clicked back into place. Ken, or what was once him, jerked his head with frightening strength once more. The bear toppled over and down into the dirt before springing back up. Foliage shredded, trees shook at their struggle. Bestial snarls and thrashing echoed. Birds fled as dust plumes rose. The beasts clashed again.

The bear rammed into him, biting onto his left shoulder. Ken's clawed feet dug massive lines in the soil. Losing ground against his foe, he lowered his body, and placed

his free hand on the ground. Using a more stable footing, he latched his jaws onto the bear's giant throat again. The bear wheezed as it tried to suck in air.

Pushing it down into the now bloody mud, Ken brought up his other claw. Vengefully, he tore at the ursid's eyes. Blood bubbled out, its stark brown iris popped. His long claws slipped into the opening and pushed in further. The crimson in his maw urged him on. The bear was enfeebled. Victory would soon be his.

He pulled ligaments and the bear's esophagus in his fangs. It meekly tried to rake at him and its mouth slipped from his shoulder. Feeling the bear's grip loosen, Ken tore at the creature with both claws. The frenzy of the kill took him beyond humanity. Fur and gore matted him and was flung into the branches. An ecstasy filled his being – the will to exist – the thrill of murder.

The bear gave several big throes as its life ebbed away. Ken took numerous massive bites from the still living flesh in his long wet-nosed muzzle. It tasted more alive than any other meal. In those woods, in that copse, his heart beat like it had never before. The shadows were cut away from his eyes as the long sharp ears atop his head took in every sensation for miles, his miles.

His wet bloody nose flared at the mixture of fear, both the bear's and his own, and for what he'd become. He liked it without choice. A vibration gurgled in his throat, but his hunger was stronger. He gorged like the animal he was. Now he was a part of the woods proper.

Chapter 13
You

Ken shook as he looked in the mirror. His frail nude form stared back. The unnatural lights inside of the apartment bathed him. Fear was in his puffy green eyes. His clean hands rubbed over his potbelly, arms and legs. There wasn't a scratch, a bruise, or anything that would suggest he just got into a tangle with a bear.

From the bathroom, he stumbled over his wrecked backpack and into his meager studio apartment. He sat on the leather footstool which stuck to his sweaty flesh. His eyes adjusted to the dark from the bright bathroom. They adjusted too well. In the shadows he saw his computer desk with all of its cords running behind it. Nearby was his two-seat sofa in front of the wide-screened television on the wall. Eying to the left, he noticed that there were crumbs on the diminutive kitchen table by the short untidy tile counter.

Something caught his eye. There was a fine layer of dust on top of the refrigerator that he never detected before. He was alone, but a presence unseen seemed to blanket him. The hairs on his neck stood up and moved, like something was breathing on them. He turned around quickly. There was no one, nothing there.

Cradling his head in his hands, he reflected on the previous night. It had all happened so fast. Visions hit him. They were of his wolfish face ripping deeper into the dead bear's torso. A hunger – one greater than he had ever known. A great feast of flesh, a gorging.

More visions assaulted him. That creature, him, ran from the kill site with his backpack in its teeth. It followed the scent of water to a lake north of the grove. It smelled pure, and the lake itself was haunting in the abundant moonlight. Quickly, it entered the water and washed. It also licked the gore from its forearms and fur.

The flavor returned to Ken. He gave a dry wretch. Concentrating, he continued to recall more events.

The beast ran back to the car. As quickly as he had changed, Ken returned to himself in that empty parking lot. It was then that his consciousness, his control, returned. Naked from the destruction of his clothes, Ken climbed into his car and made the midnight trip home. He had scampered back into his apartment and went straight to the bathroom to cry.

None of what he remembered seemed real. A fabrication of a fevered dream. Ken looked over at the clock. It was one-ten in the morning. The green of the clock's numbers felt too strong to look at. He pulled his eyes away.

More sensations from the attack infiltrated his mind. The smells and tactile sensations came rushing back. He exhaled, lowering his head in the dark, and tried not to think anymore.

A few minutes passed until he got up and wandered to the kitchen. Thirst overcame him. His stomach growled and his mind flashed to himself taking massive mouthfuls of the bleeding bear. He stopped and covered his mouth, the taste returned. Quickly, he moved over to the sink, bowed his neck, and gave a few dry heaves. His heart pounded.

Ken collapsed onto the old counter. Tears dripped from his eyes and his face reddened. Snot dripped from him. In the dark, he wept quietly for a time.

With his composure regained, he went to the fridge, and reached inside for some bottled water. As his right wrist crossed into the light, he froze. There was a scar. Not one from a bear or his own doing, but one that looked all too familiar. Four long scars ran down each side of his wrist. They looked to be in the shape of the wolf claws he once wore; it appeared like they burrowed under his flesh. His eyes widened at the sight while a shiver ran down his spine.

It lasted only a few seconds until he heard a scream outside. It was high-pitched, far too high-pitched. Another followed it as he, without thinking, made his way to the window that faced the parking lot. Below his third-story apartment window was a parked red minivan with its running lights on.

Three young children, maybe near ten or twelve years old, were chasing each other around the vehicle. A tired, hefty mother lurched from the driver seat and closed the sliding door harshly. She began to yell at them under the light of the lamppost. Ken started to focus on her words, but then something happened.

Through his chest ran a noticeable weight and it shifted into his face. He staggered back, surprised. His tongue felt wet, more than it ever should. The weight spread down his neck, and to the end of his arms. Its heft became so great that it felt like he'd be crushed by it. Blood clouded his mind and snapping sinews. He felt a desire to hunt and kill the weak beneath him. His blood ran into his nostrils and his palate was flooded with the memory of fresh meat.

With effort, he ripped his eyes away from the scene below and slunk to his knees. Taking deep breaths and clearing his mind, the sensations seemed to subside. He kept breathing until the weight evaporated back to his chest and seemed to settle there. It nestled into his sternum and rested patiently as if it knew it would return. It was part of him now.

Chapter 14
It

"Get any sleep last night?" George asked the tall man with the rosy face and spectacles.

"Some. I was still so excited by the hunt yesterday and thought about it all night," Justin replied.

Jake was ahead of them, he was deadly focused. The hunting guide scanned the tall grass between the trees. They were near a lonely trail by the spot where they shot the bear the day before. The wind cut through the isolated path. He squinted at something along its side.

"Hey guys, shut up," he said loudly as he hunched. "I see something."

There was an impression of grass and dirt near the trail's edge. A path had been cut into the thicket. Slowly he neared it with the other two breathing heavily behind him. There was a massive footprint just off the trail. Yet it was facing the wrong direction, it came out of the thicket.

More were around it and Jake leaned in to study them. "Cover me," he said.

George snapped to and unslung his rifle. Their client did the same. As Jake looked at the trail he realized that there was another type of track. One made from modern hiking boots that went into the wooded area. The hunter leaned closer to the prints, the big ones. Something was off. They were elongated with a giant pad and deep nail markings. At times it seemed the creature walked on two legs. Other times there were large human-like handprints mixed with them.

"What the fuck," Jake muttered, mostly to himself.

George crept up behind him, carelessly. "What? What is it?"

"Big tracks. I don't know this animal. They're almost bipedal." He pointed to the handprints. "It's too human."

George stared at the tracks in disbelief.

"What is it?" Justin asked. "Not something native?"

"No. . ." Jake trailed off and peered deeper into the woods off the path. "Doesn't look like this beast is from around here, or this planet. We better check it out."

George got close to Jake while Justin was busy watching the trail they came from. "What the hell are you talking about?" He gulped, wide-eyed. "Whatever is down there could attack us."

Jake grabbed him by the collar of his orange hunting jacket. "If it was that bear, we could be on the hook for this. Wouldn't you agree, deputy?"

"Damn it." George let out a long snort from his nose and it rustled his beard's black hair. "Justin, we have to check it out. Could be that bear and if it's downed, wouldn't you want the trophy?"

Justin nodded eagerly.

Jake focused his attention back to where the trail led down.

Justin sucked in great gasps of air, looked around nervously, and said, "What if it's alive?"

"We finish it." Jake ducked under a branch and followed the trail into the foliage.

Jake's shape smothered is shadows as he carefully walked through the thicket. George's jaw hung. Justin trailed behind them hyperventilating. With shaky hands, Justin pushed the glasses up on his face as they tried to slip off. Cracks and snaps echoed through the trees. The hunters went deeper. There was a sour stink. It was one of death.

Near the bottom where the slope flattened, a visceral landscape emerged in the underbrush. Juvenile saplings were snapped to splinters. Branches torn from mature tree trunks and foliage were thrown all over the pine needles on the ground.

In the middle of the carnage were pools of blood mixed with gouges of clawed mud. A torn jacket rested by a pair of broken glasses and ripped up jeans. There was a tent with rope which looked tossed away. Tent material was scattered in the cool copse.

Jake knelt near the fly-ridden corpse of a massive black bear. A gunshot wound marked its shoulder and its face was shredded into long ribbons. The flank of the carcass was stripped wide. Ribs stood up in stark whiteness. The bear's ropey muscle and sinew drooped. Its internals were hollowed out and spattered around it.

"Fucking shit," George's face went slack.

Justin was silent and blinking incredibly fast.

Jake's face hardened into stone. "Yup, that was the bear. Something got to it."

"Killed someone too." Justin was shaking even harder and his face was bright red. "What are we going to do?"

Jake eyed the long and strange footprints in the blood matted muck. He inspected the bite marks on the bear's torn open flank. There was an intensity in the hunter's eyes.

"What are you doing?" George asked as he kept his rifle close.

"Boys, we've made it now." Jake replied.

"What? We're in deep shit!" George got close to him as Justin followed. "How could we have made it?"

With a fast motion that made the other two step back, Jake looked back at them like a cat eying a mouse. "Don't you get it? Whatever did this is unknown. If we can track it down and kill it, we'll be rich."

"What about the body and the dead bear? Someone is gonna find them and then we're screwed. We'll be responsible for a dead hiker or something!" George said loudly.

Jake held open his hand and patted downward to hush him. Justin watched, scared. From his red plaid shirt Justin pulled out a rag. He wiped his face.

"You aren't thinking about hiding this? Are ya?" Seeing Jake's stoic grin, George shrugged, defeated. "Just like the deer?"

With a confident and big grin, Jake said, "Of course. You know the spot." With fierce eyes, he locked onto Justin. "You will get your bear trophies today. Can we count you in for a hunt of a lifetime? To kill an unknown beast? We'll conquer it, just like from the days of old." There was a meanness in his tone, one that implied trouble if obedience wasn't given. However, there was also morbid excitement.

With a mournful face and sunken eyebrows, Justin looked at the mauled jacket. "We'd better catch that thing for all our sakes."

Chapter 15
The Call

Ranger Hart looked at her dashboard terminal while pulling into the parking lot. The green text on the black background displayed something about a kill site found early this Sunday morning. She took a sip from her thermos. It smelled strongly of jasmine tea as the SUV parked in the early dawn light. There was an old lady with a giant backpack and wavy long grey hair. Her hand waggled fevorously at the ranger.

"Oh, my god! Oh, my god!" She shouted while Hart exited her patrol vehicle. "I found something. Looks like something was killed."

She stepped out and pulled up her gear belt over her thin frame. "Possible. That does happen in the woods, you know."

"No, not like this." The older woman shook her scrawny neck in the cold breeze. "I've been hiking all over the country ever since I was young. Ain't seen nothing like this."

Hart reached into the backseat and withdrew a large steel briefcase, then secured the vehicle. "Alright, let's take a look."

Both went down the hiking trail about three miles. It wasn't until the full noon sun hit them that they reached the bend where the lonely thicket lay silent. Something was eerie, something unnatural lingered. They both could feel it. Their feet stopped just short of the trailside where it sloped toward the foliage. The grass and shrubs were heavily flattened down the hillside.

"You first," the sunburnt lady said to her and raised her eyebrows at the ranger.

"Shouldn't be anything down there you haven't already seen," she responded to the old woman.

The silence was broken by Hart's boots crunching through the underbrush with the hiker cautiously following. The old lady held her walking stick, white-knuckle tight. She quivered.

"Damn. Alright, I haven't seen this before," Hart said as she laid eyes on the carnage. "This is something strange for sure." She pushed up her work cap and scratched her short black hair. "What on earth could have done this?"

"Nothing, that's what. You think it was a cult or something?"

Hart stared into the tree branches above. There was viscera still hanging and broken branches were dangling. Some of the saplings and yearling trees were snapped in two. Whole patches of bark were shredded off the pines. Deep gouges scarred the earth, filled with mud and crusty blood.

"Not a cult, but maybe something unnatural. Something that's new, something which will upset the balance of our ecosystem." Hart said quietly.

"A Bigfoot?"

Ranger Hart shook her head at the question. "Nope, definitely not."

"What then?" The old lady demanded. "What could do this?"

Ranger Hart looked over her shoulder, back at her. "I don't know." She crouched down to the forest floor and eyed the dirt. "You'd best go on and get to hiking. I'll be here a while. Appreciate you calling us." She snapped open her investigation kit.

The old lady stared at the scene a moment. "No problem. Be safe."

She only nodded at her as the hiker left. Once free of distractions, Hart opened the steel briefcase fully and took out some crime scene tape. After she blocked off the approach down the slope, she withdrew a camera and carefully took a series of photos from just outside the carnage area. Dutifully, she followed the path of destruction as if recreating it with her pictures.

There were recognizable things: clothing scraps from a blue jacket, a pair of broken glasses, bear fur and bits, and shreds of human skin. There were tracks and gouges in the mud, showing a fierce melee. However, there were other traces that caused Hart to slow and hesitate.

Among the familiar evidence were long, midnight black fur. It was coarse and surely not ursine. A few partially obliterated tracks were alien to the forest. These had canine traits, but were far too stretched out. Also, the weight placement was wrong. Whatever left them was more upright, than on all-fours.

Ranger Hart expanded her search to the perimeter of the scene. It was there that different signs were seen. These were partial boot tracks. The treads were missing, as if the wearer had foot covers on. Near them was a massive slide mark over the mud. Its presence signaled that something heavy was dragged away. It ended at the edge of the hiking trail to the south.

She sighed in frustration. Clearly this site had been tampered with. Dutifully, Hart continued her work of collecting and documenting. The hours passed into the late afternoon.

Once the scene was broken down, Hart stopped at its edge and gave it one last look. The site was something from a dream, a primal one. The trek back was long and the sun was starting to set when she reached her patrol vehicle. Tiredly, she picked up her cellphone and dialed.

It rang twice before a female voice answered. "How's it going, Tonya?"

"Been a long day, Reggie," Ranger Hart answered. "You won't believe this one unless you see the pictures."

"Wow, something big?" Reggie asked.

Ranger Hart looked out the window and back down at the trailhead. "That would be putting it lightly. Forensics is going to need to take a look at this. I have a feeling that

we'll be seeing more of whatever it is that happened out there. The scene was tampered with."

"I take it that you're headed back to HQ? Will we need to put out an advisory? Was it a homicide?"

"I'm not sure, but mark me as busy. If any more calls come in for Kawishiwi District, someone else will need to take them. It'll be a few hours." She looked at her green eyes in the rearview mirror. "No advisory yet, we don't know what we're dealing with."

"Okay, you're marked as busy. Well, that could take six months for forensics."

The Ranger exhaled sharply. "I know, I know. They move at the speed of government, but that's the system we have. I'll probably take lunch after stopping at HQ."

"Copy. Have a good Code Seven," The dispatcher said.

Ranger Hart hung up the phone and put her SUV in gear. The breeze from her open window drifted over her and ruffled her uniform. Her troubled face reflected on the windshield glass.

Chapter 16
Rolling the Dough

From a mossy porch, Jake looked out over his domain on a lazy Sunday morning. That domain was an unkempt, grass-filled acre. His rusty and half-fallen barbed wire fence divided it from the outside world. He sipped thoughtfully from a worn mug that was stained from sitting in the dirt. George took a pull from his mug as well. He blew away the steam with his nostrils as he drank. His often-repaired lawn chair creaked as he leaned back in it.

"What do you think we're dealing with?" George asked as he peeled his jacket's backside off the duct tape he was sitting against. "It's dangerous enough to tear up a bear like that. Sooner or later it's going to find someone else. Then we'll have to deal with other hunters. More people are going to try and bag it."

"No idea what it is." Jake scratched his thick hairy arm near a scabbed-over cut. "But, we have an advantage. We know it's out there and can get a head start. It's just an animal, we can outsmart it."

"You think it's worth something?"

Jake nodded. "Fuck yeah, it is. I bet those white-coats at the college will pay handsomely for it."

"Well, I can give them a call. See what kind of cash we're dealing with." He replied.

"No." Jake's voice went from jovial to dark suddenly. "We can't let anyone know what's going on. They'll start looking themselves."

George blinked at the realization and softened his words. "Good point, good point."

The old screen door cracked open as Heather held the crooked thing ajar with one hand. The other precariously dangled a worn-out coffee pot. George nodded to her as she came out onto the porch. Jake held his mug out expectantly.

"Good morning," she said to George as she poured a fresh cup for him. "Sounds like you two are making big plans."

"Very big plans," he replied and took a sip of the hot liquid. "Oh my, that's your special brew. Thank you!"

She smiled at him, which made Jake raise an eyebrow at her. From there, she turned to her man, filled his mug, and rubbed his arm. He seemed to sooth some while his features slackened.

"Of course, it's all thanks to Jake. The ingredients are expensive," she said happily.

He looked up at her as she finished and locked his brown eyes with her pale blue ones. “Well, it’s been nice having a client who pays well for once.”

“Speaking of Justin, where did you meet that guy?” George asked.

Jake rubbed Heather’s hand with his big palm. “Ran into him at Tyler’s Gear.”

“Is he still going with us?” George shook his head and drank a few long mouthfuls. “Not like we need him, or to be splitting our share with that crusty city-slicker anyhow.”

“George, we’re bringing him.”

“What? Come on!”

Jake pointed at his friend aggressively. “That guy will fly back out here, on his own dime, and pay us to come hunt that thing down with us.”

“How’d you get that deal out of him? Justin must be a real dumbass to agree to that.”

“I’ll start some French toast,” Heather said as she slipped into the door. Her long curly brown hair followed her inside.

With a snort and nose wipe, Jake watched her leave. His attention went back to George. He hushed his words, which took the bite off them. “As long as that fool is shoveling out cash, I’m taking it. So, even if we don’t find the beast, at least I still get paid. We will find it.”

His friend downed the last of the special coffee. “Whatever buddy, I just hope it turns out like you want it to and cutting him in is worth it.”

Chapter 17
Warnings

"Morning Ranger Hart. How goes it this fine Monday?" the old man asked her from under his wide hat.

She shrugged. "Well enough."

The two teenage boys waved as they kept hiking down the trail from the parking lot. Their red matted hair was covered with matching fishing caps laden with more expensive lures than they could ever use. Ranger Hart waved back as the big white, floppy-eared dog hustled to keep up with them. Her focus went back to the old bowed man whose name still slipped her mind.

"You look tired, not like you. Most of the time you're pretty relaxed out here." He set his oversized, army green tackle box down next to him. There were *U.S. Marine veteran* stickers all over it. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. It's just –" she stopped herself looking down at the wrinkly old timer. He looked like he knew bullshit when he heard it. Hart just let out a big sigh.

Using his index and thumb, the old man tipped down the brim of his wide straw hat. There was a pin dangling from it. It was the sergeant's chevron.

"Listen, from my years back, I've heard some crazy stories. You have no idea just how superstitious and wild young soldiers can be."

She stared at his green irises for a second. "I'm not a soldier," she relented.

"Still, try me," he said.

"There's something out there, I saw what it can do a couple days ago. The attack was only two trailheads from here. There was an animal kill site which was enough to give an experienced ranger nightmares."

"Any idea of what it was?" The concern in his voice was refreshing.

"I don't know, but if you run into some big, elongated tracks that are too human for comfort, get out of there."

"What did it kill?" he half-mumbled in shock with his jaw dangling.

"The thing tore up a bear nearly beyond recognition. There were hiker clothes too, but I couldn't find a scrap of the body."

"Shit," he blurted out. "Are you hunting it down, going to kill it, make the woods safe for people again?"

"Working on it," she replied. "I just don't know where to start on this one."

A silence, a truth, lingered. “Thanks, I’ll keep the boys extra close by.” He looked over his shoulder just in time to watch the fluffy dog disappear around a bend and deeper into the trail.

“Neither the coroner or Kawishiwi District Rangers have made an announcement yet. You’ve been warned,” she said with seriousness.

“You be careful out here too, Ranger. I don’t want to hear about you in the news.”

She bobbed her head in acknowledgement. The man half-hobbled and half-ran as he rounded the bend to catch the teenagers.

“Get back here! I don’t want any of you out of my sight,” his voice echoed past the trees after he disappeared.

Chapter 18
More Box Voices

Ken stared at his damaged backpack. Bloody mud was encrusted over it and there were long slashes that ripped through its outer material. Ken cautiously slipped out his phone from a bloody side pouch. Cracks ran along the screen where a great pressure had damaged it.

The pulse in his neck and chest began to race. A weird pressure was building over his sternum and it wiggled up into his throat. He began to salivate. With some calming breaths, it soothed, and quieted.

A text message notification and three missed calls showed on the home screen. The background was of a medieval castle, the one from his online game. Punching in his code, the device unlocked with a fake-sounding click. To Ken, the human world seemed a dream.

First up were the texts. The most recent one was from Manny. With a plop, he sat in his chair directly across from his dusty television. His eyes focused through the grime and chips on the screen.

Hey, Ken. I hope you're okay. Janet is really mad seeing as you've no called and no showed for the last two days. Call as soon as you can or you might get fired! More importantly, it would be good to know you're not hurt or something while out hiking.

Hi Manny. Tell Janet sorry, but I lost track of time and just got home. No signal out there! Ken replied.

It was time for the three missed calls. All three were from his office. Quietly, he sat on the fuzzy blue chair near his leather footstool. Overcome with both lethargy and anxiety, he dropped the phone into his lap.

Breathing shallowly, he stared into the kitchen where frozen food packaging was carelessly tossed onto the white tile counter. There was clothing on the floor and a pile of blankets where had slept – signs of him living like a wounded animal.

Cars buzzed by outside. An airplane thrummed overhead, clearly headed to the airport. It seemed that the world barely noticed he'd been hiding for the last forty-eight hours.

The smartphone chirped, it was Manny. *Thank goodness, buddy! I was getting worried. You'd better call now!*

I'll call. Ken tapped his answer out.

The phone rang after he had selected Janet's desk number. The second ring sounded, his neck tensed. The third ring sounded and then that strange weight developed

in his chest and it slithered into his teeth. His teeth felt ready to snap. A growing sensation enveloped his mouth as it wriggled to transform. Somehow, he focused just enough to get to the fourth ring. Janet answered.

"Ken! Where the hell have you been? It's Wednesday for god's sake! You know a third no-call-no-show in a row is instant termination." Her voice was more grating than usual, pushier than ever.

"Sorry, I was out when –"

"Can you get here right now? The Branch Manager is breathing down my neck. It's your fault. We're behind in security reports and analysis readouts."

"Wh-What?" There was surprise in his voice as he pulled his ear away from the phone and looked at it.

"You know we're understaffed. Get in here, I need you to get to work."

With the news, his concentration slipped, and the pressure in his teeth shifted to his tongue. Without his consent, it spoke.

"If that's that case, I should come in whenever I like. Seeing how poorly you and your team work without me."

Ken gasped at his defiant words.

There was only silence on the other end of the line. It remained for mere seconds.

"You're lucky to have a job here. Now get in, or you won't have that job."

A snarl came to his lips when he replied, "Sounds more like you're lucky to have me at your worthless –" Ken then wrangled his mouth to obey. "I'll be there as soon as I can. Sorry for the delay."

"I should fire you. Now you're –"

He hung up the device and pulled several very deep breaths. His cheeks were bright red. The weight had vanished from his mouth. It had seemingly been erased from his being, satisfied for the moment.

From his chair, he rose and went into the kitchen. The early morning light glinted off the stained linoleum floor. From the sink's faucet, he filled a glass and drank several gulps. The glass clinked onto the neglected counter.

Feeling pitiful, Ken stared at the phone. Stalling, he took even more gulps of water. He dialed his mother.

It rang and he set down his drink. The sound between each ring felt too long. A click came. He heard a familiar, although not comforting, nasally female voice answer.

"Ken! I'm so glad you called. You really should start calling me weekly – like you agreed to when you moved those two years ago."

He paused.

"Ken? Ken baby, are you there?"

That weight came up from his chest and tried to force its way into his mouth. It tried to grasp at his tongue, but he was ready this time, and mentally shoved it away.

"H-hi, Mom."

"Are you excited for us to be there next weekend for your birthday?" Her tone was one of both genuine longing and a stern forcefulness.

Before he could answer, background noise increased from the receiver on the phone. The sound of footsteps nearing could be heard. She had switched over to speaker-phone.

"I, uh, I am. Howev –"

"Oh that's great! We're bringing your favorite vanilla cake. You never did tell us what you want for –"

"Mom, listen. I need to –"

"It's not polite to interrupt," a much more masculine voice cut in. "Your mother was asking you something important." This deeper and rolling voice was clearly his father's.

Ken grumbled, which almost let loose the weight into his vocal cords, but he hushed it.

"What would you like for your birthday?"

He pushed out a long sigh. "I don't know, Mom. Things have been confusing as of late."

"You must want something. A new game? Any new figurines, or how about a gift card?"

He looked back at his six action hero figures. They sat on a shelf over his red colored bed. They were covered in dust and clearly hadn't been handled in some time. He blinked, then shook his head in irritation.

"I just don't know. Go ahead and surprise me." He pulled in a lungful of air. "Would you please listen now?"

"Surprise you? What's that supposed to mean?" A plate scratched along the surface of a table as if someone leaned in to listen.

"Don't come down this weekend. Please, don't. It's really important that you –"

"Garret!" his mother cried.

Scratching came through the phone. His father had taken over.

"Now you listen! I don't know who you think you are, denying us a visit. We're your parents, for Christ's sake! After all we've done for you! We're coming and that's final." His fist hit the table with his words. "All you do is work and play video games! It's not like you have anything better to do!"

An intensity came into Ken's eyes as he lost focus while trying to think of something to say. In that slip, his disobedient tongue took its opportunity.

"How do you know what I do? Maybe if you two weren't such unbearable fucks, I'd actually want to see you."

Ken bit his tongue trying to control the outburst. It bled. He yelped painfully which almost sounded like a laugh. In shock, he stared down at his red-cased cellphone. The cracked screen obscured his parent's phone number.

Ken hit the disconnect button in horror. He hung his head for a moment. Tears dropped from his face. With resolve, he wiped them off. Ken opened the tiny closet by the front door. Inside was an extra pair of glasses and his work shirts. They were still pressed and neatly hung. He reached for one.

Chapter 19
Whispers

"So that older guy, uh, Justin, is he coming back into town this weekend?" George pushed his hair back as he leaned forward on the old pool table.

"Sure is. You wanna know what he's paying?"

George rubbed his stubbly chin and took a sip from a tin beer can. "Oh, I dunno. Maybe five hundred?"

Jake smiled through his rough beard and gestured upward with his big thumb. His friend's eyes opened wide. The man took another drink as pool balls in the background clacked over the twangy country music.

"Nah," he said and threw a dismissive hand wave at Jake.

Jake's smile grew bigger. "Yes sir, a grand for a weekend. I've got him on *the big* schedule."

"How could that guy afford those prices? You're robbing him."

The bulky man held up his index finger and shook it. "Nuh- huh. I told him about the cost of doing dangerous hunts. He jumped on it."

"Still, who could fork over a grand every weekend?" George held his hand up toward the dingy counter where the barman was. "I mean, you'd have to be rich or something."

From under the dim light above them, Jake leaned into the illumination. It showed his shrewd eyes and sharp features. "Justin told me that he retired from being an engineer at some dam in Idaho. That guy is loaded. If this goes on long enough, then I'm loaded." Jake took a gulp from a beer mug. "Justin's just prey, and I'm eating him alive."

"You're just loaded on beer tonight." George tilted back a little after telling his joke. It gave him space from the man across the pool table.

Jake gritted his teeth for a second, and his lip turned into a sneer. He abruptly started to laugh and a grin came through. George leaned forward once more, relieved.

"Damn right, I am. I'm buzzed on someone else's dime, too." He poured more into his maw. "You in for this weekend?"

"Still cutting me in?"

The hunter held up his drink in the smoky room. "Of course, buddy."

"Then, of course, I'll be there!" George tapped his beer can against Jake's mug.

Both men drank in the small bar off one of the many back roads. Only about a dozen customers were in attendance and slumped over their beverages. Most of the

patrons had a road-weary stare that had yet to thaw out for spring. The two hunters, however, were as lively as the coming summer.

Chapter 20
Truths

Pale light slithered over Ken's face as he leaned close to the computer screen. An intensity was in his eyes. It was one that made him shift uneasily in his chair. Using a stretched out finger, he hit the escape key, and leaned back into his mesh gaming chair. Boredom swept over him. Ken stared out the partially-open blinds of his windows.

That night, the sky was extra sharp where the stars twinkled longingly. The trees in the distance seemed to be a fur covering on the familiar mountain. He took in several deep and reassuring breaths while studying the geography to the north. That unnamed weight in his chest seemed to calm, but at the same time ached to be free. Or maybe he himself ached for solitude as well. A blip came from his computer.

Why'd you drop from the match? Doing that in the middle of PVP that really hurts us. It was a message from Glattor56. *That's not good, we were just about to kick you from the guild because you were inactive for so long. Now this?*

Yea? Ken typed back and then looked out the window until the annoying blip chimed once more.

Yea! It was weird. You'd been working hard and got some promotions. Heck, we were about to give you some responsibilities which means a bigger share of the weekend loot drops!

Okay. He replied, yawned, and then twirled around in his swivel chair.

Okay? That's all you can say? What's gotten into you?

He swiveled his chair back to his keyboard and typed. *I'm just not into the game as much as I used to be.*

Uh-oh. Have you picked up a new game? There was an upside-down smiley face at the end of the message string.

I'm just doing other things. Ken replied and the indicator came up that Glattor56 was already typing.

His friend's blue letters stood out from the grey background. *You can't just give up after four years of playing! What could be that interesting?*

Ken's fingers started to reflexively type, but then he paused. Frozen, and looking down at the sticky, worn old keyboard, he felt his jaw hang open. His tongue rubbed his incisors and he stretched his pinky.

I've been out hiking a lot up north. It's really fun. The quietness is nice and makes me think a lot.

What? Glattor56's response was followed by many question marks and confused smiley faces. *You're joking right?*

No, I'm not. There's something I have to do. I have to make amends. Ken answered.

Silence drifted between the two supposed internet-friends. They had ever seen one another in the flesh. It was then that the messenger showed Glattor56 was replying.

Amends? You're not going to jail or something? Alright, all I can say is that if you don't show up this weekend, the guild could let you go. Just a fair warning.

Ken's face winced at his own typed words. *No, I won't be going to jail. My family will be here this weekend anyway. I guess I might get kicked. Sorry, I've lost my love of the game.*

Heh, no worries. We're a big and popular guild, so we'll probably find a replacement fast. Oh! The next round is starting. Take care!

The hum of the computer tower pervaded his room. It droned on loudly and seemed to drown out his exhausted and lonely sigh. He turned off the screen and the computer.

In a long and stark gaze, he looked out his open window. His vision crept past the power lines and silhouettes of buildings in the setting sun. It was then that his irises focused on the mountain with its smaller companions in the distance. Something stirred in his chest. It seemed to want to cry out, but Ken stifled it with a gulp.

Chapter 21
Weekend Duty

"That asshole called out Saturday. There goes my weekend." Ranger Hart twirled her index finger in the air. "Surprise, surprise. That makes two months in a row."

"You'll be getting as much OT as I am, Tonya." Reggie dug into a bag of chips and took a few bites. She reached over her blue dispatch headset and a stuffed animal bear wearing a ranger uniform. She grabbed a lunch pail. "I'm getting tired of eating out of this thing six days a week."

"Just be safe out there, especially after what you told me." The heavyset lady put down her glasses in front of two keyboards and several computer monitors. "I'm the only one monitoring the radio most of the time. So, I don't want to take a call about you ending up dead."

"Yea, yea," Ranger Hart told her flippantly.

When Reggie put her glasses back on and turned to the computer screens, she ruffled her long frizzy black hair. "Did you ever get those lab results back?"

Ranger Hart looked back at her and shook her head. "Way too soon. Ask again in about three months." She walked out of the room and drew her hair back into a short ponytail.

"I appreciate you working tomorrow," a male voice said. It echoed in the hall along with boot steps.

She looked over her shoulder at a tall clean-cut man in the same tan uniform who came in from a different exterior door. "Not like anyone else would, those lazy bastards."

As he pushed out of the dispatch center, the light from outside world revealed his lieutenant bar. "Don't bring it up," he said. The door closed.

"I won't, Gary." She took a right turn down a white linoleum hallway with forgettable beige walls.

A door was before her with *Vehicle Yard* above it. Using her lunch pail, she shoved the door open to reveal a warm sunny day. Her patrol SUV, number 3, dutifully waited for her by the back gate in the little parking lot. She stuck her ranger hat on and took the driver's seat.

Chapter 22
Fates

Ken knelt in the messy grove where the bear was killed. Direness weighed heavily upon his shoulders. Gently, he placed a stone into the mud. Taking big stones from his arms, he kept at it until a small cairn formed. He bowed his head.

"I'm sorry that I killed you," Ken whispered. The trees above seemed to listen in the silence when the wind ceased. "I didn't want that to happen. I, I-"

The world grew quieter, more somber. Ken held his breath, nervous. It felt as if the bear was there, watching. He pressed his lips together and summoned the strength to continue.

"I'm certain you didn't mean to attack me, either. What has happened is over, be at peace. I honor you." Ken's words softly echoed in the foliage.

The static anger in the air faded. The ghost was gone. Ken shed a few tears, alone.

Finally, he staggered to his feet. Rubbing his head in disbelief, Ken wandered off and back into the woods. Carefully, he made his way to a lake where he glared at his reflection in the waters.

The waters were tarnished with algae and stank strongly of it. In the liquid, Ken attempted to view himself clearly. His form was obfuscated by the green algae smears and that frayed apart when the wind blew. His eyes were distant, his face slouched. Unlike the other times in the woods, his hands shook with uncertainty.

Images raced in his mind of the bear fight, of what it did, of what he did, and could still do. Where he'd usually be calm, the weight in his body was discomforting. It flittered out from its usual hiding spot in his chest and spattered onto his head and limbs. It throbbed excitedly.

He watched the sunrise over the isolated lake in the lonely backwoods. Reflexively, he checked around himself. It seemed he was alone.

Ken rinsed himself in the lake water. The water jerked as Ken stuck his hand into it, the fluid rushed over the algae.

After washing, Ken stood. He did not wear a jacket in the cool morning or carry any hiking gear. A feral tint was on his wild hair and in the rims of his eyes. They were traces of how he spent the previous night.

An intrusive sound reached Ken's ears. He crouched furtively.

There were young voices from about three hundred feet away and to his right. Two red-haired teenagers were rushing to the water's edge with tackle boxes in hand. They seemed as cheery as the morning light while they began to rig up hooks.

"I told you boys to slow down!" A surly old voice chased after them. It belonged to a bowed old man in a straw hat who emerged from the underbrush.

While watching them, the urge, that pressure, shifted from Ken's ears to his heart. It began to beat quickly, indignantly. A strange idea entered his mind. It suggested that these were his woods, his territory. The fishermen were the trespassers. They had no right to be here. They weren't a part of the woods, like he was.

Ken's breathing accelerated, then his mouth salivated. His vision shook.

Ken started to coil up and make ready for a primal charge. Taking several deep breaths, he started to slow his heart rate and calm the weight in his chest. The angry thoughts receded, lifted away like a fog. He blinked slowly and with effort. His muscles slacked.

The morning silence still lingered. Its serenity once again upon him. His focus returned to keeping the unnamed feeling at bay. Carefully, he stepped through the underbrush and away from the visitors.

"You boys have to stay close, ya hear?" The old man's voice echoed loudly through the trees again. "Where's Jud? Damn it, you let him get too far out ahead!"

Ken looked through the tightly bunched leaves toward the voice. The old man had thrown his arms in frustration. Shaking his head, he focused on the obscuring plant life blocking his exit.

Just then, a growl came. Suddenly Ken looked down. Before him was a big fluffy white dog with floppy ears. It bared its teeth and snarled. The pressure in his chest exploded and it weighed over his whole form. He clutched at his sternum. It felt as if it would crack and then it did.

"Run," Ken forced out through hoarse and painful breaths.

The dog stepped back. Its growl grew, but its eyes widened in fear. Ken's chest expanded and his limbs unnaturally extended. That black coarse hair crept over his body. Wild ears atop his head flicked open, his teeth elongated. The tree branches began to seem less high up.

A yelp came from the brush as the white dog flew from it. Its limp form flopped. Gore sprayed from its torn open head and torso when it landed.

"What the fuck!" The old man yelled as he reached into his waistband. "Get back, get back!" He yelled at the two boys.

They hurried behind him while he trained his old pistol's sights on the foliage. Great crashing came from the thicket as the water vibrated near its shore.

"Run!" The old man shouted. The boys did.

From the wooded grove came a massive beast. It was taller than a man by two feet. It bristled with sinew from under its dark fur. Green lupine eyes bored a hole right through the old man's flesh and right through his soul.

The monster sprinted at him in a partially upright gait. It covered the distance quickly.

The old 1911 pistol rattled off fire. Most rounds struck the thing in the torso and shoulder. One even hit it on the muzzle. The cursed beast didn't flinch. Its skin knit itself up and sealed quickly.

The gun's chamber locked open. The magazine was spent. In horror, the old man looked up briefly before it tore into him.

Chapter 23
The Wrong Day

"Shit." Jake spat on the ground near the lake's edge. "We're going to have a problem now."

Yellow caution tape blew in the breeze. There were two Kawishiwi County Ranger patrol vehicles parked by a Saint Louis County coroner's car. Uniformed figures gawked at the carnage in the normally serene environment.

George, who was with Jake and about a hundred yards away from the scene, looked through a pair of camo binoculars. "Well, the word is going to get out right quick. Luckily we decided to fish." He handed them to Jake. "Do we tell Justin?"

Jake studied the ravaged and half-eaten bodies by a strewn tackle box. The wind had blown the soiled blankets off them. Strangely, there were small piles of rocks beside each of the three cadavers and the ripped-up canine.

"We'd best. That way he'll buy more time to be out here to find that thing – that animal or whatever." Jake lowered the binoculars and put them back up to his face. "What the fuck are those rock piles about?"

George looked away from the carnage and stared at the ground. He shrugged uncaringly.

"Gets you thinking, huh?" Jake blurted out sharply.

His friend looked up slowly.

"About your daughter and son, I mean. Just seeing what that thing did to that old fella and the two young ones who tried to run." Jake lowered the binoculars from the hewn limbs and shredded clothing. "Fuck, we'd better be careful. This will be our best challenge yet."

He watched one ranger vomit and a few others look over the dead bodies. George studied them as well.

One of the lawmen was a short lady with dark hair and cap, who was busy taking photos. There was something about the way she moved and lingered over the scene. She typed purposefully on her laptop and scoured the area for tracks.

"That ranger lady is into it," George said.

Jake cracked his knuckles. "I can tell. Think you can pull some strings at your office? Get some information."

"Doubt it. Lake County Sheriff is different than the rangers."

"Don't you guys all share the same databases, or general orders, or something?" He looked over at George who was sipping from a strong-smelling coffee thermos.

He shook his head. “Nah, we don’t.” Suddenly he popped his head up and stored his drink in his pack. “But you might get a chance to get some answers right now.”

Jake looked over his shoulder to where the officers were. The lady was coming over to them. Her face was hard and her eyes were focused. Determination emanated from her. In her hand was a notepad.

“We just might.” Jake nodded in the late afternoon sun and smeared some sweat from his thick grimy neck onto his jacket.

“Mister Jake Stills.” Ranger Hart looked hard at the big man. “What brings you to Raven Lake on this eventful Thursday morning?”

Jake held up his crusty, stinking tackle box. “This, we were just going fishing on a fine Thursday morning.”

“You too?” She looked over at George who was fumbling in his wallet.

He presented a laminated sheet of paper. “Need to see our licenses?”

She held up her hand. “Nah, I’ll let it slide this time. I have more pressing things.”

“What happened over there, Ranger?” Jake asked almost politely.

She narrowed her eyes at the big man and replied, “You must have some idea, using those binoculars. It’s not like you’re hidden out here in the open by the water’s edge.”

George chuckled a little, then quickly stowed the laughter when Jake gave him a harsh glare.

“Yea, well, we saw that someone got attacked.” He sighed. “Something unusual – especially with the stone piles.”

She looked back over her shoulder at the coroner picking up body parts and bagging them, then back at the men. “Happened a few hours ago, at least that’s what the coroner estimates. It’s all very concerning. I’m not sure about the rocks, they’re new to me. Animals don’t do that. Yet, a person can’t dismember a body like that.” She adjusted her hat when the wind almost blew it off. “Now, I know you boys are out and around the backwoods a lot. Have you seen anything strange lately?” Her eyes focused on them both in preparation for a lie.

“Nothing like it. At least from what I can see.” Jake paused a second. “Maybe if we had a closer look.”

Ranger Hart gave him a dismissing glance. However, George’s breathing was off, he was exhaling too long, and the fingers on his left hand fidgeted. The man barely contained his anxiety.

“How about you?” She turned to Jake’s friend. “Seen anything like this?”

George took a deep breath, and his hands went still. “Never, not in all my years out here.”

Ranger Hart let a long pause settle in. Jake stood stony firm, but George started to blink rapidly and his fingers fidgeted some more.

"Look, Jake, I just want some information. You both are much better at the woods than I am. Anything helps. We need the help," she said.

Jake ground his teeth at her and thought for a second. "You've been in the woods as much as I have. What are you playing at?"

Ranger lifted her hat and rubbed her forehead. She then looked to the overweight ranger that had accompanied her to the scene. He was busying himself with putting up more caution tape. The nearby coroner was busy texting on his phone. Both were oblivious to the surroundings and appeared to be just going through the motions.

"As you can see, I don't have the best partners right now." She turned back to them. "I need a second opinion. I'm not sure what I'm dealing with."

"What makes you think that we'll know what it is?" George seemed to relax a little.

"I don't have a clue. Blind luck, I guess." She put her notepad away in her pocket. "I've just run into two scenes like this and have no leads. The few tracks we have are all wrong and the damn thing is smart, it covers its trail. Either that, or someone is covering for it."

"Did it kill other people?" George asked anxiously.

She nodded. "Likely a person and a bear."

Jake put his tackle box and old chipped fishing rod down. "So, will there be announcements to the public?"

"Does it matter?" Her voice slowed, her inflection tightened with suspicion.

Jake's eyes popped open, and his fist balled up when he was called out. "Maybe it's because I'm a member of the public and want to know."

Hart's jaw tensed. "Listen Jake, it's become pretty clear that you have a hint of what's going on and are holding out. Just level with me so we can get somewhere. It's not like you own these woods and mountains."

"Fuck, these are my stomping grounds, so I want to know!" He rubbed his right hand through his shaggy hair in frustration. "What makes you think I'm in the know?"

"Not only are you interested, and asking questions, but are you actually stopping to talk with me. Normally I barely get a sentence or two. Clearly, you're trying to pull out some info." She then shot George a look. "Not to mention your friend has been fidgeting this whole time."

George shrugged at Jake, who began to pace. He took a few steps to the left and rubbed his bearded chin. Then he took another few to the right and gave George another dirty look. Finally, he did another lap and jammed his hands into his pockets.

"Hands out of the pockets, please." Ranger Hart reflexively said with a polite tone.

Jake quickly stuck his open hands in the air and groaned to himself. "Not gonna shoot me over this, are you?"

George watched with a blank stare.

"We can do this all day, or we can both get somewhere," Ranger Hart said.

Jake abruptly stopped pacing. "I want it."

"You want to hunt it?" Her eyes flared open. "Okay, I can work with that." She turned to George. "Do you want to hunt it too?"

He smiled. "Yeah, if we bag it, we can get some fat cash for it."

"God damn it." Jake swatted his hand at his friend. "We didn't have to spill all the beans!"

She nodded at the two bantering. "Has anyone put a bounty on this thing? What do you think it is?"

"No, no bounty. I'm sure someone will pay good cash for it dead or alive – scientists even." Jake sighed. "I don't know for certain what it is, but it's big and it's powerful. We're not sharing our prize with you, either."

"Fine," Ranger Hart replied, "I just want it to stop killing folks. It seems like it's fast becoming a menace to visitors."

George rocked back and forth on his heels. "Back to the public announcement, will there be one?"

"In time. The PIO is on vacation for another week and we're waiting for DNA from the first kill site. It will verify that a person was killed, but I'd expect administration will put something out soon," she replied to him.

"Can you stall them?" Jake had a strong tone.

She shook her head. "Absolutely not! That would mean more people would die." She pointed angrily at Jake. "You can't possibly think that your big hunt is worth more than other people's lives?"

He eyeballed her bitterly. "It's not my problem if they can't hack it out here. That beast is going to be ours. No one is going to stop us."

"I'm not going to stop you. In fact, I hope you bag that thing. However, I won't be delaying our investigations, either." Ranger Hart's words were cutting; her irritation was showing through her professional demeanor.

"Come on, George. We've got what we needed. No point in sticking around here." Jake grabbed his rod and tackle box quickly.

His friend looked down at the rod in his own hand and then at the lake. He frowned and followed him back toward the parking lot where the truck was waiting. Ranger Hart watched them depart through the foliage and then onto the trail. Her features were stern and her notepad empty.

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In the pale moonlight of that same night, covered in mud, Ken was doubled over into a ball. It was somewhere deep in the Minnesota wilds where he wept. He was covered in sticky pine needles and leaves on that early Sunday morning. Trembling, he clasped his head within his hiding spot.

"Why?" he asked the silent woods, the silent world. He sucked in snot and tears ran down his chin. "What did they do to deserve that?"

He balled his fists. His extra pair of glasses was gone. His clothing was ripped away.

Ken angrily stared down at the fang scars on his wrists. "Why is this happening to me? Where did you go?"

His tears renewed and he collapsed onto the forest floor. Images of the old man being slaughtered raced through his mind. Ken ripped off his arms as he screamed. Wolfishly, he bit down on the helpless man's face, crushing it. Somehow, Ken went even paler from shock when thinking about the running boys and feasting on their remains once he was done butchering them.

He lay there for an untold time. Finally his tears subsided and he pushed himself up. The invading pressure was weak in his chest. It had been sated for some unknown reason. Ken staggered weakly from heavy memories and fresh regrets.

His wandering took him toward the trail and back to the parking lot, back toward civilization. His feet dragged. A false sanity awaited him back in the city where he could focus on a paycheck and work. It would be an equal travesty to be human once again.

Chapter 24
To Take a Hand

Sitting in a cubicle was a tired, ragged form bent over a keyboard. Morning light seemed to coat everything else, yet missed that shadow of a person. Its features were hunkered low as if it was trying to hide with nowhere to do so. The other workspaces were a chorus of chatting. This shadow had yet to even turn on its computer.

Ken's puffy eyes studied the numbers and letters arranged in rows of plastic on his keyboard. They seemed a foreign language or maybe they'd just lost their purpose. Weather beaten hands dragged over them mindlessly, absently. His irises studied his undecorated desk.

"Ken, hey Ken, are you okay?" It was Manny's voice.

He looked up to his cubicle partner. What was once a boyishly soft face was now drawn; Ken's edges were sharp and piercing.

Manny's eyebrows raised at Ken's visage, he then shook his head. "You don't look so good. Where were you Wednesday and yesterday?"

Rubbing his temple, he replied, "I just haven't been feeling well."

"Did you go to the doctor?"

He shook his head at Manny slowly.

His words softened. "All of Monday and Tuesday you barely said a word. Then you disappeared for two days. Something is up. You might need to get checked out."

"You'd best," it was Andy's voice that came from behind Manny as he walked up. "You'll need a doctor's note if you plan to miss any more work days." He hunched over Manny. "Janet has been hooting and hollering about you."

Manny glanced over at his computer screen and the backlog of reports. "For good reason. The branch manager has been crawling all over her."

After pulling a sip from his mug, Andy wandered off. He joined Gina and Misty at the meeting table by the coffee machine. Their loud chatter ensued when he arrived.

With his index finger, Manny tapped on his Disneyland mouse pad. "It's not your fault, Ken. Everyone else should be pulling their weight. One person calling out can't cause a total backup like this."

Ken checked over Manny's shoulder. The useless banter over the office grew from the three of them as they poured fresh coffee. Misty quickly glared at the two men talking. It was as if she heard her name being spoken. A shallow grin came from her and she went back to whatever it was they were discussing.

Manny held out his left hand toward Ken. "If you need any help, just let me know. I'll do what I can. You're a good friend and one hard time doesn't have to define you for the rest of your career."

Ken paused, looking at the hand, then shook it. "Thank you. I'll let you know if you can do anything." He sighed and turned on his computer. "I suppose I'll need to get something done, at least."

An airy whoosh came from the hallway door and Janet came in quickly. She moved with a coffee mug dangling from her fingers as she went to the talking group. Their chatter hushed for a second, then renewed with vigor.

Janet patted down her wrinkled blue shirt and combed back her fluffy black hair. It was only a couple short words before she broke from the group and wandered back to her desk on the left side of Ken's. As she passed, she gave him deep glances and a grimace was on her face.

Ken and Manny did their work while the others talked. Only the loud chatter and clinking of the coffee pot made noise over the air conditioning. Just as Ken finished his first data security report and started the next, Janet's voice came from over her full-sized cubicle wall.

"Ken, could I talk to you for a moment?" she said with both a professional and friendly tone.

Manny looked over at him and took his pencil from his ear. Cautiously, he rolled it between his fingers and thumb.

After a deep breath, Ken got up and went around the corner into her cubicle entrance.

Mounds of loose papers and folders were tossed carelessly into piles that surrounded Janet's keyboard. They were stacked so high that they blotted out her Chihuahua knick-knacks and photos of her with an overweight man. She looked up from the blue cellphone in her hand.

"One second," Janet lazily said and she angled her face toward the glowing screen.

Ken sighed and crossed his arms. An uneasy quiet fell over them while a phone rang somewhere in the office. Manny could be heard busily typing before he picked it up. The volume from the others had finally reduced some when they moved into the breakroom for their 10 AM. Ken found his foot tapping impatiently without his permission.

A full minute had passed before she set the device down. "So, I expect that you know why I called you back here?"

He started to respond, but he felt that foreign presence enter his tongue. It tried to seize control of his jaw. With a gulp, he stopped himself. Janet watched him curiously as he opened his mouth, but then closed it. It made him look nervous.

"Your mom isn't having a relapse, is she?" There was pity in her voice, a fake pity. "I'm worried about you."

He flatly answered. “No, she’s okay, but thanks for –”

“Oh, thank goodness. Last time you cried and that was awkward.” Her smile was too wide and her dull eyes betrayed her true uncaringness.

The pressure surged forward angrily and Ken barely kept rein of it.

“Your attendance has been awful. You were late Monday. Then you missed Wednesday and Thursday. I’m surprised you made it in today.” Her phone blipped and she looked at the screen, but then returned her focus to him.

“I’m sorry, I just haven’t been feeling well lately.” His voice lowered. “I just need some time to sort it out. My attendance will be better next week.”

“It had better be,” she said. “The branch manager is reviewing me because of you. You’ll need to work overtime today and come in Saturday for the whole day.”

Indignation flushed on Ken’s cheeks from her words. Suddenly, Ken’s mouth wouldn’t obey. It was no longer his own as it turned into a snarl. “That’s your problem, not mine. Maybe you should stay late, maybe you should come in Saturday, and maybe you should hire some more workers who actually do work.”

Janet’s face hung in shock.

Ken gasped. He blinked several times, taken aback by his own bravado. The typing from Manny’s keyboard slowed. He overheard.

“I should file a written reprimand. Insubordination won’t be tolerated!” Janet’s voice raised and she threw her hands up.

The terrible desire for retribution tensed his limbs and it took all of his might to control his own body from the pressure, the change. Her fists balled as she watched him take a few long calming breaths. A balance was struck between him and his writhing tongue. They spoke together.

“Do what you must, it’s not fair to expect me to fix the problem you’ve caused,” his tone was firm and he stepped out of the cubicle without being dismissed.

Hushed cursing came from Janet’s so-called work area. Manny looked over at the tired Ken with disbelief. Once back in his seat, Ken began to work at his usual pace. A serenity settled on him, like a great burden was lifted. Nodding, Ken confidently held his head high – maybe there was a compromise, maybe there was control and temperance, maybe this too was a charade.

Chapter 25
Where It Leaves You

"I can't believe that we had to drag you out of your apartment! We drove all the way here to see you!" Ken's father shouted. "For fuck's sake, we're your family. Saturday is your day off!" Garret's deep voice seemed to echo in the older Ford SUV.

He was barely able to fit in the driver seat due to his oversized belly and black beard that lay on it. From the rearview mirror, he gave Ken a hateful glare, and then scratched his hairy tattooed arm in the afternoon daylight.

"Oh, lay off him." Ken's mother flicked her wrist. It was covered in gaudy costume jewelry. "You've said it enough already."

"Well, he isn't talking. How do I know if he's gotten the point?" Garret slammed on the gas pedal and quickly took a blind corner. "It was your stupid idea to have a picnic out here for him. Why would anyone drive out this far? Especially him!"

"Slow down!" she cried and held onto the grab handle. "You're going to get us killed. That would be a great birthday present, wouldn't it?"

Pine trees whipped by and dust kicked up from the rear of the vehicle.

Ken's forehead bumped the window as he sat staring out it with distant knowing eyes.

Daniel, who was behind his mother's seat, looked up from his Switch game console and at the sound his brother's head made. He looked back down and his spindly fingers kept playing on his game system.

The car kept speeding. "Julie, I'm driving! I'm driving fine!" Garret's voice raised.

"Just because you raced cars as a teenager doesn't mean you know how to drive!" she shouted. She smacked her bulging and red-painted lips. "Slow down!"

Their arguing continued. Ken watched the seat between him and his catatonic brother. A present rested on the soda-stained vinyl. Blue spaceships on a black starry background looked back at him from the wrapping paper. The yellow bow bounced with the rough road. A shadow cut over the gift and drew his attention back to happenings.

"Are you listening, mister?" it was Julie's angry voice as she pointed at him with spite.

Intangible ears on the top of Ken's head twitched toward the sound. The pressure in his chest was growing exponentially. He felt phantom claws lingering over his fingernails and toes. It wanted out, badly.

Ken closed his eyes, focusing hard. He tried to take in long inhales, tried to stop the inevitable.

"Why would you say that to your family on the phone?" His mother attempted to mask her anger, her pain, with a motherly voice.

Garret kept the pedal down. "It was pretty fucked up to say to your folks!" he yelled.

Ken looked to Daniel. His younger brother pulled the gaming device closer to his face and pushed his earbuds in deeper. The argument grew louder, but the words were faded and foreign. He concentrated on the weight in his body, trying to control it. A sadness crept onto Ken's face. The pressure worked its way into his pectorals. They stiffened, strengthened. It took his tongue gleefully.

"The way you're acting is pretty fucked up," he said to his father.

Garret's face turned stark red and his knuckles went white on the steering wheel. "What?! What did you say?"

"Kenneth!" Julie clasped her cheeks with her palms. Her loose jewelry shook. "Language like that and in front of your brother!"

The internal weight covered him wholly and inescapably. His face felt heavy and laden with fangs. His sinew contorted tight. His tongue went lupine.

"He's not my brother. You're not my family." Wickedness singed the words coming out of his rapidly changing, animalistic maw.

Ken's size grew as black fur bristled out from around his clothing. The garb he wore ripped away. With a snap, his jaw misaligned as it re-formed into a muzzle. Sharp ears rose from his thin head hair. The seatbelt holding him broke. Muscle bristled out from under his neck that gave way to a wolfish face.

Julia screamed. Garret screamed. Daniel dropped his gaming system and froze.

Ken barely fit inside the SUV as his arched back touched the ceiling. He grabbed his father's head and yanked which made the vehicle swerve toward the wall of pines.

Garret's spine ripped from his neck as bloody sinew slathered over the windshield.

The family's cries were brief as the vehicle went headlong into a tree, then flipped down a sharp embankment. It rolled twenty feet to a smoking and dusty stop.

Chapter 26
Broken Boughs

Ranger Hart stood looking down into the deep gouge that violently tore into the pines. A dark red SUV lay at the bottom. Crooked limbs were scattered in its trail. The metal was twisted at the wrong angles. The blood coagulated inside of the vehicle and oozed out from the ripped up metal. It looked like it had exploded from within.

"I'd say that they died on impact. The cause was speed." Lieutenant Gary said as he walked up next to her.

Ranger Hart shook her head. "I'm not so sure." She then rubbed her eyes tiredly.

"We know they were eaten after impact," He took a sip from a dented thermos that glinted in the headlights of his patrol SUV. "Besides the rock piles, what makes you think otherwise?"

"It's the metal. It's mangled up wrong," she replied. "I still haven't figured out the stones."

He patted her shoulder. "The wreck was laying out here all day before someone spotted it from the highway." He sighed. "That was plenty of time for a bear to rip it open and cart the bodies off. They're hungry after hibernation."

She started to walk down the destroyed scar on the forest. "There weren't any bear tracks. There weren't any animal tracks at all. The stones would have been knocked over too." Gary followed her to the SUV where the tow truck driver was hooking up his winch. "Bears take the easiest route into a vehicle." She pointed at the windows and then the half-torn off roof. "They don't go through thick metal when there are broken windows."

Gary studied the wreck with concern as the night breeze ruffled his graying hair. "Point taken."

She waved her hand over the scene as her voice grew frustrated. "There aren't any other tracks here, not even from the animals who'd normally come to investigate something like this. Whatever happened here was enough to spook away their curiosity."

The tow truck driver, who wore a greasy jumpsuit with a name patch of *Jeb*, looked up and listened.

Seeing this, Gary put his hand on her bicep. "Let's go back to the patrol vehicles and talk about this," he whispered.

They ascended the slope to reach the two patrol vehicles. He leaned on the hood of one. She stood with her arms crossed in front of him.

"Alright, what's up with you lately?" he asked her.

Ranger Hart shook her head. "What do you mean?"

"You've been voluntarily working an extra day a week for a month now. I can't remember when the last time you took a vacation was, and now you're on some kind of critter hunt."

She gave him a serious look. "I'm fine, Gary."

"Reggie told me that she's forwarding all animal-related reports to you." His voice was firm, but empathetic. "You're out in the backwoods all the time and I'm mostly stuck in a station. You're my eyes and ears out here. What's going on? What's gotten you all riled up?"

She looked over at the smashed embankment where the vehicle crashed, then back at him. "You'll think I'm nuts."

"Tonya, I'm not going to think anything like that. You've been right about a few poachers and some animal attack cases before," he said.

She paced a few times before answering. "There's something out here. Something I haven't seen before. Something more dangerous than anything I've ever encountered. It thinks like a human, like us."

He nodded deeply. "And what do you believe it is?"

"That's the problem, I don't know. Hell, I've even asked some of the scumbag hunters. They haven't a clue either."

"What do you know about it?" he leaned up and his blue eyes glinted with worry.

She shook her head. "It's big, has black fur, and can kill the shit out of a bear. Damn thing has elongated and clawed tracks too. They're almost human-like. It leaves little rock piles wherever it kills something. I was reading. . ." She paused at her own words, then sighed. "Stones such as those can be used to mark grave spots."

"Hmm. Are you saying that this animal is giving them burial rites?" Gary scratched his head.

"Maybe, but we've got to put something out to warn visitors," she said. "I think it's already killed a hiker and an uncle with his nephews."

"I saw those reports, but it was nothing a bear couldn't do. Maybe a reclusive mountain man has tracked it and given the dead their final rites," he replied sternly. "True, in most cases the tracks were covered up, but it still wasn't something a bear couldn't do or some weirdo hillbilly. It still has fur, claws, and teeth, just like any other animal we've managed. We can beat it."

"Not this time, it's different. Like how the tracks are missing from this scene too. Odd, wouldn't you think?" There was an anger in her voice, but one that was under control.

He shrugged. "Who would cover up animal attack sites?" He then pointed to the embankment. "Who would cover up tracks at a car crash site?"

"That's why something isn't right," she said.

He looked down and went silent. She had her back turned to him and watched the tow truck driver winch the vehicle out of the slope. From one of the ripped off doors, gristle-stained gift wrappings slid out.

"I understand your position," the Lieutenant said. "There have been a lot of deaths in the park recently. I'll bring it up to the Captain on Tuesday when he gets back from Maui and hopefully we can get the Sheriff himself involved. A public release should be put out."

Relief washed over Ranger Hart as she let her hands down. "Thank you, but it needs to be sooner than that. We need to do it tonight or tomorrow."

"I can't, not without their permission. Ruffling admin's feathers would be bad while they are on a leadership training trip. We'll just have to wait," he shrugged complacently. "I'm going to go check on the next of kin."

Ranger Hart kicked a stone from off the worn asphalt and into the grass. "Do we have any in this area?"

"The plates came back to an owner in Portland, Oregon. They have a son who lives in Duluth. I'll be stopping by his apartment." He opened his driver side door. "Go home. You're past your end of watch anyway."

He plopped into the seat and reversed his SUV. Ranger Hart waved and observed him as he turned the vehicle around. His tail lights disappeared on the dark and forested road.

Chapter 27
What You Are

"This Message is for Ken Burton. I'm Lieutenant Gary Massey with the Kawishiwi District Rangers. I stopped by your apartment at about eleven PM, but no one answered. I have some urgent news I need to tell you. Please call me back immediately." Ken listened to the message as he sat on a splintery wooden bench.

His eyes were puffy and deeply ringed. His hands quivered as he tucked the phone into his pocket. The impound yard lobby was empty except for an old receptionist who silently watched him from her desk.

He rubbed his stubbly chin which felt much more angular, thinner, and weathered than he could recall. He listened to her type and ignored the television that was broadcasting a rerun of the previous night's football game. In the light of morning, Ken slumped on that bench until a metal security door near the receptionist opened.

"Mr. Burton?" Ranger Hart asked as she opened the door further.

He looked up at her and got out of the seat.

"I apologize that the Lieutenant couldn't meet you this morning. He had a priority event that required his attendance." She stepped out and onto the black and white tiles. "I'm Ranger Hart. Thank you for meeting here. Say, haven't I seen you somewhere? Out hiking?"

"Yes, we've met before." He nodded. "I got the message this morning. Gary told me that something happened."

"That is correct. I'm sorry he couldn't tell you sooner. You must be one heavy sleeper. We called a few times and then we pinged your phone at your home, but you didn't answer your door when we knocked," she replied.

"I'm sorry," he said, then took a deep breath. "I've been exhausted and just haven't been well, and now this." He choked up a little.

After giving him a second to compose himself, she waved him through the door. "I understand. Follow me."

He did so.

Ken gulped. Part of it was for the anxiety of what lay ahead. The other was to keep his tongue behaving as the pressure settled on it.

"This will be hard to see, but we need confirmation that it is your family's vehicle," Ranger Hart said as she opened a door to a closed garage down the hall.

With the flick of a switch, Ranger Hart turned on the warehouse lights. Subdued luminescent glows strengthened from above. The light curled over the shelves filled with boxed evidence, crawled between bagged contraband, and finally settled on a pair of mangled vehicles in the back.

He followed her with his head down. His pulse raced, his breaths went shallow, and all the while that familiar pressure moved to his heart. She led him past the first vehicle which was an old white Buick sedan. One of the doors was missing. Fast food wrappers littered its interior. The steering column was punched with a screwdriver.

It was at the second vehicle where his skin paled. His family's SUV lay before him. Under the muted lights, it seemed to be an exhibit set for a trial. Judgement leaked from the twisted metal. He froze. The ripped metallic edges were sharp on his eyes. The bloodstains felt like evidence on his skin. His eyes teared up.

The Ranger looked over and into his misty green irises.

Pain surged through Ken. He covered his face with his hands. The red sweater sleeves slid down his arm to reveal the fang scars on his right wrist.

Ranger Hart studied the suspicious scars a second, but then refocused on Ken.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I've been trying catch the thing that did this."

He nodded and sniffed in a dangling snot thread. Quietly, he approached the wreckage, wiping his bloodshot eyes. Disbelief hung over him. Even though he was there for the carnage, the sheer power it took to rip open the steel hulk was a shock. He sadly looked away from the disfigured reminder.

"Do you need me to identify the bodies?" His voice trembled as the pressure moved into his mouth.

Ranger Hart shook her head. "There isn't anything to identify. Whatever did this devoured nearly everything." She paused at her own words and their callous nature. "That's all we needed. Get some rest." She inserted more empathy in her voice.

He closed his eyes for a long moment. "I will, thank you. What comes next?"

"The coroner will get a hold of you," she said as she opened the door back to the lobby. "If you don't mind me asking, what were they doing out in the woods? Why were they in Minnesota?"

Ken was facing away from her when his eyes widened at the sudden question. The pressure proliferated over his face and tongue. A voice that was his answered, but the words came from something else.

"I was going to meet them for a picnic. It was my birthday, but I fell asleep," he said with an unnatural calm.

Ranger Hart nodded, as if taking note of his response, then said, "If you need anything at all, just give me a call. I'll find what did this so it can't do it to another family."

He turned around once in the lobby to see her holding out a business card. She pushed it toward him. He took it and slipped it into his jean pocket.

"I will," he replied. Tears pooled around his eyes. "But, now I need to be alone."

She watched him walk out of the station. A silence returned to the place. She sighed and went back inside the hallway. The old receptionist kept typing and the sound of it echoed in the void.

Chapter 28
Undeniable

Solitude's call drew him to the woods where he wept most of Sunday. Ken had excused himself from work the next two days and ventured into the great forest up north, where he delved deeply into its remoteness. The afternoon sun was his only witness when the change took him. When his mistakes, failures, and regrets melted away, he was in a place where he could simply focus on existing, eating, and running free.

Massive claws pushed into the soft loamy soil near the water's edge. Ken watched himself lower his muzzle to the liquid and drink with his long canine tongue. He could taste it. He could feel the coolness of the water and the air surrounding it. His claw tips had vivid sensations when they touched the earth. The fur on his body ruffled in the wind and he could feel each hair. The smells were incredible. Every tree had its own scent, every rock, and breeze.

When he looked up to the unending sky, the universe seemed to rain its secrets upon him. His lupine pupils cut through the civilized mental haze. After slacking its thirst, his body moved and he was a passenger. Out in the middle of nowhere, he could relax and enjoy the ride. There was no one to hurt. Civilization couldn't interfere.

A smell entered his nostrils and he followed it eagerly. It was the odor of hide and antler. It was deer. He salivated and his stomach rumbled. The ears on his head went wild and panned in every direction. The wind was downward. It was to his advantage. Dropping to all fours, he carefully slinked toward the southern source. His movements and the movements of his body agreed for once.

The smell's source wasn't far. His heart raced purely and with natural purpose.

At the crest of a valley, half a mile away, he peered down into a thicket of raspberry bushes. They were sandwiched between aspens. Through the foliage, he could sense the deer. Each little step it took, each little nibble it made, was picked up by his ears.

Quietly, and with a grace Ken never knew in his human life, he hunched into the leafy cover. His green eyes watched it. They studied each muscle shift under the fur, each breath the deer took, and every twitch of its ears or nose.

His prey shifted its pace and began to wander from bush to bush. The deer carefully selected which morsels to chew. Going northwest, it was getting closer. He waited patiently, in stillness. The deer had closed from about fifty yards to twenty. It flicked its ear that touched its growing antlers.

Ken's breath held. His soul quieted. An exhilaration tensed over his muscles. The desire for familiar bloody meat made him salivate. He knew this dance instinctively. It felt right. It felt purposeful.

The deer dipped its head to pick at something near the dirt. That's when he leapt. His form rushed through the brush and sent it flying. The deer's head shot up. Its eyes were wide in the terror of its own mortality. Bolting, it turned and vaulted over a large flat rock. Ken was a mere fifteen feet behind it and closing. As he slid over the rock after it, he could almost taste the fresh bloody flesh.

Both his and his prey's nostrils flared. The quiet of the wilds was broken. Twigs snapped and deep gasps were taken. At seven feet from his prey, Ken reached his long clawed hands out. Their knifelike talons stretched out for the creature's haunches. A mechanical snap sounded.

Using his clawed feet, Ken dug into the soft loamy earth and came to a sudden stop. The deer panted through the foliage and out of sight. Ken studied the woods. As he moved, a snap came again. It was an intruder in his isolated world – an interruption of his sacred act.

Another snap led him closer to the source and it was then that he found it. A snarl came to his lips. They curled back to reveal his long pearly fangs as he neared a tree. The culprit was a brown box with a solar panel near its top. A camera lenses was at its center. It snapped again.

He ran to it, ripped it from the tree which sent zip ties and bark soaring. Once he threw it to the ground, he stomped on it with his massive feet until it was a pile of exposed circuits.

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Gravel crunching came from the old dirt road as a Lake County Sheriff's SUV skidded to a stop outside of the small worn house. George leapt from the driver's seat while still in his tan uniform and ran through the unkempt and overgrown yard. He weaved around a broken down wheelbarrow and past an empty metal tanning rack. The sun set as he neared the door.

He loudly knocked on Jake's peeling front door.

Jake rose up from his table and Heather watched him nervously while his face reddened. Bits of chicken and rice were flung from his beard as he savagely opened his red door.

"What the fuck?" He shouted so strongly that George recoiled by stepping away.

Gathering himself, George held up his cellphone. "I got it! I got it!" he said with an enthusiasm that overcame his sudden fear.

The redness drained from Jake's cheeks and he wiped his facial hair of his meal. "Picked a hell of a time." He reached for the phone.

George unlocked his device and gave it to him. “It’s the camera on the home page.” He then popped his head in the doorway to see Heather snuffing a candle on the dinner table. “Sorry!” he said to her.

Heather gave him a curt wave. She picked up a package of cigarettes off the counter by the spotty stove and disappeared out the back kitchen door, lighting a puff. Jake was busy opening the camera footage as George watched over his shoulder.

Images of a massive half-lupine and half-human form were seen cutting through the brush. He swiped to reveal more images and silently watched them with intense eyes. Finally, Jake stopped on the last photo. The thing had both claws on the camera and was ripping it off the tree while staring right into the lens. Curious scars gleamed through its fur on its right wrist. It looked like they were caused by teeth.

“Which camera was this?” Jake said calmly.

George’s voice peaked, anxiously. “That’s the Hatchet Lake cam. The one we put out there in the gooseberry food plot for the white-tails.”

“Looks like some kind of canine,” he said to George coolly.

His friend nodded. “Yea, we’ve killed wolves before. We can nail this thing.” He rubbed his hands together. “Hell, could even sell this photo for some scratch.”

Jake shook his head and tossed the cellphone back at George who barely caught it.

“No,” he said sternly. “We can’t tip anyone off. We have to bag it first. I think I know this creature.”

George stuffed his phone into his duty jacket’s pocket. “Right. Wait, what? You know it?”

“The circular scars on its wrist reminds me of someone who wore a wolf claw bracelet. Killing this weakling will be easy.” A sinister smile crept over Jake’s face. “I’ve got you now, wolfy. I know where you live and just where to bushwhack you.”

Chapter 29
Reports

On the brink of dingy table sat a Rock Creek Eatery menu. Its edges were frayed as the reflection of a grey tile ceiling were on its plastic cover. Through the haze of unwashed windows, neon green lights flowed. It obscured what could be seen of the night and stars.

A lady with wiggly, long brown hair walked up to the table and took the menu. She poured water into an empty glass before a lean and muscular man. He watched her through his uncut blond hair. His stubbly face was frozen in a scowl as he stared down at a half-eaten bloody steak.

"Something wrong, dearie?" She asked him.

He looked at the name tag upon her red and white dress. "I'm just not enjoying the meat, Nina."

"I'm disappointed to hear that." She frowned and scooped up the plate. "Most first-timers usually rave about our steak. How about a soda or something?"

Ken narrowed his eyes, remembering her. "No thanks, it just doesn't taste fresh. I'll pass on the soda and pay up, and be on my way."

"I'll get the check," she said.

Nina went past the old, but shined counter and worked the register which beeped. Ken went back to studying the night sky and ignored the playing television. The only two other patrons were busily discussing a boating trip in the coming June. Ken listened to their fuzzy talk uncaringly as they chatted a few booths away. He rubbed his finger over the rubbery red seat he sat on.

The hostess came back with a paper in her hand. "Here you are, Hon."

Ken reached into his wallet and pulled out some cash for the bill and tip. She thanked him and made her way back to the register. While she did that, Ken took one last sip of water from the glass on the table. He licked his lips and frowned at its flavor. Nearing the door, he heard something that grabbed his attention.

"We have a message from the Kawishiwi Ranger District this Tuesday night. So, Captain Lemont, can you tell us the reasoning for the wildlife warning?" A chipper voice came from behind Ken.

He turned around to see the television hanging near the register, above Nina. There was a slim woman in an overstuffed coat next to a clean-shaven man in a tan uniform. There were bars on his shoulders and authority in his voice.

"Last weekend was the most recent animal attack in a string of them. It killed a fisherman and his nephews. We believe it to be a bear. The attacks were centered around

the Superior National Forest and Boundary Waters areas. It's best if people cancel their trips at this time until we get a better grasp of the situation."

She nodded while listening and then replied, "But the park is still open?"

"It is." he said firmly, "However, you've been warned and the park will not accept any liability."

The anchor turned toward the camera. It zoomed in on her. "There you have it. An official press release from the Kawishiwi District Rangers. If you travel to this park area, be extra cautious."

Commercials began to play. Soft sniffling and sniveling reached Ken's ears. He looked at their source.

Nina covered her face with her apron as she turned away from watching the television. Her anguish grew to sobs. Nina pushed open the swinging doors to the kitchen, disappearing inside. Ken watched the doors sway. He slowly blinked, lowered his head, and then shoved the exit door open to where the night embraced him.

In the cold air, his breath appeared. Nearing his car, his thoughts were heavy about the carnage he had caused. He stared at the looming northern mountains from over the roof of his car.

Chapter 30
Traces

Ranger Hart stood to the right of the trail, near a fallen trunk. The rest of the tree had crossed the hiking path and was cut with a chainsaw to allow passage. She studied the mud-matted sawdust in the dirt. The rings of the old, dead wood shone strikingly.

She studied two hikers walking through the saw dust. It stuck to their feet and was scattered farther and pushed deeper into the dirt. They were a young couple with smiling faces and trendy backpacks. Ranger Hart watched them approach as she stood near the trail under a short pine. She took a morsel of her deli meat sandwich into her jaws and chewed.

"Good day," the lady said as she passed.

The Ranger gulped down her bite. "You too. Hey, be careful this far out. Did you see the news lately?"

Both of them stopped and the man said, "The one on CBS Three about the animal the trucker spotted near the highway?"

Ranger Hart squinted at him. "Wait, that's not what I was talking about. Which report is that?"

"Yea! A trucker's dash cam spotted a dogman in the woods near a highway," the female hiker said. She then pointed her finger up to the sky in a realization. Taking a moment, she withdrew her phone from her pocket. "I saved a picture of it from the broadcast. We wanted to see if we could get a glimpse of it."

Curiously, Ranger Hart leaned over her box-shaped phone. A fuzzy dash cam image, painted mostly green from night vision, was before her. On it was the shape of a lupine figure illuminated by headlights. It was looking up at the camera, clearly startled while dragging a girthy tree out of the roadway.

"A damn trucker beat me to it," Hart murmured.

The male hiker nodded and a whimsical grin was plastered on his face. "We came out to hike and see if it was true."

She shook her head. "No. I was talking about the one on the radio - on WDIO. Something has been attacking hikers and visitors in this area. That creature fits the bill, so watch your back," Hart said.

They lady waved at her and the man started to walk away with her. "We'll be careful," she said.

Ranger Hart watched them disappear down the trail. She stuffed the last bit of crust into her mouth and stared into the foliage. Sunlight filtered through the needles and leaves to mingle with the underbrush.

Hart sighed heavily. “Stupid kids.”

As she watched the wind, a faint trail caught her eye.

The grass on the forest floor was matted, and recently too. It was the short grass near the trunks of trees where the earth was harder. Using the well-angled sun, she studied the signs of passage that were highlighted to her eyes. Something had gone through here more than once.

She cautiously wandered from the trail and stooped near the light impressions. They were barely there, and partially wiped away with rough twig-like gouges. Whatever came through here was large. There were long nails on the tips of the half-dollar sized toes. The rest was smudged.

Ranger Hart looked down the trail to where it would lead. Through the budding raspberries was a creek that wound northward. It was cut betwixt the cedars. The forest grew denser and resembled old growth. The woods themselves seemed to try and hide the animal’s passage.

Taking a deep breath, Ranger Hart got up and trod into the foliage. Her form was like a shadow, one that was quiet and in tune with where she should be. A chill rose from the fresh spring waters that splashed upon rocks. The needles and leaves ruffled over her ranger hat as she kept forward. Something drew her on.

Going slow, she checked for more tracks or signs of her quarry’s passage. They were scant, but present. It wasn’t until the prints cut off the creek to right side that she stopped. Looking back, the trail was long gone as the creek dutifully bubbled. She was about a mile in.

She clicked on her radio. “This is Charles Three. Can you read me?”

“Yes, we can,” a familiar female voice answered through some static.

“Reggie, I’m following a game trail going northeast from Alworth Lake, near Hatchet Lake. I might be out of radio range for a time,” she said to the paddle mic on her shoulder.

“Roger. Be careful,” Reggie answered.

Ranger Hart looked ahead at the obfuscated tracks. She reached down to her oily-smelling sidearm, and pressure checked the chamber. A cartridge peeked back her. Deliberately, she clicked the safety off.

It was another mile and a half through the brush until it opened up into a small clearing. The berry bushes and wide-leafed vines seemed to have grown deliberately to form a copse. The canopy above, made of combined needles and leaves, let few sunrays between them.

Ranger Hart carefully entered the clearing with her hand still upon her gun. The elongated and canine tracks here were too numerous to count. A large depression was on the opposite side of the fifty foot area. Massive branches, needles, and dried leaves formed a pile at its center. She crouched near the sleeping spot and picked up small clumps of pitch black fur.

Her eyes widened in the tranquil surroundings. There was a green superhero toy lying in the leaf litter. She reached for it, but stopped. Deep gouges ran over the figure's green leotard. Half of its bright yellow cape was ripped off. Carefully, she checked over her shoulder. Only silence and stillness were watching.

Taking deep breaths, she tugged down on the collar of her uniform and then got up. Above her, through a hole in the canopy, was an unending sky dotted with white fluffy clouds. She looked over the lair. Her shape seemed foreign and a violation of this place's sanctity. With a purpose, she backed out of the grove and glided back down the path from where she came. She no longer seemed a part of the woods and hurried away back to radio reception, and into the parking lot at the trailhead.

"Reggie, I'm back," She said. "I may have found something."

"Roger," the dispatcher answered. "What is it?"

Ranger Hart opened the door to her patrol SUV. "I think it's a den of some kind. I'm going to be monitoring it for the next few weeks."

"Like an animal den?" Reggie quickly answered.

"Yea, a resting place. I'm not sure if it's from an animal, or a human, or something that's not human anymore." Ranger Hart nervously checked over her shoulder. "If I spot something, I'll call in for backup," she radioed back and took a long look at her old bolt action hunting rifle mounted on the vehicle's center console.

"You're not making sense, Tonya," Reggie transmitted back.

Ranger Hart shook her head. "It won't, not unless you've been seeing what I've been seeing over the last few weeks."

"Understood," Reggie replied. "Stay safe out there."

Chapter 31
To Beat a Wolf

"Whoa! There he is!" Andy's voice was loud enough for the entire office to hear. "It's almost time to go home."

Near the break table and coffee pot, Gina looked behind her as Ken entered through the door. She pushed up her curved glasses as Misty poked around her for a look. They then returned to their chatter and their voices grew hushed.

Ken had puffy dark rings under his eyes. His normally nice white shirt was wrinkled and unwashed. He lacked the usual undershirt and tie. A stench came from him of unwashed sweat and wilderness.

"I thought you quit! Where have you been lately?" Andy rolled the empty white coffee mug in his hand.

With a wave, Ken dismissed him. Andy's eyebrows furrowed and he gritted his teeth, but wandered away toward the chatting ladies.

Ken headed for his desk next to Manny. His lean unshaven face and chiseled eyes were locked onto his unpowered terminal. With an uncaring plop, he slumped into his office chair. It creaked in resistance to his undomesticated body.

Manny looked over from his side of the short cubicle. There was a deepness reflected in his gaze. He quietly watched Ken who just stared at the blank monitor like an uncaring stone.

Meekly, Manny quietly said, "Hey, Ken. Are you doing okay? You don't seem yourself lately."

Ken didn't acknowledge him.

"I'm worried." Manny leaned over the cubicle some. "Seriously."

The disheveled man looked over at Manny whose eyes were concerned. He clasped the short divider wall between them with both his hands. The knuckles on Manny's hands were white.

"I'm fine," Ken waited a moment to answer. "It's nothing worth discussing." He turned back to the computer and pressed the power button. "I'm not sure how long I'll be here." He gave a longing looked out of the window and at the mountain range in the distance.

"Are you quitting?" Manny asked him as he sat back in his chair.

Ken watched the Windows logo pop up on his screen. "Yea," he sighed. "Something like that."

Typing flowed from Ken's cubicle. Unlike his normal pace, it was broken with long pauses between each burst. He sighed many times and stared often through the windows. Next to him, Manny diligently worked, but kept glancing over at his cubicle partner. The others were crowded around the break table.

Janet was nowhere in sight until an hour later, near five o'clock. The sunlight was dwindling through the windows.

As she entered, she fluffed her curly black hair and then took a bite from a wrapped fast food sandwich. Misty and Gina hushed immediately and went to their own cubicles. Andy moved to meet Janet, who was coming through the center isle of the workspaces.

"How was your luncheon meeting?" he asked his boss.

Janet finished her mouthful, looked at the sandwich, and then grinned. "Pretty good. What's up?" She wrapped up the food, then wrinkled her nose. "What is that smell?"

"He finally showed up," Andy replied.

Janet craned her head toward Ken's cubicle where his uncut shaggy blond hair poked up from the divider. Her footsteps seemed to crunch on the ancient yellow carpet. She rounded the divider's corner. Ken had already turned around to face her, his jaw was stern; his eyes were focused. Frightened, Manny watched from his workspace.

"I'm glad you're here." Janet smiled too fake and wide. It wrinkled the edges of her mouth.

Ken didn't budge. He just waited.

She took a deep breath, then continued. "I guess you saw this coming. It's your own fault."

He was still. Readiness emanated from his starker than ever green eyes.

Andy wandered over and leaned on the divider opposite from Janet and Ken. Misty and Gina had crept from their workspaces, to get close and eavesdrop. They lingered a couple of feet behind Andy.

Janet opened her mouth. Anger flowed through her eyes. Her berating began.

The pressure had climbed over Ken's chest and infected his neck. It crept behind his eyes and made his ears ring. Ken couldn't hear Janet's words anymore or feel their influence. Now, his boss was pointing at him harshly, so hard that the rings on her fingers shook.

Gina was whispering to Misty. There was malice upon her red lips, a gossipy glint in her eyes. Andy smirked as he drank from his coffee mug. Dribbles of black dripped from the ceramic.

Ken was strangely calm. His breathing was uninterrupted as Janet's long scuffed fingernail nearly touched his nose. Stubbornly he shoved the pressure back to his sternum. It echoed in his ribcage, then rooted into his heart and propagated viciously. He

released a relaxing sigh. Finally, the weight settled and stopped squirming in his insides. It wound up, like a coil, then patiently waited. His hearing returned.

Janet withdrew her finger and placed her hands on the hips of her blue dress. She waited, as if expecting a reply or reaction.

Then a concerned low voice broke the brief pause. "Ken, let's get out of here. You don't deserve this." The voice belonged to Manny. He held his left hand out, over the cubicle half wall, and held it toward him.

Ken's eyes shot open. His nostrils flared. "I deserve this." His voice was off, it sounded overly deep and stretched.

"No, Ken, you don't. This is unreasonable." Manny begged.

Ken blinked slowly. "Manny, I need you to duck. Stay out of the way."

His friend's face went pale. Manny ducked down.

With a focused exhale, Ken released the pressure, the beast. His mouth became a maw. His hands twisted into hybrid-paws and his skin riddled with black fur pushing out like needles. His body grew horrifically quick. In but a second, what was inside was outside.

Ken whirled around as he finished transforming. Janet froze, in terror, until Ken swiped at her face with a massive claw. It popped both her eyes, opened her neck, and ripped off her bottom jaw. Manny fell backward into his workspace as Andy turned to flee. His coffee mug clattered onto the floor. Ken's hand latched onto him by the neck and with a simple flick, tore his head from the top of his spine.

Misty ran into her cubicle and slid under her desk. Gina was halfway to the only door, screaming. She did not get much farther.

Flailing wildly, Ken bowled through the flimsy cubicles. His long arms rasped the ceiling, busting tiles, and knocking light ballasts free. He pounced atop Gina and bit hard into her flank. Screams erupted as her ribs snapped and were torn away by the his jaws.

Ken crunched and swallowed as Gina twitched, dying, in a pool of her own innards.

Misty fumbled her cellphone's combination lock. The phone's light illuminated her face beneath the desk. A primal growl surrounded her. Tears dangled from her chin as she froze. Heavy steps neared. A metallic whine came as Ken used his claws and weight to collapse the desk on her. The desk's top touched the floor. From beneath erupted sickening snaps, then gurgling. At last there was the blissful silence.

An instinct rumbled in Ken's lungs. He began to suck in air and form a howl, but stifled it when he saw the destroyed office.

Ken made his way back to where the carnage began. Flipped desks, fallen wall studs, and wreckage were strewn where had he released himself. His inhalations slowed. His claws went slack and his ears dropped. From under one part of a cubicle and below a big light ballast, he saw Manny.

The right side of his head was smashed under the heavy weight that fell from above. Blood pooled out from under the debris. A frozen look of horror lingered in his eyes.

Ken knelt next to his coworker, his friend. He rubbed his muzzle and forehead with his claws. Taking deep breathes, he gritted his teeth and growled in frustration, in sorrow. Ken laid his massive clawed hand on Manny's chest. Bowing his head, Ken lingered in regret. Without being able to speak, this was his quiet apology and eulogy.

Standing, he made for the glass window of the office building. Through it he saw the mountaintops past the parking lot. In the window's reflection he studied the beast that he was: a pitch black lupine with his recognizable stark green eyes. Red dribbled over his fur and wild body.

Almost gently, Ken rolled his ears back and pushed his massive head through the translucent barrier, through his own reflection. The glass gave quickly. Sparkling shards washed over his fur as he climbed over the metal and drywall window frame.

Once outside, he shook and grunted. The glass and clothing bits, the last illusions of civilization, flew from him. Sternly, Ken fixed his gaze behind him, at the office complex. Feral power was in his irises, one that showed his determination to never let something like this happen again.

Looking up and toward the mountains, Ken felt their call vibrate deeply in his chest. They enticed his eyes and pulled him forward. He didn't deny the call any longer, and spurned the human world that couldn't accept him.

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Ken's furry shape ripped through the trees. He looked behind himself and at the busy highway, from where he'd fled. In the dusky light, he could see the stopped cars and hear the people shouting. He kept charging forward through the trees. He cut through the shrubs, over backroads, and went along creek beds. Miles had passed. The sun had set.

It was there in the dark when he finally stopped in the brush, about thirty yards away from a dusty two lane highway. Interior lighting flowed from the windows of a mobile home about half a mile behind him.

The pressure relented when asked and his shape slithered back to its human self. He was naked in the cold. It felt icier than ever. Balling himself up while sitting on his haunches, Ken wailed relentlessly. His eyes were inflamed. Drool and snot mixed on his chin. He shivered.

Manny's face under the wreckage came to him. His family's screams echoed in his ears. The slaughter of the fisherman and the boys accusingly stirred in his mind. He coughed hoarsely and cried harder.

Between his tears, he looked at his bloody hands. They didn't feel human anymore. He didn't feel human anymore.

It was about ten minutes until his harsh sobs calmed. The pressure lingered on his head and drifted into his chest. The alien sensation was softer. Ken inhaled. Carefully he pushed the pressure over his body with his will, and finally by his own choice.

His hands elongated and his chest expanded. The teeth in his mouth receded and came back fangs. The fur ran over him like needle pricks. He sucked in night air through a wet nose. It smelled of loamy earth and stunk of exhaust. Pulling himself up, Ken resumed his flight with a fresh resolve. Purpose filled his running toward the deepening wilds.

Chapter 32
Sirens

"Stay inside!" Ranger Hart shouted to a heavy woman dangling a cigarette in her mouth. "Everyone! Now!"

The woman, who was in a flower shirt, spit out the smoke and opened the door to the Deer Ridge Fuel shop. Ranger Hart was behind her as she shoved a man in a flannel shirt and hiking boots inside. The woman looked at the ranger through the glass of the gas station.

"What's going on?" she asked as she locked the door with her old wrinkly hands. Through the glass, her voice was distinctly muffled.

Ranger Hart said, "Margaret, something is on the loose. It came up from the city and has already killed some folk in town. It's moving fast."

Margaret pushed up against the door which pressed her name tag on it and splayed her black curly long hair against it. "An animal? From the city?"

"I'm not sure what it is – stay inside!" Ranger Hart said and she then went around the store toward the Rock Creek Eatery diner.

Nearing it, she saw that all of the lights were on. Through the windows, a crowd by the bar could be seen. They were watching a television mounted on wall. Ranger Hart went up the steps and tried the front entrance. It was locked. An employee spotted her through a window. Nina, in her red work shirt, rushed over to the door.

"Stay inside," Ranger Hart said to stop her from opening the lock.

Nina looked at her through the glass on the front door. "Is it the thing on the television?"

Ranger Hart looked past the woman to the TV. There was a news anchor in a nice black shirt at a desk. Next to him was a video on screen showing a black humanoid-lupine hybrid dashing into the woods. The source was a low quality video taken at a rest stop. Ranger Hart's face hardened, she ground her teeth.

Ranger Hart stared at the image.

Nina tapped on the glass. "Are you okay?"

"Yea! Don't go anywhere! It's not far from here." She snapped out of it and stepped back.

"We won't!" Nina said.

"Ranger Hart, have you checked on air support?" It was the voice of her Lieutenant from her radio paddle mic.

She was running back to her SUV as she depressed it to reply. “I did- it’s en route to gas up. They were on an outside agency assistance call.” She opened the door to her SUV. “They’ll have to refuel before they can give chase.”

“Roger. We’re still out at Vermillion Dam with that nut job who assaulted a security guard. Stay put until we can get you some backup.”

Hart paused. Through her windshield and through the night, she studied a large moonlit mountain. It towered over all of the others. “Gary, I know where it’s going. I’ve got to stop it before it gets anyone else.”

“God dammit, Tonya!” the Lieutenant said. An anger mixed with fear flowed from the paddle mic.

“I’ve been after this thing for weeks. Now’s my chance!” She released the paddle mic’s transmit button anxiously.

Gary clicked the mic a few seconds, then sighed. “I can’t stop you. Just don’t get yourself killed. I don’t want to have to call your folks in Montana to tell them.”

“If it comes to that, have the secretary do it.” Ranger Hart slammed her patrol SUV into drive and hauled ass onto the highway.

Chapter 33
Worlds Meet

Saplings and berry shrubs were slammed aside. Dust kicked up, leaves flew. Two massive green eyes reflected in the light of the full moon. Ken was on a straight course back to his lair, his woodland home. He leapt up and over a large boulder, then scrambled over a fallen tree. As he passed through a little grassy patch, his black form silhouetted in the bright moonlight.

A muzzle flash erupted from the darkness at about two hundred yards away. Ken staggered as a bullet ripped through his right shoulder.

Steadying from the hit, Ken's eyes honed in on the source. From a small hunter's blind, Jake cycled his rifle's bolt. Two men were beside him.

Ken let loose a beastly snarl and charged. The forest seemed to part for him, willing him forward and aiding in his work.

Justin fired. His shot went wide. George flubbed for his rifle's safety. Jake slunk rightward through the brush and away from his hunting partners.

Ken scrambled below shrubs, jumped over fallen logs, and galloped on all fours between bursts of bipedal running. Through the dark, he flung himself at them with primal violence.

Justin fired again. His shot split bark from a pine just to the creature's left. It closed the distance. Justin gasped, dropping his gun and covering his face with his hands.

Ken reared up and swiped his long claws. Justin's glasses went sailing and his head was smashed open. The glasses skipped into the dirt.

George discharged a round into the dirt as he tried to bring his weapon to bear. Ken turned, then pounced onto him. Rips and tears echoed in the shadows. From the dark, an arm flew, then another. Weak gurgles followed the carnage.

Jake stood from behind a gooseberry shrub. His firearm was ready. His finger was on the trigger. He squeezed steadily.

The shot slammed into Ken's back. He whipped around, more enraged. Blood flew from his wound and maw, spattering the woods. His sharp green, hate-filled eyes almost cut Jake's flesh.

The final hunter cycled the bolt again. Ken tossed aside what was left of George's torso.

Jake pulled the trigger as the lupine adversary rushed through the foliage.

The round hit Ken in the sternum. A loud crack spread through the woods. The bullet peeled bone and exposed muscle. The wound nightmarishly began to heal.

Jake's eyes widened at the sight. He started to cycle his gun's bolt, then he ducked right as Ken swung his claws at him recklessly.

Leaves scattered from the shrub Jake was near. The shell ejected from the chamber. He stepped back as the massive canine head bit at him. The teeth flashed and snapped closed without result. Jake's bolt returned. The chamber was ready. He was at point blank range.

Jake raised up the manual sights on top of his scope right at the beast. Its black nose was his target. "You're extinct, bitch!"

His rifle fired. The woods flashed as the animal used its long arm to slap the barrel away, causing him to miss. Jake jerked sideways from the tremendous strike and his boot slid in the soft soil. Ken's other claw followed behind the first.

Bringing his gun up in defense, Jake barely it got in the way of the blow. The rifle shattered. His arm shattered. The stock and barrel separated. The claw continued through his broken weapon and caught him in the stomach.

Jake's internals spattered out and he fell backward onto the soft earth. Screaming, the beast smothered him with its weight. It held down his chest and clutched his remaining good arm.

The hunter's irises shook. He saw the fang scars on Ken's wrist. Jake tried to wrench free, but the beast was too strong. A bloody and defiant grin streaked over Jake's face. "I know the weakening you are, under all of that fur. I saw your true form! After me, there will be a hundred others. We'll kill you. I win in the end!" He yelled.

Ken pulled his throat out with his teeth.

***

A muzzle flash went through the woods as Ranger Hart sped down the back roads in her patrol vehicle.

"Reggie, come in." She depressed the transmit button on her dash radio. "You there?"

"Tonya, I'm here. I heard you're out looking for that thing," the dispatcher responded in the growing static. "You're getting pretty far out there."

"I am. I found it. It's near Hatchet Lake."

"What?" Reggie said. "You're cutting out."

Ranger Hart skidded her vehicle to a stop in the middle of the highway. "Hatchet Lake!" She shouted into the SUV mic and dropped it.

She unlatched her old bolt action rifle from the center console. Siren lights washed over the pines. She pushed open her door and stepped into the flickering red and blue pines. Her boots scraped over the beaten asphalt. Another shot sounded. One last muzzle flare lit the night, a few hundred feet away to the left of the road.

She turned off the safety, shouldered the old gun, and looked down her basic iron sights as she moved forward. Standing tall, she pushed through the foliage that felt as if it resisted her. She trudged on, fighting against her own fear as well.

A wind blew from the south and it coiled through the shaking trees, rushing north. Her hand was ready at the trigger. As she scanned through the rough terrain, something moved. It was a mere forty feet away.

Two massive lupine eyes were above the brush, above her. Under them was a great muscled chest. Blood trickled from a wound that finished closing on its sternum. Its thick fur was matted in gore. It smelled of a fresh kill.

Stained lips curled back to show long and recently used teeth. A lupine face was locked onto her. It licked its lips.

Ranger Hart gasped. She froze, seeing its size and the wound unnaturally closing.

Her hand reflexively started to depress the trigger. Her body shook.

The beast didn't move. It stood unafraid and waited impatiently as it splayed its long claws open and closed. Its ears twitched.

She looked into its stark green eyes, hesitating. Then she noticed that on one of its wrists was a scar from four long fangs.

"It's you!" she said to herself and looked up from the sights.

***

Something vibrated in Ken's chest. The weight pressed hard. It stretched from his recent wounds, from his heart, and tried to slither into his limbs. The pain he felt, the thrill of killing, urged him on. Yet, Ken was in control. He blinked, by his choice. There, in the night of the full moon, Ken stood unafraid of himself.

The ranger was looking at him as she pushed her hat's bill up. She was the one from the station. Ken relaxed as she lowered the rifle. The pressure in him kept shoving and ripping at his muscles to act.

Silence lingered as they stood before one another. The trees watched, listened. For a moment in the night, the civilized and lawful woman stared a hole into the savage and wild animal. At that moment, the animal was more powerful.

Ranger Hart stepped away and retreated back toward the road's edge. She kept her eyes on him. There was a defiance, but also a coolness of knowing she was outmatched.

Ken watched her leave. He let her leave. Once she was out of sight, he dropped to all fours, and darted away.

Branches whipped his fur and were hardly noticed. The darkness was easy on his eyes as he navigated to a familiar ravine and followed it hastily. At the top, in a outcropping of rock, he approached his sleeping site. In the pile of fur and branches, he rummaged until he found his treasure.

It was a superhero toy with a torn off cape. The plastic man smiled broadly in his dark green leotard. Ken carefully cradled it into his big paw.

In his mind were flashes of his family and Manny. So too were flashes of the fisherman's and his charge's slaughter, the carnage at the office, and the battle with the bear. He felt their agony and shock.

Ken scrambled onto the rocks above the trees. He looked back from where he came.

The city glowed like a foreign land in the distance. A culvert below was full of torn up bodies. He still smelled their bits upon himself. Flashing emergency lights flicked on the road underneath him. A dark figure near it had the vehicle's door open and was reaching inside it.

That feeling, that urge rose into him once more. The pressure climbed into his throat. Instead of stifling it, he let it out. He howled deeply and wolfishly into the moon-filled night, accepting the responsibility of his actions that lead him here.

From his chest it reverberated into the naked wilds and it echoed into the eternal night. It was mournful and filled with pain. He honored the dead. He honored what he was now, and he let go of humanity, forever.

His ears lowered and he closed his eyes bitterly. Something answered his cry.

Another howl came from the north. It sounded distant. This one was more drawn out, tired, older. Although it was the first time he'd heard it, the howl was eerily familiar. Images of the old lady he met on the trail came to him. Their howls had connected them together.

The call that first ushered him into the woods burned into the depths of Ken's soul. It pulled him onward. From that stone, he descended, and ran with the toy between his jaws. On all fours he followed that howl to never return.

Epilogue
Just in Case

Ranger Hart stared out the window of her SUV. She studied a baby-faced young man in a tan uniform as he talked to a driver in a scratched-up sedan. Red and blue lights flicked above them in the early summer daylight.

The young deputy smiled. The driver of the other car, an old woman with long curly black hair, laughed. Ranger Hart looked down.

In her hand was a letter. She rubbed her thumb over it as she read it. It was from a DNA test at a forensics lab. Her eyes skipped to the bottom where the identification said *inconclusive*. Wearily, she folded it back up and stuck it into her patrol bag.

The young deputy waved as the car pulled away. He came back to the driver's seat of her vehicle and opened the door.

"How was that stop?" He asked her.

"Not bad," Ranger Hart answered. "That was an easy one, a local. Those out-of-towners are the worst." She shrugged. "Still, an improvement over last week."

He sat down and started the ignition. "Thanks, not a bad start to the day."

"Not at all." She reached into her patrol bag.

Ranger Hart took out a thermos and set it between her legs. She then pulled out a snub nosed revolver, checked the cylinder, and stuck it in her boot. Then another, and even smaller revolver came out. She opened the cylinder, checked it, and stuck it into her other boot.

She took a sip from her thermos and realized that her partner was watching. "What?" she asked.

"Well, it's just that, um. I know people carry backup guns, but two back up guns?" He pulled down on his body armor's collar as he spoke.

She shook her head. "I suppose you've heard."

He blushed some. "The lieutenant was talking about it after briefing."

"It's true, I carry silver bullets in the other one." Ranger Hart buckled her seat belt.

The younger officer buckled his own. "But, why?"

"These woods aren't ours. They belong to something else – something that needs to be respected and left alone. Something that anyone, even the most unlikely, can become." She looked at him sternly from under her hat.

He furrowed his brows in confusion.

She pulled her hat down tighter. “Some hunters were killed one night by it. Whatever did it, did the world a favor in my opinion.” She sighed. “Some innocent folk died needlessly too. It was a real mess.”

The trainee turned his radio down to listen.

“I’ll tell you the story another day. Let’s focus on training.” She leaned back in her seat.

The SUV pulled onto the highway. It ran along the snaking roads – all while under the watchful shadows of the primeval mountains that were whipped in the ancient winds.

About the Author

I was born in California, the year was 1985. I grew up in a small town in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. After grammar school, I graduated college with a B.A. in Sociology. Later, I attended more school and picked up an A.S. in Natural Science and a Crime Analysis Certification.

Most of my life, I've been writing in some capacity. I published my first book in 2019. The majority of my written works are in fantasy, science fiction, and horror genres.

I've never been married, or had any children. I've worked in a slew of fields ranging from the trades, to law enforcement, retail, as a laborer, and even in banking. I'm still a working schmuck to this day.

When I'm not writing, you can find me out enjoying nature, bowling, target shooting, gardening, and gaming.

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To truly understand the world, you must don your lupine brother's eyes. His unfiltered irises cut through the artificial darkness surrounding you.

-NTW