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## April

Saturday morning, at 6:55, April heard her door open. She knew it was her father checking in on her. She had spent the last two days sulking, hoping her father would change his mind. But the ski trip had not been mentioned again. He didn't even suggest having a fun weekend again. He reminded her of his plans to golf, despite the call for low temperatures. That was the thing about Colorado: You could ski in the mountains and golf in the plains at the same time.

April kept her breathing even and her eyes closed, listening. Her father stood there, lingering. He never did that. Maybe he was regretting making her stay home. Maybe he was thinking of canceling golf and doing something with her. Then he turned. She heard his even stride going out to the garage; the door rumbling open and then rumbling closed. April flung back the sheets and hurried to the office, peeking out to the front street. She watched his SUV back into the street and then roll away from the house. She waited, counting to fifty. He did not return.

Bounding back to her room, she pulled out the clothes she had laid out the night before. Steve had come over after dark and

fetches her bag for the weekend. She would just need to grab her skis and poles. She didn't want to risk her father noticing them missing from the rack in the garage. She glanced over at herself in the mirror: jeans, sweater, boots. Just some friends this weekend. She didn't need to put in a lot of effort. She pulled up her hair into a pony while she walked down the hall to the garage.

She pulled her gear from the rack and stepped out into the sideyard, leaning them against the house. The neighborhood was quiet. The chill in the air forced everyone to stay in their homes, even though the sun was shining brightly and the snow had melted a few weeks ago. Looking through the houses and trees, she couldn't see the mountains, but she knew there was still snow on the ground up there. She took a deep breath in, enjoying the smell of winter. She let out a breath, watching the mist swirl and disappear before her eyes. Perfect day for skiing. Probably not an outstanding day for golfing. April stepped back inside, locking the door. She went back to the house and filled a grocery bag with a few snacks. Her father hadn't even noticed she had done the grocery pickup a few days early.

Her phone chimed at 7:10. She looked at it.

"Ready?" Steve was awake. Was she ready for this? In her 18 years, she had never, ever disobeyed her father before. She came home when he said, did her chores, followed the rules. Everyone made fun of her for it. Was it worth the risk of getting into so much trouble for a ski trip? She looked over at the last place she had seen her mother. It was the night before she found the note. She had sat at the table, drinking a glass of white wine. Her eyes were far away, and she wasn't speaking. Her father had come home and gone straight to his office. He didn't even say hello to her.

Maybe this was a bad idea. But she didn't care. She wanted to have fun too. She wanted to be out with friends, laughing.

April sent Steve a thumbs up emoji, and her stomach did a flip. She was excited. Did it always feel this good to do something bad? She pulled on her jacket and grabbed her bag of snacks. She set the note to her father on the counter, in the exact same place her mother had left their notes. She explained in it she would be back late Sunday. She had gone skiing. By the time her father got home from his 18 holes and his two hours with friends at Hole 19, she would be on the slopes or in a hot tub.

Steve was loading her gear in the back of his truck when she stepped outside. April practically skipped to him.

"I'm so excited! Let's go!" April hugged him. He grinned, hugging her back. He opened the passenger door for her. She climbed in and he hurried around to the front. April was putting on her seatbelt when she glanced over at Steve's house and saw his father standing in the front room, his coffee cup in hand. They locked eyes and April felt dread fill her. Caught before they even rolled down the street.

Steve's father raised his mug to her. April smiled and waved back.

Living in Colorado was a wonderful thing. By 8, they were already cruising among the peaks. Just like she thought that morning, there was still plenty of snow hidden up in the mountains, and it only got deeper the higher they went. The green pine trees were still frosted over and looked like a perfect postcard. They would be at the cabin in no time.

"Does Charlotte know you're coming?" Steve asked her once they were too far away for her to change her mind.

"No; I wanted to surprise her. Besides, the fewer people who

know about my deviant behavior, the better.”

Steve smirked at her.

“I still can’t believe you’re actually doing this.”

“Me neither!” She squeezed his hand, so glad that he had convinced her to come. He didn’t pull it away. Suddenly, she thought about his father. “Is your dad going to tell mine?”

“Yeah, probably. Probably to keep him from calling the police and claiming you’re a runaway.” Steve glanced at her. “I told my dad our plan.”

April glared at him. “He could have ruined it!”

“I always tell my dad the truth. About most things, at least.” April rolled her eyes, knowing there were a lot of things that his father didn’t know. Like what happened at homecoming. April hadn’t been there, but she heard Steve had made quite a dent in a keg at the after party. “Anyway, he didn’t say anything at first. He finally said that your dad needed to learn that he can’t control you. He’ll be outside when your dad comes home and reads your note. And he’ll do his best to keep him home.”

Steve somehow knew exactly where to take them when they reached the mountain town of Elk Falls. The little town was growing fast because of an invasion of Texans, according to Steve’s father, who had complained about it on the last family trip there. Her father argued it was good for Colorado. Good for the economy. What an accountant thing to say. April remembered coming up there in the winters with her mother, when the town was small and the slopes weren’t crowded. She had liked it then. Her mother had grown up in the area and seemed to know a lot of people. Her father rarely came with them then. They would come up and spend the weekend camping or staying in the old run-down hotel, eating ice cream and telling ghost stories. April caught herself scanning the crowds for a

glimpse of her.

The town had tripled in size in the last ten years; there were condos right across the street from the run-down double wide trailers. The streets were crowded with a mix of brand new Land Rovers and 1990s Fords. The same run-down hotel was always full in the winter months. Her father made reservations for their skiing trips six months in advance. Steve's dad always made fun of him but never seemed to mind having the rooms when skiing season rolled around.

They were soon out of the old town, bypassing the cute city center and driving past car dealerships and Walmart. The mountains rose up around them; snow piled up over the car on the right side of the road.

"That's weird. It's usually more melted by now." Steve wrinkled his eyebrows at the snow.

"It's been a crazy year. When was the last time they canceled school two days in a row?" The district rarely gave snow days, but they had had several this year. Snow had been abundant everywhere. April considered telling Steve that she had read that Colorado was almost completely drought-free because of it. But she knew he wouldn't care. They were about ten miles outside the town, climbing up an old dirt road that had private property signs strewn everywhere.

"Charlotte's family wants privacy, I guess," Steve murmured after the tenth sign in a quarter-mile. April found the signs unnerving. Why have so many? Who was trespassing on this property? What did they need all the privacy for?

The trees grew thicker and the road narrower. April pressed herself against her seat. The branches seemed to reach down and grab at the truck, smacking the window as they passed. Charlotte's family needed to do some mitigation.

“This cabin better be worth it.” Steve’s teeth were gritting as they drove past the trees and up a steep hill. The mud was thick and April worried they wouldn’t make it. The engine roared, and they climbed up the hill.

The cabin was beautiful: an A-frame style with a wrap-around porch. The roof was green with matching shutters on the windows. There was snow around the cabin, and a large open field on either side. The cabin seemed to sparkle at them, inviting them over. No wonder the family wanted privacy.

“Worth it!” Like the mist from her breath earlier, her uneasiness evaporated. She was happy she had come. At least this place would be worth a grounding.

There was still plenty of snow on the ground up here. April hopped out of the car, glad she had pulled on her boots before they left. She saw Willie’s car. Off to the side of the house was a garage. It must be full, since they didn’t park inside. No one had bothered to shovel when they had gotten there. Their friends had tramped the snow down. April slipped a little, the spots slick now. Steve caught her before they climbed up onto the deck. Steve knocked while April glanced back over her shoulder.

The green of the trees popped against the blue of the sky and the white of the snow. The sun was not shining as brightly as it had been in the city; there were some clouds moving in. The crisp air was filled with the scent of pine and the smoke from the stove inside. A postcard, Hallmark moment. April smiled. She squeezed Steve’s hand. Worth it.

Willie opened the door, wearing checkered pajama bottoms. His eyes widened when he saw April, but he said nothing.

“Hey, Steve,” he said. “Glad you could make it.”

“Thanks! Where’s Charlotte? I have a present for her.” The boys were talking unnaturally loud.

Willie stepped aside allowing Steve and April to enter. Charlotte was sitting on the enormous living room couch, cradling her phone in her hand. Her eyes met April's and her mouth dropped open. Then she screamed with joy, jumping up and flinging herself around April.

"Oh, my god! Oh, my god! You came! I'm so happy!" April hugged her back. Any last bit of nerves she had about coming were erased.

"It was Steve's idea." April wanted to give credit to the hero of the hour. Stepping back, she smiled at him and he blushed for a second, looking away.

"Is this why you said you had to come up separately yesterday?" Charlotte hugged him too. "You guys are so awesome!" April looked at Steve, confused. He had said he was coming up this morning. Had he changed his plans for her?

"We had a raging time last night!" Willie changed the subject before she could question him. "Zach and his girlfriend are still asleep. Is it okay if we don't go skiing until this afternoon? We kind of need the morning to recover." April forgot about Steve's story and felt her heart drop. Her eyes flicked to Charlotte, who offered a strained smile. Zach was there.

April was back to last summer, on a hot night. She was in a car with Zach. He was smiling at her, moving too close to her, his hand sliding too far up her leg.

"Come on, let me give you a tour!" Charlotte grabbed her hand and dragged her away from the boys. "The hot tub is back here. It feels so good!"

"Is your mom here?" April looked around for Mrs. Williams. She would be okay with an adult around. He couldn't do anything with an adult around.

"She didn't come. I just told you she was coming in hopes to

get you here. Look, it worked!”

Charlotte frowned. April glanced back at Steve. She knew she could ask him to take her home. They might beat her father home and she would never get in trouble. But then she would ruin his weekend. And he was laughing with Willie. “Lighten up, April. Nothing bad will happen because my mom isn’t here. We’re all pretty much adults, anyway!”

Charlotte knew the story, knew why she was upset. Why did she invite him?

The house was beautiful on the inside. Charlotte explained that her grandparents had bought it and the family had been chipping in a little every year to update it. “They built the original cabin in 1886. In the 60s some people bought this land, tore it down and had this place put in its spot. My grandparents bought it in the 90s and we’ve updated almost every room.”

The kitchen looked modern, with light wood cabinets and dark stone counters. Junk food and the remnants of last night’s party were piled on the island. April averted her eyes from the mess, her fingers twitching. Why hadn’t they just put it away? The walls were the traditional cabin with logs stacked and white chinking smoothed out in between each log and the entire place was homey. But April felt trapped.

In the living room was a large pellet stove and a fireplace with a huge stone mantel. The fireplace contained several stones and candles.

“We just use the pellet stove. It’s easier than a fireplace.” Charlotte shrugged. On top of the mantel were pictures of her family and a large mirror.

“When did you invite Zach?” April asked, examining a collection of snow globes on the china cabinet in the dining room. Most were from the local area, sporting various tourist



attractions. Some were from other states. April thought they were all tacky. Kind of matched her friend.

“I invited him when you said you weren’t coming. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have, I swear.” Charlotte glanced at the boys before stepping closer to April and taking her hand. “Nothing’s going to happen. His girlfriend is here. He won’t bother you, I promise.”

This would be a horrible weekend.

## 4

### Steve

The cabin's open plan on the main floor showcased the kitchen and dining area. Just off the kitchen to the right of the pellet stove was a hallway leading to two bedrooms and a bathroom.

"You guys will have to sleep up here." Charlotte led the way up the spiral staircase. She demonstrated for them the couch that could be made into a bed. "I hope that's okay. We couples want our privacy." Charlotte giggled as Willie wrapped his arms around her. The cheerful couple went back downstairs to continue their recovery and Steve brought up their bags. Upstairs, he found April leaning against the railing on the balcony, looking at the peaks around them. It was like a postcard. Maybe he could use this to make a move? What better background would he get?

He looked at her. She was lost in thought, her eyes flicking around the scenery, not really seeing it. Her hands gripped the rail in front of her. The happy April he had ridden up here with was gone. He had felt the tension rise in the room when Charlotte mentioned Zach.

"This is pretty sweet." He broke her train of thought. She

looked at him and then back at the scenery. She relaxed.

“I could stay up here forever. It’s so quiet. There are no neighbors pestering you, sneaking into your room.” Steve bumped her with his hip and she smiled, looking down at the snow.

“You might have to. Your father might not let you come home,” he teased, trying to lighten the mood. He wondered what had happened with Zach. He knew they had gone on a few dates last summer.

April frowned.

“I don’t want to talk about my father the rest of the trip. I’ll deal with him when I get home.” Her voice was harsh, and he turned away from her.

“Fair enough.” Steve wiped the snow off the railing before leaning on it. “I’ll take responsibility for this. It was my idea.” April sighed.

“It was your idea, but I could have ignored you. I’m sorry I snapped at you.” She paused, pushing some more snow off the railing, watching it plop below them. “My father said that nice guys were sometimes the worst.” Steve glanced at her. “Maybe he was right.” Her eyes were focused in on him, glowing. His heart skipped a beat.

“I’m not as nice as he thinks.” This was the moment. He should reach out and kiss her. Steve took a step forward, his hand sliding over her icy fingers. She didn’t break eye contact. “Hey, Steve, April! Willie said you were here.” Zach appeared behind them, stopping Steve in his tracks. Steve shook Zach’s hand. April blushed, smiling at him. Zach was a little taller than Steve, with light brown hair. He wasn’t in great shape, but he had a smile that seemed honest. He got away with a lot and Steve knew he was no good. His father had let it slip that he had been

arrested once last summer for underage drinking and fighting. His last girlfriend also had a restraining order against him. Bad news all around. But girls seemed to like a bad boy.

“Come meet Mel, my girlfriend.” Steve let April go in front of him, closing the balcony door behind him, locking it. April waited for him, standing closer to him than she normally did. Mel stood at the base of the staircase, waiting for them to come down. She was a girl Zach had met a month ago at a volunteer event. She went to online school and was the sort of girl Steve could see Zach with. She wore a skintight T-shirt and had a full-sleeve tattoo already. She had dyed her hair a shade of blue that was fading, and she wore purple contacts. “How’s it going? Heard it was quite the party last night?”

Steve tried to make conversation with her. Mel’s eyes darted up to his face and then back to her hands, picking at the chipped purple nail polish. She looked bored.

Zach stood next to her, his beard making him appear much older than he was. His brown eyes studied them all, seeking approval for his girlfriend from them.

“Are you guys excited for skiing?” April joined in the attempt at conversation. Charlotte and Willie were snuggled on the sofa, looking at their phones. They each held a red drink with a celery stalk sticking out of it. Bloody Mary. Must have been a party. Glad he missed it.

“I don’t ski.” Mel shrugged, looking at Zach after she spoke. Steve wondered why she looked so frightened.

“Yeah, we’re just going to hang back at the cabin.” Zach seemed to give her a nod of approval.

“Cool.” Steve moved to the kitchen, April following. Steve sorted through the food piles and found a container of tiny muffins and began munching on one. “Glad you came on a ski

trip.” April smirked at him, pinching his arm before she began to clean up the mess from last night.

“It’s just nice to get out in nature and enjoy it.” Zach patted Mel on the shoulder. “We’re planning on sitting on the porch or going down into town and walking along the river.” “Cool,” Steve repeated, taking three more muffins and rolling his eyes so only April could see. What a condescending asshole.

By 11 and after a second round of Bloody Marys, Steve, April, Charlotte, and Willie headed back down the narrow drive toward the slopes. As April climbed up into the truck, Zach and Mel appeared and got into his car.

“We’re going to go to town, grab some lunch, walk along the river,” Zach told Steve, even though Steve hadn’t asked and didn’t care.

“Have fun,” Steve mumbled before slamming the door to his truck and starting it up. April relaxed again, asking about the runs that might be open and if he would mind if she stuck with Charlotte that day.

“She isn’t a good skier. Probably need to stick to the bunnies.”

“Promise you’ll do at least a black with me at some point today?”

April picky swore that she would.

The foursome spent the afternoon on the slopes. April and Charlotte stuck with the bunny slopes while the boys ventured to the more advanced runs. Willie was not as good as Steve, so they had to stick to the intermediate slopes. The blacks had already been shut down for the year. Not enough snow.

“Probably be back up tomorrow, though,” the lift operator told them while they waited in line to catch a ride up the hill. “Supposed to get a freak spring storm.”

Steve looked at April.

“We could come here before heading home tomorrow. We’ve always wanted to do fresh powder!” Steve hated that their families planned their trips up here so far in advance that they had to hope there would be enough snow.

“We can see.” April sat down in the lift with ease. Steve knew she would want to. But she stared off into the distance again, probably thinking about her father and what tomorrow would be like. Steve felt a pang of guilt. This had been his idea. He should have just stayed behind with her. They could have found something to do in town.

After a couple hours of up and down, Steve came to the bottom of the hill and found April taking off her skis. Charlotte was standing next to her, holding her arm.

“What’s wrong?” Steve called.

“She fell!” Charlotte shouted back at him. Steve glided over to them. April rarely fell anymore. She wasn’t as daring as Steve, but she could cruise down the slope quickly when she wanted to.

“Are you okay?” He pulled up his goggles. April looked at him, her face flushed. She was flustered.

“Yeah. Just stopped paying attention for a split second and then, bam, I was on the ground. It’s fine. But I feel like I pulled something in my leg.” She grimaced, adjusting her weight. “I might have to call it a day.”

Willie slid to a stop with them.

“I’ll sit with you. We can go get some food. You guys want anything?” Charlotte clicked out of her skis.

“Should we just go? We can!” Steve looked at April. She smiled and shook her head. “Go get some more runs in. For me.” Steve agreed but turned down the food, wanting to beat whatever storm was heading in. Willie followed. He probably wanted some food. But Steve would eat when the skiing was

done.

“That was cool of you, to bring April.” Willie said once they had settled into the lift and were heading up the mountain.

“She really wanted to come,” Steve shrugged, messing with his goggles.

“When are you actually going to tell her how you feel?” Willie wasted no time. He was the second person to ask Steve that question this week, and he still could not answer it.

“Come on, man. You really want to talk about this right now?” Steve was desperate to change the subject.

“Hey! I’m no Casanova, but when are you going to get a better location? A remote cabin, a hot tub, some nice snow. It’s like one of those horrible chick flicks that Char makes me watch. Tonight is your chance!” Willie was a grade A stoner. He had shaggy brown hair and was as skinny as they came. Not much bothered him, and it had surprised Steve when he and Charlotte got together. The only thing they had in common was their love of partying.

Not that he and April had much in common.

Steve didn’t know how to explain to Willie how much April meant to him. They were both quiet for a while. Steve enjoyed watching the trees roll under him and other skiers and snowboarders flying by. He cringed when one crashed. That was never fun. The slopes were hard packed and not beginner friendly. The mountain was quiet today. End of the season was almost here. Steve noticed some clouds starting to creep over the mountains above them. They looked like a dark purple. The lift operator had been right about the snow coming in tonight.

“Man, I hope tonight is good. Last night Charlotte got mean drunk. I slept on the couch. Don’t know if I can keep doing these games with her,” Willie blurted out. He had wanted to talk

about relationship issues and only started with Steve and April. Steve felt bad for his friend. Charlotte was what boys called high maintenance. She needed constant attention and reassurance. She wore so much makeup, Steve wondered if anyone would recognize her without it. And was he the only one who noticed she didn't eat very much? Of course she was a mean drunk; she drank on an empty stomach. She picked fights any chance she got, and Steve was not fond of her selfish behaviors. He didn't even know why April was her best friend. April hadn't even been able to finish the beer her father let her have last summer at a barbecue. And he had seen her polish off an entire pizza by herself once. It was impressive.

"I'm sorry, man." Steve's longest relationship had been a month. He wasn't really in a position to offer advice.

"It's fine. We've been together for almost two years. Maybe it's time to try something new. Zach's girlfriend is...different." Steve stared at his friend. Was he thinking of trying something with a friend's girl? That was not cool.

"Yeah. That's one word for it."

"How do you think she is in the sack?"

"Really, dude?" Steve looked away.

"I mean, a girl like that. She's probably pretty crazy..."

"You really think it would be a good idea, trying to get with another friend's girl on your girlfriend's birthday?"

"Well, not a good idea. But an idea."

Steve pulled on his goggles, not responding. Willie laughed. They reached the top of the mountain and prepared for the dismount. They both slid off, going down the mountain, racing each other, passing the guy who had fallen. He was up and moving much slower now. Steve pulled ahead, expertly sliding to a stop at the bottom of the mountain. The bottom was bustling



with people. So many people who paid so much money to sit outside next to large fires and drink overpriced drinks. At least, that's what his parents always did when they came up here. His mom would do maybe three runs, then spend the rest of the day making friends with anyone around her. Steve's dad lasted about ten runs before he was done and joined his wife. Most of the time, April's dad never got on the mountain. He would be back at the hotel, on a conference call or something. Normally, April would still be out with him.

"Look, there are the girls." Willie pushed up his goggles. Charlotte was waving at them, grinning.

"Maybe we should head back. Don't like the look of those clouds," Steve said, nodding toward the top of the mountain. The clouds had moved down the mountain. A heavy storm was brewing. He remembered the struggle his truck had getting up the driveway to the cabin and wanted to be back before it really came down.

"I could go for a beer and some hot tub. Maybe some girls in bikinis. Think Mel has any other tattoos?" Willie winked at him. Steve shook his head.

"Not a good idea, bro."

"We'll get a few margaritas in April. That will loosen her up enough for you to enjoy!" Steve shook his head. He had wondered why April and Charlotte were friends, but now he wondered why he and this guy were. When had he become so sex-crazed? Or was he a weirdo for not wanting that?

"You guys ready?" Charlotte asked. April was looking at the clouds, concerned like Steve. Willie gave Charlotte a sloppy kiss. She giggled, feeding him the last of their fries. April offered Steve her drink.

"Have fun?" she asked him. He nodded, making a face at the

taste of the Diet Coke but finishing it anyway.

“Would have been better with my best ski buddy. Willie couldn’t keep up with me like you!”

“It isn’t always a race. It’s a ride! Right, babe?” Willie grinned.

“That’s right!” Charlotte giggled again. It sure didn’t look as though they were having any problems. April offered Steve an apology smile. The girls gathered their things while the boys took off their skis. Steve noticed that April was limping slightly as they walked to his truck.

“Hey, are you okay?” He took her skis and added them to his own over his shoulder.

“Yeah, just pulled something in my leg. I can carry those!”

He didn’t give them back, dumping them into the back of the truck instead. April tossed her helmet, goggles, and gloves into the duffel in the truck. Her face was cloudy.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asked her quietly. Willie and Charlotte were bickering about something. Steve saw the games Willie was talking about now.

“Nothing. Sorry. I’m just preoccupied.” She held his arm for support, sliding out of her ski boots and putting on her snow boots instead.

“About what?” He knew the answer.

“My dad. I’m just worried he’ll lose it when he gets home and try to come up here.” Her eyes drifted back to the clouds. “I don’t want him driving in that storm.”

“It will be fine. My dad will probably convince him to stay.” Steve took off his ski boots and slid on his tennis shoes. “Let’s not freak out about that yet. How about we just enjoy being here?”

April nodded. They got into the car and followed Willie’s car back to the house.

“Why did you lie to me and say you were always coming up here today?” The question came out of nowhere. Steve stopped himself from blushing, grinning at her.

“You really wanted to come. I figured if I said I was coming up Saturday, you wouldn’t feel guilty about it anymore than you already do.”

April stared at him. He was being studied, her gray eyes moving over his face.

“I appreciate it. You’re a good guy, Steve.”

His heart sank. He was in the dreaded friend zone.

## Officer O'Neil

Officer Jim O'Neil had a ritual. Every day, he would wake at 5 AM. He would report to the gym, completing a self-designated workout of the day before showering and returning home. He would help his wife with their two daughters, cooking breakfast and making her coffee. During the week, the girls would head off to school. His oldest, Emma, was already in third grade. He could still feel her tiny hand wrapping around his pinkie the very first time he held her. She still held his hand, but he knew those days would end very soon.

On the weekends, if he was working, his wife would often take the girls to her mother's for the day. That is where they were heading now. Officer O'Neil's quarterly schedule had just moved to being off Mondays and Tuesdays and working on Saturdays and Sundays. He hated this schedule. He missed his kids and his wife. It made him especially irritated, and he knew his face showed it when he arrived at his usual first stop while on duty, the Brown Bear Cafe.

"Good morning, officer." Heather, the barista, smiled at him. "Why so cranky?"

“Not cranky.” He tried to lie, handing her his canister to be filled. He was never very good at it. Heather shrugged. She never pestered him. The Brown Bear Cafe was empty that morning. “Small crowd.” She shrugged again.

“Everyone hit the slopes early today. Beating that storm heading in this evening.”

Officer O’Neil had seen the warning on the news this morning and taken it with a grain of salt. The weathermen in this state was never right. Tomorrow would be 60 and beautiful, just like today, with maybe a dusting more of snow.

“Still good on my tab?”

She nodded, and he raised his canister in thanks.

O’Neil got back into his SUV cruiser and headed to the highway. There was a steady stream of cars heading up toward the slopes, eager skiers fitting in a last weekend of skiing. He positioned his car, so he had an unimpeded view of the traffic. He needed to be seen, to slow down any aggressive drivers. Ski season was hard to determine. Colorado could have snow all the way to June, even to July in the mountains, or it could be dry as a bone as soon as April. This year had been a rough year, it was March and they still had a lot of snow on the hills. But they were running out, and it was getting slick on the runs. If it snowed tonight, the streets would be crawling with people tomorrow, wanting to catch fresh powder.

O’Neil could ski, but it wasn’t his favorite activity. He had grown up in this tiny town and so had his wife. They had met in high school and a love of fishing and camping had kept them together for the last 15 years. They never liked the gigantic cities down in the foothills, and although they hated the growth, the town had seen in the last few years, it was nice to see what had been a run-down community thriving again.

O'Neil only had to set down his coffee and give one ticket that morning. That afternoon, he took his patrol down to the river and the main street where the city had begun, so many years ago. The buildings here were tall, narrow, and stacked together. What had originally been a grocery store was now an activewear store, with overpriced, trendy clothes that the ski bums all bought. O'Neil enjoyed walking around in the old buildings and feeling the history. Sometimes he would swear he saw the old miners and ranchers walking down the sidewalks. He could see the ladies with their petticoats stepping off the wagons.

He marveled at the strength of the people who had built this town, in the middle of the mountains, with unpredictable weather, and dangerous animals just out of sight. The fortitude they had to stick out the winters and build a community out of nothing. People today, himself included, complained about the slightest inconvenience. The biggest complainers were the teenagers. They had spent years having everything handed to them, living in every one-gets-a-trophy society. O'Neil knew he had grown up weaker than his dad. And the boy with a bun and the girl with blue hair walking down the sidewalk now were growing up weaker than him.

O'Neil did not like the look of them, especially the boy. The girl's blue hair annoyed him, but he recognized it more as a cry for attention than a punk, tough look that he was sure she intended it to be. The boy was hefty. He walked slightly behind her, hands in his pockets, surveying everyone who walked by. He had a poor attitude. The girl kept her eyes down, glancing up at each store. He knew he was profiling. But after years of doing this work, he could spot the troubled ones a long way off.

O'Neil watched as they stepped into the activewear store.

The girl lingered at the front in the window, reaching out to touch a long-sleeved shirt. She glanced at the price tag and flushed before dropping it and moved on to the rack to the right. O'Neil knew that was the clearance rack. His wife only bought clothes from that rack.

The boy disappeared to the back. O'Neil knew that was where the men's clothes were. He did not like that he couldn't see the kid. O'Neil waited a while, watching the girl move away from the clearance section and out of sight. About ten minutes later, the pair emerged, empty-handed. They walked down to the next shop, an old bookstore. They disappeared for a while and reappeared with a plastic bag. The girl carried it, looking happy. They disappeared down the next corner, heading toward the river path.

O'Neil contemplated following them, but he decided against it. They had done nothing wrong. And he couldn't follow them to see if they did. This time of year, down by the water, they couldn't get into a lot of trouble, anyway. But something about the boy struck him as trouble, and he made a mental note of his face. He put his car in drive and headed back to the coffee shop for a refill. He had to wait in line this time. Skiers were heading out of the mountain and hitting up the shops for warmth before heading back to their lodges or back home. He had just gotten a refill in his thermos when the door chimed behind him and the boy and girl from the street entered.

She looked even more rattled than when he saw her on the street. Her blue hair had been ruffled, and it looked as if she had been crying. She kept her eyes down and the boy was gripping her arm just above the elbow. O'Neil impulsively sat down at a window table and waited. The couple ordered before sitting at a table close to him. They didn't speak, the girl staring at her

coffee and the boy looking out the window.

"I'm sorry. About earlier." The boy said. The girl's eyes flicked up to him. "I just thought it was something you wanted too."

"It is...just not right now." She flinched when he touched her arm. O'Neil wanted to interfere.

"I promise it won't happen again."

"Okay."

"Say you forgive me?" He hooked his fingers under her chin. Her eyes widened slightly.

"I forgive you," she repeated. He kissed her gently.

O'Neil hated the boy. He had seen plenty of domestically abused women to know the signs of one. He wears her down, controlling her every move. That could be his daughter, he thought. No, not his daughter. He would never let that happen to his daughter. His daughter would know better. His daughter would know to leave. Or shoot him.

Standing, he left the coffee shop and the two kids behind. He pulled out his phone and dialed.

"Hey, honey, how are you and the girls?"



## 6

### April

April stood in front of the bathroom mirror, examining her body closely for any imperfections. April didn't often subject herself to this as she avoided wearing a bathing suit whenever she could. She was not as skinny as Charlotte. Then again, no one was as skinny as Charlotte. April knew she could probably put a little more effort into her body. Her tummy was a little round and her arms weren't super toned. She wore a blue two-piece suit. Charlotte had convinced her to buy it last summer for their tanning sessions in her backyard. She rubbed her thumb over the mole on her left hip, hating it. It was the first thing she saw on herself anytime she got out of the shower. Her freckles were the second thing.

Charlotte had taught April how to apply makeup about three months after her mother had left. Her father was not happy when she started wearing a full face of makeup everyday. He never said anything, but his faces and sighs had been enough. She eventually stopped because of the massive breakouts that followed any makeup she put on. She resolved that she would be the quiet, freckled girl that read too many books and that

nobody noticed.

It wasn't like it mattered. She didn't need to impress anyone there. But she felt very exposed in her bikini, and she was back in the car with Zach.

Her leg twinged. She winced, looking down. She definitely pulled something in that fall. Karma, she thought. That is what she got for sneaking away and going against her father's wishes.

She wrapped a towel tightly around herself and stepped out into the loft. She heard voices downstairs. She almost went back and changed back into her clothes, willing to lie about even having a suit. Charlotte would find it. Or find one for her. Or convince her to go in a bra and panties.

A bathing suit, bikini or no, was better than that.

Before heading down to join the others, April checked her phone one more time. It was just after 5 and she had not heard from her father. Either he had gone out with his friends and was having a wonderful time at the 19th hole, or he was on his way up there. She shrugged. He was probably still out with his friends. The 19th hole would often developed into dinner. He might not go home and see the letter for for another two or three hours. Even then, it would take him three hours to get to her. She went downstairs, trying not to aggravate the pain in her left leg. She had not fallen that hard in years, but her mind had been elsewhere, and the snow was slushy. Karma.

Steve and Willie were standing at the bar, blender before them, attempting to make a mixed drink. April felt another pang of fear. She had been drunk once before. It had been with Charlotte, in her basement, one Friday night when they had stolen a bottle of wine from her parents' supply. The headache the next day throbbed back to life in April's mind. She hadn't even enjoyed it that much before the headache. She remembered not being able

to think or saying what she wanted too. She is not impressed.

Willie stood in his swim trunks and plain T-shirt. Steve was shirtless. His six-pack abs matched the arms he had showed off in her bedroom the other night. When did he get so fit? The boys were hyper-focused on the blender, and April found herself hyper-focused on Steve.

“Birthday margaritas!” Charlotte announced, sashaying into the room, breaking April’s stare. She sported a pink itty-bitsy bikini that left very little to the imagination. Willie pulled his eyes away from the machine and made a purring noise as she approached him.

“Do you want one, April?” Steve asked. Steve knew April rarely drank. His father had given her a beer last summer and Steve had to finish it for her. She had not liked the bitterness of it. She thought about her leg and her decision to be bad. She might as well be a little bad while she was still free.

“Sure. Sounds good!” She also didn’t want to be the loser who didn’t drink that night.

Steve carefully poured the green liquid into a red solo cup before passing it off to her. Willie was making Charlotte giggle in the corner.

“Hot tub?” Steve suggested. April followed, hurrying to escape the PDA.

Steve expertly threw back the cover on the hot tub and turned on the bubbles. He always seemed to know how to do things that she would have struggled with. April took a sip of the margarita while she watched Steve climb in, smirking at the faces he made while he lowered himself into the water.

“Man, those slopes wore me out today!” He settled into one of the far corners of the tub. “Glad we have this to relax in. You coming?” He shifted his attention to her. April took another sip.

She could smell alcohol, but she couldn't taste it. Maybe it was a light one. She undid the towel, carefully folding it and placing it on a nearby rail before climbing in. Steve held out his hands, taking her drink and helping her down into the tub. She thanked him, taking back her drink.

"How's your leg?" he asked when she had settled into the opposite corner from him. If she drank too many of these, would he keep her safe? Or would he be a threat, like her father had said?

"Okay. Hopefully this helps."

"The tub or the tequila?"

"Both?"

Steve chuckled.

They sat, sipping their drinks and listening to the bubbles. The stars were peeking through a few clouds. They were brighter away from the city lights.

"Wonder where Zach and Mel are?" April mused.

"Who knows? Even if they come back, she probably doesn't do hot tubs."

"Maybe she's a vampire. Can't go out in the sun," April heard herself say out loud. She thought about the last supernatural romance book she had read. It had been about a vampire and a werewolf set of lovers. The vampire couldn't go out in the sun. She watched the words drift from her mouth and wanted desperately to make them come back. Steve laughed.

"Are they allowed to get wet? Vampires?"

She relaxed. Steve always got her sense of humor.

"I don't know. I know they can't have garlic."

"We'll have to try an experiment!" Steve made a beard out of the bubbles and pretended to stroke it, imitating deep thinking.

"You're such a dork!" April laughed, taking another drink.

So much for sipping it. Her margarita was already half gone and her head was fuzzing. Steve splashed her in response. She splashed him back. He snatched her hand, pulling her to him. "Oh, it's on now." He took a deep breath, ignoring her squeals of protest, and dunked them both under the water. They came up quickly.

"You got water in my nose!" April wiped her face, shaking out her now soaking wet hair. Hadn't she read once that getting your hair wet in hot tubs was a terrible idea?

"That's what you get from splashing me!"

"You started it!"

He dunked them again. They came up laughing. April was wrapped in his arms when he sat down, placing her in his lap. They sat like that for a moment, Steve's eyes focused on her, waiting for her reaction. She wasn't sure he was breathing; she knew she wasn't. This was something they had never done before. She let herself relax into him, his arms pulling her tight against him. She could feel his heart beating in his chest. He was watching her, waiting for her reaction. In her books, this is when they would kiss. But kissing Steve? Is that what he wanted? Was he messing with her?

She felt safe there, against him, the water rumbling around them, the glow of the evening disappearing to night. The sound of a car door slamming and footsteps on the porch pulled apart them. Zach and Mel appeared just as April slipped back to her spot, taking a sip of her drink. Steve did the same.

"Hey, how was shopping?" April asked the two as they came up the stairs.

"Good! The town was cute. Had some good pizza. Walked along the river. Found a cool book about local legends and ghost stories!" Mel held up her find. April wanted to reach out and

take it, but knew her wet hands would ruin such a beautiful book.

“Drinks inside. Join us!” Steve chimed in.

Zach nodded, guiding Mel away from them. April settled back into her corner, Steve watching the weird couple go inside. His face filled with disappointment when Charlotte and Willie joined them, carrying the pitcher of margaritas with them.

“Why is your hair all wet?” Charlotte looked horrified. Maybe there was a rule about hot tubs, water, and hair.

“Steve dunked me.”

Charlotte smiled coyly at April, then Steve. “Well, what a jerk!”

Willie offered April a refill, and she took it. She would only have two, she decided. Two turned into three and before she knew it, she was giggling at nothing with Charlotte while Steve and Willie discussed the rides they took that day. The pain in her leg seemed to have melted away, and her mind was not focusing on Zach anymore. She wanted to lean into Steve again and see what happened next. Mel and Zach appeared, joining them in the hot tub.

“See, fine with water.” April whispered into Steve’s ear. She had to slide next to him to accommodate the recent arrivals. His arm went around her shoulders, a soft smile on his lips. Charlotte leaned against Willie. April copied her. Zach frowned at her but April pushed any thought of him away from her, enjoying the bubbles and Steve.

“It’s snowing!” Charlotte squealed, pointing at the sky. Large, wet flakes were floating down around them.

“The radio said that we were supposed to get a big springstorm. Could close the pass for a day or so!” Mel announced.

April turned her cloudy mind away from the boy next to her back to her father. What if he drove up on tonight? And got in that

storm? She would never forgive herself if something happened.

“Excuse me!” April stood, climbing out of the tub and drying off, stumbling a little as she hurried inside and up to her phone.

The notification light was blinking blue. Three messages and two missed calls. One voicemail.

Message 1.

“April, I cannot express my disappointment in you right now. I told you that you could not go this weekend!”

Message 2.

“Call me back.”

Message 3.

“April, do not ignore me.”

April sat down on the edge of the sofa and listened to the voicemail.

“April! How could you do this? I thought we came to an agreement! I am coming up there and getting you tonight! This is completely unacceptable! I have never been this disappointed in you in my entire life!” April heard the doorbell in the background. “Why the hell is Leo here??”

The message ended. “How mad is he?”

“Pretty mad.” April glanced up at Steve. He was holding his phone in his hand.

“My dad convinced him to wait until morning to come. If you want, we can just head out in the morning. You can call him and tell him you’ll be home then.”

“You want to go to the slopes again tomorrow. Fresh powder.” April shivered.

“I would rather be the one who takes you home. I can only imagine the guilt trip your father will put you through for three hours.” Steve stepped forward, rubbing her arms. She stared up at him. He looked at her, the same way he always looked at her.

But she was seeing him in a strange light.

“Okay. But let’s not tell anyone. I don’t want Charlotte freaking out.” Steve nodded, kissing her forehead. Uh oh; maybe he wasn’t looking at her the way she thought he was.

Instead of calling, April texted.

“I’ll be back tomorrow. Just know I am safe and sound tonight.”

She did not say she was sorry, because she wasn’t. Her father needed to realize that she was about to be an adult. He needed to treat her like one. She set her phone down and turned her attention to Steve.

“Should we go back to the hot tub?” he asked.

April shook her head. “I could use another drink.”



## 7

### Steve

Steve was mixing up another margarita for April when she appeared at the bottom of the stairs, in sweats and a T-shirt, carrying her book with her.

“You can go back to the hot tub if you want. I’ll just stay inside and read.”

Steve shook his head.

“Back to couple central? Pass.”

He jogged upstairs to change. Really, he could spend some more time in the hot tub. He and April had had a moment in that hot tub. They had rough housed, like they always had. But this time, he held onto her, and she had fallen against him, into his arms, as if she had done it hundreds of times before. She had stared up at him and he could see, for the first time, that maybe he wasn’t her best friend for a moment. He had a chance. He changed quickly, hurrying back down the stairs. April was on the couch, holding the book Mel had shown off earlier.

“Cool, ghost stories; read one out loud.” Steve jumped onto the couch next to her.

“Really? You like these?”

“Hell, yeah! Ghosts are so freaking cool. We should go on a ghost hunt sometime. My dad knows a guy who gets called in by families to investigate their houses.” Steve pressed his side against her and she did not pull away. It was true. He loved ghost stories. He really wanted to go on one of the ghost hunts. But he also just wanted to be close to her. April rolled her eyes. “What? They find stuff!” She smiled and focused on the book again.

“I’m sure they do.” She opened the book cautiously. April always handled books like bombs. They were precious to her. She kept her fingers at the edges, delicately turning pages, looking each one over. Her face wrinkled, pausing on an almost blank page. Someone had scrawled across the page in black ink.

*“Dear Reader,*

*Congratulations on finding this one-of-a-kind, life-changing book. Before you venture to read any of the following stories, I am compelled to warn you. The tales within are of a most gruesome and sinister nature. All are based on people who are no longer living but are still with us. If you do read a story, be prepared for the consequences. You have been warned.”*

“So cool!” Steve put his arm around her. She still didn’t pull away from him.

“Why would someone write that?” she asked.

“To make you want to read it more, probably.” He took his finger and ran it over the ink. It didn’t smudge. “See, just a print to look like handwriting.” April didn’t look convinced, but she turned to the next page. There were 16 story titles printed with a page number next to them. Steve read them over and pointed at the third story on the list. “‘Three Finger Jack’! Read that one!” April glanced at him. He knew she didn’t like to skip around. But she flipped to page 27 and began to read out loud. “There

once was a mountain man known as Three Finger Jack..." They were interrupted by the back door opening and their friends stumbling in laughing.

"Hey guys! What happened to you two?" Willie asked, stopping in the middle of the room, dripping all over the floor. Charlotte stood next to him, smirking at them.

"Got too hot for the hot tub. Figured we would wait for you guys here," Steve said before April could say anything. Mel's eyes landed on the book in April's hands.

"I hope you don't mind; we saw it on the table and wanted to see what it was about." April closed the book quickly. Mel did not smile. Zach looked from Steve to April, frowning. Steve did not pull his arm from around April and she did not move away from him.

"Let's get changed and hear one of the stories!" Charlotte suggested, pulling Willie along with her. April handed the book over to Mel, who snatched it back and stomped off. Zach followed, glancing back at them as they went.

"Wow," Steve grumbled. April was blushing. "Don't worry about it," Steve said, rubbing her back. "If she didn't want us to read it, she shouldn't have left it out here."

Steve fetched them a refill while they waited for the others. He grabbed a bag of chips, wanting to make sure April kept food in her stomach. He didn't want her to be sick that night. She ate a handful of them, her eyes going to the windows. The flakes of snow were coming down faster now.

"Maybe we won't be going home tomorrow?" Steve didn't hate the idea of being stuck in the cabin for an extra day. April's eyes showed a mix of emotions. She must be worried about her father.

Mel returned with the book, clutching it to her chest protec-

tively. Steve raised his eyebrows toward April.

“Should I get the garlic?” he whispered. April giggled. Everyone else came out, joining them around the pellet stove and decorative fireplace mantel.

“Which story?” Mel asked, eyeing April.

“‘Three-Finger Jack’,” April said, leaning back against the couch. Steve leaned back with her. Mel found the page, skipping the warning.

“There once was a mountain man known as Three Finger Jack. How Jack lost his fingers is still a great mystery. There are several stories. The one you are about to read is the true circumstances.

“Everyone who lived in Elk Falls feared Jack. He was one of the best hunters and trappers of his time. Jack lived high above the town, and people would venture nowhere near his territory. If someone did, they never came back. Children would go into the woods, daring each other to call out to Jack. ‘Come out, come out, wherever you are!’

“Isn’t that a hide and seek game?” Charlotte asked. Everyone shushed her.

“They believed that if Jack caught you, he would string you up by your ankles, cutting first your left wrist, then your right before slicing your throat. Some even speculated that Jack could survive in the mountains for so long by eating the people he caught.

“Whenever Jack came to town, everyone stayed out of his way. Women and children would be ushered into their homes. Men would cluster together, watching as the infamous hunter carried his latest pelts to trade. He was tall and broad. His teeth were rotten, and he never spoke to anyone but the traders.

“So, it surprised the people of Elk Falls when Jack came to town one early spring day with a wolf dog pup trailing behind him.

The pup bounced along, wagging his tail and doing everything that the old mountain man Jack told him to do. Even when he got in the way and the old mountain man kicked the pup, the dog stayed with him, making sure to never get under foot again.

“At the end of the summer, the mountain man returned, and the pup had grown but was still a puppy, bounding alongside, wagging his long tail at everyone they passed. And still the dog stuck by his owner, even when he threw an empty bottle of beer at him, for no particular reason.

“The next spring, Jack and the dog returned, and everyone marveled at the beauty of the dog. Jack was always filthy, needing to bathe. His odor made grown men queasy. The dog was always marvelously white, clean as fresh snow, with piercing blue eyes and a silky coat. The older dog now walked stoically behind his owner, avoiding his feet, patiently waiting for him to come out of the bar. The dog still wagged his tail, low and slow at the people who passed him. He avoid his owner’s feet and ducked when a bottle came at him. And he still followed him home.

“One fall day, Jack left for the mountains and three teenage boys decided to follow Jack. They had grown up going into the woods and calling for Jack. But Jack had gotten older, and they wanted to prove their worth, or some silly nonsense like that. They trailed behind the skilled hunter, laughing at themselves, not sure what they would do to him or his dog.

“Then the hunter and his dog took a left turn off the trail. The boys followed, but soon lost sight of the man. And then it was dark. And they were lost.

“Afraid now, the boys tried to find their way back to the trail, back to town. But they could not. The leader of the little group decided they should bed down for the night until daylight could

guide them back home. The boys made jokes, laughing about how silly they had been. The leader called out, "Jack! Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

"Why would they do that! Boys are so dumb!" Charlotte giggled when Willie put her in a headlock. Mel stared at them until they stopped. She cleared her throat and continued.

"The next day, the parents of the three teens went in search of them. They found their bodies hanging upside down, their wrists and throats cut with writing in blood on each of their foreheads.

"Ollyollyoxenfree."

"That's creepy," April muttered.

"The townspeople swore revenge and gathered a posse of their bravest men. They searched for weeks for the mountain man's home. They never found him. Occasionally, they would see his dog, standing on the edge of the trees, watching them. But he would disappear if anyone tried to approach.

"The first snow came early that year. And the snow was frequent and unrelenting. The townspeople did not know if Jack would survive the winter. They hoped he would not.

"Up in the mountains, hidden in the woods, Jack and his dog Zeke enjoyed the winter at first. Jack had stalked up with plenty of food and supplies. Jack was a lover of the drink and would go into drunken rages, taking it out on the only thing that he could, his poor dog Zeke. Despite his size, Zeke never fought back.

"Then, one spring day, it snowed, and kept snowing for three days. It snowed so much that the snow covered the cabin.

Jack was concerned. They were running low on supplies. 'I could always eat you!' He told the dog with a chuckle.

"Jerk!" Willie said.

Zach sighed. "Please stop interrupting her!"

Willie rolled his eyes at Steve.

“After two weeks inside the tiny cabin, Jack became fed up with waiting. He forced the door open, and he dug and dug. Suddenly, snow came crashing down on him. It smothered him.”

Steve glanced around at everyone. Charlotte was staring wide-eyed and enthralled. Zach was watching his girl with an approving look. Willie was listening, but with his head back on the sofa. April didn't appear to be listening. She was staring at the mirror on the mantel.

“Jack was giving up his struggle, letting the snow claim him when Zeke pulled him out.”

“Aww!” Charlotte reached up and took Willie's drink. “Dogs are awesome!”

“He didn't deserve it,” April mumbled. Steve nudged her this time when Zach shot all of them a warning look.

“Jack was grateful for his dog's actions. This dog that he had been nothing but cruel to for years had just saved him. Jack felt gratitude to something for the first time in his life.” Mel paused, Steve assumed for some dramatic effect. “He decided that he would not kill Zeke after all. But, after almost two weeks of a diet of water, Jack looked at his dog, dying on the ground, and knew what he had to do.”

“Oh, my god! If he kills his dog and eats him, I will be so pissed!” Charlotte spilled part of the drink. “Shit.” She wiped it off her top. Willie took it away from her, pulling her back into his chest. April took a drink of her margarita and rested her head on Steve's shoulder.

“Jack went to the kitchen and got a knife. He looked at the dog, remembering all the fond times they had had. Remembering that this dog had just saved his life despite the horrible way Jack had treated him over the years. He could do this one thing, this

one kind thing for his dog. Jack laid his left hand on the table, spread his fingers wide.” Everyone in the room was looking at Mel now. Even April was gripping Steve’s arm a little tighter. “Looking down at his hand, he assessed them. He didn’t really need his pinky finger for anything. Without it, he would still be able to do his work.”

“What. The. Frick,” Willie mumbled.

“Jack raised the large hunting knife and, with a quick smack, sliced his pinky right off. He tossed it to his dog. Zeke ate it, grateful for the small morsel of food. But in a few days, the dog was dying again, lying on the ground, his breathing shallow. So Jack went to the kitchen, got the knife...”

“No, no, no!” Charlotte covered her ears.

“...laid his left hand on the table and assessed his fingers again. He was never going to get married, so he didn’t need that ring finger. With a fell swoop of the knife, he sliced the finger right off.”

Steve made a face and April held back a laugh when he flexed his finger on both hands, interlacing her fingers through his. Steve’s heart beat tripled in speed. There was no way she couldn’t hear it pounding in his chest.

“After Zeke had gobbled up the finger, Jack sat down on the bed, looking at his knife and drinking the last of his shine. He had held off finishing it, but the pain in his hand was bad, and he needed just enough to take the edge off. But soon, the bottle was empty and a fresh idea came to Jack’s head. Here he was, holding a knife with an enormous animal lying before the fire, watching him. And if the dog really loved him, like he cared for the dog, he wouldn’t mind giving up his life to feed him.

“Zeke’s eyes had not left Jack since the bottle came out. When Jack staggered to his feet, Zeke did something he had never done



before. He growled at him. Jack took a step toward his dog, his left hand dripping blood onto the floor. The dog growled again. Jack became angry. He had sacrificed his fingers for this mutt. He should be grateful. He lunged at the dog and the dog rose to fight back.” Mel paused again.

“A few months later, the snow had melted, and a traveler stumbled across the cabin. He called out to see if anyone was inside. He opened the door, cautiously. Inside the cabin, he found nothing but a human hand, missing two fingers, wrapped around a bottle.

“Some say you can see Jack still on snowy nights, out wandering the hills, looking for someone to offer his dog in his place. They say if he catches you, he hangs you like he would one of the animals from his trapping days and takes your fingers for Zeke. Others say that Zeke will never take the fingers and is only interested in getting his vengeance on the owner who abused him for so long. Are you ready to find out?”

Charlotte glanced out the windows at the woods. April tilted her head, looking at Steve. “That was an interesting ending,” she said. “Are you ready to find out?”

“Just like the warning earlier. Just trying to scare you.” Steve hadn’t found the “Deadly Ghost Story” all that scary. It was a letdown. Maybe they should read another one?

“Great job, babe!” Zach gave his girlfriend a rough pat on the back. Steve didn’t like that Zach was patting his girlfriend like you would a dog.

“Did it really happen?” Charlotte whispered.

“I don’t think so.” Mel shook her head. “Just an old story.”

Charlotte glanced at April.

“The book says it is a true story!”

“Probably one of those myths that adults tell children to keep

them from wandering off in the woods at night,” April assured her friend, reaching out and squeezing her arm. April didn’t look scared either. As she moved, the large mirror on the mantel slowly tipped forward, tumbling to the ground, crashing in front of the group. They all sat, staring at the mirror. Willie rose and inspected the mirror, lifting it from where it had crashed, mirror-side down onto the wood floor. It was somehow not broken.

“That was weird,” Zach said, helping Willie pick up the mirror and place it back in its spot. “There’s even a little lip here, to stop it from falling forward.”

“That has been there for years and never done that!” Charlotte’s eyes had grown wide in fear.

Steve assumed it was just the snow and the story, but the hairs on his neck stood up and April shivered under his arm. He glanced at her. It was a coincidence.

“Just the house settling and popping, with this weird weather,” Zach suggested, plopping next to Mel again.

“I don’t know. That was way too creepy.” Charlotte stood and went to the window, peering out. The group was silent. April watched Charlotte, her brow wrinkled in concern. A single howl broke the silence.

“What was that?” Mel bolted up.

“That sounds like it’s right outside!” April stood and joined Mel at the glass. Steve followed, his hand sliding around her waist. She did not pull away from him. Steve scanned the treeline, looking for signs of dog or wolf or coyote. But nothing appeared.

“I didn’t think there were wolves in Colorado?” Steve said.

“They’re making their way back into the wild.” April glanced up at him. “I read about it.” She shrugged. He smiled. Of course

she had.

“Ow!” Charlotte turned and faced them. She pulled up her sweater, wincing. Three thin scratches were turning red and rising slowly on her arm just above her wrist. “What the hell?”

“You must have scratched yourself outside,” Steve suggested while Willie inspected the arm. No blood came, but the scratches were visible.

Mel stared wide-eyed. “You’ve been marked,” the purple-eyed girl whispered.

April looked at Mel and then at Steve, raising an eyebrow in confusion.

“What? Marked? What does that even mean?” Charlotte yanked her sleeve down, stepping past Willie, glaring at Mel. “What did you do?”

“Babe,” Willie said, resting a hand on her shoulder.

“Marked; it’s something in the supernatural world. It’s like a spirit or something, messing with you,” Mel stuttered, closing the book and bringing it up against her chest like a shield.

“This house isn’t haunted. I’ve been coming here my entire life. If there is anything here, you brought it!” Charlotte looked back out the window. “He’s out there. Isn’t he?” Willie whispered to Charlotte. Her wide eyes had only grown bigger, frantically looking out into the dark.

“I thought she wanted a ghost story?” Mel whispered, looking at April and Steve for support.

“She did. Don’t worry; she wasn’t expecting it to be that good,” Zach told her, patting her again. Steve waited for the “Good girl” that should have followed but didn’t.

Another howl permeated the . April shivered under his arm.

## April

The drinks had hit April hard during the story. She had zoned out for parts of it, admiring the intricate work on the mirror, making a pattern out of the circles. Too many drinks to focus. That was probably all that was wrong with Charlotte. Or she had had too much weed. April had only tried the stuff once, but she had heard of kids having freakouts while on it. Willie convinced Charlotte to come away from the window and sit at the bar.

April was not a fan of being drunk. She was cloudy and numb. Maybe numb was a pleasurable thing to some, but she felt vulnerable. Especially with Zach there. But Steve's arm around her, his hand on her hip, made her feel protected.

"Can we have some food?" April looked up at Steve. He smiled down at her. Maybe it was the booze talking, but Steve had a fresh look about him that night. April couldn't explain it. He wasn't just her next-door-neighbor best friend anymore.

The group made some dinner while Charlotte watched, rubbing her scratches but seeming to relax. Willie had stocked up on all of Charlotte's favorite food: Totino's pizza rolls, mozzarella sticks with hot sauce, and Cup o'Noodles. By the time the food

was on the table, Charlotte seemed to have forgotten about the scratches, the howling, and the story, downing a shot of tequila before settling before the pile of food. The birthday girl sat at the table, giggling as she tried to eat the mozzarella stick and a long line of cheese stretched from her first bite to the last half of the stick in her hand. Mel sniffed a pizza roll and asked Zach if there was garlic in them. Steve made wide eyes at April and she giggled.

April was not feeling hungry, but she ate anyway, slurping down some ramen. A water glass appeared in front of her. Steve sat next to her, his plate piled high with the food. The food helped her feel a little more on the ground.

“We should play a drinking game!” Charlotte announced. April blinked hard. A game for drinking? Weren’t they all drinking just fine without it becoming a game?

“Whatever the birthday girl wants!” Willie jumped up and fetched some cards.

“Keep drinking that water!” Steve took her empty noodle cup, going to the kitchen. While he was gone, she munched on a few pizza rolls from Steve’s plate, sipping her water, observing everyone else. No one seemed as far gone as her. And they all seemed so much more adult than her. This is what her father had done to her. She was the same age as these people, but she was still a baby. She couldn’t handle her alcohol. She didn’t know what was coming next. And all she wanted to do right now was go upstairs and sleep. She couldn’t do that, though. Then she would be as lame as everyone already thought she was.

Would she be this lame if her mother had stuck around? Would her mother have let her sneak out and come get her after she partied too hard? Would she have felt better about leaving her father alone, if her mother had been at home?

Steve set another cup in front of her. April looked at him, wanting to say she didn't want a drink. He smiled and leaned to her, whispering in her ear.

"No alcohol. Just sip it slow." He squeezed her shoulder, and she managed a sloppy smile at him. He was such a nice guy. Such a good-looking, strong, guy. Her father wasn't the only one who had been wrong about him. She touched his hand, squeezing his fingers as a thank you. She looked back across the table and saw Zach staring at her, leaning back in his chair.

She was back in that car, in the backseat, pushing, fighting.

"You okay?" Steve sat next to her, his eyes worried. She took a couple deep breaths, nodding. She needed to focus on Steve. She took his hand and leaned against his shoulder. "I'm okay."

By the end of the game, everyone was looking the way April had felt. She didn't really remember any of the rules, simply doing whatever Steve told her to do. There was something about thumbs with 8s and chugging with aces and trying to rhyme with 9s. April just laughed most of the time, grateful to drink whatever was in her cup. Charlotte won. She drank the cup in the center of the table, one hand in the air, while Steve, Willie, and Zach chanted "Chug, Chug, chug!"

After the game, a cake appeared with the number 18 blazing on the top. They all sang "Happy Birthday" to Charlotte, who applauded them.

"You sound like drunken sailors!" she announced, raising her glass to everyone.

"Well, the drunk part is right!" Zach laughed at himself, getting up and going to the bathroom. April smiled, taking a long gulp from her cup. Steve had put more water in it for her. Mel had laid her head down on the table, her eyes closed. Steve asked and fetched her some water too. Zach didn't even

seem to notice that Mel was looking sweaty and green. Zach was such a jerk. His girlfriend needed something and Steve, not her boyfriend, was taking care of her. April watched as Steve put his hand on Mel's shoulder, just like he had on hers. She watched him smile and Mel smiled back. She felt jealous. That was new.

Willie set a piece of cake in front of April, breaking off her stare. It was a rich fudge cake with chocolate frosting. April could only handle a few bites. Normally, she could have handled half the cake. Mel couldn't eat any, despite Zach's demands that she needed to stop acting like this and eat her damn cake. She was embarrassing him. Charlotte and Willie did not seem to notice; they were feeding each other.

"I think we need to go to bed!" Zach helped Mel to her feet, telling them all goodnight and apologizing for her behavior before disappearing into their room.

"She better not puke in there." Charlotte wiped Willie's lip free of chocolate frosting.

"She'll be okay." Willie purposely put more chocolate frosting on his lips. Charlotte grinned at him, leaning forward to clean the frosting off with her tongue. April made a face, getting up and going to the front window. The snow had piled up on their cars.

"Maybe we won't be going home tomorrow." She glanced at Steve in the glass's reflection. It was so clean, it was as if he were standing outside, watching her.

"Good." April forced her mind to focus on something other than Steve, smiling down at Mel just like he had smiled down at her. "I think I should go to bed too." Steve nodded, glancing at Charlotte and Willie. Charlotte had moved to join Willie in his chair.

"Probably a good call. Good night, guys!" He followed her

upstairs.

April read another message from her father. He told her he was expecting her home no later than noon tomorrow. She dropped her phone on the table and went to her bag, digging out her pjs.

When she came out of the bathroom, Steve had pulled out the sofa bed for her and was fluffing up a pillow.

“How come you aren’t drunk?” April asked, crawling into the bed, regretting coming up there. She could feel the bar of the frame in her back. The numbness had worn off and a headache was creeping around her. She covered her eyes with her hand.

“I have a little more experience drinking than you. Lesson one: Don’t pound margaritas while in a hot tub.” Steve pulled the covers over her, smiling down at her. “I put a glass of water there for you. And a trash can here, just in case.” She thanked him, pulling her hand away from her eyes. He lingered above her for a moment, then moved over to the smaller couch.

April watched him lay out a blanket and strip off his shirt. His back was pure muscle under his dark skin. Her cloudy mind went back to the conversation she had had with Charlotte at the ski lodge while they waited for the boys to finish their runs. April and Charlotte had each ordered a Diet Coke and one basket of chili fries to split between them.

“I’m so happy you’re here!” Charlotte ate a few fries, sipping the soda.

“Me too. I’ll probably be in so much trouble, but I don’t even care.” Charlotte tilted her head. “I snuck out. My dad does not know where I am. He thinks I’m at home reading.”

“Well, April Harrison. Never in my life did I expect you to sneak out. And you did it for me!” Charlotte hugged her again. “You must love me!”

“Of course I love you! You’re my bestie!” They munched on



fries, enjoying their prime spot, watching people coming in from their runs with a heater blasting next to them.

"I'm sorry about Zach." Charlotte broke their silence. April was surprised. Charlotte never apologized for anything.

"It's okay." She tried to smile. "I mean, nothing happened. Just almost." April remembered what it felt like, Zach up against her, his breath on her neck, asking her to touch him.

"Isn't that enough? I didn't want to invite him, but Willie insisted. He was pretty certain that if you didn't come, Steve wouldn't."

"Why? Steve loves to ski and he and Willie are best friends."

"Oh, April," Charlotte shook her head. "You really are clueless."

"What are you talking about?" April was confused. Sure, Steve had lied when he told her he was coming up here today instead of last night. He had changed his plans for her. Big deal. He knew she would feel guilty and not come if he had told her the truth.

"Steve is 100% head over heels for you."

April blinked. What? Steve? No!

"We're just really good friends."

"Yeah, maybe you. But Steve is in love with you. You can see it when he looks at you. You know half the school wants to be with him and he blows everyone off. For you."

April didn't believe her. She could think of times when Steve had other girlfriends. They never lasted long, but he was a high school boy. The only thing he was ever focused on longer than a couple weeks was baseball. She had even helped him ask out his homecoming date for that year.

Or...she had talked him into asking out a girl for homecoming, because he had wanted her to go with him. She had stayed home,

reading.

“Just watch him when they come back. Maybe you’ll finally see.”

When the boys found them, she watched Steve, looking for signs he was anything but a friend. He seemed normal, taking her drink, but then he said he had missed her on the slopes. He took her skis, and she realized for the first time that they behaved more like a couple than a pair of friends. When he asked her what was wrong while helping her out of her ski boots, she lied. She was no longer concerned about Zach or her father.

She was wondering if maybe the guy she had been waiting for had been living next to her the whole time.

In her drunken state, she was feeling very brave. “Steve.”

“Hm?”

“You could come share this bed with me. If you want.” Steve glanced over his shoulder at her. Surprised. “Are you sure? I’m okay on the couch.”

She nodded. “It isn’t very comfortable. But it’s better than that couch.” The numbness gave her the advantage to not overthink any situation.

Steve tossed the pillow over to her and snapped off the light before crawling in next to her. He kept his distance, cradling his head in his hands, staring at the ceiling.

“Steve,” she said again. He looked over at her. “I like you.” He smiled, flipping to his side.

“I like you too, April.”

She knew he didn’t get it. She tried to think of words to tell him differently. But nothing came to mind. Instead, she pulled herself to him, pressing her lips to his again. Tequila gave her courage. In the hot tub and here.

He didn’t pull away, but he didn’t kiss her back. Tequila could

not hide that. She pulled back.

“Oh,” he said, his eyes widening on her. She was holding her breath.

“April,” he said. “There are rules about doing things with a girl who is drunk. Maybe we can talk about this tomorrow?”

Why did he have to be such a nice, sweet, caring guy?

April had nodded an agreement before rolling away. Sober April would have been up all night, replaying those moments in her head. Sober April would never have done this. Her father was wrong about one thing. Steve was not someone she had to worry about.