

Visitor

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Chapter One

As I drove north, my mind rambled.

After forty years of teaching, I had recently retired. To my dismay, a feeling of uselessness swelled in this elective unemployed state, crowding out fun. My calendar bulged with events. Each day overflowed with activities, both personal and civic. Yet a void existed. An intrinsic satisfaction eluded me. Despite my involvement, I felt I no longer had anything of value to give to anyone.

At the height of my melancholia, my nephew Joe called to ask for parenting advice. During our conversation, he commented, “Aunt Betty, you’re a great role model. I admire your ability to adapt and enjoy life's many changes.”

His compliment nudged me into reality. Like other transitional times, this stage would present an array of challenges and multiple rewards. I wondered how I allowed my ego to interfere with earned leisure.

Returning my focus to Joe, I asked, “Are you and your fiancée Nancy ready for your wedding?”

“I think so. Our last arrangement involves you. After I had raved about your qualifications, Nancy decided she would like you to care for her daughter, Jennifer, while we go on our honeymoon. I agree.”

No longer feeling adrift, I accepted, with humble appreciation, their offer to care for

Jenny.

In the subsequent weeks, I was impressed to observe how the love-struck couple prepared Jennifer for my extended visit. The four-year-old and I instantly established a warm rapport upon our first meeting. Still, her mother, Nancy, insisted I spend a weekend at their townhouse in the city. During those two days, Jenny and I took abundant pleasure in getting to know each other.

Since then, our phone conversations have reflected her eagerness for our upcoming adventure.

During each call, Jenny asked, “Aunt Betty, will I see you today?”

“No,” I replied, “but we’ll be together soon.”

Following the marriage ceremony, Jennifer and I would stay at Tony’s log cabin located in

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idyllic country seclusion.

Almost there, I exited the freeway and followed a narrow road surrounded by massive trees. Giant redwoods lined the meandering asphalt, creating a shaded tunnel effect. As in past visits, I marveled at the ancient vegetation.

Missing my small, maneuverable car, I slowly and carefully took each curve of the winding road very seriously. Relying on her motherly instincts, Nancy recommended I rent an all-terrain SUV in case of unexpected adverse weather conditions. She feared a rainstorm could severely damage our only way out. Nancy didn’t trust the hard-packed decomposed granite covering the long twisting road from the public street to the vast property.

I adhered to her suggestion, thinking no precaution seemed too great to protect Jennifer.

I inched up a hill, enjoying the remnants of a sunny day. On the next turn, I caught a glimpse of the picturesque retreat. At a sluggish speed, I approached the house and parked. Before I could leave the car, Nancy stood beside me.

From the open window, I attempted to hug her. “Hi. Where’s Jennifer?”

In her typical fashion, Nancy rattled off an elaborate response. “She’s in her playhouse. When we’re here, she gets up early every morning and slips down into the root cellar, where she entertains herself until I call her to breakfast.

“Joe says she would stay there night and day if we let her.” Nancy sighed. What’s

really nice is that she's safe and content down there."

Half listening to her, I automatically nodded in agreement.

I quickly retrieved my lightweight suitcase and followed her into the house. Nancy wanted me to hear more. "At first, it really wasn't the kind of place for a little girl to spend time in, but things have come a long way since we arrived. Joe covered the unfinished surfaces with drywall and painted the room with a lavender hue. Then I decorated the space." As she spoke, Nancy strolled into the kitchen. "Come see it. Undoubtedly, Jenny will con you into going down there with her, so I'm sure you'll appreciate its present appearance." Behind her, I said, "I just want to be with Jennifer."

Engaging in a graceful pivoting motion, Nancy turned toward me. A pleased grin

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dominated her attractive face. With one hand, she reached down as if to touch the wooden floor. She raised a trap door from its seamless concealment in the parquet design. In a single file, we descended a short flight of creaky steps, transporting us into a child's fantasy world of texture and imagination. Supple fabrics, muted colors, and a host of miniature objects beckoned me to enter this space of wonder and whimsy.

Engrossed in serious activity, Jennifer didn't seem to notice our arrival. Dressed in embroidered jeans and a lacy blouse, as if part of a painting, Jenny fit perfectly into this artistic scene.

"Aunt Betty's here."

Looking up at us, the adorable child said, "Wow." Then, like a bouncing ball, she sprung into my open arms.

After a momentary embrace, she took me over to her dolls. Beaming with pride, she introduced me to her little family.

As Nancy marched up the steps, she joked. "I can take a hint. I know when I'm not wanted."

Playful minutes melted away in Jenny's happy land of make-believe.

Sometime later, her mother's cheerful voice interrupted our game and offered us an invitation: "The afternoon sun is starting to go down. Let's run outside and see if we can catch

it.”

I followed Jenny up the stairs, out the front door, and onto the porch. We joined her mother, who was sitting on a swing. With Jenny nestled between us, Nancy and I pushed down on the soles of our shoes to activate the swing.

Joe had fashioned the oversized moving seat using wooden scraps from the cabin. Nancy added the comfortable corduroy-covered cushions and contrasting pillows. The three of us sat in awe as we soaked up the unfolding color show of reds, purples, and orange.

A beguiling hush descended upon us. In delicate increments, evening fell, and a slight chill engulfed us.

Hand in hand, we entered the dark house just as a wash of white light flashed. Its brightness illuminated the entire interior of the cozy kitchen.

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“Joe’s home,” Jennifer piped up.

“Jenny’s right. Joe will be here in fifteen minutes. Since this area is off the beaten path, we can see the beam from his headlights a few miles away.”

“How intriguing,” I said.

“Not really,” Nancy commented in a matter-of-fact tone. You see, the start of his property is on a hill a bit higher than the one this house is on. Even though thousands of acres separate the two peaks, light is visible from both points.”

Following her detailed explanation, I tried to express the value of this phenomenon. “Since there’s no phone service up here, it must feel comforting for Joe to be able to signal you this way.”

“I guess so, but if we don’t light up the cabin, we’ll scare him.” After striking one match, she skillfully lit two propane lanterns.

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Chapter Two

I awoke at dawn with expectancy. As the hours passed, caterers, relatives, and friends invaded the little house. By noon, to keep Jennifer clear of the commotion, I took her along with

two dolls for a stroll by the stream.

“Aunt Betty, I think my babies are tired.”

“Then let’s rest.”

While we rocked her dolls to sleep, Jenny asked, “Is my Daddy coming to the party?” “Honey, I don’t know.”

Her grown-up-sounding words accompanied a somber expression: “He promised to visit but hasn’t. Maybe he doesn’t know where we’re staying.”

I didn’t want her to feel rejected, so I agreed, “You’re probably right.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I thought it imprudent of me to give her false hope, especially since I knew nothing about this man.

“Aunt Betty, could you call him and tell him where I am?”

Instead of answering her question, I decided to elicit additional information. “What does your mother think about your father visiting?”

“Mommy doesn’t like him. She says Joe is going to be my new daddy. So I don’t need my old daddy anymore.”

Instead of waiting for me to comment, she pointed toward a nearby fir. Her face brightened. “Look at the gray squirrel. I like its big tail.”

Relieved that she had changed both the subject and her mood, I said, “Yes, I see him. He’s adorable.”

Leaving her dolls behind, Jennifer ran toward the tree. “Could we take him home with us?”

While cradling the two pretend babies in my arms, I joined Jenny. “He wouldn’t be happy in a house. Squirrels like living outdoors. But speaking of homes, I guess we’d better get back to yours to prepare for your mother’s party.”

“Is it time for me to wear my new pink dress?”

“Yes indeed. Would you like to say goodbye to Mr. Squirrel before we go?” Waving her petite hand, Jennifer shouted, “Mr. Squirrel, bye-bye. I hope you stay in our

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trees so you can meet my daddy when he comes. I know he’ll like you just as much as I do.”

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Chapter Three

Throughout the marriage ceremony, I stood close to Jennifer. She seemed enthralled by the meaningful event.

“Mommy looks just like one of my Barbie dolls, doesn’t she?” Jennifer asked.

“I think your mom looks even prettier.” I gave Jenny a little squeeze. And so do you.”

Jenny leaned into me. “I like weddings. Maybe Mommy can get married again next week.”

Her innocent remark initially made me laugh, but then a tinge of sorrow clouded my joyful disposition.

These two young adults had previously suffered through the pangs of separation and divorce. I could only hope Nancy and Joe had gleaned enough wisdom from their struggles to make this new union last.

With the sacred rites complete, the party began. Despite the absence of electricity and many other modern-day conveniences, the reception proved to be a huge success. Musicians performed toe-tapping tunes, delectable delicacies were prepared over an open fire pit, and the great outdoors provided a fantastic ambiance.

At dusk, the last of the crew departed.

Within the cabin, subdued murmurings of love slipped through the rounded walls as the bride and groom changed their clothes.

I helped Jennifer with her shower. She put on her pajamas and asked if she could sleep in her playhouse. After chatting for a while, she readily agreed it would be better for her to rest in her room.

When the newlyweds entered her space, I gazed at the enchanting pair. Dressed in matching blue jeans and white T-shirts, they personified true bliss. Together, these attentive parents read their child her favorite story. When the couple decided to depart, Jennifer seemed tuckered out. She dreamily whispered goodnight from underneath her pastel coverlet to her mother and stepdad.

As the couple left the house, I walked a few steps behind them and overheard Nancy say, “I feel uneasy about leaving.”

Joe tried to reassure her. “Don’t worry. Out here in the woods, Jenny’s far from harm's way.”

Before I could confirm his sentiments, they were in their four-wheel drive SUV. From the raised porch, I watched the rearview lights of their vehicle fade into the pitch of night. The sound of their engine droned on long after all visible traces of them vanished. I waited to catch a glimpse of the red beams to reappear when the car reached the highest hill, but for some reason, I never saw any sign of them. After waiting and watching for several more minutes, I guessed the taillights were not bright enough to shine through the long distance. Not questioning my conjecture any further, I slipped into the house.

Later on, I sat outside enjoying the countryside stillness. Sipping some hot tea, I reflected upon the beautiful day. Among the many strangers, Jennifer exhibited her friendly nature. I realized she could have comfortably stayed with a host of other people. A hushed gratitude caused my eyes to moisten. Nancy created an endearing bond between us by choosing me to watch her precious daughter.

My gaze turned to the pages of a novel. Under the limited light emitted from a propane lantern, my tired eyes quickly faltered and dissuaded me from reading. At ten o’clock, I extinguished all the lights, entered my room, and, filled with contentment, crawled under toasty warm blankets.

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Chapter Four

A flash of light caused me to bolt straight up in bed. The dial of a battery-powered clock illuminated a scarlet 2:00 a.m.

Remembering Nancy’s earlier account, I knew a vehicle headed for the house. Although it didn’t seem logical for the couple to disturb us in the middle of the night, I attempted to calm myself by thinking they needed to fetch an essential item before traveling.

Persistent waves of protectiveness washed over me. A recurrent question resounded in my head: *What if someone else approached?*

Almost without thinking, I slipped into my robe, rushed into the kitchen, and opened the door to the root cellar. In bare feet, I ran into Jennifer's room. I whisked the child into my arms and carried her down the squeaky steps. She moaned briefly and smiled through her deep sleep. For a few brief moments, I held her close. I rocked her until her breathing was steady and deep. Gently, I laid her slender form on the tiny chenille-covered settee.

Drenched in cold sweat, I returned to the kitchen and closed the hatch door. I grabbed an area rug from an adjacent room to cover the latch. An instant later, I realized I had drawn attention to the security spot instead of hiding it.

For a second time, I snatched up the rug. As if pitching a ball, I flung it high in the air. It landed on the sofa with a soft thud.

Sitting still in the darkness, I waited. All the while, I attended to the outside noises. Had they been there all along?

Besides the chatter of many crickets, the wind rustled the treetops, and the stream played a refreshing song. At another time, this collective tranquil hum would soothe me. Right then, these combined natural melodies initiated an annoying agitation. I feared they would conceal sounds from an intruder.

How wrong I was.

The thunderous roar of an engine jolted my store of adrenalin.

This rude disturbance caused me to reformulate my plans.

Remembering Joe once told me he stored a shotgun in the attic, I stumbled around and found the dangling rope attached to the captain's stairs. Strength found its way into my typically feeble arms. I pulled down the heavy steps, hoisted myself up the narrow portal, and retrieved

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the loaded weapon, along with a box of shells. I tucked the box in my pocket. Its weight dragged down the left side of my robe. As I moved, it bounced off my thigh as if to remind me of both its presence and its dangerous potential.

Although contrary to my pacifist philosophy, I felt convinced this represented the wisest

choice. It occurred to me that my beliefs easily swayed when tested. I settled my moral dilemma by rationalizing. Indeed, saving the child was a valid excuse to seize any available means of self-defense.

Without further hesitation, I lowered myself into the fanciful retreat and drew the trapdoor above my head to a close. In the cool darkness, I clutched the wooden stock. My tense body matched its rigid structure.

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Chapter Five

I remained huddled on the hidden staircase. During what seemed like an inordinate period, the mechanical noise grew to a deafening pitch until the ground underneath me shook—minutes clicked by.

An abrupt silence, like a roar of thunder, awakened an ominous sensation to vibrate within me. I sucked in my breath.

A squeaking began, ending with a slam. My mouth opened. To prevent it from emitting a scream, I forced air to escape from my expanded lungs.

Several intervals of knocking accompanied a masculine voice shouting, “I know it must be late, but I’ve traveled so far. You must let me in.”

The man’s voice bellowed above his rapid tapping on the window. “Look, I’m not here to scare or hurt anyone. You have to believe me. Just give me what I want, and then I’ll leave you alone.”

The faint pounding grew louder with his emphatic message, and the floorboards overhead growled.

With blood-curdling certainty, I knew this horrid man entered the cabin. I aimed the weapon toward the closed trap above me. My right index finger laced itself around the cold metal trigger.

His reverberating, rough voice yelled, “This doesn’t have to take long.”

As he moved from room to room, his voice drifted. I strained my ears to hear him. “Where are you? This place isn’t very big. Don’t you realize sooner or later I’ll find you?”

Listening to crashing and clanking noises above, I conjured up visions of him ransacking

and vandalizing this appealing home.

Not knowing for how long, anxious and trembling, I sat in the dimness.

His voice and footsteps stopped. I heard the door close with a bang.

I checked on Jennifer with great concern. Like other children, this dear one could sleep through just about anything.

Hearing her rhythmic breathing calmed me long enough to think more rationally.

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The moments dragged in the silence. This man probably wouldn't leave until he obtained whatever he came here to get. Not to place Jennifer at risk, I needed to seize the opportunity to confront him while she slept. Once she awakened, he would discover her. What would happen then?

My gut told me I needed to act immediately. Once I discovered what this man wanted, I could give it to him.

His words had told me once satisfied, he would leave.

Could it be that simple? Could I believe him?

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Chapter Six

Praying I had assessed the situation correctly, I slowly raised the trapdoor. In stealth-like movements, I crawled out onto the kitchen floor. My fingers closed the hatch in slow increments.

Gradually, I slithered across the smooth wooden surface toward the uncovered window.

Rising my head to eye level, I peered into the blackness. I blinked a few times, but as if I were blind, I couldn't see a thing. From above came a beam of light. I looked toward the sky. The full moon peeked from underneath a passing cloud. In direct line of sight, I spied a dark, nondescript pickup truck.

I turned and caught a glimpse of a figure sitting on the swing. A churning whirlpool of terror, like acid, burned my skin. Even in his hunched position, he appeared enormous—much larger than anyone I'd ever seen. His head buried in his two oversized hands obscured his face.

As I stared at him, I began to feel his vulnerability. Without considering another thought,

I rose. With one long stride, I reached the door, grabbed its brass handle, and opened it. The man brazenly stepped out onto the porch.

Pointing the menacing shotgun at the intruder, I managed to spit out, “Don’t you even think about moving.”

Just as he raised his head, the light disappeared. Once again, clouds blocked the moonlight. What I saw amounted to a vague outline of a man.

“Who are you?” his hoarse, deep voice startled me.

My stomach quivered. “The question is, who are you?”

“Nobody,” he retorted.

“Well, whoever you are, take small steps and walk to your truck. Get going, or I’ll pull the trigger.”

His feet went backward until he sat on the swing.

“Didn’t you hear me? Get out of here before I kill you.”

Sincere conviction accompanied his words. “Please do me that favor. Go ahead. Just blow me away.”

Ignoring his request, I demanded, “What do you want?”

His despondent voice whispered, “It doesn’t really matter. Does it?”

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“Let me be the judge of that.” The heavy weapon bobbed up and down within my nervous grip.

“What I want is the one thing I can’t have.”

This strange giant wept. As if in a state of tortured anguish, his repetitive wailing echoed a deep sense of suffering.

Not wanting to be fooled by his dramatic display, I interrupted his crying by repeating, “Will you please tell me what this is all about?”

After a short while, he ended his lament by replacing it with a growling inflection: “It’s about my daughter Jenny. I want to see her.”

An acute annoyance flared up within me in response to his hostile tone. Anger seemed to temper my fright. Demanding answers, I yelled at him. “If you’re her father, why would you

sneak up here like a thief in the night? Why wouldn't you call Nancy and make proper arrangements to see your beautiful child?"

Like an enraged bear ready to strike, he raised his colossal form. The snarling quality of his voice matched his fierce countenance. "Why? 'cause the judge ordered me to stay away from Nancy and my Jenny. Sure, I'm no saint, but no matter what I've done, I've never been a threat to my child."

"So you're violating a court order in addition to scaring the wits out of me."

He quieted his voice a bit. "Not exactly. Nancy went on and on in front of his honor's bench. Finally, the judge suggested I stay away for a while to shut her up. Well, I obeyed him. When our next court date arrived, Nancy's attorney arranged a postponement. "All these months later, I still haven't seen my little girl."

He bowed his head. Through his sniffles, I heard the sounds of genuine sadness. "Lady, I'm sorry. This was a crazy idea. Let me ease back into my truck and out of your life."

With slow, short steps, I moved a few paces backward. With the long gun barrel, I motioned the stranger forward.

Like a dejected pup, he lumbered toward his vehicle.

The heavy door made a grating noise as he swung it open. A light from the cab revealed glistening tears streaming down his face.

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"Sorry," he said.

An ashen cast descended upon him in the unnatural glare like a ghostly shroud. The color drained from his skin, and his tremendous strength seemed to wither away. The gravity of his expression alerted me to the depths of his depression. I was sympathetic to his situation and convinced myself that only I could help this desperate man.

"Wait," I cried out. "I'll let you see Jennifer for a few minutes. But one false move, and you're a dead man."

His chin lifted. "What are you saying? When and where can I see her?"

"Right here this morning when she wakes up."

His face was like a rubber mask, and he took on a different persona. Although

streaked with fresh tears, it conveyed the essence of joy.

Nodding my elbow toward the front door, I ordered, “Come inside and get cleaned up.”

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Chapter Seven

Like an obedient child, the strange man entered the small dwelling and stood before the porcelain basin.

I temporarily placed the gun on the table. Contorting my body, I attempted to lean over it. Through my robe, the box of shells banged against the table leg. I wondered if the man realized what caused the thumping noise.

Since anxiety spilled out to my shaky fingers, it took several attempts before I successfully struck a match.

In the faint light, I could see him reach out. “Here, let me light the lantern.”

I screamed, “Don’t come any closer!”

He froze in place.

Once illumination flooded the space, I salvaged the weapon.

He continued to stand absolutely still until I pointed the barrel toward the sink.

I felt more at ease when he proceeded in its direction.

With water splashing and soap suds bubbling up to the ceiling, he ducked his entire head under the faucet. Still dripping wet, he turned and faced me.

After a few seconds, I realized he needed a towel. I pulled one out of a cabinet drawer and handed it to him.

“Perhaps you’d like to take a nap in there.” I pointed the gun at the door to my room.

He acknowledged my suggestion by slipping into the guest quarters.

Left standing alone in the kitchen, I felt my blood loudly pumping through my aching heart and, subsequently, gushing through my veins.

What was this all about?

Joe never mentioned an abusive ex-husband. Jennifer referred to her father most

positively. Nancy could sometimes act a bit theatrical, but she didn't strike me as the kind of woman who would deliberately hurt anyone, especially not Jennifer. She must have good reason to keep Jenny away from her dad.

Then why did I believe this man? Why did I let him stay? At any rate, this business didn't concern me. My role here didn't give me the right to decide who should or shouldn't see Jennifer.

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Paranoid thoughts spun in my exhausted brain. I imagined Jenny's father to be a person who occasionally experienced unpredictable episodes of irrational, maniacal behaviors. Then again, this man could be just about anyone, only pretending to be a loving parent. He could be a common thief or someone under the influence of mind-altering narcotics.

Convinced I must force him to vacate the premises, I began formulating a new strategy when a sweet voice interrupted me. "Auntie, where are you? I need to use the bathroom."

Trying not to make noise, I gingerly placed the gun on the floor. I pulled open the concealed door and climbed down the short flight of steps. In the shadowy light, I could see Jenny's face. A dominating impulse pleaded with me to wrap her in my arms, carry her to the car, and drive far away. Since I had tossed the keys to the SUV on the dresser in the room where the stranger slept, removing her from this potentially perilous scene seemed impossible. "Jenny, sweetheart, take my hand. I'll bring you to the bathroom."

She lingered, trying to decide on a toy to carry with her.

Remembering I left the gun on the kitchen floor, I wanted to enter the room without her, to stow it away.

"Jenny, wait on the bottom step till I call you. Then you can go use the restroom."

In her grogginess, she robotically obliged.

Before I could see him, I felt his clammy touch.

"Let me help you." His manly voice assaulted my ears.

"Daddy, Daddy, I knew you would come," Jennifer squealed.

In a flash, we three were in the kitchen. Jenny snuggled up in her father's embrace while

I frantically searched the room for the shotgun.

All my worst fears came crashing down on me as I heard Jenny say, “Did you come to take me away with you while Mommy’s gone?”

A bizarre grin flashed across his face.

That was it. This four-year-old figured it out. Jenny’s father came here to kidnap her, and I foolishly gave him the chance to do so.

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Chapter Eight

Standing beside me in the kitchen, still holding Jenny, the stranger chuckled. Then he reminded the child, “Don’t you need to use the bathroom?” He lowered her feet to the floor. As Jennifer ran to relieve herself, he urgently explained, “I know this looks bad, but to avoid Jenny from seeing the gun, I stashed it in the bedroom closet.” His eyes bulged, and his lips curled, giving him a hideous appearance, but his subsequent statement sounded authentic. “Believe me. I’m not going to hurt you.”

At a loss for words, I just stared at him.

Within a few moments, Jenny ran back into his awaiting arms. Even in the diffused light, I could see her entire form exuding happiness. Glancing at her dad’s face, I witnessed a similar glow.

It seemed clear I was invisible to them as they reveled in their reunion. Like it or not, I did what I did.

Moments later, the two of them headed for Jenny’s playroom. I followed, sat down, and, akin to an unseen phantom, watched father and daughter reacquaint.

They participated in a series of pretend scenarios. Jenny’s father sat on a dwarfed chair next to a miniature table during a tea party, similar to a male version of Alice in Wonderland. Every so often, he peered at his child with extraordinary intensity. Before this date, I had never observed any parent study their offspring with such scrutiny. He attempted to catalog her many developmental changes during his long absence.

Hours past.

Bright sunlight streamed down the root cellar from a small high corner window,

replacing the sepia luminescence from the propane lantern. Intruding upon the laughter, I offered to prepare breakfast.

His eyes sparkled when he said, "I'll fix us something."

Her father lifted Jennifer into his arms and carried her up the stairs. "What would you like to eat, honey?"

Jenny just shrugged her shoulders.

He perused the pantry, pulled out a cereal box, and poured some in a bowl. Next, he

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skinned a banana and made a silly face from its ripeness over the flakes. His creativity provoked a pleasant reaction from Jennifer. With apparent pleasure, she consumed all of her food. Their merriment resumed. Giggles and smiles dominated their interactions. Showering her with tender love, he made a positive impression. He certainly didn't appear to be a villain in all this gaiety. I attempted to excuse his trespassing into this cabin only a few hours earlier by blaming his actions on his high level of frustration.

From the corner of my vision, I noticed Jennifer yawning. She rubbed her eyes. Alerted to her signs of fatigue, her father announced, "Because there's much work to be done, I must go now."

He kissed Jennifer goodbye.

While he transferred her into my arms, he said, "Thanks for this great gift."

I felt a hot flush splash from my cheeks to my lips as I slanted them upward.

He politely held the door open with his shoulder so we could step outside.

It seemed important to ask, "Don't you even want to know who I am?"

First, he smiled at Jennifer, then made eye contact with me. "For some time now, I've known you're a living saint."

His flattery reinforced my conviction. I had made the right decision, allowing him to visit Jenny.

The frail body in my embrace began to wriggle.

"Let me down," she squealed.

Understanding her desire to hug him again, I lowered Jennifer onto the weathered surface.

With small running steps, she started to follow her father.

His voice conveyed firm authority. “Jenny, you stay right there on the porch. I promise we’ll be together real soon.”

In haste, I reached Jennifer and held her tiny arms. She didn’t notice my touch or the puddles of cold dew beneath her feet. Concurring with him, I offered, “I’ll do everything in my power to help you keep your promise.”

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While he slowly nodded, his features projected sternness as he said, “Damn right you will.”

Before I could respond, Jenny wriggled from my gentle grip. Her fingers pointed to the forest, while her lips shouted, “Daddy, Daddy, look up in the big tree. It’s my friend, Mr. Squirrel.”

Her father didn’t acknowledge his sweet child.

Instead, his truck door groaned as he opened and closed it.

Perhaps it was just the sun's reflection on his windshield, but he appeared to have a glazed look on his face.

To get his attention, I took a few long strides past Jennifer.

By then, he had backed up and was turning his truck around.

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Chapter Nine

I quickly carried Jennifer and her favorite doll into the cabin. I grabbed my car keys, and without locking the door, I placed her in her car seat in the SUV. I drove at a safe speed into town. During the entire trip, Jenny talked nonstop about her father’s visit. I was too busy concentrating, so I didn’t comment or respond.

At the police station, the almost deserted lot gave me plenty of parking options. I left Jennifer at the reception desk with a female officer and followed Chief Larson to his office.

As if in a trance, I told him about my unexpected visitor. In conclusion, I exclaimed, “As Jenny’s father accelerated his truck, the wind lifted a tarp covering its bed. Standing on the raised porch, a vivid image registered in my mind--Nancy and Joe, heaped side by side like old rag dolls, had matching daggers protruding from their bloodstained T-shirts.”