

1.

Tommy Gunderson woke in the middle of the night to the howling of the wind and the siren of his home's security system. *Probably an animal*, he thought, still half dreaming. But the system deployed a pattern recognition program calibrated to avoid false alarms from deer or raccoons. The alarm meant an intruder of the two-legged kind, intent unknown.

The swoop of the alarm seemed to deepen as Tommy threw the covers off and rolled out of bed. He pulled on a hooded black sweatshirt to match the black sweatpants he slept in and stepped sockless into a pair of running shoes. Fully awake now, he strode down the hallway to the kitchen, where he tapped on the space bar of his computer's keyboard and, when the machine lit up, clicked on the video feed to see what was going on. Thermal imaging revealed the orange heat signature of a human, crouched low by the edge of his fishpond.

Tommy moved quickly down the hallway again and threw open the door to his father's bedroom. Still sleeping, present and accounted for. He'd given the older man's caregiver the night off. Whoever was crouching by the pond was definitely uninvited.

Tommy didn't like uninvited guests.

He walked swiftly to the back door, grabbed the heavy black flashlight that hung from a hook by its strap, and hid it in the pouch of his sweatshirt. The moon was full, casting light on the yard, across the pond, and out toward the woods beyond.

He felt his heart rate quicken and was bracing himself for the cold when his cell phone rang from the kitchen counter where he'd left it to charge.

"Mr. Gunderson?" a woman's voice said.

"You got him."

"Sorry to wake you—this is the East Salem police. We have an automated alert from your system. Is everything all right?"

"You guys are fast," he said, keeping his voice low. In a community of wealthy estates like his, the police took special care to assist the residents whose taxes paid their salaries and funded their children's schools.

"Do you need assistance?" the dispatcher asked. "We already have a car in the area."

He quickly considered. "If it's no bother. I'll meet him at the gate."

Armed with his flashlight, Tommy went to the front door, tapped the security code on the keypad to disarm the system, then stepped out into the darkness. He walked briskly, keeping to the shadows, rounded the side of the house, and trotted up the driveway. Gold and rust-colored leaves had started to drop from the trees. He avoided stepping on them, lest he alert the intruder.

Tommy recognized the cop in the squad car waiting at the gate. Frank DeGidio, like most of the local cops, worked out at Tommy's gym. Frank was a burly bear of a man with a swarthy complexion, thick black eyebrows, a permanent five o'clock shadow, and bloodshot eyes.

"What's he doing by the pond?" DeGidio asked, staring in the direction of the intruder. Tommy's house sat on ten landscaped acres, with another twelve acres of woods beyond the cleared lot. The half-acre pond was at the edge of the woods, about a hundred yards from the house.

"I stocked it with rainbow," Tommy replied. "Maybe he's fishing?"

"Without a license," DeGidio rasped, "at three in the morning? That's gotta be illegal."

"Probably a kid," Tommy guessed. "Just give him a warning and a ride home."

DeGidio opened the trunk of the squad car and handed Tommy a Kevlar vest. Tommy hesitated.

"Probably a kid, but you never know," the cop said.

WAKING HOURS

“Does this make me look fat?” Tommy asked.

“Donuts make you look fat,” DeGidio said. “I speak from experience.”

The vest fit tightly over Tommy’s muscular physique. The cop adjusted his jacket to make sure he could reach both the Glock 9 on his right hip and the Taser on his left.

They moved quietly, Tommy leading the way. As they neared the water’s edge, Tommy saw that whoever was there was dressed in white.

Ten feet away, their presence still undetected, he saw that the intruder was a woman. Stepping closer, he heard a low animal-like sound.

“Can I help you?” he asked, exchanging glances with DeGidio.

She turned. She was elderly, probably well into her nineties, her pale face a desiccated mask of leathery wrinkles. Coarse black whiskers protruded from her chin. Her thin, cracked lips curled inward, her hair a wild snarl of unruly white wisps, so thin that in spots the moonlight shone off her age-spotted scalp. Her eyes were dark and watery, darting about. She was barefoot. Her nightgown was muddy. A strand of spittle hung from the corner of her mouth.

Tommy knelt down beside her and spoke softly. “It must be past your bedtime,” he said. “I think we need to find out where you live.”

She paid no attention to him but shook her head violently back and forth, speaking to herself in a low mutter. “No, no, no . . .”

He leaned in closer.

“Luck’s fairy tale can go the real diamond.”

“Ma’am?” Tommy said, louder now.

No response.

DeGidio made a circular motion around his ear. “Alzheimer’s,” he said. “That or rabies.”

Tommy tried again. “Can we give you a ride home?”

This time she looked at him. “*Lux ferre*,” she said, her eyes widening. “*Le ali congolare di mondo*.”

“Somebody’s off her meds,” the cop said. “What’s she saying?”

“Something about luck’s fairy,” Tommy said. “Hang on.”

He found his cell phone, tapped the camcorder icon, and held the phone a few inches from the woman’s face. It was too dark to get a video image, but at least he could record her words.

“Good idea,” DeGidio said. “I’m guessing she left her ID in her other nightgown.”

The old woman turned to Tommy. “Do you know what I’ve got?” she asked, suddenly sounding quite lucid.

“What, dear?” he said. “Do you have something you want to show me?”

She extended her bony fingers toward him, cupped together the way a child might hold her hands in prayer. She opened them.

“A dead frog?” Tommy said.

“Take it.”

“Thank you.” He let her place the frog in his hands. It was cold and slimy and reeked.

“Do you believe in extispicium?” she asked.

“I’m sorry?”

The frog’s entrails spilled from its belly. It had been ripped open, probably by an owl or a hawk. Unless she’d ripped it open herself.

“Extispicium,” she repeated. “Do you see?”

“Do I see what?” he asked her. “What is it you want me to see?”

“This,” she said. “*Ecce haruspices.*”

DeGidio shone his flashlight on the disemboweled frog in Tommy’s hands. The old woman poked through the frog’s innards with her index finger, as if looking for a lost penny. She was shaking her head even more ferociously now, and muttering intently. She looked up.

“These are only the first to go,” she whispered. “You’ll be the last.” She looked at Tommy again and seemed to recognize him. “You play football,” she said.

“Not anymore.”

“*Ecce extispicium!*” she said, now growling and looking Tommy in the eye. “*Ecce haruspices!*”

“That sounds like Latin,” DeGidio said.

Tommy shifted the dead frog to his left hand, wiped his right hand on the back of his sweatpants, and touched the old woman lightly on the arm.

“Let’s go back to the house and get you some warm clothes,” he said.

“*Lux ferre!*” she screamed, rising suddenly from where she crouched

by the water, springing toward Tommy and locking her thin web of fingers around his throat.

She bowled him over, driving him into the weeds.

Her nails pressed in against his windpipe as he grabbed her thin wrists. Tommy bench-pressed 350 pounds easily, but somehow he found it impossible to break the old woman's grip. He pulled as hard as he could, trying to throw her off of him.

He needed oxygen. Blood to the brain. His head was about to explode. *Where is her strength coming from? I'm losing consciousness. I'm dying . . .*

Suddenly Tommy felt a sharp electric buzzing. His vision sizzled, and he felt pain in his fingertips, his toes, and his hair. Something screeched in his ears. He smelled burnt rubber. Then the old woman went limp and fell on top of him, still holding him by the throat.

He pulled her hands from around his neck and rolled onto his stomach.

Tommy gasped for air and coughed violently, turning on his side now to see Frank DeGidio removing the Taser darts from where he'd fired them into the old woman's back.

"You all right?" he asked.

Tommy nodded, still unable to speak.

"Sorry about that," the cop said. "I couldn't get her without getting you too, as long as her hands completed the circuit."

"That's all right," Tommy said, rubbing his throat where her nails had scratched him and coughing again. He glanced over his shoulder to see an ambulance flashing its lights at the gate. "What was that? How . . . ?" He got to his feet while the cop bound the old woman's hands behind her back with orange plastic flex cuffs.

"Adrenaline," DeGidio said.

Two EMTs took charge of his intruder. As they got her sedated and resting comfortably in the back of the ambulance, a third person examined Tommy's throat and advised him to wash his scratches with a disinfectant.

"You're lucky her fingernails weren't longer, dude," the man said with a gravel voice and an accent that sounded like he was from Texas or Oklahoma.

He looked more like a biker than a doctor, in black boots and jeans

and a tattered jean jacket with the sleeves cut off. His arms and chest were tattooed and he wore silver chains around his neck. But after all the other strange happenings tonight, why not a biker-doctor too?

“You hold fast,” he said, and headed back toward the ambulance.

DeGidio reappeared then and told Tommy they were already making calls to all the nearby nursing homes.

“We’ll figure out where she belongs,” he said. “My cousin works in a nursing home—she says this stuff happens all the time. A lot of old people get mellow, but some just turn violent. They don’t know what they’re doing anymore. It’s like all the anger they’ve suppressed their whole lives comes out at the end.”

“That’s one explanation,” Tommy said.

“We’ll take care of her,” DeGidio said. “Just for the record, you pressing charges? Trespassing? Assault?”

“Nope,” Tommy said, watching as the ambulance pulled away. “Just let me know who she is when you figure it out.”

“Will do.”

Tommy walked him to his car.

“You’d be shocked at how much ground folks with Alzheimer’s can cover when they get the notion,” the cop said. “You ever see her before tonight?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Tommy said. “She seemed to know who I was.”

“Everybody knows who you are,” DeGidio opened the door to his car. “I’m guessing you probably don’t want the boys at the gym knowing a hundred-pound old lady beat you like a redheaded stepchild . . .”

Tommy offered a friendly smile, but something about the woman deeply disturbed him . . . a feeling that she hadn’t arrived in his backyard by chance. He could have been killed tonight, yet somehow he knew she hadn’t come to kill him.

“Fuggedaboutit,” DeGidio said. “What happens in Tommy Gunderson’s backyard *stays* in Tommy Gunderson’s backyard.”

“Thanks for stopping by,” Tommy said, feeling his throat again.

“Anytime.”

The officer drove away, and Tommy walked back to the edge of the

pond. He saw the frog the old woman had given him, floating belly up, torn open, guts exposed.

He crouched low to examine it again. Why had she wanted him to see it? Her words, if they were Latin as DeGidio suspected, might have been the genus or species. What was she looking for?

It made no sense to him, but he supposed it might make sense to somebody else. She'd been clear about one thing—the message she wanted him to understand had something to do with the disemboweled frog.

He reached down to pick it up, thinking he could throw it in the freezer and send it to a biologist or laboratory. But when his fingers touched the amphibian, they passed right through it, and the animal that minutes earlier had been solid in his hand simply dissolved like bath salts, a murky gray cloud that dissipated in the dark water. He pulled his hand back reflexively. He found a stick and stirred the water, then threw the stick into the pond when there was nothing more to see.

These were the first to go, she'd said. *"You'll be the last."*

He was nearly back in bed when his cell phone rang.

"Tommy, it's Frank—you're still up, right? I didn't wake you?"

"Still up," Tommy told the cop.

"You said to call when we found out who she is. We got a missing persons from High Ridge Manor. Her name's Abigail Gardener. You know her?"

"Not personally," Tommy said. "She used to be the town historian."

"You okay?"

"A little shaken, to tell the truth," Tommy said. "The doctor said I was lucky her fingernails weren't longer."

"You already saw a doctor?" DeGidio asked.

"The one on the ambulance," Tommy said. "Blue jean vest and tattoos? Looked sort of like a biker?"

"What are you talking about?" the cop said. "There wasn't any doctor there—just the two EMTs, Jose and Martin. And nobody who looked like a biker."

Tommy thanked Frank and said good night. Then he went to his computer, hoping his surveillance system might solve the mystery. His property was covered by both high-definition video and infrared cameras capable

of registering the heat signatures of warm-bodied visitors. The video feed showed only darkness at first, and then, once the ambulance arrived with its headlights pointed directly at the camera and its lights flashing brightly in the night, he saw only silhouettes crossing back and forth, making it impossible to count the number of people present, even in slow motion.

The infrared imaging was slightly more useful but still inconclusive. It clearly showed his own silhouette, and Frank's, and the old woman's, but once the ambulance arrived, the bright red heat signatures from the engine and the headlights again made it hard to sort out what he was seeing. Sometimes it looked like there were five images, sometimes six. He even saw some sort of digital shadow or negative ghost image in blue, flickering in and out of view.

He was tired and he'd given it too much thought already.

He knew what he knew—he'd spoken to a man who looked like a biker. Frank just must have missed him.