

## For the Birds

Banners advertising the Pumpkin Festival rattled overhead as David Lexington crossed Main Street. Hands stuffed in his jacket, hat pulled low, he averted his face from a couple coming the other way. He turned into the office of *The Montrose Gazette*. Elizabeth Anders looked up from her desk.

"Oh, no," she said.

"Yeah, I'm thrilled, too," David said. "But I thought you should see this. It's maybe newsworthy, or something."

"See what?"

"A letter. From Connie."

"Connie," Elizabeth said. "Connie Nordstrom?"

David dropped the letter on the desk. Elizabeth frowned, picked it up. Eyes scanning, lips pursing, she shook her head.

"Come on, David. Really?"

"Someone stuck it in my door this morning. That's her handwriting."

Elizabeth sat back in her chair. "You want me to believe there's a diary somewhere in the mountains, buried in a secret location? And it's been there for years."

"Okay. Never mind. I guess if you don't want to find out who murdered those boys. I know it was years ago, but..."

"Not exactly topical, no." Elizabeth looked out the window. She squinted. "Is that Brian across the street?"

David turned around. "Brian? Yeah, I guess."

"With his binoculars. I swear he had them pointed at me. And not for the first time."

"Maybe he likes you?"

"I doubt it. He's mad at me for not publishing his screed about the birds."

"Well, there's no more for him to watch. Who knew the mayor had that kind of power, to drive away all the birds."

"And that's my fault. Right?"

"What is?"

"Gary being mayor. Him getting elected. Ruining everything."

David opened his mouth. Then he shook his head.

"No, no," he said. "You're not going to suck me into that. I'm done debating. You. Everyone. I'm done."

Elizabeth pushed the letter across the desk. "Right. Take this on your way out."

David sighed. "Stupid of me."

"I should be touched, I suppose."

"Touched?"

"Using this as a pretext to talk to me. Cute."

"Wow. You think an awful lot of yourself, don't you."

"No more than you do of yourself."

David allowed himself his first smile. "Probably why we clicked, once."

They were quiet.

"Well," David said. "I'm off."

"The letter...?"

David didn't respond as the door opened. Brian came in.

"Sorry to interrupt, excuse me, Liz, I just wanted to see if you were going to run my article? It's been a few weeks since..."

"I'll try, Brian," Elizabeth said. "I can't promise anything."

"Okay. It's sort of important, though."

"I know it is."

Brian stood motionless, his bugged eyes trained on Elizabeth. He wore a safari hat and binoculars hung from his neck.

"Hey, buddy," David said. "You going to let me get past?"

"Sure, just... ah..."

The door opened again. In came a middle-aged woman wearing fuzzy pink ear muffs and an apron. She was the proprietor of Annie's Café. She set a tall cup on the desk.

"Just the person I wanted to see," Elizabeth said.

"How about that," Annie said. She turned from Elizabeth to David. "I never thought I'd see the two of you in the same room again."

"Thanks for the coffee."

Annie smiled. "Sure, hon. And what about Tim? You need lunches today?"

"Tim's at home with the flu."

"Oh, sorry to-- Whoa, what's this?" Annie took up the letter that was about to fall off the edge of the desk. "What messy writing. Were they drunk?"

"Actually, it's a letter from the daughter of Mrs. Pulaski," David said. "She's the lady who was a suspect in the murder of the James twins. Young boys. Poisoned. And never solved. You heard about it?"

"Yes, of course," Annie said. She read over the letter. "My sister, you know, thinks their ghosts are still around. Sometimes she sees them on the swings in the park. So she says."

"It's just something from a sad person who wants attention," Elizabeth said. She blew on her coffee and looked at David. "Thanks for bringing it by, all the same."

"Holy crap." Annie turned over the letter, eyes wide. "There's a map drawn here and everything. I know where Elk Meadow is. And Cougar Rock, too. Just a few miles up Powderhorn."

"Just because someone scrawled a few x's doesn't mean..."

"I'm going," Annie said. "Why not? It should take only a few hours to get up there and back."

"Don't you have a café to run?"

Annie shrugged. "Meg can watch it. It's slow."

"I wish I could go," Brian said. "I have a rock wren at home with a bad leg. But I know the area better than anyone. Maybe tomorrow if..."

"No, no."

"Why not?"

"Because it's police business. If it's anything."

"The police?" Annie snorted. "We know how that goes--they'll just screw the whole thing up. And it'll be weeks before someone bothers to investigate something like this."

"They aren't that bad," David said. "Still, someone should go up there. Who knows what condition the diary is in at this point. The police looked everywhere for it, as I recall."

"I'm sure there's nothing to this." Elizabeth chewed her lip. "But..."

"But?"

"This paper... This town, we all need a good story these days. It's not every day we get answers."

"So true," Brian said. He nodded vigorously.

"I'd send Tim on it, but he's home with a sick kid."

"I thought you said he had the flu?"

"That too," Elizabeth said. "Anyway, now it's a story whether I like it or not."

"I'll go, then," David said. "I'm not that busy."

"You?" Elizabeth laughed. "You're the most clueless hiker around here. Growing a beard doesn't automatically make you a mountain man, you know."

"I'm going." David took the letter from Annie. "I'll let you know if I find anything. Or maybe I won't."

Elizabeth glared, her jaw setting. Brian and Annie looked from David to Elizabeth.

"You'll be dead in thirty minutes. Seriously. And it's starting to snow."

"I'll be fine."

"Whatever my feelings are for you these days, I still don't want you to die in a ditch somewhere."

"I'm touched. But it's not necessary."

"It is." Elizabeth grabbed her coat. "It's very necessary."

Annie grinned. "You two--it's just like the old days."

"No, it's not," David and Elizabeth said on their way out.

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At the trailhead, Elizabeth paused to look at the hand-drawn map. She turned it upside down, then right side up.

"Jesus," she said.

"What?" David was out of breath. Snow was collecting on his fedora. "Are we screwed already?"

"No, thinking about Brian. The look he gives me is just creepy. I know he's supposed to be harmless, that's what everyone says, but... he still seems like a creeper."

"You're not enough of a bird for him. Maybe if you grew feathers."

"It's not funny. And there should be an ordinance against him looking at people through his binoculars. They should be banned, at least in the city."

"Good luck getting a law like that now. Unless you have deep pockets."

"His article was all about why the city should fund some kind of bird sanctuary. About why it's vital we save the jack-tailed boobie, or whatever. He just doesn't understand stuff like that doesn't sell newspapers."

"Better to have articles about me sleeping with prostitutes. Much better."

Elizabeth folded the letter into her coat. She slung on her backpack. "You couldn't wait to bring that up, could you."

David opened his mouth, and stopped again. "You know, forget it. I apologize. Let's just find the diary, whatever this thing is. Okay? Can we forget the past for just an hour?"

A smile crept on Elizabeth's face. "You don't have any idea how long this will take, do you."

"An hour? Two? Come on, it can't be more than that."

"Just follow me. I swear, you don't have a clue. No offense."

"Gee. None taken."

They climbed the winding trail. Clouds of snow like mist crashed from the trees, wind gusting in erratic bursts. Fingers of ice stretched over the stony path. David finally slipped and fell, cursing. Elizabeth looked around.

"Aren't you going to laugh at me?" he said.

"We're well past that."

"Yeah." He grabbed a branch, getting himself back up, and brushed at his jeans. "I guess we are."

A pale, variable drop of sun appeared, hanging near the southern crag of Powderhorn. Dervishes of snow danced down the mountain. Crows squawked in the firs.

"This might be the first big one of the year."

"It's not that bad." Elizabeth knocked her boot against a rock. Then she shielded the map with a gloved hand and studied it. "We'll be back before it gets worse."

"Are we close?"

"Cougar Rock isn't far. Just another mile or so. Come on."

Twenty minutes later they stopped again. Elizabeth got a granola bar from her backpack and drank from her canteen. Panting, David watched her.

"Here," she said. "I have another one. And take a drink."

David tipped the canteen to his mouth, water trickling off his beard. He accepted the granola bar. Elizabeth laughed softly, watching him chew.

"How many times did I have to feed you?"

"I have to admit I miss your cooking."

"Really? You complained enough about it."

"Yeah." David screwed the cap back on, and handed her the canteen. "I was an asshole sometimes."

"Sometimes." Elizabeth put away the canteen. "Come on. We're running out of light."

David took out his phone. "And there it went," he said. "No service. Great. Now I remember why I don't usually do this."

"You're worse than a teenager with your phone," Elizabeth said. "I didn't even bring mine."

"I was hoping to get a call from Connie. I left her a voicemail, wanting more details about all this. The letter really doesn't say that much."

"So are you two dating, or something?"

"No."

"Too old for you, huh."

"Yeah. Funny."

They went on. Elizabeth again stopped to check the map.



"We're right here." She looked around, her hair whipping from under her knit cap. "This would be so great if we actually found it. These kind of stories are very popular with readers. We could even write a series of articles. Win a prize or two, and then the paper would be..."

Elizabeth glanced over at David. He was smiling.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. You're cute with your hopes and dreams. I used to know what that was like."

"Oh, please. I'm just saying this could offer real closure for the community, and maybe we'll have some healing for..."

David laughed, a phlegmy, harsh rattle. "Don't give me that crap," he said. "You only care about your precious paper. Give me a break."

"Can't I care about two things at once? We're not all as simple as you."

"Fuck you."

David charged ahead.

"Do you even know where you're going?"

A minute later he cried out. Elizabeth hurried over to him.

"Damnit," David said. He rocked on the ground and held his lower leg. "Damnit damnit."

"See? That's why I didn't want you to do this."

"My ankle, I think. Goddamnit."

"Okay, don't panic. Let's think a minute. Can you put weight on it?"

"I'm not panicking."

She helped him upright, and he howled as he put his foot down.

"Oh, David. This is bad."

They found a boulder to get out of the wind. Elizabeth crouched, unlacing and slowly working off his boot. She rolled down the sock.

"Yeah. You twisted it. Maybe even broke it."

"Oh, God. Don't say that."

Elizabeth got up and looked around, squinting at the blowing snow.

"And do we even know where we are?" David said.

"It's not that. It's how to get you back down the mountain."

Brow furrowed, chewing her lip, Elizabeth thought for a moment. David watched her. He leaned against the boulder, favoring his bare foot.

"You're thinking of the diary. Aren't you?"

"No. I mean, I'm just wondering... We're so close. Maybe you can shelter somewhere nearby, and I can go on."

"Right. Leave me to die. That sounds about right."

"David, I'm not leaving you to die. Come on."

"Uh-huh."

"Wait, I think I see something. Let's--"

He hopped forward, lost his balance, and she caught him.

"Got you, got you," she said. She looked into his face. "See?"

David grimaced. "Yeah. Sure."

He hobbled along on his own, but finally let her support him. In tandem they followed a ridge and stopped before a narrow crevice.

"A cave," David said. "You're kidding."

The entrance was obscured by branches. Elizabeth broke them and punched at the curtain of ice, forcing her way in. Minutes later she looked out again.

"Okay. It's fine. Just until this blows over."

"No bears?"

"It's too early. Come on."

She helped him into the cave. A fox skull lay near greenish, metallic puddles. Roots hung down like ticker tape. David used the light on his phone to look around.

"What about snakes?"

"It's fine, David. We'll be out again in an hour."

"Now who's the clueless one?"

Grumbling, David sat against the cave wall, extending his leg. Elizabeth rummaged through her backpack.

"Shoot," she said. "The first aid kit must be in the other pack. But I have some tape. To wrap your ankle. That should hold it for now."

"Such lousy luck."

"Why did you go off like that? You didn't even know where you were going anyway."

"To get away from you, honestly."

"Well, I guess you paid for it."

"Right. Another one of your morality lessons."

"Hush."

She wound tape around his foot. The ankle was pregnant, latticed with purple veins.

"Stay still. It's getting bigger already."

David grunted. "What a nightmare."

"I told you. This isn't your environment."

"It's for the fucking birds, that's what it is."

Elizabeth took up a handful of snow from the entrance. "Hold that there, light pressure," she said. "I'll get some more. No danger of running out."

"Great."

Wind whistled, moaned. Snow like fairy dust puffed from cracks. The cave darkened and lightened, fragments of light like gems. David cast feeble light from his phone.

"I don't like this. I don't like it. I feel suffocated."

Elizabeth crawled over and worked to clear snow from the entrance.

"There. How's that?"

David nodded. He held snow to his foot.

"How is it?"

"I suppose this is as good a place to die as any."

"We're not dying, David."

"It's getting worse. It's terrible."

"It's not that bad. Just an hour or so."

David winced as he adjusted and lifted his leg. After a silence, he looked across at Elizabeth. She gave him a questioning look.

"You ruined my life, you know," he said.

Elizabeth didn't respond. She was huddled in her parka.

"Did you hear me? You ruined my life."

"You ruined your own life. No one told you to sleep with that girl. That was all you, David. Maybe someday you'll take responsibility for that."

"I will as soon as you take responsibility for Gary fucking Holt."

"Oh, please. It's not the same thing at all."

"I'm serious. Because of you we have that shithead as mayor. He's running the town into the ground, he's ruined everything. And just because you wanted to settle a score."

"I thought you didn't want to talk about this? You know, forget the past for a while?"

David scowled. Then he nodded, muttered.

The wind howled. Elizabeth went over again and cleared the entrance.

David watched her.

"Hey..."

"What."

"The snow. That helped, actually. The snow on my ankle?"

"Here's more."

"Thanks."

Silence.

David sniffed. "It was wrong," he said. "I'm sorry. Really sorry. Okay?"

Their faces were shadows, apparitions of gray.

"And I shouldn't have written that piece," Elizabeth said. "I was... so angry. You broke my heart."

"I never meant to."

"I know. Of course."

"I was just... It was dumb."

"I didn't think Gary had a realistic chance. Everyone thought he was terrible. I just wanted you to feel uncomfortable. Feel bad, like shit, like I did."

"Well, you did a good job. Remind me not to have you as an enemy."

"I can't believe people voted for him. It's like a nightmare."

"They're talking about a recall already."

"I heard that, too."

Silence.

"Is it feeling any better?"

"A little."

"This could be another good story," she said. "We need it these days. I mean for the *Gazette*. Things are so bad."

"Really."

"I haven't told anyone this, but... we're going under. Unless things turn around soon, in the next few weeks. Advertisers are gone. Readers gone."

"Jesus. What about Tim?"

"Already laid him off, actually."

"So he's not...?"

"No, not sick with the flu. I just don't have the heart to make an official announcement. We'd probably lose the last of our sponsors. Tim was so good. Is so good."

"Yes. I always liked his stuff."

"I passed his kid on the street the other day and he gave me the worst look. His whole family hates me, I'm sure. Now they're going to starve. Who knows."

Elizabeth hid her face in her gloves.

"Oh, honey."

"It's been really, really hard."

David scooted over to her. He gathered her in his arms, and she sobbed against him as the wind howled.

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A patch of morning light grew at the entrance. Something started to claw at the snow. Grim, wild-eyed, David maneuvered himself on one side, gripping a large rock, while Elizabeth took the other with a stick. The snow gave way. Brian's face burst in.

David hit him with the rock.

"Aaawgh," Brian screamed.

"Sorry, sorry. I thought you were a bear."

"I'm not a bear."

Blood streamed from Brian's nose. He held it as his free hand shoveled away more of the snow. Elizabeth went through her backpack, finding David's sock.

"Here," she said. "We're so sorry."

"I guess I should have yelled first," Brian said nasally. He held the sock to his face. "Are you okay?"

"Holy Christ. How the hell did you find us?"

"You're practically in my back yard. And when I saw all the broken branches..."

"Wow. Lucky for us. Jesus, I can't believe we slept all night."

They squirmed out of the cave. David and Elizabeth shaded their eyes from the low, bright sun, magnified by the snow everywhere.

"Now I know how bears feel," David said. "God, this sun is killer."

Brian and Elizabeth, on either side, helped David through the drifts of snow, passing birdfeeders, slow and painstaking, until at last reaching a cabin. Inside, the place was filled with cages. Birds chirped and squawked.

"They were about to send a search party," Brian said. He hung up his binoculars by the door. "We feared the worst."

"We were fine, actually. Until David took a fall."

David shook his head, hobbling to the couch covered in an owl-print blanket. "It's true. I don't belong out here."

"I'll get some coffee on. Oh, and this is Rico."

Brian retrieved a wren from a cage. He held the bird close to his chest; one leg was bandaged.

"The two of you have a lot in common," he said. "You both have busted legs."

David waved fingers at the bird. Rico opened his beak, then shut it without a sound, one wing twitching. Brian returned him to his cage. His shoes crunched the seeds on the floor.

"Until we get our sanctuary, this will have to do."

"Impressive," David said.

Brian got David some Advil and wrapped the ankle again. Then he set out an urn of coffee, filling their cups, and cooked a batch of oatmeal.



"Just for us, guys," Brian said to the noisy birds. "I'll feed you later."

"Thanks again, Brian," Elizabeth said. "We're so lucky you found us."

"I'm glad, too."

They sat at the table and ate. Brian looked preoccupied. Finally, he let out a loud sigh just as the birds had started to quiet. He shook his head.

"What is it?"

"It wasn't supposed to go like this. Not exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"I wrote that letter. The one from Connie? It was from me, actually."

"Oh, Brian."

"Why would you do that?"

"I was just wanting..."

Just then there was a knock on the door. Brian went to it and let in Annie. Her cheeks were red, her face and head wrapped in scarves. She slapped her hands, stomped her boots.

"Any coffee for me?"

After unwrapping herself, she waved at the birds and then joined the humans at the table. She gave Brian an embarrassed look.

"Did you tell them?"

"So you knew, too?"

Annie nodded.

"Again, why?"

Brian had been checking his phone. He put it down with a sheepish smile. Tears stood in his large eyes.

"Mayor Holt keeps saying he's going to help, but he won't. He just won't. There's no profit in it. And we need a sanctuary. Our ecosystem is failing, I see the evidence every day, and we have to do something. And, well, I thought if you and Ms. Anders got together again, you could maybe do something?"

"So, wait. You tricked us into coming up here, almost got us killed, just so we could get rid of the mayor? I can't help thinking there's a better way to do that."

"It was my idea," Annie said. "Most of it. I thought we needed something drastic, something that would really get action. Maybe it was dumb."

Elizabeth turned on Brian. "Is this why you've been spying on me?"

"Not just you."

"That's not cool, Brian. Why didn't you just come and explain what you wanted?"

"I saw you, Liz," Brian said. He looked down at his hands and spoke in a small voice.

"Every night I saw you taking Tums. And drinking a bottle of wine. You seemed sad."

"Wait. You could see me taking Tums?"

"And David, you were alone on your computer every night. You were both so lost, I thought. Anyway, I thought if I just asked you, you wouldn't do it."

"You almost got us killed."

"I did it for them." Brian waved at the cages. "I'm sorry, so sorry."

"But to spy on me like that? What else were you...?"

"He didn't mean anything bad, you guys," Annie said. "Brian's a sweetheart. He just cares about the community. Maybe a little too much. Don't you, baby?"

Brian nodded. Annie went over and kissed him.

"You two?" David said. He looked from Annie to Brian, amazed. "I mean, you two...?"

"I know, we seem like an odd couple." Annie laughed. "But it was his art. He was giving us his wonderful watercolors of his birds, people loved them, we hung them everywhere in the café, but then we weren't able to pay him when business went south. I felt so bad for him. That's when... we started to see more of each other... and we wondered how to make things better."

"Instead they got worse," David said. "I hit him with a rock."

"Brian," Elizabeth said. "I'll publish your article. Okay? As soon as I get back. Of course, it might be one of our last issues."

"What? Oh, no."

"Then again..." Elizabeth sat back, lips twisting. "Then again..."

"Uh-oh. She's thinking again."

"I could write a piece or two about Gary. All of it true. Some things I have in the archive. It's time to bring them out."

"It certainly worked against me," David said.

"No, honey," Elizabeth said. She patted David's hand. "You did that to yourself."

An hour later they went to a nearby barn and got out Brian's snowmobile. Attached behind it was a sleigh with bird wings painted on the sides. They shifted the bags of seed and helped David into it with his wrapped leg propped, Elizabeth getting in beside him. Brian and Annie sat up front. They flew down the mountain over the fresh sparkling snow and arrived back

in town by noon. As they traveled down Main Street several stopped to wave. David waved back. He exchanged a look with Elizabeth. She smiled. It seemed he was running already.