

Sirens of Despair

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His feet hurt.

He'd been walking for, what, an hour now? Knowing the speed at which he walked, that would be three miles, which wasn't especially far, not on pool-table-flat terrain like this, but still. He'd been on his feet all night, and he'd worn boots, not his most comfortable footwear. But they did possess steel toes, and that was important at a race track. Not just because you could easily get your feet ran over if you weren't watching what you were doing—which was true—but because sometimes the ability to deliver a solid kick in the nards was pretty important. Also true.

Not tonight though. The motor'd broke a connecting rod early in the heat, and that wasn't exactly something they could fix in the pits. Andy and Hal and the rest of the gang had loaded up and headed home not long thereafter. He'd decided to stick around and watch the rest of the races so that the long ride to and from Pooler wouldn't be a total loss.

It turned out to be a pretty good show all things considered, the downside of course being that they'd lost a lot of points toward the championship with their chief rival sweeping the board...fast time, heat race win, and the feature. Not good. Said rival's picture was epoxied to the inside of the commode at the trim shop that served as their base of operations, and it would receive a damned good soaking this week. It didn't help, but it sure did feel good.

So: how did he end up on foot here in the middle of a marsh on the Okatie Highway at 2:30 AM?

It had a lot to do with being cheap and stubborn. Also ignorant: he rode an old Yamaha two-banger four stroke that had a lot of problems, including a bad carb and a loose chain. The former issue could usually be remedied by removing the air filter and holding his hand over the intake; the loose chain, not so much. To fix that he'd have to replace the sprockets, something he was not monetarily or intellectually prepared to do. Replace the chain? Sure, he'd done that, a couple of times, but when the sprockets are bad, they just chew the chain up all over again. He'd shucked it twice today, once at seventy miles an hour on I-95 on his way to the track. That wasn't such a big deal. He rolled to a stop, put it back in place, and kept going, the only cost being lost time and greasy hands. This time though...this one snapped the chain, and a chain drive bike sans chain ain't going much of anywhere.

It could've been worse, he supposed. At least the bike was in a more-or-less safe spot, in the parking lot for a bakery he'd actually bought stuff from. No one was there, of course, not at this time of the morning, but at least it was off the shoulder of the road. He left a note and hoped they wouldn't mind his leaving his bike on their property for a day or two till he could get someone to carry it back to Burton for him. Provided he could convince someone to do it. Not that it would be that much of a loss if it was hauled off for scrap, but it was all he had.

But, back to the sore feet. It was a long walk back to his trailer house in Burton, even longer at this time of the morning. A bad time, a dead time. Sure, he'd covered three miles so far, maybe three and a half, but there were maybe nine or ten to go yet, and he hadn't seen a single car. Not one, not even traveling in the wrong direction. Not that direction would've have mattered; he'd have flagged them down regardless in hopes that they would have a phone in the car, one they wouldn't mind him using long enough to call Marshall, who might come out and pick him up again. Marshall Maury to the rescue, even at this bad time of the morning. He was that kind of guy.

Dennis Randol—years ago known as Corporal Dennis Randol, USMC—didn't feel like he deserved that kind of friend. But Marshall Maury was a brother Marine and was stationed at the nearby Air Station in Beaufort. An air traffic controller, for God's sake. He'd met him when he showed up one night along with a gang of his fellow ATCers at the Alibi, where Dennis tended bar in the evenings. It wasn't much, but it was income. Better still, they allowed him to crash in the store room when he needed to, rent free. Bering as the lights were presently off in the trailer, he spent an awful lot of time in the store room. At least it was cool and dry, and there was food when he needed it, and a shower. He hoped to save enough money to get the power back on before the weather turned rough.

But Marshall. Fine folk, Marshall Maury, who'd bailed him out of a bad spot a couple of times. Marines. Dennis wouldn't hear a bad word about 'em. They take care of their own. Good thing he'd always embraced that himself.

But even the Marines couldn't help him now. Not at 2:40 AM on the Okatie.

So, he walked.

And his feet hurt.

It was dark of the moon, so the highway was very dark, even with the light of the stars about and the ever-present glow from Savannah to the south, Hilton Head to the east, and Beaufort and its environs to the north. Here, in the literal middle of nowhere, it was dark with an almost physical blackness you could reach out and touch, a blackness, thick like tar, tar much like the black water that lapped not far away.

Oh, and there was plenty of that. Ahead—quite some way ahead, truth told—was the Broad River Bridge, well over a mile long. Four lanes now, he could remember when it was just a two lane and downright creepy to cross, especially the steel-decked drawbridge, which was slick even when dry. On a motorcycle, that decking had been two seconds of pure terror at night. Now it was four lanes, and the drawbridge was gone. It was still creepy, as it was somewhat higher above the water, but oh, the comfort those two extra lanes brought! It meant he could ride farther away from that drop into the cold, choppy water.

Still, the thought of walking across it was daunting. He could barely fathom what it would be like, above the water and probably a half hour walk from end to end. Early enough that there wouldn't be fishermen out—and there always seemed to be people out fishing on the bridge. Always.

Well, almost always. Not at this time of the morning, that was for certain sure.

But that was still a ways away. He was still on Lemon Island and the bridge was at least a mile away yet. And yes, his feet did hurt. Work tonight was going to be a pure-dee bitch... providing he could get there.

And that was a concern. Especially now that the ghost lights had begun to appear.

It started with one. One faint light to his right, an obvious glow off in the trees. Not lights from the city; too low to the ground and too focused.

He knew what it was, of course. He wasn't entirely dim. Just swamp gas, methane that accumulated in the marshy areas from decaying vegetation. Eventually it would work its way to the surface, and a secondary gas would spontaneously combust, setting the methane bubble alight...or so the theory he'd heard asserted. Never mind, it was a cool thing to see happen. Eventually the gas would burn off and the light collapse with an audible "pop". Dennis had seen them several times while riding the Okatie. Sometimes he'd slow to get a closer look...but never would he stop. Never. Or lift his visor, for that matter. Looking at the lights from a distance, that was one thing. Seeing them clearly...or, worse, hearing them...that was unthinkable.

There were wild stories about those lights, of course. You couldn't live in the area and not hear them. "Money lights", some folk called them. If you saw one, they claimed, and you could mark where it was when you saw it, then you could return in the daylight (of course!) and —so the stories related— if you were lucky enough, you could dig in the marked spot and find treasure. Then there were variations that claimed that only kids could find the money. Which was all well and good, but...who's going to send their kids into a swamp to dig for treasure? And second, how the hell do you dig in a swamp anyway? It seemed to him you could shovel till doomsday and not get anything but mud, and soggy mud at that. But people repeated that stuff anyway. And some folk he knew had even done some digging. They had nothing to show for their trouble but muddy clothes and sometimes snakebite stories.

And of course there were the alligators. Lots of alligators. Lots and *lots* of alligators. He'd actually played golf (badly) with Marshall a few times at the Parris Island golf course, and damned if there hadn't been a couple of very large gators that had taken to sunning themselves next to one of the water hazards on the front nine. In broad daylight! Stepping off of the relatively safe pavement here on the Okatie Highway was obviously not going to be a happening thing. Not for Dennis Randol, anyway.

Here he was then, walking through the middle of it all. Walking! Not speeding through on his bike, not with a helmet firmly strapped to his head...but walking, body and mind wide open to whatever unseen world might actually happen to be here.

Not that he was all that concerned. He didn't exactly frighten easily. He curated the Alibi's Midnight Movies and was used to shocking sights. Of course, that was on an LCD screen among a bunch of mostly beer-soaked rednecks and Marines. Here, in the dark, on the Okatie...well, things here were different.

And then, the lights. That they were there, that wasn't so bad. They were expected. A

curiosity, but nothing more. Sometimes school kids would sometimes come out to watch them in the middle of the night. A pity those same kids wouldn't come out at 3 AM, he wouldn't be in the fix he was in right now.

What he didn't expect was the...persistence. One group of lights in particular. Surprisingly, even eerily, they had appeared, and remained.

That was unusual. There couldn't be that much methane down there under the muck... could there?

He picked one out, watched it. It burned with a steady, pale blue glow. Burned, and kept burning.

Strange.

He counted four of them, the ones that burned steadily. Oh, there were more of the glowing orbs about, lots more, but those were...normal. They appeared, bobbed about almost merrily, then they vanished like all self-respecting ghost lights were supposed to. But these four...they did not. They stayed.

It took him a moment to realize that he had stopped walking.

It was another minute before he heard the voice...and yet another before he was able to grasp that it *was* a voice, and not just night noise, or the distant sound of a passing boat, or some drunk tourist on Hilton Head whose bellow had reached across the flats. No, this was very definitely a voice. A human voice. Or not, but it sure did sound human.

He had to force himself to start walking again. It took an almost superhuman effort of will.

And the lights followed him.

Maybe it was a trick of the light, or physics, or something else. Like the eyes of a picture that seem to follow you. No matter. These ghost lights did seem to be tracking him.

He kept walking. Tried to keep his eyes off of them, to ignore them.

And they were definitely pacing him. It didn't matter whether he walked slow or fast; the lights moved when he did, and in the same direction. The same five, as near as he could tell. Except...except that now maybe they were very slowly drawing nearer. They'd started farther out, toward Rose Island, perhaps a half mile away, but they had edged their way closer. Not rapidly, but enough to be noticeable.

He looked away, walked on, his step a little quicker now, sore feet be damned.

The road went through a gentle bend here angling to the northeast. In the distance ahead, he could make out the lights at the end of the bridge, still a mile off but, happily, brighter than the lights across the marsh to the southeast. Which were still coming closer, and still very much illuminated.

It hardly seemed possible that he might now be living a horror movie like the ones he screened at the Alibi. But he couldn't deny what he was seeing...and hearing. That faint voice, growing in strength the nearer it approached. Definitely human, and now even identifiable as female. Great, he thought numbly. I'm about to fall victim to the Ghost Women of the Okatie.

That at least brought a smile.

He supposed that he could run. He'd run in boots when he was in the Corps decades ago. And it was only a mile, after all. He was sure he couldn't sprint the whole distance, but he was sure that he could go faster than the ghost lights were moving. And once he was on the bridge...surely, those lights couldn't follow across the water...could they? If nothing else, that bright white LED glow of the pole lights on the bridge was enough to serve as a totem of sorts. A goal, something that represented humanity, if not out-and-out safety. He began to jog, at as swift a pace as he figured he could maintain for the ten minutes or so it would take for him to reach the near end of the bridge.

He did okay, too. He was still in pretty fair shape, and even though he'd downed a lot of beers and breathed a lot of secondhand smoke at the Alibi, he figured he could outrun a quartet of ghost lights. The road continued to curve till he was pointed almost directly northwest. He was maybe a half mile away now and chanced a look back toward the bobbing lights.

They were maybe a hundred yards off now. They had seemingly increased their pace to match his...and surpass it.

He slowed, to see if they would too.

They did not.

Time to find out just how fast he could cover a half mile. He readied himself for an all-out sprint. And then...

...then, he heard the voice again. A very clear voice, certainly female...calling his name.

Not whispered. Called. Lyrically too, as in: *Den-nis. Den-nis Ran-dol*. The syllables very distinct.

His sore feet were forgotten.

Someone else might've called back. As in, who is it? And that would be the cleaned-up version.

Dennis Randol was of somewhat sterner stuff. He stopped, cocked his head in the direction from which the sound had issued. Waited, uncomfortably. It was a warm morning already, probably in the high seventies despite the absence of the sun. And humid, ungodly humid. That was what life was like in the Sea Islands empire. Sweat was a way of life down here. You got used to it, or you found somewhere else to live.

Cold sweat though—which was what he was feeling now—that was different.

Never mind that he was hearing voices. Whether they were in his head or not didn't matter; they had called him out by name.

And now, there was more than one voice.

The sound was difficult to trace, as hard to pinpoint as birdcall in the distance. It sounded like it came from his right, which would put it in the marsh. Perhaps among the ghost lights.

So, they talk now, do they?

He waited. The lights, blessedly, stopped. Then he started walking again. He got five steps.

Den-nis, the voice crooned beckoningly, like some sort of swamp-bound siren. *Den-nis. I*

know you hear me.

Oh, I can hear you all right, he thought. I'm just not sure I believe you.

His breath had caught in his throat. It took a concerted effort to get it going again, autonomic be damned.

Den-nis. Den-nis. Answer me. Answer me, Dennis.

Against his better judgement, he finally replied: "I can hear you."

Den-nis. Come to me.

And he wanted to. Oh, how he wanted to. The voice was alluring, coaxing. Dreamy, even. And oddly familiar. He wanted to go to it, to come face to face with whatever it was that was calling to him.

But. This was the Okatie, and it was now 3 AM. And these, these were ghost lights calling to him. No, he wasn't about to fall victim to this sort of glamour. "Ain't gonna happen. Leave me alone."

There was a moment's pause, then the voice continued, softer, and minus the sing-song cadence: *That's right. Alone. You're alone, Dennis. That's why you're here right now. With me. A beat, then: With us.*

A singular voice, and then, more than one.

He'd spun a lot of tunes Saturday nights before showtime at the Alibi, and he played the music loud. The guys shooting pool in the back room liked it that way too, and tipped well for it. Tinnitus was thus a way of life for him too. But even half deaf he could tell when one person was speaking to him versus several. That last word was several voices. Again, all female.

He sighed. If he was going to be worked over by a pack of ghost lights, he figured it would be better that they all be female. "All right. You've got my attention. What do you want from me?"

Come talk to us.

Now he laughed. "I may be a lot of bad things, but I'm not stupid."

Come to us, Dennis. You'll never be shed of us if you don't.

He scoffed. "I'll never be shed of you if I do. Besides," and he started walking again, "if I get to that bridge before you do, you won't be able to follow me."

You think so? Run, then. You'll be that much more helpless when you do finally fall to us. And you will fall to us, Dennis. Believe that much if you'll believe nothing else.

He started to run, got a few steps, stopped. Looked at the lights, which hadn't moved.

"Why?" he asked. "Why me? What do you want from me?"

Your soul.

Nice, he thought. So now it's the brides of Satan?

Satan has nothing to do with it, Dennis. This is between you and me. Us.

Again with the individual voices. And something else he noticed: when they spoke, they flared brighter...as if the individual lights were indicating which was speaking.

He stood there for a moment, thinking. Yes, he probably could beat them to the bridge. It

was another mile at most. Ten minutes or less, if he could keep a decent pace up. In younger days he could've done it in six or seven minutes easy. Not so at now at the near side of 60.

Dennis. Come to us. Let us explain why we're here. Then if you still want to try and escape us, I promise, we'll let you have your head start from up there where you're at. But first you must come down and make parley face to face.

Make parley? Who the hell talked like that anymore?

Nobody, that was who. But he supposed it wasn't any stranger than his listening to a voice emanating from a ghost light.

"Face to face?" He laughed. "What face? You're a ghost light. You have no face."

Oh, I have a face, all right. We all do. That's why you must come down here, so you'll see.

"So there's more than one of you?"

He who has ears, let him hear. Or see, Dennis.

He stood there looking at the cluster of lights. "If I come down there," he said, not very assuredly, "will you agree to stay away from me?"

There was a moment's pause, then: *Of course.*

He was glad for the pause. Had the voice answered too quickly...

"All right," he sighed. "I'm coming. But stay where you are. If I see you start to move, I'm so out of here."

Slowly, carefully, and reluctantly he began to work his way down the earthen slope leading down from the causeway toward that black, black water. Once at the bottom, he sat at the edge of the water and waited. He was willing to come this far, but he wasn't in such a big hurry to wade into the morass. It was still a long walk to Burton, and it would be even longer with wet boots and socks.

"Here I am," he declared after a few minutes. "If you got something to say to me, come say it."

The lights began to approach him.

"Hey, hey, I said stay away..."

We have to approach, Dennis. You must see us, must know who we are.

He stood up, prepared to run back up to the causeway.

Stop. Wait.

He stopped.

One light had separated itself from the others and fluttered towards him.

"Not too close." He was still poised to run if the need arose.

The light stopped perhaps a dozen feet from him. It was pale blue, about half a foot around. Translucent, at least at first. It then began to expand, and for a moment he thought it was drawing nearer. Instead, it simply grew bigger. And at its center, features began to coalesce into a face.

A curiously familiar face.

"I know you," he said softly. "How do I know you?"

A long, long time ago, Dennis. In a far away place called Hammond.

The face became clearer. Light brown, almost blonde hair, almost to her shoulders. An attractive face, not drop dead beautiful but pretty. A mysterious half-smile.

Do you remember me, Dennis?

He did. Faintly, as faint as the ghostly face itself, but he did. "Carrie?" he asked. "Carrie Alger? Is that you?"

The half-smile bloomed fully. *Yes, Dennis. It's me.*

For just a moment, he stared. "My God, Carrie. It's been, what, forty years? Fifty?"

Forty three. But who's counting. Can you guess why I'm here?

He thought for a moment. Carrie Alger. He'd known her in school back in Hammond all those years ago. They'd had a passing acquaintance, a nod, a smile...they ran in two different circles. She, in the group that gathered behind the garages after school to smoke; he, who stayed after school to participate in choir and drama. Not that those choices made any difference in where they ended up. Last he'd heard, Carrie had married someone a year behind him in school and they'd had a child together. But there had been a moment...

"You kissed me," he murmured. "I remember. We bumped into each other at the summer sale downtown and you invited me over to your house for Fourth of July to shoot off fireworks. I don't remember staying very long, but I remember you kissed me." He smiled. "I think I can still taste the cigarette."

That hazy face smiled too. *Twice. I kissed you twice. I liked it so much the first time I went back for seconds.*

He nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I think you did. But we never did anything else. Why do you suppose that was?"

That's the question, Dennis. Why didn't we?

Another moment of thought. "I don't know."

But he did know. About that time his father had steered him toward the daughter of a close friend who had seemingly always been around the house. Perhaps it had been an attempt to "join the families", so to speak. He was 16 at the time, and was open to anything involving girls. Carrie Alger and her nicotine flavored kisses were quickly forgotten.

You never called, Carrie's voice said softly but accusingly. And I figured I'd laid an egg on you or something. When Will came along a few weeks later, I was open and available. There was a moment's pause, then: He beat me, Dennis. Beat me bad, before and after Eve was born. I started drinking to ease the pain. Crashed the car, killed her, tore me up. Will divorced me. Divorced me! Like it was all my fault! When all along, the root cause was you.

"Me? Why me?"

Well, it's simple, isn't it? You call me after that first day, I keep dating you, we get married, I never hook up with Will. Eve becomes your child and never dies. Your fault, Dennis.

It was overly simplistic, and not at all fair or accurate...but he was not about to argue

with a ghost light. Especially when there were three more not far away.

And what about those three? Did they have some score to settle with him as well?

She—for why wouldn't he refer to the light as "she" now that he knew who she was?—confirmed his suspicion. *Oh yes, Dennis. There's probably more out there that would like to have a piece of you, but we four are the ones with the strongest claims. So we're here, right now.*

He stood looking at her pale, pensive face for only a moment. Then he sighed, "All right, Carrie. If that's how you feel, I guess I don't have much hope of changing your mind. Let me see the others and we'll have this over and done."

She smiled. But the smile went beyond the face embedded in the light; instead, it split the light itself laterally, opening into darkness and exposing...teeth.

Big sharp teeth.

"Mother of God," he gasped.

God won't help you here, Carrie's voice said as her light edged away...and another slowly came forward.

He looked at the new arrival, waited for a face to appear.

When it did, he recognized her immediately. "Betty Boo," he whispered. Real name Betty Barnhill, he'd worked with her for several years at a furniture plant in Beaufort.

That's right, the husky voice replied. Betty Boo. Shame you didn't remember me thirty years ago. You might've saved me.

"What happened to you?"

What happened to me? Meth. Meth happened to me. You saw. You know.

"How would I know?"

The reply was an angry shout. *You saw me! Near the end! It was at a KFC in Augusta, remember?*

He didn't...not at first, anyway. But after a moment's consideration, he dredged up the memory. He'd been on his way to Gordon Park...a speedway, of course, to help Andy and Hal and the guys at a late model show. Stopped to grab a bite to eat with the Colonel, and...yes, he'd seen her there. Or at least he'd thought he had. She sure didn't look like she had when he was dating her...so skinny, rangy, almost. His father would've said, 'rode hard and put up wet' and that would've been kind. Yeah, he supposed that heavy meth use would do that to a body. He remember that he'd tried to avoid eye contact, but it wasn't possible...the place had been kinda busy and they were right next to each other in line. But he didn't speak to her. Often, years later, he regretted not having done so. Here and now, he regretted it even more.

But: "You dumped me, Betty. Remember? You called me a nutjob."

You were a nutjob, Dennis. You talked to yourself while you worked. I could see your lips move.

"I was writing stories in my head. I wanted to be a writer."

Yeah, well, look how that ended up. All you ever did was go to races. Never took me,

either. I'd have gone with you.

"I didn't know that. We never got a chance, did we?"

All you had to do was ask. And then there was that bottle of pills on your dresser you called your emergency exit. Swallow the whole bottle in a pinch and you'd be gone in minutes, right? That's what you told me. I wish I'd have had that option.

But she'd slept with him. Had him in her house even, had him sit in the bathroom and watch while she took a bath. He'd asked her if he could wash her back. She'd smiled that odd little purse-lipped smile she was constantly giving him at work and she replied, "Only if you'll promise to do my front afterward." Of course it ended up in bed. And just as inevitably, it ended badly. One of those oddball too-much-too-soon things. They parted afterward, stayed acquaintances if not exactly friends. He'd often wondered how things might've ended up if they'd decided to give things an honest try, if he maybe hadn't been quite so flaky. But it was who he was then. Was he really responsible for that?

But. Here he was, in the Okatie, faced with her...or what remained of her. And she was mad.

At him.

So...was she dead, then? He wasn't sure he wanted to know. He sure didn't want to ask.

She answered anyway. *What do you think, quiz kid? Officially, my heart stopped. That happens with meth. It's a God-awful way to die. But the fact is, I choked to death, Dennis. On my own vomit.*

He was silent. Remembering her thin but pretty face, imagining it at the end.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

There was an uncomfortably long pause. *I know you are. We all make mistakes. God knows I made mine. Maybe you were just one of many.*

"You were a good person, Betty. I still think of you a lot."

I know you do. I know. And I don't hate you. Not...like the others. But it...it doesn't keep me from being sad.

There was a soul-crushing sound of sobbing, and her face within the light contorted.

He wanted nothing more than to be able to hold her, to cry with her, even made a move toward the light, but as he approached, the light split as Carrie's had, exposing those...teeth. *Stay away!* she said in an agonized tone. *You can't help me now. It's way too late for me. And probably for you too.*

The light bobbed away.

Who's next, he wondered. Who else have I wronged?

The third light darted forward, more quickly than its predecessors. Rather than pale blue, this one had a yellowish tinge around its outside. The voice from within was angrier too. *Randol, you son of a bitch. You don't know how long I've waited for this.*

"I have a pretty good idea," he replied as the face swam into view. "This is Opal, isn't it?"

It was. The hard-edged face was unmistakable. *You know it, fuck face. I should've killed*

you when I had the chance. I could've just cut that goddamned rope a dozen different times.

Opal Kelley. Oh, he remembered her, all right. Vaguely, but he remembered her. She went back to the days when he was drinking and drugging a lot himself and spent a lot of his off-time in a haze. He'd been a security guard for an apartment complex in southern California then, and Opal lived in a condo that abutted one of the walls of the area he was responsible for. She would often walk the other side of the wall, and one night they'd nabbed a couple of kids together that had been vandalizing cars in both lots. They met for coffee afterward...and met again for much more later. He never actually moved in with her, or vice versa for that matter, but they certainly spent plenty of time in and out of each other's beds. And climbing; he'd turned her on to rappelling and they'd done that a lot together, hanging a rope off a disused bridge on the road up to Running Springs.

Which was, of course, what she meant by cut the rope. Had she been so inclined, yes, she could've killed him many times over. Instead they generally ended up making the sign of the four-legged spouting walrus on a flat rock at the bottom of the canyon.

Then he abruptly lost his job at the apartment complex...which meant that he also lost that apartment he'd been receiving as part of his compensation. He couldn't find a comparable job, so he just as abruptly left California and returned to South Carolina. Without a word to Opal, of course. Seriously, how much had she ever really cared for him? He'd always figured that all they'd had in common was mad monkey sex. For that matter, it still amazed him she'd never gotten pregnant...

But I did care. And guess what? I did get pregnant! I found that out a couple of weeks after you cut and run on me, you bastard. You've got a daughter who will never know anything about you. But that's kind of your modus operandi, isn't it? Leave no trace, right?

"That's not fair," he muttered.

It's perfectly fair. You left me when I really needed you. Hell, Randol, I was actually considering proposing to you. See, I knew you'd never had the balls to do it yourself. So I figured if I put you on the spot you'd have to go along with it.

Again, there was a faint sound of sobbing.

And then: I could've lived happily with you, Randol! And I'd have made you happy too. It would've been tough sledding, sure, but we had my condo, and I was still making good money. I didn't love you, but I'd have given it a chance to grow. But you never gave me that much. You never gave us the chance. And I will hate you forever for that.

"What happened to you, Opal? If you're here right now, I guess it means you're dead. So what happened to you?"

Why the fuck would you even care?

"That's not fair either."

Life isn't fair, Randol, or haven't you figured that bit out yet? But if you really want to know what happened to me, well, I miscarried. Bad. Hemorrhaging and code blue and the whole ER bit. You don't think about shit like that happening in this day and age, but guess

what? It does. And it happened to me. At least I lived long enough to see our daughter. She's beautiful, Randol.

A wistful look came to her face. There was a sigh, and some additional sniffing.

Beautiful, Randol. She looked a lot like you. Pity you'll never meet her. At least I got to hold her a while.

"What makes you think I won't?" he protested. "I'm still alive, damn it. Maybe I can find her."

Maybe you could. Maybe. But you won't. Because she'd be thirty-six years old now and probably gives less of a shit for you than I ever did.

"But you did care, Opal. And you still do, otherwise you wouldn't be here now."

Her face contorted as her light flared bright orange and darted toward him.

"Go on then!" he shouted. "Don't give me a chance to hear from the last one, whoever it might be."

Carrie's voice spoke quickly: *He's right. She deserves a chance to speak her piece.*

And thus Opal's light retreated and the last ghost light approached. It was paler than the others, but its voice was no less forceful when it came: *Do you remember me, Dennis?*

He looked for the face in the light. When it did finally swim into focus, it wasn't instantly recognizable. Pretty, but not familiar.

"I...I'm afraid I don't," he admitted. "I'm sorry."

So am I. Let me refresh your memory. Last time you saw me, you were at my house and we were watching my kids swim in the pool.

Kids? Pool?

And I was admiring your ass. You rode over on your bicycle and you were wearing spandex shorts. You were pretty buff, Dennis. No wonder you caught my eye at the Gardens that night.

The Gardens, he thought. The Oglethorpe Gardens? My goodness, I haven't thought about that place for years.

And when he did now, a chill ran through him.

Oglethorpe Gardens was a nightclub just down the road from the racetrack in Pooler. It was a frequent post-race meeting place for drivers, crews, and officials...and fence-hangers, race groupies. Till he started riding his motorcycle to and from, he'd gone with Andy and Hal and the gang. After he'd be a few degrees off vertical when he finally emerged from those two white doors, and had to be hand-delivered to his own doorstep.

On the night in question though...no, he'd been stone cold sober. He was riding that night. He'd even danced a little...and that was where he'd seen her. It was one of those moments he'd heard about all his life, of someone catching your eye from across the room, with a gaze so fixed that there was no way it could be ignored.

Not that he'd have wanted to. The eyes in question belonged to a stunning woman: pretty, well-shaped, and possessed of that pair of liquid blue eyes that had so transfixed him,

even from thirty feet away. Wavy, bleach blonde hair. High cheekbones. Perhaps older than she looked from a distance, but arresting nonetheless.

Their eyes locked. She smiled, as if to say, yes, it's you I'm scoping out.

Zing!

Then she'd nodded toward those white doors, and headed in that direction. He followed, of course, like he was on a leash. Half an hour later they were necking in the back seat of her car. The thirty minute delay was because his first instinct was to lead her toward his motorcycle, and yes, they'd spent a little time getting acquainted on the saddle of his Yamaha. Then she'd eased herself away from him and tugged him in another direction...and that was how they'd ended up in her car. And a nice car at that, a vintage cherry Caddy with a capacious back seat.

She'd stopped just short of raping him, and when they parted, he had her name, address, and phone number stuffed deeply into his jeans. By her. "Call me," she said insistently. "Tomorrow."

Well, calling was out of the question; his phone was either broke or disconnected, it tended to stay in one of those two states. But he was riding a lot in those days, and not just motorcycles. His dry-weather mode of transport was a British racing green Raleigh Marathon which he had bought as a wreck and lovingly restored. He'd bought it first for days the XS wasn't running, and as those days were fairly frequent, he'd amassed a lot of pedaling miles and had grown to love it. The flat roads around Burton made for easy travel, and his physical condition had improved as a result of all the hours he'd put in that saddle.

Her address, once retrieved from his Fruit Of The Looms, was in Port Royal. Not far away, maybe a half hour ride.

She had very nice home, with a pool in the back. Above ground, but in-ground pools weren't very practical around here, unless you had government money. Which she didn't, apparently. The neighborhood had seen better days, but her sprawling ranch looked surprisingly upscale in such surroundings. Surprising too was that the pool was full of kids.

She'd seen him ride up, looked at him appraisingly, and smiled widely. A few minutes later he was sipping a Manhattan on her veranda. Her name was Jennifer Watson, and she was thirty seven. Funny, how he tended to attract older women. Opal, Betty...even Carrie had been a couple of years older. Jennifer though, was a widow, and three of the kids in the pool were hers. First time he'd been around kids in a very long time.

"Do you want to take a dip?" she asked. "You look pretty hot." She grinned slyly at her apparently unintentional double entendre. "Those shorts will make dandy swim trunks."

They did, and she climbed in with him, looking very good herself in a swim suit. A game of Marco Polo ensued, and her kids took to him like...well, like they were his own.

And they could've been. He enjoyed the afternoon playing with them, and they sure seemed to enjoy being around him.

But...was he really ready to play Daddy?

Later, as he sat on the veranda with her she spoke what turned out to be fatal words: “They really need a male influence.”

He almost choked on his Manhattan. “Well, they need somebody better than me. I’m not an example anyone needs to be following.”

She smiled at that. “They don’t need an example, silliness,” she insisted. “They need attention, and love. I can only do so much.”

He drank silently, thinking, I’ve known her less than twenty-four hours, and she’s fitting me with a Daddy suit.

They parted a few hours of small talk later. He promised he’d call her.

He never did.

No. You never did. Why, Dennis? Was I that ugly? Or old? Was it the kids? Did I scare you?

No. No. Maybe. Yes. “It was a weird situation, Jennifer,” he pleaded. “If it would’ve developed...”

But you never even gave us a chance! You never called, never came back, never even wrote a goddamned note. I waited, Dennis. I waited for you. After a week I should’ve given up, but I didn’t. And with each passing day I just got more and more depressed. I even hung out at the Gardens, waiting to see if you’d show back up. You didn’t.

No, he didn’t. In fact, all these years later, he still hadn’t gone back to Oglethorpe Gardens. Not that he was ever a social type anyway, or even a heavy drinker since his younger days. He had enjoyed being at the Gardens...but he certainly hadn’t want to be confronted by a scorned woman, in public or otherwise...even afterward.

Afterward.

For, this time, he knew what had happened as the result of his actions. Or, inactions, if you will.

The episode had made national news. Jennifer Watson had evidently tired of being ignored...and had penned as much in her note.

Her suicide note.

She dosed herself and all three of her kids with sleeping pills, loaded them into that very same back seat of the Caddy she and Dennis had frolicked in, and then climbed in the front seat and started the engine. With the car sealed in her so-nearly-airtight garage.

It might’ve turned out differently. At some point, it seemed she had perhaps had second thoughts...when her body was found, the remote garage door opener was clutched in her hand. The batteries were as dead as she was.

Had Dennis not learned of this, he might’ve eventually forgotten her just as easily as he had Carrie, and Betty, and Opal. But he *did* hear about it, and he was devastated by it. Unfortunately—or perhaps not—he had neither the courage nor the prescription to duplicate her deed. At least his name had not been invoked in the note, thank God for small blessings.

But now...now, it would appear that payback time had arrived.

The lights drew together.

I'm sorry it had to come to this, Dennis, Carrie's voice said softly. You had so many chances to change things. But it's too late now, and...

"Do I still get the head start you promised?" he asked.

No!

Two voices, those of Opal and Jennifer. Their lights flared a brilliant orange, splitting to reveal those waiting teeth.

Dennis Randol did the only thing he could do. He burst into a frantic run up the slope to the road, and started for the bridge.

It doesn't matter, Carrie's voice wafted to him. You can run, but you can't hide. We know where you live, and where you work. The Alibi? Sort of ironic, don't you think? Anyway. We'll find you...if we don't catch you here.

But you won't, he thought. He was putting some distance on them, in fact. He risked looking back and yes, the lights were definitely fading. He was going to make the bridge before them for sure.

But what then? If they did know where he lived, where he worked, what did it matter? All they had to do was show up. Of course, that would make for a whale of a Movie Night, to be showing something like, say, *Poltergeist* or *Paranormal Activity*, and have the four ghost lights seep in through the walls looking for him...Wow!

The other lights, the safe lights, the ones on the bridge, they now loomed just ahead. Yes, yes, he was going to make it. He was going to make it. He would beat them onto the bridge, and then he'd be safe.

Relatively.

On the bridge, then, finally. He gasped with relief. Sure, the bridge was a mile long, but he could make that easily. He'd always heard that spirits couldn't cross water...if that was true, then he'd be safe enough here, regardless of what Carrie had said. Oh, maybe they'd somehow be able to work their way across to him, but it didn't matter, he would survive, just like he always had. Maybe he'd leave South Carolina, head in some other direction. Maybe overseas... maybe he'd be...

...there was a light ahead of him. Maybe a hundred meters. Not a car. Not a light on the bridge. A ghost light, emerging from the roadway.

From below.

From the water.

He slowed, came to a stop. Looked behind him. The other three lights were approaching from behind. Slowly, as if they were stalking him.

He sighed with resignation. So much for spirits not being able to cross water. "All right," he muttered. "All right. Here I am. I know now. I can't get away."

That's right, Randol. The voice from ahead, that of Opal. There's no getting away. Not anymore.

And then they were there with him. All four, positioned like the points of a compass, slowly drawing in on him.

“Forgive me,” he murmured. “Forgive me...and please, make it quick.”

The lights split, the “mouths” opening wide. And then they were upon him.

It was excruciating. And it lasted a long, long time.

He heard screams.

His own voice.

Screaming, over and over till he had no more voice to scream with.

Another voice, then. A calming voice. “Mr. Randol. It’s all right. Relax. You’re here, you’re safe. Nothing will hurt you here.”

Here? Where is here?

A room swam into focus around him. Mostly institutional colors. A hospital room, obviously.

“Where am I?” he asked, in what was left of his voice.

“At the Naval Hospital in Beaufort.” The speaker was an older, pale-haired woman in scrubs. “Just relax, Marine. You’re perfectly safe here. I’ve just given you something to help relax you.” She smiled faintly down at him. “That must’ve been a hell of a dream.”

Dream? Is that what it had been?

“I understand that you were in a frightful state when they brought you in,” she continued. “Do you remember anything that happened?”

Oh, he did. And how. But...was it a really a dream? Had he spent the morning being pursued and torn asunder by the ghosts of former lovers...or had something else happened? Something perhaps a bit more...oh, believable?

He decided it couldn’t hurt to ask. “What did happen?”

She shook her head. “No one’s quite sure, but it looks like you may have crashed your motorcycle somewhere out on the Okatie Highway, just before the Broad River Bridge. Must’ve knocked you unconscious. You were wearing a helmet, right?”

He always did, even on a bicycle. “Of course.”

“Good for you. Anyway, you must have lay there for a while...then the gators came up and started nibbling on you.”

He sat upright. “Gators? I was attacked by *gators*?”

“Shhh,” she hushed, gently pressing him back down. “Relax. It’s okay. Everything you own is mostly intact. Shred wounds and lacerations, nothing you won’t survive. And of course a broken leg and ribs from where the car hit you...”

“I was attacked by gators *and* hit by a car?!?”

“And lucky for you that you were! The car apparently saved you from the gators.” She smiled. “First time I’ve ever met an accident victim that could honestly claim gratitude for being hit by a car. Anyway, the driver managed to get you loaded into his car, and called 911.” She

motioned around the room. "A few hours of surgery, and here you are. So just relax and let yourself heal."

"Relax," he muttered. "I have no way to pay for any of this."

She smiled. "You're a Veteran, right? Then relax. We take care of our own." She started for the door. "Listen, if you're up for it, you have a friend outside waiting to visit."

Friend? Damn. Who would that be? He was curious enough that he nodded. "Sure. Go right ahead."

"Only a few minutes," she insisted. "You need to relax." Then she walked out.

Only now did he take a moment to take stock of his condition. His right leg was in a full-length cast, almost up to his crotch. As he became aware of it, he was also becoming aware of a terrible itch from within. He was also swaddled in bandages on his arms and legs, and his chest was wrapped tightly. The ribs, he supposed, she'd said something about broken ribs. All things considered, he was a mess. Still, it was better than the alternative. Or alternatives, as the case may be. Sure, he might be in a bed at Beaufort Naval Hospital, but at least he wasn't residing in bits and pieces in the belly of one or more gators.

Or...

"Goddamn, Randol," Marshall Maury grunted, walking in the room. "What the hell happened to you? You were supposed to be at a stock car race, weren't you?"

"I was," Dennis muttered. "I'm still not really sure what happened to me. The nurse just said that I wrecked my bike out on the Okatie. Is that true?"

Maury nodded. "Sort of. First of all, that wasn't a nurse, that was your doctor. Get with it, Randol."

Dennis grinned despite himself. "Thanks. Glad I didn't make that mistake with her. She looks like she could take me in a fight."

"Probably could. She's a Marine Colonel, you know. Anyway, here's what I got from the Sheriff's office. You laid that piece of shit Yamaha down a mile or so before the bridge—the chain broke and wrapped around the rear wheel. I warned you about that, didn't I? Didn't I?"

"You, did, Marshall, you did. Can you just get on with it?"

Maury grinned. "You had to know that was coming. Anyway, you must've been going a pretty fair clip. Based on the marks they found, they reckon you slid off the road and hit a tree. Head first. Good thing you had a brain bucket on, or we'd be having this little reunion in the morgue. Then as you lay there unconscious, you got noticed by the local wildlife, who saw you as an early breakfast and tucked in. That must've woke you up, because you somehow managed to get to your feet and started running up the highway. You got as far as the bridge, the gators in hot pursuit, where you got hit by the car. And what were the chances you'd find another car on that stretch of road so early in the morning? Pretty slim, I'd say.

"Anyway. The guy comes over the bridge at speed, right? Won't admit it but he was probably looking at his phone. Finally does see you, literally at the last second, and I guess it looked like something out of one of your horror movies, you staggering down the road, chased

by a couple of gators! They run fast, you know, faster than us. Anyway, he hits you, you end up on his hood, and somehow you pull yourself onto the roof...and thank God you hang on! Because he sure as shit wasn't about to get out of that car, not with two gators out there waiting to tear him up too. He reversed as far as he could, which was far enough, apparently, and dialed 911." He smiled crookedly. "And you ended up here. You're a lucky guy, Dennis."

Maybe, he thought. Maybe I am. But one with a hell of a lot to consider.

"I'm sorry," the Doctor said, re-entering the room. "Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. Mr. Randol does need his rest."

"I understand," Marshall said to her. "Dennis, give me a call when they're ready to spring you. We've got extra space at the house and Barb said to invite you to crash with us till you're on your feet."

"Well..."

Maury held out his hand. "No, no, just stop right there. I know what you're going through. And Delbert tells me you spend most nights shacking in the store room at the Alibi. That's no way for a Marine to live, let alone one that's recovering from being gnawed on by an alligator." He winked. "You just call, savvy? I'll come pick you up. And in the meantime, I'll see about getting your trailer refurbished and cleaned. Time you got to living proper, don't you think?"

Dennis nodded, trying to hold back tears.

"Then it's settled. Get yourself better and I'll be back by and we'll discuss this." And he left.

Dennis shook his head. Looking at the doctor, he said, "I don't deserve friends like that."

"He cares an awful lot about you," she observed.

"More than I deserve."

"Don't talk like that. Everyone deserves someone to care about them. Everyone."

"I don't."

And I don't, he thought, considering everything he'd experienced the past twelve hours or so. He didn't deserve friends, he didn't merit happiness. He sure wasn't entitled to the care he was receiving here. There were four despairing people he knew he'd hurt deeply, fatally even, and he could never atone for that. Never.

That was what he didn't understand. He didn't deserve to have lived through the past evening. So...why was he here?

The doctor walked over, gently lay her hand on his shoulder. "Listen to me, Dennis. There's nothing that's done that can't be forgiven..." and she gave him a knowing smile. "... eventually. Now. You need rest. That medicine I gave you should send you to sleep presently."

"That's good," he sighed. "And hopefully I won't have any dreams like I had last night."

Another knowing smile as she walked away. "Dreams?"

"Yeah. I had some pretty wild dreams last night." He lay back, tried to relax.

She flipped the room lights off. But there was still a faint illumination...pale...blue.

"Those weren't dreams, Dennis."

He looked at her. "What?"

"Those weren't dreams, Dennis," she repeated, motioning around her. "This...this was the dream."

The walls dissolved around her...and her body was enveloped in a growing sphere of light.

Atonement is only ever possible if the punishment suits the offense, Dennis.

Her body disappeared, her face receding into the light, which was soon joined by three others.

And, of course, the grieved parties must forgive. The face within the light looked sad. Carrie's face, of course, he wasn't sure how he hadn't recognized her. *And Dennis? I don't think that's going to be possible for a long, long time.*

A very, very long time, muttered the voice of Jennifer Watson.

The ghost lights split laterally as one, exposing those teeth.

Big, sharp teeth.

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