

EARLIER...

Older Brother shivered as he descended the basement steps.

It wasn't the cold that raised the gooseflesh on his arms, or the fact the concrete basement floor would be wet under his bare feet and the air would smell of damp earth and rotting leaves. Nature's own sweet decay. None of that bothered him.

Fear wasn't the culprit, either. The darkness held no demons. In fact, he felt there was a texture to the dark and that, if he practiced often enough and concentrated, opening his mind to the concept, he would someday find he could reach out and manipulate the inky void like so much black clay.

He curled his toes around the edge of each stair, enjoying the sensation and delaying completion of his errand as long as he could, given the fact Mama was in the kitchen awaiting his return. Her rules never changed. Do it quietly and quickly and don't turn on any lights. Your brother is not down there playing. He's being punished. If you stop to visit, I'll lock the door and you'll stay there with him.

Older Brother couldn't allow that, of course. So, as he stepped from smooth wood to chilly concrete, he called out very softly to the person he could not see.

"Hey. I got a ham and cheese and some chips."

He wasn't surprised when the response came from off to his right near the opening that led to the crawlspace. It was a grunt, no more of a sound than an animal might make at being awakened in surprise. His brother had learned the hard way to keep talk to a minimum. Mama liked a quiet house. Older Brother imagined him crawling silently out of the hole cut halfway up the wall, his oversize shoulders squeezing past the edges.

"C'mon, little bro," Older Brother said. "Take this. I don't want to just lay it down." That wasn't a lie. The smells he'd expected were joined with another, more acidic, odor. He knew it emanated from the floor drain off to his left. With no bathroom in the basement, his little brother occasionally urinated there.

Older Brother shifted his feet, squirming at the thought that the drain might be closer to the stairs than he remembered.

"C'mon, man." he spoke into the darkness again. "Mama . . ."

“She had no right!” The urgent, whispered words seemed to come out of the air itself. He had not felt his brother’s approach and now, even though they stood barely a foot apart, he could summon no sense of his brother’s exceptional bulk. The hair along the back of his neck tingled and he felt a nudge of jealousy. Little Brother embraced the darkness, too.

“I made my bed. I cleaned my room. I done it right after I cleaned yours, just like you told me. When I came home from school, she said I didn’t make my bed. But I did!”

Older Brother leaned away from his sibling’s feral breath.

“She probably messed it up herself just so she could fuck with you. I’ll fix it, though. Like I always do. I’ll get you out of here.” Actually, while she was a bitch-goddess, this time hadn’t been their mother’s doing. He had pulled his younger brother’s bed apart.

“Here, take the food,” he whispered. “She doesn’t know I’m down here so I gotta get back.”

Thick fingers gripped his shoulder. “Why’s she always doing this to me? I haven’t been bad or nothing. She’s always picking on me. . .”

Older Brother reached up and took his sibling’s hand, pressing the foil wrapped sandwich and then the bag of chips into it. They made a crackling sound. “I’ll tell her you said you’re sorry and that you won’t let it happen again, okay? You just have to promise to do everything I say, always. You got that?”

“Yeah, but...”

“Promise!” Older Brother insisted.

Silence. Then, “Yeah. Okay.”

Older Brother mounted the steps two at a time, eager to get to a shower and cleanse himself. As he closed the door to the basement and locked it, his mother looked up at him. A thick bodied and large breasted woman in a too-tight house dress, she sat at the kitchen table holding a half-smoked cigarette in one hand and a half-empty bottle of Tab in the other. A newspaper was spread out in front of her. Despite her size, she looked insubstantial. Had her dress and the wallpaper been the same color, he might not even have noticed her sitting there.

“Been down three hours. Another fifteen minutes, I guess you can let him out.” Her voice pushed through thin lips was hoarse from the yelling she’d done earlier and from the three-quarters of the pack of Marlboros she had smoked.

“He pissed in the drain again,” Older Brother said.

His mother stared at him for a moment, almost as though she hadn’t heard. Then, very precisely, she licked the fingers of her right hand and ducked her head, turning the page of the newspaper.

“Leave him,” she said.

The place where the car had gone into the water was about fifty yards downriver from the suspension bridge that carried I-90 toward the Wisconsin border. More than a dozen pieces of equipment, including three Wihega County marked squad cars, fire trucks and engines, and a dive master’s van were parked along either side of the road, and a group of firefighters and dive gear was spread out along the sloping shoreline. As we pulled up, four men in wetsuits muscled a rubber Zodiac boat off the back of a fire department utility truck and walked into the water with it. I could see two tie lines strung out as well, and a red and white striped Scuba flag bobbed on the waves about thirty-five feet from shore. Divers would be under the surface at or near that point.

A deputy in a white shirt with sergeant’s stripes on the sleeve looked up from talking into the microphone of his portable radio and broke away from the group near the water to walk toward us. I got out and met him at the front of the car.

“Don’t mind you being here but I can’t let you leave the road or go near the team,” he said. “And before you ask, no, I don’t know what we’ve got.”

“How did you get the call?”

“A fisherman across the river saw something floating. Coming across the bridge, one of my units identified it as a vehicle and called for backup. By the time we got down here,” he shrugged. “What you see is pretty much what we found. Alotta water. It’s up to the divers now.”

“We’re looking for a girl named Lindsey Sears, driving a Jeep Sahara ...”

He nodded, unsmiling but not unfriendly. “Yeah, I figured that’s what brought you out. I’m not saying what or who we think is in there. What I will say is we got the Major Case squad coming and, when they get here, they’ll probably want you gone. So if you’re going to get your footage, you best do it quick.”

Al had drifted up while we were talking and, as the sergeant went back to where the fire guys and extra divers were huddled together, he began to shoot the action. I leaned against the Crown Vic and watched.

For fifteen minutes, nothing happened. Then a buoy popped to the surface about a dozen yards from shore, followed by another. The Zodiac boat stopped moving and hovered between the buoys. I heard the crackle of chatter from a radio. Although it was too far away to understand what was being said, I could imagine the message. An image of Lindsey Sears as I’d seen her holding the frightened cat yesterday in Wiley’s parking lot came to mind.

When I was a young reporter working at a small television station in Kansas, a friend and I met a couple of underage girls in a bar one night when I was on-call. We spent a couple of hours with them until they realized it was nearly curfew and they needed to get home. They took off, a little drunk and still laughing, in an old MG convertible. We went back inside. Half an hour later, the station paged me with the report of a fatal crash on the highway south of town. As I heard the message, an odd, empty feeling came over me. I was suddenly certain that our two new friends were the victims.

I was right.

That same kind of realization now sent a chill down my spine, a feeling as dark and frightening as if a spectral being had walked out of the river and beckoned me.

A heavy-duty diesel tow-truck that had been parked along the shoulder of the road in the cluster of emergency vehicles backed down the slight slope and parked close to the water’s edge. Two divers emerged from the water, grabbed the wrecker’s hook and dragged it with them into the river. The wrecker driver put wooden chocks behind his back wheels. By that time, Al had his camera set on a tripod at the front of the car and was letting the tape roll without stopping. I looked at my watch, surprised to see that an hour and a half had passed since I’d awakened to the sound of the rain. It had fallen off to a fine mist and now a light breeze was spraying the moisture into my face. I pulled down

my hat brim. Al hunched over his camera. The hood of his yellow rain slicker obscured his face.

The tow-truck's engine rumbled and the line into the water drew taut. Everyone backed away, giving the driver room to maneuver.

I heard vehicles approaching and turned to see two unmarked squads followed by a black Chevy Suburban headed toward us. The Major Case squad. I focused my attention back on the river's edge, willing the wrecker driver to reel his line in faster. As I heard car doors slam behind me, the water churned for a moment and the bumper and then the back section of a vehicle rose into view. Right away, I saw what I was looking for. A tailgate with a spare tire racked across it. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Al give a quick thumbs up. He could see through his telephoto lens what I couldn't from my angle.

The Jeep emblem.

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