

(Who Knows) What Evil Lurks

They say drinking too much alcohol can kill you; but Jason Tyler is fairly certain that the third beer he drank that night saved his life. Jason's wife Alexis was out of town on business and Jason drowned his loneliness in bad TV and good beer; something he rarely did if Alexis was home. The third beer must have filled his bladder because he usually slept through the night without waking, but on this night he woke up to empty his bladder.

He looked at the clock on the nightstand, it was two in the morning and one of the neighbor's dogs was barking; probably the Kline's since their dog was always kept in an outside kennel. Jason wondered what the point was of having a pet if it was kept locked up all the time; probably just another point of contention, one of many, between Sal and Mary Kline.

Jason sat on the edge of the bed stretching his bad knee and was just standing up when his ears caught another strange sound. Unless his ears were playing tricks on him his back door just made the squeak it makes when it's opened too slowly. Jason's hair stood up on the back of his head. He decided to play it safe and quickly went to the closet; hidden over the door was his old Winchester 12 gauge pump shotgun.

Jason's father was a cop back in the seventies and once told Jason what he was taught back at the police academy. When entering a building late at night, the first thing you do is jack a round in the chamber of your shotgun; it's a sound meant to drive fear into the hearts of any bad guys lurking within. Jason's dad may be old school, but this seemed like good advice given the present situation. Although Jason couldn't remember the last time he was this scared, he did his best to steady his nerves, went to the bedroom door, pumped the first of the three double-aught buck shells into the chamber, then yelled down the stairs with a bit of false bravado, "Hey asshole - come on up, got a little surprise for ya."

The next sound Jason heard was the screen door slamming. Jason ran to the back bedroom and looked out the window. Just at that moment someone was climbing over the backyard fence. It was clear out, two nights before the full moon so although Jason couldn't make out any features, it was obviously a man trying to hop the fence, but he dropped something. Shit, was it a gun? It sure looked like a handgun that the guy stuck back in his pocket before hopping over the fence.

By now the neighbor's dog was going nuts and the Kline's back porch light came on. Unfortunately, the light didn't help identify who was running down the alley. Jason went back into their bedroom and picked up the phone.

"911, state your emergency."

"Someone just broke into my house; he left and is running away."

"Are you in any danger?"

"No, I don't think so. But the guy is running away, maybe you can catch him."

The conversation between Jason and the dispatcher quickly went downhill from there with Jason wanting the police to respond immediately in the hope of catching the guy and the dispatcher explaining it might take some time since he was no longer in danger and there were other priorities just then. Jason knew he crossed the line when he asked the dispatcher if those priorities included stopping for a donut and coffee before coming to his house.

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Two miles away Sandy Mason was sitting in his parked car trying to catch his breath. How could everything go so wrong? He had spent the past week preparing for last night; scoping out the surrounding area, mapping out where to park the car to cause the least suspicion, the best route to take walking to and from the Tyler house. He knew about that damn dog in the neighbor's yard. For that very reason he walked through the alley at two AM for the past three nights just to make the barking a routine. The lack of sleep was starting to affect his thinking and performance at work. Damn!

It wasn't easy to plan and execute (nice word!) the perfect murder. This was Sandy's best option for doing away with Jason Tyler. Sandy wondered how disappointed Alexis would be when she returned home from her business trip to find she's still married to that bastard. Alexis wouldn't show it in any outward sign, she's too good an actress.

Over the past six months, ever since he was transferred into Alexis' department, Alexis has acted like she wasn't even interested in a relationship with Sandy, but all the signs were there. The way Alexis smiled when she walked through the department, Sandy knew a secret part of that smile was just for him. And now all the hard work they had put into this night was down the tubes. Sandy had other options for getting rid of Jason, but they would take more time and Sandy was tired of the long wait until he and Alexis could be together.

Sandy rubbed himself as he sat in the car thinking back to the first time he saw Alexis. It was in a staff meeting and Alexis sat in the chair right next to him. Her skirt came up a little as she sat, just enough to show four or five inches of her thigh before she pulled her skirt back down. She smiled right at him, extended her hand and introduced herself, "Hi, I'm Alexis Tyler." Just like that!

Then last month he found her in the break room eating her lunch with Susan Oster. He asked if he could join them and Alexis said, "yes, please do" or something similar to that and in that sweet voice of hers as she smiled at him again. Alexis continued to talk to Susan, but Sandy knew that the words were meant for his benefit.

Alexis was laughing when she told Susan, "I sometimes envy you Susan, being single that is, I've tried to train Jason for the past twenty years and just this morning I practically fell into the bowl because he left the seat up again. My fault for trying to sit

down without turning the light on." Susan's response was to bemoan her latest experience with a guy from the online dating service. Susan and Alexis laughed at each other's story, but Sandy knew Alexis was being subtle and actually telling him how much she wanted to get rid of Jason.

Sandy held the key to the Tyler home in his hand. He thought back to that morning when she left it on her desk; clearly an invitation for him to take it and get it duplicated. She was expecting his report on the Graves' audit that morning; when he walked into her cubicle to drop off the report, there were her keys, just sitting there. He grabbed the keys, made an excuse to the department receptionist about an emergency and ran down to the hardware store to have the house key duplicated. It wasn't difficult to tell which was a house key on the ring.

It took less than a half-hour to get the duplicate, he walked in the office, but Alexis was already back from her meeting. Now what? He knew he couldn't just drop off the keys at her desk, that would imply a conspiracy between them and Sandy had watched enough police dramas to know that was dangerous. What to do, what to do? Finally, the solution occurred to him. He rushed down to the parking garage and threw the keys just under Alexis' Honda near the driver's side door. Problem solved.

Sandy's mind returned to the present, but as he continued to rub himself the images playing through his head were shattered by headlights reflecting off his rearview mirror. Sandy slumped down in his seat as the car passed. He rose up just in time to see it was a police cruiser. His heart rate increased, it took another ten minutes before he calmed down, started the car and drove to his apartment.

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Two officers arrived at the Tyler residence an hour after the 911 call to have a look around and take a report. Officers Jones and Sheppard were polite, but cold with little, if any, sympathy for Jason's situation. As they looked around the property with their flashlights the only item of notice was the fact the back door had not been jimmied in any way. Jason was certain he had checked all the doors before he went to bed, but it was obvious the police were skeptical. They finished their report and started out the front door; as Jason was shutting the door he heard Officer Jones say, "Well Peter, I could use a donut and a cup of coffee, it's been almost an hour since my last donut - how about you?" Officer Sheppard laughed loud enough that he might have woke any neighbors still asleep.

Jason was too wired by now to get back to sleep, so he made a pot of coffee and spent the next three hours getting some paperwork done. At seven he called his wife to say good morning; he decided not to freak Alexis out about the break-in; he'd tell her when she got home this evening, her flight was scheduled to land at six-thirty and she had driven herself to the airport. When eight AM rolled around he called his boss to let him know he wouldn't be in that day and why. He called a locksmith to have the locks changed and install a couple door alarms. He and Alexis would have to decide on whether they'd install a home security system.

The locksmith showed up and was finished before noon and with nothing else to do Jason went into the office for the rest of the day. Kevin Smith, Jason's boss, had already told the others in the office about the break-in at the Tyler residence, so the first hour was taken up by his co-workers wanting to discuss it. Jason was finally able to settle things down and get a few hours of work done.

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Alexis stood staring at the door; her key didn't work. This day was just getting worse and she was teed off. The entire trip to Portland was unnecessary, caused by the incompetence of Sandy Mason. His report on the Graves' audit was filled with so many errors, errors put to rest by Donald Grave's documentation; such incompetence would be reported to the department manager on Friday. Two days away from her husband and her home because Mason couldn't or didn't take the time to check his figures. Donald Graves answered every one of her questions with documentation on how the Portland office was in compliance with all of the company's financial policies. She felt fortunate that Donald didn't get too defensive or upset with the visit and that she was able to catch the earlier shuttle from Portland.

Being the problem solver she is, Alexis walked around to the back door and tried the key in the lock; again, nothing. A moment of panic attack hit her. Just a couple weeks ago she and Jason were watching that Richard Geer - Diane Lane movie "Unfaithful" on cable. They looked forward to it because their two "free pass" actors were together in the same movie, the free pass meant if either of them were in a situation where they could have sex with the respective actor/actress, they could go for it without recrimination. They had free pass musicians and sports stars, too. Alexis' were Keith Urban and JJ Watts, Jason's were Joan Jett (he heard she was gay, but this was fantasy after all, so it didn't matter) and Kerri Walsh Jennings.

So (spoiler alert) in the movie Diane Lane has an affair with some young French guy and when Richard Geer finds out, he accosts the guy and accidentally kills him. After the movie Jason told Alexis that if she ever cheated with anyone other than her three "free passes" not to expect him to fight for her, he'd just change the locks and have her served. Now Alexis is faced with part one of his threat even though she couldn't imagine why since she hadn't done anything to warrant it.

Alexis pulled out her phone and called Jason. Luckily, Jason picked up on the second ring and just as he was starting to say, "Hello, love" he got cut off.

"Jason, what the hell is going on? My key doesn't work in the locks at home."

Jason was caught off guard and said the first thing that came to his mind, which wasn't the most intelligent thing he could have said given the situation. "Alexis, I thought you were coming in on the six-thirty flight."

"What the hell does that have to do with the fact I can't get in the house? Why are the locks changed?"

"I'll be home in twenty minutes. I am so sorry. I'll explain when I get there. Hold on, love."

"Well hurry, because I have to pee and my bladder is making me angry."

Jason kept apologizing into the phone as he grabbed his keys and raced out the door, Alexis had already hung up on him. A few traffic laws were broken, but Jason was home within the promised twenty minutes. He ran to the front door and had it open as Alexis exited her car; she gave him her "angry" look but still kissed him before moving past him to head to the parlor room. Jason went back to her car to get her suitcase and briefcase. He had one of Alexis' favorite ales poured and waiting for her as she walked into the kitchen. Seeing her husband with a sheepish smile and the peace offering made her smile back. She wrapped her arms around her best friend and gave him a kiss.

"OK, now tell me what's going on with the locks."

Jason told Alexis about the break-in and everything that happened since then. Alexis was shocked that she came so close to losing the love of her life. Tears ran down her cheeks at the mere thought of a life without this special man. She ended up apologizing to him for being so angry earlier on the phone. The question whether to install a security system was answered by Alexis immediately.

"Damn right we're putting in a security system. Katie is coming home from school next weekend and there's no way I'm having her placed in danger."

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When Alexis parked in the underground parking garage Friday morning she made certain she followed her new routine. Before she exited the door, she placed the key ring in the side pocket of her purse. Ever since she lost her keys last month she made certain the keys were secure; it had taken her over an hour to find the keys and then only after Susan walked with her re-tracing her steps from that morning. She could have sworn she threw the keys on her desk, but she was late to her morning meeting because of an accident on Third Avenue and barely had time to pick up the Harrison file before rushing to the meeting. When she returned from that meeting she searched her coat pockets, under the desk, the conference room she just left, even the trash can before Susan came in because she heard Alexis swearing under her breath; Susan helped her find them under the car.

Alexis used the button on the door to lock the car; Jason taught her to do this after he read an internet article about crooks hanging out in parking lots with a devise that could intercept the key-fob's signal to lock and alarm cars. According to the article the devise could then re-create the car's unique signal so the crooks could unlock and steal anything left inside. The article suggested this could have been the method used to enter the car of that Spokane woman who was later found raped and strangled in Idaho. The theory was the rapist-murderer hid in the back seat and surprised the woman when she returned to her car. Alexis thought maybe this was a bit paranoid, but that was

before someone with a gun tried to break into their home. Now she was thinking that maybe a little paranoia was a good thing.

Alexis walked through the department and passed Sandy Mason's cubicle. He happened to be facing the hallway at that moment and she could feel his eyes on her. The small hairs on the back of Alexis' neck stood on end, the guy just gave her the creeps. The new hire showed up one morning about six months ago and the staff meeting was ready to start when she entered the conference room; there was one chair left around the table and the new guy was in a chair next to it staring at her. She had no choice but to sit next to him. As she sat down he had the nerve to try and look up her skirt, she adjusted her skirt as quickly as possible but then his eyes only went up as far as her breasts. Alexis refrained from saying, "Hey, up here." Instead she stuck her hand in front of his face and with an evil grin introduced herself.

A couple weeks ago Sandy actually interrupted a conversation Alexis was having with Susan in the break room. He was polite enough to ask if he could sit at their table and neither Alexis or Susan had the nerve to tell him to get lost, one or the other of them politely said, "OK", then did their best to ignore him and carry on with their conversation. It took them a minute to realize the creep was eavesdropping; they were laughing about something Alexis said about Jason's one bad habit when they looked over to see Sandy grinning at her.

Alexis made an appointment to see her manager Hank Dolan that afternoon to discuss Sandy Mason's incompetence and possible harassment. With any luck Sandy Mason would get reassigned or better yet, fired.

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Friday night Sandy was sitting in front of his large screen TV watching movies of Alexis Tyler that Sandy made with his smart phone. The technology today was just amazing. Back in high school he got caught by a teacher when he was following one of the cheerleaders up the stairs with his bulky camera. If they didn't want him to film up their skirts, why did they wear them so short? The vice-principal had the nerve to blame him for filming in a public space for what was obviously a ploy by the cheerleader to be filmed. None of it made sense to Sandy. He was suspended for three days, but he ended up being expelled when someone discovered his website with the other movies and photos he had taken. Once they saw the website it only took them a few minutes to discover how he obtained the movies from inside the girls' locker room. Sandy was fifteen when he was arrested, but he was lucky. His parents hired a great attorney who fought hard to prevent Sandy from having to register as a sex offender, Sandy got off with a three-year suspended sentence and his arrest record was expunged when he turned nineteen.

Sandy rubbed through his pants as he stared at the screen; it wasn't a sin if he didn't actually touch the flesh. Most of the images were taken at the office. Alexis in the conference room, at her cubicle, a couple as she stood in line across the street at the Starbucks. But one of his favorites was coming up, the image came on the screen, a

thirty second short of Alexis running down the park path in her jogging outfit; if only he had a way to blur out her husband from the movie. Sandy decided to spend Saturday looking for a movie editing program to remove Jason Tyler's image from this clip. Of course, the program would be unnecessary as soon as Jason Tyler was dead, then he will be able to take all the movies he wants of Alexis when they're together.

Ah, but here's the scene that will take him over the top, it does every time. Sandy's drone is moving over the alley in back of the Tyler home, it hovers for a second as the 'pilot' gets his bearings, then crosses over the fence of the Tyler yard. There she is, Alexis is sunbathing in her backyard and she's not wearing her top. Her perfect breasts are right out in the open, for a good twenty seconds Sandy leaves the drone hanging over Alexis, she's wearing earbuds and doesn't hear the drone. Alexis looks up, lifts the sunglasses off her eyes and sits up. The drone doesn't record the sound of Alexis' scream. This is the moment Sandy waits for every time he watches the movie, Alexis is too shocked at first to cover her breasts; after she realizes what's happening, she stands up, still bare breasted and points up at the drone. As Alexis looks up at the drone; their eyes seem to meet.

The anger Sandy feels in the next scene of the movie is almost enough to ruin the moment. When Sandy originally filmed this scene he was rubbing himself while watching the live feed. He was so transfixed by Alexis' bouncing breasts and those beautiful eyes. In his stupor he left the drone hovering over the Tyler yard. Jason Tyler comes out of the house with a shotgun and starts to aim at the drone. Sandy yanked the controls just before Jason pulled the trigger and luckily the drone wasn't hit. Sandy thought about turning Jason in to the authorities because it's against the FAA regulations to shoot at a drone, even if it's hovering over and taking pictures of your property. Sandy didn't call the FAA because he didn't know if they could trace the call to him.

After the movie ends Sandy thinks back to that afternoon. My God, what a wonderful woman! Sandy realized too late how poorly his Graves' audit report turned out. His mind was elsewhere almost the entire time he was reviewing the Portland office books. It's obvious the only reason Mr. Dolan let Sandy off with just a warning was Alexis' effort to protect him. That must be why she flew to Portland herself, to smooth things over with Graves personally to avoid Sandy from getting into trouble with their manager. Monday morning he'd get his head out of his ass and concentrate on his work to keep from getting in more trouble. If he lost his job it would cost him all the hours of the day being so close to Alexis. Between now and Monday morning he'd figure out what his next step will be in the elimination of Jason Tyler.

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Saturday morning Alexis and Jason were getting ready for a run. Alexis needed to burn off the anger she was feeling right now, all directed at that wimp boss of hers. Jason politely listened as Alexis vented.

"I can't believe Hank let the creep off with just a warning. My entire week was a waste of time due to Mason's incompetence. And when I told Hank about the harassment, he said I needed to talk to HR."

Jason knew when to keep his mouth shut. Most men never get it; how damn difficult it was to be a woman in the workplace, especially a decent looking woman. Jason knew he was one of the lucky ones, married to a beautiful woman who loved him and kept her wedding vows. She may not be one in a million, but she was certainly one in a thousand. Six months after the birth of their daughter Katie, Alexis was back to her pre-pregnancy weight. Within a year you couldn't tell she had carried a baby full term.

Jason remembered that vacation in the Bahamas, their first alone time after Katie was born. Katie was staying with his parents, Alexis and Jason flew to Miami and hopped a boat to Nassau. Six days and nights together in a tropical paradise. Alexis wore the bikini Jason bought her from the Victoria's Secret catalog. Alexis surprised Jason by revealing her belly button piercing; she had it done the day before they left for Miami and he didn't see it until she stepped onto the boat deck wearing the skimpy two piece. That vacation was also the first time he saw Alexis sunbathe topless, first on the boat, later with a group of Germans on a remote European-style beach. Since then Alexis continued to go topless at other beaches where it was allowed or in their own backyard, and once even at the pool in Vegas, but she refuses to consider Jason's repeated suggestions they try a nude beach.

By the time Jason finished stretching and ready for their run, Alexis was starting to calm down. They took off toward the park; the park was a half-mile away and had a nice trail to run down to the waterfront. There was a hill on the north end of the park with a staircase cut out. Two hundred and ninety steps up to the top of the hill. On good days they were able to run the entire distance there and back without stopping.

Jason and Alexis were on the return leg and decided to walk the last mile; the stress of the past week had taken a toll on their energy. Jason was watching the guy sitting on one of the park benches. The guy had a smart phone up to his ear, but the angle was off and then it hit him. Jason had seen men do the same thing more than once on topless beaches, there was often some pervert troll pretending to talk on a cell phone when actually the perv was filming the topless ladies. Twice in the past Jason approached these pervs and called them out, "Going to take that back home and jack-off to it?" - embarrassing the shit out of these assholes.

Jason was watching the guy on the park bench, wondering why the guy would be filming the two of them, there was nothing all that sexy about Alexis' running outfit. Alexis was excited about Katie coming home soon and was discussing their plans for next three weeks, so she wasn't paying any attention to her surroundings. Jason interrupted her after they passed the man and asked her, "Did you notice that guy with the cell phone we just passed? I think he was using his smart phone to film us."

Alexis turned around and quickly whipped her head back.

"My god, that's Sandy Mason!"

"What the hell? That's the guy that you complained was harassing you? What the hell is he doing filming us?"

"I told you there was something off with Mason."

"Should I go back and confront him?"

"And do what? He's sitting in a public park and we can't prove he's filming us unless you grab his phone before he runs or erases the image. I'll just add this to my report to HR on Monday morning."

"Alexis, I want you to start being more careful and keep your eyes open. I don't trust this guy. Start carrying that mace spray I bought you. Don't give me any lip now, just do it."

As uncomfortable as Alexis was with the thought of carrying that damn tube of mace, she knew Jason was right. She was even more creeped out now than yesterday.

Jason didn't tell Alexis, but he realized he'd seen the guy on that park bench at least once before. Jason knew the police wouldn't be able to do anything about a guy sitting on a public park bench, even if the guy was using his phone to film. But Jason had other resources. As soon as he returned to the house he called the agency his brokerage firm used for investigations. He left a message for the owner to call him as soon as he received the message, but first thing Monday morning at the latest.

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Alexis met with Clyde Walker in HR Monday to tell him about her concerns, including seeing Sandy Mason at the park on Saturday and their suspicion that Sandy was using his phone to film them. As expected, Clyde said that this couldn't be used against Sandy, but Clyde would meet with Sandy Tuesday and give him a general warning regarding unwanted attention toward female employees that could be construed as harassment.

"Are you going to tell him it was me that complained?"

"No Alexis, I'm going to keep it anonymous. We're allowed to do that in the case of a warning. If it escalates, we may be required to show him the signed complaint. If he retains an attorney, the attorney will insist on seeing the complaint. Let's hope a warning will be sufficient to correct Sandy's behavior. I'll personally follow up."

Alexis walked out of the meeting hopeful to see a change in Sandy's behavior and avoid further confrontation. Alexis had been taught by her saint of a mother to try and see the best in people. Her mother always tried to excuse peoples' bad behavior by imaging that there had to be a reason for such behavior, it was beyond her that some people could be plain evil.

Alexis did her best to live by her mother's philosophy. In high school she was captain of the cheer squad and homecoming queen; she tried to be gracious and thought for the most part she succeeded, but assholes like Sandy Mason put her mother's teachings to the test. Since that first day in the conference room six months ago, her nerve ends tingled whenever she found herself near Sandy Mason.

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Dave Philips, owner of Philips Investigations, met with Jason at eleven AM. Dave always checked his machine throughout the weekend, grabbed Jason's message Saturday afternoon and set up this Monday morning meeting; they both thought the matter deserved immediate attention.

"Dave, I need you to find out everything you can about this Mason character. Where does he come from, what's in his past? Is he dangerous? Alexis tells me he showed up in her department six months ago and never talks to anyone about his personal life. She avoids the guy, but some of the others in the department have attempted to talk to him, without luck."

Dave jotted some notes as Jason spoke, Dave looked up from his pad of paper, "I'll call our attorney this morning and get him to contact Alexis' HR Department. It's in their best interest to give us some background on Mason given Alexis submitted a formal complaint, especially after Saturday morning's incident. Our attorney won't accept 'no' for an answer or we'll file a suit. I don't know how much vetting the company did on Mason, we'll dig deeper."

"Thanks Dave, I don't have to tell you how critical this is to me. I told you about the break-in at our house. That with this puts me on edge and I need answers."

"Consider it done, we'll be moving on it today. I have some free time this week and I'll have Dwayne Larson, one of our best people, working on this. We'll get your answers."

"What about the police?"

"If and when we have something for them, we'll share it with the police. Right now we just have a co-worker who has acted strange and was seen on a public park twice. If they contact Mason right now with what we have, it might drive him underground and make him more careful."

"You know, I just thought of something. Damn! A few weeks ago a drone flew over our property and hovered over Alexis while she was sunbathing. Any chance you can find out if Mason has a drone?"

"I'll look into it; it seems to me I read that some of the bigger ones are registered with the FAA. We'll check up on it. If there's anything else you think of, little things that didn't click earlier, call me on my cell. Every bit helps if we end up going to the police. In the meantime, would you be more comfortable if we assigned a bodyguard for Alexis?"

"Let's hold off on that for now. What doesn't make sense is, if it was Mason trying to break into our house, why did he do it when Alexis was out of town? He must've known she was in Portland."

"Yeah, you're right, that doesn't make sense; but one thing I've learned in this business is most of these nutcases will do things that aren't logical to anyone considered sane. Maybe the break-in and the stalking are unrelated, we'll keep them connected for now until we learn differently."

"Thanks Dave. I appreciate you jumping right on this and your personal attention to our concerns."

"What'd you expect? You're not only a client, you and Alexis have been friends for years."

With that Jason and Dave rose from their chairs, shook hands and Jason left Dave's office and headed down the street to his office. Jason found himself being more observant of his surroundings, including looking at the reflections in the shop windows as he passed.

Dave watched his friend leave and immediately picked up the phone. "Alice, can you please ask Dwayne to come see me? Thanks."

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Sandy Mason was becoming more and more frustrated and angry. Tuesday morning he was called into the HR department and told there had been a serious complaint of possible sexual harassment against him by one of the other women in his department. He knew who complained, it must have been that bitch Susan Oster, he knew she was jealous of what he and Alexis shared. That bitch will pay for this and he knew exactly how to make her pay.

But Sandy's more critical and immediate issue was getting rid of Jason Tyler. It was almost a week since he attempted to break into the Tyler house and he still couldn't come up with a better plan than the one that failed. Going back into the house was out of the question; Thursday evening he had driven past the Tyler house and saw a new ADT signs. Sandy knew some of these signs were fake, but he didn't think this one was fake and why take the chance?

No matter how much he considered the options for killing Jason, they all had an element of danger or capture after the fact. What good would it do to have Jason out of the picture if he ended up in jail and unable to marry Alexis?

The thought of jail caused Sandy to shudder, just thinking about how close he came to spending time in juvie back in high school always produced the same reaction, but this time it triggered a thought in his head. What if he didn't kill Jason, what if he just got him out of the way by setting up Jason for a crime that would send him away for a long, long

time? But the crime would have to be so awful that Alexis would have to divorce him. What would do that?

Sandy was thinking through his dilemma while staring at the terminal in his cubicle. His commitment to buckle down and pay attention to his work was forgotten. Then he saw Alexis' reflection in his terminal, she walked past his cubicle and the solution presented itself. If he killed the Tyler's daughter and made certain that Jason was framed and convicted of the crime, it would assure Alexis' divorce from Jason, and the bonus was Sandy wouldn't be stuck with Jason's spawn. Sandy smiled to himself as he thought about it, "this deserves some more consideration" he thought to himself.

With this new idea in mind, Sandy decided it was time to get back at Susan. Using an alias, he signed on to the online dating service he overheard her mention. Within a half hour he found her profile and 'Mr. Sam Martin' submitted a request to meet Ms. Susan Oster sometime soon. With that accomplished, Sandy sat back in his chair with a self-satisfied grin and was finally able to get back to work.

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Susan spent the first half of the week auditing the Eugene office and it wasn't until Thursday afternoon that the two friends had a chance to sit down and catch up with their lives. Alexis shared what happened the previous Saturday in the park and Monday morning in HR. Susan couldn't help but notice how Alexis seemed to scan the café before starting to talk. Susan was stunned about the incident in the park, but not at all surprised by Clyde's lack of action. Most of these guys in HR were ball-less. After a while Alexis figured she was dominating the conversation and asked Susan about her date last weekend.

"Another online date, another bust. He was a nice enough guy, but we both knew by the end of the evening that we weren't what each other was looking for."

Just hearing Susan's tale of another poor experience broke Alexis' heart. Susan's first marriage ended after the second time catching her husband cheating. Susan had given the guy a chance after the first time; an office romance with his secretary of all things. The couple went into counselling after her husband begged Susan to give him another chance, but while they were in their second month of counselling, he was caught back in the secretary's saddle. (Actually, he got caught because the secretary blew the whistle on him, hoping this was the best way to get him for herself. Good luck, sweetie.)

"Anyway - since Tuesday evening I've been communicating with what seems like a decent guy. We're supposed to meet sometime soon. He's been on a big project at his work and wants to get that out of the way first. He wrote that it should be within the next week or so."

Alexis looked at her friend and tried her best to sound positive. "Good for you! One of these days the right guy is going to make you a very happy lady. You deserve it." Once more Alexis silently thanked her lucky stars not to be in Susan's shoes.

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Considering all the anxiety, most of the week was relatively quiet at the Tyler household. With Dave Philip's pull, the security system was up and operational. Katie would be home Friday; her last final for the summer quarter was Thursday and both Alexis and Jason were looking forward to the three weeks Katie had before returning to school for the fall quarter.

Both Alexis and Jason were taking the next two weeks off work to spend time with Katie at their cabin on Lake Wenatchee in Eastern Washington; two weeks of hiking and fishing. The second week Katie's boyfriend was coming to visit. It sounded like Katie was serious with this young man, Alexis hoped not too serious, Katie was only twenty. Jason was looking forward to sitting down with the poor fellow, Jason could be a big, bad poppa bear when it came to Katie, the perfect complement to Alexis' momma lion. Luckily, Katie knew her parents acted this way out of love and accepted it with humor.

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Jason stopped at Dave Philips' office on the way home Friday. Dwayne gave Jason a rundown on what he discovered so far.

"Sandy is a nickname; his given name is Sanders Austin Mason. He's twenty-eight years old, was born in Vancouver, Washington. His previous employer was Exxon in Houston. We tried to get some information on why he left Exxon, but that's harder than breaking into the Pentagon. We did find out he didn't have any arrests or convictions in Texas or any other state as an adult.

"Here's where it gets dicey. We're fairly certain Mason has some record as a juvenile. He was enrolled in the public high school in Vancouver his freshman and sophomore years, but the yearbook for his school doesn't list him as a student the following year. We checked the local private schools, and again, no record of him attending. His parents still lived in the same house during that time, but he's not enrolled in any area school.

"Using the yearbook and a local phone directory, we found a couple ex-classmates. No one claimed to be a friend, but two of his classmates remember some rumors about Sandy Mason taking up-skirt photos, there was even an un-substantiated rumor about a hole in the girls' locker-room.

"He seems to fall off the face of the earth until he's nineteen and in college. If he has a juvenile record, any good attorney will have the record expunged unless it's a conviction as a sex offender. Since we didn't find any of those, it's safe to assume he didn't rape anyone."

Jason let out his breath, he hadn't realized he was holding it the entire time Dave was talking. "Well, I guess that's somewhat comforting, but what do we do now?"

"We'll get to that in a minute. There are two more things we need you to know.

"First, Mason does own a drone, a high end drone with a high end camera. One of the neighbors in the building across the street from his apartment building has seen him on top of the roof with the thing. After it takes off from the roof, he disappears, probably goes to his apartment where he can control it and watch using the camera. He doesn't come back onto the roof until the drone lands."

"Is that legal?"

"Yes, the whole drone thing is a grey area right now. Neither our state legislature or the Feds have caught up with how quickly this technology has evolved. The Feds, as usual, were caught with their pants down."

"OK, you said two things, what else?"

"The second is more troubling. Mason owns a 9mm Glock. Are you familiar with handguns?"

"Enough to know what that is. Can't say what gun I saw the night of the break-in; it was too dark and too far away. Does Mason have a permit to carry?"

"No, but few criminals go through the trouble of acquiring a concealed carry permit. Have you thought about carrying?"

"Not going to happen; Alexis has a fear of guns and especially of handguns. I'm lucky she allows my shotgun in the house."

"Well, I'd never suggest anyone carrying if they're not comfortable with a firearm. Too many bad things can happen if you're not willing to practice and know how to react to a situation. I know you bought Alexis a handheld mace canister. Consider getting one for you and your daughter."

"Now, to answer your previous question. It might cost big bucks, but I'd like to hire a law firm in Texas to access Exxon's records. I figure it will cost us at least a few thousand or more if Exxon does fight us. But with the proper law firm we can get a judge's order for Exxon to release their personnel files on Mason. If we get a judge's order, Exxon can use that as cover to prevent any countersuit from Mason. What do you think?"

Jason didn't hesitate, "Do it!"

Dave, Dwayne and Jason spent another half-hour discussing the details of the investigation. Once again, Dave brought up the option of a bodyguard. Dwayne wasn't available since he'd be in Texas, but Dave had other options. Jason still felt it was unnecessary but did stop at the outdoor store on the way home and picked up two cylinders of pepper spray.

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When Jason arrived home that evening he couldn't help but have a great big grin on his face as he saw Katie's car in the driveway. It would be great to have her home, even if it was only for three weeks. He walked through the door and instantly Katie gave him a big hug. But he was puzzled when he noticed the stern look on her face.

"When we're you going to tell me about the break-in?"

Jason saw the moisture in Katie's eyes as she looked into his eyes. She didn't wait for his answer.

"If anything ever happened to you or mom, I don't know how I'd survive. Promise me you won't let anything ever happen to you or mom - promise!"

Jason knew Katie was being completely irrational. He looked over her shoulder to see Alexis standing ten feet away; Alexis also had tears in her eyes watching father and daughter. Jason's first thought was how he was going to make it through the next few weeks if the two women in his life were going to be this emotional. Jason's second thought was how lucky he was to have two wonderful women care so much about their family. Could life ever be better than this?

He gave his daughter another hug and told her that he'd do everything he could to keep himself and his family safe.

The rest of the evening was a whirlwind of chatter. Katie barely had time to eat as she related the events of the past semester, she was especially demonstrative as she told her parents about the 'amazing' young man she was dating. It seems Charles Owen was in his last year majoring in engineering, was in ROTC and would be going into the Army as a second lieutenant right after graduation. As Jason listened to all the wonderful attributes of this young man, he silently told himself he better be prepared for the young man's visit; Jason had a sneaky suspicion that he would soon be introduced to his future son-in-law.

Katie asked about the break-in. This was the moment Jason had been struggling with ever since his meeting with the detectives. On the one hand, he didn't want to scare the hell out of either Alexis or Katie; but on the other hand, he didn't want them to underestimate the potential threat. Jason related the details of the night of the break-in; when he told her how he had threatened the intruder with the shotgun, Katie looked over at her mom, knowing her mom's feelings on firearms. Katie did laugh at Jason's shout down the stairs.

""Come on up - got a little surprise for you"? Dad - that's just too funny; what is that, something out of one of your Bruce Willis movies?"

"I don't know, hon - just sounded like the right thing at the moment. Anyway, it seemed to have the proper effect, two seconds later I heard the screen door slam. Thank goodness; I've never shot a living thing in my life. Who knows how I would have reacted had it come to that." With Jason's last sentence the dining room went quiet for a few

moments. Alexis broke the tension by telling Jason and Katie to clear their plates; she would load the dishwasher while they spent some one on one time.

Both Katie and Jason thought that was an excellent idea; they each had something they wanted to say without disturbing Alexis. "Katie, let's walk around the block."

As they walked, Jason spoke first. "Listen, I didn't want to overly alarm your mother, but this Mason character might be a little bit more dangerous than I let on back there. One of the detectives is heading to Mason's last home and place of employment next week. I hope to have more background on this creep before your mother goes back to work in two weeks.

"I've at least gotten your mother to carry a mace canister when she's alone in the parking garage; I bought a canister for you as well. I hope I can convince you to carry it, just in case."

It was Katie's turn to share something she wasn't prepared to share with her mother. "Dad, I hope this won't cause you to think poorly of Charles, but he's taught me how to use a handgun. I have a concealed carry permit and a 9mm semi-auto; I go to the range with Charles and I'm fairly proficient. You keep the mace, I'll keep my Smith and Wesson."

Jason was shocked for a minute, but recovered enough to ask, "So where is it right now? I can't imagine what your mother would say if she knew there was a handgun in the house or the cabin."

"It's in my bedroom with a trigger lock to keep it safe when it's out of my sight. The key is in my pocket."

"Well, I hate to hide anything from your mom, but give me some time to figure out how we're going to convince your mother to allow it in the house. Let's keep this to ourselves for now."

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The more Sandy considered killing Katie Tyler, the more reasons he found for not carrying it out. For one, the framing of Jason for the crime would have to be rock solid, a fairly tough assignment. For another, if Tyler was alive not only would he and Alexis not collect Jason's life insurance, but Jason might waste thousands on lawyers for the trial. All the Tyler's assets would go away. Sandy was counting on those assets and the insurance check to set up their new life. Sandy didn't really like to work and with enough money he could lead a life of leisure.

No, killing Katie and framing Jason was not going to work. Back to Plan A, killing Jason. Keep it simple; approach Jason on the street one night, pretend it's a mugging gone bad and kill the bastard. There was nothing to connect Sandy to Jason, so why would the police suspect him?

Sandy was clever by half. Just to make certain the police looked at the murder as a robbery he went out Saturday night and tagged two buildings with gang graffiti. He was pleased with himself as he watched the local news on Sunday. A lady reporter was standing in front of one of the buildings; she was mouthing the typical hysterical "What does the rise in this gang activity mean to the safety of the citizens in our community?" Thank goodness for slow news days.

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It was Tuesday evening of the following week when Susan Oster walked out of the lounge feeling a little tipsy. Susan didn't believe she was too drunk to drive home; it had been a long day and the evening had been a bust. Sam Martin, her date from the online dating site was supposed to meet her in the lounge for their first get together but was a no show. Susan was too upset to eat and the two Cosmos went to her head. Susan unlocked her car and was confused when the sweet-smelling rag was placed over her face. As she slumped to the ground two arms held her up and threw her into the back seat before she passed out.

When Susan woke up the first thing she saw was Sandy Mason staring at her from between the two front seats of her car. She tried to move, but her arms and legs were bound; the shoulder strap also prohibited movement. Susan's eyes grew accustomed to the dark until they focused on the gun in Mason's hand pointed at her.

"Sandy, what are you doing? Turn me loose." Susan's voice was strained, but the gravity of her situation was just starting to hit her as her mind came out of the fog.

"Susan, Susan, first tell me why you complained about me at work."

"What are you talking about? I never complained about you. Why are you saying that?"

"Don't lie to me, you bitch! I know it was you that told HR I was harassing you."

"Why would I do that? You never harassed me. It was Alexis that complained to HR when you wouldn't stop stalking her!" As soon as the words left her lips she knew she had messed up, but in her defense, she was still disoriented.

"You're lying! Alexis loves me! She would never do that!"

"Alexis loves you? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the fact that as soon as Jason is out of the picture, that Alexis and I will be getting married."

Susan was stunned by the words coming out of Mason's mouth. How could this imbecile be so delusional?

"Look Sandy, just let me go. I didn't turn you into HR and I promise I'll never say a word about this to anyone. Just please let me go."

Sandy Mason was confused; he needed time to think. He opened the car door and stepped into the trailhead parking lot. There was the only car in the lot at 1:00 AM. They were miles from the nearest person, no need to gag Susan while he walked around the trailhead parking lot trying to get his thoughts together. Ten minutes later he returned, Susan was staring at him before the dome light went out returning them to the darkness.

"OK, I'm going to let you go. But you have to answer my questions and you have to remember your promise not to tell anyone about tonight. Ready?"

Susan could only nod her head in agreement. She did answer the questions, somehow thinking maybe Sandy would let her live if she did, she was frightened and grasping at straws.

Sandy's original plan was to make Susan suffer before she died, but now he felt sorry for her, she was just an innocent bystander in this melodrama. Of course, she still had to die, but instead of placing the plastic bag over her head while she was still conscious, he would put her back to sleep first.

With the information he needed Sandy exited the car, opened the bottle of chloroform and poured some on a rag. For a moment Susan thought she had her wish granted, but as Sandy opened the back-door Susan recognized the smell. "No, don't, please don't." She was turning her head back and forth, but it didn't do any good. Sandy placed the rag over her face and waited until she stopped moving.

"Sorry Susan."

Sandy took the plastic bag out of his pocket, dumped the chloroform soaked rag inside it, then placed the bag over Susan's head. A couple loops of electrical tape to secure the bag tight around her neck. Sandy stepped outside the car and waited ten minutes.

Sandy lifted Susan's limp body over his shoulder and hiked the quarter mile up the trail to where a steep cliff met the trail. Sandy removed the plastic bag from Susan's head and stripped her; with any luck the coyotes and other carrion would delay any identifiable evidence until Sandy was well on his way out of the country. Mexico was not an option, but there were plenty of other places to hide in the world.

First things first though; time to pay that bitch Alexis and her family back for their treatment of him. Alexis would stay alive long enough to watch her daughter and husband die before she was raped and killed. Sandy couldn't wait to see the look in Alexis' eyes as her world crumbled in front of her. A madman's smile crossed his lips as he drove Susan's car home to search Google Earth for the address Susan gave him during her last moments of hope. A cabin in the woods? How much better could it be? This put the whole 'gang-style' murder plan on the back burner.

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Due to an important court appearance, Dwayne Larson didn't get to Houston until Tuesday. The initial firm of attorneys that had been given to him as a reference back in Seattle refused to take the assignment due to a conflict of interest. Dwayne was initially disappointed, he assumed this had been arranged by the Seattle attorneys before he even flew down here. Luckily, the Houston firm was kind enough to give Dwayne a second reference and by Wednesday afternoon Dwayne was in the office of Schuler and Simmons explaining the situation. George Schuler agreed to attend any meetings Dwayne could arrange with the Exxon people.

Feeling better now, Dwayne contacted Exxon and had an appointment with the Vice President of Personnel Relations on Thursday morning. Dwayne confirmed George Schuler was available and used the time before the meeting to do research on the computer at the local library.

Thursday morning found Dwayne and George in Howard Grimley's office at Exxon. Grimley greeted the two men warmly, asked if either cared for coffee, tea or a soft drink, then asked them to have a seat. Given the topic, Dwayne was surprised when Grimley did not close the office door. Grimley's assistant was sitting right outside the door and could hear everything said.

"Mr. Larson, Mr. Schuler; immediately after receiving your phone call requesting this meeting I pulled Sanders Mason's personnel file and met with our in-house legal staff. Unfortunately, I have been forbidden to allow you to review the file or discuss the contents of the file unless we receive a subpoena to do so."

Both Dwayne and George looked at each other, silently wondering why Grimley hadn't saved them the time by explaining this over the phone.

Grimley continued, "That said, let me assure you Exxon will cooperate fully with any subpoena, we will not attempt to block the subpoena in any way. Mr. Larson, I don't know the full scope of your investigation, but I'm not surprised to learn someone is interested in looking into Mr. Mason's background. I can't say more than that, I'm very sorry."

Dwayne couldn't help but read Grimley's body language, it was obvious Grimley was handling the file almost like a trainer dangles a fish in front of an aquarium seal. At least that's the impression he was getting. Dwayne figured the meeting was over, got up from his chair, both men shook Grimley's hand and walked out the door with the intention of obtaining a subpoena. Dwayne knew this would take at least another day and cost thousands; even then, there was no guarantee of success. Dwayne hoped George knew a friendly judge.

As he passed the assistant's desk, she rose and offered to show them out the front door of the building. The elevator ride was quiet, but just before Dwayne exited through the revolving door, the assistant shook Dwayne's hand and said, "Let's have lunch, Mr. Larson; just the two of us." Dwayne felt the piece of paper in his hand and just nodded.

While George was signaling a cab, Dwayne took the opportunity to look at the paper. It contained a phone number.

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Two hours later Dwayne was sitting across a quiet table from Grimley's assistant, Elaine Stewart.

"I know your attorney is working to get a subpoena as we speak, but there are things you need to know about Sandy Mason that are not in the file."

"Aren't you afraid of getting into trouble with your boss by meeting with me?"

"No, Mr. Grimley actually asked me to meet with you. He's one of the good guys. His hands are tied legally, but he'll do anything he can to help you protect that lady up north. When we got rid of Mason he was afraid we were kicking the can down the road, but without police action, there was little we could do. When we received the call from the Seattle firm asking for a reference, Mr. Grimley did his best to warn them without violating corporate policy, I heard his end of the conversation, but obviously whoever he talked to up there was either too dense or simply ignored the subtle warnings.

"What's in the file is documentation of the two warnings Mason received regarding his harassment of two females in his department. This included one of the woman's complaint that she was certain he was actually rubbing himself under the table during a conference meeting.

"Mr. Grimley was in the process of terminating Mason when he suddenly submitted his resignation and left with less than a week's notice. We were relieved the entire episode was over, but one week later we received an inquiry regarding Mason from the Houston police, who were following up at the request of a Mexican police department. The Tamaulipas state police were investigating the death of a woman whose body was found in the desert. The police were looking for Mason, he left Texas rather suddenly. Mr. Grimley called the police when he received that call from Seattle firm, but that's the last we heard from the police or anyone until your office called us last week."

"So, you don't know what happened with the dead woman and the Mexican police inquiry?"

"Well, that's the scary part. Unofficially Mr. Grimley asked me to follow up because my brother-in-law is a cop and here's what I found out."

"The woman was a Mexican national but had a work visa in Texas. There was evidence she met Sandy Mason on an online dating site and her friends thought she met and dated Mason but ended the relationship after the second date. The friends couldn't understand why she was found in Mexico, she avoided going across the border except when she visited her family on Sundays, and always returned to the US before nightfall.

"The Mexican police wanted to talk to Mason because their records showed Mason had entered the country a few days prior to the body's discovery by a farmer. There was no record of her entry into the country. There wasn't enough evidence to extradite Mason, but they did ask the Houston PD to question him. Houston detectives questioned Mason once, the day before Mason gave us his notice of resignation. A week later the detective came to our office looking for Mason, they planned to re-question him, but his apartment was empty. We told him what we knew, which wasn't much. Like I said, that's the last we heard from the police. If you know anything about what's happening with the drug gangs across the border, you understand this was not a priority for the Mexican police, although my brother-in-law said if Mason returns to Mexico there is a warrant out for his arrest."

Dwayne and Ms. Stewart finished their lunch, Ms. Stewart filled in a few things here and there in answer to Dwayne's questions. They parted ways and Dwayne called his boss in Seattle with the news. Dave Philips called Jason as soon as he hung up the phone with Dwayne, but his call went to voicemail.

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That same Thursday Sandy was driving past the Tyler cabin wondering why life was so unfair and when he would catch a break. One of the cars that was parked in the drive last night wasn't there, which meant either Alexis or the Tyler girl weren't in the house. It would have been nice to get this over with last night, but as Sandy approached the cabin, the motion activated lights came on and lit up the yard.

This morning Jason Tyler was out front mowing the lawn as Sandy drove past. Google Earth gave him a good idea of where the nearby cabins were located and a quick ride past the neighbors confirmed they weren't around and not a threat to his plans.

Sandy continued down the gravel road and parked his car in the state park lot, pulled the mountain bike off the back carrier and headed down the path along the lake. Sandy assumed the bicycle would draw less attention and easier to conceal.

While Sandy parked the car he thought about how killing was getting easier. When he killed his first person, a woman down in Florida, it made him sick to his stomach. He retched for fifteen minutes in her bathroom before he was able to step over her body and get out of the apartment.

He didn't feel as bad killing that Mexican woman, but then again she deserved it. The bitch ended the second date right in the middle of dinner and called a cab to take her home. She didn't even hear him enter her apartment with the key he found under the door mat - stupid bitch. She woke up while he had his hands wrapped around her throat; the look in her eyes told him how sorry she was for treating him with so little respect.

He drove her into Mexico in the trunk of his car and dumped her body in an irrigation ditch. Just one more victim of the violence down there. He was surprised they even cared enough about one more murder that they sent a detective from the Houston

police to talk to him. "I guess only Mexicans can kill Mexicans" he thought to himself. Nonetheless, after that first visit, Sandy didn't stick around, he gave his notice and headed up to Seattle. Too bad, there were a couple of women in his department that he had his eyes on.

Whatever. Any reluctance he felt when killing the first three women wasn't on his mind or in his heart as he approached the back of the Tyler cabin. "This, I'm going to enjoy."

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Over the sound of the mower Jason thought he heard a scream. Looking up, he swore he could see two people through the large plate glass picture window. Surprised for a moment, Jason made a potentially fatal error, hitting the kill switch on the mower, running across the lawn and rushing into the cabin.

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Katie pulled into the cabin's gravel drive; something wasn't right. In all the years she lived at home, she couldn't remember one time that her father left a tool on the lawn, but here was the mower sitting there. Was she just being paranoid because of her father's warnings about her mother's stalker? How would the guy even know where they were this week?

She didn't know why, but as she sat in the car thinking, she realized it was also strange for neither her father or mother to come to the door to greet her; it's just what they always did for her or each other. For a second Katie thought about a worse-case scenario - her mom and dad decided to take advantage of her absence by getting in some 'private' time. But that didn't explain the mower being left out; surely her parents weren't so randy that they couldn't wait a few seconds to put away their tools.

Paranoid or not, Katie just felt something and slipped the pistol out of her purse and moved the slide back to put a hollow point round in the chamber. She kept the gun in her hand with her finger off the trigger, just like Charles taught her and hid it discreetly with a shopping bag. Katie stepped out of the car, walked up the front steps and into the cabin.

Katie realized she was wrong, a worse-case scenario wasn't catching her parents having sex - this was.

"C'mon in, little lady. You must be Katie."

Jason and Alexis were sitting on the sofa in the great room and a man with crazy eyes and a handgun was sitting on a bar stool behind them; The handgun was pointed at the back of her mother's head.

"C'mon I said. Come in and join this party. Your whore of a mother has been leading me on; making me think she was interested in me, but all the time laughing with that bitch

Susan Oster at my expense. Susan isn't laughing anymore and in a few hours, neither will your mother. Come on in."

Katie didn't move; she tried her best to think, think about all the things Charles had taught her over the past year. She had a clear shot at Mason, but she knew she couldn't raise the gun fast enough to avoid her mother getting shot first. Charles taught her that it wasn't like the movies, it's virtually impossible to get off a shot before the bad guy pulls the trigger, in real life the hostage's head will have a great big hole in it.

Mason misunderstood Katie's lack of movement. "Scared, are you? Can't move from fright? This is going to be more fun than I originally planned. I was going to let your mom watch me kill you and your father first, then have some fun with her before putting her out of her misery. But now that I see what a cute little thing you are, I think I'll have to play a little with you first.

"Your dad isn't such a brave man without his shotgun." Mason looked over at Jason and waved the handgun back and forth between Alexis' and Jason's heads, "Got a little something for you here."

Mason let out a sinister laugh and looked back at Katie, "And just because I can, I'm going to let your mom and dad watch. A bullet in their knees to keep them alive, but immobile."

Mason kept laughing as he got off the bar stool and started to move around the sofa, getting in position to shoot at the knees. First Jason, since Mason considered him the greater threat. From this angle Mason couldn't effectively keep an eye on Katie and her parents at the same time. Katie thought this was her best chance.

Katie dropped the bag from her hand and started to raise the gun. The sound of the bag hitting the floor shifted Mason's attention from Jason to Katie, if only for a second.

But a second is all that Katie needed. Her eyes saw through the sights of her S&W 9mm Shield semi-auto. Mason's eyes went big as he realized what he was seeing, his arm went to swing his Glock toward Katie, she was now the greater of the threats, but he was too late.

Katie didn't think about the implications of taking a human life as her finger squeezed the trigger, just like she had been taught and had practiced for months on the range; although justified, she would have moments later when she prayed that killing him was the only option to save her parents and herself from this madman.

The first bullet struck Sandy Mason dead center in his chest, but even as Mason felt that bullet enter his body he could hear the sound of a second shot. Besides proper trigger pull, Katie took seriously another lesson Charles taught her; don't ever let them back up, eliminate the threat. Katie heard those words as she fired a second, then third shot. The second bullet entered Mason's chest just slightly above the first bullet and the third bullet a little higher, this one tearing through his throat and blowing the vertebrae in

Mason's neck into tiny fragments. Mason's legs collapsed from under him and he fell into a heap on the floor.

The entire sequence lasted less than two seconds, Jason was up and kicked the gun away from Mason's open hand; a completely unnecessary act because Mason died before he hit the ground, but you can't fault a guy for trying, he at least hadn't frozen in fear.

Later Jason would have moments of doubt about his bravery and manhood; he wondered if he should have attacked Mason before his daughter returned home. He went over it in his mind; did he know Katie would come in with her gun? Is that why he didn't act sooner? Would he have done all he could before Mason raped and killed his girls? Deep down he knew the answer; moments before Katie dropped the bag, Jason was getting ready to jump off the sofa in a last ditch effort to get the gun from Mason, despite the slim chance such a move would be successful. Someone was watching out for him and his family, the bag dropped milliseconds before his move.

For now, Jason was just happy to have his two girls safe and sound. He grabbed Alexis and hugged her tight to his chest, then reached out to Katie for her to join them. Katie had the presence of mind to clear the round out of the chamber of her pistol before joining in. Alexis saw what she was doing and it suddenly hit her what Katie had done; the shock was starting to wear off.

"Where did that gun come from?"

Jason and Katie looked at each other sheepishly before Jason replied, "Later, dear. Just be glad our little girl knows how to use it. I'm looking forward to meeting Charles to thank him for his part in saving my family."

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The state troopers and county sheriffs started to show up within a half hour of the Tylers' 911 call. It was pretty cut and dry as to what happened and how Katie had fired in self-defense. Mason's car was found within another half hour and the contents of the car answered a lot of questions, both for the Tyler's and for two unsolved murders in Florida and Mexico; it would be two more days before Susan's body was found. Mason had souvenirs from all three of his killings. Also, voyeuristic videos and photos of hundreds of unsuspecting women were found on the thumb drives locked inside a suitcase. The dates on the images spanned the last twelve years.

There was a stolen Ontario license plate in the trunk, Canadian maps and a guidebook for Caribbean islands and Venezuela. Sandy Mason obviously planned to escape through Canada and end up hiding somewhere where he wouldn't be caught.

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Four days later Jason was sitting on the back porch drinking a beer and watching the moon over the lake. The moon was in the first quarter and the sky was dark, dark

enough for him to see a million stars. As Jason sat looking up, a shooting star flew past the Milky Way. Jason remembered the saying from his youth, make a wish on a falling star. "No thanks, I already got my wish." He did say a little prayer of thanks as he looked back into the cabin. Sitting at the table with only a candle to illuminate the room sat his wife, daughter and Charles; Charles had arrived earlier that day.

It didn't surprise Jason one bit that he and Alexis took an instant liking to the young man. He was bright, respectful, and obviously in love with Katie. Jason's gruff papa bear turned into a teddy bear before dinner was over that evening. Alexis was amused at Jason's behavior; so different from how Jason approached Katie's previous dates.

As Jason sat on the back porch finishing his beer and feeling blessed, the screen door opened and out walked Alexis with a couple more longnecks in her hands. She handed one to Jason before sitting down next to him.

Jason took a swig from the bottle. "This is my fourth beer tonight, I'll be up at least once tonight getting rid of it."

"Well, when you come back to bed, don't be afraid to wake me. When was the last time we had a mid-nighter?"

Jason grinned, but before he could answer the screen opened; Charles and Katie came out and headed for the lake.

"We're taking the rowboat out and may go for a swim."

Jason and Alexis answered at the same time, "Be careful out there!"

Alexis laughed and gazed into her husband's eyes. "I like him, I can tell you do, too. It's good he's here, he'll help take Katie's mind off what happened last week. Sandy Mason deserved dying, I just wish it wasn't our daughter that had to do it. She had a couple sleepless nights last weekend. Just now we were in the kitchen and Katie was sharing some of her feelings. Charles held her hands, he let her have another cry. That young man has maturity well beyond his years.

"How did we get so lucky Jason? I keep thinking of Susan and how sad it is. She was such a nice person and her life was so tragic; I find myself crying when I think of how her life ended."

Jason knew there was no answer, so he put his arm around Alexis and just held his wife.

The End

Author's Note: Before television, the radio mystery series, 'The Shadow' began each episode with, "Who knows what evil lurks in the minds of men? The Shadow knows!"