

Amanda went stiff at the sound of the laughter. She would have fallen over like a knife on point if not for an apoplectic right knee that quivered her back into balance. Was she hallucinating? *How strong was that wine, anyway?* Whatever the answer, she thought it best to about-face and get going.

She turned with a half-pirouette, took a step, and stopped. Someone was definitely behind her. Just the possibility would have sent most girls (and more than a few boys) screaming into the hall, but in her mind it was always the more frightening prospect to run from something undefined, as it became the worst thing you could imagine before long. So she repeated her half-pirouette and faced the room.

At the faded edge of the lamplight stood a figure. The first thing that sprung to her mind was a trapeze artist—or any lithe, young women with too perfect skin and a horrible, fixed gaze. It was probably a combination of her appearance and the weightlessness of Amanda's legs that brought the image to mind.

She squeezed the nail file, bending it to match her new reality. "Who are you?" she asked, her cracking voice mimicking the old plaster above.

"I'm the bear," replied the woman, tonelessly.

Amanda could hear the oil lamp's glass chimney rattling in her hand. She wanted to ask this person what she wanted but realized she might not want to know the answer

"Where is everyone?" the woman asked, taking a soft, deliberate step forward. She was sneaking in plain sight and playing it for laughs.

Amanda could see her better now and the news wasn't good. She was wearing a mask, which explained the fixed gaze and smooth, porcelain skin, and at that moment the young divorcee knew the

wind of her evening—or her life, perhaps, far more than recently—was dramatically changing. This time, instead of stinging and hot like a desert sandstorm, it was icy and bitter, leaving her stranded atop the world’s highest peak. And like all wind, it mindlessly sought a destination, behaving as it liked along the way. There was never any way to stop such a wind; there was only the possibility of staying in its good graces. To do so meant figuring a way to address it, harness it, redirect it to a purpose, or as her father was so good at doing, seek shelter against it.

Her father—what she would do to have him there with her now.

“I think I’ll go get my dad,” said Amanda.

“Can we come?” asked the woman. She took another step forward and Amanda saw a gun by her side. *Was that what she meant by “we”?* Again, she pleaded for an answer and no answer at all.

If the woman meant to give her one, she didn’t wait for it. She blew out her lamp, whipped herself around, and moved as fast as she could into the void. Navigating by memory, she hoped in her relentlessly pounding heart she was going the right way and that her little brother had found a way beyond the attic door.



Lucky listened to the patter of bare feet fade into the sound of the wind. He had missed the chance to use his charm, and the situation was such that he may never have another shot. Even worse, Jasper’s breath had consumed the last whiff of the girl’s powdered sweetness and the thought made him madder about the idiot’s choice to break in. Adding injury to insult, he had slipped coming through the window and cut his knee. The wound wasn’t deep, but it distracted him something fierce. And in the pitch dark having just announced

their presence, it throbbed like a handful of toad. Had the other two listened to him in the first place, they might have gotten invited in like guests. He could have said he was lost, or maybe looking for a wayward hound. But the chance was lost once Jasper got in his mood from the stickers, and Lucky figured it had less to do with the pain in his neck and more to do with how they had scratched up his precious "vision".

The truth was Delilah had his dick in a headlock and his head in a dicklock. When they had begun this trip, all that walking billboard wanted to do was carve a few bars of soap and kick off a little chaos like in Shartlesville: innocent stuff that wouldn't stick to them much if they kept moving. Now, the big lummoX was showing off, and if they didn't get to that little girl right away the hornets would be stirred up for sure. *Ain't no fun in scaring something if you can't watch it be scared*, he complained to no one in particular. Their control of the situation was deteriorating rapidly, putting them in serious danger of fucking the whole thing up. That's what he planned on telling them eventually, with all due respect.

Until then, it was time to assess their circumstances and make the best of them. The lamplight they had been fixed on like miller moths was gone, so they would have to get about by moonbeam. Dirty windows in woods thicker than pine tar meant they would be hard pressed to find them folks by dawn. By then, they would have likely been scared to death.

Sure as shit on your shoe, Delilah had a solution. With a *click* her mask came into view, and Lucky could see a tiny light of some sort in her hand.

"How'd you do that?" he asked her, waving his hand over the tiny bulb.

"It's a keychain light. I stole a few at the surplus place." She

dug into her tight skirt pockets and with a cute wiggle produced two more and handed them out.

“Why didn’t you tell us before?” asked Lucky, trying to keep his voice down. “We could have used them in those friggin’ needle bushes out there.”

“That’s why,” she said. “You would have turned them on and ruined our surprise.”

“And Chief Breaking Glass here didn’t do that anyway?” Lucky realized he had let his manners slip and hoped he wouldn’t lose a few teeth as a result. To his relief, “Chief” was too busy shining his new light at all the surrounding junk to hear.

Delilah covered Jasper’s bulb. “Careful, we don’t need to give too much away. She’s only seen me and there’s no need to let on as to how many we are. I say we split up, but head in the same direction. And we’ll have to come up with some kind of signal for when one of us finds one of them.”

“We could blink our lights,” said Lucky.

She shook her head and said, “This place is bigger than it looks from the outside with at least three ways to go in deeper. Light makes us too much of a target. No—we’ll need to do it by sound. Let’s each pick something, but nothing so loud that it spooks any more prey.”

Lucky bristled at the word “prey”. It might have been because it reminded him of her eating biscuits. Or maybe it was the idea of one of them getting to his little girl before he did. More than likely it was due to the fact they were involved in a hunt, which awakened a competitive spark he hadn’t felt in a dog’s age. He would need to move fast. A head start wouldn’t hurt, either.

Lucky nodded in agreement to the plan and they hashed it out some more. The idea was to play with their food before eating it, stretching the fun to its maximum return. In that spirit

they chose their various signals: Jasper would give a short bird whistle, Lucky would throw some change, and Delilah would pump her gun.

Satisfied they had a plan that would work, Lucky slipped the midget pick into his belt and went off to find them little bare feet.



Amanda tried moving quietly, but it was impossible. Her lamp now cold, she was forced to use her free arm to guide her while being mindful of her steps. It was as if she were on a frozen pond being chased by cracking ice. Her eyes remained fixed on the faint glow of the fireplace that bent around an unknown number of walls before coming into view. As she feared, she was heading back using a different route, so it was all new territory for her. She might as well have been dropped in the woods.

Things fell over all around her—floor lamps, vases, picture frames—and at one point what sound like a stack of little cages. Those had made the most noise and in all her terror, the absurd image of hiding inside one came to mind. The more noise she made, the faster she felt she needed to go. It was a vicious cycle of blind flight and bartering space and she was paying the price with her shoeless feet. For everything she disturbed, several smaller things followed. She wanted to scream in pain when an errant footfall found a plug or a piece of glass, but as nonsensical as it sounded, she didn't want to give away her location. It was one thing to be leaving a trail of antiques to track; it was quite another to be alerting someone that she was heading in their direction, possibly injured and completely out of her mind.

She poked her head around a corner and did well to control her breathing. There were other things to consider, and she needed as

clear a head as possible to work them out. She was almost to the den, which meant the hall to the attic stairs was just the other side. Once through, she could take the familiar route past the kitchen and into the long, and mostly empty, corridor. It was a relatively straight shot from there, meaning there was a good chance her family would hear her if she called out. Doing so, however, might give them away. She had to decide if it was best to tread lightly—assuming they would be safely inside the attic by the time she arrived—or stay quiet and take her chances alone.

There were other considerations, as well. If she were being pursued, she was certainly closer to her family than this visitor who, as far she knew, was the only crazy person in the house whose last name wasn't Ducharme. Perhaps the woman would decide the contest wasn't worth the trouble. If the "bear" turned out to be some neighbor's daughter with a toy gun and a demented sense of humor, it might all be laughed off as a stupid prank in the morning. A little money exchanged for the window with a few choice words of warning and everyone would go back to scrubbing floors, trimming trees and breaking entirely with reality.

But one, stubborn detail lay wedged in a primitive fold of her brain: she might have brushed against someone as she turned to leave the foyer. She took small comfort in how it could have been her imagination in cruel cahoots with the wine. Not only were her thoughts racing from the shock of the events, she did manage to drink the dusty bottle totally dry before sending it to its doom. As she covered another precious length of hallway, a new set of conflicting thoughts gnawed at her resolve: if one small woman had come all the way up the mountain just to spook a bunch of strangers, she might be crazier than she looked.

Amanda caught a lucky glimpse of glass and barely avoided slamming into a door. A profound sense of security washed over her when the doorknob turned easily. Pulling on it, she found out why: the door was freestanding, attached to nothing and leading to nowhere. Her stomach knotted tightly and she vomited a teaspoon of hot bile into the back of her throat.

There was a whistle. She held her breath and waited to hear it again. As quietly as she could, she tiptoed around the door and flattened herself against the wall behind it.

There was another sound. Despite being utterly incongruent with the circumstances, she knew exactly what it was having heard it hundreds of times at work. When one of the coins rolled into her right big toe, she thought it might have been a dime.

