

THE FEAR
OF WINTER

Tom released the death grip on the steering wheel, and with his eyes closed, he put the 4Runner in park. Leaning back into the headrest, he listened to his heart pounding against his chest and took a few deep breaths in an attempt to calm his nerves. At almost sixty miles per hour, the collision had been a blur, and he'd had no opportunity to swerve, but that was probably for the best.

He exhaled, then opened his eyes.

The 4Runner had come to a stop at a 30-degree angle, diagonally across the highway and the gravel shoulder. The passenger-side headlight was dark, and the driver-side headlight beamed into the dense forest. Outside, the trees were motionless.

There were no signs of the animal, but judging by the impact, Tom's best guess was that it had been a deer, maybe a fawn. He'd hit an adult male elk as a teenager, and it had collapsed the roof, almost crushing him inside

the car. Luckily, this impact wasn't as catastrophic.

Tom pressed the hazard button and turned off the vehicle, then rolled down the window. He listened for a few moments, but the only thing he could hear was his heart.

He stepped out of the car and quietly shut the door. The night was cold against his ears and neck. The temperature was probably in the low twenties, maybe even in the teens. He walked to the front of the 4Runner to survey the damage.

The radiator grille, bumper, and right front fender were caved in, the passenger-side headlight was completely missing, and the "Colorado Native" license plate frame was shattered. Blood was splattered across the hood and fender, and strains of fur were entwined in the plastic cracks.

Tom turned back to the embankment, looking to the east, then west, then back, but there was no sign of the animal.

His head hurt. Probably a concussion from hitting the windshield.

Trudging to the rear of the 4Runner, he opened the hatch, retrieved the roadside emergency kit, and removed a flashlight. He shined the light across the highway and followed the skid marks, which stretched about thirty feet, maybe longer. The smell of rubber still hung in the air.

Tom started back along the embankment, shining the light across the forest. He contemplated driving away, but his conscience wouldn't let him sleep knowing there could be a mortally wounded animal dying at the edge of the forest. Hopefully it had died from the collision or broken its neck on the landing, or run deep into the forest and found a final resting spot to succumb to the injuries. Anything that would keep him from using his gun. He didn't want to kill tonight.

About a tenth of a mile from the crash, Tom stopped in ankle-deep snow.

“No, no, no,” he whispered, shaking his head.

The flashlight found the fawn hiding behind the trunk of a Douglas fir about forty feet directly ahead. The animal was curled up in the snow drift—ears back, eyes closed, lying in a pool of blood-soaked snow, gasping for every breath. Tom stood there for a long time, shining the light on the fawn.

Suddenly, the animal sprang up, but almost immediately it dropped back into its own footprint. It looked up at Tom, then slowly turned back to the forest. Defeated, it appeared to accept its impending fate.

Tom was about fifteen steps down the embankment when the roar of an engine broke the silence. He turned back to the highway. Through the trees, he could faintly see the shimmering headlights of a truck. The engine roared louder and louder. It sounded like an eighteen-wheeler, and if the driver was speeding, they'd have little time to react to the back of Tom's 4Runner still parked on the dark and icy road.

Tom ran up the embankment but slipped and fell on his stomach, partially knocking the wind out of him. He pushed to his knees, then jumped up and began high-stepping through the snow.

Upon reaching the pavement, he started a full sprint. About a minute later, he reached the vehicle, climbed in, turned the key, pulled the gear shift into drive, and stepped on the gas. Snow crunched as he steered the car off the highway.

Tom leaned back and fixated on the driver-side mirror. The truck was practically on top of him, and for a moment he thought it might still collide with his car and hurl him into the forest as he had done to the fawn.

The deafening engine rattled the entire vehicle as it passed. After about twenty seconds, it was gone, disappearing into the darkness of Highway 40 and the Rocky Mountains.

Tom turned off the car and stepped outside. He walked back down the highway until he found his tracks. Stopping for a second, he looked up to the night sky. A coyote howled in the distance, but after it faded, there was nothing.

Slowly, he traced the snow tracks down the embankment, moving the flashlight across the forest. His breath was a thick, white cloud.

“Hey boy, where’d you go? Nothing to be afraid of,” he said, slowly removing the Glock 17 from his belt.

Halfway down the embankment, Tom spotted the pool of blood in the snow. He stopped and stared. The deer was gone, the forest was still, and Tom was alone.

Wiping the snow out of his eyes, he started back up the embankment as the crescent moon disappeared behind a cloud.

Tom turned off County Road 50 and into his driveway. A light shone from the kitchen, but there was no sign of Lisa. He sat in his car and stared at the house.

After a couple minutes, he opened the door and stepped into a few inches of snow on the driveway. It crunched under his Merrell boots. Tom contemplated shoveling the driveway and walkway right then, but he decided against it. It was too cold, and he was tired. It’d have to wait until tomorrow, or maybe the day after, or maybe the weekend.

At the front of the 4Runner, Tom looked down at the

bumper. He stared at the damage for a moment and then continued up the driveway.

Tom stepped onto the porch, grabbed a handful of salt from a Home Depot bucket, and tossed it on the stairs and walkway. Turning to the front door, he placed his hand on the doorknob and felt it twist. Lisa had left it unlocked again.

He walked in and untied his boots, placing them on the boot tray. The furnace rattled a few times, then smoothed into the calming sound of natural gas. It was hot, probably in the high seventies; Lisa never lowered the thermostat below seventy-five in the winter.

The TV was on but muted, a rerun of *Seinfeld*. A quilt lay half on, half off the couch, and a near-empty wine glass stood atop the coffee table with no coaster. Tom picked up the remote, turned off the TV, then grabbed the wine glass and started to the kitchen. The warped hardwood floor creaked with every step.

A pile of dishes towered in the sink, and an open prescription pill bottle rested on the table. Picking it up, Tom found that it was empty. Xanax, 1mg, Quantity 30, prescribed to Lisa three days ago with the instructions to “Take 1 tablet every 8 hours as needed for anxiety.” He stared at it for a minute, maybe longer. This was the fourth empty bottle he’d discovered in the last few weeks: this one, the one on the floor next to her nightstand, the one in the bathroom trash can, and the one in her glove box. In all likelihood, there were many more.

He placed the glass on the counter next to the sink, dropped the pill bottle in the trash, and opened the cupboard, removing a rocks glass. An assortment of whiskey bottles stood on the hutch—Buffalo Trace, Jack Daniel’s, Johnnie Walker, Wild Turkey, and Maker’s Mark.

Opening the Jack Daniel’s bottle, Tom poured a few

shots into the glass and drank it down in two gulps without wincing. He refilled the glass about two thirds of the way, then put the bottle back on the hutch. Sipping on the whiskey, he stared out the kitchen window, watching snowflakes fall to the earth.

A sound came from behind, and Tom turned to the hallway. Max, his eleven-year-old black lab, was standing there, breathing labored, his hind legs shaking.

“Hey boy, you snuck up on me. How are you doing tonight?” Tom said with a smile.

Max had once been a great adventurer and the perfect hiking partner, but now spent the better part of his days sleeping at the foot of the bed. The only time he got up was to eat or go to the bathroom, and more often than not lately he didn’t make it outside for that. He was near-blind, probably deaf, and hadn’t barked in over a year. Tom knew Max would be lucky to make it another year, and sometimes contemplated taking him out back to put him out of his misery, but he couldn’t imagine a day without Max. The dog was currently Tom’s only friend and his closest confidant.

“Are you hungry, Maxie?”

Tom grabbed a dog bowl, dumped a cup of Purina into it, then placed it in front of Max. The dog stared at him for a moment, blinking a few times, then bowed down and slowly began to eat. Tom rubbed his head for a bit before walking back to the table, where he resumed sipping on the whiskey. His eyes were heavy as he watched Max bury his nose into the bowl.

A few minutes later, the dog walked over to the table and lay down on the kitchen rug, closing his eyes. Tom bent down and started rubbing his head.

“That’s a good boy.”

Sometime later, Tom rose and started up the stairs.

Partway down the hallway, he stopped at Megan's room. Tom pushed the door open and peered in. A faint musky smell surrounded him. It had been almost six months since he'd stepped into her room, and it was exactly how he remembered it. Virtually untouched.

Tom carefully walked across the undisturbed carpet to sit at the edge of the perfectly made bed. Running his finger across the gray comforter, he looked up at the ceiling, then closed his eyes. He could almost hear her voice calling for him. Almost.

Rubbing his eyes, he looked around the room. Her dresser, her nightstand with the alarm clock flashing twelve, her desk with textbooks and notebooks and a mini gumball machine, and finally her cork board, with nature pictures, a work schedule, and inspirational quotes tacked onto it.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a photo album labeled "More Summer Vacation Pictures" on the bottom shelf of the desk. He reached for it and began turning the pages. Disneyland, Miami Beach, Seattle, Moab, birthday parties, camping, and Yellowstone. Yellowstone was his favorite vacation. They'd gone there for a week when Megan was nine. They made it to almost every major attraction in the park—Old Faithful, Mammoth, Yellowstone Canyon, Grand Prismatic. They even saw a grizzly bear cub in a visitor center parking lot. Megan had named him Freddy.

What he wouldn't give to have one more vacation with her.

Tom shifted on the bed to look out the window but found himself staring at his reflection for a few moments instead. He closed the album, placed it back on the shelf, and got off the bed. After straightening the wrinkles in the comforter, he started toward the door. He turned off

the light and blew a kiss, closing the door behind him.

Continuing on to the master bedroom, Tom found that the door was shut.

In front of the dark wooden door, he started to think about his life. All of the mistakes and all of the failures that had brought him to this moment. He considered turning around and walking back downstairs, but after a minute, he gave a light knock.

“Lisa?” he said. No response. After a few seconds, he knocked louder.

“Lisa, are you awake?”

Nothing again. Tom turned the handle and pushed the door open.

Lisa was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bed, holding an empty wine glass. Her head tilted up slowly, and she stared at Tom as if looking directly through him.

“Are you okay?”

He already knew the answer.

She remained motionless. Finally, she said, “I didn’t hear you get home.”

“Yeah, I got here about an hour ago. I was feeding Max.”

“Oh.”

“Have you had dinner? Want me to make you something?”

Lisa looked into the empty wine glass.

“I was at Perks today, just sitting alone, sipping on a coffee, reading the paper, and a group of three women sat down at the table directly behind me. I’d never seen them before, and I doubt they recognized me.”

Lisa started flicking her index finger against the glass.

“They were discussing how bored they were with their husbands, and their families and their lives. Just the mundane bullshit I always overhear women talk about,

nothing captivating. But then the topic changed. They started talking about the Bob Anderson murder and the murder of some nurse in Boulder a few years ago, and a couple of hitchhikers who were murdered on Hoosier Pass back in the eighties. They were fucking giddy the way they talked about it. It was disgusting, and I was about to get up—then one of them mentioned Megan’s name. I leaned back to get a better listen.”

“Why, Lisa?”

“The fat one said they heard a rumor that Megan was abducted, raped for a few days, then tied to a tree and left for dead. Either dead from the elements or wildlife or the killer sliced her throat.”

“You know that’s just stupid small-town gossip,” Tom said.

She shook her head. “How do you know that? You’ve been looking for almost two years, and you’re not any closer to finding her than the day she vanished. And I’m sitting here living my own fucking nightmare. Every waking moment. I can’t touch her, hug her, kiss her, or even bury her. She isn’t alive and she isn’t dead—she’s a lost soul in some fucking purgatory.”

“I’m going to find her,” Tom said, choking on his words.

Deep down, in places he was scared to visit, he knew that Megan might never be found, but he could never utter those words, especially to Lisa.

“I hope you’re prepared to find a scattered pile of bones.”

He didn’t answer.

“You couldn’t find the killer of those kids, and you’re not going to find Megan!”

Before his own daughter’s tragedy, not solving the murder of the kids in the pizzeria was his biggest failure.

“Please stop.”

She looked up at Tom and without warning threw the wine glass at the closet door. It shattered, and hundreds of tiny shards fell to the carpet. Neither of them flinched; their eyes remained locked.

“I hate you for convincing me to move here. I really do. I wish I would’ve said no. If I had, Megan would still be alive.”

“She is not dead, and I promise that I won’t stop looking until I find her.”

“Let me give you a piece of advice. She is never coming back. Never. Megan is dead. She’s gone forever.”

“I love you, but you’re wrong.”

“Then where the fuck is she?” Lisa screamed, spitting the words.

“I don’t know,” Tom whispered.