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Friday evening

It rarely snows in the Coastal Plain, but tonight Joseph was relying on the impending forecast to cover his tracks.

Dinnertime was barely approaching but the sky was already the color of pitch. He switched off his headlights once he turned off the main road, though the gravel road on which he found himself was difficult to see in the darkness. He slowed the truck to a crawl and relied on his memory of the straight, narrow drive lined on both sides by perfectly flat tobacco fields. Set back a quarter mile from the road was an old clapboard farmhouse, the windows glowing from the lights within and the pleasant aroma of burning wood wafting from its chimney.

As he passed by, he came upon an old tobacco barn that appeared to be one gust away from toppling onto its side. He knew immediately past the barn was a narrow dirt driveway. He turned onto it, edging the battered pickup alongside the barn until the dilapidated structure blocked the farmhouse from view.

He turned off the engine and focused his attention on a newer home to his left at the end of a long gravel driveway, nestled inside a semi-circle of thick woods.

About a half acre around the home had been cleared and from the looks of the fresh, small plantings around the foundation, he determined the brick and vinyl sided structure was fairly new. A set of dim solar lights lined a path from the driveway to the front door.

His eyes wandered from one window to the next. The upstairs consisted of three dormer-style windows. The one furthest from him was cast in a diffused yellow glow and as he watched, a young man wandered past the window. A moment later, the light was turned off, replaced by a soft one in the center window. He watched as the man moved past it, his head slowly lowering as if he were walking down a flight of stairs.

He followed his movements as he reached the first floor and turned on a light in the entrance hall, throwing the stained glass in the front door into a radiant mosaic.

Joseph's eyes wandered a few yards from the house, where the pine trees provided privacy from the old farmhouse, now off to his right behind the barn.

He opened a box containing latex surgical gloves. Methodically, he removed his leather gloves and donned the others. When he was finished, he clasped his hands together and flexed the fingers. They might soon cause his hands to sweat, but he didn't intend to wear them for more than a few minutes.

With his eyes set on the newer house, he opened another box and slipped a pair of black rubber overshoes over his Italian loafers.

His breath was beginning to fog the windows when he dipped his hand between the seats and retrieved a Smith & Wesson Model 351PD Revolver. He knew without checking that seven bullets were in the cylinder, though

he didn't expect to use more than two. About six inches in length, the weapon was surprisingly light. He knew others who used silencers, but he didn't care for them. They reduced the accuracy and were more difficult to conceal, as they added length and bulk. He slipped the weapon into the deep pocket of his trench coat, absent-mindedly fingering the metal as he continued to stare at the house.

He cautiously opened the truck door. The interior light did not come on; he'd made sure it wouldn't after he'd stolen the vehicle. He left the door open. He walked to the edge of the truck and looked back at the road. He could barely see it in the darkness. And with the truck pulled close to the barn, it would not be noticeable from the roadway.

He glanced farther down the gravel road. There was nothing else there. No other homes, no businesses. Just these two houses set back amidst tobacco fields. The air was cold and crisp, with the unmistakable feel of an impending snowstorm in the air.

Once he passed the barn, he walked in a steady gait to a line of trees. He stopped briefly when he reached them and studied the old farmhouse. Its lights were still visible in the darkness, but even if someone were to peer outside, he knew he was sufficiently concealed. He remained close to the trees as he neared the new house.

He ignored the pathway from the driveway to the front door, opting instead to move around the house toward the back. There were three windows on the side of the house; through the gossamer curtains in the first window, he could see a formal living room from ambient lighting in the entrance hall. The second window was set high and didn't open; he assumed it was in a bathroom. The third window was the same size as the first. He stopped when he reached it.

The curtains were open here, revealing a breakfast nook. An Early American-style pedestal table was surrounded by four chairs with blue and white cushions secured with bows. Through this room, he could clearly view the kitchen. The cabinets appeared to be light oak. Along the left wall was a refrigerator and countertops obscured by mounds of papers and half-empty food containers. Along the right wall was the door leading outside. There was a security chain dangling on the wall beside it. A window in the door was framed in ruffled curtains. Stepping forward and peering through the window, he narrowed his eyes. The door was unlocked, just as he'd been told it would be.

Directly across from him against the far wall was another set of cabinets, a kitchen counter, a sink and a stove and oven combination. And in front of the stove with his back to Joseph, was the young man.

Joseph remained at the window for a couple of minutes. His eyes wandered briefly to an open can on the counter.

He moved toward the back of the house. A detached garage was located just beyond the house with two doors facing the road. There was a new white Ford F-250 with a crew cab parked in the driveway just outside one of the doors.

He moved up several steps onto a deck. He stopped at another window that was located opposite the refrigerator. The young man remained at the stove, stirring the contents of the pot. The flame was high, as if he intended to bring the food to a boil.

He moved to the door. He watched the young man's profile.

The telephone rang and Joseph remained perfectly still, but the man turned his back to the door and hurried into the hallway. Joseph grasped the door knob. It turned easily.

He opened the door and slipped inside softly closing it behind him. He could hear the man's voice in the hallway. Joseph noticed the food was bubbling. The aroma of chili spices wafted toward his nostrils. He reached to the stove and turned it off.

"Okay," the young man was saying. "Yeah, we can talk about it after church on Sunday."

Joseph stood beside the refrigerator. Pictures were plastered all over it with the kind of magnets sold in tourist traps.

"Okay, bye," the man said.

He listened to the sound of footsteps approaching the kitchen. The man entered, turning immediately toward the stove. "Huh," he said, bending down to look at the extinguished flame.

Joseph took a step forward.

The man whirled around, coming face to face with the revolver. Joseph was no more than two feet away when he fired one shot directly into the man's left eye. He had already sunk to the floor before blood began to ooze out. There was no need to check his pulse. Joseph knew he was dead.

He was returning the weapon to his pocket when he heard a faint click. He cocked his head and listened. The house was silent.

He stepped over the body into the hallway. He stopped near the foot of the stairs and listened again. It had sounded like a door closing. He glanced up the stairs. The heater kicked on, and he let out an inaudible sigh. Probably the heater, he thought. There wasn't supposed to be anyone else here.

A light shone through the living room window, briefly brushing over him, and he instinctively recoiled. Someone was coming up the driveway.

He moved to the shadows, and made his way around the living room toward the window. Standing to the side,

he watched as a deep blue sports car drove past the side of the house. The automatic garage door opened and the vehicle pulled past the truck and parked inside. A moment later, the driver side door opened. Under the glare of the garage's ceiling lights, he could clearly see a flash of long, lean legs before an attractive young woman stepped out and pulled a long coat around her. Then the car door was shut and she hurried from the garage to the house, using a remote to close the garage door behind her.

Joseph swore under his breath. She wasn't supposed to be here, he thought with growing irritation.

The back door opened and she screamed. He glanced around the living room, his eyes resting on an open doorway that led down a short hall to the breakfast nook. Silently, he moved into the hall and past a half bath to the breakfast table.

The woman was crouched over the man, cradling his head and trying to awaken him. She began to scream for help.

Joseph pursed his lips. This would never do.

He stepped toward the kitchen, but the woman heard his movement and swung around. He raised the weapon, pointing it directly at her head.

She screamed and tried to come to her feet but she slipped in the blood that now pooled on the floor. Continuing to scream, she half-crawled, half-raced behind the refrigerator into the hallway. He heard the telephone as it was knocked off the hall table, the bell emitting a short burst as it hit the floor. He heard another, louder, thump.

He calmly stepped over the man and followed the woman into the hall. There was a noticeable trail of blood across the floor, leading from the dead man to the woman. She had fallen again. Her coat was soaked in blood. One arm had flailed at a banister, leaving fresh red prints all

over the white paint. She had retrieved the telephone and was frantically trying to punch the buttons for 9-1-1 but her fingers were all over the keypad.

He raised his weapon.

She grabbed for the banister, hauling herself upward as she screamed again. The phone dropped to the floor as the shot rang out, striking her in the face. She keeled backward, her head ricocheting off the newel post before she slumped to the floor.

He tried to step around the blood that she'd dragged from the kitchen into the hallway. He picked up the phone and listened for a dial tone. Her call had not gone through.

He heard a moan and he turned to study her. She had beautiful brunette hair that flowed down her back. He looked at the arch in her back and her three inch heels. He surveyed the blood splattered across the floor, the walls, and the telephone table. It was sloppy work. It should never have gone down like this, but there was no helping it now.

He retreated down the hallway and stepped over the young man. He glanced into the pan and sniffed the chili. It was a good night for chili, he thought as he moved past. Then he opened the back door and eased onto the back deck. He reached back inside and set the lock before pulling it shut. He checked to make certain it was secure.

Then he was heading back to the truck along the reverse route he had taken a few minutes before. He glanced at his watch. Only twelve minutes had passed since he'd exited the truck. That was about twice as long as it should have taken.

As he climbed into the driver's seat, a heavy, wet snow began to fall. He smiled as he started the truck, backed down the driveway beside the barn, and headed back toward Lumberton.

The silence grew oppressive in the house. Once the crunch of the gravel could be heard under the truck's tires heralding its departure from the house, the door softly opened to the upstairs guest room.