

The Trophy
By
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Rev. March 2020

Bernie barges through the kitchen door startling Miranda, “I’m sorry Miranda. Is Sue Ellen here? I need to see her. Now!”

Miranda walks into the early afternoon sun’s rays painting the tiled floor of the studio. She stops behind the artist working the partially completed canvas. “Ms Sue Ellen, Mr. Bernie is here to see you. He seems upset.”

A delicate hand dips the brush into a jar of acetone, wipes it clean, then, lays it on the paint palette, “Thank you, Miranda. Where is he?” Asks Sue Ellen Wickford.

“In the kitchen ma’am.”

The tap, tapping of Franco Sarto flats across the granite tile of the hallway to the kitchen announces Sue Ellen’s arrival. Bernie Hill stands up from the stool on the far side of a large island in the center, turning to greet her. “Good lord Bernie, what happened to your face?”

Without hesitation, Sue Ellen glides to the sink counter and unrolls a few sheets of paper towel. She wets them with cold water, walks around the island and begins dabbing away the dried blood from Bernie’s right cheek. “Here, let’s clean this up. Bernie, these look like scratch marks. Who did this to you?”

“Phyllis. What a mess, what a mess I’m in, Sue Ellen.”

—Sue Ellen draws back and stares into Bernie’s eyes. “What happened?”

“I came home at lunch to pick up blueprints I needed for a bid I am working on. When I pull up, there’s this old pick-up truck full of junk sitting in the driveway. I walked into the house and hear Phyllis talking to someone in the living room. So I walk in and find her in the arms of this gomer from the hills, and ask, ‘What the hell is going on?’ She says he’s her ex-husband who’s here to see their daughter. So I ask what the hell is she doing hanging all over him and she says it is nothing and to chill out. Chill out, she says. Who says that, anymore?”

“Then he shoots his mouth off saying something like ‘Yeah man, just chill out’, which sets me off. I ask him, who in hell he thinks he is, telling me to chill out in my own house. Then, Phyllis starts getting all pissy and tells me not to make a scene, while gomer still has his arm around her waist! I’m thinking, what in the hell is going on here, she’s acting like I’m the bad guy for walking into my own house and finding my wife hugging this tall young man in the middle of my living room. So I tell her I think her friend needs to leave and make arrangements to see Darcy when she is out of school.”

“Bernie, I warned you about that girl. I told you I thought there was something about her that I didn’t trust.” Concern etching her brow, Sue Ellen continues gently dabbing at the scratches to stop the bleeding. “So, how did you get these scratches?”

“Sue Ellen, I can’t believe this is all happening to me. Anyway, Phyllis is just standing there, with her arms crossed, glaring at me like I’m an intruder or something, and, gomer is staring at me with this funny smile. Get this, he still has his arm around Phyllis’s waist. She never tried to move away from him. So, I step up, push them apart, and tell gomer to kindly keep his hands off my wife. He steps back and gets this real badass look on his face and Phyllis grabs my arm and pulls me back, saying that I should leave. She says that she needs to talk to Lenny. Lenny is gomer’s name. She says she has to talk to Lenny boy about visitation rights. So, I tell her that she can call him.” Bernie pauses and pulls back from Sue Ellen’s first aid treatment. He walks to the refrigerator, grabs a beer, twists off the cap and takes a swig.

“Sue Ellen, you won’t believe what happened next. I’m still not exactly sure what happened myself.” Bernie takes another long swig from the beer. “Lenny boy says to me ‘Man it’s time for you to leave, you’d better get out of here.’ You know me, Sue Ellen. I am not a violent man. I went nuts, Sue Ellen! This dip shit from the hills is telling me I’d better leave my own house, and leave him there with my wife. Sue Ellen, I went nuts, and started swinging at old Lenny boy. Then, as Lenny-boy and I are wrestling around the living room, Phyllis grabs me around the neck, wrapping her arm across my face, screaming, ‘Get off him, you idiot! Get off him, you fool.’”

Stunned, Sue Ellen sits down on a stool, her hand over her mouth, transfixed as Bernie unfolds his story.

“Then, I see Lenny boy cock his arm back to punch me. Just as he swings, I duck my head down and he smacks Phyllis right in the nose. Broke it I think...knocking her right off me. That’s when she scratched my cheek. God, she was screaming and howling. When she hit the floor, she must have jammed her hand or something because she was holding it funny. Her nose was bleeding all over. Lenny and I just stood there looking at her sitting on the floor holding her nose, screaming at me. She’s saying I did this to her, that I broke her nose and yelling at Lenny to call the police, that she’s going to have me arrested for attacking her.”

“But, you didn’t hit her; Lenny did, didn’t he?”

“Right, but she accused me of doing it. She was screaming like crazy for me to get out of her house. Saying she wants a divorce. She said she wasn’t going to let no man beat her like this. That she was going to have me thrown in jail for attacking her. It was crazy, Sue Ellen.”

“So what did you do?”

“I tried to help Phyllis up but she started kicking at me, telling me not to touch her. When Lenny started for the phone, I figured I’d better leave, so I came here. I don’t know....”

“My goodness, Bernie, sounds like you need to get a good lawyer. I’ll talk to Bill when he gets back from Myrtle Beach tomorrow.” Sue Ellen looks sadly at her ex-husband. She still loves him, but she could not live with him, which is why she ultimately left him and married Bill Wickford, the attorney she and Bernie had for years, and used for their construction businesses. Bernie understood why. There was little they kept from one another. With his easy-going personality, Bernie had not remained upset for long. And, because of the shared custody of their only child, Kyle, they both work diligently to maintain a close and civil relationship. Bill remains Bernie’s principle legal counsel for the business, and close friend.

“I think I’ll go down and talk to Chief Hanson before they come looking for me. I’ll explain to him what happened.” Bernie finishes his beer.

“Where are you going to stay tonight? You can stay here until you determine what’s going to happen between you and Phyllis.”

“Thanks, Sue Ellen, but I think I’m going up to the cabin and clear my mind... try to sort out what’s going on here.” Bernie walks to the door. “Thanks for cleaning me up and listening. I still love you, you know.”

“I still love you too. You be careful. I don’t trust that woman. I wish you hadn’t married her. You should have married someone your own age, but instead you had to have a young trophy wife to parade around the country club. Christ those old fuddy duddies up there fall all over that girl and she plays right up to them like a two bit whore, which she probably was at one time.”

“Thanks, Sue Ellen, I really didn’t need that lecture again, after all this.”

“I’m sorry Bernie, but I can’t help myself. You’re such a kind and gentle person. I didn’t trust that girl when she first started working in the City Manager’s office. Then, when I met her mother at your rehearsal dinner, I knew why. After she put her snout in the whisky trough, her true trailer park colors came out. And not a high-class trailer park either. That mother of hers is as hard as they come, trust me. And, the apple usually doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

“Yeah, her ex-husband has a pretty rough look about him too.”

“Bernie, I mean it. You be careful. Don’t be so naïve, and pay attention to what’s going on. Something just doesn’t seem right with this.”

“Well hell, Bernie, I’ve known you all my life, and, there isn’t anyone on this good earth who could convince me that you laid a hand on Phyllis.” Chief Hanson rocks back in his high-back desk chair. “I’ll talk to the prosecutor and tell him you’ll stay in the area until we can complete the investigation. You realize I have to do an investigation, right?”

“Yeah, I understand, Al. I appreciate your confidence in me. Can you do a record check on this Lenny guy - her ex-husband? I have a bad feeling about him. He seems like a real slick character.”

“You bet I will, unofficial, you know. I didn’t like the smell of em either. I’ve seen his type before. I see plenty of em in this business, you know. Give me a couple of days.”

“Thanks, Al. I just don’t know what the hell is going on here.”

“Well old buddy, you’d better lawyer up good. That young thing might try to take you to the cleaners. Frankly, she has you by the balls right now unless you can prove they’re up to something. Might be hard to do.” Chief Hanson cocks his hat back on his head. “Where are you staying, in case we need to talk to you?”

“Up at the cabin for now. Kyle is going to stay with Sue Ellen. But tonight, I’m going to stay down at the office. I have to pick up some clothes and stuff though, so, I need to make arrangements to get them.”

“I’ll call Phyllis and tell her she has to let you in to get your stuff. What’s a good time for you?” Chief Hanson makes a note to the planner sheet on his desk.

“Ten tomorrow morning would be good.”

“Done. I’ll tell her to make sure she’s not there.”

Bernie enters his Bremley office. It’s empty. He expects his staff to be out by five pm on Fridays, off to the bars for a weekend of rest and revelry. In the break area, he puts a six-pack of Budweiser bottles in the fridge and takes a bottle from the carton. He sets it, along with the McDonald’s bag, on the table. Taking out the fries and a double cheeseburger from the bag, he twists off the Bud cap. As he unfolds the burger wrapper, he looks up at the project board posted on the wall before him. Everything is on schedule, as he would expect. Although not a taskmaster, Bernie instilled in his employees the responsibility for living by their word, hence bring your projects in on the schedule projected. Bernie rewards his employees well, sharing his business’s success with them, which is why they are loyal, hardworking, and bring projects in on time.

Al’s words stick with Bernie. ‘She has you by the balls right now, unless you can prove they’re are up to something.’ Unaccustomed to scheming against an adversary, Bernie struggles with the notion of spying or doing anything unethical. He has always been straightforward, honest and upfront in his relationships. For the first time in his life, a nagging suspicion eats at the pit of his stomach causing him to think defensively. Bernie pops a fry in his mouth, and looks again at the project board concentrating on the line for the Hammity Party store. “Perfect.”

Bernie pulls his black Dodge Ram four-wheel drive extended cab truck up to the garage door and pushes the door opener. “Good, she’s not home,” he mutters in relief. He snatches the box of equipment off the passenger seat and scuttles into the house. In the living room, he opens the

entertainment center and strategically places a small camera and recording equipment into the shadows of the 50-inch flat screen TV. He sets the motion sensor at its base, then, plugs the equipment in.

After completing the set-up, Bernie goes to his office in the basement. He opens a gun safe located behind his sprawling stand-up desk and takes out his old Colt 45 automatic, a 30.06 rifle, and ammo, then takes the weapons to his truck. Next, Bernie goes to the bedroom and gathers a duffle bag full of clothes and bathroom necessities. He opens a wall safe hidden behind a hinged picture of his hill-top cabin hanging on the wall behind his desk, and takes out all of the cash. Bernie places four thousand dollars in an envelope and scribbles a note to Phyllis: *This is cash to pay the bills; I will be at the Cabin. Call me on my cell phone if you want to talk about yesterday. Love Bernie.*

Not ready to give up on their relationship, he makes sure Phyllis has enough money to take care of the household expenses.

Bernie returns to the living room, hesitates for a moment and stares at the television. With a shrug of reluctance, he walks to the entertainment center reaches behind the base of the television and switches on the recorder. Locking the house as he exits, Bernie leaves for the cabin.

“Bernie, we don’t have anything to talk about. My lawyer will contact you.” Bile fills Phyllis’s voice.

“Phyllis, I didn’t do that to you, and you know it. Your ex swung at me and I ducked. He hit you. Not me. We need to talk this through.” Bernie pleads into the phone.

“We are through, shit head, so don’t call me again.”

“Wait a minute, Phyllis, don’t hang up. I need to get to some files and blueprints from the basement. When is a good time to come and get them?”

“Two this afternoon. I have to see the doctor about my nose and wrist. Be gone before I come home.”

“Ok, Ok. No problem. Are you all right? I mean is anything broken?”

“Just my nose. God, it hurt so bad when they straightened it out. I’ll kill you, you asshole, for doing this to me. My wrist is sprained real bad. My eyes are black. It’s all your fault, asshole.”

“I’ll be there at two this afternoon. I didn’t do this.” Phyllis hangs up, leaving Bernie staring at the phone. “Good lord, what’s going on here?”

Bernie extracts the recording system and motion sensor from their dark hiding space, stuffing them into the duffle bag. He then returns to the gun safe, and grabs two additional weapons placing them into the bag.

Sitting at the hand built oak desk in his Bremley office, Bernie clicks the mouse on play. He watches the computer monitor, the black and white video picture flips on, and he hears Lenny's voice. "How much do you think he's worth?"

Then Phyllis's, "Millions I suspect. He would never discuss his business or his net worth with me. His ex-wife still has interest in the business, though."

Lenny sits down on the couch and taps his thigh. Phyllis sits down on his lap, lying back into his arms. "I'm sorry I busted your nose. I meant to hit him."

Lenny laughs. "Well little girl, we'll soak his wife-beating ass for millions, then move out to Vegas or Reno. We'll live the high life we have always dreamed about." He reaches up, turns her face to his, and kisses her. They begin disrobing, then, make love on Bernie's favorite leather couch.

Grimacing, Bernie clicks the video player off. "The hell you will."

Monday, Bernie walks into City Hall avoiding eye contact with everyone he meets, sliding unnoticed into Phyllis's office. He leaves an envelope on her desk chair seat, then retreats stealthily back out his truck. Lunchtime is always a good time to enter a government building unnoticed, because nearly everyone goes out for lunch.

Phyllis recognizes Bernie's handwriting on the envelope. As she tears open the envelope and pulls the note out, a memory stick falls onto her desk. She opens the note:

Phyllis,

I love you, but, after you look at the file on this memory stick, you will realize why you must leave my house and town. I will be filing for divorce as soon as my attorney arrives back in town. I am willing to settle for some small amount of cash, enough to get you by until you can find another job, in another town. I mean you no harm. However, I will use this information if necessary. Call me on the cell when you are ready to discuss this. - Bernie.

P.S. You should be able to use Windows Media Player on your computer to play this.

Phyllis walks to her office door, shuts and locks it, then sits back down at her desk and slips the memory stick into the USB port. She clicks on Windows Explorer, then on Temporary Disk. There is only one file is on the memory stick, its title, 'Lenny and Phyllis January 20 2009 at Bernie's House'. Phyllis hesitates, bites her lower lip, then, double clicks on the file. At the prompt, she clicks on Windows Media Player. She gasps at the sound of Lenny's voice. Wide-eyed, Phyllis watches herself sit down on Lenny's lap. After watching a few moments longer, she closes the Media Player and jerks the memory stick out of the CPU. "You bastard Bernie, you dirty bastard."

"Lenny, meet me at the house by two. We have to talk, and I want to do it before Darcy gets home from school."

“What’s up babe? You sound upset.”

“That bastard Bernie is going to screw us. Be at the house and I’ll show you what I mean.”
Phyllis pushes end on her cell phone.

Lenny tells his boss he has to leave at one forty-five for a doctor’s appointment. Reluctantly, his boss agrees, but tells him to get back as soon as he can.

Phyllis hears Lenny come through the garage entrance door and shouts. “I’m in the den.”

Lenny saunters in and kisses the back of the Phyllis’s neck. “So what’s deal about Bernie?”

Phyllis clicks the mouse and the video begins to play.

“Hey, that’s us. That asshole taped us.” Lenny stands watching as they begin to disrobe then make love. Lenny loses focus on the immediate problem represented by the tape, staring in admiration of his prowess. “Maybe we should go to L.A. and check out doing porn movies. I think there is good money in it.”

“Shut up you fool, and think. I am not giving up what that asshole owes me.”

“I could get all the tapes,” Lenny says casually, admiring his form.

Phyllis clicks the mouse and the screen goes blank. “How are you going to do that? Do you think Bernie will just hand them over to you? Besides, he’s no fool. There are probably several copies. How would you find them all?”

“Beat it out of him if I have to.”

“Yeah, right. Then he goes to the police and we’re in trouble.” Phyllis looks pensively back at the computer screen.

“We could off him, and then we’d get all of his estate,” Lenny indifferently suggests.

Phyllis spins around in her chair. “We’d have to make it look like an accident or something. Otherwise the police will look to us as primary suspects. I ain’t doin no jail time.”

“I met a guy in the pen who told me about offing a guy and getting away with it.”

“So why was he in the jail, then? Sounds like that plan didn’t work too well.” Phyllis’s experience with Lenny’s criminal escapades warrants the sarcasm in her question.

“Stealing cars. He never was fingered for killing the guy. Walked scot free.”

“How did he pull it off?” Phyllis leans forward. Lenny has her attention now.

“Hi Bernie, this is Chief Hanson. I got the information you asked for. Just remember this is off the record. I’ll have to deny any knowledge of giving this to you, or shoot you. Just between two old friends, right?”

“Of course Al, this is just between two old friends. What did you find out?” Bernie grabs a pen off the desk in his office at the back of the cabin and readies a note pad.

“Well Bernie, Phyllis’s boy Lenny is a real piece of work. His name is Lenny McCoy. He and Phyllis married when she was just out of high school. A real hillbilly affair, I’ll bet. Lenny has been in and out of jail ever since. He was sent up on several charges: burglary, auto theft, and one incident where he nearly beat this guy to death with a Louisville Slugger. That one got him sent up for six years. Phyllis divorced him after that situation, apparently tired of living in poverty and paying for all of his legal expenses.”

“Thanks, he sounds just like you said, a real piece of work. Go figure. You think you know someone, then bam, the truth hits right in the mouth. What a wake-up call.”

“Look Bernie, don’t take this guy lightly. Be careful. Maybe you should move back into town. You’re up to the cabin, right?”

“Yeah, I’m going to stay here for a week or so. Besides, I see it’s snowing. I think we’re supposed to get dumped on pretty good tonight. No one is likely to come up this way in this stuff. Besides, I have plenty of protection.”

“Well suit yourself, but stay in touch and let me know when you’re back in town. We’ll go have a beer.”

“I’ll take you up on that next week. My treat, for getting me this information. Thanks Al, you’re a good friend.”

“You bet, buddy. I might have more than one since you’re buying. Take care of yourself and call me if anything goes squirrely up there.”

“Will do. Goodnight, Al.”

“Night Bernie.”

Chief Hanson hangs up the phone, picks up Lenny’s rap sheet and silently wonders, *What are you and Phyllis up to?*

Lenny flips on the windshield wipers as they drive into heavy snowfall. “How much farther to the cabin? Man, this snow is great. It will cover our tracks.”

“About four or five more miles, it is nearly to the top of the mountain. There’s a dirt road on the left. It goes about a half mile through the woods to his cabin. There are two buildings, the main house and a guesthouse on the backside. I’m sure he’s staying in the main house.” Phyllis

studies Lenny's amber silhouetted face. The slap of the wipers hypnotically beat away, like a heartbeat. She knows that Lenny's life of crime and time in prison have hardened him. But, his calm and seeming indifference to the task before them surprises her. Her anxiety heightening with each tick of the odometer toward their destination.

"There's the drive on your left." Phyllis points to the nearly hidden entrance of the two-track road to Bernie's mountain-top compound. Large wet snowflakes pelt the windshield. Lenny flips the wipers on high.

"Man, I ain't never seen it snow this hard. That's good. This shit will cover our tire tracks real good after we leave." Lenny slowly navigates the two-track, staying between the oak-lined edges of the road.

As they break into a clearing, Lenny stops about one hundred feet from the large, two-story log cabin. He turns off the headlights. "You remember what you're to do? What's the matter with you? You don't look so good."

"Lenny, I'm not sure about this. I don't think I can do this." Phyllis gazes out the windshield at the lights shining out of the cabin's first-floor windows.

"Come on, this is our ticket. You can't go yellow on me now. We take care of this and in a few weeks, a month, at best, you and I'll be out of this hick town, sitting in the lap of luxury in Vegas or Reno."

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this. This is crazy. If we get caught, both of us will go up for a long time."

"After that video, you're screwed and so am I. We have to think about Darcy too. What kind of life is she going to have if we blow this? So make sure you do everything as planned, and it will be fool-proof." Lenny pulls up to the steps of the large porch, surrounding the three sides of the house he can see. "Man this is a great place. We might want to keep this."

Phyllis steps out of the car. She hears music coming from the house. She realizes Bernie is playing Beethoven's, 'Romance for violin and orchestra No. 2'. Bernie loves Beethoven. The lilt of the strings pulls her thoughts back to the many star filled summer nights they sat on the porch swing, sipping wine, holding hands, and listening to Beethoven's music booming out the screened windows, filling the surrounding forest with its beauty.

"Come on, go up and knock on the door." Lenny whispers loudly as he grabs an item from the back seat of the car and walks up the steps. At the top step, he turns to see Phyllis still standing by the car, and waves for her to follow him. She bows her head, and slowly walks forward. As she steps onto the porch, Lenny sees tears streaming down her cheeks and kisses her on the cheek, whispering, "This will be over quickly, then, we can get out of here." He nods toward the door.

Phyllis walks to the door and raises her hand, but, does not knock. Instead, she turns her back to the door, shaking her head no. Lenny taps the end of the bat on the door sharply, three times, startling Phyllis. She remains with her back to the door.

Bernie jumps at the rapping sound coming from the front door. Laying his book down, a curious frown crosses Bernie's face. *I'm not expecting anyone?* He walks to the door, moves the curtain aside, and immediately recognizes Phyllis's form standing with her back to him. Bernie opens the door. "Phyllis what..." A flash comes down across the opening door. Cringing in pain as the bat smashes across his right forearm, Bernie yelps, "What the hell," and, begins shuffling backwards, bent over, holding his arm.

Lenny steps into the doorway knocking the door open with his shoulder hitting Phyllis in the back knocking her to her hands and knees on the porch floor. "What the hell," she mutters.

"Lenny, what are you doing here?" Bernie continues back-peddling as Lenny charges, swinging the bat at a downward angle, hitting Bernie just above his left ear. The force of the blow knocks Bernie sideways to his right, tearing his ear half off. Bernie ducks to avoid the oncoming bat, but the second blow lands on his left shoulder, spinning him around. Lenny begins raining axe-like blows to the back of Bernie's head, sending toppling him to the floor, in front of the burning fireplace. Bernie wraps his hands and arms over the back of his head, to buffer the blows, while kicking at Lenny to back him off.

Lenny lands a vicious blow across Bernie's kidneys, causing him to wince and roll over. Still kicking at Lenny from the floor, Bernie tries to grab the bat with each swing. In spite of his defense, Lenny's bat finds its mark, hitting Bernie on the forehead, opening a large gash above his left eye, stunning him. Bernie limply flails his arms, trying to fend off Lenny's assault until a devastating blow lands to Bernie's left cheek, knocking him out.

Phyllis steps through the doorway and hears Lenny's grunts as he delivers several more blows to Bernie's limp body. The hollow thud of each blow sickens Phyllis. She runs back out the door, down the steps and lays both hands on the front fender of the car. Phyllis leans forward and throws up.

Lenny scrambles out the door and off the porch, tossing the blood-covered bat on the plastic-covered back seat of the Subaru Outback. He opens the rear hatch, and grabs the kerosene heater, a five-gallon can of fuel oil and starts back into the cabin. Pausing, "Christ Phyllis, pull it together and start the car." Then, he turns, and lumbers up the steps with his payload. Beethoven's piano sonata No 14 in C sharp minor begins to play.

Setting the heater in front of the fireplace, Lenny opens the can of fuel and begins pouring a stream of kerosene around the heater. To avoid stepping in the fuel, Lenny dances backwards, in rhythm with the sonata. He spreads the oil around the perimeter of the cabin. Lenny returns to Bernie and douses him. He pours the last bit of fuel to the entrance door. Lenny steps over the fuel on the entrance floor, walks to the heater and lays the can on its side, with the cap partially unscrewed. Striking his lighter, he touches the flame to the oil in front of the heater, saying to Bernie's lifeless body, "It all has to start here." As the fuel ignites, it begins slowly spreading out

in each direction. Lenny gives a few orchestral baton waves, then skips over the oil-soaked door threshold, leaving the door open, allowing extra supplies of oxygen in to fuel the flames.

“Phyllis, I told you to start the car. You going to be all right? You’ll be all right when we get home. We’ll have a few drinks and pop in a movie to take your mind off this.” Lenny jams the car into reverse and wheels backwards in a large arc, then, stomps on the brakes. The car’s front end slides around in the wet snow. He shifts lever into drive, and floors the accelerator to the mat, causing the tires to spin with little movement of the car. Backing off the gas pedal until the tires gain traction, the car sashays side to side, he points the car toward the road back to the main highway.

The car whipping back and forth causes Phyllis to moan, “Stop the car.”

“What? I ain’t stopping for nothing. We need to get space between us and Bernie, before he gets crispy.”

“Shut up you idiot and stop the car. I’m going to be sick again.”

“Common, Phyllis, suck it up, at least until we get down the road a bit.” Lenny’s pep talk goes unheard. Phyllis bends forward, upchucking down her shins and across the floor mat.

“Goddamit, Phyllis, now I’ve got to clean this mess up before I can turn this in.” Lenny rolls down the window to dissipate the rancid odor of the vomit covering Phyllis’s pant legs. Lenny turns his head toward the window for fresh air. Phyllis flops back against the seat, closing her eyes. Ping-pong ball size snowflakes pelt the windshield as Lenny turns onto the main highway back to Bremley. There are no signs that any other vehicles have recently passed by this stretch of highway. Lenny begins singing. “Let it snow, Let it snow.”

Phyllis moans, and throws up again.

The flames follow the path Lenny laid with the fuel. Slowly at first, the expanding heat causes the fuel to become more gaseous, accelerating the ignition. Bernie’s eyes pop open. He sees orange flickering on the ceiling. Rolling to his right side, he slowly rolls up onto his hands and knees. The heavy fumes of the fuel oil strike his nose, shocking his stunned brain to focus on awareness. Bernie raises his head. His left eye is swollen closed, but, with his right eye, he sees the flames coming toward him. He pushes himself back onto his knees. Surveying the room, he sees the flames lapping at the walls and welling up in the front door opening. The fresh cool air fuels the flames in the doorway, raging inward, licking at the ceiling.

As the flames snake onto his knees, Bernie bends forward and pushes himself backward to his feet. In the process, his fuel-oil-soaked shirt cuffs and hands ignite. As the flames crawl up his sleeves and pant legs, Bernie staggers toward the doorway. Picking up momentum forward, he closes his eyes and mouth, and barges through the flame-filled doorway, fully engulfing his body in flames. Bernie charges forward, and hits the first step, tumbling down the rest, into the snow. The melting snow hisses and steam rises off Bernie as he rolls through the snow. Finally, the

hissing stops. Bernie lies sprawled out on his back forty feet from the porch. Large fluffy snowflakes gently powder his face.

Bernie scoops snow and packs it over his face and head, then jams his stinging hands into the snow. His Boy Scout first aid training had served him well in the past and tonight it might save his life. In time, he begins to shiver. He rolls to his side, and pushes up to a sitting position. He stares at his cabin; the flames dance in the windows. In the light of the fire, he looks down to see his pants partially burnt away, but his boots are still in good shape. He inspects his hands, flexing them to test their functionality. Rolling onto his right elbow, he gets to his feet, slowly turning full circle surveying the scene. His mind races, trying to assess what had just happened. "What have you done to me Phyllis?" He spreads his arms wide, looks to the snow-filled skies, screaming, "Look what you have done to me Phyllis!"

Bernie takes a deep breath, savoring the cool damp air, then, he squares his shoulders and slowly plods through the five-inch deep snow to the back of the burning cabin. The heat of the fire is growing intense as he reaches his pick-up truck. Flipping the long toolbox open on the driver's side, he grabs the tackle-box-sized first aid kit, large flashlight and a hidden set of spare keys. Bernie gingerly climbs into the cab, and backs the truck sixty feet down to the quest cabin and workshop. He parks in front of the workshop and makes an increasingly painful trudge to the cabin door. The adrenal rush from his ordeal is waning, slowly unfolding the extent of his injuries to him. Stinging pain from his left ear begins, then a throbbing headache. Bernie knows he must stave off severe shock.

Inside the door, Bernie checks the light switch. Nothing, as he suspected. The fire must have taken out the electrical service box for all of the buildings. He switches on the flashlight, and makes a circuit around the cabin lighting kerosene lamps – a backup must this high in the mountains. With a large lamp and the med kit, he walks to the bathroom. Bernie holds the flickering lamp up to the mirror, getting the first glimpse of the damages Lenny inflicted. "Damned lucky you're alive ole boy," he says to the unrecognizable, blistered face and nearly hairless head staring back at him. He pushes the large gash on his forehead closed, but it reopens when he pulls his finger away. Then, he lifts his left ear flopping out from the side of his head pushing it back in place. It flops back out when he lets go of it. Drying blood decorates his neck and shirt. A shiver of disbelief ripples through his body.

Bernie digs through the med kit until he finds the triple antibiotic ointment and a medium-sized jar of Vaseline. The first order of business is to lather up his charred face and scalp with ointment, then put the ear back in place.

After coating his burning skin, he wraps a roll of gauze around his head to hold his ear in place and stop the bleeding. Rummaging through a closet, he finds a full-face black ski mask. Bernie gently stretches it out. He moans as he pulls it over his head.

Need fluids, he thinks. In the kitchen, Bernie picks up a pitcher sitting on the counter, noticing the skin on his hands tear. He packs snow in the pitcher, then, sets it beside an oil lamp. He walks to the tool shed and searches for all of the grease he can find. He also finds his black Carhart work overalls and a pair of leather gloves. "Perfect."

The long-sleeve t-shirt he wore under his wool shirt had partially protected his arms, but there are severe burns on his fore arms just above his wrists. His legs, above his boots to mid-thigh, are also badly burned, requiring heavy greasing and wraps of gauze. Fortunately, there are only a few singed pubic hairs. He sighs in relief, thankful that his manhood and torso has been spared. Thoroughly covering the severely burned areas with grease and assorted ointments, he slips on the insulated coveralls and carefully pulls the leather gloves on, cinching up the straps on the back. Bernie opens the bottle of Naproxin Sodium and pours four into the palm of his glove, pops them into his mouth and drinks down the melted snow in the pitcher. He repacks the pitcher, puts it on the passenger's seat floor, and turns on the heater. Back in the cabin, he grabs the flashlight, med kit, charred clothes, then, snuffs out the oil lamps, locks the door. Bernie begins driving the twenty-mile trek to the city of Hemlock. He has an office there.

Lenny guides Phyllis into the kitchen and sits her down on a stool at the island. "Man, I'm glad Darcy is not here to see this. She'll miss some school while she's at your mothers, but shit, after we collect all the money, we can hire a tutor for her." He pops the top off a couple of beers. "Here, drink this. It'll settle your stomach."

Phyllis takes the beer and nearly swills down the entire bottle. "Get me another one, and a shot of Southern Comfort. Leave the bottle here. I'm going to need it. Jesus, I can't believe what we just did."

"What? What we did baby girl, is secure our lives to a life of luxury. It was our dream back in high school. You just have to be cool and not give away any signals that you know anything about this."

"Yeah, I know, but thankfully tomorrow is Friday, and I took the day off. I'll need a long weekend to get my shit together. I don't want to see anyone until Monday."

"Shouldn't be a problem. You hungry? Man, I'm starved." Lenny finishes his beer and cracks open another, grabbing another one for the road. "I'm going to the carwash and wash the puke out of the car. I'll put it in the garage to dry out. Go get cleaned up and we'll celebrate when I get back." Lenny raises his eyebrows suggestively.

"Bring back some KFC with wedgies and slaw."

"Will do, if they're open. You might have to settle for Mickey Ds. Leave some of that Comfort for me."

Hemlock lies twenty miles northwest of Bremley. It is a growing community, and Bernie established a construction office there seven years ago. This office currently has five projects in various stages of completion. He pulls up to the office, located in an industrial park on the south side of the city. Bernie checks the dashboard clock – five-thirteen am. His staff will begin arriving around eight and there is little chance many other people will be driving into the area until seven or later, providing sufficient time for him to gather the supplies he needs.

Bernie walks into the workshop and pulls a three-quarter inch, four-by-eight sheet of plywood off a storage rack. He measures and cuts two one-foot by seven-foot strips off, then loads them into the back of the truck. He grabs a tarp and three large rolls of duct tape, placing them on the box seat of the cab. Bernie walks into the planning room, checks the project tracking board, then walks to the key rack and pulls one key off the ring for project three, and smiles.

After driving farther north to the city of Brickingham, Bernie stops at a gas station on the outskirts of town, filling the truck's two fuel tanks using the self-serve diesel pump. He then drives slowly back to the cabin, sipping on one of the bottles of water he had taken from the office. "Have to keep hydrated," he reminds himself. The persistent pain creeps back in, so he takes more Naproxin. His left eye, swollen to a slit, has virtually no vision. The gash over his left eye continues to weep droplets of blood, forming a crimson stream trickling across his brow and down his cheek, soaking into the ski mask.

Bernie, an ex-Marine, always kept himself in good physical condition, working out at the local fitness center - which his company built - and running three to four miles, four to five days a week. The regimen is now paying dividends, especially now that he is in the mid-forties. Although he never thought of himself as a tough guy, other people recognized his unrelenting stamina and strong will, especially when he is focused on a mission. These attributes alone are why he became a successful businessman. He finishes everything he sets out to do, on time, and brought every project in on budget. People are always impressed with his attention to detail and ability to track the many projects of his various businesses. It was not by accident that Bernie became so successful.

At the halfway point of the drive back up the mountain to his cabin, Bernie hits the snow-covered road. He locks the truck into all-wheel drive. The warming temperature causes snowmelt evaporation, resulting in a heavy fog blanketing the mountaintop. It is a long slow slog over the mountaintop, and back down to the driveway entrance to his cabin. Breaking through the clearing, the cabins smoldering remains are hardly discernable through the dense fog. As he drives by the cabin to the guesthouse, Bernie realizes that the heavy snow and thick moist atmosphere created by the fog have nearly extinguished the fire. The sight of his cabin, built with his own hands, his dream home, destroyed, stokes his anger.

Bernie walks into the guesthouse confident that no one will come up this way for another day or so. Even if someone has been trying to contact him, on the now burnt-to-a-crisp cell phone he left lying on his desk, he is sure they will wait for another day of snowmelt before coming up to check on him.

Bernie had considered picking up a cell phone from the Hemlock office but decided against it. For his plans tonight, he does not want a cell phone ping tracking his movements. Earlier, before he left the cabin, he disabled his trucks On Star, for the same reason. After bringing in the water and duffel bag from the truck, Bernie builds a fire in the potbelly stove standing at the center of the great room. He grabs a bottle of water and sits down in a rocking chair facing the stove. Resting his feet on the footstool, slowly rocking back and forth, Bernie watches the growing flames dancing out the stoves open door. He begins singing to The Doors tune, "Come on Phyllis light my fire, come on Lenny light my fire, come on baby light my fire, come on baby light my

fire, now you've gone and lit my fiiiiirrrrrre." He laughs aloud at his cleverness, then snarls and resumes singing. The heat from the stove slowly warms the small cabin.

An aching burn wakes Bernie just before dusk. He pops another Naproxin, then picks up two Taser guns off the table, checks the charge and puts them back into the duffel bag. Opening the damper on the wood stove to let the fire burn out, Bernie taps a gloved finger on the auto start button on his key chain. He searches through the kitchen drawers, and finds a small paring knife to peel the magnetic business signs off the front doors of the truck. Without them, his truck will look like the ten to twenty others like it driving around Bremley. He tosses the knife and signs into the toolbox behind the truck cab, climbs behind the steering wheel and drives to town.

"Hey Phyllis, you up to going down to the pub for pizza and a few beers?" Lenny finishes wiping the shaving cream from his face.

"I'm not going anywhere. I look like shit, feel like shit and don't want any shit. Go down there and get one, and sum'mor beer." A daylong drunk is what Phyllis had in mind when she woke up at noon. Her bloodshot eyes, natty hair and foul beer breath attests to a good start toward that end.

"Yeah babe, that'll be good. Why don't you jump in the shower while I'm gone. A good hot shower'd do ya good."

Phyllis wobbles off the kitchen stool, stubs out her cigarette, then staggers into the bathroom, dropping her drawers and plopping down on the toilet, with a lengthy fart.

"Jesus Phyllis, wait until I get out of here before doing that crap. I'm leaving. I should be back in a half-hour or so. Get cleaned up, for Christ sakes." As Lenny walks out, he closes the bathroom door behind him, raising his eyebrows and shaking his head in disgust.

As Bernie Drives up Spring Lane to his house in Bremley, he spots headlights turning out of the driveway to his house. A heavy darkness blankets the area making it difficult for headlights to cut through - a strange phenomenon that occurs periodically - suiting Bernie's mission well. He recognizes Lenny's white pickup truck as it whisks by. Lenny appeared to be the only person in the truck. "This couldn't get any better." Bernie mutters, recognizing that he will be able to deal with them one at a time.

Bernie turns into the driveway, and shuts off the headlights. He pulls the Taser guns from the duffel, and lays them on the passenger seat. As he pulls up to the garage, he punches the garage door opener and the door begins to rise. After driving into his stall, he stands up in the truck doorway and unplugs the garage door opener.

Stiffness has set in from the long drive and nights events resulting in a painful climb up the four steps to the garage entrance door. Bernie stops on the landing and switches the Taser on. He pushes the doorbell, and waits silently, hoping Darcy is not here. From some far away corner of the house, he hears a faint voice sounding like Phyllis's yelling spiced expletives. The words become more comprehensible as she nears the door. "Jesus Christ, a person can't even take a

crap in peace around here. This better not be some Seventh-Day Adventist handing out literature. Worse yet, Lenny if this is you...,” Phyllis begins as she opens the door. “What the hell! Who are you? You are way too late for trick or treat, dip shit.” Turning back into the house, she starts to close the door.

Bernie steps into the doorway knocking the door open. “It’s Bernie, Phyllis. Trick!” He raises the Taser and shoots the electrodes into her back, sending her quivering body to the floor. He squeezes the trigger a little longer than necessary to assure enough of a jolt to render her helpless for as long as possible. Bernie watches her squealing in pain, squirm and shake on the floor. “This is the one I bought for you. Remember? You said they were worthless and wanted a 38 special instead. Gee Phyllis, this one seems to work pretty well, doesn’t it?” Phyllis grunts something unintelligible.

Thankfully, Bernie sees no sign of Darcy, as he hurries about his task, dragging Phyllis’s limp body into the garage area. He flips on the lights and pulls two cement blocks and one piece of plywood from the back of his truck. He flops Phyllis onto the plywood and lifts one end resting it on a cement block. Then he lifts the other end onto the second block. With a roll of duct tape, he commences wrapping it around Phyllis, forming a cocoon, securing her to the board. Leaving her eyes and nose uncovered, he cuts the tape with the paring knife. Bernie lifts the end with her feet, placing it on the edge of the tailgate, then picks up the end with her head, and shoves Phyllis onto the bed of the truck. He lays the Taser, still plugged into Phyllis, beside her. “Be quiet or I’ll give you another poke. Understand?” Her eyelashes flutter but she does not answer.

Bernie turns the garage lights back off picks up the second Taser, switches it on, and walks to the side entrance door of the garage, and waits.

Lenny wheels into the driveway finishing the piece of pizza he wolfed down as he drove to Phyllis’s house, full of thoughts about this palace soon being his. He punches the garage door opener but nothing happens. “What the hell is wrong with the door now?” Agitated by the inconvenience, Lenny punches the button several more times, then gives up and shuts the engine off. Closing the pizza box and grabbing the eighteen-pack of Bud Light, Lenny walks around the right side of the garage mumbling. “Helluva time for the damned door to quit working.” He opens the garage side entrance door, “Maybe the remote batteries are de... Ack!” Lenny squawks as the Taser X26C’s probes penetrate the collar of his shirt, sending high voltage pulses into his neck, temporarily overriding the command and control mechanisms of his central nervous system sending the pizza box helicoptering to the floor, the beer crashing to his feet and Lenny fish flopping onto the cold concrete floor.

“Helllllo Lenny, it’s me, Bernie. I’m so happy to see you again.” Bernie pulls the trigger again, giving Lenny another ten-second jolt, rendering him limp as a wet rag. He drags Lenny’s body onto the second piece of plywood, takes Lenny’s cell phone and drops it on the tailgate, then secures Lenny in his own duct tape cocoon. After loading Lenny onto the bed of the pickup box, he gives Phyllis another zap, her body convulses. She jumps so strongly her entire body and board hop at least a quarter of an inch off the truck bed. “Oh my Phyllis, did that sting a little?” She moans and mumbles something unintelligible through the tightly wound tape. Bernie

tenderly taps both of them on the forehead “Now you two just rest right there. We have a little trip to take.”

Unfolding the old paint tarp, Bernie throws it over Lenny and Phyllis, then picks up a cement block, dropping it beside Phyllis’s head with a thud, to hold the tarp down. The second block he tosses in lands on the side of Lenny’s head. There is a muffled “Uh.”

“Sorry about that, Lenny boy.” Bernie closes the tailgate, picks up Lenny’s cell phone, the pizza box and beer. “Thanks for the pizza and beer. How thoughtful of you. I haven’t eaten in over a day.”

Storing the beer on the back seat and the pizza on the passenger’s seat, Bernie steps up and plugs the garage door opener back in. He hits the door opener, and starts the truck then, realizes that Lenny’s truck is parked behind him. He climbs out of the truck cab and takes Lenny’s cell phone into the kitchen, dropping it on the island’s counter beside Phyllis’s phone. He then walks back out to Lenny’s truck and opens the driver’s side door. “Good, a stick shift. I really didn’t want to be rummaging through your pockets for keys.” Then he spots them in the ignition.

Bernie pauses before shifting the truck into neutral, steps back and looks in the box.

“Um, um, Lenny, you are dumber than a box of rocks,” Bernie says as he picks the blood-stained Louisville Slugger out of the truck’s box. He takes a few swings with it. “Nice balance.” He returns to the cab, shifts the truck into neutral and gives it a little shove. Bernie watches the truck begin its long slow roll down the drive onto the grass and come to rest, with a thud, against a large pine tree. The driver’s door slams shut.

Bernie stuffs the bat under the tarp, shuts the tailgate and begins the drive back to the cabin.

As he turns onto the driveway to his mountain top retreat, Bernie notes the heavy fog has begun to lift. When he drives into the clearing he sees a faint glow from the charred remains of his cherished cabin. At the guest cabin, Bernie throws the tarp back, uncovering Phyllis and Lenny’s heads. “You guys should try to get a little nap; we have a hot date later tonight. I’ll leave the tarp pulled back. Perhaps you will appreciate the smell of your handiwork. Don’t bother trying to call out for help. We are miles from anyone who can hear you. Besides, you need to conserve your energy for all the fun we’re going to have. I’ll be back to take you to the party in a few hours. Nighty, night.”

The agony of little sleep, severe burns over thirty percent of his body, an ear partially lopped off and a pounding headache from his head being used for batting practice is ebbing back as his pain relief helpers wear off. He pops another Naproxen, wraps himself in a wool blanket and sits down in the rocking chair, *no sleep tonight. Another days work and I can rest*, he muses. *Finish this business then rest and recuperate.* Maybe I’ll go to Tahiti for a few months. “That would be nice. Hey Phyllis, I think when we get done tonight I’m going to go to Tahiti,” Bernie yells, then begins humming ‘Come on baby light my fire, come on baby light my fire.’

“Hi guys, well I am happy to see that you’re still with me - time to go to our party. Are you shivering? Was it a little chilly out here? It will be a short twenty-five, thirty-minute drive, and we’ll get you warmed up. So make yourselves comfortable.”

“Mmmph, ommph, mmmph.” Lenny and Phyllis wrestle against their bindings with little effect.

“What’s that, Phyllis, you have to go pee? You say you need a pillow. Oh, you’re uncomfortable. Baby, you have no idea how uncomfortable I feel right now.”

Phyllis rolls her eyes toward Lenny and mutters something. He rolls his eyes toward her but sees only a silhouette of her face. Exerting another surge of energy he tries to break free of the tightly wound cocoon entrapping him. “Damned duct tape,” he mutters. “If I can only get one hand lose,” Lenny laments, but he doesn’t. Bernie was thorough with spinning the web around Lenny and Phyllis. Thoroughness is one of the attributes that made him good at his business. *Plan thoroughly, and execute*, is Bernie’s motto, and so far, he is executing his plan with precision.

It is one am Saturday morning, and they arrive at the nearly completed building site. Bernie backs the truck through the door he had just opened, thinking about the incredible coincidence of all of these circumstances coming together at this time, providing the opportunity to complete his mission. *Maybe there is a god*. He smiles, thinking. *I might have to start giving to church again*.

After closing the overhead door, he pulls a four-wheeled cart up to the truck’s dropped tail-gate and slides Phyllis onto it. She whines and cries but Bernie says nothing to her. He wheels her into a large room with other carts and a row of four stainless steel doors aligned in a row across a brick wall. Steering another cart back to the truck, he drags Lenny on, then joins Phyllis. “It’s party time, my friends. Let’s see who will be the first one to get to dance with the devil. Eanie, meanie, miney, moe, aw screw it Lenny, I am choosing you since it’s my party.”

Bernie opens the far left stainless steel door, wheels Lenny’s cart up to the opening, removes the Taser gun and probes, then, pushes Lenny and his board through the opening. Bernie grabs the baseball bat and thunks Lenny on the forehead. “Here is your favorite bat, sport.” He drops it beside Lenny. Bernie grabs his burnt clothes, the empty pizza box, and the tarp, stuffing them on top of Lenny’s face.

“Muff, muff, mmmuff.” High-pitched babble emits from under the tarp.

“What’s that, Lenny? Can’t hear you, Lenny. Phyllis, what is Lenny saying?” Bernie walks back to Phyllis bends over her, staring directly into her eyes. “Got nothing to say Phyllis?”

Phyllis mumbles through the duct tape wrapped tightly across her face. Furrowed eyes staring at the ski-mask-covered face evoke abject fear. Bernie pulls the paring knife out of his coverall pocket and gently cuts away the tape from around her mouth. “I guess it won’t hurt to let you talk. No one can hear you out here if you start yelling. There now, that’s better; what did you say?”

Pooching and flexing her lips, Phyllis asks, “Bernie, why are you doing this? What are you doing? Are you crazy?”

“Wow Phyllis, you are simply incredible, so calm and manipulating. Just a minute let me finish with Lenny, then we’ll chat about this whole situation.” Bernie returns to the panel beside the door. She hears him punch some buttons, then close and lock the stainless steel door. Phyllis rolls her eyes and twists her head as far as she can and sees the red numbers two-thirty at the top of the panel’s digital display, then Bernie’s hand punching a large red button.

Lenny lies bound to the sheet of plywood, mortified, staring into the darkness. Moments latter, he hears click, click, click, a soft whoosh, and then an inferno’s roar.

From behind the stainless steel door, Phyllis hears Lenny howling and screaming. Within twenty seconds, the pain-filled cries dissipate to the dull roar of the cremator’s eighteen hundred degree propane gas flames. Within seconds, the oxygen had been sucked out of the chamber and one breath of the scorching air choked Lenny out.

“Don’t worry Phyllis, he didn’t suffer long.”

Tears stream down her temples. Phyllis blinks her reddened eyes searching Bernie’s face for a sign of compassion. “Why, Bernie? What about Darcy? He’s gone now Bernie. We can be all right again. He made me do it Bernie. Oh God Bernie, I am so sorry. Why do this, Bernie? What about Darcy?”

“My, my, you’re a friendly little chatter box now, aren’t you. So many questions...Let’s see, Phyllis...Where do I begin?” Bernie stands next to the cart, bends over Phyllis’s face and gently removes the ski mask.

Phyllis gasps, closing her eyes at the sight of Bernie’s red, swollen, bloodied and burnt face. His left eye, still swollen shut is now blackened. he bandage holding his ear in place is saturated with dried blood.

“No, no, no, noooooooooo.” With a high-pitched squeal, Phyllis begins thrashing like a wild animal seeking freedom. “What about Darcy? What about Darcy? Goddamit Bernie, you can’t do this. We can work something out.”

Bernie leans up against the cart and softly taps her shoulder while the roar of Lenny’s oven hums the devil’s tune in the background. “You know Phyllis, I would have worked with you if you wanted a divorce. You always said I was a softy, a pushover for every needy person I met. I must admit though, I was really pissed when I saw the video. But, I could have put that behind us if you and your boy Lenny would have played nice.”

“I know, I know, I screwed up Bernie, but, I’m really sorry for.....Oh Jesus, Bernie. What about Darcy?” Her mouth twists in agony as the totality of the consequences for what she and Lenny had done sear her mind. To her credit, thought Bernie, she does genuinely seem more concerned about Darcy than her own skin.

“Well, you didn’t want her to have my name, so I guess your mom will raise her, poor kid. I have no legal rights. Besides, if they convict me for toasting Lenny, it wouldn’t matter would it.” Bernie chuckles at Phyllis’s dilemma. “Helluva mess you created, isn’t it? If it makes you feel any better, I’ll do what I can to make sure Darcy is taken care of. She shouldn’t have to suffer for her mother’s indiscretions.”

Phyllis opens her eyes wide staring into Bernie’s knowing that he would do his best to help Darcy. For all of his quirky ways and flakiness at times, she always felt Bernie was a good guy and appreciated the fatherly affection he showed toward Darcy.

She softly whispers, “Thanks.” Tears well, she closes her eyes tightly sending rivulets flowing down her temples. Bernie bends down and kisses her eyelid. A piece of his torched lower lip sticks to her eyelid, tearing off as he pulls away. He stares at the little piece of his flesh, a symbol of the significance of what Phyllis and Lenny did to him.

With a tinge of remorse, saying no more, Bernie opens the second cremator door and pushes Phyllis toward the firebrick-lined chamber. Phyllis’s eyes pop open and her lips draw tightly across her clenched teeth as she begins hyperventilating, emitting a wheezing squeal with each breath. Bernie stops, “I can’t let you suffer like Lenny did.”

Bernie walks back to his truck, grabs a roll of duct tape and returns to Phyllis. He winds tape around Phyllis’s head and the board covering her mouth again. “Try not to fight this. It will be painless this way.” Pushing down on her sternum, Bernie places his hand over her eyes and pinches her nostrils.

At first, Phyllis does not struggle, but nature’s reflexes take over and her body thrashes futilely against the gray cocoon entrapping her in a desperate act of survival. Within a few seconds the death struggle begins to wane, as Bernie stares into the empty doorway of the cremation chamber.

A few moments pass after Phyllis’s lifeless body went still. Bernie slams the door shut to the Phyllis’s oven. Then the beep, beep, beeping sound over the dull roar of Lenny’s oven as Bernie punches in the time setting. He pauses, then, punches the start button. He turns and leans against the door, his chin sagging to his chest. Click, click, click, the igniter fires, then the louder click of the main gas valve opening, sending hissing propane gas rushing to the nozzles, igniting as it passes by the pilot light, exploding into the chamber with fiery vengeance.

A lonely tear drop falls to the floor. He mumbles, “Goodbye sweet heart. You leave with no pain, while I have to live with mine.”

Bernie goes out to his truck, turns on the radio and pushes the CD button. A Beethoven concerto begins to play. Bernie takes a sip from a bottle of water. “Got to drink fluids.”

Four-thirty am, the dashboard clock reads, time to go pick up Lenny and Phyllis. Bernie walks to the back of the pick-up, pulls an empty five-gallon pail out and returns to the cremation ovens.

Opening the door of Lenny's oven, Bernie switches on the lights and begins sweeping the layer of ashes to a chute emptying into a collection box. He dumps the ashes from the collection box into the pail, then cleans up Phyllis and dumps her into the pail. The new style ovens, Bernie had recommended to the owners handled the body fluids as designed, leaving no mess to clean up.

Bernie searches the main office area of Manchester's Funeral Home and Crematorium, and finds a shop vacuum that he knows should be at the work site. He vacuums out the little bit of dust remaining in the oven chambers, the collection box and off the special broom used for extracting the ashes. Bernie picks up the pail and vacuum, and makes one last scan around the room to assure he has removed all evidence of being there, then, carries his cargo back to the truck.

Fatigue hangs heavy over Bernie during the half hour drive back to Bremley. He pulls into his concrete company's yard, and drives up to the mixing barn. Shutting off the lights but leaving the engine running, he steps to the tailgate and lifts the pail of ashes out. His legs begin to shake with each step as he climbs the steps up to the Portland Cement hopper. Bernie lifts the lid of the pail and peers into the open top. "Man, I'm so tired. Phyllis, do you hear me...I said I am tired, Phyllis...It'll be over soon Phyllis, then, I can get some rest."

From the platform surrounding the lip of the hopper, Bernie dumps the pail of ashes into the gray cement, raking them into the mix until there is no obvious sign of them. "Monday morning is a big pour, Phyllis. I have just the right spot scheduled for you and Ole Lenny-boy." He pulls a lever on the wall, sending cement pouring down into the hopper. Bernie shuts it off when it is full, and leaves.

Twenty miles east of Bremley, Bernie turns south on US 75. He has just picked up breakfast at McDonalds. Setting the cruise control at seventy, he pulls an Egg McMuffin with cheese out of the bag and takes a bite, thinking, *Damn I am tired, got to get some sleep soon.*

"Chief Hanson, Sue Ellen Wickford is on line two for you."

"Thanks, Patty Ann." Al Hanson and Sue Ellen, like Bernie, are long-time friends since their high school days. He punches the button on the phone. "Hello Sue, to what do I owe the honor of your attention this fine Monday morning?"

"Hi, Al. Look, Al, I'm concerned about Bernie. Kyle has'nt been able to reach him on the phone. He's been up to the cabin and hasn't spoken to anyone in days. Have you heard from him?"

"Yeah, I saw him last week. I don't know, maybe it was Thursday after he had his little tiff with Phyllis, but not since then. He said he wanted some time to himself, so haven't bothered to call him."

"Well, I'm worried, Al. You know they had a big snowstorm up on the mountain. It's not like him to go a day without talking to Kyle."

“I agree, Sue. That does seem peculiar. I’ll send Cliff up to the cabin to check on him. He’s on patrol up that way checking for cars that might have gotten into trouble during the storm. I’ll let you know what he finds.”

“Thanks Al, you’re the best.”

“You’re too kind. Give Bill my best. Ta, Ta.”

“Ta, Ta.”

Deputy Cliff Peacock turns into the drive to Bernie Hill’s cabin and comes to a stop when he reaches the clearing. As he stares at the smoldering remains of the familiar cabin, he hits the speed dial on his cell phone. Thankfully, because of Bernie’s influence, there is a cell tower located strategically to allow for calls from this side of the mountain. “Chief, you’d better get up here and bring the Fire Marshall with you.”

“What the hell are you talking about Cliff?”

“The cabin’s burnt to the ground and I don’t see any sign of Bernie’s truck or Bernie.”

“Sue Ellen, this is Al. I just came down from the cabin. It’s gone, burnt to the ground and the only sign of Bernie are some tire tracks and foot prints down at the guest cottage.”

“Oh my god! What happened?”

“Well, it’s hard to say, but it looks like he had a kerosene heater running and something went wrong, setting the cabin on fire. The Fire Marshall is still up there investigating. He said the way the fire seemed to ignite looked weird. He’ll let me know what he thinks. There’s no sign of Bernie, though. I’m concerned, Sue. Have you heard from him yet?”

“No, neither has Kyle. Al, Bernie never had a kerosene heater in that cabin. He would never use one. You know there was a propane furnace in the cabin.”

“You’re right about that. In all the years I hunted with him up there, we never used a heater. Strange.”

Shortly after crossing the Georgia State line, Bernie turns off the interstate on the Dalton exit. He drives east until he arrives at the Conasauga River bridge and pulls on the shoulder of the road. Dropping the tailgate, he puts the two Taser guns in the bottom of the pail then drops one of the cement blocks on top of them. He carries the pail to the center of the bridge and waits for the traffic to pass, then drops the pail into the water. It floats for a second, tips to the side, fills with water and sinks out of sight. On his way back to the interstate, Bernie stops beside the mailbox of a rundown home and places the shop vac beside the driveway. He drives back to the interstate and continues his trek south.

The late afternoon sun shines in the passenger window and pivots into the windshield as Bernie pulls off I75 onto the Macon, Georgia exit. As he drives toward town, he keeps an eye peeled for the police. At an intersection far up the road, he sees a patrol car turn onto the highway going in the same direction. Bernie floors the truck. Closing rapidly on the officer, he pulls into the center turn lane, racing by the unsuspecting officer.

The whoosh and growl of the truck's diesel engine roaring past startles Officer Taft. He flips on the overhead flashers and siren, and quickly catches up to the slowing truck. The driver turns on his right signal, pulls off onto the roadside shoulder, and stops. Officer Taft radios for back-up as he stops diagonally behind the truck. When he steps out of the patrol car, he unsnaps his holstered Glock, then snugs the side of the truck as he walks forward, ready to draw. All State Highway Patrol officers are trained to expect worst-case scenarios. He stops just back from the driver's side door, taps on the window and shouts orders. "Roll down the window...Slowly put your hands on the steering wheel."

Looking straight ahead, the driver complies. Officer Taft steps forward, peers in to see the man has a black ski mask on and leather-gloved hands grip the wheel. He takes a step back, pulls and points his gun at the man. "All right sir, slowly use one of your hands to take that mask off."

The man slowly takes both hand off the steering wheel and gently pulls the mask up over his head. In the process, a piece of his charred left cheek sticks to the mask, peeling off a small patch of skin. Blood begins dripping down his cheek, causing Officer Taft to flinch. The man turns and looks into Taft's eyes revealing the full extent of his injuries. "Good God Sir, what happened to you?"

"I don't know."

"Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"My hands and arms, and legs are pretty bad."

"What's your name?"

"I don't know."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know."

"How did you get burned so badly and cut on the head?"

"I don't know."

"All right shut your engine off and just sit right there." Officer Taft reaches for his lapel mike. "This is Unit 1050 requesting an ambulance to just west of Branch Sreet on Lexington Highway."

“Roger that. Do we have an accident?”

“Negative. Just a man severely burnt and with bad head injuries. I just pulled him over. He seems to have amnesia or something.” Officer Taft gives the operator the license numbers to run an ID check on.

Walking back to the driver, Officer Taft opens the driver’s door. “Sir, I have an ambulance coming. We’ll get you to a hospital pronto. We have a great burn center here in Macon. Give me your keys. I’ll have someone take your truck to an impound center where it will be safe.” He then walks around the truck, opens the passenger door and looks through the glove box, finding a vehicle registration.

“Are you Bernard Jenkins Hill?”

“I don’t know.”

Chief Hanson hangs up the phone, “Jesus!” He punches the intercom button. “Patty Ann, get me Sue Ellen Wickford, asap.” Rocking back in his chair, he cocks his hat backward. “Bernie, what the hell are you doing in Macon, Georgia?”

The phone rings and Sue Ellen picks up. “Hold on ma’am Chief Hanson would like to speak with you.” Seconds pass, “Sue Ellen, we found Bernie. He’s in Macon, Georgia.”

“Macon, Georgia, you’re shitting me, right?”

“No joke, Sue Ellen and he’s in pretty bad shape. They picked him up on a routine traffic stop. Sue Ellen, they think he has amnesia, and he has burns on thirty percent of his body. He also has a huge gash on his forehead and his left ear is half tore off. I’m heading down there in about an hour.”

Holding her hand to her forehead as she hears of Bernie’s condition, she asks, “Can I ride along? Someone needs to be there with him.”

“You bet. I’ll swing by on my way out to the interstate. Give me about an hour to wrap some things up here and pick up some clothes and stuff.”

“Thanks, Al. I can’t believe what you just told me.”

“Yeah, well get this. I tried to call Phyllis to let her know, but couldn’t get a hold of her. So, I sent one of the guys up there to tell her. They found the house unlocked, her ex-husband’s truck crashed into a tree at the bottom of the driveway, two cell phones laying on the kitchen counter, and Phyllis’s car sitting in the garage, but no one there. It’s like they disappeared off the face of the earth. Weird, I tell ya, very strange. I need to talk to Bernie.”

The large cement truck backs toward the crew chief. He stands with his hands spread apart, coming together as the truck nears its target. The driver stops when the Crew Chief's hands touch. He puts the emergency brakes on and shifts the drive gear for the large concrete-filled drum. The Crew Chief, and his helper, swing the discharge trough to center of the pour site. He gives a thumb's up and the driver flips a switch, sending a gray river of stone, sand and Portland cement spewing onto the floor of the tank. Two more pours will finish this job.

After talking to the doctor about the extent of Bernie's injuries and prognosis for the amnesia, Sue Ellen is led by a nurse to Bernie's room. "Mr. Hill, you have a visitor. Do you recognize her?"

Bernie shakes his head no.

"Hi Bernie. I'm Sue Ellen. Don't you remember me?"

Bernie looks at the nurse, then back at Sue Ellen saying nothing.

"Well, I'll leave you two alone. Bernie you push that button if you need anything. Ok darling?" The nurse waits for Bernie's usual nod of understanding, then scurries off to another patient's room.

"You don't remember me do you?" Sue Ellen walks up and sits on the side of the bed, looking over Bernie's bandaged body. "I'm so sorry. What happened to you, Bernie?"

Bernie motions with a gauze-covered finger for her to come closer. Sue Ellen bends forward and Bernie whispers, "How's Kyle?"

Sue Ellen eyes widen. "You remember Kyle?" Bernie puts his finger to his lips, and winks at her. Sue Ellen whispers, "So, you're all right?"

Bernie spreads his arms wide and cocks his head.

"Well I guess you're not really all right, are you. And, you have amnesia, right?" Sue Ellen places emphasis on 'right'.

Bernie puts his finger back to his lips and Sue Ellen nods in understanding.

Bernie closes the door of his pick-up truck. Sue Ellen shifts into reverse and backs into the turn around, asking. "How are you feeling today?"

"Not too bad. The pain patches help with the skin grafts but the physical therapy for my knees and arms, especially my hands, is brutal. My hands are coming along, but a few fingers will never return to full flexibility." Holding his hands forward, Bernie demonstrates the progress he has made. "The scar tissue is pretty thick on the smaller ones."

“How do you feel about moving back into the house? I find it fascinating that Phyllis and her ex seem to have evaporated off the face of the earth. I can’t believe she would leave her own child like that.”

Bernie chuckles.

“What?” Sue Ellen asks. “I don’t think there is anything funny about this whole situation.”

“I just find your choice of words humorous – evaporated.”

“I think that fire fried your brains. Do you remember anything about what happened that night, yet?”

“Nope.”

“Nothing?”

“Nope.”

“I talked to Al yesterday. He said that their investigation is going nowhere. He said that no one has reported Phyllis or the ex missing. Her mother says she hasn’t heard from them yet, but expects to. She thinks they ran off on a fling somewhere.”

“I talked to her mother a couple of days ago, too, and offered her some cash to give up custody of Darcy. She was more than happy to get rid of her. I get to pick her up this weekend. After my last skin graft next month, I’m taking Kyle and Darcy with me for a month of sailing around Tahiti.” Bernie watches the landscape as they drive to the south side of Bremley.

“Sue Ellen, I can’t thank you enough for running the business for me. You’ve done a great job and the guys I’ve talked to say you’re a great boss.”

“Don’t forget, I do have a vested interest in this business. I’m happy to do it, but you hurry up and get back in the saddle cowboy. I want to get back to my painting.” Sue Ellen pulls the truck to a stop in front of the facilities office. “I still don’t understand why you want to check this job out, and why today?”

“You know me. I have to know everything, remember? That’s why you divorced me.” Bernie chuckles, ignoring the last part of her question, “You can wait here. I won’t be long.”

“Fine.”

Bernie walks through the door with a sign on it reading, ‘Sanitation Employees Only’, and asks the clerk staring strangely at him, “Is Fred in? I’m Bernie Hill and want to check out the job we completed a few months ago.”

“Oh yeah, I’m sorry Mr. Hill. I didn’t recognize you, with your...well, you know...”

“I understand. I hardly recognize myself anymore. Is it all right if I go back and check out how my guys did?”

“Of course, Mr. Hill, but I’m the only one here right now. You know the way. I’ll be here watching the control panel if you need anything. Fred will be back this afternoon if you need to talk to him. He’s at a meeting with the Mayor.”

“I won’t be long.” Bernie walks behind the counter and out the back door to the pickling tanks of the Bremley Sanitation Station. Walking past two large holding tanks he comes to the newest tank built to receive raw sewage from the growing community, the one his concrete company’s crew had just finished. He walks around the perimeter walkway, inspecting the work, then, stops midway along the south side. From his jacket, Bernie pulls out a long stem rose. He takes the cut and bent wedding band from his side pocket, and slips it on the rose stem. With a strand of welding solder, he secures ring to the stem. Holding the rose up, he gently kisses the bud then tosses it into the sludge. Bernie watches them slip away into the blackness. He mumbles, “Happy anniversary, Phyllis. To the high life.”

The End