

**LOADED**  
by  
**Wendy Koenig**

The girl had most probably been beautiful. Park Ranger Paul Theriault stared down at her body. What was left of her now was considerably less than beautiful: blue-black, partially gnawed legs that he imagined had once been lean and tapered, a grossly distended abdomen that most likely was once trim and flat and long blond hair gnarled in a mass on a scalp that had been split wide open.

Above, a few late migrating sparrows were singing and flitting as if nothing were amiss. A soft autumn breeze gusted through the tips of the pines and bare-branched oaks and birches. Moist brown leaves covered every exposed inch of ground. Some leaves even cupped tiny silver pools of rain. The heady scent of wet earth was lost beneath the sweet-basal stench of decaying flesh. It was what had alerted him of a body, though he'd thought it might be the carcass of a moose or bear. He carefully stepped backward into what he hoped were his original footprints. Pulling a flag spike from his belt, he planted it in the nearest tree. Turning, he traced his path back to his blue work truck and called the local police on his radio.

Even though it was chilly outside, Paul turned on the air conditioner, sucking in fresh, unspoiled air while he waited. He seemed to wait forever, swatting flies and staring at the barely visible flag. Who was she? Why was her body here, in the middle of the northern Maine woods, virtually the middle of nowhere? The remnants of the girl's clothes were sequined. She was no hiker. Ergo, she was brought here and died or she died and was dumped here. A creep of chill began across his shoulders and spread up his neck.

Details would be important. Paul leaned over and pulled the ever-present tiny notebook and pencil out of the dash. The pencil lead was broken down in the shaft of wood, so he clamped his fingers tightly around the nub. Closing his eyes, he tried to picture the scene again. Her body was in a grove of tall oak saplings. The immature upper branches criss-crossed and would have concealed the body from above if the leaves were still on. As it was, the cool autumn nights had driven the leaves to the ground, creating a colorful mattress. The body lay *on top* of the majority of those. So, the girl had been brought here some time within the last three weeks, after peak color season and after the last of the leaves had fallen.

He nodded, opened his eyes and scratched the pencil across the paper. The girl's body had been lying with her head to the north and curled – huddled almost – facing west. The position of the body made her seem insecure. *Immaterial*. Paul lifted his pencil. It wasn't natural for a body to be dumped and end up in that position. Her body had been staged. The chill crept over his shoulders and neck again. This time it forced its way down his arms and goose bumps raised the hair there. The pretty girl had been murdered.

Todd Nedeau extricated one long leg and a broad shoulder from behind the wheel of the police cruiser. He followed that with the other half of his body. Finally standing, he paused and wrinkled his nose as a breeze blew from the direction of the body. He turned his square bulk and started walking toward Paul.

“Well, if it ain't cop wannabe.” He spoke with a Boston accent. Paul had always hated that particular verbal affectation. They lived in the upper end of Maine, more than half-a-day's drive from Massachusetts. *Poser*.

“Stop!” Paul put up his hand from where he stood at the edge of the road. The few crows in the treetops took to the pale gray sky in a fury. “Tire tracks.” He pointed at a set of wide-set tracks that extended wider than his own overlapping truck’s. To his credit, Todd stopped dead and gingerly hopped off the road as well. The Medical Examiner’s car pulled in behind the cruiser and Todd relayed the warning before the M.E. exited his vehicle.

Todd stared down at the road. “Those are pretty wide. Four-wheel-drive type. Hummer, I’m thinkin’.” He reached in his car for his camera and snapped a couple pictures. He then nodded at the M.E. and turned to Paul. “Okay. Tell me how you found her, Non-Cop.”

Same old Todd. Paul gritted his teeth. He tapped his Park Ranger badge and said tightly, “I was making my rounds when I saw the tracks. I came down the road here and smelled her. I thought it might be a poached carcass and went to investigate. As soon as I saw the girl’s body, I planted a flag and returned along the same path I’d entered the scene.” He pointed to the flag.

Todd approached as Paul spoke and stood directly in front and no more than a foot away. When Paul finished, Todd held his gaze a moment. His breath washed over Paul in an acrid bath.

“Why didn’t you look for footprints?”

Paul decided not to notice the deliberate trap. After what he’d done, he deserved it. “I’m not the cop.”

“That’s right. You’re not.” Todd’s pleasure at the revelation was evident in his wide smile. He whistled a cheery tune that Paul thought might be *Paradise City* by Guns and Roses as he sighted the flag and began searching the ground. He slowly moved deeper into the woods.

The M.E. came up beside Paul. He wore a bright red shirt and was a tall, balding man, nearly as tall as Paul, himself. But, whereas Paul was tall and lean and Todd was tall and square, this man was tall and chubby. He was aged, too. Maybe even close to retirement. The man cleared his throat, grimaced and said, “It’s a ripe one isn’t it?”

“Yep. Been here a couple weeks, I’d guess.” Paul reached to shake his hand. “You’re Bob Thompson. Welcome to the woods of Maine. I’m Paul Theriault. You getting settled into your office?” They both focused their attention on Todd, watching for an all-clear signal.

“Getting there.” Bob hesitated and then asked, “So, what’s with you two? Would you mind telling me? I’d like to know what I’m getting between.”

“You want the short story or the long?”

“Whichever is the most interesting.”

Paul sighed. Not looking at Bob, he began, “Todd and I were in the Police Academy at the same time. It quickly became apparent to everyone that Todd had little talent.”

“And you had plenty.”

Paul hesitated and then shrugged. Keeping his attention on Todd’s search, Paul said, “Todd took matters into his own hands and goaded me at every opportunity.”

“You didn’t have to respond.”

After weeks of petty baiting and insults, Todd had eventually found the right button to push, the right words to say. “I almost killed him, though he didn’t press charges.”

“And when you graduated, you were rejected from every department.”

Paul shook his head slowly and they were silent again. Todd had reached the body and had begun a search around it. After a few minutes, Paul said, “I lost my taste for police work and eventually dropped out for a different career path.”

They watched Todd in silence. Finally he finished sweeping the area and waved them over.

Bob hefted the equipment and handed a case to Paul. “How long ago was that?”

“Two and a half years.”

Bob led the way toward the body. He spoke quietly over his shoulder to Paul. “Looks like he’s spoiling for a rematch.”

So it would seem. Paul followed, carefully not answering. He scanned the surrounding trees. Here, they were wide-spread. It would have been easy enough to carry a body or unconscious woman through them. Conversely, he saw no broken branches, scratch marks or violent turnings of leaves. Further confirmation that the woman was brought into the woods unconscious or dead.

“What do you see?” Bob asked Paul. He was wrapping a baggie around each of the dead girl’s feet. The hands, after a brief scrutiny, had already been done.

“I think,” said Paul, “the point is what YOU see.”

“Yes, but an extra pair of eyes is always helpful. Isn’t it Officer Nedeau?” Bob lifted his gaze to stare directly at Todd.

Todd spoke to Paul in answer to the M.E.’s question. “Only authorized people are allowed here. He’s nothing but a bark biter.” He jerked his thumb toward the vehicles and smiled. “Time for you, Nature Boy, to go wait for the Game Warden and the ambulance.”

“Actually, Officer Nedeau, I need his assistance. Yours, also.” Bob took his gaze off Todd, underscoring his words. Todd tightened his lips and his face flamed in obvious anger.

Carefully leaning over the body, the M.E. slit the front of her dress at mid-section and examined the dark flesh on the girl’s stomach. Then he moved up to her neck. Gingerly, he placed his gloved hand on the bruise on the opposite side of her throat. “He choked her with his hands from behind. See how my fingers fit?” They nestled inside the bruise like the insert of a glove. “Help me turn her so I can see her back better.”

Paul squatted at the body’s feet while Todd positioned himself at her shoulders. Together, with the Medical Examiner at her mid-torso, they gently turned her. The stench of decaying flesh intensified and all three took a moment to apply more camphor to just below their noses.

Bob slit the back of her dress. “There.” He pointed at a dark patch on her lower back. “See that bruise? He held her down, probably with his weight on his knee while he choked her. Her blood has settled to the front of her body, which means she was on her stomach for at least a couple hours after death.”

Stiffening, Paul glanced away. The killer was a monster. Why from behind? So he couldn’t see her face when she died? He felt guilty? It seemed a contradiction. Most killers who used their hands did so to make it personal. Glancing at Todd, he saw by the law man’s frown that the irony was not lost on him, either.

Todd spoke first, slowly. “To keep her from fighting him off.”

Paul stood and turned a slow circle. Out here, there was nothing: no camps, no real roads, no buildings or structures of any kind. And no people. He looked back down at the body’s pose. Again that word rose in his mind: *Immaterial*.

“Paul. Tell me what you see.” The M.E.’s voice was low, but insistent, his sharp eyes watching.

Not looking at Todd, Paul said, “Power.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Todd’s face was skewed into a dark grimace. Clearly, he thought Paul was the dumbest thing he’d ever seen.

“Look around you. She’s out here, in the middle of nowhere, posed like it doesn’t matter if she’s alive or dead. She wasn’t even good enough to be allowed to look at him while he killed her. She’s nothing. Nothing at all. And THAT makes HIM the absolute power.”

“Bullshit! You don’t know your ass from a hole in the ground! Your quitting the police academy was the best thing that ever happened.”

Bob held up his hand to stop Todd’s tirade. He said, “I don’t care what’s happened between you two. What I care about is this poor girl. Now, I think Paul’s got a valid theory. Once I get her back to my lab, I might be able to shed more light on this. Until then, Officer Nedeau, your job, both your jobs, is to assist me. You can best do that by keeping your outbursts to yourself.”

All three men stared down at the girl, each lost in his own thoughts. Paul was just numb. The sheer emotional brutality of the murder shook him.

The sound of the approaching ambulance seemed to break the spell. Paul retreated to the road to guide the EMTs to the body. Though, he reasoned, anyone with a decent nose would find her soon enough. His attitude bothered him, that thought would be something worthy of Todd. Surely the dead girl deserved more respect than that.

The ambulance parked under a frame of trees branches.

Paul stepped out of the late night darkness into the brightness of Gilles’s Diner. He looked for his girlfriend, Sara. She was at the far end of a long line of booths against the window, waiting on a customer. Looking up, she waved him over, a happy smile on her face.

The diner was just finishing the after-supper-dessert-and-coffee crowd. As Paul walked the gauntlet between booths and counter, he nodded in greeting to the last few customers. It was autumn and there were a couple faces he didn’t recognize. Hunters, probably. In that case, it didn’t hurt to make friendly to them now. They’d be seeing him again.

Reaching Sara, he smoothed a lock of her long black hair and gave her a quick kiss. “Hey.”

“I want you to meet my uncle. He’s just moved here.” She looked down at the customer.

Following her lead, Paul’s gaze met Bob Thompson’s.

Bob stood, right hand outstretched and a huge grin on his face. “When Sara told me about her fiancé, I had no idea it was you. Sit down.” He motioned with his free hand to the empty bench across from him.

Paul frowned and shook hands. Fiancé? He was going to have to talk to that girl. He glanced at her, but she was already scurrying away. He sat, carefully smoothing the cracked, blue naugahyde first.

Looking squarely at Paul, the M.E. said, “So you become a Park Ranger.”

Paul shrugged. “I like it. Nobody bothers me.”

The older man nodded. “Well, for what it’s worth, I think you’re in the right field.”

They paused to let Sara place two cups of coffee on the table. Paul tried to catch her eye, to let her know he wasn’t upset with her, but she avoided his gaze. Her face was blazing red when she hurried away again.

She returned almost immediately with two pieces of pie. Coconut cream for Bob and Sugar pie for Paul, his favorite. She had no reason to apologize. This time, as she turned to leave, Paul snatched her hand. He smiled up at her. “Sit with us.”

She finally met his gaze, relaxed and smiled back. “I can’t. I’m not allowed. You know that.”

Paul raised himself in his seat, still holding her hand. He glanced at the two remaining customers. “No one here will care.”

“Gilles won’t like it.”

“He isn’t here.”

Biting her lower lip, she slid in beside him. “All right. For just a minute.” Turning crooked in the booth, she faced Paul, her knees pushing hard against his. Her eyes were piercing and almost as dark as her hair. “Jessica said you found a body in the woods. She said the girl was wearing a sequined dress.” Jessica was Bob’s intern at the morgue.

Paul glanced at Bob, who was already deep into his pie and smacking his lips. The older man shook his head. “Small towns.”

The door to the diner opened and Todd stepped in. He glanced around. When his gaze lit on Paul and Bob, he headed their way. Sara swung out of the booth and started down the aisle toward the kitchen. As Todd passed her, he said, “I’ll have my coffee with your uncle.”

Reaching the table, he said to Paul, “Shouldn’t you be waiting with your Game Warden for your Special Investigators, Nature Boy?”

“Been and gone.” Paul took a bite of his pie, pulling the fullness of the sweet crunch slowly off the fork into the well of his mouth.

Bob grunted. “Huh, that was fast.” He stood to let Todd slide in.

Sara arrived with the coffee, waited for Todd to settle and placed his coffee in front of him. After a worried glance at Paul and then Todd, she left. Paul wondered if she was thinking they might fight again. It seemed everyone always did.

Todd frowned at Paul. “I don’t have a report yet, Non-Cop.”

“*That* will take a couple days. It takes time for the official document to make its way through the channels.”

The M.E. swallowed the last bit of his pie and pointed his fork at Paul. “But . . .”

Paul nodded. He lowered his voice and leaned in, pie forgotten. “But, they found what looked like dried semen everywhere surrounding the body location. Killing this girl musta really turned him on. I’m talking at least a dozen different ejaculations.” Todd watched him speak with a skeptical scowl bruising his face. His right arm was resting across the back of the bench.

Bob said, “I found semen stains all over her, too. Inside, she was torn in five places. And I’m talking long mean tears. The guy was brutal.”

“Son of a Bitch!” Todd smacked his hand against the vinyl of the bench. Sara startled where she was cleaning the counter, looking every bit like a doe caught unawares. The last patron of the diner, an elderly woman whom Paul was sure was a devout member of the local Baptist church, cast a disapproving stare at them. Todd lifted his hand by way of apology and returned to the table’s conversation. “I shoulda known it would be bad when you were the one to call it in, Monkey-Boy. You’re nothin’ but trouble.” He took a tentative sip of his coffee and grimaced, setting it down. Steam curled toward the stained ceiling.

Bob continued as if there’d been no interruption. “Our killer likes what he does. He’ll do it again.”

“The way he spewed all over the ground out there proved even more that she was immaterial, not just to him, but to the whole world. She could have been nothing but Kleenex. Or just dirt on the ground. Hell, he could have been like a cat covering his scat. He’ll definitely do it again,” Paul said. He leaned back on his bench. The elderly lady got up and left. Sara cleared her table. “I would be interested to know how old that semen was. If it was all the same age or if he’d returned a few times.”

Todd glanced briefly at Paul, and then jutted his jaw at Bob. “What else did you find?”

“Scrapes go vertically across her collar bone down to her armpits. There are trace elements of a residue and fibers of some type that are being analyzed. I also found bits of carpet under her fingernails. She has more scrapes across the tops of her hips and around her pelvic region. I confirmed the pressure point mid-back where he held her on the floor while he choked her. He put so much pressure that he compressed a couple discs in her spine.”

“This is one sick fucker.” Todd tried his coffee again, this time following the tiny sip with a big gulp. He held his cup in front of him and said, “I can’t find out who she is. She’s not local, thank God. Augusta is searching their database. If they have nothing, I’ll have to go national. Probably FBI.”

The diner phone rang and Sara scurried from the back room to answer it.

Todd raised his eyes, meeting Paul’s gaze head on. “You keep saying he’s proving she’s immaterial. To who? Who does he have to prove this to?”

Sara raised her hand to her mouth and slumped against the wall. Something was wrong.

Paul stood. “Everyone. Himself. The girl.” He started down the aisle to where Sara was still on the phone. He flung over his shoulder to Bob and Todd, “Especially to the law.”

Sara’s pale face turned toward him when he reached her. She didn’t bother to put her hand over the mouthpiece of the phone. “April didn’t come home last night.” With a shaking hand, she hung up the phone.

Paul guided Sara to a seat at the counter. He called to Todd, across the now empty diner, “I think you’d better come here.” Immediately, Todd launched over the back of the bench even as Bob worked to get out of the way.

“My sister didn’t come home,” Sara repeated to the group of men, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Who saw her last?” Todd pulled out a notepad.

“I did. We hung out at Q’s together.”

Todd nodded, then asked, “But, she didn’t come home with you?”

“No. She met this guy and left with him.”

“On her own?” Paul asked.

Sara’s eyes welled with tears. “I didn’t see. I don’t know. I went out to dance with Rhiannon and Jen.” She finished in a whisper.

“It could be nothing.” Bob stooped to catch her gaze. “Ok?”

She nodded, but her frown spoke of her skepticism.

“What’d he look like?” Todd stood poised, pen in hand.

“I didn’t see him very well. He wasn’t tall or skinny or fat either. He had brown hair, I think. Or maybe it wasn’t. I don’t know. I just don’t know.” The tears broke free from her eyes and streamed down her cheeks. She burrowed her head against Paul’s shoulder.

“It’s all right. Just close your eyes and focus on the being at Q’s again.” Todd’s voice was gentle, reassuring. Paul blinked. He’d seen it before, in other officers, this gentle empathy with the victim and the victim’s family. He’d just never expected it from the man he considered his nemesis. It lifted Todd from marginal to almost decent as a cop. Almost.

Obediently, Sara shut her eyes. After a moment, she said, “Okay.”

Todd asked, “Do you see them?”

“Yes, they’re by the door. He’s just a bit taller than April. With a suit. A nice suit. And a crew cut. I...I think his hair *is* brown, but it could be because it was dark in there.”

“That’s good, Sara. Really good. Keep your eyes closed. Look at him. Did his suit fit him well? Was it tight or did it hang?”

“It looked like it might be loose.”

“Good. When she spoke to you, was she happy or tense?”

“She was giggly, you know, like she’d won a prize or something.”

“Was there anything she wanted really bad? More than anything else in the world?”

“Well,” Sara opened her eyes and looked directly at Todd. “She’s always wanted to be a model.”

“Sometimes people change.” Bob said to Paul as they stood outside the diner. Todd was pulling away in his squad car with Sara.

Paul shook his head. “Maybe. We’ll see.” It was a funny kind of truce he and Todd had reached.

They stood quiet, watching the police car’s tail lights pull away in the dark. Then, Paul said, “I just ... .” He ended by shaking his head helplessly.

“I know. But my niece is strong. You’ve seen her. If anyone stands a chance at surviving this animal, she does.” Despite his words, doubt crept into Bob’s voice.

It was too much. Paul couldn’t just be a bystander awaiting the final verdict on April’s life. Abruptly, he said, “I’ll see you later.”

Bob grabbed his arm before he could turn away. His gaze met Paul’s. “You’re going back out there, aren’t you?”

Paul nodded, staring after Todd’s fading tail lights. “Sometimes a change of perspective will bring out new details.”

Dropping his hand, Bob walked toward his car. “Let me get my jacket.”

“No. I’ll go alone. I’m sorry, but I don’t need any distractions.”

Bob stopped, pursed his lips and then slowly said, “All right. Call me if you find anything.” He glanced at his pocket watch, a scuffed dial hanging from a chain, the lid gone. “Someone will still be at the hospital. Maybe, as you say, I’ll try a change in perspective while looking at the body.”

“Good luck.”

“And to you, too.”

With that, the two men parted ways.

Paul’s cell phone buzzed just as he was pulling up to the Game Warden’s barricade at the crime scene. He’d switched to his personal vehicle, a 1976 CJ5 Jeep. His work truck didn’t have the traction that the jeep did.

Bob’s voice filled the phone when Paul answered. “Todd got a call from the FBI. Seems they’ve been watching for killings like this. There are four more bodies just like ours in Massachusetts. We’ve got a serial killer.”

Neither man said anything for a moment. Paul parked and stared out the windshield at nothing in particular while the news sank in. A serial killer had April. She’d wanted to be a model. That had to be how he’d convinced her to go with him. Probably masquerading as a photographer or something.

Paul gritted his teeth. He sure as hell wasn’t going to stay out of the investigation now. Climbing out of the Jeep, he said to Bob, “I’ll be careful,” and hung up. After grabbing his flashlight, he stepped off into the darkness.

He kept the light off until he reached the marker for the tire tracks. There, he flicked on the light and crouched, careful to not disturb the prints. He cleared his mind of everything he knew about the case and looked at the tracks as if seeing them for the first time. The tires of the vehicle were wide-set, with sharp gouging treads. A Hummer, perhaps, as Todd had said. With off-road tires. What else? His own Jeep was far too narrow and light. These grooves were deep. Something heavy. No dual axles, either, as there were no inside prints. A converted pickup for construction, maybe. Paul nodded to himself. Yeah. Except the tires were too narrow for any truck. What the hell?

He stood and flashed his light around the area. Finding nothing noteworthy, he followed the tracks for about twenty feet. Then he swept his light across the trees until he located the yellow crime scene tape stretched around where the body had been found. Stepping over the tracks, he played his light across the ground looking for evidence as he walked until he reached the spot where he'd found the unidentified girl.

Flicking off his flashlight, Paul stood at the edge of the area, letting the scene fill him. Then, he closed his eyes and envisioned the body, the way he's found it. The position, the leaves, the stench, the crows, maggots and the fall air. Anything he could remember. Turning on his flashlight again, he opened his eyes and stared at the crime scene, superimposing his vision on it. Nothing stood out to him. Todd's technique had been a good one, but it hadn't helped Paul.

Pulling out his notebook, Paul flicked on his light again and compared his sketch to what he remembered and what he now saw. Nothing. He reviewed his notes.

"Immaterial," he'd written. But that wasn't all of it. Her fetal position suggested she'd been helpless against the killer's power. Again, a message. He liked being a god and he wouldn't stop. April, who looked so much like the murder girl, was as good as dead, too. And Paul had found nothing that would stop it from happening.

Bitter, he returned to the road, carefully staying away from the tire markings. He let his light play ahead of him as he walked. He stopped stock still, though, when he lit upon a scattering of small branches and twigs. He backed up and lifted his light to the trees above. His mind returned him to when the ambulance had been parked there. It hadn't touched the trees, but the branches had made a perfect frame around it. A square one.

The evidence lined up: a tall square hole in the trees, wide-set and deep tracks from a heavy vehicle, and narrow tires. Paul's mouth dried. Flipping open his phone, he called the police station. "Officer Nedau, please. Tell him it's Paul Theriault and I have information on the murder."

Not even half a minute later, Todd answered.

Paul relayed what he'd discovered and added, "So, look for a bus or tandem axle RV with All-Terrain tires. It should have scratches from the trees, especially on the roof. Maybe even a few twigs."

"Hell, he could be parked out in the woods. Probably is, right now anyway." Neither man said the obvious, that the killer would need privacy to take care of April.

Paul said, "Sooner or later, though, the killer will have to surface. Those kinds of vehicles need regular maintenance. Plus, a vehicle that size limits which roads he can use. Only the logging roads will be big enough for it."

"Right. I'll call in everyone to get searching immediately. Your people, my people, state police, anyone and everyone."

"Don't forget the FBI. I'll go pick up Bob."

It was two in the morning and Paul shifted his Jeep into four-wheel drive on the fly. The road wasn't muddy, but it was spongy and the leaves were slick from recent rains. His tires didn't have a whole lot of traction. Beside him, Bob clung to the "Oh shit" bar and roll frame while he tipped and swayed with the vehicle. On the back seat lay two hunting rifles.

Paul's phone buzzed. "Therault," he answered.

There was a long pause and then, "I saw you last night."

Paul jerked his foot off the gas pedal. "Who is this?"

"I think you know." The voice was disdainful, arrogant and smooth.

Now, Paul slammed on his brakes and wrote the word *killer* with his finger in the grime on his windshield. As the jeep stopped, Bob jumped out and jogged into the headlights, tipping cell phone to see the numbers.

"Where's April," Paul asked the killer.

The phone made a series of rustling noises and a girl screamed. "Does that answer your question?"

"Don't you hurt her!"

"Oh, please. That's what I do. Don't waste your breath and my time."

Afraid the killer would hang up, Paul quickly said, "Ok...then." He took a deep breath, trying to divorce his emotions from this. It wasn't easy. He focused on Bob, watching him talk to someone, probably Todd on his cell. To the killer, he asked, "Why did you call me? Just to taunt me?"

"Taunt? No. I wanted to have a little chat."

"So chat. It's your dime."

"Good boy. As I said, I saw you last night. There in the woods. Why did you nod as you squatted by the side of the road? Do you have voices in your head? Are you a psychopath like they say I am?"

"You hear voices, is that it?"

"Noooo. I asked if *you* did. I'm actually perfectly sane. Probably more so than most."

That's to be debated, thought Paul. "No, I don't hear voices. I was just confirming some ideas I had." In the distance, Bob made motions for Paul to keep talking.

"And what ideas would those be?"

Paul didn't even hesitate. They needed as much information as possible and, even if the killer didn't answer his questions, he might glean something. "For example, are you driving a bus or an RV?"

There was a pause on the other end and Paul was afraid the killer would hang up. But, just when Paul thought to say something more, the killer spoke. "Well, you *are* a clever lad, aren't you?"

"I am, but so are you. How'd you get my cell phone number? You had to be pretty clever to do that." Down the road, Bob was shaking his head at him.

"Save your sucking up for your boss. You and I both know that any idiot can find your number on the internet."

"True." Paul motioned Bob over and wrote *wi-fi* on the windshield. While he was writing, he asked, "Why are you up here, in Maine of all places?"

"The woods are different here. Almost sacred in some places."

"Sacred, huh?"

"Yes," the killer paused and then said, "I've spend a lot of time in them. Like you."

Paul chose to ignore the goad. "So, there are more bodies here?"

“A few, yes.”

“Where?”

The voice took on a surly note. “Don’t cop me. Just remember, I was only five steps away from you last night. You could be dead.” The call ended.

Bob returned to the Jeep. “The triangulation didn’t work. But, Todd says that the wi-fi is a good lead, especially at this time of night. It can’t be too much longer now.” The strain bit deep into his face, making him look haggard.

“Bob,” Paul said gently, “April’s still alive. I heard her.”

Tears sprang from the older man’s eyes.

Todd’s voice was barely audible due to the background noise of the helicopter. “We found a couple of witnesses who work at Mary’s Truck Stop on I-95. They said that right around midnight a man came in to inquire about Wi-Fi access. He wasn’t too tall. He was lean to medium build with a brown crew cut and brown eyes. The girl said he was kinda good looking and really friendly. He bought a couple snack items, paid cash. Then, get this, he hands her a business card. It says *Castle Modeling Agency, Kirk Brown, Agent*. Offers to come to his RV for an online live interview with his main office in California.”

“Convenient,” Paul said.

“Very. She doesn’t go because she’s working. Anyway, he leaves but stays parked in the lot for about an hour. Finally he pulls away, taking the south-bound lane.”

“He’s running back to Mass.” Paul slowed the Jeep.

“That’s my guess. He’s still gotta stop and ....” Todd let his sentence die away.

“Take care of April,” Paul finished. His voice was tight, grim. He cast a sharp glance at Bob and quietly said, “If she’s still alive.”

Todd continued. “I’ve got everyone scrambling and I’ve got a couple choppers with search lights in the sky. I don’t imagine he’s on the highway still, though. He’s probably back in the woods.”

“That’s in our favor. He can’t travel fast or far on those logging roads. I’m headed that way.” Turning around, Paul hit the gas.

By the time they reached I-95, Bob’s face had taken a gray tint to it. They pulled on to the pavement and Paul pushed the gas pedal to the floor. He just hoped the wildlife stayed off the road since he was outrunning his headlights. No way would he be able to stop in time to avoid a collision.

They drove in silence, each man in his own thoughts of Hell. Twelve minutes down the highway, Paul’s phone buzzed.

Over the noise of the chopper, Todd said, “We have him.” He gave the location. “He won’t surrender to anyone but you. How far out are you?”

“About twenty-five minutes.”

“April’s alive, but hurry.” Todd hung up.

Eighteen minutes later, Paul parked the Jeep behind a group of five squad cars with strobing brights. Circles of light from helicopters floated around a brown, recent make RV. The windows of the ground vehicle were tinted and, even from the jeep, small branches were visible on the top. A thin scratch ran its length. Todd met Paul and Bob as they approached. “He won’t come close to any of the windows so we can immobilize him.”

Paul’s phone buzzed.

“That you?” Brown’s voice was still smooth and calculating. Still in control.

“It is.”

“You comin’ in?”

“As soon as you let April go.”

“When I see you comin’.”

“Here I come.” Paul took the handcuffs Todd offered and walked past the group of law officers, brushing away hands that reached to stop him. He kept the phone on, kept talking to Brown. “So, why surrender to me?”

“I like you. We have a *rapport* as the cops would say. I want to make you famous.”

Paul reached the mid-point and stopped. “I’m half-way. Send out April.”

“What if I changed my mind?”

“Then I’m not coming in and you take your chances with the FBI.” Paul turned as if to leave, but the door to the RV opened and he pivoted back to face the vehicle. April ran out the door, wearing a blanket over her semi-nude body. She ran straight to Paul and into his arms. He held her, rocking and stroking her hair while she sobbed.

Todd came up behind him and said, “Come with me, April. Your Uncle Bob is here and waiting for you.” He gently pulled her away and Paul refocused on the RV.

April lunged for Paul’s hand. “Paul, no! You can’t go in there. He’s crazy! He does horrible things.” Her face crumpled. “He’s crazy!”

Todd continued to pull her away. “He knows, April. He knows. But, this is the way it has to be done. It’s the only way.”

Paul lifted his chin and strode forward. “I’m coming,” he said into his phone. Then he turned it off and pocketed it. Brown letting himself get caught and then letting April go somehow didn’t fit with the power thing. Or did it? If Paul became famous, then Brown would also become famous. It felt a bit shaky to Paul, but that might be all there was to it.

Reaching the RV, he pulled open the door and stepped inside. There, in the center of the carpeted floor, on his knees, fingers laced behind his head was Brown. Lean to medium build. Brown crew cut. He didn’t look dangerous until Paul looked in his eyes. There he saw something entirely dark with no sense of guilt or remorse.

“All the way down, arms stretched straight out to the side.” Paul kicked assorted junk out of the way. Brown complied without a word and Paul stepped in, placing a knee in the middle of the killer’s back. He wanted to press down, pulling up on Brown’s head like the killer had done to his victims. Instead, he took the closest hand by the thumb and wrist, turned it behind Brown’s back and cuffed him. Then, he reached across for the other hand and did the same. Once done, Paul stepped back to the door and waved in the FBI. Never once did he take his eyes off the man in the center of the room. It was only when the FBI agent began reading the killer his rights that Paul looked around.

Along one end of the room was an elaborate setup of camera, computer and TV. To follow Brown’s claims, these would be for the live web interviews with his office in California. In reality, Paul was sure it was used for another kind of film.

Suddenly, he knew how much he’d been played. Brown had never tried to escape. He’d planted that card on purpose, knowing it would be found. He’d even casually mentioned Wi-Fi just to point to the truck stop. When had it started? How long had Brown been contriving to be caught by Paul? Since he dumped the girl’s body? Did it matter? Paul was tired and more than a little disgusted. He didn’t want to know what else was in that roaming chamber of horrors. Leaving the RV, he called Sara.

Her voice answered, small and tearful.

“Sara, we have April. She’ll be all right.”

Sobs were the only sound on the other end of the phone. After a moment, the line disconnected.

Bob was beckoning him to the ambulance, but Paul waved him off. He had unfinished business. Brown was being led out of the RV, smiling at the crowd like a celebrity. Paul gritted his teeth. If he’d had any doubts about Brown’s motives for his surrender, they ended now. As the FBI led Brown past, Paul said, “You told me you’d make me famous, but you were wrong. I’m going to request that my actions be reported as the result of various anonymous tips. The world will probably suspect it was you who made those tips in order to be caught. No one will know you’re not a coward who quit. Your power ends here.”

Brown bared his teeth and lunged toward Paul only to be brought up short by the FBI men. In a strange and guttural voice, he yelled, “You can’t do that. I’ll escape and come after you. You don’t know terror until I’ve gotten hold of you!” By that time, the small group had reached the squad car and any more dialogue from Brown was cut off, though Paul could still hear some kind of shouts from inside the car.

He turned to go, but found an FBI agent blocking his path. The man was wearing typical FBI garb, but also wore a ten-dollar smile. Beside him and watching him was Todd with his own eager ten-dollar smile. The agent said to Paul, “I think you pissed him off.”

“I suppose so.” Paul shrugged and gave a half grin. At least, if Brown escaped or got released somehow, he wouldn’t be going after any more innocent girls. Paul would be his main target.

The FBI agent watched him for half a minute, head cocked a bit to one side. Then he said, “We’ve been tracking this guy for almost three years. You were in the right place at the right time. Still, you could have quite a career in law enforcement. You might want to consider that.” Without a word to Todd, the agent strode to his waiting car.

Todd scowled at the agent’s back and then shot a dark look at Paul before storming away.

Paul watched him go. Their truce was over. Todd was his nemesis again. Some things never changed.

THE END