

## “Winter Wolves”

A short story by Kristin Kisska

### Helena

When I was a feisty little girl, my late grandmother loved to quote an old proverb, *If you are afraid of wolves, don't go into the forest.* I ignored her back then—I wanted to meet a wolf or at least observe one from afar.

It took me a lifetime to truly embrace her warning.

It's nearly dusk when I hear Jimmy's car roll down the driveway and park in the small area I keep for guests. I've been expecting him, but he's late. He has a reservation to stay as a guest for the next two nights. His wife, Lisa, booked the Thornton Room last week, but I'm worried that the incoming winter snowstorm might derail the plans.

On clear evenings, I'm gifted purple, pink, and orange sunsets over layers of mountain ranges, reaching as far as the eye can see from the porch overlooking the cliff. Not tonight. The fog hangs low and moody, masking all but the closest line of snow-tipped pine trees.

“Welcome to the Lost Cabin Inn, Mr. Weber.” I open the door as he trudges up the snow-covered steps with his luggage. Blusters of snowflakes billow in my foyer, adding a fleeting moment of glitter before disappearing in the warmth. A rare howl in the distance draws my notice. It's likely someone's dog, but wouldn't it be lovely if the wolves had returned to West Virginia? I certainly hope so. “How was your drive up?”

“Crazy roads. I passed the last hint of civilization more than ten miles ago.” Having walked right past the boot scraper mat next to the front door, he stomps inside without concern

that the snow he tracked in will melt on the hardwood floor alongside the duffel he dropped next to the staircase. You'd think a man in his mid-thirties would have learned a few manners by now.

"The Allegheny Mountains are as majestic as they are unforgiving, even on a good day. But in inclement weather, this winding road can be rather treacherous." As is the thousand-foot cliff my family's old house overlooks. Though stunning, if those jagged rocks could talk, they'd tell the unfortunate stories of the drivers we lose every few winters due to black ice and gravity. In my sixty-odd years of living in these parts, I've learned to respect all the forces of nature. "Perhaps you'll be treated to a nice view tomorrow. In any event, I'm glad you arrived safely."

He drapes the wet parka, hat, and gloves over the reception desk. I grab them before the water can feather the ink and warp the pages of my reservation ledger. My restraint, bred in me by generations of women serving in the hospitality industry, keeps me from reprimanding him.

"I thought my wife was joking when she told me about this place." While he turns a full circle to inspect the common areas of my bed and breakfast, I drop rags behind him to soak up the puddles by the front door. From his huff, I surmise it doesn't meet his expectations. He pulls out his cell phone, jabs at it a few times, then pockets it again, his irritation growing by the minute. "Dammit. I can't get any reception here. What's the Wi-Fi code?"

"Unfortunately, we are located in the National Radio Quiet Zone because of the Green Bank telescope observatory." As I explain this, his eyes widen, and his jaw drops. "Radio frequencies are restricted, as are cell phone service, Wi-Fi, and microwave ovens."

"Are you kidding?" He steps towards me, towering over me with his complexion turning ruddy. "How do you people live out here in the boondocks?"

"Not to worry." I put my hands up as I step backward. He's not the first guest to object, but most adjust quickly to the relaxing benefits of going screen-free for a long weekend. "I have

a complimentary landline telephone you can use for any phone calls you need to make. Plus, we have cable access for our television—”

“Why would I want to be stranded in the middle of nowhere, stuck in the 1990s, with nothing to do?” His voice grows louder and sharper with each passing minute.

Oh dear. With this storm brewing—both inside and outside—I hope Colleen will arrive soon. I’d rather not be alone with this man any longer than necessary. Instead of responding to his insults, I sit at my desk to check him in.

Behind his shoulders, I spy the snow piling outside the windows. My porch lights illuminate the big flakes falling faster, thicker against the darkening sky, giving me the sensation of being encapsulated in a shaken snow globe. I’ll need to shovel the front steps and walkway tomorrow morning, a chore I’ve managed over a decade of winters since inheriting the inn from my grandmother. I once considered selling it, but the sunrise vista is so breathtaking, it’s kept me here year after year. I suppose beauty truly is in the eye of the beholder because this charming old house on the cliff is my happy place.

“My wife, Lisa, should’ve been here by now.” His gruff voice pulls me from my Zen. Just as he says this, my telephone rings.

“Lost Cabin Inn. How may I help you?” The voice on the other end of the phone would usually cheer me. Not tonight. I clear my throat as I hand him the receiver. “It’s Mrs. Weber.”

### **Jimmy**

“Hello?” Lisa had better have a good excuse for why I’m here and she’s not. This whole weekend getaway was all her idea.

“Oh, good. You made it!” Her voice somehow irritates me even more. I glance around but don’t see the gray-haired hippie woman who checked me into this shack.

“Yes.” My voice is steady but icy as I squeeze the receiver. “Where are you?”

“Look, Jimmy, I’m really sorry, but I’m stuck behind a car crash at the bottom of the mountain. The storm hit faster than expected, so the police closed the pass to traffic. I won’t be able to make it up tonight. Don’t worry, though. I’ll stay at a hotel in a nearby town and drive up first thing in the morning after they’ve plowed and sanded the road.” Her voice fades, and the phone line crackles, but it could just be my pulse accelerating. How dare she sound so relieved?

“How is the bed and breakfast? I wish I were with you.”

“Is that so?” My pulse throbs in my ears. She insisted we drive separately and meet at the B&B because she had a doctor’s appointment that she couldn’t reschedule. The elements of Lisa’s plan collide in my brain. “The way I see it, if you truly wanted to, you’d already be here. Are you happy now?”

With a satisfying bang, I slam the receiver onto the phone’s cradle, disconnecting Lisa’s call. And just like that, the innkeeper materializes from around the corner, serene as all get out.

“When may we expect Mrs. Weber to arrive?”

“The roads are closed.” I clip my words, not bothering to hide my ire. If this inn weren’t in the middle of nowhere, I wouldn’t be stranded here without my wife. “She’ll be here tomorrow morning.”

“Well, better safe than sorry, right?” Her laugh is throaty, accepting. But I can’t share in her lighthearted mirth. She motions to a common lounge area in the adjoining room full of couches, easy chairs, and shelves stuffed with books and knick-knacks. “Make yourself at home. Relax by the fire and warm up. If you can wait a few minutes, I’ll show you to your room.”

After wandering into the sitting room, I scroll through the TV channels using the buttons on the side. No remote control. Again, with the Quiet Zone. I can only find emergency news reports about the weather, so I switch it off. A game table sits next to the fireplace, but who wants to play checkers by themselves? No way will I invite the innkeeper to join me. Then I scan the bookshelves, but everything looks old, leathery, and musty. Classics. Certainly nothing from this decade, let alone this century.

This place is backward.

My cell phone has zero bars. Again, I try to activate the app that shows Lisa's location, but it's still buffering. I'm getting the strong suspicion this separation isn't a coincidence. What are the odds I'd find out there was no car accident and the pass is open? I'm half-tempted to check out and drive down to where I can get cell service to track her.

As I reach for my suitcase to do just that, the door jangles, and a woman walks in. Correction, a stunning young woman. Snowflakes caught in her wavy blond hair frame her face and highlight her wide brown eyes. She's bundled in a puffy winter parka, but all points lead to a petite and trim frame—just my type. I press pause on my plans to exit.

“I’m sorry to intrude, but I saw your sign.” She approaches the innkeeper. Her voice is breathy with notes of frustration. “You wouldn’t happen to have any vacancies tonight, would you?”

After the old witch replies that she’s in luck since the other guest had canceled their reservation, the pretty stranger unwraps her scarf and sheds her outerwear to confirm my initial assessment.

“Oh, thank you. I’ll take the room. I’m heading to the ski resort, but I’m not good at driving in the snow, let alone in the dark. The temperature plummeted, and the roads are sheer ice.” She turns to both of us. “I’m Colleen. Colleen Shelman.”

“Welcome, Ms. Shelman.” The innkeeper writes her name in the ancient logbook. “I’m Helena. This gentleman is Jimmy Weber. Let’s get you both settled in. I think it’ll be a long night before this snowstorm passes.”

No wedding ring on her finger. Yes, I think maybe I’ll hang around a little longer. I slip off my wedding ring in case that’s a deal breaker for her. After all, Lisa could’ve been here to run interference. This is her fault.

After we stow the luggage in our separate bedrooms, we meet back downstairs in the sitting room. The innkeeper has stoked a fire in the fireplace with the log crackling from the flames. “It looks like it’ll just be the three of us tonight. May I offer either of you something to drink? Coffee or tea, perhaps?”

Eyeballing the glass bottles of amber liquid in the corner, I wink at Colleen. “Do you have anything stronger?”

The old bat stares at me for a long minute. I’m getting judgy school teacher vibes from her. The sooner the innkeeper stops chaperoning us, the better.

“Ah, yes. Of course. Whiskey? I’m afraid that’s all the liquor I have on hand tonight. When the roads clear tomorrow, I can drive to the store and—”

“Whiskey, neat.” My favorite. And some attractive company. Tonight may not be a total failure after all.

“Certainly. And anything for you, Colleen?”

The young woman holds my gaze before turning her attention to the innkeeper. “Wine, please.”

“I think I have a bottle or two in my cupboard.” She backs away. “Why don’t you both settle in and make yourselves at home.”

Colleen wanders the perimeter of the room, scanning the bookshelf’s collection. I can’t let her get lost reading some book by a cozy fire. So, I approach the game table and inspect the colorful cardboard boxes stacked beside it. “Are you up for a little competition?”

She tilts her head, running her fingers through her long hair. “I’m game if you are.”

### **Colleen**

I wasn’t lying when I said the roads were treacherous, nor that I was unfamiliar with driving in the snow. But I lied about heading to the ski resort, some ten miles beyond. Jimmy doesn’t need to know that.

When Helena returns with our drinks, she apologizes for only having a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon. Not a problem for me. I won’t be partying.

“Cheers.” I clink glasses with Jimmy as we sit down at the table.

He shoots his liquor back in one gulp and hands the tumbler to Helena for a refill. After sinking into his chair, he smiles at me as if he thinks he’ll get lucky. He won’t. But he doesn’t need to know that either.

Before following his lead, I inspect the other games on the shelf and slip out a box, holding it up and shaking it like a maraca. “Instead of a game...”

“A jigsaw puzzle? No way. Checkers are better—”

Helena returns with another whiskey, a full glass of amber liquid. I shudder to think of how potent it might be. This time, he sips it.

“Please?” Dropping my voice to a sultry pout, I let my hair cascade over my shoulder. Flirting with him is painful. I sip my wine while inching away. “It’ll be fun. I promise.”

“Okay...” He leans toward me, taking the bait. “Why not?”

Rather than respond, I reward him with an approving smile. I keep my eyes trained on him before unloading the puzzle box on the table. We begin by turning each piece over one by one so that the picture side is up. He scoots his chair closer to me every few minutes and brushes his hand against mine as we work the puzzle.

Just as we find the fourth corner, the room goes dark, except for a hint of light from the glowing embers in the fireplace. Even the porch lights are off. Jimmy’s sweaty hand covers mine, but I slip it from his grasp, grateful he can’t see me cringe.

“Oh dear, we must’ve lost power.” Helena rushes in with a flashlight, then lights candles around the room to provide soft ambient lighting. “I’ll check the fuse box. Mr. Weber, might I trouble you to add that last log to the fire, so it doesn’t get too cold inside?”

Grumbling, Jimmy leaves my side to tend to the fire and get a solid flame growing. I move to each window and draw the heavy brocade drapes to insulate the room from wintry drafts. The sitting room grows cozy and warm, with soft, rosy lights from the fire bouncing around the walls, casting shadows here, there, and everywhere. The sofa and overstuffed chairs, meant for guests to lounge and enjoy their stay, remain empty yet inviting. If I didn’t know better, I’d describe it as romantic.

Helena returns, confirming that the storm knocked out the electricity. “I tried to report the outage to the power company, but even the landline is dead.”

“No phone or electricity? This stormy night is certainly turning into an adventure.” My comment is directed towards Jimmy, but he’s relatively quiet. At least he’s returned to searching for the edge pieces of the puzzle’s frame.

“Why don’t I go rustle up something to eat?” Helena says. “You must be starving. My kitchen has a gas stove that works without power.”

“No need, Helena. Why don’t you help us put together this puzzle?”

Jimmy gapes at me as if I’ve grown two heads. “But I’m hungry.”

“Thank you, Colleen. That’s very thoughtful. I love a good puzzle.” Helena’s face brightens, as if she’s not typically included in guests’ activities. Turning to address Jimmy, she nods. “Give me a minute or two while I put the kettle on for tea. I have some stew I can warm up, as well.”

While we are alone, I clink glasses with him again. “So, tell me about yourself, Jimmy.”

“Sure. What would you like to know?”

I wait until he takes another sip, and then, with a voice as smooth as it is spicy, I drop. “How did you meet your wife?”

“Wife?” He swallows hard, sputtering and coughing. “How did you know?”

My shoulders relax, and I try to hide my smile of triumph. While motioning toward his left hand, I wink. “The indentation on the skin of your left ring finger is still fresh. Wedding band?”

Instead of replying, he gulps more whiskey, then busies himself with sorting the puzzle parts by color: royal blue, black, white, and cream. A challenge, given the poor lighting afforded by the candles and fireplace.

I let him stew in his thoughts, grateful for the small consolation that, for all that poor Lisa endured these past seven years, she won't need to suffer the insult of yet another mistress.

Helena returns with her cup and saucer, bobbing the tea bag as steam rises.

Any gentleman would've stood and helped a lady sit down, but he doesn't flinch. From his hunched shoulders and focus on the puzzle, I gather he's still processing how his plans for tonight took a wrong turn. Or perhaps his whiskeys have begun to catch up with him. Either way, his manners are remiss, not that I'd have expected better.

Helena reaches for the box to study the puzzle's image. "Ahhh, *The Call of the Wild*. I haven't read that novel in decades. Maybe I'll resurrect my copy this winter and give Buck's saga another whirl."

"Good idea." I catch her gaze across the game table while carefully choosing my words. "Whenever I read it, I've always found new ways to admire how a working dog could right injustices and ultimately revert to his instinctive place in the wild, joining a wolf pack."

"Indeed. But I wonder if Jack London also embedded a deeper meaning in the story." Helena's and my conversation seems to eclipse Jimmy's notice. I doubt he's read it. Bits of our puzzle are starting to resemble the completed image. "Man-made laws may serve us well, but sometimes they seem lacking as a substitute for the greater, fundamental balance of justice in nature."

"Interesting thought." My heartbeat jackhammers in my chest, so I struggle to keep my hand and voice steady—as steady as Helena's as she lifts the translucent bone China teacup to her lips. "Do you mean that our legal system doesn't work?"

"Oh, I think most of the time it does. But it certainly isn't perfect. We've all heard of the occasional poor soul who was imprisoned unjustly. And the criminal who went free on some

technicality or other, only to strike again.” Helena leaves our table to poke the fire, reigniting the room’s flames and light. “Mr. Weber, you’ve been awfully quiet. Are you quite comfortable?”

Jimmy straightens so abruptly that I flinch. “All this talk about justice makes me think. The three of us are stuck here. No phones. No electricity. No one is around for miles in any direction. And the mountain pass is closed to traffic because of the snowstorm.”

My neck prickles. Helena’s eyes widen as she steps to the side of the fireplace. Her hand moves behind her back, and I catch a glint of metal.

Still not making eye contact with either of us, he reaches for another puzzle piece. His voice grows stronger. “I could kill both of you right here, right now, and no one would know. They might not even discover your bodies until the spring thaw.”

He grows quiet. Still.

Five heartbeats lapse.

Only pops and crackles from the flames pierce the heavy silence. Helena stands next to the fireplace, still as a statue, her eyes wide.

Ten heartbeats.

Holding my breath, I inspect Jimmy’s face. No furrowed brow. No wild eyes. No clenched jaw. He’s calm. Eerily calm. I inch back, shifting my feet under the table in case I need to lurch away from his reach or shield Helena.

Finally, after an endless pause, his lips quirk, and his eyes squint, showing wrinkles feathering into his temple.

“Lighten up, girls. It was just a joke.” His hollow laugh does little to calm my nerves. He tosses back the remainder of his whiskey. Then, leaning on his elbow, he hands the glass to Helena. “Make it a double.”

### **Helena**

Joke or not, Jimmy's observation dropped among us with the subtlety of an ambush.

Before accepting his empty tumbler, I rehang the fire poker. Thank God I didn't have to use it.

But I'm reassured that the weapon is available and ready should we need it to defend ourselves.

I refresh his cocktail. As with the last drink I served him, I've added a little something extra to his whiskey neat—a pinch of powder from my crushed prescription sleeping pills. In my day, we called this sort of spiked drink a Mickey Finn. Young ladies have always been cautioned to be vigilant about having their drinks tampered with, lest they risk falling prey to certain predators of the unscrupulous male variety. But men? Not so much.

I know because I was a victim. Once. I learned the hard way that our society is structured to protect men first, then children, then women. We are dead last.

Do I feel a little guilty about drugging Jimmy? Perhaps. But after his thinly veiled threat, I'm emboldened. Justified. Any lingering trace of guilt has vanished.

If he's noticed a bitter aftertaste, he hasn't complained. After this drink, I suppose he'll have consumed about two pills. I've already noticed some yawns. A few extra blinks. An occasional wobble of his head. Right now, he's struggling to rotate puzzle pieces to attempt to insert each tab in the blanks to see what fits. His fine motor skills are fading.

He could still try to attack us, but I daresay the sleeping pills have leveled the playing field.

I wish we could've retroactively given Lisa that advantage, especially since he'd drugged her on more than one occasion.

Despite the drawn curtains, the windows around the sitting room are drafty. Even with the healthy fire, a chill has settled in the room. Candlelight flickers against Jimmy's face as I bring a throw blanket for each of us. Gusting winds howl outside, and I can imagine all the snow accumulating with no end in sight. It's probably softened the cliff's edge, right beyond the tree line. I'm certain the weather reporters have escalated the storm's label to blizzard.

Lifting the puzzle's box, I admire the old-fashioned cover of *The Call of the Wild*, which is materializing on the game table. After scanning the loose pieces in the cream pile, I snap one into place in the center of a circle, completing the shape of a full moon surrounding the silhouette of a howling wolf.

"Well done, Helena." Colleen lifts the wine glass to her lips, but since it's still full, I suspect her sipping is performative. "Wolves. Such a beautiful animal. Are they native?"

"Native? Oh, yes. The West Virginia mountains used to be home to the Eastern Gray wolves, but it's been over a century since we've had any wild packs hunting in these parts." I can't mask the bitterness in my sigh. "Humans drove them out."

The fact falls like glass onto a tiled floor, scattering shards of shame in all directions. In their evergreen quest for dominance, humans have driven more than one population species to extinction without considering the consequences.

"I don't like wolves," Jimmy speaks up. "At least dogs can be trained. You know, man's best friend and all. The ones that won't heel are a threat and a waste of resources. That's why I hunt, though most is for sport. Kill or be killed."

My throat squeaks. I crush my lips together, but my tongue burns with the lashing he deserves. In my soul, my distaste for this man grows exponentially. It takes me several moments of deep breathing to diffuse my temper. I don't dare meet young Colleen's gaze lest my

fragmented control falters. I must stay the course. We share a mission. And we have not yet completed it.

“Speaking of wolf packs...” Colleen picks up the orphaned conversation thread, and I must say, I’m impressed that she can maintain such a casual tone. “Did you know that female wolves can be ruthlessly protective of the vulnerable members of their pack, even against other wolves?”

Her distraction is a most welcome salve to my wounded sensibilities. I do my bit to help keep our conversation flowing. “So, it’s not just mama bears who get a reputation for brutal defensiveness?”

“Quite similar, though in canine form.” Her shoulders straighten as she stretches her back. I can relate. Hunching over the puzzle for so long can be uncomfortable, at least for my creaky old bones. “But she-wolves cast their net wider. They protect not only their young but also their sisters. Their pack’s injured. The weakest. Even if it’s against another member of their pack.”

“Isn’t that what young women call *girl code* these days?”

“Ahhh, good point.” Her laugh is infectious, if not genuine. “We humans did follow suit, didn’t we? Nature didn’t give us fangs, but women have a few wolf tricks up our sleeves.”

Jimmy shifts in his chair, no longer commenting on killing animals for the crime of existing as nature created them. He stretches his collar, though I doubt it’s from being overwarm, given the chill that’s overtaken the room.

Returning to the task at hand, I glance at the piles of remaining loose puzzle pieces. Some appear to have extra design elements that don’t match the image on the box.

“Oh!” After combining two such pieces, I show them a word fragment. “Do you think this puzzle has a secret message?”

“Secret message?” Colleen perks up. “Oh, how fun. I just love a good mystery, don’t you?”

“Indeed.” I catch her wink, but Jimmy seems more focused on drinking his whiskey than the puzzle or the company he’s keeping. “Let’s see what it says.”

Jimmy wobbles, then grunts. I expect it’s been some minutes since he’s been able to add anything new to the puzzle. He shoves his chair away from the table while yawning. “I’m feeling tired. I think I’ll go upstairs and turn in for the night.”

No, no. I can’t let him leave.

“I’m afraid that’s a bad idea. The bedrooms upstairs must be frigid, but I’m sure the power company will restore electricity soon. Until then, you mustn’t leave the warmth of this room, Mr. Weber.” Fortunately, he doesn’t challenge my instructions and settles back into his seat. “Besides, our stew should be ready soon. I hope you have a good appetite.”

### **Jimmy**

My brain is feeling a bit hazy—the buzz from this whiskey is the only thing making this bizarre night somewhat tolerable.

The old hippie lady is odd enough. I mean, who’d want to live voluntarily on a mountain alone?

But the younger one? She might be pretty, but she should keep her bizarre factoids to herself. Is she trying to impress me with her weird wolf obsession? Female wolves, to be exact. Who cares? I tuned her out ages ago. Don't get me wrong, I'd sleep with her if she'd shut up long enough. She's the only reason I'm still sitting in the sitting room, not upstairs.

Some food might compensate for listening to their drivel. I take another gulp of my whiskey as my stomach grumbles. A couple of heaping bowls of stew would help. I had to teach Lisa how to have my meals ready on time. It took a few lessons, but she fell in line.

Once, it almost got me into trouble with the law. Thankfully, my high school football teammate happened to be the responding officer. He looked the other way and buried the inquiry so deep in paperwork he vowed it'd never see the light of day. To thank him, I dropped off a case of beer on his back porch. Years later, I still buy him a drink anytime I see him at a bar. He magically makes all my little infractions disappear.

Plus, I've got this creepy feeling these two women already knew each other. I thought my joke about killing them would buy me a break from their chatter, but no such luck. Every new puzzle piece they snap into place seems to be a cause to celebrate each other. It's a child's activity. And what's up with all the glances between them? Their gazes jolt in my direction whenever I shift in my seat or yawn. Why do I get the sense that they are judging me?

Not that I care.

What a waste of a night. I must be more worn out than I realized. I can't believe I sat through even half of this stupid puzzle. Then again, I am enjoying the old bat's top-shelf whiskey. One thing's for sure, I'll never see them again after tonight. At daybreak, I'll leave before anyone else is awake. I don't care if I need to turn my car into a snowmobile to make it

down this mountain. I'm not waiting for Lisa to show up here so that we can spend another night trapped in this estrogen-infested, isolated B&B.

What was Lisa thinking when she booked this place last week? For a hot minute, I was proud that she wanted to treat me to a weekend getaway. I deserved it. After nagging me for years, I finally agreed to let her start working last month.

A couple of times a week, I drive by her workplace during my lunch break to confirm her car is there. And I check her phone every night to monitor her texts and emails in case she starts a relationship with one of her disgusting coworkers.

Not on my watch.

I've invested too much training in our marriage to let it unravel. The extra money is nice, though. Plus, Lisa is finally pulling some weight in our finances. I've been eyeballing a new ATV. Her contribution should cover the vehicle loan. Dang, maybe I should've given my approval long ago.

When Lisa handed me her first paycheck, she wanted to celebrate. We got dinner at my favorite sports bar. Last week, one of her new librarian colleagues had won a free stay at this inn and couldn't use it, so she offered it to Lisa. My idea for a vacation is to go hunting with my buddies. She thought this would be a good compromise—nature for me and a little relaxation for her. She asked, so sugary and sweet, that I caved. Who am I to turn down a free vacation?

The plan went downhill from there. I was packed and ready to go when Lisa called me from a doctor's appointment I didn't know about. So, I had to drive here myself. Now she's somewhere at the bottom of this mountain doing God-knows-what with God-knows-who, and I'm stranded here in the dark with two idiot women who won't let me mind my own business.

In the middle of a freaking blizzard.

Didn't Lisa check the weather forecast? No wonder her colleague ditched the reservation. She's going to pay for this one. Big time. I need to remind her of her place.

"Mr. Weber?" The old lady leans towards me, offering a puzzle piece. I belatedly realize I've been staring into my empty glass. "It's the last one. Would you do us the honor of finishing our puzzle?"

Jeez, this is the best buzz I've ever had. My limbs feel deliciously languid, and I can hardly keep my eyes open. I rub them and stretch my arms before doing as she requested. Concentrating on fitting the part into the hole takes all my focus. My fingers seem to have turned into all thumbs, but I finally snap it into place. The two women clap when it's complete.

It's a book cover. Big freaking deal.

"What do you think of the secret message?" The younger woman—Colleen? Caroline?—asks with a sultry voice full of promise. Or maybe it's that everything seems to be getting a little fuzzy. Blurry. Motions are happening faster than I can process.

The fire has died down to just glowing embers. The candles are low. The lighting in the room has almost grown dark, and it's hard to see much of anything.

I lean over the game table to examine the words she's pointing at in the now-finished puzzle. The letters float in and out of focus and double up, so I can't quite make out the whole thing. I grunt while trying to read it and have trouble grasping the meaning. Something about the forest.

Then, for one heart-jolting moment, I can read the entire message. I straighten in my chair. A surge of new understanding floods me. The call. Interesting. Something in the secret message resonates deep within me.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I concentrate as best as my whiskey buzz will allow, but all the sounds seem to blend together. If I listen really closely, I can make out something. Something sing-songy. Soulful. What is it? Maybe it's the wind. Or could it be a howl?

It's silly. All this talk of wolves has got my brain hyper-focused on it. The sound might just be the wind from the storm, but maybe...

Scooting my chair from the table, I try to stand, but my legs feel heavy.

The old bat's face is inches from mine as I push myself up. She seems to shift like I'm looking at her in the reflection of one of those silly, warped mirrors at the funhouse. She's talking, but her words aren't registering. "What?"

"Firewood, Mr. Weber. Our fire has died down, and the room is getting colder." She's holding me steady by the arms. I must be swaying. "Would you please fetch us another log from outside?"

I look from her to the glowing embers, then back to her face again. The whites of her eyes have rounded to bullseye targets. "Uh, sure."

"Here, let me help you." This time, the younger woman is by my side. What was her name?

With my arms slung over the shoulders of the two women, I'm upright and trudging through the kitchen to the porch. I don't know if it took us ten seconds or ten minutes, but when the old lady unbolts the door and opens it, the blast of frigid air hits me in the face, jolting me awake. The sound outside is crystal clear.

Definitely a howl.

Definitely canine.

Maybe all the nonsense about wolves tonight was legitimate after all. I stumble forward, out into the swirling snow and darkness. Wait. Why am I outside? Oh, right. Firewood.

The old lady points to the stack of chopped wood, covered in snow, blocking access to the trees beyond.

I shake her grip from my arms. I'm strong. I'm a man. Plodding through fresh snow, I veer away from the woodpile, instead heading to the tree line. If that sound is coming from a wolf, I want to see it. Who's going to stop me? The women can wait for the log. I can do whatever the hell I want. Lisa knows that.

"Be careful, Mr. Weber. It's slippery. Watch out for the cliff!"

I wish the old lady would shut up.

Despite not wearing a coat, hat, or gloves, I find the shock of the cold invigorating. A surge of energy zings through my heavy body as I lean into the gusting wind to move forward. I can barely distinguish sounds—canine or human—so I trudge closer to the trees.

Every cell in my body needs to hear the howl again. Kill or be killed. Eat or be eaten. With each step I take, new strength fills my numbed limbs. There's a bit of a slope, so I grab the closest tree trunk to steady my body. The old bat was right. The ground is slippery, though I won't give her the satisfaction of proving her warning correct. Sliding downward from one tree to the next, I hug each while figuring out the next best option.

Then, I hear it. Crystal clear. The call.

The wolf.

I lean towards the sound to embrace it, letting go of the snow-covered tree trunk. But my foothold gives way, and I slip.

Then I'm weightless, falling down, down.

Down.

### **Colleen**

As the brother-in-law I had never met before tonight stumbles towards the tree line, I grab Aunt Helena's hand and squeeze. He's barely a dozen yards away, but the snow distorts the visibility in the pitch darkness, making it hard to see him.

She's warning him about the cliff, though he probably can't hear it with all the wind. Her caution is generous, which is more than I'd do for that abusive lowlife.

We only need to wait for gravity and the elements to do their job. Please, let the universe cooperate. Justice is so hard to come by.

All that matters is that right now, Lisa is harbored safely at the bottom of the mountain, awaiting an update from us.

With my arm wrapped around Aunt Helena's shoulders, I guide her back inside the house and shut the door from the cold. We wait by the picture window, watching and praying that our rescue operation worked.

It's taken months of planning to choreograph this moment—more if you count all the years I spent searching for my little sister after she dropped out of college and disappeared with her secret boyfriend. A few months later, my parents received a postcard. She said she'd be road-tripping the country and not to worry. She was in love with Jimmy Weber. It had no forwarding address, but the photo was of some bizarre junkyard place called Music Box Village in New Orleans. That was seven years ago. The last time my parents ever heard from her.

With no follow-up contact from Lisa, I didn't find out until much later that they'd eloped. They'd moved to a remote rural area of Virginia and kept to themselves. Over time, he'd

shortened her proverbial leash until she depended entirely on him. It was almost as if he'd drugged her to keep her captive.

He ensured she had no job, so she'd be financially dependent on him. Trapped. He controlled their bank account. She didn't have any social media accounts. He forced her to sever ties with her family and friends back home, then he bullied her from starting any new friendships in her community.

Finding and intercepting Lisa two years ago was a boon. I'd encountered a teen working in a national grocery store chain with a shop in my Chicago neighborhood. The promise of a free specialty coffee drink was all it took to convince him to scan for Lisa's name in their targeted marketing database. Quite a few customers named Lisa Weber populated the printout, but only one said James and Lisa Weber.

Aunt Helena, recently widowed, had been helping me over the years. We were both shocked to learn that Lisa had been living within a few hours of the Lost Cabin Inn all this time. After flying to Virginia, I finally made contact. Lisa had no idea our parents had passed away, both heartbroken at having lost touch with one of their two daughters.

At first, Lisa was reluctant. Still, we planned meetups at her grocery store every few weeks, so if Jimmy watched her location, she had an alibi. We started crafting a rescue operation with baby steps. We armed her with egocentric reasons to campaign, convincing Jimmy that she should get a job. I scoured the local listings to find her a part-time job at a nearby library. He relented, mostly because he'd warmed to the idea of her contributing supplemental income to his budget.

Aunt Helena's inn is located cliffside in the National Radio Quiet Zone surrounding the Green Bank Observatory's telescopes, providing the ideal conditions for us to free her from

Jimmy's grip and to keep him from monitoring her. All we needed to do was wait for an incoming severe winter storm.

Twenty minutes have passed, and Jimmy still hasn't returned with firewood. We just have to wait and see if *Operation Rescue Liza* worked.

Please let it work because we may never get a second chance if we fail.

### **Helena**

As dawn breaks, the sky over the eastern bank of the Allegheny Mountains becomes a glorious watercolor of pastel oranges, purples, and yellows. Each new sunrise ray from the horizon highlights the ice encasing the barren branches of the snow-topped trees below—a winter wonderland.

Sweet, protective Colleen sits beside me, her head resting on my shoulder, nursing a steaming cup of coffee. Neither of us breathes a word lest we tempt fate.

Last night, we waited for Jimmy to return to the house after he walked towards the trees. He never did. His car remained parked next to the inn, buried beneath a thick layer of snow. His foot tracks were also covered and erased over time.

The brunt of the winter storm passed sometime during the deepest, darkest hours of the night, leaving behind a peaceful silence in its wake. After a time, we knew. He was somewhere on the deep, raw side of the cliff. The storm would finish the unsavory job if the fall didn't take him first.

My niece is finally safe from that monster.

As was our plan, I'd notified Lisa once Jimmy had arrived to check in, which gave her a few minutes to call the inn and convince him that she was stuck behind a car accident and wouldn't be able to arrive last night. The mountain pass was certainly treacherous—that wasn't a lie. But the storm didn't knock out the electricity. I'd flipped the fuse switches and unplugged our landline's cord. And the rest of our plan unfolded organically, even the puzzle. I believe the universe sends helpful signs to those who need them most.

As the family's matriarch, I'd do anything for my nieces. However, I never anticipated that premeditated murder would be in my destiny. Should the authorities question Jimmy's death, I'll take the fall and accept any consequences. I don't deny my guilt. After all, I spiked his drink with my prescription sleep medication. And I feigned the power outage. I'll even attest that I sent him outside on an errand for firewood. I've lived a long life and will go to my grave, satisfied that Lisa is finally safe. I hope my late sister would be proud.

Beside me, I hear Colleen sniffle.

“Shhh...the worst is over now.” After shifting Colleen against the side of the sofa, I cover her with another throw blanket and comb my fingers through her thick hair. A silent tear rolls down her cheek. She did right by her sister, my niece. But the finality of the act is a lot to process.

I wander over to the game table, taking one last look at the completed puzzle with its secret message. It had worked like a charm, but no need to leave behind more evidence of our dark mission. Piece by piece, I disassemble the puzzle, feeding it to the fireplace and giving new fuel for the flames. The image will live on only in our memories.

Soon, I must notify the local authorities and report my missing guest. Lisa will arrive later this morning, as planned—her alibi is solid. By then, the mountain search and rescue efforts

will be well underway at the base of the cliff. If they don't find his body by dusk, the local volunteers will downgrade the mission to one of recovery.

We all know the drill.

These mountains can be ruthless to those who don't respect their quiet power. Not unlike the dwindling East Gray Wolves when they were siphoned off a century ago. One must always protect one's own. We three women are the last remaining members of the family line.

While relishing the calm interlude between last night's storm and this morning's impending activity, I notice that Colleen has nodded off. She'll need the rest. I step outside again, watching as my breath crystallizes in the crisp morning air.

Miles of majestic mountains stretch before me in all their wintry glory. As my grandmother always claimed, the view from the Lost Cabin Inn's porch is breathtaking. Nature has a way of healing itself. From fire or drought. From death or disease. In the distance, an extended howl echoes along the mountain line.

Could it be a dog?

Or perhaps it's a lone wolf who had wandered back into the nearby wilderness, reclaiming her natural habitat before man had driven the packs out?

One can only hope.

*If you are afraid of wolves, don't go into the forest.* Oh, grandmother. It was never the wolf I feared.

THE END