

THE GUARDIAN

MATTHEW IDEN

A

MARTY SINGER

SHORT STORY

The Guardian

A Marty Singer Short Story

Matthew Iden

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*For Smoker, Brandy, Max, Sam, Maggie, Sunni, Gus, Elrod, and
all dogs—past, present, and future.*

"Oh, for crying out loud," I said. "Are you kidding me?"

I intentionally passed on the more colorful language I could've used as I surveyed the carnage in front of me. At my adopted daughter Amanda's request, I'd been working on evolving into a more tolerant, less vulgar Marty. It had been difficult. Thirty years as a DC Homicide cop had given me one he-...ah, heck of a vocabulary.

And it was begging to be used right now.

It was six-thirty on an early February night. I was standing at the fence that lined the far edge of my backyard and looking down the alley that ran behind all the houses on the block. Twilight was settling in, painting everything in rich purples and deep-hued blues, but I didn't have the patience to admire the Monet-like palette around me at the moment, since I wasn't looking at artfully rendered haystacks or enticing French landscapes.

I was gazing over the contents of my garbage can, strewn across the ground and down the length of Trash Alley.

It was the night before garbage day and, as I'd done for nearly three decades, I'd put my can out along the fence like everyone else. It wasn't something I always bothered to do. Living alone and with an appetite somewhat stunted by a battle with colorectal cancer meant I normally saved my trash for two or three weeks before it was necessary to haul it out. And, since I was pretty good about recycling and I composted, too—well, I mean, I chucked carrot peels under the hedges—I just didn't have much to show on Thursday morning when the truck came around.

Over time, the result was a stunningly fragrant collection of debris. I felt bad for the garbage guys, but I doubt I had the worst garbage they'd ever sniffed. If they'd been offended, I'm sure they would've given me a subtle hint, like accidentally dumping half of the contents on the ground outside my fence. Or not picking my garbage up in the first place.

No, that wasn't the problem. My problem had a name. A name that could put me in the blackest of moods, a name that could make me use strong language, even.

Barkley.

The 120-pound yellow lab was the pet of my across-the-way neighbors, the Cohens. They'd had Barkley for ages. Or, that's what it seemed like—I barely knew them, but the dog had always seemed to be around.

They were nice enough, I guess, but young-ish families of four weren't exactly my demographic. They had normal jobs like accounting and middle management and went to soccer practice on weekends. I'd chased guys who used lead pipes to settle their differences.

I saw the Cohens occasionally while I did yard work or when Rob Cohen tried picking up running again. We bumped into each other at block parties and neighborhood barbeques that I felt obliged to go to, but small talk between people like the Cohens and people like me was destined to fall flat.

"Hey, that looks like a blood spatter analysis I had to do once" was just not the kind of repartee one was supposed to engage in at summer social functions, yet that's exactly what I said at a picnic last year when Rob had dropped his ketchup-laden hotdog on the sidewalk outside the Bruster's home.

Everyone within earshot had laughed it off, but I caught Marge Cohen deftly steering her kids, Kip and Mikaela, away from me when it looked like we four might be trapped together in a corner of the yard between the horseshoe pit and the pool. I tried to atone for the faux pas at other events, but found it difficult to break through their reserve.

Barkley, now, was a different matter.

The galumphing mini-pony, while generally an indoor dog, was let out every evening at five-thirty to do his duty and probably to get him away from the dining room table long enough for it to be cleared. He would pee and poop, sniff a little, and each Wednesday night—without fail and despite my politely-worded requests—he would knock over every garbage can in the alley in about ten minutes. As an encore, sometimes he would eat the most horrific thing he could find and yack it up in my yard.

"Oh, *Barkley*," Rob or Marge would say when they came out and found me stooped over, gathering trash and re-bucketing it. "You goofball!"

Barkley would simultaneously duck his head in shame and wag his tail, though I swore he was grinning because they'd let him off the hook again. What should've been a stern talking-to turned into a wry, adoring wag of the finger and a light swat on the backside of an animal that had the pain tolerance of a rhinoceros.

The alley, resembling a warzone, would take an hour to clear. Granted, the Cohens always pitched in and did their share of the work, but I wanted to ask why they couldn't keep their godda—gosh darn dog in the house one night of the week? They seemed like reasonably intelligent people and the neighborhood had had the same trash night since Eisenhower was in office. What was the problem?

It didn't matter. The Cohens, as a family, had chronic short term memory loss, Barkley was acting on instinct, and if I kept complaining I would become that guy, The Cranky Old Man Who Everybody Talked About But Didn't Like.

I settled for listening intently from my living room each Wednesday night, like a ham radio operator waiting breathlessly for a signal to come to him from across the ocean. Or, in this case, keen for the sound of banging metal cans and the scrape of plastic Glad bags being dragged through the dark.

And, tonight...I'd missed it. That son of a bitch—technically not a curse—had upset my can and decorated the length of the alley with three weeks of reeking trash. I couldn't believe I hadn't heard him. Even listening intently, I'd only caught the sound of maybe the last wuffle or baleful puking noise, because the deed was done. Then my mouth dropped open and I struggled to keep my vocalizations rated PG-13.

He'd only knocked over *my* can.

"Oh, that's it," I said as I walked into the alley to survey the damage. A cold wind whipped through, stirring plastic bags and rattling greasy aluminum foil. Fuming, I grabbed the emptied garbage can and proceeded up the alley. From experience, I knew it was easier to work back to my house than it was to lug the increasingly full can there and back again. So, with gritted teeth, I trudged along the cinder alley to find the far end of the trail.

It ended six houses away. A record, even for Barkley. I turned and looked back down the alley. Not quite an hour's work, but if I didn't start now, the wind would blow it from here to the Pentagon by tomorrow morning.

I frowned, though, as I stooped to pick up a wax paper package I recognized from the previous month. Barkley, although wary of me after I'd given him a piece of mind once or twice, normally came out of someone's yard at this point, wagging his tail and grinning wide. Kind of a *Hey, buddy, can you blame me?* look. But there was no sign of him.

"Barkley," I called. "It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you. Much."

Nothing. I peeked into a few of my neighbors' back yards—it's all right, I was a cop—looking for him. Pale yellow lights winked on in homes as the evening deepened, telling the tale of comfortable families settling down to tuck into the evening's dinner. A young couple, framed like a Norman Rockwell painting in their kitchen window, kissed, grinned at each other, kissed again. I pulled my head back out of their yard, feeling voyeuristic and dirty.

Scuffing along the alley, I gave the other yards a cursory glance. The breeze gusted, slamming a screen door somewhere with a bang. I shivered and pulled the hood of my sweatshirt over my head. In my fever to stop Barkley's reign of terror, I'd abandoned my dinner and run right out of the house without grabbing so much as a jacket.

I was near the end of the alley by now, where it met the little suburban thru-way of Barton Street. Barton, in turn, merged southbound with Wilson Boulevard as the main artery through my little neighborhood, Clarendon, and north towards Lee Highway, the traffic of which I could hear as the distant sound of angry wasps.

I'd never known Barkley to have ventured away from our little block of houses, let alone out to Barton and beyond. I mean, why would you when there was plenty to eat, bark at, and poop on right here at home?

"Dumb dog," I hollered. "Where are you?"

A sound. I froze, listening. It had been something far away and indistinct. I didn't want to say it was a bark or a howl, but something in between? Either that, or it was a grocery truck honking, I couldn't tell which. Whatever the source, it had come from northbound on Barton.

I glanced left and right, then crossed the street at a walk-jog. It wasn't a sense of urgency or concern that drove me, exactly. I was ready to throttle the dog myself. But neither did I want to see the big dummy get creamed by four lanes of traffic down on Lee Highway. I wouldn't given *myself* a fighting chance on that stretch of road, never mind a dog who chased cars for a living.

This section of Clarendon slipped down a steep hill, past and through tidy middle-class homes, until it reached the extended gully that merged with the four-lane thruway. Drainage ditches and parks, basketball courts and garden apartments lined the way. A small indentation in the road had become an excuse to put in a small grocer and a dry cleaner—Northern Virginia's screwy zoning laws on display. But, while the stores' signs were garishly lit, they were also a tiny bit charming. Neither one, after all, was a chain store or a giant mega-shop. Just a pair of local merchants trying to get by.

I took care heading down the long slope, keeping my ears open for another bark. The occasional car zoomed by and once an Arlington commuter bus roared past, its passengers looking bored and despondent, as most bus riders do. Night sounds took over until a scuffing sound from behind made me turn my head. A young man, twenty-something, jogged past at a pace I could only envy. Although he was going downhill, his easy stride told me he would take the hill coming back at the same speed. I stifled an urge to trip him.

There, again. No mistaking it, that was a howl. Or a yowl. I wasn't sure what the difference was. An answering moan and high-pitched bark from two neighborhood dogs confirmed it.

I jogged down the slope now, going a little faster than was comfortable. We were in one of those weird, winter warm spells peculiar to DC and Northern Virginia—sixty degrees one day, sleet the next—and the streets and sidewalks were clear of ice, but it would only take one little patch of the stuff for me to say good-bye to general good health for someone in their fifties and hello to reconstructive hip surgery.

Barton emptied into a side street that I knew was a dead-end on one side and funneled to Lee Highway on the other. I was drawn to the left, towards the larger road. Go to the greatest danger area first. But the sound hadn't come from that direction. I stood still, listening again.

A dim, hooting bark, definitely to my right. I took off for the cul-de-sac.

The little circular drive was home to five picturesque colonial houses. Red brick, white columns, fake black shutters. Like the other homes in the area, lights—mostly on the first floor—illuminated the lives inside. In one or two, flickering blues told of families already done with their dinner and sitting down to watch TV. I walked to the edge of the circle, squinting into what was now purple darkness.

"Barkley!" I called. "Here, boy."

Woooo. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end. The forlorn howl had sounded like it had come from the bottom of a well. I'd avoided getting too close to the houses—didn't want a repeat of the dirty old man situation—but now I explored the fronts of yards, calling Barkley's name and peering under hedges.

An exterior spotlight came on, one of those automatic sensor jobs, flooding the yard I was in with the strength of ten-thousand candles. A moment later, the front door opened and a man's voice called, "Can I help you?" The timbre of the voice was a mix of caution, question, and *get out of my yard.*

"Sorry. I'm looking for my dog," I said. "Yellow lab, about the size of a Mini Cooper, smells like trash?"

"Didn't see him," the man called, still cautious but with a little less *get out* in his tone. "You followed him back here?"

"Yeah. Well, sort of. I heard him bark. It sounded like he was at the other end of a tunnel."

"Oh, boy." The door shut and the man walked towards me, a silhouette that materialized into a scrawny forty-something wearing a faded Green Lantern t-shirt, jeans, and flip-flops. "He's not in the culvert, is he?"

"What culvert?"

"Over here," he said, motioning towards the property line between his house and his neighbor's. A ditch I had taken for a very green, very unkempt hedgerow was actually a small stream that had been diverted under the cul-de-sac and led between the two properties. In the almost non-existent light, I could see the trickle of water flow into a black hole near the back of the combined lots.

"Oh...sugar," I said, my stomach dipping. "Not good."

"I told the county to put a grate over that thing," the man said with the familiarity of an old, comfortable argument, "but they wouldn't listen."

"Where does it go?"

"I never followed it myself, but it's pointing towards Lee Highway," he said. "Which would make sense. The stream is runoff from higher on the hill. It pours down here when it rains, then flows under the highway."

"Storm water runoff," I said. "Dang it."

"If your dog's in there, no telling how far he could go," the man said helpfully. "It might empty out by the Potomac."

"Do you have a flashlight I could borrow?" I asked. "I hate to ask, but I don't even have my phone, I ran out of the house so fast."

"Sure," he said. "Hold on."

The man hot-footed it back to his house and disappeared, reappearing a moment later with a cheap stick flashlight. He handed it to me with an apologetic expression on his face. "Sorry, that's all I have. I'd help you look, but my wife's due home any minute."

"No sweat," I said. "I appreciate your help."

And with that, I crouched, pointed the flashlight at the gaping mouth of the tunnel, and moved into the culvert.

* * *

"Honey, did you put out the garbage?" Marge called from upstairs.

"Not yet," Rob yelled over a shoulder. "I'm a little busy here."

He'd just put the roast in the oven, along with the carrots and green beans. The gravy, bubbling away on the stove stop, was ten seconds from burning. It was frustrating, sometimes, being the only one in the house who could cook. After a long day doing other people's taxes and listening to their ridiculous excuses for forgetting their paperwork, the last thing he wanted to do was put together a three-course meal. It didn't matter that Marge, Kip, and Mikaela would eat wet cardboard if he served it—it offended his sensibilities to put anything but his best on the table.

He couldn't blame Marge. As the middle-manager at a software company, she had her own problems—and ones that kept her at the office late most nights. In fact, this was one of the few times in the last month she'd been home before eight. Just in time, he thought grumpily, for tax season to keep *me* at the office until nine.

"When you do, could you keep an eye on Barkley?"

Rob stripped off the quilted oven mitts—they were a gift from Mom, knit things in the shape of turkeys—and snatched at the spoon to stir the gravy. Burn one molecule of the stuff and the whole batch would be ruined. The charcoal taste never left your mouth once you ate burnt gravy.

"Kip's watching him," he yelled, his eyes glued to the pan, looking for the little black flakes that would tell him he was too late.

The goop burped and a fleck of the stuff splattered onto his chest, though thankfully landing on the apron the kids had gotten him—the front was a gorilla in a bikini—instead of his dress shirt. He desperately swished the spoon back and forth, but a little eruption of burnt brown chips told him he'd missed his window. He turned the heat off and slapped the spoon on the counter in disgust. "*Fudge!*"

"Kip never pays attention, honey," Marge called. "And since it's garbage night, Barkley's going to be on the prowl."

"What?" Rob said, raising his head, distracted.

"The *garbage*, hon. Mr. Singer is going to lose his mind if Barkley tips his can over one more time. I gotta jump in the shower now."

"Oh, no," he said, blinking. The look on Singer's face the last time they'd picked up after Barkley had been the kind Rob imagined his neighbor had reserved for the murderers and drug dealers he'd chased for thirty years.

Yet, somehow, every week, no one in the family remembered to grab Barkley on Wednesday nights after the garbage had been put out. Rob got the impression Singer was a reasonable man, which worked out when Barkley turned the back alley into a war zone. And he'd been a police officer, so he couldn't be all bad, although he also got the sense that the man had a short fuse. And there was that weird episode with the hot dog the summer before...

"Mikaela," he called out to the living room. "Go find your brother and bring Barkley in."

No answer. Rob stripped off the apron and stalked out to the living room. His thirteen year old daughter was slumped in a corner of the couch like she'd grown out of it like a fungus. She had the TV on, earbuds in her ears, and was reading a book thicker than a dictionary. The cover of the book was a riot of swirling colors and Celtic knots. A pointy-eared maiden in a robe looked longingly into the distance.

"Mikaela," he said, turning the TV off and waving a hand between the book and her face. "Go find your brother."

Mikaela raised her head, peeved. "What?"

"Find—your—brother," Rob said. "And bring Barkley in. It's almost dinner time and it's nearly dark out."

"Why?"

"Because," he said, reaching over and shutting the book. "Just do it."

"*God*, why do I always have to do these things?"

Rob crossed his arms. "Three—two—"

Huffing, she flounced from the couch to the front door, slamming it on her way out. Rob glanced at the trash his daughter was reading, then tossed it back on the couch. He should talk to Marge about getting Mikaela to read something worthwhile, instead of the fantasy crap she loved. It was a slippery slope from Rowling to Tolkien and then on to the racier stuff. He wouldn't have minded if she'd been reading Heinlein or Clarke or Van Vogt—those were fiction,

too, but at least they were *science* fiction and might spark some interest in physics or math or engineering. Reading about dragons and goblins and wizard school wasn't going to get you a job.

He shook his head on the way back to the kitchen, then groaned as he opened the stove to check the roast. The carrots had burnt, too. He must really be losing his touch. At this rate, he was tempted to start something else for dinner. Unlike gravy, though, vegetables could be saved. Throw in some broth or sherry and you could pass the mistake off as intentional. The vegetables weren't burnt, they'd *caramelized*.

He heard the front door bang open as he was splashing the carrots with the sherry—not too much, didn't want the kids to get loopy—and he yelled over a shoulder, "Did you get Barkley, too?"

"Mikaela," he yelled, getting cross now. That girl... then he heard a noise and looked up. Mikaela was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, a stricken look on her face. Rob's heart fell apart in little pieces. "What's wrong?"

"Kip. And Barkley," she said. "They're not there."

* * *

The man had had the strangest look on his face. He had walked up, asking for directions, but strangers never came down the alley and his question didn't make sense anyway. Like, where was Alexandria from here? And, was his Mommy around?

Kip hadn't called his mother *Mommy* since forever ago, like when he was five. And he'd heard of Alexandria, but it wasn't anywhere around here. He wasn't sure he should say anything in any case, because the man's expression was weird, like he was trying to smile and grit his teeth at the same time. And Kip knew the man shouldn't be in the yard in any case. A part of him recognized that they were in the far corner of the lot, the only place you could stand and not be in view of the house.

"Alexandria isn't around here," Kip said. "You gotta go out to Barton Street."

"Do you think you could show me?" the man asked. "I'm real lost."

"It's down there." Kip pointed down Trash Alley.

"Oh?" the man said, surprised. "Well, that's not too far. You wouldn't mind pointing it out to me, would you? I mean it's right down there. I get turned around so easy and I don't see very well."

The man did look old to Kip. Forty, at least, older than Dad. And maybe he *couldn't* see—he was wearing thick glasses that made his eyes look big and wavy, like the glass in grandma's bathroom window. It wouldn't hurt to help him. Then again...Kip glanced down at the fort he'd been building with all the old sticks in the yard, blown down over the winter. He really wanted to finish it before Dad called him to leave it and come in for dinner.

The man followed Kip's eyes. "Oh, don't worry about the fort. You're almost done, by the look of things. You can finish it in no time. My name's Donnie, by the way. What's yours?"

"Kip," he said automatically. Always respond promptly when an adult asks you a question, Mom said.

"Nice to meet you, Kip," the man said, holding out a hand. Kip shook it reluctantly. The man's hand was dry and warm.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Donnie."

The man smiled wider. "Just Donnie, Kip. No need to be so formal. Do you think you could you help me find Barton Street now?"

Kip bit his lip. It seemed wrong, felt wrong, but he couldn't think of an actual reason to say no. "Okay, but only to the end of Trash Alley. I gotta be back for dinner."

"Trash Alley, eh? That's a wonderful name. Did you make it up yourself?"

"No," Kip said reluctantly. He wanted to take credit. "Mr. Singer did."

"Is Mr. Singer your dad?"

"No. Just our neighbor. Mom thinks he's mean, but I think she's wrong. He's actually pretty funny."

"Well, I'd like to meet him some day," Donnie said. "He sounds like he has a wonderful sense of humor. Anyway, let's find Barton Street, shall we?"

"Okay," Kip said, then the man grabbed his hand and held it, which he didn't like. He hadn't held anyone's hand since he was five, either. But when he tried to pull his hand away, the man squeezed, almost enough to hurt, then looked down at Kip and smiled.

* * *

I'd be lying if I said this was my first time trudging through the muck of a sewer culvert. It wouldn't even be my second or third. I'd been in plenty of odd spaces as a cop. But that didn't mean it I enjoyed the experience.

Discomfort came from the dark and the damp, of course, and the uncertainty of what you were actually stepping through—especially now, since my footwear consisted of a pair of tatty moccasins that I liked to wear when I watched TV. The cold, gooey muck was squelching through the gaps in the stitching and finding its way between my toes.

Then there was the lurking suspicion that you weren't the only one in the pipe. If you could fit through, then so could a junkie, a homeless person, or a random nutcase. And nobody wanted to bump into any of them. I didn't even want to think about the rats, possums, and other urban wildlife that might be hunkered down inside.

But, to me, the spookiest part of the journey was the uncertainty of where the tunnel ended. Would it spill out into a suburban yard like the one I'd entered, with plenty of headroom and open air? Or would I find myself on a one-way journey into a sewage pool? Or, perhaps worst of all, would the tunnel begin to shrink in tiny increments until I found myself squeezed flat?

The last was the nightmare scenario, of course. If things got crowded, finding Barkley would be a snap since he'd be stuck, too. Either that or I would simply wish the dog well and turn around. But logic didn't have a lot of sway when the dark and damp closed in, the cold radiated from the curving concrete walls, and the smell of rotting plant material threatened to choke you.

The flashlight helped keep the demons at bay. More than that, it gave me something else to think about. Namely, that I could see a set of prints in the algae-green muck underneath my feet. It was I'd been looking for, of course, but the trail was odd.

I was gratified to see the palm-sized prints that I took to be Barkley's—it was nice to know that I wasn't exploring the underbelly of Arlington's sewer system for nothing—but then two other sets of prints threw me. The sloping walls of the tube naturally confined the prints to the center-bottom of the pipe, which meant that all the prints overlapped each other, but this was a mess of two kinds of shoes, one of which rang alarm bells in my head.

The first print was slightly smaller than mine, a boot of some kind with a thick, heavy tread, like a snow-tire. The other had the webbing pattern popular in sneakers, but it was half the size of the other—surely a child's shoe. The prints were less than distinct, but we'd had plenty of run-

off since January's snowmelt. Anything older than a day or three should've been washed away by now. And the tracks didn't look any older than Barkley's, which obliterated most of them. So, logically, both prints were recent.

The passage was telling me a story, and a scenario took shape in my mind, one that I didn't like the look of. For thirty years, I'd been paid to be suspicious and make deductive leaps. I'd gotten pretty adept at it. The problem was, in my former line of work, it rarely felt good to be right. Shining the light ahead, I picked up my pace, looking for more than just a lost dog, now.

* * *

"We can't start blaming each other," Rob said, trying to stop the accusations before they got any traction. "Finding Kip is the only important thing right now."

Marge, her face blotchy with restrained tears, took a breath and nodded. They were standing by their back fence, both with their arms crossed and their breath puffing into clouds. They'd done a quick search of the neighborhood—through the alley, down Barton, and around the perimeter of the block, keeping in touch by phone. They'd uncovered nothing except a deepening darkness and empty yards. The natural inclination had been to ask *how could I let this happen?* followed quickly by *how could you let this happen?*

"How do we know Kip isn't playing somewhere?" Marge said, trying to find a different reason than the obvious.

"He'd never stay out this late," Rob said. "He knows better. And with Barkley missing, too, This isn't just another late curfew. Even if it is, I don't care. If we go overboard, then we go overboard. The worst that could happen is the neighborhood laughs at us for being helicopter parents."

"Oh, Rob. Barkley wouldn't have left Kip," Marge said, her lip starting to quiver.

Rob felt his own start to go, too, but he took a deep breath and forced his emotions to take a back seat, trying to stay strong. "That's a good thing, Marge, not bad. Barkley would lay down his life for Kip, you know that."

Mikaela burst out of the house, breathless. "The police are on their way."

"Okay. Mikaela, run over to the Bruster's—" he began, then caught Marge's look. *Do you want to lose her, too?* "Scratch that. Stay here. I'll go down to the Bruster's and ask them to pitch in. Marge, why don't you go over to Mr. Singer's and see if he'll help? I think he hates my guts."

"He's not that bad, Rob," Marge said. "And he was a policeman."

"Whatever. Go talk to him and I'll get anyone I can to hit the pavement." He turned to his daughter. "Keep your cell phone handy and call Mom or me when the cops get here, okay?"

"And don't let anyone in the house," Marge said. "I mean, anyone. If the police come, tell them we're around the corner and can they wait on the porch."

Mikaela, eyes wide, just nodded. The Cohens split up and continued the search for their son.

* * *

Kip slipped on the rocks. Moss and slimy water meant even his Keds couldn't get a grip on the giant boulders and he scraped his knee pretty bad as he tried to climb down the jumble of stone and to the stream below.

The man—he didn't like thinking of him as Donnie—had held onto his hand all the way down Trash Alley, talking about things that Kip didn't understand or didn't make sense for the situation, like the way people dressed these days and wasn't it lousy that immigrants were taking all the jobs?

Kip kept silent, wondering if he could yank his hand away or maybe pull with a steady pressure that would make the man let go eventually. But even though he seemed old and kind of pathetic, he was incredibly strong and as hard as Kip squeezed, the man squeezed harder.

Near the end of the alley, the man looked up Barton first one way, then the other, and back again, as if he were expecting someone. It was dinner time in the neighborhood and everyone knew there'd be nobody on the streets, but Kip didn't think it be the smartest thing to point out. He wasn't sure the man would've heard anyway, since he was mumbling to himself.

"Must be cautious, must be judicious," the man said under his breath, not acting lost at all. In fact, he seemed to know exactly where he was going: across Barton to an old brown car, big and boxy like Grandma's, the one Dad called "the tank." The man was nearly dragging Kip with him now and it suddenly felt like a terrible idea to have gone with him anywhere, to have even talked to him.

"Let me go," Kip said, no longer worried about being polite to an adult. "I don't want to be with you anymore."

"Just a little farther, lad," the man said. "My car's right over there. Don't cause a fuss, now."

Kip dug in his heels, leaning back at a steep angle as he tried to get away. The man's face shuddered and rippled—the smile was long gone, leaving just the gritted teeth. He yanked Kip towards him, almost pulling his arm out the socket and Kip cried out. The man leaned over as if to pick Kip up bodily when they heard a deep "*Garuuuf!*" back in Trash Alley.

"Barkley!" Kip called in relief. "Here, boy!"

The man gasped as Barkley came galloping down the alley like a quarter horse, knocking one of the trash cans to the ground and spreading it down the street as he came. The man let go of Kip's hand and frantically dug in his pants pocket for something.

As Barkley came closer, the happy bark took on a more territorial bass note as he sensed something drastically wrong, that someone was threatening one of his pack and, by the time the lab was crossing Barton, his teeth were bared in a snarl that Kip had never seen before.

Barkley launched himself at the man, who shrieked and pulled whatever he'd been searching for out of his pocket. Kip scrambled away without taking his eyes off the impact as Barkley went to take a bite out of the man's upper thigh. But the man's hand stabbed forward, there was a loud snapping sound like a firecracker going off, then Barkley gave a pained yelp and fell to the ground like he'd been shot.

Kip cried out Barkley's name, but his dog lay on the ground, twitching. The rescue, which seemed so sure before, had now evaporated and the man, who had backed himself against his car in his panic, gave a shout of triumph and turned towards Kip.

"Come on there, lad," the man said, holding his hand out and walking towards Kip. "You don't want me to electrocute you like I did your dog, do you?"

Choking back tears, Kip lurched to his feet and took off running. He didn't know where he was going, he just needed to get a way from the man who had killed his dog and wanted to do the same—or worse—to him. He'd never been more than a few blocks past Barton before, but of course he'd watched when Mom took it to the mall or the grocery store. He knew it went downhill and that meant you could run fast.

As he ran, the neighborhood became nothing but a blur of dark houses, outlines of cars, glittering streetlamps. Normally, he'd be thrilled to be this far from home, but all he could think

about is how little he knew about where he was going. Behind him, the man labored to keep up. Kip could hear his breath coming in ragged gasps and his footsteps slapping the sidewalk unevenly.

The pitch of the slope increased until it was all he could to keep his feet underneath him. But he felt a little surge of triumph—the man's breathing had faded away until he couldn't hear it behind him at all. Kip normally ran everywhere he went anyway and if this guy was as out of shape as his dad, he wouldn't have any trouble outlasting him long enough to get back home or find help. Kip even risked a glance backwards to see just how far he'd outpaced the man—

And then he was flat on his back, stunned and with a throbbing pain across the top, right-hand side of his chest. He looked up from the ground, bewildered, only then seeing the car's side view mirror he'd run into, skewed upwards into the night sky. His chest seized and convulsed as he tried to get a breath. As he lay there, he heard the man coming closer. Kip hiccupped and choked, trying to get his wind back—and he'd almost done it—when a dark shadow blotted out the sky above him.

"Don't make a fuss now," Donnie said, as he leaned over, the grin back on his face.

* * *

"How old did you say he is, ma'am?" Officer Stiles asked, pen poised above a small white notebook.

"He'll be eleven in April," Marge said, trying to keep her mind on nothing but facts and known quantities. Losing her cool wouldn't help Kip, but in her head, she was screaming and it took all of her willpower not to break into a run around the neighborhood, calling his name. They'd done that already until the Arlington police had arrived and it hadn't done any good.

"Do you have a photo of him?"

"On my phone," Marge said, pulling it out and thumbing through approximately five thousand pictures of her kids that she'd never downloaded to her computer. The officer gave her a police department email address and she sent five along with a picture of Barkley.

"Your husband's still out looking for him?"

"Yes, he was trying to get some friends in the neighborhood to join in while I came back to meet with you."

"Everything okay between your husband and your son?"

"What?" she asked, confused, then waved her hand dismissively. "They're fine. Rob's not the problem."

"So no arguments? No threats to leave home?"

"No, not in a million years. He's just a sweet boy who likes to play outside," she said, then stopped talking as she fought a choking sensation in her throat. She put a hand over her mouth and reeled in her emotions after a minute. "Anyway, he'd never leave Barkley, our dog."

"But you said the dog was gone," the young officer said, flipping back through his notes.

"Yes, he is, but...oh, what I'm trying to say is, if he wanted to run away from home—which he didn't—and planned to take Barkley along so he could play Huck Finn, he's bright enough to have grabbed some dog food, his coat, some peanut butter. He would've made an adventure out of it."

"But he didn't, so it must've been spur of the moment," Stiles said.

"Exactly," she said, then cleared her throat. "What...what is it that you can do to find him?"

"We've already notified all Arlington PD units. They'll have your son's and dog's pictures from dispatch. Officer Ford and I will start our own search and try to coordinate your husband and anyone he's found to help."

"Can you..." she swallowed. "Can you put out an Amber alert for him?"

Stiles got an apologetic look on his face. "I'm sorry, ma'am, not yet. There're strict rules for that and one of them has to include proof of an actual abduction. If we can find someone who witnessed getting him in a car or taking him into a home, we can put it out ASAP, but not until then."

Marge opened her mouth to protest, when the officer's partner, Al Ford, jogged over. They both turned to him.

"Got something, Al?" Stiles asked.

"Not much, but an old lady on Barton said she heard someone calling for a Barkley. When she looked out, she saw a tall, skinny guy in a hoodie walk past, looking into yards."

"Oh my God," Marge said. "Is that the man who took Kip?"

"We don't know anyone took him, ma'am," Stiles reminded her. "And calling for the dog seems a little out of character for someone trying to abduct a child."

"Does it sound like anyone you know?" Ford asked.

"No, not really," Marge said, hesitating, wracking her memory. She saw people in sweatshirts all the time. Did one of them look any different than another?

"We can check it out, at least," Ford suggested to his partner.

"Yes, we can." Stiles turned to Marge. "Please stay here and keep your phone handy. We'll look into this and stay in touch."

With that, the two police officers jogged over to their cruiser and took off for Barton Street.

* * *

To my relief, the pipe opened into a kind of spillway, tumbling down a small mountain of boulders. To break up the flow of water, I guessed, so that they didn't have a fifteen foot waterfall eroding the bank. The stream continued through a thinly forested gully and disappeared into the gloom.

The sound of traffic was all around me, though I couldn't see it, so I assumed I'd gone under the highway and popped out the other side in one of Northern Virginia's many "armpit parks," as I liked to call them—oddly-shaped glens that only existed where developments stopped and roads began. This one continued downhill, so it was a good bet that its eventual destination was, as the Good Samaritan with the flashlight had guessed, the Potomac River.

Placing my feet gingerly on the flattest parts of the monoliths, I clambered down the boulder field and tried to pick up the scent near the stream. I swept the flashlight back and forth, looking for any kind of sign Barkley or the mysterious child's and adult's prints.

The only result was one fat paw print in the mud, pointing roughly downstream, but it was good enough for me. All I wanted to confirm was that the trail didn't ascend the steep sides of gully to the road. I took off down the slight slope. As I navigated the narrow track that ran next to the stream, I tried piecing together just what the heck had happened to start this goose chase.

One scenario was that Barkley had taken off after something or someone, chasing them pell-mell down Barton Street and through a healthy chunk of lower Arlington. I don't know what could make a dog lose his mind like that. Maybe a cat or a raccoon or, in Barkley's case, something smelling of three week old garbage.

If that's what had happened, it didn't take much imagination to see Kip, the Cohen's little boy, chasing after his beloved dog, calling his name, trying to get him to stop and come back home. Which would explain the smaller set of footprints.

But where did the boots come from, then? They couldn't be Rob Cohen's—he wouldn't make his ten year-old son splash with him through a culvert to retrieve the dog. Same went for another neighbor trying to pitch in and help Kip catch Barkley—any adult in their right mind would take Kip back home first, explain the situation to the parents, *then* maybe lend a hand to find the yellow lab.

I grunted as I slipped on a slimy river rock, got my balance, then pulled my hoodie closer. God, it was getting cold. But the ideas that had been forming in my head kept me forging ahead.

What if I had the order wrong? What if it wasn't Barkley-Kip-Boots, but Kip-Boots-Barkley? The order changed everything, because Boots after or with Kip meant that either he and Kip were together—and that didn't seem like a good situation—or he was chasing the boy. And Barkley was playing catch up in an attempt to stay with his young charge.

If I was right and the worst was happening—and I was definitely one to assume the worst—then I was in a quandary.

Kip and Barkley both knew me. Not well, but better than the average stranger on the street. So, the best way to reach them, get them to stop, or come out of hiding was to call their names.

But that big, booted print in the mud changed the entire dynamic. If I started shouting into the darkness at random and warned some creep who was chasing Kip that there was someone hot on the trail, then maybe I've suddenly got a hostage situation on my hands. Or worse, if the guy thinks he might be better off if Kip wasn't around to give the Arlington PD a description of his would-be abductor.

With that in mind, I kept my trap shut, pointed the flashlight low to the ground, and chose my steps with care. If someone *was* out to get Kip—or Barkley, for that matter—I planned to be the only one springing surprises tonight.

* * *

Donnie swore as he limped along the streambed, holding his kneecap with one hand as if to keep it together. Which he almost was.

A deteriorating meniscus had required surgery on the knee a year ago and the little squirt must've been psychic, because he'd kicked him right on the side of the knee with that size four sneaker and nearly crippled him. When it happened, it was all Donnie could do not to scream. He grabbed for the knee with both of his hands, trying to hold the moving parts together.

A small part of his mind watched in alarm as the kid scrambled to his feet and took off running. If he headed back home or to a trusted neighbor's house, Donnie could find himself in a real bind, the kind where you had to explain to a couple of angry adults what you'd been doing, trying to pull their kid into your car.

But to his relief the kid took off in the opposite direction, down Barton, probably running blindly to get away from the Bad Man. *Keep running, lad. Every step takes you farther away from the people you know.* But he had to watch helplessly as the kid put distance between them while he just stood there in pain.

After a minute massaging his kneecap, Donnie gingerly tested his weight on it. Moving cautiously, he found his maximum speed was a walk-jog with a funny hitch. *Step-step-HOP* as he tried to put as little weight as possible on the injured joint. With a determined expression, he set off after the boy.

It was against his better judgment. He'd been at this game for almost twenty years now and he'd only survived that long because he had *instinct*. He knew what appealed to the kids through the different eras—comics, candy, video games—and when a situation looked too good to be true. There were no hard and fast rules, you simply had to listen to your gut.

Years before, when he'd just started out, he'd found what he thought might be his Shangri-la: the video arcade. Every mall had one tucked away in the low-rent corners in the back near the doors. Kids of all ages would hang out there, often for hours. Parents couldn't wait to drop their kids off with a bag of quarters and swing back to pick them up late in the afternoon after they'd gone shopping or grabbed a few drinks at TGI Fridays. Adult supervision was limited to one aging burnout who collected the tokens and made sure the kids weren't trashing the games.

It was the one place where age didn't matter—any and all were welcome. The only requirement was that you have quarters and thumbs. You might get a quizzical look if you were over twenty-five, but enough pinball wizards and out-of-work nerds were left over from the seventies that the average arcade's clientele ranged from ten to forty. Name one other place in

public life where an adult creep like himself could spend four unsupervised hours with ten year-olds?

In a way, he'd done those families a favor. What kind of parent dropped their pre-teen son or daughter off at the *mall* for hours at a time? Maybe some of them had learned a lesson from the things he'd done.

Oh, and he'd learned *his* lesson. Dip your hand into the cookie jar one too many times and you were bound to get your wrist slapped. Which was another way of saying, if you don't listen to your gut, expect to go up the river for twenty to life.

Since the arcades were always by the back door of the malls, where the funny angles of the enormous building made it unattractive for any of the larger stores, he could park close to the entrance, which meant he could also leave quickly if he had to. And it helped when he was trying to talk one of the kids he had his eye on to come out to his car. *It's right over there, see?*

One Saturday morning, after he'd already had talked to some of the boys and made some progress, he drove to the mall as usual, parked near the door, and grabbed a heavy sack of quarters he kept as bait.

He had his handle on the door, ready to get out, when a glint of something behind the glass doors caught his attention. The glare was bad, so he was mostly looking at reflections of cars in the parking lot, but he thought he'd caught the glint of something odd—a flat, metallic flash.

Nobody hung around the entrance. The doors were for going in and out, and not much else. If a kid was here, he was hurrying to get into the arcade, not loitering by the exit. Some of the older ones, the teens, liked to sneak a smoke, but they went around the corner near the trash bins so that the mall cops wouldn't roust them.

Mall cops? Donnie frowned. He'd noticed one or two old men patrolling the place, but they generally fell asleep in the chairs by Orange Julius or lingered around the fountain in the center of the mall so they could talk to people. He squinted, watching the door carefully. His heart was thumping and his hand, still resting on the car door handle, was clammy.

There it was again. The same glint. At about shoulder height on an adult. A minute later, the outer set of glass doors wobbled as the inner doors were opened, then a man came all the way outside, which is when Donnie's heart almost popped out of his mouth.

It wasn't a mall cop, it was a *real* cop, and the only thing keeping Donnie from starting the car and flooring it was that the guy looked utterly bored. He sauntered through the exit, looked

around, and scratched an armpit. Then he cracked his knuckles and paced the width of the entrance with his hands in his back pockets and his belly leading the way. Fifteen steps took him to the edge of the sidewalk, then he turned around and did it again.

Donnie sat paralyzed, unsure what he should do. Getting out of the car wasn't an option, but driving away wouldn't be keeping a low profile either. The cop was bored stiff and would probably love to have something as exciting as a car driving by to distract him. It would be child's play to grab Donnie's plate number, run it, and then two detectives would be knocking at his apartment door, asking questions about how often he visited the arcade at the mall and would he mind coming down to the station for a few questions? So the smart thing was to stay put, no matter how nervous it made him.

The cop continued to pace, daydreaming, then Donnie almost groaned as the officer idly reached into a breast pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. No one was going to say boo to a cop standing at the entrance and smoking, so he puffed away while Donnie sweated it out, wondering if the cop was bored enough to start trawling the parking lot.

After five anxious minutes, the cop sucked the last bit of nicotine out of the cigarette and flicked the butt into the parking lot. A final lungful of smoke went up into the sky, then the cop turned and waddled back into the mall.

Donnie counted to two-hundred—he couldn't count heartbeats, his was going too fast—then started the car and crept out of the lot. He never went back to that mall, not even to shop. It had been no accident the cop was there, he was sure of it. They'd been waiting for him and he'd come *this* close to spending the last twenty years in prison. He'd never ignored his gut since.

Until now. Every instinct screamed at him to turn around and hobble back to the safety of his car. It was sitting there, a mere block away, practically begging him to forget this kid and save his skin. But else something pushed him on. Maybe he was angry—not many kids had ever fought back or so quickly or hurt him so badly. Maybe he really wanted this one. Or maybe he was just tired of playing it safe.

Whatever the reason, it wasn't leaving any room for negotiation, he discovered. Even entertaining the thought of turning around made him swear and flinch. And that's when he realized that he was going to chase this little boy and catch him, even if he killed himself trying.

* * *

"What do you think?"

Stiles, face impassive, kept his eyes glued to the sidewalk on his right while his partner drove. His line of sight twitched from the street to the yards behind them, then back to the sidewalk.

He wasn't just looking for the kid or the dog, he was looking for any number of signs that could give them that all important end-of-the-string to pull on. A child's shoe. Evidence of struggle. A homeowner out on their lawn, wondering what all the shouting had been about. Without that string, they could drive these streets until this time next year without finding a thing.

"Stiles?"

"I heard you," Stiles said, then caught himself. "Sorry. Thinking about my own boy. Trying not to."

Ford nodded but didn't say anything. A divorce the year before had been the dominant event in his partner's life, a divorce where the only goals the two sides had shared was custody of their six year-old and the chance to draw blood from the other.

Watching the amount of damage his friend suffered for months had led to Ford to break off his own engagement. Stiles had tried to talk him out of it, promising that his own experience was atypical, out of the ordinary—but Ford had seen too many cops go through the same thing to believe him. And since he didn't have any plans for a career change, the prudent thing to do was learn from his partner's experience and embrace the bachelor's lifestyle.

Spending as much time together as they did had taught Ford something else, something less obvious: the only thing that hurt Stiles more than the divorce itself was the thought that his little boy wasn't under his protection all the time. Which made responding to this particular call a personal hell for Stiles.

"It doesn't look good," his partner said suddenly, surprising Ford. He'd expected silence until they found something. Or a definitive nothing. "It's pitch black out. Barton is two miles from four major arteries out of here. No witnesses to an abduction."

"But?" There'd been room for a question.

Stiles gave a long, whistling sigh and pushed back in his seat. "But...the dog. Where's the dog?"

Ford shrugged. He owned fish. "Anywhere. Nowhere. Why?"

Stiles made a face. "The ped approaches the kid, talks him into following him or getting into his car or whatever. The family dog is nearby. If the kid yells for help, the dog would at least follow or chase the guy."

"Not if the creep drives off."

"Then why isn't the dog back home by now? He might chase the car for a block or two, but he's going to come back to home base. Or, if he's wandering around the neighborhood, Cohen would've found him or we would've seen him by now."

"That's thin."

"Maybe," Stiles conceded. "It's giving the dog a lot of credit."

"But you've got a theory."

"A couple of them."

"Lay it on me."

"There's no creep. The kid's stuck in a sewer drain somewhere and the dog won't leave the kid, which explains why neither one's come home yet."

"Lassie, go get Pa!" Ford said in a high-pitched voice. Stiles looked over for the first time. "Sorry. What else?"

"Or they were both on foot, the kid ran for it, and the dog chased the two of them. Or the dog lit into the ped and gave the kid a head start."

Ford looked skeptical. "How long's the average ten year-old going to last against an adult male in a footrace?"

"Depends on the lead he's got. Whether the dog attacked the creep. Bunch of factors."

Ford nodded his head. "That one makes more sense. You know, if that's the way it went down, that would mean the creep's car or van is still around."

Stiles's eyebrows shot to his hairline. "You're right. So you went to the Academy, after all. I thought they found you at the temp agency."

"They did. I read *Deduction for Dummies* and faked the rest. What about the skinny guy in the sweatshirt?"

Stiles scratched his nose. "He's the creep. Or he isn't, he wasn't calling 'Barkley', and the neighbor misunderstood what he heard. Or made it up."

Ford shrugging nod, like *yeah, maybe, okay*. "Any other ideas?"

Stiles didn't say anything for a long minute. Early evening gloom had passed and crimson winter clouds had given way to deep night and full darkness. Ford squinted, trying to pick out clues from the everyday objects that took on over-sized significance in the poor light. It was a repeated tableau of grim, darkened yards only partially illuminated by street lamps and porch lights.

"Stiles?" Ford prompted.

His partner sighed again. "Or the dog's dead and the kid is as good as gone."

* * *

Kip couldn't remember ever being this cold.

He had on jeans, a t-shirt, and the stupid sweater his mom always made him wear when he was outside, which was too much when he was playing in the yard—he was always sweating and freezing at the same time when he came in—but now he wished he had his winter jacket. And gloves. And a hat.

The hat would be nice, because his ears felt like they were burning, which was weird, since he was cold. Then he remembered from *Shackleton's Journey to the South Pole* that the burning sensation might be the first sign of frostbite, which terrified him, because he'd read that victims of it lost their nose first. Although his nose felt okay, it was just runny.

But his shoes and jeans were wet up to his shins from splashing in the stream and a muddy patch went all the way to his butt from when he'd slid down the rocks trying to get away from the man, so he was frozen from the waist down.

It didn't matter, though. The man had continued to chase him after he'd killed Barkley—*don't think about that*—even after Kip had kicked him in the knee. He'd felt a little surge of victory when the man had yelled out in pain, but that all went away when he'd glanced back a minute later and, in the fuzzy light of the street lamps, saw the man limping after him like something from a horror movie. Or what he thought a horror movie was like, since Mom wouldn't let him watch one, not even the bad black-and-white ones Dad laughed at on Sunday nights.

So he'd pushed on, since he didn't have a choice, and eventually he was so lost that he simply followed the stream. It went downhill, which made it easy, and it seemed like it should go somewhere.

But then Kip realized that, if *he* found it simple to let the stream be his guide, so did the man. So, if he was predictable and obvious, it would be a piece of cake for the man to grab him. And Kip knew he didn't have any other advantages, either. He wasn't going to outrun him if they got to a flat part—the man was limping, but he was bigger and gaining on him. And fighting back wasn't going to work. The man wouldn't let him get a kick in a second time.

Kip gulped. The options didn't look good. The only thing left was to hide. He was good at it—he almost always won when he played with kids around the neighborhood—but this one was for all the marbles, as his dad liked to say. If he didn't hide well enough, then the man would find him and there was no one around to help.

One thing going for him was that the man probably thought he was dumb and would keep on following the stream in the same direction until he gave up. Then he—

Kip froze. He'd heard a howl in the distance, coming from behind him, back the way he'd come. For a second, it had sounded like Barkley and his heart thudded in his chest. Then he thought, no. There were dogs all over his neighborhood and they barked and howled constantly. Why wouldn't there be dogs here, too, doing the same thing?

No. It was up to him, and him alone, to get out of this mess. And he had an idea on how to do it.

* * *

Thirty year-old sweet gum trees arched above me, their tops touching. Road noise was a low grumble, punctuated only by the occasional honk or car stereo with the volume cranked. Unexpected smells invaded my nose, like the deep green odor of dirt and rotting vegetation that signaled winter was slipping away and spring was trying to push its way into relevance.

The environment was bewildering, a Through the Looking Glass moment. I found it difficult to believe that I'd arrived here—wherever *here* was—by the power vested in my own two feet. Last time I'd checked, there hadn't been a primordial wood that I could reach on foot from my

house. Yet here I was, barely keeping hypothermia at bay and creeping like Hawkeye from tree trunk to tree trunk as I stalked someone whose single identifying feature was that he wore boots.

I was getting worried. I'd been following the tracks for almost an hour now and I hadn't seen a sign of anyone or anything besides a few muddy tracks. No Barkley, no Kip, no Man in Boots. No struggle, no object left behind as a guide, no body. The last was a relief, of course, but the streambed I was following would eventually dump us in somewhere under the George Washington Parkway in a conglomeration of storm water run off systems, rocks, and a river that killed about seven people a year. If I was going to have a throw-down with a phantom pedophile stalker, I could've named a more accommodating setting.

As if on cue, the narrow channel I'd been slipping on more than walking on broadened into an open area half the size of a Little League infield and about as muddy. The stretch was also flatter than what I'd trekked through and the trickle of water that had been guiding me slowed to a reluctant ebb. The clearing meant there was a break in the trees, of course, and I breathed a little deeper and a little easier when I could see the night sky above me.

But I couldn't stand here and admire the view, I had some quick investigative work to do. A wide, flat section might mean branching pathways along the perimeter that I needed to find quickly, in case the hunt had veered in a different direction. Then again, if I found no evidence that the race had taken a sharp turn, I'd have to return to the stream as it headed for the Potomac...but at double time for having wasted time scouring the perimeter. Cupping the light of the flashlight in my hands, I bent over nearly double to peer at the ground for fresh tracks.

And there they were.

Clear as day—okay, compared to what I'd *been* following—were the pint-sized sneaker prints I'd hoped to find. The tracks were deeper and more distinct than anything I'd seen so far, and clearly took a left turn out of the clearing at an angle to the direction the stream was flowing. Excited, I followed them long enough to confirm that it wasn't a scuffle or a false-trail, then doubled back near the stream to see if I could find evidence of the Mysterious Man in Boots.

His tracks were there, even deeper than what I assumed were Kip's—which made sense, being a larger, heavier man—but they stayed locked to the side of the stream and were soon swallowed back into the murky under dark of the woods.

I smiled for the first time that night, although the muscles of my face were almost frozen. It looked like Mr. Big Boots hadn't brought a light. Or he hadn't been a Boy Scout. Or both.

Trusting that Kip would blindly follow the stream to its terminus, he'd plowed ahead and, with any luck, was a few minutes from tipping into the Potomac.

I'd leave him to it. At this point, it was more important to find Kip and get him home than it was to collar the guy and drag him before a magistrate. Both would've been nice, but I'd settle for saving a ten year-old from hypothermia or worse. Hurrying, I trotted back to where I'd found Kip's tracks and began following the trail.

While I couldn't call for the kid in case Mr. Boots heard me and came running, I felt confident that I could use the flashlight on full and I kept it locked on the clear, muddy evidence that Kip was alone and ahead of me, ready to be rescued.

My mistake.

* * *

The tree reminded Kip of the only time he'd gone fishing. Mom had let him hold the little brown trout they'd caught before they had to toss it back for being too small. Kip had expected it to be squishy and warm, but instead it was strangely firm and cold and muscular under a film of slime that made Kip want to gag. He'd flung the thing away from him as far as he could, making Mom laugh so hard she almost fell out of the boat.

Climbing the tree was a lot like holding onto that fish. Wet moss was awfully close to trout slime and the hard, ridged bark underneath wasn't much different than the fishy skeleton that was barely covered by scales. The muck got under his fingernails and a plug of it had dropped into his ear somehow. But it was what he needed to do if the plan was going to work.

He thought he might slip right off the tree and fall, but a knot in the trunk let him stick one foot almost all the way in that helped him reach a great big tree limb that stuck out like a ship's plank. It took three tries—enough that he threw panicky glances over his shoulder, afraid the man would catch him before he'd had a chance to try his plan—but he managed to climb the trunk while still holding onto the knobby stick he'd grabbed on the way.

Inching out onto the mid-point of the branch, Kip tucked himself into a small ball, hoping that his jeans and sweater were dark and dirty enough to make him look like an owl or a chunk of dead leaves. After a second, he decided his face was probably the most noticeable thing about

him, but by scratching the trees bark with a finger, he scraped up a small gob of slime that he slapped onto his face like war paint, obscuring both cheeks and his forehead.

Then the only thing to do was try to ignore the cold and the dark and his own fear while he waited for his chance to win all the marbles.

* * *

He couldn't believe it.

Over an hour chasing this one stupid kid and he'd lost him in the middle of a freaking forest. His knee was on fire while the rest of him was about to fall off in frozen chunks. Somehow, the kid had either outran him or had left the main path.

Donnie pulled out a lighter and held it a few inches off the ground, trying to pick up the kid's tracks. Until now, Donnie had used nothing but the glint of the stream and the contrast between it and the ground to guide him, only pulling out the lighter from time to time to make sure he was still on the trail.

But, after a minute of studying the ground, he found nothing but mud and his own tracks, deep ridged ruts made by his work boots. He swore and straightened, considering. Maybe the kid had decided to run *in* the stream to hide his tracks, but it was a lot more likely that he'd simply turned and fled into the woods. The only thing left to do was turn around, find the trail, and try to track him down. Baring that, it was where he had to go to get out of this god-forsaken wood, anyway, so he might as well start back.

Donnie slipped the lighter back in his pocket and was starting the long, painful hike back up the slope when he froze in place. If he wasn't going crazy, a soft yellow light was bobbing up and down in the woods a hundred yards away and directly in line with the path he'd walked down.

His heart jumped in his throat. For the length of the chase, he'd thought he was the one doing the chasing, not the one being hunted.

Wait a minute, he told himself. It didn't have to be someone following him, specifically. It might simply be someone looking for the boy. Or a random hiker. Or a homeless guy camping out. Then his gut chimed in.

But what if it is someone looking for you?

He'd ignored his instinct to this point, but no more. It was time to listen. There was nothing to lose by being cautious and much to gain if he played it safe and used his head.

Placing his feet carefully—not easy, considering his knee—Donnie crept up the trail to see just who was following whom.

* * *

I suppose the first hint should've been the most obvious, that the tracks were so easy to see and follow. The second hint was when they ended at the base of a tree in a muddy mess.

The third hint was when Kip, with a blood-curdling scream, dropped from a branch about three feet above my head and laid a piece of Virginia pine against the side of my noggin.

As swings go, it wasn't a homerun, but it was definitely a base hit. Stars popped and exploded in my vision and the only thing that kept me from being knocked unconscious was the thin cotton batting of my hoodie. The blow was strong enough to stagger me, and I slipped to one knee in the mud. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Kip recover from his jump, all three and a half feet of him, looking like a Pygmy warrior as he brandished his knobby shillelagh over his head and scowled with a mud-streaked face.

An odd cocktail of chagrin, panic, and professional disappointment flashed through me as I thought—after all I'd survived in my life, including gun shot wounds, colorectal cancer, and thirty years as a homicide cop—I was about to have my ticket punched by a ten year-old with a tree branch.

"Kip!" I yelled, simultaneously trying to ward off his next attack and pull my hood back so he could see my face. "It's me! Mr. Singer, from next door."

Kip was winding up for another swing and I wasn't sure my exhortation would've been enough, but my hood fell away and maybe there was just enough light for him to see that I was actually someone he knew and not the creep who'd been tracking him all night.

"Mr. Singer?" he asked and the Pygmy warrior melted away to be replaced by the face of a scared ten year-old boy. "What are you doing here?"

"First things first," I said, when I was sure he wasn't going to bean me again. I squinted at the ground, looking for my flashlight. I found it a few feet away and turned the light on my face so he could confirm it was me. "Are you being chased by someone? A man?"

"Yes," he said in relief. "An old guy stopped by our back yard and tried to grab me, but Barkley—" he gulped "—Barkley attacked him and I got away."

"Where's the man now?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. I thought you were the guy."

"I guess so," I said, rubbing my head where he'd nailed me. "Speaking of Barkley, where is he?"

"The man," Kip said and his face started to cave, "the man killed him."

"Oh, no," I said. "I'm so sorry, Kip. What did he do to him?"

The kid held out his hand, demonstrating. "He...he zapped him with this thing in his hand and Barkley dropped and started jerking around on the ground."

I knelt, then reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "Okay, try not to think about it. I know it's hard, but it sounds like Barkley did a really brave thing and might've saved your life. Let's not waste that, okay?"

Kip nodded, gulped once, then the tears shut off just like that, surprising me. I'd seen cops with less self-control than this kid. I didn't want to tell him that if the man had done what I thought he had—used a stun gun on Barkley—then there was a good chance that his dog was still alive. Then again, if he wasn't, I didn't want to be the one to have lied to the poor kid.

With a few more words of encouragement, I got Kip back into fighting shape and laid out our plan. Which, all things considered, was simple: head back the way we came, watch out for the man, and walk home unless we found help on the way. Kip was to keep his stick at the ready in case we ran into trouble, while I had my flashlight. And it was time to start moving if we didn't want to freeze to death.

With the amazing resilience of kids, Kip took the new situation in stride and was actually smiling as we retraced our steps back up the streambed. I wanted us to stay stealthy, at least until we reached a street or a road, but it would be heartless to tell him to be quiet after everything he'd been through already, so I let him talk as long as he kept his voice down.

He outlined the night's events and I allowed myself a silent congratulations. I'd guessed almost everything that had happened until the point of Kip's ambush. As he gave me the would-be abductor's name and physical description, however, my cop's mind started churning. Saving Kip was paramount, but nabbing a hardened pedophile was a close second. Someone with this guy's confidence was going to try a repeat performance in another neighborhood as soon as he

got over his disappointment of losing Kip. And next time, there might not be a friendly neighborhood ex-cop in the area ready to intervene. Someone had to stop this guy.

"What made you think of the ambush?"

"I read about it in *Robin Hood and the Silver Horn*," he said. "Robin and Little John hid in a tree, then swung down when Prince John rode underneath them and clobbered him."

"Except you didn't have a Little John."

"No." He eyed me up and down. "But you're about the right size."

Kids said the strangest things. I laughed, unable to help myself, then gasped as I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. But too late.

Perhaps I'd been half-expecting it after Kip told me that Donnie had used a stun gun on Barkley. Or maybe the man, being an amateur, fired it prematurely, making it snap, and I flinched. Either way, one minute I was chuckling at Kip's observation about my size and the next I was hit with the most painful cramps I'd ever experienced. In fact, calling them cramps is underselling it. The man had only grazed me, but the horrible sensation ran along the right side of my body from my kidney to my shoulder like I'd been simultaneously doused with lit gasoline while a giant wrung me out like a dish towel.

Unable to control my own muscles, I dropped to the ground like a felled tree. The flashlight slipped from my nerveless hand and I had only a dim recognition through the pain that Kip was yelling something as a large shadow detached itself from the surrounding darkness and moved to swallow up the young boy.

Kicking my legs and flapping my arms produced no result. The only physical act I was capable of was squirming on the ground like a fish off a hook. A distant corner of my brain, the one that remembered my police training, was calmly working through my options as the rest of my brain babbled at it like a lunatic.

Memories of training courses flashed into my head. Laughing as we watched reluctant volunteers offer to demonstrate what it was like to take the charge and do the "drop and flop" on the gym floor. Reading the corporate literature on Tasers and stun guns and pepper spray, self-defense weapons that were as likely to be used against cops as bad guys. *A stun gun disrupts the signal from the brain to the muscles, causing the assailant to drop...As a general rule, a one second contact will repel and startle the attacker, giving intense pain and muscle contraction.*

Had he nailed me for a second? Two? I tried to unglue my tongue from the roof of my mouth. If he had a knife and decided this would be a great time to use it, it wasn't going to matter. I felt panic surge through me a second time tonight. I didn't want to die flat on my back, paralyzed and helpless.

But he seemed more concerned with going after Kip, who was swinging his club like he wanted to knock the guy's block off. Although, smart as he was, he was aiming low, trying to catch the jerk's knee again. Unfortunately, the man seemed prepared for that and grabbed Kip's arm on the backswing and ripped the stick away, then picked him up and swung him over a shoulder.

My heart sank as I watched the man slouch away, Kip kicking ineffectually as they went. There was little I could do now and probably little I'd be able to do at all. Maybe I recover from the stun gun in a few minutes, maybe not, but now the man had a hostage. The situation had gone from glorious and resolved to worse than ever.

Then the shadow stopped, hesitating, as if getting ready to run. Then, with a jerky movement, the man dropped Kip to the ground like a sack of garbage and threw his hands up to protect himself. A primal snarling filled the air as a blur, four-footed and light yellow, sprang at the man, hitting him in the chest at full speed.

With a high-pitched yell, the man crashed to the ground with a hundred and twenty pounds of dog on his chest. Even through my befuddled state, I was impressed with the savage noises coming out of Barkley's mouth as he tried to rip Donnie's face off. The two rolled in the dirt, then a short scream confirmed that *something* had just become the dog's chew toy. I struggled to move. Feeling was returning to my muscles that had been twitching uncontrollably a moment before and I held out hope that I could join my neighbor's dog in tearing parts off of Kip's would-be attacker.

But Donnie, made of sterner stuff than I would've guessed, bucked and twisted enough to throw Barkley off his chest and scramble to his feet. He landed two quick kicks that made the dog yelp pitifully and sink to the ground. As the lab attempted to get to his feet, the man tore off into the woods faster than I would've thought possible. Barkley made a game attempt to follow, but Kip yelled at him to stay and the dog reluctantly turned at the tree line and limped back to us.

"Mr. Singer? Are you okay?" Kip asked, looking down at me. Barkley shuffled over and sniffed my neck, then began licking my face.

"Angh," I said, the muscles of my neck and face still half paralyzed, then tried again.
"Don't...don't let him pee on me."

Kip smiled for the first time, his arm around his dog's neck, and waited for me to recover.

* * *

It was almost nine o'clock. Three hours, give or take, since anyone had seen Kip.

Rob stood at the bathroom sink, staring at himself in the mirror, looking at his own haggard face that had aged years over the course of a few hours, wondering if this is how it was going to be for the rest of his life. Counting off the hours. Then the days, weeks, months, and years. Waiting for his little boy to come back.

How did other families cope? They must find each other, he decided. It had to be the only way you could share the burden. No one else would understand. To the rest of the world, you were just the family who let their little boy disappear.

Water rolled off his nose and into the sink. He'd come home briefly to splash hot water on his face and hands, trying to warm himself for another house-to-house search after spending three hours outside already. Half the neighborhood had turned out to look, and the support was stunning, but Rob's inner skeptic whispered that he'd better get ready for the worst.

He reached for a hand towel to dry himself off so he could continue the search. But when he felt the rough terrycloth against his face, some block of resolve was kicked away and he had no choice but to let himself go for the first of a dozen, wracking sobs. He buried his face deep in the towel, using it to muffle the grief and fear he'd pinned down and locked in a box for the last three hours.

Which is why he didn't hear his name being called from somewhere near the front of the house. When a fist pounded on the bathroom door, he nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Dad!" Mikaela yelled through the door. "Come quick!"

A weird jumble of emotions ran through Rob, an almost physical sensation that he felt as a tight band across his chest. He threw the towel on the floor and fumbled with the doorknob. Mikaela was already gone and he sprinted down the hall, through the living room, and outside.

A small knot of people had gathered near the curb at the front of the house. Stiles and Ford were off to one side, leaning against their cruiser, arms folded, but faces split wide with smiles.

The police lights were still on and they spun silently, flashing the yard, people, and nearby cars with circus colors.

Rob ran across the yard. Kip was in Marge's arms, being squeezed like a rag doll. Their son was covered in mud from head to toe as though he'd been stirred in a pot of the stuff. Mikaela, her teenage aloofness forgotten, was crying and hugging whatever part of Kip she could get her hands on. Barkley was simultaneously wagging and barking, completely confused. Rob found himself hugging the three of them and this time the tears weren't stifled.

When they'd calmed down enough to separate into individual people again, Rob finally noticed, standing off to one side, a tall man looking mud-spattered and weary. Perplexed, he squinted at him until the other smiled and said, "Marty Singer, Rob. Am I that dirty?"

"Mr. Singer?" he asked, thoroughly confused. "What happened to you?"

"He found Kip, Rob," Marge said, her eyes bright.

"He saved me, Dad!" Kip yelled. Barkley barked. "Some weirdo tried to grab me and shove me in his car, but Mr. Singer followed Barkley and I hit Mr. Singer with my stick, then he got into a fight with the man, but the man zapped Mr. Singer with a thing and he fell down, but then Barkley saved both of us when he bit the man on the face and then we came back here—"

"Hold on," Rob said. He thought his head was going to explode. "You followed Kip, Mr. Singer?"

His neighbor shrugged, looking embarrassed. "I was, ah, coming out to chastise Barkley for knocking over my garbage can. Again." He glanced down at the dog, who grinned back at him, unfazed. "Something felt off when I couldn't find him, so I started looking around the neighborhood, afraid he'd headed down to the highway. I thought I was on a mission to save your dog, but it turned out to be more than that."

"And you found some man trying to grab Kip?" he said, feeling his stomach contract at the thought, a fist of fear and anger digging into his gut.

Singer nodded. "I didn't figure that out until later, unfortunately. He ambushed us and laid me out with the stun gun. But Barkley saved the day."

"You actually got shocked?"

Singer gave a wan smile. "Seven hundred volts' worth. Warmest I've been all night."

"Did they catch the...the man?" Rob asked, looking over at Stiles and Ford.

"No, not yet. After Barkley chased him off, he disappeared and I wanted to concentrate on getting back here. Stiles spotted us tromping along Barton looking like the Creatures from the Black Lagoon and gave us a ride. I managed a vague description of the guy for them, but Kip did better than that, since he'd been close enough to almost kick the guy's knee off."

"They think they might know where his car was parked," Kip said, eager to chime in. "They might be able to run his plates!"

"Careful, you sound like a cop," Singer said, grinning at him. Barkley bounced over, barked, then pushed his butt against Singer's leg.

"Marty," Rob said, holding his hand out. Singer grabbed it and shook. "I can't repay you, ever. There's nothing that comes close. But I've got a cold pot roast in the oven and burnt gravy on the stove inside, if that appeals to you."

"That sounds wonderful," Singer said. He looked down, surprised to find himself scratching Barkley's back end. "But maybe you could keep Barkley away from the garbage next Wednesday night?"

"You've got a deal," Rob said, then led the way inside.

* * *

It had been close. In both ways.

He'd almost had the boy. Twice, he'd been a half minute away from nabbing the little darling and getting him into the car. Except for bad luck and interference by the neighbor—a neighbor!—he would've had the pleasure of Kip's company right now.

And he'd been close in the other sense, too. It had been agony climbing back out of that cesspit of a forest and trudging up the hill, looking over his shoulder constantly for any sign of the police. But either he'd gotten lucky or his instinct was honed sharper than he thought, since he'd been alone on the road.

Only when he'd gotten close to Barton had he seen the tell-tale flash of red and blue, police lights letting him know that his freedom was hanging by the thinnest of threads. But the cops weren't moving or searching, they were parked. In fact, he realized with a little surge of joy, they were parked in front of the home he'd picked, where he'd found Kip in the first place. Just sitting

there. They didn't have a clue that the man they were looking for was less than a block away and slipping into his car right under their noses.

He'd watched in the rearview mirror for mile after mile after driving away, expecting at any moment to see those same lights overtake him and force him to the side of the road. He wasn't sure what he would do if that happened. Running from the cops was how you turned a misdemeanor into a felony...but getting sent to prison for molesting a child was just another way to commit suicide. Take your chances running or face the music and hope this wasn't your time?

In the end, he hadn't needed to worry. The lights faded into the distance, his breathing became easier, and he was even able to relax some on the hour's drive back to his home in Maryland.

A week had passed since that night. Pain from the dog bite had faded, though it would take weeks for the scar to do the same. He'd tell coworkers that he'd been bitten on a walk to rehab his knee, which would safely explain the limp and the scar at the same time. The two together were too memorable to expect people not to notice and ask.

But for now, he had the weekend to contemplate where he'd gone wrong and what he could do differently next time. He needed a different shtick, he thought. The old one wasn't working. But this was no time to rush. He ought to take it easy for a while, listen to his gut, try again. Maybe in DC this time, since Virginia would be off-limits for a while.

He'd just sat down with a beer to watch some TV when a knock on the door brought his wandering attention into focus. He sighed and set the beer down, then went to answer the door. His landlord had never had a peephole installed and so Donnie was completely stunned to see three uniformed policemen, one from his own district and two in different colors, standing on his step when he opened the door.

"Donnie Flanagan?" the local policeman said. "This is officers Stiles and Ford. They'd like to have a word with you, sir, if you don't mind."

The cop's voice trailed off as he, and the other two policemen saw the livid bite mark. Stiles and Ford exchanged a glance. Then Stiles reached for the handcuffs on his belt.

And, this time, Donnie's gut didn't have a single thing to tell him.

Author's Note

The Guardian began life as *The Wicked Flea*, a light-hearted, tongue-in-cheek nod to the fifth book in the Marty Singer series, *The Wicked Flee*. Barkley, of course, is the one with the fleas and Marty's irritation with the Cohens' dog was supposed to be the somewhat slapstick central theme.

While writing the story, however, I found that I was crafting something more substantial and serious than a flippant tale of Marty versus the neighbor's garbage-obsessed Labrador. The words started writing themselves and I ended up with something much different than what I'd started.

I hope readers still find reason to laugh at a few points—the bones of the original parody remain, and I've always tried to inject humor into all of the Singer stories. But I think that *The Guardian* in its final form can take its place next to the other, more serious plots in the series.

Barkley hasn't made his last appearance in Marty's life, however, so there may still be room for another try at *The Wicked Flea*. The Cohens' *still* can't remember to bring him back inside on Wednesday nights...

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About the Author

Matthew Iden writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, thrillers, crime fiction, and contemporary literary fiction with a psychological twist. He is the author of the Marty Singer detective series:

[*A Reason to Live*](#)

[*Blueblood*](#)

[*One Right Thing*](#)

[*The Spike*](#)

The Wicked Flee (July 2014)

If you'd like to be emailed about future releases by Matthew Iden, [please sign up here](#). New subscribers will also receive the Marty Singer short story, *The Guardian*, **free** as a thank you. Your address will never be abused and you may unsubscribe any time.

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