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Marcia woke up slowly. Her head hurt. Her shoulder throbbed against whatever hard surface it was pressed to. She also couldn't see anything. But her vision wasn't inhibited. Wherever she was, it was dark.

But none of that was the worst thing. She was naked and she acutely realized she was moving; moving fast. Much swifter than she *ever* cared to move. Her heart raced in her ribcage.

Marcia suffered from tachophobia, the irrational phobia of speed or going too fast. She never understood why she acquired this fear but it started when she was fifteen and visiting Cedar Point amusement park in northern Ohio. She and several of her friends went to the park for a weekend of roller coasters, water rides, sugary sodas, and various artery-clogging foods. Things went fine for Marcia at first. She rode two roller coasters and loved every second, as she always had in the past. But when her group decided to take on the *Magnum XL 200*, one of the tallest, fastest, steepest roller coasters at the time, something snapped in Marcia. After she and her friends wound their way through most of the serpentine paths, Marcia watched a chain of coaster cars as it reached the summit of the initial two hundred-foot hill. As the screams of the riders started to dance into her ears, Marcia felt her heart flutter, then speed up. Sweat formed on her brow, upper lip, and under her arms. Her skin started to crawl and shivers scurried up and down her spine. The screams of the riders intensified in her ears until they became deafening to Marcia and she started to visibly shake. At that point, it was time for her and her friends to advance in line but Marcia didn't budge. One of the boys she was with tried to take Marcia's arm and move her along while other people waiting in line shouted for Marcia to keep advancing, but she stood petrified watching the coaster cars plummet down the steep steel slope. Tears slid uncontrollably from Marcia's eyes and, without meaning to, she let go of her bladder. People behind her started to point and shriek with laughter while Marcia's friends tried to get her to move. Marcia soon added her own shrieks to the mix and it took two security guards to essentially carry her out of the line and away from the coaster.

After she got cleaned up and changed into a fresh pair of shorts from her backpack, she sat on a bench with her best friend next to her. Marcia wasn't able to explain what happened. She could only tell her friend the thought of travelling at such a speed suddenly and violently overwhelmed her. Marcia hadn't been able to ride any more rides and wasn't even able to look at any of the faster ones. Things got worse the next day when they went to leave. The boy whose car they were traveling in took a right turn to enter Ohio State Route 2 and, before he even got the speedometer up to thirty miles an hour, Marcia was in a full blown panic attack. It took her and her friends seven times as long to get home to Minneapolis than it normally would have because they were forced to use routes where the car didn't exceed twenty-five miles an hour. Even at that speed, Marcia held onto her best friend and shuddered most of the way.

Twenty years later, her phobia was relatively unchanged. In twenty years, she'd never been on a freeway. She'd not flown on a plane either. She lived within walking distance of her job and the few stores she needed to keep her and her husband in a stocked house.

Her husband tolerated her phobia. They'd been married for eight years and in that time, he'd never tried to get her to face her phobia. Marcia often wondered why in the beginning of their marriage, but when she came to realize the fact that Chad was a full blown alcoholic and wrestling with a few fears of his own, she stopped wondering.

But now, something was very wrong. Marcia tried to remember what happened. She'd been on her second glass of pinot grigio after work. She sat by the open den window reading a magazine and listening to her headphones when she felt a sharp prick in her neck. She turned to look at what might have bitten or stung her and saw the window screen had been cut. An arm was retracting through it and the hand at the end of it held a syringe. As she looked up to see who owned the arm, the world swam out of focus and she passed out.

Awake again, she was aware of the motion around her. Devastatingly aware. She started to whimper. She tried to move her hands but found her wrists restrained where her hands rested on her thighs. She immediately began to sweat. Not a light misting but thin streams worked their way across her forehead, into her eyes, from her arm pits, and from behind her knees. She moved her head around, trying to see anything.

"Ah! You're awake!" a mechanical voice said from somewhere in the dark speeding place.

"Wha...Wha...Wha?" Marcia stammered. Stammering was all she could manage. She became aware she would piss all over herself if the motion didn't stop very soon.

“How you feeling, Marcia?” the voice said. “Scared?” There was a taunting tone discernable even though the voice was obviously coming through a microphone.

“Wh...Wh... Where...?” Marcia managed.

Without answering, the voice said, “Tachophobia? That’s a good one, Marcia. Unique. And with such a low tolerance threshold! I gather you’re feeling pretty uncomfortable right now.”

Marcia trembled. *Do I know that voice?* she asked herself.

“Yes, Marcia. I can see you’re pretty fucking scared right now. And you don’t know the half of the shit you’re in,” the voice said. “I’m sure your wondering. I have a camera on you. It has night vision on it so I can see you even though all you see is darkness. You *do* look pretty fucking spooked. Want me to fill you in on the rest?”

Marcia quickly shook her head. As she suspected, she began to urinate when whatever she was in shook violently. Waves of indignity washed in to join her boiling anxiety.

“Too bad, so sad,” the voice goaded.

Marcia instantly took control of her urine stream and was able to stop it. The phrase the voice just said was more than familiar to her. “Ch... Ch.... Ch...,” she stuttered. *Chad?* her mind clearly said. *Too bad, so sad* was a line her husband said somewhat frequently.

“Right now, Marcia, you’re in the trunk of a car. It’s night time. And we are cruising at about...” There was a dramatic pause. “Seventy-three miles an hour on Interstate 35 W.”

When the voice said “seventy-three miles an hour” Marcia couldn’t hold herself anymore and her bladder let loose again. In spite of the warmth of the fluid, she felt ice cold. Every muscle became rigid.

“And right about... now, I suspect the stimulant I forced down your throat while you were knocked out is kicking in gear,” the voice said. “It’s a special pill. One of my own concoction that the FDA would surely not approve of. How do you like it?”

Marcia’s tears burst free. It was true; whatever he gave her *was* taking affect her. Impossibly, her heart seemed to speed up even faster. *Why is this happening to me?* she asked herself.

“I can see you don’t like it one bit,” the voice said and began to laugh. “Ah. We’ve got the highway mostly to ourselves now, Marcia. Would you like to see what I’ve done with this car? It’s special just for you.”

Marcia tried to shake her head in the negative but felt paralyzed. The stimulant in her blood, whatever it was, was working fast now. Blood pounded in her ears. Sweat poured from her. Her stomach felt sour. She could smell her urine as it soaked into the floor of the trunk.

“Check this out, you fearful bitch,” the voice said.

There was a click from somewhere around her and then to her right, Marcia saw the trunk lid open up. The night was dark but not as dark as the inside of the trunk and she could see other headlights in the distance behind them.

A millisecond later, the speed hit her. The wind rushed in and slid across her exposed skin. The landscape raced by at an alarming pace. The red taillights glowed in anger and warning. Marcia began to panic. Her eyes went wide; her heart thundered; she started to make a guttural choking sound mixed with sobs. Rational thought left her.

Then the trunk lid slammed closed on its own instantly cutting off the air and making the enclosed place seem stifling. But Marcia couldn’t care about that. She was too aware of the speed. With every sound the car made against the pavement, she felt herself slipping closer and closer to the edge.

“That was fun, right, Marcia?” the voice teased. “I’m kinda proud of the modifications I made to the car. How about another glimpse?”

The trunk lid flew up again and Marcia was powerless but to look out into the maw of the night as it sped by. This second dose of speed made her mind step right up to the edge of a very deep chasm. She would rather die than endure this any longer.

And then the trunk slammed closed again.

“We’re going to test the limits of your little phobia, Marcia,” the voice said. “Who knows? Maybe when we’re done, you’ll finally be over it. If you are, great! But I’ll still kill you.” A pause. “We’re doing eighty miles an hour now, Marcia,” the voice said with emphasis on the eighty. “Want to have a look?”

But Marcia was unable to react. She heard the word “eighty” and her mind fractured.

The trunk lid opened.

With no sane thoughts left, Marcia stared into the night. Death would be preferable to this speed and the devastating effect it had on her. She shifted, rolled, and shimmed herself to the edge of the trunk.

“What are you doing, Marcia?” the voice said with obvious surprise. “Get back in the...”

But it was too late.

Marcia climbed out of the trunk and rolled away from it. She smacked onto the pavement and it began to shred her flesh and rend her bones. The last thing she saw was a pair of rapidly approaching headlights. The last thing she smelled and heard was tires burning and screeching in an attempt to stop. The last thing she felt was the hot rubber of the tires of the eighteen wheeler that ran her over.

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In the driver’s seat of the car, a man looked into the rearview mirror and watched his prey’s body bounce across the highway after she threw herself out of the trunk. He was furious she got away like that but he couldn’t go back for her.

But he was somewhat successful. Her phobia had killed her. Or at least caused her to kill herself.

Tachophobia he said to himself. *That’s a good one. And at least now that whiny bitch is finally dead.* He returned his eyes to the road and then took the next exit and doubled back. The police would be on site soon and he knew of a good place to watch while they scraped her corpse off the interstate.

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Chad Dean crawled up from the drunken haze he fell into a few hours ago when he got home from his shift. Somewhere, something was pounding. A good part of him was sure that, after four beers and five shots of bourbon, the noise was coming from inside his own head.

He rolled over on the bed. He didn't recall coming into the master bedroom but that was no surprise. He realized he was on top of the bedclothes and that he was naked. He didn't mind. His side of the bed was near an open window and a breeze blew in and danced across his bare skin. The breeze found his exposed manhood and he felt it stiffen with arousal.

He blinked his eyes open just as another session of the pounding ended and looked beside him where Marcia should be sleeping. He meant to rouse her and see if she would be up for a middle-of-the-night quickie. But Marcia wasn't there.

"Marcia?" Chad said aloud. When Chad got home from his shift, Marcia had been sitting in her usual chair working on some wine and reading. They kissed, chatted for a few minutes about their days, and when it was clear Marcia wanted to get back to her magazine, Chad did what he always did when he got home. He started to drink.

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Chad's path to addictive drinking started nine years ago after a night he would never forget. He was twenty-seven at the time and thinking that his life couldn't be any better when it suddenly changed. Chad was a beat cop then, often working the rougher area of north Minneapolis. He was relatively new to the police force and knew, on his way to detective, he had to start somewhere. One night, he and his partner were on patrol two blocks off of Fremont Avenue. In the passenger seat of the cruiser, Chad happened to look out the window when he saw something that alarmed him on the side of one of the many abandoned homes that were popping up everywhere due to the recession. If he was looking any other direction at that second, he would have missed it and maybe several lives would be different. He directed his partner to stop and they got out of the patrol car. On the pedestrian sidewalk, they slowly walked until they could both see what Chad saw; and out of the car now, they could hear as well. There were four people there and the sounds from each of them would haunt Chad's thoughts for at least the next nine years, if not

forever. Three of the people were men, one white, one black, and one east Asian, and all appeared to be in their twenties. All three of these men had T-shirts on but pulled up over their heads and around their necks so their heavily tattooed chests were exposed. They all also had their pants down around their ankles. The white and Asian men had their sides to Chad and his partner so their faces were partially in view. They were slowly stroking themselves while they watched the black man who was obviously copulating with the fourth individual. But as Chad and his partner neared even closer, it was clear that this was not consensual sex. The black man was aggressively raping the fourth person and Chad quickly saw it was a boy around fourteen years of age. He put his hand on his holster and undid the safety strap at the same time as shouting "Hey!" His shout startled the three men and the black man withdrew from the boy. He also moved what he was holding in the boy's mouth. A pistol, and Chad recognized it as a simple Beretta. The pistol had been responsible for the muffled squeals that emanated from the boy which Chad would never forget. Chad shouted to his partner and fumbled with his gun while the black man whirled on them. The other two rapists quickly yanked their pants up and drew their own guns and, before Chad could do anything, bullets were flying in his direction. He slammed to the ground and eventually worked his own service revolver from its holster and started to return fire. The firefight was over in less than ten seconds but it felt like ten years to Chad. The rapists fled but not before making some of their shots count. Chad's partner didn't get down fast enough and, even though he wore Kevlar on his torso, it did nothing to stop the bullet that entered his skull through his eye. His corpse lay splayed in the weedy lawn and stared one-eyed up at the stars.

Chad called for backup with his radio, explained the situation to the dispatcher, and gave a brief description of the perpetrators. He stared at his lifeless partner then. Just minutes ago, they were talking about where to grab some chow and now his partner was dead. He started to shake where he stood before he heard strained whimpers from behind him. He realized he had forgotten about the rape victim and spun around. He hurried through the high grass and his heart sank as he neared the boy. Closer to the victim now, Chad quickly realized he was wrong about the boy's age. When the investigation was over, Chad learned the boy had only just turned eleven. But turning eleven didn't make him immortal and he lay, mostly naked, with a few tatters of his clothing hanging off of him, half in the weeds and half on a crumbling sidewalk. A bullet hole was in his neck and blood gurgled from it. Chad fell to his knees beside the boy and tried to comfort and assure him while he radioed for a second ambulance but the pallor of the boy's skin told Chad it would be too late. And it was. The boy died less than a minute later still trying to call for his mother. The investigation would also later reveal that the boy had died as a result of a bullet from Chad's gun. When he learned this, Chad was devastated. His intention was to stop the crime and

bring justice to the criminals and, instead, he had killed an innocent victim and lost his partner. The rapists were eventually caught and given life sentences for the felonies they committed but that didn't stop Chad from assuming his fair share of the guilt. After the crime scene was cleared around dawn the next morning, Chad was dismissed to go home where he immediately grabbed a bottle of Jack Daniels and without meaning to, set himself on an alcoholic's quest for redemption at the bottom of a bottle.

Chad was put behind a desk after that. Six months later, he met Marcia and the pair started dating. It wasn't long before Chad realized Marcia was laden with her own demons and a rather unusual phobia but he figured as long as she didn't get in the way of his drinking, he didn't care. They married a few months after that. Shortly after their wedding, Chad went to recertify for his marksmanship. In the firing range, he quickly became unnerved by the cacophony of gunfire. But he didn't want to be seen with a weakness. He un-holstered his own firearm. It, of course, wasn't the same gun he had accidentally killed the eleven year old with. It was the first time he held a pistol since that fateful night and while the gun weighed no more than a couple pounds, it felt like a boulder in his grip. He managed to empty the clip with eyes pressed closed and a shaky hand and when he was done, he quickly dropped the weapon on the counter in front of him. He stared at the lethal metal and it taunted him; mocked him; reminded him of his failure. Days later he couldn't even look at his gun, let alone touch it. He actually became terrified of it. He learned it was a phobia called hoplophobia. In the months that followed, the intensity of the phobia waxed as did his alcoholism. The latter he couldn't care less about but the phobia had to be quashed if he was ever going to maintain a career in law enforcement.

He started seeing a therapist, one that Marcia often saw, and went on a ten-month struggle to rid himself of the phobia. He failed at that too. He was a desk jockey with a fear of his own gun and well on the way to corroding his liver and other digestive organs.

Several years later, he quit the police force. Even at his desk, the sight of guns moving around him all the time became unbearable. He took another desk job; this one in front of a computer doing data entry.

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Chad rolled on his back in bed wondering where Marcia was. She had probably fallen asleep in her chair. He moved his hand down his torso and began to gently stroke himself.

Then the pounding began again.

Chad realized something or someone was banging on the front door of the house. He speculated Marcia must have finished her bottle of wine if she was able to sleep through that, and he wished he'd had another beer and shot to help *him* sleep through it too, even though he could tell his stomach was going to be angry with the amount of booze he'd already dumped into it.

He let go of himself, sighed, and turned to the clock.

2:45 AM it read.

"Who the *fuck* is banging on my door at 2:45 in the morning?" he grumbled to the empty room.

More pounding carried into the bedroom. Whoever was out there wasn't going away.

Chad swung his feet off the bed, padded to his dresser, and took out a pair of black briefs, which he pulled on. He left the bedroom and headed for the front door. He passed the den in the process and saw the light was still on and Marcia's reading material rested haphazardly on the floor. Chad didn't notice the window screen by the chair had been cut. Someone would point it out soon enough.

Where is she? Chad wondered.

More pounding.

"Okay. Okay. Ease up on my wood will you?" he grumbled as he approached the door. He undid the deadbolt and opened the door. A face he instantly recognized was there. "Terry?" Chad said with genuine surprise.

Terry Calles was a young ambitious detective who'd transferred to Minneapolis from somewhere down south two years before Chad quit the department. Chad basically liked the slightly younger detective but still didn't know a lot about him.

"Mr. Dean?" Terry said. "Is everything okay? I've been knocking for some time."

"I was asleep," Chad returned and hooked a thumb behind him. "And what's this 'Mr. Dean' shit? It's Chad. You know me."

"Have you been here all night, Mr. Dean?" Terry asked ignoring Chad's directive.

"My shift ended at nine. I hit the liquor store then came home. I've been in bed since about midnight," Chad returned trying to sound convincing. He admitted to himself that he'd drunk enough in those couple hours to make anything he'd done since about 11:15 a complete blur.

“Is your wife home?” Terry asked.

Chad recognized the tone. Terry was fishing. “I... I’m not sure I guess. She was here when I got home but I haven’t seen her since your pounding woke me up. I guess I’m a little surprised *she* didn’t answer the door.”

“I’m actually not surprised at all,” Terry returned sharply. “Is there anyone else here who can verify where you’ve been since you got home from work?”

Chad shook his head. “Just Marcia. What do you mean you’re not surprised Marcia didn’t answer the door?”

“We got a call from the Blaine PD tonight,” Terry started. “Seems there’s been some kind of incident.”

“Blaine?” Chad blurted. Blaine was a suburb miles to the north of Minneapolis. Chad scratched his head. “What’s this got to do with Marcia?” He laughed. “You’re not going to tell me you found her in some bar up there are you? Because Marcia is terrified of speed. She can’t ride in a car, bus, the light rail. She can’t move more than a few miles an hour.”

“It’s difficult to be sure,” Terry said. “We only have this to go off of.” He pulled his smart phone from his pocket, clicked a few icons, and brought up a photo. “ID bracelet they found says ‘Marcia Dean.’ Do you recognize this, Mr. Dean?” He showed the image on the phone to Chad.

A woman’s hand rested palm down on freeway pavement. Though Chad couldn’t see it from the photo, the hand could have easily been disembodied. Around the wrist was something he *did* recognize. His wife’s ID bracelet. Marcia had gotten one just like it after they married. If that wasn’t telling enough, the diamond in the ring setting on the ring finger was one Chad himself selected.

“What the fuck is this?” Chad said. His heart sped up in his chest. Any whispers of the booze in his blood stream dissipated leaving only a headache behind.

“Blaine PD got the call to come out to a... well... a grisly scene on I-35 at the edge of their jurisdiction,” Terry began moving the phone away from Chad. “A woman got hit by a semi. At least that’s what we think. It’s too difficult to be sure right now.”

“And you think it was Marcia? Impossible!” Chad asserted. “She *can’t* get out of the city.” But the image of her diamond and her bracelet resurfaced in his mind.

“We can’t be sure it’s her yet,” Terry said putting hands up defensively.

“Why not?” Chad pressed.

Terry sighed. “Get some pants and a shirt on, *Chad*,” Terry instructed. “The woman’s body is in pretty bad shape. We’re going to need you to come tell us if it’s your wife or not.”

Chad opened his mouth to protest more but stopped himself. This was just police procedure and there was really no way he was going to get around it. Surly this dead woman on the highway was someone else who just happened to have a similar combination of jewelry. There were over three million people in the metro area and it was definitely possible that someone out there did. Highly unlikely with her same name on the bracelet but still possible. When he got back, he would find Marcia merely passed out in the guest room or on the sofa in the basement probably after having more than one bottle of wine. She would be hungover but none the worse for wear. “Okay, *Detective*. I’ll humor you. Wait here a minute please,” he said. Chad left the door open, turned around, and headed back for the bedroom he shared with his wife. He went back to the dresser, took out a pair of running shorts and a T-shirt and pulled them on.

In his T-shirt drawer was a travel-sized flask of silver tequila. He picked it up, opened it, and drank two separate mouthfuls.

It would be the last drink he would get for a while.



“Alright,” Terry said. “We’re here.” He’d pulled them up to the Anoka County Medical Examiner’s building at 3:41 AM.

Chad was silent during the entire drive. Partly because he didn’t want to say anything that could later be used to incriminate him and partly because he didn’t want the smell of tequila vapors to hit the detective and possibly set him off. But now that they were here and he was able to get out of the car, Chad did feel like talking. “What time was the body found?”

“Found?” Terry questioned, raising an eyebrow and closing his own car door. “Well, I’m not sure that’s the right word. The semi driver came across her... so to speak... at 12:05.”

“Any chance this semi driver is lying... Maybe put her there himself?” Chad said.

“Unlikely,” Terry said. His loafers clicked on the pavement as they approached the building. “There was a lady travelling not far behind the semi. She said she’d been behind it for a while and saw it slam on its brakes.”

“Any fingerprints of the victim?” Chad asked. They were inside now and making their way to the stairs that would take them down to the morgue.

“Well, yeah. I showed you the photo of the hand back at your place. Even still we’ve got half a set of fingerprints... at least,” Terry said.

“Any matches?” Chad asked.

Terry shook his head. “Those prints aren’t in any of the ID systems out there so whoever she was, she’s never been printed by law enforcement.”

Marcia’s never been printed Chad’s mind nagged. “I’m guessing there’s no way of knowing if the woman was alive or dead before the semi hit her?”

“So far, you’d be guessing right,” Terry returned. They were at the morgue entrance and stepped through the double doors. “And given the state of the body, we may never know.”

“So if the body was found in Blaine’s jurisdiction on a federal highway, why are you involved?” Chad asked. Inside the morgue, the sterile smell could not entirely mask the malodor of all the death that had come through this space.

“I’ve got a buddy on the Blaine PD. I was up at his place playing cards when the call came in. When we got the vic’s name and ran it, we found only one Marcia Dean... though there were plenty of M Deans. Your address came up and since you were in *my* jurisdiction, I said I’d come and collect you,” Terry explained.

Chad didn’t like the way Terry said “collect.” “Am I under arrest here?” he said quietly.

“No. No,” Terry said. He cocked an eyebrow, eyed Chad like he was a small animal, and the corner of his mouth curled into a smug smile. “Not yet, anyway. It’s a damn shame you don’t have an alibi though.”

A cold sweat broke out on Chad’s brow after the detective said this. *But he’s right* he said in his mind. *I don’t have an alibi. Or even a fucking recollection of anything that happened after chasing that fourth shot of bourbon with that fourth beer.* The thought of alcohol made his mouth water and he desperately wanted a drink. He looked around and discovered unless he was going to drink some kind of a sterilizing alcohol, he wasn’t going to get a drink here. “Terry? Why would I kill my wife? I love Marcia,” Chad said honestly.

“Motives are a dime a dozen,” Terry said and shrugged. “If you did it, something will come up.”

“*If* this body you found is even my wife,” Chad countered.

“Well we’re about the find that out,” Terry returned. “Hey, Holly? Holly? You around?”

They heard a rustling in a corner of the morgue space. A second later, a woman appeared from an office that was tucked away back there. She was tall, thin, and quite striking with sapphire blue eyes and chestnut-colored straight hair that framed the porcelain skin of her face. “I’m here, Terry,” Holly said as she made herself visible.

Chad thought she was one of the most beautiful women he’d ever seen.

“Is this the gentleman who’s going to hopefully ID the freeway victim?” Holly asked. “Results came back on the blood at least. The type is B negative.”

Chad knew his wife’s blood type was B negative.

“This is Chad Dean,” Terry said. “Marcia Dean’s husband.”

Chad stuck out his hand and Holly shook it, though it felt to Chad like she couldn’t get her hand away from him fast enough.

Sensing this, Holly said, “Sorry. It’s not you. It’s touching the living in general. Occupational hazard. I’m the assistant medical examiner. So I get the night shift.” She shrugged and bounced her blue eyes with her last statement.

“Holly? Why do you keep it so dark down here?” Terry asked.

Holly chuckled. “I don’t need a lot of light most of the time, Detective. For that matter, no one here really does.” She waved her hand toward the rows of closed stainless steel refrigerators that were used to house the bodies of the dead before burial. “So I save energy every way I can. You know? For the future. Humanity should really be terrified of the future. Especially if we keep adding to the population like we are.”

“Does the future scare *you*, Holly?” Chad asked.

“Oh, heavens yes,” Holly said. “It’s not my biggest fear by any means but it’s up there. My biggest fear is one of those irrational phobias, you know? I suppose a lot of people have them.”

“I suppose so,” Chad agreed thinking about his own phobia of firearms. *He* certainly didn’t think his phobia was irrational. Crippling, debilitating, and mind-rending came to mind, but not irrational. “So what *is* your biggest irrational fear then?”

“Look,” Terry said with a tone of irritation. “Can we just get to the body already?”

“Of course,” Holly said. “Follow me. I’ve only done a cursory examination of the body. I’ll do the post mortem after Mr. Dean hopefully identifies her. A couple of Anoka’s finest detectives are here waiting, It is their scene, after all, though I got the distinct impression they’d be happy to hand this off to the state police or the FBI since it happened on a federal highway.”

“That’ll be for us cops to figure out,” Terry said.

“Uh. Right,” Holly said. “The body’s in here.” She stopped beside a door that led into an exam room and waved a hand for them to enter.

Terry stepped in first and Chad followed. Inside the exam room they did indeed find two plain clothes detectives who looked grim and ceased whatever conversation they were having. They eyed Chad suspiciously. On the table in the center of the room, beneath a bank of high-powered lights, a body bag rested.

“Okay, Mr. Dean,” Holly began. “I have to warn you. This is... going to be pretty shocking. More so if it’s actually your wife, but I want you to be prepared for what you’re about to see here. It’s not going to be pretty.”

Chad nodded. He took a deep breath and wished again that he could have a drink. He thanked whatever forces working tonight that each of the three officers in the room had his firearm concealed. “Okay. I’m ready,” Chad said.

Holly nodded and moved to the body bag. She slowly unzipped it. When she was finished, she looked again at Chad and thought he looked like a frightened puppy. His sleep-roused sandy blonde hair was tousled. His hazel eyes were wide. And she recognized a slight tremor in him. But when he nodded again, she pulled the bag cover off of the body.

“That still’s gotta be one of the worst things I’ve ever seen,” Terry said when the corpse was revealed. He grimaced.

“I’ve seen worse,” Holly said. “But not much. Mr. Dean? Can you step closer and take a look? Can you tell us if this is your wife?”

Chad felt frozen where he stood. Finally, Terry stepped up behind Chad and moved him closer to the table.

Chad looked down at the table.

The lower portion of the body was intact at least. Even though there were many cuts, scrapes, bruises, and abrasions visible on the shins, knees, and thighs. The left foot was turned almost backwards and the ankle was black and blue from the shattered bones beneath. The torso was not so good. Broken ribs jutted through the bloody skin in places near the sternum, clavicle, and the right breast. The left arm was still attached but the right had been torn off and rested beside the body. The flesh below the elbow was a shredded wreck with no recognizable forearm or hand. But the head and neck were the worst. The gigantic truck tire had literally squashed the skull to pieces. All that remained was a gelatinous pile of

tissue, hair, and bits of bone that the crew had been able to scrape off the highway and plop into the bag about where the head belonged.

“Cripes!” Chad eked out. He felt acid boiling in his stomach and mixing with the tequila that hadn’t been absorbed yet. It started to burn into his esophagus. “How the fuck do you expect anyone to identify that?” He staggered back, whirled around and knew he was going to vomit. He searched for a sink, raced to it, and made it in the nick of time. He had little in his stomach and regurgitated a small stream of thick reddish goo that reeked of stale beer, the tomato soup he’d had for dinner, and the unpleasant combination of bourbon and tequila. But even though the face was a mangled mess, Chad recognized the shape of her breasts, her pubic hair, and of course her ring and bracelet.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Dean,” Holly said. She looked at Terry. “Maybe we can get some DNA from their house and match...”

“Does... does the body...,” Chad began while he clutched the edge of the sink. “On her backside... Marcia has a birth mark on her lower back. Right side. Three small circles of lighter skin that form an almost perfect equilateral triangle. She had a white rose tattooed right in the middle of it.” He suddenly laughed. “Fuck. She can’t ride in a car but taking a needle to her skin was nothing.”

“Can one of you help me?” Holly said to the Anoka detectives. With a grumble one of them moved over and they lifted the body together. Holly quickly found the birthmark and tattoo. “Is that enough of an ID for you, Detective?”

The detective nodded. “Step over here, Mr. Dean. I’m takin’ you into custody.”

“What?!” Chad, Terry, and Holly all said together.

“His wife’s dead and I heard he ain’t got no alibi,” the detective said. “It’s always the husband.” He unclipped his handcuffs and moved toward Chad.

But Terry stepped between them. “No alibi is not evidence. You need evidence to make your case. Not your assumption that the husband always does it.”

“I can still take him in and hold him for questioning,” the detective snapped back.

“But you won’t,” Terry said forcefully. He puffed up his chest. “I won’t let you take this man anywhere without some good evidence. We may not be all that close but this man was once a good cop.”

“Yeah?” the detective said. “Getting his partner killed and killing some innocent kid?”

Chad started to advance on the detective. “Man! Fuck you! How dare you say that to me!” he bellowed. He had every intention of striking the detective but Terry held him and the detective’s jacket opened revealing gun metal that glinted in the bright light of the exam room. The sight of the firearm ignited Chad’s hoplophobia and he gasped and stopped.

“Gentlemen!” Holly shouted. “This is a morgue. Have some respect for the dead!”

“Look,” Terry grumbled. “Gather your evidence. Then make your arrest. Until then, Mr. Dean is going home.”

The detective eyed Terry, looked at his partner, and then glared at Chad. “Fine! But don’t even think of going anywhere, buddy.” He shifted his gaze to Holly. “You get the autopsy report to me right away, lady. I want to know if this woman was dead before or after the truck hit her.” He didn’t wait for a response and stormed out of the room. His partner followed.

When the Anoka detectives were gone, and the tension slightly eased in the room, Holly began to close up the body bag. “I... I saw how you reacted to something in the detective’s jacket. It was his gun, wasn’t it?” she asked Chad.

He nodded slowly. “Everyone has their irrational phobias, right? Speaking of which, you never got to tell me yours.”

“Spiders,” Holly said with no hesitation. “Can’t stand them.”

Terry looked at Chad, then Holly, then back to Chad. He said, “C’mon, Chad. Let’s let the doctor do her exam.”

