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Night-time Is My Time

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The definition of an owl had always pleased him: A night bird of prey . . . sharp talons and soft plumage which permits noiseless flight . . . applied figuratively to a person of nocturnal habits. *"I am The Owl," he would whisper to himself after he had selected his prey, "and night-time is my time."*

1

It was the third time in a month he had come to Los Angeles to observe her daily activities. "I know your comings and goings," he whispered as he waited in the pool house. It was one minute of seven. The morning sun was filtering through the trees, causing the waterfall that spilled into the pool to sparkle and shimmer.

He wondered if Alison could sense that she had only one minute more of life on earth. Did she have an uneasy feeling, perhaps a subconscious urge to skip her swim this morning? Even if she did, it wouldn't do her any good. It was too late.

The sliding glass door opened, and she stepped onto the patio. Thirty-eight years old, she was infinitely more attractive than she had been twenty years ago. Her body, tanned and sleek, looked good in the bikini. Her hair, now honey blond, framed and softened her sharp chin.

She tossed the towel she was carrying onto a lounge chair. The blinding anger that had been simmering inside him escalated into rage, but then, just as quickly, was replaced by the satisfaction of knowing what he was about to do. He had seen an interview in which a daredevil stunt diver swore that the moment before he began to dive, knowing that he was risking his life, was an indescribable thrill, a sensation he needed to repeat over and over again.

For me it's different, he thought. The moment before I reveal myself to them is what gives me the thrill. I know they're going to die, and when they see me, they know, too. They understand what I am going to do to them.

Alison stepped onto the diving board and stretched. He watched as she bounced softly, testing the board, then positioned her arms in front of her.

He opened the door of the pool house just as her feet lifted from the board. He wanted her to see him when she was in midair. Just before she hit the water. He wanted her to understand how vulnerable she was.

In that split second, their eyes locked. He caught her expression as she plunged into the water. She was terrified, aware that she was incapable of flight.

He was in the pool before she had surfaced. He hugged her against his chest, laughing as she flailed about, kicking her feet. How foolish she was. She should simply accept the inevitable. "You're going to die," he whispered, his voice calm, even.

Her hair was in his face, blinding him. Impatiently he shook it away. He didn't want to be distracted from the pleasure of feeling her struggle.

The end was coming. In her craving for breath, she had opened her mouth and was gulping water. He felt her final frantic effort to break away from him, then the hopelessly feeble tremors as her body began to go limp. He pressed her close, wishing he could read her mind. Was she praying? Was she begging God to save her? Was she seeing the light that people who have experienced a near-death event claim to have seen?

He waited a full three minutes before he released her. With a satisfied smile he watched as her body sank to the bottom of the pool.

It was five minutes after seven when he climbed out of the pool,

pulled on a sweatshirt, shorts, sneakers, a cap, and dark glasses. He had already chosen the spot where he would leave the silent reminder of his visit, the calling card that everybody always missed.

At six minutes past seven he began to jog down the quiet street, another early morning fitness buff in a city of fitness buffs.

2

Sam Deegan had not intended to open the file on Karen Sommers that afternoon. He'd been fishing through the bottom drawer of his desk in search of the packet of cold pills he vaguely remembered having stashed there. When his fingers touched the well-worn and troublingly familiar folder, he hesitated and then, with a grimace, pulled it out and opened it. When he looked at the date on the first page, he realized that he had been subconsciously intending to find it. The anniversary of Karen Sommers' death was Columbus Day, twenty years ago next week.

The file ought to have been kept with the other unsolved cases, but three successive Orange County prosecutors had indulged his need to keep it at his fingertips. Twenty years ago Sam had been the first detective to arrive in response to the frantic phone call from a woman screaming that her daughter had been stabbed.

Minutes later, when he had arrived at the house on Mountain Road in Cornwall-on-Hudson, he had found the victim's bedroom crowded with shocked and horrified onlookers. One neighbor was bent over the bed uselessly trying to administer mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Others were attempting to pull the hysterical parents away from the heartbreaking sight of their daughter's brutalized body.

Karen Sommers' shoulder-length hair was spilling onto the pil-

low. When he yanked the would-be rescuer back, Sam could see the vicious stab wounds in Karen's chest and heart that must have caused instant death and had drenched the sheets with her blood.

He remembered his initial thought had been that the young woman probably never even heard her attacker enter her room. She probably never woke up, he reflected, shaking his head as he opened the folder. The mother's screams had attracted not only neighbors but a landscaper and delivery man who were on the premises next door. The result was a thoroughly compromised crime scene.

There had been no signs of forced entry. Nothing was missing. Karen Sommers had been a twenty-two-year-old first-year medical student who surprised her parents by coming home for an overnight visit. The logical suspect was her ex-boyfriend, Cyrus Lindstrom, a third-year law student at Columbia. He admitted that Karen had told him she wanted both of them to start seeing other people, but he also insisted that he had agreed it was a good idea because neither one of them was ready for a serious commitment. His alibi—that he had been asleep in the apartment he shared with three other law students—was verified, although all three roommates admitted they had gone to bed by midnight and therefore did not know whether or not Lindstrom had left the apartment after that time. Karen's death was estimated to have taken place between two and three in the morning.

Lindstrom had visited the Sommers house a few times. He knew a spare key was kept under the fake rock near the back door. He knew that Karen's room was the first one to the right off the back staircase. But that wasn't proof that in the middle of the night he had driven fifty miles from Amsterdam Avenue and 104th Street in Manhattan to Cornwall-on-Hudson and killed her.

"A person of interest"—that's what we call people like Lindstrom today, Sam reflected. I always thought that guy was as guilty as sin. I

could never understand why the Sommers family stood by him. God, you'd have thought they were defending their own son.

Impatiently, Sam dropped the file on his desk, got up, and walked to the window. From his perspective he could see the parking lot, and he remembered the time a prisoner on trial for murder had overpowered a guard, dropped out the window of the courthouse, raced across the lot, mugged a guy getting into his car, and driven away.

We got him in twenty minutes, Sam thought. So why in twenty years can't I find the animal who killed Karen Sommers? For my money, it's still Lindstrom.

Lindstrom was now a high-powered New York criminal attorney. He's a master at getting the murdering bums off, Sam thought. Appropriate, since he's one of them.

He shrugged. It was a rotten day, rainy and unusually cold for early October. I used to love this job, he thought, but it's not the same anymore. I'm ready to retire. I'm fifty-eight years old; I've been at police work most of my life. I should just take the pension and run. Lose a little weight. Visit the kids and spend more time with the grandkids. Before you know it, they'll be in college.

He had a vague sense of a headache brewing as he ran a hand through his thinning hair. Kate used to tell me to stop doing that, he thought. She said I was weakening the roots.

With a half smile at his late wife's unscientific analysis of his approaching baldness, he went back to his desk and stared down again at the file marked "Karen Sommers."

He still regularly visited Karen's mother, Alice, who had moved to a condominium in town. He knew it comforted her to feel that they were still trying to find the person who had taken her daughter's life, but it was more than that. Sam had a feeling that someday Alice would mention something that had never occurred to her as being

important, something that would be the first step toward finding out who had gone into Karen's room that night.

That's what has kept me in this job the last couple of years, he thought. I wanted so much to solve this case, but I can't wait any longer.

He went back to his desk, opened the bottom drawer, and then hesitated. He should let it go. It was time to put this folder with the other unsolved cases in the general file. He'd done his best. For the first twelve years after the murder, he'd gone to the cemetery on the anniversary. He'd stayed there all day, hidden behind a mausoleum, watching Karen's grave. He'd even wired the tombstone to catch anything a visitor might say. There'd been some cases where killers had been caught because they'd paid an anniversary visit to their victim's grave, even talking about the crime to their victim.

The only people who ever came to Karen's grave on the anniversary were her parents, and it had been a gut-wrenching intrusion of privacy to hear them reminisce about their only daughter. He'd given up going there eight years ago, after Michael Sommers died and Alice came alone to stand at the grave where her husband and daughter were now resting side by side. That was when he walked away, not wanting to be a witness to her grief. He'd never gone back.

Sam stood up and put the Karen Sommers file under his arm, his decision made. He wouldn't look at it again. And next week, on the twentieth anniversary of Karen's death, he'd put in his retirement papers.

And I'll stop by the cemetery, he thought. Just to let her know how sorry I am that I didn't do better by her.

3

It had taken nearly seven hours to drive from Washington through Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey to the town of Cornwall-on-Hudson.

It was not a trip Jean Sheridan enjoyed making—not so much because of the distance, but because Cornwall, the town in which she had grown up, was filled with painful memories.

She had promised herself that no matter how persuasively charming Jack Emerson, the chairman of their twentieth high school reunion committee, attempted to be, she would plead work, other commitments, health—anything to avoid being part of it.

She had no desire to celebrate her graduation twenty years ago from Stonecroft Academy, even though she was grateful for the education she'd received there. She didn't even care about the "Distinguished Alumna" medal she'd be receiving, despite the fact that the scholarship to Stonecroft had been a stepping-stone to the scholarship to Bryn Mawr and then the doctorate at Princeton.

But now that a memorial for Alison had become part of the reunion schedule, it was impossible for her to refuse to attend.

Alison's death still seemed so unreal that Jean almost expected the phone to ring and hear that familiar voice, the words clipped and rushed as though everything had to be said in the space of ten sec-

onds: "Jeannie. You haven't called lately. You've forgotten I'm alive. I hate you. No, I don't. I love you. I'm in awe of you. You're so damn smart. There's a premiere in New York next week. Curt Ballard is one of my clients. An absolutely terrible actor, but so gorgeous nobody cares. And his latest girlfriend is coming, too. You'd faint if I even whispered her name. Anyhow, can you make it next Tuesday, cocktails at six, the film, then a private dinner for twenty or thirty or fifty?"

Alison always did manage to get that kind of message across in about ten seconds, Jean thought, and Alison was always shocked when ninety percent of the time Jean couldn't drop everything and race to New York to join her.

Alison had been dead almost a month. Impossible as that was to believe, the fact that she might have been the victim of foul play was unbearable. But during her career she had made scores of enemies. No one got to head one of the largest talent agencies in the country without being hated. Besides, Alison's rapier-like wit and biting sarcasm had been compared to the stinging utterances of the legendary Dorothy Parker. Was someone whom she had ridiculed or fired been angry enough to kill her? Jean wondered.

I like to think that she had a fainting spell after she dove into the pool. I don't want to believe that anyone held her under the water, she thought.

She glanced at the shoulder bag beside her on the passenger seat, and her mind raced to the envelope inside it. What am I going to do? Who sent it to me and why? How could anyone have found out about Lily? Is she in trouble? Oh, God, what shall I do? What *can* I do?

These questions had caused her weeks of sleepless nights ever since she had received the report from the laboratory.

She was at the turnoff that led from Route 9W to Cornwall. And near Cornwall was West Point. Jean swallowed over the lump in her throat and tried to concentrate on the beauty of the October after-

noon. The trees were breathtaking with their autumn colors of gold and orange and fiery red. Above them, the mountains, as always, were serenely calm. The Hudson River Highlands. I'd forgotten how beautiful it is here, she thought.

But of course that thought led inevitably to the memory of Sunday afternoons at West Point, sitting on the steps of the monument on an afternoon such as this. She had begun her first book there, a history of West Point.

It took ten years to finish, she thought, mainly because for a long time I simply couldn't write about it.

Cadet Carroll Reed Thornton, Jr., from Maryland. Don't think about Reed now, Jean warned herself.

The turn from Route 9W onto Walnut Street was still an automatic reaction rather than a considered decision. The Glen-Ridge House in Cornwall, named after one of the town's large boarding-houses of the mid-nineteenth century, was the hotel chosen for the reunion. There had been ninety students in her graduating class. According to the latest update she'd received, forty-two of them were planning to attend, plus wives and husbands or significant others, and children.

She hadn't had to make any of those extra reservations for herself.

It had been Jack Emerson's decision to have the reunion in October rather than June. He'd done a poll of the class and determined that June was when their own kids were graduating from high school or grammar school, making it more difficult for them to get away.

In the mail she'd received her ID badge with her senior class picture on top and her name emblazoned under it. It had come with the schedule of events for the weekend: Friday night, opening cocktail party and buffet. Saturday, breakfast buffet, tour of West Point, the Army-Princeton football game, and then cocktail party and black-tie dinner. Sunday was supposed to have concluded the reunion with a

brunch at Stonecroft, but after Alison's death it had been decided to include a morning memorial service in her honor. She had been buried in the cemetery adjacent to the school, and the service would be at graveside.

In her will, Alison had left a large donation to the scholarship fund at Stonecroft, which was the primary reason for the hastily planned memorial ceremony.

Main Street doesn't feel very different, Jean thought as she drove slowly through the town. It had been many years since she'd been here. The summer she graduated from Stonecroft, her father and mother had finally split, sold the house, and gone their separate ways. Her father was now managing a hotel in Maui. Her mother had moved back to Cleveland where she had been raised and had married her high school sweetheart. "My biggest mistake was not marrying Eric thirty years ago," she'd gushed at the wedding.

And where does that leave me? That was the thought that ran through Jean's mind at that moment. But the breakup had at least meant the merciful end of her life in Cornwall.

She resisted the impulse to detour to Mountain Road and drive past her old home. Maybe I will sometime over the weekend, she thought, but not now. Three minutes later she was pulling into the driveway of the Glen-Ridge House, and the doorman, a professionally warm smile creasing his face, was opening the door of the car and saying, "Welcome home." Jean pushed the button for the trunk and watched as her garment bag and suitcase were scooped up.

"Go right to the check-in desk," the doorman urged. "We'll take care of the luggage."

The hotel lobby was clubby and warm, with deep carpeting and comfortable groupings of chairs. The front desk was to the left, and diagonally across from it Jean could see that the bar was already filling with pre-cocktail party celebrants.

A banner over the front desk welcomed the Stonecroft reunion class.

"Welcome home, Ms. Sheridan," said the clerk, a man in his sixties. His smile revealed glistening white teeth. His badly dyed hair exactly matched the finish on the cherry wood desk. As Jean gave him her credit card, she had the incongruous thought that he might have cut a chip from the desk to show his barber.

She wasn't ready to deal with any of her old classmates yet and hoped she could get to the elevator without being stopped. She wanted to have at least a quiet half hour while she showered and changed, before she had to put on her badge with the picture of the frightened and heartbroken eighteen-year-old girl she had been, and join her former classmates at the cocktail party.

As she took the room key and turned, the clerk said, "Oh, Ms. Sheridan, I almost forgot. I have a fax for you." He squinted at the name on the envelope. "Oh, sorry. I should be calling you Dr. Sheridan."

Without replying, Jean ripped open the envelope. The fax was from her secretary at Georgetown: "Dr. Sheridan, sorry to bother you. This is probably a joke or mistake, but I thought you'd want to see it." The "it" was a single sheet of paper that had been faxed to her office. It read, "Jean, I guess by now you've verified that I know Lily. Here's my problem. Do I kiss her or kill her? Just a joke. I'll be in touch."

For a moment Jean felt unable either to move or think. Kill her? Kill her? But why? Why?

He had been standing in the bar, watching, waiting for her to come in. Over the years he'd seen her picture on her book jackets, and every time he did, it was a shock to see that Jeannie Sheridan had acquired such a classy look.

At Stonecroft she'd been one of the smart but quiet ones. She'd even been nice to him in an offhand sort of way. He'd started to really like her until Alison told him how they'd all made fun of him. He knew who "they" were: Laura and Catherine and Debra and Cindy and Gloria and Alison and Jean. They used to sit at the same table at lunchtime.

Weren't they cute? he thought as the bile rose in his throat. Now Catherine and Debra and Cindy and Gloria and Alison were gone. He'd saved Laura for last. The funny part was that he still wasn't sure about Jean. For some reason he wavered about killing her. He still remembered the time when he was a freshman and had tried out for the baseball team. He'd been cut right away and had started to cry, those baby tears that he never could hold back.

Crybaby. Crybaby.

He'd run off the field, and a little later Jeannie had caught up with him. "I didn't make the cheerleader squad," she said. "So what?"

He knew she had followed him because she felt sorry for him. That's why something told him that she hadn't been one of the ones who made fun of him for wanting to take Laura to the prom. But then she had hurt him in a different way

Laura had always been the prettiest girl in the class—golden blond, china blue eyes, great body, noticeable even in the Stonecroft skirt and blouse. She was always sure of her power over the guys. The words "come hither" had been meant for her to utter.

Alison had always been mean. As a writer for the school paper, her "Behind the Scenes" column was supposed to be about school activities, but she always managed to find a way to take a dig at someone, like in a review for the school play when she'd written, "To everyone's surprise, Romeo, a.k.a. Joel Nieman, managed to remember most of his lines." Back then the popular kids thought Alison was a riot. The nerds stayed away from her.

Nerds like me, he thought, savoring the memory of the look of terror on Alison's face when she saw him coming toward her from the pool house.

Jean had been popular, but she hadn't seemed like the other girls. She'd been elected to the student council, where she'd been so quiet you'd think she couldn't talk, but anytime she opened her mouth, whether there or in class, she always had the right answer. Even then she'd been a history buff. What surprised him was how much prettier she was now. Her stringy light brown hair was darker and fuller, and cut like a cap around her face. She was slim, but not painfully thin anymore. Somewhere along the way she'd also learned how to dress. Her jacket and slacks were well cut. Wishing he could see the expression on her face, he watched as she shoved a fax into her shoulder bag.

"I am the owl, and I live in a tree."

In his head he could hear Laura imitating him. "She has you down pat," Alison had screeched that night twenty years ago. "And she told us you wet your pants, too."

He could imagine them all making fun of him; he could hear their shrill gales of mocking laughter.

It had happened way back in the second grade when he was seven years old. He'd been in the school play. That was his line, the only thing he had to say. But he couldn't get it out. He'd stuttered so much that all the kids on stage and even some of the parents began to snicker.

"I ammm th-th-the ooooooowwwwwllllll, and, and I livvvvve in aaaaaa . . ."

He never did get the word "tree" out. That was when he burst out crying and ran off the stage holding the tree branch in his hand. His father had slapped him for being a sissy. His mother had said, "Leave him alone. He's a dopey kid. What can you expect? Look at him. He's wet his pants again."

The memory of that shame mingled with the imagined laughter of the girls and swirled in his head as he watched Jean Sheridan get into the elevator. Why should I spare you? he thought. Maybe Laura first, then you. Then you can all have a good laugh at me, all of you together, in hell.

He heard his name being called and turned his head. Dick Gormley, the big baseball hero of their class, was standing beside him in the bar, staring at his ID. "Great to see you," Dick said heartily.

You're lying, he thought, and it's *not* great to see you.