

He'd built The Cabin with his own two hands.

Every October, when the leaves got colourful and the breezes cold, he stepped away from his home office for a solid week. At The Cabin, the leaves and the breeze had a higher value, and Pete always looked forward to them for an extended little holiday.

And, every October break, a morning walk along the woods' many paths was practically a daily occurrence. Pete knew these roads pretty well.

The paths were wide enough for four-wheelers to frequent, and they were smooth enough – moss grown over ancient gravel – for hikers and their dogs. In ten years, only twice had Pete ever met other people along these roads. Today would be the third time, and person #4 was a decade away.

Pete walked quietly and alone, surrounded by a mist that clung to the trees. The curling ferns ranged from lime green to rich brown; all beautiful, and all dying. Pete often returned from his walk with a handful of wildflowers; even at this late season, some could be found. He found it deeply beautiful here.

Coming upon the clearing, he stopped abruptly at a fork in the trail that split the road, wider than the paths it led to. This spot was always thick with Pearly Everlasting. But the grass and the gravel weren't as lonesome as usual; a single huddled figure sat at the base of a tree near the trail's edge. He spotted her right away.

She was so hunched over that she resembled a heap of laundry. Pete knew it was a woman by the timbre of her hair; though ragged and tangled. It hung before her face, and it hid her features. From behind the knotted mass of free-hanging hair, she wheezed a moan that started as a friendly greeting.

He felt chilled. And he felt startled.

"Uh, hello?" Pete launched, friendly concern in his voice. "Are; are you alright?" Clearly this woman was homeless or lost. She didn't flinch upon seeing him, and she didn't get up. Despite her hidden face, Pete could tell that she wasn't elderly; he guessed about 40. A few years younger than him.

Her voice was like the grinding of two stones against one another. It came as a whispered hiss.

"Kkkkkk..."

Maybe she was choking? No; choking on a word.

"Kkkkkk-AN eeeeeee...."

As Pete looked around – was there anyone else here? – the woman let her words go in a single torrent.

“Kkkkaa neee-yew... kkkkeh femee... eee-yurrr nayyyime?”

She said it again, just as stone-grindingly but a little more clear: “Can you givvvvvve me your name?”

There was no hesitation. He uttered the four-letter word and gave her his name. His intention was to offer her help. Maybe bring her back to The Cabin for a hot shower and a bowl of soup, if she felt comfortable enough for it.

But he couldn't. It was no longer his. His Cabin, nor his shower. *Or* his soup. On the very instant he gave his name, he felt a whoosh that blew from within; a stirring in his very bones. He felt confusion, and twitching in his fingers.

He saw a feeble imitation of a smile cross her face, as though she hadn't in years. She rose from her seat beneath the boughs, and walked into the path. She avoided looking at him as he stammered, asking her for her name, too; she ignored him. He found that his feet felt rooted to the spot, and it was only with great effort that he managed to drag them a few steps toward her. When he looked up, he saw that she was much farther away; he'd only moved two steps and she'd gotten to the edge of the clearing, walking down the path that he'd come on. He opened his mouth, intending to let loose a “Hey”, but found his

lips cracking and his throat dry. Panicked, he lost track of her in the autumn limbs, and she was gone.

And here he was. Tethered to this clearing. No one else was in sight, and the mist hung mutely around him. His voice was gone. Though he struggled to move, he fell to the ground easily.

Autumns passed, colder and bleaker.

Casey looked out the window at the morning's mist. This was her first time overnight in the cabin she'd bought about eleven years ago. It was such a sweet space, warmly appointed but long forgotten. The yard was overgrown. The step was covered in leaves. The firewood piles had long-since fallen over.

She'd gotten a small fire crackling in the woodstove, and faced the hearth. This week, she was determined to clear out the previous owner's belongings. She'd bought this cabin at an estate sale, and had never met its original master. Apparently he'd built the place with his own hands.

Craving a morning walk in the woods, she left to start familiarizing herself with the trails. The gravel crunched beneath her soles, and she soon came to a fork in the wide road, where the mist opened up just a little.

It was there she found him.

He was crouched on the edge of the clearing, where some vegetation was managing to grow in the late autumn chill. He was wearing a tattered shirt of what was once flannel, and his hair was peppered with cobwebs and dried leaves. Quiet, he seemed aware that he was a startling sight. His face was not old, but mid-forties and handsome, though he clearly hadn't showered or shaved in a long time.

His fingers moved surreptitiously, grasping at the thin stalks of Pearly Everlasting, severing them with his rough fingernails.

His index finger had a callus where the thumbnail met it, pinching stems one after the other. She didn't dare get any closer.

"Hhhhhell oh" he said, a rasp of a voice made dry with too much time outdoors and not enough time warm. He didn't rise from his knelt position and he didn't stop picking flowers. He didn't even turn to face her. His hand expertly pinched and tore the dying stems.

Casey gripped her walking stick, and looked around for someone else, for anyone else; for help.

The huddled shape of a man lifted his head; still facing the other direction.

Yeah, fuck this, Casey thought. She made her mind up to leave.

"Dohhh nitt bee... dooohh-n't be afraid." he struggled to use his voice, but laboured over the syllables in a methodical way. He had been practicing these words, Casey thought. "I'm owwwwnn-lee here to pick summmm flowers. Can you give me your name?"