9:12 AM

Alex’s eyes open, and reaches out to the nightstand to grab his watch. He moves the watch right in front of his face, and focuses on the time. *Shit, past nine again. What just woke me up? Certainly not an alarm.* Over the past few weeks, Alex has found it harder and harder to maintain his morning routine, and has only sporadically set his watch’s alarm. It wasn’t just him. His whole family would sleep in, often until 10 or 11 AM, if he didn’t wake them. This week alone he has bailed on his morning workout three times in order to lay in bed, half asleep, avoiding the reality of their situation.

On most days, they really had no reason to get out of bed at all, and every day, it seemed more logical to pass the time sleeping. Since the flu had run its course in the neighborhood, there was little real activity or traffic within the area Compounded by record low temperatures, and several nasty snowstorms, few ventured outside for any reason. Most people were holed up for the winter, trying to stay warm. THUNK. *What the fuck is that? I knew I heard something. Sounded like something hit the house. BUNK! Another one?*

Alex hears a voice, emanating from the backyard, then clearly the sound of something hitting the side of their house. *Son of a bitch, here we go.* He pops out of bed, throwing the comforter on top of Kate. Kate has seen him move this fast before, but only in response to a strange noise in the middle of the night, or one of the kids calling out from their rooms when they were toddlers. She immediately goes from hazy eyed to alert.

“What is it, what’s wrong?” she whispers forcefully.

“Hold on.” Alex says, as he moves quickly to the rear window of their bedroom. He peeks out of the side of the window blind and stares for a few seconds. They both hear another cracking sound. Alex starts walking quickly, nearly jogging, toward the bedroom door.

“Honey, keep the kids away from the windows to the back, I don’t want them seeing this.” He pauses, rethinking his choice of words. “I don’t want them to get hurt standing near the windows, that fucking lunatic Todd is standing in our backyard in jeans and a fucking t-shirt, throwing rocks or something at the house.”

“Again?”

“Yes, again, but he is throwing really high, like he is trying to hit the roof.”

He emphasizes the word roof, and raises his eyebrows, giving Kate his “do you get it?” prompt. He walks into the closet.

“The solar panels?” she asks in a tone indicating she already knows the answer. “What are you going to do?”

Alex pokes his head out of the closet, and says, “I can’t let him fuck up the solar panels.” Then he disappears back into the closet.

Kate gets out of bed, and out of habit, starts to pull the comforter up to make the bed. She stops, shaking her head. She starts walking over to the walk-in closet. Alex has replaced his pajama bottoms with jeans, and is also now wearing a gray wool mock turtle-neck sweater. As Kate reaches the closet, Alex fully emerges holding a Mossberg 590 combat shotgun in one hand, and a military style belt with two pouches in the other. He leans the shotgun against the wall, scraping the light blue paint and slightly damaging the drywall. He uses both hands to put the belt around his waist, and fasten the quick-snap buckle. He then opens one of the pouches and removes four shotgun shells. The shells are mostly red with a brass bottom. Kate stares intensely at the shells, and then looks up at Alex while almost imperceptibly shaking her head. Alex rapidly slides each shell into the underside loading breech on the shotgun. Four rounds.

 “I really don’t want to hurt him, but I will not let him jeopardize our survival.” He starts walking down the hallway to the stairs. *Everyone else has lost kids, wives, husbands, everything, but Todd has lost all remaining sense of anything. He is fucking nuts, and he won’t stop until he sees us suffer too.*

“Not on my watch,” he mutters.

Kate follows closely behind, pleading, “Hon, he probably lost Jordan, that was all he had left, he’s out of his mind. Imagine how you would feel.”

Alex reaches the stairs, and starts down the stairs, stopping halfway and replying, “What am I supposed to do, just let him vent a little more on us? Thanks for laying that guilt on me, but I am not going to sit around and hope he stops trying to smash our solar panels. I am going out there to stop him, if he won’t stop…” Alex pauses, then continues, “I am going to do everything in my power not to use this, just keep the kids away from the windows, please.”

He then turns and continues down the stairs. *I really hope he didn’t lose Jordan too.* The Perry family had been unfairly destroyed by the flu. Statistically, Todd’s family suffered a 100% Clinical Attack Rate and an 80% Case Fatality Rate. The national Clinical Attack Rate was last estimated at 40-45%, and Case Fatality Rate at around 20%. Reality rarely mimics statistics, and some families might have fully survived exposure to the flu. *Not Todd’s. They ended up on the screwed end of that statistical curve. I can’t imagine.*

Ryan suddenly appears at the top of the stairs, looking confused and sleepy.

“Hey mom, what’s all the racket outside. Whoa! Where’s dad going with the shotgun? Dad, where you headed?” Alex continues without answering.

Kate responds, “Ryan, let’s go to Emily’s room, and make sure she’s alright.”

“Alright? What’s wrong mom? Where is dad going, he looks all business.”

THUNK. They both hear muffled yelling from outside. Ryan pushes past his mom, back into his room, and opens the shade. He sees Todd, dressed in a tee shirt and jeans, looking disheveled, unshaven, and crazed. There is a blue duffel bag on the ground by his right foot. Todd pulls his arm back and hurls a rock up at the window and misses. The rock hits the house’s siding and bounces off, falling back down into the snow banks below. Ryan quickly shuts the shade, and backs away from the window.

“Christ, Mike’s dad is trying to break the windows again. I knew I heard something hitting the house. Holy crap, what’s dad going to do to him? Shoot him? Can he do that?”

“Dad’s not going to shoot him, he just brought the gun to scare him away.”

“Dad doesn’t need a gun to take him out. Last time he slammed him to the ground in less than a second, and then dragged him back to his house. Unassisted.”

“Yeah, but he took a risk getting that close to him. Even though he was wearing a mask, your dad thought that he had made a mistake. He wants Todd to know right away that he means business. Let’s check on Emily.”

As they walked to Emily’s room, they could both hear rummaging downstairs, as Alex made his final preparations to confront Todd.

Downstairs, Alex grabbed a bottle of water from the pantry, and took a long drink. He put down the bottle on the kitchen island, and turned toward the mudroom. He first put on insulated boots over his wool socks, and then stared at the snow shoes sitting in the small study adjacent to the mudroom. With over two feet of snow on the ground, he was seriously considering using them, but decided against them. He would need more mobility, even if it meant trudging through snow. A few feet of snow wasn’t that bad anyways. He also decided against a winter jacket. He didn’t want to wear anything bulky that could get in his way. He still had no idea what he might have to do out there. The sweater should be fine for right now. Skipping the jacket, he put on a wool watch cap, and pulled it tightly over his ears. The thermometer read 13 degrees Fahrenheit, and he could see the wind shaking the pine trees in the backyard. He thought about the jacket again. Next he put on leather gloves, with no inserts. He wouldn’t be out there long enough to need the inserts, but he would need as much manual dexterity as possible if he had to use the shotgun. Finally, he grabbed one of their radios, with a headset. But, then he put the radio down. *The last thing I need is for the voice of reason to fill my ears while this nutbag rants and raves about how we killed his wife and kids. This is going to be hard enough.*

Alex slings the shotgun over his shoulder, putting the weapon in the most non-threatening position available. *Of course, not bringing it would be more non-threatening, but I don’t trust this crazy fucker for one second. Why would he come back after the last episode. I told him I would kill him if he returned. Suicide attempt? Whatever it is, this is the end of it.* Alex opens and steps through the mudroom door connected to the garage. He stops, closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. The garage is significantly colder than the house, and he can see his breath. He looks at the back door to the garage, leading into the backyard. Adrenaline starts pumping through his body at the sight of the door, and he starts trembling slightly. *I really don’t want to go out there and do this, but his shit ends today.* Alex steps toward the back door of the garage and reaches for the dead bolt lock, turning it open slowly until he hears the distinct release of the lock. He puts his gloved hand on the door handle, and starts to turn it slowly. He almost forgets to unlock the door handle itself, but remembers it at the last second, flipping the lock on the door handle with the other hand. If he had forgotten to unlock it, he would have locked himself out, which is something he routinely did before the pandemic. *This is it, out we go.*

*Holy shit it’s cold!* Thirteen degrees is cold enough, but with a constant 15 miles per hour northerly wind, the temperature took Alex by surprise. Despite the situation dragging him into the backyard, and the bitter cold, Alex is pleased to be outside. Trips out of the house have been rare since the pandemic hit, and he typically would relish any opportunity to get out. This time is different, but he still appreciates the fresh, shockingly cold air. He looks up at the sky, which is overcast and gray, a shapeless, uninterrupted ceiling of clouds. Maybe the remnants of the last storm system, but just as likely a typical January day. He glances past the deck, at Todd, standing knee deep in snow, wearing faded blue jeans and an ugly Boston Red Socks T-Shirt. *He must be freezing, or he truly can’t feel a thing. Numb, all over. I have a bad feeling about this. Everything about this. He’s absolutely lost it.”* From this distance, Alex can also tell that Todd has lost considerable weight, even more since the last encounter nearly a month ago. Alex glances around the yard at the young pine trees, covered with heavy snow, looking for signs of any other neighbors. *You never know.* He sees no other footprints in the snow, other than a line of prints passing right by him and ending where Todd stands. *Fair to assume he is alone.*

Alex starts walking toward Todd, looking in his direction. Todd seems oblivious to his presence, picking up another solid object from the duffel bag, cocking his arm back, and hurling it up toward the roof. THUNK! Alex starts walking in the snow, toward him, but movement is difficult in the snow bank behind the garage. The top layer of snow has frozen solid to form a semi-supportive layer, that might supports one footstep, but not another. Alex fights his way toward Todd. He closes to within 20 feet, and Todd never looks in his direction. He seem totally focused on landing a shot right onto one of the solar panels. Alex takes a quick look up to the roof, and can see no apparent damage. Yet. Todd reaches into the duffel bag and pulls out a baseball. When he bends over to reach into the bag, Alex sees something tucked into his jeans. Alex is 20 feet away, and eyes him warily. The object looks like the wooden handle of a revolver. As far as Alex knew, Todd did not own a firearm. He didn’t seem like the type to own one either, but then again, very few of his neighbors expected him to show up at the first pandemic planning meeting with an assault rifle slung over his back, wearing a respirator. Surprises have become pretty common in this neighborhood.

Todd pulls his arm back, and aims at the house again. However, instead of throwing it at the house, he suddenly pivots his left foot, steps toward Alex, and whips the ball at Alex’s head. Alex was anticipating Todd’s erratic behavior, and tracks the ball as it passes to the left of his head. He didn’t even have to move to dodge it. A clear miss to Alex from the start, but he really was not sure if the miss was intentional, or if Todd meant to hit him in the head. At that range, and speed, the ball could have killed him, or at least seriously injured his head. Alex fought every instinct to grab the shotgun, and point it at Todd. *No, only as a last resort.*

Todd reaches down to pick up another object out of the duffel bag. It looks like a large rock to Alex.

“Todd, what’s going on here? I thought we had an understanding.”

In a barely audible tone, he responds, “I lost Jordan last night. That’s all of them. My whole family is gone. Five bodies. Can’t even bury them.” His voice raises slightly, “All piled up inside the bulkhead door, frozen and protected from the animals. Nowhere to else to put them.”

Alex strains to hear him over the wind. As Todd finishes, Alex takes in a deep breath of freezing air, and lets it out with a sigh. *What the hell can I possibly say to him, I can’t even imagine what happened to him, to them. Why did this have to happen to all of them.*

“Jesus Todd, I’m so sorry, I don’t…”

Todd loudly interrupts, “You can just shut the fuck up. Yeah, you have no idea what it’s like, sitting in your castle on the hill, watching the rest of us fucking suffer.”

“Hey Todd, let’s not do this, alright.”

“Do what? When Jordan died last night, I looked over at your house, and could see lights on in your bedroom. Not a light on in the whole neighborhood, except for the castle on the hill. Did you know that I ran out of candles last week. I couldn’t even see her face when she died. She couldn’t see mine either. All we felt was bitter cold, hunger and darkness. But not over in the castle. No, in the castle there was light, warmth, food, happiness and health.”

“Todd, we’ve been down this road before. What do you want?”

“Want? Uh, let’s see, about 7 weeks ago I would have appreciated some food for my family. Maybe some of that TerraFlu, yeah, that would have been nice. Hmmm? Some basic medical supplies could have helped over the past month, to help fight pneumonia. Did I mention food? How about just anything useful, some warmth, some firewood?”

“You have a propane fireplace, why would you need firewood?”

“Fuck you, even if I could use it, you wouldn’t have given me any.”

Todd mocks Alex’s voice, “I can’t make any exceptions, if I give you supplies, I have to give everyone supplies, and everything I saved would be depleted immediately, and then everyone would be screwed.”

“Todd, I’m really sorry about all of this. Would you please go home? Right now.”

“Wow, that sounded sympathetic. Sorry your wife and four kids are dead, now will you get the fuck off my property.”

Todd’s right hand slowly moves behind his right hip to the small of his back. Alex sees this, and immediately reacts by swinging the shotgun from a slinged position, to an aimed ready-to-fire position. The motion is swift, and within a fraction of a second, Todd has a shotgun pointed at his head. The sudden movement surprises Todd, and he furtively moves his hand back around to the front of his abdomen. His hand is empty. Todd doesn’t know that the shotgun’s safety is still engaged, and that the chamber of the weapon is still empty. Alex contemplates rectifying that situation, but is satisfied with Todd’s reaction to the gun.

Todd doesn’t say anything, just continues to stare at Alex. Alex looks into his eyes and sees insanity. His brown eyes are bloodshot and glazed, sunken deep into the sockets, and his skin has a gray pallor. He is sporting a disturbing grin, which combined with weeks of facial growth, makes him look even more unstable. Todd barely resembles the man he was in early October. Over eight weeks of starvation, fear and perpetual tragedy has dragged him to the brink of existence. *This is it, I can just barely see it through his crazy eyes. He wants to die.* He continues to stare intently at Alex, without speaking. Alex catches some movement out of the corner of his left eye. The shade in Ryan’s window just moved. He keeps the shotgun pointed straight at Todd. *Great, an audience.*

Todd finally speaks, “Your cheering section? Alex, when Jordan died last night and I looked at your house, I swore to myself that I would destroy your fucking solar panels, so that you would at least be on the same level as everyone else. I felt it was the least I could do for all of our neighbors.”

*Insanity for sure, confirmed 100%.*

“What are you talking about Todd, do you think that everyone around here would be happy if the lights went out in our house. Maybe they would, but I have a wood-burning stove with plenty of wood, I have battery powered lights and plenty of candles. We’re fine, with our without the solar power Todd. We were ready for this. I can stay here for a long, long time.”

He pauses, then continues, “As long as nobody takes harassing us to the next level. Todd, do you plan to take it to the next level? If you do, I think my best option would be to blast your head from your shoulders. I didn’t bring my family this far, to let you, or anyone fuck it up. What’s it going to be Todd?”

*Please grab your weapon, and make this easy for me. I really want to kill you now, you miserable fucking asshole. Just move your hand behind your back one more time, and your dead.* Alex racks the slide mechanism on the shotgun, chambering a double-odd buck shell into the chamber. He then thumbs the safety on the very top of the stock, by his cheek, up into the off position. He is ready to shoot Todd now. *Please give me a reason to do this. It’s the best option for both of us.* He points the gun toward Todd’s chest, and looks over the barrel, increasing his field of vision.

“Time to go Todd, one way or the other.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Todd mumbles, and reaches into the bag to pick up another rock. As he reaches down, Alex flips the safety back on, and charges Todd. Todd reacts by trying to throw the rock at Alex. However, Alex crosses the gap quicker than Todd anticipates, and strikes him to the upper left side of his head with the butt of the shotgun. As he strikes Todd, he continues to move around Todd’s left side, completely rendering the attempted throw useless. The blow to Todd’s head knocks him off balance, and he starts to stumble uncontrollably to his right. As he tumbles, Alex follows him, ready to hit him again with shotgun, if necessary. Todd crumples into the snow, on his back, already bleeding from the small gash on the left side of his head. Alex slings the shotgun over his shoulder, and flips Todd over on his stomach. Todd protests and tries to get up, but Alex pins him to the ground by his left arm and applies horrific pressure to his shoulder and elbow. This action forces keeps Todd face down in the snow. Alex takes one hand off Todd’s arm, and searches his waistline for a weapon. He finds a .38 caliber revolver. It looks like an old weapon, and Alex remembers that Todd’s grandfather served on the South Portland Police Department through the 70’s. This could be his grandfather’s service pistol. He checks the pistols safety, which is engaged, and tucks the weapon into his own belt. He looks up at the house, and sees that Katelyn is watching through Ryan’s window, and so are his kids. *Emily is finally up. As much as I wanted to shoot you, I’m glad I didn’t do it here.* He takes a few zip ties from his own pockets, and locks Todd’s hands snuggly behind his back.

“Now to move your ass out of here, and back to your house.”

Todd manages to utter a few words, “Why didn’t you just shoot me? Can’t shoot me in front of your kids?”

Alex responds, “If you had pulled that gun out, I would have killed you without hesitation. But yeah, your right, I didn’t want to kill you in front of them.” He leans in close to Todd’s ear and whispers forcefully, “But I wanted to kill you, badly. I am done with you, do you understand me? I may still kill you when we are out of here, so shut up, and don’t fuck with me. We’re going for a sleigh ride.”

Alex starts to walk back to the garage, feeling secure that Todd is not going anywhere on his own, any time soon. He has to grab a few things, and then move Todd out of here. As he reaches the garage, Kate appears in the doorway.

“Thank God you didn’t have to kill him. What are you going to do with him.” She pauses, and continues before Alex can respond. “It’s freezing out here, you should have a jacket on.”

“I was heading back in to grab a jacket. I wouldn’t want the kids to see me smashing anyone’s head in without the proper seasonal attire.”

“Smart ass. Where are you going to take him.”

“Home, I’m going to load him up on one of the kids’ sleds and drag him back to his house. Throw his ass back in and make it clear to him that if he enters our yard again, with anything more than a white flag and his birthday suit, I am going to shoot him from one of the windows, and let his body lay where it falls.”

“I don’t think we need him walking naked into our yard.”

“True, the point being that he understands that there are very few circumstances under which he should ever return here. Check this out.”

Alex draws Todd’s revolver from his own waistline, and shows it to Kate.

“Was he carrying that?”

“Yeah, must be his grandfather’s service pistol. I remember his wife mentioning that Todd’s grandpa served with the South Portland PD. Let’s see if this thing is ready to roll.”

Holding the pistol in his right hand, Alex depresses a button on the left side of the revolver with his right thumb, and releases the drum holding the bullets. Each of the six cylinders is loaded. None of the strike plates on the brass bullets look damaged. The weapon is clearly loaded, and all six rounds appear to be ready to fire. Alex pushes the drum back with his left hand, and removes one of the bullets. He examines it quickly. Kate watches him.

“The bullets look new. No sign of deterioration. Todd was carrying a deadly weapon, completely unknown to us, and probably any of the neighbors. I wonder how many other deadly surprises are lurking in the neighborhood. We can’t be too careful with anyone at this point.”

“I agree, imagine if he had rifle. He could shoot out the panels, and shoot into the house. Anyone could do that.”

“True, but as far as I can tell, Todd represents the worst case scenario for this neighborhood. Hell, he was a fucking nutcase from the beginning. Even before everyone in his house started getting sick, he was all over us. I think he represents the extreme. Then again, this winter is hardly over. We can’t let our guard down at all. It’ll get worse before it gets better.”

Alex replaces the bullet, closes the drum, and returns the gun to his waistband.

“How are the kids?”

“Fine, Emily went back to sleep, and Ryan is loitering in the kitchen waiting for breakfast. I just wanted to make sure you were alright.”

“I’m O.K., this is just not how I wanted to start the day. I should be back in about 30 minutes. I’ll bring a radio, so we can keep in touch. Make sure to lock up this door, and keep your pistol on hand. Just in case. I’ll keep you posted. What’s for breakfast? “

“I think some pancakes are in order today.”

“Really?” Alex sounds genuinely pleased and excited. “We still have that huge thing of syrup that we haven’t opened. Time to crack that baby open.”

“Oh yeah.”

Alex moves past her, into the garage to retrieve one of the plastic sleds. As he slides by the hood of one of the cars, Kate calls out to him.

“Hey honey, thank you for giving Todd one more chance. If anyone deserves one, it has to be him.”

Alex looks back at Kate, and responds in a somber tone, “He lost Jordan last night. It’s unbelievable to think that his whole family was taken from him.” He looks down at the garage floor. “They’re stacked up between the bulkhead and his basement. It’s the only place cold enough to keep them from decomposing, and keep the animals away. I can’t wrap my head around that.”

“Holy shit. Did he tell you that? “

“Yeah. I can only imagine how many other families have done the same thing. Waiting for the ground to thaw. No one, not even the town or state will come to pick them up. Hey, I need to get rolling here. Before Todd spools up again. “

“What are you going to do with his gun?”

“It’s my gun now. Our gun. No way in hell I’m giving it back to him.”

“Be careful honey. Don’t take any chances. You should wear your respirator. You really never know.”

“Can you get one from the mudroom for me?”

Kate ducks back into the house, while Alex grabs the sturdiest sled along the far wall of the garage. He picks a red plastic sled, big enough for two riders, with a long, looped rope attached to the front*. Perfect for pulling 180lbs of limp weight over the snow. Well, maybe not perfect, but better than a fireman’s carry through the snow. I don’t want to get too close to him anyways.* Kate returns with a respirator and his winter jacket. She hands them to Alex as he returns to the door leading to the back yard. Alex puts on the jacket, and places the revolver in one of the oversized pockets.

“See you in a few minutes Kate. Love you.”

“Love you too. Put your mask on please.”

Alex places the respirator over his face, pulls the straps tight and makes a funny face toward Kate. She shakes her head and shrugs. Alex steps through the open door, and turns around to face her again.

Through the mask he yells, “Lock up after me, I’ll come back in through the mudroom door.”

Kate gives him a thumbs up sign, as Alex shuts the door and walks back over to Todd’s limp body, pulling the sled behind him. The mask helps take the edge off the freezing air that enter Todd’s lungs, but he still hates to wear these things. He has always felt funny about wearing a mask. Almost a mild form of claustrophobia. Once the mask goes on, he feels trapped or enclosed. Since the military, he could barelya stand masks. *This is nothing compared to 100 plus degree days in a MOPP Level 3 Full Chemical/Biological suit.*  He approaches Todd, and can tell that he hasn’t moved since Alex bound his hands. He is still facing down, and a bright red blotch has spread in the snow under his head from the wound. Alex can see that it is still bleeding. *Not my problem, he can fix that himself later.* Todd looks like he is either relaxing in the snow, or has passed out.

Alex yells, “Todd, you still awake there?”

No response. *Probably passed out. Should make the trip a little easier.* Alex grabs his left elbow, and pulls him onto his back. Todd’s eyes are closed, and his breath is visible whisping out of his nostrils. *Still alive. We’ll see for how long.*  *Not sure why that popped into my head.* Alex moves the sled right next to Todd’s left side, and first lifts his legs onto the sled. Alex immediately surmises that Todd is bigger than the sled, and that this trip will not be as easy as he thought. Next, he grabs Todd under both armpits and lifts his upper torso up and onto the sled. Miraculously, after another minute of adjusting Todd’s body, he manages to get most of him onto the sled, with his arms under his back. *Man, he’s lost a lot of weight.*

Alex looks up at the house, and sees Ryan staring out from the family room window. Ryan gives him a thumbs up, and Alex returns it with a military salute. He can see Ryan smiling. Alex turns toward Todd’s house, and starts to pull on the sled. At first, it does not move easily, having initially sunk into the snow under Todd’s weight, but as Alex continues to pull the sled free of the crushed snow, the sled moves along easily. Alex decides to take the straightest path to Todd’s house, through both the Walker’s and Anderson’s front yards, although it is clear from Todd’s footprints that he moved through the backyards. *I want everyone who might be watching to see my deliver Todd back to his house unharmed.*

The whole trip looks relatively flat, traversing pristine, undisturbed snow. Since most households haven’t removed any of the snow that fell during the storms, the walkways and driveways lay buried under snow, indistinguishable from the rest of the scene. A few households cleared the early snowfalls, but by the time the major storms hit, in late December and early January, Alex was the only one continuing to clear his driveway. Of course, by that time, very few households made any attempt to take sick family members to any of the hospitals or triage sites. There was simply no point because every pandemic treatment site was operating at overflow capacity. Even trips to seek food became pointless by mid November.

Alex cleared his driveway because it represented an obstacle for him to overcome if his family needed to leave this house and seek refuge elsewhere. Unlikely, but he felt better about having the option, though he at this point he seriously doubted that he could traverse the road leading out of his development. Once beyond the driveway, his SUV would wade out into 2-3 feet of snow. Not surprisingly, the town ceased plowing non-essential roads even before the first major snow storm hit. Durham Road certainly qualified as non-essential, unless you lived on it. Looking out at snowy expanse between houses, only the orderly progression of mailboxes gave a rough sketch of the road’s location underneath the snow.

Alex continued trudging across their neighbors’ yard. The trip was proving difficult due to the snow, and he regretted not grabbing his snow shoes, when he returned for the sled. Three quarter’s of the way across the Walker’s front yard, Alex stops for a moment and glances up at their house. All of the wooden plantation shades are shut, and have remained this way for days. Over the past month, he has only occasionally seen the slats open. Even then, they only remained open for a very short duration of time. Just enough for a quick reconnaissance of the area. Despite being neighbors and friends for over 7 years, he still has very little idea what happened to them over the past two months.

Alex continues through their front yard, passing the garage, and presumably crossing over their driveway. *Not even a hint of the driveway. If I wasn’t staring at the garage door, I’d have no idea.* This was the furthest trip he had taken outside since the first storm, and he was soaking in all of the details. He glances back at his own house, and can see that the shades of their family room have been raised. Presumable, someone is watching his trek to the Perry’s house. He turns back around, and continues pulling Todd into the Anderson’s yard.

The location of the Anderson’s driveway is discernible in the snow. Alex had seen John clearing the driveway with his snow blower during the first few storms, but hasn’t seen any signs of activity in their yard since. Alex is unable to observe their house directly, since the Walker’s house almost completely obstructs his view of the Anderson’s colonial. Todd’s house is similarly obscured from direct observation through Alex’s windows.

Alex decides to pick up the pace in the Anderson’s yard. Being out in the open is starting to make him nervous, and he starts glancing at all of the houses, looking for anything out of the ordinary, like an open window. *Should’ve gone through the backyards. Fucking stupid to parade out in front. I know some of these people hunt, so I know that I am not the only one with guns around here. What I really should have done is swapped the shotgun for the AR-15. The shotgun won’t do shit for me if someone takes a shot. This thing will barely make it across the street with any effect.* His military training, and paranoia are simultaneously kicking in, to make him feel uneasy. He keeps moving toward Todd’s house at a slightly faster pace. A quick look up at the Anderson’s confirms that the shades are shut, and everything looks normal. *Almost there.*

Alex enters Todd’s yard, and turns left toward the back of Todd’s garage. As he passes the corner of Todd’s garage, he intersects Todd’s original footprints in the snow, and follows them to the garage door. He checks Todd, and still finds him unconscious, though when he moves Todd’s face, it seems to almost wake him up. *Good, I need him to wake up, because I am not carrying his ass into the house.*

Alex turns the garage door handle, and pushes the door inward. The door resists, but he puts his shoulder into the door, and it pushes all the way into the garage. *Holy shit!* A terrible rotten odor immediately overtakes him, and he fights an overwhelming urge to vomit. He starts to gag, and closes the door. Angrily, he kicks Todd in the upper left arm.

“Wake up! Let’s go! Get up! There is no way I am walking through that shit stink you have brewing in the garage. Come on! Move it!”

He kicks him a few more times, and Todd opens his eyes, squinting and looking up at him. He then glances at his hands, and looks confused.

“Where did you take me?”

“Where do you think? Back to your house. What the fuck is that smell in your garage?”

As he utters the words, he immediately thinks about Todd’s family. *Oh fuck, I really hope it’s not them. No, that’s right, they are in the bulk head, this couldn’t be them. Just trash.* He looks at Todd’s face, and can imagine Todd is registering a similar thought. Alex struggles to keep from glancing at the bulkhead, which is behind him. *Don’t look, I need to keep him calm, until he is back inside. Don’t fucking look!* Alex looks back at the door to the garage, and swallows hard thinking about the stench behind the door.

“What smell?”

*What smell? Is he fucking kidding? Maybe the whole house smells like this.* Glancing around quickly, he does not see any trash bags lying within sight in the backyard. *Oh shit, I just looked at the bulkhead. Don’t look at him right away.* Alex turns his gaze to the door, and opens it again, with the hope of dissipating some of the smell from the garage. He turns back to Todd.

“Todd, I am going to help you stand up, and walk back into your garage. If you fuck with me, I will take you out. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” he replies in a quiet mock military tone.

“Good. Once you are inside the garage, I am going to remove your handcuffs, by snipping them off. O.K.?”

“Sure.”

“Then, I am going to close the door, and we won’t see each other again, will we?”

“I hope not.”

“Me too. Alright, up we go.”

Alex moves over to his right side, and puts both of his hands under Todd’s right bicep and armpit. He then pulls Todd to a standing position, as the sled slides away over the hard crust of the snow. Todd is visible shivering now. Todd turns toward the door, and starts to walk, slowly, without any help.

“Are you alright to walk?” Alex asks.

Todd just nods his head, and continues into the doorway of the garage. The smell is still nearly unbearable for Alex, and he is visible wincing from the stink. Todd stops just inside the garage, and extends his arms behind him. Alex reaches into his pocket and pulls out a leatherman multi-tool. He opens the wire cutter tool, and quickly cuts through the zip ties. This is not the first time he has done this. Alex backs up, watching Todd closely. At first Todd does not move, he just stands there, shivering. After about 30 seconds, he slowly turns around. When he faces Alex sees a transformation, the rage is gone from his face, replaced by sorrow and tears.

“There’s nothing here for me anymore Alex.”

Alex just stares at him, with no idea what to say.

Todd continues, “I’m sorry for everything, for all the shit I’ve put you through. I…I was just trying to help them.” He glances in the direction of the bulkhead.

Alex is stunned by the sudden change of emotion, and feels a terrible rush of guilt.

“I wish I could have helped everyone, I just…”

“You don’t need to explain it. I understand.”

Alex nods his head.

Todd then whispers, “I just wish you had killed me back at your house, that’s all I really wanted. For someone to kill me.”

Alex can see that he is despondent. He reaches his right hand into on of his coat pockets, and removes Todd’s revolver. Todd looks at the gun, and then looks up at Alex. His shivering has stopped. Alex opens the revolver’s drum, and deposits all of the bullets into his left hand. He then closes the revolver with a flick of his right wrist. He pockets the bullets, and then fishes two of them back out of his pocket. He looks up at Todd, walks to the doorway and extends his left hand, while still holding the gun in his right Todd puts his right hand out, and Alex drops the two .38 bullets into his hand. He then extends his right hand, and offers the weapon to Todd. Todd looks into his eyes, swallows hard, and takes the pistol from Alex.

“Close the door Todd.”

Alex pauses, and then says, “I’ll make sure they’re all taken care of when Winter’s over.”

Todd nods slowly, ‘Thanks.”

Alex nods back, and grabs the sled’s rope, and starts walking back toward his own house, following Todd’s footprints through the backyard. Looking over his shoulder, he removes his respirator, and continues watching Todd, until the door shuts. The cold air hits his lungs, and causes him to take a shortened breath. *Fuck this!* After that, he never looks back, but his ears strain fiercely against the wind. Straining to hear the sound that he didn’t really need or want to hear.

Once across the yards, he walks around the front of his house, across the cleared driveway, and onto the shoveled walkway leading to the mudroom door. He knocks repeatedly, until Kate appears from the kitchen, unlocks the door and let him in.

She immediately hugs him, and won’t let go.

“You should have brought a radio, so we knew you were alright. We lost sight of you when you went around back. Scared the shit out of me.’

“I completely forgot the radio. Wasn’t really planning to drag an unconscious man back to his house today. I had no problems at all. Todd gave me no hassle.”

“How did you leave it with him? Is he going to leave us alone?”

“I don’t think we’ll ever see him again.”

“What do you mean? Please tell me you…you didn’t…you know.”
 “No, I didn’t execute him.”

“What did you do?”

“I gave him his gun back, with two bullets.”

Alex stared into her eyes, and at the same time thought about Todd’s face when he handed him the gun. He looked relieved, and for a brief moment, his eyes looked like they were renewed with a purpose. Alex hugs her even tighter, as he fights back tears. Kate squeezes back, and rubs his back. She releases the hug suddenly.

“Hey, everyone is looking forward to pancakes. We haven’t taken any steps toward making them, but everything you need to make the pancake batter is out on the island.”

“Nice, anything else I can do for you all this morning? You’re cooking them. They always stick to the damn non-stick pan for me, and I am not going to be blamed for fucked up pancakes. Especially not today.”

Kate looks into his eyes, and can see that they are troubled by the mornings events.

“I love you hon.”

“I love you too.”

Alex pauses, and then adds, “Let’s really keep a real close eye on the neighborhood. It doesn’t look like much is going on out there, but any of the houses on this street could have a drama like this ready to explode.”

“Alright, let’s talk to the kids about it later.”