

JANUARY - FRIDAY - 7 P.M.

Sheer terror obliterated all rationale from Kent Hewitt's mind and fueled his legs into a frenzied sprint. He raced through the dense forest praying he was headed in the right direction. Large, thick branches stretched outward in front of him and tore flesh from his face, but he paid no attention. The canopy of leaves overhead had squashed any remaining hope that the few rays of dwindling daylight might save him if he ran into trouble before reaching safety.

Kent was sickened by the coppery-tasting film that coated his tongue. Blood gurgled up from the wound in his neck and choked off most of his breath. His lungs burned as if the devil had drove a fiery pitchfork into them. *Don't stop, don't look back*, Kent thought repeatedly, feeling his energy wane. *Surely they won't chase me into the open.*

The hum of eighteen-wheelers roaring down the highway reverberated off Kent's ear drums and it spurred his body to squeeze out another drop of adrenaline. He could see the clearing ahead of him as he crested the top of a hill and the stream of headlights whizzing past as dusk took residence in the sky. *Please god*, he thought, *just let me make it to the highway.*

Kent tightened his fingers around the syringe still clenched in his hand that he had snatched off a shelf in Dr. Cohn's home-based lab about ten minutes earlier. Dr. Cohn had advised it was filled with a serum that would diminish his acne outbreaks, but Kent quickly realized that Dr. Cohn had no intention on giving it to him. The creature or whatever it was that had emerged from the shadows once Dr. Cohn left the room sprang onto him, plowing its razor sharp teeth into the side of his neck. Kent had screamed for help, but heard someone engage the door lock. He'd known instantly that the *good* doctor had no intention of letting him out of the room alive.

Somehow during the struggle, he had found a scalpel and slashed it across the creature's face filleting its cheek. The stunned creature did not collapse, but shrunk away wailing in agony. The momentary distraction gave Kent enough time to grab the syringe for evidence, throw a metal stool through the window, and get a decent headstart.

A flash of excruciating pain ripped into Kent's shoulder. His legs buckled and he sprawled onto the forest floor headfirst. He rammed his elbow back and felt it connect solidly with his attacker's mouth. With fading strength, he rolled over and stabbed the syringe into his attacker's eye or at least what was left of it. The attacker was like the creature in Dr. Cohn's lab, but this one had a more alarming resemblance to the legendary vampire. Still, its eye sockets were surrounded by rotting skin that hung in clumps.

Kent struggled to his feet and stared briefly with morbid fascination at the vampire-like creature science scholars had concluded could never exist. He felt, in some ironic twist of fate, he was witnessing the beginning of the end for humanity starting with him. His awe simultaneously turned to bone-chilling fear as the creature ripped out the syringe and flung it on the ground as though it had been nothing more than a mere annoyance.

The creature glowered at Kent and bared its elongated fangs. Kent lifted his foot to take a step back, but heard a twig snap behind him. He turned around; already knowing what waited for him. Two more creatures materialized out of the shadows. Kent's only escape route was cut-off. *Fucking vampires*, he said, feeling the support of his legs waiver.

The thunderous sound of splintering branches shattered the eerie silence. A large figure descended from overhead and crushed the one creature standing behind Kent on impact. Kent watched the other vampire-like creatures shrink back behind the trees. He immediately felt the hot, fowl stench of the uninvited guest's breath fall upon the back of his neck instigating a shiver of impending death to surge down his spine.

Kent couldn't will his body to turn around and face the Grim Reaper's messenger. He dropped to his knees and curled up into a fetal position hunching his shoulders to protect his neck. He had never been afraid of anything except his father's iron-fist, but now he longed for his dad to appear out of the shadow to save him. He would take the beating that would come later for interrupting his dad's poker game.

A ghastly animal-like howl caused Kent to bring his knees closer to his chest. He shielded his face and head with his arms as the ravenous snarls of the vampire-like creatures swarmed around him. However, their intent on feasting on his blood seemed to be put on hold as they battled the large intruder for their dinner.

The horrific sounds of chomping on and tearing of flesh were followed instantly by blood spraying across every nearby surface. Kent knew when the last drop of death had fallen, his life would be over. This was his one and only chance to get away. He took a deep quivering breath, forced his eyelids open, and looked back over his shoulder. The petrifying sight spurred him into flight and he was on his feet, staggering toward the highway. Although he was extremely woozy, his mind would not allow him to be eaten by creatures that were supposed to only live in horror movies.

Kent stumbled out of the tree line and onto the shoulder of the highway. He saw an approaching semi-truck and began waving his arms frantically in the air. The ground seemed to sway beneath his feet. The semi-truck blew past without slowing down almost knocking him over. Kent glanced back toward the chaotic scene he had managed to survive, but it had disappeared into the darkness. He fell onto his knees. Unconsciousness began infiltrating his mind and blackness invaded the outer edges of his vision. It was hard to breathe and he struggled back onto his feet but was unable to maintain his balance. He stumbled into the slow-lane and was awashed in bright light, but barely noticed. Staring at him from the side of the road was the reason he hadn't been devoured by the vampire-like creatures. Their fabled enemy had crashed the dinner party.

Kent glimpsed the enormous silvery grill of a semi-tractor trailer bearing down on him and heard the high-piercing squeal of its brakes. He was a breath away from death, but he did not avert his gaze. This death would guarantee he stayed dead and by what

he'd just experienced, anything was better than returning to roam the world as something other than human.

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Dr. Travis Cohn clasped his hands behind his back and glared through the shattered window. His tall, lanky form kept the overhead fluorescent lighting from spilling out into the night. He turned and surveyed the damage to his lab. An entire shelf of scientific beakers had smashed onto the floor and particles of glass were strewn throughout the room. Blood was splattered on the beige fabric of one of the examination chairs and a tray of stainless steel surgical instruments had been scattered across the floor.

Dr. Cohn shifted his attention to the closed door that led into his office where his assistant with benefits, Debra Reed, had offered to stay late due to the fiasco that had ensued. He trusted her, loved her, and was his ace in the hole. Her connections with the police department were priceless. He could hear her frustration toward whomever she was speaking to on the phone.

A fowl stench enveloped the lab and Dr. Cohn turned back toward the window. One lonely creature climbed back through the remaining pieces of jagged glass still lodged in the window pane and collapsed onto the floor. Blood gathered on the creature's chest from three elongated gashes.

Dr. Cohn walked over and knelt down next to the creature. He studied the serrated flaps of skin and the significant depth of the wound. The creature reached up, but Dr. Cohn knocked the ill-formed hand away. He stood up, walked over to his workstation, and pulled open the top drawer. He withdrew a Glock 9 millimeter and aimed it at the creature. With a squeeze of the trigger, the creature's head exploded spewing blood and rotting flesh in various directions.

Debra rushed into the room with a sawed-off shotgun poised for action, but immediately lowered it when she saw Dr. Cohn standing over the creature. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Dr. Cohn said, "just tying up a loose end. Who was on the phone?"

"Colonel Lewis," Debra replied. "He's advised that the administration is tired of waiting for a sworn written statement that you have ceased all research operations."

"What did you tell him?" Dr. Cohn said, tucking the Glock back into the drawer.

"That it must have gotten lost in binary hell," Debra said with a satisfied grin. "I'm not sure he even understood what I meant. I promised to fax it again in the morning."

Dr. Cohn cupped Debra's face in his hands. "You are a woman after my heart," he said. "I'll be sure to reward you later for your sly explanation. Have you received word from Charles about our other situation?"

Debra looked over at the decapitated creature rotting on the lab floor. "He's trying to find out what exactly happened, but there's not a lot to go on. It's not like any of the projects came back except for this one and its not talking."

"No, it's not," Dr. Cohn replied, grinning devilishly. "Any word on if Kent made it out alive?"

“Apparently not,” Debra said. “According to Charles, the only part of Kent that wasn’t decimated by the semi-truck was a solitary tennis shoe found near the shoulder of the road.”

“Good,” Dr. Cohn said. “We don’t need any more delays or complications. “

“Do you want me to type something up to fax to Colonel Lewis?” Debra said.

“That won’t be necessary. I’m sure Colonel Lewis will make a surprise inspection within the next week or two regardless if we fax over a sworn statement or not,” Dr. Cohn replied. “We will deal with him swiftly when the time comes. No one betrays me a gets away with it.”

JANUARY - SUNDAY - 1:15 A.M.

Daniel Pratt staggered out onto the porch of the Sigma Kappa fraternity house and crumpled to his knees. The wooden slats that ran the length of the porch supported his falling weight easily, but it did not keep the seasick feeling splashing in his stomach from overwhelming him. Unable to lift his head, he crawled over to the railing, which felt as though he was making his way across the bow of a ship being tossed in a fury. He grabbed the top railing with both hands and pulled himself upward, flung his head over the side just in time to hurl onto the unsuspecting bushes that were trimmed into nicely shaped blocks below and not the clothes that he had just put back on.

Out of the four guys that had participated in what some would consider hazing, Daniel was the one who had survived the final initiation phase administered by the Sigma Kappa fraternity brothers. Daniel and the others had been ordered to strip down and get in a five-foot-wide, two-and-a-half-foot-deep closet. They'd had to consume a six-pack of beer and half a bottle of Jack Daniel's within an hour. Afterward, they'd had to eat a handful of exotic jelly beans ranging in flavor from earwax to sardines and were finally made to spin around for one minute. Daniel had been the only one in the group who'd managed to keep everything down and not pass out.

Now, alone in the darkness that enveloped the porch, Daniel felt the glow of success somewhere under the muck of alcohol coursing through his veins. He was not about to let his fraternity brothers find him passed out on their front porch. He pushed himself up from the railing and struggled to keep his balance as he teetered back and forth from heel to toe. He stumbled toward the concrete steps that led down from the porch onto the walkway.

The porch steps were not steep, but with Daniel's skewed vision they appeared as treacherous as a ladder bridge over an ice crevice on Mount Everest. He placed his left foot out in front of him, bent his right knee, and leaned forward, hitting the first step solidly. He brought his right foot down beside his left and did the same routine for the next three steps. When he reached the walkway, he looked back with a triumphant, toothy grin. *That wasn't so bad*, he thought.

When Daniel stepped onto the sidewalk, he looked up and down the street and realized from the darkened windows that he was the last man standing on Fraternity Row. The surrounding Victorian-style homes were magnificent reminders of the city's history. Triton University had acquired most of the homes and converted them into fraternity or sorority houses, but their appearance was maintained with the utmost diligence. The neighborhood emanated beauty, strength, and fine craftsmanship.

The street was lined with majestic California Black Oak trees, their large, full branches offering a shaded sanctuary from the blistering sun during the summer months.

At night, though, the tree limbs seemed to transform into long, bony arms outstretched in a menacing plot to keep darkness in and the moonbeams at bay. One might believe they had stumbled into Sleepy Hollow if they were unfamiliar with the area.

Daniel drifted aimlessly from one edge of the sidewalk to the other. He zipped up his jacket and pulled his hood on to keep the wind from howling in his ears. He could see swirls of gray escape from his mouth as his warm breath collided with the cool air. It had been a mild winter, but tonight the temperature felt like it was in the low forties.

Daniel picked up the pace, stumbling every now and then, as he made his way back to his dorm room. With about two blocks to go, he caught movement out of the corner of his left eye. He paused and looked across the street into the front yard of a sorority house. He couldn't see anything or anyone lurking in the shadows or standing on the darkened porch.

Daniel took a few more strides before spotting something again, *was that a man?*, racing from tree to tree. Whoever or whatever it was used the cover of darkness effectively, staying low to the ground and blending in with the shadows. Daniel pretended not to notice but quickened his pace. He was in no condition to fight off a would-be attacker.

For a fleeting moment, Daniel considered that it might be one of his newly earned fraternity brothers trying to scare the shit out of him. That theory lasted about as long as a sneeze. Even without the benefit of light, whatever was following him didn't appear to be just in pursuit of a simple scare. It appeared to be hunting him.

Daniel fell into a flat-out run or at least an attempted run in his drunken state. He tripped over his own feet, tumbled to the ground, scrambled back up, and made it a few more steps before repeating it all over again. He looked along the trees, the bushes, and the parked cars for any sign of whatever was chasing him. Finally, he stopped in his tracks, placed his hands on his knees, and threw up again.

A flash of debilitating pain tore into Daniel's neck before he even had time to realize that something had attacked him. He flung his arms in every direction and spun around, ramming whatever was on his back into the trunk of an oak tree. The pain in his neck momentarily subsided and he stumbled backward, trying to gain distance between himself and the attacker.

Daniel's hand instinctively flew to the side of his neck in an attempt to contain blood which was spurting from the gaping wound. The weakness, stealing the strength from his extremities, was a sure indication that he was quickly bleeding out. He tried to call out for help, but choked on his own blood. He fell backward and laid sprawled across the ground. There was nothing else he could do but watch as the attacker he had thought was a man approached him.

The creature that neared was part man and part animal. It had no eyelids and the tissue around each orbital socket seemed as if decaying. Its mouth was distorted, with too many teeth occupying the same space, and two very long fangs covered in blood. The veins in its face were bulging through the translucent skin like blue streaks of paint. Daniel closed his eyes and waited for the creature to finish him off.

The sound of screeching tires, doors slamming, and the thwap of bullets from silencers as they impacted the creature forced Daniel to open his eyes one last time. A man wearing a black ski mask decapitated the stunned creature with a swift swipe of a

sword as another man drove a wooden stake through its heart. The third masked man knelt down beside Daniel.

The man peeled off the ski mask and looked down at Daniel. "I'm so sorry," he said, placing the silencer against Daniel's forehead. "It's the only way to make sure you don't end up like that."

Daniel closed his eyes, no longer feeling any pain. Then all was dark.

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The shortest of the masked men scooped up the creature's head. He placed the decaying mass inside a large, plastic trash bag careful not to get any of the creature's blood on him. "Dr. Cohn's research project is getting way out of hand," he said, tying off the bag.

"Before long, we'll be outnumbered."

"I'm quite aware of that," the unmasked man replied, standing over Daniel's body. "The only way to defeat Dr. Cohn is to use his experiment against him."

"How are we going to do that?" the shorter man said, hoisting the creature's decapitated body over his shoulder. "Steal the serum and inject it in those we think will use it for the good of mankind?"

There was an awkward moment of silence. The shorter man waited breathlessly for a reply, but the unmasked man made no further conversation as he grabbed Daniel by the arms and dragged him toward the back of a white van.

The shorter man glanced up at the sky. "God help us if we're wrong."

APRIL - WEDNESDAY - 6:45 P.M.

Lawrence Williams held the football jersey at arm's length. He knew it was almost identical to everyone else's on the team, but there was one huge difference: this one belonged to him. The back of the jersey had his last name and the number eight embroidered in bold, blue lettering that stood out against the white material. "I did it," he whispered. An almost-forgotten smile pulled at the corners of his mouth, which spread across his handsome ebony face.

Lawrence had resisted celebrating his newly appointed position out of respect for the other guys who hadn't been selected for the honor. Now, alone in the locker room, he envisioned the pride that would gleam from his mother's eyes. As if that wasn't enough reason for a little self-appreciation party, he imagined the extra coolness points he was going to receive from his little brother – icing on the cake.

Lawrence knew that his mother, Mildred, and brother, Anthony, would be waiting anxiously to see how fate had played out. Mildred would be peeking out the front window until she saw the headlights from his truck turn into the driveway. She and Anthony would dart into the kitchen, certain that he hadn't seen the blinds swaying from their abrupt departure. He would walk in and sit down next to them at the kitchen table as they pretended to play one of Anthony's board games. He would sigh deeply and pat his mother's hand. She would wait breathlessly, searching his eyes for the truth. Then he would smile and announce that he had earned the starting quarterback position for the fall season.

His mother and brother would cheer wildly and pound their palms on the kitchen table. Mildred would insist that a celebration at the local pizza parlor was in order although they really couldn't afford it. She, above everyone else in his life, would understand that the coach's decision had been the ultimate payoff to the years he had devoted to training and eating right. She had watched him tackle every obstacle, personally and academically, with finesse and determination. She had encouraged him, supported him, and loved him. She had been the ultimate friend.

Lawrence also came to realize that his family's contributions to his athletic success extended beyond their faith in him. His father, Tony, had been a quarterback, but not at the college or professional level. He had played for fun with a group of guys from work for over ten years. They met every Sunday at Triton City's community center whether the sky was a cloudless blue or plagued with horizontal rain.

Lawrence had inherited his father's love for football as well as his impressive physical stature. He stood 6'3" and weighed 212 pounds. He was undeniably quick on his feet and a fast learner. His father had impressed upon him that it was always best to have

a wild card up one's sleeve. That way, if played at the right moment, it had the potential to make all the difference in the world. Lawrence had taken this advice to heart and tried to think of ways to make himself an extraordinary football player.

If there was one thing Lawrence was certain of, it was that the benefits of being ambidextrous were countless. He had just entered into his freshman year of high school when he finally succeeded in hurling a football through the center of an old tire with almost flawless accuracy using either arm. Tragedy struck the following year with his dad's untimely death, which left Lawrence without anyone to share his passion. In turn, he took it upon himself not to let all the moments that he and his father had shared die, too. He coped with his grief by throwing himself into football practice and improving his speed and power.

It wasn't until May of his junior year that Lawrence believed he had perfected his skills so much so that he might have a chance at making the high school football team. He called up one of his dad's old work buddies to see if it was all right if he started coming down to the community center on Sundays to play some ball. He received an enthusiastic response and was welcomed with open arms. During the next three months, Lawrence learned the importance of having a strong offensive line and to think quickly on his feet.

In August of that same year, he signed up for the walk-on tryouts for the high school football team along with about eighteen other hopefuls. The first day had been spent testing his balance, stamina, and power. He was invited back the following day to participate in a scrimmage. The coach about choked on his whistle when he saw Lawrence make his first pass to an open wide receiver at the five-yard line that connected for a touchdown. After four more flawless passes, Lawrence became an official member of the team.

From that moment forward, Mildred and Anthony attended every game. Mildred chatted with the other parents on topics ranging from academics to statistics. She screamed, "That's m' boy!" whenever Lawrence threw a pass, regardless of whether or not it resulted in a touchdown. Her excitement came strictly from watching how happy it made her son, just as it had the man she had loved and spent twenty-three glorious years in marriage.

Mildred was only 5'4" and had a waist no larger than Lawrence's thigh. Her soft, black hair had started turning white during her early thirties, which she blamed playfully on having a house full of men. There was no doubt that Lawrence had her eyes; lucky for him, he had also inherited her vision. She had 20/20 vision with perfect depth perception. She also had killer reflexes that would have made her a lethal shot had she ever wanted to shoot an actual gun. Mildred, though, preferred to challenge her sons where arcade zombies were the targets and plastic blue and pink guns were the weapons of choice.

"Those were the days," Lawrence whispered, glancing up toward the locker room ceiling. He clutched the gold cross that hung from a gold chain around his neck and checked the clock above the practice schedule posted on the corkboard. It was getting late, just about two minutes before seven. His mother would be frantic if he didn't show up as promised in half an hour. He looked at his jersey one last time before laying it over his shoulder.

Lawrence opened up his assigned locker that would have his name on it by week's end. He pulled out his duffel bag and placed it on the bench he'd been sitting on.

He folded his jersey and tucked it inside the duffel bag, on top of a couple of school books, so that there was very little chance of it getting creased if he was careful. After a quick survey of his locker to make sure he wasn't forgetting anything, he slammed the locker door closed and headed toward the exit, duffel bag in hand.

Lawrence pushed through the double doors and into the brightly lit corridor that took the players from the underground locker room up to the field. He knew that he had earned the opportunity to prove to everyone that he could easily run with the big dogs in the NFL, especially the scouts who were looking for the next Tom Brady. His excitement spurred him into a sprint and the pounding of his feet reverberated off the walls. He exploded onto the field, imagining the stands were filled with fans chanting his name.

He took a moment to catch his breath and look out across the football field. The stadium lights were still on, giving the illusion that the sun was still soaring above the mountains, but the menacing night sky told a different story. Dark, gray storm clouds blocked out the moon and masked the radiance of countless stars. Lawrence couldn't remember if the weatherman had predicted rain, but he had no intention of getting caught in a downpour. He hurried across the field toward the exit gates.

A ten-foot-high chain link fence with barbed wire across the top surrounded the perimeter of the stadium. It was the school's valiant attempt to keep those wishing to deface private property at bay. The entry and exit gates that led to and from the stadium and out to the concession stand and parking lot were between the two sections of seating positioned closest to the fifty-yard line. As Lawrence neared the gates, he could see that they had already been secured with a thick piece of chain entwined through the links. Still, he gave the exit gate a strong tug. It clanked loudly against the chain securing its position. He walked back onto the field. "Anybody here?" he shouted, looking up into the announcer's box. "I'm locked in!"

After a couple of seconds had passed, he walked back over to the exit gate and stared at the top of it. He knew he could scale the fence in no time; it was the barbed wire that concerned him. He pulled his cell phone from the side pocket of his duffel bag and flipped it open. He scrolled through his telephone directory already knowing he hadn't programmed the phone numbers for his coach or campus security yet, but figured it was worth a shot anyway. After confirming what he had suspected, he dialed 911.

The dispatcher at the police station picked up the phone on the second ring. "Police department, what is your emergency?"

"Ma'am, the gates are locked and I can't get out," Lawrence said. Suddenly, he was immersed in darkness and it stole his breath, suspending his ability to speak.

"Sir, are you still there?" the 911 dispatcher demanded.

Lawrence listened for laughter by whoever the pranksters were that had turned off the stadium lights. His slight annoyance at such a juvenile act transformed into fear when he heard the snarls of at least two wild animals closing in on him. He flipped the cell phone closed and shoved it deep into his pocket, threw his duffel bag over the barbed wire and jumped onto the fence.

Lawrence had just reached the top when he felt a sensation similar to two ice picks penetrating the calf muscle in his left leg. He screamed out in pain, but managed to hold on to the top bar of the fence just below the barbed wire. The animal's teeth sank deeper into the muscular tissue of his lower leg. It jerked Lawrence's leg back and forth, trying to yank him off the fence.

Lawrence kicked blindly with his right leg at what he suspected might be a Doberman or another type of guard dog incorporated into the university's latest attempt to keep vandals out. He finally connected on his fourth attempt and the animal released his leg, crying out in pain. Goose bumps exploded all over Lawrence's skin as his terrified mind refused to rationalize the humanlike shriek. He frantically hoisted himself up and laid his chest on the barbed wire. It tore through his shirt and into his flesh, but he didn't care. He forced himself to do a somersault, leaving pieces of skin from his hands and upper torso on the barbed wire as he tumbled down to the ground on the other side.

He scrambled to his feet, grabbed his duffel bag, and didn't dare turn around as he staggered toward his vehicle. He could hear the mesh wire of the fence rattling behind him. The fact that his freaked-out mind finally accepted that whatever was scaling the fence wasn't an animal chilled him to the core of his soul. "This is not real," he repeated over and over quietly.

He yanked his keys from the front pocket of his jeans and pressed the remote to unlock the doors to his black Toyota Tundra less than twenty feet away. He felt the blood from the bite on his calf collecting at the top of his sock. His chest was drenched in blood and so were his hands. Sweat poured from his brow and he grimaced with every step, but he wasn't going to stop running. He knew if he did he would be throwing himself at the Grim Reaper's feet and seeing his father a little sooner than planned.

He dove into the driver's seat, pulled the door closed, and locked it. The dimming dome light gave him enough time to check the backseat area to make sure he was truly alone. He tossed the duffel bag onto the passenger seat, started the engine, and looked up in time to see a trash can hurtling toward the windshield. He ducked behind the dashboard, shifted into drive, and stomped on the accelerator. The trash can slammed into the windshield, causing an elongated crack to develop through the center.

Lawrence yanked the steering wheel to the left and felt the right side of his truck roll up and over something. He wasn't sure what he had crushed under his 4X4 tires and he didn't care. He wasn't stopping for anything. The trash can slid off the hood and clattered onto the pavement. Lawrence straightened in the seat to avoid crashing into anything that might thwart his escape. He flipped on his headlights and tore through the parking lot.

When Lawrence looked into his rearview mirror he saw something so undeniably outrageous that he couldn't avert his gaze. It appeared to be a man, or maybe half-man-half-animal, chasing after him. It drifted in and out of the illumination of his taillights. He peeled his eyes from the mirror and checked the speedometer. He was about to exceed the 55 mph mark and explode from the parking lot into a bustling street with no time to change his mind.

The Tundra barreled onto University Boulevard, causing an instantaneous eruption of honking horns, screeching brakes, and spitting profanity. The stench of hot rubber filled the air. Lawrence didn't really want to look back, but he checked the rearview mirror anyway as he fishtailed slightly before regaining control. He needed to be sure that the unsuspecting drivers in the other vehicles slowly converging back into formation weren't being ripped through their windshields.

"Thank God," Lawrence said, relieved that they had not become a part of his waking nightmare.

A few miles down the road, he turned left onto Broadway and whipped into a busy grocery store on the corner called "The Market." He pulled beneath a rather bright parking lot light close to the front of the store. Jumping out of the cab, he checked the roof and undercarriage to make sure he wasn't taking anything extra home. He noticed that across the right headlight appeared to be blood, but there wasn't time to wash it off before going home. He inspected the cargo area and the backseat one more time.

Lawrence climbed back into the truck and dialed his mother's number. He listened to the series of rings as he maneuvered out of the parking lot and into one of the northbound lanes of traffic. "Pick up the phone!" he pleaded.

It was on the fifth ring that Mildred finally answered. "Hello?"

"Mom, it's me," Lawrence said, trying to keep calm.

"What's wrong?" Mildred demanded, recognizing the unusual edge to his voice. "Have you been in an accident?"

"I wish I had time to explain, but I don't. I need you to not ask me any more questions," Lawrence said. "Just do what I tell you — it's a matter of life or death."

Mildred gasped. "You're scaring me, Lawrence!"

"I know. Just please pack an overnight bag for you and Anthony. Don't open the door for anyone but me. I'll be there in less than thirty minutes."

Mildred tried to make sense of her son's insanity. "Were you cut from the team?"

"Mom, I don't have time to explain!" Lawrence shouted. "Just do as I say and don't open the door for anyone."

"Okay, Lawrence," Mildred said, her voice trembling uncontrollably.

"And Mom?"

Mildred's voice was just a breath above a whisper. "Yes."

"Get Dad's gun from the shoebox in the top of my closet. The ammunition is in the sock drawer of my dresser. If anyone comes to the door and tries to get in, aim for their head and shoot to kill."

Lawrence flipped the cell phone closed. He prayed his mother would do what he had requested and not call the police. Of course, if she did, he wouldn't blame her. He knew he sounded like a raving lunatic, but how does one tell his mother something as bizarre as what he had just encountered? In fact, how do you explain that something mimicked during Halloween had just chased you through a parking lot?

Lawrence sat in silence with only the hum of his speeding tires against the asphalt to keep him company. He needed to formulate a plan, but his thoughts were all jumbled as he tried to grasp onto some sort of reasonable explanation. He considered rolling down the window and letting in a little fresh air to clear his mind, but he wasn't completely sure if the thing he had just escaped wasn't waiting for that very opportunity.

He glanced over at the duffel bag and shook his head. It seemed so strange that twenty minutes before he had been rejoicing that he was the new starting quarterback. Now he was rejoicing at the fact that he was alive. He no longer cared about that jersey or the NFL. All he cared about was the two people who meant the world to him, waiting at home. There was nothing real or mythical that would harm them as long as he was alive. He had made his decision; he was going to live.