The Stranger

by Jim Harrington

“I can't go to sleep,” Jonathan said, laying on the doctor's couch. He counted on his fingers to keep his mind active. “I'll certainly die if I do.” He pointed at the man sitting in the chair without looking at him. “You told me so.”

“That wasn't me,” said Dr. England. “That was the man who kidnapped you.”

This man didn't have a beard, Jonathan thought. And his hair wasn't grey, and he didn't yell all the time, and he wore a suit and tie. Still, it was him. Jonathan curled up on the sofa, his knees to his chest, his back to the man.

“I don't believe you.” Jonathan twisted his neck until the man appeared in his peripheral. “You lied to me before.”

“Tell me what happened, Jonathan.”

“I did already.”

“Tell me again.”

Neither spoke for a few seconds. Jonathan rolled onto his back, still clasping his knees, and stared at the ceiling. He rocked from side to side.

“I was on my way home from the soccer game. Mom was at work, so I had to walk. I turned the corner and you grabbed me and pulled me into the bushes. A cloth covered my mouth. I smelled something funny and fell asleep. I woke in a cabin chained to the wall.”

Dr. England wrote in his pad, his legs crossed, and finally said, “Then what?”

“You were there. Why do you keep asking?”

“My memory isn't as good as yours.”

Jonathan frowned. Maybe if he told the story one more time the man would let him go home.

“You told me we were going to play hide and seek. I said I was fourteen and too old to play.” Jonathan hugged his knees tighter. “You told me we were going to play the adult version. That's when you said I'd die if I fell asleep before the game started.”

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“How long did he wait to start the game?”

“I don't remember. Three days?”

“What happened than?”

“You entered the cabin, put a big knife on the table, and tossed me a key. I ignored it. Stared at your eyes. I could tell you'd been drinking.”

“How?”

“It was how mom and dad looked when they came home from a party. Not that they ever tried to hurt me.” Jonathan glared at the man. “Not like you did.”

Jonathan wondered where his dad was and if he'd ever come back.

“Then what happened.”

“You told me to free myself, take the knife and run into the woods. You said you'd count to twenty and then come after me. I didn't move—until I heard you start counting.”

“Did you take the knife?”

“Not at first. Then I saw you pick up the shotgun and rack a shell into the chamber.”

Jonathan paused.

“Go on,” Dr. England said, his pen suspended in the air.

“This is stupid. You know what happened. Unless you're a moron. Are you a moron? You sure act like it sometimes.”

“No, I'm not a moron, Jonathan. Go on.”

Jonathan straightened his legs and continued.

“I ran as fast as I could, given it was dark and there wasn't a path. I went until I couldn't see the cabin and turned at a right angle, ran some more and turned again. I planned to circle back so I could follow the road out.”

“That was smart, Jonathan.”

“Until I tripped over a log and sprained my ankle.” Sweat beaded on Jonathan's forehead. “I crawled behind a tree and concentrated on slowing my breathing. Figured you'd find me if I didn't. That's when I heard you calling me. I inched into a recess in the tree and waited. I couldn't outrun you, even if you had been drinking. A twig

snapped nearby. I clutched the knife and waited. When you stepped in front of me, I stabbed your leg. You grabbed the wound, and I stabbed you in the side. You fell to the ground, and I stabbed you in the back—over and over and over—until you stopped moving.”

Jonathan's breathing was rapid. He began counting on his fingers again.

“What did you do then?”

“I waited until dawn and made my way to a road where an old man gave me a ride in his pickup truck.”

“What about the man chasing you?”

“He was dead. I told the old man what had happened. Why I had blood on my clothes. He told the police.”

“You're sure he was dead.”

“Positive,” Jonathan said with venom in his eyes.

“Then how can I be him?”

“I haven't figured that out yet.”

“Have you slept since you've been home?”

“No.”

“Don't you want to?”

“No. You'll kill me.”