

Those eyes.

Those fiery, malevolent eyes.

They were still there, staring at me through the rearview mirror. And they'll probably follow me forever, like the headlights of a car trailing behind me on a dark lonely back road. I just wish I knew whose they were. Because even though that was my plump face and stubby snout looking back at me in the reflection, those eyes certainly weren't mine. They hadn't been mine for quite sometime now.

That's when a loud noise startled me, causing my focus to shift away from the mirror and over to the darkness that stretched out beyond the glass. The jarring cacophony of a car horn brought my senses back to reality, and my ears began twitching as I heard what sounded like hundreds of little feet running across the roof of the vehicle. I must've dozed off again, probably because of the continued rhythmic drumming noise coming from the heavy downpour.

Yet... it was mesmerizing in a way, listening to the rain hammer on the car while I watched the lights from passing vehicles illuminate all those tiny droplets of water. It made them glisten as if someone had dumped a bag full of diamonds all over the windshield.

Then my eyes moved over to the road, and I watched vehicle after vehicle rocket by me from where I had parked my car on the shoulder. They were streaking down the highway in a line of endless taillights, looking like a trail of glowing ants as they marched along a black canvas. They were still traveling though, which was what I should've been doing. That's when I realized I couldn't continue to sit here and stare out the window when I knew damn well it wasn't safe for me. I had to find a way to get moving again, even though I didn't have the foggiest idea where I was headed or what I was going to do when I actually got there. Not like it really mattered. I just had to go.

I needed to get away.

After a couple more vehicles passed by I reached down with my thick cloven hand and grabbed the key, which was held in the ignition's tight grasp. I turned it one slow, agonizing click, hearing the soft jingle of the other keys imprisoned on that cold metal ring. Then I mouthed a quick prayer, begging for it to please start as I turned the key the remaining distance. The car moaned and growled, protesting like a sick, angry dog that didn't want to get out of bed. I finally released the keys.

That settled it. The car was dead, and I was stranded. All on the one night I happened to leave my cell phone on the dresser. It's what I get for leaving in such a hurry.

"Damn," I muttered before taking in a shuddering breath. Then I rubbed my snout with my wiry haired arm, aggravating the already irritated skin. It itched even worse now,

burning me with an agonizing, relentless ache that wouldn't go away. It just wouldn't stop, kind of like all the other things happening to me back at home.

And that seemed to be the trigger, because it brought everything rushing back to me in a sudden flood of thoughts and images. It overwhelmed me, to the point where I couldn't even think straight and I started panicking and twitching nervously in the seat, frantically looking around for any possible way to make it all stop. But no, my mind just continued running out of control and I didn't know what to do, but yet, I could see all those things flashing in my mind over and over again until it was impossible to see anything else.

Why? Why was this happening to me? I just didn't understand it; none of it made sense anymore. There were... those things. Odd, strange things going on... like my stuff, it was out of place all over the house. I mean my wallet, my keys, my medications, even the damn toothbrush wasn't where it was supposed to be. Nothing was where I remembered it--nothing.

And then there was the money that vanished from the lockbox, and the open windows and the unlocked doors and the missing clothes, and the--oh god... those bleach stains in the carpet.

What were they?

I don't remember them being there before, ever. And I don't know why, or where they came from, it was... it was all driving me insane. I mean, if someone had been in the house, I would've smelt them, right? There would've been scents all over the place, but there weren't. There was just... that odor. Like disinfectant or something, and it was everywhere, all the time, but I don't remember using it. So I... I figured I was going crazy. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep, and it was all coming at me so fast I didn't know what else to do, so... so that's when I knew I had to leave. I had to get away.

But where? Where could I possibly go, completely out of the blue and in the absolute dead of night, no less? It was a crazy notion, but... really, what choice did I have?

At first I thought about going to see Garvis, since the last time I talked to him he'd just bought that wood cabin up by Badger Flat, but then I remembered he was out of the country with his business partners on something important, which was so like him. He was always off gallivanting somewhere, trying to pretend like he didn't have problems just like the rest of us. Some brother he was. Not that he'd want to talk with me anyway, but I had a better chance with him than I did Woodley.

Woodley... had it really been that long since either of us bothered to speak one word to each other? The last time was... it had to be the day daddy went to trial; and that was...what--like twelve years ago. Maybe more.

It felt like such a distant memory now. Some sort of fantasy, like those stories they used to tell us all before bedtime. Back when the three of us were just little pigs without a

care in the world... when we still acted like brothers. Like friends. Back when momma was still alive.

So... so that was about the time I decided to get in the car and start driving. I couldn't depend on my brothers to help me. That I was sure about, and I'd figure out someplace to go eventually, on my own.

Which is how I ended up here; with the rain pounding on the car harder than ever before, as if those tiny little raindrops were somehow laughing at me incessantly. I just wanted it all to stop. And it did once a pair of headlights brightened up my rearview mirror like the eyes of a predator stalking its prey under the cover of night. So I froze, rigid like a statue for a couple of seconds before I sunk into the driver's seat ever so slightly, hoping to get a glimpse of the vehicle in the mirrors. Unfortunately, the blinding light drowned out everything else, and I felt my heart flutter a little in my chest. The term sweating like a pig seemed strangely ironic at that moment, because if I were actually able to sweat, I would've been pouring buckets right about then.

Who was it? A cop? Or maybe this was the person who broke into my house and did all those things to me? No, no, no, I mean that was just crazy, right? Someone wouldn't go around following me like that, now would they? Would they?

My back twitched against the seat as I watched a shadow burst from the driver's side door of the vehicle behind me. It streaked toward my car, flowing like death on the prowl as it looked for another soul to steal. I didn't hesitate to reach for the door, making sure it was securely locked. The shadow eventually migrated to my side front window and rapped on the glass with a single dull claw. It looked like the pointed beak of a hawk frantically trying to get through to a rodent on the other side, and it made me swallow a heavy lump in my throat. I couldn't help but stare at the wet glass for a few seconds before I finally reacted and cracked the window.

"Car troubles?" the dark figure questioned, his tone slightly elevated so I could hear him over the passing cars.

My snout flexed, sucking in a quick burst of air as I tried not to grunt. He was a wolf. I could tell that much by his hot earthy breath, and it made me wonder if he was trying to catch a whiff of my scent too. Could he smell my fear? Were his instincts sharp enough to pick up on that?

"Y--yes," I finally replied as I cracked the window a little further, trying to get a better look at him.

Even though less of the talking figure was distorted by the sopping wet glass, it still didn't help. I couldn't see his entire face, partially because the dark red hood he was wearing kept his head shrouded in a shadowy veil, leaving only the faintest glimpse of gray fur visible around the wolf's protruding muzzle. But when cars roared by, they

temporarily illuminated his visage and I saw those teeth--and those eyes, standing out against the darkness. It definitely startled me.

“Where's ya headed?” the wolf asked.

His voice--it was deep. Very masculine, and it enticed me in a strangely pleasant sort of way that I couldn't quite pin down. It wasn't so much that he had a country vibe to his voice. It was more like he sounded uneducated, but there appeared to be a genuine, homey charm to him which made you take notice. And the fellow seemed awfully benign given that he was standing next to a busy highway out in the pouring rain. Maybe he really was trying to help me out? Regardless though, I still had to think of something. I mean, even if this wolf wasn't the one doing those things to me, I couldn't let him know I was running away.

Come on dammit, think.

“Fl--Florin... I'm going to Florin,” I replied with an adolescent-like stammer as I locked onto the wolf's fiery golden eyes, which seemed to lure me in like a cobra enchanting its prey.

“Florin? Ain't that just south a' Manning?”

I pondered that for a moment, a little unsure myself before I finally answered him with a nod.

“You're a long way from home, ain't ya? Well, you're 'n luck, cause I'ma headed right by there. I'll give ya a lift.”

“Well, umm... I--I don't think I--”

“Hey, don't worry 'bout it,” the lupine insisted as he backed away from the car door. “Let's jus get ya outta the rain.”

I hesitated stepping out of the car, as if I'd somehow been glued to the seat. But I finally pried my hoofed fingers away from the steering wheel and opened the door. The noise of the rain increased dramatically as I got out of the vehicle, so much so, I would have to shout if I wanted to be heard, especially when another car drove by and drowned out all the other sounds. The wolf headed back to his larger vehicle, his bushy gray tail swaying to and fro like a hypnotist swinging his watch.

I moved around to the rear of my car and opened the trunk of my small hatchback. I grabbed my duffel bag from inside before slamming the door and locking the car with a push of a button on the keys. The lights flashed on my vehicle as I turned and rushed over to the wolf's sedan, watching as he opened the passenger side door and began fumbling around in the car. Another vehicle sped by, blinding me for a moment as it flew passed us and sprayed fine droplets of water on my face.

When I got to the other car, I could hear his radio blaring, and I saw the wolf had a child seat strapped into the passenger side and was struggling to get it loose. This struck me as odd. Why did he have a pup carrier but no pup? Then another car sped by, showering us with more water from a dip in the road, and it reminded me that I needed to get moving.

"It's okay. I'll sit in the back," I said before opening up the rear door.

The wolf nodded in agreement and headed around to the driver's side. I threw my bag into the car and got in, quieting the noises outside with a slam of the door. I could hear the radio more clearly now, the song "Brick House" thumping through the aged, tinny sounding speakers on the dashboard. My lupine driver stepped inside and immediately shut the radio off before situating himself behind the wheel, adjusting his tail and lowering the hood on his red coat. It made me feel like I was in the back of a damn taxicab.

"Sorry 'bout that," the wolf said as he looked over at the child seat. "I jus dropped my little one off at her grand mama's place. It's pretty rare I have passengers anymore, if ya know what I mean."

Deep down, I knew I should've let things be and not inquired more. But the pup carrier was nagging at my brain for some odd reason, and Lord knows why, I just couldn't let it go. Maybe it was because of the nerves.

"I thought it was against the law to have a carrier in the front seat?"

The sentence just shot out of my mouth, and I wanted to slap myself as soon as I said it. Then I saw an irritated look wash over the lupine's face as he glared at me through the rearview mirror.

"Only if ya face it forward and ya have airbags. But in this piece a junk--" he paused, just long enough to shake his head, "airbags weren't even heard of yet."

Way to make friends, jackass. Now shut the hell up so he can drive. "Sorry--I... I was just curious, is all."

That seemed to satisfy the wolf because he glanced at his side mirror and pulled out into the line of vehicles littering the highway. We were going. Thank the Lord, we were finally going. As long as it was away from here. Anywhere but here.

"So let me introduce myself," the wolf said in a chipper tone. "The name's Mike Hooten, but my friends call me Hooter."

I hesitated when those eyes of his found mine through the rearview mirror. I knew what he wanted. I knew what I was supposed to do, but the words had trouble coming out.

I had to say something though, so I eventually dribbled out the reply, "I'm Ben." *No--no, don't give him your real name, idiot.*

"What? No last name?" Mike asked, switching his eyes from the road to the mirror again. "Do I gotta get all huffy and puffy to get it outta ya?"

He chuckled at that, but I certainly didn't see the humor in it. My mind was far too occupied to think rationally, let alone clearly.

Quick--a name. Give him a fake one, hurry. "It--it's Huffington."

Crap. That sounded ridiculous. And I watched as Mike gave me the most perplexing look, which made the hairs all over my body stand up straight. I must've been shaking like a dang fish out of water.

"Ya alright there, partner? You sure look like sumthin' has ya all knotted up. You ain't in some kinda trouble, are ya?"

There was heat in his voice now. He knew something wasn't right. I needed to quell his curiosity--and fast.

"No--no, good heavens, no. It's just... I--I had a bad week at work and I... I'm just getting away for awhile."

"Oh... well, okay. Jus don't get your little tail in a twist or nuthin'." He laughed again, and he seemed surprised that I didn't find his clever pun equally amusing. "Lighten up there, ol' boy. I ain't one a' those big bad wolves like your momma used to tell ya about back when you was younger. I'm just a guy tryin' to help another guy out, is all."

I didn't respond. I didn't know how to, and Hooten seemed to catch on because he turned his attention back to driving. We rode in silence for the next ten miles or so, listening to the rain beat on the car while streaking headlights flew past us in both directions. It caused everything to go by in flashes; from light to dark, light to dark. It made my eyelids heavy. Made me want to sleep. But I couldn't, and not because I didn't want to.

It was because I hadn't had a good night's sleep in well over a month.

And I really didn't know what to do about the situation. I mean, the sleeping pills didn't help, that was for dang sure. They only caused me to feel even more paranoid about the whole thing, and the drinking simply made everything worse. But if I kept this up, I'd most certainly lose my job. I'd lose it all, and then what? I'd just... I didn't want to

think about it. The thought of what might happen... it was down right scary. That's when I felt the panic building up again, getting ready to boil over inside and I started shifting around in the seat, trying to keep myself calm.

Don't do it, Ben. Not in here. Please... not right now.

“So, Mr. Huffington, why ya goin' to Florin?”

That jarred me. It sounded so weird hearing a fake last name come out of Hooten's mouth, but at least it snapped me back to attention. I felt the sudden swell of panic begin to subside. But now my thoughts were racing to catch up with me, and I couldn't help wondering if maybe I had fallen asleep. Did I black out? Did I miss something important? I met the wolf's eyes in the mirror before I dropped my head and stared into my lap. I tried to think of a reply, but it was hard because I knew his eyes were still there, staring at me.

Why? Why did he have to toy with me like this? Why couldn't he simply shut up and drive? Or just kill me now and get it over with? What was he waiting for?

An answer? Maybe an answer would get him to stop glaring at me with those eyes.

“I'm going to visit my brothers,” I muttered back. “One lives in Florin, and the other leaves just up the hill near Badger Flat.”

“Sounds like a good deal to me. So what's the occasion?”

“Oh--uhhh, it--it's family business. Nothing I really want to talk about though... if you don't mind?”

“Not a problem. I can relate when it comes to family matters. Got enough problems of my own.”

“Thanks, I apprecia--”

And that's when a phone started ringing.

Hooter began fumbling around in the center console, causing the car to swerve a bit as the phone continued to blast that annoying chime. It sounded like the shriek of a crying piglet set to an obnoxiously upbeat electronic tone, and it made me feel like my ears were going to start bleeding at any moment if it didn't stop. Finally, Hooter picked up the device and looked at the screen. But when I saw a wretched snarl form on the edge of his muzzle, it made the muscles in my back tighten so much I nearly grimaced from the sudden twinge that crawled up my spine.

“Sorry I... I gotta take this,” Hooten muttered. I could almost hear his teeth grinding as he spoke. Something about this phone call was going to be bad. Really bad.

I choked on the aching lump in my throat as I watched the wolf flip open the phone and raise it to his ear. Then I heard a strident, almost piercing howl of a voice resonate through the speaker, and it was so loud, even I could hear a few choice words clearly. That's when I knew I had made a [i]really[/i] big mistake. I should've never gotten into this dang car.

“Hey!” Mike shouted, slightly pulling the phone away from his ear as the yelling intensified. “Wai--wait a damn minute. What the hell ya screamin' at me for?”

The voice answered, and it became muffled when he moved the phone back against his head.

“Now look here, I came by when I was supposed to, aw'ight? I can't help it if ya got your--”

Another pause, and my hoofed fingers began digging their way into the worn leather seat. The muffled voice was getting louder now. More aggressive.

“Well, if ya didn't invite every Tom, Dick, and Harry over to your momma's house, than maybe I wouldn't be interruptin' nuthin', now would I?”

I heard a laugh come through the phone before that voice started howling again. It made my stomach turn a bit, especially when I caught the sound of Hooten's tail brushing against the seat. He was getting pissed.

“No! You're the one who screwed things up. Now don't you go blamin' all of this on me.”

Hooter didn't even realize that he was drifting onto the shoulder until after the right side tires started banging against the rumble strips. Then he swerved the car back onto the road, and my head nearly smacked into the side window.

“No. Screw you, ya stupid bitch. And don't you bring Kayla into this mess either, ya hearin' me? You leave my daughter out of it!”

There was more talking on the other end now, but it quieted down, and not in a good way. Hooten's tail hammering against the seat told me that much.

“Don't you threaten me like that. If you take my daughter away from me, I swear to God I'll--Mary Ann? Mary? You--”

That's when he pounded the phone against the wheel before throwing it onto the dashboard with a loud crack. And even though I couldn't see much inside the dark vehicle, I was sure something had to have broken. Hooter slammed his paw against the steering wheel, then he repeated it a few more times, producing a solid thumping sound

that made my tail twitch inside my pants. I had been quietly begging for that conversation to end as quickly as possible, but now I was beginning to regret that wish. I attempted to take a breath, but the tension hovering inside the small confines of the car seemed to suck the air right out of my lungs. It felt thick and oppressive, and so much worse than before. Much, much worse.

The wolf hung his head down and breathed in a heavy sigh before muttering, "I'm... I'm sorry ya had to hear that. It's jus..."

I don't know how, but I managed to inhale enough air to start speaking. "It's okay, I--I understand that... you know, these things happen," I replied, but it sounded fake as soon as the words escaped my mouth. Probably because they were. I wanted to say something, anything, I didn't care what, just as long as it changed the conversation.

"Yeah, but I..."

The wolf trailed off, and I watched him bend over slightly in the seat. Hooten belched, then he let out a groan as the wolf dropped one hand from the wheel. The car swerved again, and when Hooten finally straightened back up, he was panting.

"Hooten... maybe we should stop. You don't look so good."

He nodded with a rumbling growl, and a few seconds later he flipped on the right blinker.

A blue sign with bright white lettering reflected in his headlights that read, "REST STOP 1 MILE AHEAD". The wolf sped up, and when he got to the exit he tore down the off ramp before quickly parking the car in one of the many empty slots. He stormed out into the rain, slamming the door behind him as he put his paw over his muzzle and raced for the men's bathroom. And just like that, he disappeared into the darkness.

Only two lights appeared to be working here, and none of them were near the facilities. It made the place look completely dead, other than a couple of cars which littered the small parking lot. There was no movement inside any of them though. I had a sneaking suspicion the people had probably stopped just to get some sleep. Yet here I was, sitting in a stranger's car while he ran off to throw up in the restroom.

I contemplated leaving. My brain kept shouting at me, "*Just get your bag and run, you idiot. Go!*"

But when I looked over at the bathroom, I couldn't help feeling bad for the poor schmuck who was in there. That must've been his wife on the phone, or a soon to be ex-wife from the sound of it. She was probably screwing around, making life miserable for him and his daughter. What a horrible way to live. And for a moment, just a moment, everything that had been happening to me over the last month or so seemed to fade away. Yeah sure, I may have been a freaking mess, but at least this wolf had tried his damndest

to help me out. Even though it sounded like his life was going to hell in a hand basket. And what did I want to do? Run away. Good Lord Ben, at least try and do something decent for the guy in return.

And that's when I decided to step out of the car.

I ran toward the bathroom, feeling the rain assault my head as I attempted to block it with one cloven hand. Not like I could see much of anything, and I nearly tripped when my right hoof clipped some of the busted up concrete on the walkway. When I finally did get to the door, the smell just about knocked me backward. I covered my snout, which didn't help much with the stench as I heard Hooten gagging in one of the stalls. Then there was a heavy, clumpy sound of fluid being expelled from his body as it hit the toilet water below, which made me belch in my mouth. He coughed and choked, muttering something like 'fucking bitch,' and I wondered if maybe I was better off just going back to the car. But I stepped inside anyway, hearing Hooten spit and hack into the toilet before he flushed away the evidence. When he came out of the stall, the wolf was wiping his muzzle with the back of his arm, and his eyes drifted up to meet mine. It was those eyes again. The ones that were clouded with anger and hatred, and they were just looking for a place to channel it as the wolf stomped toward me.

"Hooten? You alrig--" I started to say, but I didn't get the chance to finish my question.

The wolf grabbed me by the collar, and I felt my feet become light as he swung me toward the wall. I heard something break behind me, and a sharp pain bit into the back of my skull. It made my entire body feel woozy and energized simultaneously, sending out sharp twinges through my nerves that made all my limbs want to jump and contract in a spasm. And that was it. That sensation, it ended up being the last thing I remembered as a bright flash lit up behind my eyelids.

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"Do I fuckin' look alright to you?" a voice said just as my eyes suddenly popped open.

My head hurt like hell, and I heard the tinkering of glass hitting the floor when my senses started to come around. What a way to wake up. This place was dark, and it smelled like piss and vomit. My snout twitched from the stench, and I zeroed in on those eyes when everything else started coming back into focus. They were lupine eyes too, belonging to a wolf who for some reason had grabbed me by my shirt collar.

Who the heck was this guy?

"What are you--get off me!" I shouted, moving my arms in-between his so I could push outward and force them apart. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

Glass crunched underneath my hoofs as I pushed the wolf away and turned around, glancing at the broken mirror behind me. I brushed the back of my head and checked for blood. There wasn't any. Just a few small pieces of glass stuck in my hair.

How in the world did I end up in a dirty public restroom with this guy? Dammit, my fucking head.

I rubbed the back of my skull and turned my attention to the wolf, who was now backing away while shaking his head. He looked down at his paws, as if he were going to start crying like a flaky little pansy. Guy must've lost his mind; some drunk, homeless bastard by the looks of it.

"Look, Ben--I'm... I'm sorry, 'kay? I... I jus lost it," the wolf said when he finally shifted to make eye contact with me. "I'm under a lot of stress and... I'm really sorry."

Ben? Who the hell is Ben? "I'll say. What the fuck is wrong with you, anyway?" I said, half pissed, and half trying to figure out what the heck was going on.

"Look, I... why don't I jus go back to the car and call ya a cab, alright? It's the least I can do after... well, this." He motioned with his hands toward the mirror and added, "Again, I--I'm really sorry."

I could hear the wolf heading toward the door just as I turned around and looked at the mirror. That's when I saw it. A nice piece was still hanging there, about ready to fall off and shatter all over the floor. What a waste. So I made sure to reach out and save it from obliteration. It was big and sharp and pointed--you know, like a broken piece of glass should be. I grabbed it with my cloven hand and pulled it free, and thankfully my porcine skin was so rough that it didn't even slice through me when I gripped the chunk of mirror a little bit tighter.

"Yeah. Yeah, I bet you're sorry. Real sorry," I thought to myself as I turned back to the wolf and started walking toward him. *"I'm gonna make sure of it."*

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When the world came back to me, it did so in a panicked flash of awareness, like you do when you wake up from a horrid nightmare. I noticed it was still dark out as I blinked away the haze, and that's when I came to realize that I must have blacked out or something. But yet, I was still inside the car, parked on the side of the road just like I had been before Hooten...

Wait. No. No, this wasn't my car. This was Hooten's car. So then... why was I in the driver's seat, and where the hell was Hoo--

Then I smelt it. A pungent, burning odor assaulted my nostrils like someone had waved smelling sauce in front of my face. And when I moved my hands up toward my

snout, the scent just got stronger and stronger. It saturated everything, and I wanted to turn on the interior light so I could see it with my own eyes, but I didn't need to because... that smell, it was too distinct.

It was blood. Dried blood... and it wasn't mine.

“No. No, no, no--please, no,” I muttered to myself, trying not to panic as I looked around the cab with my hands held in the air so I wouldn't touch anything. “This--this can't be happening. Not to me, please. It just can't--it--”

And that's when I finally saw them.

They were right there, staring back at me from my dark, sad reflection in the rearview mirror. It was them. It was those eyes. Those fiery, malevolent eyes.

But this time... there was no question as to whom they belonged to.

This time... I knew they were mine.

They always had been mine.