

KIMBERLY DAWN REMPEL

# THE VISITOR

She cupped a mug of hot coffee in her hands, sipping it more out of habit than enjoyment. On the outside, she looked like a satisfied and contented woman nestled on the sofa. Her feet, clad in wool socks, were leisurely crossed on the coffee table in front of her. Her gaze rested on the wild evergreens beyond her window, which stood edged in fresh thick snow, looking quite like a holiday scene.

But things are rarely what they seem.

Inside, Julie was brooding. Over-thinking. Worried. Julie had always worried, she supposed, but she'd come to realize it was just what happens when one has a vivid imagination. Worry was simply a consequence of an active and intelligent mind. Maybe even proof of it. Yes, a lack of worry evidenced a lack of thought. Planning. Considering all the possibilities. It had to. A mind at peace was a mind asleep, she reminded herself.

At that moment she noticed a shadow appear on one of the evergreens. Something about its tall, oblong shape - or was it the darkness of it? - caught her attention, but she wasn't sure why. She shook it off as another one of those overly-imaginative thoughts, and carried on with the matters at hand.

Like the cruise she and her husband had just booked. In a couple of months, they'd be sailing on the Atlantic, clinking wine glasses, and maybe even taking dance classes. But they'd charged the trip to a credit card. What was the balance again? It had to be close to the limit. What if there was an emergency? Her chest tightened with all the questions that followed. What if the ship went down for some reason? How would they survive? She'd never been on the ocean; what if it made her dreadfully seasick? Or worse, gave her that unusual condition of having the sea-sickness follow her on land and last for months or even years after the cruise? She knew someone who that had happened to... It was a thing. And what if the cruise was just a big drunken party scene she couldn't escape? Or what if it was all old people playing shuffleboard? Maybe they should cancel.

Julie sighed and sipped her cooling coffee, catching sight of the shadow on the evergreen. Wait ... was it darker now? And slightly bigger? No, that didn't make sense. Some thoughts just had to be tossed from one's mind as overly imaginative. This was one of them. She would just ignore - *wait*. She looked at it again. The oblong shadow seemed to have changed its shape slightly, as though developing shoulders.

*Wow. Someone needs to get a grip*, Julie thought. She rose from the sofa, taking one more look at the shadow, relieved to see it looked just as a shadow should; still, black, and without shoulders. She shook her head and laughed to herself as she walked to the kitchen for a refill.

On her return to the sofa, she sat and looked out at the evergreen scape and noticed the shadow was now on a different tree. A closer one. Her heart turned to stone in her chest and her eyes locked on the shadow. One of two things was happening; either something weird was going on or she was having some kind of psychotic break.

Snow from two trees over tumbled softly from its branches, as though the bough had been bumped. Julie's eyes scanned and darted, looking for the bird or squirrel that must have done that. She saw none. No birds. No squirrels. Not so much as a bird in the air, or even a breeze. She moved her eyes back to the shadow, but it wasn't there. In one beat of her frightened heart, she found it. The shadow was now inexplicably on the most forward tree. The closest one. The last tree between the wall of evergreens and her own living room.

Her mind twisted in knots and her breath quickened. She couldn't make sense of it. There was no object to cast a shadow there. The black shape seemed to exist independent of light and dark. And now, on this last tree, the shadow appeared again to have shoulders and ... was that a head?

Julie's hands trembled. She set the mug on a nearby end table and returned to watching out the window. But the shadow wasn't there. Her eyes searched from tree to tree. No shadow. She froze, becoming a statue, alert for any movement, any sound. Thirty seconds passed this way. She heard nothing. She saw no shadow.

She let out a relieved sigh that sputtered into a chuckle. Of course. Everything was fine! What, did she think a shadow had come to life? And, that if such a thing would happen, that of all the things to do in the world, it would decide to come after her for some reason? *Illusions of grandeur, much?*

For a moment, her keen and worrisome mind entertained the notion of her going crazy one day. What would that look like? How would she know? Was there a way to keep it from happening? What would her husband think if she did lose it for real one day?

There she was, worrying again. Those thoughts were like a runaway freight train sometimes, and could probably turn into flat out paranoia if she wasn't careful. It was a bad habit, but she could control it. "Stop it!" she said aloud. "Forget it! It's over! It's nothing!" She shook the thoughts away and grabbed a throw from a nearby chair to settle back onto the sofa. Maybe she'd read a book. Or flip open her Scrabble app. On her way back to the couch, she noticed the neighbor's dog through the window. He stood starkly still, staring toward her house. Was he snarling?

Julie walked toward the window to see what was bothering the dog. She craned her neck at the window, contorting to see every angle of the house and yard, but saw nothing. She pulled away from the glass. Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw movement in another window. A quick passing of something black. Like a shadow. Like a shadow moving toward the back of the house. Making its way to the door.

Fear jolted her thoughts into a single impulse – she needed to lock the door. Now. She whipped around, ready to bolt for the door, but stopped dead in her tracks. There, in her dining room, stood the shadowy figure, tall and dark. Her heart turned to ice in her chest. The figure stood, a black silhouette, with shoulders, a head, and a wide-brimmed hat. She could not make out any facial features except the mesmerizing green eyes that seemed to stare straight into her soul.

For a moment, she stood silent and stunned, taking in the sight. The eyes stared steadily, almost seeming kind. Managing a sliver of boldness, Julie asked, "Who are you? What do you want?"

The figure's voice was low and smooth, like a jazz musician. "You summoned me. So here I am."

"Summoned you? I never –"

The figure raised a hand, "Okay, invited then." She thought she saw a smirk appear on the shadowy face. For a moment, the sultry voice and smile made her relax. Frightened as she'd been, perhaps she'd misjudged this creature and its intention. Maybe it was a kind being here to help her.

Her reassurance was brief. The figure raised its black gloved hands and tugged gently at the fingertips, removing one glove. As the glove lifted from his hand, it revealed gangly, clawed fingers. "You invited

me.” He said, taking a step toward her. He tugged at the other glove with his claws. “You bid me to come in.”

“I never --” Her words caught in her throat, refusing to form. Her mind, however, crowded with fear. The nearer the being came, the deeper and darker her fear became.

“You beckoned me to play with you, so here I am.” He took another step, still smiling tenderly as if looking upon an adored child.

Fear turned to panic as he approached. His kind face and evil presence didn’t match. Their incongruity was short-circuiting her mind. She desperately wanted to believe he was kind, but his evil presence made her blood run cold.

*Evil! That was it – he was evil, wasn’t he?* Julie remembered something about evil having to get away when people said the name of Jesus. Was it Christians? Or was it more of a magic spell? Or the power of positive thinking? Either way, she’d risk it. This guy had to go. “Back away,” her voice trembled as she continued, “get away from me. In Jesus’ name.”

The figure cocked its head slightly, and smirked. “Aren’t you cute?” He stepped closer, his green eyes glowing warmly. They pulsed like gentle waves on a great green ocean that invited her to dive in. “I know who Jesus is,” the man was within arm’s reach now, and lifted a hand to her cheek as he spoke, and stroked it, “but you don’t.”

Julie felt cemented in place, unable to flee. But even as the figure touched her, something changed. Somehow, the terror itself became frozen. Her pounding heart stilled. Her breath slowed. Something in his eyes seemed to call to her, reassure her. As his gangly claws caressed her cheek, a surge of warmth ran through her like hot cocoa on a frozen night. Fear melted away. The moment they connected, she knew it was right. She could almost hear the being speaking in her mind now, even as he stroked her cheek.

*Let me open up your mind to true intellect,* he said.

A feeling of deep agreement rose up in her at the promise, and she nearly swooned at his smooth, precise articulation of the word. Intellect.

*Will you let me open your mind?*

Why she’d been so afraid, she could hardly remember. The man’s deep, rolling voice called to her in waves. She swayed as he spoke, as if she were an empty vessel washing ashore. She stopped just short of letting her eyes roll back with pleasure. The touch on her cheek, the voice in her mind, and those soothing hypnotic ocean eyes ... it was all so irresistible. All Julie wanted in the whole world was to say yes. *Yes, beautiful stranger. Come. Open my mind.*

“So it shall be...” He said. He moved closer. Up against her. As though he meant to walk right through her.

*Wait,* she thought, as if startling out of a dream, *who are you again? What’s happening?*

*Forgive me, he answered, speaking to her mind, I forgot to introduce myself. Honestly, I didn't think it necessary since we've been acquainted for so long. I thought you'd know me the moment I walked in. I'm a bit disappointed about that, actually. No matter. Your confirmation is at hand.*

"Confirmation?" she thought to the being.

"Yesss..." The word hissed from the shadowed face. Both clawed hands were on her cheeks now. He gently turned her head to the side as if to speak into her ear, and she let him. "The proof of a sound intellect, my dear."

Her knees weakened, her whole body aching for the promise of knowledge, the true power.

"Awarenesssss.... To be truly open and awake to a whole other plane of possibilitiessss."

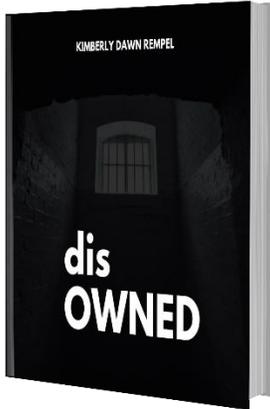
She felt her arms go limp in surrender as she repeated it. *Yes. Awareness... The possibilities...*

He continued hissing in her ear, "To know. To see. And now, my dear, you can truly own this power." He turned her head forward again so they were face to face. His green eyes flashed with excitement as he delivered the next words. "And I you."

With that, the shadow stepped into her, disappearing from sight. The moment she absorbed him, she knew it wasn't right. Knee-weakening pleasure was instantly yanked away. Just as quickly, it was replaced by a sharp, piercing dread. Indeed, her mind's eye was opened like a vortex of darkness, each level churning with deeper and darker horrors. Somewhere in the twisting blackness of her mind, there was screaming. Many people were screaming. And just for a moment, she thought she heard the shadow's gleeful chuckling. His long, satisfied giggle was soon swallowed up again by the growling, churning tornado.

To anyone seeing Julie from the outside, she could have looked quite at peace, returning to the sofa in a daze. There she sat, her feet clad in wool socks and set on the floor in front of her. Her gaze rested on the wild evergreens beyond her window that stood edged in fresh thick snow, looking quite like a holiday scene.

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