

Triangle

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„Maybe I'll go to Baltimore.“

„You mean...“ She looked at him. „To see...“

„Doug,“ he answered.

„Really?“ Mo Anderson asked and looked carefully at her fingernails, which she was painting bright red. He didn't like the color but he didn't say anything about it. She wouldn't listen to him anyway.

„I think it'd be fun,“ he continued.

„Oh, it would be,“ she said quickly. „Doug's a fun guy.“

„Sure is,“ Pete Anderson said. He sat across from Mo on the front porch of their split-level house in suburban Westchester County. The month was June and the air was thick with the smell of the jasmine that Mo had planted earlier in the spring. Pete used to like that smell. Now, though, it made him sick to his stomach.

Mo inspected her nails for streaks and pretended to be sort of bored with the idea of him going to see her friend Doug. But she was a lousy actor; Pete could tell

she was really excited by the idea and he knew why. But he just watched the lightning bugs and kept quiet. Unlike Mo, he could act.

„When would you go?“ she asked.

„This weekend, I guess. Saturday.“

They were silent and sipped their drinks, the ice clunking dully on the plastic glasses. It was the first day of summer and the sky wasn't completely dark yet even though it was nearly nine o'clock in the evening. There must've been a thousand lightning bugs in their front yard.

„I *know* I kinda said I'd help you clean up the garage,“ he said, wincing a little, looking guilty.

„No, I think you should go. I think it'd be a good idea,“ she said.

I know you think it'd be a good idea, Pete thought. But he didn't say this to her. Lately he'd been thinking a lot of things and not saying them.

Pete was sweating—more from the excitement than from the heat—and he wiped the sweat off his face and his round buzz-cut blond hair with his napkin.

The phone rang and Mo went to answer it.

She came back and said, „It's your *father*,“ in that sour voice of hers that Pete hated. She sat back down and didn't say anything else, just picked up her drink and examined her nails again.

Pete got up and went into the kitchen. His father lived in Wisconsin, not far from Lake Michigan. He loved the man and wished they lived closer together. Mo, though, didn't like him one bit and always raised a stink when Pete wanted to go visit. She never went with him. Pete was never exactly sure what the problem was between Mo and his dad. But it made him mad that she treated the man so badly and would never talk to Pete about it.

And he was mad too that Mo seemed to put him in the middle of things. Sometimes Pete even felt guilty he *had* a father.

He had a nice talk but hung up after only ten minutes because he felt Mo didn't want him to be on the phone.

Pete walked back out onto the porch.

„Saturday,“ Mo said. „I think Saturday'd be fine.“

Fine...

Then she looked at her watch and said, „It's getting late. Time for bed.“

And when Mo said it was time for bed, it was definitely time for bed.

* * * * *

Later that night, when Mo was asleep, Pete walked downstairs into the office. He reached behind a row of books resting on the built-in bookshelves and pulled out a large, sealed envelope.

He carried it down to his workshop in the basement. He opened the envelope and took out a book. It was called *Triangle* and Pete had found it in the true-crime section of a local used-book shop after flipping through nearly twenty books about real-life murders.

Pete had never before ripped off anything, but that day he'd looked around the store and slipped the book inside his windbreaker, then strolled casually out the door. He'd had to steal it; he was afraid that—if everything went as he'd planned—

the clerk might remember him buying the book and the police would use it as evidence.

Triangle was the story of a couple in Colorado Springs. The wife was married to a man named Roy. But she was also seeing another man—Hank—a local carpenter. Roy found out and waited until Hank was out hiking on a mountain path, then he snuck up beside him and pushed him over the cliff. Hank grabbed onto a tree root but lost his grip—or Roy smashed his hands, it wasn't clear—and Hank fell a hundred feet to his death on the rocks in the valley. Roy went back home and had a drink with his wife just to watch her reaction when the call came that Hank was dead.

Pete didn't know squat about crimes. All he knew was what he'd seen on TV and in the movies. None of the criminals in those shows seemed very smart and they were always getting caught by the good guys, even though *they* didn't really seem much smarter than the bad guys. But that crime in Colorado was a smart crime. Because there were no murder weapons and very few clues. The only reason Roy got caught was that he'd forgotten to look for witnesses.

If the killer had only taken the time to look around him, he would have seen the witnesses: A couple of campers had a perfect view of Hank Gibson plummeting to his bloody death, screaming as he fell, and of Roy standing on the cliff, watching him...

Triangle became Pete's bible. He read it from cover to cover—to see how Roy had planned the crime and to find out how the police had investigated it.

Tonight, with Mo asleep and his electronic airline ticket to Baltimore bought and paid for, Pete read *Triangle* once again, paying particular attention to the parts he'd underlined. Then he walked back upstairs, packed the book in the bottom of his knapsack, and lay on the couch in the office, looking out the window at the hazy summer stars and thinking about his trip from every angle.

Because he wanted to make sure he got away with the crime. He didn't want to go to jail for life—like Roy.

Oh, sure, there were risks. Pete knew that. But nothing was going to stop him. Doug had to die.

Pete realized he'd been thinking about the idea, in the back of his mind, for months, not long after Mo met Doug.

She worked part-time for a drug company in Westchester—the same company Doug was a salesman for, assigned to the Baltimore office. They met when he came to the headquarters for a sales conference. Mo had told Pete that she was having dinner with „somebody“ from the company, but she didn't say who. Pete didn't think anything of it until he overheard her telling one of her girlfriends on the phone about this interesting guy she'd met. But then she realized Pete was standing near enough to hear and she changed the subject.

Over the next few months Pete realized that Mo was getting more and more distracted, paying less and less attention to him. And he heard her mention Doug more and more.

One night Pete asked her about him.

„Oh, Doug?“ she said, sounding irritated. „Why, he’s just a friend, that’s all. Can’t I have friends? Aren’t I allowed?“

Pete noticed that Mo was starting to spend a lot of time on the phone and on-line. He tried to check the phone bills to see if she was calling Baltimore but she hid them or threw them out. He also tried to read her e-mails but found she’d changed her password. Pete was an expert with computers and easily broke into her account. But when he went to read her e-mails he found she’d deleted them all.

He was so furious he nearly smashed the computer.

Then, to Pete’s dismay, Mo started inviting Doug to dinner at their house when he was in Westchester on company business. He was older than Mo and sort of heavy. But Pete admitted he was handsome and real slick. Those dinners were the worst... They’d all sit at the dinner table and Doug would try to charm Pete, and ask him about computers and sports and the things that Mo had obviously told Doug that Pete liked. But it was real awkward and you could tell he didn’t give a damn about Pete. He just wanted to be there with Mo, alone.

By then Pete was checking up on Mo all the time. Sometimes he’d pretend to go to a game with Sammy Biltmore or Tony Hale but he’d come home early and find that she was gone too. Then she’d come home at eight or nine and look all flustered, not expecting to find him, and she’d say she’d been working late, even though she was just an office manager and hardly ever worked later than five before she met Doug. Once, when she claimed she was at the office, Pete called Doug’s number in Baltimore and the voice-mail message said he’d be out of town for a couple of days.

Everything was changing. Mo and Pete would have dinner together but it wasn’t the same. They didn’t have picnics and they didn’t take walks in the evenings. And they hardly ever sat together on the porch anymore, looking out at the fireflies and making plans for trips they wanted to take.

„I don’t like him,“ Pete said. „Doug, I mean.“

„Oh, quit being so jealous. He’s a good friend, that’s all. He likes both of us.“

„No, he doesn’t like me.“

„Of course he does. You don’t have to worry.“

But Pete did worry, and he worried even more when he found a piece of paper in her purse last month. It said: *D. G.—Sunday, motel 2 P.M.*

Doug’s last name was Grant.

That Sunday morning Pete tried not to react when Mo said, „I’m going out for a while, honey.“

„Where you going?“

„Shopping. I’ll be back by five.“

He thought about asking her exactly where she was going but he didn’t think that was a good idea. It might make her suspicious. So he said cheerfully,

„Okay, see you later.“

As soon as her car had pulled out of the driveway he’d started calling motels in the area and asking for Douglas Grant.

The clerk at the Westchester Motor Inn said, „One minute, please, I’ll connect you.“

Pete hung up fast.

He was at the motel in fifteen minutes and, yep, there was Mo's car parked in front of one of the doors. Pete snuck up close to the room. The shade was drawn and the lights were out, but the window was partly open. Pete could hear bits of the conversation.

„I don't like that.“

„That...?“ she asked.

„That color. I want you to paint your nails red. It's sexy. I don't like that color you're wearing. What is it?“

„Peach.“

„I like bright red,“ Doug said.

„Well, okay.“

There was some laughing. Then a long silence. Pete tried to look inside but he couldn't see anything. Finally Mo said, „We have to talk. About Pete.“

„He knows something,“ Doug said. „I know he does.“

„He's been like a damn spy lately,“ she said, with that edge to her voice that Pete hated. „Sometimes I'd like to strangle him.“

Pete closed his eyes when he heard Mo say this. Pressed the lids closed so hard he thought he might never open them again.

He heard the sound of a beer can opening.

Doug said, „So what if he finds out?“

„So *what?* I told you what having an affair does to alimony in this state. It *eliminates* it. We have to be careful. I've got a lifestyle I'm accustomed to.“

„Then what should we do?“ Doug asked.

„I've been thinking about it. I think you should do something with him.“

„Do something with him?“ Doug had an edge to his voice too. „Get him a one-way ticket...“

„Come on.“

„Okay, sorry. But what do you mean by *do something?*“

„Get to know him.“

„You're kidding.“

„Prove to him you're just a friend.“

Doug laughed and said in a soft, low voice, „Does that feel like a friend?“

She laughed too. „Stop it. I'm trying to have a serious talk here.“

„So, what? We go to a ball game together?“

„No, it's got to be more than that. Ask him to come visit you.“

„Oh, that'd be fun.“ With the same snotty tone that Mo sometimes used.

She continued. „No, I like it. Ask him to come down. Pretend you've got a girlfriend or something.“

„He won't believe that.“

„Pete's only smart when it comes to computers and baseball. He's stupid about everything else.“

Pete wrung his hands together. Nearly sprained a thumb—like the time he jammed his finger on the basketball court.

„That means I have to pretend I like him.“

„Yeah, that's *exactly* what it means. It's not going to kill you.“

„You come with him.“

„No,“ she said. „I couldn't keep my hands off you.“

A pause. Then Doug said, „Oh, hell, all right. I'll do it.“

Pete, crouching on a strip of yellow grass beside three discarded soda cans, curled into a ball and shook with fury. It took all his willpower not to scream.

He hurried home, threw himself down on the couch in the office, and turned on the game.

When Mo came home—which wasn't at five at all, like she promised, but at six-thirty—he pretended he'd fallen asleep.

That night he decided what he had to do and the next day he went to the used-book store and stole the copy of *Triangle*.

* * * * *

On Saturday Mo drove him to the airport.

„You two gonna have fun together?“ In the car she lit a cigarette. She'd never smoked before she met Doug.

„You bet,“ Pete said. He sounded cheerful because he was cheerful. „We're gonna have a fine time.“

On the day of the murder, while his wife and her lover were sipping wine in a room at the Mountain View Lodge, Roy had lunch with a business associate. The man, who wished to remain anonymous, reported that Roy was in unusually good spirits. It seemed his depression had lifted and he was happy once more.

Fine, fine, fine...

At the gate Mo kissed him and then hugged him hard. He didn't kiss her but he hugged her back. But not hard. He didn't want to touch her. Didn't want to be touched by her.

„You're looking forward to going, aren't you?“ she asked.

„I sure am,“ he answered. This was true.

„I love you,“ she said.

„I love you too,“ he responded. This was not true. He hated her. He hoped the plane left on time. He didn't want to wait here with her any longer than he had to.

But the flight left as scheduled.

The flight attendant, a pretty blond woman, kept stopping at his seat. This wasn't unusual for Pete. Women liked him. He'd heard a million times that he was cute. Women were always leaning close and telling him that. Touching his arm, squeezing his shoulder. But today he answered her questions with a simple „Yes“ or „No.“

And kept reading *Triangle*. Reading the passages he'd underlined. Memorizing them.

Learning about fingerprints, about interviewing witnesses, about footprints and trace evidence. There was a lot he didn't understand, but he did figure out how smart the cops were and that he'd have to be very careful if he was going to kill Doug.

„We're about to land,“ the flight attendant said. „Could you put your seat belt on, please?“

She squeezed his shoulder and smiled at him.

He put the seat belt on and went back to his book.

Hank Gibson's body had fallen one hundred and twelve feet. He'd landed on his right side, and of the more than two hundred bones in the human body, he'd broken seventy-seven of them. His ribs had pierced all his major internal organs and his skull was flattened on one side.

„Welcome to Baltimore, where the local time is twelve-twenty-five,“ the flight attendant said. „Please remain in your seat with the seat belt fastened until the plane has come to a complete stop and the pilot has turned off the Fasten Seat Belt sign. Thank you.“

The medical examiner estimated that Hank was traveling eighty miles an hour when he struck the ground and that death was virtually instantaneous.

Welcome to Baltimore...

* * * * *

Doug met him at the airport. Shook his hand. „How you doing, buddy?“ Doug asked.

„Okay.“

This was so weird. Spending the weekend with a man that Mo knew so well and Pete hardly knew at all.

Going hiking with somebody he hardly knew at all.

Going to kill somebody he hardly knew at all...

He walked along beside Doug.

„I need a beer and some crabs,“ Doug said as they got into his car. „You hungry?“

„Sure am.“

They stopped at the waterfront and went into an old dive. The place stunk. It smelled like the cleanser Mo used on the floor when Randolph, their Labrador retriever puppy, made a mess on the carpet.

Doug whistled at the waitress before they'd even sat down. „Hey, honey, think you can handle two real men?“ He gave her the sort of grin Pete'd seen Doug give Mo a couple of times. Pete looked away, somewhat embarrassed but plenty disgusted.

When they started to eat Doug calmed down, though that was more likely the beers. Like Mo got after her third glass of Gallo in the evenings. Doug had at least three that Pete counted and maybe a couple more after them.

Pete wasn't saying much. Doug tried to be cheerful. He talked and talked but it was just garbage. Pete didn't pay any attention.

„Maybe I'll give my girlfriend a call,“ Doug said suddenly. „See if she wants to join us.“

„You have a girlfriend? What's her name?“

„Uhm, Cathy,“ he said.

The waitress's name tag said: *Hi. I'm Cathleen.*

„That'd be fun,“ Pete said.

„She might be going out of town this weekend.“ He avoided Pete’s eyes. „But I’ll call her later.“

„Pete’s only smart when it comes to computers and baseball. He’s stupid about everything else.“

Finally Doug looked at his watch and said, „So what do you feel like doing now?“

Pete pretended to think for a minute and asked, „Anyplace we can go hiking around here?“

„Hiking?“

„Like any mountain trails?“

Doug finished his beer, shook his head. „Naw, nothing like that that I know of.“

Pete felt rage again—his hands were shaking, the blood roaring in his ears—but he covered it up pretty well and tried to think. Now what was he going to do? He’d counted on Doug agreeing to whatever he wanted. He’d counted on a nice high cliff.

But then Doug continued, „But if you want to be outside, one thing we could do, maybe, is go hunting.“

„Hunting?“

„Nothing good’s in season now,“ Doug said. „But there’s always rabbits and squirrels.“

„Well—“

„I’ve got a couple of guns we can use.“

Guns?

Pete said, „Okay. Let’s go hunting.“

„You shoot much?“ Doug asked him.

„Some.“

In fact, Pete was a good shot. His father had taught him how to load and clean guns and how to handle them. („Never point it at anything unless you’re prepared to shoot it.“)

But Pete didn’t want Doug to know he knew anything about guns, so he let the man show him how to load the little .22 and how to pull the slide to cock it and where the safety was.

I’m a *much* better actor than Mo.

They were in Doug’s house, which was pretty nice. It was in the woods and it was a big house, all full of stone walls and glass. The furniture wasn’t like the cheap things Mo and Pete had. It was mostly antiques.

Which depressed Pete even more, made him angrier, because he knew that Mo liked money and she liked *people* who had money even if they were idiots like Doug. When Pete looked at Doug’s beautiful house he knew that if Mo ever saw it she’d want Doug even more. Then he wondered if she *had* seen it. Pete had gone to Wisconsin a few months ago. Maybe Mo had come down here to spend the night with Doug.

„So,“ Doug said. „Ready?“

„Where’re we going?“ Pete asked.

„There’s a good field about a mile from here. It’s not posted. Anything we can hit we can take.“

„Sounds good to me,“ Pete said.

They got into the car and Doug pulled onto the road.

„Better put that seat belt on,“ Doug warned. „I drive like a crazy man.”

* * * * *

The field looked familiar to Pete.

As Doug laced up his boots, Pete realized why it was familiar. It was almost identical to a field in White Plains, the one across the highway from the elementary school. The only difference was that this one was completely quiet; the New York field was noisy. You heard a continual stream of traffic.

Pete was looking around.

Not a soul.

„What?“ Doug asked, and Pete realized that the man was staring at him.

„Pretty quiet.“

And deserted. No witnesses.

„Nobody knows about this place. I found it by my little old lonesome.“ Doug said this real proudly, as if he'd discovered a cure for cancer. „Lessee.“ He lifted his rifle and squeezed off a round.

Crack...

He missed a can sitting about thirty feet away.

„Little rusty,“ he said. „But, hey, aren't we having fun?“

„Sure are,“ Pete answered.

Doug fired again, three times, and hit the can on the last shot. It leapt into the air. „There we go!“

Doug reloaded and they started through the tall grass and brush.

They walked for five minutes.

„There,“ Doug said. „Can you hit that rock over there?“

He was pointing at a white rock about twenty feet from them. Pete thought he could have hit it but he missed on purpose. He emptied the clip.

„Not bad,“ Doug said. „Came close the last few shots.“ Pete knew he was being sarcastic.

„So, *what? We go to a ball game together?*“

„No, *it's got to be more than that. Ask him to come visit you.*“

„Oh, *that'd be fun.*“

Pete reloaded and they continued through the grass.

„So,“ Doug said. „How's she doing?“

„Fine. She's fine.“

Whenever Mo was upset and Pete'd ask her how she was she'd say, „Fine. I'm fine.“

Which didn't mean fine at all. It meant: I don't feel like telling you anything. I'm keeping secrets from you.

They stepped over a few fallen logs and started down a hill.

The grass was mixed with blue flowers and daisies. Mo liked to garden and was always driving up to the nursery to buy plants. Sometimes she'd come back without any and Pete began to wonder if on those trips she was really seeing Doug instead. He got angry again. Hands sweaty, teeth grinding together.

„She get her car fixed?“ Doug asked. „She was saying that there was something wrong with the transmission.“

How'd he know that? The car broke down only four days ago. Had Doug been there and Pete didn't know it?

Doug glanced at Pete and repeated the question.

Pete blinked. „Oh, her car? Yeah, it's okay. She took it in and they fixed it.“

But then he felt better because that meant they *hadn't* talked yesterday or she would have told Doug about getting the car fixed.

On the other hand, maybe Doug was lying to him now. Making it *look* as if she hadn't told him about the car when they really had talked.

Pete looked at Doug's pudgy face and couldn't decide whether to believe him or not. He looked sort of innocent but Pete had learned that people who seemed innocent were sometimes the most guilty. Roy, the husband in the Triangle book, had been a church choir director. From the smiling photo in the book, you'd never guess he'd kill a soul.

Thinking about the book, thinking about murder.

Pete was scanning the field. Yes, there... about fifty feet away. A fence. Five feet high. It would work just fine.

Fine.

As fine as Mo.

Who wanted Doug more than she wanted Pete.

„What're you looking for?“ Doug asked.

„Something to shoot.“

And he thought: Just witnesses. That's all I'm looking for.

„Let's go that way,“ Pete said and walked toward the fence.

Doug shrugged. „Sure. Why not?“

Pete studied it as they approached. Wood posts about eight feet apart, five strands of rusting wire.

Not too easy to climb over, but it wasn't barbed wire like some of the fences they'd passed. Besides, Pete didn't want it to be too easy to climb. He'd been thinking. He had a plan.

Roy had thought about the murder for weeks. It had obsessed his every waking moment. He'd drawn charts and diagrams and planned every detail down to the nth degree. In his mind, at least, it was the perfect crime.

Pete now asked, „So what's your girlfriend do?“

„Uhm, my girlfriend? She works in Baltimore.“

„Oh. Doing what?“

„In an office.“

„Oh.“

They got closer to the fence. Pete asked, „You're divorced? Mo was saying you're divorced.“

„Right. Betty and I split up two years ago.“

„You still see her?“

„Who? Betty? Naw. We went our separate ways.“

„You have any kids?“

„Nope.“

Of course not. When you had kids you had to think about somebody else. You couldn't think about yourself all the time. Like Doug did. Like Mo. Pete was looking around again. For squirrels, for rabbits, for witnesses. Then Doug stopped and looked around too. Pete wondered why, but then Doug took a beer from his knapsack and drank the whole bottle down and tossed it on the ground. „You want something to drink?“ he asked.

„No,“ Pete answered. It was good that Doug'd be slightly drunk when they found him. They'd check his blood. They did that. That's how they knew Hank'd been drinking when they got the body to the Colorado Springs hospital—they checked the alcohol in the blood.

The fence was only twenty feet away.

„Oh, hey,“ Pete said. „Over there. Look.“ He pointed to the grass on the other side of the fence.

„What?“ Doug asked.

„I saw a couple of rabbits.“

„You did? Where?“

„I'll show you. Come on.“

„Okay. Let's do it,“ Doug said.

They walked to the fence. Suddenly Doug reached out and took Pete's rifle. „I'll hold it while you climb over. Safer that way.“

Jesus... Pete froze with terror. Doug was going to do exactly what Pete had thought of. He'd been planning on holding Doug's gun for him. And then when Doug was at the top of the fence he was going to shoot him. Making it look like Doug had tried to carry his gun as he climbed the fence but he'd dropped it and it went off.

Roy bet on the old law enforcement rule that what looks like an accident probably is an accident.

Pete didn't move. He thought he saw something funny in Doug's eyes, something mean and sarcastic. It reminded him of Mo's expression. Pete took one look at those eyes and he could see how much Doug hated him and how much he loved Mo.

„You want me to go first?“ Pete asked. Not moving, wondering if he should just run.

„Sure,“ Doug said. „You go first. Then I'll hand the guns over to you.“ His eyes said: You're not afraid of climbing over the fence, are you? You're not afraid to turn your back on me, are you?

Then Doug was looking around again.

Looking for witnesses.

„Go on,“ Doug encouraged.

Pete—his hands shaking from fear now, not anger—started to climb. Thinking: This is it. He's going to shoot me. I left the motel too early! Doug and Mo must have kept talking and planned out how he was going to ask me down here and pretend to be all nice and then he'd shoot me.

Remembering it was Doug who suggested hunting.

But if I run, Pete thought, he'll chase me down and shoot me. Even if he shoots me in the back he'll just claim it was an accident.

Roy's lawyer argued to the jury that, yes, the men had met on the path and struggled, but Hank had fallen accidentally. He urged the jury that, at worst, Roy was guilty of negligent homicide.

He put his foot on the first rung of wire. Started up.

Second rung of wire...

Pete's heart was beating a million times a minute. He had to pause to wipe his palms.

He thought he heard a whisper, as if Doug was talking to himself.

He swung his leg over the top wire.

Then he heard the sound of a gun cocking.

And Doug said in a hoarse whisper, „You're dead.“

Pete gasped.

Crack!

The short, snappy sound of the .22 filled the field.

Pete choked back a cry and looked around, nearly falling off the fence.

„Damn,“ Doug muttered. He was aiming away from the fence, nodding toward a tree line. „Squirrel. Missed him by two inches.“

„Squirrel,“ Pete repeated manically. „And you missed him.“

„Two goddamn inches.“

Hands shaking, Pete continued over the fence and climbed to the ground.

„You okay?“ Doug asked. „You look a little funny.“

„I'm fine,“ he said.

Fine, fine, fine...

Doug handed Pete the guns and started over the fence. Pete debated. Then he put his rifle on the ground and gripped Doug's gun tight. He walked to the fence so that he was right below Doug.

„Look,“ Doug said as he got to the top. He was straddling it, his right leg on one side of the fence, his left on the other. „Over there.“ He pointed nearby.

There was a big gray lop-eared rabbit on its haunches only twenty feet away.

„There you go!“ Doug whispered. „You've got a great shot.“

Pete shouldered the gun. It was pointing at the ground, halfway between the rabbit and Doug.

„Go ahead. What're you waiting for?“

Roy was convicted of premeditated murder in the first degree and sentenced to life in prison. Yet he came very close to committing the perfect murder. If not for a simple twist of fate, he would have gotten away with it.

Pete looked at the rabbit, then looked at Doug.

„Aren't you going to shoot?“

Uhm, okay, he thought.

Pete raised the gun and pulled the trigger once.

Doug gasped, pressed at the tiny bullet hole in his chest. „But... but... No!“

He fell backward off the fence and lay on a patch of dried mud, completely still. The rabbit bounded through the grass, panicked by the sound of the shot, and disappeared in a tangle of bushes that Pete recognized as blackberries. Mo had planted tons of them in their backyard.

* * * * *

The plane descended from cruising altitude and slowly floated toward the airport.

Pete watched the billowy clouds, tried to figure out what they looked like. He was bored. He didn't have anything to read. Before he'd talked to the Maryland state troopers about Doug's death, he'd thrown the true-crime book about the Triangle murder into a trash bin.

One of the reasons the jury convicted Roy was that, upon examining his house, the police found several books about the disposing of evidence. Roy had no satisfactory explanation for them.

The small plane glided out of the skies and landed at the White Plains airport. Pete pulled his knapsack out from underneath the seat in front of him and climbed out of the plane. He walked down the ramp beside the flight attendant, a tall black woman. They'd talked together for most of the flight.

Pete saw Mo at the gate. She looked numb. She wore sunglasses and Pete supposed she'd been crying. She was clutching a Kleenex in her fingers.

Her nails weren't bright red anymore, he noticed.

They weren't peach either.

They were just plain fingernail color.

The flight attendant went up to Mo. „You're Mrs. Jill Anderson?“

Mo nodded.

The woman held up a sheet of paper. „Here. Could you sign this, please?“

Numbly Mo took the pen the woman offered and signed the paper.

It was an unaccompanied-minor form, which adults had to sign to allow their children to get on planes by themselves. The parent picking up the child also had to sign it. After his parents were divorced Pete flew back and forth between Wisconsin and White Plains so often he knew all about the airlines' procedures for kids who flew alone.

„I have to say,“ she said to Mo, smiling down at Pete, „he's the best-behaved youngster I've ever had on one of my flights. How old are you, Pete?“

„I'm ten,“ he answered. „But I'm going to be eleven next week.“

She squeezed his shoulder, then looked at Mo. „I'm so sorry about what happened,“ she said in a soft voice. „The trooper who put Pete on the plane told me. Your boyfriend was killed in a hunting accident?“

„No,“ Mo said, struggling to say the words, „he wasn't my boyfriend.“

Though Pete was thinking: Of course he was your boyfriend. Except you didn't want the court to find that out because then Dad wouldn't have to pay you alimony anymore. Which is why she and Doug had been working so hard to convince Pete that Doug was „just a friend“.

„Can't I have friends? Aren't I allowed?“

No, you're not, Pete thought. You're not going to get away with dumping me the way you dumped Dad.

„Can we go home, Mo?“ he asked, looking as sad as he could. „I feel real funny about what happened.“

„Sure, honey.“

„Mo?“ the flight attendant asked.

Mo, staring out the window, said, „When he was five Pete tried to write *Mother* on my birthday card. He just wrote *M-O* and didn't know how to spell the rest. It became my nickname.“

„What a sweet story,“ the woman said and looked like she was going to cry. „Pete, you come back and fly with us real soon.“

„Okay.“

„Hey, what're you going to do for your birthday?“

„I don't know,“ he said. Then he looked up at his mother. „I was thinking about maybe going hiking. In Colorado. Just the two of us.“

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