



Lonepine

I TOSSED LUCY'S LETTER AND CHECK INTO A DESK drawer and laid the two brass keys on top of my wardrobe, assuming I would soon forget about both the letter and the keys. The cynic's voice inside me told me my aunt's words were the rantings of a dying person hanging on to reality by a thin thread. Yet, I had nagging doubts. Every time I opened the desk drawer, I spotted the letter and had the urge to read it again. Her penmanship was neat, her grammar was correct, but her message was bizarre, even frightening, and it was frustrating for me to try to make sense of it. I couldn't shake the apparent urgency of her letter.

At night I would dream of Lucy and the look I had seen in her eyes twenty years earlier. In these midnight visitations, we were back at my grandmother's funeral. At the casket's side, Lucy stared at me again as if she were looking at a ghost. Then she quickly pressed two golden keys into the palm of my hand while saying something that I couldn't quite understand. I could see her lips moving, but I could hear no words. She would suddenly vanish in a flash of light and I would wake abruptly, in a cold sweat.

Each morning, after such an encounter, I would go straight to my desk drawer, take out her letter, and again read her words, always pausing when I came to, "Proceed to my home." These four words jumped out at me each time my eyes passed over them, as if they had a life of their own.

Finally, I understood that the words Lucy was speaking to me in my dreams were those same four words — “proceed to my home.” She was telling me to go to Montana as she pressed the keys into my hand, night after night. I read her letter a dozen more times before I finally summoned up the will to go.

Needless to say, I remained a skeptic. Megalomaniacs think they’re going to save the world and usually they just make a mess of it. For all I knew, Aunt Lucy may have been in that category. She had written something about the future of our entire species being at stake, so when I got to the airport I was amused that my flight had been cancelled. Damn, it’s tough to make a trip to save the species when you can’t even get on the plane! Nevertheless, I was transferred to another airline, and after being routed through Toronto, I arrived in Missoula drowsy from airport beer, and already six hours late in saving the world. I had ample time to think on the plane, and I managed to conjure up plenty of doubts about what I was doing. Why was I going to Missoula, Montana, in May, when I should have been home taking care of my roofing business? Was I that easily manipulated by letters from deceased strangers and by inexplicable dreams? The roofing season had just begun in Pennsylvania. At this time of year business picks up so much that I hardly have time to read my mail. Taking off on vacation in the spring is virtually unheard of.

But, I *had* deposited the ten thousand dollar check into my bank account before leaving home, and now I felt obligated to carry out Aunt Lucy’s instructions. So here I was, at an airport in Missoula, Montana, fifteen hundred miles from home, whether I liked it or not.

I picked up a rental car and headed for a nearby hotel. It was too late to do anything else. After a couple of cocktails at the hotel bar and a few rounds on their gambling machines, I was ready for bed. Getting an early start the next morning seemed like a good strategy since I didn’t know where I was going.

The next morning I drove straight to a gas station mini

store, grabbed a cup of coffee and a donut, and bought a road map of Montana. The Indian reservation where Lucy lived was a few hours drive north of Missoula, near Flathead Lake, and with Montana's unlimited interstate speeds, I was soon heading north at a good clip. The ruggedly green Mission Mountains framed the road and made for a beautiful spring drive under an endless azure sky. This was my first time in "Big Sky Country" and I could see the area's appeal — breathtaking mountains, vast expanses of wilderness, plenty of elbow room, and lots of places off the beaten path where one could disappear from the world.

Soon, the dark expanse of the lake came into view and a sprinkling of a village appeared on its south bank. I pulled into the gravel lot of a small, old diner, one of those silver ones that looks like a mobile home. I squeezed through some parked cars and went inside, choosing a booth next to a window with a magnificent view of the lake. The water was a blue carpet stretching wall to wall between the green mountains, extending forever into the distance. Dilapidated fishing boats dotted the lake's edge, bobbing like white driftwood against the shore. A stiff, cold wind had flags on boat masts snapping and dancing.

After ordering a grilled swiss on rye, fries smothered in gravy, and a glass of iced tea, I asked the graying, portly waitress for directions.

"Can you tell me where Lonepine Road is?" I asked.

"Lonepine? You mean the *village* of Lonepine. That's about an hour west of here, north of Camas. I suppose if you drive toward Camas someone out there will be able to tell you where Lonepine Road is. There's no Lonepine Road around here, in Polson."

"Are you absolutely sure?"

She looked at me askance, shook her head, and said, "I've lived here all my life. What're you looking for?"

"Well, I have a map here showing Lonepine Road coming out of a village on the south shore of Flathead Lake." I fumbled in my shirt pocket, unfolded Aunt Lucy's hand

drawn map, and placed it on the tabletop, smoothing out its creases.

The waitress leaned down and squinted. “That’d be Polson,” she said, pointing at a spot on the map. “That’s where you are now.”

“I’m looking for a house about 15 miles out,” I pointed, “on this road here.”

“Let me see that.” She took the map in her hands and held it at arm’s length. “Why, that’s not Lonepine Road. That road has no name. It’s just a dirt road that eventually gets you *near* Lonepine, *if* you’re dumb enough to drive it that far. I guess I’ve heard some people call it Lonepine Road, but then it’s called a lot of other things too. Used to be called Witch Road or something like that.”

“Which Road? Like you’re lost?”

“No, Witch Road, like witches live out there.” She smiled and nodded. “You’re not from around here, are ya?”

“Witches?”

“You know. The kind that fly on brooms. Why, they say there’s UFOs out there, too. I don’t believe it, but some do. I never go out that way. Militia out there too. No sir, I don’t need those kinds of headaches in my life. I got enough crap around here with Harold. He’s the manager.”

She turned and walked away, refilling the patrons’ coffee cups as she passed by.

I scanned a local paper and finished my lunch, which was surprisingly good considering the place was little more than a dive. But my mind kept wandering back to what the gray-haired waitress had said. With the newspaper in front of me, I stared into space, thinking about witches, UFOs and militia. If I’m lucky I’ll get out of this place alive. Or maybe not. Maybe I’ll be abducted by a UFO. That will really delight my wife. Witches I can probably deal with. Militia? No thanks. I don’t think they eat enough brain food. I’ll keep my distance if I see any gun-toting nimrods.

I snapped out of my reverie and decided, what the hell, I can find this Lonepine Road or Witch Road or whatever the damn thing was called. Afterall, it was on Lucy’s map.

A little sleuthing in the car and I should go right to it. I had to admit that my curiosity was piqued, and since I love a challenge, I paid the bill, left the waitress a five dollar tip, and headed for the car.

Yet my doubts about my aunt's sanity were increasing at every step of this journey. Was she a witch? Did she belong to the militia? Or was she actually an alien, I wondered, sarcastically. At least, thank god, I've avoided Harold, I thought, as I slammed the car door and started the engine.