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ROUNDHEELS

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CARRIE NAUGHTON

If only she'd known that Darren lived with his mother.

No way Tracy would've left the bar with him if she'd known that beforehand. She'd been eyeing at least two other prospects at the Boondocks Lounge from her vantage point on stage—a leggy Latina by the jukebox drinking Bud in a bottle, and a pair of husky brutes in Tucson Electric Power work shirts sharing a pitcher of Kiltlifter. Both promising, and this was before midnight, which was saying a lot for a bar with a giant fake bottle of Chianti decorating its front parking lot.

She should've slid into the booth with the TEP guys after that last set with her band, Heart of a Viper. She'd figured them for line workers, and liked the idea. Lots of good pole jokes there, and probably two pairs of godlike thighs.

But, no. She'd picked Darryl. Wait—Darren.

Now, he lay passed out facedown on his bed with his boxers around his ankles, while she wriggled herself back into her panties. She adjusted her garter belt beneath her miniskirt, tightened her bra straps and decided to see if Darren had anything to eat—or better yet, drink—in his kitchen.

She laced up her boots and slung her purse, surveying the room one last time. The house was a prefab ranch style shitbox that needed a deep clean, but to his credit, Derek (Darren?) didn't have a lot of clutter, and the bedsheets had been fresh. Otherwise, she wouldn't still be here, would she?

Tracy fumbled her way down the hall without turning on a light, found the kitchen, and there was Mama, sitting at a filthy wooden table smoking a Virginia Slim menthol and watching late night infomercials on a portable TV. The kitchen smelled like yesterday's fried bacon, tobacco and rotten vegetables.

Tracy paused in the doorway, wondering first if the woman had a gun, and second if she might consider sharing the bottle of Jack Daniels sitting on the table next to the crusty tuna can ashtray.

In the unholy gleam of the infomercials, filtered through a smoky haze, the woman looked like a corpse. Then she turned her head and squinted at Tracy's shadow shape.

Tracy stepped closer. The two women stared each other down for the appropriate length of time, and then Mama grumbled, "I know you."

"I doubt it," sighed Tracy, pulling a cheap ladderback chair out from the table. "I only just met your son tonight."

She lowered herself into the chair. Her fanny was bruised from Derek's hands. Darryl's. ~~Darren's~~. Whatever his name was, he'd been quite the gripper, like he thought he could knead her ass into some new kind of bread while they screwed. *He needed my buns*, she mused, and wanted to write that down because it might make a decent song lyric, but Mama was talking and Tracy didn't feel like digging a pen out of her purse.

"Of course you just met Darren tonight," Mama chuckled. "I hope he was a gentleman."

"Not at all." Tracy shook her head. "But I've never been a big fan of gentle."

Darren. Okay, it was Darren. Whatever.

"You ain't a hooker."

"Nope," Tracy said, mildly. "Not a hooker."

"You're in that band," Mama said. "The metal band."

"Rockabilly," Tracy corrected her. Even though that wasn't totally true, either. They didn't know what they were, but the whole mess had

started out as rockabilly.

"Heart of a Viper," Mama decided, pointing the ash end of her cigarette at Tracy's cleavage. "That's it. That you?"

"That's my band." Tracy nodded, reaching for the bottle of Jack. "You mind?"

"Be my guest. I mean, you're already my son's guest, right?"

Tracy took a long pull straight from the bottle. She took a second tug and swished the whisky around in her mouth, swallowed, and felt pristine.

"I'm Tracy Hawthorne," she said, and stuck out her hand.

Mama switched her Virginia Slim from her right hand to her left, and shook with Tracy.

"I'm Helen." Her fingers felt like whispers, like dry leaves.

"How do," said Tracy.

"Do all right," Helen replied. "Can't sleep. Nothin' new." She smirked, and pushed a strand of lank brown hair behind her ear. "I don't wantcha to think you all woke me up."

"Oh, I wouldn't care either way," Tracy said. "I didn't even know anybody else was here. You got any Cheez-Its? I'm really craving some Cheez-Its right now."

Helen chuckled. It turned into a cough that sounded like someone cold cranking a tractor.

"Yeah," she rasped, after a fortifying swig of whisky. "Actually we do got Cheez-Its. That cupboard over there. Help'self."

The Cheez-Its were unopened—Tracy had to stop herself from doing a minor victory dance about that—and they were White Cheddar, her second favourite, after Hot & Spicy.

"I might eat this whole box," she warned Helen.

"I might just help you."

Tracy tore open the box and carried it to the table. She had a second thought, and went back to the cupboard for two juice glasses.

"Let's be ladies." Tracy set the glasses down and poured two fingers of booze for each of them.

"For once," said Helen.

They clinked and drank. Tracy munched handfuls of Cheez-Its, but Helen didn't seem hungry.

"Can I bum one?" Tracy asked, gesturing toward Helen's smokes.

"They're menthol."

"I know." Tracy dusted powdered cheese and crumbs off her hands, selected a cigarette from the hardpack that Helen offered to her, then produced her own Bic and lit up. The menthol was chilly. Like smoking dry ice. She usually chose Marlboro reds, but she wasn't particular, and Derek—fuck—*Darren*—had mooched all her cigarettes earlier at Boondocks. The overall bouquet of Virginia Slim didn't quite compliment the Cheez-Its now stuck in her teeth, but she wasn't about to complain.

Tracy blew out smoke and eyed Helen. "How come you can't sleep?"

Helen lit a fresh cigarette off the end of the one she'd smoked down to the filter. She had bleary, bloodshot eyes made even muddier by the glow of the TV, and Tracy guessed she hadn't washed her hair in days. It was chopped in a bad shag, the kind of unhip mullet cut that no hairstylist should be allowed to get away with.

Tracy had worn her own hair down tonight, which was rare—usually she pinned it up in a wedge or a French Twist. But even after her rowdy grabass session with Der—*Darren*—she knew her chocolate cherry waves and even her Bettie Page bangs had stayed perfect. She wanted to check her makeup, though. That had to be a smeary disaster.

Helen made Tracy wait through two long, lungbusting drags before she responded to Tracy's question.

"I have nightmares," she whispered.

"Oh yeah? What about?"

"Darren's father."

Tracy narrowed her eyes. "He live here?"

"He's dead."

Oh really? Tracy enjoyed her Virginia Slim, wondering if messing around with the paranormal might be a worse habit than smoking. "What happens in the nightmares?"

Helen took another drink of whisky. Her eyes shifted to Tracy but her head didn't move. "There's people in the house. Hidin' in the corners. Sometimes they're crawlin' around on the ceilin'. Yellow eyes. And then I wake up and *he's* in the room with me. Mostly he's sittin' in the chair in the corner where I put all my dirty clothes. Sometimes he's squattin' on the edge of the bed. On the bad nights—he's sittin' on top of me. Pushin' me down, with his knees in my belly."

Helen served herself more whisky and looked a question at Tracy.

She nodded and Helen poured her another hefty shot.

"That's a classic Old Hag dream," Tracy said.

"Wha' you mean, *hag*?" Helen scowled, as if Tracy had just insulted her.

"Not *you*," said Tracy. "It's a psychobabble term. The Old Hag. A lot of people have dreams like that. It's a form of sleep paralysis."

"Gary wan't no hag," Helen protested. "He was a big man."

"I'm not talkin' about Gary. I'm talkin' about your nightmares."

"Gary in't in my nightmares."

"You just said—"

"I said *I wake up and he's in the room*. I'm *awake* when Gary comes around." Helen jabbed one broken-nailed finger down on the grimy table to punctuate her statement.

Tracy had been ready to finish her drink and leave, but something about Helen's night terrors snagged her interest, like a hangnail on silk.

"Okay," she said. "I misunderstood. So... What's worse? Gary, or the yellow-eyed people in your dreams?"

Helen sucked in a hefty dose of nicotine and tar before countering with two questions of her own. "What's sleep paralysis? How d'you know about all this shit?"

Tracy shrugged. She didn't know *all* about it, but she'd researched like mad this past year, everything from the Warrens to Edgar freakin' Cayce. "It's pretty interesting, don'tcha think?"

Helen frowned. Then nodded. "Yeah. Kinda."

"I read a lot. Sleep paralysis is like... night terrors. There are cultures all over the world with the same stories of the Old Hag. Supernatural assault is another term for it. That feeling of being pinned down, unable to move, totally overwhelming fright—like a shitty yourself with fear type of scary—and feeling like you're awake even though you're not. It's not real. But it's a real phenomenon."

"It's *real*," Helen argued. "Gary's real. He comes around all the time. He's not done with me."

"Not done how?" Tracy realized she might need more cigarettes for this. Or Cheez-Its.

As if reading her mind, Helen pushed the pack of Virginia Slims across the table.

"He said I was stealin' cash from the bag he kep' hid under the big

rock out back. I never took nothin'."

"Who did?"

"Hell should I know? Probably nobody. Probably Gary was too stupid to count it right. He had a heart attack in the middle a yellin' at me about it. *What'd you do with my money, you bitch!* And then he just keeled right over. I stood over him and laughed. I think that's why he's still around. He still thinks I took that money but also he's still pissed at me for laughin' at him when he died."

"Does Dar—Darren ever see Gary?"

"Don't know. I don't think he does."

"Did Darren maybe take the money?"

Helen scrutinized Tracy. "Why you askin' about the money?"

"Oh, fuck's sake woman," Tracy leaned back in her chair. "I'm not interested in your damn money. I *was* interested in your son, for about two hours. Now I'm just here for the Cheez-Its and the conversation. Okay?"

"And my whisky," Helen said.

"That too," Tracy admitted. "And maybe one more smoke."

"What you think I needa do about Gary?"

Tracy tapped her Bic on the table and took a drag off her cigarette. She kinda wanted to see this Gary for herself. She could handle something Old Haggy like Gary. Couldn't she?

"Lemme think about it for a minute." Tracy stubbed her cig out in the tuna can. "You got a bathroom I can use?"

"Back down the hall, first door on the right."

Tracy found it easily, even in the dark. She flipped on the light switch and was rewarded with the sight of her own mug in a spattered mirror. Her mascara was only slightly smudged, but she definitely needed a touch up on her lipstick and some general maintenance. Kissing Darren had been the tipping point that had eliminated the Jukebox Latina and the line workers from the night's competition—Helen's boy had a talented and not overzealous tongue, which Tracy appreciated. Later, she'd discovered to her satisfaction that he also had six-pack abs and was hung like a porn star. Which meant she now had a kink in her walk and Dollar Store L'Oreal Plum Adagio smoodged all over her chin and neck.

Maybe that hadn't been visible while she'd been chatting with Mama Helen about Gary. Oh, who really cared.

Tracy plopped her purse down on the counter. It was more like a Go Bag than a purse, with all the essentials for a long night out, a morning after, a practice session with the band, or a midnight exorcism.

Not that she'd ever actually done an exorcism. The shit that had gone down backstage at the Bedlam concert a couple weeks before didn't count. Since that night, though, she tried to be more prepared.

She swabbed her face and décolletage with a Kleenex and reapplied her lipstick, then powdered her cheeks and nose. After a last glance in the mirror and a healthy scratch at the mermaid tattoo on her shoulder—that one *always* itched—she had a piss, washed her hands, and dried them on the bandana in her bag. The bathroom wasn't super dirty, but there was no way she was touching that sketchy hand towel, caked with worse schmeck than the linens at Heart of a Viper's practice trailer.

When she opened the bathroom door, a man was standing there, and it wasn't Darryl. Crap—Darren. Gah, why did she have such a problem with his name?

"Hi there," Tracy said to the guy, who towered over her by a foot, and who smelled like the grave.

The man said nothing. He glowered, and blocked her way. He was wearing jeans and a tucked-in plaid shirt, but the more she tried to determine his color and shape, the more she had trouble focusing, as if he were both there and not there at the same time.

She prickled with anticipation, and a tinge of unease.

"Is this your house?" Tracy stalled. "Are you Gary?"

He remained silent, looming, blurring in and out of her sight, only his dark-rimmed eyes punctuating the shifting question of his existence. Tracy looked into those eyes, through them, and a wave of hideous self-loathing swept over her.

dirty slut get outta my house

"Slut?" Tracy cackled. "Is that all you got? Scary Gary. You dumb, dead bully."

That feeling of shame, completely foreign to her and utterly unwanted, receded, leaving her skin feeling wet and cold.

The four bare bulbs in the vanity bar above the mirror zizzed and popped out, one by one.

"Well, shit," Tracy spat. She dug her Bic out of her purse, held it up and flicked the flywheel with her thumb. The long flame showed

her an empty doorframe and a cheap painting of a desert sunset on the wall in the hallway.

She glanced down, and saw the cuff of a pant leg at the right edge of the doorframe.

Among the other things in her Go Bag, like her iPod, condoms, bubblegum, a spare thong and some extra D'Addario strings for her Stratocaster, Tracy carried a bag of rock salt and a stun gun. She stepped back toward the toilet and pulled both of these items one-handed out of a side-zippered pocket. Then she lifted her thumb off the Bic and tucked the warm lighter into her bag by feel, because without its flame she could no longer see a thing.

She liked to sing, at times like this. She liked to sing any time, really, which was why she had a band, but in the watches of the night, trapped in a bathroom by a malevolent ghost, she figured a little bit of music could do a girl good. And maybe confuse whoever—or whatever—was lurking just outside the door.

dirty slut

my house

She'd been listening to Horrorpops in her Subaru on the way to Boondocks, so that's what popped into her head. Mostly the riff they did on the old Madness song, 'Our House,' which seemed quite fitting at the moment.

my house

Instead of singing about some house in the middle of a street, Patricia Day sang about her fist punching somebody right in the middle of his face. Tracy hummed a few bars, but grew impatient. She wasn't afraid of the dark, but it was damn annoying.

"Show me your face," she said to Gary hiding outside the door, "and I'll introduce it to my fist. Come on, be a man and show yourself."

She didn't wait. She stepped over the threshold, turned to her right and thrust the stun gun forward, pressing the trigger. Blue fire crackled between the prongs, but in the electric light, nobody was there. No disembodied ghostly pant leg, either. She put the gun back in her purse, but kept the bag of rock salt in her left hand, in case this wasn't over.

Tracy walked back to the kitchen, darkness at her back.

There was no one sitting at the table. The bottle of Jack and the two glasses were still there, and a Virginia Slim still smoldered among the stubs and Starkist. A handful of Cheez-Its had spilled out of the

box onto the greasy tabletop. Tracy picked it up and stuffed it in her purse for later.

"Helen?" she said to the empty room.

"Hey," said a sleepy male voice. Darren shuffled into the kitchen in his boxers, scratching idly at his belly button. He was actually better looking than Tracy remembered.

Way to go, me, she congratulated herself, and strolled over to kiss him goodbye and maybe give him her number. She might wanna see him again—but not in this house.

He saw the salt bag in her hand, rubbed his eyes. "Wassat? Izzat crystal? I don't really... do meth. That's a *lotta* meth."

"It's salt," Tracy said.

"Why?" He stroked the cleft between her breasts with one teasing fingertip. "What're you doin' in here?"

"I was just jawin' with your mama," she said, kissing him. He was warm and smelled like stale beer and bedsheets. "But now I gotta split. Tell Helen thanks for the hooch and the cigarettes."

Darren pulled away from her, his lips stained pale plum from her L'Oreal. He looked more perturbed about her leaving than Tracy would have expected.

"How you know my mom's name?" Darren's voice trembled, high-pitched, like a boy's.

"I told you. We were just—" Tracy glanced behind her, at the table, the bottle, the two glasses.

"Did you *see* her?" Darren was wide awake now and no longer horny, but eager in a new kind of way. "I *see* her sometimes, but she won't talk to me. You *talked* to her?"

"We had a couple drinks, and I bummed a cigarette or two." Tracy stared at the table. There were no Virginia Slims anywhere. No tuna can. "Oh *man*," she groaned. "I am *such* a rube."

She'd always prided herself on her observational skills, but she had to up her game. Sucked to be an amateur.

Darren was babbling. "Is my mom okay? Is she—mad? What does she want?" He moved closer to her, and took her hand.

"So, your mom's dead, am I right?"

Darren nodded. He had to be maybe 25, but at that moment, he looked twelve. "Yeah, she—a couple years ago. My dad—my dad did it. Strangled her. And then he had a heart attack. It was right here, in the

kitchen. I wanna sell the house, but—it's been on the market forever. I'm stuck here tryin' to make payments until the bank forecloses."

Tracy let out a breath. "I'm sorry. That pretty much blows."

Darren chuffed out a laugh. "Sure does." He let go of her hand and stroked her mermaid tat, as if touching her consoled him.

"She's not mad at you," Tracy said. "I think she's just scared. And stuck here, too."

"Can I help her? Can you? Do you know how?"

"Maybe," Tracy muttered. She thought about Gary's lost money. She wanted to get the better of him, not run away from him. And if she could help Darren and his poor dead mom, too, she was damn well gonna try.

"Darren. Is there a big rock out back, in the yard?"

Darren gave her a funny look. "Yeah. Why?"

"Where's the back door?"

Darren led her down the hall to a deadbolted door on the west side of the house. He stuck his bare feet into a pair of flip flops by the door.

"You ever see your Dad?" Tracy asked Darren as they slipped out into the sweltering Tucson night.

"No. But he's around. You're the only girl—lady—I ever brought back here who's stayed past midnight. I think my Dad shows up sometimes to play mean tricks, like he used to do to my ex-girlfriend when he was still alive. Most chicks get freaked out in the middle of the night and bolt."

"I am not most chicks."

"Yeah. I dig that."

"I dig that you're not like your Dad."

"Didjoo see him, too?"

She thought about lying. Didn't. "Yeah. He called me a dirty slut."

"Sorry. Even when he's dead he's still a dickhead."

Tracy wanted to write that down, as a song title, too. "I've been called worse things than slut, and with more creative word choices. This ancient bastard even called me a roundheels at one of my shows."

"Heck's that?"

"It's old slang. A loose woman. I took it as a compliment."

"Good on you."

"Yep. How do we get to the backyard?" She studied Darren's face in the moonlight.

"This way." He led her to a chain link fence and opened the gate. They walked out onto a mostly bare expanse of dirt about a third of the size of the house. The half-assed landscaping included two sagging prickly pears, a decrepit patio table and two chairs, and an abundance of weeds.

A cinderblock retaining wall surrounded the back and sides of the yard and separated the house from the neighbours'. In the far corner, a hefty boulder squatted in the shadows.

"Come on," said Tracy, picking her way around the smaller cactus to the boulder, glad she'd worn her boots instead of her slingbacks. She heard Darren's flip flops thock-thocking as he followed behind her. No need for a flashlight—the moon was big and bright enough to illuminate even the windblown trash rucked up against the wall.

"What's the deal?" Darren asked.

"Help me roll it."

"Uuhhh—" Darren hesitated.

At first Tracy thought he was balking because he didn't think he was strong enough, and he didn't want her to think he was weaksaucy.

Then she saw Gary walking toward them. He passed right through the bigger prickly pear like exhaust smoke, and as he did, a small rodent—probably a packrat—squealed in terror, leaped out from its nest inside the cactus and darted across the hardpan.

"I feel somethin'," Darren said. "Is somethin' comin'?"

"You don't see him?"

Darren wheeled around. "No. Who is it?"

"Gary."

dirty slut get away

"Come 'ere," Tracy ordered Darren. She opened the bag of rock salt and poured it in a circle around them and the boulder.

"Wow, you're like, a total professional ghostbuster."

"Help me roll this rock," Tracy barked. "Now."

The two of them grappled with the huge boulder, which was as high as Tracy's knees and weighed at least two hundred pounds.

"Why're we doin' this?" Darren panted.

"Just push it over. On three." She took a second to admire Darren as he wrestled by her side, his biceps bulging and his thigh muscles straining, like an Olympian painted on a vase.

get away get away from my rock

"My rock," Tracy sang, with a sneer, "in the middle of my night."
Suddenly Gary was beside her, enveloping her in a chill blast of air that reeked of mould and shit.

He was *inside* her salt circle. Tracy's lungs filled with his stench and she coughed, wondering vaguely if she could get the Hantavirus from a specter. Would it be called the Hauntavirus? Tracy coughed harder as stanky Gary's shade began to envelop her, suffocate her.

"Dammit!" she wheezed, trying not to stare into his eyes. "This salt circle crap always works on *Supernatural*!"

Darren squatted, picking up a handful of salt. He held it out to Tracy, as if that might help. She grabbed his hand, the grit of the rock salt grinding between their pressed palms.

As soon as she touched the salt, the cold and the stink dissipated, and she could breathe again.

"What do I do?" Darren panted, staring bug-eyed with his hand clamped to hers. "What's goin' on?"

"Calm yourself." Tracy cleared her throat with a gusty rumble, thinking, *gawd, I sound like his mom hacking up a lung*. "We're okay."

But she hesitated, wondering if Gary might come back. She counted to fifty and, when Gary didn't show, impatiently released Darren's hand. What had happened just now?

She stared at the salt on her fingers, then shook her head. Balls to this. She'd do the research later.

She stashed the baggie of salt in her purse, then started to shove at the boulder again. Darren joined her. After several seconds of strenuous grunting, which sounded amusingly similar to their earlier romp in Darren's bedroom, they gave the rock a final heave and rolled the big chunk of granite sideways.

"Watch out for scorpions," she warned Darren, who jogged back a step and almost tripped over his own flip flops. She pulled a small LED flashlight out of her purse and shone it into the depression they'd uncovered.

"Whoaaahhh," Darren breathed.

Resting in a small hole chiselled out of the caliche was a gallon Ziploc bag full of cash.

Tracy reached down and picked it up, shook off the dirt and crickets and a dime-sized beetle, and handed the bag to Darren. It must have weighed two pounds.

He took the dusty bag, opened the top and peered into it while

Tracy aimed the flashlight for him.

"Enough for a few mortgage payments?"

"More than enough," Darren whispered. He looked up at her.
"Way more. Wow."

He dipped his hand in the bag and came out with several one hundred dollar bills. Tried to pass them to her.

"Nah," Tracy shook her head. "I'm good. It's your money now."

"Please take it. I wanna pay you."

"Not a hooker," Tracy shook her head.

"Not for *that*," Darren said. "For the... whatever. You're like... Ghost Chaser! Ghost Punker!"

"Ah, no. No I'm not." But finally—tonight—she was certain she wanted to be. Certain she'd be hella good at it the more she learned.

Darren blinked. "Is Gary gonna come back? Is my mom?"

Tracy wanted to assure him that he was finally free of his ghosts, and that Helen was free of Gary, but she had no idea if that was true.

"Wish I knew." She reached in her purse and extracted her cell phone. "Maybe—shit, maybe light some sage and wave it around or somethin'."

"You should take this anyway," Darren tried to give her the cash again.

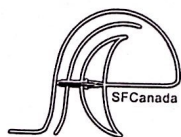
Tracy checked the time on her phone. It was almost four in the morning. She'd told Ray and Sebastian she'd meet them at the trailer around eight for an early practice session. They had a gig on Wednesday at Plush.

"I don't need your money. I already got a job," she said. Make that two. She had a lot more research to do after tonight.

"Yuh but—" Darren started to speak, but Tracy stopped him with her mouth on his. He recovered quickly, and kissed her back.

"I owe you," he told her. "Anything. Anytime."

She tucked her phone back in her purse, thought for a moment, then pulled out the box of Cheez-Its and handed it to Darren. "I gotta scram," she said softly. "See ya." ■



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