

Moving through the lesson Winters realized he was standing, knew it wasn't the position to take, putting people off, intimidating them, making it appear he wanted to be in authority and such an approach could inhibit the responses he wanted. He kept talking but quietly sat on one of the battered couches, squeezing between Colton Beaumont and Leroy Snodgrass. The teens were listening and Winters explained the situation of the Bible reading, applied it to their lives, brought faith alive, at least hoped that was what he was doing.

"Timothy was supposed to set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity," Winters voice expressed his passion. "And even though this letter was written to some guy thousands of years ago, it is aimed at any young Christian." Winters leaned in to the group. "That means you."

Now it was time for them to speak, for these unfamiliar teens to open up to this stranger, this new entity among them, an intrusion, veiled threat, something breaking the norm. They went along with his leading and answered questions, sharing some thoughts, naïve, unformed, often off the mark but easily set straight. It wasn't long before Winters gained confidence, knew he was doing something right, directing and encouraging without destroying feelings or eager ambitions. Karen gave him an appreciative nod when he deftly handled the issue of purity, treading lightly, moving ahead with delicate tact.

His own youth made him a natural candidate to lead the teens of the church but he had no experience at it. Out of high school in a small town in the hills west of Raleigh, North Carolina, he attended two years of college, general studies, his focus as unclear as his future and his goals. Just after his twentieth birthday he felt called to ministry and switched to Duke Divinity School in Durham, working through another four years of education to become a pastor in the Methodist Church. But seminary classes were not designed to teach a person to be a pastor. The school produced theologians, clergy well versed in the Bible and its history with no foundation for actual preaching or leadership or, in the case of youth pastors, innovative teaching and crowd control. Winters assumed God would provide that, but faith and courage and experience seemed to be what gave him ability.

The last two years of seminary included part-time work in a small church near the school, Templeton United Methodist. He was a student pastor responsible for education in the church but that equated to being a clerk, ordering supplies, maintaining the inventory of Bibles and textbooks, and filling in at whatever Sunday school class needed a teacher. He preached three times a year. With graduation he was ordained probationary elder, a complex name for a beginning pastor, but returned home to live with his parents. A year later Faith Methodist lived up to its name, stepped out in faith and hired him as an associate.

"I'm sorry, it's time," Karen tapped her imitation gold watch, the discussion of future plans just getting productive. With nothing more to get them out of their seats, the group stood, stretching in a babble of talk and laughter and pushing. Purses and bags were lifted and slung over shoulders as the teens headed for the door.

"Does everyone have a ride home?" Winters called over the hubbub. He had been taught all the legal ramifications of keeping teen-agers safe. A chorus of "yes" answered.

“I can make sure,” Karen sidled up to Winters, patted his arm. “If you have other things to do.”

Winters flinched at the thought. He did have something to do. He had to go up to Pastor Anderson’s office and endure the man’s wrath, had to try to explain why a beautiful teen-age girl under his care and old enough to be a temptation to men had exposed her rear to him. He lingered a moment gathering up the discarded papers and pens as the teens filed out of the room, exploding into the fellowship hall, thundering to the far staircase then up and out to the front parking lot.

Karen Hastings waddled along behind the herd, satisfied it had been an interesting meeting, pleased with how things had gone. Her group of friends from the church would enjoy hearing this young man, Winters Macklin, seemed to have what it took to guide the youth of the church, to steer them away from the wild and reckless activities most teen-agers in town were involved in. He knew what he was talking about, spoke at a level they could accept and appreciate, and that was a good thing, a reason to have hope that this generation of young people could do more than spend their time drinking and fornicating, an idea that at once repulsed her and lit a fire of envy.

So many of the young girls looked so worldly, mature, advanced beyond their years, ready to take on the indulgences of adulthood when they were still so young. But she had to admit her peers were just as wild and promiscuous when she was younger. It was just that it had been so long ago. She didn’t feel she had the energy to enjoy life like when she was younger, enjoy it now when it was acceptable to do what the teens were doing – things they shouldn’t.

“You have a ride?” Karen asked the cluster of teens around her as she came out the church’s wide glass doors, onto the expanse of blacktop and white lines, the main parking lot of the church. She was confident they did, hoped they did, because the sun was slipping fast behind the trees on the distant hillside, leafy branches black silhouettes, the horizon a soft smear of orange and gold clouds, the pale sky swift fading to deeper blues. Her car key was in her hand.

A string of cars flowed from parking spaces, headlights flicking on as the vehicles formed an orderly procession to the exit, then turned left or right onto Hawkins. Three cars remained dark and silent; her own car, Pastor Anderson’s and Pastor Macklin’s. The last car moving from the parking spaces stopped a moment and two of the boys jumped into the back seat. Only Lindsay Ketchum and Alexia Cheatham remained, arms stiff at their sides, their faces averted from Karen.

“Do you have a ride?” she asked, vague resentment rising, these two the most attractive of all the girls, flirty, salacious in dress and behavior, reminding her of the “in crowd” girls she knew growing up, girls she envied and hated for their beauty. Never the most popular girl in high school or the years that followed, Karen lingered on the fringe of cliques and groups of friends, dating when asked, but ever so infrequently. She was plain and wished she could have been as pretty as some of the others, but she assumed it was her wholesome, down-to-earth mediocrity that finally attracted Dub Hastings and prompted him to marry her. She saw her average

appearance as a blessing from God, spared the temptation to be a tramp, and instead settled into a comfortably mundane life.

“My mom is coming,” Lindsay glanced at the woman.

“You sure?” Karen raised her chin.

“Yeah,” Lindsay gave another dismissive look, held up her cell phone. “She just texted. You can go on.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” Karen took a step toward her car. The idea of not actually seeing these girls safely tucked away into a parent’s car made her uncomfortable, but the two pastors were still in the church and would have to pass this way on their way out. And Lindsay had said someone was coming.

“Okay,” Karen began walking to her car. “Y’all be safe now.”

“Where is your mom?” Alexia watched Karen fit herself into her Bonneville and start the car.

“She stopped to get milk,” Lindsay glanced down at the phone. The Bonneville came to life, the headlights flicked on and Karen turned out of the parking lot. “She’ll be here in a couple minutes.”

“I want to walk home,” Alexia stepped away from her friend.

“Why?”

“I want to meet Nathan,” Alexia faced Lindsay but backed away, moving toward the corner of the church building. “He gets off at nine. He can meet me at the gazebo before I go home.”

“What about my mom?”

“Tell her I got a ride,” Alexia kept backing away.

“I guess,” Lindsay cradled her phone and debated between texting her mother then or explaining things when she pulled up. “You sure?”

“Yeah,” Alexia turned. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Lindsay said something after her but Alexia didn’t hear, rounding the corner of Faith Methodist, the church rising large and imposing, a gray stone castle fading into darkness in the quick dying twilight. The high arched window of the pastor’s office glowed yellow above her as she followed the side parking lot along the church wall to a wide stretch of lawn. She could have walked along Hawkins Road following it down the steep hillside, but beyond the parking lot the road arced away north, a lazy loop around the hill, and walking the road would add almost fifteen minutes to her trip. Lindsay’s mother would drive that road, and she would stop and insist that Alexia ride with them.

Alexia held her phone in front of her, crossing the dark grass of the broad, empty lot behind the church. Walking home, she texted Nathan and saw by the clock on her phone it was 8:40. *Meet me at gezebo*. If she hurried, if she didn’t get bogged down by the woods ahead of her, she could make it to the gazebo just after 9:00.

The grassy lot gave way to a wooded area, a sparse gathering of trees growing thicker and thicker to the east, closing together into a dark forest of maple, pine, locusts, walnut and oak, all draped in heavy kudzu, aggressive vines and big leaves. Just as the woods grew thick the trees were divided by an old road, cracked, broken, littered with loose stones. It was the road to the

old school, Canaville High, a big, two-storied shell of a building, abandoned for years, left to rot, to fall apart on its own, for time to dismantle it piece by piece. The neglected structure brooded over the northwest edge of Canaville, perched on the crest of an outstretched arm of the hill where Faith Methodist was, masked by the trees grown dark and primitive, wild and untamed since the school was closed thirty years ago.

Most everyone avoided the area, let the school sit alone and abandoned, stayed out of the woods around the old building, allowing it to rest and lament in peace. Alexia had been in the woods before. Most of the kids in town had. It was a great place to hide, to find some cool spot among the trees, to find an adventure in childhood fantasy, explorers in a jungle. Boys came here to drink in secret, to smoke in the shelter of branches and underbrush. Boys lured girlfriends to the intimate woods hoping for sex. Evidence of all that went on was littered among the underbrush; beer cans, whiskey bottles, broken boards, a shopping cart, and black smudges of fires left to burn themselves out. Walking from the church to town it was the fastest path, downhill most of the way, and many of the teens would walk through in summer and fall. But that was usually in daylight.

People claimed the old school was haunted, the ghost of a teacher from long ago roaming the deserted halls, floating among the dark, thick trees outside seeking revenge for her own death. Alexia was never sure about the stories, each one a little different from the others, the details blurred and confused. Boys took girls to the woods around the school, sometimes forcing their way into the dead building, hoping to scare the girls, to get them to nestle in their arms for comfort, to be impressed by their daring and bravery. Nathan had taken her to park along the deserted road not far from the old school, wanting to make out, to be passionate, to kiss and touch and see some flesh, but a noise scared them off. Few came to the area at night.

As Alexia crossed the cracked road, again into thick trees, her phone chirped and she jumped. Nathan had texted her back. *OK*. He would meet her at the gazebo. He would get off work at the grocery in fifteen minutes, about the time it would take her to get through the dark forest by the school. She would only have to wait about ten minutes at the gazebo.

She didn't like the idea of walking through haunted woods at the feet of a haunted school in the dark but she could get down to the Willows faster this way. "The Willows" was what everyone called Willow Glen, a newer subdivision on Canaville's north side, a complex maze of streets and cul-de-sacs around a park and half a dozen willow trees. The Cheathams had a two-story Colonial there. The only entrance to the subdivision was on Benson Street, over a small bridge flanked by pools and fountains. A gazebo was set at the edge of one of the pools.

*By old school. Creepy*, she texted. Alexia made her way deeper into the woods, the school on her right obscured by dark trees, and she wondered if it was better to see the building rather than not. She heard the sharp hiss of tires on Hawkins far below and saw the flicker of headlights through the trees. Lindsay and Mrs. Ketchum were on their way home.

Alexia picked her way through the dark woods, pushing through dense underbrush filling the space between trees. She watched her footing, careful to step over thick roots thrusting their way up out of the moist, black dirt. The sun was completely down now, hidden beyond the

mountains to the west. It was cooler but not cold, the air among the trees dense and humid. She moved across a level place and came to a break in the trees, the spot where the steep hill dropped to the road below, Route 63, named Thatcher when it entered town. It led to the Willows. Through the thin branches she caught sight of the old school, saw “ox hall,” the glass windows still intact, dark sockets of dead eyes watching her. For a moment she was certain she saw movement behind a blank pane, a small glimmer of lavender light, and the thought sent a chill through her heart. But maybe it was the moon, the bright white sliver hung above the trees ahead, its image faintly reflecting in the glass.

Alexia brought her phone up again to text when she heard a noise behind her, subtle, restrained, the sound of furtive movements. She spun but saw nothing except dark woods. *Scared*, she texted.

She turned back to the slope, took a few tentative steps down the hillside and glanced back at the school, the windows blank and black now, no sign of light or movement. Again she went forward but stopped when she heard the certain sound of a twig cracking under the weight of a foot. She spun in the direction of the sound but there was nothing except black trees, indistinct shapes in the shadows. Her heart beating faster she moved quickly along the sloping hillside, stumbling over roots, tripping on rocks, her skirt catching in the branches of small bushes. Out of breath she paused and again heard the definite sound of someone approaching.

“Who’s there?” she called, but there was no response. She gripped her phone ready to text a desperate message to Nathan, but there would be nothing he could do. Another sound came from behind her. She stood still in fear and waited, imagined the transparent white, a ghost moving among the trees behind her, wispy figure of a person hovering above the ground, certain that if she looked the specter would be there, fierce and horrible and cold. Another crack of brittle wood. Someone was coming closer.

“Oh, God,” she whispered to herself, took a deep breath, and with all the courage and strength she could muster turned to see who was behind her.