

“Raven’s Nest”

A year after Sarah’s death, Alex knew it was time to go through her closet. For the past few weeks, he had woken up staring at the closet door, unable to forget the dreams which urged him to open it and face his fears.

On the day of the funeral, her children had chosen a few keepsakes without ever going into the closet, and he’d never heard from them again. Perhaps he should have been upset with them; after all, he’d nursed their mother through two terrible years of chemo, watched as her crystal blue eyes dulled, and even held her in his arms as she passed into whatever comes after life. But Alex wasn’t bothered by their lack of interest in him. He wasn’t their father and hadn’t met them until they were young adults. They’d always treated him cordially, but he thought that was because Sarah would’ve been upset with them if they’d done otherwise. Still, a simple gesture, a call or a visit, would have been nice.

The past year had been rough for Alex. A few times he’d thought about seeing a counselor, but he’d never made an appointment. During that time he’d learned how to get through the sad and lonely days without crying; still, he spent a lot of time trying to figure out why some days were better than others. Mornings had been really hard on him since he and Sarah had enjoyed starting their days together. He’d finally created a new routine and it had seemed to work.

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After Alex woke up, he headed to the kitchen and made himself a cup of coffee and a piece of toast. Then he put on his old flannel robe, grabbed the morning paper off the porch, and went out into the back yard. He sat at the patio table and watched the birds flurrying around the feeders hanging in the junipers. The sun hadn’t yet peeked over the fence, but the bottoms of the few clouds in the sky were changing from light gray to orange. Alex had just lifted his cup in a salute to nature when a chill climbed up his spine and raised the hair on the back of his neck. He shivered and pulled the collar of his robe tighter. The cool morning air seldom bothered him; icy mornings growing up in Minnesota had given him immunity to the gentle breezes of the Southwest. Yet the raw cold had been real, reminding him a little too much of the Iron Range.

He pulled the rubber band off the rolled up newspaper and spent a moment trying to flatten out the wrinkles. The ritual was necessary for a daily paper that managed to reach ten pages on a good day. The headlines were usually about local politics and the back page was dedicated to the high school sports teams. He turned to the inside, searching for the crossword and Sudoku puzzles. Reaching into the pocket of his robe, Alex took out the ballpoint pen he kept there, clicked it open, leaned over the table, and started filling in the puzzle.

A delicate voice uttered, “Alex.”

He dropped the pen and turned around, first one way and then the other. *That's odd*, he thought, as he stood and walked into the house, shaking his head, wondering if he'd left the radio on. Alex ended up in the bedroom and stood at the foot of the bed for a moment. "What the hell was that?" he said out loud, his words filling the quietness. Then he laughed at himself, the nervous chuckle a self-confirmation that he probably was going crazy. He stared at the jumbled covers, and wondered if he was getting old or just imagining he'd heard his name.

*Gonna have to do the laundry soon*, he thought as he looked at himself in the antique mirror Sarah had gotten from her grandmother. *Maybe start going to the gym too*. He turned away from the mirror and headed back outside.

Alex returned to his seat at the table, took a sip of the lukewarm coffee and picked up the pen. He glanced at the first clue on the crossword and read aloud, "One across, 'a mental image of something threatening.'" He couldn't come up with the seven-letter word, but he knew the feeling, so he moved on to the next clue, and the next. By the time he finished the crossword, the Sudoku, and his coffee, the back yard was filled with the morning sun.

The small birds had flown off and Alex could hear the odd clucking sound of the ravens as they tapped their bills and picked at the purple berries in the trees. One of the large black birds soared into the yard and lighted on the small concrete birdbath near the adobe wall. Alex was surprised; he had never seen a raven so close, let alone seen one drink from the birdbath or glare at him with its black eyes. He glanced down at the small chunk of toast he'd left on his plate and tossed it at the raven to see if it would leave. But the bird didn't move or drop its stare.

"Get out of here you stupid bird!" Alex yelled as he picked up his cup and the newspaper. Keeping one eye on the raven, he put the pen into his pocket and glanced at the finished crossword puzzle. His attention was drawn to the first entry, the one he'd struggled with, and he read the seven-letter word. He looked at the staring raven and then back at the puzzle, and said the word out loud, "specter." For the briefest of moments, he tried to make a connection between the puzzle, the bird and the voice, but the thought slipped away as he rose and walked into the house. Alex glanced back through the screen door when the raven quorked once and flew over the wall. He watched the bird disappear, and then he shook his head and walked down the hall to the bathroom to take a shower.

For the rest of the day, Alex managed to accomplish a number of tasks. He never did get into Sarah's closet to sort through all of her old stuff. That plan seemed to have vanished from his head like so many others did these days. Alex didn't think he was senile, but he'd be seventy-seven on his next birthday, and a little forgetfulness came with the territory.

For most of the thirty-six years they were married, even as Sarah lay next to him, Alex would drift off to sleep thinking about her. That night, as he slid between the sheets, he brought up his favorite memory, the one of Sarah standing next to a desert willow on the edge of an arroyo. That hot day they'd been hiking since sunrise. Sarah always took the lead, and he liked

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following her because it gave him a great view of her slim legs and trim hips. The wind was just strong enough to tug at the tree's leaves and blow her hair away from her cheek. As he stood behind her, she said his name almost as a sigh. He'd started to reach out to put his hand on her shoulder, but had stopped and stepped back when she raised her arms toward the sky and started singing, her whispery voice floating on the wind. The words and tune were unfamiliar to Alex, yet they were soothing. Bathed by the melody and the warm sun, he'd closed his eyes and breathed in the sound of her voice, the memory stirring his mind and his body. Over the years, when he was restless and had trouble falling asleep, he'd drawn on that memory.

The next morning, when he opened his eyes, Alex could see the sunlight on the junipers. He heard the chittering of the birds and a barking dog from somewhere down the road. He stretched and moaned with the pleasure of a good night's sleep and pulled the covers up to his chin. *This would be a good day to stay in bed*, he thought as he looked at the door, *but I really need to get into Sarah's closet*. Reluctantly, he flipped the blankets to the side and sat on the edge of the bed. He turned once to look at the door, then stood and headed for the kitchen.

After he'd had his coffee and read the paper, Alex walked down the hill into town. He thought about all the years of hiking and eating natural food with Sarah. He'd kept on following her diet—which he called bark and twigs—and occasionally he'd have a beer with some of the guys from the hardware store. He even kept a bottle of tequila in the kitchen, one he and Sarah had used for special occasions. He remembered there hadn't been any of those for quite a while as he crossed the main street and headed for the deli on the corner.

The pleasant aroma of warm bread greeted Alex when he walked into the store. The guy behind the counter put a half-dozen slices of pastrami onto the scale, wrapped the meat in wax paper and slid the package down the stainless steel table to the girl at the cash register. He greeted the woman in front of Alex and asked if he could help her. Alex didn't hear what she said; he was bent over, looking through the glass cabinet at the variety of meats, trying to decide what he wanted. He was also trying not to stare at the woman's slim body and her tight workout pants. He shook his head, decided on the roast beef, and as he stood back up, the woman turned around and nearly bumped into him.

"Oh! I'm sorry," she said.

"No problem," said Alex, stepping back out of the way. "It was my fault."

The woman smiled at him and whispered, "You should try the soup; it's wonderful." Alex turned and watched her as she moved toward the door. Pushing it open, she turned and smiled at him again and then walked out into the bright sunlight.

"Can I help you?"

"Huh?" said Alex.

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“What would you like to order, sir?”

“Uh, I’ll have some of the soup,” he said, still feeling the warmth of the woman’s smile. He waited while the man filled the container, trying to remember the last time someone flirted with him. *Must have been Sarah, and that would’ve been nearly forty years ago*, he thought. Alex paid for the soup and a small loaf of sourdough bread and walked up the hill to his house, all the while thinking about the encounter with the woman. By the time he got home, though, he’d set the thought aside and felt ready to begin clearing out Sarah’s closet.

Alex put the soup in the refrigerator, the bread in the old breadbox, and reluctantly walked down the hall to the bedroom, trying to forget about the dream. He took a deep breath and stared at the closet door, then took a step back and slumped down on the bed. Tears welled up in his eyes when he realized that the things in the closet were all he had left of Sarah and the time they’d had together. He knew that they were just clothes and shoes, but they were *her* clothes and *her* shoes, and giving them away would feel like cheating on her memory.

Alex closed his eyes and lay back on the bed. Tears ran down his cheeks. He thought about the day he and Sarah had moved into the house and how they’d unloaded the truck. They’d sweated and cursed some of the tight corners. Eventually, when the truck was empty, they’d showered together and made love on a sheet spread across the mattress. Alex choked back a sob and recalled that afterwards, they’d sat on kitchen chairs on the patio and drunk half a bottle of tequila. They toasted their new house and their tired muscles and anything else that would allow them another shot of the liquor. That night, they’d laughed and told stories until the moon had made a full course across the sky. When the night revealed a cascade of stars on black velvet, they’d made one more toast and then rushed into the bedroom for another time of loving.

*Sarah isn’t her clothes and shoes*, Alex thought. *She’s my memories of her, and she’s young and strong*. He sat up and looked at the door again, then rose and opened it. He expected to be hit with a cloud of dust; instead he smelled Sarah’s lavender oil. But the sweet memory of her softness and her beauty was suddenly interrupted by an icy chill that crept up his neck. Alex closed the door and walked out of the room.

In the kitchen, he took the soup out of the refrigerator, poured it into a bowl, and put it in the microwave. *This is too weird*, he thought. *I’m just gonna sit outside, eat some soup and sourdough and start acting like a grownup*. When the timer on the microwave went off, he carried the bowl, the bread, and the bottle of tequila out to the patio. The soup smelled good, like something Sarah might have made, yet as he sat back in his chair, he thought of the woman at the deli.

Alex filled the glass with the silver liquid and set it aside while he ate the soup and bread. When he finished, he stared at the shot glass, then picked it up and took several sips of the liquor. After a few minutes, Alex’s anxiety disappeared and he took the dishes and the bottle back to the

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kitchen. He rinsed the dishes off and put them in the sink. Then, grabbing the tall bottle, he took a deep breath and walked back down the hall and into the bedroom.

A little anxious about what he might find, he opened the door to Sarah's walk-in closet and flipped on the light. The lavender smell was still there.

At first, each blouse or skirt he touched reminded him of Sarah, and he felt a trace of guilt when he took them off their hangers and carefully placed them onto the bed. After struggling with some poignant memories, he finally worked his way through all of the hanging clothes and started pulling the large boxes from the shelves and the floor along the back wall. Most of the boxes were labeled in Sarah's familiar script. Carrying the cartons two at a time, he made a dozen trips to the front porch.

Alex went back to the bedroom to make sure the closet was empty, and discovered he'd missed a shoebox pushed back into a far corner. He stretched up onto his toes, reached into the corner and slid the box to the edge of the shelf. He was surprised by how light it was. When he lifted it down, he felt something slide inside the box, something small. Sarah had marked the outside with a single word—"Personal."

He stared at the word on the box, wondering why Sarah would have wanted to keep anything from him. *We always told each other everything*, he thought; *we had no secrets—except for this one I guess*. Curious about the contents, he tucked the shoebox under his arm, grabbed the tequila bottle and returned to the kitchen. Walking out onto the patio, he heard the bill-tapping of the raven and spotted the bird perched high in a juniper across the wall, but paid him no attention.

As he set the box on the table, he felt the fear from his dream again. Alex folded his arms across his chest, and rocked the chair onto its back legs. The sun was still shining above the hill and tree line to the west, and Alex felt the sweat under his arms. His head was throbbing too, but he wasn't sure if it was because of the warm air or the half bottle of tequila he'd drunk; *probably both*, he thought. He closed his eyes for a moment and tried to hang on to a memory that flitted into his mind like a hummingbird; something about Sarah and the sun and purple flowers. He reached out with his mind to grasp the thought but it was slippery and he couldn't hang onto it. Then, in an instant, he had it and followed the image to a memory of the first day he saw Sarah.

It had been in the summer, a few years after his divorce, and he'd gone with some buddies to an outdoor concert. They'd found a place at the back of the crowd with enough room to spread blankets on the lawn. The smell of flowers and pot floated along on the soft breeze and the sounds of the band warming up seemed to glide alongside them. The voices of the growing crowd pulsed and rippled in waves, high and low, loud and soft, and the combination of the sounds and smells, and the beers they'd had gave Alex a wonderful buzz. With his legs stretched out in front of him, he leaned back on his elbows, closed his eyes and let the sunlight warm his face. Somewhere inside his reverie, he sensed the slightest whiff of lavender; he took a deep

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breath and opened his eyes. Just down the slope, with her back to the stage, a woman was tossing pieces of bread to some chickadees that had gathered on the grass around her. She was tall and slender, and was wearing a long dress of some delicate fabric. She'd pulled her shoulder length hair away from her face and tied it in a ponytail and had slipped some small purple flowers above her ear. The faint scent of lavender caressed his senses, but it was her crystal blue, piercing eyes that touched him most. It felt as if she was looking through his eyes into the deepest part of him; as if she'd known him for all of eternity. He wasn't afraid. Instead, he was so captivated by her that he rose and walked toward her, all the while trying to think of something cool to say; anything that wouldn't sound foolish. Her eyes never left his, and when he neared her, she extended her hand and said, "Hi, I'm Sarah."

"I'm Alex," he said, "and you're beautiful."

Sarah hadn't blushed or laughed; she'd just smiled, looked at him, and said, "I knew you'd be here."

They ended up spending the afternoon together, and after the concert he gave her a ride home. She gave him her phone number and by fall they were married.

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The warm sun wouldn't let him stay in the day dream, so he opened his eyes and looked at the shoebox on the table. He poured himself another shot, then sat up straight in the chair, pulled the box square in front of him, and reached for the lid.

A whisper. "Don't touch the box."

Another frigid chill wrapped itself around his neck. *What's going on?* he thought. *That sounded like Sarah's voice. Is that what this is all about?* The raven quorked once then spread its wings and flew from the juniper, lighting on the adobe wall at the back of the yard. "What the hell," he said aloud. "There's that damned raven again." Then, turning away from the bird, he pulled the lid off the shoebox and peered inside. What he saw was even odder than the raven.

The sunlight reflected off a tiny silver hook and loop on the side of a small, hand-carved wooden box. The symbols cut into the lid meant nothing to Alex, but maybe they did to Sarah. Why else would she have kept it? He sucked in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He looked into the shoebox again and stared at the small box. *Why can't I touch it,* he thought. He tipped the shoebox and the smaller box slid out onto the table. Alex reached for it but stopped when the raven quorked loudly and flew toward him. The bird perched on the back of a chair not three feet from Alex.

Trembling in fear, he tried to keep his eyes on the raven, but the assault he'd made on the tequila bottle had taken a toll on his senses. His breathing had slowed and his eyelids closed, like a curtain at the end of a play. He struggled to open them and to focus on the ebony bird. Alex

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fought the fatigue, but the liquor won the battle and his eyes closed again, his head relaxed, and his chin settled on his chest. The raven, perched as still as the Maltese Falcon, continued to stare at Alex through obsidian eyes.

Behind the darkness of his lids, something gnawed away in his head, urging him to fight, to open his eyes, to stay in the moment. He heard the great whooshing of a blacksmith's bellows and felt the pulsing wind on his cheeks. Alex forced his eyelids up and, through a tequila fog, looked directly into the red-rimmed eyes of the raven. The bird seemed as large as a condor, its giant wings spread in a wide arc, the feathers heavy, velvety, drape-like. It had left its perch on the chair and now stood beak to nose with Alex, its talons gripping the small box.

Alex wanted to back away, but the bird had him pinned to the chair. He tried to focus on the raven, struggling to draw a breath into his starving lungs, but feared he'd startle the bird if he moved. Almost like a warning, the raven screeched, then pounded its wings, and lifted off the table. Still holding the small box in its talons, it flew over the wall and disappeared beyond the junipers.

The sudden silence spread over Alex like a shroud, binding him to the chair, and mercifully his mind went blank.

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Alex woke up the next morning, surprised that he was in bed, and more surprised by the absence of a hangover. He rose quickly and walked out to the back yard, glancing at the junipers across the wall. The chair he'd been sitting in lay on its back, and the open shoe box and empty bottle were side by side on the small patch of grass just off the patio. He looked around the yard, trying to make sense of what he saw, but clarity wouldn't come, and soon he realized he didn't want to know what had happened. Instead, he decided that after a cup of coffee he was going to take Sarah's stuff to the Rescue Mission and then head down the hill to the deli to see if there was anything going on, maybe buy some soup, or make a new friend.

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