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# CROSSROADS

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Regina Holt unconsciously bit her lip as she stared at the middle-aged waitress standing on the far side of the counter. Wisps of hair stuck firmly against her brow, held fast by the glistening layer of late-summer sweat covering every exposed inch of her body.

"Well?"

"I'm not really sure, ma'am."

"Please," the strain in Regina's voice made itself apparent, "take another look."

The waitress, Peggy according to her name tag, sighed heavily and looked at the photograph placed between them. An image of a blonde teenage girl smiled up at the two of them.

"Nope. Afraid not."

"But she was here!" Regina gripped Peggy's arm before she could turn away. "I have a postcard from here." She let go and fumbled hurriedly in her purse. A beaten postcard proclaiming that, "Caboose Kitchen promises you'll give your fingers a lickin'," fell onto the table and landed alongside the photograph. "It was mailed three weeks ago."

"Don't matter none. Still, don't remember her."

Regina pulled a twenty out of her purse and laid it on the table alongside the photograph and postcard. Her hands shook uncontrollably as she reached for her cup of coffee. Peggy stared at the twenty and scoffed before walking to the other end of the counter.

Regina's stomach clenched as the coffee worked its way into her system. She hadn't eaten since the day before, couldn't bring herself to keep anything down since starting the search for Jillian. The thought of what may have happened to her caused the swallow of coffee to churn in her belly, threatening to escape.

A hand went down on both the picture of Regina's daughter and the twenty. Nails painted an atrocious shade of pink led to anorexically thin arms attached to a gaunt-faced teenager. Her lips moved quick as an auctioneer as she spoke.

"Name's Kelly." The picture and the twenty slid to her side of the counter.

"She's my daughter. Have you seen. . . ?"

"Jillian. Hair's longer in the picture."

A half sob escaped Regina. "Yes. She wanted something different for college."

"Yeah . . . that's her all right," and slid the picture, minus the twenty, back to her.

"Do you know where she was heading or anything? Anything at all?"

Peggy returned and placed a hand on Kelly's shoulder, catching some wisps of brown hair in the process before squeezing hard. The older woman's gaze burned first into the younger waitress then settled on Regina.

"Your girl probably got cold feet and took off somewhere with a new beau."

Regina met her gaze. "That's not like Jillian. She's passionate about school."

"No one here can help you ma'am."

"But what about. . .," Kelly began.

The grip on the girl's shoulder visibly tightened. "No one."

Kelly's gaze dropped. "Sorry. I must've been mistaken."

"Try talking to the sheriff if she's missing." Peggy guided the younger waitress to the far end of the counter where an elderly group of men sat quietly staring at the women's legs.

Regina shoveled the spilt contents of her purse back in and laid two ones on the counter. As she stood, she fished three more twenties out and exposed them subtly as she walked out. The ringing of the door chime rang annoyingly overhead.

Hot wind sucked the air from her lungs as the summer afternoon continued to cook the countryside. She turned and walked past the windows to the alley beside the building. Dried mud splattered the side of the café as well as the dry goods store telling tales of pickups and the hormonal young men that drove them.

Ten minutes passed before the battered back door of the café opened and Kelly stepped out with a bag of trash and tore it open with a single swipe of a fingernail. Half-eaten food, napkins and

straws spilled onto the alley. The teen knelt and started to pick up the contents slowly. Regina moved to the far side of the dumpster, the three twenties still clenched in her fist.

"She was askin' for ghost stories."

"Jillian loved . . . loves to write about ghosts."

"Peg told her about the crossroads and about Missus Groden."

"What about the crossroads?"

Peggy's voice echoed from inside the kitchen. "Kelly, where are you?"

"Bag tore," she called back.

"Move it! You're cuttin' in on my break time, missy."

Kelly gave a wary look to the open door. "I gotta go. It wouldn't do to upset Peg. She's a mean one and I need this here job."

"Who's Misses Groden? And what crossroads?"

"Old lady Groden's been telling yarns about these parts for more than fifty years. The crossroads . . . they're built over what the old timers call a 'bad spot.' My daddy said it was kind of like a puckered bruise on an apple. You tend to avoid it."

"Is that were Jillian went?"

"Peg's afraid you'll call the cops on her."

"The crossroads, Kelly. Is that where my daughter went?"

"Yeah . . . yes. That's where she said she was going. Had a picture of the place in one of those spook books. Said something about ley lines and boundaries." She motioned to the money. "I gotta get back inside."

"Kelly? Get your skinny ass in here!"

Both looked up expecting to see the hulking form of Peggy in the doorway. There was nothing but a passing shadow.

"Finishing up now," she called back.

"I really gotta go. You're gonna get me in a heap of trouble." She reached out and grabbed the bills. Regina refused to let them go.

"The crossroads. Can Misses Groden tell me more about them?"

"Yes."

"How do I find her?"

"Take the first left past the bank and follow the road. Road dead ends at her house. Crossroads are right before her place. She'll be home by dark. Always is." With that said she pulled hard on the money, tearing it free of Regina's grip. "Now git before you get me in even more trouble." The teen wedged the twenties into the bra on her nonexistent chest and slammed the door closed.

The reverberating slam disturbed a cloud of flies from enjoying the bounty the dumpster had to offer. They swarmed around Regina's head landing and taking off with such speed that she could do little to fend them off. Retreating to the street cured the problem and the swirling mass returned to the confines of the alley.

Potholes made up the majority of the road leading to Mrs. Groden's home. The 1997 Ford station wagon scraped as it bottomed out for the tenth time. A canopy of trees created the illusion of driving through a tunnel. That, mixed with the constant onslaught of bugs bouncing off the slow-moving vehicle caused her white-knuckled grip to mimic that of Peggy's at the diner.

The undergrowth along the stretch of road offered little more than a green carpet of vines, common to the region. Nothing moved on either side of the road. The sun reflected off something to her left. Regina slowed the car as she emerged into a clearing scarred by man's placement of two roads intersecting. She pulled the car as far to the side of the road as she dared and stopped.

Stepping from the air-conditioned car, Regina walked the ten-yards to the crossroads. Dried mud holes pocked the crossroads. Weeds, the lowest being waist high, covered all four corners. Early evening shadows blanketed the western half of the clearing, slowly moving their way east as the sun set.

In the distance, the rumbling of an engine could be heard approaching. She turned, kicking a piece of metal with her sandaled foot. The corner of a license plate broke free of the dried mud. Dirt covered the better part of the plate. Regina kicked it again and broke the metal plate free. It landed face up in front of her.

The letters KBQ were visible.

"K . . . B . . . Q . . . oh God, no. She dropped to her knees and gripped the plate. A fingernail tore as Regina scraped away at the dirt. When no more would release, she slapped the license against the ground and turned it back over.

Years of exposure to the elements and rust had eaten away all of the coloring that once covered the plate, now leaving only the imprint for identification.

"K . . . B . . . Q . . . 1205." She stared dumbly at license plate, the plate that bore the same number as her daughter's. The rusted numbers flaked as the last remnants of a breeze blew past.

A battered old pickup burst into the clearing, racing towards her at breakneck speed racing the ever-increasing shadows. As it shot past Regina looked up at the elderly couple in the cab, at the old woman occupying the passenger seat as they sped past.

She saw sapphire blue eyes.

Eyes once so full of life.

Her daughter's eyes.

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