

In the Company of Thieves

by

Michael Berrier

OFF-STAGE EXTRA

Jennifer Vining stood in the nursery with the phone to her ear, one hand to her belly, where the baby they intended to name after his father gave her a gentle nudge.

To her left, the crib and rocker were covered with a tarp to keep the glue and paint off them. The plastic sheeting under her shoes crinkled as she turned to watch the last section of wallpaper peel from the wall with a deliberate rip. The fallen paper revealed the pink paint that she'd been in the process of covering when Tony's call changed everything.

"Jen, did you hear me?" Tony's voice was hushed. Behind his labored breathing she heard the surge of the wind and a crashing wave. It made her wonder what Tony and their daughter were doing at the beach so long after sunset.

The voice of their daughter Natalie came across the phone lines then, and Jennifer heard an undercurrent of fear in the five year old's voice.

Away from the phone, Tony said, "Natalie, quiet, honey." Then his voice returned. "Jen, don't take anything. Just go. Call me when you're on the road to let me know you're safe and we'll figure out where to meet."

But how could she leave now? She was nearly done. The section of wallpaper that now lay in a roll on the floor was the last one. When that was done all she had to do was clean up, and the room would be ready for Anthony, Jr.

"I can't just leave," she said. Outside, the wind kicked up.

"You have to," Tony said. "No more talk, Jen. Just tell me you're leaving. Please!" Another wave crashed, this time with a wallop. Wherever Tony was, the wind was as heavy as it was outside their house. It breathed through the phone lines like an obscene caller.

Somewhere at the corner of the house an eave popped. She stared at the walls. The house around her took on the sinister frailty of the little pig's house of straw.

"Jennifer!" Tony's whisper startled her.

"All right. I'm going."

“Call me when you’re on the road.” He clicked off, stifling a cry from Natalie, and the roar of the wind in her ear vanished.

She got out of the room and maneuvered onto the stairs, blind to her feet below her belly. The coat closet was at the foot of the stairs. It wouldn’t take her but a minute to put on her heavy wool coat.

The house creaked. It must have been the wind. Not an intruder. Not the steps of a thief or a murderer making the floor pop. No one on the roof making the ceilings groan.

She made it to the first story. Her hand was on the knob to the coat closet when the latch on the front door rattled.

She froze. She didn’t want to look, but her eyes were drawn down the hall. Their front door stood at the end of it, and from here she could look through the fan of opaque glass at the top.

What came through the opacity of the windows was the shadows of waving tree limbs and fluttering leaves, toying with the light from the street.

A steady shape at the base of the window looked like the head of a man rising into view to try to see through.

Jennifer threw open the closet door and seized a coat. She rushed through the dark kitchen, struggling to find the openings in her coat for her arms.

She found her keys where she’d left them.

In the garage, the metal of the big garage door popped in the wind. Her hand went habitually for the switch that would make the big panels rise up, but she stopped herself.

She got inside her Explorer and locked it, brought around the seat belt and buckled in. Her eyes went to the rear-view mirror and she reached up to thumb the remote. The opener kicked in and the panels in the mirror rose. She cranked the ignition key. The car’s engine revved and drowned out the noise of the garage door.

Then the other door opened—the door to the house. Light spilled out and framed a man in the doorway.

He rushed into the garage and went for the car.

Jennifer shifted to Reverse and stomped on the gas.

The Explorer crashed into the garage door. Metal wrenched and screeched. The panels buckled, scraped along the roof as she ripped through.

She cried out. The man ran alongside, pulled at the handle, but it was locked.

Then a metal sheet cascaded down the windshield. The car must have knocked it loose.

It took the man down.

She was in the driveway. The light of the opener flashed in alarm. Sections of the ripped-apart garage door hung at odd angles like shredded shutters, and the man crouched underneath a sheet of torn metal.

He brought his face up to her and wrestled free from the metal.

The Explorer made the street and the tip and bounce forced her attention away from the intruder. In the wind, the trees lining the street bucked and swayed, the flicking shadows coating the familiar street with unreality.

Jennifer realized she was screaming. She cranked the wheel around to bring the car in line with the street, and wanted to stop, to shift gears, but the man was coming down the driveway after her. Patches of shadow fluttered across his face. His long hair fanned in the wind in a burst of blackness around his head.

No time to stop. No time to shift.

She stomped on the gas, tried to look behind her. The baby made it impossible to turn normally. She strained her neck to see.

The Explorer gathered speed.

She glanced back the way she'd come.

The man sprinted toward her, not thirty feet away.

A concussion rocked her backward. Her ears rang with the sound of ground steel.

The Explorer stopped.

Her hands went to her belly.

A car alarm wailed.

Jennifer pounded both hands on the middle of the steering wheel. The Explorer's horn joined the siren.

Light streamed into the street from Jennifer's left. Someone must be coming.

Twenty feet away, the man chasing her stopped.

His eyes shifted. His hair played wildly in the wind, streaming and fanning in the shadows.

He took a step backward.

Jennifer leaned into the wheel. The horn blared and the car alarm wailed.

The wild-haired man retreated further, into the windblown shadows and the darkness beyond them.

Jennifer turned to see her neighbor coming out, his tank top and sweats pressed against him by the wind.

She looked forward. For a moment, she thought she saw the trailing threads of his hair playing in the wind, but the man who'd been in her house had vanished into the night.

In the confusion that followed, what rang in her ears wasn't the wail of the alarm from the car she'd plowed into. It wasn't the horn blasting from her Explorer that she couldn't stop hitting, nor the curses of the neighbor who owned the car she'd hit, nor even the sobs escaping from her own throat.

What rang in her ears were the hushed words of her husband and the cry of her daughter on a beach somewhere in the darkness, with the wind and the waves behind.

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