



**OUTSIDE  
THE**

**L I N E S**

THE TERRIFYING NEW NOVELLA  
BY

CRUSSELL C.  
CONNOR

3.

## THE PEOPLE

The house where Andrew thought he'd seen the figure was a two-story ranch-style with a wide porch, overhanging eaves, and shutters painted in shades of off-white and green. The front loomed over him in funhouse fashion, threatening for all its hominess. Even the lifeless eyes of the plastic ducks marching across the lawn sized him up. Andrew figured this was how members of the bomb squad felt when opening a package that might contain a life-ending explosion, wondering if they would have time to see and comprehend the horror before it consumed them. He searched each window facing the street for any sign of the half-glimpsed man in the old-fashioned suit.

By the time he reached the yard and crossed to the porch steps, the darkness in the sky was actually noticeable, and showed no sign of slowing. The sun was still high in the sky, but its light no longer reached the earth. It felt like mid-afternoon out here now, and on a short, autumn day.

*You're jumping at shadows. Literally. You'll feel stupid when you find a phone*

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*and all of this is explained.*

That sounded good, sounded cozy, sounded *sane*, but what the hell kind of explanation could there be for an abandoned neighborhood with no end and darkness falling before lunchtime? Perhaps the bigger danger here would be not getting scared *enough*, of coddling himself with assurances that everything was hunky-dory. As Ronnie suggested, they were in the Twilight Zone, and the sooner he stopped denying it, the sooner he could figure out the punchline of this episode.

He checked over his shoulder and saw the kid watching him intently over the hood of the truck.

Andrew approached the door. The mat in front was plain brown with ‘CHILDRESS’ written across it in white capitals. He rang the doorbell.

Once again he heard the chimes ring on the other side; once again there was no response. He peered through the frosted glass set into the door, but could see nothing.

“All right, here we go.” Technically, in an emergency situation, he was given authority to commandeer or break-and-enter. He just didn’t know if this qualified as an emergency situation.

He would just have to answer to charges later, if they came. Daylight was actually wasting, and he didn’t want to still be here when it got dark.

Andrew stood back a few paces and made ready to kick the lock, when it suddenly occurred to him to try the handle.

The door swung open.

Mean-spirited laughter drifted up the street behind him. Andrew ignored it and stepped inside.

As soon as the cop (oh wait, ‘Andrew,’ wasn’t it? Jappy little Officer Andrew, as if introductions would turn them into the very bosomest of buddies) disappeared into the house, Ronnie strained against the cuffs. As soon as he saw that wasn’t going anywhere, he turned his attention to the door instead.

Most of the devastation to the truck was localized at the front end and driver’s side. Besides the window he shot out, there was no damage over here. Therefore, no hope of ripping the door off its hinges and carrying it

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with him either.

He caught sight of his sweaty, blood-covered face in the side mirror. He tucked his hair back and used the bottom of his t-shirt to gently clean the blood away from his nose and out of the cracks of his face. When he was mostly clean, he stared at the unfamiliar topography. His entire nose was crooked to the right now and grossly swollen. It would shrink again, but never properly set.

And all because of that cop, all because of his good friend ‘Andrew.’ The sooner he left this guy in the dust, the better. He looked over at the driver’s seat, where the bag of cash sat tantalizingly within reach, if only his hands weren’t bound. The idea of being arrested and then escaping *with* the stolen dough was enough to make him drool.

*Ronnie-o, you’re like a goddamned retard. Look around you, and get it through your blunt skull that something’s going on here, something bigger than cops and crooks. And you may just need him to get out of it.*

Ronnie straightened and did as the voice suggested, looking around at the silent houses, at the weirdly darkening sky. “I don’t need anybody,” he growled, pulling and straining against the cuffs and the door anyway.

He was still trying when he heard the shuffling footsteps behind him.

The interior of the house was decorated in an overpowering Southwest motif. A large Mexican mural of a lonely *vaquero* covered the far wall facing the door, just before one had to turn right to head upstairs or left to go deeper into the house, flanked on both sides by paintings of desolate western landscapes. The living room had matching black leather furniture, an end table with a cowboy boot lamp, and a 50-inch widescreen. The fireplace was on the wall to the left, and on the mantel above it he could see pictures—presumably the Childress family—in various frames themed with things like chili peppers and barbed wire.

Everything looked neat and tidy and normal.

Save for the large puddle of blood across the entryway, which Andrew would be forced to step in or over to reach the rest of the living room. He knelt to stare, ripping his pants a little more. His own red-tinged reflection stared back. He reached a hand out and touched the edge of the puddle.

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It was still wet.

It was still *warm*.

Andrew wiped the blood unconsciously on the hem of his khaki pant leg and pulled the pistol from his waistband. He crouched perfectly still, listening to the noises of the house. He wanted to yell out, identify himself as a cop, but was afraid of who might be listening to receive that information. Everything in him, all the instinct he was born with and those that he'd developed since, told him to march back out the door and try a different house.

*And what if they all have blood puddles? Or worse? What then?*

Deal with that if it happened.

*Then what if someone needs help right here? This blood didn't get here by osmosis.*

Andrew stood and hopped over the stain, one leg in front of the other. He moved across the living room, walking by the fireplace and mantel as he did. He paused to take in a family portrait in the middle: middle-aged white father, mother aging but still attractive, two girls, the oldest probably close to seventeen, and one boy that could be Joey given another year of growth spurt, all gathered together in their Sunday best in front of one of those blue smudged backgrounds that professional photographers loved. He memorized those faces, both as practicality and motivator, and kept moving. The logical place to look for someone would be upstairs, where the man in the suit had been, but he wanted to clear the ground floor first and try to find a phone. He glanced up the stairs once and then headed toward the opposite hallway.

He poked his head into the kitchen, found nothing amiss and saw no phone. The shadows in here were deep, the light from the two windows above the sink dwindling in the unnatural eclipse. He turned to the hall behind him.

It was short, a door on the left and a door on the right, an end table in the nook at the end with more cowboy and Mexican crap. He reached out to the door on the right, pulled it open without hesitation, and almost opened fire at the shape that came leaping out.

He managed to hold off, but emitted a strangled bark of a scream before realizing it was a fold-out ironing board. The interior was nothing more than utility closet, sandwiched in the wall space between kitchen and

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hall. After his heart slid back down out of his throat, he closed the door.

Andrew turned to the door on the left and, with a hand that felt like a lump of congealed grease at the end of his arm, gave it a shove. He gripped the pistol as it swung open.

The master bedroom lay within. The door opened from a corner and he leaned in, sweeping the weapon from side-to-side. In the waning light from the large, curtained window, he could see a desk against the wall to the left of the door, and a king-size bed with side tables at the head, the one on the left with an actual cradled phone, not a cordless. But Andrew could only let his eyes linger greedily on it for a second before they rolled to the figure slumped across that desk beside him.

“Sir?” he asked. His words were swallowed by the infected silence of the house. The profiled figure didn’t stir.

He moved across the threshold and gasped at the change in temperature that washed over him with the brutality of an avalanche. The interior of this room was as hot and arid as the afternoon Sahara. He paused, almost breathless, and then stepped back into the living room.

The delightful coolness of central air-conditioning soothed his assaulted nerves.

He knew certain rooms in houses could be hotter than others, but the difference in temperature was too extreme for it to be a mere fluke of the house’s construction. And the barrier between the two was so defined it could be cut with a razor.

Andrew stepped back in and didn’t stop this time, pushing through the uncomfortably warm air. The first trickles of sweat coursed down his face by the time he crossed half the distance to the small desk. He held the gun up, not quite covering the person at the desk but ready to do so. It was hard for that icy hand on his back to get a hold on him in this kind of heat, but it was still there, clinging as tenaciously as fungal rot.

The figure sat in a leather writing chair pushed all the way up to the desk’s edge, upper half slumped across the wooden surface so that he rested face down with hands at each ear. He didn’t think it was the figure from the window. Judging from the size and the haircut, it was most likely Mr. Childress, the man of the house himself, wearing jeans and a brown shirt, ready to go out and mow the lawn on Saturday morning.

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The desk was clear around him except for one plain, unlined sheet of white paper above where his head rested. There was writing on it, and something told him it wasn't the grocery list for the day. Andrew leaned far enough over his shoulder—careful not to touch the prone form—to read it.

The sheet contained only one word in an all capital, blocky script, written over and over again in *Shining* fashion. They were large enough that he didn't have to squint in the dimming light to read them.

STRANGER, it said, in nice, neat, even rows, crammed together from edge to edge. Andrew stared at it blankly.

“Sir?” he asked again. His mouth was so dry; the single word rasped over sandpaper lips and croaked out. The heat in this wilting room seemed to be increasing just as the light from the windows was fading. His hands involuntarily tightened their grip on his piece, squelching out sweat against the gun's grip. “Sir, are you all right?”

He put one hand on the man's shoulder.

The body leapt into the floor as if it was spring loaded, and Andrew jumped away, again almost unloading his clip. It landed on its side and rolled onto its back. Andrew's eyes bulged in horror.

Mr. Childress had no *face*.

From his forehead to his chin was a gaping, blood-crusting hole, as though someone had taken an industrial size ice cream scoop and run it through skin, bone, and brain alike, coring the center of the head like an apple. Andrew could see all the way to the red stained flesh at the back of his head, because all of the gore and brain matter that should have been occupying the space was missing. Not just gone, but removed with such surgical precision that there wasn't so much as a drop of blood on the carpet or the writing desk. It looked more like he'd been born that way, and somehow made it through life this far without two-thirds of his head.

Andrew's thoughts went dizzy. This was a murder, murder most foul, murder in quaint Strangewood Homes, which meant there was someone else here, someone bigger than his current captive, and why was *Andrew* here, if he hadn't chased that damn kid he'd be at the fucking zoo right now, and once again that image of Joey at the kitchen table occurred to him, coloring with the attention and focus of Michaelangelo...

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He could feel his breath increasing, lungs choking in the searing heat, and knew if he didn't calm down he was going to pass out.

Andrew forced himself to look away from the gruesome discovery and turned to the phone. He hurried across the room to it, put his pistol on the nightstand and snatched the handset off the cradle. He dialed 911 on the base without checking for a dial tone, and put the phone to his ear.

No connection, no tones, just the droning hiss of an open line. But it was heavy with potential, like the silence of an open canyon, and he moved to put his finger down on the cutoff button when he heard something in that void.

It was oh-so-faint, but growing louder. Even so, he knew it was the same sound he thought he heard when he tried the cell phone that was now in his back pocket.

The giggle of a child.

It kept growing in volume until it would be impossible to write off as imagination, high and lilting, the pitch and timber making it hard to place as male or female.

"H-hello?" he rasped. He was shaking now, his hand stuttering the phone across the surface of his ear, and he pressed the plastic hard to his flesh to make it stop. He was terrified suddenly, his heart pounding in his chest and blood roaring in his ears and the heat in this room was making him so sick...

"Hi," the child said, in a voice whose innocence did its best to belie the malice stuck to the bottom of each word like gum under a table. "Would you like to hear a song?"

"Who are you?" Andrew asked. He had the surest thought he was dreaming, that this whole surreal experience would fragment any moment when he was jolted awake by the electronic wail of his alarm clock. "What is this, what's going on?"

*"Little Andrew Horner, sat in the corner, looking at aaaaall the blood,"* the voice began.

"I...How do you...?" he choked out. The air in here had warmed past the breathable threshold, and he couldn't afford to waste the dribble he pulled into his lungs.

*"He picked up his gun, said 'Let's have some fun,' and went out to join the*

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*flood?*

“No,” Andrew said, and his own voice was the one that sounded distant now. His eyes rolled back in his head, lids fluttering.

The voice was snarling now, malicious and deep. “*Little Joey Horner, dead in the corner, a feast to feed The One; when He arrives, the Sedoc and Nod, will amount to nothing and none?*”

“STOP IT!” Andrew screamed, and flung the phone away. It bounced against the carpet and landed earpiece up, and the sound of that awful giggling drifted out.

And, God help him, he wanted to put it back to his ear.

He raised a foot and stomped on the plastic, again and again until the housing cracked under his foot and the electronics shredded and that laughter was still coming out...

Ultimately, it was a shout outside that snapped him back to reality.

He blinked and looked around. The phone lay in jagged shards on the carpet, and for the smallest of seconds he honestly couldn't remember why he was bashing it to pieces. The room was no longer sweltering, and that feeling that he was in a dream world was gone.

Another shout came from outside, followed by the honking of the horn in his truck.

Andrew snatched his gun from the nightstand, jumped over the body in the floor, and ran for the front door.

Ronnie spun when he heard movement behind him, the motion too violent for the leeway he was given by the handcuff chains. His arms jerked in their sockets. He tried a different approach, sliding his right arm through the window of the truck and turning his entire body.

A man staggered up the gutter toward Ronnie with dogged determination, several yards beyond the truck's bed. He was old, late sixties, and looked like somebody's grandfather ready for retirement in Florida, wearing slip-on corduroy shoes, white pants belted nearly up to his nipples, and a button-up Hawaiian print. A crown of thinning white hair stood up in listless tufts on top of his gaunt skull. So the neighborhood wasn't deserted after all.

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“Goddamn old man,” he said. “You scared the shit out of me.”

The guy didn’t answer. His face was nothing but slack, no expression whatsoever, his mouth swinging open and eyes rolling like marbles. Even so, there was something anguished in his face, in the barely drawn corners of his wrinkled lips.

He took another halting step forward, almost losing his balance, and then another, reaching the truck’s bed. His shambling movements set Ronnie’s hair on end, but he wasn’t about to waste this opportunity.

“Listen, you gotta help me!” he cried, putting as much desperation in his voice as he could muster. “This guy hit my car and...and he’s crazy! He pulled out a pair of handcuffs and locked me to his truck! Can you run and, like, get a hacksaw or something?”

The geezer’s rolling eyes looked everywhere but at him. He lurched forward, just a few steps from Ronnie now, and stood there, swaying slightly as the late afternoon sunlight faded toward dusk.

“Hey! Hey man, did you hear me? I said I needed help!”

Those roaming eyes stopped bouncing and fastened onto him like an eagle’s talon. His lips peeled back from age-yellowed teeth, and he snarled. Before Ronnie could respond, the old guy leapt at him, hands encircling Ronnie’s head and neck, open mouth moving toward his face.

“What the *fuck*?” Ronnie yelled. With one arm through the truck’s window and the other shackled to it, he couldn’t bring them up enough to defend himself. As it was, he twisted in the old man’s grip, turning his head away. A smell like rancid pickles filled his nostrils. One of the hands clawed at his broken nose, setting his face on fire, but then he felt teeth sink into the cartilage of his ear, just above his earring. His attacker reared back, taking a hunk of flesh and the metal stud with him. Ronnie bel-lowed in pain as the man leaned in for another bite.

This time he thrashed, throwing his whole body back against the crumpled front side panel of the truck. He managed to get a knee up between him and the old man and shoved to break contact. Once there was room, he kicked out and caught the guy in the stomach with his boot heel.

The old man tumbled backward, sprawling across the curb, but sat up again almost immediately. Ronnie’s blood was smeared across his lips and dripping down his liver-spotted neck. He gnashed his teeth, a dumb, feral

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expression.

“*COP!*” he screamed at the top of his lungs. “CO-uh, *ANDREW!*”

Even if the chow-mein motherfucker heard him, there was no way he could make it in time. The old man was almost on his feet. Ronnie circled the edge of the doorframe, swinging around to the inside and avoiding a swipe of the old man’s hand at the same time. He hopped up into the passenger seat backward, positioned his hands so the chain was in the gap between door and frame, and jerked with all his might. The door slammed closed with a crash, but couldn’t latch with the chain blocking it. He held it closed anyway.

Of course, it didn’t prevent the old man from just leaning in the shattered window to grab at him.

Ronnie yelled again. His wrists and hands were vulnerable trapped so close to the door and with such little room to move, and that’s what the bastard went for, bending his neck to snap at them. He pushed the door open again, flinging him away, and then pulled it back closed. Before the old man could get at him, he lay down on his stomach on the seat, stretched his legs out, and used his foot to press down on the horn in the middle of the deflated air bag flowing out of the steering wheel. The high-pitched blat rolled up and down the street.

The old man lunged back through the window, squirming inside almost on top of him, and Ronnie could only thrash as merciless teeth snapped at his exposed back and neck.

Andrew almost slipped in the blood in the entryway, but then he was hurdling the threshold (the mat on the stoop now said ‘CHILDRENS,’ he noticed, bright and bold, and how could it’ve ever said anything different?) and running across the darkening lawn toward his truck. He came around the far end with the gun at his side.

At first he thought his prisoner had gotten himself stuck through the window of the truck trying to get free. Then he saw the handcuff chain and flailing hands and realized the legs sticking out the open window weren’t Ronnie’s.

“Hey, what’s going on!” he shouted.

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The legs stopped their kicking. The body slid in reverse out of the window and wobbled to face him.

It was a blood-stained old man, his eyes rolled up to the whites.

“Jesus Christ kid, what did you do to him?”

Ronnie’s head popped up below the level of the window in the cab.

*“It wasn’t me, man, he’s fuckin crazy! He bit my ear off!”*

Andrew looked back to the newcomer. The old man staggered forward, arms out like a silver screen mummy, a look halfway between crazed and mentally challenged caught on his face.

“Sir, I need you to stand back,” he said authoritatively.

*“Shoot him! Shoot the son of a bitch!”*

The old man didn’t stop. He was just a few yards away, gnashing his teeth and wheezing. As Andrew watched, he gave a shiver, and then a dark stain spread across the front of his groin and down his pants leg.

Andrew raised the gun. “Stand back, or I *will* open fire!”

*“Quit givin him warnings and SHOOT HIM!”*

The old man broke into a sudden burst of speed, his hooked fingers reaching.

Andrew pulled the trigger.

The pistol discharged directly into the middle of his chest. He staggered back, drool and blood running from his mouth, then charged again. Andrew fired once more, the report rolling across the street. The old man fell full out backward on the pavement—his head made a brittle crunch against the concrete that set Andrew’s hair on end—and lay still.

“Thank Christ,” Ronnie panted from the truck. “I thought he was gonna kill you and come back to finish me!”

“What the hell happened out here, Ronnie?” Andrew demanded.

“I don’t know, I’m sittin here, handcuffed to your truck, he just walks up starts attackin me!”

“Where did he come from?”

“I didn’t see, man, he was behind me! He bit my ear off, I’m bleedin all over the place again! Fucker prob’ly had rabies or A.I.D.S. or some shit!”

Andrew took a few steps forward with the gun trained on the old man’s prone form. He knelt slowly, extended two fingers, and placed

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them against his throat. “Ah God. No pulse. He’s dead. Shit!” That opened up a whole new can of worms. Jesus, this was probably someone’s medicated grandfather that had wandered off, and now he’d ended the man’s life. For a dizzy moment, nothing else mattered, none of what he’d seen in that house, just that fact that he’d killed another human being, that they were going to take his badge if he didn’t end up in jail himself.

“What happened in the house?” Ronnie asked, breaking his panic. “Did you find a phone?”

“No,” he lied. “I mean, yeah, but...it was out.”

“Well then what are we gonna do? You can’t leave me tied to this thing forever!”

He opened his mouth to answer, but a new noise cut him off. There was no wind here, not the slightest flutter of breeze, and sound carried far. This one was unmistakably human, a distant, lamentable moan.

“Hey. Hey, man. Uncuff me,” Ronnie said quietly, opening the truck door and hopping out.

“Hold on. Be quiet a sec.” Andrew stepped around the truck. That moaning continued, drifting to them, getting steadily louder. He stared up the street in the direction they’d walked the first time. It was now dark enough for the lamps lining the sidewalk to begin kicking on one at a time. The sun was gone above them, lost in the starless black that was slipping over the world.

“C’mon man, set me loose.”

“I said, shut up!”

He saw the first few as they careened around the corner of the next intersection: hunched, deformed figures that stopped to goggle at their surroundings like cavemen dropped into the modern world. By the time these early arrivals had caught sight of the two smashed vehicles half a football field away, they were joined by more shufflers with the same broken gait as the old man; first five, then ten, then a crowd too big to count. Most had something wrong with them; shriveled arms, backward legs, kinked spines. He saw a lady that appeared to have the stump of a head growing out of her abdomen and a wriggling hand on the end of her neck. The few that spotted him pointed and roared, capering like monkeys to get the other’s attention. The entire group broke into a shambling run *en*

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*masse*, jogging toward them, a marathon from hell.

“GET ME THE FUCK OFF THIS TRUCK!” Ronnie roared.

Andrew tore his gaze away from the ravening, twisted horde of suburbanites descending upon them and ran to his prisoner. He jammed his hand in his pocket to get the keys while Ronnie yelled and the pounding footfalls and gibberish of the mob got closer. He spared only one glance back before he leaned over the lock and saw there were *dozens* of them coming, and the first would be upon them in seconds. He found the key he wanted and slid it into the lock on the cuff around the kid’s left wrist.

As soon as it fell away, the kid jerked his arm back through the window, turned and ran.

Ronnie watched those things coming while the cop tried to unlock him. All of them had the same vacant, rattled expression on their faces (wherever those faces happened to be on their mutated bodies) as the old man. As strong as that fucker had been, there were more than enough of them now to tear the two of them apart barehanded.

So when he was finally free, he didn’t waste breath or seconds. He pounded pavement, with the handcuffs still dangling from one wrist.

He looked back to find Andrew hot on his heels. Those freaks reached the truck and swarmed around it. Andrew pulled his pistol, shouted a warning, and opened fire into their midst. Ronnie saw a couple go down from well-placed torso or limb shots, but the rest kept lurching after them without hesitation.

Nothing around except more houses. The next intersection was far ahead, but if they couldn’t gain any ground, then turning corners wouldn’t help them lose their pursuers. They needed to put obstacles between them, and fast.

From the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of movement. He looked in time to see a figure in an old-timey suit step back into the growing shadows of a narrow gap between a lime green Colonial and a blue one-story next door. No way to be sure, but he thought the movement he’d seen was a beckoning wave.

Moving on nothing but instinct, Ronnie veered sharply in that direc-

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tion. The cop continued a few paces along the street before realizing he was alone, and then changed his course to follow. The mindless crowd curved its path like a flock of birds, coming up onto the curb and cutting across the lawn to head them off.

Ronnie reached the side of the house. It was fully night now. There was no moon in the sky (not even any stars, some back part of his brain noted), yet somehow there was still enough light for him to see the tall picket fence that ran between these houses. The wooden gate into the backyard of the Colonial hung wide open. He rushed through and halted, reached to pull it shut. Andrew slid inside just before it banged closed. Something hit the other side of the wood a split second later, hard enough to shake the whole length of the fence. Ronnie held the inside of the lever in place. There was no lock of any kind, but after a few seconds it became obvious the things were too stupid to just lift the latch.

Andrew had sprinted forward, crossing the backyard and heading toward the fence that bounded the opposite side. Ronnie went after him as the gate cracked down the middle from dozens of misshapen fists pounding at the other side. He moved down the alley between fence and house, out into the open part of the backyard. The figure that had brought them here was nowhere in sight.

The cop reached the back fence that separated this yard from the house that backed up to it. He snagged the top, pulled himself up, swung a leg over, and disappeared on the far side. Ronnie never had the upper body strength for chin-ups, but he sprinted after him.

Wood splintered with a rough sound. Ronnie looked back as he reached the fence. Two or three of their brainless pursuers tried to slither through the small hole they'd created at the same time, and ended up getting stuck. Ronnie saw one little kid with cloven hands get his torso punctured by a jagged board, and still he clawed and reached after them, making a snarling, squealing noise. The others went back to pounding and tearing, widening the entrance.

Ronnie jumped and grabbed the top of the fence. He kicked and struggled, tried to find purchase for his knees or feet against the boards, but just couldn't pull himself over. He was fucking trapped.

A hand lowered in front of his face. Andrew clung to the fence top,

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leaning over precariously, sweat dripping from his forehead. Ronnie took the offered assistance, and together they manhandled him up and over the top just as the entire gate came down with a crash.

They ran. Around the pool in this backyard, out through the gate along the side, closing it behind them. They were on another dark street now, and they ran a block, turned one corner, ran three more, and made another turn. Finally, after both were panting and exhausted, Andrew waved him over to a large, brick house with a “WE SUPPORT STRANGWOOD HIGH GIRL’S VOLLEYBALL” sign in the lawn. The front door was secured, but the cop busted a small window next to it with the butt of his pistol, reached through, and unlocked it.

In the gloomy entrance hallway, they passed a side table with an elegant centerpiece and brass candlestick holders. Ronnie snatched one of these.

When they reached the living room, Andrew turned to him. “I think we’re okay for now,” he panted.

“Good,” Ronnie answered, and hit him right between the eyes with the heavy base of the candlestick.

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