

Ivy Cole and the Moon

Sample file

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Gina Farago

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*For my husband, Karl,
thank you for believing . . .*

Sample file

A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

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Prologue

WHEN DARKNESS falls on a mountain, it does not descend slowly, like the sinking of a great black ship over the peaks. Rather, the light is just gone. The forest, by the shade of midnight, becomes irregular, indiscernible—a spot of dropped ink, opaque and black.

Things crouch there, in the dark, hidden. Eyes watch from treetops or hollowed trunks close to the mossy floor. Slithering and creeping take place unbindered. Rustling leaves in the wind become stalking footfalls, and twigs that snap betray unseen threats from behind every tree.

There is care to take in the woods at night, alone . . .

Clifford Hughes, self-proclaimed ladies' man and handsomest employee at the Doe Springs Post Office, tore through the thick underbrush, unmindful he had fouled his pants. How long ago was uncertain. Seconds, minutes, an eternity. It didn't matter. Panic drove the man onward. An iron band of terror wrapped around his laboring

chest, squeezing the wind out of him but propelling him blindly into branches and limbs that seemed all too determined to hold him back. Vines curled like nooses to grasp at his collar, and the ground melted up to his ankles in a leafy quicksand. A shoe wrenched loose, but Clifford left it, only to go sprawling as a log rose up from the forest floor, bashing his knees. He scrambled to his feet and continued running, leaving a trail of blood droplets through the ruined legs of his postal uniform. A spiderweb netted his face and he batted at it wildly as his body pitched forward a second time, sending his bulk face-first into a bed of moss.

Clifford looked up, bits of dirt and leaves clinging to his scratched face. He drew a painful breath and realized the rock wedged under his ribs may have done some damage. Clifford's eyes darted around, but he was alone. Slowly he pulled himself to a sitting position. Breath hitched on what was surely a broken bone. He touched the sore rib and winced. Holding his side, he staggered upward, a damaged man climbing an invisible ladder to unsteady feet.

The forest was still. Clifford strained to hear something—anything—beyond his own shallow breathing, but even the chirring of crickets and frogs had ceased. He turned in a circle, gathering his bearing. At some point in the footpath he thought he was following out had disappeared, swallowed up by feathery clouds of bracken ferns. In front of him, behind him, to the left, to the right . . . it all looked the same: a black wall of towering tree trunks and its suffocating screen of underbrush. Boulders crouched among the laurel thickets like gravestones, or something else. A moving branch, the wind? Or the—Clifford couldn't bring himself to think the word. It was impossible.

Clifford stumbled forward, aware of the noise he made. Sweat dripped in his eyes but his hand came away red when he wiped it. *Jesus Christ, I'm going to kill myself trying to get out of here*, he thought. Hysterical laughter bubbled up behind the notion. He redirected the energy down into his legs, willing them to keep going. This was the right way. It had to be. Clifford shambled through the trees, drunk from the pain in his ribs, his head, his knees. From trunk to trunk,

he made his way, praying to the good Lord that what pursued him had tired as well.

Ahead of him—a break in the trees. He had made it!

Adrenaline and gratefulness mingled to push Clifford forward once more. He broke into a jog, then a run. *Thank you, God. Oh sweet Jesus, thank you.* Safety lay in front of him at last, out of these cursed woods. His truck was there, the house, a telephone.

Clifford rushed into the clearing and stopped, bewildered. A woman's torn clothes lay on the ground. The stream babbled to his right. A belt lay at the toe of his dirty sock—it was his own, fallen off when he'd first fled this place.

He was back in the glade he'd attempted to escape. Sweat and blood stung Clifford's eyes once more, but he made no move to wipe it. He strained to see into the shadows, but all was still.

He froze. The sound came from behind him. It was close. Clifford heard the thing padding softly toward him. It rose up on powerful hind legs and breathed gently against his neck. Its breath was earthy and sweet, like the leaves and soil of the mountain.

"Please . . . no . . ." A fat tear rolled down Clifford's cheek. He slowly turned.



*“Sometimes there are folks in this world
who just deserve a good killin’”*

HOW COULD a monster have come to Doe Springs?

Sheriff Gloria Hubbard sat at her desk, a stack of grisly photographs and a hurriedly typed police report in front of her. Her hands trembled slightly, out of frustration more than anything, as she held the brief and photographs of the latest victim, Clifford Hughes.

“Sheriff, are you all right?” Deputy Jonathan Meeks hovered in the doorway, the peppering of gray along his black sideburns seeming heavier this morning. He was only thirty-six, but today they all looked older. “I brought you a cup of coffee.” The deputy placed the cup on her desk, then settled his still-athletic frame in the seat across from her. He glanced at the stack of reports between them, waiting but not expecting much in the way of an answer. Scraping another body off the forest floor last night had not been easy on any of them.

Gloria nodded and took a drink of coffee. The liquid burned all the way to her stomach, a familiar and comforting feeling this early in the morning.

“I was looking at the board.” Gloria nodded at the five-by-five bulletin behind the deputy’s head. It should be blank, this small-town

crime board, a window of brown nothingness into which she could focus, the pores in the board a distraction to lead her mind away from the new set of photos in her hand. But, instead, it was a crowded place, filled with the faces of folks she'd known since childhood. They stared back at the sheriff, a few of them she'd had the privilege to call friend. "I was thinking Clifford's picture would be up there with the missing if we hadn't been—lucky—this time."

The word hung between them. *Lucky*. Lucky to have found one so quickly, she meant. For Doe Springs had not seen luck for a while now, this rural town, perched on a crest within the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. What a difference a year could make. One short year. Gloria recounted the first of the losses one by one, a daily ritual that did nothing in the way of bringing them back or easing the pain of how they left this place. Delaroy Cox, found wedged facedown in the rapids of the Crippled Bend River, his body decimated by water and the creatures that inhabited it. The sheriff's two deputies had hauled Delaroy's returned raft and bloated body ashore while the man's skin slip-slided off in sheets behind them. Randy Mabe, fallen from a bridge, his skinny broken frame discovered by wife Eleanor, who'd been out looking for her drunken husband all night. Alice Tripp's, train fatality. Jerry Flint, heart attack, found high up in a chestnut oak, his hunting rifle empty and clutched tightly to his chest. Macy Wyatt, their only apparent suicide—frozen to death in her own root cellar, the door bolted tight from the inside. The missing persons list had shrunk as bodies turned up, like Clifford's, but the postal worker's pictures would not go on the wall with the accident victims and the unaccounted for. There was a special place for those reports: in the stack of files now growing thicker along the edge of the sheriff's desk.

"Doesn't make much sense, attacking livestock all this time, then going for people too," Meeks tried again. He didn't like the sheriff this way—quiet, withdrawn. She'd been holed up in here since they got back from the woods off Route 7.

"No." Gloria took another sip. She put down the photographs and cradled her mug thoughtfully. "If only livestock had been the end of it, and not the beginning. When Merle called us last

November, I never believed here we'd be, six months later, dealing with this. It seemed like a minute ago we were at the farm." They'd found Merle's Herefords scattered about their pasture like gutted confetti. Merle, standing in his raincoat underneath an overcast sky, ranted and waved his arms, then fell oddly silent when he realized there was nothing the police could really do; heavy rains washed away any prints before they got there. A fluke, they'd assured Mr. Trent, something wandering through with an overzealous appetite but most likely moved on.

Until Dennis Largen's pigs in late December.

"Four."

"What's that, Meeks?" The sheriff steered back to the present again, her coffee mug growing cold in her hands.

"I said Mr. Hughes makes four." The deputy eyed the files lying on the sheriff's desk, their pages peeking out browned and bent from handling.

As if I don't know that! Gloria put the cup on her desk and massaged her temples. The pecan-colored hair pulled back in a tight ponytail felt slick, and the edges of her forehead, where hair met skin, were taut with the strain of her worry. A migraine was brewing, and there'd be no stopping it.

"Another full moon this time too," Meeks continued, pointing out the obvious. "You know what folks are saying. Are you a superstitious woman, Sheriff?"

She was not. Gloria did not believe in curses or wives' tales or the thing under the bed. As the rumors grew wilder, her resolve grew stronger to fix whatever was broken in her town. But the police were no closer to knowing what they were after than they were months ago, when the first body turned up. Sadly enough, a girl no older than seven discovered the remains. Sneaking off to play in Daddy's cornfield traumatized what up until then had been a typical farm daughter's life. The torso lay in the field just a few feet from a well-traveled road leading out of Doe Springs. Barely beyond childhood himself at age twenty-one, the transient had apparently been hitchhiking when whatever roamed the mountains came upon him. The little girl's screams echoed across the corn, then a deafening silence

swallowed the cries as she sat in the back of the sheriff's car engulfed in her mother's arms. The frightened woman rocked her daughter, whose eyes looked only inward at the horror she'd stumbled across.

Two other attacks followed, but the similarity to the ravaged livestock pointed to the same culprit. Patrolling Doe Springs's one main street and cross-stitch of back avenues was a regular nightly habit now, regardless of the cyclic lunar connection. Nonetheless, May's full moon, gently named the Flower Moon in Native American lore, rose over Appalachia pale as milk glass last night, and with it came a frantic call from a hunter on the outskirts of town. The dispatcher's voice, filled with cold radio static and dread, had driven the sheriff's heart into her stomach and her Jeep into a ditch. She'd sat at the wheel, cursing God and the devil all in the same breath. Then she'd headed south into the country to find what was left of their postal service's only deliveryman. Number Four.

"Superstitious? Don't be ridiculous, John." Gloria straightened in her rollaway chair, the springs supporting her back whining from old age. The report in front of her blurred for one dangerous moment, and the sheriff wiped her eyes with an unladylike rough hand, a police officer's hand. *How could a monster have come to Doe Springs?* she wondered again. Why here, little mountain haven, of all places? There was nothing here but farmers, good ole boys, and a miniscule collection of townspeople. Nosy, yes. A little too imaginative? Maybe. But good folks, all of 'em.

Maybe not all of them. Clifford Hughes's pictures stared up from the desk, the Polaroids fanning out to blend into an ochre haze. The man's usual cocksure expression was unidentifiable in a mask of eyeless gore. Deputies had been to the Hughes house a half dozen times to pull the brawny alcoholic off his wife, Patricia, but Clifford was smart enough to be lounging in his battered recliner whenever law enforcement arrived. It was always the neighbors who called, and Patricia never pressed charges. The girl was young and pretty; why she stayed with such a violent man (and a well-known womanizer to boot) was perhaps more of a mystery than his death.

Gloria secretly thanked God over and over when a call came

through with a name she did not recognize or was not close to in some way, like Hughes, other than their attempts to arrest him. Knowing the victims, another downfall of small-town life, made sleeping impossible and living a numb experience between grief and exhaustion.

“Sheriff Hubbard?” Deputy Melvin Sanders poked his head through the office door.

“What is it, Sanders?”

“The body is on its way to the medical examiner’s office. We couldn’t find everything.” Melvin looked apologetic and drawn. The short, dark hair on his head was wet, an attempt to clean up at the office, the sheriff supposed, but the effort only made him look mobsterish. The bruiselike circles under the deputy’s eyes, however, mirrored her own.

“I know, Sanders. I was there, remember? It’s just like the others.”

“No, ma’am, it’s not the usual. There are personal items missing this time. Mrs. Hughes swears she doesn’t have them and Mr. Hughes never took them off.”

“Well, for God’s sake, tell me what they are.” Gloria’s patience was worn clear through. After wading through last night’s bloody muck, she was in no mood for beating around the bush. The “usual,” as her deputy put it, was the condition of the kills. Every site they’d investigated had revealed the same: a body ripped to bits, the pieces strewn within feet of each other, and the organs—gone. It was consistent with what they would expect from an animal attack. Predators favored soft tissues. But whatever had come down from the mountain had a vicious appetite as there was rarely ever much left for the police to collect aside from bones.

“Two rings are missing from Mr. Hughes’s possession: a wedding band and a silver Harley Davidson signet. And also a gold chain.” Sanders filled up the sheriff’s doorway, waiting for a command or a reply of some kind.

“Type it up, and get a picture of the missing jewelry from the widow, if she’s got one.”

“Yes, ma’am. I did that already—this morning while I was at the

Hughes house.” Melvin cleared the distance from door to desk in two strides. He was a big kid, Gloria observed, to be so polite all the time, even in the most stressful of situations. Experience would take that out of him, though—Gloria felt forty-two going on a hundred, and while courteousness was still a valued small-town attribute, it became harder to muster it up the older and less tolerant she became.

The new photos landed atop the stack from the previous night, juxtaposing death and life in a glossy finish. Clifford on his wedding day, his bride sliding the gold band onto his hand. Clifford outside a biker bar, shooting the camera the bird, the Harley Davidson ring front and center.

“Thank you,” Gloria managed.

“Uh, Sheriff?”

“What is it, Deputy?”

“I don’t know of any animals that like to wear jewelry.”

Gloria attempted a smile, but it sat crooked on her exhausted face. “I’ll make a note of that, Savers. You and Meeks go get some breakfast now. It’s going to be a long day.”

Sample file

IVY COLE sat at the Hughes's kitchen table with her dear friend, Patricia. It had been a horrific treat for the new widow, and Ivy consoled her the best she could. The call came that morning, much earlier than Ivy had expected. Usually her work was not discovered for days, sometimes weeks, and on most occasions since moving here, not at all. But bodies had been turning up left and right over the past year, and even Ivy couldn't take credit for all of them. Maybe a curse had fallen over the town. Lord knows the little she did to eradicate riffraff could raise such a ruckus, especially since she was so careful about disposing of the evidence.

But not well enough lately. And certainly not this time. Ivy had barely crawled into bed when Patricia's weepy voice on the end of the phone line pulled her enervated body from underneath the covers once more. A deputy had been at the Hughes house since four, a deer hunter, of all people, the culprit to blame. Ivy grumpily wondered his name and address while she pulled on yesterday's skirt, still crumpled on the floor. But the hateful thoughts passed as soon as she drove up to the ramshackle two-story farmhouse, lit up like Christmas even after the sun had cleared all traces of a foggy dawn.

When the police finally exited after questions and condolences, the big deputy tiptoed out like he was navigating gravestones in the front yard. Southerners were respectful of the dead, even from a distance, and widows were particularly venerated. Patricia would soon have enough suitors to replace any pleasant memories she might conjure up of Clifford after the funeral, but Ivy guessed the girl would be hard-pressed to think of even one.

Now, in the officer's absence, there were only the two women and a big empty house. Low-slung ceilings cracked and bowed over rooms that stank of Clifford Hughes and his penchant for Wild Turkey. The living room itself was a zoo of dead animals the man had killed over a lifetime, their glassy, dust-coated eyes haunting even to Ivy. She steered her friend from the plaid sofa and its Winston-Light pockmarks into the slightly friendlier kitchen. Perched in wood-backed chairs cushioned by fully heart pillows Patricia had made herself, they talked and stared and cried the morning away.

At ten-thirty, Ivy scrounged through the splintering cabinetry for a skillet to begin some breakfast. The refrigerator was overstuffed with meat, eggs, butter, cheese, milk—even though the house was falling down around them thanks to Clifford's slack attention, Patricia knew better than to ever let the food stock get low. Clifford's appetite could change for blood if his stomach was ever made to feel neglected.

Ivy stood over the frying bacon and eggs with a spatula. Tendrils of blond hair escaped from a messy knot at her neck only to cling to her cheeks and forehead, glued there by stove heat. Somewhere upstairs, a clock ticked loudly, and Ivy, in between consoling her friend and cooking this grease-sputtering meal, considered going up there and smashing the annoying thing. But that would be unexplainable and crazy, so Ivy swiped sticky hair from her eyes instead and wished there were more to the air conditioning in this house than an open window and yard-sale fan. But even her own house had no central A/C; up on the mountain, you didn't need it. Unless you were cooking enough bacon and eggs to feed an army. An army of one who might down a forkful if the cook was lucky. Ivy didn't dwell on it. This was Clifford's food, and getting it out of the house would

be a good cleansing. If most of it ended up in the pigs' trough, so be it. It was fitting, in a way. She flipped the food onto a plate and set it in front of Patricia, who had not moved since Ivy placed her there hours before.

Patricia started to lift her fork, but then a new spate of tears streamed down her face and off the edge of her chin. They dripped over the food and set up around the edges of it with the grease. Patricia'd alternately cried and laughed since Ivy had arrived. It was hysteria, the weary deputy had whispered before leaving. But Ivy knew better—Patricia didn't know whether to be sad or completely grateful, and the guilt was eating her up.

"You're not having nothing," the girl sniffled. She plucked at pillow lace and didn't even glance at her meal. The eggs sat under the watery deluge, turning Ivy's stomach.

"I had a huge supper last night, *missy*. I'm not the least bit hungry. But you need to keep your strength up. Please finish your breakfast." Ivy nudged Patricia's plate closer. The girl needed to eat. She was a nickel shy of a hundred and shrinking fast. Ivy swore Patricia had weighed a good one hundred and twenty-five when they met.

"I can't. How can I eat after hearing . . . what happened to him." Patricia's brown eyes grew wide as the egg yolks. Flecks of green near her pupils competed with the amber, but the colors were backlit by a swollen ring of red inflammation that looked dangerously close to pinkeye. Ivy studied the peculiar state of Patricia's eyeballs as the girl continued. "Torn apart, they said, Ivy. Parts of him—gone." She hissed the last word and grasped Ivy's hand in a quivering claw. Raggedly chewed fingernails bit into her friend's skin, leaving irregular half-moons along the palm.

Ivy pried her hand from underneath the distraught younger woman's. "Now listen to me, *missy*. You just put that right out of your head. Doe Springs is suffering from too much melodrama, and the police have fallen right into the drama pit with it. People are talking crazy enough without you jumping in after them. That deputy should be ashamed of himself for stirring such a vile pot this early in the morning. I've half a mind to file a complaint." She considered it seriously for one moment, then shook her head. There was enough

fuss in this town without adding the spectacle of a lawsuit against the sheriff's office. But really, they were making such a big to-do about it all. Nobody even liked Clifford, for heaven's sake. "Anyway, I'm sure it wasn't nearly as gruesome as you're picturing it, Patricia. Don't let your imagination get away from you."

Patricia lapsed into giggles at that point, then clamped a hand over her mouth. Tears trickled down her fingers in their endless unflinching flood. Ivy was growing tired of the boomeranging emotions, and upstairs the incessant ticking was wearing on her last nerve as well.

"Stop that, Patricia. Get a hold of yourself. You're not acting rationally."

"Rationally!" Patricia screamed suddenly, startling Ivy in her seat. "My husband of six years was disembowled last night not a mile from this house and you want to know something?" Patricia took a gulp of air, her red-rimmed pupils growing insanely large. She spit the words at Ivy: "I'm happy! This is the best thing that's ever happened to me, so I must be the most horrible person in the world—worse than whatever creature did that to him." Patricia slumped like a battery-dead doll, the outburst stealing the last of her energy. The flood finally ended with the revelation, and now she stared spent at the Formica tabletop.

The confession was out. Ivy, even though knowing it to be true, was relieved. Each time, the fear was the same: What if she'd made a mistake? But looking at Patricia's swollen lip, the cut around it crusty from where she continually sucked at the wound not allowing it to heal, was the only reminder Ivy needed to know what she did was right. Whether Patricia admitted it or not. But she did admit it, and the modest confirmation was gratifying.

"Oh no you're not, sweetheart. No, you're not . . ." Ivy held the sobbing girl as her eyes focused past the peeling kitchen walls and the sagging farmhouse and the modest stretch of garden beyond it to someplace far away, where deep woods held secrets and the dead cycled back into the soil to feed the forest womb.

At a quarter till noon, Ivy put Patricia to bed and promised to come check on her later that evening. Just before going, Ivy sneaked

upstairs and located the noisy little clock. She smashed it soundly, then scraped the shattered pieces into her pocket.

Ivy began walking home—it was only two miles and she could pick up her van on her second visit later. A walk could clear her head and her hair of the smell of cooking grease. She avoided the route that passed by the last place Clifford Hughes ever saw alive. It was too beautiful a day to be dredging up more thoughts of *him*.

Ivy bent down and removed her sandals so she could enjoy the gritty dirt road on bare feet. The evergreens and rhododendron closing in on each side of the narrow, twisting lane dwindled down into a pasture of sweeping grasses the color of butternut. Rising above them, the Appalachians arced and rolled across the skyline. This was a far cry from the lower Los Angeles home she'd left a year ago, but the isolating landscapes and pipe-boughed privacy were a welcome respite from the cramped California streets.

It had long been time to get back to her roots anyway. But one never really left the South, no matter where travels might take them. A girl born below the Mason-Dixon carried that stamp in her heart for life. Blue mountain fogs and sweet magnolia haunted dreams regardless of where the pillow on which Ivy rested her head lay.

Her whole life she'd clung to the memories of her childhood in North Carolina, ten years that were broken into fragments of flight about the world as she and her mother, Catherine, followed William Cole's growing business from one upstart to the next. But always to return to the safe haven of the mountains . . .

It had seemed all too brief, those backwoods romps and firefly chases and knee-high wadings in cow-muddied creeks, before a move across the ocean to Catherine's native Germany and, finally, a hasty flight back to the concrete-bound permanence of New York (without her mother, this time), where Ivy spent her teenage years wandering across graying landscapes and wishing for the verdant green from her youth. After leaving her father's Manhattan apartment at