

THE MIASMA IS NOT FOR US TO SAY

MARTHA A. HOOD



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For information, address
Candlemark & Gleam LLC,
2523 Solstice Trl, Chapel Hill, NC 27516
mes@candlemarkandgleam.com

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For honest contractors and dedicated public servants—all those who work to mend fences and build bridges, both the literal and the figurative.

CHAPTER ONE

“So Diane told her parents we were back together, and her mother, particularly, was less enthusiastic than she’d hoped. It’s hard. I mean, they’re nice enough to me, but—”

“Carlos, what’s that smell?” Mayor Carol Asher interrupted the contractor.

“Oh yeah, right. I was meaning to show you.” He led the way across the concrete slab to the crack—almost an inch wide in some spots—that zigged and zagged like a jack-o’-lantern grin.

Over near the entrance, sliced-up rolls of indoor-outdoor carpet waited to be hauled away. Carol had hoped the smell might be coming from the old carpet. It was not. “So. What does this mean?”

Carlos Fowler pulled his hair out of its man-bun, shook his head, and redid the hair as a ponytail. “It’ll slow us down a day or two, but it should be okay.”

Carol was a tall woman and her gaze was level with that of the contractor’s. “What about the foundation? Is this part of a bigger problem?”

“No. A nuisance, that’s all.” He stepped away and squatted on the other side of the mini-chasm. “Smells like beach restroom.”

“And sweat socks. But you’re saying you can seal it up?”

“Yeah.”

“And the smell should go away, right?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“The winter formal is less than two weeks from now.”

“For the high school?”

“Right.” Something about the young man’s demeanor—a fidgetiness—made Carol ask, “What’s wrong?”

Carlos stepped over the crack and stood side-by-side with the mayor. “Just had a thought. You heard of the miasma?”

That took her aback. “The miasma. That was well before your time. Well before mine, even. What makes you think of that?”

“Just some stories I heard as a kid.” Carlos traced a level along the edge of the fissure. “Even if it is, we have better sealants now than we did then. Once we’re done, nothing will seep through.” He pulled out his phone. “I’ll get my guys back in and we’ll get this done today. It can dry overnight, and...” He snapped his fingers. “...problem solved.”

While Carlos made the call, Carol walked out onto the veranda. Such a beautiful view, and a beautiful, sunny day. Not surprisingly, the beach below the pavilion was busy even though it was a Monday in January. Mothers with preschoolers, playing in the sand. Gulls, skimming the top of the water. A few surfers, braving chilly waves.

The town of Lovely enjoyed a mild climate year-round, and its inhabitants suffered little from the climate variations that troubled other locales. Sitting in a cove surrounded by hills, it was isolated from the bustling megalopolis to the north and the larger towns to the south and east. It retained its small-town charm. Kids might grow up, go to school or work elsewhere for a few years. Yet a surprising number of them returned to raise their families, even those who worked in neighboring towns like Sandune, just to the south.

Carol went back inside after Carlos had left. She looked up at the rustic beams that made up the vaulted ceiling, across at the massive stone fireplace. Despite the renovation, the pavilion remained emblematic of the era it was built in. It was a retro classic.

While admiring what had been done so far, Carol tried not to look at the horizontal band of mist hanging above the crack in the floor or the oval swirl that seemed to be trying to form within it. Almost done, this space for dances, banquets, and wedding receptions. This source of income and pride for the city, restored to its former glory. Better than former glory. Down the hall, fresh and bright new restrooms gleamed with tiles and chrome. On the other side, the new kitchen shone sleek with stainless steel and commercial-grade appliances.

Carlos Fowler called her later that afternoon to confirm he and his crew had filled in the crack and leveled the floor. Wisps of gray vapor wafted out no more. Once level and dry, the floor was laid. One week later, Lovely High School students held their winter formal there.

The miasma emerged. It tried to form without knowing it was trying. No eyes, no ears—nothing had time to form before the cold cement poured down. It fought the darkness. It did not know it fought; it fought nonetheless.

CHAPTER TWO

The Monday after the winter formal, Mayor Asher received a call. “The contractor told me,” Councilman Win Speed said, “what you and he did.”

“And that would be?”

“A crack opened up on my patio. Foul smell. I called Carlos to fix it.” The councilman and his wife owned a home on the bluffs above the pavilion. “I wouldn’t let him touch it once he told me it might be the miasma. What on earth were you thinking, pouring a bunch of cement down there and not saying anything?”

Carol had just arrived home from the hardware store with a new flapper for her upstairs toilet. She held the flapper, still in its packaging, while she listened to his rant.

“I expected better of you, Carol.” The councilman used his most patronizing tone. “This is the miasma. You needed to say something. You needed to bring it to the attention of the council and the town. You had no right to try to handle this on your own.”

“We have zero evidence it’s the miasma.”

“Evidence. You want evidence. It smells, Carol. It’s right outside my kitchen, and I think it’s looking at me.”

“I doubt that.”

“I want you to get Herman Lee over here immediately. He was involved the last time.”

“If this is the miasma, Herman isn’t going to want to be anywhere near it.”

“He’s a city councilman. It’s his duty to help if he can. He helped kill it last time.”

“And nearly burned down the whole town.”

“Fine. So we get the fire department out there too, ready to go, when old Herman drops the bomb this time.”

“It was fireworks. They used fireworks.”

“Wrong. It was a Molotov cocktail.”

“Either way. Herman’s not going to be dropping any explosives anywhere.” Time to change the subject. “So, did Carlos fill in the crack for you?”

“Hell, no! I need Herman to confirm what it is.”

“Whatever it is, you want to fill in the crack. You don’t want that in your back yard. And you definitely don’t want it in your house.”

“You just want to sweep this all under the rug, don’t you? You’d love to wriggle out of your responsibility here.”

“I’m not trying to wriggle out of anything; I’m only trying to solve problems, and not see an abyss in every crack of concrete.”

“I want to call a special emergency council meeting for tomorrow night,” he said.

“We’re already having our regular meeting.”

“Then this is our agenda. Nothing else. Only this.”

She had barely recovered from the councilman’s call when she received a text from Carlos.

Sorry I spilled the beans to Captain Asshole, followed by a string of red-faced emojis.

Don’t worry about it, she texted back. And then she worried.

She set about finishing what she had started with the toilet flapper. She installed the flapper, flushed to make sure it worked, and dropped the old one in the wastebasket. She washed and dried her hands and went out to the kitchen to finish some cold coffee from earlier. She caught one of the paper’s headlines, the one about the governor’s recall election, and read a bit of the article before she drained her coffee and called Herman.

#

“What I experienced was not the original. Stories about the miasma go way, way back.”

Herman Lee lifted his suit jacket from the back of his kitchen chair and put it on. A possible reunion with the miasma was, apparently, an occasion to dress up. But that was Herman. He straightened his tie and motioned Carol to lead the way.

The drive to Win Speed’s house was short, but silent and fraught. The older man was usually full of smiles and cheer. A joy to work with on the council. But the man beside her looked every bit of his ninety years, frail enough to blow away in the wind.

They parked in front of the house. It was in a beautiful neighborhood on the upper bluffs, with a view of the ocean. Win and family were on the slightly less desirable side of the street, where the fronts of the houses had the view rather than a panorama in back. Herman climbed the steps with jaw set.

Win opened the door and looked at them like they were missionaries about to drop pamphlets on his spotless porch. Stress lines furrowed his short forehead. He didn't bother to greet them with a *good afternoon* or any such niceties, but scowled and gestured them in.

Herman stopped just past the threshold. He grabbed Carol's arm. He looked at her with a kind of pleading horror. Carol smelled it too. He half-shook his head. "It still makes me sick to my stomach, after all these years."

"We don't have to go any farther, if it's too much."

Win's heavy brows scrunched upwards, approaching each other across the bridge of the nose. "Yes, we do have to go farther. That's why you're here."

Herman pressed his lips together, took a heavy breath, then said, "Just let me brace myself."

"Take all the time you need," Carol said.

Win gave her a look of pure murder. Carol gave him one right back, and took Herman's elbow. Herman accepted her support and shoved his glasses up on his nose. He kept one hand on the back of a sofa as they made their way through the living room. As they entered the family room they saw it, seeping out of a crack at the base of the sliding door.

Carol dropped Herman's elbow. "It's in the house!"

Win threw his hands up. "I told you. As usual, you failed to take the situation seriously. And you show up here with no emergency services. No police, no fire, no ambulance. What were you thinking?"

Herman straightened his shoulders and held his head high. From behind, Carol could see how he stooped forward, just a little. He dragged his fingers through his precisely parted, coarse white hair. He moved forward more boldly, until he was within two yards of it. He reached out, almost as if to touch it, then pulled back, as a frond of fog came out toward him.

The mist coalesced into the rough ovoid shape Carol had seen at the pavilion. And before them both, the face of a young man appeared. It had a mouth, and it appeared to be trying to speak.

Herman grabbed Carol's wrist. "Oh God, oh God." With surprising strength, he pulled her into the living room.

Win followed, arms held wide. "Now what are you doing?"

Herman shook his head. “We have to get rid of this. I don’t care how. Even if we burn half the town down again.”

#

He didn’t know what he was, or how he came to be here, but now, he knew he was. At least that. He recognized things. Windows. A house. Although this didn’t look like any house he would have known. This house had different things in it, bright and shiny and all lighted up, for which he had no context.

He didn’t know there was a context to be had.

He didn’t know these people who lived in the strange house, and their fraught energy both attracted and repelled him.

He swirled.

More people came in. He recognized one of them.

CHAPTER THREE

Carol Asher spent several hours Tuesday afternoon at City Hall, preparing for the council meeting. She was not alone. Win Speed paced the halls, talked loudly on the phone, and interrupted Carol every five minutes.

“Where the hell is Herman?” he wanted to know, hanging like a specter in her door. “I have some questions for him.”

“I’m sure he’ll be here soon. It’s only four o’clock.” She laid a hand on the historical materials Herman had brought her earlier. “You’ve read these, right?”

He frowned at the photocopied material. “I don’t have time to read all that crap. Some of us have to work for a living, you know.”

“You could read it now. Since you’re here and all that.”

Win was saved from the need to reply by the arrival of Councilwoman Bernice Washone and her husband. Stanton’s wheelchair whirled past Win and Carol, into Bernice’s office.

“Geez,” he muttered to Carol, “why does she have to drag him everywhere she goes?”

“You bring Liv and the kids here sometimes.”

“Yeah, but...” He gave a vague gesture, then trained a narrow-eyed glare on the mayor. “Don’t go sanctimonious on me. Don’t you dare.”

He turned away from Carol and went to Bernice’s office. He said they were having a quick, *private* meeting in the mayor’s office. Could she come, please. Bernice shrugged and rolled her eyes, but followed Win and Carol into Carol’s office.

Win strode in, stopped abruptly, then spun and faced them both. “We have to present a coherent front to the community.”

Carol and Bernice shared a look. “What on earth are you on about now, Win?” Carol stepped

around him, and behind her own desk.

“I’m talking about our not sounding like the usual gang of idiots,” he said.

“And coordinating with you will prevent that,” Bernice said. “Right.”

“Look.” He leaned across Carol’s desk. “We can’t be naive about this. We come out talking about a bad-smelling vapor. The old man freaks out right in the middle of the meeting, and we’ll be all over social media tomorrow.”

“Don’t talk about Herman like that,” Carol said, “and remove your body from my work space.”

Win pointed his finger at Carol and Bernice in turn. “This is all going to come back to haunt us, you know.”

Herman Lee arrived shortly before five-thirty and came to Carol’s office. He lowered himself into the chair opposite her. “I would like to recuse myself from any voting that might happen tonight.”

She said, “We’re all enmeshed in this, you know.”

“Not like I am.”

“We’re already down a council member. And we need your input. You’re the only one with direct knowledge of the miasma.”

He nodded. “I know. That’s the problem.”

She reached a hand across to him. “Look. I intend to approach this thing in a rational, unemotional way. We’ll plot a course of action. Maybe all we need to do is repair sidewalks and patio slabs around town. Maybe we need some help from the county, or the state. But, one way or the other, it won’t go down like it did before. That said, we’re all in this together, and we all have personal interests at heart. And, I repeat: we need your help.”

Herman sighed heavily, Win returned from wherever he went, and a few minutes before six, the mayor, councilmen and councilwoman walked down together, and took their places in council chambers.

Lovely’s town council meetings were every bit as boring and tedious as council meetings anywhere in the world, and were generally poorly attended. Special emergency meetings drew more folks, and news of the miasma’s return had spread. Tonight, the chamber was three-fourths filled and people were still coming in. Many of the faces were familiar, and expected. Many others had never attended a council meeting before, as far as Carol knew.

The mayor checked her mike and rapped her gavel. After the Pledge of Allegiance and Invocation, Carol announced the postponing of regular business, including several presentations

awarded to citizens and businesses. “We hope the message of these postponements reached everyone in a timely manner. We promise to get to you next time.”

The city manager’s report was submitted in absentia. Jonna News was out of town, in Sandune, attending to family business.

Win Speed snorted. “She misses more meetings than she makes.”

“Let’s move on,” Carol said.

“That’s like, five miles away. She can’t just pop over?”

Carol turned slowly toward Councilman Speed. “That’s a subject for later. Let’s return to matters at hand.”

Approval of minutes from the previous meeting passed without discussion.

“We’re ready now to move on to our single agenda item, the reappearance of the miasma,” Carol said.

Before she could finish the sentence, Councilman Speed went down to the podium off to the side, from where members of the community customarily spoke.

The mayor frowned. “Councilman, what are you doing?”

He glared at her. “I wish to make a citizen’s statement before the council discussion.”

The mayor asked the two other council members if they objected. Neither did.

Councilman Speed clutched the podium and leaned in. He began by thanking everyone for coming, extolling the civic excellence of Lovely and all its citizens, and then went on about how humbled he was by the honor of holding public office, how he thought integrity was a really good thing, how he wished everyone would have as much integrity as he did, and how painful it was to realize they didn’t always.

When he was done with that, he stopped, surveyed the citizenry, some of whom were still spilling through the doors, then swung to look at Mayor Asher. “Ms. Mayor,” he said, “Please explain why you concealed news of the miasma’s return for a full three weeks.”

Carol stood. Win Speed frowned. She made her way down to the public podium, passing by the vacant seat on the way. She stood next to Win Speed, whom she towered over, and leaned down to the mike. “Here is what happened.” She related the filling of the crack during renovations at the pavilion, and then said, “I did not know it was the miasma.”

“You only admitted to it when I caught you in the cover-up. If it hadn’t reappeared at my house, you never would have said a thing, am I right?”

“If it hadn’t reappeared, there wouldn’t be a problem. So, right. I wouldn’t have said anything.

Why should I?”

“Were you more concerned with the completion of your pet project than you were with the safety of your fellow citizens? Because it would seem so.”

“The pavilion renovations were approved by the full council—as you well know. Of course I want it completed! We have events scheduled through the end of the year.”

He pointed at her. “I’m holding you responsible for the damage to my house.”

“If there are damages, I suggest you call your insurance company.”

With the mayor and councilman sniping at one another, questions and chatter erupted all over the chambers. Councilwoman Bernice Washone reached across and pounded the mayor’s gavel in a futile effort to restore order.

“What on earth made you think,” Councilman Speed bellowed, “you were capable of handling this by yourself?”

“It wasn’t her fault!” The voice came from the chamber, and belonged to Carlos Fowler. He rushed from the back of the chamber to the front.

“We are not taking public commentary at this time,” Councilman Speed barked.

A deafening sound greater than any gavel, the sound of the metal collar around a pencil eraser rapping against a microphone, startled the assembly to silence.

Councilman Lee adjusted his trifocals and brought his pale lips close to the microphone. He laid down the pencil. “Carlos Fowler was present when the miasma first reemerged.” He paused, and raised one finger. “He and his crew poured the concrete that filled the crack at the pavilion. I believe the young man should be allowed to speak.”

“But it’s my back yard the damned thing is coming up in!” Win protested.

“Yes,” Councilman Lee replied, “and we’re trying to see what we can do about that.”

Speed scowled, but nodded. Carol Asher returned to her seat.

Carlos Fowler leaned across Win Speed to the podium microphone. “Neither the mayor nor I thought it was a big deal, and I still don’t think it is. I can seal it up at Councilman Speed’s house, or anywhere else it comes up.”

More commotion in chambers. More gavel pounding, this time by the mayor. A hand went up in the third row, waving wildly. Refreshing, that someone would wait to be called on. Except, it was Nancy.

Former City Manager Nancy Lightwood asked, “What about its sentence?”

“Its *what*?” Win Speed’s scowl deepened.

“Its sentience. Its *brain*,” Nancy said.

“Incorrect. There is no brain,” Herman Lee said.

“Is it true people have seen a face in it?” Nancy asked. “If it has a face, it’s a person.”

“Tom Cooper,” Herman Lee said. “Yes. I saw his face yesterday, at Councilman Speed’s.”

Carol had hoped not to get into this end of things but now it was done, and council chambers had once again burst into chatter and shouts. The gavel was getting a workout. “If you look at the historical record, you’ll find other occasions of the miasma’s appearance, going back to the nineteenth century. People reported seeing faces then, too,” she said.

“Where is this information?” Nancy asked. “Is this online?”

“I kept some clippings,” Herman Lee said. “I brought them to the mayor and the council this morning.”

Carol said, “And the same material is available at the Historical Society. You can find everything there.”

“You need to put all the information online,” Nancy said. “You really need to do that, Carol.”

Win Speed looked like he would explode. He held his arms out, palms down, like a preacher attempting to seat a congregation. “No, no, no, people, we do not have time to dilly-dally with unnecessary research on ghosts.”

“You’re the one who thought it was looking at you,” Carol reminded him.

Herman shook his head. “I don’t know if you’d call them ghosts. Tommy’s not in there, and whatever the nature of the thing, I don’t think it has a brain, not the way we would see it.”

Nancy Lightwood rose from her seat, and came up along the wall, stage right. “He may not have a brain like us, but he shows intent. The miasma’s sentience is not for us to say. He has intent; therefore, he has a right to live, just as the rest of us do.”

“I’m really tired of these unsanctioned comments,” Councilman Speed said. “This is no way to run a meeting.”

“I think we’re past trying to defer comments,” Carol said.

But Councilwoman Washone had focused on Nancy Lightwood. “Do ants have a right to live? Mosquitoes? Rattlesnakes?”

Win Speed tossed a pen down. “Obviously not. But we’re wasting time, talking about this.”

“Every creature is a part of the whole!” Nancy declared.

Herman Lee said, “If anything, the miasma is smart the way ants or bees are smart. It has a sense about it.”

“See? It’s a pest, not a person.” Win pointed a pencil at Nancy.

“Only an idiot would think bees are pests,” Nancy said.

“We tried to give it what it needed,” Herman said. “We set about opening up new venues for it, out of the center of town.”

“I thought there was a fire,” Bernice said.

Pain crossed Herman Lee’s face, and his voice came out a croak. “That was before the fire.”

“You’re saying we shove it off to some other place?” Win Speed asked. “This could work?”

“It could work,” Herman said. “It’s all outlined in the material I gave you earlier.”

Nancy Lightwood crossed her arms. “You need to contact Animal Care and Control before you do anything.”

Win Speed stared at her as if she were an entire colony of ants. Or bees. “Consider yourself contacted then. But you have no standing.”

“I’ll inform my superiors.”

“You do that.”

“One agency that should be contacted,” Bernice Washone said, “is the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment. We need to evaluate the danger. We need to separate fact from fallacy.”

“One more thing the city manager hasn’t done, I suppose,” Win said.

“Look, we only confirmed it was the miasma yesterday!” Carol’s voice had risen. She lowered it. “I’ll see the appropriate authorities are contacted first thing tomorrow. Thank you, Nancy.” The mayor looked at Herman Lee. “We’ve had a few hours, at least, to review the material you found for us.”

“We haven’t seen it!” Nancy shouted.

The mayor ignored her. “We should now discuss how to use what we learned last time to manage the miasma this time.”

He took off his glasses. “I was just a kid, so I wasn’t among those doing the learning, but it was—I understand—a matter of luring it to a more acceptable place. Out of the center of town.”

“If we come up with a list of acceptable venues, could you help us?” Carol asked.

“I’ll certainly try.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. We can’t go forward without specifics.” Win said.

Carol turned to him. “Okay, specifically, we come over to your house, and try to lure it away.”

“If it worked before,” Carlos Fowler said, “it’ll probably work this time.”

“We don’t need your approval, Mr. Fowler,” Win Speed said.

“Once it’s left,” Carlos went on, “I’ll pour some of my good, self-leveling cement into Councilman Speed’s crack and his problem will be solved.”

“This had better work,” Win Speed said.

Councilman Lee leaned into his mike. “I suggest we come up with a list of appropriate locations for the miasma to be. That will give us some options, as well as the, um, entity itself.”

Councilman Speed said, “I think Mayor Asher should be the one to attempt contact, to lure the thing away.”

“No!” Herman Lee shouted. “This is not without risk. I should do it. I’m the one who knows him.”

“And Mayor Asher lacks the emotional IQ to communicate with this entity,” Nancy Lightwood called out. “She’s never had kids...she doesn’t even own a pet. She has no idea about how to earn trust.”

Bernice Washone, taking a page from Councilman Lee, tapped her mike. “Nancy, that’s enough.”

“Don’t tell me I can’t speak!”

“You’re getting personal. It isn’t appropriate.”

Carol said, “I will attempt to contact the entity. And I’d like Councilman Lee to come along to coach me.” She turned to him. “Would you?”

Nancy sniffed, Win Speed grinned. Bernice Washone looked resigned.

“I move Mayor Carol Asher attempt contact with the miasma at the earliest possible opportunity,” Councilman Speed said. “Like tomorrow.”

Carol folded her hands and leaned forward. “I second.”

The vote was three to one, with Herman Lee casting the negative vote. “But I’ll be there. And I’ll help.”

Carol moved, and Herman seconded, to extend the council session for as long as it took to come up with a short list of appropriate venues. The motion passed unanimously. Under pressure from several in the chamber, including the former city manager, the citizens were invited to remain as well. Many left, but many stayed. Nancy hurried to the front row, and sat, leaning forward, staring intently and objecting to nearly every location suggestion.

Nonetheless, they completed their list in a little over an hour.

Tommy liked the councilman's house, but he wished the people were nicer to each other. The lady of the house didn't exactly yell, but everything she said was at the top of her voice.

"Listen to me, girls! You have precisely one-half hour to gather your necessary belongings. Then we're out of here, with no telling when we'll be back!"

The girls complained, but got busy.

The lady cursed colorfully and stomped upstairs after her daughters.

Doors slammed, followed by angry words, full of frustration.

Tommy was mad and sad. He didn't understand why they were going away. He stretched toward the foot of the stairs, but then the councilman came home. Tommy retreated. He wanted them to like him. It was all he ever wanted, to be part of a normal family.

The man came in and yelled upstairs. Then he climbed the stairs, yelling some more. He reminded Tommy of his dad, except this man wasn't drunk, and he didn't even sound angry, really. He just talked loud all the time, like the lady.

The lady came downstairs with a suitcase, followed by the man. She turned upstairs and yelled a little more. The man hugged the lady and gave her a wet kiss. A minute later, the girls came down, each with her own suitcase.

The younger one was kind of cute. The suitcases had wheels on them, and the younger girl spun it around and around, until the lady, now red-faced, nearly crying, shouted at her to stop.

The man hugged and kissed the girls. The lady was agitated during all of this.

Finally, she said, "Let's go." She led them through a door at the far end of the family room. A deadbolt clunked shut behind them.

The man stared at the closed door for a long time. Then he came into the family room and plopped down on the big sofa. Tears ran down his face.

Yeah. It was sad to be alone.

CHAPTER FOUR

An assortment of citizenry gathered in the street outside Win Speed's house, kept at a safe distance by local police. The fire department had an engine there, too.

Nancy Lighthouse charged up the steps and squeezed in front of Carol, Herman, and Gregg Sung, from the state's Environmental Health Hazard Assessment Office. "I need to go in there with you."

"No. Herman, I, and Mr. Sung here will go in. You will remain outside."

"But he's from OEHHA. He's going to treat it like it's nothing but a bunch of chemicals. And he's wearing flip-flops. How serious can he be?"

"Ma'am," Gregg Sung said, "That's all any of us are. Chemicals."

While Nancy stared at Gregg Sung like he had just strangled a puppy, Carlos Fowler and a small crew headed down the side of the house into the back yard, to fill in the crack once the miasma was successfully diverted.

"Go stand behind the police line, Nancy. I don't want to have to have you arrested."

Nancy frowned. "You'll regret this, Carol."

Carol regretted a few things in her life; she doubted this would be one of them. She watched Nancy descend the steps with relief.

The councilman answered the door quickly. He pulled the mayor and Councilman Lee inside with neither pause nor greeting. He frowned at the young man with them. "Who the hell are you?"

The young man stuck out his hand. "Gregg Sung. I'm an associate toxicologist with the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment."

Carol gestured to Gregg's backpack. "He's going to take a few samples before we begin."

Win said to Carol, "I don't want extra people tromping through my house."

“I can go around back,” Sung offered. “It’s in the back yard, right?”

Carol grabbed Gregg’s arm. “No. He comes in with us.”

Win rolled his eyes, and Gregg Sung followed Carol and Herman inside. Win stayed in Carol’s face. “My family had to leave, you know.”

“Probably wise. Are you staying at the Strand?”

“They are, yeah.”

“Nice.”

“It’s not a vacation, you know. And I’m sending Jonna the receipts.”

The now-familiar smell hit as they stepped into the family room and kitchen area. Part dirty socks, part ocean, part dead seaweed, part beach restroom, it clung to the hairs of the nostrils like a wet beach towel. Yesterday, it had been mostly in the yard; now, it was mostly in the house. Carol took a few cautious steps forward.

“Look at this.” Win skirted the miasma’s misty tendrils and took up a spot behind the kitchen island. “The crack runs right along the slider, and the seal on the door isn’t as good as it should be.”

“I’ll get set up.” Gregg moved over to the sliding doors. He set down the large case he had, knelt down, and opened it. He extracted gloves and a mask and donned them. “You don’t have these?” he asked.

“That would kind of miss the point, for me,” Carol said.

Gregg pulled instruments from his case and laid them out on the floor.

Carol turned to Herman. “Let’s get to work.”

Herman looked at Win. “There’s no reason for you to be here. It should just be the mayor, me, and the toxicology fella.”

Win shook his head. “No way. This is my house. I’m not going anywhere. Wait. What the hell is that?”

Gregg Sung was extending a telescoping pole and attaching something that looked a bit like an analog UHF antenna to the top. He lifted it up triumphantly. “I’d like to put this next to the kitchen island.”

“Do it, then.” Win leaned against the counter. “Get busy, and get this thing out of here.” He jabbed at the mist for emphasis, accidentally touching a tendril. He pulled his hand back from the awful moistness. He wiped it madly on a dishtowel. “That damned thing’s grown, even since you got here.”

It was true. As Gregg placed the instrument, Carol got into place and attempted to prepare

herself.

“Now what are you doing?” Win asked.

Gregg was attaching a green rectangle to the wall. “This will measure toxic compounds after we’re done here. Ozone, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, particulates, and so forth. It will transmit automatically to our regional office.”

Win looked like someone had spat in his breakfast cereal. “Liv’s not going to like that.”

“She can redecorate later.” Carol was more concerned about Herman. “Are you all right?”

For answer, he pointed at the vapor. “Can you see it?”

She could, just. The face. A young boy, halfway through puberty. A dangerous time to be alive, regardless of era. Fireworks, skateboards, drugs, alcohol...the ways a kid could die were infinite. This one had that expression teachers and parents and law enforcement had been looking at forever. His eyes were wide with fear, but his mouth was set in defiance. He wanted to be saved from himself; he wanted to be left alone to do as he pleased. The tension swirled like a storm.

Carol opened her tablet and the document containing pictures of the six locations the council had agreed upon. She had memorized them late last night; now she went over them once more, absorbing details and affixing them on her mind’s map of the town and its outskirts.

“Now,” Herman said, “go on and step right into it. That’s right, just like that.”

“Do I call him by name?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t. Remember, it’s not him, and you never knew him anyway.”

The miasma’s tendrils embraced and adhered to Carol’s skin like a spider web. Fingers of moisture played at her lips, tickled the corners of her eyes, and probed her ears. When one touched the corner of a nostril, she resisted the urge to sneeze and breathed in for the first time.

“Now, visualize the first location,” Herman’s voice was muffled by the mist.

That would be at the base of the cliffs just south of town. There was a nice cave there, and the prevailing breezes from the northwest would keep the miasma well out of town. The miasma could run up and down the beach, blend in with the coastal fog that rolled in periodically.

The miasma gripped her head like a vise. She let out a croak.

“Stay calm, Carol. Keep breathing. Move on to the second location.”

That one was at a natural fault line, east of town. It was so dull as to be difficult to visualize—only a flat plateau, but a flatness reminiscent of the concrete slab of the pavilion. A fissure snaked down the northern quadrant.

The miasma gripped her head and her chest. Without waiting for a prompt from Herman, she

pulled the abandoned factory to mind, a property the town had taken over about fifteen years ago. It was the shell of a building about two hundred fifty thousand square feet in size. Cracks of the appropriate size marred the floor in several areas. She showed it on her tablet, and she held it in her mind.

The miasma roiled, churning like a wash cycle, and the primitive shape of a boy's face made distorted expressions. It pulled its tendrils, all but one, from the mayor. Her chest was free and she gasped in welcome air, along with more vapor. The single tendril still wrapped around her head drew out details of the factory as it appeared in her mind's eye. It sucked until she thought her eyes might collapse into her head.

The tendril then snapped back into the mass of the miasma, and the roiling ceased. Carol held on to the kitchen island for support until the miasma started to shrink. She stepped back into the family room area. Herman put his arm around her. She didn't want to lean on the old man, and reached out for other help. Gregg Sung transferred his phone to his left hand (he was taking video) and grabbed her elbow.

She steadied herself. "I'm fine. Thanks."

They turned their attention back to the miasma. It shrank, slowly at first, but then more quickly. It flowed through the crack like water down a suddenly unclogged drain. Carol went immediately to the slider and gave Carlos the sign to start filling. Herman sat down heavily on Win's sectional sofa. Gregg Sung stood there, still holding up his phone at a now-empty kitchen. Win rubbed his chin and furrowed his brow.

Carol told Win they were done. "Your family can come back now."

As she and Herman reached the front door, she heard Gregg Sung trying to tell Win something about the equipment he was leaving there, and Win telling him he didn't need to be told something as simple as not screwing around with equipment.

But when she came out the front door, the councilman was right behind her. The crowd was still there, on the sidewalk. It was a good thing it wasn't tourist season or there would be more fuss. As it was, the mayor recognized just about everyone there by face, if not by name.

"Everything went smoothly here," she called out to the crowd. "We have officers over at the old factory, and they will text me if they see the miasma come up there. So it's a waiting game right now. We have a crew in back, filling the crack, as we speak."

Someone shouted, asking if the mayor was taking questions. Before she could answer, Win Speed edged around her.

“We can take a few questions, if you like,” he said.

The first came from an older woman. “Did you talk to him, Herman?” She was one of the few left in town who had known Tommy Cooper as well.

Herman tightened his jaw. “I did not talk to him,” he told her, “and it’s not Tommy.”

“Why does it need a crack to come up? Why doesn’t it just come up from the ground?” This was from Merritt Hammer, the fire chief.

It was a good question, another one for Herman. “A narrow fissure provides focus for it. Without a crack, it’s just diffuse vapor. I remember that from before.”

Gregg Sung introduced himself to the crowd. “The historical record suggests the ideal crack width to be three quarters to a full inch. Much wider, and it comes out too diffuse to become much of anything. Narrower, and it can’t come out quickly enough to become something.”

Win announced that this would be the final question. “My family needs some quiet now.” He asked everyone to please leave. “There’s nothing more to see here.”

True enough. The crowd dispersed.

Gregg Sung came up behind Carol and Herman as they walked to their cars. “I’d like to talk to you more,” he said to Herman, “There are a lot of holes in the records.”

Carol stepped in protectively. “Look...”

“I’m sorry,” Gregg said. “I know this is rough. It’s just that some of our information seems incomplete, if not downright wrong in places. I’d appreciate the opportunity to sit down with you and go over it. When you feel up to it.” He fumbled in a pocket. “I have a card here...”

Herman sighed. “No, no. It’s okay. I’m fine. How about right now?”

They agreed they would go over to Righteous Grind as soon as they received word on the miasma.

They didn’t have long to wait. Four minutes later, the mayor received a text from Police Chief Mesadieu over at the old factory. She held up her phone to those hanging on. “The miasma has entered the factory.”

#

Tommy’s new home hummed.

The contractor and his crew were busy stringing thick wire and unpacking boxes that were filled with strange equipment. They were talking about it as if they were making a movie. But it

didn't look like movie equipment. Tommy hung suspended along a line roughly down the center axis of the empty factory, along the main crack. He rose up toward one of the pieces of equipment, to get a better look, and saw a lens. So it was a camera. But it was so small.

Two women came in, the big one, and her friend, the colored lady. Carol and Bernice. They talked to the contractor about this place. It used to be a factory, then it was a mall with small artisan shops, then it was a skate park. It hadn't existed at all when Tommy was alive.

The picture Tommy was shown had been that skate park thing. Ramps and jumps and guys on surfboard skates. Nothing here now but cracks. They were sort of fun. Different sizes and places. Tommy played, going from one, to the next, to the next, and to the next. He played and listened. But he wished the guys in the picture were still here.

"We'll have 24-hour surveillance?" Carol asked.

"Absolutely," the contractor said.

Tommy wondered if constant surveillance meant people would be here all the time, maybe someone he could be buddies with. It could be like being in the movies.

Carlos grinned. "I see neither Win nor Nancy showed up. I guess she's still pissed off."

"Being pissed off is Nancy's favorite hobby," Bernice said.

The contractor pointed to one of the boxes, installed where a green steel support pillar met a crossbeam. "You'll have six cams," he said. "I'll show you how you can download an app to control these remotely. You won't have to come down here to see what's going on. You'll be able to zoom in and out, turn cams off and on, whatever you like, from your phone." He took out one of those small communication phones everyone had here, and showed them something.

Tommy billowed out of his crack and rolled to a spot ten feet from them. The two women squealed and ran over to stand together against the cinder block wall. The contractor waved his crew back, out of the miasma's reach.

Tommy condensed to a ball, and then opened a bubble of air in the middle, to create a mouth. He needed to speak, but only gurgled at first. Then, from deep within the murk, he found a voice in the vibration of droplets. It was like the voice he had, so long ago. "Where's Hermie?" he asked.

The effect on everyone was immediate. The contractor's workers fled. Carol went pale, flattened herself against the wall, and panted—her big chest rising and falling like an ocean wave. Bernice clutched her chest.

Carol came a few steps closer. "I'm sorry," she said. "Herman is an old man. He's tired, and this has all been quite a bit for him to handle."

“Why is he an old man? He can’t be. Our birthdays are the same month.”

“You’ve been gone a long time, Tommy.”

“How do you know my name?”

“Herman told me.”

“Well, tell him we need to talk.”

“I’ll give him the message.”

“He has to come. You have to make him.”

Bernice came to stand beside Carol. She said, “I saw you playing a few minutes ago. That’s good. We brought you here because we thought you would like it. We want you to be happy.”

Happy. Yeah, Tommy wanted to be happy. But then, instead of talking more, the two women turned and left, without so much as a goodbye. Tommy felt his face break up and fall, like a jigsaw puzzle being swept off a table.

“Hey,” one of the contractor’s crew said, “it’s raining in here.”