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5,500 words

Cannibal

by Danny Scalise

"Mom, I'm finishing up my shift. Maddy will have to wait. I cannot drop everything and run off to Lexington every time you hear from her." Cora's mother calls with this request often. Her younger sister Madison gets a hold of a new phone and calls her mother. Mother calls Cora who tries to go bail her out. Pikeville is two and a half hours east of Lexington.

As she finishes her shift as an ER nurse, Cora is still in her hospital green scrubs. Unlike other nurses, she wears no makeup, no jewelry and pulls her hair back in a ponytail. She doesn't care for the younger physicians there and has no desire to find a husband at work. This doesn't stop the younger coworkers from pursuing her romantically. She just isn't interested.

At 5'2" tall she isn't large, but makes up for her small stature with an aggressive leadership style that does her well in the emergency department. Her scrubs are a little too big

and belie the body she keeps physically fit for a woman of 39. She runs 25 miles a week and is in the hospital gym three times a week.

#

Her sister Madison, age 36 is different. Maddy, as she's known to the family was just as beautiful as her older sister when they were teenagers, but could never live up. Maddy didn't do as well in school and dropped out of nursing school, something she only started because her big sister did it.

Depression started for Maddy at a young age, somewhere around 14. First it was alcohol. She was 16 when a local police officer caught her drunk behind the wheel. Promiscuity followed, including at least one abortion Cora drove her to get so their mother wouldn't find out. The Baptist Church in eastern Kentucky wouldn't approve of that.

By 18, Maddy had moved onto cannabis and cocaine. In her twenties, she admitted to her sister she had been using pills. When Cora asked, she just said "you know, pills." Cora knew Maddy had moved on to methamphetamine and heroin before catching her with fentanyl. She introduced her younger sister to the local harm reduction group run by the health department. They gave her clean syringes and test strips to see if fentanyl was in other drugs she was taking.

#

Tonight's call from their mother seemed more urgent. Cora is tired from a long shift that is challenging her own mental health. Yet, she knows the long trek west to Lexington is in her future. At home, she turns on the television and fixes a quick bite to eat. Nothing is good on the news this late, but she still watches while devouring a spinach and strawberry salad with grilled

chicken. She takes one look at the Chardonnay bottle in the refrigerator and remembers she has to go tonight.

Slowly, she arranges her dishes in the dishwasher and gets to the bathroom of her small home. As she undresses, she wonders if this is another mission to save Maddy that ends up in Maddy back from where she was saved. The hot shower washes the stink of the days shift off of her, but her gray is still showing. Never one to consider herself vain, she thought briefly of dying her hair to get rid of it, then moved on.

Before getting dressed, Cora packs a bag with two outfits, two toothbrushes, and some toiletries. Her optimism usually fails her, but she always hopes Maddy will take her up, they will get a hotel room and she can put her little sister in some clean clothes and clean her up. It never happens.

Now in blue jeans and a flannel shirt, Cora puts a baseball cap on with her pony tail outside the back. Her appearance needs to be presentable enough, but this wasn't a glamour mission. She puts the duffel bag in the trunk of her four year old Toyota Camry, cracks open an energy drink and pulls out of her driveway headed west.

#

Arriving at a police station after 2am usually means someone you care about is in jail. Cora is there and this isn't the first time she's seen this particular building. In looking for her sister, she has been there three times. Abruptly, an officer behind a desk inquires to her need to be there. "Who you lookin for sweetie?"

"Madison Meadows, my sister." She is very businesslike as she does not appreciate being called sweetie by a police officer, or anyone for that matter.

"No here tonight. You get something mixed up?"

"She called our mother saying she was in trouble. I assumed that meant she was in jail."

"Jail isn't here sweetie, but I can see if your sister is in there now."

"Thanks" she says while thinking she will have more to say if he says sweetie again.

The officer asks her a litany of questions about her sister's age, visible tattoos, and hair color. He finds record that she had indeed been a visitor to the local jail, but was not incarcerated at this time. Perplexed, she starts to worry. If her sister isn't in jail and is in trouble, this could be worse than she had expected.

"Where could I find someone who's homeless like Maddy?"

"Depends."

"On?"

"You're not gonna want to hear this, but best case is she is staying at one of the shelters just outside of downtown. More than likely, she's over on the East End, near Winchester and Midland. Addicts over there usually looking to do something for their next score. Some of em don't stay very long." He realizes as soon as he says it, she is not happy with his characterization of Madison Meadows.

"OK." Cora isn't happy with the officer and his disparaging of her sister, but she takes his advice and drives across town. Mostly storage facilities and industrial, but some residential. This isn't the wealthiest area of Lexington. In a parking lot where the road bends, she sees a few women who look past their prime of life.

#

A woman getting out of a four year old Toyota is not a common site in this parking lot this late. The girls there look at her with a genuine curiosity. "Maddy." She yells in the general direction, hoping that her sister is there and she can end this night.

"No Maddy here, but for $50 I'll be whoever you want me to be." The woman's voice raspy from years of smoking cigarettes and who knows what else. The rest of the women there are laughing.

"Have you seen her? Her name is Madison Meadows but she goes by Maddy." Cora is almost begging for someone to have seen her sister. She takes her phone with the photo of Maddy and walks it to each of the girls there. The photo is a few years ago before Maddy took a turn for the worse. Even if they'd known her, they wouldn't recognize that version of her.

"If she isn't here, where can I find her?" Cora directs her question at the raspy voiced woman.

"The Supper Club. But you better go quick, those girls don't last anytime. I don't know what happens, but anyone who goes there, don't come back."

"Where is the supper club?"

"Hell if I know. Just some Jesus freaks that come here to save our souls and offer us sompin to eat."

"You don't know where I can find these people?"

"Not tonight, they done been by. None of us wanna join em, so they leave us alone. Come back tomorrow night. It'll be the weekend and this place'll be rockin'."

Dejected, Cora gets in her car. Looks like that bag will go to good use tonight. She drives to the outer edge of town and finds a Hampton Inn. She parks, grabs the duffel from the trunk

and walks in the front door. A young man, obviously a UK student is working the graveyard shift. He hasn't seen anyone this attractive come in during one of his shifts, so he quickly goes into customer service mode. "Checking in?"

"Do you have a room? I don't have a reservation. I didn't think I'd be staying the night here. I'm exhausted."

"Usually we're sold out, but you're in luck." He takes her ID and asks, "just one night?"

"Make it two. I need to work tomorrow night too." Realizing she just characterized looking for her sister as work.

"Miss Meadows, you're in room 108, just down the hall on your right. The pool is that way and the fitness center too."

She'll use those tomorrow. Now, she just needs a little rest.

#

Cora wakes up and looks at her phone sitting on the bedside table. She's slept through the free breakfast. Her sleep patterns are off from working in the ER the last few years. Being out this late after driving and looking for her sister was too much. She needed real sleep and got it.

She neatly folded the clothes from last night thinking she may need them later. Cora started the shower and decided to look at her phone. Nothing new. Just a message from her mother earlier this morning asking if she'd found Maddy. She'll have to call her later.

Showered, but not ready for the day, the in room coffee was better than she'd remembered. Perhaps she just needed it. She began to think of what she could do to look for her

sister today, before going back to the parking lot later. She decided to find food, then find someone who might know where Maddy could be.

#

The local harm reduction troop runs out of the first floor of the public health department. Cora had brought Maddy here once to introduce her to them. She works with the local group in Pikeville and knows this isn't a great answer to her problems, but harm reduction programs can keep her alive.

The security guard at the entrance seems dubious to her reasoning, but being the cute girl and flirting can sometimes get her where she wants to be. He calls back to the harm reduction office and asks someone to come up front. Cora sits in a small waiting area, looking outside the building. She sees homeless people walking up and down the street like zombies. Something isn't entirely right about the way they walk and carry themselves, but she snaps out of her thought when a man close to her age interrupts her, "Ma'am, can I help you?" She is familiar with the eastern Kentucky accent. It is unlike anything else in the English language.

"I'm looking for my sister. She's been here before. I think she's in trouble."

"We don't do things here."

"What do you mean?"

"Our program is all mobile now. This is just a storage for our stuff."

"Do you think you could help me find her?"

"I don't know, there's HIPAA and all. Not sure what I can tell you."

"My sister suffers from depression and she started self medicating with different drugs at a young age. She comes to this place to get clean syringes."

"Honey, she don't come here." His comment was like nails down a chalkboard, but Cora needed someone right now.

"I found some people last night who mentioned The Supper Club. Do you know where I could find them?"

"They are wonderful people, the best really. They help those girls stop hookin and doing drugs."

"Where can I find them?"

"Dunno, they just show up in their white vans and preach to them girls. It's always girls too. Just the whores, don't talk to homeless men. I guess that's their kink."

"Do they have an office?"

"Honey, I don't know where they is. But you stay around them whores and you'll see em."

Cora knows where she needs to be tonight. Looks like another night in Lexington.

#

It's very dark at 11pm at the parking lot. Cora parks 50 or so feet away to watch. She sees the same girls from last night, including the one with the raspy voice. They seem to be scratching themselves a great deal and moving a lot. A car slows before stopping. A man rolls the window down, one of the girls approaches. A brief conversation then she gets in and they drive off. This scenario happens a few times. Within 30 minutes, the first girl walks back to the parking lot.

She doesn't see her sister, but sees a white panel van pull up. In what looks to be an old English script is the words 'The Supper Club' with a plate of food and wavy lines representing

steam as to show the girls, there is hot food with this group. A couple gets out. The man is white, with brown hair, a beard and glasses. He is wearing jeans and a sweater over a button up shirt. The woman, also white with a close cut bob haircut a navy sweater and a denim skirt. They have papers in their hands and begin talking to the women. All of the women there wave the evangelistic couple away. Cora moves quickly.

Out of the car and in the parking lot in a flash, she speaks to the evangelists. "Excuse me."

"Well, she looks new."

"I'm not new. I'm looking for my sister."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend."

Cora holds up the phone with her sister's photo up again. "Have you seen her?"

The woman looks closely, then waives the man over. They both look at the phone. The woman speaks first. "She does look familiar."

"But I can't place her." He finishes her sentence.

"She's my sister and she's missing. I have reason to believe she is in trouble."

"All of these girls are in trouble. We just want to save them. Like you."

Cora is certain these two are nothing like her. Their idea of saving someone is quite different than what Cora does on a daily basis. Growing up in a Baptist home, she knows the false piety many evangelicals can put off. She isn't buying any of what these two are selling.

"I hope you find your sister." The woman is almost condescending as she gets back in the van. No souls ready to be saved tonight.

"Thanks." But Cora isn't finished with them. She quickly gets to her car and tries to follow them. As she weaves through the less than well designed streets of Lexington, they stop at parking lot after parking lot passing out tracts to the women they see. The ruin one woman's trick as her John sped away. Cora is taking note of everything she sees.

It's now after 1am and Cora follows the van to one final parking lot. The evangelicals get a sale. The girl gets in the van with them. Cora stays as close as she can without them seeing her, but she is afraid her skills are not what she thinks they are. The van pulls up to an old church not too far from downtown. There is a gate and after the van pulls in, the man gets out of the driver's side of the van and closes, then latches the gate. The van pulls away behind the church, out of Cora's view.

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Cora comes back in the daylight. She sees the gate is open and walks up the stairs to the main entrance of the church. She opens the large door. Surprised to get in so freely, she is quickly intercepted by a middle age man wearing khakis, a button up shirt, and a cardigan. His hair is very conservative and he speaks in a midwestern accent that doesn't give away anything about him. He obviously isn't from eastern Kentucky. "Excuse me ma'am. How may I assist you?"

"I am a nurse. I wanted to help out. I was told the Supper Club was here and that y'all help women who need helpin." Her Appalachian accent is coming out quicker than she'd like.

"God bless you. I wish I could say come in, but we are closed for a private retreat. I will tell the rector that you stopped by. If you'll give me your name and contact information, I will have him contact you."

Cora has never given strange men her real contact information and isn't about to start now. She scratches a name and a phone number down that she made up and immediately forgot. She can see over the man's shoulder that in what used to hold church services is now cleared out and has a very ornate gothic dining table with large chairs padded with dark leather. The table is set for a feast she imagined would be in a medieval story. He gestures his hand toward the door. She thanks him and begins to walk out. Looking up to her left and right, there are security cameras everywhere. Cora is on notice.

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It's dark now. Cora parked many blocks away for fear that her car was noticed or caught on camera. Her ball cap was helpful as a disguise. A light in one of the basement rooms comes on. She looked at her phone and realized it was almost 10pm. The cameras would be watching, so she had to be prepared to run. The wall on the far side from the gate was smaller and Cora could hop it. Just like hopping the fence growing up.

Cora walks surreptitiously to the room with the light and is confused by what she sees. This looks like what she saw in the funeral home when she had to identify her father's body some years ago. Her mother was too emotional and Cora being the oldest was always the strong sister. After a brief flashback to a terrible time, she looks closer. The stainless steel table, hoses, a drain in the floor, and blood all around it. Something or someone had been on that table and not lived to tell. She takes a few photos and runs. She quickly hops the wall and is sprinting to her car. Out of breath, she hits unlock and gets in.

The drive to the police station was brief, but felt longer. Cora's mind was racing. She had forgotten about her sister for a few moments and was thinking about what she saw. At the

police station station, the same officer was working late again. “You find your sister?” At least he didn’t call her sweetie.

Cora shows the officer the photos of the prep room and describes the church. The officer seems bored with her story. “Honey, you show me a picture of someone’s funeral home and describe a church that kills people. This is Kentucky. We don’t see shit like that here.”

“I want to file a report.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. Something.”

“That ain’t the way it works, sweetie.”

Now wishing she could put him on that table, Cora abruptly walks out. She heads back to her hotel and asks that young man, still smitten with her if he could let her stay another night or two. Not flirting this time, he looks less impressed. “Please, I need your help. No one will help me tonight.” Seeing the damsel in distress he agrees and asks for her ID and credit card again. He issues her another room and she goes to crash again.

#

With only her phone, she begins to research the church, the Supper Club, and see what she can find. The church is owned by a Dentist who is well known to own thoroughbreds. Nothing new in Lexington, a rich man who owns horses. He sits on the board of health and the attorney who is listed on the buildings file online is also on the health board. She is also very prominent in the community. Cora looks them up and finds photos and bios of both. Upstanding citizens. Donors. Patronage. The wealthy doing what they need to do to be called a

philanthropist instead of a robber baron. Both are connected to the Supper Club, a religious group helping women get out of the sinful life.

Sitting in her hotel room she thinks about what she has seen and how she needs to find her sister. Her on a week off a week schedule is supposed to give her respite between 7 day shifts. This is certainly not days of rest. She lies in the bed trying to think of her next step.

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The next night, Cora feels this is how to help her sister. Something about this church is drawing her near. She knows Maddy could be naive and can fall for a good sales pitch from an evangelist. She had done it before. Cora returns to the church, this time she is going to find out what else happens there.

Parking even farther away, something she questions as she is walking to the church, she gets to the wall again. She hops over and looks up at the destination. Tonight there are more lights on. The entire building is lit up like there is going to be a midnight mass. She walks to the side where the prep room was, but nothing there.

Just down from her position is a side door and windows. The stained glass is lit up beautifully giving her some light to move around, but no way to see in. Classical music is fairly playing from the sanctuary. She sees that the door's window is partially broken. She reaches inside and opens it, not knowing where it will lead.

Up the steps, Cora can hear the music louder. There is a buzz. Conversation. People are there. It's a party of some sort. She recalls stairs near the main entrance and what she thought would be a balcony. Feeling her way through the church, she finds the stairs and slowly creeps up to the balcony. Hiding behind the organ's seat Cora can make out the dentist and the attorney

and six other people eating their feast. She doesn't understand what she is seeing. Why would they hide this? She snaps a photo and begins slowly walking down the stairs.

At ground level there are more stairs going down. This building has a basement. Not unlike any other church, classrooms and storage were kept below ground. Cora walks downstairs and begins going down the hallway. The old fluorescent lights make it challenging to see. Room after room have a small window where she can see in. Innocuous items such as classrooms for Sunday School and storage of tables. Then the prep room.

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Cora quickly turns her back to the window and puts her hand over her mouth. Her blood pressure is up, breath is labored, and she begins to sweat. It's something she cannot unsee. She wants to make certain it isn't a figment of her imagination, so she slowly looks again. There on the table is more blood, but this time, the severed head of a woman was laying on the counter behind it. A bowl with what looked like ankles and hands. Fleshy parts and bones were also on the table. Cora took photos quickly and need to get away from this place. Now she and her sister were in danger.

As she is walking briskly to find an exit, she hears someone. A person walks into the prep room and Cora is in the shadows and goes unnoticed. He was wearing an apron and gloves. Obviously he was there to clean up and nearly caught her.

Standing, back against the wall, trying to be silent and invisible Cora hears something. Crying. Sobbing. It sounded like a little girl. Uncontrolled sadness and pain. Cora knew that cry, or one like it. She followed the noise and looked in the room where she thought it the

loudest. She slowly moved her head toward the window after looking up and down the hallway to see if she'd been noticed. Again, this was something she couldn't unsee.

#

In the room were five women. They were malnourished and wearing nothing. Cora could see the tattoos on their body and their ribs in the faint light. None even looked her way, except one. "Maddy". She caught herself talking. She reached to the door and opened it. Surprised that it opened, Cora called for Maddy who looked like a zombie. Her sister was somewhere behind those eyes and it must have been enough.

Maddy came to her sister, naked and obviously drugged. Cora takes her dark jacket off and wraps it around her sister, making her red and blue flannel shirt very conspicuous. Cora knows she has little time, as someone was going to notice them. The other four women just laid on the ground. They made no noises. Cora would have to come back. She quickly snapped a photo and took her sister moving quickly to try and find an exit.

Outside, Cora begins to run toward the wall. Maddy can't run. Her bare feet and drugged body are barely moving. Cora places Maddy's arm over her shoulders and tries to reason with her sister. "Come on Maddy. We gotta get you out of here." The two stumble across the 50 or so yards to the wall. Cora helps her over and then hops over herself. Cora's jacket doesn't spare Maddy's body from scratches from the wall. She is hurt, drugged, and bleeding. Maddy needs to get to help quickly.

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Cora has her sister in the front seat. Maddy's blood shows on the upholstery. "Come on Maddy, stay awake." Cora is driving quickly, but going no where. She needs to get somewhere

safe. She goes back to her hotel. Pulling into the door, an area usually where guests drop their bags off before they park, Cora gets her sister out of the car and drags her into the hotel.

The night clerk sees Cora and her mostly naked sister and feels this is what one sees in a college town. Cora walks right past him, behind the counter and into the office. Her sister is laying on the bench normally used only at breakfast. The clerk surprised says to Cora, "You can't be in there."

She ignores the command and tears the First Aid kit off the wall. She finds the naloxone and gives it to her sister. It isn't an opioid that was given to her. This isn't working. The clerk called 911 earlier and the dispatcher sent both the police and an ambulance. Cora directs the EMTs and before anyone notices, Maddy is hooked up to an IV and covered up with a blanket. She has a pulse and that will have to be good enough tonight.

The police officer, while looking at Cora's photos laughs and says to her that's the worst halloween set up I've ever seen. That doesn't even look real. Your sister was out hookin and get a little to far into the stuff. I should arrest her, but don't want to deal with the paperwork.

#

Frustrated at the Lexington law enforcement, Cora gets her sister up to her room. She puts Maddy on the bed and covers her with a blanket. Cora cannot sleep. She continually looks over to see if her sister is breathing. She is, each time. Cora plugs her phone in and sits at the desk. It's almost dawn, she hasn't slept and her sister hasn't rested. She opens her phone and searches for investigative reporters in the Lexington area.

The Lexington Herald-Leader is the newspaper of record and has an investigative team. Cora calls the number and gets a voice mail. She decides to await a time with patience when a person might pick up. Two hours later, someone does.

#

It's 9am, Maddy is still asleep, but alive. A man wearing a waxed cotton coat and hat knocks on the door. Cora lets him in. He takes off his hat, jacket, and scarf. "Ma'am, this is quite a story. I'm gonna need a little more proof before looking into this."

Cora explains what happened, why she was there, then pulls out the phone she's used to document everything. She swipes from photo to photo. The reporter is less than impressed with her story, one he has heard over and over again. Then the photo of the head. The photo the police thought was a halloween prank. He quickly stands and is instantly queasy. "Where did you get that?"

"I told you, the church. They are killing young girls there."

"Can you send me those pictures?" Cora nods in affirmation, then sends them via text. He agrees to call her later and grabs his coat, scarf, and hat. He moves out of the room quickly. Maddy never noticed him there. He didn't even get to the photo at the dinner table.

#

Going through the photos with the editor, the reporter is still shellshocked. He cannot get the picture of a woman's head out of his head. Then the photo of the dinner table. "What's this?" His editor is now very inquisitive. "I know him, and her. Why did she send you a photo of their supper?"

He quickly calls Cora and puts his phone on speaker. "Cora, I'm here with my editor. You sent a photo of some people eating their dinner. Why did you send that?"

"That was upstairs while the girls were downstairs."

"You mean, that's the church?"

"Yes. Last night."

Uncomfortably, the editor takes his hand and moves it across his neck telling his reporter to end the call. "Thanks Cora." As he hangs up.

"You know I'll need to call these people. They are prominent in this community. To say they have something to do with murder is going to be tough for this paper."

"Call who you need to. I'm going to start working on the story."

#

Cora is back at her mother's house. They are nursing Maddy back to health, who isn't the best patient. The three spend most of the day watching television. After a few daytime shows their mother enjoys, they see the 5pm news coming on. "Breaking News".

On cable news networks, there is breaking news every day and every hour. It's how they keep people's attention in the 24 hour news cycle. But in Pikeville, KY, the local news doesn't "Break" much of anything. But the screen was red and the big block lettering told them to pay attention.

"Lexington elite club accused in cannibalism." Cora's attention is focused now. She waits for the anchor to go on. "Dentist Mark Adams, prominent attorney Angie Fellow, and others have all been accused in a cannibalism ring. According to reporting by the Lexington Herald-Leader, the prominent philanthropists are accused of pretending to be a part of a charity

that works with homeless women. The group lured the women to a church where they were drugged, killed, and butchered. The group allegedly would eat the women later in the evening in a macabre ceremony they called The Supper Club."

"Dr. Adams is said to have fled, and is believed to have a home somewhere in South America. Attorney Angie Fellow was found hanging in her victorian home after an apparent suicide. Dr. Philip Gregory was found in his Mercedes outside his Lexington home dead of a self inflicted gunshot wound to the head."

"Another member of the group, whose name has not been released has confessed to the scheme. In further reporting by the paper, the group, some of which have yet to be named or arrested, preyed on vulnerable women and felt that their victims were, and I quote the statement, "animals, and we ate them just like deer or chickens.". We will bring you more as this story develops.

#

Cora is aghast. She hadn't realized that she saved her little sister from being eaten. On the couch, she snuggles herself up to Maddy and the two grab each other tightly. "Thank you Cora. I knew you'd never leave me there." Maddy may or may not believe that, but says it anyway.

#

A couple of weeks later, coming home from another grueling shift, Cora grabs the mail as she is walking in to her house. She throws it down on the table. Tomorrow starts her off days. She kicks off her shoes, and grabs the Chardonnay out of the refrigerator. She pours herself a healthy size glass, justifying it as necessary. She takes her ID badge off of her scrubs and sets it

on the counter beside the mail.

A handwritten letter is among her bills and junk mail. It has no return address but was posted from Nashville, TN. In it are photos and a letter. The photos are of her going into the church and taking her sister out. All from outside, nothing inside. The letter was on a piece of paper from small notepad. It was brief. "You should have joined us for supper Nurse Cora."