



snolly.gos.ter n [probably an alteration of snallygaster, a mythical creature that preys on poultry and children, circa 1860] ; a shrewd unprincipled person.

It began with a bag of chips—an empty bag, actually, found lying in the grass outside the bedroom window of Robin Hillcrest's apartment one Monday afternoon. She had been watering the hanging plants above the back patio when she first noticed it.

The groundskeepers around here leave behind more trash than they pick up, Robin reasoned. Or maybe Katie had left it there during back patio play-time. Robin did seem to recall buying a similar bag of sour-cream and onion potato chips on Friday, but had been unable to find it when she wanted a snack during *Sex and the City*, on Sunday.

So that was it, then, Robin decided. *That sly Kat-Bird must have smuggled it out.*

Katie enjoyed playing on the back patio. She would choose from the herd of stuffed animals that lived in her room whichever ones were her favorite that week—a select club to be sure, but always including *Sneaky Pete*, her stuffed cat—and set them up outside along the sliding glass door. These would serve as her audience while she danced and sang along to whichever movie soundtrack CD was her favorite that week. It was evidently catching, because many of the neighborhood children had started bringing their favorite animals, stuffed or otherwise, to join in the fun. Knowing Katie, she had fed most of that bag to the other kids and probably saw only two or three chips herself. Robin found it difficult to be mad at Katie for sneaking the chips when her intentions were so good. Katie wanted everyone around her to be happy and was always looking to share what she had in order to achieve that. She even tried to be nice to that little monster Zack Gilarakis.

Zack was something of a bully-in-training. He was a year younger than Katie, but made up for his youth with sheer obnoxiousness. Rather than playing nice, he thought it was funny to ridicule Katie and her friends as they danced and sang. His disruptions weren't quite as effective as he would have liked, though. Most of the children who lived at the apartment complex were on Katie's side and usually followed her words of wisdom

to ignore Zack. Or occasionally, she could defuse the situation by offering him a brownie, or whatever food item Robin had made for Katie and her friends. This was always a temporary solution, though. The boy just didn't know when to give it a rest. He wasn't content unless he was making other kids miserable. While he might not be very effective at it now, Robin thought, give him a couple of years and a small army of cohorts and it would be another story altogether. Someone needed to give that kid a good smack now.

"Katie, did you take the chips I had on the counter?" Robin asked her daughter, as she came into the kitchen for some juice.

"No."

"I'm talking about the big bag of sour cream and onion, I bought Friday," Robin said. Katie just shook her head, though, which caused Robin to flush with irritation. She thought Katie had finally gotten beyond her recent lying phase, but apparently she had been mistaken.

"Katie, let me explain something to you," Robin began, shifting into methodical lecture gear. "Remember when we went to the store on Friday and I bought the big bag of sour cream and onion chips?"

Katie nodded.

"Well, that bag of chips made it from the store to the car and from the car into this kitchen. I know, because I remember putting them on the counter, right there." Robin pointed to a space on the countertop that was not currently supporting the weight of a bag of chips. "Now, I know that *I* didn't eat the chips because I'm not retaining water. So, out of the two people in this house, that eliminates me. Who else does that leave as a suspect, Katie?"

"I didn't take the chips, Mommy," Katie said. And that was all she would say on the matter. Even after Robin pointed out that the empty chip bag had been found not six feet from where Katie played and that no one else had even been in the house but the two of them, all weekend long Katie stuck to her guns, refusing to admit responsibility. Robin finally had to let it go, but not without sending Katie to her room without television. Until now, she had never known her daughter to continue brazenly lying in the face of all evidence to the contrary. Either Katie had become much better at deception or one of them was very confused.

It rained and stormed all weekend long, and Robin and Katie were cooped up in the house for most of it. On Sunday they ordered pizza for supper, then read Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* together and watched two entire *Blues Clues* tapes before the Kat-Bird began to yawn. After tucking her daughter into bed, with Sneaky Pete by her side, Robin returned to the comfort of her couch and a cup of her favorite cranberry tea, with cinnamon oil added to it, hoping to find something a little more intellectually stimulating on television than a grunting blue dog. Outside the rain continued to pour, but the wind from the earlier thunderstorms had died down.

Robin loved the rain, mostly because it reminded her of Oregon, where she used to live and where Katie's father still did. The friends she left behind and the rain were practically the only good memories she had of Diamond Lake. She was much more comfortable here in the south.

Robin decided to open the patio door to let the light breeze and the smell of rain in through the screen. Setting her tea on the coffee table, she walked to the window and pulled on the wand, opening her vertical blinds. She lifted the security bar from its place and was about to open the door when she caught a glimpse of a reflection on the glass.

What was she going to do about that hair? Her blond locks were too short to pull back in a pony tail but too long to let spill into her face every time she moved. What she really wanted was to cut it short again, but she had spent the last four months letting it grow out so she didn't have to spend so much time on it every morning. As enjoyable as short hair always seemed, when you finally had it cut, it usually turned out to be a much bigger hassle than you ever wanted.

There was a click as Robin pressed the switch in the door's handle to unlock it. She was about to slide open the door when she noticed a sudden movement, beyond her reflection. Robin regarded the movement with a kind of detached curiosity at first, waiting for her brain to translate the movement into something mundane, like the motion of one of her hanging plants or rain droplets running down the window. Then Robin truly saw beyond her reflection and the shape on the patio resolved into the silhouette of a person.

Robin gave a startled squeak of a cry, her arms flinching involuntarily at the shock of what she was seeing. Someone was standing directly outside her back door. On *her* patio! Instantly her mind flooded with a rush of questions: *Who is this? Is he a prowler? A peeping Tom? If so, what did he see? Why can't I see him? Am I about to*

be assaulted? This was a gated apartment complex, dammit! This sort of thing was not supposed to happen here.

Distantly, Robin saw her own arm reach out and lock the door. The man—if it even *was* a man—remained, silhouetted against the light from the corner of the adjacent apartment building. No light fell from the halogen lamp mounted high above her patio to reveal any of his features. He was just a dark shadow against the grass of the common yard in back. Robin reached up to the light switch beside the door and flipped it up. Nothing happened. No light came on at all.

Then, almost casually, the man turned and stepped around the corner of the building and was gone.

With a huff, Robin released the breath she had been holding. She blinked several times then focused her eyes beyond the reflection of the room until she could again see the grass behind the other building, the rain falling through the light that illuminated the grass and the dark splotch of shadow covering her patio and a good portion of the yard beyond it.

Robin was about to turn from the window when there was another burst of movement outside. The man's silhouette leaned back around the corner of the building, blocking out the adjacent building's lamp. Her heart, which had not begun to slow from her previous scare, began pumping even faster, but she held control of herself. This guy was obviously getting his thrills terrifying her and she wasn't going to give him any more satisfaction. She steeled herself, staring straight back into his eyes—or, rather, at the black, featureless space where his eyes should be.

The man raised his arm and gave her an odd little shoulder shrugging wave. Then he disappeared around the corner again and was gone.

Robin's legs felt rooted to the spot in fear, but she forced them to move anyway. She leapt for the security bar, slamming it down into its place where it could again brace the sliding door. She broke the pull wand of the vertical blinds in yanking them shut. The blinds swayed back and forth allowing little glimpses into the darkness mixed with water spotted light patterns, but Robin didn't see them. She was at the kitchen phone, dialing.

"Hello?" a female voice said from the receiver.

"Mom! Someone was at my back door!"

"Who?"

"I don't know... a prowler."

"When?"

"Just now!"

"Did you call the police?"

"No."

"Well call them! What the hell are you talking to me for?"

"I... well, okay."

Robin hung up the phone, then lifted the receiver again and began to dial. She hung it back up, waited a few seconds then lifted and dialed again. She pressed a 9 and a 1 and was on the verge of pressing the final 1, but hung up the phone instead. Robin just couldn't shake the image of the man's parting wave. It seemed so non-threatening, even apologetic. In fact, no matter how she tried, she couldn't imagine the wave meaning anything other than, "*Hey, sorry for scaring the shit out of you. I was just passing through.*" This benign intention didn't answer why he was standing at her door in the first place, but Robin still couldn't bring herself to call the police. Instead she called her mom back.

"I'm sure it was nothing," Robin told her mother after relating the details of what had happened. "If he'd wanted to break in or harm me, he could have done it as soon as I'd unlocked the door."

"You don't think you should call the police just to be safe?"

"No. What are they going to do? Come over and dust for prints? He didn't do anything except startle me. And he seemed sorry about it."

"Well, I still don't like it," her mom said. "It's not just you there, you know. You've got Katie with you too."

"I'm aware of that, mother."

"You need a gun?" her father said from one of her parents' other phone extensions. "I can send you a gun."

Robin considered it. She'd grown up around guns, back in Mississippi, but, as her mother so helpfully pointed out, Katie was in the house and Robin didn't like the idea of a gun being there too. "No, Pa. That's okay."

"Charlotte's a big city, now. Never hurts to be prepared."

"No, Pa."

In the morning, after dropping Katie off at school, Robin called her store on her

cell-phone and told them she would be coming in late today. Then she drove home and proceeded to march over to the management office of the Augustine Bay apartment complex. It was a place she rarely set foot in, except to pay her rent. While there had been a myriad of problems with her apartment over the past few months, Robin had thus far dealt with them by bribing the maintenance men with cookies and the occasional beer to get them to see her repairs as a priority. So far this had been a good policy, but not today. Today she was going to the top. However, no one seemed to be in Augustine Bay's managerial office when she stepped inside.

"Hello?" Robin called. There was no answer, so Robin wandered out of the office and down a short hall and into the *Captain's Nest*—which was the name that Augustine Bay gave to its nautical-themed lobby. Its large French doors, floor to ceiling windows, overstuffed furniture, fireplace and hardwood floors seemed to be designed to make people feel like they were in a large, warm and cozy living room, while the extensive collection of nautical décor, covering nearly every surface of the room, was evidently there to make people feel they were also at sea. It was a theme that Augustine Bay's management must have felt necessary to accessorize the man-made pond sunk into the front lawn of the apartment complex.

Robin thought the room was gaudy. It smacked not only of falseness but of an organization that felt it had to resort to such tactics so that people somehow felt at home there. If this was her home, she would burn it to the ground and start over.

However, as no one was in the lobby, either, Robin decided to wait there anyway, in spite of her offended sense of taste.

Among the many whittled model fishermen, stray buoys, hung, glass-fronted displays of knotted rope examples, and framed calligraphy sea-chanty's, however, were a few non-nautical photographs that caught her eye. Robin walked around the room, examining each of them. Some seemed to be promotional photos taken during apartment events; such as an Easter egg hunt taking place along the artificial lake's artificial boardwalk. Others were framed newspaper clippings featuring a picture of smiling employees and accompanying article about the grand reopening of an apartment complex. From article to article, the apartment complexes varied, but all of them seemed to have been purchased and renovated by the Amber Street Properties Consortium, the very group that had recently purchased Augustine Bay. Robin noted that two of the photos contained the same overweight, bald man. Robin had heard the phrase pear-shaped

before in reference to fat people, but she had never seen someone for whom the phrase was an exact description until now. He was uncannily pear-shaped, with tufts of brownish hair jutting from the sides of his bald head, some of which he had seen fit to comb over his bare pate. He looked like a clown on his day off. He was probably an executive with the Amber Street Properties Consortium. Robin decided she disliked him already.

Distantly, she heard a toilet flush followed half a minute later by approaching footsteps.

"Hello?" Robin said.

"Oh, hello!" a female voice responded. Robin recognized it as that of Janice, the apartment's secretary. She stepped from a side hallway, a rosy-cheeked, bleached and permed bundle of smile.

"I was starting to think nobody was home," Robin said.

"Sorry about that," Janice said. "I was having a moment. How can I help you?"

"Who do I talk to about a prowler?"

"You had a prowler?"

"I had a prowler."

"Oh, my," Janice said. "That sounds like a job for Bill."

"Okay."

"He's out showing an apartment right now, but he'll be back," Janice said. "You're welcome to wait here, though."

"Sure thing."

Robin followed Janice back to the front office where she had a seat in one of the guest chairs there. It was the same tope-vinyl-covered chair she had sat in when she signed her lease papers a few months ago.

"So tell me," Janice began, offering Robin some candy from the dish on her desk, "this prowler... what happened?"

Robin sighed, then told Janice about her recent scare.

"Oh, honey," Janice said, after listening to the tale. "Same thing happened to my friend Barbara, once. Different apartment group, mind you," she said with a dismissive gesture. "Barb was watching TV one night and looked up to see some guy at her back door. Only this guy was... well..." Janice looked around to make sure no one would overhear. "He was *helping himself*, if you know what I mean." Janice then mimed the

action she was referring to, so there would be no confusion.

"Oh! Um.... yeah. I get the picture," Robin said.

"Actually, Barbara said that in this guy's case it was more like this," Janice said, miming the same motion as before, only much smaller.

Robin laughed out loud, then coughed self-consciously and tried to return her face to a serious expression. It was too late, though. The image was stuck in her head and Robin found herself beset with sudden fits of giggles. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to laugh..." Robin said between snorts. "I... I'm sure it was... was just awful."

Janice smiled reassuringly. "No, it's all right. We laugh about it now, but Barb was scared to death then. I mean, he didn't even stop when she called the police. She stood there and described him to them, right down to his *hoo-hoo dilly*. But he kept right on going the whole time. Didn't leave her patio or even slow down `til after he'd... well, you know."

Robin nodded quickly before Janice had time to mime a visual-aid.

"And then, when the police got there, she said they seemed mad at her that they had to come out at all... Like she shouldn't have called them unless the guy was actually in her house, or something."

"Geez," Robin said. "Makes me even more glad I didn't call them."

"You didn't?"

"Well... no. I really wasn't sure the guy was even trying to look in my window in the first place. It was raining pretty hard out there. He might have just been wandering by and stepped under the patio awning to stay dry."

"Oh, honey, I doubt it. Not with your looks. Besides, all the walkways in the front of the buildings are covered. He could have stayed a lot dryer there if he wanted to. Listen... You see anyone sneaking around your windows again, you should call the police. But first, you call the apartment switchboard and tell them to transfer you to the security officer."

"This place has security?" Robin said. She was surprised, because for a supposedly gated-community most of the security measures in place at Augustine Bay were pretty half-assed as far as she was concerned. By design, the gates surrounding the complex were supposed to prevent intruders by only allowing those who knew the special pass code to enter. Unfortunately, they seemed to be in a perpetual state of disrepair. Every few months, Augustine Bay would have them repaired, after which they would

work for a week, maybe two, opening only by code, until someone grew impatient with the slow process and tapped them with their car-bumper. This usually damaged the gears, causing the gates to spring open permanently.

"Not hired security, no," Janice corrected. "But we do have a police officer who lives here. He gets a break on his rent and in return agrees to check out any security problems we might have when he's off-duty. Just domestic disturbances, usually, but he did help stop some car thieves last year." Janice passed Robin an Augustine Bay business card with the switchboard number circled. "You have any more problems, you call."

Mr. Gully returned shortly. Robin had not met the man before, as he had only taken the position as apartment manager following Augustine Bay's recent change of ownership. He was a thin man of average height, dressed a business-casual khakis and white shirt combo. She would have guessed him to be her own age—not bad-looking—with a good head of brown hair and a nice smile. Accompanying Mr. Gully was a young couple—evidently prospective renters. Or they might have been prospective renters before their tour, but now seemed intent on leaving with as few rental commitments as possible. They gathered up their driver's licenses, which Janice had been holding, accepted some more brochures and left the office as quickly as politeness would allow.

"I somehow don't think I made that sale," Mr. Gully told Janice. "Have I really been off the sales floor that long?" Janice shrugged. Then Mr. Gully noticed Robin. "Hi. I'm Bill Gully," he said, offering his hand.

"Ms. Hillcrest's here to see you," Janice said.

Mr. Gully flashed a ready smile. "Glad to hear it. Sorry if you had to wait long, but we're a bit short handed around here these days. I'm afraid one of our salespeople was recently... well, let's just say he's no longer with the company."

Janice mimed a knife across her neck.

"I see," Robin said.

"Nothing to be concerned about," Mr. Gully said. "Just means some of us have to work a little more until we can transfer someone from one of our other properties." He smiled. "How can I help you today?"

"Ms. Hillcrest's here about a prowler," Janice said helpfully.

"Oh?" Mr. Gully said.

"Well, I don't really know that he was a prowler," Robin corrected. "I just... Well,

maybe I'd better explain."

Mr. Gully gestured her into his office. It was not a large room, but it made up for its lack of size by a lack of any of the nautical decorations contaminating the rest of the building. Instead, there were a few tastefully framed photographs, two of which featured the same pear-shaped man standing among other smiling Amber Street Properties employees. The guy was probably Mr. Gully's boss.

"I'll have to apologize in advance, Ms. Hillcrest. I'm usually accustomed to scheduling appointments with our residents, so I can pull their file in advance to familiarize myself with them. Under these circumstances we must understandably forego this, of course. So, please forgive any lapses in knowledge on my part. Tell me, which apartment are you in again?"

"Apartment K-8."

Mr. Gully wrote this on an Augustine Bay stationary pad atop his desk blotter. His desk was immaculately free of clutter.

Robin began at the beginning, relating how she had sat down to watch TV, but wanted to take in the aroma of rain and got up to open the window. She told him how she had already unlocked the back door before noticing there was someone on her patio and how scared she had been that this might have been a peeping tom, or worse. Then she told him how she had locked the door, just before the stranger disappeared around the corner of the building.

"But then he stepped back around the corner and gave this... this little shrug. And a wave—like he was sorry for startling me, or something. That's what made me think he might have just been stepping out of the rain back there."

"Did he say anything?"

"Not that I heard. Just the shrug and wave, then he was gone."

Mr. Gully frowned. "Well, I'm sorry something like this happened to you, Ms. Hillcrest. It's probably just a misunderstanding, but it had to be startling for you all the same. I'm just sorry that it happened at all. Especially here. Augustine Bay prides itself in being one of the most secure..."

"...apartment complexes in the whole city," she finished for him. "Yeah, that's what I was told back before I moved in. Gated community, no access to those who don't belong, the whole bit. You don't have to sell me on the place, okay? I already bought."

"Excuse me?" Mr. Gully began, adopting a cautious tone of insult.

"Listen, I'm in retail myself. Sure, it may only be as a secret shopper out at Concord Mills, but I still recognize a company line when I hear it. So for a second, would you just stop thinking about avoiding liability for your apartments and really listen to me?" She didn't wait for his response. "I'm not going to sue you. I realize that no system and no apartment complex is perfect. This sort of thing can happen no matter what steps are taken to prevent it. But—and this is a pretty big but—I think a lot more than lip-service should be done around here when it comes to security."

"Now, Ms. Hillcrest," Mr. Gully began.

"Are you aware, Mr. Gully, that there are gaping holes in the chain-link fence surrounding this complex? I counted four of them this morning near my building alone. Even that guy," she said, pointing at the pear-shaped man in one of the photographs on the wall, "would have no trouble fitting... though... them." Robin paused, stared closely at Mr. Gully's face, then up at the photograph. A shudder of horror came over her.

It was him! How could she have missed that? Add 150 pounds, take away the too perfect to be real hair and Mr. Gully would be very bald and quite probably pear-shaped. They both even had the same mole on their cheek.

Robin felt her face blush red. "Mr. Gully, I'm so sorry," she said. "I didn't realize... or recognize... I mean... Wow."

Mr. Gully held up his hands in a calming gesture. "Don't worry about it, Ms. Hillcrest. Don't worry at all," he said. Robin noticed, though, that his face had gained a pinkish hue. "Honestly, I'm flattered that you didn't notice sooner."

"I'm surprised I noticed at all. I'm just so sorry that I said that..."

Mr. Gully rapidly clicked his tongue against his teeth and shook his head dismissively. "No need to apologize, Ms. Hillcrest. It's forgotten." He stood up and walked to the picture of his former self. "I don't know why I keep these around anymore. Well, that's not true. I suppose I keep them to remind me of how far I've come. It's taken me two years to lose the weight, but my doctor says it was worth it if I keep it off. I'm afraid Diabetes runs in my family."

"Well, hey... Great job," Robin said. "If you don't mind my asking, how'd you do it? Atkins Diet?"

"Actually, no," Mr. Gully said. "Would you believe a balanced diet and exercise?"

"No kidding?"

"No kidding whatsoever."

"Go figure," Robin said, nodding in an impressed way. However, try as she might, she couldn't think of any suitable followup commentary. She toyed with the idea of mentioning all the fat people she had seen at her recent 10 year high school reunion, but decided that was probably not the best way to go. The silence stretched until both of them were smiling at one another with very tight lips.

Mr. Gully coughed and then sat down at his desk once more. "Um, as to your situation last night," he began, and Robin noticed that all traces of the managerial salesperson of before had left his voice. "I feel that it is I who should apologize to you. I certainly didn't mean to belittle your experience or in any way suggest that it isn't very serious. It's just that I've been managing apartment groups for the past twelve years... I've managed everything from slums to high-rises and I've seen this kind of situation dozens of times. Not around here, mind you," he said with the same dismissing gesture as Janice had given her. "But I've seen it before. In most cases it's just a peeping tom. But I've also seen incidents in which the prowler is a stalker or an ex-husband, sometimes a co-worker or just someone with a grudge. Do you know of anyone who might fall into one of these categories for you, Ms. Hillcrest?" He picked up his pen and held it poised for writing.

Robin gave the man her sweetest insincere smile. "Mr. Gully, I'm a secret shopper. It's my job to catch and testify against shoplifters. I make new enemies every week. None of them have ever followed me home before, though. As for my ex, he's on the other side of the country and is far too busy with his career and, I imagine, his secretary, to have any time to stalk me."

"I see," Mr. Gully said, setting his pen down.

"Whatever category my visitor falls into, next time he comes to my patio door, I'd like to be able to see him. So I would appreciate very much if you sent someone over to repair my broken patio light. Today."

"Your patio light is out?" Mr. Gully said. Robin thought she heard a trace of the litigious-phobic tone creeping back into his voice.

"Very out," she said. "It's supposed to come on automatically when the sun goes down. The last time I remember seeing it on, though, was three months ago."

Mr. Gully practically *yeepped* in shock. "Done," he said. "It will be fixed by the end of the day."

"Very good," Robin said, her smile becoming a bit more sincere. "Now, what about the gates and the holes in the fence?"

Mr. Gully agreed to send someone around to patch the holes in the fence, but admitted that it would be the third time they had done so that year. It was tough to keep the fences mended when there was a major grocery store on the street behind the complex. Residents preferred walked directly to it, rather than having to go around the block. As to the gates, Mr. Gully assured Robin that he was trying to convince the central office that an overhaul of the gate system was necessary. In the meantime he promised to have them repaired once again, for all the good it would do.

As she stood to leave, Mr. Gully arose and took Robin's hand in one of his then patted the top of it reassuringly with his other one. "Whether or not what happened to you was... innocent. If anything similar happens again, Ms. Hillcrest, you should not hesitate to call the police."

"Or the rent-a-cop, right?"

Mr. Gully blinked. "Come again?"

"The off-duty policeman who lives here," she said. "Janice told me to call the switchboard for him if I needed to?"

"Ah, yes," Mr. Gully said. "Officer Gilarakis."

Robin's mouth dropped open. "Gilarakis? That little monster's dad is a cop?"

"I'm sorry?"

Robin almost clapped a hand over her mouth, but instead chose to close it voluntarily then reopen it when she was sure what would come out of it again. "Excuse me, Mr. Gully. Just thinking out loud."

"Mm," Mr. Gully said. "I didn't think to mention Officer Gilarakis to you. He's something of a hold-over from this complex's previous ownership, I'm afraid. His role as our after-hours security officer is grandfathered into his lease."

"I take it you disapprove?"

Mr. Gully took a long breath. "*Disapprove* is a strong word. I presume the 'little monster' you were referring to was his son, Zack, correct?" Robin nodded. "Yes. My office hears quite a bit about young Zack. Complaint calls, mostly." Mr. Gully then paused, as if considering his words carefully. "You know the phrase about apples not falling far from trees? It's an applicable one, if you take my meaning. You can, of course, do as you see fit. But if it were me, I would just call 911." Mr. Gully then smiled

broadly and adopted what Robin judged to be his best managerial face yet. "Of course, chances are, you and your daughter will be perfectly safe and last night this was a one time occurrence. You let us know if there's anything further you need, though."

True to his word, the repair crew arrived at Robin's back door shortly after two o'clock and set about replacing the patio light. The new light not only worked but had both light and motion sensors that automatically turned it on whenever it detected movement on the patio at night. It worked beautifully. Robin was of half a mind to leave the blinds completely open and then lie in wait with a camera, ready to take a snapshot of the bastard should he return. She even went so far as to find her *Polaroid* and make sure it was loaded with film, but decided not to put this plan into action. Katie was a pretty observant kid... Well, to put it more accurately, Katie was pretty observant when observation lead to something she wanted to do or have or something Robin didn't want her to do or have. Otherwise the child could be infuriatingly inattentive. Robin had to admit, though, that lurking near the open blinds with a camera was likely to catch Katie's attention and lead to uncomfortable questions. She hadn't told Katie about the man at the door and wasn't planning to, if she could help it. It would most likely frighten her and the last thing Robin needed was a child terrified to go to sleep at night for fear of prowlers.

"Katie?" Robin asked over their dinner of beef stew, mashed potatoes and carrots. "Did you know Zack Gilarakis's dad was a policeman?"

"Yeah," Katie said. "He picks Zack up from school in his police car sometimes. Sometimes they do the siren when they leave."

"They do, huh?"

"Yeah. And his dad came and spoke to our class on parents' day that time."

"The class had a parents' day? I don't remember any parent's day."

"You weren't there. You had to work," Katie said.

Robin immediately felt three inches tall. Now she did remember that day and how she had been unable to get away from work. The parents' day had coincided with a major sale at the Concord Mills Outlet Mall, and her skills as a secret shopper had been greatly needed. Robin loved her job, though. Secret shoppers were paid well, as their risk of getting hurt in the course of doing their job was greater than average as shoplifters could be downright violent when confronted. The increased pay meant she only had to

work part time, while Katie was at school.

It was an interesting question, though: Could her visitor have been one of the people she had prosecuted? She had to admit it was at least possible. In her job she rarely confronted the shoplifters personally, preferring to allow store security to move in and do that for her. But she had seen plenty of the thieves when testifying against them in court. Her phone number was unlisted, but there were always other ways for a determined person to find her home address. Legal ways, even.

"So. Was Zack's dad nice?" Robin asked.

"He looks just like Zack, only bigger," Katie said. Robin tried to imagine Zack's sneering, red, freckly face atop an adult policeman's body. It just didn't look right. "And he's already married to Zack's mom," Katie added.

Robin frowned. "I wasn't looking to date him. I just wanted to know if he was anything like his son."

"Just letting you know," Katie said before stuffing another fork full of mashed potatoes into her mouth. Ever since the divorce, Robin had noticed that Katie kept a watchful eye out for potential step-fathers and made it a point to alert Robin when she saw them. She was actually a fairly amazing judge of character, though Robin could never get beyond the notion that this was her seven-year old daughter playing match-maker to even attempt any of the matches. However, Robin made it policy to heed Katie's advice when it came to men Katie said were no good. Robin suspected that doing so had saved her a lot of grief.

"Katie... " Robin began, a thought suddenly occurring to her. "You haven't noticed any strange people around here lately, have you?"

"Strange people?"

"Well, men. Strange men... Around the apartment complex?"

Katie thought about it while chewing a bite of beef-stew. "Nope," she said. "Just the usual ones."

On Wednesday afternoon, Robin noticed that the holes in the chain link fence near her apartment had been mended. By Thursday night, the front gates were once again in proper working order. Mr. Gully had even seen to it that the yellow and black striped mechanical arm, which was designed to lift after a resident typed in their pass code and lower immediately after their car passed under it, had also been repaired. This made the

gate far more effective at deterring cars from sneaking through the slow-closing gate on the tails of residents with proper key codes. Even this system was not perfect, though, as Robin learned a few days later.

Robin and Katie were returning from *McDonald's* and Robin had stopped at the amazingly still-functional gate to type in her pass code when in her rearview mirror she saw another car enter the Augustine Bay driveway. She quickly typed in her code, but the gate and arm moved far too slowly for her to drive through before the other car was already behind her. Somehow she just knew they were going to try and sneak through. Sure enough, as soon as she began moving, they did too—right on her bumper. Robin tried to drive as slowly as she could, hoping the arm would come down between the vehicles preventing this parasite from getting through the gate on her tail. The arm didn't lower, though, and the man continued, remora-like. Robin tapped her brakes. The man drove into her bumper. Her car rocked with the impact, making Katie gasp. The man honked loudly.

“Back off!” Robin screamed, gesturing out her driver's window.

Suddenly the man was out of his car, walking quickly to her window trailing a cloud of vulgarities.

“Hey! What's the big idea, slamming on your damn brakes?”

Robin suddenly found herself getting out of her own car, facing down this man who was twice her size. “I didn't slam on my brakes! I tapped them! If you hadn't been half way up my butt trying to sneak through the gate there wouldn't have been a problem.”

“Hey, lady, I live here!”

“How the hell am I supposed to know that? Oh, yeah, that's right! I'd know you lived here if you had stopped and typed in your goddamn gate code instead of sneaking through in my ass!”

“Fuck you, lady!”

“No! Fuck You!” Robin screamed. “This is a gated community! People that live here have codes to open the gate and people that don't *don't!* I'm not putting up with any more perverts at my back door because assholes like you are too damn lazy to press four numbers!” Robin turned on her heel and stomped toward her car. Then she stopped suddenly, turned back to the man, narrowed her eyes to angry slits and said, “And if you ever try sneaking through the gate on my ass again, I'm going to do a hell of a lot more

than scrape your bumper!”

The man blinked down at her, surprised perhaps at her fury. He threw up his hands and went back to his car. Robin watched him go for a moment, then climbed into hers and drove on.

“Mommy? Are you okay?” Katie asked.

“Yeah. Yeah, baby. I’m okay,” Robin said. But she knew it wasn’t true. As much as she had tried to convince herself that she wasn’t still bothered by her encounter last Sunday, she could see that was not the case. She’d let a little thing like that gate parasite send her into a fury in front of her daughter and that was neither normal nor good.

Robin tucked Katie into bed that night, Sneaky Pete by her side as always. Before reading her a story, Robin felt she should address what had happened at the gate that evening.

“Mommy didn’t behave very nice tonight, did she?” Robin said.

“You were mad.”

“Yeah. I was.”

Katie smiled and patted Robin’s hand. “Sometimes when we’re mad, we say things we don’t mean.”

“Yeah. But I shouldn’t have yelled at that man. That’s not the way I would want you to solve your problems, so I shouldn’t do it either.”

“It’s okay, Mommy. You’ll do better next time.”

Sometime in the night, Robin heard Katie get up to go to the bathroom. Her daughter usually slept soundly and rarely got up at all. When she did get up, Katie had a tendency to sleepwalk to the bathroom and on more than one occasion had been found squatting over the hamper beside the toilet rather than over the toilet itself. So when she did get up, it was best for Robin to check on her to make sure she was aimed in the right direction.

Robin got up and walked to the bathroom, situated between their bedrooms. Katie wasn’t there.

Must have heard her leaving the bathroom, Robin thought. She walked past the bathroom and into Katie’s bedroom. It was dark, except for Katie’s *Mickey Mouse* night

light, but Robin could still see her daughter lying in the bed, soundly snoozing. In fact, she didn't seem to be in a much different position from the one Robin had watched her fall asleep in.

Huh, Robin thought. Had she only dreamed that she heard Katie get up?

Robin turned to go back to bed. She had nearly made it to her room before she realized that there had been something different about Katie's sleeping form. It took her a moment to place it, but she realized that when she had just been in Katie's room, Sneaky Pete had not been in the bed with Katie. Before Robin had time to consider the meaning of this, she heard a noise from the kitchen. There was a slight scrape followed by the metallic clang. It sounded exactly like her laundry basket, colliding with her washing machine in the laundry room, which was located just off of the kitchen.

A chill seized Robin's heart. Her ears strained to hear any further sound, but there followed only silence.

Robin stood perfectly still for what felt like several minutes. In her mind, she turned over a handful of possible ways in which the sound she had heard had not originated within her own apartment but from within a neighbor's. Unfortunately, as cheaply made as her apartment was, the builders had not skimmed on the soundproofing filler in its concrete block walls. No matter how she tried, Robin couldn't recall ever hearing a noise from next door, particularly not the sound of a washing machine being struck by a laundry basket, kicked into it by a careless foot.

Standing in the darkness of her apartment, Robin continued to strain her ears for any further sound from the owner of that careless foot, just as, she imagined, he too was straining for any sound of her. She didn't want to give him one, so Robin waited, scarcely daring to breathe. This wasn't an easy task, as her heart was beating so fast that the shallow little breaths she was allowing herself weren't enough. She began to get dizzy, so she began breathing deeply, though still slowly.

After a minute or so, she was able to calm herself enough to begin seriously debating whether she had heard anything in the first place. She had been half-asleep when she'd heard it, after all. It could have been anything. Maybe her mind was just interpreting the sound as something inside the apartment in some sort of paranoia-induced feint. If this was the case, though, she still couldn't go back to bed until she had gone through the kitchen and into the laundry room to make sure. She would never be able to sleep, thinking that she had just left her child and herself exposed to some kind of

bogeyman, no matter how imaginary he might be. There was also the matter of Sneaky Pete's whereabouts. Maybe he was under Katie's covers, rather than missing from her bed. But if not, it meant someone really was in the house and she would have to do something about it.

Robin stepped through the rounded opening that separated the hall from the foyer of the apartment, and the main living area beyond it. The kitchen was to the left, just off of the dining area, and was an enclosed room to itself, save for the laundry room that lead off from the far end of it. Robin moved slowly toward the kitchen's entrance. Her feet made no sound on the carpeted floor, for beneath that carpet and padding was nothing but cold silent concrete. Unfortunately, it meant that her intruder, assuming she really had one, could also move unheard unless he continued to be careless with his feet. Her plan was to make it to the kitchen, grab a butcher knife or at least a rolling pin and see if she could see or hear anything more definite from her uninvited guest. Robin had nearly reached the kitchen doorway without hearing so much as the scuff of a shoe, when she saw a shadow move and froze in her tracks.

Her kitchen butted up against the front of the apartment and had a window offering a view of the common area between her building and the next one down. Light from the common area ambiance lamps streamed through her unshaded window and into the dining area directly outside the kitchen. And it was into this light that the shadow was protruding. Robin guessed it was the head of her intruder, peeking out from the laundry room at the end of the kitchen.

For a long time they both stood still in place, neither truly seeing the other but at least one of them knowing of the other's presence.

What would she do if he came out? She didn't have any kind of weapon handy. She should have brought her pepper spray, dammit!

The shadow withdrew from the light. He wasn't coming out. Not yet, at least.

Very slowly, Robin backed away from the kitchen until she reached the hallway again. She stepped into Katie's room. She closed the door, being careful to turn the doorknob before it shut so it wouldn't make noise. Then, with a degree of caution she hadn't used in locking a door since she was in high school, she pushed the knob in and turned it to the right. There was a hole in the other side of the handle where a screwdriver could be inserted to unlock the door, but she didn't think her intruder, should he come by, would be able to see it in the dark.

Robin went over to Katie's bed, where her daughter still lay sleeping. She reached for the receiver of Katie's *Power Puff Girls* telephone—the telephone she had almost refused to buy for her daughter, but relented on the grounds that it gave Katie somewhere private to talk to her father on the rare occasions that he called. Robin's impulse was to call her mother again, but could already hear her mother's voice inside her head screaming, "Why in hell are you calling me again? Hang up and call the damn cops!"

Robin carefully picked up the receiver. There was no dial tone. Instead, there was a steady buzzing sound followed closely by a recorded female voice that said, "If you would like to make a call please hang up and dial again. If you need help, hang up and then dial your operator."

Shit! Robin thought. There was a phone off the hook somewhere else in the house—in the kitchen or living room, most likely. Her intruder had probably taken it off the hook just in case he was heard while doing whatever it was he was doing.

Bet you didn't count on a cell phone, did you? Robin thought. Only her cell phone was in her own bedroom. She would have to go get it.

Robin went to Katie's door and listened. She heard nothing through the wood. Carefully she unlocked and opened the door. She slowly, ever-so-slowly, peered around the corner until she could see the dining area and then the living room. No one was there. Good.

Robin wanted to lock Katie's door, but realized there was no way to do it without making noise. Instead she left the door open a crack before creeping down the short hallway and into her own bedroom. Her cell phone was exactly where she had left it, recharging atop her dresser. She slipped the phone out of the charging stand, caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and noticed she wasn't wearing much. She snatched up sweat-pants and a t-shirt from a pile by her bed, then carefully crept back to Katie's room. Only after the door was safely locked again did Robin dare to turn on her phone.

It beeped loudly.

Damn you to Hell, Motorola, she thought, stuffing the phone into her unworn sweatpants. Then Robin stood still, listening for activity, just as she imagined her laundry-room adversary had done earlier. She heard none.

She moved to the window where the reception would be better and began scrolling through her phone's menu of numbers. *Thank God for programable dialing,*

she thought, coming to the one she wanted.

"Switchboard," a female voice said from the receiver.

"Yes," Robin whispered, praying they could hear her. "I need you to connect me with... with..." *Dammit, she didn't even know the man's first name.* "With Officer Gilarakis. The security man."

"One moment," the operator said.

There was silence on the line, then a few moments later she heard a ring from the speaker. It rang three times before there was an answer.

"Hello?" a sleepy sounding woman said.

"Mrs. Gilarakis?" Robin asked.

"Yeah. Who's this?"

"Robin Hillcrest, from Apartment K-8. I need your husband to get over here right now. There's an intruder in my house."

There was a pause, the sound of motion and then of a door opening through the receiver.

"Robin, I'm sorry, but I'm not sure where Frank is," Mrs. Gilarakis said. "He stepped out for a smoke around twenty minutes ago, but I don't see him out front now. Might have gone to the store, but he probably had to walk around the long way, cause they patched the damn fence."

The chill around Robin's heart went even colder now. "Twenty minutes ago, you say?" she asked.

"Yeah. You better call 9-1-1. Or I can do it for you, if you want. And I'll tell Frank to get over there when he comes back. I'm sure he'll just be a minute."

"No, thanks," Robin said distantly. "I think I already know where he is."

"Huh?" Mrs. Gilarakis said, but Robin had already lowered the phone from her ear.

So, the apple truly doesn't fall far from the tree, Robin thought. *Well, this tree's getting chopped.*

Robin pulled on her T-shirt and sweatpants and dropped the phone into her pocket. She was still frightened, but found that this layer of fear was now flooded over with a layer of anger. This son of a bitch had been peeping in her windows for who knew how long. Now he was in her house. He'd been inside her daughter's room! There was no way she could let him do that and get away. It was her job to track down thieves.

Officer Frank Gilarakis was just one more thief—a thief of her peace of mind.

She returned to the door and listened again, but still heard nothing. Slowly, Robin unlocked the door and turned its handle. No one burst through it suddenly, as she half-expected. She opened it and paused to listen again. Her senses strained against the darkness for any sign of him, but the only sounds she heard were Katie's soft snoring behind her.

She forced herself to take a step into the hall, toward the foyer. Then another. Her eyes remained locked on the short hall to the living room where at any moment, she expected Officer Frank Gilarakis to leap at her from the shadows. He didn't.

Robin paused at the opening of the foyer, then slowly peered around the corner into the main room. It was dim, though the blinds of her back door were open. She didn't see anyone there. And there were no shadows from the kitchen. Evidently he was still in the laundry room. This fact was confirmed when she heard the ping of her dryer door opening.

That sick son of a bitch, she thought. That's why he was in the laundry room. He was going through their clothes. She hated to think what he might be doing with them, though she was somehow sure Janice would have had a ready visual aid, had she been here.

How the hell did he get in the house anyway? Did security officers have a master key, or something?

It didn't matter. The police would have to sort it out later, after they had arrested him. And while Officer Gilarakis was busy in the laundry room, Robin knew just what she could do to provide the police with the proof he had been there.

Robin tip-toed back through the foyer, but instead of going toward the kitchen she detoured over to the end-table by the couch. She took what she came for from the end-table and turned back toward the kitchen.

Fear was building in her again. Her vision was beginning to tunnel on her and she could feel her legs shaking. *Why hadn't she said Yes, when her pa offered her a gun?* Instead, she slid a butcher knife from its block on the counter.

She moved to the edge of the open laundry room door, took a deep breath, then stepped fully into the door frame.

"Say cheese, asshole!" she shouted. The dim figure within the laundry room glanced up just as Robin snapped his picture with her *Polaroid*. Robin squinted through

the viewfinder to protect her eyes from the flash, but she was already on the move before the camera had finished spitting out its picture. She dashed through the kitchen, through the living room and was nearly to the bedroom corridor when she heard a cry of anger behind her followed by a tremendous crash. Gilarakis had evidently plowed into the door frame in blind pursuit. He wouldn't be able to see clearly for a while, which was what Robin was counting on.

Robin flung herself through Katie's door, slamming it behind her as she passed. Then she spun, the camera and film swinging on its neck-strap, and locked the door before looking around the room for something with which to brace it. She took the chair from Katie's little desk and tried to wedge it under the doorknob, but it was far too small to reach. Robin tossed it aside.

"What are you doing, mommy?" Katie said. She was sitting up in her bed, looking at Robin with wide startled eyes.

"Katie, honey, get under your bed."

"What's happening?"

"Just do it, okay? Get under your bed right now! And don't come out until I tell you to!" She didn't mean to scream, but she didn't have time for guessing games here. Katie did as she was told, rolling out of bed and then underneath it.

"Is there a tornado?" Katie asked.

"No, baby. Just stay there."

The doorknob began to turn in a violent jerking manner. Gilarakis was fighting against its lock with no success. He had made it farther than Robin had expected at this point. Then something slammed into the door from the other side. She had hoped he would just run away from the apartment, but in retrospect that had been a false hope. Now that he knew she had proof of his identity, he wouldn't leave until he took it from her.

He slammed into the door again, growling loudly this time. Robin saw the door bounce on its hinges. Another slam like that and he might get in, lock or no lock. Her eyes darted around the room, looking for anything that could brace the door better than the chair. Katie's bookshelf was against the wall to Robin's left. It wasn't large, but it was solid oak—a gift from Katie's woodworking grandpa. She pulled at the shelf to tip it up on one end just as Gilarakis slammed against the other side of it a third time. She heard the door crack loudly, but it held.

"I have a knife, dammit! I have a knife!" she screamed. She should have called the police first, she thought. They might have made it by now. What had ever possessed her to try this?

Robin heaved against the shelf, tipping it up and leaning it over so that its corner coming to rest on the white painted surface of the door. She expected there to be a fourth assault on the door from the other side; and indeed, she heard a door being broken open, but it was not Katie's bedroom door. It sounded like the front door of her apartment.

"Freeze! Police!" a voice shouted. This was closely followed by a loud wail of anger from directly outside the door. The wail seemed to recede for a moment, moving away from the door. Then, following a high pitched *klonking* sound, like that of a wooden bat colliding with a hardened object, it abruptly stopped. Something heavy fell to the floor and then a low groaning could be heard.

"Ms. Hillcrest? Ms. Hillcrest, are you there?" said a strong voice from the hallway.

Robin was swaying on her feet, but managed to say, "Yes. I'm here."

"It's Officer Gilarakis, ma'am."

"Yes, I know who it was," she said.

"You called my wife a few minutes ago?"

Suddenly, Robin's legs gave out and she slumped to the floor, tears pouring involuntarily from her eyes. Katie crawled from under the bed and into her mother's arms. Robin held her tightly, sobbing into the girl's hair.

"Mommy," Katie said. "Why does your camera have a picture of Mr. Gully sticking out of it?"

the end