



# THE HIDDEN PLACE

— a short story by —

**Stoney deGeyter**



## DENIAL

A cloud of acidic steam fills my mouth with the sweet taste of antifreeze. A beam of light fails to penetrate the night that surrounds me. The single headlight, absent its counterpart, reflects off the raindrops and filters back through the shattered windshield. Inches above my head, the downpour beats against the top of the car like an out-of-control drum solo. It does little to drown out the blaring horn.

I blink away the glare burning into my retinas, but the dizzying stream of audiovisual chaos paralyzes me.

*This is not happening.*

I squeeze my eyes closed, but my surroundings remain unchanged.

The throbbing in my head draws attention to warm liquid dribbling down the side of my face. I reach to investigate, and pain shoots through my skull. The liquid is sticky between my fingers and red in the faint glow of the lone headlight.

*Blood?*

I struggle to make sense of the world around me. A tree occupies what was once the passenger seat, and a man is squeezed between it and me. Dangling from somewhere above, a wire flops around like an unchecked fire hose, sparks shooting in all directions. No, that's not a tree beside me; it's a utility pole.

*Did I do this?*

The seatbelt pulls tight between my breasts. My fingers fumble with the release until I'm free from its grip. I tug on the door handle and push, but it remains in place. I use what little leverage I have and ram my shoulder into the door. Stuck.

Raising my elbow, I bash it into the window beside me. The glass crumbles like a dry pastry. I scramble through the opening, but an old bit of knowledge gnaws at me. There's something I'm supposed to do—or not do—around cars and electricity. I push the unremembered thought aside and launch myself off the car, careful not to touch it and the ground at the same time.

Landing face-first, I'm instantly soaked and half-buried in muck. I pull myself up and look for a path of escape.

*My companion!*

I dive back through the window, keeping my feet off the ground. Wrestling my hands under his armpits, I pull. He's 190 pounds of dead weight.

Shoving fear and common sense aside, I plant a foot in the mud and press the other knee into the side of the door. With my arms wrapped around him, I push against the car for leverage. Maneuvering him into the driver's seat, I jam my foot against the door and pull with every bit of strength I have left.

The crackling wire on the other side of the car grabs my attention. Everything around me slows to a crawl as the wire slap against the vehicle.

*What did I do to deserve this?*

A loud pop echoes through my ears, and I'm blinded by a white flash. The electrical current surges through my arms that still cling to my companion and into my chest. The jolt blasts me back into the mud.

*This is not happening.*

Darkness overtakes me.

## GUILT

My eyes flutter open. Raindrops pelt my face like some sort of sick water torture. The horn, the headlight, and the sizzling and snapping of electricity make their way into my consciousness.

*What have I done?*

My lungs are desperate for air. The weight of another body crushes me. I heave him off, and air rushes into my lungs. I'm breathing now, but is he? "Don't be dead."

I grab his wrist. He can't die. I don't know who he is, but somehow, I know that my life is intrinsically tied to his.

The electrical wire slaps, hisses, and sizzles. Another ear-splitting pop and flash as it connects with the car's metal roof.

The man has no pulse, yet my own heart races. I place my head on his chest. No heartbeat.

"No! No, no, no, no, no!"

Instinct takes over. I hoist myself up and straddle him. Lacing my fingers together, one hand on top of the other, I place them on his chest and deliver a series of compressions.

I count them out. Thirty compressions and two breaths into his lungs. Thirty compressions, two breaths.

"Breathe, dammit."

Thirty compressions, two breaths.

Everything around me fades. I'm on autopilot. *When did I learn CPR?*

Thirty compressions, two breaths.

*Please, God, don't do this to me.*

I resist the urge to beat the life back into him. *Does that even work?*

Thirty compressions, two breaths.

My arms burn.

Thirty compressions, two breaths.

*I won't have death on my conscience.*

Thirty compressions, two breaths.

I can't save him. I grab both sides of his face and scream. Ten seconds of ear-splitting desperation escapes through my vocal cords.

I collapse, plunging myself back into the mud. The warmth of my tears contrasts against the cold rain slapping against my face.

*Oh, God, what have I done?*

From deep within, the connection that links our lives together begins to sever. I don't know how or why, but I'm convinced that his death will be followed by another.

But whose? I don't even know my own name.

## ANGER

“Crap! Crap, crap, crap, crap, crap.” I close my eyes and calm my breathing before exploding again. “CRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAP!”

“Do you mind?” The man sits up and places his head in his hands.

“What the—! Don’t scare me like that.”

He cocks his head. “Like what? What happened?”

“I guess you missed the whole getting into an accident thing. And almost dying.”

“Feels like I died in a boxing ring.”

“That was me saving your life.” I wait for a ‘thank you,’ but it never comes. “I’m fine, by the way.”

I run my hands up and down my legs and over my chest, just to be sure. Nothing broken.

He climbs to his feet. “Let’s get out of the rain.” He pulls me to my feet, crushing my hand with his grip.

“Where’re we going?”

He points across the road. “There.” In the darkness beyond is the remnants of an old house, survived only by a crumbling brick hearth and a half-rotten bus shelter out front. We duck under its battered roof, careful not to touch the walls. The slightest provocation will likely cause it to collapse. At least we’re out of the rain. Mostly.

Through the glow of the headlight emanating across the road, I inspect my companion. He’s five inches taller, making him just under six feet. His hair is thick and dark and his beard neatly trimmed. “Listen, whoever you are. I don’t know what happened. I don’t even know your name.”

“To be honest, I don’t either,” he says. “I was hoping you could tell me. You don’t remember anything at all?”

I narrow my eyes. “You deaf? That’s what I just said.”

He raises his hand in surrender.

“All I remember is waking up and saving your life. Again, you’re welcome.”

He faces the wrecked vehicle. “Were you drunk?”

I grit my teeth. “No.” *Jerk.*

He looks at me quizzically, then reaches for my face.

I slap his hand away.

“You got mud on you.”

I wipe my cheek, and a clod of mud smears on my hand. *Why did he have to be right?* I step out of the shelter and scrub the grime off in the rain.

“You should stay out of the rain.” He pulls my shirt.

I shove him. “Don’t touch me. Look, for all I know, we were on our way to your murder den. Let’s just get help.”

“Fine. I’ll go see what I can find in the car. Stay put.”

I watch him trot across the road. “Watch out for the electrical wire,” I shout.

He flings his hand over his head, waving me away.

*Asshole.*

In the ambient glow of the headlight, I watch his shadowy figure move around the vehicle. He sticks his head through the driver’s window, pops out again, then steps around to the back. The trunk opens, and I lose sight of him before he reappears.

He jogs back across the road. “I found this. Must be yours.” He holds out a sweater.

I snatch it and yank it over my head. “Find anything else?”

He holds up a wallet. “Just this.”

## DEPRESSION

“At least you know your name, James. I’m still nobody.” The rain has stopped, and we trudge down the middle of the road, the dotted yellow line barely visible. “You didn’t find a purse or anything else in the car?”

“Nothing.”

I slow my steps and scuff my feet along the asphalt. “Seems weird that I’d leave home without a phone or ID.”

“I went all around the car but without a light, couldn’t see much. We’ll go back tomorrow. In daylight.”

“You’re right; it’s no use.” Despite the sweater, I shiver in my wet clothes. My head throbs and my boots dig into my calves. “Are you sure we’re going the right way?”

“Based on the position of the vehicle, this is the direction we were headed.”

“But we don’t know if we were driving toward or away from civilization.” I wrap my arms across my chest and squeeze.

“Have you remembered anything?” He asks. “Where you live? Favorite food?”

“Not a thing.” I drop my head.

“Yeah, I get it.”

“It’s not that. My heart aches, and I don’t know why. I’m wet and cold, and neither of us has any idea where we are. And to top it off, I’ve got mud and rocks digging into my leg.”

“Want help getting them off?”

“They’re too wet. I’ll never get my feet back into them, and I’m not walking barefoot.”

“I guess we can just be grateful to be alive.”

I shrug.

James stares off into the distance. “Check that out. C’mon.” He grabs my hand and yanks me along. We trudge forward, keeping an eye on the light peeking through the thin forest of trees. “There’s got to be a driveway nearby.”



The clouds part and moonlight shines through, almost as if God himself is showing us the way. Then a cold wind pushes through my wet clothes, sending shivers throughout my limbs.

*Cruel trick, God.*

“There’s a mailbox.” James pulls me. He squints to read the words painted on the side. “McCallum. Hey, that’s me.” He releases my hand and digs into his back pocket, pulling out the wallet he found in the car. He angles it around until the moonlight illuminates the reflective letters just right. “Same numbers on the mailbox. This has gotta be my house, right?”

“*Your* house?” My voice cracks. I didn’t expect this. I scan the road and woods for alternatives, but we truly are in the middle of nowhere.

## AWAKENING

I follow James down the long, winding driveway, assessing my options. I have none. The light he spotted through the woods is a single-bulb porch lamp attached to a small cabin. The surrounding area is overgrown with weeds like it hadn't been used in years. There are no vehicles out front, no garage or shed in view, and no light seeping through the windows.

All five of my senses are in overdrive, tuned to every detail around me. A split on the porch rail, the smell of a pond or a nearby swamp, crickets chirping in the distance, the faint hum of a utility meter. The whole place feels like a living entity.

James tries the doorknob. "Locked."

He pulls up a welcome mat revealing an unfaded patch of wood stain but no key. The mat drops, and he feels along the top of the doorframe. "Hmmm." His empty hands fall to his side.

James steps off the porch and roots around the overgrown flowerbed, moving plants left and right with his foot. He reaches down and comes up with a rock. "Got it." Flipping it over, a hidden compartment opens, and a key drops into his palm. James smiles, holding it up for me to see.

I follow him back to the porch, uncertain of the wisdom of going inside but also unsure of the wisdom of not.

The door unlocks, and James steps into the dark cabin, feeling along the wall for a switch. An overhead bulb reveals a small living area. "Let's get out of these wet clothes." He points down a dark hallway. "Bedroom's probably this way. C'mon, let's see if I have anything that fits you."

"I'll, uh... I'll wait here."

"Suit yourself." He shuts the door then disappears down the hall.

The cabin is tidier than I expected. A tan couch sits on a dark brown carpet floor facing an oversize television. Two large stereo speakers stand like sentries on either side—I assume there are no neighbors to complain about noise. Magazines and remote controls are placed in perfect symmetry on two end tables. Curtains from the 1970s are pulled tight in front of the window.

The kitchen opens up on the far side of the living room. Out of nowhere, a fresh burst of energy surges from within me. I'm now certain a rescue is imminent, though I can't imagine what it will look like. Is this where I'll find my memories? Will someone come to my aid? There is something familiar about this place, and I sense I'm where I need to be.

I flip on the kitchen light. Stacked on a small breakfast table are unopened utility bills and a current catalog for home medical supplies, all addressed to James. The sink is clear of dirty dishes, and the fridge holds only a half-empty jar of pickles and a package of tortillas.

A closet catches my eye. My stomach rumbles. Maybe it's a food pantry. I tug the handle, but the door doesn't open. A latch above holds it in place. I slide the bolt and pull.

A musty odor attacks my nostrils. Instead of food-stocked shelves, a set of wooden stairs leads down into a cellar. The kitchen light doesn't penetrate the darkness beyond. *I'm not that hungry.*

Tacked to the cellar door are a dozen pictures, a necklace, a colored hair scrunchie—complete with strands of hair, and a notecard with a distinct smell of perfume. My shoulders sag. *He has a girlfriend.* A paper with large hand-drawn letters surrounded by doilies declares her name. *Karyn.*

I study the pictures, and they register familiarity. All distance shots of the same woman at random locations. Shopping for groceries, riding a bicycle, getting out of her car, entering a bank, strolling through a park. The shots are innocent yet magnificent in capturing the mundane aspects of her life. They are beautiful works of art. She's his idol to be worshiped.

"I found some clothes you can change into," James booms from the hallway. My face flushes, having almost been caught peeking into his hidden altar. Pushing the cellar door closed, I glance at the pictures again and freeze. The photos *are* familiar. That's me. *I'm Karyn.*

## RECONSTRUCTION

James holds out a sweatshirt and sweatpants as he approaches. “Best I could find. There’s a bathroom down the hall you can change in.”

I grab the dry clothes but really want to spring into his arms. Knowledge of our pre-accident connection fills me with hope. Memories or not, I know everything will be okay. The pictures are all the evidence I need. He and I have a history. “James and Karyn. I like the sound of that.”

His smile drops but returns just as fast. He glances at the cellar door beside me.

“It’s sweet,” I tell him.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“How long have we been dating?” I open the cellar door and gaze into his eyes. “Though, I never would have pegged me as a ‘Karyn.’ These shots are amazing.” I scan the pictures again, but this time something about them seems... off.

“You weren’t supposed to find those,” he says. “But I guess it was inevitable.”

I cock my head. “You remember?”

“It was the easiest way to lure you here. You and her will be my first twofer.”

I struggle to process his words. *This isn’t right.*

James’ eyes grow dark. He boxes me in with nowhere to go but down the stairs behind me. I need to get past him, but my legs won’t comply.

James grabs my neck and squeezes. I claw at his fingers, desperate to keep him from robbing me of life. Then his grip loosens, and he shoves me back. I fall down the descending stairs, and, in a matter of seconds, my life flashes before my eyes.

*My life!*

Recent memories dislodge from their hiding place and ambush my consciousness—images of meeting James in a nightclub. He invites me to come home with him. I say yes.

*Why?*

The images flash to an earlier time. I've seen James before. I got his attention and flirted a bit, leaving him wanting more.

Flashing back further, images of a crowded bar fill my head. I glimpse the man I now know as James, but I didn't know him then. This was the first I'd laid eyes on him. He's talking to a familiar-looking black woman. It's the woman in the pictures. *She's Karyn.*

The two of them leave the club together. My heart aches, but I don't know why.

I leave the drinks and squeeze between the throngs of people, making my way to the door. Searching up and down the street, James and Karyn are gone. *Who is she?*

Another flash, and I remember everything.

*Karyn is my sister.*

Reality floods back as I tumble down the stairs. Reaching out in desperation, I grab hold of the rail and hang on for dear life. My back slams into the wall and my feet thump-thump-thump down the steps.

The door above me slams. The unmistakable sound of the lock sliding into place sends a chill through my bones.

I calm my breathing and process my restored memories. Everything's okay. Tonight didn't go as planned, but I know what I have to do. I trained for this.

## ACCEPTANCE

A muffled voice echoes from deep within the cellar.

I feel my way down. “Karyn?”

“Mmmmm mnm mmmmmmm!”

A pull string brushes against my face. I tug, and a dim glow brings the dank cellar to life.

“Oh my God!”

Karyn sits in the dirt, her arms wrapped around a pole behind her. An agglomeration of emotions passes through me like an unstoppable train. I am Denial. I am Guilt, Anger, Depression, and Awakening. I am Reconstruction. I’m all of these at once.

The metaphorical train passes.

*I am Acceptance.*

I rush over and fling my arms around my sister. “I didn’t know if I’d see you again.”

Tears stream down my face.

She buries her face into my neck.

I tug the gag from her mouth. “Has he hurt you?”

“Not yet. How did you find me, Nia?” She scans the stairs. “Are the police coming?”

“No. No police. It’s just me.”

Her eyes widen. “What do you mean?”

“I turned in my badge and gun.”

“*You quit the force?* Wh—why would you do that?”

“You and I both know how the law works. It would be too lenient on this guy.”

Her eyes narrow. She knows I’m up to something. “What’s the plan, Detective?”

“I told you, I’m not a detective anymore.” I pull out a small pouch wedged between my boot and leg. My lock-pick set.

“I’m *still* a prosecutor,” she says.

I work the lock that’s keeping her chained to the pole. “Are you? Every cop in the state is looking for you, and where are they? My captain pulled me off the case, but I found you before they did. The system is broken, and you know it.”



“That may be, but I’ve taken an oath to uphold it.” She rubs her wrists. “But if we have to kill him to get away, I’m okay with that. Got any more toys in those boots of yours?”

I smile and wink.

I exchange my wet skirt and blouse with the clothes James handed me earlier while catching Karyn up on how I found her. “Things would have gone better had I not lost my memory, but we can improvise.”

Karyn grabs my hand and squeezes. “The important thing is we’re together, Nia. And together, we are strong.”

We wait for James to return. After an hour, I begin to wonder if he will. Finally, the door opens at the top of the stairs. I feel Karyn tense up beside me.

James drops two steps and watches us from a distance. He holds a snub-nose .38 revolver.

Karyn sits just as I found her, hands tucked behind the pole. I’m curled up next to her. “What are you going to do to us? Please. Just let us go.”

“You can drop the act,” he says. “I didn’t notice before, but now I see the resemblance. You hunted me, Nia, and that makes you dangerous. Stand up. Both of you.”

And just like that, our plan is shot.

I pull myself to my feet and help Karyn up. She keeps her arms wrapped around the pole behind her.

“I came for my sister,” I say. “Just let us go.”

“That’s not gonna happen.”

James drops several more steps down, keeping the revolver trained on us. He speaks in hushed, measured tones. “I don’t intend on killing either of you—yet. I have other plans. But if you give me any trouble, Nia, I’ll shoot your sister in the head and feed her to you over the next six months.”

My fists clench. I believe every word he says.

“Someone will find us,” Karyn says.

“Not here, they won’t. James McCallum doesn’t live here anymore, and nobody’s looking for him. No one’s been to this cabin for years. Well, except me and the others I’ve lured here. So few people drive this old highway. Once I dispose of your car, no one will find you.”

James pulls back on the hammer. “Now, if you’ll be so kind, Nia, please stand over there. Face the wall.”

I step back but refuse to turn around.

James takes another step. His foot snags on the Teflon bootlace I had fastened across the stairs. Momentum pulls him forward. He crashes to the floor, letting go of the revolver.

Karyn pounces. She wraps the other shoelace around his neck and yanks. He struggles to his feet, and I lunge to help. Karyn and I jerk him back to the post, the lace digging into his neck. She ties him to the pillar.

His neck secured to the post, James pulls a knife from his waistband and swipes at us, but we’re safely out of reach. He then slashes at the Teflon cord that’s choking him but only manages to gouge his own neck. A stream of dark red blood flows down his chest.

I find the gun and aim it at his head. The hammer clicks back under the pressure of my thumb.

“Don’t.” Karyn raises her palm toward me.

“Why not? You heard what he was willing to do to us.”

“Exactly. How many other women has he preyed on?” She doesn’t wait for me to answer. “No, a quick death is too good for him. And, like he said, nobody knows about this place.”

James drops the knife and claws at the string, fighting for air.

With unsettling satisfaction, I watch him gasp. A week ago, I would have protected him and ensured he received his fair day in court. But he crossed a line—the thin line of family blood.

I lower the pistol. My eyes narrow, and I flash Karyn a devilish grin. “What do you have in mind, Prosecutor?”

“Oh, I’m no prosecutor,” Karyn sneers. Her lips curl into a menacing grin. “Today, I’m judge and jury. His death will be long and slow.” She loosens the lace around his neck, just enough to prevent suffocation.

“Devious. What happens once we’re done with him?”

Karyn grabs the knife. “Then, you and I bring the next serial-killing bastard here.”

I smile. “Our own little hidden place. What do you think, ‘James’? Sound fair to you?”

Panic spreads across his face. All he can do is gasp for air as the blood pulses from his neck.