

TRASK MANOR



A SHORT STORY



Mark L. Benson

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TRASK MANOR

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To The Boy. Your love of horror and the macabre was the inspiration for this story.

To The Girl. Your passion for the English Language and writing skills continue to be an inspiration for me.

To The Wife. Your loving support and encouragement drive me forward in all my endeavors.

I love you all.



Observation 1: The Gardener, Dismissed

The landscape truck hadn't even cleared the drive before Warren turned his fury to the lawn, muttering venom at the manicured sprawl. What he didn't get to say to the gardener, he now spat at the ground.

Camilla stood behind the thick velour curtains of the second-floor window, clutching a spiral-bound notebook against her chest, watching him pace the lawn like a wounded general surveying a battlefield. Below, the stretch of perfect grass was freckled with divots—small, defiant wounds left by squirrel claws. He circled the perimeter as if expecting the creature to reappear, emerging from a hole like a conjured demon.

He was still in his robe, the dark red silk one embroidered with his personal monogram: a hawk's talon, black-threaded and hooked mid-clutch, stitched over the heart like a warning. His cane stabbed at the soil with each step, occasionally swinging wide as if he might beat the dirt into obedience. A twitch had returned to his left hand—the one still numb from the stroke—making him look like a marionette dancing under someone else's pull.

Camilla turned from the window before he could look up and see her. She made a note in the margin of yesterday's page:

Gardener fired (Tuesday). "Incompetence dressed as kindness," W. said. Blames him for enabling the squirrel.

She paused, tapped the pen against her lip, then added:

W. speaks of the animal as if it's sentient. A trespasser with strategy. A spy.

Downstairs, a door slammed. Warren's footsteps followed shortly after—*drag-limp-tap, drag-limp-tap*—accompanied by a labored breath that entered the gallery before he did. He brought with him the familiar scent of soil and iron. Camilla didn't flinch. She rarely did anymore.

"You saw him leave?" he asked, voice dry as ash.

Camilla nodded without looking up from her notes. "Truck was halfway to the expressway when you started cursing at the rhododendrons," she remarked, jotting something down in her notebook. "Looks like you'll need to find yet another landscaper who won't join your ongoing battle against the squirrels."

He huffed, then poured himself something from the decanter he kept behind the taxidermied owl. Amber liquid sloshed over his trembling fingers.

"It's outright defiance," Warren grumbled. "I explicitly tell them to eliminate every nut-burying pest from the premises, yet not a single one makes an effort." He took a sip from his crystal highball glass, smacking his lips and flashing his teeth in a snarl as he swallowed.

"This last one, he collaborated. They talked, you know, the groundskeeper and that vermin. They signaled to each other."

Camilla lifted her pen but didn't write that down. She watched his reflection in the glass over a grotesque landscape painting—trees shaped like spines, rivers like veins. She'd long since learned his tempers had more heat than depth, and boredom with the act goaded her to prod him.

"Maybe it just wants to live."

That earned a stare. His right eye twitched. "It wants dominion."

They stood like that for a while, silence stretching between them like a taut wire. Camilla broke first, shifting her focus back to her notebook, conceding the standoff to her employer.

Warren acknowledged his triumph with a snort and shifted his focus to the gallery floor. It was cluttered with crates—some already opened, others still sealed. He moved like a man only partially stitched to the pre-

sent. The left side of his body lagged half a beat behind the right, forcing his gait into a dragging, asymmetric rhythm that the cane barely corrected.

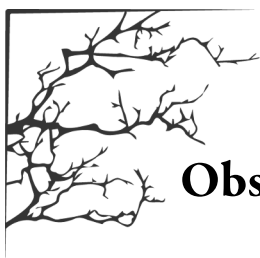
She exited the gallery and wandered the western hallway, increasingly annoyed by his quiet scrutiny of her efforts. For the past eight years, working for Warren Trask had been a continuous struggle, requiring Camilla to skillfully manage his ever-changing moods. She was confident that her work surpassed what he expected, having witnessed countless employees come and go, dismissed for the most trivial reasons. Yet she stayed, driven by an inexplicable intrigue with this tyrannical bully of a person. This fascination had her documenting Warren's darkness with the same precision she reserved for ancient relics—and perhaps just as perilously.

The stroke had spared his voice—when he barked, walls listened—but it had stolen other things: the steady hand he once used to sign away properties and marriages alike, the balance that once let him stride through his gallery like a god, and the words he now had to fish for with visible frustration. Camilla had seen him weep in rage over a dropped spoon, then thunder orders at staff with the force of a courtroom verdict. He was a man in decline, but not silence. His body was betraying him—but his fury had only grown sharper, more concentrated. When he shouted, it was like hearing thunder roll through a coffin.

She returned to the gallery, giving Warren ample time to complete his impromptu inspection. As she walked by one of the security monitors, which illuminated the corner of every room in the manor, she spotted him once more—Warren, captured by the cameras, standing on the lawn.

Staring at the trees.

Waiting.



Observation 2: Noonday Reckoning

The shouting floated down the west corridor—muffled, frantic, all consonants.

Camilla looked up from where she was taking notes in the gallery's side room. She paused her pen, tilted her head.

Glass shattered.

Then came the voice, hoarse and furious: "I will not eat forest debris!"

She sighed.

Another tantrum.

By the time she reached the dining hall, tension still clung to the air like smoke.

The young chef—pale green apron tied neat, sneakers gleaming with the kind of confidence only inexperience can buy—stood frozen at the long table, eyes wide with disbelief. A plate lay shattered on the floor. Crushed arugula and pecans glistened like it had rained oil and resentment—the salad exploded like springtime roadkill, scattering leaves, nuts, and panko-crusted fish fillet without direction.

Warren Trask loomed nearby, leaning on his cane like a weapon. His face was flushed an ugly purple beneath the thin tissue of his skin.

"This—" he gestured at the mess, his hand trembling slightly, "is bait. It's not a meal. I asked for food, not a goddamn foraging pile."

The chef stammered something inaudible.

Warren cut her off with a dismissive wave, then turned, muttering as he limped down the hallway. "Useless. All of them. That demon rodent in the yard eats better than I do."

He disappeared around the corner, his voice still echoing.

Camilla stepped slowly inside.

The maid was already crouched with a dustpan, moving with practiced calm.

"Welcome to lunch at the manor," Camilla said dryly.

The chef blinked too fast, meeting her eyes. "He—he just snapped. I didn't mean—I didn't know—"

"He doesn't eat nuts," the maid said without looking up. "Thinks they're a personal insult since the squirrel. Won't touch trout either." She pursed her lips and, in a mocking impression, added, "It has a face that remembers."

The chef opened her mouth to respond, then closed it. Her cheeks were bright red.

Camilla watched as the maid swept up the remnants of the meal, steam still faintly rising from the trout. "Looked good to me."

"Too good," the maid replied. "That's the problem." She straightened up, giving the young cook a knowing smile, one that came from having witnessed countless similar situations. "I have no doubt you're a skilled chef, but if you want to stay here, avoid trying to win him over with your culinary talents. He doesn't trust anything that wasn't boiled, peeled, or packaged before Clinton's second term."

She walked into the kitchen, tossing the shattered plate into the garbage, while the chef trailed behind her, looking both puzzled and annoyed.

"Was that... normal?"

The maid hung the broom and dustpan in place on the back of the pantry door. "For him? That was practically a compliment."

"So, what, he hates salad? Or just people who make it?"

"Oh, he hates everyone. Salad's just an excuse."

"Well, that's comforting," the chef remarked, rolling her eyes as she lifted the cutting board, still littered with bits of the nut garnish she'd sliced, and tossed it into the stainless-steel sink. "Does he throw things often, or should I feel special?"

A smirk spread across the maid's face. "Don't take it personally. He used to throw worse things at congressmen."

The chef's brow furrowed. "He was—what? Important?"

Camilla and the maid exchanged a look.

The maid leaned against the counter, wiping her hands. "Oh, honey. Warren Trask used to own the night." She said it like the man she'd mentioned was a different Warren. A ghost still wandering the upstairs halls.

"In the '90s he ran half of River North from a cell phone the size of a cinder block. Bought up buildings, kicked out families, made deals over steak and scotch. You think he's a mean son-of-a-bitch now? You should have known him then." She paused, allowing the chef a chance to avoid delving into Warren's history, yet she appeared captivated by the story.

"So, he's always been an asshole real estate prick?"

"Real estate was just his beginning. He lost that business to wife number one in the divorce. Then, he turned to art—or maybe it turned to him. One of those early evictions gave him his first valuable piece. Nobody knew what it was worth until after he made it disappear."

The maid gave Camilla a small nod of mutual understanding. Camilla picked up the thread.

"That's when he started The Gallery Ebonthall. Private parties for politicians, actors, rich kids with trust funds and bad intentions. Masked exhibits. He became the gatekeeper for Chicago's art collectors, and he was damned sure not to lose this empire the way he lost the first." She paused. "The second wife took his children. The third, the South Beach condo. But the gallery? Untouchable. Each one swore they'd destroy him on the way out."

The maid gave a sharp grin. "The last one came the closest. Slipped something into his drink. Some kind of French poison. Nearly finished the job."

The chef's eyes went wide.

"Saved by the maid," the older woman added, "though no one ever got a bonus for it."

Camilla gave a shrug. "The stroke left him with the arm twitch and cane. The rest never really came back."

The kitchen fell quiet for a moment. The maid, gentler now, put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "If you stay, cook beige things. Salt, butter, no garnish. No jokes about squirrels. And whatever you do—don't leave food on the patio. She must not be treated with any kindness."

"She?"

Camilla gave a small, private smile. "You'll know her when you see her."

And in the window, far behind them, something small and still clung to the garden wall.

Watching.

Waiting.



Observation 3: The Eastern Europe Collection

The new collection had arrived in crates stamped with false customs markings and smelled faintly of mildew mixed with copper and incense. She'd begun unpacking the contents hours ago. The main gallery was silent, lit by a shaft of afternoon sunlight through the curtains and the occasional flicker from the fireplace Warren insisted keep burning, even in June.

Camilla unwrapped another canvas from its waxed paper.

It was small—about the size of a child's school portrait. The frame was carved wood, scorched black. The canvas swam with shades of crimson and rust, surrounding a lone figure staring straight through the viewer, mouth half-open in a silent howl. In the background, wooden scaffolding loomed, its purpose unmistakable despite the deliberate blur. The figure's irises were too detailed. Too lifelike. She leaned closer, and they seemed to shift slightly from the flicker of the fireplace.

She laughed under her breath and jotted a note in her sketchbook.

"Final Moment of an Atrocity Witness" – artist unknown. Possibly Croatian, pre-1970. Medium: oil on primed vellum. Frame appears to have been burned. Purposefully?"

She took a sip of wine—Chianti this time, bottle already half gone—and moved to the next crate. The house groaned.

Not settling. Not wind.

A pulse.

The repetitive tapping of Warren's cane on the marble floor signaled his approach. It resonated down the hallway, irregular, like Morse code

with a stutter. Camilla appreciated his built-in early warning system and the time it afforded her to prepare, relieved that his condition prevented any stealthy surprises.

He came into view through the archway, still dressed in silk pajamas and his monogrammed robe, one slipper half off his heel. He looked at the painting in her hand and flinched.

"That one," he said, voice lower than before. "Don't leave it where it can watch me."

She raised an eyebrow. "Those eyes do seem to follow one around, don't they?"

He didn't answer.

Instead, he walked the gallery in slow circles, peering behind frames, ducking low beside statues, muttering to himself about scratching sounds in the vents and something watching from the garden.

Camilla set the painting aside and returned to her work, heart thrumming with a rhythm she pretended was caffeine.

She'd witnessed his fluxing paranoia before. Especially when Trask Manor grew too loud with memory and silence. But today felt different. The mansion was leaning forward. Waiting. Something was shifting. And she wanted—no, needed—to know what came next.

Behind her, Warren muttered again. Something about claws. Something about the eyes in the grass.

She found the invoice she had set aside to discuss with him, the one with the error. A crate was missing from the manifest—no artist name, no description, no estimated value—and Warren didn't tolerate 'uncatalogued mysteries' unless they were his. Camilla knew exactly what such a gap meant, but the game required her to tilt her head, feign puzzlement, and pretend she hadn't already guessed which law he was sidestepping. As she approached, she watched his body twitch as a tremor ran the length of his body.

"There's a discrepancy," she said, holding out the clipboard. "One crate wasn't on the bill of lading. No signature, no origin point. Could be a shipping error or—"

He waved her off with a growl. "Christ, not now. You people think paperwork matters when that thing is still alive."

Camilla blinked. "You mean the squirrel."

"The demon," he spat. "The little bastard's still defiling my property, digging like it's hellbent on my ruin. I saw it from the library. Dug up the hydrangeas like it owns the land."

"Maybe it's territorial."

"So am I." Warren uttered the words with his familiar ire and vitriol, but Camilla sensed another emotion alongside it—fear?

He jabbed the cane at her. "If you need paperwork, it's in the office. The desk—bottom drawer. There's a file folder marked 'Blackthorn Holdings.' Now go. I need to think."

She turned without another word, but the moment her back was to him, her pulse picked up. Warren didn't send people into his office. Not even the maid went near it unless it was dusting day, and even then, only with gloves and a sense of dread.

This was an opportunity, and she was never one to waste a good door left ajar.

The office was exactly what she expected: too warm, too dark, and filled with the sour tang of aged paper, scotch, and skin oil on leather.

The desk stood like an altar at the room's center. Mahogany, overbuilt, scarred with old rings and burns. The bottom drawer groaned as she pulled it open.

The Blackthorn Holdings folder was right where he said. The bill of sale was tucked inside, complete with serial codes and a scribbled note: *Piece #7: acquired off-catalog. Seller insisted on discretion. Payment wired in full.*

She *should* have stopped there.

She didn't.

She slid the next folder forward. GALLERY EBONTHALL: ARCHIVE.

Her pulse thundered in her ears.

Here was the opportunity she anticipated, stuffed within this folder's covers.

Inside: photographs. Dozens. Some from Warren's gallery hey-day—flashes of tuxedos and dim lights, masks and flutes of champagne. A photo of him with a Chicago alderman. Another of him beside a surrealist oil painting of a woman whose hands were where her eyes should be.

But deeper in the pile, the tone shifted.

A series of images, all taken from Warren's own back terrace.

A squirrel. Small. Ordinary. Photographed at different times of day. Mid-leap. Digging. Staring directly at the lens.

On the back of one photo, a note in his handwriting:

Same eyes. Doesn't run. Knows something.

Below that:

Where did she go before winter? How did she come back?

Another photo. Another note:

It's watching me forget. I dream of teeth.

Camilla's fingers trembled as she set that one aside.

Then she found the sketch.

Charcoal on hotel stationery, yellowed with age. Crude lines. A squirrel with too many limbs, spindly and twisted. Eyes marked only as black circles—unlabeled voids. Around it, scribbled fragments:

Coat like wet velvet

Claws not from here

Baited me

*Wants me to **REMEMBER***

Camilla stared.

Then the doorknob clicked. Had she been so engrossed that she didn't hear the incessant tapping approach?

She shoved the folders back in place, heart hammering, and turned just as Warren appeared in the doorway, leaning heavy on his cane.

His eyes narrowed.

"Did you find it?"

She nodded, holding up the bill. "It was right where you said."

He looked past her at the desk, then back.

"You didn't touch anything else?"

Camilla smiled.

"No," she lied.

Warren nodded once. "Good."

He turned and shuffled off.

As she closed the office door behind her, she whispered to herself:

"You've seen it before."

And from the garden beyond the window, foliage rippled like water as something small and silent shifted in the ivy.



Observation 4: The Onset of Night

The demand came after dinner, as it often did.

Warren sat at the long dining table, roast untouched beside him, steaming like a personal insult. He picked up his glass of wine with a trembling hand, his eyes twitching toward the gallery wing.

"I want them done tonight. All of them," he said, once again setting an impossible target.

Camilla stood at the doorway, arms crossed, her faux quilted handbag adorned with shiny gold C's hanging from her left shoulder. "It's almost eight."

He didn't look at her. "And?"

"And I don't catalog cursed art in the dark without overtime and full access to the espresso machine."

He looked up at her then—briefly. The tremor in his left hand went sharp-edged, rattling the bulb of glass against the table. "Fine. The espresso. And time and a half, as always."

He said it like a challenge, but she could hear the relief leaking out around the syllables, a faint hiss of release. The bravado was mostly muscle memory.

Camilla stepped out of the archway, positioning herself at the end of the table, her posture clearly indicating she was in control of the conversation. "You understand that the entire collection won't be finished by morning, don't you?"

"They'll be here Friday," he said, each word dragged out like furniture on concrete. "The Hungarians. You know how they are about prove-

nance." He paused to take a slow sip of the Burgundy, unbreaking his intense stare from beneath his jungly eyebrows. "They don't buy stories. They buy threats."

She rolled her eyes at his excessive dramatization of the implied danger. "You want to sell these to war criminals, fine. But if you want the catalog by Friday, you'll stay out of my way. No lurking. No commentary. Just trust that I'll deliver—like I always do."

She paused, letting the silence stretch—giving him just enough space to choose the smarter path. When he continued the standoff, she pushed with a veiled threat.

"Do it your way again, and there won't be a catalog. Or me. Your call."

She tugged the strap of her purse higher on her shoulder and returned his stubborn gaze, hoping Warren didn't notice the emptiness of her false bravado. The truth was, she wanted to stay. The longer she was in Trask Manor after dark, the more it gave. A creak in the stairwell. A whiff of old varnish and decay. And Warren himself—tired, twitching, and shedding secrets faster than the hair falling from his thinning scalp. The request granted her privilege into the evening routine of the old mansion, which was precisely what she desired.

Warren's nostrils flared beneath his beaklike nose as this time he was the first to relent, scoffing at Camilla's defiant stance. "Clearly, you're too inept to finish by morning. I expect you'll work through both nights and make damn sure our clients aren't met with disappointment."

Camilla gave a long sigh and tossed her bag onto the hall chair with deliberate apathy. "Fine. But I'm not sleeping in that crypt of a guest room again," she continued with her stipulations. "I'll take the gallery floor and a bottle of anything north of \$50 for a nightcap."

"You'll make do with whatever's in the kitchen," he countered, asserting his final say as the housemaster. She let his command stand, answering only with a shrug. Before she retreated to the gallery, he issued one last stern warning.

"Do not make a fool of me in front of our clients."

"I never have, and I never will," she replied, her back turned to him as she left him to his meal.



Trask Manor was a colossus, a hundred and twenty years of stone and wood, its jagged dormers and angular roof line giving the mansion a sinister stare, especially in twilight. Inside, it had too many corridors for one human mind to map. Camilla had counted the rooms once—thirty-eight, not including the minor ones like butler's closets and pantries—but it was common knowledge that only half those chambers had ever truly known occupancy. The rest—the sealed music room with its untouched piano, the second-floor library where leather spines gathered dust behind glass doors—were mausoleums for a kind of living that had never happened.

None of Warren's children, nor any of the ex-wives, had made it past the foyer in a decade. The guest wing might as well have been condemned, sheets still draped over the beds like shrouds.

Camilla didn't have to wait long before the mansion plunged into its eerie evening rhythm, a haunting hour when the structure seemed to transform from a mere dwelling into a sentient creature, tense and alive, holding its breath in a deafening silence. Just after sunset, Warren Trask began to move through the house with purpose—an insane battle plan unfolding in real time, concocted and fermented in the stagnant depths of his paranoia.

From the shadows of the gallery she watched, notebook at the ready, breath shallow. She didn't move. She didn't speak. Any disturbance might tip whatever fragile logic he still clung to.

He wore his old wool topcoat now, the one with the frayed cuffs and that faint brown stain on the lapel—not from his ex-wife's attempt, but from a broken wineglass in '07. He dragged it over his pajamas like makeshift armor, sleeves too long, collar stabbing at his jaw.

In his right hand: the antique dueling pistol from the study display, its barrel dull but steady.

In his left: a rusted live trap baited with raw almonds and a torn strip of what looked like silk ribbon.

Camilla scratched her ball point pen into the notebook paper:

9:34PM - W. prepping. To capture squirrel?

He was muttering—low, sharp phrase fragments flicked into the room like sparks. The vaulted ceiling and marble columns caught them, scattered them, sent them skittering back to her ears in crooked rhythms, like a record needle skipping across cracked vinyl.

"...came back this year... earlier than normal... watching me from the south hedgerow... you favor the stone basin after rain..."

He stopped near the French patio doors, staring out across the garden as though he could see through the darkness itself.

She struggled to stay hidden in the shadows, peering through the ornate iron spindles of the main staircase railing. The cool metal left faint crescents on her fingers, but she didn't shift.

"You'll never stop, will you?" His voice was low, intimate, as if speaking to an old adversary. "It's the same every year. You wait. You scheme. For my demise."

He bent stiffly, placing the rusted trap near the threshold, the ribboned bait swaying in the draft.

"Well, not this year." His voice rose, brittle with fury. "This year it ends." He leaned closer to the glass, his face a pale reflection in the dark, and rapped the gold handle of his cane against the pane in a sudden, sharp rhythm.

"Do you hear me?" he bellowed now, each word striking the glass like a hammer. "This year it ends!"

He turned abruptly, shoulders rigid beneath his old coat, and shuffled toward the dining room. Camilla held her breath as his footsteps receded, then began again—doors creaked, dishes clattered, the metallic clang of something heavy shifting. She needed to see. This was why she stayed, why she endured nights in these breathing walls: to catch him in the act of whatever madness had kept him alive this long.

She slipped from the stairwell and crept toward the dining room, stopping at the wide entrance. Warren was bent over the antique table, arranging objects with a strange, deliberate care. Four copper bowls, each overfilled with salt, anchored each corner. In the center, a fifth bowl cradled blackened peanut shells and a scorched matchbook, its lettering charred but still legible from some long-closed steakhouse.

The air smelled faintly of metal and ash, and for one heartbeat Camilla thought she heard the faintest scrape from somewhere beyond the French doors—as though something out there was listening.

Camilla slowly inched forward.

"Warren," she said carefully, "what's the salt for?"

He didn't look up.

"Boundary."

"For...?"

"The curse," he whispered.

Now he looked up, but not at her. Past her. His eyes were glassy, rimmed with broken red veins.

"You think this is madness," he said. "But this isn't the first time. Not the first year. It comes back. Every summer. Same eyes, same intent. It's choosing the moment."

Camilla's throat felt dry. "Why now?"

He laughed. Just once. Brittle as snapped bone.

"Because I drowned it," he said, voice lowering as if the walls themselves might be listening. "At one of the early rentals... back before all this." His eyes darted briefly, then fixed somewhere far behind her. "It wouldn't stop coming back. Tearing into the plaster, nesting in the beams. The woman swore it was harmless, said it had been there longer than she had." He watched the memory as if he was unfolding in front of his cloudy eyes, his stare locked and unwavering. "She said it protected them all."

"It happened the same night I... acquired my first piece," he went on, softer now, careful. "Funny how certain things stay bound together. Cer-

tain... acts." His grip tightened on the cane. "I couldn't risk it interfering some way, damaging the art, being a nuisance."

His narrow lips formed a tight, thread-like line across his jaw as he nodded, agreeing with the ideas percolating in his mind. "It was always watching, always scratching, always a pest. So, I trapped it. Took it out to the basin and held it under until it stopped moving."

He swallowed, jaw tightening. "I didn't just toss it. I buried it. Proper. Marked the spot. That was supposed to be enough."

For the first time he looked directly at her, and the broken red veins in his eyes seemed to pulse.

"But it wasn't."



That night, he didn't sleep. Camilla didn't either.

She watched him on the security monitors—seven dusty black-and-white feeds flickering in the gallery. He patrolled the halls with the pistol cradled like a newborn, whispering incantations he barely remembered.

Once, around 2:30 AM, he entered the west corridor and froze.

He stared at something off-screen.

Didn't move for seven minutes.

Then turned and vomited against the marble baseboard.

Camilla never saw what he saw.

At 4:00 AM, he returned to the dining room altar.

He placed a single walnut at the center of the burned peanut shells.

Then he whispered, his voice dropped to a hiss, steady and cold:

"You win tonight. But tomorrow...

...tomorrow, I end this."



Observation 5: The Cleansing Flame

The sleepless night had burrowed into her marrow like a parasite, its tendrils spreading through her skeleton until even her teeth ached. Less than an hour after dawn, she made her way into the kitchen, preparing to push the espresso machine to its limits.

Warren was already bustling around the yard, moving with the frantic energy and disorder of ants in a disrupted colony. She watched him over the edge of her steaming cup, aware that he too had been awake all night, and felt envious of the old man's newfound vitality.

Trudging across the back lawn in his housecoat and boots, he dragged a metal trash can and a bundle of soaked rags behind him like a soldier returning to a battlefield only he remembered. He stopped beneath the massive oak near the garden wall, where green ivy climbed halfway up the stone in a thick summer coat.

The nest was high—gnarled twigs and pale debris packed tight in the fork of two limbs, swaying just slightly in the morning wind. Warren squinted up at it like a sniper, lips moving in silent calculation.

Then he got to work.

He had planned this.

She saw that now.

The garden hose had already been coiled and repositioned, ready in case the flames got greedy. A long, heavy ladder leaned against the sturdy trunk of the oak tree. The trash can was stuffed with newspapers drenched in some kind of chemical accelerant—lighter fluid, Camilla guessed, mixed with something sharper.

And then—of course—there was the fire poker from the hearth, twisted into a makeshift torch, wrapped in burlap and twine.

He lit it with trembling hands, hissing through clenched teeth as the flame caught fast.

Like a man reenacting a myth known only to him, he ascended the ladder—painfully, shakily, one rung at a time—until he was just below the nest.

Camilla opened the sliding door a crack.

"Warren!" she shouted across the lawn, her voice tinged with trepidation at the unfolding scene. "Please don't—"

"It can't continue like this," he rasped. "Every summer, it's back to torment me, remind me of my past sins." The glow from the flames danced across his sharp features, highlighting the insanity fueling his behavior. "This must end today."

"There's a better way than—"

"She leaves parts, Camilla. Teeth. Shells. Things from the past. Things I thought I buried."

He thrust the torch into the nest.

The dry sticks ignited with a whuff, flames licking outward in a bloom of smoke and char.

The squirrels—if they had been there—did not scream.

But Warren did.

"GET OUT!" he bellowed at the flames. "GET OUT OF MY HOUSE! YOU ARE NOTHING!"

The fire rose fast, then cracked and sagged as the nest began to fall apart, raining cinders down onto the damp grass. One ember landed on his coat. Camilla's breath caught but he managed to bat it away before it could catch.

She sprinted for the hose.

By the time she got there, the nest had collapsed entirely, a blackened clump of twigs smoldering at the base of the tree.

Off the ladder, Warren stood over it, panting, triumphant.

The fire was out.
 The yard was singed but not lost.
 The mansion remained untouched.
 For now.



At lunch, Warren dined alone in the parlor. He requested champagne. A cigar. He hummed between bites. Called the chef by the wrong name. Told the maid to "double the cameras" but also "to take the afternoon off."

When Camilla passed him in the hallway, he gave her a crooked smile and said, "You don't hear her anymore, do you?"

She didn't answer.

He cackled with reckless triumph; a sound wrung from a man who's certain in his conquest. "Tonight, pour yourself a glass from my decanter—the reserve I save for men who win."

Camilla recoiled from Warren's euphoria. She'd never seen him like this before—manic, almost giddy—and it made her skin crawl. This wasn't the monster she knew how to handle.

Even Warren seemed startled by his own jubilation, and his true nature reasserted its dominion like frost reclaiming thawed ground. His tangled bramble of gray-black eyebrows, lifted high in rare, triumphant arcs, sank back into their usual post—low and knotted above a scowl—as his smirk withered.

"Enjoy it. I'd hate for it to be your farewell toast—over a missed deadline."

And there it was—the predictable cruelty she could work with.

The burst of Warren's rare celebration still drifted through the house, thin but persistent, like the waft of smoke after a match is blown out. Camilla let it carry her, her hands moving quicker, sharper, through the crates. But when the last lid came free and she saw the final four pieces, the lift inside her sank into something cold and tight. Finishing meant no reason to stay—no sanctioned excuse to remain another night in his or-

bit. The thought wrapped around her chest, constricting, until even her breath felt stolen.

Warren didn't need to know how close she was to completing the task; she could always antagonize the old man later if she wanted, strumming his anxiety about being prepared by morning. Rising to her feet, she pressed her palms into her kidneys, stretching the tension from her back. What she truly needed was to open the first wine bottle of the evening.

The corkscrew wasn't in its proper drawer. She couldn't remember if she'd put it back, with the distractions of the prior evening. While searching through the rest of the kitchen, she caught a flash of movement darting across the lawn in her peripheral vision.

The hair on her forearms stiffened as goosebumps crawled across her limbs.

With a bottle of red tucked under her arm, she approached the line of windows overlooking the yard, narrowing her eyes against the stark contrast of the bright reflecting sun off the back fence and the deep shadows cast by the trees in the west. The ashes of the charred nest twirled in the wind, while the garden hose remained unraveled across the grass. Everything else was exactly as it had been.

Camilla let out a long breath, considering that her exhaustion might be causing her to feel off-balance. After a final look around the yard, she resumed her search for the corkscrew, checking each of the lower rooms she had permission to enter.

As she ascended the grand staircase, she imagined she could hear the soft patter of tiny footsteps moving in quick, staccato bursts along the roof line.

Clip-clip-clip.

Pause.

Clip-clip-clip.

Pause.

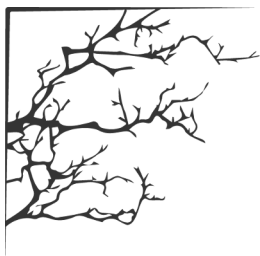
By the time she reached the top, her goosebumps had returned.

As Camilla walked through the gallery's arched entrance, she spotted the missing corkscrew sitting on the security monitor console. With a smirk at the absurdity of her search, she picked it up, eagerly anticipating the smooth, velvety texture of her selected Merlot.

She froze, her smile vanishing instantly.

There on the monitor, for a brief, flickering moment, the same squirrel sat in the ashes of the nest.

Looking directly at the camera.



Observation 6: Encroachment

By evening, the sky pressed low and bruised over Trask Manor, as if it too had grown weary of watching Warren unravel. There was no need to question it; the mansion creaked and throbbed with paranoia's relapse, suffocating the hopeful mood that had prevailed throughout the afternoon. Warren, too, had noticed the squirrel's return.

Having completed the catalog for the Hungarians' arrival the following day, Camilla deliberately steered clear of Warren. She feared he might dismiss her for the evening now that the task was done. She couldn't have that. Not now. Not after his botched attack on the clawed root of his madness.

Retribution was on its way.

She could taste it in the air.

Camilla was content holing up in the west gallery—it was where she did most of her work and where she felt most comfortable. Lined with oil paintings in heavy frames that smelled faintly of smoke and varnish, the room was always cool, always quiet. Here, time hung in place, like the moths suspended in the resin sculpture above the fireplace.

She sat cross-legged in the leather chair beneath *The Drowning of Dimitri*, a painting she could never fully look at. The boy in the image was waterlogged, but his expression was... awake. Alert. Too knowing. His eyes didn't follow you; they led you.

She prepared herself, notebook open, pen steady. Anticipation of what this night would bring surged through her.

7:04 PM. W. in dining room, untouched meal. Pistol on the table.

7:31 PM. Alarm triggered on the south lawn. No breach recorded. W. insists it was "a test."

8:12 PM. W. asked if I'd ever seen a squirrel blink.

Camilla's hand paused at that one. The pen hovered, trembling slightly—was she shaking, or was it the house? She stared across the gallery, eyes landing on the twisted bird sculpture, its bronze neck bent at an unnatural angle in the dim corner. For a second, she could have sworn the shadows beneath it had shifted.

She blamed the wine. The number of empty bottles in the gallery's corner had steadily increased throughout the evening.

The house breathed differently after dark.

Sometimes she thought the walls remembered things. She'd been in the mansion long enough to feel the moods of it: when it was docile, when it was watching, when it was waiting. Tonight, it was the latter.

Down the corridor, a sound echoed—soft, deliberate. Not wood settling. Not pipes. A scrape. A rustle. Close to the baseboards.

Her only movement was her hand scrawling furiously across her notebook.

8:44 PM. Sound in the walls. Not the usual creak. No wind outside. No rain. Just...

She stopped writing. A thin chill slid along her spine.

She rose slowly and moved toward the hallway. The lights buzzed overhead, humming louder than she remembered. The paintings on either side of the corridor flickered under the faint glow—faces distorting, features half-submerged in darkness. She passed the portrait of the woman with the endless eyes and refused to look into the mirror beside it.

She halted her movement across the mezzanine as she spotted Warren entering the foyer below. He moved toward the front entrance, taking a moment to peer through the side windows before confirming the doors were locked. Once he trudged deeper back into the manor, she resumed her path.

Entering the east wing of the house, the sound returned—closer this time. Behind the wainscoting.

Scratch.

Pause.

Scratch.

Drag.

Camilla stopped. Her heart beat once, loud and hollow in her chest.

Down the hallway, past the double doors of the master suite, something moved. The light beneath the door blinked once—as if blocked by something passing in front of it.

Camilla took one step forward. Then another.

When she reached the door, she rested her hand on the knob. It was cold. Colder than it should have been.

Behind it, something shuffled.

She stood there a moment longer.

Listening.

Smiling—just slightly.



Observation 7: Hunt Reversed

At 3:11 AM, Camilla heard the scream.
Not loud. Not sharp. A strangled thing, caught halfway between a cry and a gasp, cut short at the end. It came from the east wing—Warren's wing.

The pen dropped from her hand.

She had been dozing in the gallery, her notebook balanced on her lap, a page half-filled with a sketch of the owl sculpture's twisted talons. The moment the scream reached her, she knew: this was not human suffering.

This was something deeper.

Older.

She rose, slowly, sliding her sketchbook into the crook of her arm like a medical chart. The house breathed; the floorboards flexed. Somewhere, a grandfather clock struck a half-hour.

She didn't rush.

No panic.

Only instinct.

She followed the sound down the west hall. The house seemed to whisper, with the earthy smell of aging wood and the faint odor of dust, oil paint, and copper.

A second sound cut through—a sharp crack. Glass. Or bone. Followed by the staggering clatter of a cane hitting marble.

She reached the landing of the main staircase and saw the master suite's double doors thrown wide. Beyond them, the lights flickered,

casting spasms of illumination across the floor. And in that pulse of light and shadow, she found him.

Warren stood barefoot in his silk pajamas, one arm braced against the wallpaper, the other clutching a fireplace poker. His eyes were wild. His mouth worked like he was chewing glass.

"I saw it," he hissed. "*Inside*. In the stairwell. On the banister."

Camilla kept her voice low, clinical. "What did it do?"

"It looked at me."

Silence.

"And then it smiled."

Warren moved room to room, checking under divans, behind drapes, above doors. It wasn't fear driving him now—it was certainty. The thing was still here, and it was waiting for him to slow down. Camilla trailed behind, notebook in hand.

The poker trembled in the grip of his right hand; his atrophied left flailed about, seeking support from corners and furniture. Every few steps, he turned back, sure he was being watched.

He was.

Scratches appeared on the hallway walls. Thin, fresh gouges in the plaster. A trail of disturbed dust in the library. A single acorn—blackened and cracked—on the landing of the grand staircase.

"I burned it," he kept muttering. "I ended this. I made sure."

Camilla stayed silent, noting each detail.

3:36 AM – Subject escalating. Hunt behavior now openly reversed. House displays new physical alterations (unverified): damage to plaster, evidence of object displacement. Hallucination? Residue of intent?

Then came the sound that didn't belong—the piano.

A single note. Then another. Inharmonious. Slow.

Warren turned white, nearly dropped the poker.

"That room's locked," he whispered.

Camilla didn't reply. They both knew he didn't lock rooms anymore. Not since the stroke. Not since the latest wife.

The third note rang out—high and sharp, like something alerting the dark that they'd arrived.

They moved as one, toward the music room. The door stood open, and the piano—his third wife's, untouched for years—waited.

On the keys: a bloody pawprint.

On the bench: nothing.

Camilla stepped back.

Warren rushed forward, swinging the poker wildly. He struck the instrument once, twice, sending dissonant echoes through the house like a music box dying.

Then darkness swallowed the room. A sliver of moonlight squeezed from between the dusty drapery and sliced the room in half, like a spotlight's beam across a Shakespearian stage.

Warren began to scream.

It wasn't coherent—just fragments, broken curses, sobs that turned to shrieks.

Camilla stood still, watching the blackness dance with shapes.

There was movement near the floorboards.

Fast.

Silent.

The cold that gripped Camilla's spine wasn't fear—it was recognition. This was it. The inevitable conclusion Warren had been running from for decades. And she was about to witness it.

The first strike was to his leg—deep and immediate. The sound was of something wet and deliberate. Warren crumpled to one knee, gasping, dropping into the moonbeam.

The second tore clean through the fabric—then flesh—of his shoulder, flaying him open like a side of meat hung for too many days, edges glistening, curling, exposed.

Camilla didn't scream.

Her breath caught somewhere behind her ribs, locked tight. She stood frozen in the music room doorway, one hand clamped over her

mouth, the other clutching the notebook so hard the spine creaked. She felt as though she were watching a painting come to life—one born of madness, pain, and some old, vengeful god.

She wanted to run. God, she wanted to run. But her legs wouldn't listen.

Because this wasn't just violence. It was a sentence being carried out.

And she was a witness.

Tiny claws pried apart muscle like peeling rotted wallpaper from plaster. Each twitch of Warren's body only seemed to encourage it. He flailed his arms about trying in vain to reach his furred aggressor, dropping in and out between the darkness and the moonlight. A ragged bloom of flesh spread from shoulder to neck, petals of pain unfurling as blood soaked into his robe.

It wasn't frenzy.

It was a lesson.

A message.

A reckoning.

Warren howled, fell back, twisting to crawl across the floor.

From the shadows, two pinpricks of reflected light blinked. The squirrel moved again.

The third strike hit his hand—his right, the one he used to sign evictions, write checks, grip wives. The poker clattered and rolled into darkness.

Warren whimpered. "Please..."

The squirrel paused, perched on his chest, bathed in the single moonbeam breaking through a gap in the curtains.

Camilla saw it clearly now.

Its body was wrong—too still. Its eyes were not eyes. Not mammal. Not glass. They were deep, oil-black spheres that seemed to reflect far more than just this room. Its claws were bone-white, designed only to unmake. Its pelt looked spun from dusk and old nightmares, bristling with

malice, and when it opened its mouth, she saw nothing inside. No teeth. No tongue. Just dark.

Endless.

Dark.

Part of her wanted to intervene—reach for Warren, pull him back from the horror the darkness held. But her feet stayed rooted. He'd earned this, hadn't he? Eight years of cruelty, of watching him destroy everyone who came close. Her hand twitched toward him, then fell. She was choosing inaction, and the weight of that choice pressed against her chest like a stone.

The final strike came not from claw but intent.

The squirrel pressed its tiny skull to Warren's throat. There was no sound. Just a tremor. And then Warren stilled.

No final breath. No dramatic gasp. Just gone.

Like flipping a switch from on to off.

Camilla stood frozen in the dark.

The squirrel turned its head slowly toward her.

And waited.

A long beat passed. Then another.

It stepped off the body, tail curling like punctuation, and crossed the floor toward her. She did not move.

The squirrel stopped at her feet. Looked up. Met her gaze.

A question hung between them.

Will you tell them?

She gave the smallest nod.

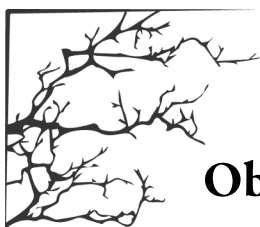
And then it turned, disappeared into the shadows.

She was alone.

Alone with the silence. Alone with the corpse. Alone with the story.

She opened her notebook and wrote:

4:02 AM – W. expired. Cause: vengeance.



Observation 8: Legacy

The manuscript was tentatively titled *The Quiet Tyrant: A Personal History of Warren Trask*.

Camilla had typed the phrase so many times her fingers now moved over the keys without thought, like muscle memory trained in ritual. The working draft sat at just over 92,000 words. She was on chapter eighteen: *Inheritance of Soil*.

It was late afternoon. Rain tapped against the windows in soft, rhythmic patterns. The lights in the study were dimmed. Trask Manor—hers now—was silent.

She'd inherited it all, of course. The legal matters were swift and uncontested. Warren had disowned his children long ago, rewritten the will under paranoid supervision. Everything of consequence—artwork, estate, accounts—now belonged to Camilla Voss, "for services rendered in loyalty and discretion."

A gift, he'd called it. A trap, she now knew.

She sipped her tea, set down the cup, and typed:

He was not merely a cruel man. He was a conductor of decay, orchestrating suffering with the same detail he once curated his art. But cruelty leaves fingerprints. It stains the air, the walls, the land. And sometimes, if the rot runs deep enough, nature answers back.

Camilla paused.

That last part had come out too easily.

She pushed her chair back and stood, stretched and walked the length of the study. Her bare feet whispered across the old rug. Outside, dusk swallowed daylight.

The artwork remained, for now. She had kept it in place—perhaps out of habit, perhaps because it would be easier to sell once the book was finished. But lately, it seemed to shift slightly when she wasn't looking. One sculpture appeared to have rotated a quarter turn on its pedestal overnight. The painting of the drowning face had fogged behind its glass—only on the eyes.

She didn't write that part down.

Back at her desk, she scrolled through to the final chapter, her cursor blinking near the bottom where she'd left a placeholder:

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Night of Reckoning

She hadn't written it yet.

Immediately after the attack, she'd spent hours sitting on the cold stone steps outside, unable to weep, unable to move. The events had blistered her mind raw, like a nerve left exposed. Her mind became a courtroom where logic prosecuted madness, neither winning as she assembled and discarded versions of the truth that wouldn't end with handcuffs or a straitjacket.

Trask Manor loomed behind her—silent, still, as if satisfied.

At some point, near dawn, she'd drifted back in, expecting the scene to still be smeared with violence: the gouged floorboards, the shredded upholstery, the ruin of Warren's body slumped where the squirrel had left him.

But the house had changed.

The wreckage was gone. The shattered glass, the overturned bench, the trails of blood—erased. Only Warren remained where he perished, facedown in the music room, his body intact, his expression curiously peaceful, as if he'd simply collapsed mid-performance.

That was the story she chose to tell.

She reworked her notes, aligning them with the version the coroner would later confirm: heart failure. No signs of trauma. No forced entry. An old man, under pressure, undone by paranoia.

But she remembered.

She remembered what the mansion had done—what it had allowed. How it had drawn her in, held her there, and forced her to watch. Not to help. Not to intervene. Just to carry the memory.

Only then did she understand.

The house and the squirrel had worked in tandem—tools of something older, something crueler, something patient. Warren had been judged. Camilla had been spared.

Not because she was innocent.

Because she was the one who was meant to remember.

The squirrel was never found.

But Camilla knew.

It hadn't killed out of instinct. It had killed with purpose. It had waited. And when it looked at her afterward, she'd felt something pass between them—not forgiveness, not mercy, but assignment.

You will tell them what he was.

Not just the facts. The truth that was beneath the facts. The warning they carried within.

She returned to the keyboard and began to type again:

Some deaths are not accidents. They are verdicts, delivered without appeal, without ceremony.

I did not kill Warren Trask.

But I was there when the reckoning came.

The report would say heart failure. An old man worn thin by obsession. And that's not wrong. Not exactly.

But the truth, the one that lingers, is harder to write. Not because it's unclear—but because it's unwelcome.

Some forces don't want to be named. They want to be understood.

Warren wasn't the first to go too far in this place. I suspect he won't be the last.

She saved the document. Then backed it up.

Twice.

The house sighed an approval.

Behind her, something small clung to the garden wall.
Watching.
Waiting.

THE END

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About the Author

Raised amidst the vibrant landscape of Chicago's Southwest side throughout the 70s, 80s, and 90s, Mark found joy in captivating audiences with vivid tales of his upbringing. After lassoing his soulmate, also a proud Chicagoan, he planted roots in the western suburbs to cultivate their brood. But fear not, their ties to the city remained as sturdy as deep-dish pizza crust, with summer days spent by the lakefront, holiday evenings among downtown's festive glow, and weekends indulging in the culinary delights of their favorite eateries.

By day, Mark conquered the world of packaging design, but his creative spirit refused to be boxed in. From creating hockey goalie mask designs to testing his comedic chops in stand-up, his artistic flame burned bright. Now, he embarks on a new chapter as an author, with the imminent release of his debut novel, "Archer Heights." Evoking the nostalgia of his youth, the suspense novel is like a time machine to his childhood neighborhood, capturing the essence of growing up on Chicago's vibrant southwest side.

Read more at marklbenson.com