

Stan Can't Sleep

Chapter Two, "As Good As Gone" by Kathryn Lord

It's one in the morning and Stan Estabrook is awake.

His wife Marilyn sleeps just fine. She's always been a good sleeper. Never even woke when their kids cried in the night. He wishes he weren't so worried about her. She snores softly beside him. He wishes he could be snoring too. Does less and less of that nowadays.

The moon outside reflects silvery off the fresh snow, makes the bedroom almost as light as day. Stan watches the outlines of the windows play on the ceiling as the moon creeps across the sky. Interesting that the moon moves from one side of the sky to the other, just as the sun does during the day. Makes sense, but he never noticed.

Stan used to worry about his business. He spent plenty of sleepless nights going over the finances, upside-down, forward, and then to hell and back. He obsessed about how he was going to keep all those dollars in the air and potatoes moving to market. But he doesn't worry about work in the middle of the night anymore. He worries about Marilyn.

She's not the same. Definitely not the same.

The kids suspect. It's those FaceTime calls. Stan hates them. He feels like their kids are spying, nosing around. And Marilyn can't figure out FaceTime for the life of her.

Like the session they had today with Josh and the grandkids, out in California. "Who are those people?" she asks him. "Why are they on TV?"

“They’re our son, dear, Josh and his wife. You know, Mandy, and their two kids. Our grandchildren.”

“That’s not Josh. That’s a grown man. Josh is in high school.”

Josh calls back on his cell phone seconds after the FaceTime call is over. Stan’s stomach clenches. His mouth goes dry whenever he sees Josh’s name on the caller ID.

This won’t be the first time that blasted kid has shoved his smart-assed, know-it-all opinions in Stan’s face. Doesn’t even say hello first.

“Come on, Dad, admit it. Something’s wrong with Mom. Can’t miss it, even from California. Don’t you think you should take her to see Dr. Roy?”

“She’s just tired,” Stan says. “All she needs is a good rest.”

“Christ, Dad, what a load of shit. According to you, she’s been tired every time we’ve called in the last six months.” Josh’s voice is tight, loud. He’s probably pacing back and forth like he does when he’s upset.

Stan gives another try. “You know her memory’s never been that good.” Shabby, but the best he can do.

“Mixing up our names is one thing. Not remembering she has grandchildren is another. You’ve got to do something.”

“Well.” Stan sighs. “I’ll call Dr. Roy. In the morning.” He’ll think about it, anyway.

“That’s what you said the last time we talked. I’m starting to think you’re as bad off as Mom.”

“Now, just a goddamned minute.”

Stan can feel his ears getting red. They always do when his blood pressure goes up. That’s when Marilyn would say, “Take it easy, dear. Calm down. Did you take your medicine today?” She used to, anyway. Not anymore.

He pauses, clears his throat, tries to swallow. “I hear you, Josh. I’ve got things under control. Remember, it’s our business, mine and your mother’s. Not yours.” His throat aches from his effort to not yell.

Josh doesn’t speak right away. Stan can almost hear him counting to ten under his breath. Then Josh says, “Okay, Dad. But we’re all worried— me, Anna, and Tim. They see it too. If you need me to help, I’ll fly out. Just say the word.”

Stan lets out a long, relieved lung full of air. Sounds like he’s off the hook. For now, anyway. “Thanks for the offer. We don’t need it. But thanks.”

“Okay, then.” Stan could hear Josh sigh. “Bye, Dad. Talk to you again soon. Kiss Mom for me.”

“Will do.”

He’ll think about calling Dr. Roy. Think, but won’t. When he pictures what Dr. Roy would say as Marilyn sits on an exam table, her nakedness barely covered by a tissue paper gown, it makes him so nervous that he pours himself a scotch. And he doesn’t even like scotch that much.

Stan gives up on sleep and swings his legs over the side of the bed. He puts on his slippers and robe, then pads down the stairs. He stops in the kitchen long enough to turn up the heat and fill the teakettle, then starts down the hall to his office. He switches on his computer, next, the TV set to the Weather Channel. Then he walks back to the kitchen and makes a cup of chamomile tea. He puts his nose right in the cup, inhales the smoky, apple-y aroma.

Back in his office, Stan opens the home security program on his computer and turns the huge computer monitor so he can see it from the sofa. He sinks into the brown leather and pulls the navy plaid afghan over his knees. He sips his tea and watches for the local weather report on the TV. And he keeps an eye on Marilyn, up in their bedroom, still sound asleep.

The monitoring system *was* for security, in the beginning. He'd had cameras installed everywhere when he built the house. Completely hidden. Not even the family knows. He uses it mostly now to watch the birds and the squirrels at the feeders, the deer when they come out in the winter to nibble the tips of the cedars and high-bush blueberries. Though sometimes, he spies a bit when they have company, house guests. Which they haven't for a good while, since Marilyn's not been Marilyn. He'd look, a little, not too much. Turn off the cameras if things got too spicy. Usually. A man's got to have some fun, right? Harmless. What folks don't know won't hurt them.

The forecast is bleak. It's almost the shortest day of the year. Not much more than eight hours of daylight. If the sun's out. Dreary. Temps hover around zero for the foreseeable future. More snow coming today.

Stan checks the weather in Florida. What's it doing in Sunnyvale, that RV resort south of Jacksonville they bought into eight years ago? Balmy. High 70s for the rest of the week. Nice.

Marilyn always perks up when they head south. The days are longer, and of course it's much warmer. They've got friends down there, Chuck and Sue next door. Common folks, a little odd. Finances not the best, Stan suspects, but they all get along. Marilyn and Sue are the real chums, visit back and forth. No Christmas card this year, though. Sue's always been good with that. She might have missed last year, too, but he doesn't recall. He hopes things are all right.

Marilyn will do better in Florida. He just has to get her there.

Stan leaves the grim County weather forecast behind. Turning back to his computer screen and the security system, he does a quick check of the bedroom, then moves to the birdfeeders in back of the house. That's his favorite diversion, though there won't be any bird action until it gets light. Deer visit at night though, and racoons. Foxes sometimes, and skunks.

But then he clicks back to the bedroom, because he realizes that the heap of blankets in the bed is not Marilyn.

She's not there.

Stan clicks through the bathroom, the upstairs hall, the other bedrooms. No Marilyn. Then down the back stairs, into the kitchen, one dim light on over the stove, the dark dining room. Still no Marilyn. On to the living room. Also dark, but there's some movement. A ghostly figure, and suddenly a flash. It's Marilyn, and it looks like she's trying to light a fire. She's laid kindling in the middle of the living room floor and has struck one of those long fireplace matches.

Jesus H. Christ.

Stan launches himself off the sofa and down the hall to the kitchen as fast as his seventy-plus-year-old legs can manage. Through the dark dining room and into the living room. The fire that Marilyn's trying to start is barely catching. Stan grabs the burning kindling and throws it into the cold fireplace. He stomps out the sparks smoldering in the carpet, that outrageously expensive oriental that Mr. Maurice, the decorator, had insisted on. Stan can't tell if the carpet is ruined. He'll have to wait for daylight to see.

"Marilyn! Oh, Marilyn, what were you thinking?" he shouts, still stomping and looking for other sparks. "You could have burned the whole blasted house down."

Marilyn stands back from the scene in the middle of the rug. Her nightgown flares around her legs. Her hands and the white linen are smudged with soot.

"Cold?" she says, a question really. "I was cold?"

Build a fire. Right in the middle of the living room floor. Makes perfect fucking sense.

There it is, clear as a shot of vodka. I've got to get us south. I'll ask Arthur to drive the RV down to Florida, and then I'll fly down with Marilyn.

Arthur's a good man. Too good for what Stan pays him, but if a boss is lucky in The County— and Stan is— he finds a guy like Arthur and uses the hell out of him. And men here are glad of it. Opportunity doesn't knock very often here and both sides know it.

Just have to work out the details. Got to get Marilyn to Florida. Got to. No choice at all.

Jumping Jehoshaphat. Arthur's the answer. The only answer, really.