

THE KNOELL ROYAL OAKS CUCKOO'S EGG

BY B. R. FLYNN

We're being replaced. Don't go home.

Hancock Green read this text message again while sitting in his car just after leaving the company Christmas party and frowned. It was from Beau Ford who, while not strictly speaking his biological brother, was as close to one as he had ever – and would ever – have.

? he wrote back. Following it up with,

What do you mean?

When he had opened the text, he nodded as he read the first sentence. It made sense to him. Both of them worked for Centropolis Analytics and there had been some talk among his team that they were all going to be let go. The company had grown a big head, in Hancock's opinion, ever since they had won the NASA contract. The rumor was that the company was eyeing the latest graduates from MIT. Kids, basically. No need for the expensive old folks like Hancock and Beau.

Hancock chuckled to himself. Old. They were both only in their early thirties but, in this business, that was old, all right.

So the first sentence wasn't a problem. But the second...

Don't go home.

What could Beau possibly mean by that? It didn't make any sense. Hancock scratched his chin and looked about.

He was parked across the street from the bar and grill that the company had booked out for the Christmas party. It was late and most everyone had already gone home but Hancock spied Richard Hollis, his boss, heading towards his car down the road. He thought for a moment about stopping the man and asking him about the rumors straight out but decided against it. He was still a little buzzed from the wine and it would take enough effort to drive home without the added stress of a confrontation.

Still, the text bothered him.

He looked at his phone, knowing that he would have heard a notification if Beau had texted him back but hoping that he had somehow missed it. There was nothing, of course. Beau hadn't got back to him.

Hancock sighed and got the car going. It was a short drive home. The bar and grill was less than two miles from his house. And less than two miles from work, as well. In fact, most of the company lived nearby, in the Knoell Royal Oaks neighborhood of Phoenix. Up until recently, with the NASA contract and the rumors, the company had felt like a family. Practically all of them living nearby, all of them friendly.

Brenda, his wife, would still be up. She had told him that she didn't feel well enough to go out but Hancock knew the truth: she didn't want to be around his coworkers. She didn't like them. She liked Beau and his wife Carol well enough, of course, but the others she couldn't stand. So she would still be up and that was good. He wanted to talk to her before heading to bed. Maybe Ed, his son, would still be up. It was unlikely, but that that would be good, too.

When he pulled up to his house, he stopped the car in front of it, along the sidewalk instead of pulling into the driveway. He checked his phone again – still nothing – and looked at the house. Yes, there was a light on in there. Brenda was still up.

So why was he hesitating?

Don't go home.

That's what the text had said. Beau wasn't someone that would just say something strange out of the blue. He had seemed a little off at the Christmas party. Distant. He had left early, making some kind of nonsense excuse. And then the text.

Don't go home.

Hancock looked at his house once more before starting the car up once again and driving over to Beau's house. He would check up on his friend. See if anything was wrong. Talk to him. That seemed like the best course of action.

Beau wasn't far – the next street over, in fact – and Hancock was there in seconds flat. He parked outside the house and killed the engine. There were no lights on in Beau's house and Hancock frowned, now doubting his plan.

But he felt that he had to speak to Beau. Had to figure out what was going on with his friend.

Sighing once again, he got out of the car and marched up the short path to the house. He knocked on the door and waited. When no response came, he fished his phone out of his pocket and called Beau.

After a few rings, the phone went to voicemail and he disconnected the call, knocked on the door again.

He was just about to leave when his knock was answered by Carol. She opened the door and smiled pleasantly at him.

“Hello, Hancock,” she said.

“Carol,” Hancock responded. “Everything all right?”

“Why wouldn't it be?”

“Beau sent me a weird text. I got a little worried.”

“He's not feeling well. Already gone to bed, I'm afraid.”

Hancock frowned. Something was off here but he didn't quite know what.

“Would you like to come in?” Carol said and stepped aside, gesturing to the interior of the house.

“Sure,” Hancock said.

He headed inside. It was dark in here and Hancock felt a little guilty. He must have woke Carol. She followed behind him and turned on the hall light. Now that he could see her better, Hancock wasn't so sure of himself anymore.

She was fully dressed. Impeccable, in fact. Not a hair out of place. So he couldn't have woke her. But if that were the case, why was the house dark? Was she just sitting in the dark? Or worse, just standing in the dark? The idea creeped him out.

“Would you like something to drink?” Carol asked.

“No, I'm fine, thanks. Can I speak to Beau?”

She shook her head. “No, I'm afraid not. He's not feeling well.”

That pleasant smile again. It was a strange smile. No teeth at all. A Mona Lisa smile, that's what they called them. Enigmatic. That was the word.

“I'd like to speak with him, all the same,” Hancock said.

“I can't let you do that.”

“I'd like to see you try and stop me.”

He pushed past her and headed towards the master bedroom. The sound that emerged from Carol's mouth behind him was one he had never heard before. A kind of wobbling wail. It was followed a bark of an order, in a tone Carol had never used in all the years he had known her. “Don't go in there!”

He ignored her and opened the bedroom door. It was dark but there was just enough light coming from the hall light that Carol had flicked on for him to make out a crumpled shape on the floor at the foot of the bed. It was a man. Was it Beau? He wasn't sure.

As he watched, another shape moved from the far corner of the room – a tall, willowy shape that swayed like a reed in the wind. It moved swiftly and slammed the door shut on him.

A strong hand grabbed him by the shoulder. Hancock whirled around and saw Carol behind him, that same Mona Lisa smile on her face. Her grip was unnaturally strong.

"It's okay, Hancock," she said. "It helps if you just stay still."

Adrenaline kicked in and he managed to swat her hand away and run for the front door. If Carol had locked it behind him, he might not have made it, but she hadn't and he escaped into the chill night air, running for his house. He didn't bother with his car; he was only a street away.

As he ran, his mind was focused on his wife and son and that first sentence that Beau had written.

We're being replaced.

He reached his house and fumbled with his keys to unlock it. He needn't have. The door was unlocked.

"Brenda!" he called as he entered the house. "Ed!"

His wife rounded into the front entrance from the kitchen. "What's wrong, honey?"

"Oh, thank God," Hancock said as he hugged her. "Is everything all right?"

"Of course. All is right with the world."

He frowned and broke the hug, held her out at arm's length. She was smiling. A pleasant, Mona Lisa smile. Not a hair was out of place.

"Oh, Jesus," he said.

Her grip on his shoulders was strong and, try as he might, he couldn't break free. He could hear footsteps coming up the front steps and looked towards them. Carol walked inside, followed by Richard Hollis, his boss. Both of them were smiling pleasantly.

"It's all right, Hancock," Richard said. "All part of the grand design. All good for the company. And the planet, of course."

Hancock struggled but his wife was too strong. Carol joined her and the two of them forced him into a chair in the small dining room. Richard followed them, hands folded politely behind his back.

"We've been monitoring this place," Richard explained. "Through the data, you understand. It's nice."

"This place?" Hancock said. "Knoell Royal Oaks?"

Richard shrugged. "That and the planet. But you're right, this neighborhood is ideal. Small, out of the way, not too many eyes on it. A perfect place to start the replacement."

"So you're some kind of alien invaders," Hancock said, trying to laugh. It wouldn't come out right. "Here to steal our resources or something?"

Richard had no problem laughing and did so, loud and long. He shook his head. "What resources?"

You've squandered it all. No, no, by dear boy. It's just that we think we'd do a better job here than you.”

Another person walked into the house and joined Richard. It was Beau. He was now smiling just like the rest of them.

“I don't believe you,” Hancock said. “I don't believe you! It's a trick! A joke! Tell me it's a joke!”

“I'm afraid not,” Beau said as he joined Carol and Brenda in holding the struggling Hancock down.

The sound of small feet echoed through the house and Ed wandered out of his bedroom and into the kitchen. Hancock started to cry when he saw that same smile on his ten-year-old son's face.

“It's okay, daddy,” Ed said and put a hand on his shoulder. His grip was far stronger than it should have been. “It only hurts for a minute.”

Richard Hollis turned off the kitchen light, plunging them all into darkness but there was just enough light for Hancock to see the tall, willowy form that stepped out of Ed's bedroom. It wasn't fully formed yet but as it slowly approached Hancock – arms outstretched towards him – he could already see the resemblance.

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