

# DARK HOUSE

*By*

**Lake Lopez**



[www.LakeLopezOnline.com](http://www.LakeLopezOnline.com)

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Lake Lopez  
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**D I S C L A I M E R**

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## DARK HOUSE

### Chapter One

**T**he car breaks. Its engine makes a loud bang, then sputters as metal rips into metal. The noise reminds me of my father's deathbed cough. I let off the gas and the motor shuts down. I coast in neutral, ease the car onto the narrow dirt shoulder and stop.

"Damn it to hell."

I'd been speeding, pushing my old car through the shadows by Becker Lake, the place where the rich hide their weekend houses. The road is always smooth, each crack and pothole immediately patched and filled. A dark, burnt oil smell emanates from the car's hood, poisoning the clean scent of woods. My running shoes crunch through gravel as I walk. A glow of house lights shines through the trees and, when I find a driveway, I head toward the light.

It's a big white colonial; no curtains or security bars. I see her clearly through the kitchen window, a slender woman with dark blonde hair. She's pulling a tray of cookies from the oven. She senses me, I guess, because she turns and peers through the glass. A quizzical look crosses her features. I wave and offer a smile. She meets me at the door.

"You're the guy who drives the Mustang, right?"

"Yeah," I say. "It just broke down on me, too."

She holds the door open. The smell of baked cookies wafts out to welcome me. My stomach churns for one as I step inside. Cookies are everywhere; plates of them cover the counters and the kitchen table. I glance through the doorway and see a huge mound piled on top the dining room table.

"I like to bake," she says and her hand slips to my arm, touches me above my elbow. All at once I see my life with this girl, laughing in this kitchen, long strolls through the trees together, holding hands and kissing at the water's edge... It's a lifetime in of one feminine touch. She smiles. It radiates. My knees buckle a little.

"So what do you do, Mustang guy?"

"I'm a writer," I say. "I'm finishing my next novel now." I like the smooth tone of my voice. I sound sure of myself, even cocky. I catch the look of my arms then, firm and muscular. My stomach, I see, has no bulge. I run one hand through my hair and find it long and, most likely, a boyish mess.

I'm dreaming.

My mind seizes that thought; I am dreaming.

Then a man's yell tears through the stillness outside. "Ou taah aaaah merr," he says. "Ou et aahh aaaa merr ow!"

The woman just smiles at me, unalarmed.

*“My ex,” she says. “He lost one leg and every bit of his common sense.”*

*I envision a one-legged man, limping through the woods on a robotic prosthetic, spying on her from behind an oak tree. He was crazy-eyed, dangerous. The image angered me. A girl like this, someone had to protect her from a man like that.*

*“Pay no attention to him.”*

*The room begins to ripple, as if the walls are turning to liquid. Two children enter from the dining room; a boy in shorts, dark haired like me, and a girl in a summer dress, a child version of the mother.*

*“Do you have kids?”*

*“Someday I will,” I say.*

*The whole room shudders.*

*“Next time plan to stay awhile.”*

I woke up in my clothes, long sleeves still buttoned at my wrists. The oppressive darkness of my apartment surrounded me. I slid off my couch, limped stiff-legged to the balcony and smoked a cigarette. September’s wet air sent shivers crawling down my spine. The dream’s images, shards of my past stacked into nonsense, stuck in my head.

The Mustang – the first car I’d ever owned. I’d worked two jobs to buy that relic; ticket ripper at the Marion Theater and burger flipper at Hardee’s. My dad made me earn every dollar. “A boy’s first car should be all his own,” he’d said. We’d called it, “Ryan’s Red Wreck.”

Becker Lake – the last place I’d spent quality time with my dad. We hadn’t owned a house there. Poor people only rented. I remembered the boat oars in his meaty hands as he propelled us across the water’s flat surface. I saw the permanent engine oil under his nails as he uncoiled the anchor. By then I’d hated the constant grime on him. “I sure would love to own a house on a lake like this,” he’d said and coughed into one fist, the lung cancer already bristling in his chest.

It was a good dream, I decided, especially the girl. The doctor told me that the medication could trigger vivid dreaming. I’d been expecting nightmares, though. If this was all it could do to me I didn’t mind at all. I slammed the balcony door, stripped to my boxers and left the clothes on the floor. My stomach sagged over my drawers, a ball of fat. The girl from my dream wouldn’t look twice at me in this life. I pictured her, the curves of her hips, her luxurious hair - .

*A lone candle’s tiny flame sends lightning around her bedroom. We claw at each other, two bodies merging under white sheets. The flashes of light blind me. In the total darkness I hear her moan. Then, in a low and breathless whisper, she adds, “Ah, baby.” It almost makes me cry, the way she calls me baby.*

*She slides off of me. My vision returns. I eye her alabaster body, then roll onto my side and pull her close so I can keep her a little longer.*

*"I'm falling for you hard," I say.*

*The words sound loud, like thunder.*

*She turns to me and smiles. Again, it radiates.*

*Then I hear him screaming again, the man in the woods. His guttural yells penetrate the walls like a sudden blast of winter.*

*"Ou taah aaaah merr. Ou et aahh aaaa merr ow!"*

*"He's really nuts-o tonight," she says and chuckles.*

*"We have to do something about him," I tell her.*

*Her soft lips fall to mine and in that kiss a single moment stretches to eternity.*

## Chapter Two

"Nice kicks." Larry entered my cube with a customer's file, stepping over my gym bag and running shoes. "Are they new?"

"I bought them last year," I said.

"I read somewhere that they pack more technology into a pair of modern running shoes than they did the first astronaut suits. It's the same synthetic materials." He picked up one of the red-and-black shoes. "That's why they're so lightweight."

I took my phone headset off my head and fiddled with it. "Interesting."

"These look bran new. You put any miles on them at all?"

"Did you need something?"

"Yeah, actually, I have to talk to you about this quote because you completely screwed up. It's a mess."

The whole time he lectured me I thought about fishing with my dad, the way the boat rocked underneath us, the feel of wet air on my arms, the cold against my seat and my father's peaceful gaze between coughing jags. Larry shut up. I nodded. "Okay."

"So you really have to double-check your work before you click submit."

"Got it."

By the end of the day my head throbbed and I skipped running. I drove home in the dark, glad it was Friday. Inside my apartment, I dropped the shoes next to my front door. Their soles were black as roofing tar. Not one speck of street dust or mud had tainted them since I bought them with a credit card. How pathetic.

I washed my face in the bathroom. Then I opened a small brown bottle, shook out one pale blue pill and swallowed it with tap water. I hoped it sent me back to Becker Lake. Then I huddled upon my couch.

*My writing room is small and crammed with books. I spend the morning at my desk, drinking green tea and writing. Framed covers of my previous works adorn the walls, seven novels, all of them have a gold bestseller seal in the lower right corner.*

*I'm dreaming again.*

*And in this dream I'm a bestselling novelist – awesome.*

*I think about having a cigarette, but dream-me doesn't have any ashtrays around. This life holds too much to live for, I guess. I leave the office, pad through the old house in my socks, admiring old wood molding and paneling. The house fits me like a broken-in pair of jeans. I find the master bedroom. A picture of me and the girl lays on the nightstand. It must be her handwriting on the back, Ryan and Miranda, it says.*

*I don a sweatshirt, cinch up my red and black shoes and head outside. The screen door bangs shut behind me and I break into a jog. I start breathing deep, but I keep my wind. My chest expands; my lungs feel plump and full of oxygen. I run along the waters edge, then cut through a patch of forest and onto the asphalt road. I walk to cool down, then stroll to her house. She's sitting on the porch below the street address numbers, 667.*

*"I was hoping you'd come by today."*

*I hurry up the steps. Her playful grin makes my heart accelerate more than the run did. She stands up and I wrap my arms around her.*

I woke up numb. A haze of morning light filled the living room. For a moment I thought I'd slept through the alarm, then I realized it was Saturday. I got off the couch, stiff muscles resisting movement. I headed for the bathroom and something caught my eye. It was not movement, but the realization that something had changed. My running shoes; they were exactly where I'd left them, but they were no longer new. The red-and-black material had faded. The soles had worn down and turned grey. I poked at one with my foot, felt cold against my toes. Then I knelt down. A slow current of electricity vibrated inside me. I snatched them off the floor. The shoes were damp. The waffle shaped tread was heavy with brown sand.

### **Chapter Three**

*On Saturday afternoon, I take the little girl fishing. Our wooden rowboat creaks and sways on gentle waves. She sits across from me, her clever fingers baiting a hook. "Good job." She beams back at me, eyes bright. She's my favorite, I know, but I remind*

*myself that I mustn't neglect the boy. He loves baseball and, on Sunday, we toss a sweat-stained ball back and forth in the backyard. I throw it high, making him run to get under it. Each throw pops into his glove, the sound of a good catch. He hurls it back, laughing, pleased with himself. I'm delighted with his laugh. He's my favorite, too, I guess. Miranda joins me.*

*"Thanks for spending time with them," she says. "They really think you're something."*

*"What about you?"*

*"Oh, I guess they're right," she says.*

*That evening, after dinner, the four of us pile onto the couch and watch a kid-movie, something with animated creatures I'd never heard of. The girl likes it. The boy makes fun of it. A plate of Snickerdoodle cookies two feet high sits on the coffee table. We stuff ourselves with them, devouring the uneven circles and licking cinnamon sugar off our fingers. My mouth goes dry. Then, as the kids are dozing off on the floor, the screaming begins.*

*"Ou taah aaaah merr."*

*The kids – my kids – lift their heads and look at us, teary eyed. Miranda scoops them up, one on each knee. I stand. Then I pace back and forth.*

*"Ou taah aaaah merr. Ou et aahh aaaa merr ow!"*

*"He's close to the house."*

*"No," she says. "He never comes out of the trees."*

*The window shatters. The crash of breaking glass makes us duck. Miranda clutches each kid close to her as shards hurl past her. Sharp pieces land on the couch, her shoulders, in her hair.*

*"Don't."*

*It's too late. I'm already at the door, pushing through it, charging into the woods. The air is colder than it should be this time of year, like ice. I see my breath and start to shake. The forest is still, quiet. I hear branches break and I trot toward the sound.*

*"Hey! Come out. Now."*

*I find him, a shadow figure, taller than me, broad shouldered, hobbling away from the house.*

*"Hey, come here." I chase after him. "I want to talk to you."*

*He dodges through trees, lumbering on his good leg, leading me in a zigzag pattern. He's trying to get me lost, get me turned around so he can conk me on the head. I burst onto the shore. The lake is in front of me, a vast shadow of black water. On the beach is a message. He'd carved it in the sand.*

**L E A V E**

*A tall wave rises up and crests about ten feet out. It crashes over the letters. The surprise wave washes over the word and rushes all the way to my feet, splashing over my shoes and soaking me up to my ankles. When it pulls back the message is gone. The cold settles into my flesh and, all at once, the whole word shudders. The trees shake so hard they blur and the water rises into tidal waves.*

“No, I don’t want to wake up.”

“Are you coming to work?”

I stood in my living room, the phone in one hand and a filthy, worn out running shoe in the other. It was heavy with lake water, like it’d been drenched.

“Of course I am - on Monday.”

A foul, locker-room odor had filled the room.

“It’s Wednesday,” Larry said.

“What?”

“It’s Wednesday afternoon,” he said. “Look, if you miss four days in a row it’s considered job abandonment.”

“I’m sick,” I said. “I got really sick.”

“Will you be in tomorrow?”

“Yes,” I said. “I will definitely be in tomorrow.”

After a long silence he said, “Okay.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, but he’d already hung up.

I held the shoe for a long time. The odor, I realized, was my own. It was days and nights of boiling sleep. I went to the bathroom, turned on the tap water, and popped the lid off the pill bottle. I shook three capsules into my palm and gulped them down with lukewarm water. The pills took hold with a deadening sensation, an anesthetic against my soul. Everything went heavy. Still, I trembled myself to sleep.

## Chapter Four

*“Wish you’d tell me what’s on your mind.”*

*We’re in her bed; the now familiar shadows pulsing with warmth. She’s resting her head on my chest. Her hair smells clean as the first day of summer.*

*“If I sleep forever I’ll die.”*

*The bed squeaks as she shifts positions.*

*“You ain’t sleeping, baby.”*

If I’m not asleep than both of me exist and here at Becker Lake I’m as real as the sand and mud stuck to my shoes. I am not an image in my own longing, but flesh and bone. I live – happy.

*I shake my head, clearing the sudden sensation of waking up off of me.*

*“Stay forever, okay? It won’t hurt for very long.”*

*“What won’t?”*

*After a silence she tells me. “The poison.”*

*I can sense her biting her lower lip, a look of pleading straining her features.*

*“The kids, they adore you.”*

I never wanted children, but now that I’ve taught a tomboy girl how to fish and played catch with an exuberant boy I do. I don’t care that they’re not my own. I don’t care that their biological father stalks the woods outside the lake house. I will deal with him.

*“And I love you.”*

I will protect them; each of them. Nothing bad will happen to us, not to my family.

I woke up groggy, my bed empty, and closed my eyes to

*Slide close to Miranda and inhale the warm smell of her*

And eventually relented, blinking against the first rays of morning piercing my bedroom window.

I was starving.

Later, at work, I opened a browser and searched for “667 Becker Lake, Becker Lake, Minnesota.” The search came back with three-and-a-half million sites. I clicked on the first – fishing tips.

*“Whoa, what happened to you?”*

Larry stood at my cubicle, eyebrows raised with suspicion. He stared at my arms. They were cut from the branches I ran through when I sprinted through the woods. Each arm was a tangle of deep red lines edged with white infection.

*“Do you need something?”* A fever burned in my head, pushing a sweat as thick as oil out of my pores. I felt it dripping through my hair.

*“The forms for your sick days.”*

*“I’ll leave them on your desk.”*

*“And I have to write you up for not calling in.”*

*“No problem.”*

He left. I put my phone on Do Not Disturb, sending every call to voicemail. I kept clicking links and that afternoon I found it: Becker Lake Man Charged with Wife's Murder. I read the article twice. It gave no gruesome details, only short facts; woman found dead, man arrested. It said nothing about her sweet nature or that she was a good mom. It didn't say she loved to bake, only that she was found dead in the early evening hours.

"He kills her. If I'm not there, he kills her."

More sweat poured out of me. My skin went cold. Nausea rose inside me. A thumping dizziness made me rest my head into my palms, exhausted. I closed my eyes.

*She meets me at the door. No girl's ever been so happy to see me before. She is so beautiful it's hard to inhale, like my lungs are too busy looking at her to do their job. The woods are quiet this afternoon. No birds, no cars on the nearby two-lane, not one sound. She hugs me tight. I lean down, kiss her head.*

*"Come inside," she says and leads me into the kitchen. Cookies, great mounds of them, are piled everywhere.*

*She's set on aside for me. It's a large circle on a red napkin and silver tray. She hands it to me. "Snickerdoodle's your favorite, ain't it?"*

*"Should I eat it now?"*

*"Plenty of time for that later," she says. "Right now you should come upstairs with me because the little ones are at school."*

## Chapter Five

I scanned my apartment, my small, dark house. The cookie waited on my kitchen counter, between a coffee stain and the sink. I took it to the couch. For a time, I thought about my mom and wished I had more memories of her. I had so many of my father. I hoped I still had them in the next life. I got a glass of tap water and swallowed the rest of the blue pills. I felt a slow, creeping paralysis infecting my muscles as the chemicals took hold. I inhaled long and slow, steadying myself. Then I bit into the cookie.

My tongue tingled. I chewed fast and swallowed. The inside of my mouth began burning. I fought back a retch and stuffed more Snicker doodle into my mouth. I chewed. I swallowed. Chewed and swallowed and the pain erupted below my heart, a long piercing like being stabbed from the inside. It emerged hard and definite as *the woods near Becker Lake come into focus.*

*The smell of trees and black earth, of water in the air and wild things with matted fur and sharp teeth. I'd never noticed that dangerous scent before. I sat on a grey boulder, the clearing in front of me illuminated by moonlight. A man stands in front of me and his presence startles me. I stand up too fast, lose my balance and crash to the ground. Dead pine needles dig into my palms. I try to cry out and cannot. Blinking, dazed, I turn to peer up at the man. He looks down at me. His eyes are full of sadness. I don't*

*understand. He points to his mouth then feigns eating a cookie. I nod. Yes, yes. I ate her cookie. He opens his mouth. He has no tongue. A stump of tissue, fish belly white, raises near the back of his mouth.*

*“Ah old uu taah aaaah merr.”*

I told you stay away from her.

I’m not dreaming now.

My mind seizes this realization, this time with dread.

I am not dreaming.

I get to my feet and I run. I’ve spent so many hours running through these woods that I get my sense of direction right away, but this time I’m easily winded. I’m panting by the time I find the road. I pass my red Mustang, still sitting on the shoulder, emanating that thick, burnt oil smell. Miranda’s house lights must be off because no glow guides me. I find the road, though and I charge to it.

The white colonial is a decrepit shell of weather worn wood. The remnants of white paint curl off in long peels. All the grass has died and the dirt surrounding the house is as grey as concrete. I hear my children’s laughter, but there is no longer joy in it. Now, it’s high pitched, malicious. The front door opens a few inches. I sense someone – something – peering out.

“You came,” it says. Its voice was full of cold mud. “Welcome home.”