

# Litton House

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The prefabricated sadness of an abandoned used car lot met me when I pulled onto the patchy gravel. A single sedan squatted near the front door, a place far out in the far out, lonely on top of lonely, a place of no witnesses. I arrowed toward the sign, glowing fuzzy neon orange in the night—OPEN. The drive from San Francisco to Oregon’s coast was made longer by the coastal route to avoid Interstate 5. Man has created nothing more boring than those hypnotic inducing concrete ribbons slicing through nowhere to nowhere.

Off go the wipers, lights, and ignition—*clack, click, clunk*.

Through the window, a gray woman at a desk, shuffles papers and stuffs folders, a pencil is stuck behind her right ear. An easy joint to rob. Scenarios flail like whips, cracking each time I picture the old gal falling under a gun, a knife, a garrote, or similar quick violence. My readers stand too impatient for slow deaths. Neck snaps work if you have the strength. Most don’t.

A bell chimes when I push through the door. The woman lifts her head and gives me the eye, unaware of danger’s possibilities. I could be anyone. But I’m not. At least not one anonymous to her. She recognizes my face from the dust jacket of a book occupying a corner of her desk, flayed open upside down, spine cracked. From where it split, I can tell she’s not yet

to gangster demons leaping out at Abigail and her younger sisters. The point of no return. Though still recognizable as me, that back cover photo reflects ten years past of semi-innocence. My agent insists on not changing it. Fans want cozy consistency.

“Mister Becket, I thought about giving up on you. Almost closing time.” I knew her voice from the phone.

“But it’s not.”

“No. Almost.”

I hate almos<sup>t</sup>s, might haves, and other phrases that swallow readers in vague prose quicksand.

“Keys.” I meant it as a command. She took it as a question.

“Right here,” she said, handing over a manila envelope, my last name, block letters carved with a red felt marker. “I put directions to the cottage inside. The owners were happy to get the booking, it being past tourist season and all.”

She smiled again. Teeth too even. False choppers can identify a victim. Best to remove them before burning the body. I checked the envelope’s contents. Two keys, rental paperwork, a Google map stamped with the Donaldson Rental Agency logo, and phone number. No area code. I mumbled a soft noise. Didn’t ask her name but noticed she had a lazy eye, a small mole on her left temple, and a coffee stain on the cuff of her gray sweatshirt.

“If anything breaks or needs repair, don’t fix it yourself. Call us, and Randy will be right over.”

Never fear. I reference screwdrivers, wrenches, and hammers for less mechanical things. I fled, sliding out the door into the wet womb of misty Pacific Northwest night.

My car lights swept the front of the cottage, catching the windows, refracting rivulets of water, tears streaming down their faces. I turned off the headlights. Let them cry in the dark. Shallow puddles packed the ground. Liquid jumped up as raindrops fell, joining the many losing their freedom. The valise in the passenger seat will do for the night. The rest can wait until morning for less rain and less darkness.

I scissor-fingered a key from the envelope and tapped it on the doorknob three times to warn whatever made the glass panes weep that I was taking possession. A knife shove and twist into the lock completes my claiming of this nest.

The light switch clicked. My eyes fixed on the kitchen I knew to be on the left from the photos. Bottles clanked as I landed my case on the counter. At my command, obedient soldiers took ranks—a cocktail shaker, lemon bitters, vodka bottle, and a jar of olives. Only cretins use gin, that perversion. Anxiety found relief from a full ice tray in the freezer, the old aluminum sort with a lift lever to crack the cubes.

Three shakes, no more, no less, of the slushy nectar, rest for fifteen seconds, then a continuous pour through the strainer. Once begun, never stop mid-stroke. Hesitation is a killer in my books. The first, no olives, went down like fast fire. One blaze to put out another.

Moving through the cottage, I sipped a second, opening drawers, checking the water pressure and the linens. The rear door was bolted against whatever might climb onto the back porch. *Lions, tigers, and bears*. The last hallway door led to a cellar. Time enough tomorrow to find bodies stacked in dark corners. The bedroom desk is too confined, and the sitting room just large enough for feet on the floor visiting. I adopted the kitchen as my workspace.

I concocted a third libation, one more than I usually take unless I lost count, but tonight I'll toast my absent muse, who left San Francisco two weeks before I did. The bastard. Missing. Just like Evelyn six months earlier. I want to call her the bitch, but not enough water has passed beneath that bridge.

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Morning plucked at my eyelids. Loud knocking launched from the front door. An unkempt man waited on the other side of the window, dressed for success in a plaid shirt, tan bib overalls, one strap undone, and a dirty ball cap. I cracked open the door, gripping a baseball bat I found in the pantry last night.

“Morning, sir. I’m Randy. Come to fix the downspout.” His thumb hooked to the right while his eyes flogged me, judging my rumpled clothes. I stood waiting, mouth dry as bay leaf potpourri. Yes, it was beyond dawn, and yes, he was stating his business. Two unacknowledged facts don’t make a conversation. I nodded. “Louise said you’re some sort of writer.” He won’t let me off the hook.

So, the old lady has a name. I gave him my standard patter. “I write for the regimental disillusioned. Hit below the belt, churn their guts to lay open their nasty inner swamps from the comfort of an easy chair after pretending to be someone else all day.” Let him digest that.

His eyes darted left, then right, seeking an exit. “Well, yeah,” he said, scratching the underside of his rough beard. “Mostly, I like to read westerns. Louis L’Amour.”

“I’m sure you do. Downspout,” I reminded Randy, wanting to end this droll waste of an opening scene. He shuffled off. I shut the door and sock footed into the kitchen for a jigger of antiseptic vodka before taking a morning piss.

Thoughts of greasy bacon and eggs punched through, punishing me. I studied the crumpled Google map printout. Seabridge Diner, Murdock’s general store, and Sandy’s Ocean Liquor laid out my path on this ditchwater dreary day.

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A week into my cloister, I pushed away from writing to explore the property, leaving behind an angrily pecked page on my laptop. Paths are inviting to those with curiosity and occasion for adventures. I discovered mine in a back corner of the cottage lot, its trailhead concealed by a woven thimbleberry hedge. Boots, I need boots and my walking stick.

The track led me to a bluff, wild surf below, aged driftwood, and water battered the rocks. The damp wind tore below. I could blame a slight misstep on the weather until I hit bottom. After that, who would care? Another day perhaps. I turned left, following a trodden trail.

A low wrought iron fence gate led to a tangle of what had once been a proud ornamental garden. I scuffled my way around a hedgerow, then through weeds that had overtaken a lawn before I saw it. Vegetation crawled up the pale gray sides and into the cracks of the three-story, layered monstrosity yielding to the onslaught of time. The building sprouted what suited its moody isolation, yet it begged for my intrusion, leaves wind curling like fingers lured me closer.

Granite steps led to a sheltered portico from the remnant of a stately drive. I imagined drivers dressed in black livery attending to their employer's long automobiles lining the edges during festivities. It would be a shame if there weren't those events. Without the exercise of purpose, material things are a sadness.

Not a single leaf lay on the polished stone ledge, not one sprig pushed up from cracks between the slabs. It was as if the old house clung to this last, vain slice of dignity. A breeze gusted past me, pushing open the tall doors. Dead leaves rattled inside the empty foyer as they scuttled to dark corners. Greeting me, a great column of light spilled through a two-story window at the top of a curved staircase. The musty smell of rotted carpet lessened the longer I stood there, taking in the artistry of the columns, cornices, and corbels. A plaster ceiling medallion lay shattered on the floor, no sign of the chandelier that once hung from its center, once high above trivial activities.

Well into my exploration of this museum dedicated to rich exhibits of emptiness, I encountered the old man. His fish belly complexion pulled me up short, as did his deep brown, almost black irises. Reflected lamplight in his room spark-danced in his pupils.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think anyone lived here.”

The gent stood, gestured toward a chair. “Welcome to Litton House, Samuel. Pleasant day for a walk.” He held a leather-bound volume in his left hand, a pipe in his right. Introduced himself as Lewis Farnell.

What else to do but sit?

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Someone needs to know, share my experience, hold my belt as I peer over the edge. I called John.

“Come back to the city,” he said. “The lack of stimulation has addled your brain.” He wasn’t one to let specious words interfere, always to the point or what he sees of it. His impatience saves time.

“The opposite,” I told him. “I can’t finish my book there. Too many—”

“Assholes and pretenders. Say it, Sam. My list is longer than yours, and yet I stay.” His electronic voice ricocheted off the shiny surfaces in the cottage’s kitchen. “Tell me again what happened. I’ll pick it apart like Buckley did Vidal in ‘68.”

“Before my time. Born a year later.”

“Still the best benchmark for dispatching fakers.”

“It was real, John.” I insisted. “As real as my visits to your townhouse except for the disappearance.”

“Go back. See if it happens again, then call me. If I don’t hear from you, I’ll brush up your eulogy for the memorial service. Is it okay if Thompson comes? Never mind, what will you care? You’ll be dead.”

His end of the conversation was over. Mine just begun when I heard the click, then silence. John keeps an index of coded information, ready to translate the truncated lives of people he tolerates. He enjoys speaking at funerals, talking about the bastards, and thrusting a posthumous stab into every Caesar he encountered.

Eleven days later, the police called to ask if I'd known John well. Past tense. I said no. What would be the point of the truth now?

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The cuff of old man Farnell's burgundy dressing gown exposed his pallid wrist—an austere study in darkness and light. Blue-veined hands reached toward the table next to the armchair. *Tink, tink, tink* brought sharp focus to the moment as he tapped his pipe in the ashtray. Nothing fell from the upturned bowl of his calabash. Nothing ever did. I never saw him pack load it. Never was there the air-lingering tobacco bitterness that assaults, seeping from thick walls of so closed a place.

This chamber became an intimate place for me, a place to search for certainty. A few dim lamps cast downward cones in the corners. Sometimes appearing as a gentleman's study, a library, or a trophy room, never settling from one visit to the next. Behind his armchair, a lamp arch hovered like a vulture on the line. This is a man's retreat of dark wood, hard surfaces, and sharp edges.

I call him the old man, a stamp of genuine respect for his broad experience, though I know his name and use it when addressing him, mister nailed to the front end. That, or simply, sir. Farnell's thin, gray mustache and authoritative attitude gave him the stiff bearing of a colonel, the stuffy British sort.

“What can I do for you today?” he inquired.

Indeed, what? Everything, nothing. Remain in existence as my necessary touchstone. Answer a million questions in fast stride or one at length. Give me the courage to carry your surety when I leave this place, fearful my bowl too is empty.

I diverted, asked him about famous people he'd encountered in his long life and wide travels. My interest drove me to find who influenced him, who had carved those deep trenches and divots in his psyche.

"Famous. I think not," he said with a rat trap snap on the last syllable. "Nobody is in the strictest sense of the word." He pointed his pipe at me like the service revolver he must have carried abroad. "Bumblers whose heads rose above the din of their time," his voice growled. "Darlings of a bored media." The topic would have flushed his face if slack vessels could manage it. "Red ants among black ones, but ants just the same. If you scratch deep enough, penetrate the veneer, a more fitting title would be notorious."

"How so?" I could think of a few such examples.

He patted the book on his lap. "Henry Morton Stanley, the chap who found David Livingston in the wilds of Africa. Was noted for it. Accolades showered down on his head. He should have rested on those laurels right there, but he raped and enslaved the Congo at the behest of the Belgian King Leopold. A monarch I considered quite insane, by the way. Few remember that, but I do." Farnell paused, looked down. "I helped him."

“I suppose I’m a black ant? One of the undistinguished among the indistinguishable?”

He adjusted his ascot. “That depends.” His eyes drilled into mine. “Do you want to be notorious?”

I ignored the last question, it bordering on what might lead to defining an almost thing. The first was more interesting, less personal. “Depends on what?”

“Not what. When. Even the where is irrelevant. Time is the strongest force in the universe. You can’t buck that tide, but you can ride its currents.”

He turned away and placed his book on the table barely large enough for it, then faded away, as did the richly appointed room of heavy curtains and heavier furniture. Dust and decay returned to the floor. The mantle stood empty, the oak paneling was again age-streaked with mold. The change exposed the shabbiness of my chair in the muted gloom of late afternoon, invading through murky windows.

Farnell makes his exit when I get too close to the words I need. During our third meeting, I asked if he existed after our conversations. When he said yes, I further inquired where he went. He told me it was I who disappeared, not him.

Our discussions became twice-weekly affairs. Tuesdays, we posed questions—his of the Socratic variety, mine abstract, not demanding, circling butterflies never touching down. On Thursdays, we aired out our challenges and answers.

After he left, there was no point in remaining. Opening the iron gate to the cliff-side path, I looked back at Farnell's mausoleum. Once a display of 1920s indulgence, now overgrown and a century vacant. Masons laid these walls to last five hundred years, yet nature invades the smallest cracks in buildings and people.

This big, blustery day made for seven-league boots, shades of gray and grayer rolling from the western sea. Like an old man waving his cane at speeding cars, it comes to nothing. From the cottage, I heard my addiction calling.

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Night settled like a matron into her chair, as did I, lap filled with the volume, *Autopsy Medical Devices*. I thumbed past the title and front piece pages, looking for the table of contents. The lights flickered once, then again, before remaining dead after the third. Windblown darkness slammed against the cottage walls, bleeding through, replacing shadows with blacker things. Outside, dozens of distant eyes glowed in the trees. Had I secured the cellar door?

Shedding my warmer, I shuffled toward the kitchen, lit a candle, then traded my cocktail glass for a knife. I latched the deadbolt from inside the pantry. Someone before had faced intruders. Let the night beasts scratch the widows, rattle the doorknobs, break the furniture, but not my bones. A red glow flooded under the door, fading then brightening, searching.

Cold sweat trickled down my back. I covered the sound of my breathing with an old pillow that smelled of mouse droppings. When silence came, it was doubly menacing, my mind filling the void.

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Morning fog threw up protective barricades. A weaker person, one needing comfort, would propose the assault had been a dream, a trick of the night, or some other nonsense. I wasn't a weaker person. Nothing was out of place except the end table lamp in the sitting room, slightly askew but evidence enough of intrusion. Did I leave the last page of my manuscript face down? Had the night visitors read it? Was the act of placing it upside down a rejection? I mixed a martini, chewed olives impaled on a cocktail sword, and thought of Evelyn, the whiteness of her skin, and how she floated above vague talk at parties.

Into my second drink, I made my shopping list: battery-powered lantern, three jars of stuffed olives, fresh bread, black paint, and a propane torch to burn their eyes out.

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I've fallen into the habit of taking long walks out past civilization's edge, a replacement for the hours spent in city coffee houses, watching, listening to the mannequins, hoping to catch something worthwhile for my now absent muse to

gnaw. Had he found a new home to clutter-clatter? Should I hang a help wanted sign? Inquire within.

My canvas shoulder bag and walking stick stood sentry on a hat tree beside the cottage entryway, waiting for a walk. As usual, the day was overcast, though I chanced rain wouldn't come. Hard rain is rare here. More often than not, it's a constant hint of mist, like someone gently spraying your face as they would a favorite house plant to knock the dust off. Make you shine again. I swiped the porch light switch before shutting the front door. Three steps on, I stopped—don't call it hesitated. Did I lock it? Turning back, I twisted the handle. Yes, locked. Three more paces. I wondered if I pulled it tightly shut. I had. Satisfied, I walked to the end of the drive, swinging my walking stick forward like a minesweeper, knocking down dew-strung spiderwebs.

A narrow, mile-long blacktop led to three blocks of boardwalk stores, a hotel, and the town hall. Like a metronome, the dull thump of my staff on the pavement provides the rhythm while my thoughts wander in melody, rising in one stanza, falling the next.

At each coda, I turn to glimpse the man who has been following me. He knows before I look, stepping into the tangled verge or ducking behind a tree. I'm no fool. Though I never see him, the buzz of his anonymous presence, his snapping observations chewing on my trail, erasing my steps, comes loud and obnoxious.

From behind, a vehicle slows, stops. Randy. Unmistakably, unremarkably, Randy. Another almost person, like those in the city I'd fled.

"Hey there, Mr. Becket." Same hat, same overalls, same stains on his tee shirt. "Drove by the cottage just now. Looks like the storm turned up some shingles last night."

Claws do that. I walked over and used the driver's side mirror to look behind me. Damn clever, my stalker. He knew what I was doing. Cold molasses on ice, Randy droned on. Treasures rested in the back of his truck. No longer would the tormentor slap my walls, scratch at my door, or streak past the corners of my eyes.

"Can I borrow your hatchet and some baling wire?" I asked.

He craned his neck to see what I was pointing at. "Sure. I'll leave 'em on your porch."

Randy turned around and drove toward the cottage. Good boy. I trod on, wondering if Misty is working the counter at Ocean Liquor today, an easy acquaintance I've made. Good for short company and physical needs. She likes to be choked.

Lunch at the hotel today.

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A season's true arrival is not a sudden thing. You only notice looking back a few weeks or a month if you've misplaced your calendar, as I had. I woke today realizing I've had a house guest for nine days. It's not Misty. She rarely stays until morning and

certainly not for days. Most of last night was spent searching for the cool side of the pillow.

I faced my kitchen guest. “Are you sure you’re not dead?” Our past talks seemed vague memories—cigarette smoke, easily dispatched.

John set his coffee mug on the table and peered over his glasses. “Do I smell dead?”

“I don’t know what that smells like.”

“You’d know.” His hand circled on his wrist, fanning his face. “Horrible stench. Lingers in the nose, on the tongue, like crotch foot. Even the embalmers can’t ward it off,” he said, placing thumb and forefinger on either side of his neck, covering slits where tubes had pumped preservative. “You need to shave.”

“Gave it up. Mirrors lie.”

“How so?” he asked.

“They reverse reality.”

“Not reason enough.”

“Okay, how about the fact I see your ugly face looking back at me.” I’ve never had such an insipid conversation with John, nothing so personally intrusive. Of late, they’ve held all the charm of a ransom note.

“Lucky you don’t see Donna’s.”

“Donna?” When will he shut up?

“That hooker I introduced you to in the city. Thought you could use a distraction. She gave you her name as Jasmine.”

That set me back. “A free spirit, an adventurous sort.”

“A five-hundred-dollar a night free spirit. Had to give her another two grand to keep her mouth shut after you plowed up her face.”

“I didn’t.”

“You did.” John smiled.

I squinted. “Why do you believe her over me?” John’s dialog needs a rewrite.

“She’s my sister.”

“I know you’re not real.”

John took a sip. “No one has come up with a proper definition of that word.

The urge to poison his food sped through my thoughts, but he never ate. Since his arrival, the night voyeurs have abandoned their siege and encroachments. They fear him, biblical blood smeared on my doorpost, forbidding entry. He never stands, never leaves the chair facing the back of my laptop, my shield. Doesn’t matter. His words or mine?

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Today's sky scrapes the treetops as it does every meeting day. The same wind, the same smells, and the same lurker has followed. Days efficiently recycled.

After I settle in, Farnell asks, "What would you like to discuss?"

"The end of our last conversation."

He adjusted his lap blanket. "Don't get fixated on that. When you question reality too deeply, the evidence evaporates, like continually slicing of a grain of sand."

"Is yours, just now, the same as mine?"

The pipe took to the right side of his mouth for a clenched response. "Can we separate or count realities? If not, chaos masquerading as mirage rules."

I recrossed my legs, finding comfort in the green velvet armchair but not in his answer. My mind screamed for simplification.

"Ah, well," he continued, "to each his own. They must synchronize when awareness rears its head. Otherwise, it's too complicated and convenient a coincidence, don't you think?"

He drummed his fingers on the heavy volume held on his lap. Always the same book. No title on the spine or leather cover. Never open in my presence. I've fought the impulse to examine it, to ask him to pass the weighty thing to me, yet I fear something might shatter if he did.

"Must I leave this one?"

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You know why, Samuel.”

Resigned, I gave him an answer to a question unasked. “I hate the sameness knocking about in my head.”

“Where would you go?”

Where to flee, so the act of my leaving won't drag mystery and memory in the wake. Back to the age of reason?

As if knowing my mind, he says, “Not possible.”

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Absent muse be damned, I borrowed from the endings of my previous books, bringing this one to an end. It's now suitable for my publisher and the editor minions he keeps chained in his twelfth-floor dungeon. Does he know the floor above is not really the fourteenth, its weight ready to crush? Like mirrors, elevator buttons lie.

After slipping it over the transom by overnight mail, I told him to make changes as the vassals see fit. No need to send me the proofs. Just let the corpse lie in peace. Since emailing the malignant manuscript, I've felt buoyant, a fraction of happy, you might say. Clarity does that for me, or when clarity fails, celebratory martinis.

I side glance at John. He's drinking coffee. Where does he get it? None in the cupboards. We hadn't spoken in days, but

there he sits, cup never empty, sipping through his teeth, making that horrible sound, smiling, and whispering, “almost, almost, almost,” every time I stop writing. His voice wraps around my brain stem like a fist. I tell him to shut up or leave.

“Where would I go?” he asks.

“To hell,” I said. His grin slips into a smile. Has he won, or was his time up? In either case, he leaves, not in a Farnell fade, but in an instant, taking his cup with him.

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Last Tuesday, Farnell promised to have a surprise for our next chat. Sober, I watched the clock all morning, fortified with granola, tea, and Tylenol, waiting to strike out for Litton House. This is not a day for bottle bravery.

Kicking through soggy leaves, brushing away ferns, I came to sea bluff. The grinding surf and driftwood engaged in relentless dance and clash, insistent as detective’s dame in need of a match. Water always wins. In a crevice below lay the body of my stalker, artfully draped in kelp, no longer to taunt. The old boy got sloppy and missed seeing the danger. Satisfied, I pushed nature aside, uprooted the wired stakes, tossed my trap over the edge, and watched as it was devoured.

Litton House looks fresher, strong-shouldered, time’s slump lost. The lawns are manicured, hedges trimmed, and the twisted driveway weeds removed. The garden gate refused to give its normal squeal when I swung it open. I’ll be annoyed if

this is the surprise Farnell promised. The tall doors stand apart. Electric light shone from within. I walked past waist-high vases on plinths peppered about the foyer. Lush landscape paintings held the high ground below the chandelier. Fresh flowers lay on a credenza, the cloying fragrance almost intolerable. None of this impressed me. Settings without characters rarely do.

Farnell's room is as it should be, lamps lit, pools of light as stepping stones. His chair vacant, as is mine. I looked about, expecting him to be standing by the bookshelves. No. Not there. Not anywhere. My heart beat faster, anticipating. It felt like sacrilege when I took his seat. My fingers stroked the cover of his book, the spine, the paper edges. I pulled it to my lap.

"Your martini, sir."

Never would I have expected Farnell to be offering a silver tray, him giving a half-bow. His formal black suit, stiff white shirt, gloves, and tie smacked of smug servitude. I hesitated, desiring eye contact not offered, then took the stemmed glass—clear liquid, three speared olives. "A young woman to see you, sir," he said before making an invisible retreat, as butlers do.

A spectacled woman with dark severe-cut hair stood at the library door, water dripping from her rain jacket. Her soggianness reminds me of Evelyn, her doe eyes drag up Donna's naked familiarity.

I stood, knew my lines, heard my words. "Welcome to Litton House, Priscilla. Pleasant day for a walk."

“I didn’t think anyone lived here,” she said.

What else could she say after falling into this flytrap? I’ll learn her sins and release mine.