

*Eva – by James Watts (Nov. 18, 2022)*

Death floated down on him like a parachute in the wind – twisting and turning, helpless against the forces of gravity. His eyes fluttered frantically like a suicidal moth circling an open flame. He tried to focus, tried to make sense of his final seconds. His lips parted to release a whistling, bubbling mixture of bloody saliva and escaping air. A metallic taste filled his mouth as his kidneys shut down. His last sensation the bitter scent of self-loathing. His body twitched twice, then slumped lifeless below the Riverview High School team logo – a cougar – at the bottom of the cold, dirty staircase in the girls’ locker room.

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Alice enjoyed being a senior at RHS. Exciting plans for prom, graduation, and college eclipsed the pressures of projects, homework, and studying for finals. Maintaining relationships was a full-time job. One wrong word in a hurried social media post could sentence a girl to hell, or worse. Even a fashion faux-pas – too slutty or too prudish – and popularity vanished. Having a dead father and a jailed stepfather who had tried to poison her, gave her serious street-cred. When teachers looked at her with pity, she paid no attention. Only one teacher had impacted her life, but Miss Ranvier had disappeared along with their secret.

Today there was only one mission – to lock down her date for the prom. Throughout high school, Alice had developed from a nerdy, quiet, homely introvert into a confident, clever, strong and most would say beautiful young lady. She didn’t need make-up. Alice was the whole package, with her dark flashing eyes, raven, shoulder-length hair, and clear, country-girl complexion. Unlike other girls in her category, she was friendly to everyone. She was a mentor for young students and a fierce advocate for social justice. She could have commanded an audience in the school cafeteria, but she spent most lunch hours in the gym, training for an upcoming match or coaching younger wrestlers.

Alice hoped to make prom plans quietly, but like most high schools, rumours moved faster than the internet. Mysterious mating rituals began in September. By May, sweaty-palmed boys who had not found a partner, shunned sweatpants and their crusty hoodies, applied copious amounts of deodorant, and donned polo shirts and khakis to improve their chances of getting the date of their dreams. Although the wolves had been circling, Alice had other plans.

With lunch almost over, Alice headed toward the locker room. She was sweaty from wrestling above her weight class, and it would be good to get changed into dry clothes. At the top of the stairs she heard him, “hey bitch, why don’t you answer my emails? Do you think that you are too good for me?”

Alice turned around. Jacob was coming at her, quickly. In his hand was a short bar from the weight room. The thought that crossed her mind and made her grin was, “this poor skinny kid sure could use some weight training!”

“Slow down, tiger,” Alice said. “I didn’t get any email from you.”

“Bullshit,” Jacob screamed. “You always ignore me.”

He raised the bar above his head and was about to bring it crashing down on Alice when from the corner of her eye, Alice detected movement; a blur of blond hair, blue eyes, and a swift-moving Riverview High School gym uniform. Then Alice observed Jacob flying through the air, flailing, flipping and falling in a heap at the bottom of the staircase. Then she saw Eva.

“Hey, Eva!” Alice said, a little surprised. “Where have you been? I’ve been looking for you.”

“I was in the weight room, working out,” replied Eva, a little out of breath.

“Do you want to go to the prom with me?” asked Alice, glancing briefly down the stairs.

“Sure!” replied Eva enthusiastically. “Thought you’d never ask!”

They descended the staircase toward the locker room, carefully stepped over Jacob’s still body, and got changed into their uniforms for afternoon classes.