HE WAITS

JG Faherty

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SECOND EDITION

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DEDICATION

To all my friends I grew up with and remain friends with to this day. We would have been right at home ignoring what our parents said and trying to find out what was in that well.

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Hungry Little Timmy lives at the bottom of the well
Don't let Timmy eat you or your soul will go to Hell

Chapter 1

No one ever blamed Ron Francis for the death of his little brother, Stu. No one except Ron, of course.

It happened on a sunny July afternoon, the kind of day when boys played baseball or caught frogs at the pond or rode their bikes to the store and emptied the change in their pockets to buy sodas and bags of potato chips. It was 1980, a time when living in the suburbs still meant kids didn't worry about getting abducted by perverts or accosted by crack heads behind the school.

The worst thing a ten-year-old boy expected to have happen was getting scratched by thorn bushes while exploring in the woods behind their neighborhood or maybe falling off a bike and limping home with a sprained ankle or scraped knees. Even the most superstitious, afraid-of-the-dark little kid, the kid who'd never get picked for any team, the kid who'd be most likely to spend a gorgeous summer day reading a science book, wouldn't expect to get eaten alive by a monster.

Not in the daytime. Not in real life.

Which was why Ron never thought twice when he decided to open up the well and look inside.

"You shouldn't do that," Stu said, watching as Ron pulled the old, rotted boards off the hole all the kids called 'the well.' No one was really sure if it had ever really been a well; it was so old even the parents in the neighborhood didn't know what it used to be. Whatever it had started life as, now it was just a round hole in the ground, about three feet across, with stones lining the edge.

Years ago, someone— probably an overcautious parent, Ron figured—had placed heavy planks over the top so no stupid

kids would fall in. Of course, you'd have to be a real spaz to fall into a well, but they probably had spazoids back then, too.

Over time, weeds and bushes and vines had grown over the planks until it was almost impossible to move them. That is, until Ron and a some of his friends—Jimmy O'Keefe, Manny Rivera, and Butch Moore—decided to tear up all the wild vegetation so they could move the planks and see down the hole.

They'd worked halfway through the previous afternoon before everyone had to go home for dinner. They were supposed to finish today, but Butch had gotten poison ivy and was in bed, covered in pink goo from his face to his feet. And Jimmy and Manny both had chores to do for their parents. They'd all agreed to wait a day, but Ron had decided to go back on his own. Why should he have to wait just 'cause everyone else couldn't come?

He'd been leaving the house when Stu elected to tag along. Of course, Ron hadn't told him where they were going until they got there. Not when there was as good a chance as not Stu would run back into the house and tell on him. Stu wasn't as much of a dork as most little brothers, but you still couldn't trust him not to wuss out and ruin the whole day.

"You should stop," Stu said, his voice growing more nervous with each plank Ron pushed away.

"Shut up, will ya?" Ron paused to wipe sweat and dirt from his forehead.

It was only noon, and already it had to be ninety degrees. There weren't even any trees to provide shade, because the well sat in the middle of "Old Lady" Miller's field, an acres-wide expanse of dead grass and scrub that occupied the space between Hudson Terrace and Maple Avenue. The big kids some times partied there at night, and most everyone from Hudson Terrace used it as a short cut while walking to the middle school and high school, both of which were on Maple.

Stu, who could have passed for Ron's twin if he hadn't been two years younger and three inches shorter, chewed at his lower lip.

"Mom said we should never go near it."

"I said, shut up." Ron tugged at more vines. The stupid things were strong as steel, and they were doing a good job of scraping his hands. But he didn't stop. There were only two more boards to go, and he could already feel cold air rising from the deep pit.

"But she said—"

"Zip it or go home, nerd-boy. Mom says a lot of things. Doesn't mean you gotta listen to all of them. If it was up to her, we'd have to wear helmets when we ride our bikes, like retard kids. You wanna do that, too?"

Stu shook his head, his sandy- colored hair flopping like wet mop strands. "No. But what about Timmy?"

"Timmy? Who…don't tell me you're talking about that stupid rhyme. There's no monster in the well, you dip. That's just something the big kids tell little kids to scare them."

"Hungry little Timmy lives at the bottom of the well. Don't let Timmy eat you or your soul will go to… Hell." Stu said the last word fast, as if afraid their mother might hear him curse.

"You are such a baby." Ron pushed back his own longish hair and tugged at the last board. It held fast, caught in some roots and dirt, and then came free so suddenly he flew back and landed on his ass. Stu didn't laugh, which told Ron he was really scared.

"Look. If you're that afraid, just go home. You don't have to stick around."

Without waiting to see what his brother did, Ron leaned forward and peered into the hole. A foul odor rose up from the

dark depths, a stench that reminded him of the time he'd found an old bottle that had a dead mouse floating in the watered-down beer, all bloated and covered in slime. It was like farts and mud and swamp and road kill all mixed together and then locked in a box for a hundred years. The kind of smell he imagined you'd get if someone died in a house and no one found them for months.

He tried to see down, but despite the sun being almost directly overhead, its rays only penetrated about four feet before the blackness overpowered them. Still, he could tell the inside walls were made of rocks, like the stone walls people used to divide properties back in the old days.

He put his hand down, ran his fingers across rocks which felt like they'd been stored in a freezer instead of sitting just below the surface on a hot summer day.

"Eew. That thing stinks worse than your butt." Stu waved his hand in front of his face, but instead of backing away, he crawled a little closer.

"That's 'cause of all the dead bodies down there," Ron said, hoping to scare him even more.

"Very funny. I'm not stupid. Or scared."

"Whatever. I wanna see how deep it is." Ron looked around until he found a fist-sized stone nearby and then dropped it into the hole. He counted the seconds out loud, waiting for it to hit water or ground.

"One…two…three…four…five… six…wow, it must really be deep. I didn't hear anything."

"Let me try!" Stu hurried off and came back with a rock so big he needed both hands to carry it. "We'll have to hear this one!"

He handed it to Ron, who shook his head. "Go on, you can drop it. Just don't be a spaz and fall in."

"I won't." Stu went down to his knees and pushed the rock over the edge. This time they both counted together.

"One…two…three—"

The attack happened so fast Ron never had more than a glimpse of the creature, but the terrifying afterimage of it remained seared into his brain forever, like the figures burned into the cement at Hiroshima.

One minute he was at the edge, staring into a black hole, and the next *things* reached out of the darkness. Horrible things that seemed made of shadows.

Black talons grabbed Stu by the shoulders and pulled him into the murky depths. Stu cried out once and then his body disappeared, his voice trailing away after it.

And even after Ron grew up, got married, and had children of his own, he still heard that scream in his nightmares, heard the last words his brother ever spoke.

"Ronnie, help!"

Chapter 2

I can't believe I'm here.

Ron Francis stared at the house from the bottom of the driveway and did his best to fight back the shudders and nausea that seeing the place always brought on.

The house hadn't changed all that much since he'd last seen it, what, ten years ago? Fifteen? It was hard to remember.

Fifteen. I was in town for Mom and Dad's anniversary party, their thirtieth. The last one before they moved to Florida. I dropped them off.

He hadn't gone inside, though. That would have been asking too much. He'd been overjoyed when his parents took up semi-permanent residence in Tampa, because it meant he could visit them and not be so terrified to step foot in their house that he had to sleep in a hotel instead.

Except now he had no choice. The house was his, at least until he could get it on the market and sell the damn thing. And he couldn't do that until he and Annie went inside and looked around to decide what to keep for themselves and what to sell.

Against his will, his gaze lifted, moving past the faded blue vinyl siding to what lay beyond the short backyard.

Old Lady Miller's field.

The afternoon sun hovered just above the distant hills, painting the field a warm, glowing orange. Like the house, it didn't appear the field had changed much, which surprised Ron. After all, more than thirty years had passed since Stu…

He'd expected the field to be gone, eaten away by the starving beast of suburban construction, a monster that gobbled pristine land and shit out rows of identical high ranches and center hall colonials.

This time his shiver broke through and he regretted using the word monster, even if it was only in his thoughts. Because if the field was still there, that meant the well was, too. And if the well was…

Jesus, I wish I didn't have to be here.

His abhorrence of the place—the field, the house, the whole damn town!—was so great he would have preferred standing next to his father's coffin again, despite how terrible that day had been.

"Ron? You okay?"

He turned at the sound of Melanie's voice. She rested a hand on his arm and for the first time in their twelve years of marriage her touch didn't comfort him.

"Yeah," he said, placing his hand over hers, but she wasn't fooled.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"No, but I have to. It's my name on the deed now, so it's me who has to do the walk through. Besides, it's time. I need to do this so I can finally put it to rest."

Of course, by 'it' he meant 'him,' and Melanie knew it. He'd made no secret of the fact that Stu's death still haunted him, that he'd never for-given himself for his little brother falling into the well.

Ah, the big lie. The same one he'd told the police, and his parents, and the men who'd gone looking for Stu. He'd told it so many times over the years it should have become the truth in his mind, the way other oft-repeated lies will.

I just turned around for a second to get another rock and I heard him yell. When I looked back, he was gone.

Except it hadn't. Each time he told it, each time someone mentioned how tragic it was or asked him if he was okay, it didn't matter how many years had passed or how many times the

words were spoken. He still felt just as guilty as the day it happened. And just as afraid.

Over time, he'd learned to control his feelings so that nothing real showed. He learned to say all the right things: *I know it's not my fault; I still miss him; I wish he was here*.

Some of them were even true. No matter what, though, there were always the two demons warring inside him, the twin devils that had been born that day. The guilt of doing nothing when he knew something had taken his brother. And the total terror that whatever was in the well would return one day and take him, too.

Hungry little Timmy lives at the bottom of the well Don't let Timmy eat you or your soul will go to Hell.

All the times they'd repeated that rhyme as little kids. Just like the older kids before them, and the generations before them. None of them knowing it was true, that something horrible, something evil, lived in the old well.

Melanie's hand tightened on his.

"Whatever you decide, I'm right here with you. And so is Annie."

Ron nodded, fighting back a grimace. The mention of his sister's name was another stab in his heart.

She'd only been six when it happened. Only six, but she'd loved Stu, probably more than she'd loved Ron. At the age of ten, Ron's list of important things in life hadn't included a baby sister. Sure, he'd have defended her if anyone tried to hurt her, and she was fun to play tricks on, but he'd had his friends and his sports and his comic books. It'd been Stu who made time to play with her.

Annie had been wonderful in the years since, completely understanding why Ron could never go into the field again, why he had to leave town right after college and never come back.

She'd stayed, married a local boy, had two great boys of her own. Had taken on the burden of caring for their parents as they grew older.

How much would she hate me if she knew the truth?

Not for the first time, Ron wished his father had left Annie the house and him the bank accounts, instead of the other way around. The old man had always said he set it up that way because Annie already had a nice, big house, whereas Ron and Melanie lived in the city, in an apartment. It didn't matter that their apartment had as much square footage as Annie's house.

"Families are supposed to live in houses, with lawns to play on, not stacked on top of each other like ants in a nest."

That's what their father would say whenever talk of houses came up. But Ron had a feeling leaving him the house was the old man's way of forcing him to come back one last time, forcing him to face his demons.

If only he'd known there really were demons.

As if on cue, Annie chose that moment to drive up, parking her shiny new Escalade next to Ron's more practical hybrid.

She didn't waste any time spending that inheritance, Ron thought, watching his sister and the twins get out. Ken and Randy immediately ran to the front yard, where Ron's two sons, Ron Junior and Charlie, were tossing a ball back and forth.

"At least we don't have to worry about keeping them occupied," Annie said, joining Ron and Melanie.

"They're getting so big." Melanie gave Annie a hug.

"I know. I can't believe they're starting sixth grade next year. It makes me feel old."

"Me, too. Ron Junior is going into seventh, and Charlie turns eight next week."

Eight. The same age as Stu…

Ron gritted his teeth. Was there anything that wasn't going to remind him of that day?

God, I wish I hadn't come back. Maybe it had been a mistake. Maybe he wasn't strong enough to spend two days in a town where every place he looked, every face and building he saw, was a reminder of the nightmares he'd never outgrown.

"That's all they are, nightmares." The voice of Doctor Ellison, the psychologist he'd seen twice a week throughout his twenties. The only person Ron had ever told the truth to.

Ellison had been convinced Ron imagined the monsters dragging Stu into the darkness because his mind couldn't handle the guilt of watching his baby brother fall into the well, and he'd tried to convince Ron that his memories were false. Ron had wanted to believe it, too; had stuck with therapy for seven years hoping eventually the doctor's logic would prevail.

It hadn't.

After that, he'd tried sleeping pills, alcohol, anything that might help him sleep. Nothing worked, not until he had kids of his own. Once Junior came along, and then Charlie, Ron began sleeping a little better each night. The nightmares came less frequently, and even when he had them, they weren't as god-awfully realistic as they'd been when he was younger.

He wasn't sure if it was just the passing of time or if subconsciously he felt he'd made up for Stu's loss just a little by bringing two great kids into the world, but he'd reached the point where he could manage five or six hours of real sleep most nights. And for that he was grateful.

I doubt I'll get half that tonight.

Even though they were sleeping in a hotel on the other side of town, just being back was sure to bring on some major nightmares. He'd already decided to avoid the problem completely by not going to sleep. Better to be exhausted for two

days and let Melanie drive home than suffer through dreams that made the worst horror movies seem like kiddie shows.

"Ready to do this?" Annie asked, looking up at him. Although she'd inherited the Francis family looks— sandy hair, a smattering of freckles on pale skin that burned too easily, and eyes as green as emeralds—she'd started out shorter than her brothers and stayed that way.

"Ron?" Melanie poked his arm when he didn't answer.

"Yeah. Christ. Let's get it over with and get the hell out of this place."

He was halfway to the door before he realized he'd spoken out loud.

Chapter 3

"Hey, you guys want to see some- thing cool?"

Randy tossed the baseball up and down as he spoke. Short like his mother but stocky like his father, he looked like he should have been clutching a football to his chest rather than playing catch.

"Hell, yeah," Junior said, joining his cousins.

Charlie tagged along behind. "What is it?"

"You see that field back there? That's where Uncle Stu died."

A quick chill ran down Charlie's back, making him shudder. The story of their uncle's tragic death was well-known in both the Francis and Carter households, and even though Uncle Stu was nothing but an abstract idea and some black and white pictures to him, the idea of dying by falling into a well had always given Charlie the creeps.

"Hungry little Timmy lives at the bottom of the well. Don't let Timmy eat you or your soul will go to Hell," Ken said, making his voice sound all low and spooky.

Junior frowned. "What's that, some kind of stupid nursery rhyme?"

"No, it's about the well. Everyone in town says it's haunted."

"Because of Uncle Stu?" Charlie asked.

Randy shook his head. "No, they say it's been haunted for like, centuries."

"Who's they?" Junior sounded bored with the whole idea.

"Everyone. The whole town." Randy spread his arms. "All the parents know it. My friend Eddie Gooler says his grandfather told him about it."

"You mean, people believe someone lives in the well and eats people?" Charlie smiled, thinking to himself that Randy and Ken really were total hicks.

"Don't be a dork. Nobody believes that old tale. But they use it to scare little kids, so they don't end up playing there and falling in."

"Like Uncle Stu," Junior said.

"Right. Supposedly the well is like a bottomless pit or something; it's really fuckin' deep."

"You've seen it?"

"Yeah. It's back in the field, where the high school kids party. It's supposed to be sealed up, but somebody got the lid open."

"I wanna see it," Charlie said. It sounded like a cool thing to do, despite being a little scary. Or maybe because of it. Plus, when they went back home, he'd have a story to top Eddie Sanchez, who was always bragging he'd seen his sister 'doing it' one night. Seeing the haunted well where you uncle disappeared was way cooler.

"I don't know…" Junior pursed his lips. "Dad said we're not supposed to leave the yard."

"Don't be a pussy," Ken said. "You can see the field from the back porch. Besides, you're with us. How much trouble can you get in?"

"Um…"

"I'm going," Charlie said.

"Check it out, the little brother has the balls." Ken slapped his back.

"Fine, we'll go. But let's hurry so we can get back before anyone notices we're gone."

"No problem. The path practically starts in your backyard."

* * *

Ron glanced up from his notebook, where he'd been jotting down what furniture to keep, what Annie wanted, and what to sell or donate.

"It's awfully quiet outside. Where are the kids?"

Without waiting for an answer, he went to the living room window and looked out. "They're not out front. Mel, are they in the back?"

"No," his wife answered from the kitchen.

"Dammit! I told them not to wander off." Ron opened the front door. "Junior! Charlie!"

"Relax," Annie said. "Listen."

Ron did, trying to figure out what she was referring to, but all he heard were the usual sounds of a suburban summer day. Lawn mowers, cars, a radio playing classic rock somewhere down the street. Bells.

Bells? Was that… "The ice cream truck." He heard the relief in his voice.

Annie smiled. "Same damn truck that used to come around when we were growing up. When it comes to ice cream, my kids have bionic hearing."

"Ours, too," Melanie said, emerging from the kitchen with a faded dish towel in her hands. "I've seen them run four blocks just to catch the truck."

"Sounds like it's just a couple of streets over. I'll bet my last dollar that's where they are. And if I know my boys, after they finish their popsicles or Toasted Almonds or whatevers, they'll probably take their sweet-ass time getting back. I've never known two kids who could lose track of time the way those two do."

"They won't go into the field, will they?" Fear wormed around in Ron's stomach like a nasty eel.

"I doubt it. They still cut through on their way to school; all the kids do. But they prefer the park or the school yard, anywhere they can ride their skateboards. Besides, they know to stay far away from…you know."

"Okay." The squirming things in his guts grew larger, eels now instead of worms, but Ron forced himself to keep calm. He'd told the boys not to play in the field. Annie's kids knew to stay away from the well. As much as he wanted to run out and find Junior and Charlie, he knew it was just his own fears, his own neurosis, that made him believe something bad would happen. And part of coming back, part of facing his inner demons, meant not giving in to his phobia.

He just wished the eels would listen to his brain.

* * *

"I thought you said it was all covered up."

Charlie stared at the black crescent in wonder. It was obvious someone had already exposed the opening, perhaps more than once. The weeds and vines were partially torn away, and the iron manhole lay partially on the cement around the hole, exposing a sliver of beckoning darkness.

"It was, the last time we were here," Ken said. The four of them squatted down to take a closer look, and Randy pointed at deep scratches in the concrete.

"Looks like someone pried it open." He slipped his fingers into the opening and gave a grunt as he pushed against the lid. It grated a couple of inches across the cement.

"What are you doing?" Junior reached out and put a hand on Randy's arm to stop him.

"Hey, I just wanna look. I'm not gonna fall in. Geez, stop being such a wuss. Are you gonna help me?" He shook his arm free and put his hands against the steel again. This time his brother joined him, and together they were able to slide the heavy lid all the way off before they collapsed, red-faced and sweating.

A cool draft pushed at Charlie's face and chest, almost chilly compared to the heat of the sun beating on his back and neck. At the same time, a rotten odor filled his nose, and he leaned back, tears running from his eyes.

"Jesus, that's ripe!" Ken turned his head away, coughing and waving his hands in front of his face.

"I'll bet there's loads of dead animals down there, full of maggots and shit." Randy looked almost excited by the idea, and Charlie kind of knew how he felt. They were like explorers, discovering a cave or finding a long-lost tomb filled with mummies. Except those people hadn't found the tomb of their own relative. He wondered if his uncle's body was part of the smell, and then it hit him that Uncle Stu had been just a kid when he died.

The same age as me.

By now there'd be nothing left but bones. Charlie'd seen how dead animals rotted away, he'd seen rats and cats dead in alleys, had watched while over time the bodies first swelled up and then flattened out, the skin and fur slowly disintegrating until only the skeleton remained.

Is my uncle's skeleton down there like that? Just bones in the mud, like a dried-up swamp filled with fossils?

The idea was at once creepy and cool. Around him, Ken, Randy, and Junior stayed silent, and he wondered if they were feeling the same way. The twitter of the birds and the *screeeee* of the grasshoppers hiding in the tall, dying grass now sounded too

loud, as if nature was shouting at them, and he wished someone would say something. When someone finally did, it was him.

"I wonder how deep it really is?"

Ken handed him a rock. "Only one way to find out."

"Wait." Everyone stared at Junior, who looked ready to puke. His face had gone pale, and sweat ran down both temples from his new crew cut. "That's how Uncle Stu died. Him and dad were dropping rocks into the well."

"And he fell in. We all know the story." Ken looked at Charlie.

"Are you gonna fall in?" Charlie shook his head, but right then he wasn't sure. Staring into that black hole made him feel dizzy, and the stink coming up didn't help. All of a sudden, he wanted nothing more than to go back to Grandpa's house and find that ice cream truck they'd heard earlier. Then he could get a Bomb Pop and forget all about stinky wells and dead uncles he'd never met. But that meant being a pussy, which was the word the big kids used to make fun of you when you were afraid to do something.

They also talked about eating it, but that didn't make sense. Why would you eat a frightened person?

"Oh, now you're both gonna wimp out?" Randy reached for the rock. "Gimme it. Pussy."

Charlie was about to hand it to him when he felt someone grab his belt. He looked back, saw Junior there.

"I'll make sure you don't fall." Knowing his brother had his back drove away all the fear. He trusted Junior more than anyone. Junior would never let anything happen to him. Even if he got dizzy or leaned over too far, his brother would make sure he didn't fall.

Charlie reached forward and dropped the rock into the darkness. They all drew closer, listening for a splash.

The only warning Charlie had was a sudden worsening of the foul, unwholesome air. Two red lights appeared in the blackness.

And then the claws had him.

Chapter 4

The moment Ron heard the first scream, he knew.

Even before he saw Ken and Randy running across the backyard, the field a profane monument to death behind them, he knew. He *knew*.

It's happening again. The well.

"Ken! Randy! Ohmygod, what's wrong?" Annie opened the back door and nearly got trampled as her sons pushed past her and thundered into the house, still shouting for help.

"Call 9-1-1! Call 9-1-1!" Ken's face was sunburn red from running in the heat, his hair plastered to his head with sweat.

"What happened?" Melanie asked, her voice almost as loud and hysterical as Ken's. "Where's Junior and Charlie?"

Ron didn't wait for their answer, although he caught most of the words as he opened the basement door and grabbed the rope and flashlight he'd seen hanging there earlier, the same ones he'd hung there as a boy. He'd been amazed they were still there after all this time, almost as if his father had known they'd be needed someday. Now he silently thanked his father for saving them.

"The well…something in there… got Charlie and Junior…monster."

Don't let Timmy eat you.

He hoped the old story wasn't true, at least not that part of it.

Please, God, let there be time. Time enough for me to find them.

"Look out." He nudged Melanie aside as he headed for the back door.

"Ron, where the hell are you going? Call the cops! Something happened to—"

Ron swung around so fast Melanie stepped back. "There's no time. I know what happened to them. The same goddamned thing that happened to Stu."

"What? They fell into—"

"No." He grabbed his wife by the shoulders, gave her a little shake so she'd stop talking and listen. He saw the shock and hurt in her face, regretted it was necessary. He'd apologize later. If there was a later. "Listen. I lied to you. I lied to everyone. Stu didn't fall in. Something in the well…took him. Something terrible. Black, with red eyes."

"And claws," Randy said, his face ashen.

"Ron, I don't understand. What…?"

"There's things in the well, just like the old rhyme says."

"Hungry little Timmy…" Annie whispered, and then put her hands to her mouth. Melanie looked from him to Annie and back again like they were talking gibberish.

"What? I never heard…"

"You're not from around here. But it's real. Something evil. And it has our boys. But I'm going to get them."

With that, he turned and ran out the back door, ran across the yard towards the field that had haunted him for thirty-two years. His entire adult life spent anguishing from guilt and fear.

Not anymore.

You don't get my children, goddamn you.

He reached the tall, yellowed grass of the field and kept going, knowing he'd hit the trail in a few yards and then he could make better time. Someone shouted his name. He didn't glance back. Let them follow. Once he was in the well, they could do

any damn thing they wanted. Wait. Call the police. Call the fucking Army. As long as they didn't try to stop him.

Why the hell did they go up there?

You know why. Because it's what boys do.

They explore. They go where they're not supposed to. They're drawn to mysteries and trouble like moths to a porch light, circling around with no idea of how much danger they're in until it's too late.

The decades dropped away as he ran, each step as familiar as if it'd been three days instead of three decades since the last time he'd gone to the well. A day just like this. Sunny, hotter than hell, the perfect kind of summer day when nothing should go wrong.

So clear was the path in his mind that he left it at exactly the right spot and came to a stop only a few feet away from the black, leering mouth of the well. Its fetid odor still lingered in the air, leaving a filthy residue of corruption on his tongue and in his nose.

He glanced around and located a stout bush that looked rooted deep enough to hold his weight. He was tying the rope around its base when Melanie and Annie caught up.

"Ron, you can't. It's too dangerous."

Two strong tugs told him the rope should hold. He looped it around his waist. Melanie grabbed his arm. Tears and sweat ran in twin rivers down her cheeks and her eyes had a wild look.

"Please. I'm begging you. Don't go down there. Wait for the police."

Ron looked his wife in the eyes, wishing to hell things could be different.

"I have to. Jesus Christ on a cross, it's our kids, Mel. Junior and Charlie are down there. Because of me. If I'd told the truth when I was kid, then maybe…"

"Maybe nothing. No one would've believed you." She clutched at him harder, her nails leaving red marks on his skin.

"This is what I have to do. I love you, Mel." He kissed her and then pulled away, ignoring her cries. It was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do.

Until he stepped over the edge and dropped into the darkness.

Chapter 5

Even with the flashlight on, the throat of the well was the darkest place Ron had ever experienced. It swallowed the light after only a couple of feet, so that he couldn't even see his own sneakers.

He let the rope play out slowly, despite his desperation to reach the bottom. He bumped into the sides several times, thick damp moss and lichens actually protecting him from serious injury. Nevertheless, he didn't increase his speed. The last thing he needed was to crash into a jutting rock or hit the bottom too hard. He'd be no help to the boys with a broken bone or concussion.

Of course, that was assuming he had enough rope to reach the bottom.

Memories of that awful day came back. Dropping stones into the well, waiting to hear them land. They never had heard anything, had they? Did that mean the well was truly bottomless?

It can't be. Those…those things live in here. There has to be an end to—

His feet struck the ground and he cried out as he collapsed to his knees. It took his brain a second to catch up and realize he'd landed on something soft, so soft it was like falling onto a mattress. A very wet mattress.

Heart pounding, anticipating the attack that was sure to come at any moment, he swung the flashlight back and forth several times before aiming it down to see what had cushioned his fall.

The sight was almost too vile to bear.

He was kneeling on a thick bed of oversized mushrooms, each as large as a softball, their thick stems and grotesquely-

shaped caps white as bone and soft as rice pudding. Each movement he made ruptured more of the mutant fungi, sending cold rivers of slime across his hands and legs. Their smell pummeled him, a wretched combination of wet earth and pond mud, an odor he recognized from the first time he ever peered into the well, before the other stench, the one filled with decay and death, had overpowered everything. A stench that even now lingered in the air.

"Ron! Are you all right?"

Melanie's voice. Muffled, but not too distant. He looked up. The open- ing of the well was maybe forty feet away, a tiny sliver of white providing no escape from the total darkness at the bottom. It struck him then that there must be a slight bend in the shaft, just enough to prevent people at the top from seeing the bottom, but not enough to notice while descending. The bottom also seemed wider than the top opening, maybe five feet across.

"I'm okay!" he called back. "Don't come down."

One of them replied, but the words were lost in the echoes of his own shout. Hoping they'd heard him—and cursing himself for announcing his presence so openly—he played the light around the bottom of the shaft once more, looking for the opening he knew was there. This time, he saw it. Only about three feet high, pure black against pure black. The globular mushrooms in front of it were crushed and broken, as if something had crawled or slid across them multiple times.

A shiver ran up Ron's spine that had nothing to do with the chilly air or his sodden clothes.

This is it. The lair of the beast.

Somewhere down there the things from Hell, animals that shouldn't even exist, had his children.

"I'm coming, boys," he whispered.

* * *

Crawling through the demons'— that's how he'd started to refer to them in his head—tunnel turned out to be as awful as Ron had feared.

Mucus-thick fluids from the crushed mushrooms oozed over his hands and soaked his pants, their chill slowly numbing him. The idea that he might be breathing in millions of deadly spores with each breath had him near the point of vomiting. The increasing presence of the demons' revolting stink didn't help. More than once he found himself gagging, and he had to stop and swallow the acidic taste of his own stomach juices.

Memories of the first hours after Stu's disappearance came back to him. Men had gone into the well looking for him. Ron had tried to warn them, but the words jammed in his throat and never got out. The would- be rescuers had stayed down there for hours, and Ron thought them goners, too. Then they'd returned, anguish carved into their faces over their failure to find Stu.

Why had they stopped looking? Ron fought to remember. Something about a pit…?

The narrow confines of the tunnel took their toll on him as he continued to deeper into the lair. Despite all his efforts to be careful, he'd knocked his head on the ceiling several times, and now tiny dribbles of blood were tickling their way through his hair and down his neck. His knuckles were scraped and raw from trying to hold the flashlight and crawl at the same time, and the thought of the contaminated goo coating his wounds brought images of incurable infections setting in.

I'll be lucky to keep my hands when this is all over.

Of course, his hands were the least of his worries. He'd be lucky to make it out alive.

Can't think like that, he kept telling himself. *You have to survive long enough to get Charlie and Junior back to the surface. Then…*

That's where his thoughts always stopped. Because there was no 'then.' There was only rescuing his boys. After that, whatever happened didn't matter. He'd escape or he wouldn't. Probably the latter. There was a very good chance he'd die at the hands of the thing who'd killed Stu and taken his boys, and maybe that's how it should be. A long-overdue punishment for what he'd done thirty-two years ago.

Crawling in the darkness provided the perfect fuel for his memory, and the events of that day looped endlessly on the screen inside his head. Peering into the depths of the well. A sudden sensation of movement, as if the darkness itself had come alive. Black limbs reaching out of the nothingness and seizing Stu. His last words. *"Ronnie, help!"*

Even now, each minute, each second, was as clear as if it happened only hours before. The hateful movie played over and over, while Ron's arms and legs robotically moved him forward, his brain trying to dig any other details, anything he'd missed, from the graveyard of memories in his mind. Two specks of red in the inky black. Eyes? Most likely. The claws clutching at frail shoulders. Stu's body tumbling into the impossible gloom.

"Ronnie, help!"

The hellish film came to an end once again, and once again it started from the beginning.

"Dammit!" There had to be something. So intent was he on his memories that he never noticed the floor ending until it was too late.

With a gasp, he tumbled off the ledge.

Chapter 6

Ron opened his mouth to cry out but he hit solid ground with his arms and face before his scream could leave his throat.

The flashlight rolled away and he grabbed at it, terrified of being without the comforting white beam. Gritty dirt rubbed between his hand and the plastic, letting him know just how filthy he was; however, he was happy to have the extra help for his grip. He aimed it forward and his guts twisted at what it revealed.

Less than three feet from his out- stretched hand, the floor disappeared. He swung the flashlight left and right; the pit extended from one side of the chamber to the other, a good twenty feet or more in diameter, far enough that the beam of light barely illumnated the far side. *A pit.*

He'd remembered correctly. That was why they'd stopped the search. They came to a pit so deep they couldn't see the bottom, even after lowering a light down on a rope.

"He probably survived the fall down the well, but was disoriented and started crawling through the tunnel, looking for a way out. Without a light, when he came to the pit…we're sorry, Mrs. Francis, but there's no way to retrieve the body."

While his mother broke down in tears and his father comforted her, Ron had listened as the police and rescue team talked about sealing the well for good. Then he'd gone to his room and cried himself to sleep. Which was what he felt like doing now.

That's it, then. My boys are gone forever.

A huge sob threatened to explode up from his chest, and Ron forced it back down. That was for later. For now, he had to get out without falling into the hole, and before those things came back out of it. Moving carefully, he turned on his hands

and knees so he was facing the tunnel he'd emerged from. As he did so, his light reflected off something away to his left. He aimed the flashlight back at it.

A sneaker? Jesus! That's Charlie's!

The creatures had taken the boys this way, but… He paused, his thoughts trying to catch up and process what his eyes were seeing. How could the sneaker be sitting there, unless...

The sneaker was on a ledge. A ledge that went all the way around the pit. Ron swung the flashlight past his son's shoe, one part of his brain forcing the other to accept the implications of the evidence before him.

His boys might not have fallen— or been taken—into the pit that had put an end to Stu's search so many years ago. And that meant he could continue looking for them. *Had* to continue.

How had those would-be rescuers missed the ledge? Or maybe they didn't, and they just assumed a small boy crawling in the dark would be a lot more likely to fall in than go around. As explanations went, it made sense. On the other hand...

Maybe the demons took Charlie and Junior someplace else…

He studied the ledge. About four feet wide. And there were marks in the dirt… the same kind of scuff marks he'd seen earlier. Something had moved along the ledge recently.

Or been dragged.

I can't turn around now. Pressing his back against the cave wall, he stepped onto the ledge and began a slow, steady creeping walk along the left side. When he reached the abandoned sneaker, he knelt down and grabbed it. A mental image rose up, him falling forward into the unimaginable depths, and he had to put both hands on the ground to counteract a sudden dizziness that threatened to turn imagination into reality.

It took several deep breaths before he could stand, but he refused to relinquish the sneaker. Even if he didn't find the boys, he'd be damned if he'd go back with nothing…

Stop it. Don't think like that. Not until you have to.

Resuming his tightrope act, light aimed just past his feet so he couldn't see the endless drop-off to his right, he shuffled his way around the pit until he reached the far side, where the ledge widened into a flat area as large as the living room in his apartment. From the other side of the hole, there'd been no way to see anything like it existed.

He aimed the light at the cave wall and was immediately rewarded when the beam showed not only another opening, but more scuff marks in the dirt, leading right into the new tunnel.

Ron wasted no time entering the passage, which was slightly taller than his own six feet. More of the mutant fungus domes grew along the floor, although not in the same packed concentration as before. He barely had time to wonder where the tunnel would lead when it opened into a second chamber, this one much smaller. He paused at the entrance as a thought came to him. There were probably going to be other tunnels and drop-offs; he needed to make sure he could find his way back.

"Gotta mark this, somehow." Ron cringed as his voice echoed off the damp rock. He hadn't intended to speak out loud.

Clamping his lips shut against another mistake, he searched his pockets, trying to find anything he could use as a marker. All he came up with was a wallet and his car keys, neither of which would be useful. Then he noticed his shirt, a bright yellow polo Melanie had gotten him for golf.

Perfect.

He pulled it off, never relinquishing his grip on the flashlight. Dirt and mushroom goo had left dark brown stains across the front, but by turning it inside out he ended up with a

serviceable square of yellow, which he placed at the lip of the tunnel. As long as he had his flashlight when he returned, there'd be no way he'd miss the entrance.

Shivering as the frigid air draped his back and chest in an icy blanket, Ron resumed his forward progress, grateful he'd come across no side branches where demons with razor-sharp claws could wait for a stupid intruder with a death wish.

It was only a matter of a minute's walk to cross the miniature cave, which he belatedly realized was really only a temporary widening in the tunnel that narrowed down to only about three feet high again on the other side, forcing him to crawl once more. Cursing the change in height, he paused to check his watch. If his memory was correct, he'd been below ground for less than an hour, although it seemed like ten times that. He guessed he'd traveled maybe a half-mile, most of it on his hands and knees, and it felt like it. The cold air and ground no longer numbed the abrasions and bruises, and he had a suspicion it wasn't sweat making his hands damp.

Can't worry about it now. Gotta keep moving.

He wondered how much farther he'd have to go. So far he'd heard nothing but his own breathing and the scraping of his skin against the earth. Was that a good sign or bad? No screams, no sounds of crying. No ghastly chewing or breaking open of bones. Did it mean the boys were alive? Or were they already dead and the demon was even now stalking him, ready to add him to the pile of Francis corpses in its lair.

Hungry little Timmy…

The poem seemed pretty definite about what happened to people who went into the well. Timmy— *hungry* Timmy—ate them. And then their souls went to Hell. Ron didn't give a fuck about souls at the moment, but the eating part, well, that had him

worried. There were a lot of ways to die; being eaten alive had to be among the least pleasant.

…lives inside the well.

That part always made him wonder. How had the neighborhood nursery rhyme started? He knew it went back further than his own family's presence in town, which spanned three generations. Was it just coincidence? Or had others disappeared into the hole, victims of the frightful creature living in the depths? If that was the case, why hadn't anyone ever tried to fill in the damn shaft, just dump a shitload of rocks and dirt down there and then put a big honkin' cement slab over the top?

Instead, it seemed that everyone's solution was just to put a cover over the entrance and tell kids not to play there. It didn't make sense. Even if kids were the only ones to ever see the thing, and the adults didn't believe their stories, those kids would eventually grow up and, like him, remember what had happened in their youth. And then that generation would do something to make sure no one ever went near the place again.

Unless…maybe there were no other witnesses.

Maybe I'm the first person to see one of those creatures and live. Besides, who am I to cast blame? I saw it and never did a damn thing. All these years. I could've come back and dumped a few hundred pounds of cement down the hole. But instead I just stayed away, let it be someone else's problem. And now it's come back to bite me in the ass.

The word 'bite' triggered a new thought. What exactly lived in those Stygian depths? Demons, or just some kind of mutant bat, all deformed and over-sized like the mushrooms? Or perhaps a species of prehistoric creature, something that should've been extinct millions of years ago. And how had they survived all those decades? Were they long-lived? Or…

Ron stopped in mid-crawl.

Exactly how many of them are there?

Jesus fucking Christ, am I crawling into a nest?

How could it even be possible? Animals had to eat *(don't let Timmy eat you!),* which meant the creatures had to hunt on a regular basis. A single animal—let alone a whole tribe of the damn things—couldn't survive on just one meal every thirty years.

Or could they? Pythons and anacondas could go a whole year without food. He'd seen that on a wildlife documentary. Reptiles had a different type of metabolism, didn't have to eat regular meals the way mammals did. And who knew what kind of fucked up physiology the demons had? Maybe they lived in some kind of suspended animation and only woke up when they smelled people. Maybe they lived on rats and moles and insects and just ate kids when the opportunity came along. Maybe they just ate the fucking mushrooms and humans were a special anniversary dinner for them.

Ron gritted his teeth. Thinking about shit he didn't know was just wasting time, a way of putting off the inevitable. He had to keep moving. He'd either face one creature or a bunch. It didn't matter. He'd save his children or die trying. He lifted his hand.

And that's when he heard it.

Something so faint his own raspy breathing almost drowned it out. Crying? Taking a deep breath and holding it, he tried to listen harder, focus all his senses on that one indistinct sound. At first there was nothing except the *thrum-thrum-thrum* of his pulse pounding in his ears and the high-pitched buzzing of his auditory nerves that only became noticeable when there was no other noise.

Then he heard it again. Soft and muffled, so weak he couldn't even tell where it came from. Something between a sob

and a whimper. The kind of sound a terrified young boy might make.

One of them's alive!

And if one was, the other probably was, too. All his previous musings and distractions disappeared, leaving a single thought in his mind: find them. Fast.

He turned his flashlight off and started forward, preferring to risk crashing into a wall or falling into a hole rather than giving himself away before he had to. The pitch black closed in around him, threatening claustrophobia. Ron focused on moving his hands and legs in sequence, an orderly progression that brooked no hesitation, like a beetle or ant marching onward. As he crawled, he listened. The occasional snatches of crying served as a beacon, guiding him forward and providing at least some assurance that no major obstacles lay in his path.

Of course, the boys could be on the other side of another bottomless ravine; after all, the creatures flew, didn't they?

Each time that image popped up he had to force it down before his limbs faltered.

Can't worry about what you can't see. Just keep moving and hope your re-flexes are fast enough to stop you if the earth disappears again.

They weren't.

Just like the last time, his hand dipped down farther than he expected, encountering nothing but air. He tried to compensate for the sudden shift in his point of balance, windmilling his arms in an effort to find solid purchase, but he ended up pitching forward. This time the fall was much farther; far enough that he had time to twist his body around so he wouldn't land on his face again. He managed not to cry out as he slipped over the edge, but he couldn't hold back a wheezing

grunt when he hit the ground on his left side and the flashlight jammed into his ribs. A double burst of pain shot through him, twin explosions in his elbow and rib cage. There was a moment where the darkness disappeared, replaced by bright red and white stars, then the tiny white supernovas faded away.

Fighting back the urge to curse, Ron rose to a sitting position, holding his arm against his side with his other hand over it, in an effort to cradle both injured body parts at the same time. A wave of pain-induced nausea washed over him, accompanied by a dizzy spell that caused the red stars to jiggle back and forth.

He took a deep breath and then immediately regretted it, as the foul stench of the demons filled his lungs, leaving an almost physical residue on his tongue and in his nostrils. It took several seconds before the intense sting in his elbow faded to a dull ache, letting him know he'd only banged the so-called 'funny bone' rather than breaking anything.

Once he could move the arm without gritting his teeth, he leaned over to pick up the flashlight. This time he did cry out. The soreness in his ribs ratcheted back up to its former agony, a twisting, pulling hurt that was a sure sign he'd done more than just bruise something.

Hoping he'd just cracked something, he felt around for the flashlight again, moving extra slowly while pressing a hand against his left side. Every breath of polluted air added to his nausea, and he fought the urge to gag, knowing it would only hurt his ribs even more.

Each flex of the muscles brought tears to his eyes, a sharp grinding like someone was scraping a knife against the bones. But the throbbing didn't get any worse, and he managed to find the light and lean back again without making any noise. A small victory, but one he was proud of nevertheless.

As he placed his thumb against the ‘On’ button, he noticed his vision still hadn’t cleared. Tiny red dots, pairs of them, scattered in random fashion against a black canvas.

Red dots in the well, right before...

A sensation much worse than nausea erupted in Ron’s stomach.

It’s not my vision.

Eyes. Pairs of demonic crimson eyes. All staring at… Him.

Something rustled in the void. The red dots shifted, and he realized it hadn’t been dizziness making them move before, they were moving on their own. Moving as their owners moved.

He pictured the creatures salivating and dancing from clawed foot to clawed foot as they prepared to pounce, monsters from Hell growing more excited with each second. So many of them. It was hopeless. He’d never stand a chance. He wanted to just close his eyes and wait for death. At least that way he wouldn’t see it coming. Instead, his thumb reacted to a signal from some part of his brain that wasn’t under conscious control, and pressed down. The yellow beam snapped to life.

And all hell broke loose

Chapter 7

The moment the light hit them, the creatures scattered in all directions. A few rushed straight at Ron, who screamed and covered his face with his arms. His frantic movements brought on a fresh round of pain in his ribs, and his frightened cries turned into a hoarse shout.

"Motherfuckingbastard!"

Something struck his shoulder and he swung the flashlight at it, his terror overriding the stabbing agony in his side. He caught a glimpse of a dark shape banking away and then he turned the flashlight back at the main pack. Shadowy forms zipped back and forth in chaotic fashion, but as it sank in that they weren't attacking him, he calmed his movements so the light no longer turned the cavern into a weird netherworld disco.

Ron aimed the light at a group of the things huddled on the floor and they sprang into the air, heading every which way but towards him. Their wings made an odd fluttering that reminded him of the whistling of a dove's wings.

Although they were fast, he was able to start fitting the different impressions of them into a solid picture. Elongated black wings, like someone had taken a bat and stretched it out. Stout bodies with muscular arms and legs. Deadly-looking claws, so long he could see them clearly despite the murky light and constant movement. The eyes, like red sparks in charred wood, just waiting to burst into flame. Oddly misshapen heads, lumpy ovals with no discernible ears but with over-sized snouts that ended in flat, pig-like noses. If they had tails, they were too small for him to see. All of this in a package about the size of a large chicken.

A chicken? Ron felt something come to life inside him. He slowly got to his feet, keeping one hand above his head while

the other waved the flashlight back and forth, keeping the little demons at bay. When he found he could stand up and still not touch the ceiling with his hand, he gave a triumphant cry.

He towered over the little motherfuckers!

"Get ready for an ass kicking, you bastards!"

He waved the flashlight around like a sword. Demons from Hell or prehistoric mutant flying lizards, he no longer cared. Razor- sharp claws or not, no way a couple of dozen flying chickens were gonna stop him. Hell, he'd just keep stomping and kicking them, he'd bat the little shits out of the air if he had to, until they were either all dead or they high-tailed it to safety. He might get some cuts in the process, but stitches were nothing. Not when he'd thought there was something waiting there to eat him.

"Hungry Timmy, my ass," he muttered, striding forward towards where he'd last heard the sounds of his boys. The demon-things swooped around him, always staying just out of range. He heard more of them above and behind him, and he made sure to swing the light in those directions, too.

"I'll bring a couple of you back and toss you on the goddamned grill."

Anger slowly built inside him as he used the flashlight like a light saber, slashing his way through the swarm. They dived and banked in dizzying patterns, somehow avoiding even accidental contact.

He thought back to his childhood. Had he known then the things were so small—and obviously afraid of light—he'd have gotten his friends together and they'd have gone into the well with baseball bats and BB guns and rescued Stu. Shit, he'd have gone himself.

I'd have been a hero. The boy who rescued his brother and discovered some kind of new species of dinosaur or

something. Set for life, instead of spending all those years slowly dying of guilt. The anger metamorphosed into a fiery rage, a fury like none he'd ever felt.

If only he'd known! A bunch of stupid flying chickens had cost him his brother and his happiness. Well, they were gonna pay. He'd make sure of it. Once he had Junior and Charlie safe on the surface, he'd come back with a gun and some gasoline and do what nature should have done a long time ago. Make the damned things extinct.

The cave he'd fallen into had no turns or obstacles to block the light as he shined it back and forth. The beam penetrated the darkness for a good twenty or thirty feet, far enough for him to see the space was getting wider the farther he walked. How wide, he couldn't say for sure. A hundred feet? Two hundred? It was hard to believe such a cavern existed right below the yards and field he'd played in as a child.

Wait 'til he told everyone what he'd found! Scientists would be falling over themselves to explore the place, not only because of the creatures, but because such a wonder existed at all. Hell, the town might even turn it into a tourist attraction.

Maybe I should hold off on selling the house. I've got a feeling property values might just be going up soon.

As he walked, he listened for more of the cries he'd heard, but the noisy flapping masked all other sounds, the creaking and whistling echoing off the cave walls until it almost seemed he was inside a machine. A machine that needed a good oiling.

Ron paused to rest his right arm, which was beginning to tire from constantly swinging it. Plus, each motion caused jagged pains across his left side.

No sooner did he lower the flashlight than the demon-birds attacked. Claws punctured his back and shoulders, driving

him forward onto his knees. His ribs shrieked in response to the added insult, a red-hot brand that immobilized his left side for several moments. He tried rolling over, succeeded only in falling onto his right arm. The demons sprang away and then dived down again, raking their nails across his chest and stomach.

"Get away!" Gritting his teeth against the pain, he got back to his knees and swung both arms around. Fist and flashlight both connected with surprisingly solid bodies and then he was free, the light once again keeping them at bay.

"Stop being stupid, Ron," he muttered. Taking as deep a breath as he could without choking on the polluted air, he told himself to get his ass in gear. There was no telling what condition the boys were in, and if he had to carry one of them…well, between that and his injury it was going to be a difficult return trip.

Instead of moving forward, he hurried to his right until he came to the wall of the cave. Only after placing his back against the wall and aiming the flashlight ahead did he continue walking, snapping the light behind him just often enough to keep anything from sneaking up on him. Partially protected, he went on in that fashion for several more minutes before a change in the noise overhead alerted him that something was going on.

He aimed the light up, just in time to see the entire swarm of demon-things flying in tight formation. At first they seemed headed right for him, and he went to his knees, ready to fight them off. Instead, they zoomed past in a straight line and disappeared farther into the cavern. An involuntary shudder ran through him. There'd been a lot more of the things than he'd figured. At least a hundred; probably more. The idea of fighting them all suddenly didn't seem so easy.

Doesn't matter. They're gone now.

In their absence, a hushed quiet filled the cavern, broken only by the slight wheezing of his breathing, the crunch of dirt and stones under his feet, and the occasional drip-drip of condensation trickling off the walls and ceiling.

And then someone screamed.

Full of terror and pain, the high- pitched shriek echoed out of the darkness ahead of him, from the same direction the demons had flown. As bad as it was to hear, it was all the worse because Ron recognized the voice.: Charlie.

"I'm coming!" he shouted as loud as he could. Stealth be damned. His kids were in trouble and needed him right now!

Ron took off at a run, able to go full speed now that he didn't have to keep waving the flashlight in all directions. A short sprint brought him to a darker circle of black, a section of the cave wall that sucked up the light instead of reflecting it.

Another tunnel? Another cavern? It didn't matter. It had to be where Charlie's voice had come from, where his kids were being held. Pausing just long enough to aim the light down and make sure he wasn't stepping into another drop-off, he entered the new cave.

He guided the light around, following the wall in a circle from left to right. At the farthest point, it was only about thirty feet wide. He kept the light gliding along, and then stopped.

Something had moved. Something a different color than the walls or floor. Lighter. He swung the light back. A mound of something on the floor, like a pile of rocks and logs… no, not logs…arms. And legs. Two shapes, separating now…faces…

"Charlie! Junior!"

"Dad!"

He sprinted across the cavern, his eyes focused on the wonderful, magical sight of his children, both of them alive and getting up on their knees, and then his arms were around them

and he was squeezing them tight against his chest, not caring the least about the jagged knife of pain in his ribs.

They squeezed back, making him gasp as something in his side moved in a way it shouldn't. They cried and sobbed, and he let his own tears flow until he remembered they had to get out before the creatures returned. He pushed himself away, despite wanting to hold on to them forever.

"Junior, Charlie, are you okay? Are you hurt?" He shined the light on them and they both turned away, shielding their eyes.

Stupid! They've been in the dark for hours. He turned the flashlight to the side and asked the question again. Eyes wide and watering, they both shook their heads, and Ron knew they were being brave because he could see dried blood on both of them, knew they had to be cut and bruised.

"Can you walk? Be honest."

"Yeah, I'm all right," Junior said, and Charlie nodded as he wiped the back of his hands across his cheeks and sniffed back a gob of mucus.

"Then let's get the hell out of here. Your mom's waiting up top, with Aunt Annie and your cousins. They're probably all going crazy by now."

"Dad, there's monsters—"

"I know," he interrupted Junior, as he helped them both to their feet. "They've been around a long time. I saw them when I was your age, but I never told anyone. I didn't think they'd believe me."

"Ken and Randy told us something lived in the well, but we didn't believe them, either," Charlie said, taking Ron's hand.

"They told you the old nursery rhyme? I knew it growing up. Everyone did."

"The monsters got Uncle Stu, didn't they."

"That's right. I was there the day they killed him." He gave them a little push towards the mouth of the cave, then froze at Charlie's next words.

"But he's not dead, Dad."

"What do you mean?" Ron spoke slowly, still not sure he'd heard his son correctly.

"We saw him," Charlie said.

"No, we saw somebody," Junior countered. "We don't know who it was. And he was…kinda weird."

"It was Uncle Stu." Charlie's voice had the same I-know-I'm-right tone that he often got when he and Junior argued about baseball or dinosaurs. And more often than not, Charlie was right. But Stu, alive? After thirty-two years? It wasn't possible.

Ron aimed the light around, making sure none of the demons were sneaking up on them. Then he placed a hand on each of their shoulders and bent down, looking into their frightened eyes.

"Where did you see this man? Did he talk to you?"

"Back there." Both boys pointed to the one part of the cave Ron hadn't examined. He turned the light that way and saw another opening. Which made sense, because the demons had to have gone somewhere. How many more caverns or tunnels were there?

"He was hard to understand," Junior said. "We were in a different cave, but the monsters left us so we tried to find our way back to the well, and then the monsters came back and we were afraid they'd carry us away again. Except they didn't. They just flew past. And then you showed up."

"Jesus." How brave were his sons? They'd been attacked by things out of nightmares, left in a dark cave, and instead of falling to pieces they'd tried to find their way home.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do. You guys are gonna take the flashlight and head for the well. It's a straight line back, but be careful. One of the caves has a deep hole in the center. Don't worry about the monsters, the light keeps them away, they don't like it. That's why they flew off when I came here. I'm going to see if I can find this man you saw."

"No way!" Charlie grabbed Ron's arm in a death grip, as if he was afraid of being abandoned again.

Can't blame him.

"You won't be able to see in the dark," Junior said.

"I have matches." Ron patted his pants pocket, where he always had a lighter and at least one cigar stashed.

"We're going with you. You won't get him out by yourself. He looked like he was hurt or something. He never got up."

Hell. Someone else the demons had dragged down here?

He could leave, get his boys to safety, and then lead a rescue team back. With guns. And fire. That would be the smart thing.

And if it's Stu? I already abandoned him once.

No. It couldn't be.

But did it matter? Whoever it was, he was someone else's Stu. A man with a family, friends. A man who might die before help could arrive.

A man I can save.

And that would go a long way to assuaging the guilt he'd carried with him all his life.

"All right. Let's go. But stay close. Junior, take Charlie's hand. I don't want us getting separated." Wondering how thin the line was between doing something good and doing something stupid, Ron aimed the light forward and led his sons deeper into the unknown.

And away from rescue.

Chapter 8

In the no-man's land far beneath the surface, time seemed to flow differently as the three of them crept through the latest tunnel. How the boys had found it, let alone traversed it, in pitch darkness continued to amaze Ron. That they'd come this way was evident from the multiple footprints the flashlight continued to pick out. There were other marks as well, marks that showed something—or some things—used the tunnel on a regular basis. Certainly the demons traversed it—he could tell that from the stench, which still bordered on overpowering despite the amount of exposure he'd had to it.

But not all the marks were the thin tracks of the creatures' claws. Scuffed tracks, as if something had been dragged or pushed across the dirt. More bodies? It made sense. Even flying as a group, the demons couldn't carry a full-grown person. Charlie and Junior had already told him they hadn't been carried. The creatures had slowed down their fall through the well just enough so they didn't get hurt when they landed on the 'icky'—Charlie's term—mushroom bed. Then they'd been dragged through the dark, kicking and screaming the whole way.

What would they find at the end of the tunnel? A graveyard of past victims? An image came to Ron, thousands of bones piled up, the yellowed, gnawed skeletons of animals and people mingling together in the dirt, the remains of generations of blood-thirsty monsters creating a memorial of death.

Was Stu's skeleton among them? Despite Charlie's insistence that Stu was alive, Ron still couldn't believe it. Another person down here? Sure. Someone from town, perhaps someone who lived alone and hadn't been missed yet. But not Stu. Not after thirty-two years.

He wished he could stop and rest; the ache in his side was growing worse by the minute, and he'd started to hear a hitch in his breathing, a wheezing kind of gasp that came every few breaths or whenever his foot came down wrong on the uneven ground. So far the kids hadn't noticed. Soon, though, he wouldn't be able to hide the severity of his injury from them.

And what if we're attacked again, or I fall?

How much pressure would it take to turn a cracked rib into a broken one, creating an internal dagger that pierced his lung? Strong and brave as they were, his boys wouldn't be able to drag him all the way back to the well shaft.

Should've forced them to go back when I had the chance. Brought them back. Even if it meant the stranger down here died. He could've done it. But in truth, he didn't want to be separated from them again. Not ever. Not after almost losing them in such a terrible fashion.

And how terrible an example would that have made? It's okay to let someone else die in order to save your family? He'd always taught them that everyone's lives were equal. Of course, that was before he'd had them taken away. Now he couldn't imagine anyone or anything being more important than his family. Which was why he had to keep them safe. And if that meant not rescuing this other person, so be it. If there were more creatures, or if the person couldn't walk on his own… Well, that's what rescue teams were for.

Just then his light reflected off something up ahead. A baseball hat, blue with a Mets NY emblem. Charlie's. He picked it up and handed it to his son, who put it on, his pale face too solemn for someone so young.

"Not much farther now," Charlie said. "I lost this when we ran away." Although he didn't show it, there was a quaver in

his voice that told Ron his youngest boy was on the verge of tears. And rightly so.

"Hey." Ron turned and knelt in front of the boys, holding back a grimace from his barking ribs. "You don't have to go back in there. You can wait here for me. Or we can turn around and head back for the well. When we get to the top, we'll send a rescue team for whoever's still down here. You've already been braver than you have to be. You're heroes. You don't have to prove anything to me or anyone else."

Charlie shook his head before Junior even had a chance to speak. "No. We can't leave Uncle Stu."

"Charlie, it's been thirty years. Nobody could—"

"It's him, and I'm gonna prove it." Charlie pushed past Ron, who fought the urge to just grab his son and head for home. Junior paused for a moment and then followed his brother.

This really means something to him. And would I have been any different in his place, at his age?

He knew the answer. The stubborn gene was a strong one in the Francis family, and Charlie had gotten a full dose.

"Not so fast, guys." Ron moved ahead of the children again, holding out the flashlight like a sword, their one weapon against both the darkness and the creatures inhabiting it.

Up ahead, the tunnel narrowed slightly and began a gentle curve. He slowed down, wary of hidden dangers, but the bend only lasted a few dozen feet before straightening out again. And then a near-physical wave of foulness slammed into him, so potent he couldn't even take a second breath after the first one seared his lungs. It was as if something had taken the stink of the demons and magnified it, concentrated it into a hot sauce of rank poison. It was the filthy stench of pure evil.

Ron's lungs finally rebelled against the unclean breath he'd drawn and erupted into a spasm of coughing that had him

clutching at his rib cage and moaning at the same time. He leaned against one wall, afraid he might puke and praying he wouldn't, because it would probably be too much for his ribs to take.

The spasms subsided after several seconds, although the gurgling in his stomach remained. With tears running down his cheeks and the grimy, bitter taste of bile in his throat, he cast the light forward again, illuminated a cave that looked about as large as his old middle school gymnasium.

Something moved on the far side.

Ron shined the light at it, his stomach clenching into an icy fist. Just like the boys had said, the man was there. At least, it could have been a man. Definitely a man-like creature, wrapped in what appeared to be a sleeping bag or a pile of clothing. Ron couldn't be sure, because his vision was still blurry and the body was on the other side of the cavern.

He wiped the back of his hand across his eyes and blinked several times. It didn't help. He couldn't be sure if it was a man, a corpse, or just old clothing.

Then it spoke.

"Ron. Turn the light off before you come any closer."

Ron's heart jumped and skittered at the sound of his name. The voice was oddly rough, raspy and rather wet, like an old man dying of emphysema or lung cancer. Rough, but understandable.

He said my name. I heard it. He said my fucking name!

"See, Dad?" Charlie whispered. "I told you."

A hand tugged him forward— Charlie's? Junior's?—he didn't know. His brain felt frozen, numbed by the possibility that after all this time…

No. It can't be. Maybe he heard one of the boys say it…

Still, his finger, moving on autopilot, found the button on the flashlight and pressed it. The darkness was immediate and total. Ron stopped, dizzy from the drastic change. He might have fallen if his boys hadn't each taken an arm and steadied him. They silently urged him forward but he fought it, afraid to move.

Blacker than a cloudy sky at mid- night, the space around him seemed to compress, to push down on him, as if the dark had gained weight and mass. Even though he knew the walls of the cave were yards and yards away in all directions, the panicked part of his mind told him they'd gotten closer, were even now sliding silently towards him, ready to crush him.

"Dad, c'mon." More tugging. This time the mental brake released and he let them guide him forward, his feet shuffling slowly, like a mummy in a classic movie. He did it only because he couldn't get his children to safety until they finished this, solved the mystery of the man in the cave.

The man who knows my name.

Led by his children, Ron made it across the cave by repeating a mantra in his head to keep his claustrophobia at bay.

The walls are not moving. The walls are not moving.

It helped, although more than once a tiny whimper escaped him. He hoped the boys didn't notice.

God, they're so brave.

"Put him here." That low, muddy voice again. It was closer this time, much closer. Somewhere just past his left leg.

Ron stopped, afraid he might step on the stranger. Charles and Junior tugged again, this time pulling downward. Ron knelt and another sharp pain zig-zagged up his side. This time he couldn't hold back a gasp.

"You're hurt," the voice said.

"Dad?" Junior asked. Ron quickly denied it. They had enough to worry about besides their father being injured.

"I'm alright, just a pulled muscle. What about you? Who are you? How did you get here? Can you walk?"

"Your boys told you who I am, Ron. I knew who they were the moment the fliers brought them here."

"The fliers?" It wasn't the question Ron wanted to ask, but it was the one that came out. Something in his brain seemed to rebel at voicing the others, as if knowing the answers might be too much for it.

"That's what I call them. Even after all this time, I still don't know what they are."

"All this time…?" Ron's insides twitched, and he felt the claustrophobia return. Only this time it wasn't the walls of the cave closing in. It was the walls of impossibility, ready to crush everything he believed.

"Don't tell me you've forgotten that day thirty-two years ago?"

Ron moaned. "No. But it can't be… you can't be…"

"But I am, Ron. It's me. Stu. Your brother."

"Those things, they took you…" Ron's weakness returned and only the cave wall stopped him from toppling over.

"They took me, but they didn't kill me. I thought they were going to. I was so scared, Ron. Their claws. And that terrible stink. I think I passed out before I even hit the bottom of the well. The next thing I knew, everything was black. And the fliers… I figured they were going to eat me. Or worse. You remember the poem, Ron?"

"Hungry little Timmy…" Ron whispered.

"Lives at the bottom of the well," Stu finished. "Don't let Timmy eat you or your soul will go to Hell. I figured something was going to eat me. Either the monsters or Timmy. I was only eight, remember? I didn't know any better."

"Oh, God!" It was too much for Ron. His tears didn't burst out of him, they exploded. He slid to the floor and curled on his side like a baby, his chest hitching with the force of his crying, the pain in his ribs mirroring the daggers of guilt in his heart. At the same time, all the remorse and shame he'd held inside came to a head and erupted, a poison-filled boil on his soul finally coming to a head and opening up.

"I'm so sorry, Stu! It's all my fault. I thought you were dead! I took you there and then you were gone and you called out for me but I was so afraid I didn't tell anyone I told them you fell in when I wasn't looking and the people who looked for you said you fell into a pit and all these years I never told the truth and I hated myself and now you're alive and I could've saved you, could've brought you back and oh shit I'm so sorry!"

"It's okay, big brother. You were a kid, too. I never blamed you." Something cold and soft touched Ron's hand, stroked it. A shiver ran up his arm and images of giant leeches filled his head, but he didn't pull his hand away.

I never blamed you. Those four words were like magic. In one quick instant they did what years of therapy and decades of self-recrimination couldn't.

They destroyed the guilt.

It fell apart in pieces. Dissolved like mud in a river. Crumbled like a sandcastle in the sun. Disintegrated. Stu continued talking, unaware of the emotional rebirth he'd enacted in his older brother.

"After a few days, I realized the fliers weren't going to kill me. I spent hours calling for help, until my throat hurt so bad I couldn't even whisper. Then I started to crawl around, looking for a way out. I found other tunnels, other caves. I drank water when I came across it, and gradually learned my way around. Eventually my eyes adapted to the dark. You probably haven't

noticed, but there are bits of moss or something here and there that glow. I found things to eat—mushrooms, mostly. Funny, huh? Mom always tried to get me to eat them, and I never would. The ones down here are big, and juicy. They taste kind of like dirt but I got used to them."

"But you never found the tunnel to the well?"

The soft, damp hand patted his arm again. "I did, although I don't know when. Months? Years? Time is different when there's no day or night to measure it by. By then, I couldn't walk very well. And the light, even that little bit, it hurt so much. I thought that sooner or later someone would come for me. If not you or Mom or Dad, then someone else had to fall into the well, right? It was easier to wait. After a while, the waiting turned to just living."

"Christ, Stu, I'm so sorry…" Ron stopped, unable to go on. What could he possibly say? No words existed to convey how he felt.

"It's okay. Really. And I never thought that after all this time, it would be you…and your kids…" Stu's odd voice made it hard to tell, but Ron thought he heard a terrible regret in his brother's words.

"It doesn't matter now," Ron said, remembering their problems weren't over yet. They still had to get back to the well, without encountering the fliers. "All that matters is that we get back to the surface. Annie's there, waiting for us. And my wife."

"Annie…I've thought about her, too. I was her favorite back then."

"You always were, even after… C'mon, let's go. Me and the boys will help you."

"No." A single word, but it landed heavy as a hammer on Ron's chest.

"What? Stu, we can't stay here. And you don't have to. This nightmare is over now."

"Actually, it's just beginning. I really wish it wasn't you, Ron. When the boys told me, I thought…I thought maybe it was just the same name…but then I saw…and I knew."

A tornado of thoughts flew through Ron's head. Nothing was making sense, like he'd fallen into some kind of demonic Wonderland where no one was who they seemed to be.

"I don't understand. You have to come back with us. I risked my boys' lives to come get you. Why would you want to stay?"

"This is my place, now. I belong here. With my own." "Your own…?" The unreality of the situation grew, making Ron light-headed. Stu's next words didn't help things. "Stay still and you'll be fine."

The clammy limb pressed against Ron's arm, a moist, cool thing that wasn't a hand yet it had a palm and nubby things that felt like fingers. Ron pulled away, the sudden sensation of disgust too strong to control. And then there was noise. A whistling, flapping sound that quickly grew until it was all he could hear. The fliers were returning.

"Jesus! They're coming back. We have to—"

"No." Hands pushed him back down. "Uncle Stu is right. If you stay still, they won't hurt you." Junior's voice, behind him.

"How—?" No further words were possible because the swarm arrived, filling the cavern with wings and claws and stench. Ron cried out and covered his head with his right arm, his left arm unable to rise that high. Alien bodies bumped and jostled him, their wings stinging and scratching as they passed. Their constant movement made it hard to tell how many there

were; he only knew there were too many, that their foul odor was sucking the air from the cave and choking him.

All at once they settled down, the fluttering and whistling dying away to just an occasional rustle as the unseen monsters jostled each other for room on the cave floor. Ron felt them nudging him with their obscene heads and poking at his skin with their talons. As Stu had promised, though, none of them became violent. In fact, they seemed more curious than anything.

Ron's thoughts whirled as he tried to comprehend this latest weirdness in a day filled with strange events. Could it be the fliers weren't inherently dangerous? After all, they hadn't really hurt anyone, hadn't killed Stu or Charlie or Junior. They'd only attacked Ron when he surprised them in their lair, just like any wild animal would do? Had they just taken Stu and Charlie out of curiosity? And was it possible Stu had developed some sort of kinship with the fliers after being stuck with them so long, like a boy raised by wolves? Was that why he refused to leave?

"Stu," Ron began, and then paused when the rustling around him increased. He continued in a softer voice. "This isn't your home, no matter how long you've been here. You have a family up above, people who want you back."

"I know, but it's not that easy, big brother. I'm part of this world now, like it or not. I have been, for a long, long time. And now my time is growing short. Someone has to take over. I never expected it to be blood, but I guess in a way that's only fitting."

"You're not making sense."

And why should he? He's been down here thirty years; he's probably more than a little crazy. Which meant it was time to do what he hadn't done three decades ago. Save his little

brother. Ron reached down, aiming as best he could in the pitch dark, intending to grab Stu by the shirt or sleeping bag or whatever he'd wrapped around himself. Broken rib or not, he'd drag or carry Stu to the well. The boys weren't hurt; they could walk with him, and even help. Except instead of encountering cloth, his hands touched more of the soft, moist flesh.

And sank into it.

There was a sound like wet garbage falling to the floor and warm liquid poured over his hands and wrists. The vicious smell of it was worse than anything he'd encountered in the caves so far, so terrible Ron found himself unable to even turn his head before his stomach contents came up and out. The spasm ignited fresh fire in his ribs and he shouted his pain before he even finished puking, spraying bits of half- digested food and stomach acids everywhere.

Stu cried out as well, a bubbling, gurgling gasp that sounded more like Ron's vomiting than a shout of pain. Without thinking, Ron turned the flashlight on to see what he'd stuck his hands into. And that's when everything really went to hell.

The reaction from the fliers was instantaneous. They all took flight at once, only this time in attack mode. Ron found himself flailing blindly with the flashlight as the creatures bit and clawed at him. Talons pierced every inch of exposed flesh, cutting grooves across his shoulders and back. Something tore a chunk of scalp away and he spun around and spotlighted the thing, which dropped its meaty prize and flew off. After a brief but frenzied struggle, he managed to drive the fliers away.

Shouting at Charlie and Junior to stay down, he turned the light back towards Stu. Who screamed as the beam brushed his face. Ron aimed the flashlight away, but not before he saw the thing that had been his brother.

What he'd thought was a sleeping bag was in fact a pale gray bloated body, much larger than a normal human torso. It went from Stu's neck to where his knees should have been. Stubby arms and legs stuck out from the sides and bottom, useless appendages that ended in fat little nubs. In the center of the pulsating sac was a gaping hole from which the clear, vile fluids still ran. Movement in that hole caught Ron's eye. Through the purple and blue spots left behind by the bright light, he caught a glimpse of something even more repulsive than his brother's horrendous transformation.

A flier, smaller than the others, with its wings still half-formed.

"Sweet Jesus!"

"Now you know the truth," Stu gasped, and Ron understood why his voice sounded so odd. His brother's face was as inhuman as his body, nose and mouth angling towards each other in a parody of the fliers' snouts. His eyes had deteriorated into tiny black dots devoid of eyelids or eyebrows. All his hair had disappeared, leaving a round dome covered in wrinkled skin.

"The truth?" Ron backed away from the thing that had been his brother.

"They don't take people to eat them," Stu said, his voice growing weaker. Ron had a feeling he was hearing his brother's dying words.

You left him to die once, and now you've killed him.

"Then…what?"

"They need me, Ron. I'm their king and queen. The species…has to live…"

Understanding bloomed in Ron's head. Stu was dying; had been dying even before his fatal injury. So the fliers had gone looking for his replacement. And found Charlie and Junior.

Those things want to change my boys. Or me.

He doubted it mattered to the creatures which one they took. One of them was doomed to become a… monster like Stu. Unless he put a stop to it.

"No, it has to die. C'mon, kids, we're getting out of here." He grabbed Junior by the shirt and pushed him away from Stu. Did the same to Charlie. Once again they objected, saying they couldn't leave their uncle, but this time Ron overrode them.

"Now! Move it!"

He shoved them again, so hard that Charlie cried out, but he paid no mind. There'd be time for apologies and explanations later, after they escaped. Herding his boys like reluctant cattle, Ron guided them back through the line of tunnels and caves, crawling when they had to, walking when space allowed. When they came to the point where the next opening was several feet higher than the cave floor, Ron stopped and cursed. How the hell would he get Charlie up there? It was only about four feet, but with his ribs, picking up his younger son would be near impossible. Climbing up himself would be no picnic, either.

He stared at the miniature cliff, frustrated by his lack of ideas. The sound of rustling and whistling grew closer behind them. The fliers had left Stu and were heading for them.

"Junior, help your brother up." Thankfully, the boy did as he was told without arguing. Once Charlie was in the mouth of the tunnel, Junior boosted himself up and in. That just left Ron. The rush of alien wings suddenly tripled in volume and he knew the fliers had entered the cavern. He turned and aimed the light at them, astounded by how many there were. How long had Stu been… he stopped, appalled by the idea of his brother pumping out alien creatures like some kind of mutant birthing machine.

The swarm drew closer and he zigged the light back and forth. The first wave veered away, but then the light turned from bright white to pale yellow.

Shit! Not now! Ron shook the plastic case and the brightness increased slightly. Not enough to make a difference, though, and the fliers swooped down in a giant mass, slashing him with their claws and teeth.

"Dad, turn the light off," Charlie shouted. Ron thought about it for one second and then decided it was too risky. That may have worked back in Stu's cavern, when the creatures weren't agitated. Now they were pissed, and turning off the light would be an open invitation for a full-scale attack.

"Fuck that," he whispered. They'd come too far, were too close to getting out, to be stopped now. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he turned and jumped, digging his fingers into the hard-packed dirt. The agony in his ribs was tremendous and he screamed, but he didn't let go. Instead, he used the flashlight as an anchor until his feet found purchase against the cave wall. Then pulled himself up and over the lip. All he wanted to do was lie still and catch his breath, but the fliers continued their attack, forcing him back to his feet.

"Go!" he gasped, stumbling into his children. He willed his body to keep moving, spurred on by the knowledge that just ahead was the dangerous pit, and then they were home free.

Only a little farther now. You can do it.

When they reached the last cavern before the short tunnel to the pit, Junior and Charlie again attempted to turn back, forcing Ron to waste precious time urging them to keep moving. Finally, he resorted to taking hold of Charlie's shirt and dragging him. Junior, too big for Ron to manhandle with an injured arm, hesitated, torn between returning to his uncle's side or staying

with his brother and father. In the end, he made Ron proud by not abandoning them.

"He's not your uncle anymore," Ron said, shining the light around, looking for the next tunnel. Every step, every breath, every word hurt more than anything he could remember, but he felt he owed them at least a few words of explanation. After all, it had to be a shock to discover the uncle they'd believed long dead was still alive; leaving him behind was probably hard on them, too. You didn't abandon family. But Stu wasn't family anymore. He wasn't even human. Probably hadn't been for years.

The whistling of approaching wings grew loud again and he flicked the flashlight back and forth until it picked out the dirty, ragged remains of the shirt he'd used to mark the entrance. "Run!" He pushed the boys forward, following as fast as he could. They hadn't gone far when he found himself slipping and sliding on a floor suddenly slick with bursting, slimy mushrooms. Before he knew it, he'd lost his balance and fallen to his knees. This time there was no mistaking the *snap-grind* of bones shifting in his rib cage. White-hot pain, so beyond agony he didn't even have words for it, exploded in his chest. His lungs refused to work and he had no breath to shout with. All he could do was clutch his arms across his sides and gasp for air.

"Dad, are you all right?" The voice reached him through the ringing, pounding noises that seemed to fill his ears. He couldn't even tell if it was Charlie or Junior who'd spoken. The tightness eased up just enough for him to draw a breath, and with the oxygen came determination. If he could breathe, he could move. And as long as he could move, he was getting his kids to safety. "Let's…go." It wasn't much more than a whisper, but they heard him.

Hands helped him to his knees and he staggered forward, following now instead of leading. He tried to keep the flashlight aimed ahead of them, but his shaking hand turned it into weak yellow lightning, the beam bouncing randomly off the floor, walls, and ceiling. He kept one hand against the tunnel wall, his balance precarious from the fluid-filled mushrooms and the misery that threatened to turn his legs limp.

The final tunnel seemed endless. A journey through Hades. Just like the rhyme.

Except my brother is Timmy and instead of eating people he got eaten himself, from the inside out.

A few feet ahead, Charlie came to a stop, Junior right beside him. Ron was about to shout at them again when he saw the reason. They'd emerged from the tunnel onto the ledge that signaled they'd reached the pit. "To the right," he gasped, motioning with the near-useless flashlight. The boys hesitated for a moment, then started walking, their youthful agility enabling them to traverse the ledge with ease.

Every breath like swallowing acid, Ron pressed himself against the cave wall and slid his feet forward inch by inch, his whole body shaking in expectation of the fliers attacking again and sending him tumbling into the bottomless depths. But they didn't, and he made it to the other side despite his legs feeling like two bags of Jell-O. Ahead of him, Charlie and Junior crouched down and entered the last tunnel. This time Ron was prepared for the cold slime of the mushrooms and he took care to place each hand and knee firmly before moving forward in a sliding, creeping motion.

Without warning, the boys stopped in their tracks. Ron lifted the flashlight to see why, but nothing happened. He looked down at it, saw it was dead. He shook it and banged it against his hand, but the bulb remained dark. So how could he see? Then he

realized where they were. The well! They'd reached the well shaft. After being in the dark so long, the tiny bit of light filtering down was enough for his sensitive eyes to see by.

"We did it. We fucking did it!" He went to move forward and Junior stuck out a hand, blocking him.

"No, Dad, we can't go. We have to stay." Something in his voice sounded off. Different. Ron tried to place it; it sounded vaguely familiar…

"What do you mean? You're mother's up there, waiting for us."

"It's too late. This is our place now. They need us." Charlie this time, although it was hard to tell. His voice… those words…

Like Stu.

"No. Jesus, no, please. Not that. It's not too late. We can get you help. The doctors…"

"I'm sorry, Dad. The change has already begun. It's in their bite. This is as far as we can go; we only came with you to say goodbye. We're with Uncle Stu now, and he's with us. And all the others, they're in here, too."

Junior put a hand to his forehead. "We have become them, and they have become us." Next to him, Charlie brought a softball-sized, suppurating mush- room to his mouth and bit into it. Vile juices spurted out, running down his arm and cheeks.

"We don't belong in that world anymore," he said. The sounds of fluttering and whistling reverberated just out of sight behind Ron. The fliers, gathering. Waiting. Waiting for their new Queens.

"No. Whatever's happened, it can be fixed. Cured. Just come with me and—"

"Look." Charlie held out his free hand. Ron drew in a sharp breath at the sight of it. The fingers were too short, and

something like webbing stretched between them. A biting pang ran through Ron's chest that had nothing to do with his ribs. His boy's hand was gone, replaced by some kind of mutant paw. That hand would never throw a ball again, never grip a bat, never hold a pen.

"Stay with us," Junior said. "We can all be here together. You can be part of us, too. With your brother."

Tears ran down Ron's cheeks at the realization his sons were no longer his. No longer human. He'd failed. Again. He'd failed to save Stu not once, but twice. He'd failed to keep his boys safe. And now he'd failed to bring them back alive. There was only one thing left to do, and he couldn't fail at that.

Shaking his head, blinded by his tears, he pulled his lighter from his pocket and flicked it on. Orange-yellow flame flared up, causing Charlie and Junior to cry out and put their arms over their faces, hiding eyes that had already turned pure black. In that brief moment as they turned away, Ron pushed past them and entered into the dim circle of light at the bottom of the well.

"Melanie! Annie! Help! Help! I'm coming up!" Squinting against the light, so intense after hours in the darkness, Ron felt for the rope he'd used. Instead, his hands found something even better. A rope ladder.

Thank God! They'd gotten help. He shouted again, and voices shouted back down at him, telling him to hang on tight. He looped his good arm through and took hold, planted both feet on one of the rungs, and fought to keep his grip as the ladder began to rise. Rather than look up into the dazzling light, he kept his gaze downward, waiting for the fliers to attack. But the shaft remained empty. As he continued to rise, he thought he heard a single sentence float up from the dark.

"Don't leave us."

Then everything disappeared in brilliant oranges and reds.

Chapter 9

Ron woke to a gray world. A scream rose up in his chest and he stopped it just before it reached his mouth as he recognized his surroundings.

Furniture. Walls.

Not the caves. He was safe. The memories of the past few hours came flooding back. Being pulled to safety. Fading in and out of consciousness, but still managing to tell a tale drastically different from the truth. A series of caves, coming to a pit so deep his flashlight couldn't reach the bottom. Believing his boys, disoriented and possibly hurt, must have tragically fallen into it. And the thousands of bats he'd encountered, bats so large he'd never seen anything like them.

"Got to kill them all," he'd told the men who pulled him up. "Bats carry rabies. Too dangerous to go down alone."

With night rapidly approaching, the police had decided the best thing was to put together a search team the next day and go down with poison, and then seal the well for good. Then they'd taken Ron to the hospital, where they'd wrapped his cracked ribs, given him the first painful shot of his rabies series, and treated his cuts and bruises. After that, they'd sent him home with orders to rest. Except he had other plans.

He couldn't let people go into the well, not even armed police officers. Without knowing what they were up against, they'd stand no chance. And telling the truth wasn't an option. They'd call him crazy, lock him away somewhere, and then he'd never get the opportunity to make things right. Right for Stu, right for his boys. Right for himself. Because of his injuries, they'd decided to spend the night in his parents' house rather than the hotel.

He slid out of bed, not worried about waking Melanie, not after the sedatives the doctors had given her when she'd broken down after hearing her children were gone. Down the hall and to the basement, where he located the old gas cans his father had always kept there. Three five gallon cans, which he took outside and filled from the car, using a siphon hose that was old and dusty but still in one piece.

The pain in his ribs rose from its slumber as he picked up the jugs and started off across the field, and he said a thank-you prayer for the painkillers he'd taken before bed. There was no need for a flashlight; the stars provided more than enough light to follow the trail back to the well. The police had strung yellow tape around the area and covered the hole temporarily with a sheet of plywood. They'd even done him a favor by leaving his rope piled to one side.

He tied the end of it to the gas cans and then lowered them down the shaft, knowing that all the drugs in the world wouldn't help if he tried carrying the containers and climbing the rope at the same time. Then he took a deep breath and slowly descended down the shaft, using his feet to brace himself against the walls and take some of the strain off his arms. Even so, by the time he reached the bottom he was fighting to breathe and soaked in sweat.

As much as he wanted to rest, he didn't allow himself the luxury. Not with so little time left.

He opened the first can and poured half the contents on the mushrooms. The heavy odor of the gas, at once pleasant and unpleasant, filled the air. The rest of the contents he poured in a trail behind him as he crawled through the tunnel, sliding the other two cans ahead of him. Wherever the gasoline landed, the mushrooms shriveled and turned black, which Ron took a sign

he was doing the right thing. How do you fight the dark? With fire and light.

When he reached the lip at the end of the tunnel, he climbed down and then lit a match to the gas trail, shielding his eyes from the painful glare of the flames. Then he made his way onto the ledge as fast as possible, managing to put several dozen yards between him and fire before it reached the well shaft. The whoosh of igniting gas and an intense glow spurred him onwards into the first cave, which he crossed without hesitation, and from there to the second tunnel. This time he was careful when he reached the end, lowering the cans over the ledge before climbing down.

Then it was across the large cavern and into the cave where he'd found the boys, the thin glow of the phosphorescent lichens more than enough to see by. When he got to the cave containing the thing that had once been Stu, the dove-sound of wings alerted him to the presence of the fliers before he saw them lined up along the walls and hanging from the ceiling.

"We knew you would come." Two phlegmy, rough voices spoke as one.

Charlie and Junior lay on the ground in the same place Stu had occupied. Of their uncle there was no sign. Eaten? Dragged away? It no longer mattered to Ron. Stu's death was on his hands, just as it had always been; only the manner of death had changed. Now he would be responsible for the deaths of his children as well. And really, they were already gone, no longer human. All that remained of them were their faces, which hadn't yet completed their metamorphosis from man to monster. Their bodies were beginning to bloat, stretching their shorts and T-shirts to the point of bursting. Their legs were splayed to the sides, and Ron guessed they'd no longer be of any use for walking.

Which explains all the scuff marks I saw in the tunnels.

"I know." It wasn't a lie. He'd heard them calling to him from the minute the sun had set: Charlie, Junior, Stu. And all the others, the children and adults who'd looked into the well over the centuries, the ones who'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time, every thirty years or so. The ones who'd met Timmy, and become him. All their memories, locked in DNA and somehow passed on from queen to drones, and from them to him.

"The change has already begun. It's in their bite."

Why had it taken so much longer for him? His size? Or maybe he hadn't been bitten until that final attack? It explained everything, though. How he had been able to see without the flashlight. Why the fliers hadn't killed him at the end when they'd had the chance. Why the light of dusk had seemed like a supernova in his eyes.

Why he heard the voices in his head.

That's when he'd known he had to end things before anyone else went into the tunnel. Soon his mind wouldn't be his own; then it would be too late. He'd end up as one of them, take his place beside his sons, subsist on deformed mushrooms, give birth to more fliers.

This would be his only chance, his last chance, to be the hero he should have been thirty-two years before.

"You won't do it," the twin voices said. Ron shivered. The change must be happening faster—they were starting to hear his thoughts as well. And the urge to join them was growing stronger.

He didn't waste time or energy answering. Instead, he opened both gas cans and poured the contents on the ground and himself, soaking his clothes and skin. The fumes burned his nose and eyes, a tiny taste of what was to come.

"Father, you don't have to do this." The voices were calm. Too calm.

Ron forced his shaking hand into his pocket and drew out the long lighter they used for the grill. Each movement took effort, as if gravity had increased around him. He knew it was the combined force of his children, trying to bend his will, to delay him long enough for him to succumb to the hive.

"I love you, Charlie. I love you, Junior," he said. "Better that we all die than we live like monsters."

"We loved you too, Father."

With that, he pulled the trigger on the lighter and held it to his legs. The gas ignited instantly, blinding and burning him at the same time. With a scream, he ran towards his children, intending to throw himself onto them.

The fliers converged on him before he'd gone three steps, hitting him like a solid wall and driving him backwards. He fell to his knees, the fire covering his entire body, the agony of burning so great he didn't even feel his ribs snap and pierce his lung. More of the flying demons landed on him, none of them clawing or biting, merely laying their bodies across him to put out the flames. He understood this even as he heard the boys talking to the fliers, and the last pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

The queens could talk to their young.

Like all the previous queens, when Stu felt his life coming to an end he'd ordered the fliers to wait for the next suitable host. That's how it had always been. One queen, keeping the species alive. Until Junior had fallen in with Charlie. Two queens could produce more fliers. Three queens even more than that. For the first time, their numbers would be more than they needed to stave off extinction. He sensed the influence of Charlie and Junior in the new plans, their young minds forcing

evolutionary advancement for the hive. Ron's pain faded as his new chemistry took over, numbing him, healing him. Rearranging him inside and out, so that egg production could begin.

In the meantime, there would be more men coming soon. The fliers needed to be ready. Soon there would be dozens of queens. And after that?

It would be time to swarm.

About The Author

A life-long resident of New York's haunted Hudson Valley, JG Faherty has been a finalist for both the Bram Stoker Award® and ITW Thriller Award, and he is the author of six novels, eight novellas, and more than 50 short stories. He writes adult and YA dark fiction/sci-fi/fantasy, and his works range from quiet suspense to over-the-top comic gruesomeness. He enjoys urban exploring, photography, classic B-movies, good wine, and pumpkin beer. As a child, his favorite playground was a 17th-century cemetery, which many people feel explains a lot. You can follow him at www.twitter.com/jgfaherty, www.facebook.com/jgfaherty, www.jgfaherty.com, and http://jgfaherty-blog.blogspot.com/

BONUS SHORT STORY

Show and Tell

By JG Faherty

(previously appeared in Fender Stitch Magazine, 2011)

Todd Cummings set the box down on the kitchen table and dipped a spoon into the bowl of Crunchy Chunks his mother placed before him.

His mother reached out, as if to pat his shoulder, then her hand reversed direction, going to her mouth, where she proceeded to chew on a fingernail. “You’re bringing it to school?”

“Mmm-hmph.” A dribble of milk escaped his lips.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Her blue eyes carried more than a trace of concern. “We’ve only been here a few months.”

“Yeah. Today’s Show and Tell. It’s perfect.” He patted one hand on the box. In response, the human skin covering it rippled and sighed.

“Well, if you think so...” She returned to the stove, where a pan of bacon sizzled and filled the air with the crisp scent of sweet, frying meat.

“I do,” Todd mumbled around another mouthful of cereal. “It’s sure better than Juan Sanchez’s baseball cards or Stefanie Millstein’s hamster.”

He scooped up the last of the milk, slurping it off the spoon with a noise like a clogged drain opening.

“Manners, Todd,” his mother said.

"Sorry. I gotta go. I wanna make sure I don't miss the bus today."

"Don't show anyone until you get to class," she called after him as he bolted out the back door, his book bag over one shoulder and the box tucked under his arm.

"Duh, Ma! I'm not a feeb," he shouted without looking back.

Then he was running down the sidewalk to the corner, where two or three of his schoolmates already stood waiting.

"What's all the ruckus?"

Alice Cummings closed the door as her husband entered the kitchen.

"Todd took it to school. For Show and Tell." She wiped her hands on a dishtowel and leaned against the sink with a sigh.

"Honey, it's his choice. Nothing you can do." Bob Cummings put an arm around her shoulder, careful keep his fresh-pressed shirt from brushing against the dirty counter. "He's old enough now."

She shook her head. "They grow up too fast. When we were that age--"

Bob put a finger to her lips. "When we were that age, things were a lot different. People didn't have the imagination to handle it." His face relaxed back into a smile. "Hell, we didn't even have the means to get it from one country to another."

He plucked a piece of bacon from where it lay drying on top of some paper towels. "Mmm. That's good. Any eggs to go with it?"

With another sigh, Alice opened the refrigerator.

"How do you want them?"

###

"What's in the box?"

Todd paused on the top step of the bus and glanced at Mr. Cuomo. All the kids secretly called him 'Cuomo the Homo,' because the bus driver had a high, girlish voice. Earlier in the year, Teddy Bonocore had gotten in trouble for spreading a rumor that Mr. Cuomo liked little boys. Todd still wasn't sure if he believed Teddy or not.

"It's for Show and Tell."

"Can I see?"

Todd shook his head. "I can't open it until class. But I'll show you on the way home."

Mr. Cuomo smiled. "Okay, pal, you do that."

The bus pulled away from the curb with a groan, belching black diesel smoke from its rear. Todd used one hand to steady himself as he made his way down the aisle. He took a seat next to Freddy Watkins.

"Watchya got?" Freddy asked.

"It's for Show and Tell. You'll see in class." He held the box tight on his lap with both hands. The ancient lid had no lock; he'd thought about putting rubber bands around it but in the end he'd decided they might leave marks on the tanned skin, or maybe even rub away the scrawled writing that covered all four sides. He didn't know if rubber would erase spellbound blood the way it did pencil marks, but he didn't want to take the chance.

"What did you bring?" Todd asked his classmate.

Freddy opened his book bag. "It's a picture of the tank my dad drives in the Army."

"Cool," Todd replied. He liked the stories Freddy told about his dad, who'd been sent away to fight in the war. He hoped Freddy went before him in show and tell. He wanted to hear about Mr. Watkins' tank.

###

Mrs. Westphalt clapped her hands softly. “That was very interesting, Tina. Please tell you mother we said thank you for letting you bring in her memory quilt.”

Tina Cass stuffed the red, white, and blue-checkered quilt under her desk and sat down.

“What a boring hobby,” Freddy whispered. Todd snorted into his hand.

“Next up is Todd.” Mrs. Wesphalt adjusted her glasses as she read from her list. “What do you have for us today?”

Todd held the box in both hands as he made his way to the front. Heads turned and necks craned as the students tried to see what he had.

“This box has been in my family for as long as anyone can remember.” He held it up so everyone had a good view of the tan rectangle, roughly the size and shape of a shoe box. “My Dad says it was already really old when his grandfather was a boy.”

“That’s amazing,” Mrs. Westphalt said. “What’s inside it?”

“The future,” Todd replied.

“The future of what?” Beth Cahill waved her hand in the air.

“Of everything. You, me.The whole world.”

Todd stroked a hand across the smooth human leather. The brick-colored script flowed around and around, creating new patterns each time. Several of the students *oohed* and *aahed*. Mrs. Westphalt frowned.

“You can’t see the future in a box,” Kenny Sweeney said, a mocking smile creasing his chubby face.

"Open it for us, Todd." Mrs. Westphalt glared at Kenny and then favored Todd with an indulgent smile. "Let's see what the future holds for us."

"Okay. But everyone has to come up here and look. I'm not supposed to let anyone else touch it."

He lifted the lid with one finger and tipped the box forward so the whole class had a good view. Even Mrs. Westphalt, veteran of hundreds of show and tell sessions, stood up to get a better look.

Todd didn't jump or drop the box when his teacher screamed and fell backwards, her hair already turning a ghostly white. He'd expected something like that to happen. None of the other students noticed her death; some of them stared in wide-eyed silence. Others uttered their own terrified cries, although no one else's heart stopped.

Beth Cahill stood still as a statue, a stream of piss running down one leg. Kenny Sweeney turned to the side and threw up before collapsing to the floor in tears. Neither reaction surprised Todd. Beth was an obnoxious know-it-all with no friends, and Kenny was the class bully.

From what his father had told him, those were the kinds of people who usually saw something they didn't like.

Not everyone fared so poorly. Freddy was laughing and clapping, shouting "That's me! That's me! I'm flying a space ship!"

Cindy Ippolito had a happy, surprised expression on her normally serious face. "I never knew I could sing!"

After everyone had a good look, Todd shut the box. The children−those who weren't in shock−returned to their seats while he remained at the front of the classroom. Now that he'd opened it here, he had to take it through the school. It was the only way.

"Todd?"

It was Freddy, holding his hand up.

"What?"

"What do you see when you look into the box?"

Todd smiled. "The whole world. As soon as I'm old enough, it will all be mine."

Freddy nodded.

"What happens now?" Lashonne Reynolds asked.

"Everyone has to see. Bring them to me."

The students filed out of the class, heading in all directions through the school. For the next several hours, screams and terrified shouts flew side-by-side with exclamations of joy, maniacal laughter, and howls of sorrow as Todd's schoolmates and their teachers took their turns.

By the end of fourth period, it was over. Besides Mrs. Westphalt, only one other person−Mr. Covalo, the gym teacher−had succumbed to a vision of his future.

When Todd was finished, he went to see Mr. Connors.

"I think you should send the children home early," he said to the balding principal.

"That's a good idea, Todd. I'll have the buses here in fifteen minutes." He kissed Todd's hand and bowed his head until Todd left the office.

Todd returned to his classroom, where he sat down in Mrs. Westphalt's chair.

"Todd?" Nancy Bishop raised a hand.

"Yes?

"Do you have to go?"

He sighed. That was the worst part, moving from town to town. He hated leaving his friends behind. But there was no other way to accomplish the ultimate goal entrusted to his family so many generations ago.

"I do, Nancy. But not until school's over in June."

Mr. Connors' voice came over the loudspeaker, announcing the buses had arrived.

The box was warm and active in Todd's hands as he walked down the hall, his schoolmates in line behind him.

"I never saw somebody die before," Freddy said, on the bus going home. "How long do you think we'll get to stay home?"

"At my last school it was three days." Todd hoped it wouldn't be any longer than that this time. He liked going to school and learning new things.

"Cool. Wanna come over my house and watch cartoons?"

"Sure," Todd answered as the bus pulled up to the corner. Theirs was the last stop. "But first I have to show Mr. Cuomo."

Nick Cuomo held in his screams long enough to let the last two children off the bus, shut the door, and pull away from the curb.

They're going to find out about me. All those boys.

I can't let that happen.

He pressed down on the gas pedal, pushing the bus up to seventy miles an hour. Five blocks from Todd's house, he turned the wheel and aimed the bus for the largest tree he could find.

Todd and Freddy looked up from their Dragon Slayer game at the sound of sirens outside.

"What's that?" asked Freddy.
Todd smiled. "The future comes faster for some people."

Other books by JG Faherty:

Novels:
Hell Rider (coming soon)
The Cure
Carnival of Fear
Ghosts of Coronado Bay
The Burning Time
Cemetery Club

Novellas:
He Waits
Castle by the Sea
Thief of Souls
Fatal Consequences
Legacy
Cult of the Black Jaguar
Winterwood